



Reconstructing the Future: Contemporary Scottish Literature and the Nation

L'avenir comme reconstruction : l'idée de nation dans la littérature écossaise contemporaine

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Reconstructing the Future: Contemporary Scottish Literature and the Nation

L'avenir comme reconstruction : l'idée de nation dans la littérature écossaise contemporaine

Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon

- 1 Four years after the independence referendum in Scotland, there's still an agreement about the fact that it was a time of exceptional political and cultural debate in which, to quote Arianna Introna, the country's "progressive essence was realised". This essence is in her view to be opposed to Gerry Hassan's concept of the "Missing Scotland", which refers to "a population disconnected from politics", and which, according to Hassan, is one of the causes that led to the result in the referendum (2016, p. 117). This opposition and the dynamics of a progressive Scotland are important, because they also relate to the part played by the cultural, not just in the run up to and the campaign for (or against) independence, but also in its connection with the definition of nationality and therefore with nationalism in all its forms—banal nationalism,¹ civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism,² which came under intense scrutiny during the campaign.
- 2 There are many very vocal culturalists in Scottish academia, such as Scott Hames, or Alan Riach whose opening words to the book he has co-written with Alexander Moffat, "All arts work for independence" (2014, p. 7), go straight to the point. But the idea is to envisage Scotland's future as a means to go beyond the premise that was prevalent in the devolutionary period, namely that devolution was brought about by its writers in the absence of political will, in short the now famous "there's been a parliament of novels for years" argument (McLean, 1999, p. 74). It has to do with cultural nationalism, and its link with the polysemic notion of representation in an artistic context: this notion implies both a means to represent people politically, in other words to acknowledge a seemingly "natural" or intimate connection between politics and culture, and art's capacity to represent humans and their humanity. As Riach makes clear in *The Arts of Independence*: "Literature, painting, music, architecture—all the arts

—are the most essential outward form in which we make distinct our own humanity.” (Moffat & Riach, 2014, p. 7)

- 3 Here, two thinkers come to mind, in order to reflect upon how Scottish culture has, in the decades since the 1979 referendum, been aligned with Scottish nationalism in the writings of many a critic. Scott Hames, whose 2012 book *Unstated* is precisely devoted to the relationship between Scottish nationalism and Scottish culture, and Murray Pittock who, in his article “What is the place of theories of nationalism in a transnational age?” (2013), brings a historical perspective to the contemporary evolution of our conception of nationalism. Pittock shows that the transition from Marxism to globalization has, of necessity, changed our conception of nationalism, in the sense that, as Ulrich Beck had noted in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006), globalization has meant a sense of borderlessness among the elite (2013, p. 3). In turn, this borderlessness gave rise to what Beck, adapting Billig’s notion of banal nationalism, calls “methodological cosmopolitanism”, “which is marked by the emergence of multiple loyalties and cultural mixing” (2013, pp.2-3). But the limitation of this form of banal cosmopolitanism according to Pittock is, in addition to the fact that it is the elites themselves who carry out the investigations on their own shifts in attitude and allegiances, the sheer number of states which have become independent since the 1990s, a fact which makes banal cosmopolitanism fairly unreliable. Emphasising therefore the need for a different definition of the concept of nationalism, a move away from ethnic nationalism (which insists on issues of race, religion and language) as well as from cosmopolitan nationalism,³ he goes back to Ernest Renan’s definition of nationality which foregrounds “the importance of the legacy of memory and shared sacrifices (properly held, not imposed by an elite)” (2013, p. 10). This definition of nationality as “solidarity” goes beyond the reductive, exclusive even, trope of political representation for the arts, because this trope leads at best to a partial assessment of the part played by literature in the context of the Scots defining themselves as a people, while, at worst, it can even mechanically exclude that which does not conform to the representational imperative, as Alex Thomson noted early on (2007, pp. 4-16).
- 4 As a consequence, envisaging the future, the post-indyref, post-Brexit situation in connection with culture, with a view to examining the part and relevance of culture to the conjuring up of the nation, is a re-construction of the future in the sense of the invitation to “try again” embossed on the cover of some of Alasdair Gray’s novels and maybe, as has been suggested by several analysts, try anew, rather than staying with the old formula of literature standing in for politics. This renewal of our critical perspective involves looking at the various ways the future can be envisaged, at the variety of responses to our understanding of our common humanity.
- 5 Caroline McCracken makes clear the disconnect between representation and compulsory alignment, in her delineation of what she terms “the moment of the independence vote”:

