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Margery McCulloch

The Undeservedly Broukit Bairn:
Hugh MacDiarmid's *To Circumjack Cencrastus*



To Circumjack Cencrastus is one of the most neglected of Hugh MacDiarmid's significant works. Lacking the virtuosity and stylistic and conceptual unity of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and without the controversial quality which keeps *In Memoriam James Joyce* in the public eye, it has for many years been largely ignored in discussions of MacDiarmid's poetry, labelled a failure by critics and by its poet himself, who has acknowledged to the present writer, as to others in the past, that he "should have done better" in the work.

Yet *Cencrastus* is a pivotal poem in MacDiarmid's development and is of significance both for the understanding of the evolution of his work and for the contribution it makes to the history of the fragmented Scottish poetry tradition. It also contains much fine verse.

This short study is an attempt to contribute both to the ending of the critical neglect of *Cencrastus* and to a wider understanding of the work.

Cencrastus was published in October 1930, four years after *A Drunk Man*. In many ways it is a sequel to the earlier poem and its opening suggests that it is beginning at a point not far distant from where the Drunk Man's metaphysical wanderings so abruptly ended. But while *A Drunk Man* opens with the easy conversational tone and rhythms which immediately draw the

reader into the circle of its protagonist and his drinking companions, thus rooting its philosophical nature firmly in the poet's realization of the Scottish environment, in *Cenrastus* poet and reader are instantly grappling with the philosophical attempt to isolate some fundamental pattern in the universe. As the poem continues, its Scottish context is realized with a force equal to that of *A Drunk Man*; yet the contrast in their openings is only one of a number of important differences of a formal nature which contribute to the failure of *Cenrastus* to make the initial impact of *A Drunk Man* and to achieve the integrated unity of the earlier poem. Both poems contain lyric, satirical and meditative passages, but while the form and imagery of *A Drunk Man* binds these into a greater whole, *Cenrastus* remains to a large extent, and in spite of the amount of very fine poetry in the work, a collection of poems on related themes which taken together express the poet's contradictory response to living experience.

The structural problem of *Cenrastus* is exacerbated by the thematic and stylistic contrast of the poems which immediately follow the philosophical opening section. These poems deal with the loss of Scotland's identity as a nation and the tragic cultural effects of this loss. Their form is either lyric or satire, or as in the case of "Lourd on my hert," a mixture of both. They have an immediate identity of theme and style which the meditative sections take longer to develop, which thus confirms them in the reader's mind as separate entities. Their tragic theme has a potency which early establishes its hold over the reader. In consequence, the Scottish theme, instead of being part of the larger exploration of material and transcendental reality as in *A Drunk Man*, acquires a life of its own which in the end overwhelms the more universal *Cenrastus* theme of the poem and destroys the equilibrium between its parts.

This imbalance is not helped by the poet's subjective treatment of his themes and his failure to find a sufficiently realized symbol to give form to the abstract nature of his quest. In *A Drunk Man* MacDiarmid found a persona which in its own vernacular way was as relevant to the Scotland of his day as Dante's more formal symbolic device of a journey through hell, purgatory and paradise was to medieval Europe. It gave him both a recognizable public voice and the licence for his idiosyncratic, antiszygal juxtapositioning of thought and image. Similarly, the symbolism of the poem, although constantly in flux, has a sufficiently stable core of meaning to withstand its shifting allusiveness. *Cenrastus* is less fortunate in both respects. The protagonist of the poem is the poet himself, but unlike, for example, the similarly sub-

jective analysis of the growth of a poet's mind in a poem such as Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the *Cencrastus* poet has to deal with a conflict situation both in his own mind and in his society. As in *A Drunk Man*, his urgent need is for symbols which will help objectify and structure his responses to his situation and embody his metaphysical search. The Cencrastus snake symbol as used by MacDiarmid is not able fully to supply this need. Like the symbols in *A Drunk Man*, it is protean and allusive, but unlike them its essential core of meaning is not sufficiently realized and consistent. Just as the response to experience in *Cencrastus* is frequently a too private one, stemming from the frustrations of an artist working in an indifferent, anti-intellectual environment, so the key to the symbolism at any given point in the poem is often confined to the poet's mind.

There are three principal themes in the poem: the exploration of material and transcendental reality through the symbol of the serpent; the theme of Scotland's lost identity and cultural heritage; and that preoccupation with the role of the artist which underlies much of MacDiarmid's poetry. Although these themes can be isolated in theory, in practice they frequently merge with each other. This is especially so with the theme of the artist, which can be most satisfactorily discussed in relation to the other themes: the theme of Scotland's lost cultural heritage is the story of the struggle of an artist to find his own artistic identity in a situation where there is neither a living tradition nor a sympathetic environment to nourish him; the philosophical pursuit of ultimate reality frequently merges with the artist's search for its equivalent in his work. And while the *symbol* of the curly snake may be absent for long stretches of the work, the *spirit* of Cencrastus permeates the whole, both positively and by the poet's evocation of its loss.

