

Hells, Havens, Hulls: Literary Reflections of Scottish Cities

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To anyone looking for patterns in human history, the formation and development of large urban conglomerations must surely appear as one of the most consistent and universal trends discernible. One may also perceive a movement towards global uniformity of urban settlements especially in our present times; and yet cities still remain as different from one another as do human beings, for all their generic similarities. Under these circumstances, looking at literary representations of urban milieus in the context of national literatures seems to be an appropriate manner of doing justice to the ambivalent nature of such images which reflect a specific city or cities, and at the same time the city as an ideal form in the Platonic sense, the one blueprint behind its many and varied manifestations.

In this brief and correspondingly eclectic survey of the city as a topos in Scottish literature from the eighteenth century to the present day, I would like to begin by borrowing and adapting a global framework outlined by John Rennie Short. His threefold typology of urban discourses will, by way of a slight adaptation, provide a grid for the ordering of my specific observations on selected Scottish texts. On these observations I will finally elaborate in reference to another general model set out in Paolo Virno's *Grammar of the Multitude*.

My first source is a recent article in which John Rennie Short distinguishes between the authoritarian, the collective and the cosmic city; a trichotomy with which I propose to match the respective images of the city as hell, the city as haven, and the city as hull. In the hope that the first two pairings may for the time being seem self-evident enough, let me try to explain the third. Short claims that the urban coalescence was initially a religious artifact whose inherent symbolism was hollowed out by a process of secularisation, transforming the meaningful cosmic city into the merely functional market city. The latter he sees as characterised by a mass of superficial signs which do not add up to any deeper or coherent sense, and which thus leave human beings without a sense of purpose to their lives: 'At its existentialist bleakest the city

becomes a setting for the meaningless passage of the individual through a blind universe, bereft of meaning' (23).

I shall come back to this point, which Short aptly enough illustrates with an example from a twentieth-century Scottish novel, James Kelman's *How late it was, how late* (Short, 23). First I will begin my historical account with the attempt to identify a characteristic juxtaposition of motifs related to all three of the abovementioned images, in an eighteenth-century Scottish poem. The text in question is 'Auld Reekie' by Robert Fergusson, the title Old Smoky being a time-honoured nickname of Edinburgh, the first and for long the only city of any considerable size in Scotland. Trevor Royle has chronicled its appearance in literature from around the beginning of the sixteenth century, when William Dunbar exhorted the authorities of Edinburgh to take action against some blatant or pungent nuisances.^[1] Royle's summary of Dunbar's stocktaking reads as follows: 'It was not a pleasant picture. The city smells horribly, poverty is rife, merchants swindle honest men, the citizens fall pray [*sic*] to violence and crime and even the town's minstrels have fallen on such poverty of ideas that they can only sing two songs' (12).

If Dunbar's Edinburgh was sharply divided into a hell for the common people and a haven for the courtly and commercial elite, life in Fergusson's Auld Reekie was marked by a unique conviviality or 'mixer-maxter of the social classes' (Royle 97). Fergusson's poem reflects the outlook of citizens who have accommodated themselves pretty well in their environment, and have made their peace even with the infernal smells. The refuse dumped on the street each morning is referred to as 'Edina's roses' (Crawford 140), a variant of the popular euphemism Flooers o' Edinburgh. The dirty gutters are the nemesis of the fop or 'macaroni drunk' (144), who is therein subjected to an egalitarian levelling of his pretensions. Even 'deeds o' darkness and o' night' (143) do not meet with Draconian censure or Scots flyting, but are treated in the mellow spirit of Horatian satire; the mock-heroic talk about the 'glory' of the 'bruiser' is matched by the mock-moralistic talk about the 'shame' of the 'damn'd whores and rogues' (144).

