

ON IRISH POETS WRITING IN SCOTLAND

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2023.65.7>

Abstract: Starting from the polyglot work of the Dublin-born and Skye-based Rody Gorman, who writes in Scottish and Irish Gaelic, English and his own invented translation of “intertonguing,” this essay explores recent poetic connections between the two countries through readings of Irish poets who live or have lived in Scotland: the Gaelic and Irish peregrinations of David Wheatley, and the “minoritized diasporic” position of poets in English such as Alan Gillis, Miriam Gamble, and Aoife Lyall. It discusses ways in which these poets engage with dislocation, linguistic multiplicity, the risks of being absorbed into a new environment, and the possibility of flitting – Sweeney-like – between places, literatures, and trees. It ends with a focus on the diasporic Gaelic writing of Niall O’Gallagher, and how he negotiates his Irish inheritance. There is an unexpected focus on bodybuilding, birds, and moths; on people being transformed into dolphins; and an unregretful Columba cheerily leaving Ireland behind.

Keywords: Irish poetry, Scottish poetry, Sweeney, transformations, cianalas, poetic resistance, feathers

Some context: I write this as someone who was, for a while, a Scottish poet living in Ireland. The first poems I wrote as an adult were written in Dublin, and read in the St Stephen’s Green Unitarian Church for a Poetry Introductions night organised by Noel Monahan. I had got a sense that the poems might actually be reasonable by showing them (at his kitchen table in Camus Crois on the Isle of Skye) to Rody Gorman, a Dubliner who has made his home in Scotland. There were – and still are – few other Scottish poets living and writing in Ireland: the trip south-west across the Sea of Moyle is not one commonly made, at least not to uproot and re-root. Moving back to Scotland in 2010, and living here with an Irish poet, I came to realise that the reverse was not the case, that the flights from Dublin and Belfast to Edinburgh and Glasgow, the ferry from Belfast or Larne to Stranraer or Cairnryan, were lines of poetic connection, displacement and nostalgia, for a

sizeable – and generally ignored individually or *en masse* – number of Irish poets writing in Scotland. This is a group who often fit only awkwardly, if at all, within the established Irish communities around the country. They are not even a minoritized group, but a shadow of a community: poets sometimes claimed by Scotland, sometimes not, poets sometimes remembered in Ireland, sometimes not; these dynamics are irrational. Many, but not all of the poets I'll talk about are personal friends, and this essay is perhaps thus an act of recognition as much as of criticism. Certainly, it would be dishonest of me to ignore my own intricate relationship to the poets I'll talk about; it would also be dishonest to ignore the erraticness of the Scottish poetry scene – born largely out of the incredible poverty of cultural debate in the country – that sometimes celebrates, sometimes does not, the poets living in the country no matter where they were born.

The conversation between Ireland (the Republic and the North) and Scotland is a multi-lingual one, involving English, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Scots, and Ulster Scots. In his 2017 collection *The President of Planet Earth*, David Wheatley's paean to the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay (almost) ends with the short poem "Eilean": "A lochan, a flat stone / placed in its centre – / Scotland, I have / added an island / to your store."¹ Attitudes to such a process of personal, cultural cairn building – on a national scale, and across languages (the Gaelic-titled "eilean" leading to, being glossed by, the five-line English poem) – are broadly what I will be looking at, in the work of Gorman, Wheatley, Alan Gillis, Niall O'Gallagher, Miriam Gamble, and Eoghan Walls, with brief discussion of Aoife Lyall and Rachel McCrum. (There are other figures I could mention – Leontia Flynn, say, who spent a formative year in Edinburgh.) This is a process of archipelagic creation and exploration, of building bridges between islands, languages, and literatures (the concrete poetry of Hamilton Finlay and Morgan doesn't have a comparable tradition in Ireland), and individual poems. But the poets also have the knowledge that such bridges, like the one north of Tolsta on the Isle of Lewis, might ultimately be bridges to nowhere.

In 2015, the Dublin-born poet Ailbhe Darcy, while she was living in Germany (she now lives in Wales), suggested that Eoghan Walls, Miriam Gamble, Dylan Brennan, and herself were poets of a "new wave" of the Irish diaspora who had a different experience of exile to those born before the 1980s:

Unlike previous exiles, many know what it's like to feel entitled to the pursuit of pleasure, material goods, or a prosperous future. The new Irish Diaspora is different, too, by dint of the unprecedented mobility and access

¹ David Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2017) 163.

to information bestowed on them by new technology... Because this generation of the Irish Diaspora—of which I am a part—is different, reading backwards into the literature of Ireland’s past can only take us so far. We must read around us and learn from writers in other places. Because our own writing cannot assume a local readership, as it might if we had stayed home, we have to hope that it reaches out to readers beyond the Irish.²

This is perhaps too confident about the strength of that “local readership” in the first place and suggests that wider reading only comes from an experience of exile (which is not necessarily the case). The hint of a (positively) uprooted global citizenship is perhaps to be lauded, but it might equally have been found in Mandelstam’s “nostalgia for world culture,” and “reading backwards into the literature of Ireland’s past” does still retain its (nostalgic) attractiveness for many. Nevertheless, the central tensions are salutary: the questions of what and where each poet is reading and learning, and who they are writing for, are central and slippery, as is the relationship (present or absent) with Ireland or any sense of “home.”

The poetry of Rody Gorman, for example, puts particular pressure on the apparently insignificant preposition “bhuam.” Ciaran Carson meditated for a whole book on the power of the prepositions *Until Before After* (2010), but it is physical distance rather than temporal ordering (or the relationship between the two) that preoccupies Gorman’s poetic eye. “Bhuam” he most often renders as “over there” – or, in the recent “intertonguing,” “farawaywanting from us” (in dictionaries it would most likely appear as “far from me”).³ The attention to what is “over there,” combined with a complicated sense of “wanting,” recurs throughout his career. In “Ri Taobh Linne Shlèite” (Beside the Sound of Sleat), originally published in *Fax* (1996), he writes:

Choisich mi san uisge
Ri taobh Linne Shlèite
Nuair a dh’fhalbh thu san oidhche

’S dh’fhidir mi ’n t-uisge-stiùireach
Is gun lorg idir air an t-soitheach
A dh’fhag thall bhuam e,

² Ailbhe Darcy, “The New Irish Diaspora Poets,” *The Town Crier*, 7 August 2015, <http://towncrier.puritan-magazine.com/irish-diaspora/>.

