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Living with the double tongue: contemporary poetry in Scots

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At the beginning of the 20th century literary renaissance one of the main drivers of Scottish writing was the socio-political need to establish cultural difference from what was perceived as an English tradition— to make room for one's own, so to speak. In this regard Hugh MacDiarmid's propaganda for the use of Scots to counter the hegemony of standard English has been of immense importance to 20th century Scottish writing—even for those writers such as Tom Leonard and James Kelman who would disagree with his political nationalism. More than that, MacDiarmid's case was a seminal one in the development of all literatures in English, and his essay on 'English Ascendancy in British Literature', first published in Eliot's *The Criterion* in July 1931, is a key—if often neglected— document in the early history of postcolonial studies. Nor would Kelman and Leonard be out of sympathy with the case it makes for difference, plurality and so-called 'marginal' utterance.

By the 1930s MacDiarmid's claims for a tri-lingual Scotland were well established and the case for linguistic and cultural pluralism has been upheld with increasing sophistication ever since. The use of a plural title for the magazine *Scotlands* in 1994 is a case in point, as is the slowly growing recognition since then that 'Scottish' literature might even be written in languages other than English, Gaelic or Scots as it is, for example, in the polyglot Urdu / Glaswegian demotic in Suhayl Saadi's 2004 novel *Psychoraag*. In fact the critical impact made by Tom Leonard, James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Duncan McLean, Gordon Legge et al, has led to more recent Scottish writers, such as Alan Bissett (*Boy Racers*), Des Dillon (*Itchycooblu*), Anne Donovan (*Buddha Da*), Matthew Fitt (*But n Ben A-Go-Go*) and Saadi himself, embracing a linguistically diverse and strikingly oral energy in their work with even more enthusiasm. And such energy seems to be celebrated for its own sake, rather than as part of any overtly nation-defining agenda.

Nevertheless, questions of language and identity still haunt the work of contemporary Scottish writers. One might even argue that the linguistic pluralism inherent in Scottish cultural identity—in that original interplay between Scots, English and Gaelic— has made writers in Scotland peculiarly sensitive to how subjectivity is simultaneously constructed and undone in the precisions and imprecisions of language and in the tangled translations and transitions (and the political and social complexities) between utterance and reception. Such questions, however, are less likely today to be framed in terms of a national identity or as part of a literary enterprise claiming continuity with and the revivification of an ancient literary tradition. If identity is an issue among contemporary Scottish writers it is more likely now to be framed in the contexts of personal, existential, political or sexual being. Thus for example, Liz Lochhead's ironic, hilarious and painful engagements with her generation's experience of being a woman in Scotland have been followed by similar explorations in the work of Magi Gibson,

Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie and Meg Bateman who share a very contemporary sense of belonging and not belonging — often predicated on questions of race, class or sexual orientation. The prose writing of Janice Galloway shares the same perspective. Poets who left Scotland when they were young, like Kate Clanchy and Carol Ann Duffy also reflect on a borderline sense of ‘Scottish’ identity in terms that open up much larger questions about the unstable and liminal nature of identity itself. ‘All childhood is an emigration’, as Carol Ann Duffy puts it in her poem ‘Originally’, remembering that her family moved to England when she was five years old. ‘Do I only think / I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space / and the right place? Now. *Where do you come from?* / strangers ask. *Originally?* And I hesitate.’

Origins are notoriously untraceable, but issues of ideological and political hegemony cannot be escaped when a poet chooses to write in Scots or Gaelic in the face of cultural productions almost exclusively dominated by forms of English. An even more complex picture emerges in the case of those poets who are not native speakers, but who choose to learn the language in order to find a voice for themselves. This is the experience, for example, of fine Gaelic poets such as Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Christopher Whyte, Meg Bateman, Roddy Gorman, Peadar Morgan, and the late Alasdair Barden. Such writing acts may have intensely local or national roots, but their relevance is much wider in that they also embody a political decision (conscious or otherwise) to commit to a form of expression that speaks on behalf of all cultural minorities in an act of resistance to the increasingly global domination of English. There seems to have been a more intimate motivation, too, for such writers whereby the shift to another language has also led to an untying of the tongue. This is a way of being creatively ‘carried over’ which is much more profound than any matter of simple translation, as with Sydney Goodsir Smith, for example, who was born of English parents in New Zealand and educated at Oxford, and yet somehow could only find his most necessary expressive outlet in Braid Scots. It is language, after all, that creates the subject, not vice versa, and to write in Gaelic or Scots (given that the medium is also the message) is to commit to a vision of self and the world that is simultaneously assertive and provisional, even perhaps embattled, and always already under threat of neglect, erasure or even extinction. And for some writers this has been like coming home.

