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Carol McGuirk

“Nocht Sae Sober As a Man Blin’ Drunk”:  
MacDiarmid’s Transformations of Burns  
in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*

Naomi Mitchison compares the two greatest poets of modern Scots in a Burns Night oration quoted by MacDiarmid in his memoir *Lucky Poet*:

Where Burns, in his time, could only whisper, we can shout. Hugh MacDiarmid shouts, sometimes rather deafeningly. The two Scots poets are both beautifully tactless, but where Burns—in deference to his age—apologized and even effaced, though not always convincingly, Hugh MacDiarmid...plunges deeper.<sup>1</sup>

In an earlier Burns Night oration (delivered in 1892, the year of Christopher Murray Grieve’s birth), G. K. Chesterton, who was thirty-three years later to become the butt of an early section of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, locates the source of what Mitchison calls the “effacing” quality in Burns. Chesterton, noting Burns’s “hopes for the devil and charity for all classes of men, except the humbug,” singles out Burns’s “universal sympathy” as his chief distinction.<sup>2</sup> Though Chesterton goes too far—Burns’s sympathy, far from being universal, was greatly diminished when he looked up from the helpless to the lordly—an underlying confidence in human fellowship, along

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<sup>1</sup>Naomi Mitchison, quoted in *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London, 1943), pp. 232-3.

<sup>2</sup>G. K. Chesterton, Burns Night oration, reprinted in *The Debater*, 2.8 (Jan. 1892), 73.

with a downright affection for fellow-sinners and transgressors, does provide a leaven in Burns's poetry, including almost all of his satires.<sup>3</sup>

When Hugh MacDiarmid adapts and echoes Burns's images, it is the sentiment, the implicit optimism that underlies Burns's sympathy, that he tends to question. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* echoes the language and imagery of Burns almost on every page. But two mock-epics by Burns are especially important in influencing the setting, imagery, subject-matter, and even "plot" of MacDiarmid's masterwork. In "Tam o' Shanter," a middle-aged man distinctly under the influence gallops through the night-landscape and, instead of falling from his horse into the river Doon and drowning—as he fully deserves and as has been predicted by his own wife Kate—instead is positively rewarded for his bad behavior. Tam is given a fleeting vision of the apprentice-witch Nanny, the feminine Other as illuminated by lightning, firelight and moonlight. In Burns's "Death and Dr. Hornbook," which in its essentially comic presentation of the supernatural may be read as an early sketch for "Tam o' Shanter," Burns's speaker and the skeletal figure of Death enjoy a companionable moonlit discussion of the medical secrets of the community. Like "Tam o' Shanter," "Hornbook" is a narrative poem that appears to be about a drunk man's nocturnal encounter with the transcendent; yet the intense focus of both poems' speculative gaze is really nothing more or less sublime than the undraped human body: alive or dead, diseased or poisoned in "Hornbook," emphatically gendered as female in the figure of Cutty Sark, her unclothed fellow-witches, and even the exposed rump of the mare Meg in "Tam o' Shanter."

In both "Tam o' Shanter" and "Death and Dr. Hornbook," Burns's setting is a comic yet visionary darkness silvered by moonlight, a night-setting that yields revealing glimpses of a range of community transgressions, from those Burns clearly regards as venial—lewd dancing, indecent exposure, husbands who won't go (or stay) home, drunkenness—to what should be the more serious matters of suicide, Satan worship, infanticide and parricide. In both poems, however, Burns's tone in referring even to the grimmest matters is distinctly giddy, a consequence of choosing a protagonist temporarily impaired by drink and disinclined to prudent judgment. As in Jonson's anti-Puritanical *Bartholomew Fair*, satire turns back on the satiric impulse itself, ever on the hunt for "enormities." Policing human behavior becomes the unenviable task

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<sup>3</sup>The reading of Burns as "universally" benevolent and genial may well be more a creation of the Burns-cult than an inevitable response to Burns's poetry. In "Robert Burns's Satires," John C. Weston well argues that the reading of Burns as sympathetic is usually taken much too far: "that Burns's satires are not tragic, black, visceral does not mean that they are merely gently bantering and wittily amusing. Their power derives from the fierceness of Burns's hatreds and his intention to wound his adversary. The splenetic and the friendly temperament can exist together." *The Art of Robert Burns*, ed. R. D. S. Jack and Andrew Noble (London, 1982), p. 37.

of wives and magistrates (the Kates and the Overdos)—not of poets or their chosen mock-heroes.

