

The closed room: expressions of existentialism and absurdity in Gaelic drama

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Introduction

This paper is an exploration of six Gaelic plays written in the 1960s and 1970s: in particular it seeks to contextualise them with European drama of a roughly contemporaneous period by the likes of Ionesco, Sartre, Beckett and to demonstrate the internationalism of this genre of Gaelic writing. In the period under consideration Gaelic drama was most commonly performed as a one-act competition piece by amateur companies, (Macleod 2011) and the plays considered here were all part of that genre. While the Scottish Community Drama Association and An Comunn Gaidhealach competitions might seem far removed from Parisian and London theatres, the influence of the latter over the content of some of the former is visible. The articles in this journal and Macleod (2011) show that Gaelic drama has made a major contribution to the development of cultural expression within the Gaelic community on account of the volume of plays produced in amateur companies across the country and the number of people engaging actively with the arts. This paper, though not an exhaustive study of the Gaelic drama of this era, is a demonstration of the importance and excellence of this genre. It teases out various themes from Absurdist and existential theatre in other languages and uses some of the extensive scholarship of that drama as a mechanism to consider a selection of plays by three playwrights Finlay MacLeod (Fionnlagh MacLeòid) (1937-), Donnie Maclean (Donaidh MacIlleathain) (1939-2003) and Iain Crichton Smith (Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn) (1928-1998), all from the Isle of Lewis. The first two of these writers revealed to me in personal correspondence and in interviews that they were indeed interested in international theatre of the type explored here and Smith's non-dramatic work has previously been considered in this vein, with Cox suggesting that one can find in Smith's stories the influence of existentialism and also Camus' concept of the Absurd (1992: 195) (see also Macleod 2007, Bateman 2013).

Until the 1960s or so, while Gaelic drama was very popular in both the cities and rural communities, the style of the drama was largely sequential: (Macleod 2011) there would be clear plots, frequent musical interludes and themes which tended to be light-hearted or historical. The 1960s saw a burgeoning of dramatic output with playwrights deliberately experimenting in style and challenging audience expectations: one of the first of these was Finlay MacLeod's 'Ceann Cropic', written in 1963 in Aberdeen where Macleod was a (mature) student of psychology. Of all the plays under discussion here, this was surely the most challenging to its audiences: with no linear plot, two odd characters and meandering dialogue it has clear parallels with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (first staged in its original French in

1953), a play that has been universally recognised as a pivotal point in theatre history and has been succinctly described by Bennett as:

... famously the play where nothing happens. Two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, spend the length of the play anticipating the arrival of a man named Godot, who never shows up. While waiting, their conversations weave from Jesus to suicide, among many other things. (Bennett 2011: 27)

The title, 'Ceann Cropic', is in itself noteworthy and somewhat difficult to translate: perhaps 'Stuffed Head' ('crappit heid' in Scots)¹. It is a traditional food of the north of Scotland and common in Lewis where MacLeod grew up; it consists of a fish head stuffed with oatmeal and other parts of the fish: loved by some and loathed by others, because of its pungent odour and less than beguiling visual appeal, it certainly has a strong cultural resonance. 'Ceann' and 'Cropic' are also the names of the two characters in this play. In a discussion of absurd identities with regard to *Waiting for Godot* Suciú (2007: 135) discusses the 'problem' of naming, noting that the names of the four characters have been 'interpreted as representatives of the great four powers of the world in the immediate context following World War II', thus bringing definition and giving a cultural setting to a play which otherwise denies these. While the reading of *Waiting for Godot* in terms of post-war power politics is now largely discredited, it would be inappropriate to discuss MacLeod's play without acknowledging the association of his title and the names of the characters to its cultural context.

The play is set in a room and the only stage furnishings are two large tea chests on which the two characters sit, apparently waiting for something to happen. The room itself is, of course, a device as it encloses the characters; it separates them from what is happening outside the door and also protects them from an unspecified threat: it is clear from early on in the play that both characters are scared of what is outside the room.

There is no story or plot, in the traditional sense, in this play: it is merely two characters speaking to each other, without communicating. Although there is no language barrier between the characters, their dialogue is far from what might be understood as standard conversation. Esslin remarked that one of the most notable features of Absurd drama is its treatment of language: according to his definition of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' it is because it is in some respect 'anti-literary' that there has been a 'turning away from language as an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning'. (Esslin 1980: 328) Certainly here MacLeod's dialogue

corresponds with Suciú's description of how Absurdist playwrights employed language:

The experiments to which it was subjected gave rise to a language which is dislocated, disjointed, and full of clichés, puns, repetitions, non sequiturs, stereotyped phrases, conventionalised speech ... meant to support the parody and highlight the absurdity of language in context. (Suciú 2007: 132)

Ceann Cropic begins with Ceann entering and pretending to make a cup of tea for Cropic:

Cha do chuir ... cha do chuir mi siucar idir innt ... dè na tha thu gabhail? ... Seachd gu leth? ... ochd. Ochd thuirt thu an toiseachd ... 's e ... 's e seachd gu leth ... Cuiridh mi sia innte.

Leamon! Nach eil fhios agad nach eil leamon innte is sia gu leth de shiucar innte ... Seo, tha sia gu leth innte.

Leamon na aonar! Chan eil thu ag iarraidh teatha? ... Ma tha thuirt thu gun robh. ... Thuirt thu teatha ... Cha leig thu leas òlaidh mi fhìn i.