When C. M. Grieve took up arms on behalf of Scots in his ‘Theory of Scots Letters’ in *The Scottish Chapbook* in the early months of 1923, he was especially keen to align the project with English, Irish and European modernism, citing James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Mallarmé, Proust and Dostoevsky, and arguing that the only reason for using Scots would be to press forward ‘the experimental exploitation of the unexplored possibilities of Vernacular expression.’ It was in this spirit that MacDiarmid’s early lyrics, not to mention *A Drunk Man*... generated the first and perhaps the most striking examples of ‘demotic modernism’ in Scots. In *Devolving English Literature* Robert Crawford has written well on the creative contribution made by so-called ‘provincial’ writers to early modernism. He cites the demotic usage of, amongst others, Eliot, Joyce, Pound and MacDiarmid along with the later ‘Barbarian’ sympathies of Douglas Dunn. But the particular and problematic role played by the Scots language in this evolution is worthy of still further study.

In MacDiarmid’s early lyrics the vernacular voice and ethnographically specific folk expressions from Jamieson’s *Dictionary* meet with a modernist and expressionist

intensity whose perspectives link the utterly local with the cosmic —the stackyaird lit by lightning. The final effect of this memorable combination is very similar to the literary and linguistic effects that Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists called ‘estrangement’ or ‘defamiliarisation’. The lyrics in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* were far better Imagist poems than ever ‘les Imagistes’ managed in their anthologies between 1912 and 1917. An early reviewer for the TLS was not slow to identify these tendencies in *Penny Wheep*:

While the new volume contains nothing quite so good as the best things in *Sangschaw*, it has, on the whole, the same merits—an unusual sense of the movement and changing aspects of the earth in its diurnal round, a gift for seeing familiar things from new angles and illuminating poignant situations by flashes of imaginative insight. . . . But there are the old faults too — pretentiousness, bravado, an affected robustness, not to say coarseness, of taste, a penchant for ugly words and subjects, and that over-emphasis which has been the bane of Scottish literature from the first.¹

For all its limitations, this review’s distaste for ‘coarseness’, not to mention ‘ugly words and subjects’, encapsulates a crucial insight into what has been, in effect, the historical role of Scots in the wider ideological context of ‘English’ literature. This role has been especially marked in the last century, when the interrelationship between Scots and English has been a significant factor in how literary Scots has come to be used as a uniquely creative medium. And it was precisely this quality that MacDiarmid evoked in his ‘Theory of Scots Letters’. A more than familiar passage makes the point:

We have been enormously struck by the resemblance —the moral resemblance—between Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A *vis comica* that has not yet been liberated lies bound by desuetude and misappreciation in the recesses of the Doric: and its potential uprising would be no less prodigious, uncontrollable, and utterly at variance with conventional morality than was Joyce’s tremendous outpouring.

The poem ‘Gairmscoile’ (from that ‘coarse’ collection *Penny Wheep*) goes still further and argues a directly Freudian case for Scots as a language which has particular access to the primal drives of the unconscious:

. . . On the rumgunschoch sides o’ hills forgotten	rough and rocky
Life hears beasts rowtin’ that it deemed extinct,	roaring
And, sudden, on the hapless cities linked	
In canny civilisations’s canty dance	prudent; neat
Poor herds o’ heich-skeich monsters, misbegotten,	irresponsible
. . . Streets clear afore the scarnoch advance:	tumultuous
Frae every winnock skimmerin’ een keek oot	window; eyes
To see what camsteerie cast-offs are aboot.	riotous

MacDiarmid’s early claims for Scots presuppose a uniquely ‘Scottish’ psyche that only the Scots language can express and such arguments were common at the time. No

¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 24 March 1927, p. 214.

contemporary critic would support such an essentialist position in the face of our understanding that language constructs subjectivity rather than vice-versa. As a matter of cultural history, however, there is no doubt that the evolution of Scots has led to an ever closer association between that tongue and a world of folk experience and Rabelaisian energy. One might trace this back to the carnivalia of the Christis Kirk on the Green tradition carried forward, (not without a conscious backward eye on that tradition of course) by Fergusson and Burns. So in this respect, at least, MacDiarmid's hopes that Scots might be a good medium for a 'prodigious' and 'uncontrollable' *vis comica* are not inappropriate.

