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ARTICLE

Coming in From the Cold – Scottish Masculinity in Post-Millennial Fiction

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This article builds on Jones's previous work on masculinity in Scottish fiction, probing the ongoing process of moving beyond dominant paradigms of masculinity in Scottish writing. The analysis explores the haunting power of masculine spectres and their return to centrality in twenty-first century Scottish fiction. The article juxtaposes Emily Mackie's novels *And This is True* (2010) and *In Search of Solace* (2014), which both remain fixated upon masculinity with Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011), which resists the urge to re-centre masculinity despite its central male character, and offers a contrasting alternative to dominant modes of male identity.

Keywords: Scottish Fiction; Masculinities; Emily Mackie; Ali Smith; Empathy; Relational Selfhood; Post-secularism

In previous work I identified a trend in a strand of devolutionary Scottish fiction, by both female and male writers, for male characters to 'disappear'; that they were 'wishing and attempting to vanish or be rid of themselves, dying or already dead' (Jones 2009, 1). I characterised this trend as a farewell to 'the Man that was' (Jones 2009, 189) – the masculinised Enlightenment liberal humanist self – an assertion based on the noteworthy cache of 'disappearing men' in novels of the period. In relation to Alan Warner's first novel *Morvern Callar* (1995) it was my thesis that the eponymous central character's mountainside internment of her dead lover 'leaves no possibility of a resurrection of Him, the Man that was' (Jones 2009, 189), as he is signified in that text. This corroborated the work of other commentators' observations of shifting masculine subjectivities in Scottish fiction, citing, for example, Warner's later male-centred novels where 'the emasculated rather

than the patriarchal individual (or nation) is the one most likely to get to know himself as well as see, recognise and welcome his other' (Schoene 2007, 263). This was certainly a period of disorientation and a process of transition which produced anxious characters often stuck between discredited old models of gender identity and as yet not fully achieved new ones.

However, in the first decades of the twenty-first century this process has seen uneven development in contemporary Scottish fiction. Progressively open representations of femininity have appeared in the work of writers such as Ali Smith, Jenni Fagan and Kerry Hudson, and some diverse engagements with queerness characterise masculine figures in texts by James Robertson, Alan Bissett and Zoë Strachan. But the emergence of radically alternative models of masculine subjectivity in particular has been a stuttering process struggling to move beyond the dominant paradigms, so that the spectre of traditional masculine authority continues to wield, if not exactly presence, then centrality and influence in a significant portion of recent fiction.

This essay examines Emily Mackie's novels *And This Is True* (2010) and *In Search Of Solace* (2014) which illustrate a continuing preoccupation with traditionally dominant modes and ideals of masculinity. It juxtaposes these with Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011), a novel presenting an alternative approach to, and effectively a critique of, the impulse to re-centre masculinity. I will conclude by considering Smith's novel in relation to Rosi Braidotti's promotion of a postsecular critical context which is productive of affirmative affects rather than founded on negativity. Smith's central male character, Miles, effectively challenges the re-centring of masculinity in her suggestively nomadic vision. Whether vaunting spectral or otherwise insubstantial masculine effects, these chosen examples signify contrasting implications for male identity and masculine authority. The following argues that dominant masculinity, often marginalised through death or disappearance in the devolution texts, returns from the borders of its banishment in these new fictions to haunt contemporary representation.

An interesting case of such a trope can be found in James Kelman's 2012 novel, *Mo said she was quirky*. Kelman's work provides a prominent illustration of

the disappearing male figure; his fiction has mostly focused on working-class male central characters who, dispersed over inner and outer terrains in Kelman's inimitable narrative style, become somewhat unanchored, psychically and territorially, by the end of the text. *Mo said* diverges from this model in having a female central character, so although it is her partner Mo who is the agent of the title, it is Helen's experience of life we are tuned into. However, it is her long-estranged brother Brian who is the spectral presence here; she thinks she recognises him in the figure of a homeless man who, with his companion, crosses in front of her taxi on her way home from work one night. When she attempts to accost him on the next night he attacks her: 'he muttered something and swung round, locked his right hand on her throat for her so to let go, to make her let go his arm [. . .] and when her eyes were open properly the two of them had vanished' (Kelman 2012, 228). As the novel ends here, it is never confirmed whether this is Brian, but this violent emergence and disappearance suggests the continuing presence of an unassuaged masculinity at the periphery of mainstream perception, even if Kelman does attempt to counter this in the figure of Mo, a gregarious Pakistani man who is known for his humour, resourcefulness and caring personality. The theme of a marginalised dominant masculinity staging a return to centrality can be found in several recent texts.

