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Flyting: 1964 and 2014

Corey Gibson

In 2014, National Collective proposed a new model of discourse among the various strands of the Yes campaign, one that would epitomise the imaginative and participatory approach they had repeatedly called for since their inception in 2011. Titled 'Project: Flytings', this intervention was inspired by the so-called 'Folksong Flyting', a public dispute in the opinion pages of the *Scotsman* in the spring and summer of 1964 between Hugh MacDiarmid and Hamish Henderson.[1] These exchanges were initially concerned with the political credibility and cultural value of the contemporary folk revival, but soon generated a trenchant and wide-ranging interrogation of the role of the artist in modern Scotland. MacDiarmid insisted on the exigency of an avant-garde who would deign to elevate the people through the gravity and impenetrability of their work, and thereby pursue 'ever more edifying artistic alloys, superior forms of Lenin's "monumental propaganda"'.[2] Henderson, by contrast, rallied behind the wisdom and revolutionary potential of the 'common weill', championing a popular art that he understood to be *collective* and collaborative in its formal origins as well as in its inferred political disposition. The salience of this 50-year-old dispute for National Collective is clear: it asked whether a *national* and *collective* culture was possible; it asked whether this might be built upon or directed towards certain political aims; and it challenged its participants to find a role for the artist in this programme.

The 'Flyting' is more than just another anecdote testifying to MacDiarmid's thorniness and his appetite for bombastic rhetoric. It was an exchange between two cultural movements – the literary renaissance and the folk revival – as prescribed, promoted and defended by their principal strategists.[3] To see the

[1] National Collective, 'Project: Flytings', http://nationalcollective.com/2013/03/10/project-flytings/, accessed 11 February 2015.

[2] Alec Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters of Hamish Henderson* (Edinburgh, 1996), 128.

[3] A selection of these exchanges are available in Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 117–41. For more in-depth analyses of the various flytings between Henderson and MacDiarmid see Corey Gibson, 'The Folkniks in the Kailyard: Hamish Henderson

opinion column controversy in these terms is to examine the possible forms and purpose of a so-called 'committed' art.[4] Those organising under the banner 'artists and creatives for independence' perhaps took lessons from the 'Flyting' in this regard, inhabiting a clear tension between the cultural activism of a self-appointed vanguard and, as Gramsci called it, the 'National-Popular'. While National Collective have not been so concerned with theorising 'commitment', their insistence on both heterogeneity and collectivism leaves the individual artist in a bind all too familiar to Henderson and MacDiarmid.

In a playful extension of the speculative thinking that came to typify sections of the independence debate, National Collective later advanced '5 New Traditions for a New Scotland'.[5] The Collective's first directive is to 'imagine a better Scotland'. The very act allows for a vast field of alternatives, and encourages us to break with a notion of tradition that relies on gradual accretions, adaptations, and slippages that go unnoticed except with hindsight. The purposeful establishment of 'New Traditions' would be a forceful, almost violent proposal were it not for the hypothetical realm it inhabits. The list is predicated on classic studies of the contrivance and paraphernalia of national myths: on Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990), and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).[6] National Collective's call for the establishment of 'new' national traditions is therefore inflected by a droll acknowledgement of the manipulation that would be required of such an intervention. In drawing from those who, using the apparatus of post-structuralism, revealed the capacity of western imperialism for conjuring, maintaining and promulgating claims to authenticity and therefore modernity, they ask us to consider why these processes might not be means for other ends

and the 'Folk-song Flyting' in Eleanor Bell and Linda Gunn (eds), *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?* (Amsterdam, 2013), 209–25; and Corey Gibson, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics* (Edinburgh, 2015).

[4] It should be noted that MacDiarmid and Henderson's exchanges came ten years before Adorno's elucidation on 'committed and autonomous art' was translated (by Francis McDonagh) and published in the *New Left Review*. It should also be stressed that, while the crux of their debates might be usefully considered in relation to Sartre's *What is Literature?* (to which Adorno was responding) the poets themselves were not overtly, or perhaps, consciously, participating in this public discourse. Their frame of reference was more immediate, more personal, and significantly more *national*.

