

Selected Texts by Ken Cockburn
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Poems

Polytheron
On the Flyleaf of the Green Encyclopedia (7 Volumes, c.1920)
Byron's Don Juan, Cantos I & II: Selected Errata
from 'Le Bateau Ivre' by David Livingstone
Keys
Haiku
Leave the Window Open (renga)
Mesostics

Translations

Goethe, from Venetian Epigrams
Brasch, Song
Britting, Golden World
Rautenberg, the hair creepy-crawlies

Prose

'A remix of a familiar song':
a selection of modern and contemporary poems from Scotland

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Polytheron

So hot we sleep with everything open,
doors anchored with stones the beach provided.

A wind that curls behind sends one – slamming
the door to – skittering across the flags.

The white curtain billows into the room
as your breathing lets me know you're asleep;

from the terrace I see a sickle moon
tomorrow's dawn will overtake and wipe

but in today's the animated trees
emerge from night, the morning star lingers

and telephone wires against the pallor
of sky are staves, awaiting notation.

from *On the flyleaf* (2007)

On the flyleaf of the Green Encyclopedia (7 Volumes, c.1920)

Inherited I think from my grandpa –
about the time we flitted
and my father bought the Daimler
as well as a Mini for mum,
without anyone saying anything
it was replaced
by a 20-volume red-bound new edition
Children's Britannica.

Ungratefully
I hardly opened it. Simplistic,
out of date compared to the papers and tv
yet lacking the perspective of History
the old set offered my teenage mind,
with entries such as those on
'The Great War'
which made further wars inconceivable
and the 'Austro-Hungarian Empire',
dissolved, but whose successor states
were not yet visible to the encyclopedist.

Amid our consuming affluence
what I craved was not
the immediate fact but transformation
and a glimpse of distance. The new set
was as useful as the decorative shutters
mounted either end of the long kitchen window.

from *On the flyleaf* (2007)

Byron's Don Juan, Cantos I & II: Selected Errata

For "southern" read "sun-burnt".
For "dyeing it" read "a peruke".
For "lay with" read "kissed".
For "freeze up" read "congeal".
For "sufferings" read "miseries".

from 'Le Bateau Ivre' by David Livingstone

Funnel, furnace, deck and bottom honeycombed –
The cabin now a breeding-place for mosquitoes,
Scorpions found their way into our beds,
And snakes climb on board with ease by the chain-cable.

Myriads of cockroaches infested the vessel;
They not only ate round the roots of our nails
But devoured and defiled our food, flannels, and boots.
If you kill one, a hundred come down to his funeral!

The Shire swarmed with crocodiles; we counted
Sixty-seven of these repulsive reptiles
On a single bank. The corpse of a boy
Floated past the ship; a monstrous crocodile

Caught it and shook it, as a terrier dog
Does a rat. Others dashed at the prey,
Each with his powerful tail causing the water
To churn and froth, as he tore off a piece.

from "visions" read "meteors": found poems, and an alphabet, from the John Murray Archive (2007)

Keys

Departures entail the handing back of keys
you only ever borrowed, even if
the place was nominally yours. Return,
you'll have to buzz, announce yourself, convince
the keyholder you're not a threat, your voice
flattened by the intercom's electrics,
belonging to another world, another stranger.

Oh, keys entail responsibilities.
At one time I had half a dozen bunches –
complications moving home and office –
they weighed me down, me worrying I'd left
the one I needed. No, better when, in transit,
I carried none at all, dependent on
acquaintances, on friends of friends, to open doors.

from *Souvenirs and Homelands* (1998)

Haiku

overnight snowfall
on the Old Town
my pioneering footsteps

Easter
so late it bumps into
Mayday, the pagan

White drawing pin
in the postcard's blue sky
daylight moon

two weeks away
a buddleia
rooted on the side of the van

rosebay willowherb
summer's pink is loosening
to weightless white down

one more
yellow leaf falls
the strutting ravens

proof? yes
the golden leaf
he thought to pocket

shavings in a white saucer
the pencil was blunt
from writing about the moon

December
the grey pebble holds open
a cookery book

Life's too short
to be forever
writing haiku

(Uncollected)

