
AA MY MINDIN: MOVING THROUGH LOSS IN THE
POETIC LITERARY TRADITION OF SHETLAND

Roseanne Watt

Division of Literature and Languages
University of Stirling Scotland UK

*Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy*

September 2018

**UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING**



Abstract

Shetland literature is often defined by loss – the loss of language, of a way of life, of a place within time itself. Shetland writers have historically responded to this landscape of loss through a stringent need for the preservation of tradition. This thesis is an attempt to understand that response, and to frame my own creative practice in dialogue with this tradition, whilst trying to create something new within it. In particular I will discuss the influence of Norn on this narrative of loss, and how the language came to be framed in death has contributed to this atmosphere of loss and desire for preservation. The Shetland poet Robert Alan Jamieson has written eloquently and insightfully on these matters; as such, the bulk of this thesis is given over to a critical reading of his collections, with a view to understanding his response, and through this coming to an understanding my own. Part of this thesis is creative practice, and the films produced in that regard can be viewed online following instructions contained within; the final part of the thesis is a critical framing of this practice using the framework built by the thesis prior to that point.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, to my supervisors, Professor Kathleen Jamie and Dr Sarah Neely; your encouragement, knowledge, enthusiasm and kindness over the years has helped me gain confidence in my own abilities as a writer and filmmaker, allowing me to produce work which I am very proud of. I could not have asked for a better team to supervise this doctoral project; thank you.

Thanks also to the team at SGSAH and the AHRC who gave me this wonderful opportunity; especially Dee Heddon and Jude Henderson. Thank you for facilitating such a wide range of events where I could meet my peers and develop my skills as a researcher. It's been a blast.

Thanks to the staff in the Divisions of Literature and Languages and Communications, Media and Culture at Stirling University, whose teaching I have benefitted from since my undergraduate years. In particular, I would like to thank: Kevin MacNeil, my first creative writing tutor; for telling me that writing didn't have to be a hobby, and for being the first to publish my work in *These Islands, We Sing*. Your time in Shetland was brief, but it profoundly affected the course I would take when moving to the mainland for uni; I am so grateful for your continued generosity. Scott Hames, whose unending support throughout my time at Stirling University has been instrumental in ways it would take an entire other thesis to list; thanks for picking up that copy of *These Islands, We Sing* way back in 2012. To Chris Powici; your insight into the poetic craft has been utterly invaluable to me over the years; thank you for your generosity, your enthusiasm, your support and your conversations.

Thank you to Mark Ryan Smith and Brian Smith. Your scholarship, conversations and insights have been invaluable to the formation of this thesis.

Thanks to Stuart, for being just the best.

Huge thanks to my parents, Leslie and Anne; for being constantly supportive of me in all my creative ventures – even when those ventures are a bit bemusing. Dad; I promise I'll write you a poem that rhymes soon. Mam; thanks for liking poetry that doesn't always rhyme – you'll get your poem sooner than Dad will.

To my grandmother, Lexie, for being the finest and most generous storyteller, as well as the kindest person, I know. To Alfie Jamieson, for his fine Burra voice and tales from the far haaf. Your voices pretty much made my films for me; thank you.

To my friends, for being the sort of squares to spend summer after summer making funny, weird short films. Aidan, Cara, Mhairi, Lorcan, Chris, Harry, Marjolein, Joe, Katya, Willem. Let's go to the pictures.

To Maddrim; thank you for keeping the youth filmmaking bug going, over a decade later. You are brilliant, all of you, and I look forward to seeing your creations every year at Screenplay. Also, thanks for the nickname: Dr. Poet. We can say it and mean it for real now!

Thank you to Kathy Hubbard; an inspiration and role model, whose constant championing of local filmmaking over the decades is entirely responsible for the trajectory of my career so far. Thank you for never saying no to Maddrim's wildest whims, even when that meant potentially setting the Bonhoga Gallery on fire. Thank you for continuing to acquiesce to my wild schemings, still. And for providing the best picnic on the shoot for Raaga. Onward, kishie wife, we have more work to do, and I canna wait!

Thanks to Dr Mark Kermode and Professor Linda Ruth Williams; the best film festival curators we could have ever asked for, and our dearest friends. Thanks for laughing at the off-the-wall short films of some wacky Shetland youths; September will always be the best time to come home.

Thank you to Lynn Thomson; another kishie wife whose support I have cherished dearly – on Raaga, and throughout the entire PhD process. I can't wait for more kishie wife adventures together!

Thank you to all my SGSAH buddies, whose support and friendship has meant so much throughout these four years. A special shout-out to Lucie Whitmore, whose friendship I count as the most wonderful bonus to having undertaken this PHD.

Finally, I must acknowledge the Dogs of Academia, who were a constant delight throughout these four years. Lefvbre, whose presence at my supervisory meetings were always a delight. Liesel, whose love is abundant and willingly – if a little violently – given. Buddy; so tiny, so furious, so easily-kidnapped, whose love is a great honour to be bestowed upon a mere mortal. Birdie, who loves to be tucked in and whose photos always cheered me up on the harder days of PhDing. And Madra, who stole a bag of Maltesers from my desk and ate them on top of my laptop, thus destroying it beyond repair. Thanks for the lesson in backing up my files, I guess.

Declaration

I, Roseanne Watt, hereby declare that this work has not been submitted for any other degree at this University or any other institution and that, except where reference is made to the work of other authors, the material presented is original.

Roseanne Watt

Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements	2
Declaration.....	4
A Note to the Reader.....	6
Introduction	7
Chapter 1	16
Chapter 2	26
Shoormal: A Sequence of Movements	28
Archipelagic Spectres	34
Nort Atlantik Drift	42
Chapter 3	52
Conclusion	61
Bibliography.....	64

A Note to the Reader

This thesis involves assessment by creative practice.

To view the six films which accompany this research,
please go to the following website:

www.aamymindin.com

and enter the password:

'shoormal'

Introduction

The oldest Shetland dialect poem is a short verse called ‘The Unst Lay’¹. It is a curious piece, which seems to follow from the ‘Rúnatal’ – a verse of the *Poetic Edda*’s ‘Hávamál’ – in which Odin hangs himself from the world tree, Yggdrasil, in order to win the secret knowledge of the runes. ‘The Unst Lay’ draws from this scene, though its Christian imagery is far more amplified than in the original; the only remaining Odinic element is in reference to Yggdrasil, which in the ‘Hávamál’ verse is referred to as the ‘tree of which no man knows from where its roots run’². The result is a striking, and quite unsettling, piece of dialect poetry:

Nine days he hang pa da rötless tree
For ill was da fólk an göd was he;
A blöddy mett was in his side,
Made wi a lance at widna hide;
Nine lang nichts i da nippin rime
Hang he dere wi his naked limb,
Some dey leuch
Bit idders grett.³

The story goes that the fragment was first recorded in 1865 by a Shetlander called George Sinclair⁴. He passed it on to scholar and antiquarian, Arthur Laurenson, who in turn sent it to the German folklorist Karl Blind. In his letter to Blind, Laurenson wrote:

It is evidently a Christianised version of the Rune Rime of Odin from the Háva-mál, and is curious for the way in which the Rootless Tree of Northern mythology is confounded with the Cross. The second line is quite Christian, the fifth purely Pagan. The old woman who recited this was quite aware that the verses could not strictly apply to Christ. She knew in what points they differed from the Gospel, but she repeated them as she

¹Brian Smith, ‘The Unst Lay: Ancient Verse, or the Earliest Shetland Dialect Poem?’ Lecture, Scottish Society for Northern Studies, Edinburgh, 25th November, 2017, p.16

²Carolyn Larrington, *Trans. The Poetic Edda*, (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999), p.34

³Laurence L. Graham and John J Graham, eds., *A Shetland Anthology: Poetry from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, (Lerwick: Shetland Publishing Company, 1998), p.11

⁴Karl Blind, ‘Discovery of Odinic Songs in Shetland,’ in *Nineteenth Century*, 1879, pp.1091-1113, p.1092

had learned them [...] I am afraid this fragment is all we can now recover of 'The Unst Lay'. No doubt there was more, which, by time's attrition, has been rubbed away.⁵

I had already been captured by the poem's disquieting, elegiac imagery, but to learn that it reflected something of Shetland's ancient oral tradition was a deeply exciting prospect. By that point I had spent most of my academic and creative life navigating the rootless tree of Shetland's literary tradition; a tradition which, because of Shetland's unusual socio-linguistic history, has endured the monumental loss of its ancient literary canon. At last, here was a tangible survival from that canon; fragmented, yes, but fully translated. And what marvellous serendipity, too, that the earliest dialect poem should stem from a story about the divine acquisition of the written word. It was the kind of metaphor that, in any other narrative, I would have accused of being far too on the nose.

The poem's image of the rootless tree, though, struck me on a more personal level, for it bore an uncanny resemblance to a tree I had already written about; a raaga-tree⁶ which had washed up on the beach just down the road from my house. Over the years it became a strange presence there, commanding an almost fabled gravity, like the body of an ancient sea-monster. I found myself writing stories, poems and essays about this tree, attempting to get at the knot of its meaning, though never quite reaching it. It felt important, somehow; this uprooted tree in a treeless landscape. A line from 'Apo Da Bloo Djoob' by the Shetlandic poet Robert Alan Jamieson seemed to attach itself to the body of it: 'Da sie's da wye da wirlid kums tae wis'⁷. *The sea's the way world comes to us*. And was the world not once a tree? Then here was an old idea of the world, washed up on the beach where I had spent so much of my childhood. Reading 'The Unst Lay' for the first time, I had found that tree again, and its peculiar weight grew only heavier in my mind.

Then, last year, I received an email from Shetland Museum's archivist, Brian Smith, who had taken on the task of researching 'The Unst Lay' thoroughly. During this research, he had come across a short story I had written for An Lanntair's *Between Islands* project, which featured a fictionalised version of the raaga tree that so fascinated me. He wondered at the story's links to the poem from which I had taken my title, 'The Rootless Tree'. From this chance exchange came the most

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 'A tree that has been torn up by the roots and drifted by the sea.' James Stout Angus, *A Glossary of the Shetland Dialect*, (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1914), p.105

⁷ Robert Alan Jamieson, *Nort Atlantik Drift*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press Ltd., 2007), p.74

extraordinary revelation: ‘The Unst Lay’, he told me, was a hoax, the story of its origins nothing more than total fabrication⁸.

*

Kevin MacNeil notes in his anthology of Scottish island poetry, *These Islands, We Sing*: ‘The islands have ... produced and attracted an inordinate number of talented poets, and it is worth considering some further reasons for this happy circumstance.’⁹ These reasons, MacNeil surmises, are deeply tied to the island-geography’s inherent condition of liminality:

The edge is the point at which the known becomes the unknown, where everything can change, and do so quite completely. As with thrashing tide meeting solid land, the periphery is a place where opposites clash or converge, where creativity and danger are at their most alive. If Scotland’s islands are seen as remote, this is because of the way their perception is mediated through dominant, often indifferent, centres of power (which are themselves remote when viewed from an island context). Perhaps this sense of being ‘other’ so often foisted upon the islander is, in the end, a problem that can become a solution, in the artist’s hands at least. The islander’s sense of being removed from the heart of things (the centres of power, influence, visibility, enhanced opportunity) relates, I think, to the writer’s sense of being an observer as much as a participant.¹⁰

It is a convincing argument; liminality fosters an outward-looking literary perspective, which becomes a rich imaginative space for art to flourish within. MacNeil’s anthology is certainly testament to this theory, as is the fact that many of Scotland’s most celebrated poets were from or lived on islands; Edwin Muir, Sorley MacLean, Ian Crichton Smith, and George Mackay Brown being the most recognisable names in this regard.

It is a little uncomfortable, then, to note that of all these aforementioned poets, Shetland contributes none of equal renown. Hugh MacDiarmid is, perhaps, the closest name Shetland could claim, with the poet having lived on the island of Whalsay for seven years during one of the most productive points of his career¹¹. But MacDiarmid is hardly thought of as a Shetland poet by Shetlanders themselves, let

⁸ I return to this story in my thesis conclusion.

⁹ Kevin MacNeil, ed., *These Islands, We Sing*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), p.xxi

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ruth MacQuillan, “Hugh MacDiarmid’s Shetland Poetry,” in *Hugh MacDiarmid in Shetland*, ed. Laurence Graham and Brian Smith, (Lerwick, 1992), p.8

alone by those on the Scottish mainland¹². Whilst Scotland's northernmost archipelago may have significant cultural exports in its traditions of music and knitting, this is simply not the case with its literature. There's little improvement in the sphere of literary criticism, too; aside from the work of Mark Ryan Smith, Penny Fielding, Silke Reeploeg, Brian Smith and Lollie Graham, there are very few academic texts which engage meaningfully with Shetland literature. Even then, out of these aforementioned names, Mark Ryan Smith is the only one who offers a truly comprehensive study on the topic.

The Literature of Shetland (TLS henceforth) is, therefore, an important work of scholarship for this thesis, and indeed for the wider field of Scottish literary criticism. As Smith notes in his introduction, it is rare to encounter a reader who is familiar with any Shetland literature; 'writing from Shetland remains, to borrow the title of a Tom Leonard book, outside the narrative'¹³. Structured as a chronological overview of Shetland's recorded literary tradition, Smith's study allows the story of Shetland's literature to enter and become tangible within that narrative. Though he resists the idea of TLS being in any way a 'Shetland literary canon', Smith's study nonetheless elucidates an intriguing, shifting literary identity.

