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Modernism and Colonialism

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“Upon the thistle they’re impaled”:

Hugh MacDiarmid’s Modernist Nationalism

The “Scottish Renaissance” of the 1920s–30s distinguished itself among contemporary modernisms, at least in the English-speaking world, by its programmatic nationalism. Hugh MacDiarmid’s long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926),¹ the showpiece of the movement, is surely unique among the major modernist works for forcing its topical preoccupation with national identity upon the reader as a linguistic problem. The problem, while most acute for English and other non-Scottish readers, poses itself for Scottish readers too, since MacDiarmid’s “Synthetic Scots” does not pretend to imitate a vernacular language but brandishes archaic and exotic words, phrases, and tropes mined from dictionaries and earlier poetry. Language materializes the category of nationality that MacDiarmid insists upon as the crux of his poem, in that Scots presents itself as a dense and resistant medium that requires the reader’s work. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* reminds us—as many modernist texts remind us—that language stands in a relation of materiality to literature (since language is what literature is “made of”) even if that materiality, too, is ultimately figurative (not least because literature materializes language, as writing and printed text). Where MacDiarmid’s poem departs from other explorations of the question is in its specification of that materiality as a national—which is to say a historical—problematic.

The nationalist problematic underwrites the strong internationalist drive of MacDiarmid’s project. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* claims modernist credentials by opening onto a horizon of “world literature,” in line with the

general commitment of the Renaissance to a renewal of Scottish national identity through reorientation from Anglo-British to Continental European political and cultural models—witness MacDiarmid’s embrace of various forms of socialism, from Social Credit to Marxist-Leninism, or the pioneering translations of modern German and East European writers (notably Kafka) by Edwin and Willa Muir. *A Drunk Man* anchors its internationalism to a linguistic and cultural bedrock of “provincial” Scots, as MacDiarmid adapts verses by Aleksander Blok, Zinaida Hippus, Else Lasker-Schüler, George Ramaekers, and Edmond Rocher into Scots (out of English translations) and calls up heroic explorers of the existential deep such as Dostoevsky and Melville (“a Scot,” 135) so as to reimagine their achievement in native terms: “Burns in Edinburgh,” for example, turns out to have undertaken the Dostoevskian dive into the abyss (139–40). *A Drunk Man* makes its most overt bid for participation in an emergent modernist canon by grappling with *The Waste Land*.²

T. S. Eliot—it’s a Scottish name
Afore he wrote ‘The Waste Land’ s’ud ha’e come
To Scotland here. He wad ha’e written
A better poem syne—like this, by gum! (94)

This time we can make the comparison with Burns, as he matches local performance practice against a mid-eighteenth-century imperial standard:

Thought I, ‘Can this be *Pope*, or *Steele*,
Or *Beattie’s wark*?’
They tauld me ‘twas an odd-kind chiel
About *Muirkirk*.³

The demotic and mock-heroic challenge to a high literary tradition is a convention of modern Scots poetry.

Scotland is the crux of MacDiarmid’s project in a way that Ireland, for instance, is not for Yeats or Joyce, in that the formal difficulties encountered by readers of Yeats or Joyce are not determined by a linguistic difference marked as “Irish.” The standard history of modern Irish literature poses nationalism as a late-romantic developmental stage (the Celtic Revival, the Gaelic League, the Abbey Theatre) which is superseded, with the formation of an Irish Free State, for the high achievements of Irish modernism (the later Yeats, Joyce, Beckett). Joyce’s “Citizen” (in *Ulysses*) performs the obso-

lescence—Neanderthal, “Cyclopean”—of one discourse of militant nationalism, even if Irishness is transfigured, carried forward rather than cast off, in the Joycean cosmopolitan *Aufhebung*. In Scotland, by contrast, the flowering of a nationalist movement during the decades of high modernism constitutes the developmental anomaly that Tom Nairn has called “Scottish belatedness.” Belatedness, in Nairn’s analysis, turns out to signify “romanticism,” since literary romanticism’s revival of vernacular linguistic and cultural forms, in opposition to an imperial neoclassicism, had provided the ideological substance of national identity for movements of political self-determination in nineteenth-century Europe—a historical phase brought to an end with the First World War.⁴

