

Gaelic Scotland – A Postcolonial Site? In Search of a Meaningful Theoretical Framework to Assess the Dynamics of Contemporary Scottish Gaelic Verse

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The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw what is known today as the Highland Clearances, which was in effect the forced migration of a large proportion of the population of the Scottish Highlands due to intensified sheep farming in the name of a more effective economic land use (Devine, 1999, pp.176-78). For the Gaelic speech community this meant ‘the removal of its heartland’ (MacKinnon, 1974, p.47). MacKinnon argues that ‘effectively this was to reorientate the linguistic geography of Scotland in reducing the Gaelic areas to the very fringes of northern and western coastal areas and to the Hebrides’ (1974, p.47). Yet, it was not economic exploitation alone which influenced the existence of the Gaelic population in a most profound way. There was also an active interference with language use through the eradication of Gaelic from the sphere of education as manifested in a series of Education Acts from 1872 onwards. Such education policy ensured the integration of the Gaelic speech community into English-language Britain (MacKinnon, 1974, pp.54-74). Gaelic Scotland therefore had its share of experiencing what in postcolonial literary studies is identified as the ‘two indivisible foundations of imperial authority - knowledge and power’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995, p.1; referring to Said, 1978, p.32). As the editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* explain:

the most formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of ‘knowing’ other peoples because this ‘knowing’ underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves [...] A consequence of this process of

knowing became the export to the colonies of European language, literature and learning as part of a civilising mission which involved the suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures beneath the weight of imperial control. (Ashcroft *et al*, 1995, p.1)

Dynamics paramount to the colonial enterprise are most certainly confirmed, with Gaelic society collectively and strategically forced to integrate into a system of knowledge enforced by the very source of economic power.

Note, however, the use of the term ‘European’ in the above quotation. With postcolonial literary studies, we observe the apparent dichotomy between Europe as colonizer and non-European societies as colonized. In his article ‘A Passage to Scotland: Scottish Literature and the British Postcolonial Condition’ Berthold Schoene makes a convincing case for Scottish literature to be post-colonially conditioned whilst arguing that works dealing with the effects of the Clearances such as Fionn MacColla’s *And the Cock Crew* (1945) and *Consider the Lilies* (1968) by Iain Crichton Smith would make excellent samples of literary work to be analysed from a postcolonial perspective (1995, p.109).¹ More importantly, Schoene points towards the misconception of British society as a homogenous entity as it is perceived by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, one of the key texts of postcolonial literary studies, who argue that:

while it is possible to argue that [Irish, Welsh and Scottish societies] were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to

¹ Note that throughout this paper I am making a distinction between ‘post-colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’. I am employing the term ‘post-colonial’ as reference to the historically determined condition of the former colonized nations and cultures as unfolding in post-independence times taking into account both ‘neo-colonial’ and ‘anti-colonial’ dynamics. With ‘postcolonial’ I am referring to the theoretical framework that is ‘postcolonial theory’ which aims to scrutinise ‘relations of domination’ (Loomba, p.19) between cultures and nations based on an understanding that the colonial enterprise has profoundly shaped the nature of the relationships between societies in today’s world of economic and cultural globalisation. For a discussion of ‘postcolonial’ versus ‘post-colonial’ see Loomba, pp.18-19 or Ashcroft Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, pp.186-92.

accept their identity as post-colonial. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989, pp. 31-32, cited in Schoene, 1995, p.107)

Although there is an awareness of the impact of colonial dynamics on the Irish, Welsh and Scottish societies and an understanding that such dynamics were due to outside forces, these societies are then integrated into the homogenous whole of Britain. Such an approach, however, denies the collaboration of certain sections of the colonized society with the colonizing force in most colonial contexts (Said, 1993, pp.316-317), as well as the profound and lasting impact of colonial dynamics on societies at the margin of today's United Kingdom. As Said argues:

