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Katherine K. Maynard

Hugh MacDiarmid and Thomas Hardy: Local Realities and the "Revolt Against all Accepted Things"

"From the beginning I took as my motto—and I have adhered to it all through my work—Thomas Hardy's declaration: 'Literature is the written expression of revolt against all accepted things.'"¹ Even the most sympathetic reader must concede that Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry poses a critical dilemma. Few poets so consistently registered the twentieth-century's political, philosophical, and cultural turmoil in their work as MacDiarmid. Yet it is precisely this engagement with explosive features of moral, intellectual, and literary tumult—the assertion of national heritage and language, political extremism, atheistic absolutism, and rejection of Anglo-American cultural standards—that makes it difficult to locate MacDiarmid precisely within a literary-historical context. Superficially, his poetry seems to occupy the margins of literary journalism, alternately addressed to various special interest subscribers. A closer examination suggests that MacDiarmid's atheism, nationalism, and communism may be interpreted as logical extensions of Thomas Hardy's agnosticism, socialism, and liberalism. Further, evidence indicates that Hardy impressed MacDiarmid as one of the few poets prepared to address what seemed the central conflict of the age: the emergence of scientific inquiry as an intellectual and cultural force in western Europe. In this light, much of what seems willful or eccentric in MacDiarmid's poetry can be seen as a conscious strategy to consolidate and extend Hardy's efforts to express atomistic materialism in aesthetic terms.

¹Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet* (London, 1943; rptd. 1972), p. 232.

Although critics have noted connections between the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Hugh MacDiarmid, until Harvey Oxenhorn's study *Elemental Things* (1984), discussion displayed a "now you see it, now you don't" quality even at its most illuminating. Frank Kermode, for example, advanced the tantalizing observation that "MacDiarmid's early poems hid a lot of Hardy in their heather and thistle garments."² Donald Davie went further, arguing that Hardy and MacDiarmid both commingle the "quaint" and the "ironic" in their poetry:

MacDiarmid, though he is the least insular of British poets, is also among the most old fashioned; at least as old fashioned as Hardy. More indeed, for the poems of his which most recall Hardy recall not the greatest Hardy but the dated and quaint, though sturdily impressive Hardy who is ironical about the cosmos.³

Davie was immediately rebuked by Kenneth Buthlay, who, asserting MacDiarmid's Scots heritage, dismissed the argument outright for its "tendentious linking of MacDiarmid to English writers."⁴ In his turn, Davie reiterated his view, declaring, "I remain impenitently convinced that I detect Hardy behind some [of MacDiarmid's] early poems. . . ."⁵

In his comprehensive analysis of MacDiarmid's poetry, Harvey Oxenhorn presented a solid case for linking the two poets. Oxenhorn cites "MacDiarmid's debt" in "Prelude to Moon Music" to Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" and suggests further comparative study of three pairs of poems by each author. He adds that it would have been hard to read "The Eemis Stone"—let alone write it—in 1924 without feeling the influence of Hardy in terms of poetic architectonics, a reliance on psalm and ballad forms, the handling of meter and stanzaic structure and tone.⁶

MacDiarmid's own comments support Oxenhorn's thesis. In fact, several references suggest that he recognized Hardy as a catalyst whose work helped to redefine the role of the poet and the place poetry could occupy in a

²Frank Kermode and John Hollander, ed. *Modern British Literature: The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (London, 1973), p. 563.

³Donald Davie, "A'e Gowden Lyric" (a review of MacDiarmid's *Collected Poems*), *New Statesman*, 10 August 1962; rptd. in Donald Davie, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 113-6.

⁴Kenneth Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve)* (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 117.

⁵Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (New York, 1972), p. 53.

⁶Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 41, 53-4, 192.

scientific age. In *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, in a letter dated 31 July 1925, MacDiarmid criticizes Charles Murray's vernacular poem "The Whistle" for its popularity among those of "vulgar taste." "I shall begin to be interested in Charles Murray from a literary point of view," he writes, "when I find him having a vogue among the same people as, say, Thomas Hardy (as a poet), and Edmund Blunden and 'AE,' or better still, amongst those equally appreciative of Blok, Spitteler, and Valery."⁷

MacDiarmid's choice of poetic models is revealing. His grouping of the trio, AE, Blunden, and Hardy, seems based primarily upon extra-literary criteria. However dissimilar, these poets could all be considered peripheral to the English literary establishment of the 1920s. AE's Celtic mysticism, Blunden's war realism, and Hardy's alleged pessimism reveal a fascination with human experience pushed to some limit. Such subjects were not calculated to win wide attention when Georgian and Edwardian poetry still echoed in many ears. That MacDiarmid associates the trio with Blok, Spitteler, and Valery—all continental poets—only reinforces his preference for writers outside the Anglo-American tradition.