In a judicious account of MacDiarmid’s nationalism, Stephen Maxwell questions its conformity to a romantic paradigm in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Citing MacDiarmid’s *Scottish Chapbook* slogan “Not Tradition—Precedent,” Maxwell argues that *A Drunk Man* “previews the development of his nationalist ideas beyond [their] linguistic [i.e., romantic] phase” that would take place in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵ MacDiarmid’s nationalist thinking took its cue from “the official Allied doctrine that the First World War was a war fought for the rights of small nations, and by the international acceptance at the Versailles Peace Conference of the principle of national self-determination”—a last formal ratification, on the stage of European politics, of nineteenth-century nationalist ideology. MacDiarmid looks beyond this “nationalism of tradition,” according to Maxwell, to anticipate “the second wave of progressive nationalism in the twentieth century”—the anticolonial liberation movements of the emergent Third World, which were driven less by a romantic ambition to recover a national identity based on language and culture than by a need to forge their own terms of engagement with globalizing forces of political and economic modernization.⁶ It seems over-optimistic to cast MacDiarmid as a prophet of the great phase of decolonization and Third World nationalism of the post-World War II “Bandung era.”⁷ Nevertheless Maxwell’s account usefully locates MacDiarmid (and modern Scottish Nationalism) in a historical interim between nationalist paradigms and draws attention to the vexed status of a “colonial” problematic in his work—one in which colonization assumes, after all, the romantic formations of culture and tradition. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* confirms but also complicates Nairn’s diagnosis of a Scottish modernist nationalism that bears the burden of a belated or historically displaced

romanticism. The complication lies in the poem’s critical recognition of and struggle with its own romanticism, yielding a provisional acceptance—at once comic and melancholic—of Scots as a material condition that resists radical transformation, the terms of which are relentlessly cast as “meta-physical,” produced by the poet’s imagination.

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle holds fast to a national language, Scots, which tropes the historical difference between Scotland’s relation to imperial England and the overtly colonial case of Ireland. There, the lack of a distinct Anglo-Irish language, an equivalent to Lowland Scots, corresponds with other symptoms of a colonial history—such as the underdevelopment of an indigenous civil society—in a linguistically as well as politically polarized terrain. Three main languages are current in modern Scotland: Gaelic, English, and Lowland Scots. (It is worth repeating here what almost every commentator on MacDiarmid feels obliged to repeat, the historical status of Scots as a distinct language rather than a “dialect” of English.) If in Scotland too, Gaelic denotes a colonized ethnicity and English an imperial hegemony, Scots is the vernacular language of the vast majority—the middle and working classes—of the population and as such represents a “national” domain of civil society and everyday life. Historically, Scotland’s fall from sovereignty did not follow a colonial trajectory of conquest and occupation by a foreign power. Scotland lost its court when James VI acceded to the English throne as James I, Elizabeth’s heir. The Union of Crowns was followed, a century later (1707), by a Union of Parliaments which absorbed the Scottish legislative assembly into Westminster. The Union of Parliaments was negotiated by a formal treaty between the two nations’ governing classes; in return for surrendering executive autonomy, Scotland gained access to English markets and imperial trade and kept the key institutions—of religion, law, finance, and education—that sustained a relatively autonomous, national civil society in the Lowland towns. Scots settlers, soldiers, merchants, bankers, administrators, educators, and professional men flourished across the worldwide commercial and colonial networks of the British empire. The Gaelic Highlands present a very different case: their modern history exhibits all the sorry symptoms of colonization, with military repression (in 1746) followed by economic restructuring, evacuation of populations, and legislation to abolish markers of cultural distinctiveness. But the colonial difference that marks the *Gaeltacht* cut across Scotland itself, not just across Great Britain: dividing Highland from Lowland Scotland

and England (and those regions within themselves), rather than Scotland from England.

The diagnosis of “internal colonialism,” sometimes applied wholesale to Scotland, thus involves a murkier state of affairs than an “English” domination of “Scotland” within the British Isles.⁸ Scotland’s political absorption into Great Britain reproduced, rather, a set of relations of domination and exploitation within and across the national identity, since Scottish and English interests colluded in colonizing the Highlands and in developing the British empire overseas. The linguistic difference between English (the language of imperial administration and official culture) and Scots (the language of everyday life) encoded, rather, a broad class distinction within Lowland Scotland as its economy industrialized throughout the nineteenth century. If Gaelic could be the trope of a lost ancestral nation—as it promptly became, with exquisite contradictoriness, in James Macpherson’s “Ossian” translations less than fifteen years after Culloden—Scots, rife with these complexities and internal contradictions, frames the impossibility of any such purifying conception.

MacDiarmid and the “Renaissance” literati developed a version of the critique of “internal colonialism” which diagnosed its effects in the radically internal domains of psychology and culture. This is the so-called “Caledonian Antisyzygy,” or “zigzag of contradictions,” a term coined by G. Gregory Smith in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) and adopted by MacDiarmid over the next few decades. (T. S. Eliot’s review of Smith’s book, “Was There a Scottish Literature?” [1919], generated his own subsequent account of tradition in a critical debate which forms the theoretical context for MacDiarmid’s argument with *The Waste Land* in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*.)⁹ The “Antisyzygy” characterizes a schizophrenic logic of internal doubling and splitting manifest at the level of language, the medium of culture and subject-formation. In *Scott and Scotland* (1936) Edwin Muir contends that the division between English (the “technical” language of writing, reason, science) and Scots (the “organic” language of speech, song, emotion, daily life) codified a fatal “dissociation of sensibility” in modern Scottish culture, formalized in the mid-eighteenth-century discourses of Enlightenment, when the Scottish universities promoted English linguistic standards as a cultural technology of modernization.¹⁰

