

Translating Gaelic Scotland: the culture of translation in the context of modern Scottish Gaelic literature

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With this paper I would like to take a closer look at the ‘culture of translation’ as it appears to flourish in the context of modern Scottish Gaelic literature. As the Gaelic literary scene does not exist in a local literary vacuum, it is continuously involved in the process of negotiating its literary and cultural identity within the realms of a global reality. The quest for the wider audience is very present amongst those involved with Gaelic literature and has indeed been viewed in positive progressive lights as the following remark by Gaelic poet and scholar Donald MacAulay reveals:

The publication of translations along with the verse has allowed access to it for non-Gaelic speakers and there is no doubt that, as a result, the status of Gaelic poets and poetry has risen in the eyes of non-Gaels. Gaelic literature has become a more acceptable commodity for mainstream publishers and cultural entrepreneurs, and indeed for all who see themselves as connoisseurs of literary forms. And this has enhanced the status of Gaelic culture, which is a highly desirable development. (MacAulay 1994: 53)

Award winning Gaelic poet Aonghas MacNeacail goes even further arguing that ‘the mere act of writing in Gaelic, no matter how instinctive or involuntarily, is a political act, a gesture of defiance against a history that has conspired relentlessly against the language. And why shouldn’t we argue that translation is also, and overtly, a political act, in that it offers a reminder to the outside world that “We are still here”?’ (MacNeacail 1998: 155).

Turning the phrase ‘translation of culture’ around, arriving at the very revealing phrase ‘the culture of translation’, is very enabling in that it provides the opportunity to redress the balance of the argument by shifting the perspective from ‘out of’ Gaelic towards ‘inside’ Gaelic as literature and language. In terms of translation studies theory, we are taking the ‘cultural turn’ by moving the focus of examination from translation as text towards ‘translation as culture and politics’ (Munday, p. 127). Consequently, as Anthony Pym puts it, ‘we would like to know more about who is doing the mediating, for whom, within what networks, and with what social effects’ (p. 3). These, then, are the very questions which allow for the

perspective I will adopt with this paper to view the translation dynamics that inform the existence of Gaelic literature as it is lived today.

With Gaelic, it is the prevailing practice of self-translation into English published along the Gaelic texts in en-face bilingual editions which dominates and shapes literature publications most significantly, particularly Gaelic poetry publications. Research into self-translation has in the past concentrated very much on the author as a bilingual person and his or her attitude towards the texts. It is, therefore, a rather inspirational experience to read an article by Maria Fillippakopoulou in this summer's issue of *In Other Words*, an issue dedicated to the subject of self-translation, in which she argues towards an historicizing approach towards the study of self-translation focusing on questions addressing what she calls:

pressures relating to constraints of systematic nature, related, for instance, to languages of limited diffusion and their role vis-à-vis majority languages; [to] power differentials, shorthand for the real differences in prestige and impact between major and minor languages and literatures. (Fillipakopoulou 2005: 24)

Yet, before looking closer at the specific phenomenon of self-translation in combination with the bilingual edition I consider it fruitful to take a little time to consider translation as a general phenomenon. Here I would like to draw attention to the skopos theory of translation, as established by Hans J. Vermeer, which aims to be a general theory of translation. It defines translation as purpose driven action with the translator as responsible performer of translational action who is conscious of what skopos (i.e. purpose) underlies each translation activity, since different translation choices will have different impacts on the reception of the translated text (Vermeer 1996). Let me therefore consult the active 'agents' of literary translation in a Gaelic context.

Questionnaire-based research has shown that it is indeed the concern to widen the audience for Gaelic texts, that primarily leads authors, editors and publishers of Gaelic poetry to provide English translations.¹ Interestingly, translations are also deemed helpful both for learners of Gaelic and for Gaelic native speakers who might not necessarily be confident in reading their own language. Concerning self-

¹ This questionnaire based research is part of my research towards a forthcoming PhD thesis on the influence of translation on Gaelic literature (Krause forthcoming).

translation, some authors expressed a strong sense of ownership over their work along with a desire to keep the emphasis on the original Gaelic texts. Others are concerned to save the translation from misinterpretation, and therefore mistranslation. For many it is a pragmatic choice considering the lack of knowledge of Gaelic amongst the Scottish literary community and the lack of financial support specifically for translation. Finally, some authors view self-translation as a reflection of their bilingual existence both in creative ways (seeing the same idea expressed in the other language) and in external social ways (to allow the work to be shared by those who do not have a command of Gaelic, named in some cases as friends and family).