Shetland has no ancient literary canon. Following the loss of Norn, the Scandinavian tongue of the Isles, much of the old oral tradition could not be understood, passed on or recorded for the sake of posterity. This has had the curious result of Shetland's documented literature beginning, as far as current records state, only two hundred years ago; in 1811, with the poetry collection of Dorothea Primrose Campbell, closely followed by Margaret Chalmers in 1814. Over the ensuing two centuries, Shetland writing moved from Chalmers' patriotic celebration of Britain and empire towards something of a Norse identity 'renaissance', following the publication of Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate*¹⁴ in 1822. Dialect writing would emerge around the 1870s, though it would take the innovation of J.J. Haldane Burgess in the 1890s to really set its spark alight. By the twentieth century, the local tongue would come to take utmost precedence in the concerns of local literary circles, especially in the decades which followed the publication of Shetland's (and

¹² It is only in recent times that MacDiarmid's name has begun to re-enter the narrative of the Shetland literary tradition in modern anthologies, namely in Mark Ryan Smith's and Penny Fielding's *Writing the North* and Kevin MacNeil's *These Islands, We Sing*.

¹³ Smith, *TLS*, p.2

¹⁴ Smith, *TLS*, p.32

Scotland's) most long-lived literary magazine: *The New Shetlander*, which was first founded in 1947 and remains in circulation today.

The publication of *The New Shetlander* allowed a coherent Shetlandic literary identity to be articulated, which was facilitated by the rise of local media in general. Smith notes that a 'croft archetype' began to emerge in the ensuing years, which would become a touchstone image for many writers of the magazine. The symbol of the archetypal croft permitted writers to approach themes of change during a time when traditional values were thought to be in precarious balance with the destructive forces of modernity: 'crofts, and the people who live on them, are often faced with a changing world [...] the certainties of their communities are under threat'¹⁵. As Shetland writer, Malachy Tallack, notes in his review of Smith's study:

Indeed, what is striking about this period, particularly from the 1970s onward, is the degree to which [*The New Shetlander*] both tapped into and fed a genuine appetite for dialect writing in the islands. In print and in performance, poets were in real demand. It was a popularity that was linked to the general unease many felt in the early years of the oil industry. Fear of losing the dialect, fear of losing what was uniquely 'Shetland' about Shetland, fear of losing what Vagalund called 'da aald true wyse': poetry served to celebrate and to conserve those threatened things. It served as a marker of identity.¹⁶

The quotation from the poet Vagalund betrays the dichotomy which had been developing in the isles' literary psyche for quite some time; one which sited any 'authentic' vision of Shetland solely in the domain of the past, whilst modernity was branded a threat to this truest vision of Shetland. Charged by an ideology of preservation at its core, the result is a body of writing in which the older, pastoral world of the croft features far more than the era's changing industrial landscape.

In an article in *The Drouth*, Smith notes that Shetland writing diverges from what was happening on the Scottish mainland at this time, where a highly engaged literature was flourishing in response to the political and economic climate of Thatcherite Britain and the failed devolution referendum of 1979. He puts this difference down, largely, to the differing economic fortunes of Shetland and mainland Scotland, arguing that the work of writers like James Kelman and Tom Leonard emerged 'from working class communities which suffered badly in the eighties and nineties. Their work is so potent because it puts those communities into

¹⁵ Ibid, p.92

¹⁶ Malachy Tallack, "Northern Lights," *Scottish Review of Books*, August 2014

the literary world¹⁷. Shetland, on the other hand, was ‘getting enormously wealthy from North Sea oil’¹⁸. It would seem that in the wake of this sudden economic boom, class identity became something far less tied to income and much more a matter of *heritage*. By looking to the past for subject matter, Shetland writers of this era were able to sustain a sense of identity that had been entirely disrupted by the drastic changes going on in their present; a continuity which found its strongest link to the past in the dialect, Shætlan¹⁹.

It is this need to strengthen the integrity of local identity first and foremost which aligns with what Faroese scholar Bergur Rønne Moberg has come to define as ‘the literature of the ultraminor’. Departing from Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of ‘minor literature’, where works of literature are written in a major language from a marginal position, the ‘ultraminor’ occupies a space where literature is produced

within a distinct but small language community, very much based in a specific territory. Far from deterritorialising a hegemonic class or culture, an ultraminor literature may be used to create or bolster the community’s territorial integrity.²⁰

This concept of the ultraminor offers the chance to define the literature of small cultural spaces with far greater acuity than previously offered by the term ‘minor literature’. In Shetland’s case, it also offers an explanation as to why its literature has not comfortably integrated into part of a recognisable, wider Scottish literary tradition as other ‘Scotlands’ have. As Michael Gardiner puts forward in *Modern Scottish Culture*, Scotland is identifiably a minor nation with a minor literature, where it ‘always has to become in the face of a more powerful being’²¹, an idea reflected in Cairns Craig’s conception of the Scottish literary tradition in *Out of History*, where ‘peripheral’ literatures are assimilated into ‘the core culture’ of the English literary tradition²². The most predominant feature of a minor literature is in how ‘language

¹⁷ Mark Ryan Smith, ‘Words on an Island’, *The Drouth*, Issue 51, p8

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Throughout this thesis, I will use the terms ‘Shetlandic’, ‘Shætlan’ and ‘the dialect’ interchangeably.

²⁰ Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch, “Introduction: Defining the Ultraminor,” *Journal of World Literature* 2, no. 2 (2017) pp.135-136

²¹ Michael Gardiner, *Modern Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) pp.1-2

²² Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996)

is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialisation.²³ Or, in other words, ‘to be minor is to take a major voice, and speak it in a way that expresses your preferred identity.’²⁴ This is a literature that gains collective value from its subversive and political qualities; the ultraminor, on the other hand, will often derive most of its value solely within the local community from which it originates.

It is within this theoretical framework that this thesis moves, building on the ground opened up by scholars such as Smith, Craig, and Moberg, as well as Brian Smith, Michael Barnes and Yasemin Yildiz (soon to be discussed). Where Mark Ryan Smith’s approach is necessarily all-encompassing, my own shall employ a narrower lens, engaging with one particular aspect of the Shetland literary tradition: how the loss of Norn and lack of an ancient literary canon has resonated throughout the poetic literary tradition, and the implications this holds for the creation of poetry within this situation. It is from this question, and the discoveries I’ve made in addressing it, where I derive the thematic mortar of my creative practice.

Chapter 1 details the history of Norn within the Shetland literary tradition, and how the loss of Shetland’s ‘original mother tongue’ contended with the developing dialect literature of the time. It is important to stress that this thesis will not be engaging with the Norn language as a linguistic subject, nor any of the debates which surround it in this sphere. The ‘when, what and how’ of Norn’s death is an arbitrary matter to the subject at hand; rather, it is the manner in which the loss of Norn has been framed by scholars, editors and writers over the last few centuries which is of most interest to us here, and how this may have shaped attitudes towards the modern Shetland dialect, especially as a literary language. The scholarship of Faroese philologist Jakob Jakobsen is of particular interest in this chapter, and the subsequent work of Brian Smith and Michael Barnes in challenging some of the ideas put forward by him.

In Chapter 2, we turn to the work of contemporary Shetland poet, Robert Alan Jamieson, and examine in detail how he actively negotiates with his literary and linguistic inheritance of loss and absence within what he calls the ‘linguistic wasteland’ left by Norn’s death. ‘Negotiates’ is a key term here, for Jamieson is constantly grappling with a linguistic heritage caught in the flux of dialect and

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p.16

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.54

English. What Jamieson strives for in both of his collections is akin to what Yasemin Yildiz calls writing ‘beyond the mother tongue’.

The idea that a writer can possess only one ‘mother tongue’ results from what Yasemin Yildiz has come to term ‘the monolingual paradigm’, wherein ‘individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue’, and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation’²⁵. Monolingualism established itself as the natural norm across Europe in the late eighteenth century, effectively casting those who spoke and wrote in multiple languages as ‘a threat to the cohesion of individuals and societies’.²⁶ The result of this is ‘a disavowal of the possibility of writing in non-native languages or in multiple languages at the same time’.

Despite these problematic aspects of the mother tongue, Yildiz argues there is little point in trying to avoid use of the term, for its effects are already embedded in culture. Instead, she cites the ‘need to *work through* the mother tongue and not simply sidestep its force.’:

Viewed from this vantage point, writing ‘beyond the mother tongue’ does not simply mean writing in a nonnative language or in multiple languages. Rather, it means writing beyond the *concept* of the mother tongue.²⁷

The ‘mother tongue’ is an enduring idea, and in the Shetland context it has particular resonance. Without a doubt, the dialect is considered the reigning mother tongue of isles; there is even an active Facebook group which calls itself ‘Wir Midder Tongue’, dedicated entirely to the discussion of Shaetlan.

Like many a minority vernacular, Shetlandic has endured shifting fortunes over the years, and anxieties around its survival are never far from being stoked into a frenzy. As far as its literature is concerned, however, it can really only be considered one of the greatest Scots success stories, at least in as far as sheer output goes. As Mark Ryan Smith notes:

For nearly a century and a half, Shetland dialect writing has had an accepted place in local culture. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of books, featuring the language. There are several dictionaries. There are dialect lessons in schools. And there is a journal, the *New Shetlander*, where dialect writers will always find an open, encouraging platform for their work.

²⁵ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). p.2

²⁶ Ibid, p.6

²⁷ Ibid

For many Shetland writers, the idea of the 'mother tongue' is one that bolsters an authentic sense of identity, as well as a sense of belonging to a particular place. Jamieson's approach and Yildiz conception of writing beyond the mother tongue is thus exciting for my own creative practice, for it charts a path through the literary tradition's pervasive narrative of linguistic loss through embracing both dialect and English as poetic equals.

In Chapter 3, I explore how a burgeoning cinematic dimension to Shetland's literature has come into play in recent times, nurtured by the annual Screenplay Film Festival's championing of local filmmakers. The validating power of a minor cinema behind an ultraminor literature is an important consideration for the future vitality of the literary tradition. In this chapter, I provide a critical framing of my own creative practice of film-poems and portraiture; building from Jamieson's ideas surrounding memory, imagination and the linguistic wasteland, I reimagine this space on film as a 'wilderness' wherein the literature can be 'rewilded'.

Chapter 1

The Rootless Tree:

Norn, Dialect and the Shetland Literary Tradition

It would seem that Shetland's limited literary history has not gone unchecked; in the 1930s, Hugh MacDiarmid (bombastically) proclaimed Shetland to be

a Brobdingnagian country peopled by Lilliputians, and [...] one is burdened by a sense of the fact that not one of its people throughout all the centuries of human history has ever achieved expression on a plane of literary value whatever [...] It is amazing that the Shetlands should have given us no poetry... no poem that is worth a minute's notice and nothing of any value at all in any of the arts.²⁸

Whilst there is a clear intent to provoke with these comments, MacDiarmid's 'amazement' is, perhaps, not entirely unfounded. There is indeed very little in the way of an ancient, native Shetland literature, and MacDiarmid's knowledge of the Celtic bardic canon would have made this relative lack seem quite stark. However, what MacDiarmid does not seem to recognize here is that the loss of the ancient canon was not because it wasn't worth preserving, but rather that socio-historical circumstances lead, inevitably, to its decline.

Another writer who was similarly underwhelmed (and similarly damning) of Shetland's literary output was the Faeroese novelist, William Heinesen. Unlike MacDiarmid, however, Heinesen explicitly links the loss of 'old norms' to 'the slippery slope that made the Shetland Islands and the Orkneys so strangely culturally faceless and lifeless'²⁹. It is the fact that the 'old norms'

²⁸ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland: Hebrides, Orkneys, and Shetlands*, (London: B.T Batsford, 1939) p.88

²⁹ William Heinesen, 'Færøsk folkekarakter. Nogle tanger og strejftog.' Trans. Bergur Rønne Moberg, (Tórshavn: The Family Archive, 1942) p.107

survived in Faroe that leads Moberg to state that ‘the Faroese have developed into a more dynamic literary culture compared with our neighbors [Shetland and Orkney]’³⁰. Though semantically vague, the ‘old norms’ which Heinesen and Moberg refer to are most likely the native languages of both archipelagos. That Heinesen attaches value to a literary tradition’s longevity is significant; to him, the loss of Norn meant that Shetland’s literary tradition had essentially been cut off at the root, with dire consequences for its continued growth.

Whether or not this a fair way to assess the health of a literary tradition is a discussion for another chapter; what is of most interest to us here is how this *perception* of rootlessness influenced attitudes towards Shetland’s developing literature of the time. This chapter takes a brief, critical look at the subject of Norn in its historical literary context; examining how its loss was framed by editors and scholars within Shetland’s literary scene, and the shadow this cast over the developing dialect movement within that scene. Critically, then, the following analysis centres not on what Norn was or could have been, but rather what Norn’s *absence* means for the story of Shetland’s literary tradition. To investigate this, we must look directly to the main protagonist in this story; the Faroese philologist, Jakob Jakobsen.