Like so many postcolonial cultural movements in subsequent decades, the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the 1920s was keen to challenge, or even to reverse old perceptions of the relationship between the so-called centre and the periphery. From a Eurocentric perspective, MacDiarmid aligned Scotland's case with Landsmaal in Norway, with the Belgian literary revival ('soyons nous-mêmes!') and with the Russian Slavophiles, among others — all determined to show that supposedly 'peripheral' 'backward' cultures could contribute something radically new (but also something authentically grounded in the folk) to what were coming to be talked about (after Nietzsche and Spengler) as the tired old, over-sophisticated, creatively bankrupt cultures of the West. Much influenced by Gregory Smith in his 1919 book, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, MacDiarmid argued that the Scots language affects a union between the base and the beautiful not seen since medieval times. And he went on to claim that this spirit — suppressed by an Anglo-Scots educational system and 'polite' society — is much more in keeping with the spirit of *Ulysses* and its avant-garde exploration of states of modern consciousness and (most notoriously) female sexuality and the gross body. Exactly the same 'prodigious' impulse can be identified in the poetry of Goodsir Smith and Tom Leonard, or in W. N. Herbert's *Cabaret McGonagall* and Irvine Welsh's fiction.

But this is not simply a question of Scottish literary history alone, which is to say an ideological construct born out of canon formation. Nor is it in any way an essentialist proof of some Scottish penchant for the physical as was once argued by both Gregory Smith and MacDiarmid. On the contrary, the unseen partner in this construction of 'Scottishness', is in fact another conception of 'Englishness'. Indeed it can be argued that from the late 18th century to modern times the literary role of Scots has been to act as English's 'other', analogous to what Freud would call the return of the repressed — in this case the socially, canonically and linguistically repressed. So the Rabelaisian explosion of *A Drunk Man* (or indeed of Joyce's *Ulysses*) derives from the coexistence and the collision of different cultural positions, different points of view, different canons, different registers and different dialects many of which have indeed been repressed by the hegemony of standard English and the social and economic side-effects of modern-day education and publishing. (Tom Leonard makes a similar point from a more political perspective about the repressive powers of the conventional literary canon, willed or otherwise, in the introduction to his 1990 anthology *Radical Renfrew*.)

Looked at in this light, the modern Renaissance of literary Scots and its contemporary manifestations are no less than a replaying of that 'victory over linguistic dogmatism' ascribed to the 15th century Renaissance by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* — a victory which can only be properly achieved, according to him, in a multilingual world and most especially in the linguistic borders between languages.

a complex intersection of languages, dialects, idioms, and jargons. . . the new consciousness was born not in a perfected and fixed linguistic system but at the intersection of many languages and at the point of their most intense interorientation and struggle.²

It is the Bakhtinian ‘interorientation’ of Scots and English together which generates this energy, despite the fact that MacDiarmid wanted to ascribe it solely and uniquely to Scots alone. And of course within modern Scots itself there is another level of interorientation, made manifest in a wealth of dialects, different registers, hybrid expressions and rhymes which sometimes draw on the Scots and sometimes on the English form of the same word.

In particular, such linguistic fluidity has come to be associated with oral expression, or rather a literature of direct address, from the epistles of Burns to the overtly Rabelaisian roles adopted by Sydney Goodsir Smith’s poetry, which could be said to be another, more sensual, version of MacDiarmid’s ‘drunk man’ persona. The Drunk Man’s intoxication, like Goodsir Smith’s celebration of a meths drinker, revisits the tired stereotypes of ‘Scottishness’ to celebrate a Dionysian release of the creative imagination completely at odds with convention, not just in moral terms, but in the rapid changes of mood, register, genre and focus that so characterise the poem and its essentially oral delivery.

It seems very likely that this linguistic freedom —as originally celebrated by MacDiarmid, Goodsir Smith and indeed by Joyce himself— does indeed stem from what Bakhtin saw as ‘the ability to see one’s own media from the outside, that is, through the eyes of other idioms’, the other idioms in this case being an awareness of the often uneasy and sometimes highly creative relationship between established English modes of expression and the by-comparison ‘marginal’, because largely oral status of Scots, Gaelic and Anglo-Scots. In Scots language poetry the subaltern can indeed speak (to borrow the concept from postcolonial theory and ‘subaltern studies’) for this is an expressive area that has not lost the common touch, even as it recognises that such utterance is simultaneously liberated and marginalised (even ghettoised) as a small part of an already small genre and expressive sphere. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this realisation is simultaneously highly creative and highly unstable.

