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*Margery Palmer McCulloch*

Burns, MacDiarmid and Beyond:  
Transformations of the Love Lyric and its National Context

At the international Burns Bicentenary Conference at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, I concluded my paper on Catherine Carswell's *The Life of Robert Burns* with a move outwards from Carswell's focus on the sexuality of Burns and his women to a consideration of Burns's love songs as a poetry of desire, where the love relationship depicted in the song was itself a metaphor for a reaching out to the "beyond," to an ideal unrealizable in this sublunary world. In this connection, I saw a relationship between the motif of *Sehnsucht* found in Romanticism generally and especially in German Romantic poetry and *lieder* and the keynote of longing so often struck in Burns's songs. I would like to take up again Burns's transcendent use of the love song, the poetry of desire, relate it to his perception of his national context and then move forward to compare and contrast this eighteenth-century situation with that of MacDiarmid in the Scottish Renaissance period of the early twentieth century.

One of the notable qualities in Burns's love lyrics is their celebration of the natural countryside alongside their celebration of love or their lament for the loss of love. There is, of course, a long tradition stretching back to classical times of love imagery being borrowed from the natural world and used for mundane or transcendent purposes, and in Burns's own century Alan Ramsay brought the sense of the everyday life of the countryside into his love drama *The Gentle Shepherd* alongside its pastoral conventions. Burns, on the other hand, seems able to communicate an emotionally charged and less circumscribed experience of the actual world of nature in his verses. To adapt a phrase from Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, we find Burns giving us a selection of the natural world as really experienced by men and

women, and giving it to us in a selection of the language really used by his Ayrshire contemporaries. This is a new poetic voice speaking to us apparently directly and communicating moods and associations with which we can empathize; and it is the recognition of this emotional reality beneath the crafted surface which draws out our deep response to the poetry and music of the songs.

In Burns's early poem "The Vision," there is a more ambivalent encounter with love and the natural world in the persona of the Muse Coila who comes to give the speaker her validation of his poetic aspirations. At first Coila would appear to offer the possibility of being the object of the speaker's sexual desire as he watches her enter the room, "A tight, outlandish *Hizzie*, braw" with "such a leg [that] my bonie JEAN / Could only peer it."<sup>1</sup> However, rather than the real-life girl who, as Burns tells us in his *Commonplace Book*, so often acted as the Muse who brought together "Love and Music and Poetry," Coila is one of Scotland's national Muses, and the poet is the object of *her* interest rather than she herself being the sexual object of his. Coila is the Muse of Burns's own Ayrshire district of Kyle, who has watched over his poetic development and has now come to confirm his role as rustic bard and to encourage him at a time when he appears to be regretting his chosen vocation and feeling himself a failure:

All in this mottie, misty clime,  
I backward mus'd on wasted time,  
How I had spent my *youthfu' prime*,  
                  An' done nae-thing,  
But stringing blethers up in rhyme  
                  For fools to sing. (*Poems*, I, 103)

It is interesting to contrast this modest, even if ironically expressed view of Burns's aspirations as local poet with his view of himself as National Bard in the late 1780s and early 1790s. In the later period we find a much more confident artist who has tested himself through the publication of his poems and through his interaction with Edinburgh intellectual society. His experience of Scotland was much wider also as a result of his journeyings in the late 1780s, and his awareness of the ambivalences of the political world within and without Scotland more mature. Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether Burns was Nationalist or Unionist, Jacobin or Jacobite, or whether—in

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<sup>1</sup>"The Vision," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 104, 105. Henceforth *Poems*.

anticipation of MacDiarmid—he was “whaur extremes meet,”<sup>2</sup> being all of these things at one and the same time. What seems relevant to my topic, however, is Burns’s perception at this later date of his own involvement with Scotland as opposed to the more modest involvement with his local Ayrshire district of Kyle in “The Vision”; and his perception also that Scotland and her culture were under threat. As with Scott’s comments in the final chapter of *Waverley* about “tracing the evanescent manners of his own country,”<sup>3</sup> so Burns in his song-collecting and revising appeared to see himself as helping to preserve the threatened traditions of his country in the form of its national song. And in this way he was fulfilling the bardic tradition of involvement with cultural definition and national focus.

