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Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution. Voice, Class, Nation*

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 336 p.

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> *Le poëte en des jours impies*
> *Vient préparer des jours meilleurs.*
> *Il est l'homme des utopies,*
> *Les pieds ici, les yeux ailleurs.*
> [...]
> *Peuples ! écoutez le poëte !*
> *Écoutez le rêveur sacré !*
> *Dans votre nuit, sans lui complète,*
> *Lui seul a le front éclairé.*
> Victor Hugo, "La Fonction du Poète", *Les Rayons et les Ombres* (1840)[1]
>
> The poet in such days gone awry
> From far brings the tidings of better days.
> One whose spectre is bright and starry
> His feet on earth, his eyes on the distant haze.
> [...]
> Oh people! Listen to the poet,
> Listen to the sacred dreamer,
> For the night without him is dimly lit
> His thoughts alone make each star shimmer.
> Victor Hugo, "The Function of the Poet", trans. David Bellemare Gosselin (2017)[2]

1 Victor Hugo's nineteenth-century vision of a world led by poets and dreamers—famous though often dreaded amongst high-school French pupils—might sound incongruous,

at first, when discussing the cultural politics of contemporary Scotland. Yet after reading Scott Hames's first monograph, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution*, recently published by Edinburgh University Press, one is left wondering about the enduring appeal of literary pretences to prophetical rule.

2 Hames's book sheds light on the neo-romantic dream of Scotland's post-modern literary vanguard, which, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, vindicated Scotland's distinctive voice as one deserving political representation. From the works of Alasdair Gray to those of James Kelman, James Robertson, A. L. Kennedy, and Irvine Welsh, this artistic endeavour, prophesising Scotland's parliamentary future, seemed triumphant, in July 1999, when the new Scottish republic of letters was seconded by an official, Scottish Parliament. The Canongate Wall, built in 2003 on the northern façade of the Scottish Parliament building, stands as a testament to this version of contemporary Scottish history. Its twenty-six, carved quotations, including lines from Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig, Hamish Henderson, Edwin Morgan, and Alasdair Gray, enshrine the idea that Scottish writers engendered devolution.

3 However, this established, self-glorifying myth of contemporary Scottish literature, comes under severe criticism in Hames's monograph. In slightly controversial fashion, Hames argues that the dream of Scotland's literary vanguard—far from ideals of prophetical or artistic independence—followed and substantiated the more prosaic, technocratic project of British political elites, laid out by the Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969–1973), in hope to safeguard Britain's post-imperial union from risks of implosion. Crucially, in other words,

> [...] the demands of nationalist intellectuals in the post-1967 period were politically aligned not with a disruptive, still less a 'revolutionary' movement seeking to overthrow the established order, but with a strategy to re-secure UK sovereignty in an upgraded, 'modernised' form. The Dream played out within the political logic and electoral boundaries of the Grind, and would not otherwise have passed from the terrain of imaginative literature to the affable stones of the Canongate Wall. (p. 40)

4 Such friction—and collusion—between Scottish literary imagination and British managerial politics leads Hames to approach devolution not as a poetic dream come true but as a "structuring principle" (p. 10), a "cultural condition" (p. 302) imposed by the British state on the field of Scottish literature from the top down. Instead of guiding the Scottish nation to political freedom and despite sincere, radical, and patriotic beliefs, Scottish dreamers were subjected to a bitter, Hegelian "cunning of reason". Their literary talent, branding Scottish distinctiveness as a political object requiring limited, vertical representation, merely served the cause of British unity and *status quo*.

5 According to Hames, Scottish literary interplay with British devolving politics took two principal forms. On the one hand, many left-wing writers and intellectuals of the 1970–90s became directly associated with various magazines, such as *Scottish International*, *Cencrastus*, *Chapman*, and *Edinburgh Review*, serving as display-platforms for distinctively Scottish writing—when not trying to influence Labour's internal politics, as in the case of *Radical Scotland*. Many editors and contributors to these magazines, including, for instance, Alasdair Gray, James Robertson, Joy Hendry, George Kerevan, and Pat Kane, would go on to play significant roles as pro-devolution activists within the 1990s Scottish Constitutional Convention.