Tha seo ro mhilis! ...Dè na chuir thu innt? ... Trì? ... Dh'iarr mi ort leth na spàinne a chur innte.

(I didn't ... I didn't put sugar in it at all ... how much do you take? ... Seven and a half? ... eight. Eight you said to begin with ... yes ... it's seven and a half ... I'll put six in it. Lemon! You know there is no lemon in it with six and a half spoons of sugar in it ... Here, there are six and a half spoons in it.

Lemon on its own! You don't want tea? ... But you said that you did. ... You said tea ... You don't need to, I'll drink it myself.

This is too sweet! ... What did you put in it? ... Three? I asked you to put half a spoon of sugar in it.)²

This ridiculous conversation about how to drink tea, and many other segments of their interaction, is 'clown-like', and again 'clowning' was postulated by Esslin in his definition as a pivotal feature of Absurd drama which relied heavily on verbal nonsense and abstract theatrical spectacles. (Esslin: 328)

Styan went so far as to suggest that all the characters of *Godot* and *Endgame* (Beckett 1957) are pairs of comics or clowns:

The activity of these characters is not 'action' in the sense that it works to develop a story; it is merely 'performance', the visible presence of an entertaining character. [...] His clowns are therefore abstractions standing more for the nature of existence than for people. [...] They] wait for the end that does not come, like figures carved in time, but they do so with a pathetic animation. And it turns out to be very funny to watch them. (Styan 1981: 127)

The conversation about the tea is followed by an abrupt question from Cropic: 'Bheil an dorus glaist?' (*Is the door locked?*): from that the audience might begin to wonder if the two characters are hiding from something. Both Ceann and Cropic ask again and again about the windows and the door: are they shut and are they safe? It is perhaps this fear of whatever is outside their enclosed space which leaves them unable to maintain a rational logically progressing conversation.

The characters keep on asking questions of each other, not just about their safety, but in an attempt to identify each other. The immediate assumption when we first meet the characters is that they know each other, but their repetitive questioning would suggest that they do not really know one another, after all:

CEANN Cò thu? (CROPIC DOESN'T MOVE)
 Cò thu? (LOUDER)

CROPIC Cò mi?

CEANN Cò thu?

CROPIC (GOING TO BOX, PONDERING THE QUESTION. SITS BOX RIGHT)
 Cò mi?

CEANN Cò mi? Cò thu? Cò e?
 (CALMER) Cò Sinn? Cò sibh? Cò iad?

CEANN *Who are you? (CROPIC DOESN'T MOVE)*
 Who are you? (LOUDER)

CROPIC *Who am I?*

CEANN *Who are you?*
 CROPIC *(GOING TO BOX, PONDERING THE QUESTION. SITS BOX RIGHT)*
 Who am I?
 CEANN *Who am I? Who are you? Who is he?*
 (CALMER) Who are we? Who are you? Who are they?

They continue in this way until eventually the audience, and perhaps they themselves, learn each other's names.

Of nonsense language in plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, Esslin suggests: 'the literature of verbal nonsense expresses more than mere playfulness. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language, it batters at the enclosing walls of the human condition itself'. (1983: 341) He points at various literatures which have traditions of nonsense poems and rhymes. The Gaelic literary tradition, though not discussed by Esslin, clearly supports nonsense verse and oratory, for example in its puirt-a-beul songs and alliterative runs in story-telling, of which there is a clear example in MacLeod's play:

Ceann: 'Ni mort. 'Ne milleadh. 'Ne math. 'Ne misg. 'Ni marag. 'Ni mùin.
 'Ni moladadh. 'Ne magadh. 'Ni mùin. 'Ne miall. 'Ni miastaireachd.
 'Ni miorbhailean.³

About half-way through the play, after Ceann and Cropic have spoken about their names, about fishing and different fish, a post-card comes round the curtain onto the stage. They are frightened by the post-card and do not wish to read it. The post-card is clearly a threat of something undefined which exists outside their room. Ceann and Cropic then imagine that there is someone else on the stage with them: they refer to him as Cas-Cham ('Crooked Leg'), again another noun used to culturally locate the character and the action ('Cas-Cham' being a variation of 'Cas-Chrom', a type of spade). Ceann and Cropic attempt to interrogate him for a while, as they did with each other, but then he leaves. Ceann and Cropic cannot agree on what this man looked like and once again their conversation becomes illogical and lacks the structures of normal conversation. The play ends with the two of them leaving the stage: venturing outside of their safe room. Ceann, however, returns with a box; he speaks to the audience and shows them what is inside the box. There is nothing in the box, although he maintains, to begin with, that there is. With his final and prophetic statement he cautions against dismissing something just because it is invisible: 'Na bi thusa smaoinichadh nach eil e ann ged nach fhaic thusa e' (*Don't*

you believe that it is not there even though you don't see it). He throws the imaginary contents of the box at the audience and tells them that it is 'ceann-cropic'. Ceann's final utterance is very significant: this is about the problem of certitude, how we can know and understand things. The lack of order and rationalism depicted in 'Ceann Cropic' is intensified by the characters being shut in a room: Esslin noted (1983: 144) in relation to the mainstream theatre of the Absurd that 'enclosed space enforces certain dialogue which is often banal'; the trope of the shut room is used again in the Gaelic plays discussed here and while it may have led to banality elsewhere, in *Ceann Cropic* it has resulted in serious introspection and discovery.

