

“s na cnàmhan gu bhith ris | a-nis’ / ‘and the bones almost showing through | now’: reading contemporary Gaelic poetry

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In a letter to Douglas Young dated 2 February 1941, the Scottish Gaelic poet Somhairle MacGill-Eain dismissed a current mainstream of English language poetry: in particular he objected to the ‘meagre mosaiced whinings of Eliot and the flat slicknesses of Auden etc etc, all so keen to express their age. All this contemporaneity I think just nonsense’.¹ There are political and national dimensions here (MacGill-Eain was a confirmed socialist and Scottish nationalist), but there is also the possibility that ‘contemporaneity’ might have different characteristics within Gaelic poetry (less ‘whiny’, less ‘slick’), or indeed that MacGill-Eain had a resistance to the notion of the contemporary as some form either of imposition or fallacy: much depends on the tone one uses to read that ‘nonsense’. How one goes about defining contemporaneity or the ‘contemporary’ will vary across every culture, every language, perhaps indeed every individual. Different communities and cultures will raise historical moments to the status of totemic icons or omphaloi of contemporary identity, of ‘nowness’; it appears that for a large part of the British population, say, the present moment began (and perhaps ended) with the Second World War – this wartime or post-war episteme is one we are condemned to live through, or relive repeatedly. Within Gaelic culture, the contemporary moment – the episteme we find ourselves in – might stretch back even further, not to a single point in time, but to a process (often ill-defined but always emotively felt) that lasted for over a century from the 1740s onwards: the process of ‘clearance’. Gaelic speakers are (and will be until there is a reliable, definite Renaissance or resurgence) living in a period post-clearance, one still coloured by – often externally imposed – Celticist notions of

¹ Somhairle MacGill-Eain, ‘Letter to Douglas Young’, 1941, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6419 Box 38B. For writers who have published under both English and Gaelic names, I have tended for consistency and clarity in the argument to use only one name (the Gaelic) in my essay – this is the case even when discussing essays published in English, as with Christopher Whyte [Crisdean MacIlleBhàin].

decline and fall, by the threat of being a final Ossianic spokesperson, the “last of one’s race”.

It is perhaps possible, in other words, to trace the beginnings of Gaelic contemporaneity in the writing of a non-Gaelic speaker and a highly controversial visitor to the Scottish Highlands in the 18th century, Samuel Johnson. On the island of Coll, coming to the end of his tour with Boswell, Johnson discourses on what he terms the ‘opening’ of the Highlands and Islands, and subsequent emigration from the area:

The great business of insular policy is now to keep the people in their own country. As the world has been let in upon them, they have heard of happier climates, and less arbitrary government; and if they are disgusted, have emissaries among them ready to offer them land and houses, as a reward for deserting their Chief and clan. Many have departed both from the main of Scotland, and from the Islands; and all that go may be considered as subjects lost to the British crown; for a nation scattered in the boundless regions of America resembles rays diverging from a focus. All the rays remain, but the heat is gone. Their power consisted in their concentration: when they are dispersed, they have no effect.

It may be thought that they are happier by the change; but they are not happy as a nation, for they are a nation no longer. As they contribute not to the prosperity of any community, they must want that security, that dignity, that happiness, whatever it be, which a prosperous community throws back upon individuals.²

The ‘nation’ that Johnson describes is one that is ‘scattered’, ‘divergent’, ‘dispersed’ and powerless: it is atomised, based on individuals rather than on any sense of a ‘prosperous community’, a nation that ‘no longer’ exists. Whether any of the people that Johnson is describing would have identified themselves as a ‘nation’ is beyond the scope of this essay, not least because the interrelationship between clan and country or the tensions between cultural or racial identity and national identity is

² Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. by Peter Levi (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 128.

complicated: the distinction between 'Gàidheal' and 'Gall' [Highlander and Lowlander] was for many 'Gàidheil' (or Gaels) more of a determining factor than between Scottish and English, say. But if Gaels at that time are to be considered a 'nation', then it is a nation that was always already scattered, divergent and dispersed. This, though, might have a positive dimension.

The clan system itself created social and cultural structures that were scattered, decentred, fluid, even deracinated: the fiefdoms of the clan system were dotted around islands and isolated glens, at least to some extent independent of or resistant to the distant rulers – British, Scottish, Scandinavian, Irish – who laid claim to their allegiance. This was a nodal society rather than a society radiating out from a hub: this is not, though, a rhizomatic society, in the sense discussed by Deleuze and Guattari, since these nuclei were themselves rigidly hierarchical; with the symbolic importance of trees to the Gaelic community (and the clans themselves), the clan and chief system is more aptly imagined as forest: dispersed, rooted and evolving, and capable – ultimately – of being cleared. In the contemporary Highlands, the traces of this society are physically marked out in the present by ruined castles, ruined villages. And the contemporary, virtual, non-physical Gàidhealtachd that one now has to imagine, is more similar to de-centred clusters of individuals than even the thinning forest of the Highland past. There is no physical or political centre to the Gaelic-speaking population, no cultural centre, no religious centre: one of the most heartening things about the Highlands is how religious orthodoxy fragments through schisms almost as soon as it is exerted. It may be – perhaps unsurprisingly – that Johnson was wrong and that the strength of Gaelic speakers did not 'consist in their concentration', but in their dispersal, their 'boundlessness'. Rather than being 'rays diverging from a focus. All the rays remain, but the heat is gone' Gaelic culture might better be figured as a series of ripples or echoes that don't stop, but rather rebound onto themselves. Certainly, this was the type of energy Somhairle MacGill-Eain was trying to evoke in the Clio section of his long poem *An Cuilithionn*, which

he imagined as a form of ‘native symbolism’ that ‘radiates from Skye and the West Highlands to the whole of Europe’.³