The moment of the independence vote foregrounds desires for representation, duration and consistency; authorship underpins these but as resistance, renewal and multifarious difference. (2014, p. 2)

In spite of the persistence of the word “representation”, backed up by two other nouns designed to narrow down its meaning, Literature here needs to apply its “multifarious difference”, to steer clear of the representational imperative, which has simply shown its own limitations, not least of which the danger of essentializing Scotland and

rendering it a fake version of itself. Scott Hames backs this up in the same issue of the online literary magazine *The Bottle Imp*:

The key Scottish novels of the past few decades largely reject the politics of ‘representation’ enshrined in parliamentary democracy, yet they are continually presented as the models and cultural guarantors of Scottish devolution understood as the (incomplete) recovery of national agency and identity via representation. (2014, p. 1)

He asserts this fact again in an even more pointed and concise fashion: “[...] the key Scottish novels of the past three decades set little store by ‘representation’ on the parliamentary template.” (2014, p. 1) The cat is at last officially out of the bag.⁴

- 6 In *Unstated*, Margaret Elphinstone gives her own version of this rejection of representation by focusing on the sheer diversity of artistic productions and their capacity to invoke a multivalent conception of identity:

Scotland is an imagined community, which exists in five million forms inside our heads. It can’t be defined, but through the arts we construct alternative images of what we are, and what we could be. (Hames, 2012, p. 74)

This insistence on plurality and diversity in this quotation, the refusal of any final “image of what [Scottish people] are”, the projection not into a static, past-based image, but into the future, emphasises the part played by artists in (re)constructing the future rather than representing the people. But this is a common enough argument, and what remains to be seen is how to do that—what to make of the current “diversity” stereotype and how to engage with the notions of representation in a new way.

- 7 To begin with, as pointed out by McCracken, formal innovation generally works against easy notions of representation, with Kelman a case in point. His first-person point of view within a third person narrative, his refusal of the standard third-party voice is a formal breakthrough which can hardly be put on a par with the representation imperative in the electoral sense of the term, even though it has paved the way for writers like Irvine Welsh, Laura Hird or, more recently, Jenni Fagan. Because of Kelman’s particular focus on giving a voice to the voiceless, the unheard voices of literature, the Hineses, the Sammy Samuels or Patrick Doyles of this world, he has been considered as “representing” his people, if not in a political sense, at least, in the sense of shedding light on a supposed reality of the state of Scotland and the Scots, while he himself fiercely resisted the idea of speaking on behalf of his country. This has earned him the kind of reception he gained for winning the Booker prize with *How Late it Was, How Late* in 1995, but also the kind of ostracism south of the border where, well into the 21st century, his books were not readily available on high street bookstores’ shelves. This fact is a sort of absurd, paradoxical demonstration of the failure of the representational trope: an author’s work is rejected precisely on the (false) ground that he represents his country, his people in the most general sense of the term, in this case a representation deemed unacceptable. Politics in lieu of literature does not work, however politically committed a writer may be.
- 8 Another point that one can make about the literary being incompatible with representation understood as transposition is illustrated by James Robertson’s historical novel *And the Land Lay Still*. It is, in Hames’s words, a novel precisely intent upon representing Scotland in the political sense of the term, in producing the “intelligible story of Scotland” by including characters and events “oversaturated with representative significance” (2017, p. 2). For Hames it does so by means of its structure, its “narrative architecture” which “insists on the piecing together of personal scraps

