Re-Inventing Tradition(s): The Grotesque in Short Stories by Scottish Women Writers

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of how the grotesque is used in two short stories by Scottish women writers (Janice Galloway's "The Meat" and Ali Smith's "May") to argue that while women writers struggle to foreground technique in their literary work, critics and scholars insist on narrowly framing them according to questionable gender and nationality labelling. In the Scottish case the short story plays a significant role in this confrontation, specially regarding women writers, even though the genre is hardly ever highlighted in surveys of Scottish Literature, including those with a gender focus. The grotesque is not, in any case, a feature of Scottish women writers' short fiction but an element used by them in this genre to resist easy identity labelling and to reclaim a literary criticism focused on the writer above the person.

How can we judge whether an element in a short story by a particular author is representative of this author's whole output? When can we claim that this element is, besides, crucial in the configuration of the national literature framing the author's work? Can the element suffice to ascribe the author to this literature, transcending the author's actual marginal position for reasons of gender, class, race or ethnicity? In short, what kind of tenuous arguments do we use to mount the fragile structure that we call Literature and that often seems to be nothing but a figment of our collective imagination as specialists?

These questions sprang to my mind when teaching a very brief short story by Janice Galloway, "The Meat", from her collection *Blood* (1992), within an elective subject devoted to "Scottish Literature and Culture" (Autumn 2007). At 378 words, "The Meat" qualifies as a micro short story and is very convenient for class discussion in these times in which students don't read in advance. Previous work on other short stories had already set the mood for the exploration of the unexpected in Scottish women writers' texts; we had already dealt with A.L. Kennedy's quirky characters in "The Mouseboks Family Dictionary" and "The Roles of Notable Silences in Scottish History", and Jackie Kay's tense domesticity in "The Woman with Fork and Knife Disorder" and "Big Milk". Galloway's own story "Blood" had even sent a queasy (female) student rushing out of the classroom. This peculiar piece deals with the odd consequences of a self-doubting young woman's visit to the dentist; later in the day, she scares away a shy colleague romantically interested in her by initiating conversation forgetting about the blood still gushing from her mouth. Despite the student's visceral reaction, "Blood" is not simply a gory tale but quite a touching analysis of female insecurity, the theme also of Galloway's stunning first novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989).

As Douglas Gifford observes, "The combination of sensitive interpretations of women's pain and a sharp eye for the farcical, the grotesque and the excesses of modern society are found in Galloway's ... *Blood*." (1997: 609) Yet, this is too mild, too aseptic to describe the shock that my audience (45 women, 3 men) and myself received when reading "The Meat" (re-reading in my case). What seemed just a funny, dark piece at the time I selected the readings for the subject, turned out to open up a big gap

in our perception not only of Galloway's writing but also of women's writing and of Scottish writing to boot. The anecdote is simple and graphic enough: a carcass hangs unsold in a butcher's shop for ten days until the butcher chops it into bits and pieces, which he throws to the rats and stray dogs haunting his shop's back close. Only when readers reach the final paragraph –"In the morning, all that remained was the hair and a strip of tartan ribbon. These he salvaged and sealed in a plain wooden box beneath the marital bed. A wee minding" (109)– are they jolted into the appalling realisation that the carcass was the butcher's wife. This immediately compels the dismayed victims of Galloway's peculiar humour to re-read now in the full knowledge of what the story is really about (patriarchal violence, of course).

If written by a man, "The Meat" could be flicked away as a disturbing, grim, sexist joke but what makes its rotund imagery –"By the tenth day, the fat on its surface turned leathery and translucent like the rind of an old cheese." (108)– lodge permanently in our memory is the fact that it is written by a woman. The question that, like the carcass, hung in the air in class was not "what kind of sick short story is this?" but "what kind of woman would write this?", for this use of the grotesque disturbs readers doubly. The whole class wriggled uncomfortably in their seats not only because they were amazed by the sheer bravado it takes to narrate something like this in so few, perfectly chosen words but also because, including the very few men in class, they realised that this was no take on Sweeney Todd but an incisive criticism of a patriarchy so dominant that we don't see women's ill-treated bodies, not even when their sad remains are fully displayed. Students found some comfort, somehow, in the fact that the story was firmly set at two removes from their own culture, being written in English by a Scottish writer (the wee word "wee" was there as a "minding" of this, both closing the text together).

