

Absurdities and Epiphanies: “The Kilt” from my *Slavonic Dances*

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Abstract

“It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature”, wrote Henry James; his own fiction demonstrates that he knew instinctively that a great deal of history can affect the course of “little” lives. Tom Hubbard refers to his own story “The Kilt” from his book Slavonic Dances (2017): this concerns a Scottish student who falls in love with a Czech counterpart: their private comedy is shattered by public tragedy. Hubbard sets his work in the context of other Scottish writers who have responded to the Prague Spring and the invasion, notably a poet of an earlier generation and longer historical reach, Sorley MacLean (1911-96). His essay begins with a striking reminiscence of 1968 by the Edinburgh-born journalist Neal Ascherson, who witnessed and reported on many of the key events in late twentieth-century east-central Europe. Hubbard compares the ways in which the “little” story and the “little” poem attempt to deal with the “great” issues in life.

Key words: absurdities, epiphanies, Slavonic Dance.

Fifty years ago, in 1968, the Scottish journalist Neal Ascherson was witnessing and reporting on events in east-central Europe, including what was then Czechoslovakia. When he was interviewed on Radio Praha some thirty-six years later, in 2004, he spoke of his memories of the Prague Spring, when there was hope that Stalinism could be successfully challenged by the “socialism with a human face” championed by the new First Secretary Alexander Dubček and by his supporters and allies in government and in the population.

Neal Ascherson recalled how, in 1968, he attended a reception in Hradčany Castle. Here is part of his account:

We all poured in, western journalists, everybody wandering around. And I looked around and there was this little guy on a chair up against the wall, rather away from the crowd, with a plate on his knee and it was Dubček. And you could just walk up to him and say “hello...listen...Sasha” [at this point Ascherson laughed], you could ask him a question.

It was all absolutely open; an extraordinary informality, which actually was Czech, it was very Czech - I loved it.

(Ascherson 2004)

There is still a vogue for what have been called short short stories – stories that consist of only one paragraph. It’s a form that has been deployed by Scottish writers such as James Kelman (“Acid”, in Kelman 1989: 115), John Herdman (Herdman 1979) and James Robertson (Robertson 2014). I would say that Neal Ascherson’s brief account has the quality of a short short story – the content has vast historical significance, but the form is concise. It’s not fiction of course; Ascherson is remembering something that actually happened; but his reportage of other real events is just like that: he has the gift for the significant detail that illuminates a major historical moment. Another good example of this is his sketch of another Communist leader, a very different one who was to prove an adversary of Dubček; this was the Polish Party boss Władysław Gomułka: “Gomułka was a harsh intolerant personality with a violent temper. His grim, bony skull, eyes peering at the world through steel-rimmed spectacles, encouraged his opponents to regard him as a pitiless Marxist fanatic” (Ascherson

1987: 141). (Ascherson goes on to explain that in fact Gomułka was not a slavish follower of Moscow's line. In 1956 his Polish nationalistic brand of communism made him popular; by 1968, however, he had squandered all hopes at home and abroad, and dutifully answered Brezhnev's call by contributing his own Polish tanks to the invasion of Czechoslovakia.)

The vivid sketches in Ascherson's reportage would appear to follow the criteria laid down by Edgar Allan Poe in his famous account of the short story's ideal aesthetic:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents - he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel.

(Poe 1965: 108)

That utterance, first published in 1842, seems to me to be tacitly supplemented by Robert Louis Stevenson's insistence, forty-two years later, that similar criteria could be applied to the novel, which he maintains is "a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity" (Stevenson 1924: 142).

Returning to Ascherson, we may note the comedy of the encounter with Dubček – the everyday, mundane detail of this apparently ordinary guy with a plate on his knee; moreover, there is Ascherson's feeling that he could address him as "Sasha" rather than the formal "Alexander" or "Mr First Secretary". The comedy is all the more poignant for our knowledge of what was to come in August, when the forces of the Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviet Union, invaded Czechoslovakia.

I have been interested in the way that deeply *tragic* convulsions can be illuminated by the *comic* treatment of events leading up to these convulsions. In 1968 I was a schoolboy; I was studying history as well as English and French literature, so I was aware of the historical drama of world events in that year, but I lacked the maturity to understand what was happening. However, some years later, during the 1970s, I was a student at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, and had become interested in east-central Europe. In the University Library I found an extremely disgusting book, a propaganda book published in Moscow and which defended the invasion. In this book there were some strange photographs of Prague during and after the invasion, but the most bizarre of all was a picture of a Prague street and a guy walking along that street and wearing what seemed to be a woman's skirt. I looked more closely at the photograph and the skirt appeared to be a Scottish kilt – the garment resembling a skirt and which is worn by men.

