Crossing the Boundaries in Gaelic Fiction

> The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'. The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. (Bhabha 2007, 3)

Introduction

Bhabha's notions of negotiation and identification are useful ones in the contemporary conversations about culture, cultural demarcation and the role of literature in the construction of both history and tradition. Location, for Bhabha and many other current commentators, is a crucial aspect of the study of culture and tradition, and this has often, in postcolonial (or post-colonial) treatments, been expressed in terms of centrality and peripherality. But, at the same time, we see issues of boundaries and bounded spaces taking an important place within the general academic consciousness, as well as within the creative literature itself. Thus, notions like border-crossing and transgression, liminality and a sense of the beyond are all key ideas in the current literary scene. This essay investigates the extent to which an awareness of boundaries, border-crossing and the notion of 'beyond' have entered Gaelic prose fiction in recent decades, with a view to demonstrating how, in one way, Gaelic fiction has remained current and international in its thematic interest. The investigation will show how the Gaelic literary community has responded to, and positively adapted to, these contemporary cultural turns. As a result, the essay marks one of a series of staging points in what will become a large-scale study into this developing relationship. Before we turn to specific examples from the literature itself, we might glance at some germane points of contact in the academic discourse, in order to contextualise further the work being done here on Gaelic fiction. With that background sketched in, the paper will then focus on stories by three writers from Lewis, chosen partly because of the interesting relationship Lewis might be said to have with the ideas of centrality, peripherality, boundedness and tradition.

In their important book, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture,* Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull considered that "there are grounds for arguing that large tracts of the Scottish past have been affected in ways reminiscent of the distortive action of colonialism upon 'third world' cultures" (Beveridge and Turnbull 1989, 16). If that were so, then we might not be surprised to discover in Gaelic literature some traces of what the same authors describe as "a particularly contorted attitude of mind, an inferiorist perspective upon the history of their own culture" (16). What we find, though, as often as not, is a confident and sophisticated adoption of contemporary trends, sometimes metafictionally and self-reflexively interwoven with strands from what we might think of as older tradition. Rather than clinging to perceived tradition and trying to fend off the centripetal forces of Anglo-British (or Anglo-American) culture, modern Gaelic fiction has created for itself a liminal space where it can continue to form part of its associated society's identity at the same time as articulating with these forces in both 'collaboration' and 'contestation'. This is not a

new phenomenon for Gaelic literature, which has, after all, co-existed with major literatures for many centuries. However, the Gaelic language and society may well be witnessing a 'moment of historical transformation', as is suggested by the considerable efforts being expended in sociolinguistic work at present. If indeed this is a moment of historical transformation, and regardless of what form it will ultimately take, the creative writers have only been enlivened and empowered by it.

In his seminal work *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha wrote that it "is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*", and went on to qualify this: "Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present'" (Bhabha 2007: 1). These two concepts - that of the *beyond* and that of surviving on the borderlines (whether temporal or spatial or indeed more abstract) - have found considerable resonance among cultural commentators in the early twenty-first century, especially those who write about minorities, peripheries and societies that were formerly colonies. As Cairns Craig reminded us in an essay in *Beyond Scotland*, Scotland is 'beyond', precisely because conceptions of nations, identities and communities are constructed, and that there is no inherent contradiction in this, despite the fact that earlier writing took a contrasting view (see the workings of this more recent style of thinking in Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012 [1983], Hobsbawm 1990, Anderson 2006 [1983])); moreover, building on the work of John Macmurray, Craig noted that identity is "constituted not by one's uniqueness, but by one's *relations* to others" (Craig 2004: 251). Thus, a sense of boundaries and boundary-crossing, rather than being a contradictory or eccentric theme in Scottish writing, is simply the artistic expression of what Craig sees as the 'projected intentions' of identity construction; and, since the nation is as much an 'agent' as the people who live within it, these projected intentions constantly serve to redefine the nation (251). To some extent, this leads him to challenge the popular postcolonial idea of hybridity, because hybridity itself presupposes a measure of essentialism. For Craig:

> Scotland might stand as exemplar of the fact that nationalisms and national cultures are always multiple, not because they are "hybrids", but because they are bounded accidentally and within those boundaries there are always alternative versions of the national culture. (Craig 2004, 250-1)

We might observe here that the idea of 'boundary' is being used in two ways at once in some of the current cultural commentary: it represents borders *between* 'countries', but also does duty as a term for cultural demarcation *within* countries that exist in pluralistic fashion; that is to say, these 'alternative versions of the national culture' are often themselves regarded as being on either side of boundaries from one another. These demarcations have often been conceived or presented as schisms or fractures: in Scotland, we need look no further than the often-quoted notion of Caledonian Anti-Syzygy. A generation ago, David McCrone was writing about the imagery and iconography of the splitness so often inherent in perceptions of Scottishness in his *Understanding Scotland: the Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (McCrone 1992). Borrowing ideas from Louis Althusser, McCrone wrote: "Two disparate cultural formations have combined into a hegemonic system which locks Scots into a sense of their own inferiority in the face of a powerful Anglo-British culture" (McCrone 1992, 186). McCrone made these remarks in discussing Beveridge and Turnbull's book, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (1989), and went on to suggest that Beveridge and Turnbull made "one central assumption, that Scottish national culture exists"

(McCrone 1992, 189). While it seems fair, in one way, to level this charge at *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*, we might also note in passing that McCrone himself made the assumption that "a powerful Anglo-British" culture exists (i.e. in singularity, where Cairns Craig's multiplicity and plurality reading may be an attractive way to understand even establishment-driven projections of Anglo-Britishness). McCrone was making use of a particular understanding of 'inferiority'/'inferiorism', following the work of Frantz Fanon, which became one of the central ideas debated by scholars of Scottish literature in the 1990s and thereafter.

For a flavour of how the debates on inferiorism have developed in more recent days, see a number of papers by Willy Maley, Gerard Carruthers and Matt Wickman in *Studies in Scottish Literature* Vol. 38, 2012. Carruthers, for instance, points to a schism in the very conceptualising of the discipline. He writes:

> The relative stability and plenitude of Scottish literary studies in the early twenty-first century has been contributed to by promoters who were, on the one hand, over-zealous in their cultural nationalism and, paradoxically, on the other, Anglocentric. (*Studies in Scottish Literature* Vol. 38, pp. 14-5)

Carruthers sees a tendency for some writers (critical and creative) towards isolationism that equates to what he calls a superiorism. The metaphor Carruthers employs to describe the way some writers and scholars have approached Scottish literature is that of the coin. He chooses the metaphor with care, taking advantage of the fact that the coin implies not just oppositeness and, therefore, splitness, but also inextricable linkage. The two sides of the coin imply a Janus-like conceptualising of Scottish literature (albeit that only one side of a coin is normally 'headed'). It is interesting to note, though, that the weakness Carruthers points out in this isolationist 'superiorism' is an over-zealous cultural nationalism related to Anglocentrism. This is similar to a point Donald John MacLeod made in relation to proponents of Gaelic literature in his important paper "Gaelic Prose" (MacLeod 1977):[1] in that paper, MacLeod referred to an 'inverted adulation' of English culture. MacLeod was tracing the development of Gaelic creative writing across the pivotal period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when prominent members of the Gaelic literati were particularly aware of the attenuation in the language. He noted the tendency towards cultural interpolations (such as the importing of drama and the novel) and the deliberate efforts to encourage Gaels to write and consume these media, as if they could, perhaps, prove that Gaelic was as capable as English simply because it also had these kinds of cultural artefacts. MacLeod's point is an interesting one and, in many ways, prescient, considering how the debates elsewhere in Scottish literature came to concentrate on similar issues.

