

Old songs and new poetry

A few months ago my brother John, who is as well qualified to give an opinion as anyone I know, said that the greatest of all Scottish works of art is *Cumha na Cloinne*, the 'Lament for the Children', attributed by the tradition of pipers to Patrick Mór MacCrimmon and therefore of the 17th century. I hardly demurred, but suggested that, if it is not *Cumha na Cloinne* or some other one of the great pibrochs, it is one of those Gaelic songs of the two and a half centuries between 1550 and 1800 — the songs in which ineffable melodies rise like exhalations from the rhythms and resonances of the words, the songs that alone make the thought that the Gaelic language is going to die so intolerable to anyone who knows Gaelic and has in the least degree the sensibility that responds to the marriage, or rather the simultaneous creation, of words and music. It may be that a great piper without Gaelic can play a great pibroch supremely; it may even be that a great singer without much Gaelic can be coached into a great singing of one of those songs; but it is certain that no one who does not know Gaelic can really hear one of those songs. Perhaps one or another of the great pibrochs is in itself a greater thing than any single one of the songs, but there are so many more great songs than great pibrochs that I am convinced that Scottish Gaelic song is the chief artistic glory of the Scots, and of all people of Celtic speech, and one of the greatest artistic glories of Europe. I have been of this opinion for nearly 40 years, I have reiterated it *ad nauseam*, and now I am more convinced of its validity than I have ever been. I am no musician, but I can well imagine one of our fine pipers making about me the kind of remark that Gogarty made to Francis George Scott about Yeats, after listening to Scott and Yeats arguing about words and music. Like many others, I believe that there has never been a great song that is not a great poem too, and I believe with Croce that all poetry is 'lyrical', that verse now and again, but rarely, arrives at a point which it utters the 'lyrical cry'.

There are now in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies something like 6,000 separate Gaelic melodies, and it can be taken for granted that many of them can be called 'great'. A song like the Campbell/Morrison 'Ailean Donn', or the MacLean 'Ailean Donn',

'Cairistiona', or the 'Jura Islands' or 'Mac Sìri', or 'Iain Garbh', or 'Young Margaret', or two or three of the MacGregor songs, is an art beyond art when it is well sung, and it is still great poetry to one who has never heard it sung. I am, for instance, quite sure that I thought 'On the level of the road' one of the greatest of all Scottish poems long before I knew that there was extant a melody for it, which I heard for the first time from the late Mrs Buchanan Dunlop (Cathy Clark) in 1948.

If the words only of those old songs were extant, if the melodies were all lost, the songs could not fail to be a perennial stimulus to Gaelic poets. But since both melodies and words are extant for very many of them, the stimulus to some poets is so great as to be almost destructive. In the Thirties of this century something happened to articulate Gaels (by 'articulate' I mean likely to express their views more or less publicly) which had not happened for 100 years before. It was as if a French child of some peasant family near Chartres or Rheims, after being inside these cathedrals, had been taken away to some English industrial town where the only Gothic architecture was a few Victorian churches; as if he had lived there and had never seen a picture of a French or English medieval church until, in his late teens, he went back to the French cathedrals. In 1920 the 'image' of Gaelic song was to almost all articulate Gaels only as mediocre Victorian Gothic is to the Gothic of the 12th or 13th centuries. By 1930 there was beginning to be a difference, and as the Thirties went on, more and more Gaels were boldly proclaiming where the real artistic glories of their people lay. Among those Gaels Hector MacIver was one of the keenest sensibilities, and his eloquence was such that while he was still an undergraduate, or soon after, he was being mentioned with Maxton as one of the foremost Scottish orators of the day. He was also one of the few Gaels whose moral courage equalled his physical courage, and he had as much physical courage as any man I have known.

The Celtic Twilight of the 1890s and its product, the *Songs of the Hebrides*, were to the realities of Gaelic song poetry as Victorian Gothic is to the North French cathedrals. There is, however, in Gaelic song such an intrinsic quality of poetry and music that some of it could not fail to come through again and again, even in the *Songs of the Hebrides*, just as there is such a quality in Gothic architecture that it often shines through sham Gothic. In the 1920s, therefore, much 'educated' Gaelic opinion was right in preferring the *Songs of the Hebrides* to almost all 19th-century Gaelic song, which now seems, to me at any rate, to have been a natural product of the Clearances, the

Evangelical Revival and the Education Act of 1872.