The second play of MacLeod's to be discussed here is also set in one room: there is a twist here, however, as we are also able to hear the opinions of others outside of the room. If one can find similarities between *Waiting for Godot* and 'Ceann Cropic', the influence of Beckett can again be noted in 'Na Fògarraich' (*The Exiles*). This time MacLeod uses a device that Beckett used in the one-act one-character play *Krapp's Last Tape* (first performed in 1958) where the protagonist has for a long time been in the habit of recording his opinions about life and events at regular intervals. He then sometimes reviews his tapes and comments on them, for example: 'Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway.' (Knowlson 1992: 9) Esslin (1983: 79) was of the opinion that Beckett, in his use of the tape recordings, found a device which displayed the 'graphic expression for the problem of the ever-changing identity of the self': this is true also of the tape used in MacLeod's play. 'Na Fògarraich' was first written for radio in 1968 and was later adapted for stage. This play is set in Chicago and there are six characters: the exact relationship between all of them is not completely clear, but they form an extended family unit of some kind. Five of the six characters are together in a sitting room in Chicago and the sixth is only heard speaking on the tape which one of the characters, Iain, has brought home with him after spending three months in Lewis on an extended holiday. Although the play is set in Chicago, clearly all the characters originally hail from the Isle of Lewis: Chicago, of course, being one of many cities in North America where the Gaels emigrated to in the twentieth century.

For the most part the tape contains messages from Anna in Lewis to the Chicago family that had not returned to Lewis, but from time to time Iain is heard speaking to her. It is this technique of hearing Iain speak to both Anna in Lewis and his friends in Chicago about essentially the same subject which allows the audience to see how an individual's perception changes: this device is effectively causing a schism in the time continuum in that we simultaneously see the present and the past. At both points in time Iain is comparing Lewis with Chicago and thinking about Lewis as he knew it in the past and the place as it is on his return.

In Lewis (and recorded on tape) Iain praises all that the 'new world' has to offer the immigrant Gael and his descendants:

TAPE: IAIN ... saobhreas is farsuingeachd ... freedom aig a chula duine ... 'son fosgladh a mach .. 's tilgeadh dhiot nam bannan a bh' ort 'nad oige ... obair ann dhan a chula duine ... tighean breagha soillear central heating .. educational opportunity aig a' chlann gus an tig a' foghlum a mach air an cluasan ... Chic aig Domhnall ann a sin ... deanamh Oceanography 's chan fhac a sheanair cail ach dorgh is modarach .. Myrtle a nighean ... laboratory technician .. chan fhaca a seanmhair ach strabhlaidh is polais ..

MURCHADH 'N tusa tha sud Iain?

DOMHNALL Gettesburg ann an Arnol.

MARAID (off) ... ach an cluinn sinn Anna.

TAPE: IAIN ... laboratory technician .. chan fhaca a seanmhair ach strabhlaidh is polais ..

Sud an duthaich dham bu choir an oigridh gu leir a dhol ... sud agad Tir nan Og ... de th' ann a seo dhaibh ... seoladh is hotels ... air falbh darna leth na bliadha ... 's chan' eil entertainment air talamh ann dhaibh .. no movies no dancing no drugstore ... cionnas a tha 'n oigridh beo ann a seo.

TAPE: Bha thu fhein beo ann Iain .. 's mise leat.

ANNA

TAPE: IAIN 'N uair a bha mise greis anns na States Anna ... bha mi g' radh Wow! Nach bochd nach robh mi seo bho thus ... 's a faicinn na cloinne ri fas bha mi delighted na bha de chuir-seachad is de dhibhearsain aca ... toys, footballs, tricycles ... a bharrachd air na bh' againne nar eirigh suas ... falbh dhan a sgoil le briogais mhoiliscin ... 's amadan de dh'fhad monarch fo m' achlais ...

TAPE: IAIN ... *wealth and opportunities ... freedom for everyone ... to develop.. and to shrug off the ties from youth ... work for everyone ... beautiful bright houses with central heating .. educational opportunity for the children until education comes out of their ears ... Donald's Chic there ... doing Oceanography and his grandfather never saw anything except handlines and fishhooks.. Myrtle his daughter... is a laboratory technician ... her grandmother never saw anything but chains and polish ..*

MURCHADH *Is that you Iain?*

DOMHNALL *Gettesburg in Arnol.*

MARAID (off) ... *if we could hear Anna.*

TAPE: IAIN ... *laboratory technician .. her grandmother never saw anything but chains and polish ... That's the country that all the young folk should go to ... there's your Land of the Youth ... what is here for them ... sailing and hotels ... away from home half the year ... and there is no*

*entertainment at all for them .. no movies no dancing no drugstore ...
how are the young folk alive here.*

TAPE: *You lived here Iain ... and me with you.*

ANNA

TAPE: IAIN *Once I was a while in the States Anna ... I said Wow! Isn't it a shame
I wasn't here from the beginning ... seeing the children growing up I
was delighted with what they had for fun ... toys, footballs, tricycles
... more than what we had growing up ... going to school with
moleskin trousers ... and a stupid lump of peat in my armpit ...*