The reference to Hardy is also important because MacDiarmid was adamant about distinguishing between the critically slighted poetry and the often infamous novels, which he held in far less esteem. His attitude toward Hardy's fiction is clear from his endorsement of Cecil Gray's statement: "even today the whole hierarchy of the English novelists from Fielding and Smollett, through Dickens and Thackeray up to Hardy and Meredith means precisely nothing to me. I simply cannot read them. I have tried hard, I have read several books of each. I have given them all a fair trial, but it is no use." This statement, MacDiarmid said, "should be hung up in large print in the vestibule of every library in Scotland."⁸

Hardy's importance to MacDiarmid's strategy of "revolt against all accepted things" becomes clearer in a second reference found in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, 21 August 1925. The passage suggests a probable route by which I. A. Richards' estimation of Hardy's modernity became available to MacDiarmid:

A writer in the *Glasgow Herald* summarizing Mr. I. A. Richards' most important essay "A Background for Contemporary Poetry" which appeared in "The Criterion," said "Since the Sixteenth Century what Mr Richards calls the "magical view" of the world has been gradually giving place to the scientific. Nature, that is to say, has been neutralized. It is indifferent to us. In contemporary British poetry, therefore, we ought to learn how we are taking this momentous change in

⁷Hugh MacDiarmid, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 16.

⁸Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept* (London, 1966), p. 271.

world-view. Mr. Hardy, Mr. Richards thinks, is the only living British poet who refuses to be comforted by beliefs that derive from the dying (but still strong) magical view of nature. . . . Mr. Hardy has achieved a "self-reliant and immitigable acceptance" of an indifferent universe. The other major poets of the age—Mr. Yeats, Mr. de la Mare and Mr. Lawrence—have all fled from the necessity of accepting the world-view of science. . . . Mr. Richards thinks that poets will have "to face the issue in bolder fashion. . ."⁹

To this estimate of Hardy's poetry as boldly modern, MacDiarmid adds, "I substantially agree with Mr. Richards."

The essay in which this reference appears deals with Sir Ronald Ross and Ronald Campbell Macfie, two scientists who were also poets. MacDiarmid's verdict upon the pair is terse and summary. If they were "of equal importance to all but the major Georgians," MacDiarmid declares, they were nonetheless willing to bury their heads in the sands of conventional culture and failed to fulfil what might have been expected of them.

Near the end of his career, MacDiarmid was more explicit about "the necessity of accepting the world-view of science" as fundamental to poetic composition. In his *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), he refers to

. two kinds of knowledge,
Knowing about things and knowing things,
Scientific data and aesthetic realisation,
And I seek their perfect fusion in my work.¹⁰

Six years later he spelled out his expectations for a poet in his essay *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) where he approves

. . . a poetry which fully understands
That the era of technology is a necessary fact,
An inescapable phase in social activity (p. 1029).

He further claims that poetry, or at least the kind of poetry he would like to see, is, by its nature:

A protest, invaluable to science itself,
Against the exclusion of value
From the essence of matter of fact (pp. 1028-9).

⁹Hugh MacDiarmid, "Sir Ronald Ross: Ronald Campbell Macfie," *The Scottish Educational Journal*, 21 August 1925, pp. 23-4.

¹⁰Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid, 1920-76*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 782. Further references to this edition will be supplied in the text.

By elevating "matter of fact" or data retrieved from scientific investigation to a central position in poetic composition, MacDiarmid echoes Hardy the poet who placed a premium on fidelity to fact.

In the "Preface" to *Poems of the Past and the Present*, where Hardy answers critics who fault him for advancing a pessimistic philosophy, he contends that he has no grand designs upon his readers. Insisting upon the discrete character of individual poems, he states that "unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change."¹¹ What Hardy labels "*unadjusted* impressions" (emphasis mine) are observations that have not been re-touched to conform to theological or political ideology.