Leave the Window Open

Summer-camouflaged,
our little hilltop shelter
fortified by tea

unseasonal rainfall
each hello undiluted

a circle, a square
and a grey scale measurement –
one pair of sandals

the scatter of glad feet
unlines the raked gravel

fireside dreaming,
crackle of birch-twig bones –
aching for ice cream

happed figures
curling on the frozen pond

brushing her hair
and telling a made-up story
which just keeps going

red blots the page, his book –
use my pillow to clean the cut

the chink of glasses
against the wet pavement –
rain runs in torrents

you can't resist
removing your shoes

running after bees
trying to catch some honey –
dry biscuits for lunch

a wasp at last gasp
passes on too-ripe fruit

>>>

>>>

candle wax drips
down the old bottle –
a withering turnip

and all across the green vault
who has hammered the gold leaf?

an escaped gift-giver
in the shape of a garden
is hunted by no-one

on her silvery wire she
walks down the children's voices

drawing the curtain
on smells from an orchard, leave
the window open

with eyes tightly closed
she hears her foetus grow

the iris pokes out of
an old pair of shoes
on Tuesday

with full bladders we finish
by soaking the compost-heap.

*A nijuuin renga in summer
The Hidden Gardens, Tramway, Glasgow
Saturday 24 July 2004*

Participants

Ken Cockburn, Master poet
Peter Manson, Host poet
Vicky Hale, Co-ordinator
Irene Brown
Larry Butler
Mandy Haggith
Laurie Purvis
Angus Reid
Ruth Sheldon
Nuala Watt

Mesostics

novem**B**er's transformativ**E** Ecstasy mono**C**hromes s**H**ut

a**B**erfeldy s**I**lvers **R**abbie's wreck**K**ed mu**S**eum

spring**G**'s r**O**ugh do**R**ic glare**S** y**E**llow

atho**L**'s c**A**nnon scatte**R**s **C**ones everyw**H**ere

from *Mesostic Herbarium* (2004)

from 'Venetian Epigrams' (1790)

27.

More than once all nine have come, I mean the Muses:
yet I paid them no attention, wrapped up as I was with some girl.
When I gave her the elbow, the Muses gave me the elbow:
there I was, out of control, and avid for blades or pills.
Parnassus, though, is full of gods: arrived to help me,
Indolence! I greet you, mother of the Nine.

36.

Tired, I was, of seeing painting after painting,
masterpieces, and Venice isn't short of these.
This type of pleasure too requires a break, a breather;
wearied, my gaze went seeking livelier delights.
Acrobat! I saw it was you behind those figures
which Bellini depicts so charmingly with wings,
which Veronese sends with goblets to the bridegroom;
fooled, his wedding-guests drink water as if it were wine.

56.

Autocrats will mint, on thinly silvered copper,
their imposing features; selling the people short.
Chancers will mint the spirit's likeness on lies and garbage:
lacking critical tools, you'd think it heaven on earth.

79.

"Everything makes sense," a student tells me, "once you've
got to grips with theory, like the professor says."
When you've ensured the cross is properly constructed,
some poor body will always end up crucified.

100.

Sorrowful, Midas, was your fate: with trembling fingers
you, a hungry old man, held your heavy, modified food.
I'm the same, though happier; whatever I handle
there and then's transformed into mercurial verse.
Muses, I'm not resisting you, but I clasp my lover
tightly, so you don't make me make her make-believe.

Translated from the German of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Golden World

September is thoroughly gold:
The sun, which sky can no longer hold,
The stubble field,
The drowsy sunflower by the plough,
The cross on the church,
Apple on bough.
Will it drop? Perhaps not.
A blink and the wind
Has whirled
It into the golden world.

Translated from the German of Georg Britting (1891-1964)
from *Poetry Posters for Schools* (2005)

Song

I don't want to lose what I have, and yet
I don't want to stay where I am, and yet
I don't want to leave her I love, and yet
I don't want to meet those I know, and yet
I don't want to die where I'm living, and yet
I don't want to go where I'll die:
I want to stay, there, where I've never been.