[5] Christopher Silver, '5 New Traditions for a New Scotland', http://nationalcollective.com/2014/01/19/5-new-traditions-for-a-new-scotland/, accessed 11 February 2015.

[6] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: narrating the nation', in Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (Abingdon, 1990); Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

entirely.[7] This is not an advertisement for the 'dark arts' of political spin; nor is it a primer in Cultural Studies. It is a challenge to the movement National Collective describes: to engage, ceaselessly, in critical self-awareness.

Thus the 'new traditions' were to be modelled after what Bhabha called 'foundational fictions' – though they came with some caveats. For example, they might borrow from elsewhere, as in the case of 'The Bairn's Box' inspired by Finland's universal provision of 'maternity packages' to expectant mothers. They might be ostentatious about their agenda and the selective lens they deploy to promote it, as in the case of a programme for 'National Empathy' founded on a passage from 'the much misunderstood' Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Or, they might be emphatically de-centered: celebrating 'Inter-dependence' day over the exceptionalism that is supposed to attend a 4 July model.

The last of these 'New Traditions' was to be a 'National Flyting Festival' to replace the Party Conference Season: a week-long ritual debate, inspired, inevitably, by Nordic social democracy, and in particular the Swedish *Almedalsveckan*.[8] Each political party represented in Parliament, regardless of size, would be assigned a day to set out their commitments. The whole process is thereby intensified and enlivened. It takes on the appearance of a direct and explicit public dialogue as opposed to the staid platform for party unity, the anaemic display of previously agreed-upon policy announcements: 'The Flyting Festival… would provide a space where policy could be crowdsourced, dogma could be questioned and politicians could check in on their mandate'. Instead of a scenario where the conflict is, quite transparently, over the tactical courting of the news cycle, this event would be a direct incitement to *engage in* conversation.

Drawing on the MacDiarmid-Henderson flyting as an appropriate model of discourse among 'Yes' campaigners, or for the political elite in a projected 'New Scotland', does, however, invite more confusion than clarity. It speaks to a reckless impulse to get wilfully tangled up in and impeded by competing ends: measured and dispassionate debate, and an exultant kind of vituperative theatre. 'Flyting' first denoted any public quarrel or scolding, particularly those that ought to have been private but which spilled out into the public sphere. Now, it is principally associated with the formalised bardic contest,

[7] We might also add Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn to the roster.

[8] Ben Duckworth, 'Yet another thing Sweden does better than us: party conferences', *New Statesman*, 27 June 2013, http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/06/yet-another-thing-sweden-does-better-us-party-conferences, accessed 11 February 2015.

distinguished by the show of virtuoso versification and powerful invective, and practised by the great fifteenth and sixteenth-century Scottish Makars. In William Dunbar's famous flyting with Walter Kennedy, for example, the poets display the kind of colourful personal attacks that would greatly improve the entertainment-value of our enervated current affairs programming, but would do little to advance a pundit's agenda. Even at First Minister's Questions our representatives resist the temptation to sneer about misshapen owls, maggoty sheep, scabby cormorants, unfeeling sows, or insane werewolves. Some critics have mapped the flyting's influence through its cousins 'sherracking' and 'scalding'; others have found its traces all throughout the Scottish literary tradition: in Gavin Douglas, David Lyndsay, Alexander Montgomerie, Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Thomas Carlyle and MacDiarmid.[9] However, these examples are too diverse even to cohere around a vague sense of provocation or prickliness, and they rely, fundamentally, on a notion of cultural exceptionalism that no longer holds sway in the study of Scottish literary history.

