

“WHAT HORRORS WORSE THAN THESE?” CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN CATHOLIC GLASGOW

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Abstract: With reference to a particular short lyric written in Gaelic, the poet discusses his origins in the Catholic community of Glasgow in the 1950s and 1960s, using the observations of Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o to highlight how a predicament he had originally conceived of as utterly personal has much wider implications than he initially imagined, in terms of colonialism both linguistic and cultural. In his case, the mechanism of exclusion was twofold, as a Scot within the larger unit of the United Kingdom, and as the descendant of immigrants who were perceived as Irish rather than Scottish, foreigners in terms of their religion within the context of the city of Glasgow.

Keywords: colonialism, exclusion, Glasgow Catholic, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o

In a series of letters Rilke wrote from Paris to his wife the sculptress Clara Westhoff between June and October 1907 which have come to be known as “the Cézanne letters,” the poet comments on how much it matters for a painter not to grasp the full implications of what he is doing:

The painter should never become conscious of his insights (nor in general any artist): without making a detour via his thinking processes, his progress should remain opaque to him, entering his work so fast he cannot identify it at the moment of transition.¹

The title I have chosen may well be misleading. Perhaps it encourages you to anticipate a Joycean tirade against Catholic narrow-mindedness when contrasted

¹ Paul Cézanne, *Die Bilder seiner Ausstellung Paris 1907 besucht, betrachtet und beschrieben von Rainer Maria Rilke* (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2018) 52. My translation.

with the supposed open-mindedness and liberality of a Calvinist tradition somehow mitigated by the Scottish Enlightenment. Such a tirade would play into the hands of the very prejudices I aim to highlight, deepening the predicament I intend to outline as clearly as I am able.

A poem I wrote in October 2020 in Olomouc, a charming and characterful town in Moravia with an admirable range of Baroque and turn of the century architecture, at a time when the second lockdown provoked by the recent pandemic was looming, has come to mean in retrospect something very different from what I originally perceived as its drift. Or rather, I could say that a different level of meaning has been added, which accounts for the relevance of the lines by Rilke quoted above. Here is the poem, followed by an English version that attempts to reproduce what the Gaelic says as faithfully as possible:

Chreid mi gur subseig do-dhèanta a bh' annam
's a' mhòmaid 's an àite san d' rugadh mi –
buillsgean no ionad-seallaidh bho nach toirte
fiosrachadh seasmhach, earbsach air an t-saoghal.

Bha gach faireachdainn 's gach mothachadh
a thàinig orm 'na bhriseadh-lagha, no
'na dheuchainn-dhearbhaidh ann an cànan ùr
nach tuigeadh neach sam bith, a b' fheudar eadhon

dhomh fhìn a ionnsachadh 's a chur an cleachdadh.
B' e 'n cànan ud do-dhèantachd bithealas
neach mar mi fhìn, a bhuineadh, a-rèir coltais,
do chinneadh gun ro-aithneachadh no cead.

Cha b' ann ach beag is beag a dhearbhadh orm
làn-daonnalachd m' fheirge, mo ghairge is
an iongantais a dh'fhairich mi gur ann
am measg mo chosmhailean a bha mi beò.

*I believed I was an impossible
subject, in the place and at the time
when I was born – a centre or a viewpoint
offering no stable, trustworthy feedback*

*about the world. All my feelings and sensations
resembled breaches of the law, or else
an experiment in a new language
nobody could understand, one even I*

*had to learn and start putting to use.
That language was the impossibility
of someone like me existing, from a species
that had been neither permitted nor foreseen.*

*Only gradually did I come to realise
how totally human my anger was,
my savagery, my amazement at
being alive amongst others just like me.*

The poem was a programmatic statement, placed at the start of the second “book” of fifty in an extended sequence of poems identical in length and metrical patterning. The person speaking perceives himself as what would be termed in German a *Randerscheinung*, such an unusual, indeed aberrant phenomenon that no useful conclusions can be drawn from it. Its situation is the very opposite of “exemplary” or “representative.” Today the positive turn in the final quatrain, where the speaker comes to realise that the emotions and uncertainty tormenting him are absolutely and quintessentially human, can strike me as not entirely convincing.

