For a Breath of Air: Scottishness in the Writing of Kathleen Jamie

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Scottish features that permeate the work of Kathleen Jamie (b. 1962). Her Scottishness is manifested in poetry, prose, and travel non-fiction. Jamie draws upon the tradition of landscape literature and theories of imagination of the English Romantic poets. The article investigates Jamie's affinity to the Scottish countryside as manifested in her lyric poetry and in a series of personal essays in her non-fiction volume *Findings*. Another theme discussed by the article is Jamie's choice of language —her use of Scots as compared to the use of standard English. The essay also analyzes Jamie's exploration of the relationship of poetry and science. The poetic process of imagination is contrasted in her writings with scientific observation. In the final section, Jamie's interest in her own heritage is explored in texts that juxtapose Scottish culture with the cultures of Pakistan, Tibet, and China.

Keywords

Scottish poetry; poetry of nature; travel; Scotland; Pakistan; Tibet; China; nationalism; Romanticism; identity; Kathleen Jamie

Among the twentieth-century Scottish poets, there are two enthusiastic cyclists—Norman MacCaig and Kathleen Jamie. They are both Scottish patriots who have learnt to admire the uniqueness of the Scottish countryside during their bike rides. In their poems they invest mundane objects with metaphysical significance. In his poem "An Ordinary Day," MacCaig describes how the observer becomes part of the observed scene as "my mind observed to me, / or I to it, how ordinary / extraordinary things are or // how extraordinary ordinary / things are, like the nature of the mind / and the process of observing."[1] Similarly, the poetry of Kathleen Jamie is defined by her affinity with the Scottish landscape, her interest in Scottish politics, habits and customs, and the Scots variety of English. In a recent interview with Caroline Blyth, Jamie explains her motivation for having chosen a writing career: "I knew very early on that I didn't want a proper job, and I thought if I can make myself unemployable I'll have no option but to be a writer."[2] In the early 1980s Jamie became recognized as one of the most talented young Scottish writers.

1. Norman MacCaig, "An Ordinary Day," in *The Poems of Norman MacCaig* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2005), 164.
2. Caroline Blyth, "Autonomies and Regions: An Interview with Kathleen Jamie," *Oxford Poetry* 7, no. 2 (2003): http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/texts.php?int=vii2_kathleenjamie (accessed March 20, 2011).

In the literary genres that Jamie has employed (poetry, non-fiction, travelogue) she speaks with a distinctive Scottish voice. Moreover, she believes that poetry may bring people back to a more wholesome appreciation of the natural world. In the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Jamie advocates that "poetry is the place where we consider or calibrate our relationships—with ourselves, our culture, history. However, with the natural world, many of our approaches have been infantilised, or cauterized."[3] Her poetic style evokes the fragmentary, unrhymed, sometimes obscure diction of the German Romantic poet Hölderlin.

As a practitioner of contemporary Scottish landscape poetry, Jamie utilizes the Wordsworthian proposal for poetry to be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [which] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."[4] Jamie gets inspiration for her poems from close observation of the Scottish Lowlands and islands. She also adheres to Coleridge's notion of imagination and fancy. Coleridge advocates that the proper use of secondary imagination is a sign of a true poet as the secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible; yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead."[5] Similarly, Jamie chooses objects and places that are dead and abandoned and creates imaginary stories about their form of existence. She focuses on the ability of manmade objects to become the historians of human progress. This method has already been employed by John Keats, who, in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" claims the vase to be ". . . still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, / Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme."[6] Jamie shares with Keats an interest in history and attention to sensual experiences. In a recent interview she comments on the importance of the use of sensory perceptions that become transformed into poetic visions:

> As to how a poet 'sees'—I have no idea. Best 'seers' I have ever met are naturalists and scientists. What a poet may do with more care and application [than] some others is use language, and bend the language into the shape of the world. Perhaps poets use language as a form of 'seeing'. More and more, however, I think the job is to listen, to pay attention. I'm not a naturalist, I'd have been embarrassed to be called one. As a writer I can provide a sort of connective tissue (that's why I can't accept the distinctions, nature/not-nature; new audience/converted).[7]

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3. Quoted in *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Autumn 2004: http://www.poetrybooks.co.uk/news/04/autumn_bulletin/ (accessed March 20, 2011).
4. William Wordsworth, "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 365.
5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: Everyman, 1997), 175. Coleridge's italics.
6. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1193.
7. Kathleen Jamie, "Interview with Kathleen Jamie," *BooksfromScotland.com*, March 13, 2006: http://www.booksfromscotland.com/Authors/Kathleen-Jamie/Interview (accessed March 20, 2011).

