

**„FIDDLERS AND PAINTERS AND SUCHLIKE IRRELIGIOUS FOLK“?:
CALVINISM, MUSIC AND THE VISUAL ARTS IN SCOTLAND
AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

TOM HUBBARD

Tom Hubbard, who is currently editor of the online Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism (BILC) at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, was Visiting Professor in Scottish Literature and Culture at ELTE University for the first half of 2006. He was the first Librarian of the Scottish Poetry Library (1984-92) and subsequently held visiting posts at the universities of Grenoble (Stendhal), Connecticut, and North Carolina at Asheville. He has also taught at Glasgow School of Art and Edinburgh College of Art; a series of lectures at the former were written up as his book *The Integrative Vision: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Baudelaire, Rilke and MacDiarmid* (1997). He gave a paper on “Calvinism and the Arts in Scotland” on 27 March 2006 in the Research Forum, which was followed by a Scottish-Hungarian poetry reading in the afternoon.

During my first professional visit to Hungary in the spring of 1996, I was amused to discover that Scottish life and culture had not gone entirely unnoticed by at least two major figures of the Hungarian *fin-de-siècle*. I am not referring to the more recent *fin-de-siècle* but to the more stylish one before that: the years leading up to 1900 and a little beyond.

In the course of a short story which appears in a translated collection published by Corvina of Budapest, Endre Ady makes a rather cheeky reference to the puritanical virtues to be found in the Scottish hills (Ady 136). (In revenge, I have since made versions of Ady’s poems in the Scots language.) Moreover, I learned from Judit Szabadi’s book on the painter József Rippl-Rónai—who incidentally produced a powerful portrait of Ady—that he (Rippl-Rónai) was close to a Scottish painter called James Pitcairn-Knowles. I had no idea of this man’s work until I was called back to Budapest in 2004 to give a lecture, at the Ernst Museum, to accompany an exhibition of the work of both painters.

Rippl-Rónai and Pitcairn-Knowles had collaborated with the Belgian Symbolist writer Georges Rodenbach (1855-1898) on a joint literary-visual arts publication. Normally, an image illustrates a text, but here the images by the two artists were to be illustrated verbally by Rodenbach. Now it is in this context that I found yet another Hungarian being cheeky about the Scots; this is how Rippl-Rónai contrasts his contributions to the project with those of Pitcairn-Knowles:

My drawings will be in color, reproduced by lithography (from stone slabs); those of my Scottish friend will be cut in wood... His pictures are sad, mine are cheerful; his remind me of death, mine inspire pleasure in life; his are evocative of winter, mine of summer. (From Rippl-Rónai’s memoirs, qtd. in Szabadi 17)

During my various working visits to Hungary I have enjoyed much pleurably idle chatter comparing the tendency of Scots and Hungarians towards gloom and pessimism, and this has led us into all sorts of generalizations that, like most generalizations, have more than a little truth about them. However, I would like to suggest that we ought to question certain assumptions, held by Scots and non-Scots alike, that the former have been, and continue to be, in the grip of something called Calvinism—this ogre which terrorizes us, and supposedly drains the life out of us. It seems to me that this attitude, curiously enough, serves to reinforce the dread doctrine of predestination, and allows us to perpetuate self-fulfilling stereotypes.

I would suggest to you that we Scots have used Calvinism as an excuse for many of our failings. If we do not blame the English, we blame Calvinism for our reluctance to recognize and enhance our existing contributions to the cultural and scientific well-being of our fellow-citizens on this earth. Undoubtedly, Calvinism has had adverse effects on the Scottish psyche, if there is one. If we consider ourselves to be mere worms under an all-powerful and all-determining God, we are hardly going to have the confidence to assert ourselves. The doctrine which divides mankind into the Saved and the Damned must encourage a Manichaeian, dogmatic, sectarian mentality, and can only reinforce our tendency to be a richly diverse but yet sadly fragmented country, in cultural terms.

