

Article

Ben Dorain: An Ecopoetic Translation

Garry MacKenzie

School of English, University of St Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9AL, UK; grm5@st-andrews.ac.uk

Received: 15 September 2018; Accepted: 11 June 2019; Published: 14 June 2019



Abstract: In this article, I reflect on my own practice in translating Duncan Bàn Macintyre's eighteenth-century Gaelic poem, *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, into a twenty-first century 'ecopoem'. Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* has been praised for its naturalism. My translation of this long poem emphasises the immediacy and biological specificity of Macintyre's descriptions. I explore how the act of translation might intersect with contemporary ecological concerns. My poem is not simply a translation, but incorporates *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* into a new work which juxtaposes a free English version of Macintyre's work with original material concerned with contemporary research into deer behaviour and ideas of ecological interconnectedness, including biosemiotics and Timothy Morton's 'dark ecology'. This article is a reflection on my production of a twenty-first century excavation and reimagining of Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*. I consider how the difficulties of translation might be turned into imaginative opportunities, and explore how translation has the potential to function as exposition and expansion of an original text, in order to create a poem which is itself an ecosystem, comprising of multiple ecological, cultural and political interactions.

Keywords: ecopoetics; translation; Gaelic poetry; Scottish poetry; mountains in poetry; creative criticism; ecology; red deer; biosemiotics; Scottish Highlands

1. The Ground: Duncan Bàn Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*

How does it begin?
With the piper's drone
with the coarse fabric of the land
 in greens and greys and purples,
the lines of hoof and song
 that cross it.

Landscape as pibroch:
the drone never silent,

never still,

then fingered notes
lift high above the moor: (MacKenzie 2017)¹

Duncan Bàn Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* (*In Praise of Ben Dorain*) is a mid-eighteenth-century Gaelic poem about a mountain in the Scottish Highlands and its herd of red deer. Macintyre (1723?–1812) was illiterate and composed the poem orally. Its formal construction is influenced by the movements and rhythmical variations of the pibroch, or classical bagpipe music, and also by the metrical emulations of pibroch found in the work of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, a Gaelic poet writing a generation

¹ These are the opening lines of *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*. While they draw out themes present in Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, these are new lines, not a translation of his Gaelic poem.

or so before Macintyre (Thomson 2006). Along with Alasdair's *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* (*The Birlinn of Clanranald*, first published in 1776) it is routinely described as one of the masterpieces of Gaelic literature: Alan Riach, for example, has described *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* and *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* as 'two long poems that should be familiar to anyone who cares about Scotland' (Riach 2016).

Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* can be regarded as having an early kind of environmental awareness based on close observation of the natural world. Sorley MacLean (1911–96), a pioneering Gaelic modernist poet and arguably the most significant Gaelic writer since Macintyre and Alasdair, believed *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* to be 'the greatest example of naturalistic realism in the poetry of Europe' (MacLean 1997, p. 33). The poem's eight sections are each concerned with aspects of the mountain, the seasons, and the life cycle of the deer. There are precise details about diet—the freshest streams to drink from, preferences for herbs such as primrose, St John's wort and tormentil flowers. Throughout there is a prevailing sense of deer as individuals, generated through references to differing appearances and personalities, from a many-antlered stag to an eccentric and unpredictable hind. Deer run across the hillside, and can be heard barking and bellowing. The description is unsentimental and literal: The deer, the rocks and the trees of the hill are not symbols or metaphors, but deer, rocks and trees. Animal behaviour and other ecological details are recorded in a manner not unlike a modern biological field study. For example, here is Macintyre's brief account of a deer using a wallow pool:

Broc liath-chorrach éild'
An lod g' a loireadh théid,
Cuid dh' a h-arraid fhéin
'N uair bu deònach leath'.

That grey, fussy brock of a hind
goes to roll in a pool—
a sample of her vagaries.

when she fancied it. (MacLeod 1978, pp. 202–3. MacLeod's translation)²

Macintyre's sustained focus on these things is unrivalled in Scottish literature until the ecologist Frank Fraser Darling's landmark monograph *A Herd of Red Deer*, first published in 1937. Darling spent long periods of time observing red deer in their Highland habitats, and his description of the kind of wallow favoured by hinds complements Macintyre's in its focus on the sex and action of the deer and the consistency of the pool: 'The hinds roll in clear water but not in supersaturated peat [. . .] providing a place in which to roll rather than to wallow' (Darling [1937] 2016, p. 61). Stags, Darling notes, prefer muddied wallows rather than pools (p. 61).

Implicit in the wealth of sights and sounds is that the speaker of the poem is immersed in this landscape. Narrative intrusions are for the most part limited to occasional exclamations of affection for the hill and its non-human inhabitants, rather than bringing the poet's emotions or thought processes to the fore. In his admittedly partisan reading of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, MacLean compares it favourably with English Romanticism, in particular the 'mixture of sentimentalism, pure illusion and ruminating subjectivity' of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (MacLean 1997, pp. 33–34), a prospect poem suffused with the meditations of the poet. Instead, MacLean finds in *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* a 'realisation of dynamic nature' (MacLean 1997, p. 34). The Gaelic poet Iain Crichton Smith (1928–98), whose translation of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* was first published in 1969, is right to suggest that John Clare's poetry might be the nearest English equivalent (Smith 1969, pp. 29–30). Human interests are limited to practical rather than more abstract, metaphysical concerns. Hunting and fishing are necessary means of subsistence, rather than the sport which they became with the nineteenth-century Balmoralisation

² When quoting from *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* directly I have included the Gaelic with MacLeod's literal English translation below. When quoting from translations which are published solely in English without a parallel text, I have included Macintyre's Gaelic in a footnote.

of the Highlands. Strikingly, this long poem about a mountain does not once mention climbing to its summit.

