Writing His Way through Grief in Scottish Gaelic: Christopher Whyte's Elegy to Maria-Mercè Marçal

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Abstract

In 1998, Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal died of cancer, aged 45. Scottish writer Christopher Whyte had lived in Barcelona for the best part of two years and they had become close friends. After her death, he wrote a long mourning poem in Scottish Gaelic, the language he favours for his poetry. This essay, which is indebted to Jacques Derrida's views on death, mourning and friendship, will focus on Whyte's elegiac poem, entitled *Leabhar Nach Deach A Sgrìobhadh: In memoriam Maria-Mercè Marçal, 11.XI.1952-5.VII.1998/Un llibre no escrit: In memoriam Maria-Mercè Marçal*, in order to analize it in the context of the multilingual dialogue that Christopher Whyte, or Crìsdean MacIlleBhàin, as he signs his poetry in Scottish Gaelic, establishes with her dead poet friend.

Keywords

Maria-Mercè Marçal; Christopher Whyte; Mourning; Friendship; Jacques Derrida; Illness; Body

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Introduction

In these disorderly, out-of-joint times, when far-right political parties encourage the suppression of all languages other than Spanish in the campaign leading up to the first and second 2019 Spanish general elections; when advanced models of schooling are maliciously questioned regarding the use of so-called minority languages; the media in Catalan are threatened on all fronts amid an atmosphere of unforgiving repression by the Spanish State against those who dare to imagine Catalonia as an independent Republic; Christopher Whyte exemplifies how an open-minded, multilingual, tolerant approach to languages and cultures is not only extremely productive, but also, I would dare to say, the most ethical of positions. A poet, novelist, translator and scholar (at La Sapienza, in Rome, first, and then at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow), Whyte was one of the first academics to argue that issues of gender and sexuality, often knotted with perceptions of nationhood, had to be taken into account when entering the traditionally male-dominated territory of Scottish literature. He also claimed that it was necessary "to reroute, or at least diversify" (Whyte 1995, xvii) the approach to writings by canonical Scottish figures such as Walter Scott, Robert Burns, the eighteenth-century poet author of the popular *Auld Lang Syne*, and others.

Conversant in several languages, including Catalan, as he spent the better part of two years living in Barcelona, Glasgow-born Whyte writes his novels in English and his poetry in Scottish Gaelic (under the name of Crìsdean MacIlleBhàin); his translations as well as his critical and scholarly work, however, are not limited to these two languages. He has translated Pasolini, Rilke and Marina Tsvetaeva into English. In 1997, for an issue of *Champan* magazine (no. 88) devoted to Catalan literature (*Window on Catalonia*), he translated

into English short stories by Quim Monzó and Sergi Pàmies, as well as poems by Narcís Comadira, Gabriel Ferrater, and, Maria-Mercè Marçal, specifically *La germana, l'estrangera.* Whyte's way into writing poetry in Scottish Gaelic was via translation (Whyte 2002, 67): in the 1980s he produced versions in Gaelic of Konstantinos Cavafis, Yannis Ritsos, Tin Ujević, Eduard Mörike, Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmataova. In 1985, he translated into Italian from the original Gaelic the Scottish poet Sorley MacLean. It was only after this intensive training in multilingual translation, that he began to write his own poems in Scottish Gaelic and, in 1987, publishing them in *Gairn*, a Gaelic-only magazine (Whyte 2002, 67, 69). Six collections of poems have followed. The first, *Uirsgeul* [Myth], appeared in 1991 with facing-page English translations, but the next one, from 2002, was exclusively in Gaelic: *An Tràth Duilich* [*The Difficult Time*], which is a collection focused mostly on Whyte's adolescence. *Dealbh Athar* [*Father's Image*], from 2009, comprises a painful memory of the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his father and has been translated into Irish by Gréagóir Ó Dúill. In Whyte's fourth poetic collection, *Bho Leabhar-Latha Maria Malibran* [*From the Diary of Maria Malibran*], published with translations into English by various hands, also from 2009, the poetic subject is a 19th-century opera singer who recalls her life and her experiences of sexual abuse. In the epilogue, the author advocates writing in Gaelic on subjects that are not strictly related to what may be perceived as "Gaelic issues." *An Daolag Shìonach* [*A Chinese Beetle*], from 2014, is in Gaelic only. Whyte's latest collection, *Ceum air cheum* [*Step by Step*] (2018), includes twelve long poems, most of them translated into English by the Gaelic poet Niall O'Gallagher, who also has translated into Scots a poem about Whyte's mother, and four other poems translated into English by Whyte himself. Now based in Budapest and Venice, Whyte continues to translate Rilke and Tsvetaeva into English and has published Gaelic poems in several anthologies of Scottish authors with translations into English and Scots by O'Gallagher. Whyte is also the author of four novels in English: *Euphemia MacFarrigle* and the *Laughing Virgin* (1995), *The Warlock of Strathearn* (1997), *The Gay Decameron* (1998) and *The Cloud Machinery* (2000).[1]