The Cencrastus Theme

It does not seem to me to be useful to attempt to relate MacDiarmid's pursuit of Cencrastus too closely to any particular philosophical scheme. As we see throughout his work, the poet was sensitive to the intellectual influences of his own time as he was aware also of the traditions of his Scottish past, and he was eclectic in the gathering of ideas which interested him. Although we can at various points in *Cencrastus* find affinities with the theories of philosophers such as Bergson, Nietzsche and Hegel, in the end the philosophy is the creative synthesis of the artist, not the logical scheme of the metaphysician. Similarly, his use of the serpent symbol-

ism is not fixed. Jamieson's *Dictionary of the Scottish Language* would appear to have contributed the name "Cencrastus" as it provided much of the vocabulary for the Scots lyrics and *A Drunk Man*, but its relevance ends with the name.¹ The serpent, coiled tail in mouth, is the Celtic symbol of wisdom and eternity and the poet himself described Cencrastus as "the snake symbolizing the fundamental pattern of the universe."² Perhaps the most relevant aids to the understanding of Mac-Diarmid's snake symbolism are the early "Sea-Serpent" poem from *Penny Wheep* (1926) and the serpent symbolism of *A Drunk Man*, in both of which the serpent appears as the vital creative life-force in the universe and in man, and where, as in *Cencrastus*, the absence as well as the presence of this essential life is explored.

Centrastus is pursued transcendently and materially in the poem. There is no progression in the quest, the poet's mood alternating between optimism and despair as he glimpses then loses sight of the serpent. The lengthy opening section is a microcosm of the poem as a whole. It expresses both his optimism and his pessimism and introduces most of the ways through which he believes the Cencrastus spirit may be apprehended. Some indication of the potential power this spirit may have over man is indicated by "and Man/ Shudders to see you slippin' into place" (*CP*, p. 181),³ where the fear of human being for physical snake suggests man's parallel fear of the Cencrastus spirit which may lead him out of his known world into a freedom which is inconceivable to man.

One significant way in which man may approach Cencrastus is through the work of the artist, a motif which appears almost immediately in the opening section of the poem. The insight that "the poet's hame is in the serpent's mooth" (*CP*, p. 186) is given a tangible presence by the imagery from the world of everyday human experience in which it is embodied:

Poets in throes o' composition whiles
 See you as fishermen in favourite pools
 May see a muckle fish they canna catch
 Clood-like beneath the glitterin' fry they can.
 (*CP*, p. 181)

The search for the elusive serpent is paralleled in the poet's attempt to harness his inspiration, and as in the wider application of the theme, he alternates between optimism and despair. The upsurging rhythms of

Can you be in their harns and no' the pool
 Yet wi' a sudden bowspring on the air

Ootshine the sun?

are immediately contradicted by the poet's awareness of his defeats:

The dooble tongue has spoken and been heard.
 What poet has repeated ocht it said?
 (CP, p. 182)

MacDiarmid's search has some affinities with the themes of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Both poets seek to catch hold of a moment out of time and both realize that only through time is time conquered. Similarly, both are occupied with the difficulties of language and expression. Yet in spite of these relationships, there is a difference of emphasis in the work of each poet. MacDiarmid was less of a conscious craftsman than was Eliot, and although the struggle to attain expression through words is for both poets related to the catching of the experience, with the Scottish writer one feels that the emphasis is on the insight rather than on its precise verbal form. Both explore ways of affirmation and negation in their search, but MacDiarmid on the whole makes only a token acknowledgement of the negative way. His nature is not to withdraw but to fight, and his characteristic exploration of ultimate reality through the affirmation of everyday life is given force by the qualities of the Scots language which is still to a considerable extent the medium of *Cencrastus*. The following passage shows MacDiarmid plundering Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" for his imagery of withdrawal and giving a negative colouring to Eliot's "And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices/ In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices":

Even as youth's blindness hauds the body dear
 And only slowly, slowly, year by year,
 The dark thins and the een o' love grow clear,
 My hert'll stiffen and rejoice nae mair
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea-voices,
 Whaup's cry or goose's gansel o' mankind

 but haud
 The warld a photo o' me as a loon
 I canna mind o' haen been at a'
 A state I put awa' wi' spung-taed pranks,
 Wi' nae precociousness.
 (CP, pp. 259-60)

Yet despite the slow rhythms and mood of withdrawal in the

opening lines, both the "whaup's cry" and "goose's gansel," together with the final "photo" image, have all the vigour of MacDiarmid's materialism and the sturdiness of his Scots idiom.

