Nature’s Song under the Bombs: Pastoral Echoes in some Scottish War Poems

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When it came to describing wars, particularly the First World War, poetry was a very common medium in Great Britain, not only because it belonged to folk tradition, and was therefore closer to people’s hearts, but also because it provided an accessible yet rich way of sketching the environment and feelings. A world of atrocities could, moreover, be somehow subdued by more imaginative or traditionally literary elements. Helen Goethals argues that during the war, poets “conjur[ed] up, in words, an imaginary landscape, created out of the circumstances of war, which often produced an exacerbated sensitivity to the phenomenal world” (369). The sensitivity she describes is evident in Scottish poems from both the First and Second World War as they often focus not only on visual details but on scent and sound, too, whether these are remembered perceptions or sensations the poets actually felt or wished to feel again. For as war turns from a frontline conflict to global mass destruction, the perspective of a world of silence and darkness looms large, and indeed, there seem to be fewer pastoral soundscapes in World War II poems just as the representation of landscape as a whole changes. Are the sounds of nature still heard amid the rumbles of the bombs and how does their expression or interpretation show a poetic evolution between World War I and World War II? As nature’s comforting, sometimes nostalgic song fades away to be entirely distorted owing to shell-shock, it is gradually replaced by the sounds of city destruction, human pain in a waste land and ultimate mutism in front of the horrors of World War II. As a result, some poets resort to a new pastoral, involving new poetic forms in an attempt to struggle against silence.
1. Shellshock and the distortion of Nature’s comforting song

There is a double tradition of nature writing in Scotland. The first emanates from a deeply rooted Gaelic sense of place. It culminated in the 18th century and is extremely classical, almost scientific as far as descriptions are concerned. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and Duncan Bàn MacIntyre were among the best representatives of Gaelic nature poetry at the time and Derick Thomson describes their innovative poems as texts where the landscape is depicted in “‘exhaustive’ passages, [where] language is firmly controlled: each epithet adds to the description” (Thomson 164). He further argues that nature in their poems is “all-important and sufficient” as opposed to poems following a more English tradition based on the imitation of Virgil and which tend to relate nature to man or the divine (160-161). The second tradition of nature writing is more lyrical and is best exemplified in Walter Scott’s picturesque sceneries and Highland literary sensibility precisely because it has, since Romanticism, developed such powerful, resonant mechanisms for evoking sublime mournfulness. Both, however, tended to mix and turn into less picturesque, more homely representations of the parish garden or all too hackneyed descriptions of lochs and misty mountains in the early 20th century, giving birth to the Kailyard School. These clichés are mostly reflected in early World War I poetry, not only because patriotism needs these images, as uniting symbols to rely on, but because what is known and definite, shared by all, is reassuring and comforting, a point David Goldie emphasizes when he argues that “this is to conceive of popular poetry not so much as an unimaginative practice […] but as a social practice that works with the consent and shared consolation of a wider readership” (2007, 159). The First World War popular texts resound with the sound of burns flowing down Scottish mountains, the ubiquitous sheep and Lavrock (or lark) or the occasional bagpipe echoing through the glen. MacKenzie MacBride’s “Shouther Airms!” is typical of such naive yet patriotic exaltation:

And for field whaur lav’rocks wing,
For the braes whaur burnies sing,
We will shouther airms.
We the Border laddies stoot,
Frae whaur rang the clash of steel
And fires flashed frae crag and peel,
When oor clans cam’ oot.
Hielan’ lads we are wha ask
That you spare oor Gaelic tongue,
And oor hames the glens among,
And we’ll dae the task!
All together—
Kissens all o’ Tamson’s’ race,
Only gie’s a Scottish lilt,
Only gie’s oor pipes and kilt,
And the deil we’ll face!
(Goldie, Watson 38)

The poem combines nature’s song and Scottish clichés in a melody that is made to sound Scots, though artificially so. Were it not written about the First World War, the text might be judged as a caricature of bardic poetry on the battle field owing to the anaphoric
constructions and the binary rhythms within parallel structures which reinforce its oral, sing-song aspect. The Scottish spelling of familiar words is, moreover, conscientiously used and so are well-known traditional Scottish words such as “glen,” “kilt” and “pipe,” giving the text an accented lilt indeed, but a thoroughly well-behaved one, which matches its peaceful over traditional pastoral setting. The poem, however, is not and does not claim to be dedicated to Scottish sounds and pastoral. These commonplace are merely what David Goldie would describe as “tropes” whose aim is to sweeten the experience of war (2007, 171) and perhaps also to exhort the soldiers, implying that they are doubly fighting for Scotland, both as an area of the United Kingdom but also as a nation itself, a nation which is no longer divided between Gaeldom and the borders, and which will gain more independence provided its men show their bravery in war. Hence the enthusiasm expressed by the accumulation of exclamation marks, the chorus and the waltzing trimeters.