³ Gorman’s developed translation style – for which see his translation of “Samhail” below – deconstructs the act of translation, showing how individual words, when translated, contain many different possible routes or options.

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Sin agus a' ghealach
A' tuiteam an cridhe na beinne,
Fann, sgàinte.

*I walked out in the rain
Beside the Sound of Sleat
After you left at night*

*And I noticed a wake
But not a trace
Of the vessel that left it over there*

*And the old moon
Falling in the heart of the mountain,
Faint and rent.⁴*

And “bhuam” appears at crucial points in his lockdown poems “Ri Linn Glasadh an t-Sluaigh / Over a Hundred Days of Solitude in the Highlands,” and especially “Samhail,” which I will quote at some length here:

A' tathaich air ais mun bhothan
Seachad air Coill' a' Ghasgain
Agus Abhainn an Ùird na lighe
Far an robh na buachaillean rin linn
'S an doras-mòr air a ghlasadh
Agus bùird is tàirnean air na h-uinneagan
'S an sanas ann: *Cùm a-mach*
'S e a' tuiteam am broinn a chèile,
Dh'fhairich mi bhuam crònan
Is carachadh nam fiadh
An lùib nam fiùran 's nan gallan
Samhail taimhslich nam bodach.

Back hauntvisiting around the bothy past the woods of Gasgan and the Ord River in stagnantspate where the shepherdlads were in their generationtime and the windows nailed and boarded and a Keep Out whisperwarningsign there in it and all falling in, I feltheard over there the

⁴ Rody Gorman, *Lorg Eile / Final Call* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2022) 10. The translations are Gorman's own.

purldirgelull-lowing and movement of the deer beambowbendamong the straightscionsaplingstalks apparitionlike the sound of the oldspectreboys before they come to occupy a house.

Fiadh na chlosach

ri taobh a' Bhealaich Ruaidh

ri taobh nam fianach-dosach

*the carcass of a deer beside the way at Bealach Ruadh beside the tufted deer grass*⁵

These are not randomly chosen poems: they come first and last in Gorman's recently published selected poems, *Lorg Eile / Final Call* (2022), and there is a strange – uncanny – continuity between them. In “Ri Taobh Linne Shlèite” what is “bhuam” is already absent: the boat that leaves a wake; the lover (?) who left during the night; the old moon (to be replaced by the new moon?). The pervasive sense is of absence, distance, and of a hovering between loss and longing – if saying something even as intangible as this is appropriate. In “Samhail,” meanwhile, Gorman uses the layout of his poems and translations to echo the effect of the Gaelic poetic form, *croasanachd*, which combines verse and prose to represent two people speaking, and with the sense that the two parts of the Gaelic “poem” – or two separate poems – are kept apart by that chunk of inter-tongued English. What happens in that pause between the poetry appears to be the death of the deer who are “haunting” the forest. What does this death signify, if anything? Who is haunting who: is the poet haunting the place, the deer haunting the poet? What is required, or no longer required, to “keep out”?

Reading these poems together suggests an ongoing engagement with what is unclear or opaque, with histories that are only accessible through distant traces, “purldirgelull-lowing,” or the silent, overly evocative image of the deer carcass. Meaning is not embodied, crystallised, or solidified here, but deferred or gestured at (kept “over there” as it were, or “kept out”). This is evident in the allusion to the most famous (and perhaps elusive) Gaelic poem of the twentieth century, Somhairle MacGill-Eain's “Hallaig,” which begins “Tha bòrd is tàirnean air an uinneag” [The window is nailed and boarded].⁶ “Hallaig” is concerned with the manner in which a space can be retained for the evocation of a Gaelic community cleared a hundred years earlier, the village of Hallaig on the island of Raasay: MacGill-Eain pictures the dead coming alive in the woods of Raasay, in an anthropomorphic reimagining of the trees. The epigraph suggests that “Tìm, am

⁵ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 260.

⁶ Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / White Leaping Flame: Collected Poems*, ed. Emma Dymock and Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011) 230-35.

fiadh" [time, the deer] is in the woods of Raasay. When a deer is then shot (but not, apparently, killed) by the poet using "gunna ghaoil" [the gun of love], this suggests a desire to stop or, at least, hold back the march of time: time would hasten on the process by which the people of Raasay are forgotten. At the end of the poem its blood won't be seen again in the woods "rim bheò" [while I live; literally "in my lifetime"]. This has quite different connotations if you take that "lifetime" to be that of the poet, the speaker, or the poem (and the "life" of a poem as continuing for as long as someone can read it). Any hope that the poem might offer for the continuity or restoration of a community on Raasay is tentative, and opaque. Gorman's poem is blunter, but no clearer about its ultimate meaning. The deer is dead through causes unknown, and if the ending offers some connection with or afterlife in the landscape, it does so more emphatically in the English translation than the Gaelic: the clear etymology of "deergrass," against the trace of "fiadh" in "fianach." Responding to the most famous Gaelic poem of the twentieth century is perhaps an act of poetic bravado, and also one that raises questions about the differences between Gorman's poetic positioning and MacGill-Eain's (with MacGill-Eain's deep-rooted genealogical connections to Raasay, and the community he reimagine). Gorman's poem is also certainly haunted but is more passive, more distanced. It is not the poet's "gun of love" (as in MacGill-Eain's poem) that turns the deer into the deer carcass; what does, though, remains unsaid – though that the death occurs in the space between the Gaelic stanzas taken up by the English translation may itself be suggestive. This combined sense of being haunted but also distanced gives "Samhail" a dream-like, or specifically "aisling"-like, quality, but one which verges on the nightmarish as well as the visionary.