“Curse on my dooble life and dooble tongue, / —Guid Scots wi’ English a’ hamstrung—,” growls MacDiarmid in his second long poem sequence, *To*

Circumjack Cencrastus (236). The aphorism reduces the predicament to a self-evident distinction between guid Scots and bad English. Elsewhere it becomes all too clear that the task of decolonization will require the expulsion not so much of an alien English presence but of a part or aspect of oneself. The “intimate enemy” (in Ashis Nandy’s formulation¹¹) folds Scottish subjects in a closer embrace than in stark conditions of colonization, where a binary opposition may be easier to untangle. In a frank statement of his “quarrel wi’ th’ owre sonsy rose” (England), MacDiarmid complains that he “[stands] still for”—at once endures and continues to represent—

... forces which

Were subjugated to mak’ way
For England’s poo’er, and to enrich
The kinds o’ English, and o’ Scots,
The least congenial to my thoughts.

Hauf his soul a Scot maun use
Indulgin’ in illusions,
And hauf in getting rid o’ them . . . (157)

And early on, in the most often-quoted phrase from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, the poet repudiates the constitutional topos of moderation and compromise that has justified Scotland’s partnership in the Union: “I’ll ha’e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur / Extremes meet”—a positionality, the poet goes on to boast, justified not by philosophical reason (the symptom, presumably, of a post-Union, anglicizing “Enlightenment”) but by “auld Scottish instincts” (87). One way of reading the phrase—in terms of a political rather than a psychic topology—is to see MacDiarmid invoking a “colonial” site for his enunciation. If the “hauf-way hoose” suggests a provisionally domestic setting (preparing its occupant for reentry to home life), then the site where extremes meet suggests a site radically exterior to domestic norms—one governed, for example, by the “extreme” political relations of colonialism.

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A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle is not always perspicuous in its rendering of the imperial force field of Scottish identity politics. Even through its blind spots and dark passages, the poem apprehends the symbolic violence that

attends the formations (which are always deformations) of national identity. In an opening diatribe against the popular ceremony of Burns Night (commemorative suppers held on January 25, Robert Burns's birthday), the poet attacks the inauthentic, sentimental modality of cultural nationalism that historians have labeled the "invention of tradition,"¹² applied in the nineteenth century as key ingredient of a Tory Unionist ideology of empire:

You canna gang to a Burns supper even
 Wi'oot some wizened scrunt o' a knock-knee
 Chinee turns roon to say, 'Him Haggis—velly goot!
 And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney

No' wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote
 But misapplied is a'body's property . . .

Croose London Scotties wi' their braw shirt fronts
 And a' their fancy freen's, rejoicin'
 That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,
 Bagdad—and Hell, nae doot—are voicin'

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,
 In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,
 And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an
 Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' their thochts. (84–85)

The vision of Burns Night celebrated by Chinese and Cockneys, from London to Timbuctoo, Bagdad and "Hell," displays a profane traffic of Scottish national identity in the symbolic economy of empire, with the debasement of Burns's poetry to an ideological currency of "sentiments o' universal love" bamboozling colonial subjects. The mention of "London Scotties" and a Cockney piper at once exposes and blurs the historical agency of Scots themselves in this system. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the main literary apparatus for processing Scottish cultural nationalism into a trope of British imperial identity throughout the nineteenth century, had coined the phrase "Cockney" as a term of Scots contempt for low-bred Englishmen—only it was a Tory Unionist epithet aimed against radical romantic writers such as Keats, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt, whom one would suppose to have been MacDiarmid's precursors in a genealogy of anti-imperialism. As in *Blackwood's*, satiric scorn holds hands with nostalgia, as

MacDiarmid's verses put Scots, via Burns, in the figurative position of an original property and paternity adulterated by promiscuous sentimental exchange and intellectual "fathering." (The very dynamic, in other words, that a postcolonial criticism will celebrate under the title of "hybridization.") The sneer at the degenerate "Chinee" adds racial purity to the phantom of a traduced pure Scotland, even as it blocks critical thinking about the actual history of Scottish interests in the China trade (Jardine Mathieson in Hong Kong, and so on).