So I thought, what's a Scotsman wearing a kilt doing in Prague during late August of 1968? Forty-eight years later, in 2016, I found myself wanting to write *Slavonic Dances* – a book of three short stories or novellas which would have as their common theme a Scottish character having a relationship with someone from eastern and east-central Europe, or otherwise discovering some aspect of the culture of one of the countries in that broad geographical region. I could see the comic possibilities in a Scottish person's

misunderstandings, in his or her blunders, as that person tried to make sense of new experiences. Out of these comedies would come, almost inevitably, absurdities.

However, I wanted the themes of these stories to be ultimately very serious ones; it became necessary for the absurdities to be somehow transformed into *epiphanies* - meaning those intense moments of sudden revelation, as in the stories comprising James Joyce's *Dubliners*: such moments might be erotic in nature, and / or political, and / or spiritual. That is when the possibilities of *tragedy* came in. The tragedy, if you like, lurking behind the comedy.

The first of the three stories concerns a working-class Scottish woman at a dance, meeting an exiled Polish soldier based in Scotland – there were many of these gentlemen in our country during the war and Scottish girls were attracted to them. My heroine loves her exotic husband but he has a dark secret. So, early in their relationship the Polish guy is trying to teach his Scottish girl to dance the *krakowiak* but she is too clumsy and makes a complete mess of it. Much later, she learns of the bitter sadness of his past life.

The third story is about a Scottish poet and singer who discovers the songs of the Russian composer Mussorgsky: they have their roots in Russian and Ukrainian folklore, and as a result he is led to appreciate the folklore of his own country, Scotland. He feels something about Russia, Ukraine and Scotland that is melancholy, haunting, and which breaks the heart. He reaches that point, however, after various experiences that show him up as a vain, well-meaning and intelligent idiot. In other words, the lyrical grows out of the ludicrous.

Each of these three stories is self-contained but they are linked to each other by certain symbols, leitmotifs, allusions and echoes.

The second story, the central story, is what concerns me now. It's called "The Kilt" and this is where I take as my rather daft initial inspiration that photograph of the Scotsman in a kilt walking down a Prague street after the tanks have clattered their way into the city.

In my story, the Scotsman is called Angus Cooper and he is a young university student who is on a visiting scholarship at the Charles University. He arrives in Prague in the autumn of 1967, at a time when political changes seem to be on the horizon, but he's cautious. He has packed his kilt in his luggage but is afraid to wear it in public in case he is arrested – the police might think the kilt is an example of western decadence: the idea of a man wearing a skirt might seem too subversive. However, at the Charles University, he meets a Czech girl, a fellow-student called Hana Jandová, whom he considers the sexiest woman he has ever met. They begin an affair and Hana succeeds in persuading him to be brave and wear his kilt – she thinks he has a nice posterior and if he wears his kilt he too will be sexy. (A Scotsman who wants to wear a kilt needs to have a sexy arse and sexy legs.)

The Prague Spring of 1968 arrives and the university students are excited at the prospect of new political freedoms. It's a great time to be young; it's a great time to be young and in love. Angus loves Hana for her beauty, her bright personality, her sense of humour. She is very funny and loves to tease him. It makes her irresistible to him.

As the spring becomes summer and the weather gets even better, it's time for the lovers to leave the big city for a holiday in the country. Hana's family home is in Zlonice, a small town to the north-west of Prague. It's where Dvořák spent much of his youth. Hana introduces Angus to her mother Mrs Jandová and to her young brother Pavel who is an accomplished pianist: his playing of the Czech composers adds to the romantic atmosphere of the holiday. The two lovers, Angus and Hana, the Scot and the Czech, enjoy a brief idyll in a

lovely part of the country, and here we come to the centre-point of the story, indeed the centre-point of the whole book:

“As you are our special guest,” grinned Hana, “[Pavel] is going to play you Smetana’s *Macbeth and the Witches* and Dvořák’s *Scottish Dances*. He is a villain, he wants to make you homesick.”

Pavel performed many more pieces than these; and in Angus’s ears there lingered such alternations of the playful and the lyrical that, in long memory, would mingle with his explorations of the serene environs of Zlonice, in the company of his young lady. They took the trails through the woods, Hana clutching his arm at a sudden instance of bird-song, or the slightly distant church bells carrying their melody over the fields, that the sun-dappling of the branches seemed like a ballet of pure light, the Slavonic dances of nature itself.