A good example of the way Jamie transforms ordinary subjects into foci of her poetic vision is given in *Findings* (2005), a collection of personal essays on Scottish landscapes. In "Darkness and Light," Jamie's imagination is triggered when she visits the neolithic village of Skara Brae on the Orkney Islands. Once there, she becomes fascinated by the darkness of Maes Howe, an old burial place, on the day of the winter solstice. While a magical beam of light comes down into the tomb she plans to enjoy a silent vigil which is totally destroyed by the modern pursuit of knowledge and accuracy because a Historic Scotland Committee has ordered a precise 3D scanning of the tomb: "The tomb-builders had constructed their cairn to admit a single beam of solstice light: it was the bending of a natural phenomenon to a human end, somewhere between technology and art. . . . The building wasn't designed to be breathed in and lit. It was designed to be dead in, and dark. Breath and light mean algae, and algae is damaging."[8] Throughout *Findings* Jamie sticks to her principle of refusing to judge reality: "This is what I want to learn: to notice, but not to analyse."[9] She goes to various Scottish places and uncovers the local rarities. She is interested in the intersections of the present with the past, such as when she finds an old vertebra which sets her thinking about the animal that it comes from. Analogously, when Jamie describes her visits to abandoned huts and villages in the remote islands of the Orkneys and Hebrides, she imagines the time when people still lived there:

> It had been inhabited once. A single abandoned house stood at the westernmost end of the bay. . . . Maybe there's something instinctive in us, that we're drawn to human habitation and can't resist a ruin . . . . These are the rarities in human history, the places from which we've retreated. These once-inhabited places play a different air to the uninhabited; they suggest the lost past, the lost Eden, not the Utopia to come.[10]

Jamie creates an immediacy of place; she imagines possible characters and populates the emptied houses, beaches, ships, and meadows with them. The isolation of the human observer is alleviated by the inclusion of an animal presence, such as that of a bird. She refuses to write of these landscapes as an insider; rather, she keeps a distance so as to be able to marvel at the slightest detail, like a Romantic visionary.

In her poetic prose, Jamie excels in depictions of the relationships between opposites. For example, in "Light and Darkness" she meditates about the relationship of these phenomena, trying to recall the stock metaphors about them. She finds the concept of darkness the one that is less explored and thus more fascinating:

> our cherished metaphor of darkness is wearing out. . . .
>
> Pity the dark: we're so concerned to overcome and banish it, it's crammed full of all that's devilish, like some grim cupboard under the stair. But dark is good. We are conceived and carried in the darkness, are we not? . . . Our vocabulary ebbs with the

8. Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005), 17, 23.
9. Jamie, *Findings*, 42.
10. Jamie, *Findings*, 63.

> daylight, closes down with the cones of our retinas. . . . We say death is darkness; and darkness death.[11]

Jamie's variation on a pastoral theme from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" draws a parallel between light and darkness, beauty and truth. The Keats line "beauty is truth, truth beauty" denotes, in the context of Jamie's work, the exploration of dark, haunted locations, which, in turn, cause the author to reach enlightenment and a sense of aesthetic pleasure and truth.

As a moderate conservationist, Jamie adopts the vocabulary of ecology in an effort to portray "the relationship between literature and the environment, particularly the representation of landscape, the treament of wildlife and the economy of the natural world."[12] Her prose can thus be viewed from the perspective of ecocriticism, which has come to mean "a digression from the more familiar literary analysis premised on gender, race, class and so on. The emergence of ecocriticism also reflects the changing political landscape of the 1990s and the emergence of environmentalism as part of our everyday vocabulary."[13]