and fragments into the larger mosaic of national story, one whose structural movements are defined by aggregative public events such as elections and referenda” (2017, p. 10). One of the remarkable aspects of this novel from a formal point of view is the discrepancy between the varied points of view and the interventionist, didactic, fairly static voice of an external narrator, who, in a manner reminiscent of the 19th-century realist novel, expresses an authorial-sounding opinion about the state of the nation and the historical reasons that led to the present situation. Hames notes that it is in fact quite remarkable that this voice should be at the exact opposite end of the formal spectrum from Kelman’s own innovative narrative voice, a voice which refuses that kind of external authoritarian discourse.

- 9 So the question boils down to the relationship established between politics and aesthetics, or between politics and art, or rather to a reappraisal of this relationship in a context in which it can no longer be unquestioningly considered as self-evident. In his 2000 book *Le partage du sensible*, Jacques Rancière argues that literature, and more generally the arts, provide us with a particular way of seeing the sensible by cutting it up in a way that makes our common experience visible in a new way. He insists on the fact that this new way can be shared by all:

C’est le découpage des temps, des espaces, du visible et de l’invisible, de la parole et du bruit qui définit à la fois le lieu et l’enjeu de la politique comme forme d’expérience. Le politique porte sur ce qu’on voit et ce qu’on peut en dire, sur qui a la compétence pour voir et la qualité pour dire, sur les propriétés des espaces et les possibilités du temps. (2000, pp. 13–4)

- 10 This sense of the shareable world that art gives us is taken up again in *Politique de la littérature* with renewed emphasis on the sense of a human community: “[*Pour qu’il y ait de la politique,*] *il faut qu’il y ait de la configuration d’une forme spécifique de communauté.*” (Rancière, 2007, p. 11)
- 11 This “configuration” is a far cry from banal nationalism and from the reaction against it, which, as Pittock reminds us, is on occasions a fairly violent one because it comes from those who cannot or will not conform to a model too far removed from who they are as a community. Kirsty Gunn, in her contribution to *Unstated* defines how she sees independence, nationality and Scotland by positioning herself as an individual strongly within a community:
- It’s how we imagine ourselves and the country around us that makes us who we are, independent in a way that’s true and strong and real. Never the other thing. That other gets turned into a different slogan, is bought and sold every day and, unless we willingly choose, it could never lay claim to those lonely, lovely hills that speak to me of somewhere that’s both separate and connected, a place where I myself might live, where I might belong. (Hames, 2012, p. 114)
- 12 For Gunn, belonging and not belonging, looking for a way to represent a community is done by delineating a space that she opposes to the “other” space, the space of “slogan”,⁵ the space of representation in the electoral sense, which she captures in her allusion to the Burnsian phrase of being “bought and sold for English gold”, curtailed to just “bought and sold” to widen the scope of the criticism: artists are, of necessity, the creators of a different, parallel universe. They make up a world that interacts with the world of politics, but are in no way intent on representing it. What creativity adds to the representative impulse is the necessary distance that paradoxically enables us to engage, not with our nation as a political entity, but with our sense of who we are and therefore really to create that community.

- 13 Similarly, Alan Riach's poem "Glasgow" reminisces about and projects this sense of a community in the last stanza:

7
 So, not nostalgia, please. What is so sad and cannot now
 be claimed, is unreturnable.
 Recognise that. Dividedness, and not diversity. It's there all
 right. But when you feel this city work,
 as a friendly force that drives the green life up and out of
 the earth, the air enamelled blue
 with all the conviction of speech in its best gambols, it's
 something worth a listen and look
 around, and colourful, as Doré's Dante's deep Inferno,
 keeps you guessing, horrified, for people,
 and knowing that the love and laughter, light, are in there
 too, right to the end.
 From far beginnings we might never know, but what the
 present is, is what we do. (2017, p. 59)

