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Intercultural Opportunities and Regional Identity: Nordic Voices in Scottish Literature

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Regions of Identity

Originally motivated by the 2008 ‘*European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*’, the research agenda for this article is focussed on the ways in which cultural and literary practices have become marked as *national* or *global*.¹ The central question explored is whether and how regional literature may be said to *mediate* between different communities of cultural practice, and national cultural ‘territories’, in a way that *crosses* and *interrogates* established geo-political boundaries. In light of an intercultural approach to this question, it seems most fruitful to define Nordic literature as a site of interplay between plural, converging, but also seemingly contradictory *regions of identity*, a site of continuous change but, most importantly, of human agency, intercultural *dialogue* and ‘our ability to go beyond the limits set by our existing beliefs and practices’ (Callinicos 2006, p.243).

Nordic and Scottish Narrative Communities

In the introduction to the millennium edition of *Nordisk Litteratur*, a literary yearbook published by the Nordic Literature and Library Committee, you will find the editors wistfully reflecting on the fact that, one hundred years previously, a ‘Nordic literary community’ had existed:

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at an international seminar entitled *Nation Building, Nationalism and Scandinavianism in Nineteenth-Century Scandinavia*, at the Centre for Scandinavian Studies, Aberdeen (30 March 2009).

When Knut Hamsun wrote *Sult* (Hunger) at Nørrebro in Copenhagen [. . .] the book was read on the day of publication all over Scandinavia. Henrik Ibsen's plays often had their premieres in other countries than Norway (Isaksen *et al.* 2006).

Since then, Nordic countries have developed in separate directions, establishing discrete, *national* literatures, with a dispersed literary community following geo-political structures and divisions. Are there parallels with the United Kingdom and continuing political and cultural movements that aim to define 'Nations within Nations'? What can Scotland's regional literature tell us about the intellectual and cultural interaction with the cultural 'construction projects' of nation building, nationalism(s) and globalisation, which, after all, are movements that resonate throughout modern and contemporary Europe?

From a Scottish perspective, part of the processes of political devolution and national unification as a 'Nation within a Nation' in the United Kingdom have been accompanied by the increased promotion of all things, culturally, *Scottish* and a consequent negation of regional cultural difference and their corollaries of political resistance. What has happened to the plural, complex, regional identities within Scotland, and the potential for expressions of cultural regionalism through literature?

Historically, nineteenth and twentieth-century writers from the Northern Isles such as J.J. Haldane Burgess in Shetland, and George Mackay Brown in Orkney, have generated texts that represent the continuing dialogue that 'Scots-Shetland' culture has had with both the Nordic and European cultural spaces – aptly (if somewhat abruptly) summarized in the following *Shetlopedia* entry:

Shetland's Literature reflects its history: five hundred years of Norse rule, followed by five hundred years of Scottish

and British – this, in very simple terms, is the political reality of the last millennium (Shetlopedia 2009).

Although clearly linked to the ‘Nordic forum’ (both historically and culturally), the location of political and civil institutions in Scotland have meant that both historical and contemporary literary narratives share a cultural identity very much locked into an English/Scottish dualism. This means that, although, in reality, very different from Scotland, the cultural identities of the Northern Isles are often subsumed under the Scottish national literary identity, which has been interpreted as provincial and ‘ambiguous’, or even ‘tormented’. The following comment by Harvie in *Scotland and Nationalism: British Society and Politics 1707 to the Present* illustrates the perceived ‘ambiguity’ in twentieth and twenty-first century Scottish literature:

Scotland’s reckoning with itself was, at best, ambiguous. [. . .] Among the characters invented to typify modern Scotland, [. . .] the notion of solipsism was pervasive. Whether in the cases of Inspectors Laidlaw or Rebus, or the tormented characters and encoded plots of Ian Rankin, Iain Banks, Ian MacEwen or even Allan Massie, a divided, fathomless and largely male society was on view [. . .] (Harvie 1977, p.226).

Yet, at the same time,

As in the Nordic countries, Scotland’s culture seemed to have moved into an era that was simultaneously Scots and international (Harvie 1977, p.218).