As a poet and literature scholar with interests in landscape poetry and Scottish literature, and as a hillwalker familiar with the West Highlands, I have lived with Macintyre's poem for several years. I first came to know it in Smith's translation, part of which was anthologised in *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (Crawford and Imlah 2000, pp. 256–65). Later I acquired sufficient Gaelic to read the original poem, in the version collected in Angus MacLeod's *The Songs of Duncan Ban Macintyre* (MacLeod 1978). In 2014 I was commissioned to write a literary travel guide to Scotland, and I knew I wanted to include my own translations of Gaelic poetry in the book (MacKenzie 2016). Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* was high up the list. I wanted to give non-Gaelic readers a sense of the musicality of the original—its carefully plotted metrical structure and its dense pattern of end rhymes, internal rhymes and alliteration. I set out to translate the first few lines of the poem, which are an introduction in which the poet praises the mountain, describes its shape and surroundings, and turns his attention to the deer. It was a frustrating experience. I was aware that I could not simply replicate the ways in which Macintyre's intricate metre complements his rhetorical grandeur, and so attempted a version in rhyming iambic tetrameter, hoping to achieve an approximation of the driving momentum found in Geoffrey Hill's "Genesis", which begins: 'Against the burly air I strode/Crying the miracles of God' (Hill 2006, p. 3).

The problem was that my emphasis on this form resulted in lines which felt conventional, archaic and almost pastoral. After completing the book, I felt I had unfinished business with the poem. What had drawn me to it in the first place was the relatively unmediated access it gave to the phenomenal world through its combination of orality and unsentimental observation. I sought to do something new with *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, to see if I could produce a translation that emphasised these aspects of the poem. Rather than creating an English equivalent of Macintyre's form, I wanted to explore how a completely new form might draw out the content of the original and situate it in a modern poetic context, while also bringing contemporary environmental philosophy, ecocriticism, Highland ecology and the politics of land use into the equation. I decided to place *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* in conversation with the modern world, and translate it as an ecopoem, by which I mean a poem with a particularly ecological emphasis. I have called the resulting work *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*.³

In the rest of this article, I do not offer a critical study of Macintyre's poem, but instead, reflect on my production of a twenty-first century excavation and reimagining of it. I consider how the difficulties of translation might be turned into imaginative opportunities, and explore how translation has the potential to function as exposition and expansion of an original text, in order to create a poem which is itself an ecosystem, comprising of multiple ecological, cultural and political interactions. My aim is not to give an exposition of my own work, but to explore the possibilities of what might be called 'ecopoetic translation', and so I shall not be quoting heavily from my own work here. I will discuss issues of translation, formal openness and ecopoetics, before concluding with some thoughts about how landscape poetry, and poetry more generally, might engage with twenty-first-century ecology.

2. Traversing Languages, Translating Mountains

I am not a professional translator, and it may be more accurate to describe my English rendering of Macintyre's poem as a 'version'. Fiona Sampson characterises the version as a form of translation which 'brings together the stimulating constraints of a given original with room for manoeuvre', and I share her understanding of the possibilities of 'versioning' (Sampson 2012, p. 130). For Sampson, manoeuvres might include employing a different metre from the original, changing tenses or speakers and altering diction (Sampson 2012, p. 130). Whilst poetry is sometimes glibly characterised as 'what's

³ This is a work in progress and not yet published in its entirety. Sections which have been published in print or online are cited in my bibliography, along with the unpublished manuscript.

lost in translation', Sampson argues that literary translation might be the process which 'rediscovers the poetry [...] by trying to produce a new finished poem in the target language'; every translation 'is a new, and to some small extent reframed, reading of the original text' (Sampson 2012, pp. 121, 124). A poetic version foregrounds this act of renewal and reframing, to a greater extent than a prose translation. My version of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* is an attempt to draw out particular ecological aspects, explicit and implicit, of the original, and in so doing create a work that might be read for its own merits in the target language (especially its exploration of environmental themes), rather than functioning as a resource for introducing the Gaelic poem to non-Gaelic readers.

Emily Wilson, a contemporary translator of Homer's *Odyssey*, argues that the terms of successful translation should not be tied solely to the question of faithfulness to the original. Wilson acknowledges that all translations are 'entirely different text[s] from the original poem. Translation always, necessarily, involves interpretation. There is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original' (Wilson 2018, p. 86). Anne Carson, another contemporary translator of Greek poetry, has discussed the merits of 'catastrophizing' translation by emphasising the slippages and inadequacies of the process, questioning the possibility of 'rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue' (Carson 2016). Her translations of the Greek poet Ibykos, for example, use words from other texts including Bertolt Brecht's FBI file, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, and the owner's manual for a microwave oven (Carson 2016), to render a Greek lyric poem in several modern English versions with radically different inflections. Whilst accuracy and rigour remain important to literary translation, the approaches suggested by Wilson and Carson enable looser, more figurative renderings of texts. These may have alternative but nevertheless meaningful engagements with the capacities of the target language, and the concerns of the target culture.

Existing translations of Macintyre's poem tend to emulate the strict metre and rhyme scheme of the original, concentrating on its purely literary accomplishments at the expense of Macintyre's ecological sensitivity. Iain Crichton Smith's frequently cited translation breaks the eight long sections of the poem into short stanzas. These are mostly quatrains in a combination of rhyme schemes. There is a haiku-like, imagistic clarity to some of these stanzas, and the rhythmical and rhyming patterns of Smith's *Ben Dorain* convey something of the sonic qualities of the original. However, these formal constraints also undermine the success of the work as a poem in English. Problems include line breaks which are anticlimactic to the point of banality:

Spirited and delicate
and shy,
in fashionable coat
he goes by (Smith 1969, p. 11)⁴

and inverted or otherwise contorted syntax which is awkward for an English reader:

Elegant of style
modestly to dwell
in the greenest dell
most luxuriant. (Smith 1969, p. 19)⁵

Although Smith, in the essay which accompanies his translation, is a perceptive critic of the poem, his commitment to its formalism clouds the meaning of some images, such as the half-rhyme of the couplet 'That's the gentle soil/of a laughing style' (Smith 1969, p. 22).⁶ In their very different

⁴ Macintyre's Gaelic reads, "S aigeannach fear eutrom/Gun mhórchuis, / Theid fasanda 'na éideadh/Neo-spòrsail' (MacLeod 1978, p. 196).