A preoccupation with the work of the artist continues throughout the poem. In the late section entitled "North of the Tweed" there is conflict in the poet's mind between his sensuous awareness of nature's revitalizing power and his intellectual impatience with the difficulty of catching hold of a moment out of time by such temporal means. The fine poem belies its poet's fears. MacDiarmid's ability to give his insights a concrete presence through his use of imagery derived from ordinary, everyday living is paralleled by his ability to use nature as a means of communicating metaphysical insights through the senses. This is both an attribute of the Scottish tradition and also what he himself considered an inheritance from his childhood in the Scottish Borders.⁴ In our justifiable concern over the lack of a vital contemporary literature which relates to urban, industrial Scottish life, it is perhaps easy to forget that Scotland is a country where the natural countryside and sea-coast is still the environment of many of its people, and no less than the urban can be a vital means of exploring human existence. MacDiarmid has restored to Scottish nature poetry the metaphysical dimension which was absent in Burns and his imitators. Here, in "North of the Tweed" his evocation of his own apprehension of moments out of time is sufficiently sensuous and precise to enable the reader to share in his experience. And gradually his own insistence that no natural metaphor can capture Cencrastus is silenced:

Thinkna' that I'm ungratefu', wi' nae mind
 O' Deirdre and the fauld o' sunbeams yet,
 Or canna find on bracken slopes abune the bog
 The orchis smellin' like cherry-pie;
 Or that the sun's blade cuttin' straightly through
 A cloudy sea fails wi' my cloudy hert,
 Releasin' it frae self-disgust until I tine
 A' sense o' livin' under set conditions
 And live in an unconditioned space o' time
 Perfect in ilka pulse and impulse, and aince mair
 A seven whistler in Kintyre, or yon broon hill
 That's barren save for fower pale violets on
 A South-leanin' bank.

(CP, p. 270)

Nature, man and his vision of Cencrastus are seen to be ulti-

mately part of the same whole.

There is a similar metaphysical use of nature imagery throughout *Cencrastus*. The wild burn that struggles to win free in "Shaddows that feed on the licht" from the opening section of the poem is a symbol of the racial experience within us. It is one with the river of Neil M. Gunn's *Highland River* and the Esk to which MacDiarmid returned in his exploration of the sources of his creative inspiration in the *Clann Albann* poetry which followed *Cencrastus*. More precisely, in *Cencrastus* the wild burn held fast in the clutch of dark roots symbolizes the poet's imprisoned creativity, prevented from running free by the accidents of the past, by the tortuous roots of the Scottish tradition.

Another source of imagery in the pursuit of Cencrastus, as in *A Drunk Man*, is the Scottish Kirk. Like Burns before him, MacDiarmid exploits to the full the evocative power of the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. In the pursuit of Cencrastus "the only road is endless" (*CP*, p. 267) and the poet gives the insight force by the familiarity of the biblical reference in which it is embodied:

The praise o' you is no' for ony man
Wha seeks to big Jerusalem onywhaur
And be at ease, for he's nae suner there
Than roond its wa's your fatal music dirls
And doon they coup like Jericho's again.

(*CP*, p. 183)

His quarrel with his fellow-men--and especially with his fellow-Scots--is that by refusing to allow themselves to think freely and without prejudice they are postponing, if not destroying, the possibility of man realizing his potentiality of being. Even Christ is not immune from the poet's censure. Christ in his own life caught the spirit of Cencrastus, but he denied true life to his followers when he asked them to believe in him, not in the potentiality within themselves: "He should ha' socht/ Faith in thensel's like his--no' faith in him" (*CP*, p. 182). Christ's denial of the true spirit of life to his followers is paralleled in man's falsification of the idea of God--"The immortal serpent wa'd up in life/ As God in the thochts o' men" (*CP*, p. 244)--and this symbolic idea that man has falsified and ossified the idea of God is used throughout *Cencrastus* to express the poet's frustration both at his fellow human beings' willing conservatism and at the apparently irrevocable tethering of mankind to temporal reality. Yet as in *A Drunk Man*, his ideal is not to escape finally from the temporal, but to introduce into human life the qualities of

the autonomous life-force of the universe. At times his apprehension of the gulf between what is and what he is seeking overwhelms him and his despair flows out, as in the following passage, in an idiom peculiarly Scottish which recaptures the Drunk Man's sudden horrified insight into his own and mankind's true condition:

And aye the veil is rent and a' I see
 In horror-stricken blasphemy is mysel'
 As in a mirror, and owe my shoulder, Daith,
 And 'yont Daith Life again--an endless swell
 O' mountain after mountain, a faithfu' flock
 Each wi' a bawbee for the collection poke!
 (CP, p. 242)

It is at one such point of despair that "A Moment in Eternity" from the early English-language *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923) is inserted into the poem (CP, p. 276). Its mysticism provides a moment of refreshment for the *Cencrastus* poet, although stylistically it is at odds with the poem as a whole, its imagery evoking Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting of the nineteenth century. Only what Kenneth Buthlay in his study of MacDiarmid calls an "incandescence of *mind* at the centre of it" helps this interpolation to make a relevant contribution to the thought-conscious *Cencrastus*.⁵

The poem constantly returns to the idea of open, unprejudiced thought. "The beaten track is *beaten* frae the stert" (CP, p. 282), yet man's tragedy is that he cannot conceive of true freedom. As the Christians have diminished the idea of God by giving it human definition, so the attempt to define freedom results in its dilution and distortion: "Freedom is *inconceivable*. The word/ Betrays the cause" (CP, p. 185). It is not some absolute of truth which the *Cencrastus* poet seeks, but the "pooer to think"; to re-assess, to change, to be inconsistent if necessary. For him *Cencrastus* is "the insatiable thocht, the beautiful violent will,/ The restless spirit of Man, the theme o' my sang" (CP, p. 285). Within this belief in freedom is contained the utopian faith that man can ultimately shape his own destiny:

Man's in the makin' but henceforth maun mak' himsel'.
 Nature has led him sae faur, up frae the slime
 Gi'en him body and brain--and noo it's for him
 To mak' or mar this maikless torso.
 (CP, p. 285)

This faith in the potentiality within man and the insistence

that in order to release it man must himself take hold of his life, is a theme which animates MacDiarmid's work from *A Drunk Man* to *In Memoriam James Joyce*. It is closely related to his emphasis on identity, the need "to be yoursel'." Without self-realization one cannot contribute to human evolution. As D.H. Lawrence saw too, we can only make "the great onslaught on to the outside lie, the inside lie being settled. And that is freedom and the fight for freedom."⁶ The tragedy of MacDiarmid's country, Scotland, is that by acquiescing in the loss of her distinctive identity, by refusing to settle "the inside lie," she is no longer a vital part of the fundamental pattern of the universe, and the poems relating to this Scottish theme explore fully the ramifications of her loss. It is this "to be yoursel'" motif, too, which gives point to the inclusion of the adaptation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Requiem: Für eine Freundin" (*CP*, p. 197), which otherwise stands somewhat uncomfortably in the midst of the satiric depiction of Scotland. This adaptation has on occasion been singled out as one of the best things in *Cencrastus*, but, like "A Moment in Eternity," it is stylistically divorced from the rest of the work and its inclusion is justified by content rather than by style. Both Rilke and MacDiarmid believed in the necessity of self-realization in life and in art, and for the German poet the Freundin Paula's death in childbirth--*der umeigne Tod*--was a falsification of her previous life as autonomous artist. His fear of being similarly diverted from his single-minded devotion to his work is given force by the very real evocation in *Cencrastus* of the Scottish poet's struggle to maintain his artistic equilibrium in the face of a hostile society.

MacDiarmid's final exploration of his Cencrastus theme is in the long meditative section, "The Unconscious Goal of History" which also brings *Cencrastus* as a whole to an end. In itself this is a satisfactory poem, but it is not a relevant final expression of the Cencrastus theme. The suggestion that men are the unconscious tools of the historical process contradicts the emphasis throughout *Cencrastus* on the need for free, creative thought, and the insistence that it is up to man himself to realize the potentiality within him. MacDiarmid himself seems to have recognized this contradiction and he subsequently qualifies the "unconscious goal" motif with the prophetic faith that men will in the end

. wauk to the possibility
 O' workin' oot and makin' their destiny
 In fu' consciousness
 (*CP*, p. 287)

In addition, the second half of this poem introduces--at this late stage--two new symbols, the sea and another snake which, like the "unconscious goal" motif, conflicts with much of what we have already learned of Cencrastus. One feels that the addition of the poem was an afterthought, and that it was not composed with the dominant themes of *Cencrastus* in mind. It does not make a relevant contribution to the poem as even "A Moment in Eternity" and Rilke's "Requiem," for all their stylistic incongruity, do.

On the other hand, "The Unconscious Goal of History" does provide an early example of a working method which MacDiarmid increasingly employed in his later English-language poetry, most noticeably in *In Memoriam James Joyce*. Roderick Watson, in an unpublished thesis on MacDiarmid's poetry, first drew attention to the relationship between "The Unconscious Goal of History" and a pseudonymous essay by one "Filioque" entitled "The Great Sea-Serpent" and published in *The New Age* of 11 March 1926. A comparison of essay and poem shows that "The Unconscious Goal of History" has been based very closely in parts on "The Great Sea-Serpent," many of its phrases having been taken directly from the essay, suffering only a sea-change into Scots where necessary. "Filioque" was not, however, as Dr. Watson implied, MacDiarmid himself. The poet frequently used pseudonyms in his prose writing, but the poetic style of the "Sea-Serpent" essay bears no relationship to his vigorous, argumentative and syntactically complex essay and journalistic prose medium. It is, however, exactly the kind of poetic prose material--notable for its rhythmic cadences and imaginative use of language and idea--which he later borrowed for use in, for example, the short poem "Perfect" and, especially, for use in many extended passages in *In Memoriam James Joyce*. Thus, although "The Unconscious Goal" poem does not make a fitting concluding statement of the Cencrastus theme, it does contribute to the pivotal nature of *Cencrastus* by pointing forward through its working method to MacDiarmid's later literary practices.⁷

More relevant to the pursuit of Cencrastus is the lyric which is interpolated just before the closing lines of "The Unconscious Goal of History." "My love is to the light of lights" is a vision poem in which the spirit which the poet seeks to capture is personified as a woman. The lyric relates to the vision of the Silken Leddy in *A Drunk Man* and to the *Cencrastus aisling* "Aodhagán Ó Rathaille sang this sang," in which, like his Irish counterpart, the poet meets the "Brightness o' Brightness" in a lonely glen. Like Keats's Psyche, whose sanctuary was dressed "with the wreath'd trellis of a working brain," MacDiarmid's goddess has her home in the poet's

mind--"My love she is the hardest thocht/ That ony brain can ha'e" (*CP*, p. 291)--thus emphasizing the importance the poet attaches to thought in his search. This vision poem is an appropriate final expression of the Cencrastus theme.

