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Finding Your Way Home: Explorations of the Journey Motif in Alan Riach's *Homecoming*

Abstract

This article endeavours to explore how Alan Riach in his poetry collection *Homecoming* (2009) treats the motif of home as an internationalist summation which locates and bolsters Scotland's own sense of identity, contextualised in terms of the poet's personal understanding of his own poetic purchase on the themes of remembering, leaving, finding, and rediscovering home. Moreover, critical attention is paid to the way Riach's poems forge a construct wherein a cultural agenda represents the clearest way forward for the accomplishment of Scotland's nationalist aspirations.

Keywords: Sottish poetry, Alan Riach, cultural agenda, journey motif, memory

"I long to reach my home and see the day of my return. It is my never-failing wish. And what if one of the gods does wreck me out on the wine-dark sea? I have a heart that is inured to suffering and I shall steel it to endure that too. For in my day I have had many bitter and painful experiences in war and on the stormy seas. So let this new disaster come. It only makes one more."
(Homer, *The Odyssey*, 76)

1. Introduction

The motif of Odysseus returning home is an irresistible poetic position, imagining as it does the poet as journeyman, with all the accompanying heroic epithets, who, after years of exile, yearns to reconnect with the sources of self, those being family, home and hearth, and homeland. Alan Riach, celebrated Scottish poet and cultural activist, proposes a correlative of this outlook in his collection *Homecoming* as an "intuitive place of departure, leave-taking, putting the home you come from behind you, and setting forth like Odysseus, into the unforeseen" (7). The axiom of the journey motif, the human dilemma of home, is very much dependent on

the premise of setting out, ‘the leave-taking’; and Riach found himself regarding home as a place of departure for the far-off and unknown when, in 1986, he left Scotland as a young English Literature scholar in order to take up a postdoctoral position at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. This was a place that would be home for the next fourteen years, one where he would forge a career, marry, start a family, and commensurately write collections of poetry and literary criticism which would earn him a considerable literary and scholarly reputation.

The literary exiled hero is often seen committing to work that will bring them home in the actual sense, or in the imaginary and creative spheres; and Riach, as scholar, poet, and the principal ‘lyrical I’ of what are often autobiographical poems, committed to all three when he made a decision to return home to Scotland in 2000, and actually doing so in 2001 in order to take up the position of Professor of Scottish Literature at Glasgow University. Following this move, between 2001 and 2009 he set about compiling earlier poems and writing new poems for *Homecoming* that would encompass the arc of departure, settling, travelling, returning, and re-settling. The collection was published in 2009 and reprinted in 2014 so as to coincide with the year-long Homecoming Scotland celebrations; and with the restated aim – as could be read on Riach’s publisher’s webpage – of “putting Scotland in touch with the wider world, as the country prepared to welcome back its sons and daughters” (Luath Press). This 2014 reprint also became a part of the conversation about the nature and identity of Scotland in the run-up to the “aye, naw, mibbe” (McDermid) scenario of the Scottish Independence Referendum.

2. Setting Out

The arc of Riach’s *Homecoming* begins with a section entitled “Seven Preludes” (23–29), written in New Zealand; and these early poems establish the tones and themes that are to be found throughout the collection. In “On the Island,” for instance, there is the accompanying spirit of a father figure whose voice fortifies his son by his “distant presence” for the unsettling early days of an expatriate life where a career would have to be pursued on the other side of the world. In this poem, Riach alludes to the companionship of a rootedness in the connection of home which can always be summoned when there is a crisis of spirit or a faltering of resolution:

Your voice was a nearness, a guide
 I had to keep close to, to keep
 to the road [...]
 to find a way of seeing in that dark, [...] (2014, 23)

But if representations of home and the familiar are presented as untetherable heart-strings, these same representations are adorned by the poetics which understand the replacement of concrete things with mood and reverie. This dichotomy is

evocatively illustrated in the poem "October 1st, 1988," where the poet calls to his father like a distraught Odysseus unable to clasp the shade of his mother Anticlea languishing in the underworld:

There is no harbour
and no sunlight;
the span of the bridge is not there (2014, 24)