The extent to which nightmare and dream combine in his approach to Scotland in particular is developed in "Aisling" from *Beartan Briste* (2011), which Gorman intertongues as "Dreamnightmareaislingwomanvisionpoem." This poem begins "Alba bhuan air faire" ["O Scotlandpinewhite farawaywanting from us"]; Scotland too is deferred or held at a distance, in other words; the dream-like version of the nation suggested by the "aisling" genre is one that is here a site of longing but also distance (that "farawaywanting").⁷ This is again a poem that perhaps needs to be read alongside another, this time one of Gorman's own from the same collection, "Dol a Laighe" (Sinking). Looking up from his desk, the poet sees the sunset out the window and has a curtailed vision:

⁷ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 161.

siud nam fhianais
Air èiginn carraig
No 's dòcha gur e th' agam eilean beag
A' gobadh a-mach às an linne
Nach nochd ach ainneamh
Ainneamh nuair a bhuaileas
An solus ud ball àraidh
Ri dealachadh-nan-tràth
Fada bhuainn air faire.

There in witnesspresence just about is a cockroachknotheadlandrock or maybe a youngwee island gobsticking out of the centurysound that appears only rarely when that moon phaseknowledgelight hits a particular peniscablebowlsplot at onceearlyprayermeanpartingtime farawaywanting from us on the horizon-ridge.⁸

Gorman's islands, in other words, are always sinking beyond reach, his aislings are always dissipating, rather than concretizing. His intertonguings enact this, especially in that most recent incarnation in which normal script and italics, indentations and stanzaic patterns jostle together. Eric Falci has persuasively argued that in Irish and Scottish Gaelic poems published with *en face* English translations the "poem" – even for speakers of those languages – consists of an act of reading in the "gutter" between the two texts, as the reader's eye scans across to the English for help with any unusual or unknown words, or complex images.⁹ A poem like "Samhail" complicates this reading experience further; reading this poem, one no longer looks for the "text" in the gutter, but in the various runnels rushing between the blocks of language.

Such dislocations and unfootings are no surprise. In the early-ish Irish-language poem "Oileán" (Island) from *An Duilleog Agus an Crotal / The Leaf and the Lichen* (2004) Gorman has two islands, two "homes," separated by time as well as distance. One is associated with a public literary life: "I gcuideachta Seamus Heaney, / Margaret Atwood is Derek Walcott / Agus neach as Críoch Lochlainn / Ag féile thiar / I mBaile Átha Cliath mo dhúchais." [In the company of Seamus Heaney, / Margaret Attwood and Derek Walcott / And some old geezer from Iceland / At a reading held / At home in Dublin.]¹⁰ The other is "an oileán / Ina

⁸ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 143.

⁹ Eric Falci, "Reading in the Gutters," *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 161-75.

¹⁰ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 74-75.

bhfuil cónaí orm ó shin.” [the island / Where I’ve made my home.] Returning there, waiting for him on the floor by the door “Beidh *Scotland on Sunday* / Agus an *Independent*, / Lá ar gcúl beirt.” [Will be a copy of *Scotland on Sunday* / And one of *The Independent* / Both a day behind.] The slightly throwaway world of international literature festivals – those random connections between writers, that “some old geezer” – is contrasted with the different timescale of Skye. But to what end? To emphasise the difference between the Irish ways of describing belonging: “mo dhúchais,” as against somewhere “ina bhfuil cónaí orm”? To suggest the fetishization of that which is out of time, the day behind? To hint at the delayed relationship to “independence” in both places? Or simply to evoke an uneasy – or comfortable – inhabiting of different worlds? If there is a self-conscious name-dropping here (both of the poets and the newspapers), there is also a sense of mutual misunderstanding between those worlds: it is unclear what is actually being crossed on the bridge back from Kyle of Lochalsh to Skye, “an ghrian / Ag dul faoi, na faoileáin ag fáí go hard” [the sun / Setting, the gulls looking down].¹¹ In an earlier Irish poem, “Cumarsáid” (Communication) from *Bealach Garbh* (1999), all that can be understood is a paradoxical fluency of misunderstanding: “Nach maith a thuigim as do chaint / Go bhfuil muid líofa beirt / I dteanga nach dtuigeann muid i gceart” [I understand clearly / From what you have to say / That we’re fluent, both of us, / In a language neither understands].¹² If each poet is an island, a repository of an individual language, there is no hope of building a bridge between them, no matter the skills of the translator.

This sketch aligns Gorman’s work with the frequent position of the exile poet: between two worlds, languages, understandings of the world, alienated from both and – in the process – from the past and the present, in a reality that is intangible or slippery: the world could be seen to be sinking “bhuam” at all points. This is not the whole story, however. Another touchstone for Gorman is the example of the mad king Sweeney from *Buile Shuibhne*, who offers a model of the Irish poet / singer / birdman flitting back and forth between these islands (and their tree-tops), belonging everywhere and nowhere. In the original story Sweeney, driven mad and turned into a bird-like creature by the curse of St Ronan Finn, wanders the treetops of Ireland, Scotland, and Western England. Gorman has engaged in multiple, multilingual reworkings of *Buile Shuibhne*, which are due to be published later this year, but Sweeney is also a figure who has been quite widely explored by recent Irish poets: Seamus Heaney for one made use of the story to connect the different islands in the midst of the Troubles in *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and *Station*

¹¹ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 74-75.

¹² Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 38.

Island (1984). Sweeney is a complex character to adopt, and not one reducible to any questions of belonging to or dislocation from particular locales, communities, religions, or regions; there is an otherness to Sweeney that brings into question the borders between humans and other creatures, with the possibility of the dissolution of the human into an entirely different species, or indeed genus.