*

Norroena, or Norn, was a language of the Northern Isles that evolved in the islands from the early Viking settlers in the ninth century, superseding the language (or languages) of the Pictish inhabitants. Norn as a living, spoken language is completely extinct, with the last native speaker alleged to have passed away in 1850³¹. The reasons given for Norn’s death are largely speculative; certainly a complex array of factors were at play during its demise. Historical circumstance is often cited as a major force undermining the survival of Norn, when Shetland was pledged from Scandinavia in 1469 as a

³⁰ Bergur Rønne Moberg, “The Ultraminor to Be or Not to Be: Deprivation and Compensation Strategies in Faroese Literature,” *Journal of World Literature* 2, no. 2 (2017)

³¹ Smith, *TLS*, p.11

dowry gift to the Scottish King James III. As it was, the ensuing centuries saw Shetland becoming ‘ecclesiastically, legally, politically and linguistically Scottish’³².

The death of living patrons of the language, paired with low literacy rates, meant much of the oral tradition could not be understood, passed on or recorded for the sake of posterity. Very little is known about the songs, poems and stories of ancient Shetland, although the handful of fragments that have survived into translation certainly hint at a vibrant oral tradition. As far as the extant corpus goes, the ‘Hildina Ballad’ is the most complete survival of these fragments. It is a traditional ballad, collected on the island of Foula in 1774 by a minister called George Low³³. Consisting of thirty-five four-line stanzas, the ballad is a gory narrative of love and revenge between the ruling classes of Orkney and Norway. Another tantalizing glimpse into ancient Shetland literature is a broken song called ‘King Orfeo’, which details a Shetlandic version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Though it is written mainly in dialect, the verse contains ‘a fossilised fragment’³⁴ of Norn, suggesting it was preserved during a time of transition, probably when the Norn language was no longer understood. Scholars have since translated the fragment, which forms the ‘chorus’ of the ballad: ‘Skowan örla grön, Whaar gjorten han grön oarlac’. This loosely translates to: ‘Early greens the wood, where the heart goes yearly’³⁵.

Whilst much of the syntax and grammar of Norn has been lost to time, a lexicon of over ten thousand words does still survive to this day. This is thanks almost entirely to the work of Jakob Jakobsen, a Faroese philologist who carried out meticulous fieldwork in Shetland from 1893 to 1895. Jakobsen’s research culminated in a variety of publications on the topic, including a two-volume dictionary titled *The Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*³⁶. During his time in Shetland, Jakobsen recorded every single

³² Ibid, p.5

³³ Ibid, p.4

³⁴ Ibid, p.240

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jakob Jakobsen, *The Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, (AMS Press, 1985), p.16

remnant of the Norn language he could find, which eventually amounted to ten thousand individual Norn words, as well as a great many ‘fragments’ of Norn texts. Whilst there were many published outcomes of his research, according to the linguist Michael Barnes, his ‘doctoral thesis, the place-name volume and the dictionary can without a doubt be classed as landmarks in the history of Scandinavian philology’³⁷. Indeed, it is impossible to engage with the Shetland literary tradition in any meaningful way and not encounter Jakobsen’s work in some form; his scholarship has had profound influence over some of the finest poets in Shetland’s linguistic and literary circles, including the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, William J. Tait and Robert Alan Jamieson.

It is because of Jakobsen’s meticulous, remarkable scholarship that thousands of Norn words have survived oblivion. It is only relatively recently that some of Jakobsen’s methods have been called into question. In the summer of 1993, a conference was held in Lerwick to celebrate the centenary of Jakobsen’s arrival in Shetland. Two papers were presented at this conference which went some way in challenging the reverence which many had attached to Jakobsen over that last century; Michael Barnes’ ‘Jakob Jakobsen and the Norn language of Shetland’, and the aforementioned Brian Smith’s ‘The development of the spoken and written Shetland dialect: a historian’s view’. Both papers called into question aspects of Jakobsen’s scholarship which had gone underexamined; his conception of language death, for example, and his tendency to think of Norn as a language whose Scandinavian identity was being corrupted by Scots influence, as well as his tendency to use ‘Norn’ and ‘the dialect’ as interchangeable terms.

Smith, in particular, was concerned for the impact this might have had on the modern dialect. In examining the influence of Jakobsen’s research, he notes that the timing of Jakobsen’s arrival in Shetland is an important aspect to consider:

³⁷ Michael Barnes, “Jakob Jakobsen and the Norn Language of Shetland,” in *Shetland’s Northern Links: Language and History*, ed. Doreen J. Waugh, (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1996), pp.1–15

During the 1880s and early 1890s Shetland changed utterly. For two centuries Shetlanders had been forced to kow-tow to their landlords, and had been bound in perpetual debt to merchants. Now, in a matter of a decade or so, national legislation (the Crofters Act) and market forces (in the shape of the Scottish herring fishery) had emancipated them. In 1889 and 1892, just before Jakobsen arrived, 2000 Shetlanders applied to the Crofters Commission for fair rents, and during the hearings they spoke at length, sometimes in dialect, about the unpleasant things that had been happening in the islands for so long. Jakobsen walked into a society which had just become free, and which was violently disaffected from its own modern history.³⁸

Shetlanders were extremely accommodating to Jakobsen's Norn quest, and he became, both during his stay in Shetland and thereafter, an extremely popular figure³⁹. Barnes notes that 'Jakobsen's publications on Norn were well received by his contemporaries – specialists and lay people alike'⁴⁰, suggesting that his research had great reach and influence within the general Shetland populace of the time. Yet, whilst Jakobsen was treated with great reverence amongst Shetland folk, Smith notes that:

....some aspects of his work had a less happy result here. Jakobsen was the Faroese patriot par excellence ... [He] thought that Shetland was less well-endowed. In particular, he believed that the language that he heard in Shetland was the palest reflection of its Scandinavian cousins.⁴¹

There is certainly evidence of this attitude in Jakobsen's work. Take this example, for instance, from Jakobsen's popular 1897 publication *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland: Two Popular Lectures*:

³⁸ Brian Smith, "Wir Ain Aald Language: Attitudes to the Shetland Dialect since the 19th Century", in *Dialect 04: Two Day Conference and Public Debate on the Development of the Shetland Dialect*, ed. Shetland Arts Trust, (Lerwick: 2004), p.4

³⁹ Brian Smith, "The Development of the Spoken and Written Shetland Dialect: A Historian's View," in *Shetland's Northern Links: Language and History*, ed. Doreen J. Waugh (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1996), p.30–43

⁴⁰ Michael Barnes, "The Study of Norn," in *Forum for Research into the Languages of Scotland and Ulster*, (Orkney, 2009) p.34

⁴¹ Smith, "Wir Ain Aald Language", p.2

Less than 200 years ago there was a number of Norn ballads in Shetland. But they are all lost except one, which relates a strife between one of the earls of Orkney and the King of Norway. [...] These ballads or “Vissicks” (from O.N., *vísa*, song) were kept up for centuries to a great extent as accompaniment to dance, an old medieval dance, in which all the persons taking part joined hands and formed a compact circle on the floor, moving forward and keeping a certain time with the feet. There was no need of any musical instruments. A foresinger or precentor began every verse, and the others joined in, singing the chorus. This dance was not extinct in Shetland until the middle of the last century, about the same time that the Norn language in Shetland had got corrupted and began to get lost. And when the language got lost, the ballads were bound to get lost too. In Faroe this is almost the only amusement of the people at the present day, and it is through this ancient kind of dance, that the old Faroese ballads have been kept alive.⁴²

In this passage, Jakobsen relates in no uncertain terms that where Shetland failed in the preservation of tradition, Faroe had succeeded. This was a success which he explicitly tied to the survival of the Faroese language; a matter close to Jakobsen’s heart, and as fellow Norn scholar Gunnel Melchers notes, an issue which had profound impact on the way he viewed the predicament of Shetland Norn:

However, inspired by concern for his mother tongue, Faroese, being “swamped” by Danish, his research on Shetland was obsessed with the fate of Norn surrendering to Scots and English and could be seen as a “rescue operation”. He soon realized that he had come “at the eleventh hour if he was to be successful in saving what was left of the Norn language from passing unrecorded into oblivion”.⁴³

As well as this, Barnes notes that ‘In keeping with the climate of the times, [Jakobsen’s] approach was strongly historical. Even his efforts to promote

⁴² Jakob Jakobsen, *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland: Two Popular Lectures* (Lerwick: T. & J. Manson, 1897) pp.7-8

⁴³ Gunnel Melchers, “‘Nornomania’ in the Research on Language in the Northern Isles,” in *Language Contact and Development around the North Sea*, ed. Merja-Riitta Stenroos, Martti Mäkinen, and Inge Særheim (John Benjamins Publishing, 2012), 231–36, p.221

Faroese as a language capable of dealing with the demands of the modern world sprang in part from a veneration for its Old Norse origins’.

Jakobsen’s view that Norn was ‘corrupted’ by the Scots tongue, until it became what would now be considered the modern Shetland dialect, is one which Barnes and Smith are particularly critical of, pointing out it is a process of language death which has no historical precedent⁴⁴. Gunnel Melchers is more forgiving in her own assertion of Jakobsen’s approach to the language shift, citing:

It is true that Jakobsen describes the process as “steady and gradual”; however, when doing so, he is more often than not using the term “Norn” in the sense of “Shetland dialect”, which, as mentioned earlier, is unfortunate and confusing, but less objectionable as a description of what was going on in the language. It seems to me, in fact, that the Norn > Scots controversy in general is partly due to fuzzy and shifting terminology; Jakobsen’s varying and inconsistent use of “Norn”, “Norse”, “Scandinavian”, “Shetland dialect” and “Shetlandic”, for example, would provide data for a linguistic paper in its own right.⁴⁵

Under such a framework, Smith argues that it becomes easy to succumb to a phenomenon he terms ‘Nornophilia’: to romanticise Norn as the lost ‘Midder Tongue’ and view the modern Shetlandic dialect as the corrupted degenerate to an original, higher plane of vernacular⁴⁶. This was certainly the view of Danish linguist, Laurits Rendboe, who believed Norn survived far longer than Jakobsen had claimed it to, positing that Shetlanders had resisted the colonising influence of the ‘hated Scots’ language right up until the end of the 19th century⁴⁷. In his lecture at the 2004 Dialect Conference in Lerwick, Smith provided a revealing example of this ‘nornophilia’ playing out in the public sphere, too. In 1953, a Shetland expat living in Shropshire, William

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Smith, “The Development of the Spoken and Written Shetland Dialect: A Historian’s View”, p.30

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Sandison, published a book titled *Shetland Verse: Fragments of the Norn*, a poetry anthology which contained the work of around a dozen Shetland writers (none of whom actually spoke or wrote in Norn). Quoting from the preface, he writes:

In a few more decades, [the Shetland dialect] shall have reached its end, as nothing more than a corruption or mispronunciation of the English language. ... Those goodlyvowelled old words, those broad renderings of the modified 'a', and the modified 'o', showing, as they did, the kinship of the Shetland Norn with the Old Norse from which the Norn came, are now quickly dying out [...] Just as the strong tongue that Burns knew is dwindling down into the tawdriness of "Lauder" Scotch, so the tongue our ancestors cherished, is falling now, exhausted of its richness, into the grip of the humourists of the local press [...]

There is no wish to further any movement towards the Norn, in the way that a section of the Norwegian people are struggling to bring their modern language back to the old *Folksmaal*. Any such retrogressive movement is unthinkable, in the face of modern developments. Let such beauty as is gathered here stand as a mark, however slight, of what now is past; as a soothing, perhaps, to those who, against reason, must dream at times of olden things; and as a curiosity of etymology to those whose thoughts are purely scientific.⁴⁸

Smith points out that the contextual ironies here are manifold: Sandison's collection was put together during a time when dialect writing in Shetland was actually going through something of a renaissance, thanks to the first publications of *The New Shetlander* magazine. What is being lamented here is not reflected in the reality of Shetland's literary scene; rather, it amounts to little more than a fetishization of loss, and the inevitability of decline.

Yet, this was a myth that endured, and it is this romantic view of Norn as 'the lost mother tongue' which has led many to scholars to actively avoid engaging with Norn's resonance within the modern Shetland literary tradition. In both of Brian Smith's papers on the topic, he introduces Norn in a dismissive, almost impatient manner, as something to 'get out of the

⁴⁸ Smith "Wir Ain Aald Language" pp3-4

way⁴⁹. His view was that the popular understanding of Norn at the time was damaging to the literature of Shetland dialect, by distracting folk from its literary potential as a ‘peculiarly poetic language’⁵⁰. Mark Ryan Smith mentions the subject briefly in his introduction, but only in the sense of historical context-setting, providing it as an explanation for the ‘paucity of early literary work’ within Shetland. The merits of this approach are clear, and with proven precedent; Norn’s loss has certainly been devastating for the ancient legacy of Shetland’s literary tradition, but to wallow in this grievance achieves nothing but pessimism, bitterness and a skewed view of history. Surely it is better, then, to focus on what is alive in Shetland literature; to turn our attention to nurturing the present dialect in all its potential?

In certain respects, yes; in others, perhaps, not so much. As I have discussed already in this chapter, it is clear that Jakobsen’s research and critical framing of the Norn language has had profound reach within the Shetland literary community. It is important, then, as Melchers, Smith and Barnes remind us, to acknowledge that Jakobsen was an antiquarian, and his approach was primarily one which saw the Norn language as something antique, and therefore in desperate need of preservation. Yet, there is a lack of clarity in the terms Jakobsen uses in his research, and he often ends up implying that dialect and Norn are synonymous entities to his readership. This effectively frames the modern dialect within the self-same narrative of loss as Norn, and instills a similar need to preserve it from this fate. Whilst much has been done to reverse the attitude that the dialect is the corrupted inferior of a purer origin, this insidious narrative of loss is much harder to undo. In this respect, Norn’s death casts a long shadow over the development of Shetland dialect literature, for the result is a literary tradition perpetually haunted by the *memory* of a dead language.

