Gerard Lee McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism, 1786-1831*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 222. £80. ISBN 9781474441674.

A valuable addition to the growing body of work on Scottish Romanticism's contributions to conceptualising modernity, Gerard Lee McKeever's *Dialectics of Improvement* foregrounds Scottish writers' innovative uses of genre and aesthetics to create new perspectives on our modern world. McKeever's monograph convincingly argues that the aesthetic frameworks generated by Scottish Romantic writers fostered new discourses about improvement and modernity and created new possibilities for the role of literature. By improvement, McKeever means not a teleological or linear narrative of modernisation but 'a matrix of ideas about progress, many but not all of which cohere' (8). Building on the work of Ian Duncan, Penny Fielding, Matthew Wickman, and others, McKeever argues that Scottish writers of the Romantic period were particularly well positioned to articulate the ambiguity of 'improvement' because of Scotland's marginal position within the four nations and the rapid changes Scottish society experienced after the Jacobite uprising in 1745 and the Highland Clearances. McKeever anchors his claim that Scottish writers shaped our modern understanding of the perils and benefits of social and economic progress in careful readings of major genres, including the poetry of Robert Burns, the short fiction of James Hogg and Walter Scott, the plays of Joanna Baillie, and the novels of John Galt. By linking narratives of improvement to the literary frameworks forged by a range of Scottish writers, McKeever makes a compelling case for Scottish Romanticism's influence on modern aesthetic practices that continue to negotiate tensions between national and local cultures and an increasingly complex global world.

McKeever's engaging reading of Robert Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' in his first chapter serves as a model for his thoughtful treatment of aesthetics, history, and culture throughout his book. McKeever reads Burns's poem as forwarding a sense of 'tradition-within-progress', which figures time as a 'line overlapping a circle' (47). Tradition, represented by the cotter and the 'cottage ideal' he embodies, serves as the line; it also models a form of faith outside of institutionalised religion and associates this new form of worship with the cottage, which becomes a figure for a timeless tradition. McKeever puts Burns's 'cottage ideal' in dialogue with William Gilpin and other British aesthetic writers. Notably, as McKeever writes, Gilpin included 'The Cotter' in his 1789 edition of *Observations, Relative to Picturesque Beauty*, three years after the poem was first published. The line of tradition represented by the cotter and his cottage both cuts through and 'sutures' the conflict between Britain's 'modernizing goals' and 'residual social structures' (54). The enduring cottage aesthetic fostered by Burns's poem helped create a sentimental ideal for readers and a cultural space for tradition and the local that persists within our increasingly global and industrial world.

In subsequent chapters, McKeever finds Scottish writers addressing this same tension between residual Scottish social structures and increasingly complex modern economic and industrial frameworks in short fiction, drama, and the novel. James Hogg's and Walter Scott's tales and sketches in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and *Chronicles of the Canongate* exploit the 'indeterminacy' inherent to short fiction and the genre's roots in Scottish oral culture to find new ways of exploring tradition's function in modernity (73–74). Similarly, Joanna Baillie's plays, specifically *Count Basil*, *The Family Legend*, and *The Alienated Manor*, explore the pedagogical potential of the theatre for establishing enduring moral guidelines meant to 'reform' the growing bourgeoisie and encourage them to reflect on the perils of improvement and Scotland's 'primitive'

past (137). A concluding chapter engages with John Galt's novels *The Entail* and *Annals of the Parish*; Galt notably avoided the term 'novel' for his fiction, preferring the label 'theoretical history'. Galt's own experiments with aesthetics make his work an ideal fit for McKeever's concluding chapter. He argues that Galt's fiction struggles to reconcile modernity and empire with cultural forms that are rooted in local and regional pasts and explores how to sustain national character without allowing it to slip into a dangerous and atavistic form.

McKeever has a gift for explaining complex theoretical ideas and applying them to literary texts; this is evident in his careful juggling of twentieth- and twenty-first-century aesthetic theories and the Scottish Enlightenment's treatment of progress and aesthetics. Although one of the many strengths of this monograph was its focus on aesthetics and literary form, I did find myself at times looking for a more direct treatment of the Scottish Enlightenment. Recent studies of Scottish Enlightenment historiography, particularly the work of Silvia Sebastiani, has uncovered the role Scottish Enlightenment theories of progress played in our modern understandings of race and gender. A direct and sustained engagement with race and gender and their contributions to the aesthetics of improvement might have strengthened an already excellent book. Despite this, McKeever's well-crafted and thoroughly researched monograph makes a clear case for the continued study of Scottish Romanticism and its relevance to our modern world.

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