While Iain is content to praise his current homeland to Anna and to apparently reject his attachment to Lewis, when speaking solely to his peers in the States he has a different opinion. The tape in this play demonstrates how inconsistent and erratic people's opinions and identities can be. By allowing us to see and hear Iain speak from two different locations and at different points in time we see that Iain does not know what he wants or how he feels. When he was in Lewis he praised America but when he is in Chicago he misses Lewis greatly (for example he plays a lot of traditional Gaelic exile songs and looks forward to receiving his weekly copy of the local newspaper *The Stornoway Gazette*). His statement below, made after returning to Chicago, shows that he is not as content with his lot as he appeared on the tape:

IAIN *Dh'fhag mise Leodhas 'na mo bhalach naoi-bliadhn'-deug ... 's cha
mor gun chuir e smuain orm ... cha robh fhios agam gun do dh'fhag
mi cail air mo chulaibh ... gus a mhaduinn a rainig a Marloch Quebec
... 's a chaidh ar cur dhan a' chattle truck a thug sinn gu ruigeadh
London Ontario ... 'S sheas sinn ann a sin man slavaichean fhads a
thagh tuathanaich sinn ... sin a cheud uair a bhual agams, Ille tha thu
'nad aonar ... tha thu cho lom sa bha thu a tighinn dhan t-saoghal
agus is fhad a seo tigh Iain Spagaich ... 's ged a thug an duthaich sa
dhomh saobhreas a tha cumail taca rium ... an Chevrolet air an drive
... an deep freeze anns a' bhasement ... a rud a dh'fhag mi air mo
chulaibh ann a London Ontario cha d' fhuair mi riamh air ais e .. 's
nuair a chaidh mi dhachaidh dha lorg am bliadhna ... cha robh e idir
ann ... cha robh sgial air ... 'se cuis-thruas a th' anns an fhogarrach.*

IAIN *I left Lewis as a 19 year old boy ...and I hardly thought about it ... I
didn't know that I had left anything behind me ... until the morning the
Marloch arrived in Quebec ... and we were put into the cattle truck
which took us to London Ontario ... And we stood there like slaves
while the farmers chose us ... that's the first time it struck me, boy you
are alone ... you are as bare as you were the day you came into the
world and this is a far place from Iain Spagach's house ... and
although this country has given me wealth to support me ... the
Chevrolet on the drive ... the deep freeze in the basement ... the thing
that I left behind me in London Ontario I never got it back .. and when I*

went home to look for it this year ... it wasn't there at all ... there was no sign of it ... the exile is an object of pity.

This play brings a fresh interpretation of 'cianalas', one of the main themes of modern Gaelic literature: (MacLeod 2010) here the nostalgia of the exile is depicted alongside a representation of the paradox of identity. Even though Iain gives two conflicting versions of a situation, at both points in time he clearly believed he was telling the truth and was not intentionally establishing deceptions. The tape, an object void of human emotion and bias, shows that there is no such one-sided view: the truth is relative. The focus on relativity of meaning in MacLeod's play has much in common with other European plays. For example, theatre scholar Umberto Mariani (2008) has been critical of Esslin for ignoring the debt the existentialist theatre and fiction of Sartre and Camus owe to Pirandello whom he believes first portrayed the absurdity of the human condition on stage, much earlier than either of the Frenchmen. Mariani believes (2008: 106) that 'uncertainty about one's identity is caused not only by the loss of earlier certitudes, but also by the sense of the change constantly occurring in our personality, its instability, as well as its complexity and multiplicity'; this idea he believes originates in the theatre of Pirandello, rather than Beckett as Esslin believes. Whatever this concept's origin, it is well illustrated in MacLeod's play.

Both 'Ceann-Cropic' and 'Na Fògarraich' use props and stage settings to very specific and focussed intent. I have discussed elsewhere (2014) how the Gaelic playwright Donnie Maclean was particularly interested in stage design; further analysis of his work and how he uses the stage and props could demonstrate how some of his work could also be seen to be influenced by trends in contemporary European theatre. For example, in Maclean's 'An Sgoil Dhubh' (1974), which literally means the Black School(-ing) but is the equivalent of 'the black art', the design of the set is central to the performance. In it, the stage is divided into two halves: on one side an old woman sits alone in a wheelchair with nothing beside her. She is in a room mostly by herself but interacts with her son: the pair clearly do not get on. There is a window in her room through which she often observes life outside. The action on this dark side is always surreal. On the other side, the stage is designed to

reflect a contemporary and apparently ordinary family home in Lewis. Splitting the stage in this manner with hugely contrasting settings emphasises the apparent isolation of the old woman; it also illustrates and accentuates the absurdity of her situation.

The old lady herself, though, is not apparently aware of her isolated existence. She constructs a life built of lies, possibly in an attempt to bring some comfort to herself in the face of such isolation and unhappiness. The relationship between the old woman and her son is tense: he clearly resents her and having to look after her. During the first interaction between them on the stage he tells her that he is building a wheelbarrow with which to dump her body into a grave when she soon dies. When she challenges him on this – ‘Bheil truas idir agad ri cailleach bheag, bhoichd a tha a' cur seachad deireadh a beatha anns an dorchadas seo?’ (*Have you no pity at all for a poor old woman who is spending the end of her life in this darkness?*) – he responds that he does not.