From the perspective of international and intercultural processes of unification, it may be considered quite old-fashioned to look at a regional identity (Nordic or otherwise) – as something that preceded the more progressive and unifying, national (British, Scots or International) ‘identities’. Have the Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland not stopped ‘being Nordic’ long ago, and is any attempt at showing the opposite not kale-yard nostalgia?

Nordic Identity in Transition

In order to explore aspects of Scotland's 'Nordic identity', it will be useful to situate the Orkney and Shetland islands in their historical *and* cultural contexts.

Nowadays known to be the Scottish Northern Islands or Northern Isles, the islands of Shetland and Orkney were historically and politically part of the 'Nordic kingdom' represented, for example, by the medieval *Kalmarunionen*. This was a series of personal unions (1397-1524) that united the three kingdoms Denmark, Norway (with Iceland, Greenland, Faroe Islands, Shetland and Orkney) and Sweden (including some of Finland) under a single monarch. Although of a very intermittent nature, this symbolic and historically significant unification established Danish dominance over the countries concerned,² resulting in a cultural-historical 'moment' that has resonated throughout Nordic culture and society ever since:

[This] common Nordic identity has grown through inter-Nordic trade and migration, through substantial efforts to harmonise domestic legislature across a broad range of sectors, and through extensive inter-Nordic cooperation and interchange of scientific, academic and cultural activity (Thomas in Miles 1996, p.16).

The Nordic Council of Ministers defines 'Nordic countries' as consisting of 'Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Finland, Åland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The Faroe Islands and Greenland are both part of the kingdom of Denmark, and Åland is part of the republic of Finland' (Nordic Council of Ministers 2008). This modern definition excludes Shetland and Orkney, which became part of Scotland and, later, the United Kingdom and Scotland, in the fifteenth century.

² The Norwegian monarch actually resided in Denmark.

In a chapter on *The Concept of the Nordic Region*, Baldersheim and Stahlberg differentiate between ‘the Nordic region’ (as encompassing ‘the monarchies of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and the republics of Finland and Iceland, as well as the Faroe Islands and Greenland’) and ‘Scandinavia’ (‘a collective term for Denmark, Norway and Sweden’) (Miles 1996, p.16-18). This is an interesting differentiation when dealing with traditional ‘Scandinavian’ literature / identity and it’s wider, and in some senses, more recent, ‘Nordic’ partners, meaning a division between young and old:

Denmark and Sweden are old-established powers, while the independent states of Norway, Finland and Iceland in their present forms are new nations of the twentieth century (Thomas cited in Miles 1996, p.16).

The changing geo-political landscape (of exclusion and inclusion of certain geographical areas within the Scandinavian or Nordic ‘concept’) is thus an ongoing political project – one that extends to cultural production within these regions. The current geo-political and historical climate is not only in dialogue with historical texts and contemporary literature, but also with literary criticism and the literary canon itself. Equally, literature is therefore not merely the repository of culture or tradition, but part of ‘a system of discriminations and evaluations’ of which ‘culture is a system of exclusions’ (Said in Bhaba 1990, p.100). As we will see, processes of cultural politics are, however, not always complete or all-encompassing.

Laurits Rendboe’s highly influential study of *The Shetland Literary Tradition* (1986) documents Shetland writers Laurence Nicolson and J. J. Haldane Burgess as being referred to as ‘the bards of Thule’, and their work featuring both in themes and language what he calls a ‘Nordic identity in transition’ (Rendboe 1986, p.30-31). This is because both Orkney and Shetland societies still find themselves at the *crossroads* of both Scandinavian and British nation building narratives,

and thereby offer interesting and complex cultural and literary responses to them. So, despite becoming part of a different nation and ‘culture’, Nordic narratives have persisted both in Shetland and Orkney, particularly during and since revivals of Scandinavian identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

An important factor in the creation of a distinctly *Nordic* cultural identity in Shetland has been a persistent and active ‘Shetland culturology’ (Church 1989, p.202), initially promoted by a ‘Nordophile Network’ (Cohen 1983, p.II) of intellectuals in Lerwick during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Just as Norwegian historians of that period, irked by the union with Sweden, idealised the independent Norway of the middle ages, Shetland antiquarians, confronted with the squalid details of local landlordism, looked back to the quite unrecorded Shetland of the twelfth century (Cohen 1983, p.484).

