

Satellite Culture and Eliot's Glencoe¹

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No concurrence of bone.
T. S. Eliot

ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's one poem about Scotland is a verbal response to landscape unparalleled in his work and significant in its recognition of what cannot be appropriated or assimilated. Although one critic, in 1975, called it Eliot's "only great short lyric," it has almost never been discussed or even mentioned in subsequent criticism. In its recognition, however, of a scene and history beyond what his other work reveals, "Rannoch, by Glencoe" not only represents a momentary realization of history and geography outside his own, it counters Eliot's social analysis of cultures he defines as "satellite," or subsidiary to his concept of "the greater peoples." In "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," Eliot argues that the importance of literature from "regions" combines the "stronger" culture's connection of the satellite to the "world at large" and the "satellite" culture's contributions to developing and enriching the "stronger." Yet in "Rannoch, by Glencoe" Scotland and its tragic history are merged in a landscape and consciousness with power and significance in and for Scotland itself.

Keywords: Eliot, Scotland, culture, history

On February 6, 1692, thirty-eight members of the MacDonalds of Glencoe were massacred by the Campbell Earl of Argyle's Regiment on orders backed by the signature of King William. The government of William and Mary, in order to reconcile the Jacobite clans of the western Highlands, had required that all chiefs concerned must sign an oath of loyalty by 1 January 1692. Traveling in winter, MacIan of Glencoe, Chief of a small branch of the Clan Donald, arrived too late to sign; this was used as a reason to refuse his oath and to provide a pretext for government intervention. The result was an event that even today resonates in Scotland as treachery. The Campbells were billeted with the MacDonalds and accepted their hospitality, a form of honor profoundly to be trusted in Clan culture. Yet they carried orders "to fall upon the rebels the MacDonalds of Glencoe and put all to the sword under seventy." After living and eating with the MacDonalds, the

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Campbells rose in the morning and “killed MacIan, his wife, two of his sons” and others of his clan to the number of 38. Many escaped to die of cold. But others survived to tell the story. While it has often been described as interclan warfare, it was, in fact “a regular unit of the British standing army acting under orders” (“Glencoe”).² Rannoch Muir covers over 50 square miles of bog, heath, and water between Glencoe, the Bridge of Orchy, and Loch Rannoch. It is vast, wild, and uninhabited (“Rannoch Moor”).

Eliot had taught Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* in his 1917 lectures on “Modern English Literature” (Schuchard (1999): 42, 44), and it is across Rannoch Moor's rugged terrain that David Balfour struggles on his return. In 1932 when Eliot visited Rannoch, he had thus been, in a sense, prepared for its forbidding and beautiful scenery. Yet his poem in the sequence entitled “Landscapes,” “Rannoch, by Glencoe” (Eliot 1963: 141), remains a totally distinct and strangely haunting vision of what contains a history and emotion unlike anything else he wrote. Elizabeth Schneider, in *T. S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet*, called it “Eliot's only great short lyric,” and noted the history of Glencoe, with its “desolation that in spirit includes the personal with the geographical and historical, the moral with the cosmic.” “There is,” she claims, “nothing else resembling it in Eliot” (1975: 162-64). Her short commentary begins a recognition of the strangely alien perception Eliot here evoked, yet almost no critic except Nancy Hargrove has since discussed the poem or even mentioned it. A random sample of indices in my own collection of critical texts on Eliot shows it is hardly even named. If it appears at all, it is as one of the “minor poems” grouped as “Landscapes” without reference to its sharp difference from the others. In some cases it is not even clear that the landscapes are not all American.

But Schneider was right. In “Rannoch, by Glencoe” Eliot achieved something unique in his work, “a great short lyric” and a recognition of otherness quite distinct from his characteristic treatment of landscape. Eliot got it exactly right; he captured the resonances that go beyond even the massacre itself to a long history. What, then, did Eliot get right, and why has the poem been generally ignored? The answer cannot be separated from Eliot's notion of the meaning of “England” and his ambiguous stance toward all those parts of the “United Kingdom” that are not England and not English. On the one hand, he affirmed diversity of culture and insisted on the need for what he termed “regions” to remain culturally distinct. In “Notes towards the Definition of Culture” he argued that “a man should feel himself to be, not merely a citizen of a particular nation, but a citizen of a particular part of his country, with local loyalties” (1949: 125). On the other hand, he distinguished them from those he

² I am relying for this brief summary on the *Collins Encyclopedia of Scotland*. However, the story of Glencoe is known throughout Scotland and recalled as both betrayal and attempted genocide, which, in the words of this text, “made the name of Glencoe one of infamy through the ages.” Extended accounts appear in Scottish histories, and John Prebble published a widely-read book on Glencoe. Because of its history, Rannoch Moor is also a familiar name and place to anyone in Scotland.

