

Finding the Poem - Modern Gaelic Verse and the Contact Zone

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In an article subtitled “Border Writing in Quebec”, translation studies scholar Sherry Simon celebrates the contact zone as a creative space where translation and interlingual writing meet. Acknowledging her debt to Mary Louise Pratt who established the concept of the contact zone in the context of postcolonial literary criticism, she defines it as a “place where cultures, previously separated, come together and establish ongoing relations.” Accepting that “historically, these zones have grown out of colonial domination” she asserts that “increasingly, however, we find that Western society as a whole has turned into an immense contact zone, where intercultural relations contribute to the internal life of all national cultures.” (58) She re-evaluates the very activity of translation in today’s world stating that “the place of the translator is no longer an exclusive site. It overlaps with that of the writer and, in fact, of the contemporary Western citizen.” (59) Not surprisingly, translation plays an important part in Scottish Gaelic literature. Writing in Gaelic means writing in a minority language, and considering Scottish literature as minority literature in an English language context, Gaelic writing reveals itself to be twice removed from the sphere of mainstream majority literature. Not existing in a local vacuum, Gaelic literature is continuously involved in the process of negotiating its literary and cultural identity in the light of global realities both without and within its own boundaries to a degree that we might want to question the validity of the term boundaries altogether and embrace the contact zone as a more apt perception. As Iain Galbraith reflects “Gaelic poetry from ‘Hallaig’ [by Sorley MacLean] to ‘cùinntas’ [by Aonghas MacNeacail], as it were, has existed in a permanent state of tension with the English language.” (162) Indeed, during the second half of the twentieth century Gaelic poetry publishing has sought its audience through the ever increasing format of en-face Gaelic/English publications.

With regard to contemporary Gaelic poetry, almost every facing English text is the result of self-translation by the Gaelic authors. Only one of the more widely published Gaelic poets, namely Christopher Whyte, has in recent years decidedly moved away from self-translation, engaging in collaborative translation work with other poets and translators instead where translations of his Gaelic poetry are desired.¹

In a Gaelic context, then, the place of the writer continuously overlaps with that of the translator. Just how firm a grip translation has on Gaelic literature and creative original writing is revealed in the following observation by John MacInnes contemplating the nature of contemporary poetry in Gaelic:

Now the buoyancy and assurance have vanished and the rich tonality of oral poetry have been replaced by a new, bare, formal poetic that expresses with far greater subtlety the uncertainties of the complex, “modern” world. This can be very austere. At one extreme, indeed, there is hardly a discernable rhythmic pulse. The real vitality is in the ideas that a poem expresses. One great advantage is that the poetry translates easily and elegantly into English; and sometimes, to quote Thurber, “it loses something in the original”. (Review 342-43)

In the introduction to *An Tuil*, a bilingual anthology of twentieth century Gaelic verse, the editor Ronald Black notes that “items like ‘Fontana Maggiore’ [by Christopher Whyte] ... happened to read beautifully in English, but sprang entirely from non-Gaelic models and sensitivities, and appeared not to have an independent Gaelic existence, to the extent that the Gaelic versions could not easily be understood without reference to the English.” (lxiv) Although this statement could be argued to be highly problematic in the light of the discredited notion of “cultural essence” particularly in postmodern and postcolonial cultural studies, it is nevertheless interesting to observe that the Gaelic text is still regarded as original writing, an assumption which in fact cannot be taken for granted considering a statement by Whyte that “more than once I have been asked if I write the translation first, then put the poem into Gaelic.” (“Translation as Predicament” 183) Gaelic author and critic Donald MacAulay admits that “reading the ... (bilingual) anthology *An Aghaidh na Siorraidheachd* I was concerned to find that with some poems I felt unable to determine, from reading them, which was the translation and which the original.” (53)