These tensions are at the heart of Sydney Goodsir Smith’s poetry and the persona he adopts as a writer. But the use of Scots in poetry is not simply a question of affecting to speak in a too-often despised ‘voice of the people’. Goodsir Smith, after all, was not a native speaker of Scots, but if this were no more than an affectation on his part the poetry would not survive or convince in the way that it does. The real achievement of the polyphonic, heteroglossial, even ventriloquial aspect of Smith’s work is how it realises (in every sense of the word) the fluidity of *all* expression and the final instability of all writing when it shares space with the spoken word. In *Under the Eildon Tree*, in Elegy 5, the persona of the poet himself is introduced, like Oblomov, lying in bed in the middle of the day:

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.p. 470-1.

Here I ligg, Sydney Slugabed Godless Smith,	lie
The Smith, the Faber, poietes and Makar,	
And Oblomov has nocht to learn me,	teach
Auld Oblomov has nocht on me	
Liggan my lane in bed at nune	
Gantan at gray December haar,	gaping; mist
A cauld, scummie, hauf-drunk cup o' tea	
At my bed-side,	
Luntan Virginia fags	lighting
—The new world thus I haud in fief	
And levie kyndlie tribute. Black men slave	
Aneth a distant sun to mak for me	
Cheroots at hauf-a-croon the box.	
Wi ase on the sheets, ase on the cod,	pillow
And crumbs of toast under my bum,	
Scrievan the last great coronach	Gaelic lament
O' the westren flickeran bourgeois world.	
<i>Eheu fugaces!</i>	
<i>Lacrimae rerum!</i>	
<i>Nil nisi et caetera ex cathedra</i>	
<i>Requiescat</i> up your jumper.	(154)

This is good irreverent fun, but the passage is more disruptive than it may seem at first. Most noticeably of course, it shamelessly enjoys the status of the self-consciously 'Bohemian' writer. But it also mocks that status by recognising the unexamined privileges by which he is free to write. It might even suggest that the freedom to write his last lament for the western world is actually subsidised by the bourgeois imperialist capitalism he affects to despise: 'Black men slave / Aneth a distant sun to mak for me / Cheroots at hauf-a-croon the box.' These lines simultaneously assert and ironise all claims to authorial power and 'seriousness'. The literary reference to the hero of Goncharov's novel claims a certain intellectual breadth that is simultaneously contradicted, by the colloquial Scots 'has nocht to learn me'. The collage of Latin tags at the end lays claim to classical authority, but it also despises and deconstructs that authority. Even so, the fragments do speak a kind of truth. 'Alas the years go flying by'; 'the tears of things', and 'speak nothing but good of the dead', all relate to passing time, age, and fading powers. Popes and authors might speak *ex cathedra*, but this author cannot complete any of these phrases, and the only thing that comes from his throne is 'Nothing unless etc' and *Requiescat*, (the first word of an epitaph), followed by the colloquial vulgarity 'up your jumper'.

There's more at stake here than just Rabelaisian vulgarity and the 'unspeakable'. What the fluidity of this discourse finally has to do with, is not so much the 'unspeakable' (as in 'the unspeakable Scot') as the 'unsayable', or perhaps the 'unwritable'. For speech is where we have the last word. No written text can withstand the spoken aside, or the parodic voice, or being taken out of context. MacDiarmid catches exactly this deflationary tone (as Byron before him was wont to do) in *A Drunk Man*... "'Let there be licht," said God, and there was / A little'. Scots excels (in the spirit of David Craig's 'reductive idiom') at such effects.

Among the poets of the ‘second generation’ of the modern literary renaissance it is Robert Garioch who dedicates himself most conclusively to a largely oral utterance. He can write in a literary form reminiscent of the Makars, of course, but for the most part his poetry is distinguished by its relaxed and colloquial Scots – a form that was to be followed in turn by Duncan Glen, William Neill and Alastair Mackie, especially in the latter’s underrated *Back-Green Odyssey and other poems*, published in 1980. Garioch’s demotic focus was apparent from the very first in the little 1940 collection *17 Poems for 6d* which he shared with Somhairle Mac Ghill-eathain (whose Gaelic poems appeared in the volume without any English translation).

Shote! Here’s the polis,
The Gayfield polis,
An thull pi’iz in the nick fir
Playin fi’baw in the street!