The background role played by Pope's mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* in "Tam" is played by Eliot's *The Wasteland* in MacDiarmid's poem. But it is not T. S. Eliot who is being echoed when Hugh MacDiarmid adopts a drunken speaker, a nocturnal moonlit setting, and a body-based subject matter: all these come from Burns, as does the exuberant refusal of any ostentatious high seriousness. And yet the differences are more striking than the similarities. MacDiarmid does, in some sections of *A Drunk Man*, have a mind to catalogue enormities, as in his bitter indictment of the outcome of the General Strike. And he exhibits almost none of Burns's fundamental fondness for the human body—for sins and also virtues of the flesh. In *A Drunk Man*, MacDiarmid's speaker tends to deny that he is embodied by his body: "I canna feel it has to dae wi' me."<sup>4</sup> MacDiarmid's speaker cannot rest in appreciative contemplation, as Burns's so often do, of the body as a source of pleasurable sensation and response. The flesh is not for MacDiarmid a solution but very much part of the problem of existence—the sign of the Cradle-and-Coffin, the skeleton-at-the-feast. An utter absence of pleasurable response is emphasized even in the final two lines of MacDiarmid's poem, spoken by the speaker's absent wife. "Jean's" projected rejoinder to some 2,600 preceding lines of inspired reverie, including the speaker's final comment "O I ha'e Silence left," is merely tart and deflating: "'—'And weel ye micht,' / Sae Jean'll say, 'efter sic a nicht!'" (ll. 2684-5).

*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is curiously like Burns's "Death and Dr. Hornbook" in this arbitrary closure. Burns's poem, like MacDiarmid's, ends very abruptly and may even have been excluded by Burns from the Kilmarnock edition of 1786 because the poet regarded it as unfinished. Similarly, well-known legend has it that *A Drunk Man* eluded final form until MacDiarmid sought help from his former schoolmaster, the composer F. G. Scott, who not only suggested how the various parts should be arranged, but himself wrote Jean's two concluding lines. The conclusion of *A Drunk Man* is like "Tam o' Shanter" in giving the last word to the voice of the prosaic and the prudent. Burns's concluding moral, which might have been drafted by Tam's long-tongued but also long-suffering wife Kate, is as follows:

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,  
Ilk man and mother's son, take heed:  
Whene'er to drink you are inclin'd,  
Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,

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<sup>4</sup>*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Poetry*, ed. Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (New York, 1992), p. 37, l. 329. Subsequent references are to the line numbers as given in this edition.

Think, ye may buy the joys o'er dear,  
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.<sup>5</sup>

The superego is handed these final moralizing lines, but the heart and soul of Burns's most ebullient poem lie elsewhere, in Tam's scene with the joyously libidinous witches.<sup>6</sup> In MacDiarmid's poem, the absent wife Jean, though more respectfully considered than Tam's wife Kate in "Tam," nonetheless performs Kate's role as the housebound wife whose prudence is administered ultimately as a kind of antidote to poetic flight and whose scoldings about drunkenness are earlier dismissed by the Drunk Man as just so much "natter, natter, natter" (in *l.* 164, where Jean's "natter" rhymes with, and deflates, an earlier echo of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" in *l.* 161 "water! water!").

Jean's unimpressed final rejoinder, like the final moral of "Tam o' Shanter," may seem arbitrary and insufficient precisely because the entire text of *A Drunk Man* is already a rejoinder—not only to the poems of Burns but to a hundred other poets and texts echoed within it. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* could be read not only as MacDiarmid's belated modernist rendering of Burns's themes but also as the thundering vernacular rejoinder that Burns never received in 1785 or 1786 from David Sillar, John Lapraik, and the rest of the local poets he addressed in all those dialect verse-epistles so deeply preoccupied with the status of poetry in Scots and the boundaries between the local, the national and the international in poetry. It may have taken 140 years, but Hugh MacDiarmid finally does respond to the issues raised by Burns.

Early in "Death and Dr. Hornbook," Burns's young narrator confidently confesses to what he defines as a slight overindulgence in ale:

The Clachan yill had made me canty,  
I was na fou, but just had plenty;  
I stacher'd whyles, but yet took tent ay  
    To free the ditches;  
An' hillocks, stanes, an' bushes kenn'd ay  
    Frae ghaists an' witches.