As a contextualising frame for these examples, Alan Warner's recent novels can be characterised as, in some ways, lessons from the recent history of gender relations. *Dead Man's Pedal* (2012) is set in the 1970s with the coming of age of Simon Crimmons who betrays his own abilities and his father's forceful entrepreneurialism to enter a declining industry and become a train driver. His struggle with the constraints of gender identity in that small local context is approached from a different angle in *Their Lips Spoke of Mischief* (2014), a novel set in the 1980s which focuses on Welsh Lou and Scottish Douglas, two aspiring writers living in London who drink, dream and debate away their days. Continuing the interest in non-patriarchal masculinity, these novels are not so much nostalgic for a lost ideal as stuck within its parameters. *Their Lips Spoke of Mischief* presents elemental gender stereotypes, particularly in Lou's wife Aoife, who is both siren and mother, a calcified image of the feminine: a

model who has the kind of 'menacing' (Warner 2015, 31) and deathly beauty realised in fashion's discursive spectacle of femininity. This submissive portrayal of Aoife is presented in relation to the two male 'writers' who have pretensions of intellectual grandeur while wallowing in objectification and exploitation of women, and, ultimately, violence against them in Lou's case.

Warner's narrative succeeds in capturing hope and despondency simultaneously, exposing the pretensions and dysfunction of a gendered cultural impasse. If femininity is portrayed here as mysteriously beautiful, dependent and acquiescent, masculinity is exposed as feckless, selfish, irresponsible, prejudiced, brutish, incapable; a fabricated and fake autonomy. However, in the novel's open ending the hyperbolic masculinity of Lou would seem to prevail leaving intact a violent relationship and an erotic triangle which the more receptive Douglas will fail to escape. Hailed as touting hedonism over hope in his early work, here Warner leaves us despondent at the intact patriarchal structures.

This historical fiction charts not the return of dominant masculinity but an instance of its less than triumphal survival in a decade that saw retrenchment on both sides in the 'gender wars' brought about by feminism; the 1980s gave us the fracturing of the women's movement as liberal equality feminism was challenged by concerns of identity and difference, while the emergence of neoliberal economic strategies was accompanied by a neoconservative nostalgia for traditional values which sought to constrain and thwart gender liberation. The depiction of the male characters in Warner's latest novel constitutes a prequel to devolution fiction's gender disorientation, and, ironically, is a suggestive prefiguration of the dominant masculinity that returns in recent twenty-first century texts.

Mackie's fiction is enthralled by masculinity and its contemporary journey through the battlefields of identity politics. Both novels prioritise male experience, though in different ways, and in this they provide topical examples of a restaging of dominant masculinity at the centre of focus, returned from the margins of discredited authority. *And This Is True* (2010) is narrated by fifteen year old Nevis who has lived in a transit van with his father Marshall for eleven years. The text charts the break-up of this intensely homosocial relationship. *In Search of Solace* has a multiply

fragmented, metafictional focus but the backbone of the narrative is provided by intermittent cameo scenes of a man and woman in bed, Jacob Little and, we assume, his teenage lover Lucy, though she is never named. That Jacob has committed suicide before the text begins, by stepping off a roof in an event filmed and then virally spread over the internet, makes him a spectral yet central presence in this novel. The fact that both Nevis and Jacob are writers underscores the depiction of a self-conscious re-assertion of masculine control, here over the discursive realm, when faced with the threat of overpowering relationality engendered by women.

