

1984

## Reflections on Hugh MacDiarmid

Wang Zuoliang

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Zuoliang, Wang (1984) "Reflections on Hugh MacDiarmid," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol19/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Wang Zuoliang*

## Reflections on Hugh MacDiarmid



Hugh MacDiarmid is the pen name of Christopher Murray Grieve who came from the border between Scotland and England. Among his ancestors were tough men who sometimes committed robbery across the border; some were weavers of Scottish cloth. He proudly declared in one of his poems:

Reivers to weavers and to me. Weird way!  
Yet in the last analysis I've sprung  
Frae battles, mair than ballads...<sup>1</sup>

To many readers and critics MacDiarmid's most moving poems are those of his early years. About 1925 he and several of his friends initiated the "Scottish Literary Renaissance" movement, and he himself began to write poetry. During these years he wrote mainly lyrical poetry in a peculiar Scottish dialect called Lallans. Even today many people still enjoy these early poems such as "The Watergaw," "The Bonnie Broukit Bairn," "The Eemis Stane," "Moonlight Among the Pines" and "Empty Vessel." These are fresh, beautiful short poems, but not insubstantial ones. MacDiarmid always added something to a simple scene, to enlarge and deepen its significance.

In "Empty Vessel," for instance, the poet describes a country woman's agony upon losing her baby. She is driven insane, singing to her dead baby. The four-line ballad form

which the poet uses gives this ordinary scene a style of primitive simplicity and a sense of eternity. A transition appears in the second stanza; the country setting of the first stanza changes into a more general scene of nature. This poem is based on an eighteenth-century folksong, but MacDiarmid enlarges the woman's agony to encompass the whole universe.

"The Eemis Stane" is a meditation on time and life and death. If the world is unsteady like a stone in the wind, then life is simply capricious. Fame and history are only moss and lichen, covering everything. (This expression is novel--usually people say that fame will be buried by time, or that it will survive time and become immortal.) However, this is not a meditation in the abstract. The scene is concrete; it is surrounded in a sort of desolate atmosphere with strongly infectious power, and the primary images of stone, world, wind, sky and snow remind the reader of the universal circumstances of human existence.

"Moonlight Among the Pines" is a love poem of great momentum and tender feeling, in the fresh setting of the moon amidst the piney woods.

The poems mentioned above are only a few examples to prove that MacDiarmid's lyrics are among the most outstanding works of Scottish literature. Here a key element is the use of the Scottish dialect. MacDiarmid strongly protests the "English ascendancy" in Scottish literature, but at the same time he completely understands the predicament of Scottish poets:

Curse on my dooble life and dooble tongue,  
--Guid Scots wi' English a' hamstrung--

*Speakin' o' Scotland in English words  
As it were Beethoven chirpt by birds;*  
(I, 236)

He is dealing with Scottish subjects and they must be expressed in the Scottish idiom otherwise the content will be distorted. This conclusion is drawn from the work of many other poets as well as from his own experience. What kind of Scottish dialect should be chosen, then? Burns had provided an example for others, but the bitter experience following his death gives a warning. Writers trying to follow the Burns tradition added a too sentimental and vulgar atmosphere which made the language sound more like that of a tipsy woman. MacDiarmid, however, would go a new way. He chose mainly the dialect from the lowland district of southeast Scotland, added some Scottish words and phrases collected from a dictionary of ancient dialects [J. Jamieson, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Tongue*--Ed.]. Consolidating these, he called it

a "Lallans language," which he used as the language of his early poems. Using the Scottish dialect, absorbing the quintessence from the long tradition of Scottish country people, with the poet's modern sensibility which developed under the influence of the works of Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Rilke to correct any tendencies toward anarchism, these poems broke away from the English literary tradition and struck against the "English ascendancy" while displaying the brilliant genius of the Celts. This is the key element which makes MacDiarmid's lyrical poetry fresh and powerful.