In *Findings*, Jamie portrays not only the natural world but also the rise of Scottish nationalism, which intensified upon the opening of the new Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh in 1999. In "Skylines" she glorifies Scotland through revisiting the historical sights in Edinburgh: "The city sends up noise and fumes, and also the symbols of the day, the zeitgeist cast in shining brass and lifted skyward. But symbols, with their exact, not-negotiable 'meaning' fall out of use, ... When you can no longer read then, we have to look [them] up in books. They become curiosities."[14] Although some historic symbols might become obsolete even for the Scots, there is the brand new architectural wonder of the New Scottish Parliament that can be best observed from the elevated position of Edinburgh's tourist viewpoint on the Calton Hill: "The city's newest building is immediately below the Calton Hill; you can look directly down on it. A twenty-first-century affair, of smoked glass, presence and inclusion, cinemas and escalators and bars, the Omni building promises leisure for all. What it raises on its roof is a garden. You can't see it from the street, of course—you have to climb the hill."[15] However, Jamie's interpretation of Scottishness lacks the nationalist pomp of Robert Burns and Walter Scott. Jamie prefers to explore the Scottish landscape and Scottish identity in the balladic and elegiac tone that is a trademark element of Scottish writing. Helen Boden believes that the "significance of Jamie's work lies in its skilful renegotiation with the ways the nation is and has been

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11. Jamie, *Findings*, 3.
12. Matt McGuire, "Kathleen Jamie," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, ed. Matt McGuire and Colin Nichols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 149.
13. McGuire, "Kathleen Jamie," 149.
14. Jamie, *Findings*, 158.
15. Jamie, *Findings*, 160–61.

represented; with the past and its stereotypes."[16] Moreover, Jamie is quick to emphasize any minute differences between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, which makes Scotland a place with a unique cultural heritage.

In *Findings*, Jamie's interest in nature does not manifest itself in simply cataloging the birds, flowers and trees—these are used to induce moments of epiphanic revelation. As Michael McCarthy argues, "in essence these are prose poems, carried neither by argument, nor by story, nor by any driving emotion. . . . Their point is the vivid catching of the fleeting aspects of the world around us, which, by watching in an unusually acute and attentive way, Jamie does with remarkable skill."[17] In a second essay from this book, "Peregrines, Ospreys, Cranes," Jamie captures a quiet atmosphere on a Scottish beach:

> [F]ew people were there . . . I saw the male peregrine in the afternoon being pursued round the cliff by a single crow. The crow veered off and went to sit in the tree, but it must have left the peregrine piqued, because he circled alone two or three times more, stooping as though in scorn at whatever happened to be flying beneath him. A jackdaw jinked away with its life. Then the peregrine flew up and away over the hill, and was silhouetted for a long moment against the misty sunlight. An hour later he was back. On another ledge, six feet below, was what looked like a burst cushion, pigeon-pink-grey.[18]

She delights in reporting the details of animal life and such a scene brings her joy as the uttermost goal of her writing.

Jamie is a poet who communicates sounds as well as silences. For example, the roaring of a waterfall on the River Braan in the Scottish Highlands is juxtaposed with the absence of sound: "Away from the river, a pleasing silence fell."[19] In "Findings," the title essay of the book, Jamie talks of herself as a solitary listener who frequently cycles to isolated places to enjoy moments of nonverbal communication with the landscape: "I grew to appreciate the company of people who listen to the world. They don't feel the need to talk all the while."[20] Throughout the essay, Jamie employs imagery of the natural world and then lets her mind associate freely, as when she observes the quiet surface of the sea: "In this anchorage, the water was so still, so emerald green that when an arctic tern flew over, its plumage absorbed the green of the water and it became a green bird."[21] The green color of the seawater changes into an imagined bird and Jamie's mind wanders off to vizualize the green birds of Amazonia.

Tess Taylor argues that the strength of *Findings* rests on Jamie's weaving of all the elements and the cycle of the seasons into an oxymoronic picture

16. Helen Boden, "Kathleen Jamie's Semiotic of Scotlands," in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 27.
17. Michael McCarthy, "A Fine Talent for Observation that Needs a Bigger Stage," *Independent*, June 14, 2005: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/findings-by-kathleen-jamie-752536.html (accessed March 20, 2011).
18. Jamie, *Findings*, 37.
19. Jamie, *Findings*, 73.
20. Jamie, *Findings*, 54.
21. Jamie, *Findings*, 68.

of the Scottish countryside: *Findings* is a "collection of essays about sites where nature and non-nature intersect. . . . In fact, it is the complex relationship between the apparently 'real' and the merely 'aesthetic' that most fascinates Jamie. She loves finding and exploring the paradoxes."[22] In an earlier collection of poetry, *A Flame in Your Heart* (1986), Jamie explains her ambivalence about the progress of the year wherein life and death mingle: "We don't have seasons, we just repeat / the same on a groaning train of men / who get discharged at the other end. / Under our hands, nothing changes."[23]

