

Language, Metre and Diction in the Poetry of Sorley Maclean

In the history of Gaelic poetry no voice is more distinctive than that of Somhairle MacGill-Eain ('Sorley Maclean'). Although readers who have some knowledge of Gaelic poetry in translation may well give an immediate assent to that, realism demands that we base the judgement on a knowledge of the Gaelic poetic tradition in its entirety and in the original language. This is no doubt as much of a commonplace as it is to observe that thematic power, brilliance of imagery, and the various other qualities that distinguish a writer, can and do make their own impact even in translation. But it becomes something more than a mere truism when the original language and the language of translation are as far removed from each other as are Gaelic and English, in nature, in history, and in status. It is not merely that English and Gaelic are inherently, both structurally and phonologically, so very different. There is also the question of cultural and historical perspective. Somhairle MacGill-Eain restored to Gaelic poetry the scope and amplitude of a mature, adult voice. His work is not only the product of his own genius but is shaped, controlled and energised by tradition.

Gaelic literature has developed over some fifteen centuries: a rich, dominating, hierarchical literature which expresses the manifold experience of a people who eventually, between Ireland and Scotland, divided into two nations. It has its aristocratic and plebeian aspects; its literary, sub-literary and non-literate streams. As a living language with an immensely large working vocabulary, rich and flexible in the usages of its oral verse-making and story-telling, supported by vigorous traditions of expository prose in writing and extempore eloquence in the Church, Gaelic had by no means lost contact with its former greatness during Somhairle MacGill-Eain's formative years. It is true that by that time Gaelic poetry had in some respects become attenuated, but the language could still cope with an astonishingly wide range of human experience. In none of its registers could it be called a

'peasant language', no matter how poor many of its speakers may have been in terms of this world's goods.

A large part of Somhairle MacGill-Eain's greatness as a poet lies in his restorative work: this can properly be celebrated as a triumph of regeneration. His poetry is intensely Gaelic even when it is so different from anything else in Gaelic; his art, even at its most personal, draws upon so much of the inherited wealth of immemorial generations. What is perhaps more difficult to convey to a non-Gaelic reader is that this sense of the restoration of our heritage to its proper place plays a fundamental part in our assessment of his poetry. We experience a shock of excitement as we read him. Naturally this cannot be separated from his art and craft, or from the pain and joy of his poetry, from its subtlety and passion. Yet it is logically, and, perhaps more important, psychologically distinct. There is pessimism in MacGill-Eain's poetry: much of it, indeed, is tragic. But his voice, in my sense of the term, is at the same time optimistic and resurgent and these sentiments are conveyed to at least the same degree as his pessimism. If that is a paradox or a mystery it cannot be helped. The point is that it is true.

How does Somhairle MacGill-Eain achieve this? How did he revolutionise Gaelic poetry? What resources did he have at his disposal in native Gaelic? What did he borrow? What were his strategies? How colloquial or dialectal, literary or artificial, is his language? How different are the formal structures of his verse from those of the poets who preceded him? To deal with any of these questions adequately would require much greater scope than that of a short essay. All I can hope to do here is to indicate some of the answers and warn non-Gaelic readers of certain pitfalls.

To begin with a general point. Simply by reading an English translation, no one could ever guess at the nature of MacGill-Eain's Gaelic diction. There is nothing very difficult – nor, in purely linguistic terms, anything very egregious – in the English. By contrast the original Gaelic exhibits virtually an entire spectrum of language. Transparent simplicity is to be found side by side with a formidable density of verbal texture. A full linguistic commentary must await another occasion; for the moment it is enough to say that practically all the available registers of Gaelic, ranging in quality from the demotic to the arcane, are included at some point or another. There are times, naturally, when the ordinary reader requires industry combined with ingenuity to unravel the meaning. This fact alone

would give added value to the poet's authoritative translations. Personally, and in spite of the author's modest disclaimer, I regard these translations as poems in their own right. Of course they make a very different impression from their originals. Perhaps because in English they do not administer quite the same shock of modernity, or because they are easier, or for some other related reason, bilingual readers may occasionally prefer the translation. MacGill-Eain may be the 'Bard of his people', as he has been described, but one must understand that this is a specialized use of the word 'bard'. In medieval and later Gaelic society the bard was a fairly simple praise-singer.

There are undoubtedly misconceptions held about some aspects of his work. I have heard him referred to as a Romantic who consistently uses strict Classical forms. This is at best a partial judgement. I have heard it said also that his originality is restricted to the content of his poetry: that he has not brought to Gaelic verse much in the way of metrical innovation. His art has been described as essentially that of a maker of songs, with the corollary that their true quality could only emerge with the support of a musical setting. This last point may display a confusion concerning 'lyricism' or it may be connected with the fact that in Gaelic tradition almost all poetry, including non-lyrical poetry – what we, from a modern Western European point of view, would certainly call poems not songs – was linked with melody or performed in chant.

It is only fair to add that none of these observations have appeared in print, in serious criticism. Rather they are all the kind of comment which one may hear in discussion, made by people who have at best an imperfect knowledge of Gaelic or who have failed to read the poems very closely. One can often see what gives rise to such judgements but there is not a great deal of substance in any of those I have cited. In what follows, I am keenly aware that much of what I say about MacGill-Eain, especially on the subject of his technical achievement, cannot be demonstrated to a non-Gaelic reader. This is unsatisfactory but unavoidable. Matters of technique, and rhythm in particular, require direct knowledge of a language, or an unconscionable amount of space. But a good deal of the argument is really concerned with cultural background and that at least can be checked.

It is obvious from the content of his poetry that MacGill-Eain is a contemporary European poet. What then are the resources that are available to a modern Gaelic writer whose horizons are as wide as that, and what are their limitations?

First, Gaelic is a major European language, drawing as it does on the oldest literary tradition in Europe outside Latin and Greek. But it is not a 'modern' language in the sense that English, French or German are modern languages. The processes of history – which for us have been also processes of ethnocide – have disposed that the terminology of the modern sciences, for instance, is not represented in the Gaelic vocabulary. To put it succinctly: there is a word for 'atom' but only a recent coinage for 'molecule'. On the other hand, largely because of a continuing theological tradition, it is possible, without creating an unduly large number of neologisms, to discuss philosophy, literary criticism and the arts in general.