The Clearances removed most of the Gaelic-speaking people to the industrial Lowlands and to Canada and Australia, vastly aggravated the poverty of those left crowded on the poorest patches of land in the Highlands and Islands, and broke their spirit. The Evangelical Revival proved with Fundamentalist and Calvinist logic that this world is only 'a vale of tears' and that the faithful must bear all the iniquities heaped on them by the powers that be, which are ordained by God, and that this world's material acquisitions do not matter at all. When the effects of the Evangelical Revival were abating, the Education Act began to teach children to sing 'Hearts of Oak' instead of 'Cairistiona', 'Cabar-féidh' or 'Beinn Dórain'. The 'spiritual' leaders who were not Free Church Evangelicals went to Balmoral, and for the sake of the Anglo-Scottish Establishment, of which they were a part, preached nauseous propaganda against their fellow Gaels of Ireland. Even if the Free Church ministers could have brought Victoria and all the Establishment to some Gaelic Canossa, they would not have thought it worthwhile, knowing that she and almost all of her Establishment would soon have to endure fires worse than the Canossa snows.

In the terrible late 18th century and the worse 19th century, the years from 1780 to 1870, when Anglicised land-capitalist Highland chiefs with Gaelic names all but destroyed their blood kindred in order to fill their own pockets, Gaelic song poetry degenerated to a feeble wail and to a feebler pietism; what was healthy became parochial. In those years most of the real spiritual quality of the Gaelic-speaking people was expressed in the almost wholly extempore and unrecorded sermons and prayers of ministers and 'men' to whom all poetry and song except the Psalms of David was one of the more seductive vanities of this vale of tears. If only a moderate fraction of those sermons and prayers had been recorded, however, Scottish Gaelic would have a great 19th-century prose. Even as late as the 1920s it was quite common to hear some minister or elder quoting richly, by oral tradition, from sermons or prayers delivered 70 or 100 years before. Such quotations made it quite plain that in frankness, sincerity and psychological insight, expressed with an astonishing wealth of imagery and illustration, sometimes sonorously eloquent with the incomparable resonances of the Gaelic language and sometimes racily colloquial, Gaelic once had a great prose. If a man of imagination is convinced of the rags of human righteousness and of the desperate wickedness of the human heart, the expression of his conviction cannot fail to be powerful. Even to this day there may be

heard Gaelic sermons in which the thought is essentially that of St Augustine, Calvin or even Pascal, and the prose one of great tension and variety. I fully believe that I have never heard or read as great a Gaelic prose as I have heard in the unrecorded sermons of Ewan MacQueen.

I do believe that this almost lost prose had far more impact on modern Gaelic poets than the prose, for instance, of Norman MacLeod, who was regarded until recently as the 'greatest' Gaelic prose-writer. I am sure that, compared with the lost prose of John MacDonald of Ferintosh, that of Norman MacLeod is merely orotund pietistic parochialism crossed with the parochialism of Balmoral. The Balmoral variety confirmed the parochialism that was imposed on Gaelic literature by the impotence of the 19th-century Scottish Gael in the face of the Clearances, and aggravated that post-1746 sense of inferiority which induced so many educated Gaels to derive an undue amount of comfort from the impact on Europe of James ('Ossian') Macpherson. A few months ago, hearing the doyen of international Celtic scholars exalt James Macpherson largely because of his impact on Europe, I felt impelled to commend to his attention a much greater Macpherson (Mary), of whom he had apparently never heard. One trouble is, or was, that men of industry and critical intellect comparable to the many who had worked on Celtic philology, and Scottish Gaelic philology in particular, had never applied themselves to Gaelic poetry, or at any rate to the Gaelic poetry of Scotland. I vividly remember my own thrill in 1933 when Mr James Caird and Dr George Davie introduced me to *Sangschaw* and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and I found, *inter alia plurima*, that Hugh MacDiarmid had sensed the greatness of Alexander MacDonald. Looking back now, I realise that the native sense of inferiority was part of my gratification at finding some genuine if one-sided appreciation of 18th-century Gaelic poetry in the man, a Lowland Scot, who I then felt, and still feel, had written some of the greatest European poetry of the century. I do not presume to be a judge of comparative European poetry, but the Nobel Laureates, Yeats and Eliot, are both, I think, inferior to MacDiarmid. If I remember rightly, I did not in 1933, nor do I now, put Alexander MacDonald's poetry on the same high level as the obscure or anonymous songs of 1550 to 1800, but it is very difficult to think of those songs as poetry alone. Their impact can never be that of poetry alone, though as such they are great enough for me. Their duality does, however, make them a dilemma to the modern Gaelic poet, whom they may fill with despair.