That such a bilingual existence is not necessarily a balanced one becomes apparent in a reply by a highly acclaimed author who translates his Gaelic poetry into English almost as a matter of fact. In his reply to the questionnaire he states that 'I would, however, not translate my own poems in English into Gaelic' whilst pointing towards the 'fact that I had already been writing in English before ever writing a poem in Gaelic.' Only a small number of poets, mainly of a younger generation and not yet widely published, voiced concerns regarding translation and self-translation specifically. One poet stated that 'the difficulty of translating not just the meaning of the words but the range of referents inherent within the culture is for me insurmountable.' For another 'translation into English would have meant becoming a poet in another language.' There was also the somewhat laconic yet rather thought-provoking reply that 'there is a large canon of English material, so why add to it.' Finally, a poet of considerable reputation for whom Gaelic is a second language, has decided to abandon self-translation, resorting to monolingual publication or collaborative work where translations are required, as the practice of self-translation undermines the credibility of the original writing process (Whyte 2000: 183). Recent Gaelic poetry has indeed been described as 'English poetry in Gaelic' (MacInnes 1998: 342), yet, on the whole, translation in a Scottish Gaelic literary context curiously remains an activity performed without much reflection on its impact on Gaelic as living language and literature.

What then are the conditions surrounding Gaelic literature? We have a community twice removed from state power with a minority language at its core which (finally having secured official status this year) has frequently been doomed a

dying language, thus demanding measures that go far beyond mere language maintenance towards pro-active language development. In a letter to Douglas Young dated 27 May 1943, just before the publication of his acclaimed poetry collection *Dàin do Eimhir* (1943), Sorley MacLean contemplates creative yet sensitive approaches towards the development of Gaelic vocabulary to ensure the language's relevance to all areas of modern life (MacLean, *Acc. 6419*: 27 May 1943). By June of the same year, his mood had dramatically deteriorated:

The whole prospect of Gaelic appals me, the more I think of the difficulties and the likelihood of its extinction in a generation or two. A ... language with ... no modern prose of any account, no philosophical or technical vocabulary to speak of, no correct usage except among old people and a few university students, colloquially full of gross English idiom lately taken over, exact shades of meanings of most words not to be found in any of its dictionaries and dialectally varying enormously (what chance of the appreciation of the overtones of poetry, except amongst a handful?). (MacLean, *Acc. 6419*: 15 June 1943)

Half a century later we have an even smaller Gaelic population, and what is highly important for Gaelic as literary medium, we find that most of the native Gaelic speakers are actually English readers due to the continuous lack of presence of Gaelic as natural medium for reading and writing in education and in Gaelic society on the whole. In an article discussing publication activities in twentieth century Gaelic Scotland Joan MacDonald notes that 'although most Gaelic speakers could, if pressed, read any Gaelic text, most are not sufficiently at ease with the written word in Gaelic to enjoy the experience' (MacDonald 1987: 77). Yet, Gaelic is not naturally an oral language with inherent qualities which resist participation in the written medium, but rather it is simply underdeveloped with regard to the written medium particularly in terms of its reception. As a result of the social history surrounding Gaelic communities,² Gaelic as a language has been actively minoritised and marginalized, preventing it from developing its full potential according to the needs (i.e. modern vocabulary) and opportunities (i.e. the written medium) of modern life.

With regard to minority languages then, Michael Cronin, author of *Translating Ireland*, argues that 'translation is both predator and deliverer, enemy and friend'

² Amongst potent social forces conditioning the existence of Gaelic communities were the Highland Clearances in late 18th/early 19th century, the Education Acts from 1872 onwards which actively suppressed Gaelic as medium for education and subsequently the overwhelming influence of Anglophone education and media.

(Cronin 1998: 148) He illustrates his point referring to the example of bilingual Irish/English publications of modern Irish poetry:

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

Considering that, as identified above, Scottish Gaelic is a language which struggles in its efforts towards vocabulary maintenance and development and which is only slowly developing as a language that is read by its speech community, we could conclude that the English version in bilingual Gaelic/English poetry publications faces little competition.

Yet, we are not merely in the presence of translation but rather we are in the firm presence of self-translation. As research conducted in a variety of cultural environments has found, self-translation is more likely to undermine the status of the original than translation done by somebody other than the author (Fitch 1985; Grutman 1997; Jung 2002). In his article 'The Status of Self-Translation', Brian Fitch argues that:

the writer-translator is felt to have been in a better position to recapture the intentions of the author of the original than any other ordinary translator for the very good reason that those intentions were, in fact, his own. If no distinction is made between the two versions of a given work, it is because they appear to share a common *authorial intentionality*. (Fitch 1985: 112)

He then asks the logical question 'does this mean then that with the abandonment of the by now wholly discredited notion of intentionality as a pertinent factor in any account of the literary text [...] the activity of self-translation thereby becomes indistinguishable from that of any other form of translation' (Fitch 1985: 112)? Does it matter then whether the translation is provided by the author or by somebody else? Fitch suggests that 'in order to begin to clarify the situation, the basic distinction between the reception and the production of the text must be made' (Fitch 1985: 113).