A more recent work on the *Reception and Construction of the Norse Past in Orkney* provides a similar chronology of nordophile enthusiasm within the intellectual circles of Orkney (Seibert 2008, p.166-171). From ‘Early Old Northernism’ during the Scottish Enlightenment, via Sir Walter Scott’s romantic representation of Norse culture in his novel *The Pirate*, to the ‘Viking Enthusiasm’ of the Udal League during the mid-1880s,³ and the ‘Golden Age of Antiquarianism’ (itself greatly influenced by the dominant political discourse of Nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s), are seen by Seibert as having ‘provided the historical basis for twentieth century patriotism’ (2008, p. 171).

Clearly, ‘contemporary circumstances influence peoples’

³ See A. W. Johnston (1907), *Orkney and Shetland Miscellany*. London: The Viking Club (Curtis and Bramish Ltd), William P. L. Thomson, ‘*The Udal League*’, *Orkney View*, 2 (1985) or J.A.B. Townsend, ‘*The Viking Society: A Centenary History*’, *Saga-Book*, 23/4 (1992).

perception of the past, the factors that contribute to the construction and perpetuation of past relationships' (Cohen 1983, p.484). It follows that, although Orkney and Shetland literature needs to be situated within its cultural and political context, this should also include a consideration of historical and contemporary discourses *about* the past contained within literary criticism itself, and a recognition of the intercultural nature of this particular strand of regional literature.

An Intercultural Approach to Regional Literary

Narratives

Anthony Smith, in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* comments that the rise of transnational cultures is a logical conclusion to the Second World War:

Before 1945, it was still possible to believe that the medium-sized nation-state was the norm of human organisation in the modern era and that national culture was humanity's highest aspiration [. . .] The Second World War destroyed that vision and aspiration (Smith 1990, p.172).

Within the post-war world of 'power blocs and ideological camps, humanity was re-divided' according to a 'truly global politics and culture' (Smith 1990, p.172). In place of the now obsolete nation state 'arose the new cultural imperialism of Soviet communism, American capitalism, and struggling to find a place between them, a new Europeanism' (Smith 1990, p.172).

Still, in its insistence on being this 'new age' of transnational communication, this type of globalist discourse still implicitly accepts the existence of cultural boundaries along national or ethnic limits. On the one hand, it asserts that globalisation, migration, decolonisation, and the post-war processes of European integration have led to a questioning of *traditional collective identities* based on the idea of a *unitary*

nation-state and confidence in Western supremacy. On the other hand, and as a result of these globalising, postmodern developments, it supports an increasing preoccupation in public or civic life with such issues as cultural diversity, religious and social allegiances, (inter)national canons and the internal and external borders of Europe (which are based on the very national borders that it claims no longer exist).

This is because, on the contrary, nations have neither disappeared, nor are obsolete. Post-1945, and, most importantly, post-1989, there seem to have been ever smaller nation-states emerging by the year and with them, the civic institutions and discourses (including literary narratives) that are associated with the rise of nations:

Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role (Bhabha 1990, p.49).

However, and as a consequence of post-modern reorientations of both literary and historical studies by figures such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Richard Rorty, historical explanations have now moved to a ‘discussion about the part played by language in producing and shaping historical meaning or “making true”’ (Munslow 2000, p.8).

In terms of intercultural communication this represents a move away from considering individual cultures and cultural narratives as more or less well defined, static and homogeneous entities (usually centred around national states or language groups) that reflect a fixed cultural or social reality, that can be easily taught, understood and managed (Pearson-Evans 2007). Instead, and following Blasco’s (2004) critical approach to intercultural encounters, this paper suggests literature and society as being in constant *dialogue* with internal social

and cultural complexities, as well as external cultural difference, including political and historical change. Cultural communication in general, and literature in particular, is thus a *meaning-making activity* that *generates* intercultural narratives, identities and cultures, rather than reflecting a particular unified, underlying national or global social reality or historical truth.