If this sounds a slightly optimistic understanding of how Gaelic culture functions, this is perhaps necessary when faced with the stark choice offered by Ruairaidh MacThòmais, one of the dominant figures of the last 50 years in Gaelic culture, in his final collection *Sùil air Fàire* [Surveying the Horizon, 2007]. In ‘Teagamh’ [‘Doubt’] he offers a version of a clichéd choice between ‘Gaelic briste’ or ‘Gaelic sa chiste’ [Gaelic broken or in a coffin]: ‘Cò ’s fheàrr: | Alba gun Ghàidhlig, | no Alba le Gàidhlig phiullach an TV?’ [What’s better: | Scotland without Gaelic, | or Scotland with the ragged Gaelic of the TV?]⁴ MacThòmais’s poem demurs, suggesting that ‘Tha e rèir ’s cuin no càit na rugadh tu’ [It depends when or where you were born], before offering a gesture of defiance despite a sense of impending doom:

Chan eil air ach toiseachadh a’ sgrìobhadh,
is leantainn a’ sgrìobhadh mas e sin do chrois,
is leac bhrèagh fhàgail
os cionn na ciste,
’s a’ chiste bhith làn nuair thig an fhois.

[There’s nothing for it but to begin writing, | and follow the writing if that’s
your cross, | and leave a lovely flagstone | over the coffin, | a coffin that’s
full when rest comes]⁵

Defiance in the face of the inevitability of death is one way of resisting the ‘powerless’ individuality that Johnson had predicted, without simply engaging in coffin-filling. In the remainder of this essay I will explore ways in which the idea of Gaelic as being scattered divergent and boundless (or indeed politically engaged and

³ Somhairle MacGill-Eain, ‘An Cuilithionn [Introduction and Part I]’, *Chapman*, 50–51. Summer (1987), 158–63 (p. 158). This long poem, originally written in 1939–1940, was only published – with changes – in 1987. For a full history of its composition and publication, see Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939 and Unpublished Poems*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2011).

⁴ Ruairaidh MacThòmais, *Sùil air Fàire: Dain Ùra* (Steòrnabhagh: Acair, 2007), p. 30. My translation.

⁵ MacThòmais, p. 30. My translation.

'threatening' once more) might be seen as a bulwark or stay against nothingness, however temporary. First, though, I would like to step back and ask some questions about the contemporary more broadly; for, even if there are particular Gaelic inflections, this is clearly not just a Gaelic crisis.

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Giorgio Agamben, in his hugely influential 2009 essay «Che cos'è il contemporaneo» [What is the Contemporary], describes the contemporary in terms of rupture or disjunction. Agamben relies on Roland Barthes' suggestion that «*Le contemporain est l'inactuel*» ['The contemporary is the untimely'] and puts this alongside Nietzsche's suggestion that the contemporary is characterised by 'a disconnection and out-of-jointness' ["in una sconessione e in una sfasatura"].⁶ Importantly, this idea of the contemporary is not *new*. We are here in Hamlet (and Derrida) territory: 'the time is out of joint'; the king-our-father is dead, our future course is uncertain at best, depressedly suicidal at worst; and time itself is almost physical, a part of the body, a dislocated shoulder perhaps, or open wound.⁷ The contemporary is, then, a form of (bodily) trauma and 'being contemporary' is a matter of both holding a wound open and simultaneously trying to heal it. As Agamben puts it 'The poet, insofar as he is contemporary, *is* this fracture, *is* at once that which impedes time from composing itself and the blood that must suture this break or this wound'.⁸ This is an ambitious claim for a poet (but then poetry has long liked to give itself unacknowledged roles in moments of crisis, of conflict). Less viscerally, the means of saturation proposed is the paying of careful attention: Agamben suggests in gazing at the 'darkness' of their own time, on the 'unlived', poets discover (or even create) 'the life of the

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 40.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Time Is Out of Joint', in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 14–38.

⁸ Agamben, p. 42.

contemporary', and through this being 'contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been'.⁹

This last idea, of the contemporary as some form of 'return', is particularly useful, if only to call into question Enlightenment models of the progression of history (these have rarely been the friend of Gaelic culture). It allows one to read Agamben alongside Bruno Latour's refusal to treat the 'modern' as something set apart or distinct (and implicitly better) than a past that is variously imagined as traditional, superstitious, archaic or backwards. Latour instead imagines grouping 'contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line' which would mean that 'We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled'.¹⁰ In such a 'polytemporal' framework labels such as 'archaic' or 'advanced' are irrelevant 'since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times'. Reading Latour and Agamben together leaves us with a multiple, complex relationship with time (which is then identified with the 'contemporary'); it is polytemporal, with disjointed anachronisms, and a sense that the present moment is constantly being haunted by various ghosts – of the past and the future.

On one level, this gives us another way of framing the odd phenomenon of the Celtic Twilight, with its creation and commercialisation of cultural (post-Ossianic) out-of-jointedness for modern (and modernist) consumption, or of Somhairle MacGill-Eain's 'Hallaig', with its expressed desire to shoot and freeze 'Tìm, am fiadh' [Time, the deer], or indeed of the Royal National Mòd, with its repetition of cultural modes and manners little changed over the course of the last hundred years.¹¹ More broadly, one could suggest that Gaelic culture has been 'out-of-joint' (and staring at un-lived 'darkness'), for hundreds of years, since the repressions and dismantling of the clan system following the Jacobite Uprising of

⁹ Agamben, pp. 51–52.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 75.

¹¹ Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / White Leaping Flame: Collected Poems in Gaelic with English Translations*, ed. by Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), pp. 230–35.