Far more comfortable was Ali Smith's beautiful story "May" from *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2004). In "May" Smith manages to narrate how a member of a couple falls in love with a gorgeous tree in bloom to the partner's dismay without actually using a personal pronoun to disclose what kind of couple this is (hetero, homo) nor whether man or woman falls for the alluring tree. This is not grotesque in the same way as "The Meat", since the image that this tale of *folie à deux* leaves us with, necessarily fuzzy as we don't know who to visualise, is romantic to the point of being almost cloying:

> When I get to the house with the tree I see you there in the dark under it. You are lying in the dark under it. You are lying on your back on the ground. You look like you're asleep.
> I lie down next to you under the tree. (69)

"May", however, is equally bizarre, also begging the question of what kind of woman would write something like this (a lesbian in revolt against the reductive use of gender-based identity, of course).

Given their resistance to gender and national labels, both Galloway and Smith would surely point out that the right question to ask of both stories is "what kind of narrative experiment is this?" (one in micro fiction and in the use of pronouns, respectively, would be the right answer). However, literary specialists do not favour the technical perspective on writing that writers tend to foreground in discussing their work. Proof of this questionable attitude is how the short story is dealt with within Scottish Literature: more as evidence of thematic unity (yes, as I'm doing here regarding the grotesque) than as evidence of the mastery of technical, literary skills.

Consider, for instance, what Alan Bissett does as an editor of the remarkable volume *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction* (2001) in which he sets out to prove that "... undoubtedly Scotland's is a fiction haunted by itself, one in a perpetual state of Gothicism". (6) This view was inspired by an article in the journal *Gothic Studies* by David Punter, despite the fact that he clearly warns the reader that

> I do not mean to suggest an essentially unique engagement with the Gothic within contemporary Scottish fiction. On the contrary, we might assume that the Gothic mode, insofar as it has to do with direct materials of nightmare, with phantoms and the crypt, will find a particular way of forcing itself to the surface under any cultural circumstances which are characterised by lack, insufficiency, mourning. (1999: 115)

Disregarding Punter's warning, Bissett claims that "Scottish writers, for their part, have returned time and again to themes of disunity and schizophrenia... Everywhere, split, disharmonies voices. And what a tune". (2) The 20 stories he collects (11 by women, 9 by men) do suggest indeed that Gothicism is very much alive in Scotland, although what we are not told in Bissett's introduction is how he chose his material. Actually, there is not a single word about the fact that his material *are* short stories, as if the genre were a transparent medium (pun intended) through which Scotland's Gothic subconscious manifests itself. Tellingly, there are no comments either on the majority presence of women in the collection.

The short story is, thus, trapped in a limbo regarding its relevance in the construction of a particular national Literature and is subordinated to gender issues when it's dealt with specifically, if it is at all. *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3. Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, published as recently as 2007, has no specific chapter on the short story. This is also excluded as a genre in the chapter devoted to women writers, Susanne Hagemann's "From Carswell to Kay: Aspects of Gender, the Novel and Drama" (a title, by the way, that as is habitual uses 'gender' meaning 'women', as if 'men' were not part of 'gender'). Hagemann's analysis covers Catherine Carswell, Naomi Mitchison, Willa Muir, Ena Lamont Stewart, Sue Glover, Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay and makes a point of stressing that "Gender is a comparatively recent issue in Scottish literary criticism (...) While gender rose to prominence in Anglo-American criticism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Scottish criticism this did not happen until the early 1990s. One of the main reasons, it has been argued, is the quest for Scottishness" (2007: 214). In his introduction to his pioneering volume *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, the editor Christopher Whyte concurs while opening up 'gender' to include far more than just women. At any rate, Hagemann concludes that

> In fact, from one point of view it can be argued that the texts analysed here have little in common apart from the frequency of female protagonists and gynocentric perspectives in the context of patriarchal societies. More positively phrased, what becomes clear in this chapter is the sheer range not only of aspects of gender, but also of

> concrete manifestations of these aspects. (2007: 224)

On his side, Bernard Sellin reaches a similar conclusion in his comparison of the work of a male (Robin Jenkins) and a female (Galloway) Scottish writer, a comparison which tries to bridge the generation rather than the gender gap. In his view, "It is a sign of the vitality of modern Scottish literature that it is more difficult than ever to restrict it to neat definitions, categories or traditions. Instead we have individual voices expressing themselves with originality and growing self-confidence" (2007: 231).

