

1985

The Cheka's Horrors and On a Raised Beach

T.J. Cribb

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

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

Recommended Citation

Cribb, T. J. (1985) "The Cheka's Horrors and On a Raised Beach," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol20/iss1/8>

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.

T.J. Cribb

The Cheka's Horrors and *On a Raised Beach*



In the *Hymns to Lenin* MacDiarmid brings poetry to politics as Wordsworth and Davidson before him had proposed to bring poetry to science.¹ In the First Hymn Lenin's greatness derives from his capacity to channel the mighty power that resides in and is shared by all men. MacDiarmid defines this power on the one hand by the physics and biology of evolution, and on the other by the historical and social analysis of marxism. In this perspective scientist, politician and poet proceed on the same principles. Lenin's greatness does not come from any mysteriously personal sources (still less from supernatural ones), as it would, for example, in the Romantic idea of Napoleon (which is of course Napoleon's idea of himself), but rather from a kind of simplicity, a transparency to the historical and physical forces involved. Such a perspective does not reduce him to a mere mouthpiece or puppet, for the ability to be thus transparent entails exceptional intelligence, energy and resolution, making Lenin a highly individualized human being: original, active, decisive—a free man; yet he is only able to realise his freedom so fully because he cooperates with material processes which are

impersonal in the extreme. These are seen as determined, though not determining, existing in the form of a constant potential in and beyond the human, which may or may not be realised. Realisation depends on the openness of the human channels. Hence it is that when leading individuals do succeed in realising their full potential, precisely because that potential is a general human one shared by all, their actions look as much like determined necessity as like free will. Small wonder, then, that MacDiarmid's poems keep up a running reference to Christianity, for in the West it is Christian moral theology which has most concerned itself with the problem of free will.²

Another way of putting this is that it is only when a man believes his life has some purpose beyond his own immediate will that suffering and death perplex his belief in it, for they too must be part of the purpose. In MacDiarmid's case the perplexity arises when confronting murder by the Communist Party in Soviet Russia. With characteristic thoroughness he recognizes this not in its conspicuous later development under Stalin but in its very origin under Lenin. "The Cheka's Horrors" are presumably those of the Red Terror of September, 1918.³ To say "Amen" to those horrors, as MacDiarmid does in the Hymn, is what most sticks in the throat of many a reader. The forthrightness of pronouncement perhaps gives an impression of recklessness or irresponsibility, but if so the impression is most misleading and cannot be supported by an attentive reading of the poems.⁴ The commitment to the meaning that Communism finds in life may be forthright in the First Hymn, but the daunting problems such a commitment entails run through the following Hymns to a climax of intensity in "On a Raised Beach."

Leading up to it are the remarkable three elegies of *Stony Limits* (1934).⁵ Neal Ascherson surmises that "the retreat to Whalsay may have become, after 1939, an evasion of choices he did not wish to make."⁶ That is not usually MacDiarmid's way. He does not evade contradictions by adopting one at the expense of the other, but rather, by intensifying both, struggles to reach surer ground below or beyond them. In this he resembles Blake, the only one of the first Romantics to look steadily at the Terror and so to come out the other side of it, and this may be the strategy of the elegies. Their progressive denudation of landscape, hardening of language and tightening of form can be read as an increasingly difficult attempt to wrest meaning from

deaths whose finality becomes more and more relentlessly realized. They are shadows cast by eternity.

