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Title:

Ar Lorg na Gaoithe

The impossibility of translating Séamas Mac Annaidh's *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* into English.

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“Translating is not pouring wine from one bottle into another. Substance and form cannot be separated this easily” (Waldrop 1984:42)

Introduction

Many paraphrase Robert Frost to suggest that poetry is that which is lost in translation. The question of untranslatability at its most extreme assumes translation, in the words of Ortega y Gasset, to be “a utopian operation and an impossible proposition” (In Schulte and Biguenet 1992:98). Untranslatability as a concept is something of an absolute anti-ideal which for the most part acts as a reminder of the limits of human endeavour and the relative autonomies of text-bound and diachronically situated linguistic worldviews, the result of perfectionist translators’ yearnings for the essences of meaning.

The central concerns of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* are incompatible with the textual extension that translation implies, without a total reworking of the text and the inclusion of the hyper-autobiographical interference of the translator. I intend to bypass much of the untranslatability discourse by focusing on what I believe are the key themes of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí*, remembering, in Susan Bassnett’s words, that “It must be clear at the outset that the text, understood to be in a dialectical relationship with other texts and located within a specific historical context, is the prime unit” (Bassnett 1991:117).

Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí

Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí was first published by Coiscéim in 1983 when Séamas Mac Annaidh, from Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, was twenty-two years old. It was widely acknowledged as a significant addition to the public corpus of Irish language literature upon its publication. Literary critic Máirín Nic Eoin wrote at the time: “Is leabhar ar leith an leabhar seo, leabhar a mbeifear ag trácht air go ceann i bhfad” (1984:19). [This book stands out on its own. It will be talked about for a long time.] It can be easily separated for the purposes of study into four definite narrative strands.

The first follows Séamas Mac Anna (not, note, Séamas Mac Annaidh) in what is quite obviously a case of autobiographical fiction, time-checked throughout, through a day-in-the-life account of events in Enniskillen, for example, collecting the dole and wandering around town, all leading to a bizarre meeting between characters from a

separate narrative strand and Séamas, as narrator, in the town square, a meeting scheduled for three o'clock.

The second narrative strand is based on the Gilgamesh Epic, a Sumerian Epic from approximately 2500 BC that tells of the quest of Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, for the gift of immortality. At the end of his quest Gilgamesh meets the wise hermit Utnapishtim, who eventually concedes the secret of immortality, which is a plant, but on his way home down-river Gilgamesh pauses to wash himself, and a snake sneaks on board his boat and eats the plant.

The third and probably most striking narrative is the story of a mysterious doctor, Siamais Mac Greine, who arrives in Dublin from the Middle East with a bundle of ancient parchments. After a visit to Newgrange, where it seems he discovers the secret of eternal life, and following a series of unfortunate accidents, he takes the brain of an old man, Patrick Ó hUltánaigh, the body of a young boy, also Patrick Ó hUltánaigh (the old man's great-nephew), and the face of a paperboy. He puts them together and re-animates the lot to create a person that he, coincidentally, names 'Gilly'. This is an obvious and deliberate retelling of the Frankenstein myth. We then follow Gilly as he makes his way through school, very much in a typical rites-of-passage fashion. In the process he meets the old man's sweetheart, Sally Holme, from whom he has been separated in bitterness for many years since their idyllic childhood days on her father's estate. This narrative in many ways runs parallel to the Gilgamesh Epic, for example, the quest for immortality, the companionship and death of a close friend (Fánaí), and the confrontation with the monster Humbaba in the forest. Eventually Gilly forms a punk band, and he meets death at Sally's hands during what turns out to be his first and final performance. It is an odd mixture of Frankenstein, schoolboy antics, Bildungsroman, heightened fantasy, cross-references to the previous two narratives, and a rather unconventional love-story.

The fourth narrative strand is another apparently autobiographical tale relating a summer on an unspecified island at an Irish College in the Gaeltacht where Séamas worked as a *ceannaire* (supervisor) following completion of his B.A. degree, concentrating in particular on his strained relationship with one particular student, Mícheál, who refuses to speak in Irish. It is presented to us primarily through the medium of unashamedly playful dialogue, incorporating slang, English, and pidgin Bearlathas (Irish with English linguistic structures).

