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Examining the ways in which Scottish writers challenge the idea of national identity; with particular reference to John McGrath and Tom Leonard

Grace Baird

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Abstract:

This article explores how John McGrath and Tom Leonard seek to expose and dispel received ideas about what Scottish national identity is, and present what they view as a more accurate and representative image of Scottish national identity. McGrath does this in his play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black, Oil,* through his satirical approach to tackling issues such as exploitation that has been faced by Scots over the years as a means of inspiring future generations to fight for Scottish integrity and way of life. Leonards' approach varies in both form and content as we see him deconstruct negative ideas and prejudices surrounding Scots dialect in his series of poems*, Unrelated Incidents,* to offer validation to Scots dialect as a literary language which can and should be used to create recognised and respected works of literature. Both authors look at issues of anglicisation with McGrath focusing on how the tragedies of Scottish history must be remembered, considered, and brought into the way we understand modern Scotland as a distinct and separate nation. He looks particularly at exploitation of Scottish resources and the suppression of the Gaelic language. Leonard looks at the ways in which the anglicisation of Scottish culture has led to Scots dialect being viewed as intellectually inferior to standard English especially in academic circles. He writes phonetically in the working class Glaswegian dialect to throw a stark contrast against the anglicised version of Scots accepted in other literary works. Both McGrath and Leonard present an impassioned defence for the importance of the appreciation of Scottish people, culture, and language, fuelled by their Scottish nationalities.

This essay will explore how ideas about national identity can be challenged through literary works, examining *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* by John McGrath and an extract from Tom Leonard's series of poems; *Unrelated Incidents*. I will look at themes of collective forgetting and the long-standing presumption that Scotland is a powerless country, which McGrath seeks to dispel. He does this through his focus on Scots culture along with Brechtian techniques of absurdist theatre. I will investigate Leonard's challenging of negative connotations associated with Scotland and Scots vernacular. The primary ways he does this is by writing in working-class Glaswegian dialect and by investigating the position of those marginalising the Scottish identity, in the field of literature and the wider academic world.

At the heart of *The Cheviot* is McGrath's crusade to break down the systematic forgetting of the nation. He explores the idea that accepted memories of a nation's history are a created construct – with aspects of that history purposely forgotten by the people themselves or faded from national history by the authorities (Hirst and Colum,89). Hirst and Colum explain that "the selectivity of communicative acts of remembering can induce collective selective forgetting" (88) and it is the lack of remembrance of the exploitation Scotland has faced over the centuries that *The Cheviot* attempts to undo. McGrath keeps themes of exploitation running throughout the periods of time explored and as Śledzińska observes, "the play […] focuses on the expression of tragedy arising from the continuous oppression of the (Scottish) people" (126). McGrath forces his audience to recognise that the unfolding atrocities were once the reality of Scottish Highlanders, with actors reciting first-hand historic accounts of the events. Following a scene about the resistances to the Clearances we hear about police brutality; "the police struck with all their force, not only when knocking down but after, when they were on the ground, they beat and kicked them while lying weltering in their blood" (McGrath,12). The stark reality presented is shocking, as although there is a passive awareness of the Highland clearances, details are often obscured to maintain the image of a harmonious United Kingdom (McCrone,66). By presenting disturbing accounts of the Clearances, McGrath compels his audience to consider the unjust treatment of Scotland.

McGrath also uses this technique to exemplify how Gaelic was jettisoned by the government. It is widely known that speaking Gaelic has diminished since the Clearances, although it is often forgotten that it was illegal to speak Gaelic in the 18th century

(McGrath,52). This demonstrates that Scottish culture has not altered organically but because of purposeful oppression of Scots and their traditions. At the close of *The Cheviot,* McGrath changes tack to inform his audience that injustices were still occurring. It is important to remember that the three instances of exploitation *The Cheviot* outlines – the sheep, the stag and the oil – were not all historical as at that time, the Scottish oil industry was merely beginning. Therefore, we must consider the end of the play as a direct address to an audience that had power to effect change. McDonald says, "the play asks us to see seeds of historical events flowering in the present" (56). It can be considered that McGrath was afraid of how the past seemed to be repeating itself and that Scotland might be exploited by the oil industry, exemplified at the close of the play when the fourth wall is broken by the cast directly addressing the audience. The final discourse between audience and performers affirms the opening sentiment of the play; that their story is not yet finished (McGrath,2). Here, it can be said that McGrath challenges not an externalised idea about Scotland but one that Scots have self-imposed: that they lack power to change the pattern of exploitation. McGrath does this by posing the direct question to the audience; "Have we learnt anything from the clearances?" (73). This places personal responsibility for bettering Scotland's future on the audience and reminds them that the Highland Clearances are part of Scottish national history. Therefore, for a Scottish audience, it is now their task to achieve control of the land which their ancestors could not.