This description of the relationship between perception and poetic composition is deceptively simple. Hardy glides rather easily from a term for subjective perception, "impressions," albeit "unadjusted," to the more technical and objective term, "readings," without indicating how the medium for this process of "recording"—the observing human consciousness—can guarantee accurate transcription. The slippery language anticipates the discovery by early twentieth-century scientists that the observer indeed plays a role in the process of observation and may affect what is being observed. At this early stage of scientific development, however, the thorny question exists only as minor ambiguity, tangential to Hardy's concern for jettisoning pre-conceptions that have obscured important specifics.

At the heart of Hardy's statement rests an assumption about the superior accuracy—hence validity—of scientific observation. Empirical methodology seemed to indicate that phenomena could be understood best if atomized—broken down into the smallest and, by implication, purest constituent elements. To Hardy "the road to a true philosophy of life" begins by attending to these particulars. In the "Apology" to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, when Hardy again endorses empirical inquiry as a vital weapon for progress, he concedes that human beings are continually susceptible to fear and superstition; he laments that "belief in witches of Endor is displacing the Darwinian theory and 'the truth that shall make you free'" (p. 561).

If the task is daunting, it is also an essential exercise for progressive modern men and women. Empiricism has introduced a method for obtaining accurate information, and the application of this technique, which Hardy describes as "questionings in the explorations of reality," provides the means for overall improvement of the human condition: "the first steps toward the soul's betterment and the body's also."

¹¹Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (New York, 1982), p. 84. Further references to this edition will be supplied in the text.

In this atomistic and materialist universe, the individual stands as the unit of society, the word the unit of language, and the moment the unit of time. However mechanical this structure now seems, it held the virtue for Hardy, and MacDiarmid after him, of counterpointing generalized categories that subsumed all particulars. Empiricism seemed to be a neutral tool, well suited to balancing the tendency to indulge easy categorization. Yet the vigilant process of recording isolated facts inevitably draws attention to anomalies or exceptions to the rule that prove disruptive to authoritarian theological and political dogmas. Hardy was adept at identifying enigmatic moments involving dilemmas of human identity, aspiration, and suffering. Numerous poems depict men and women in circumstances where the application of a general law or custom seems cruel and inhumane. Confronted with a choice between upholding a law or "humbly recording" an occasion of individual struggle, however bizarre, Hardy invariably chooses the latter and sides with the victim.

MacDiarmid found Hardy's devotion to fact a particularly useful starting point for a practice of modern poetic composition. A comparison of two poems on a related theme reveals important points of influence and departure. The first poem is Hardy's "Unkept Good Fridays":

There are many more Good Fridays
 Than this if we but knew
 The names, and could relate them,
 Of men whom rulers slew
 For their goodwill, and date them
 As runs the twelvemonth through.

These nameless Christs' Good Fridays,
 Whose virtues wrought their end,
 Bore days of bonds and burning,
 With no man to their friend,
 Of mockeries and spurning;
 Yet they are all unpenned.

When they had their Good Fridays
 Of bloody sweat and strain
 Oblivion hides. We quote not
 Their dying words of pain,
 Their sepulchres we note not,
 Unwitting where they have lain.

No annual Good Fridays
 Gained they from cross and cord,
 From being sawn asunder,
 Disfigured and abhorred,

Smitten and trampled under:
Such dates no hands have scored.

Let be. Let lack Good Fridays
These Christs of unwrit names;
The world was not even worthy
To taunt their hopes and aims,
As little of earth, earthy,
As his mankind proclaims (pp. 842-3).

The poem is dated "Good Friday, 1927." MacDiarmid's "The Innumerable Christ," which deals with a similar theme, bears the following epigraph from Professor J. Y. Simpson: "Other stars may have their Bethlehem, and their Calvary too":

Wha kens on whatna Bethlehems
Earth twinkles like a star the nicht,
An' whatna shepherds lift their heids
In its unearthly licht?

'Yont a' the stars oor een can see
An' farther than their lichts can fly,
I' mony an unco warl' the nicht
The fatefu' bairmies cry.

I' mony an unco warl' the nicht
The lift gaes black as pitch at noon,
An' sideways on their chests the heids
O' endless Christs roll doon.

An' when the earth's as cauld's the mune
An' a' its folk are lang syne deid,
On coontless stars the Babe maun cry
An' the Crucified maun bleed (p. 32).