The malleability of Sweeney – with the potential to be liberating as well as nightmarish – is perhaps what makes him attractive to the Derry poet Eoghan Walls, who now lives in the north of England, and who wrote his second collection, *Pigeon Songs* (2019), while living in Carnoustie, on the North Sea coast of Scotland.¹³ Walls, Sweeney-like, has been peripatetic around these islands. Originally from Derry and having completed a PhD at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in Belfast, he has lived in Laytown in the Republic of Ireland, Carnoustie, and now outside Lancaster: he is published, though, by the Welsh press Seren. *Pigeon Songs* is one of the more extreme versions of aviphilia, or love of and identification with birds: it is half written from the perspective of pigeons and perhaps inevitably includes the unhomed Sweeney in the poem “Sweeney’s Song.” Walls’s work often revolves around the corporeal, and how fatherhood affects his relationship to his own body and its transformations. (I should hesitate to say “his own” since the lyric “I” in his work, as here, includes the non-human as well as the human, and at times comedic, at times grotesque, transfigured versions of the “poet.”) “Sweeney’s Song” stages an uneasy dislocation from the self, from the “here”:

Last night I dreamt I had a second penis,
a nestling chick. I knew it was the baby’s.
Though I knew it was going to leave us
and slowly get reabsorbed into my body,

¹³ Sweeney is a more attractive model for male than female poets; there might, though, be something of Sweeney in the poem “Do not alight here again” by Rachel McCrum, who is from Donaghadee in County Down, lived in Edinburgh for much of the 2010s, although she has since moved to Montreal (her first collection, *First Blast to Awaken Women Degenerate*, takes its title – as a challenge – from John Knox). In “Do not alight here again,” she writes ambivalently of “the Mainland / where we were always supposed to end up” and implores at the end: “Get out. / Leave while you can. [...] Wander far. / Be better than us. // Do not alight here again.” Rachel McCrum, *First Blast to Awaken Women Degenerate* (Edinburgh: Stewed Rhubarb Press, 2018) 9. Why stop after one dislocation, one upheaval when one can – like Sweeney – continue wandering and alighting?

there was a comfort to it. The night before
I did my weights in the blue light of the telly,
working my triceps and flight muscles sore
as you flickered between two foreign movies.

Tonight I've stuck my head outside the train
with Dundee's lights splattered on the river,
my hair plastered to my skull like feathers

and I am barking like a gander in the rain.
There is so much of the world I do not know,
but I am coming home. I'm coming home.¹⁴

If the transformation into Sweeney is a matter of bodybuilding, it becomes a training and preparation of the self not for flight and departure, but for return – or indeed a “flickering between” those instinctual pulls. At the end it is unclear what manner of “home” the speaker is coming back to: if it is a sense of self and his own body or something more expectedly domestic. But it is also unclear what it would mean for someone like this character, “hair plastered to my skull like feathers,” to come home, and whether we actually would want to see what that would entail: is there a hint of threat as well as promise in that last line?

The idea of “home” is not always as fraught in the work of Irish poets in Scotland. Aoife Lyall, for one, is more celebratory of the ability to imagine and recreate a sense of home in *Mother, Nature* (2021). She faithfully rewrites Seamus Heaney's famous “While the others were away at mass” from his “Clearances” sequence – a poem about the domestic closeness of peeling potatoes with his mother – to end with the lines “I kiss / Your hands and they taste of starch, and home.”¹⁵ Where “home” for Heaney had been found in the shared domesticity of housework, in Lyall's work it is found in this but also in the act of alluding to Heaney – there is a second degree of “homeliness” here, an accumulation of forms of belonging.

The same can't really be said for Walls's “Sweeney's Song,” however. It is balanced, and preceded in *Pigeon Songs*, by another train poem, “The Story of Grace,” which presents a moment of departure from the everyday and mundane:

¹⁴ Eoghan Walls, *Pigeon Songs* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren Books, 2019) 49. “Sweeney's Song” was originally published in *Magma* poetry journal in 2015.

¹⁵ Aoife Lyall, *Mother, Nature* (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2021) 62; Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 27.

And then there was a night when the train stopped
by a field halfway between Leuchars and Dundee,
and the world was in snow as far as she could see,
the moon ridiculously big, and despite her laptop

at her seat, the boys, the shop, she took her window,
dropped to the rocky track where an ankle twisted,
and soaked her jeans clambering up from the ditch
until she was scrambling across the uneven snow

taking the path of the stoat or the doe in the dark
aware of her muscles again and the edges of air
in her lungs, up her back, plunging into nowhere,

trailing warm plumes of breath beneath the stars
until the train left her with only her own sounds,
alone on the earth, wondering what happens now.¹⁶

The trope of departure might involve another response to Heaney. In his variations on the Sweeney myth in "Sweeney Redivivus," the last section of *Station Island* (1984), the poet becomes "incredible to myself" through a process of election and isolation which separates him from any sense of community and belonging. "The King of the Ditchbacks" in the same volume ends on the image of "a rich young man // leaving everything he had / for a migrant solitude," and it is into such a "migrant solitude," a feeling of now being "incredible" that Grace appears to have plunged herself in Walls's poem.¹⁷ These connections might seem forced. Walls, however, has a PhD on Heaney, Hopkins, Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and the influence between the poets runs deep and works in unusual ways, despite meeting a certain degree of resistance.¹⁸ The physicality of Walls's poems is important (even more so than Heaney's). Being transformed into Sweeney or thrusting oneself (from a train into a snowy field in Fife) is a physical and not simply metaphorical process: they require "working my triceps and flight muscles sore," or have the effect of leaving you soaked, with a twisted ankle, and "aware

¹⁶ Walls, *Pigeon Songs* 48.

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984) 98, 58.

¹⁸ Eoghan Walls, "A Dialogue between Phenomenology and Poetry: Reading Heaney and Hopkins through Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty" (PhD diss., Queen's University Belfast, 2009).

of [your] muscles again." The myth of exile and return is not linear but is one which involves a regaining of the self, and also a reworking, a bulking up of the self: but there is also the knowledge that whoever returns will be palpably different.