What then is the relationship between the two language versions? Considering that with contemporary Gaelic poetry the English “doppelganger”, as it is referred to by Wilson McLeod (151), does not only demand physical space in poetry collections but moreover asserts its presence during the very process of creative writing, we might even want to ask “Where do we find the poem?” Taking a closer look at English self-translations of Gaelic authors, corpus based research reveals instances of translation loss, i.e. “any feature of inexact correspondence between ST [source text]

and TT [target text]" (Hervey, Higgins and Loughridge 234), such as explicitation, generalisation, or compensation which are a common occurrence in any translation process.² Take, for instance the realisation of "fear-leughaidh" (man of reading)³ as "reader" in Derick Thomson's self-translation of "Facail" (*Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 1982) which succeeds in disguising the attitude towards the reader as explicitly male gendered in the Gaelic text. However, there are instances where translation loss, commonly altering the poetics of the target text slightly compared to the source text, can have a more dramatic impact on the relationship between the source and target text resulting in drastic discrepancies between each text's poetics. The reference to "long nan daoine" (boat of the people) in Aonghas MacNeacail's "Oideachadh Ceart" (*A Proper Schooling* 1996) evokes historical events which saw the attempted abduction of people from the Hebrides to be shipped to America and sold as slaves in 1739. In the translation we find "the emigrant ships" which in its plural appearance is a more abstract concept embracing the entire history of the clearances and its social and emotional consequences for the Gaels. Similarly, the lines "far am fuadaichear na daoine / gu iomall a' cumhachd" (where people were cleared / to the edge of power) referring to modern day urban existence in Meg Bateman's "Iomallachd" (*Aotromachd* 1997) has a clear reference to the clearances (fuadaichean) triggering a whole array of connotations with one single word which fails to be equalled by Bateman's own rendering "where people are removed". The use of "fuadaichear" further contributes to the overall coherence of the poem by connecting back to the first stanza which focuses on the Highlands and its people, thus allowing for reflection on the social history of the Gaels. Such coherence is lost in the translation. Rather we are witnessing a site of fragmentation.

Whereas fragmentation might be a frequent and conscious poetic choice on the part of the Gaelic self-translating author, viewing English translations in the light of their Gaelic originals at times reveals what could be called lapses with regard to poetic tension. Consider for instance the realisation of "leac mo smuain" as "stone of my thought" in Thomson's self-translation of "An Loch a Tuath" (*Creachadh na Clàrsaich*). The English choice "stone" misses entirely the "flat", "slab-like" quality of "leac" with the latter suggesting something like the "the plain of my thoughts", thus adding a very visual quality to the imagery which, by virtue of collocation with "smuain", will have an impact on an interpretation of the imagery in metaphysical terms as well as it adds to the coherence of the poem considering the surrounding

imagery. "The stone of my thought" seems an effortless and, what is more, misleading option in the light of the rather marked choice of "leac". In "Facail", a poem contemplating the impact of language loss, Thomson coins the phrase "mac-facail" (son-of-a-word) which is a word play echoing the phrase "mac-talla" (echo) earlier in the poem. The idea is that the community will not be able to detect the nuances in the resonances of words anymore, i.e. the echoes (mac-talla) or the "son of a word" (mac-facail). The latter is rendered in English as "the son-word" which seems confusing since it suggests a particular word or kind of word,⁴ rather than resonances of each and every word in all its multitude.

Another remarkable example comes from Catriona Montgomery's self-translation of "Cearcall mun Ghealaich" (*Re na h-Oidhche* 1994) which initially follows the original closely, even rendering the title in a rather marked way as "circle about the moon" which could pass as an instance of foreignisation, in that the realisation of the preposition in the translation directly reflects the use of preposition in the source text. This would echo translation practices adopted by Sorley MacLean, author of the renowned collection *Dàin do Eimhir* (1943), who crafted his translations as highly literal reflections of his original poetry and never as poetry in its own right, with the original poems of paramount importance and lyrical authority.⁵ Yet, whereas MacLean kept a constant grip on these literal translations, Montgomery's translation seems to fall apart, losing sight of the original. We have fragmentation, gaps in the translation and distortion of imagery. This is significant in the light of the following observation by Verena Jung:

While self-translators are almost expected to make major changes, so far these changes have not been adequately related to the target audience. They have tended to be attributed to the higher creative potential of the self-translator (Fitch, 1988: 131) or criticised as an unacceptable liberty (Faiq, 1987: 11) taken by the self-translator as "dictator". (532; her references)