Beveridge and Turnbull's book, with its 'eclipse' title, is also suggestive of a kind of transgression: an eclipse is, after all, another kind of boundary crossing, albeit one in which the agent doing the crossing obscures the one being crossed. If we accept that there is such a thing as the eclipse of Scottish culture - and accept it we surely must, with all the evidence we have seen of it in the past few years - then we should also acknowledge that there is an eclipse of Gaelic culture that runs in tandem with it. *Tandem* may not, in fact, be the correct metaphor here, because the relationship between Gaelic and other-Scottish culture is complex and is not adequately imaged by the picture of two bodies working together to provide mutually-beneficial power for a

single machine. If our eclipse image is meant to evoke stellar bodies obscuring one another, then it might be most illustrative to think of Scottish culture as being like a moon and Gaelic culture like a smaller satellite, which is at once or in turn eclipsed by both the Anglo-British culture's planetary proportions and the Scottish culture's relatively smaller but still lunar size. All of this, though, leaves us with an uncomfortably old-fashioned metaphor of orbits and peripherality, which is equally too simplistic to be an adequate representation of anyone's reality. We may need to refresh our metaphors. Indeed, a crucial question for scholars to address in the next few years will be: what is the nature of the relationship between Gaelic and other-Scottish literature? It will not be straightforward to answer this (if it is possible at all) without a careful and painstaking consideration of the wider cultural interrelationships between Gaelic and other-Scottish traditions. Scholars may also turn their attention to considering why the academic world has been so coy about addressing such questions to date.

The Eclipse of Scottish Culture contains a discussion of some of the discourses of Scottish identity that were characteristic of sociological and other works in the decades leading up to the end of the 1980s and the eventual march towards political devolution. The book deconstructs the hierarchical oppositions that (according to Beveridge and Turnbull) have been associated with Scotland and England (and we may note that so many of these discourses did indeed seem to be about Scotland and *England*, rather than Scotland and Britain, Scotland and the UK, or Scotland and what is now commonly being referred to as rUK):[2] in particular, there is discussion of Scotland as dark versus England as light, Scotland as parochial versus England as cosmopolitan, Scotland as backward versus England as advanced. Along with many other issues, Beveridge and Turnbull see these discourses as symptomatic of Fanonesque inferiorism. What is striking about much of the discussion is that, while it is indeed possible, as they suggest, to see some parallels between a British-run Scotland and a European-dominated Africa, a great deal of the argument can also apply to a Lowland-dominated Gàidhealtachd. *Understanding Scotland: the Sociology of a Stateless Nation* tries to reconcile the cultural differences between the Gàidhealtachd and Lowland Scotland by pointing at the major literary renaissance that was begun in the Modernist period:

> The Scottish literary renaissance of the 1920s expressed itself in the work of MacDiarmid, Grassic Gibbon, Linklater, MacColla, Muir, Bridie, as well as Violet Jacob and Naomi Mitchison [...] These socio-cultural developments were rooted in a pluralistic cultural system in Scotland - in Gaelic (Sorley MacLean), in Scots (notably, MacDiarmid and Gibbon) and even in standard English (Muriel Spark). (McCrone 1992, 193)

The point about rootedness may be valid, but the structure of the argument somewhat subverts this, in the way that Gaelic is appended as an afterthought, represented only by Sorley MacLean. In some sense, a more useful exemplar might have been George Campbell Hay, who, after all, was one of the few writers in the twentieth century who published a substantial body in both Gaelic and Scots. However, Hay's unusual distinction would also subvert McCrone's subsequent suggestion that "These ways of expressing Scottish culture are inclusive rather than exclusive, building on the erstwhile alternative ways of being 'Scottish' - Lowland and Highland, Protestant and Catholic, male and female, black and white" (McCrone 1992, 193). It might be

helpful to add to McCrone's analysis Homi Bhabha's notion of 'in-between' spaces, and to imagine overlapping interests, rather like a Venn diagram, rather than unremitting and unequivocal inclusiveness. According to Bhabha:

> These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha 2007, 2)

The remainder of the current essay shows how a great deal of what has concerned many of the major commentators on Scottish literature and culture in recent years is indeed also manifested in Gaelic writing. Specifically, we see that contemporary Gaelic fiction presents countless boundaries, in-between spaces and borders, and that there is a substantial symbolism generated out of tropes of border-crossing. The focus here is on a small group of writers from Lewis, but other selections could just as easily have been made to illustrate the key points.

