A Polar Projection: The Northern Dimension in Modern Scottish Literature

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Abstract

Drawing on a transnational turn in recent Scottish literary criticism, this dissertation examines a transnational northern dimension in modern Scottish literature. Following a ‘No’ vote in an historic referendum on independence in 2014, the question of what Scotland and ‘Scottishness’ is in a post-referendum twenty-first century world is once again being debated and reimagined. Literature, as always in Scotland, will play a major role in this process. While the nation and national identity remain important subjects of critical focus and investigation, the writers examined within this dissertation offer ways of reorienting and reconsidering the conceptual, cultural, and creative boundaries of Scotland and Scottish literature, moving northwards into an awareness of as well as engagement with a Nordic and broader circumpolar world. For these writers, the North is both a physical as well as conceptual space, and it is articulated in a number of ways: as an aspirational identity; a metaphysical space, theological as well as philosophical; as the cultural, historical and geographical world of the Norse sagas; and a larger cartographic and physical space of being in the natural world, or more geographically, ecologically, and topographically defined, being in the North. By looking North, the writers I consider in this dissertation have complicated essential notions of Scotland and transcended prescriptive conceptions of Scottishness through a reorientation of their imaginative and creative perspectives. At a time when the North is becoming an important transnational subject of critical study, these writers provide an opportunity for Scottish studies to expand its critical scope into a broader global context. From James Macpherson’s transnational northern epic Ossian (1765) to the northern ecophilosophical writing of Hugh MacDiarmid, Kenneth White, Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, and from the creative engagement with the Icelandic sagas in the Norse novels of George Mackay Brown and Margaret Elphinstone to the transnational northern imaginative and discursive space in the contemporary Shetlandic poetry of Robert Alan Jamieson and Christine De Luca, there has been and continues to be a strong transnational northern dimension in modern Scottish literature. I will conclude by suggesting new critical directions in Scottish northern studies.

Keywords: Scotland; modern Scottish literature; North; transnational literature
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Introduction

After a successful devolution referendum in 1997, which came on the back of a failed referendum in 1979, Scotland regained some form of political representation from Westminster through devolution and the reestablishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999. In the recent independence referendum in 2014, however, Scottish voters voted ‘No’ to Scottish independence by a margin of ten percent. In the wake of such an historic referendum, the topic of what Scotland is and how it can be reconceived is once again becoming a central issue. The very question asked of Scottish voters, “Should Scotland be an independent country?” begs its own questions. What is a country? What is the difference between a country and a nation? What is Scotland? What does it mean to be “independent” in the twenty-first century? Writing in Scott Hames’s collection Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence (2012), the author Denise Mina argues that Scotland is the perfect case study for such questions. “We could be at the helm of a public, philosophical exploration of, for example, the scope of our social and moral obligations, of the limits of international interdependence, of twenty-first century conceptions of statehood,” states Mina. “It could be the start of a new enlightenment.”¹

Scottish literature—which has always been seen as something of an ‘unacknowledged legislator’ in terms of cultural politics and identity—will no doubt be at

the heart of these debates. Just as the failed 1979 referendum precipitated a gallimaufry of angry, confident, diverse, and politically attuned Scottish literary voices, the recent referendum result is sure to initiate another debate in Scottish literature and Scottish studies about what Scotland is in a post-referendum twenty-first century world. In *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999), Cairns Craig argues that the novel offers a space wherein the concept of the nation and national identity can be debated. In *Scotland: Poets and the Nation* (2004), Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford argue that the topic of the nation has likewise been at the heart of Scottish poetry. In this dissertation, however, I will discuss a range of modern Scottish writers who look beyond the national and reconceptualize Scotland as being part of a larger transnational northern or circumpolar world.

In the same year that Hames’s book was published, Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland, in partnership with Creative Scotland and the Scottish Poetry Library, commissioned ten of Scotland’s best poets to write a poem commemorating the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn. The victory of Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn in 1314 is a landmark event in Scottish history, and both its history and subsequent mythologizing in culture has informed the Scottish imagination for over seven hundred years. Taking place only two years before the referendum vote, the task of writing a poem on a national theme that had the chance of being inscribed for posterity on the monument of such a symbol of national identity was culturally and politically charged.

The winning poem by Kathleen Jamie, “Here Lies Our Land,” which has since been inscribed on the Rotunda, escapes didacticism and historical triumphalism by looking at and contemplating Scotland and Scottishness in a very different way.
Here lies our land: every airt  
Beneath swift clouds, glad glints of sun,  
Belonging to none but itself.

We are mere transients, who sing  
Its westlin' winds and fernie braes,  
Northern lights and siller tides,

Small folk playing our part.  
‘Come all ye,’ the country says,  
You win me, who take me most to heart.²

The poem is undeniably Scottish: it is about connection to “our land”; it uses Scots; it pays homage to several figures, poems, and popular ballads of the Scottish literary tradition; and it alludes to the Scottish national pastime of talking about the weather, especially when the sun comes out. If the four-beat tetrameter makes a “profound bow” to the past masters of John Barbour, Robert Burns, and Walter Scott, all of who wrote about Bannockburn in that meter, the slip from such a nationally charged tetrameter into the trimeter of the third line is revealing.³ It moves away from conceptions of Scotland and Scottishness defined by historical animosity with England, territorial claim and national boundaries into a sense of belonging that is instead founded on respect for and connection with the natural landscape and phenomena of Scotland. The land, as Jamie tells us, “[belongs] to none but itself.” The natural world remains indifferent to claims of nation and national identity, but a sense of connection and belonging to its landscapes, ecology, and phenomena can be articulated by those who dwell there—“mere transients, who sing / Its westlin’ winds and fernie braes, / Northern lights and siller tides.” Jamie’s focus on the natural world in the poem is connected to her

³ Ibid.
recent shift away from more abstract issues of gender and nation into transnational ecological issues and concerns.

The reference to the Northern Lights is also revealing and pertinent to the issues I examine in this dissertation. While Jamie claims to refer to the “northern lights” of Old Aberdeen, thereby situating the poem in an urban Scottish scene, the phrase can also be read as representing a northern dimension in her own work as well as in modern Scottish literature more generally. It is while watching the Northern Lights off the coast of Greenland in *Sightlines* (2012), for example, that Jamie says: “Suddenly I wanted to change my map. Something had played itself out. Something was changing.” Taking Jamie’s intention to “change [her] map” northwards as a cue, this dissertation explores the different articulations of “North” and “northerness” in Scottish Literature from James Macpherson’s Epic of the North, *Ossian* (1765), to Jamie’s most recent essays. Drawing on recent developments in Scottish criticism, transnational theory, and Cairns Craig’s notion of a “peripheral perspective” first announced in *Out of History* (1996), I trace different conceptions and representations of the North in Scottish literature from the eighteenth century to the present. While the nation and national identity remain important subjects of critical focus and investigation, the writers examined within these chapters offer ways of reorienting and reconsidering the conceptual, cultural, and creative boundaries of Scotland and Scottish literature, moving northwards into an awareness of as well as engagement with a Nordic and broader circumpolar world. As

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4 Ibid.
Jamie again says in *Sightlines*, “you are placed in a landscape, you are placed in time. But within that, there’s a bit of room for manoeuvre.”

As Kenneth White states in *On the Atlantic Edge* (2006), “As to that word ‘North,’ it has a whole host of connotations.” “North” is a relative concept; it exists as an idea as well as a cartographic and physical space. As Alexander Pope famously wrote in *An Essay on Man* (1734):

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Ask where's the north? at York 'tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland at the Orcades; and there
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.
No creature owns it in the first degree,
But thinks his neighbour further gone than he.
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More recently, in *The Idea of North* (2004), Peter Davidson presents an encyclopaedia of personal, cultural, and topographical Norths from all over the world and throughout recordable human time. The North is a place that is both physically mapped and imagined, “with the North as metaphor, almost as metaphysics,” as White states. As Davidson suggests more than once in his own study, “Everyone carries their own idea of north within them.” Christine De Luca would agree: “Whaarivver we ir, der aye someen nort-by.”

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7 Jamie, *Sightlines*, 71.
For the Scottish writers I will examine in this dissertation, the North is both a physical as well as conceptual space, and it is articulated in a number of ways: as an aspirational identity; a metaphysical space, theological as well as philosophical; as the cultural, historical and geographical world of the Norse sagas; and a larger cartographic and physical space of being in the natural world, or more geographically, ecologically, and topographically defined, being in the North. By looking North, the writers I consider have complicated notions of Scotland and transcended prescriptive conceptions of Scottishness by reorienting their imaginative and creative perspectives into transnational engagement with a wider Nordic and circumpolar world. At a time when the North is becoming an important transnational subject of critical study, these writers provide an opportunity for Scottish studies to expand its critical scope into a broader global context.

Scotland, or what we now call Scotland, was once part of a wider transnational northern world. As texts such as Barbara E. Crawford’s *Scandinavian Scotland* (1987) and Gordon Donaldson’s *A Northern Commonwealth* (1990) show, the Scandinavian presence and influence in what is now Scotland was extensive in the medieval period. Before it started to form into a more homogenized national shape in the twelfth century, what we now call Scotland was culturally diverse and geographically ambiguous. As Thomas Owen Clancy’s *The Triumph Tree: Scotland’s Earliest Poetry AD 550-1350* (1999) makes clear, there were a range of different cultural and literary influences circulating in ‘Scotland,’ such as Gaelic, Norse, Old English, Welsh, and Scots, all of which transcended the borders of our current conception of Scotland. With the expansion of the Scottish kingdom, connections with the Nordic world started to become eroded and strained. Rosemary Power explains in “Scotland in the Norse Sagas” that Scandinavian interest in Scotland started to wane after the Norwegian king Haakon’s
failed attempt to retain Norwegian sovereignty over the Western Isles from an expanding Scottish Kingdom at the Battle of Largs in 1263: “[The saga-writers’] interest was in the Norse kingdom, and with the loss of that kingdom to Scotland and the decline in saga-writing, the Isles sank into the mists, to be sighted only occasionally by some storm-driven voyager.”

Although vestiges of Scandinavian culture and the Norse language remained, the Northern and Western Isles would slowly become more Gaelic and Scottish. The Scottish influence in the Northern Isles is one of the reasons Walter Scott identifies in relation to the waning Norse-influenced old order in the Northern Isles in *The Pirate* (1822), for example, and later writers such as George Mackay Brown and Robert Alan Jamieson have talked about the impact of what Jamieson in his novel *Da Happie Laand* (2010) calls the “Scotticisation” of the Norse culture of the Northern Isles and the subsequent loss of a wider transnational northern perspective as Shetland came to be represented in a box at the top right-hand corner of Scottish maps, dislocated from its actual geographical position in order to present a neater representation of Scotland and its Isles.

Union with England in 1707 further precipitated a southern perspective in Scotland. As we shall see in Chapter One, Daniel Defoe’s propaganda poem *Caledonia* (1706) presents the Union as a means for Scotland to escape its unpropitious northern circumstances and join in England’s imperial and commercial exploits. Up until the eighteenth century, despite the frayed Scandinavian connection through the expansion of the Scottish kingdom, there were still extensive Scottish connections with northern

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Europe. Thomas Riss’s edited book *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot … Scottish-Danish Relations, 1450-1707* (1988) broadened investigation into Scottish-Danish relations from interest based solely on the Scottish acquisition of Orkney and Shetland in the fifteenth century to later aspects of this northern relationship such as Scottish emigration to Denmark, trade, military involvement, and cultural relations. Alexia Grosjean’s *Unofficial Alliance: Scotland and Sweden, 1569-1654* (2003) examines the impact both militarily and culturally of Scottish involvement in the Swedish military (and vice versa). More recently, Grosjean and Steve Murdoch have brought critical attention to Scottish involvement in Scandinavia and elsewhere in *Scottish Communities Abroad in the Early Modern Period* (2005). Both scholars have unearthed vast amounts of information about Scottish involvement in northern Europe and are general editors of The University of St Andrews’ The Scottish, Scandinavia, and Northern Europe (SSNE) Biographical Database. With the aid of the information collected within this database, Murdoch’s thoroughly researched *Network North* (2005) highlights the importance of kith and kin in the creation and operation of commercial, confessional, and political networks of Scots operating at various levels of importance and influence in northern Europe in the early modern period. What this research makes clear is Scotland’s strong connections with northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, in the early modern period. These networks, while not altogether dismantled, would be reduced when new domestic and colonial opportunities started to become available after the signing of Union in 1707. As Douglas Hamilton states in *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World* (2005), “An emerging tradition of transatlantic migration and enterprise predated the Act of Union of 1707 and acted, albeit in a relatively minor way, alongside the more substantial migrations to north and eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the Baltic.” However, “After 1707, the balance between European and Atlantic involvement swung decisively to the
West. Access to the English empire after 1707 created new opportunities that were seized upon by Scots.¹⁵ Despite the evidence of these pre- and post-Union enterprises, the Union was seen and promoted by many as Scotland’s salvation from its bleak and peripheral northern situation. London continued to remain the centre of power and opportunity in the British Isles. As Samuel Johnson famously put it, “the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England!”¹⁶

The forging or negotiation of a British imperial identity from the eighteenth century onwards has often been read in terms of precipitating a series of splits or crises in Scottish literature as cultural nationalism reacted to the further erosion of an autonomous Scottish identity and the loss of a political centre as well as the force of a developing British Anglocentrism that was in many ways created and expounded in Scotland as a means of creating access to the opportunities of Empire. Since the Union, Scottish literature has been characterized by various attempts at national revival and redefinition. For Michael Gardiner, this constant need to reform and become something other is a consequence of what he, drawing from Gilles Deleuze, describes as Scotland’s status as a “minor” nation: “Scotland, in Deleuzian terms, always has to become in the face of a more powerful being, since, as a nation with no state, it has no official identity, outside of the images of an ethnic people (or even ‘race’) which have been described as its being by the rest of the world, by the UK and, especially, by itself.”¹⁷ As a small nation within a larger, predominantly Anglo-Britain, Scotland always

has to redefine and reassert what it is mainly through its culture. As Ian Brown and Alan Riach point out, “‘Renaissance’ may not be the key word in Scottish culture from the nineteenth until the twenty-first centuries, but it surely recurs.”\(^\text{18}\) They go on to mention the various revivals from Patrick Geddes in the late nineteenth century to the two Scottish Renaissances in the early and late twentieth centuries, with the devolution referendum and the remaking of a parliament on the cusp of the millennium as another example of national rebirth.

It can be very generally argued that devolutionary writing in Scotland—that is, writing that has contributed, as the writer Suhayl Saadi has argued, “to the post-devolution literary-historical dynamic of national self-determination”—has had nation, national politics and Scottish identity as central concerns.\(^\text{19}\) In post-devolutionary criticism, however, this national interest is now being both extended and transcended. Such a determination to look outwards was facilitated by a shift in Scottish criticism around the 1980s that embraced Scotland’s multiplicities of culture as a creative benefit rather than adhering to an earlier post-war desire to organize and understand Scotland in more essentialist terms. From the early twentieth century right up to Tom Nairn in the 1970s, Scotland as a nation was seen as ‘schizophrenic,’ unstable, and incoherent due to a lack of linguistic and organic continuity and homogeneity that T.S. Eliot, writing in 1919, argued were the requisites for the existence of a national tradition. As Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney state: “Scottish culture (and the very phrase risked


oxymoron) was viewed as shattered, fissured, radically split – between Scottishness and Britishness, emotion and intellect, Highland and Lowland, Scots and Standard English.”

As Cairns Craig has explained, in the face of Eliot’s assumptions of what constitutes a national tradition, the fragmented history and cultural circumstance of Scotland would seem distorted: “Such a view damns all peripheral cultures and all writers within peripheral cultures with the rigor of a Calvinist predestination.”

In the 1980s, however, supported by postmodern and postcolonial theory, such a view of a deformed or fragmented Scotland was seen as the basis of a healthy culture, not one defined by essentialism and homogeneity. For Craig in *The Modern Scottish Novel* and Riach and Gifford in *Scotlands*, this celebration of plurality is representative of the internal dialogues of a changing but still bounded Scottish identity. As Gifford and Riach state, this multiplicity “is a recognition of the pluralism the country is capable of encompassing, not a call for constricting uniformity. And yet the idea of national identity remains sustaining.” For other critics, however, and especially within a post-devolutionary era wherein Scotland is seen to have regained at least a semblance of autonomy after years of political and cultural struggle and creativity, the study of Scotland and Scottishness has become decentralized and opened up into transnational directions. As Berthold Schoene states: “No longer regarded, or led to regard itself, as exclusively Scottish and thus found or finding itself lacking, it becomes free to reconceive of itself in broader terms, with reference to other cultures (not just English

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21 Craig, *Out of History*, 16.

culture), indeed as situated within a vibrant network of interdependent cultural contexts.⁴³

Looking beyond Scotland’s borders and engaging with aspects of Scottish culture that can also be seen to transcend any singular view of Scotland, such as recent interest in the literature of Scotland’s diasporic writers, has been a noticeable aspect in much post-devolutionary Scottish criticism. As Eleanor Bell states in *Questioning Scotland* (2004), “[Devolution] provides a long-awaited and much needed potential for Scottish literature to look beyond the often overly fixed boundaries of ‘home.’”⁴⁴ In an appended chapter to the second edition of his influential book *Devolving English Literature* (2000), Robert Crawford argues that with a renewed sense of national purpose comes an international prerogative: “To develop that autonomy in the post-devolutionary era requires more than ever an alert and inclusive looking out.”⁴⁵ It is an argument that he reiterates once again at the start of his chapter on contemporary Scottish writing in *Scotland’s Books* (2007): “The challenge for Scottish literature today is to engage not just with Scotland but with the world.”⁴⁶

Part of this transnational turn in Scottish studies has been the attempt to reconnect and reengage with a wider Celtic dimension. In *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (1999), for example, Murray Pittock urges Scotland to renew and explore “old

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links of Celtic commonality (real or imagined)” with Ireland. Scotland’s history as both victim and agent of British imperialism presents complications when trying to (re)forge these connections, however. As Jamie Bawn reacts to his grandparents’ somewhat naïve view of Scottish and Irish relations in Andrew O'Hagan’s Our Fathers (1999), “‘Ireland’s its own country no thanks to Scotland,” I said, catching my own breath. “And Ireland never did you any favours either.” Complicated as these relations are, new publications such as James McGonigal, Donny O'Rourke and Hamish Whyte’s Across the Water: Irishness in Modern Scottish Writing (2000) and Alison O’Malley-Younger and Willy Maley’s Celtic Connections: Irish-Scottish Relations and the Politics of Culture (2012) have begun the process of exploring these connections and issues in greater depth, looking to (re)establish transnational links with Ireland.

There is, however, a broader transnational dimension to contemporary Scottish literary criticism that this dissertation will examine. The terms ‘transnational’ and ‘transnationalism’ are often conflated with the language, processes and forces of globalization, capitalism and international politics, all of which makes us question the purpose and validity of the nation state within a twenty-first century world. Transnational culture and economics have a massive influence on concepts of personal and national identity as well as cultural difference or distinction. It is this idea of “transnationality induced by global capital” that Aiwha Ong studies in Flexible Citizenship (1999), for example. As Ong states: “Trans denotes moving through space and across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-

states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism.”29 While the terms ‘transnational’ and ‘transnationalism’ are therefore predominantly used in terms of economic and political globalization, the writers that I discuss within the following chapters locate themselves within or imagine an alternative space of being outside of the constructions and networks of more dominant cultural, political and economic hegemonies, whether domestic or global. They all project a “peripheral perspective” in terms of opening up alternative northern cartographic, cultural, and ecological space. As Peter Hitchcock puts it in Imaginary States (2003), these writers use “imagination itself as a possible force for alternative modes of Being and being in the world.”30

Scotland is often depicted and understood as existing on the north-western periphery of Europe, looking in to the greater centers of power and influence in the south and east of Europe. “This is the North,” says Jamie in “Gloaming,” “where people, the world perhaps likes to imagine, / hold a fish in one hand, in the other a candle.” It is a “brink” at the “far end” of the world.31 Scotland’s own internal northern and western extremes have been characterized variously in terms of the melancholy and sublime landscapes of Ossian; the lochs and glens of Walter Scott’s romanticized Highlands; the uncanny abode of Scottish Gothic; a place of dearth, depopulation and wilderness; and


the setting of adventure and suspense in the novels of John Buchan. But as the
Icelandic-born Scot Magnus Magnusson has remarked, “I have always been entranced
by the delicious geographical anomaly that called the northernmost county in Scotland
‘Southland’—Sutherland—thanks to my ancestors.”32 The writers that I will look at in this
dissertation do not see Scotland and its Isles as peripheral in terms of being a frontier,
limit or conclusion. Looking North, Scotland’s conceptual boundaries are reoriented into
an alternative space of “Being and being conscious in the world.” For Gavin Francis,
writing in his travel journal True North (2008), the very north of Scotland, Cape Wrath, is
not a endpoint but a “crossroad of worlds: the end and the beginning of the North.”33

In Beyond Scotland (2004) editors Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair
Renfrew argue that the foundational study of Scottish literature was based on
establishing Scottishness “as a site of internalised contradiction” that, while fruitful at
times, “has also constrained Scottish criticism in its insistence on the idea of a tradition
defined by its internal oppositions” and therefore “does not anticipate the place of
intersection might be as likely to occur on the periphery as at the centre.”34 A couple of
responses from Scottish writers to the prospect of independence are particularly
revealing here. Both Alan Bissett and Alan Warner believe Scottish literature to be full of
internal “anger” as part of Scotland’s being a stateless and somewhat tangential nation
within a larger British state. It is haunted by history and political and cultural discontent.
For Bissett, if Scotland had voted ‘Yes,’ “the anger that we see as a seam running

32 Magnus Magnusson, “The Viking Road,” in Scotland and Scandinavia, 800-1800, 1.
33 Gavin Francis, True North: Travels in Arctic Europe, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2010), 303.
34 Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew, introduction to Beyond Scotland: New
Contexts for Twentieth-century Scottish Literature, ed. Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and
Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 11.
through Scottish literature would ebb. We’d be less torn, there’d be less grievance, there’s be less sense of trying to make ‘Scottishness’ into a quality, because we’d just be a normal country like every other country.” Warner also argued that “a yes vote would free us as Scottish writers from a hidden war that rages inside our own minds.” For Bissett and Warner, anger, anxiety, internal (metaphorical) schizophrenia, “a hidden war” all continue to permeate Scotland’s imagination. It is a “hidden war” that is certainly depicted in Alasdair Gray’s 1982, Janine (1984) as he wrestles with the cultural and political situation of the time, taking refuge from this torment in brutal and sadistic sexual fantasies. The majority of the writers that I look at in this dissertation move away from this historical anxiety and anger by projecting themselves and Scotland into an alternative transnational northern direction and space of being. As we shall see, for writers like Kenneth White, Christine De Luca, Robert Alan Jamieson, Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, there is more interest in exploring peripherality and being in the North than such anger and angst at the heart of Scottish literature and Scottishness. As Attila Dósa comments about the work of John Burnside, “he has a specific interest in the northern periphery of Europe” as he “takes a fresh view of Scotland’s geographical position, and considers it in relation to other northern territories such as the Scandinavian Peninsula, Iceland, and the Arctic region.” By moving into the North as an “alternative [mode] of Being and being conscious in the world,” it can be argued that


these writers adopt what Craig calls a “peripheral perspective.” As Craig explains: “We need ways of thinking about tradition which neither forces us to accept the concepts of dominant cultures … nor makes us simply a poor reflection of the same fundamental structures. We need a peripheral perspective that allows us to draw our own lines of filiation, within our own culture, between ourselves and the core cultures, but most important of all, between ourselves and other peripheral cultures.”

Craig reiterates this theory in his chapter “Centring on the Peripheries” in Bjarne Thorup Thomsen’s edited book of essays *Centring on the Peripheries: Studies in Scandinavian, Scottish, Gaelic and Greenlandic Literature* (2007), a text that focuses on the “complex spaces of the Nordic world and Scotland.” As Craig explains in the conclusion to his chapter:

To centre on the peripheries requires us to trace the ways in which the peripheries appropriate from each other the tools of cultural resistance, copy forms by which they can adapt to the pressures of outside forces, and remake the difference by which they can continue to live within their own value systems. To the historians and critics of the centre, these pathways will be invisible but their invisibility to the centre is the opportunity of the periphery to construct an alternative kind of history, a different kind of map of the ways in which the past has been shaped, and therefore of the ways the future might be shaped.

It is this “peripheral perspective” that informs Robert Alan Jamieson’s and Murray Wallace’s 1997 editorial of the *Edinburgh Review*, entitled *more boreali*. They begin by reiterating the traditional view of Scotland as “a small country, out on the Euro-periphery, looking habitually south and slightly eastward to the golden triangle connecting London, 

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40 Cairns Craig, “Centring on the Peripheries,” in *Centring on the Peripheries*, 32.
Paris and Bonn/Berlin, with Brussels at its midst.”\textsuperscript{41} Similar to the “hidden war” and “anger” of Warner and Bissett, they also reiterate the familiar view of a Scottish identity beset by historical anxiety and “divided selves”: “Yes, the story goes that this is a country of seasonal swings, of tribally divided selves, Tcheuchter an Sassenach, Tim and Billy, splits an schisms – where one hand does what it likes and the other is too timid to do anything about it – Dr Jekyll, antisyzgies and a’ that. Too variegated, too set against ourselves, for any simple nation-state identity to fit neatly.”\textsuperscript{42} What they propose instead is a move into the North as part of a new post-devolutionary trajectory: “It seems, at this point in its history, as if Scottish culture must ‘go into the north,’ to fulfill the creative potential of its future as a northern European country in post-imperial Britain. For when the center of government shifts, its relationship with the ‘peripheries’ changes – an Edinburgh parliament will obviously alter the political map by shifting power northwards.”\textsuperscript{43} “Let Scotland’s future be a ‘north,’” they conclude. “By looking north, that habitually south-eastern crick in the Scottish neck clicks back into place.”\textsuperscript{44}

The North for Scottish writers is therefore written or conceptualized as a mythic, metaphysical, or ecophilosophical space outside of history. As we shall see, White’s ‘White World’, for example, is a perspective of the physical world in the northern territories that attempts to dissolves self and to deny the influence of history and its association with place in favour of a more experiential apprehension of landscape, geology and surrounding phenomena. The majority of writers examined within this dissertation adopt a peripheral perspective that is both cartographic (positioning

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 8.
Scotland in relation to the northern peripheries) and historical (writing the North or the experience of being in the North in terms of being outside of history). At the same time, however, such a peripheral perspective or critical approach can be limiting in its insistence on such divisions, and, as I discuss in relation to White, the denial of history within the North becomes problematic in terms of the peoples who live in the North, such as the Inuit, and the North itself as a historical construct.

This dissertation examines the various articulations of “North” and “northernness” in modern Scottish literature. At a period in Scottish history when the topic of what Scotland is as a nation will no doubt be debated, discussed and reimagined, the writers that I examine in the following chapters provide the opportunity for a reconceptualization of Scotland and Scottish literature by opening it up into a transnational world of the North in terms of an identity, a culture, a conceptual space, as well as a wider space of being and ecophilosophical contemplation.

The overall trajectory of this dissertation is to examine how writers from the eighteenth century to the present day have represented, imagined and discussed alternative transnational northern dimensions in their work. Chapter One begins by looking back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as I discuss how James Macpherson’s Ossian (1765) inaugurated a ‘northern turn’ in Europe. I argue that, despite being long cast under the shadow of the authenticity debate, and despite its claims to post-Union and post-Culloden cultural nationalism, Macpherson’s Ossian can be read as a transnational northern epic. At the conclusion of this chapter, I also discuss James Hogg’s rewriting of Macpherson’s text, Queen Hynde (1825) and Walter Scott’s The Pirate (1822) and its representation of the Scottish Northern Isles. The Isles are central to the writers that I look at in this dissertation, and Scott’s somewhat
sensationalized representation of the Isles becomes something that later writers look to both challenge and move beyond.

Chapter Two moves into the twentieth century and examines the works of the well-known figure of the Scottish Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid, and the lesser-known figure of Kenneth White. Locating themselves out of history and out of the predominantly nationalist and Marxist concerns of MacDiarmid’s Renaissance project, both writers move into what might be called a Scottish-Northern-Eastern ecophilosophical poetics that, through White, expands out into a transnational and transcultural circumpolar space of being.

Chapter Three discusses the creative engagement of George Mackay Brown and Margaret Elphinstone with the Icelandic and Scandinavian sagas. Both authors weave their own very personal narratives within the original sagas, and they both conceptualize the geographical space of the North. The North for Brown becomes the setting of a search for an elusive, mystical silence, while the North for Elphinstone becomes a space that questions the perceptions of self as well as the epistemology of the centre. I conclude this chapter by discussing Elphinstone’s novel *The Sea Road* (2000) as an example of a post-devolutionary Scottish novel that aims to move the Scottish imagination into an awareness of and engagement with the transnational space of the North.

Chapter Four begins by looking at the contemporary Shetlandic poetry of Christine De Luca and Robert Alan Jamieson and concludes by examining the recent poetry and prose of Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside. Both the language and the
broader content of De Luca’s and Jamieson’s poetry can be seen to open up what might be called a transnational imaginative and discursive space in the North. Finally, like MacDiarmid and White, both Jamie and Burnside are concerned with reconnecting with the space, landscapes, ecology and animal life of the natural world, and through that concern both writers have moved into a larger transnational northern space located both within and outside of Scotland. My dissertation will conclude with a brief discussion of new directions for Scottish literary study in terms of the North.

Scotland is in the process of reinventing itself once again. Literature, as always in Scotland, will be at the centre of this process. The wider world of the North is fast becoming an important field of transnational and interdisciplinary study. By reconceptualising Scottish identity and reorienting Scotland northwards into a wider circumpolar world, the writers whom I examine in this dissertation offer the possibility for Scottish literature and its criticism to become part of an emerging and truly global discourse of the North.
Chapter One: Epics of the North

In her 2005 edited collection, *The Global Eighteenth Century*, Felicity Nussbaum introduced the concept of “critical global studies,” the aim of which was to “resituate eighteenth-century studies within a spatially and conceptually expanded paradigm” in order to “spark more nuanced accounts of the relations among freshly juxtaposed regions, disciplines, and methodologies.”¹ This broadened critical perspective has had a positive impact on studies of James Macpherson's *The Works of Ossian* (1765). In *The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique* (2005), for example, Clement Hawes looks to expand the discussion of Macpherson's poems from “superficial” debates focused on “bilateral conflict” between Scotland and England into broader questions concerned with “global expansion” indexical to the rise of the British Empire and British cultural nationalism, although, at the same time, he returns to familiar accusations of Macpherson as a fraud and fabricator of “ethnic, national, and racial 'roots'”.² Leith Davis has also approached Macpherson's poems from a transnational perspective, arguing that “a transnational perspective can not only provide new ways of understanding Macpherson's work, but can also present a different view of the relationships between Scotland, the British archipelago and the rest of the world during

the time of transition between the first and second British empires.”\(^3\) Tobias Döring has also argued recently that Macpherson's *Ossian* "emerges through and against transnational practices and cultural entanglements" and is therefore "predicated on emphatically transnational productions."\(^4\) Other important critical re-evaluations of Macpherson's poems include Howard Gaskill's edited book of essays *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (2004), which, as its title makes clear, discusses the impact and influence of Macpherson's Ossianic poems in Europe. A significant part of this re-evaluation has focused on the poems' reception in Scandinavia and northern Europe. Gauti Kristmannsson has pointed out how Macpherson's poems, although criticized and slighted by many in Britain, were "received by many 'Northerners' all over Europe with enthusiasm and exhilaration" and were influential in facilitating a new sense of nordicity in the North that could be seen to rival the classical South.\(^5\) Murdo MacDonald goes so far as to describe Macpherson's epic work not only as "an identifiable moment of European northernness" but the "epitome of northerness."\(^6\) He also argues that Macpherson's poems inaugurated a distinctly northern ecological representation of rugged landscapes, torrents and moorland that would later be adapted into the forests and mountains of Elias Lönnrot's Finnish epic, *The Kalevala* (1849). Not only does *Ossian* provide the North with a transnational sense of identity and mythology to rival the


Homeric south, it also provides a wider northern sense of place and geographical identification.

Drawing on these broader transnational re-evaluations of Macpherson's work, especially in terms of its northern dimension, this chapter argues that Macpherson's Ossian presents the reader less with an overtly national epic based essentially on collected (and modified) sources of Scotland's ancient Celtic heritage than a transnational epic that represents a broader northern world wherein the borders and distinctions between the poem's Celtic and Scandinavian elements are not fixed, but mutable and often non-existent. Macpherson's fragments of Ossianic poetry represent a complex network of familial and diplomatic connections between Scotland and Scandinavia, including many instances of cultural entanglement. It is, to quote from Ossian, an epic that “[bounds] over the waves of the north.”

While the bulk of the chapter considers Macpherson's Ossianic poems, I also look either side of the poems chronologically. I begin with a brief cultural history of the perceptions of the North in eighteenth-century Britain before Macpherson. Figures such as Daniel Defoe represent a general view of the North as a barren wasteland and a place devoid of prospects other than the potential economy of its glens and fjords. Scotland, which Defoe regards as part of a broader northern world that stretches from Norway to Lapland to the tip of Greenland, can only find salvation from its peripheral situation through Union with England and access to its imperial capital and enterprise. Scotland must therefore be depicted instead as a defensive British barrier against the North. As we shall see, this process of putting symbolic barriers between Scotland and

the North in order to facilitate internal British Union is represented in a number of mid
eighteenth-century Scottish texts.

The chapter concludes by considering two Scottish texts from the early
nineteenth century that involve themselves with a Scandinavian dimension. James
Hogg's *Queen Hynde* (1825) is a revision of Macpherson’s *Ossian* and Hogg’s own
attempt to write an epic of the Scottish nation. It can therefore be read as a response to
the criticism and prejudice Macpherson’s poems received in Britain in the years after
their publication. Hogg’s epic changes many details of Macpherson’s original poems,
and his representation of the Viking invaders, like Scott’s representation of the Northern
Isles in *The Pirate*, is often sensationalized. Hogg is also more determined than
Macpherson to establish Scotland’s Celtic heritage as the essential foundation of the
Scottish nation. While Hogg's epic does not portray the same degree of familial,
diplomatic and geographical crossings and connections that Macpherson portrays in
*Ossian*, a transnational Scandinavian element is worked into the end of the epic, and
any racial or cultural distinctions between the Celts and Scandinavians established
within the poem are subsequently complicated through Hogg's use of shifting and
malleable identities.

I end with a discussion of Walter Scott’s *The Pirate*. Although Orkney in the
Scottish Northern Isles was briefly and imaginatively represented as a setting of
desolation and melancholy in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Scott’s novel was the
first to make the Isles the setting of an entire novel.8 Scott’s novel initially sensationalizes
the Scandinavian ‘otherness’ of the Isles that were, at that time, still very alien to those

8 It should be noted here that Dorothea Primrose Campbell’s *Harley Radington*, which is set
mainly on Shetland, was published the year before Scott’s *The Pirate* in 1821.
on the mainland, but he also tries to bring the Isles into a more national trajectory through an Enlightenment narrative of improvement and progress at the novel's conclusion. As we shall see, the Northern Isles are central to the transnational cartographic, cultural and ecological shift northwards in modern Scottish literature. Scott's initial representation of the Northern Isles therefore becomes important in terms of understanding how that representation is both challenged and transcended in the works of later Scottish writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Margaret Elphinstone, Christine De Luca, Robert Alan Jamieson, and Kathleen Jamie.

I

In the early eighteenth century, the North was perceived by many English and Scottish writers as a backwards periphery. The Union was seen and promoted as Scotland's salvation from its bleak and unpropitious northern situation. Defoe’s propaganda poem *Caledonia* (1707), for example, as a paean to Scotland, stresses that that nation can only be salvaged from its inhospitable circumstances through union with England. The purpose of Defoe's poem is presented to the reader in his “Dedication”: “An Essay to rescue [Scotland] from Slander in Opinion, and Reproach in the Mouths of the Partial World.” Defoe claims that he will present “Scotland's true Picture to the World” in order to “rescue her from the Malice and Ignorance of Men.”⁹ Later in the poem, it becomes clear that this attempt to show that Scotland can be successful is conditional to the signing of Union with England. By itself, Scotland's potential to improve and “come behind no Nation in Europe” is stifled by its lack of innovation and its being part of what

⁹ Daniel Defoe, *Caledonia, a poem in honour of Scotland, and the Scots nation. In three parts* (London, 1707), accessed Feb 13, 2015, Simon Fraser University, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW3313182073), i.
Defoe depicts as a barren, inhospitable northern world. Scotland's northernness is fully elaborated in the first part of the poem:

In Northern Heights, where Nature seldom smiles,  
Embrac'd with seas, and buttrest round with Isles,  
Where lofty Shores regard th' adjacent Pole,  
Where Winds incessant blow, and Waves incessant roll;  
Where Tyrant Cold in Glacy Ocean reigns,  
And all the Habitable World disdains,  
Defies the distant influence of the Sun,  
And Shines in Ice.\(^{10}\)

The North is, from this perspective, uninhabitable. It is a “Tyrant” of “incessant” torment, brutality and misery. Any potential or chance of improvement is held hostage in this world; it “Shines in Ice” as if imprisoned.

