'Like Pushkin, I': Hugh MacDiarmid and Russia

Patrick Crotty
University of Aberdeen

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Hugh MacDiarmid has never enjoyed the canonical status his acolytes consider his due. Those acolytes have dwindled in number since the 1970s and ’80s, and, as the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century approaches, there is scant evidence of live interest in the poet’s achievement anywhere in the world, least of all his native Scotland.

One reason for this is that MacDiarmid, as Seamus Heaney ruefully remarked, “gave his detractors plenty to work with”; quite apart from indulging in cultural and political opining sufficiently provocative for the public at large to dismiss him as a crank, he published a dismaying amount of slipshod and even banal verse, mainly in his later years. The bulk of the poetry for which the highest claims have been made is written in Scots, with the inferior material committed to an all too accessible English – a fact that leaves few who casually encounter the latter with much inclination to invest the effort requisite to engagement with the former. And that is to say nothing of the work’s pervasive elitism, so out of kilter with the discourses of equality and diversity that dominate contemporary poetry

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commentary. (If MacDiarmid’s elitism was no more deep-seated than that of the securely canonical Yeats and Eliot, it was far shriller in articulation.)

Subtler problems work against the reputation also. The poetry tends to slip through the net of attempts to characterise it: even the most authoritative among the dozen or so critical monographs devoted to it have little space left after their dutiful tracking of the twists and turns of the career for communicating a sense of the electricity and revelation that mark the oeuvre at its luminous, richly diverse best.

Perhaps nothing has inflicted more damage on MacDiarmid’s legacy than the belief that he has been “outed” as a plagiarist. Charges of poetic plagiarism typically rely on Romantic aesthetics of sincerity and an associated faith in the status of lyric as expression of feeling. MacDiarmid repudiated such aesthetics, insisting again and again that poetry derives from words rather than emotions or ideas. He prefaced Annals of the Five Senses (1923), his first, patronymically-ascribed monograph, with an acknowledgement that the “strange fish” contained therein were to be viewed “through a strong solution of books.” The revelation that he had based a lyric in The Islands of Scotland (1939) on three consecutive sentences from a story by the Welsh writer Glyn Jones (1900-1995) gave rise to a famous controversy in the Letters pages of the Times Literary Supplement after the piece in question (“Perfect”) had been singled out for praise in a review of Collected Poems (1962). TLS readers may have been left with the impression that authorial perfidy had been proven, yet it remains the case that “Perfect” was not a poem until MacDiarmid created it out of materials (mainly) supplied by Jones, and that the title, epigraph and artful line divisions make a significant contribution to the impact of the whole.

MacDiarmid’s devotion to a secularised version of the Johannine In principio erat Verbum offers an extreme instance of a familiar modernist trait that links him to James Joyce and Dylan Thomas – two writers he repeatedly eulogised – as well as to his younger compatriot W. S. Graham and to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing and related currents in twentieth-century poetics that share an ultimate source in Stéphane Mallarmé’s privileging of the signifier over the signified. He acted on his belief in the Word by looking to the most obvious place – the printed page – for the stuff of his art. Not only Scots dictionary entries but passages from poems, songs, stories, novels, travel books, literary histories, journal articles and newspaper reviews provided the “inspiration” for his emphatically (if at times covertly) bookish brand of lyricism. In many cases, identifying its underlying text or texts no more deprives a MacDiarmid poem of interest

than identifying an artist’s paint supplier robs a painting of its worth. At
their most highly charged, indeed, the poems call their sources into play,
setting off delicate reverberations and facilitating intertextual dynamics of
varying degrees of complexity.

It would be misleading nonetheless to present MacDiarmid as a selfless
avatar of modernist intertextuality. His most impressive poetry transfigures
its raw materials, certainly, but some of his less energetic writing scarcely
goes beyond transcribing them. Few aspects of his career illustrate as many
points along the spectrum from transcription to transfiguration as his
decades-long involvement with Russia and Russian literature. The
Stalinism that led him to re-join the Communist Party of Great Britain in
1956, when thousands were resigning their membership in protest at the
Soviet intervention in Hungary, was the best known and most derided of
his Russian passions. That this ostensibly “real world” affiliation was
every bit as bookish in origin as the poetry’s frequent citation of aphorisms
by the ardently anti-Bolshevik Leo Shestov was a fact the poet hid from
the public, and perhaps even from himself.

