Scottish Polysyzygiacal Identity and Brian McCabe's Short Fiction

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Abstract

Contemporary Scottish literature has increasingly involved complex negotiations between the different Scottish identities that have proliferated since the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties. At the present time, the concept of identity postulated is no longer essentialist and monologic, like the one associated to the two halves of the traditional 'Caledonian antisyzygy', but positional and relational, 'polysyzygiacal', to use Stuart Kelly's term. As this article shows, Brian McCabe's short fiction explores Scottish identitarian issues from a renewed multifaceted and dialogic perspective, fostering an ongoing debate about what it means to be Scottish nowadays, and contributing to the diversification and pluralisation of literary representations of identity.

Key words: polysyzygiacal identity, diversification, literary representations, Brian McCabe

"A world is always as many worlds
as it takes to make a world."
—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (2000: 15)

"I am rooted but I flow"
—Michael, in V. Woolf's *The Waves* (1977: 69)

Introduction: The Genre of the Short Story in Scotland and the Caledonian Antisyzygy

Contemporary Scottish literature has increasingly involved complex negotiations between the different Scottish identities that have proliferated since the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties (March 2002: 1). Especially in the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the (transmodern) conflicts triggered off by globalisation and glocalisation, as well as by the development of communication technologies, have further affected identity construction. But this whole process of the redefinition of identities has always been considered an ongoing process, since cultural identity is "a matter of becoming" (Hall 1993: 394).

The short-story genre as often been taken as emblem of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, and this contributed to its contemporary diversification and pluralisation, since every individual voice claimed its right to be heard (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 83). A miscellany of voices has raised to meet the demand of the short-story's formal and thematic variety. Indeed, as recent critical studies have shown,[ii] the short-story genre is so diverse in form, themes, and style that a homogenous and general definition and study is almost impossible. As we shall see, this fact might point out towards the necessity of a heterogenous understanding of contemporary Scottish literature.

It is generally accepted that the particularities of the contemporary short-story genre in Scotland are mostly related to language and identity issues. Obviously, since language is of central importance in Scottish literature, both stylistically and ideologically, the use of the vernacular in the short-story form has further connotations than in the English short story. Additionally, the fact that the vernacular and non-standard speeches frequently appear in

many short stories may be related to the short-story's form of character presentation (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 86). Often, the function of the vernacular in this genre is not only one of characterisation and contextualization, but it is also ideological or political, contributing to the depiction of local culture and the narration of marginal experiences (May 1994: 108). In the case of Scotland, where the use of the Scots language was vilified after the Union when English became the language used for intellectual and institutional matters,[iii] the use of language cannot be easily separated from a political reading.

Edwin Muir's famous "Scottish predicament"[iv] (1936: 9) was pessimistically based on the idea that, due to this fact, the Scots were estranged from themselves, schizophrenic, since they were condemned to "think in one language and feel in another" (1936: 8). Muir, clearly influenced by Eliot's notion of tradition, held the preconception that the Scots language was inadequate as a literary language (Carruthers 2001: 21). As he further stated in his essay *Scott and Scotland* (1936), Scotland could only create a national literature by writing in English: "If we are to have a complete and homogeneous Scottish literature it is necessary that we should have a complete and homogeneous language" (Muir 1936: 178). As Carruthers points out, this notion of an ideal whole-language system is based on the idea that "language exists in an unceasing hierarchy which is not simply about how languages are perceived relatively within the context of cultural power-relations. […] Thus, the expression in the Scots language must always be necessarily inferior once the hegemony of English is established" (Carruthers 2001: 21). In this line, Muir believed that life and literature were no longer part of a coherent and single system and that, consequently, literary creativity in Scotland was ruptured and doomed (Carruthers 2001: 22). In his own words: "Scottish life is split in two beyond remedy" (Muir 1936: 36).

Despite the fact that the use of the Scots language in literature was revitalised by the Scottish Literary Renaissance, led by figures such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, the idea that the Scottish mind was split endured, and this was reflected in fiction too, both thematically and stylistically. Thematically speaking, the figure of the Double — or *Doppelgänger* — became a *topoi* symbolising this Scottish fracture or split self. Examples of this would be classic such as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and also contemporary works such as Alasdair Gray's "The Spread of Ian Nicol" (1956), Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989), Brian McCabe's *The Other McCoy* (1990) and "The Host" (2001), Jackie Kay's "The Woman with a Fork and Knife Disorder" (2001), or Ali Smith's "The Hanging Girl",[v] to cite just a few.