One might argue that there is another narrative thread, that of the interjecting narrative voice, Séamas Mac Annaidh himself speaking in the first person, in the role of both illusory intermediary between reader and text and the role of Creator. This is characterized by continual pleas for communication, extracts from songs, wordplay, punning, and an almost malicious bilingualism.

Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as a traditional novel, and it would be tempting to assume that its almost flippant approach and its outrageous fantasy are indicative of a lack of thematic depth. We have in the *Cuaifeach* a text of startling complexity and profundity, and we are more than justified in treating it as a prolonged meditation on death, the nature of self, the nature of reality, immortality, and the Unjustified Self. As I shall show later, by considering, in Susan Bassnett's words, "the function both of the text and of the devices within the text itself" (1991:118), the function of the text as hyper-autobiography and as quest for an Unjustified Textual Self is what ultimately militates against there ever being a translation, as such, of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí*.

Death

Heidegger has written that “Death, honestly accepted and anticipated, can become an integrating factor in an authentic existence.” (MacQuarrie 1972:198) Death is an all-pervasive and multifaceted presence in the text of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí*. By continually revisiting the experience of death in and through the text Mac Annaidh attempts to objectify it for himself, whereby he can then examine its role in his own life and his responses to it. Establishing this is crucial to our understanding of this novel’s function and my subsequent claim of untranslatability.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, as well as being one of the major structural components of this work, is also one of the main ways in which death is maintained as a constant concern throughout the text, both in the re-telling of the epic in translation and in the use of the parallel narrative involving Siamais MacGréine and Gilly. The tone of the epic is dominated by a profoundly pessimistic Mesopotamian world view, and would seem to be the perfect complement to a modern meditation on death.

Whereas the Gilgamesh epic might seem to be the most obvious reminder of mortality in *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí*, Mac Annaidh has managed to weave a Death Awareness into the fabric of the text. One of the simplest ways in which this is done is by including reports of deaths, almost at random, throughout the novel. These are deaths of both anonymous and famous people, confirming Death as the Great Leveller of history. Mac Annaidh incorporates twenty-eight deaths into the text in this fashion.

Ursula le Guin has written that “narrative is a strategem of mortality. It is a means, a way of living. It does not seek immortality; it does not seek to triumph over or escape from time ... It asserts, affirms, participates in directional time, time experienced, time as meaningful” (In Huston 1995:713). In *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* Séamas Mac Annaidh reaffirms mortality by continually marking illusory real-time at irregular intervals in his day-in-the-life narrative. The passing of time, instead of being a comfort, even a deception, becomes a reminder that life is always a movement forwards, onwards, towards an inevitable conclusion.

But where we find the effect of passing time in one of the narrative strands, it is clear when we examine all of the strands together that the actual structure of the novel, the multiplaned narratives and their apparent random sequence militate against even passing time acting as a comfortable yardstick or support. The constantly changing narratives add to an overwhelming sense of panic and uneasiness. “Is cuma faoin scéal” [The story doesn’t matter] becomes from the start one of the many mantras of the book, hinting that maybe the process is the priority, that maybe it is more important to convey unease, and ultimately to communicate something about the nature of the death experience, than to participate in the unfolding of a strictly linear and ‘traditional’ narrative.

This apparently haphazard approach is also to be found in the style of the autobiographical narratives and the primary narrator’s voice, a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ simulation that has been greatly influenced by the writings of Peigí Rose (1991) in *An tUltach* magazine, themselves often characterized implicitly and explicitly by unease. It is from Peigí Rose that Mac Annaidh borrowed the much used metaphor of the “Guairneán” (translated in Ó Dónaill (1981) as “whirling motion; whirl, spin; swirl, eddy ... Tossing about, restlessness, uneasiness, whirlpool”) which is combined with the oft-repeated image of the “Charybdis”, a ship-devouring monster of classical Greek mythology, identified with a whirlpool off the coast of Sicily, and the “Cuaifeach” or “Tempest” of the title to convey the confusion and tumult of life

and the ever-present threat of death. Restlessness is constant: in the narration, in the personal sicknesses and angst-ridden lives of the characters, and in the style and structure of the novel. In the general thematic context of death this restlessness can certainly be linked to the imminence of the final hour.