4 Enthusiasm for the battle quickly wore thin, however, and as the sound of guns began to be heard, the memory of nature turned more nostalgic, either to sadder laments or to comforting lullabies whose accents are reminiscent of Presbyterian psalms. This is the case in John Buchan’s “On Leave”:

[]

If a’ the hills were graves
There was peace for the folk aneath
And peace for the folk abune,
And life in the hert o’ death...
Up frae the howe o’ the glen
Cam the murmur o’ wells that creep
To swell the heids o’ the burns,
And the kindly voices o’ sheep.
And the cry o’ a whaup on the wing,
And a plover seekin’ its bield.
And oot o’ my crazy lugs
Went the din o’ the battlefield.

(Goldie, Watson 7-8)

5 The poem is thematically close to Wordsworth’s “The Thorn” as the soldier sits on a cairn in the hills and mourns for his dead child and battle comrades. The persistent trimeters, however, unlike MacKenzie’s waltzing lilt, create a destabilising music as the ear misses what Derek Attridge calls “the reassurance of a fully-realised four-beat line” (92). Each line is individualised as an end in itself, erasing the feeling of continuity and liveliness of the poem and making it both more solemn and resigned to doom. Nature’s song is similarly subdued and hushed to a quiet, kindly murmur while the circularity induced by repetitions and rimes unites the dead and the living in a natural world turned into prayer: “Kneelin’ aside the cairn / On the heather and thymy sod, / The place I had kenned as a bairn, / I made my peace wi’ God” (Goldie, Watson 8). A prayer made all the more intimate by the occasional Scots words which mostly refer to body parts (“hert,” “heid,” “lugs”) or a more personal surrounding and experience:

I scarcely kenned for my ain.
I sleepit twae days in my bed,
The third I buried my wean.
The wife sat greetin’ at hame,
While I wandered oot to the hill,
My hert as cauld as a stane,
But my heid gaun roond like a mill.

(ibid. 6)

6 “The art of the intimate,” as Santanu Das calls it, also developed among those who were not just on leave but had stayed home. He argues that for them, “precise details become a mode of registering the war’s epic blasts” (2013, 19). Violet Jacob’s “The Field by the Lirk o’ the Hill” is a lament written for her son, Harry, who was killed at the Battle of the Somme, aged twenty-one. Her usual descriptions of Angus landscape focuses in this poem on one single field and a particular soundscape, the silence of the untended farm. It resounds through the accumulation of one-syllable words which slows the reading down owing to consecutive stresses, though the rhythm is basically trochaic, except in the haunting refrain whose anapests give the whole poem a dark, ghostly solemnity: “The yaird’s a’ weed, / And the fairm’s a’ still - / Wha’ll sow the seed / I’ the field by the lirk o’ the hill?” (Goldie, Watson 24). The silence is broken only by the all too human “shrill cryin’” of Whaups.

7 The word “crying” unites nature and man in a common audible grief that soon deteriorates into madness as the soldiers who returned are affected with shell-shock, which Peter Leese defines as “traumatic neurosis,” a response to “the stress and anxieties of urban, industrial societies” which were emphasized by the First World War “with its types of sickness, injury and mutilation” (2). The din of the battlefield which had started to make its way into the poems gradually replaces and distorts natural sounds and the traditional rimed common metre. Thus in W.D. Cocker’s “Storm Memories” (Goldie, Watson 19-20), the description of a tempest is slowly replaced by the evocation of an anti-Brontësque raging front as the sounds of “shattering waves,” “booming gale,” the “wails,” “sobs,” “howls,” “buffets” of the storm remind the persona of the “guns of Passchendaele” until the dripping of rain after the storm becomes the dripping of dying men’s blood and women’s tears in a final stanza where the common metre is threatened by two-beat-lines and the ghostly spondaic “drip, drip, drip,” which rimes with nothing but itself:

Drip, drip, drip,
Now we are counting the losses,
Drip, drip, drip,
Counting the wooden crosses.
And the wind in the firs and larches
Takes up the mournful tale.
Drip, drip, drip,
Lost hopes, lost years,
Drip, drip, drip,
Blood and tears,
O ridge of Passchendaele!

(ibid. 20)

8 The autotelic nature of this line draws the contours of a mind impaired by memories and reflects Freud’s repetition compulsion in which the subject is constantly haunted by nightmares leading back to his evil experience.