1745-46 (and, again, the parallel and subsequent clearances). Luke Gibbon's argument about Ireland – that 'Irish society did not have to await the twentieth century to undergo the shock of modernity' because 'disintegration and fragmentation were already part of its history' and that the profound sense of catastrophe engendered by the Great Famine meant that Ireland didn't 'need to await the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history' – also holds for the Scottish Gàidhealtachd.¹² But does this make Gaelic culture – fragmented, disintegrated – necessarily (and excitingly) 'contemporary'? Or – in a point-scoring-exercise – at least excitingly contemporary *before* British or English culture? That might depend on whether one is looking at it from outwith (as a 'minor' culture or literature in which everything has a collective – and ultimately singular – value), or whether it is seen as a fluid, dynamic and complex culture in which these questions are to be debated and disagreed upon.¹³

It would be possible to situate Gaelic poetry within broader national or international 'contemporaneities' that map onto the usual tropes of beginnings and endings, births and deaths, of individuals, institutions, publications, ideas. On a Scottish level this might mean the end of WWII, the devolution referenda of 1979 or 1997, the opening of the Scottish parliament, the death of Hugh MacDiarmid, the publication of *Lanark*, the last time Scotland qualified for a football world cup. Within a global framework, it might consider as an origin point for the contemporary the fall of the Berlin Wall, the birth of the internet, 9/11, the 2008 financial crash, the advent of Covid-19 or – more broadly and less usefully – the Anthropocene. These all – well, most of them – have left their mark on Gaelic literature; but they must jostle with internal markers of the passage of historical periods, or the establishment of new norms. Looking at Gaelic poetry as a thing apart, the contemporary era might be marked by the publication of *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* [Modern Gaelic Poetry] in 1976, with its immediate canonisation of the five

¹² Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), pp. 6, 167.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, v. 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 17.

poets it included: Somhairle MacGill-Eain (1911-1996), Deòrsa mac Iain Deòrsa (1915-1984), Ruairaidh MacThòmais (1921-2012), Iain Crichton Mac a' Ghobhainn (1928-1998), and Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh (1930-2017), who was also its editor.¹⁴ Or by the publication, in 1991, of *An Aghaidh na Sìorraidheachd* [In the Face of Eternity], an anthology that attempted to follow *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* and 'bring together the work of the two generations following' (v) the earlier anthology, Meg Bateman, Maoilios Caimbeul, Anna Frater, Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Aonghas MacNeacail, Catrìona NicGumaraid, Mairi NicGumaraid and Crìsdean MacIlleBhàin.¹⁵ In his introduction, MacIlleBhàin – who edited the collection – explains the odd combination of boundless optimism and isolation suggested by the title:

On the one hand, it suggests that Gaelic poetry is projected into a future not of one or two decades, but which can, given political will and the commitment of individuals, be limitless. On the other hand, Gaelic poems, like any poetic word, are thrust into a void which often seems limitless and unresponsive, but where they hope to find an echo, or even a resonance which will persist in time.¹⁶

The anxiety expressed here derives from the ongoing existential crises of the Gaelic language: the steady decline, census by census, of the number of speakers (exacerbated by difficulties in securing homes and jobs and the communities that spring from these in the Highlands and Islands). But there might also be an anxiety facing Gaelic *poetry* in particular.

The other main contenders for a 'beginning' of a Gaelic contemporary cultural moment could all presage the ongoing marginalization of poetry within Gaelic culture, having previously – for centuries been – central to community life (especially when taken to include song. The first of these is the cessation of the magazine *Gairm* in 2002, after 50 years of publication. Edited primarily by Ruairaidh MacThòmais, *Gairm* was the main forum, among other things, for tussles between

¹⁴ *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig: Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, ed. by Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1995).

¹⁵ Christopher Whyte, 'Introduction', in *An Aghaidh Na Sìorraidheachd: Ochdnar Bhàrd Gàidhlig = In the Face of Eternity: Eight Gaelic Poets* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), p. v.

¹⁶ Whyte, 'Introduction', pp. xx–xxi.

reformers and traditionalists within Gaelic literature, where you would find poems under the influence of Samuel Beckett and Màiri Mhòr nan Oran rubbing shoulders with Gaelic language ads for Carlsberg and information about lamb sales (the various journals that have followed *Gairm – Gath, An Guth* and now *Dana* and *Steall* – have not quite achieved its reach or iconic status). The other possible beginnings of the contemporary are the inception of the *Ùr-Sgeul* series of novels and collections of short-stories in 2003 (which attempted to force the creation of a contemporary Gaelic prose literature and saw the publication of 34 books over the following 8 years), and the launch of a dedicated television channel in the language, BBC Alba, in 2008. The marginalisation of poetry within Gaelic culture might not do it harm, however; at the very least, the poetry might not bear the burden of having to focus on ruptures and crises and traumas and then also guarantee the survival of the language itself (or at least not do so *alone*). On the setting up of a Scottish Parliament, MacIlleBhàin imagined that this might in some way liberate Scottish literature, and allow it ‘to be literature first and foremost, rather than the expression of a nationalist movement’; there may be a similar liberation for Gaelic poetry if it is not required to be the main tool for exploring language loss or cultural decline (or indeed turned to as a museum for a lost or dying culture).¹⁷ What risked being an art of coffin-filling might become instead an ethical (in a Levinasian sense) being-towards-death which is life-giving and community-building. If in space no-one can hear you sing, then you can make as much noise as you like: certainly, there has been a great deal of poetry written into the limitless void MacIlleBhàin imagined.