The passage may represent the default setting of a "vulgar" romanticism which MacDiarmid discards as he warms to his theme—a kind of ideological throat-clearing. Critics of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* generally agree that the poem eschews the nostalgia that infects this early polemic, although not its high-flying individualism. MacDiarmid presses for a renovation of Scots that looks forward and upward, rather than back down to an origin. Before he blasts Burns Night, the poet issues the first in a series of manifestoes:

To prove my saul is Scots I maun begin
 Wi' what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect,
 And spire up syne by visible degrees
 To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked. (84)

Here, as so often in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ambiguity hollows out the poet's bravado, begging the question of what exactly the poetic restructuring of Scots will entail. Does proof of a Scots soul consist in the transcendence of debased conventions of Scottishness (such as Burns Night)—or, ironically, in the invocation of them to begin with? The "heichts" are, presumably, that rarefied space "whaur / Extremes meet"—although the trope of visionary ascent traditionally promises an arrival above and beyond dialectical strife. When extremes meet, what happens—will they neutralize or suspend each other, or spark off further turbulence? Will poetic elevation bring a transcendence of Scots (sloughing it for some other, as yet unimagined condition) or a dialectical sublation (carrying it forward, in an improved variant, some sort of Super-Scots)?

The poem's linguistic retention of Scots would appear to give a decisive answer to the question. (The only stanzas in English mark its fitness for second-remove burlesque—of Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," 150–51.) Whatever else it may knock down or throw out, *A Drunk Man*

continues to offer its reader Scots, in full if not overflowing measure. Yet the question keeps asking itself throughout *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and it probes to the quick of MacDiarmid's great invention, the stylistic medium that makes it one of the great modern poems in any language (rather than a rambling nationalist rant), "Synthetic Scots." "Synthetic" carries several different meanings. It can denote an artificial product, neither original nor organic, forged out of disparate elements. It can denote a higher unity that resolves and unifies the dialectical forces of its production; or, alternatively, a stage that remains subject to those forces, and thus one that will yield further, provisional syntheses. These distinctions inform the accounts of Synthetic Scots, and of the poetic and nationalist enterprises it underwrites, offered by MacDiarmid's critics. A single collection of essays, for example, proposes Synthetic Scots as, variously: the linguistic foundation of a renovated national culture, analogous to Dante's invention of a Tuscan-based Italian (Carl Freedman); the medium of a liberal, multi-cultural "dialogism" (Nancy Gish); and a deconstructive antidote to the imperial model of a "standard" language, enacting a fragmentation and dispersal of national identity rather than its reconstruction (Rena Grant).¹³

Of these accounts, Grant's best keeps faith with the fierce (sometimes truculent) contradictoriness (in his own phrase, "nocht but cussedness," 133) of MacDiarmid's performance, although Grant tends to standardize the deconstructive impulse into a governing strategy. The emphasis on the site "whaur / Extremes meet" as one of ever-breeding contradiction underrates the poem's repeated investments in a rhetoric of messianic rescue, transcendental altitude, visionary revelation, and symbolic totalization, announced in that early promise to "spire up" to unreckoned heights. Quite late in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, the poet asks:

Is Scotland big enough to be
A symbol o' that force in me,
In wha's divine inebriety
A sicht abune contempt I'll see?

For a' that's Scottish is in me . . .
And I in turn 'ud be an action
To pit in a concrete abstraction
My country's contrair qualities,
And mak' a unity o' these . . . (145)

The ambition to forge a "concrete abstraction" which will unify Scotland's contradictions expresses itself in the idiom of a rhapsodic transcendentalism. And in several sequences MacDiarmid anticipates the programmatically sublime Wallace Stevens of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* and *The Auroras of Autumn*. W. N. Herbert has parsed the project of "synthesis" in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* as one of symbolic totalization, fatally compromised, however, by what he calls "the solipsistic nature of [the poet's] vision."¹⁴ MacDiarmid's symbolic technique consists "of establishing exteriorized symbols of the self, in order to reincorporate them into an aggrandized persona." In such terms, the synthesis would seem bound to fail. "MacDiarmid's inability fully to resolve his symbolic structure at any given point" ensures that the poem can only "resolve one set of paradoxes momentarily, only to create more. . . . The real energy the poem displays is caused by the poet's partial resolutions and continued bafflement."¹⁵ This evaluation comes close to Grant's final appraisal of the poem's "recognition that it *does* encounter contradiction—though it does not seem always to recognize the logic of it—and its refusal at least to rewrite it into a nineteenth-century paradigm."¹⁶

Both critics, then, read the impasse of a late or residual romanticism in MacDiarmid's project of synthesis, although one interprets it, in the mode of irony, as the poem's refusal (of an organic form of national identity) and the other, in the mode of pathos, as a failure (of symbolic totalization). The recognition of a romantic poetics in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* should remind us, at least, that failure is written into the protocols of the "egotistical sublime," the formal term for what Herbert (insisting on an ethical vocabulary) calls solipsism. As Marc Redfield has put it, it seems that "any entity marked as romantic will turn out to resist its own romanticism."¹⁷ This recognition should help us think through Nairn's diagnosis of "Scottish belatedness"—the anomalous, anachronistic appearance in Scotland of a romantic cultural politics at the European moment of high modernism. Such terms as "romanticism" and "modernism" identify loose sets of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies under the long-duration historical conditions of modernization, and they are variably rather than strictly tied to a periodizing chronology. The meditation on a "romantic" national theme in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* together with (and through) its modernism reveals, for one thing, the romanticism residual in a modernist poetics that holds onto visionary and totalizing ambitions (the "mythical method" and

its analogues), even while that poetics may end up confirming the loss of an authentic origin, the ruin of a universal symbolic order.