9 Santanu Das explains that “Along with nightmares, and tremors, the war issues of the British medical journal The Lancet reported cases of blindness and deafness, resulting from what the eyes and ears had witnessed” (2007, 73). This results in even further sound distortions. In R.W. Campbell “The Border Breed” (Goldie, Watson 13-15), the traditional pastoral representation of Scotsmen as good savages is distorted as the “man from the hills” becomes McSteele or “man of war.” Similarly, the apparently mimetic “shrieking
shrapnel” impairs their hearing so that guns are described as singing (“When the song of the guns had ended”) and language is finally renounced, to be replaced by meaningless onomatopoeia as “dumb” may be heard in the “zipping dum-dum Hell” and as “ranged” men “riddled” with bullets become unrecognisable riddles. Lack of logic is completed as “speak” is made to rhyme with “shriek,” “well” with “hell,” “hill” with “kill,” nature only “echo[ing] the weird death-shriek.” The process further accelerates as the Great War leaves the way to World War II.

2. Hijacking pastoral sounds: from city life to human pain in World War Two poetry

While British ground remained relatively undamaged during the first conflict, the air raids of the Second World War were devastating for the countryside, but also, and especially for the cities. War poetry was thus partly transferred. It should also be noted that England, rather than Scotland, became the centre of these new cityscapes, not only because its cities were much more heavily bombed than Scottish towns, but also perhaps because, among some poets, there grew a sense of British unity owing to the deadly raids on a nation. This is exemplified in Naomi Mitchison’s “London Burning” (ibid. 150-151). Traumatic repetitions of World War One are now taken for granted as evidenced by the “London again, London burning again” refrain. Natural elements are no longer a source of comfort. While the river may first be looked upon as a savior providing water against the incendiaries (“We were lucky that time the incendiaries dropped in the river”), it remains silent, hushed up by the faltering rhyme “river/forever.” The whole poem is in fact written as a diary in free verse whose rhythm arises from strictly-timed everyday activities—all of which are associated with particular sounds—in a town doubly struck by war, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s “burning” waste land. Work in the office by day and the streets by night, under whistling bombs, are punctuated with “blitztalk,” Big Ben’s chime indicating curfew, the radio and military-like order to “get home, get in, get down,” Naomi Mitchison’s respelling of Eliot’s “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala.” There is cohesion in such rhythm, in automatic, repetitive words, noises and gestures. Yet larger coherence, the meaning of life, has disappeared, as is epitomised in unlinked, unfinished sentences such as “there is no... There is no library,” and a text which starts in medias res and ends on an implicit allusion pointing to annihilation and death: “I, like Lot’s wife, like Whittington, turn again.”

Landscape changes on the battlefield, too, and the horror of the trenches are replaced by the desert, a natural waste-land created by war and a spiritual emptiness. A good example is Edwin Morgan’s “From the Divan” (ibid. 161-163). Antipastoral is present in this poem as description is first negated: “No northern mists envelop me, / there’s nothing but the silent metal.” Nature is then literally and literarily undermined owing to prosaic collocations such as “the pack of stars.” Then the sounds of nature are, in a way, hijacked: the word “land-mine” is itself an aberration as it contains the very element it destroys, while the stars are described as “dron[ing],” like mild bees, but they are in fact German planes and not actual stars. The discrepancy between language and the world it is meant to represent, is certainly linked with modernist innovations, but it also expresses a loss of innocence, a bond between man and nature which the war has broken forever. Confusion ensues which is reflected in the disjunction between lines and meaning and ultimately, a lack of sense:
[...] Tents are cheerful
with lights-out laughter but the round of things is the
night. On guard, I climb the water-tower. Strengthening
stars are thick in absolute black. Who ever mourned
the sun? A universe unbroken
mends man and the dark.[...]

(ibid.)

12 Mutism thus wins out, all the more so after the discovery of the Final Solution. Michael
Hinton’s “The Traveller” (ibid. 129-130) instrumentalises nature, almost making it an
accomplice in horror. Walden’s log cabin in the peaceful wood near the pond is parodied
in the mild description of the gas chamber, a “clean brick building [...] arranged / Among
the pine-trees, the toneless promise / Of shower-baths, the quiet closing / Of air-tight
doors.” What ought to have been a tranquil natural place, a silence inviting meditation,
turns into a cold hell of unspoken, unnamable suffering: “And when, pierced from within,
their worlds darkened, / The fake window, painted, was a new pain.” Silence had earlier
invaded the first tercet:

Dust rose up then from the bandaged feet, shuffling,
Loaded the verminous clothes. Silent, an upward river,
Their haste was the less because they were going to death.
(129)

13 In these very first lines, dust and vermin swallow up the bodies that are described as a
“silent, upward river,” a gross metaphor bluntly denying the positive symbolic values of
water as a purifying, life-giving element. Moreover, individuality is debunked by this
vision of a flow, of an indistinct mass of people led to total destruction. Similarly, bodies
are reduced to damaged parts and ghostly envelopes soon to be eaten up, namely
verminous clothes. The first two sentences, with their broken syntax, lack a proper
human subject: feet are shuffling on their own accord to a fatal destiny. Blunt, terse,
sometimes over-simplistic or awkward in its syntax, such is the language in this whole
poem, not only because its use by the Nazis as propaganda and justification demands that
it be desacralised and destroyed, but also because the poem describes a slowly drying up
stream of consciousness: “So spoke the traveller, and fell silent; a simple man. / His mind
was troubled; he had sought peace with words.” The ambiguity of the sentence adds to
the disquieting feeling as the common idea that words are swords with which to find
peace is debunked to be replaced by the poet’s having to fight against his own arms,
against himself, body and mind, as it were. In other poems, language destruction seems to
take the form of a noisy multilingual gobbledygook, which, however, turns into a form of
resistance.

3. Struggling against silence: new poetic forms

14 This is the case in George Campbell Hay’s “Esta Selva Selvaggia—This Savage Wood”
which resorts to English, French, German, Italian as well as Greek and Arab in a reflection
of a world war situation:

‘Haus kaput-maison finie
kaputcapito? familie.
Alles ist kaput. Compris?’
‘Er hat uns belogen he told us lies.’
‘Who wanted war? The poor man dies
in war. He threw dust in our eyes.’
Meaning and form are scattered in confusion while nature is only called upon to enrich a crude, injurious vocabulary through which the pastoral and its sounds are definitely desacralized. There is no longer harmony between man and beasts: soldiers are grotesquely transformed or insulted as animals, from dog to pig and frog with a climactic moth, *mite* in French, making a the pun on semite. This name-giving is not like a biblical act of creation but a cry of scorn and destruction. Further on, speech is disordered into a jungle of languages and a mosaic of comments which are juxtaposed, not linked. The different translations or pseudo translations are another subversion of the poem and create a tension towards excess or multiplicity of meaning, a carnival mirror of sense. Language is hence taut to the point of rupture, of hemorrhage, and an excess of meaning leads to meaninglessness: this poetry runs the risk of implosion. George Campbell Hay appears quite avant-gardist in this poem as his subversions suggest that modernity does not lead to harmony and emancipation but to destruction, meaninglessness and silence. Hybridization, however, together with a destructured, injurious language, is a form of impurity and struggles against Nazism as a perversion of modernity. The idea is dangerous enough to threaten the poem’s sense and certainly changes its music. Yet for poetry to survive, it needs to be thus reinvented, remodeled, given a different tone and voice in the vein of Adorno’s demand. The impulse can already be felt in pre-1945 poetry and takes on new forms which do not lead to but resist silence while being critical of their own status.

The question of form has already been studied but the discrepancy between rimed common metre, traditional song-like forms with end-stopped lines and a gradual destructuration of both lines and stanzas combined with blank verse leading to a more diary-like, conversational tone and then eventually stream of consciousness and fragmentation, deserves emphasis. This is evidenced in the comparison between MacKenzie MacBride’s and Michael Hinton’s texts. Poetic survival, however, requires more than these devices and a way of going round, of avoiding an impending doom, is through subversion, humour and polyphony. A good example which combines all these techniques is “Home Fleet” by Olive Fraser. Eclogue itself is a subversive mode, as it was used by Virgil in order to comment upon war. No wonder pastoral should be taken up to describe the post-war traumas of the First and Second World Wars. In Fraser’s poem, low burlesque turns a scene of woe into a joke as Biblical, Greek and military phrases and references are turned into agricultural and cooking considerations:

‘Cabbages for the R. A. F.!’
When to their Plate (no lesser there
Than ‘Ajax’ or bright ‘Exeter’!)
My cabbages’ hearts are vanished all
And I, their earthy admiral
Stay useless here, some voice will rise
From these poor stumps of argosies

(ibid. 118)
Till ‘Guns and cabbages’ still I hear
Victorious upon the year.