This is a highly unusual linguistic state for a literature to emerge within, and the narratives which this has called into being should not go unexamined. The Shetlandic poet, Robert Alan Jamieson, is acutely aware of this linguistic

⁴⁹ Smith “A Historian’s View”, p.31

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.40

context, with both of his poetry collections examining aspects of this predicament of the modern Shetland dialect. As such, in Chapter 2 we shall examine his work in-depth, discussing the means by which Jamieson uses poetic form to chart a path through what he has come to term ‘the linguistic wasteland’ left in Norn’s wake.

Chapter 2

The Linguistic Wilderness: Negotiating tradition in the poetry of Robert Alan Jamieson

Robert Alan Jamieson holds a curious position within the Shetland literary tradition. Whilst he is certainly an experimental poet, his subject matter is rarely radical: most often, it is engaged with the importance of memory and dialect, predominantly examining themes of childhood and community – all subjects which are very much aligned with the concerns of the *New Shetlander* school of poets. Where Jamieson diverges from many of these poets, though, is in his approach to poetic form and linguistic structure, as well as in an acute, scholarly awareness of the historical, political and linguistic complexities at play within his inherited tradition. Drawing strength from these complexities as poetic subjects in their own right, Jamieson bridges something of the gap between established traditional subject matter and contemporary form.

Taking cues from Hugh MacDiarmid and William J. Tait, Jamieson has also invented his own orthography for the Shetland dialect that is utterly unlike that of any other Shetland writer's, and which captures something of the disparities between written and oral forms of dialect and English. Jamieson constructs his orthography from the linguistic tools available to him, using Jakobsen's *An etymological dictionary of the Norn language in Shetland* as a major resource, as well as the *Concise Scots Dictionary*⁵¹. The result is a written version of Shetlandic that is scattered with Germanic diacritics and Scandinavian phonetic constructions, and by such means Jamieson allows his text to be visually weighted by the presence of its Norse origins. This further emphasises the schism he perceives between the dialect's written and

⁵¹ Robert Alan Jamieson, "Da Saekrit Paetbank: Meditaesjins Apo a Sjetlin Poyit's Responsibieltie T'dir Middir Tung," in *Dialect 04: Two Day Conference and Public Debate on the Development of the Shetland Dialect*, ed. Shetland Arts Trust, (Lerwick: 2004), 56–62.

oral/aural forms: whilst most examples of written dialect conform to a structure within the parameters of English/Scots language phonology, there are sounds and subtleties in Shetlandic which cannot be accommodated for, and which a non-native reader will struggle to accurately comprehend. As Jamieson himself notes, with dialect writing using English conventions of spellings: ‘...hit wis læk dej wir a græt lokk o siekrit konvensjins atwien Sjetlin pojit an riedir, dat allood da lokil tung t’spæk trow da Engliesh forims.’ (p.59) (*‘...it was like there were a lot of secret conventions between Shetland poet and reader, that allowed the local tongue to speak through the English forms.’*). For native speakers of the dialect, then, the reading experience of Jamieson’s verse becomes an uncanny one: the sounds of Shetlandic are captured far more accurately in this orthography, especially those which are particular to Jamieson’s West Mainland accent, but upon the page the words appear foreign and nearly inaccessible. Jamieson’s orthography thus imbues his verse with something of a ‘lost knowledge’ of the glyphs and phonetics of Nordic languages, through making their invisible oral/aural presence visible in the written form.

During his writing career so far, Jamieson has published two full-length poetry collections: the first, *Shoormal*, in 1986, and the second, *Nort Atlantik Drift*, in 2007. With over twenty years separating each publication, the contrast between both collections is stark: *Shoormal* reads as the work of a young poet grappling with the complexities of what he perceives to be a broken literary inheritance; *Nort Atlantik Drift*, on the other hand, seems to be written by a poet who has long since resolved such conflicts, and whose preoccupations lie instead with the ‘now’ of the dialect, but which are nonetheless disturbed by an undercurrent of ‘silence’ which runs through the entire collection. *Nort Atlantik Drift* has received much wider critical reception and attention than *Shoormal* has, which is in part due to the more accessible, familiar terrain of the former’s subjects, and the fact that Jamieson supplies English ‘translations’. However, it is only through the critical examination of each collection on *equal* terms that we can chart Jamieson’s

path through the complex space of his local tradition, and the resolutions he comes to within it.

Shoormal: A Sequence of Movements

Shoormal is a collection that is openly conscious and questioning of the tradition it occupies. Whilst at the 2004 Dialect Convention in Lerwick, Jamieson revealed that much of the collection was driven by the motivation to ‘do something different’ with the dialect, after having read an anthology of Shetland writing which to him seemed ‘owir Engliesh in hit’s forims an aftin owir Sjetlin in hit’s subchek’ (though he wryly concedes that this ambition may also have basis in the ‘følish konfiedins o jooth’⁵²). Consisting of 34 poems that turn in tidal movements between Shetlandic and English, *Shoormal* seeks to explore what Jamieson calls ‘the matter of linguistic vitality’⁵³

In its phrasing and vocabulary, a language reflects the particular character of its native speakers. As Shetland lost its Norse culture, words which contained in their very sound and syllabic structure strong clues to the philosophy and temperament of their makers have passed from memory. ‘Vital wirds’, in the sense that they have no foreign substitute – ‘vital wirds’, in that they reflected the peculiar vitality of those who formed them.

The result for many is the form of a wasteland. The new language is not natural to the tongue, the old is forgotten. Without a vital means of verbal expression, which is not elitist or alien, reticence and inferiority abound. (p17-18)

This line of thought has much in common with the writing of Hebridean poet Iain Crichton Smith, who Jamieson cites as an important influence on his writing. Crichton Smith also grapples with the idea of language death in many of his poems and essays, such as in his prose-poem ‘Am Faigh a Ghaidhlig Eas?’ (*‘Shall Gaelic Die?’*), stating simply: ‘Am fear a chailleas a

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Robert Alan Jamieson, *Shoormal*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986) p.12

chanain caillidh e a shaoghal.’ (*He who loses his language loses his world.*)⁵⁴. Here, Crichton Smith imagines the loss of Gaelic being so complete and irrevocable that it brings about a total cultural amnesia, where all previous frames of reference have been destroyed. In the case of Norn’s loss, though, Jamieson argues that it is *access* to the world it once held which has been wholly denied; the loss is not an absolute one, for knowledge of its existence remains within the new language, but its ‘linguistic vitality’ has long since faded into utter amnesia. For Jamieson, it is important to emphasise that an inheritance of absence is still an inheritance of *something*; the loss of an older language is not the same as never having had a language in the first place. Jamieson’s metaphor of a linguistic ‘wasteland’, then, is key to understanding Shetland’s cultural inheritance of absence, for it describes a place of detritus: absent of life, hostile to new growth, constantly bearing witness to its own losses – but, a presence within a landscape all the same. It is in this metaphysical space which the poems of *Shoormal* move and resonate.

Jamieson’s aim with *Shoormal* is to document what he observes to be the state of flux which the dialect has entered, and believes that ‘the way ahead’ for the literary tradition lies in an understanding that there can be such thing as balance ‘comprised of polarity’:

In order to offset the negative mood of inferiority, the full flood of English must be mastered and accepted [...]; yet it must never be allowed to break the thread of belonging. While accepting the full flood, that belonging must simultaneously be strengthened and celebrated with a fresh bloom of culture, till its growing magnetism reverses the flow. There must be pride, but no flags; strength, but no aggression; power, but no greed; all counterbalanced by an international awareness grounded in humanism.

To capture this idea of the balance of polarity, Jamieson begins the collection with an epigraph, quoting the first stanzas from both Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘Water of Life’:

Wha looks on water and’s no’ affected yet

⁵⁴ Iain Crichton-Smith, *Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1995)

By memories o' the Flood, and faurer back,
O' that first flux in which a' life began,
And won sae slowly oot that ony lack
O poo'er's a shrewd reminder o the time
 We ploutered in the slime?

And Edwin Muir's 'The Original Place':

*This is your native land.
By ancient inheritance
Your lives are free, though a hand
Strange to you set you here,
Ordained this liberty
And gave you hope and fear
And the turning maze of chance.*

These references to Muir and MacDiarmid wilfully brings a schism into play from the very start of the collection. Both were infamous antagonists when it came to the 'Language Question' in Scotland; Muir surmised that 'Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English', a statement which followed from his belief in a 'disassociation of sensibility' caused by how 'Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another'⁵⁵. MacDiarmid, on the other hand, espoused and championed the revival of Scotland's minority languages, especially in their literary spheres, and fashioned his own synthetic form of Scots; a patchwork language that sought to represent a national identity made up of its different component parts⁵⁶. Jamieson's reference to both notorious strains of argument sets up the space of the schism his collection will come to occupy, where both Shetlandic and English language poems are brought together between its pages, adding further depths to Jamieson's titular metaphor of the shoormal⁵⁷. The cited quotations from the specific poems put forward this notion in literary terms: both poets are in opposition ideologically, yet both verses are linked thematically through their preoccupation with origin.

⁵⁵ Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982) p.81

⁵⁶ Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid*, (London: Paladin, 1990) pp.389-392

⁵⁷ 'the space between the tides where the moon weighs the density of the ocean: in this instance, a symbol for the flow and ebb of the local dialect.' *Shoormal*, p.11

For Jamieson, moving forward constitutes something more nuanced than the binary arguments that had thus far dominated the dialect/tradition debate. What he offers is not so much a compromise as it is a Janus-like approach to tradition, where neither the present nor the past are given precedence over the other, but rather posits that both should exist in a balance of continuity, and thus ensuring the future's prosperity. This framework of continuity rallies against reading the past as a simple, linear narrative, and seems to foreshadow Cairns Craig's own theory of 'simultaneity' for the wider Scottish tradition. In *Out of History*, Craig surmises that Scots should resist definitions of being 'in a temporal hierarchy defined by historical progress,' seeking instead values which are 'outside of history as we define it: not *after* history, or *before* it, but *beyond* it'⁵⁸. It is necessary, instead, to recognise 'the most banal feature of our ordinary lives ... and that is simultaneity: not simply that events happen simultaneously in the space around us, but are happening simultaneously in the space that is our own bodies'⁵⁹.

That said, Jamieson follows his optimistic proposal with something less hopeful:

It is my hope that *Shoormal* will be read and understood as a sequence of movements and that its existence may somehow strengthen the fraying thread of today.

In terms of 'linguistic vitality', and on the personal level as I have explained, *Shoormal* is shifting sand in the tide; my own belonging began before I knew of language, and widens with the flow. But in the shoormal are many folk; drawn to the deep sea but yearning for dry land, as the tides move about them, the fluid of Glunta⁶⁰, while they hesitate to speak, seeking a forgotten word, spluttering an expletive. It is in this situation that the metaphorical sense which Jakobsen attributes to 'sjurmol' is most fitting: that of a dilemma.

It is on this slightly more pessimistic note that Jamieson concludes his introduction to *Shoormal*. The thread of continuity is still 'fraying', even with these efforts of counterbalance. If language is the tether to a sense of

⁵⁸ Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, p224

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.221

⁶⁰ the moon (haaf-language)

belonging, to belong to the shoormal is to belong to a ‘dilemma’, for ultimately the shoormal is an entropic space, a wordless lived experience, and those caught up in it cannot anchor a sense of identity or chart a forward trajectory. It is this dilemma that the poems of *Shoormal* must navigate through in order to find a stable literary identity and tradition, and Jamieson’s approach to this is constituted by two distinct spheres of investigation: the dialect and its relation to a (lost) Scandinavian linguistic identity, and the relationships the local tradition has within a wider, archipelagic literary context.

Shoormal is certainly an interesting reading experience. As Smith notes: ‘Even for someone used to reading Shetlandic, it is very challenging indeed.’⁶¹ . This is asserted from the opening poem of the collection, ‘Avunara’, where the reader is immediately forced to navigate a new and strange linguistic world:

Fae dis graet ledi I’ll lukk dy glureks,
 Skorpnin saat apo dy face,
 Scravlin, lurrin da boo o wyrds
 Apo dy tongue, norard t’Norn.

Dis goglit spaek, lackin da vynd
 T’lowse dy hert fae ledli toons o døl,
 Quhar avunavara rins dy glumpsin jaas
 Wi wyrds o iddir lands.⁶²

The positioning of this poem at the start of the collection is deliberately meant to destabilise the reader, but not all the poems in the collection are quite so packed with obscure Shetlandic words; indeed, Jamieson immediately follows ‘Avunara’ with an English poem (albeit with the Shetlandic title ‘I Da Hert o Da Stonn’). But Jamieson himself concedes that the ‘impenetrable’ nature of the verse was very much intended when writing the collection:

In a lok o [*Shoormal*’s] pojims, da langwiech is kynda unriedibil. Bit
 in a wy dat wis da pojint I wis makkin – dat da graet sjims o histrie

⁶¹ Smith, *TLS*, p216

⁶² Jamieson, ‘Avunara’, p23

furt o dis pierie gaddirie o land itada nort atlantik, dir kynda med da past unriedable t'wis. We dønna hae da wrytin o wir foarbærs bakk mær as twartree hundir jier, an if we did we widna, forby twaartrie spesjilists be aebil t'makk mukkil o it. Quhit we dø hae is fir da mæst pært choost da Norn-studdit Skots an English wrytin o da last kuppil o hundir jier. In Shoormal, I wis t'sum ikstent enaktin dat, in da impenietribil forims da poyims sumtymys took.⁶³

It is perhaps something of a disservice to the collection in calling these poems wholly 'impenetrable' or 'unreadable'. The aim to enact the unfathomable nature of Shetland's literary past is certainly an effective and dominating experience upon a first reading of *Shoormal's* verse, but it is one which does not stand up to repeated reading. Arguably, the effort required to decipher the poems of *Shoormal* even heightens the reading experience of the collection: by allowing the reader to divulge the meaning of the more obscure dialect words through a supplied glossary, Jamieson emulates, on a psychological level at least, what it would be like to come to know that fabled 'linguistic vitality' of Norn, even if it is at one remove from the real thing.