Nairn correlates the belated appearance of Scottish nationalism in the 1920s with the absence of a genuine romantic movement, the cultural crucible of a nationalist politics, in Scotland during the early-nineteenth-century epoch of European romanticism. That absence was a consequence, in turn, of the precocious or premature development of the Scottish Enlightenment, the cultural form of post-Union civil society.¹⁸ Although Nairn's argument is in several respects problematic (ignoring much of what was actually going on in Scottish literature in the first third of the nineteenth century), it reflects the analysis of Scottish cultural history made by the intellectuals of the Renaissance themselves, and so helps bring MacDiarmid's project of synthesis into focus as a realization or reclamation—under the formal protocols of modernism—of that absent Scottish romanticism. The void of the genuine article, in Nairn's account, was covered up by the Victorian-era industrial production of an imaginary Romantic Scotland, the debased currency of Scots kitsch denounced in the "Burns supper" sequence early in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. As we saw, MacDiarmid's polemic clings to the idea of an authentic Burns—an original poetry buried under the rubble of vulgar misappropriation which a true reading might rescue. Elsewhere, under the slogan of the "Caledonian Antisyzygy," MacDiarmid and his cohort articulated a more thoroughgoing critique of a modern tradition of Scottish literature fatally compromised by its Unionist historical production—a critique that tended to invest all the more powerfully in the romantic fantasy of a lost, pure, prelapsarian Scotland. In *Scott and Scotland*, Muir ended up pushing back the onset of the "dissociation of sensibility" from the Enlightenment and Union to the Reformation, reiterating MacDiarmid's denunciation of the "foul trap" in *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (213).¹⁹ That poem rejects Burns, Scott, Carlyle, and "R. L. S." altogether as representatives of a "false Scotland" (208) and identifies the true one with the occluded Gaelic realms of "Alba and Eire" (213), in a gesture that reprises the vexed Scottish origins of European romanticism in Macpherson's "Ossian" poetry, the very archetype of the inauthentic representation of national origins.

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle resists its own romanticism most productively, perhaps, in its complex evocation of Burns, who remains the metonymic representative of a modern Scots poetry and national tradi-

tion.²⁰ Rena Grant notes that Burns's poem about a drunk man who stays out late and has a vision provides a touchstone for MacDiarmid's, which alludes to "Tam O'Shanter" as the national model it must overgo. *A Drunk Man* makes its most explicit claim "to exceed the limits of the Burns poem and to evade [its] return to 'normality'" in a citation of the climax of Tam's adventure.²¹ Spying on a witches' coven, unable to control his excitement, Tam gives himself away and scampers homeward with the witches in pursuit. MacDiarmid's drunk man boasts:

I canna ride awa' like Tame,
But e'en maun bide juist whaur I am.

I canna ride, and gin I could,
I'd sune be sorry I hedna stude,

For less than a' there is to see
'll never be owre muckle for me. (109–10)

This declaration fixes Burns's role in Scottish poetry as representative of a national failure of romanticism—the failure to advance, that is, from a sentimental and satiric poetry of common life to a romantic project of visionary totalization. "Tam O'Shanter" casts visionary rapture in a materialist bathos of domestic and erotic comedy—the hero's act of seeing is at once prurient and phobic, registering its banal transgressiveness in an anthropological idiom of black magic and taboo, and shut off by his flight back home to bed; while the loss of his mare's tail burlesques the sacrifice required of the adventurer into the contact zones of romance. The poet of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in contrast, declares his superior readiness to stand and see all—and pay the price of that revelation, presumably, in sustaining the messianic role he elsewhere lays claim to.

In poetic terms, what would seeing all entail? MacDiarmid summons an alternative model for this visionary ambition from deeper in the Scots tradition, from the pre-Reformation past. This is the early-sixteenth-century makar William Dunbar. Early in *A Drunk Man*, MacDiarmid blasts the Scots tradition for having flung Dunbar "owre the kailyard-wa'" (106: the domesticated "cabbage-patch" of the modern literary canon). Elsewhere, in his manifestoes, he exhorted modern Scots poets to follow "not Burns but Dunbar" as their native example. Dunbar's poetry offers something more than a Burnsian vein of demotic satire; it realizes the allegorical

dream-vision, fusing a fallen temporal condition with its mystic transfiguration, of which MacDiarmid's drunken rhapsody aspires to be the modern analogue.