The relationship of life and death is further developed in "The Braan Salmon," another essay from *Findings*. Jamie documents an occasion on which she watched the salmon who swim against the current to reach their place of birth. They may never reach their destination, since numerous artificial structures on the river make it impossible. The poet regrets that the struggle of the salmon is futile as a result of human activity: "Now I knew a secret, something the salmon didn't know, that whether it be instinct or technique it didn't matter, their effort was hopeless. . . . Could I 'replenish my soul' by watching the salmon try to leap the falls, knowing all the while that it was useless?"[24] Having presented the tragedy of the salmon, Jamie turns to the superior laws of nature, where only the fittest and luckiest are predestined to survive. She proceeds to describe an encounter with a group of students who are working by the river on projects related to a nature photography course. She wonders whether such a technical approach to photography may bring across the spirit of the animals and genius loci:

> It was something the photographer had said that bothered me. A week-long photography course. And his students skulking among the trees, slightly farcical with their woolly hats and tripods. I had nearly asked him what a week-long photography course consisted of, but the river was too loud and I'd a hunch I knew already—it would be similar to the creative writing courses I teach myself. His would be all lenses and composition and f-stops and light meters. Wildscapes. How to make a better photograph of the natural world. How to master all that technical stuff but make the image look fresh, natural, accidental even. How to employ all that technique expressly to make the result look natural, techniqueless.[25]

Jamie doubts that the method of studied artlessness in photography could capture the character of the scenery.

The relationship of nature and science is explored further in "Fever," where the author talks about the positives and negatives of an X-ray of the human body: "The X-ray gives an external image of something we carry within ourselves. An image we have to draw out of ourselves, that we might see it in front of our eyes and so take it within ourselves again. Out of the lungs

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22. Tess Taylor, "Landmarks," *Boston Review* 33, no. 4 (July/August 2008): http://bostonreview.net/BR33.4/taylor.php (accessed March 20, 2011).
23. Kathleen Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead: Poems, 1980–1994* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2002), 35.
24. Jamie, *Findings*, 80.
25. Jamie, *Findings*, 74–75.

and into the brain."[26] As Wordsworth described in the "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," there is a difference between the poet and the scientist: whereas the poet recreates perceptions of objects, the scientist scrutinizes them and sticks to the pragmatic description of reality:

> [T]he Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the Man of science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies. The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.[27]

Jamie defies the Wordsworthian division between the world of the scientist and the lyric poet. In this respect, Jamie again draws on Coleridge's theory of fancy and imagination. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge proposes that fancy works only with "fixities and definites . . . [of] Memory emancipated from the order of time and space" and that it must receive "all its materials ready made from the law of association."[28] Jamie starts with the mechanical fancy that works upon the repeated paradigms of memorized associations and proceeds to employ the creativity of imagination that brings about new images. However, what Jamie shares is the Wordsworthian premise that "the knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of science is pleasure."[29] She delights in assuming the role of the Romantic mirror that reflects the outside world, providing material for introspection. In "Surgeons' Hall," Jamie explores the connection between science and nature. The location is part of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, which was a unique place for the study of practical anatomy. She walks round the hall, passing jars with limbs and tissue, and does not see in them only parts of human bodies. Rather, she grows interested in the structure of the body and is amazed by the effect of having the samples on display for many years: "[T]he chemical intervention which arrests the natural processes of decay is called 'fixing'. Once fixed, a specimen can be kept for a long time."[30] In 2006 Jamie wrote a series of six poems that were commissioned for the Anatomy Acts exhibition at the Edinburgh City Art Centre. In these poems she sees the human body parts as objects of art—for instance, an ovarian tumor is likened to an almost perfect frog. As Sarah Jones documents, "Jamie finds the beauty in the unnatural and

26. Jamie, *Findings*, 105.
27. Wordsworth, "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," 362–63.
28. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 175.
29. Wordsworth, "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," 363.
30. Jamie, *Findings*, 130.

the sadness in the scientific."[31] She makes the reader believe a tumor can be beautiful.