The text that I shall explore in what follows is a long poem, a requiem in words, divided into six sections and entitled *Leabhar Nach Deach A Sgrìobhadh: In memoriam Maria-Mercè Marçal, 11.XI.1952-5.VII.1998*, or, in the version translated into Catalan by Francesc Parcerisas and Jaume Subirana: *Un llibre no escrit: In memoriam Maria-*

[1] For more details of Whyte's publications and translations, see his comprehensive website http://www.christopherwhyte.com

Mercè Marçal, 11.XI.1952-5.VII.1998 (Whyte 2005, 352 59).[2] Whyte wrote the poem in Scottish Gaelic shortly after Marçal's death from cancer at the age of 45. In my reading, I will move along three distinctive axes which make the poem unique, addressing the particularities of each axis although I am well aware that all three function as threads that criss-cross the poem and establish rhizomatic alliances with each another.

First, I will consider the reasons behind Whyte's decision *not* to translate his own poetry from Scottish Gaelic into English. In doing so, I will take into account the poet's views on self-translation (Whyte 2002, 64 71). Secondly, I will read *Un llibre no escrit* as a text of mourning. I regard mourning as one of the main narratives of our times, a discursive approach to the perception of what we call reality that illuminates crucial aspects of it, blurs the boundaries between the private and the social; relating death to life, history and memory, intimately and unavoidably. Catalan philosopher Joan-Carles Mèlich believes the human condition to be elegiac (Mèlich 2017), and Whyte's poem reminds us precisely of that, not only through its focus on the death of a loved one but also through its refusal to engage in metaphysics.

In order to read this long poem as a text of mourning, I cannot ignore Freud's 1917 definition of mourning and melancholia (Freud 1991, 251 68) as private processes of introjection: mourning being a dynamic way of getting over a painful loss and melancholia, a pathological attachment to loss. However, I am more interested in the wider ethical dimensions to mourning and melancholia highlighted by some post-Freudian scholars who take on board Freud's references to mourning and the self in such later writings as *The Ego and the Id*, in which he expresses "doubts regarding the possibility of a successful mourning without residue" (Ricciardi 2003, 33). Sarah Ahmed, for instance, in *The Politics of Emotion*, understands "the complexity of grief as a psycho-social process of coming to terms with loss" (Ahmed 2004, 159). Discourses of mourning, even if they appear to be intensely private, are knotted with social, political, historical and, ultimately, ethical implications.

A powerful example of the multidirectional charge of grief and of how the textuality of loss (in any form or medium) makes public, hence socially relevant, the privacy of affect and desolation is the visual poem "Elegia al Che," written by Catalan avant-garde poet Joan Brossa shortly after Ernesto Che Guevara's death in October

[2] Both Parcerisas and Subirana contributed to the translation with Whyte's input. There is also a translation into English by Sally Evans (Whyte 2009, 99 109). The poem was first published in the Irish journal *Comhar* 63:3, 10 11. The Catalan translation was published as a *plaquette* by Cafè Central in 2005. In the same year, it was included in Sam Abrams, ed., *La mirada estrangera*, Barcelona, Proa, 352 59.

