

Conversations
with
Scottish Poets

Marco Fazzini

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Gifts as Interviews: a Preface

When I think about the genesis of this book, I can point to an exact time: it all began in Edinburgh in the summer of 1988.

I first encountered Edwin Morgan's poetry when I first met him. That evening, all the students who had registered for the 1988 Scottish Universities Summer School course gathered in a college common room to listen to this strange, jerky poet from Glasgow reading his poetry after they had listened to other guests, such as Douglas Dunn, Liz Lochhead and Valerie Gillies. Of course, Morgan's reading went well: he was a success both as a person and as a writer. I was so impressed by him that I decided there and then to visit him in Glasgow at the earliest opportunity.

It was a rainy, dark August night in the same summer when Patrick Williams and I went to Morgan's flat. Once again, I was won over by Morgan's strange, attractive voice; much more than the meanings of lines and phrases, it was his voice that resonated in me in a way that had not happened before. His quirky sounds and nervous haste seemed to contain ancestral secrets, echoes of ancient ways of gathering forces.

What I also discovered that evening was that art does not always have to be serious and that it must trust those liberating moments in which the artist/performer/poet works into and out of his or her language with seeming ease. I am not speaking in particular of either the sound poems or the concrete poems Morgan has written; rather, I am referring to his entire poetic oeuvre, and in particular to all the ways in which poets strike a balance between tradition and innovation, seriousness and joy, closed and experimental forms.

For various reasons, one might discover that it's inconvenient, or disappointing, to know the actual person after one has read

their work. My own experience is other than that, and most of my strongest friendships (and literary collaborations) have sprung from the poets themselves and from knowing them directly. One always runs the risk of being influenced by a 'halo effect' when called on to judge or write on a friend's work; even so, I have discovered much and learnt a great deal by interviewing my poet-friends, listening to their voices, asking them for explanations, influences, directions, tricks of the trade and contextual details that I would have had difficulty understanding by reading alone.

In 1993, I stayed in Scotland for an extended period. I lived overlooking a beautiful beach just outside the magical town of St Andrews. With the help of Douglas Dunn, I busied myself with selecting and translating texts from among the seven hundred poems included in Norman MacCaig's *Collected Poems*. I did not personally know him at that time, but I had grown to admire his work when I was working on an anthology of contemporary Scottish poetry translated into Italian in 1991–92. MacCaig's lucidity and ability to forge striking links between disparate ideas and objects is well known, and his irony was notorious to everyone who knew him.

When eventually I accompanied Valerie Gillies on a trip to visit him, I spent several hours talking to him about poetry – and much more. I realised that we had a number of literary attitudes in common. I refer, in particular, to the barrier any honest intellectual must erect against every sort of complacency and falsity: linguistic, academic or social. That meeting with Norman – whom I later met again, in 1995, when we launched my translations together with Seamus Heaney and Valerie Gillies at the National Library in Edinburgh – was all-important to me as a translator and academic. This is because in choosing a poet to translate, a translator reveals his or her own tastes – what I would call 'elective affinity' – something that informs them of the limits of feeling and creating, that reminds them of what boundaries should be observed; unchecked intrusion into someone else's work and privacy risks frustration, and mis-readings. There must be a slow and passionate developing of words, personalities and

collaborative friendships, letting them reveal to us the undervalued parts of our being. I have read a great many poets; with some of them I have felt impelled towards translation so much so that – by chance? by coincidence? – they later became friends, collaborators, more than mere acquaintances: poets who often shared projects, ideals, adventures, meetings and readings.

Other meetings, often encouraged by Douglas Dunn or Valerie Gillies – such as the one with Sorley Maclean – were similarly refreshing experiences on my literary path. When I first visited Sorley, I remember I was terribly late because I had miscalculated the time needed to travel from St Andrews to Skye; there was no bridge then and I had not factored in waiting for the ferry.

Once I arrived in Portree, I kept asking for directions at every house along the sound. As luck would have it, I bumped into one of Sorley's relatives who phoned him with news of my arrival. I remember Sorley standing just in the middle of the road, waving with open arms, gesticulating as anxiously as a New Yorker hailing a cab to get to hospital to see his newborn child. On that day, no interview was recorded. Although I had my tape recorder in the car, when Sorley asked me if I had one that could capture his voice reciting some of his poems, I said I didn't, afraid that I would miss the magic of the afternoon by being too...professional. The whole afternoon and night was spent talking about Gaelic poetry, World War II in Italy, translation, family trees, occupations, common friendships in Scotland, passions, and so on.

Some time later, we began corresponding, and I decided to conduct a postal interview using the same set of questions I had previously asked other poets. That was the beginning of a long work which includes some of the major Scottish poets, but also writers from different countries, such as Australia, India, Canada, England, St Lucia, South Africa, Nigeria, etc. A reader might describe some of the questions as clichéd; they are so because I wanted all of the writers to reflect on the same topics and difficulties (or mysteries) concerning translation, the source of poetic inspiration, influences, relationships with parents and relatives,

their study abroad or in college residences, reception of their first books, and so on.

During that semester in St Andrews, I also got in touch with some of the then young writers in the area, such as Robert Crawford, Don Paterson and John Burnside; they are still correspondents and friends, wonderful writers and translators whose work and friendship remain a refreshing source of ideas. I remember first meeting Alisdair Gray when I visited my friend Hamish Henderson in the Grange Care Home, quite close to the Edinburgh Meadows. Hamish and I had met several times, mainly at his university office, or at Sandy Bell's, and once in his flat beyond the Meadows, to record an interview. But the tape didn't work and our long interview was lost by the inefficiency of a distracted machine.

In 2001, I spent several months in Edinburgh on a Royal Society of Edinburgh scholarship in order to complete my *Alba Literaria. A History of Scottish Literature*, an attempt to read and view Scottish literature from a postcolonial angle. Someone informed me that Hamish was at the Grange Care Home, and gave me Katzel's phone number to ask for permission to visit my friend. Well, as it happened I visited on the same day and hour as Alisdair Gray, and we spent the whole afternoon there, mainly listening to the fading memories of Hamish, with a loquacious Alisdair chanting and telling stories.

Soon after that occasion, I gave a couple of dissertations on Alisdair's works, and also invited him to read in Venice at a session in a theatre. A poet and friend of mine in Venice said that the most interesting aspect of the performance was my attempts at interviewing Alisdair in public. My attempts to question him were met by the monologue he wanted to deliver on that occasion. The actual interview in this book was conducted in writing some time later. The video of that theatre session is interesting, theatrical and ridiculous, a secret indie documentary, like my third interview with Edwin Morgan, which has never been transcribed and remains for home entertainment only.

The two interviews with Iain Crichton Smith and Derick Thomson were conducted by post when, between 1993–96, I was working on my PhD dissertation at the University of Venice, a work that was later published as *Crossings. Essays on Scottish Poetry and Hybridity* (2000). Together with Sorley Maclean's, the interviews first appeared in 2004 as a trio piece, 'Three Interviews. Three Views', in *Studies in Scottish Literature*. The other interviews are with friends I have seen several times in Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews, Vicenza and Venice. Christopher Whyte shared several translation projects with me, as well as views on Italy and Scotland on his many visits. David Kinloch has represented a joint friendship between Whyte and Crawford. Kenneth White is a poet I have known since my first translations of his poems in 1992. His first Italian book, *Scotia deserta*, was published in 1996, the first in a poetry series I have edited since then.

I have always considered these interviews as gifts; they have no market or commercial value but speak rather of the poetry of life, helping us to transcend the pressures of economics and fulfil our need to be freely linked with other people. In one of his beautiful books, Jacques T. Godbout suggests that by giving 'a gift' to a friend one can bring forth the 'unanticipated', an essential surprise to build social links. A poet would say that through it we introduce 'grace'; a scientist would call it creative randomness and uncertainty. One example of such 'grace' – both the grace of a gift given in the form of an interview, and the gift of being a poet – is contained in an interview donated to me some years ago. Margaret Atwood had this suggestion to meditate upon:

"I really recommend this book to you. I'm a writer, yet this book is not about writing or how to write, or anything like that. It's about gift theory. It's called *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. What Lewis Hyde is talking about is how things pass from one person to another. There are two ways in which they pass. Actually, there are three, but we're not going into the third one, which is called 'Stealing'. One of them is 'Buying' – you buy a commercial product. The other is 'Giving' – you receive a

gift. A gift is not weighed and measured, nor can it be bought. As I say in my book *Negotiating with the Dead*, a gift can't be expected or demanded; rather, it is granted, or else not. In theological terms, it's a grace, proceeding from the fullness of being. One can pray for it, but one's prayer will not therefore be answered. If this were not so, there would never be any writer's block. The composition of a novel may be one part inspiration and nine parts perspiration, but that one part inspiration is essential if the work is to live as art. (The parts vary for poetry, but both are still involved.) The activity of writing, if you are a serious writer at all, exists in the gift part of that diagram. You receive your gift, you practice your gift and you give away the products of your gift, but in order for other people to receive that it would happen to be writing."

Marco Fazzini, Vicenza, 16th April 2015

1 NORMAN MACCAIG

When did you start writing?

Age sixteen.

Do you remember your first poem?

Thank God No!

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

I am still hoping.

So, you do not consider yourself as a writer...

I have to be one on the evidence of what people say. Anyway, I have tried to write an awful lot of poems, so I must be a writer in some sense.

Should I think that other people's judgement has some relevance to you?

No, not at all!

What were your interests when you started writing poetry?

Fishing.

Nothing else?

Music. People. I was only sixteen! I liked poetry in so far as I got it as part of my programmes at school. I never thought I could possibly be a poet.

2 Scottish Poets in Conversation

Why did you choose poetry rather than prose or drama?

It takes longer to write a novel, longer to write even a short story. When I was sixteen the English teacher, Puggy Grant, asked us to write an essay or a poem for homework. I thought: 'Well, a poem's shorter'. That's how I started.

I am thinking of what most of the poets do when they revise and revise their poems for years.

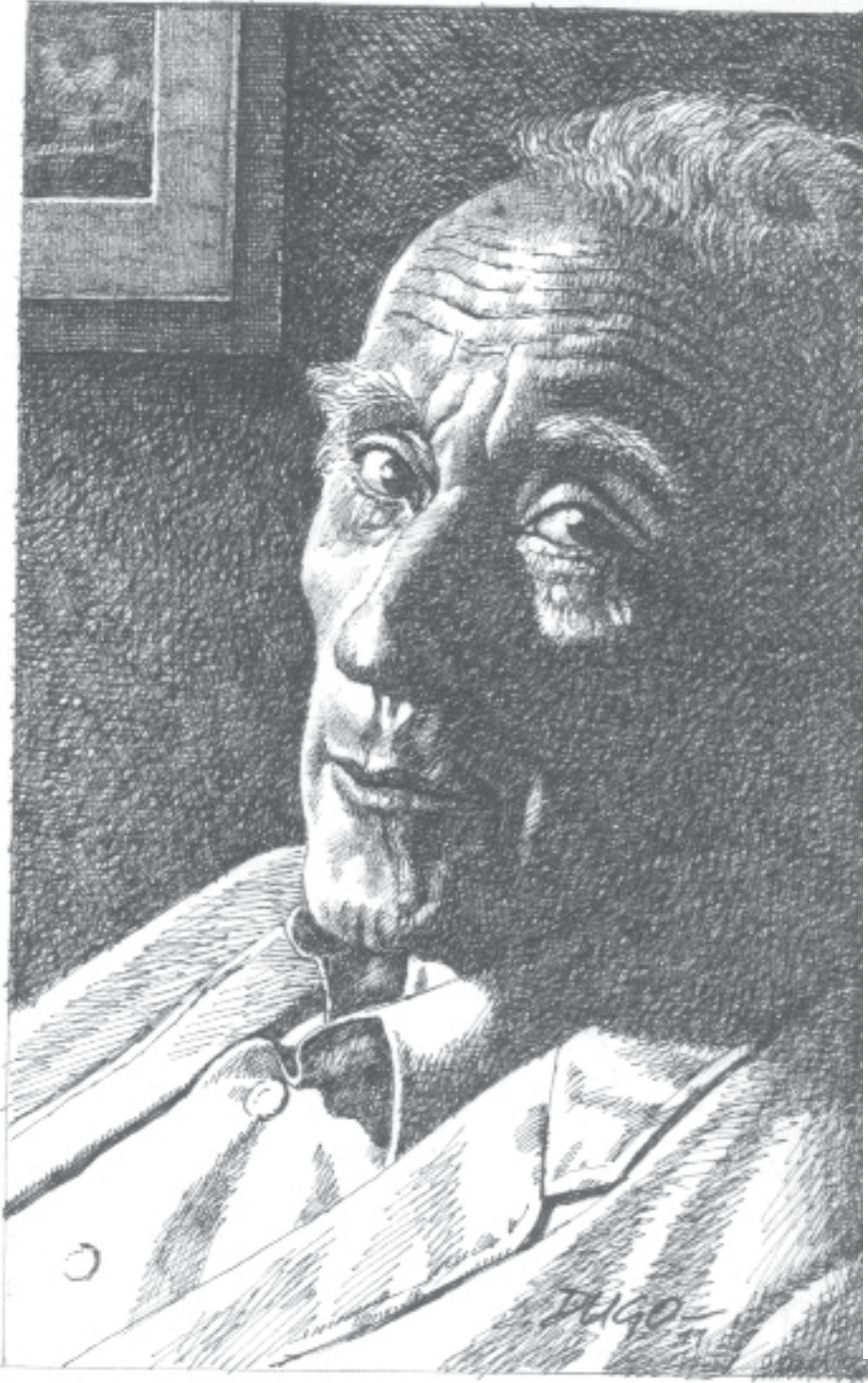
All those drafts? No, no, no! Nobody has ever printed any drafts of mine because I only write one draft.

You are a lucky man...

Yes!

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

They did not know what I was doing. Well, I thought they didn't... My father, of whom I was very fond, was the most undemonstrative man and when I started sending poems to papers and magazines – one of them was *The Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, which was headed by a Scottish poet, not a good one – I never showed anything to them. When he died, I looked into his papers and I realised that he had cut them all out. I understood that because I am a little bit like my father. My mother was not interested in poetry at all. She was illiterate. She could not read. She came to Edinburgh from Scalpay, Harris, at the age of sixteen, with no English. I tried to learn Gaelic at an early age but she could not help me because she did not know the difference between a noun and a verb. She could not tell me the Gaelic for 'Yes' but... – and this is an enormous BUT – I have never known anybody whose metaphors and images occurred so repeatedly in conversation. She thought in images and metaphors. If there is



Norman MacCaig by *Franco Dugo*

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any poetry in me I know where I got it. Certainly, in her case, all that came from her was oral tradition. You tell me about Southern African Bushmen and the way in which they used stories and myth for their oral tradition, stories and so on. I think that's fairly common in 'primitive' people, to use that horrible phrase. For example, Gaelic speakers don't have many swear words, so if they have to abuse you they have to use their imagination.

So, you did pick up some Gaelic...?

Yes, I began to learn it on my own and I got fairly good at it in the sense of reading it. But since I have lived in Edinburgh all my life, I have not met any Gaelic speaker. To learn Gaelic I think it's necessary, very nearly necessary, to live among the people who speak it.

You mean to live a Gaelic life through language...?

As well, yes.

There's an interesting poem of yours where you speak about Aunt Julia.

Yes, she was my mother's sister. I was 12 years old when I used to visit her. I could not understand her. My Gaelic was poor. Now, if you go to Scalpay in the school playground the children are speaking English not Gaelic.

How much value do you attach to the usual traditional structures of poetry?

Traditional structures...I hate these words! I suppose you mean metre, rhyme...

Yes, also the sonnet form, or a precise rhyme schemes, etc.

I never wrote a sonnet in my life. I never wrote something with traditional forms in mind, like Dante's terza rima. In my earlier poems I used a variety of rhyme schemes and regular metres,

which were possibly derivations from Gaelic rhyme. Then, there was a break I made from metre and rhyme to free verse.

Have you ever chosen a particular work to inspire your poetry?

No.

Do you like classical poets?

Yes I do: Homer especially, and ... och, they are too many. Gaelic poetry was also a kind of influence, especially Gaelic rhythm, not metre!

What's the origin of a poem? Does it take its shape first as a sound, a rhythm, or as an urgent message to be expressed?

I never had an urgent message in my life. In fact, I remember that once I had been talking about poetry in general, not my own poetry, and I read one poem which I claimed to be a beautiful, beautiful poem. And, at question time, a woman in the audience asked me: 'I agree Mr MacCaig that it's a beautiful poem, but what's its message?' 'If you want a message', I replied, 'go to Tesco's'.

Do you decide the topic of your poetry before writing?

No. I never make decisions. It starts with a blank piece of paper, a blank mind, and then into my mind comes a memory of a place, of a person, of an event or of the three at once, but usually it's an unimportant detail and I struggle about that, and then the poem trickles down the page. And, then, once it's finished, it's finished. I never revise my poems. I often write a poem in the morning, and in the afternoon I can't remember anything, I can't remember what it was about. They are mostly one-page poems. I believe in brevity.

6 Scottish Poets in Conversation

Have you found writing as a regular activity?

It used to be regular, but it isn't anymore.

But, have you tried to write every day?

Just about. I used to think that if you didn't write 16 poems a day you were bad. As I grew older I wrote fewer. I got cleverer.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

A quick answer to that is that I have never abandoned a belief in that sort of rubbish, because I never had it. I don't know what poetry can compensate for. I don't believe it's necessary to compensate the lack of God. I have often defined myself as a 'Zen-Calvinist', if that means anything to you.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

No, I'm not.

What's your opinion of the critics?

We must be fair with good critics and bad critics. I don't do any face to critics. I don't keep reviews of my books. I don't read them. Well, I think I only kept one review: it was so awful! I would say: anytime you are sick, read this! And, yes, I also kept some good ones as well, the ones which seemed to be not only approving but giving the sense of where I was going to, a notion of what I was getting at.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask

how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic phrase: 'Poets often lie'?

I believe poets often lie. You have the right to write things but they have to be true in a tiny sense. I wrote a poem which had a reference to oystercatcher with red legs ('Moorings'). Later I realised red was wrong – the legs are orange. I once went to a reading and a beautiful poem was read: but it contained a reference to a gannet perched on a post. That's a lie, an evident imprecision because gannets cannot perch.

You have always been very precise in your language. It must have been a kind of search for truth, at least for the truth of reality.

It's not that kind of big, mysterious truth you might think of. It's a search for truth in a narrow sense. You can call it accuracy. And, of course, poets tell the truth through the medium of lies. I'm extraordinarily interested in Mr Plato.

Please, tell me something about the poetry you produced in the 1940s and your relationship with other poets.

That was a period in which a group of writers in Britain called themselves "The New Apocalypse". The interesting thing was that there was one man in Cornwall, one in Wales, three in Scotland, and one in England and they all found themselves writing the same total rubbish. They even started a magazine to print it. I was one of the three Scottish poets ... I don't want to mention the other two Scottish writers. I described every poem contained in my first two books as a 'vomitorium of unrelated images'.

So, what happened between the 1940s and the 1950s? Did you change your ideas on poetry? Were you aware of what you were writing?

No, I wasn't aware ... I tell you why I got over it. I remember I gave copy of my first book to a friend of mine, so he read these abominations. When I met him after some time he asked me: 'Here's your book Norman. When are you going to publish the answers?' So, I started crawling on bloody knees towards lucidity.

Would you like to summarize your feelings about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality?

No, that's too complicated.

Can you tell me anything about the use of myth in your poetry?

Yes, it's possible to use mythology. Myths are fascinating with their interesting stories, fairy tales, etc. for the decrepit you. Myth is as cloudy as the origin of the black. It doesn't come often in my poetry and I sometimes use myth to say something different.

I'm thinking about your friend Seamus Heaney and the way in which he has been using myth...

That's a later movement in Seamus Heaney's poetry. He is not expressing the myth for the sake of the myth. He's expressing the myth for the sake of what it's out of it, which is a different thing altogether. I've written a few poems which are about classical myths, but I have used them with a kind of strategy that you might call *reductio ad absurdum*. I did not want to be ironic, but they were ironic.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

A Scottish poet.

Do you think you have ever romanticized your country?

I don't romanticize anything. I hate the Romantic pretence and

Romantic stories. The history of Scotland is mostly Romantic rubbish when it's being simplified, even the learned stories are like that.

Are there any favourite poems of yours?

They are all in my *Collected Poems*. It contains the best poems I've written since the 1950s. My regret is that since the *Collected Poems* I've not written anything: the well is dry, and it has stayed dry since the death of my wife Isobel. I'm afraid it's a permanent blockage. Death to me was only a concept till some years ago: then, some of my best friends died, and Isobel did as well, and suddenly death was not a concept anymore. So, after all these years of writing, what I remember as my best poems are those written for my friend Angus MacLeod: I think it makes sense, as you say, to judge them as elegiac poems.

Looking back over all your poetic work, what do you think is its most characteristic feature?

I cannot say exactly: images? Yes, very good images, usually funny ones; and irony. And my love for the Highlands and Scotland in general.

2 SORLEY MACLEAN

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

I had no ambition to become a writer, but verse, in Gaelic and English, seemed to come to me in my teens. This verse was normally generated by the attractiveness of girls or natural scenery, especially of woods, hills and mountains. In my later teens I sometimes wrote verse expressing my failure to live up to my ideals of conduct. I was enthralled by the fusion of ‘music’ and poetry in many Gaelic songs and frustrated by my own inability to sing them, as most of my family could. I was angered by attempts to ‘improve’ Gaelic songs.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing?

My parents did not know of my verse until they saw in a magazine ‘The Highland Woman’ in 1938. They disapproved very much of its ‘anti-religious’ tone, but they did not disapprove of poetry in general. On the contrary, my father liked and knew much poetry. He was a fine singer and a piper.

What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

There was much discussion of poetry among many groups of students; and, among certain Highland students, of Gaelic song, often attacks on the ‘improvers’ of Gaelic song. I very often translated Gaelic poetry orally, and wrote some literal translations

for Hugh MacDiarmid to versify. I came to love the 'lyrical cry' in poetry and eagerly accepted Croce's ideas of the lyrical nature of all poetry. I did not show any of my own verse to anybody until very late in my student days, when I showed some to James Caird, but when I came back to Edinburgh, in January 1939, I showed some to Garioch. 'The Ship' was read at the Annual Dinner of the University Celtic Society in 1934. It is symbolist, and its content is politico-literary.

What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

The answer to (this question) is implied in much of my answer to (the previous question). I had a great liking for Shelley but nothing I wrote myself was influenced by his poetry except that perhaps I had some of his 'passion for reforming the world'. I had a great admiration for Blake's shorter poems. My readings had to be comprehensive in English but I liked Latin and French poetry and, above all, Greek poetry, which I knew only in translation. I read and liked selections of Italian poetry, and read all the *Divina Commedia*, with the Italian and English versions on opposite pages. Of the French I especially liked Baudelaire and Verlaine and Villon. I read all the Scottish Gaelic poetry I could find but was especially fond of sixteenth and seventeenth century song.

Speaking about translation, Valéry affirms: 'The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech modified by emotion, into "language of the gods" and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms'. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urging message to be expressed?

I accept Valéry's ideas about some poems or poets but not by any



Sorley Maclean

Sorley Maclean by Franco Dugo

means of all poets or poems. Norman MacCaig has often said that he sat down to write a poem and when words came he let the poem develop. If he approved of the result he kept the poem. If he did not he burnt it. I think that in some ways the end of Yeats's translation of Ronsard's famous poem supports Valéry's words, which I find very obscure.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being predetermined?