True, the physical, geographical connections are closer between England and Ireland than between England and India, or between France and Algeria or Senegal. But the imperial relationship is there in all cases. Irish people can never be English any more than Cambodians or Algerians can be French. This seems to me was always the case in every colonial relationship, because it is the first principle that a clear-cut and absolute hierarchical distinction should remain constant between ruler and ruled, whether or not the latter is white. (1993, p.275, cited in Schoene, 1995, p.115)

The understanding of a homogenous 'European language, literature and learning' as expression and agent of colonizing forces exerting its influences over areas outwith Europe is also highly misleading in that it denies the existence of struggle for survival of marginalized societies within Europe in the face of colonial enterprises. Furthermore, it prevents the interpretation of imbalanced power relationships of nations within Europe in the light of postcolonial thought, which would be highly beneficial for what, in some cases, have become minorities.

If, with regard to Scotland, David McCrone observes that '[due to the] separation of the state (British) from Society (Scottish) . . . there is a powerful sense of Scotland being 'over', as belonging to the past: the

essential Scotland as consigned to history' (McCrone, 1992, p.200; as cited by Gardiner, 1996, p.37), we could argue that this is even more the case with Gaelic Scotland. We have a community twice removed from state power with a minority language at its core which (having gained official status finally this year) has frequently been doomed a 'dying language', thus demanding measures that go far beyond mere language maintenance towards pro-active language development. In a letter to Douglas Young dated 27 May 1943, just before the publication of his acclaimed poetry collection *Dàin do Eimhir* (1943), Sorley MacLean contemplates creative yet sensitive approaches towards the development of Gaelic vocabulary to ensure the language's relevance to all areas of modern life (MacLean, letters, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6419). By June, his mood had dramatically deteriorated:

The whole prospect of Gaelic appals me, the more I think of the difficulties and the likelihood of its extinction in a generation or two. A ... language with ... no modern prose of any account, no philosophical or technical vocabulary to speak of, no correct usage except among old people and a few university students, colloquially full of gross English idiom lately taken over, exact shades of meanings of most words not to be found in any of its dictionaries and dialectally varying enormously (what chance of the appreciation of the overtones of poetry, except amongst a handful?). Above all, all economic, social and political factors working against it, and, with that, the notorious, moral cowardice of the Highlanders themselves. (MacLean, letters, 15 June 1943, NLS)

Half a century later we have an even smaller Gaelic population, and, highly important for Gaelic as a literary medium, we find that most of the native Gaelic speakers are actually English readers due to the continuous lack of presence of Gaelic as a natural medium for reading and writing both in education and in Gaelic society on the whole (Scotland Census 2001;

Leirsinn 1997; HMIE 2005). In an article discussing publication activities in twentieth-century Gaelic Scotland 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. (1997, p.77)

Gaelic is not naturally an oral language with inherent qualities which resist participation in the written medium, but rather it is simply underdeveloped both as a written and as a read language. As a result of the social history of Gaelic communities, Gaelic did not enjoy the space other languages such as German or English had to develop its full potential according to the needs (i.e. modern vocabulary) and opportunities (i.e. the written medium) of modern life. We might want to acknowledge such dynamics as rather pronounced consequences of a colonial past.

Although control over language is clearly identified as ‘one of the main features of colonial oppression’, with language becoming ‘the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of “truth”, “order” and “reality” become established’ (Ashcroft *et al*, 1989, p.7), postcolonial literary theory nevertheless seems reluctant to address the issue of language choice and subsequent language use. In the introduction to *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* the editors state that:

the reader ... recognises, but does not directly address, the importance of the continuing body of work in indigenous languages. The ‘silencing’ of the post-colonial voice to which much recent theory alludes is in many cases a metaphoric rather than a literal one. [...] Without endorsing a naively ‘nativist’ position post-colonial theory needs to be aware that it is engaged in a project which supplements rather than replaces the continuing study and promotion of the indigenous languages of post-colonial societies. (Ashcroft *et al*, 1995, p.4)

There is a sense of parallelism here, with the new literatures in the language of the former colonizer and the literatures in the indigenous languages perceived to exist side by side without affecting each other's condition, and without authors having to make crucial choices in the light of social and political dynamics when moving between the two.² Postcolonial literary studies conducted in the anglophone world rather focuses on the discussion of post-colonial writing in English and 'the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture' (Ashcroft *et al*, 1989, p.7).