All three poems, while independent in themselves, can be seen as preparing for the definitive achievement of "On a Raised Beach." This frees itself alike from the occasion of elegy and from the Miltonic echoes that haunt its predecessors. If any comparison with Milton can be made, apart from the obvious thematic affinities with *Paradise Regained*, it is with the oratorical plangency of sounds, as astounding and numbing to the senses on first reading. Language is wrenched free from nature and "natural" responses and in this unconditioned existence stands before us with a finality as absolute as the rocks it anaesthetically indicates. Because the meaning of so many of the words is unknown to us our minds are rebuffed from their surfaces and we are forced to gather what we can from the syntax, and that, shifting between object and subject, slipping through hanging participles and overlaid with instances, after long delays finally comes to rest in defeated repetition of the mere nominative "stones" (line 16)—a treadmill syntax.⁷ The comparison with Milton breaks down when pursued to this point, and breaks in different directions if we take other points of departure. The poet's gestures, for instance, are, though like a blind man's, distinctly unmiltonic in their physicality, locate him on a level with the material world, and so require a quite different production of the voice in reading; the voice of this poet is very far from subsuming its object. Contributing to this difference is a sort of hypertrophy of meaning in the vocabulary, which is more Marlovian than Miltonic in the outrageousness of its learning, and, however opaque at first reading, signals urgently and challengingly to be understood. The tension between this demand and the contrary effects already noted is severe and sets up an oscillation between the meaningfulness of the language and its opacity, an oscillation that is seen to be magnetically caused and, if the poem works, momentarily resolved by the stones themselves.

After the stunning first paragraph the poem continues:

Deep conviction or preference can seldom
 Find direct terms in which to express itself.
 Today on this shingle shelf
 I understand this pensive reluctance so well,

This not discommendable obstinacy,
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,
These stones (p. 423)

The second and third "this" here refer back to the general proposition of the first two lines in terms of feelings; as a result of this language of feeling and the introduction of the first person we assume that the deep conviction that cannot express itself is personal. We perhaps associate it with the difficult language of the first paragraph and construe that as symptomatic of the difficulty the poet has in expressing his feelings, as when confronted by death in the elegies. But then the demonstrative pronoun shifts from singular to plural, from "this" to "these," which entails a slight adjustment of our reading, from a subjectivity assumed to be unitary to the gradations and distinctions within it; the poem seems to ravel out in complexity of psychology and analysis. The next line consequently comes as a surprise when "these" is repeated but followed by and joined to "stones." We realise that we have to revise our premises entirely, that the deep conviction and subsequent feelings do not belong to the poet at all but to the stones. We are thrown back to the beginning to start again, a beginning that has been there all the time beneath our subjective assumptions that slither and slide away from it. We have been rebuffed by reality, as in the first paragraph, with the effect of a bracing, a sharpening of our sense of it, a finer discipline and tuning. The subtle use of the demonstrative pronoun, then, repeats the basic gesture of the first paragraph, which is simply to point, to indicate that which is. It is this act of recognition in the face of extreme repugnance and difficulty that I take to be continuous with the political recognition of the "First Hymn to Lenin."

I have gone into detail on the first few lines of the poem to establish this point and also as semi-sceptical response to Crichton Smith's challenge that MacDiarmid's poetry of fact "requires some new form of criticism that we haven't got as yet."⁸ If the poem's procedures are as I suggest, then they are as fine in moral nuance, in discrimination of tone, implication of gesture and resource of language as anything else in MacDiarmid or the tradition of feeling and subjectivity descending from Wordsworth, to go no higher.

At the same time, and for the same reason, it must be

emphasized that it is a poem, not a piece of philosophy. It is philosophic not in the sense of presenting ideas but by representing the act of philosophizing. This is also an aspect of its modernism and, implicitly, its politics. It is not the expressive overflow of individuality such as we find in Renaissance copiousness, nor is it the intense identification with an object such as we find in Romantic epiphany—both haloed unawares by the magnifying atmospherics of history. It is the mind's activity itself in the act of concentrating, making us aware of its interventions and velleities, and in fact "mind" is no adequate word, for the whole man is engaged in this activity. We are aware of the poet's body, gestures, feelings, for this is not the abstracted philosophic product but something carried on by a lonely figure at the edge of a remote island in the North Atlantic about 1934. That the poem presents itself as being thought and spoken during the morning of one day is an image of that concentration, by the very fact that it is a clear fiction. We are aware too of the emotional pressure that initiates and partly sustains the poem, a pressure that produces a constant tension, a danger of hardly controlled impatience, which is of course the authenticating sign of actual patience. We feel, then, that the emotional pressure, while perhaps remote cause, is not efficient agent but rather something that is included yet left behind in the achievement itself, for what brings the poem to realization is not feeling but will, that disinterested concentration of the philosopher, the scientist, the watch-repairer, the car-driver, or Lenin—individualised, impersonal, disciplined, self-aware, attentive.