And This Is True

In Mackie's first novel masculinity has been literally subsisting at the margins as Marshall and Nevis have dropped out of mainstream society and, until the period recounted in the text, lived a nomadic existence in a transit van. Marshall has taken his son on the road after his wife leaves him. Told through the naive voice of Nevis, the reader never learns how this existence is maintained, but it is the mundane details of the everyday in the van that constitute Nevis's reality, and to which he clings when this way of life ends. Marshall, an ex-English teacher and obsessive writer in private notebooks, has educated his son during their journeying, ensuring the isolated nature of their existence. Nevis is unsocialised and awkward in the ways of human interaction. The novel relates how this semi-idyllic, for Nevis, lifestyle comes to an end when Marshall decides to leave the road for a more settled mode of living. After crashing the van and being taken in by Nigel Kerr, a farmer, and his oddly characterised family – his son Duckman, his sister Elspeth, and her daughter Ailsa – Marshall strikes up a relationship with the clumsily seductive Elspeth and considers sending Nevis to school. Nevis's anger at being forced to accept independence from his father forms the principle dynamic of the narrative leading to a destructive and disturbing conclusion.

Life in the van is characterised as abject. In one section titled 'The Rot' Nevis writes in one of his lists: 'Two bodies breathing, sleeping, sweating among unwashed clothes, on top of filthy torn sofa cushions pulled from a skip, never rid of that slight smell of rubbish. I could press my face deep into the padding, breathe in and smell

it, the fousty, wet, garbage. Rotten. [. . .] Could stun a dead man' (Mackie 2010, 127). This homosocial world without women is an abject one, existing among the waste of mainstream communities, the disgusting sign of society's impurity. In keeping with this outsider realm, the homosocial bond is brought to an end by what the mainstream would constitute as a perversion, an incestuous homosexual act when Nevis kisses his father, simultaneously discovering and disclosing his desire to a shocked and rejecting Marshall. Because of this incident Marshall decides to return to mainstream society: 'I think it's time we went back to normality' (Mackie 2010, 102), he says. This transition results in dislocation for Nevis and exacerbates his social alienation. A breakdown follows and a period confined to bed drifting between nightmare-filled sleep and feverish, unreal waking moments. The journey back from the margins is painful and involves a dissolution and reconstruction of self, 'my reprogramming' (Mackie 2010, 123), as Nevis terms it.

However, it is significant that Nevis's continuing disaffection is expressed in misogyny. That this is associated with homosocial and homosexual desire makes this text a particularly alarming and alarmist warning of the dangers of anti-social masculinity. Nevis's suspicion and hatred of women is signalled throughout the text, where they are characterised as sickly, persistent seducers, fake and cloying and faintly rotten, and often animalistic. Judged as even more abject and closer to 'rot'/death than himself and Marshall, women for Nevis are nauseatingly physical; their abjection is located in their bodies rather than their surroundings, as in the van. For instance, on first meeting Elspeth he describes her as laughing, 'nostrils flaring, and I felt her breath bellow against my face: chewed food mixed with a sickly sweet perfume' (Mackie 2010, 29); and further, 'I knew her more by smell – the sweet perfume she squirted behind her ears and on her neck and wrists, covering up the cooking fat and sweat' (Mackie 2010, 169). Females are often monstrous here, like the woman at the checkout, 'so fat she was sweating from her face [. . .] her face seemed to bulge forward' (Mackie 2010, 56–7). Other animal imagery is used to fix Ailsa, a particular target of Nevis's dislike for her adolescent flirtatious stalking of him; he imagines her flexing and twisting her tongue 'like a snake. I tried to imagine kissing her; her jaw would dislocate and her small mouth would open wide so as she could devour my

whole head' (Mackie 2010, 97). Elsewhere, Ailsa is 'sharp, her thin face and cheekbones, her pointy nose and chin, her cutting eyes' (Mackie 2010, 60). In their craving of attention and relation, women lack autonomy here, in stark contrast with the men who are all actual or aspiring loners.