Fergusson's poem thus paints a rather couthy Pandemonium, or a perpetual carnival that has survived Reformationist clean-up attempts. His city is not only a haven from inclement weather, 'Unfleggit by the year's alarm' (141); it also harbours the 'joyous tavern' and 'mony a club' (144) where merriment goes on after hours. The characteristic intermingling of classes and the freedom of speech in such enclaves made them an important informal forum of the Scottish Enlightenment: unorthodox thought and behaviour found shelter here just as debtors could 'breathe the bliss of open sky' (149) in the sanctuary of Holyrood Abbey, safe from the agents of the law. Those, however, are not the only representatives of the authoritarian city in Fergusson's view: equally watchful are the 'stairhead critics' who spy on 'Their neighbour's sma'est faults' (142) and thus represent the danger of a collective tyranny of the self-righteous, kept in check by

tolerant urbanity.

A more devious threat to the special kind of social life that Edinburgh bred came from the construction of the New Town, a project greeted with enthusiasm in Fergusson's poem, although he does express fear that the grand scheme begun under the guidance of 'Drummond's sacred hand' (150) might not fare so well under corrupt successors.[2] The nostalgia with which the poet regards the former Lord Provost parallels that with which he contemplates the palace of Holyrood, abandoned by royalty since the Union of Crowns in 1603. The former living symbol of Scotland's 'dignity' has become an empty and defunct reminder of its 'ancient state'; the poet is left

Lamenting what auld Scotland knew
Bie days forever frae her view. (148)

There is a twofold irony here: for the removal of the court surely contributed to the transformation of Dunbar's divided into Fergusson's fused Edinburgh, while the building of the New Town enabled a new social segregation that was fairly well complete when Robert Burns entered the city in 1786.[3] Fergusson was long dead by then, and the social elite had descended from the upper floors of the Old Town lands, to occupy more spacious and more sanitary dwellings beyond the former boundaries. To Burns, this development seems to have made the city only more impressive; and the 'Address to Edinburgh' praises the 'elegance and splendor' of the buildings, alongside Edina's status as a seat of commerce, justice and learning. What seems even more important, though, is the liberty of thought and speech that the city promised him. Coming 'from an Ayrshire community which was still very much in the iron grip of Knox's dogma and discipline' (Fowler 136), Burns held great expectations of Edinburgh's people: 'Their views enlarg'd, their lib'ral mind, / Above the narrow, rural vale' (Kinsley 249).

The earnestness of this expectation is somewhat easier to assess than the degree to which it was met. Fowler cites evidence suggesting that on the whole, the egalitarian Burns found urban men not too different from their rural cousins, while he admitted to the existence of a superior type among the city's women (see 136-137). In contrast to his success rate elsewhere, Burns's relations with such females seem to have borne out the note of unfulfilled desire that characterises the poet's gaze in the 'Address', where 'th'adoring eye' and the 'fancy' of the poet are engaged by 'Heav'n's beauties' (Kinsley 249). A discrepancy between stimulation and gratification, however, can turn a paradise of the senses into a tantalising hell, and if such a sentiment is present only as an undertone in Burns's poem, the latter does nonetheless invite association with more explicit passages such as the following, from Edwin Muir's non-fictional observations published 1935 under the title *Scottish Journey*. In the Edinburgh section of the book, we read:

The apparently unmotivated intentness of Scottish street crowds is filled with unsatisfied desire. It is as if the eye were trying to undertake the functions of all the other senses, and the accumulated frustration and hope of a people were thrown into a painfully concentrated look. (18)

This seems eminently applicable to the combination between the voracious and the nostalgic gaze in Burns's 'Address', where the first and the last stanza refer to Edinburgh's past role as seat not only of the monarchy, but also of the Scottish parliament. The Castle and the Palace serve as a reminder of lost glory, viewed 'With awe-struck thought, and pitying tears'. To the wildly beating heart of the patriotic onlooker, fulfillment comes only through sentimental empathy with those who bore 'Old *Scotia's* bloody lion'. The praise of Edinburgh's present and the expression of individual hope and promise or temptation is thus sandwiched into a lament for the city's and the country's past. For this past, the ancient monuments stand as relics that cast the 'honor'd shade' in which the rural poet takes 'shelter', as one to whom Edinburgh is still a haven, if clearly not a heaven (Kinsley 250).