Thus, the focus of postcolonial literary theory is on the appropriation of the English language, making the presence of the colonized known through the medium of English by adopting a variety of strategies such as the use of untranslated words from indigenous languages, the use of vernacular language, code-switching, syntactic fusion, interlanguage etc. (see Ashcroft *et al*, 1989, pp.58-76). In conclusion, post-colonial writers are celebrated for 'hav[ing] contributed to the transformation of English literature and to the dismantling of those ideological assumptions that have buttressed the canon of that literature as an elite Western discourse' (Ashcroft *et al*, 1989, p.76). The subject of anglophone postcolonial studies, i.e. the new literatures in English, is thus a medium highly beneficial to English as a language and a culture in that it ensures the continuous development and expansion of that language. As Ashcroft *et al* explain:

because language is such a versatile tool, English is continually changing and 'growing' (becoming an 'english') because it realizes potentials which are then accorded to it as properties. Thus English is no different from any other language in its potential versatility. It merely appears more versatile because it has been used by a greater variety of people [...] The application of a language to different uses is

² For an investigation into the dynamics surrounding authors' choices in a minority literature context see for instance Egri Ku-Mesu, 1998.

therefore a continuous process. And these uses themselves become the language. (1989, p.39)

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, author of another of postcolonial studies' key texts, *Decolonising the Mind*, shifts perspective in the following poignant remark:

Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we 'prey' on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggle of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own? Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Shokolov, Brecht, Lu Hsun, Pablo Neruda, H.C. Anderson, Kim Chi Ha, Marx, Lenin, Albert Einstein, Galileo, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato in African languages? And why not create literary monuments in our own language? (1986, p.8)

We have a clear shift in focus away from English towards the indigenous language which is viewed in its own right and its needs understood in the light of its colonial past.

With regard to Gaelic, such a shift in focus is vital. I would therefore argue towards applying postcolonial reading strategies to the Gaelic situation rather than treating Gaelic literature as a post-colonial literature, thus acknowledging that the dynamics of power-relations surrounding Gaelic defining its status as minority language and literature are ongoing. Indeed, even although Gaelic literature may not be as consciously post-colonial as texts such as J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) or Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002), it nevertheless shows traces of the postcolonial conditioning. Take for instance the following poem by Myles Campbell (Whyte, 1991, p.34).

Cogadh an Dà Chànain

'S mi an leanabh sàraicht',
 an dithis gam altramas.
 Fhuair mi 'n t-uachdar om mhàthair
 ach om mhuime bainne lom.

Tha mo bheul sgìth de chich na tè ud,
 an sgalag! an tràill!
 a tha air iomadh muinntireas fhaicinn,
 a' reic a bainne ris a' mhòr-shluagh –
 's beag an t-iongnadh a cìoch a bhith cas.
 Tha a bainne geur a' dol
 tarsainn m' anail
 agus a' fàgail blas searbh na mo bheul.
 Cha ghabh im no càis' a dhèanamh dheth.