In the second stanza, Scotland is described as “First youngest Sister to the Frozen Zone” who is “Batter'd by Parent Natures constant Frown.” In his footnote to the first line, Defoe explains that Scotland is “Youngest Sister, because the North Capes, and the Coast of Greenland, seem to be of the same family, but advanc'd farther North.” As part of this northern “family,” Scotland is “First youngest ... to express Scotland the first of the Habitable, or at least Sociable Parts of the World, so far North.” The North, then, is a barren icy wasteland. Scotland is the only part of this northern “family” that can be salvaged. Any promise this land holds—which Defoe is at pains to say is fishing—is made prisoner to this formidable northern zone, as well as a lack of Scottish innovation to overcome these obstacles. Not only an icy, fjord-canked desert, this northern “Parent” is also personified as a threat:

Circled with dreadful Cliffs and Barb'rous Shoars,

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 1-2.
Where the strong Surf with high impetuous Roars,
Invades the Rocks, and these their Rage disdain,
And with redoubling Noise they're hurry'd home again.”11

Scotland, as part of a unified Britain, is the land's defence against the North, depicted here as an invading 'other': “These are th' eternal Bounds of Providence, / The Oceans Bridle, and the Land's Defence.” There should be no leakage North. As Defoe states in his footnote to these lines, “The high Shoars could be in no place more needful to place Bounds proportion'd to the furious and vast Northern Ocean that beats upon Scotland, from whence there is nothing but Water, to the very Frozen Zone of the North Pole.” Defoe envisions Scotland as an isolated area, continually fighting off threats from North and South: “Behind this Rugged Front securely lies / Blest Caledonia, and with Ease defies / Her Northern, or her Southern Enemies.”12

Defoe also stresses that Scotland’s northern situation has placed a burden on its potential: “Behind this Rugged Front securely lies / Old Caledonia, all the Worlds Surpize.” Defoe's use of “Old Caledonia” is perhaps an attempt to situate Scotland back into a southern history, that is, a history defined by the Roman presence in Britannia. In comparison to this, the North holds no promise whatsoever. As Andrew Wawn makes clear in the opening segments of The Vikings and the Victorians (2000), up until scholarship in Denmark and Sweden in the seventeenth century generated an awakening of interest in the north in the eighteenth century, medieval and early modern views of the north in the British Isles were of stockfish instead of sagas and sorcerers instead of heroes.13 As Defoe states in his footnote to these lines, “The Worlds Surpize

11 Ibid., 2.
12 Ibid., 3.
to find a Country so Peopled, and so Inhabited behind such terrible Places, which to the
Sea-ward promise nothing but desert, and abandon'd, uninhabited Places." Scotland
therefore waits for that “blest Hour” when her potential can be realized, that of being
within “The Union, whereby Improvement shall reveal the hidden Fruitfulness of
Scotland.” In lines that foreshadow Thomson’s “Rule, Britannia” (1740), this Union is
blessed by providence:

Britain's Left hand, which when she shall unite,
As Nature dictates, and the Fates invite,
And joyn her youngest Sister on the Right:
How shall they Mutual Wealth and Strength Convey,
And with Contempt the weaker World Survey!\(^{14}\)

For Defoe, if Scotland is to become a successful nation, it must change from being part
of a wider northern world and look instead to Union with England. It must, therefore,
become the northern border of a united Britain instead of part of a barren polar “family.”

Despite the opportunities that the Union would offer to Scots, London was
envisioned as the continuing centre of power and opportunity in the British Isles. By the
middle of the eighteenth century, many enterprising Scots headed south to England to
make the most of the opportunities facilitated through the Union and the Empire, and the
figures of the Scottish Enlightenment attempted to purge Scots of their distinctive
‘Scotticisms’ through the study of rhetoric and English literature in an endeavour to
transition Scots into the Empire’s Anglo-British culture. With the forging of a British
imperial state and identity, the representation of the relationship between Scotland and
the North changed.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 4.
In Caledonia, Defoe places emphasis on Scotland as a northern border against a threatening northern 'other.' In the years after the 1707 Union, the threatening North of Defoe’s Caledonia was relocated to Scandinavia by various Scottish writers and balladeers in order to facilitate an internal union between Scotland and England. In Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837 (1992), Linda Colley argues that, “The sense of common identity here did not come into being, then, because of integration and homogenization of disparate cultures. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other.”

Scandinavia was not, as was the case with the Catholic France that Colley identifies, an ‘Other’ based on religion or politics, but it was an historical and geographical ‘Other’ that could be drawn upon for dramatic and ideological purposes. The ballad “Hardyknute” (1719), for example, a text that was first supposedly found by and then later attributed to the work of Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw, celebrates the Scottish Hardyknute’s victory over Viking invaders. The historical backdrop to the ballad is possibly the Battle of Largs in 1263 between the kingdoms of Scotland and Norway. Mel Kersey has described the business of “textual fabrication and myth-making” among Scottish and English writers that “united these two countries in a British ideological preoccupation with literary nation-building.” According to Kersey, there was a “perennial impulse to reconstitute antiquity in order to meet the needs of

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contemporary identities." The Norse in “Hardyknute” are therefore depicted as a separate and threatening ‘other’:

Let Scots, quhyle Scots, praise Hardyknute,  
Let Norse the name ay dried,  
Ay how he faucht, aft how he spairrd  
Sal latest Ages reid!17

Kersey argues that the ballad’s focus on an external Scandinavian threat from outside the British Isles relocates the focus away from domestic border animosity between Scotland and England. As Kersey states, focussing on Scandinavia as the threat “provides Scotland with a non-British enemy.” This interpretation is complicated, however, by Allan Ramsay’s own addition to the ballad by describing the Vikings as “raging Revers” who pose a threat to the sovereignty of “the unconquerit Scottish swaird,” thereby relocating the action back into the historical context of the Debateable Lands. Ramsay somewhat subverts the claim of British unity by referring back to the internal troubles.

John Home’s play Douglas (1756), too, pits the Scots against the Scandinavians. In the “Prologue” to this play, the action is described as being set “In ancient times, when Britain’s trade was arms.” It therefore focuses on the bilateral border conflict between the Scottish Douglas and the English Percy families. “Such illustrious foes,” the “Prologue” informs us, “In rival Rome and Carthage never rose!” The historical animosity between

17 “Hardyknute,” in The ever green being a collection of Scots poems before 1600 … vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1761), accessed Feb 13, 2015, Simon Fraser University, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW3313601531), 263.
18 Mel Kersey, “Ballads, Britishness and Hardyknute,” 45.
19 “Hardyknute,” The ever green, 255.
these two families symbolizes the larger historical animosity between Scotland and England. Despite the animosity between these families, however, both manage to leave the past behind them and, in the face of external threats, join together in a union that anachronistically enacts the Union of 1707:

But whilst those generous rivals fought and fell,  
Those generous rivals lov'd each other well:  
Tho' many a bloody field was lost and won,  
Nothing in hate, in honour was all done.  
When Percy wrong'd, defy'd his prince or peers,  
Fast came the Douglas, with his Scottish spears;  
And, when proud Douglas made his King his foe,  
For Douglas, Percy bent his English bow.20

The play tells the tragic story of Lady Randolph and the rise of her estranged son, Norval, from peasantry to his rightful place in power. Running parallel to this is the narrative of an impending invasion by Danish forces from "the stormy north."21 The fact that it is an external threat instead of an internal one is made clear:

Ay, no inroad this  
Of the Northumbrian bent to take a spoil:  
No sportive war, no tournament array  
Of some young knight resolv'd to break a spear. And strain with hostile blood his maiden arms.  
The Danes are landed; we must beat them back,  
Or live the slaves of Denmark.22

For Lord Randolph, “The antient foe of Caledonia's land” is no longer England but Denmark.23

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21 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 29.
When the subject of the Danish invasion is discussed, Lady Randolph uses it as a means of advocating the necessity of internal union between Scotland and England:

War I detest; but war with foreign foes,
Whose manners, language, and whose looks are strange,
Is not so horrid, nor to me so hateful,
As that which with our neighbours oft we wage.
A river here, there an ideal line,
By fancy drawn, divide the sister kingdoms.
...
Yet will they not unite their kindred arms,
And, if they must have war, wage distant war,
But with each other fight in cruel conflict.
...
Thus fall the prime of either hapless land;
And such the fruit of Scotch and English war.  

Borders are erased here to facilitate internal union between Scotland and England: “A river here, there an ideal line, / By fancy drawn, divide the sister kingdoms.” But such “ideal line[s]” are entrenched at the expense of “foreign foes.” As we shall see in Ossian, however, the contact between the Celts and Scandinavians is not one of strangeness, as is it is here presented by Home, but one of similarity, kinship and union.

Macpherson's The Highlander follows the same paradigm as “Hardyknute” and Douglas, forging a British union in the face of an external Scandinavian threat. The poem revolves around the events of a battle between Scots and Scandinavians at Cullen in the north of Scotland in the tenth century. Despite being a Scottish epic based on historical Scottish texts, the poem is most importantly a celebration of Britishness. This is made explicit in the Hermit's prophecy in “Canto V”:

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23 Ibid., 38.
24 Ibid., 6.
Why mention him in whom th' eternal fates
Shall bind in peace the long-discoursing states?
See Scot and Saxon coalesc'd in one,
Support the glory of the common crown.
Britain no more shall shake with native storms,
But o'er the trembling nations lift her arms.\(^\text{25}\)

Once again the aggressor is “fierce Scandinavia's hostile pow'r.”\(^\text{26}\) When the hero of the poem comes to King Indulph’s court to present his arms in defense of his country, the King refers to Albion, which, depending on historical preference, could mean the whole of Great Britain or just its northern part, Alba, which is Gaelic for Scotland. Emphasis, however, is placed on how Scandinavia is the tyrannical aggressor towards both Scotland and England, as the character Dunbar makes clear:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Fierce Denmark all the North commands,} \\
\text{And belches numbers on our neighb'ring lands,} \\
\text{England's subdued, the Saxon's o'ercome,} \\
\text{And meanly own a Danish lord at home.} \\
\text{Scarce now a blast from Scandinavia roars,} \\
\text{But wafts a hostile squadron on our shores.} \text{\(^\text{27}\)}
\end{align*}
\]

Interestingly, Macpherson also disassociates Scotland from connotations of being from and of the North in the poem. The invading Scandinavians are representative of “the North,” but the Caledonian warriors are described as being southern: “The Southern warriors stretch the lines of war / Full on the right, obedient to Dunbar.”\(^\text{28}\) This is significant in the sense that this disassociation from the North will undergo a dramatic change in Ossian. Just as Defoe depicted the north of Scotland as a defense against the

\(^{25}\) James Macpherson, The Highlander: a poem: in six cantos (Edinburgh, 1758), accessed Feb 13, 2015, Simon Fraser University, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW3310227933), 64.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 16.
North, these texts create imagined borders between Scotland and Scandinavia in order to represent internal British Union. As we shall see, however, the world of Ossian is far more fluid and entangled in terms of the connections between Fingal's Celtic kingdom and its northern neighbours, and not merely in terms of conflict.

As I have attempted to highlight in the preceding section, up until the middle of the eighteenth century, the North, very generally speaking, was seen as a threatening wasteland (as in Defoe's *Caledonia*) and devoid of those “noblest” prospects that are situated in the south of England. Subsequently, “Hardyknute” and *Douglas* turn the Scandinavian North into a British “other” in order to facilitate internal union. But around the middle of the eighteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century, there was in the British Isles and Europe something of a 'northern turn' in terms of the perceptions of the North and its literature as the heroic antithesis to Neoclassical aesthetics and standards. As Penny Fielding points out in *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography* (2008), Scotland, as North Britain, became a paradoxical space that was seen or represented as both peripheral and central to British culture. As Fielding states, “North Britain, then, can erase or extend its boundaries to accommodate the political and cultural purposes of its Scottish authors.”

Macpherson was at the heart of this northern vogue, and both Hogg and Scott were each influenced by its continuation into the nineteenth century. As Margaret Omberg has argued, “Macpherson’s poems were instrumental in the awakening of interest in Scandinavia” and were “the first in English

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poetry to portray the Scandinavian North to any appreciable extent.” With its fragments of tales of ancient Celtic heroism and melancholy, Scandinavian associations, settings and spirits, as well as its setting of a wide and wind-blasted northern topography, Macpherson's Ossian is very much an epic of the North. The threatening and sublime northern topography envisioned by Defoe that was used as a means of persuading Scots to turn their perspectives South is now made the setting of a Romantic Celtic-Scandinavian epic about the origins of the Scottish nation.

III

The world of Ossian itself is a broad one. The fragments transport the reader from Ireland to Scotland to the Northern Isles and further north into Scandinavia. There are various interactions, histories and transferences that circulate and intermingle within this northern network. It is a world that appealed to other Nordic writers, artists and scholars. Discussing the reception of Ossian in Scandinavia in The Reception of Ossian in Europe, Howard Gaskill states, “Since Scandinavia ... plays an important role in Ossian, a sense of affinity is not surprising.” Peter Graves’s chapter in the same book, “Ossian in Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finland,” comments on this developing affinity. In a three-part translation of Ossian, Skaldestycken af Ossian, edited by G. Knös


31 Not only does the content of Macpherson’s poems make this clear, but in 1773 he also published a “Fragment of a Northern Tale” in the “Preface” to an updated collection of his poems, which, although published to counter criticism of publishing Gaelic sources in English, can also be read as an attempt to reassert the Nordic and Gaelic fusion within his poems, telling the reader that the fragment is the beginning of a poem “translated from the Norse to the Gaelic language; and, from the latter, transferred into English.” Macpherson, The Poems of Ossian, 410.

and G. Rosé, Graves’ notes, “It is of interest that the writer of the introduction notes the similarity between Ossian and the Scandinavian skaldic poems and the runes of the ancient Finns in terms of antiquity and oral transmission.” Other publications, such as Nils Arfwidsson’s Oisians sånger, efter Gaeliska originalet och på dess vers-slag försvenskade (1842-1846), draw parallels and note similarities between Macpherson’s Celtic Scotland and Scandinavia. Keith Bosley has also remarked on how Macpherson was seen as “a kindred spirit” to Finnish antiquarians, and how this interest culminated in Lönnrot's Finnish epic, The Kalevala. Finally, one only needs to view Danish artist Nicolai Abildgaard's Ossian signt zur Harfe seinen Schwanengesang (1782) to get a sense of how Macpherson's blind bard can come to transcend an exclusively Celtic association. If Macpherson’s poems were slighted and ridiculed back in Britain, the Celtic and Scandinavian relations within Macpherson’s poem initiated or inspired a broader sense of cultural identity in the North, which acted as a counter to the dominant Neoclassical tradition of the South. Cairns Craig’s comments about cultural associations between Scotland and Ireland through Macpherson’s poems become equally true for the North: “The turbulence produced by Macpherson’s Ossianic poetry was to prove profoundly creative as it was translated from periphery to periphery, continually disrupting the order – both aesthetic and historical – that centre-periphery hierarchies are designed to maintain.”

33 Peter Graves, “Ossian in Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finland,” in The Reception of Ossian in Europe, 204.
The historical settings of the poems themselves are, as I have said, broad and fluid. But in the “Preface” to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), this culturally entangled world does not seem to exist. Instead, we are told that the genuineness of these remains of ancient poetry is due to the maintenance of an isolated community. As Hugh Blair, the writer of the “Preface,” states: “And tradition, in a country so free of intermixture with foreigners, and among a people so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors, has preserved many of them in a great measure incorrupted [sic] to this day.”

Purity of blood does seem to be a concern in the world of Ossian, as when Morna, after first stabbing and then being stabbed by Duchomar, places a stone between their fallen and bleeding bodies, “[so] that [Duchomar’s] blood might not be mingled with hers.” But a very different picture appears to emerge despite Blair’s insistence on Macpherson’s Celtic world being “free of intermixture” in the poems themselves.

Fingal and Swaran, King of Lochlin (Scandinavia), share blood relations, as described in Book VI when Fingal talks to the captured King: “King of Lochlin, said Fingal, thy blood flows in the veins of thy foe. Our families met in battle, because they loved the strife of spears. But often did they feast in the hall; and send round the joy of the shell.” And there is reciprocation: “Blest be thy soul, thou king of shells, said Swaran of the dark-brown shield. …Take now my hand in friendship, thou noble king of Morven.” This scene of mercy in fact echoes an earlier scene in Macpherson’s *Highlander* between Alpin, the Caledonian warrior, and Haco, his Danish adversary.

After sneaking up on the sleeping Danish host, killing a few and capturing others, Alpin

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37 Ibid., 30.
38 Ibid., 101 (my emphasis).
39 Ibid., 101.
and Haco fight. Alpin is victorious but refuses to execute Haco. Haco accepts this gesture and compliments Alpin’s martial exploits: “Accept, brave man, the friendship of a Dane, / Who hates the Scot, but yet can love the man.” Alpin responds: “Such valiant deeds thy dauntless soul confess, / That I the warrior, tho’ the Dane, embrace.” The mercy offered here is based purely on martial respect: friendship may be formalized, but national or racial identities are kept firmly entrenched. In the scene between Fingal and Swaran, however, there is a much deeper and more entangled relationship between the two figures based on family, blood, history and diplomacy.

The relationship and history between Fingal and Swaran opens up within the poems a complex familial and diplomatic network between the Celts and Scandinavians. In Book III the reader is given an insight into the communication between “Lochlin’s woody land” and Morven that exists over “the waves of the north.” Although in this case the emissary sent to Morven is an agent in a plot to kill Fingal and his men, and although Fingal “[doubts] the foe,” there is an instance of cultural entanglement before Agandecca, the daughter of Starno who is in love with Fingal, tells Fingal of her father’s plans and subsequently pays for this with her life: “The voice of sprightly mirth arose. The trembling harps of joy are strung. Bards sing the battle of heroes; or the heaving breast of love.—Ullin, Fingal’s bard, was there; the sweet voice of the hill of Cona. He praised the daughter of the snow; and Morven’s high-descended chief.” Similarly, in Book VI, Ullin sings of Fingal’s great-grandfather, Trenmor, and his exploits in Scandinavia. Fingal seems to ask this of Ullin after seeing Swaran downcast after

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41 Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, 73.
42 Ibid., 73.
defeat. He tells Ullin to “raise the song of peace. ... And let a hundred harps be near to gladden the king of Lochlin. He must depart from us with joy.” The song of Trenmor is therefore meant to express peace and connection between Scotland and Scandinavia: “Trenmor, said the mouth of the songs, lived in the days of other years. He bounded over the waves of the north: companion of the storm. The high rocks of the land of Lochlin, and its groves of murmuring sounds appeared to the hero through the mist;—he bound his white-bosomed sails.—Trenmor pursued the boar that roared along the woods of Gormal.” The song goes on to tell of the impression Trenmor made in Lochlin: “The king of Lochlin prepared the feast, and called the blooming Trenmor. Three days he feasted at Formal’s windy towers; and got his choice in the combat.” We are then told: “The shell of joy went round with songs in praise of the king of Morven; he that came over the waves, the first of mighty men.” There is also a love interest between Trenmor and the Scandinavian princess Inibaca that foreshadows that between Fingal and Agandecca. The song is therefore meant to appease the heart of Swaran and remind him of the deep connections—familial, diplomatic and combative—between Morven and Lochlin.

These transnational connections also become entrenched in the cultural memory of the Celts and Scandinavians. Memory plays a major part in Ossian. It always seems to be on the verge of disappearing. But the poetry of the bards, we are told, makes sure that these memories are kept for posterity. There are various examples of tombs and cairns being built as monuments to the memory of fallen warriors and tragic lovers, with

43 Ibid., 99.
44 Ibid., 99.
46 Ibid., 100.
bards singing their names into immortality. “Hear my voice, ye trees!” sings the bard, Carryl. “My voice shall preserve the praise of [Malcolm], the hope of the isles.”47 The best example of this comes from the poem “Berrathon.” It is within this poem that we encounter the death of Ossian himself: “And shalt thou remain, aged bard! when the mighty have failed?—But my fame shall remain, and grow like the oak of Morven; which lifts its broad head to the storm, and rejoices in the course of the wind.”48

According to Fiona Stafford, the monuments and songs of the past were an integral part of Highland cultural and racial awareness:

The memory of the Fiana was not only perpetuated through popular stories, but through the very landscape of the Highlands. Any ancient monument whose origin was unknown was attributed to the Celtic heroes.

... The survival of legends and monuments were part of the Highlanders’ deep sense of the antiquity of their race. ... The legends of the Fiana were symbols of the unconquerable spirit of the Highlanders, who saw themselves as a pure race, unsullied by foreign influences.49

But there are many examples in Ossian where this essentialist Highland community is interpenetrated by Scandinavian influences, and vice versa. The Scandinavian princess Agandecca’s tomb, for example, “ascends on Ardven.”50 She also enters the memory of Fingal: “And if thou, Agandecca, art near, among the children of thy land; if thou sittest on a blast of wind among the high-shrouded masts of Lochlin; come to my dreams, my fair one, and shew thy bright face to my soul.”51 When Fingal mortally wounds Mathon,

47 Ibid., 10.
48 Ibid., 198.
50 Macpherson, The Poems of Ossian, 74.
51 Ibid., 79.
who, we are told, was an admirer of Agandecca and therefore a friend of Fingal, a “foe of
the foes of my love,” Fingal demands Ullin the bard to incorporate him into song and
raise his tomb: “And is it by me thou hast fallen, said the son of Comhal, thou friend of
Agandecca. I saw thy tears for the maid of my love in the halls of bloody Starno …
Raise, Ullin, raise the grave of the son of Mathon; and give his name to the song of
Agandecca; for dear to my soul hast thou been, thou darkly-dwelling maid of Ardven.”

When Orla, another Scandinavian warrior, chooses to engage in what will be a very one-
sided fight against Fingal, he says, “But, King of Morven, if I shall fall; … raise my tomb
in the midst, and let it be the greatest on Lena.” He goes on: “On Lena’s death I shall
die; and foreign bards will talk of me.” When Orla dies, Fingal orders: “Oscar and
Fillan, my sons, raise the high memory of Orla. Here let the dark-haired hero rest far
from the spouse of his love. Here let him rest in his narrow house far from the sound of
Loda.” Finally, when Fingal’s own son, Ryno, dies, Fingal exclaims: “And here my son
shall rest, said Fingal, the noise of their fame has reached my ears. Fillan and Fergus!
bring hither Orla; the pale youth of the stream of Loda. Not unequalled shall Ryno lie in
the earth when Orla is by his side. Weep, ye daughters of Morven; and ye maids of the
streamy Loda.”

The fragment “The War of Inisthona” exemplifies the political and cultural
alliances and entanglements in Ossian between the Celts and Scandinavians. According
to a note by Macpherson, “Inisthona, i.e. the island of the waves, was a country of

52 Ibid., 87-88.
53 Ibid., 92.
54 Ibid., 93 (my emphasis).
55 Ibid., 93.
56 Ibid., 95.
Scandinavia subject to its own king, but depending upon the kingdom of Lochlin."

There are several fragments that concentrate on events in Scandinavia, such as "Comála," “The Battle of Lora," “Carric-Thura," and “Berrathon.” In “The War of Inisthona,” Oscar, Fingal’s son, begs his father to go to the Scandinavian island to fight:

Fingal! thou king of heroes! Ossian, next to him in war! ye have fought the battle in your youth; your names are renowned in song.—Oscar is like the mist of Cona: I appear and vanish.—The bard will not know my name. ... Let me fight, O heroes, in the battles of Inis-thona. Distant is the land of war!—ye shall not hear of Oscar’s fall.—Some bard may find me there, and give me my name of the song.—The daughter of the stranger shall see my tomb, and weep over the youth that came from afar. The bard shall say, at the feast, hear the song of Oscar from the distant land."

The link between Scotland, or Morven, and this Scandinavian island is related by Fingal:

“Tell, Oscar, to Inis-thona’s king, that Fingal remembers his youth; when we strove in the combat together in the days of Agandecca.”

Perhaps the most noteworthy example that encapsulates this cultural entanglement within song and memory is in “Berrathon” when Ossian sings, “Your fame will be in the song; the voice of the harp will be heard in your praise. The daughters of Selma shall hear it; and your renown shall be in other lands.” This is a world where cultures clash as often as armies. Both Fiona Stafford and Penny Fielding have noted that the Celts and Scandinavians in Ossian and Hogg’s Queen Hynde are depicted as similar in terms of race and social practices instead of being seen as “radically different.” It is, to quote from Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things (1970), a “convenient” world that is entangled through song, memory, geography

57 Ibid., 439.
58 Ibid., 115.
59 Ibid., 115.
60 Ibid., 196.
61 Fielding, Fictions of Geography, 23.
and various complex familial and diplomatic alliances and interests. Far from being constructed as separate and entrenched entities, “[Celtic and Scandinavian] edges touch, their fringes intermingle, the extremity of the one also denotes the beginning of the other. In this way, movement, influences, passions, and properties too, are communicated. So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears.”

This transnational and entangled northern world is presented very differently, however, in Hugh Blair’s *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763). Within this *Dissertation*, Blair is at pains to separate Scotland’s ancient Celtic heritage from any similarity or links with Scandinavia in terms of both geography and culture. Part of the *Dissertation* focuses on “whether the Gothic poetry has any resemblance to the Celtic or Galic.” Blair emphatically denies any resemblance. Using a translation by Ole Worm of the “Funeral Song” by Regner Lodbrog, Blair states, “This is such poetry as we might expect from a barbarous nation. It breathes a most ferocious spirit.” *Ossian*, however, according to Blair, conveniently represents eighteenth-century literary sensibilities: “But when we open the works of Ossian, a very different scene presents itself. … We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity. Our hearts are melted with the softest feelings, and at the same time elevated with the highest ideas of magnanimity, generosity, and true heroism. When we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desart [sic], into a fertile and cultivated country.” Blair is unequivocal in his desire to keep the noble savages of Macpherson’s Celtic fragments separate from the “barbarous” poetry of the North: “The Celtæ, a great and mighty people, [are] altogether distinct from the Goths or

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Teutones.”64 The historian John Pinkerton would have agreed, although for different reasons, as I will briefly discuss at the end of this chapter. But Blair’s views are, once again, in direct contradiction to the poems themselves and Macpherson’s own comments. Identities, for example, are not as demarcated between the Celts and Scandinavians as Blair likes to think. Take, for example, this description of the Celtic hero Cuchullin: “He rushed, in sound of his arms, *like the terrible spirit of Loda*. … He sits on a cloud over Lochlin’s seas: his mighty hand is on his sword, and the winds lift his flaming locks.—So terrible was Cuchullin in the day of his fame.”65 Cuchullin, a Celtic warrior, is juxtaposed with “the terrible spirit of Loda,” a Norse god, and I have already highlighted the familial and blood relations that Macpherson articulates in the poems.

Blair also describes Scandinavia as geographically distinct from Scotland. “When the scene is in Ireland,” he argues in his *Dissertation*, “we perceive no change of manners from those of Ossian’s native country.” However, “when the poet relates the expeditions of any of his heroes to the Scandinavian coast … the case is quite altered.” Referring to a couple of instances in the poems of such expeditions, Blair states, “No sooner are we carried to Lochlin, or the islands of Inistore, than we perceive that we are in a foreign region.”66 This geographical distinction between Scottish and Scandinavian settings in the poems is something recent critics have argued against. In *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography*, for example, Penny Fielding talks about the vagueness of Macpherson’s geography: it is an interchangeable North instead of a spatiality of distinct

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64 Ibid., 349.
65 Ibid., 138 (my emphasis).
66 Ibid., 377.
locations. Howard Gaskill has also remarked on Macpherson’s “topographical vagueness”: “What Macpherson continually evokes is a certain type of landscape with a limited number of stock features, rather than particular settings.” He goes on to say: “Heath, moor, storms, mist and dank autumnal decay are not confined to Scotland.”

Murdo MacDonald also comments on this, stating, “So the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century need for this northern epic stemmed not only from the fact that they are myths … but from the fact that they evoke northern ecologies.” The setting of Ossian, in terms of topographical description, is not nationally defined or demarcated; it is instead a transnational northern space.

Finally, Macpherson himself makes it quite clear that Ossian is not just a Scottish epic but an epic of the North. He dedicates a large portion of his own Dissertation to defending the ancient cultures of Celtic Scotland and Scandinavia against what he sees as southern bias:

This history of those nations which originally possessed the north of Europe, is little known. Destitute of the use of letters, they themselves had not the means of transmitting their great actions to remote posterity. Foreign writers saw them only at a distance, and therefore their accounts are partial and undistinct [sic]. The vanity of the Romans induced them to consider the nations beyond the pale of their empire as barbarians; and consequently their history unworthy of being investigated. Some men, otherwise of great merit among ourselves, give in to this confined opinion. Having early imbibed their idea of exalted manners from the Greek and Roman writers, they scarcely ever afterwards have the fortitude to allow any dignity of character to any other ancient people.

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68 Gaskill, introduction, 6.
69 MacDonald, “Art as an Expression of Northernness,” 368-69.
He continues: “An incredulity of this kind is natural to persons, who confine all merit to their own age and country. These are generally the weakest, as well as the most ignorant, of the people. Indolently confined to a place, their ideas are narrow and circumscribed.”  

But of all those prejudices which are incident to narrow minds, that which measures the merit of performances by the vulgar opinion, concerning the country which produced them, is certainly the most ridiculous. Ridiculous, however, as it is, few have the courage to reject it; and, I am thoroughly convinced, that a few quaint lines of a Roman or Greek epigrammatist, if dug out of the ruins of Herculaneum, would meet with more cordial and universal applause, than all the most beautiful and natural rhapsodies of all the Celtic bards and Scandinavian Scalders that ever existed.

Macpherson's comments here are diametrically opposed to Blair’s and his intent to separate what he promotes as a distinct and noble ancient Celtic tradition from the “barbarous” poetry of the Scandinavians. Macpherson is here trying to place his work in both his own Celtic tradition and a Nordic tradition. In Bardic Nationalism (1999), Katie Trumpener argues that, in response to increasing Anglicization, the writers and the intelligentsia of the geographical ‘margins’ began to shape their own national and historical consciousness. This is obviously at play in the case of Ossian and the Scottish intelligentsia’s promotion of it. But as the examples above have attempted to highlight, what is interesting in the process is the articulation not of an essentially Celtic Scottish epic but a broader northern epic, which incorporates a strong Scandinavian dimension into the heart of its representation of Scottish identity. This Scandinavian dimension, although changed in certain ways, also remains a concern in James Hogg's nineteenth-century response to Macpherson's epic and its critics, Queen Hynde.

71 Ibid., 216.
72 Ibid., 216.
In his autobiography, *Memoir of the Authors’ Life* (1834), Hogg believed that *Queen Hynde* “was to prove my greatest work.”\(^73\) Comparison to other works such as *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818) and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) might make a mockery of such a claim. *Queen Hynde* is, however, Hogg’s own attempt to write a nineteenth-century Scottish epic, and it draws from and builds upon Macpherson’s *Ossian* in terms of purpose (a Scottish epic), location (Queen Hynde’s palace Selma is, of course, taken from Fingal’s Selma), and narrative (invasion from the North). Hogg was also responding to the prejudice levelled at Macpherson’s poem by its various critics. As Susan Gilbert and Douglas Mack state,

> For those who shared [Samuel] Johnson’s world-view, the values and the glories of civilisation were to be identified with London, the centre of the British Empire; and deviations from the cultural norms of the British metropolis were, by definition, to be regarded as manifestations of the second-rate, the backward, the provincial. *Queen Hynde* is one of a number of Scottish texts that subvert such assumptions by being open to the potential value of the voice of the Scottish ‘margins’; and Hogg’s epic seeks to allow that ‘marginal’ voice to be heard.\(^74\)

While the poem’s representations of the Viking invaders, such as the cruel practices of Norse paganism and the well-known but erroneous image of Vikings drinking out of the skulls of dead enemies, often seem to resonate with Hugh Blair’s rather than Macpherson’s representations, there is, at the conclusion of the poem, a trenchant Celtic identification in terms of the origins of the Scottish nation, but it is one that also


accommodates, if to a lesser degree than in Macpherson's *Ossian*, a Scandinavian dimension.

There are also significant differences between Macpherson's and Hogg's texts. One obvious difference is that Hogg's work is full of humour rather than Romantic northern melancholy. Another major change is the importance Hogg places on the Christian foundations of the Scottish nation by bringing in the character of St Columba, the holy man of Iona:

And that this land, within whose bound  
The cross of Christ a rest hath found,  
May 'scape this overwhelming snare,  
And still be God's peculiar care.\(^{75}\)

This Christian emphasis is juxtaposed with a fairly unflattering representation of Norse paganism, which has more in common with Walter Scott's *Harold the Dauntless* (1817) in its representations of the Vikings. The Christian element is nowhere to be seen in Macpherson's *Ossian*, however. While there are ghosts and spirits, there is no Christian God. Macpherson’s description of lonely, melancholy individuals within raw and wind-blasted northern landscapes evokes a feeling of alienation rather than any kind of divine presence. Even the Druids have been forced out. The only encounter with a god is when Fingal wrestles with and defeats an Odinic spirit menacing a Scandinavian kingdom. Fingal is the killer of gods, and there may be a tinge of Enlightenment disdain for superstition in its representation.

Despite these differences, however, the northern aspect of Macpherson's poems is maintained in Hogg's epic. Once again there is a Scandinavian threat from the North, but geographical and cultural demarcations are deconstructed through Hogg's portrayal of the performance of identity and of the Celtic-Scandinavian conclusion to the poem.

Hogg's representation of identity (personal and national) is not fixed but unstable, malleable and permeable. In Queen Hynde, this is used to deconstruct differences between Celt and Norseman. Midway through the poem, the Vikings and Celts agree to a series of games instead of all-out war to decide the fortunes of the Celtic kingdom. Similarities instead of ethnic differences between the Celts and Norsemen are emphasized during these games: “The rival nations equal stood, / In feats of skill and lustihood.”

Distinctions of identity are again dissolved within the bustle of the streets and the marketplace: “And there they crowded, trading, bustling, / Till eventide, full rudely jostling.” Identity itself, whether personal or cultural, is deconstructed. There are various examples in the poem when personal identities are changed or distorted, such as the performance of Wicked Wene as the Queen, Eiden's being seen as the shape-shifting Norse god Loki as well as his transformation from peasant to king and saviour of the Celtic kingdom, and the Norse prince Haco dressing himself and a number of his Norsemen as Highlanders in order to save Wene and a number of other female hostages from the fires of pagan sacrifice.

This deconstruction of fixed identities is also presented on a national scale at the end of the poem. Both King Eric and Prince Haco offer very different visions of a

76 Ibid., 167.
77 Ibid., 98.
transnational northern world to Queen Hynde's Celtic kingdom. Eric, who is portrayed as a resistless imperial monarch, desires to own and rule the entire North with his pagan priests as “one huge resistless monarchy”:

All Scandinavia owns my reign,
From Finmark to the northern main;
My errand is, I frankly own,
To win your queen [Hynde], and wear your crown;
That all the northern world may be
One huge resistless monarchy.

Such a vision of pagan totalitarianism is not meant to impress the reader as a reasonable proposition. It is a view that is countered, or at least tempered, by the more diplomatic vision offered by Prince Haco to the Queen (who, at this moment, is actually Wicked Wene and yet another example of Hogg’s deployment of shifting identities):

What I will do thou yet shall see,
For peace, for Scotland, and for thee.
...
Now since I’ve seen thee, and approve,
And feel, to see thee is to love;
Might Haco but thy heart engage
No deadly wars the Norse might wage.
...
This to prevent, and Scotland free,
Might you transfer your troth to me
Here might we reign on sable throne,
In old imperial Beregon;
And to your Albyn’s present bound
Unite our islands all around.
And when the time comes, as it may,
That Scandinavia owns my sway,
O’er these thy towers, shall wave unfurl’d
The ensigns of the northern world,
And Scotia’s free unyielding land
To all these regions give command.

78 Ibid., 50.
79 Ibid., 65.
Although Prince Haco does not in the end marry the real Queen, his vision of a northern union is kept alive to some degree at the end of the poem through his marriage to Wicked Wene and their becoming “Scandinavia's king and queen.”\textsuperscript{80} This marriage is matched by that of Queen Hynde and the Celtic hero, Eiden, simultaneously enforcing a distinct Celtic foundation of the Scottish nation as well as presenting a diplomatic union with Scandinavia through Prince Haco and Wicked Wene and their return to Scotland at the end of the poem:

\begin{quote}
Thence they returned to Albyn’s coast,  
In wedded love, when all their host,  
Save those within the ships that lay,  
Had melted from the world away,  
And were received with greetings kind  
By Eiden and his lovely Hynde.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

The ceremony of marriage is a familiar trope in the nineteenth-century historical novel, and in many occasions, such as in Walter Scott's \textit{Waverley} (1814) and Susan Ferrier's \textit{Marriage} (1810), it is meant to represent through metaphors of domestic partnership a political marriage or union such as the Union of Scotland and England in 1707. So while the marriage of Queen Hynde to Eiden is meant to reinforce the native Celtic roots of the Scottish nation in Hogg's poem, the marriage of Wicked Wene and Prince Haco adds a faint but still significant transnational northern element to the poem’s conclusion.