- 14 Riach makes clear the impossibility to represent one people, one entity, and the danger of essentializing Scotland and the Scots by revoking the politically correct "diversity" to opt for the franker "dividedness". This however is not an obstacle, as the optimistic symbolism of the poem indicates, invoking as it does images of happiness, energy and new beginnings: "a friendly force that drives the green life up and out of the earth", "colourful", "enamelled blue air", "love, laughter, light" are all intent upon this drive towards the clear future. The energy, the "conviction" of "speech in its best gambols", this capacity of the artistic language (the gambols) to create, to "imagine ourselves" as Gunn puts it, manages the transition, or the synthesis of being divided (Riach) or both "separate and connected" (Gunn). The gambols of speech are indeed what Rancière identifies as the basis for the politics of literature:

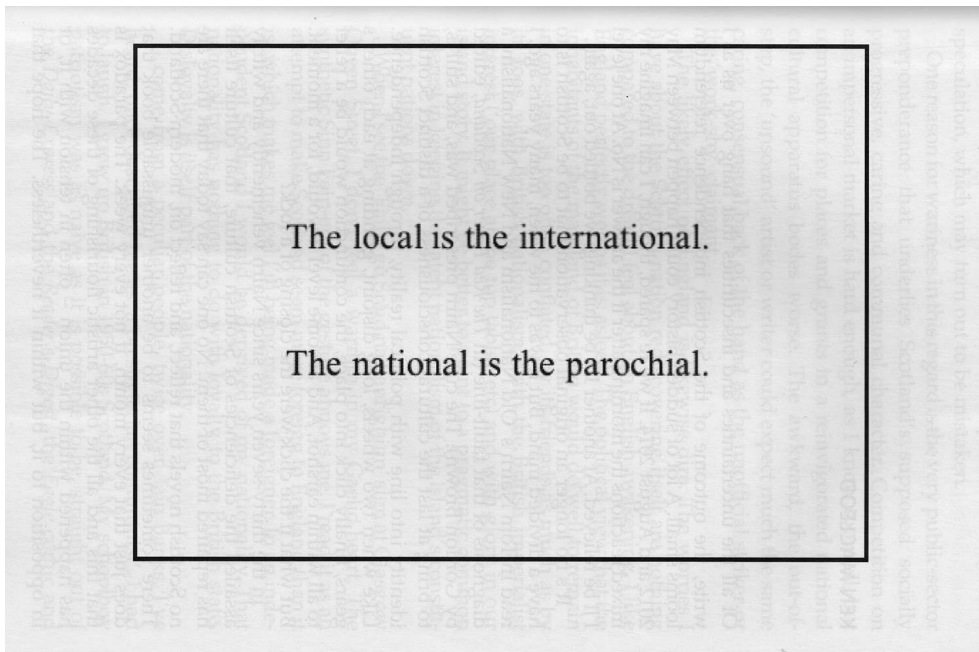
Les écrivains ont affaire aux significations. Ils utilisent les mots comme des instruments de communication et se trouvent par là engagés qu'ils le veulent ou non dans les tâches de construction d'un monde commun. (2007, p. 13)

- 15 For Riach, how we imagine ourselves corresponds to our ability to be "in there", to stick with the present in a proactive manner, because, as he argues "what the present is, is what we do", shifting from potentially divisive pronoun "you" used throughout this stanza, to the collective "we" at the end.
- 16 In *Le partage du sensible*, Rancière goes into more detail about the connections between art and politics, and defines three modes of identification for art ("*les régimes d'identification de l'art*"), two of which I'd like to focus on. The first one he calls "the ethical mode of images" in which "art is not identified as such, but is subsumed by the question of images" (2000, p. 28, my translation), and the second one is described as "the aesthetic mode of the arts" which can be seen as the mode in which "the identification of the arts is no longer made through the different ways of producing it, but through the distinct way of being sensible which is specific to artistic productions" (2000, p. 31, my translation). This distinction appears to be very relevant today to the evolution of the perception of what should be literature's goal in Scotland. The critical world's insistence on the representational imperative in the years since the 1979 referendum pertains to the ethical mode of images: Hames speaks of the reduction of "Scottish culture to tourist bait, and [of] the arts to 'creative industries'" (2012, p. 2). As early as 1995, many writers, including James Kelman, were very vocal in their