But the major Gaelic contribution to scientific enquiry is in the field of language. In Europe in the Middle Ages, Gaelic poets and men of letters were unique in the analysis of their own language. Their approach was not based on the model supplied by the grammatical categories of Latin alone, and using a fresh and independent eye, they developed attitudes that are strikingly similar to those of modern linguistic science. The potential of the language for coping with linguistic analysis is therefore clear enough; how easily it can be used in other fields of intellectual and cultural activity has been demonstrated in the twentieth century. Irish Gaelic, which has a roughly similar history, is used in all the disciplines of university curricula; in Scotland, too, Gaelic has been shown to be perfectly adequate for dealing, for instance, with mathematics and biology. But these contemporary experiments apart, the learned vocabulary of Scots Gaelic has on the whole remained substantially that of a medieval European language.

Secondly, the Gaelic poetic tradition is one that takes us back almost 1,500 years, and this literary tradition does not divide, at any rate in its higher reaches, into its distinctively Scots and Irish streams until the seventeenth century. Throughout the stages and vicissitudes of that long history, formal characteristics of structure and rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, elision, and all the other properties that can be an integral part of the statement of a poem, engrossed the attention of Gaelic poets and linguistic scholars alike.

For instance, rhyme, when it emerges in the poetry of the seventh century, is carried not only by the vowels and diphthongs of the language but also by the consonants, which were analysed phonetically and organised in distinct categories for that purpose in the schools of rhetoric. So strong is the Gaelic fascination with the

refinements of literary form (and the fascination still exists) that in the 'Dark' Ages high-class men of letters, as a leading Irish scholar, Professor James Carney, has argued, not only concentrated on the most difficult and impressive metres: in the early period these élitists went so far as to avoid vowel rhyme altogether, preferring the subtler and more sensitive, but much more demanding, consonantal rhyme. Such craft could only exist in a sophisticated written literature. At a lower level, so to speak, oral poetry and song followed their own ways, from time to time borrowing, as elsewhere in the world, from the writers.

To take one example, although Gaelic is a 'stress-timed' language, the Gaelic literati of the Middle Ages evolved a metrical system in which symmetry is achieved not on the basis of the heavy stresses of the verse line but on the number of syllables within it – no matter where the stresses fall. The visual pattern of such strictly 'syllabic' lines is, however, disrupted in speech or song by the inherent rhythm of the language itself, since regularity of stress predominates. What emerges in this kind of poetry then is an overall symmetry which may involve varying degrees of light and heavy stress, wrenched accents, or even silent stresses. Any tendency to preciosity in these 'Strict Metres' was removed when oral poets took over and modified the exacting syllable-count of the writers. Indeed, what are faults from a scholastic point of view seem to me, from the viewpoint of modern Gaelic sensibility, often to be positive virtues. The verse becomes loosened but the subtle rhythmic complexities remain and are still conspicuous in certain areas of Gaelic poetry.

Although the *quasi parlando* style characteristic of some traditional Gaelic singing may be of different or diverse origins, its subtleties are comparable with those just described. Even in the songs that accompanied communal labour (such as the well-known waulking-songs) there are similar variations in movement, although they can hardly have developed from written poetry. The fact of the matter is that a feel for complexity of rhythm – for the freedom of speech-rhythm, for instance, pitted against the demands of strict form – is one of the most special and sensitive graces of Gaelic verse in general. At one extreme it can be found in dance-songs, particularly the older *puirt-à-beul*, which preserve their regularly accented dance rhythms over against a variably stressed text. The result is a form of syncopation.

But from about the mid-nineteenth century the mainstream of Gaelic poetry failed to draw upon this astonishing rhythmical abun-

dance. For the most part the rhythms commonly used by poets whose work was published tended to be regular, and rather mechanical, stressed patterns. Paradoxically, the technical resources of Gaelic verse had become much more depleted in what was then appearing in print, and in the songs that enjoyed a vogue among the *émigré* Gaels of Lowland cities, than in the still vigorous oral poetry of the Gàidhealtachd itself. MacGill-Eain had free access to this area of poetry – it was a living tradition within his own family – just as much as he had to the entire body of published Gaelic verse. Because he had these advantages, both sides of the Gaelic poetic inheritance contributed to his own metrical restorations and innovations. In that process MacGill-Eain may be said to have slowed down the pace of Gaelic poetry, enlarged its metrical scope and created verse techniques that were capable of coping with the demands of a modern sensibility.

In this connection it is interesting to note that one or two earlier poets, notably the Lewisman John Munro, a young graduate of Aberdeen who was killed in action in 1918, had also felt the need to break the constraints of traditional form. It is evident that Munro was influenced by English metrics. MacGill-Eain, of course, also had the freedom to choose from English metrics, but his strategy was different. In essence most of MacGill-Eain's metrical patterns are derived from Gaelic or are a very subtle compound of English and Gaelic forms. The latter offers a range that stretches from the free verse of charms and incantations to the strict metres of the learned poems.

While MacGill-Eain has not cultivated these 'Strict Metres' in the way that George Campbell Hay has done, his technical virtuosity is based on his awareness of what non-literate poets have done in the development of these same forms. Writing about the great anonymous songs of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he himself has this to say: 'Technically they are simple but adequate, their metrical basis being the old syllabic structure modified by speech stress'; and significantly he adds: 'I think that is the most permanently satisfying basis for Gaelic metrics.'¹

Technically, MacGill-Eain's own verse is anything but simple. It is true that he is not averse to the use of couplets, quatrains and other well-established traditional forms. It is true, too, that some poems can appear to traditionalist readers to be more complex technically than they really are. The syntactical patterns may be unexpected, and grammatical inflection much more strictly imposed than in any variety of colloquial Gaelic; but the stanza-forms and rhymes will remain

quite regular. And it is probable also that the brilliant, novel imagery combined with traditional form can give the impression of a new technique. But these are not the poems in which MacGill-Eain's technical originality best manifests itself.

While, as I have suggested, he may have restored a slower pace to Gaelic poetry, MacGill-Eain also writes in metres that stride and surge and alter speed in much the same way as he changes the shape of the stanza and the trajectory of his rhythms from one section of a poem to another. In 'Coilltean Ratharsair' this protean quality is obvious to anyone whether he reads Gaelic or not. In 'Cumha Chaluim Iain MhicGill-Eain', which has a unique structure in Gaelic poetry, the stanzas vary from four to twelve lines; and the rhyming lines vary more or less in the same unpredictable way. There is a long poem, 'Craobh nan Teud', the elements of which may, technically speaking, all be derived from Gaelic tradition but which are combined in new relationships. (The title 'Tree of Harpstrings' – or of any stringed instrument – is taken from the pibroch 'The Lament for the Tree of Harpstrings'. It may be a corruptly transmitted name, but even if it is a corruption, it is still a remarkable metaphor. MacGill-Eain uses it as a kenning: it is 'the tree of poetry', 'the tree of art', and I shall refer to it briefly in another connection at a later stage.)