Like McGrath, Leonard's work is strongly associated with Scottish people and their culture, though framed in a more modern context, focusing on wider academic discourses about Scottish identity. A striking feature of Leonard's *Unrelated Incidents* is the phonetic style he utilises to express working-class Glaswegian vernacular. Leonard is not the first to write in Scots as it has been a canon literary language for hundreds of years. Yet, this radical style of writing does not conform to the accepted version of Scots. Nevertheless, his work was well received by both Scots and a wider audience (Hadfield & Hadfield,251). Leonard's style obliges the reader to read the piece in the vernacular of the author because as Donald Wesling articulates; it causes the reader to "reproduce it exactly in the mind, on the vocal cords" (304). This is important as it emphasises the focus Leonard wants to draw to the value of Scots language and his national identity. For example, in the third stanza of *Unrelated Incidents one* "its thi lang-/wij a thi/ guhtr… thi lang-/wij a thi intill-/ects Inglish" (Dunn,336). The poetic voice of Leonard is strong here and unmistakably Scots. His national identity and the scrutiny he endures, are inseparable from the words of the poem and integral

to its meaning. It cannot be assumed that the voice we hear in the poem is Leonard's own voice, but it is heavily influenced by his experience of being a native Scots speaker in an academic context. Leonard's abstract style of spelling gives the reader a strong sense of his voice and allows them to interpret the poem within the framing of both his Glaswegian and wider Scottish identity. He presents a conversation in which the speaker is told that their own vernacular is invalid and that they must conform to standardised English to be taken seriously. Leonard wants his Scottish identity to be at the forefront of his work rather than hidden in conformist English spelling. It shows the sense of pride he feels in his identity as a working-class Glaswegian. Almost all his literary works are written in this style of Scots which holds significance as it challenges the assumption that Scots is not a valid language to be used in academia or literature.

McGrath too uses language as a means of examining the core ideas of the play. However, where Leonard focuses on the value of living languages, McGrath brings the issue of the fading language of Gaelic to the forefront of his linguistic investigation. Often the tourist industry portrays Scotland to be an untouched, mysterious place, speaking a strange language (McCrone,63) whereas in reality when McGrath wrote *The Cheviot* there were less than five-hundred Gaelic monoglots and only 1.7% of the population had any Gaelic knowledge (MacAulay,141). Śledzińska's observation that "McGrath himself was very open about his desire to uncover the Highlanders from the mist of romance and backwardness by exposing the truth about their ruthless economic exploitation." (125) aids our understanding of McGrath's motivation to dispel conceived ideas about Scotland. It can be interpreted that he saw them as a façade to hide the more unpleasant aspects of the relationship between Scotland and England. In *The Cheviot* this is most notably shown through the MC's comment that "[i]t's no good singing in Gaelic anymore – there's an awful lot of people here won't understand it" (McGrath,51). Here, McGrath makes the audience consider that it is probable that few will be able to understand the scattering of Gaelic throughout the play. In a similar manner as Leonard, McGrath explores the elevated status that the English language receives. During the Gaelic discourse, its decline is attributed to the rise of English, with the MC saying Gaelic has been lost "[b]ecause English is the language of the people who own the highlands and control the highlands" (McGrath,52). We see from this observation that the governing bodies of Scotland became anglicised therefore making English appear to be the language of the educated and successful. This furthers McGrath's insights into the false

portrayal of an untouched Scotland which has been frequently changed against the will of its people.

Hadfield observes that speakers of minority vernaculars are seen to be less educated (253). Leonard's purposes of writing in this manner are to validate the Scots language as a legitimate literary tool and to dispel the received idea that the way one speaks reflects one's social status and education. He does this through discussion of complex, intellectual ideas in each of his poems from *Unrelated Incidents.* For example, in the third poem Leonard contests the dominance of standard English (Wesling,304) in politics and the media. He takes on the persona of and satirises a BBC News presenter and broaches the topic of accents. "the reason/a talk wia/BBC accent/iz coz yi/widny wahnt/mi ti talk/aboot the/trooth wia/voice lik/wanna yoo/scruff." (Dunn,338) Despite the persona, Leonard retains the Glaswegian dialect. The discussion of right and wrong in language is key. Leonard seeks to disparage the link between speaking standardised English and telling the truth (Wesling 306). Leonard felt pressured to speak 'properly' when growing up (Dósa,70), which furthered his mission to end the shaming of speaking in local dialects. The reader feels Leonard's frustration at this marginalisation through his use of laconic line structure (Wesling,306). Short sentences give the poem a sense of anger when read aloud. Leonard concludes his discussion on truth with the powerful sentiment "this/is ma trooth" (Dunn,338). He directly goes against the idea that the only correct way to express oneself is through standardised English, by saying that there is no singular 'true' way of speaking or writing.