So far most of the evidence has been elicited from critical interpretation of the published text itself, but the rich collection of MacDiarmid material in the University Library of Edinburgh contains a most interesting source from which confirmation of the present reading can be derived. It is a complete version of the poem in the poet's hand included with twenty-seven letters to F.G. Scott to whom, presumably, the manuscript was originally sent.⁹ It differs substantially from the published version. The striking paragraphs that open and close the poem do not appear. Nor does the section of over fifty lines that begins "We must be humble" (p. 425), for the manuscript proceeds directly from the observations on birds to the printed version's second attempt to invoke the essence of the stones by

hurling hard words at them: "Ratchel, striae, relationships of tesserae" (p. 426). The manuscript then has sixty-five lines of reflection on poetry, the stones and the hills of Morven, which do not survive into print, and then leaps to l. 299 "As romanticists viewed the philistinism of their days" (p. 430). It thus omits the two whole sections totalling 130 lines that begin "This is no heap of broken images" and conclude with "The rocks rattling in the bead-proof seas" (pp. 427-30), save for ll. 255-263 ("It will be ever increasingly necessary . . ." p. 429), which are transposed. By comparing these extensive revisions with the final text we can see the direction in which MacDiarmid was moving.

The disciplined impersonality argued for so far is dependent on the poem's concreteness, its enactment of its meaning, for the discipline can only be objective rather than personal if it is an event both in the real world and derived from it. That MacDiarmid was alive to the fundamental importance of this to his meaning can be seen from the revision of the following lines:

Behind the dullness, the silence, denial and despair
I impute to them, deep in the heart of each stone there,
I see the unconquerable hope, the light of lights divine.
What are our minds if we cannot help them?
Shall we compare ourselves to minor cases?
Be legs to the halt, eyes to the less blind, voices to
the less dumb,
But leave these stones, blind, dumb, moveless in their
places?

The reason these lines flag is that MacDiarmid had temporarily lost touch with the spirit and discipline of his enterprise, which is to dispense with the anthropomorphisms and projections of subjectivity. His means to that end is the external reality of the stones, which is compromised by the lines he scrapped. This is very clear from the lines that replace them:

These stones will reach us long before we reach them.
Cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime.
They will stem all the torrents of vicissitude forever
With a more than Roman peace.
Death is a physical horror to me no more (pp. 427-8).

The most penetrating guide to this extremely consequential dimension of the poem is Donald Mackinnon's *The Problem of Metaphysics*, as MacDiarmid himself was keen to point out, and the lines of consequence can perhaps be conveniently indicated by the following:

While Kant emphasises the spontaneity of understanding, and of that imagination which in one place he characterises as the "understanding working blind," it is fundamental to his whole argument that neither understanding nor imagination creates its own objects. For Kant, to come to know what is the case is a finding, not a fashioning.¹⁰

Kant characterizes this finding on the one hand as conditioned by the limitations of our physical sense-system, and on the other by the necessarily limited scope of the various laws obtaining and partially observable in the physical world, where "limited" means limited precisely to the physical. In other words, if we cast longing looks in the direction of transcendent cause we are rebuffed and thrown back by the conditions of our own existence. By ruling out the possibility of knowing any first cause as such, Kant creates a space for human freedom which is thus not determined by a transcendent cause. Yet having locked himself into the empirical world of experience so thoroughly he is in great difficulty when seeking to rescue a notion of morality as having any objective or binding force, such as is traditionally supplied by a god. Deprived of this recourse, Kant nonetheless wants to assert that "Morality is not a matter of arbitrary choice; it is in some sense expressive . . . of the order of the world" (p. 38). So does MacDiarmid. Both believe that they find, not fashion. But whereas Kant derives his absolute morality from a recourse to the imperative mood, and removes it from the time-bound natural world, MacDiarmid insists on remaining with the demonstrative and deictic. His materialism struggles to wrest marxism from the rock.