As Angela Wright states, nineteenth-century Scottish writers explored the national crisis after the Union by using Gothic conventions and tropes (Wright 2007: 73). Some authors have identified the Scottish linguistic fissure as the source of a real and mythical inarticulacy, which has become a central preoccupation in Scottish fiction (Wallace 1993: 221). According to Paul Coates, when the double is explicitly dealt with in fiction, it is often "written by authors who are suspended between languages and cultures" (1988: 2). Examples of such authors include Joseph Conrad, James Hogg, R.L. Stevenson, Henry James and Oscar Wilde, among others (1988: 2).[vi] Hence, and given the fact that this figure is found in many other world literatures and cultures, for one might wonder if this particular use of the *topos* of the Double to symbolize the lack of a coherent linguistic or national unity is exclusively Scottish. However, it cannot be denied that, as a consequence of this theoretical tradition, the

Jekyll-and-Hyde figure has been interpreted as the monstrous son of this Scottish linguistic and identitarian ambivalence or disunity (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 221).

Stylistically, Scottish — dissociated — literature became identified with a "dissociation of sensibility" (Eliot 1921:4), a "swithering of modes" (Craig in Hart 1978: 406), a "zigzag of contradictions" (Smith 1919: 4), or a "sudden jostling of contraries" (Smith 1919: 20) which Gregory Smith termed "antisyzygy" (Smith 1919: 4). Traditionally, the literature of Scotland has been believed to be characterised by the oxymoronic nature of "the Caledonian Antisyzygy" (Ibid.: 4), namely, a reflection of all the contrasts — or "intermingledons", to use Burn's term (in Ibid.: 34) — present in Scottish history and culture that shows a mixture of contraries or things alike: "real life and romance, everyday fact and the supernatural, things holy and things profane, gentle and simple, convention and 'cantrip,' thistles and thistledown" (Ibid.: 20). Linguistic disunity or the so-called Caledonian antisyzygy have often been dramatised by means of narration and characters. Moreover, irony, juxtaposition, multiple voices, and habitual counter-pointing are said to be distinctive of Scottish culture, expressing an ongoing crisis of identity (Simpson 1988: 251). Perhaps in a more positive light, G. Gregory Smith states that "energy and variety" (Ibid.: 35) are at the very core of the Scottish narrative mood. As Smith further states in his seminal work *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919):

> Scottish literature is not so placid. […] If a formula is to be found it must explain this strange combination of things unlike, of things seen in everyday world and things which, like the elf-queen herself, neither earth nor heaven will claim.
>
> (Ibid.: 35)

This combination of the supernatural and the realistic has been said to constitute an essential trait of Scottish fiction and of the Scottish sense of self in general (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 86). One of the halves of the Caledonian antisyzygy would correspond to down-to-earth realism, and the other to the realm of imagination and fantasy. Additionally, the tendency of the short-story form to mix fantastic and real elements will be accentuated in Scottish literature, since the "polar twins of the Scottish Muse" (Smith 1919: 20) dwell on opposites and combine the interest in the intimacies of life (Ibid.: 41) with the allure for strange worlds and moods (Ibid.: 23).

Nevertheless, these strict dichotomies — which come from the *a priori* assumption that Scotland presents its self in counterpoints — are not valid anymore, in the sense that they reveal themselves as highly simplistic and prevent Scottish culture from showing its many nuances and from further developing and exploring new complex identities (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 87). In fact, many contemporary writers, such as Iain Banks, Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray, Jackie Kay, James Kelman, A.L. Kennedy, Brian McCabe, Ali Smith, Alan Warner, Irvine Welsh, explore a number of possible identity-configurations and tend to focus on characters who struggle to reconfigure the fragmentations of identity created by stereotypes like the Scottish antisyzygy or the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde myth.

As we shall see in the present article, in Brian McCabe's short stories, the realistic and the fantastic or supernatural are not elements present in oppositional terms. "They are rather an amalgam that reflects the many shades of meaning they convey, a flux which fits the changing processes of experience" (Ibid.: 87). At the present time, the concept of identity postulated is no longer essentialist and unitarian, but positional and relational. This contemporary performative, multiple, plural, multifaceted, adaptable and relational self is

always in process, negotiated. Moreover, as the self is produced in a discourse that is always, by definition, dialogical, the relation self-others is at the core of identity. The focus of attention has shifted towards the processes of identification and dialogue, which are revealed as key forces at work in identity construction (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 1). Bearing all these ideas in mind, discourse, and contemporary literature seem ideal fields to explore the mechanisms of contemporary identity construction and representation.

New Approaches to Identity: A Caledonian Polysyzygy?

Historically, Scottish culture has explored the different identities that are developing in line with the changes taking place in society at large, from its medieval sovereignty as a nation, its Union with England in 1707, its 1998 Devolution within the United Kingdom, and presently, its negotiations regarding Brexit. Until the turn of the twentieth century, self and nation were viewed in binary terms as oppositional entities: the self was defined by opposition to the Other, and Scotland by opposition to England. However, Scottish art in general and fiction in particular have been one of the major sources of exploration of the adaptability of the Caledonian sense of self and nation. The Second Scottish Renaissance, taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the subsequent literary flourishing, taking place at the beginning of the new millennium, offer a variety of literary voices and genres that reveal new and contemporary complexities which go beyond the traditional stereotype of the Scottish male, white, heterosexual author. Scottish contemporary literature has no doubt contributed to the redefinition of a more flexible and open identity. Writers such as A.L. Kennedy and Jackie Kay, among others, have questioned "standard assumptions of both national and gender identity by articulating a position of in-betweenness, or of downright unease with traditional definitions" (Sassi 2005: 158).