Her son is clearly cruel and unloving towards her: when she asks him to give her a cup of tea and he gives her water; when she begs him to take her on a trip around the island, his response is to wheel her around the stage so that she might look out of the window. The window is symbolic of her imagination and her perception: she does not always see the same thing. At times she sees something that scares her: ‘Air adhart, air adhart a thrustair. Chan eil a' sin ach uinneag a phollution’ [*move on, move on you rogue. That is only the window of pollution*] and at other times incidents from her past, which pleases her: ‘Tha sin nas feàrr! An taobhsa, tha sealladh brèagha - mo bheatha a dh'fhalbh agus nach bi ann a-chaidh, chaidh tuilleadh. An taobh ud, salachar an latha 'n-diugh agus nas miosa ri tighinn.’ [*That's better! This side, there is a beautiful view - my life that has gone and that won't ever return. That side is today's dirt and worse to come*]. (Mac'Illeathain 2005: 74-75)

On the bright side of the stage there is a Lewis family preparing for and then welcoming an American cousin who, as it turns out, is coming to work in the nascent oil support services based in Stornoway. In sharp contrast with the dark side, the action and dialogue here is logical and sequential. The logic is only shattered when

the man from the dark side enters and having participated in socialising, leaves with the American visitor to the dark side, breaking down the (invisible) barrier in the middle of the stage to worship the oil on the dark side. It is presumably the oil that the old woman sees out of her window and that she fears.

'An Sgoil Dhubh' uses stage design as an essential part of the drama. Maclean uses it to create a world which is surreal, uncomfortable and to a degree frightening. In another of his plays Maclean uses just one key prop to great effect to demonstrate the absurdity of modern life. I have previously written (MacLeod 2014) about how Maclean's play 'An Dall' (The Blind Man) was clearly influenced by Ionesco's *The Lesson* and about how Maclean's principal character's blindness is symbolic of his separation from society. 'An Dall's' setting in a regular living room is typical of Ionesco's style where characters are set in 'real-life', 'normal' situations, but are unable to communicate or interact with their surroundings. While Beckett and MacLeod showed this inability to communicate via clichéd nonsense utterances, Maclean uses his character's addiction to the television and his reaction to its breaking as a metaphor for man's inability to communicate.

Suffering because of an inability to communicate effectively is seen again in a play by Iain Crichton Smith. Smith is well known as a poet, novelist and short story writer in English and Gaelic. He was also a dramatist: a couple of his plays have been published in Gaelic, but, like the majority of Gaelic plays, they are largely uncollected and unpublished. In one of Smith's plays, 'Tog Orm Mo Speal' (*Give Me My Scythe*) (1979), we see the comic character of Murchadh / Murdo who first appeared in the serialised Gaelic novel *Murchadh* (*Gairm* 1979-80) and has elsewhere appeared in the English novel *Thoughts of Murdo* (1993), and in the posthumously published collection *Murdo: The Life and Works* (2001). In this play, as elsewhere, Murchadh is simultaneously a comic figure and a philosopher (somewhat similar to Esslin's description of the Absurd clown). Although Murchadh might at times appear a comic figure with a degree of absurdity in utterances which are not always logical or easy to follow, there are certainly numerous naturalistic conversations and there is a clear sequence of events in the play.

Murchadh lives with his sister Màiri and the play is set entirely in the house they share. It begins with Màiri speaking to the Minister; she has sent for him for support as she is worried that Murchadh has stopped working:

MÀIRI Thàinig e a-steach o chionn dà latha leis an speal 's thubhairt e nach robh e a' dol a dhèanamh car tuilleadh. Chan urrainn dhomh a' Hoover a chur air an làr leis.

MURCHADH (*anns an aon ghuth ath-ghairmeil*) Edgar Allan Hoover! (*bheir am Ministear sùil air*)

MÀIRI (*ann an guth ìosal*) Chan urrainn dhut tuigsinn dè bha e ag ràdh.

MINISTEAR Fàg thusa còmhla riumsa e.

MÀIRI 'S cha ghabh e a lit nas motha. Chleachd e bhith a' gabhail a lit a h-uile latha ach shad e an spàinn chun an làir.

MÀIRI He came in two days ago with the scythe and he said that he wasn't going to do any more. I can't put the hoover on the floor because of it.

MURCHADH: (in a repetitive tone): Edgar Allan Hoover! (the Minister looks at him)

MÀIRI (in a low voice) You can't understand what he is saying.

MINISTEAR You leave him with me.

MÀIRI: And he won't take his porridge either. He used to eat his porridge every day but he threw the spoon to the floor.

Màiri is concerned about her brother as he has stopped the activities that marked his life as 'normal'; he has forgone the normal actions that society demands of people to fit in, such as: work, eating the right food at the appropriate time, engaging in meaningful conversations with people around about. These actions are our individual 'timetables'; the dramatist and philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) used the term 'functions' (1948) of these activities and, since Murchadh is not fulfilling his 'functions', people are both worried about him and wary of him. Marcel discussed this issue of how people can be defined by their mundane actions and how in general we want and need to ascribe these roles to others:

Travelling on the Underground, I often wonder with a kind of dread what can be the inward reality of the life of this or that man employed on the railway - the man who opens the doors, for instance, or the one who punches the tickets. Surely everything both within him and outside him conspires to identify this man with his functions - meaning not only his functions as worker, as trade union member or as voter, but with his vital functions as well. The rather horrible expression 'time table' perfectly describes his life. So many hours for each function. Sleep too is a function which must be discharged so that the other functions may be exercised in their turn. The same with pleasure, with relaxation; it is logical that the weekly allowance of recreation should be determined by an expert on hygiene; recreation is a psycho-organic function which must not be neglected any more than, for instance, the function of sex. We need go no further; this sketch is sufficient to suggest the emergence of a kind of vital schedule; the details will vary with the country, the climate, the profession, etc., but what matters is that there is a schedule. (Marcel 1948: 2)