labeled "the greater peoples," in which England was included but not Scotland. England, he made clear, was not a region: "The Englishman, for instance, does not ordinarily think of England as a 'region' in the way that a Scottish or Welsh national can think of Scotland or Wales" (Eliot 1949: 126). That Scots have continually thought of Scotland as a nation does not seem to be part of his conceptualization. His claim, based on his definition of a language, is too complex to define here, but for the purposes of my argument what matters is the relegation of Scotland to a region whose importance, like that of other "regions," which he calls "satellite cultures," lies in its contribution to the richness and complexity of English culture.³ He offers two reasons for the sustaining of local cultures, the first being that "any vigorous small people wants to preserve its individuality." But the second justifies its being sustained as a satellite:

The other reason for the preservation of local culture is one which is also a reason for the satellite culture continuing to be satellite, and not going so far as to try to cut itself off completely. It is that the satellite exercises a considerable influence upon the stronger culture; and so plays a larger part in the world at large than it could in isolation. For Ireland, Scotland and Wales to cut themselves off completely from England would be to cut themselves off from Europe and the world, and no talk of auld alliances would help matters. But it is the other side of the question that interests me more, for it is the side that has received less acknowledgement. It is that the survival of the satellite culture is of very great value to the stronger culture. (Eliot 1949: 128-29)

Putting aside the obvious questions of why independence would cut off the other cultures from Europe and why it should be of absolute value to them to enrich English culture, what this reveals is a set of assumptions consistently evident in Eliot's merging of landscape and consciousness. If memory is the America of a New England childhood, "History is now and England." In the late poems this becomes a merging of abstract spiritual experience with consciousness, a merging that, in the "Landscapes" of American scenes and even, in "Usk," of Wales, fuses Eliot's emotional and spiritual experience in ways that anticipate *Four Quartets*. Only "Rannoch" resists this appropriation of space into a personal and definitive vision. If, as Grover Smith said of Eliot's "peculiar privacy," it is only in "Portrait of a Lady" that there is "pure realization of an external character" (1956: 298), it is only in "Rannoch by Glencoe" that there is pure realization of an external place, other and unassimilable.

In *Four Quartets* each "Quartet" incorporates a place with memory, history, and self. This fusion of internal and external experience is represented in internal

³ For a full discussion of the implications of this claim for Scottish literature, see Nancy K. Gish, "MacDiarmid Reading *The Waste Land*: The Politics of Quotation," in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*.

monologues, direct addresses to the reader, and varying pronouns. The philosophical speculation that opens "Burnt Norton," for example, shifts to an address to an unnamed companion now known to be Emily Hale (Gordon 1999: 265-67) and is followed by what "we" have done in memory or imagination. "East Coker" and "Dry Salvages" open with internal monologues on personal memory as it recalls generations – one's own or those of all who live in time. "Little Gidding" moves from internal reflection to addressing a "you" who remains in the impersonal and general of any reader. For all their abstract and spiritual content, and for all their beauty and power, these poems remain, as Smith stated, in a "peculiar privacy" where "the people of Eliot's world behave in the way Eliot has felt" (298). The assumption remains that for "I," "we," "human kind," "you," "they," experience is one and is what Eliot has felt. Significantly, both Mary, Queen of Scots, and Charles I (who spent his last night in safety at Little Gidding) are appropriated for the creation of an "English" history blended with Eliot's own. Queen Mary's motto reversed to "In my beginning is my end" takes the reader to the origins of Eliot's family in "East Coker," and "a king at nightfall" coming to Little Gidding identifies this American expatriate "Royalist" with the Scottish royal line, as seeking in some way a comparable solace in an idealized community, "folded in a single party." At the end of *Four Quartets*, the past has reached a "concurrence" not to be found at Rannoch or Glencoe which are, in this sense, unlike the other "Landscapes" of America and even the "hermit's chapel" placed in Usk, another site of legendary connections with the Jacobite wars. Unlike the others, "Rannoch, by Glencoe" finds no echoes in *Four Quartets*.