Yet another way in which death pervades the text is in the extended use of the Garden of Eden analogy as played out through the love-story-that-isn't between Patrick Ó hUltánaigh, later to be Gilly, and Sally Holme. Eden is mythically the source of all sin, death, and self-consciousness, and, in Ernest Becker's words, "The final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one's own death, which is the peculiar sentence on man alone in the animal kingdom. This is the meaning of the Garden of Eden myth and the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man's peculiar and greatest anxiety." (Becker 1973:70)

We cannot ignore the importance of the work being written in the medium of Irish, a minority language often associated with the metaphor of Dying, as explored recently in the unpublished work of Sarah McKibben. As McKibben says of Ó Cadhain and Ó Nualáin so we can also say of Mac Annaidh: "If by simply speaking they prove Irish is not dead, they go further, interrogating the metaphor and reversing it to prove that Irish is very much alive" (1997).

Responses to Death

Having outlined the ways in which death permeates the text of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* it befits us to look at the ways in which Mac Annaidh has responded to death in the novel. At its most direct the response is an actual restatement of Horace's "Carpe Diem", or "Seize the Day". It is in the context of "Carpe Diem" that the title *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* assumes most significance, incorporating as it does two of the major recurring metaphors in the novel: the *cuaifeach* and the *lon dubh* or 'blackbird'. Mac Annaidh uses the *cuaifeach* (Meaning 'tempest' or 'squall' - a play on the birdcall sound 'cuach') as an indicator of his hyperstimulated state of mind, reflected in the nature of the book. He uses the blackbird first and foremost as a symbol for instinctive spontaneity. As he states explicitly:

Bhí an lon dubh aige mar shiombail den rud fhileata (sic) greannmhar a bhí istigh ann féin, an spiorad aerach sin nach raibh aon srian air. (193)
[The blackbird was for him a symbol of that poetic, funny thing, that bright, unbounded spirit that was within him.]

A second major response to death is through the use of humour. In *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* the humour is heavily dependent on witticisms and punning, what Ezra Pound has coined "Logopoeia". Much of the humour is to be found in the fulcrum narratives of the Gilgamesh Epic and the Frankensteinian story of Siamais Mac Gréine and Gilly. It is interesting to note that the Gilgamesh Epic is, in its original form, a source of much humour. In the *Cuaifeach* the epic initially retains its dignified and noble tone, but gradually gives way to low burlesque.

James Hall has written that "comedy is usually serious, however much some analysis may burlesque its kind of seriousness" (1966:45). Koestler (1964) has argued that threat, aggression, or apprehension are indispensable ingredients of humour. We have seen how the threat of death is almost a constant in *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí*.

This tension is continuously generated and discharged through humour along the contrasted planes of Nonsense and Death.

Any negative experience suffered is balanced by a desire, a need, to communicate. A problem shared is a problem halved. For those fully aware of their mortal condition communication can be an attempt to defeat the loneliness and isolation that comes from that knowledge. Mac Annaidh's desire for communication is expressed without reservation: "Déanaimis teagmháil. Cumarsáid ... please"(48). A constant plea is, "Amharc sna súile agam. Déanaimis caidreamh"(9). The act of reading is a form of interpersonal communication in which the eyes, of necessity, play an important part (leaving aside the use of braille), linking the reader to the author through the text. The reader is necessary in the author's attempt to make the act of communication complete, which places a focus on Mac Annaidh's use of intertextuality throughout the novel, culled from an eclectic variety of texts, often texts that have formed part of Mac Annaidh's formal education throughout secondary school and university. Writers such as Máirtín Ó Direáin, Seán Ó Ríordáin, W.B. Yeats, Myles na gCopaleen, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Art Mac Cumhaidh, Dante, Wilfred Owen, Séamas Ó Grianna, Seosamh Mac Grianna, Séamas Dall Mac Cuarta, Pádraic Pearse and many, many more find their work quoted and paraphrased throughout the text, and an exhaustive sourcing of all the intertextual references in the *Cuaifeach* would be an almost impossible task, maybe even a pointless one; each reader brings their own literary/textual background to bear on the text as they read it, maybe even finding resonances that were totally unintended.

The Quest for Immortality

It is necessary to ground our assessment of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* in its treatment of death and its responses to death so that we might fully appreciate the way in which *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is a lunge for immortality, and, as we shall see later, an attempt at eternal self-perpetuation, an attempt to conquer death. The very first words of the novel are "Biseach an Bháis", a statement of mission and intent. The central narrative structure, as we have seen, is the Epic of Gilgamesh; the quest of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, for the ultimate prize of immortality. The second most important narrative of the novel, that of Siamais and Gilly, is based on Victor Frankenstein's archetypal quest to defeat death.