In this instance the target audience seems to be disregarded since there is no evidence of an effort to show the English readership the poetic wealth of the original. This exposes an interesting attitude possibly unique to the poet/self-translator who writes in a minority language which largely depends on the readers of the English translations to reach an audience. Self-translation here might be due to outside forces rather than to the internal bilingual creative urge on the poet's part.⁶

Already with MacLean's poetry we witness the tendency amongst readers and critics to take the self-translated text as definite point of interpretation, as demonstrated by John MacInnes:

From the poet's own translations it is evident that he sometimes focuses sharply and individualistically on a particular point in the semantic range of a word. "Labhar", for instance, in its general import "loud", is almost always translated "eloquent". This meaning is known neither in literature nor in contemporary spoken Gaelic. But it may have been used in that sense in certain contexts in the past: Dwelly's Dictionary gives "eloquent" as the fourth sense of the word. ... Wherever such extensions of meaning have their source, they are to be regarded as an enrichment of the language. ("Language, Metre and Diction" 146-47)

Thus, with MacLean's poetry the need for translation is due to the intralingual development within the Gaelic language. Yet, increasingly, provision of English translations has become an interlingual endeavour. In "Ceòl" (*Smeur an Dochais* 1991) Thomson introduces the concept of "electro-magnetic particles" to the poetic sphere of Gaelic. However, the Gaelic "smùr an dealain-thàirnidh" remains obscure without its English counterpart. Stretching Gaelic in such a way is not unique to poetry,⁷ yet with Gaelic becoming the mirror image of English concepts and idioms, the need for English is compelling. Note Iain Crichton Smith's line "no mar mhagnet airgeadach" (or like a silver magnet) which resorts to the direct import of the word "magnet" in "Na h-Eilthirich"⁸ (*Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* 1976). The use of English in the Gaelic texts is not infrequent. In Bateman's "Iomallachd" we have "sna towerblocks eadar motorways" (in the towerblocks between motorways). In "Ceòl" Thomson uses "flat" pondering over resonances of Gaelic music/culture in today's Gaelic world. Similarly, Màiri Montgomery uses English words and phrases to satirical effect in her politically charged poems addressing the influences of incomers particularly to the islands.⁹ The use of English becomes a conscious tool employed by the author to highlight linguistic and social friction in a bicultural world, thus adding an important layer to the meaning of the poetry in Gaelic which remains invisible in the translation where the English word becomes just one amongst many.

Dependency on English as conclusive point of reference does not merely occupy the word level but also enters the very sphere of imagery. With MacNeacail's "samhla" we have a poem which describes a metaphorical journey through a person's

body. Throughout the poem the imagery is clear in English, explicitly naming body parts such as “rib-cage” or “collar-bone”. With “cliabh” commonly meaning “creel” rather than “rib-cage”, the Gaelic “am faic thu portan is rodan a’ dannsa gu tiamhaidh fon chliabh” (do you see a crab and a rat dancing melancholically under the creel/chest), however, remains arbitrary. Close reading sessions with native speakers also showed that “ugann” was taken to mean “collar-bone” in the light of the English translation only.¹⁰ In “Mar a Thubhairt a’ Chrè ris a’ Chreadhadair” (*An Aghaidh* 1991) Whyte is concerned with the anatomy of the hand. In Gaelic we find reference to “cruinnead eagsamhail nan roinn / caochanan gach luirge” (the varying roundness of the parts/divisions / eddy/streamlet of every mark/print). Considering the vast semantic range of “roinn” (share, portion, division, proportion etc.) and “lorg” generally meaning “mark, print”, the English translation “the varying roundness of each joint / the eddy of each fingertip” exerts authority over the poem by virtue of clarity, with the Gaelic relying on the reader to make the connection between words and imagery. In such cases the Gaelic remains at best elusively arbitrary which, after all, is an inherent quality of poetic creation, yet inevitably draws the reader’s attention to the clarity of the English text, since after all we all want to interpret and understand. At worst, however, the Gaelic text remains meaningless, since any potential meaning as it lingers in the Gaelic text—a text which might well be composed of new, unfamiliar or uncommon words and phrases, due to the poetic nature and the minority existence of the language involved—is positively invited to unfold within the realm of English due to the authoritative nature of the self-translated text and the illusion of one-to-one equivalence created by the bilingual en-face edition.