Could it be that Scottish authors have collectively set out to dismantle the way we label writers and build the hulking constructions that the ideas of national Literature and identity are? Is Galloway's "The Meat" an example of this catch-me-if-you-can attitude, rather than an example of Scottish women's short story writing? When will be learn to see that, as Jackie Jay herself remarks, "A short story is a small moment of belief. Hard, uncompromising, often bleak, the story does not make things easy for the reader. It is a tough form for tough times"(2007)?

When Scottish short stories are dealt with on the strength of the genre, inevitably identity is connected primarily with women rather than men. Thus, after introducing Jackie Kay with high praise of her style and originality, Isabel Carrera writes that "Resulta casi imposible para cualquier crítica de Kay, como para la propia autora, eludir las discusiones identitarias" (2005: 176). Kay herself has insistently complained that none would refer to Martin Amis as a white, male, heterosexual, English writer in the same way she's treated as a black, female, lesbian, Scottish writer. Proof of this is that another woman, Daniela Rogobote, totally neglects to mention in her essay "Fuera del laberinto: Las representaciones textuales y visuales en las historias cortas de Alasdair Gray" (2005) that Gray is a white, male heterosexual, focusing instead on his themes and techniques, as is hardly ever done with women writers.

In an essay on James Kelman's short stories published in the same volume in which the essays by Carrera and Rogobote appeared, David M. Clark states that "En el presente trabajo se pretende analizar cómo Kelman fusiona contenido y estilo a través de su narrativa breve con el fin de mostrar la contingencia radical de la vida diaria, lo absurdo de lo cotidiano. En este sentido, insiste en que siempre quiso escribir sobre su propia cultura, la cultura obrera y urbana de una localidad específica, en su caso Glasgow" (2005: 93). As he adds, "La narrativa breve será el medio escogido por el autor para devolverle la voz a estos sujetos invisibles, marginados por la corriente dominante de la sociedad" (2005: 93). This voicing of the marginal is the reason why, as Alison Lumsdem had already argued, "Kelman's work has given a new-found credibility to the short story in Scotland, and suggested ways in which it may be developed; his influence is evident on many of the women short-story writers working in Scotland today" (2000: 167).

But if Kelman is the father of this alleged female tradition, Muriel Spark is the mother, as both Lumsdem and Lynne Stark claim. Discussing the novels of Agnes Owen (a writer perhaps better known for her short stories) Stark notes that Spark and Owens hadn't been previously connected because of class differences, yet "The connection is most apparent in Owens's last two novels where she combines a deliberately pared-down style with dark, frequently violent, subject-matter. With its terse dialogue, bitter humour and cast of grotesque characters, *A Working Mother* recalls Spark's grimly comic novellas of the mid 1970s" (2000: 114). Stark insists that in Owens, Spark and more generally in women's writing, "The grotesque is an index of the world's imperfection" (2000:114) leading to tragi-comedy, a package that seems to be nicely captured in Galloway's nasty "The Meat".

At the end of her review of the Scottish women writers she surveys, Lumsdem insists that "These writers describe women in many roles, and are bound neither by the old parameters of women's experience nor by a particular Scottish agenda. However, while gender and nation may not be foregrounded in their work, these are very much part of the texture." (2000: 168) But are they? Or are they more than in the case of men? Isn't, after all, Galloway's rotting carcass also a protest against this constant foregrounding of the woman writer's identity and the butcher none but the literary critic (of any gender)? What is "The Meat" primarily: a technical feat, as the writer sees it, ("a tough form for tough times") or a gothic site where nation and gender enact once more the dramatic return of the repressed, as the reader-critic claims? How do we stop piling our labels on writers that don't want them and see them as *writers* above all?

Perhaps, just perhaps, the grotesque that surfaces so often in Scottish women's short stories is the tool we need to begin to deconstruct false male and female national traditions. Stories like "The Meat" or "May" invite and challenge us to see into the genre beyond the gender through strong or mild shock. Maybe, only maybe, shock of any degree *is* part of how Scots tend to write in order to shock readers out of their lazy use of labels ('I'm NOT English,' they seem to scream). Yet, even louder is their scream for us to *read* their work as *writing*. In the end, I'm awed not so much by what Galloway says about gender in "The Meat" but because she only needs those neatly trimmed 378 words to shake me so badly out of my belief that women (of any nationality) write in a particular way.

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