opposition to the management of the city of culture in Glasgow for reasons that partly had to do with the transformation of the event into a series of static images of Scottish culture. Closer to us, Matthew Whickam criticized Alex Salmond for enlisting Burns in the referendum campaign, when Salmond claimed that the Bard would vote yes. Quoting the adverse reaction that this confident announcement triggered, in particular on the part of the Better Together campaign spokesman, labour MSP Richard Barker, Whickam pointed out that what was wrong with it is that it was an appropriation of literature by images:

Forget for a moment Burns's imaginary proclivities about the outcome of the vote. Perhaps without intending to, Baker conjures a more fitting place for the humanities in the public sphere than the ventriloquizing ascription of voting preferences, and that concerns the status of the human. And with one breath Baker has made Burns a precursor to concepts of the human subject as both fatally riven and as multiplied indefinitely beyond itself. (2014, p. 1)

- 17 Refuting this “ventriloquizing ascription of voting preferences”, Whickam rejects the ethical mode of images, and falls back upon the trope of our shared *and* divided humanity which is uttered by both Gunn and Riach. Conversely, the attempt, by writers and critics alike, to align literary production with the aesthetic mode, that is the mode that allows for a partition of the sensible, can be seen as an entry into modernity according to Rancière—modernity seen not a rupture but as the reinterpretation of what arts does, and of what makes art (2000, p. 36). This is no less than a reversal of our preconceptions on the representative status of the arts, a paradigmatic change. Tom Leonard, in his response to Hames's question in *Unstated*, insists on such reversal in a very economical manner, placing the arts firmly in a modern perspective:



(Hames, 2012, p. 127)

- 18 This playful insistence on the necessity to challenge our own understanding of the notions we have been clinging to for so long (in this case, and very aptly considering the nature of the question, the global-local, parochial-international conceit) is a very telling illustration of Rancière's point on the “*régime esthétique des arts*”, that it “unties the link between subject and mode of representation” (2000, p. 36).