In her work on Dunbar, Priscilla Bawcutt has done a great deal to further confound modern champions of the flyting form, describing its asymmetry; its pattern of 'accusation and rebuttal'; its 'comic fantasy' superstructure in relation to its base, or 'substratum', of fact; and its connections to a 'lynch mob' mentality, wielding – and thereby demonstrating – the power of public humiliation.[10] Like Tom Nairn's account of the Scots' love of 'fiery debate edging on violence, yet leading safely nowhere', this is the kind of exchange that can continue in perpetuity, chasing its tail.[11] Its innovations are stylistic but they are not germane to reasoned debate and the sincere pursuit of truth. As a contest for patronage there was something at stake for the poet: financial reward and a guaranteed audience. If only in this respect, it is the forbearer of the literary prize. Exchanges were circulated in manuscript form, read aloud for gathered crowds, or left nailed to the kirk door; from there to the *Scotsman* opinion columns, comments threads, hyperlinked 'evidence', and the mythic conflicts of 'trolls' and 'moderators'. Unlike the comments thread or a Twitter melee, the medieval flyting expected its audience to be in on the joke, and to take often perverse insults in the spirit in which they were given. Despite its flamboyant viciousness, this was a performance that demanded collusion, and

[9] Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), 78, 100, 128, 164, 173, 208, 229, 241, 242, 287.

[10] Priscilla Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford, 1992), 227, 225, 235, 244.

[11] Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism*, 184.

a degree of good faith. In this respect, the flyting becomes an inversion of the scepticism and irony with which we are accustomed in observing political slanging matches and reading high literary modernism: it is no more than it appears to be and it does not pretend otherwise.

In 1964 the stakes were at once higher and lower than the medieval slanging match: the subject matter was more serious, but the impact of the debate on political – or even literary – realities, was negligible. Through their exchanges, MacDiarmid and Henderson contested the conception of literary 'value', and, in particular, political expediency as a measure of this value. In doing so, they considered the role of the popular and the populist, they examined distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture, and they fought at length over the respective merits of 'communal' and 'individual' models of authorship. Where MacDiarmid imagined himself at the vanguard, dragging the people into class-consciousness and revolutionary fervour, Henderson sought to dissolve his agency in a vast, anonymous resurgence of collective political (and poetical) action. Together they asked how political action is inspired and, finally, taken: in the minds of individuals, or through a collective consciousness.

The two poets conspired in enacting this back and forth, encouraging their readers to consider the kind of art, and the kind of artist, appropriate to the needs of modern Scotland. As both men were in on the joke, they could afford to play up to the performance, exaggerating the terms of disgust, distrust, and disapproval of the other, and, potentially, refining their own arguments, smoothing the edges through conflict and abrasion. Theirs was an honest performance and investigation: impartiality and objectivity were not staged, but rejected outright. The cynicism of gesture politics is dispelled with and replaced with something more provisional, equivocal, and inquisitive. A conclusion is not reached because it would require concessions, and those are unthinkable. If agreement were possible, the controversy would never have begun. This is a debate that performs its own shortcomings wholeheartedly: it is not an impasse in the model of the exclusive disjunction of yes/no, but an affirmation of two competing, even contradictory forces in the processes of culture and politics: the individual and the collective. Claims and counter claims posed in the flyting will always go untested: they are part of a performance and ought to be judged as such. The more vividly described, the more compelling the narrative, the more spectacular the delivery, the more successful the combatant. There is no real pretence of reasoned argument. The dispassionate outlook is passionately asserted and the irony is not lost on anyone.

The incursions of the literary world on the independence debate, while

opening up more imaginative engagements with the issues, rarely reflected directly on the role of the artist in society. There are, of course, notable exceptions, not least, Scott Hames' *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (2012). However, even amongst that selection, a great many were at pains to insist that their contributions were not privileged, or even distinct, due to their designation as 'writers'. In the context of William MacIlvanney's touted but unrealised involvement in the writing of the White Paper; Alasdair Gray's 'settlers and colonists' brouhaha; Edwin Morgan's posthumous contribution to the pro-independence war chest; Liz Lochhead's dual role as Scots Makar and Yes ambassador; Alan Warner's warning just a few weeks before the referendum, that a No vote would be 'the death knell for the whole Scottish literature "project"', and countless other public pronouncements, this invocation of a fifty-year-old dispute reconnects with another time when the literary community was very vocal, though perhaps not so audible, in arguments about politics, culture, and national identity.[12]

Throughout the last hundred years there have been several points at which Scottish literary culture has, by force of circumstance, turned its attention to the national question. These make for a familiar picture: where literary lights concern themselves with Scotland's constitutional status; with its political direction relative to Westminster; or with the limitations and/or boundlessness of the national paradigm more generally. It is common for loose groups of contemporaneous writers to be celebrated as 'Scottish' coteries; where the writer's efforts to individualise and localise experience are glossed over in