It is not only that Murchadh has stopped doing the things that he should be doing, but that he is, in the opinions of others, doing things that are not expected of him. It is evident from the setting and from the dialogue between Murchadh and the Minister that Murchadh enjoys reading. He has a keen interest in reading philosophy and when he says to the Minister, with regard to Màiri, "nach eil 'fhios aig an "conscious" aice dè tha an "subconscious" a' dèanamh..." (*her "conscious" does not know what her "sub-conscious" is doing*), the Minister responds critically:

Tha thu air a bhith a' leughadh leabhraichean a-rithist. Nach tubhairt mi riut sgur a leughadh? Tha mòran leughaidh na sgìths don fheòil. Tha sin anns an fhìrinn a tha sin. Tha gach nì anns an fhìrinn.

(You have been reading books again. Didn't I say to you to stop reading? A lot of reading is tiring to the flesh. That is in the Bible that is. Everything is in the Bible.)

The Minister, like Màiri, and presumably others who come into contact with Murchadh do not know how to deal with a crofter who reads philosophy and who thinks deeply about the situation around about him. As Sartre observed:

A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer, just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing with a direct regard which does not see at all, which is no longer meant to see, since it is the rule and not the interest of the moment which determines the point he must fix his eyes on (the sight "fixed at ten paces"). (Sartre 1996: 59)

Màiri and the Minister are certainly uncomfortable with Murchadh reading and focussing on something that is not part of their expectations or their normality, and as a result of their failure to understand him, they are also unable to communicate with him effectively. This communication failure often results in humour in the play. One example of this is when a Psychiatrist meets with Murchadh, at Màiri's request:

PSYCHIATRIST Èisd rium a-nis. Nuair a chanas mi facal riut can thusa am facal a thig a steach ort. A bheil thu deiseil?
MURCHADH Chan eil.
(*greiseag nan tàmh*)
PSYCHIATRIST A bheil thu deiseil a-nis?
MURCHADH (*an dèidh ùine*) Chan eil.
(*greiseag nan tàmh*)
PSYCHIATRIST A bheil thu deiseil a-nis? Canaidh mi facal.
MURCHADH Facal.
PSYCHIATRIST Dè?
MURCHADH 'S e "facal" am facal a thàinig a-steach orm nuair a thubhairt thusa "facal".
PSYCHIATRIST Tòisichidh sinn a-rithist. Seo am facal a-nis. "Arbhar".
MURCHADH Donn
PSYCHIATRIST Donn?
MURCHADH Ay 's ann as t-fhoghar a bhios an arbhar ann, 's bidh na craobhan fo dhuilleach dhonn. Leugh mi sin ann an leabhar uair, chan eil fhios nach ann anns a' Bhiobhall.

PSYCHIATRIST Facal eile. "Gorm".
 MURCHADH Feur.
 PSYCHIATRIST Feur? Feur? 'S ann a tha am feur uaine.
 MURCHADH Chan ann ann an Gàidhlig. 'S ann a tha feur gorm ann an Gàidhlig.
 PSYCHIATRIST Cò chunnaic a riamh feur gorm?
 MURCHADH Chunnaic muinntir na Gàidhlig feur gorm ...

PSYCHIATRIST Listen to me now. When I say a word to you you say the first word that comes to you. Are you ready?
*MURCHADH No.
 (silence for a little while)*
PSYCHIATRIST Are you ready now?
*MURCHADH (after a while) No.
 (silence for a little while)*
PSYCHIATRIST Are you ready now? I will say a word.
MURCHADH Word.
PSYCHIATRIST What?
MURCHADH "Word" was the first word that came to mind when you said "word".
PSYCHIATRIST We will begin again. This is the word now. "Corn".
MURCHADH Brown
PSYCHIATRIST Brown?
MURCHADH Ay, it's in Autumn that there is corn, and the trees' leaves are brown. I read that in a book once, I don't know if it wasn't the Bible.
PSYCHIATRIST Another word. "Blue".
MURCHADH Grass.
PSYCHIATRIST Grass? Grass? The grass is green.
MURCHADH Not in Gaelic. The grass is blue in Gaelic.
PSYCHIATRIST Who ever saw blue grass?
MURCHADH Gaelic speakers saw blue grass ...

Although the Psychiatrist puzzles over Murchadh's insistence that the grass is 'blue', Murchadh's statement is consistent with how the colour spectrum is verbalised in Gaelic. Gaelic has different colour spectrum divisions to English and the English green / blue / grey colours do not always match exactly onto Gaelic ones. This bizarre word association quiz continues for some time: each time with Murchadh giving an unexpected answer. Eventually the psychiatrist believes that he knows what is wrong with him: "Tha an dà chànan aige. Sin is coireach. An dà chànan. A' Bheurla 's a' Ghàidhlig. Tha inntinn troimh-chèile. Chuir an dà chànan inntinn troimh-chèile." (*He is bilingual. That is what is wrong. The two languages. English and Gaelic. His mind is confused. The two languages confused his mind.*)

This 'problem' of bilingualism is a recurring theme in the work of Smith, of course: the comic figure of the jester has been used to good effect in both his English and Gaelic poetry as an image of the bilingual, bifurcated fool (Macleod 2001) and he has elsewhere written about doctors diagnosing bilingualism as the root of a person's mental instability (e.g. the poems 'Dè tha ceàrr' and 'An Litir Àraid' in *Bùrn is Aran* [1960]). Here, however, we see more of Smith's comic hero struggling and perpetually seeking a resolution to the predicament he finds himself in. At the end of the play Murchadh accepts that things need not be as others expect them to be and curiously he returns to the routine expected of him: significantly, it is not with a heavy heart that he returns, but with a song.