The remainder of this chapter will explore some ways in which poets have carried on writing into that vacuum, and the questions of historical, linguistic, political and environmental location and dislocation that arise. I will focus on poems that address the ‘now’ explicitly and those that – in a deictic gesture – address themselves to an object or entity (often Scotland or the World) as a current ongoing concern. From this arises an overarching sense that ‘The expression of a nationalist movement’ may have become less urgent over the noughties at least (with the

¹⁷ Christopher Whyte, ‘Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 34.2, 274–85 (p. 284).

opening of the parliament, and the slow ticking towards ... well what?) and been displaced by the re-emergence and refraction of what had been the dominant trends of Gaelic poetry in the 20th century. These are, on the one hand, ongoing attempts to understand, undermine and explode inherited notions of belonging and rootedness – the tropes of ‘dualchas, dùthchas and gnàthas’ (that, as Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh suggests, which is due to you as a result of your heritage, your place of birth, or your own character) or of ‘tìr is teanga’ [land and language].¹⁸ On the other hand, there is a self-reflexive depiction of a language and language community in seemingly irreversible decline – poetry that could be seen as a development of the clearance poetry of the 19th and 20th century: the clearing of the landscape narrowed and limited to the clearing of a language. Both the relationship with the land and the language, however, come to be associated with the global environmental crisis, as linguistic or cultural out-of-jointedness is repeatedly connected to environmental out-of-jointedness.

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The interrelationship of time, language and landscape is crucial, for example, to ‘Tròndairnis’ [Trotternish] by Meg Bateman, from her 2007 collection *Soirbheas / Fair Wind*. This is a concrete poem, mimetic of the Trotternish ridge on the Isle of Skye; it has two stanzas of five lines and each line is indented to give the effect of an ongoing land slip. The slipping ridge allows us, as it were, to see the operation of geological time; people come from all over the world ‘gus a’ charraig chruaidh fhaicinn na ruith’ [to see the solid rock in flux], with *homo sapiens*, who only appear on one step on this rocky ‘staidhre beò’ [escalator], having the false sense that the movement of the earth has ‘momentarily’ come to a stop.¹⁹ The present is a momentary mirage of stability, in a much wider geological process of decay and rupture created by the slipping lineation. The first line, however, offers a sleight of hand, as the place and

¹⁸ Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, ‘Cannons, Myths and Cannon Fodder’, *Scotlands*, 1 (1994), 35–54 (p. 39).

¹⁹ Meg Bateman, *Soirbheas / Fair Wind* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), pp. 54–55.

the poem become entwined. ‘An seo chithear an talamh a’ tuisleachadh’ [Here you see the land lurching], it suggests. The ‘seo’ [‘here’] of the poem is not just the landscape but the text on the page; rather than evoking an external reality the poem creates its own invoked reality; what you see ‘lurching’ is not just the land, but the language it is written in. Geological tourism here becomes a tendentious metaphor for stadial history tourism of the type practised by Johnson in his journey to the Western Isles, his attempt to see a ‘prior’ state of civilisation before it disappeared. It is not possible to read this poem innocently, without feeling your eye as that of the tourist, wandering from the Gaelic towards the *en face* English translation (in an image of possible historical progression). As we encounter the sublime timescales of the slipping basalt, the Gaelic language is also placed – distanced – within this framework; but then again all of humanity is made miniscule and transitory by the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail also often tends towards cosmic perspectives at times, in his presentations of the world. In ‘alba, air adhart’ [scotland, forward], written in the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum, he explores the fragility and smallness of Scotland, ‘air bhog | ann an amar braoin beirme’ [afloat | in a basin of fermenting foam].²⁰ Viewing the country from space, the poet suggests that ‘shaoilinn nan laighinn mo bhròg ort | gum prannainn na bha mùirneach | ann a’ seachas do chuislean’ [i feel that should my boot fall on you | i might crush what was beloved | in the narrative of your veins]. This tenderness could – particularly given the political context – have led to propagandistic dogma (MacNeacail is an affirmed supporter of Scottish independence). Instead, however, it leads to a tentative optimism about the ability to overcome ‘stumbling’ or ‘struggle’. Coming to terms with a life that has encompassed the pre-electric and the internet ages, the poet imagines sitting ‘aig do sgrìon ri solus coinnle | rannsachadh réite eadar aon is neoni’ [at your screen by candlelight | researching the concord between one and zero] and encounters:

an sgleò bhriathran doillearach

²⁰ This poem is unpublished; I quote it by permission of the author.

eadar an sgoil-callaid agus
callaid na sgoile glainne

tha tuigse agad air tuisleadh

tha tuigse agad air spàirn

[the cloud of darkened words | between the hedge-school and | the glass
school's hedge | | you have a knowledge of stumbling | you have a
knowledge of struggle]

The poem's truths are opaque, told slant. Although it might not be possible to find a 'concord between one and zero', it is possible to hold the thought of both of them in your mind at the same time, to allow for ambiguities or – as Seamus Heaney put it – different 'conditions of truthfulness', while also being aware that such a process requires not dogmatic certainty but a knowledge born out of stumbling and struggle.²¹

Such tender empathy is quite distinct from Ruaraidh MacThòmais's – at times – savage undercutting of the ties between the Gaelic language and place.

MacThòmais's late work, in particular, is pessimistic about the future of Gaelic, and is not afraid to highlight some of the sacred cows, shibboleths and hypocrisies regarding how the language is treated; it is perhaps in this work that the idea of a physical contemporary 'rupture' is most clearly present. In 'Àros nan Sean' [Old Folk's Home] in *Sùil air Fàire*, Gaelic is seen as an old folk's home with men and women nibbling barley-bread with a 'sweet harp accompaniment | and the odd cough | we will mumble | "Up with the Gaelic"'.²² Bodily and linguistic decay are associated with each other here, as they are with the dislocation of Gaelic and Scotland: as the place names become hollowed out the poet's own ability to express himself in Gaelic suffers. The poem traces the regression of Gaelic across mainland Scotland:

²¹ Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* [Pete Laver Memorial Lecture Delivered at Grasmere, 2nd August 1984] (Grasmere: Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1984), p. 4.

²² MacThòmais, p. 21.

Chunnaic mi 'Ghàidhlig faisg air a' bhàs
ann an àilleachd Chinn Tire,
agus deich bliadhna fichead an dèidh sin
air ruighe 's air rèidhlean
ann an siorrachd Pheairt...

