

1988

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Recommended Citation

Whyte, Christopher (1988) "Construction of Meaning in MacDiarmid's "Drunk Man",
Studies in Scottish Literature: Vol. 23: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol23/iss1/15>

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Christopher Whyte

Construction of Meaning in MacDiarmid's "Drunk Man"



In the words of Archibald MacLeish, "A poem should not mean / But be"; and Tolstoy, asked about the meaning of one of his novels, answered that the only way he could possibly explain it would be to write the whole novel over again. Primarily an active participant in life, and not a reflection of it, art has no more need of explanation or justification than life itself. Serious criticism, then, cannot set itself the task of extracting the meaning of a poem, discussing the issues raised in it as if a content had been translated into poetry and needed to be translated out again.

A poem may in this sense be like a football match: not a content, but a procedure. We do not ask what a football match is about. To look for meaning of this kind in a poem, and evaluate it on the basis of what is found, would imply that the meaning could in some way exist separately from the poem itself. Once the meaning had been extracted, the poem would be left lying there, superseded and useless like a squeezed orange. The effect would be both to invalidate retroactively our experience of reading the poem (in so far as the critic, and not the poet, had put us in possession of its meaning), and to render further reading superfluous. To expect meaning of this kind from a text automatically impoverishes our experience of it, suggesting that it will have an underlying harmony, a coherence of tendency, whereas

texts that operate at the highest levels in fact often move constantly from one point of view to another, linking together in a dynamic structure truths which, outside the text, remain irreconcilable.

This does not mean that a poem may not contain a message. The function of the message in helping to conclude a poem may rival in importance the role of the result in a football match. But just as the fact that two football matches produced the same result gives us not the slightest pretext for assuming they were identical, so the message at the end of a poem may have little or no organic connection with the poem itself. The role of the message may even be parodied, as when at the end of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" we read that the love of all animals is the key to holiness:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

The inadequacy of the message to the experience which has just been described pinpoints both our urge to integrate the experience and render it meaningful, and the extreme difficulty of doing so.

The longer a poem is, the more acutely the need may be felt for it to conclude with a message. The reader, so to speak, should have something to take away. Three such messages occur in the penultimate section of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, allowing the speaker to put aside his speculations at least for a while. They are three peaks, almost, of descending intensity. The first concerns the possibility of illumination:

And we may aiblins swing content 2509
Upon the wheel in which we're pent
In adequate enlightenment.¹

The second concerns the function of poetry:

The function, as it seems to me, 2584
O' Poetry is to bring to be
At lang, lang last that unity . . .

And the third concerns the function of the Scottish poet:

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

2638

A move from the general down to the specific is clear in the progression from spiritual enlightenment to poetry to Scottish poetry. Yet no-one would suggest that reading and understanding these messages is equivalent to reading and understanding the poem, the more so as the Drunk Man himself remains unconvinced by the final one:

Auch, to Hell,
 I'll tak' it to avizandum. . .

2649

The last message is an answer given by an unknown voice (the italics make it clear that the Drunk Man is not speaking). Moreover, all three messages are optative, referring to a desired state of things or course of action, projected into a future that may or may not become reality, making the conclusion they offer the poem a very fragile and interim one.

The meaning of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, then, can hardly be sought in these closing desiderata. Perhaps we should turn our attention from *what* the poem means to *how* it means. What the critic can do is to suggest strategies for reading the poem. These will be valid to the extent that they show the poem to be a coherent, interlocking whole, where things that are random or redundant in everyday speech (images, repetitions, phonic effects) function with a very much reduced casuality. The reader makes the poem meaningful through a perception of the non-casuality and non-redundancy of these elements, and the finer and more thoroughgoing this perception, the more completely the poem may be said to be "used." What should emerge will be not so much a harmoniousness, or agreement, of different elements of the poem, but their relatedness, their pertinence to one another. In this way a critic can make the reader, and him or herself as reader, more aware of what is being done to and with the text.

In this sense every critic has to face the problem of naming: naming the operations we carry out on the text, and naming those elements and patterns within it which allow us to make it meaningful. Such naming will not prevent the text from yielding a different impression, a different experience, with each reading. On no two occasions, and to no two

As it now stands it'll be at least six times as big a book as *Sangschaw* . . . My friend Scott, (the composer) and I afterwards went over the whole thing with a small tooth comb.

There has been lively discussion about the exact nature of Scott's contribution to the final version of the poem. Every literary movement needs its saints and miracles, and the idea of Scott sorting out MacDiarmid's poem, beside its inherent attractiveness, has a kind of mythical value, within the hagiography of the Scottish Renaissance Movement, which it would be foolish to underestimate. The scene is rich in parallels: Wordsworth suggesting the albatross for the "Ancient Mariner," Pound ruthlessly editing *The Waste Land*. Scott's own account, in a letter to Maurice Lindsay now deposited in the NLS, implies that MacDiarmid had lost all control of his material, but would lead us to expect a high degree of organisation in the finished product:

I outlined the plan and supplied the title of the poem during a rainy hike and a night in Glen Clovis hotel. Christopher usually wrote his poetry in snatches: he never had any sense of form and after some months of scribbling on the back of envelopes and odd bits of paper, he sent to Glasgow an urgent call for me to come for a weekend and see the litter (and mess!) he'd been making of my bright idea . . . we sat down to a table, a great heap of scribbled bits of paper and a bottle of whisky. I can still see Christopher's face when I was indicating the shape the poem, or for that matter a musical composition, ought to take . . . We spent until day-break sorting out the items worth keeping, Christopher arranging them on the table like a pack of cards in the order that I indicated as likely to give the best sequences, climaxes, etc.³

If Scott was really influenced by his knowledge of musical form in the advice he gave MacDiarmid, we could expect to find traces of this in the finished poem, and the point is worth returning to.

These lines, in a letter from MacDiarmid to Soutar dated March 3rd 1931, strengthen the case for considerable coherence in the poem:

I think you are wrong in your preference for *Sangschaw* and your description of my last two books as farragoes .

. . tho' I myself described the *Drunk Man* as a gallimaufry. As a matter of fact it is far from that and is very closely knot throughout -- much more than *Cenrastus*.

In his "Author's Note" to *A Drunk Man*, MacDiarmid had given a rather different impression, implying that personal experience of drunkenness was the only key to understanding his work:

Drunkenness has a logic of its own with which, even in these decadent days, I believe a sufficient minority of my countrymen remain *au fait*. I would, however, take the liberty of counselling the others, who have no personal experience or sympathetic imagination to guide them, to be chary of attaching any exaggerated importance, in relation to my book as a whole, to such inadvertent reflections of their own sober minds as they may from time to time -- as in a distorting mirror -- detect in these pages, and of attempting, in, no doubt, a spirit of real helpfulness, to confer, on the basis of these, a species of intelligibility foreign to its nature, upon my poem.⁴

Note that we are not forbidden to make the poem intelligible, but to force upon it an "intelligibility foreign to its nature." The whole passage is coloured with rich humour, and the persona of the poem has clearly spilled over into the preface. MacDiarmid is enjoying his pose as drunken bard. Sadly, if the humour is missed, the appeal can read like an admission that the text is incoherent. It would be a mistake to expect the poem to resemble the rambling discourse of a drunkard in any literal sense. Drunkenness requires a literary, and not a literal interpretation. The very use of regular metre highlights the artificiality of the pose.

That the drunken pose has a function emerges very early on, when the "I" of the poem steps out of itself for two stanzas and stipulates an explicit pact with the reader:

(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.

21

But aince I get them there I'll whummlle them
And souse the craturs in the nether deeps,

-- For it's nae choice, and ony man s'ud wish
To dree the goat's weird tae as weel's the sheep's!)