On the other hand, in her account of Burns’s song collecting in *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*, Carol McGuirk suggests that “self-preservation was also among Burns’s motives as he revised traditional material.” She says: “His private values are consistently—if covertly—conveyed in most of his song revisions,” and she adds provocatively: “Scottish song fragments were the formal shell into which Burns chose to retreat after Edinburgh.”<sup>4</sup>

This interaction of the personal and the national motives brings me back to my starting-point of Burns’s poetry of desire and the transcendent role played by his love song revisions in particular. When we read and listen to the love songs, we notice that the longing expressed through words and music is not the conventional plea from male lover to coy mistress who will not give him the satisfaction he seeks, but a longing which takes account of mutability and yet transcends human time. Absence, and with it longing, is the keynote of “For the sake o’ Somebody”—whether the absence of the loved one or the Prince across the water, if one reads this song in a Jacobite context. And longing is also the keynote of “The Banks o’ Doon,” especially in its less specific third version and musical setting. Yet alongside the evocation of absence or longing in both songs, there is also the positive evocation of what has been or what could be were circumstances different: “Thou minds me o’ departed joys, / Departed, never to return” (*Poems*, II, 575); “I could range the world around...I wad do—what wad I not— / For the sake o’ Somebody!” (*Poems*, II, 850). In “Ca’ the yowes to the knowes,” on the other hand, the lover appears to speak confidently of trysting, of the strength of his passion and of his inability to part from the loved one: “I can die—but canna part” (*Poems*, II, 739); but when sung, we notice that the melody accompanying these apparently positive

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<sup>2</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken. 2 vols. (London, 1978), I, 87. Volume and page numbers for further quotations will be given in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814), Everyman paperback edn. (London, 1976), p.478.

<sup>4</sup>Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985), p. 116.

sentiments is in the minor mode which, when combined with the slow dotted rhythm and the evocative structure of leaps and steps, subverts the positive verbal communication and creates a sense of longing and *potential* absence which points beyond the present to some unknown future. This recognition of loss or absence through the melody may then turn us back again to the words where we notice that much of the poem is in fact written in the future tense, and this proleptic narrative interacts with the minor melodic mode to produce that sense of *Sehnsucht*, that longing for the transcendent ideal found so often in Romantic period poetry and song. There is a similar scenario in "O wert thou in the cauld blast," by tradition written by Burns during his last illness for Jessie Lewars who had come to help Jean with house and children. Here the dominant note is again one of stretching out to the ideal relationship, with the longing balanced by the motif of protectiveness which has often been pointed to as a recurring element in Burns's love songs: "Oh wert thou in the cauld blast...I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee" (*Poems*, II, 813). One notices, however, that the tense here is conditional and one remembers that in real life at this time Burns himself was the one in need of protection from the harshness of the everyday world.

Burns's love songs, then, however much tradition has associated them with the celebration of a particular woman or sexual relationship, are, as is increasingly being recognized, art works which transcend their immediate source of inspiration and are also, I would argue, transformed into symbols of a longing for the ideal which goes far beyond the longing for an ideal love relationship. In his book *Scottish Journey*, Edwin Muir described the Burns Cult as a myth "based on a firm foundation of sanctified illusion and romantic wish fulfilment." And of Burns himself he said:

This legendary figure is a Scotsman who took upon himself all the sins of the people, not to redeem them, but to commit them as ideally as they should be committed.... He was a scapegoat driven out to sweet pastures, while the people elected to remain in the wilderness.<sup>5</sup>

This caustic assessment seems to me to be unfair to Burns and the Scots, both of whom have had to try to come to terms with an uncertain identity and, in the case of the Scots, with an often *unarticulated* sense of national loss and aspiration which may explain their conscious or unconscious response to the note of longing struck in Burns's songs. This itself is a human response felt also far beyond Scotland and the Scots. So far as Burns himself is concerned, I find myself remembering Rilke's definition of *Sehnsucht* in relation to Burns's last years. For Rilke, "Das ist die Sehnsucht, wohnen im Gewoge und keine Heimat haben in der Zeit" (That's what longing is: to live in a state of flux and

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<sup>5</sup>Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (1935; rptd. Edinburgh, 1979), p. 90.

have no homeland in the world of Time).<sup>6</sup> Burns too was in a state of flux when he had scaled the Mount Parnassus of Edinburgh and found that not only was it *not* the home of art and intellect he had imagined it might be, but that, whatever its nature, it could not offer him a place where he could function and where others would accept him as the professional artist and craftsman he was, as opposed to the heaven-taught ploughman they wished him to be, and the farmer they insisted on keeping him, despite his attempts to find the patronage which would lead to another occupation. Caught between his love for and at-oneness with his rural environment and his contrary need for the intellectual stimulus of minds which matched his own which he had glimpsed in Edinburgh but which had been ultimately denied him, it is little wonder that the note of *Sehnsucht* is so often struck in his love songs and that, as McGuirk has suggested, his song collecting became a vehicle for self-preservation as well as for cultural preservation. In both activities, however, the stretching out to the beyond, to the transcendent ideal, was a dominant motif.