Given Eliot's consistent use and re-use of images and moods, not only throughout the early work but in the latest, such as the children in the apple tree of "New Hampshire," the river of "Virginia," the song birds and sea of "Cape Ann," and the place of prayer in "Usk," this individuality sets the poem apart. Thus, while "Landscapes" have frequently been seen as preludes to *Four Quartets*, "Rannoch" is distinct in being purely external, not an address, and not spoken to self or to an other. Moreover, its images are not American or English, nor are they used elsewhere. Rather, they are drawn largely from Scottish history and legend, and from a memory not Eliot's and not English. The crow, for example, is a constant in Scottish literature from the medieval ballad, "The Twa Corbies," to La Corbie, the weird chorus-like figure of Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. This is not the American-sinister of Poe but the beast of battle in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the raven defined in *Jamieson's Dictionary* as "a bird of ill omen," who, in the ballad, dines well on the "new-slain knight" but on Rannoch starves. The stag is the constant of nineteenth-century literature about aristocracy who go to Scotland to shoot, an emblematic figure even used in the film, *The Queen*, to show Elizabeth's emotional link to some powerful Scottish scene. "Moon cold or moon hot" refers to a

December or June moon (Stillman 2008),⁴ in both of which “substance crumbles, in the thin air” and the road has ghosts of memory from ancient wars. It is noticeable even to an American living in Scotland that memories remain for centuries and can evoke fierce emotions still – as the votes for devolution and a parliament have revealed. Eliot's sentence, “Memory is strong / Beyond the bone” is striking not only for its immediate intensity but for its difference from the bones of Eliot's early poems; these bones are like the ones at the end of “The Twa Corbies”: “O'er his white banes, when they are bare, / The wind sall blaw for evermair.” They evoke neither the horror of trench warfare, like those of *The Waste Land*, nor the purified body of “Ash Wednesday,” but the utter desolation of betrayal and abandonment. Moreover, the “broken steel” and “Clamour of confused wrong” resonate with long centuries of clan wars overlaid with the ultimate and unforgotten desolation of Glencoe.

If, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot represents that part of his ambivalent concept of “regions” as contributors to England, in “Rannoch” he seems to have encountered something beyond his power to reframe, a wildness and difference whose history could not be “folded in a single party.” The concluding lines are telling:

Pride snapped,
Shadow of pride is long, in the long pass
No concurrence of bone. (Eliot 1963: 141)

This closure leaves no space for the notion of “contribution” or value to the “greater peoples.” It asserts instead the recognition of what is other and for itself. Yet it does not recur in any later poem, and Schneider's evaluation has had no follow up. What Eliot, here, got exactly right also defined what may account for these exclusions. Many visitors go to Scotland and for a moment see that it is itself, but they cannot hold on to that realization when they leave. For Eliot, whose later visits to Scotland were for openings and performances at the Edinburgh Festival, the experience of Rannoch may never have been repeated. Yet it offers perhaps the one poetic realization of what may not be infolded or appropriated, and what his theoretical proposition of preserving individuality demands, if it is to be other than a momentary tourist's view of a history outside the self. In the history and memory of Glencoe, there can be no “concurrence of bone” between the betrayed and the betrayer, inevitably as they are intertwined. In the vastness of Rannoch, what remains is a form of identity beyond regionalism that cannot serve as a “satellite” or enter into the “single party” of Eliot's private consciousness. That he recognized this, if he did not retain it, may account for its unique position in his poetry.

⁴ Although I can find no sources of “moon hot” or “moon cold” except from Native Americans and the New England Eliot had also just visited in 1932, they are separate from the images of place, landscape, or historical event. See *The Old Farmer's Almanac* (2008) for names of months based on the moon, used by Native Americans and Colonists.

ADDENDUM

Since writing this essay, I have spent a great deal of time studying the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum Campaign and spending the week of the vote in Scotland. A striking fact about Scotland's sense of its distinctive culture and identity is that, whether I talked with No or Yes voters, they all identified first or entirely as Scottish. In fact, in several decades of writing on Scottish literature, and living there for many periods, I have never heard a Scot say "I'm British." Many No voters now add it as a second identity, but in my experience that is a recent impulse to make it a significant point. Though they may differ on how Scottishness can best face the future, within or without the Union, they are intensely aware that their history, culture, language, and politics are different from England's and are, for most, a source of pride and self-definition.

Despite the 55% to 45% win for No, Eliot's encounter with difference seems as central to understanding Scotland and Scotland's culture today as in 1932. That, in itself, attests to the power of Scottish national identity, which cannot be equated with any simplified definition of nationalism. Thus, when Eliot spoke of a Scottish national seeing Scotland as a "region," he used a term I, at least, have never seen in the writing of a Scot: they do not see themselves as a region but as a nation. For Scots, Scotland is, and has always remained, a nation, however allied with the other nation in the Union. And, ironically, English nationals are finding it essential to consider what has been called "the rise of Englishness." Thus a gap appears, in the poem, between Eliot's intellectual claims and his rich artistic imagination, a recognition compelling, in his own terms, a move beyond dissociation to what Schneider calls the "desolation that in spirit includes the personal with the geographical and historical, the moral with the cosmic." It remains, I think, the source of this poem's "great" lyric power.

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