Take, for instance, how Jamieson highlights his use of the fisherman's tabu-word 'glureks' for eyes (rather than 'een') in the glossary. The tabu language of Shetland fisherman (also known as the haaf-language⁶⁴) is thought to have stemmed partly from the belief that whilst the land may have become hallowed by Christianity, the sea remained a space in which older gods and spirits still reigned. Fishermen feared incurring the wrath of these older gods, whose good favour they believed their lives depended on. As such, substitutions for the consecrated 'land words' were spoken instead, using a lexicon of 'sea words' which were almost always Norn in origin. Through his use of 'glureks', Jamieson achieves a greater depth of meaning which 'een' itself could not have supplied: the strange, hostile space of an older world is

⁶³ Jamieson, *DSPB*, p.58

⁶⁴ Remco Knooihuizen, "Fishing for Words: The Taboo Language of Shetland Fishermen and the Dating of Norn Language Death," *Transactions of the Philological Society* 106, no. 1 (2008): 100–113, p.100

alluded to, imbuing the poem with a further residue of linguistic loss, for the words of the haaf-language have long fallen out of wider use.

Archipelagic Spectres

Patience, and the willingness to learn the language of these poems, are rewarded with access to their meaning – or, at least, partial access, for there are also numerous meta-textual references at play throughout the poems. The recurring spectres of MacDiarmid and Muir throughout the collection signals a shift in the traditional gaze: since stability and longevity can't be found in the native tradition, Jamieson looks (psycho)geographically outwards (rather than temporally backwards), reaching for links offered from traditions outside of Shetland. In a biographical introduction in the 1994 poetry anthology, *Dream State*, edited by Daniel O'Rourke, Jamieson speaks about these ties from beyond the shoormal:

Coming from a community which has a limited literature of its own but having already gone beyond its parameters, I don't feel I have any direct literary forebears, though in recent years I've realised I'm part of a Scottish tradition, like it or not. MacDiarmid's time in Shetland is a strong connection; though our linguistic roots are different, I identify with Iain Crichton Smith's ambivalence over exile from the island and native language; I recognise much in George Mackay Brown's landscape, but Shetland and Orkney are really as different as Edinburgh and Glasgow. The words of Scandinavian writers like Knut Hamsun or William Heinesen are as familiar.⁶⁵

The 'like it or not' is telling: seemingly, to be overtly aligned with a Scottish tradition feels somewhat treacherous, considering the historic narrative Jakobsen pitches, where Scots acts as an antagonistic force in the general health of Shetland's literary tradition. But, 'like it or not', Scotland remains an important dimension of Shetland's literary identity, and to not acknowledge this is to foreshorten its tradition even further. Yet, it is also

⁶⁵ Robert Alan Jamieson, *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*, ed. Daniel O'Rourke, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), p.89

important to note that Jamieson aligns himself with a *specifically* archipelagic tradition within the Scottish context – writers whose geography necessitates looking outwards. By totalising this Scottish archipelagic identity, Jamieson is able to accommodate a deeper and more resonant connection to that of his own local tradition, all whilst looking further afield still, towards Scandinavia.

As far as Hugh MacDiarmid was concerned, this kind of ‘archipelagic thinking’ was strategically exciting; he greatly admired the historic condition of islands as innately outward-looking, and in his numerous essays about the Scottish islands he speculated on ‘the very different course not only Scottish, and English, but world history would have taken if the whole of mainland Scotland had been severed from England and broken up into the component islands of a numerous archipelago’⁶⁶. His own Shetland period was informed by the belief that the potential for revitalising Scotland lay not in its centres of power, but instead in its ‘exclaves’ (and he came to call Shetland ‘Scotland’s greatest exclave’), as in ‘its remote and peripheral islands, highlands, and borders, from which its neglected languages still encoded distinct mythologies, communal rituals, and patterns of living which were both residual from distant pasts and, importantly, anticipatory of different futures.’⁶⁷

For Jamieson, MacDiarmid’s Shetland period is a ‘strong connection’, despite the fact MacDiarmid has often been omitted from the narrative of the local tradition itself. William J. Tait, who is perhaps Jamieson’s closest literary forebear, perceived the treatment of MacDiarmid in the isles as inexcusable: ‘I am still appalled to think that [...] one of the greatest living poets was resident in Shetland, and, if we knew of his existence at all, it was as a subject for cheap gibes [...]’⁶⁸ Jamieson seems certainly inclined to share Tait’s view. In part two of his poem dedicated to the isle of Whalsay, ‘Yit Mair Lallies’, he writes:

⁶⁶ Macdiarmid, *Islands*, p.7-8

⁶⁷ John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). p.164

⁶⁸ Laurence Graham, “W.J Tait, 1919-1982: A Tribute,” *The New Shetlander*, 181, Hairst (1992), p.14

Tinks du, quha freed wis fae dis mirk, an
 Forged da face o modrin times?
 Fir en, da pør tètak MacDiarmid
 Du sneestert at fir aetin brukks
 Set lowe t'aa da hedder dross
 Dan coosed apo da bare Scots broo, an wi
 His blaain brunt awa da deid growth
 T'loo da new t'come trowe strong agen.

An sae quhitever waarmt wi ken,
 He hed a haand in makkin, wi his
 Pen, an Qualsa tho du stands a gem
 Example t'wis aa, hail athoot
 Da hunsin suddren shooder, mind oot!
 An dønna forgit da wan dat røsed
 Dy beach an mony anidder tø.

The imagery portrays MacDiarmid as the man who 'freed us from the dark'⁶⁹ through the metaphorical imagery of burning heather on the moors, a process known in Scotland as 'muir-burning' (no doubt, a wry play-on-words is intended here). The poem depicts 'poor, scorned MacDiarmid' setting alight the 'heathery dross', clearing away the 'dead growth', and by doing so, allowing 'the new come through strong again'. Muir-burning is carried out by crofters to improve the quality of grazing land, and so the speaker attributes MacDiarmid's legacy as very much a revitalising force within the local literary landscape, concluding with a warning directed at Whalsay itself to not 'forget the one that raised/your beach and many another too'.

'Yit Mair Lallies' seeks to champion the importance of MacDiarmid's legacy within the local context, one which its speaker perceives to be growing more and more distant from its old self as its wealth increases. However, the technique which is specifically celebrated remains somewhat problematic: as Craig notes in *The Modern Scottish Novel*, and what Jamieson literally depicts, MacDiarmid's rallying cry of 'Not Burns: Dunbar!' and "Precedents: not traditions!" essentially amounted to 'scorched earth tactics', where, in attempting to get back 'to a purer origin', MacDiarmid actually failed to create

⁶⁹ Jamieson's *Shoormal* verses are mostly translated using Jamieson's own supplied glossary and, when certain words are absent from this, John J Graham's *The Shetland Dictionary*

an organic tradition which could still link the past and the present⁷⁰. But *Shoormal* is, as Jamieson subtitles it, ‘a sequence of movements’ – as such, these poems move from one so-called ‘solution’ to another, providing a balance of polarised perspectives. In this sequence, then, ‘Yit More Lallies’ seems to act more as a counterpoint to an earlier poem, ‘Neidfyre’, by recalling the fiery imagery of heather burning from a much more Muir-centred perspective:

Kerry da neidfyre t'da herths o wir warld
An dere set lowe t'fresh dry hedder;
Bigg it up till aa fok feel its haet
Quharever dey nicht sit or mak dir maet
An lat wir bairns be free dan o dir pox,
As da past is slokkit wi da blighted bass.

‘Neidfyre’, Lines 11-16

‘Neidfyre’ is defined in Jamieson’s glossary as ‘fire reputed to have prophylactic powers’, and the speaker calls for its power to be used to heal children of the ‘black scabs’ which have ‘gathered’ in their mouths, as a result of the ‘plagued light of the day’. Though the speaker’s identity remains ambiguous, there appears to be a certain metaphorical alignment with these ‘black scabs’ and the ‘goglit spaek’ reference in ‘Avunara’ – the mouth, the physical site of language within the body, has become diseased by the past. Of course, the fact that Jamieson writes this poem in dialect is a deliberate and wry choice, seeking to ironically undermine the speaker’s intention, for the dialect as a vessel for metaphorical expression is particularly strong in this poem; especially with its numerous words for different states of fire (‘lowe’, ‘slokk’, ‘bass’) – words whose definitions English can’t accommodate quite as succinctly. For the speaker, though, all that remains to do is to burn away this ‘pox’ with the healing fire of a new language – an idea which parallels historic attitudes towards Norn and the Shetland dialect, and could also be commenting on those towards Gaelic and mainland Scots too.

⁷⁰ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p22

MacDiarmid's presence in 'Yit More Lallies' is overtly stated, but of all Jamieson's meta-textual references, it is MacDiarmid's poem 'On A Raised Beach' that becomes the most haunting presence. MacDiarmid wrote 'On a Raised Beach' in 1934, during his seven-year 'exile', as he termed it, on the island of Whalsay, which lies just off the east side of the Shetland mainland. The poem confronts the austere setting of a raised beach on the uninhabited island of Linga, where MacDiarmid embarks on a philosophical, aesthetic and existential investigation of the stone-world. Though the poem is written largely in English, MacDiarmid utilises scientific, geological language to create a sense of disconnection and inaccessibility around the scene he describes:

All is lithogenesis – or lochia,
Carpelite fruit of the forbidden tree,
Stones blacker than any in the Caaba,
Cream coloured caen-stone, chatoyant pieces,
Celadon and corbeau, bistre and beige,
Glaucous, hoar, enfouledered, cyathiform,
Making mere faculae of the sun and moon⁷¹

Mark Ryan Smith notes that, just as Margaret Chalmers, having no literary tradition to fall back on, learned to read Shetland's unconventional landscape: 'in the *Stony Limits* poems, MacDiarmid had to do the same. He had to learn how to see these places, how to read them, how to make something of them.'⁷² In place of tradition, what he turns to instead is deep time: the vast, ancient, geological span of time which goes beyond human comprehension (and against narrative), in which MacDiarmid finds a temporal vista that brings about the co-existence of both the pre-human and the post-human:

These bare stones bring me straight back to reality.
I grasp one of them and I have in my grip

⁷¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems Vol I*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1996), p.422, lines 1-7

⁷² Smith, *TLS*, p.121

The beginning and the end of the world,
My own self, and as before I never saw
The empty hand of my brother man,
The humanity no culture has reached, the mob.⁷³

The poem is particularly resonant throughout the poems of *Shoormal* in terms of its specific setting: not only is it identifiably ‘Shetlandic’, but a raised beach is defined in geographical terms as an ‘emergent coastal landform [...] raised above the shoreline by a relative fall in the sea level’. In other words, raised beaches are landscapes which once inhabited the chaotic, fluctuating space of the shoormal, but which now exist at one remove from it. It is interesting to note that the speaker of ‘On a Raised Beach’ rarely looks to the ocean as a source of imagery or metaphor; his preoccupation is with the solidity and presence of the stones, and about establishing a connection with a seemingly indifferent, universal earth. This certainly chimes with many of Jamieson’s poems in *Shoormal*, with MacDiarmid’s invocation of deep time through stone-imagery a frequent recurrence throughout the collection; most notably in ‘I da Hert o Da Stonn’, ‘Grind o da Navir’, ‘Foregengin’ and ‘Aa Gaits Led De Hame’.

If ‘On a Raised Beach’, as Alex Thomson puts it, is ‘essentially a monologue [...] striving to be a dialogue with a world that won’t answer back’⁷⁴, then Jamieson’s second poem of *Shoormal*, ‘I da Hert o da Stonn’, is precisely that sought-for answer. In this poem, Jamieson articulates the space of absence in fittingly oxymoronic terms: as something still tangible, despite never being truly of substance. It is an idea fortified by imagery that remains in a state of constant ‘between-ness’, and which recall MacDiarmid’s image of the ‘faculae of the sun and moon’:

This is about a space:
The space between the milk of the moon
And the corn yellow liquor of the sun.

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Alex Thomson and Jim Mainland, “On a Raised Beach, a Dialogue,” *Writing the North*, 2013, <http://www.writingthenorth.com/dialogues/on-a-raised-beach/>. Date accessed: [27/06/2016]

In this rich void, we move,⁷⁵

The speaker of the poem, spoken as a collective ‘we’, profess to be masters of ‘timelessness and space’ which are situated ‘in the heart of the stone’. Identity remains ambiguous; initially, it seems to be a voice which comes from a distant vantage point in history, and whose direct address in the present tense indeed creates a space which is outside of linear time: ‘You seek our future from oracles, / Our past from relics.’⁷⁶ By the poem’s final stanza, and in another alignment of Craig’s theory of simultaneity, this voice comes to occupy the body itself: ‘Though we are in you, somehow, understood. / We are your children, still unborn...’⁷⁷. Once again, the idea of linear time collapses; the past comes to exist simultaneously within the present moment, and onwards into a potential future – even, crucially, when conscious access to this past is denied.