The question of reconciling personal and national Muses is more straightforward when one comes to the poetry of Burns's twentieth-century successor, Hugh MacDiarmid. For one thing, the love lyric is not a genre much used by the modernist MacDiarmid and the few love songs he wrote are either impersonal and reflective in tone as in the chilly "First Love" from *Stony Limits*, or they are openly symbolical and transcendent. The fine lyric "Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton" from *Scots Unbound* is a love-song to the *earth* written, in part, in the metaphor of a human love relationship:

Cwa' een like milk-wort and bog-cotton hair!  
I love you, earth, in this mood best o' a'  
When the shy spirit like a laich wind moves  
And frae the lift nae shadow can fa'  
Since there's nocht left to thraw a shadow there  
Owre een like milk-wort and milk-white cotton hair.

In the second stanza, however, the transcendent mode becomes more explicit as, in the manner of Thomas Hardy, the poet draws attention to sunlight and shadow in the natural world and applies this opposition and balance of natural forces philosophically to the human world:

Wad that nae leaf upon anither wheeled  
A shadow either and nae root need dern  
In sacrifice to let sic beauty be!  
But deep surroondin' darkness I discern

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<sup>6</sup>Raine Maria Rilke, "Das ist die Sehnsucht" in *Harrap Anthology of German Poetry*, ed. August Closs and T. Pugh Williams (London, 1957), p. 498.

Is aye the price o' licht. Wad licht revealed  
Naething but you, and nicht nocht else concealed. (I, 331)

MacDiarmid's female Muse is thus characteristically in the service of a philosophical or ideological apprehension of the nature of human existence and, in contrast to the poetry of Burns, there is little of a more traditional love-song surface identity to mislead the reader.

What Burns and MacDiarmid share, on the other hand, is the bardic mingling of the personal and the national in their operation as poets, but here again MacDiarmid is much more explicit and didactic in his expression of his mission to revitalize his country and her culture. In this objective MacDiarmid looked for support to Russian writers such as Dostoyevsky and Blok, who also believed that a writer should become involved with the fate of his country. And it is in his "Silken Leddy" adaptation of Blok's symbolist poem "The Lady Unknown" (I, 88-9) that the Drunk Man's poetic aspirations in relation to his country are validated, just as in "The Vision" the Muse Coila had affirmed Burns's poet-speaker's similar if more modest ambitions. In the work of both poets, therefore, the female Muse is an essential ingredient in the poetry of personal and national desire.

Burns and MacDiarmid both lived at times of crisis with regard to Scottish culture and language, but the crisis was much more apparent and decline much further advanced in the years immediately after the First World War when MacDiarmid initiated the revival movement which has come to be known as the Scottish Renaissance. His approach to regeneration was therefore more didactic and more explicitly ideological than was the preservation mission of Burns 150 years before. There was also in the late modernist period a more general sense that civilization—and European culture in particular—was in decline, as can be seen by the reader response to Eliot's *The Waste Land* which appeared to speak for a generation in its expression of the nihilism of the time, while a poem such as Yeats's "The Second Coming" with its message: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,"<sup>7</sup> took on implications which reverberated beyond its national inspiration in the Troubles of Ireland. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* belongs to this literature of crisis, but unlike the elegiac tone of *The Waste Land* and the mood of withdrawal in much characteristic modernist writing, MacDiarmid's nationalist agenda brings the spirit of Romantic idealism into the poem to interact with its modernistic features. Thus *A Drunk Man* not only dramatizes scenarios of decline, it simultaneously proposes ideals of regeneration. And it is here that we find among the shifting symbols of the poem the symbol of woman, either in the everyday persona of the Drunk Man's wife Jean, or in the transcendent

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<sup>7</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (London, 1982), p. 211.