Like the English Romantics, Jamie is a keen advocate of the pantheism that is present in the Scottish natural landscapes. In her early poem "View from the Cliffs," which was not included in any major collection, she contrasts the unspoiled beauty and peace of the island in the Orkneys which "rises like the letter D, / gently rolls, / . . . . / . . . the ocean / and twenty thousand seabirds"[32] with the disturbing image of natural treasures being exploited for commercial purposes: "Between the rocks a walnut lifts / lobsters for London."[33] A similar tribute to the soul-nourishing nature of the Scottish landscape may be found in "Cramon Island": "Come and scratch your feet / on sharper, more explosive shells. / Draw your own blood / for a farther view, / a place to lay bare / among ruins. / The choice will return in time."[34] As a permanent resident of the Firth of Forth Jamie values this sanctuary, which becomes an almost inaccessible island at high tide.

Jamie employs what the Romantics called the "inward eye," which transmits vision between the outer and inner world. For her, all the perceptions rise from the "attitude of mind"[35] and are transformed into ideas. It is exemplified in her poetry collection *The Tree House*, where, in "Before the Wind," the wild birds search for ripe cherries and the speaker fights with them in order to secure more cherries for herself.[36] Jamie starts with the observation of the birds, then focuses on the cherries, which are likened to stone and flesh, and finally she returns to the blossoms and the birds: ". . . A mouth // contains a cherry, a cherry / a stone, a stone / the flowering branch / I must find before the wind // scatters all trace of its blossom, / and the fruit comes, and yellow-eyed birds."[37] In Jamie's poetry, there are also poems in which elements of nature and civilization are juxtaposed. In "White-sided Dolphins" a boat with dolphin-watchers and a shoal of dolphins become unified: "we travelled as one // loose formation: the muscular / wingers, mothers-with-young, / old scarred outriders / all breached alongside."[38] A similar scenario is the subject of "Rhododendrons," a poem in which the reflection of the blossoms beneath the surface of the water is compared to the cosy family atmosphere of watching TV. The poet disrupts the peaceful tone with existentialist doubt: "What was it, / I'd have asked, to exist / so bright and fateless // while time coursed / through our every atom / over its bed

31. Sarah Jones, "Anatomy of a Natural Poet," *Scotland On Sunday*, May 13, 2006: http://living.scotsman.com/features/Anatomy-of-a-natural-poet.2775219.jp (accessed March 20, 2011).
32. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 11.
33. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 11.
34. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 25.
35. Kathleen Jamie, *The Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004), 17.
36. See Jamie, *The Tree House*, 13.
37. Jamie, *The Tree House*, 13.
38. Jamie, *The Tree House*, 22.

of stones—?"[39] The significance of the rhododendrons becomes evident when these are preferred to the thistle, a symbol of Scotland.[40] Further evidence of the coexistence of flowers and humans may be seen in "Water Lilies," where the blossoms are compared to the upturned palms of hands. William Logan has noticed the power with which Jamie's poems surprise the reader with unexpected shifts of tone and angle; the "poems look better the more you know of them, and the more of them you know—they live halfway in the shadows, like a predator waiting to strike."[41] In "The Dipper" Jamie admires the experience of a bird that suddenly appears out of a waterfall and starts to sing: "I can't coax this bird to my hand / that knows the depth of the river / yet sings of it on land."[42] There are occasions on which Jamie explores a darker vision of the natural world. In "Frogs" she contrasts the pastoral lyricism of Wordsworth with contemporary nihilism.[43] An image of copulating frogs is disrupted by the description of an approaching car which runs them over. Jamie then highlights the paradoxical unity of the two frogs, which, dead, become one body, "belly, to belly."[44]

Jamie's Scottishness becomes most pronounced when she writes of her travels to Tibet, China, and Pakistan. Being outside her native country, she maintains a fresh perspective on what it means to be Scottish. Tess Taylor argues that Jamie has a genuine interest in Scottish culture but has to be temporarily "exiled" in order to appreciate it: "Jamie's interest in Scottish identity occasionally manifests as a curiosity about all the people who left Scotland."[45] In *The Autonomous Region: Poems & Photographs from Tibet* (1993), a poetry travelogue co-authored by Jamie and photographer Sean Mayne Smith, Jamie explores various cultures—Scottish, English, Tibetan, and Chinese. Fiona Stafford believes that "the poems suggest that the mythic dimensions of her journey across China were also criss-crossing with her home, since several use Scots and feature images such as 'a lassie in a red scarf', 'a loch called Qinghai'."[46] Jamie opts for the role of an unobtrusive observer who does not explicitly judge the Asians by European standards of behavior. She excels at portraying the people she has met during her

39. Jamie, *The Tree House*, 33.

40. Kathleen Jamie, *The Golden Peak: Travels in Northern Pakistan* (London: Virago, 1992). In this book, the rhododendrons are used throughout as a symbolic gift of the Scottish visitor to her Pakistani friends.