⁵ 'A' chré bu cheanalt' stuaim, / Chalaich i gu buan/An glean a' bharrach uaine/Bu nòsaire.' (MacLeod 1978, p. 212).

⁶ 'Sin am fearann caoin/Air an d' fhàs an aoibh' (MacLeod 1978, p. 218).

ways, Hugh MacDiarmid's 1940 translation and Alan Riach's 2013 translation avoid some of these pitfalls. And yet I cannot help feeling, as a reader, that in being swept away by the musicality of these translations, which are each searching to represent this attribute of the original, it is hard to concentrate on the precision of the imagery, the sheer wealth of ecological information in Macintyre's poem. If some translators, as is the case with Smith, MacDiarmid and Riach, prioritise the sound of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, then there is scope for another version which turns attention to the ecology of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, whilst creating new rhythms, rhymes and alliterations which complement the content as it is presented in English.

Ecology is significant in terms of the content of the poem, but I am also interested in exploring what environmental philosopher Timothy Morton might call a 'Dark Ecological' approach to translating a text. Given that climate change and other environmental problems are massive systems caused largely by humans, and that we are inside these systems rather than external actors, Morton claims that in the contemporary world 'ecological awareness forces us to think and feel at multiple scales, scales that disorient normative concepts such as "present," "life," "human," "nature," "thing," "thought," and "logic"' (Morton 2016, p. 159). Might the notion of completely faithful translation be another normative concept which can be fruitfully disordered? Might translation itself be an ecological act?

Translation is an underexplored area of ecocriticism, despite increasing interest in the negotiation of human and non-human sign systems suggested by biosemiotics (Maran 2014, p. 260). In a special issue of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation* titled "The Big Green Issue", Terry Gifford raised a number of questions about translation and ecopoetics. These, however, tend to be general questions about environmental poetry—'what makes good ecopoetry?', 'does the artistic quality of writing have to be compromised [by] scientific content?'—rather than addressing possible ecological implications of the practice of translation itself (Gifford 2008a, pp. 80–81). The rest of the journal issue is likewise concerned with bringing non-English ecopoems into print in English, without explicitly exploring the process beyond reproduction of environmental content in the target language. Other ecocritical works, whilst recognising ecopoetry and ecocriticism from around the world, give little attention to translation: the index to Greg Garrard's compendious *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, for example, has no entry for translation, despite boasting an international range of contributors.

Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* offers scope to consider intersections between ecology, ecocriticism, ecopoetics and translation. This is not only because producing an English version of it is obviously the translation of a literary text, but also because the poem itself is concerned with a range of vocal and non-vocal biosemiotic communications: The zoosemiotic world of signs between individuals and groups of red deer, and the ecosemiotic world in which humans and non-humans 'read' one another. Stags roar and hinds bark warnings to the rest of the herd. Mothers grunt and grumble to their young. White rumps are visible threat warnings. Male posturing is the body language of the rut. The speaker of the poem, and in turn the reader, interpret the behaviour of the deer in the context of hunting or as part of a wider appreciation of the creatures and their place in the ecosystem of Ben Dorain. The deer are wary of any sign of human activity. Macintyre's recording of deer behaviour is at times relatively objective, and at other times anthropomorphic. The events of the poem, and the text itself, take place at the intersection of human and non-human languages and cultures. In the third section of my poem, in lines I have translated from Macintyre's Gaelic, a herd, and then various individual members, can be heard: 'I'll count at least two hundred deer [. . .] From their slender frames/resounds a great music'; 'Do you hear that stag with the distinctive roar/hauled from the fathoms of his chest?'; 'The young hind with the sweet lowing voice' (MacKenzie 2018b).⁷ The speaker's subjective response to these grunts, calls and barks is a favourable comparison with his own, human culture:

⁷ 'Cupall chunntas cheud/[. . .] Is osgarra o 'm beul/Torman socair réidh'; 'An damh le bhùireadh féin/Tighinn a grund a chléibh'; 'An t-agh as binne geum' (MacLeod 1978, pp. 202, 204).

I'd take it
 over all the music of the Gaels
 this sweet song
 this breath
 passed down through generations,
 this ardent belling
 on the face of Ben Dorain (MacKenzie 2018b)⁸

These translated lines are counterpointed with new material which expands upon Macintyre's observations. A stag's bellowing is filtered through the adverbial style of Heidegger, 'he roars/roaringly' (MacKenzie 2018b) and a hind's call is embellished with details which combine metaphor with the observational tone of Frank Fraser Darling's field studies:

 a hind will stitch
 her voice into the wind
 [...]
 Her role is to warn
 the herd of trouble—at her bark
 they're instantly alert. (MacKenzie 2018b)

