

1.4 G. Gregory Smith, from *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919)

Two considerations of contrary bearing present themselves at the outset. One is of encouragement; that the literature is the literature of a small country, that it runs a shorter course than others, and that there is no linguistic divorce between its earlier and later stages, as in southern English. In this shortness and cohesion the most favourable conditions seem to be offered for the making of a general estimate. But, on the other hand, we find at closer scanning that this cohesion, at least in formal expression and in choice of material, is only apparent, that the literature is remarkably varied, and that it becomes, under the stress of foreign influence and native division and reaction, almost a zigzag of contradictions. The antithesis need not, however, disconcert us. Perhaps in the very combination of opposites—what either of the two Sir Thomases, of Norwich and Cromarty, might have been willing to call ‘the Caledonian antiszygy’—we have a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability, which is another way of saying that he has made allowance for new conditions, in his practical judgement, which is the admission that two sides of the matter have been considered. If therefore Scottish history and life are, as an old northern writer said of something else, ‘varied with a clean contrair spirit’, we need not be surprised to find that in his literature the Scot presents two aspects which appear contradictory. [. . .]

One characteristic or mood stands out clearly, though it is not easily described in a word. We stumble over ‘actuality’, ‘grip of fact’, ‘sense of detail’, ‘realism’, yet with the conviction that we are proceeding in the right direction. We desire to express not merely the talent of close observation, but the power of producing, by a cumulation of touches, a quick and perfect image to the reader. What we are really thinking of is ‘intimacy’ of style. Scottish literature has no monopoly of this, which is to be found in the best work everywhere, and is indeed a first axiom of artistic method, no matter what processes of selection and recollection may follow; but in Scots the zest for handling a multitude of details rather than for seeking broad effects by suggestion is very persistent. [. . .]

The Scottish Muse has, however, another mood. Though she has loved reality, sometimes to maudlin affection for the commonplace, she has loved not less the airier pleasure to be found in the confusion of the senses, in the fun of things thrown topsyturvy, in the horns of elfland and the voices of the mountains. It is a strange union of opposites, alien as Hotspur and Glendower. [. . .] Does any other man combine so strangely the severe and tender in his character, or forgo the victory of the most relentless logic at the sudden bidding of sentiment or superstition? Does literature anywhere, of this small compass, show such a mixture of contraries as his in outlook,

subject, and method; real life and romance, everyday fact and the supernatural, things holy and things profane, gentle and simple, convention and 'cantrip', thistles and thistledown? [. . .] There is more in the Scottish antithesis of the real and fantastic than is to be explained by the familiar rules of rhetoric. The sudden jostling of contraries seems to preclude any relationship by literary suggestion. The one invades the other without warning. They are the 'polar twins' of the Scottish Muse. [. . .] This mingling, even of the most eccentric kind, is an indication to us that the Scot, in that medieval fashion which takes all things as granted, is at his ease in both 'rooms of life', and turns to fun, and even profanity, with no misgivings. For Scottish literature is more medieval in habit than criticism has suspected, and owes some part of its picturesque strength to this freedom in passing from one mood to another. It takes some people more time than they can spare to see the absolute propriety of a gargoyle's grinning at the elbow of a kneeling saint.

(G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* London: Macmillan & Co., 1919, pp.3-5, 19-20, 35.)

1.5 T.S. Eliot, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?' (*Athenaeum* August 1919)

We suppose that there is an English literature, and Professor Gregory Smith supposes that there is a Scotch literature. When we assume that a literature exists we assume a great deal: we suppose that there is one of the five or six (at most) great organic formations of history. We do not suppose merely 'a history', for there might be a history of Tamil literature; but a part of History, which for us is the history of Europe. We suppose not merely a corpus of writings in one language, but writings and writers between whom there is a tradition; and writers who are not merely connected by tradition in time, but who are related so as to be in the light of eternity contemporaneous, from a certain point of view cells in one body, Chaucer and Hardy. We suppose a mind which is not only the English mind of one period with its prejudices of politics and fashions of taste, but which is a greater, finer, more positive, more comprehensive mind than the mind of any period. And we suppose to each writer an importance which is not only individual, but due to his place as a constituent of this mind. When we suppose that there is a literature, therefore, we suppose a great deal.

Professor Gregory Smith assumes the existence of a Scottish literature more by the title of his book than by any assertion he makes. For in his treatment, which is fairminded, honest, intelligent and scholarly, he even supplies us with suggestions towards finding reasons to deny the existence of a Scottish literature. He has written a series of essays, dealing with what

appears to be one subject, and the conclusion issues very honestly from his treatment that the unity of the subject is not literary but only geographical. What he has done is, because of the reflections it provokes, perhaps more interesting than either of two things he might have done. He might have written a handbook of writers who were born or flourished north of a frontier; such a book might have a practical utility, without giving occasion to any generalizations. Or he might have made a study of the Scotch mind. Such a study might have great interest on its own account, but at all events it is not part of Mr Gregory Smith's intentions. A book which contains no discussion of Scottish philosophy, which barely mentions the names of Hume and Reid, and only reports the personal dominance of Dugald Stewart in Edinburgh, does not pretend to be a study of the Scotch mind. It is only the Scotch mind in literature and belles-lettres that is charted. Because the book is neither a handbook nor a study of the Scotch mind, it is a study of Scotch literature in a sense which requires that there should be an organic formation.