[I have seen Gaelic close to death | against the lovely background of Kintyre,
| and thirty years later | on ridges and plains | in Perthshire...]²³

By the end of the poem, this decline has reached Lewis, the island on which MacThòmais was born and which – along with Glasgow – features as one of the main poles of his poetic universe: it is also one of the last remaining bastions of the language (although recent research does outline how precarious the position of the language there is too)²⁴. At this point, place names – in the *translation* of the poem, but not the original Gaelic – come to stand in for, or on top of, words that have their own distinct contextual meaning ('nis', for example means 'now', as well as 'Ness', the most northerly point on Lewis):

ach is beag a bha dhùil a'm
gun tigeadh a' ghagadaich
buileach cho dlùth orm,
tachdadh sa bhràighe
is ciorram an ceòs,
liota san teanga
(mas teanga an tung),
tràghadh an ùige
is monbar am mùirneig,
's na cnàmhan gu bhith ris
a-nis.

²³ MacThòmais, p. 22.

²⁴ Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and others, *Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2020).

[but had no idea | that the stuttering | would come quite so close to me, |
choking at the Bràighe/throat | and maiming in Keose/the hollow, | lisping
in Tong/the tongue | (if Tong is a tongue), | ebbing in Uig/the bay | and
mumbling at Mùirneag/the loved one, | and the bones just about showing in
Ness/now.]²⁵

Ness (or the 'now') is here a final frontier of Gaelic, a measure of how far decline has progressed, the point beyond which it cannot retreat without being lost forever (beyond Ness are only the now uninhabited islands of Hiort and Rona). In MacThòmais's poem, translation is clearly implicated in the process of decline, of Gaelic shrinking back towards the far north-west of the country, as the abstraction of the words into place-names in the English version tracks – or indeed – brings about – the diminution and 'choking' of Gaelic.

The following poem in *Sùil air Fàire* is one, perhaps tellingly, he did not translate. 'Soidhne nan Tìm' [Sign of the Times] is an ambivalent comment on how the 'strength' of Gaelic is paralleled by the meaninglessness of the English versions of placenames on Lewis:

“S e Siabost as bòidhche”
ach co às a thàinig Shawbost?
A bheil Pabail cho Caitligeach
's gun tug iad Bayble air?
Is cò 'm bàrd tha 'na laighe
an Garryvard?
Bha sinn uair cho eòlach
air an dà sheòrsa ainm
's nach do rinn e dragh sam bith dhuinn,
ach a-nis,
's a' Ghàidhlig a' fàs cho làidir,
cuiridh sinn na dhà air
gach post is soidhne

²⁵ MacThòmais, p. 19.

ach an tuig luchd-turais
gu bheil iad a-nis ann an Gearraidh na h-Aibhne
stad mionaid – chan eil ann ach Garrynahine.²⁶

[“Siabost is the most beautiful’ | but where did Shawbost come from? | Is
Pabail so Catholic | that they called it Bayble? | And who is the bard buried
in Garryvard? | We were once so used | to these two types of name | that it
didn’t bother us | but now, | with Gaelic growing so strong, | we put the two
on | each signpost | so the tourists will understand | that they are now in
Gearraidh na h-Aibhne | – wait a minute – no, in Garrynahine].

There is a wryness – or bitterness – to the comment on the ‘strength’ of Gaelic that means placenames can be bilingual just for the sake of the tourists. And there are also two telling temporal shifts in the poem: ‘ach a-nis’ [but now] and ‘stad mionaid’ [wait a second]. Given the discussion earlier in this essay, these could be read as introducing a contemporary crisis (or at least pause) in which the connection between place and language is disrupted to create, ultimately, an unrooted meaninglessness. This is ultimately figured by the difference between Gearraidh na h-Aibhne, with its literal meaning of ‘the fork in the river’, and the transliterated, meaningless, Garrynahine: as readers we exist in that ‘mionaid’ [minute] in which Gearraidh na h-Aibhne is becoming Garrynahine, in which the connection between the language and the land – and meaning more broadly – is lost. A playful treatment of these names might see ‘ach a-nis’ becoming a stand-in Lewis village, an Achanis [the Point of the Field / the But-now], which would mingle Aiginis (the next village along from Bayble, where MacThòmais grew up) and Acha Mòr, the next village along from Gearraidh na h-Aibhne. This is not, however, the bent of MacThòmais’s imagination; his attitude towards translation is one characterised not by exploration or experimentation (as in the work of some other poets we will come to shortly), but by anxiety and even anger, at what happens when Gaelic gets translated into English. He is not alone in this.

²⁶ MacThòmais, p. 22. My translation.

Translation – and in particular the cultural and political significance of Gaelic-English parallel texts, which was for much of the last 30 years the most common way of publishing Gaelic poetry – was the basis for one of the few virulent debates in Gaelic literature in recent times. On one side, those in favour of parallel translations generally argued for the importance of increasing the audience and reception for Gaelic poetry, and the role of translations in attracting more people to the language. Those against parallel translation (and especially, as in Crisdean MacIlleBhàin’s case, against parallel self-translation) generally felt that the Gaelic texts were undermined irrevocably to the extent, in Wilson McLeod’s phrase, that ‘with English being universal, Gaelic is no longer needed for communication, indeed no longer *needed* at all’.²⁷ This debate has subsided (into apathy or peace?) or – perhaps – been surpassed; certainly now there is a relatively wide range of divergent approaches to translation: parallel English-Gaelic translation, as with MacNeacail and Bateman; parallel Gaelic-Irish Gaelic texts, as in the *An Guth* anthologies; Gaelic-only publication, as in *Northwords Now*, *Steall* and the collections of poetry published by Clàr (notably Niall O’Gallagher 2013 *Beatha Ùr* and 2016 *Suain nan Tri Latha* and Deborah Moffat’s 2019 *Dàin nan Dùil*); the root-and-branch reversionings of Rody Gorman; and a hotch-potch of all of these on a poem by poem basis. But translation – and the translatability or otherwise of cultures – remains also a central theme of the poetry itself, as MacThomais’s poems suggest. Meg Bateman’s ‘Envoi’ to *Soirbheas*, for example, is written under the influence of the Irish-language poet Nuala Nì Dhomhnaill’s ‘Pharaoh’s Daughter’, in which the original text is like Moses set adrift into the Nile for someone (some unknown translator) to collect. In ‘Envoi’ the poet’s shock is at seeing her English translation of a Gaelic poem appear by itself, its images standing naked and incongruous ‘gun iomradh fiù ’s gun b’ i a’ Ghàidhlig | a’ bhean-ghlùine dhaibh’ [with no mention that Gaelic | was ... the midwife].²⁸ The