The stone makes no further direct address for the rest of the collection; each speaker who encounters it after this point is left to ruminate from an exterior perspective, to draw their own interpretations about what exactly lies at its heart. In ‘Foregengin’, for instance, the speaker continues searching for that fabled linguistic vitality, bidding the stone to ‘Bring back t’me da name o dem / Dat cast de ida ocean’s face.’⁷⁸. But the return of this ‘name’ is wholly dependent on the movement of the tide:

Quhan swall will rise t’røse da mune,
Dan I will rise an lowse dis shackle,
Quhan stonn will rise t’meet da shore
T’bring da name, da oracle,

Dan will I hear da sangs o dem
Dat vormished lang t’up an ging,
Dat sent de, stonn, t’fin dir wye.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Jamieson, ‘I da Hert o da Stonn’, lines 1-4, 24

⁷⁶ Ibid, lines 8-9

⁷⁷ Ibid, lines 45-46

⁷⁸ Jamieson, ‘Foregengin’, lines 3-4

⁷⁹ Ibid, lines 8-14

Here the speaker seems to describe an elemental process similar to the creation of a raised beach; the ‘swell will rise to praise the moon’, ‘stone will rise to meet the shore’ – only then will the ‘shackle loosen’, and ‘bring the name, the oracle’. What is posited here is that the stone contains not just the key to the past but also the future – the subsequent enjambment and stanza break emphasising that only through the discovery of the future will the speaker be able to ‘hear the songs of them / that longed an age to up and go, / that sent you, stone, to find their way’. It is no longer clear at this point who the ‘them’ of the stanza is: these songs could now just as easily be the unsung melodies of the future as they could be of the past. What *is* clear is that the stone has become a wayfinder through the shoormal; moving – ideally – towards a raised beach.

The reader’s final encounter with the stone is in ‘Aa Gaits Led De Hame’ – the antepenultimate poem of the collection. It is at this point the speaker seems to have come to terms with exactly what lies at the heart of the stone, articulating it thus:

Ida hert o da stonn dir waits a place
Dat isna space, but a mindin o afore.
I dis ting caad time, be faerce an proagin,
Roon an fu – lay up nae bing o øsless wid.⁸⁰

In the heart of the stone, there is only ‘the memory of before’; which in Shetland’s literary context, as established, is an unknowable historic narrative. Up until now, the speaker of these poems has longed for that narrative to cross these inhuman boundaries and yield the lost stories of deep time, but in the end this is a futile hope. The speaker of ‘Aa Gaits Led De Hame’ (‘All Paths Lead You Home’) concludes that ‘in this thing called time, be fierce and searching’, in order to avoid piling up ‘heaps of useless wood’. In other words, ruminating obsessively over the past is pointless; instead, the stone should be used as a means of progressing forward:

Pit dy bøt apo dis stonn.

⁸⁰ Jamieson, ‘Aa Gaits Led De Hame’, lines 1-4

See foo it fits dy fit?
As if someen it wis de eence
Hed set de oot a gait?⁸¹

This is an intriguing conclusion for *Shoormal's* stone metaphor to arrive at, which seems to depart from MacDiarmid's own in 'On A Raised Beach'. As Louisa Gairn notes:

The geological wordplay of 'On A Raised Beach' [searches] for an alternative outlook on nature and our place within it which is not accessible to us in our everyday experience of the world. We may think of the stones as tools for building, MacDiarmid suggests, but that is not *their* truth. 'There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones' [...]⁸²

Both 'On A Raised Beach' and the stony poems of *Shoormal* use this metaphor to examine the nature of truth. For MacDiarmid, 'truth' is sited in the phenomenological experience of the stones themselves, and he ruminates on how an understanding of this through art may be able to forge deeper connections to the natural world; for Jamieson, the stones contain the authentic and irretrievable narrative of the past, but they can still be used to build a 'path' forward regardless, because knowledge of the stone itself exists. Thus, it is only in recognising both the loss *and* existence of this knowledge, in simultaneity, that we are able to progress through the linguistic wasteland.

Nort Atlantik Drift

Published over two decades later, *Nort Atlantik Drift* is a very different publication to that of *Shoormal*. Reflecting on his first collection, Jamieson says, 'The poetry I wrote then was more concerned with particular words, the stranger the better, than with the sound of the language – bricks more than mortar, so to speak.' Jamieson confesses he began to think less of the 'old

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Louisa Gairn, "MacDiarmid and Ecology," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p90

worlds and their magical qualities’, and became ‘less angered by loss’. Instead, his attention turned to the sound and musicality of Shetlandic itself:

I thought about Shetlandic as a spoken tongue whose dialect music lay in distinctively pronounced vowel sounds and percussive consonants (as in a little phrase like 'itida), rather than as high poetry or a great store of old words we'd a cultural responsibility towards. With Shetlandic vowels, a word from anywhere could sound Shetlandic. The other day on the street I heard a woman say how 'traamityzt' someone had been... So my practice as a poet altered as I worked with the sound of the dialect, writing from the remembered voices of the old people in Sandness.⁸³

This idea that the Shetlandic pronunciation of words was, in its own right, a way of undermining the globalising power of English proved to be an empowering one for Jamieson. The preoccupation with loss, especially in the wake of the oil boom, was fervent in the dialect writing of the time; but as Jamieson notes:

Maybe the idea of old Shetland was always disappearing for someone in every generation as their own days, way of life and people ended. Whatever, it was clear to me then that the old forms of Shetlandic would have to change, in poetry as much as in life. We'd have to work a little bit harder for our understanding. For me, the great revelation came through bilingual text and wrestling with a few poems about the sea and the tradition of 'saelin'.⁸⁴

This led him to a practice of writing which he called ‘Shenglish’; poems which existed in their first instance as an amalgamation of English and Shetlandic. On completion of a poem in this form, Jamieson would then separate the two into their component, linguistic origins, until he ended up with two versions of the same poem in both English and Shetlandic. The rough English ‘translation’ allowed Jamieson the freedom to experiment much more aurally with the written Shetlandic forms, wherein it became a

⁸³ Robert Alan Jamieson, “A ‘Quite-Right’ Upon the Sacred Peatbank,” *Fortnight* 442, no. March (2006): pp.24–27

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

matter of ‘rendering the sounds of the dialect honestly and consistently’.⁸⁵ This resulted in a way of writing that allowed anyone, Shetlander or otherwise, with enough knowledge to make a fairly decent attempt at sounding and hearing the words on the page.

The poems of *Nort Atlantik Drift* are far easier for a reader to understand than those of *Shoormal*. Jamieson avoids the use of obscure Shetlandic words throughout this collection, and though his poems still retain his Scandinavian-inspired orthography, the provision of ‘English prose cribs’⁸⁶ makes the reading experience far less alienating to a non-native reader. Far from conceding ground to English, this bilingual technique allows Jamieson to reflect to the duality of the ‘linguistic frontier’⁸⁷ he grew up within, where English was the language of the professional sphere, whilst Shetlandic was strictly relegated to the domestic. Smith notes that the implications of this approach goes against techniques which other Shetland writers had previously employed, in that ‘despite the oppression of the local language, [Jamieson suggests] something is gained when children are made to speak in two different ways. He accepts both tongues as part of his linguistic heritage.’⁸⁸

The subject matter of *Nort Atlantik Drift* is similarly accessible, documenting a semi-autobiographical sequence of maritime-themed poems. The poems which begin the collection are rooted in the concrete experiences of the poet’s childhood, but eventually move into a re-imagined future for the speaker; the ‘life-I-might-have-had’, as Jamieson puts it, ‘had the nine-year-old boy I was gone to sea as he thought he might.’⁸⁹ This allows him to meditate on things that were, and things which might have been. Despite the fact that Jamieson reimagines this future, however, it is always framed within a narrative of having already happened, in a melding of memory and imagination that gives *Nort Atlantik Drift* an intriguing narrative trajectory, where the past, present and future come to exist in continuity.

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Smith, *TLS*, p.218

⁸⁷ Jamieson, *The Sacred Peatbank*, p.23

⁸⁸ Smith, *TLS*, p.218

⁸⁹ Jamieson, ‘Introduction’, *Nort Atlantik Drift*, p.11

The first poem of the collection sets up this idea concisely. ‘Da Boat Biggir’s Nefjoo’ (‘The Boat Builder’s Nephew’) is, according to Jamieson, ‘a gathering of fragments of memories from holidays and Sundays spent at my grandfather’s house in Gonfirth, where a beautiful, mysterious sailing ship in a bottle and an outsize Readers’ Digest *Great World Atlas* held great fascination.’⁹⁰ The poem is an intriguing amalgamation of memories and voices; the sayings of ‘aald folk’, severed from their contextual image, which constantly disrupt the narrative of the present moment:

Quhan da bærn’s chap da windoo
he hadds up da sjip ati’da bottil,
sjaaks his hed – awa!

An da aald fokk sæ –
‘Tink næthin o’it.’
‘Tym’ll tell.’ ‘Du’ll fin dy nitch.’

He tinks – Foo dæs’it kum t’gjing insyd?
no a trikk, bit maachikk.
Dønna shaa me, I want it ta happin.

An da aald fokk sæ –
‘Quhar dir’s a will, dir’s a wy.
Aniddir skirtfoo fæ da skroo.’⁹¹

Time, here, is presented as a continuum; these fragments of memory are written in a present tense which must always be in-dialogue with the past. This in turn seems to render into verse something of the inescapable experience of memory; how each person carries within them the voices of the dead, and it is through this means that we are connected to them. Memory, here, becomes a much more tangible connection to the past than in *Shoorma’s* stone metaphor, particularly in respect to linguistic heritage, which is presented here as something alive and knowable within living memory.

The power of memory – and more importantly, that which memory calls into imagination – to sustain language and tradition becomes a particularly

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.15

⁹¹ R.A Jamieson, ‘Da Boat Biggir’s Nefjoo’, lines 1-12

resonant motif throughout the following poems of the collection, for it is through such means that the identity of place is also compounded. As well as this, the sea becomes a potent metaphor for going beyond parameters; beyond the island, tradition, and language; beyond, even, history and the future. In ‘Atlantis’, for example, we witness the child-speaker imagine an entirely new island into being, inspired by a school lesson which likened the sunken land of Atlantis to Shetland itself:

Missis Tomsin telt dim
 a’da sungkin laand
 ‘at slippit inanundir

wast an fram fæ
 Afriek’s mukkil hill,
 quhar Atlas stød himsel,

hungshin up da globb
 læk’it wis choost a stobb
 he’s kerrjin fæ da banghs –⁹²

Here, the global becomes local through the clash of metaphor; where ‘Atlas himself stood, / holding up the globe as if it was a lump of driftwood he was carrying from the shore –’. The child contextualises grander classical myths within the familiar landscape of Shetland, whilst Shetland itself becomes the ‘tops of antique mountains’ that had reached from Nevis to Jotunheim, ‘now Atlantic deep and lost’. This lost geographical identity still resonates, but it remains subtext; the poem, instead, opens up into the realm of imagination, as the child-speaker sets about drawing his own imagined island. He calls this island Atlantis, and then begins to name ‘the hills and lakes ... the towns and castles’ to ‘give it order’. The poem ends likening this imagined island to Shetland, reinforcing the idea that the power of the imagination holds the ability to reclaim that which is ‘Atlantic deep and lost’. A similar idea underpins ‘T’Da Hum’ (‘To the Uninhabited Isle’), where Jamieson meditates briefly on the stories which fed ‘a thin boy’s imagination’. Allusion is made to

⁹² Jamieson, ‘Atlantis’, lines 1-9

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, which moves to a rumination on the 'living tale' of the St Ninian's Isle treasure trove:

a'træsþir fun in fiftie-æght,
apo Sænt Ninjin's Ajil,
mann ryght enjogh bie troo.

Twintie-æght piesis a'silvir
an da chaa-bon o a niesik –
a Piktish troav wie a guddik kroon.

The 'twenty-eight pieces of silver and the jawbone of a porpoise' become 'a Pictish trove with a riddle for a crown'. Why the jawbone was included amongst the silver, manmade items remains uncertain; whilst its presence suggests a special relationship that once existed between humans and cetaceans in the Pictish era, this in itself can never be confirmed, and the answer to this riddle has long since been lost to time. In the context of this poem, however, the loss of truth is of little consequence; as with the pirate tales of RLS, the 'guddick' of the porpoise jaw becomes a thing upon which the imagination can take root. It is not the truth of circumstance that matters here, but the stories that such a mystery inspire, and the ways in which these narratives enter the collective imagination.

Moving into the latter parts of the collection, Jamieson's speaker leaves the safe island of his childhood behind, becoming a merchant sailor. As Jamieson notes in his commentary:

The knowledge, understanding and artefacts of the world that the merchant seamen brought home with them meant that although Shetland was a small isolated community in global terms, its folk had an awareness of the true size of the world. This demonstrates the misapprehension that such a 'marginal' community is less informed about the world at large than more 'central', metropolitan situations, where everything, it appears, is near at hand.⁹³

⁹³ Jamieson, *Nort Atlantik Drift*, p.77

Here, Jamieson speaks of the same sensibility of islandness which MacNeil spoke of in the introduction to *These Islands, We Sing*, where liminality encourages an outward-looking perspective on the world. The sea is the place ‘not where the land ends, but where the world begins’⁹⁴. In ‘A Port Hol Apo Da Wirld’ (A Port Hole On The World), Jamieson depicts his speaker’s journey south, making metaphorical use of the ship’s porthole as the means by which he can ‘let a new light in’:

Da wirld is swaarmin noo,
a waatirie grind is opnin t’da suddirt,
t’lat a njoo lyght in.