'Craobh nan Teud' opens with a section of short-lined octaves:

*Air cruas nan creag
tha eagar smuaine
air lom nam beann
tha 'n rann gun chluaine:
air mullach beò
tha treòir nam buadhan:
air airde ghil
tha 'n lios gun luaidh air.*

On the hardness of the crags
there is precision of thought;
on the bareness of the mountains
there is an undeviating verse;
on a living summit
the energy of [mental] gifts;
on a shining height
is the garden that is not spoken of.

After eight declamatory stanzas in which both rhymes and rhythms vary their pattern, there comes a section of ten quatrains of longer lines.

*Chunnacas fo sgàil craobh na dòrainn
ag coiseachd sràidean Pharais gu lòghmhor
na seann siùrsaichean beaga breòite
a chunnaic Baudelaire 'na ònrachd.*

Beneath the shadow of the tree of agony,
walking the streets of Paris radiantly,
I saw the little, old, infirm harlots
whom Baudelaire saw in his loneliness.

Between the fourth and fifth quatrains, an octave, in basically the same metre as the first section, interrupts the progression; the last two stanzas of the second section are also octaves which again reflect the metres of the first section. Each of these has its own individual properties of rhythm and rhyme. These permutations are repeated (though never identically) with an extraordinary exuberance and virtuosity, in diction as well as metre, until we come to the end of the poem.

The sensuous effects which the poet achieves here through rhymes and contrasts of sound, through sustained and cumulative rhythms, and through alternating and contrastive rhythms, are of course utterly impossible to reproduce in translation. I can only offer the suggestion that the intensity and complexity of emotion which are evident even in translation find a counterpart in these 'formal' aspects of the original.

Earlier I drew attention to the fascination that Gaelic poets had, right from the beginnings of our literary history, with the very substance of language and the ways in which its strength and richness and delicateness may be exploited to make an impact upon the senses. MacGill-Eain's concern with the auditory properties of his medium puts him securely in that tradition: it is partly what makes him a Gaelic poet. Yet although at times there is almost an excess in this side of his writing, he can just as easily compose in other styles.

Most of MacGill-Eain's poems have an abundance of traditional rhymes, both internal as well as end-rhymes. A few have only minimal or unconventional rhyme. Many poems are in traditional rhymed quatrains; others are in irregular paragraphs. There is no definite linear development to be traced from any one of these positions to

another. His two earliest published poems 'A' Chorra-Ghrìdheach' and 'A Chiall 's a Ghràidh' are in markedly different styles: the first in rhyming quatrains, of strong but varied rhythm, which shows a number of departures from strict conventions of rhyme; the second in an unusually bare and sensuously meagre *vers libre*, the lines of which are grouped in threes. Certain features of the design of both these poems appear and develop throughout his work.

MacGill-Eain employs the traditional Gaelic system of internal as well as final rhyme very freely. Technically, this ornamenting device, as I shall call it for the moment, is perhaps his most conspicuous link with the traditional past. The internal rhyme is the most distinctive marker of what the modern Gaelic speaker regards as 'traditional' technique (end-rhyme is of course taken for granted) and it remained the leading ornament in the diminished verse tradition of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries which I alluded to earlier. It is sometimes implied that this cross-rhyming is a difficult art. It is not. The fact of the matter is that the Gaelic imagination is so dominated by the design that it is almost impossible to avoid it.

Connected with that fallacy is another. We sometimes hear it said that unless we bring a conscious awareness of these aural patterns to bear upon the poems or songs that contain them, our appreciation of the poetry is limited. This is almost the reverse of the truth. If the ornamentation obtrudes, the poem remains no more than an artefact – either that or we ourselves are guilty of focussing on the craft at the expense of the poetry. It is only when we take the craft for granted, and the aural sensuousness works upon us subliminally, that total communication takes place. Furthermore, because of the tyranny of mechanical rhythm and predictable rhyme, it is a more difficult art to break the hold of these metres than to follow their rules. But perhaps even more difficult is to combine old and new in such a way that neither neutralizes the other. This poetry never lets us forget that it is extending the tradition in which it is so obviously rooted.

If Somhairle MacGill-Eain's poetry were subjected to a mechanical analysis in terms of all its rhetorical techniques, we could show that its author is a master in the use of traditional ornament. But the 'ornament' is an integral part of a dense fabric of speech. At other times the senses are jolted because the reinforcement of an expected rhyme is suddenly withheld. The effect is physical and the meaning is altered as well. Those who care to test any of these statements can find the proof almost anywhere in his poetry.

One good example is the beautifully designed, wistful poem 'Gleann Aoighre'. It is a sad, exquisite poem of great rhythmic poise and delicateness, with rich textures of vowel contrasts and harmonies, none of which is external to the meaning. Later poems, 'Aig Uaigh Yeats' to take an example at random, on the whole tend towards a looser weave of sound; in this poem the lack of rhyme in expected places and the sudden occurrence of rhyme, as well as the asymmetry of its three stanzas (8 lines; 9 lines; 8 lines), are quite as much part of the meaning as the aural tapestry of 'Gleann Aoighre'. Another late poem 'Creagan Beaga' has a completely different design: three quatrains with regular 'ab' end-rhyme and no internal rhymes.

*Tha mi dol troimh Chreagan Beaga
anns an dorchadas liom fhìn
agus an rod air Camus Alba
'na shian air a' mhol mhin.*

I am going through Creagan Beaga
in the darkness alone
and the surf on Camus Alba
is a sough on smooth shingle.

The use of 'agus' ('and') at the beginning of a line (where traditionally Gaelic would nearly always use the connective "s") has a strangely unsettling effect. It checks movement and gives the scene a kind of stillness – unremarkable as the word 'and' may seem in translation. The word 'agus', however, is used in various other places in MacGill-Eain's poems in a normal colloquial way but none the less not in the way of colloquial Gaelic in poetry. On each occasion it makes a special impact. The last line of the verse ' 'na shian air a' mhol mhin' has a magical effect, achieved by the vowel contrast, of realising the sound of the surf on a shingle beach, and the effect is made intensely real and intensely local by the use of the word 'rod' which is localised in the Gaelic of Raasay and parts of Skye.