On the Edge
It is no coincidence that the Gaelic language has found itself perched 'on the edge'. Over the course of centuries, socioeconomic and political forces steadily and inexorably pushed the Gaels towards the geographical margins of Scotland, across the symbolically-charged boundary of the sea and to the outer islands. In the second half of the twentieth century, Lewis, an island that was once on the periphery of even the Gàidhealtachd, became one of the main engine rooms in a resurgent literature that forged ahead with vigour and invention. A substantial proportion of the Gaelic prose fiction produced from the middle of the twentieth century onwards came from Lewis. From this island on the edge, we have a remarkable crop of brilliant writers, in whose work we can find many instances of their fascination with boundary-crossing and cultural location. In the fiction of Fionnlagh MacLeòid, we can see, for instance, psychological and mental dilemmas, attempts to bridge the cultural-linguistic chasm associated with the bilingual minority perched on the periphery. Donnchadh MacGillÌosa's work features many different kinds of boundary-crossing, between tradition and modernity, between realism and mythopoeia, between folklore and narrative. In Iain Moireach's writing, we find the sense of schism within the characters themselves, often in the form of metaphysical angst at their situation: they struggle to come to terms with their identity as Gaels within a larger culture that is, itself, subsumed within a much larger culture.

While the three writers examined in this essay are broadly contemporaries in age terms, discussion of their writing crosses certain undefined borders in literary movement terms. Iain Moireach has produced only one collection of short stories to date,[3] and that as long ago as 1973, with the publisher Gairm, at a time when that imprint and the related magazine, of the same name, were the dominant force in Gaelic fiction output. Donnchadh MacGillÌosa published his second collection in 2013, and both of his books came out during what we came to think of as the 'Ùr-Sgeul era'.[4] Although MacGillÌosa had written before, his first book of stories appeared in 2004 and is largely responsible for having established his reputation. The third writer, Fionnlagh MacLeòid, spans both periods, crossing the unclear boundary between the 'Gairm era' and the 'Ùr-Sgeul era'.[5] Like MacGillÌosa, MacLeòid's first collection appeared during the Ùr-Sgeul phase in fiction production, but many of the

stories within it were written during the Gairm era, and his reputation as a writer was well established many years prior to the publication of his book, *Dìomhanas*. In fact, MacLeòid and Moireach were two of the most significant playwrights in the revolution that enlivened Gaelic drama from the 1960s onwards, a revolution that included several other writers from Lewis.[6]

Liminal Spaces

Let us next consider the idea of liminal spaces, borderlands of various kinds where different questions of identity and truth can be explored. For Iain Moireach, and the stories in his *An Aghaidh Choimheach*,[7] many of the liminal spaces are those that nestle within characters' sense of themselves and of their own identity. *An Aghaidh Choimheach* is a highly varied collection, ranging from the long, return-from-exile title story, through comedy, fable, gritty rite-of-passage and a dose of surrealism. But, common to most of the stories, there is a sense of the fractured self. There is a clue there for the reader in the title story that opens the book. "Aghaidh Choimheach" literally means 'strange face', in both senses of the word 'strange'. But the phrase is also the Gaelic equivalent of the word 'mask'. As well as the usual associations we may have with masks and their use in concealing – all of which is relevant here (and there is, I think, also a deliberate allusion here to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*) – Moireach also uses the image in a way that recalls Roland Barthes' work on the semiotics of clothing, an idea that has been familiar in Scottish culture at least as far back as Thomas Carlyle and *Sartor Resartus* (1836). The main character in "An Aghaidh Choimheach", one Aonghas Iain, returns to the island of Lewis after spending more than forty years in Canada. His brother, Doilidh, meeting him at the airport, recognises him not because of some remembrance of their familial link; he recognises him because of the way he is dressed: he recognises him, in fact, as a Canadian. Doilidh's first impression on seeing his long-lost brother is: "có nach aithneachadh Canéidianach air a thrusgan?" / "who would not know a Canadian from his clothing?"[8] Aonghas Iain has, therefore, made a transition in his apparent identity: his outward appearance marks him as belonging to another country.