Macpherson and, to a lesser extent, Hogg weave within their epics of the Scottish nation and national identity a transnational Scandinavian dimension. As a

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 216.  
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 216.
conclusion to this chapter and a means of transitioning into later chapters, I want to turn from epics of northern identity to the representation of the Northern Isles in Water Scott’s novel *The Pirate*. Drawing on the vogue for Norse Romanticism that was in many ways kindled by Macpherson’s poems, Scott’s novel represents a period of transition in the Isles’ history when its Scandinavian culture was coming under increased strain from mainland Scottish influences at the turn of the eighteenth century. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Scott both sensationalizes the Scandinavian ‘otherness’ of the Isles and then attempts to accommodate the Isles and what he sees as its more reasonable Scandinavian traditions into a more unified national narrative of progress. Both the romanticization of the Isles and the attempt to bring them into a national focus will, as we shall see, be challenged and transformed by other writers who center on the northern peripheries as a geographical, cultural and ecological space of transnational possibility. As Robert Alan Jamieson has the Reverend Archibald Nicol comment and then delete while editing the fictional *History of Zetland* in *Da Happie Laand* (2010), a task which better informs the Reverend as well as the novel’s readers of the history of the Isles: “Zetlanders have always declared that Scott’s *Pirate* gave no true picture of Zetland life; but the most intimate and diversified knowledge of Zetland life has never inspired a book worthy of an instant’s comparison with *The Pirate*.”

Scott’s novel is seen here as dominating the representation of the Northern Isles in Scottish literature, giving “no true picture” of the Isles themselves. While the Revered claims that no other representation has come close, or even existed, Jamieson’s own novel and Shetlandic poetry set out to reverse this situation, as does Hugh MacDiarmid, who tries to get

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83 Jamieson, *Da Happie Laand* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2010), 140.
beyond such romanticization into a deeper penetration of actuality in Shetland in the 1930s, and the work of later writers such as Elphinstone, De Luca, and Jamie all centers on and represents the Northern Isles in very different terms.

In 1814, just a few years before writing his novel, Scott embarked on a trip around Scotland, visiting the Northern Isles in the process. He kept a journal of his trip that was later published in J.G. Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1837) entitled *Vacation 1814. Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla, and the Lord Knows Where*. Alluding to the same lines from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1734) that I quoted in the introduction to this dissertation, Scott’s title admits to a certain ignorance of Scotland’s northern extremes that seem to lie outside of the greater public consciousness. Just a few years after Scott had completed his trip to the Northern Isles, for example, Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*, which includes a famous passage set in Orkney where Victor Frankenstein creates and then destroys a mate for his own monstrous creation. Although Shelley never visited Orkney, the location was in her imagination a “desolate and appalling landscape” that would match the desolation that Victor himself is feeling and the horror of the action that he must undertake.\(^{84}\)

Scott also draws on the perceived strangeness or otherness of the Northern Isles in *The Pirate*, and his novel is full of extravagant Nordic representations and references to delight and thrill the reader. The greatest example of this is the terrifying figure of Norna of the Fitful Head, whose supposedly supernatural powers and recitations of Nordic poetry shock and impress upon the imaginations of the locals. While the young Mordaunt Mertoun is far more sceptical of Norna’s ancient Scandinavian

supernaturalism, thereby running a thread of rationalism throughout these encounters in
the novel, “his incredulity went no farther than doubts”:

She was unquestionably an extraordinary woman, gifted with an energy above
others, acting upon motives peculiar to herself, and apparently independent of
mere earthly considerations. Impressed with these ideas, which he had imbibed
from his youth, it was not without something like alarm, that he beheld this
mysterious female standing on a sudden so close before him, and looking upon
him with such sad and severe eyes, as those with which the Fatal Virgins, who,
according to northern mythology, were called the Valkyriur, or ‘chusers of the
slain,’ were supposed to regard the young champions whom they selected to
share the Banquet of Odin. 85

It is a superstitious world that, according to Scott, lagged behind Scotland at the time,
which was then in the “second state” of the increase of “religion and knowledge” that
looked upon superstition with both fear and intense hatred, consigning those found guilty
of what the Privy Council considered witchcraft to the flames of public execution. The
Northern Isles, however, were still then in the “earlier stages of society”:

Zetland was yet a little world by itself, where, among the lower and the ruder
classes, so much of the ancient northern superstition remained, as cherished the
original veneration, for those affecting supernatural knowledge, and power over
the elements, which made a constituent part of the ancient Scandinavian creed.
At least if the native of Thule admitted that one class of magicians performed
their feats by their alliance with Satan, they devoutly believed that others dealt
with spirits of a different and less odious class—the ancient Dwarfs, called, in
Zetland, Trows, or Drows, the modern fairies, and so forth. 86

It is within these Isles, as Scott says, that the ancient Scandinavian world that so
enthralled eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers exists as an actual culture among
the population. As Scott relates:

85 Walter Scott, The Pirate, ed. Mark Weinstein and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
University Press, 2001), 92.
86 Ibid., 50-51.
Halcro’s poetry might indeed have interested the antiquary as well as the admirer of the Muses, for several of his pieces were translations of imitations from the Scaldic sagas, which continued to be sung by the fishermen of those islands even until a very late period; insomuch, then when [Thomas] Gray’s poems first found their way to Orkney, the old people recognized at once, in the ode of the ‘Fatal Sisters,’ the Runic rhymes which had amused or terrified their infancy under the title of the ‘Magicians,’ and which the fishers of North Ronaldsha, and other remote isles, used to sing when asked for a Norse ditty.\(^87\)

Scott’s representation of the Northern Isles is characterized by a lingering Scandinavian otherness that keeps the Isles at first very much apart from the Scottish mainland in the imaginations of his readers, connected as it is instead to an ancient culture that extends into the North. It is a world where “the old Norwegian sagas were much remembered, and often rehearsed by the fishermen, who still preserved amongst themselves the ancient Norse tongue”; it is a place of “Scandinavian tales” of “Berserkar, of Sea-kings, of dwarfs, giants, and sorcerers”; it is a place where mermaids are spotted and the kraken still lurks—all of which is given even greater mystery and gravitas by the geography of the North itself:

Such legends are, indeed, everywhere current amongst the vulgar; but the imagination is far more powerfully affected by them on the deep and dangerous seas of the north, amidst precipices and headlands, many hundred feet in height,—amid perilous straits, and currents, and eddies,—long sunken reefs of rock, over which the vexed ocean foams and boils,—dark caverns, to whose extremities neither man nor skiff has ever ventured,—lonely, and oft uninhabited isles,—and occasionally the ruins of ancient northern fastnesses, dimly seen by the feeble light of the Arctic winter.\(^88\)

As we shall see in the next chapter, this northern geography and topology will be cleared of Scott’s Romanticism and made instead the setting of rocks and stones for the

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 137.  
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 18.
existential contemplation of actuality and being in the poetry of MacDiarmid and Kenneth White.

Much of this Nordic extravagance and supernaturalism is, however, gradually demystified in Scott’s novel and given rational explanation as the novel progresses, especially in terms of Norna’s supposed powers, which are soon revealed to be aided by secret passages and an intimate knowledge of the Isles and its patterns of weather. At the end of the novel, Norna is therefore depicted as passing from her pagan practices into the Christian faith, and “[her] dwarf was dismissed, with ample provision for his future comfort.”89 This can perhaps be read as an attempt by Scott to make the Isles less strange or alien in the imaginations of his readers, for the crux of the novel is the transitioning of the Isles into a broader national narrative of progress and improvement alongside Scotland.

There is initially a clash of cultures between these Scandinavian Northern Isles and the influence of the Scottish mainland. “Hither [the Scots] have come like the clack-geese,” the Udaller Magnus Troil laments at the beginning of the novel. “[The] ancient days and the genuine manners of these Islands are no more; for our ancient possessors,—our Patersons, our Feas, our Schlagbrenners, our Thorbiorns, have given place to Giffords, Scotts, Mouats, men whose names bespeak them or their ancestors strangers to the soil.”90 His fears are, perhaps, justified, as the representative of Scottish ‘improvement,’ Triptolemus Yellowley, who has come to “civilize the Zetlanders, and improve their very confined knowledge of the primary arts of human life,” is completely

89 Ibid., 388-389.
90 Ibid., 10.
ignorant of the land and the way of life of the islanders, and many of his ideas are
ludicrous and at complete variance with the reality of the situation of the Northern Isles
and its communities. His dislike of as well as inability to control his Shetland pony while
in conversation with the Udaller about improvements, which results in him being thrown
“into the shallows of a Zetland rivulet,” is a potent symbol of his inability as well as
refusal to properly understand the local landscape and its culture.

It is through the figure of Magnus, however, that a negotiation of the Scottish and
the Scandinavian on the islands is finally accommodated. While he is proud of his Norse
ancestry, traditions and customs, he is not, like his daughter Minna or the poet Halcro, in
favour of separating from Scotland as part of some romanticized dream of a
Scandinavian Viking alliance. As Cleveland tells Minna near the end of the novel,
“Denmark has been cut down into a second-rate kingdom, incapable of exchanging a
single broadside with England; Norway is a starving wilderness; and, in these islands,
the love of independence has been suppressed by a long term of subjection, or shows
itself but in a few muttered growls over the bowl and bottle.” Likewise, Magnus
dismisses Halcro’s Norse fantasies. Halcro begins by boasting: “I would it were possible
to see our barks, once the water-dragons of the world, swimming with the black-raven
standard waving at the topmast, and their decks glimmering with arms, instead of being
heaped up with stockfish … reaping where we never sowed, and felling where we never
planted-living and laughing through the world, and smiling when we were summoned to
quit it.” To which Magnus responds: “Spoken like a fool, I think … we are all subjects of

91 Ibid., 39.
92 Ibid., 106.
93 Ibid., 211.
one realm, I trow, and I would have you to remember, that your voyage may bring up at Execution-dock. — I like not the Scots … that is, I would like them well enough if they would stay quiet in their own land, and leave us at peace with our own people, and manners, and fashions; and if they would but abide there … I would leave them in peace until the day of judgement."\textsuperscript{94}

It is through Magnus that Scott is able to accommodate both the Scottish and the Scandinavian as part of “one realm.” Any kind of extravagant Nordic otherness that makes the Northern Isles seem at first completely “Other” or alien is demystified, and romantic dreams of Viking independence are deflated. But at the same time, Scott is able to accommodate the more reasonable aspects of both the Northern Isle’s confident Scandinavian culture as well as Scotland’s culture at the end of the novel as both Magnus and Yellowley look towards a united future of progress and improvement. Having Halcro no doubt recite Nordic songs and poems on one side, he listens on his other side to “the lucubrations of Mr. Triptolemus Yellowley, who, laying aside his high pretentions, was, when he became better acquainted with the manners of the islanders, and remembered various misadventures which had attended his premature attempts at reformation, an honest and useful representative of his principal.”\textsuperscript{95}

Just as at the end of \textit{Waverley} (1814) Edward Waverley “felt himself entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced,” the Scandinavian dimension of the Northern Isles in \textit{The Pirate} becomes a somewhat sentimentalized or romanticized accommodation to

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 139-140.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 390.
the “real history” that must now take place alongside Scotland as part of “one realm.”

This, perhaps, is the Shetland that is dislocated from its geography and put in a box next to Scotland—a representation that the writers in the following chapters seem intent on rectifying in order to articulate a wider polar projection in modern Scottish literature.

This chapter has examined texts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that raise the possibility of a transnational northern dimension. As I suggested, before Macpherson published his Ossianic epic, the North was represented as a barren and unpropitious world. Scotland, according to Defoe, could only be saved through Union with England. I next looked at the ballad “Hardyknute,” John Home’s play The Douglas, and Macpherson’s poem The Highlander to show how the Scandinavian North was used by Scottish writers as a geographical and historical “Other” that had to be defended against in order to produce internal British Union. This changed with the publication of Ossian. Read outside the shadow of the authenticity debates and claims of cultural nationalism, Macpherson’s and, to a lesser degree, Hogg’s, epics of the Scottish nation opened the space of the North in their representation of Scotland belonging to and operating within a wider northern world and identity. As Howard Gaskill and others have also highlighted, Macpherson’s poems influenced a greater sense of nordicity and northerness from Scandinavia to Russia. It therefore becomes less of a surprise to find the character of Asta Sollilja reading and weeping over Macpherson’s poems at the heart of Halldór Laxness’s Icelandic classic Independent People (1934). Scott’s The Pirate also becomes important in a discussion of Scotland and the North as the first novel to represent the Scandinavian dimension of the Northern Isles, although, as we shall see, this representation undergoes challenge and transformation as later Scottish

writers look to the north and Northern Isles of Scotland less as part of “one realm” than a wider transnational northern world.

While Macpherson’s Ossianic poems can be read as representing the conceptual space of a transnational North in Scottish literature, one of the fallouts of the publication of his poems was the beginning of a fierce Celtic-Nordic racial debate that would remain contentious in Scotland from the late eighteenth century into the middle of the twentieth century. Despite Macpherson’s synthesis of Celt and Scandinavian in his poems, Hugh Blair tried to separate the two by extolling the superiority of the Celtic noble savage over the Scandinavian or Teutonic race. Meanwhile, John Pinkerton, writing in his *Dissertation on the Origins and Progress of the Scythians or Goths* (1787) and *Enquiry into the History of Scotland* (1789), launched a scathing attack on such ‘Celtomania,’ claiming that the original inhabitants of Scotland, the Picts, were a Gothic race who came to Scotland via the Northern Isles from Scandinavia, and that the Celts themselves were degenerate imposters. Such theories about the supposed racial superiority of northern peoples such as the Goths, Saxons and Norsemen carried on throughout the eighteenth century and spilled over into the nineteenth century, and the Norseman and Anglo-Saxon were often depicted as the forefathers of the English race and their ideals of industry and Empire. Scott satirizes the whole Celtic-Nordic debate in *The Antiquary* (1816) by having two garrulous old men, Johnathan Oldbuck and Sir Arthur Wardour, argue over its trivialities.

In *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), Matthew Arnold attempted to ‘salvage’ Celtic culture from much historical and cultural prejudice, but he did so only at the expense of characterizing the Celt as an effeminate, dreamy, irrational and mystical tonic to the ordered and industrious Anglo-Saxon or Norseman. In *Scottish Skalds and
Sagamen (1996), Julian D’Arcy argues that Arnold made a “sincere effort to reconcile the two races”: “The Celtic imaginative flair was a necessary antidote to Saxon dullness and regularity.” In Acts of Union (1998), however, Leith Davis interprets this “reconciliation” in a less fanciful way, suggesting that, in his promotion of “Teutonic superiority,” Arnold “recommends the subordination of the ‘Celtic spirit’ to the Saxon ‘genius.’” For Davis, then, Arnold’s intentions are based on “containment” and “assimilation” instead of what D’Arcy sees as reconciliation. D’Arcy traces this racial controversy from its roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British writers and historians to its influence in the literature of some of Scotland’s best twentieth-century writers. It is not my intention in this dissertation to retrace the racial debates that D’Arcy outlines, but rather, to examine the way these debates were extended and transformed in the Scottish writing of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. My next chapter will therefore look at two twentieth-and twenty-first century Scottish writers, Hugh MacDiarmid and Kenneth White. Like Macpherson and Hogg, MacDiarmid and White conceptualize the North as a wider transnational space that is facilitated through a Celtic-Nordic and wider circumpolar fusion. Unlike some of their twentieth-century counterparts, however, MacDiarmid and White move this Celtic-Nordic dimension beyond any racial connotations into a very different, elemental poetics of being and actuality.

Chapter Two: Scottish Shamans

In the conclusion to my previous chapter, I highlighted the contentious Celtic-Nordic racial debates that enflamed Scotland after John Pinkerton’s anti-Celtic response to the Celticism initiated by James Macpherson’s Ossian (1765). In the 1890s, Patrick Geddes called for a ‘Celtic Renascence’ that intended to rehabilitate the image of the Celt from such associations of being “a doomed and rather fey race.”¹ The rehabilitation of the Celt in Scottish literature, however, seemed to stay very close to Matthew Arnold’s view, and the overt sentimentalization of the Gael in the novels of Geddes’ friend William Sharp (Fiona Macleod) is also identifiable, albeit to a lesser degree, in the twentieth-century novels of Neil Gunn and Eric Linklater, as is the representation of the rational and commanding Norseman. As Murray Pittock states, these writers “and others belong to the ‘Scottish Renaissance’ which in prose fiction was heavily laced, in its 1930s as in its 1890s variant, with a spiritualised and idealised Celticism which was seldom interrogated.”²

This chapter will examine two twentieth-century Scottish writers, Hugh MacDiarmid and Kenneth White, who attempt to move away from such sentimentalized Celticism into what might be termed a Celtic-Northern-Eastern ecophilosophical poetics.

² Ibid., 27.
Like Macpherson and James Hogg, who depict in their epic poems a fluid northern world where the Celtic and Scandinavian merge, MacDiarmid and White also bring the Celtic into contact with the North, but do so in terms of a poetics that moves beyond racial connotations as well as any Celtic or Nordic romanticization into a more ontological space of being and actuality that also encompasses an Eastern intellectual dimension. Both MacDiarmid and White therefore explore the concept of a Scottish-Northern-Eastern poetics of being and actuality that expands the creative consciousness of Scottish poetry into a wider transnational and transcultural northern space. I will begin this chapter by discussing MacDiarmid's work and then move into a discussion of White.

MacDiarmid is perhaps best known for his early modernist lyrics in synthetic Scots as well as his Odyssean explorations of self, nation, existence and the wider cosmos in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926). He was at the forefront of the early twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance, which has since come to be regarded and understood as Scotland's contribution to international modernism. Most critics, however, have identified a turn in MacDiarmid's poetics and politics around the 1930s, which has also been identified as a period of turbid personal and domestic crisis. While his Scottish nationalism and engagement with Scotland continued, he moved more broadly into epics of knowledge and fact written mainly (although not exclusively) in English or a defamiliarized English medium. His “Hymns to Lenin,” which began in the 1930s and continued into the 1950s, brought a Communist agenda into his poetry that coincided with the socialist movement in the poetry of W.H. Auden and Cecil Day Lewis.

in England, although, as MacDiarmid was vociferous in explaining, he was also very much apart from what he saw as Auden's and Day Lewis's very middle-class associations.

It was during his 'exile' in Shetland that MacDiarmid took his poetry into a colder, sterner but at the same time deeply philosophical engagement with the material world that seems at odds with the historical perspective of Marxism and his preoccupation with Scottish nationalism. It is a shift that is part of a larger movement into a poetry of fact that is perhaps most identifiable in another of his great epics, In Memoriam James Joyce, which he began in 1939 but did not publish until 1955, within which there is an obvious turn towards science, language, information and a developing ecological awareness. It is in In Memoriam that MacDiarmid displays his knowledge and understanding of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, for example, whose critique of Western thought and concept of Dasein was likewise influential to White. It is obvious from the following quotation that MacDiarmid had read or was at least knowledgeable of the content of Heidegger's classic philosophical text, Being and Time (1927):

> Even so, Conscience calls the self of Dasein Out of the state in which it is lost ... To call the self back into the silence Of the 'existent' potentiality of being.

The exploration of the calling of the self “back into the silence / Of the 'existent' potentiality of being” is an identifiable aspect of MacDiarmid's shift towards a poetics of actuality in the 1930s. Commenting on this shift, Roderick Watson remarks: “It is as if he relinquished the traditional role of the poet as maker/makar/god-like author in favour of a

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4 Ibid., 772-773.
cooler and more neutral relationship between himself, the reader and the surrounding world." In a very marginal but at the same time highly significant poem of this period of MacDiarmid's life and career, “Skald's Death” from Stony Limits (1934), MacDiarmid makes this shift out of the national and “back into the silence” very clear:

I have known all the storms that roll.
I have been a singer after the fashion
Of my people – a poet of passion.
    All that is past.
Quiet has come into my soul.
Life's tempest is done.
    I lie at last
A bird cliff under the midnight sun.  

The poem can be read autobiographically: MacDiarmid, now 'exiled' in Shetland, has relinquished his position as “the singer after the fashion / Of my people,” meaning Scotland and his Scottish Renaissance project. “All that is past” and the poet of the nation is now silent. It has a strong tone of dissociation. As MacDiarmid remarks in a letter written to Neil Gunn in 1933, commenting on his time in Shetland: “I am rowing about on lonely waters; lying brooding in uninhabited islands; seeing no newspapers and in other ways cutting myself completely away from civilised life.” At the same time, however, he confides to Gunn that he is “gradually finding myself – a new self.”

This “new self” might also be read in the concluding lines of “Skald's Death”; it is the death of an old self into a more open sense of being. Divorced from the world of


“civilised life,” that is, from the modernity of Scotland and the machinations of history going on elsewhere in the world that he would otherwise read about in the papers, MacDiarmid’s movement North into the austerity of the Shetlandic landscape has precipitated a “[calling] of the self back into the silence / Of the 'existent' potentiality of being.” Just as he explains to Gunn that he passes parts of his days “lying brooding in uninhabited islands,” the speaker of MacDiarmid’s poem “[lies] at last / A bird cliff under the midnight sun.” These lines are ambiguous. They seem to suggest that he does not lie under or above the bird cliff but that he somehow is the bird cliff. If this is a poem about death, it might suggest that the tomb is the bird cliff. But if it is autobiographical and therefore a metaphorical death, that is, the death of MacDiarmid as a poet of the nation, it might suggest instead that a more elemental silence that has come into his soul in Shetland: the quiet, the birds, the cliff and the midnight sun.

Another way of looking at “Skald’s Death” is to read it as a poem not so much about MacDiarmid’s life but about his movement into the northern realm of Audh, who comes to represent a sterner poetics of actuality that MacDiarmid uses to engage with the Scottish landscape and clear it of what he saw as distortive Celtic Twilight associations and influences that MacDiarmid saw as entwined with what Pittock describes as the “spiritualized and idealized” variant of Geddes’s ‘Celtic Renascence.’ Like the speaker of the poem who now lies dead “under the midnight sun,” Audh, as MacDiarmid mentions in The Islands of Scotland (1939), was buried “in one of [Iceland’s] cold jokulls.”

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8 Hugh MacDiarmid, The Islands of Scotland (London: B.T. Batsford, 1939), 42.
The figure of Audh appears in a few of MacDiarmid's poems. She is equated with the Scottish-Irish figure Deirdre in the search for a new Scottish muse in “The Gaelic Muse” from *Lucky Poet* (1943): “Deirdre, Audh – she has many names, / But only one function.” That “function” is to inspire a new poetry in Scotland: “Your songs, my friends, are songs of dawn, of renaissance too.” Both Julian D'Arcy and Heather O'Donoghue see the synthesis of Deirdre and Audh in terms of racial compromise on the back of the racial debates mentioned earlier. As D'Arcy states: “It is … perhaps fitting that it is MacDiarmid, the poet who always strove to be 'whaur extremes meet,’ who suggests the most intriguing and idiosyncratic synthesis as a possible compromise in the divisive feuding over the Nordic and Celtic origins of the Scottish people.” Similarly, O'Donoghue describes this synthesis as “a fitting symbol of Scottish identity and ethnicity.” This might be true. MacDiarmid was obviously mindful of the antagonistic Celtic-Nordic debates in Scotland. He tries to synthesize these elements by incorporating Celtic and Nordic mythology into his epic poems *A Drunk Man* and *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), and he also uses the historical Celtic-Scandinavian figure of several Icelandic sagas, Audh, the Deep-Minded, “whose intrepid blood / still runs in far generations / Of her children’s children,” as a symbol of racial reconciliation in Scotland. But Audh means more than this for MacDiarmid. In his autobiography *Lucky Poet*, for example, MacDiarmid seems to imply that Audh represents the characteristics of instability, eccentricity and contradiction that are at the heart of the “Gaelic Idea” he introduced in an earlier essay, “The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea,” which

9 MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, 658.
was first published in two parts in the magazine *The Modern Scot* (1931-2). He then goes on to say she stands apart from “the almost uniformly dull and commonsensible collection of buddies that constitutes our Anglicized Scottish nation today” and the various ‘enemies’ that MacDiarmid had seemingly been writing against up until that time: “The Enemy is Anglo-Scotland, the *droit administratif*, the pluto-bureaucracy, the mindless mob, the chaos of our great cities, the megalopolitan madness, European civilization's ruthless and relentless depreciation and denial and destruction of the Gaelic Genius, worse than Nazi anti-semitism at its worst.”

It is therefore very hard to understand Audh in terms of any singular or identifiable motif. But in *Islands*, within which MacDiarmid's evocation to Audh is most apparent, it is clear that Audh represents a Scottish-Scandinavian muse who presides over MacDiarmid's advocacy for a poetics of actuality.

*Islands* is a book which discusses Scotland's Western and Northern Islands in terms of their landscapes, cultures and socio-economic situations, and it attempts to get beyond what MacDiarmid saw as other highly romanticized and idealized published accounts of the Islands. The whole book, he informs us, is presided over by Audh:

The Muse with whom I am concerned in this book—since it deals not only with the Hebrides but with the Scottish Islands as a whole—is not Deirdre, but (one of the greatest, yet least known, women in Scottish History) Audh, the 'deep-minded,' wife and mother of chieftains, Gaelic and Scandinavian, who, at the end, left the Hebrides and voyaged, via the Faroes, where she landed to see some of her grandchildren, to Iceland, where she died and lies buried in one of its cold jokulls.  

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14 MacDiarmid, *Islands*, 41-42.
Within the book, MacDiarmid quotes another of his lesser-known poems, “The Stone Called Saxagonus,” in which he explains the kind of poetry he wants and does not want. He begins by registering his abhorrence of the Celtic Twilight associations and sentimental strains in Scottish and Scandinavian music and literature:

Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser’s Hebridean songs – the whole
Celtic Twilight business – I abhor,
Just as in Scandinavian music I have no use
For ‘the delightful taste of a pink sweet filled with snow,’
The delicate pastel shades, the romantic nostalgia,
Found also in writers like Jens Jacobsen.

For MacDiarmid (and others), Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s Songs of the Hebrides (1909) was representative of the sentimentalization and trivialization of Gaelic culture. MacDiarmid’s response is to look northwards to Scandinavia in his desire for “Ibsen’s hardy intellectual virility ... and that of Sibelius in the Gaelic spirit.” “Give us Gaelic poets and composers again,” he demands, “Who will stand first and foremost as Sibelius stands / Towering over the Palmgrens and Järnefelts.” Selim Palmgren and Armas Järnefelt were twentieth-century Finnish composers who MacDiarmid obviously thought inferior to their countryman and contemporary, Jean Sibelius. MacDiarmid refers to Sibelius again in “Good-bye Twilight” from A Clyack-Sheaf (1969). As its rather unsubtle title suggests, MacDiarmid is once again aiming his poetic red pen over any traces of Celtic Twilightism. “Back to the great music, Scottish Gaels,” says MacDiarmid. “Too long / You have wallowed in the music of Delius.” Like Palmgren and Järnefelt in “The Stone Called Saxagonus,” the figure under fire here is the English composer Frederick Delius, some of whose compositions were inspired by the dreamy Celticism of Sharp.

15 Ibid., xiv.
16 MacDiarmid, Complete Poems, vol. 2, 1124.
Murray Pittock suggest that Sharp’s novel, *Pharais* (1894), presents “Celtic Scotland as dreamy, feminine and prone to the ‘mind-dark’ of hereditary madness.”\(^\text{17}\) According to MacDiarmid,

> Sibelius lacks wholly the rather morbid preoccupation With what is vaguely termed 'Nature' Delius possesses. An obsession that does not allow of any very clear Spiritual vision or insight into the true inwardness of the thing That is the obsession. Delius looks upon 'Nature' and promptly becomes Doped, drugged, besotted – my countrymen, even as you.\(^\text{18}\)

For MacDiarmid, Sibelius “keeps all his very fine / Northern wits ... / Very well on the alert” and knows “That that aspect of the matter is an aspect only, / That there's much more to it than only that.”\(^\text{19}\) MacDiarmid obviously thinks that the music of Sibelius depicts the Finnish landscape with a deeper resonance that is devoid of sentiment and romanticization, and it is this northern note that he wants to bring to the Scottish landscape and the culture of the Gàidhealtachd. “Out from your melancholy moping, your impotence, Gaels,” MacDiarmid therefore demands, with an obvious reference to the Romantic melancholy of *Ossian*. “(You stir the heart, you think?... but surely / One of the heart's main functions is to supply the brain!) / Back into the real world again.”\(^\text{20}\) The kind of poetry that MacDiarmid wants requires a deeper “insight into the true inwardness of the thing,” that is, a deeper identification of mind with the material reality of the “real world.” In “The Stone Called Saxagonus” he therefore calls for a “harsh, positive masculinity, / The creative treatment of actuality” in response to the “sweetie-wives” and

\(^{18}\) MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, 1124.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 1125.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 1126.
others of the Celtic Twilight who “have bemused the geology of the islands.” While the call for a “harsh, positive masculinity” is particularly jarring, it might at least be understood in terms of a reaction to Victorian connotations of unstable and irrational femininity that were foisted on characterizations of the Celt.

As the muse of Islands, it becomes clear that Audh represents for MacDiarmid this northern turn towards “the creative treatment of actuality.” As he says in his introduction to Islands:

The appeal of the Shetlands is not so facile as that of the Hebrides, nor has it been eked out by so many adventitious aids. This is not altogether a misfortune. If the Shetlands are much less known they have at all events escaped the danger of superficial and generally false enthusiasm, and have nothing to correspond to 'Celtic Twilightism'. ... If the fake-glamour of the Hebrides has become a weariness to the flesh and a real obstacle to their true apprehension, an insistence on the claims of the Shetlands now may prove a useful corrective, and help to establish a properly balanced conception of Scotland as a whole. A sense of actuality will serve us better than any artificial allure.

Had MacDiarmid read Walter Scott’s The Pirate (1822)? Although it did not create in the Northern Isles anything like the “fake glamour” of Twilightism that MacDiarmid argues has “bemused the geology” of the Western Isles, Scott’s novel certainly represents the Northern Isles with a “superficial and generally false enthusiasm.” The lack of this “fake glamour” in Shetland, however, allows MacDiarmid to bring himself back in touch with the stones and elements of the physical world. It is the austerity of the landscapes and strange light of “the North” that can provide the basis for such poetry of actuality:

Just as the adventures, the dangers, the thrills of work in these dim Northern waters are best brought out, not by over-statement, but by a calm regard for fact

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21 MacDiarmid, Islands, xiv-xv.
22 Ibid., 7.
and an intimate knowledge of the subject ... the Shetlands call alike in the arts and in affairs for the true creative spirit. Anything pettier would be sadly out of place in these little-known and lonely regions, encompassed about with the strange beauty of the North, the fluctuation of unearthly colour at different levels of the sun, the luminous air, the gleam of distant ice, and the awful stillness of Northern fog.23

It was amid such a setting on a raised beach in Shetland that MacDiarmid wrote what is probably his greatest philosophical poem, “On a Raised Beach.” While the poem was written a few years before the publication of *Islands*, the poetic spirit of Audh as a northern muse of actuality is strongly present within it.

“On a Raised Beach” is an attempt to “reconcile ourselves to the stones.”24 It begins by rewriting the Christian creation story of Genesis into the grammar of rocks and stones, thereby bringing the mind from theological metaphysics back to the bare stones of physical reality: “All is lithogenesis – or lochia, / Carpolite fruit of the forbidden tree.”25 MacDiarmid wants to “have nothing interposed / Between my sensitiveness and the barren but beautiful reality.”26 But getting into the stone world, whose “gates are open,” is an almost impossible task. Unlike the bird, whose gates are also “always open” to the reality of being, he is “doubtful” that humanity’s are even “ajar.”27 Deliberately using a defamiliarizing scientific English in order to heighten the ‘otherness’ of the geological from the human, the speaker turns the stones in his hands in order to bring his mind into the reality of stone, although “through them no man can see”: “like a blind man [I] run / My fingers over you, arris by arris, burr by burr / ... Bringing my aesthetics in vain to

23 Ibid., 54-55.
24 MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, 428.
25 Ibid., 422.
26 Ibid., 431.
27 Ibid., 423.
bear.” Trying not to impose his own human meanings and qualities onto the landscape, he accepts the existential reality of death and the dumb indifference of the rocks:

I am no more indifferent or ill-disposed to life than death is; 
I would fain accept it all completely as the soil does; 
Already I feel all that can perish perishing in me 
As so much has perished and all will yet perish in these stones. 
I must begin with these stones as the world began.29

The acceptance of this cold reality is certainly disturbing in its nihilism, but it does not lead to thoughts of suicide. There is a “deeper issue” that MacDiarmid is trying to penetrate—reconciliation with the physical world. “Here a man must shed the encumbrances that muffle / Contact with elemental things,” because

What happens to us  
Is irrelevant to the world’s geology  
But what happens to the world’s geology  
is not irrelevant to us.30

Two years after publishing Islands, MacDiarmid edited and wrote the introduction to The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry (1941), which is perhaps best known for his elision of Edwin Muir’s poetry after their fallout over the use or non-use of Scots. While the figure of Audh seems to disappear as a muse, the Celtic and Northern element is again emphasized. What makes The Golden Treasury distinct, however, is the addition of an Eastern intellectual aspect:

28 Ibid., 422-23.  
29 Ibid., 424.  
30 Ibid., 428.
But if I have been concerned with the little white rose of Scotland, I have also been concerned to ensure that its roots are given their proper scope. [Scottish poetry] cannot be confined to a little Anglo-Scottish margin. Recent Scottish poetry has been trying to reclaim a little of its lost territory. A study of *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* appeared in 1937. Toward the end of his life Mr. Yeats returned to the Upanishads and commended these to the attention of our younger poets. That movement back to the ancient Gaelic classics and then North to Iceland and then East to Persia and India is the course the refluence of Gaelic genius must take.\(^\text{31}\)

A synthesis of Celtic and Scandinavian inspired a desire for a poetics of actuality in *Islands*. This is again made clear in another poem, “Happy on Heimaey” from *Collected Poems* (1962), which records a visit MacDiarmid took to Iceland. Within the poem MacDiarmid quotes several lines from “an ancient poem ascribed to Colum Cille” (Saint Columba) that expresses a deep pleasure about being “on an isle's breast, on a pinnacle of rock”—a quote that tellingly keeps the elemental but leaves out the original poem’s invocation to God—at the end of what is essentially a poem that articulates an experiential appreciation of being in the Icelandic landscape and phenomena.

MacDiarmid might also have been interested in philological and historical connections between Scotland and Scandinavia, as well as connections found in the Icelandic sagas, but in this poem it is purely elemental, bringing the “Gaelic genius” into contact with the Icelandic landscape and revelling in an experience of being-in-the-world, or more geographically centered, being-in-the-north, that has yet “[to] be touched by the finger of science” in a way that will catalogue, disenchant and objectify these experiences in its necessary pursuit of knowledge.\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{32}\) MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol.2., 1044.
The addition of an Eastern element in *A Golden Treasury* brings a broader philosophical language and tradition to MacDiarmid's northern poetics of being and actuality. In the middle of *In Memoriam*, within which he luxuriates in the languages, dialects and linguistic creations from every period of history around the world, MacDiarmid states, somewhat unexpectedly,

(For unlike you, Joyce, I am more concerned With the East than the West and the poetry I seek Must be the work of one who has always known That the Tarim valley is of more importance Than Jordan or the Rhine in world history).

While he only mentions the Indian Upanishads and Persia in *The Golden Treasury*, later poems such as “Diamond Body” bring in other Eastern intellectual associations such as Chinese Taoism. If Audh was a Scottish-Scandinavian muse of actuality, the Eastern intellectual element touches on a rich tradition of thought that subverts ideas of the fixed self as well as the structuralism and Cartesian subject-object or mind-body dualism that has had such a lasting impact on Western thought. The essential revelation in the Upanishads, for example, that the human self (*ātman*) is coexistent with absolute reality (*brahman*) pursues a unifying principle that suggests the duality we might appear to see in the world is unreal, and in the Taoism of Chuang Tzu similar emphasis is placed on the loss or opening of self within a world and cosmos that likewise subverts any sense of dualism, as can be seen in Chuang Tzu’s famous story about his dream of being a

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33 Ibid., 801.
butterfly, awaking, but then not knowing “whether it was Chou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Chou.”

“There are not two worlds,” MacDiarmid muses in “Diamond Body,” “A world of nature, and a world of human consciousness, / Standing over against one another, but one world of nature / Whereof human consciousness is an evolution.” It is a poem inspired by his reading of Chinese Taoism, as well as his own experiential observations of landscape, light, sea and the minute life he looks at under a microscope. “Diamond Body” is a poem set in Scotland, informed by Eastern philosophy and which engages with MacDiarmid's northern poetics of actuality from Islands and “On a Raised Beach.” 