This poem, like a number of others in the collection, draws on the marginal world of street culture evoked by counting and skipping rhymes — none of which would ever be in danger of claiming canonical status. It is also reminiscent of the vernacular verse tradition and of William Soutar’s bairn rhymes. Garioch recalled the genesis of ‘Fi’baw’ in *As I Remember*, describing his impatience at the poems in English being written by his fellow students:

I reacted by presenting ‘Fi’baw in the Street’ glottal stops and all. I thought I was being rude, but it was well received. Mr Murison’s *Guid Scots Tongue* tells us how Allan Ramsay’s work was one of reaction. I regard mine as a small part of that reaction, which has never quite ceased since Ramsay began it, sometime about 1720. (*As I Remember*, p. 58)

The marginal and hence contestatory status of spoken Scots could not be put more clearly, although urban Scots was itself despised by many Scottish scholars at the time, including Murison as editor of the *Scottish National Dictionary*, for whom in industrial areas ‘Scots and English forms are jumbled up haphazardly so that a clear and consistent pattern can no longer be traced’. (*The Guid Scots Tongue*, p. 56).

Nevertheless, Robert Garioch’s unique achievement is to have produced a substantial body of subtle and moving poetry in a dense but relaxed and wholly natural demotic utterance. The opening lines of ‘Lesson’ offer a good example:

I tuik it in ma heid to gae downbye Leith Docks,
eftir how monie years? I cannae mind,
binna jist coming aff the ship frae Aiberdeen,
Saint Sunniva? Thae boats haena made that run for years.

Yet the poem contains references to Robert Louis Stevenson and his family, to Stendhal and Tchaikovsky, and it ends by invoking Apollinaire’s poem ‘Un Phantôme de nuées’ from *Calligrammes*. At the same time the amazingly catarrhal effects of ‘Heard in the Cougate’ make their own case for the gross body and the ‘rudest’ sound poetry — yet these are also contained within the structure of a sonnet, that most canonical of forms:

Whu’s aa thae fflagpoles ffur in Princes Street?

Chwoich! Ptt! Hechyuch! Ab-boannie cairry-on.
 Seez-owre the wa'er. Whu' the deevil's thon
 Inaidie, heh?' ‘

Garioch's implicit challenge to those who would confuse poetry with social class is entirely in keeping with the spirit of Tom Leonard's work and his consistent determination to politicise matters of literary value, and subject matter. Leonard aligns himself with William Carlos Williams in the struggle to find fresh and subtle expression in the kinetics and phonetics of words on the page and to liberate these words from the sounds, rhythms and expectations of conventional verse and standard English. Leonard goes still further, however, in seeking to validate the urban demotic speech of the west of Scotland in lines whose content and form challenge the expectations (and the unacknowledged assumptions) of the average reader and all questions of 'taste':

ma lungz iz fuckt
 bronchitis again
 thi smoakin

lookit
 same awl spiht
 yella ngreen

van goghs palate
 paintn sunflowers

The results can be subtle as well as brutal and sometimes both at the same time as in that shift from 'palette' to 'palate. The distinguishing closing effect in many of these poems, however, is that of sudden dismissal or abandonment in the same complex spirit as Goodsir Smith's '*Requiescat* up your jumper', but more aggressive, more challenging.

Leonard's use of urban demotic, along with contemporary practitioners Donald Campbell, Carl MacDougall and Stephen Mulrine's 'The coming of the wee malkies', was prefigured by Ian Hamilton Finlay in his 1961 collection *Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd Haw, an Inseks, an, Aw, a Fush*, and echoed in poems such as Margaret Hamilton's 'Lament for a Lost Dinner Ticket, which look back to an older vernacular tradition of verses such as Mrs M. C. Smith's 'The Boy in the Train'. (It should be noted in passing, however, that Leonard's poetry scarcely ever uses what could be called dialectal forms, and the lexical content of his lines is predominantly English with a strong West of Scotland accent — further estranged by an often wittily structured phonetic transcription.) But the crucial difference between these poets and Leonard is the latter's political position which is evident in every line he writes, not least in his furiously Foucauldian opposition to what he sees as the inherently ideological role of the educational system:

The important word is code. To understand Literature is to understand a code, and the teacher is the person trained to possess the code that Literature is in. This has to be accepted unconditionally, as it is the sole basis of the teacher's power to grade pupils' responses. A piece of writing that does not acknowledge the code that the teacher has been trained to possess, can not be

accepted as Literature: for such writing deprives the teacher of the only basis of his power of assessment. This applies even when the ‘canon’ has been enlarged to ‘allow’ some writing about, for instance, working-class lives

— ‘Introduction’, *Radical Renfrew*, (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1990), p.