We see in the poem "Where?" for example, how a feeling of dislocation whilst living in New Zealand was most acutely felt by the poet when he was trying to good-humouredly inculcate a sense of Scottishness in his three-year-old boy, an act of playful instruction, not so much grounded in the presenting of heritage markers as nurturing an instinctive feeling about oneself, one's own character, and a determined affirmation of one's origins and birthright:

'Yes,' I tell him. 'We are Scottish.'
He's been there twice, started moving, crawled, fast,
from standstill to speed that first visit,
and then before we left,
a few steps, hesitant,
from his grandmother's hands to his mother's.
Now he sees the planes fly over
in different directions, all of them heading one way.
'Where is that plane going?' I ask him.
No hesitation, certainty impatient
with a question and answer so doubtless: 'To Scotland.' (2014, 26)

We can assume that the subsequent years saw the poet continue to contend for his children, with a twinkle in his eye, that all roads and air routes lead to Scotland. It is thus hardly surprising that Riach retrospectively chose to explore in such poems his own sense of identity in terms of 'being in the moment' but 'elsewhere' vis-à-vis spectrums of emotions revealed by way of the expressionist perspicacity of seeing beyond, self-reflection and snippets of memory, all of which are most fascinatingly adorned by Riach's elicitation of the firmament and topographical description. Such acuity is evocative, indeed, of Hugh MacDiarmid's expressionist poetry, and in this vein, the poem "The Weather Log" conveys the idea of the poet as being set apart, or disenfranchised from the scene that he is looking upon, leaving him with a flurry of questions, but with no inkling of the kind of answers which could ever be forthcoming:

The dark October streets are washed –
The usual, leaves and rain –
The orange arm of the windmill scythes
slowly through again.

A growling in November midnight
 draws us through, to look at the sky –
 Turning, angled, circling, at the source of its cone of light,
 in the air outside, up high –
 Twistily, above Queen’s Park, a helicop-
 ter – other torches flicker in the trees below, on the hilltop.

Who are they looking for, and why? (2014, 112)

In addition to the motif of leaving matters hanging in the air with weighty questions, there is much in this poem that obtains thematically for the entire collection. Indeed, here and elsewhere, Riach favours images over symbols for the verbal expression of something concrete, discernible by the way in which he seeks to capture fleeting variations of reality and enter into communion with the fullness of the scene before him. Such an artistic position foregrounds the relationships of both poetry and the painterly scene, and travel and language, as being “the values of taking one’s time and walking in landscapes experienced not as possessions but visceral quotidian experiences” (2016, 160). This outlook is clearly in evidence throughout *Homecoming* and can be discerned in snippets of poems such as a fragment from “The Wall,” where we read: “the silence of it, / and a warm sun / on the cold trees” (2014, 58). Such poetic tropes resonate closely with Henri Bergson’s intimation of knowing a place by way of intellect and intuition (see Bergson); and these vistas of telling and retelling merge resonantly in *Homecoming* with the legacy of Parnassian verse, which extolled the writing of poems as an exotic composition of a single theme with a select number of words and motifs (see Epstein 541–542). And what could be more striking than these lines in the poem “The Magnetics of Earth,” where soul merges with landscape and intuits the familiar:

[...] Beyond them, the pinnacles
 strike upwards for clear air,
 looking for more sky
 through blue-gold haze –
 A sisterhood of rising shapeliness.
 A brotherhood of strange familiarities,
 slanted by distortions in their growth,
 twisted as families are, by
 love and difference, cruelty and friendliness and force. (2014, 50–51)

These metaphysical responses frame amplified cogitational moments for Riach’s poetry. Not only do they encompass imaginative flights that humanise the environment, but they also enable the description of encounters through humorous observation, soaring flights of reflection, and, significantly, foreground the efforts to assert a unifying cultural agenda in what is a patchwork and at-odds-with-itself national landscape.