A different lyght aatagidder
an en’at døsna chænych wie sæsins
bit hadds its koors trowoot da jier.⁹⁵

From its onset, the poem extinguishes the lights of Lerwick and places the reader within a ‘swinging’ world; local identity dissolves within the vessel of the ship, creating a sense of complete disorientation up until the fourth stanza, where, as a ‘watery gate opens to the south’, the reader is able to stabilise themselves inside a new setting, outwith Shetland. This light, unlike Shetland’s, is much more constant, ‘holding its course throughout the year’. But, whilst this light may hold constant, our sailor finds himself still navigating an unfamiliar, and often frightening, new world; as such, in poems such as ‘Onlie Ryght at Hem Aflot’ (‘Only Truly at Home when Afloat’) and ‘Koriekil’ (‘Coracle’) he turns to language as a sense of tethering in the midst of this uncertainty. What is most striking in these poems, however, is how silence, rather than language, begins to move to the fore; ‘silences becalm him’, whilst words ‘only break like waves along beaches’, and it is only ‘silent faith’ which can let him go ‘sailing/the surface of meaning to Heaven’.

This silence has been growing insidiously from the very start of the collection. Even in the very first poem, Jamieson sets up repetition of the

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Jamieson, ‘A Port Hol Apo Da Wirld’, lines 6-9

phrase 'he tink's'. It is an interesting recurrence to note, for it underlines how, more and more, the speaker of the poem does not actually speak the words being written; his language is explicitly stated to exist most vividly within the framework of thought. This brings an interesting tension into play, highlighting the limits which Jamieson runs up against in this poetic form. For all his ability to command the sound of thought from the page, the poet is nonetheless powerless to grant these words a spoken form. Without this spoken element, a subliminal silence runs through the poems of *Nort Atlantik Drift*, which, by the final poem of the collection, 'Disæblit Siemen', threatens to become all-consuming:

Dis dæs,
a njoo sylins
faas wie da haar.

He tink's – d'ir næ berth ava.
So he's stoppit tellin
aa da siekritis a'is kraft

t'da kabin bojie
duggin'im,
swaabin'is dæks.

Noo da task is ta mark rædie
a bunk t'læ a lyf-tym apo –
t'fin a sæl-kloot fir a windin-shiet.

He'll byd quhyit
till da wind blaas da haar
fæe da oshin's roar.

Till da sun rippils trow,
he'll hadd'is koonsil kloss.⁹⁶

In his commentary on the poem, Jamieson states that 'Now the mariner's skills are comparatively redundant and the tradition of 'gjaain t'da sælin'

⁹⁶ Jamieson, 'Disæblit Siemen', p.124

dating back two centuries is largely finished. With it, so the passing of lore from one generation to the next is lost.’ Despite the optimism to be found in the earlier poems explorations of memory and imagination, the conclusion we are left with by the end of *Nort Atlantik Drift* is still one absorbed by a narrative of loss. However, this narrative holds subtle differences to the one which *Shoormal* sought to explore. It is not the absence of language which brings this narrative into play, but rather the sailor’s choice to perpetuate silence. Driven by his belief that there’s no longer any work on the ships, the sailor has ‘given up telling the secrets of his craft / to the cabin boy dogging him, swabbing his decks.’ Believing that his knowledge is of little value in the present context, he concludes there is no worth in passing it on to the future generation. It is on this point the reader is left to reflect; how, in making living memory redundant, by allowing silence to fall, we jeopardise our own access to and continuity with the past.

It is worth noting here that, though the overall tone of the poem is certainly one of despair, Jamieson still allows for a glimmer of hope to emerge in the final two stanzas, where the sailor professes to ‘stay quiet till the wind blows the sea mist from the ocean’s roar. / Till the sun ripples through, he’ll keep his council close.’ But what hope is there, realistically, when the narrative of loss becomes self-enacting? What power could poetry possibly hold over this fate? In Chapter 3, I turn to a critical framing of my own creative practice in order to seek answers to these questions, focussing on how the art of filmmaking can combat the silence of the page, allowing the fusion of filmed poetry and memory to become a revitalising, remediating artistic force.

Chapter 3

Rewilding the Literature: a creative practice

When I was very young, I could not ‘hear’ the dialect which my Shetland relatives spoke. I suppose you could attribute this to the fact that in our household, my father spoke with a broad Shetland accent, whilst my mother spoke English with an Irish cadence. The two forms of speech were of equal weight in my mind, and I could discern no stark differences between them.

I don’t remember what this state of mind was like. Even in writing this now, I feel inclined to disbelieve myself; the differences seem so obvious now. I know this *was* so, however, because I can recall the moment this state of vernacular deafness ended. It was shortly after I started school; I had been speaking on the phone to my grandmother, and over the crackling landline I suddenly heard her saying ‘du’ instead of you, ‘de’ instead ‘the’. From that point forward, it was as though both English and dialect had bifurcated in my mind, and with this, a choice seemed to present itself:

Which one?

*

In 2014, I was fortunate enough to attend a screening of Susan Kemp’s poetic documentary, *Nort Atlantik Drift*, at the Screenplay Film Festival in Lerwick. The documentary rendered the poems of Robert Alan Jamieson’s second collection into a richly cinematic experience. Speaking of the potential influence of film on verse, Kemp says:

There is an obvious place for film here, as language and dialect on the page can transform utterly when spoken. I felt that a film would make a distinct contribution to the impact, not by repetition or duplication,

but by adding another layer of information than could be presented within the existing, more traditional, means of engagement.⁹⁷

The idea that film has such transformative power over the nature of verse is a potent one for this thesis, and Kemp's documentary acts as a fitting coda to the conclusion of *Nort Atlantik Drift* that we discussed in Chapter 2; for where the page may fail in rendering dialect into a spoken form, film succeeds. Kemp's documentary brings Jamieson's own voice to his poems, and set against the backdrop of his childhood home (as well as in the wake of his father's death), the poems are able to further resonate.

Chapter 3 of this thesis departs from the format of its former two, entering into a critical framing of the films from my own creative practice. Over the past four years of this research project, I have created six films – three filmpoems and three film portraits – which seek to artistically engage with some of the ideas this thesis has discussed. Moving from a visual rendering of Jamieson's 'linguistic wasteland' to the power of memory and imagination as fortifying narratives, I hope to show, as Susan Kemp does, the potential of film as a revitalising force in the future of the Shetland literary tradition – one which allows us to escape the wasteland, and enter the fertile space of a wilderness instead.

THE FILMS

As mentioned previously, the films which make up my creative practice take two forms: filmpoems and film portraits. From the onset of this project, it had been my intent to explore the fragility and plasticity of cultural memory through the creation of an archive of film-portraits, documenting the memories of several Shetland tradition-bearers. My purpose had been to disrupt narratives of loss which I knew existed within the Shetland literary

⁹⁷ Susan Kemp, 'Making the film', *Nort Atlantik Drift*, 2014, <https://nortatlantikdrift.com/a-report-on-nort-atlantik-drift-a-portrait-of-robert-alan-jamieson/>. Date accessed: [05/02/2018]

tradition, and to stem anxieties which surrounded this loss. As the project evolved in scope, however, I became aware of the need to not only document the memories of Shetlanders through the film portrait form, but also to explore how film itself could artistically engage within the space of Shetland's literary tradition, and act as a revitalising force.

This, in effect, gave my creative practice two distinct strands; the film-poems came to embody themes that related to the literary tradition as an entity preoccupied with absence and loss; whilst the film portraits engaged with the validation of memory within the present, enabling a tangible link to the past to be created from this present. Both forms align with ideas which emerge from the poetry collections of Robert Alan Jamieson, and it is through Jamieson's oeuvre they find symbiosis within the wider Shetland literary tradition. Above all, these artworks are profoundly connected to my personal, artistic outlook and experience; I shall be discussing them as such, where personal context is in need of explanation.

It is my preference that the films be viewed in the following alternating sequence: 'Midder', 'Quoys, Unst', 'Lexie', 'Spill', 'Alfie', and 'Raaga'.

'Midder'

Recalling the voices of the dead who disrupt the present in Jamieson's 'Da Boat Biggir's Nefjoo', I begin my sequence with 'Midder'. 'Midder' features a piece of 'found' oral history, in which my great grandmother, Jessie Moffat, recounts a supernatural story from the 1st World War. The recording is part of a longer session of storytelling, in which Jessie recounts stories from a far older Shetland, long before the first sup of oil reached the shores of Sullom Voe, and she tells them with a calm, soft-spoken authority. Listening to the tape for the first time, I was soon struck by the curious fact that none of the stories Jessie told were of her own memories; they featured the lives of other people in the family. As though anticipating my thoughts from another vantage in time, between the pause of one story and another, she abruptly announces: 'An I hae no stories o me ain; it wis aa joost hard wark.'

This was a statement coming from a single mother, who had spent much of life as a herring lass; following the silver darlings from Lerwick to Yarmouth and back. When not occupied in this seasonal work, she spent her time earning money as a housemaid for a rich family in Lerwick, as well as working the family croft. Yet, despite this full and varied life, she believed she had no stories to share. In the hierarchy of memory, it was those who participated in the grander narratives of history and myth whose stories became worth repeating. By her own reckoning, then, her life-story became an absence.

It became important to me to reintroduce the woman to the narrative of the stories she told, and to achieve this through the medium of film portraiture. I was keen, however, to ensure this film was rooted in the present; the story itself was a historical one, whose speaker had died over a decade ago, and I felt to have the visuals of the film reflect the historicity would do little justice to its impact on an insightful, artistic level. As such, I ‘found’ Jessie through another means; the objects of the house she had lived in during the latter part of her life, and which now belongs to my grandmother, Lexie Watt. Cut between these interior shots are various seascapes, which, as well as reflecting the story Jessie tells, are also meant as a reference to the sea-journeys Jessie herself took as a herring lass.

An interesting aspect of Jessie’s delivery in the recording is that it is not fully-Shetlandic, despite everyone present in the room being a native Shetlander. Whether she does it consciously or not, she ‘knaps’ throughout – attempts to speak ‘properly’ – most likely for the sake of the camera and the posterity of the stories which she tells, believing these are most ‘correctly’ rendered in English. As such, the voice that we begin with in this sequence of films is one which is caught between Shetlandic and English.

'Quoys, Unst'

'Quoys, Unst' is the first film-poem I made for this project, and actively seeks to portray a sense of the 'linguistic wasteland' through the imagery utilised. I was drawn immediately to the abandoned croft house which features in this film, and from which it draws most of its metaphorical resonance. There was something about its presence in the landscape, the way the light wrecked inside it, the way the Unst wilderness had come to invade it, that spoke of an inherent poetry within it. In many ways, the house constitutes as much a 'found' poem for me as Midder does 'found' oral history, in that the footage preceded the poem I would write for the film. Thus, my intent with 'Quoys' became to coax a poem tied to my own present from the footage I gathered; with the two narratives interweaving, complimenting and counterpointing each other.

The film employs techniques which are more commonly found in the horror genre, through creating a general sense of melancholia and enacting a 'haunting' behind the poem's own textual presence within the film. The prospect of experimenting with elements of horror was an exciting departure for me; where before I had utilised the film-poem form to capture the inherent beauty I saw within my surroundings, 'Quoys' became an opportunity to make this beauty uncanny, even hostile.

The text of the poem itself is largely written in English, but utilises Shetland words throughout to destabilise the certainty of this linguistic identity. The fact that the poem's text has no accompanying voice is a deliberate choice, aiming to recreate a sense of the silence of the linguistic wasteland it moves over. But the film is not itself silent; the sounds of the surrounding wilderness encroach upon the house, at times growing unnervingly loud, and remind the viewer of what lies just outside the perimeters of the frame.

The figure which haunts the imagery of 'Quoys' is, though distinctly humanoid in shape, never glimpsed for long. This presence is meant to

constitute a fragmentary existence within the frames of the film; though its existence is known, the truth of its self, of its identity, is never fully revealed. By the end of the film, however, this presence moves from being a presence *within* the house to one which is outside of it, attempting to re-enter its space, as portrayed in the final image of a silhouetted hand slowly appearing at the window.

'Lexie'

Lexie's film portrait is the most personal of all the films presented here. It features a portrait of my grandmother, Alexandra 'Lexie' Watt, telling the story of how she came to live in Shetland permanently, following the outbreak of World War II. Lexie's story is of very little consequence to the wider historical matters of the time, and this is exactly what fascinates me about it; not least for the fact it highlights to me, in no uncertain terms, how much the circumstances of my life today depended on the timely arrival of a telegram.

One of the things which I find compelling about Lexie's story is how, in counterpoint to her mother, she frames herself as an agent of her own narrative. Where Jessie gives up the space of identity, Lexie seizes it. It was the authority of her voice, the way her story could only originate from within her, that led me to frame her in shots where she looks directly into the camera, and into the eyes of the viewer.