Yes, the gestation is frequently semi-conscious, or hardly even semi-conscious. I would say that emphatically about two or three or more poems of my own, notably 'Dogs and Wolves' and the conclusion of 'The Cuillin', both written in a half-awake condition, about three a.m., in the last week of December 1939, after I had heard terrible news of a woman I loved.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

I would say it could apply after great disillusion with an ideal or ideals, or a terrible loss, but in most cases it would not apply.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

MacCaig says: 'there is no consolation'. I am sceptical about consolation except in rare cases; I am still more sceptical about redemption in art. I think Yeats himself got some consolation from poetry, in what he called 'joy'. Eliot's poetry of redemption is contrived and precious.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?

I cannot speak for the whole generation of young Scottish poets as I have not read them all. There are some authentic voices such as MacNeacail (Nicolson) three or four Campbells (men) and three Montgomeries (women). There is a remarkable learner, Meg Bateman.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

Scottish.

Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?

Yes, but I think the chance of complete independence is not great unless the dreadful Thatcherite policy comes to full fruition.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

I am not sure what the 'so-called post-colonial discourse' means but I think there is some reason for the post-colonial treatment.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

All poetry that is not pure fantasy must have a sense of reality or rather be based on reality. MacCaig said he had no imagination but his ability to make the ordinary wonderful is surely the product of a wonderful imagination. My most realistic poems are the few war poems and the 'Broken Image' poems, but the 'Haunted Ebb' poems are an imaginative concealment of a terrible reality, a tragedy of love *in extremis*. My two best poems 'The Woods of Raasay' and 'Hallaig' have the same muted reality, the first 11 octaves of 'The Woods of Raasay' being descriptive realism, the

rest of the poem hovering between imaginatively concealed tragedy and delight in natural sights and sounds.

3 EDWIN MORGAN

When did you start to write?

Quite early, actually, in school. I loved writing anything: prose as well as poetry, long stories, long essays. The kind of poetry I was taught when I was at school was mostly romantic. It was in the early 1930s and at that time modern poetry as such wasn't taught at all. We did the Romantics: Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and I quite enjoyed that. I think the earliest poems I wrote – I don't have them now – were nature poems. Although I was living in the city the first things I wrote were not related to that; somehow I didn't take up that theme until a lot later and I suppose my first poetry was a kind of indulgence, a kind of escapism. I am thinking about Keats and Tennyson's language with its splendid, luscious phrasings which interested me at that time.

What were your interests at that time?

Although I probably feel, when I try to decide what my interests were, that it would be poetry, I think it was very often prose or the cinema. That was a great cinema-going time and Glasgow was a great cinema city in the 1930s, particularly before the war. There were tremendous queues all around the cinemas and you could see a great range of foreign films at the old Cosmo, now called Glasgow Film Theatre. Those films made a big impression. And prose too: the novels of Conrad, Hardy, Melville, the Brontes because I hadn't done very much of them at school. It's really hard to say just exactly what interests you when you come

to your own writing, but that background certainly gave me a great excitement and it's entered into my poetry in a certain way. As for poetry, I was really attracted by the French symbolists and by the Russians in particular, but also by the modern poets such as Eliot and Pound. But I, who took an English degree and was Professor of English Language and Literature, had to go through the process of learning both Old English and Middle English because the language component was very considerable at that time. I also had to know a lot about the history of English language through Germanic back to the Sanskrit.

I mention that simply because this was the time when I could read and enjoy Anglo-Saxon poetry and I liked it tremendously; that was why I translated *Beowulf* and the rest of the poetry too. And I think this kind of alliterative four-stressed line keeps surfacing and resurfacing in my work. Not as a conscious, deliberate device but as something which had imposed its typical metrical system, that way of counting not the syllables of each line but the number of beats. So the patterning was not a patterning of syllables but of stresses and of alliteration. I liked that but also liked the nature of the poetry too, the heroic poetry and that kind of stoic philosophy.

Did you decide to translate The Wanderer and The Seafarer because you were unsatisfied with the previous translations or did those two elegies contain any hidden clues to the art of your own creative writing?

When I was writing *The Seafarer* in particular, I knew Pound's version and I disliked it so much that I felt it had to be done again. When I started to study Anglo-Saxon language I found it very hard to enjoy Pound's version so I felt I had to do it differently. I could see that Pound's translation was important in his development but looking at it as a contemporary person I thought it was a strange old-fashioned kind of translation, full of archaic words



Edwin Morgan by Paolo Annibaldi

which I thought not right for that poem. For a man who was supposed to be re-vitalizing or re-modernizing English poetry that was a strange work. Of course I understood that he wanted to reproduce the flavour of the Old English poetry but I am still convinced that there are better ways of doing that: you can still use the contemporary language and yet suggest a great deal of what that old poetry was like.

When war burst I had to join the Army and during the five years I spent in the Middle-East I could not write poetry at all, not even read one single book. I felt very bad about that, I felt guilty about it. When I went back to Glasgow to finish my University courses and get my degree I felt that I had to get back into poetry somehow, and one of the ways was through translation. I wanted to write something in verse, even though it was not my own. I probably found Anglo-Saxon versions useful in that kind of way and they also reflect something of my own feelings, especially *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

In a recent book on translation written by Hatim and Mason¹ the two writers see the text as a social event and they suggest that the reader and the translator must study the three main elements in a text: the text producer, the meaning and the text expression. Would you speak of your ideas about: a) the text producer of the two main Anglo-Saxon elegies, that is your idea about the period of composition, the possible interpolator or monastic editor; b) your opinion about the most important meaning or cluster of meanings in the two elegies; c) their mode of expression?

The texts of the two main Anglo-Saxon elegies are of course open to discussion. When I was doing the translations there was not much discussion about the possibility of the texts being unstable. I took them as they were, as they had been printed. I

¹ Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, *Discourse and the Translator* (London and New York: Longman, 1990).

tried to see the poems as wholes. I do not think that the Christian elements at the end were added. They seem to me to emerge logically from the poems. I took the opposite point of view of Ezra Pound. He said that there must be an interpolator in the poems, so he cut the Christian references out. If you stress the metaphorical function of the language of the two elegies you obviously try to get at a Christian interpretation of the images contained. In that case it is not just a man who is away from his family and his retinue but he becomes a kind of spiritual pilgrim. It seems to me that the spiritual sense of exile and longing was something that could very easily be part of the original poems.

I would like to know more about those two poems. It is hard to see exactly where the background of the elegies comes from. There must be some Scandinavian influences and references. That was the period of the great voyages in the cold latitudes. Even so it is not easy to place the poems geographically. I think that at the end it is more a mental than a geographical landscape that is being described.

The term 'elegy' we use as a label to define these poems is a very rough kind of description. I do not think that the strict meaning of 'elegy' as a lament for a dead person can be applied here. It is a lament for a previous state of existence and the man who wanders is thinking about that lost stable society I was speaking of before. If the poems were written in England when the Danes were looking for incursions, that would increase the writer's sense of the uncertainty of life. I think you can always describe them as dramatic monologues or dramatic meditations.

Introducing his translations from the French poets, the Italian poet, critic, and translator Mario Luzi observes that he has never thought about constructing a theory about an object which is eminently empirical. Distinguishing between theatrical translations, which are intended for performance, and lyrical

*translations, which contain a certain arbitrary element, the poet stresses the aesthetic and creative prerogatives of the latter. There is no need, he says, to require a performative verification for lyrical translation because its quality lies in the unpredictability of its creative work and in its being a moral and linguistic appropriation or estrangement of the original text.*² *Don't you think that in the case of Anglo-Saxon poetry we are half-way between the lyrical and the performative, the written and the oral, the personally confessional and the objective historical?*

Yes, very much so. It is an arguing point how much of the oral element was in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Some of the poetry we think is quite difficult would be able to be enjoyed by people gathered to listen to it at a recital, probably in a hall and with a musical accompaniment, even though we do not know much of it. So I think the performative element is there, but the Anglo-Saxon poet wanted to get both effects: he/she wanted to have something that could be seen on the page, something to be meditated and appreciated for its aesthetic elements and, at the same time, something which could be performed and delivered to an audience. The translation from Anglo-Saxon poetry has to reproduce these two effects, these two functions. I was very much conscious of this double task for the translator. One of my friends was a good guitarist at that time and he tried to accompany a piece of my translations. It seemed to be possible to have that for the actual metrical effects of the English texts. You can also get a way of accommodating the words to a regular beat if you want to. Obviously, some of the lines in Anglo-Saxon poetry have a lot of small words so that they appear as long lines. But when you speak them aloud there is necessarily elision so that poetry can be adapted for a public and oral performance.

² Mario Luzi, *La cordigliera delle Ande* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), v-ix.

*Accepting what Francis Newman has to say in his study of Homeric translation, literary assessment is 'culture-bound', and any evaluation of the intrinsic values of a work relies on the particular audience it confronts.*³

Would you comment on this statement? And did you think about an audience in particular when you translated Anglo-Saxon poetry?

I do not think I was primarily concerned with an audience when I was doing translations from Anglo-Saxon poetry. I did it just because I liked it so much that I wanted to make new versions of some of the best poems of that period. I was probably also thinking about a general audience interested in poetry and able to enjoy that particular archaic style. I suppose there was also the feeling that what I was writing had, educationally, some kind of interest for academies and schools. At that time, the study of Anglo-Saxon was almost everywhere a compulsory part of English courses. I thought it would be useful to people actually studying Anglo-Saxon to have a new translation of that literature, especially *Beowulf*. But this didactic purpose of my translations was almost unconscious because the whole work mainly came out of my enthusiasm. Anyway, my *Beowulf* is still in print in USA and it is still used at the University of California. It seems to be the standard text for other college students as well. From what I can recollect *The Seafarer* was translated in May 1947 and revised in February 1950. The translation of the poem was first published in the magazine called *The European*.⁴ *The Wanderer* was translated in June 1947 and revised in February 1950. It first appeared in an anthology called *Medieval Age*.⁵ I started translating *Beowulf* in the same period.

³ Cfr. Francis Newman, 'Homeric Translation in Theory and Practice', Matthew Arnold, *Essays Literary and Critical by Matthew Arnold* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 313–77.

⁴ London, no.14, April 1947.

⁵ Angel Flores, ed., *Medieval Age* (New York: Dell, 1963). It also included the translation of *The Seafarer* which appeared in 1947 in *The European*.

*Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of 'disponibilité' and he states: 'At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him.'*⁶ *Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?*

Yes, I think I do. I think it is an important idea! I have done translations in different ways. Sometimes it started off because I felt an affinity with the other poet and other times I was asked for translations. I prefer if I discover some poet for myself and particularly if that poet has not been translated, or has been translated badly, before. It is a big challenge to do a new version of it. The life and the feelings of the poet I translate seem to be things I can be very close to. With Montale that started by being suggested to me by somebody else. In the case of Anglo-Saxon poetry the reader can feel that the atmosphere of the poems reflects the society of the period, obviously, even though it is difficult to know who the poet was. In particular, in the case of *The Wanderer* it is fairly clear that he/she is somebody that was put into exile, somebody who is not part of the society he enjoyed so much. The state of mind of this isolated figure (maybe a historical figure?) is probably related to some of the themes recurring in my poems. I think there is something in this.

There is something similar in *Beowulf* too. The hero does his job, helps others, goes to a different country, kills monsters but he does not really belong to a particular social group. It is quite like the two figures in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Now that I carefully try to look at the period in which I translated the two elegies, it occurs to me that there was a kind of unconscious substrata in my mind. I did them in the late 1940s, just after the war when I

⁶ Renato Poggioli, 'The Added Artificer', in Reuben Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 141.

came back from the Army. I was myself a kind of ‘wanderer’, or a ‘seafarer’. (I think I identified with the piece far more than I realized at that time). Both figures in the elegies were concerned with death, war, cities being destroyed, sense of loss. That was exactly what I had to experience in Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt during the war.

Endeavouring, sometimes, by the choice of the prose medium, to avoid infidelity to the meaning of the original or super-translation, the translator should hope to move the reader towards the author, to reproduce the author’s manner and matter in the spirit of what Rolfe Humphries has to say in his essay on translating Latin into English verse: ‘A good translation... ought, for the sake of the contemporary reader, to sound, on the whole, more familiar than strange; yet in justice to the original, some hint, at least, of his quality, some soupçon of his foreign accent, must be kept.’⁷ Would you like to speak about your achievements?

I did not, myself, follow the alliteration. I used it but I did not follow it as a system. Perhaps if I had to do the translation again I might add more alliteration, but what I did want to retain was the rhythm and the music of the original poem, more than Pound himself did. So I wanted that my version should have a good sense of the rhythm so that the sounds could move well in a four-beat line. I did attempt to use rhymes more than alliteration, especially internal rhymes. There is a large difference between Old English and Modern English but on the whole it is quite possible to have similar rhythmical effects. I tried to make it as modern as possible without using too many archaic words. I wanted my translations to be accessible to the modern reader both from a musical and a linguistic point of view.

⁷ Rolfe Humphries, ‘Latin and English Verse—Some Practical Considerations’, Reuben Brower, ed., *On Translation*, 60.

The translator has always to face the problem of faithfulness. A crucial question which arises for the translator is: 'What does it mean to be faithful? Do I have to be faithful to the formal and linguistic structures of the original or to its literary beauty?' And again: 'If it is true that it is impossible to produce a perfect translation, what should I sacrifice in this work: meaning or music?' How do you react against these theoretical problems?

This is the central problem of translation and it seems nearly unanswerable. I try to get both kinds of faithfulness, as far as I can. If it is not possible to reproduce the exact form of the original, then there must be an equivalent form the translator can use. When I was doing *Cyrano*⁸ I was conscious of the difficulty of reproducing the original French rhyming alexandrines. I thought that rhyming pentameter couplets in English would be the closest equivalent form for it. It seemed to work quite well on the stage, but you cannot always find a metrical equivalent for the original form. If it is a sonnet, well, in Italian it would be relatively easy to reproduce the rhymes, but that is very difficult in English. Sometimes I do not bother with the rhymes of the original, especially if it is a poem in Portuguese, Spanish or Italian. I like to try, anyway.

As for Anglo-Saxon poetry, it seemed to me that they were relatively straightforward poems. Occasionally I was not sure if I could identify some creatures like the seagull, the cuckoo. Apart from that, the poems seem to contain few details about things which would be very different from one culture to another. There are some common elements like storms, sea, darkness, birds' crying which I could easily transfer into a modern English version.

J. R. R. Tolkien, speaking about the problems of translating Beowulf into English, observes that 'For many Old English poetical words there are

⁸ Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac. A New Verse Translation by Edwin Morgan* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992).

(naturally) no precise modern equivalents of the same scope and tone: they come down to us bearing echoes of ancient days beyond the shadowy borders of Northern history.⁹ Do you agree that the modern writer lacks modern lexical equivalents? If you do, how did you treat these particular problematic words?

I do not have a theory about the translation and the transition that some old terms require. It depends on the context and, as Mario Luzi states in the passage you quoted, translation is a very pragmatic thing. You must decide if you want to be totally modern or if you want to remain half-way between the old and the new. But there are, of course, problematic words. When in *The Seafarer* the speaker says that his mind's desires again urge his 'soul' to set out. I was not really sure what the word meant. You can call the man's senses and memory 'soul' if you try to imagine that man travelling over the waves and recollecting his past life. It is a poem about memory in the past and he re-creates his memories in his mind so strongly that they seem present. I took that image not to be metaphorical. The image contains an almost heroic feeling. I think you would not get an emotional charge if it was only a spiritual voyage. If that line had been written by an ecclesiastical or a priest or a monk you would not have got that emotion of senses.

Other problematic words were *goldgief* which I translated gold-giver, *byrne* (I say mail-coat), *duguth* (I say retinue), and *beorb* (I say barrow). As for *meodubeall* I thought that mead-hall was the best translation because it suggests a kind of gathering place. You can keep the phrase 'mead-hall' as meaning 'wine-hall'. We have the modern word 'wine-bar' today and perhaps 'mead-hall' sounds a little bit strange because we do not very often drink mead, even though you can buy mead.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Translating Beowulf', *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: George & Unwin, 1983), 50.

As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal 'deep structure' underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a 'recoding' or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 – the original Anglo-Saxon text, in this case – can be understood by the readers of Text 2 – the English translations. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their 'Intentions', that is 'pure language' as Walter Benjamin has defined it.¹⁰ Would you comment on this?

The idea of the existence of a 'pure language' in poetry, as described by Walter Benjamin, did attract me. I used that idea in one of the articles I dedicated to the translation of poetry¹¹ and what I was saying in that article was that when you translate a poem that is important to you, you want to stay very close to the text so that the task of the translator becomes a very hard task. You get to a stage where you feel that the poem exists in your mind, almost without language, and you have a sense of it as a non-verbal object. You feel its presence in an almost physical way so that the poem seems to be reduced to some basic universals. The American poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg has tried to translate American-Indian poetry and he has some recordings of American-Indian poetry (Navahoe poetry) which is extraordinarily different from anything. He got some recordings of Navahoe poetry which involve very strange sound effects, sometimes trying to imitate the neighing of horses and things of that kind – half-verbal, half sound-poetry. How do you translate that, how do you ever get a sense of that as an American-Indian would feel it? But he did try. He would possibly

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1973).

¹¹ Edwin Morgan, 'The Translation of Poetry', Hamish Whyte, ed., *Nothing Not Giving Messages. Reflections on His Work and Life* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).

argue that even there there may be something that is universal. But there must be some kind of difference between the two very remote languages and it would be very hard to get towards that deep structure. But I think with European poetry that probably is quite possible.

Your poetry alternates between innovative and traditional structures. Can I ask you how much value you attach to the more conventional structures of poetry?

I don't think I have one view of the matter. It seems to me that for certain things I have done I wanted to be free to follow what was around in recent poetry. That would allow me to move in unexpected ways. At other times I felt I really had to use strict form and the sonnet is still very much available as a form. In a sense, each poem presents its own problem which has to be solved; sometimes it is a strict metrical solution and other times it is a free form kind of solution, or maybe a mixture of the two which even contains elements of concrete poetry in a traditional pattern. I am not sure, really, but I have always liked the idea that poetry, like the other arts, is definitely entitled to explore its own formal potential even though it may make mistakes or may go into a cul-de-sac. But, occasionally, it may go into some interesting region and bring back something from somewhere else. I think that it is what happens to concrete poetry or sound poetry.

But what's the origin of a poem? Does it take its shape first as a sound, a rhythm or as an image?

It can be either. I think it very often begins with a rhythmical sense of something that's in your mind and it hasn't been very well defined at all. But it can be an image. I don't think it's easy to generalize about that but I would say that the rhythm is very important to me. Even if there is a free form without a regular

metrical structure I would try to pay a lot of attention to the way it moves rhythmically from one line to the next. I think any good poetry, whether it's free or not, must please the ear, must be music. So I think rhythm is always important and that's probably why when I am writing a poem I vocalize it and read it aloud from line to line.

Emmett Williams, introducing his Anthology of Concrete Poetry, says that this new poetry 'was a poetry far beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be contemplated or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation ... a kind of game, perhaps, but so is life. It was born of the times, as a way of knowing and saying something about the world of now with the techniques and insights of now.' Would you accept the idea that concrete poetry contains this element of game? And who do you think enjoys the poem most, the poet in composing or the reader in activating it?

Yes, I think there is an element of game, in the sense you have a play of words, a play of letters and perhaps also a play of sounds. But I suppose the hope is that what you produce is something that would give pleasure to other people because there is always an element of game in art in any case. Perhaps there is more of an element of that in concrete poetry. But the argument would be that it has something to do with structure, and although there are certain playful elements it may also be a way of discovering new means of structuring a poem which is not related to any of the previous metrical or free verse arrangements at all. Sometimes a poem becomes an object of contemplation on the page and although the reader or the viewer may enjoy the play or the humour or the satire that there may be in a concrete poem, other kinds of concrete poems are made for you to meditate on what is a surprising and beautiful object like a work of art. It can become very visual. Some of them cannot be read aloud at all and some people do not want to accept them as real poems. I

suppose it divides people: I know that from the reaction to my own concrete poetry.

If we look back to the origins or the first attempts of a visual conception of poetry we discover that the permutational poems of the cabalists, the anagrams of the early Christian monks, the carmina figurata of the Greek bucolic poets, the pattern poems of the Babylonians, Herbert's and Thomas's poetry in England and Apollinaire's Calligrammes in France have underlined that picture-writing was an ever-present impulse which had only to wait for the right moment to burst. Could you suggest any particular reason for this new development of concrete poetry from the early 1950s up to the 1960s? In other words, do you think that concrete poetry was an international movement because there were suitable social, technological and poetical situations for it to grow, or would you rather say that its internationalism was mere chance?

It is quite difficult to be sure where exactly it rose. It depends on how closely or not you can trace it back to the preceding decades. It began in German-speaking Switzerland and in São Paulo, Brazil. You mentioned Apollinaire: you can certainly trace it back to the earlier part of the twentieth century, but the fact that those poets came together at that time around the 1950s and the fact that most of the early practitioners were in contact with each other would argue that there was something going on, some groups which started to come out. I am quite sure there is some relation to the development of computer technology. The element of combination or re-combination of elements is quite strong in concrete poetry and it began to be written at the very time when computers began to be used. I do not know how far this affected South American poetry but I think in Switzerland and among the other German or German-Swiss poets who came on the scene that was a strong influence. Other factors are related to what was happening in the plastic arts. Just before that there

was a thing called concrete art and the sculpture of Max Bill in particular. Ian Hamilton Finlay is fond of saying that Max Bill was the originator of concrete poetry although he was a sculptor. And again the question: why his art was connected at that particular time? If it is a postwar situation one might expect something different to emerge, something like Dada. But one has this kind of thing which is partly abstract, partly playful and partly, as critics have said, a kind of neo-Modernism. I felt that there was a kind of new Modernism around after the 1930s, not just in concrete poetry but in other fields as well.

*In your essay on concrete poetry 'Into the Constellation' you quote Eugen Gomringer who says that 'the aim of the new poetry is to give poetry an organic function in society again, and in doing so to restate the position of the poet in society.'*¹² *In which way do you think concrete poetry can give back the poet a social dimension?*

Ian Hamilton Finlay's idea was that the poem would become a kind of object in society. If 'concrete' implies something solid or perhaps tri-dimensional, the poem can get away from the books, becoming an object as many of Finlay's poems did; they were made in glass or wood or stone or metal of some kind and you might have seen something that was literally an object, even a concrete poem. Finlay, who had the reputation of being a great experimenter, wanted to place his works where people could see them, possibly in the streets. One of his poems is called 'Acrobats' and its letters are arranged in such a way that you get an image in your mind of acrobats on each other's shoulders forming a pyramid.¹³ We get concrete poetry in a book, on a postcard, also on the wall of a house, so that children of the school nearby could

¹² Edwin Morgan, *Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1974), 25.

¹³ See 'Acrobats' in Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 184.

see it. One of the aims is that the poem can go out somewhere and people will not feel that a poem is something that is not for them. This has not really happened to any great extent but when it has people seemed to like it.

In your essay 'The Poet and the Particle', before discussing Robert Garioch's 'The Muir', you suggest that 'if it is not the duty, it should at least be the delight, of poets to contemplate the world of science'.¹⁴ Could you say which fields of science you have tried to describe in your poetry?

I have never felt this split between science and the artist that many people feel. Nowadays one comes up against the sheer problem of specialization, of mathematics, of very technical vocabulary. I admired Hugh MacDiarmid for his attempts to deal with this problem of how to bring scientific and technological words into poetry. I found these poems very interesting. In my own poetry it was not so much the problem of bringing into it a lot of technological words as of taking certain themes which seemed to be pressing – this was in the 1950s and 1960s. It was partly with regard to biology, but I think astronomy and space explorations were also two of my early scientific interests.