The appeal to Dunbar, then, is quintessentially "romantic": not least in the imaginary failure that attends it. Dunbar's visionary performance employed an allegorical technique underwritten by the culture of its production and reception. Allegory works by mobilizing a communally recognized system of schemes and figures that gives cognitive access to a communally recognized metaphysical order. A modern reinvention of ancient allegory is bound to fail because it cannot summon around itself that vanished social universe of shared doctrines, conventions, and associations from which the allegorical web was woven. Instead of allegory, the modern poet—which is to say the romantic poet—must work with symbolism: the prosthesis of a severed organic bond with reality, an instrument that recovers a numinous totality all by itself, in isolation from a fallen social language, by virtue of its access to a precognitive (mystical or unconscious) ground of being. Paul de Man, in a powerful critical reversal of Coleridge's privileging of symbol over allegory as *techné* of the romantic imagination, identifies the metaphysical nostalgia attending the claims of the symbolic in historical time—to which condition, paradoxically, the allegorical can give authentic access, precisely by virtue of its "inauthentic," historically ruined status.²²

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle thematizes the attempt and failure of symbolic totalization through a series of tropes: the visionary access of light that dialectically intensifies a cognitive darkness, the succession of poetic elevation by a comic or ironic bathos, the figural role of woman as at once mute, pure object of transcendental desire (the "silken leddy" of the interpolated Blok verses), and material speaking subject, contaminated by historical and biological existence, that refutes the poet's idealizations. Scotland becomes the topical focus of this push and pull of totalization and resistance, the decisive manifestations of which take place poetically, linguistically, as a function of MacDiarmid's Scots:

I wad ha'e Scotland to my eye
 Until I saw a timeless flame
 Tak' Auchtermuchty for a name
 And kent that Ecclefechan stood
 As pairt o' an eternal mood (144)

The lines parody in advance the T. S. Eliot of "Little Gidding." Their optative mood is at once confirmed and mocked by the phonetic resistance—dirty, sensuous—of the place-names "Auchtermuchty" (a comic shibboleth) and "Ecclefechan" (Carlyle's birthplace) to a visionary sublimation: yielding Scots as what sticks in the throat, the phoneme 'x.'²³

Bathos defines the closing movement of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. The poem's culminating sequence, "The Great Wheel," turns beyond Dunbar to Dunbar's master, the European supremo of visionary allegory who licenses MacDiarmid's epic ambition, Dante. As a sublime figure which joins the poet's vision with the dynamic mechanism of the cosmos, the Wheel evokes the mystical exaltation of the *Paradiso* only to deny its transcendental content—the presence of his fellow Scots ("on a birlin' edge I see / wee Scotland squattin' like a flee," 159) provokes the poet's recognition that "I micht ha'e been in Dante's Hell" (164). Rather than realizing a symbolic totalization, then, the Wheel represents that totalization as a metaphysically empty formal principle. It signifies the astronomical cycle of twenty-six-thousand years in which all of human history is stuck, from the War in Heaven to World War I (159). The poet looks down on his own national tradition:

I felt it turn, and syne I saw
 John Knox and Clavers in my raw,
 And Mary Queen o' Scots ana,'

And Rabbie Burns and Weelum Wallace,
 And Carlyle lookin' unco' gallus,
 And Harry Lauder (to enthrall us). (164)

"They canna learn, sae canna move," says the poet's ghostly interlocutor (a Virgil rather than a Beatrice):

But stick for aye to their auld groove
 — *The only race in History who've*

Bidden in the same category
Frae stert to present o' their story,
And deem their ignorance their glory. (165)

The effect of sticking in a groove is reproduced in MacDiarmid's formal imitation of terza rima, which rhymes all three lines of the stanza instead

of reproducing the delicate onward-locking movement of Dante's rhyme-scheme. The poet protests (in a dominie's blustering English):

'But in this huge ineducable
Heterogeneous hotch and rabble,
Why am I condemned to squabble?'

And is answered with a last gloss on the messianic role he has intermittently claimed:

'A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o' his people's doom,
And dee to brak' their livin' tomb.

Mony hae' tried, but a' ha'e failed.
Their sacrifice has nocht availed.
Upon the thistle they're impaled.

Unless he make a greater sacrifice:

You maun choose but gin ye'd see
Anither category ye
Maun tine your nationality.' (165)

The poet confronts a stark choice between a categorical surrender of nationality, or a fall back into its worldly, squalid, untransfigurable state. The third, "synthetic" way, of a radical reformation of Scots, has disappeared from view. The poet will remain impaled on the thistle, the symbol now for an obdurately historical and material reality that outwears symbolic transformations.