In another fascinating counterpoint with Jessie, it is interesting to note how Lexie, too, 'knaps' during her narration; for instance, saying 'children' instead of 'bairns'. What is striking, however, is that when Lexie 'knaps', it is during moments where her psychic geography is aligned with Edinburgh; as her story moves from Edinburgh to Shetland, so too does the sound of her speech become much more inflected by the island of her birth.

The house in which I filmed Lexie is another point of personal significance. Known as 'North House', this was the house in which Lexie took the family to holiday in over the summer. It is the house of my father's

childhood summers – and mine, too. At the time of filming, the house had fallen into disrepair, and Lexie was in the process of fixing it up again. This proved to be a potent metaphorical setting for Lexie’s story to play out against, where she comes to occupy a space that is on the surface certainly worse for wear, but which she has taken upon herself to make new again.

‘Spill’

‘Spill’ is a film-poem which focuses on the oil industry – or, more specifically, its decline in recent times, found in the symbol of a decommissioned rig. As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the oil industry has been largely absent from the work of Shetland poets during its boom years in the 70s and 80s; when it did feature, it was usually framed within a tone of satire or outright negativity.

My approach in the film-poem is to take a more nuanced stance towards the subject, favouring one of observance and the ways in which the rigs had come to occupy my memory, and the memory of Shetland’s seascape. The ‘fairgrounds of their bodies’ centres the child-like perspective the poem takes, here; the way the rigs dominated the horizons of my youth in ‘spider’s symmetry’, yet seemed almost carnivalesque when lit up at night. The fact that they exist within a kind of silence, too, motivates the lack of spoken voice in this film-poem. This silence, however, is not the one of loss, but rather one willingly placed around the subject of the oil industry at large. By filming the rigs, I allow the narrative of Shetland’s petro-culture to enter the literary sphere, and question the silence surrounding it.

‘Alfie’

‘Alfie’ is a film portrait of Burra fisherman, Alfie Jamieson. In it, he recounts the stories and lore of the fishing trade – a livelihood he has been in all his life. With *Nort Atlantik Drift* such a crucial text within the body of

this thesis, it seemed more than pertinent that the final film portrait should be of a haaf-fisherman, and feature in its imagery the space of the sea, and a man's place within it.

Of all the film portraits, Alfie's is perhaps the most linguistically authentic. He does not alter his manner of speech to accommodate any outside context; on his boat, he is utterly himself, and the memories of his trade. Whilst much of the topics Alfie covers in his recollections centre on fishing lore and superstition, Alfie himself grounds these things in his own lived reality, saying dismissively that he 'never paid any attention' to them.

The fishing gear on Alfie's boat is all handmade by himself. As such, Alfie comes to occupy a space in the film portrait in which he at all points the architect; commanding the narrative, and commanding the objects within it.

'Raaga'

Raaga is a film-poem which returns us to the cyclic world of myth; indeed, to the very beginning of this thesis. As I mentioned before, the image of the raaga-tree I wrote about in my introductory paragraphs has become something of a touchstone metaphor for me. Raaga renders this tree into a fully-fledged being.

The image is rife with meaning; the death of the Norse culture entangled with the death of the world tree. A story about Jesus and/or Odin hanging himself, ostensibly written in the treeless place of my upbringing. The film-poem was my attempt to put some of this 'knot' of metaphor into an audiovisual form. The tree, thus, became personified as a kind of deity of loss, emerging from the sea into a barren landscape to which it did not belong. As it walks across this landscape, it sheds the image of itself, in a series of echoing images that represent its transformative journey through the sea, to be washed up upon the beach.

This is the first time I allow a voice to accompany the poem on screen. In Raaga, however, the voice speaks in Shetlandic, whilst the text on-screen

reads in English. This seeks to create the sense of simultaneity which Jamieson strives for in his collections, and which I feel is the most natural expression of my own linguistic identity within the Shetland context – as something both Shetland and English, allowing for an exploration of the tensions that this sets into play.

The music is made entirely using human voice, at times distorted and stretched into a strange drone. The inspiration was choral plainchant, to evoke the religious and pseudo-christian imagery of the Rootless Tree; it is the religious made strange. The word chosen for the singing was ‘Sjusimillabaka’, a Norn word meaning ‘between the sea and the shore’. The dichotomy inherent in the word is reflected in the costume, with a ‘face’ on the front and on the back, looking forwards and backwards through time, not wholly Christian or Norse; not in the sea or on dry land.

Conclusion

The story of ‘The Unst Lay’ goes as follows: it was first recorded in 1865 by a Shetlander called George Sinclair. He had heard it from an old woman called ‘Russlin’, who lived in the village of Norwick in Unst. In a letter to the folklore scholar, Karl Blind, Sinclair expressed regret that ‘Few now will take any interest in this sort of lore; and these old wives fables will soon be interred with their bones.’⁹⁸

It was in April 2017 that Brian Smith first contacted me about ‘The Unst Lay’, and he has since presented three lectures on his research into the mysterious fragment (in Orkney, Edinburgh and Shetland respectively). His paper, ‘The Unst Lay: ancient verse, or the earliest Shetland dialect poem?’ argues that, contrary to established belief, the poem was actually written by the man who claims to have discovered it; George Sinclair.

Smith’s evidence for this is based predominantly on letters written between Sinclair, Laurenson and Blind, as well as George Sinclair’s personal diary. Whilst Sinclair never confesses to having penned the poem himself, we are provided with several reasons to doubt him. According to Smith, the first damning rebuttal to Blind’s analysis of the poem comes in 1883, from the Icelandic scholar of Eddic verse, Guðbrandur Vigfússon. Vigfússon condemned the discoveries of ‘Odinic fragments’ in Shetland as ‘utterly illusory’⁹⁹, arguing that if a fragment of the *Hávámál* – a poem widely acknowledged as being in a state of advanced deterioration – had survived for hundreds of years, the chances of it corresponding *exactly* to strophe 138 are indeed slim¹⁰⁰. Smith also reveals that, following Vigfússon’s publication, Laurenson and Blind never wrote of ‘The Unst Lay’ again, suggesting they too came to doubt in Sinclair’s story¹⁰¹. Through his own linguistic analysis

⁹⁸ Karl Blind, ‘Discovery of Odinic Songs in Shetland’, p1092

⁹⁹ Brian Smith, “The Unst Lay: Ancient Verse, or the Earliest Shetland Dialect Poem?” (Kirkwall, 2017) p9

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p10

¹⁰¹ Ibid

of the poem, Smith also exposes a more modern usage of dialect expressions than would be expected of such purportedly ancient verse – particularly in the metaphorical use of ‘rime’ and ‘mett’¹⁰². Finally, ‘The Unst Lay’ seems to ‘emerge from nowhere in 1877’¹⁰³, asking us to believe in an ancient tradition of verse writing which would not emerge again until January 1878, with the publication of James Stout Angus’s ‘Eels’.

Of course, none of this evidence can claim with absolute certainty that Sinclair is the sole author of ‘The Unst Lay’, but it does take a stretch of faith to believe otherwise. It is a compulsion I can understand, however; George Sinclair’s story is a beautiful one, for it offers a compelling historical narrative to a place that craves such things. To think it is nothing more than a practical joke at the expense of a German scholar is, perhaps, not as palatable an origin for the first Shetland dialect poem to bear.

In any case, there is something at stake when subscribing to either story. For me, with this doubt cast over the poem’s origins, I was surprised to feel a sense of relief. ‘The Unst Lay’ was a piece of writing which had captured my imagination from the first time I’d read it – surely I should have been devastated to learn of its dubious roots. By the time Smith contacted me, however, I had become frustrated with the verse. It seemed the more I analysed it, the more I found myself wondering at the implications it actually held; to confirm the poem’s ancient roots would, surely, validate the fetishization of loss which I was deeply suspicious of. With the background noise of loss and ancient Nordic identity muted, however, it is suddenly easier to read ‘The Unst Lay’ for what it is: a rather fine piece of dialect verse.

*

Tradition and history are crucial topics of debate in Scottish literary studies. Cairns Craig argues that Scottish literary tradition is vexed by contradictory impulses to chart, yet also defy, the primacy of historical consciousness.

¹⁰² Ibid, p13

¹⁰³ Ibid

Throughout my creative practice, I have sought to celebrate the means by which Shetland poetry and oral tradition have actually come to defy the narrative of 'loss' perpetuated by the recorded literary tradition, and (on a very modest scale) re-constituted, in film-poetry and film-portraiture, a digital narrative archive for Shetland cultural memory and literary identity. Rather than shirking the presence of the linguistic wasteland, my films have actively sought to explore this space, rendering its form into an artistic practice which moves from the idea of 'wasteland' – a place of detritus, hostile to new growth – into the fertile space of a wilderness. It is by this process of 'rewilding' that I hope to continue to grow my artistic method.

Bibliography

- Angus, James Stout. *A Glossary of the Shetland Dialect*. Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1914.
- Barnes, Michael. "Jakob Jakobsen and the Norn Language of Shetland." In *Shetland's Northern Links: Language and History*, edited by Doreen J. Waugh, 1–15. Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1996.
- Barnes, Michael. "The Study of Norn." In *Forum for Research into the Languages of Scotland and Ulster*. Orkney, 2009.
- Blind, Karl. "Discovery of Odinic Songs in Shetland." In *Nineteenth Century*, 1091–1113, 1879.
- Bold, Alan. *MacDiarmid*. London: Paladin, 1990.
- Brannigan, John. *Archipelagic Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Craig, Cairns. *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996.
- Craig, Cairns. *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Crichton-Smith, Iain. *Collected Poems*. Edinburgh: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1995.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Gairn, Louisa. "MacDiarmid and Ecology." In *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Gardiner, Michael. *Modern Scottish Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Graham, Laurence. "W.J Tait, 1919-1982: A Tribute." *The New Shetlander*. 181, Hairst (1992).
- Graham, Laurence L., and John J Graham, eds. *A Shetland Anthology: Poetry from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. Lerwick: Shetland Publishing Company, 1998.
- Jakobsen, Jakob. *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland: Two Popular Lectures*. Lerwick: T. & J. Manson, 1897.
- Jakobsen, Jakob. *The Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*. AMS Press, 1985.
- Jamieson, Robert Alan. "A 'Quite-Right' Upon the Sacred Peatbank." *Fortnight* 442, no. March (2006): 24–27.
- Jamieson, Robert Alan. "Da Saekrit Paetbank: Meditaesjins Apo a Sjetlin Poyit's Responsibelitie T'dir Middir Tung." In *Dialect 04: Two Day Conference and Public Debate on the Development of the Shetland Dialect*, edited by Shetland Arts Trust, 56–62. Lerwick, 2004.
- Jamieson, Robert Alan. *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*. Edited by Daniel O'Rourke. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994.
- Jamieson, Robert Alan. *Nort Atlantik Drift*. Edinburgh: Luath Press Ltd., 2007.

- Jamieson, Robert Alan. *Shoormal*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986.
- Knooihuizen, Remco Knooihuizen. "Fishing for Words: The Taboo Language of Shetland Fishermen and the Dating of Norn Language Death." *Transactions of the Philological Society* 106, no. 1 (2008): 100–113.
- Larrington, Carolyne. *Trans. The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999.
- MacDiarmid, Hugh. *Complete Poems Vol I*. Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1996.
- MacNeil, Kevin, ed. *These Islands, We Sing*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011.
- MacQuillan, Ruth. "Hugh MacDiarmid's Shetland Poetry." In *Hugh MacDiarmid in Shetland*, edited by Laurence Graham and Brian Smith. Lerwick, 1992.
- Melchers, Gunnel. "'Nornomania' in the Research on Language in the Northern Isles." In *Language Contact and Development around the North Sea*, edited by Merja-Riitta Stenroos, Martti Mäkinen, and Inge Særheim, 231–36. John Benjamins Publishing, 2012.
- Moberg, Bergur Rønne. "The Ultraminor to Be or Not to Be: Deprivation and Compensation Strategies in Faroese Literature." *Journal of Word Literature* 2, no. 2 (2017).
- Moberg, Bergur Rønne, and David Damrosch. "Introduction: Defining the Ultraminor." *Journal of Word Literature* 2, no. 2 (2017).
- Muir, Edwin. *Scott and Scotland*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982.
- Smith, Brian. "The Development of the Spoken and Written Shetland Dialect: A Historian's View." In *Shetland's Northern Links: Language and History*, edited by Doreen J. Waugh, 30–43. Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1996.
- Smith, Brian. "The Unst Lay: Ancient Verse, or the Earliest Shetland Dialect Poem?" Lecture. Scottish Society for Northern Studies, Edinburgh. 25th November, 2017.
- Smith, Brian. "Wir Ain Aald Language: Attitudes to the Shetland Dialect since the 19th Century," in *Dialect 04: Two Day Conference and Public Debate on the Development of the Shetland Dialect*. Ed. Shetland Arts Trust. Lerwick: 2004.
- Smith, Mark Ryan. *The Literature of Shetland*. Lerwick: The Shetland Times Ltd., 2014.
- Smith, Mark Ryan. "Words on an Island." *The Drouth, Issue 51*, n.d.
- Tallack, Malachy. "Northern Lights." *Scottish Review of Books*, August 2014.
- Tallack, Malachy. *Sixty Degrees North*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2015.
- Thomson, Alex, and Mainland, Jim. "On a Raised Beach, a Dialogue." *Writing the North*, 2013.
<http://www.writingthenorth.com/dialogues/on-a-raised-beach/>.
- Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012.