As we approach this boundary, the comparison with Christianity suggests itself once again. When MacDiarmid writes "Bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth" (p. 423), he clearly reminds us of Jesus's reply to the devil, who tempts him to change the stones into loaves: "Man shall not live by bread

alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). MacDiarmid too is praying in the wilderness; he too eschews supernatural intervention. The point of difference is that he wants bread from stones even so, for the stones are not left as indifferent matter, optionally instrumental to God's will (however the Son of God may refrain from exercising the option); they are themselves the source of reality:

And beneath them all a stupendous unity,
Infinite movement visibly defending itself
Against all the assaults of weather and water,
Simultaneously mobilised at full strength
At every point of the universal front,
Always at the pitch of its powers,
(pp. 426-7).

These lines do not appear in the Edinburgh University Library manuscript, which confirms the interpretation so far advanced. It is this view of matter, owing something to Nietzsche, something to Marx, and much to modern physics, that enables MacDiarmid to assert the simultaneity of spirit and matter in his illuminating interview with Walter Perrie.¹¹ By the same token, he knows he runs no risk of that curious emotional and quasiphysical inanition that overtakes such representative figures in the empirical-idealist tradition as Bentham, Mill, Russell and Valéry.¹² In the earlier draft of the poem MacDiarmid concludes:

I tread with contentment and ease,
And not at all like Monsieur Edmond Teste
Who knew the devil in him throve as long
As he kept to level ground
So [to (deleted)] he took to scrambling among
The rocks and compelled his mind
To pay more attention to directing his hands and feet
Than to his impossible thoughts—I find
No such relief, and need none,
Nor compete
Any longer with the stones as if we were not one.

The published version wisely and more effectively chooses not to

MacDiarmid changes the father-son relationship into one of fraternity:

I grasp one of them and I have in my grip
The beginning and the end of the world,
My own self, and as before I never saw
The empty hand of my brother man (p. 432).

This is not a religious but a political relationship, so that he can go on to say:

(The masses too have begged bread from stone,
From human stones, including themselves,
And only got it, not from their fellow-men,
But from stones such as these here—if then) (p. 432).

If the answer to the question "Where is the Christophanic rock that moved?" (p. 423) is that the rock does not move and no god is shown forth, then what answer does the poem give to another of its questions: "What Cabirian song from this catasta comes?" (p. 423). One answer is of course the poem itself. A Cabirian song, however, is a mystic, cultic one and the poem is certainly no rapt dithyramb, yet it courts the comparison with mysticism by the subdued resonance with Blake developed in the passage on the inward gates of the birds and the stones. The poem where Blake makes most use of the idea of the gates of perception is *Milton*, where the sons of time such as Milton and Blake himself are broken in upon by the visions of eternity and time collapses to infinity, as do all the dimensions of space. The moment of *Milton*, when Blake is suddenly rapt outside the door of his cottage and the whole poem takes place, might be said to correspond to the moment of "On a Raised Beach." But the differences are crucial. MacDiarmid may write "Nothing has stirred/Since I lay down this morning an eternity ago/But one bird" and it suggests a moment out of time, as with Blake. Yet the movement of the bird is an actual event in the mundane world, whereas the moments when Milton enters into Blake's left foot and when Los binds on his sandal and when Ololon descends to him are all spiritual events during Blake's trance, irruptions of eternity into the illusion of the mundane world:

And every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and Not
 A Natural; for a Natural Cause only seems: it is a Delusion
 Of Ulro & a ratio of the perishing Vegetable Memory.

(Plate 26).

With MacDiarmid, on the other hand, eternity is a dimension of matter, which is why he can twin with it the moment of the poem, the particular morning and the bird's movement. In this respect he is much closer to Kant's insistence on the objective existence of substance and causality, whence derives the human perception of time. Therefore MacDiarmid's mysticism, if one wishes to use that word, is more rational and certainly more material than Blake's. It consequently issues without any strain or impedance in day-to-day politics.