41. William Logan, "Verse Chronicle: The World Is Too Much with Us," *New Criterion*, December 2007: http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-world-is-too-much-with-us-3718 (accessed March 20, 2011).

42. Jamie, *The Tree House*, 49.

43. See Jamie, *The Tree House*, 5.

44. Jamie, *The Tree House*, 5.

45. Taylor, "Landmarks."

46. Fiona Stafford, "A Scottish Renaissance: Edwin Morgan, Douglas Dunn, Liz Lochhead, Robert Crawford, Don Paterson, Kathleen Jamie," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237.

travels. McGuire argues that "Jamie's poetry presents alternative ways of travelling. It is a gateway through which to access this walking-pace world."[47] The mostly untitled poems picture the Tibetan locals and their philosophy. Jamie, as a foreigner, chooses an angle of vision that is both detached and participatory. She is amazed by the spiritual freedom of the Tibetans, by their will to live and to overcome obstacles with ease: "'Promise or rumour without author or source / ever keeps us moving, against the way / of the small clear river'—which is to say: uphill. . . . 'Life! / Wo! *That* straggling caravan.'"[48] The Tibetans consider the nomadic style of life a divine gift that makes them happy in spite of the physical hardship of perpetual traveling: "he loved / the way his lips cracked, loved / to feel his head spin, loved / to cough the dust and consider himself / a journeyman, a-journeying."[49] Jamie repeatedly brings up her Scottishness while describing her Tibetan and Chinese experiences. In "For Paola" she uses the Scots variety of English to portray the horror of having learnt about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, where an estimated 3000 people were killed in a military offensive in reaction to protests. Several governmental attempts to make the mainly student protesters demanding democratic reforms leave failed as the students refused to leave the square until their demands were met. Through an encounter with a Tibetan woman who is sweeping the floor, she learns that Tibet "is a place your friends disappear: / trust naebody. Luve a."[50] Jamie captures the quiet dignity of the Tibetan people and wonders whether the Scots would be able to accept their national fate with such grace. Even the accompanying photographs bring across the spiritual happiness of the Tibetans, which originates in their religious practices, meditation, and disregard for the Western cult of materialism. What matters in Tibet is not the accumulation of property and attainment of success but rather the enlightenment that might be experienced on the road.

The kinship of travelogue prose and poetry is best shown in the Karakoram Highway poems from the 1987 collection *The Way We Live*. The 1300-km-long Karakoram Highway, which runs from Pakistan to China, was built with great effort between 1966 and 1986. Although the majestic government project was nicknamed the "Friendship Highway" by the locals, ironically, there is no friendship between Pakistan and China, as one of the characters in *The Golden Peak* attests: "[T]his Friendship Highway, what is this? It is a means by which the Pakistan and Chinese governments can shake hands in case of emergency!"[51] The highway, then, divides the common people of the two nations instead of bringing them closer to each other. The route partly copies

47. McGuire, "Kathleen Jamie," 141.

48. Kathleen Jamie, *The Autonomous Region: Poems & Photographs from Tibet* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), 19. Jamie's italics.

49. Jamie, *The Autonomous Region*, 22.

50. Jamie, *The Autonomous Region*, 70.

51. Kathleen Jamie, *The Golden Peak*, 12.

the ancient Silk Road, which refers historically to a system of important trade routes connecting Asia with Africa and Europe, but which today symbolizes the western cult of commercialism. Jamie compares the Silk Road to the ancient Roman road network reaching to the northern outposts in Scotland and identifies the strategic and military importance of both roads. In the other poems of *The Way We Live* Jamie assumes a tone of lyrical tenderness, leaving criticism of Pakistani politics aside. She meditates about the mountains and colors that shape the mood of the traveler; there is "Angora blackness,"[52] "[n]o colour but brown,"[53] "long passive blue,"[54] or "crop[ping] yellow."[55]