By the second half of the 18th century Gaelic poetry had known

some wonderful triumphs in the realisation of physical nature. In a kind of objectivity it had gone as far as poetry can go, certainly further than any poetry I know in English, French or Latin. But it is deficient in explicit humanity. Duncan Macintyre can realise the great sweep of a mountain or the different motions of stags and hinds on it, or the eddying of a spring on its shoulder; MacDonald can realise the thump and splash of a ship's fore-quarters, or the sob under its aft-quarters, or the squirting race of a rope over its gunwale or through a cleat. Both can do such things as no one else, I believe, has ever done them in any language I know. But the physical scene is in itself far more important than either the explicit human reaction to it or its place as a background to human activity. Its appeal is overmuch to the senses rather than the heart or the brain, and though I do not discount its implicit emotion of joy, I think that it lacks the power to move most people deeply. In essence, its effect is something like a transcendent triumph of the Imagist programme of English and American poets in the first 20 years of this century.

In this same second half of the 18th century, however, the saintly Dugald Buchanan was expressing with a terrible clarity and intensity the Pauline-Augustinian-Calvinist reaction to the dispensation of the universe. His poetry is at the very opposite pole from that of MacDonald and Macintyre. It is an explicit expression of human love pitted in acceptance against a pre-conceived theistic view of the universe; it is the inevitable resolution of Calvinist passion. His poetry is at the opposite pole, too, from the inhuman sexual passion of the 16th-century song, though the modern reader may see a likeness:

You burned my stackyard of oats and barley,
You killed my father and my husband,
Yes, and my three young brothers;
Though you did that, I rejoice that you are alive.
I like dark Allan from Lundy,
My love the brown-haired coated Allan
I like dark Allan from Lundy.

It is a sad and ironic comment on the inadequacy of contemporary evaluations of poetry that in the Eighties and Nineties of the last century Scotland had in Mary Macpherson a major Gaelic poet when Edinburgh, Dublin, London and Paris thought that the vapid Celtic Twilight was the only poetic habitat of the Gael. She, too, is the antithesis of Dugald Buchanan. Nineteenth-century Gaelic poetry is at its best in her when she mingles in it her sorrow and humiliation,

the destruction of her people by the Clearances, her great *joie de vivre* and her perplexity that the remnant of her people have grown so 'strange' that 'sorrow is wheat to them', her holding fast to her own worldly pride and 'vanity', the plant that 'satisfies the flesh'. She is one of the few 19th-century Scottish Gaels of stature who did not dismiss the world in exchange for the ecstasies of the Evangelical Revival, or who were not so broken by the breaking of their people that their poetic voices became mouthpieces for parochialism and moralising. In her, echoes of the old songs are heard far oftener and more authentically than in any other 19th-century Gaelic poet. Indeed the old songs, gone underground except in the Catholic Islands, were often more or less secretly in the mouths of people who refused to accept the orthodoxy that no worthwhile 'criticism of life' in glorious words, that was not ostensibly religious, had ever come from Gaelic lips. In Raasay about 40 years ago, an old woman of impeccable Free Church antecedents once said of the Psalmist: 'David, the dirty blackguard, what was he compared with William Ross!' I myself consider William Ross's last song one of the very greatest poems ever made in any language in the islands once called British, but I do not think of it nearly as often as I do of some of the old songs. I think of it, however, more often than I do of any poem by MacDonald or Macintyre.