[12] Kevin McKenna, 'Alex Salmond aims for independence white paper with a literary twist', *The Observer*, 13 July 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/13/alex-salmond-white-paper-william-mcilvanney, accessed 11 February 2015; Scott Hames, 'Responses to Alasdair Gray's "Settlers and Colonists"', https://storify.com/hinesjumpedup/alasdair-gray-does-not-do-twitter, accessed 11 February 2015; Brian Currie, 'SNP reveals its £1m independence fund', *Sunday Herald*, 23 October 2011, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/snp-reveals-its-pound1m-independence-fund.15560082, accessed 11 February 2015; Jane Bradley, 'Scots Makar Liz Lochhead called to resign over SNP', *The Scotsman*, 29 November 2014, http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scots-makar-liz-lochhead-called-to-resign-over-snp-1-3620051, accessed 11 February 2015; Alan Warner, 'Scottish writers on the referendum – independence day?', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote, accessed 11 February 2015.

favour of the notion of a concerted movement. They are arranged in this way so that they might speak of a broader malaise plaguing the nation, one that would, inevitably, only become manifest in the political culture ten years, or perhaps a generation, later.[13] This is literature as political barometer, and the artist as (sometimes unwilling, or at least, unselfconscious) vanguard. Matthew Hart has noted that MacDiarmid only succeeded in his synthesis of romantic nationalism and socialist internationalism on the page, and there, only in the early lyrics and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926).[14] This reconciliation is perhaps only possible in cosmic pastoral, where the mundane and the transcendent are always mutable and capable of swift symbolic transformations. Certainly, MacDiarmid's efforts to graft the national to the international failed utterly in the political sphere. Now, however, the independence referendum and the success of the SNP hold the potential to foster a diluted twenty-first-century nationalist internationalism. At least rhetorically, this was borne out in the skittishness displayed around the term 'nationalism' among many Yes voters, particularly in the distinctions between 'civic nationalism' and its 'cultural', or worse yet, 'ethnic', variants. However, to plot MacDiarmid on the same historical trajectory as the vaunted broad church of Yes would be to indulge in something of the poet's own inventive relationship with the radical national tradition.

At the time of their 'flyting' MacDiarmid and Henderson were on similar political latitudes: both campaigned for an independent, socialist Scottish republic of one shade or another, and both felt that their political ideals could be effectively engendered in their art. Where they differed was in their notions of *how* this art might relate to realpolitik. Their exchanges scrutinised the respective responsibilities of the intellectual elite, and the general mass of the people in affecting this change. Evidently National Collective saw this kind of wrangling over tactics, and over high-minded notions of the agency of artists and their audiences, as relevant to the independence debate.

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[13] For recent critiques of this tendency in contemporary Scottish literary commentary, see Scott Hames, 'Introduction' in *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh, 2012), 1–18; Scott Hames, 'Scottish Literature, Devolution, and the Fetish of Representation', *The Bottle Imp*, Supplement Issue 1 (2014), http://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/SWE/TBI/TBISupp/TBISupp1/Hames.html, accessed 2 April 2015; Alex Thomson, '"You can't get there from here": Devolution and Scottish literary history', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3 (2007), http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/thomson.htm, accessed 11 February 2015; and Alex Thomson, 'Review Essay: Writers on Scottish Independence', *Scottish Literary Review* 5:1 (2013), 129–37.

[14] Hart, Matthew, 'Nationalist Internationalism: A Diptych in Modernism and Revolution', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 31:1 (2007), 21–46.

National Collective insist that our first duty is to '*imagine* a better Scotland'. Their 'Flytings' project was described as a reflexive endeavour: 'an attempt to build a public sphere of correspondence, about ourselves and our movement'. It asked that community meetings throughout Scotland submit questions and responses, in any medium, reflecting on 'where the human and the artistic lies in relation to the political'. The inaugural post, addressed to Edinburgh, asks:

> What are the main components of "Scottish identity"? Bring something to the meeting that encapsulates it, then take a photograph of the assembled objects.
> What is meant by "social justice"?
> What are the best ideas from the "Freedom Come A' Ye" [sic]?[15]
> What do you think when you see this photograph? [the launch of the Yes Scotland campaign, May 2012]

> How do you feel about England?