²⁷ Wilson McLeod, ‘The Packaging of Gaelic Poetry’, *Chapman*, 89–90 (1998), p. 151. The fullest treatment of this debate can be found in Corinna Krause, ‘Eadar Dà Chànan: Self-Translation, the Bilingual Edition and Modern Scottish Gaelic Poetry’ (unpublished PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2007).

²⁸ Bateman, pp. 174–75.

English version is, for Bateman, a 'tàcharan', a changeling, with all of the eeriness (and disjointedness) this suggests.

In other poets this eeriness or disjointedness offers an opportunity for creative chaos, rather than an anxiety about the ghostliness or otherness or absence of the 'original' Gaelic text. A surreal rewriting of nominally Gaelic names provides the structure, for example, for Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul's Italo Calvino-inspired English language fiction book *Invisible Islands*.²⁹ Caimbeul is a prolific writer in both Gaelic and English and in his poetry he often highlights and celebrates the different resources and cultural hinterlands available in the two languages: and especially how the formation of a 'self', or indeed the delivery of a joke, might be different in the two languages. The abecedary title poem of his 2011 collection *Aibisidh*, for example, depends on the fact that such a poem necessarily cannot be translated between the languages: for a start, because of the different numbers of letters in each alphabet (Gaelic only has 18 letters). Instead of a poem and translation, then, what the two texts offer are quite different maps through their cultures, based on fragmented song lyrics. The Gaelic starts (drawing on songs from different genres and periods) 'Alasdair a' Gleanna Garadh | Brochan lom, tana lom | Cadal cha dèan mi, sùgradh cha dèan mise'.³⁰ This could be literally rendered as 'Alasdair of Glengarry | Bare porridge, thin bare | I won't sleep, I won't flirt'. However, the English cannot – while retaining the same cultural currency – simply translate what these lines mean, and so Caimbeul's English 'version' heads off in a quite different direction: 'All people that on earth do dwell | Bye bye love | Can I sleep in your arms tonight, baby?'³¹ This is poetry and language not as transparent medium, but as the generator of meaning and of individual identity: the speaking voice – if that is what you would call it – in each poem is constructed entirely differently across the two languages.

How to read this poem (or these poems)? Do you need to read the English as

²⁹ Angus Peter Campbell, *Invisible Islands* (Glasgow: Otago, 2006).

³⁰ Angus Peter Campbell, *Aibisidh* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), pp. 64–65. My translation.

³¹ Campbell, *Aibisidh*, pp. 64–65.

well as the Gaelic, or consider them as entirely separate entities? And how far should one map the 'Aibisidh' [ABC] of the poem onto the poet himself (his initials are, after all, APC)? One overall approach might be to explore the different dynamics within the Gaelic and the English texts and what these suggest about the resources and limitations available for creating a culture or a self (and how these have been embraced or rejected). Perhaps in an inversion of one stereotypical image of Gaelic culture, there is a greater emphasis on Christian songs in the English, rather than the Gaelic, with nods to 'Victim Divine, thy Grace is mine', and 'Mine Eyes have seen the Glory' as well as 'All people that on earth do dwell'. There is a slightly greater tendency in the Gaelic to name specific individuals (perhaps in a refraction of the clan-and-chief songs common in the culture): the only 'person' named in the English is Molly of 'Good Golly, Miss Molly'. And is there a connection between the narratives of clearance, emigration and loss in the Gaelic (as in a line from Màiri Mhòr nan Òran's 'Nuair a bha mi òg' [When I was young]) and the muted militarism of the English ('There was a soldier, a Scottish soldier'). No reading of the poem could, though, ever definitively answer these questions. Here, as throughout Caimbeul's poetry there is an emphasis on fragmentation and miniaturism (in part, as he notes himself, because he also wrote the longest novel ever published in Gaelic): his work is a bricolage or anastylosis, creating baroque shapes and patterns out of cultural odds-and-ends. The poem is then necessarily a subjective sketch of a history through song (whether that history is personal or cultural). Perhaps it is telling, and reassuring, that both texts end on exuberant, celebratory nonsense - 'Ud ud aithearam' in the Gaelic and 'Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-day-ay' in English: creativity and joy outstrip any anxieties about the weight that cultural traditions might exert on the individual.

There is a different form of fragmentation or incoherence in the exploded translations of the Dublin-born and Isle of Skye-based Rody Gorman. A prodigious writer in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Gorman has long offered a bridge between those languages in his own poetry (he is in the midst of a long-running, long form and polylingual version of the Sweeney myth, based on the 12-th century Irish *Buile Shuibhne*) and his editorial work (especially of the - now in abeyance - journal *An*

Guth). His 'Sweeneyese' style of translation first appeared in his 2011 collection *Beartan Briste*, which could be literally translated as 'Broken looms', but which Gorman translates using the full gamut of meanings available in Edward Dwelly's iconic dictionary of the Gaelic language, as 'burstbroken judgementshroudloomdeeds'. The title poem, with Gorman's translation, is as follows:

Tha na beartan briste
Ri ceann an taighe
'S a' bhrèideag leatha fhèin a-staigh

Ri tac an teine,
Balbh, ciùin,
A' dol bhuaithe

San t-suidheachan
Ris an dalltanachd
Ris an Leabhar,

A' feuchainn ris na briathran fad' ud
A' dèanamh a-mach
Air a beulaibh sa chlà mhòr.