The development of the relationship between the original and the translation in terms of prosody is an interesting one to observe. Whereas MacLean appears to pay little attention to sound in his English self-translations compared to the sonic feast offered in his original poetry, we perceive an increasing presence of prosody in English self-translations over the past decades. Consider Thomson’s translation of “Facail” where rhythm suddenly seems to swell and get hold of the text in lines seven to ten, whereas the original sounds mainly through a combination of alliteration and assonance throughout:

Nuair a thig a’ bhalbhachd

When stillness comes

oirnn, nuair nach dùisg	over us, when the word
am <u>facal</u> <u>mac-talla</u> ,	does not waken an echo,
nuair nach cluinn	when the hall does not hear
an <u>talla</u> <u>mac-facail</u>	the son-word,
nuair a shiolaidheas an <u>sùgh</u>	when the <u>sub</u> <u>subsides</u>
a tha <u>cumail</u> lìomh ann an ruith na cainnte,	that keeps a glow in the rhythm of speech,
saoil am bi <u>sinn</u> ann idir,	<u>will</u> <u>we</u> , I <u>wonder</u> , exist at all,
a <u>seas</u> an <u>iomhaigh</u>	will the image survive
/ / > / > / /	/ > / >
anns an àile <u>thana</u> <u>sin</u> ?	in that thin air?

Extract from "Facail" by Derick Thomson

Poetic tension in terms of prosody moves back and forth between the Gaelic and the English text succeeding in attracting our attention. In MacNeacail's "samhla" the rhythmically beautiful line "an clachan, an coire, an cochall do chridhe" (in the village [based around a church], in the corrie, in the husk of your heart) is realised in English as "in kirkton, in corrie, in the husk of your heart" which equals the rhythmic quality of the Gaelic yet interrupts the coherence in terms of imagery as present in the original. Taking into account the work of the younger generation of Gaelic poets such as MacNeacail, Bateman or Whyte, whose work reveals a particular concern with prosody in the times of *verse libre*, we find indeed that their poetry is as finely scanned in the English version as it is in Gaelic.¹¹ Given that languages differ greatly in their sonic make up and that the author/translator makes choices according to semantic as much as sound qualities of every word, we have to acknowledge that here we are in the presence of difference rather than equivalence between the two language versions (Bassnett, Toury).

Indeed, the phenomenon of the two versions going separate ways is not confined to prosody only but is also present with regard to imagery. Take for instance the extract from Bateman's "Iomallachd" referred to above ("far am fuadaichear na daoine / gu iomall a' cumhachd" literally meaning "where people were cleared / to the edge of power"). The intransitive use of "removed" suggests a general state of being

rather than demographic movement. The two poems clearly depart from each other. With regard to MacNeacail's "Cathadh Mór" (*Seachnadh* 1986) Whyte observes:

The Gaelic "siosarnaich shocair aig lòineag air bradhaid" translates literally as "gentle hissing of a snowflake on firewood", while the accompanying English reads "somewhere sibilant crystals turn steam on the fireglow". The English is richer and more evocative than the Gaelic, positioning the speaker with "somewhere" and emphasising the coming together of contrasting elements with "steam" and "fireglow". Nor are we aware of the fire's luminosity in the Gaelic. Rather than the English offering a version of the Gaelic which is the "original", both realisations of the poem need to be taken into account if we are to experience its full effect. (*Modern Scottish Poetry* 230)

At the end of "Am Bodach-Rocais" (*Nua-Bhàrdachd*), a poem embracing new influences to Gaelic life, Thomson translates "tùrlach loisgeach" (burning bonfire) as "searing bonfire" turning the "burning" experience which might well be one marked by enthusiasm into something cruel and painful. Given that "tùrlach" is a word not widely known whereas "loisgeach" is a common every day word, the discrepancy between the adjectives in the two language versions might be resolved by the Gaelic reader by bestowing 'searing' qualities onto "tùrlach" rather than accepting a difference between the two poems caused by the self-translating author.