Besides a fashion sense, the decades of living on the other side of an ocean, beyond an international border, have created numerous other differences between the brothers. These differences leave the brothers with an unbridgeable schism between them, as Doilidh comes to represent what Aonghas Iain left behind when he emigrated to Canada forty years earlier, and Aonghas Iain struggles to understand why his homecoming does not invoke an emotional response in proportion with the *cianalas* he has felt while away. At the same time, for Doilidh, Aonghas Iain comes to stand for lost opportunity, selfishness, and possibly a form of betrayal. By living his life on the other side of the great barrier of the Atlantic Ocean, with all of the social and cultural barriers also implied by that, Aonghas Iain has let the family down, and, in doing so, given Doilidh cause to doubt himself and regret his own choices in life.

The exile theme is a common one in Gaelic literature. At times, it is linked to a very Gaelic variation on Fanon's inferiorisation, wherein the character of the Gael regards himself as a member of a subaltern culture which is, itself, subsumed within another subaltern culture. In other words, the Gael within Scotland is still a Scot within Britain. This take on the theme underlies Moireach's story "Am Pàrtaidh", which is the second one in his book. The Gaelic community in some of Moireach's writing is

an expression of what Frank O'Connor called the "submerged population group" (O'Connor 2004 [1985], p.18), except that there also exists a native backlash reaction against this position. For instance, the main character in "Am Pàrtaidh", Ailean, is an archetypal angry young man. He is a student in a city, probably Edinburgh, who spends the present chronology of the story at a party in somebody's flat. During the course of the evening, the reader is privileged to a number of flashbacks from Ailean's perspective, and we come to realise what lies behind some of his angst. His negative reaction to a sense of cultural alienation has led to him turning away from his background, his past and his family. But, Ailean's father has died when the two of them were still estranged, and this has left him full of doubt and self-loathing. Much of Ailean's negativity is directed towards key aspects of what were often thought of at the time of writing (i.e. late 60s or early 70s) as typical components of a Gàidhealtachd culture, despite the fact that even in the early 1970s one might easily have identified them as *stereo*typical components, and certainly things that were by no means characteristic of all Gàidhealtachd communities.

In his book, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Declan Kiberd wrote: "an Irishman only came to consciousness of himself when he left his country" (48). The statement is also germane to the (Scottish) Gaelic community and sums up what has happened to the character Ailean in "Am Pàrtaidh". By leaving his Highland home, he has come to question his own identity and to question how his background has come to form that identity. Ailean's main difficulties are with the judgemental Calvinistic religion that is exemplified by his father's strict, phlegmatic adherence to his own understanding of Christian practice, and, to the same degree, with what he sees as his compatriots' simple acceptance of their place. Ailean rejects the Gaels' willingness to accept their otherness, their peripherality, even though his rejection of his fellow Gaels leaves him isolated not only from the Lowlanders at the party but also from the Highlanders who otherwise seek comfort in numbers. At the same time, Ailean rejects the willingness that some of the Gaels have to hybridise themselves, to adapt and fit into the new location of the Lowland city, and to find some kind of commonality with the Lowlanders, even if that commonality then exists in an uneasy relationship of suspicion, mutual distrust and, as is hinted in the story, mutual dislike. Then again, Ailean himself is still aware of being split, of existing in liminal spaces.

In *Inventing Ireland*, Kiberd writes about the concept of being caught between two languages and being ashamed as a result (115). The phenomenon of being caught between two languages occurs in a flashback scene in "Am Pàrtaidh" when Ailean remembers taking his father to a restaurant and ordering his food in English. His father visited him in the city and Ailean recalls how their previous roles were reversed there because of the change of environment. In the city, Ailean was the leader and his father was reduced to being a rather cringing follower. His father was clearly a fish out of water and was uncomfortable with every aspect of the environment, not least the requirement to speak English. He looked to Ailean for help and guidance. Shame is one of the key emotions in the scene, especially when Ailean has the audacity to speak to his own father in English. It redefines their relationship, but the shame later returns to haunt Ailean himself when he finally realises the impact of what he has done.