In a number of poems, Jamie resorts to Scots in order to describe events and the feelings of an outsider about the remote Asian country. In an interview with Kirsty Scott, Jamie explains her choice of language: "I like the feel of it [the feel of Scots] and the texture of it in the mouth, just to keep it flavoursome."[56] She strives to retain her "tartan suitcase [because] Scots . . . is present in your mouth and in your ear and because it can do a job that standard English can't do, reach parts that language cannot reach."[57] For Jamie, Scots provides access to thoughts and emotions that she would not be able to express in standard English. However, the reader of Jamie's poetry would often benefit from the preference of English to Scots. William Logan believes that the use of Scots is a drawback rather than a positive aspect of Jamie's poetry, since "the poems she casts into Scots, unfortunately, offer only beauties borrowed or begged—perhaps that's the result when a language once robust becomes largely literary, learned with half an ear in childhood or only later from books."[58] In Jamie's hands, Scots becomes a linguistic hindrance that makes the meaning of her poems unintelligible to non-Scottish readers. An example of this problem is "Sang o the blin beggar" where the condensed lines and spare syntax obscure the poem even further without having any clearly beneficial effect: "Folk that talk lik rivers o risin / will be swept awa tae gutters lik the rain // o this dynasty o wickitness / grieve agin the night and howl wi dugs."[59]

Another notable travelogue is *The Golden Peak* (1992), expanded as *Among the Muslims* (2002). Here Jamie juxtaposes and appreciates two very different cultures—the Pakistani and the Scottish. Some Pakistani rituals and homes remind her of Scotland and its traditional values: "I like the Golden Peak [hotel] because of the dark fireplaces and this extraordinary wallpaper, the

52. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 56.
53. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 61.
54. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 61.
55. Jamie, *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, 62.
56. Kirsty Scott, "In the Nature of Things," *Guardian*, June 18, 2005: http://www.guardian.co.uk (accessed March 20, 2011).
57. Kathleen Jamie, "Interview with Kathleen Jamie," by Lilias Fraser, *Scottish Studies Review* 2, no.1 (Spring 2001): 22.
58. Logan, "Verse Chronicle."
59. Jamie, *The Autonomous Region*, 72.

bow windows and the incongruous camp beds. It makes me think of a Scottish drawing-room, billeted in wartime."[60] Jamie sympathizes with the Pakistanis in the region because they suffer from political and social unrest. She compares this situation with the Scottish initiative for a devolved parliament in Edinburgh. Similarly, the Pakistanis have struggled for political autonomy: "The people of the Northern Areas have no representation in the Pakistani Parliament which administers them. They can't vote, because the question of to whom, India or Pakistan, their area should belong has yet to be resolved."[61] In *The Golden Peak*, the link between the Pakistanis and the Scots is emphasized when Jamie visits a former British library in Pakistan and shows the local nobility a dusty book about Scotland. She becomes friendly with the locals and is invited to take lodgings with the Shah family. This gives her an opportunity to become an insider to the Pakistani culture and religion. In order to penetrate the cultural otherness around her, she resorts to images of Scotland:

> To understand their culture I found myself making analogies with my own, and it wasn't difficult. Was Mrs Shah so different to my own grandmother, who speaks a fine Scots, and left school young for a life of menial tasks; for whom Pakistan is as remote and unimaginable as is Scotland for Mrs Shah? My grandmother can't drive or speak a foreign language, has never crossed the threshold of a college; does not smoke, drink, swear or wear short skirts. She rarely goes out without a scarf. She'd get on well with Mrs Shah. They'd talk about their gardens.[62]

The garden would seem to be a common theme for intercultural conversation for both these ladies. While Jamie tries to paint a closeup of the Pakistani culture, she retains her distance as she is aware of her foreignness: "As I got to know the family better, I still felt pretty displaced."[63] In spite of this, she enjoys learning about the rituals and habits that give order and meaning to life in Pakistan.

As a contemporary Scottish writer whose prose and poetry draw on the Romantic visionary pantheism of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats, Jamie keeps searching for fresh links between nature and technology, past and present, and between different cultures and nations. In "Findings" Jamie wonders "if it's still possible to value that which endures, if durability is still a virtue, whether we have invented plastic, and the doll's head with her tufts of hair and rolling eyes may well persist after our own have cleaned back down to the bone."[64] Her poems and prose are defined by her Scottishness, which manifests itself in her use of language, as well as her choice of subject matter. Still, she does not assume a millitant or nationalist perspective, preferring the tone of a laid-back observer of nature and culture who is proud of her heritage but does not wear it as a fashionable accessory.

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60. Jamie, *The Autonomous Region*, 8.
61. Jamie, *The Golden Peak*, 15.
62. Jamie, *The Golden Peak*, 37.
63. Jamie, *The Golden Peak*, 37.
64. Jamie, *Findings*, 67.

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