When Murchadh lifts his scythe again at the end in preparation to resume the old activities, a comparison must be made to Camus's portrayal of Sisyphus from Greek mythology (from which Esslin drew heavily in his definition of the 'absurd'). When Sisyphus had to roll his stone up the hill each day, as the gods made him do, and did this task without complaint even though the stone rolled back each day, Camus was of the opinion that Sisyphus must have been happy. Murchadh, too, seems to finally accept his fate at the end of the play when he returns to work, singing; his final utterance is both surprisingly indifferent and axiomatic 'agus an dèidh sin, tog orm mo speal' ('*and after that bring me my scythe*'; ie 'I will just get on with life'). As Esslin put it:

It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation. (Esslin 1965: 23)

While this is clearly not an absurd play, according to Esslin's definition, because of its sequential and logical structure, there are certainly interesting parallels to be drawn between it and Camus' reworking of Sisyphus and particularly Esslin's interpretation of it.⁴

Not all of Smith's plays have absurd-like or comic characters: his two published works *An Coileach (The Cockerel)* (1966) and *A' Chùirt (The Court)* (1966) have much more linear story-lines; they do, however, challenge established ideologies and portrayals of history and are highly stylised explorations of ideals, events and individuals. In complete contrast to the pared-back language of MacLeod's 'Ceann Cropic', these two plays display the best of Smith's consummate word-craft as he brings two well-known stories (Peter's betrayal of Christ in the former and an incident related to the Highland Clearances in the latter) to the stage and explores anew themes of ideology and responsibility. The discussion below focuses only on the latter of these two plays.

A' Chùirt is based on the same story as Smith's well-known novel *Consider the Lilies* (1968), and thus the plight of one (fictitious) Mrs Scott and her interactions with historic figure Patrick Sellar (factor to the Duke of Sutherland). This particular working of the story (Smith has several versions of it in various media in both English and Gaelic) is set in the court room where Sellar is being tried for his actions at the time of the Clearances: and we only learn of what happened to Mrs Scott (being forcibly evicted by Sellar and being refused help by her church Elder) through her responses to the various questions from the Judge. This play is much more than a commentary on this particularly difficult era of Scottish history: Smith succeeds in focusing on the human emotion and the sense of bewilderment and betrayal. Neither is this an ordinary court-room: there is only one door and it is secured by two guardsmen. The three central protagonists are being forced to recall various actions and take responsibility for these: we learn at the end of the play that the Judge is in fact the Elder who had refused Mrs Scott protection against Sellar. In considering this play alongside European works, there are immediate comparisons to be made between it and Sartre's *Huis Clos* (translated as *In Camera* in Britain and *No Exit* for

American audiences [Styan 1981: 118]) in which portrayals of objectification and competitive subjectivity are brought to the fore.

Huis Clos has only a small cast: its three main characters are locked in a room and are facing an eternity in each other's company with no prospect of exit. In limited company and enclosed surroundings the characters are forced to see themselves as others do: they are under constant scrutiny and are clearly in distress as a result. This is a type of hell: a hell of objectification. The characters in *A' Chùirt* are also in hell: we are told the old woman came from upstairs; we are made aware of the extreme heat; the hands on the clock do not move and there is, clearly, no exit. Their hell, like that of the characters in *Huis Clos*, is made worse by the company they keep: each being eternally reminded that their present crisis is clearly based on their past action while only the old woman has the ability to leave.

A' Chùirt not only presents an exploration of the impact of a historic event on individuals: it is another demonstration of Smith's own existentialism (see Macleod 2007 and Bateman 2013) and his particular way of demonstrating his ideology with an ironic use of biblical imagery. It would be wrong to discuss this play without pointing out some of this usage. The most clear and visual biblical reference is the banner which hangs above the stage for the duration of the play: 'Na tugaibh breith chum nach toirear breith oirbh' / 'Judge not, that you not be judged'. D.I. MacLeòid, in his review of the play, compared this to a Brechtian technique (*Gairm* 59 283-287), but whereas Brecht's visual aids generally deliberately interrupted action to give direct detail to an audience, Smith's banner encapsulates the whole message of the play about judging others and oneself repeatedly. This is not the only time the passage is used: the Elder uses it when he recalls how he had told the old woman that he would not be able to save her from Sellar's assault as he has chosen to put his own family first: he feels guilty about this decision, a decision he must later live with for all eternity. Before he tells the old woman that he will not help her, he admits that he has been tempted and quotes Matthew 4:8 at her: "S sheall e dha na rìoghachdan 's an domhainn gu lèir, 's e thubhairt e ris [...] (and he showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory and he said to him [...]): unlike the Elder,