Such sharp gender disparity is reflected in Nevis's preoccupation with the masculinised Enlightenment ideals of singular truth and apprehendable reality, and with controlling his narrative. When he begins writing, it is to capture his lost life; 'not fiction. I want to write the truth [. . .] my memories, what's real and what's not' (Mackie 2010, 273–4). Yet, the narrative eludes his control, stopping and starting, going backwards and forwards in time, exposing his unreliability when it comes to the truth and his fallibility as a teller of his own life. Finally he writes his story as a fairy tale, the kiss as the seal of a vow never to stray from his father's side (Mackie 2010, 247). Through this methodology he realises the value of fiction, that it can express and simultaneously hide the truth, but that ultimately the promise of writing is not achievable: 'pouring the past onto paper, ciphering through the days in the hope it pulls everything together and makes sense. But it doesn't' (Mackie 2010, 328). His inability to know the truth produces a controversial end to the narrative when he is unable to remember if, in a fit of violence after discovering Marshall and Elspeth having sex, he really did rape Ailsa. His father's rejection of his kiss is mirrored by his own rejection of Ailsa's kiss, and his frustrated desire turns violent. However, with a trauma-circumscribed blank in his memory he cannot be sure of the sequence of events, and Ailsa has not reported it to the police. The text is testing our certainties here in its challenging of what it sets out as postmodern relativism. If knowledge of truth and reality can never be certain then we cannot be proved guilty; we are relieved of our responsibilities towards others and for the consequences of our actions, as Nevis seems to be here. At the end he is ready to let go of the past, something he has constantly criticised his father for believing is possible or desirable. Finally Nevis exits to a different story, 'a different character' (Mackie 2010, 344).

And This Is True posits the return of dominant masculinity to the social mainstream from the margins, unrelieved of its misogynist foundations, as a dangerous

eventuality. The possibility of rehabilitation, the breakdown and reconstruction of identity, is doubted while traditional gender roles and behaviours prevail. The novel presents us with a world stuck in the discredited past, and a character unable to countenance the possibility of overcoming the gap that separates self from other. Though Marshall slips back into this unchanged world, taking up his old role and position, for Nevis, deeply infused with his homosocial past and perhaps pathologically alienated from women, the social world is oppressive and alienating, and he yearns to return to the margins; 'Let me live alone in the close confines of the back of the van any day, I thought. There is more freedom there than under the watchful eye of others' (Mackie 2010, 286).

In Search of Solace

Mackie's second novel is a complicated narrative telling the tale of the arrival of a drifter, Jacob Little, in a small, obscure Scottish town and his effect on the people he comes into contact with there. The author broaches no doubts as to the significance of fiction here as the storyteller begins by demonstrating their control: 'Can you see now, dear reader, the real power I have? I can be everywhere. I can see everything, inside and out' (Mackie 2014, 5). At the same time they promise to 'ground you, dear reader, don't fear, never fear' (Mackie 2014, 4). We are promised an explanation of the mystery of Jacob Little, who, significantly, is also a writer. In Mackie's heavy-handed metafictional style, this authorial intimacy and exposure is a laboured methodology and ultimately clears the way for explanation rather than interpretation, for clarity rather than a more postmodern doubtfulness.

This convoluted text unravels the story of thirty-three year old Jacob Little, another wanderer re-entering from the social margins. Arriving at Big Sal's pub enquiring about a room to rent, he initially seems unsure of his name. He is in town looking for a woman; 'she knows who I am' (Mackie 2014, 21). This woman he calls Solace, a girlfriend from ten years before; he shows people he meets a picture asking if they know her. However, this picture turns out to be a postcard of a painting of a blonde woman posed nude: 'Look how her hair falls in those thin, wispy ringlets and how her rose lips part slightly into that innocent, virgin pout – that lie, that deception –

just like your own wide-eyed gaze' (Mackie 2014, 41) Jacob has written in one of his notebooks. 'Solace' is another elemental feminine, a figure of saving comfort and consolation for unsettled men like Jacob, though also stereotypically a figure tainted with seductive falsity tempting men to their fall.

In another narrative strand we hear from Solace, not of course her real name which we never learn, who does indeed know the facts of Jacob's story. He is a man called Adam Garret whose half-brother was named Jacob Little; this original Jacob killed himself as a teenager. Solace asserts that Adam becomes 'Jacob', perhaps because he is haunted by guilt for his tormenting of his half-brother as a child which he confessed to her, and perhaps he is also encouraged in this by his step-mother/Jacob's mother, whose mental ill-health is illustrated in her own later suicide. Solace relates how, after Jacob disappeared she lived with this step/mother after the birth of their son. This woman, the child's grandmother, began calling her grandson 'Jacob'; 'She began to believe that *she* was his mother. She even began to call my baby boy Jacob' (Mackie 2014, 306). This explanation, coming towards the end of the novel, posits a clear reason for the rest of our Jacob's history which emerges after his death: his nomadic life living as different people – at least seventeen dominant identities – misleading others into intimacy and relations under the fictitious conditions of his existence. The instability of identity is a central theme here but, as it turns out, one concerned with pathology not contemporary existential crisis.