1967. The alphabet without the C, the H and the E speaks volumes about the devastation Che's loss represented for Brossa and for others: how can one carry on writing, thinking, living without them, without him? Brossa's silencing of these three letters is simultaneously deafening because it signals the burning presence of absence and the ensuing understanding and sharing of textual loss. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler suggests that mourning implies a social "we" rather than a solitary or solipsistic "I":

> What grief displays [...] is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.
>
> (2004, 23)

Mavis Gallant once wrote: "Memory [...] is inseparable from language" (2004). Indeed, memory is a meaningful and complex ingredient in Christopher Whyte's poem as mourning is felt both before unavoidable death and afterwards, as a poignant part of remembrance. Moreover, the ill body and its fluctuating qualities inscribe their presence with words that do not elude but rather chronicle the intractable aspects of Marçal's illness. In *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir*, Lisa Appignanesi (2000, 6) asserts that "[m]emory is an emotional climate, a thick set of sights and smells and sounds and imprinted attitudes which can pollute as well as clarify." Likewise, the visual elements in Christopher Whyte's poem suggest a very sensorial, almost tactile, attentiveness to the texture of flesh, to the materiality and embodiment of the subject that recalls the haptic cinematic quality that Laura U. Marks (2000) has identified in what she calls "the skin of film." The poem places the addressee, the female poet, close to death, in a Deleuzian in-between position, the in-betweenness of being mortal, heightened by the implacability of a lethal illness. What the poem has in common with other European narratives of grieving published in the last few years will also be part of my reflections, and I consider Derrida's ideas of friendship, the self, and the dead other in conjunction with mourning.

I would also like to emphasize the significance of the fact that the poem was written by a gay poet and addressed to a lesbian poet, two writers who stand for their times, well-known not only because they have no qualms about acknowledging the political dimension of their sexual orientation, but also, as already indicated, because of the languages they use: Scottish Gaelic and Catalan, one Celtic and the

other Romance, but both politically repressed and socially marginalized during specific periods of their histories, languages to which these two "double outsiders" have made an outstanding poetic contribution.

Against Self-Translation

Christopher Whyte (2002, 67) claims that when he has been asked to translate his poems into English, he has done so "under duress. It has never been done with either pleasure or satisfaction," and he has always tried "to let as long an interval as possible elapse between writing a text and translating it":

> Self-translation for me has been an activity without content, voided of all rich echoes and interchanges I have so far attributed to the practice of translation. It is almost a question of voiding the poem of its content, which may, indeed, be the language in which it was written.
>
> (Whyte 2002, 68)

He emphasizes that:

> [i]f translation is about crossing barriers, contaminating one language with the experience and the rhythms of another, self-translation occurs in situations of exile or of crude subjugation, where one language is attempting to take the place of another.
>
> (Whyte 2002, 69)

Whyte questions "the hurry to get whatever is written in Gaelic published in English as soon as possible" and his explanation for such hurriedness is clear: "what matters is to dispense with the Gaelic text, to render it superfluous" (Whyte 2002, 69). As Wilson McLeod (cited by Whyte 2002, 69 70) says, the facing-page translations have "serious consequences," inasmuch as the "the two texts can be seen as two distinct and different compositions, two 'originals' of essentially identical legitimacy and importance," when, in fact, one is dependent on the other. Whyte sees Gaelic Sorley MacLean's English translations of his own Gaelic poems as "grimly haunting doubles from which his Gaelic poems no longer have any hope of being prised free," and which may even distort the reception of his work as a whole (Whyte 2002, 70); this sense of haunting doubleness stems from the fact that self-translations are interpretations that may limit the "many resonances of the text, effectively telling us what it means, with an authority which we are

powerless to controvert, because their source is the author." When commenting on the translations into English in a book of essays about MacLean (Ross-Hendry 1986), he complains about the editors' failure to indicate which contributors had access to the Gaelic originals and which did not. Outspoken against "the intellectual class in Scotland" who refuse to "acquire basic literacy in Gaelic," Whyte writes:

> I cannot conceive how it is possible to write with real authority and understanding of Scottish history and culture in total ignorance of Gaelic, or, at the very least, without pointing to that space as a crucial one to which the person writing has no access. To claim anything else is a lie, which relies for its perpetuation on collusive silence. It is a silence I, at any rate, will not agree to observe.
>
> (Whyte 2002, 70–71)