There is nothing necessarily or reductively "Scottish" about these poems, other than their setting in trains in Fife; the ideas of escape and homecoming they present are not, say, modulated through an engagement or reworking of Scottish precursors. But then, tying the tale of Sweeney to a particular national narrative or identity would be – to some extent – to reduce its weird power, its sense of earth-shattering change. It marks, among other things, the border line between pre- and post-Christian Ireland, and the absolute shift in world view this entails, and so even its "Irishness" is one that is fractured and disjointed.

Exploring how knowledge too – and with that poetic form – can be fractured is one of the ways in which David Wheatley's poetry has dealt with the relationship between Irish and Scottish poetic traditions: with the tendency, however, to find ways of combining, overcoming, ironizing or simply avoiding any such disjointedness. Wheatley is from Bray, County Wicklow, and did a PhD in Trinity College Dublin before lecturing in Hull and now in Aberdeen; he speaks and writes in Irish and Scottish Gaelic, as well as Scots and English (different languages are tools for exploration and play rather than obstacles to understanding in his work). His most recent book, *The President of Planet Earth* (2017), was largely written in rural Aberdeenshire. Weirdly, for I think there was no crossover with Walls, it too features a poem in the voice of birds – two herring gulls in this case, "Calum" and "Hamish," who in the poem "Pseudocouple" become cyphers for various other doubled or split identities: Didi and Gogo, Mercier and Camier, Statler and Wardorf, Keats and Chapman, Scotus Eriugena and Duns Scotus, Wallace and Bruce.¹⁹ In the process of "twinning" Ireland and Scotland (as the blurb on the back of his collection puts it), Wheatley engages with the experience of uprooting himself and integrating himself into Scottish literary traditions, and especially exploring symbolic historical precedents for such a relationship. There is, perhaps inevitably, once more an identification with Sweeney, in a poem relating a plane flight to bird flight, "Keen":

Under the plane's giant white-tailed eagle wing
where flitting Sweeney's final teardrop fallen
petrified to Ailsa Craig, flitting all alone
myself, I fancied that I heard a great auk calling.²⁰

¹⁹ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 92-93.

²⁰ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 86.

Alongside that “last stray bewildered auk,” though, there is also the symbol of the missionary father, Colmcille: the first, rather than the last, of something. “Colmcille’s Farewell,” Wheatley’s re-versioning of the Ur-text of Irish dislocation in Scotland, is embittered rather than longingly celebratory. The poem addresses Ireland:

No horizon is not the better for want of you,
no storm at sea less welcome than your harbours.
You are the mistranscription in every manuscript,
the tuneless hymn intoned by the abbey dunce.
I would wish the Holy mother the squealing of pigs
before the dull, click-clacking drone of your prayers.²¹

This “farewell” is entertainingly joyful and unregretful – there is none of the nostalgia, loss and piety of the poem ascribed to Columba on which it models itself: “Fil súil nglais / fégbais Éirinn dar a hais” [A blue eye turns / watching Ireland fade behind].²²

With this departure from the “dull, click-clacking” comes a celebration of where Columba was heading to; Wheatley has explored the Scottish poetic canon more insistently than any of the other poets I talk about here (Gorman aside, perhaps). He has a sequence of sonnets in Scots for Robert Fergusson, the poet maudit of pre-Burnsian Scotland. He also has various poems which flit between Gaelic, English, and Scots, as in “Brock”: “*Breac* the brock / laid broken-backed / by the side of the road [...]”²³ He has a response to the Gaelic tree alphabet based on *Auraicept na n-Éces* (The Scholar’s Primer) and is perhaps the poet who has made most use of Gaelic for concrete poetry (although that field is not large), in a series of poems – “The Reed Bunting Unseen” – dedicated to Ian Hamilton Finlay. These concrete poems can swerve from playful unpickings of orthography (with the title a crucial part of the poem in each case)

IRELAND/SCOTLAND: TO THE SÍNEADH / SĪNEADH FADA
Over here we drive on the other side of the vowel.²⁴

²¹ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 27.

²² Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, and Peter Mackay, eds., *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Verse* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2021) 189-90. Translated by Meg Bateman.

²³ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 96-97.

²⁴ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 157.

to playful explorations of dislocation, and the way in which poetry, in a parallel to the heritage industry, might often involve the removal of items (or poems) from their “original location”:

SITE-SPECIFIC

This poem is on permanent loan
to its original location.²⁵

Often these poems are suggestions of “elsewheres” which are, ultimately, nowhere. These are developed at length in “The Rumoured Existence of Elsewheres,” which is, I’d argue, a response to Ruaraidh MacThòmais’s “An Dàrna Eilean” (The Second Island). MacThòmais’s poem proposes an infinite sequence of lochs on islands in the middle of lochs, with the effect of presenting a sequence of endless longing without fulfilment: “anns an t-solas gheal sin / chunnaic sinn loch anns an eilean / is eilean anns an loch, / is chunnaic sinn / gun do theich am brударar pìos eile bhuainn.” [in that white light / [we] saw a loch in the island, / and an island in the loch, / and we recognised / that the dream had moved away from us again.]²⁶ In Wheatley’s hands this becomes, in a poem located in Mull, “The island behind the island behind the island. / The loch with no name robbing us of ours too. [...] The flag of an unknown nation, / wistfully displayed.”²⁷ The “wistfully displayed” brings us into one of the most loaded concepts in Gaelic self-awareness, the idea of “cianalas,” or longing / nostalgia / homesickness.²⁸ “Cianalas” is, importantly, always already displaced. Rody Gorman translates one of his Gaelic poems written in Cape Breton, “Air an Druim,” as “Cianalas”: the English version, but not the Gaelic, features the blunt statement “This is *cianalas*.”²⁹ In Gorman’s poem, whether it is “cianalas” or not depends on whether you are speaking English or not; Wheatley’s poem then becomes the perfect displaced metaphor for “cianalas,” precisely because there is no apparent connection to Gaelic at all. Crucially, though, “cianalas” is not to be experienced as a debilitating condition in Wheatley’s

²⁵ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 159.