The Scottish Theme

As discussed earlier, the Scottish theme is not in essence divorced from the wider Cencrastus theme. Scotland's sterility is part of the self-suppression of the life-giving spirit by mankind which "mappiemou'd...never bites aff mair than it can--sook" (*CP*, p. 186), but the potency of the theme's expression in the exploration of the lost Scottish identity results in that motif having its own imaginative life. This potency derives also from the theme of the poet's relationship to his society, for in *Cencrastus* the problems of the artist force themselves on the reader, both conceptually and concretely through the poetic expression, and contribute one piece of irrefutable evidence as to the cultural effects of the loss of nationhood.

Although it was foreshadowed in the lyric "Shaddows that feed on the licht," this subversive Scottish theme is first explicitly expressed in "The Mavis of Pabal" which laments the loss of a living cultural tradition and the consequences of this loss for the artist:

For poetry's no' made in a lifetime
And I lack a livin' past;
I stand on the tap o' the hill
- But the miracle canna last!
(*CP*, p. 192)

It is this vital connection between poet and past which Eliot considered so essential in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." And this is the Scottish poet's tragedy: keenly alive to the preoccupations and ideas of his own time, he is cut off by historical accidents from the past which should have provided him with the tradition within which to express his awareness. He is

A pool cut aff frae the sea,
A tree without roots that stands
On the ground unsteadily.
(*CP*, p. 191)

Will and determination on his part cannot replace the succour which his country should supply.

One of MacDiarmid's more positive approaches to the problems of cultural loss in *Cencrastus* is through what he calls the Gaelic Idea. His success in resuscitating Lallans in his early Scots lyrics and in *A Drunk Man* at times obscures the fact that the Scottish Renaissance Movement was concerned with the revitalization of *all* Scottish life, not only with that part which related to the Lowland Scots culture. MacDiarmid came increasingly to appreciate the extent of the loss of the Gaelic heritage and he believed that its recovery would release the Scottish psyche in a way that Lowland Scots with its close relationship to English could not do. His prose writings of the late twenties and the thirties frequently return to the theme of Gaelic Scotland. As an intellectual concept, he saw the Gaelic Idea as a parallel to Dostoyevsky's Russian Idea, the importance of which to MacDiarmid lay in its dynamic potential and which was "in no way devalued by the difference of the actual happenings in Russia from any Dostoyevsky dreamed or desired."⁸ In addition, he believed the recovery of the Gaelic tradition to be a necessary balance to the emergence of proletarian Russia which threatened to upset the traditional oppositions of North and South in European culture, and he saw the Celtic heritage as having affinities with Eastern culture, an interest in which his later poetry increasingly displayed.

Thus from the first MacDiarmid's Gaelic Idea was an outward-looking concept which had nothing to do with "the activities of An Comunn Gaedhealach, no relationship whatever with the Celtic Twilight."⁹ In contrast to his Edinburgh literati counterparts of the eighteenth century, his sturdier artistic *nous* did not allow him to be misled by a false Ossian. In addition to his intuition of the need for a reunion of Scottish cultural elements and his writing to that end, in the periodicals and journals which he edited he always encouraged the best Gaelic writers of the time.

Yet however much he perceived the importance of the Gaelic past, the poems in *Cencrastus* show that what Neil M. Gunn called "getting the Gaelic aristocratic idea into Lallans harness"¹⁰ was no easy task. One realizes--perhaps with some surprise--how great a debt MacDiarmid's use of Scots owes to the eighteenth century vernacular tradition, a debt which can be disguised by the unfamiliarity of the Scots vocabulary in the lyrics, the "metaphysical" use of that vocabulary in *A Drunk Man* and the intellectual content of his discursive poems in Scots. In later Gaelic-theme poetry, poems such as "Lament for the Great Music," "Direadh III," "Island Funeral," MacDiarmid wrote successfully in English, but here in *Cencrastus* there is often an unhappy alliance between the almost tragic

starkness of the theme and the attempt to express it in vernacular Scots. He finds difficulty also with his praise of Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair: "I saw a wee clood that awa doon/ In Glen Guisachan lay" (*CP*, p. 209) is too couthy to be the harbinger of the great eighteenth-century Gaelic poet. Equally unsatisfactory is his praise of MacMhaighstir by means of the Scottish reductive idiom. Like Burns and Fergusson, MacDiarmid is expert in the use of this idiom for satiric purposes, but it is unusual to find him employing it as a method of praise, especially when this praise is at the expense of at least two literary figures, Herman Melville and Paul Valéry, who we know have influenced him and whom he admired. Douglas Sealy points out in the essay "Hugh MacDiarmid and Gaelic Literature"¹¹ that MacDiarmid is on no less unsteady ground when he lists MacMhaighstir's companions in poetry, and that the passages dealing with Gaelic literature in *Cenocrastus* are based on a too uncritical reading of Aodh de Blacam's *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*. Indeed, throughout these Gaelic sections one finds an uncritical sentimentality in the poet's attitude to his subject which reminds one of his own censure of the novels of Neil M. Gunn ("I think the real criticism of Gunn's work as a whole is that he perpetuates the myth of Highland and Island spiritual superiority"),¹² and which is uncharacteristic of MacDiarmid's work as a whole.