In his book of essays on translation, Francesc Parcerisas recalls a conversation in Aberyswith with the English poet R. S. Thomas, a great advocate for the Welsh language, about a promising Welsh poet who, after producing a good book, was in a hurry to translate it into English and to publish it in both languages almost simultaneously. He should have let the Welsh original collection run its course, argued Thomas, allowing it to take its place within previous and current Welsh literature. Once translated into English, Thomas insisted, those who will read the work in English, even the Welsh who will read it in English, will never appreciate its contribution to Welsh poetry (Parcerisas 2013, 98), a reflection that, no doubt, Christopher Whyte would easily understand.

Narrative of Life, Narrative of Loss

It is of note that several narratives of loss deal not just with the death of a loved one and its effects, such as the bewilderment at the realization that life goes on regardless of one's feelings of loneliness, the painful void that ensues or the raw grief that can easily last years, but also with other issues that at first do not appear to have much to do with mourning, issues that nevertheless help structure and inscribe a discourse which otherwise might prove impossible to articulate. It is as though these narratives of mourning needed a fulcrum to unfold and to shift the readers' attention away from the sadness, if only momentarily. In *H is for Hawk*, a book by Helen McDonald published in 2014, a narrator struck by grief after her father's death, resorts to falconry while trying to come to terms with

her father's absence: the time-consuming process of taming Mabel, a goshawk from a Scottish quayside she takes to Cambridge, where she lives, parallels the long process of mourning. In Julian Barnes's *Levels of Life* (2013), it is the history and curiosity of aerostatic balloons which eases the reader into the heart-breaking chronicle of Barnes's wife Pat Kavannah's illness and subsequent death. In Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), a male narrator, a recently widowed father of two boys who is writing a book on Ted Hughes, uses the motif of the crow, a recurrent image in Hughes's work, to provide the mourning narrative with a focus around which pain can be put into words. And when Rosa Montero wrote about the grief she experienced over her husband's death, she relied heavily on the diary Marie Curie wrote after the sudden death of Pierre Curie, a text which becomes so intertwined with Montero's that even its title, *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013), comes from Marie Curie's diary (Montero 2013, 25). The poem that Christopher Whyte wrote in Scottish Gaelic in the aftermath of Maria-Mercè Marçal's death follows a similar pattern: here, in the form of conversations the poetic subject remembers having had in Barcelona with his friend on two separate occasions. On the first one, she is already very ill but still hopeful that she will be spared an imminent death. Chatting over lunch, Maria-Mercè tells Whyte about a novel she wants to write, one in which the characters find themselves bereft of the woman who had brought them together, a woman who has died in a fire at a camping site. Marçal never had the time to write her novel about a loving dead woman and the void she leaves behind, which is the subject of the conversation between the two writers, and which nonetheless crops up in a number of his verses. The ghostly, never-written book plays a role similar to that of McDonald's goshawk, Porter's crow, Barnes's aerostatic balloons and Curie's diary in Montero's book. However, in Whyte's long poem, the fact that the poetic subject and his addressee, the poet who will die soon, are both writers makes the motif of the unwritten book, its play of absence and silence, particularly poignant:

> Vas dir-me que estaves preparant una altra
> novel·la però que encara no en volies
> parlar. I, això no obstant, tan aviat com ens van
> haver posat les estovalles vas començar:
> 'Potser recordes, de l'estiu passat,
> un accident als Pirineus…
> […]
> La meva novel·la començarà amb una dona
> que mor allà, al càmping, i tractarà dels que ella
> deixa enrere. […]

(Whyte 2005, 354-55)

And she takes over the narration: "La meva novel·la començarà amb una dona …" (Whyte 2005, 355). She clings to the project as if trying to preserve not just a good life, now so precarious, but also a future life for her impossible book. The mourning subject reflects:

> […] Tot i que els llibres no es fan amb la vida
> que vivim, sinó amb totes les vides que haurien
> pogut ser la nostra i no ho han estat.
> Una història enllestida és un objecte
> que se'ns escapa de les mans i cau al fons
> d'un estany: visible sota l'aigua ondulada,
> brillant, inabastable, nostre i així i tot
> ja no és nostre, diferent, i alhora el mateix.
> […]
> Estaves tan a prop de la mort, vaig pensar,
> que havies trobat la manera de posar la teva
> pròpia mort al bessó de la nou de la història!