As for Gaelic poetry, Stakis Prize for Scottish Writer of the Year winner in 1997 Aonghas MacNeacail explains that '[the judges] took the translation at face value and read them as workable poetry' (McLeod 1998: 149). Similar dynamics are highlighted by Christopher Whyte who points out that none of the contributions to the publication *Sorley MacLean - Critical Essays* states whether it was the original Gaelic texts or his own English translations which served as basis for critical analysis (Whyte 2002: 70; refers to Ross and Hendry 1986). Translations, given they have been produced by the author of the original Gaelic text, have apparently acquired canonical status. Thus, the fact that the English version is in most cases the outcome of self-translation by the Gaelic author (and as such, as should be noted, is rarely referred to as translation within the publication) adds to the dominant status of the English facing text.

With the bilingual edition, such dominant status seems further reiterated. Considering reading patterns with regard to the bilingual en-face edition in a special edition of *Visible Language* dedicated to bilingualism in literature, Lance Hewson observes that with the bilingual edition "[the] translation ... is taken to be *the* translation of a work." (Hewson 1993: 150). Furthermore, he reminds us that 'it should not be forgotten that such a edition contrasts directly with the source text published by itself in its original culture, and the target text published without reference to the source text' (Hewson 1993: 155). Arguing that with the text published in its original format only, it is firmly embedded in the source culture it sprang from, inviting the reader to appreciate the text from within such a perspective (and this I consider of crucial importance in the context of Gaelic literature), Hewson contrasts that the bilingual edition 'is, in Meschonnic's terminology, "decentered" towards the second language-culture, seen in the light of the translation it has undergone' (refers to Meschonnic 1973: 30). He arrives at the conclusion that:

in the bilingual edition, the very presence of a target text on the facing page acts as a magnet attracting the target language reader back towards his or her own culture, thus biasing the reader and presenting him or her with a version of the text which will inevitably have adopted some of the target language norms. (Hewson 1993: 155)

Considering that with both Gaelic native speakers and Gaelic learners, it will most likely be a reader more used to reading and inevitably better read in English who comes to the bilingual edition, thus being firmly embedded within the sensibilities of

an Anglophone literary world, such publication practice reveals itself as highly dangerous to the development of Gaelic as a read language and literature in that it reinforces a reading pattern that is already there.

Let me seek help from postcolonial literary criticism at this point. Contemplating the coming into being of meaning Homi Bhabha argues that ‘the pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement’ (Bhabha 1995: 208). Rather, as Bill Ashcroft explains:

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

Meaning thus occurs at the point of a voicing and a perception of the utterance at a real moment in time conditioned by historical and social forces. With regard to the social conditioning of such an utterance as such Ania Loomba emphasises that ‘the sign, or words, need a community with shared assumptions to confer them with meaning’ (Loomba 1998: 35). With the Gaelic text in Gaelic poetry publications, then, such community is easily lost, with the Gaelic native speaker and learner (who is increasingly part of the Gaelic speech community) likely to follow established reading habits, thus relying heavily, if not entirely, on the English text. In that, Gaelic poetry could be argued to be a Gaelic flavoured extension of the English language literary canon.

Moreover, the continuous presentation of their ‘native’ literature along with the English back up version, particularly in its modern appearance which on the whole is moving away from traditional literary conventions quite considerably, poses a threat to the very willingness on the part of the Gaelic reader to make sense of the text in Gaelic. This in turn prepares the path for native Gaels to condemn what is presented as a Gaelic text as not Gaelic in nature at all, thus denying the development of Gaelic literature as natural in the light of cultural exchange both within the world of Gaelic literature with its close proximity to an Anglophone world and in a world wide context of urbanisation and globalisation. In the introduction to *An Tuil* – a bilingual anthology of 20th century Gaelic verse - editor Ronald Black states that

'items like 'Fontana Maggiore' [by Christopher Whyte] [...] happened to read beautifully in English, but sprang entirely from non-Gaelic models and sensitivities, and appeared not to have an independent Gaelic existence, to the extent that the Gaelic versions could not easily be understood without reference to the English.' (Black 1999: lxiv) Offering 'Fontana Maggiore' to a Gaelic native speaker in a close reading session as part of my PhD research, the first instinct was to consult the English translation. Having covered the English translation, I asked my informant to stay with the original. Having read through the Gaelic text he described it as 'convoluted in parts' acknowledging, nevertheless, a 'very clever use of words' in a poem that, once engaged with, 'reads well'. It could therefore be argued that the illusion of one-to-one equivalence created by facing translations provided by the author succeeds in rendering the differences between the two texts virtually invisible, thus hiding the poetic dynamics as they unfold in the Gaelic text from the sight of the majority of readers given the prevailing reading patterns.