It is a proposal that the National Theatre's project, 'Dear Scotland', pursued in a slightly different format. Inviting 'rants and regrets', 'love letters and break-up cards', 'advice', 'demands', 'hopes and dreams' throughout the year of the referendum, the focus and purpose was unspecified and produced

[15] Henderson's song, 'The Freedom Come-All-Ye' has long been touted as an alternative national anthem but it has had its profile raised significantly in the past year. It was performed to great acclaim by South African soprano, Pumeza Matshikiza, at the opening ceremony of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2014, and in his speech at the Hydro in Glasgow during the SNP Tour of November 2014, Alex Salmond declared his support for its claim as a future national anthem.

a diverse catalogue of 'notes': from Trip Advisor-type reviews ('We really enjoyed our visit!') to personal testimonies and political edicts.[16] Contemporary writers were also commissioned to produce a series of monologues under this title (Dear Scotland), each one written for a different voice from the past or present and inspired by artworks in the National Portrait Gallery: Jimmy Reid, The Cromarty Fool, Boswell, Michael Clark, Jackie Kay.[17] The project invites, if not dissent, then at least variety; it insists on containing multitudes. There is no dearth of pronouncements on the artist and the question of Scotland's constitutional resettlement speaking with a communal, but not homogenous, voice. There remains an eagerness to explore the opportunities this referendum provided outside of the 'official discourse' of the main campaign organisations, to reflect on social, political and cultural life, and to escape 'a pattern sponsoring the reduction of all politics to identity politics'.[18] The 'nation' is always at least a foil, though it can be anything from a ghost at the feast to a lumbering protagonist who has taken on too many contradictions to be convincing. While identity politics invites us to weigh and balance the competing and overlapping conceptions of self and community that pervade, the flyting presents a challenge to this logic, a structure of contradiction and tension that neither offers nor seeks resolution.

Before National Collective and the *Unstated* volume, the full scope of this notion of variance and contestation was embraced by the artist and author Momus (moniker of Nick Currie), who, in 2009, published *Solution 11-167: The Book of Scotlands*. Written in response to the SNP's success in the 2007 Holyrood election, it set out to use 'any language, that is, except the "wooden tongue" of official discourse', and to outline

> in a numerical sequence, one hundred and fifty-six Scotlands which currently do not exist anywhere. At a time when functional independence seems to be a real possibility for Scotland – and yet no one is quite sure what that means – a delirium of visions, realistic and absurd, is necessary.[19]

In this premise we discover:

[16] 'Dear Scotland', http://dearscotland.net, accessed 11 February 2015.

[17] 'Scots from Past and Present Have Their Say On Scottish Independence', http://www.thespace.org/artwork/view/scotlandvote, accessed 11 February 2015.

[18] Hames, 'Introduction', 5.

[19] Sternberg Press, http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1242, accessed 11 February 2015.

SCOTLAND 164
The Scotland in which four hundred years of profound influence from Calvin is replaced by four hundred years of profound influence from Calvino.

SCOTLAND 41
The Scotland in which a thousand flowers bloom, and a thousand schools of thought contend.

SCOTLAND 59
The Scotland which isn't just readable, it's writable.[20]

Momus takes seriously that much-vaunted notion of MacDiarmid's: 'Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?'[21] Now one of the twenty-six quotations carved into the Canongate Wall of the Scottish Parliament, these words have, at least in that context, lost their political potency, appearing as part of a pastiche that includes those of Andrew Carnegie, Mary Brooksbank, Hamish Henderson, Psalm 19:14, and of course, Anon. With Momus, we are asked on the strength of a pun, to imagine a Scotland out of historical sequence where postmodernity had taken hold in lieu of the Reformation: *Invisible Cities* (1972) over *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536).[22] A 'thousand flowers' invites dissent and criticism even as its Maoist resonance evokes the brutal suppression of counter-revolutionaries, and the iron consensus of 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People' (1957). Momus does not specify whether Scotland 41 lives up to the proclamation, or to the historical context of which it is shorn in *Solution 11-167*. The implications are left unuttered in lieu of another vision, in service of the premise of limitless (im)possibilities. One of these is Scotland 42: 'The Scotland in which the flowers wilt, and the schools agree' (52). In *this* alternate Scotland, only dejection follows the promise of heterogeneous democratic discourse.