This is Garioch’s poetry of ‘reaction’ with a vengeance, and in this respect Leonard’s example has been hugely influential in the subsequent burgeoning of demotic writing and the celebration of Bakhtinian carnival and the gross body that has been such a marked feature of Scottish literature — particularly in prose — since the 1990s.

It is no accident, either, that some of Leonard’s work in English (such as ‘The Rainbow Of’ in *Intimate Voices*) explores the possibilities of sound poetry and concrete poetry. In his 1976 essay on William Carlos Williams (‘The Locust Tree in Flower and why it had Difficulty Flowering in Britain’) Leonard aligns himself with the experimental writing of Ian Hamilton Finlay and Bob Cobbing, both of whom, like MacDiarmid himself, have pursued what he sees as a lifelong process of ‘deliberately and constantly ignoring the boundaries of what would be considered “correct” lexis for poetry.’ (*Intimate Voices*, p. 97)³ With James Joyce, Pound and MacDiarmid in mind once more, it can indeed be argued that this willingness to repossess the canon by dispossessing the English language (or vice versa) is the mark of writers who have felt themselves to be coming from the cultural margins and the use of a heteroglossial Scots, or a demotically accented Scottish voice, has proved to be particularly effective in this regard.

The contemporary poets who seem to be the latest successors to this aspect of MacDiarmid and Goodsir Smith’s complex and ground-breaking use of Scots are Robert Crawford, Richard Price, W. N. Herbert and David Kinloch whose work in this vein first appeared in the magazine *Gairfish* (edited by Herbert and Price), as well as in the issues of *VERSE* (edited by Crawford and Price along with Henry Hart and David Kinloch), during the late 80s and early 90s. In an article written for the little magazine *interference* (published in Oxford) Richard Price identified Kinloch, Crawford and Herbert (along with Peter McCarey and Alan Riach who mostly write in English) as a group ‘who, for the sake of a name, one might call the Scottish Informationists’.

Self-appointed ‘schools’ must be approached with caution and indeed Price himself had reservations about the label, but the Scots-using poets in this set did have some common ground. Price points out that they all ‘have been or still are “exiles” from Scotland, Crawford and Herbert in Oxford, Kinloch in Paris and Salford, McCarey in Geneva and Riach in New Zealand.’⁴ One could speculate on the extent to which this distancing perspective might have influenced them, and this again is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s point about ‘the ability to see one’s own media from the outside, that is, through the eyes of other idioms’ and indeed Kinloch is an academic whose profession is French language and literature. In the years since Price’s article was written, at least three of them have come home, but the point remains that at a crucial time in their development these writers shared something of Herbert’s experience, as he put it, that ‘being Scottish in England was the discovery of suppressed contrasts.’⁵

³ *Intimate Voices*, (Vintage: London, 1995), p. 97.

⁴ Richard Price, ‘The Informationists’, *interference*, ed. Michael Gardner, Oxford, nd, p. 11. [1991]

⁵ W.N. Herbert in *Dream State*, ed. Daniel O’Rourke (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994). p.144.

Price goes on to note that they are all holders of doctorates and argues that:

their poetry is an intellectual poetry not seen from new poets in Scotland for a very long time. They write in English and in Scots—indeed Kinloch’s recent poetry is marked out by its habitation of the filament between the two. Languages talking to languages is itself a shared theme. When they write in Scots, they do so in a spectrum that runs from the elegiac to the combative, often with a cognisance and a celebration of the very artificiality of the Scots they use — an admission which, hardly startling in any wider view of the world’s literature, seems to make their poetry uncomfortable for those whose avant-gardism starts and stops with MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man*.

...

Language is not the same issue [for them] as it was for MacDiarmid or even for the Morgan of the 1960s, though language’s relation to orthodoxy is a characteristic field of play (an eclectic Scots; the languages of France, Zimbabwe, the Soviet Union, Viet-Nam...)