'S chan e sin,
 ach tha e sabaid
 airson uachdranachd
 air an stapag mhilis
 a tha daonnan nam bhràigh.³

Dealing with the issue of identity, which is a very common theme in post-colonial literatures, there is a sense of nostalgia in this poem triggered by the 'sweet stapag' (a traditional Gaelic sweet made of oatmeal, cream and milk) that is in danger of being assimilated into the despised 'foster culture' represented by 'a mhuime' (the foster mother). There is indeed a tendency towards nostalgic essentialist perspectives on the past in contemporary Gaelic poetry leading to 'grief, resignation, [and] rage in the face of Anglicisation' as Paul Barnaby (2002, p.93) observes with regard to the Gaelic/English anthology *An Aghaidh na Siorraidheachd* (Whyte, 1991).⁴

³ I, an oppressed child / with the two nursing me / from my mother I got cream / from my foster-mother but skimmed milk / My mouth is tired of that one's breast / the servant! the slave! / who has seen many services / selling her milk to the multitude – / no wonder her breast falls steeply / her milk runs sour / over my breath / leaving a sharp taste in my mouth / neither butter nor cheese can be made from it / And that's not all / it is fighting / for supremacy / over the sweet stapag / that is in my chest yet. [my translation].

⁴ Paul Barnaby is referring to poems such as Meg Bateman's 'Alba fo Dhimeas' ('Scotland Despised'), Aonghas MacNeacail's 'fòrladh dhachaigh' ('home vacation') and Anne

Preoccupation with the pure essence of the past, however, becomes a fruitless endeavour if we perceive the nature of culture as suggested by Stuart Hall:

The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break' [...] Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. (Hall, 1990, [n.p.]; cited by Gardiner, 1996, p.36)

Inevitable and continuous change is the very subject matter of Derick Thomson's *Am Bodach-Ròcais* (MacAulay, 1976, p.165). Perceiving the changing forces results in a burning sensation which might well force a renewed positioning on the part of the perceiver:

An oidhch' ud
thàinig am bodach-ròcais dh'an taigh-chéilidh:
fear caol àrd dubh
is aodach dubh air.
Shuidh e air an t-séis
is thuit na cairtean às ar làmhan.
Bha fear a sud [sic.]
ag innse sgeulachd air Conall Gulban
is reodh na faclan air a bhilean.
Bha boireannach 'na suidh' air stòl
ag òran, 's thug e 'n toradh às a' cheòl.
Ach cha do dh'fhàg e falamh sinn:
thug e òran nuadh dhuinn
is sgeulachdan na h-àird an Ear,
is sprùilleach de dh'fheallsanachd Geneva,
is sguab e 'n teine á meadhon an làir
's chuir e 'n tùrlach loisgeach nar broillichean.⁵

Frazer's 'Ar Canan 's ar Clò' ('Our Tongue and our Tweed').

⁵ That night / the scarecrow came to the ceilidh house / a thin tall black-haired man / wearing black clothes / He sat on the bench / and the cards fell out of our hands / There was a man there / telling a story about Conall Gulban / and the words froze on his lips / A woman was sitting on a stool / singing, and he took the effect out of the music / But he did not leave us empty: / he gave us a new song / and stories from the East / and bits and pieces of the philosophy of Geneva / and he swept the fire from the middle of the floor / and put a

This poem is the scene of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as:

a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358, cited by Ben Beya, 2001)

This definition is Bakhtin's reply to the self-imposed question 'What is hybridization?' As 'one of the most recurrent conceptual leitmotifs in postcolonial cultural criticism' (Ben Beya, 2001), hybridity as a concept is frequently scrutinised by postcolonial critics. Yet, not surprisingly, the concern with the 'hybridised nature of post-colonial culture' once more focuses on the 'new literatures in English':

lay[ing] emphasis on the survival even under the most potent oppression of the distinctive aspects of the culture of the oppressed, and show[ing] how these become an integral part of the new formations which arise from the clash of cultures characteristic of imperialism. (Ashcroft *et al*, 1995, p.183)