It is ironic that MacDiarmid, who campaigned so vociferously, and in his own use of Scots in the lyrics, *A Drunk Man*, and many later poems, so successfully, for the supplanting of the spirit of Burns by that of Dunbar, should in *Cenocrastus* exhibit the eighteenth-century malady in his attempts to unite the Gaelic and Lowland Scots traditions. Yet it seems to me that here in *Cenocrastus*, as nowhere else in his poetry, the reader is brought to make connections with the cultural insecurity of Burns. The poet himself seems to recognize this: his lament in "Aodhagán Ó Rathaille sang this sang" is

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

(*CP*, p. 225)

His tragedy is that of the poet who has lost his tradition, who is able to appreciate the extent of the loss and the need for recovery, and who is yet unable to effect that recovery because of the very nature of the original loss:

O wad at least my yokel words
 Some Gaelic strain had kept.
 (CP, p. 225)

The Gaelic theme is only one aspect of the poet's concern with his country in *Cencrastus*. The more general theme of Scottish sterility and lost identity is expressed throughout the poem in lyric and satirical passages. The irony of "El Rey de Escocia no es nada" (CP, p. 227) where each of the heroes of Scottish history is shown to have had little genuine connection with Scotland, has its complement in "Oor four Universities" (CP, p. 203) where the universities' concern seems to be with all learning except that which relates to Scotland. In a review of *Cencrastus* in 1931,¹³ Professor Denis Saurat objected to this attack on the universities; as he did also to MacDiarmid's satirical target, "the stupid folk" in the lyric "Lourd on my hert." In both instances Professor Saurat would seem to have missed the deeper purpose of MacDiarmid's satire, and in the lyric perhaps did not recognize its affinities with its Scottish tradition. *Cencrastus* demonstrates to those who wish to listen the tragedy of a lost culture, and a country's universities cannot escape their share of the communal responsibility for this. "Lourd on my hert," in its positive use of the poetic convention of the seasons and in its combination of lyricism and satire, is in a tradition of Scots poetry which goes back to the Makars. In MacDiarmid's poem the Scottish winter weather is both a correlative for the poet's mood of grief as he contemplates his country's condition and a symbol of the deadness which lies over Scotland. The short ironic "And no' for guid!"--itself a rhetorical feature of the Scottish tradition--which follows the lyric beauty of the opening lament foreshadows the move into more explicit satire in the second stanza where we find the "stupid folk" who seemed to Professor Saurat such unworthy targets for the poet's pen, but whom, "Diffusin' their dullness roon and roon/ Like soot," the poet saw as being responsible for keeping "the sunlicht oot" of his country's life (CP, pp. 204-5).

And this dullness is surely one of the dominant preoccupations of the *Cencrastus* poem:

For the eternal evil's no'
 Tragedy, but the absence o't,
 No senseless extremes but the sordid mean,
 No poer but a pooerless lot,
 No' the sharp and deep, but the dull and flat,
 No' Hell but no' ha'en even that,

And the triviality o' a'
 But the haill o' human thocht.
 (CP, p. 221)

As in the discussion of the Gaelic-theme poems, one returns to the eighteenth century for comparison, this time to Augustan England and Alexander Pope and a similar insight that man's tragedy is often to be found in his folly and triviality, not, as might be expected, in his deliberate pursuit of evil. The reign of Dullness in *The Dunciad* is no less horrifying because of the foolishness at its heart and the wit which gives it poetic form. Similarly, Pope's *Moral Essays* explore themes of the potentiality and the folly within mankind which bear a relationship to MacDiarmid's preoccupations. MacDiarmid's

Progress? There is nae progress; nor sall be,
 The cleverest men aye find oot again
 For foolish mobs that follow to forget
 (CP, p. 243)

finds a parallel in Pope's "Epistle to Burlington." Because of the eighteenth century belief in a rational, ordered universe, Pope was able to absorb the paradox of folly and creativity in mankind into the greater whole. There is no such consolation for the twentieth century poet concerned with social and philosophical problems.

Although Professor Saurat's examples of unworthy objects of satirical attack were mischosen, he was right to detect petty satire in *Cencrastus*. There are a number of satirical passages (some of these in a late section of the poem containing "sangs...of true Scottish pride" (CP, p. 261) which ironically includes some in the English Romantic style) which deal with local contemporary Scottish figures and which add nothing at all to the poem in an artistic sense. The problem with MacDiarmid's direct, subjective approach to his themes is that, without satisfactory externalizing machinery, the frustrations peculiar to the artist can become confused with those which have a more universal significance. I think this accounts for a number of examples throughout his work as a whole where he has been accused of shallow thinking or inconsistency. In *Cencrastus* we see the problem exacerbated by the conditions peculiar to the Scottish cultural situation and the effect these had on a poet struggling to find his own artistic identity, who yet found himself emotionally bound to the psyche of his indifferent country:

. Whiles
 I look at Scotland and dumfounded see't
 A muckle clod split off frae ither life,
 Shapeless, uncanny, unendurable clod
 Held in an endless nightmare (like a foetus
 Catcht up in a clood) while a voice
 Yowls in my lug: 'You'll find nae way oot.
 Its spell is no' to brak.'