Of course one can find in various areas of Gaelic poetry manifestations of a comparable art. In some verse forms the full panoply of rhyme and other devices is mandatory and if the pattern is broken the art is flawed. Other forms allow considerably more freedom. MacGill-Eain uses all the possibilities and uses them together. No other Gaelic poet has produced an art which gives the impression in such a remarkable way of playing constantly fluctuating movement against

stable forms. No Gaelic poet has a richer or more delicate or more varied auditory imagination. Yet at no time are we in danger of being seduced by that. It is what he says, not how he says it, that arrests the attention. The reasons why the labels of 'romantic' and 'classical' have been applied respectively to the content and form of his poetry are easy to see but like any other major artist he is not to be restricted by them. Integrity, not formalism, is the distinguishing feature of his poetry. Thus he will introduce stanzas in different metres, or alter their lengths or their rhyme-schemes, according to the demand of the moment and still create a sense not of formal ineptitude but of artistic inevitability.

It ought to be clear even from the brief sketch I have given of the metrical resources of Gaelic that the modern poet has almost an embarrassment of riches to draw on. But because MacGill-Eain's complex music is verbal, not melodic; since the great bulk of what he has written is poetry and not song and has a self-contained existence in speech or on the printed page; it is undoubtedly different in kind from the music-and-verse that precedes him. Does this difference in kind then mean that he has borrowed from English or other metrical traditions? One of the problems in tackling that formidable question is that although Gaelic has unique metrical forms, it also shares a common Western European literary heritage. Specifically with regard to Somhairle MacGill-Eain, one may single out a given structure and find its parallels easily enough in other literatures; sometimes, however, one can more easily find them in earlier Gaelic. Take an example: the fundamental metric of 'A' Bhuaille Ghréine'

*Do m' shùilean-sa bu tu Deirdre
'S i bòidheach 's a' bhuaile ghréine*

To my eyes you were Deirdre
beautiful in the sunny cattle-fold

is the same as W.B. Yeats' 'To Ireland in the Coming Times'

Know that I would accounted be
True brother of a company

Of course each poet realises the metre in his own individual way. The young Yeats (of the 1890s) lacks the sophistication, the varied pace, of the young MacGill-Eain (of the 1930s); Yeats' later rhythms often remind one, quite irresistibly, of the movement of MacGill-Eain's poetry. Even the sequences of rhyme used by both poets have some-

times a good deal in common. MacGill-Eain tells us (although the statement is not necessarily about metrics) that he 'did not know the middle and later poetry of Yeats until well on in the thirties, but from then on it affected me considerably'.² He has also declared, in a completely different context, that 'metrically Gaelic can do anything English has done, but the metric of the great bulk of Gaelic poetry is impossible in English'.³ We must guard against facile comparisons and facile inferences alike.

In any event, there are in Gaelic more than one species of metric in what may generically be called choral songs (waulking-songs and the like) which yield a pattern not unlike that of 'A' Bhuaile Ghréine', 'An t-Eilean', 'Coin is Madaidhean-Allaidh', 'Nighean is Seann Òrain' and one or two others.

To put it in the simplest terms, waulking-songs are sung in couplets or single lines. When these are written down without their choruses of vocables, we find in some of them a paragraphic structure of irregular lengths, each paragraph division being indicated by change of rhyme. The change usually marks a change in thematic treatment or in subject-matter. There are a few songs (I cannot think of more than half-a-dozen in the whole of Gaelic literature) which appear to have been sung in these irregular paragraphs, not in the lines or couplets of the waulking-song tradition. One of the best known in print is an address to the famous seventeenth-century warrior, Alasdair mac Colla (Alexander Colkitto), 'Alasdair a laoigh mo chéille | Có chun-naic no dh'fhàg thu 'n Éirinn'.⁴

The poems I have cited – 'A' Bhuaile Ghréine', etc. – are certainly not replicas: they all tend toward couplet rhyme, here and there extended beyond the couplet, but they do give the same sense of rhythmic drive and energy. This traditional paragraphic structure probably affords one of the best starting points for adapting a Gaelic metre to what we may call, for brevity's sake, a non-traditional sensibility. This opens up an interesting line of speculation, seeing that the metre is native and ancient and that some of the poetry composed in it has a positively surrealistic character. For MacGill-Eain has his own vein of surrealism: 'Coin is Madaidhean-Allaidh', among other poems, exemplifies it. Almost at every turn, the critic is forced to adopt a Janus attitude. Furthermore, Gaelic poetry, in which the oral element is so strong, frequently displays the paratactic style associated with oral poetry throughout the world. The stanza, or even the line, is usually self-contained, in sense as in syntax.

In MacGill-Eain's work in general what we find is the normal thematic development of literary poetry. This is not a matter of adding one idea to another, line after line. But when there is a tendency to make the line or couplet autonomous in meaning, the reader frequently has a sense of being poised between the old Gaelic poetry and the new. That feeling is inescapable even if the explanation suggested here is wrong. At all events, the modern revolution in Gaelic poetry is to a large extent centred on thematic development. A new concept of poetic structure has been introduced to Gaelic literature and English poetry certainly provides a wide enough field in which to seek its source. Yet when all background influences on MacGill-Eain's poetry come to be investigated, these vivid, passionate songs, with their flexible paragraphic structure, cannot be left out of account. They have their own kind of thematic sequences which use an antithetical, cumulative or climactic mode of expression.

How did Somhairle MacGill-Eain solve the problem of creating a 'modern' diction from the resources of his native language? First, so far as I am aware, there is not a single neologism, strictly speaking, in the whole of his poetry. 'An ceathramh seòl-tomhais' (the fourth dimension), might seem to qualify for the label of neologism but 'seòl-tomhais' (a mode of measurement), is colloquial enough: 'seòl' in such compounds is still productive in Gaelic. An English reader, finding the word 'synthesis' in the translation, might well suspect that the original is a modern coinage. But 'co-chur' (better 'cochur': it is stressed on the first syllable) is a well-established item in the vocabulary of Presbyterian theology and preaching. In that context it has a slightly different meaning: its elements nevertheless are precisely equivalent to the Greek elements which form the word 'synthesis'. The fact that the poet can find what he needs in the working vocabulary of the language is a comment on the extraordinary wealth of Gaelic and its capacity for survival in spite of the ethnocidal policies of centuries. MacGill-Eain draws on every area of Scots Gaelic, sometimes using obscure and little-known words, whether from literature or from the living language. It may be that certain of the 'literary' words are now obsolete in speech but it is dangerous to dogmatise about obsolescence in Gaelic, as anyone who has devoted a reasonable amount of time to the study of dialects and oral tradition will appreciate.