Despite the fact that Scottish literature tends to be resistant to neat classifications, there is a need to find new theoretical tools to describe and analyse the new literary and dialogic reality, as new realities demand new critical tools. According to the previous negative or pessimistic vision of Scottish identity as the damaged product of adverse historical circumstances, polarity and fragmentation appear as characteristics to be avoided. However, if the cultural and linguistic diversity in Scotland are perceived as a multiplicity rather than as a splitting, then an enriching reality is revealed.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, self and nation were viewed in monologic terms — that is, as self-contained and exclusive entities; and consequently, defined in binary terms: the self was defined by opposition to the Other, and Scotland by opposition to England. But the monologic understanding of the self was set into question, especially by modernist and postmodernist literature and criticism,[vii] and it was progressively abandoned in favour of the logic of multiplicity (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 82-83). The works of the Bakhtin group in the early twentieth century and, from the nineteen sixties on, that of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, displaced this notion of identity in favour of the notion of self in dialogue or in relation, that is, presupposing an active interaction between individuals, between self and other(s) (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 259). Later, postmodern sociological and philosophical accounts of a heterocentric and polyglot self further contributed to new understanding of the dialogic, hybrid and multiple selves and cultures — we are not isolated entities but are always interconnected —, pointing out to the necessity of an ethical relationship between self and other. The self "is no longer plausibly

understood as a unitary entity but appears instead as one fragile moment [caught up in the flux of] dialogic circuits" (Gilroy 2000: 109).

In the light of this dialogical turn, Scotland could no longer be considered as a damaged or split land or an 'artistic wasteland', and Scottish identity would no longer be understood as being divided. For example, Cairn Craig proposes a positive view of Scottish art and literature as examples of a culture that is engaged in the dialogue with the other(s), engaged in a conversation in different dialects, a dialectic that is the foundation not only of persons but of nations (Craig 1999a: 115). Once dialogism questions the unity of language, it is easy to see the beauty and creative energy of the polyphony created by a plurality of languages coexisting in the Scottish nation, giving birth to a complex and dynamic relational social entity constructed "through mutuality of personal relationships" (MacMurray 1957: 38). Therefore, and in order to enhance the richness and complexity of this new contemporary writing in Scotland, new theoretical concepts and criticism should be developed, as this will reveal new and fresh readings of Scottish works.

In his introduction to the collection of short stories titled *Headshook. Contemporary Novelists and Poets Writing on Scotland's Future* (2009), Stuart Kelly comments on the characteristic fluidity and plurality of Scottish identity: "'Scotland' is not a fixed and immutable entity, but a discontinuous succession of states, actively imagined in each and every generation" (Kelly 2009: 2). Scotland has been and is a "stateless nation", "a multivocal nation", "a multi-ethnic nation" (Sassi 2005: 9), and also a globalised and changing nation. As he further states, "the infamous 'Scottish Double'" has been over-used by critics to the point of exhaustion" (Kelly 2009: 12). And its use has negative consequences for the interpretation of Scottish literature: G. Gregory Smith's term 'Caledonian antisyzygy' "was actually descriptive of the failure of Scottish literature — its lack of organic unity" (Kelly 2009: 12, emphasis added). If we want to escape the negative readings fostered by this type of metaphors, we need others that recognise the richness and plenitude of contemporary Scottish literature. As Kelly proposes, "[a] new critical term should be made: polysyzygy — multiple alignments, plural connections, a web of interlinked ideas and words" (Kelly 2009: 12). This playful turn of the screw of Smith's term is indeed very helpful and representative of the new trends in 21st-century literary writing.

Moreover, the concept of the 'polisyzygy' or the adjective 'polysyzygiacal' could also be applied to the representation of Scottish identity in contemporary literature, as we shall see. The Scottish interest in identity might be defined as an 'obsession' which is 'healthy' — "insofar as it has gradually encouraged a more flexible and encompassing approach to issues of identity, as Carla Sassi notes (Sassi 2005: 10). As she further explains, while syncreticity and polyphony might not be unique to Scottish culture and literature, "it is true that Scotland, like other countries, has been led (almost compelled) by historical contingencies to represent its identity in layers" (Sassi 2005: 152). And many Scottish writers show this deep concern with identitarian issues in their work. One of these authors is Brian McCabe.