Hybridity is thus a tool that 'subverts the narrative of colonial power and dominant cultures ... by the very entry of the formerly-excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse' (Ben Beya 2001). With contemporary Gaelic poetry, it is the continuous physical en-face presence of English in Gaelic poetry publications and, more significantly, its presence during the very process of creative writing, given the bilingual and bi-cultural existence of the author as well as during the process of reading given the (ideally)

burning fire into our hearts. [my translation] - Note Thomson has Middle East in the fourth last line of his self-translation into English, which might be the intended meaning for the Gaelic 'àird an Ear', however, the Gaelic only manages to denote 'eastern direction' or 'the East'. This, incidentally, is an example of hybridity, discussed below, in that the Gaelic original is stretched according to the English text which, considering it appears in the shape of an en-face self-translation, attracts attention to itself as the site of the creative impulse and succeeds in asserting interpretative authority over the original Gaelic.

bilingual nature of the reader, which leads to the hybrid character of the medium.

As Wilson McLeod observes, ‘the role of translation is fundamental to contemporary Gaelic poetry, for matters have reached the stage where hardly any volume of Gaelic poetry is published without accompanying *en face* English translation’ (1998, p.151).⁶ We are firmly in the contact zone, a concept established by Mary Louise Pratt in the context of postcolonial literary criticism. In a translation studies context Sherry Simon celebrates the contact zone as creative space where translation and interlingual writing meet whilst re-evaluating the very activity of translation, 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’ (1999, p.59). Referring back to Pratt, however, we find the contact zone defined 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’ (1999, p.584). Revealingly, McLeod interprets prevailing publication practices of Gaelic verse as ‘reflection of and metaphor for’ the decline of Gaelic as living language, pointing out the underlying logic:

The Gaelic speech community has shrunk by three quarters over the last century, from a population substantially monoglot to a bilingual population dominant in Gaelic, to a bilingual population ever more obviously dominant in English. With English being universal, Gaelic is no longer needed for communication, indeed no longer *needed* at all. In a sense, then, packaging Gaelic poetry in such a way as to push it into a kind of existential limbo is only appropriate. The utilitarian logic seems impeccable: Why bother with the expense of printing Gaelic introductions when everyone can

⁶ Note a recent series of Gaelic monolingual poetry publications by the Diehard Publishers, who are a small independent publishing house in Callander dedicated to contemporary Scottish poetry with a particular interest in contemporary Gaelic verse. Their Gaelic publications, three collections in all over the past seven years, might appear to be a substantial and encouraging contribution to the records of monolingual Gaelic publications. Yet, it has to be noted that this is a series of beautifully hand made books of rather small circulation.

read English? Why bother with printing Gaelic versions of the poems? And the inevitable last question: why bother with Gaelic at all? (1998, p.151)

Taking the ‘cultural turn’, i.e. moving the focus of examination from translation as text towards ‘translation as culture and politics’ (Munday, 2001, p.127, also see Gentzler, 1998), translation studies theory is increasingly concerned with ‘historicizing the phenomenon of translation itself’ (Levefere, 1998, p.12). The focus is on the dynamics of translation as intercultural mediation rather than on normative evaluations of texts in translation. Michael Cronin argues towards understanding ‘translation in all its dimensions as cultural, because culture is about a whole set of human activities, not one subset that is privileged by the gaze of the commanding other’ (1998, p.155). Consequently, as Anthony Pym puts it, ‘we would like to know more about who is doing the mediating, for whom, within what networks, and with what social effects’ (2004, p.3). Not surprisingly, we find the notion of translation as ‘colonial discourse’ entering the field of translation studies. Tejaswini Niranjana has devoted her work to the analysis of translational activity in a postcolonial framework. She believes that ‘in a postcolonial context the problematic of *translation* becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity’ (1992, p.1). This belief is based on her argument that:

translation ... produces strategies of containment. By employing certain modes of representing the other – which it thereby also brings into being – translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them acquire the status of ... objects without history. (1992, p.3)

The act of translation is identified as an active force in cultural representations showing the historically determined development of such translation strategies. Simon emphasises the value of cultural translation studies research towards an understanding of power relationships between

cultures, believing that ‘translation research maps out the intellectual and linguistic points of contact between cultures, and makes visible the political pressures that activate them’ (1996, p.136).