Border-crossing

Donnchadh MacGillÌosa published his second collection in 2013, making it one of the last of the Ùr-Sgeul titles: *Màiri Dhall agus Sgeulachdan Eile*. His first, *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc* (2004),[9] was the first short story cycle ever published in Gaelic and is the one I discuss here. *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc* follows a number of strands, crossing seamlessly between realism and mythopoeia, between a writing style that the earlier homeland poets, or the first contributors to the magazine *Gairm* in the early 1950s, would have recognised as typical or traditional Gaelic writing (although MacGillÌosa does this with a measure of parody and self-awareness), through a style that beautifully and convincingly recalls the oral culture that has suggested the storyline of one whole strand of the book, and into a style that is as modern and evocative as anything by MacGillÌosa's contemporary Tormod Caimbeul, who was often thought of as the stylist *par excellence* in Gaelic prose fiction.

There are a number of major characters who reappear throughout *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc*, but chief among them all is the title character, An Tocasaid. We know that colourful nicknames are commonplace in many parts of the Gàidhealtachd, and that these nicknames are often linked to *sloinnidhean*, and so MacGillÌosa makes this into a 'rooting' device (much as Tormod Caimbeul did in his novel, *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, 1979). In this book, An Tocasaid's nickname is so key to his character that his acquisition of the name gets a whole story of its own, culminating in the amusing and idiosyncractically bilingual, bicultural run:

> Tormod Beag, Tormod Beag againn fhìn, Tormod Noraidh, Norman MacLeod One, in contradistinction to Norman MacLeod Two, alias Tormod Nell, mac Thormoid 'Ain Tuirc, an donas beag ud, am bastard na bids' ud, am balach gòrach, an dòlas duin' ud, a bhlaigeird air do chasan, a mhic an uilc, a mhic an diabhail, m' eudail-s' air a mhullach, the man himself, College Boy, Guga, a Thormoid a luaidh, a Leòdhasaich na galla, yon big teuchter, Desperate Dan, Plum MacDuff, that Scotch git, you great big fucking Paddy, my own dear darling, the Body, the Brain, sweetie-pie, Prof, Dead-Eye Dick, honey, Leg-over len, Mac, wherefore art thou Romeo, Come-again Charlie - agus a bhàrr orra sin uile, quintessentially and perennially, an Tocasaid, agus Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc. (*TAC*, 18)

One strand in the book recounts supposed folk tales or wonder tales that An Tocasaid's grandmother used to tell him when he was a child. The fact that these tales are just as new and just as made-up as anything else in the book adds to the self-reflexive metafictionality of the piece, but they are so convincingly done that the reader could be tempted to speculate that MacGillÌosa might have out-Macphersoned Macpherson, had he so wished. These pseudo folk tales centre around the character An Sgeilbheag. As we read these An Sgeilbheag stories, we encounter yet more forms of border-crossing with the fiction: we cross between text worlds within text worlds, and we cross the boundaries of irony and style. Somewhere in between, the author himself disappears, lost in the interstices between tellings. An Sgeilbheag, the main recurring character in these pseudo folk tales, is, typically – we might say, archetypically – a prince. In the story, "Am Fear Nàimhdeil, Neimheil", An Sgeilbheag must defend the borders of his father's realm from an amorphous and powerful monster. When An Sgeilbheag doubts that he can stop the creature, his magical brown shoes warn him that he must, or else the monster will track him down and kill him, then cross over the border into his father's kingdom. There is clearly a

symbolic significance in this border-crossing motif, which underlies the rest of the story. The story draws heavily on folk motifs and the idea of the Gaelic otherworld, which represents another boundary that is often alluded to in the Gaelic cultural canon. I have written about this feature in the fiction before, in an article about the figurative use of water: many of the liminal spaces, the crossing-over points, in both the otherworld tales and indeed in the formally realist fiction involve water (Watson 2011a). In "Am Fear Nàimhdeil, Neimheil", the water is again significant: having finally fought the monster to a stalemate and persuaded it to retreat, An Sgeilbheag jumps into a stream to cool down. His combat has superheated his body to the point where it instantly boils the water. These changes of state – An Sgeilbheag's empowered state calls to mind Cù Chulainn's warp spasm and other similar heroic raptures, and the rather more mundane evaporation of the water – add to the many senses of crossing-over that we find in the story. The narrative voice also crosses over, into a poetic lyricism that immediately calls to mind the oral tradition. Examples include:

> Am beathach a bha guineach, gonach, gamhlasach, ghoid i a neart. (*TAC*, 104)
> "Tha 'n oidhche cho dubh dorch ri poit-tearra – chan fhaic mi nì, 's chan fhaicear mi, 's dè rèist as ciallta dhiubh? Leigibh dhomh cadal, 's mi cho sgìth," (101)

> A h-uile freumh feagail a dh'fhairich e na bheath', gach gath gairiseachaidh, a h-uile pioc sgàig is oillt is uamhainn a rinn a-riamh luidean dheth, agus còrr – chruinnich iad na chom nan aon bhailc. Leig e às ràn mar a leigeadh leanabh. (103)

In my book, *An Introduction to Gaelic Fiction*, I wrote that:

> *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc* is more closely integrated than a short story cycle and yet has less cohesion than a novel. It lies poised between the two in an uneasy and brilliant tension. (Watson 2011b, 160)

The phrase "uneasy and brilliant tension" sums up MacGillÌosa's writing in all sorts of ways. It is certainly among the most accomplished in modern Gaelic fiction.

Internal Borderlands
Fionnlagh MacLeòid has published two books of prose fiction, his short story collection *Dìomhanas* (2008), and a prize-winning novel, *Gormshuil an Rìgh* (2010). *Gormshuil an Rìgh* has a good deal in common with *Tocasaid 'Ain Tuirc*, and for that reason, and for the sake of variety, this essay will avoid discussing the novel (which I have discussed elsewhere: Watson 2011b), and concentrate now on one of the stories in *Dìomhanas*. MacLeòid studied psychology at the University of Aberdeen in the 1960s and became fascinated with the philosophy and psychology of personal identity. There was, at the time, a vogue for discussing the so-called mind-body duality, and the implications for one's personal identity associated with a procedure called a corpus callostomy: an operation to sever the corpus callosum, an area of white matter that connects the hemispheres of the brain. Surgeons had begun performing this procedure in the 1940s in order to treat epilepsy, as the corpus callosum plays an important role in interhemispheric communication in the brain. It was found that severing the corpus callosum led to a reduction in interhermispheric

communication and did help to alleviate the symptoms of conditions like epilepsy. Among the side effects of the procedure is the inability, or reduction in ability, to process verbal inputs that involve crossing over between the hemispheres. MacLeòid became interested in the implications of this split-brain phenomenon for personal behaviour and identity, especially as it chimed with his pre-existing interest in the psychology of bilingualism. The story "An Cluaisean" takes up both of these interests. The main character, whose actual name we never learn, goes to hospital to have his tonsils removed. In a strange accident, his corpus callosum is somehow severed and he wakes up temporarily mute. In time, he starts to be able to hear and speak Gaelic, but he can neither hear nor speak a word of English. Strangest of all, though, is the fact that his speech comes out of his right ear – hence, the name 'Cluaisean'. This fascinates doctors and chat show hosts, although it causes him problems at school, as all the serious work of school was done in English at the time, and he can now only speak Gaelic. MacLeòid here was satirising a situation that he himself went on to try to change, as he was involved in implementing a bilingual education policy for the Western Isles, which was, in a way, a forerunner of today's Gaelic Medium Education. He also satirises and parodies other institutions in the course of the story, including the medical profession, the aforementioned chat show industry, and various stalwarts of the Gaelic milieu, especially An Comunn Gàidhealach, the organisers of the National Mòd. Moreover, we cannot help but notice that An Cluaisean's situation also parodies the well-known myth of the inarticulate, tongue-tied Scot. Beveridge and Turnbull discuss this motif, thought to be a manifestation of inferiorism, brought about as a result of Calvinisim (Beveridge and Turnbull 1989, 10). They also go on to challenge the long-held perception of silence as being a characteristic feature of Scottishness (1989, 11).