3. The Short Fiction of Brian McCabe

Brian McCabe was born in 1951 in Easthouses, a small mining community near Edinburgh. In the early nineteen seventies, he formed a Poetry Society with other aspiring writers, such as Ron Butlin, Andrew Greig, and Liz Lochhead, becoming "The Lost Poets" (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 36). They obviously started as a poetic group, but some also progressively developed into writing fiction, especially short stories: Butlin published *The*

Tilting Room (1983) and McCabe *The Lipstick Circus* (1985), whereas Greig stuck to poetry, and a bit of essay, and Lochhead started writing drama. At present, McCabe is a fully recognised creative writer in Scotland who has been writing for more than forty years. He has published five poetry collections,[viii] a novel[ix] and four collections of short stories: *The Lipstick Circus* (1985), *In a Dark Room with a Stranger* (1993), *A Date with My Wife* (2001), *Selected Stories* (2003).

McCabe's short stories belong to the tradition of the modern short-story genre inaugurated by Chekhov, among others. As McCabe himself has stated: "I remember reading Chekhov's short stories when I was quite young, and in a way I was trying to copy them; but there was nothing, there was nothing to imitate, there was no style that I could see" (in Aliaga 2013: 45). According to McCabe,

> what makes Chekhov so good is his insight into human psychology and motivation, which you can't imitate, so that was a kind of lesson. I suppose though, that it was a kind of influence, because it showed me the great thing that a story could be, that a short story could be just as much a great work of art as a novel, and that made me want to write my own stories as well.
>
> (Ibid.: 45)

Characteristically, as Ford explains, in Chekhov's short stories the dark territories of mankind are indirectly revealed in normality, without epiphanic moments or dramatic outcomes (Ford 2006: 20). So that, in many of his stories, there is a hidden truth that can be perceived through the everyday. McCabe has praised, as many other have, Chekhov's ability to get into the human psyche.[x] Both authors' works share a deep interest in common people and their everyday life, in what makes us human and what makes us individuals. This interest in everyday identity is indeed shared by McCabe's fiction, as all of his stories, even those with fantastic elements, show the commonalities of their particular lives.

Regarding style, McCabe is also a friend of minimalism. His relatively undemanding and simple vocabulary and syntax are deliberate, as McCabe believes that simplicity is a key element for the success of writing. His minimalist style is by no means accidental: "I'd eschew a thick language stew / — too many wordy ingredients / fighting to be the flavour" (McCabe 1987: 74). In his short fiction, he tends to stick to just a few characters in a concrete and delimited space (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 46). And this restraint has also been applied to his only novel *The Other McCoy*, which has the rhythm of a short story, which contributes to the unity of effect. The author himself commented in a personal email that he deliberately chose a concrete and reduced space and time for his novel, "trying to keep things, economical and manageable" (McCabe 2005). The whole plot unfolds in the streets of Edinburgh on a single day: Hogmanay.

Thematically, McCabe's writing revolves around identitarian issues. Typically, the narrators in Brian McCabe's short fiction undergo some kind of self-discovery via a personal crisis or they are "frontier subjects", that is, subjects who "reveal a position that understands vital stability as an apparent and passing cognitive construction, since they have to be flexible and open to the other(s) if they are to adapt to the environment and survive" (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 88). Moreover, the liminality of the particular situations that characters undergo in his short stories can affect the whole text-world, as the boundaries between reality and fantasy are often blurred by the focalisers' unreliable or altered perceptions. This indeterminacy in the characters and in the narration challenges "the traditional exclusiveness

of certain subjects", as Smith said on Scottish literature in general (Smith 1919: 36), and also the exclusiveness and fixity of the subject, as we shall see.

McCabe's stories are always set in Scotland, depict common people with everyday problems and questions and are, mostly, close to his own experiences. However, they are so imaginative, that sometimes they even enter the realm of the fantastic.[xi] We could argue that the realistic and the fantastic are skilfully combined in striking imaginative terms that allow readers to glimpse at a hidden reality which is there at work in our perception and construction of his created world (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 88). McCabe's narrators and characters usually have to face the strange hidden in the everyday, and this demands an adaptation of their perception and understanding.

Brian McCabe uses the complexity of the perceptions of his character-bound narrators to present subjective yet universal experiences that combine the common and the uncanny. McCabe is generally interested in the representation of liminal states: childhood, when characters start discovering how strange the world they inhabit is; adolescence, when in the process abandoning childhood, they start discovering the strangeness of adulthood; or the liminal states of sleeping, dreaming, being drunk, having a nervous breakdown, etc. All of these processes are in-between states with a blurry ontological ascription (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 89). The estrangement of McCabe's narrators and characters convey an overwhelming perplexity in the perception of the world, where the necessity of relating with others can be difficult, but which is always essential.

