

A Great Radical: Hugh MacDiarmid, 1892-1978

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From just after the First World War to just before the Second, Hugh MacDiarmid was writing the poems which entitle him to be considered a great radical. By "great" I don't have in mind some academic marking system which arranges writers in rank, stretching from "great" through "very good" to "mediocre". I mean that the visions of mankind which MacDiarmid symbolised in the imagery of his poems are so deep-reaching that we cannot do without them if we want to take stock of what it has

meant to be human in the middle years of our century.

For "radical" also read "rebel". If someone is filled by a powerful sense of life, its energies and possibilities, he will also feel keenly how it can be stunted, injured, destroyed, and he may well then want to struggle against the destroyers. But I prefer "radical" because it suggests, as well as militancy, a concern with the core of things. MacDiarmid's imaginative insight was so keen, vivid, and physical

that he habitually thought his way through to the very wellspring of whatever process concerned him, whether it was family life, sexuality, the waste and the plenteousness of nature, exploitation and tyranny, or industrial work. So he writes in "The Seamless Garment", a poem from the first book he wrote as a Marxist, *First Hymn to Lenin* (1931):

You are a cousin of mine
Here in the mill.
It's queer that born in the Langholm
It's no' until
Juist noo I see what it means
To work in the mill like my freen's.

He is speaking to a relative, a weaver in the tweed mill, and in the most natural language he goes on to raise the most fundamental issues:

Are you equal to life as to the loom?
Turnin' oot shoddy or what?
Claith better than man? D'ye live to the full,
Your poo'ers a' deliverly taught?
Or scamp a'thing else? Border claith's famous.
Shall things o' mair consequence shame us?

Lenin and Rilke baith gied still mair skill,
Coopers o' Stobo, to a greater concern
Than you devote to claith in the mill.
Wad it be ill to learn
To keep a bit eye on their looms as well
And no' be hailly ta'en up wi' your tweel?¹

In this poem MacDiarmid develops a twin ideal—Lenin stands for effective practical action, Rilke the German poet stands for the creative use of language:

Lenin was like that wi' workin' class life,
At hame wi't a'.
His fause movements couldna been fewer,
The best weaver Earth ever saw.
A' he'd to dae wi' moved intact,
Clean, clear, and exact.

A poet like Rilke did the same
In a different sphere,
Made a single reality—a' a'e 'oo'—
O' his love and pity and fear;
A seamless garment o' music and thought
But you're owre thrang wi' puirer to tak' tent o't.

"A a'e 'oo" means 'all one wool' and was once a common Scots phrase that meant cloth woven so perfectly it was as though it had been made from a single thread with no joins or knots. Inside the poem, which makes us realistically at home in the mill, the phrase takes on rich concrete meaning and enters permanently into our minds as a symbol for life

¹ From *Selected Poems*, ed. David Craig and John Manson (Penguin, 1970, 1976), pp. 58, 60. All quotations from this edition unless otherwise specified.

lived so effectively, with so little waste, falsity, or purely automatic behaviour, that everything hangs together and everything we do serves our deepest aims. MacDiarmid is offering an ideal to the people of his country, especially the less privileged and less educated, the manual workers, and he is daring to take them to task for being apathetic, for setting their sights too low: "You're owre thrang wi' puirer to tak' tent o't"—'you're too preoccupied with lesser things to concentrate on it—the great thing, the seamless garment, whether this takes the form of the best literature or of a successful revolution. MacDiarmid can say this without sounding patronising, without either hectoring the workers or talking down to them, because in his language and background he is one of them, and because he knows the value of their skills:

The shuttles fleein' owre quick for my een
Prompt the thocht,
And the coordination atween
Weaver and machine.

The hail shop's dumfounderin'
To a stranger like me.
Second nature to you; you're perfectly able
To think, speak and see
Apairt frae the looms, tho' to some
That doesna sae easily come.

Scottish Backwardness

That poem is radical in every sense, from the naming of a revolutionary politician as a key figure in our world to the raising of questions fundamental to modern industrial society. It had taken MacDiarmid ten years to get to this, from his beginnings as an originating poet around 1922. That is not slow as development goes, and in the course of it he had had to bring the poetic gamut of his culture (the Scottish) out of a moribund 19th-century state into a modernism which could make use of present-day facts, concepts, and language. Literature in Scotland was mouldering. The loss of political independence, the systematic wiping out of the Highland culture after Culloden, the huge losses of people through the Clearances, emigration, and the raising of regiments who then died off through disease and battle—this long-drawn-out social tragedy, from 1750 to 1900, brought it about that most of the talented people had left the country.²

² Details in my *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People* (1961), pp. 273-93. Scotland lost, among others, Carlyle, James Mill, Macaulay; James Gibb and the Adam brothers (architects); James Thomson, Thomas Campbell, and John Davidson (poets); Gilray and David Wilkie (artists); and George Douglas Brown, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Lewis Grassie Gibbon (novelists).