[the burstbroken judgementshroudloomdeeds are burstbroken by the
endhead of the homehouse and the littlenapkinsailwifie on her own
athomeinside

by the tacksupportfire, dumbsilentatpeace, calmgentle, fadelosing it in the
pewseat, going darkblind with the goodbook,

trying to thinkmake out those longfamiliar victoryoathverbsayingwords in
mouthsidefront of her in the largeharristweedprint.]³²

Here any attempt to translate, to pass between cultural contexts, is necessarily multiple, complex and incoherent; this goes beyond a 'foreignising' approach to translation to one that is deeply alienating, even intergalactic. As the poem suggests, choosing one word at each juncture of opportunity or possibility would be to narrow the possible meanings of the Gaelic text, in a way which may be unjustified or too forceful. For any reader that veers across the gutter between the two texts – and that will include all Gaelic readers, accustomed to the crutch and steering of the English version – the Gaelic poem becomes itself destabilised: print and tweed become inseparable, but inexplicable.³³ Meaning itself slips from the reader as for the woman in the poem (as she goes 'darkblind').

Similar translation effects had appeared in the 2006 anthology *Dreuchd an Fhigheadair* (again edited by Crisdean MacIilleBhàin), in which contemporary Gaelic poems were re-versioned by leading non-Gaelic speaking Scottish poets, who were dependent on cribs that provide the full range of meanings of Gaelic verbs, to avoid a foreclosure of meaning. In some of these translations, every possible meaning finds its way into the final version. In Jackie Kay's 'A white road', for example, a response to Derick Thomson's 'An Rathad', reams of related participles engulf the poem – 'a reel's singing and spinning,/ Battering, rushing, crushing, pounding' [in the Gaelic there are only two verbs, 'sadh' or throwing 'pronnadh' or pounding] and 'brùchdadh' leads to 'a stripe of sweat belching bursting gushing rushing'.³⁴ In David Kinloch's response to Aonghas MacNeacail's 'dàn', meanwhile, Kinloch uses the full lexical range of the title to render it 'poem/song/destiny', and then uses the

³² Rody Gorman, *Beartan Briste: Burstbroken Judgementshroudloomdeeds* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2011), pp. 24–25.

³³ Eric Falci, 'Reading in the Gutters', in *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 161–75.

³⁴ *Dreuchd an Fhigheadair = The Weaver's Task: a Gaelic Sampler*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Scottish Poetry Library, 2007), pp. 35–36. I discuss this elsewhere: Peter Mackay, 'An Guth and the Leabhar Mòr: Dialogues between Scottish Gaelic and Irish Poetry', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 1.2 (2008), 175–88.

freedoms that this lexical multiplicity provides to create a version not tied to the Gaelic even in this multiple or contingent way. Kinloch's language is alive and challenging, turning writing into "spraycanning" and "a bitch without soul" into a "heartcore bitch", on top of such wonderfully complex phrases as "a brand new | john's syntaxoscopic interface", "your guff clings on eternally", "heat dogg, heartmonger, boy | bitch", "I won't howk out your beauty", "palimpsest tattoo" and "grindcore at my throat". Such translation work is reassuringly expansive and boundary pushing, especially since there is little in contemporary Gaelic poetry itself that engages with such rich palimpsests, although the York-born Marcas Mac an Tuairneir's urban overwritings and reclamations of space do come close. 'Rùisgte' [Unsheathed] from this first collection *Deò* [Breath] opens with an evocative mix of sex, vomit, shit and consumerism: 'Leacan do rathaidean | Salach le cac nam faoileagan, | Sgeith nan siùrsach air | Sràid a' Mhargaidh'; with some pointed dialectal turns, in English this becomes: 'Your filthy flagstones are | Soiled with sgorrie shit | And doxy boke | On Market Street' – this is as far from a stereotypical Gaelic love of the landscape as you might get when chucked out onto the street at closing time.³⁵

When such exuberant and iconoclastic translation techniques are applied to the 'Aisling' genre, in Gorman's poem of that name (rendered as 'dreamnightmareaislingwomanvisionpoem' in English), it serves to undermine the relationship between the poet and the nation that would normally appear in such poems:

Alba bhuam air faire,
'S ann a bhios mi gur faicinn
Gu cruinn fhathast bhon tobhta
Far an robh 'n teaghlach agam san làthair
Anns an aimsir a dh'fhalbh –
Fàs is beathaichean gun àireamh,

³⁵ Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, *Deò* (Uachdar Thìre mu Chraoibh, Siorrachd Pheairt: Grace Note Publications, 2013), pp. 30–31.

Am bearradh fada fo bhlàth
'S mo chridhe bochd fhèin ri leaghadh,
An saoghal coimheach
Duaichnidh 's bàn le chèile,
Balbh is bodhar
A leithid a cheumannan fodha
Na Thìr-fo-Thuinn
An aomadh a' Chuain Sgìth.