- 19 In that context, the very important trope of “the land”, “those lonely, lovely hills” to quote Gunn again⁶ has, according to McCracken, to be valued for its centrality, its permanence, but also for the profound mutability it affords us, because precisely of the repeated artistic reshaping of its meaning(s): “But if the land itself is inscribed, over time it shifts and surges unpredictably according to its accumulated detritus of words and meanings.” (2014, p. 2)
- 20 Jackie Kay phrases this in a way that emphasises her own internalisation of the concept of “the land”: “The land itself triggers off something within us, which can be quite deep, so I don’t need to be in it to have it. I have it in my mind and I carry it with me.” (2016, p. 7) In her poem “Black River”, Kay expresses this through the trope of the “black river running through our arteries” which is then shown to change colours, to shift from “black, to brown, to blue” (2011, p. 11). This vision deprives the land of its sacrosanct mythical fixity, marking Kay’s own appropriation and transformation of this stereotype of Scottish identity. She turns it into a much more fluid concept symbolised by her choice of the image of running water. Kathleen Jamie’s famous poem inscribed on circular wooden panels at the Bannockburn monument, “Here lies our land”, is described by the artist as not being written by her alone—the poem evokes lines from the Ballads, Hamish Henderson and Violet Jacob, this intertextual construction making it in effect a polyphonic, fluid celebration of the land. As a logical conclusion to her method, Jamie says she would be happy to have her name dissociated from the poem, in the great tradition of the (anonymous) Scottish ballad.⁷
- 21 In the works of contemporary writers, this possibility of partition of the sensible emerges very regularly, as is seen for instance in Kirsty Logan’s novel *The Gracekeepers* (2015) in which the protagonist Callanish, who lives on a circus boat on the sea in a post-apocalyptic world, claims that she “did not know how to mourn the world that she has never seen” (2016, p. 120). Her words are not just sad, they are also freeing; they echo Riach’s exhortation to avoid nostalgia in “Glasgow”, because “What is so sad and cannot now/be claimed, is unreturnable”. Avoiding the sanctification of one version of the past is also an immense opportunity if one remembers the last words of the poem —“what the present is, is what we do”. The future “land” has been shared, it can allow for “dividedness” and not just “diversity” and can therefore truly leave the mode of images in order to be re-invented with endless possibilities—“from black, to brown, to blue” (Kay, 2011, p. 11). It can do so because of new voices, new connections—Jenni Calder speaks of creativity as “the powerhouse of connection and identity” (Hames, 2012, p. 42). So “what we do” opens up the possibilities for Scottish writers to connect in different, diverging ways that convey the fluidity of who “we” are, finally vindicating Rancière, who claims that:
- [La littérature laisse] le tapage de la scène démocratique aux orateurs pour voyager dans les profondeurs de la société, en inventant cette herméneutique du corps social, cette lecture des lois d’un monde sur le corps des choses banales et des mots sans importance.* (2007, pp. 30–1)
- 22 It seems to me that the referendum, with the tremendous pressure put on writers to take part, has yielded the perhaps unexpected result of requiring of them, as well as of critics of literature, to go back to the fundamental part played by literature, not in party politics and the political debate at a basic level, but in the putting together of something much more precious, the “hermeneutics of a social body” which alone, can enable people to see themselves in their dividedness and well as their diversity. Callanish in *The Gracekeepers* is separated from her mother; when she comes “awake to

silence, her dreams clinging”, she makes the point that “she has put it into words best she could, but it was like trying to describe the logic of dreams” (Logan, 2016, p. 74). Even though she cannot fathom how to imagine the world and connect with her mother, she achieves the feat of what artists, collectively and in their dividedness, achieve, that of putting silence into words, and therefore of participating in the revision of the much decried myth of Scotland. Because, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out, myth precisely relies on the hermeneutics of the social body:

Le mythe n'est pas seulement la solution imaginaire d'une contradiction réelle insoluble, il est aussi la familialisation (la sexualisation) de la conjoncture historique, comme il est l'historisation de la conjoncture familiale (sexuelle). C'est d'ailleurs parce que le mythe établit ce type de jonction entre le personnel et l'historique qu'il est capable de perdurer et d'investir des conjonctures nouvelles. (1988, p. 75)

- 23 It seems that, in the period after the two referenda took their toll, a new myth for Scotland can at last be envisaged, as Scotland seems ready, to paraphrase Lecercle, to engage with new situations, new domesticised and historicized narratives, a new politics for the nation. This is captured in the form of an injunction to artists by Jenni Calder, that “artists should not ever be satisfied” (Hames, 2012, p. 42). Those are new times we are entering. As Riach puts it, we have entered “the Ghost Time”:

Turn the last page. Enter the Ghost Time.
There are no assurances. All is uncertain.
Pull back, and let fall, the last curtain.
Ghosts whisper things: strange rhythms, strange rhyme. (2017, p. 129)

- 24 The new paradigm that is emerging for Scottish culture in connection with the conception we have of “the nation” allows artists to be confident in not being satisfied. It urges them to try again in ever new, ever different creative and productive, (re)constructive ways. It invites them to produce strange rhythms, strange rhyme.