Translated from the German of Thomas Brasch (1945-2001)

the hair creepy-crawlies

for jonathan meese

the ears whelks
the forehead a great sheet of copper
the eyebrows viaducts
the eyes spinning cycle wheels
the nose a tangle of snakes
the mouth a pothole
the chin a bowl of white porcellain
arms legs trunk sex
patches strewn on the floor the heart
a pulsating firework

Translated from the German of Arne Rautenberg (1967-)

from *Feathers & Lime* (2007)

**'A remix of a familiar song':
a selection of modern and contemporary poems from Scotland**

(An introduction to the Scottish poems presented in German translation in the periodical die horen)

When the Scottish artist and publisher Alec Finlay exhibited at the Overbeck-Gesellschaft in Lübeck in 1999, he was handed some haiku pamphlets by the poet Arne Rautenberg. Home again, and not understanding German, he was curious enough about them to ask myself, and two other writer-friends, to translate them. I did so, began corresponding with this haiku poet, who happened to stay in a part of Germany I knew from my student days in the early '80s, and then arranged to visit him in Kiel in November 2002.

It went well, and I left various books with him, including *The Order of Things: an anthology of Scottish sound, pattern and concrete poems*, which I had edited with Alec Finlay; and *Dream State*. First published in 1994, and expanded in 2002, *Dream State* showcased a range of poets born between 1955 and 1970. Arne passed this and the other books on to the poet-translators Mirko Bonné and Sylvia Geist, and all three began over time, with no particular outcome in mind, to translate poems they felt some connection with, locating these in and beyond the books I'd left. Arne's own interest deepened during a visit to Scotland in late 2003, when he met a number of poets including Edwin Morgan. It was Sylvia's idea to approach die horen with the idea of a 'Scottish issue' and, again over time, the idea ripened. Their translations were supplemented by Jan Wagner's versions of Meg Bateman, made for the poesiefestival Berlin 2004, and of Don Paterson; and by Christina Scheunke's versions of Edwin Muir.

This selection then does not have a single editor (least of all me!), but has come together based on the translators' tastes, inclinations and opportunities. It attempts neither an overview of recent practice, nor to trace a particular stylistic or thematic route. But before looking at the translated poems, I thought it would be useful to look more broadly at 'Scottish poetry' as constituted from around the 1920s.

It might be written in one of three languages: Gaelic, English and Scots. Of the three, the last is the hardest to define. Related to English, but with more Scandinavian and French-derived and fewer Greek and Latin-derived words, it has no standardised grammar or orthography, comprises a number of regional variations, is often used fluidly with English, and has often been denigrated as 'slang' or as a corrupt version of English. Gaelic, once spoken across large areas of the country, is now restricted to the

north-west highlands and the Western Isles, though education and broadcasting initiatives are reversing its decline. Scottish English is often tinged with particular idioms carried over from Scots and/or Gaelic - as in Duffy's 'The Way My Mother Speaks'.

Who qualifies as 'a Scottish poet'? The acceptance criteria are generous. Of the poets featured here, Gorman was born in Dublin, and moved to Scotland as an adult where he now lives with his family. Duffy lived in Glasgow till about the age of six then moved 'down South' to the English Midlands where her father had found work. McCarey grew up in Scotland but has spent much of his working life in Geneva. Bateman was born to English parents in Edinburgh, and learned Gaelic at university. Etcetera etcetera. What's required is an engagement with this particular geographical area - and thanks to the sea that area at least, other than the 'Debateable Lands' along the border with England, is easily defined - based on birth, parentage, language, residency, or any combinations thereof. (A few years ago while compiling an anthology, I considered bringing into the fold Les Murray, the great Australian poet who has Scottish ancestors, a Scottish name and who has written occasionally on Scottish themes; but that was perhaps a step too far.)

The founding father of Scottish literary Modernism was 'Hugh MacDiarmid' (the pen-name of C.M. Grieve, 1892-1978). His ecstatic short lyrics and cosmic monologues of the 1920s were written in 'Lallans', a dynamic revision of Scots which pooled words and phrases from different regions and eras, and went hand in hand with political demands for an independent Scottish republic. His later work was written mainly in English, but again incorporates vocabulary from all areas of human knowledge, particularly the scientific. As an anthologist, MacDiarmid extended 'Scottish poetry' to include the Gaelic tradition (previously considered closer to Ireland), and an extensive body of older poetry written in Scotland in Latin.

