

A decorative graphic in the top-left corner consisting of a grid of blue squares in various shades, arranged in a pattern that tapers to the right.

Alaisdair Gray

Interviewed

Local vs provincial art

- “DH Lawrence said that all good art is local, all bad art provincial. He meant that good writers use local materials without thinking it inferior in the eyes of an audience. Provincial writers have a distant metropolitan audience in mind, so over-explain the local material they use, emphasizing it to the point of distortion, or simplifying it nostalgically as Barrie did in his Thrums and Sentimental Tommy stories, or brutalizing it improbably as in the grotesque first chapter of Hay’s *Gillespie* and the later novels of Irvine Welsh.”

English vs Scottish Literature


- “From the earliest poets of Scottish literature (Barbour, Blind Harry, Dunbar, Douglas, Lyndsay) to the earliest novelists (Scott, Galt, Hogg) Scots writers well knew the differences between their own culture and England’s but had the confidence to love the best in English writing and learn from it: as Henryson and Douglas did from Chaucer, Burns from Pope, Scott from Fielding (...). Most Scots writers lost this confidence between the death of Galt and the coming of MacDiarmid.”


Vs simple generalizations

- “You are seeking big simple generalizations to explain what Scottish fictions have in common with each other that make them differ from English, Irish, or USA fictions. But be careful not to over-simplify. Don’t take John Knox too seriously. From the days of David Hume, Boswell and Robert Burns onward no creative Scot has been bothered by Calvinist guilt, though in moments of weakness we have used it to explain our weaknesses. You may have heard of The Caledonian Antisyzygy, which makes us wag back and forth between stark reality and far-fetched fantasy. Has any land lacked writers who do that? Scotland’s queer geography and greater poverty, compared with England’s, have given her a different social history, therefore different material for her writers to use. But the differences between the best of them are more valuable than their similarities.”

The audience to write for / the language to write in

- “I want to be read by an English-speaking tribe which extends to Capetown in the south, Bengal in the east, California in the west, and George Mackay Brown in the north. This does not preclude me from using any words of Scots origin that I please. [...]. Most English words were originally used by illiterate Celts, Germans and Scandinavians. To these an international civil service of priests added some long Latin words and a clan of bullyboy Norman invaders some posh French ones. In the past century the main additions to our vocabulary have been devised by scientists and technicians. Words stay alive because we find them useful or entertaining.”

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- “[...] When a writer is using English dramatically – not necessarily in a play, it can be in a story where several speakers are quoted – the verbal colouring (if his characters are not bound to one social class in one emotional state) will be tinted with idioms which vary from Biblical to the Johnsonian, from American film-commercial to local cockney, Oxbridge, or Glaswegian. And this is simple realism.”



“[...] Edwin Muir’s frequently quoted formulation of the Scots writer’s predicament into a double-bind choice of, write Scottishly and you’ll be sincere but neglected by the world-as-a-whole, write for the English world-as-a-whole and you must discount the source of your emotions – seems to me nothing but a huge failure of nerve, a cowardice in the face of our best examples. MacDiarmid was one such example. He spoke of all the things he believed, using all the language he could master, local and historical, scientific-technical, political-polemical.”