I suppose the poet is the musician *manqué*, but just as surely the musician is the poet *manqué*, because 'this intellectual being, the thoughts that wander through eternity', are at most only implicit in the musician's art. As poetry, the old Gaelic song has everything except our modern world and the far-ranging, uninhibited, troubled, explicit modern intellect; and because it has what it has, and is the supreme aesthetic product of our Gaelic-speaking people, it is bound to be one of the major influences on even the most modern Gaelic poet who is not altogether *déraciné* and ready to swallow unmixed the latest poetic theory from London, New York, Paris or Moscow. I think that all modern Gaelic poets, even those out at forward observation posts on the European poetical battlefield, would agree with me in this. On the European front itself, it is this necessity for an intellectually satisfying content that remains art which has produced Symbolism, and Symbolism, in its manifestations in Blok, Yeats, Valéry, Rilke, MacDiarmid and Eliot, is the most impressive 'ism' that I know of in this century.

Gaelic song before 1800 has everything except complexity of explicit thought, and it affords a variety of the many kinds of utterance that Arnold calls 'criticism of life'. Think of Fraser of Reelig's daughter

regretting the three things that come unasked; or John MacLean holding off his passion for the Campbell woman, with his unbending tree and ebb followed by flood; or the unknown poet accepting his loss of East, West, North and South, and — 'almost' — of his God. It has supreme passion held at the shortest arm's length compatible with art or the longest arm's length consistent with passion. It has the consolation of the woman raped at the shieling and forsaken, that she still has kinsmen and probably a lover among the splendid MacDonalds with the glories of Auldearn on their arms; the bitter grief and mixed love of the Campbell wife of MacLean of Coll hearing the slaughter of her brave kinsmen at Inverlochy by the 'bad' clans, with her husband and son among them, the MacDonalds and the MacLeans; the magical evocations of external nature in such songs as those attributed to Donald of Bohuntin and 'The Braes of Locheil', the 'Heir of Strath Swordale's Daughter', 'Mac Siri', the song of the Kintail outlaw Farquhar MacRae in his cave in Coire Gorm a' Ghlinne behind Ben Attow, of John MacRae on the run from the Yankees about 1780, remembering his going up and down through Glen Sheil and Torr-Laoisich of the song-thrushes.

In the impressive 'Notes on the Border Ballads' in his book *Latitudes*, Edwin Muir had some significant and even moving things to say about those great Lowland poems. He talks of them as contemplating life in the light of pure passion. More often than not, the Gaelic song does not have this pure passion. It offers a breathtaking evocation of the natural background as well as passion as great as words can hold, and since human life and the human heart are subtle and 'impure', I believe that, partly because of this, the greatest Gaelic songs are greater poems than the greatest of the Lowland Ballads. For those who know Gaelic I need mention only the 'heavy surge and the deep kyle' in 'Cairistiona', or the 'little birch hollow' in 'Come, my love', or the glimpse of moonrise in the song of the woman who has lost her five children, 'Girl over yonder'. There are many examples of such a counterpointing of suffering and of a kind of Yeatsian 'joy'.

Celtic poetry has frequently, and rightly, been accused of rhetoric, of excessive stylisation, of a too elaborate and self-conscious technique. Far too much of the technical virtuosity of the Bardic Schools overflowed into the vernacular Chief-and-Clan poetry of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. But it is not so with the old songs. There the poet is talking to himself — herself, more often — walking the tightrope of metre without being conscious of it: and it is never tighter than, until this century, was considered by European practice neces-

sary to poetry. I am not going to enter the question of metre and Free Verse except to say that however slack the rope of auditory shape may be, there has nevertheless to be some kind of tightrope onto which the poet goes. I am not prepared to allow to the word 'rhythm' the vagueness sanctioned by much contemporary theory in Britain, Europe and America. Metre does not make poetry, but I am not satisfied that poetry can exist without it. Perhaps it is as the 'filthy rags of human righteousness' are to the Calvinist Elect.

One seldom or never hears in the old songs of Gaeldom the rhythmic stumblings that one often hears in even the greatest of the Lowland Ballads. It can be argued that these flaws in the Ballads are due to generations of oral transmission, but why do they occur so seldom in Gaelic songs, which have undergone oral transmission for as many generations? In the Gaelic song the obvious corruption is often as breathtaking as the undoubted original — in total imaginative effect as well as in rhythm or metre. One undoubted quatrain on the execution, in 1570, of Gregor of Glenstrae reads as follows:

I reached the meadow of Bealach,
And there I got no peace;
I did not leave a hair of my head unpulled
Or skin on my hands.