A rare, if not obsolete, word is 'drithleann' ('sparkle, gleam', etc.), which occurs, for instance, in the very early 'A' Chorra-Ghrìdheach: 'luasgan is cadal gun drithleann' ('unrest and sleep without a gleam');

'ciùrrte, aon-drithleannach' ('wounded, with but one sparkle'). The adjective 'drithleannach' is used in a striking image of a piper's fingering in a seventeenth-century song by the Blind Harper at Dunvegan. Noun and adjective alike, however, are rare even in literature. Another very rare word is 'diùchd' ('appear, manifest (oneself)'). So far as I know, only two poets have used it before MacGill-Eain: Uilleam Ros and his maternal grandfather Am Piobaire Dall, from whose poetry Ros possibly learnt it. If it is short – 'diuchd' and not 'diùchd' – it may still be known in speech, though in a somewhat different sense. There is actually some doubt as to the quantity of the word: MacGill-Eain writes it with a long vowel.

Interestingly enough, a number of words exist in Gaelic which certain writers, from about the second half of the eighteenth century, have lengthened unhistorically. Some of these are part of the same Presbyterian and theological vocabulary as 'cochur'. For instance, MacGill-Eain takes 'éire' ('burden') from established ecclesiastical usage: it occurs in 'Coilltean Ratharsair':

*'S e gu bheil iad ag éirigh
às an doimhne thruaigh reubte
tha cur air beanntan an éire*

It is that they rise
from the miserable torn depths
that puts their burden on mountains

We know from the song tradition, however, that the word is short (e.g. 'Och a Rìgh gur trom m' eire | Nochd 's mi 'n eilean a' chaoil', where rhyme fixes the quantity). Although some academic critics may feel that words like these are solecisms, and that it is an aesthetic and linguistic lapse to prolong their existence, this is surely far too austere a view. MacGill-Eain is perfectly justified in choosing words from this particular literary register of Gaelic just as he is justified in taking words from any area of living Gaelic speech.

Words are public but far from impersonal entities and frequently have a private life in individual imagination. When an author (who is perhaps more likely to be a writer rather than a non-literate composer) succeeds in transmitting his individual perception of a word – its sound, its appearance on a page, or a latent meaning – to the public context of his work, a hitherto unrealised potential is made available. In that creative process a writer puts his own impress on a word: it can

never be quite the 'same' word again. Its position in the language has shifted; its status has been enhanced and its meaning extended. A major writer alters the language itself.

MacGill-Eain uses the Gaelic lexicon in such a way that literary Gaelic will never be the same again. The context of his poetry gives the common currency of Gaelic, as well as the antique and unusual words, the quality of newly-minted coin. Recurrent words – among them words that express degrees of brightness, unrest, unattainableness, transience, suffering, pride – form his unmistakable signature. An individual reader will, of course, have his own predilections in choosing the words that sign a poet's style. Some readers may agree that the word 'lì' ('sheen, tinge' in spoken Gaelic) has a distinctive place in the group: normally in MacGill-Eain's poetry it is the sheen of beauty or just 'beauty' itself. 'Ardan', another key-word, is in common usage 'pride' in a pejorative sense, a tendency to take offence easily. MacGill-Eain emphasises rather its sense of 'proper pride, fierce pride, proud anger'.

Of the various words for 'jewel' in Gaelic, he chooses the interesting and fairly rare 'leug'; adj, 'leugach'. Historically it is interesting, if only for the fact that it has been described as 'a false "literary", "southern" [Highland] restoration'.⁵ Although this judgement is unduly dismissive, the word is probably to be regarded as a literary coinage. It is certainly one of the lexical markers of MacGill-Eain's poetry: 'Mo leug camhanaich is oidhche' ('My jewel of dawn and night'); 'Agus fodham eilean leugach' ('And under me a jewel-like island'); 'Ciamar a smaoinichinn gun glacainn | An rionnag leugach òir' ('How should I think I would seize the radiant golden star'); 'Agus fo reultan Africa | 's iad leugach àlainn' ('And under the stars of Africa, | jewelled and beautiful'). A few poets have used 'leug' in the past but it now exists in a wholly new dimension.

From the poet's own translations it is evident that he sometimes focusses sharply and individualistically on a particular point in the semantic range of a word. 'Labhar', for instance, in its general import 'loud', is almost always translated 'eloquent'. This meaning is known neither in literature nor in contemporary spoken Gaelic. But it may have been used in that sense in certain contexts in the past: Dwelly's Dictionary gives 'eloquent' as the fourth sense of the word. This development, too, may have come from ecclesiastical usage. Wherever such extensions of meaning may have their source, they are to be regarded as an enrichment of the language. Even if Somhairle Mac-

Gill-Eain is only making accessible what is already latent in Gaelic, his claim to originality is high in this sphere also. No doubt if this poetry were written in Lowland Scots, it would have been celebrated or criticised long before now for its 'synthetic' diction. But if there is any parallel, on a purely linguistic level, between MacDiarmid's treatment of Scots and MacGill-Eain's treatment of Gaelic, the cultural perspectives of Gaelic makes for a fundamental difference of approach on the part of Gaelic readers from that of the critics of 'synthetic Scots'.

Gaelic poets of the past, literate or non-literate, were frequently eclectic. The non-literate Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh in the seventeenth century, composing in the vernacular, borrows directly or at one or more removes from Classical Gaelic poetry. In the eighteenth century the highly literate Uilleam Ros sought what he required in the living dialects. And there are many other examples. As a general observation, one may say that in Gaelic tradition (where fame and linguistic versatility are closely allied) no poet of note has been, in the strict senses, a 'dialect poet'. Even with this background, however, the linguistic authority and arbiter of usage that MacGill-Eain constantly cites is the Church – in his case the Free Presbyterian Church, of which his family were adherents. Time and time again I have heard MacGill-Eain back up his discussion of linguistic usage with the phrases: 'Chuala mi 'san eaglais e' or 'Dh'fhaodainn a bhith air a chluinntinn 'san eaglais' ('I (could have) heard it in church').