There is no doubt that, like Leonard, McGrath uses satire as a means of conveying political messages. Brown noted that "[a] hallmark of this play is the use of well-known tunes for satirical new texts, creating a disjunction between pre-existing referents and new contexts for political meanings" (204). The satirical songs that feature throughout *The Cheviot* are notable due to the juxtaposition of the familiarity with traditional folk songs they are based on and the narrative of the lyrics. One of the most significant examples of this is the use of 'These Are My Mountains' throughout the three time periods of the play. We see this first when the song is performed by Scottish characters and the audience (McGrath,2). Here it is not used satirically but as a marker of the original meaning. We see that meaning evolve when Queen Victoria sings (McGrath,37): although the lyrics remain unchanged, we see the beginning of outside influence entering Scotland. These visitors, however, were more innocent than our last singer. The final time we hear the song, it is performed by Texas Jim in

full satirical glory. The lyrics are distorted from a love-song addressing a homeland to a threat of destruction and claim to a land that is not his own. Consider the lines: “I’ll screw your landscape, screw your bays, I’ll screw you in a hundred ways” (McGrath,58). McGrath demonstrates that the outside influences encroaching upon Scotland now intended to use it for personal gain without regard for Scottish culture. Throughout *The Cheviot* we see McGrath’s political agenda of returning the land to the people, inspiring the audience to reject their perceived powerlessness.

Leonard’s view of writing in Scots differs from other writers in the same field, notably Hugh MacDiarmid who is widely respected for having launched the Scottish Literary Renaissance. MacDiarmid sought to bring back true Scottish culture yet in Leonard’s own words he was “extremely elitist” (Dósa,76). MacDiarmid failed to celebrate the existing vernaculars and marginalised them further by creating synthetic Scots which still brought no legitimate academic value to the Scots vernacular widely spoken in daily life. Leonard believes that there was an element of grandiosity and pretentiousness that came with the Scots writing which made it into the academic system and was not an honest attempt to bring Scots literature into the greater literary world (Dósa,75). He accused MacDiarmid of being a “cultural and linguistic monopoly capitalist” (Leonard,98). He also thinks that more value should be given to living languages (Dunn,339) that hold significance to the people of today’s Scotland rather than delving into so-called dead languages as MacDiarmid did. This links to Leonard’s core idea that the pluralism of Scottish vernaculars is what makes them so rich and valuable. At the core of Leonard’s agenda in writing *Unrelated Incidents* is his desire to detach the concepts of spelling and sound. This idea is most transparently approached in the second poem of *Unrelated Incidents* where Leonard asks “fyi huvna/hudda thingk/aboot thi dif/frince tween/sound/n object n/symbol; well” (Dunn,337). By this Leonard is asking the reader to consider how words on a page have more than one fixed pronunciation, and an abstract object does not have just one predetermined name. He seeks to challenge the status attached to different forms of language and the people who speak them and focus on the communication aspect of language and the art form.

McGrath uses Brechtian techniques to heighten the audience’s awareness of the reality they are watching but chooses to transmit them in the form of familiar traditions. This is imperative to the audience’s understanding of Brechtian techniques as it makes them accessible to a Scots audience and exemplifies the value McGrath places on Scottish culture.

One way McGrath utilises absurdist theatre is by breaking the fourth wall. In *The Cheviot* this is seen through the use of pantomime tropes. Although pantomime is not of Scottish origin, it is a long-standing traditional style of theatre which is extremely popular, with records of pantomimes being performed in Scotland in the 1700s (Baston,284). For example, in the scene featuring the Sturdy Highlander we see the classic pantomime feature of directly involving the audience (Taylor,33) when he requests that "if any of you should see any of those big Red Indians […] will you let me know? […] Walla Walla Wooskie. Will you shout that?" (McGrath,25). Not only does this involve the audience, it also shows how McGrath sees Scottish culture as a legitimate form of academic transmission, just as Leonard views local dialects as valid literary languages.

Both Leonard and McGrath present an impassioned defence for the importance of the appreciation of Scottish people, culture and language, fuelled by their Scottish nationalities. This is presented in a variety of ways; through form, choice of language, dramatic techniques and core themes of both literary texts. Leonard invites us to think about language and why certain ways of speaking are held in higher regard than others, whereas McGrath focuses on social hierarchies; who ought to be in control and who holds the power in our society. Both texts invite the reader to consider how pre-established opinions influence our world views of people and historic events, and how we can deconstruct stereotypes and form unbiased opinions of society.

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