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# Of National Bondage: Alasdair Gray's *1982 Janine*

Tamás Tukacs

## Introduction

The September 2014 Scottish referendum on independence raises several practical and theoretical problems as to the future of Scotland, the United Kingdom and, we have to add, of the European Union as well. It is unprecedented in the post-1945 history of Europe that a territory which had been united with a larger entity more than three hundred years ago should become a wholly independent state, and, according to the plans of the SNP, remain or become a member state of the EU as well. The referendum was supposed to put an end to the vicissitudes of Scottish identity that have permeated the discourse on Scottish nationalism and national consciousness since the nineteenth century, but, since the majority of the Scottish voters decided in favour of remaining part of the UK, it is to be expected that the issue of independence continues to be a hot issue for decades to come.

Scottish nationalism is peculiar, since it is rare that a smaller country, after being colonised by a neighbouring larger entity, should greatly benefit from the union. The price Scotland had to pay for economic prosperity from 1707 onward, was the lack of the emergence of self-defining, stable nationalism in the Romantic era. The Scottish had little cause to rebel against England. Scottish nationalism, as Michael Billig stated it in the title of his 1995 volume, is "banal nationalism." Since it is not defined by a separate language and since the foundations of Scottish culture are not basically different from the English one, Scottish nationalism is characterised by a concentration on territorial aspects, history, certain institutions, a "mythic past," cultural symbols and icons. One important feature of Scottishness is that from the nineteenth century on, what could be termed collectively as "Scottish culture" has appeared, largely due to the very effective colonising techniques of the English, in the form of fragmented, easily digestible and mostly emptied cultural icons and stereotypes (the kilt, the Scottish landscape, the Celtic tradition, tribal heritage, and the stereotype of the reticent and stingy Scotsman, and so on). The renewal of Scottish literature during the first Scottish Renaissance in the twentieth century and its later versions and reverberations had to cope with this considerable dilemma, namely, that Scotland possessed every attribute that could have paved the way for "healthy" nationalism, yet Scottish consciousness

has constantly been tormented by a profound sense of backwardness compared to its more developed neighbour, which was exacerbated even more by the failure of the 1979 Devolution Referendum. Scotland seems to possess all the essentials of nationhood, yet that has not translated into political existence as of yet – instead, Scotland is still coping with the problem of the binarity between being identified as a mental image, an idea, a mood and its actual, physical existence (Dósa 23). From this aspect, the 2014 vote can be seen as a milestone in grounding a new Scottish national identity.

The lack of a clear idea of what Scotland should look exactly like as a nation is the source of a fundamental dichotomy between isolation and openness. It is ironic that Scotland has been bound to Continental culture with innumerable ties, especially to the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, as opposed to England, yet the reverse is also true: certain aspects of England's culture seem to be more "open" and flexible in contrast to the inward-looking, isolationist culture of Scotland struggling with its own stereotypes and the lack of a narratable past.

This binarity of openness vs. isolation also appears in literary criticism regarding Scottish works. In recent decades, there has been a tendency to break away from the normative and prescriptive, "traditional" type of criticism, characterised by essentialism, canon-building and the construction of a national tradition that closes off anything that is alien, hybrid, feminine or anything that does not conform to the masculine and working-class thematic of Scottish fiction (Miller 13). As Gavin Miller puts it, "References to a Scottish tradition of context […] seem to invite a metaphysical position in which Scottish cultural artefacts share a common essence which is necessary to their existence as works that are specifically Scottish." (13) In short, Scottish literature appears to be carrying the burden of the obligation to be Scottish, to be about Scottish people and Scottishness. As a solution, several critics have been urging a kind of openness and a transcendence of the "old-fashioned genealogical style of criticism" (Miller 13). As Eleanor Bell, for instance, points out, "Arguably, Scottish literary studies have been more focussed on canon-building and the construction of the national tradition, and too immersed in tradition-inspired approaches" ("Postmodernism" 86). Elsewhere, she states that "this approach of reading against the grain [one that includes issues of postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism] may, at a symbolic level, prove useful to Scottish studies in its probing and unearthing of national identity" (*Questioning* 2).