6 On the other hand, in a more subtle, indirect manner, leading Scottish novelists refashioned Scottish working-class lives and vernacular speech as the new icons and signposts of a distinctively Scottish way of writing. From James Kelman's *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) to Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), and A. L. Kennedy's *Looking for a Possible Dance* (1993), "authentic", proletarian Scottishness was branded as an aesthetic, recognisable "display-identity" (p. 235) in need of legitimate—and legislative—representation. Hames's last two chapters are dedicated to this specific issue in contemporary Scottish writing. Together, they probably constitute the most, arresting, adroit—though possibly disheartening—section of the entire book. As it appears, the very structures, themes, and styles of post-modern Scottish classic novels —that many of us, in Scottish literary studies, have come to love and admire—are mired in the ambiguous, slippery ground of devolution. Whilst empowering Scottish subaltern speech and disenfranchised subjects, by allowing their representation in award-winning literature, Scottish post-modern writing, on the other hand, dispossesses Scottish workers, hindering their radical capacity to secede from social order by marketing their lives and language in the Anglophone, middle-class world of literary consumption and parliamentary *bon mot*. Not even Kelman, the anarchistic, "unparliamentary" (p. 289) writer, is spared from Hames's critique of "difference-fetishising", whose "appetite for signs, motifs, and language encrusted with historical conflict" (p. 295) prevents vernacular "patter" from ever "generating *new form* out of its own, unsettled and illegible status" (p. 297).

7 This half-way point, between the liberation and the commodification of Scottish identity, distinguishes late twentieth-century Scottish writing from its antecedents. Indeed, whilst the so-called "second literary renaissance" of the 1980s and the first "Scottish Renaissance" of the interwar years are often conflated as part of a similar movement towards Scottish cultural independence, Hames identifies a sharp opposition between both literary ventures. On the one hand, the first "Renaissance", epitomised by Hugh MacDiarmid's poetic works, turned a critical eye to post-1707 Scottish writing—the infamous "kailyard" that lay from Robert Burns to J. M. Barrie—, yearning back to fantasies of pure, unsubdued, Scottish medieval panache.[3] On the other hand, most writers of the "second renaissance", eschewing MacDiarmid's separatist dreams, decided to celebrate Scotland's contemporary blend of motley, mongrel, vernacular identities. Yet by doing so, they also accompanied Britain's constitutional reform whose precise aim was to incorporate traits of Scottishness in a new, multicultural, and liberal political order, purged of any secessionist or revolutionary ailment. As explained in Hames's first chapter, such opposition between the first and second "renaissances" became evident during the late 1960s, when poets like Tom Scott and Alexander Scott, two of MacDiarmid's continuators, railed against the review *Scottish International*—future venue for radical texts by Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard, whilst subsidised by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

8 It is perhaps unsurprising, in this context, that 1980–90s Scottish writers went on to rehabilitate MacDiarmid's *bête noire*—the eighteenth-century poet, Robert Burns. As a complex symbol of post-union Scottish literature, standing at the crossroads of Scots and English, radical peasantry and obedient civil service, "Scots wha hae" and "The Dumfries Volunteers", the shade of "Scotland's Bard" had long remained *persona non grata* in Renaissance writing.[4] Yet in the era of devolution, Burns's bardic, "protean" qualities (as termed by Kenneth Simpson in 1988) appealed to new Scottish writers.[5] As

explained by broadcaster Billy Kay in the February 1987 issue of *Radical Scotland* (quoted by Hames, p. 152), Scottish culture was now moving "right back to Burns". Bardship—the ambition to voice and preserve Scottish identity into a representative, authoritative body of work—had become a new symptom of Scotland's devolutionary condition. Certainly, Sheena Wellington's singing of Burns's "A Man's a Man" at the inauguration of the Scottish Parliament, in July 1999, completed this agreement between bardic postures and Scotland's new parliamentarism.