I think that when space explorations began to be possible, when they began to be part of human experience and not just science fictions as they had been when I was a boy, I started to write about these things. I did it in such a way that actually the scientific content in my own science fiction poems, the 'Particle Poems', try to say something about the particle. I also like to imagine projections into the future. In 'In Sobieski's Shield', which is a kind of heroic poem, I go back to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and although it is a science-fiction poem where people are pushed into a very difficult situation in a far future, it still

¹⁴ Edwin Morgan, *Essays*, 17.

revolves around human experience, it says something about survival and heroes.

And what can you say about your personal experience of the gestation of a poem?

Very often gestation is a kind of physiological thing. I cannot find the exact words to define these strange feelings but I am disturbed in some kind of way, troubled or worried and become bad tempered to my nearest and dearest. I learned to read the signals that this is going to be a poem but it may be something that is so vague that I could not even say what is going to be about. But when I get this feeling I usually find that it does relate to something and it is very often a phrase or a line, not so much an idea, that comes into my head. I am not quite sure whether I might relate it to a landscape, to a city or to people but it comes into my head very strongly and instantly. It seems to fix itself to these vague feelings of discontent and then I know I have to get going otherwise I feel as if I have let myself down.

The process of getting into a poem is one of the great anxieties of composition but I have to put up with it somehow. There is an invisible strange command which tells the poet to produce a poem and he cannot neglect it even if he has to sacrifice himself.

Would you expect to write poetry regularly?

Writing is not regular for a poet because poetry is the most precarious of all arts. If you are a novelist or a writer of short stories you have the chance to have a regular task every day, a certain amount of pages or words. I know many fiction writers who can really do that. In poetry it is very hard to plan things and one must wait. Obviously, I try to write something every day even though I am not writing poetry, just to get myself in touch with language. But it cannot be made regular. Even with long things

like *Paradise Lost* in which you ought to keep a great deal in your mind, the poet did not write regularly. He had bad moments too.

Looking back over all your work what do you think is its most characteristic feature?

I think it is a difficult question because I have written quite different kinds of poems. Maybe it is easier for others to answer but, personally, I think it is probably something to do with that heroic hope that I talked about in 'In Sobieski's Shield' that we also find in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

I very often like to have poems about people facing difficult and crucial situations but not going under. I like to think of people surviving very difficult things, like the old man in 'In the Snack-bar' or the people in 'In Sobieski's Shield'. I think the characteristic of these people is that they accept real challenges or real problems but they do manage somehow to come through. There is a kind of stoic note about it but it is hopeful rather than despairing. I like to think about the idea of overcoming something desperate.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet writing in the United Kingdom or a British poet?

A Scottish poet. For me the word 'British' does not mean very much and I feel I am Scottish as Geoffrey Hill is English and Seamus Heaney is Irish. I think that the United Kingdom, or dis-United Kingdom, is a strange body. It must be very strange to an outsider to understand what we are in this island. That is why we do not use the word 'British' very much. But if your work possesses any international appeal you are just a poet even though there is the local flavour. For me it was more Glasgow than Scotland.

4 DERICK THOMSON

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

I started writing very early, certainly before the age of ten. Made a 'house magazine', wrote simple verses in Gaelic and English. Fairly committed to writing by mid-teens.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

Parents encouraging. My father was a poet and editor of poetry. My mother very interested in poetry and song.

What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

A fellow-student at Aberdeen University, from 1939, was Alexander Scott, who had been writing from his early teens also. We both published poems at that period. After the War, Iain C. Smith (from the same village as myself in the Island of Lewis) became a fellow-student at Aberdeen. I had for some years been a committed Scottish nationalist, and read quite widely in Scottish literature in the 1940s.

What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

Reading ranged fairly widely. Deep interest in Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Probably Yeats became the strongest individual focus in the postwar years. Also much involved with Gaelic song, especially from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Speaking about translation, Valéry affirms: ‘The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech modified by emotion, into “language of the gods” and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms’. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urging message to be expressed?

Poems can come into being in many different ways, and Valéry certainly describes some important springs for poetry. I sometimes have an urge to write about an experience or an event, but just as often a poem begins from a sensation, a memory, a vision, a phrase, and then grows, moulding itself out of images, words, rhythms.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

Sometimes there is a period of gestation, but this can vary from five minutes to fifty years. I remember writing a poem about the decline of Gaelic speech about 1963, but the poem is set about thirty years earlier, at the time of my grandfather’s death (‘Coffins’). Longer poems, especially sequences, tend to have a longer and more deliberate period of gestation. A recent sequence ‘Meall Garbh’ ranges over fifty years of memory, and a few more centuries of history, and was written throughout February 1988.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

One comes to expect a degree of misinterpretation. The danger is more acute when non-Gaelic readers or critics comment on Gaelic poetry, since even accurate translation cannot capture the range of resonances that a poem has in its original form.



Derick Thomson

Derick Thomson by Franco Dugo

There is often a danger of critics letting their personal prejudices (political, generational) show.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

I would agree that the relationship between poetry and 'truth' is a complex one. Sometimes a poem can be 'inspirational' to the extent that the poet does not fully understand its 'truth' or 'meaning' at the time, and may be puzzled or surprised by it later.

Could you explain what it means being a Gaelic speaker in Scotland? And what does it mean writing poetry in Gaelic now?

Gaelic is in a state of flux in Scotland. There are said to be about 66,000 speakers, perhaps 2,000–3,000 of these learners, and many thousands more who have started learning Gaelic. But the native-speaking population is declining steadily, and so the most secure base for the language is gradually withering. Public support is stronger and more obvious, with more publication, more media exposure, more pressure-groups. We seem to be moving gradually towards the Irish-type situation, with a declining native core and a spreading learner-group which sometimes brings a brash confidence and sometimes an insensitive dimensions to the use of the language.

Gaelic poets have already fallen into two fairly distinct groups: native and learner.

I decided to write poetry only in Gaelic about 1948, and have stuck to that since then, but often provide parallel English versions. What began partly as a political decision has become a

way of life. I believe that whatever I have to say as a poet relates strongly to my Gaelic background, but I am of course involved and deeply interested in the world around me. A friend recently accused me of extreme tenacity, perhaps obstinacy, in continuing to write Gaelic poetry. He had a point.

The Gaelic-literate public for poetry is very small – a few hundred only – so it is now important to provide translations, as we all want to speak to a larger body of people interested in poetry.

Do you think the translations (both of your own poetry and other poets) can be considered a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?

In my own translations (of my own verse and that of others) I try to convey the exact sense of the original, and to suggest the rhythmic flow. There are ideas and turns of phrase that cannot be translated exactly, and cannot carry the associations that the original expressions have. Sometimes a different image or idiom will bring one closer, and then it is worth sacrificing the literal translation.

As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal 'deep structure' underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a 'recoding' or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their 'Intentions', that is 'pure language' as Walter Benjamin has defined it.¹ Would you comment on this?

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1973).

I can go along with the Wilhelm von Humboldt statement in a general sense, but think that there are many subtleties of thought that are affected by particular language usages: the communities can develop patterns of thought and individual idiosyncrasies that become woven into the community language, and that one of the fascinations of individual languages is such individuality.

*Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of 'disponibilit ' and he states: 'At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him.'*² Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?

I can agree with Poggioli's statement in general.

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is 'the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions'. Do you agree with this statement?

I like your statement about Scottish poetry. There is a long history of interest in 'an agnostic link between man and nature' in Scottish poetry generally, and it shows up quite strongly in Gaelic poetry from early times, then in the eighteenth century, and again in the twentieth.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?

I think there is a conscious effort to extend the subject range of

² Renato Poggioli, 'The Added Artificer', in Reuben Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 141.

poetry in Scotland, but on the whole politics and aesthetics are not seen as comfortable bedfellows.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

A Scottish poet.

Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?

I expect to see constitutional change, leading to a kind of European ‘independence’, in the next decade.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

Yes, why not? Scotland, like the U.K., is a post-colonial country, though it still has a colonial flavour within the U.K.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

My poetry has a strong basis in reality, whether one is attuned to that reality or finds it distressing or uncongenial, but poetry should not consist of sermonising or philosophising. It should, ideally, move reality on to the different plane of the imagination, which makes new insights possible, and can transform discourse into art.

5 IAIN CRICHTON SMITH

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

I was writing from an early age – about eleven.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing?

It was only my mother who was alive. My father had died when I was one or two years old. My mother didn't show much interest in my writing.

What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

I was in Aberdeen University. I was lucky that there were a number of writers in that particular university. Derick Thomson, the Gaelic writer was there and so was the late Alexander Scott who edited a magazine called *North East Review*. These two had been in the war and were older than me.

What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

I have read widely in poetry and prose. But in my late adolescence my most important influences were T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Later in my life, in the 1960s, I was much influenced by Robert Lowell.

Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: "The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into "language of the gods" and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for

his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms'. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

I do agree with this. Poetry can be a sound searching for the idea which it will express. Or perhaps 'theme' might be better as in Yeats, 'sought a theme and sought for it in vain' etc.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being predetermined?

Sometimes an intuition can re-emerge a long time after its first appearance and the poem might then be written. Sometimes the poem can be written in response to an urgent immediate demand.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

I'm not sure if so much weight can be placed on poetry as to replace religion. Arnold had a similar idea. Certainly there is a connection in that one often waits on the poem as one might wait on a religious phenomenon.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

I think this can happen. However, if the explanations are consistent one might have to accept them as possible ones.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you



Iain Crichton Smith *by Franco Dugo*

rather accept the Platonic phrase: 'Poets often lie'?

I think in poetry one has to be true to what one feels. It is not objective truth set against reality. Rather the language has to be so exact in poetry that it forces one towards the truth of the self.

Could you explain what it means being a Gaelic speaker in Scotland? And what does it mean writing poetry in Gaelic now?

There are 70,000 Gaelic speakers according to the last census. To write in Gaelic is an act of faith that there will be a public though a small one.

Do you think the translations (both of your own poetry and other poets) can be considered as versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?

I have done a number of translations from Gaelic into English. I try to be as faithful as possible to the sound the poem makes and to the words the poet uses. Even if his style is totally different from mine, I try to follow it. One should not aggrandize another poetry to one's own work.

As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal 'deep structure' underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a 'recoding' or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their 'Intentions', that is 'pure language' as Walter Benjamin has defined it.¹ Would you comment on this?

I'm not sure that I agree with this. Some people would say that for

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations* (London, Collins/Fontana, 1973).

instance English and Gaelic are so different from each other that one cannot translate a Gaelic poem into English at all. I think a language has its own 'genius'. All one can do is an approximation.

*Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of 'disponibilité' and he states: 'At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him.'*² *Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?*

I have translated mainly because I wish to display my enthusiasms to others. Translation should not be a task. It should be done out of love for the original text.

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is 'the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions'. Do you agree with this statement?

I think there is a strong link between the poet and nature in much Scottish poetry and especially in Gaelic poetry. I'm not sure that there is necessarily a sense of the sacred in this. Scottish poets tend to view nature unsentimentally and they generally don't philosophise about it, as Wordsworth does.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

I think that one can find comfort in certain great poetry. But I don't think that poetry can replace religion (I myself am not

² Renato Poggioli, 'The Added Artificer', in Reuben Brower (ed.), *On Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 141.

religious). It can, I suppose, supply a sense of order but one cannot live one's life exclusively by poetry.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?

In certain young Gaelic poets there is a feeling of nationalism. In essence I would say that they are more political than my own generation was. On the other hand the generation before mine was highly political.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

I would say I consider myself simply as a poet. Others may categorise me, perhaps in my opinion wrongly. I would imagine that my Scottishness will appear in my themes and perhaps in my choice of language.

Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?

I do think so. It seems that Labour will win the next election and they have promised devolution if not independence. I think in the near future there will be a change in Scotland's constitutional status.

Would you tell me when and why you started writing 'The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe'?

I wrote 'The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe' in the 1970s. I was led to it by my interest in loneliness as a phenomenon about which I had written many poems and also by my interest in language. What happens to his language if a man has only himself? Is language a communal activity? Also, what happens to

a man's relationship to reality when he is absolutely alone? These questions still seem to me to be important.

Was there any intention to re-write and destroy from within one of the institutional texts of English tradition?

No. However there is a programme called 'Desert Island Discs' (on radio) in which people are asked what books etc. they would take to a desert island. Interviewees in my opinion do not at all wrestle with the idea of total solitude. I meant to show in my poem the seriousness of loneliness. What would have happened, for instance, if Robinson Crusoe had gone blind? Where are the limits of the individual: that is what I was concerned with.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

I think it should be treated on the basis of what it says about the human predicament. Its depth of insight is what will be important.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

Imagination can transform a reality which may appear to be meagre. It does not however need to falsify reality. It can say, reality should be like this, or that. Imagination should be based on reality, otherwise it becomes fantasy.

6 ALASDAIR GRAY

When did you start to write?

When I was taught to do so at the age of five in primary school.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

They encouraged. My father gladly typed out my earliest and most puerile verses, stories, plays.

What do you remember of your period of study in Glasgow. Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

If study is enjoyment of reading and thoughts provoked by reading, my studies have often slowed down but never stopped. Periods were dominated by the work of particular writers. In my teens a teacher encouraged my writing by first printing my work in the school magazine, then making me editor of it.

Have you ever chosen a particular poetical work to inspire your poetry or would you rather speak about a kind of comprehensiveness in your readings and influences? What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

Poe. Early H. G. Wells. Hans Andersen. William Blake. Thomas Hardy. Hogg. Dickens. G. M. Hopkins. Burns. Ibsen. Shaw. Bosch. Beardsley. Munch. Hokusai. Hiroshige. Etc.

What's the origin of a poem? Do you accept the idea that it can be originated

first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

With me it always began with a sonorous phrase that needed enlarging to present an idea more clearly. The idea contained a mood or feeling that only made sense when logical as well as sonorous. The germinating phrase usually indicated loss or absence.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

No. I would speak of gestation as the period in which a poem is being determined.

Would you expect to keep writing poetry regularly?

I have never written poems regularly.

Do you take great care in ordering the poems in a collection?

Yes.

Would you comment on this observation and add something to the following statement of agnostic faith summarized by Wallace Stevens in his 'Adagia': 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.'

Wallace's statement must be true of himself since he says it. I prefer the faith of William Blake who thought Jesus was the everlasting creator, redeemer and poetic imagination.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

No. My main fear for my work is that it be ignored or forgotten.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of



Alasdair Gray

Alasdair Gray by Franco Dugo

Poetry to the Search for Truth, says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

Gadamer's statement only makes sense to me if he is rephrasing Aristotle's dictum that poetry (lyric, epic & dramatic) contains more truth than historical writings, which can never present all the causes of what they describe. Did not Plato (an imaginative writer) put his condemnation of poets into a dramatic dialogue advocating a fascist Utopia? Totalitarians always want to ban folk who imagine what they don't. See Hitler & Stalin.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

I am obviously both.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

If reality is experiences (what else can it be?) then poetry, like other word structures, describes realities by imagining them – by inventing shareable images of them as truthfully and entertainingly as possible. (In the previous sentence 'entertainingly' may be replaced by 'surprisingly').

Looking back over all your poetic work what do you think is its most characteristic feature?

I wrote them.

Are there places that have been especially important to your poetry (maybe have lent themselves easily to metaphor)? And are they the same ones that have been important in your life?

No. It is people who have been especially important: people who live close to me. That I have almost always lived in Glasgow is a coincidence I share with more than a million. It is the context to which I need not pay conscious attention, in poetry.

Many of your poems reflect your ideas about human relationships and love. How does it feel to be a contemporary poet who writes about love, when so many other poets today do not?

I have never felt outside a poetic mainstream because I have never noticed one.

Your notes at the back of your Sixteen Occasional Poems: 1990–2000 seem to anticipate your readers' questions. Do you imagine your readers when you write? Who do you imagine?

I do not – cannot imagine my readers, but hope what I write makes sense to any intelligent reader who enjoys a variety of verse in English. The notes are to help such readers enjoy my verses more.

Do you think it's important to share your work as it develops?

I have found it useful to share partly written novels and plays with friends, but all my poems have been so short that I have had no time, while writing them, to invite useful criticism.

Which kind of shame does poetry cause in surviving its author?

Only readers who survive the author can tell you that, but I am sure they would feel the same shame when the poet lived. My own shame when I re-read my immature work is not posthumous. I cannot imagine such shame.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be skeptical about its value?

Like several arts and sciences, poetry is a way of enjoying and learning other people's feelings and discoveries through beautiful used words. I cannot be sceptical about what pleases and teaches me. I do not understand your use of the word redemption here, perhaps because I am not very religious.

You were working as a writer in residence until recently: do you really think that people can be trained in this kind of mysterious and difficult job?

All training is useful to those learning difficult jobs, and experienced professional doers are good teachers of surgery, law, bricklaying, music, etc. I do not regard wordcraft as essentially more mysterious than these, though some students cannot learn, bad instructors cannot teach.

In becoming accessible is poetry in danger of giving up too much? What are the implications of publicity?

To have a talent destroyed by too much money and admiration must be a tragic experience. I wish every poet could be so savagely tested – especially me.

Considering the little attention paid to your poetry collections and the few reviews written on them, I would like to ask you if this was caused by the position of Alasdair Gray as a well-known Scottish novelist or by a larger and more general disregard for poetry as a literary genre.

Neither. My poetry is smaller in quantity and also gloomier, less varied in tone than that of better known Scots contemporaries, so of course my prose is more popular.

In the last ten years many Scottish publishing houses have disappeared, and some of the surviving ones have stopped publishing literature. Do you think that in the New Scotland literature, and poetry in particular, will have to be subdued to the strength of other priorities?

Please, do not ask me what will *have* to be done in the New Scotland. I would like to see full, well-paid, useful employment for everyone in the New Scotland: office cleaners as well as poets. That is what *should* be provided, not what will be.

How do you judge the function and role of institutional and government initiatives in support of arts and writers in your country?

I have not investigated these things enough to give a far-reaching, intelligent judgement. The language of the Scottish Arts Council's [now called Creative Scotland] publicity leaflets is as inspirationally abstract as those of most public bodies, and gives a strong sense of fully employed administrators, languaging.

In your note about the poem 'South Africa April 1994' you observe that 'After 1950 several states created and kept by violence ended without violence destroying them: the British and USSR empires, the dictatorship of Greece, Spain, Portugal, South Africa. I wanted to celebrate the fact that unjust systems at last exhaust those who inherit them, that no human state is solid'. Did you want to suggest any actual link with the political situation of Scotland?

No. The state of Scotland was not made by overwhelming military or police intimidation, but by my nation's chief landlords, soldiers and professional folk working for the English rulers. Tony Blair's silencing of Scottish criticism by giving Scotland an almost completely powerless parliament is the most recent example.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

Only by those who enjoy such treating and including. I assume this discourse is a kind of criticism. If it concentrates on only one aspect of poetry it is a limited and limiting kind.

7 KENNETH WHITE

Can you tell me first something about your background?

I emerged from the Glasgow proletariat. They're a mixed bunch, the Glasgow proletariat. A lot of them came down from the North. On my maternal grandmother's side, there were Downies, on my maternal grandfather's side, Camerons. On my paternal grandmother's side, there were Mackenzies from Inverness. On my paternal grandfather's side, it's folk from what used to be MacGregor country. In the old days, I might have been Coinneach ban Macgregor – Kenneth the White of the Gregor clan. But the MacGregors, as you know, being notorious rebels, were deprived of everything, including their patronymic: 'Children of the mist', they were known as.

My paternal grandfather, John Dewar White, was professional piper, strolling actor, soldier (whenever he could, so as to see the world), factory worker and bartender. To say the least, he'd been around.

My father, Willie White, a bright pupil at school, and always a great reader, worked on the railway, and was a strong trade-unionist, active in politics: he was a left-wing socialist, while my uncle, Archie Cameron, was one of Glasgow's staunchest Communists. As to my mother, she was less socially inclined, more secretive, with all the contradictions of Scottish culture bundled inside her.

Everything was set up for me to be a Glasgow boy myself. But my father, by deciding that he wanted to bring up his children in another context, broke the line (or maybe rather, restored the

context). To this end, he got himself a job in a small village on the coast of Ayrshire. Which means that from the age of three I was raised in that context of shore, field and forest, moor and mountain.

Apart from visits to grandfolks, I only went back up into the city when I was eighteen, as a student at Glasgow University.

All that's made for a kind of multiple dialectics in me: between city and country, nature and civilisation, culture and politics, nomadism and sedentarity.

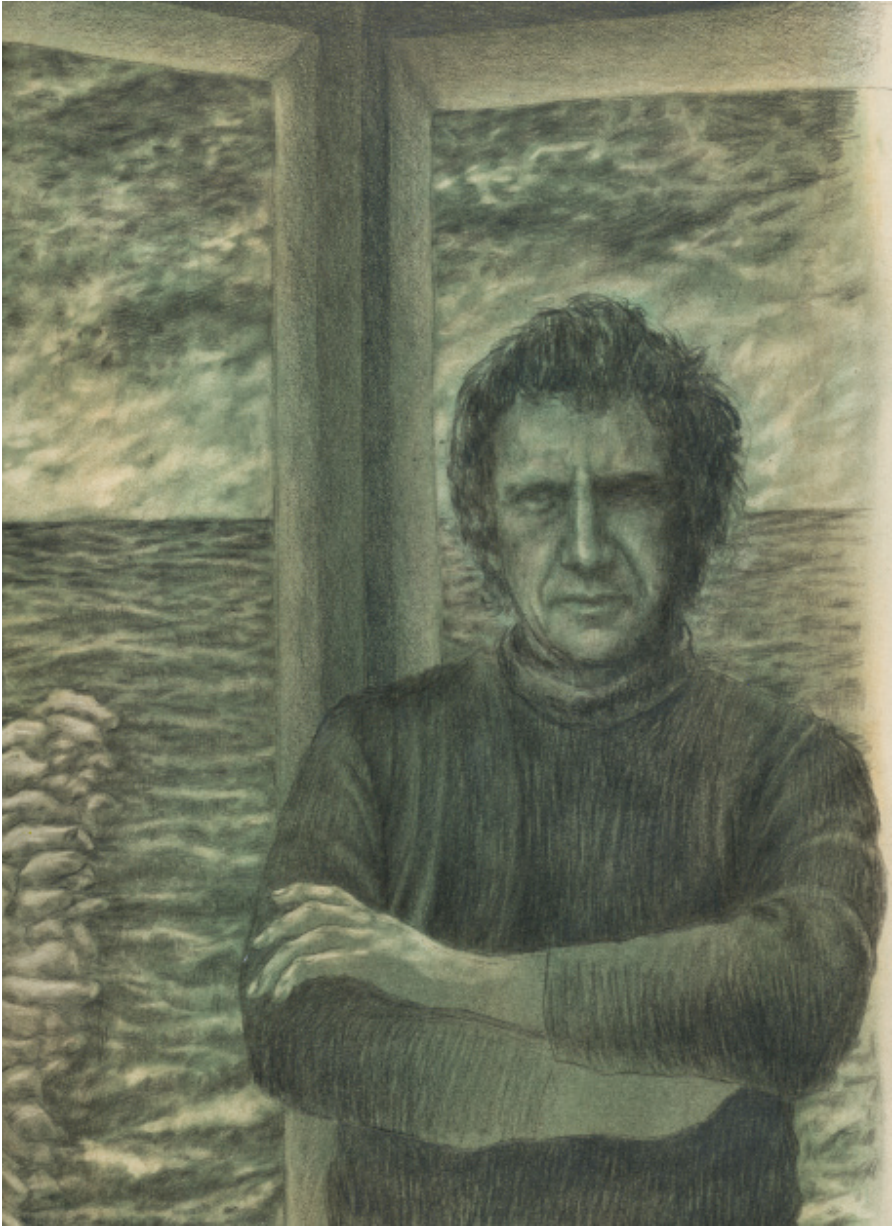
When did you feel that you would become a writer?