MacDiarmid did not rest content with just repeating what he had done. The long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, published in 1926, marked a further development of his poetic skill. The work consists of several independent poems, including lyrics such as the famous "O wha's been here afore me lass" (I, 103) which made Yeats feel, when he was shown it by a friend, "amazed that there should be such writing and he unaware of it."<sup>2</sup> There are also satirical poems, comic poems, philosophical poems, extempore poems, epistles, translations, and imitations. He also wrote his first political poem, the "Ballad of the Crucified Rose" (I, 119), which praised the General Strike of May 1926. What links the whole long poem is its theme: the condition of Scotland. The thistle is the symbol of Scotland, used as the pattern of the Scottish national emblem. It appeared in many places in the poem and the man who was observing it was a drunken person. The moonlight was very gentle, and everything was seen as dream-like. The thistle underwent many marvelous changes in the drunken man's sleepy eyes. (For a while the thistle becomes an embryo in a test tube.) Each change represents one aspect of Scottish life, therefore while the drunken man was observing the changes, the poet was reflecting and criticizing the reality of Scotland. MacDiarmid's love for Scotland is beyond question. However, he is also aware of many of the weaknesses of his country. That is why his poetry is full of biting sarcasm and mockery particularly aimed at the upper-class Scottish people, castigating them for their neglect of traditions, their selfishness, conceit, apathy and self-deception. Even the withering of the red rose of the mammoth demonstration was imputed to the body of the plant itself:

The vices that defeat the dream  
Are in the plant itsel',  
And till they're purged its virtues maun  
In pain and misery dwell.  
(I, 121)

MacDiarmid knew exactly what should be a Scottish poet's duty:

A Scottish poet maun assume  
 The burden o' his people's doom,  
 And dee to brak their livin' tomb.  
 (I, 165)

What is the way of salvation for Scotland? The poet, looking far into history, which appeared to him like "a huge moving wheel," observing the reality of Europe, found that an unprecedented struggle was taking place in Russia. He hailed Dostoevsky:

I, in the thistle's land  
 As you in Russia where  
 Struggle in giant form  
 Proceeds for evermair,  
 In my sma' measure 'bood  
 Address a similar task,  
 And for a share o' your  
 Appallin' genius ask (I, 137-8)

The conclusion was clear:

--At a' events, owre Europe flaught atween  
 My whim (and mair than whim) it pleases  
 To seek the haund o' Russia as a freen'  
 In workin' oot mankind's great synthesis.  
 (I, 135)

The word "synthesis" will appear again in MacDiarmid's poems; here it represents the new political and social experiment, referring to the Soviet system of workers, peasants and soldiers. Influenced by John Maclean, the leader of Scottish workers, MacDiarmid put more and more political meaning into his lyrics; actually he was experiencing an important development in political thought. In addition to the Scottish nationalism which he espoused before, he began to cherish the ideal of communism, and he attempted to achieve a new "synthesis" between these two.

As a result, during the thirties, MacDiarmid wrote his three hymns to Lenin. The first and second were written and published in 1931 and 1932 respectively. The third hymn was written at an unknown date, but it apparently belongs to a later period to judge from its content and form and was published in 1955.

In the Soviet Union, long hymns like Mayakovsky's "Vladimir

Ilyich Lenin" had been published. By the thirties the Soviet system was well established, but the capitalist world had been shaken by an economic crisis. It was an offense to the bourgeoisie to admire the leader of the world proletariat; it needed not only political courage but also artistic courage to do so, because there would be difficulties in determining what to praise and how to praise.

MacDiarmid solved these difficult problems in his own particular way. He did it neither by shouting hollow words like "long live," nor by loading his writing with fulsome flattery. As he said in the "First Hymn to Lenin," his concern was to see "If first things first had had their richtfu' sway" (I, 298). The "first thing" is Lenin's position in human history. The poet compared Jesus with Lenin, and continued:

Christ's cited no' by chance or juist because  
You mark the greatest turnin'-point since him  
But that your main redress has lain where he's  
Least use--fulfillin' his sayin' lang kept dim  
That whasae followed him things o' like natur'  
    'Ud dae--and greater!

Certes nae ither, if no' you's dune this.  
It maatters little. What you've dune's the thing,  
No' hoo't compares, corrects, or complements  
The work of Christ that's taen owre lang to bring  
Sic a successor to keep the reference back  
    Natural to mak'.           (I, 297)

And the significance of Lenin is:

Great things, great men--but at faur greater's cost!  
If first things first had had their richtfu' sway  
Life and Thocht's misused poo'er might ha' been ane  
For a' men's benefit--as still they may  
Noo that through you this mair than elemental force  
    Has f'und a clearer course.       (I, 298)

To MacDiarmid, nothing mattered so much as the development of people, and he especially extolled Lenin because the revolution that he had led enabled for the first time human beings to give full play to their own talents, not like "the traitors ...through a' history" (I, 298) causing human beings to be bogged down forever in a state of childish ignorance.