The people who stayed on were demoralised and gloomy. Literary concerns dwindled down into the pokey and the backward-looking. During the century or so from 1820 onwards, no Scottish writer created a first-hand image or an unforgettable line about the life in the cities, factory work, class struggle, or involvement in global events such as world war. Stories and poems tended to be written by ministers of the Kirk and they centred on humble and homely old folk, spending the twilight of their days in quiet old villages.

Remaking a Style

When MacDiarmid came back to Scotland after military service in the eastern Mediterranean and started to write (just at the point when Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and the mature Yeats were bringing out their crucial work), he set himself, deliberately, to remake a style for poetry in his country. He took words and phrases from folksong, dictionaries, and his native speech, and he also took symbols and forms from Continental writers (Dostoevsky, Rilke). Many of his earlier lyrics are exercises, he was trying out a whole gamut of styles, in the way of so many modern artists (Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky). But his own vision starts to emerge—a very modern sense of the world as an arena of conflict, a site of organic evolution, where vital instability is a permanent condition of life and human nature, human feelings, are always mixed and ambiguous. His politics were not yet revolutionary, but he had been a socialist since before the Great War, a member of the ILP and (before he was twenty) one of a Fabian Research Committee on Land Problems and Rural Development, for which he wrote valuable memoranda. His poetry wasn't yet political, it was radical more in the sense of opening itself to conflict instead of settling for harmony, piety, quietism. For example, he faces the mixture of ecstasy and disgust that can lie at the root of sexuality:

Your body derns
In its graces again
As the dreich grun' does
In the gowden grain,
And oot o' the daith
O' pride you rise
Wi' beauty yet
For a hauf-disguise.

The skinklan' stars
Are but distant dirt.
Tho' fer owre near
Your are still—whiles—girt
Wi' the bonnie licht
You bood ha'e tint
—And I lo'e Love
Wi' a scunner in't.³

³ *Poems*, pp. 26-7.

Near that poem, however, in the original book (*Penny Wheep*, 1926), we find a piece adapted from the German which at a stroke brings into Scottish literature the things which it had needed for so long—imagery from the urban scene, awareness of worldwide political and social movements, and knowledge of what writers were doing in the rest of Europe. The poem is about Karl Liebknecht, the German Communist leader murdered during the suppression of the revolution in Bavaria just after the War.

His corpse owre a' the city lies
In ilka square and ilka street.
His spilt bluid floods the vera skies
And nae hoose but is darkened wi't.

The factory horns begin to blaw
Thro' a' the city, blare on blare,
The lowsins' time o' workers a'.
Like emmits skailin' everywhere.

And wi' his white teeth shinin' yet
The corpse lies smilin' underfit.⁴

His other major theme of his maturity, the need for a national revival, is glimpsed in just one poem of that time, "In Glasgow":

I'd rather cease from singing
Thank make by swinging wrong
An ultimate Cowcaddens
Or Gorbals of a song.

I'll call myself a poet,
And know that I am fit
When my eyes make glass of Glasgow
And foresee the end of it!⁶

Toward Marxism

So MacDiarmid's Twenties poetry promised to work at a deep level of personal and social experience. But the tight short lyric lines and verses gave him too little room to develop deep trains of thought. He wrote two book-length sequences, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), in both of which he tries to meditate on the theme that now possessed him, the mediocre quality and low morale of Scottish culture:

I look at Scotland and whiles dumfounded see't
A muckle clod split off frae ither life,
Shapeless, uncanny, unendurable clod ..."

Both poems can look tremendous in excerpt, but both, especially the later one, constantly run out into verse journalism, repetitious flailing and railing at

* *Poems*, p. 26.

⁵ *Sangschaw* (1925), p. 53.