The rising Moon began to glow  
The distant *Cumnock* hills out-owre;  
To count her horns, wi' a' my pow'r,

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<sup>5</sup>*Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), II, 564, *ll.* 219-24. Henceforth *Poems*.

<sup>6</sup>Because of the gap between the beggars' sentimental, idealistic songs and their actual (self-serving, self-destructive, aggressive) behavior, the anarchic and revolutionary values they articulate in "Love and Liberty"—"Courts for Cowards were erected," etc.—actually are undercut. Cf. my note to "Love and Liberty" in *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, ed. Carol McQuirk (London, 1993), pp. 220-23.

I set mysel,  
But whether she had three or four,  
I cou'd na tell.

I was come round about the hill,  
And todlin down on *Willie's mill*,  
Setting my staff wi' a' my skill,  
To keep me sicker;  
Tho' leeward whyles, against my will,  
I took a bicker.

I there wi' *Something* does forgather  
That pat me in an eerie swither; (*Poems*, I, 79-80)

MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man* opens with an echo of these stanzas from "Hornbook," but it is an ironic and revisionary echo in its emphasis on waning energy:

I amna' fou' sae muckle as tired—deid dune.  
It's gey and hard wark coupin' gless for gless  
Wi' Cruivie and Gilsanquhar and the like,  
And I'm no' juist as bauld as aince I was. (*ll.* 1-4)

In adopting Burns's motifs, as here, MacDiarmid often undercuts them by removing Burns's emphasis on comfort taken from good fellowship and community. Unlike Tam o' Shanter's "glorious" hours at the tavern in Ayr, the speaker's drinking bout with Cruivie, Gilsanquhar and the rest is remembered resentfully as hard and tedious work. Unlike Tam or the unnamed speaker of "Hornbook," MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man* cannot "free the ditches" but begins with a fall. Lying in a moonlit ditch, immobilized but not silenced (rather like James Joyce's Dubliners), MacDiarmid's narrator contemplates the thistles and bracken. Sometimes he slips into Burnsian octosyllabics even as he echoes and revises Burns:

I canna ride awa' like Tam,  
But e'en maun bide juist whaur I am. (*ll.* 833-4)

Unlike the speaker of "Hornbook," who has Death to converse with, and unlike Tam o' Shanter, who has Nanny and the female community of witches to contemplate, MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man* is solitary, reduced to soliloquy and dramatic monologue—to which, as mentioned, only a distinctly insufficient and unsympathetic response will be forthcoming. Community, relationship and rejoinder—those evidences of human interconnectiveness in which Burns takes such comfort and delight—are not absent in MacDiarmid, but they are unstable and phantasmagoric. The speaker's musings on Scottish community and identity in *A Drunk Man* are continuously being projected, constructed, and

dismantled as he observes and explores the alternately lovely and grotesque transformations of the thistle.

Burns assaults the smug virtue of the “unco guid” in his epistle to Jamie Smith; their rigidity is counterpointed by his and Jamie’s likely more zigzag and storm-tossed course on the sea of life: “Ye are sae *grave*,” Burns’s speaker mockingly informs the righteous, “nae doubt ye’re *wise*” (*Poems*, I, 183). MacDiarmid shares Burns’s decided preference for Scottish sinners over Scottish men of property:

And O! to think that there are members o’  
St Andrews Societies sleepin’ soon’,

\* \* \*

*Nae doot they’re sober*, as a Scot ne’er was,  
Each tether’d to a punctual-snorin’ missus,  
Whilst I, *puir fule*, owre continents unkennt  
And wine-dark oceans wander like Ulysses. . . (ll. 385-6; 397-400; emphasis added)

Incidentally, the feminine rhyme in that last stanza—most unusual in modernist poetry—recalls Burns’s habitual double and feminine rhyme: “hose well” / “Boswell” in “The Author’s Earnest Cry”; “unsought for” / “fought for” / “unwrought for” in “A Poet’s Welcome,” etc.