In the "Second Hymn," MacDiarmid discussed the relation between poetry and politics. The poem attracted a good deal of attention from western critics; some said that MacDiarmid claimed to be the equal of Lenin, and that poetry must be

independent of politics. The example they cited was:

Sae here, twixt poetry and politics,  
 There's nae doot in the en'.  
 Poetry includes that and s'ud be  
 The greater poo'er amang men. (I, 326)

Some quoted the concluding lines: "Ah, Lenin, politics is bairns' play / To what this maun be!" (I, 328) to show MacDiarmid's disrespectful attitude towards politics.

What did he mean by those words? If you reread the whole poem you will find that he was full of respect for and felt very close to Lenin, therefore he felt that he could come out with what was on his mind, comrade to comrade. He showed this attitude from the beginning:

AH, Lenin, you were richt. But I'm a poet  
 (And you c'ud mak allowances for that!)  
 Aimin' at mair than you aimed at  
 Tho' yours comes first, I know it. (I, 323)

The respect that the poet felt for Lenin was fully expressed in "First Hymn" and other poems written at the same time (e.g. "The Seamless Garment," "The Skeleton of the Future"). So when he wrote the "Second Hymn" one year later he felt no necessity to repeat himself. Instead he discussed poetry in depth. MacDiarmid held high hopes for poetry:

tho' Joyce in turn  
 Is richt, and the principal question  
 About a work o' art is frae hoo deep  
 A life it springs--and syne hoo faur  
 Up frae't it has the poo'er to leap  
 (I, 323)

Judging by such criteria he found that the present situation of poetry was not satisfactory. He spoke first of his own poetry:

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

*Gin I canna win through to the man in the street,  
 The wife by the hearth,  
 A' the cleverness on earth'll no' mak' up  
 For the damnable dearth. (I, 323)*

The situation was the same for other poets. They influenced "but a fringe o' mankind in ony way" (I, 324); their topics are too cramped to attract large spirits; genuine great poetry should be "free and expansive."

Poetry, however, has good prospects, especially as it gains enlightenment from Lenin:

Poetry like politics maun cut  
The cackle and pursue real ends,  
Unerringly as Lenin, and to that  
It nature better tends.

Wi' Lenin's vision equal poet's gift  
And what unparalleled force was there!  
Nocht in a' literature wi' that  
Begins to compare.

Nae simple rhymes for silly folk  
But the haill art, as Lenin gied  
Nae Marx-without-tears to workin' men  
But the fu' course instead.

Organic constructional work,  
Practicality, and work by degrees;  
First things first; and poetry in turn  
'll be built by these. (I, 324-5)

This shows solid and concrete admiration of Lenin. How, then, can one say that the poet was joking about Lenin? MacDiarmid's style was at once lively and serious. He considered that poetry must deal with really important subjects instead of getting bogged down in trifles. Such stupid matters should be cut off like a monkey's tail! The poet must be mature, no longer naive--one may recall that this was also stated in the "First Hymn." Now Lenin had given poetry an opportunity to be fully developed. As a result of the victory in the struggle which he led, human beings could for the first time be "Freein' oor poo'rs for greater things, / And fegs there's plenty o' them" (I, 325). At such a new level, poetry could be all-encompassing, and become:

*The core o' a' activity,  
Changin't in accordance wi'  
Its inward necessity  
And mede o' integrity. (I, 328)*

Thus MacDiarmid looks forward to a new role for poetry in the future, and if you visualize what this future poetry will be,

"politics is bairns' play." MacDiarmid might be right or wrong, but he was not setting himself up as greater than Lenin. He was seeking a new "synthesis" between poetry and politics. It was precisely Lenin's October Revolution which carried human history to a new stage and so made that "synthesis" possible.