Referencing the Taoist teachings of The Secret of the Golden Flower, which was translated into English in 1931, as well as remarking on advances in the technology of scientific observation and his own phenomenological observations, MacDiarmid's poem questions our assumptions of the duality of self and world through the apprehension of a “greater unity”: “In the reconciliation of the differentiated / And the inferior function, the 'great Tao / – the meaning of the world' is discovered.” It was this “reconciliation of the differentiated” that MacDiarmid was attempting to penetrate in the northern landscape of Shetland, and it is in the ancient teaching of Taoism that MacDiarmid here finds a similar language and way of looking at the world. As he says at the end of the poem, which once again references a state of unitary consciousness explored in the ancient Taoist text: “I have achieved the diamond body.”

36 Ibid., 1088.
Poems like “On a Raised Beach” and “Diamond Body” give a completely different picture of MacDiarmid as a poet and thinker. Nationalism, Marxism and the anxiety over the use or non-use of Scots are forgotten in these poems, as MacDiarmid moves himself out of history and into geography, that is, out of cultural politics and into a greater existential experience and understanding of being in the physical world. And it is this MacDiarmid of “On a Raised Beach” and “Diamond Body” rather than the nationalist MacDiarmid which appealed to Kenneth White and to whom White dedicates his poem “For MacDiarmid”:

Scotland in winter
wind whooming round the white peaks

I have been walking along the river Druie
by the golden pine and the silver birch
thinking of your poetry

now in the Lairig Ghru
at the heart of the ontological landscape
alone with the diamond body.\(^{37}\)

There are several aspects of this poem that are central to White’s geopoetics: the Scottish setting; a supernihilistic conception of being among natural elements; “the ontological landscape”; the allusion to White’s philosophical space of “white world”; the centrality of the birch as a northern ecological signifier; the importance of walking and thinking as a synthetic process; explorations of being; and references to the East. The opening line might also be a reference to Edwin Muir’s poem “Scotland’s Winter,” within which Muir depicts a Scotland devoid of a coherent identity and whose rootless,

cultureless population “are content / With their poor frozen life and shallow banishment.”

For White, however, it is exactly this situation of being out of history that provides a means of bringing the mind into a more fundamental sense and experience of the world. Locating himself outside of the historical world and certainly outside the nation and Scottishness of MacDiarmid’s Renaissance, White invokes MacDiarmid’s later poetry and his poem “Diamond Body” as central to his own explorations of being in “the ontological landscape,” walking its landscapes randomly and thinking his phenomenological experiences into a metaphysics, that is, what in The Wanderer and His Charts (2004) he calls “a thinking-in-the-territory (implicated in it, not imposed upon it). ... A landscape-mindscape.” What White attempts in his own geopoetics is to bring to Scottish and world poetry an existential awareness of being-in-the-world that, White believes, is crucial if the culture of the Anthropocene is to retain any fundamental significance.

Referring to MacDiarmid’s introduction to The Golden Treasury in On Scottish Ground (1998), White says, “As I’ve suggested elsewhere, in other studies, the move North that MacDiarmid speaks of has to mean more than Iceland and the Scandinavian sagas, just as the move East has to mean more than Persia and India. I’d speak rather of the whole of Eurasia Septentrionalis.” This circumpolar world—its territories and cultures of Inuit and Celtic poetry, northern shamanism and the ancient philosophy of the East—is the physical-metaphysical space that White feels he belongs to, and it is a world to which he believes Scottish culture should open itself if it could only move

beyond its proscriptive twentieth-century obsession with the nation, its Anglo-Scottish ‘schizophrenia’ and the impact of its history of Calvinism, Victorianism and industrialism that has, for White, dissociated Scotland from a fundamental understanding and appreciation of the deep time, ecology and complexity of its own natural, physical space. As White states, “Scotland has lost its sense of physical space and intellectual horizon, reduced only to social context.” White therefore advocates getting back to what he calls “Alba”: “Alba is Scotland uncouthied, un-crudied, re-discovered. Scotland itself after all is a colonial term, and Scotland has been over-colonised. Post-colonial Scotland means getting back down to Alba, to original landscape-mindscape, and, connecting them, wordscape.” This means “thinking back into the ice,” using the image of the landscape appearing in the wake of receding glaciers as a means of bringing consciousness back into clean phenomenological contact with landscape: “[t]he land emerges / bruised and dazed / in the arctic light.” From this perspective, consciousness unspools and

[tries] to grasp at something that wanted no godly name something that took the form of blue waves and grey rock and that tasted of salt.

The movement out of history and into contact with the cultures and ontological landscapes of the North, what White describes in terms of a Hyperborean “white world”


42 White, *On Scottish Ground*, 3.

43 White, *Open World*, 598.

44 Ibid., 600.
on the peripheries of modern ‘civilization,’ is a significant part of White’s geopoetics, and he uses it as a means of expanding Scotland’s sense of itself and its cultural and physical place in the world.

Despite his referring to himself as another example of the wandering Scot as seen from Duns Scotus to John Muir, and despite writing essays about Scotland and setting much of his poetry in Scottish landscapes, as well as interacting with and linking himself to other Scottish intellectual figures such as James Hutton, David Hume, Geddes, Gunn and MacDiarmid, White has been curiously ignored by Scottish literary criticism, and he only gets the briefest of mentions in Robert Crawford’s otherwise excellent *Scotland’s Books* (2007).

There are possible reasons for this. The most obvious is that Kenneth White left Scotland for France, becoming a French citizen and publishing in French, and for some time Scottish criticism has found it hard to accept writers as part of Scottish literature who do not live in Scotland and do not write about predominantly national issues. A diasporic turn in Scottish criticism is beginning to rectify this, however. White can be seen along with other writers emerging in the 1960s such as Edwin Morgan and Alexander Trocchi who felt impatient with the Scottish scene and who wanted to move out into other forms of expression such as the Beat Movement. White had no interest in the nationalism of the Renaissance or in writing in Scots, and he felt constrained in a British literary market whose only interest in Scotland seemed to be about selling another book about Glasgow hard men and urban decay.

Cairns Craig has also suggested that White’s poetics, which has more in common with the style of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound through its
deployment of short, laconic, visual lines of “significant meaning” than the 1950s and 60s confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, might be another reason for White’s marginal status. There is a strong American influence in White’s writing, and he often refers to the influence of the great writers of the American tradition such as Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville and Williams in his essays and ‘waybooks.’ “[They] carried more space and energy with them,” White explains, “because they were breathing deeper. Also, because they were come-outers, breaking out of a restricted context into a space still to be defined, for which they didn't have all the coordinates.” But his poetry also has strong aesthetic and intellectual similarities with the ancient Chinese poetry of figures such as Wang Wei and Meng Hao-yan, whose own stravaigings around and sense of being within his native mountain landscapes is related through a plainspoken, spontaneous, imagistic style very much like White’s, and whose poetry and ‘waybooks’ are also obviously inspired by the Zen Haiku, Japanese aesthetics and travel narratives of the seventeenth-century Japanese writer Matsuo Bashō.

The desire to break out of existing conceptions and “restricted contexts” of the world into an undefined and difficult area is something that White first began to work out during his time as a student in Glasgow in the middle of the twentieth century, where he experienced a profound sense of alienation and nihilism. It was in his dimly-lit student rooms that looked out over “the ten thousand chimneys” and the streets and coffeehouses of Glasgow where White would sit and read T.S. Eliot, Oswald Spengler,

Emil Cioran and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, to name but a few examples, seeing a correlation between their words and the cranes, smog, shipyards and industrial brutalism of Glasgow. 47 “The landscape was cancerous,” White recollects, “with big clocks tolling the time, and the river had lost all memory of salmon.”48 His poem “Zone,” for example, is a rewriting of Eliot’s Preludes (1917) from the perspective of his own experiences of the city. At the end of the poem, which echoes the end of Eliot’s original, White hopes he can “elope / with the first image tossed from the city’s rusty womb.”49 But just as Eliot’s images of the city seem to sink into nihilistic conclusions—“Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh; / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots”50—White documents a “deep loneliness” in the images he comes into contact with: the sun is “a beetroot thrown in mud”; whiskers of light from lamps “are lost / in the electric bonfires of the passing trams / while bored-looking women lug their prams”; and “cranes and gables” hang over the city. All of it in the end seems manifest in the “inaccessible eyes” of a black cat who crosses his path and “[survey[ing] with disdain / my enterprise decides he need not remain.”51 Along with many other twentieth-century writers, White felt a prescient sense of decline and struggled to grapple with the age and find within it (or without it) something radical.

Summing up his memories of Glasgow, White says, “It had a reputation of being a hell-hole, and tried to live up to it, often succeeding.”52 This “reputation” that White

47 White, Open World, 8.
48 White, On Scottish Ground, 194.
49 White, Open World, 4.
51 White, Open World, 4.
52 White, On Scottish Ground, 194.
speaks of is explicitly described (or inscribed?) in such works as Edwin Muir’s *Poor Tom* (1932) and his descriptions of the industrial central belt of Scotland in *Scottish Journey* (1935), MacDiarmid’s poems about Glasgow, H. Kingsley Long and Alexander McArthur’s *No Mean City* (1935), George Blake’s *The Shipbuilders* (1935) and the realist elements of Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, which, although published in 1981, was being put together as early as 1954. Cairns Craig has commented that the Scottish novel from the 1980s onwards defies the “historical reality in which it is trapped” by “discovering a variety of routes into alternative ontologies where the imaginary can become real.” If Gray’s “Unthank” can be seen as one of these “alternative ontologies” in which to escape the historical reality of the present, White wanted to move into an “alternative ontology” that did not escape into fantasy but entered instead into an existential ontology of being-in-the-world located outside of the historical. “A lot of literature just describes the prison,” says White, “or comments on it, or has somebody gripping the bars and howling – or maybe painting the bars in lurid colours. I wanted to break the cage.”

In the opening pages of *Lanark* Gray describes the protagonist Duncan Thaw unsuccessfully “looking for daylight” or some kind of dawn. This search for a metaphorical dawn out of the darkened skies of Glasgow caught between its industrial past and the machinations of late modernity is a symbol that is also at the center of White’s early Glasgow poems. As described earlier, the sun is imagined as a rotting beetroot tossed upon a muddy sky in “Zone.” In “A Dark Secluded Bay in Ireland,” which,

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54 White, *On Scottish Ground*, 198.

as its title makes clear, is not set in Glasgow but somewhere in Ireland, “there’s not a bit of yellow sun in sight” as the poet sits “scraping away at this deal table / like an old angel trying to learn the fiddle.” There is a palpable sense of frustration and alienation in these early poems, as in “New Moon,” within which White describes himself as a struggling poet who can “read / no future, live no present,” his mind “sick with a bellyful of memory” in a “skull like an old tin can that rattles.”

In “Winter Lodgings at Scotstoun” “a dark, red sun” beats beneath the “night-fog” and “ten thousand chimneys” of a Glasgow evening. But in “Reading Nietzsche on the River Clyde,” which alludes to Nietzsche’s The Dawn of Day (1881) and quotes the epigraph at the beginning of that book from the Indian Vedas, there is the promise of some ambiguous, unarticulated new beginning: “‘There are many dawns’ / [Nietzsche] had read in the Vedas / ‘that have not yet shed their light.’”

56 White, Open World, 12.
57 Ibid., 17.
58 Ibid., 8.
59 Ibid., 11.
attempt to get at something like a whole way of being.\textsuperscript{60} In his poem “Heron of the Snows,” for example, the subtitle of which is “Chinese studies on Maryhill,” White contemplates a painting by a tenth-century Chinese painter, Siu Hi, called ‘Heron in the Snows.’ I cannot find reference to this painter or this particular work, but White might be referring to the later eleventh-century painter and poet Su Shi. The painting obviously holds for White a supernihilistic quality of coldness, stillness and absolute naked existential being the like of which he wanted to express in his own poetry, especially poems situated in Scottish landscapes. Responding, silently, to the deep questioning of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, Siu Hi’s Heron “like the ghost of an answer / balances in the wind / and stares at the questioning world.”\textsuperscript{61} The answer is in the heron’s silence, its cold eyes, the grey sky and the wind blowing through in its feathers. Or as Ludwig Wittgenstein articulates it: “We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.”\textsuperscript{62} Also, in “In the Botanic Gardens, Glasgow,” White meets a kindred spirit in Bashō, whose haiku and Oku no Hosomichi (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) influenced White greatly, and who was also, according to White, “out for unheard poetry.”\textsuperscript{63} The third segment of this poem therefore has White looking at and seeing a birch tree as a thing-in-itself:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

It’s been at the centre of myth
at the centre of legends
but if you can see where it stands
exactly as it is here now

\textsuperscript{60} Kenneth White, Pilgrim of the Void (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), 11.
\textsuperscript{61} White, Open World, 13.
\textsuperscript{63} White, Open World, 14.
so silver, so slender, so tall
you'll go away beyond them all.64

The poem is an attempt to train our perception, which is why the verb “see” is at the very centre of the poem. The birch, which is a sacred symbol in Celtic mythology and a broader representative of northern ecology for White, is here given an Eastern dimension, as White attempts to see the birch devoid of human imposition, meaning or reference. As one of Bashō’s students, Doho, says of the teachings of his master: “The master said, 'Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo stalk from a bamboo stalk.' What he meant was that the poet should detach his mind from self ... and enter into the object, sharing its delicate life and its feelings. Whereupon a poem forms itself. Description of the object is not enough: unless a poem contains feelings which have come from the object, the object and the poet's self will be separate things.”65 In White’s poems, “the mind cries out for unity, for a unitive experience” and moves into a spatial mindscape beyond the power of linguistic expression into a “sheer experience of the nakedness and loveliness of everything, an ecstatic existence, expanding to the sense of cosmic unity.”66 It is an experience that involves at first dissolving the self into an openness to naked being and then later developing that experience into a suitable poetic language. In “In the Botanic Gardens,” White wants us to come into contact with the birch tree as a thing-in-itself, to bring our minds into a clearer moment of apprehending its thisness before it gets jumbled up in myth and legend. At the beginning of his poem “Valley of Braches,” White describes walking in the valley and being aware

64 Ibid., 14.
66 White, On Scottish Ground, 60, 64.
of a sensation “that speaks to me like a memory / whispering with all its branches.” It is an experience for which he tries to find a language: “The wording would have to come from mental territories still unknown to me” so he can “[walk] in this place, with the need to voice it.” As White says:

I must enter this birch-world
and speak from within it
I must enter into
this lighted silence.67

He tries to bring himself into a state of awareness that can “enable us / to quietly /
penetrate the reality.”68 It is a difficult existential mental space to express, perhaps even impossible:

Waiting for the words
to come out of the silence

words for this emptiness-plenitude
this absence-presence

words for the sensual spirit
infusing those trees

words like the nichtwesende wesenheit
of Meister Eckhart

words like the buddhist sunyata
but more rooted, more rooted
and running with sap69

What he wants to emerge from this thinking-in-landscape is a language to

say the world anew

67 White, Open World, 275.
68 Ibid., 276.
69 Ibid., 277.
dawn-talk
grammar of rain, tree, stone
blood and bone.\textsuperscript{70}

These perspective dawns and references to the East began to synthesize with White’s reading of western philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, the archaic practices of shamanism, ancient Celtic poetry and his own experiential stravaigings across various world landscapes, literatures and cultures, all of which would gradually begin to inform and influence him and be articulated more and more in his geopoetics. He continued his voracious reading while still struggling and working things out in Scotland, studying also how the great writers of modernism such as Ezra Pound and MacDiarmid also tried to grapple with the age. He read and admired Pound’s \textit{Cantos} and MacDiarmid’s sprawling epics of fact and information and their attempts to grasp, almost desperately, at some kind of coherence that, more often than not, falls into incoherence. The drunk poet-philosopher of \textit{A Drunk Man} falls into silence at the end of his philosophical odyssey; the vital force proves elusive in \textit{To Circumjack Cencrastus}; and despite his obvious knowledge and revelling in the expressions, dialects and languages of the world that try to express and understand existence in \textit{In Memoriam}, MacDiarmid admits that it is all “an extended metaphor for something I never mention.”\textsuperscript{71} White felt that such poetry—while admirable—was lacking in something more vital. With its subtitle “In memoriam Ezra Pound,” which is an obvious allusion to MacDiarmid’s \textit{In Memoriam James Joyce}, White’s poem “In a Café at Largs” quotes the opening lines of Pound’s famous canto CXVI:

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 280.
\textsuperscript{71} MacDiarmid, \textit{Complete Poems}, vol.2., 745.
Came Neptunus
   his mind leaping
      like dolphins
These concepts the human mind has attained.

These lines have been read as Pound’s articulation of his modernist desire, as he himself says in the following lines, to “make cosmos”: that is, a totalitarian fantasy to recognize or realize through the collection of records, myths, fragments and artefacts from history the whole sum of human knowledge. But if Pound and MacDiarmid believed that such a conglomeration of information was, at that time, the sum total of what “the human mind has attained,” White adds a trailing line at the end of Pound’s quotation in his poem that suggests he does not believe that this is the pinnacle of Western culture but that something else awaits to be apprehended or, as he says, is “still to be attained.”

White does not make it clear at this point what exactly is “still to be attained,” but he was beginning to put together his geopoetic vision. He held no affinity whatsoever with the “ungrounded, uninspired, ineffectual texts” of “trendy writers and myopic intellectuals” who called themselves postmodern, nor with the writers of the Beat Era: “a populist syncretism with no development of an idea, no consequential activity.” Instead he looked further back in time, stopping off at the Romantics and admiring their critical response to René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. There is in White’s critique of modernity a tone similar to William Wordsworth’s description of how the mass urbanization and industrialization of modernity “are now acting with a combined force to

74 White, *On Scottish Ground*, 159.
blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.”75 As Jonathan Bate states in *Romantic Ecology* (1991), “if one historicises the idea of an ecological viewpoint – a respect for the earth and a scepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society – one finds oneself squarely in the Romantic tradition.”76 There is therefore a Romantic strain in White’s writing, but his influences go even further back into Celtic poetry, Eastern philosophy and shamanism, finding within these texts, traditions and practices correspondences and connections and a cleaner phenomenological apprehension of the world.

White’s own long poem, “Walking the Coast,” which contains fifty-three poems or “waves,” could be read as a response to Pound’s and MacDiarmid’s librarian epics. It is, as White states at the beginning of the poem, “a recapitulation of my living up to that date, a summing-up . . . of the whole Scottish mindscape, and a map of new co-ordinates.” In sum, it is a poem that tries to aim for “panorama and perspective.”77

Instead of building a poem full of historical knowledge, however, the opening poem describes White’s poetic intent to “select / the features of real significance” out of the “chances and changes” of the chaotic world and “how to order / the signs and symbols” that circulate around that world “into new harmonic wholes” so as to articulate a more existential experience and awareness of being-in-the-world. This is, for White, the true task of poetry:

77 White, *Open World*, 126.
to keep alive
in complexity
and complicity
with all of being -
there is only poetry.

The erratic structure of the lines in each poem is meant to reproduce the flux and reflux of the tides. White is walking randomly, physically present amid the phenomena of the shore, outside of the 'centers' of the historical world, experiencing it, but at the same time making of its chaos a language “so as to make / of the welter / a world that will last.”

It is, as he tells us in poem III, “a hymn to chaoticism,” which, as its religious aspect suggests, tries to bring the language of metaphysical reverence and enchantment back into a fresher, secular revelation of a physical world devoid of divine meaning and which is seen ostensibly in terms of objectified knowledge and utilitarian value.

It is nihilistic, chaotic, but at the same time filled with an ecstatic sense of being. It is not perfection that he seeks but a language that can capture “natural form / in movement.” Instead of the vast epics of information that Pound and MacDiarmid exhibit as the sum total of what “the human mind has attained,” White’s poetry is about dissolving the ego—“and now the struggle at the centre is over / the circumference / beckons from everywhere”—and opening up the nervous system into a more experiential awareness of existential being. It is the task of the poet to then make of that physical experience a language, a metaphysics, that can keep alive in complexity

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78 Ibid., 127.
79 Ibid., 129.
80 Ibid., 158.
81 Ibid., 154.
and complicity
   with all of being.

As he says in poem XI:

   the biological
   aim of art
   is to project around us
   the images
   the proofs
   the manifestations
   of a power of synthesis
   at one with life
   and maintaining life
   against solitude
   and fragmentation
   the cold aggressiveness
   of the space-time world.82

This is what White saw as missing at the centers of Pound’s and MacDiarmid’s epics—
“a power of synthesis / at one with life.” It is this “synthesis” of the human and the non-
human that White feels has been lost in modernity, and he therefore sets himself the
task of “founding and grounding / a world.”83 Poem LII therefore refers back more to the
MacDiarmid of “On a Raised Beach” than of A Drunk Man or In Memoriam:

   it is possible
   to live with the rocks
   in unity of mind
   and perhaps one who knows
   even one rock thoroughly
   in all its idiosyncrasy
   and relatedness
   to sea and sky
   is better fit to speak
   to another human being
   than one who lives and rots perpetually
   in a crowded society

82 Ibid., 137.
83 Ibid., 146.
What White wants to bring forth in his poems is an examination of what it is to be human in a supernihilistic world of geological deep time, complexity and the interrelatedness of the human, the non-human and the cosmological. For White, this is “essential,” a truly radical poetics that he feels is missing in modernity.

What White means by a radical poetics therefore has nothing to do with politics or politicized theory, aesthetic experimentation with language or language games, nor with what he sees as literature that postulates itself in terms of radicality but stays at a strictly sociological level. “What I was out for,” White explains, “obscurely, intuitively, was a new event in poetics: a space of being, allied to a transpersonal language.”

His attitude towards much contemporary poetry is made explicit:

Poetry signifies the transcendence of the individual conscience and the introduction to a world (a cosmos, a beautiful whole in movement). It is the absence of these two notions (transcendence, and penetration) which makes for a degraded state of poetry where, for example, observations (more or less ‘deep’) on this, that, and the next thing, event, person, thought, feeling, imagining, pass for poetry – when in fact they are only the literary subproducts of individuals, psycho-physiologically in a larval state … crawling more or less contentedly about a decomposed environment of which they constitute the ‘literary world,’ a hideous caricature of the real world of poetry. Real poetry, and the life it implies, begins a few thousand miles, as the gull flies, as the wind blows, away from this ‘civilised’ compound.

To suggest that anything other than White’s notion of “real” poetry is the product of a “decomposed environment” is a fairly brazen observation to make, as if all poetry must

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84 Ibid., 178.
85 White, On Scottish Ground, 199.
86 Ibid., 58-59.
adhere to the depths of his own geopoetic perspective that, as he admits, is a very personal, isolated, “transpersonal” experience. But the “civilised compound” that White refers to here is the cultural decay of Europe predicted by such thinkers as Nietzsche, and White sees the continuation of this decay within the urban nihilism of late capitalism. “[Away] at the dead end of the Calle San Pablo,” White writes of Barcelona in Travels in the Drifting Dawn (1989), “where there are no longer any women visible, only men humped in sordid drink-shops with pale blue TV screens flickering in the darkness, yes, this is the end, with a pale-green-painted little hospital-looking shop there advertising lavajes-siphilis, the syphilitic end of the overhuman bloody world.”87 According to White, Western culture has at its very center a historical perspective. From Plato to monotheism to Hegel, there is always the expectation of something beyond, some kind of metaphysical salvation or historical ideal located outside of a present that is seen as broken or unsatisfactory. For White, such an expectation alienates humanity from its own existence and the physical world. “The House of Being … is reduced to a villa,” says White, “an asylum, or a sanatorium at the side of the technological Highway, containing much wailing and gnashing of teeth, some cynical laughter, some last-minute speeches, some ‘avantgarde’ experiments, some whimperings, many death-croaks.”88 It is a representation of the numbness and absurdity of modernity so vividly depicted in the beleaguered worlds of Samuel Beckett. But White is fed up waiting for Godot, and he sees nothing much ahead of him on the “technological Highway” but Disneylands, Nietzschean ‘Last Men’ and economic metaphysics. White therefore opts to get out of history whenever he can and into the randomness of open space and a more

88 Ibid., 60.
fundamental sense of being-in-the-world and cosmos rather than remain continually frustrated and alienated in a world filled with fractured and schizophrenic psyches. “All my own work … is involved in the exploration of the area neglected by the autobahn of western civilization and in the elaboration of new concepts, ways of being, elements of a potential culture,” says White. 89

It is as an “intellectual nomad” that White is able to move into this difficult area outside of history. There are correspondences between this aspect of White’s thinking and writing with the nomad introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (1980). Like White, Deleuze and Guattari critique the Western intellectual establishment of their time, especially in terms of notions of progress, objectivism and nationalism as a way of defining the subject in the world. In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari represent the figure of the nomad, who, unconstrained by nationalism, moves out into the spatial territories of the world, resisting forces of centralization and demarcation. Nomads “have no history; they only have geography.” 90

In his poem “Ovid’s Report,” which takes as its subject the Roman poet's exile “alone among uncouth clods / on the cold and foggy banks / of the impossible Black Sea,” White pushes Ovid’s initial disgust at being divorced from the historical center of Rome into an acceptance and ability “to move off into the dark and live with it.” 91 His sense of self, defined as it was by his life and work in Rome, starts to unravel and a deeper sense of becoming in the world starts to appear: “the world opened up / wider

89 Ibid., 92.
90 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 393.
91 White, Open World, 509.
and more demanding / than I'd thought.”92 His being at “the world's edge” becomes synchronous with his being at the edge of being, between the historical and “a land of wind and shadow” and “a wild swan whooping.”93 What White's poem does is to move Ovid out of history and into geography, that is, “into this night / get further into / this new space.”94

The concept of the “intellectual nomad” was something that White first read in Spengler’s The Decline of the West (1926). Spengler’s urban nomads move around the city both physically and intellectually. But instead of remaining one of Spengler’s urban nomads, White takes the intellectual nomad outside the walls of the city in order to move into open spaces where he can begin the process of “working out a new mindscape after emergence in the landscape.”95 As White explains in The Wanderer: “The intellectual nomad ... is engaged, outside the glitzy or glaury compound of late modernity, in an area of complex coordinates. He is trying to move out of pathological psycho-history, along uncoded paths, into fresh existential, intellectual, poetic space.”96 The facilitation of such a movement into ontological space involves getting out of history and into geography, walking its landscapes randomly and experiencing its physicality, as well as moving intellectually among the different cultures and literatures of the world, ancient and modern, that can contribute to something like a complete world culture and a deeper understanding of what it is to be human in the world and larger cosmos. “The nomad doesn’t make history,” White says. “He follows his paths from well to well. He’s

92 Ibid., 510.
93 Ibid., 510-11.
94 Ibid., 514.
95 White, On Scottish Ground, 195.
96 White, The Wanderer, vi.
concerned with well-being. So doing, he works in close to geography, and with the parameters of sensitive space.” Outside of the “latest intellectualistic half-language” and “endless social commentary” of the contemporary cultural scene, much of which White believes is unsatisfactory, the “intellectual nomad” works in a far more existential space and is engaged with questions of being-in-the-world. White wants to bring the mind and body back into a physical-metaphysical experience and conceptualization of space, matter and phenomenology in what might be described as sensually epiphanic moments in his ‘waybooks’ and often brief but shudderingly beautiful articulations of naked being in his poems. These simple lines from “The Pinelands,” for example, move into a space of emptiness, disencumbrance and a deep sensation of being at home in the world: “the cry of the pheasant / in the forest stillness.” That “cry of the pheasant” is what empties the mind and brings it into a deep unison with “the forest stillness” and that silence of absolute naked existential being that Martin Heidegger calls “the open region that clears the 'between' within which a 'relation' of subject to object can 'be.'” They are poems that lead the mind into such a space; they do not provide a finished, polished poem that, for White, reduce poetry to “an ego-limited conscience, with more or less skill, taste, sensitivity, etc.” They go beyond ego and into an undefined space of being and becoming.

These moments should not be dismissed as escapist or some kind of arrogant hermitic disdain for the contexts and situations of the all-too-human lives we live and negotiate in cities and towns. Zarathustra comes down from the mountain, after all. They

98 White, Open World, 377.
100 White, On Scottish Ground, 58.
are instead powerful and important epiphanic moments of being, without which, White argues, “culture, as Nietzsche foresaw, would go to the dogs, that is, to what he called the ‘last men,’ hideously productive, but creatively nil.” As MacDiarmid explains in “On a Raised Beach”:

It is not a question of escaping from life
But the reverse – a question of acquiring the power
To exercise the loneliness, the independence, of stones,
And that only comes from knowing that our function remains
However isolated we seem fundamental to life as theirs.
We have lost the grounds of our being,
We have not built on rock.

White therefore finds it imperative for the sake of existing fully as a human being in the world and the cosmos to bring the mind and body back into touch with an authentic appreciation of being.

This space of naked being that White emerges into is what he calls “white world.” This is a phrase that can prove bothersome. From a surface level, it dredges up uncomfortable connotations of racial privilege as well as the accusation of an egotistic imposition of White’s self onto the world. But neither of these things is at all inherent in what the phrase signifies. It is instead a term that designates a space of being wherein what we have come to understand as the metaphysical self is opened to the sensation and experience of clean phenomenology. It is a transpersonal space that White experiences himself and which he also finds in his reading of ancient Celtic poetry, shamanism and large elements of the Eastern intellectual tradition. His immersion in this “white world” is something he talks about in terms of his memories as a child in the

101 White, Open World, 179.
village of Fairlie on the west coast of Scotland, where, like the young Kenn in Gunn’s *Highland River* (1934), he moved among and experienced the phenomena of the natural world. “White world” is therefore a contextual term that “brought together the phenomena I was moving among (breaking waves, quartz pebbles, wings of gulls, birch-bark), the country I was living in (its ancient name: Alba), and, as a bonus, my person, but in an almost anonymous way.”

It is the immersion of non-self within the rhythms and patterns of this “white phenomena” that provides the experiential sensation of world, which White as poet then articulates into a geopoetics: “For, before being an idea (with philosophical developments), and a field of existential poetics (containing, potentially, a social programme), it is an experience, centering on the real body – a psycho-physical experience that can be of the utmost intensity.”

It is therefore an open, sensual and at times highly sexualized experience of what White calls “the incandescence (the whiteness) of the earth,”

the vague premonitions of which may be nascent at the initial experience, concrete primarily in the erotic flash, in contact with things and the elements … at the centre of the universe, gathering into itself as much as possible of the real world, towards unlimited marriage, a sheer experience of the nakedness and loveliness of everything, an ecstatic existence, expanding to a sense of cosmic unity … or, to put it another way, *eros* leads to *logos*, physics to metaphysics, the relationship to things to a relationship to being itself.

The concept of “white world” also contains connotations of the North in terms of both physical territory and intellectual idea. Scotland (as “Alba”) is part of this northern “white world,” as White argues after much philological explanation in his essay, “The Alban Project” from *On Scottish Ground*: “I’d say that it seems both easy and justifiable

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103 White, “Grounding a World,” 199.
104 White, *On Scottish Ground*, 63.
105 Ibid., 64.
to interpret Alba as ‘the white heights,’ ‘the high white place,’ ‘the high white world.’”

The birch tree especially, which is a recognizable and widespread phenomena in the Northern Hemisphere, returns time and again as an object of study and contemplation in many of White’s poems. It is at the center of his poem “Northern Trail,” within which is represented a transnational northern space that accommodates various recognizable natural phenomena of the North, including an obvious Scottish dimension: dark northern waters; Greylag geese; “grey smir / obscuring the loch, / smooring the hills”; birches, arctic char and boreal flora and fauna. It is a poem of observation that leads the reader, like Bashō does in his haiku, into an experience of a solitary unfolding moment that captures and reveals a deeper sense of reality.

But the North is also conceptualized as an intellectual idea in terms of a process of unidentified becoming. Borrowing from both Nietzsche’s declaration in *The Antichrist* (1895) that “We are the Hyperboreans—we know well enough how much out of the way we live” and Herman Melville’s view in *Pierre* (1852) of how the Hyperborean regions “will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought,” White states:

I’m always thought of as a Scotsman. But I’m an Eskimo by naturalisation. And this nationality itself is only passport protocol. In fact, I’m Hyperborean. Nobody knows anything about the Hyperboreans. The Hyperborean is a man out on an erratic path towards a region situated somewhere off the map. People only see erratics (the stones he leaves in his tracks), but what he sees, in lightning

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106 Ibid., 1-2.
107 White, *Open World*, 93.
flashes, is the region beyond. No definition is possible of what he sees over there. We’re twenty thousand miles from civilisation.\textsuperscript{110}

It is within this Hyperborean “white world” that White—or White as open nervous system—becomes immersed. He experiences it in the Scottish, Canadian, Siberian and other northern landscapes, as well as finding flashes or traces of its insight in ancient Celtic literature, Inuit vision, Amerindian religion, northern shamanism and the Eastern intellectual tradition—a circumpolar culture that he feels is geographically, culturally and intellectually connected in terms of “direct contact, immediate association, outwith system, institution, mythology.” “To ‘see again,’” says White, “which means both perspective and clarity of vision, is, at least for a start, to open up the whole northern circumpolar complex.”\textsuperscript{111}

According to White, it is through ancient Celtic culture and, presumably, his own poetry that Scotland is connected to this transnational circumpolar world:

Back to Finn, and, via that figure, into that Hyperborean ‘white world’ from which … the Celts derived so much of their myth, and over to the Caucasus where … Scot meets Scythian … and we open out on the whole of the Eurasian Steppe. Doing so, [Scots] will not be losing roots and identity, we will be extending them, enlarging them, recovering scope and energies, able to apply them within any specific socio-cultural context, for example, the one now called Scotland.\textsuperscript{112}

It was to this conception of Scotland (or “Alba”) as “white world” that White says he “added the whole hyperborean, circumpolar complex, which brings together Celtic culture, Indian-Inuit culture, and Siberian shamanism. And then again, the white


\textsuperscript{111} White, \textit{On Scottish Ground}, 32-33.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 42.
background of Zen Buddhism, where supreme identity is described as ‘a white heron in the mist’—all of which again, both territorially and ideationally, belongs to the “white world” of the Hyperborean North.”

After reading in later adult life Mircea Eliade’s famous book on shamanism, The Ecstatic Techniques of Ecstasy (1955), White noticed that he had practiced a home-made form of shamanism as a young boy walking the shore, woods, moors and hills around the village of Fairlie. As he mentions in his interview with Attila Dósa in Beyond Identity (2009), “I had the feeling of being in touch with a larger, more-than-human context.” In the archaic practice of shamanism White finds a way of being and thinking that is devoid of Platonism, monotheistic religion and dualistic philosophy, all of which, White argues, has informed the basis of Western intellectual, scientific and technological culture, culminating in humanity’s techno-economic mastery over and objectification of the material world. Traditionally, the shaman of the community is a figure through whose ecstatic rights of passage and visions is able to connect to the realm of the gods beyond the visible boundaries of the community, the majority of whom are represented in terms of the natural world and animal kingdom. White is not calling for the actual practice of some kind of neo-shamanism, complete with medical and magical therapeutics, to be practiced in, say, Glasgow. “I am speaking of a basis,” he explains, “and a basis on which all kinds of developments are possible.” He goes on: “On the basis of this fundamental experience … let us both expand and intensify – into, for example, ecology, lightning philosophy, live poetics and, who knows, even enlightened

113 Dósa, “Strategist of Mutation,” 265.
114 Ibid., 261.
cultural politics.” He is therefore interested only in what he calls shamanism’s “general cosmology”:

What the shaman, or the ‘dawn-man,’ as the Ojibwa call him, is out for, is an ecstasy (getting outside one’s self as well as outside history), and a de-conditioning. Starting out from a reduction (renunciation of social identity, etc. – he is in fact invited to see himself reduced to his bones), the shaman achieves a transcendence, a capacity for experiencing (and also expressing) total life. By separating himself, at least temporarily, from the community (and to a certain extent he always remains outside), the shaman comes to know an identity larger than the one coded in the community, and it is precisely this which enables him to do the greatest good to the community, by giving it breathing space. If the shaman imitates the movements and voices of animals and birds … it’s in order to learn the language of the whole of nature, this desire for complete language leading eventually to the practice of incantation (providing enchantment) and/or the development of a jargon (the language of the jars, that is, the wild duck).

White believes the practice of shamanism to have arisen when nomadic tribes of peoples moved across the earth after glaciation, which obviously influenced his own clean phenomenological perspective: “I am suggesting that we try and get back an earth-sense, a ground sense, and a freshness of the world such as those men, those Finn-men, knew when they moved over an earth from which the ice had just recently receded. This is the dawn of geopoetics.”