If the feelings expressed by Burns on his entrance into Edinburgh both overlap and contrast with Fergusson's attitude towards his accustomed habitat, then the differences can be in part explained in terms of a disparity between the insider's and the outsider's perspective. Elsewhere, these two are sometimes found in a complex conjunction, as for instance in the final section of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*. Stevenson could hold much against his native Edinburgh; not least the climate, against which the more expansive city of his day was so much less effectively shielded than Fergusson's Old Town that it earned the following verdict expressed at the very beginning of Stevenson's 'Picturesque Notes': 'For all who love shelter and the blessings of the sun, who hate dark weather and perpetual tilting against squalls, there could scarcely be found a more unhomely and harassing place of residence' (4).

At the same time, Stevenson defiantly maintained that Edinburgh had 'but partly abdicated' (5) as a capital, and that there was 'no city of the same distinction' (4) to be found anywhere else in the world. In *Kidnapped*, however, his protagonist David Balfour finds himself repelled by the very sights which should have given pleasure to a youth of humble country upbringing first setting foot in the nation's principal city. Nonetheless, David's thoughts at that moment are with Alan Breck, the companion of his recent adventures in the Highlands, and he views the parting from Alan which was a condition of safe access to the city, as a betraying of loyalties. It is this sense of guilt that colours David's first impression, reported in the last chapter of *Kidnapped*:

The huge height of the buildings, running up to ten and fifteen stories, the narrow arched entries that continually vomited passengers, the wares of the merchants in their windows, the hubbub and endless stir, the foul smells and fine clothes, and a hundred other

particulars too small to mention, struck me into a kind of stupor of surprise. (313)

This is surely at least in part a projection of authorial sentiments onto a fictional character, and moreover a good 130 years into the past. The description of the mid-eighteenth century city here contains the word 'narrow', an epithet which Burns had used to evoke a mindset prevailing in rural Ayrshire: and this mindset was indeed one which Stevenson likewise discerned in his Victorian city. In Stevenson's literary imagination, the same contrasts which Fergusson sought to reconcile through poetic mediation were more likely to engender narratives of escape, pursuit, capture and return. Behind this pattern we can discern the dual nature of Victorian Edinburgh, a city that was on the whole far more sanitary and well-regulated than its previous incarnations, but that could at the same time feel far more constrained or restrictive.

The Edinburgh that David Balfour sees is chaotic and confusing. The historical city that he entered had harboured mettlesome individual minds like that of David Hume, seen refractory mobs as in the so-called Porteous Riots of 1736, or witnessed other 'spectacular events' (Daiches 111) such as the takeover by the Jacobite army in 1745. Even the staid Athens of the North of the early-nineteenth century, though lending itself as a suitable backdrop for the stage-managed pageantry of George IV's royal visit, had still produced 'ebullitions' (Young 76) over religious and legal matters. In contrast, Stevenson's Edinburgh seems to have no longer been too fertile a breeding ground either for radical thought or for radical action.

History and literature indicate that the evident marginalisation of eccentricity continued well into the twentieth century, with a consequent decline in the state of the arts. In 1878 Robert Louis Stevenson had still taken Edinburgh as 'Half a capital and half a country town' (*Notes*, 6), and when in 1930 Andrew Dewar Gibb bluntly declared, 'modern Scotland has no capital' (237), this judgment was founded less on the lack of political clout than on a drought of cultural achievement or activity, prior to Edinburgh's metamorphosis into Festival City from 1947 onwards. There was and still is some doubt as to whether the annual inundation of the city with world-famous artists, amateur performers and their respective audiences for the duration of three weeks has any profound effect on cultural life outwith that period. The poet Robert Garioch shared such reservations, though in 'Embroidery to the Ploy', he mentions a positive side-effect in the at least temporary recreation of an eighteenth-century style social farrago in venues with a special late license:

Jist pitten-out, the drucken mobs
frae howffs in Potterraw,
fleean, to hob-nob wi the Nobs,
ran to this Music Haa. (18)

Elsewhere, Garioch's Edinburgh pubs can appear as enclosures to escape from rather than to escape to. In 'Doktor Faust in Rose Street', the eponymous visitor terminates a brief sojourn from the place of his eternal damnation with the request to be taken back there, away from the student crowd with their unintelligible beery 'clavers' (78). The comic exaggeration qualifies the opinion to a certain extent: Faust's conclusion 'as Hell to Rose Street, sae is smell to stink' (79) tests the limits of hyperbole; and with their particular clientele, the venues located in this particular part of the New Town neither could nor can be taken as representative of Edinburgh in general. This compartmentalisation, however, is one of Garioch's very complaints, as voiced for instance in the poem 'To Robert Fergusson'.

Here, the poet laments a twofold division of the city along spatial, social, and linguistic lines. The use of urban Scots in Garioch's poetry is an attempt to bridge the division, by once again elevating the 'coarse and grittie' tongue of the Cowgate, abandoned by the educated classes to its degeneration into a 'corrupt twang' (22) which nonetheless remained the closest living relative of the eighteenth-century rhymers' literary Scots. To the modern poet, the sight of Fergusson's grave brings a meditative or dreamlike recreation of a former wholeness, an integrated and fulsome life symbolised in the personification of Fergusson's Edinburgh as a young woman 'weill worth seein' (19), holding out the promise of good things for those who lived with her. The meditation proves that ancient relics still mean something to those who recall former times, while the contemplation of shallow modern façades brings home the absence of meaning, substance, or reality:

Thir days, whan cities seem unreal
to makars, inwit gars us feel
fause as the hauf-inch marble peel
in Princes Street. (23)

Neither, however, does a look at the Old Town satisfy, for it is only a 'waesom wreck' of its former self. But if Garioch's palpable fondness for his city is thus often nostalgic, this nostalgia is not directed at an ideal past, but rather at one whose contradictions and imperfections could still be encompassed and envisaged by a single poetic sensibility. In this respect, there is a strong similarity between Garioch's regard for Fergusson and T.S. Eliot's regard for Donne; and in the poem 'The Muir', Garioch elaborates further on modern Scotland's predicament and its chances of embracing closeness and distance, reality and idea, reason and emotion, in a unified or indeed a 'twafald' (65) imagination. The scope of this imagination, however, he sees as fettered by infernal circumstances, including a dual urban hell with the smoking furnaces of Glasgow on the one side, and the bourgeois frigidity of Edinburgh on the other:

In Glesca and in Hell muckle is kent
of reik and flames, by deevils and by men
levan or hauf-gaits levan, and they ken
in Edinbrugh the wey to freeze the ghaist
in ice as thick as thon in Dante's den. (52)

Over the past hundred years or so, Scottish urban literature has reacted in various ways to or against its real or supposed confinement. As regards Edinburgh fiction, the range of this variety can perhaps be measured in terms of the distance between Muriel Spark's Jean Brodie and Ian Rankin's John Rebus, or Irvine Welsh's Mark Renton. From the picture of a social framework with a stable centre that allowed a fairly precise pinpointing of characters and behaviour as orthodox or unorthodox, central or marginal, we have arrived at a picture in which the margins threaten to overshadow the core. This core is, as Christopher Harvie puts it, "that middle ground of "insecure Scotland" which is tenuously protected by "overwhelmed" (65) guardians such as DI Rebus.