‘Informationism’ has not caught on as a critical title, but Price’s point about ‘language as a field of play’ and ‘language’s relation to orthodoxy’ is relevant here and helps to describe something of what links at least Crawford, Herbert and Kinloch in their use of Scots. If MacDiarmid and Goodsir Smith began with colloquial Scots and the speaking voice in their work (even if their material was derived from the dictionary) these poets seem to have invoked the dictionary from the very start. Yet the ‘demotic’ is still there, for, in Herbert’s case especially, the poetry shows another phonetic re-writing of oral Scots, closer this time to the street speak of Dundee. He describes his position in Daniel O’Rourke’s anthology *Dream State*:

So I write in both English and Scots. In each of these I could be accused of lying. In Scots I pretend that my basic speech — Dundonian — hasn’t been atrophied by cultural neglect, and still has access to the broad vocabulary of the Scots dictionary. This creates the language of a quasi-fictional country, one which offers a critique of the present status of ‘Scotland’.⁶

As a matter of fact, dictionary access to ‘the broad vocabulary of Scots’, brought him to embrace the most obscure terms and to create the most estranging neologisms, only to ‘explain’ them with parodically pedantic English glosses. This is the ‘lie’ in action, a kind of double lie, which Herbert refers to as ‘the forked tongue’ in a phrase reminiscent of MacDiarmid’s old complaint about ‘the dooble tongue –guid Scots wi’ English a’ hamstrung’, except that Herbert argues for both sides of this doubleness. In the Introduction to his collection *Forked Tongue* (Bloodaxe, 1994) he notes ‘I don’t want to choose between them; I want both prongs of the fork. Aren’t we continually hopping registers like socially-challenged crickets? My motto is *And not Or*.’ Linguistic ‘forking’ is especially evident in the volume shared between Crawford and Herbert: *Sharawaggi Poems in Scots* (Polygon, 1990). To those more used to the natural flow of spoken Scots the aesthetic effect of these poems is strange — rather akin to Brecht’s alienation

⁶ *Ibid.*

effect— deliberately rigidified, artificial and (in a medium so long associated with the apparently natural ‘presence’ of direct address and the familiar speaking voice) curiously disturbing.

Such work (and Crawford and Herbert have gone on to do different things) has exploited ‘linguistic difference’ with a much more knowing air than ever MacDiarmid and Smith did. If Scottish identity is associated with the Scots language, these poems serve to problematise that identity (or to reassert it under the sign of irony) and then to problematise the nature of language itself. This is a creative position fully aware of post-structuralist and postmodern paradigms, aware of the arbitrariness of the sign, the hybridity of modern culture, and the constructed nature of all ‘identity’.

So the forked or double tongue sets out to challenge not just English, but the ‘transparency’ of language itself—our conventionally comfortable habits of reading, and our equally unconsidered assumptions about writing. It is as if Saussurean *parole* has been overtaken by *langue* and the illusion of speaking presence has been replaced by a kind of linguistic constructivism where the poet has swallowed, or been swallowed by the dictionary with a vengeance. And yet paradoxically the final message is still one of ram-stam energy, heteroglossia and the unpredictably creative spirit to be found in the mouths and lives of ‘ootlanders’ and ‘bauchles’. (In this respect it is firmly within the ‘Christis Kirk’ tradition, and reminiscent once more of Goodsir Smith’s ‘The Grace of God and the Meth-Drinker’ or MacDiarmid’s ‘Auld Wife in High Spirits’.) Indeed, in the Author’s note to *Dundee Doldrums* (Galliard, 1991), Herbert explains how his early experiments with Scots (and especially the Dundee Scots of his childhood) were inspired by the celebration of the verbal energy and the sheer sound which he found in Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*, while the title ‘Dundee Doldrums’, is a conscious echo of Ginsberg’s ‘Denver Doldrums’.

Nevertheless, Herbert does also recognise the artificial nature of the exercise and although his work is based on his native dialect, he does not, like Tom Leonard, seek to reproduce the phonetic authenticity of demotic speech. In the introduction to *Forked Tongue* Herbert notes that his poetry in Scots:

could have been a kind of New Demotic verse; boiling the idiolect down to something I’m able to say in a pub. But that would be a poetry that’s afraid of getting beaten up. Most of my Scots, to be blunt, gets the shit kicked out of it. I don’t stay ‘true’ to how thi Peopul speak: I search dictionaries for gorgeous defunct fragments; I make things up. I think that’s the poet’s task: to invent new ways of saying that are beautiful even after they’ve had the shit kicked out of them. So Landfish [the section of Scots poems in the volume] is peculiar, baroque. It may be a challenge to read, but that’s the challenge: come on in, the clytach’s lovely.⁷

And it is in this challenging context that the Sharawaggi poets re-examine the relationship between language and national identity. Less persuaded by the cultural agenda of the modern literary Renaissance and all too aware of the many clichés of Scottishness that have gone before, they are yet still compelled to make that mark of difference and to make it via the mother tongue—or perhaps, more accurately, the

⁷ W.N. Herbert, ‘I tell a lie’, *Forked Tongue* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 10

grannie's tongue. (Kathleen Jamie has paid similar tribute to the sharp and unaccommodating Scots tongues of grannies in her collection *The Queen of Sheba*).