Both poems examine a central tenet of Christianity, the singular character of the person—and suffering—of Christ, then examine the belief in light of material facts. Behind the poems stand the arguments of Victorian rationalists such as Frederick Harrison, John Morley, Thomas Huxley and others. Biblical scholarship epitomized the purifying effect of investigation that cleared away the overgrowth of myth and falsehood from historical fact. Many who had been oppressed intellectually or emotionally by religious dogma felt empowered by such investigative enterprises. As Jerome Buckley has pointed out, "the tangible evidence of the laboratory, the apparent and

immediate drama of empirical research" made the rationalist confident that "to the free intelligence the full truth would at last be revealed."¹²

Despite the obvious similarities, the poems arouse different responses. Hardy's poem is retrospective. Its tragic implications lead readers to consider what has been lost by a blind adherence to an arbitrary belief. If many idealistic and virtuous individuals have endured political persecution and physical torture comparable to Christ's, they also deserve universal respect. Implicitly, the poem forces readers to ask what humanity has sacrificed in compassion for unsung thousands by devoting attention to the person of Christ. Has Christ worship, as prescribed by tradition and orthodoxy, the speaker asks, ironically inspired indifference to human suffering? Has such tradition and uncritical practice made humanity inhumane and unfeeling?

In contrast, MacDiarmid's poem compels readers to project a hypothesis drawn from astronomical observation and laws of probability into the future in order to confront its implications. If humanity accepts scientific findings that earth may be only one of innumerable planets "'Yont a' the stars oor een can see/ An' farther than their lights can fly," then the events that seem of singular importance may, logically, have analogues elsewhere. Even such miraculous events as the birth and death of a savior may be repeated many times over on many different worlds. Laws of probability suggest that such events will recur long after the earth itself has been extinguished: "An' when the earth's as cauld's the mune/ An' a its folk are lang syne deid." In its summary diminishment of a central tenet of Christian faith, the effect is sobering—and chilling.

Where Hardy's poem implicitly challenges the reader to use Christian myth to scour personal experience for other instances of worthy suffering, MacDiarmid attempts to help readers face a seemingly irrefutable fact. The difference lies in the degree to which the two poets embrace empiricism.

Hardy's poem "Hap" represents virtually an empiricist's lament. The well-known poem declares that the operation of chance is the pre-eminent force in the universe. Humanity can record its operations, albeit belatedly, but comprehension remains elusive. The last stanza serves as a lament for a life where experiencing pain seems needless and arbitrary:

—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . .
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain (p. 9).

¹²Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (New York, 1951), pp. 186, 187.

"Hap" also suggests the limits of Hardy's ability to incorporate scientific technique into his aesthetic. The reference to a pilgrimage and the personification of "Time" and "Casualty" reveal his reliance on traditional religious concepts—if only for purposes of debunking.

Hardy frequently projected what he was "humbly recording" against the backdrop of prevailing dogmas. The result is a conglomerate of disparate elements in many poems: the scientific and theological, the technical and the archaic, and the local and the universal. His determination to see each moment in its own terms also inspired continual experimentation with rhyme schemes and stanza forms in an attempt to create poems as original as the discrete moments they recorded.

This accommodation suggests that, despite his impatience with traditional beliefs and conventions, Hardy did not possess MacDiarmid's fervent, however partisan, decisiveness. He could declare his desire to cast off illusion, as he did in "He Abjures Love," but in the same poem frame a question that encapsulates human apprehension:

—I speak as one who plumbs
Life's dim profound,
One who at length can sound
Clear views and certain.
But—after love what comes? (p. 237).

His answer, "A scene that lours,/ A few sad vacant hours,/ And then, the Curtain," illustrates his characteristically charitable view of human fear, vulnerability, even vacillation—all shortcomings, of course, which feed the desire for consoling dogmas.

Even in nominally agnostic poems dealing with religious topics, the personal God of Christianity is rarely far from the scene. Many poems that involve heavenly interviews with a supreme being or soliloquies by God—"God's Education," "A Plaint to Man," "God-Forgotten," among many others—function as exempla, depicting a vision of humanity ennobled by struggles in an indifferent universe. "A Plaint to Man" closes with God urging not adherence to a transcendental ideal but affirming humanity's capacity for "brotherhood":

The truth should be told, and the fact be faced
That had best been faced in earlier years:

The fact of life with dependence placed
On human heart's resource alone,
In brotherhood bonded close and graced (p. 326).

Hardy worked diligently to uphold anti-authoritarian positions, to eschew dogma and ideology, but clung finally to the modest hope stated most clearly in his "Apology" to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*: "pain. . . shall be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness operating through scientific knowledge" (p. 558).