Time goes by in the story, and eventually the Cluaisean is able to hear and speak English as well as Gaelic; but the English goes only through his left ear. And, because his right ear cannot *hear* English and his left ear cannot *hear* Gaelic, his two ears are unaware of one another speaking. He effectively turns into two separate individuals, one of whom is an English speaker and the other is a Gaelic speaker. MacLeòid generates a good deal of comedy out of this scenario, such as when the authorities decide to test An Cluaisean's IQ, and it turns out the English-speaking side of his brain has a higher IQ than the Gaelic-speaking side.

Beyond the humour alone, MacLeòid is striving to strike directly at the heart of the issue of personal identity, and what it means to be a person straddling two cultures, two communities and two languages. He explores certain attitudes that have been prevalent in recent decades in the Gaelic community, including the notion of how the languages should be allowed to articulate with one another, and the extent to which there can be a stable diglossia within the Gaelic milieu. The point where the two languages impinge on one another's domains has often been treated as a borderland, even a battleground. For example, Donald MacAulay's paper "Borrow, Calque and Switch: the Law of the English Frontier" (1982), deals with these issues from a linguistic perspective, but the noteworthy point in this current discussion is that he uses the 'frontier' metaphor: the frontier is a border that implies exploration and potential conflict. In "An Cluaisean", MacLeòid imagines the director of An Comunn Gàidhealach seeing the split-brain accident as a wonderful opportunity to establish an impenetrable barrier between the languages, and thus between the separate identities and the cultures they manifest. The story goes:

b' e fear-stiùiridh a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich a bha buileach toilicht' leis a' Chluaisean. Seo, ars esan, a bha sinne a' sireadh bho chionn bhliadhnaichean. An dà chànan a chumail air leth bho chèile, 's air an aon stèidh. (*Dìomhanas*, 143)

It is fair to say that MacLeòid's humour here reflects a genuine issue in the Gaelic community, a genuine sense of discomfort with the way the two languages and their associated cultural appurtenances relate to one another. In the case of the parodying of An Comunn Gàidhealach and the Mòd, we see a manifestation of the suspicion that the very institutions that have been erected to preserve the language and culture may well have been instrumental in, at very least, affecting significant cultural changes in fundamental areas.

Conclusions

When we try to understand the significance of these tendencies in recent Gaelic fiction, we are reminded of another of Homi Bhabha's statements: "*It is in the emergence of the interstices -- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference -- that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness,* community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 2007, 2). So, our common experience emerges in the delineation of difference, and thus we come to understand our place within the world and our own cultural significance. In this way, Bhabha challenges the centre-periphery metaphor and provides an alternative, inclusive trope of cultural location that enables us to make sense of the extraordinary vibrancy of a literature that is literally on the edge. Thus, Iain Moireach's Gael who is only comfortable on a train or a ferry is not somehow odd or alien: he is, in fact, intensely aware of the interstitial nature of the negotiation of cultural identity. Being consciously and mindfully biculutural turns out to be advantageous in a world in which old understandings of 'nationness' and even community have come under such strain. Donnchadh MacGillIosa's blending of the pseudo-tradition, the mythopoeic, with the contemporary formal realism perfectly illustrates the negotiation of cultural value, in which the Gaelic tradition and the bilingual, pluricultural modern-day Gael can find common ground and shared significance: recall Bhabha's words that the "recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification". Fionnlagh MacLeòid's exploration of the internal borderlands tests Cairns Craig's analysis of the accidental boundaries and alternative versions of the self. And, in the end, we are reminded that the 'collaboration' and 'contestation' that dominate An Cluaisean's life after his unfortunate operation are merely symbolic of the kinds of 'in-between' spaces that, according to Bhabha allow for "elaborating strategies of selfhood".

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