When I wrote it, it expressed my perception of myself as an outsider, in the family, at school, amongst the people I grew up with, in the place where I found myself – Glasgow in the 1950s and 1960s, before large scale demolition and depopulation transformed its appearance, not to mention the vigorous sandblasting operations of the 1970s which removed decades of grime and soot from façades throughout the city, revealing the fragile, lemon-coloured stone underneath, or the impression given by surviving, isolated buildings that the place had recently suffered a devastating enemy air raid. The syndrome of “not this place – not these people,” which can even extend to a rejection of your own personality, is one I shall call “disidentification.”

Aged barely eighteen, I came upon a piece of music which expressed with almost frightening precision the sense of bottomless, tormenting alienation I am describing. I had, so to speak, been smuggled, thanks to a friend, into the room with listening booths and headphones where students of the Music Department at the University of Glasgow could gradually become acquainted with the classical repertoire thanks to vinyl recordings. The recording I chose was of an opera by

Richard Strauss composed between 1911 and 1915 to a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (The Woman Without a Shadow) which even today is relatively rarely performed. It opens in a magical palace high in the skies. The Empress is wedded to a mortal man with whom she has a passionate physical relationship. A year having gone by without them conceiving a child, which would allow her to cast a shadow, she is informed that once three days more have passed her husband will turn to stone. The only remedy is to descend to the world of men and steal someone else's shadow. A passionate plea to her nurse, a malevolent, misanthropic creature, for assistance in the undertaking follows, upon which, to the clamorous, deafening music of an interlude entitled "Flight to Earth," the two women throw themselves over the battlements of the heavenly palace, hurtling downwards to the world of men, where they enter the home of a humble dyer and his wife through the chimney.²

I used a short quotation from this point in the libretto as an epigraph to "E fui calato in mezzo a quella gente," the third item in *Ceum air Cheum / Step by Step* (2019),³ originally published in a second anthology of gay and lesbian writing from Scotland edited by Joanne Winning in 1992:⁴ "Weh, was faßt mich gräßlich an! Zu welchem Geschick reißt mich hinab?" [Alas, what grasps / hold of me horrendously? / To what fate / am I being snatched downwards?].⁵ This poem's title was in Italian not just because the words themselves came to me in that language, but because the sudden switch to Gaelic at the very start could convey the feeling of being plummeted without warning into a totally alien and unrecognised environment. Italian, in this case, would be the language used in a preceding existence.

Particularly when you are on the threshold of adulthood, there are certain pieces of music, or paintings, or lines of poetry that affect you like a message, embodying as they do fundamental insights or attitudes whose meaning it may take you years fully to unravel. Many of these retain their power to inspire and disturb till much later in life. They speak directly to and of you, encapsulating in ways you cannot hope to grasp immediately, and may never fully grasp the

² The music can be accessed in a fine performance issued by Decca in 1992, the first complete recording ever of this opera, with Georg Solti conducting. Júlia Várady sings the role of the Empress and Reinhild Runkel that of the Nurse.

³ See Crisdean MacIlleBhàin / Christopher Whyte, *Ceum air Cheum. Cruinneachadh Dhàintean nas Fhaide / Step by Step. A Collection of Longer Poems* (Stornoway: Acair, 2019) 55.

⁴ Joanne Winning, ed., *The Crazy Jig* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992) 76-83.

⁵ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Die Frau ohne Schatten Libretto," Opera Arias Database, accessed 31 May 2023, <https://www.opera-arias.com/strauss-r/der-frau-ohne-schatten/libretto/>.

implications of your being on earth. The opening scene of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* still has this effect on me. What riveted me was the notion of a “Präexistenz” or pre-existence, that before arriving in the human world you have been somewhere else, a place to which you truly belonged and from which the world of men represented an unjust and incomprehensible banishment. This was how I instinctively looked on Glasgow as a child and an adolescent.