I mention above that Carson uses the words of a Beckett play and microwave instructions to translate a Greek lyric. Much of my own translation of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* is in a contemporary English idiom with a generally informal register. Where Macintyre writes of a buck 'Gun sgiorradh gun tubaist', translated by MacLeod as 'immune from slip or mishap' (MacLeod 1978, pp. 208–9), I render it 'he never slips, never comes a cropper' (MacKenzie 2018a, p. 124). However, like Carson, I also borrow terminology from other sources, and allude to other texts, in order to highlight ecological themes implicit in the original and to interpret them in the light of modern ecological discourse. This discourse includes contemporary environmental philosophy, most notably the notion of interconnectedness of humans and non-humans found in works such as Morton's *Dark Ecology* (Morton 2016), and also discussion of a more obviously local environmental issue: the relationships of land ownership, farming, hunting, forestry and (un)sustainability in the Scottish Highlands. For example, at the end of the fourth section, a hind is described 'A' fuireach 'sa' mhunadh/An do thuinich a seòrsa.' MacLeod's literal translation puts it like this: 'she stays on the moor/where her kind were established' (MacLeod 1978, pp. 210–11). My version offers a different perspective on these lines, borrowing from the language in which Deleuze and Guattari characterise life as being lived not within an enclosed space and defined time but along 'lines of becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004, p. 323). Anthropologist Tim Ingold, influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that 'such lines [...] bind every animal with its world': every individual and species has its own lines of movement, communication, growth and potential (Ingold 2011, p. 83). Here is my ending to section four of *Ben Dorain*:

 the threads of her life
 the lines of her
 becoming
 compose this land:

 like all her kin she's part
 of the tapestry of the hill. (MacKenzie 2018a, p. 132)

Elsewhere my version borrows from the terminology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Frank Fraser Darling's *A Herd of Red Deer* and the writing of the Highland land reformer and

⁸ 'S annsa leum 'n uair théid, /Iad air chrònanaich, /Na th' ann an Eirinn/De cheòlmhoireachd: / 'S binne na gach beus/Anail mhic an fhéidh/A' langanaich air eudann/Beinn Dóbhraín' (MacLeod 1978, pp. 202–4).

environmentalist Alastair McIntosh. Like an organism, my poem is made up of multiple constituent parts, symbiotic combinations offering new potentialities to each other. Human DNA evolved through incorporation of code from parasites and symbionts so that we cannot tell what DNA is wholly ‘ours’ and what comes from viruses (Dawkins 1999, pp. 200–23). Mammals rely upon the thousands of species of bacteria, fungi, viruses and archaea in their gastrointestinal tracts in order to metabolise (Nelson 2015, passim). Might a translated poem concerned with ecology also incorporate the words—accumulations of code—which fruitfully alter the original text? My *Ben Dorain* is a translation which explores how poetry might engage with such complexities.

There are two final points I wish to make in this section. Firstly, I am conscious of the ethical implications of translating from Gaelic, a minority language which has faced historical persecution. If I bring the poem into English, does that undermine the prospect of reading it in Gaelic? Iain Crichton Smith, in the introduction to his translation of Sorley MacLean’s *Dàin do Eimhir*, argues that translation and discussion of work in translation are necessary to bring Gaelic poems to a wider audience (Smith 1971, p. 11). Similarly, my version is aimed at an Anglophone readership, few of whom will have any experience of the language. Where existing translations of the poem might anticipate a readership keen to access a masterpiece of Gaelic literature (largely, of course, this means the world of Scottish literary studies), I am interested in bringing the poem into a different conversation: Contemporary environmental poetry from Scotland and from far beyond, a conversation in which Gaelic is indeed a minority language. Does this then mean that my version is appropriation? Should sleeping dogs (and deer) be left to lie? This is an understandable, defensive position. But to move beyond the poetry world for a moment, the politics of recent years shows that the health of any culture depends on openness, fluidity of movement and discourse, rather than fence-building and the staking out of territories. An environmental literature, too, must combine a concern for localities and bioregional priorities, with national and planetary perspectives. I accept that translating Gaelic into English might be perceived as exploiting openness from a position of strength, as free speech is not always equal but can take place along the common hierarchies of power. But, as I will show when I discuss poetic form in more detail below, my version of *Ben Dorain* is intended as a respectful conversation in which various voices and traditions speak alongside each other and to each other. To take an anachronistic liberty, if Macintyre’s *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* might be described as akin to rap lyrics due to its repetitions, obsessive rhyming and rhythmical intensity, then my ecological version of it is more like acid jazz or the hip-hop music underlying rap: A process that samples, alters, embellishes and hybridises a recognisable original.

Secondly, there is a sense in which all translations need to function as an exposition of their source, but I also see my version as a kind of ‘creative criticism’. I get this term from Stephen Benson’s and Clare Connors’s book of the same name, which explores those works in which critical and creative writing overlap, such as Peter Gizzi’s aphoristic ‘Correspondences of the Book’ or Denise Riley’s ‘Lyric Selves’, both of which respond to literary texts in a medium that is a hybrid of poetry and criticism. As Benson and Connors suggest, these poets and critics appreciate

the fact that when you read or look, those boundaries [of originality] seem to dissolve; the fact that images haunt you like your own dreams, become the stuff of those dreams; the fact that words speak in you that aren’t your own, and merge into the fabric of your inner voice, a voice that is always made up of other voices. (Benson and Connors 2014, pp. 33–34)

Creative criticism blurs the demarcations of originality and authorship. As I will discuss in more detail below, my poem *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain* both is and is not a version of Duncan Bàn Macintyre’s *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*. It both is and is not an original work of mine. Is this ambiguity ecological? According to Benson and Connors, creative criticism

views the act of artistic creation as something which didn’t happen back ‘in the beginning’, but that is still at stake [. . .] Creative critics get their hands dirty in what Frankenstein calls the ‘workshop of filthy creation’, tapping into the dynamism of a work at its roots and participating in its unmaking and rebinding energies. (Benson and Connors 2014, p. 26)

Instead of a poem being completed when it is written down (or, in the case of an oral poem, recited to an audience), Benson and Connors suggest that the creative process continues into the poem's reception, to the extent that the poem might be continually remade. Translation is an acute form of critical engagement, and my *Ben Dorain*, in the terminology of Benson and Connors, participates in the 'unmaking' and 'rebinding' of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*.