For all its potential to fuel rebellion, Hardy's "evolutionary meliorism" is essentially defensive. His avowed distrust of philosophy precludes construction of a viable revolutionary program. Further, his regard for human suffering continually returns him to those moments when pain was most acute and philosophical speculation superfluous. Ultimately, fidelity to "unadjusted impressions" manifested itself as an act of dissent: a refusal of sentimental consolation, rigorous skepticism about Christian theology, a consistent social liberalism, and a respect for local customs and dialects threatened with extinction by the culture and language of the majority. Hardy, who was particularly sensitive to the crushing power of religious superstition and class prejudice, believed that men and women could not refuse or repudiate the "unadjusted impressions" rendered by objective or unbiased observation. It was his great strength as an artist to recognize the painful consequences of acknowledging such "unadjusted" facts.

MacDiarmid seems to have grasped the implications of the scientific methodology early on, sensing more acutely than Hardy its incendiary potential. Much of his poetry is a process of working out and applying scientific principles to vast tracts of human experience. To measure how far MacDiarmid extends these methods, compare "A Plaint to Man" or "Hap" with "The Fool." The poem represents a virtual declaration of war against "accepted things":

He said that he was God.
 'We are well met,' I cried,
 'I've always hoped I should
 Meet God before I died.'

I slew him then and cast
 His corpse into a pool,
 —But how I wish he had
 Indeed been God, the fool! (p. 8).

Its closing sentiment notwithstanding, "The Fool" captures the brand of revolutionary absolutism which rests upon a faith that history is on one's side. Writing a generation after Hardy, MacDiarmid displays much less tolerance for principles he believes have been thoroughly refuted by scientific investigation. Consequently, where Hardy is a skeptical liberal, MacDiarmid is an atheistic communist. His poetry displays little of the ambivalence that mani-

feats itself at times as passive endurance in Hardy's verse. MacDiarmid's greater certainty rests squarely upon his faith that science is regularly yielding the material facts of an historically inevitable process.

MacDiarmid's poem "Poetry and Science" establishes the primary position of science in the modern world:

Without some chemistry one is bound to remain
Forever a dumbfounded savage
In the face of vital reactions.
The beautiful relations
Shown only by biochemistry
Replace a stupefied sense of wonder
With something more wonderful
Because natural and understandable.
Nature is more wonderful
When it is at least partly understood (p. 631).

There is no compromise position. One stands with the forces of history, as exemplified by science, or risks extinction. Ironically, this distinctly anti-mystical position carries to the logical conclusion the relation, even intimate alliance, between scientific fact and poetry for which Wordsworth held such high hopes a century earlier.

While extreme, MacDiarmid's strategies are anything but idiosyncratic. Geoffrey Thurley is one of many critics to fault twentieth-century poets for passively recording facts. "The poem as percept-structure, in which observations loosely belonging together within a witnessed scene or situation are given the appearance of logical cohesion and inter-relatedness," he observes, "is the common stock of mid-century poetry on both sides of the Atlantic."¹³ MacDiarmid's effort to politicize the process of observation reveals a desire to act upon the evidence of his senses and the findings of objective investigation. If he can be faulted for the extremism of his commitment, Thurley suggests that the failure to initiate or sustain any "inward *engagement*" is evidence of a much wider "recurrent mid-century malaise."¹⁴

Further, MacDiarmid's use of fact was not invariably wedded to overt political ends. His poem "Crystals Like Blood" suggests the power that can be unleashed by training the eyes to observe even the crudest mechanical operations in minute detail. The poem presents the process of extracting mercury from cinnabar in exacting detail:

¹³Geoffrey Thurley, *The American Moment* (New York, 1977), p. 34.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59.

I remember how, long ago, I found
Crystals like blood in a broken stone.

I picked up a broken chunk of bed-rock
And turned it this way and that,
It was heavier than one would have expected
From its size. One face was caked
With brown limestone. But the rest
Was a hard greenish-grey quartz-like stone
Faintly dappled with darker shadows,
And in this quartz ran veins and beads
Of bright magenta.

And I remember how later on I saw
How mercury is extracted from cinnebar
—The double ring of iron piledrivers
Like the multiple legs of a fantastically symmetrical spider
Rising and falling with monotonous precision,
Marching round in an endless circle
And pounding up and down with a tireless, thunderous force,
While, beyond, another conveyor drew the crumbled ore
From the bottom and raised it to an opening high
In the side of a gigantic grey-white kiln.