I started writing around the age of twelve. Listening to people talk, I had the awful impression that nobody understood anybody, and that language was being used in a very confused kind of way. So I'd transcribe the conversations, and write them out logically. In other words, my first aim in writing was for a clarity. I kept the transcriptions in a big biscuit tin, and when the tin was full, I emptied it.

At about the same time, I spent a lot of my time walking along the shore on my own, or 'up the back', as I called it: the landscape of field, forest, moor and hill up behind the village. There I was confronted by a non-human context: lines, colours, noises, bird and animal cries. I tried to work my way into it: looking listening, getting into movement. On the shore, I'd imitate gull cries, in the forest at night, I'd imitate the owls. I'd follow hedgehogs for hours, run with hares over the moors. And I tried to find a human language at least equivalent to all that.

At school I imitated models. I did pastiche after pastiche of Burns. But that imitation of models, which I learned to do pretty fast, never meant so much to me as the two other processes.

I wrote seven full manuscripts between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. But I still didn't consider myself as 'a writer', I



Kenneth White *by Paolo Annibali*

was just ‘working’. It was only in Paris, where I lived from 1959 to 1963, that, after years of writing, I knew I was going to be ‘a writer’. That comes across in the book *En toute candeur*, published in Paris in 1964.

How do you see your writing activity with regard to society?

These days, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context, writing is seen exclusively in terms of society, and even only with regard to social categories. So we have women’s literature, gay literature, children’s literature, and so on. A mass of social categorial stuff with little scope anywhere.

A bit higher, and more interesting, is the French idea of the socially engaged writer and intellectual, which started up at the time of the Dreyfus case. It’s Emile Zola sticking his neck out with his ‘I accuse’ – up to say, Sartre, at the end of the Second World War. I go with the notion that the writer has a significant rôle to play in society. But when this runs down to overhasty engagement on this or that issue, and to merely journalistic commentary, not only do I see no point, I see a perverted mess. There I begin to think of the old Chinese distinction between ‘intellectuals of the market’ and ‘intellectuals of the mountain’. The latter takes more time and space.

Right from the beginning, while not neglecting society (there is social analysis in all my books), I saw that it was necessary, also for the sake of society, to work in a larger context.

As a student in Glasgow, I plunged into all the big socio-cultural frescoes I could get my hands on: Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, Flinders Petrie’s *The Revolutions of Civilisation*, Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, among others.

For Spengler, studying the period between 1800 and 2000, we were living in a context of exhausted vitality, marked by a lack of living matter. Art was practised and would be still, of course, in

the future, but there would be no great poetry, no great painting, no great music. While semi-intellectuals, with no real sensation of life and with a loathing for the land, lived as parasites of the city, the lucid and powerful mind would just go away, abandon all this context, and make a living as he could. As for the land itself, that had begun disappearing with the establishment of the castle and the temple, and was to disappear more with the town and the market, while still remaining source and reference, it would gradually vanish entirely with the rise of city, factory and bank, increasingly so as the city progressed towards civilisation's final stages.

The mind that realizes all this is the 'intellectual nomad'. One can think of Rimbaud, Nietzsche's 'hyperborean', Hesse's *Steppenwolf*. This figure excited my mind more than most poets and writers. I tried to see how I could continue that line, open up another field.

When he embarked on his vast study of the twenty-one civilisations humanity had known, Toynbee had at least two main motivations: one was revulsion at the parochial and provincial social history he saw going on round him and the desire to plunge into history 'writ large', the other was to see if there might not be an answer to Spengler. He shared to a great extent Spengler's analysis of the contemporary situation: he saw disintegration everywhere, he was profoundly dissatisfied with 'Western cultural pabulum', and the whole context seemed to him like the life-in-death experienced by the Ancient mariner of Coleridge's poems after he had killed the albatross. But he still wondered if there might be some prospects for Western Civilisation, the only one still extant – if there might be a new growth-phase. If Spengler was a concluder, Toynbee was a questioner. That's where I was with him. But for Toynbee (as for Eliot), the cruciality of the question lay in religion, indeed the whole process of

history for him was ‘a progressive increase in the provision of spiritual opportunities for human souls in transit through ‘This World’. I didn’t see things that way. Which is why, while Toynbee himself seemed to find a refuge, and propose to ‘post-Modern’ civilisation a haven, in the spirituality of Francesco Bernardone of Assisi (‘the most god-like soul born in the Western World so far’), I stayed out in the open (often, in the cold). Out in the open with those ‘wanderers in the Western wilderness’, those ‘Western pilgrims’, those ‘Western navigators on the face of the waters of History’ Toynbee evokes throughout his writings.

This is the context of my work. Hence the essays, that try to map things out, beginning with the massive thesis I did in Paris on intellectual nomadism. Hence the waybooks, neither novels nor travel-writing, which move outwards in a multi-dimensional way. Hence a poetics which is out to be more than neat commentaries on this or that aspect of person, community, society.

To sum up, if we need a relationship to society, we need also a relationship to the universe. The latter contains the former, the former does not contain the latter.

Why did you leave Scotland at one point?

What I left first of all was Britain, which felt to me like a big wet blanket. But Scotland was part of it: the only difference was that its side of the blanket had a tartan fringe (meaning by that, identity ideology, and narrow nationalism). So, there was that general social, cultural, psychological context.

On the more specifically literary plane, back there in the late Sixties I could see a big change for the worse taking place in the publishing houses. It was a situation that was to become so normal that it wouldn’t even be noticed any more, the way ideology (what passes for thought in the absence of thought) isn’t noticed, it is just part of ‘the real world’.

I published my first books from London, at Jonathan Cape. I did five books with them: a prose book, two poem-books, a translation of the surrealist poems of André Breton, and a translation of Breton's long poem *Ode to Charles Fourier* (with an essay on utopian socialism). When I presented my sixth manuscript, I was told it was more 'continental' than 'British', closer to Joyce and Beckett than to 'the English novel'. OK, I said, so I'll get it published in France. 'Ah', it was answered, 'yes, France is a literary country'. In other words, anything like demanding, advancing literature was going to be more and more marginalised in Britain, if not annihilated.

Another London publisher I went to see at this time made it even plainer: he told me he was no longer in literature at all, he was in the leisure and entertainment industry. His advice to me was to put all my real writing in the fridge for at least ten years, and in the meantime write a fat novel about my home-town, Glasgow – that he would be able to sell in the mass market. That kind of stuff, fast-food literature, was in fact arriving in wagon-loads from the US: gilt-edged hamburger productions.

So to continue and advance my work in a more propitious context, I went to France. I knew (I had no illusions) that the situation long prevalent in the US, and that had arrived in Britain, would eventually hit France and the rest of the Continent. But there would maybe be about thirty years' respite. That would be enough for me to get going with.

Let me say in the bygoing that I never actually lost touch with Scotland. Apart from the fact that I always took a lot of Scotland with me and had an extensive Scottish library in my various places of residence (Paris, the Pyrenees, Brittany), I was often over in the country, 'incognito' as it were, moving through cities, towns and villages, along the coasts, into the mountain areas, on the islands. Always with senses wide open and mind alert. I travelled

over Scotland in fact a lot more than most people resident in the country.

During all the years of my ‘exile’, I’d say to myself now and then that if I ever did return to English-language publishing (I still wrote nearly all of my books in English, from which they were translated into French and other languages – it was only the essays I came to write directly in French), it would be with Scotland, if ever some new publishing house there seemed possible. I had allegiance to the country, dues to pay to my ancestors. I also considered that, in a new Europe, small countries might have a chance to go faster and better than big countries.

So I’ve worked as a European Scot, seeing Scotland as what I think of as PMU: ‘politically manageable unit’. Over the past few years, I’ve worked with three Scottish publishing houses: Mainstream, Polygon, and Birlinn (who took over Polygon).

What has the reception been like, from the social point of view, the readership point of view, the critical point of view?

Satisfactory to tremendous.

I knew it wouldn’t be a primrose path or a cake-walk. To start with, a lot of writers who’d worked out a niche for themselves in the context I’d refused would feel not only that I was treading on their turf, but that I was threatening their existence. They’d react as they could. I’ve seen that happening in various ways. It’s a small game.

So far as criticism goes, back in the nineteenth century US, Hermann Melville, one of the American writers close to me, more and more *isolato* (the word he used) in his context, said that there were never more than five real critics in any country, and most of them most of the time were asleep.

There have been excellent critical reviews of my books in

Scotland. There have been others that simply don't understand the general drift of my work, or its methods.

To be a first-rate critic is difficult. You have to have world-literature and world-thought at your fingertips, you have to have a general sense of possibility, and you have to have a mind open to new methodologies. Everything, from the general social context to the educational system, is against the existence of such a mind. Even if the mind is there, critical space is every much as curtailed as literary space.

As to readership, readers are encouraged in most of what's called reviewing to consume mush and like it. Well there are readers who, despite the persuaders, refuse to eat mush. They resist, they look for something else. These are the people I work with.

I'd like to hear you on your poem 'Scotia deserta' and about the 'Atlantic poetics' you speak of in its conclusion.

I wrote that poem in the Pyrenees – the way Duncan Ban Macintyre wrote his Oran Coire a'Cheathaich (Song of the Misty Corrie) in Edinburgh. But while being the same kind of evocation, it is not marked by the nostalgia of the Gaelic poem. If there's a fleeting, secondary sense of 'left' or 'abandoned' in the deserta of my title, it's mostly a deserta the same as the deserta of *Arabia deserta*, that is, it's wild or wilderness Scotland that is being referred to as basis, with some sense of my itinerary out from it. 'Scotia deserta' is the continuation of the long poem *Walking the Coast*, which I wrote in three weeks of hyper-concentrated energy in Edinburgh, just before leaving Scotland for the Continent – for France, 'the favourite place for Scottish wanderers', as David Irving calls it in his *Lives of the Scottish Poets*.

As to Atlantic poetics, it all goes back ultimately to the contemplation of rough seas off the West coast of Scotland, to long walks in wind or whirling snow over the Ayrshire moors,

to tracing out the lines of birch bark, or the lodes of quartz in sandstone. To a reading, in other words, of chaos-cosmos (later, I was going to call that ‘chaoticism’), to a sensation of movement across space, to a sense of the order in apparent disorder. Before being writer or poet, I’m a cosmo-logician.

I’ve moved over the world quite a lot, but I’ve never forgotten my early years on the Atlantic coast of Scotland. If you look at my residences – West coast Scotland, the Atlantic Pyrenees, Brittany’s north coast – I’ve always remained faithful to the Atlantic.

To consider ‘Atlantic’ now in specifically cultural, intellectual and literary terms.

A lot of our literary theory and practice, like a lot of our philosophy, stems from the Mediterranean. Great and beautiful things have come out of it: Greek temples, the poetry of Pindar, and so on. But it tends to confine being to defined space, and it’s over-humanized. Pindar tells the Greeks not to go out past the Pillars of Hercules, past the Mountain of Atlas, into an ocean of chaos and the void, to listen to the sirens will drive you mad, better go to the Olympic games.

To go out into the Atlantic is to go outside measurement and confinement, and the ‘all-too-human’. This space has its own forces and forms. Atlantic poetics tries to find them.

It’s also, even more radically, to go outside humanity, or, shall we rather say, to go outside a closed conception of human being. Here I’m thinking of the biological theory of the human being as ‘open system’. In that theory, the language of human being is not distinct from the language of the universe. Atlantic poetics is open poetics, open world poetics, bio-cosmo-graphy.

I tend also to include in the basis of atlantic poetics, along with ‘open system’ biology, field theory, that is, the study of dynamic systems with a large number of degrees of liberty, outside any

simplistic notions of locality and causality. Scottish minds have been very much into this. I'm thinking, for example, of James Clerk Maxwell's work on electromagnetism.

I may add that the work 'Atlantic' is associated also in my mind with the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci known as the *Codice Atlantico*. I went through all those notebooks once and made out a manuscript for myself with what Leonardo had to say about tides, currents and waves, water-movement in general.

A text depends first and foremost on the quantity of mental energy present. After that comes interaction, rhythm, and lines moving out into almost imperceptible waves. A poetic text is never summed up in its contents, it has prolongations. It starts out there, it takes place, then it moves back out there.

There's another aspect to this 'Atlantic' context.

In the study of the civilizations of the world, Frobenius passes in review their mythological, religious and metaphysical bases – from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. The Atlantic has seen the pile-up of these, and the instauration of a techno-economic basis. We've begun now to see the limits of this. And Frobenius suggests that it's on the Atlantic coast something new might start up. This new thing will be an orchestration of the cultures of the world, in a new synthesis, and on the basis of an 'Eastern-type' contemplation.

I've worked at that in poetics.

I started with Whitman stripped of Hegelian progressivism and of faith in 'these States'. I'm thinking of his poem written in Colorado where, facing a chaos of rocks, he says he's willing to give up everything habitually associated with poetry: emotional theme, regular if not musical form, simile and metaphor, whatever – if only he could give some sensation of that rock-pile. Elsewhere, he talks of expressing in human language the sensation of the undulation of a wave. This is ground-breaking.

I learned a lot from prose. For example, from the wide-ranged extravagance interspersed by sudden flashes of the journals of Henry Thoreau. Most English writers can't write prose at all, and English verse is dead. The exceptions are Hopkins, but he is too hysterical, and D. H. Lawrence, but he is too nervously jabbering. I learned a lot from Far Eastern aesthetics. Saying the most with the least: haiku, for example. When this has entered Western consciousness and poetics at all, it's been reduced to thingness. Thingness, without the aura of emptiness. It's perceptions, but reduced. It's phenomenology, but of a primary school sort.

I learned a lot also from old Celtic poetry, both brythonic and gaelic. There's a good deal of *cynghanned* (interconsonance of consonant and vowel) in my poetics. At times, I write Gaelic in English.

Other confirmations came in from French poetry. The use, beyond regular scansion, of multiple prose rhythm in Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The breaks of the Breton poet Corbière. The movement of what is in my eyes the manifesto-poem of the twentieth century, Cendrars's 'Prose of the Transsiberian'.

Your wandering hasn't only taken you to France. You mentioned your moving over the world. This is evidenced in what you call your 'waybooks'. Would you care to offer a definition and a description of them?

Everything gets set into small, closed categories. Prose-writing in Britain will be divided into novels, memoirs and travel-writing. In a respectable (shall we say) British bookshop, I've seen the poetry section divided into 'Love' and 'War'. How wretched can it get?

Anyway, not wanting my prose books to get stuffed into some inadequate category, I felt the need for a new word. The waybook can carry elements of the novel, in one sense it's ongoing autobiography, and since it crosses territories, it will be seen as close to travel-writing. But the waybook isn't just the writing of a traveller,

it's the logbook of an intellectual nomad. In other words, it has more intensity to it, and it has more dimensions.

Take *The Blue Road*. At surface level, it's the account of a trip from Montreal, along the North bank of the St Lawrence river, up into Labrador. The 'blue road' on the geographical, territorial level is the St Lawrence river. But *The Blue Road* is also, via discrete, passing allusion, an account of the whole cultural, intellectual, literary evolution from Romanticism till now. On that line, the 'blue road' is on a parallel with Novalis's 'blue flowers' or Tieck's 'Travels into the blue'. Then it's an *itinerarium mentis*, showing the move of the mind through confusion to clarity, from constriction to expansion.

With the waybook, I'm continuing in my own way what was once a very strong line in Scottish literature. Think of Smollett's *Roderick Random*, which, as well as being a satirical anti-novel, is a Scotsman's desperately humorous attempt to get out of Britain.

At different times I've tracked Scots doing this kind of thing, moving all over the earth, or holed up in some isolated part. Examples? Old Robert, on the Barbary Coast, in Henry Dana's *Two years before the Mast* or Dr Long Ghost of Melville's *Mardi*, a surgeon (in fact, the Scottish poet, Alan Cunningham) who, having quarrelled with the captain of the vessel he was on, lived resolutely in the foc'sle with the crew, and later, having jumped ship entirely, spent years wandering about the Pacific islands. On to Alexander Mackenzie, the track-maker, and John Muir, the most adamant walker of the American wilderness. Not forgetting all those nameless ones who went into the wilds and became Indian, or who manned the most remote and isolated trading posts.

It was Scott that bedded and bogged down Scottish literature in history (anecdotal history). Now it's bogged down in contemporaneity. But we've got the whole earth and world culture to

investigate and reconnoitre, rescuing it from monolithic exploitation and colonial caricature.

What about geopoetics? Would you care to outline its principles and its perspectives? Is it making headway? What is its relationship to the other radical projects such as phenomenology and deconstruction?

Geopoetics is the general term I came up with, after long studies in politics, cultural history, philosophy, science and literature, and a lot of experience on the ground (from territory to territory), to indicate the deepest questioning and the most far-reaching propositions. We have been badly in need of such a key-term for a long time. There are a lot of half-ideas around, and some good half-ideas. But there has been no deep-rooted, high-powered synthesis.

You mention deconstruction. I've been interested over the years in a lot of French thought (there wasn't much real thought going elsewhere). But I was 'deconstructing' in a book like *Incandescent Limbo* long before the term deconstruction was invented. From the point of view of geopoetics, deconstruction can be part of the process, so long as it doesn't turn into a half-way house, with its own complacences and trivialities. Philosophical deconstruction starts off by picking holes in Hegel. But Hölderlin the poet was already farther out than Hegel the philosopher. In the field of culture and literature, deconstruction breaks down the idealistic structures of 'high culture'. Fine, I go with that – I started out with Nietzsche, and frequented for long years Rimbaud. But when it gets under-translated as it so often does into preferring a soldier's love-letter to Dante, or the tie of a bandana in some ethnic community to a painting by Van Gogh, I say no and move off.

Phenomenology has more to it. I started off there with Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. What Husserl does is put the 'world' (that is,

normal conceptions of it) in parenthesis, and try to have a cool, clear look at things. From Husserl I moved on via Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty's 'prose of the world' (prose, as over against idealistic constructions). But to come back to Husserl, his title *Cartesian Meditations* is a reference back to Descartes' *Meditations de prima philosophia*. I got to thinking about the possibility of a *prima poesia* that, while not being classically or romantically idealistic, wouldn't fall into the slump that came in the aftermath of these structures, with poetry having little more to do than social comment or verbal tiddleywinks, and prose becoming more and more thick, ugly and opaque.

I learned a lot from philosophy. But Heidegger looks more and more to poets, and Merleau-Ponty looks more and more to artists. Poets and artists have been more my companions than philosophers.

My main line probably goes back to Nietzsche, my first enthusiasm as a student in Glasgow, and his idea of the philosopher-artist (in my vocabulary, the poet-thinker). What I take from Nietzsche is one of the most radical analyses of religious, idealistic culture ever done. And his final injunction: 'Brothers, remain true to the earth'. Which ties in with the statement by Rimbaud, also one of my Glasgow companions: 'If I have taste left for anything at all, it's for earth and stones'. Their critique of practically everything doesn't wind up in nihilism (a soft semi-nihilism is a trait of the modern mind), it's a supernihilism, with a horizon of possibility. There's a start there for geopoetics.

Back of it all, experiences on the Fairlie moors, and along Atlantic shores, all of it completed and expanded in other areas around the world...

To sum up geopoetics, it's an international (transnational), interdisciplinary (transdisciplinary) movement, bringing together writers, scientists, artists, philosophers from around the world,

whose aim is to open up a new cultural space, by going back to the basis of all culture, the relationship between mind and land, and this on an intellectual, sensitive and expressive level.

The movement is making headway. Slowly, but surely. The idea is spreading, via my books. There are centres in about ten countries now, working locally, including one in Scotland.

Where do you see yourself going now?

In towards greater and greater concentration, out in ever-widening circles.

8 DOUGLAS DUNN

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

One answer is ‘always’. Another – and maybe the truest, or most realistic – is that in 1970, when I was a librarian in the University Library in Hull, I realized that it might just about be financially possible. I lived by my writing for twenty years. Now that I’m professor at St. Andrews, I no longer call myself a writer.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

They neither encouraged nor discouraged me, but let me get on with it.

What do you remember of your period of work in Hull? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

Philip Larkin was more than encouraging than not. I lived in Hull for eighteen years, and naturally I had literary friends, some of whom were and remain real friends, like Sean O’Brien, Peter Didsbury and Douglas Houston. The late George Kendrick and Frank Redpath, poets both, were also friends, and Ted Tarling, an editor and small-press publisher. Besides these I knew a lot of artists through my first wife Lesley Balfour Wallace, as well as academics and musicians. Tom Paulin was just a year behind me as a student at the University. I saw Larkin regularly and was very fond of him.

Have you ever chosen a particular poetical work to inspire your poetry or would you rather speak about a kind of comprehensiveness in your readings and influences? What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

No, I don't. I've always read widely and in subjects you wouldn't associate with me. In poetry I've always been fixated on Shakespeare, Byron, Browning, Auden, Whitman, Frost, and more recently Dante and Rilke. In the essay my first and lasting love is Montaigne. In the short story I dote on Stevenson, James, Chekhov, Mansfield and Flannery O'Connor. But I keep on discovering new interests. Lately, for instance, I've been re-reading Ted Hughes with increased admiration.

Speaking about translation, Valéry affirms: 'The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech modified by emotion, into "language of the gods" and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms'. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urging message to be expressed?

Yes, I do. 'Formal intuition' strikes me as a good and accurate phrase. Poems can often begin in mystery.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

Yes, but do you know when it's happening?

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his 'Adagia': 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

With this kind of statement, I find that I don't have much of an opinion either way. I believe in the old gods, the more the better.



Douglas Dunn *by Nicola Nannini*

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

No, because I'm a critic too. Obvious misreading can be irritating. Considering the kinds of fear on offer, though, this is trifling.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling ... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

Poets often lie, of course, but it's a subordination of the literal in the service of truth. I'd find it irresponsible to claim the autonomy of 'the word of the poet'. In fact, even that phrase sounds aggrandizing and inflated. A poem has to prove itself by its sheer ability to do so.

Could you explain how you came to terms with the task of translating Racine's Andromache?

I don't know if I did. It was the most difficult task in the literary line I've ever undertaken. Classic French tragedy is utterly different from its counterpart in English, especially Shakespeare and Webster, Ben Jonson less so. No metaphor, for example, and no great, externalizing poetic sweeps. My method was embarrassingly simple. I translated word for word, slowly, and then revised, for pace, rhythm, and rhyme. Early on I knew that full Racinian rhyme wasn't possible – Racine's vocabulary is incredibly small. Shakespeare's is more than twenty times bigger. Writing with limitations on vocabulary is immensely awkward.

Do you think your translations can be considered as versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?

I haven't translated enough to be expert even on my own procedures or intentions. Fidelity to the original, though, whether Racine or Leopardi, is always an aspiration, perhaps, rather than a fact. I like to get to know as much as I can about the authors I translate. It's like acting – you become the other author and live the part. I like the enabling fantasy of that.

Do you believe that there is a basic human sensibility of a sort, as Wilhelm von Humboldt has stated, and that it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal 'deep structure' underlying all languages, so that, according to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their intentions?

I've never believed in the 'translation is impossible' theory. Languages and texts are translatable, or transferable, at least to a large extent, even if nationalities and cultures differ enormously – and I'm glad they do – because we're all human, and I think that's what 'deep structure' means, or appeals to.

Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?