To this end David Kinloch foregrounds Scots and its uneasy interface with English in new ways, while also echoing MacDiarmid's debt to Jamieson's *Dictionary* by including specific acts of homage to that particular boneyard of unexpectedly fertile words. And the poetic persona he chooses for his *Dustie-fute* collection is the ancient one of poet as jongleur, or dustie-fute (pedlar or wandering mountebank), or rintherout (vagrant) — and in these poems he speaks of (and for) 'the strange revenge sometimes taken by secret or suppressed languages' — the very agenda which makes his own poems rewarding but difficult to read. And in his case, his own homosexuality is another term by which he feels the need to speak (and to speak in Scots too) on behalf of those too often cast as 'ootlanders'.

Does the 'auld alliance' of words and things stand a chance among the traffic and pimps in the Publicis Saint-Germain? For it's not as if *dustie-fute* were my familiar. I could easily confuse *dustie-fute* with *elfmill* which is the sound made by a worm in the timber of a house, supposed by the vulgar to be preternatural. These words are as foreign as the city they have parachuted into, dead words slipping on the sill of the living metropolis. They are extremes that touch like dangerous wires and the only hope for them, for us, is the space they inhabit, a room veering between dilettantism and dynamite. Old Scots words, big French city and in between abysmal me: *ane merchand or creamer, quha hes no certain dwelling place, quhair the dust may be dicht fra hes feete or schone*.

The 'Dustie-Fute' sequence of poems is not just about old words, as Kinloch explained in *Dream State*:

nor is it simply a poem about the difficulty for many writers of my generation who would like to write Scots more fluently than they are able. These unexpected, boisterous words become in the course of the poem a kind of metaphor for the queer and wonderful tongue that is dying prematurely in the mouths of young men killed off by Aids.

What is it like to live and to die as a gay man in Scotland in the 1990s? What is it like to be in love, to be responsible and find that love and responsibility dishonoured by many who surround you? What is it like to want to write a poetry that orchestrates a range of competing voices and textures in the belief that only in this way can you do justice to the complex emotions and ideas such questions provoke? These are some of the questions my poems are trying to ask⁸

It is the special history of the Scots language (and hence of Scottish culture) that has made such a conjunction possible — culturally alert to the co-existing differences (and the disparities in power) between Scots and English, between what is said (and how we write) and what is written (and how we speak), and when and in what genre we do one and not the other. Yet the modern world is ruled (and not just the metropolitan world of London) by what is written, and —at least in prose— what is written is most likely to be

⁸ David Kinloch, *Dream State*, p. 72.

formal English. So there is a generic and not just a specific cultural insecurity at the heart of Scots, not least in an already embattled but still self-consciously oral genre such as poetry. The same struggle can also be seen in those creative writers dedicated to the use of 'black' English. Yet the voice still offers an extraordinary immediacy, a fluidity, an evasiveness, a capacity for endless revision and relativity, and in this respect the speech act is a metaphor for the creative act itself — that magic of continual making, unspooling, coming out of . . . somewhere. Perhaps this is a model for the nature of poetry itself — the literary form more than any other which attends to and comments on, and is mystified by its own becoming. And the 'strangeness' of Scots in particular can be seen to foreground the oddness of all language use and casts deconstructive doubt on the possibility of ever achieving any full or final translation into stable meaning. After all, are not all acts of poetry, when looked at in this light, transrational acts 'against' the very concept of linguistic equivalence?

So MacDiarmid's notion of the 'double tongue' as a hindrance must be re-identified as an asset. The real 'doubling' in Scots stems from its closeness to English, and from what, over the years, has become the sociolinguistic and cultural inseparability of the two languages by way of a need to constantly re-invent and restate their mutually defining differences. In the cause of productive unsettlement, the double tongue has become the 'forked tongue' — a creative and potentially subversive 'other', with an inbuilt sense of *ostranenie*, of hybridity and of being foreign to ourselves even as we speak or write most intimately.