If English translation cannot possibly transmit a sense of the variety and luxuriance of MacGill-Eain's Gaelic or convey the impact of a rare word in a new and contemporary setting, much less can it suggest the 'ambiguity' which a complex of associations creates. The following lines occur in 'Aithreachas': 'A Dhia, 'se bòidhche a' ghàrraidh: [. . .] nach fhan ri buidheachas an fhoghair' ('O God, the beauty of the garden: [. . .] which will not stay for the yellow gratitude of autumn'). 'Buidheachas' is gratitude; 'buidhe' is yellow. These words are unrelated and are not normally linked in the mind of a native speaker of Gaelic. The present context, however, inevitably evokes the image of ripening corn. At a deeper level of analysis, still another word 'buidhe', which belongs with 'gratitude' not with 'yellow', and survives in some stereotyped phrases, where it is in fact linked with 'yellow', would also come under scrutiny. This is the 'buidhe' of the line 'bu bhuidhe dhomh na do na h-eòin' ('the springtide is more golden to me than to the birds') in 'Reothairt'.

Another example of ambiguity may be found in the opening line of

‘Am Mùr Gorm’: ‘Mur b’e thusa bhiodh an Cuilithionn | ’na mhùr eagarra gorm’. Here the two words, again unrelated, are ‘eagarra’ (‘precise’) and ‘eag(ach)’ (‘notch(ed)'). The translation, ‘But for you the Cullin would be | an exact and serrated blue rampart’, has perforce to put the two elements on the same semantic footing. The original Gaelic allows the primary sense to remain dominant. In his English translations of each of these citations the poet has succeeded in conveying the scope of the images by making them fully explicit. Even if some subtlety is lost they are still powerful.

Occasionally an image or a statement seems, indeed, to make as great an impact in English as in Gaelic. One of these is the marvellous line in ‘Hallaig’: ‘Anns a’ chamhanaich bhalbh bheò’, translated ‘in the dumb living twilight’. ‘Balbh’ is primarily ‘dumb, without speech’, but is also the normal colloquial Gaelic for ‘still, hushed’. In Gaelic ‘beò’ (‘living’) is as unexpected as ‘dumb’ is in the brilliant translation which selects the primary meaning of ‘balbh’. When the native element is combined with a concept that is Romantic (in the sense that Wordsworth’s ‘living air’ is Romantic), the resulting compound image is a microcosm of the blend of sensibilities that makes MacGill-Eain the kind of poet that he is: modern, sophisticated and Gaelic.

I am therefore not implying in anything that I have written that the non-Gaelic reader is cut off from his poetry. What I am emphasising is the need to assess his work against the background, and within the perspectives, of Gaelic literature as a whole, if those aspects to which translation gives us access are to be understood in all their richness. A number of topics which still require to be interpreted in that light come to mind. For instance, an entire essay could be devoted to his use of place names; another to the sea as a source of imagery. Place names occupy a central place in Gaelic literature. The sea is one of the great themes of Gaelic poetry, particularly the song-poetry of the Hebrides and the North Western seaboard. In MacGill-Eain’s poetry these and other themes make comparisons and contrasts with the poetry of the past.

The wonderful celebration of mountains in ‘Ceann Loch Aoinear’ is unique as a nature poem in Gaelic in the way it brings together visual, aural and tactile images in a multi-dimensional style. This can certainly be said to be a poem of Romantic sensibility; it is also a poem which is probably quite as effective in English translation as it is in Gaelic. For all that, a Gaelic reader recalls other celebrations of famous mountains: Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir’s panegyric to

'Beinn Dobhrain', for instance, or Domhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn's passionate evocation of the mountains of Lochaber. Certainly a contrast of sensibilities exists between 'Ceann Loch Aoineart' and 'Beinn Dobhrain', whatever terms we may find to express it.

Curiously enough, there is more of a bond between the Romantic in MacGill-Eain and the sixteenth-century hunter-poet Domhnall Mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn as he views the mountain he shall never climb again while it 'will not descend until doom'. More than a gap of centuries, however, separates Domhnall Mac Fhionnlaigh's unclimbable mountain and 'the mountain that may not be climbed' of MacGill-Eain's 'Nighean is Seann Òrain'. And yet at a much deeper and more obscure level one can sense a relationship between, say, 'the full, bare mountain' ('a' bheinn làn lom') in 'Craobh nan Teud' and the mountains of the wilderness that appear in Gaelic song more than once under the name of 'A' Bheinn Mhór'. Symbolically, the mountain is a place of ritual mourning: 'ascending and descending the mountain'. It is also equivalent to the Greenwood of Love: 'on the peaks of the mountains [. . .] in the track of the bellowing deer'. The mountain and the wild moor symbolise the anarchic energies and activities of human life set in contrast with the regulated life of the settled community. At times one feels that this is an archetypal image: that the 'great mountain', the 'forbidding mountain', the 'mountain of mist', and so forth, are all partly a reflection, no matter how faint, of the cosmic mountain which features in art and culture throughout the world. How much of that is directly relevant to the mountain symbol in MacGill-Eain's poetry ('A' Bheinn air Chall', for example; or 'the shifting mountain of time') must be left in the realms of conjecture. The point is, once again, that the Gaelic reader is aware of the tradition no matter what the sources of the poet's inspiration may have been.

Something of the same kind is true of the image of the tree. Gaelic poetry is full of kennings and metaphors of trees. They are to be found in love poetry and in eulogies composed for the warrior, the 'tree of battle', the 'tree of slaughter'. In a mid-seventeenth-century poem Gaelic warriors are described as 'trees of good lineage from fairy hills'. The fairy mound or *sidhein*, the abode of the ancestral dead, is also the local focus of the Otherworld in pagan Gaelic cosmology. An image such as that continues to draw upon a primitive source of energy. The seventeenth-century poet was no doubt well versed in the ancient lore of the great sacred trees of Gaelic mythology which are themselves

representatives of the tree that grows at the axis of the world. For those who know that lore and the kennings of Gaelic poetry, ‘*Craobh nan Teud*’, with its ‘tree of poetry’; ‘the beautiful heroic tree’; ‘tree of ecstasy’; ‘the love-tree’; the ‘great tree of the high mountains’ develops a familiar rhetoric even if the development is new and extraordinary. Nevertheless, these particular metaphors actually lead us away from the mythopoeic universe. We return to it in ‘*Hallaig*’:

*'s tha mo ghaol aig Allt Hallaig
'na craoibh bheithe, 's bha i riamh
eadar an t-Inbhir 's Poll a' Bhainne,
thall 's a bhos mu Bhaile-Chùirn:
tha i 'na beithe, 'na calltuinn,
'na caorunn dhìreach sheang ùir [. . .]
Chunnacas na mairbh beò [. . .]
na h-igheanan 'nan coille bheithe,
dìreach an druim, crom an ceann.*

and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig,
a birch tree, and she has always been
between Inver and Milk Hollow,
here and there about Baile Chùirn:
she is a birch, a hazel,
a straight, slender young rowan [. . .]
The dead have been seen alive [. . .]
the girls a wood of birches,
straight their backs, bent their heads.