²⁶ Derick S. Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich: Cruinneachadh de Bhàrdachd, 1940-1980* (Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1982) 220-21.

²⁷ Wheatley, *The President of Planet Earth* 85.

²⁸ The shibbolethic force of “cianalas” is the Gaelic inflection of a nineteenth-century tendency Svetlana Boym has outlined, as “intellectuals and poets from different national traditions began to claim that they had a special word for homesickness that was radically untranslatable.” Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 12.

²⁹ Gorman, *Lorg Eile* 104.

work, a lived experience of loss: it is, rather, an unrooted cultural emblem (that “flag of an unknown nation”), which is to be encountered as just another mode, model, or form of existence – and which, as such, can be adopted or ironized just like any other.

For his first Scottish-written book, Wheatley moved from the Irish publisher Gallery Press to the northern English publisher Carcanet; similarly, Alan Gillis, the Ards-born poet who is Professor of Poetry at Edinburgh University, has recently moved with the collection *The Readiness* (2020) from Gallery to the London-based Picador (where the Scottish poet Don Paterson was the editor). These peregrinations have their own weight, influence, and expectation. Gillis has been an important figure in the Scottish poetry scene: one-time and long-time editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, one-time member of the Shore Poets in Edinburgh. But there is still – and this says more about the odd nature of the poetry world in Scotland – a sense that his presence is barely acknowledged. It is rare to see him invited to read at festivals and events in Scotland, despite the fact he is a mesmerising reader of his own work. If, as Ailbhe Darcy argues, “We must read around us and learn from writers in other places. Because our own writing cannot assume a local readership, as it might if we had stayed home, we have to hope that it reaches out to readers beyond the Irish,” there is always the risk of falling between two readerships, of not being fully recognized or integrated in either world, for all of that increased mobility.

This is particularly true of a poet like Gillis, whose work does not locate itself as consciously as Wheatley’s in a place and culture he has adopted. Gillis is pre-eminently still a poet exploring, on the one hand, the mundanities of domestic life, of estate life, of the working-class community in which he grew up, with its brooding violence and hyper-masculinity, and on the other, how these can be combined and contrasted with the full weight of the western poetic traditions (the Dundee born and raised Paterson is thus an ideal, sensitive editor for his work). Such, at least, is the dynamic of “Dionysus in Belfast,” from *The Readiness* (2020). In a pattern familiar from various Belfast murders and beatings, four lads in a BMW – “Big Andy, Wee Eddie, Fat Bobby and Sandy” – pick up a “foreign-looking glipse” who is looking for “The Limelight”; the violence they plan to do to him is returned in ways they couldn’t have imagined. They are transformed into dolphins, after “the stranger sets free / his own weird hoo-hoo-hoo”: “Wee Eddie’s / nose grows, and grows, to a moonwhite // two-foot beak and Fat Bobby reeks / of kippers and lets out a backseat squawk / like Flipper. All turned dolphin, piss-streaks / through the night, they scoot off, diving for Belfast Lough.”³⁰ There is,

³⁰ Alan Gillis, *The Readiness* (London: Picador, 2020) 32-33.

despite the violence in the world imagined here, a faith in transformative power; there is the sense that the life of the four lads as dolphins, scooting off for Belfast Lough, is now actually better.

This may also be crediting poetry (that “weird hoo-hoo-hoo”) with the ability to transform, to improve; and it may hold that the world itself is generally pervaded, or haunted, by benign spirits (at least as a counterbalance to the violence of humanity). The sense of possible benignity persists in the few poems Gillis has located in Scotland. “On Blackford Hill,” for example, stages a meeting with an old man on a park bench, there to remember walks with his wife who he now visits in “Cairdean House” (“Cairdean” being the Gaelic for “friends”). Up the hill, he says, “You’ve more interest / in angels,” and the man he encounters may himself be an angel. When they part, the poet says:

I bid him the best, and as I walk
into the empty space before me,
the here of the air, it shifts over there,
ghosting everywhere and nowhere,
layer upon layer of nothing distinct.

[...]

On Blackford Hill’s
slopes, ice and ozone, I breathe in the air
and because it is not human, breathe out.³¹

There is a level of self-possession here – if not possession of place – that was missing from his earlier poems set in Edinburgh, where he himself becomes that ghostly spirit. In “Nostalgia,” for example, from the earlier collection *Scapegoat* (2014), the poet remembers how “I too *lived* somewhere. Life had shape / I dream of now: journals and Schweppes, / candles stubbed in empty bottles of wine” and works up to the realisation of “how / imperceptibly we perceive it’s too late / to be free, get a grip, give life shape.”³²

At the end of “No. 8” from the same collection, it becomes clear that the bus the poet is on is in Edinburgh (until its arrival “onto North Bridge” there was nothing located about it otherwise), and the sudden discovery that the poem is evoking a particular place and time doesn’t bring rootedness but a sense of temporariness:

³¹ Gillis, *The Readiness* 24-25.

³² Alan Gillis, *Scapegoat* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 2014) 47. Emphasis added.

Sometimes I feel like a feather
swept this-a-way lifting
that-a-way through the heavens
of my time and place here
on earth
while nonetheless
sitting on a bus.³³

Fate is accepted here, even if that is just the fatedness of bus routes. The feather being “swept this-a-way lifting / that-a-way” has the air, once more, of the scattered Sweeney blown off course and ended up in Scotland by chance. That “chance” might, of course, be *ill*-fated: in the title poem “Scapegoat,” Scotland is the unwelcome – and then only – option for McCandless, on the run after his first, failed job as a getaway driver. “Ah could go tah fucking Scotland” becomes “Spread out and look, / one says. Another asks, what for? / If he’s smart he’s in Scotland.”³⁴ By “On Blackford Hill,” though, the sense of “nothingness” (that “layer upon layer of nothing distinct”) can nonetheless be countered by the salutary meeting with the human and the non-human.