Yes. It would be implicated in what I meant by 'an enabling fantasy'. But part of the attraction is not in affinity so much as in the discovered differences between the translator and translated, and between their two texts. Especially when a big gap in time is involved, then the new text usually serves a different or a rehabilitated purpose. I'm thinking of Pasternak's translation of Shakespeare. But how elective *are* the affinities shared by poets? All good poets, true poets, have a lot in common – they have poetry in common.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

I don't find myself in the least bit sceptical about the values of art and poetry. I live by them, and teach them. Part of what a poet does is to represent these values. However, I distrust a lot of what is said about poetry these days. There's too much marketing around. It stinks up the atmosphere. Consolation? Redemption? Well, maybe. Like most people, I find these, when I find them, in other things too. Love, sex, whiskey, my children, seeing my students graduate, opening the curtains to look over the Tay into the beauties of light and water, nice food, nice wine. Anything that gives harmless pleasure and contributes to the good of the world is just fine by me.

Would you like to summarize your feelings about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?

I think they're less political than their predecessors, and hearteningly confident and assured. I follow their work with keen interest, especially that of Robert Crawford – who's a colleague at St. Andrews – W.N. Herbert, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson and David Kinloch. They're very good writers, and I'm proud of them. As for the relationship between aesthetics and politics in their work, I'm not sure if it exists in a clear and meaningful way. Their work is perhaps closer to that of English writers like Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, and a bountiful supply of others, than the 'middle generation'. The poets of the North-West European Archipelago with whom my affinity doesn't need to be elective – Heaney, Harrison, Longley, Mahon, Paulin, Williams, Hamilton, Raine, Fuller, Reid, and others – have all been involved in an intuitive moral project which hasn't been properly acknowledged or described. Younger poets in Scotland and elsewhere in the British Isles have a quite different instinctive project. As

adults they've known no other government than a Conservative one. They've picked up on the ludic side of Craig Raine and Paul Muldoon. Poets like Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, and myself, in Scotland are still almost aggressively political as well as steeped in the aesthetic dimensions of language and verse. I don't find this to anything like the same extent in the younger Scottish poets I've mentioned.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

Having written five poems in three years, I wonder if I can even call myself a poet without feeling fraudulent. In poetry, nationality conditions language and some beliefs, habits, and procedures. I'm a Scot who writes in the English-language-with-a-Scottish-accent, that is, in my mother tongue. I don't think of myself as British. I doubt if many people – never mind poets – do. It's an 'official' term, a term of governmental convenience.

Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?

That is my very deep desire. I think we deserve it. Whether it will happen remains to be seen, and I hope to see it. Nationalism in Scotland is an unusual phenomenon. As I'm fond of repeating, it hasn't killed anyone and no one in this century has died for it. Our 'national epics', Barbour's *The Bruce*, and Blind Harry's *Wallace*, are unread – I find this exhilarating. We still sing Robert Burns's love songs, though. The Scots have a reputation as dourly Calvinistic and as scientists, reasoners, philosophers, and soldiers. If the evidence of my experience is anything to go by, then the Scots are hedonistic, benevolent, and really very agreeable people, on the whole. Like everywhere else, though, we have our criminals, psychopaths, perverts, patriots, Conservatives, and

bigots. It's the most interesting country I know, very beautiful, and profoundly mismanaged.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

First, we have to bear in mind that the Scots contributed more dynamism to the British Empire than anyone else. While there are post-colonial aspects to Scottish history and culture – as well as the consequences of what's been called 'internal colonialism' – Scotland was never itself a colony. We have to be historical about these matters. Bear in mind, too, that R. L. Stevenson wrote two of the stories which comment tremendously on colonialism, *The Beach of Falesà*, and the *Ebb Tide*. Neither is discussed in Edward Said's great book *Culture and Imperialism*. Instead he discusses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, this being more glamorous because of Chinua Achebe's critique which exposed its racism. The Scots have been capable of racism, and still are, but it's even more of an aberration than in England – it cuts across the true grain of the nation. Unlike the Irish, say, when the Scots emigrate, they assimilate themselves into the host terrain. There's no Scottish lobby in the USA, for example, despite the numbers of assimilated Scots Americans.

So, your question elicits an answer which can only point to the complications involved. Also, Scottish literature is a very old one, just as the Scottish realm is one of the oldest in Europe. 'Post-colonial discourse' can throw interesting light on Scottish culture, but it is far from the complete explanation of its remarkable longevity and – or so I would claim – of its remarkable interest.

You have often stated that French surrealist poetry has influenced you in various ways. How do you reconcile the spaciousness of surrealist imagination with the strict metrical control of your latest books?

The only way I can explain this is through a) what came to be my own temperamental affection for metrical writing, and b) the fact that Robert Desnos, one of my intimate and obsessive heroes of poetry, managed to combine the two, for which impertinence he had to break with André Breton's definition of surrealism. I believe in the power of dream, and of the unconscious, as any poet must. For thirty years I've been a student of Freud's work. I love poetry and the human mind best of all when they leap into the unexpected and revelatory. I find this human and interesting.

Would you speak about your first collection called Terry Street? Is it true that Philip Larkin helped you with your first publication?

I lived in Terry Street, in Hull, for two years. A few months ago, my poems set in Terry Street were republished by the Hull magazine *Bête Noire* with photographs taken by Robert Whitaker in 1968, when he was the Beatles' photographer. It was close to being a slum street, and I bought a house there – for £ 250 – when I was a student.

When I had the poems completed, Philip Larkin, who was my mentor – no other word for it – rearranged the poems in the order in which they appear in the book. The title was given to the book by the late Charles Monteith, at that time the poetry editor at Faber & Faber, but possibly nudged by Larkin. The book was recommended to Faber & Faber by Larkin, and I was under contract to send it to them, by the terms of an agreement which I'd signed when I appeared in *Poetry: Introduction* the year before. You can imagine my feelings – delight, consternation – when the book was accepted by the publisher which issued T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and Seamus Heaney. When my copies arrived, I kissed them. It was all beyond my wildest dreams, and I'm a wild dreamer.

Some readers know that book more than others, though, and it's had the complicating effect of typecasting me. Larkin always preferred it to my writing after it, and was never hesitant in saying so. If some of his published letters are anything to go by he was less enthusiastic about the book to others than he said to me. But I was grateful then, and see no reason to be ungrateful now.

Can you tell me anything about the collections you published in the 1980s? Can you speak about a shift of intents and technique in comparison with your previous production?

St. Kilda's Parliament (1981) was a more Scottish book than previously, and reflected my continued thinking and feeling about Scottish subjects, although I was living in Hull, in England. *Elegies* (1985) was about the death of my first wife, too young, from cancer, and my metrical habits, established in *Barbarians* (1979), and earlier, helped me a great deal in writing poems which I had to write although struggling constantly against an unwillingness, or reticence. By the poems in *Northlight* (1988) my metrical habits had become more or less ingrained and inevitable. I don't see this as reactionary – I'm not that sort of person – but as a consequence of maturity and intuitive preference, consolidated by a happy second marriage and children. In everything I write, the forms and rhythms are demanded by my mood and subjects, and I simply obey what they tell me to do. I don't *impose* meter and form on a poem; I allow them to happen. Loyalty to intuition is what a poet should exemplify, in writing as in life. But I don't like 'should' or 'ought'. I don't prescribe.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

This is crucial, not just for me, but, I suspect, for any writer who

is a native Scot and who inherits a mind characteristic of the country. Scots suspect imagination, even when they possess a good and vivid one. They distrust the made-up – it's too close to make-believe, and too distant from the literal and the actual, from the visible fact. That is why so much of the best Scottish writing is strikingly imaginative – Scott's novels, Burns's *Tam O'Shanter*, Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Barrie's *Peter Pan*, MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and Norman MacCaig's daring metaphorical poetry. You get it, too, in otherwise politicized and realistic novelists like James Kelman, whose novels and stories couldn't exist without both imagination and a very powerful awareness of the real. The same is very obviously true of Alasdair Gray's novels and stories, but more so.

In my own work, I see it as a confrontation of the two. My preference – temperamentally, or as I understand myself – is for the lyrical, and the mysterious, perhaps also the spiritual and the naturally religious (those old gods again). At the same time I have a pair of eyes – not too good, and spectacled, but I can see – so I know about the lives and dilemmas of the people around me. I don't drive, and I usually travel by bus. I walk a lot in other towns and cities when I'm there. Because I've appeared on television quite a lot, and my photograph has been printed in newspapers, I'm sometimes recognized on trains, in airports, on streets – 'double-takes', as they call them. On the whole, though, I can go virtually with invisibility, and go where I like. This is very necessary to me as a writer of poems and stories, and I couldn't function without my observing participation in the lives of the so-called common people. I think I accepted the chair at St. Andrews instinctively in order to absent myself from the literary world of public exposure. That is, I went into university life in order to ensure an invisibility that was beginning to become

less possible, and, perhaps, to help me to prepare for a work which I don't quite know about yet, but which I know is about to begin when its time is ripe.

In other words, I believe in the imaginative, and I believe in the literal. I have to be clever and cunning in safeguarding my ability – such as it is – in being obedient to both of them.

In one of the sections of the sequence called 'Disenchantments', included in your book Dante's Drum-kit (1993), you say:

*Depopulated place, its physical
Selfhood was beautiful; its country shone –
Sky, water, ruins, five swans, and the still*

Untimed lucidity my mind moved on.

Do you tend to romanticize your country or do you see it in an emotionally non-nostalgic way?

I hope I don't romanticize or sentimentalize anything. This takes us back to your previous question. Distrust of the imaginative, and faith in imagination, lead me to question everything I dream or see. The great thing in poetry, of course, is to be positive, assured, confirmed, and honest. Moments when all these are disclosed together and in harmony are, I would submit, rare. Being at home with myself, my work, my wife, my children, I have no need of nostalgia. Much poetry arises from disturbance, so I might not seem so at times, but I am a happy man.

Would you like to summarize your ideas about the process by which all the privacy and the 'famous reticence' of a writer is indiscreetly unveiled by a biographer? Were you referring to what they did with Philip Larkin's life and letters?

In 'Disenchantments' I was referring to Larkin. Like many of Larkin's friends I was disappointed about the disclosures in the *Selected Letters* and in Andrew Motion's biography. At the same time, what else could Anthony Thwaite, editor of the *Selected Letters*, or his biographer, have done, other than be true to the material which they discovered and had to deal with? But I continue to have reservations, less with the *Letters* than the biography. The biography was too soon, and my hunch is that Andrew – a very ambitious man – groomed himself to write the book well in advance of his subject's death. This could be extremely unfair, but there is something about Andrew's book – much as I like Andrew himself – which strikes me as unfair, too. But what else could he do, other than suppress the truth? Larkin was a very complicated man and I doubt if the entire story has been told. I was so very fond of Larkin I feel sure my opinions of him are totally unreliable. He would have hated Andrew Motion's biography, of that I am absolutely sure. And he's turning in his grave over the publication of his letters – in which, I am ashamed to say, I assisted in a minor way by contributing copies of Larkin's letters to me. Perhaps we should modify Yeats's phrase and speak about the perfection or imperfection of the work in relation to the inevitable imperfection of the life. But it is a subject – biography – which disturbs me, if only because I have so much of which to be ashamed.

Which kind of shame does poetry cause in surviving its author?

The writer was, or is, never as good as he or she wanted, or wants, to be. What you write always falls short of the dream of what you desired. Scientists, and some painters, sculptors, and composers, are so much to be envied by poets – and this is expressed in a lot of poetry – because their achievements are very often definitive. Poetry is always provisional. The incompleteness of a life's work

is the most beautiful and pathetic thing about it. I know for a certain fact that I won't do everything I want to.

If you should think about your poetical production from the 1960s up to now would you find a single character which distinguishes your writing?

My desire is always to be open to change. Humanity and compassion are virtues which I hold dear. I wouldn't claim them for myself except as aspirations. My hope, ever, is to be kind and unselfish, helpful, and to avoid vanity and the vicious. I love the world.

9 VALERIE GILLIES

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

Growing up on the open moors of Southern Scotland, the light, the land, the elements, the people, these things made me a writer. At school in Edinburgh, the tension between rural and urban life and language, that's part of it too. I remember very clearly, I was fourteen, when a lyric came to me, to fit in with the rhythm of walking and where I was going. It arrived complete, it came out of nowhere. I was a channel for the words. I still compose like this sometimes, though I might change more lines when I get home.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

My parents think I am an amazing poet. But seriously, our house had plenty of books. My father was an expert on jet engines, he left the RAF to go to university when I was at school, he was one of the war veterans who had a grant to study. My mother has a doctorate in architectural history. And she never underestimates the power of the arts. Till recently they ran an art gallery in the Scottish Borders. So there was a love of learning at home. My love of poetry came from hearing my grandfather recite William Dunbar and Robert Henryson in his strong Angus voice. He spoke very rich broad Scots. My great-grandmother composed poetry and my grandmother could remember many of her verses.

What about your university years? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

University gave me the chance to learn and translate Anglo-Saxon, middle English, and medieval Latin poetry, and to read widely, everything from the seventeenth century metaphysicals to contemporary American writers. I met real live poets there for the first time: Norman MacCaig, who was Writer in Residence while I was a student, and Sorley Maclean, whom I knew well because his daughter Ishbel and I are friends. I would go to Wester Ross, Skye and Raasay with the Macleans which had a tremendous influence on me. Reading Sorley's own translation of his 'Poems to Eimhir', I can remember that moment, where I was sitting, everything about that morning, it was a terrific experience. He was not well known at the time, of course, he wasn't lionised till about a decade later. I would be nineteen when I met him and I used to take a few poems to show him every time I stayed with the Macleans. He used to mark them with little signs that looked like Chinese ideograms, to show the poems he liked best. Three strokes of the pen was the best sign.

Sorley came from a tradition where some of the greatest poets were women, Sileas na Ceapaich or Mairi Mhor nan Oran. To him, and to my husband, William Gillies, another Gael whom I met through the Macleans, it was natural that a woman should compose poetry. That made a big difference to me, writing in the 1960s and early 1970s when all the big poets seemed to be men.

When I left Scotland to study in South India, I met several contemporary Indian writers who were writing in English or in the regional languages, particularly those of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Again, it was not mainstream tradition, but it was powerful work. At the time, the Indo-English writers seemed to predict a great future.



Valerie Gillies by Nicola Nannini

I was a postgraduate student analysing the response of British and Indian writers to India. There were few points of similarity because they were writing about different Indias.

India had a tremendous influence on my writing. I was a bit overawed to meet the internationally famous authors from the South, R. K. Narayan or Raja Rao. At the same time, my studies included a year attending the course in Sanskrit aesthetics at Maharajah's College, Mysore, and this experience, together with reading South Indian aestheticians of the day who wrote in English, like M. Hiriyanna and Ananda Coomaraswamy, formed my ideas for a working life as an artist. My understanding of all the arts and my ability to collaborate in cross-media work dates from this experience.

The first selection of my poems to appear in book form came with *Trio: New Poets from Edinburgh*, published by Three Rivers Press in New York in 1971, when I returned from Mysore.

Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urging message to be expressed?

Yes, the sound comes first, it makes me think of those days in South India when the conch-shell sounded to wake up the divinity and to destroy ignorance at the same time. In Mysore we talked about 'dhvanyaloka' in Sanskrit aesthetics, it means 'sounding' as the origin of all the arts. You continue to hear what you have heard in the deep silence. I can hear that rhythm emerging before I compose anything.

Western thought comes nearest to it in the line of the psalm, 'abyssus abyssum invocat...', 'deep calls to deep...' where it reverberates. Paul Celan's last poem has it, describes it as

deep upon deep

the Invisible
summons the wind
into bounds

In my latest collection, *The Lightning Tree*, I'm talking about something similar in the poem 'The Routing Well', a local well which forecasts storms at sea although the coast is seven miles away. Again, the longer poem, 'Coomlees Farm', has it in the last verse:

Maybe you experience on a Monday in Coomlees
a slow humming from the numinous coomb,
one voice, one landform, chanting an audible *om*...

While I'm translating I am a singer of that sound, too. I try to keep to an accurate translation, but I relive it like a singer who feels the song. Then what may be the original voice of Dante or Leopardi comes sounding through everything.

Would you speak about a period of gestation which precedes the actual composition or writing of a poem?

O yes, the springs of a poem are fed below the surface, they can leap up after a long time in the subterranean dark. My poems for the sources of rivers celebrate this, like 'The Source in the Snow' from the slopes of Ben Lui – a truly alpine place, where the first water of the River Tay emerges from beneath the ice.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his 'Adagia': 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

Wallace and his 'Necessary Angel', that's a favourite book on

my shelf. His necessary angel is good but this quote is not so good. One trip to Asia would show millions of people believing in things which western scepticism has tried to banish. I mean, I speak from the heart, I see poetry as heart knowledge, as a way of experiencing life. I see the *via creativa* as a step on the way, it puts spirit in all my work. This is what a spiritual journey is about. The poems are a gift. It's the divine nature to give gifts, it's ours too. I learnt while following two great rivers from source to sea, overflow is the source of art!

An artist's work is to see the unity of creation again, to experience a healing between us and creation. That's why I can identify so completely with a place that I write a poem about it.

I like when Meister Eckhart talks about our need to recover the experience of the sacred wilderness, to soar like eagles. That's opening the spirit to great things, divine things. He sees creation as a grace, 'gratia gratis data', grace freely given, the first grace. A creation spirituality is one where energies catch fire, it's a good world view for an artist. We're here to connect to the source. And then to the grace in each other.

I've not spoken about this in an interview before, it's more autobiographical than I usually am ... I came from a free-thinking, agnostic background, where my grandparents were of the generation whose religion sank in the mud of the First World War. I went to school in the presbyterian black and rebelled strongly against that institution. As a student I read seventeenth century sermons and divine poems and went off to find out where these poems of meditation came from. My spiritual father was an Irish Cistercian monk in an abbey in the Lammermuir hills. By twenty-one I'd become a Catholic and considered entering a community of contemplative nuns. Marriage and family life turned out to be my calling, but thirty years on, I am a devout catholic whose daily

practice is contemplation. And the love of silence. It's the other side of the coin from all my words.

Of course, I went to a Hindu university and I love and see the beauty in Hindu and Buddhist traditions ... as the Vatican Council suggested we should. For me, any faith is not about the weight of the church's history or about institutions or beliefs or rules, it's about the power of the spirit. There's a need for inter-faith dialogue. If we are grounded in our own tradition, we can speak to each other. If we don't do that, it will be fundamentalism which will grow, not the spirit.

There's a great similarity between Advaita Vedanta and Western contemplative thought, for example, in the idea of non-duality. And I can see how Eckhart's creation spirituality fuses with Sanskrit aesthetics. Ananda Coomaraswamy brings that out clearly. Ideas from both civilisations can work on the practice of any of the arts, and especially poetry.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

Writers always ask for better criticism, it's like turkeys asking for a happy Christmas. I think our current situation in Scotland is one of writing in isolation, in an absence of mutual criticism.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

Poets never lie. Otherwise they would write fiction.

Can you tell me anything about your experience as a translator of poetry?

I cut my hair. Dante's influence made me cut my long classical braid in favour of flowing renaissance locks. No, seriously, when you are translating someone for a while you enter into their mindset and the world view of their time. I felt really down after a summer spent translating Leopardi, I saw the whole world through his eyes. And I felt really impassioned while translating the seventeenth-century Gaelic woman poet, Sileas na Ceapaich with her love poems and battlesongs.

Do you consider your translations as a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?

The latter. In English or Scots I'm trying to echo the sound which Dante makes. The different melody of each language, that's endlessly fascinating.

Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?

The passages I choose to translate run parallel to events in my own life.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

Writing poetry is part of the journey I make to find original blessing and beauty, it's part of a whole cosmology. Yes, poetry is a consolation, it's one of many. That means it increases hope and joy. So how do I live out of a consolation experience which is a moment of creativity? With energy to go forward, to communicate with others. I can take a poem out to schools or children's hospitals, or into colleges or psychiatric wards or any place it's not been before, as an opening for mind and spirit.

My work for Artlink in the hospital arts makes me identify

with the ‘outsider’ artists. To be part of a team bringing poetry and visual arts workshops to people in locked wards who can’t get out to access the arts, that gives me an idea of the true power of poetry. And it cuts free from the falsity of fame. ‘Poetry is strong enough to help’. I don’t see the point of poetry if you’re not going to take it somewhere. What people write is full of surprises.

Again for Artlink, the exhibition of poems and photographs from the book *Men and Beasts* which my colleague and I set up in the hospital gallery earlier this year, was seen and enjoyed by 10,000 people going about their everyday lives through the hospital corridors. All through the winter months.

What do you think about the contemporary literary situation in Scotland?
We’re inventing Scotland at the moment. Perhaps my real country is poetry.

We may be seeing the beginnings of a new relationship between Scots/Gaelic/English poetry, re-inscribing a few of those narratives. Time for an origin myth for modern Scottish poetry.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

I am a Scottish poet writing in the post-Ukanian period.

Do you see any possibility to treat Scotland and its literary production in a post-colonial way?

Surrealism occurs in Scotland more than post-colonialism. But our cultural history is deformed by colonisation. We also feel guilty about post-colonialism if it means how the Scots maintained the Empire. So do the Irish. If we look outside Europe, we can’t talk about de-colonising in the same way as India can.

Are we really all the new trans-cultural? Or are we just swooping

on the chance of a free drink in the multicultural hospitality tent? I think we do have a specifically national imagination.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

Some say the imagination is evidence of the divine. As for reality, if that means things in the human realm, in the realm of time, then I'm still trying to find out what it is.

The Trimontium Trust, enthusiasts of all ages dedicated to the understanding and discovery of Roman Scotland, recently made me their poet laureate. They call me '*poeta vatesque sola Trimontii*', 'sole poet and seer to the place of the three hills'. So I'm poet laureate to 200 acres of open fields and the Eildon Hills. I consider it a tremendous honour, to be described both as makar and as seer. That's how imagination (seeing) and reality (true locality) unite for me now. And any time there's a new find at Trimontium, I'll be celebrating it with a well-turned verse, as I always do.

Would you please find a single word or character which distinguishes your writing?

I can hear Norman MacCaig's voice saying 'Animal energy!' But I suppose it's my characteristic to be elemental, mine is an outdoors poetry. It always has been, from the Indian days of *Each Bright Eye* in the 1970s, by way of following the river for Tweed Journey in the 1980s, to *The Ringing Rock* in the 1990s, right up to today's storms and fireballs in *The Lightning Tree*. Yes, 'elemental' is the word.

And my poems are where they should be. The site-specific work I'm doing now, those inscriptions for sculpture, you can find across Scotland, exposed to the elements, cast in bronze or carved in stone. I never sign them, they're pure praise of the *genius loci*.

10 CHRISTOPHER WHYTE

When did you feel that you would become a writer?