The Intercultural Narrative

To the cynic, 2008, *The Year of Intercultural Dialogue*, could merely be seen as a ‘management activity’ by a corporate Europe aiming to defuse internal conflict by ‘fostering European identity and citizenship’ (European Culture Commission 2008). However, the above definition of *intercultural dialogue* also points to phenomena that effectively connect literary works and their interpretations across national or regional boundaries. As such, it serves as a useful analytical tool to conceptualise the dynamics of cultural production as a negotiation between the socioeconomic reality of a historical period and the dominant discourses *about* it, or (in poststructuralist terms) *narratively constituting it*: ‘Narrative is central to historical explanation as the vehicle for the creation and representation of historical knowledge and explanation’ (Munslow 2000, p.169). In that sense, writers such as Haldane Burgess from Shetland and George Mackay Brown from Orkney generated what are *intercultural texts*, representing the continuing dialogue that Shetland and Orkney island societies have had (and still have) with *both* Scottish and Nordic cultural spaces. However, whereas George Mackay Brown (1921–1996) – the ‘Bard of Orkney’ – is considered one of the great Scottish poets of the twentieth century, very little is known, within Scottish literature at least, about his Shetland counterpart, Haldane Burgess. A short

diversion is therefore necessary to document a defining figure in Shetland's cultural and literary history.

Nordic Regionalism and Shetlanrie

James John (J.J.) Haldane Burgess (1862 - 1927) was a poet, novelist and musician, as well as a Scandinavian scholar. Born in Lerwick, he studied in Edinburgh and, having lost his sight in the last year of study, returned to Shetland to publish works in Shetlandic or Shetland dialect and English. His output includes a novel called *Tang* (Seaweed) and *The Viking Path*, which was translated into German, but you will also find 'Translations from Scandinavian' in collections of poetry such as *Rasmie's Büddie* (first published in 1891).

Along with a group of interested antiquarians and historians of the time, Burgess assisted visiting Faroese linguist Jakob Jakobsen in his researches into the Norn language in Shetland. Jakobsen, who, during prolonged fieldwork in Shetland in the years 1893-1895, collected more than ten thousand 'words of Norn origin', noted that the Lowland Scottish dialect of nineteenth century Shetland was still

saturated with an old Norse element, the numerous relics of the language formerly spoken in the Islands, so-called Norn, which had been in use there since the Islands were peopled by the Northmen in the Viking-age, and partly in the period just preceding the Viking-age proper (800-1000), i.e. from the close of the so-called ancient Norse period till well into the 18th century (Jakobsen 1985, p.XXXI).

His work resulted in a 'Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland', which is still the main resource of information on the origins and usage of the Shetland dialect.⁴

⁴ Based on Jakobsen's field work, the dictionary first appeared in Danish in four volumes between 1908 and 1921, and was subsequently published in English (posthumously) in two volumes, 1928 and 1932.

Significantly, for both Shetland's literary and popular culture, Burgess was the author of what can only be described as Shetland's 'cultural anthem' – the 'Up-Helly-Aa Song'. First published in 1907 by T. & J. Manson in Lerwick⁵, it is one of the three main songs still performed by processions of more than 800 'guizers' or men in Viking dress at the annual winter fire festivals or *Up-Helly-Aa* nights in Shetland's towns and villages.⁶

The Up Helli-Aa Song

From grand, old, Viking centuries	On distant seas, their dragon-
Up-Helli-A' has come,	prows went gleaming outward
Then light the torch and form the	bound,
march, and sound the rolling	The storm-clouds were their
drum:	banners, and their music ocean's
And wake the mighty memories	sound;
of heroes that are dumb;	And we, their sons, go sailing still
The waves are rolling on.	the wide earth round and round;
	The waves are rolling on.

<i>Chorus: Grand, old, Vikings ruled</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
<i>upon the ocean vast,</i>	No more Thor's lurid Hammer
<i>Their brave battle-songs still thunder</i>	flames, against the northern sky;
<i>on the blast;</i>	No more from Odin's shining
<i>Their wild war-cry comes a-ringing</i>	halls the dark Valkyrior fly;
<i>from the past;</i>	Before the LIGHT the heathen
<i>We answer it "A-oi"!</i>	Night went slowly rolling by;
<i>Roll their glory down the ages,</i>	The waves are rolling on.