The opening two items in the sequence of poems which was the first original material I published in Gaelic, “An Sgoilear a’ Sealltainn Air Ais” (The Scholar Looks Back), beginning respectively “Fhuair mi mo sgoilearachd” [I got my schooling] and “Ach rugadh mi ann am baile cruadalach” [But I was born in a cruel city],⁶ describe the “before” and “after” of my predicament, which I also saw as that of Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s Empress, but without the positive aspect of the Empress freely choosing to descend into a world which is alien to her because there is something she desperately needs that can be obtained nowhere else, and which will enable her to rescue the man she loves from petrification. After all, we encounter the Empress in her previous, authentic existence which she abandons voluntarily in favour of the alienated world in which her story will be played out. I found myself in an environment for which I felt no affinity whatsoever – to the extent that I solemnly informed my classmates, aged seven, that I was not Scottish at all, I actually came from Sweden. Positing a previous existence was a means of coping with the ordeal, of giving it a meaning I struggled to locate by any other means.

Though both my parents and three of my grandparents were born either in Glasgow or on the outskirts of the conurbation, I grew up in a community that was perceived as foreign in terms of religion and, comically, of race, the product of a massive immigration to central Scotland mainly from the northern counties of Ireland which got under way in the course of the nineteenth century. Being the focus of prejudice is a situation that immobilises you due to its inherently paradoxical nature. You are at one and the same time at the centre of attention, in the spotlight, and invisible. People do not see you for what you are, they see the prefabricated image of their prejudice, which they then project onto you. When age twenty-three I broke it to my parents that I believed I might be homosexual, rather than sitting me down and asking me to explain what was happening now and what had been going on with me till then, my mother characteristically went to the public library and borrowed a series of books dealing with homosexuality. What light a member of the Westminster parliament’s account of being caught under a tree in St James’ Park in the act of fornicating with a guardsman, and the consequences which followed, was capable of shedding on the issues her own child confronted remains a mystery to me.

⁶ Crisdean Whyte [sic], *Uirsgeul / Myth. Poems in Gaelic with English Translations* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1991) 2-3.

I spent the summer of 1989 teaching at an English language school in western Edinburgh where my students were mostly Italian and Spanish. The overall programme on offer was excellent, and included talks given by figures from different walks of Scottish life, who discussed their activities and the light these could shed on the society in which the visiting students found themselves. One talk was given by a woman from the Scottish National Party in her late twenties or early thirties, so only slightly younger than myself. In the course of her discussion of the case for independence she several times used the expression “Irish Catholics” to describe people practising the Catholic faith who were resident in Scotland. When the moment arrived for questions, I put it gently to her that perhaps the time had come to prise these two terms apart. What that would have meant was, ceasing to identify a difference in religion as a national and ethnic difference, and recognising that it was feasible to be Scottish and Catholic at one and the same time, that Catholics were an integral part of the Scottish population and indeed of the nation. The woman answered that she found this inappropriate and had no intention of revising her terminology. Looking back, I would see this as a hangover from the anti-Catholic prejudice which characterised certain elements in her party as late as the 1970s or 1980s, and which can be traced back, for example, to the vigorous protest (since repudiated) made in 1923 by the Church of Scotland to the Westminster Parliament under the title *The Menace of the Irish Race to Our Scottish Nationality*, about how immigration was in the process of altering irrevocably the make-up of the Scottish population.⁷

Some ten years later I was present in the audience at a lecture given during the Edinburgh Festival by Scottish composer James MacMillan entitled “Scotland’s Shame,” in which he lambasted the ongoing prejudice, discrimination and abuse to which Catholics in Scotland were subjected, not least at football matches between the two opposing Glasgow teams, Celtic (pronounced always with an initial “s”) and Rangers. At the end, I went up to him and told him how strongly I supported the denunciation he had offered. He looked at me with a startled expression and asked: “Oh, so you think I am right then?” Apparently he had been urged in several quarters on no account to give the speech, or ever to address the topic in public, as the damage done to his own standing would be irreparable.⁸

⁷ *The Menace of the Irish Race to Our Scottish Nationality*, dokumen.tips, accessed 26 March 2023, <https://dokumen.tips/documents/menace-of-the-irish-race-to-our-scottish-nationality.html?page=1>. The report in question was expressly repudiated by the Church of Scotland only in 2002.