The Edinburgh of Rankin's crime fiction is subject to all kinds of corrupting influences that undermine decency as well as respectability or gentility. The retreat of beleaguered middle-class values complements the long-established Scottish pattern of a rebellion against gentility, an assault which in Victorian Scotland could produce alliances between the most and the least cultured members of society. As Bernice Martin states in a 1981 study, the features of social change in Britain since the 1960s have included a growing convergence of behaviour between the expressive bohemians and the anarchic lumpenproletariat, both alike 'in their patterns of unstructured mess', and both 'anathema to the spirit of respectability' (55).

Seen from the conservative perspective of the petty bourgeois, there may thus indeed be reason enough to link whatever bohemian reconquista of Edinburgh has taken place, with the city's recent notoriety for crime. Still, there was enough criminal activity in Victorian Edinburgh, as shown in the real-life accounts of James McLevy, or the fictional case histories of James McGovan.^[4] The double life of Deacon James Brodie as Town Counsellor and burglar belonged to the late-eighteenth century; and the career of Robert Knox with his connections to the notorious grave-robbers and corpse-purveyors Burke and Hare to the early nineteenth. Nonetheless, it is not only contemporary fiction's zest for debunking that has undermined the twentieth-century stereotype image of Edinburgh as a haven of peace or boredom, ruled by Morningside tea-drinkers and Jenners shoppers. Rankin's Rebus knows his statistics as well, in all likelihood, as do many of Rankin's readers, who can hardly doubt the veracity of claims such as these:

There were large chunks of Edinburgh where you could live your whole life and never

encounter a spot of bother. Yet the murder rate in Scotland was double that of its southern neighbour, and half those murders took place in the two main cities. (113-114)

A similar use of authentic material occurs in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, where rates of HIV infection are interwoven with TV game show noises in a manner that casts doubt not on the validity, but rather on the impact of such statistics (see 193).

While a desperately hedonistic life in Welsh's Edinburgh goes on under the shadow of AIDS, it is a disease called Senga that reigns in Matthew Fitt's recent Scottish Sci-Fi novel *But n Ben A-Go-Go*. Apart from using a futuristic projection of urban Scots as the vehicle of narration, this tale also projects Scotland's cities into a larger dystopian unit known as Port. The reader is challenged to gauge the similarities and differences between this place and the ones he or she knows; a task comparable to that posed by Lewis Grassie Gibbon's 1930s novel *Grey Granite* with its synthetic array of a 'socially fragmented' (McCulloch 36) Duncairn, or indeed by the enigmatic setting of James Thomson's long narrative poem *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), which a recent compendium of Scottish literature describes as follows:

A mixture of negative mind-state, nightmare, or dark hallucination – the idea and image of city used as a symbol with multiple significance, its usefulness stemming from its concrete location and its atmospheric possibilities of mausoleum gloom and stagnation. (Gifford 383)

A similarly atmospheric setting is produced by the projection of one city alone in Alasdair Gray's 1981 novel *Lanark*, a monumental work of fiction in which Glasgow coexists with its fictional mirror image Unthank. In its dual structure, *Lanark* continued as well departed from a tradition of realistic representation that combined or oscillated between the indictment of hellish conditions, and the expression of defiant pride in those who managed to live in them. Among the preceding images of Glasgow were that of a neater and tidier counterpart to eighteenth-century Edinburgh;^[5] and that of a bastion of mercantile honesty and civic harmony, as represented in the Bailie Nicol Jarvie in Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*. The industrial revolution then left little more of the 'Dear Green Place' than its Gaelic name; as early as 1857, the poet Alexander Smith would half lament and half extol the fate of a 'true son' (Whyte 7) of Glasgow, whose life and grave are mapped out within its confines of the city he addresses in the spirit of sacrificial submission: 'A sacredness of love and death / Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath' (10).