MacDiarmid’s interest in Russia had begun as a literary and
philosophical one, and when, in the early 1930s, he began (albeit
tentatively at first) to embrace Bolshevism as a cure for the problems that
had made the country appear to Dostoevsky and other apocalyptic writers
of the late Tsarist period to be the Sick Man of Europe, he was following
the example of his mentor in Russian matters, the literary historian D. S.
Mirsky (1890-1939). Though he wrote a harsh review of Mirksy’s Modern
Russian Literature for the New Age (25 June 1925), MacDiarmid soon
came to admire him, and five of Mirsky’s books on Russian literature and
politics were to provide important source material for the poetry in the
years 1926 to 1932. Edwin Muir, a friend of both men, drew A Drunk Man
Looks at the Thistle (1926) to Mirsky’s attention shortly after publication.4

4 An aristocrat and son of a Tsarist minister, Mirsky served as a White officer in the
Civil War. Escaping to England, he lectured on Russian literature at the School of
Slavonic Studies at King’s College London for a decade from 1922. (MacDiarmid’s early supporter and translator Denis Saurat was Professor of French
at King’s during the same period.) Increasing alienation from both the Bloomsbury
“set” and the émigré community gradually led Mirsky to embrace communism; he
returned to the Soviet Union in 1932 and perished in the Gulag seven years later. A
scrupulous account by Mirsky’s biographer G. S. Smith of the Russian critic’s
correspondence with the Scottish poet is hampered by incomplete access to the
relevant sources and by the author’s evident (and, given the dearth of detailed
critical commentary, understandable) bafflement before MacDiarmid’s poetry: G.
S. Smith, “Mirskii and MacDiarmid: A Relationship and an Exchange of Letters
MacDiarmid’s later account of his interest in Russia has distorted the chronology. In the 1970s, he claimed to have been more deeply moved during his service with the Royal Army Medical Corps in World War I by the Easter Rising in Dublin and the October Revolution in Petrograd than by any event directly associated with the War itself. The assertion reads back into his early years the Scottish separatist and international communist enthusiasms with which he had since become identified. The epistolary and journalistic record, conversely, suggests that the poet’s concern with both Ireland and Russia post-dated his demobilisation, and developed out of a conscious search for parallels to the cultural awakening for which he began agitating in the early 1920s. As his campaign for a Scottish renaissance gathered pace, a relentless stream of poems, newspaper articles and reviews complemented the editorials of his own periodicals in alluding to American, Belgian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Dutch, French, German, Greek (“Cretan”), Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Provençal, Serbo-Croat, Spanish and Swiss literary precedent, the national and regional examples proliferating in service to an almost berserker attempt to jolt Scottish literary aspiration from what he saw as the torpor of its default British frame of reference.

I: Russia in the Early Work (English and Scots)

Russia joined the international chorus early, by way of a pseudonymous article in the Edinburgh Evening News of 18 January 1921 in which “A. K. L.” argued for the Bolshevik character of Robert Burns’s politics – Grieve may still have been more than a decade away from endorsing communism but he had already mastered the knack of going for the jugular of respectable opinion. The editorial of the first (October 1922) issue of the Scottish Chapbook praised Shestov as “that epigrammatic metaphysician.”

Four months previously, on 10 June 1922, Grieve’s earliest known poem on a Russian subject had been posted at the end of the first of two batches of “Scoto-Russian Notes” contributed under his own name to that and the
following week’s issue of the Dunfermline Press. “To Andrey Biely,” a strained (and still uncollected) sonnet, had been composed, he explained there, in response to “reading” Christ is Arisen. A 1918 sequence of fragmentary meditations on the Revolution, Hristos voskres is regarded as one of Biely’s weaker productions, and consequently, unlike his novels and short stories, it has never appeared in an English language edition. Far from encountering the sequence in the original, Grieve knew it only through ten brief translated extracts quoted in “New Tendencies in Russian Thought,” an unsigned Times Literary Supplement leading article of 20 January 1921. The TLS piece (now known to have been written by Carl Eric Bechhofer Roberts) provided fodder also for the 10 June “Notes” more generally – half of them amount to little more than lightly edited borrowings from it. One might be forgiven for dismissing the “Notes” as the work of a charlatan pretending to an expertise he did not possess. Yet it can be argued that they exhibit high faith along with bad faith: bending the columns of a local newspaper to discussion of avant-garde developments in European poetry as part of an effort to create the intellectual conditions necessary for a national renaissance takes courage, albeit of a quixotic kind.