⁵ It was originally performed to the tune 'John Brown's Body', an American marching song, but was replaced later by a composition by Thomas Manson.

⁶ The others being *The Norseman's Home* and *The Galley Song* which is sung to a Norwegian Folk melody.

<i>Sons of warriors and sages!</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
<i>When the fight for Freedom rages,</i>	We are the sons of mighty sires,
<i>Be bold and strong as they!</i>	whose souls were staunch and strong;
Of yore, our fiery fathers sped	We sweep upon our serried foes,
upon the Viking Path;	the hosts of Hate and Wrong;
Of yore, their dreaded dragons	The glory of a grander Age has
braved the ocean in its wrath;	fired our battle-song;
And we, their sons, are reaping	The waves are rolling on.
now their glory's aftermath;	<i>Chorus</i>
The waves are rolling on.	Our galley is the People's Right,
<i>Chorus</i>	the dragon of the free;
In distant lands, their raven-flag	The Right that, rising in its
flew like a blazing star;	might, brings tyrants to their
And foreign foemen, trembling,	knee;
heard their battle-cry afar;	The flag that flies above us is the
And they thundered o'er the	Love of Liberty;
quaking earth, those mighty men	The waves are rolling on.
of war;	<i>Chorus</i>
The waves are rolling on.	
<i>Chorus</i>	(Burgess, J.J.H. 1907)

With lines such as 'From grand old Viking centuries Up-Helly-A' has come' and a chorus centring around 'Sons of warriors and sages', the song not only revives and reinterprets Nordic imagery and ancestry, but evokes a very specific and localised sense of cultural identity. If we add to this that *Up-Helly-Aa*, as a festival, was established in its modern form in Lerwick, Shetland's 'capital', in the 1870s (with the high point of Scandinavinism being around 1867), and that it involves the burning

of a reconstructed Viking galley, we have some powerful hints at where both Shetland intellectuals and popular culture were aiming to situate themselves during the nineteenth century and beyond. Roy Grønneberg comments in ‘Jakobsen and his Shetland Correspondents’:

Jakob Jakobsen has always bulked large in Shetland’s intellectual life. [. . .] [His research] must have made a considerable impact on the local people and given a great boost to the latent pro-Scandinavian sentiment which already existed (1984, p. 234).

So, for example, many other Shetland writers such as T.A. Robertson, also known as Vagaland, repeatedly draw attention to the ‘Norn’ language as being a direct link to Shetland’s Nordic past and present in their narratives:

Shetlanrie

[. . .]

Now, if a boat you mention, then there's many a Norn name,

From the ‘tilfers’ in the bottom to the ‘stamreen’ at the stem,

And Norn it is you’re speaking when you labour in the hill,

With the ‘tushkar’ that you dig with and the ‘kishie’ that you fill

[. . .]

(Robertson 1975).⁷

As Laurits Rendboe notes in his introduction to *The Shetland Literary Tradition*:

⁷ The author’s own comment to the title is stated as follows: ‘SHETLANRIE - After the Norman Conquest English was considered to be an inferior language. However, in 1362, the Law of Englishrie was passed, after which English displaced Norman-French as the official language.’ It is unclear whether Robertson just wants to draw our attention to the perceived ‘inferiority’ of all languages by conquering /colonising powers, and by inference, dominated cultures, as the central part of this comment, or whether he really thought that a similar ‘Law’ was desirable (and possible) for Shetland.

This poetry, often mild, often forceful, as the need be, has never played the role of ‘art for art’s sake’. It has always been an integral part of Shetland life, being used to set forth warnings so as to rouse the people when needed, to commemorate worthy events, or to bestow praise where it belonged, just like the skaldic poetry of the old Norsemen (Rendboe 1986, p.35).

Orcadianism

Themes of intercultural identity and links to a literary past beyond Orkney, Scotland or Britain are also explored in the work of the Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown (1921–1996). In works such as *Vinland* (1992), *Magnus* (1973) and *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), Mackay Brown not only reinterprets history from a similar Nordic perspective, as do Burgess and Robertson, he does so in a transformative way – ‘by passing it through the eye of the needle of Orkney’ (Heaney in Parham 1996).