In other words: "We are going to pretend that all this is the haverings of a drunk man stranded somewhere on the road home. But you know and I know that this is a poem I am writing which will follow a predetermined pattern in order to gain certain effects." So we are very quickly made aware of an organising, structuring consciousness behind or within the drunken persona. It's rather like an aside at the theatre: the character is ostensibly speaking to himself while in fact furnishing essential information directly to his listeners. But if his listeners aren't "the folk . . . the fules . . . them," who *are* they? Perhaps the lines are addressed to the small number of readers capable of following the poem, and who can therefore be let in on the secret of something unexpected, and funny, that is going to happen. We get an enjoyable sense of being "in the know" as the Drunk Man vanishes for a moment, and the writer makes an ally of his reader.

These same lines indicate another reasoning for assuming the persona of a drunkard. Drunkenness is "still deemed Scots," a part of cliché Scottishness. This hero takes his place within a tradition of literary drunkenness, and transforms it.

Few can have failed to notice that one of the closest texts with respect to which *A Drunk Man* innovates is "Tam O'Shanter." Burns' poem is reread on several levels. Burns puts the stress on action, leaving reflection and moralising to the narrating voice. MacDiarmid fuses narrator and protagonist and expands reflection until it blots out any real action except the sorry process of feeling less and less drunk:

O fain I'd drink until I saw 1373
Scotland a ferlie o' delicht,
And fain bide drunk nor ha'e't recede
Into a shrivelled thistle syne,
As when a sperklin' tide rins oot,
And leaves a wreath o' rubbish there!

MacDiarmid echoes the only words Tam speaks in such a way as to stress that this poem is taking a different turn:

"Noo Cutty Sark's tint that ana',
And dances in her skin -- Ha! Ha!

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

Cutty, gin you've mair to strip,
Aff wi't lass -- and let it rip!" . . .

MacDiarmid's bawdy, as so often, is fundamentally serious. The Drunk Man wants to see beyond the witch's nakedness in metaphorical terms. The next lines echo Burns' moralising ("pleasures are like poppies spread"):

Ilka plesure I can ha'e 841
Ends like a dram ta'en yesterday.

Direct references to Burns, and more or less veiled quotations, abound in *A Drunk Man*. What interests us here is how the fictional framework of the poem reinterprets "Tam O'Shanter." Where Tam's wife is an impressive caricature,

Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm

MacDiarmid's drunkard justifies his wife's reaction the very moment he mentions it:

. . . jalousin' what 15
The wife'll say (I dinna blame her fur't).

and feels sure of understanding at the end:

But aince Jean kens what I've been through 2655
The nicht, I dinna doot it,
She'll ope her airms in welcome true,
And clack nae mair about it . . .

Tam is at home with his drunken cronies, one of whom might have served equally well as hero for Burns' poem. MacDiarmid's drunkard is deeply alienated:

Speak -- and Cruivie'll goam at you 785
Gilsanquhar jalouse you're dottlin' . . .

And whiles I wish I'd nae mair sense
Than Cruivie and Gilsanquhar,
And envy their rude health and curse

My gnawin' canker.

The very fashion in which they are presented ("Cruivie and Gilsanquhar and the like") implies that they are merely representatives, that any two others would have done as well.

Adopting a drunken persona, MacDiarmid had to find textual equivalents for drunkenness, devices which would keep alive for the reader an illusion agreed upon at the outset of the poem. But maybe this is putting the cart before the horse. MacDiarmid did not introduce abrupt transitions, changes in tone, free association, collage and linguistic extravaganza because he was writing about a drunk man: rather, the drunken pose justifies thematically the introduction of these devices. It is the genial common touch which robs MacDiarmid's avantgardism of any pretentiousness by giving it thematic motivation. The poet chose to write about a drunk man in order to be able to use these devices.

The pose has further advantages. Drunkenness is associated with lowering of the threshold of inhibition, with sleep, with being horizontal (perhaps on a bed) and therefore with sexual activity. It motivates much of the poem's sexual explicitness. Moreover, being drunk may make one more aware of bodily functions yet at the same time estranged from them -- they seem to take place of their own accord:

I'se warrant Jean 'ud no' be lang 591
 In findin' whence this thistle sprang.

Mebbe it's juist because I'm no'
 Beddit wi' her that gars it grow! . . .

As erection fades, the drunkard is a powerless, woebegone spectator:

For aince it's toomed my hert and brain, 2667
 The thistle needs maun fa' again.
 -- But a' its growth 'll never fill
 The hole it's turned my life intill! . . .

On the other hand, he has access to a privileged vision:

There's nocht sae sober as a man blin' drunk. 277
 I maun ha'e got an unco bellyfu'
 To jaw like this -- and yet what I am sayin'
 Is a' the apter, aiblins, to be true.

Detached from his own body, with a liberty of association and expression normally denied him, pregnant with his nation's and his own destiny, he becomes a kind of oracle, Pythian priestess of a different inebriation:

Is Scotland big enough to be 2010
 A symbol o' that force in me,
 In wha's divine inebriety
 A sicht abune contempt I'll see?

One point remains to be made about the organisation of the poem. The "Author's Note" continues:

It would have been only further misleading these good folks, therefore, if I had (as, arbitrarily enough at best, I might have done) divided my poem into sections or in other ways supplied any of those "hand-rails" which raise false hopes in the ingenuous minds of readers . . .

This is precisely what MacDiarmid did, under pressure from his publishers, in the 1962 American *Collected Poems*. *A Drunk Man* appears there as a sequence of lyrics each with its own title. This has the advantage of showing where MacDiarmid perceived the seams in his text, the ending of one section and the opening of another. Yet the overall effect is changed. He inserted, not only the titles of sections, but also the space which separates them, a typographical space with a precise resonance for the reader. An adequate reading of the 1962 text must consider not only the titles, but the effect of the spaces introduced. Dealing with the 1962 text, we are naturally drawn to the centre of each section in an attempt to evaluate it and perceive its relation to the whole. Probably it would be very rewarding to study not the units but the joins in the text, the transitions or apparent swervings and detours towards completely unrelated material, moving from the centre of each section away to its beginning and end. The disadvantage of the 1962 text is that it eliminates these seams, replacing each by two spaces and a title, with a different semantic value. To sum up: drunkenness is fundamental to the poem, but neither causes nor justifies incoherence.

In the attempt to get at the coherence of the text, to tap its meaningfulness, we shall name a series of elements in the poem, almost a grid through which to sift successive

sections of it. (As with all sifting, our grid will not retain the entire text. Some of it -- its finest particles, perhaps -- will continue to elude us.)

What is the text doing at any given point? The answer (asking a question, singing a song, addressing an absent listener) will tell us the *mode*, while we will classify as *voice* features highlighted by the question of who is speaking. We will consider the *dramatis personae* of *A Drunk Man* -- not just the human beings who take part in the fictional situation, but also the thistle, the moon and the serpent. These can be called *symbols*, although we will see that they do not fulfil this function in any modern sense. They are closer to the abstractions of medieval allegory, and in fact tend to take the place of the characters themselves.

How does the world outside the text impinge on and inform it? Answering this question will allow us to list the *referents* in *A Drunk Man*. These may be to actual places (Scotland, Ecclefechan, Auchtermuchty) or to religion and myth (Christianity). Where the source is another text, we will speak of *literary referents*. The poem is tendentially a monologue, something spoken and heard rather than written and read. Its primary activity is talking. What does it talk about? In so far as the issues the Drunk Man raises can be grouped under a series of headings this will be done. The headings ("decline," "being true to yourself," "going beyond") will be called *topics*. They tend to intersect with one another or point in each other's direction, so it would be tempting to see them as meeting or *clustering* at particular points. These topics (axes of meaning) and their interrelations (clusters) can be visualised as the structure of *A Drunk Man's* meaning, not a phrase or a sentence, but a crystal, a three-dimensional entity which cannot be grasped in its entirety from any single viewpoint.