⁸ See in this connection Thomas M. Devine, ed., *Scotland’s Shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2000), and also Phillip A. Cooke,

Describing yourself as being, or having been, the victim of prejudice may also be unsettling because it casts you in the role of victim. What are you looking for? Pity? Revenge? If MacMillan described Central Scotland as “Northern Ireland without the guns and the bullets,” the parallels are nonetheless restricted. Irish immigrants reached Glasgow in a condition of poverty and disadvantage, whereas the Protestant settlement of Ulster at the start of the seventeenth century involved the displacement of large sectors of the resident population in favour of the new arrivals, who dispossessed them of their land. In one case the newcomers were privileged, in the other the objects of hostility and opprobrium. For me the experience was of growing up in a society and place where your right to be and belong, to define yourself as “Scottish” in any meaningful way, was constantly liable to question. Prejudice of this sort was not, of course, confined to Scotland. When I was a student at Pembroke College, Cambridge, the then Dean, Meredith Dewey, broke in on a conversation I was having at one of the musical parties he regularly held in his rooms to observe with exasperation that: “You’re just a chatty Irish Catholic!” Evidently my fluency and my readiness to discuss matters not normally touched on in polite conversation among the English upper middle classes had irritated him. It was a timely reminder that one’s fragile membership of the culturally dominant group could be revoked without warning at any stage.

My Christian name and surname were not, in the Glasgow of the 1950s and 1960s, an undisguised and challenging proclamation of belonging to the minority, as happened with classmates such as Desmond Mirner, Michael Haggerty or Dermot Maguire. Another boy, born and brought up in Scotland, was called Fintan O’Reilly and, within the last decade, one of my nephews gave his daughter the name Orlagh, still tantamount to a declaration of war in a Glasgow environment. Unsavoury as the discrimination these evoked can seem, it did mean that there existed a rich and evocative “poetry of names” which it can be hard for anyone unfamiliar with that divided society and the particular species of apartheid practised there to understand. One strategy groups suffering from prejudice develop to defend themselves is cutting themselves off, creating an attentively policed haven within the larger society to which only they can gain admission. Gay men and women still do this today. I remember how in the Edinburgh of the 1990s the question “Will it be a mixed party?” implied “Are any straight people going to be there?”

The underlying issue was one of territoriality. Catholics in Scotland benefited from having state-funded schools, both primary and secondary, which were

The Music of James MacMillan (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019), in particular Chapter 6: “Raising Sparks – ‘Scotland’s Shame,’ Politics and a Scotch Bestiary.”

specifically confessional and offered teachers a career structure where the discrimination they were exposed to elsewhere was absent. I want to emphasise the protective nature of these boundaries. My father's sixty-fifth birthday party was the first occasion on which Catholics and Protestants of my parents' generation were simultaneously present in the family home at one and the same time. Never before had any of his golfing companions crossed the threshold with their spouses. Even then, spontaneously, as if by a tacit accord, Protestants congregated in one room, Catholics in another.