Questions of denomination and background, which will inflect Irish poets’ relationships with Scotland, are pertinent here. A Catholic getaway driver would be more likely to head to “fucking Dublin” than “fucking Scotland.” McCandless’s options are shaped by his upbringing and (nominal) religion: free will is perhaps always circumscribed in different ways; not everyone’s fates have the same shape. A similar sense of the lack of free will (and the inevitability, for all its apparent skittishness, of fate) characterises the work of Miriam Gamble, a Brussels-born and Belfast-raised poet who is a friend and colleague of Gillis’s at Edinburgh, who did her PhD alongside Eoghan Walls at Queen’s University Belfast (the poetry world is, after all, very small), and who has lived in Scotland since 2010. “The Canal at Fountainbridge,” from her third book *What Planet* (2019), depicts a post-industrial world of dispossession in which:

The water doesn’t flow one way or the other
of its own imperative, but takes direction
from the wind; it turns back
on itself when it counters the lock,
peppered moth cut loose
from the products of industry [...] ³⁵

³³ Gillis, *Scapegoat* 34.

³⁴ Gillis, *Scapegoat* 65, 67.

³⁵ Miriam Gamble, *What Planet* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2019) 50.

The peppered moth is used as an example for the teaching of evolution to show directional colour change: dark-coloured moths became more prevalent during the industrial revolution; light-coloured moths once air pollution had cleared. Unlike the peppered moth, the poet is resistant to the pressure to be shaped by your immediate environment. The poem ends with an almost nightmarish image of an over-landscaped canal side:

Here is the scurf

of the past, the clean scalp of the future.
Here is a landscape like the head

of an orator, meticulously shuffling
through its show of slides –

what is to be kept, and what forgotten,
and in what order.³⁶

In “Maighdean-Mara,” a poem in her previous collection *Pirate Music* (2014), there had been a defiant – and erotic – positioning of herself in terms of Scotland: “Give me your tongue, Scotland. / I’ll meet you eye to eye [...] I would sing, and I would stand.”³⁷ By “The Canal at Fountainbridge,” though, this has become tempered by a wariness of being erased, of being consumed and broken: “And here is your own small past, / abstracted from it in a box / others will smash and squeeze.”³⁸ *What Planet* ends with (more) “Moths” and the realisation that her language too has evolved to include Scottish words and pronunciations: “Something changed when I wasn’t looking: / *gies* and *cannaes* came like moths to test their wings / on the filament of my tongue.”³⁹ One might, in other words, also become overwhelmed by one’s environment, one’s voice and distinctive speech “nearly” merging invisibly into a background: “I am hovering in stonewash blue, I am stamped / on the image like a pale moth on a pale tree, / a white crow on a field of white, or nearly.”⁴⁰

Like Gillis’s work, Gamble’s often reimagines Northern Ireland rather than Scotland as its immediate territory (when it has a specific “territory”), in returns

³⁶ Gamble, *What Planet* 51.

³⁷ Miriam Gamble, *Pirate Music* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2014) 33.

³⁸ Gamble, *What Planet*, 51.

³⁹ Gamble, *What Planet* 74.

⁴⁰ Gamble, *What Planet* 74.

to childhood, to the suburbs, to “Betty Staff’s,” her grandmother’s dance hall in Belfast. If the title *What Planet* (no question mark) is in part a questioning of place, it is one that does not want to reconcile geographical differences so much as highlight them: in a footnote in this collection she describes how in a collaboration with Nerys Williams they were “interested in attempting to explore displacement without nostalgia.”⁴¹ Her poetry holds together different experiences and places – Siete Lagunas in the Sierra Nevada in Andalucía, the “Abandoned Asylum” of Craiglockhart, the distorted through-the-looking-glass political realm of “Wonderland” – to see how they overlap or overlay one another or (crucially) don’t, and how one can maintain identity and a sense of self even when transported and transposed. In “Moths” body overlays place, not vice versa: “In your painting of the Old Man of Storr / the diaphanous scrim of my breasts overlays him.”⁴² The poem suggests, though, that it may only be the power of art, and acts of reimagining, that allows this perspective: one in which self and body remain the determining features, and in which location (and even a sense of aged patriarchal definition) fades into the background. Selfhood, in Gamble’s poems, is an act of will, in other words, against conditions – in Scotland or otherwise – that would render you identical, homogenous, with the world around you, or choose for you – with the “clean scalp of history” what is to be remembered and retained.

Questions of what is foreground and what is background might be even more pressing when dislocation and doubleness are a matter of birth rather than choice. Born and bred in Scotland, Niall O’Gallagher has quite a different relationship to “Irishness” and “Scottishness” to the other poets discussed here: the doubleness – the “twinning” Wheatley engages in – was not something necessarily chosen, although by learning Scottish Gaelic in adulthood O’Gallagher developed his own way of addressing it. This is not to say that there is in any way a singular or unitary “Irishness” experienced by poets raised in different denominations and religions in Dublin, Belfast, Greystones, Derry, and Newtownards. However, the tensions between “being” Scottish and Irish were something O’Gallagher was born into, and being part of an established Irish community in central Scotland and so being subject to the particular Scottish flavour of sectarianism is something he has had to negotiate in ways the other poets have not. The result is an individual plotting of different cultural affiliations and attractions, careful not to be bound by the entrenched positions of Scotland, or the established Irish community in Scotland. His poetry reworks a familial connection with Ireland – in particular with Tír Chonaill – at the level of formal structure and poetic positioning. He makes

⁴¹ Gamble, *What Planet* 79.

⁴² Gamble, *What Planet* 74.

common use of *aicill* rhyme (this has supplanted earlier explorations of the Petrarchan sonnet to become his most common poetic approach), and has epigraphs from *Tochmarc Étaíne*, and from the poems of Carolan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (as well as Dante, Ovid, Josep Carner, Catullus, and others). Nevertheless, he remains suspicious of the myths of self that often come with Scottishness, or with second- or third-generation Irishness.