(CP, p. 275)

These artistic problems are present to a greater or lesser degree throughout *Cencrastus* which in the course of its development seems inadvertently to have become an allegory of the growth of a Scottish poet's mind. But there are also many passages in the poem where the poet has triumphed over his environmental frustrations and has used these in a way similar to Pope's satiric use of social behaviour in the *Moral Essays*, which results in some very fine poetry. Much of this poetry is to be found in the long section "Frae Anither Window in Thrums" (CP, pp. 230ff), the reference in the title being to the novel *A Window in Thrums* by J.M. Barrie, in which the principal character is trapped in her home by illness and her contact with the outside world limited to what she can see from her cottage window. The poet in *Cencrastus* is similarly trapped by the demands of his occupation as a journalist, but the picture of the world reflected in *his* window is very different from the synthetic and sentimentalized Scotland of Barrie.

The immediacy and rhythmic control of the opening lines of the "Thrums" section are arresting in a way similar to the opening of *A Drunk Man*. The syncopated rhythmic linking of the first and second lines--"Here in the hauf licht waitin' till the clock/ Chops..." (CP, p. 230)--gives form to the poet/journalist's waiting and the final release of the striking hour, while the flowing and ebbing of the subsequent lines patterns his apprehension of his trapped situation and his loss of artistic vitality. The poet's eyes are "stelled" and *Cencrastus* itself at this point seems "a serpent faded to a shadow." Yet the darkened, reflective window draws out the poet's thoughts in poetry which contradicts his pessimistic estimation of his situation. His strength lies in his refusal to capitulate to the Thrums ethic. His insistence that, as he had earlier proclaimed, "Art canna gang back to ignorance o' itsel', Tine ocht that consciousness has won for it" (CP, p. 196) has the tang of Pope's similar impatience with his fellows in its closing couplet:

For if it's no' by thocht that Poetry's wrocht
 It's no' by want o' thocht
 The verse that flatters ignorance maun seem
 To ignorant folk supreme
 Sin' nane can read the verse that disna
 The dammed thing bides as if it isna!
 (CP, p. 232)

In contrast to the earlier Gaelic-theme poems, the poetry in this "Thrums" section exhibits MacDiarmid's ability to embrace a wide range of registers and references--including a quotation from Mallarmé's "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe"--within his Scots-English without stylistic incongruity. The appearance of the boss releases a flood of satiric poetry, comic yet pointed in its implications, catching with immediacy the tones and aura of the canny Scottish newspaper proprietor, self-satisfied and unaware of the need for any intellectual or spiritual dimension in life. MacDiarmid's answering curses remind one fleetingly of Burns's satire, but a truer analogy is with Pope. Timon's villa may be grander than the "new hoose" of MacDiarmid's boss, but the owners are equally pre-tentious and unthinking, concerned only with what will exhibit their new-found riches. And in the work of both poets, beyond the satirizing of the ignorant and self-satisfied, is the ideal of what might be. In spite of differences in their poetic styles and philosophical beliefs, beyond the satire in both is the desire to find

That power who bids the ocean ebb and flow

 Builds life on death, on change duration founds.¹⁴

And like the English poet, MacDiarmid is master of the brief, witty, epigrammatic statement, the implications of which reverberate far beyond its bounds:

'A' complain o' want o' siller
 Nane complain o' want o' wit.'
 (CP, p. 229)

The beaten track is *beaten* frae the stert.
 (CP, p. 282)

I'm no' the kind o' poet
 That opens sales o' work....
 (CP, p. 236)

It is interesting to find the twentieth century heir to the Scottish tradition able to relate to the most imaginative of the English Augustans in a way denied to his eighteenth century Scottish counterparts.

MacDiarmid struggles heroically against his constricting environment in *Cencrastus*. In "Up to the een in debt" (*CP*, p. 252) his vision is of poet and universe alike becoming the flotsam of "the foul diurnal sea," where animal life and human rubbish are equally meaningless, a vision made more horrifying by the implicit reminder of the contrasting philosophical harmony of Wordsworth's "Lucy" poem in its closing lines. "Hokum" which immediately follows "Up to the een in debt" shows the poet regaining his equilibrium and once more pointing a mocking finger at his fellow-Scots and their need to dilute their artistic and intellectual whisky with "Hokum," something he finds it impossible to provide. Despite its humour, this poem too is a serious criticism of the relationship between artist and society, its essential theme being that the true artist's art "canna gang back to ignorance o' itsel'" (*CP*, p. 196).