[20] Momus, *Solution 11-167: The Book of Scotlands* (New York, 2009), 15, 49, 136.

[21] MacDiarmid, 'Scotland Small?', *Complete Poems* (Manchester, 1994), 1170.

[22] In *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London, 1997), Tom Nairn predicted that globalization, rather than laying 'nationality politics' low, might produce something akin to Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: 'an imagined proliferation of fantastically different urban-based cultures haunting the future as rural ghosts once dominated the past' (72).

If the national paradigm is so elastic, if it can be reimagined in endless variations, then it simply becomes a framework for rehearsing its own internal contradictions. Scotland is cosmopolitan and parochial, revolutionary and reactionary, and is not unique in this. MacDiarmid and his peers, not least Henderson, sought to reconcile a decaying romantic nationalism with an ascendant socialist internationalism in the early and mid twentieth century – what better clue to the inchoate character of the nation as approached through its literature? Momus' cover speaks to the same notion. In a typeface reminiscent of *Ingsoc*, against the backdrop of an orange (Pantone 1655) Saltire on a white background, it states: 'Every lie creates a parallel world. The world in which it is true'. There is, therefore, no authority or authenticity in any one of these 'lies'; boundlessness abounds.

If we set these notions next to Alasdair Gray's ubiquitous 'work as if you live in the early days of a better nation', we are, in fact, placed squarely in MacDiarmid's camp. MacDiarmid wrote for a revolutionary future that would not be realised. His work absorbed this wished-for future and enacted it in the present, in a stubborn and insistent denial of the political landscape. This approach was unavailable to Henderson. In the mid-1930s MacDiarmid could write for Glasgow in 1960 and envisage an Ibrox crowd for an academic debate on psychotherapy and autosuggestion; but Henderson was unable to leave anyone behind in imagining the future, and so, was constrained to the present and to the accumulated past.[23] In this sense at least, their exchange might be neatly described in the same terms Gerard Carruthers used in suggesting that the final lines of 'To a Mouse' could have been written for the Yes and No campaigns respectively: 'Och! I backward cast my e'e/On prospects drear!' for Yes; 'An' forward, tho' I canna see,/I guess an' fear!' for No.[24]

Henderson was restrained not simply by popularity or populism, but by the demand to disestablish his individual agency in favour of a collective will, and entrust his political ideals to that precept. For MacDiarmid, the collective culture symbolised by folk song was reactionary if it was capable of political significance at all. It was certainly not to be promoted as a revolutionary historical force, despite its appetite for contradiction and discord. Though MacDiarmid, like many of his peers (and many critics and historians since), wrote of a democratic impulse in the Scottish literary tradition, it was always

[23] MacDiarmid, 'Glasgow, 1960', *Complete Poems*, 1039.

[24] Gerard Carruthers, 'Robert Burns and the yes campaign', *The Guardian,* 19 July 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/why-robert-burns-yes-campaign-alex-salmond, accessed 11 February 2015.

framed as an historical phenomenon from which contemporary work might spring. It may have survived into the present, but it was not sufficient for the imagined revolutionary future – it only helped to articulate the stasis that needed overturning ('The seed has died; we have the harvest').[25] As MacDiarmid wrote in the 'Flyting', the Communist cause was to advance through a class-consciousness that would be hard-won at the level of the individual, because 'the interests of the masses and the real highbrow, the creative artist, are identical, for the function of the latter is the extension of human consciousness'.[26] Later in the same letter MacDiarmid reminds his readers of the scale and ambition of this project: 'The grandeur of the time requires grand syntheses' akin to Lenin's 'monumental propaganda'.[27]