The combination of self-translation and bilingual en-face edition thus provides a highly rigid format for Gaelic as literature and language, leaving little space for flexibility for the original to live its literary life to the full and, what is more, in its own right. Such combination is therefore a potent drug that cannot help influencing the nature of modern Gaelic literature. Witness the following statement by Iain Galbraith about a forthcoming anthology of twentieth century Scottish poetry in German:

Gaelic poetry from 'Hallaig' to 'cùnnas', as it were, has existed in a permanent state of tension with the English language. To remove that tension in an anthology which purports to translate Gaelic poems not only as individual texts, but as texts that exist or have originated in a Scottish context, would be to remove them to a convenient utopia – a non-place or un-reality – whose isolation from the current polyvocal site of their primary engagement would seem to add to rather than resolve their history of displacement. (Galbraith 2000: 162-3)

Besides the fact that the inevitable conclusion appears to be that there is no chance for Gaelic to be positively 'placed', this argument highlights the homogenising effect the culture of translation as prevailing in a Gaelic literary context has on the reception of Gaelic literature. First of all, it denies the fact that in the case of Sorley MacLean, the author of 'Hallaig', the majority of his early work was published in the first place

without English translations in 1943 (MacGhillEathain 1943). Yet, more importantly, an significant aspect in the development of Gaelic poetry remains unmentioned. With MacLean, we have a poet who consciously placed his creative impulse with his Gaelic original writing, resorting to what could be described as ‘faithful’ translation after the writing of the originals, with a clear understanding that the translations are not poetry in their own right. With MacNeacail, the author of ‘cùinntas’, and other more recent authors, close reading of both the Gaelic and the English texts reveals a movement of the creative impulse between the two (Krause 2005).

I would like to offer the conclusion that the ‘culture of translation’ as present in a Gaelic literary context carries the potential of preventing the translation of culture, in that it suggests equivalence as well as hindering the development of Gaelic as literature and language from within therefore showing bilingualism’s ‘uglier face’ resulting in ‘some kind of double monolingualism’ as Rainer Grutman puts it (Grutman 1993: 224). In that, I am observing a clash between the individual acts of creativity performed by writers and the effects such individual acts have on the collective medium that is Gaelic verse. Here I would like to recall skopos theory which defines translation as action with the actor deciding upon the strategies according to the particular purpose (i.e. skopos) of translation. I would like to argue for skopos theory to be an important translation theory to be considered in this context in that it raises consciousness about translational actions whilst highlighting the fact that translational action inevitably has an impact on the literature in question, with different approaches serving different purposes. With regard to choices, on the one hand, we might ask whether translation and publication practices surrounding Gaelic poetry fit the purpose of, as has been argued, promoting the development of literacy amongst learners and native speakers, or indeed of keeping the emphasis on the original poetry. On the other hand, if not informed about the purpose of a particular translation, readers can nevertheless draw conclusions with regard to the underlying purpose of the translation by noting particular publication approaches – to allow for smooth consumption through the medium of English suitable to raise the profile of individual authors and Gaelic poetry on the whole in an English speaking world.

Prevailing translation and publication practices are very much a reflection and a result of language hierarchies surrounding Scottish Gaelic, yet, at the same time,

they support and strengthen such hierarchies, thus functioning as marginalizing and therefore minoritizing forces in shaping the existence of Gaelic as literature and language. I would, therefore, like to argue towards the re-evaluation of translation in a Gaelic context as a site of friction and differences between languages and cultures which is in need of translation and publication practices which resist the illusion of one-to-one equivalence, such as non-translation, collaborative translation with clear reference to the translation process or indeed multiple translation. We might also want to note that there are choices with regard to the languages involved in the translation process. As well as having a fruitful impact on the development of Gaelic literature, translations from a variety of languages into Gaelic as well as translations of Gaelic texts into languages other than English could lead to creative collaborations between authors and translator which would ensure an active engagement with the Gaelic language in terms of actual communication, which is a vital consideration for any 'lesser used' language.

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