As well as supposedly practicing a homemade shamanism as a child in Fairlie, and reading about Inuit and Siberian shamans in The Romance of Labrador (1934) by Evgenia Schimanskaya and Eskimo Life (1893) by Fridtjof Nansen, White also encounters this “white world” shamanism in the ancient Celtic literature of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. His engagement with the Celtic world has nothing to do with the

115 White, On Scottish Ground, 42.
116 Ibid., 38.
117 Ibid., 48.
eighteenth-century Romantic revival that was sparked by the popularity of Macpherson's *Ossian*, the Celtic Twilightism that MacDiarmid loathed, nor with its supposed funeral in the linguistic extravaganza of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939). He goes beyond all of this: “But if you trace it back far enough – up beyond Gaelic pieties – you come to something like an archaic deer-cult … something close to the caribou cult of the Indians and Eskimo of Labrador.” Reading the ancient poetry of the Celts, White finds traces of a particular strand of Celtic shamanism, the vestiges of which he finds even in the Christianized poems and hymns of Celtic monks. Discussing the juxtaposition of his Christian education and his reading of these Celtic poems, White says, “As a recipient of a good Scottish education, I had lengthy screeds of the Bible by heart, and wasn’t insensitive to its rhythm and its grandeur, but from then on [after reading certain Celtic poems], I knew I preferred ‘the noise of the waves in the morning as they flowed over the beach of white pebbles’ to any talk about God.” He therefore wants to get out of redundant Scottish cultural clichés: “That mixture of common sense and sentimentality, of social realism and airy-fairy, of Gaelic piety and Lowland pawkiness,” as well as mundane, semi-political poems in Lallans into a “re-reading and enlargement” of Scottish culture, shedding a new light on “our long-lost, long caricatured and sentimentalized background.” He sees this shamanic element in the literature of Fionn mac Cumhaill, the figure of Celtic mythology who appears as the hero Fingal in Macpherson’s *Ossian*. He also identifies vestiges of the shamanic journey in the famous Scottish folk ballad “Thomas the Rhymer” and even Robert Burns’ “Tam o’ Shanter” (although a failed shamanic journey due to its pathos of eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism).

118 Ibid., 21-22.
119 Ibid., 22-23.
120 Ibid., 40.
likewise finds flashes of “white world” consciousness in the poems of ancient Celtic figures such as Taliesin, Llywarch Hen and Aneurin. “I suggest that something like this is a good basis for culture,” White argues, “a real basis for a (Scottish) literature: devoid of romantic sentimentality, Gaelic piety and Lowland reductiveness – a ground we lost long ago, which went subterranean.” He quotes Taliesin:

I am the wind that blows over the sea
I am the wave of the sea
I am the roaring of the sea
I am the bird on the seacliff.

For White, Taliesin and other ancient Celtic figures and texts represent a sense of being present in the world, experiencing it, becoming open to it, and giving voice to that experience. Just as in the extract I quoted from Chuang Tzu earlier in this chapter, the subject-object divide is dissolved here as Taliesin locates himself in the world instead of seeing himself and the world. As Tony McManus states, White identifies this sense and articulation of being most strongly in the circumpolar world from Japan to the Inuit of northern Canada: “In Basho, Wang Wei, Taliesin and Uvavnuk, human expression is expression of the landscape, the voice of the earth. They have nothing whatever to do with notions of ‘self’ or ‘ego in later adult life,’ there is no ‘opinion,’ no concern with ‘society,’ no ‘angst’. For them, poetics is the realm of more refined and more expansive perception, poetry the voicing of presence in and of the world.”

The Hyperborean “white world” is therefore found in the landscapes and ecosystems of the North, as well as in northern and Celtic shamanism. “[W]e lie here

121 Ibid., 41.
122 Ibid., 31-32.
now,” White says in “Fragments of a Logbook,” “on the line / that joins the celtic to the boreal.” But he also encounters this “white world” in the East, bringing its philosophical perspectives into his own appreciation of northern phenomena. “The more I walk / this northern coast / the closer I am to the East,” says White in “The Gannet Philosophy.” And in his essay “The Birds of Kentigern,” White claims, “It is far from being a rule, but I find that it’s often minds with a Celtic background that get closest to the Far East.”

While the East has suffered from Western ‘Orientalism,’ White argues that beneath such portrayals and the commercialization of the East there is “a confirmation of what is most alive, and most essential, in its own existence” and that “there lies something of the first significance, something essential to the human being, something which, grasped and incorporated, could change a man’s life, something the lack of which makes the idea of a fulfilled human existence impossible to realise.” He finds this in the writings and wanderings of Bashō, who, as I have already mentioned, was “out for unheard poetry”; the essays of Kenkō; the poetry of Wang Wei and other traditional Chinese poets; the teachings of Taoism, which offers White ontological re-evaluation; Zen Buddhism, which taught White the Non-Self (as did Hume) and the ability to see in a naked, fresher light; Japanese Shinto; the Tibetan Buddhist teachings of Marpa Lotsawa; and the paintings of Hiroshige and Sesshū, who, after achieving “emptiness,”

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124 White, *Open World*, 476.
125 Ibid., 93.
126 White, *On Scottish Ground*, 73.
127 Ibid., 66.
painted “with the fewest strokes / the hardness of rocks / and the twistedness of roots.”

White’s formulation of this “circumpolar culture,” or “white world,” is, from a twenty-first-century critical perspective, problematic. First, although White expresses respect for and interest in native peoples and their cultures, he does use language that runs the risk of being taken as prejudicial and condescending in tone. In “The Alban Project” essay examined above, for example, White employs the now pejorative term “Eskimo,” which, around the time of the publication of White’s text in the middle of the seventies was, in Canada, being changed to “Inuit.” It is a term he uses elsewhere, however, such as in his ‘waybook’ *The Blue Road* (1983). White might also be accused of romanticizing the “Eskimo” here. But, like his interest in shamanism, it is not the lifestyle or practices of the Inuit that White is referring to here; it is a tradition of being and a way of seeing and interacting with the world that he finds in Inuit culture. Like John Burnside’s appreciation of the native Sami people in Norway, White finds in Inuit culture—and Japanese, Chinese, Siberian and Celtic culture—flashes of an articulation of connection to the fundamental reality of the earth, rooted in an oral poetry that is connected to the terrain.

Another problem here is White’s obvious gender bias. “The Hyperborean is a *man* out on an erratic path.” White’s references, both artistic and intellectual, are predominantly, if not exclusively, male. The women that we do encounter in White’s ‘waybooks’ are also sometimes seen to represent the culture or landscape that he is looking to move into, both physically and mentally, and there are occasions when this

can become sexualized. In *The Blue Road*, for example, he meets “a little Canadian girl, part French, part Scot, part Mohawk” in Quebec. While “royally stoned,” the conversation turns to Labrador and soon becomes convoluted and abstract. White then starts discussing his sense of being in Canada: “I was beginning to feel in my element. I was beginning to love Canada. I mean Quebec.” But this then becomes associated with his having sex with the woman he has met, who remains nameless. “I was beginning to love Quebec,” he says. “I loved it all night. That big round moon was driving me crazy.” 129

The synthesis of space, landscape and the female body is obvious here, and the connotations of White’s suggesting he is “beginning to feel in [his] element” becomes troubling. There is no violence to the imagery; there is no sense of dominance or control. The emphasis is on love. But at the same time, it objectifies the woman he is with; it makes her body a symbol of the landscape and space that he is literally and figuratively looking to penetrate. As I mentioned earlier, White’s experience of the physical world is often described erotically: “a sheer experience of the nakedness and loveliness of everything.” These moments of erotic connection with the world are almost always genderless; they are moments of absolute being located outside of such designations of gender and nationality. But there are occasional moments when White sexualizes the female body to the extent that it become intertwined with his geopoetic philosophy and vision. There is no trace of masculine imperialism, however; the landscape and the woman he is with in *The Blue Road* are not depicted as something to be conquered or controlled. The landscape is not depicted as “awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason,” as Anne McClintock puts it. 130


landscape is a difficult reality that White is looking to enter into, both mentally and physically, but not in any way that suggests egotistic control or appropriation. It is a space wherein the self, which is made up of history, language and reason, is dissolved within a more naked and authentic state of being in the world. Having said that, there is in White's work a distinct lack of female references and representation, and these moments of gendered and sexualized experience are evident if only occasional.

White is looking to open Scottish poetry to a new poetics of being-in-the-world in the de-territorialized spaces located outside of history. He believes that through his own poetry, Celtic poetry, northern shamanism and Eastern art and philosophy, Scottish culture can be opened up into a new northern transnational and transcultural space. This Celtic-Northern-Eastern association, which MacDiarmid first pointed towards in *The Golden Treasury*, is perhaps most explicitly stated in White's *En toute candeur* (1963):

“my greatest space of being is perhaps that crown of the world which goes from Scotland to Iceland and Alaska, and comes down again by Siberia into China, Japan and India. I've heard tell of a Eurasian circumpolar civilisation. We know very little about this yet, and many of its vestiges could be lying deep below the ice, but I feel that that is the culture I ultimately belong to.”

To conclude this chapter, James Macpherson and James Hogg opened up a Celtic-Scandinavian space and an enlarged sense of identity in their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northern epics. In Shetland, MacDiarmid transforms that Celtic-Scandinavian association through Audh into a northern poetics of actuality, to which he

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later adds an Eastern dimension. Identifying himself more with the MacDiarmid of “On a Raised Beach” than the librarian epic of In Memoriam and especially the nationalism and Scots of the epic A Drunk Man, White extends MacDiarmid’s Celtic-Northern-Eastern poetics into a transcultural and transnational circumpolar “space of being” and geopoetics, widening the field of Scottish poetry and conceptions of cultural identity in the process. It should also be noted here that, through their explorations of being and landscape, MacDiarmid and White belong to a wider group of twentieth-century Scottish writers such as Neil Gunn and Nan Shepherd who also engaged in what Cairns Craig describes a “higher perspective…beyond all history” in terms of their own explorations of being within Scottish light, landscapes and ecology, often referring to the East in terms of similarities in seeing and experiencing the world. For MacDiarmid and White, however, this exploration of being in the physical landscape is opened out into a wider northern and circumpolar space.

MacDiarmid’s reference to Audh came from his reading of the Icelandic sagas, and at the end of The Blue Road, White writes a geopoetic poem based on his reading of The Vinland Sagas. For both MacDiarmid and White, the cultural and geographical connections between Scotland, the Northern and Western Isles, and a wider northern world depicted in the Icelandic and Scandinavian sagas opens up a wider sense of connection between Scotland and the North. In my next chapter I will discuss two writers, George Mackay Brown and Margaret Elphinstone, who have engaged extensively and creatively with the Icelandic sagas, weaving within the content and history of those sagas their own very different conceptions of the North, and, in doing so, as Elphinstone also argues, expand the conceptual boundaries of Scotland and the

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Scottish imagination through their historical fiction into a sense of being part of a wider transnational northern cultural and cartographic space.
Chapter Three: Scottish Sagas

In their introductory article to *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (2012), Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney comment on the more "relaxed and inclusive understanding of Scottish literature’s canon [as] an observable late twentieth-century phenomenon."¹ For Carruthers and McIlvanney, the study of Scottish literature today is not a subject that can remain purely within the confines of established national boundaries: the very history of how these boundaries came to be, the movement of authors in and out of Scotland throughout time as well as the various international influences working upon and within the literature itself means that any attempt to define Scottish literature in such an essentially national way presents only a very select and ultimately distorted picture of what the subject of Scottish literature could potentially encompass. Just as Carruthers and McIlvanney use Scotland’s Gaelic heritage as an example of a Scottish culture that also transcends Scotland, that is, “an Irish-Scottish world that straddles the North channel,” George Mackay Brown and Margaret Elphinstone have both looked to the Nordic world, drawing extensively from and involving their work creatively within the ancient Icelandic and Scandinavian sagas.²

The historical fact of a strong Scandinavian presence in what is now Scotland and its Isles, facilitated by maritime routes, the close geographical situation of Scotland in

² Ibid., 2.
relation to the Faroes, Iceland and the Scandinavian Peninsula, and the echoes of these
correlations can account for much of this influence and inspiration. As Heather O’Donoghue states in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature (2004), Old Norse literature inspires a "passionate sense of history and place" in the Scottish tradition. From William McIlvanney’s Docherty (1975) to James Kelman’s How Late it Was, How Late (1994), much of Scotland’s best writing in the late twentieth century is set in Scotland’s urban central belt. By involving themselves within the sagas and the geographical movement of the historical North, Brown and Elphinstone present an alternative northern dimension to the urban Scottish scene. While Brown’s North is in many ways a mystified ideological cartography of archetype, symbol and metaphysical silence, Elphinstone’s novels use and appropriate from the sagas with the intention of opening the Scottish historical imagination out into the larger space of the North from Scandinavia to the north-eastern territories of Canada. In doing so, as Cairns Craig states, Elphinstone constructs "an alternative kind of history, a different kind of map of the ways in which the past has been shaped, and therefore the ways in which the future might be shaped."

In my previous chapter, I discussed Hugh MacDiarmid’s and Kenneth White’s poetics of actuality and being. For White especially, the circumpolar world becomes a larger transnational and transcultural space for his geopoetics. In his poem “Labrador,” which was first printed at the end of his ‘waybook’ The Blue Road (1990) about his

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travels north through Quebec into Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, White draws on the voyages recounted in *The Vinland Sagas* by Scandinavian and Icelandic sea-farers such as Leif Ericson in the late tenth century. “My character is true to type,” says White in his notes to the poem, “but a little extended and developed.” Staying true to the geography of the voyage of Leif Ericson and using recognizable Nordic poetic elements such as kennings (complex compound metaphors), White admits his own poetic license: his character “moves away beyond the worldly complications some skalds went in for when they were playing to the gallery.”5 The recounting of his character’s journey to Vinland is therefore “extended and developed” and bends the original narrative towards his own geopoetic philosophy described in the previous chapter. There are no gods, no Christian narrative and no violence: there is only the void of vast skies and cold winds, “the lonely ways of the sky of sands / the gull path,” “a place of rocks, quick streams and emptiness,” all the time having his character move into a “nameless place” of “white silence,” an actual “new world” wherein identity is dissolved and the angry clamouring of life stilled as a greater appreciation of being-in-the-world unravels itself.6

“My character is true to type, but a little extended and developed.” This is a statement that can also be used to describe Brown’s and Elphinstone’s own involvements with the Icelandic sagas. Like White, both authors draw upon and participate in a creative dialogue with *The Vinland Sagas* as well as many other sagas, especially *Orkneyinga Saga*, using the history and content of the sagas as the basis for their own creative productions and philosophies. In *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen*

6 Ibid., 520-25.
(1996), Julian D’Arcy has already discussed Brown’s rewriting of *Orkneyinga Saga* to facilitate his own creative ends. I want to take this further, however, by arguing that such extensions and developments are part of Brown’s attempt to weave his own vision or concept of silence within the narratives of the sagas in his novel *Magnus* (1973) as well as the geographical space of the North in his long poem *Water* (1996). Furthermore, when D’Arcy published his book, Elphinstone had only then published one Norse novel, *Islanders* (1995), so he did not include her in his study. Since then it has become clear that Elphinstone is very much drawn to the North, writing another Norse novel, *The Sea Road* (2000), as well as arguing that such engagements by Scottish writers with the Norse world and its literature can extend the conceptual boundaries of Scotland northwards. In her own engagements with the sagas, Elphinstone writes a strong female voice into what is the predominantly masculine world of the sagas and uses the North as a conceptual space that contradicts the epistemological assumptions of the centre.

Before engaging in a discussion of Brown and Elphinstone, however, I first want to briefly discuss two other Norse novels of the twentieth century, Eric Linklater’s *The Men of Ness* (1932) and Neil Gunn’s *Sun Circle* (1933). Both of these novels depict a North of violence and masculinity from which both Brown and Elphinstone seek to move away, and, as D’Arcy makes clear in his own study, there is often in both writers’ work a disturbing emphasis placed on connotative Norse and Celtic racial characteristics. These novels are indeed bleak and full of violence, but if they are read with a consideration of the historical period in which they were published, they can be understood quite differently. Published in the early 1930s, both novels appear in the wake of the violence, death and destruction of the First World War that had left Europe numb. The war that was supposedly fought to end all wars was only the bloody prelude to another war that
would break out into full-blown conflict in the late 1930s. Both Linklater’s and Gunn’s Norse novels were therefore written and published during a time of great uncertainty and have within them a prescient sense of a dark and destructive fate.

At the heart of Gunn’s novel is the Viking invasion of a Pictish community in Scotland in the ninth century. The brutal invasion of the Vikings, their concern with racial purity and the imposition of their own Norse values and beliefs ominously predicts the castigation and violence that many peoples and communities would be confronted with in the face of the steamrolling power of the Third Reich. This is best articulated at the beginning of the novel. The power and the menace of the Vikings’ preparations in the North sounds portentously across the sea: “And through this summer day across the eastern sea comes the ghostly echoing of master craftsmen hammering the smooth planks of the longships of the Vikings against yet another – and perhaps final – invasion.” Soon the “uneasy strength of the North” will be unleashed upon “the mystery of the West.” Gunn’s reliance on familiar Arnoldian racial dichotomies of the industrious Norseman and the mystical and the effeminate Celt is obvious here, and at the end of the novel there is a disturbing perspective that seems to suggest that the dark and mysterious people of the West cannot rule themselves and therefore must seek strength of leadership elsewhere. The strength of the Norse invaders is depicted in terms of their austere efficiency and purity. “Out of the North come grey shapes and long seas and men,” says Gunn, “the North which is worn smooth by austere winds that have searched out all the faults and cleansed them with the dry fine sand that eternity filters through time.” The language that Gunn uses here is hauntingly prescient of that used by Nazi propagandists during the war. The power of the North is about to sweep down upon the dark and vulnerable people of the West, and it is a power that searches out “faults” to be
“cleansed” in its pursuit of perfection. Out of this North come the Vikings: “a shape of terror and death and the glory of man is pagan and invincible.” Awaiting this Norse power is the undefended and effeminate West: “All down the West the islands lie to sea under this hot summer sky inviting and unprotected, and the long gaze narrows with foreknowledge of their certain rape.” The language of power and purity as well as the depiction of Viking brutality in the novel is disturbing in itself, but it becomes even more so in light of the events that would soon sweep across wartime Europe.

_The Men of Ness_ is also a Norse novel filled with brutal violence, dark Viking humour, vengeance, cruelty and death. But again it all seems connected to the Europe Linklater and others of his time had lived through and were again heading inevitably towards. Linklater’s description of England during the time of the novel’s setting, for example, seems a dark commentary on the slaughter and destruction of the First World War:

In those years there was no peace in England but from end to end of it war and murder. Rich men were held for ransom, and poor men starved. Where tall ministers had stood and rich abbeys been there were now ruins and stones blackened in the fires that had burnt them. Much land was left untilled and many a hide for it bartered for a little food. It was a common saying that men had little to eat and horses nowhere to drink, for in every horsepond blood had been spilt or a dead man thrown, and a horse would whicker and turn from the smell of it.

A dark fate hangs over the heads of many of the novel’s protagonists who have the misfortune of being born into this world. As in the best of Greek Tragedy, deeds long past remain abrasive in the air and come back to haunt their perpetrators or those unlucky enough to be associated with it through lineage or kinship. Such a deathly fate

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hangs especially heavy over the heads of the sons of Thorleif Coalbiter throughout the novel, culminating in their brutal death at the novel's end. Remorselessly goaded into taking action against the murderer of their mother’s first husband, Bui, who was brutally slain by Thorleif’s own brother, Ivar, the sons of Thorleif sail out one day on a Viking expedition and are fatefuly wrecked upon the shores of England and the domain of Ivar. Fate and their mother’s desire for bloody vengeance steer them towards their deaths. Before being wrecked on the shores of England, however, they become lost amid the stormy swells of the sea, lose men, starve and fight amongst themselves. In one scene they awake to find one of their crew, Reider, dead. They decide to bury him at sea, so they attach a stone to his body and throw him over the side. But the stone comes loose and Reider comes back to the surface. “All the men stood at the side of the ship and looked at him,” writes Linklater, “and some were uneasy and said there was ill luck in that, when a man would not sink but come out of the sea again to look at his messmates.”⁹ They tie another stone to him and toss him over again. But once again the stone comes loose and the dead body follows the ship before finally floating away. The description of Reider’s corpse following the ship is a disturbing passage that portends the death of many of the Vikings onboard. The corpse that refuses to sink but instead follows the men symbolizes the deathly fate that hangs over many of the novel’s characters, especially the sons of Thorleif who will later die alongside Ivar at the end of the novel. There is no escaping their fate. The world of The Men of Ness is indeed dark, and there is in its bleakness a meaninglessness that for many of its characters is lived only in the anticipation and culmination of death, which is why death itself is treated in the novel with the black humour of the original sagas. The fateful world that Linklater

⁹ Ibid., 162.
writes in *The Men of Ness* can therefore be read in terms of the violent fate that would await many young people in the prelude between the First and Second World Wars, and Gunn’s novel offers an eerie foretaste of the events that would soon unfold in Europe.

Brown, however, had no interest in retelling tales of “blond butchering Vikings / Whose last worry on sea and land / was purity of race.” His rewriting of the traditional saga stories and the geography of the North itself becomes instead the basis of his own very personal search for a conception of metaphysical silence. In *Interrogation of Silence* (2008), Rowena and Brian Murray suggest that “silence is a persistent motif throughout [Brown’s] writings.” Brown never fully articulates what this concept of silence is in any coherent or straightforward way, but it is an idea or vision that has lingered and lurked throughout his entire writing career. Like White, who is constantly striving to articulate the silence of authentic being in the world, Brown seems to imply that his own idea of silence is something that exists beyond language. Language, Brown tells us in “To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093,” is as “unstable as sand.” But it is the poet’s task to try to speak the unspeakable. “A poem exists in its purity,” says Brown. “Silence is best: poetry is forever striving for the unattainable perfection of silence.” The minimalist narrative style of the Icelandic sagas and the stone words of runic poetry taught Brown “the importance of pure shape” in his writing. As he states in a runic poem from “Stations of...

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the Cross,” the rune is “Obliterator / of a thousand questing mouths, / and sevenfold silence still.” But the silence that Brown was continually searching for seems to exist beyond the realm of language as well as the temporal and the historical.

Another way of interpreting Brown’s concept of silence is through the way in which he weaves the mythical and symbolic into the temporal and earthly. The cycles of the seasons, the deaths and regenerations of the human and the ecological, and the rhythms and processes of rural agriculture are permeated with the symbols and rituals of Catholicism, as if to suggest that within these earthly and transient revolutions exists a metaphysical significance. Once again this seems to be similar to White’s physical-metaphysical poetics. Unlike White, however, who is searching for a language to articulate absolute being within the physical landscape of the North, Brown’s metaphysics is theological, full of symbolism and archetype, and deeply connected to his faith. It is through this symbolism, however, that Brown tries to structure the historical with a greater universal significance. This is evident right at the start of Brown’s writing career. In one of his earliest poems, “The Road Home” from The Storm (1954), Brown juxtaposes the domestic, agricultural image of the sowing of seeds with a broader cosmological reference and significance:

As I came home from Birsay
A sower, all in tatters,
Strode, scattering the seed, immense
Against the sunset bars,
And through his fingers, with the night,
Streamed all the silver stars.\(^1\)

\(^{15}\) Brown, Collected Poems, 189.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 2.
The beginning of the poem locates the speaker in a very domestic scene—his walking home from Birsay. But the figure sowing seeds seems to suddenly take on an archetypal significance. He becomes “immense / against the sunset bars,” and the everyday domestic seeds that fall from his hand into the soil take on a larger universal significance through their juxtaposition with the stars. For Brown, the image of the sower of seeds held a strong Christian connotation. As Brown states in his essay “Writer’s Shop,” first published in Chapman magazine in 1972 and quoted by Archie Bevan and Brian Murray in their introduction to The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown (2005), the sower and the seed “seemed to illuminate the whole of life for me. … It included within itself everything from the most primitive breaking of the soil to Christ himself with his parables of agriculture and the majestic symbolism of his passion, and death, and resurrection. … You will find it at the heart of many of my stories and poems.” As Bevan and Murray go on to state in their introduction, “The conjunction of the agricultural and Christian cycles and rituals was to become a strong and increasingly familiar element in [Brown’s] work.”¹⁷ For Hugh MacDiarmid and White, the landscapes and elements of the North become the basis of a poetics of actuality and being. For Brown, however, the ecological cycles of the land, the changing seasons, agricultural processes, and the lives and deaths of Orkney’s inhabitants are all bound together through the Christian myth of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. The earthly and the divine are woven together in his poems and stories through a structural deployment of symbols and rituals such as the Trinity, the Eucharist, and the Stations of the Cross, all of which provide Brown with a language or a mythology through which to order or give greater meaning to

the historical. It is this concept of silence that Brown brings to his engagements with the sagas, especially *Orkneyinga Saga*, and the geographical space of the North. As we shall see in *Magnus*, Brown carefully weaves within the original saga of the Viking Earl his own ideological vision of Magnus’s gradual inculcation into the symbols and rituals of the Catholic faith and merges it symbiotically with descriptions of agricultural decline and regeneration.

Brown’s vision of uncovering the universal within the particular was obviously influenced by Brown’s friend and once tutor at Newbattle Abbey, Edwin Muir. As Margery McCulloch highlights in *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts, 1919-1959* (2009), Muir’s use of Greek myth in his poetry was a means of articulating an ideal or an image of timeless significance as opposed to the task of merely writing about the realism of everyday life.¹⁸ Muir’s concept of “The Story and the Fable” was obviously highly influential for Brown. As he explains in *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969):

> The facts of our history – what Edwin Muir called The Story – are there to read and study: the neolithic folk, Picts, Norsemen, Scots, the slow struggle of the people towards independence and prosperity. But it often seems that history is only the forging, out of terrible and kindly fires, of a mask. The mask is undeniably there; it is impressive and reassuring, it flatters us to wear it. Underneath, the true face dreams on, and The Fable is repeated over and over again.¹⁹

According to Brown (and Muir), history is a “mask.” There is a greater and timeless reality or meaning that “dreams on” regardless of history. Sometimes, however, that “true face” is seen within the historical. In the martyrdom of Magnus in *Orkneyinga Saga*,

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Brown saw one such historical Story that echoed the central Christian Fable of Christ’s crucifixion. As Brown states, “out of the waste-land of fire and revenge, the story of the martyrdom of Earl Magnus shines like a precious stone.”20 One of the strangest moments in Magnus occurs when Brown suddenly breaks the novel’s temporal narrative by relating the story of the execution of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. Magnus’s martyrdom in the twelfth century and Bonhoeffer’s death in the middle of the twentieth century transcend the brutality of their historical situations through association with the centrality, from a Christian perspective, of Christ’s crucifixion. The aim, as Elizabeth Huberman states, is to “extend the events of twelfth-century Orkney backward and forward in time, until they transcend the merely local, to become a universal pattern.”21 For Brown, Magnus’s Christ-like martyrdom in Norse Orkney is linked to a greater metaphysical silence: “That was the one only central sacrifice in history. I am the bread of life. All previous rituals had been a foreshadowing of this; all subsequent rituals a re-enactment. The fires at the centre of the earth, the sun above, all divine essences and ecstasies, come to this silence at last – a circle of bread and a cup of wine at an alter.”22 This synthesis of the earthly, the universal, and the symbolic or ritualistic is the silence that Brown weaves into the original Icelandic saga in Magnus. He appropriates from the original saga various elements of plot, setting and history, but they all become a backdrop to his own very personal vision of order and meaning.

20 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, 44.
One of the major aspects of the Nordic sagas that appealed to Brown’s imagination was the documentation of a time of historical transition from an older Scandinavian paganism into an emerging Christianity. That historical process of transition provided Brown with a means of representing the movement of his protagonists out of the “terrible and kindly” fires of history and into his own historyless conception of Christian silence. The Christian significance that is already articulated, albeit to a much lesser degree, in Orkneyinga Saga is intensified in Magnus through Brown’s own manipulations and creative additions, especially through his synthesis of Catholic symbolism, the story of Magnus’s sacrifice, and his descriptions of the earthly rhythms and cycles of agriculture. In short, Brown is trying to find “a shaping divinity [that] takes over from our rough-hewings,”23 or, as Berthold Schoene states in The Making of Orcadia (1995), he is trying “to bring light and order into the confounding welter of unstructured reality and grasp the intractable phenomenon of time.”24

This process of engaging with the temporal and historical in order to find within it a greater significance is central to Brown’s poetics. As he says in “The Poet”:

Therefore he no more troubled the pool of silence.
But put on mask and cloak,
Strung a guitar
And moved among the folk.
...
Under the last dead lamp
When all the dancers and masks had gone inside
His cold stare
Returned to its true task, interrogation of silence.25

23 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, 174.
Brown’s emphasis on masks, cloaks and dying lamps once again articulates his notion of a certain inauthenticity and ephemerality to historical life. While the poet “[moves] among the folk” and engages with the life of the community, his “true task” is to try to find within that world an essence that seems to be beyond utterance. It is an “interrogation of silence,” which suggests frustration rather than revelation. It also has strong similarities with White’s metaphysics, wherein the poet’s self is opened to the phenomena of the natural world that the poet must then intellectualize and give form to in the shape of a poem. Unlike White, however, Brown is not intent on experiencing and articulating the naked reality of the natural world; his silence is Christian and articulated through the deployment of myth and symbol.

Brown’s first attempt at writing a more Christian element into Orkneyinga Saga appears in An Orkney Tapestry. As Brown states at the beginning of the text, he is going to use poetic license alongside historical fact in order to “round out a meaning.”²⁶ He admits “this book takes its stand with the poets” in terms of his desire to create “a kind of profile of Orkney.”²⁷ As Schoene states in The Making of Orcadia, “An Orkney Tapestry aims to disclose the solid deep structure of Orcadian history, the mysteriously patterned and patterning mix of the Fable of which the different historical eras of Orkney are but ephemeral reflections.”²⁸ In the third chapter, “Vikings: The Transfixed Dragon,” Brown follows the original narrative of the saga closely and even berates the “revising monk” for “putting halos around the head of the hero.”²⁹ The irony of this statement comes at the

²⁶ Brown, Orkney Tapestry, 3.
²⁸ Schoene, Orcadia, 64.
²⁹ Brown, Orkney Tapestry, 84.
end of the chapter when Brown breaks with the historical narrative of the saga and has Rognvald Kolsson and his men participate symbolically in the Stations of the Cross in order to seek forgiveness for the Viking’s “hawkflight through the history of Europe.”

This is Brown’s first creative attempt at weaving within the Icelandic saga his own Christian motifs in order to structure it with what he understands to be a greater metaphysical significance. It is in Magnus, however, that Brown comes closest to articulating his ideal of silence.

Speaking of the importance of the martyrdom of Magnus in his work, Brown says:

“These historical events form the backdrop to much of the narrative and verse that I have written. Without the violent beauty of those happenings eight and a half centuries ago, my writing would have been quite different.”

Reworking the events of Orkneyinga Saga almost obsessively within stories and poems between 1969 and 1974, the eventual publication of Magnus was, for Brown, “the best writing I have done.” Just as White and Elphinstone break with the traditional stoicism of the sagas to express philosophical and psychological insights, Brown’s narrative style is often poetic and full of reflection, especially in his descriptions of Magnus’s developing fascination with and gradual inculcation into the symbols and rituals of the Catholic priests. In an unpublished interview with Ernest Marwick, part of which is quoted in Brian Murray and Rowena Murray’s Interrogation of Silence, Brown states, “if a writer uses the best and most beautiful language than he can, then he may, admittedly, suggest something of the

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30 Ibid., 118.
31 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, 9.
32 Ibid., 71.
nature of sanctity." In *Magnus*, the Icelandic sagas are transformed into a very personal exploration and articulation of Brown’s concept of silence. As Schoene states, *Magnus* is “a heavily interpolated text that frequently replaces fact with fiction, or faith.”

At the center of the novel is Brown’s attempt to weave together the martyrdom of Magnus, the central myth of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the ecological and agricultural rhythms and processes of the land, and the liturgical patterns of Catholicism, all of which is meant to structure the temporal with the universal or divine. “Now that the seed was uttered upon the land the peasants waited for the sun and rain to do their bit,” Brown writes. “What they had performed was an act of faith. They trusted that the seed they had buried would return from the grave, first the shoot, then the ear, then the stalk with a full burden of corn in the ear.” The language here moves in and out of the physical and the metaphysical, the natural and the mythological, the temporal and the timeless, as if integrated in a symbiotic relationship. One of the strongest reasons that Brown converted to Catholicism in 1961 was because he was entranced by its cosmogony. Unlike Presbyterianism, Brown believed that Catholicism upheld a connection between the finite and the infinite. As Richard McBrien explains, “the Catholic vision sees God in and through all things. … The visible, the tangible, the finite, the historical – all these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence.” Brown weaves this Catholic vision into *Orkneyinga Saga* as we follow Magnus’s progression into the faith. It is in his chapter “The Killing” that Brown’s vision of silence reaches

34 Schoene, *Orcadia*, 218.
apotheosis. Moments before his murder, Magnus enters a small church and becomes fascinated with the ritual of the Eucharist and how the ordinary agricultural labour of man—his “sowing and reaping and baking”—are “drenched, interwoven, imbued, possessed [and] informed with divinity”:

The chalice was elevated. The priest mingled the broken bread with the wine, figuring forth Christ’s resurrection – [Magnus] smiled at the beauty of the symbolism. The priest consumed the Host. A moment later he set the Precious Blood to his lips. All things, thought [Magnus], are being done well and in order. The dust that was his mouth opened and shut on the word he could not find in his dream: Sanctus. The word pulsed like a star in the mirk of the nave.37

The symbolism within this passage, the representation of Magnus as a “chosen seed,” and the descriptions of agricultural regeneration in the novel all come together eventually as if to suggest the interconnectedness of the ordinary and the divine. For Brown, the word “sanctus” in this passage articulates that vision of silence.

As Julian D’Arcy has already highlighted in Scottish Skalds and Sagamen, there are numerous occasions in the novel where Brown deviates from the original saga, all of which are done in order to present Magnus as more of a Christ-like figure of mythical importance rather than the politically motivated and understandably all-too-human person he is represented as being in the original saga. In the words of Alan Bold, Brown must “scan the saga account of Magnus’s life and isolate the qualities of saintliness.”38 One of these deviations is Brown’s representation of Magnus as a “chosen seed.” In the original saga, Magnus has a brother and two sisters. But in Magnus he becomes more of a symbolic figure. As Brown describes Magnus’s conception: “a great sacrificial host surged between the loins of bridegroom and bride, and among them a particular chosen

37 Brown, Magnus, 145.
seed, a summoned one, the sole ultimate destined survivor of all that joyous holocaust.”\textsuperscript{39} This scene of copulation is then juxtaposed with a sexualized description of the labourers Mans and Hild ploughing their field: “The plough went, waveringly, making a second scratch across the flank of the hill, borne by the woman, driven by the man. They were bowed under the immensity of their labour.”\textsuperscript{40} Correspondingly, the third of Arnor Earlskald’s “Three Sacred Bridal Songs” celebrating Magnus’s conception mixes allusions of conception, Christ’s sacrifice, the natural world and agriculture:

> What is the lost cry in the heart of the earth?  
> I am wounded. I have taken a wound in my flesh. The lips of it will never come together. Fore has been thrust deep in the wound. My flesh is branded.  
> IT IS THE SUN. IT IS THE PLOUGH AND THE SOWER.\textsuperscript{41}

The physical act of conception, the processes of the land, and the central myth of the death and resurrection of Christ are all juxtaposed as if to suggest an interconnected significance between the temporal and the divine. If Magnus was the fruitful consequence of being a “chosen seed,” it is his eventual death and burial that allows the people of Orkney to “[bring] out their peaceful scythes for the second morning of harvest.”\textsuperscript{42} The human, the natural, and the divine are all interconnected and structured through symbolism and archetype in order to round out Brown’s vision of silence. It is in \textit{Magnus}, therefore, that Brown finally accomplishes or comes closest to achieving the silence that he wanted to articulate.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 26.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 12.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 28.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 206.
Brown returned to *Orkneyinga Saga* and *The Vinland Sagas* in his novel *Vinland* (1992). Despite its title, however, the actual historical voyage to Vinland by Leif Ericsson and his crew only takes up a very small portion of the narrative at the beginning of the novel. For White and Elphinstone, the geographical voyage across the North Atlantic in *The Vinland Sagas* is used creatively as a means of opening up a transnational cartographic mindscape in Scottish literature and the North is conceptualized as a philosophical Hyperborean space that questions the self and epistemological assumptions. For Brown, however, Vinland is less a physical place than a nightmare that his protagonist Ranald carries in his consciousness his whole life after witnessing a particularly violent event in Vinland as a young member of Leif’s crew. That event was the callous murder of a Vinland native by the appropriately named Viking, Wolf, whose name links him to the apocalyptic wolf Fenrir from Norse mythology who is prophesied to break his magical fetter during Ragnarök, kill Odin, swallow the sun and generally bring the world to an end. As Leif Ericsson states in the novel, “it is some great fool like you, Wolf, that will bring the world to an end.”