Such developments could be celebrated as creative expression of the truly bilingual author. Yet, as Whyte observes in MacNeacail's case, such bilingualism is not necessarily balanced "in that almost without exception he offers a facing English translation for his Gaelic work, but not the other way round. His poetry in Gaelic and English has, then, a doubleness which his poetry in English only lacks." (*Modern Scottish Poetry* 227) Here, I would like to recall Pratt's definition of the contact zone as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." (584) Indeed, the increased physical presence and interlingual influence of English on Gaelic poetry leading the bilingual reader to find the poem back and forth between the facing versions is not only the result of the bilingual nature of the individual author but rather has to be seen in the light of social conditions prevailing within Gaelic literature as a collective medium. As Whyte explains, contemporary Gaelic poets

“have no homeland where ... the language can evolve and alter on the lips of monoglots.” (Review 45) Even with regard to the very contact zone celebrated by Simon, Ralph Sarkonak and Richard Hodgson note that “it could no doubt be safely said that for many of our Québécois friends and colleagues, bilingualism is not just intellectually invalid but politically incorrect in the Canadian sense of things, since it is taken as proof of the assimilation of the linguistic minority by the dominant, even colonizing force of the majority.” (37, note 10) In a Gaelic context, the author writes not only for a numerically restricted audience but also for one which struggles to be a Gaelic readership. In an article discussing Gaelic publication activities in twentieth century Joan MacDonald notes that “although most Gaelic speakers could, if pressed, read any Gaelic text, most are not sufficiently at ease with the written word in Gaelic to enjoy the experience. Hence, there is still not a wide and willing market for a variety of Gaelic publications.” (77) Moreover, we have to acknowledge the presence of learners in the Gaelic world, not only as potential readers of Gaelic literature but also as authors of the same.¹² Highly dense noun-based poems such as “samhla” or “Fontana Maggiore” might, therefore, alienate the Gaelic reader who does not only possess a wider passive vocabulary in English than in Gaelic but also lacks the experience, this is particularly true for Gaelic native speakers, of reading such pieces in Gaelic. Thus, as it has been argued by Gaelic authors and editors, English translations provided in en-face Gaelic poetry editions are seen not only as a means of reaching a wider audience but also as an aid for both learners of Gaelic and Gaelic native speakers who lack the necessary reading skills.¹³

Considering, then, that with Gaelic learners and native speakers, it will be most likely a reader more used to reading and better read in English than in her/his native Gaelic who comes to the bilingual edition, the following observations by Lance Hewson are highly compelling:

When a text is published in its original form, it belongs fully to its language-culture, and it is potentially translatable into any and every language. It is both a reflection of its original culture and a potential text waiting to be transposed into other cultures The source text of the bilingual edition, however, is presented as having undergone one translation operation in one direction. It is, in Meschonnic’s terminology, “decentered” towards the second language-culture, seen in the light of the translation it has undergone.¹⁴ From the point of view of the target language reader, the difference is important, because the

two source texts simply will not be read in the same way. Even when a reader resorts to dictionaries and target language-based sources of information on the source language when reading, he or she will remain within the source language-culture. But in the bilingual edition, the very presence of a target text on the facing page acts as a magnet attracting the target language reader back towards his or her own culture, thus biasing the reader and presenting him or her with a version of the text which will inevitably have adopted some of the target language norms. (155)

The bilingual en-face edition could fairly be argued to be a hindrance to the internal development of Gaelic as a literature and language in that it is supporting a reading pattern that is already there. As Hewson remarks, with the bilingual edition “[the] translation ... is taken to be *the* translation of a work.” (150; his italics) Furthermore, research conducted in a variety of cultural environments has found that self-translation is more likely to undermine the status of the original than translation done by somebody other than the author, with the self-translation taken as second original.¹⁵ The combination of self-translation and bilingual en-face edition thus provides a highly rigid format for Gaelic as literature and language, leaving little space for flexibility for the original with the interpretative engagement on the reader’s part occurring through English rather than Gaelic. Such a combination poses a threat to the very willingness to make sense on the part of the Gaelic reader preparing the path for Gaelic natives to condemn what is presented as Gaelic as not Gaelic in nature at all. Such an attitude, in turn, succeeds in denying the development of Gaelic literature as natural in the light of cultural exchange both in the particular contact zone occupied by Gaelic verse and in a world wide context of urbanisation and globalisation.¹⁶ Furthermore, the illusion of one-to-one equivalence created by facing translations provided by the author inevitably renders the differences between the two texts virtually invisible hiding the poetic dynamics as they unfold in the Gaelic texts from the sight of the majority of readers given the prevailing reading patterns, which in turn remain unchallenged.