Effectively a "double colonisation" affected Catholic Glasgow in the years when I grew up. The colonisation I have in mind was not political or economic in nature, though no doubt both those aspects were active, but primarily cultural. Both were a product of imperial, colonialist dynamics active within the British Empire from the eighteenth to at least the mid-twentieth century. The local Protestant bourgeoisie had a distinct position, given the opportunity they seized for acting in partnership with England and the London core of the Empire when it came to the benefits of industrialisation and of exploiting the colonies. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has tellingly suggested that what we speak of as "the modern" would have been inconceivable without the advent of the Industrial Revolution which, in turn, was dependent on the long-term theft of material resources from colonies both within and beyond Europe: "There is no region, no culture, no nation today that has not been affected by colonialism and its aftermath. Indeed, modernity can be considered a product of colonialism."⁹ When it comes to distinguishing the respective positions of Catholics and Protestants, Ngũgĩ's analysis is again highly relevant, when he speaks about "the centrality of the Irish experience to the colonial question, especially as it relates to language, culture, and social memory. Ireland was England's first colony, and it became a prototype for all other English colonies in Asia, Africa, and America."¹⁰

It is possible to look on the obsession with toxic forms of religiosity, whether with Catholicism or radical brands of Calvinism, as a reaction to the twin traumas of, in Scotland, the suppression of the Gaelic language and the large-scale eviction of the peasant population and, in Ireland, the suppression and loss of Irish and the years of the Great Famine. The memory of the Penal Laws against Irish Catholics meant that loyalty to the Catholic Church could function as a declaration of hostility towards the London power centre, in a manner not dissimilar to the role practising as a Catholic bore in communist Poland after the Second World War.

⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New. An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009) xi.

¹⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New* x-xi.

Cultural colonisation meant that, at school and at university, practically the only literature made available – the only literature whose existence was acknowledged – was English literature. Still today in Britain and Ireland, it is customary to refer to a university degree in literature as a degree in “English,” as if there were no useful distinctions to be made between the two. “Scottish” people were denied access to literary products which they could meaningfully identify as their own, to which someone else could not lay a prior claim. What does it mean to have a culture “of your own”? Various factors come to mind. One is geographical, an explicit link to a location or locations to which a person has a lived, personal connection. Another is that their “own” culture bears unmistakable traits of the circumstances in which a person grew up. Glasgow even today is a stunningly rich phenomenon in linguistic terms. When I was a boy, people claimed to be able to identify the neighbourhood of the city from which a person came according to the way they spoke. Visiting foreigners today may find it impossible to engage in meaningful dialogue with people on the street because their speech is so distinctive and hard to understand. This experience of a multilingual background is an integral part of growing up almost anywhere in Scotland, yet was not reflected in the English cultural products then made available. Educated, cultivated people in Glasgow speak a form of English significantly different from what is used in the south-east of Britain. I have not forgotten how, when I was working as a lector at the Faculty of Languages of Bari University in Pùglia in southern Italy in 1976, a manual of English pronunciation was thrust into my hands, and I was informed that I would be teaching a pronunciation course from the following day. I had to abandon the lesson after about twenty minutes when it became clear to me that, in phonological terms, the English I spoke, which today would be classified as Standard Scottish English, differed radically from what was described in the book. And that was without taking into consideration a form like “amn’t,” or the absence of “shall.”

Moreover, placenames like Garthamlock, or Gartcosh, or Carnwath indicate the presence of a very different language stratum, apparently embedded in the land itself and absent from mainstream English culture. A culture “of your own” is also a culture towards which you acknowledge a responsibility greater than that any other community carries, responsibility for its study, its maintenance, and its continuation. If Scottish people struggled to view the imposed English cultural products as “their own,” members of the Irish immigration suffered a double colonisation because they were similarly absent from products identifiable as Scottish. There was no trace, for example, of the experience of toxic religiosity in its Catholic form so evident in a *Bildungsroman* such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce.

Continuing to privilege the cultural sphere, I would like to describe my understanding of the "colonial pact" according to which members of these two communities – very approximately, the Protestant and the Catholic communities in central Scotland – were permitted access to the English culture which educational institutions made available to the exclusion of any other. I am speaking, of course, about the 1950s and 1960s, when I grew up. But many of the features I am attempting to highlight are still pertinent today. My own understanding of the "colonial pact" was rendered considerably more acute, and painful, through getting the opportunity to transit directly in 1970 from a Catholic school of Jesuit inspiration in Central Glasgow to a Cambridge college where I took a three-year qualification in "English."