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NOTES

1. For a definition of banal nationalism, see Billig (1995, pp. 6-8).

2. On civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, see Ignatieff (1993, pp. 5–9), Barry (1993, pp. 79–109), Mason (2000, pp. 115–47).
 3. See in particular how Pittock shows that banal nationalism fails to function when the gap is too big between local systems and Americanization, and that in these cases, pockets of resistance grow, a strong one Islam. (2013, p. 5)
 4. See also my own paper “Caledonia Dreaming” (2016) in which the danger of essentialism in connection with the representative imperative, and with this idea of creating an integrated image of Scottish identity to oppose the English is developed.
 5. On that point, see my chapter “‘They Peer at My Dark Land’: The Ethics of Storytelling in Contemporary Scottish Women’s Writing” in the forthcoming book *Women and Scotland: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon.
 6. One remembers the defining part played by the land in Grassie Gibbon or McDiarmid to give just two examples. McCracken reminds us that in both these authors’ works, as well as in much Scottish literature, “the land sustains and marks the unproblematically Scottish” (2014, p. 2).
 7. See Jamie Talking to Billy Kay in the BBC Radio Scotland programme “A History of Scottish Literature”, Episode 1, “The Flower o Nationheid”, broadcast on 5 October 2014.
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ABSTRACTS

This article examines the recent development in Scottish literature and criticism, away from the critical commonplace that describes how Scottish culture has, in the decades since the 1979 referendum, been aligned with Scottish nationalism. Starting from the definitions of nationalism given by Michael Billig, Michael Ignatieff, Ernest Renan, and the analyses of Scottish historians and cultural nationalists, it shows how what it calls the “representational trope” is at last being abandoned. This renewal of our critical perspective involves looking at the various ways the future can be envisaged, and at the variety of responses to what Riach describes as the fundamental goal for the arts—to further our understanding of our common humanity. Those responses involve for artists the necessity to (re)construct the future rather than to represent the people. By focusing on the works of artists such as James Kelman, James Robertson, Alan Riach, Tom Leonard, Jackie Kay and Kathleen Jamie, but also on some artists’ comments on an independent Scotland, and by using the theoretical framework of Jacques Rancière’s politics of literature, his notions of the various modes of identification for the arts, and of the partition of the sensible, the paper traces the way that Scottish writers today engage with a renewed, more fluid myth of Scotland, and focuses on literature’s capacity to build what Rancière describes as the hermeneutics of the social body.

Cet article s’intéresse à l’évolution récente, dans la critique et en littérature écossaise, qui consiste à s’écarter du stéréotype, omniprésent depuis le référendum de 1979, de la littérature comme mode de représentation de l’Écosse et du politique. Il s’appuie tout d’abord sur les définitions du nationalisme proposées par Michel Billig, Michael Ignatieff et Ernest Renan, et sur la pensée de critiques nationalistes et d’historiens écossais pour examiner ce qu’il nomme le « trope représentationnel », et son abandon récent. Ce renouveau de notre perspective critique induit un retour sur la manière dont peut être envisagé l’avenir, et un examen de la pluralité de propositions qui ont en commun leur persistante volonté de délimiter et d’illustrer notre humanité, aspect qui, selon Alan Riach, est le but de tout art. Les propositions d’artistes aussi

divers que James Kelman, James Robertson, Alan Riach, Tom Leonard, Jackie Kay ou Kathleen Jamie, mais aussi leur analyse de la place des artistes dans le débat sur l'indépendance, partagent la volonté de (re)construire l'avenir plutôt que celle de représenter la nation. L'article adopte le cadre théorique mis en place par Jacques Rancière pour évoquer les notions de politique de la littérature, du partage du sensible et des régimes d'identification de l'art pour tracer la manière dont les écrivains écossais s'attellent aujourd'hui à la tâche de la fabrication d'un nouveau mythe de l'Écosse, un mythe plus fluide, moins rigide, capable de refléter ce que Rancière décrit comme l'herméneutique du corps social.

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Keywords: Scottish literature and criticism, cultural nationalism, James Kelman, James Robertson, Alan Riach, Tom Leonard, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie, Jacques Rancière's politics of literature, hermeneutics of the social body

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