The closing lyric of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* repeats the movement of exaltation and bathos in an aesthetic rather than didactic key. Empty, so he says, of metaphysical desire, the poet claims a last, inalienable property: "Yet ha'e I Silence left, the croon o' a'" (166). "Silence," however, is not really silent, not least in its being a noisy literary echo (of dying Hamlet). The poem's last turn evacuates this last-ditch Romantic plenitude:

—'And weel ye nicht,
Sae Jean'll say, "eften sic a night!" (167)

Silence means exhaustion rather than a refuge of the numinous. Jean's rebuke, projected by the poet as a rejoinder to his own garrulousness, confirms the poem's resistance to its own transcendental drive and locates that resistance in the (ventriloquised) speech of the wife. The wife's speech, as figurative source of the everyday idiom of vernacular Scots, reiterates a Burnsian poetic: Tam O'Shanter comes back home from his visionary adventure, like MacDiarmid's drunk man, although Burns does not directly represent the wife's speaking voice. The quality of that return—is it a defeat or a victory?—remains as ambiguous as it is in Burns's poem; or rather, MacDiarmid reprises Burns's comic ambiguity at a metapoetic remove, coding the allusive fall back to Burns as a poetic triumph at the same time as it is a metaphysical defeat. The end of *A Drunk Man* reasserts Scots as the medium of a material historical existence that shows its strength, as well as its limitation, in a sensuous resistance to transcendental schemes, in addition to its being the medium of the poem's formal and aesthetic achievement, its shimmering exhibition of the material resources of a national literary tradition (Burns, Dunbar, the ballads) for future performance.

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After *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, MacDiarmid turned his poetic career in two major directions, both of which involved a creative rethinking of the anachronistic configuration—typified by an "absent" or "belated" romanticism—of modern Scottish literary history. MacDiarmid resumed, with amplified urgency, the romantic quest for national origins, reaching beyond Dunbar to a deeper source, and then—in an apparently antithetical move—he invested his late career in a spectacularly deconsecrated and contaminated version of English as "world language." In both cases we can read MacDiarmid as troping the "place" of these languages—Gaelic, English—in a Scottish tradition, in an experimental aesthetic that augments the exploration of Scots in *A Drunk Man* and other works of the 1920s and 1930s.

In *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, the poet excoriates "Oor four universities" as "Scots but in name," with professors fluent "in Sanskrit / Or Czech—wi' a leaven / O' some kind o' English" but ignorant of indigenous language and tradition. The poet roars: "in Hell here there isna / A Scotsman amang you!" (203–4). The Scottish history and culture so outrageously neglected turn out to be Gaelic: "Where Tremnor triumphed / Or Oscar fell . . . Muiread-

hach Albannach, / Lachlan Mor of his stem, / And Finlay Macnab" (204). MacDiarmid affiliates *Cencrastus* with the earlier Irish Celtic Revival to proclaim a new nationalist ideal of "Gaeldom regained" (188). In "The Irish in Scotland," the poet conducts his foreign guest—after brushing aside the false tradition of Burns, Scott, Carlyle, and Stevenson—to "the islands / Where the wells are undefiled / And folks sing as their fathers did / Before Christ was a child" (208). What looks like a full-blown romantic regression is qualified, however, by MacDiarmid's glancing acknowledgments of his project's Ossianism—the constitutive inauthenticity of a modern recovery of "the Gaelic Idea" through English translation. "Where Tremnor triumphed, / Or Oscar fell" evokes the mist-wreathed mise-en-scène of *Fingal* and *Temora* more suggestively than a scientifically verifiable historical geography; while "the wells are undefiled" alludes to Spenser's tribute to Chaucer, a topos of the English construction of a national poetic tradition.²⁴ MacDiarmid's own lustrous translations, "The Birlinn of Clanranald" (1935) and "The Praise of Ben Dorain" (1940), render into English the great poets of the eighteenth-century Gaelic revival (Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair, Duncan Bàn MacIntyre) whose work was eclipsed in literary historiography by the sensational career of "Ossian." The alternative path to a "Gaeldom regained" would be that taken by Sorley MacLean, and others who followed him, in writing a modern poetry in Gaelic after the example of those eighteenth-century masters. MacDiarmid's role, then, can be viewed as undertaking a redemption of Macpherson's, in which his own translations encourage a modern Gaelic revival rather than usurping its place: reopening the case of "Ossian" as a seedbed for new poetry, rather than reiterating its invention of cultural origins.

The next major turn in MacDiarmid's development, the assumption of "a poetry of facts" (630) and a "World Language," that is, English, as the global medium of scientific knowledge, is the step that has confirmed his status—even more than his work in Scots—as the unreadable monster of anglophone modernism. Seamus Heaney attempts to put an optimistic spin on the consensus, calling on MacDiarmid's critics to "make a firm distinction between the true poetry and what we might call the habitual printout . . . [W]hat happened to Wordsworth will happen to MacDiarmid: the second phase of his career will be rendered down to a series of self-contained, self-sustaining passages of genuine poetry."²⁵ Against the explicit romanticism of this call for salvage, other commentators defend the continuing avant-

gardism of MacDiarmid's late phase in such works as the enormous *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955). Carl Freedman argues that the invention of "a world language based on and against normative English," with its immense accumulations of data transcribed (or "plagiarized") from miscellaneous sources, dissolves the ideological categories of property and identity that sustain a traditional work of reading.²⁶ Robert Crawford, in the most imaginatively compelling account of this poetry, redeems the trope with which Heaney dismissed the bulk of it: "tracts of the later poet seem like nothing so much as material turned out by a computer database, bibliographical printout, cyber-text language that . . . closely [resembles] the kinds of information today most commonly held in machine-readable form."²⁷ This constitutes the radical project Crawford calls "Modernist Cybernetics," in which MacDiarmid's late poetry imaginatively apprehends the postliterary—genuinely postromantic—linguistic environment of digital information storage and retrieval systems that has only very recently become naturalized by the saturation of everyday life with computer technology.