The rhetoric of an inclusive, participatory movement for Scottish independence is caught in the same tensions played out in the 1964 flyting. MacDiarmid describes the future he seeks, and the poetry that will mark its arrival; Henderson looks for evidence of its emergence from among that romantic construction, 'the people'. From contemporary Edinburgh playground skipping songs, to the dusty manuscripts housed in the University of Aberdeen, Henderson's search turns up too much that lies far outside the scope of the radical underground folk culture and too little easily reconcilable with the language of the revolutionary vanguard. In the words of Henderson's other most treasured luminary, Gramsci: 'there is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore'.[28] As a foundation for political action, it is too vast and variable. It renders absurd any attempt at bloody-minded intransigence, and, as Henderson's stock-in-trade, it is both his strength and his weakness in debate.

On the surface of things, the 'Folk-song Flyting' is an unlikely paragon of measured, reflexive discourse. It was characterised by cruel invective, rhetorical posturing, misinformation, and purposeful misinterpretation: quotations are unburdened by context, opponents are rendered as caricatures, straw men appear at every juncture, and the intellectual and imaginative limitations of each participant are relentlessly targeted. Personal attacks and lofty intellectualism are bundled up together and hurled at the opinion columns of the *Scotsman*. MacDiarmid had lambasted the folk revival as 'a wallowing

[25] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 134.

[26] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 127.

[27] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 128.

[28] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds), trans. William Boelhower (London, 1985), 194.

in the mud-bath of ignorance' and '[a] re-emersion in illiterate doggerel'.[29] Henderson denounced the poet as 'the apostle of a kind of spiritual apartheid', a champion of the 'self-elected elect'.[30] From the comments thread to the debating chamber, discussions surrounding the independence referendum have been replete with these devices, though on the most public of stages they are coded in less colourful, and less interesting, registers. Often, they have relied on the most impenetrably boring focus-grouped euphemisms. On the other hand, efforts have been made to curtail some of the most obviously reductive or diversionary hyperbole, though it persisted throughout the 2014 campaign, and after. As one line of argument, or particular phrasing, becomes over-wrought, it gets debunked and is wielded as proof of the intellectual bankruptcy or tawdry affectations of the other side. What horrors would visit an independent Scotland? Which are reserved for a Scotland with the temerity to vote 'No'? And how many legitimate criticisms, or probing questions, can be deflected or dismissed as 'cynical ploys' from the other side? This is not substantive or analytical discourse, but posturing. In this sense the 'flyting' may seem like a form that describes the shortcomings of the debate, rather than the kind of conversation we should have aspired towards. And its relevance to the diverse groups that have, perhaps only temporarily, come together to campaign for a common aim, seems even more mysterious.

By invoking the 'Flyting' National Collective made a plea for two important developments in their movement: first, a vigorous reflexivity that might foster unity by encouraging discourse, and second: an implicit and explicit connection with a distinct national cultural tradition that could be imaginatively *modernised* — where the old violence of the vituperative duel might be conjured up without being embraced, and threatening the integrity of the project's *collective* credentials. However, the real thing, with all its abuse and irrationality was raging all around them in the mainstream debate. The only thing missing there was the irony and self-awareness that gives the 'flyting' mode its power. In one sphere, therefore, the flyting was too timid and too concerned with consensus; and in the other, it was missing its performative self-consciousness.

Henderson and MacDiarmid were not debating whether or not Scotland displayed 'cultural confidence' in its art, nor were they debating whether or not such 'cultural confidence' would be a reliable measure of the popular appetite for political or constitutional change. They were not promoting or critiquing the 'mythology of Scottish exceptionalism'. Yet these are the terms that arise

[29] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 94.
[30] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 132.

when we think critically about the role of writers in the contemporary debate. In response to T. M. Devine's late statement of support for a 'Yes' vote, David Torrance, citing Allan Massie, reminded us that this 'cultural confidence' within the Union, which is so often aligned with the nation's literary figures, goes 'both ways': it might signify an appetite or a readiness for political autonomy, or it might show that 'Scottishness' is perfectly sustainable within the framework of the Union.[31] Of course, neither of these propositions is true; but diluted, more compromised versions of both hold a concurrent and observable kind of truth. 'Cultural confidence', if it can be measured at all, might tell us very little about a singular direction of political will – especially when forced into the narrow binary of a yes or no debate. Life and literature are more complicated.