‘*Hallaig*’ is a twentieth-century poem and contains images of its time. Setting these aside, I have the feeling it is also a poem that would have been understood a thousand years ago and more. The mandarin caste of medieval society who were the keepers of ancient wisdom and learning, and whose name *file* originally meant ‘seer’, might not find ‘*Hallaig*’ as mysterious as some modern readers do. ‘*Coilltean Ratharsair*’ would be far more baffling.

These of course are opinions that depend upon a knowledge of Gaelic poetry throughout history. Much more accessible are the synchronic aspects of MacGill-Eain’s poetry: the inner relationships that exist between individual poems and the deployment of certain leitmotifs. Within the limits of this essay I can only draw attention to one or two examples of what I mean. In spite of the fundamental difference between

the symbolism of ‘Craobh nan Teud’ and ‘Coilltean Ratharsair’, we can sense here and there an underlying connection in imagery, as if parts of each poem had the same matrix. ‘Craobh nan Teud’ has:

*Gealach is dubhar uaine choilltean,
Cùirneanan an driùchd 'na boillsgeadh,
briodal sùgraidh nan òg aoibhneach,
'nan leugan òirdhearc 'na loinn ghil.
Suaimhneas sneachda nam beann grian-laist'*

Moon and green shadowiness of woods,
Beads of dew shining in its light,
Tender love-talk of the happy young,
Splendid jewels in its bright elegance.
Snowy tranquillity of sun-lit mountains

Compare that from ‘Craobh nan Teud’ with this from ‘Coilltean Ratharsair’:

[. . .] *sàmhchair choilltean,
ceilearadh shruthan is suaineadh aibhnean,
ciùine reultan buidhe a' boillsgeadh,
lainnir a' chuain, coille-bionain na h-oidhche.
Nuair dhòirt a' ghealach na crùin shoilleir
air clàr dùghorm na linne doilleir [. . .]
[. . .] *Sgurr nan Gillean [. . .]
[. . .] *sgiambach le ghile,
le ghile sneachda 'na dhrithleann,
ciùin agus stòlda 'na shitheadh [. . .]
Coille uaine [. . .]***

[. . .] the peace of the woodlands,
the bird-song of rivulets and the winding of burns,
the mildness of yellow stars shining,
the glitter of the sea, the phosphorescence of night.
When the moon poured the bright crown pieces
on the dark blue board of the sea at night [. . .]
Sgurr nan Gillean [. . .]
[. . .] in its whiteness,
in its snow whiteness sparkling,
calm and steadfast in its thrust [. . .]
Green wood [. . .]

It is only a trace and I have to mutilate the verse in order to focus on it. The next example is somewhat different. *Dàin do Eimhir LII* reads:

*Do m' dhùr-amharc bha thu 'nad reul
's tu leat fhéin 's an iarmailt:
is thugadh dhut an dà leus
le m' aigne thorrach 's m' iargain.*

*'S an uair sin bhoillsge thu le trì
an aon leus dìreach trianaid;
ach cha robh 'nam leòis dhian fhìn
ach clann do lithe 'n iargain.*

*Bha mi feitheamh ris a' bheum
a mhilleadh do réim le chrionadh;
ach thug mi dhut na trì dhut fhéin
an ceann réis deich bliadhna.*

*Oir nam b' iad mo leòis gin fhìn
a bheòthaich li 'nad lias-sa
bu chinnt gun cailleadh iad am brìgh
le glasadh tim deich bliadhna.*

*A shuilbhreachd 's a chridhe chòir
's sibh lòghmhor ann an aodann:
a mheallaidh cridhe 's a mheallaidh sùla
ur n-ìomhaigh rùin a h-aogas!*

*Cha b' ann fada bha an tòir
a thug corr 's deich bliadhna
an uair a bha an fhaodail corr
's na dh'fhoghnadh dòchas siorruidh.*

To my steady gaze you were a star
all alone in the skies,
and you were given two rays of light
by my fertile mind and my longing.

Then you shone forth with three
in a single direct effulgent trinity,
but in my intense rays of light
there were only the children of your beauty yearning.

I waited for the stroke
that would impair your power and wither it;
but I gave you the three for yourself
at the end of a space of ten years.

For had they been of my own begetting,
those rays that kindled beauty in your brightness,
they would surely have lost their power
through ten years of time's greying.

Affable nature and kind heart,
you are radiant in one face –
beguiling the heart and beguiling the eyes –
beloved image of her appearance.

It was not long, the pursuit
that took longer than ten years,
when the treasure-trove
was more than enough for eternal hope.

If this is compared with 'An Sgian', it is clear that both are metaphysical poems, twin poems though not identical; and both immediately recognisable as the offspring of one intellect. Finally, from 'Craobh nan Teud' again come these images:

*Éibhneach anns a' mbeangach bhláthmhor
suaimhneas geal an aodainn áluinn,
leugach anns a' chumadh-fáire
fiamh ulaidhe an rainn neo-bhàsmhoir.*

*Mar a reachadh i na b'fhaide
's ann a theannadh i na b'fhaisge,
's mar a thrialladh i am fadal
's ann a mhiadaicheadh a h-aiteal.*

Joyful in the flowering branches
White tranquility of a beautiful face,
Jewelled in the horizon's shape
The precious gleam of immortal verse.

The farther it moved away
The nearer it approached,
As it travelled into the distance
So would its light increase.

In passing we may note the resemblance of the first verse to the last stanza of ‘Am Mùr Gorm’:

*Agus air creachainn chéin fhàsmhoir
chinn blàthmhor Craobh nan Teud
'na meangach duillich t' aodann,
mo chiall is aogas réil.*

And on a distant luxuriant summit
there blossomed the Tree of Strings,
among its leafy branches your face,
my reason and the likeness of a star.