The actions of 'unmaking' and 'rebinding' call into question the ontological stability of the poem. They might be said to be ecological in that they chime with contemporary understandings of humanity's relationship with the biosphere. For example, notions of a hermetically sealed body and a detached, rational mind have been questioned by increasing awareness of the multiplicity of the microbiome, the ability of viruses to reprogram our cells, and phenomenological theories about embodied thought. The human body both is and is not made up of human DNA. We are implicated in the environment, but the environment is also implicated in us. A poem which challenges the permanence and stability of its own literary creation is a way to explore such ecological ideas in the form and content of a literary work.

3. Ecological Pibroch

My poem is not simply a translation, but incorporates *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* into a new, longer work. Macintyre wrote in a form resembling the pibroch, bagpipe music in which a theme is repeated with increasingly elaborate embellishments in the form of patterns of grace notes. The sections of Macintyre's poem are named after common pibroch movements: *Urlar* (the theme or 'ground'), *siubhal* (variation, which I translate as 'traverse') and *an crunludh* (the closing or 'crowning' variation). Given that bagpipes do not allow variations in volume, and when played solo there is no means of adding a counterpoint, 'all the piper can do is create melody with his range and then elaborate it to the limit of his ability' (MacNeill and Richardson 1987, p. 31). Taking my cue from this structure, each page of my poem is divided vertically down the middle, with my translation of Macintyre's poem on the left and original material on the right. This is not entirely binary: Some sections break free of this structure and straddle both sides of the page. About half of my poem is my translation (or version) of Macintyre. The rest is my response, which includes contemporary research into deer behaviour and ideas of ecological interconnectedness and deep time: For example, biosemiotics and Morton's 'dark ecology'. It also includes reflections on forestry, gamekeeping and tourism, foregrounding themes of sustainability and Highland land ownership today, and these sometimes complicate the view of the mountain which Macintyre offers:

In full Highland dress, jewelled with woods,
each thicket waving its blossoms in the wind,
you're flawless, Ben Dorain, you lack nothing.

Walk into the text at a different point,
before the hills were overstocked with deer
for sport and profit; before the poet
watched sheep lay them to waste
(MacKenzie 2018a, pp. 122–23)⁹

I will now explain in more depth the decisions I have taken on the right-hand side of the page, as well as describing some other formal aspects of *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*.

I will now explain in more depth the decisions I have taken on the right-hand side of the page, as well as describing some other formal aspects of *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*.

As I mention above, one of the problems with the more formalist translations of Macintyre's poem is that the sonic effects drown out or weaken the precision of the natural imagery. I wanted to produce

⁹ The first three lines of this quotation are my translation of 'Làn-trusgan gun deireas, / Le usgraichean coille, / Bàrr-guc air gach doire, / Gun choir' ort r' a innseadh' (MacLeod 1978, p. 208).

a version of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* which was full of light and life and movement, and so chose a more formally open arrangement in which line breaks and other pauses are determined by the breath and motion of the poem and its subjects. Appropriately for a poem characterised by movement across an unenclosed landscape, this is an ‘open field’ translation of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*. In his essay “Projective Verse”, Charles Olson describes ‘open field’ as a composition process in which, rather than finding words that fit with formal requirements, the poet ‘can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself’ (Olson 1950). Alluding to Robert Creeley’s poetics, Olson states that ‘form is never more than an extension of content’ (Olson 1950). In the context of my version of *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, this means that when Macintyre admires a mountain stream, the words are arranged like water flowing down the page. When young deer are described playing, single-word lines are spaced out from left- to right-hand margins, as if they too are leaping around. Accumulations of adjectives (a common trope in Macintyre’s poem) might be rendered in metred, rhyming lines close to the original, but are situated alongside prose sections in a scientific register which deal with how deer find the calcium and phosphorus necessary for good health. At each point of the poem, I have asked where the poem itself—its language and its content—might lead the formal arrangements, rather than *vice versa*.

This applies to the left-hand side of the page, which derives from Macintyre’s Gaelic, and also on the right-hand which brings in new material, and which is arranged in a variety of forms determined by the content. This content includes quotations from science and the arts, versions of other Gaelic texts which might be described as typical of the Gaelic ‘nature poetry’ tradition, and a list of animals, insects and geological features common to the Western Highlands. There are also lines which provide a gloss or commentary on the structure of the poem as a whole, for example by making explicit the debt to the structure of the pibroch and explaining the attributes of the *urlar*, *siubhal* and *an crunludh*. In the fourth section of the poem, Macintyre’s description of a hunt moves into a catalogue of deer myths from places including Scandinavia, Siberia and India:

unless her skin is torn
by the first lead shot,
there’s no-one on earth
who will take her alive

she runs into the margins of time’s book,
where words and landscape fuse
in an ecology of myth:

look as she joins the four red stags
who gnaw at the shoots of Yggdrasil

look as her heart’s torn out on the Steppe
and the shaman rides her soul
to the otherworld

[...]

turn away as Saraswati, river of wisdom,
Brahma’s creative power,
puts on her hooves, her pelt
as red as the first rays of the sun
(MacKenzie 2018a, pp. 128–32)¹⁰

¹⁰ The first four lines of this quotation are my translation of ‘Nan tèarnadh a craiceann/O luaidhe ‘s o lasair/Cha chual’ is chan fhac’ i/Na ghlacadh r’ a bèò i’ (MacLeod 1978, p. 210).