In order to access and participate in the dominant culture, which is effectively being forced upon you, you are required to minimise, indeed, to dissimulate whatever elements mark you out as in some way different, as not belonging. The "colonised" party knows that if he or she fails to conceal these elements, conditional access to the dominant group and its associated culture may repeatedly be imperilled. An obvious manifestation of the "pact" is the situation a cultivated Scottish person finds themselves in when talking to a similarly cultivated individual who identifies as English. It is taken for granted that you will be familiar with the work of Jane Austen, of the Brontës, of Charles Dickens and of course of the Shakespeare whose cult is so undying and ubiquitous. But for you to expect that the English party should know something about the work of Hugh MacDiarmid or of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, of William Dunbar or Robert Ferguson, would be so preposterous that the expectation does not so much as enter your mind. The basic lack of balance, the injustice of the "pact" needs no underlining. And yet even today, in a majority of cases, it remains axiomatic and unspoken. The "coloniser" determines the agenda, and to challenge it means somehow disappearing off the map of what is ultimately sayable.

I have not forgotten being told, while studying at Pembroke College, Cambridge, that, after the regular Sunday evening conversation with my parents in Glasgow, my contemporaries found it hard to make out what I was saying for as much as half an hour. When I pointed out that this was because of my Scottish accent, a thoroughly likeable chap remarked: "Scottish accent? I thought that was a speech defect!" At the time it seemed enormously funny. Looking back, the implications were chilling. Factors of difference were liable to be turned against one unpredictably and without any warning.

An obvious consequence is that those elements which are dissimulated and taboo acquire an enviable potential for disrupting the pact itself. That explains why choosing to write in Gaelic, or the fact that a major portion of MacDiarmid's

work is couched in an “artificial” form of literary Scots – but what literary language is not “artificial”? – has such explosive and disruptive power, a power which also rests on such writing being impenetrable to the “coloniser” for as long as he refuses to renounce his side of the “pact,” together with the advantages it gives him.

Having described the “double colonisation” of the Catholic community, and having explained the mechanism of what I term the “colonial pact,” I would now like to list the seven “horrors” involved, specifically for me, in growing up in Glasgow at the time I did. The third is a topic I have dealt with extensively, in both poetry and prose,¹¹ and is personal in nature, so I do not intend to discuss it any further in this context. While it is possible, if far from likely, that the fourth might have been less crushing if I had come from a Calvinist, rather than a Catholic background, it is worth remembering when in 1980 the House of Commons in Westminster voted to decriminalise sexual acts between consenting adult males in Scotland, there were only four Scottish nationalist MPs among them. All four voted for homosexuality to continue being a crime punishable with a prison sentence. This gives some indication of the “sea change” that has taken place in Scotland between the period I am discussing and the present day:

1. The deprivation of rights, in terms of employment and material benefits, to which that community was subjected.
2. The internalisation of these injustices in terms of self-image and self-perception, and the coping strategies which the community developed in response to them.
3. What went on in my birth family.
4. Wall to wall homophobia (family, church, society).
5. Disidentification.
6. Amnesia.
7. Exclusion from cultural representation.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has spoken about the “erasure” to which those who have been colonised are subjected, particularly if colonisation was accompanied by, or culminated in, geographical displacement. He asserts that

Colonialism [...] tried to subject the colonized to its memory, to make the colonized see themselves through the hegemonic memory of the colonizing center. Put another way, the colonizing presence sought to induce a historical

¹¹ See Crisdean MacIlleBhàin, *Dealbh Athar. Leaganacha Gaeilge le Gréagóir Ó Dúill* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2009).

amnesia on the colonized by mutilating the memory of the colonized; and where that failed, it dismembered it, and then tried to re-member it to the colonizer's memory – to his way of defining the world, including his take on the nature of the relations between colonizer and colonized.¹²