His short stories permit the construction of some kind of plural or multiperspectival focalisation that suggests some kind of unity made out of various and inevitably partial bits. In that sense, we could argue that the perspective represented in many of his short stories is 'polysyzygiacal'. Sometimes we find stories which offer diametrically opposed perspectives, thus offering the reader the possibility of constructing a whole scene through the juxtaposition of various partial and subjective perspectives. This imagined scene becomes somehow an objective or at least quite plural space where different voices are set in a dialogic relationship to each other (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 91).

Given all the multiple perspectives and focalisations in McCabe's collections of short stories, readers are forced to draw their own conclusions, a task that, as Kirsten Matthews has pointed out, is encouraged by "the developing empathy through the angle of perception appropriate to a situated speaker" (Matthews 2008: 74). In other words, in order to understand, readers have to enter some kind of dialogue with the text and empathise with the different characters' perspectives.

A Date with my Wife (2001) and the Representation of Polysyzygiacal Identity

I have chosen to focus on three stories from the collection of short stories *A Date with my Wife* to analyse the representation of plural or multiple identity due to the variety of narrators and characters found in them: "Losing it" (McCabe 2001: 23–31), "The Host" (McCabe 2001: 33–44), and "The Night" (Ibid.: 155–161). Brian McCabe's third collection consists of eighteen short stories that question the mechanisms of the mind and the relation self-other, as well as identity issues in general.[xii] The narration of all the stories in the book is heterodiegetic, and the focalization is presented through the main characters, who have a precise and distinctive emotional perception.

The first short story, "Losing It", explores the relation of the individual with the virtuality of the contemporary world.[xiii] It presents the story of a man, John, — "who

depended on computers for his living" (McCabe 2001: 23) — just after he has smashed his computer screen in a fit of anger. The motivation for his irrational outburst of violence is that he has lost all the work he had been doing in the last months: "Almost a year's work had gone, had vanished into cyberspace in a split second" (McCabe 2001: 24). The title thus refers both to the losing of impalpable but essential information and the losing of self-control: "He stabbed a finger at the monitor, as if to say it had got what it deserved. Then he began to shudder with a strange laughter" (McCabe 2001: 24).

As in many other stories by McCabe, losing control is associated with non-social laughter, that is, with uncontrollable hysterical laughter: "it burst in his chest like an underwater explosion and his throat was crowded with it as it rushed to his mouth and spilled out in a froth of giggles" (McCabe 2001: 24).[xiv] And it often expresses what characters cannot put into rational words.

The protagonist admits that "it felt good to have let his anger out, let go of it completely" (Ibid.: 26). He resets his mind, so to say, in order to start again. At this point, like other McCabe's characters, the protagonist gives the particular incident that has brought him to a "threshold position" a paradigmatic entity (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 184). As he recognises, "maybe it wasn't the computer, maybe he'd lost it with himself" (McCabe 2001: 26). After this, readers may interpret metaphorically his remarks about the machines that have to be fixed — the broken interface, the car —, the "limbo files" (Ibid.: 29), the "noise" (Ibid.: 29), the messages that do not "get through" (Ibid.: 28), the "lost signal" (Ibid.: 31), as referring to his entropic and chaotic mental state, to his existential condition.

The computer with a broken interface or John phoning his own number and getting his own voice on the answering phone (Ibid.: 30) could also be interpreted in this same symbolic line as signs of the isolation he is experiencing. Real communication with the others is, then, as difficult as ever in the age of communication. As he phones his own number again and gets the answering phone:

> He heard his own voice trying to sound as neutral as possible as it told him: "Hello, this is John. I'm sorry you got the machine. If you have a message for me […] please wait until you hear the tone." He waited until he heard the tone.
> He was about to leave the message when he lost the signal completely.
>
> (Ibid.: 31)

Even though he differentiates between himself and his voice on the answering machine, he cannot differentiate the loss of the signal from the loss of himself.

The fact that he phones his own number, listens to his recorded voice talking to him creates a reduplication of his identity in a sense. We have a John trying to contact another John via a technological communication device. This element points out to the surge of 'virtual doubles' in contemporary times. Although, in fact, the virtual world offers a wide range of possible avatars[xv]or virtual identities, the development of internet technologies and human interaction with multiple human subjects in the virtual realm has brought to the fore the complex nature of digital embodiment in a fictitious space. The existence of virtual worlds reveals identity as a performative, multiple and fluid entity. In this sense, we can no longer speak of a scission of a monologic self, but rather of a proliferation of multiple and dialogic representations of the self. A polysyzygiacal identity.

Brian McCabe's stories have a tendency towards ambiguity and usually allow for various readings and possible interpretations, which prevent either-or interpretations and suggest the existence of various layers of meaning. It is left to the reader to interpret this

'loss' as a Luddite break from his dependence on virtual machinery or as the death of his answering-machine *Doppelgänger*. In both cases, Jack frees himself from the splitting caused by contemporary technology (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 185). Another possible interpretation is that he has lost real direct human contact, the ability to establish a real dialogue with others and with the other(s) within himself (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 185). This is a danger that we are often preoccupied with nowadays, as we mostly communicate via technologically-mediated virtual avatars. Communication among individuals does not necessary improve in a transmodern technological world.