It seems to me, then, that the acceptance of the Cheka's horrors in the "First Hymn" is not lightly undertaken. MacDiarmid exploits the circumstances of the deaths of the poets and of his own breakdown, poverty and isolation to discover humanity in inhumanity, a positive in negation, a life without hope of resurrection in death. Some, perhaps most, may nonetheless agree with Tom Sawyer's conclusion about *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "The sentiments was interestin', but tough." They will, however, find short shrift if they hope for much easier options from the other major voices at that time seeking to articulate the experience of this century. The choice Brecht offers in *The Measures Taken* (1930) is bleak enough, and Eliot, for all his reassuring composure and more familiar psychological terrain, in *Ash Wednesday* (1928-30) offers absolutely no hope in "time which is always time" or place which is "always and only place." And it is not MacDiarmid but Pound who at this date fails to reckon the costs. Those costs and choices can partly be located where the extremes of fascism (arising on nationalism) and Stalinism (arising on socialism) meet and it is precisely here that MacDiarmid's poetry intervenes.

He leaves us only with the stones. It is with their presence that the poem ends in the style of its beginning. It is a reprise rather than a repeat, though, for the language modulates from geology and mineralogy to terms of rhetoric, also present at the beginning but not so prominently. True to its originating deictic gesture the poem contracts back into its object after the long meditation, which is confessed as no more than a series of

dilations in words on something that their nets can never quite capture and which reposes in the haecceity of the rock. Both language and the reality that elicits it are twinned in "diallage," meaning both "a grass-green variety of pyroxene" and a rhetorical figure "by which arguments, after being considered from various points of view, are all brought to bear upon one point."¹³ MacDiarmid can truthfully say in a passage deleted from the final version:

I pile these words together as Nature piles a raised beach,
But they are not meaningless. They are carefully chosen
and apt.

Dictionaries are open to all; but these words are not easily
capped.

Churchill College, Cambridge

NOTES

¹Texts of poems by MacDiarmid are quoted from *The Complete Poems, 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, 2 vols. (London, 1978).

²For a recent discussion of the problem as it arises in Marxism see Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London, 1975), pp. 73-133.

³The Cheka was formally constituted in December 1917 and reconstituted as the GPU (Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie—State Political Administration) in February 1922, becoming OGPU (Ob'edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie—Unified Political Administration) in 1923. See E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* (London: MacMillan, 1964) I, 180-1, 212, 228, 404.

⁴ Douglas Dunn makes the accusation of recklessness in "Hugh MacDiarmid: Inhuman Splendours," *New Edinburgh Review*, 52 (November, 1980), pp. 17-21.

⁵"In Memoriam: Liam Mac'Ille Iosa," "Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum. In Memoriam: Rainer Maria Rilke 1875-1926," "Stony Limits. In Memoriam: Charles Doughty, 1843-1926."

⁶Neal Ascherson, "MacDiarmid and Politics," in *The Age of MacDiarmid*, ed. P.H. Scott and A.C. Davis (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 226.

⁷*Complete Poems*, I, 423, must surely be the correct text, rather than *A Lap of Honour* (London, 1967), which runs the sentence on to the end with a question after "cairn," or *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology* (London & Boston, 1972), which repeats the obvious misprints of *Stony Limits and Scots Unbound* (Edinburgh, 1956).

⁸Iain Crichton Smith, "MacDiarmid and Ideas, with special reference to 'On a Raised Beach,'" *The Age of MacDiarmid*, p. 157.

⁹Edinburgh University Library, Manuscripts, Gen. 887, ff. 83-88.

¹⁰Donald Mackinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 7.

¹¹MacDiarmid, *Metaphysics and Poetry*, ed. Walter Perrie, (Lothlorien Publications, Hamilton, 1975).

¹²A.J. Nuttall offers an interesting perspective on this phenomenon in *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (London, 1974).

¹³*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*. See Ruth McQuillan, "MacDiarmid's Other Dictionary," *Lines Review*, 66 (September, 1978), pp. 5-14.

Note: Since the writing of this article Catherine Kerrigan has made the MS version of 'On a Raised Beach' available as Appendix A in *Whaur Extremes Meet. The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid 1920-1934* (Edinburgh, 1983).