It appears that Alasdair Gray's *1982 Janine*, published in 1984, readily offers itself to these kinds of "post-readings" with its typographical experimentation and play with chronology and narrative voice. While it is easy to term Gray's novel "postmodern," the historical context of its publication must not be left unconsidered. Published only five years after the failure of the 1979 referendum, the text could be evaluated as a response to the Scots rejecting independence and the subsequent uneasy relations of Scotland with Thatcher's government. It seems that Gray himself wrote with the intention of transcending the limitations of

essentialism and nationalism. As he put it in "A Modest Proposal for By-passing a Predicament" (referring to Muir's notion of the predicament of the Scottish writer): "It is very queer that a small nation which has bred so many strongly local writers of worldwide scope still bickers and agonises over the phoney old *local versus international doublebind*" (9). Yet such a "postmodern" text as *1982 Janine* cannot help but leave behind concerns with locality, nationality and Scottishness, either. In what follows, I am going to read Gray's novel as an allegorical text on Scotland's situation in the early 1980s, after a failed referendum, paying special attention to the dichotomy appearing in Gray's sentence above between the local and the worldwide and, implicitly, between isolation and openness. Isolation is not only present in a spatial but also in a chronological sense in the novel, and since the protagonist's story clearly parallels Scotland's fate, the interrelatedness of the communal and the personal past is the second major theme of *1982 Janine*. To be able to approach the novel from this perspective, however, we must look at the Scottish literary tradition as a source of anxieties over isolation versus openness.

Unhistorical Histories: The Legacy of Scott

"Scotland is a place with a past but a place without history," Cairns Craig asserts in *The Modern Scottish Novel* (118) and with this, he tackles a vital point of Scottish consciousness, that is, the problematic of the organic relationship with the (national) past, directing attention to the dilemma of the coming to terms, ordering and narrativisation of that past. This is a point around which the discussion of the relationship between Scottish fiction and identity may be ordered. Besides this, it is also important to look into two related themes, the relationship of Scotland to the outside world (including England) and Scotland's relationship to herself.

The history of the Scottish novel still bears the mark of the oeuvre of Walter Scott, together with Scotland's in-between situation that Edwin Muir described in the 1930s, writing about Scott, although his words bearing a more general significance, as Scotland at that time being "neither a nation nor a province" (11–12). On the one hand, Scotland was assimilated into England and the English identity, more specifically into the English Whig tradition (which exerted great influence on historiography and Scottish fiction) in the eighteenth century in a way that it was beneficial for Scotland economically but, in return, the kind of national consciousness and historical culture that could have paralleled national independence and the sense of the past in the Romantic age could never fully develop. On the other hand, Scotland never became an integral part of the new British identity and, to some extent, always stayed in the category of the strange and exotic. Paradoxically, certain elements of Scottish identity lived on – the Kirk, the School and the Law – but nineteenth-century Scottish nationalism was expressed in a way that it supported the union with England (Craig, "Constituting" 5). From this perspective, the beginning of the nineteenth century may be regarded, both temporarily and geographically, as a kind of "no-man's land" for Scottish literature. It was in this schizophrenic, in-between state that Scott began writing his historical novels.

The same dichotomy may be observed in the critical assessments of Scott as the one often referred to in connection with Scotland: on the one hand, he is a writer of European significance, shaping the classical form of the historical novel, and exerting an influence on countless other authors, from Pushkin to Balzac. On the other hand, he was the one who distanced the past from the present, locked Scottish history into quarantine, solidified certain stereotypes, and falsified and mythicized Scottish history to an extent that his influence can be felt in present-day Scottish writing as well, as far as the problematic relationship with the national past is concerned. According to Georg Lukács, "Scott's extraordinary and epoch-making talent in writing is expressed through the structure of his novels based on a 'middling,' merely correct but never 'heroic' hero" (37, my translation). Through the figure of the "hero," Scott presents the critical moments of English and Scottish history more or less objectively, carefully avoiding extremes, Scott being a middle-class, conservative Tory himself. Although, with such a central hero figure, the crises of history are described with "almost unsurpassable perfection" (Lukács 37, my translation), this kind of historical novel could never become the means of national resistance or that of a search for identity, since Scott's aim was precisely seeking out the points of compromise between the two nations by showing how conflicting ideas could merge into a higher and more sophisticated unit; for instance, the fight of Saxons and Normans results in the birth of the English nation, the War of the Roses leads to the reign of Elizabeth I or the Cromwellian civil war is epitomized in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Lukács 35).