In Mackay’s twentieth-century novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time*, the main protagonist, Thorfinn Ragnarson, becomes the focus of this communal Nordic memory or ‘imagined community’. Significantly, and as the title suggests, the text considers time not as something linear, but as an ocean of narratives that constantly envelops the main character and defines his cultural identity: ‘Round Norday island, the great ocean music goes on and on, everlastingly’ (Brown 1994, p.59). Both in the conversations Thorfinn hears when growing up on the Orcadian island of Norday (from *Nord* = North; *ay* (ey or oy) = island) in the 1930s (itself a memory constructed by the narrator), and the frequent dreams he has of travelling through history, Thorfinn / Norday island represents the particular intercultural historical narratives of the region (Beaumont, 1997–2010). The exchanges between islanders of differing perspectives that take place at

the local smithy articulate Orkney's peculiar cultural and political situation as part of Scotland's 'periphery':

Ben Hoy objected that Orkney had never been a part of Scotland anyway till 1472 and then the Scots had fallen on the once powerful earldom of Orkney and batted on it like hoodie crows. Terrible it had been.

MacTavish brushed that aside. 'Well', said he, 'you've been Scottish now for a long time. That's an old song you're singing, my man' (Brown 1994, p.25).

The narrative then follows Thorfinn, the main protagonist, in a symbolic dream-journey south to Scotland, assisting the Scottish Nationalist 'knight' MacTavish, while the islands themselves remain (at least in Thorfinn's head) a rural Nordic paradise. During the war, and in a semi-autobiographical move by the author, Thorfinn becomes a writer of historical novels. Returning to a changed Norday after the war to re-capture 'what was left of the glory and the dream', Thorfinn realizes that 'the tide had turned' with the glory and the dream 'lost beyond recall' (Brown 1994, p.216) – although the novel nevertheless expresses hope that Norday/Orkney will have its own 'voice'. . . eventually.

Contemporary Nordic Voices in Scottish Literature

Shetland-born Robert Alan Jamieson's poetry represents a particularly good example of how intercultural dialogue generates such an 'authentic voice', a cultural identity that is regional, yet distinctly part of both the Nordic and Scottish literary landscape. His collection of poetry, entitled *Nort Atlantic Drift*, very closely connects both form and language⁸ to locality. It evokes, not just a specific 'place' or landscape (the area around Sandness in the North West of the Shetland

⁸ Linguistically, he uses his own form of Modern Shetlandic Scots or Shetland dialect.

Mainland), but also a specific historical period (the time when the writer remembers growing up there, during the 1960s).

Unlike MacDiarmid, Jamieson does not invent a ‘fake’ language, identity or cultural ‘place’. He simply uses the existing one to explore old and new themes. He particularly focuses on representing the cosmopolitan nature of island life and identity, which is a constant intercultural dialogue between Shetland and the Nordic world, as the following poem from the chapter ‘Atlasland’ illustrates:

Bottilt

Hit wis a Hæie’s chinchir koardjil
he baalt owir da fæs a’da wæjiev
wie his haandskrivin ’po da pæpir insyd.

Da Hæie’s korks snødit tyghtir,
wid kiep his ingkie messiech
dry fir da wirld t’fin.

Fæ dis laandfaa, he myght rekk
oot ta Riejkjaviek ir Tromsø,
t’Heligolaand ir Tor’s Havn.

He nivir dootit an ungkin haand
wid lift Hæie’s bottil
fæ an ebbin grund sumwy.

Dan dir kam a lettir bakk. A man’d fun
it,

ati’da shoormil, an wret, wie fotoos,
fæ dat ungkin laand akross da sie –
Æshnis.

It was a Hay’s ginger
cordial bottle he threw
beyond the incoming
wave, with his
handwriting on the paper
inside.

Hay’s corks twisted
tighter, would keep his
inky message dry for the
world to read.

From this shore, he
might reach out to
Rekjavik or Tromsø, to
Heligoland or Torshavn.

