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Stuart MacGregor, *The Sinner*. London. Calder and Boyars Ltd. 1973. 256 pp. £2.50.

Published soon after MacGregor's death in a car accident in Jamaica, *The Sinner* reveals how much literary talent has been prematurely cut off. His novel deserves serious consideration as a work of literature for the scope of its theme and the brilliance of its style. In Denis Sellars, MacGregor has given us a memorable portrait of a wordmaker, a man battling against the sense of fatalism and doom which is his Scottish heritage, and against the falsity of contemporary synthetic culture. One of its minor themes is psychic foreknowledge, and an incident in the novel eerily prefigures the tragic circumstances of the author's own death.

In title and theme *The Sinner* recalls James Hogg, but Denis Sellars is a guilt-ridden hero, a victim of the Scottish version of azenbite of inwit. A Calvinistic sense of sin haunts his imagination as a vision of Mad John stalking the streets of the city. His sin is not named in the novel, yet it is clearly despair, for Sellars is searching for a reason to go on living. The novel begins with his contemplation of a handful of Nembutal pills and ends shortly after his second attempt at suicide has been forestalled. His persistent death wish also erupts in destructive acts—brawling, near betrayal of those closest to him. He finds hope in Kate, the mother-wife, everkiss from outhwit, and the progress of their relationship is convincingly charted through low-keyed conversations.

The dour influence of Mad John is also behind the failure of Nichol Ross, Denis, and others to stage a performance in the Festival which will revive the true Scottish tradition. It is Hackett, promoter of commercial folk music who reigns in modern Scotland, a blighted land in which balconies fall from shoddily built apartments. MacGregor makes numerous symbolic connections between the private life of Denis Sellars and the public one: his twin brother Rob is a television star, Nichol Ross may be their father, Hackett tries to get Denis as a replacement for Rob. Lisa, the folk singer who goes over to Hackett, becomes for Denis the "irresponsible fuck," a theme which he condemns in modern popular music. Kate, whom Denis had dismissed as lacking in poetic sensitivity, writes an outstanding folk song. All these characters show us facets of Denis's creative ability

—its sources, its potential misuse, its close connection with his emotional life. Unfortunately Ross, the key figure in this symbolic pattern, is the least convincing character in the book.

To Denis, Ross is the fulfilment of his need for a personal and cultural father figure, and need obscures his ability to understand Ross as an individual. He remains a mystery to Denis, and since we see everything as Denis sees it, to the reader as well—his mysticism and psychic powers may be fake, his compassion does not accord with his egotism. After his death, Ross leaves a mysterious manuscript which is a mixture of many modes of communication (cultural symbolism again), but the novel ends with Denis still trying to decipher it, while Kate ties up the loose ends of the plot in a letter to a friend. One suspects that MacGregor does not believe in Ross except as a necessary hypothesis.

The most outstanding feature of *The Sinner* is its dazzling style. Although MacGregor's style is Joycean in some respects, it is spare rather than expansive. He conveys the essence of an action with sharpness and economy, and the narrative moves at a rapid, almost a breathless pace:

The song had uglified to a gurgle of words, a wild lock—vomiting head-shake; her body bent with racking sobs, the swarthy men trying to comfort her, another dark woman screaming. Nichol rose gallant. Arnold Schulz following. Kate nodded, patted my hand, you go help as well, darling, but I had seen Murdo's sudden snarl.

As well as having access to the thoughts and feelings of Denis Sellars, we are in touch with the solid reality of the world around him. He is intensely conscious of human beings, especially the faces and gestures of his friends, and of the details of everyday life in the city of Edinburgh. The dialogue is convincingly homely and flavoured with the dialect.

Sellars's mind has a different quality from that of a Joycean hero. He is not primarily a thinker, and his literary conversations with friends are incantatory evocations of the spirit of Scottish literature. He is capable of sudden, irrational acts in response to his strong feelings, some of which are fantastically humorous. He is most deeply moved by the lyrical simplicity of a folk song as it extracts the pure essence of feeling from the chaos which surrounds him. It is through the prose style of the novel that we come to understand the personality of Denis Sellars; his anger, hysteria and sentimentality are

countered by moods of humour and biting irony, and by his rich imagination which plays with metaphor and fantasy:

I jumped the last four steps, people watching, slowed down for the sake of reverence. Settle and lean against a Norman arch of ageing stone, face bowed into shadow, I loved her you know, although on second thoughts her stone says COLIN NIMMO (1818-74). Peaceful here, no movement around to disturb the dead. Earthy quiet fresh smell. Listen. Bubble. Grass growing again, the dead never learn. Nitrogen feeding slender green blade and so to cowbelly to the filth that makes me sick. Colin Nimmo, I've a mind to dig you up. Good old Burke and Hare. Helio crocus tips slithering through a glance of old snow, Bless you, little lover, I'd like you for Kate.

Sellars's extreme responsiveness has a touch of hysteria about it, and the tone of the novel might seem shrill were it not for the fact that he is never quite predictable—he is just as likely to take a comic as a tragic view of his situation. It is this mixture of tones which makes *The Sinner* such a gripping novel. MacGregor had not yet achieved perfection of form in his prose writing and was still searching for a controlled approach to his material, yet the novel is very much alive with a deeply felt experience of the quality of life in a particular place at a particular time—modern Edinburgh—and of a wordmaker's attempts to contact the living spirit beneath the drab surface of the city. As such, *The Sinner* should be considered as a contribution to modern Scottish literature.

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