More surprisingly, in fact, Crawford's analysis illuminates MacDiarmid's late poetry as a recapitulation and hyperbolic expansion of the linguistic project of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment: the achievement that, simultaneously with the work of Burns, "Ossian," and the Gaelic poets, constituted "Scotland's absent Romanticism" as the first of the modern movements in European literature. Enlightenment discourse reinvented English, the written dialect of imperial administration, as the universal medium of a new science of man. MacDiarmid's World English, an experimental variant of that Enlightenment invention for a posthuman age, thus represents the most audacious of his attempts to reimagine a "national" language in relation to its world-historical horizon.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Murray Grieve (1892–1978) assumed the penname "Hugh MacDiarmid" in 1922, before the appearance of his book-length collections of poetry. In this essay I follow the convention of using "Hugh MacDiarmid" to refer to Grieve's poetic identity and persona(e). Citations of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and other poems refer by page number to *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).
- 2 See Crawford, "A Drunk Man Looks at *The Waste Land*"; Riach, "T. S. Eliot

- and Hugh MacDiarmid"; Gish, "MacDiarmid Reading *The Waste Land*: The Politics of Quotation," in *Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Gish, 207–29.
- 3 Burns, "Epistle to John Lapraik."
 - 4 Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, 94–95, 103–5.
 - 5 Maxwell, "The Nationalism of Hugh MacDiarmid," 207.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 209.
 - 7 For this designation, referring to the 1955 Bandung Conference of newly independent Asian and African states, see Larsen, "Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism," 12–14; citing Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, and Amin, *Empire of Chaos*.
 - 8 The standard analysis, coining the phrase, is Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*. McClintock lists "internal colonization" ("where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony") as one among "a variety of forms of global domination": "The Angel of Progress." This description applies to the Gaelic Highlands, as in Hechter's account, but scarcely to Lowland Scotland, unless "colonialism" is to be understood in so broad a sense as to dull its analytic edge.
 - 9 The primary texts by Smith and Eliot are reprinted in McCulloch, ed., *Modernism and Nationalism*, 6–10. See Gish, "MacDiarmid Reading *The Waste Land*," 208–20; Crawford, "Scottish Literature and English Studies."
 - 10 Muir, *Scott and Scotland*. On the eighteenth-century "Scottish invention of English literature," see Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*.
 - 11 Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*.
 - 12 See Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, and especially Hugh Trevor-Roper's (problematic) contribution, "The Invention of Scotland: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," 15–42. For a more detailed consideration of the Scottish case, see Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland*.
 - 13 See in Gish, ed., *Hugh MacDiarmid*: Carl Freedman, "Beyond the Dialect of the Tribe: James Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, and World Language," 253–73; Nancy Gish, "MacDiarmid Reading *The Waste Land*"; Rena Grant, "Synthetic Scots: Hugh MacDiarmid's Imagined Community," 191–206.
 - 14 Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid*, 47.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 55, 57–59.
 - 16 Grant, "Synthetic Scots," 206.
 - 17 Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 32.
 - 18 Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, 114–18.
 - 19 For the critique of Muir and "Antiszyzyg" historiography, see Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, and Craig, *Out of History*, 82–118.
 - 20 See Riach, "MacDiarmid's Burns." See also Finlay, "The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries."
 - 21 Grant, "Synthetic Scots," 191–92, 197. Kenneth Buthlay, however, finds the parallels between "Tam O'Shanter" and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* "to be

- weak and in fact trivial": see MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. Buthlay, 1.
- 22 De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality."
 - 23 Edwin Morgan, a fellow poet, notes that the nationalist trope of the place-name confirms MacDiarmid's rural rather than urban cultural identity: "MacDiarmid and Scotland," in *The Age of MacDiarmid*, ed. Scott and Davis, 198. See also MacDiarmid's poems "Water Music" (1932) and "Scotland" (1934).
 - 24 Edmund Spenser's tribute to Chaucer, in *The Faerie Queene* (4.2. 32); cited by Walter Scott in the "Dedicatory Epistle" to *Ivanhoe*—the great Scottish romance of English national origins, 19.
 - 25 Heaney, "A Torchlight Procession of One," 321, 336.
 - 26 Freedman, "Beyond the Dialect of the Tribe," 264, 269–72.
 - 27 Crawford, *The Modern Poet*, 212.

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