In the midst of this narrative, Jacob begins a relationship with sixteen year old Lucy Westbry who, on secretly reading his notebooks, finds in him an attractive, mysterious and romantic stranger to match the myth of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, to which she is enthralled. Losing her virginity to him in the dirty and desolate rented room, their week-long affair ends when he disappears, eventually committing suicide. Left with his journals, Lucy will make an academic career out of his writing becoming 'professor of Philosophy, specialising in the works of Jacob Little [. . .]' "Without question, it was Jacob Little's influence on me that inspired my decision to study philosophy. And it is the journals he left behind that have allowed me my career" (Mackie 2014, 324–5). She edits his novel and publishes his journals and in

the process becomes possessed by him: 'So much did Jacob become a part of her that years later, whenever she called to mind that wicked footage, it was *herself* she saw standing up there on the roof' (Mackie 2014, 327) in the suicide video. This is an ironic realisation of Jacob's philosophy, that 'without Others a Self cannot exist' (Mackie 2014, 332). However, contrarily, it is this lack of control or agency over the self, Lucy hypothesises, which led Jacob to the changing identities, as a method of regaining control: 'He often writes in his later journals that he no longer exists or that he no longer knows who he is. And it seems that this is the reason he began his search for Solace' (Mackie 2014, 332). The novel, then, becomes a quest for identity, and for an idea of identity, echoing contemporary crises of meaning under the influence of the postmodern dismantling of the subject and its relationship with the world.

However, this quest would appear to present us with the re-centering of identity and its reduction to a narratable truth, drawing together as it does the dispersed strands of Jacob's self into the one complete whole of the novel and its conclusion. It also, of course, stages a re-centering and re-prioritising of masculine discourse through Lucy. Enamoured of the myth of Man as romantic hero she advocates this image in her promotion of Jacob Little in her work. She becomes a conduit for Jacob's philosophy, and his voice even, to enter the academic establishment, through her writing and academic work, and through her appearances in more popular, mainstream contexts, such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival.¹ Though it is manipulated by her – and is in effect, a joint effort – the work bears Jacob's name and authority. This rehabilitation of masculine discourse through female support and encouragement makes a 'Solace' of Lucy, the fulfilment of his quest. Though the philosophy itself appears to encapsulate a particularly feminine challenge to Enlightenment rational discourse – that it is not autonomy but interrelationality that defines the self – it is an approach which Jacob seems unable to accept, which drives him to lose himself and his hold on life. This is an indictment of a strongly

¹ This is one of the largest and most established of book festivals, running annually since 1983 in Edinburgh, hosting a large and diverse programme of writers' events and talks over two weeks in August.

feminist approach to subjectivity, particularly seen in conjunction with the drawing of female characters here as negatively dependent in their openness and relationality on men and masculine authority, and ultimately constrained by a fixed gender hierarchy. Indeed, even the fact of Lucy's lesbian mothers cannot distract her from her vocation in rehabilitating masculine discourse.

If *In Search of Solace* enacts a critique of postmodern scepticism by restoring reason and causality to the narrative of the self, it also rebuffs the postmodern crisis of the masculinised subject by dismissing it as pathology. The fluidity of identity is indeed reduced to a dressing up game, a box which contains all Jacob's assumed and abandoned personas and which is discovered by ten year old trans child Lizzy: 'Lizzy in her excitement and youthful curiosity begins pulling on clothes and affixing accessories so that before our very eyes her appearance begins to change and grow into a melange of Jacob identities. Wilhelm and Merton and Lambert and Otto. They appear in flashes and slices and then disappear as Lizzy tugs on another pair of trousers, another waistcoat, another wig' (Mackie 2014, 316). This parody of identity performativity consigns destabilised selfhood to a joke, signalling that the prevailing social reality continues to be predicated on the violently maintained gender hierarchy founded on a dominant aggressive masculinity, exemplified in Big Sal's husband Bev who beats her after finding her fellating Jacob. Bev himself is returned from the margins, the oil platforms of the North Sea. He is a reminder of the ultimate sanction of male power through which the text presents a pessimistic appraisal of the possibilities of change and the novel turns its back on the creative space of disorientation to remain stuck like the broken clock of its closing paragraph.