"First Hymn" and "Second Hymn" have different emphases, but they are completely consistent in spirit--in love for the revolutionary leader, in the central argument, even in key phrases (e.g. "first things first"), and both were written in Scottish dialect. In "First Hymn" each stanza consists of six lines (the shorter last line introduces a pause); in "Second Hymn" each stanza consists of four lines. These forms were chosen to suit MacDiarmid's free-flowing, lively style. The poems were not superficial and empty; in them he expounded some general principles of poetry. He wrote concretely but did not get bogged down in details; epigrams appear here and there; images are striking but not fantastic; his skillful use of rhythm takes full advantage of the subtleties of dialect. Thus these two hymns are outstanding in their artistry.

"Third Hymn to Lenin" was first published in *The Voice of Scotland* in 1955. The reason that it was mentioned as a work of a later period is that here MacDiarmid's style changes in comparison with the "First" and "Second Hymn." Scottish dialect and the short stanza disappear; this poem is characterized by free verse and standard English. Words and phrases gush out with a new tremendously eloquent momentum, revealing the poet's anxieties about the city Glasgow.

The poet introduces a seaman, then he asks rhetorically: Can a sailor know the flow of the waves as Lenin knew the flow of history? MacDiarmid then sings of Lenin:

You turned a whole world right side up, and did so  
With no dramatic gesture, no memorable word.  
*Now measure Glasgow for a like laconic overthrow!*

On days of revolutionary turning points you literally  
flourished,  
Became clairvoyant, foresaw the movement of classes,  
And the probable zig-zags of the revolution  
As if on your palm;  
Not only an analytical mind but also  
A great constructive, synthesizing mind  
Able to build up in thought the new reality  
As it must actually come  
By force of definite laws eventually,

(II, 894)

After a long passage the poet proposes:

Be with me, Lenin, reincarnate in me here,  
Fathom and solve as you did Russia erst  
This lesser maze, you greatest proletarian seer!  
(II, 895)

What was the problem that Glasgow was facing? The poet painted this scene:

A horror that might sicken your stomach even,  
The peak of the capitalist system and the trough of Hell,  
Fit testimonial to our ultra-pious race,  
A people greedy, lying, and unconscionable  
Beyond compare.--Seize on this link, spirit of Lenin,  
then  
And you must needs haul upwards to the light  
The whole base chain of the phenomena that hold  
Europe so far below levels worthy of its might!  
(II, 895)

Following this MacDiarmid described the stench of a Glasgow slum, and quoted a passage in prose from William Bolitho's (pseud. of William Bolitho Ryall) *The Cancer of Empire*:

Door after door as we knocked was opened by a shirted man, suddenly and softly as if impelled forward by the overpowering smell behind him....Once in a woman's shilling boarding-house it leapt out and took us by the throat like an evil beast. The smell of the slums, the unforgettable, the abominable smell!  
(II, 896)

Despite such slums, however, many Scots were still content to leave things as they were:

So long as we avoid all else and dwell,  
Heedless of the multiplicity of correspondences  
Behind them, on the simple data our normal senses give,  
Know what vast liberating powers these dark powers  
disengage,  
But leave the task to others and in craven safety live.  
(II, 896)

As he did with the drunk men looking at the thistle, once again MacDiarmid mercilessly castigated those apathetic people: Labour M.P.'s, idle talkers, scholars and scientists. They allow the fascists to run wild and even help to spread

their rumors. For example, MacDiarmid points to famous astronomers (e.g. Sir James Jeans) who, instead of carrying forward their research into scientific truth went back to the arms of the church. The poet shouted with rage at this situation: "This is the lie of lies--the High Treason to mankind" (II, 899).

Nor did MacDiarmid spare scholars and poets who aroused his disappointment and anger:

Michael Roberts and All Angels! Auden, Spender,  
 those bhoyos,  
 All yellow twicers: not one of them  
 With a tithe of Carlile's courage and integrity.  
 Unlike the pseudos I am *of*--not *for*--the working class  
 And like Carlile know nothing of the so-called higher  
 classes  
 Save only that they are cheats and murderers,  
 Battening like vampires on the masses. (II, 900)

A true poet, he pointed out, must be concerned with something completely different:

Our concern is human wholeness--the child-like spirit  
 Newborn every day--not, indeed, as careless of tradition  
 Nor of the lessons of the past: these it must needs  
 inherit.