Since the mid-Victorian days of Alexander Smith, the image of industrial Glasgow – whose development has been meticulously traced by Moira Burgess – and the image of the working class have formed a nexus firmly ensconced at the very centre of the Scottish sense of identity. This might be resented for different reasons: by those, for instance, who share MacDiarmid's view

that nothing good could ever come out of such a deprived and depraved place as Glasgow. A completely different, but equally resentful stance comes over in the following comment from *Trainspotting*:

Ah've never met one Weedjie whae disnae think that they are the only suffering proletarians in Scotland, Western Europe, the World. Weedjie experience ay hardship is the only relevant experience ay it. (191)

This version of Glasgow/Edinburgh rivalry as a deprivation contest leads right into the thick of Scotland's contemporary debate. If it is true, as Michael Gardiner holds, that Scotland 'lacks the luxury of comfortable rural "organic" images of the national culture' (49), then privileged representations of urban experience would by the same token be potentially privileged representations of Scottishness. If the artistic scope or worth of such representations were limited by the soil on which they grew, then Scottish culture as whole would be branded as deficient.

Hence the ambivalent attitudes towards success and failure, especially of the artistic kind, in the literary production of Scotland. This double-edgedness is often accentuated by making a person with artistic or literary ambition the focal character, as for instance in Archie Hind's 1966 novel *The Dear Green Place*, which shows the protagonist Mat Craig's effort to become a novelist in spite of his view of the odds. To him, 'the grey tenement sprouted world of Glasgow' is devoid of all that makes a novel's material:

the aberrant attempts of human beings and societies to respond to circumstances, all that was bizarre, grotesque and extravagant in human life, all that whole background of violence, activity, intellectual and imaginative ardour, political daring. (87)

The chief irony here lies in Mat's inability or refusal to see what others do perceive. The grotesque, the bizarre, and the violent had after all been obvious enough to become novelistic stereotypes. In 1935, Alexander McArthur's and Kingsley Long's *No Mean City* put the razor-wielding hardman on the literary map; in the 1960s, the genre tradition was still popular and productive, with Corgi paperback editions of the aforementioned tale as well as of Bill McGhee's *Cut and Run*.^[6] Books like these are what Alasdair Gray alludes to in the famous scene from *Lanark*: 'Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves' (243).

Once again, the key is the difference between character and author. Duncan Thaw speaks from the perspective of a young art student in the 1950s; Alasdair Gray writes from that of a mature artist well aware of what Cairns Craig calls 'a profound amnesia about the real nature of Scottish culture and the actual history of the arts in Scotland' (34). Yet *Lanark* itself is clearly the fruit of

Gray's attempt to break new ground, to transcend fictional traditions or conventions, and to create a work of art on a previously unmatched scale; and the resulting creation of the surreal Unthank does come pretty near to what Lewis Grassie Gibbon might have considered a fitting embodiment of 'the essential Glasgow' (82), when he doubted the possibility of any anthropomorphic image.[7]

Craig identifies *Lanark's* setting as belonging to a type of urban hell in Scottish fiction which is made hellish by the absence of history. The wraith-like life of a nation still extant, but no longer an independent player on the historical stage, is what Craig sees mirrored in the literary recreation of the Scottish city as 'a world of endless repetition, of endless endurance' (131) in which there is at best a drink- or drug-induced simulation of individual fulfillment. Seen through the lens of Short's typology, Alasdair Gray's Janus-faced portrait of Glasgow/Unthank shows a combination of aspects belonging to two complementary sub-categories. Short distinguishes between a thin authoritarian city where the main compulsive force is the drive for self-gratification, and a thick authoritarian city of total surveillance and control; the respective archetypes he names are Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.