Mackie's 'grounding' of this tale for the reader amounts to a re-territorializing of gender identity. In this instance, the returned masculinity exemplified by Jacob Little is not so much dangerous as self-destructively pathologized, and made and kept this way by women who accept, embrace and embalm the gender hierarchy with their mythicised desires and preservation of old narratives. Brief signs of radical resistance, like the exuberant schoolgirls, who appear early in the novel to 'flash the finger' at a man 'gawkin' (Mackie 2014, 17) at them from the pub, are quickly dismissed as attention is returned to 'the person who interests us [. . .] the man who apparently doesn't

know who he is' (Mackie 2014, 17). Monstrous and mad, in thrall to the spectres of dominant masculinity, women ensure that men's centrality is not lost but re-directed and renewed. Depicted as waiting for the return of men from the margins, femininity is a conservative force here, confined and constrained by traditional and dominant paradigms and genres of gender.

There but for the

Ali Smith's novel shares one central parallel with Mackie's texts, a primary concern with a remarkable male character plunged from obscurity to the centre of attention. However, he is not present but a now absent attendee to the lives of others, and his story is told through four people who he has, at one time or another, profoundly affected. These marginal types – Anna, who used to work with refugees; Mark, a gay man; May Young, an elderly woman nearing death; and Brooke, a ten year old black girl – focalise the narrative of Miles Garth, how, as an unexpected dinner guest at the home of Gen and Eric Lee in Greenwich, he has locked himself in their spare room and over the following months become the focus of a crowd of people seeking new meaning in a faithless and senseless world. Understanding Miles to be a kind of savant, diverse groups set up camp outside the Lee's house and wait for his non-forthcoming appearance, supplying him with food, when Gen refuses to oblige. The disparate groups who make up the 'Milo camp' – Japanese couples, women in business suits, people with placards signalling different affiliations, as well as the wildlife such as the dogs and the fox living peacefully together – are an ensemble, an image of harmony in difference, of peaceful co-existence and connection. Their burgeoning need to find meaningful connection creates the impulse to make Miles a leader, a position he refuses in his non-appearance. So in a contrast with Mackie's texts, this oblique centralising of Miles does not constitute a return of dominant masculinity but facilitates a privileging of kindness, empathy and relationality set in motion in Miles's relationship with each of the four foregrounded characters. He is, then, a 'new' man, an example of an alternative masculine identity associated not with autonomy, control and destructive individualism, but with altruism.

Miles can be interpreted as a saviour figure in his facilitation of the Milo Camp and human connection; his mysterious non-presence in the text is also similarly suggestive. The title of the novel, *There but for the* is, of course, the first part of a proverbial saying – ‘there but for the grace of God go I’ – which expresses thanks for not being in someone else’s less fortunate place. It articulates a circumspect empathy, acknowledging the influence of external forces in our lives, in this case that of a god, but also fate or providence or chance. However, the grace of God is an absent presence here as the reader of the title cannot help but finish the phrase; the grace of God haunts the title and the novel. Miles, as similarly an absent presence in the text, is associated with this missing grace, this ‘benevolent divine influence’ (Oxford English Dictionary). However, it is not his transcendent spiritual difference that is highlighted by those around him – his association with another dimension – but the very human-focused quality of his behaviour. He is remembered for his material acts of kindness and affirmation: whether surreptitiously wiping up spilt tea with his socked foot, or making sure Mark has a glass of red wine at the dinner party, or helping Anna become part of the group on the European tour of prize-winning young writers, or marking the anniversary of his friend’s death every year by visiting her mother, who turns out to be Mrs Young. These acts demonstrate his thoughtfulness and empathic ability to understand people and their particular needs; they signal profound connection and humanity, not divine intervention. Miles’s empathy is in stark contrast to other characters, particularly the middle-class dinner party guests who are exposed as materialistic, selfish, prejudiced and ignorant bullies.

To undermine any singular interpretation of the concept of grace, Smith deliberately fractures its meaning providing ambiguous and ambivalent connotations throughout the novel: grace is negative when it refers to the name of the telecommunications system that puts Anna’s mother out of a job; grace is positive when May Young thinks that she is living her ‘days of grace, and you don’t get many of them’ (Smith 2011, 205); and Grace is the name of the wife of the man who wrote the song ‘Me and My Gal’ (Smith 2011, 183). In the last epigraph in the preliminary pages, Shakespeare proclaims that in ‘every wink of an eye some new grace will be born’.