But as capable of such complete assimilation and sur-  
 render,  
 So all-inclusive, unfenced-off, uncategorized, sensitive  
 and tender,

That growth is unconditioned and unwarped...  
 (II, 900-1)

In order to accomplish such a prospect, the poet again ap-  
 pealed to Lenin:

...Ah, Lenin,  
 Life and that more abundantly, thou Fire of Freedom,  
 Fire-like in your purity and heaven-seeking vehemence,  
 Yet the adjective must not suggest merely meteoric,  
 Spectacular--not the flying sparks, but the intense  
 Glowing core of your character, your large and  
 splendid stability,  
 Made you the man you were--the live heart of all  
 humanity!

Spirit of Lenin, light on this city now!

Light up this city now! (II, 901)

This concludes the "Third Hymn." In short, in this poem MacDiarmid called for the awakening of the Scottish people and he considered that the way Lenin pointed out was the only way to eradicate poverty and disease in cities like Glasgow. He adopted a Whitmanesque free verse using language closer to spoken every-day expression, with rapid shifts in diction. The entire poem was written in English, completely abandoning the Scottish dialect. This became a characteristic of his later period.

The change in style first revealed itself in the mid-thirties. The collection entitled *Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems*, published in 1935, consisted of about fifty poems. All of them, however, were written in English except "Second Hymn"; among these were several outstanding pieces such as "On the Ocean Floor," "The Storm-Cock's Song" and "Reflections in an Ironworks."

In addition to these, several short English poems are also worth mention. "The Skeleton of the Future" (from *Stony Limits*, 1943) is usually included in selections of the poet's work. In it he used the terminology of geology to describe the solidity and glitter of Lenin's coffin chamber as well as the light which was reflected from the snow outside to represent the Russian land and people, to end with "the eternal lightning of Lenin's bones" (I, 336), a line both realistic (describing the light on Lenin's remains) and symbolic (representing Lenin's undying influence on mankind); the title itself reinforces this theme.

"Of John Davidson" (from *Scots Unbound*, 1932) is another impressive poem. Every line is permeated with deep emotion, although the author unemotionally describes how he observed Davidson's lonely figure walking up to the edge of the sea, but suddenly there is "--A bullet-hole through a great scene's beauty." The serene world was violently torn apart: a talented poet, like other beautiful things, ended in a single moment. Meanwhile MacDiarmid detachedly points out the reason for the tragedy: a short-sighted view of the future, finding the wrong spiritual sustenance. Compared to this deeply felt elegy, many other modern poems that mourn the dead seem to be perfunctory, composed only for the occasion.

It was, however, the long poem that formed the main feature of MacDiarmid's work in the later period. *In Memoriam James Joyce*, published in 1955, was one of them. The poem consists of 6,000 lines, but was only a part of a much longer poem, *A*

*Vision of a World Language*, which was never completed. The content of *In Memoriam James Joyce* is complex; some parts of it are difficult to understand. At least two themes are clear: first, men must inherit and develop the whole human culture from ancient times to today (this has already been emphasized in "Second Hymn to Lenin"); secondly, a writer should bring his linguistic potential into full play as Joyce had done. MacDiarmid admired the Irish writer greatly. Many critics had frowned on the large number of new words which were created by Joyce in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, but MacDiarmid fully supported Joyce's effort because he (MacDiarmid) considered language as "the central mystery / Of the intellectual life" and thought that a writer should seek the language which best conveys his sensibility:

A language that can serve our purposes,  
 A marvellous lucidity, a quality of fiery aery light,  
 Flowing like clear water, flying like a bird,  
 Burning like a sunlit landscape.  
 Conveying with a positively Godlike assurance,  
 Swiftly, shiningly, exactly, what we want to convey.  
 (II, 822)

MacDiarmid considered that the attempt at originality which he and Joyce were making was significant:

That is what adventuring in dictionaries means,  
 All the abysses and altitudes of the mind of man,  
 Every test and trial of the spirit,  
 Among the débris of all past literature  
 And raw material of all the literature to be.  
 (II, 823)

This would be a kind of language that is understood by every nation, thus various cultures develop intercourse with one another and the development of human beings would be universal. It is evident that the poet's two themes are actually one, and that the first one is the prerequisite of the second.