If anything, I thought I would be a composer until I was well into my teens. I actually had one year of individual composition lessons at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama before leaving school. The sort of figure I had in mind was someone like Antonio Vivaldi, perhaps because he was redhaired, and that made a connection with Scotland, perhaps because he was a priest and I was being educated by Jesuits, perhaps merely because he was so astonishingly prolific and I have always loved that kind of fruitfulness. It was my sister who taught me to read, and I can only have been four or five when my crowning ambition became to copy out, into one of the pale brown Glasgow Corporation ruled jotters my father brought home from school, the text of a story from an album I was reading. And after a holiday in West Kilbride in the early 1960s I wrote most of the opening chapter of a novel having a vaguely Celtic title, set on the coast there, with views of Arran across the Firth of Clyde. Later in my teens I wrote a series of poems in a blue notebook which are the first things I would regard as really mine, and after going to Italy I completed a cycle which I submitted to the magazine *Cencrastus* under an assumed name (one which continues to carry a particular significance for me). They were never published, and I did not start writing again seriously till I was halfway through my thirties.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

I once said in a public debate that Gaelic, which is the language of most of my poetry, enjoyed ‘the glamour of maternal prohibition’ and, when I get really impatient with being asked why I do not write verse in my first language, have more than once answered that I do it so that my parents can never read what I have written. One winter evening in 1987, when I had already settled in Edinburgh, I called on my parents in Glasgow to discover them poring over a copy of *Chapman* magazine in which a number of my English poems had appeared. I do not know how they found out about it. Perhaps my father saw it in the local library. ‘Don’t you think,’ my mother asked me, ‘that certain things are better left unexpressed?’ So no, I wouldn’t say that my parents encouraged my interest in writing or that they expressed especial satisfaction with the results. I am the youngest of four children and (though my brothers and my sister would no doubt challenge this) the repository of certain secrets, or understandings, about how the family functioned which it would have been inconceivable to articulate or even to refer to. The result was that I labelled a sizeable proportion of my perceptions as ‘mad’ and continued to do so for a decade and a half after leaving home. Speaking out was a risky enterprise, fraught with possible penalties, which may explain why I put off starting to write for so long. When you give voice to what you are carrying inside you, you cannot exercise complete, or even significant control over what is going to emerge. And yet I feel I ought to balance that by admitting that at times I have believed the most pressing thing I had to express was my mother’s overwhelming, never articulated anger, almost as if she were at last speaking through me. If that is in any sense true, then I have a real debt to her.



Christopher Whyte *by Nicola Nannini*

What do you remember of your periods of study at Cambridge? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

My three years at Cambridge were, quite frankly, an extended holiday. I had managed to escape from the family, the Jesuits and Glasgow thanks to a skilful ruse nobody could call into question, and all I had to do in exchange was produce one, often two, essays a week, and perform my other academic tasks to reasonable satisfaction. As I was studying for the English tripos, we did not even have to attend lectures, so that my commitments were restricted to three or four hours of supervision each week, leaving room for fascinating discussions on ethics, literature and film lasting long into the night, or for all male tea parties when we would toast crumpets in front of an old-fashioned gas fire and deliberately not put on the lights, so that dusk gradually filled the room, making the half-lit conversation all the more engrossing. One of my closest friends then has since become Professor of Modern Greek at King's College, London and has published a novel. He was working on one while a student and, in our circle, he was seen as the writer. There was not really room for anyone else. I was too busy enjoying myself, while at the same time policing a self-imposed chastity which represented a kind of security in that environment, and which I would not abandon till my first springtime in Rome.

Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: 'The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into "language of the gods" and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms'. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

Is your quote from the essay prefacing his version of Virgil's

Eclogues? I have no difficulty in agreeing with Valéry in this or in many of his other pronouncements about making poetry. People have sometimes asked me if I write a poem in English first, then translate it into Gaelic, and I found the question so astonishing because my experience of composition is, at least in part, one of putting words together in rhythmic patterns, so that when there is a space I am waiting to fill the potential candidates have a phonetic melody and a stress pattern which has nothing to do with English, almost as if the language itself were personified and put forward a range of possible words. Deciding where the first line ends is a crucial issue for me since it will give me a metrics for the rest of the poem. It reminds me of having a length of cloth draped across a table and deciding where you are going to make the cut, or even of rolling pastry out in a restricted space. As for the message, if that has any importance, and I would often say it doesn't, it rarely becomes apparent to me until long after a poem is completed.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

I have found it possible to carry a poem, or the notion or intimation of a poem, around with me for years. 'Aig Abhainn Mhartainn' ('At Kilmartin River') was conceived on a trip I made with you, Marco, and the woman who became your wife, in July 1995. But I did not attempt to get beyond the opening line until early June 1999. 'An Daolag Shìonach' ('The Chinese Beetle'), which has been translated into three languages, a polemical pronouncement which helped me get back into writing Gaelic poetry after a break of nearly five years, stayed with me for at least two before I wrote it down, and somehow became associated with the main door to the close in which I live, and which is painted black. But experience also tells me that, when you work,

when you put in time and effort and compose with a certain assiduity, poems will be ‘given’ to you out of the blue, without any preparation or previous warning. It is one of the rewards you get for taking your gift seriously.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: ‘After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption’.

I feel wary of Stevens’s post-Romantic glorification of literature and, indeed, of any ascription of religious significance to poetry. I know far too much about religion, especially Christianity, and its potential toxicity to want to mix it up with poetry. And though I would argue that believing is a muscle which can atrophy like any other muscle, but which improves with exercise, and would claim that I am able to believe in infinitely more things now than I could when I was nine or even twenty-nine, a Christian god or any monotheistic god figure is thankfully not one of these and I suspect never will be. Why does life need redeeming?

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

In all honesty I have to say that my poetry has received practically no critical attention and does not seem likely to do so in the foreseeable future. So this is one concern I do not need to have. Myles Campbell, in a review for *Lines Review*, could not get over his astonishment that a gay man should be writing in Gaelic and not conceal the fact that he was gay, while Ronnie Black in his introduction to the *An Tuil* anthology was equally disconcerted that someone who was not a native speaker should persist in writing in Gaelic and, what is more, should fail to respect the accepted rules about appropriate subject matter for the language. Need I

add that neither critic offered me significant help in improving my writing?

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling. To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic phrase: 'Poets often lie'?

In the end a poem is an object, just as the building an architect designs is an object in the outside world. And just as, when the architect walks away from the completed building, he hopes that it will not collapse in smithereens behind his shoulders, so a poet has to ensure that the thing he makes will retain its inner coherence whatever the cultural weather and will not subside or lurch or fall apart. If you push it with your finger it will not fall down, and if you tap it gently it will give a musical ring, like a well made wine glass. As for truth, people who search for truth or proclaim it or claim to be its mouthpieces have always made me scared. It is sensible to give them as wide a berth as possible. And truth in poetry? Truth is no more important than either beauty or pleasure and the latter two are less likely to be subverted for authoritarian ends. The kind of literary truth that interests me is what you find in that marvellous conclusion to one of Beckett's novels (is it Molloy?): 'I sat down and wrote: it is midnight. It is raining. It was not midnight. It was not raining.' I know it sounds bad, but I have more than once thought that my advice to people who find themselves in a situation of cultural dearth or stalemate would be: 'Start telling lies. Lies as interwoven, complex and multifarious as you can come up with'.

Can you tell me anything about your passion for foreign languages and translation?

In London in 1975, when I was just beginning to be able to read German poetry with any fluency, I did some prose versions of Hofmannsthal. But my first serious translations were of ‘The Ashes of Gramsci’ and ‘Lament of the Mechanical Digger’ by Pasolini, done in Rome in 1979 and 1980. At that time, though I wanted to write, I had no plans to come back to Scotland. Putting Pasolini into English, I imagined, could furnish me with a vocabulary and a style for writing about the place where I was living. Since then I have repeatedly used translation as a kind of launching pad for original work, tuning into the voice of another poet and then altering the frequency ever so slightly to locate an intonation of my own. Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva and Luis Cernuda have repeatedly helped me in this respect, though I have never managed to publish any of my English versions of Cernuda. You can only do this with carefully selected authors, so I would concur in what Poggioli says about ‘elective affinities’.

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is ‘the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions’. Do you agree with this statement?

My views on the current state of writing in Scotland are very different from yours. I would say that what is lacking is any sense of the sacred. If my Catholic upbringing (with the associated Irish ascendancy) continues to make me feel an outsider in the place where I was born, it also induces a particular alienation from Calvinism and the Calvinist inheritance, which in the end have produced the very worst kind of secularity, a society riddled with petty bourgeois materialism and the delusion that the most

unruly energies, not least sexuality, can be made to submit to its utilitarian logic. Deep down I cannot resist the notion that this will, in the end, create its own nemesis, though in what form I am unable to say. While I would define myself, if pressed, as a born again pagan, I have to confess that, as I get older, I increasingly feel the need to spend time in countries that were Catholic, if for no other reason because of the greater closeness these retain to natural cycles and to the exercise of magic.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

What big words you are using! Art can do lots of things, and it undoubtedly has a connection to the immaterial, the spiritual, the transpersonal. But artists would do well to think of themselves as craftspeople first and foremost. I learnt a lot about how I can make poems thanks to a pottery class I once attended, and cooking and ironing continue to be inspiring and exemplary activities. Patient, unhurried application is what is needed. As we cannot in any case gauge or control the effect of what we will do, we might as well concentrate on doing it as consummately as we can. Modesty is a commodity in short supply among Scottish artists in the present day. I would suggest it needs to stage a comeback.

What is your impression about the New Scotland? Do you see any change for literature, and poetry in particular?

Who would I be to pronounce on such a topic? It makes me think of a well known Scottish poet foolish enough to fall into the trap laid for him by an interviewer, who had asked him to name the two or three most significant poets writing in Scotland in the present day. How to make yourself twenty enemies in the space of one single sentence! What I will say is that I am not sure the generation of poets who have come to the forefront in the last

decade or so are superior to the figures who have died (I think of Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig, George Mackay Brown and Iain Crichton Smith), yet are receiving infinitely more coverage and public exposure than they did. I cannot quite decide what to make of that paradox. It may be part of the general marasma we have all got caught up in since the parliament opened. When a nation gains autonomy, things either get a lot better or a lot worse, and I remain to be convinced that, in Scotland, they have got better.

What do you think Scottish literary identity is today?

I find the concept laughable. Is it a club of which one can be a paid up member? Could I go to my GP and tell him: 'I feel a bit low on Scottish literary identity today and wonder if you could give me a topping up?' I write and, for better or worse, I was born and currently live in Scotland. That is the beginning and the end of it as far as I am concerned. People who talk about Scottish literary identity are interested in constructing fences and marking out territory for themselves. I want no part of either activity.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

As both a poet and a novelist, I aim to produce work which will have meaning on both a Scottish and a European level. England and Britain are quantities I do not engage with.

11 JOHN BURNSIDE

When did you start to write?

I was always interested in books, but also in music and visual arts. I did not see myself as a writer, however, until I was in my late twenties (my first book, *The Hoop*, came out in 1988, when I was 33); even then, I did not really begin to take the work seriously until around 1990, when I began to see the possibilities of poetry, to begin with, and later other forms of writing, as a means of philosophical / ecological discourse. I continued to work in the computer industry until 1994/1995, and only became a freelance writer at around the age of 40, when I wrote my first novel, *The Dumb House*.

And how did your parents react against your new leanings towards the arts?

My parents strongly discouraged my interest in all of the arts, especially music (I was not allowed, in fact, to have a musical instrument in the house until I was around 13, and then only after the intervention of a local priest, Father Duane). This doesn't mean they did not want me to 'get on', in an academic sense: I was encouraged to read 'factual' books, to study hard in the 'useful' subjects. Every element of my education was geared towards a limited but recognisable 'success' in one of the professions: teacher, perhaps even doctor or lawyer. This would have pleased my parents, and schoolteachers, very much. When I showed no interest in following this path, they all pretty well washed their hands of me.

What do you remember of your stay in Corby? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing? Did you choose a particular writer to inspire your work?

I have very mixed feelings about Corby. I felt angry, just being there, and wasted huge amounts of energy and time giving expression to that anger (small acts of violence, ‘substance abuse’ etc.). I was expelled from school at sixteen for various petty offences which could easily be seen as manifestations of this anger: I had an unhappy home life, didn’t like the school I was in, didn’t like most of my neighbours and schoolmates. I did not write in those days, not at all. I was interested in music, and was encouraged by a music teacher at my school, Mr Norman Edmunds (the finest and most generous teacher I have ever encountered) not only to play and to listen to ‘classical’ music, but also to read poetry and drama. It was Norman Edmunds who started me reading Russian writers, Ibsen and the English Romantics (at far too young an age). He also fostered my growing interest in music, especially in Bach. Later, I began to learn how to think, after a fashion, by reading the classics – an interest fostered by another marvellous teacher, Mr Ben Corrigan, a classics teacher from Fermanagh, who encouraged me to read the Latin (and later Greek) poets and thinkers.

In several of your poems you seem to underline the problem of belonging to a place or going back to a place which could be considered your omphalos – in ‘Ports’ you say: ‘our dwelling place’; in ‘Geese’ you say: ‘homing’. Have you ever considered yourself as an exile?

I think exile – from the land, from other animals, from the sensual and truly erotic, from a lived sense of justice, from his / her true nature – is *the* fundamental experience in industrial / capitalist society. I believe that my writing (and the work of those writers who tend to interest me) is an essentially ecological pursuit:



John Burnside *by Dorian Scaggosi*

ecological in the sense of being a study of the art and science of dwelling meaningfully in the world – or, in a piece of shorthand I have adopted, of ‘living as a spirit’. From this, it can be seen that the notion of exile I am presenting has nothing to do with a specific state, much less a specific nation. It relates to place, as opposed to space, to the local as opposed to the global, to an individual, *lived*, as opposed to a socialised, and essentially commercial, experience of the world. I am an exile because other people own the land, because they are free to poison it, because the majority of the world’s population lives in enforced poverty and fear, because new extinctions, of plants, animal life, habitats, happen every day. Considered from this point of view, how could one not be an exile? How could one be at home in anything other than an imagined world, a world we posit, from day to day, as the only possible dwelling place, the only possible home. This home is a metahabitat, if you will, in which all creatures are honoured and treasured, and where the desire for money and power is finally seen as pathological.

Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: ‘The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into “language of the gods” and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms’. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

I not only accept, but I would insist, that the poem originates in a rhythm – a rhythm in which our bodies are attuned to ‘the song of the earth’. I would also say that, no matter what the words may say, when the poem is completed, the real ‘message’ of a poem is that rhythm, first and foremost.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption'.

I would love it if more people abandoned a belief in g(G)od, but I wouldn't expect them all to start writing poetry. I think the arts generally do have a significant part to play in reminding us of the real, at transitional times (which I hope this time is), when we are shifting from one belief system to another (and I hope, rather than trust, that we are). The real is here present with us: water, air, stones, plants, animals, gravity, light. I think the best art has always worked against orthodoxies of religion and politics, to reassert the worth of the ordinary, the physical and the transient against the grandiose, puritan, metaphysical ideas of church and state. Don't the poems we love best sing of the transient beauty of hedgerow flowers, the fleeting joys and pains of love, of our occasional and tentative epiphanies in a mysterious world, as against the thousand year Reich, the tyrant's desire for immortality and the promised eternities of the official religions?

In an interview with W. N. Herbert you say that the prose writer is concerned with what Wittgenstein says you can say about the world, and the 'poet is trying to get into that area, and work in that area where you can't say about the world, you can only show'. Would you explain this sentence?

I'm not sure I used the right example there, using Wittgenstein. A better way of saying it might be to make a distinction between taxonomy and invocation in language. We need to observe and describe the world, in order to negotiate it well, and this respective activity might be called the taxonomic mode – summed up in the myth of Adam, where he names the animals. To name things, to describe a world, we must separate, make distinctions, break the continuum of the real up into meaningful fragments. Not only is there nothing intrinsically bad about this mode, it

can even be a joyful way of apprehending the world (because I believe there is, or can be, a profound and fundamental *affection* in naming things). To name requires attention, or one might say *attentiveness*, and this seems to me closely allied to a notion of affection, of caring for things.

However, once we have named, we are in danger of thinking this labelled and fragmented world is all the reality we have, that there is nothing else. One might say that we forget that the world is more than the sum of its parts. There is another way of seeing the world, another mode, which I want to call *invocation*. This is well expressed by the myth of Orpheus, who could make new, as yet unnamed, creatures out of thin air, merely by singing. This myth, it seems to me, is necessary as a balance to the story of Adam. Invocation is the mode by which we reintegrate the things of the world. One might see this mode as essentially metaphorical: for, as Hannah Arendt says, 'Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is brought about'. Invocation, then, is an attempt to bring about the oneness of which Arendt speaks: a oneness which is 'out there' in the world, and is only ever fractured in our imaginations. I see the invocative aspect of poetry (of all art) as a healing power, in so far as it restores the oneness of the world, and our continuity with 'the things of the world', especially with other living things. To this extent, invocation can also be described as an ecological pursuit.

Of course, it should go without saying that we need both the taxonomic and the invocative modes in order to live as spirits in the world. This talk of modes, this rather simplistic picture of a complex and shifting awareness, is not intended as a dualistic, or oppositional, description, but as an account of a binary, or complementary, relationship. In other words, these two modes are not 'real', they are imaginative tools, by which we restore balance in our dealings with everything that is 'other'.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

I tend to see a poem as an organic entity, with a life of its own. Once it is out in the world, it's on its own.

I am struck by the way in which your poems contain a special perception of light and colour, especially colour which you define almost with an artist's precision ('scarlet and cherry red'; blanc-de-Chine', etc.) Is there any painter who taught you how to read and observe the external light and details of reality?

Too many to number here. I have learned from a variety of artists – painters, printmakers, photographers – from Edvard Munch (a strong presence in my recent poetry) to Agnes Martin (a subtler influence, at the spiritual level, one might say). In a more direct way, I have learned much from working with artists on collaborative projects (for example, on 'Evidence' with Callum Innes, or 'A Tayside Inventory' with Will Maclean). Also, my wife is an artist, working in stained glass, which adds another dimension to thinking about light and colour.

The relationship between man and landscape is something you also insist upon in your novels. Do you think there is a different way of relating ourselves as human beings to the external natural reality?

I think this is the key question for all of us, at this point in our history. Before I go any further, though, I'd like to make a couple of points on terminology, with regard to 'landscape'.

I do not find the term 'landscape' very useful, in discussions of this nature. For me, 'landscape' means something passive, something looked at, seen as an object to be admired, or appropriated, or managed in some way, and as such, is a denial of the land as a living, organised entity. I prefer to speak of terrain, when referring to the land in a general sense, and to use the term 'habitat'

when speaking of a specific area. For me, the word ‘habitat’ suggests something active, a living, inhabited, highly organised entity, which we share with other animals and plants, which is constantly changing of its own accord, which is not simply there for our use or entertainment (this does not preclude our using it, of course, with due respect for those others with whom it must be shared). None of this is new, of course, but it bears repetition, for clarity’s sake.

Clarifying the language we use with regard to the land is a first step towards answering the question regarding our relationship with ‘external natural reality’. Moving beyond such terms as ‘landscape’ we become aware of the land as something shared (as habitat) and as given (terrain). By way of this process, we may come to an understanding that ‘the world’ is something that is created, moment by moment, in a complex, mysterious, *shared* process. That all beings make up Being, as it were. ‘The world is everything that is the case’ can be read as a realist statement, in one sense: what is the case is given, is always changing, is capable of being modified by all. The course of the twentieth century might be seen as a philosophical investigation into this external natural reality.

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is ‘the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions’. Do you agree with this statement?

I couldn’t agree more with this description – I am interested to hear that you found this ‘new sacrality’ in Scottish writing in particular. Or perhaps I have misunderstood. I find exactly what you describe in the Russian Acmeist poets, for example (especially Mandelstam), in Greek and Spanish language poets

(Seferis, or Paz, for example), in quite a number of contemporary American poets (Mary Oliver, Allison Funk, Jorie Graham, Linda Gregerson, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Chase Twichell and Robert Wrigley, to offer just a few examples). It's there in D. H. Lawrence's poetry, isn't it? In Wallace Stevens, too. These are just a few examples, off the top of my head. Maybe you could say that the *general* trend in twenty century poetry has been towards this secular / agnostic sacrality. Perhaps we could even say that there was a similar trend in the wider range of twentieth century thinking – in Bergson, in phenomenology, in 'Lebensphilosophie'; in Merleau-Ponty, in Heidegger, even in some of Wittgenstein; in the emergence of eco- and eco-feminist political thought, and in a growing appreciation of the knowledge, skills and insights of 'indigenous' people; in literary criticism and commentary (from Gary Snyder, say, through Mary Oliver, to Jonathan Bate); in the work of musicians such as Michael Tippett, Arvo Part, John Adams, and the increasing recognition of music created outside the 'Western classical' mainstream (Adams, for example, has cited Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as a significant influence). In the visual arts, one looks to the painter Agnes Martin, or the photographer Raymond Moore, in film to Terence Mallick, Andrei Tarkovsky and others – the list could go on and on.

Why is this? It's an interesting question, and I only have the most provisional of answers to suggest. One might be that the religious hierarchy hijacked the sacred from commonplace lived experience and set it apart, in the tabernacle, on the altar, for its own purposes (just as the ruling classes hijacked the *genius loci*, the sacredness of *place*, to create the corrupt fiefdoms which they would naturally administer and control). In both cases, the aim was to obtain and enjoy power: over others, over natural 'resources', over the earth itself. And poetry is a democratic art, one might say, in so far as it opposes this power with joy, with the

affirmation of all that we cannot control, of everything which has no market value, of that freedom which, as Marx said, arises naturally from ‘the recognition of necessity’.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

Emerson says that ‘every actual state is corrupt’. I would tend to agree with him. I have never felt any particular loyalty to a country, or government, only to habitats, and local communities. I could imagine feeling a deep civic loyalty to a community which raised taxes to fight poverty, rather than a war (as our Chancellor has just suggested the British government will do). But I cannot imagine that community as a state, in all honesty.

What is your impression about the New Scotland? Do you see any change for literature, and poetry in particular?

Is there a ‘New Scotland’? What I see is mostly business as usual, for landowners, corporations and vested interests of various kinds. What is urgent in the new Scotland, as elsewhere, is a recognition of the need to change our way of living, in a search for environmental justice and a meaningful way of dwelling with the land, with water, and with the sky. I actually believe that everything else depends upon this, and that without a sound ecological base, all our efforts at social justice are doomed to failure. We have to change the way people think, beginning with the recognition that there is nothing interesting about greed, or violence, or manipulation. The powerful, the very rich, the violent, are suffering from a socially-legitimised psychosis, a psychosis intimately connected, unfortunately, with our ideas of manhood, and social worth. In Scotland, around one in four women report incidents of domestic violence at some point in their lives – these are only the reported figures. In Scotland, large tracts of the land are

owned and mismanaged on behalf of people – the very rich, corporations, trusts – who have no interest in that land other than as a source of cash (often in the form of subsidies extracted from ordinary taxpayers). Scottish soil is foully polluted, and we are obliged, against the will of the majority, to give shelter to military and industrial facilities whose record on pollution and unjust aggression is deeply disturbing. Just three examples of problems we have here, though they are not unique to Scotland. I do hope for a ‘New Scotland’ – but we are not there yet.

If you should think about your poetical production, would you find a single character which distinguishes your writing?

If pressed, I would say that my work is mainly concerned with the relationship between humans and the rest of the world (let’s use the term ‘The Other’ here, following Levinas, but with some reinterpretation of this term).

I am very much affected by Levinas’s philosophy, especially with regard to our responsibility to ‘The Other’. But this other, I would read not just as the human, but as the ‘more than human’ other, i.e. all living things. Our responsibility is to respect and protect all living things. To honour this vast ‘Other’, however, we must also respect all habitat: for we cannot honour other living things if we damage or destroy their sources of shelter, nourishment and play. Thus we must honour all things, from the air, to rocks and soil, to trees, to all waterways, to the ocean, to the wind, to pond life, to Arctic mosses, to temperate forest, to silt, to reedbeds, to glaciers – everything that is, is a habitat.

At the same time, this demand that we honour The Other is also a call to enlightened self interest. For the truth is, we are not separate from The Other, we do not, and cannot, live ‘apart’ from the rest of the world. Every action in the world, however seemingly insignificant, has some consequence for us, as individuals,

as human societies. The one blessing of the twentieth century is that we have just begun to understand this.