The ideal procedure would be to comment on the text, line by line, section by section, in the light of these elements. Instead we will be obliged to consider the topics one by one, constraining them to a sequence and a separateness which already betray the poem, dragging it forcibly away from meaningfulness in the direction of bare meaning, from the *how* of meaning to the *what*. In spite of this, the intention remains that of offering the reader strategies, and not solutions. The climactic section on the "Great Wheel" will be given special consideration.

In so far as *A Drunk Man* is being successfully read even now, appropriate strategies have already been discovered. If they and others like them can be named, made explicit, then

Seven couplets (581-594) now return to a speech situation which dominates much of the poem, the soliloquy. Pronouns are a sure guide to voice, to the origin and direction of the text. Here first person is used for the Drunk Man, while all other verbs are third person (including those applied to Jean).

In the nine-line lyric which follows (595-603 -- already printed in *Penny Wheep*, and "suggested by the French of Edmond Rocher"), the situation changes again. First person forms disappear. "I" and "Jean" are replaced by "a man" and "a luvin' wumman." We are looking at the pair of lovers from outside, as it were, although the emphasis remains on the man's experience of the act of love.

The next two quatrains (604-611) contain a dialogue in which the addressee finally answers back. A man is talking to a woman, whose age appears to have dropped sharply. Thematically the dialogue is linked (through the idea of exposure, of "seeing through") with the lyric, but the speech situation has changed. The thought is complex enough to be worth paraphrasing. He is amazed that her gaze is unchanged by the horrors she has discovered in him. She replies that if he could pierce it (could see through her seeing), he would discover something even more appalling (" -- *Gin you could pierce their blindin' licht / You'd see a fouler sicht! . . .* ") Given the concentration on sexuality in the passage, it is appropriate that seeing becomes a kind of penetrating. But in this sense the woman is penetrating the man, and not the other way round. We could identify the male voice with the Drunk Man, but the present tense and the fact that he is not alone make this problematical.

The rest of the passage (612-635) is in ballad metre. It has a sketched-in narrative structure (rare in the *Drunk Man* as a whole), with three distinct moments in time: the bridal procession, the deflowering recalled in a flashback, and the dialogue of bride and groom on their wedding night. The narrator's voice of the first eight lines gives place to those of the lovers themselves. None of the three voices can easily be identified with the Drunk Man's. The dialogue between bride and groom may develop and echo the earlier dialogue, but we are clearly dealing with different people, or with the same people at a different stage of their story.

To sum up: in a mere 65 lines as many as eight different voices intervene, and only one through attribution or quotation. Thematically the passage is extremely tight, but changes in voice create a continually shifting perspective. The various situations do not have a clear

chronological relation to each other: it seems pointless to ask which "came first." As so often in the poem, changes in voice permit escape from the straitjacket of monologue, allowing, for example, woman to have her own say (however briefly). The Drunk Man is relieved of the burden of validating all the views expressed in the text.

Changes in voice are not always so subtle or short-lived. The passage on the General Strike returns to a "background voice and speaker" situation:

Sae ran the thocht that hid ahint 1143
 The thistle's ugsome guise,
 "I'll brak' the habit o' my life
 A worthier to devise."

Typographical devices like inverted commas and italics warn the reader of phenomena of voice. If the poem were being performed, the intervention of a different actor would be the aural realisation of these visual signs. At one point, the text seems to turn around and talk back at the speaker:

Thistleless fule, 529
 You'll ha'e nocht left
 But the hole frae which
 Life's struggle is reft! . . .

At the poem's close, italics tell us that the answers are coming from an unidentified source (2616ff). Elsewhere, they serve to highlight sections of the poem which constitute a summing-up, as in the intensely moving invocation to Jean of 2024-2055. Even if we feel certain the Drunk Man is speaking, there can be a dizzying range of identifications:

I'm fu' o' a sticket God. 1632
 THAT'S what's the maitter wi' me.
 Jean has stuck sic a fork in the wa'
 That I row in agonie.

Mary never let dab.
 SHE was a canny wumman.
 She hedna a gaw in Joseph at a'
 But, wow, this seecund comin'! . . .

In these lines he is a peasant husband suffering his wife's labour pains by magical sympathy, a Joseph unjustly drawn

into the physical struggle of giving birth to a child he did not father, and new virgin mother of a new Messiah.

The use of texts by Alexander Blok (169-220, 241-252) and Zinaida Hippus (353-368), by George Ramaekers (309-316) and Else Laske-Schuler (401-410), could be seen as a change of voice, with footnotes ("From the Russian of Alexander Blok," "Adapted from the Russian of Zinaida Hippus") taking the place of "Sae Jean'll say" or "Sae ran the thocht . . ." On the other hand, they are part of the rich intertextuality of *A Drunk Man*, and as such can be classed as *literary referents*. Obviously the elements in the poem will not slip neatly into categories proposed for them, but will tend to straddle categories or shift from one to another.

In the same way, *voice* and *mode* naturally blend into one another. The question "Who is speaking?" points to factors of voice, the question "Who's being spoken to?" to factors of mode. The pronoun "you" has at least three different uses: to someone who is present, listening, and able to answer (*dialogue*); to someone who is absent, but will eventually get the message and have a chance to reply (*a letter*); and to someone absent (maybe dead), who will never hear our words, and for whom all possibility of replying is excluded (what we shall call *apostrophe*).

Not surprisingly, *A Drunk Man* is as rich in modes as it is in voices. We have already found soliloquy, dialogue, the "lyric poem" excluding direct speech, and ballad-style narrative. The Drunk Man only once speaks to Jean as if she could reply:

Jean! Jean! Gin she's no' here it's no' oor bed 101

On all the other occasions when she is addressed we are dealing with apostrophe. A paradox of this mode is that the most heartfelt and moving of her husband's words to her are possible precisely because she cannot hear them. From what we can gather, their real-life dialogue has a rather different tone.

Clear my loured flesh, and let me move 2032
 In the peculiar licht o' love,
 As aiblins in eternity men may
 When their swack souls nae mair are clogged
 wi' clay.

The drunk man addresses many other people and entities in the course of the poem: his own soul (125ff), the mysterious

apparition of Blok's lyric (223ff), the thistle (232ff), the moon (652ff). Burns is invoked in a lively parody of Wordsworth addressing Milton:

Rabbie, wad'st thou wert here -- the warld 61
hath need,
 And Scotland mair sae, o' the likes o' thee!

Footnotes tell us who is being addressed in two passages entitled "Letter to Dostoevski" (1745-2023) and "Farewell to Dostoevski" (2216-2236). Elsewhere, we even find the mock heading to a letter, as if to a disreputable whore at her favourite tavern:

"To Luna at the Craidle-and-Coffin 819
 To sof'n her heart if owt can sof'n:--"

Dialogue involves question and answers. The text, given time, may supply an answer:

Was it the ancient vicious sway 1175
 Imposed itsel' again,
 Or nerve owre weak for new emprise
 That made the effort vain,

A coward strain in that lorn growth
 That wrocht the sorry trick? . . .
 * * *

The vices that defeat the dream 1191
 Are in the plant itsel',
 And till they're purged its virtues maun
 In pain and misery dwell.

Elsewhere, there are varying degrees of rhetorical question (depending on the likelihood, in his own opinion, of the Drunk Man's receiving any answer).