One of the quotations which I incorporate into the second section is taken from a *Guardian* interview with the contemporary American poet Jorie Graham. I hope that, implanted into the context of my poem, it provides the reader with a way in: ‘things can be adjacent and the adjacency creates a glow of meaning’ (Edemariam 2017; I have lineated it as poetry in my version). Like a physical landscape, my long poem is composed of multiple adjacencies, and meaning can be found in their juxtapositions and interactions, rather than in a cohesive narrative. At another point I use intertextuality to expand upon Macintyre’s description of a hind, ‘Bha sinnsireachd fallain’, which I have translated as ‘she has the vigour of her mothers’. The quotation opposite this line abridges a phrase of Darwin’s about natural selection: ‘those who nourish their offspring best leave the greatest number to inherit their superiority’ (MacKenzie 2018b).

The quotations from Graham and Darwin put Macintyre, or at least my version of his poem, in conversation with contemporary Anglophone poetry and evolutionary biology. Other sections bring Macintyre into adjacency with his Celtic literary forebears. The fourth section of my poem opens with a description of a scribe in a medieval monastery as a means of introducing my version of the wonderful ninth-century Irish margin note, by an unknown author, included in Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson’s anthology *A Celtic Miscellany*: ‘Pleasant to me is the glittering of the sun today upon these margins, because it flickers so’ (Jackson 1976, p. 177). I include this in order to draw a parallel between the scribe, pausing in his labour to admire and record his pleasure at the sunlight through the trees, and Macintyre’s seemingly unmediated response to his own surroundings. I also want to suggest that Macintyre—whether consciously or not—can be seen as part of a literary tradition which Jackson identifies with a particularly rich ‘power of vivid imagination and freshness of approach; as if every poet [. . .] discovered the world for himself’ (Jackson 1976, p. 61).

The final section of my poem opens with an anonymous early Celtic composition, which is oral and probably mythical in origin. In his 1895 *The Story of Early Gaelic Literature*, Douglas Hyde notes what he calls ‘the curious pantheistic strain’ of “The Song of Amergin”, the mythic first bard of Ireland. Amergin’s song begins: ‘I am the wind which breathes upon the sea, / I am the wave of the ocean,’ and continues in a mystical elision of human, god and phenomenal world (Hyde 1895, pp. 25–26). Alastair McIntosh interprets these lines as evidence of a longstanding ‘green spiritual consciousness’ in the Gaelic-speaking world (McIntosh 2004, pp. 41–42), and Robert Graves has discussed Amergin at length in *The White Goddess* (Graves 1971, passim). I do not wish to romanticise Gaelic culture by suggesting a uniform ‘green consciousness’, or to unduly associate Graves’s esoteric mother goddess imagery with Macintyre and the wider Gaelic community, but the thought which Hyde calls ‘pantheistic’ strikes me as compatible with the strands of contemporary environmental philosophy which highlight the ‘enmeshed’ nature of existence. For Timothy Morton, ‘mesh’ is a shorthand for ‘the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things [. . .] Since everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground’ (Morton 2010, p. 28). Amergin functions for me as a conduit between Morton’s poststructuralist ecology and the confluence of human and non-human in Macintyre’s *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*. My own rendition of the “Song of Amergin” quotes some lines of the poem as recorded by Hyde. Its anaphoric, almost liturgical structure affords opportunity to include variations to its original theme, and my version veers into a more contemporary environmental context, mentioning climate systems, urban wildlife, rust on pit wheels and plate tectonics:

I am Pangea, Laurentia, Afro-Eurasia
 I am lace-workers stitching in air
 I am circuit board and smartphone
 I am the hyperobjectivity of the hill (MacKenzie 2018b)

Although I incorporate quotations and versions of earlier Gaelic literature into my poem, much of the non-Macintyre material is my own. In the fourth section, I expand the scope of Macintyre’s representation of deer by exploring some of the ways in which the animals have featured in cultural history across the globe. This ranges from a description of St Kentigern yoking deer to a plough, a

symbolic taming of wildness, to Saraswati, Hindu goddess of knowledge, nature and the arts, walking the earth disguised as a deer. This international cultural history is a means of situating the particularity of Macintyre's work in conversation with ideas from around the world, of de-parochialising readings of a poem which tends to be discussed almost entirely in Scottish literary circles.

For a similar reason, I include extended similes, of the sort which Alice Oswald brings to the fore in *Memorial*, her 2011 version of Homer's *Iliad*. Oswald unties these Homeric similes from their contexts, repeating them twice between the deaths of the Greek and Trojan soldiers. In each of her similes the 'vehicle', the detail used to describe the subject is retained while the subject itself is omitted altogether:

Like when god keeps the night awake with lightning
And the sky jumps into readiness for a huge rainstorm
And sometimes hail or snow when blizzards wander in the fields

Like when god keeps the night awake with lightning
And the sky jumps into readiness for a huge rainstorm
And sometimes hail or snow when blizzards wander in the fields (Oswald 2011, p. 28)

The effect of this is that Oswald's similes suggest a Greek poetic culture which takes its bearings from the phenomenal world. Lightning, hail, snow are an immediate part of experience, rather than something which happens 'out there' in nature. There seems to me to be a similar pre-modern orality to Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, and my own similes on the right-hand side of the page are intended to emphasise both the orality and the interconnections between animal behaviour, meteorological phenomena and subjective human response which Macintyre's work shares with *Memorial*.

Another area in which I have amplified Macintyre's poem, adding in additional detail in order to comment on what I feel is an overlooked aspect of it, is in supplementing his observations with more sustained biological detail. In part six of the poem, there are eight lines on deer behaviour:

'S gum b' e 'n aighear's an éibhneas
Bhith faicheachd air réidhlean
A' comh-mhacnas ri chéile
'S a' leumnaich feadh mòintich;
Ann am pollachaibh daimseir,
Le sodrach gu meamnadh,
Gu togarrach mearcasach
Aintheasach gòrach.