They made love by a stream – at the burnside, as Angus expressed it, that language might share in their intertwinings. In turn, Hana translated for him a one-liner which she’d seen chalked on a wall at the university: *I would like to increase our population but I have no apartment.*

“Here,” she added, “is no apartment. Of course, this is not my time for increasing the population.”

“But if it was –”

“Then the child, our child, would inherit two cultures.”

August arrived. On the greens behind the Jandová home, Angus’s kilt, duly washed and pegged to the clothes-line, flapped like a banner in the breeze of its hosting.

(Hubbard 2017: 59-60)

It’s too good to last. The lovers return to Prague and during the night of August 20-21, 1968 the tanks are on the move: the invasion has begun. Angus and Hana join a demonstration against the occupation; the police move in; the lovers are separated in the confusion; arrests are made; Angus doesn’t know what has happened to Hana; he realises that he will have to return to Scotland and that he will never see his Czech girlfriend again. At least he believes he will never see her again...

The public tragedy has begun, and it has created private tragedies. Put it another way: private comedy is shattered by public tragedy. In August 1968, it all seems hopeless. At the time, it *seems* hopeless.

The American expatriate novelist and short story writer Henry James once wrote that “It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature” (James 1879: 3). His own fiction demonstrates that he knew instinctively that a great deal of history can affect the course of “little” lives, can affect you and me, the “ordinary” people.

For a long time, I had wondered what to do with the material that eventually became my story, “The Kilt”. I had contemplated writing a novel which would encompass the history of the Austro-Hungarian empire and its successor states of the twentieth century. Then I thought, no: that idea would be too solemn and longwinded, to say the least. I went on to edit a book of essays on the French writer Flaubert: one of his works is *Trois contes* – three tales, a set of three longish short stories or novellas – and that seemed to me to be a model for what I should attempt to write. *Slavonic Dances* is the result.

I love Flaubert for his very French aesthetic of firm structure, concision, and irony. Irony goes well with the concision advocated by Poe and Stevenson, as quoted above; irony can enable you to say one thing and mean its opposite, simultaneously. Irony is also a possible meeting point of comedy and tragedy, irony enables you to be funny and serious at

the same time. I would add to that a cogent statement by the English writer Christopher Hitchens: “The struggle for a free intelligence has always been a struggle between the ironic and the literal mind” (Hitchens 1989). That has been well understood by Czech writers, for example by Milan Kundera.

Sometimes a poem possesses the quality of a short story, if we can detect in that poem a narrative structure, and also if we get a sense of a large context within which we can situate the small text. At least two Scottish poets have responded to the sacrifice made by Jan Palach when he immolated himself in Wenceslas Square in protest at the invasion and its repressive aftermath. Sorley MacLean, who wrote in the ancient Gaelic language of Scotland, was born in 1911 and belonged to a generation of socialists who regarded the Red Army of the 1940s as liberators of Europe from fascism; he became disillusioned with the Soviet system and in 1969 his poem about Palach marks the Red Army as no longer liberators but oppressors, and he links the violation of Czechoslovakia with the oppression of people in the west as well as in the east. (“Palach”, in MacLean 1990: 244-247) A later Scottish poet, George Gunn, was born in 1956 – another year of enormous significance in the history of east-central Europe, notably in Poland and Hungary. Gunn’s poem was written some twenty years after MacLean’s, and the younger poet places Palach’s sacrifice in the context of future events; MacLean had placed it in the context of past events. Gunn’s poem relates Palach’s altruistic suicide to the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and to “the expectant lips of a regenerated people” (“Hello, Jan Palach”, in Gunn 1991: 38-39). So: here we have two Scottish poets, of different generations, both honouring Jan Palach but with different perspectives on his death in 1969. Here we have two Scottish poets, in brief texts, giving us a sense of the expansive forces of history beyond the verbal confines of these texts.

In conclusion, I would cite the strong influence of Franz Kafka on two contemporary Scottish novelists and short story writers, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman. Kafka, who was born in Prague, was initially translated into English by a Scottish husband-and-wife team, Edwin and Willa Muir. Alasdair Gray’s 1983 short story, “Five Letters from an Eastern Empire” is a very Kafkaesque tale, and a strongly ironic one, set in an authoritarian, totalitarian state which masks its cruelties with rhetoric and euphemism. As for Kelman, as well as the pervasiveness of Kafka-like scenarios in his fiction, he is the author of a long essay on the Czech writer, and he wrote this in the same year as Gray’s story, 1983. At the beginning of this text Kelman comments on Kafka’s short story “The Great Wall of China”, which also evokes the claustrophobic, closed system of an eastern regime. And again, both writers are only too aware that lies and propaganda are as readily deployed by the powerful and the privileged in the western world.

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