That quatrain appears to have 'corrupted' to:

I ascended the great mountain path with no stop for breath,
Before the day greyed (i.e. before morning twilight);
I put the hair of my head to the ground
And the skin of my two hands.

Metrically, the corruption is as good as the original.

Most of the new Gaelic poets are very much aware of the tremendous song poetry behind them, and I suspect that its effect on them is ambivalent. On the other hand, it is an emotional stimulus making for devotion to the marvellous Gaelic language. I frequently re-read Sir Maurice Bowra's remarks on the Russian language in his introduction to *A Book of Russian Verse*, and I can never do so without applying to Gaelic much of what he says about the Russian language, and without being aware of a devotion to the Gaelic language among nearly all Gaelic poets, old and new, traditionalist and *avant-garde*, similar to the devotion to the Russian language which Bowra attributes to Turgenev. Nor can I read Bowra's words without being the more painfully aware of the intolerable situation of Scottish Gaelic

today. For there is good reason to fear that the great song may soon be lost because there are no ears left to hear it. Modern Gaelic poetry may be, as an Appin man once put it 25 years ago, 'the last glimmer of the Gaelic sun before it goes down for ever'.

The Appin man's words referred in particular to what was new and vital in Gaelic poetry 25 years ago, but now, with what there is of 'new' as well as of more traditional Gaelic poetry, it looks as if there will be Gaelic Joshuas while there is a Gaelic language. We have the work of William Matheson, the Canna Campbell, the School of Scottish Studies, and of three now dead, my brother Calum, K C Craig and Hector MacIver, to keep all Gaels, and the new poets especially, alert to what is behind them. And we have the inspiring examples of the great tradition-bearers, of whom it is impossible not to mention Mr Calum Johnston. We owe more to him than to anyone else alive.

Of those of whom I am thinking, Hector MacIver was almost unique, in that he was able to respond to the old and the new at the same time, and by virtue of his astonishing moral courage and his eloquence. He always maintained in conversation that what was in Gaelic would be Gaelic if it were worth while at all, no matter what foreign influences had gone to its genesis. That, I feel sure, is true. Certainly the Gael is a mixed, variable human being, and not a pasteboard creation looming in a twilight or anywhere else. Poetry must have some kind of universality in it, no matter what the local habitation and name. It is much the same, but different as well, with prose literature. With some important changes, the central character of Mauriac's fine novel *La Parisienne* could be a West Highland Seceder. The language itself, however, does in poetry constitute a difference so great as to be a difference in kind. I think I can apprehend the greatness of Mauriac fairly well without reading a word of him in French, but I cannot see greatness in Goethe, reading him in translation, and so I have to take it on trust that he is a great poet. By the same token, neither I nor anyone else can ever hope to persuade the non-Gaelic world that William Ross's last song is comparable in quality to the best of Shakespeare's Sonnets. When Iain Crichton Smith talks of 'the infinite resonance' of William Ross, we know what he means, but the phrase is meaningless to anyone who does not know Gaelic.

The old songs may have a destructive influence on the modern Gaelic poet because of the danger that, no matter how many languages and literatures he knows well, the old Gaelic songs will remain for him the supreme hermaphrodite of words and music. It may be true on occasion, as with the 'Cro of Kintail' and the fragmentary words to

one movement of *Cumha na Cloinne*, that the words are not anything to the music, but very often the simultaneous growth of both is such that after them one despairs of any human art of the ear. I know perfectly well that this is not fashionable talk nowadays, but to me no poetry, whatever it has of intellect or passion, or of delicacy and subtlety of perception, is great poetry unless it also has an auditory effect in proportion to one or more of its other qualities. Compared with that, 'purity' of diction is just one of the better products of sterility. The reduction to the absurd of the opposite view was achieved by editors who put in their anthologies MacDiarmid's 'Perfect' and rejected his 'Moonstruck'. (Morally, T S Eliot was one of them.) It is primarily this appeal to the ear which makes Yeats and the early MacDiarmid and, at a lower level, Eliot and Auden, such good poets. (I never shared Hector MacIver's reverence for Dylan Thomas.)