However, in a distorted echo of this, we also hear Richard, the grossly prejudiced mini-drone seller at the dinner party look forward to a future when robots will conduct our conflicts for us: 'To kill without actually having to. Hand to hand combat, gone in the wink of an eye' (Smith 2011, 120). We may ask what we are to make of these two winks. Smith is suggesting that for every killing that takes place in a wink of an eye, a new grace is born; that for every Richard, there is always a Miles; and, ultimately, that for every moment of prejudice, there is a possibility of empathy. The choice between these options, according to the novel, is ours to make.

The fact that nothing – no person, no deity, no discourse – exists to make that choice for us is demonstrated in Miles's disappearance from the room and from the novel. By the end of the text we are informed he has left without telling anyone and without a trace, leaving the 'Milo Camp' of followers with no focus or leader except for their own projections. Eschewing influence, control and authority, revelation and explanation, Miles is an example of masculinity refusing power and embracing obscurity. He collapses the centre-margin dichotomy, as he brings the margins in the form of the narrative's radical refusniks (Anna, Mark, May, Brooke, the Milo Camp) to the cultural centre of the bourgeois town house. His abdication from power and effectively also from representation is a manner of saying 'no' to power. This formulation is put forward by Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), her treatise on the importance of recognising 'non-phallic' masculinities (that is, non-oppressive and non-dominating male identities). Whereas Silverman sees these as especially evident in representations of male masochism, Smith, on the contrary, suggests kindness, empathy and openness to others are also valid strategies of saying 'no' to power.

There but for the refuses to re-centre dominant masculinity; though Miles is a driver of the narrative at no point does he control it. He is a disruptive force, connecting with outsiders and encouraging their challenge to bourgeois authority, exposing its unjust, unequal and hypocritical foundations. Unlike Mackie, Smith does not explain away the mystery of Miles Garth and subject his narrative to rational interpretation. At the end of the novel, which is the end of Brooke's section of the

narrative, we are taken back to the beginning. It closes with the lines '[Brooke] sits on the little bit of wall below the railing. She unfolds the piece of paper in her hands and she reads again the story written on it' (Smith 2011, 357). This is the story that Miles has written for her, one she asked him to write ten pages before: 'You have to imagine that if you were sitting there where you are, on the bike, and also here in the room with you was another version of you, like, say you but three or four days before you were ten years old [. . .] what story would you tell yourself and what story would your self tell you?' (Smith 2011, 346–7). This is the story we have read as the prologue of the novel which starts 'The fact is, imagine a man sitting on an exercise bike in a spare room' (Smith 2011). The novel is, then, a story without end, a narrative turning back on itself, refusing to complete a linear progression; there is no explanation of Miles. Off-centre and anti-hegemonic, this depiction of masculinity remains blurred and without clear definition.

Smith's oblique portrait of Miles raises several questions in relation to contemporary views of masculinity. As a space of mystery in the text he is associated less with an actual saviour figure than with a space of the sacred, something which Patricia Waugh points out has previously been designated as 'feminine' and associated with the limits of reason. However, Waugh further argues that postmodern theory's 'dangerous use of the metaphor of "femininity" to designate a linguistically non-reproducible "otherness" effectively redescribes a space of the sacred' (Waugh 1992, 127). Mysterious and benevolent Miles – a figure suggestive of this sacred/postmodern unrepresentable – occupies a non-masculine and therefore, by default, 'feminine' space, bringing into relief the boundaries of rational discourse. Waugh, though, points out that 'such a "feminine" space has always been used to deny the *material* existence of actual women' (Waugh 1992, 127, italics in original). From this point of view, though we may consider Miles to be appropriating a key conceptualisation of femininity and, in effect, colonising that space, we can also argue that if this conceptual space has traditionally been damaging in its effects on the lives of women, Miles's appropriation can be seen as a strategic reversal of this discourse of femininity, challenging its efficacy and relieving women of that representational

burden. One question he poses, therefore, is whether this move denies the existence of actual men in the same way. Though this cannot be said to be the case, this conceptual appropriation does signify a challenge: a more open model of masculine subjectivity, less suspicious of its others and less bounded by the rational. In less abstract terms, Miles's undermining of the autonomous male subject is more simply referenced in his 'human' qualities, his kindness and relations with others. Empathy, Smith has written in *Artful*, is a going beyond the self (Smith 2012, 171); in very material ways that is what Miles is doing here, and in the process challenging autonomy and the sternly defended boundaries of hegemonic dominant masculinity.