Here I would like to recall Niranjana’s argument as referred to above. As she states, it is her concern as translation studies theorist to ‘probe the absence, lack, or repression of an awareness of asymmetry and historicity in several kinds of writing on translation’ (1992, p.9). Cronin, who has devoted extensive research to the circumstances of translation in Ireland, however, observes that *Siting Translation*, the publication in which Niranjana presents her research:

bears eloquent testimony to the continued operation of the ahistoricity, exclusion and essentialism it so deplores in conventional translation theories and colonial narratives. Throughout the study references are repeatedly made to ‘European languages’ ... ‘European description’ ... European attitudes, narratives and values. There is no attempt made to ‘account for the asymmetry and inequality of relations between people, races, languages’ in Europe itself. The history of the evolving power relationships between the many languages in Europe is ignored and we are presented with the ahistorical, essentialist concept of ‘Europe’ with its implicitly homogenous translation strategies. (1995, p.85)

Thus, postcolonial translation theory shows traces of the same exclusive approach as we have already noted with postcolonial literary theory.

Translation theory, however, has adopted a more inclusive approach towards the analysis of power relations as they inform translation processes by increasingly paying attention to the concept of ‘minority’. Lawrence Venuti defines minority as:

a cultural or political position that is subordinate, whether the social context that so defines it is local, national or global. This position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non-standard and the non-canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture. Yet minorities also include the nations and social

groups that are affiliated with these languages and literatures, the politically weak or underrepresented, the colonized and the disenfranchised, the exploited and the stigmatized. (1998, p.135)

He further states that ‘the terms ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ are relative, depending on one another for their definition and always dependent on a historically existing, even if changing, situation’ (1998, p.135). Thus, as Cronin asserts ‘‘minority’ is the expression of a relation not an essence’ (1995, pp.86-87). Cronin further argues that the ‘unequal relationship between a major and a minority language ... makes conventional approaches to translation problematic’ (1996, p.185). In fact, translation itself becomes a double-edged sword for minorities. On the one hand, every minority language speaker must rely on the practice of translation as a tool to communicate with the wider world. On the other hand, translation endangers the survival of the minority language in that it inevitably strengthens the majority language in its oppressive character while confining the minority language to the margins of a linguistic community, finally pushing it into disappearance. As Cronin has it, ‘translation is both predator and deliverer, enemy and friend’ (1998, p.148). He illustrates his point by referring to the example of bilingual Irish/English publications of modern Irish poetry:

The translators and editors of translation anthologies defended their work on the grounds that the translations would bring the work of Irish-language poets to a wider audience [...]. The acceptance of translation by many prominent poets in the Irish language could be seen as an endorsement of a policy of openness, delivering poets in a minority language from the invisibility of small readerships. However, the target-language, English, was not innocent. In a situation of diglossia where the minority language is competing for the attention of the same group of speakers, Irish people, then translation cannot be divorced from issues of power and cultural recuperation. (1995, p.92)

The situation of Scottish Gaelic literature mirrors the Irish scenario very closely. Considering that, as identified above, Gaelic is a language which struggles in its efforts towards vocabulary maintenance and development and which is only slowly developing as a language that is read by its speech community, we could conclude that the English version in bilingual Gaelic/English poetry publications faces little competition. The fact that the English version is in most cases the outcome of self-translation by the Gaelic author (and as such is rarely referred to as translation within the publication) adds to the dominant status of the English facing text.⁷

Let us re-visit postcolonial literary criticism at this point. Contemplating the coming into being of meaning, Homi Bhabha argues that ‘the pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement’ (p.208). Rather, as Ashcroft explains:

the written text is a social situation. That is to say, it has its existence in something more than the marks on the page, namely in the participations of social beings whom we call writers and readers, who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind, as ‘saying’ a certain thing. (1995, p.298)