The Glasgow I grew up in was a place where most people came from nowhere. The city had mushroomed dizzyingly in terms of population in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century. While it is dangerous to generalise, few memories tended to be retained of the places people's grandparents or great-grandparents had arrived from. It was as if this information could be of little relevance or assistance in the great "melting pot" the city had become. My own mother could tell the story of how her father, with the unusual surname MacCrossan, originating from a village named Killiclogher on the outskirts of Omagh in County Fermanagh, had left his job at the Harland & Wolff shipyards in Belfast when an object dropped from a great height nearly hit him. Presumably the object was directed at him as an unwelcome employee of Catholic origin. Having state-funded Catholic schools was again an advantage in that it preserved a significant marker of difference. A persisting sense of Irishness among the people my parents frequented could not be reduced merely to a matter of names such as Seamas O'Sullivan. Nonetheless, if my mother had a "native land," it was Byres Road and the streets of the West End surrounding it. In a just world, her passport would have given "Glaswegian" as her nationality. It should not be forgotten that until the 1970s Glasgow was not perceived as an integral part of Scotland. The city was too clamorously the product of Empire for that to have been the case.

So "amnesia" was a consequence of the erasure which was also, from the cultural viewpoint of the coloniser, a cultural erasure. The colonised subject was a blank space, a "tabula rasa," a void which could only be filled with an imperfectly acquired and shaky simulacrum of the coloniser's own culture. This is why Ngũgĩ constantly returns to the crucial value of "remembering," though I would want to add that the ultimate purpose of remembering is to unpick "disidentification," to take possession of the current situation and circumstances by understanding the forces which created them and how one came to be there. When returning to one's previous location, whether idealised or not, ceases to be an objective or even a consideration, taking possession of one's predicament, asserting one's right to it and one's ownership of it, can be a major means of empowerment.

Doing so requires the creation of new cultural artefacts, involves representing that situation in art. ("Creative imagination is one of the greatest of re-membering

¹² MacIlleBhàin, *Dealbh Athar* 108.

practices.”¹³) Representation brings relief, and the denial of representation – nowhere finding stories, or images in which you see yourself reflected and where you can to a certain extent “read” your own experience (another form of ownership) – causes acute emotional and psychological distress and pain. The situation of the “colonised,” in cultural terms but not just in those, is one of real, continuous, and intense suffering which representation can alleviate. Just as a translation ultimately derives its value from not being the same as the original, so any representation will not be identical with the experience it represents. It is only one among many possible variants, the fruit of active choices and a conscious agency which is in itself a form of empowerment. Moreover, it renders that experience accessible to people who may not necessarily identify anything corresponding to it in their own lives. So representation is also a means of overcoming isolation and invisibility.

At this stage, I would ask readers to return to the poem I quoted at the very start of this essay and to read it through once more. I am confident that they will see the second reading which was not clear to me when I wrote the poem. Namely, that it referred, not just to the situation of an individual, but to the predicament of a whole community – and perhaps not only of that community – as the result of an undeniable series of political, economic, and cultural processes. Seen in this light, the closing lines could refer to the development by which representation allows a situation perceived as stifling, imprisoning, and ultimately imposing silence to become generally available, its characteristics applicable on a much wider basis than was initially suspected.

A further consideration needs to be offered, after which I will outline a series of hypotheses, and then conclude. Whoever tries to provide representation of the invisible position will be perceived at least initially as a traitor, and consequently ostracised and excluded. Why? There are two main explanations. On the one hand, this person is releasing and making generally available information about the community which has until now been jealously guarded. Access to it was the privilege of a limited number of people drawn together by the experience of discrimination and marginalisation. What I am describing now also applies, although to a more limited extent than in the past, to the confidential information about gay and lesbian communities which often secured people’s chances of survival especially if they lived “in the closet.” On the other, the features specific to the community are not infrequently experienced as a fount of shame. Bringing them out into the open will challenge the shame and unease associated with these indices of difference. And last of all, these representations challenge and threaten

¹³ MacIlleBhàin, *Dealbh Athar* 39.

to nullify the coping strategies that have ensured the community's survival until now and which are understood to have served it well.