Images associated with Burns are sometimes provided by MacDiarmid with an updated political edge. In famous lines from his first epistle to La-praik, for example, Burns prays to his Muse: “Gie me ae spark o’ Nature’s fire, / That’s a’ the learning I desire” (*Poems*, I, 87). MacDiarmid’s revision in “The Weapon” section of *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930) transforms these lines to: “Scots steel temper’d wi’ Irish fire, / Is the weapon I desire.” Another example: Burns’s song “A red red Rose” was considered by Yeats to contain the purest lyric images in all Burns’s work; but when the song’s central image is appropriated by MacDiarmid in a famous section of *A Drunk Man* (sometimes titled “Ballad of the General Strike,” sometimes “Ballad of the Crucified Rose”), the red red rose is politicized, signifying the brief hope awakened by the initial success of the General Strike. The red rose—a symbol of reform, unlike the reactionary, Jacobite “little white rose of Scotland” of a later poem by MacDiarmid “that breaks the heart”—is crucified, so that another failure of sympathetic rejoinder is stressed in this section of *A Drunk Man*. “The Ballad of the Crucified Rose” documents the rose’s final martyrdom at the hands of the community:

A rose loup’t oot and grew, until  
It was ten times the size  
O’ ony rose the thistle afore  
Had heistit to the skies. (ll. 1155-8)

\* \* \*

And still it grew until it seemed  
The hail braid earth had turned  
A reid reid rose that in the lift  
Like a ball o' fire burned. (*ll.* 1163-6)

\* \* \*

Syne the rose shrivelled suddenly  
As a balloon is burst;  
The thistle was a ghaistly stick,  
As gin it had been curst.

Was it the ancient vicious sway  
Imposed itsel' again,  
Or nerve owre weak for new emprise  
That made the effort vain, (*ll.* 1171-8)

\* \* \*

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

Let Deils rejoice to see the waste,  
The fond hope brocht to nocht.  
The thistle in their een is as  
A favourite lust they've wrocht. (*ll.* 1191-8)

\* \* \*

Like connoisseurs the Deils gang roond  
And praise its attitude,  
Till on the Cross the silly Christ  
To fidge fu' fain's begood! (*ll.* 1207-10)

MacDiarmid, moving between embittered echoes of "A red red Rose" and "Tam o' Shanter" (the deil who plays pipes for the witches' dance likewise "fidges fu' fain" at the marvels of human anatomy the witches' dance reveals), betrays none of Burns's sneaking fondness for the deil. A later section of *A Drunk Man*, "The Thistle's Characteristics," comically echoes the language both of "A red, red Rose" and Lady Nairne's Jacobite song "Will Ye No Come Back Again," though MacDiarmid's politics preclude any sympathy for Burns's nostalgic Jacobitism, let alone the Lady Nairne's:

Wull a' the seas gang dry at last  
(As dry as I am gettin' noo),  
Or wull they aye come back again,  
Seilfu' as my neist drink to me, (*ll.* 1379-82)



The lines that immediately follow these echo central images from another of Burns's early mock-epics, "Scotch Drink":

Food fills the wame, an' keeps us livin:  
Tho' life's a gift no worth receivin (*Poems*, I, 174)

Burns's lines are tinged with a certain gloom, deepened in MacDiarmid's adaptation:

Yet but fer drink and drink's effects,  
The yeast o' God that barm in us,  
We nicht as weel no' be alive. (*ll.* 1401-03)

*A Drunk Man* has many comic and lighter moments, for MacDiarmid does not darken or embitter all of his literary borrowings. As his source-images in Burns are usually genial and comic (or typically are read that way by the Burns audience MacDiarmid is chastising in *A Drunk Man*), MacDiarmid places his own stamp on these images by recasting them in more disillusioned terms and contexts. By contrast, with a somber or sacred literary source such as the sublime first command of God in Genesis, MacDiarmid's revision will lighten and undercut: "'Let there be Licht,' said God, and there was / A little" (*ll.* 2101-02). MacDiarmid's comic variations on sober sources are typically offered as a punishment for sentiment, as in his dismissive echo of the Lady Nairne, or of overly metaphysical high-mindedness. Yeat's poem "Among School Children," written in June 1926, nonetheless must have been known to MacDiarmid that same year, for *A Drunk Man* impudently recasts "How can we know the dancer from the dance," its evocative final question:

Guid sakes, I'm in a dreidfu' state.  
I'll ha'e nae inklin' sune  
Gin I'm the drinker or the drink,  
The thistle or the mune. (*ll.* 448-49)