While *Vinland* obviously draws on the events of *The Vinland Sagas* as well as *Orkneyinga Saga*, the novel is more about the internal existential narrative of Ranald who gradually dissociates himself from Viking life and politics to lead a more reclusive and eremitical existence alongside the Christian monks who live on the edge of Ranald’s Norse community. If Brown draws upon and manipulates the content of *Orkneyinga Saga* in *Magnus* to round out a greater metaphysical vision of silence, the historical content of the sagas in *Vinland* becomes increasingly peripheral to Ranald’s narratological point of view. Ranald lives through some of the most famous events in

eleventh-century Norse history such as the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 and the Christianization project of the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason. Brown is constantly having to disrupt the narrative in order to inform Ranald and the reader of what is going on elsewhere: “these matters Ranald of Breckness learned from the men who came to visit him.”\footnote{Ibid., 138.} History becomes a distant echo in the novel as we follow Ranald into a more introspective and increasingly Christian existence of contemplation and repentance. As he explains to his grandchildren: “a deep distrust had entered into his heart at human folly and cruelty, his own included; and how he had seen that power drives men mad, and how Earl Einar of the Twisted Mouth had fallen into his own web-of-treachery at Skaill in Sandwick; and how he had decided to wash his hands of politics and violence and attend only to the farm of Breckness.”\footnote{Ibid., 226.} Unlike \textit{Magnus}, there is no deliberate stationing of religious symbolism or archetype in the novel. The Christian silence that Brown weaves throughout the narrative of \textit{Magnus} is only articulated at the very end of \textit{Vinland}. As Ranald becomes older and more reclusive, he also becomes more devout, culminating in his death of Easter Monday and his metaphorical journey into what Brown poetically indicates as the silence of the Christian faith:

Soon afterwards Ranald died on the greensward above the shore.  
The fishermen carried his body into the chapel.  
The monks lit candles at his head and at his feet.  
The chapel was shaped like a stone ship.  
At sunset they sang in the choir.\footnote{Ibid., 232.}

Brown died in 1996, just a few years after publishing \textit{Vinland}. In the year of his death his long poem \textit{Water} was published. Once again the theme of searching for an
elusive metaphysical silence is prominent as Brown has a restless speaker move around the geography of the North in search of its meaning. The poem begins with an ominous pronouncement from an unidentified voice, “an intruder,” which seemingly exists outside of the world: “Find, said the intruder, your / place of lustration.” This sets the speaker of the poem on a journey around the North to find this ambiguous source of illumination or purification. He joins the crew of a ship, leaves Orkney, makes money and comes ashore in the Faroe Islands. But again the ominous voice returns: “Your place is otherwhere.” 47 He leaves again, moving all over the North, living several different lives in different places: he gets married in Denmark, starts a family and makes a living as a merchant; he is exiled on Greenland for seven years after murders are committed in Trondheim, seeking repentance “On the green tongue of a glacier, / Acquainted with wolf and / walrus and arctic skua”; and he becomes part of a “convocation of old men” in Sweden. But each time he settles, the voice comes back to tell him to move on and seek elsewhere. In Greenland, for example, where he becomes intimate with the Inuit people and their obvious connection to the land and the elements, the voice tells him:

You have met the masks –
snowflake, berg, glacier.
Element and essence are further on.

The world and its elements, which is the reality that MacDiarmid and White seek to penetrate in the North, are here merely the “masks” of something more significant but undefined that exists beyond the physical world. Constantly seeking “The one syllable that might / lock purity in the / ultimate crystal,” 48 it is only when he is dying as an old

47 Brown, Collected Poems, 379.
48 Ibid., 380-81.
man at the end of the poem that some kind of metaphysical silence is perhaps touched when the mourners enter and dip their fingers in the holy water: “Thrice shaken, the shining inside the / stone.”

There are moments in Brown’s work that represent a distinct sense of being in the North in terms of its landscape, geography, and light. “Nowhere is the drama of light and darkness enacted with such starkness as in the north,” he says in Portrait of Orkney (1981). In “The Midwinter Music” from An Orkney Tapestry, Brown writes: “In the northern islands December is a dark month. The lamps are burning when people go to their work. Light thickens again in early afternoon. The weather, more often than not, is cold and stormy. There are also calm clear nights when the hemisphere of sky is hung with stars and in the north the Aurora Borealis rustles like curtains of heavy yellow silk.” This sense of northerness is then entangled with myth and symbolism, “It is the season of The Nativity,” Brown tells us in the next paragraph. Through his creative engagement with Orkneyinga Saga and The Vinland Sagas in his novels Magnus and Vinland, and through his search for “illustration” around the North in Water, Brown’s North is the setting of a mystical search for an obviously religious but still markedly elusive silence that obsessed the writer for the entirety of his writing career.

A few years later Elphinstone would also draw inspiration from The Vinland Sagas in her novel The Sea Road. But before that she wrote another tale of the Norse world, Islanders. Like Brown’s work, both of Elphinstone’s novels draw from Orkneyinga Saga and The Vinland Sagas. Unlike Brown’s, however, her engagements with the

49 Ibid., 382.
51 An Orkney Tapestry, 135.
sagas are not theological, and her concept of the North is very different in terms of its imaginative representation. Elphinstone’s novels are instead structured and delivered by multi-dimensional female protagonists and, in *The Sea Road*, the North becomes a space that questions the epistemological assumptions of the centre instead of being the setting of an elusive search for Christian silence.

The first Norse novel, *Islanders*, presents the reader with a significant change in perspective from the more traditionally masculine representations and expectations of the Norse world. As Simon Hall states,

> Violence is minimal, erupting and passing quickly without much comment, there is no central blood-feud, there are no battles, and the lawsuits result in peaceful solutions as opposed to the bloodshed we might expect in saga proper. There are lengthy and detailed descriptions of characters’ inner-feelings and a large amount of space is devoted to the lyrical evocation of natural surroundings. Female characters command as much of the narrative as male characters, and there are gay characters. All this is a far cry from anything written in thirteenth-century Iceland.52

The politics, heroism and violent masculinity of the traditional Viking world as represented in the sagas touch only marginally on the daily lives and struggles of the small northern community of Fridarey (Fair Isle). Instead we follow the story of a teenage girl, Astrid, who has been shipwrecked on the island en route to Noreg (Norway) from Dyflin (Dublin). The peripherality and isolation of Astrid’s new surroundings are analogous to her own marginal position within the community. Within this historical narrative, however, we follow a more modern and universal theme of female struggle against male patriarchy as Astrid endeavours to assert her own autonomy in a world

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where male guardians make decisions and life choices on her behalf. Once again, Hall summarizes Elphinstone’s proto-feminist revision of traditional saga expectations:

> Part of what the novel seeks to do is create a fleshed-out narrative for marginalised female characters from the landscape and period of *Orkneyinga Saga. Islanders* redresses the imbalance by choosing as its central character a damaged young woman, and dwelling on themes such as the inner lives, the struggle against oppression, and the sexuality of the women of Fridarey – the like of which would never have occurred to the original saga authors, or their male translators and imitators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.53

This re-evaluation of the traditional structures and concerns of the sagas is evident once again in *The Sea Road*. As Elphinstone states at the beginning of her book, “The characters and events in this novel are chiefly based on the accounts found in *Eirik’s Saga, Graenlandinga Saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga.*”54 There are only intermittent references to Gudrid and her journey to Vinland in *The Vinland Sagas* themselves. In Elphinstone’s novel, however, the reader is given a much more multi-dimensional picture of her character.

> While *Islanders* follows a very simple narrative of Astrid’s exile and subsequent growth into independence as a woman, *The Sea Road* is a far more involved and complex novel, and it takes the reader into different dimensions of Gudrid’s life and voyages that are kept silent in the sagas themselves. While the original voyages, geography and characters of *The Vinland Sagas* remain, and their stories are told (with the exception of the terrifying figure of Freydis whose murderous activities go strangely unmentioned), Elphinstone also provides the reader with insights into the psychological depths of Gudrid, the lives of other characters, supernatural suspense and terror,

53 Ibid., 170.
philosophical contemplation, beautiful descriptions of the Icelandic landscape and vivid descriptions of what must have been terrifying journeys across the sea to Greenland and Vinland. There are times when the original voice of the sagas emerges, such as at the start of the novel when Elphinstone writes: “They outlawed Eirik from Norway for some killings,” which echoes exactly the brilliantly laconic lines from The Vinland Sagas.  

Not only does Elphinstone add greater character depth to the figure of Gudrid, she takes the Vinland voyages into what was then a space that existed outside of the known world and uses it as a device to question the very foundations of knowledge and perception extolled and taken for granted by the historical centre of Rome.

It is on the figure of Gudrid that Elphinstone concentrates, charting her life and development as a person from her childhood in Iceland to her voyage to Vinland and finally her pilgrimage to and death in Rome. The picture that Elphinstone paints of Gudrid is of a fiercely independent and somewhat iconoclastic woman. “I attempted to emulate [saga writing],” Elphinstone says, “so far as was compatible with a twentieth-century novel that also required the central character and first person narrator, Gudrid, to give expression to her emotions and inner life.”

Gudrid is fairly two-dimensional in the original saga, as are mostly every other character; such is the narrative style of the saga writers. But in Elphinstone’s novel, we enter into very personal moments of Gudrid’s psychology, from overtly sexual experiences to moments of great existential dread. Near the beginning of the novel, for

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55 Ibid., 15.
example, the older Gudrid, who is narrating her story to a young priest in Rome, relates her experience of laying out in the sun as a girl in Iceland and gives us a personal explanation of what this moment produced within her:

I remember a day – I must have been seven, eight years old – when the sun shone fiercely on the pastures, and there wasn’t a breath of wind. I lay on my back, arms and legs spread like a starfish, and felt the heat of the sun go all over me, touching my skin and my closed eyes and my hair. It seemed to reach right through my bones. I squinted up into the blue sky, and felt myself falling and falling, drowning in the splendid brightness and the heat. I was innocent, and yet I knew what passion was. It’s only come to me rarely. Marriage has meant good company, but only passion like that at the very beginning.57

At other times these insights are decidedly dark, such as when Gudrid feels a great meaninglessness or hollowness at the core of herself and life in general when in Greenland:

I know I’ve been lucky, but sometimes I’ve struggled with a dreadful hollowness inside. It doesn’t usually last long. It often comes in the autumn, and for a few days I have to fight it. ... There are worms that get into men’s guts and eat them slowly from within. You can catch them if you eat herbs from land where sheep have grazed. Horrible. But this comes from somewhere else. A kind of soul worm, perhaps. It eats away under my ribs, and I have nothing inside to face the world with, only an emptiness that at all costs I must hide.58

There is also a feeling of helplessness and isolation as a human being in the vast silence of the North, very much outside the divine authority of the Roman church, in the face of which Gudrid seems to become aware of the sheer indifference of the world, the endless sky and the waves that surround the ship, all of which bring into her a sense of her own insignificance and fragility. She confides to Agnar, the scribe, having a moment of nihilistic openness to the possibility of being swallowed up by the chaotic void outside:

57 Elphinstone, The Sea Road, 22.
58 Ibid., 167.
I was lonely, Agnar. I missed my foster mother. I was frightened of being in this world without anyone to guide me. I was afraid of my own strength. Mountains do move, sometimes, and ice falls, and the sea sends up great waves that wash away the land where we lead our fragile lives. I’ve lain at night in a wooden ship, and heard the ice cracking all round us, and felt the wave it makes when it crashes down into the sea. Shall I tell you the worst thing about being on a ship in a storm? What my real fear is? It’s the urge to throw myself over. I see the swell come up to the gunwale, or the waves crash against the bow and drench us; I see the great troughs open up under our bows; I see huge seas like moving mountains hurling down on to us; and what I want to do is give in. I don’t want to resist, Agnar, I want to go in. I want to throw myself headlong in the chaos that surrounds our little world.\(^59\)

This is the North into which the novel moves the reader. Much like White’s Hyperborean space, Elphinstone’s North is a difficult area that complicates established truths, inverts perceptions of reality and unreality and makes Gudrid question the very foundations of her self and her assumed understanding of the world. “My story begins far from Rome,” Gudrid tells Agnar. “It begins in a place that is full of water and shadow, where colours melt and change, a place of space and cleanliness, a long way north of here and lost forever in the past.”\(^60\) The North—Iceland, Greenland and later Vinland—is a place of mutability, “full of water and shadow,” where perceptions are distorted and the margins of life and intruded upon by unknown aspects that appear and disappear at the peripheries of vision.

At the beginning of the novel we are introduced to Agnar, an Icelandclergymansituated in Rome who has been asked by Cardinal Hildebrand to transcribe the story of Gudrid, who, Hildebrand remarks with a mild degree of panic, has supposedly travelled outside the world of mortal man—that is those northern areas then lying outside of cartographic knowledge. From the center of Christian religion at Rome, the North, or the

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 82.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 11.
Far North, was seen as a metaphysical boundary between the known and the unknown, between life and death. “This woman, apparently, is one of those who have gone beyond the confines of the mortal world, in the body,” says Cardinal Hildebrand. “She has dwelt for over a year in the lands outside the material world.” This northern otherworld is a place that could, possibly, challenge the doctrines of Rome. Indeed, as Gudrid herself explains later in the text, the North and North West, removed from the concerns of Rome, is a place that does not adhere to those same structures, and where God’s absence is palpable. Speaking of her time with Thorstein the Black in Greenland, at a moment in time just after each had lost their spouses, Gudrid recollects to Agnar, “All that winter we were outside the boundaries of this world of yours, and the rules you make just don’t apply.” It is literally a place beyond the constructions and impositions of good and evil perpetuated by the center: “Good and bad, light and dark – in this country these things may seem inevitable as living itself, but in the Western Settlement in winter it was not like that.” The Christian God, spread forth around the world from Rome, flickers between existence and non-existence in the North: “All of us had known bad winters, but perhaps I had the most reason to dread the want and isolation ahead. I prayed, as we all did, but God seemed far away in this land where no prayer had ever been said before.”

Her own childhood in Iceland had already provided her with awareness that there are aspects of existence and life that lie outside of our understanding and perceptions. The landscape of Iceland, for example, is filled with flickerings and swift moments of

61 Ibid., 3.
62 Ibid., 137.
63 Ibid., 170.
liminality. As Gudrid says of the “unknown things” that inhabit the same space and landscape as herself: “I’ve seen them often, but always from the corner of my eye. If you look straight at any of those folk they change shape at once into twisted lava columns, so you’re never quite sure of what you’ve seen.”\(^{64}\) The North becomes through its strange light and vastness of sea and skies a metaphorical borderline between the world we believe to be reality and that which lies outside of our understanding, a void of the unknown. “At the edge of the world there are mountains of ice and frozen seas,” Elphinstone writes, “and a sky so vast that all the souls of the world could never breathe in it. No one has ever gone so far, not even in his mind. And if one did, all he might hope for, beyond the boundaries of what exists, would be to find nothing.”\(^{65}\)

There is one incident in particular in Vinland that is mentioned in the original saga but given philosophical depth in Elphinstone’s novel. Alone in the camp, Gudrid suddenly comes into contact with a native woman. It is an unsettling encounter, as Gudrid at first seems to “recognise her,” even though she could never have seen her before, and she even thinks she can understand what the woman is saying, even though she does not understand the native language. After telling the woman her name, Gudrid asks the woman her own name. “‘Gudrid,’ she replied, like an echo,” and then vanishes soon after when Gudrid is startled by a scuffle elsewhere.\(^{66}\) The unsettling nature of the encounter is that it seems to deconstruct Gudrid’s very sense of her self, her own identity. It becomes part of the broader narrative of the novel that questions the centre through an encounter with the periphery, that is, what lies outside established constructions—

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{65}\) Ibid., 132.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 207-208.
geographical, empirical, theological, personal. Like the existence or non-existence of Vinland to Rome, Gudrid does not know whether to believe her own memory of the encounter or see it as a dream or figment of her imagination. Gudrid’s journey into the then unknown spaces of the North becomes synchronous with a process of questioning the constructs of what we perceive or are told to perceive to be the reality of the world.

Hildebrand wants Agnar to translate Gudrid’s tale and “improve her crude account, as no doubt it will be, with your own sound theology.” Hildebrand is in the business of reinstating Rome as the political and theological center of the world and therefore Gudrid’s tale of voyages to places “quite out of the world” could jeopardize this if not subsumed and translated in terms of their own doctrines. “Those were the days of reform,” says Agnar, “and we were involved in nothing less than a mission to reinstate Rome as the centre of the world, this time upon the basis of spiritual principality.”

Agnar is originally frustrated at having to record Gudrid’s tale, thinking it a waste of his own and the Church’s time. But the more he listens to Gudrid’s tales, and the more he understands of the places she has travelled to, he begins to think differently about himself and the world he inhabits. “Will my words change the world you see?” asks Gudrid at one point to Agnar. The answer is yes, as Agnar explains at the end of the novel: “She sees things her own way, and I think she has taught me something about how to do that too.” Speaking of her stepmother Halldis, who was accused of being a witch, Gudrid sums up what is the philosophical dimension of the novel: “All that means,
I think, is there are some who know how to stretch the boundaries of this world a little
father than most people think possible.”

In their engagements with the Norse sagas, both Brown and Elphinstone imagine
the North as both a geographical and a conceptual space. For Brown, the North
becomes the setting of a metaphysical search for silence, while for Elphinstone the
North becomes a space that questions and contradicts epistemological assumptions. In
writing about the North and engaging creatively with the sagas, both authors “stretch the
boundaries of this world a little” by moving Scottish literature into a dialogue with the
Norse sagas and, in doing so, as Elphinstone has argued, expand the imaginative
boundaries of Scotland into an awareness of belonging to as well as being part of a
larger northern world.

In *On the Atlantic Edge* (2006), Kenneth White relates a conversation he had
with Brown about the North and Brown’s interest in the Norse sagas. When Brown
discovered *Orkneyinga Saga*, White tells us, “it was … like Keats reading Chapman’s
Homer: ‘A whole new world opened up.’” As the character Scarf states in Brown’s
novel *Greenvoe*: “to the north are other islands, Shetland, Faroe, Iceland.” There is a
strong awareness in Brown’s Norse-themed novels and poems of the historical
circumstance that parts of what are now Scotland once belonged to and operated within
a larger northern world that transcends any essential conception of Scotland. Brown’s
description of a Viking ship heading to battle in the Menai Strait in *Magnus*, for example,
is “crammed with a host of northerners: Norwegians, Danes, Hebrideans, Icelanders,

71 Ibid., 26.
Orkneymen.” 74 Attila Dósa has commented on this northern aspect in Mackay Brown’s work in Beyond Identity (2009), observing that a large portion of Brown’s work is “intent on (re)creating a cultural association between [Scotland and Scandinavia]” by writing “the north of Scotland as a hub between northernmost countries to the east and west.” 75

As Mariadele Boccardi has recently argued, Scottish national identity “is crucially fostered by the nation’s production of credible imaginative accounts of its historical trajectory.” Discussing the role of contemporary historical novels in re-imagining Scotland’s self-image and national identity, Boccardi states, “Exploring the conditions for a national narrative and hence the imaginative recreation of the nation’s history, historical fiction draws new, meaningful links between the past and the present rather than romantically engaging with discrete historical events in anachronistic isolation.” 76 Elphinstone has also commented on historical fiction’s ability to inform a sense of national identity, but she also argues that by engaging with the literature and geography of the North, Scotland’s identity or conception of being in the world is moved into a transnational dimension. Her novel The Sea Road, for example, which was published in a period when Scotland had, in a way, re-entered history through the process of devolution in the late nineties, projects the Scottish imagination into an alternative northern dimension that has, as I will argue in my next chapter, been a recognizable aspect of post-devolutionary Scottish literature. As she states in her chapter “Some Fictions of Scandinavian Scotland” in Scotland and Europe (2006), “For many writers in

74 Brown, Magnus, 51.
Scotland ... Scandinavia is an aspect of past history and present significance, which to overlook would leave Scottish literature the poorer.” She takes this idea further, arguing, “[all] historical novels, whether consciously or not, revise and expand narratives of nationality.” Interaction by Scottish writers with the words and worlds of the sagas, Elphinstone argues, “shifts constructions of Scotland a little to the north”: “They insist we review Scotland on the map: no longer positioned in the extreme north, as maps of Britain would suggest, Scotland becomes one of a network of far-flung lands linked together by seaways, so that they become a cohesive cultural, if no longer political, hegemony.”

Such a northern projection is evident in both of her Norse novels *Islanders* and *The Sea Road*. At the beginning of each novel, the reader is first presented with maps that disorient traditional cartographic representations of the British Isles and the continent. Scotland is usually depicted as being on the northern peripheries of Europe while our attention is drawn in a south-easterly direction into England and the larger landmass of the European continent. As helpful, impartial and informative as maps seem, they can also have a great impact on how we see the world and our place within it. The maps that introduce us to Elphinstone’s novels reimagine the reality we expect to find by centering on the northern peripheries and thereby representing a new way of looking at and understanding Scotland’s place in the world. In the map that introduces *Islanders*, for example, Elphinstone swivels a traditional map of Britain and the continent on its head so that our attention is drawn to the centrality of Scotland, its Northern Isles, Norway and Iceland. As Simon Hall states, “This map identifies the northern territory and

78 Ibid., 110.
at the same time indicates that we will be expected to look at it differently, suggesting the altered perspective that is such an important preoccupation of the text." Similarly, in *The Sea Road*, the world that is visualized swings our attention, as Scottish or British readers, from the north of Scotland and into a northern world where Iceland, Greenland and the northeastern territories of Canada are given precedence. As well as shifting traditional representations of the social dynamics of the Norse world, Elphinstone’s novels attempt to alter the traditional geographic perspective of the reader by projecting an alternative northern world towards which Scotland should look. As Elphinstone writes of Leif Ericsson’s discovery of Vinland in *The Sea Road*: “Leif’s ship has drawn an invisible line across the world now, from Iceland to Greenland to Norway to the Hebrides to Vinland to Greenland, a fine thread knitting the separate pieces of the world to one another, so that they become one.”

What Elphinstone’s argument seems to be is that a cultural and cartographic shift can manifest itself via the creative involvement of Scottish writers with the literature, history and geography of the North. Her novel *The Sea Road* can therefore be read as a post-devolutionary historical novel that offers an alternative way of understanding Scotland in terms of being part of a larger transnational northern world. In my next chapter, I will look at the contemporary Shetlandic poetry of Christine De Luca and Robert Alan Jamieson, both of whom have been active in creating an transnational imaginative and discursive space in the North, as well as the recent poetry and prose of Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, both of whom have moved into the North as part of a larger space for exploring the concept of being in the natural world.

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80 Elphinstone, *The Sea Road*, 104 (Italics in original).
Chapter Four: A Polar Projection

In a recent interview with Mark Lawson on BBC Radio Four’s *Foreign Bodies* programme, Ian Rankin was asked about the similarities between Scottish and Scandinavian crime writing. “I do think the Scottish sensibility, psychology, psyche is very close to Scandinavia,” Rankin observes. As well as a sense of introspection and bleakness that he deems the northern winters and short, bright summers can bring to the Scottish and Scandinavian imagination, Rankin believes there is also commonality in the sense of being “on the edge of Europe, looking in, or … on the edge of culture.”\(^1\) As I mentioned in my introduction, however, Cairns Craig tries to complicate this centre-periphery dichotomy in *Out of History* (1996) by proposing a “peripheral perspective.”\(^2\) Instead of “looking in,” as Rankin has observed, to the more dominant networks of globalized, centralized power and influence, the writers I will look at in this chapter have shown an interest in moving into an alternative northern space. The north of Scotland is not seen by these writers as any kind of frontier, limit or conclusion, but as a transformative space that can defamiliarize connotations of national belonging and broaden conceptions of Scotland and Scottish literature into a wider northern world. I will begin by looking at the Shetlandic poetry of Christine De Luca and Robert Alan Jamieson, both of whom use their poetry to open up what might be described as a transnational discursive and imaginative space in the North. I conclude this chapter by

\(^1\) Ian Rankin, interview by Mark Lawson, *Foreign Bodies*, BBC Radio Four, November 6, 2012.

discussing the more recent work of Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside. While De Luca and Jamieson are primarily concerned with opening up this space through language, Jamie and Burnside look North to engage with questions of being in the natural world.

Before discussing the work of these writers in any depth, however, it is important to note that all of these writers can be read in terms of a distinctly northern turn in post-devolutionary Scottish culture. Lawson’s question to Rankin about connections between Scotland and Scandinavia is representative of a larger interest in contemporary Scotland regarding its relationship to as well as its links with Scandinavia and the North more generally. Imagining Scotland as part of a Nordic or larger northern world has been a discernible aspect of the devolutionary and post-devolutionary process. For examples that bridge the worlds of literature and politics, one can turn to the devolutionary writing of Alasdair Gray and the post-devolutionary proposal of a turn to the North in Jamieson and Murray Wallace’s editorial article in the 1997 autumn edition of the Edinburgh Review referred to in my introduction—an article that was re-published on the popular Bella Caledonia website in the run-up to the independence referendum in September 2014, therefore giving it renewed emphasis in a post-referendum Scotland that will no doubt begin another period of questioning and exploring its conception and identity as a nation.

Published in the wake of the failed 1979 devolution referendum, Gray’s novels Lanark (1981) and 1982, Janine (1984) can be read as despairing accounts of contemporary Scotland. The Glasgow of Lanark, “Unthank,” reminds one of Edwin Muir’s and Hugh MacDiarmid’s views of Edinburgh as an ontological empty space, and the central protagonist of 1982, Janine, the aptly named “Jock” McLeish, is the representative of a Scot stifled by Thatcherite economics, conservative self-hatred, and
the mantra that Scotland is “a poor little country, always [has] been, always will be.”³

However, there is unanimous agreement among critics and readers alike that Gray’s novels, in the words of Robert Crawford, “helped encourage a new cultural and even political confidence” in Scotland.⁴ Michael Gardiner also reads Lanark as demonstrating “an encyclopaedia of possibilities in which normal time and space restrictions are suspended,”⁵ and Carla Sassi reads the conclusion to 1982, Janine, with its vision of Jock standing at a train platform with a sense of both uncertainty and determination, as an optimistic image of both man and nation ready to “[come] to terms with [their] past mistakes and [shape their own] future.”⁶

As part of this determination to imagine Scotland differently, Gray suggests that Scotland should look northwards and eastwards towards what he perceives to be the more socially democratic ethos of the Scandinavian countries. No doubt influenced by the despondent prospect of Thatcherism, 1982, Janine seems to suggest that Scotland, as part of a British political state, is in the wrong socio-political climate. Responding in his “Epilogue” to his own character’s refrain that Scotland is “a poor little country,” Gray states, “Though John McLeish is an invention of mine I disagree with him.” Scotland, Gray argues, should model itself upon Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Finland. The impression Gray gives is that Scotland has fallen from its place as a northern European or Nordic country and has been subsumed instead onto what he perceives to be the less social-democratic, more neo-liberal economic-politics of

the British state. “Our present ignorance and bad social organisation make most Scots poorer than most other north European countries,” says Gray, “but even bad human states are not everlasting.” This last statement that “bad human states are not everlasting” seems to appear in Gray’s Why Scots Should Rule Scotland, a political pamphlet first published in 1992 and then again in 1997, as the promotion of Scotland being part of a Nordic Union, arguing, “with all their variety [Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland] share a basis of social welfare which Britain has abandoned or perhaps never reached.”

In the same year that Gray published his political pamphlet, Jamieson and Wallace published Issue 98 of the Edinburgh Review under the title more boreal, a clear indication of the issue’s northern focus and a statement that might have been taken from Hugh MacDiarmid’s “Author’s Note” to A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926): “The whole thing must, of course, be pronounced more Boreali.” As I have already mentioned in my introduction, Jamieson and Wallace’s editorial, “More Boreali,” argues that, post-devolution, Scotland and Scottish culture should look North and consider itself in relation to a larger circumpolar world.

This northern dimension in the work of Gray, Jamieson and Wallace has become a noticeable aspect of contemporary Scottish political debate, intensified recently by the 2014 independence referendum, wherein the whole of Scotland was put under the spotlight and debated; as well people imagined what kind of place it was and could be.

7 Gray, 1982, Janine, 345.
While Scotland is not as yet part of any Nordic Council or Union, Andrew Newby states, “Images of Nordic society, often idealized, have permeated political discourse in Scotland since the establishment of a devolved parliament in 1999.”¹⁰ And as David Arter highlights in *The Scottish Parliament: A Scandinavian-Style Assembly* (2004), the parliament itself has been influenced by the deliberative inter-party legislative process of committees in Scandinavia. “[I]t is reasonable to surmise,” says Arter, “that several of [the parliament’s] members envisaged Scotland becoming a Scandinavian-style democracy.”¹¹ Finally, within recent political debate, the journalist Lesley Riddoch co-founded the think tank Nordic Horizons that holds regular meetings and public conferences about what Scotland can learn from Scandinavia, and she often draws comparison between aspects of Scotland and Scandinavia in her book *Blossom* (2013) which covers the whole range of Scottish life from housing standards and community action in Glasgow to the topics of land ownership and reform. Other groups such as the Glasgow-based collective Lateral North have begun to investigate Scotland’s new place and identity within an economically emerging northern region and have published a detailed account of this vision in *An Atlas of Productivity* (2014). As Graham Hogg of Lateral North recently stated in *Bella Caledonia*, “Scotland is a nation of the north; it is a Nordic Scotland, it is a country of the Arctic. We should no longer be thinking of


ourselves as a country on the periphery of northern Europe, but instead a gateway into it.”

But as the poet and critic David Wheatley states in a recent article entitled “Savouring Scandinavia off Scotland” in The Irish Times, “Political arrangements come and go but geography is a far more obstinate beast.” The process of devolution in Scotland as well as the longer period of devolutionary writing in Scotland have had national politics as well as themes of identity and belonging as central concerns. With the onset of political devolution, however, this focus on the national, especially in literature, is now being both extended and transcended. It has been through the adoption of a transnational northern perspective within the work of post-devolutionary writers such as De Luca, Jamieson, Jamie, and Burnside that a broader northern shift in modern Scottish literature has been further developed. For the writers I look at in this chapter, it is more space, the “obstinate beast” of geography, instead of politics or economics that has turned their perspectives northwards. While a geographic northern perspective is not apparent in Gray’s work outside of brief political notes and observations, it is a central component in the work of De Luca and Jamieson, and Jamie and Burnside expand their concerns with the natural world from a specifically Scottish setting into the wider transnational northern space.


The rumblings of a transnational northern perspective in Scotland’s Northern Isles might be traced back to Hugh MacDiarmid. While he was ‘exiled’ on Shetland in the 1930s, MacDiarmid’s desire to see Scotland whole and complete was complicated by the fragmented nature of Scotland’s islands. The history of the Northern Isles as well as their chaotic geography provided him with a perspective from which to reimagine Scotland and Scottishness beyond any kind of essentialist identity. “No symmetry of effect is obtainable,” MacDiarmid states in _The Islands of Scotland_ (1939). “It is a chaotic spectacle seen from above. And it is impossible to get them all into focus at once even then.”¹⁴ This symbolic complication of any essentialist or bounded view of Scotland is, as Scott Lyall has observed, given extra emphasis on Shetland: “On the island archipelago of Shetland … MacDiarmid discovers the essentially fragmented nature of all national cultures, isolated in the sea of their own historical identity yet linked to other cultures by the very fluidity of that sea. … His experience of the islands allows a clearer view of Scotland. On seeing Scotland whole, MacDiarmid discovers that there are many Scotlands, each different and difficult of combination.”¹⁵ Carla Sassi focuses on the conclusion to MacDiarmid’s _Islands_ in her article “(Un)making the Modern Scottish Nation,” arguing that he provides the reader with “a striking figuration of the global connectedness that islandness implies – a prefiguration, indeed, of Edouard Glissant’s ‘archipelagic thinking,’”¹⁶ As MacDiarmid states at the close of his book: “There are invisible bridges from every one of the Scottish islands, I think, that cross so far as the

¹⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, _The Islands of Scotland_ (London: B.T. Batsford, 1939), 1.
mind of man can go and reach across whatever space lies between us and anything that has ever been or ever will be apprehensible by the minds of men.”

In “The (B)order in Modern Scottish Literature,” Sassi also argues that the issue of borders, both internal and external, has been a noticeable factor in modern Scottish literature, and the subject of liminality, of being between worlds, is significant from a national point of view in its ability to question “the very concept of national (b)order.”

“Linguistic regionalism and de-centralisation are strong trends in Scotland today,” Sassi remarks in Why Scottish Literature Matters (2005), turning, as I will also do, to the work in modern Shetlandic of Jamieson and De Luca as significant examples of this. It is through their use of what might be deemed an insular Shetlandic dialect or idiolect that Jamieson and De Luca have opened up a transnational space in the North in post-devolutionary Scotland, not only writing poems in Shetlandic on this subject but participating in translation workshops with other North Atlantic and northern European writers.

“Neither the Shetlands nor the Orkneys … have had poets of any worth.” So says Hugh MacDiarmid once again in Islands. It is an obviously provocative statement, but MacDiarmid used provocation in an attempt to rouse Scotland (and its Isles) out of what he saw as a parochial and underdeveloped cultural context. MacDiarmid is not talking here in general terms about poets who come from the Northern Isles, but about those poets not utilizing the Isles' distinct cultural and linguistic heritage. As he goes on to say:

17 MacDiarmid, Islands, 136.
19 Sassi, Why Scottish Literature Matters, 147.
“[Their] cultural traditions are negligible—and though their ancient Norn language … is closely related to Faroese … no tendency to revive that language or apply it to modern purposes has yet manifested itself in the Orkneys of Shetlands.” What MacDiarmid is calling for is a Northern Renaissance that is linked to but also distinct from his own Renaissance project. It was also MacDiarmid’s belief that such activity in the Northern Isles could facilitate a greater sense of being part of a larger northern cultural and geographical perspective.

Both De Luca and Jamieson can be seen as contemporary Shetlandic poets who have taken up MacDiarmid’s call. Jamieson and De Luca use Shetland’s distinct vernacular, Shetlandic, which is a mixture of Scandinavian-influenced Norn and Scots, to great effect in poems that range from very personal memories and reflections to more abstract contemplations. While both poets use Shetlandic for artistic purposes, they also use it to establish what might be termed a transnational discursive and imaginative space between Shetland, the Scottish (and British) mainland, and the fringes of Northern Europe. While translation of the work of writers writing in Scottish dialect into other languages has proved difficult, if not impossible, the Scandinavian dimension of Shetlandic has allowed Jamieson and De Luca to engage in translation workshops and projects with other poets, especially from the Nordic countries and the Baltics. My consideration of the use of Shetlandic in these writers’ work will be accompanied by an analysis of the more imaginative articulations of a transitional North in their poetry and prose. Both Jamieson and De Luca are therefore at the forefront of projecting and promoting a strong northern dimension in contemporary Scottish literature. As De Luca

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states in her poem “Nae Easy Mizzer” from *North End of Eden* (2010): “A polar projection changes foo we figure oot / wir world.”

Part of this re-evaluation of the Northern Isles has been in terms of adopting Craig’s “peripheral perspective.” In Andrew Greig’s novel *Electric Brae* (1992), the northern isles are described as being “near the edge … a place to fall off.” As C. Claire Thomson has pointed out, Greig’s novel “is concerned with mapping out the many centres and peripheries of Scotland” and that “the novel’s ‘centre’ is to be found not only at the end of the text but at the land’s end: a figure standing on the rocky pinnacle of the Old Man of Hoy [in Orkney].” Jimmy Renilson’s triumphant scaling of the Old Man of Hoy at the end of the novel symbolizes an existential surmounting of the enduring burdens of personal and national history. It also acts as a symbolic location for national perspective following the failed 1979 devolution referendum. After having scaled the rocky pinnacle of the Old Man, “[Renilson] stands up straight and looks to the south” in a symbolic attempt to “see Scotland clear.” The periphery is here used as a place of distance from which to view and make sense of the national whole.

Both De Luca and Jamieson have, in a post-devolutionary era, centred on the peripheries. But unlike Greig, this “peripheral perspective” is projected outwards into the North, questioning the very concept of peripherality in the process as the north of Scotland becomes not an edge, “a place to fall off,” but a transformative space that

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expands the conceptual boundaries of Scotland into a wider transnational northern world. As De Luca states again in “Nae Easy Mizzer,” commenting on the traditional cartographic depiction of Shetland “banished tae a box / i da Moray Firt or left oot aa tagidder / - ta scale up the rest”: “Peripheral has new meanin; an marginal.” When Shetland is understood properly in terms of its cartographic position in the world, straddling as it does the famous metaphysical borderline of sixty degrees north, its spatial situation should be conceptualized instead as a gateway, one of MacDiarmid’s “invisible bridges,” into a larger polar world. As Jamie remarks in Sightlines (2012) about the supposedly “wild” and “peripheral” spaces and islands in the north of Scotland: “I soon came to distrust any starry-eyed notions of ‘wild’ or ‘remote.’ Remote from what? London? But what was London?” It is with such a “peripheral perspective” that writers such as De Luca, Jamieson, Jamie, and Burnside have articulated alternative ways of “Being and being conscious in the world” by projecting a northern transnational perspective in contradistinction to the constructions and networks of more dominant cultural, political, and economic hegemonies, whether domestic or global.