⁶ *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), p. 173.

petty targets, and chunks of adaptation of translations of other men's poetry. He seems to have been working too much from negatives, from absent qualities, and from a self-centred sense of his own isolated genius. We can see now that what he had to do was (in a phrase of William Morris's) to "hook himself on to the practical movement". By the start of the Thirties he has taken a leading part in founding the National Party of Scotland; the Slump has come, Scotland's heavy industries have entered on the ten-year idleness that brought destitution to thousands of homes; and MacDiarmid has been given the crash course in social affairs which brought him and thousands of others to see the validity of the Marxist analysis. When he writes in the "First Hymn to Lenin",

For now in the flower and iron of the truth
To you we turn; and turn in vain nae mair,
Ilka fool has folly eneuch for sadness
But at last we are wise and wi' laughter tear
The veil of being, and are face to face
Wi the human race,

he is putting into verse one of the deepest thoughts in *Capital*:

The religious reflex of the real world can . . . only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature. The life-process of society, which is based on material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.⁷

And when he writes in the same poem,

Christ said, "Save ye become as bairns again."
Bairnly eneuch the feck o' us ha' been!
Your work needs men; and its worst foes are juist
The traitors wha through a' history ha' gi'en
The dope that's gar'd the mass o' folk pay heed
And bide bairns indeed,

he directly recalls Marx's definition of religion as "the *opium* of the people", or Lenin's expansion of this: "Religion is a sort of spiritual dope in which the slaves of capital drown the image of man, their demand for a life more or less worthy of human beings."⁸

⁷ MacDiarmid, *Poems*, p. 55; Marx, *Capital*, I, Part I, ch. 1, section 4, "The Fetishism of Commodities".

⁸ MacDiarmid, *Poems*, p. 54; Marx, introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: see Marx and Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow, 1957), p. 42; Lenin, *Socialism and Religion* (1905; Moscow, 1954), p. 6.

The Distance Travelled

How far MacDiarmid had come from those small though perfectly-turned early poems we can see if we compare later ones on the same themes. With the neat paradox of "I lo'e Love/Wi' a scunner in't" compare the amazing "Harry Semen" (from *Stony Limits*, 1934) in which he *imagines* his way more deeply into the very materials of life than any other poet:

Particle frae particle'll brak asunder,
Ilk ane o' them mair livid than the neist.
A separate life?—Incredible war o' equal lights,
Nane o' them wi ocht in common in the least.
Nae threid o' a' the fabric o' my thoct
Is left alongside anither; a pack
O' leprous scuts o' weasels riddlin' a plaid
Sic thrums could never mak'.
Floo mony shades o' white gaed curvin' owre
To you blae centre o' her belly's flower?
Milk-white, and dove-grey, wi' harebell veins.
Ae scar in fair hair like the sun in sunlight lay,
And pelvic experience in a think shadow line;
Thocht canna mairry thoct as sic saft shadows dae.'

This is supreme poetry—it makes a large melodious music which isn't for its own sake merely but evokes the poet's marvelling at the complexity of the physical stuff which 'is life. The complexity lies in the double-meanings of the imagery. Is the "scar" in the third-last line the vulva where the man's fluid enters? Or is it an image of the new life—the child with its traits—which will come from the sexual fusion? I think it is both: both are clearly imaged and both are relevant. And the marrying of two meanings in one image (it happens again in the image of pelvic experience) perfectly fits the subject—how two beings come together to create a third. The next verse amazingly turns back against all that: it expresses an Existentialist revulsion (well before Sartre's *Nausea*, and before Heidegger was known in Britain) from the shapeless, viscous, random quality of sheer life and an Existentialist anguish at the frailty of what we make in the face of it:

What were the oddas against me? Let me coont.
What worth am I to a' that **nicht** ha'e been?
To a' the wasted slime I'm capable o'
Appeals this lurid emission, whirlin' lint-white and
Am I alane richt, solidified to life, [green.]
Disjoined frae a' this searin' like a white-het knife,
And vauntin' my alien accretions here,
Boastin' sanctions, purpose, sense the endless tide
I cam frae lacks—the tide I still sae often feed?

This is wholly radical, not politically, but because it goes to the root of our material beings, and as a result comes up with thoughts which are too much for most of us to face most of the time. It is instruc-

tive that the godly and socialistic Victor Gollancz found "Harry Semen" too much and suppressed it (along with an important poem, "Ode to All Rebels", which among other things calls in question the possessiveness of parenthood) when he published *Stony Limits* in 1934.