Coming into the Warm: Affirmative Masculinity in the Postsecular Turn

These three novels present contemporary readers with central male characters which address a return of dominant masculinity from the margins to where it had retreated in devolutionary Scottish fiction. In Mackie's novels this return signals a prevailing inability to get beyond the idea of dominant, autonomous masculinity and with it the model of the unified subject. Associated with the Enlightenment privileging of reason, scientific knowledge and progress, this subject goes through a painful reconstitution here, re-emerging in an unchanged world which continues to reward romantic myths of femininity and masculinity and prioritises masculine discourse, even as a spectral presence of confused and unstable nostalgic desires. Mackie's impulse to explain and rationalise her mysterious characters leads to the pathologization of non-unitary identity, expressing a negative judgement which betrays a yearning for completeness and truth. This social reality remains stubbornly stuck in its ways and stalls any aspiration to change.

In contrast, Smith's novel problematizes the masculine subject and while it recognises calls for male authority, it refuses them, continuing to engage an image of male disappearance familiar from the devolution writing. However, in this instance the disappearing man is positively drawn and provides an opportunity for thinking about the subject differently. In the representation of its amorphous central character *There but for the* prioritises affirmation and this brings it into line with a key

strand of current critical thinking that also connects with his spiritual associations. For Rosi Braidotti 'affirmation is the key ethical value for the postsecular turn in critical theory, which imagines a subject whose existence, ethics, and politics are not indexed on negativity but on the production of affirmative affects' (Braidotti 2014, 262). Here, the postsecular turn is a challenge to the 'myth of secularism' and, in its radical critique of rationalism, 'questions the axiom that equates secularism with emancipation' (Braidotti et al. 2014, 5). It 'makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality' (Braidotti et al. 2014, 5) and is therefore, crucially for my argument here, associated with a challenge to a conception of political agency in the negative, and the concomitant accepted necessity of producing radical counter-subjectivities.

Miles does not promote organised political action or oppositional activism, yet the effects of his actions are shown to be affirming and empowering for those he comes into contact with, pushing them to resist the major and minor oppressions of bourgeois existence as personified in certain dinner party guests. Miles not only exemplifies the significance of the power of such affirmative consciousness, as conceptualised in relation to the post-secular turn, in his one-to-one relations and also in his inspiration of the Milo camp; but also in being dispersed and fragmented through the consciousness of others, he gestures towards Braidotti's model of nomadic subjectivity, meaning 'a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied' (Braidotti 2006, 4). This non-unitary subject, 'an entity enmeshed in a network of interrelated social and discursive effects' (Braidotti 2006, 86), is predicated on becoming and for Braidotti 'can provide an alternative foundation for ethical and political subjectivity' (Braidotti 2006, 11). Smith's novel facilitates engagement with these ideas and urges us to explore alternatives in facing questions thrown up by the disabling contradictions and challenges to social justice of our times.

The argument posed by this article therefore stands as a correction to my earlier statement that there was 'no possibility of a resurrection of Him, the Man that was'

(Jones 2009, 189) in contemporary Scottish fiction. The dangerous possibilities of his return as set out by Mackie are a warning against re-centring and re-prioritising a damaging model of dominant masculinity. Smith posits an alternative vision, and in doing so, at least makes suggestions as to the possibility of addressing ‘the pressing human dilemma: how to walk a clean path between obscenities’ (Smith 2011, 159). In the context of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence from the United Kingdom, Scottish people demonstrated a willingness to begin debating the ethical and political issues produced by a gendered social reality that traditionally privileged men. [Insert footnote: ‘Note, for example, the emergence of groups such as Women for Independence and interventions by the Women’s Budget Group which were prominent during the referendum campaign.’] Such a context I believe makes Scottish writers and fiction well-placed to explore and engage Smith’s openness to alternative futures.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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