The old songs must be a burden on the new Gaelic poet if he has anything at all of Verlaine's feeling that poetry must be '*de la musique avant toute chose*'. I think that George Campbell Hay has felt the burden more lightly in that the music he seems to have most often at the back of his mind is the word music of the Bardic Schools, a more sophisticated, less intense, more attainable music than the 'out of this world' music of 'Cairistiona', 'Little Sister', 'Girl over yonder', 'The Jura Islands', 'Mac Siri', 'I saw my lover', the two 'Ailean Donn' songs and scores of others. To me George Campbell Hay's poetry has the virtuosity of genius and is an exquisite blend of the Bardic old and the new, but I think that Derick Thomson and I myself are always haunted by the more intense, piercing and lyrical cry of the old songs. Because of that, we feel their burden more than Campbell Hay does. Of Crichton Smith, Donald MacAulay and Donald MacLeod I am not sure. It may be that they do not feel the burden at all, but I hesitate to think that.

Sometimes I feel that people like myself ought to shut up about the old songs: talking about them may be trying to do something to young Gaelic poets that can bring to mind Yeats's pardonable illusion that words of his sent out 'certain men the English shot'. On the other hand, the ceaseless reiteration of the poetic qualities of Gaelic songs which some of us have carried on for about 30 years may at least be an antidote to the dead-pan flatness of contemporary English verse. England is big and near, and liable to be too much of an influence on the new Gaelic poet, especially if he is not the linguist that George Campbell Hay is. And, by the nature of things, the poet is seldom a good linguist.

To insist on the necessity for music in poetry may put one, I suppose, into the category that English Literary criticism calls 'romantic', and it has been said again and again that the modern world and the atom bomb have eliminated romantic qualities from poetry. It seems to me that what 'romantic' means is largely a question of language, and I believe that all poetry may be called romantic in some way or other. The atom bomb, more than anything else, has brought about a change since 1945. But is this a change in kind rather than degree? The world was bad enough, and hopeless enough, between 1920 and 1930 when Scotland and the Anglo-Irish minority produced the great romantic poetry of Yeats and the early MacDiarmid, and certainly the *avant-garde* knew enough about Freud even then. It seems to me that to suggest that the atom bomb has destroyed romantic poetry for ever is equivalent to saying that it has destroyed all poetry except propaganda against the use of the bomb. This is to suggest that the final criterion of all poetry is a political or moral one, which is the same as saying that the final criterion of all human activity is political and moral, since men live in societies. It is also the same as saying that the final criterion is religious, if one believes in personal immortality. For Shelley the poet was the unacknowledged legislator of the world. For Dugald Buchanan he was, implicitly, the legislator for eternity, in which legislature the saintly Dugald Buchanan would have considered himself the obscurest of obscure backbenchers, but yet a member. The question is too big.

For the poet to believe, with the conscious mind at any rate, that the world may soon be turned to rubble by the atom bomb — is that radically different from believing, with the conscious mind, that 90 per cent of humanity, including nearly all those one loves most, are to spend an eternity of spiritual and physical torment? Poets have believed in an eternity of torment for the bulk of humanity and yet have continued to delight in love of all kinds and in external nature — in other words, have continued to be romantics. And I think they will continue to do so and be so even if they believe, with the conscious mind, that the world may soon be destroyed by atomic warfare. In the circumstances of our sub-atomic condition, it is romantic to put into pleasurable form the strange and complex, the mixed, greyish workings of the human heart. In spite of certain implications in Iain Crichton Smith's profound paper to the Gaelic Society of Inverness, poets and human beings will continue to be chancers; the preoccupation with the atomic bomb and with psychoanalytical honesty and linguistic 'purity' will have intervals of romantic voluptuousness. Perhaps these delights will be heightened by the prospect of the

atomic holocaust, as those of William Ross must have been by the prospect of his own imminent death and his intellectual acceptance of Calvinism. It was only when he was actually dying that he asked for his poems to be burned.

The honesty that admits to the inhuman sexual passion of the woman who made the song for Allan of Lundy is fit to be an example of honesty in any poetry. If the insincerity of a great deal of Gaelic and English Victorian poetry is a long way from modern sincerity, it is an even longer way from the sincerity of the woman who loved Allan. With all his poses, snobberies and disgusting fascism, Yeats is to me a far more sincere poet than Eliot. Because of this sincerity, there shines through his poetry a deep, and romantic, envy of the noble plebeian James Connolly, not to mention Pearse, MacDonagh, and even his 'drunken vainglorious lout'. Even when Yeats is at his most rhetorical, one can sense the counterpointing of the sincere and the insincere, and I myself cannot see such a sincerity behind the preciously consistent humility of Eliot.