Rather than “celebrating the joyous carnival of cultural differences”, contemporary translation and publication practices dominating the contact zone which is Gaelic verse might well be evidence of bilingualism’s “uglier face” resulting in “some kind of double monolingualism.” (Grutman 224) I would thus like to argue towards the re-evaluation of translation in this particular contact zone as a site of

friction and differences between languages and cultures which is in need of translation and publication practices which resist the illusion of one-to-one equivalence, such as non-translation, collaborative translation with clear reference to the translation process or indeed multiple translation. As Robert Bringhurst aptly puts it, “the greatest threat to communication is not difference, but sameness. Communication ceases when one being is not different from another: when there is nothing strange to wonder at and no new information to exchange.” (qtd. in Sarkonak and Hodgson 36) We might even want to note that there are choices with regard to language choices. As well as having a fruitful impact on the development of Gaelic literature, translations form a variety of languages into Gaelic as well as translations of Gaelic texts into languages other than English could lead to creative collaborations between authors and translator which would ensure an active engagement with the Gaelic language in terms of actual communication, a vital consideration for any “lesser used” language.

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¹ For Whyte's reflections on translation and self-translation in a Scottish Gaelic context see Whyte ("Translation as Predicament" and "Against Self-Translation").

² For the definition of "explicitation" see Munday (150). "Compensation" and "generalisation" are discussed in Hervey, Higgins and Loughridge (26-35, 82-83).

³ Throughout this article I am providing interlinear translations in brackets for the quoted lines of Gaelic poetry. These are based on dictionary entries in *Dwelly*, *Stòr-dàta Bhriathrachais Gàidhlig* and *MacBain* and are not to be taken as transparent or definitive.

⁴ Cf. for instance "the f-word".

⁵ See Sorley MacLean's letters to Douglas Young, held at the National Library of Scotland, *Acc. 6419*

⁶ Note that this poem has been republished in McMillan and Byrne with a translation by the Gaelic editor which succeeds in reflecting the poetics of the original.

⁷ Cf. *Stòr-dàta* or *Faclair na Pàrlamaid*.

⁸ Note that Derick S. Thomson's *The New English-Gaelic Dictionary* has "iùil-tharraingeach" for "magnetic" and "clach-iùil" for "magnet".

⁹ See "The Queen's Own Highlanders", "Nam Bitheadh Agams' Eilean" or "Na Sasannaich" in *An Aghaidh na Siorraidheachd*.

¹⁰ I have conducted close reading sessions in support of my PhD thesis researching the influence of translation on modern Gaelic literature (Edinburgh University), due in 2007. Note the entry of *Stòr-dàta*: "cnàimh-na-uga" (bone of the throat/upper part of the chest) for collar-bone.

¹¹ See also Whyte (*Modern Scottish Poetry* 232-33) on MacNeacail. With regard to the work by Christopher Whyte, this observation refers to the period of his creative work which did involve self-translation.

¹² Both Meg Bateman and Christopher Whyte, for instance, are learners of the language.

¹³ This has become evident from a questionnaire based research in support of my PhD thesis.

¹⁴ Cf. Meschonnic, 30ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Fitch (1985) or Tanqueiro.

¹⁶ Offering Whyte's "Fontana Maggiore" (the poem referred to by Black above as entirely "un-Gaelic") to a Gaelic native speaker in a close reading session, the first instinct was to consult the English translation. Having covered the English translation, I asked my informant to stay with the original. Having read through the Gaelic text he described it as "convoluted in parts" acknowledging, nevertheless, a "very clever use of words" in a poem that, once engaged with, "reads well".