Other eyebrow-raising affectations of familiarity with Russian literature in the early 1920s are not far to seek. “U Samago Moria,” an English sonnet published in the March 1923 number of Grieve’s Scottish Chapbook and included three years later in MacDiarmid’s Penny Wheep, marries a summary of the storyline of the elegiac ballad by Anna Akhmatova named in the title (“At the Very Edge of the Sea” in English) to a vivid phrase from the Proteus episode of Joyce’s Ulysses. On 8 May 1923 “The Editor” of the Scottish Nation claimed in “Lermontov: A Russo-Scottish Genius” that the key to the Romantic poet and novelist’s characteristic “fusion” of contradictory qualities was to be found in his patrilineal link through the soldier George Learmonth (d.1633) to the antithetical disposition G. Gregory Smith notoriously termed “the Caledonian antisyzygy.” A review by Grieve in the London New Age of 13 November 1924 hailed František Kupka’s Básníci Revolučního Ruska as “the only thoroughly comprehensive account of the poetry of revolutionary Russia that has yet appeared,” lauding the study’s “masterly analysis of the physical, psychological, philosophical, and political ‘conditioning’ of creative effort in Russia” (MacDiarmid, The Raucle Tongue, 1: 196-98). The reviewer went on to call for the book to be made available in English – as well he might, given that he could read no Czech.

8 Reprinted in MacDiarmid, The Raucle Tongue, 1: 60-64.
The familiar story that C. M. Grieve was transformed into Hugh MacDiarmid in August 1922 when he took to composing poetry in Scots gives the misleading impression that the writer with the latter name supplanted the one with the former. The Scots lyrics were attributed to Hugh M’Diarmid, it is true. (It took a decade for the spelling to stabilise as “MacDiarmid”.) Far from vanishing, however, Grieve kept up his campaign for cultural regeneration and his career as an Anglophone writer. The activities of a troop of lesser pseudonymous self-projections (Isobel Guthrie, Tom Thumb, J. G. Outerstone Buglass, etc.) further complicate the narrative. Though the poems and prose sketches of Annals of the Five Senses were completed long before their belated printing in May 1923, new English lyrics bearing the Grieve patronym were published in increasing variety, quantity and quality in the three years after the emergence of MacDiarmid. While not without interest, they nowhere match the vivacity of the Scots material. It is easier to recognise than wholly to account for the superiority of the Scots poems. Unexpected rhythms, precisely evoked particulars and elliptical syntax are among the factors that make them strike the ear as speech emanating from a distinctive, coherent and frequently profound source. One earnest of the success of the lyrics and A Drunk Man in enacting authority is provided by the contrast between the ways those works and their English counterparts deploy Russian-derived subject matter. In a reversal of the terms of Stevenson’s fable, it is as if MacDiarmid, a Dr Jekyll miraculously brought to being by Grieve’s Mr Hyde, was endowed with a capacity to respond with imaginative gusto and virtuoso verbal ingenuity to the patchy knowledge of Russian literature he shared with his creator, who never managed to make very much of it.

There is, arguably, no great mystery about that capacity: the psychology of the Borderer who has had to repress his native dialect to get on in the world, and the (not unconnected) conviction of the nationalist that English abets the false consciousness into which the Union has betrayed Scotland, go a considerable way towards explaining the sense of release and discovery attendant upon MacDiarmid’s resort to Scots. The constriction / liberation dichotomy can be illustrated by contrasting “Hymn to Sophia: The Wisdom of God,” a lyric by Grieve published in the Scottish Chapbook in July 1923, to “Sea-Serpent” (from Penny Wheep), a middle-length fantasia by MacDiarmid with which it shares an ideational background. The casting of the English poem in the form of a hymn may have been intended to mitigate the didacticism implicit in its expository approach to the evolutionary theology of Vladimir Solovyov:

Yet shall Creation turn to thee
When, love being perfect, naught can die,
And clod and plant and animal
And star and sky,

Thy form immortal and complete,
Matter and spirit one, acquire,

*Ceaseless till then, O sacred Shame,*
*Our wills inspire!*

(ll.13-20)\(^{10}\)