In fact, Scott mastered the English-type Whig historiography, which brought about a situation in which nineteenth-century Scottish intellectuals had to cope with a rather schizophrenic scenario. The main reason for this is that the educated Scottish did not merely put on the mask of British imperialism but also did away with Scottish history as a possible frame of interpretation and lost their confidence and interest in their history in general, especially after the schism of the Kirk in 1843. Interestingly enough, the roots of Whig historiography can be traced back to seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterian thinking and various dissenter movements, and even to the Scottish Reformation in the sixteenth century (Trevor–Roper, "Introduction" 8). The main tenets of this Whig ideology are the following: the assertion of the special role of the Anglican church in English history, a firm faith in the continuity of English constitutionalism and limited monarchism, emphasising the importance of the rule of "common law", and the presentation of England as the main exporter of Protestantism and democracy (Kidd 6; in Lukács's words: "the consistency of the English development amidst the most terrible crises" [43, my translation]). Since Scott rigidly believed in the unbroken unity of the British monarchy, the Anglo-Scottish conflicts never undermine the Union in his works. For instance, Waverley, the young officer, who participates in the 1745 Jacobite uprising on the side of the McIvor clan, and falls in love with the chieftain's daughter, Flora, returns to England at the end of the

novel, and marries an English girl, Rose. Thus, Waverley's adventure is neither an integral part of his life story, nor is it symbolically the part of England's history. His love affair and alliance with the Scotsmen is, in fact, a deviation in the normal course of his story and in history, a "romantic perversion" at best (Craig, *Out of* 39), as is demonstrated by the final scene: the main character is contemplating an image of himself in the company of Fergus McIvor. The Scottish past may only exist as framed, elevated into the sphere of art, and securely separated from the present.

As Cairns Craig demonstrates, besides the tradition of Whig historiography, Scott was also the follower of certain currents of the Scottish Enlightenment, which was rather sceptical about the mere writability of history (*Out of* 67). The main precursor of this thought was David Hume, who was fully aware of the fictitiousness of history and treated historiography as a literary genre. His intention was not to write a "true" history, since he knew that a historical event may only become suitable material for the writer if it shows enough literariness, i.e., it is invested with enough dramatic quality, orderliness or developing plot. By writing England's history, Hume's aim was not to present a "true" but a "polished," literary version of the story, which is true by virtue of being impartial. Scott followed this concept of history, and, according to Craig, he was deeply sceptical about any kind of "historical truth" (*Out of* 69), which is attested by the innumerable forewords, prefaces, appendices, explanations, and footnotes that he attached to his novels, as if the recorded (hi)story had not been stable enough to be presented in itself, lacking something that could only be made up for by supplements like these. Contrary to the classical evaluation of Lukács, then, Scott does not seem to be the master of "historical realism," but a sceptic of the Enlightenment who is fully aware of the impossibility of objective historiography. Scott may be accepted as the representative of Whig history writing or as the advocate of the Humean Enlightenment, but, in either case, the result is the same: a version of Scottish history, which is emptied, full of dichotomous stereotypes, and which does away with the organic relationship of the past and the present, displaying a "secure," unhistorical version of history.

This unhistorical concept of history represented by Scott is the root of the basic opposition in Scottish fiction between the idea of home, a sort of familiar isolation, more generally a static and vacuum-like state and the "world," history and a story that could be given shape by narrative means (Craig, *Out of* 32). At the level of the story, the former means a non-linear, non-developing, circular and repetitive narrative turning on itself, as opposed to the English realist novel of the nineteenth century, which is fundamentally teleological, and which develops the eighteenth-century social panorama into a genre tackling human and social relationships. The inward-turning Scottish narrative outside history is only given an impetus by an external event which penetrates the static, homely, familiar, convenient (or suffocating and limiting) environment and subverts it. The most typical of such events that give impetus to an isolated world is the First World War