I don't think this mentality has been better satirized than in an anonymous scrap of verse which may or may not have been composed by a Scot:

We are the precious chosen few:
 Let all the rest be damned.
 There's only room for one or two:
 We can't have Heaven crammed.
 (Cohen 309)

Calvinism as it developed as a cultural force as distinct from a theological system—that is to say, Calvinism as a web of behavior and customs in this world—seems to have got itself into a terrible tangle concerning free will versus predestination, justification by faith or even justification by an austere ethic of good works. If you have been predestined to salvation, you belong to God's Elect, and it is only too easy to justify certain sinful acts—even murder—if by these acts you consider yourself to be carrying out the will of God. This is the totalitarian rationale of ends justifying means and is at the heart of James Hogg's Scottish novel of 1824, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The Orkney-born poet Edwin Muir (1887-1959), who translated Kafka, demonstrated similarities between Calvinism and Bolshevism-in-practice; as a British Council lecturer in Central Europe during the 1930s and 1940s he witnessed—and this was rare for a Scot at the time—the rise of totalitarian régimes. In 1948 the Stalinist putsch in Czechoslovakia made Muir's position impossible, especially at the Charles University, where academic freedom was fading fast.

Returning to the nineteenth century, we can trace a line of descent from Hogg's text to that most celebrated proto-Symbolist and Calvinist-inflected novella by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). In this text, the sinner can justify himself by means of science—that accelerating force (and obsession) of

the late nineteenth century. Dr. Jekyll can retain his pious, respectable position in Victorian bourgeois society while creating a separate identity for his internal demons. By means of a drug he can be transformed into the evil little Mr. Hyde. He seems to be saying to himself: that is not me as Dr. Jekyll who commits these unspeakable acts, it is someone else, Mr. Hyde, and as Dr. Jekyll I can proceed with impunity. But of course it cannot work out like that. The devil Mr. Hyde must inevitably stake his claim against Jekyll, who has effectively entered a Faustian pact.

This work from the 1880s is ostensibly set in London, but Stevenson was drawing on his youthful memories of Edinburgh, with its solid bourgeois mansions within a minute’s walk of the labyrinthine slums. The city itself was an embodiment of Jekyll-and-Hyde duality. Stevenson sought his own personal liberation from middle-class Presbyterian Edinburgh, and in his youth attempted to find it in the pubs and brothels of the city. Guilt, though, would drive him back to his stern if loving father. We are at the point where Calvin meets Freud—and even Jung, for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a parable of the deliberate fragmentation of the personality, a rejection of the wholeness which one would have thought to be the proper course for a professional healer such as Jekyll. Jung would maintain that a denial of one’s “shadow self” stands in the way of the integration of the total personality.

We arrive at a divided Scotland, with divided Scots. It has been said that if Freud had known anything about Scotland and its obsessive-compulsive neuroses, he would have left Vienna immediately and taken on the whole of Scotland as his collective patient. Standing at the bar some years back, I suggested to the Irish poet Liam Ó Muirthile that if there were a Nobel Prize for Guilt, it would always be won by a Scot. Liam replied that the Irish would offer a strong challenge, and referred to his own Catholic upbringing. It may be, then, that features we ascribe exclusively to Calvinism may actually be shared by other Christian traditions. Think of Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915), as he quakes under the hell-fire sermon of one of the priests at Clongowes College.

So: is there an alternative to these horrors? Have Scots at all successfully ventured in the other direction: against fatal division, enabling themselves to incorporate the “shadow self” into a creative synthesis? To answer this, we might care to investigate some of the actual benefits that Calvinism can offer. In fact, we must be careful not to make too close an identification of Calvin himself with an extreme “Calvinist” and Puritan ideology. As a good Frenchman, he enjoyed his glass of wine. He would not have denied that the gifts of God, if sensuously but moderately enjoyed, could bring us nearer to Him. Calvin was not a Puritan; Puritanism was very much a later development.