(Whyte 2005, 355)

As in Jordi Puntí's short story "Vertical" (2017, 13–31), in which a man mourns his dead partner by incessantly walking along the streets and through the places they had shared when she was still alive, in Whyte's poem, Barcelona's urban spaces frame the mournful disposition of the poetic subject and help locate the memories of the two meetings which heighten the unsentimental yet strongly felt grief. The first section of the poem, which sets the scene, runs as follows:

> No podies portar amb tu el gosset,
> pobra criatura que et feia feliç
> de bon matí quan es despertava
> al cabàs amb aquella mena de dansa
> d'agraïment al món, com si no cregués
> que la seva vida anterior hagués acabat,
> que havia trobat una llar, recer i menjar. Mentre
> caminàvem, mentre intentaves explicar-me
> la teva situació, buscant els mots per expressar
> allò contra el que t'enfrontaves i que anaves
> superant, la corretja del gos tota l'estona
> se t'enredava als peus i, encara que avançaves
> inestable (no podia veure si el cabell
> t'havia tornat a créixer, sota el mocador,
> però tenies la cara com una pàgina
> que massa mans han passat, o com un

text esborrat que ja no es pot llegir),
pacientment desenredaves cada nus
que ell provocava. Només et vaig veure inquieta
quan la corretja es va afluixar i no sabies
cap a on s'havia escapolit el gosset.

(Whyte 2005, 353)

A line from a love poem by Jorge Manrique, "Que la muerte anda revuelta/ con mi vida," comes to mind. Life and death, like the puppy's leash, get entangled in the ill body of the poetic subject's friend. It also brings to mind a poem from Marçal's posthumous collection *Raó del cos* (2008) that deals with breast cancer, "Covava l'ou de la mort blanca," where the body of the poetic subject writhes on a trapeze, unable to find any stable ground under her feet:

en el trapezi
on em contorsiono
amb els meus peus vacil·lants
[…] agafada a la mà de l'esglai de l'ombra.

(Marçal 2000, 86)

In Whyte's requiem, the devastation of the body, with its "intimations of mortality," reads like a text: the face, indeed the entire body, is a book that too many hands have handled, a tired palimpsest whose words have started to be obliterated, an eroded text. And yet, the woman who does not let death take over her uncertain existence shows no signs of annoyance: "pacientment desenredaves cada nus / que ell provocava." Only the concern for another being, a little dog, is on her mind: "Només et vaig veure inquieta / quan la corretja es va afluixar i no sabies / cap a on s'havia escapolit el gosset" (Whyte 2005, 353).

Illness is here presented as leaving profound traces in the ailing body of the poet who will soon die, "(no podia veure si el cabell / t'havia tornat a créixer, sota el mocador, / però tenies la cara com una pàgina / que massa mans han passat, o com un / text esborrat que ja no es pot llegir)" (Whyte 2005, 353). These bodily signs are noted, registered, as the signs of a cancer which has not yet been identified as such in the first section of the poem. But cancer will be mentioned in the second section, which provides more precise details of the two meetings and which constitutes an account tinged by nostalgia, almost an epiphany, in which the life of the two poet-friends together contrasts painfully with the frailty that accompanies her illness "the sweetness of life being so perishable," as Dick Bogarde says in

Bertrand Tavernier's film *These Foolish Things* [or *Daddy Nostalgie*], with Jane Birkin (1990).

When two friends meet for a second time, Whyte's poetic voice accepts only reluctantly that they will never return *together* to those streets and places in the city that they had made their own:

> Fa només tres mesos d'aquella passejada,
> va ser a la primavera. El sol encara era feble,
> i era diumenge. Havien fet un parc al voltant
> d'un edifici que havia estat una estació,
> hi havia pares que jugaven amb les criatures,
> que corrien, que s'hi divertien, i jo vaig pensar
> en un dia ben diferent, el maig anterior.
> Feia més sol, aquell maig, vam trobar-nos
> a tocar del carrer de la Princesa i jo
> vaig dur-te a un restaurant que es deia
> La lluna plena.