My poetry works at the borderline between ‘self’ and ‘other’—partly with a view to undermining the feelings of separateness that makes us capable of damaging the world in which we live, the metahabitat that we must share with all other things. Of course, I have other concerns, but this is central. Naturally, this relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’ can be explored in many ways – in the so-called ‘nature poem’, or in love poems, for example. At the core of these explorations, however, I believe, lies a fundamental concern with healing, in its broadest sense: not the healing of the world, or of ‘the other’ so much as a healing of oneself, sufficient to allow for a continuation of meaningful and non-destructive play between self and other.

12 DAVID KINLOCH

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

They were very supportive from the beginning. My parents were both highly creative and talented people so this wasn't really an issue. My father died when I was twenty-five. My mother, now that she has retired from teaching infants, has enjoyed a new lease of life as a painter. But it was always understood – and I agreed at the time – that I would pursue my creative interests in the context of an academic career as soon as it became clear that I had abilities in that direction. I think they would have been concerned had I chosen to try to make a career as a writer *per se* but they would have supported my decision.

What do you remember of your periods of study in Glasgow and Oxford? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

Glasgow and Oxford were inevitably very different experiences. My feelings about my time as an undergraduate at Glasgow are very mixed. I remember it as a time of intense, focused study. At last I had the opportunity to concentrate on the books I wanted to spend time with and I spent an inordinate amount of time doing just that. I was a very intense, very mixed up young man, quite unable to deal with my sexuality and painfully shy with other people. As a result I became a hermit. The only times I ventured beyond the library was to visit Alasdair Gray who was Writer-in-Residence in 1979. I showed him countless extremely bad poems

and short stories and he helped me to structure and pare down my material. Paradoxically I was able to communicate with Alasdair because I realised he was probably madder and more conflicted than I was. Occasionally he organised readings from people like Liz Lochhead, James Kelman and Tom Leonard. At the time I don't really think I had a very good grasp of who these people were. I was so immersed in English and French Literature that I hadn't much of a clue what was going on in Scottish Literature. The exception to this was Douglas Dunn's poetry which I read carefully and admired. But this was before Dunn's move back to Scotland and, odd as this might seem, I didn't really think of him as Scottish. Ironically I had to wait until I got to Oxford before becoming interested in the matter of Scotland. I must explain that this lack of interest in Scottish Literature was partly a result of my secondary school education at Glasgow Academy which contained no trace of anything Scottish except an annual recitation of 'Tam o' Shanter' by our Maths teacher during a Maths lesson. The fact that my own grandfather had been a Scottish poet doesn't seem to have sunk in much beyond the initial impetus it gave me to start writing poetry. The poets I read thoroughly at Glasgow were Eliot, Auden and the Metaphysicals. In particular, I loved the poetry of Andrew Marvell. Edwin Morgan lectured on both Eliot and Auden but, again, I was relatively unaware of Morgan's own importance at the time.

Oxford represented escape to some extent. I got away from my family which I needed to do, no matter how supportive they were. I went to Balliol College and spent my first year staying at the Graduate Centre called Holywell Manor. This was, and is, a wonderful place that brings together students from all the Commonwealth countries. I spent most of that first year making up for the time I didn't spend socialising in Glasgow! I was part of a small band of Glasgow Scots that included Robert Crawford



David Kinloch *by Nicola Nannini*

who had been a year senior to me at Glasgow. Robert and I started to swop poems almost immediately. I liked his and he hated mine, mostly! He was probably quite right and there is no doubt that Robert helped me to focus on the craft of poetry. He introduced me to W. N. Herbert, suggested I should try writing in Scots and after a while we agreed to try editing a poetry magazine together. We approached an American friend, Henry Hart, and the first issue of our magazine *Verse* was published in 1984. My Oxford experience was broken by two important events: the death of my father from cancer in 1984 and a year spent as a Lecteur at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. My father's death was a traumatic experience. Although I loved him we had an occasionally awkward relationship and I felt a mixture of grief and release at his passing. In Paris I fell in love with another young man for the first time. I was, however, not really able to cope with either of these experiences which chased me into the arms of the Catholic Church in 1985. This was a mistake and I know that I hurt a close friend in the process. What I needed to do was 'come out' and acknowledge my homosexuality but I was unable to do this until a second stay in Paris much later in 1988. During this time in Oxford I started to read more Scottish and American authors, including Hugh MacDiarmid. What really focused me on Scotland and made me want to return to teach at a Scottish University was a certain condescension to me on the part of some Oxford dons. I wouldn't go so far as to call it 'racist' but I was sometimes made to feel that I wasn't 'part of the club'.

Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: 'The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into "language of the gods" and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms'. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm

or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

Valéry is one of the most ‘musical’ poets of the French language so his remarks about translation are understandable from this point of view. I agree up to a point. This is why I listen especially to Marvell, W.S. Graham, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Geoffrey Hill, Hart Crane, James Schuyler, Barry McSweeney, Douglas Dunn, Drew Milne and John Burnside to give just a few examples. They have marvellous ears! And although these are poets who *do* have ideas and messages to communicate, it’s as verbal musicians that I value them most. I also like some of the improvisations of L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. poetries, poetries which try to answer W.S. Graham’s searching question: ‘What is the language using us for?’ Some of MacDiarmid’s great early lyrics originated in the seduction of a single word culled from the dictionary and some of the more successful passages in his, still controversial, late work, stem from his ability to recognise and capitalise on strong rhythmical pulses embedded in found material. I acknowledge, also, your use of the formula ‘a larger formal intuition’. I like creating extended poetic sequences and here the excitement derives at least as much from the mixing and matching of different verbal and poetic textures and forms as from the notion that the ‘subject’ or ‘idea’ demands extended development. You have to be careful though. Even the most ‘difficult’ and ‘abstruse’ poems contain words that ‘mean’. That meaning may be plural and ambiguous but even the most sublime ‘Nonsense’ poems communicate ideas and messages. The great poems for me are the ones that begin in a note, a timbre or pitch, a phrase that invites, seduces, romances, abolishes, restores idea and sense. They are the ones in which the ideas seem to flow out of the words – not necessarily in an easy linear fashion – out of the music and then back into it so that at the end of the poem

you are not immediately aware that you have been listening to ‘language’ or ‘ideas’ but to a strange – I was about to say divine! – mixture of the two.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

Yes. Most poems are probably two thirds gestation. Mine are anyway. The poem that gets published is only the tip of an iceberg. The process reminds me of the way a dog turns and turns in its litter before settling! It is a peculiar mixture of physical, emotional and intellectual enticement and discomfort. The French writer, Joseph Joubert (1754–1824) who I wrote a book about, spent his entire life gestating a book of aphorisms he never published. For me there are four distinct phases: the ‘envelope phase’ during which you scribble a phrase or an idea on the back of an envelope or a bus ticket; the ‘notebook stage’ in which you work through initial ideas, try out some ‘lines’, get distracted by dinner or the telly; the ‘blank sheet’ phase which is as terrifying as Mallarmé thought it was (‘le vide papier que la blancheur défend’), during which you make a first stab at the ‘whole’ poem; and then finally the ‘revision stage’ which can seem almost endless. And for all this work and terror most of us only ever see about £50 if we’re lucky!!

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: ‘After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption’.

It depends a bit on how you interpret the word ‘redemption’. There is the sense of ‘buying back’ or ‘compensating’ for something lost. In the Christian context (although Stevens does not capitalise his ‘god’) redemption is about acknowledging and making up for sin, a notion I no longer believe in. Can I, do I

attempt to ‘redeem’ my life, Life itself, through poetry? Is it what enables me to give my life value and structure? I have no definite answer to these questions. There is no doubt that I use poetry at times to ‘make sense’, to give verbal structure to certain experiences. I also use it to transform those experiences imaginatively. If they are negative, I can transform them to some degree into something beautiful and positive (*Les Fleurs du Mal*). But I’m also suspicious of taking too ‘sacral’ an attitude to poetry. Poems are objects made out of language, some are better made than others, some are totally disposable. They’re the odd bits of putty or expanding polyfilla that shore up your tottering day to day existence! Ask me this question again when I’m eighty, if I make it that far!

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

Not ‘afraid’ no. I’m afraid of not being read at all. The biggest challenge that faces most poets is getting a decent hearing, of simply getting published and decently distributed. Then, you have to fight for attention among all the other cultural forms, nearly every one of which is watched, listened to, participated in by thousands more than those who pay even the slightest attention to poetry. Only then does the issue of the ‘critic’ possibly kick in. I say possibly because even then there is no guarantee that the critics will deem you worthy of their ‘misinterpretation’. In fact I would rather be misinterpreted by a bad critic than not interpreted at all. This might sound perverse but the fact is that because Literature and now Creative Writing have become part of the Education Industry probably more people read the critics to get a quick fix on who they should ‘read’ than actually read poets themselves. How many academics actually read, I mean really really READ poets? Very few in my experience and I earn

my living as an academic. That's the pessimistic bit. Where there is initial misinterpretation or 'mismanagement' however, I am confident that eventually the 'good' critic will come along. Not always from the best of motives. He or she might be writing a thesis and simply have to disagree with the critics who got it 'wrong' in the first place. But I have a healthy respect for good critics and little time for those who dismiss them haughtily. A first rate critic of poetry is worth any number of mediocre poets. Providing they avoid too much academic jargon they can be beacons for poets and poetry. Some of the highest criticism and philosophy is in its own way fine poetry: I'm thinking here of some of Derrida's work and much of Barthes. I think it's wrong also to assume that being the victim of critical 'misinterpretation' is always a bad thing for a poet. It can be initially frustrating, deadening even, but once you've rallied it might conceivably be stimulating. It might galvanise you to more poems where you try to explore what sent the critic off on the 'wrong' track. The creative imagination can be wonderfully perverse at times. Nor, indeed, are poets themselves exempt from the follies of misinterpretation. Harold Bloom has a remark to the effect that most great poems are the product of creative misreadings of earlier poems. All poets are also critics because they are readers. The main thing though is just to get the poem out there into an arena where debate takes place. The worst thing is oblivion and this is a particularly acute problem for an agnostic gay writer such as myself. Cliché though it may be: my books are my progeny. Why the hell did I choose poetry?! Ye gods! What malevolent genie made it choose me?!

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is

to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic phrase: 'Poets often lie'?

To answer this question properly would take an entire book! It's primarily a question for the philosopher and the critic. Perhaps not for the poet, except maybe when surveying – briefly one hopes – an august career! What I mean by this is that if the poet stops to ask him or herself too deeply whether what s/he is doing is ethical, whether their creative fictions or 'lies' are justifiable, and on what grounds, then the risk is that the well runs dry. At the risk of sounding like some demented, vatic, primitive, I would observe that it is difficult, perhaps, for people who are not hassled by the muse to imagine the extent to which poets are caught up in the rush of language and there is a sense in which language has little to do with notions of Truth and Falsehood. This sounds as if I'm proposing a kind of poetry that is unreflective and not self-aware which some folk would find strange coming from me. Perhaps all I'm trying to say here is that your question makes me uncomfortable because it is couched in language that is *essentially* alien to me. As an academic, of course, I understand your question entirely! Maybe I'm being too evasive here. I wonder how Gadamer would have reacted to the poetry of the late MacDiarmid which is in a sense a poetry of 'external verification', a poetry which simultaneously presents, hijacks, distorts and lies about facts. My own work has been described, rightly or wrongly, as 'informationist' because it responds creatively to the fact of living in the post-industrial information era. As a poet I deliberately try to negotiate, deploy and play with bodies of fact but my poetry does not seek the 'external verification' of the information highway which is in any case so overwhelmingly diverse that one senses that all notions of the factually or even ethically 'true' are instantly relativised. Indeed,

the more I think about this, the more I feel that your question is simply not ‘understandable’ in today’s context. This is a question a Romantic or Post-Romantic writer would comprehend and be able to answer. I find myself just staring at it dumbly. Sorry! In the final (final?!) analysis, Gadamer agrees with Plato to some extent. He simply believes poet’s ‘lies’ are a kind of truth.

Can you tell me how you came to terms with the task of translating Eugénio De Andrade into Scots?

I heard De Andrade read when I was a graduate student at Oxford and was immensely impressed. I instantly recognised a deeply homoerotic imagination that springs from and transforms the body of the world. Gay sensibility is often associated with urban territories but here was a poet who was able to write out of and create almost timeless, elemental landscapes. When I think about Heidegger’s concept of ‘dasein’, of ‘being in the world’, De Andrade is the poet I think of first. In De Andrade the erotic comes across as an utterly natural, compelling force. It has the smell and taste of earth about it and that is something I wanted in my own poetry. In one respect, therefore, there was a sense in which De Andrade seemed intimately familiar to me when I first read him. But there was also something strange connected to this elemental quality I’ve just mentioned. For this reason I turned to Scots rather than English. I had bought Alexis Levitin’s very fine book of translations into English, *Memory of Another River* but because my knowledge of Romance languages is sufficiently good to allow me to grasp something of the flavour of the original Portuguese I was able to sense that perhaps these English versions inadvertently ‘civilised’ or ‘softened’ what I can only describe as a sometimes abrupt or wersh ‘otherness’. I have to be careful here because this kind of argument can lead one into clichés about the ‘earthiness’ of Scots. Scots can be a

sophisticated, urbane instrument but it can also cope very well with sudden changes of register and mood as well as render the primitive, guttural urges of desire. I've talked at more length elsewhere about my own ambiguous relationship to Scots, a language that I find both strange – because I was not brought up speaking any dialect of it – and familiar – because I hear it spoken around me in the form of Glaswegian Scots. It echoes my own personal emotional experience of growing up gay in Scotland, in a fairly macho masculine culture, of belonging but not quite belonging. For all these reasons, De Andrade went more 'naturally' for me into Scots and although I approached them as translations I intended from the very first to 'incorporate' them into the long sequence of prose and verse poems of my own called 'Dustie-Fute'. My intention was that the 'otherness' of this Scots De Andrade would signify the foreignness of the gay Orpheus who sings his way through that sequence while allowing these translations to escape the charge of 'domestication', Most translation 'domesticates' and 'appropriates'. Setting De Andrade in Scots in this context was a way of shaking a dear stranger's hand, of participating for the duration of a lyric in his sensibility while respecting his own inviolable otherness. I have a feeling that sounds rather precious but it's the best I can do at the moment darling! I think it's the word 'inviolable'. It makes me reach for my wig and mascara!

Do you think your translations can be considered as versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poet's ideas and verbal inventions?

I've tried to indicate some of the reasons I incorporated my De Andrade translations into my own sequence of 'original' poems and I suppose this was the experience that led me into thinking in a much more sustained way about the relationship between

translation and ‘original’ composition to the point that I have argued against the artificial division of a poet’s work into two different categories: the poet as ‘creator’ and the poet as ‘translator’. This stems from a Romantic understanding of the poet as some kind of minor linguistic deity who creates out of nothing. I’m tempted to suggest that it’s bad Romanticism because, as Antoine Berman has so magnificently shown in his study of the German Romantics, some of them had a very high conception of the translator’s function even going so far as to assert that a translation can ‘improve’ upon an ‘original’ work. Latterly, Jacques Derrida’s work has problematised the whole notion of an ‘original’ anything. When you get into this area, therefore, the issue of being more or less ‘faithful’ becomes more complex. The old certainties have gone. You’re much more free to experiment – which I have done, blithely inserting my own lines into an otherwise ‘faithful’ translation for example – and in the process make a complete arse of yourself. To be serious though: I would say that even the most apparently ‘faithful’ translations are ‘versions’, are ‘interpretations’. Because every translation involves choice and choice is interpretation. It’s all a matter of degree. You could argue too – and I think you’re about to! – that some of my poems about other writers and poets are kinds of ‘translation’ in so far as they offer a ‘version’, – a misinterpretation even! – of those authors’ work. So it seems my ‘translations’ often pretend to be ‘original’ or occur in an ‘original’ context while my ‘poems’ are in fact ‘translations’. Perverse, aint it?

Your poems often contain many references to other poets’ works, even though you sometimes seem to prefer a kind of ironical rewriting of those poets’ achievements. I remember an observation made by Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, where he follows André Gide’s concept of ‘disponibilité’ and he states: ‘At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a

mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him'.

Yes. I think my answer to your question about De Andrade is fairly conclusive in this respect. But I would distinguish between those writers and artists I feel a genuine 'elective affinity' with – such as De Andrade, Rimbaud or Derek Jarman – and others whom I find interesting and useful, points on a compass that I feel Scotland should consult from time to time: Lorca, Whitman, Hervé Guibert, Apollinaire, Frank O'Hara. Very often I'm more interested by the 'idea' of a particular kind of writer or body of work than by the actual work itself and this is where we get into the area of 'creative misinterpretation' I was speaking about earlier.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?

I think I've already tried to answer this question in relation to your quotation from Wallace Stevens. I would simply add that I don't often reflect in my capacity as a poet about poetry as such. I'm much more concerned with ideas about and for *poems*. Where is the next one going to come from? What's the best way to go about it? I suppose it's really only in contexts like this – a questionnaire or an interview – that poets are forced to step back and examine what they do. That can be healthy, periodically. But it shouldn't obsess them. I have no taste for vatic utterances about poetry. That's very French and in this respect at least I'm quite Anglo-Saxon! Our job is to write poems. I feel I'm descending into the banal now, so I'll shut up!

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is 'the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link

between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions'. Do you agree with this statement?

I think my answer to your question about De Andrade suggests a certain measure of agreement with you here. I am reluctant to fully endorse a view of poetry as a kind of substitute religion though. Poetry for me is also a craft, a game, an entertainment with language. It is a way of thinking about the world and a working through and with the materiality of language.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

A Scottish and European poet but one with a deep interest in English and American literary traditions. The terms 'British' and 'United Kingdom' are contested and, I feel, have little real force or meaning at least in relation to contemporary poetry.

What do you think Scottish literary identity is today?

I think you can only speak about Scottish literary identities, in the plural. It would be very boring if I were to be able to offer you a definition we could all agree on. We might as well all just down pens and go home. Although I fervently hope that Scottish writers are not simply engaged in a search for their identity. This is a way of saying that I don't have a clear picture and I think it might even be creatively counter-productive to have one. All I can tell you is that these identities are changing and that a new 'take' on gender and sexuality are, in my view, significant aspects of that change. A certain degree of political self-determination has been achieved but individuals' identities in so far as these are determined in relation to family and friendships: these are in a state of flux as elsewhere in Europe and this will feed through into and be reflected in the literary arena as well.

What is your impression about the New Scotland? Do you see any change for literature, and poetry in particular?

My initial reaction is to laugh hollowly at the phrase the 'New Scotland'. The euphoria felt by many at Devolution melted away almost immediately in the face of the Executive's incompetence in dealing with several important issues. I was particularly shocked—in retrospect this was no doubt naïve—at its pusillanimity in dealing with the abolition of 'Section 28' in Scotland, a piece of homophobic, Thatcherite legislation which forbade the 'promotion of homosexuality' (ridiculous phrase!) by local councils. Remarkably this furore about homosexuality took centre-stage almost immediately after Devolution. The clause was abolished but it said quite a lot about Scotland's continuing difficulty with issues relating to gender and sexuality. The 'New Scotland' is, in this respect, still an Old Scotland, if one that is trying, sometimes painfully, to change. My own poetry is obviously concerned with this and I expect it will continue to chart that evolution in some form or other.

Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?

Yes and no. If you take the term 'post-colonial' simply as a temporal one initially then it is quite hard to decide at what stage Scotland became a 'colony' of England and when it ceased to be one (if, indeed, that has in fact occurred). Dates might be argued about and the degree of connivance by Scots in that fate would be an issue. As would the role played by Scottish writers and texts either voluntarily or involuntarily in what became the imperialist British project. 'Post-colonial discourse' is, however, not necessarily determined by temporal constraints. If you see it, rather, as an argument with and contestation of colonialism's discourses as they seep insidiously into language, education, religion, literature

and popular culture then there is much in Scotland that can be interestingly examined in the context of this critical discourse and parallels drawn with what has happened in other areas of the world where the term ‘colony’ has been less problematically applied. Indeed, Michael Cronin, one of Ireland’s foremost Translation Studies specialists has attacked the homogenising tendencies of some post-colonial critics who have been over-anxious to identify ‘Europe’ as Coloniser thus overlooking the rejection of imperialist projects and languages undertaken by peoples such as the Irish and Scots with vigorous vernacular cultures living on the ‘peripheries’ of Europe. So this is a difficult and stimulating area of debate.

Would you like to summarise your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generations of Scottish poets?

I think my answer to your question about the ‘New Scotland’ is all I can really usefully say about this. I wouldn’t dream of trying to speak for other poets of my generation beyond saying that I sense a certain disaffection from the ‘world of politics’ and that this is quite common among the younger generations. It’s not confined to poets. It depends really how you define ‘politics’. At the risk of seeming completely banal, it is true that every poem is ‘political’ to the extent that it engages or does not engage with the ‘polis’. (And I don’t mean the ‘fuzz’!) The huge argument that goes on in MacDiarmid’s poetry between politics and aesthetics would be unimaginable among younger generations of Scottish poets. Although having said that, there are obviously deliberately playful echoes of it in the work of some poets: W.N. Herbert maybe, Robert Crawford’s early poetry, some of Don Paterson’s stances.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

Again I feel I've already answered this question, implicitly if not explicitly, when commenting on Gadamer's remark. Does the 'real' exist in our media-saturated age? Hasn't it simply been invented on someone else's web page by a person now deceased? I find it difficult to tell.

Looking back over all your poetic work, what do you think is its most characteristic feature?

I think my writing is quite various, quite diverse in character. If I've got to choose a single characteristic I'd go for its spirit of curiosity.

13 ROBERT CRAWFORD

When did you start to write?

I can remember my mother writing down a story that I was making up as a child, before I could write; but I think I wrote my first poems when I was about eight. From my early teens I was committed to writing poetry, and I started publishing in magazines in my late teens, though only one of those poems made it into my first collection.

And how did your parents react against your leanings towards the arts?

They advised me to get a day job that would earn money. They encouraged my love of reading – in our house there were poetry books that my maternal grandparents had exchanged as love tokens – but I think they were scared that if I wanted to live as a writer I'd not make enough to live off. They'd both left school in their mid-teens and neither had gone to university. They were never 'pushy', but they did all they could to support my education, to give me what they hadn't had. Even while still at school, I thought being a university lecturer might be a good job, since it would pay me to read and write! I didn't quite know what university lecturers did, but I thought I'd like to be one, and that it would provide me with financial security (both my parents had been bank tellers, so that was the bank-tellerly way I thought) while letting me go on writing poetry.

What do you remember of your stays in Glasgow and Oxford? Was there

any writer or friend who encouraged your writing? Did you choose a particular writer to inspire your work?

The poet who has meant most to me over the years has been T. S. Eliot, whose *Complete Poems and Plays* I bought when I was fifteen and used to carry to school with me as a sort of talisman to ward off mathematics. It was the music of Eliot's verse that I found totally engrossing. Couldn't understand much of it, but loved it from the start. At school we read 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock': I was hooked from the opening lines, and then read the rest of Eliot's poetry for myself in a state of intoxicated bemusement. When I found out that Eliot had worked in a bank, and maintained a day job, I liked that too.

At Glasgow University I read a lot of poetry, on and off the Eng Lit course. I was lucky enough to have Edwin Morgan as my tutor in my second year (I remember his enthusiasm for Milton's 'Areopagitica!'); we'd read some of Morgan's work at school, but I hadn't liked it: thought the concrete poems and sound poems weren't 'real' poetry. However, he was the only living poet in the vicinity and I showed him some of my too many sonnets soon after I started at Glasgow. Not sure he liked them much either, though he gave me some encouragement when he read one about W. H. Auden. At the end of my second year he asked me if I'd read MacDiarmid. Though I'd published poems in Duncan Glen's Scottish poetry magazine *Akros*, and subscribed to it, I hadn't really read MacDiarmid. So Morgan gave me one of several copies of MacDiarmid's New York *Collected Poems* (then the only *Collected* there was, and unavailable in Britain). Reading MacDiarmid made me realize just what was possible for Scottish poets to do.