'Twas their joy and delight
to parade on a plain,
in fond sport with each other,
bounding through moorland;
in miry hags prancing
to rouse to excitement,
appetent, riotous,
hot-blooded, crazy. (MacLeod 1978, pp. 214–15)

I find it difficult to read these lines as anything other than a euphemised account of rutting behaviour. Rutting season (which begins in September in Scotland) is the only time of year when groups of females tolerate the presence of stags. Stags joust for supremacy, which means mating access to a harem of hinds ('harem' is the term used in ecological studies of deer). Sometimes a hind breaks off from the harem, and is shepherded back to the group by the stag. During this time stags rake the ground with their antlers, urinate in muddy wallow pools, then roll in the urine so that they are potent with the scent. Mating involves foreplay: Behaviour includes licking, rubbing bodies together, and the female mounting the male before he mounts her. These details, I think, correspond with the lines

quoted above, albeit in more explicit detail (the information on rutting here is from [Darling \[1937\] 2016](#), pp. 157–75 and [Clutton-Brock et al. 1982](#), pp. 104–39). In my *Ben Dorain*, Macintyre's eight lines become eighty-two lines: A single line on the left is expanded into several on the right which bring in contemporary ecological research about rutting behaviour. One side of the page speaks to the other, a coming-together which complements the sensuality of the scene.

On other occasions, my supplementary material does not expand Macintyre's original by complementing the sense—instead, it does so by juxtaposing the mood of his poem with prosaic contemporary information. For example, in part seven, he describes young men gathering to hunt a hind on the hill, and later his attention turns to the night-fishing of trout in nearby rivers. Although it might appear that hunting and fishing are at odds with Macintyre's affectionate portraits of deer and other creatures, Smith has discussed the thrill of the hunt as wholly in keeping with the 'absolutely pagan, [. . .] merciful and merciless' nature of the poem ([Smith 1969](#), p. 29). Dogs and spears, like hinds and calves, are 'real and equally lovingly described' ([Smith 1969](#), p. 30). I agree with Smith that there is no moral quandary for Macintyre in eulogising the hunt. The closest modern equivalent may be Ted Hughes, whose intense regard for non-human life, and his longstanding love of fly fishing, tend to complicate ecocritical readings of his poetry (see [Gifford 2008b](#)). Macintyre's enraptured hunt, however, can be meaningfully juxtaposed with details of modern Highland land use: My poem references the micronised wheat cubes which gamekeepers use to supplement winter diets (keeping deer populations artificially high for the benefit of hunting estates), barbed wire, the soil erosion caused by over-browsing of hillsides by deer and sheep, and the conifer plantations which in the twentieth century undermined the diverse ecology of Highland landscapes:

sheep grazing moor burning
barbed wire soil erosion

estate roads grouse butts
winter deer food (micronized wheat cubes)

crane flies sheep ticks
black slugs deer flies

conifer forest conifer forest
conifer forest conifer forest
conifer forest conifer forest ([MacKenzie 2018b](#))

4. An Emergent Conclusion and Things in Themselves

There is an obvious reference not made so far in this article: Sorley MacLean's *An Cuilithionn (The Cuillin)*, left uncompleted in 1939 but published in later selections of MacLean's work. It is a long poem about a mountain range, the Black Cuillin of Skye, and draws self-consciously on some of the techniques found in Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, such as metrical variations and repetitions of phrases and subject matter. Despite MacLean's praise for the directness of Macintyre's verse, in *The Cuillin* he is primarily concerned with how the mountains function as symbols. In another, more famous example, the deer of "Hallaig" is a symbol of time, rather than a four-legged mammal ([MacLean 1990](#), pp. 226–27). MacLean's symbolism works by correlating a physical object—a mountain, a deer—with something else, often an abstraction. This works best when the correlation is clear. In *The Cuillin* the mountains represent international struggles against tyranny, the prospect of socialist revolution, figures such as Marx and Lenin and antifascism ([MacLean 1990](#), pp. 74–75). As a consequence, the symbolic Cuillin peaks gesture in the direction of a host of sociopolitical themes. At its best, this is an exhilarating imaginative flight.

And yet, the mountains themselves recede from view. In the poem, they represent something other than themselves, and the same is true of the trees growing in the glens and the birds singing in the trees. In my version of *Ben Dorain*, I explore how mountains, deer and trees might be more

wondrously expansive when viewed as things in themselves rather than as polyvalent symbols. The complexity of a single leaf, multiplied by the countless other manifestations of leaf on the same tree, is amazing. A mountain such as Ben Dorain is home to many more visible (to us) ecological happenings and interactions than a leaf. The deer in Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín*, and in my own *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*, are individual deer. The mountain is a mountain. They are complex enough prior to adding any extra symbolic framework. Like object-oriented ontology, the philosophical view that no object can be known in its entirety (Harman 2018, passim), my poem trusts in the irreducibility of living and non-living things. It situates them in a physical landscape and in the ecosystem of the poem. Non-human understandings of places—the rocks which are free of horseflies, the best places for a scratch, the freshest herbage to browse—are as valid as human apprehensions.

Another tenet of object-oriented ontology is emergence: That 'new properties appear when smaller objects are joined together into a new one' (Harman 2018, p. 30). This could easily be a definition of a poem, in which numerous constituent parts create a new, unparaphrasable whole. And it is an idea which underlies the overall structure of my *Ben Dorain*. In part seven the lines on the right-hand side of the page—my original—form an accumulation of words which abandons punctuation and syntax: the kinds of rock which compose the mountain, its grasses, insects and birds, extinct mammals of the Scottish Highlands, and cultural references which marry ecological attentiveness with oscillations of scale, such as Darwin's entangled bank and MacDiarmid's poem "Scotland Small?". The list situates these things in symphony with each other: Sounds, meanings, connotations, symbioses may emerge through their proximity to one another.