when Sellar tried to tempt the old woman out of her house with false promises of a new home, she did not yield. Again in relation to her unwillingness to move on, the old woman says 'Thugaibh fainear na lillidhean mar a tha iad a' fàs' (*Consider the lilies how they grow*). It is obviously from this quotation (Luke 12:27) – normally interpreted in Christian doctrine as a message from Jesus not to worry, and that God will look after one – that Smith took the title for his later English novel. That Mrs Scott utters these words, at the point she is to be thrown uncaringly from her home, to the Elder whose faith has already wavered is poignant. Other biblical allusions include the comparison of Patrick Sellar to Judas, obviously for his heinous act of betrayal. The portrayal of Sellar is further seen as malign when the old woman says she saw him coming to her home on a large white horse. It has been said in relation to this horse in *Consider the Lilies* that it is a: 'complex and ambiguous echo of Revelation 19, 11-15, where the Word of God descends from heaven on a white horse to smite and punish, with all the fierceness and the wrath of God'. (Murray 1987: xi)

The characters in *Huis Clos* are locked in hell because they have lived life in 'bad faith' (Sartre's term for a person's inability or unwillingness to see things as they are and accept responsibility for them): they have acted as others expected them to act and without taking responsibility for their actions. Similarly the Judge / Elder and Sellar in *A' Chùirt* have also existed in bad faith: taking actions they knew were wrong and not caring about the implications of their actions. Their hell is now having to acknowledge that they acted inappropriately in life. At the end of the play the judge reveals to Sellar that he is in fact the Elder: who better to sit in judgement of Sellar than one who now knows the reality and impact of their action.

BRITHEAMH – ...'S ise bha ceart, nach i, A Phàdraig? Ach air mo shon-sa, mise am bhrìtheamh ... Cò eile a b' urrainn a bhith 'na bhrìtheamh ach mi ... Bheil thu tuigsinn fhathast?

Agus a chionn nach 'eil gaol orm fhìn, carson a bhiodh gaol agam ort-sa? Agus a chionn 's gun dh'ionnsaich mi fhìn ceartas carson nach teagaisginn e dhut-sa? Seall rium ...

(Tòisichidh a cur dheth a ghruaig air a shocair, 's an uair sin a chòta. Mu dheireadh chithear nach 'eil air ach an aon ghàirdean.)

Bheil thu a' tuigsinn a nis, a Phàdraig Sellar? (Mac a' Ghobhainn 1966, 24)

*JUDGE She was right, wasn't she Patrick? But as for me, me the judge ... Who else could be a judge but me ... Do you understand yet?
And since I don't love myself, how could I love you? And since I learned justice why wouldn't I teach it to you? Look at me ...
(He begins to take off his wig slowly, and then his coat. Eventually we see that he only has one arm.)
Do you understand now Patrick Sellar?*

Sellar and the Elder must face each other for eternity, taking cognisance of their wrongful actions. Representations of hell in literature and theatre are, of course, not unique to the existential or absurd writers, but what Smith achieves here, like the other playwrights considered in this article, is an important and captivating synthesis of Gaelic culture with European theatre trends. As a poet and writer of short stories Smith has been recognised for his important contribution to the development of the modern Gaelic literary genres of poetry, novel and short story: this article has hopefully demonstrated that he also made a significant contribution to Gaelic drama.

Conclusion

While it would be possible to more boldly propose or, alternatively, counter the arguments made about various points of existential and absurd theory with regard to these plays, this essay will, hopefully, have demonstrated that the plays here share many features with European drama of a similar era. Perhaps the fundamental existential and Absurdist themes of revolt and of man's inability to communicate resonated particularly well among writers of a minority culture which was struggling against the silencing pressure of modern society manifested in declining numbers of Gaelic speakers and by the weakening of the economic and cultural status of the islands. The playwrights considered here deserve to be more widely recognised for their creativity and the way in which they (deliberately) adapted trends in European theatre into drama which was clearly culturally located in Gaelic society. Beckett's clown-like figures are reimagined as characters with names appropriated from Gaelic cuisine ('Ceann Cropic'); the meaningless and repetitious task facing Camus' Sisyphus can be compared to Murchadh returning to his scything ('Tog Orm Mo

Speal') and the blindness symbolic of isolation in Ionesco's *The Lesson* is alluded to in Maclean's 'An Dall': all are indicative of the familiarity the Gaelic playwrights had with the trends in theatre elsewhere. That these plays, which differed greatly from the Gaelic plays which had gone before, were performed by amateur dramatic groups, often in competitions, is perhaps suggestive of their acceptance by the Gaelic (arts-consuming) community. Unfortunately the infrequency with which the plays are likely to have been performed and the inaccessibility of them, with only three of the six discussed here ever published and no known translations, means that they have not had the recognition they deserve: hopefully this essay goes some small way to address this.

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¹ I am grateful to one of the article's blind reviewers for drawing my attention to the fact that this fish dish was in fact commonly enjoyed throughout the north of Scotland, and not just in the Hebrides.

² Where no details of play publications are given, quotes are taken from unpublished scripts. Translations are my own.

³ It seems somewhat futile to try and translate this passage: its significance here is that it demonstrates an alliterative run. Ceann is asking repeatedly 'is it ...?': each of the nouns begins with 'm' in Gaelic.

⁴ Esslin's interpretation of Camus' writing is not the only possible interpretation of his work: indeed Bennett (2011) argues that if Camus can be understood not as an existentialist but as someone revolting against existentialism (as is commonly the case now), then the definition of the Theatre of the Absurd, as postulated by Esslin, would need to be reconceived.