Meaning thus occurs at the point of the voicing and perception of the utterance at a real moment in time conditioned by historical and social forces. Here I would like to refer once more to Bakhtin’s treatment of hybridization, paying attention to his argument that:

unintentional, unconscious hybridization is one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages. We may even say that language and languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization, by

⁷ Note that 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. For Whyte’s reflections on translation and self-translation in a Scottish Gaelic context see Whyte, 2000 and 2002.

means of a mixing of various ‘languages’ co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language, a single branch, a single group of different branches or different groups of such branches, in the historical as well as paleontological. (Morris, 1994, p.117)

Recalling Ngūgĩ’s plea that we shift our attention towards enhancing indigenous languages through welcoming the riches of other languages and cultures, we might regard the influence of English on Gaelic as welcome dynamics. Yet, as Bakhtin elucidates ‘the crucible for this mixing always remains the utterance’ (Morris, 1994, p.117). With regard to the social conditioning of an utterance Ania Loomba emphasises that ‘the sign, or words, need a community with shared assumptions to confer them with meaning’ (1998, p.35). With Gaelic poetry, then, such a community is easily lost, with the Gaelic native speaker and learner (whose presence increasingly affects the make-up of the Gaelic speech community) likely to follow established reading habits, thus relying heavily, if not entirely, on the English text. Moreover, the continuous presentation of their ‘native’ literature along with the English back-up version poses a threat to the very willingness to make sense of the text in Gaelic on the part of the Gaelic reader. This in turn prepares the path for Gaelic natives to condemn what is presented as a Gaelic text as not Gaelic in nature at all, thus 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. Given prevailing publication practices and reception dynamics, one could conclude that modern Gaelic poetry becomes meaningful in the shape of its English ‘doppelgänger’ (McLeod, 1998, p.151). The corpus of modern Gaelic verse could thus fairly be argued to be a Gaelic flavoured extension to the already large canon of literature in English.

This article is not concerned with making the case for Gaelic literature to be welcomed into the corpus of post-colonial literature. As I

have documented, from the perspective of postcolonial literary theory, Gaelic literature seems to be excluded from the corpus of that domain on two accounts. It does not fit the definition of post-colonial literature in terms of historical developments and it simply uses the wrong language. Furthermore, the doors are firmly shut due to the prevailing yet arguably misleading dichotomy of ‘Europe’ versus ‘indigenous’ at the heart of postcolonial thought – a dichotomy perpetuated by postcolonial translation theory. Yet, since translation studies is naturally concerned with dynamics across cultures and languages, and given an increasingly historicizing approach, translation studies critics have attempted to redress the balance by investigating minority translation in its own right. An analysis of Gaelic literary dynamics seems thus more at home within such a theoretical framework. Nevertheless, with contemporary Gaelic poetry being a medium which under close scrutiny reveals itself as a site of complex dynamics which at one and the same time bring it forward and threaten it due to the overwhelming presence of English, we find that engaging with issues raised by postcolonial theory, which inevitably are issues concerned with imbalanced power relations between cultures, will help understanding the Gaelic situation. As I have shown, issues with regard to language use and development which tie in with explorations concerning the concepts of essentialism vs. relativism and the location of meaning are highly enlightening. Furthermore, considering the concept of hybridity in a Gaelic context, together with an understanding that no culture is essential and static in nature and that new influences have to be acknowledged as natural and indeed celebrated as beneficial towards the development of any language and literature, will result in a realistic understanding of the nature of Gaelic literature. In such a light debates with regard to norms and conventions appropriate to Gaelic literature as they have been conducted amongst Gaelic authors and critics over the past decades (see Black, 1999, pp. l-li, p.lxiv) might well be argued to be reactionary. Rather, taking into account all

aspects of creative writing in a Gaelic context, identifying translation and publication choices in support of Gaelic as a thriving literature and language seems the crucial endeavour in order to pro-actively work towards a meaningful body of work that is ‘Gaelic literature’.

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