MacDiarmid had a significant influence on the three older poets featured here. Edwin Muir (1887-1959) grew up in the Orkney Islands, and moved as a teenager to Glasgow; the subject of much of his poetry is the dislocation he experienced moving from a traditional farming and fishing community to the industrial metropolis. He lived in Prague before and after the Second World War, and was the first to translate Kafka into English. His rejection of writing in Scots or Lallans in the 1930s led to a deep and permanent rift with MacDiarmid. Edwin Morgan (1920-) has lived all his life in Glasgow, other than the war years when he served in North Africa, but he too is an accomplished translator, into both English and Scots, from many European languages including German (Hölderlin, Brecht, Jandl, Enzensberger and others). His poetry is broad in form and content, and MacDiarmid's influence can be seen particularly in his exploration of scientific themes. Morgan, and Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), were the main Scottish practitioners of Concrete Poetry. Finlay is best known for his extraordinary garden in the Pentland hills south of Edinburgh, filled with sculptures and inscriptions. It lies only a few miles from MacDiarmid's last home, but both relished conflictual public debate, and while the men had been close in the 1940s, later public feuds or 'flytings' put paid to their friendship. Finlay later described the small hill between their homes as 'MacDiarmid's alp'.

In his introduction to *Dream State*, Donny O'Rourke establishes Morgan as the book's guiding light. Morgan is exemplary in so many ways: writing about the particularities of place, in his case Glasgow, often hitherto neglected by writers; his attentiveness to and talent for a great range of poetic forms, from the sonnet to new possibilities suggested by the typewriter; his engagement with other cultures by way of translation; his advocacy of Scottish cultural and political independence; as a gay man, his exploration of sexuality, guarded though it needed to be before the 1990s.

O'Rourke also sets up the twin poles of 'dream' and 'state', or the private and public worlds, and (while admitting it may be over-simplifying matters) relates his selection of poems to these. It's a good title for an anthology from the 1990s; after the failed devolution referendum of 1979, Scottish political aspirations had been expressed largely through cultural channels, with visual artists, musicians and writers all making an impact on the national and international scene. The first edition of *Dream State* in 1994 featured work by twenty-five poets then aged under 40, and was something of a coming-of-age for this generation of poets. Some, such as Carol Ann Duffy, had already published several successful collections, others were known more through magazines.

By the time of the second edition in 2002, many of these poets had become members of the British literary establishment, as the recipients of major poetry prizes, or holding down important posts in publishing and the universities. Between the two editions, another major change had taken place: the establishment of a Scottish parliament following a referendum in 1997, which first sat two years later. Interestingly, although the second edition featured work by some ten poets not featured in the first edition, they were generally not any younger than their pioneering colleagues, and it is noticeable that in recent years few younger poets, born after say 1975, have emerged. The energy that fuelled the earlier generation of poets - a sense of being in opposition, the specific goal of a parliament, the need to fill the literary arena vacated by MacDiarmid - seems to have been exhausted. The rise of individual-centered consumer culture has chipped away at the notion that writing can change the world - poems are a product like any other, just ones that don't sell very well. It remains to be seen how in years to come the current generation of teenagers, whose first experience of power politics was the evasions and euphemisms used to justify the war in Iraq, will view the considered use of language that is poetry.

Some brief thoughts on the translations: reading my own and others' poems in German is like hearing a remix of a familiar song. Some aspects, certainly, are lost, but others are highlighted in such a way as to become visible for the first time. It's refreshing to see lines written several years ago in a new form, intriguing to see which poems the translator has chosen. Morgan's 'A View of Things' is a poem I know well, and have used in writing workshops in schools; but until Arne Rautenberg came to translate it I didn't know what 'etaoin shrdl' might be (here, 'Fehlerteufelei'), and I hadn't thought through the different meanings of the penultimate line, 'what I hate about you, chum, is your china' ('china' does mean 'Porzellan', but it also, as a piece of abbreviated

rhyming slang, means 'friend', from 'china plate' rhyming with 'mate'). There is also the experience of reading Gaelic poems in German. I don't understand Gaelic, so reading translations into German offers at least as good a reading as those into English, especially when the translation has been mediated by the poet and an interpreter, as with Wagner's translations of Bateman.

I would like to thank Arne Rautenberg for planting the 'book-seeds' I left with him on that visit to Kiel; Sylvia Geist for ensuring that the translations were gathered and published here; the poets and publishers in Scotland who supplied additional books and texts to curious translators; and all the translators for their work on the poems.

Edinburgh, August 2006

The German version is available at <http://www.die-horen.de/228023.pdf>