The motif of an erasure of history connects more obviously with the latter, but does indeed have a place in both, especially when the market city transmutes into the upmarket city. In a 1991 study, Ian Spring has branded the creation of a New Glasgow image, beginning with the 1986 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign and continuing with the candidacy for European City of Culture status, as yet another blanking out of recollection. The peculiar deviousness he detects lies in the seemingly deliberate substitution of exposable, collectable or consumable artifacts for living memory; an operation exploiting as well as perverting the nostalgia built into Glasgow's mental framework ever since the obliteration of the Dear Green Place by a succession of dwellings as ephemeral as those of James Merrill's New York.[8] The entire city, viewed over time, is thus a sight as 'intrinsically unstable, continuously catastrophic' (Lombardo 148) as that of Massimo Cacciari's Venice.

Far-fetched parallels apart, the permanent refashioning of Glasgow has doubtlessly made the gap one of the more permanent features in its cityscape, and the nostalgic contemplation of the gap one of the more durable motifs in its literature. Proof of the fact that once again, nostalgia does not necessarily equate sentimental idealisation, may be seen in writings such as the 1979 poem 'Maryhill' by Tom McGrath:

Streets crisscross, divert, make bends
round the spaces where the buildings were.
Now that they've gone, we want them back,
but it wasn't exactly paradise, if you remember. (145)

Nonetheless, a staple part of Glasgow narrative, fictional or not, is the Glaswegian's epiphanic or vacant gaze at a vacant plot where a familiar building stood. For real-life examples, see TV footage of Billy Connolly's return to the spot where he was born, in the BBC series *World Tour of Scotland*;^[9] or read Ian Spring's account of his visit to the spot where his childhood home had been 'erased from the landscape' (161). As an example from recent fiction, consider a passage from Anne Donovan's 2003 novel *Buddha Da*; its protagonist, archteypally named Jimmy, is surprised by his own feeling about the vanishing of a school for which he never cared much when he was a pupil there: 'So how come when ah turned that corner and seen that big gap where it used tae be, ah felt as if somebody's punched me' (314-15).

Donovan's book is just one among a number of significant recent contributions by female authors to Scottish urban writing. In addition to the most prominent names such as Liz Lochhead in poetry and A.L. Kennedy or Janice Galloway in fiction, I would like to single out Leila Aboulela, a writer of Sudanese origin who has added to the range of Aberdeen's literary reflections, most notably with the 1999 novel *The Translator*. Talking about new developments, I should also cite Joseph Mills' 1989 *Towards the End*, as being 'the first openly gay novel set in Glasgow with Glasgow characters' (Morgan 92).

Donovan's novel has no such obvious claim to novelty, but it does provide an original and subtly crafted counterpoint to the vision of writers such as James Kelman. Donovan's Glasgow is hell in its thinnest or lightest version; her main character suffers no destitution or squalor, though he is indeed trapped in a repetitive working-class lifestyle in which even excess is regulated to the point of nausea. As the realisation of a spiritual vacuum at the centre of his existence dawns on him, he finds himself drawn by the austere attraction of a Buddhist Centre that pulls him away from his family and friends. In the novel, there is no narrative closure or synthesis of the incongruous elements; no final victory or mediation between the contrary forces or lifestyles. Instead, the reader is left to ponder the relative merits of different reactions against the loss of cosmic meaning. Short describes the real-life urban backlash against secularisation as follows: 'In the city there are many and varied attempts to fill the God-shaped hole at the center of our materialistic culture' (23).

Books such as Donovan's may help to remind readers of the necessity of such attempts, as well as of the dangers and difficulties attendant on each individual one. The secularisation of the city has after all been a process of liberation, too: and wherever the city manifests a generally accepted cosmology or indeed ideology, the status of the citizen is bound to be contingent on acceptance.^[10] Neither is collectivism the one unified answer to it all, for, as Short says in summary of a caveat voiced by Janet Abu-Lughod, 'civil society contains the Michigan Militia and Ku Klux Klan as well as chess clubs and benign neighborhood groups' (24).