Another short story which deals with the topics of the difficulty of communication and the apparition of the figure of the double is "The Host", the fourth short story in *A Date with my Wife*. "The Host" was published for the first time in *New Writing Scotland 15: Some Sort of Embrace* in 1997, and afterwards in *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction* (2001), edited by Alan Bissett, and later in McCabe's collection, *Selected Stories*, published in 2003.The story was also adapted to film in 2003 by the director Simon Hynd, and it was screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival and the Milano Film Festival in 2004, winning the Best Fiction Prize and the Audience Award of the Scottish Students on Screen 2004. The story could be considered a contemporary version of the old Scottish Double *topos*, as the protagonist, who shows signs of some mental and/or linguistic dissociation, observes "a man with two heads" (McCabe 2001: 33) sitting in his living room. "The Host" starts with the protagonist disconnected utterances: "SO . HOW . WAS . The . Film" (Ibid. 33). As he further narrates: "I was speaking in words but I didn't know what I was saying and my voice sounded thick and moronic and my mouth was dry" (Ibid.: 33). As readers find out, the man is agoraphobic and has some problems when trying to relate to the outer world, as well as to other people. His isolation is so strong that he harbours doubts about himself and the reality of his performative actions: "Had the words come out of his mouth at all or had they come sounding so strange that no one could make sense of them?" (Ibid.: 33). The dissociation that the main character feels materialises in the form of the Double: a fantastic creature with two heads who is, apparently, only observable by himself, as the other guests sitting in his room acts "as if nothing was out of the ordinary" (Ibid.: 35).

It would not be farfetched to interpret that this Double-headed man could represent the fragmentation of the protagonist's self. The fact that the other characters act as if nothing extraordinary were happening adds a touch of uncertainty in line with Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic,[xvi] as readers never know if the double-headed man is really present or if he is just a figment of the subject's imagination (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 186). However, the main character cannot ignore the presence of the two-headed man, as, while one of the heads "smiled with the corner of its mouth" (McCabe 2001: 38), his smaller head starts addressing him directly, with "the dark eyes look[ing] directly" at him: "That was very interesting. […] I don't mean what you were saying, but the way you were pretending to cough. Most people don't cough unless they have to, do they?" (Ibid.: 38). This naturalness of the strange creature's behaviour and the story's "fantastic realism" echoes Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846), whose protagonist, Mr Goldyadkin, who is extremely self-conscious and a bit paranoid, encounters his double at the office where he works, sitting on a seat opposite him. Utterly paralysed by shock, he starts doubting his own identity, whereas his double sits peacefully in front of him (Dostoyevsky 2003: 53). The main character in "The Host" is also paralysed and astonished, since the smaller head, which seemed to him an inert appendix of the bigger head, is in fact "a thinking and feeling being […] a person" (McCabe, 2001: 40). The smaller or secondary head narrates then its story: it

was once a normal head with a normal body, but one day, the other bigger head, called Douglas, started growing out of him, usurping "the other's head place" (McCabe 2001: 41). As in Dostoyevsky's *The Double* or in Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" (1846)[xvii] the apparition of the double destabilises the subject's identity and threatens with supplanting him and usurping his identity. But the subject cannot react; he, like Goldyadin, is a passive and pusillanimous character (Herdman 1990: 107).

When the protagonist's friends and the double-headed man leave, and he is left on his own, he "breathed more freely" (McCabe 2001: 43), and he observes that the room "became familiar again" (Ibid.: 43). The protagonist's bond with the world is damaged, and it is then, when he is feeling "exhausted by the evening's events" (Ibid.: 43), that he sees his reflection jump out of the bathroom mirror (Ibid.: 43). Horrified, he observes a terrible image:

> It was there, no matter how often I wiped the condensation from the mirror with my sleeve, a mushroom-like swelling on my neck: the face was not fully formed, but already I could make out the mildly interested eyes and the constant, rather vacant smile.
>
> (Ibid.: 44)

As Agnieszka Sienkiewicz-Charlish states, in "'The Host' the idea of multiple selves is literally realized" (Sienkiewicz-Charlish 2011: 84); a process described by Todorov — who understands the metamorphoses of the fantastic as the erasure of the matter/mind boundary — as the "consequence of the possible transition between matter and mind: we are several persons mentally, we become so physically" (Todorov 1975: 116). The metaphoric becomes tangible; the idea becomes flesh.