persona of the Silken Leddy, or Muse, both of whom inspire the Drunk Man and rescue him from his despairs and excesses. In passages such as “A luvin’ wumman is a licht / That shows a man his waefu’ plicht” (a lyric, MacDiarmid tells us, suggested by the French of Edmond Rocher) which leads to the enigmatic ballad “O wha’s the bride that cairries the bunch / O’ thistles blinterin’ white?” (I, 102), and, especially, in the Drunk Man’s “hymn” to his wife Jean beginning “The munelicht is my knowledge o’ mysel,” woman is a symbol of personal salvation for the male speaker, who admits his human failings and limitations and looks to the woman in his life to ignore these and through their sexual relationship to quicken and clarify him:

E’en as the munelicht’s borrowed frae the sun  
I ha’e my knowledge o’ mysel’ frae thee,  
And much that nane but thee can e’er mak’ clear,  
Save my licht’s frae the source, is dark to me.

\* \* \*

Bit[e] into me forever mair and lift  
Me clear o’ chaos in a great relief  
Till, like this thistle in the munelicht growin’,  
I brak in roses owre a hedge o’ grief.... (I, 112-13)

As the borrowing of the name Jean for the everyday woman symbol might suggest, Burns is a frequent presence in MacDiarmid’s long poem, in its early stages in particular, both as a fellow-poet who can be called upon to help regenerate Scotland and the world: “Rabbie, wad’st thou wert here—the world hath need, / And Scotland mair sae, o’ the likes o’ thee!” (I, 85); and also as a symbol of the distortions which ignorant human beings can make out of achievements and philosophies which they adapt for their own purposes, ignoring the original perceptions: “Mair nonsense has been uttered in his name / Than in ony’s barrin’ liberty and Christ” (I, 84). For despite his acquired reputation as being anti-Burns, MacDiarmid’s target was not Burns himself but the Scots and what they had made of Burns and the literary tradition from which he came. It is, however, in what we may call the “Ballad of the Silken Leddy” section that we find the woman symbol functioning as poetic Muse in a way which allows meaningful comparisons between Burns and MacDiarmid with reference to Burns’s “Vision,” a Burns source MacDiarmid does not draw attention to but which seems to me equally valid with the acknowledged Blok source in the national regeneration context. Here both poetic personae sit in the howff alone of an evening and both are visited by a mysterious female presence who explicitly in Burns and more implicitly in MacDiarmid reveals herself as their Muse and inspires them to continue with their chosen vocation:

*I seek, in this captivity,  
To pierce the veils that darklin’ fa’*



—See white clints slidin' to the sea,  
And hear the horns o' Elfland blaw. (I, 89)

MacDiarmid's poem took its starting-point from a translation by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky of Blok's symbolist poem, but his adaptation transformed it into a lyrical ballad which takes its place happily in the vernacular tradition of Fergusson and Burns. Set in a context of "white-washed cottons" hanging above "the vennel's pokiness" (I, 88), the cries of children and the sounds of the young men and their girls rowing on the lochan, its evocation of Scottish rural life displaces the modernist cynicism and world-weariness of the original while the mysterious lady becomes suggestive of the ballad world of Thomas the Rhymer. In this lyrical ballad, as in Burns's love lyrics, the female Muse inspires the poet to aspire to the ideal, to the beyond: "A sun is gi'en to me to haud... My soul stores up this wealth unspent" (I, 89); while at the same time, in mundane terms her appearance generates a poem which affirms the Scottish literary and linguistic tradition.

There is another Burns resonance here too, it seems to me. For what MacDiarmid is doing in his adaptations of European writers is not so far removed from Burns's revising practices in the song-collecting of his post-Edinburgh period. Both were using existing models for their own personal and national poetic purposes, and both transformed their originals in a way which added something new and of high quality to the Scottish poetry tradition. And although MacDiarmid complained about Burns's destroying original folk-song sources in his song-revising,<sup>8</sup> he himself behaved similarly in his early Scots lyric collections where, for example, the poem "Empty Vessel" from *Penny Wheep* is utterly changed from its demotic and predictable folk-song source, "Jenny Nettles,"<sup>9</sup> becoming in the transformation a modernist poem, elliptical in form and philosophical in import, while still maintaining a relationship with the Scottish tradition through the intimacy of its language, its ballad-like verse movement and enigmatic narrative.

Let me turn now briefly to MacDiarmid's second long poem, *To Circumjack Cencrastus* and his use of a female figure as personal and national Muse in lyrical passages from this poem.