Similarly, the social contexts we belong to, our family, friends, colleagues, may double as our life support system and our torturers: and the city we live in may double as our playground and our penitentiary. Literature may promote the awareness of such duplicities and serve as navigational guide for the urban reader who traverses hell on each crossing from one haven to another, or who locates new meaning inside the empty hull of derelict signifiers. We would do well, however, to consider that writing the city may not be tantamount to mastering it. Paolo Virno suggests that when 'opportunism and idle talk become tools of great importance' in the world of labour, then communicative action 'no longer lies outside the sphere of the material reproduction of life' (107).

Food for thought for one confronted with the loquaciousness of today's Scottish urban writing and of its literary criticism. Among the voices which readers make out in recent texts, many bespeak a far greater claim to authenticity than for instance those which one finds in the so-called Proletarian Novel of the 1930s. Whereas George Blake or James Barke would tend to use a third-person narrator and keep the rendering of working-class dialogue within the bounds of middle-class sensibilities, the readers of Kelman or Welsh get a largely unmediated hearing of their characters. But if those characters' lives are infernally repetitive, then their utterances are likely to be so, too. The question then is whether the redundancy of the text leads to anything else than a corresponding cycle of repetitions in author/reader communication. Virno's *Grammar of the Multitude* cautions against the rash accusation that repetition proves 'the *childishness* of contemporary metropolitan forms of behaviour'. But whereas he sees a fundamental need for repetition as 'the principal safe haven in the absence of solidly established customs,' he also sees a need for repetition to transcend itself, through a process lacking in contemporary cities:

In traditional societies (or, if you like, in the experience of the 'people'), the repetition which is so dear to babies gave way to more complex and articulated forms of protection: to *ethos*; that is to say, to the usages and customs, to the habits which constitute the base of the substantial communities. (39)

The production of commonality is a matter of civic survival. Virno warns that a 'publicness of the intellect' which does not 'become a *republic*, a public sphere, a political community' (41) will cause a mushrooming of hierarchies, of dependency and submission. In view of this danger, it seems vital for Scotland to remember that Scottish cities have, as Angus Calder states, 'functioned on republican terms' (*Culture* 8) in the past, and have never entirely lost their demotic energy and democratic potential.[11]

NOTES

[1] See poem 55 (174-176) in Bawcutt's edition. In contrast to this, Dunbar addresses Aberdeen as 'The lamp of bewtie, bountie and blythnes,' or as 'The vall of velth, guid cheir and mirrines' (Bawcutt 64).

[2] George Drummond took an active role also in promoting the spread of education among Edinburgh's children; see T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830*. London: Collins, 1969.

[3] For an in-depth study of the relationship between Scottish literature and this social background, see David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1680-1830*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1961.

[4] James McLevy, an Edinburgh detective, recorded his experiences in a series of books in the 1860s. In 1878, the author and musician William Crawford Honeyman published a set of fictional case histories under the pseudonym James McGovan.

[5] Fergusson's 'Auld Reekie', expresses the following hope:

Nae mair shall Glasgow striplings threap
Their city's beauty and its shape,
While our new city spreads around
Her bonny wings on fairy ground. (150)

[6] See Spring (74) and Morgan (89) for details on content and presentation of these publications.

[7] Gibbon himself concludes: 'The monster of Loch Ness is probably the lost soul of Glasgow, in scales and horns, disporting itself in the Highlands after evacuating finally and completely its mother-corpse' (82).

[8] A comparison of works like the 1962 poem 'An Urban Convalescence' to contemporary texts from Glasgow is just one of many possibilities for making or highlighting connections between the urban west of Scotland and the other side of the Atlantic.

[9] Produced in 1994 by Sleepy Dumpling (Music) Ltd; VHS recordings distributed by Polygram.

[10] The ambivalence of my phrasing is intended: for the individual's acceptance of a cosmology or ideology can be as crucial as the cosmology's or ideology's acceptance of an individual.

[11] This article is based on a paper delivered at 'Text and the City: Language and Literature in Urban Contexts' (Cairns, Australia, July 2005).

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