Socialist Polemic

Again, with the quick rhetorical flourish of "In Glasgow" compare the eight-line verses and long five-beat lines of "Third Hymn to Lenin", which even so seem only just big enough to contain what they express, the vehement outrage at what Scotland's property-owners have done to Scotland's people. The eight central verses are a sustained and unsparring socialist polemic. They invoke Lenin against the important and compromised careerists who were in charge of Labour in Glasgow:

Ah, lizard eyes, how I would love to see
You reincarnate here and taking issue
With the piffing spirits of our public men,
Going through them like a machine-gun through
 crinkled tissue,
But first of all—in Cranston's tea-rooms say—
With some of our leading wart-hogs calmly sat
Watching the creatures' sardonically toothsome faces
Die out in horror like Alice's Cheshire cat.¹⁰

By way of a passage on how fascism is engendered from poverty, and connived at by the appeasement of the well-meaning, he then moves to this fundamental passage on social backwardness, material need, inequality, and the quasi-religious fatalism which justifies people in doing nothing decisive to "lessen that foulest murder that deprives/Maist men o' real lives" (as he had put it in the "First Hymn"):

Clever—and yet we cannot solve this problem even;
Civilised—and flaunting such a monstrous sore;
Christian—in flat definance of all Christ taught;
Proud of our country with this open sewer at our
 door,
Come, let us shed all this transparent bluff,
Acknowledge our impotence, the prize eunuchs of
 Europe,
Battening on our shame, and with voices weak as bats'
Proclaiming in ghoulish kirks our base immortal
 hope.

And what is this impossible problem then?
Only to give a few thousand people enough to eat,
Decent houses and a fair income every week.
What? For nothing? Yes! Scotland can well afford it.
It cannot be done. The poor are always with us,
The Bible says. Would other countries agree?
Clearly we couldn't unless they did it too.
All the old arguments against ending Slavery!

This isn't clever poetry—compared, for example, with the other notable socialist pieces of the Thirties. It has not the cunningly organised historical knowledge of Auden's "Spain"—that remarkable historical-materialist meditation on the growth of mankind towards awareness of responsibility for our own freedom—nor has it the witty evocation of social atmospheres in which MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* excels, for example section III, on elites and privilege. But there would be a gap in the gamut of modern British political poetry if we lacked the trenchant insistence on socialist first principles which MacDiarmid expresses in those verses.

"Highbrow" and "Lowbrow"

Anybody could have understood what MacDiarmid says there (whereas Auden would baffle most readers). And MacDiarmid himself insisted on this radical test in the "Second Hymn to Lenin":

Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields,
In the streets o' the toon?
Gin they're no', then I'm failin' to dae
What I ocht to ha' dune.

Gin I canna win through to the man in the street,
The wife by the hearth,
A' the cleverness on earth'll no' mak' up
For the damnable dearth.¹¹

Unfortunately—and tragically for MacDiarmid—no one poet can solve on his own the division of the public into "highbrow" and "lowbrow", since it is based on the division of society into classes. It is significant that the "Third Hymn" was never published in full till 1957, and also that the poem itself dies away into a sand of prose philosophising about science, modern literature, etc.—the Marxist poet so far forgets himself on the third-last page of the poem as to write that "only one or two in every million men today/Know that thought is reality—and thought alone". By this time (1937) MacDiarmid had lost touch again with *the practical movement*. He had been expelled from the Communist Party for nationalist deviations (which he was to rejoin in 1956). Although he was the most original poet in Britain, he could not earn a living by his writing. He and his family had gone to live—they had taken refuge—on a small island in the Shetlands: a place as far as possible from the heartlands of the society for whom he had set himself to be the modern spokesman and whose language he had laboured in the most inspired and sustained way to make equal to the experience of modern life. In the poems he wrote there, before exhaustion and remoteness finally quenched his talent, he voices his determination to get to the core and ground of living in

¹⁰ *Poems*, p. 106.

¹¹ *Poems*, p. 91.

some lyrics that reach us like cries from the wilderness:

I was better with the sounds of the sea
 Than with the voices of men
 And in desolate and desert places
 I found myself again.
 For the whole of the world came from these
 And he who returns to the source
 May gauge the worth of the outcome
 And approve and perhaps reinforce
 Or disapprove and perhaps change its course.

Now I deal with the hills at their roots
 And the streams at their springs
 And am to the land that I love
 As he who brings
 His bride home, and they know each other
 Not as erst, like their friends, they have done,

But carnally, casually, knowing that only
 By life night undone can life be begun.
 And accept and are one.
*When was anything born in Scotland last,
 Risks taken and triumphs won ?*¹²

In a way this is an admission of defeat, a turning away from society into nature. Yet even as he does this MacDiarmid still puts in those characteristic phrases of his which define a weighing of experience—"approve and perhaps reinforce", "disapprove and perhaps change its course". He was above all a writer and thinker who wanted to get beyond the short-lived—the fashionable, temporary, or purely personal—and see through to the meaning of a thing in terms of human nature, history, and evolution.

Poems, pp. 83-4.