When we talk of “Calvinism” in Scotland, for the most part we are talking of a cultural, attitudinal, behavioral inheritance, rather than a theological construct to which people consciously adhere. Few people in Scotland today, or even over the past century and more, would say to you, “I am a Calvinist” with a capital C. In practice, Calvinism has not always been oppressive. Often it has been immensely liberating. Calvin maintained that if the law of God conflicted with the law of the State, believers had the right to defy an oppressive government. There was a strong radical streak which contradicted the tendency elsewhere for church ministers to inform their congregations that they were lowly people who must obey their God-appointed masters in the “big houses” and in the corridors of

state. The great struggles for land reform and ecclesiastical democracy in the nineteenth century were fuelled by such radicalism. Moreover, a religion centered on the Bible required believers who were literate, and so Scottish Protestantism became a force for universal schooling, the basis for what became known as “democratic intellect” as opposed to the privileged elitism of Oxford and Cambridge. Thirdly, Calvinism in Scotland may have frowned on the theatre, but its mythology of devils, witches, warlocks, bogles, sin and damnation has empowered the Scottish imagination to such a degree that we can honestly say that, without Calvinism, the arts in Scotland would have been immeasurably more insipid. Robert Louis Stevenson owed an artistic debt not only to Dostoyevsky—he was reading *Crime and Punishment* around the time he wrote *Jekyll and Hyde*—but also to his nurse Alison Cunningham, a Fife woman who was a staunch Calvinist. Alison told him lurid stories of the Protestant martyrs who had sought refuge in the Pentland Hills, where they were rounded up and taken to Edinburgh’s Grassmarket to be publicly hanged. This all gave him nightmares, and indeed it was a nightmare that released much of the creative energy for the making of *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Consider, too, the cadences of the King James Bible, as well as the eloquence of pulpit preachers, and how they are echoed in the work of writers who have come from the Calvinist tradition. Far from claiming this as a Scottish monopoly, I would point to New England and to two American greats such as Hawthorne and Melville, writers much admired by Stevenson. (I will indulge in a bit of chauvinism, though, by pointing out that a direct ancestor of Melville was a Fife man: the Reverend Thomas Melville was the minister of Scoonie Kirk in present-day Leven.)

I would propose, then, that both Scots and observers of the Scots ought to stop regarding Calvinism as the bogeyman on which everything negative can be blamed. Instead, I will attempt to show that Scottish visual art and music, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, are at their strongest when they display a synthesis—or, better, a tension—between puritan restraint and sensual energy.

In one of his major long poems, “On a Raised Beach,” the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978) writes that the contemplation of the rocks of the Shetland Islands is “austerely intoxicating” (428). That is a quintessentially Scottish oxymoron. There is a great love of contrast, of contradiction, in Scottish culture. As an earlier Scottish poet, John Davidson (1857–1909), observed, “If one has a healthy mind it is wholesome to go from extreme to extreme, just as a hardy Russian plunges out of a boiling bath into the snow” (71). (So we’re talking of oxymorons that also belong “quintessentially” elsewhere—see Stevenson and Dostoyevsky, above.)

“Austerely intoxicating” would describe much Scottish music of the turn of the nineteenth century. Take, for example, the compositions of Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1847–1935). His *Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello*, published in Leipzig, was written in 1873, at the time when young Robert Louis Stevenson was skipping classes at Edinburgh University in his earnest attempts to become a bad boy. Mackenzie came from a musical family. He tells us in his memoirs that the family would play music on a Sunday; in nineteenth-century Scotland you were not supposed to do anything on a Sunday except worship God. A policeman came to the door, but after some words with Mackenzie’s father he left in good spirits—or rather the good spirits were in him. (Purser *passim*, as with future references in this paper to musical examples.)

Mackenzie, as well as other Scottish composers of the time, composed some of the most erotic music that has ever been written; yet, unlike so much late-Romantic European music in the wake of Wagner and *Tristan*, Mackenzie’s music is never too much of a good thing, never cloying, never *stickily* sensual. Indeed, his sensuality is the stronger for the counterforce of Scottish Victorian restraint. (Scottish Dionysus tempered by Scottish Apollo, to put it in the Nietzschean terms with which John Davidson would have been familiar.)