MacDiarmid vigorously practiced what he advocated. *In Memoriam James Joyce* is a kind of embodiment of this theme. He frequently adopted foreign words and quoted foreign writers, scientists and thinkers. In one short section, for example, you can find Sanskrit, Greek, Finnish, and eastern European languages. You will also find Chinese there. He not only quotes Chinese, but also mentions Chinese calligraphers such as Huai Su, Zhao Zi'ang, Huang Shangu, Wang Xizhi, specifying "The ostentatious vulgarity of the Emperor Chien Lung, / And, in the plump and chirpy strokes of Su Tung-po, / The

loose flesh and easy manner of a fat person" (II, 765). In using a broad range of quotations from ancient to modern times, from various countries, MacDiarmid is not doing exactly what T.S. Eliot did in *The Wasteland* and Ezra Pound did in *Pisan Cantos*. MacDiarmid was their friend, and he defended the *Pisan Cantos* in *The Company I've Kept* (1966, Chapt. 7). He enjoyed the poetry of the French Symbolists and such modern German poets as Rilke, and displayed a perfect "modern sensibility" so sedulously cultivated by modernist poets. On two important points, however, MacDiarmid was different from the modernists. Eliot and others depend on knowledge coming from classical literature, whereas MacDiarmid's poetry spreads its roots in the tradition of Scottish folk-literature, which is an old but vital tradition. Eliot and Pound went back to the past, whereas MacDiarmid looked to the future. In his view, bringing the capacity of language into full play is an indispensable prerequisite for the universal development of human beings, and that is why he was so enthusiastic about it. Following his remark about Su Tung-po, at the end of the section cited, he wrote:

The real humanity of the humane is departing from the world.

I am troubled by the tendency in science to-day  
For the law to be derived from limited groups of  
observations

Rather than from the wide generalisations of  
understanding.

And I am haunted by the masses  
In our great industrial centres,  
Greedy for productivity and neglecting fertility.

(II, 765-6)

In MacDiarmid's opinion both "wide generalisations of understanding" and "fertility" are necessary qualities which people should have in a fully developed society. These concerns never troubled the bookish world of Eliot and Pound.

MacDiarmid's works of the later period arouse various responses because many critics do not like his change of style. Readers enjoy the outstanding passages in these poems, but are puzzled by them as wholes. The poet himself clearly knew what he was doing and explained it in his usual forthright manner. For instance, he wrote:

The greatest poets undergo a kind of crisis in their  
art,  
A change proportionate to their previous achievement.

Others approach it and fail to fulfil it--like  
Wordsworth. (I, 614)

\*

\*

\*

--I am forty-six; of tenacious, long-lived country folk.  
Fools regret my poetic change--from my 'enchanting  
early lyrics'--  
But I have found in Marxism all that I need--  
(I, 615)

He further declared in *The Kind of Poetry I Want*:

Utterly a creator--refusing to sanction  
The irresponsible lyricism in which sense impressions  
Are employed to substitute ecstasy for information,  
Knowing that feeling, warm heart-felt feeling,  
Is always banal and futile. (II, 1021)

Here we can see that he no longer used the Scottish dialect,  
which is consistent with his abandonment of lyric poetry.

He clearly explained his reason for writing long poems in  
the essay "Ezra Pound" (*The Company I've Kept* [London, 1966],  
p. 171):

It is epic--and no lesser form--that equates with  
the classless society. Everything else--no matter  
how expressly it repudiates these in the mere logical  
meaning of what it *says* against what it *is*--belongs  
to the older order of bourgeois "values"...

MacDiarmid also used Heine as an example and pointed out how  
he had changed his style after the success of his early lyrics,  
and enlarged the range of his subjects, though his later  
poetry was not well received and had still not been correctly  
reassessed. The writing of epics is an inevitable trend,  
MacDiarmid thought. Epics were not created in ancient times  
only; today many progressive poets are writing them--Mayakov-  
sky and Neruda, for instance, as well as "a Yugo-Slav shepherd  
[who wrote] *The Stormy Years of the 20th Century*" (*The Company  
I've Kept*, p. 179). They have all written magnificent epics.  
The appearance of the epic is inevitable, because "The gran-  
deur of the time requires grand syntheses--not only in fine  
arts or music, but also in literature, not only in prose, but  
also in poetry" (*The Company I've Kept*, pp. 178-9).