The movement North is at the heart of Jamieson’s novel Da Happie Laand (2010). The novel itself is a strange and often disorienting mix of Shetlandic history, moments of magical realism, and the driving narrative of David Cunningham’s search for his missing father, all of which are provided to the reader sporadically through a collection of voices, interviews, letters, and journals which the editor, Jamieson, has tried to form into some kind of coherence, and which takes the reader across different

25 De Luca, North End of Eden, 19.
settings from Scotland to Shetland to the fictional country of New Zetland. It is an ambitious novel that moves between narratives of exile, the search for belonging, theological debate, and the interweaving of the histories of colonial experiences of both Shetland and New Zetland that precipitates the novel’s obvious interest in diasporic communities. The search for meaning and coherence within such a melange of sources and stories can be grasped or symbolized to some degree through Cunningham’s journey to Shetland to find his estranged father. But the journey into the North is not one that progresses towards reconciliation or revelation: instead of finding his father, who is often capitalized as ‘Father’ as if to suggest a deeper theological dimension, Cunningham finds nothing but a “void”:

I go outside, leave the glass doors open and sit on the topmost step. The air’s moving seawards, away from the land. It’s cold here – it smacks of disappearance, a vacuum, as if the contents of the atmosphere were drifting out to sea along the finger of the land. Low cloud moving quickly, patches of shadowy darkness lifting and shifting, moving over the hills rapidly. There are so many spaces for wandering thoughts to fall into, gaps like holes in the solid earth. Before I can grab them, they slip into the void.  

While Cunningham finds nothing but a “void” in Shetland, the Reverend Archibald Nicol, who writes from Perth in the “Heart of Scotland,” starts to become more aware of Shetland and its geographical position through editing the unfinished History of Zetland that a dishevelled and disoriented Cunningham leaves behind at the Reverend’s house along with his journal at the beginning of the novel before wandering off in search of elusive revelation elsewhere. Upon reading and editing the History, the Reverend is upfront about his ignorance of Scotland’s northern spaces, admitting that he is more knowledgeable about theological mythologies than “the boreal peaks of my native land.”

However, “venturing imaginatively there [Nicol] came upon a land such as [he] had never
glimpsed even in moments of reverie.” As he states later on:

I have said that I but recently came to this knowledge of Zetland, and it is true
that until a matter of some eight months ago I neither understood its geographic
position, the extent of the country, nor its strategic nature. I realise that my early
perusal of maps had not aided this, as the archipelago rarely appeared in its true
position or comparable scale in such documents, presumably as it spoiled the
composition of the frame, being simply too far north and too far east to fit neatly.

Through imaginative engagement with this geographical realization, the Reverend’s map
changes and necessitates the acknowledgement as to how Shetland, once seen as “too
far north and too far east,” can, in fact, auger a spatial turn in Scotland’s consciousness
of its part of a broader northern world. “I had not realised either that [Shetland] shares
latitude with Bergen and Oslo,” says Nicol, “with Stockholm and Helsinki, with St
Petersburg – indeed, the southern tip of Greenland.” The journey North in Jamieson’s
novel is therefore one of both loss and revelation. The search for truth and reconciliation
that Cunningham embarks upon is frustrated in Shetland, but the Reverend, writing from
Scotland, is given a broader comprehension through Cunningham’s journals and the
unfinished History of how Shetland, which was in many ways colonized by Scotland and
given a distorted image through Walter Scott’s The Pirate (1822), can facilitate a new
sense of being conscious in the world.

If Jamieson’s novel facilitates a cartographic shift in the consciousness of the
Reverend Nicol, De Luca’s poetry complicates or defamiliarizes conceptions of
Shetlandic and Scandinavian space through her poetry. Fringes intermingle, borders

29 Ibid., 19.
30 Ibid., 64.
become complicated, and associations of place undergo creative defamiliarization, re-evaluation and extension. In her poem “Time Circles” from *Wast wi da Valkyries* (1997), for example, two locales, one in Shetland and one in Denmark, are disrupted from any association with a singular geography and juxtaposed within the personal memory of the speaker, creating a moment of instability and displacement: “Mirken haps a rummelled broch on Houlland’s knowe, / rowes hit in a twilt o lavender: saft smoored as a Danish Hjøllund a year ago.”

Similarly in her poem “Olympic Runes,” published in *Southlight Magazine* in 2011, Norwegian and Shetlandic landscapes intermingle in the mind of the speaker: “Climmin bi Fjellveien,” the speaker begins, “bairns pass me, / Skis shoodered lik Olympic javelins.” As in “Time Circles,” the speaker locates herself in a singular geography, whether that is in Shetland as in “Time Circles” or near Fjellveien, Bergen, with the bay of Vågen visible in the distance in “Olympic Runes.” The mixture of Shetlandic, Scots, and English in both poems encourages this spatial defamiliarization, and the intrusion of specifically Scottish words such as “bairn” (although itself etymologically linked to the Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish word for child, “barn”) in “Olympic Runes” unsettles any perspective of being in one physical space. This happens once again at the end of “Olympic Runes” when the speaker describes “toon lichts … mirlin / apön da black fjord; or a Shetland voe?”

The use of parataxis via the semi-colon juxtaposes two distinct elements as if they shared some kind of connection in the mind of the speaker. The dark Norwegian fjord of the speaker’s location is imaginatively if instantaneously uprooted from its geographical location and compared to a Shetlandic voe from the speaker’s personal memory. The descriptions of

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these landscapes and places in De Luca’s Shetlandic register—both visually and audibly constructed out of a strong Scottish, English, and Scandinavian mixture—add further to the creative derangement of Scottish and Scandinavian space. As Rachel Trousdale states in *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination* (2010), transnational writers will often try “to convey the compatibility of apparently disparate locations, which are linked by the author’s real-world experience as well as by fictional juxtapositions.”

This transnational imaginative space that De Luca and Jamieson construct is perhaps most creatively facilitated through their use of Shetlandic in their poems. The language question in Scottish literature is centuries old. Writing in vernacular in Scotland is, as Cairns Craig argues in *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999), “one of the foundations of the philosophical orientation of Scottish fiction.” Both the use of Scots as a means of national identification and the purging of Scotticisms were major issues in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the fallout between Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir over the use of Scots in the first half of the twentieth century has been widely discussed. As Fiona Stafford has argued, the inheritors of this debate in the latter half of the twentieth century felt an anxiety of influence as they tried to negotiate an expression of patriotic loyalty (as well as regional and class realism) and linguistic confidence through the use of Scots as well as achieving a greater sense of creative expression. But just as the 1980s saw a critical turn towards a celebration of Scotland’s cultural plurality, so too, Stafford argues, did Scotland’s linguistic diversity start to be seen as a means of creative strength rather than a subject of anxiety. As Stafford states, younger poets have

approached the language question from a perspective that "has been chary of absolute choices and tending instead towards more exploratory, interrogative, ironic or wittily tangential approaches."\textsuperscript{35}

Modern Shetlandic is, as Jamieson describes it, "a fascinating fusion of Norse/Scots/English with a subtle strain of the ‘Hollander’ who had been for three hundred years the key trading partner."\textsuperscript{36} While modern Shetlandic can be referred to as an Insular Scots dialect, it is better to view Jamieson’s and De Luca’s use of this vernacular as an idiolect due to evident variations in spelling and pronunciation unique to each poet. Both Jamieson and De Luca have spoken about their poetry in Shetlandic as a means of regional identification as well as an attempt to show its creative potential. For De Luca, the main concern with writing in Shetlandic is to help “hold back the monoglot tide [and] help[] raise the status of the dialect.”\textsuperscript{37} While Jamieson is also concerned with “[proving] Shetlandic is as capable as any tongue of making poetry,” he also views it as a source of poetic expression, “taking Ezra Pound’s exhortation to ‘make it new,’ or the Russian Formalists’ shout about the same time to ‘make it strange,’ as [his] poet’s motto.”\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} Robert Alan Jamieson, A Quite-Right upon the Sacred Peatbank (Edinburgh: Samisdat, 2005), 9, 3.
Starting out as a poet, De Luca felt that writing in dialect was somehow parochial and that to express more universal subjects and themes meant writing in English. “I wrote in Shetlandic when the location or theme of the poem seemed to fit,” De Luca says; “and everything else I wrote in English.”\textsuperscript{39} This personal linguistic barrier is reminiscent of the anxiety identified by Stafford. An important change in De Luca’s confidence in writing in Shetlandic, whether conscious or unconscious, seems to have occurred alongside the momentum of devolution in Scotland. As De Luca states, “The proportion of poems in Shetlandic in my first three collections, published within Shetland, increased from 30% (1994) to 44% (1997) to 47% (2002). Then in 2005 Luath Press in Edinburgh published \textit{Parallel Worlds} – it had 64% of the poems in Shetlandic, 70% if one counted the actual pages.” As De Luca goes on to say: “So I have switched completely in terms of language balance since I first started writing, with two thirds now being in Shetlandic rather than in English. There was no plan on my part, just a growing confidence over the years in offering poems in Shetlandic beyond the shores of the northern isles and not being hidebound or restrictive in the ideas or themes I might tackle in dialect.”\textsuperscript{40}

Of more importance to this chapter, however, is how the use of Shetlandic has been a means of creating in both De Luca’s and Jamieson’s poetry a transnational northern discursive space. Drawing as it does from Shetland’s strong Scandinavian heritage as well as from Scots and English, modern Shetlandic, as De Luca states, “pushes the limit of the concept of the dialect.”\textsuperscript{41} Both De Luca’s and Jamieson’s writing

\textsuperscript{39} De Luca, “Language and my Poetry,” 109.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 110.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 107.
in Shetlandic is not done in isolation: it has the ability to be understood and appreciated outside of Shetland. The strong Scottish element within the vernacular will be identifiable and understandable to those who have read dialect poetry from the Scottish mainland, and both poets also provide Standard English keys for broader comprehension. De Luca also writes poetry in English, which appears alongside poems in Shetlandic that also include an English glossary. Jamieson goes so far in his poetry collection *Nort Atlantik Drift* (2007) to translate his poems in Shetlandic into English. But the Scandinavian dimension within modern Shetlandic via the use of Norn words also facilitates a linguistic link with the Nordic countries. The “interference,” as De Luca describes it, of Norn, Scots, and English in Shetlandic provides the opportunity of writing poetry that is simultaneously regional, national, and transnational. This was another major factor in De Luca’s growing confidence about writing in Shetlandic, as she points out: “I think that the later, but equally critical, influence on my perceptions and language in my poems was having interest taken specifically in my dialect poems, by foreign poets, frequently Nordic writers, and their warm-hearted translation of them and finding that I could render their poems into Shetlandic with little recourse to English. This respect shown for our dialect by other European writers had a big influence on my linguistic confidence.”

She goes on to say: “Given that they all spoke fluent English they frequently remarked that they found more difference between Shetlandic and Standard English than between some of the other Nordic languages which are interrelated. It was as if they had discovered a long-lost half-brother or cousin.”

De Luca shows various examples of this linguistic connection, such as her translation of the Norwegian poet Thor Sørheim’s lines “smake

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42 Ibid., 110.
43 Ibid., 110.
calde, søte bær / etter ei natt med frost” from his poem “Lufing” into Shetlandic: “taste caald sweet berries / eftir a nicht o frost.”

Both De Luca and Jamieson have therefore been active in projects designed to bring together poets’ works from around northern Europe and have them translated into the language of each locality. As Salman Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.” De Luca and Jamieson are, in Rushdie’s terms (and if you will excuse the gender bias), “translated men”: their work has crossed oceans and frontiers; they have translated the work of various writers from various nationalities (especially northern Europe) and have similarly had their own work translated into various languages. The act of translation itself, as Paola Zaccaria points out, carries an inherent transnational process: it can be “read as a practice of transformation and crossing, composition and recomposition between texts and cultures.”

Scottish vernacular literature often fails to be read outside of Scotland because of the sheer untranslatability of its content. Discussing this aspect in the work of Irvine Welsh, for example, Katherine Ashley states, “Welsh’s voice, which is aggressively, sometimes uncompromisingly, Scottish, is precisely what cannot be conveyed in translation.” What makes modern Shetlandic interesting in terms of the issue of

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44 Ibid., 112.
translation is that it is by its very etymological and historical construction a vernacular that connects with other northern nations as well as the Scottish (and British) mainland. It is this aspect of Shetlandic that has brought together various projects concerned with building a transnational northern community of poets through translation.

One such collaboration was part of a wider workshop initiated by Literature Across Frontiers involving several writers and the subsequent publication of *All Points North: Shetland, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Latvia* by the Scottish Poetry Library in 2006. Similar to Craig’s “peripheral perspective,” the aim of the book, as the director of the SPL, Robyn Marsack states, is “to promote literatures written in small and minority languages, encourage translation between them and develop closer links between practitioners working in these languages.”

Furthermore, this project seems to be an attempt to place Scotland, via Shetland, into a more northern European mindscape. As Barrie Tullet points out about the design of the text: “Visually this was intended to reflect the views of the Shetland coastline. The shore, the hills, the sea are all replaced by the texts.” What this does, both visually and imaginatively, is to have the Shetland Isles constructed linguistically around the various dialects and languages of northern Europe, therefore locating the Shetland Isles within an identifiable transnational northern culture and space. Through these experiments in translation, Jamieson believes the poems will leave “a deeper sense of connectivity between these northern places in the minds of participants and audience.” This has been reciprocated in such Scandinavian publications as Håkan Anderson’s *Landskapets lycka* (2004) and Adalstienn Ásberg

48 Robyn Marsack, preface to *All Points North*, 8-9.
49 Barrie Tullet, preface to *All Points North*, 8-9.
Sigurdsson’s Icelandic translations of contemporary Shetlandic poetry in *Hjaltlandsljóð* (2012). What these projects and poems do is to incorporate the territories, dialects, and languages of the North into a wider transnational discursive and imaginative space. As De Luca poetizes in “Celebrate in Wirds” from *Parallel Worlds* (2005), words can “oppen wir een ta newness [and] mak space fur wis.”51

A good example of this desire to “mak space” and engage transnationally and one that echoes Cairns Craig’s desire for the peripheries to “appropriate from each other the tools of cultural resistance” is De Luca’s poem “Ice Floe On-line” from *Parallel Worlds*:52

We scrit wir wirts ta mak connection
wi laands whaar eence dey wir a link;
dan send dem dirlin alang meridians
tae aa erts around wir virtual world.

Eence uncans cam bi oar or sail:
a land sea circle vaege, da wirts
maist likely faered. Wir wirts birl
aff a satellites an atarns; loup and tirl,
crackle lik mirry-dancers i da lift.
We set dem sheeksin owre Arctic distances
ta gently rummel Babel’s To’er, an bigg
instead a hoose ta had wir difference.53

De Luca here appropriates for her own use what is a product of globalization, the Internet, a medium that can be used to facilitate cultural homogenization centered on cultures with the greatest economic power, and uses it instead to make connections

“owre Arctic distances.” As Craig argues: “Accepting the peripheral, maintaining the peripheral, communicating from periphery to periphery – these imply the possibility of a space from which it is possible to critique and resist the obliterating effects of international capitalism.” The Shetlandic words subversively “birl,” “loup and tirl” through the standardized binary of satellite communication, much like the chaotic music of starlings in Edwin Morgan’s poem, “The Starlings in George Square.” The placement of such words into the matrix of a homogenizing system of communication and business can be seen to disrupt the official routes and allocations of globalization in order to “mak connection / wi laands whaar eence dey wir a link.” As Morgan states, “There is something to be said for these joyous messengers / that we repel in our indignant orderliness.” On the other hand, however, in Jamieson’s poem “Vestenfraqa,” it is the force of economic capital, this time located in the North Sea oil trade, that facilitates these new Nordic bonds between Shetland and Norway. As he explains in the note to his poem: “The axis north to south, to and from Scotland, has been the Shetlanders’ main trade route for centuries now, mirroring the political shift away from Scandinavia … But in the late 20th century, the establishment of new sea and air networks in the post-oil North Sea has revived these links.” Just as De Luca comments that translation collaborations with Nordic writers generate a linguistic sense among these poets and those from Shetland of a “long-lost half-brother or cousin,” Jamieson’s poem describes the voyage of a young man on one of these post-oil journeys into Norway. Initially conscious of being a foreigner, he begins to hear recognizable words and inflections.

54 Craig, “Centring on the Peripheries,” 36.
spoken by the Norwegians and gradually “He tinks – / Jeg kjenner min fokk – / Wir æin fokk.”

Through their Shetlandic poetry, both De Luca and Jamieson create a transnational imaginative and discursive space. As the title of Jamieson’s poetry collection *Nort Atlantik Drift* suggests, the idea of making space imaginatively, which is indicated in both the noun and verb sense of “drift,” is also facilitated linguistically. As he states in his poem “Atlantis,” Shetland is “A laand wie waatir fir a boarder.” Borders are therefore symbolically mutable and encourage broader movement and connection. This is most evident in Jamieson’s poem “Bottlit.” In this poem a boy desires his “Hæie’s chinchir koardjil” bottle to drift “Fae dis laandfaa …/ oot ta Riekjaviekr ir Tromsø, / t’Heligolaand ir Tor’s Havn.” While the poem ends on a humorous note as the bottle only ends up reaching Eshaness in Shetland, “dat ungkin laan akross da sie,” the fact that the speaker’s spatial imagination is transported around the north is significant of the larger transnational aspect I have been discussing.

De Luca and Jamieson are therefore mainly concerned with creating a transnational northern space through the Shetlandic medium of their poetry. But there are examples from both poets that display a sense of the North that is facilitated through a connection to the elements and the landscape itself. “[This] is definitively north,” says De Luca, responding to the paintings of Shetlandic coasts by Sarah Longley in “In Your Face,” “a thwack / off Greenland, an oceanic scrawl” of “light, air, water, rock.” It is this

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57 Ibid., 100.
58 Ibid., 24.
59 Ibid., 36.
aspect of making and understanding space that Kenneth White discusses in *On the Atlantic Edge* (2006): “Geopoetics breaks familiarity, and recognizes a strangeness. Beginning with the lie of the land, remaining close to the elements, it opens up space, and works out a new mindscape. Its basis is a new sense of land in an enlarged mind.”

This enlarged “mindscape” is most evident in Jamieson’s poem “Atlantis.” As Jamieson states in his note to the poem, the title of the poem alludes to “The legend of the lost continent believed to have lain west beyond the Pillars of Hercules and the Straits of Gibraltar … recorded in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*.” Taking this legend of a lost land, Jamieson juxtaposes it with a sense of both geographical and general isolation that the Shetland Islands have experienced: “In an isolated Atlantic island community, such a story can easily be adapted to suit the locality, particularly when folklore contains a giant named Atla.”

But this sense of physical and metaphorical isolation—“Sjætlin’s singkin / sloalie still”—is soon displaced by the geological realization that Shetland is connected physically both to the Scottish mainland and Scandinavia through an ancient mountain range. While these places seem distinct, they are in fact

choost da taps
a’antiek mowntins
at rekt fæ Nevis nort
an æst tæ Jotunhiemen,
noo Atlantik diep an lost.

Realization of this physical connection running between Scotland, Shetland, and Scandinavia “opens up space, and works out a new mindscape.” As Kenneth White again states:

63 Ibid., 24.
To get beyond the local-global opposition, I suggest we think in terms of open world. … open world begins where one is. Every territory, while maintaining its presence and compactness, is open, if one knows how to read it. A very little knowledge of geology connects … the Caledonian Chain on the one hand with the Appalachian system in America and with a mountain line running through Scandinavia east. The same goes for hydrography, zoology and linguistics. … In other words, by being large-mindedly, wide-eyedly local … you are, naturally, global.  

It is through a similar desire to reengage and reconnect with the non-human natural world that both Jamie’s and Burnside’s recent work has moved into the North.

Jamie’s first published poem, “A View from the Cliffs,” is set in Orkney. In the poem’s first stanza, she describes how Orkney “rises like the letter D” and then “nothing, save the ocean / and twenty thousand seabirds.” The poem juxtaposes two very different worlds: the high-paced consumer market of London, where the lobsters fished from Orcadian shores are to be sent, and the world of the Orcadian fishermen themselves: “Philosophical fishermen, content / in their wisdom – The answer? / A walking-pace world.” The date of the poem is significant: 1979, the year of the failed referendum in Scotland. After this date there was a veritable storm of angry, politically informed literature from Scottish writers, who, as the title of Donny O’Rourke’s book *Dream States* (1994) suggests, dreamed a new state for Scotland where the politicians had failed. Jamie was very much a part of this scene, writing poetry on topics such as gender, the parochialism of small-minded Scottish life and identity, as well as devolutionary cultural politics. With the successful devolution referendum in 1997, however, Jamie’s writing has moved into a different direction. As Louisa Gairn has pointed out, the successful

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64 White, *On the Atlantic Edge*, 76.
devolution referendum result “marked something of a personal watershed in Jamie’s own career,” and Matt McGuire describes this shift in focus in terms of “greener and less nation-bound issues” that is evident in her poetry collection *The Tree House* (2004) and her more recent essays on the natural world. All of these collections explore a natural world that, for Jamie, as for MacDiarmid and White before her, has become increasingly disconnected from humanity. What is also discernible in *Findings* and *Sightlines* is a movement into the northern and western extremes of Scotland: back to the “nothing, save the ocean / and the twenty thousand seabirds” of Orkney described in her first poem, Shetland, the Hebrides, but also further north in *Sightlines* into transnational northern spaces and territories. Like the poetry of De Luca and Jamieson, Jamie's recent writing opens up space and moves Scottish literature into new directions. But while De Luca and Jamieson are interested in opening up the North mainly through their use of Shetlandic in their poetry, Jamie is more interested in understanding it as a space for ecological exploration, observation and concern that stretches beyond territorial assignation, like the land in her poem “The Wishing Tree” from *The Tree House* that “reaches towards the Atlantic” instead of being drawn in, like the wishing tree itself, to “the enthroned Britannia.”

It is a move North that is part of and perhaps inspired by other books interested in the landscapes, ecologies, and issues of the North such as Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1988), Peter Davidson’s *The Idea of North* (2004), Sara Wheeler's *The Magnetic North* (2010), and Gavin Francis's *True North* (2010), the latter

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of which moves around the landscapes and communities of Europe’s Arctic from Shetland to Svalbard, claiming Cape Wrath at the northern extreme of the Scottish mainland as “the end and the beginning of the North.”

The turn toward the both natural world and the North is made clear in Jamie’s interview with Attila Dósa in Beyond Identity (2009), although it should also be noted that this is still very much a recent development in Jamie’s writing and what direction it might take is unclear. Within that interview, Jamie identifies her more recent work as being “much more ecologically based”: “I am interested in the world which is more-than-human, which is beyond the human. I believe that’s where our problems lie.” This exploration into a connection with the “more-than-human” is at the heart of The Tree House, the title of which is a clear indication of the poet’s attempt to bring a greater sense of synthesis between the human and the natural, the domestic and the wild. What is different about Jamie's explorations of being in the natural world compared to the writing of White is that Jamie's perceptions and observations of the natural world often come in brief, spontaneous moments during her all-too-human life as a mother, teacher, daughter and member of general society. While she does, like White, explore those landscapes and spaces that are seen to be “peripheral” or out of the historical world of modernity, such as her travels to St. Kilda in the very northwest of Scotland, questioning the very notion of “peripherality” in the process, she does not travel and wander to the same extent as White's nomadism. Having said that, there are similarities in the style of her essays, which, like White's ‘waybooks,’ mix writing on the natural world, autobiography, and travel writing. It is within these essays, especially Sightlines, that the northern turn is most evident, and in her interview with Dósa, speaking of herself as well

Gavin Francis, True North, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2010), 303.
as other poet-colleagues at St Andrews University such as Robert Crawford, John
Burnside and Don Paterson, Jamie says, “In the future it may seem there was a school
of poets of similar interest, whose ‘northernness’ or ‘marginalness’ – rather than
‘Scottishness’ – was important.”

I will begin by discussing Jamie’s ecological turn in *The Tree House* before
moving on to note how these concerns are also very much at the heart of *Findings* and
*Sightlines*. While the locations of her poems in *The Tree House* are ambiguous, a
greater sense of place is felt in the essays of *Findings*, all of which are located in
Scotland. It is in *Sightlines*, however, that this very Scottish sense of place is opened up
into a wider transnational northern perspective, just as Burnside experiences the North—
Scotland, Norway, the Arctic—as a greater space of being and dwelling authentically in
the world in his own work.

While her switch from poetry to the essay might seem like a dramatic shift in
direction, Jamie believes these genres are related in their ability to explore and find a
language that can express a reclamation and reconnection with the natural world. *Essay*
comes from the French word *essayer* that means to attempt or endeavour, and for Jamie
both poetry and essay are therefore related in their endeavours to reorient perspective
and ways of seeing the world. Language can, of course, get in the way: its purpose is to
categorize and objectify, which can lead to the dissociation of subject and object. For
Jamie, terms such as “wilderness” or “outdoors” alienate us from a world that we are
intrinsically part of and connected to. But language can also, when used carefully,
articulate the relationship of the self to the world, expressing original experience. As
Jamie says regarding her poetry: “poetry is a sort of connective tissue where myself

70 Attila Dósa, “Kathleen Jamie: More than Human,” in *Beyond Identity: New Horizons in Modern
Scottish Poetry* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 142.
meets the world, and it rises out of that, that liminal place.”71 White, Jamie, and Burnside are all intent on attempting to capture in language those perceptual experiences of being that exists beyond language. In “The Dipper,” for example, Jamie is enraptured by the song of a bird: “It lit on a damp rock, / and, as water swept stupidly on, / wrung from its own throat / supple, undammable song.”72 These lines are reminiscent of Hugh MacDiarmid’s lines in “On a Raised Beach” about the assurance of being-in-the-world held within birdsong: “The inward gates of a bird are always open. / It does not know how to shut them. / That is the secret of its song.”73 Just as MacDiarmid struggles to find a language to express his experience of being in and of the stone world, the birdsong of Jamie’s poem is not the poet’s “to give.” There is still a distance between the realms of the human and the natural, symbolized perhaps by the fact that Jamie “can’t coax this bird to [her] hand.”74 While Jamie is therefore aware of the difficulty or impossibility of speaking the actuality of the natural, she is very concerned about bringing a better sense or awareness and connection between the human and non-human in her recent poetry and essays.

The first poem that we encounter in The Tree House, for example, is “The Wishing Tree.” The tree, which has been “poisoned” by the “small change / of human

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72 Jamie, The Tree House, 49.


74 Jamie, The Tree House, 49.
hope” through pennies being smashed into its trunk, explains its position in the world in very matter-of-fact terms.\textsuperscript{75}

\begin{verbatim}
I stand neither in the wilderness
nor in fairyland
but in the fold
of a green hill
the tilt from one parish
into another.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{verbatim}

It is through such stark language that Jamie is here trying to reorient our relationship to the natural by getting us to see the \textit{thisness} of the tree rather than regarding it as an object upon which to project our own hopes, wishes, anxieties, and imaginations. There is no trace of the grandiose language of Romantic poetry here; the natural world is not made into something daunting or sublime. It just exists as a \textit{thing} in and of the world “in the fold / of a green hill.” There is no projecting of it into a “wilderness,” through which it is othered and made to become part of the ‘out there’ beyond the realm of the human, nor is it abstracted and made to signify something symbolic or metaphorical as it is in myths and legends. It exists only in terms of its \textit{thisness} in the world, and, as White explains in terms of the silver birch of “In the Botanic Gardens, Glasgow,” “if you can see where it stands / exactly now” you transcend the projections of human signification into a cleaner phenomenological experience of its situation in the here and now as part of a greater complexity of being.\textsuperscript{77}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 4.\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 3.\textsuperscript{77} Kenneth White, \textit{Open World: The Collected Poems, 1960-2000} (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003), 14.\end{flushleft}
The place where the tree does exist, the poem tells us, is in a “fold” and “tilt” between worlds, that is, a liminal space between the human and the natural wherein there is opened a greater sense of comprehension and relatedness between self and other. “To look at me / through a smirr of rain,” Jamie has the tree relate, “is to taste the iron / in your own blood.” While these lines might be taken to suggest the taste of the iron emanating from the coins stuffed into the trunk of the tree in the rain, it seems to speak of a much deeper sense of unity between self, as a natural being composed of blood and iron, and the tree, which is also part of that same natural world. The addition of the phenomenon of the rain, the “smirr,” and its emphasis on the personal responsibility to “look,” that is, to see the tree instead of just taking it for granted, suggests a solitary experience wherein the distinction between subject and object is dissolved. It is a liminal moment between the human and non-human world that Jamie experiences in a number of her poems in which the self is momentarily forgotten and within which moment of presence and absence a new way of being and seeing is discovered.

Moments of connection to the natural world in Jamie’s poems are often fleeting, spontaneous, and caught between the events and responsibilities of everyday life. These moments provide glimpses into a greater, more united sense of being that is often lost or estranged within modernity. These moments are often awoken through encounters with animals and other species. Seemingly devoid of the Dasein of humanity, the animals and species that Jamie encounters not only give her a sense of connection to the natural world but also remind her of her own sense of alienation from their own seemingly content sense of being at home in the world. As Rainer Maria Rilke writes in

[78 Jamie The Tree House, 3.]

177
the Duino Elegies (1923): “and already the knowing animals are aware / that we are not really at home in / our interpreted world.” The swallows in “Swallows” are “so at ease”; the jellyfish of “The Glass-hulled Boat” seem “fuddled, but unperturbed”; the brief liminal connection between the dolphins and humans of “White-sided Dolphins” is suddenly broken “when true to their own/inner oceanic maps, the animals / veered off from us, north by northwest”; and the bats of “Pipistrelles” who “cinder-like, friable, flickering” form themselves into “a single / edgy intelligence, testing their idea / of a new form” suddenly vanish “before we’d understood.” It is the catching of such moments of awareness that Jamie tries to express in her poetry. While the rift between the human and the non-human is, for Jamie, at a breaking point, there is still a chance for some kind of reconciliation or beginning again. The tree of “The Wishing Tree” may indeed be “poisoned,” but “look: I am still alive—/ in fact, in bud,” and the tear that she is aware of between the human and natural world in “The Whale-watcher” is only “almost beyond repair.”

Whether consciously or not, another poem in Jamie's collection, “Alder,” reads much like White's attempts to bring perspective back down from metaphysical speculation and dissociation from the world through the symbol of the landscape and plant life emerging after the receding glaciers. Asking first of all, “Are you weary, alder

80 Jamie, The Tree House, 14.
81 Ibid., 16.
82 Ibid., 17.
83 Ibid., 23.
84 Ibid., 4.
85 Ibid., 20.
tree, / in this, the age of rain?” which may or may not be a comment on the process as well as effects of climate change, Jamie’s mind, like the receding glaciers, becomes cleared to such an extent that it can bring itself into a cleaner phenomenological experience of the world:

alder, who unfolded
before the receding glaciers
first one leaf then another,
won't you teach me
a way to live
on this damp ambiguous earth?86

The application to the alder to “teach me / a way to live” may be an ecological inversion of the plea in Psalm 25:4: “Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.”87 Instead of finding meaning by projecting anxieties about being and existing onto a supernatural deity, Jamie grounds her desire to understand herself as a human within an atheistical but more real and phenomenologically complex world. It is an attempt to bring the mind back down to earth, to the earth, and letting it slowly move out over the landscape. What Jamie is writing about here is a process of de-cluttering the ambiguities of modernity and disowning theological metaphysics for a movement into a more grounded understanding of actually being-in-the-world. In this sense, White, Jamie and Burnside are all phenomenological poets. They write about moments of lived experience—walking, listening, observing, connecting—in which any metaphysical conception of self is opened into a greater sense of relatedness with the world and larger cosmos.

86 Ibid., 6.
A necessary aspect of this process of reconnection is to extract oneself out of the historical, out of modernity, and into a more experiential connection with the natural world. As Jamie states in “Whale-watcher”: “And when at last the road / gives out, I'll walk— / harsh grass, sea-maws, / lichen-crusted bedrock.” Her reference to “the road” here might be read in symbolic terms as similar to the “technological Highway” of modernity that White wanted to get off so he could move into geography and space in order to reconnect with the world. The emphasis Jamie places here on the physical act of walking is also important, allowing her to experience the phenomena that she walks among: “harsh grass, sea-maws, / lichen-crusted bedrock.” As Jonathan Bate explains, ecological poetry “is not a description of dwelling on the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it.” Such an experience of being in the physical world and watching the slower, more assured movement of the whales who “beach, breathe, and dive” is, for Jamie, a way of bringing the self back into a connection with the world that is off “the road” and within another space where her “eyes evaporate / and I’m willing again / to deal myself in” to a more unified sense of connection with the natural world.

This is what Jamie’s recent work is about: paying greater attention to the natural world, listening into it and seeing in its complexity our own existence as humans. While Jamie’s poems are certainly about her attempt at repairing our connection to the natural and facilitating a more grounded experience of being in the world, other poems can also be read as a warning about that very process. It is while immersed in the natural world of

the lupines and foxgloves, that is, during a time when her self is immersed in a deeper experience of phenomenological appreciation in “The Buddleia,” for example, that she forgets to call her father. The figure of the father is obviously linked to the Christian Father in the poem, suggesting Jamie’s loss of faith, but there might also be a trace of a warning that immersing the self back into the natural can take you away from the other all-too-human life you inhabit in terms of familial and societal duties and cares. There is a danger of disappearance.

This danger is apparent in the last poem I will look at from *The Tree House*, “Basking Shark.” In this poem Jamie once again experiences a liminal moment of intense connection between the human and the non-human world. The “cliff-edge” that Jamie’s narrator comes to rest at, looking down beneath her into the sea, is the limit of her own realm. Below her is “not void, but a living creature,” a basking shark, “come to sense the absolute / limits of its realm.” As she rests, watching the shark, the two realms of the human and the non-human start to merge, and there is a movement into a description of being where her own mind seems to slip into a state that is aware not of self but the phenomena around her: the peat moor careering inland, the hardness of the rock she grips to lean over, the heaving sea, the flight of fulmars and the slow movement of the shark in the water—“dull / dark and buoyed like a heart / that goes on living / through long grief.” The “peculiar backwash” lapping back and forth between the sea, the realm of the shark, and the cliff, the realm of Jamie’s narrator, seems to suggest the hypnotic back and forth between self and other that is happening in this encounter. This connection within which Jamie’s sense of self seems to disappear into the natural “became unbearable” and she is only called back into herself by a sudden gust of wind.
that “in its mercy breathed again / and far below the surface / glittered, and broke up.”

It seems that the breath of wind that comes and distorts this connection is what finally reminds Jamie to breathe herself and bring her back into her own human state. It is a poem that moves between presence and absence and only just manages to have Jamie’s narrator emerge back into presence.

This endeavour to look more closely, to see the threads that unite the human and the non-human, is carried into Jamie's essays *Findings* and *Sightlines*. What is apparent in these texts, however, is that, as in Burnside’s work, the space of being that Jamie emerges into is extended beyond Scotland into a larger northern world. Like many of Jamie’s poems in *The Tree House*, the essays of *Findings* and *Sightlines* are full of acute and often intense moments of connection with the natural world. The pages are full of the cries of birds and sudden glimpses of fulmars, arctic terns, petrels, gannets, as well as the occasional whale. While Jamie also brings our attention to the more brutal aspects of nature inherent within our own bodies, such as sickness and deformity, the majority of her essays are about geography, animals and ecology: the landscapes of the northern and western extremes of Scotland in particular, its drama of light and dark, its flora and fauna, and a more elemental world of waves, wind, and rock.