He never doubted a
stranger’s hand would
pick Hay’s bottle from an
ebbing shoreline
somewhere.

Then a letter came. A
man had found it, in the

shallows, and wrote,
with photos, from that
foreign land across the sea

–

Eshaness

(Jamieson 2007, p.36).

Via the artifact of a ginger cordial bottle containing a message ‘fir da wirld t’fin’, the Nordic, or North Atlantic, world is represented as far, yet accessible, foreign, yet, surprisingly (and ironically) familiar. Eshaness is part of the island that the sender inhabits, so the reply to his letter actually comes from his neighbour across the bay. The sea is not seen as where the land ends, but where the rest of the world begins – ‘Da sie’s da wy da wirld kum’s ta wis’ – evoking a way in which the Nordic is seen as central, rather than as part of the Scottish / British ‘Northern Periphery’ (Jamieson 2007, p.73). In terms of an island identity, the poems interrogate stereotypical perceptions of a culturally peripheral or isolated place as remote, provincial and ignorant:

SIEVÆGIN

Ajunt da flat ært

a’da boondries a’sens,

he kens –

da wirld’s choost

a roond bloo baa fokk sirkil

t’wirik an liv:

a globbil awaarnis.

Du spits ati’da oshin,

Beyond the flat earth of the

boundaries of sense, he knows –

the world is just a round blue ball

people circle in order to work

and

live:

a global awareness. If you spit in

the ocean, that drop might reach

a drap myght rekk Æshnis.	Eshanness.
Bit hoiest du a sæl,	
du gjings quhaar du will,	But hoist a sail, and you go where
ta njoo-fun laand.	you please, to new found land

(Jamieson 2007, p.113).

Instead, through the metaphor of the sea / sailor, the ‘global awareness’ of the islanders is drawn to the foreground, aware of the possibilities beyond ‘the boundaries of sense’ of ‘ethnic grouping’:

He steps from the vessel to find that it is the land which is swaying and floating, and that ‘his people’ are not an ethnic grouping, but those who share a way of life (Jamieson 2007, p. 91).

With both his use of imagery and dual-language text, Jamieson thus deliberately locates his poetic narratives in the ‘Nort Atlantik’, away from the traditional cultural centres of London / Edinburgh or even dry land. Rather than attempting to move ‘the centre’ to a specific nation, language or race (Gaelic / Scottish / Shetland), he situates his work alongside that of other writers using ‘minority languages’ within the North Atlantic / Nordic region and beyond. This cosmopolitan *Weltanschauung* is reinforced by Jamieson’s commentary, when he explains the rich intercultural horizons of island communities:

The knowledge, understanding and artefacts of the world that the merchant seamen brought home with them meant that although Shetland was a small isolated community in global terms, its folk had an awareness of the true size of the world. This demonstrates the misapprehension that such a ‘marginal’ community is less informed about the world at large than more ‘central’, metropolitan situations, where everything, it appears, is near at hand (Jamieson 2007, p.77).

As the examples above demonstrate, the *Nordic Voices* within Scottish literature not only evoke ‘a sense of place’, in terms of locating their texts in their particular *intercultural* space, but also reveal how cultural history is transmitted through a plurality of voices, rather than one ‘national’ literature. The narratives illustrate how cultural identities are informed (or imagined) by the *interaction* between literatures and societies, rather than an aesthetic artifact arising from the artist’s ‘roots’, ‘nation’ or ‘native culture’.

What could be called an *intercultural* understanding of both Scandinavian and Scottish literature therefore opens the doors to re-interpreting the ‘Nordic identity’ evoked by both past and present writers, and an opportunity to question the ‘Scottish silences’ within the Nordic canon, and *vice versa*. An intentional, intercultural approach to Scottish culture and society itself then presents an opportunity for new and empowering perspectives on regional identity, and productive academic dialogue across both global and national worldviews, which, ultimately, lets regional literature speak for itself. However, and as Benedict Anderson repeatedly states in his book on *Imagined Communities*, part of the challenge is that not everyone’s voice has the same power – with imagination and narrative always enveloped by the forceful global ocean of institutional, political and economic forces.

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