(Whyte 2005, 354)

The restaurant, "La lluna plena," represents a poignant choice for the encounter, the moon being a profusely meaningful symbol in Marçal's poetry, a feminine word rich in intertextual connotations, the sun's subsidiary to which Marçal's poetry grants autonomy. Marçal had commented on her use of the trope of the moon in her first collection *Cau de llunes*:

> La lluna serà en aquest llibre i en els immediatament posteriors imatge privilegiada, recurrent i obsessiva, punt de referència lluminós alhora utòpic i atàvic, amb la subversió en pantalla del seu significat tradicionalment subordinat: 'Hi havia una vegada quan la lluna tenia llum pròpia…' podria ser el començament d'un conte.

(Marçal 2004, 185–86)

In one of her poems from *Bruixa de dol* (1979), "La lluna de porcellana," Marçal humanizes the moon, and brings it closer to earth through pathetic fallacy, and the sky and the mundane objects, or things, as Remo Bodei (2015 [2009], 9) would have it, become equals in the symbolic language:

> Perquè avui feia el seu ple
> La lluna se'ns posa a taula.
> Quin pany de cel de quadrets
> de cuina les estovalles!

(Marçal 1989, 90)

Images of everyday things, mostly related to the home, make their presence felt in a way that has been neglected by more lofty poetic traditions because of their apparent insignificance. These images are symbolic because language is inescapably metaphorical, "material things transmit immaterial symbols [such as emotional meanings]," says Remo Bodei (2015 [2009], 72), but in some of her poems, Marçal draws attention to their physical substance and to how they stand out as references to a different, material order.[3]

In Marçal's "Cançó del bes sense port," from *Sal oberta* (1982), we again find a humanized moon, one now exposed to intemperate weather, as the poet herself would later be: a dark, menacing moon:

> […] la tristesa dins la mar,
> la mar dins la lluna cega.
> I la lluna al grat del vent
> com una trena negra.

(Marçal 1989, 228)

The moon, a traditionally feminine image, is often associated to the poetic subject herself. There are many beautiful examples where, as Marçal herself writes, "vida i poesia fan la trena, indestriables" (2004, 185). In a poem from *Sal oberta*, the "I" of the poem, here experiencing a crescent phase, identifies with the moon and claims that they will sail freely together when the laws of empire, a patriarchal empire, no longer impose their presence:

> Sents? La lluna davalla i et diu Mercè-creixent,
> i se t'esmuny per sota el davantal
> i, a vol, et pren el novenari d'heura
> que lliga sal i sant, a cel obert…
>
> Cenyides per la serp de la tenebra
> la lluna i tu sou u: arbre i mirall.
> Fareu el ple quan el jorn llevi l'àncora
> i naveguin banderes sense imperi.

(Marçal 1989, 243)

[3] We will later see how Whyte also uses images of domestic utensils to illustrate his relationship with the Gaelic language. A celebration of women's traditional chores that pays homage to the mundane tools of the domestic space as a site of struggle may also be found in an early poem by Marçal, *Cau de llunes* (1989, 47).

From early on, the moon, for Marçal, is also a powerful companion in women's struggle. In the poem "Vuit de març," Marçal writes:

> Amb totes dues mans
> alçades a la lluna,
> obrim una finestra
> en aquest cel tancat.
>
> (1989, 169)

Once Whyte's poetic voice has acknowledged his friend's illness, it then waxes urgent, loquacious, vociferous even, about it. Once again, the body, a "libidinal surface, a site of multiple coding […] a living text," in the words of Rosi Braidotti (1994, 59), tells a story:

> […] Ja feia un cert temps que
> havies entomat el primer assalt del càncer
> i els cabells, em va semblar, t'havien crescut
> més espessos que abans.
>
> (Whyte 2005, 354)