I do not want to explain away every aspect of *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain*. I hope to have produced a twenty-first century ecopoem that builds on the work of an earlier poet: A long Gaelic poem which demonstrates an environmental awareness that is sometimes pragmatic, sometimes pagan, punctuated with acute observations of the natural world and with moments of wonder. Macintyre's *Moladh Beinn Dóbhraín* is the foundation of my own work, but at the same time as drawing out what might today be termed the ecopoetic elements of that earlier piece, my version introduces new material which interacts with the original. This method of exploding translation, of engaging in creative criticism, could be described as dialogic or polyphonic—I prefer to think of it as in keeping with the ecological subject matter of the poem. Poems are composed of the dynamic interplay of many factors, including sounds, meanings, connotations, metaphors and voices, all of which may be active in their creation as well as in their reading. *Ben Dorain* is also composed of numerous human and non-human individuals with distinct personalities, actions and communications, living along their own 'lines of becoming'. Furthermore, physical landscapes such as the real mountain Ben Dorain are the sites of countless biological, cultural, climatic and semiotic interactions. Timothy Morton has argued that:

all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its *form*. Ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art, isn't just *about* something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth). Ecological art *is* something, or maybe it *does* something. (Morton 2010, p. 11)

The structure of my poem, with its embellishments and amplifications, its responses to and digressions from Macintyre's work, are integral to its 'ecological-ness'. By situating Macintyre's poem in dialogue with subjects including older Gaelic nature poetry, contemporary ecological science, environmental philosophy, and the modern deerstalking industry, my work is an attempt to create an ecopoem that simultaneously speaks to present-day environmental concerns and explores how these might relate to ways of understanding the natural world which are found in an earlier poetry. The result, I hope, is emergent.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Benson, Stephen, and Clare Connors, eds. 2014. *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Carson, Anne. 2016. Variations on the Right to Remain Silent. In *Float*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Clutton-Brock, T. H., F. E. Guinness, and S. D. Albon. 1982. *Red Deer: Behaviour and Ecology of Two Sexes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crawford, Robert, and Mick Imlah, eds. 2000. *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*. London: Penguin.
- Darling, Frank Fraser. 2016. *A Herd of Red Deer: A Study in Animal Behaviour*. Edinburgh: Luath Press. First published 1937.
- Dawkins, Richard. 1999. *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum. First published 1980.
- Edemariam, Aida. 2017. Interview. Jorie Graham: I am Living in the Late Season, But It Has Its Songs, Too. *Guardian*. December 1. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/01/jorie-graham-interview-fast-poetry> (accessed on 12 July 2018).
- Gifford, Terry. 2008a. Ted Hughes, Translation and Ecopoetics. *Modern Poetry in Translation* 10: 78–81.
- Gifford, Terry. 2008b. Rivers and Water Quality in the Work of Brian Clarke and Ted Hughes. *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 34: 75–91.
- Graves, Robert. 1971. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Harman, Graham. 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Pelican.
- Hill, Geoffrey. 2006. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin.
- Hyde, Douglas. 1895. *The Story of Early Gaelic Literature*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, Kenneth Hurlstone. 1976. *A Celtic Miscellany*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- MacKenzie, Garry. 2016. *Scotland: A Literary Guide for Travellers*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- MacKenzie, Garry. 2017. Outlandia Blog Post: How Does it Begin? *Outlandia Blog*. Available online: <http://www.outlandia.com/search?updated-max=2017-07-09T20:52:00%2B01:00&max-results=7> (accessed on 1 September 2018).
- MacKenzie, Garry. 2018a. Ben Dorain: A conversation with a mountain. *Reliquiae* 6: 120–33.
- MacKenzie, Garry. 2018b. *Ben Dorain: A Conversation with a Mountain*. Unpublished manuscript, last modified August 20. Microsoft Word file.
- MacLean, Sorley. 1990. *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge: Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet.
- MacLean, Sorley. 1997. Realism in Gaelic Poetry. In *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*. Edited by William Gillies. Stornoway: Acair, pp. 15–47.
- MacLeod, Angus, ed. 1978. *Orain Dhonnchaidh Bhain/The Songs of Duncan Ban Macintyre*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- MacNeill, Seumas, and Frank Richardson. 1987. *Piobaireachd and Its Interpretation: Classical Music of the Highland Bagpipe*. Edinburgh: John Donald.
- Maran, Timo. 2014. Biosemiotic Criticism. In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. Edited by Greg Garrard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 260–75.
- McIntosh, Alastair. 2004. *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power*. London: Aurum Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nelson, Karen E. 2015. An Update on the Status of Current Research on the Mammalian Microbiome. *ILAR Journal* 56: 163–68. [CrossRef]
- Olson, Charles. 1950. Projective Verse. Available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse> (accessed on 15 August 2018).
- Oswald, Alice. 2011. *Memorial*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Riach, Alan. 2016. Not Burns—Duncan Ban MacIntyre and His Gaelic Manifesto for Land Reform. *The National*. February 5. Available online: http://www.thenational.scot/culture/14861208.Not_Burns_Duncan_Ban_MacIntyre_and_his_Gaelic_manifesto_for_land_reform/ (accessed on 11 August 2018).

- Sampson, Fiona. 2012. Creative Translation. In *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing*. Edited by David Morley and Philip Neilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 118–32.
- Smith, Iain Crichton. 1969. Ben Dorain. *Akros* 3: 11–30.
- Smith, Iain Crichton. 1971. Introduction. In *Poems to Eimhir*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Thomson, Derick S. 2006. Macintyre, Duncan Bàn [Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir] (1723?–1812), Poet. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Available online: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-17543> (accessed on 11 August 2018).
- Wilson, Emily. 2018. Translator's Note. In *Homer, The Odyssey*. New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 81–91.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).