In his discussion of contemporary Scottish culture in *Scott and Scotland*, published in 1936, Edwin Muir commented that "a really original Scots poet like Hugh MacDiarmid has never received in Scotland any criticism of his

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<sup>8</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (London, 1969), p. 140.

<sup>9</sup>See Kenneth Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve)* (Edinburgh & London, 1964), p. 33.

more ambitious poems which can be of the slightest use to him."<sup>10</sup> Muir's complaint confirms MacDiarmid's own dejected letter to George Ogilvie shortly after the publication of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and its lukewarm and / or puzzled reception:

I set out to give Scotland a poem, perfectly modern in psychology, which could only be compared in the whole length of Scots literature with 'Tam o' Shanter' and Dunbar's 'Seven Deidly Sins'. And I felt that I had done it by the time I finished—despite all the faults and flaws of my work.

*To Circumjack Cencrastus* followed *A Drunk Man* in 1930 after MacDiarmid had left Scotland for London to work on Compton Mackenzie's short-lived *Vox* magazine and had written to George Ogilvie: "I ought to have been here years ago."<sup>11</sup> It is a more fragmented poem than *A Drunk Man*, something which may reflect the crisis of identity in its poet. Like its predecessor it is personal, metaphysical and national in orientation, but its poet's disillusionment with his country and its failure to recognize his achievement is demonstrated by the fact that passages dealing with Lowland Scottish culture have become largely satiric in form while the visionary quest now takes place in the context of the Highlands and their Celtic traditions. Yet here the poet is handicapped linguistically in a way far beyond any language difficulties experienced by Burns or the *Drunk Man* poet. For the *Cencrastus* poet, like his Lowland compatriots, has no Gaelic and he is therefore confronted not merely with the task of revitalizing his nation's culture but doing so with the realization that his country's culture is seriously divided in addition to being in decline. In the lyric "The Mavis of Pabal" the speaker describes himself as

A pool cut aff frae the sea,  
A tree without roots that stands  
On the ground unsteadily.

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For poetry's no' made in a lifetime  
And I lack a livin' past; (I, 191-92)

imagery he was to use again for a similar purpose in the later and starker 'Lament for the Great Music':

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<sup>10</sup>Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (Edinburgh, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup>C. M. Grieve, Letters to George Ogilvie 9.12.26 and 6.1.30. *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Alan Bold (Athens, GA, 1984), pp. 90, 101.

...My native land should be to me  
 As a root to a tree. If a man's labour fills no want there  
 His deeds are doomed and his music mute. (I, 472)

It is, nevertheless, to the Gaelic tradition that the *Cencrastus* poet looks for inspiration:

...to the islands  
 Where the wells are undefiled  
 And folk sing as their fathers sang  
 Before Christ was a child. (I, 208)

The appearance of the female Muse in the *Cencrastus* poem is associated with Gaelic rather than Lowland culture in lyrical sections such as “*Aodhagán Ó Rathaille sang this sang*” (I, 224), “*My love is to the light of lights*” (I, 291) and “*North of the Tweed*” (I, 269). In his note to the first-mentioned lyric, MacDiarmid comments that Egan O’Rahilly was an early eighteenth-century Irish poet whose vision poem “*Gile na Gile* (‘The Brightness of Brightness’) ‘sees, in the image of an Irish maiden, that idea of which Plato dreamed; and this strange pulchritude is also Eire herself—the secret Ireland of the Gael’” (I, 294). The choice of model here therefore, even if a borrowed Irish Gaelic poet (and the eighteenth-century resonances would appear now to be Ossianic as opposed to Burnsian), fits with the bardic tradition and MacDiarmid’s own identification with his country’s fate. Like O’Rahilly, the *Cencrastus* poet similarly meets his Brightness of Brightness in a lonely glen, but, he is uncharacteristically lacking in confidence, not at all sure of his welcome: “And will she lauch ahint her haund / At my uncouth demeanour”?—uncertain, even, if he will be able to recognize the authentic Celtic Muse:

...But tho' I'm blinded in her licht  
 The hardy doot's still rife  
 That aiblins I am sair beginked  
 Thro' sma' experience o' life,  
 And favoured here wi' nae King's dochter,  
 But juist...a minister's rinawa wife.... (I, 226)

Language is the principal problem: “*O wad at least my yokel words / Some Gaelic strain had kept*”; and in the end he is forced to admit defeat:

—Fain through Burns' clay MacMhaighstir's fire  
 To glint within me ettled.  
 It stirred, alas, but couldna kyth  
 Prood, elegant and mettled. (I, 225)

MacDiarmid has more success with his *personal* poetic quest as expressed in the lyrics “*North of the Tweed*” and “*My love is to the light of lights.*” This

latter poem is reminiscent of the Gaelic praise tradition and there is no expression of constraint here as there is in the vision of the Brightness of Brightness in “*Aodhagán Ó Rathaille Sang this Sang*.” It relates also to the appearance of the Silken Leddy in *A Drunk Man* and, significantly, in relation to the intellectuality inherent in MacDiarmid’s poetic vision, the goddess or Muse invoked—like Keats’s Psyche whose sanctuary was dressed “with the wreath’d trellis of a working brain”<sup>12</sup>—has her home in the poet’s mind:

*My love she is the hardest thocht  
That ony brain can ha’e,  
And there is nocht worth ha’en in life  
That doesna lead her way.* (I, 291)

In “*North of the Tweed*,” on the other hand, the poet starts off once again in a mood of insecurity with regard to the possibility of poetic achievement and in addition he would appear to be rejecting the natural landscape of his country as a source of poetic inspiration, looking instead to something beyond the possibilities this world can offer:

The pale-wa’d warld is fu’ o’ licht and life  
Like a glass in which water faintly stirs.  
Gie owre a’ this tomfoolery, and sing  
The movin’ spirit that nae metaphor drawn  
Frae water or frae licht can dim suggest.  
Leid in nae mere Longinian hypsos come  
But in inhuman splendours, triumphin’ wi’  
‘A dazzlin’ disregard o’ the soul.’  
Nocht else’ll dae. (I, 270)

An impossible quest, one would think. Yet as “*North of the Tweed*” unfolds, mingling the imagery of the natural world in the speaker’s memories with the imagery of the loved one—“And even your een, beloved, and your hair / Are like the barley and the sea and Heaven” (I, 270);

And hoo should I forget the Langfall  
On mornings when the hines were ripe but een  
Ahint the glintin’ leafs were brichter still  
Than sunned dew on them, lips reider than the fruit,  
And I filled baith my basket and my hert  
Mony and mony a time? (I, 271)

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<sup>12</sup>John Keats, “Ode to Psyche,” *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London, 1966), p. 121.

So the poet finds that nature and love have between them released him from  
 “A’ sense o’ livin’ under set conditions,” making him once again

A seven-whistler in Kintyre, or yon broon hill  
 That’s barren save for fower pale violets on  
 A South-leanin’ bank. (I, 270)

Significantly, the poem’s final words state his intention to resume his poetic role: “Noo I’ll pipe instead—what tune’ll you hae?— / On Rudha nam Marbh” (I, 271), the aptly named Point of the Dead.

I find “*North of the Tweed*” one of MacDiarmid’s finest lyrical nature poems, rooted in that conjunction of female Muse and the natural world, personal vision and national celebration which is the tradition he inherited from Burns, a poem which suggests also a coming together of his Borders roots and Celtic aspirations through its imagery of the varied Scottish landscape; and a poem which succeeds in keeping the lyrical voice while extending the tight form of his early Scots lyrics to the slower, more meditative pace of blank verse form. Like the more overt Celtic-theme poems in *Cenchrastus* and the vision of the silken leddy in *A Drunk Man*, like the love songs of Burns, this too has been a poem of desire for what is beyond the earthly, but it is a desire which, in keeping with the recognition of the beauty in everyday things which is a major element in MacDiarmid’s poetry, has been—at least temporarily—satisfied and given expression through the imagery of a loving human relationship and of the natural world as found in the poet’s country, Scotland.

When I first started out on this exploration of the love lyric, I intended to move beyond Burns and MacDiarmid to the contemporary situation to see whether one could still find in an age of greater sexual equality, urbanization and more ambivalent local and international alliances this particular conjunction of woman and nature in a transcendent poetry of desire. I realized, however, that, to borrow from MacDiarmid’s *Drunk Man*, this would be like trying to put “An ocean in a mutchkin” (half bottle; I, 87) and that a detailed investigation would have to wait until another opportunity. For the moment the case must rest on Burns and MacDiarmid and their transformations of the love lyric and its national context.

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