I will conclude with MacDiarmid's provocative war-cry "Dunbar, not Burns!" Given this well-publicized slogan, MacDiarmid's protest in *Lucky Poet* that "my attitude to Burns has been sorely misunderstood" seems distinctly disingenuous (p. 191). And yet it is almost always Burns's sentiment, not his artistry, that Hugh MacDiarmid challenges. MacDiarmid always included Burns in what he called the Scottish poetic trinity: "I have been hailed in many quarters as the greatest Scottish poet since Burns. . . or—the way I prefer it put—as one of a trinity with Burns and Dunbar" (*Lucky Poet*, p. 175). In *A Drunk Man*, MacDiarmid's comparison of Robert Burns with Jesus Christ—"As Kirks wi' Christianity ha'e dune, / Burns Clubs wi' Burns" (*ll.* 109-10)—not only places Burns as a member of the Scottish poetic trinity but also as the linchpin figure, the ever-doomed, ever-resurrected redeemer.

MacDiarmid once assailed Keith Henderson's biographical compilation *Burns by Himself*, which attempted to combat the Burns myth by restricting biography to direct quotation only of the poet's own words. MacDiarmid angrily insisted, however, that it is not a poet's words in describing his life but only a poet's words as used in his poems that matter: "[Henderson's book] sheds no light whatever on the two most important points about Burns—his reversion to Scots from English . . . and that inflexible core of purpose. . . . [Burns] exercised all along a wonderful self-control and tenacity of purpose in regard to what mattered most—[his writing]" (*Lucky Poet*, p. 192). When MacDiarmid praises Burns's continuing productivity as a poet throughout his difficult life—that "inflexible core of purpose"—he is challenging the myth of decline that underlies popular misconceptions about Burns. But MacDiarmid's singling out as the most important point about Burns his so-called "reversion to Scots" is even more interesting. For MacDiarmid may have been the first modern critic of Burns to stress how significant it is that Burns did not write in the Scots dialect merely as a matter of course, or "naturally." (Raymond Bentman also emphasized this in his excellent 1987 Twayne guide to Burns.) MacDiarmid reminds us that Burns chose Scottish vernacular only after an apprenticeship writing in the standard and near-standard English of such early lyrics as "Song Composed in August" and "Mary Morison." And MacDiarmid's earliest poetry (published under the name Christopher Grieve) was likewise not written in Scots but in standard English. Despite the differences in tone and tenor produced by *A Drunk Man's* tendency to contradict at the same time that it echoes earlier poets and texts, there is still one element that Burns and MacDiarmid share: a "reversion to Scots," or self-conscious adult choice of Scottish dialect as the vehicle for poetry that bridges the local, national and international. If the bridge of Doon becomes the poem's symbolic as well as Tam's literal goal in "Tam o' Shanter," the forming of the "sentrice" or arch is just as central to human behavior in *A Drunk Man*: "we maun braird anither tip / Oot owre us ere we wither tae, / And join the sentrice skeleton / As coral insects big their reefs" (ll. 1511-14).

Both MacDiarmid and Burns adopted new names as part of their self-fashioning as vernacular bards, Christopher Grieve transforming himself at age thirty into Hugh MacDiarmid and Burns at twenty-eight simplifying from Burness to Burns. Burns chose the name by which he would be known to posterity while circulating the subscription list for his first volume of poems "chiefly in Scottish"; and he had chosen Scottish dialect several years earlier only after encountering by chance the brilliant and cosmopolitan dialect poems of Robert Fergusson: Burns's earlier work is written in standard English. MacDiarmid's revisitings of Burns's imagery, language, and subject-matter in *A Drunk Man* likewise stem from MacDiarmid's close and mature study of Burns's prosody and other poetic practice. For, as MacDiarmid writes in *Lucky Poet*, "[Burns] was taboo in my father's house and quite unknown to me as a boy" (p. 191). Hugh MacDiarmid's relationship with Burns, like Burns's with

Robert Fergusson, was first begun and later intensified as a result of MacDiarmid's own adult commitment to writing in Scots. MacDiarmid's re-invention of Burns's images and language in *A Drunk Man* follows the same pattern as Burns's re-invention of Fergusson: despite frequent correspondences of imagery, language, and even plot—as in the very close relationship of Fergusson's "Leith Races" to Burns's "The Holy Fair"—what is really striking is each poet's transformation of his predecessor.

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