The “Shame” of the penultimate line is presumably our human awareness of how divorced from the Deity we remain, despite the efforts of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, to reconcile the universe to God. Why then the vocative case, it might be asked, given that the lyric as a whole is supposed to be addressed to Sophia? The stiff diction and contorted syntax succeed only in drawing attention to the conceptual confusion. Such stilted and archaic tonalities find no echo in the Scots poem, a self-delighting, self-justifying embodiment of its eponymous sea-beast’s movements through space and time. However dubious its linking of snake imagery from the Ophite Gnosticism used by Solovyov to tropes associated with the Miðgarðsormr (World Serpent) of Norse mythology, “Sea-Serpent” brings such aplomb to the conduct of its primary business – making the monster’s exhilarating motion present to the reader – that questions of the provenance of its materials and even of the intellectual coherence of its vision fade into insignificance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And the serpent’s turned like a wud sin’ syne} \\
\text{That canna be seen for the trees} \\
\text{Or’s tint as the mid-day sun is tint} \\
\text{In the glory o’ its rays,} \\
\text{And God has forgotten, it seems,} \\
\text{In the moniplied maze o’ the forms} \\
\text{The a’efauld form o’ the maze.} \\
\text{Whiles a blindin’ movement tak’s in my life} \\
\text{As a quick tide swallows a sea.} \\
\text{I feel like a star on a starry nicht,} \\
\text{A’e note in a symphony,} \\
\text{And ken that the serpent is movin’ still,} \\
\text{A movement that a’thing shares,} \\
\text{Yet it seems as tho’ it twines in a nicht} \\
\text{When God neither kens nor cares.}
\end{align*}
\]

\((CP\ 1,\ 49-50;\ ll.37-51)\(^{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) *The Scottish Chapbook*, July 1923, 354. A revised version (*CP* 1, 455) was incorporated in *Stony Limits and other poems* (1934).

\(^{11}\) *wud*: wood  *tint*: lost, hidden  *moniplied*: manifold  *a’efauld*: unitary  *a’thing*: everything  *twines*: twists
The Grieve text is a versified rendition of a philosophy that remains external to it, the MacDiarmid one a self-sustaining verbal artefact.  

The hundred or so Scots poems that predate *A Drunk Man* give relatively low prominence to Russian material. “Sea-Serpent” and (less obviously) “The Innumerable Christ” are indebted to Nathalie A. Duddington’s “The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov,” an article from the *Hibbert Journal* of April 1917 that the poet was to put to a variety of uses in his verse and journalistic prose over the years. “The Last Trump,” published in the final number of the *Scottish Chapbook* in 1923 and chosen for inclusion in *Sangschaw* two years later, turns a nearly contemporary Russian poem into an opportunity to renovate the Scots tradition of the comic grotesque. “The Aerial City,” a stylishly understated rendering of a nineteenth-century lyric, had to wait almost four decades for collection, and then only in a defective text, after its appearance in the *Glasgow Herald* of 25 May 1925. In accordance with the author’s habitual manner of claiming command of languages he didn’t speak, these poems were subtitled respectively “Suggested by the Russian of Dmitry Merezhkovsky” and “From the Russian of Afanasy Shensin-Foeth,” though their shared point of departure was the tonally uncertain English of Babette Deutsch and Avraham Yarmolinsky, whose 1921 New York compilation *Modern Russian Poetry: An Anthology* was issued in Britain in 1923.

II: *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*

The Deutsch-Yarmolinsky anthology provided raw material for MacDiarmid’s variations in *A Drunk Man* on Alexander Blok and Zanaida

12 Peter McCarey points out that it is not Solovyov’s philosophy itself but Grieve’s garbled understanding of an aspect of it that struggles for articulation in the lyric: McCarey, *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Russians* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), 47. McCarey’s study, gathering a wealth of information about the Russian background to MacDiarmid’s writing, might fairly be said to display a fuller and more sophisticated appreciation of Dostoevsky, Solovyov, Blok et al. than the poet did. Its focus on intellectual influence, however, perhaps rather misses the literal-minded basis of MacDiarmid’s creativity, understating his characteristic reliance on verbal stimuli and overestimating philosophical ambition at the expense of artistic intent and achievement.