However, what kind of epic is desirable? There does not  
seem to be any criterion, but certain tendencies may be seen  
in MacDiarmid's own later poetry, namely: "Marx-ization" of

poetry--using poetry to attack and satirize class enemies with a violence hithertorarely seen in verse, and placing one's hope in universal development, including a "greater synthesis" of human culture, which is what Lenin advocated.

"Scientificization" of poetry--for this MacDiarmid wrote "the poetry of facts", using many images drawn from science, frequently using scientific words.

Internationalization of poetry--for this he drew upon the quintessence of various cultures, quoting philosophical and literary works from various languages, and using large numbers of foreign words.

Establishing a new aesthetics--there are many discussions of poetry and poetics; he not only explained his own poetry and commented on others' poetry, but also explored the fundamental principles of poetry and art. He paid particular attention, as did many other modern poets, to the language of poetry, and he always strove to be original in his own poetic language.

Do these tendencies, or the subjects and artistic techniques used to accomplish them, necessarily lead to the production of epics? This requires further consideration. MacDiarmid's merit is that his poetic performance is far more brilliant than his theory; his practice often remedies the defects of his theory. His long poems may not be epics in the traditional sense--they are not even complete works; however, they represent an important poet's extensive experiments in art. Where experiments succeed, they succeed magnificently: his political poems blend power with beauty; he employs Whitmanesque free verse with cunning; his long stanzas are full of thrust; they shift continuously to express his sinuous thoughts; he assimilates materials from many sources, making of them a rich and unified poetry. He inserts brilliant comments: the passages in which he talks about art, poetry, language and his own experience and feelings are among the most outstanding in modern European poetry. His exploration of the relation between science and poetry shows a good grasp of important issues in the modern world. He has taken a large step in broadening the range of poetry, and that step is the beginning of his search for a greater synthesis of human culture.

What is our final impression? Among modern English poets MacDiarmid is a master from the North. He followed a road which was trodden by the masses and yet particular to himself --mass-based because of his revolutionary enthusiasm and Communist ideals; particular because of his art. Whatever he wrote carries his own hallmark; it would be almost impossible to imitate his poetry. Even when his poetry seems to be dull

and redundant, suddenly a surprising image or epigram will light up the scene, or an unusual rhythm will soothe the ear. In his later poetry MacDiarmid wanted to repudiate his lyrical quality, but actually this is just the quality that makes him imperishable. This was evident not only when he wrote those enchanting lyrics but also when he wrote his later long poems. A poet's--any poet's--opinions may have great or small historical significance, but it is hard for anyone to escape from the ravages of time. Some scientific theories that MacDiarmid quoted in his long poems are obviously outdated now, and some of his understanding of Marxism may not be universally accepted, but the art of his lyrics will endure. These lyrics are not of a sweet, sentimental kind, but are of a higher order which has resulted from the fusion of deep feeling and an active imagination--the rhythm of a folksong wedded to a twentieth-century poet's sensitivity to language. This higher lyricism is to be found in his powerful eloquence, in the hymns to Lenin, in the homage to Joyce, in the prospect of the "greater synthesis" of human culture in the future.

Because he wrote with such lyricism his poetry will endure better than many modern English and American productions. When this great Scottish poet died in 1978 he had already seen that, with the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1962, his poetry had finally broken through a long period of neglect and prejudice. Since then it has won more and more readers who wonder at its power and beauty. We can be sure that he laid down his pen with a final sense of triumph.

*Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages*

Translated by Zha Jianying  
*University of South Carolina*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>[Christopher Murray Grieve], *Hugh MacDiarmid Complete Poems 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (London, 1978), Vol. II, 1150, under the title "Kinsfolk." A portion of the poem appeared in *The Socialist Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. T.S. Law and Thurso Berwick (London, Henley and Boston, 1978), with the title "My Clan is Darkness." All further quotations from MacDiarmid will be from the *Complete Poems* and will be given in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver St. John Gogarty's letter of 4 Sept. 1951 to Kenneth Buthlay's *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh, 1964), Chapt. VIII.