3. The Exile

Riach exchanged exile for tourist and visitor in travel poems not related to New Zealand. With these poems, Riach as both poet and lyrical subject is something of a Somerset Maugham figure (see Hooper) of the new millennium, absorbing the environment and reflecting on places, other people's histories and points of familiarity, and measuring them against his own life and experience. An example of this can be found in "Five poems from Istanbul: *Love poem: missing you*" where described moments swing like a pendulum between remembered past and perceived present, going there... being somewhere... going back again... and all the while the poet is bedevilled by troubled wonderings and grim musings as to whether he should or could be elsewhere:

It's only that you are not here
that makes the virtues and the facts
of all you are seem, wishfully, near. (2014, 73)

But where Maugham once said: "I am attached to England, but I have never felt myself very much at home there" (98), Riach often looks to make an "optimistic enquiry into the possibilities of growth in the potential of other countries" (2014, 18) as part of the great summation of an internationalist framework, one where Scotland may find its place. But this goal often seems elusive and ungraspable in *Homecoming*. As a result, Riach demonstrates a determination to hold back and spare readers the painful details, underscoring the Sisyphus-like nature of the task at hand: to effect a sea-change of national and cultural awareness and centralise the arts to Scotland's understanding of itself. This chariness cannot but spill over to other poems, as with "At Chambésy" where a Circe-esque erotically charged evening is described with an infusion of innuendo and just a dash of the wink-and-the-nod:

The Alpine ice; the fevered brains
And our sedate enquiries, sketching:
A delicate triangulation, balanced.

Let's leave it at that. (2014, 71)

But promise of the internationalist summation, relocating Scotland's sense of self precisely 'where it is' and 'wherever it can be,' is always ready to emerge. And this remains the case, even if the emphasis shifts in favour of the delectations of 'the elsewhere,' particularly when the poet recounts his enjoyment of the sunny splendour of a literary jaunt, the sun-dazzling upside of being the 'invited poet,' so described with the zestful élan of a synaesthesia of colour and sound in "Five poems from Istanbul: *Chilling out in the Breeze in Zekeriyakoy*":

there will be one simple dive
that takes us into the blue light (2014, 73)

4. The Return

As Andrew McNeillie writes of *Homecoming*, “Scotland is Riach’s agenda whether it’s left behind for a long or short time” (2009). And as an exponent of Scottish culture and a nationalist activist looking to nudge Scotland towards full nation status, Riach’s agenda or vision for Scotland has been for the past several years at the crosshairs of history, brought into even sharper focus as a result of the wayward result of the Scottish Independence Referendum and the existentially derailing outcome of the Brexit vote. For all that, Riach seems always reluctant to place his poetry at the service of pamphleteering and lecturing to the yet-to-be-convinced. His hopes for how the future may coalesce around a Scottish nation, free and unfettered, confident in its strides, are uttered like unspoken truths carried by one who understands that eventually the pendulum must swing in the right direction. The most demonstrative example of this ‘quarter-given’ outlook is to be found in “The Wallace Triptych,” described by Riach as a lyrical affirmation of “the struggle for self-determination” (17); which makes various aspirational claims:

This shilpit nation, set against itself
I’ll make complete, and fit to speak to others
independently. (2014, 37)

At this point in the poem, however, like Wallace with battle-fury upon him, the poet could let loose with the pen and exert a vision of the complexity that obtains for Scotland’s present-day reality and near-off future (one which is becoming more knottily complicated with each coming day). Instead, Riach imparts Wallace’s grand vision with a taciturnity that always suggests the far-offness of such accomplishments:

The variedness of folk, and words. [...]

The bridge. The water running. Brightness.
The prospect. (2014, 37)

Here the poem ends, with Wallace’s expectations ‘left at that,’ from which we may infer that that neither Wallace nor Riach are entirely comfortable with the ‘prospect of the prospect.’

5. Setting to Rights

Riach is interested in stories related to the abstract sense of home, one without gardens, or bedrooms, or occasions of childhood, and this extends to the home of his birth. But what is 'home' in the idea of homecoming if it is not communities of childhood and family, or the greater construct that is Scotland as a place of emotional belonging, with all its political and cultural entanglements. And it is perhaps in the gentle epiphanies arising from moments of perspicacity that the poems capture this tugging recall to place and memory. For, if poetry is the home which Riach carries within himself, then this same fact allows us to understand his imperative to reaffirm a position that culture in its creative sense can harness not only artistic expression but also the collective appreciation of the results. What is more, Riach adds layers to this outlook by marrying these aspirations of 'the prospect' to the envisioning of Scotland's Gaelic communities, seen as continuous and organic, and being able to hold their own against the encroachment of modernity. Indeed, Riach is at his most compelling as visionary in his description of this same plight in the poem "Thieves," with these communities seen as being on the cusp of vanishing, threatened principally by the 'second-homers.' Ironically, these are exactly the kind of people who can afford to make the trip back for the Scotland Homecoming Festival and who are pricing the locals out of their own local property markets. In other words, these same communities must be made sustainable beyond the mass appeal of snapshot pictures so as to be able to:

[...] live in their own dynamics, create an economy sustaining
All the arts and conversation. (2014, 127)

Ultimately, Riach trusts that the demonstration of culture will create a plasticity to the prevailing dynamics that will reshape an obstinate stasis, one where oral traditions achieve a complementary position alongside written cultures, and, by extension, the reinvigoration of a national consciousness which will counter the cosmopolitan Anglo-centred dilution of Scotland's identity. This Gordian Knot is intimated in the poem "Co-ordinate Points: *The Interview at St Andrews*" where we are presented with a proposal that St Andrews becomes "the hub and the hold / of Scotland," a suggestion given short shrift:

'Oh dear, dear, dear, dear!
Dear boy, can't you see?
There are English girls taught here!
That must never be!' (2014, 160)

But just as Riach understands the difficulty of cleaving the Union's gnarly knot, he is able to deftly swivel and re-situate the aspiration of Scottish self-determination by redefining Scotland's association with appropriated Celtic icons and their commensurate

associations of place; finding in mythology a metaphorical transcendence for the Scottish nation. In the poem “The Bridge to Dunskiath,” for example, we see how:

Here the young Cuchulain met the woman Skathach,
who taught him the arts of war. [...]

And this was where Cuchulain loved
and bred with Skathach’s daughter
and from this place his child would follow him
sworn by his vengeful mother to silence
until his father, in the midst of slaughter, learned
that this was his own son he’d wounded mortally,
upon the point of dying. (2014, 176–177)

This appropriation of the Gaelic hero story has a confident mode of dialogue which marries the idea of both nationalism (Cuchulain as a requisitioned ‘Scottish’ mythological hero) and internationalism (Cuchulain, the ‘Irish’ mythological figure transcending the absence of self-determination); and thereby addressing the idea of self-expression in a traditional and historical sense. But if Riach is sure about what he’d like to see: say a Scotland saying ‘Yes’ in a second Independence Referendum, then the cleaving harm that Cuchulain inflicts on his son and himself must be understood as facing squarely the part played by Scotland in its own current crisis. As “The Bridge to Dunskiath” draws the collection to a close, with the lines:

We stood upon the rocks of Skathach’s Castle,
surrounded by the cliffs and ocean breaking,
having crossed to that place, pausing to wonder
before trying to find our way back. (2014, 177)

we can see that the halcyon optimism of *Homecoming* lies in the warning that the Odyssean journey will always be fatally thwarted when borders are raised. Indeed, as Riach sagaciously notes in the poem “Elgar in Scotland: *In Oban 1924*,” home can be a place where “your trust becomes connected over year upon year, / whatever the absences are, the gulfs” (150); clearly a contention that only the imaginative spirit and literary perceptions of place can resolve the tug of war between the minutiae of matter-of-fact existence and grandiose ambitions to harness an awareness of the fact that too much that should be cherished may indeed be lost.

6. Conclusion

With some justification, Riach is not optimistic, but he does remain stoically hopeful. As we learn in the poet's introduction to his most recent poetry collection, *The Winter Book* (2017), Riach's father, as ardently nationalist as his son, had died "three weeks before his postal vote" (11). But not before we are told he "[had] converted five of his carers. And they converted their husbands" (11). Riach's elegiac recounting of his father's 'last-stand political campaigning' ends with the words "I would call that victory, as far as such can be" (11), a fitting claim for the potential of imperatives and the prerogatives to strike a match when light is in retreat. This match-lit darkness is in fact the very artifice of Riach's Homeric *nostos*, it being the location of an imaginative mind-space between a place that is home and the place from which the call to return must be heard.

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