Song is a mode that *A Drunk Man* uses frequently. Refrains (traditionally allowing alternation of solo and chorus, and designed to be remembered easily in the interests of maximum participation) are clear indicators: "We're ootward boond frae Scotland. / Guid-bye, fare-ye-weel; guid-bye, fare-ye-weel" (545-6, and 549-50). The refrain may be varied when it returns: "*Up carles, up / And roond it jig,*" and "*Up, carles, up / And let us dance*" (703-10, 721-2), "Clear keltie aff an' fill again . . . Clear keltie aff

And faith! yestreen in Cruivie's een 1549
 Life rocked at midnicht in a tree,
 And in Gilsanquhar's glower I saw
 The taps o' waves 'neth which the warld
 Ga'ed rowin' like a jeelyfish,
 And whiles I canna look at Jean
 For fear I'd see the sunlicht turn
 Worm-like into the glaur again!

This sequence includes Jean, but the Drunk Man's failure to identify with her has a different resonance. His cronies are like him, yet unlike him, a context he fails to fit into, and this deepens his sense of alienation. Jean, as woman, is his opposite, his counterpart from the very outset, and as such she alone can help him overcome his isolation. Cruivie and Gilsanquhar fit into the text through a very marginal topic (the gulf between the artist and the ordinary man). Jean, on the other hand, is integrated into the poem as a whole by her participation in some of its most crucial semantic clusters: being in bed (being horizontal), the tryst, the union of opposites (the place where extremes meet), sex as visionary experience and as procreation. In a way that recalls a Catholic rather than a Presbyterian sensibility, Jean is consistently linked with religious themes:

"I've been startled whiles to find, 572
 When Jean has been in bed wi' me,
 A kind o' Christianity!"

This link between woman and religion has two distinct elements. The Drunk Man makes us privy to the whole gamut of his feelings about sex, with perhaps a slight emphasis on repulsion and inadequacy:

Or as to a fair forfochen man 891
 A breedin' wife's beddiness seems

Even if he is addressing the moon, it seems permissible to discern experience of Jean in the lines to the "Carline":

" . . . I'll *no'* be born again 824

In ony brat you can produce.
 Carline, gi'e owre -- O what's the use?

You pay nae heed but plop me in,
 Syne shove me oot, and winna be din

--Owre and owre, the same auld trick,
 Cratur without climacteric! . . . "

It is only a step from this to one of the Drunk Man's many identifications with Christ, in which one senses all Christianity's age-old hostility towards womankind, the male clannishness of the traditional religious establishment:

-- My mither's womb that reins me still
 Until I tae can prick the witch
 And "Wumman" cry wi' Christ at last,
 "Then what hast thou to do wi' me?"

1357

That masterly metaphor ("prick the witch") is a sideways glance at one of the highpoints of tension between orthodox religion and what it perceived as a threatening, feminine power. It is therefore appropriate that when the Drunk Man desperately hankers to be released from his role, his cross, he should turn to Jean:

*Syne liberate me frae this tree,
 As wha had there imprisoned me,
 The end achieved -- or show me at the least
 Mair meanin' in't, and hope o' bein' released.*

2052

The passage these lines are taken from, with its mixture of overt eroticism and a powerful mystic urge, rereads, yet is strongly indebted to, a whole Western tradition of Marian verse which Goethe had already exploited and reread in the closing scene of Faust.

Jean is the point at which Blok's unknown lady, the relentless carline bent on procreation and Mary, mother of God, converge on the fictional situation of *A Drunk Man*. His viewpoint may be neurotically, even aggressively male-centered (he is certainly interested in what Jean can do for him, what he can obtain through her) but at least it does not pose as an entire world-view, does not pretend to speak for woman as well as man. Jean is as dynamic a figure in the poem, taken as a whole, as Cruivie and Gilsanquhar are static, as central to it as they are peripheral.

She

Nevertheless, the characters in *A Drunk Man* lack most of the functions normally associated with characters. These are carried out, to all intents and purposes, by the poem's symbols: primarily, the thistle (whose flowers are, rather confusingly, spoken of as "roses" plural) and the moon; secondarily, the rose (singular) of England and the sea serpent of inaccessible knowledge.

Yet symbols is an unsatisfactory term with which to describe them. It is hard to use a word like symbolism innocently or accurately, or to show exactly why MacDiarmid is not a symbolist poet in the way Blok or Mallarmé can be said to be. I would argue against an absolute meaning, in literary terms, for symbolism, preferring to define it historically with regard to specific decades and authors. Put rather crudely, symbolism treats the world of phenomena as an allegory to which we have lost the key. The symbols in Baudelaire's temple ("Correspondances"), have a familiar look in their eyes because we sense behind them a known, but inaccessible content:

La Nature est un temple ou de vivants piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

(Nature is a temple where living pillars from time to time emit confused words. In it Man passes through forests of symbols which observe him with familiar looks).⁵

Considerable emphasis is placed on physical sensations, which are given, involuntary (we cannot consciously choose to perceive a certain smell or see a certain colour in the sky). The intuition that the world of phenomena is a coded language encourages synaesthesia, the superimposition of data from different senses, as in Rimbaud's "Voyelles":

I, pourpres, sang crache, rire des lèvres belles
 Dans la colère ou les ivresses penitentes

(I, purples, coughed-up blood, laughter of beautiful lips in anger or in drunken remorse)⁶

The link between Scotland and the thistle is of a very different kind. The flower is a heraldic marker, a conventional badge, whose qualities will in no literal way

teach us about the true nature of Scotland. To judge MacDiarmid's distance from mainstream European symbolism, try to imagine a poem by Baudelaire in which, walking along a country road, he encounters a fleur-de-lys and starts meditating on French culture and history. (Baudelaire in fact passes, in "Une Charogne"⁷, a rotting carcass, which gives rise to very different reflections). Blok's "The Stranger" has an autobiographical derivation and was, in this sense, given. Avril Pyman tells us that Blok saw the woman "in the window of a station buffet where he was sitting alone, drinking red wine. She took shape amid the billowing smoke of a passing train"⁸. The medieval strand in MacDiarmid's use of symbols is transparent in the "Ballad of the Crucified Rose", where the thistle represents Scotland, and the rose (a footnote informs us) the General Strike of 1926. This mechanical, artificial imagery (and the adjectives sound negative only because such symbolism is rare in modernist literature) is worlds away from Blok's own dim premonitions of the 1917 upheaval.

So MacDiarmid's heraldic, medieval symbolism owes more to Dunbar than to Baudelaire or Blok. In a sense he had to take up where the Scottish tradition had left off, with "The Thrissil and the Rois." His symbols are second-hand, shop-soiled, hackneyed, evidence of MacDiarmid's readiness to set out from the banal, from "what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect" (22). There is nothing original in the moon as femininity, or the rose of England, and even the sea-serpent is in part a borrowing from Melville. The symbols are imported into the poem ready-made, and MacDiarmid stresses their prop-like status early on:

-- Mounted on a hillside, wi' the thistles 285
 And bracken for verisimilitude,
 Like a stuffed bird on metal like a brainch,
 Or a seal on a stump o' rock-like wood?

Or am I juist a figure in a scene
 O' Scottish life A.D. one-nine-two-five?
 The haill thing kelters like a theatre claitch
 Till I micht fancy that I was alive?

There is a paradox here: it is the very theatrical quality that gives the illusion of life.