The perpetuation of a person's name in the collective memory of a people has long been seen as a form of immortality. It is made clear in direct references that *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is the vehicle by which Mac Annaidh hopes to gain fame, and hence immortality. Needless to say, Mac Annaidh couches the claims in self-mockery, but the place of fame in the novel is consolidated by the importance of heroism in the text, heroism being one of the ways in which fame may be achieved. The adjectives *cróga* ['brave'] and *caithréimeach* ['triumphant', 'conquering'] are ubiquitous. In the words of Shaler: "Heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death"(In Becker 1973:11).

Autobiography

Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí can be considered in many ways as autobiography. Mark Rose has written of "the growing tendency in the mid-eighteenth century to think of writings as projections of authors' personalities. No longer simply a mirror held up to

nature, a work was also the objectification of an author's 'self'" (1993). *Cuifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is very much a reflection of Séamas Mac Annaidh's personality, but even more so, an attempted recreation of the author as a textual entity in an attempt to gain immortality in response to the experience of death. It is this hyper-autobiographical aspect which ultimately rails against the translation of *Cuifeach Mo Londubh Buí*.

Firstly, we have the day-in-the-life narrative, a thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction, including details from various periods of Séamas' life up to the point of writing. The Gaeltacht narrative might also merit inclusion here. Secondly, we have the frequent emphasis on Mac Annaidh's sense of place, his attachment to his home town of Enniskillen, coupled with his paradoxical feeling of separation from his place and people as a result of his education. It could be argued that Mac Annaidh's vital sense of place, "Buachaill ón Éirne mé"(185) compensates for his increasing detachment by allowing much of Enniskillen's historical and geographical colour to become part and parcel of the fabric of the text, in much the same way as the town is an integral part of the fabric of his life and identity.

Thirdly, the intertextuality of the novel, as we have already seen, acts to incorporate most of Séamas Mac Annaidh's literary and cultural world up to the point of writing the novel at age twenty one. It becomes a direct projection of his literary life. The intertextuality, though, serves both to underline the individual experiences of the author and to highlight the multiplicitous nature of this cultural production.

Fourthly, a more direct way in which *Cuifeach Mo Londubh Buí* might be seen as autobiography is in the omnipresence of the name Séamas or Siamais. Among the players are: Séamas Mac Annaidh, Séamas Caoimhín Mícheál Mac Anna, Séamas Mac an Bhancaire, Siamais Mac Gréine, and Séamas a' Chaca, to which we might add Shamash the Sun God from the original Gilgamesh Epic. In the wider context of the novel it is clear that all of these characters become in one way or another Séamas Mac Annaidh, Author, all deliberate projections of an alter-ego. In each case Mac Annaidh's attitude to character-as-self is particularly self-effacing.

In the novel it becomes clear that none of the characters, including Séamas in all his guises, can be said to possess a clear, distinct, or well-defined identity. Mac Annaidh succeeds in blurring many of the characters' identities, highlighting the arbitrariness of names as identifying labels. The names Gilly and Giolgamaís are one and the same, the source of no little confusion. Mac Annaidh is explicitly aware of the reader's confusion: "Cé anois atá i gceist, Séamas, Gilly, Fánaí, Giolgamaís nó an Caisideach Bán?"(174) [Who are we talking about now? Séamas, Gilly, Fánaí, Giolgamaís or the Caisideach Bán?]. By end of the novel things descend into chaos as one character blurs into the next: "Ba léir go raibh siad uilig cosúil leis ar dhóigh amháin nó ar dhóigh eile"(226) [It was clear that they were all alike in one way or another]. As well as playing a part in the overall *Cuifeach* or Tempest effect, this would almost seem to weaken the autobiographical impact of the text, but not if we accept that all the characters are Mac Annaidh himself, that *Cuifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is hyper-autobiography.

Just in case we didn't get the point Mac Annaidh spells it out explicitly for us:

Séamas
Caoimhín
Mícheál
Me all (208)

Or in the penultimate paragraph of the *Cuairfeach*:

Mhúscail sé de gheit. Bhí sé ina lá. D'éirigh Séamas amach as a leaba, d'oscail Caoimhín na cúirtíní, chuir Mícheál a chuid éadaí air, nigh Anna a haghaidh agus chuaigh siad ceathrar síos an staighre, agus nuair a d'ól siad an caife gliondrach ba é an t-aon bhéal amháin a shlog é (255).