The tagline for the *If Scotland…* conference in August 2014 was 'what will be the history of now?'[32] In returning to this speculative framework, we ought to consider that the future historians of that 1964 moment would not, could not, and did not pick a side and explain its place in the grand narrative. The flyting form and its subject matter protects against this. It is both dynamic and static: and it has no contribution to make to a retrofitted pattern of cause and effect. In a late contribution to the 'Folk-song Flyting', Henderson wrote of MacDiarmid:

> A person who can argue like this may not impress the readers of a newspaper controversy, but at least he would never find any difficulty earning a living as a contortionist. Is Mr MacDiarmid trying to emulate that other MacD. [Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937)], whose Parliamentary performances earned him the title of 'the boneless wonder'?[33]

In another of Henderson's reflections on MacDiarmid, the poet is described as a rival for the title of 'supreme practitioner of the art of the belly-flop' with the great William McGonagall.[34] These kinds of jocular performance analyses

[31] David Torrance, 'Arguments about cultural confidence work both ways', *Sunday Herald*, 17 August 2014, http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/columnists/arguments-about-cultural-confidence-work-both-ways.25047434, accessed 11 February 2015.

[32] 'If Scotland…', http://ifscotland.wordpress.stir.ac.uk, accessed 11 February 2015.

[33] Finlay (ed.), *The Armstrong Nose*, 136.

[34] Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias: Writings of Songs, Folk and Literature* (Edinburgh, 2004), 280.

belie, I think, a sneaking admiration for the unapologetic, the obstreperous, and the vicious. MacDiarmid's exulted contradictions are expounded in the form of the contortionist, and his loud and bombastic style is graced with the subtlety and nuance of the belly flop. But, the 'flyting', as a focus for these characteristics, describes irresolvable tensions – tensions that cut across debates on the national past and its future. And these ought always to have their place, if only to show by contrast the hypocrisy that proliferates in other performances.

The 'Flyting' is a reminder of the vitality of those debates that cannot be eschewed or suppressed too long without compromising on long-held, well-rehearsed principles. National Collective can, unquestionably, be placed on Henderson's side: campaigning for a culture commensurate with both collaboration and dissent, that might accommodate a given political agenda, but that cannot be forced. While critics of National Collective have described it as a 'clique', few seem prepared to go as far in their praise (or condemnation) as to call them an 'avant-guard'. Certainly, the broader Yes campaign featured charismatic voices capable of rhetorical contortions of one form or another, but it was missing its MacDiarmid. In their eagerness to embrace the broad coalition of Yes, prominent figures in the campaign bypassed the bloody-minded intransigence that was typical of the poet who saw his role as that of 'the catfish that vitalises the other torpid denizens of the aquarium'.[35] While dissent and discourse have been frequently welcomed, we might ask how sincere this request was. The 'Flyting' does not offer us a united front against political conservatism, the British State, or the vagaries of bourgeois aesthetics; nor does it offer a proliferation of ideas free to drift and settle or dissipate, or dangle side-by-side like the leaves of National Collective's 'wish trees'. It offers us factionalism: irreconcilable visions of the role of the artist in society. And what comes out of that is not reconciliation, but resolve: 'Unremittin', relentless, / Organized to the last degree'.[36]

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[35] In the spring of 2015 it looked like this kind of dynamic had arrived, with Loki – hip-hop artist and community activist – and his critique of National Collective. Loki described the tone of the site's articles as ranging from '*Guardian*-lite' to 'esoteric academic theory'; he described its outlook as 'narrow' and 'twee' with something of the ceilidh about it; and he accused some of its founding members of being too close to the SNP and established power. See 'Loki on National Collective', http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2015/03/10/loki-on-national-collective/, and Loki's own site: http://lokithescottishrapper.com, last accessed, 2 April 2015.

[36] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Second Hymn to Lenin', *Complete Poems* (Manchester, 1993), 328.