There are other connections, some simple and some complex, between ‘Coilltean Ratharsair’, ‘Craobh nan Teud’ and the short poem ‘An té dh’an tug mi [. . .]’, with its images of ‘dim wood’, ‘slender branching’ and ‘her beauty like a horizon opening the door to day’. The second verse contains precisely the same kind of metaphysical conceit as we find in the fifth stanza of ‘An Sgian’:

*Mar a rachadh i an àireamh
nam bruan gearrte prann,
's ann a ghabhadh i aonachd
'na h-aonar cruaidh teann.*

As it increased in number
of cut and brittle fragments,
so it took unity,
alone hard and taut.

The intellectual groundwork of ‘Craobh nan Teud’ is quite different from that of *Dàin do Eimhir* LII and of ‘An Sgian’, yet both display quite clearly a leitmotif of MacGill-Eain’s metaphysical poetry. There are naturally very many finer threads of connection, through the themes of time’s destructiveness, for instance, or the unattainability of human desire. But to demonstrate these connections would require a much closer examination of MacGill-Eain’s vocabulary.

My register of techniques and formal relationships would not be complete without some illustration of the way in which rhythmic patterns become a vital part of the meaning. I shall take two examples. In ‘Hallaig’, ‘The girls a wood of birches | [. . .] in silent bands | go to Clachan as in the beginning | and return from Clachan | from Suisnish

and the land of the living; | each one young and light-stepping, |
without the heartbreak of the tale':

*O Allt na Fearnaibh gus an fhaoilinn
tha soilleir an diomhaireachd nam beann
chan eil ach coimhthional nan nighean
ag cumail na coiseachd gun cheann.*

From the Burn of Fearnas to the raised beach
that is clear in the mystery of the hills,
there is only the congregation of the girls
keeping up the endless walk.

In the last line two conflicting rhythms, one the natural speech rhythm of the phrase, the other the rhythm dictated by the verse form, operate at the same time, each inhibiting the other. The result is that the line seems to be suspended: metrically it is in absolute accord with the meaning of the words. The other example comes from 'Cumha Chaluim Iain MhicGill-Eain'. If we read the last line of the sixth stanza 'Nan tigeadh tu a nall' ('If you were to come over') with elision of the 'obscure' vowel written 'a' – in other words, according to the normal pattern of Gaelic speech – a remarkable metrical effect is produced:

*Nan robh thu anns a' Chlachan eile
Tha bhos ann an Loch Aills,
Bhiodh am fear treun ud dhe do shinnsre,
Ruairi Beag a' chlogaid dhrilsich
Moiteil 's e dèanamh gluasaid
Gu do leigeil-sa ri ghualainn –
Nan tigeadh tu (a) nall.*

If you were in the other Clachan
that is over here in Lochalsh,
that brave man of your ancestors
Ruairi Beag of the glittering helmet,
would be proud to move
to let you to his shoulder –
if you were to come over.

The verse has overall a dominating, progressive movement which builds up over six lines. In the last statement that flow is suddenly checked. This gives the impression of a counter-current starting up

against the main stream. The effect on the meaning is that the affirmation of the preceding lines is abruptly nullified. There are other examples of equal metrical delicateness but none of greater poignancy in the whole of MacGill-Eain's poetry.

If this is a revolution in Gaelic poetry we might reasonably expect that the architect of the revolution had a plan of campaign. Yet this does not appear to be the case. We can, of course, infer the strategy from the evidence of the poetry itself; but nothing that MacGill-Eain has said or written allows us to state that he set out deliberately to change the course of Gaelic poetry. It was the realisation, during his undergraduate years (when he was still writing English as well as Gaelic verse) that the latter was far superior, that made him confine himself to Gaelic. This does not mean that he had not prepared himself: from his teens, according to his own account, he had been reading Gaelic poetry obsessively. In 'A Radically Traditional Voice' I have drawn attention to the relevance of T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

Tradition [. . .] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense [. . . which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence [. . .] And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

Few people know the corpus of Gaelic poetry, published and unpublished, as intimately as MacGill-Eain knows it. Yet he hardly ever draws directly on the highly developed, involuted and sophisticated verbal code which constitutes the traditional diction of Gaelic poetry. In one of the sub-codes of that diction there is a phrase 'thall 's a bhos' ('here and there'), usually followed by 'mu' ('around, about'). In itself no more than one of the inconspicuous pinning-stones of speech, it is used in lyrical poetry with overtones of tragedy, loss and grief. In a famous seventeenth-century song, a party of the hapless Clan Gregor are apparently scattered as fugitives 'here and there around Loch Fyne'; in the lament of Campbell of Glen Faochain's widow in 1645 (after Inverloch): 'Here and there about Inveraray women wring their hands, their hair dishevelled.' It is as if Auden's 'altogether elsewhere' had the backing of centuries of usage. When MacGill-Eain writes in 'Hallaig': 'Here and there about Baile Chùirn' these resonances are unmistakably there. But this type of borrowing is very rare indeed.

MacGill-Eain has invented his own diction. As a poet who is secure in his tradition, 'acutely conscious of his own contemporaneity', he has, pre-eminently, a sense of the presence of the past. He is a magisterial writer who is totally in charge of his language and the techniques of his poetry; he is never controlled by them. There are times when he appears to be pushing Gaelic to its limits. There are times, indeed, when he gives the impression of being positively cavalier in his attitude towards the language. At any event he makes no concession to his readers. From that point of view it is perfectly legitimate to call his poetry *élitist*. Or rather, since the term may be taken to imply conscious intention, the poetry would qualify for that description were it not for the fact that, as he says himself, 'I was not one who could write poetry if it did not come to me in spite of myself, and if it came, it had to come in Gaelic.' And it comes, one may add, in spite of what the poetry declares of a division between heart and intellect, as the utterance of an entire person. In other words it has artistic sincerity.

The poetry registers such a range and intensity of emotion that even when its language is most literary and most elevated, it still speaks with affective directness and a simple passionate immediacy. There is no artifice. There are simplicities and difficulties; tenderness, delicateness and a rough-hewn quality; exquisite purity, and here and there an almost stumbling innocence; and immense sophistication. It is truly astonishing that only Gaelic, when it had already been driven so much into decline, could have provided a poet with the passionate eloquence to express that integrity. Somhairle MacGill-Eain needed Gaelic and Gaelic needed Somhairle MacGill-Eain.