In the earlier part of *A Drunk Man* the chief symbols take on a dizzying variety of positive and negative connotations, which make it hard to believe that thistle and

moon head two opposing symbolic series. The moon is a mirror, the thistle the Drunk Man (221); the thistle is a phallus, the moon happiness and freedom (253); the thistle is real action, the moon potential action (271); the moonlight is leprosy, the thistle a skeleton (369); the thistle is the moon's bastard child (652). MacDiarmid frequently inserts brief, musical recapitulations, in which the symbols jostle together in apparent confusion, with Jean entering the series. These are like sudden calls to order, but militate against any long-term, articulated opposition of symbolic qualities:

I'll ha'e nae inklin' sune 448
 Gin I'm the drinker or the drink,
 The thistle or the mune.

* * *

-- *The mune's the muckle white whale* 805
I seek in vain to kaa!

The Earth's my mastless samyn,
The thistle my ruined sail.

* * *

And Jean's nae mair my wife 969
 Than whisky is at times,
 Or munelicht or a thistle
 Or kittle thochts or rhymes.

I suspect that the real function of thistle and moon is to unify the ceaseless flow of the Drunk Man's thoughts by assuming in turn the values present in it. The discourse does not derive from the symbols -- the symbols are used to organise the discourse. This is why, when in the closing section on the Great Wheel (2395-2658) MacDiarmid abandons fits and starts and abrupt transitions for sustained, cogent argument, thistle and woman are forgotten. The moon is mentioned twice (2497, 2570) but only tangentially, to be rejected, "passed" and "o'erpowered." The symbols are no longer needed, as the argument is already unified.

Elsewhere, the symbols offer unity of a very special sort. As early as 1924 the Russian scholar Jurij Tynjanov had pointed out⁹ that static unity of character, indeed, any static unity in a work of literature, can prove to be extremely variable. A sign (a name, a symbol?) is sufficient to prevent us seeking an identical character in each situation. One can conceive of a writer who would plan a novel, not on the basis of static, unified characters, but

starting from situations. Characters would be modelled and grouped to make these situations possible, and their final definition would derive from the situations in which each took part, rather as a Wagnerian leitmotif is progressively defined by the points in the opera at which it is heard. The reader would reverse this perception, starting from an imaginary unity of character (signified by a proper name, about which the author might have been in doubt until the very last minute) which moved through an apparent flux of situations.

In an analogous way, the function of thistle and moon may be to guide the reader, with their illusory unity, through the apparent flux and chaos of the Drunk Man's thoughts. Understanding the poem would then mean, not managing to attribute the correct value to these symbols (a value in fact as elusive as the psychological coherence of fictional characters) but rather managing, with their help, to give a structure to the range of issues and speculations present in the poem.

The world outside the poem is present within it through the relations this text explicitly and implicitly establishes with the "real," non-literary world, with the rest of literature and with systems of belief and of social organisation. A text may have an extremely large and diversified referential world (Dante's *Inferno*, Pope's *Dunciad*), or else treat referentiality in such a way as to camouflage or practically eclipse it (Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, much science fiction). Referentiality may again be primarily political and social (the Gaelic poetry of Iain Lom, *The Satyre of the Thrie Estatus*) or prevalently to literary texts and systems (as in *The Waste Land*). Inevitable and almost accidental as it may seem, reference, given its selective nature, is of key importance in reading a text. What is not mentioned can be as or more important than what is. In its links to the "real" world, a poem chooses a specific slant, an angle, all the more telling for its near imperceptibility.

A Drunk Man has a particularly rich system of reference, indicated in part by the poem's fondness for lists:

Heifetz in tartan, and Sir Harry Lauder!	29
Whaur's Isadora Duncan dancin' noo?	
Is Mary Garden in Chicago still	
And Duncan Grant in Paris -- and me fou'?	

The point here is the wasteful dispersion abroad of Scottish talent, in dancing, music and painting. The insertion of a knighted Harry Lauder underlines the pitifulness of what is left at home. A mere four lines bring together Russia, America and Paris, Scottish contributions to art in these countries, and the biographies of those involved: Isadora Duncan's impact on French art in the twenties, her marriage to Esenin; Grant's relationship with Vanessa Stephens and the whole Bloomsbury Group; the songs Debussy dedicated to Mary Garden, his first Melisande. Determined internationalism is a defiant reaction to the provincialisation of Scottish culture, as the wry ambivalence of this aside makes clear:

Gin you're surprised a village drunk 435
 Foreign references s'ud fool in,
 You ha'ena the respect you s'ud
 For our guid Scottish schoolin'

The irony of that last phrase returns later in the poem:

Do you reverse? Shall us? Then let's. 2200
 Cyclone and Anti? -- how absurd!
 She should know better at her age.
 Auntie's an ass, upon my word.

This is the sort of thing they teach
 The Scottish children in the school.
 Poetry, patriotism, manners --
 No wonder I am such a fool . . .

It's hardly surprising that Scotland is present everywhere in *A Drunk Man*, as geographical reality, as accumulated historical experience (or shibboleths), as a range of varieties of speech, as social ritual, as oral and literary tradition. In momentarily achieved vision, the drunk man declares:

I wad ha'e Scotland to my eye 1969
 Until I saw a timeless flame
 Tak' Auchtermuchty for a name
 And kent that Ecclefechan stood
 As pairt o' an eternal mood . . .

For Scotland I wad hain a place
 And let Tighnabruaich still
 Be pairt and paircel o' its will,

And Culloden, black as Hell,
A knowledge it has o' it itsel'.

The "bonny idiosyncratic place-names" (1776) tie this vision firmly to Scottish earth, the first three ringing alien, garbled and therefore slightly comic in either an English or a Lowland Scots context. Culloden, on the other hand, is much more than a place name. Like Flodden, it carries the mournful ring for Scottish people that Kosovo has for the Serbs, Mohacs for the Hungarians, the battle of the White Mountain for the Czechs, marking moments at which the nation itself began to fragment, to teeter on the edge of non-being. Proper names can function as a kind of shorthand for Scottish history and culture in their accepted forms, as with this gallery of the great and the notorious:

syne I saw

John Knox and Clavers in my raw,
And Mary Queen o' Scots ana',

2605

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

Elsewhere, this is compressed into a single line, as with the thistle which "for centuries . . . ran to waste" (1123), or expanded in botanical metaphor:

And owre the kailyard-wa' Dunbar they've flung,
And a' their countrymen that e'er ha'e sung
For ither than ploomen's lugs or to enrichen
Plots on Parnassus set apairt for kitchen.

727

The "Gairdens o' the Muses" are turned to an enormous cabbage patch as the Drunk Man summarises the vicissitudes of Scottish literature. The metaphor extends in one of the poem's most explicitly political references, to the case for Scottish independence:

Gin the threid haud'n us to the rose were snapt, 767
There's no a'e petal o't that 'ud be clapt.
A' Scotland gi'es gangs but to jags or stalk,
The bloom is English -- and 'ud ken nae lack!

The argument is reiterated at (2371-94), just before the "Great Wheel" section opens.

References so far have been to the series of Scottish topography, history and culture. A further series evoked is that of social practices in Scotland, perhaps most significantly the male sacrament of drinking. The poem has struck some as aggressively masculine, with its phallic imagery and stated fear of "the hole frae which / Life's struggle is reft" (531-2), a void that returns on the very last page. Its depiction of Scottish malehood is far from adulatory: drink serves both as a crutch and as a means of liberation for the Scot, dependent upon his female partner yet estranged from her, facing the sexual act with embarrassment and even reluctance.