(ibid. 101)

17 The particularity of this poem should be noted. War humour is indeed well-known for depicting foreign armies in comically losing situations or for caricatures of their soldiers. The first instance may be looked upon as a form of catharsis while the second is a disarming humour, a humour which, to take up Umberto Eco’s phrase, kills death. Both are meant as a survival break outlet from moral tensions. Most of Fraser’s poem, however, consists in a self-parody or a parody of the civilians’ collective effort during the war. One interpretation would be that the poet is debunking the war-effort advertisements, implying that their aim is to help the civil morale more than anything else. Humour is thus a way of both avoiding censorship and providing an alternative for people’s morale. Fraser’s pastoral cacophony, however, takes on a much more positive sense if it is interpreted in the light of Freud’s definition of the “joke.” In this case, the censorship the poet is struggling with is her own and her readers’ difficulty to talk about and listen to the horrors of war and to face their rather powerless role as civilians. The joke relaxes tension and the energy which was used to deny or hide war is liberated and reinjected into the poem. Meanwhile, the transformation of the cabbages into soldiers and the farmer’s disguising as an admiral has a life force which provokes what Bakhtin would call carnivalistic laughter, which he describes as being “directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders.” He adds:

Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. Such is the specific quality of laughter linked to times of crisis and renewal. (qtd. in Sandner 127)

18 In terms of music the poem uses the common ballad rhythm though the alternation of 4-beat and 3-beat lines contradicts the logic by prolonging meaning when rhythmic expectations stop. This undermines a sense of rhythmical closure at the end of the poem. There are, moreover many diversions from the iambic rhythm with trochaic, rising or falling inversions for instance, and disturbing the overall sense of a rime scheme owing to slight shifts such as death/RAF. These subversive oppositions create tensions which are then fueled by a joyous polyphony of slogans, quotations and the different voices of the persona. The result is another reinjection of ingenium or life which turns the poem into an energetic mass, a powerful defence against outside violence done to poetry. Ridiculing propaganda with agricultural references, it proves poetic disobedience and resistance remain active and language is still able to lead to freedom.

19 In spite of destruction and trauma, poets and Scottish poets in particular manage to find a new voice for themselves creating what could be called the sound and the fury of pastoral. Sound, because though it almost falls silent during World War Two, nature may still be heard, albeit indirectly, in all poems, as a common bond, a sound one. Fury because it is sometimes forgotten among the impairing, horrifying noises and atrocities of war—but also because its energy and subversive power help poetry still resound.
Scotland has a great tradition of nature writing, but by the end of the 19th century, glens, bens, lochs, bracken and quiet clachans seemed to have become the essential props of any would-be Scottish author, solidly rooted in his homeland, as part of a made-up romanticized tradition. Since the First World War, however, many authors have been rejecting or trying to build the tradition anew. After a rapid overview of Gaelic, Scots and English nature writing, this article explores the particular roles of this tradition in World War I and World War II poetry, both in terms of theme and structure, focusing particularly on aural elements. It first shows the slow
degradation of nature’s sounds in the poems on the First World War – from nostalgic reminiscences, comforting memories or patriotic pleas to human cries in the din of guns. It then focuses on anti-pastoral and the impact the idea of a waste-land had on World War II poetry, considering how the sounds of nature can still be heard in a ruined world of bombed cities and human atrocities. A last part is dedicated to the new poetic forms authors try to create in order to struggle against silence and destruction, as well as to pastoral as a subversive form and the use of sonic “carnivalesque” and resistance.

Si la nature est, depuis longtemps, ancrée dans la tradition littéraire écossaise, les landes couvertes de bruyère, les montagnes brumeuses, les lacs et les villages dormants sont devenus un apanage traditionaliste, poncifs du terroir calédonien, que les auteurs contemporains rejettent ou tentent de recréer, notamment depuis la Première Guerre Mondiale. Après une étude rapide de ce que signifie écrire la nature dans la littérature d’expression gaélique, écossaise et anglaise du pays, cet article se penche sur le rôle thématique et structurel de la pastorale, et notamment de ses effets sonores, dans les poèmes des deux Guerres Mondiales. Il montre tout d’abord une dégradation sonore dans les textes de la Première Guerre, où les bruits de la nature, après avoir évoqué des souvenirs réconfortants ou nostalgiques et incité les soldats au patriotisme, ne reflètent plus que la douleur des hommes dans le vacarme des bombes. Il se tourne ensuite vers l’antipastorale, les effets de la terre gaste sur les poèmes de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale pour se demander si la nature peut encore se faire entendre dans un monde en ruine, de villes bombardées et d’atrocités humaines. Une dernière partie étudie les modes poétiques que les auteurs tentent de (re)créer pour lutter contre le silence et la destruction, dont la pastorale en tant que mode de subversion, le carnivalesque et la résistance sonore.

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