Good humour comes to the rescue, but the determination to talk openly about the ugly aspects of the illness and the effects of the cancer treatment, is overwhelming:

> […] Et vaig preguntar
> si t'havies fet fotos quan eres més calba
> que jo. Vam riure'ns-en com si la malaltia
> fos una cosa que pertangués al passat.
>
> (Whyte 2005, 354)

Even though when they first meet, death seems to have been cheated, the text is full of the mournful sorrow that comes with the certainty of death. Death is thus proleptic and analeptic at the same time, an anachronistic, anticipated presence that forcefully wants to be part of the conversation. On this score, it is remarkable how Jacques Derrida's views on friendship, death, mourning and the self aptly characterize Christopher Whyte's poem to Maria-Mercè Marçal. For Derrida, mourning lurks in every friendship from the beginning; it is there, that is, long before death takes away one's friends. Derrida describes the emotional involvement with a friend in terms of mourning: "Je ne pourrais pas aimer d'amitié sans m'engager, sans me sentir d'avance engagé à aimer l'autre par-delà la mort" (Derrida

1994a, 29) ["I could not love a friend without engaging myself, without feeling myself in advance engaged to love the other beyond death" (Derrida 2005, 12)]. In an interview with Maurizio Ferraris, Derrida defines himself in terms of mourning through a challenging post-Cartesian statement: "Je suis endeuillé, donc je suis" (Derrida 1992, 331) [I mourn, therefore I am (Derrida 1995, 321)]. Indeed, the feeling of sorrowful anticipation permeates every line of Whyte's long poem. For Derrida, "living is nothing other than living on, surviving in or as the experience of mourning the other" (Worthan 2010, 228). Derrida is clearly not indifferent to the death of others. In *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (2003) [*The Work of Mourning* (2001)], the book that collects his writings after the death of friends, it is clear that for him

> [...] there is no friendship without the chance of one friend dying before the other. Friendship is thus forged amid this structurally irreducible possibility, in which survival and mourning enter into the relationship right from the start, long before death. Mourning therefore begins with the friend rather than at friendship's end in death.
>
> (Wortham 2010, 227)

In Whyte's long poem, the friend who is dying accentuates this ominous, undeniable feeling, as if replicating Derrida's thoughts through an experience filtered through poetic language.

Two Double Outsiders

The fourth section of the poem focusses on the elements that constitute the identities of the poetic subject and his addressee, his friend, those elements that bring them closer together, both somehow foreigners in their own land. Issues of language, sexuality, poetry and translation are accordingly highlighted. The poetic subject thus *affirms* his linguistic choice, in a way similar to her linguistic choice, one that was not free from conflict, Whyte being from an Irish-Catholic background, a community subject to significant discrimination in Scotland:

> Per això vaig triar aquesta llengua negligida
> amb paraules com plats que un dia foren regis,
> resplendents, però que després algú va desar
> en un bufet polsós. I com un vailet poruc
> que s'està convidat a casa d'algú altre
> com si no tingués dret a ser-hi, jo vaig
> trobar la clau que obria el bufet i a poc

a poc vaig anar enduent-me'n els plats,
aplegant-los en un amagatall, netejant-los
fins que els antics colors tornaven a aparèixer
com abans, al meu regne secret, però sempre
atemorit que algú no se n'adonés
d'aquells buits al bufet.

(Whyte 2005, 356)

Just as we have seen in Marçal's poetry, images of everyday things that are rarely given poetic status are also carefully selected by Whyte. Theirs is not a metaphysical language that operates with concepts; instead, it is a language that is eminently literary, at once metaphorical and close to the materiality of bodies and things. Whyte mentions other connections between the two poets, such as their translations of Marina Tsvetaeva (Marçal had done hers with Monica Zgustová in the early 1990s) and, also, their sexuality as an alternative, unconventional, freer way of understanding relationships of love:

[…] Comptaves versos
de la poetessa russa meravellant-hi
com jo, talment grans d'un rosari d'un valor
incalculable que vas traduir a la teva llengua.
Comptat i debatut, per què
no he de lloar també aquell amor particular,
que ens empenyia a nous reptes i noves proeses
i a la fundació de famílies noves?