[O scotlandpinewhite farawaywanting from us on the horizon ridge in the
offing i canwill see youall globepreciselyassembled againststill from the
turfwallthwartknollruin where my racefamilyhouse was
battlesitevictorylocationpresent in the epochseasonweathertime that has
walkevacuated – wastegrowth and unthinkableinnumerable
livingbrutecreatures, the long cuttingridgeprecipice long in
warmgreenfieldconsequencebloom and my poordearsadsick heart
narmelting, in a safealienfierce livingageuniverseworld terribly
uglydeformeddismalblack and fallowgroundvacantwhite bothtogether,
dumbatpeacequiet and heavydeafstagnantsilent so many
limpsteppathdegrees below, a tireatlantisunderthewavesland in the
fallingsurface of the tiredoceanminchbay.]³⁶

The sentiment, the phrasing, of the Gaelic is quite traditional or even clichéd – it is a poem of exile, with Scotland fading into silence and peace, as it passes over the horizon, as seen from a ship sailing away. In the English, though, it is not Scotland, but the Gaelic original, that is drifting from view, and not into a 'silence', but into a multivocality, a complex expression of anglophone meaning from which it cannot be resurrected. This is a difficult poem to make a definitive judgement about: it appears, however, to be a dream vision of Scotland as a past, as an Atlantis, sinking back into silence (dumbness), and at the same time a Gaelic poem sinking into a

³⁶ Gorman, pp. 24–25.

mass of (English) language. The relationship between these two movements is, though, at best immanent and at worst entirely inaccessible (any certainty is left 'farawaywanting').

A fear of sinking into, or being surrounded by, silence – and a parallel fear of being drowned in cacophony, or being overwritten by an other's language – is perhaps the most pervasive thrum within the 'contemporary' of Gaelic poetry: disjointedness comes through a seeping nothingness. This, certainly, is how the most influential contemporary thinker about Gaelic poetry – Crisdean MacIlleBhàin again – puts it. In 'Sgrìobhainn, nam b'urrainn dhomh, air dòigh nas toinntè' [I would write, if I could, in a more intricate way] MacIlleBhàin wryly writes that if he were truly a contemporary poet ['Nan robh mi 'nam fhìor bhàrd an là an-diugh']

bhithinn-s' a' strì an-còmhnaidh leis an tostachd,
is ghèillinn rith' gu gaisgeil, eireachdail,
gun a bhith fàgail air a' phàipear bho chd

ach fuidheall còmhradh, criomagan de chainnt,
loidhneachan briste.³⁷

[I would be constantly striving against silence, | and I would yield to it heroically, handsomely, | without leaving anything on the poor paper | | but fragments of conversation, crumbs of speech, | broken lines.]

The irony of the poem is that there is not, of course, any one single version or vision of what a truly contemporary poet (or 'true poet of today') is or should be. He is, though, clearly distinguishing himself from the fragmentations of poets such as Gorman or Caimbeul, and his own poetry tends towards an elegant, syllabic blank verse. The 'fight against silence' is here a trope, a cliché to be accepted or not. Where in his introduction to *An Aghaidh na Sìorraidheachd* MacIlleBhàin imagined being 'thrust into a void which often seems limitless and unresponsive', in more recently

³⁷ Christopher Whyte, *An Daolag Shìonach: Dàintean gun Chruinneachadh (1987-1999) agus Dàintean Ùra (2004-2007)* (Glasgow: Roinn Ceiltis is Gaidhlig, Oilthigh Ghlaschu, 2013), p. 101. My translation.

published work he envisages language as a bridge into that void.³⁸ In the last stanza of the title sequence of his most recent collection *Ceum air Cheum* [Step by Step], he suggests that ‘Cha ghabh cànan àiteachadh, a chionn | ’s dur drochaid a th’ann’ [A language can’t be inhabited since | language is a bridge].³⁹ And even – as in ‘Teicheadh bho chànain ann an cànan eile’ [Escaping from One Language to Another] – when encountering the void the poet gestures out towards it, rather than turning back in on themselves: ‘mar as trice, bidh na bàird rim faighinn | | aig iomall cànan, far an tèid i thairis | an rudeigin eile, cànan eile, ’s dòcha’ [more often, poets can be found | | at the edge of the language, where it moves | over to something else, another language].⁴⁰ Language here might even, the poem suggests, reach out into ‘emptiness itself’. There is a rejection of Heideggerian notions of dwelling in language and also a willingness to face up to – and face off – fears of decline or loss. Instead of a Johnsonian worrying over dispersal and the lack of strength that comes out of divergence, we can instead celebrate the fact of living on the edges of languages, the edge of our times: rather than rays losing their energy, every step of language is a bridge, heading to unknown destinations. If MacThòmais was right, ‘tha na cnàmhan gu bhith ris / a-nis’ ‘The bones are showing through / now’, that’s fine – it will just be a bridge of bones, out of joint or not. The task of the poet remains, as imagined by the Vermont-born Deborah Moffatt in ‘Anns an Dealachadh’ [In Parting], the final poem of her first Gaelic collection *Dàin nan Dùil*, to accept the fact that the world *hasn’t* ended: ‘Chan e gun tàinig crìoch air an t-saoghal’ [It’s not that the world came to an end], the poem begins, as on the contrary ‘Èiridh a’ ghrian a-màireach, mar ’s àbhaist’ [The sun will rise tomorrow, as normal].⁴¹ And so the contemporary poet in Gaelic must simply (in another response to the double meaning of ‘dàn’ in Gaelic – both ‘poem’ and ‘destiny’) face the white page:

Ach tha duilleag bhàn fo shùil a’ bhàird,

³⁸ Whyte, ‘Introduction’, pp. xx–xxi.

³⁹ Christopher Whyte, *Ceum air Cheum: Cruinneachadh de Dhàintean nas Fhaide*, trans. by Niall O’Gallagher (Steòrnabhagh: Acair, 2019), pp. 36–37.

⁴⁰ Whyte, *Ceum air Cheum*, pp. 46–47.

⁴¹ Deborah Moffatt, *Dàin nan Dùil* (Inbhir Nis, Alba: Clàr, 2020), p. 123.

agus is duilich cur an aghaidh an dàin.

[But there's a blank page under the poet's eye | and it's hard to push against
destiny / the poem].

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