[He awoke with a start. It was daylight. Séamas arose from his bed, Caoimhín opened the curtains, Mícheál dressed himself, Anna washed her face, and then the four of them walked down the stairs, and when they drank the blissful coffee it was the one mouth that swallowed it.]

Mac Annaidh's personality, his community of characters and text, is composite in much the same way as Frankenstein's monster is composite. So, is *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Buí* Mac Annaidh's quest for individuation, his attempt to objectify an identity, his attempt to distil his personality and present it to us, so maximizing the potential for communication between the reader and writer?

Mac Annaidh also appears in the text in the role of the author-god, breaking metafictionally into the narrative of the text. By assuming the role of the author-god Mac Annaidh assumes the role of the Supreme Individual, the Absolute Unjustified self. This parallels Mac Annaidh's attempt to create in *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Buí* a personal, unjustified, solipsist retreat. We see this clearly in the recurring metaphor of the island as it is used in the text. At a basic level the island acts as a metaphor for the two worlds of fiction and reality. At a deeper level the metaphor draws on the significance of allusions to both Seán Ó Ríordáin and Máirtín Ó Direáin. In the work of both these poets the image of the island figured prominently. For Ó Ríordáin the island is physically a place of refuge, of retreat, a place of escape, while the "other island", the "oileán eile" is an internal, spiritual space deep within the writer's psyche, a solipsist haven wherein the true essence of being is sought. For Ó Direáin the island was similarly a conceptual retreat, in many cases a romanticized construction. Mac Annaidh's island, his "other" life of the text, is loaded with these significances and is, first and foremost, a reflex of the terror of death. This novel is escapist in the most profound sense, an attempt to shed the shackles of mortality through a recreation of the self in autobiography, in fame, and as a self-contained textual world.

By participating in the text as author-god, Mac Annaidh not only sets himself up as the Supreme Unjustified Self, but also participates in the 'reality' of the fictional characters, eventually coming face to face with his own creations. By engaging with the characters as author he underlines both their fictionality and their relative independence, their differentiation from himself as author. Also, by engaging with them in this way Mac Annaidh recreates himself as a fictional character. If Mac Annaidh achieves fictional status he has therefore achieved immortality, however doomed he eventually accepts this ambition to be.

The untranslatable *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Buí*.

Having established the basic thematic structure of the novel, thereby clarifying its functional aspirations, we are able now to state the case for the untranslatability of *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Buí*. At first glance the novel is, at the very least, a difficult task for a translator to tackle. The *logopoeia* by its very nature is linguistically bound, relying almost exclusively on aural echoes and punning. Difficult, but not impossible. The bottomless intertextuality of the novel would challenge a translator to explore thematically relevant texts in the target language with a view to incorporating the new

linguistic *milieu* into the fabric of the translated text. To replicate the affected ‘spontaneity’ of the synchronic snapshot the translator would have to imbue the new text with the environment-sponging qualities of the original. Finding a way to convey the internal bilingual dynamic, replete with the considerations of minority language politics and power discourses, would require untold imagination. Again, difficult, but not impossible.

Rosetti has written that “The task of the translator (and with all humility be it spoken) is one of some self denial” (In Schulte and Biguenet 1992:65). Mac Annaidh’s *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is the complete anathema of self-denial. It is the quest for a individual hyper-autobiographical solipsist recreation of the author’s self. This book is by definition a once-off. It relies on its status as an individual text, an individual work, to coalesce with Mac Annaidh’s lunge for immortality.

This not only makes the translation of *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* difficult but, in my view, ensures that any attempt at translation must needs provide us with a wholly different text in order to replicate the original function of the novel. The spirit of the novel requires that the creator of the work imbue the text with his hyper-autobiographical self. The agency of a translator requires the full textual participation of the translator as autobiographical individual, as secondary creator, the full intertextual participation of the target language’s ‘death awareness’, the synchronic participation of events at the time of writing, and many other amendments, by which stage you have another novel on your hands, certainly not the one you started out with. The spirit of the *Tempest*, the *Cuaifeach*, and the wings of the Blackbird demands that *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Buí* is untranslatable, unless, of course, Mac Annaidh were to do it himself.

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