Folk ritual enters *A Drunk Man* with the Common Riding at Langholm, and with the practice of couvade referred to in lines already quoted. The very phrase "a stickit God" is a precise reference to the pitfalls of an ecclesiastical career in the Scottish church. With false patriotism, social reference turns openly satiric, and should perhaps be contrasted with the nationalist case put forward elsewhere in the poem:

And O! to think that there are members o' 385
 St. Andrew's Societies sleepin' soon',
 Wha to the papers wrote afore they bedded
 On regimental buttons or buckled shoon,

Or use o' England whaur the U.K.'s meent,
 Or this or that anent the Blue Saltire,
 Recruitin', pedigrees, and Gude kens what,
 Filled wi' a proper patriotic fire!

Reference also embraces differing forms of speech. The Burns suppers sequence includes a Chinaman ("Him Haggis -- velly goot!"), a Cockney, a London Scot using Received Pronunciation ("similah gatherings"), as well as people using "wild-fowl Scots" -- presumably those who only come north of the border for the grouse shooting, though the phrase also pursues the ornithological metaphor of "pidgin English". The text even turns self-conscious about its own pronunciation:

Masoch and Sade
 Turned into ane
 Havoc ha'e made
 O' my a'e brain.

Weel, gin it's Sade
 Let it be said
 They've made me made
 -- That'll da'e instead.

But it's no instead
 In Scots, but instead
 -- The life they've led
 In my puir heid.

The rhymes indicate the differing pronunciations of "Sade." This uneasy and provocative element in MacDiarmid's diction recurs when he prefers the Scots to the English variant, destroying the rhyme:

Saragossa Sea, St. Vitus' Dance
 A *cafard* in a brain's despite,
 Or lunacy that thinks a' else
 Is loony -- and is dootless richt! . . .

893

or when he tries to exploit both variants simultaneously:

Or like a flat stane gar'd it skite,
 A Morse code message writ in licht
 That yet I couldna read aricht.

2446

The opening lines of *A Drunk Man* borrow, yet transform, the hackneyed expressions of half-thinking and half-educated men: "the stuffie's no' the real Mackay," "the vilest 'saxpenny planet," the joke about "ha'en cauld feet." Some proverbs are easy to identify ("robbin' Peter to pey Paul,") elsewhere lines read as if they could or should be proverbial ("A blin' bird's nest / Is aiblins biggin' in the thistle," "misapplied is a' body's property"). Such references to actual speech point to MacDiarmid's determination to face the banal sentiments and uncertain diction often associated with oral Scots in real situations. *The Waste Land* confines such reference to the pub-closing speech in "The Fire Sermon," where it contrasts with a "pure" diction aspiring to come from nowhere. *A Drunk Man* constantly evokes actual speech.

In the case of Burns, literary and non-literary references shade into one another. No-one brought up in a Scottish environment need in fact have read Burns in order to know about him. In MacDiarmid's poem he jostles with Thomas a Kempis ("Sic transit gloria" [mundi]), Jean Elliott (33-4) and her namesake T.S. (72), a nineteenth century song "The

Star o' Rabbie Burns," a nursery rhyme (78) and G.K. Chesterton (whose obesity seems to matter more than his literary prowess). More than one reader will detect in the skittish and stylish use of doggerel rhyming throughout these opening quatrains a tribute to the Byron of *Don Juan* (appropriately another Scot).

Christianity is subject to even richer and more ruthless exploitation than Burns' work and his myth. Both a cosmology and a code of social belief and practice, it offers the Drunk Man a vocabulary appropriate to the mystic and mythical nature of his speculations. (The planetary imagery of the poem's closing section is indebted to an older religion, which identified the gods with luminaries). Here once more, it is hard to say whether reference is to a text or to social practice. Christianity provides the Drunk Man with one of his most powerful *alter egos*:

Sall my wee 'oor be cryin': "Let pass this cup"? 124

* * *

And in the toon that I belang tae 165

-- What tho'ts Montrose or Nazareth? --

Helplessly the folk continue

To lead their livin' death!

In the "Ballad of the Crucified Rose" (1119-1218) identification is more gradual. First the thistle is crucified at its own hands (1203-7), the, as first person replaces third, the series Drunk Man/ thistle/ Christ is completed:

Like connoisseurs the Deils gang roond 1211

Wi' ready platitude.

It's no' sae dear as vinegar

And every bit as good!

The bitter taste is on my tongue,

I chowl my chafts, and pray

"Let God forsake me noo and no'

Staund connoisseur-like tae!" . . .

When the Drunk Man identifies "the necromancy in my bluid [that] winna let me be mysel," with "My mither's womb" (1353-7), he shares Christ's incomprehension of and hostility to womankind at the Cana wedding feast. The deliberately shocking episode that comes next combines an ontological myth (body and soul as two dogs trapped while copulating) and a

creation myth (light through joyful yet demeaning sex -- intromission with the feminine? -- producing earth, itself almost a luminary), and MacDiarmid at once offers a Christian paraphrase -- Mary lying with the Trinity:

The tug-o'-war is in me still
 The dog-hank o' the flesh and soul --
 Faither in Heaven, what gar'd ye tak'
 A village slut to mither me,
 Your mongrel o' the fire and clay?
 The trollop and the Deity share
 My writen form as tho' I were
 A picture o' the time they had
 When Licht rejoiced to file itsel'
 And Earth upshuddered like a star.

1361

A drunken hizzie gane to bed
 Wi' three-in-ane and ane-in-three.

It is strange how quietly things like this got into print, when Joyce's *Ulysses* created such a furore. Was the Church of Scotland really paying so little attention to Scottish literature at the time?

It seems very likely that, as a system of reference for *A Drunk Man*, esoteric teaching is hardly less important than Christianity. It is in the nature of the occult and esoteric to be hidden from the public eye, and maybe we read the poem as an Arab might do who was totally ignorant of Christian teaching, aware that we are missing something, pitifully unaware how much. MacDiarmid had close links with Orage of *The New Age*, for some time an enthusiastic disciple of Gurdjieff, and speaks of Gurdjieff in favourable terms elsewhere; among the 1962 inserted titles is a quotation from Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* ("The Spur of Love" (917-32)). A reference to the Taoist symbol of *yin* and *yang* at 1334 is taken up at 1557. Further biographical research may prove whether or not the poet received esoteric instruction or some form of initiation. For the time being this stone must remain unturned, yet it is study of this kind which can probably illuminate the crucial passage on light and darkness at 2101 ff., certainly one of the poem's most difficult sections. Such lines may refer to successive incarnations (the short days), which are of limited importance when compared to the periods (the darkness) that lie between them. MacDiarmid's exaltation of darkness above the light is surprising. The latter is merely:

That queer extension o' the dark, 2128
 That seems a separate and a different thing,
 And, seemin' sae, has lang confused the dark,
 And set it at cross-purpose wi' itsel'.

The last lines return to Christian terminology. In what is probably his finest poem, MacDiarmid, officially (especially with the passage of time) a Leninist materialist, shows a heterodoxy that is both reassuring and thoroughly characteristic!

It is beyond the scope of this article to list literary referents more precisely: Kenneth Buthlay's splendid edition has covered almost all the ground. English literature crops up with surprising regularity, Shelley at 411 ("Plant, what are you then?") and Keats much further on:

O for a root in some untroubled soil, 2172
 Some cauld soil 'yont this fevered warld . . .

Shakespeare supplies a third alter ego for the Drunk Man. He has a "cursed Conscience" (260) and complains about "the mortal coil" (273). The spirit in which he echoes Chist's words at Cana is something like Hamlet's in berating his mother, and MacDiarmid's close recalls the prince's last words to Horatio ("Yet ha'e I silence left, the croon o' a" --2671). It may not be fanciful to detect a reference to Joyce in the "puir fule" who "owre continents unkent / And wine-dark oceans waunder[s] like Ulysses . . ." (399-400).