As in *The Tree House*, Jamie’s moments of connection with this otherworld are often witnessed spontaneously or suddenly, often catching her off guard. In *Findings*, for example, she talks about how these connective experiences manifest themselves during the more mundane tasks of her all-too-human life: “Between the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that’s how birds enter my life. I listen. During a lull in the traffic, oyster

92 Ibid., 23-24.
catchers. In the school playground, sparrows – what few sparrows are left – chirp from
the eaves. … The birds live at the edge of my life. That’s okay. I like the sense that the
margins of my life are semi-permeable.” 93 For Jamie, it is enough just to be open to and
aware of the existence of such an otherworld without having to analyze or catalogue its
existence: “This is what I want to learn: to notice, but not to analyse. To still the part of
the brain that’s yammering … and learn again to look, to listen. You can do the
organising and redrafting, the diagnosing and identifying later, but right now, just be
open to it, see how it’s tilting nervously into the wind, try to see the colour, the unchancy
shape—hold it in your head, bring it home intact.” 94

From watching gannets north of sixty degrees off the coast of Scotland in
Sightlines to walking the beaches and landscapes of the Hebridean islands in both
books of essays, Jamie’s writing of the natural world is full of astute observations that
bring us back to a greater awareness of a world that more often than not remains hidden
from our awareness. “The outer world … had flown open like a door,” says Jamie, “and I
wondered as I drove, and I wonder still, what is it we’re just not seeing?” 95

In the northern and western extremes of Scotland, Jamie comes into contact with
a world that is so elementally bare that language seems like an imposition: “I made
notes, but the reason I’d come to the end of the road to walk along the cliffs is because
language fails me there. If we work always in words, sometimes we need to recuperate
in a place where language doesn’t join up, where we’re thrown back on a few

93 Kathleen Jamie, Findings: Essays on the Natural and Unnatural World (Saint Paul: Graywolf
Press, 2005), 32.
94 Ibid., 34.
95 Jamie, Sightlines, 37.
elementary nouns. Sea. Bird. Sky.” Both Findings and Sightlines are predominantly set in the northern and western extremes of Scotland—the Hebrides and Northern Isles. It is there, as Jamie says, that she comes into contact with a greater sense of the physical world that language needs to become as elemental as the phenomena she walks among. But if Findings is exclusively set in Scotland, Jamie’s space of being extends into a transnational northern world in Sightlines. The movement into this greater sense of space is first alluded to at the beginning of Findings. While watching a pantomime of The Snow Queen with her children in Dundee, Jamie’s imagination starts to wander, and it follows the Snow Queen off the stage and into the world:

At one point the Snow Queen, in her silver sledge, stormed off stage left, and had she kept going, putting a girdle round the earth, she’d have been following the 56th parallel. Up the Nethergate, out of Dundee, across Scotland, away over the North Atlantic, she’d have made landfall over Labrador, swooped over Hudson’s Bay, and have glittered like snowfall somewhere in Southern Alaska. Crossing the Bering Sea, then the Sea of Okhotsk, she’d have streaked on through central Moscow, in time, if she really got a move on, to enter stage right for her next line.97

Like the Reverend in Jamieson’s novel, Jamie’s cartographic imagination moves out of Scotland and into an alternative sense of being conscious in the world, and it is the northern world that the Snow Queen traces that will become the world that Jamie will start to move herself into. In Findings this northern vision precipitates her going to Orkney to study the dramatic changes and shifts of light in the North. In Sightlines, however, this northern world is extended outside of Scotland, travelling as she does into Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides, Norway, and the southern coast of Greenland, all of which seem to become for Jamie, like the circumpolar world for White and the Arctic

96 Ibid., 130.
97 Jamie, Findings, 4.
North for Burnside, a greater space of being that transcends the national in its concern with and for the natural. It is while watching the Northern Lights off the coast of Greenland that Jamie articulates her northern turn. Talking to a friend she meets on her trip to Greenland, a dialogue ensues:

‘What brings me [to the North]? I don’t rightly know. But for thirty years I’ve been sitting on clifftops, looking at horizons. From Orkney, Shetland, St Kilda…?’

‘I know these places. And you wanted to know what was beyond?’

‘No. Actually, I never did. Not until very recently. Suddenly I wanted to change my map. Something had played itself out. Something was changing.’

This emerging consciousness of being in a wider northern world in Jamie’s most recent work is already an established element in the work of Burnside. Like White and Jamie, Burnside is concerned with dissolving what both writers feel to be an estrangement between the human and natural world, and, again like White and Jamie, he argues that we need to get out of history, that is, out of what he sees as a predominantly consumer-capitalist society and into a greater sense of natural space and being. It is in the North that Burnside has found this space, although, like Jamie, Burnside also cautions against the danger of disappearing into the world and out of human community.

As David Borthwick has recently argued, “Burnside’s work consists of an interrogation of how this home [that is, humankind’s being in a natural habitat] might be spiritually (re)inhabited, how the contemporary human subject might be re-enchanted by nature.” As Burnside states, he wants “to restore that mystery, to put us back into the

98 Jamie, *Sightlines*, 16.

open, to make us more vulnerable and wondrous again.” The poet’s task of reconnecting and rediscovering the self within a wider natural reality in the world is made clear in the following segment from Burnside’s essay “A Science of Belonging”:

As a poet, I want to suggest the importance of those elements of life that have hitherto been considered minor, commonplace, even trivial. The beauty of the real, as opposed to the virtual. The starlit darkness of the actual night, the salt and physicality and achieved grace of real bodies, the pleasure of walking as opposed to driving. A view of identity that sets terrain and habitat before tribal allegiances, the integrity of place before the idea of the nation or state, the pagan calendar before the atomic clock. A philosophy of dwelling that includes all things, living and non-living, and informed by the principle of ahimsa, of doing, if not no harm, then the absolute minimum of harm.\(^{101}\)

His work is full of moments of liminality, sightings and disappearances, presences and absences, and transformations into “a new becoming” with “new eyes to see the world,” all of which are an attempt to dissolve any sense of duality into a more connective relationship between self and other, human and non-human.\(^ {102}\) At the start of his poetry collection *The Light Trap* (2002), Burnside makes this ecological perspective to his work clear by quoting from the American ecologist Paul Shepard’s *Thinking Animals* (1978): “What is meant here is something more mutually and functionally interdependent between animal and terrain, an organic relationship between the environment and the unconscious, the visible space and the conscious, the ideas and the creatures.”\(^ {103}\) As Burnside states in his poem “Halloween” from *The Myth of the Twin* (1994), “I have peeled the bark from the tree/to smell its ghost, / and walked the boundaries of ice and


\(^{101}\) Ibid., 93.


bone.”\textsuperscript{104} Burnside has talked of Halloween as one of the key dates in the calendar: “they are, in our experience, the moments when the person is susceptible to change, where being is raw, as it were, where identity is less fixed, more open to possibility.”\textsuperscript{105} Self and other are immersed in Burnside’s poem; the speaker is able to cross between the worlds of the human and the natural, \textit{experiencing} himself as being \textit{within} the natural world instead of separated from it. Likewise, in his poem “Koi” from \textit{The Light Trap}, Burnside has his “idle mind “[spool] out / to borderline and limit” over the landscape in order to “create a world / from nothing,” that is, attempting to bring his mind into a more fundamental sense of connection with the physical world, like the mind returning to the land after the receding glaciers in the poetry of White and Jamie.\textsuperscript{106}

It is in the North that Burnside experiences the most profound sense of being in the world. Asked what the “North” means to him, Burnside answers in terms of various transnational northern spaces: “a field of willow herb on Kvaloya”; “the wildflowers of a subarctic meadow” in midsummer; “walking in snow in snow on the Finnmarksvidda, coming down from Ben Cruachan in a sudden mist, crossing the Pentland Firth on a blustery day.” But what is most important, Burnside states, is “finding the essence” within such places and spaces.\textsuperscript{107} Like White’s circumpolar “white world,” the North for Burnside is a place outside of history wherein a greater and more authentic sense of being can be experienced.

\textsuperscript{106} Burnside, \textit{The Light Trap}, 3.
While such a connection to the natural world is a prominent feature in Burnside’s work, the danger of disappearing into that world and becoming estranged from the human community is also evident in his poetry and prose set in the North, especially in the small island of Kvaløya in the very north of Norway. Just as he believes there is a strong theme of liminality between appearance and disappearance in nineteenth-century Norwegian art, he experiences in the North not silence but “far off murmuring: inhuman voices on the wind; the soft, far pulse of something I couldn’t pin down coming through the strand of birchwood near Karasjoka.” It is similar to the obscure feeling “of plenitude lost/about to be regained” that whispers in the birches in White’s “Valley of Birches.” In his essay “Alone,” Burnside recounts his wandering in the subarctic tundra of Norway, becoming disorientated, and then finding that he was, indeed, lost. Instead of breaking out into a panic or feeling a sense of dread, Burnside says he felt “a quiet sense of actually being in the world, a thread of its fabric, stupid and vulnerable perhaps, but alive and more alert than I had been in a long time.” He feels a greater sense of being alive and at home in this natural northern setting than he does among his own family, friends and colleagues and the other places he has hitherto called home up until that point, dismissing them as “an illusion.” Out of history, alone, and with a hyperawareness of a greater sense of belonging in the physical landscape and phenomena of the North, Burnside admits that he could, “quite literally, disappear.” Just as Jamie forgets to call her father in “The Buddleia” and only just remembers to breathe in “Basking Shark,” Burnside runs the risk of vanishing completely into the landscape, light, and ecology of the North.

109 White, Open World, 275.
“‘Here,’” a friend from the North tells him, “it’s not about solitude, it’s about having a real community. … When you go to the edge of the world, you have to have something to come back to.” At the edge of the world, at the edge of being, there is a danger of falling out of metaphysical conceptions of the self and out of the all-too-human world completely. Burnside managed to avoid vanishing into the tundra of Norway, but the woman from his poem “Kapelløya” from The Hunt in the Forest (2009) and several characters of his novel A Summer of Drowning (2012) are not as fortunate.

“Wonders will never cease,” says Burnside at the start of “Kapelløya,” which, set in the southern tip of Norway, describes the gradual transformation and disappearance of a woman amid the rocks, waves, and kittiwakes over the space of a week. Within this poem we meet a woman obviously suffering from some kind of grief or frustration—a “nostalgia for pain”—who ventures out at dawn to the rocks at the shoreline “to recover a world.” More frantically than MacDiarmid’s turning of the rocks in his hands to “get into this stone world” in “On a Raised Beach,” the woman of Burnside’s poem, setting herself down amid the elements of wind and “a skitter of bone in the tide,” frantically scratches and tears at the rock “till the fingers/bled.” Gradually, “day after day, / with gratitude, alone,” her mind and body starts to merge with the elements. Like the indifference flux and reflux of the tides and the “gravity of kittiwake / and herring,” she becomes “numb to the roll / of the sea” and “[gazes] on the stubborn fact / of matter,” the intricacies of which seem “like the dreaming / flesh in an old / anatomy.” The duality of subject and object, self and world, mind and matter, is gradually dissolved. And it is just

111 Ibid., 24.
at this point of transformation and disappearance that the people from the village community make an appearance only in time for them to see “the backward glance / as it turns to salt / or the flicker of ash and guile / in the still of the land.”\textsuperscript{114} In her attempt to “recover a world,” the woman of Burnside’s poem disappears into a hyperawareness of being \textit{in} that world, lost to the community who come to look for her.

This same theme of disappearance into the world in the North is also evident in Burnside’s novel \textit{A Summer of Drowning}. Set this time in the very far north of Norway on the small island of Kvaløya, the story begins and ends with the narration of an older Liv, who, ten years previously, witnessed the mysterious drownings and disappearances of various members of and visitors to her Arctic community. The novel is full of appearances and disappearances, illusions, madness, susceptibilities, and myths, but Liv is convinced that what she witnessed that summer was the disappearance of people into the very fabric of the world. As she states later in the novel, “I was always aware of a gap – a dark, clean tear – in the fabric of the world.”\textsuperscript{115} The Arctic space that she inhabits with her reclusive artist mother seems to exist on the very borderline of this liminal “gap” between two very different worlds. As she says of Kvaløya: “On the map, it looks like an angel in flight, but it is only another island in the Arctic Circle, an unexciting fringe of settlements … around a silent, almost deserted heartland of woods and low mountains, populated by herds of elusive, non-native elk, but haunted by something older and less amendable to language.”\textsuperscript{116} It is out of and into this “gap” that this “something older” is apprehended, and it is through this “gap” that the victims of the

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 47.
drownings and disappearances seem to fall through. Her friend, the old man Kyrre Opdahl, believes that this is the domain as well as workings of the mythical huldra, a beautiful woman who enters into the human world and drags off susceptible men to their deaths. While Liv does start to believe in this myth during a period of mental instability later in the novel, demonstrating just how dangerous it is to start believing in such illusions, she is more convinced that the huldra is just a metaphor for something other that actually exists in the world. “I don’t know if the huldra is real,” she says, “but I know that she exists and, sooner or later, she comes stepping out into the light of day and takes possession of whoever it is she has come for.” What she is sure of, however, is that there is a rip in the fabric of reality, or what we conceive to be reality, and through it another way of seeing and being conscious in and of the world is manifested. “[No] matter what form we give it,” she says, “or how elaborately it is contrived, order is an illusion and, eventually, something will emerge from the background noise and the shadows and upset everything we are so determined to believe in.” But that something other, some alternative world, is not a mythic or imaginative space; it is already palpable in the world that we inhabit: “in real life, that something is always there, hidden in plain view, waiting to flower.”117

Just as in the conclusion to “Kapelløya,” the only evidence of the disappearances that Liv believes that she has witnessed is a trace of “ash or dust.”118 The last disappearance that she witnesses, that of Kyrre Opdahl and the strange girl Maia, is accompanied by a shriek that does not seem to disappear into nothingness but becomes “absorbed into the land for miles around, absorbed by the birches and the meadows and

117 Ibid., 77.
118 Ibid., 5.
the white air out over the Sound, absorbed so thoroughly that it would never disappear." The disappearance of these people is not into a vacuum or some mythical world; it is into the very fabric of the world that, like Burnside in the tundra, they have all suddenly become aware of or susceptible to. Despite Kyrre Opdahl’s theory of the huldra to make sense of it all, it is another character, Ryvold, who comes closest to articulating what has happened through a reinterpretation of another myth, that of Narcissus. Instead of understanding the myth as a story of vanity and self-love, which is the traditional interpretation, Ryvold suggests that what Narcissus fell in love with was his own self reflected within the world: "He was the one he could see in the pool, along with all the other things – the sky, the trees, the world about him. And maybe that was what made him so happy – he had thought he was alone, looking at a world that was separate from him, a world of other things, and then, all of a sudden, he sees that he is in that world. He is real." If he had stayed apart," says Ryvold, "he could have lived forever. That was what the gods had promised him at birth. But now, when he seems himself and knows he is part of the world, he has to die."

The danger of disappearance or self-annihilation within a hyperawareness of actually being in the world is therefore at the heart of Burnside’s conception and experience of the North. While both Jamie and Burnside explore this danger in their work, however, their concern is primarily about the importance of bringing the mind and body back into a greater understanding and experience of the natural world. As Burnside says of his intent in A Poet’s Polemic (2003): it is a poetry “not so much as ‘self-

119 Ibid., 310.
120 Ibid., 142.
121 Ibid., 143.
forgetting' as a heightened self-awareness, in which we are capable of knowing the self, and laying it to rest, for a time, in order to be more open to, to attend to, to listen to that [natural] world."\textsuperscript{122} Despite its dangers, it is in the transnational space of the North where this "heightened self-awareness" within the world manifests itself for both Jamie and Burnside.

Just as Elphinstone believes that historical novels of the North can inaugurate a imaginative and cartographic turn in the Scottish imagination into the North, and just as Jamieson's and De Luca's poetry has tried to create a transnational imaginative and discursive space in the North, Burnside and Jamie position themselves both within and outside of Scotland in terms of writing about the North as a wider space of being in the natural world. As Jamie says, "I want to try to come to terms with where I am: a whole new world, a world with ice."\textsuperscript{123}


\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 2.
Conclusion

At the end of Douglas Dunn’s poem “75°” from *Northlight* (1988), the North appears as something of a shadow that disrupts Scotland’s pleasant southern illusions:

Postponed by seasonal delight
And midnight sun, the north returns,
A furred, Icelandic anchorite
Travelling south by landmarked cairns,
Islands, headlands, bearing his cold
Autumnal charms, spelling ridged gold
Into the shiver in the leaf,
Deciduous, wrinkled and skew-whiff.¹

And for the older Kenn in Neil Gunn’s *Highland River* (1934), sweeping his gaze around “to scan the whole northland” from the Moray Firth to the “great plain of Caithness” and further north to Orkney, “the granite speaks of Ben Laoghal, the magic mountain, beckon towards Cape Wrath and the Arctic.”² The North is both present and absent in Dunn’s poem and beckons invitingly from a distance in Gunn’s novel. To borrow a phrase from Peter Davidson’s *The Idea of North* (2004), the existence of a wider northern or polar world has been to Scotland and Scottish writers something of “an off-stage presence.”³

As I suggested in my introduction, Scottish literature has been characterized by a variety of national redefinitions and reimaginings. The topic of what Scotland is and how

it can be understood has been a central twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical concern and a subject of much contention. To paraphrase Michael Gardiner, these revivals of Scottish literature and Scottish identity have almost always been defined in terms of Scottish distinctiveness and cultural autonomy in relation to a larger Anglo-British cultural and political core or hegemony.⁴ As Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford state in *Scotlands* (2004), somewhat defensively, “no matter how Anglicised Scots become, they do not become English.”⁵ Suspicious of holistic interpretations of the nation, however, devolutionary and post-devolutionary Scottish criticism has looked to expand and even transcend the centrality of the nation and national identity into new dimensions and alternative conceptions. To quote Berthold Schoene once more, “No longer led to be regarded, or led to regard itself, as exclusively Scottish and thus found or finding itself lacking, [Scotland] becomes free to reconceive of itself in broader terms, with reference to other cultures (not just English culture), indeed as situated within a vibrant network of interdependent cultural contexts.”⁶ Drawing upon this transnational shift in modern Scottish literary criticism as well as Cairns Craig’s “peripheral perspective” from *Out of History* (1996) that endeavors to open up alternative creative space outside of centralized conceptions, this dissertation has attempted to highlight and discuss the various articulations of a transnational northern dimension in modern Scottish literature that extend the conceptual boundaries of Scotland and Scottishness by imagining and

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⁵ Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford, introduction to *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation*, eds. Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), xvii.
exploring “alternative modes of Being and being conscious in the world.” I began by attempting to read James Macpherson’s Ossian (1765) outside of the shadow of the authenticity debates and claims of cultural nationalism. Despite Daniel Defoe’s ideological attempt to move Scotland away from any wider northern association in his propaganda poem Caledonia (1706), Macpherson’s poems return to that very North, transforming its rugged and wind-blasted topography from depictions of desolation into the northern sublime and the setting of a distinctly transnational epic of the North. There is therefore potentiality in reading Macpherson’s poems and, to a lesser extent, James Hogg’s nineteenth-century rewriting of Ossian, Queen Hynde (1825), less as distinctly national epics than as representations of the nation that, to borrow a phrase from Penny Fielding, “[leak] at the top.” At the end of my first chapter, I also discussed Walter Scott’s The Pirate (1822). Scott’s novel was the first novel to be set exclusively in Scotland’s Northern Isles and obviously tries to sensationalize the Scandinavian ‘otherness’ of the Isles for a British public still enthralled by the Nordic Romanticism that was in many ways kindled by Macpherson. At the same time, however, Scott concludes his novel by attempting to bring the Northern Isles into reconciliation with Scotland and towards a more national narrative of progress and improvement.

Since then, Scottish writers have again looked towards the northern and western extremes of Scotland as well as the wider northern world beyond its borders. For Hugh MacDiarmid, writing in Shetland in the 1930s, the landscape and the elements of the Northern Isles became the setting and inspiration for a northern poetics of actuality that

would be later be synthesized with the addition of an Eastern intellectual dimension. It was the MacDiarmid of difficult knowledge and existential contemplation instead of the MacDiarmid of Scots and Scottish nationalism who inspired Kenneth White. White would go on to expand MacDiarmid’s original Celtic-Northern-Eastern poetics into his own transcultural and transnational circumpolar geopoetics, moving himself and Scottish literature outside of the nation and into a larger ontological space of being in the physical world. In my third chapter, I focused on George Mackay Brown’s and Margaret Elphinstone’s creative engagement with the Icelandic and Scandinavian sagas and their conceptualizations of the North. Like White’s Hyperborean North, Elphinstone’s North is a space that questions the self and the epistemological assumptions of the centre. The North is likewise a metaphysical space for Brown, although, unlike White and Elphinstone, it is a metaphysical space constructed through mysticism, archetype and Christian symbolism. I concluded my third chapter by arguing that Elphinstone’s *The Sea Road* (2000) can be read as a post-devolutionary historical novel that attempts to reorient Scotland’s cartographic and cultural imagination into a transnational northern world.

The contemporary Shetlandic poetry of Christine De Luca and Robert Alan Jamieson is at this center of this post-devolutionary ‘northern turn’ in Scottish literature, creating within their poetry as well as their involvement in poetry workshops with other Nordic writers a transnational imaginative and discursive space in the North. While De Luca’s and Jamieson’s North is predominantly created through cultural and linguistic connection, the greater sense of cartographic space that they open with their poems is likewise apprehended by Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside, both of whom write about
a greater sense of connection with the natural world in the transnational space of the North.

In their recent publication *Arctic Discourses* (2010), editors Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski, and Henning Howlid Wærp contribute towards a wide range of interdisciplinary studies of the representation of the transnational circumpolar world through the study of a number of varied sources that range from identity, exploration, native peoples and the environment. The writers discussed within this dissertation have been and continue to be intent on reorienting Scotland and Scottish literature into a greater awareness of being part of a larger cultural, historical, geographical, topographical and ecophilosophical North that transcends any essentialist conceptions of Scotland or Scottishness by bringing it into relation with Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and a larger circumpolar world. The majority of the writers that I discuss in this dissertation therefore center on the northern peripheries and articulate their transnational possibilities. Through an imaginative as well as experiential engagement with the North as a cultural, geographical, and wider space of ecophilosophical being, these writers have moved Scotland and Scottish literature into an alternative northern direction. To quote Jamie once more, Scottish literature is “coming to terms with where [it is]: a whole new world, a world with ice.”

As Alan Riach and Ian Brown states, “Literature is an essential way in which people in communities convey to themselves and others their concerns and

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imaginings.”¹⁰ In *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999), Cairns Craig argues that it is through the space of the novel that the nation and national identity can be reevaluated and reimagined not in terms of “some transcendental identity which either survives or is erased” but as “a series of ongoing debates, founded institutions and patterns of life whose elements are continually changing but which constitute, by the nature of the issues which they foreground, and by the reiteration of elements of the past, a dialogue which is unique to that particular place.”¹¹ As he goes on to say:

The tradition of the modern Scottish novel … is not an ‘expression’ of a national ‘geist,’ nor a singular founding principle to which any work must conform to be ‘Scottish’: the tradition is a space of debate, a dialogue between interacting possibilities of a medium shaped by the conditions of those living in Scotland – its languages and its economic and social circumstances – and within the institutions which give shape to its national imagining. It is an attempt to identify a national tradition of the novel in Scotland, not as an essence which will exclude or include writers as the ‘truly Scottish,’ but as a dialogue between the variety of discourses which, in debating with each other, constitute the space that is the imagining of Scotland and Scotland’s imagination.¹²

Craig is obviously talking here about the space of a *national* literature and dialogue. Having examined the transnational aspects of the uses of the North, I should acknowledge that there is also, of course, a national, perhaps even nationalist, dimension to the northern turn in post-referendum Scotland. While writers such as White, Jamie and John Burnside look North transnationally, the North has been used or drawn upon by figures such as Lesley Riddoch and economic think-tanks such as Lateral North as a socio-political and economic source of national reimagining and


¹² Ibid., 33.
transformation. The Scottish National Party, for example, which is now the largest party in Scotland following the 2014 referendum, has an Arctic agenda at the heart of its foreign policy.\textsuperscript{13} There is therefore a larger political dimension that needs to be analyzed in relation to a discernible northern turn in contemporary Scottish culture.

But another potential direction that Scottish literature can explore in terms of the North is to move beyond Scottish national boundaries. As Gavin Francis has recently highlighted in \textit{True North} (2010), the communities of the North Atlantic share and experience similar conditions and concerns ranging from an unforgiving climate to the phenomenon of depopulation—the latter of which, Francis states, “was a story I was to hear all over the North.”\textsuperscript{14} Travelling around the North—Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, Svalbard and Lapland—he not only follows the myths, histories and ancient literatures of the North, but comes into contact with economic, social and environmental issues that seem to be apparent in all the different places that he visits. If for Craig the Scottish novel is a space of debate and dialogue “between interacting possibilities of a medium shaped by the conditions of those living in Scotland,” there is a strong case to be made for similar debates and dialogues to be initiated between the different literatures of the North Atlantic. Writing for the literary magazine \textit{Northwords Now}, for example, Robert Alan Jamieson explains that it is the literature of the North Atlantic that he feels closest to in terms of a literary tradition:

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Personally, the writers I found most inspirational as a young aspirant – those who made it seem possible to make literature about my native Shetland – were often northerners who wrote from the inside, about things that surrounded them – more


\textsuperscript{14} Gavin Francis, \textit{True North}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Ed. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2010), 9.
the Burnsian model than the Ossianic. The poems and stories of George Mackay Brown, the early novels of Knut Hamsun, the Faroese and Icelandic work of William Heinesen and Halldór Laxness, all these seemed to depict recognizably familiar worlds which, despite the fact that they were not Shetlandic, had something of the social structure and the philosophy of my local people if not their language or the topography of the islands. Mackay Brown’s Hamnavoe was not so different from Scalloway in my imagination. Heinesen’s ‘lost musicians’ might well have been denizens of Lerwick. Lieutenant Glahn’s midsummer Nordland adventures might have taken place in some isolated part of my native isles. And Bjatur of Summerhouses, with his fierce independence and love of his flock of sheep, could easily have been one of the old Shetland crofters I grew up among.15

Just as Craig believes that a dialogue within and about Scotland can be facilitated through the space of the novel, there is a strong argument to be made that a similar transnational dialogue between the writers of the North Atlantic could highlight potential commonalities (and differences) of experience and expression.

In the same article for Northwords Now, Jamieson discusses a recent trip he took to the Yukon in Canada as part of research for a new book, and he mentions how this trip into the North of Canada inspired him to reread the poems and ballads of Robert Service, “whose work is most often associated with Canada though he was from the west coast of Scotland.”16 With the rise of diasporic interest in Scottish literary studies, these Scottish links to Canada’s North offer potential for further research.

For Sherill Grace, writing in her book Canada and the Idea of North (2002), the North is central to the Canadian imagination. From the disappearance of Franklin to the Wendigo, the North is “an idea as much as any physical region that can be mapped and

16 Ibid., 10.
measured for nordicity.”¹⁷ In this sense, her idea of the Canadian North is very much like Peter Davidson’s in *The Idea of North* (2004), published two years later. But unlike Davidson’s text, Grace’s study is resolutely Canadian. Discussing a wide range of interdisciplinary figures, texts, voices and works about and from the North, Grace’s book does not follow or subscribe to an overarching thesis. Instead, drawing on Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin, she presents a “discursive formation of the North,”¹⁸ that is, a dialogic (although sometimes very selective) representation from a variety of sources, “continually forming new ideas of the North.”¹⁹ Grace’s sources and references are, obviously, Canadian, as this is a text about Canadians “constantly imagining and constructing Canada-as-North.”²⁰ I would like to conclude this dissertation by charting a way forward for a dialogue between Scottish and Canadian studies through the examination of how Scottish diasporic writers have contributed towards this “discursive formation of the North” in Canada.

“Might we think not of a ‘native’ culture, but instead a migratory, diasporic Scottish literary culture …?” ask Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney.²¹ As Carruthers states, this dimension of Scottish literary study is still relatively unexplored: “‘Scottish literature’ in diaspora and writers of Scottish origins represents a patchy story


¹⁸ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁹ Ibid., 224.

²⁰ Ibid., xii.

that remains inadequately narrated in any systematic way.”\textsuperscript{22} Carruthers lists a number of \textit{émigré} or diasporic Scottish writers from Ulster, the South Seas, America, Australia, New Zealand, and especially Canada. He mentions Robert Service, for example, whose ballads and poems of the Yukon need no introduction here. As Grace states, “‘When Robert Service announced that ‘there are strange things done in the midnight sun / By the men who moil for gold’ … he could not have imagined what he was starting.”\textsuperscript{23} It is curious, however, that Carruthers does not mention John Buchan, who was Governor General of Canada from 1935 to 1940, and whose novel \textit{Sick Heart River} (1941) was inspired by his time and travels North in Canada. Neither does he mention Kenneth White, who, as I described in Chapter Two, moved to France, became a French citizen, and wrote and published in French. White classes himself as diasporic, migrant, nomadic—a wanderer. Although not an \textit{émigré} to Canada, like Buchan, White also travelled to and wrote about Canada’s North in his ‘waybook’ \textit{The Blue Road} (1990). Both \textit{Sick Heart River} and \textit{The Blue Road} are filled with references to the Scottish diaspora in Canada’s North. The “half breed” brothers, Johnny and Lew Frizel, who help Edward Leithen in Buchan’s novel, are a mix of Scottish and native, and Johnny is “eager to emphasize the Scottish side of their ancestry” by speaking Scots and singing Scots tunes on their journey into the Arctic.\textsuperscript{24} And heading north out of Quebec City towards Labrador, White says, “I was to come across Scotch traces all over the place.”\textsuperscript{25} For both writers, especially Buchan, the very topology and geography of the Canadian North is often reminiscent of parts of Scotland, therefore bringing the diasporic memory


\textsuperscript{23} Grace, \textit{Canada and the Idea of North}, 90.

\textsuperscript{24} John Buchan, \textit{Sick Heart River} (Toronto: The Musson Book Company, 1941), 135-136.

\textsuperscript{25} Kenneth White, \textit{The Blue Road} (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), 32.
of place into an association of place in Canada. On several occasions Buchan breaks
the narrative to juxtapose the Arctic landscape with a “Hebridean cape”\textsuperscript{26} or a “Highland
salmon river.”\textsuperscript{27} I therefore want to look briefly at both Buchan’s \textit{Sick Heart River} and
White’s \textit{The Blue Road}, both of which, it can be argued, are part of a diasporic Scottish
literature that has contributed towards the “discursive formation of the North” in Canada.

Summarizing Buchan’s novel (alongside several other novels of the Canadian
North around the same time), Grace states, “These novels represent North as an alien
and alienating landscape, feminine in its alluring charm, and as deadly as a female in a
misogynist’s nightmare.”\textsuperscript{28} It is a very accurate description of Buchan’s novel. The basic
thesis of the novel revolves around a plot that has a dying Edward Leithen travel into the
Canadian Arctic to find a missing man called Francis Galliard who has forsaken his
American capitalist life to return to his roots and make penance “at the alter of the
northern wilds.”\textsuperscript{29} In the process of finding Galliard, Buchan draws upon various
representations of the North that come straight from the poetry of Service. “It was a
borderline between the prosaic world, where things went by role and rote and were all
fitted to the human scale,” Buchan has Leithen tells us, “and the world as God first made
it out of chaos, which had no care for humanity.”\textsuperscript{30} It is a hellish place, “a colossal no-
man’s-land created in some campaign of demons”;\textsuperscript{31} it is “a void, a treacherous, deathly

\textsuperscript{26} Buchan, \textit{Sick Heart River}, 119.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{28} Grace, \textit{Canada and the Idea of North}, 183.
\textsuperscript{29} Buchan, \textit{Sick Heart River}, 109.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 118.
waste, pale like a snake’s belly, a thing beyond humanity and time”;\textsuperscript{32} it is a place that makes men mad, just as Rudy Wiebe writes about in \textit{The Mad Trapper} (1980); it is a place of illusions, fantasies, sick hearts and spiritual angst; it is a seductive landscape, feminine, inviting challenge from men, but which often turns out to be no more than a “‘cruel, bloody-minded old bitch’”;\textsuperscript{33} it is a space for spiritual contemplation and, like in George Mackay Brown’s \textit{Water} (1997), a place in which to search for some kind of elusive metaphysical Christian silence; and it is also a place of death and dearth—in fact, in Buchan’s novel, the Arctic \textit{is} Death—and populated by good-hearted missionaries, “half breeds” and “degenerate Indians” who are depicted as childish, simple, and incapable of looking after themselves.\textsuperscript{34} The Arctic becomes a place for a dying Leithen to face his own death standing up, fighting, “so he can go down in action with every flag flying.”\textsuperscript{35} The only reason Leithen seems to help the melancholy native Hares at the end of the novel, who have fallen into a nihilistic depression that is supposedly a consequence of their living in the North, is not out of any sense of fellow humanity, but a desire to finally conquer the North, that is, “to fight the North and not submit to it.”\textsuperscript{36} Buchan does not raise the question that the Hares’ melancholy might have more to do with the influence of the missionaries and imperial processes. As with any Buchan adventure novel, the narrative is full of suspense, danger and excitement. But its depiction of the North as a place to conquer both physically and mentally is a product of its time as well as Buchan’s own imperial mindset.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 315.
White’s *The Blue Road* could not be more different from Buchan’s novel in its representation and discussion of the Canadian North, although he does continue to use terms such as “Indian” and “Eskimo,” making the novel frustrating to read from a contemporary perspective, given White’s obvious respect and regard for native people and their communities, as well as his interest in Inuit shamanism, traditions and poems. Unlike Buchan, who keeps a condescending distance from the native Hares and rarely has them speak for themselves, White goes into detail, often quoting members of the native communities, about the devastation caused to their communities through prejudicial politics, development and what he sees as the pernicious influence of missionaries. Discussing the collaboration of religion and commerce at one stage in his book, White says, “[the missionaries and developers] tell [the native population] about Paradise and then proceed to blow up the very ground they stand on.”

What *The Blue Road* is mainly concerned about, however, is the search for geopoetic space in Labrador. As White states: "Maybe the idea is to go as far as possible – to the end of yourself – till you get into a territory where time turns into space, where things appear in all their nakedness and the wind blows anonymously.” Arriving in Montreal at the start of the book, White comments that Labrador to the north seems like a place completely off the mental map of most of the Quebec population. Asking for directions and ways of transportation to Labrador from Montreal, White says, "I felt as if I’d asked a metaphysical question at a congress of logical positivists.” A friend of White’s, who lives in Montreal, explains that the reason for this is that Quebec has not

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37 White, *The Blue Road*, 115.
38 Ibid., 11.
39 Ibid., 14.
managed to become aware of such physical-metaphysical space because they are too busy remembering the history of their colonial past with England. To which White responds, obviously alluding to Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance:

God almighty! Who cares about the English, whether coming or going?

If I bothered about what the English did, I’d be up there in old Caledonia with a historical chip on my shoulder, scrawling long political poems in Lallans and waving a wee flag.

Shit, you can’t be a Scotsman all your life. At least, you can’t always be harping on it. You’ve got to get out there and mix it more. Make something of it.40

Like Scotland, Quebec—and Canada as a whole, according to White—needs to move out into that greater existential spatial mindscape. “Labrador is where I come full circle,” says White, “swallow my birth, develop all the negatives of my adolescence and get a good look at my original face. What I need above all at the moment is space, a big white breathing space for the ultimate meditation.”41 It is a philosophical and poetic space, as he says, referring to Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud, all of whom, according to White, “follow the North road, trying to get into the clear, beyond all the fuzz.”42 But it is also a physical space, actual, and experienced phenomenologically. Speaking about the North in Canada, White says: “It’s only a little over a hundred years ago that all the thousands of square miles of territory that had ‘belonged’ to the Hudson’s Bay Company were added to Quebec, and such an awesome increase in space … hasn’t yet entered the local conscience. That’s why the whole of the North is still a cold

40 Ibid., 16.
41 Ibid., 20.
42 Ibid., 34.
enigma to most Canadians, while to the Amerindian it’s full of live realities.”

What White is out to explore and experience in the Canadian North is an experiential metaphysics, a mental cartography: “It’s this spatial sense of being I’m working my way into up here on the Labrador plateau.” The further into the North he goes, the more he starts to find this sense of open space and landscape, quoting from Inuit poems that, according to White, carry that sense of space and authentic being in the physical world that he is looking for and that he suggests that Canada needs to find. “Spaced-out poems,” White calls them, “way beyond the person. To stand up to landscape such as this, it takes poetry close to the bone and open to the winds.”

Buchan and White are therefore two diasporic writers who have contributed in very different ways to Grace’s “discursive formation of the North” in Canada. While Buchan might not open up any new or startling insights in his own novel, White’s circumpolar geopoetics has the potential to add an ecosophiological dimension to Northern Studies in Canada—and in Scotland. *The Blue Road* and White’s wider circumpolar geopoetics might be put into fruitful dialogue with Canadian texts that focus on native (self) representation, northern ecoliterature and ecocriticism, as well as the North as a conceptual idea. In *Enduring Dreams* (1994), for example, John Moss struggles to capture original landscape in the Canadian Arctic, that is, to “escape the world as text” and “perceive meaning in landscape, instead of imposing it.” But he comes to the conclusion that such an apprehension of authentic landscape—which White attempts to capture and articulate in his own Arctic and broader northern

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43 Ibid., 111.
44 Ibid., 117.
45 Ibid., 143.
geopoetics—cannot be apprehended at all. As Grace states, summarizing Moss’s conclusion, “we cannot escape text; we do not perceive an original landscape … freely, neutrally, directly; our perceptions, like our knowledge, are culturally mediated.” As part of a ‘northern turn’ in Scottish literature, there are therefore possibilities for further studies in terms of a transnational North Atlantic dialogue and the exploration of diasporic Scottish writers writing about and contributing towards the “discursive formation of the North” in Canada. The opportunity also arises to engage Scottish literature within a broader northern dialogue in terms of analyzing the similarities and differences of how writers from Scotland and around the world have written and represented conceptions of Arcticness or northerness.

“Scotland small?” asks MacDiarmid. “Our multiform, our infinite Scotland small? / Only as a patch of hillside may be a cliché corner / To a fool who cries ‘Nothing but heather!’” This dissertation has engaged with writers who have moved Scotland and Scottish literature beyond such clichés and any bounded conception of Scotland and Scottishness into an alternative northern cartographic, cultural and ecological sense of “Being and being conscious in the world.”

47 Grace, Canada and the Idea of North, 41.
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