In the light of the protagonist's chronic paralysis and shame, it could be understood that the main character is traumatised by the apparition of his double, who is also paralysed and inert (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 187). As Claudia Eilers has explained, the fear of the imperfect self produces a fearful self, and shame produces aggression (Eilers 2007: 68). The imperfect self would split, under the pressure of guilt, into two parts or characters, one, the materialisation of a shameful part or character, the other of shame. From this perspective, the short story's protagonist would incarnate his passive and fearful facet, and his tiny double his shameful part.

Nevertheless, the excessive presence of doubles in "The Host" —where two pairs of Double-headed men appear— could be interpreted as a parody on the *topos* of the double, so relevant in Scottish literature. Alasdair Gray has also parodied this *topos* in "The Spread of Ian Nicol" (1956). In Gray's short story, the literality of the Scottish split self[xviii] leads to a grotesque proliferation of doubles fighting with each other, which could be interpreted as a *reductio ad absurdum* (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 187). In contrast, in McCabe's story, it seems to lead to a silent and passive and absurdly unnoticed proliferation of doubles.[xix] In this excessive and grotesque story, the Caledonian double, or antisyzygy, is parodied and so becomes a multiplicity, a polysyzygy, so to say.

The next short story, "The Night", also tackles the issue of mental normality/abnormality —which is quite characteristic in Brian McCabe's fiction—, through the story's main character: Joe, a mentally immature man. Joe shows a perplexing attitude when reading a newspaper in a pub: he would look up, suddenly alert, and cock his ear in his hand" (McCabe 2001: 155). The extradiegetic narrator does not have Access to Joe's thoughts, who has serious difficulties in relating to other people. Neither the other characters in the story, the men at the bar, nor the reader, know what Joe is talking about: "Suddenly he

said aloud: 'The night. What about the night?" (McCabe 2001: 156). Nobody asks, so the mystery remains: "He put his hand behind his ear and cocked it to listen […]. After a few moments, he said to nobody in particular: 'There it is. Ah can hear it'" (McCabe 2001: 156). When he starts talking to the barman about work, the topic of taboo is raised, without being mentioned. Joe, who has motioned the barman to come closer, speaks into his ear through his cupped hand:

> "Ah'm different," he said.
> "We're all different, Joe," said the barman.
> "No you're no," Joe said. "No like me."
> […] Through his cupped hand, Joe whispered something into the barman's ear.
> The barman stood up quickly and fixed Joe with his eyes. […] "You're not supposed to call it that nowadays, Joe. You're supposed to –".
> "Shh!" Joe opened his eyes wide and put a finger to his lips.
>
> (McCabe 2001: 159)

This strategy of not mentioning the central issue is a recurrent strategy used by McCabe, as for example in the short story "Say Something",[xx] in which the central topic is a taboo which cannot be mentioned.

What is never explicitly mentioned in this story is Joe's apparent intellectual or communicative disability. The reader understands then why the other characters ask him questions strangely. The mystery about the night — "The night. What's on the night?" (McCabe 2001: 159) — eventually reveals itself as a communication gap caused by the abnormal attitude of the characters towards Joe (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 210). However, the mystery of Joe's open pondering remains still unsolved, open, for all: "'The night,' said Joe. 'What about the night?' He turned to stare at the men standing at the bar, as if waiting for their opinion" (McCabe 2001: 161). The mystery could be that of the natural world (the night) without a narrative explanation. Readers might wonder if the night could stand here for the darkness surrounding human life in a world ruled by randomness, or for the inscrutable Other. This Other — commonly associated with silence, madness, the unconscious, etc. — could also be associated with Joe's otherness or stigma, as he has been excluded by the group that fears his alterity, just as Joe fears the inscrutability and darkness of the night.

What makes perhaps this story different is that it recognises the existence of an inscrutable Other, while at the same time it also points out to the necessary ethical approach towards it despite its impenetrable character. In a dialogic relationship, there is change and interconnection, but there are always things left behind, untouched, indecipherable.

Concluding Remarks

In the last decades, a miscellany of literary voices has raised in Scotland, a fact that highlights the need for a heterogenous approach to contemporary literary forms such as the short story. As this article has shown, depending on the theoretical tools applied to the analysis of some contemporary Scottish short stories, one will obtain a certain reading or interpretation. If we insist in following Muir's "Scottish predicament" and applying Smith's "Caledonian-antisyzygy" model, Scottish culture and identity will still be seen in a pessimistic light which dooms them to be a broken, unhealthy and schizophrenic wasteland. Besides, the allegedly oxymoronic nature of Scottish culture will be extrapolated to the whole of the Scottish

identity, which will also be understood as being dissociated, split, in a sense. In this tradition, often symbolised by the *topos* of the Double, the possibility to explore other multiple and hybrid identities is also severed.