Mackenzie wrote a *Britannia* overture based on Britannia ruling the waves. It is surprisingly unbombastic. The Hungarian-born conductor Hans Richter remarked that when the tuba makes an entry, he had a mental picture of a whale surging through Britannia’s waves. Yet another Hungarian being cheeky about a Scottish artist, but one suspects that Mackenzie would have been amused rather than offended. A more important Mackenzie work, though, is his oratorio *The Rose of Sharon* (1884). What might be one’s initial reaction to the composer going to the Old Testament for inspiration? A predictable source for a pious Scotsman, one would think. But Mackenzie was not interested in theology. His Old Testament inspiration is the Song of Solomon. In *The Rose of Sharon*—especially in part three of the work, “The Awakening of the Sulamite”—Mackenzie evokes the atmosphere of a perfumed garden, one lover inviting the other into this very earthly paradise, all languorous seduction and shedding of garments.

William Wallace lived from 1860 to 1940. No, this is not the William Wallace only too familiar from Mel Gibson’s unintentionally amusing parody in *Braveheart*, but a medical man who specialized in ophthalmology before turning his career in the direction of music: from care of the eye to care of the ear. Wallace introduced a Hungarian invention—the symphonic poem—to Scotland. This form was invented by Liszt, and applies to an orchestral work which follows a broadly narrative program. Wallace’s symphonic poem, *The Passing of Beatrice*, dates from 1892. As the title suggests, it is inspired by Dante’s *Paradiso*. Liszt’s *Dante Symphony* has only two movements, “Inferno” and “Purgatorio,” so it has been said that Wallace’s piece completes the Liszt. Dante ought to remind us that Calvinism possesses no monopoly on the fear of Hell, but Wallace’s *Paradiso* is infused with the opposite of any “Calvinist” joylessness; it is a sensuous yet at the same time a transcendently chaste celebration of human love passing into the Empyrean.

The last musical example—and I cannot stress strongly enough my indebtedness to John Purser’s *Scotland’s Music* radio series—comes from Hamish McCunn (1868-1916). He was a native of Greenock on the Clyde Estuary, west of Glasgow, and the son of a shipyard owner. He is more obviously patriotic than Mackenzie or Wallace, though it must be said that Mackenzie was a pioneeringly national composer, and his markedly Scottish Piano Concerto was publicly performed by Paderewski. As for McCunn, he is not the Scottish Wagner as some have claimed, but rather the Scottish Dvořák. During his overture *The Land of the Mountain and the Flood*—premiered in 1887 when the composer was only nineteen—you can hear the “Scotch snap,” a rhythmic phenomenon much deployed by Dvořák himself. In the twentieth century, there were calls by MacDiarmid and others for Scottish music to follow the lead of Bartók and Kodály, that is to proceed on the basis of a more systematic and scientific absorption of folk music. So if McCunn is our McDvořák, we had to wait well into the twentieth century for our McBartók, but we were lucky to acquire a plethora of such, in the persons of Francis George Scott (1880-1958), Erik Chisholm (1904-1965) and Ronald Stevenson (b. 1928). They were all associated with the first

or later phases of the Scottish Revival, though their work remains little known in our proudly philistine land.

Finally, let us address ourselves to the austere intoxications of the painting, design, and architecture of the period. The painter William McTaggart (1835-1910) grew up in Argyll, a dramatically coastal region in the west of Scotland. His early love of painting was discouraged by his local Free Presbyterian Church minister, who declared that “Art is vanity, even wickedness [...]. See its connection with the Church of Rome which has dragged Italy down to a land of fiddlers and painters and suchlike irreligious folk” (qtd. in Patrick 2). McTaggart is still wrongly labeled the first Scottish Impressionist, but he developed his style independently of Monet and his French contemporaries of the 1870s. There is much more movement, more drama in McTaggart than in the relatively quieter, more sedate work of the French Impressionists. There are usually human figures in a McTaggart canvas, and they relate intimately to the natural environment. Above all, there is the powerfully elemental meeting of land and sea. His masterpiece, *The Storm* (1890), exemplifies the dark intensity of the Scottish imagination. It could serve as a visual counterpart to many fictions by Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, at those points where there is a desperate escape by sea, as in *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) or *Catriona* (1893). McTaggart’s *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* of 1895 provides dramatic comment on the plight of Scotland’s dispossessed.