(Whyte 2005, 356)

One of the most interesting aspects of Derrida's approach to mourning is his consideration of how we interiorize the dead, these others who become memory the moment they die, who "now [live] nowhere but in me" (Wortham 2010, 229). In *Mémoires: pour Paul de Man* (1988, 29), Derrida talks about "*le deuil impossible*" [impossible mourning], whereby the other is unconditionally accepted but retained as a discrete foreign body, incorporated as a distinct subject, its differences acknowledged and respected because what matters is singularity, not one's absorption of the other. As William Watkin notes in *On Mourning* (2004, 199), other thinkers such as Lévinas, Nancy or Lyotard, share with Derrida the same insistence "on the responsibility of mourning the lost other, turning attention away from those who grieve and towards those who have been lost […]. [An] ethical consideration of otherness rather than subjective coherence." Derrida talks about this "*deuil impossible* qui, laissant à l'autre son altérité, en respecte l'éloignement infini, refuse ou se

trouve incapable de le prendre en soi [...]" (Derrida 1988, 29) [impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other victim oneself] (Derrida 1989, 6), that is, respecting to the extreme the irreplaceable singularity of the dead other, accepting his or her infinite alterity, his or her singularity. The concepts of introjection and incorporation are distinctively discerned in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomie* (1986), for which Derrida wrote the Foreword "*Fors*: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok" (xi xlviii). For them, introjection is linked to a form of successful mourning, and incorporation to a form of pathological grieving, as summarized by Alessia Ricciardi (2003, 214), while they add nuances to the Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia. In *Fors*, Derrida revisits the "interchangeability" (Ricciardi 2003, 37) of Freud's concepts and asserts that:

> The incorporation is never finished. It should even be said: It never finishes anything *off*. First, for the following general reason: It is worked through by introjection. An inaccessible introjection, perhaps, but for which the process of incorporation always carries within it, inscribed in its very possibility, the "nostalgic vocation." Next, because it always remains contradictory in its structure: By resisting introjection, it prevents the loving, appropriating assimilation of the other, and thus seems to preserve the other *as* other (foreign), but also it does the opposite.
>
> (Derrida 1986, xxi xxii)

In Whyte's poem, we find this Derridean aspect of mourning as the respect for the dead friend that entails an intense fidelity to the "otherness of the other" (Derrida 1986, xxii), in the sense that we perceive the challenge posed by the dead's otherness in us, the dead's difference which can never be completely embraced. In the last section, the poetic voice recounts the moment when he learnt about the death of his poet friend, Maria-Mercè Marçal:

> ¿Està mal fet lamentar no sols la teva pèrdua
> sinó també la de totes les obres que haurien
> pogut sortir de la teva mà si haguessis
> continuat viva? Si en fos capaç, escriuria
> jo la teva novel·la: cada mot i paràgraf
> i capítol, però això és impossible.
>
> (Whyte 2005, 359)

It is indeed impossible: in terms of mourning, the poetic subject's interiorization of his friend *par-delà la mort* is closer to the process of incorporation, as the respect for the difference, the singularity, of that particular other, causes the poetic subject to stop short of any appropriation: he cannot write *her* novel; he cannot even finish it *for* her.

The conversation between the two poets is truncated by death: "La mort, le fouet" [Death, the whip], says Canadian poet Denise Desautels (2001, 40). The last two lines, after referring to the unwritten book, mark the inevitability of death with a touch of a post-Freudian melancholia which, rather than being an indication of a pathological attachment to loss, reminds us of Alison Landsberg's statement that "memories are never finished business" (2004, 45). As such, they practically ooze Derridean ethics with an everlasting affection for the now "spectral" friend - a significant ending to an inevitably aporetic text of mourning, both "unavoidable and impossible" (Gaston 2006, back cover):

> I ens queden solament fragments i pistes
> i el nostre dolor, trist, intransferible.

Melancholia here is affection, and we can say, with Sarah Ahmed (2004, 159), that the memory of the friend will persist, "taken within the subject, as a kind of ghostly death," a fragmented ghost who will always need "a hospitable accommodation," as Derrida himself put it (1994b, 175).

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