Cencrastus exhibits MacDiarmid's precarious artistic situation at its rawest. Never again does his poetry bear such an obvious relationship to the problems which faced him in his struggle to continue to write. And although Scotland continued to be an important part of the motivation behind his work, *Cencrastus* is the last poem in which the poet's country is used in such an extended way, either as the subject of his satire or as a metaphor for his other preoccupations. One feels that the poet in him, as opposed to the propagandist for the Scottish Renaissance Movement, realized that his country could provide neither the succour nor the language necessary if he were to continue to attempt to write in a way commensurate with his conception of the poet's role, and that he must move on from Scots and Scotland. "Lament for the Great Music" (1934), the most protracted example of the Scottish identity theme after *Cencrastus*, has already acquired a more distanced, objective tone, its English language giving it a timeless quality in keeping with its subject. Although it laments the loss of the Gaelic heritage and the consequences of this for the Scottish artist and the Scottish people, it no longer fights against this loss, but with resignation looks outward from it. The "Lament" looks forward too to the absorption of the individual into the universal, one of the recurring themes of *In Memoriam James Joyce*, and links that poem with *Cencrastus* by its echoing and anticipation of each,¹⁵ thus providing a piece of supporting evidence for the connectedness of MacDiarmid's work as a whole and for the

pivotal significance of *Cencrastus*.

As a long poem *Cencrastus* certainly suffers in any critical comparison with *A Drunk Man*, lacking its predecessor's unity and the astonishing imaginative virtuosity which the confrontation of modernist thought and technique with the Scottish tradition produced in the earlier poem. Yet while one would not wish to ignore or minimize its defects, it is too significant a work to be so dismissively neglected as it has been in the past. This neglect has been exacerbated by the fact that until the recent publication of *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid* (1978), *Cencrastus* as a whole had been long out of print. There is a very considerable body of fine poetry in the work, and although some of this has been anthologized successfully in *More Collected Poems* (1970) and in *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology* (1972), the poems do gain in significance by being read in the context of the work as a whole. This is especially true of the meditative poems in *More Collected Poems*. And in addition to the high quality of much of its poetry, *Cencrastus* is too important a work, both for the understanding of the evolution of MacDiarmid's poetry and for the exploration of the Scottish cultural situation, to be ignored. It is an indispensable complement to any critical or historical work on the question of Scottish cultural identity.

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NOTES

¹Jamieson's *Dictionary* describes *Cencrastus* as "a serpent of a greenish colour, having its speckled belly covered with spots resembling millet seeds." Its source, "The Passage of the Pilgremer" by John Burel in James Watson's *A Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Songs* (Edinburgh, 1706), p. 21, refers to *Cencrastus* briefly as "a beist of filthy braith."

²Hugh MacDiarmid, footnote to "Man, the reality that makes all things possible, even himself" in *More Collected Poems* (London, 1970), p. 49.

³[Christopher Murray Grieve], *Hugh MacDiarmid Complete Poems 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, 2 vols. (London, 1978), p. 181. Henceforth quotations from this edition will be identified by *CP* in the text; since pagination is continuous no volume number will be given.

⁴See Hugh MacDiarmid, "Growing up in Langholm" in *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, ed. Karl Miller (London, 1970), pp. 166-7.

⁵Kenneth Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid (C.M. Grieve)* (Edinburgh and London, 1964), p. 17.

⁶D.H. Lawrence, "Pornography and Obscenity" in *Sex, Literature and Censorship: Essays by D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (London, 1955), p. 219.

⁷See "Filioque," "The Great Sea-Serpent" in *The New Age*, 11 March 1926, 223. Also Roderick Watson, "A Critical Study of the 'Cencrastus' theme in the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid," Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1971. When I queried the "Great Sea-Serpent" borrowing with him, Grieve replied that he remembered using the essay, but that "Filioque" was not one of his pseudonyms (Letter from C.M. Grieve of 12 May 1977).

⁸Hugh MacDiarmid, "The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea," in *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (London, 1969), p. 67.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁰Neil M. Gunn, quoted by Hugh MacDiarmid in "Neil Gunn and the Scottish Renaissance" in *Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer*, ed. Alexander Scott and Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh and London, 1973), p. 361.

¹¹Douglas Sealy, "Hugh MacDiarmid and Gaelic Literature," in *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Critical Survey*, ed. Duncan Glen (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 175.

¹²*Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer*, p. 367.

¹³Dennis Saurat, Review of *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, in *The Modern Scot*, vol. 1, no. 4 (January 1931), 64-5.

¹⁴Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*, "Epistle to Lord Bathurst," lines 164-167.

¹⁵Compare "You say it isna lawfu'" in *Cencrastus* (CP, pp. 217-8) with the passage in "Lament for the Great Music" (CP, p. 473), the latter being an English-language rendering of the former. In addition both anticipate MacDiarmid's preoccupa-

tion in *In Memoriam James Joyce* with what the poet called in that poem "the space-time network." (*CP*, p. 794). "Amid the desolation" in the "Lament" (*CP*, p. 474) is both a quotation from *Cencrastus* (*CP*, p. 281) and a potential epigraph for the themes of *In Memoriam James Joyce*.