So I remember how mercury is got
When I contrast my living memory of you
And your dear body rotting here in the clay
—And feel once again released in me
The bright torrents of felicity, naturalness, and faith
My treadmill memory draws from you yet (p. 1054).

"Crystals Like Blood" presents an extremely intimate alliance of mechanical procedure and spiritual charge, attentive to the details of the stone, the production of mercury and the emotional subtleties of experience. It coheres by virtue of its imagery (the liquid metal, quicksilver, prompts the phrase "bright torrents"), its carefully balanced cadences and the connective, structuring memory. Syntactically this is how the poem develops, beginning "I remember how . . .", continuing "And I remember how . . ." (line 12) and concluding "So I remember how" (line 22) The full force of the poem comes in the admission of material reality into the elegiac mode: "I contrast my living memory of you/ And your dear body rotting here in the clay." In its commingling of the tender and the technical, the poem stands as a worthy successor to Hardy's anguished elegies to his wife Emma.

Use of dialect constitutes the final point of contact between the two poets. Again, Hardy played a significant role for MacDiarmid who, as a revolutionary, specifically a Marxist, might have been expected to jettison any

attachment to societies still practicing pre-industrial agrarian customs and language. Conventional Marxist doctrine denounces "village communities" that restrain "the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional roles."¹⁵ Hardy's ability to incorporate empirical methods without renouncing local dialect represented an important precedent to the communist/Marxist and nationalist MacDiarmid.

Hardy's defense of Dorsetshire English is put succinctly in his "Preface" to *Select Poems* of William Barnes. It is characteristically modest:

Since his [Barnes's] death, education in the west of England as elsewhere has gone on with its silent and inevitable effacements, reducing the speech of this country to uniformity, and obliterating every year many a fine old local word. The process is always the same: the word is ridiculed by the newly taught; it gets into disgrace; it is heard in holes and corners only; it dies; and, worse of all, it leaves no synonym.¹⁶

Here, and in his personal writings, Hardy accords the Dorset dialect an equality with literary English: they are both valid forms of expression. But he saw the former losing out in a Darwinian struggle for supremacy. There could be no question about the weakness of one, the strength of the other. When, in the "Preface" to *Wessex Poems*, he notes that several poems contain local words, he carefully defines the circumstances that justify his choice:

Whenever an ancient and legitimate word of the district, for which there was no equivalent in received English, suggested itself as the most natural, nearest and often only expression of a thought, it has been made use of, on what seemed good grounds (p. 6).

Hardy would pay scrupulous attention to preserving items of Dorsetshire vocabulary in his novels and poems, but he saw no point in a full-scale assault on literary English.

MacDiarmid did. MacDiarmid's earliest poems are in English, but his subsequent championship of Scots had a political motivation through and beyond the desire to preserve endangered expressions. Poetry in English that emerges from Scotland, Ireland, or Wales bears a legacy of national difference from the language in which it is written. But the history of the English

¹⁵Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York, 1991), pp. 38, 43, 45.

¹⁶Thomas Hardy, "Preface," *Select Poems of William Barnes* (London, 1908; rptd. 1933), p. iii.

language in each of those countries is far from identical. To choose to write solely in English was, for MacDiarmid, a betrayal. In 1936 when Edwin Muir declared English to be the way forward for Scottish writers, MacDiarmid rejected the option violently.

Scots was a distinct language MacDiarmid inherited from three sources: the language he heard around him in his boyhood in the small border town of Langholm, which he grew up speaking and knew to be distinct from English—which was reserved for the school classroom, or polite company; the dictionaries and word-books; and the literary heritage, preeminently Dunbar and Burns. There is no exact equivalent of this language in Ireland or Wales; nor is there in England. Regional dialects with their own validity differ in a fundamental way from a form of linguistic expression that carries a national history on its back. In *In Memoriam James Joyce*, he wrote: "All dreams of 'imperialism' must be exorcised, / Including linguistic imperialism, which sums up all the rest" (p. 790).

Such polemical nationalism is very far removed from Hardy, even at his most political and patriotic. MacDiarmid's agitational journalism, hyperactive politicking, and stir-fry attitude to cultural entropy are very foreign to Hardy. Yet Hardy's devotion to "humbly recording" particulars—linguistic, social, political—legitimized for MacDiarmid a strategy for revolutionary poetics seemingly grounded in fact and determined by history. That MacDiarmid, like Hardy, acknowledges the effect of empirical inquiry, the assertion of local custom and language, and the primacy of personal experience places him not at the periphery of twentieth-century poetry but near its center.

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