A different kind of intertextuality emerges in MacDiarmid's plagiarisms, strikingly in the review of Yeats' *A Vision* by A.E. which, as Buthlay reveals, is the prose crib for the earlier part of the "Great Wheel" section. And there are clear links with other texts by MacDiarmid: the Burns supper passage is closely linked to two essays on "The Burns Cult" from the *Scottish Educational Journal*¹⁰; 341-2 take up a phrase from *The Scottish Chapbook*¹¹, "to meddle with the thistle and pick the figs," and "the curst conceit o' bein' richt" had been quoted from Joubert in the *Annals of the Five Senses*¹². The insistence on the need "to be yersel's -- and to mak' that worth bein'" (744) had surfaced in the *Northern Review*:

there is but one road . . . the road of a conscious
 endeavour to be ourselves and nothing but ourselves . . .

. *Be ourselves* is the only motto that can fit the
Scottish renaissance . . .¹³

The links between MacDiarmid's poetry and his political journalism are clearly very close.

Reference in the poem seems inexhaustible. It suggests what the co-ordinates of *A Drunk Man* are, its collocation in time, language and culture, establishing links with, not the "real," or "non-literary" world, but simply the world of our experience beyond the poem itself, the world it engages with and aims, in the long run, to change.

What is all the talk in *A Drunk Man* about? And how can the reader bind the whole poem together in a meaningfully perceived structure? How can the concepts informing the text be isolated, the similarities and oppositions that allow us to see some sections of the poem as commenting on, expanding or contradicting others, to sense how from beginning to end it remains profoundly relevant to its own concerns? Initially, the reader may be content to sense this relevance without making it more explicit. The critic once more faces a problem of naming. Where does one idea or structuring topic end, or blend into another? If the reader's subjective participation is necessary to the meaningfulness of the poem, the critic can offer no definitive reading; but by proposing one possible route through and with the text, he can encourage the reader to seek parallel, differing or varied routes, confident that the common denominator, the text, will play a sufficiently important role for no one reading to exclude or invalidate another.

The ideas informing the text can be conceived of in two ways. First, they are the axes along which different passages in the text take their place because they show similar concerns, or highlight a single pattern in the varied material they present. These may be called *topics*. Yet the axes are interrelated, they collide and intersect at points which may be called *clusters*. Because the poem is interconnected, it is theoretically possible to travel via axes and clusters from any point in the poem, any concern, to every other point, much as a fingertip or a point of light might travel within or along the surface of a transparent, three-dimensional crystal structure.

The crystal of the poem is finite, but not enclosed. Our consideration of its topics has to be referential. When we connect the topic of light with the topic of seeing because it is light which renders vision possible, we are reading the text in the light of the physical laws that

govern the world known to us. Texts are not self-contained, solipsistic unities: they aim to penetrate, to impinge on the world of our experience and sensibility beyond themselves, beyond our experience of them. If the kind of referentiality discussed above is the tangible side of this aspiration, its explicit vesture, then the topics and clusters are its heart and core.

Space will not permit us to follow topics and clusters through the whole body of the poem. What can be done is to name the major topics and suggest the relations running between these. Previous sections have moved back and forth within the text. Here it seems appropriate to respect the reader's initial and prevalent experience of it, as a ribbon, an irreversible progress whose onward movement is reflected and affirmed in the build of verse, rhyme and stanza.

The opening paragraph (1-20) structures a variety of ideas along one single axis: the speaker is tired rather than really drunk; he isn't as healthy as he used to be; his body is ageing, and drinking is no longer the voluptuous experience of earlier days. What he drinks is a poor concoction compared to the whisky of his youth. It won't even keep out the cold, whereas once its warmth reached his very heart. Nothing in its substance justifies its name, and in this it is like everything Scottish -- mere form without genuine spirit. In each case we have a falling away from an earlier peak, or physical prowess, of alcoholic efficacy, of "true" Scottishness, and the governing idea can be expressed as degradation, adulteration, or simply decline. Tiredness is a poor second best to drunkenness, just as the transformation of publicans (and maybe even sinners) into Pharisees (91-2) is a turn for the worse. (Christ would have agreed). This topic dictates the obsession with the bogus, the ersatz, which animates the Burns Supper section. With both Christianity and the Burns cult, a message originally pure and valid has been diluted in a process seen as inevitable for the future as well as the past:

As Kirks wi' Christianity ha'e dune,
Burns' Clubs wi' Burns -- wi' a' thing it's the same,
The core o' ocht is only for the few,
Scorned by the mony, thrang wi'ts empty name.

109

If the topic of "decline" is prompted by an unflattering comparison, it then embraces the gap between aspiration and realisation, the "puir warped performance" which is "To a' that micht ha' been, a thistle to the mune" (271-2), and

recurs in the "forest worn to the back-haaf," the "Eden brocht doon to a bean-swaup" of 861-2 and the "hopeless airgh 'twixt a' we can and should" at 1022. Ruthlessly holding to one's identity, "being yourself" is a strategy for combating decline. The Drunk Man declares that "I'll be/ Mysel' nae maitter what they tell's" (147-8), generalising his resolve at 743-6 and returning to it in connection with marriage:

I dinna say that bairns alane
 Are true love's task -- a sairer task
 Is aiblins to create oorsels
 As we can be -- it's that I ask.

953

This is why he feels "A certain symp'thy" with the thistle which grows "exactly as its instinct says" (1098).

Staying put is one way of making sure you don't slide back: another is to attempt to move forward in some fashion. This appears as two topics which may be called "going beyond" and "apparent, but false progress." The second is suggested as early as 34-6, with the doubt as to the quality of the blind bird's offspring, and again in the accusation that the participants in the Burns Supper are "nocht but zoologically men" (68) -- evolutionary progress is merely an illusion. This topic casts a questioning light on procreation. If the coming generation does not represent an advance on the present, procreation is a trap, a meaningless repetition:

Millions o' wimmen bring forth in pain
 Millions o' bairns that are no' worth ha'en.

636

Wull ever a wumman be big again
 Wi's muckle's a Christ? Yech, there's nae sayin'.

Gin that's the best that you ha'e comin',
 Fegs but I'm sorry for you, wumman!

The Drunk Man cannot see the point of letting "a generation pass/ That ane nae better may succeed" (1238-9). The desire to go beyond is part of an impatience with sufficiency, with everything that is merely enough, as "less than a' there is to see/ 'll never be owre muckle for me" (837-8). In the passage from 1801 to 1924 we see the Drunk Man free himself of the limitations of common sense and family bonds, rising "at last abune/ The thistle like a mune/ That looks serenely doon" (1855-7) as he leaves humanity, himself, his very body behind.

Going beyond is constantly linked to seeing, a crucial topic also hinted at in the blind bird of 34-6, an aspiration that of its very nature seems to preclude satisfaction:

The less man sees the mair he is
 Content wi't, but the mair he sees
 The mair he kens hoo little o'
 A' that there is he'll ever see, 1458

Seeing involves a kind of exposure, a laying bare which has already been mentioned in connection with MacDiarmid's treatment of sexuality, where the man almost fears what the light of love may reveal (587ff). Intercourse allows one, in a way the Drunk Man presents as real rather than metaphorical, to see under the skin. Accordingly he comments that

It's a queer thing to tryst wi' a wumman
 When the boss o' her body's gane,
 And her banes in the wund as she comes
 Dirl like a raff o' rain. 901

Earlier he had subjected himself to the same process, seeing the thistle as "my ain skeleton through wha's bare banes / A fiendish wund's begood to whistle" until all mankind suffers the same fate, and "gibberin' on the hillside there/ Is a' humanity sae lang has hid! . . ." (370-6). Sex is a means of seeing, of access to a privileged vision, and as such it takes its place in a series which includes both whisky and disease.