However, later terms such as Stuart Kelly's 'polisyzygy' allow Scottish works to flourish and exhibit the tremendous versatility and the abundant variety of their forms and contents. In like vein, a dialogic or polysyzygiacal approach to identity, such as the one presented in Brian McCabe's fiction, unveils new and fresher forms to understand the Caledonian self beyond the narrow borders of the traditional stereotype of the Scottish white, heterosexual, alcoholic, working-class man. Engaged in a conversation in different dialects, Scottish identities can form a dynamic relational social entity, ethically constructed "through mutuality of personal relationships".

The present literary questioning of the Scottish "Geist" implies that Scottish identity issues will be further and thoroughly questioned from non-essentialist perspectives, fostering an ongoing debate about what it means to be Scottish nowadays, and what it entails to be a human being in contemporary times. Moreover, it will also allow to contextualise Scotland in a broader scenery, open to future non-exclusive reconfigurations in a world that is becoming more and more technological, virtual and interconnected.

In short, the fact that both a second Scottish Literary Renaissance is taking place in Scotland and that literary theory is spurring the creation of new concepts and approaches to the literary canon, as well as to the representations of the self in contemporary literature, brings excellent news: the vitality of contemporary Scottish literature in undeniable.

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[ii] In the last decades, many key essays on the genre approach the short-story form in its diversity from a varied number of perspectives and angles. For more on this, see: May (1994); Iftekharuddin et al. (1997); Iftekharuddin, et al. (2003); Fernández Sánchez (2001); Ibáñez et al. (2007).

[iii] T. S. Eliot defended an idea of culture as a monolithic tradition based on the stability of (a single) language. In this line of thought, Scotland would be a cultural wasteland, as its tradition could not be considered monolithic.

[iv] The Scottish predicament has been epitomised as the total elision of the evidence of the past [...] that it is impossible for the individual to relate to his or her personal memories. [...] The constant erasure of one Scotland [...] makes Scotland unrelatable, unnarratable: pasts Scotlands are not gathered into the being of modern Scotland; they are abolished" (Craig 1999a: 21). In this sense, Scottish culture could be considered as a traumatic culture.

[v] For an analysis of J. Kay's and A. Smith's short stories see: Agnieszka Sienkiewicz-Charlish. "Double Identities: The Theme of the Double in Contemporary Scottish Gothic". In The Supernatural, the Fantastic and the Oneiric (ed. Spyra, P., Wachowska, A.). Lodz : Biblioteka, 2011, pp. 79–86.

[vi] Paul Coates forgets to mention other famous German authors such as Jean-Paul Richter, E.T.A. Hoffman or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Russian writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Nikolai Gogol, or Spanish authors such as Miguel de Unamuno and Jorge Luis Borges, among many others.

[vii] It could be argued that the conception of the self as artificial constructions, which came to fruition in the postmodernist period, was already formulated by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in the eighteenth century (Hume 1888).

[viii] *Goodbye Schooltie* (1972), *Spring's Witch* (1984), *One Atom to Another* (1987), *Body Parts* (1999), and *Zero* (2009).

[ix] *The Other McCoy* (1991).

[x] Chekhov would have acquired an invaluable knowledge of human nature through his job as a doctor (Maugham, 1958: 167).
[xi] A most dramatic example is "The Host" (1997), as we shall see in the following section.
[xii] I have discussed somewhere else the first two short stories in the collection: "Welcome to Knoxland" (see Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2015) and "Something New" (see Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2011), so I will skip them for length reasons.
[xiii] McCabe has explored this issue in other short stories in this volume, such as "Welcome to Knoxland" and "Something New". For more on the topic of virtuality in McCabe's fiction, see: Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2015.
[xiv] As in other stories, such as "Norman and the Man" (McCabe 1985: 46–52), "The Sky" (McCabe 1985: 109–118), "Strange Passenger" (McCabe 1993: 1–32), laughter possesses the individual, it takes control, or, rather, the individual no longer feels in control of his or her behaviour: "Possessed by this glee-less laughter, he marched back and forth in the room, shaking his head and flailing his arms as if having to swim upstream" (McCabe 2001: 24). In these short stories, laughter becomes a form of non-verbal communication or as an emotional relief, and it serves to relieve us of nervous tension (Morreall 1987: 131).
[xv] Avatars are digital representations of self. The term avatar can be applied to both representations of AI and representations of humans (Stair and Reynolds 2010: 479).
[xvi] "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an apparently supernatural event." (Todorov 1975: 25)
[xvii] Gogol's story –where Assessor Kovalyov wakes up one morning without a nose, because it wanted to be independent and live its own life as a whole person– mixes social satire, fantastic humour and aberrant psychology (Herdman 1990: 99).
[xviii] "'No doubt about it, Nicol,' said the specialist, 'you are splitting in two down the middle'" (Gray 1997: 4–5).
[xix] In this line, McCabe's short story could be read as a parody of the figure of the double where the protagonist's passivity —as opposed to the activity of Gogol's and Gray's protagonists— is being criticised (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2013: 187).
[xx] For a more detailed analysis of McCabe's use of silence and taboos see Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2011.

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