Scott and Scotland (1936), by the Scottish writer Edwin Muir, has exercised a widespread influence which almost defies explanation, as it is surely among the most wrong-headed assessments of cultural colonialism ever penned. I have spoken of it in the past as a "taking in of the colonial wound." Today I would see it as symptomatic of a sort of "panic of the colonised" concerning the ineradicable differences which mark him or her off from the longed for, desirable, pure, and inviolately monolingual stance of the "coloniser," destined to remain unattainable:

[...] this linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another, that their emotions turn to the Scottish tongue, with all its associations of local sentiment, and their minds to a standard English which for them is almost bare of associations other than those of the classroom. [...] The major forms of poetry rise from a collision between emotion and intellect on a plane where both meet on equal terms; and it can never come into existence where the poet feels in one language and thinks in another, even though he should subsequently translate his thoughts into the language of his feelings. If we are to have a complete and homogeneous Scottish literature it is necessary that we should have a complete and homogeneous language. Two such languages exist in Scotland, and two only. The one is Gaelic and the other is English. [...] And of these two alternatives English is the only practicable one at present, whatever Gaelic may become in the future. To say this is to say that Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English.¹⁴

There could hardly be a starker contrast with Ngũgĩ's insistence on how important the use of African languages is, rather than the coloniser's language, English, which is also the predominant tongue of the African diaspora. Here he quotes Nadine Gordimer in support of his position:

But we writers cannot speak of taking up the challenge of a new century for African literature unless writing in African languages becomes the major component of the continent's literature. Without this, one cannot speak of an African literature. It must be the basis of the cultural cross-currents that will both buffer and stimulate that literature.¹⁵

¹⁴ Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1982) 8, 9, 111.

¹⁵ Reprinted in Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999) 34.

The implications for the use of Gaelic and Scots in the Scottish context require no underlining. The type of representation which I am urgently pleading for would be radically different – not tinged with shame, assertive and even confident, also devoid of any residual nostalgia about ever achieving total identification with the supposed stance of the “coloniser.”

Before closing, I want to make a series of suggestions about how a culture in fact progresses. In this case, what we could call a “national” culture is uppermost in my mind. The concept cannot be easily pinned down or simplified because the nature of any culture will be dependent on the boundaries by which we choose to define it – boundaries that may be geographical and territorial, linguistic, or historical, or concerned with self-perception and self-definition in terms of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation. The hypothesis would be that cultures, and societies, progress – that is, renew themselves – thanks to dynamic interactions between internal differences. In this particular case, it can be argued that, in political terms, a shift in allegiance on the part of a large proportion of the descendants of the original Irish immigrants from the Scottish Labour party to the Scottish National Party, taking place from the 1990s onwards, finally brought the case for independence into the mainstream of Scottish politics. Culturally, the breaking down of the barriers and the prejudice which had hemmed in those descendants produced a flowering of artistic activity in the Glasgow conurbation which might usefully be compared to what happened in Central Europe when the Jewish communities issued forth from the ghettos where they had been confined, from the 1860s onwards.

I have written “internal” differences, but it is worth proposing a *caveat* given that, within a culture, distinguishing the internal from the external and the native from the foreign is always problematic, in part because culture is of its nature also a storehouse of elements which are temporarily in abeyance, waiting patiently for the time when they can be activated and integrated afresh. In other words, a culture can also be viewed as the repository of everything which a given society is *not*. These considerations indicate why the term “identity” is so problematic, given its implications of “sameness to itself.” What matters in any given culture is not, what is the same, but what is different. A culture is not the product or the expression of a given society, but rather of the transformative dynamics which are in the process of changing that society – of constantly rendering it other than what it is.

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