9 In this light, it might have been worthwhile for Hames to further emphasise and detail the poetics of Scottish devolution. Whilst the first part of his book contrasts the works of 1970–80s Scottish intellectuals with those of their literary—chiefly poetic—forebears, his analysis, in the second part, remains limited to Scottish prose. Yet there was no shortage of relevant, vernacular, and parliamentary visions in late twentieth-century Scottish verse. Hames's cunning, cutting-edge research could only have benefitted from a closer review of poetry books, including Douglas Dunn's *St Kilda's Parliament* (1981), Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets for Scotland* (1984), Robert Crawford's *A Scottish Assembly* (1990), and W. N. Herbert's *Cabaret McGonagall* (1996). Likewise, Scottish theatre and its stage of vernacular performance, from Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987) to Edwin Morgan's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1992) and David Greig's *Caledonia Dreaming* (1997) do not feature prominently in Hames's work.

10 Certainly, Hames's multifaceted study, straddling literary criticism and political history, ran the risk of overlooking aspects of the dense—potentially overwhelming—field of contemporary Scottish writing. No doubt historians would also have reservations about Hames's cultural approach to devolution, leaving aside more pragmatic, socio-economic, and industrial factors. Interdisciplinary works always lend themselves to criticisms from the academic clans they try to reconcile. Yet such remarks are but minor in comparison with Hames's ground-breaking reassessment of contemporary Scottish literature—one likely to clear the ground for a new generation of Scottish writers and poets.

11 Above all else, Hames's book invites us to escape the impasse of Scotland's literary devolution. Should Scottish writers and intellectuals then revert to an intransigent, separatist (and potentially reactionary) MacDiarmidian position? Should they find new ways to dream, preparing Scotland's independent future away from Holyrood's managerial stronghold? Or instead, should they renounce their claim to speak for the nation—this omnipresent, bloated concept—, exploring new spaces, times, forms, voices, and communities? In other words, is it now time for post-1999, post-2014, millennial Scottish *literati* to introspect and reinvent their craft—just like post-romantic, post-1848 French writers reimagined the space of French literature after the failure and exile of Victor Hugo's fast-faded, lyrical dreams?

12 Hames does not provide any solutions; yet at a time when devolution appears increasingly insurmountable, his book enables us to pose the right questions, approaching contemporary Scottish culture in radically new, irreverent terms. In other words, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution* is a necessary weapon for anyone hoping to escape, reinvent, or transform the cultural state of the nation. As such, it stands as one of the most significant, Scottish academic outputs of the present century.

NOTES

1. Paul Meurice, Gustave Simon, and Cécile Daubray (eds), *Œuvres Complètes de Victor Hugo*, vol. 17, Paris, Ollendorf, 1909, pp. 540 and 547.

2. David Bellemare Gosselin, "Translation of 'La Fonction du Poète' by Victor Hugo", *The Society of Classical Poets*, 2017. Available on <https://classicalpoets.org/2017/11/17/translation-of-la-function-du-poet-by-victor-hugo/> (accessed on 21 February 2020).

3. Certainly, MacDiarmid's Renaissance was not merely reactionary, including revolutionary, communist, and internationalist components; yet these were mingled with dreams of cultural purity and political secessionism. See Scott Lyall, "Towards a New Scotland: Selfhood, History, and the Scottish Renaissance", in S. Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 23–55.

4. Alan Riach, "MacDiarmid's Burns", in R. Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, pp. 198–215; Paul Malgrati, "MacDiarmid's Burns: The Political Context, 1917–1928", *Scottish Literary Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, pp. 47–66.

5. Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1988.

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