Symbolism and Art Nouveau (Jugendstil, Secessionism) offer challenges to the sobrieties—and pieties—of Calvinism. A protégé of the polymath and impresario Patrick Geddes, John Duncan (1866-1945) shows how a Scottish Symbolist may deal with the traditional iconography of a Celtic country; one image in particular is sited permanently in a place associated with religious intolerance. A fountain can be seen at the spot, on Edinburgh Castle’s esplanade, where witches were burned. It bears Duncan’s relief of two heads, seemingly those of Adam and Eve; as two heads, though, they may suggest a divided psyche *à la manière écossaise*. There is also a snake, reinforcing the representation of the first couple, and who could be either the fiend in Paradise, or the Celtic serpent of wisdom, or even both. Symbolism cannot answer all that for certain. It does far better than that: it suggests.

A pupil of John Duncan, and like him a native of Dundee, was George Dutch Davidson (1879-1901), whose haunting self-portrait, while unique, evokes a Scottish Edward Munch. For me, this is *the* image of Scottish Symbolism and ought to be used as the cover of a paperback edition of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It is very much a step in the direction from a Calvinist to a Freudian psychology.

The Scottish Colorists were a group of artists who do not constitute a “School” as such, but they knew each other and shared many aesthetic ideals, not least an admiration for Cézanne and a desire to paint in that artist’s part of the world, the south of France. There, and in Paris, there prevailed a hedonistic ambience absent in Scotland and also a quality of light and color unavailable to them in the mists of home. So, of their number, Samuel Peploe (1871-1935) evoked the landscape of Cassis, on the coast near Marseille, and Francis Cadell—a Scot of French ancestry—ventured further east with his 1910 shimmerings of St. Mark’s Square, Venice. John Duncan Fergusson’s (1874-1961) *The Blue Beads*, also from 1910, reveals him as the most sensual, indeed the most sexual, of the Colorists in both style and content.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), a figure as much European as he was Scottish, attracted the attention of design and architectural circles in Vienna, Turin (Torino) and Budapest at a time when he was being ignored (or, at best, undervalued) in his native Glasgow. In 1914 he left Glasgow for good, having had enough of being dismissed as an alcoholic crank. It must be stressed, though, that there were those in Glasgow who actively championed his work and they deserve our infinite gratitude for commissioning the masterpieces which can still be seen in the city. His masterpiece of masterpieces is the Glasgow School of Art, whose new building he was called to design in 1896. This work marks the beginning of European modernism. It draws on the so-called vernacular style: that is, the plain style of the architecture of Scottish castles—“Scottish baronial.” The building’s counterpoint of geometric discipline to flowing Art Nouveau or Jugendstil was the kind of thing to appeal to the Vienna Secession. However, that counterpoint is significant in a more specifically Scottish sense, in the terms discussed throughout this paper: the synthesis of, the tension between, puritan restraint and sensual energy—austere intoxication. (I have not been entirely joking when on occasion I’ve called the building “Jekyll and Hyde in glass, wrought iron and stone.”)

One might note also the influence of Japanese architecture on Mackintosh, as part of a general tendency in Europe and North America, at this time, to delight in the visual language of the East. Minimalism, in the manner of a pared-down austerity, is associated with Japanese style. Mackintosh’s furniture, especially his chairs, can be regarded as admirably elegant sculpture rather than as ideal for personal comfort. The skeptical practicality of Scots, rather than any life-denying religion, has caused many of them to question Mackintosh’s apparent preference for form over function. Here are the words of a very down-to-earth Glaswegian, in a short story by Neil Munro (1866-1930), a popular writer during our period: Erchie works as a waiter and has visited one of the new tea-rooms whose interior has been designed by Mackintosh: “The chairs is no’ like ony ither chairs ever I clapped eyes on, but ye could guess they were chairs; and a’ roond the place there’s a lump o’ looking-glass wi’ purple leeks pented [painted] on it every noo and then” (101-102).

One might well experience some netherward discomfort after sitting on a Mackintosh chair, and yet doubt that the man himself ever intended any Calvinistic-masochistic mortification of the flesh.

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