One reason why the old song is likely to be a very dangerous inspiration for the new Gaelic poet is that it is so difficult to separate its poetry from the mysteriously moving melodies that seem to rise spontaneously from the words. That the tunes do rise spontaneously, or that they and the words are simultaneous creations, is, I take it, the opinion of the greatest living authority, Mr William Matheson. When I put the matter to him, he said that of course they did rise spontaneously, and I don't think he misunderstood my words. The moral would seem to be that if a new Gaelic poet is more than ordinarily susceptible to music, he ought to avoid the old songs, just as Rilke travelling through Switzerland, refused to see the Alps and drew down the blinds of his railway compartment. He was afraid that the Alps would disturb his art too much. The old songs are, however, human, as the Alps are not, and the modern poet can hardly shun them entirely. I think that the poet is safer in contemplating an art other than poetry if he cannot avoid 'impurities' that may come into his work from that of others, though the logic of such an insistence on purity would indicate that a poet should not read or hear, or have read or heard, any poetry but his own: this is the essence of D H Lawrence's theories but the very opposite of Eliot's.

No Gaelic poet, at all events, can shun the greatest glory of Gaelic poetry, and make an artistic Origen of himself for the sake of his art. The old songs are 'there', and in a more human way than the mountains were 'there' in Mallory's words. If they are greater than poetry alone, nevertheless the poet cannot avoid them. It may be that

there is the same kind of compulsion in the minds of the many who have maintained that if a poem cannot in some way approach the quality of music, if it lacks the lyrical cry, then it is not poetry; that even if it does not sing or chant, it must in some way suggest the song or chant. The question is how to find this suggestion of the song or chant in poetry that satisfies the mixed, troubled modern mind, and carries what is implicit in the old-fashioned phrase, 'criticism of life'. Perhaps, after all, the medley is the most satisfying modern poetic form. Perhaps, in spite of all Croce says, we must accept the 'unpoetic' flats out of which the lyrical peaks arise. Perhaps that is why so many good minds in Scotland consider MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man* and not *Sangschaw* the greatest single book of poetry by one man which has been produced in the British islands in this century. A few years ago I would have said *Sangschaw* myself, but now I am not sure. Probably no modern Gaelic poet will satisfy himself — even on the rare occasion when poets manage to do this — unless he has applied the lesson of the *Drunk Man*, or some similar lesson, as well as having drunk the heady wine of the old songs. A poet can disregard the internal combustion engine, but I doubt if he can disregard Freud and the atom bomb. Nevertheless, I feel that poetry will always resemble Valéry's sun:

*Soleil, soleil, faute éclatantée,
Tu gardes les coeurs de connaître
Que l'univers n'est qu'un défaut
Dans la pureté de non-être.*

What is in question is whether there can be poetry, or any art, which is fully relevant to the modern world and which at the same time satisfies the instinct for what is called 'beauty'. Psychoanalysis has shaken the belief in the wide divergence of good and bad, right and wrong, and has therefore undermined the basis of strong feeling which has seemed in the past to be essential to all art. Is an amoral delight no longer possible in serious art? Is George Campbell Hay's 'Siubhal a' Choire' the kind of poem that ought to be no longer possible, and is Iain Crichton Smith's 'The Old Woman' the only kind of poem that ought now to be made? To me they are both fine poems, and both have strong feeling in them. George Campbell Hay's has an old delight, and Iain Crichton Smith's has the grey modern mind's profound sympathy for decrepit humanity. His old woman could be, though she is not, the symbol of a post-atomic world, but three out of four people would say that George Campbell Hay's poem is 'beautiful', while not more than one would say the same of Iain Crichton

Smith's. Yeats excluded Wilfred Owen from his Oxford Book of Modern Verse because he felt that none of Owen's poems had in them what he called joy. By the same token he would have rejected 'The Old Woman'. Yeats, I am sure, was wrong about Owen. And I feel that the three out of four would be wrong about this particular poem of Iain Crichton Smith's.