What clearly comes out under Mr Gregory Smith's handling is the fact that Scottish literature falls into several periods, and that these periods are related not so much to each other as to corresponding periods in English literature. The way in which Scottish literature has been indebted to English literature is different from the way in which English literature has been indebted to other literatures. English literature has not only, at times, been much affected by the Continent, but has sometimes, for the moment, even appeared to be thrown off its balance by foreign influence. But in the long run we can see that the continuity of the language has been the strongest thing; so that however much we need French or Italian literature to explain English literature of any period, we need, to explain it, the English inheritance still more. Scottish literature lacks, in the first place, the continuity of the language. It is precisely in the years when English literature was acquiring the power of a world literature that the Scottish language was beginning to decay or to be abandoned. Gawain Douglas, in Tudor times, is perhaps the last great Scotch poet to write Scots with the same feeling toward the language, the same conviction, as an Englishman writing English. A hundred years later, a Scot unquestionably Scottish, one of the greatest prose writers of his time, Sir Thomas Urquhart, translated Rabelais into a language which is English.

Mr Gregory Smith makes it copiously clear that Scots literature was the literature of the Lowlands, and that the Scot of the Lowlands was at all times much more closely in touch with his Southron enemy than with the Gaelic occasional ally. Whatever aesthetic agitation may have taken place in the Highland brain, the disturbance was not communicated to the Lowlander. We are quite at liberty to treat the Scots language as a dialect, as one of the several English dialects which gradually and inevitably amalgamated into one language. Only Scotland, more isolated, and differing

from the others more than they differed from each other, retained its local peculiarities much longer. The first part of the history of Scottish literature is a part of the history of English literature when English was several dialects; the second part is a part of the history of English literature when English was two dialects—English and Scots; the third part is something quite different—it is the history of a provincial literature. And finally, there is no longer any tenable important distinction to be drawn for the present day between the two literatures.

Even if we inspect the earlier Scottish literature alone—if we take it at the period following Chaucer when nearly all the poetry of any permanent value was being produced in Scotland and not in England—we can see that Scots literature was assimilating English influence with a very different tendency from that which is evident in the English (or English including Scottish) assimilation of foreign literature. English, the more it borrowed and imitated, the more significantly it became English; the inclination of Scots literature toward English is the curve of its development toward English. And as we examine the periods of Scottish (not Scots) literature we see that there is no common denominator between the periods when Scottish literature was most important. It was important as a dialect among the other English dialects; it was important in the fifteenth century when English poetry was not important; and it was important, or rather Edinburgh literature was important, as a *provincial* literature about 1800. The last is not the importance of a separate literature; it is the importance of a provincial capital which at a certain time happens to contain as many or more men of importance than the metropolis. Edinburgh in 1800, of which Mr Gregory Smith gives a pleasing glimpse, is analogous to Boston in America fifty years later. It was as interesting, perhaps for a moment more interesting, than London. But a provincial capital, even with the *Edinburgh* and *Blackwood's* of a hundred years ago, is the matter of a moment; it depends on the continuous supply of important men; the instant this supply falls off, the metropolis, even if suffering from a like poverty, gains the ascendant. And then the important men turn to the metropolis.

It is true that Mr Gregory Smith seeks for permanent characteristics of the Scottish mind which find expression in literature. But, with deference to his superior knowledge of the subject, the characteristics which he presents do not seem essential to literature, sufficient to mark any significant *literary* difference. Neither the love of precise detail nor the love of the fantastic, which he finds in Scottish literature, is a literary trait; on the contrary, they are both more likely to be hostile to artistic perfection. Nor has the passion for antiquities, nor the persistence of local metres in verse, any extensive significance. To the extent to which writing becomes literature, these peculiarities are likely to be submerged.

We may even conclude it to be an evidence of strength, rather than of weakness, that the Scots language and the Scottish literature did not

TOWARDS A SCOTTISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE

maintain a separate existence. It is not always recognized how fierce and fatal is the struggle for existence between literatures. In this struggle there is great advantage to be won if forces not too disparate can be united. Scottish, throwing in its luck with English, has not only much greater chance of survival, but contributes important elements of strength to complete the English: as, for instance, its philosophical and historical prose. A literature does not maintain itself simply by a continual production of great writers. The historian of literature must count with as shifting and as massive forces as the historian of politics. In the modern world the struggle of capitals of civilization is apparent on a large scale. A powerful literature, with a powerful capital, tends to attract and absorb all the drifting shreds of force about it. Up to a certain limit of dissimilarity, this fusion is of very great value. English and Scottish, probably English and Irish (if not prevented by political friction), are cognate enough for the union to be of value. The basis for one literature is one language. The danger of disintegration of English literature and language would arise if the same language were employed by peoples too remote (for geographical or other reasons) to be able to pool their differences in a common metropolis. The chances of its survival, as a language and a literature in the tradition of European civilization, would be diminished against such a concentrated force as the French. For France, of course, a different danger, real or apparent, has been announced, we believe in an intemperate and fanatical spirit, by such apostles of French culture as M. Maurras: the danger of attracting foreign forces which might be received without being digested. That is at present, we trust, not an imminent peril for Britain.

(T.S. Eliot, 'Was There a Scottish Literature?', *Athenaeum* 1 August 1919, pp.680-81.)