On the one hand, having spent years in Govanhill in Glasgow, O’Gallagher is rightly wary of Scotland’s view of itself as welcoming to the world. In “Sràid Westmoreland,” for example, he criticises “na breugan a dh’ innseas dhuinn mur dheidhinn / fhèin” [the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves]: that every immigrant will be welcomed into a “baile far a bheil blàthas, bòidhchead ‘s beartas” [warmth, beauty and wealth], when in fact they encounter closes “a tha fosgailt don tìde is an dìle / a’ sìor dhòrtadh mar dheuran dhaoine cloinne” [that are open to the weather and the rain endlessly falling like children’s tears].⁴³ On the other hand, there is resistance to the tribal identities evident through the sports strips – Celtic and Donegal – on washing lines (“Linean-nighe”) across the Scottish central belt: “Air gach lìn tha na lèintean / ri chèile. Tha na *Ceillich* / is *Dùn na nGall* an crochadh, / ball-coise agus cleasachd // Ghàidhealach, aig an leth-chram.” [On every line there are shirts / beside each other. *Celtic* and *Dùn nan Gall* hanging, / football and Gaelic // games, at half-mast.”]⁴⁴ For all that those washing lines create a web connecting Scotland and Ireland, and past generations to the present, O’Gallagher is not part of that world, would fly by those nets, and cannot easily claim kinship with those washer-folk: “Bheirinn mo lèine uaine / ‘s gheal bhuam is a thoirt thuca, / ach a dh’aindeoin gach ceangail / a th’ eadarainn, chan urrainn.” [I’d take off my green / and white shirt to give it them, / but despite each link there is / between us, I can’t.]⁴⁵

Connection – and meaning – do not come for O’Gallagher through engrained tribal identity, but through personal acts of piety and celebration. He remembers his grandmother failing to convince nuns in Ireland to pray for a friend who had died fighting *against* Franco, and offers his own poem up instead.⁴⁶ Having not had songs passed down to him by his Irish-speaking father, he celebrates instead – in “O nach d’fhuair mi na h-òrain” (Since I Didn’t Get the Songs) – his grandfather’s

⁴³ Niall O’Gallagher, *Beatha Ùr* (Inverness: Clàr, 2013) 38. My translation.

⁴⁴ Niall O’Gallagher, *Suain Nan Tri Latha* (Inverness: Clàr, 2016) 42. My translation, published in Niall O’Gallagher, *Fuaimean Gràidh / Sounds of Love* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2023) 131.

⁴⁵ O’Gallagher, *Suain Nan Tri Latha* 42; O’Gallagher, *Fuaimean Gràidh* 131-32.

⁴⁶ O’Gallagher, *Beatha Ùr* 35.

house in Donegal: “Aig taigh mo sheanair chuala / sinn gach duan, facal is fonn / den chàinain is na fuaimean / a bu dual dhuinn, ciall is conn.” [At my grandfather’s house we heard each poem, word and tune of the language and the sounds that were our heritage, meaning and sense.]⁴⁷ He celebrates the way he too is involved in passing this heritage down to another “unexpected” generation: “Oir cluinnear / port gach fuinn le mo mhac òg / bha dùil nach cluinneadh tuilleadh, / na ghuileig fhèin ‘s mi ga phòg / gach oidhche.” [Because the tune of each song will be heard by my young son – that we thought would not be heard again – in his gurgles as I kiss him each night.]⁴⁸ And – as Rody Gorman had before him – O’Gallagher celebrates Edward Dwelly, the great lexicographer, and his dictionary, with its words known on both sides of the Sea of Moyle, as a symbol for the continued vibrancy of a language blooming in spite of it all, in a poem for the Gaelic League Glasgow, Conradh na Gaeilge Glaschú “1895-2020”:

Ach lìon Eideard Dwelly gach duilleag
de dh’fhaclair-san, na aibideil chraoibh’,
le faclan a chluinnte air gach taobh
Shruth na Maoile ‘s a thug gu cuimhne
nam fògarrach na dh’fhàg iad – duilleach
nan crann-daraich, fuinn nan òran caomh’,
ceòl binn nan eun anns a’ choille chaoil
– ‘s a shaoil iad nach cluinnte leò tuilleadh.

Ach cluinnear fhathast i an Cnoc a’ Ghobhainn,
A’ cothlamadh nan connrag is nam foghar
le cainnt choigrich nan innseachan air gach sràid;

agus am beul nam pàistean tha an teanga
nach d’fhuair bàs an achlais a peathar
ach tha beò am measg nan geugan seo fo bhlàth.⁴⁹

*But Edward Dwelly persevered, filled
every page of his dictionary – the leaves
of this alphabet of trees – with words heard
still on both sides of the Sea of Moyle, words*

⁴⁷ O’Gallagher, *Beatha Ùr* 34. My translation.

⁴⁸ O’Gallagher, *Beatha Ùr* 35.

⁴⁹ O’Gallagher, *Fo bhlàth* (Inverness: Clàr, 2020) 44.

*that brought memories to mind, of melodies
of songs, of leafy oaks, of the sweet singing
of birds in a wood, words the Irish in exile
feared they would never hear again.*

*Yet still in Govanhill these words are heard
on every street, their consonants and vowels
mingling with the foreign languages of India,*

*and on the tongues of the children, the language
that didn't die in her sister's arms is still alive
amidst the branches of this flourishing tree.⁵⁰*

There is hope, in O'Gallagher's poems, that not only the language in exile but the poet in a rooted exile might not only persevere but also flourish. But with this flourishing (perhaps necessarily) comes transformation: this is a poem in Scottish Gaelic rather than Irish, after all. If the language is being spoken in the treetops, it has – like Sweeney – been irrevocably changed. Whether the changing of one's tongue, the transformation of oneself, is a price that each of the poets discussed here would think is worth paying is a different matter: this, befitting a celebration of a lexicographer, might be an overly optimistic view of the metamorphic resistance of language in the abstract.

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