When I went to Oxford as a postgraduate I felt ill at ease. The milieu was alien to me. Yet I made friends with other Scots there, including fellow poets David Kinloch and W.N. Herbert – both



ROBERT CRAWFORD

Nicola Nannini
2014

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postgrads there too – and with a lot of students from overseas. I fell in love with a refugee and, among other things, this made me think very much about what it meant to me to be Scottish, and what it meant to lose your country. In Oxford I wrote about Scotland, and knew I wanted to return – though that took me six years! I read voraciously and among my favourite poets were two very different ones – John Ashbery and Les Murray – both of whom I met through the magazine, *Verse*, that David Kinloch, the American poet Henry Hart (a fellow postgrad), and I founded in 1984. We wanted to publish Scottish work in the best international company, and it was great to meet people like Seamus Heaney and Douglas Dunn through *Verse*.

In most of your poems you show a strong and complex commitment to Scotland: this is clear from the very first book you published, A Scottish Assembly, which followed your experiences in England, and Oxford in particular. Would you talk about the issue of belonging to a place or going back to a place considered your own omphalos?

Before I went to Oxford I'd not thought very deeply about what it meant to me to be Scottish. The longer I lived outside Scotland, the more Scottish I came to feel. Scotland excited my imagination – both poetically and politically – and seemed, willy-nilly, to be a good deal of my subject matter; but I wanted to try and give a fresh sense of Scotland, one that was open to the outside world, to science and technology, to pluralism. So the sort of verbal intermingledoms in some of my poems in *A Scottish Assembly* and elsewhere are trying to articulate that.

What's the 'chip of a nation' for you, Robert?

In the poem called 'Scotland' that uses the phrase 'chip of a nation' I wanted to give a sense of Scotland's heterogeneity, and to use the semiconductor as an image for that. I was going out

with a semiconductor physicist, and stole vocabulary from her. Words like ‘heterojunctive’ were exciting, and I wanted to use new technologies as metaphors. When I used the phrase ‘chip of a nation’, I was conscious, probably, of the phrase ‘chip on the shoulder’, but principally I was thinking, in the era of ‘Silicon Glen’, about microchips. So the principal sense of ‘chip’ in that phrase isn’t either potato chip or chip on the shoulder (though both can be linked to Scotland!), but a microchip: a small thing so full of expanding connections. I wanted the ironic readings to be possible, but not predominant.

Speaking about translation Valéry affirms: ‘The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into “language of the gods” and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms’. Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

Oh yes: poems often come from phrases and rhythms, then the ideas are generated alongside those. That’s what I sensed in Eliot’s work, and, insofar as I can analyse it, the way my own poems arrive usually involves verbal juxtapositions that excite my imagination: putting the word ‘semiconductor’ beside the word ‘country’, for instance. The great thing about verse is verse: by which I mean that it’s a sense of lineation that adds an extra punctuation to the flow of everyday language and lets it dance. An apprehension of that dance is what you’re after in a poem.

Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens: ‘After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption’.

Etymologically and actually, poetry is about creating, making, shaping: ideally making a shape that is satisfying in its attunement.

That's why poems have to sound right, to have a music of their own that may also engender or be in touch with a wider sense of attunement, or, on occasion, of productive dissonance. It seems an arrogance of the twentieth century to assume that this had to involve abandoning belief in God, but for a good number of people this is so. I have conflicted feelings about religion, but I venerate its shaping intelligence and that intelligence seems to me very close to what goes on in poetry. Having said that, it's easy to be grandiose: I like funny poems as well as love poems and religious poems. Poets like Dunbar and Burns, and Eliot who can range from erotic poetry to comic poetry to religious poetry appeal to me strongly.

I am struck by the way in which your poems often contain the simultaneous presence of voices and languages, not only and not necessarily from Scotland. We live, as you say in 'Simultaneous Translation' (from the collection, Talkies, 1992) 'between the lines', or close to 'the binding of a parallel text'. Would you spend a few words on the issue of hybridization and crossing-over?

Probably my imagination is excited by meetings of the familiar and the other, by clashes and kisses between sameness and difference. Rhyme involves that, and I've been enjoying using rhyme quite a lot recently. Very few of my earlier poems – the ones in collections – rhymed; but they were often built out of fusing together different textures, kinds of language or culture. Ideas of cultural crossover, mixing, 'hybridity' were and are important to me. Poetry, like identity, is porous. Because Scotland is important to me, and because I support Scottish independence, I'm all the more aware of the need to avoid ideas of purity and isolationism. Often through making versions of other poets, or crossing into the unfamiliar, you're going in quest of what may be missing in your own culture.

You have worked, especially in the last ten years, on Latin language and on some of the most beautiful and interesting texts by George Buchanan and Arthur Johnson. Would you talk about this experience with and into Latin?

I studied Latin and Greek at school, but my knowledge of them has rotted away, so now I need cribs, though I can make some sense of the original. In *Apollos of the North* – the Latin versions – or in *Simonides* (versions of Greek in Scots), I'm in touch with poetry that's both familiar and quite strange to me. The Latin culture of Scotland, which for so many centuries was Scotland's window on and link to the international literary community, has been shamefully neglected; and, as someone who believes in poetry as our greatest abiding art form, I wanted to remind people of some bits of that lost continent. I suppose the making of those Latin poems fed into my sense of the many-strandedness of Scottish literary history that I've written about in *Scotland's Books*.

In Full Volume (2008), you have included 'versions' of poems by Octavio Paz, Ossian, George Buchanan, Fernando Pessoa, Florentius Wilson, etc. Would you please talk about this process of grafting 'foreign' texts onto your own writing? And: what's the threshold between translation and version for you?

I like playing with kinds of cultural crossover, what academics like to call 'hybridity', and play is an important part of making art. But there's also a conscious wish to write from a Scottish perspective that reaches out to other perspectives and that welcomes difference. The little Paz poem I loved for its eroticism; the Buchanan for rhetorical *brío*; the Pessoa for a kind of complex wistfulness and attunement. In making versions, you're trying to stretch yourself and supplement what you have to offer. I have a very bloody-minded view of translation in poetry: all that matters is that the poem works as a poem in the target language. But the truth is that at root I'm so embarrassingly monolingual that, with

the possible exception of a translation of the Old English poem ‘The Dream of the Rood’ (in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*), which I started when I did know Anglo-Saxon, I have to rely on triangulating cribs when I ‘translate’ – so what I make are versions; to call them ‘translations’ would be to claim an expertise I don’t possess.

In your volume Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science (2006) you write an article on the relationship between the human and ‘the machine’, and computer in particular. What’s the impact computer has had on your creative writing, and on the procedures you absorbed not only from technology in general but, partly, from the computational techniques experimented in Scotland by poets such as Edwin Morgan?

I’ve been fascinated by that line of engagement with science and technology in Scottish poetry that runs through the work of John Davidson, MacDiarmid, and Morgan, and which fits with some of the thinking of the philosopher George Davie. Science and the history of science excited me for their metaphorical possibilities, not least in *A Scottish Assembly*, a book whose title is partly political, but also signals a wish to gather together different kinds of Scotland including the artistic and the scientific. In particular, ideas of the virtual fascinated me when I was writing about death in my collection *Spirit Machines*; but as computers have taken over more and more of my day job, I’ve found I’ve come to resent them as hostile to contemplation, and often as a distraction from what I like doing most.

Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, in 1992, I said that in Scotland it is ‘the passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions’. Do you agree with this statement?

If I could, I'd like to articulate, more fully than I've managed so far, a sense of the sacred. For me the language of Christianity is not bankrupt but profound. I am in awe of it, even as I find it hard to believe.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?

A Scottish poet: that's just a factual description; but I also enjoy writing about Scotland. At different times, I've found reading Irish, American, and Australian poets, as well as poets from England and Wales, a fortifying experience. Australian poets, for instance, have faced some of the same questions as Scottish poets, and have worked through them. The English language is everywhere, so one can get too hung up on ideas of the 'peripheral'. Some of the issues about the 'place' of Scottish literature and about the relations between poets and the 'Eng Lit' of the universities I've tried to work through in my prose books *Devolving English Literature* and *The Modern Poet*. Though these have an academic tone, they do connect at a certain level with issues I've had to face in poetry.

What is your impression about the New Scotland? Are you happy about its new cultural and literary milieu, or you think it's still a peripheral satellite of the English-speaking world?

I think this is a great time to be living and working in Scotland. Scottish political independence has excited me for decades, and seems closer now than it has been for centuries. Whatever the outcome of the referendum on Scottish independence, the direction of travel over the last thirty years is pretty clear. Poetry can be written anywhere and under any circumstances, but I count myself very lucky to be a poet at this particular moment in Scottish cultural and intellectual life, and to be working in St Andrews, a

small, sometimes sunny, often windswept seaside town full of seagulls, poets, and students of poetry from round the world. Cosmopolibackofbeyondism is good.

14 DON PATERSON

When did you start to write?

When I was 21, though I had a strange inkling when I was six or so, which I forgot about. My father recently produced a page from an exercise book which said (sic) ‘when I grow up I an goig to be a peot and rite peoms’. When I started, I did have the sense of a wee machine that was wound up and ready to go. I think poets are probably born – they’re mutants, word-savants, and their relationship to language is very weird. There’s far too much crosstalk all round; the rule-sets that define their mental spaces all overlap, and all the right-brain lexical entries are overwired, and have too many synaesthetic connections. One day they’ll find something fucked up in the fusiform gyrus, or something. It’ll come as a relief. None of this – here’s the tragedy – is any guarantee of a decent poem at the end of it. No wonder most poets go bananas. At least if you have a gift for art or music, you can paint or play every day.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

I didn’t have any interests, so there was nothing to encourage – but my father was terrifically supportive of me being a musician, so yeah, the idea that ‘art was an okay thing to do’ was certainly in the air. When I started to get somewhere with the poetry, they were very encouraging. But Scots are loathe to send you down any road that has no money on it. It’s no longer an especially poor society, but it still thinks like one.

Have you ever chosen a particular poetical work to inspire your poetry or would you rather speak about a kind of comprehensiveness in your readings and influences? What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?

Not a particular one – but quite often I’ll have certain poems at my side while I write, poems that I know have solved particular lyric or technical problems I’m encountering. I doubt – or at least I hope – there’s much evidence of their influence in the final result, as it’s never the surface of the language I’m imitating. I was working on something last month, and there was a particular transition I was struggling with, and I thought . . . now who’s done that kind of thing? Then I remembered a bit of Milton, and a Hecht poem called ‘A Hill’, and printed them out and had them beside me for the day. What a joy to always have such teachers. But I get far more inspiration these days from reading science, and some philosophy.

What’s the origin of a poem? Do you accept the idea that it can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

I think there are pretty much a thousand routes into it. This’ll sound naïve, but all I’m aware of is the sense that something that needs saying, and that I don’t have the words for it yet. So the poem’s not just the means of expressing it, but working out what the hell it was; I write poetry to find out what I’m thinking first, and if it makes a song, it’s probably true. There’s always some scrap you get for nothing, though, some bit of the thread that you can pick up and follow, and it might be a sound, a line, a form, a rhythm, a tone, a feeling – or, as you put it – some larger formal intuition. So long as it has some . . . possibility, and there’s a sense of something to be assuaged. When there isn’t, where there’s no itch to scratch, I’ve usually decided what I’m



Don Paterson *by Nicola Nannini*

going to write in advance. This is always a bad idea, as there's no excitement to communicate.

Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?

Well – the poem is never pre-determined, and I'd suspect any poet who writes that way. I doubt I'd want to read them. As I've said, I write to find out what it is I think, or to find out something I haven't thought. All I start with is a kind of generative proposition. I don't really believe in 'gestation', and think it's a false metaphor – or at least a scary one, given the number of deformities and stillbirths and false pregnancies involved. Thinking about poems, making notes, redrafting them, polishing them, publishing them, it's all part of the same process.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay 'On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth', says that 'the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind'. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: 'Poets often lie'?

No, I think Gadamer's is a rather silly statement. It makes some sense if you read it metaphorically, but then again – what doesn't. Of course poetry finds, and indeed explicitly seeks, 'external verification'; it's only through such a process that the reader can tell a good poem from a bad one, and it's only by placing themselves in the role of reader that the poet can attempt this verification in advance, and see where they've gone wrong, or gone right. It concurs with the reader's experience of the world in an unexpected way, or shows them something they hadn't noticed about it. They either go 'yes: that's the way it is', or they don't. Without

that verification, you have surrealism or nonsense. What distinguishes poetry as a practice isn't its epiphanies, just a certain kind of linguistic contract between poet and reader, their agreement to play a certain kind of game – one of rewarding the reader for 'reading in too deeply', of oversignifying. Gadamer muddles a neutral description of that process with a definition of poetic success. I actually don't think he's saying anything much more than 'beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Yes, the poem is an unusual kind of art in that it both makes an imaginative, dramatic or argumentative proposition, then presents the evidence for the truth of that proposition in the coherent unity of its final form; it works at an unusually high level of phonemic and semic integration that can seem almost circular in its interdependence. This might indeed convey the impression of something ... self-fulfilling and autonomous. But it needs a reader.

Anyway in poetry it's not quite *beauty* that's truth – it's style. Poets understand a very simple pre-Socratic truth, which is that if you're using a form of words and not a symbolic mathematical language to express something true about the world, style and brevity are two of the principal means by which those words might more closely approximate that reality. Style in poetry has a lyric as well as rhetorical component, but again it isn't very mysterious. It's about phonemes, their combinatorial rules, and their semantic valencies; it's about conceptual domains, and how they're blended in an unsuspected way. It's interesting that Gadamer spun off the Cratylus in that way. So did Jakobson, but he reaches much more sane and matter-of-fact conclusions. There are ways of talking sense on this subject – I'm thinking of someone like Reuven Tsur – but I think we can safely disregard most of what the philosophers think about poetry. They have a tendency to speak metaphorically, in terms of magical or alchemical transformations and idealised unities, and overstate things

rather hysterically. That's our job! There's no magic, though. Or at least I think it's a process amenable to a linguistic and semiotic description – even if the feelings poems leave us with are mysterious in the extreme.

Would you expect to keep writing poetry regularly?

I hope so! Though I'm not sure about 'regularity' – I wouldn't like to think I'd nailed the trick of it. If you learn nothing else ... it's that a blank sheet of paper is a blank sheet of paper, and it shouldn't get any easier. I think the poem is less a record of an epiphany that's already taken place, so much as a document of its real-time unfolding, and it has to be there, on the page. I mean your own shock and surprise or emotion *as* you were writing it. So the reader feels it too. They don't much care how moved you were on holiday, in bed or on the train a year before you wrote the poem. That's always a tall order, and so it should be.

Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of disponibilité and he states: 'At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him.' Do you believe in what Goethe called 'elective affinity'?

Yes, I do, and I think that's admirably well put. Though one aspect of it is entirely selfish; I think poets translate not only because they identify brothers or sisters in the spirit, but because they open a path to a new way of doing it. It's the sense that somehow, by assuming this voice in the target language, you'll lose or modify the voice you've mistakenly come to think of as your own. So sometimes it's in their vision or their style (I made a small book of Machado versions a few years back, in

the hope that some of his bravery would rub off; I doubt it did), but sometimes it's technical. I think of Rilke translating Michelangelo's *Sonnets* before he sat down to write the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. It wasn't really a conscious preparative at all, but at some level he knew that's what was needed to sharpen up some compositional tools, and move them down the conscious chain, from artful dexterities to motor skills – and that's how he practised them into fluency.

Would you comment on this observation and add something to the following statement of agnostic faith summarized by Wallace Stevens in his 'Adagia': 'After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.'

I think it's true-ish ... up to a point. Firstly, after the abandonment of faith it's up to every man or woman to find the form of their own redemption, and everyone is entitled to hate poetry, so it needn't be that. Here's where I'd quibble with Stevens, though: I don't think our lives need redeeming. It's a Christian word, and we have no need for it. We weren't sinful in the first place. Nothing was broken, and nothing needs fixing. I think what we need now is just to see ourselves as the thinking-end of evolved matter in this corner of the cosmos, the way nature has evolved to have a look at itself, and maturely assume the responsibilities that implies. There's nobody here but us chickens, yet the theistic fallacy continues to dog our thinking long after we give up on faith – we keep talking as if there really was a place where truth resided, and against which we might check out brilliant answers, at some point. Redemption is quietly predicated not just on the existence of a sin, but the truth-standard that defines it. I think poetry frees us from exactly that idea, actually – that of a truth we can't directly access, but which exists in the hands of some remote and inscrutable third party, and which we have to guess

at. Poetry shows us as freelance truth-improvisers, folk who can conjure ideas as true as you want 'em, and it restores our human independence a little. Besides, I think there's more truth in Elizabeth Bishop than you'll ever find in the bible, which spends most of its time pointing to it elsewhere. Poetry's place in the life of the spirit – well, poetic language has two functions; to make things clear and distinct where they weren't, and to join them back up again when they were broken apart. It's a natural function of language, and the way that *language*, certainly, redeems itself.

Are there places that have been especially important to your poetry (maybe have lent themselves easily to metaphor)? And are they the same ones that have been important in your life?

Other than the primal territory of my childhood – which of course is one big metaphor-pot – no. I'm not really a 'poet of place'. Although there are places I love, I'm not very good at physical description.

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

Well, I think the imagination is one of the ways we correct reality for error. Reality's all the stuff that just happens to face up, and be relatively well-lit. It's also just what human evolution has chosen to extract from the totality of things. I mean—at the extremities of our senses, the information is virtually white noise, and the human nervous system filters it down to something intelligible, but useful only for humans. All the retina does is register colour, intensity, bits of light and dark. After that – all our sensing of edge and border, all our discrimination of distinct objects—is pure neural computation. All I'm saying is that when you think of it like that, then it seems a luxury to think of the human

imagination as *distinct* from reality, given reality is, in a real sense, completely dreamt up in the first place. When we introduce these alternative universes into the world through our poems, they don't just change 'the way people look at the world' – because 'the way people look at the world' is all there is of the world. You're changing reality itself.

Do you think it's important to share your work as it develops?

It used to be when I didn't know what I was doing. Now I know what I'm doing a little better, I only show it to a couple of folk who know exactly what I'm trying to do. I used to take advice from everyone, as you should, but gradually you credit yourself with a bit of discrimination and expertise, and can safely discount the opinions of those who don't have it. 'Gradually' is the key word, though.

Which kind of shame does poetry cause in surviving its author?

Well – anything more than five years old is the work of another guy, so you have to learn to walk away, and not feel any shame. It was difficult when I heard that you'd translated a couple of very early unmetred poems of mine, because I don't recognise their author at all! But so long as you can say – well, the poems are true to who you were at the time, you have to let them go. The poems aren't yours any more anyway. Easier said than done, especially when it's clear that some previous incarnation was a bit of a schmuck, someone you'd rather forget. And the dead feel no shame, so I don't see that being a problem. Sounds like a relief.

What is the advantage, or the oddity, of being a musician and a poet at the same time? Did jazz or blues help in your poetry career? How do you see the connection between the two arts, and the performances such as those of Amiri Baraka (USA), or Mzibhake Mbuli (South Africa), or the past experience

of the Beat Generation poets and the link they created between the jazz scene and the avant-garde generation of poets?

I've always been a non-blues jazz musician, though eventually I ended up as heavily involved in 'straight' classical music and electronica. I've no interest in jazz-poetry crossovers – the two art forms strike me as very badly suited to each other, and have very different relations to time, very different compositional priorities. I think these collaborations were primarily social – you'd find yourself part of a group doing both things, and someone would go *hey! Why don't we...* But it's a false hybrid. Poetry is already set to music. Music has its own poetry. They just tread on each other's toes. Hip-hop, the song-lyric, opera – these are real forms, they've evolved together, or are at least properly collaborative.

In terms of connections, it does tune in your ear, I think. You hear phonemes a bit better. I think musicians hear metre better than poets. Metre in poetry is a far simpler affair than the whole business of metrical subdivision, displacement, timing and emphasis in music. In poetry it's just the interplay of real sense-rhyme and abstract metrical pattern, i.e. improvisation against a metronomic pulse. I mean I'm as worried about it as the next guy, but it's probably the one area, the only area, where I'd allow myself the arrogance of saying that I actually know what I'm doing, and I suppose I have music to thank.

In becoming accessible is poetry in danger of giving up too much? What are the implications of publicity?

Only if you think that accessibility is synonymous with oversimplification. I think it's possible, as Frost did, to write of things of immense philosophical subtlety in a language folk can follow. Here's trouble: to do that you have to be really good, and work really, *really* hard to find clear ways of saying strange things. It takes a demonic patience. I'd love these things for my own work,

and I very much doubt it'll ever happen. But I do understand that the stranger, more complex and more difficult the idea, the greater your obligation to clear expression. A lot of 'difficult' poetry just hasn't bothered to make the attempt.

The most worrying aspect of publicity is being overtaken by the desire to be loved. In practical terms that sometimes just means writing more funny poems, since the laugh is the only audible response you ever get from an audience. Though I've noticed how much people like being moved by poems, and I try to write more of those. Shameful it took me so long to realise, but if you learn nothing else, readers want poems to be about them, not you. They get bored with your nervous wee displays of cleverness and erudition.

Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or an English-language poet writing for a larger audience than the local one?

English-language, straight down the line. Except for those rare occasions I write in Scots, then I'm a Scot – as there's no way you can pretend it isn't a nationalist signifier. I hold to Cioran's line that a writer's country is their language. I'm a Scot culturally and politically and (mostly) ethnically, all of these are relevant. But as writer I'm an Anglophone – so to say I was a Scottish poet would graft a nationalist agenda to a linguistic one. That's not to say that there might be a thousand-and-one aspects of the poems that are 'Scottish', of course. The trouble is that while you might consider this the least interesting aspect of your work, someone coming to it from another country (especially the US, I've found) will often use your nationality as the most salient identifier, which is understandable, but mistaken, I think – it invariably comes at the expense of much more important things you're getting up to.

What's your idea about the late developments in Scottish poetry? And how do you see yourself as a part of a kind of late twentieth-century canon?

Man, that really would be the ultimate hubris! No, I don't see myself as part of any canon, and no sane man would, I think. And I genuinely don't know why a bunch of us who appear to be pretty good at this sprung up in the same generation. Something in the air. In the water. Same thing happened to Swedish tennis players in the 80s. We had good role models in Eddie Morgan and Douglas Dunn. I know Douglas will enjoy being compared to Bjorn Borg ...

How do you judge the function and role of institutional and government initiatives in support of arts and writers in your country?

It's broadly supportive. But like everywhere else there's a bizarre emphasis on finding new talent at the expense of supporting and developing the old talent. I'm not complaining – I've been very lucky – but I see others who've been less so. There's also the unfortunate tendency for very small countries to survey their talent at far too high a degree of resolution. Scotland's a country of just five million souls, and that has a whole bunch of practical consequences: you can't support a national opera; you should be very careful of administrative overspend in the marginal arts; and you're probably only ever going to have a handful of poets who are any good. We're not Germany, or Italy, and the sooner we realise it the better.

Looking back over all your poetic work what do you think is its most characteristic feature?

Stupidity, incompetence and meanness of spirit, but I'm the wrong guy to ask. I mean you can say what one would *like* others to find there ... I'd like folk to say that I didn't repeat myself.

Although I probably do. I *shudder* to think of what its most characteristic feature might be.