The urge to go beyond involves a rejection of central positions, an enthusiasm for extremism. In a linear world, being at one extreme means being as far removed as possible from the other. This is unsatisfactory for the Drunk Man, and the topic of union of opposites expresses his determination to occupy every available position or point of view. He will "ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur/ Extremes meet" (141-2). The topic is anticipated at 27-8, when he proclaims his willingness to suffer as both goat and sheep, as well as in the plan of a poem which will lead its readers to unimaginable heights before plunging them into the "nether deeps" (26). The coming together of man and woman, a topic which may be called "tryst" and makes the Blok lyric so relevant, is one aspect of the union of opposites, which extends further in pairs such as life and death, light and darkness throughout the body of the poem.

We know from an early stage what the plan behind this poem is. Increasingly the thistle's roots come to be associated with the idea of a hidden plan. Is the world of phenomena the manifestation of some kind of intentionality? Does God exist, or is he merely "o' geometry . . . made" (2406)? Only at this late stage does the Drunk Man face the possibility that the thistle "tells little o' its source" and "has nae vera fundamental root" (2402-3).

To repeat what was said at the start: isolating topics is not a way of capturing or reproducing the meaning of the poem. They should rather serve as signposts which help the reader to create order from it as he or she progresses. The mesh of interrelations they establish should prove sufficient to contain almost all of the poem. Having fixed them in our minds, the poet is able to recapitulate them with remarkable economy, as at 2158-2171, where we find means of vision ("wund or mune or een -- or whisky"), exposure ("a brain laid bare," "licht frae bare banes"), false progress ("My deid man's eunuch offspring") and colliding opposites ("Daith-in-Life and Life-in-Daith").

In the poem as examined so far, topics have remained true to themselves, entering into the combinations we have called clusters without being in any way superseded. The problematic structure they create may be revealed in greater detail, with a richer articulation, as the poem progresses; but it is constant, in a sense static, throughout the main part of *A Drunk Man*. The section on the "Great Wheel" constitutes a finale not only because of its position but also because it resolves certain topics, altering and replacing them, or silencing them in a way which makes any continuation impossible. If one made an analogy with narrative structures, it would be with the death or marriage of a major character in a novel whereby he or she passes into another phase beyond the reach of the text we are reading.

There are many indications of the special nature of this section, the longest (with the exception of the opening, 1-454) to use a single, identical form. The effortless technical command evident in a succession of 85 stanzas rhyming aaa is as expressive of a mood as the constant chopping and changing that had preceded. A new symbol is introduced, displacing the thistle for some 250 lines, second-hand like all the Drunk Man's major symbols, borrowed both from medieval philosophy and esoteric cosmogony. Until now the poem has inhabited a linear, two-dimensional world. If reality is conceived in linear terms, the possibilities of movement are three: you can go back, or forward, or stay in

the same place. The three topics decline, being yourself and going beyond are structured in this way. Moving on a wheel, one both goes forward and, eventually, returns to the same point, which implies that one has in fact gone backward. This means that it synthesises all three of the older topics in a new, cyclical image which is perceived, at least initially, as a prison offering no means of escape.

As far back as 1434 the Drunk Man had begun to have qualms about being yourself ("Nae void can fleg me hauf as much/ As bein' mysel"), and it soon enters the series of impediments:

And O! I canna thole
Aye yabblin' o' my soul,
And fain I wad be free
O' my eternal me

1895

Now he falls away from his own mind (2407), glad that "Impersonality sall blaw/ Through me as 'twere a bluffert o' snaw" (2548). The bringing together of opposites seems an impossibility:

Beauty is a'e thing, but it tines anither
(For, fegs, they never can be f'und thegither),
And 'twixt the twa it's no' for me to swither.

2398

The wheel (which resembles a record on its turntable, reproducing a pre-recorded and unalterable message) is an image of determinism, moving everything inexorably, depriving subjective perception of all validity and uniting opposites ("God and Deil" (2439)) not through achieved vision or reconciliation, but against and beyond their will -- they are helpless forms. If "Jesus and a nameless ape/ Collide and share the selfsame shape" (2476-7), this is merely because that which distinguishes them is insignificant when seen from the perspective the wheel offers, and from which any going beyond the poet might achieve would be meaningless:"

By whatna cry o' mine oot-topped
Sall be a' men ha'e sung and hoped
When to a'e note they're telescoped?

2473

Human culture has so far proved incapable of "going beyond," and this remains an aspiration which, if realised, would deprive the wheel of its terrifying quality (2491-9). The face which may or may not exist behind the wheel sums up the question of the hidden plan. In so far as going beyond was a symptom of insatiability, the Drunk Man betrays it in settling for "adequate enlightenment" (2511), for a vision that is only partial ("I wis nae man' ll ever see/ The rest o' the rotundity," 2546), for sufficiency instead of totality.

The Drunk Man sets the wheel within an imagery of planets, of luminaries, perhaps because he links it with the paths planets follow in their orbits, beyond and against their own will. Planets are, after all, intimately linked to our experience of cyclical processes in the physical world. The lexis stresses the incandescence of planets, their potential for shedding light: "stars, licht, sparks, Phoenix, Lucifer, gleids, brichten, licht-beams, enlightenment, skime, skinkle, ray, blaze, twinklin', lichtin', lowe" (2418-2562). If the wheel evokes the pattern of planetary movements in galaxies and solar systems, the hope that it may "birl in time inside oor heids" implies that we ourselves may bring forth luminaries, "thraw oot conscious gleids" (2500-1). While the topic of evolution, of false progress, is resolved in the hope that "organs may develop" which will be "Responsive to the need divine/ O' single-minded humankind" (2581-3), that of seeing reaches its final form in the identification of eyes with stars, no longer exploiting light, but themselves projecting it. We shall have become conscious items in

The licht nae man has ever seen
Till he has felt that he's been gi'en
The stars themselfs instead o' een,

2566

And often wi' the sun has glowered
At the white mune until it cowered,
As when by new thocht auld's o'erpowered.

That new thought should overpower old is precisely the point of the "Great Wheel" section. All that remains is for the poem to recall its fictional framework, returning to a mode as far as could be from the relative clarity of this resolution. Reappearing, the thistle doesn't just bring to

mind exhaustion after erection (symbol of a different creativity) but also the emptiness which the artist feels when his work has abandoned him. He has delivered what was inside him, a poem that has stretched his own and the reader's potential to the full. All that remains is to yield to a silence which offers some promise of rest.

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NOTES

1. The text is quoted from Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh, 1987).
2. Correspondence quoted from *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Alan Bold (London, 1984).
3. Maurice Lindsay, *Francis George Scott and the Scottish Renaissance* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 55.
4. The 1926 "Author's Note" appears as Appendix A on p. 196 of Buthlay's edition.
5. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. A. Adam (Paris, 1962), p. 13 (my translation).
6. Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres*, ed. S. Bernard (Paris, 1960), p. 110 (my translation).
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.
8. Alexander Blok, *Selected Poems*, ed. Avril Pyman (Oxford, 1972), p. 218.
9. There is no complete English translation of *Problema stichotvornogo jazyka* (The Problem of Poetic Language) (Leningrad, 1924). I have consulted the Italian translation by Giovanni Giudici and Ljudmila Kortikova *Il Problema del linguaggio poetico* (Milan, 1968).

10. Originally published on 23rd and 30th July 1926, reprinted in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp. 112-4.
11. See *The Scottish Chapbook* Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 1922).
12. C.M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) *Annals of the Five Senses* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 38 -- originally published in 1923.
13. See *The Northern Review* Vol. 1, No. 2 (June-July 1924), p. 82.