Hippius, passages described by Mirsky 1931 as “the only real recreations of Russian poetry in English (if I may call it English).” The longest of them, which was given the unfortunate title “Poet’s Pub” when the sequence was split into separate sections for the 1962 Collected Poems, showpieces the alchemical power of MacDiarmid’s Scots. With his understanding of the context of the original in Blok’s life and work sharpened by Mirsky’s comments in Contemporary Russian Literature (1926), MacDiarmid transforms the inert language of Deutsch and Yarmolinsky’s “The Lady Unknown” into a supple and evocative medium replete with echoes of the Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer and Tennyson’s “The Splendour Falls.” While retaining a surprisingly high proportion of his source’s diction, he alters key narrative details in the interests not just of cadence and lyric suggestiveness but of subsuming the utterance to the world of A Drunk Man. Thus Blok’s restaurant becomes a pub, his Russian summer houses Scottish labourers’ cottages, his baker’s sign the inn’s sign, his derby-hatted dandies tam-o’-shantered teenagers, his speaker’s drinking crony a female freend whose reflection in a whisky tumbler prefigures the spectral arrival of the silken leddy, his sleepy table waiters gruff barmen struggling to keep up with their customers’ orders, and the unreadable erotic eyes on a distant shore the eyes of the sea-serpent that elsewhere in the sequence beckon to the Drunk Man from beneath the ocean. The poem is further absorbed into the texture of the larger work by the speaker’s uneasy awareness that his responsiveness to the silken lady compromises his fidelity to his wife Jean.

For all the brilliance of its Symbolist adaptations, A Drunk Man’s most significant debts to Russia are intellectual rather than poetic. The notion of chaos as a creative force that pervades and – as it were – underwrites the sequence reveals the influence of Shestov, who became the subject of a vogue in the New Age in the decade following the 1920 appearance of the “authorised” translation of All Things Are Possible. That thinker is never named, however, unlike Dostoevsky, whose surname is cited (twice) in the text itself and in three of the sixteen footnotes, and who is understood to be

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15 Letter dated 26 October 1931, in Dear Grieve: Letters to Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve), ed. by John Manson, with an introduction by Alan Riach (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2011), 39. Though Mirsky hails MacDiarmid in the letter as “one of the small number of poets of the European World,” he reveals the limits of his knowledge of the work when he goes on to ascribe the Blok and Hippius versions to Cencrastus rather than A Drunk Man.


the addressee of some of the later among the protagonist’s ruminations. Where ideas become the explicit focus of the monologue, they make their appearance, as in the oeuvre more generally, in terms of or in response to specific verbal formulations of them rather than by virtue of intrinsic conceptual force.

Much of the speculative brio for which the sequence has been admired arises out of vigorous exploration of the implications or associative possibilities of textual prompts from a relatively small body of reading. The fictionalized Dostoevsky who features as the protagonist’s gangrel buddy and alter-ego from l.1746 to l.2230 is brought to life from a biographical article by the poet Richard Church in the 20 May 1926 issue of the New Age. A good deal of the sequence’s other detail about the novelist and his thought derives from “Dostoyevsky and Certain of his Problems,” a series of ten essays by Janko Lavrin published in the same periodical from 17 January to 21 March 1918 and collected in book form in 1920.18 Most of the rest can be traced to passages from the English translation of the Polish scholar Aleksander Brückner’s A Literary History of Russia19 and from Mirsky’s Modern Russian Literature and Contemporary Russian Literature. This does not mean that MacDiarmid lacked first-hand knowledge of Dostoevsky’s work – the text offers equivocal evidence that he was familiar with Constance Garnett’s translations of “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” and The Brothers Karamazov, for instance – but rather that it was less the fiction itself than particular sentences and paragraphs from a finite number of discussions of it and of its creator that gave rise to the poetry.20

The invention MacDiarmid brings to bear on the passages chosen for manipulation can be prodigious. In adapting Church’s account of the religious dimension of Dostoevsky’s Slav nationalism for the Drunk Man’s declaration of messianic purpose in relation to Scotland, the ecstatic tetrameter couplets of ll.1998-2023 harvest details from the incidental figuration of their source to create metaphors more lively and daring than any attempted there. MacDiarmid avails himself of the elucidations of Lavrin and Mirsky at many points but suppresses his awareness of them in ll.1632-39 so that he can misread “God-bearing” and thereby engineer the

18 Janko Lavrin, Dostoevsky and His Creation; a Psycho-critical Study (London: Collins, 1920).
20 There are many references to Maurice Baring’s Landmarks in Russian Literature (London: Methuen, 1910) in MacDiarmid’s prose but the book never figures as a source for his poetry, a fact that helps allay any suspicion that his awareness of Russian matters was limited to the texts he used as creative fodder.
collision between Dostoevsky’s phrase and a Presbyterian colloquialism that generates the extravagantly expressionist lyric “I’m fu’ o’ a stickit God”.

Considered in terms of their overall impact, the sequence’s reworkings of its Russian materials highlight one of the central paradoxes of MacDiarmid’s career. Taking other people’s words as the occasion for poetry is usually understood as a strike against the notion of subjectivity: the acknowledgement of the social nature of language implied in such a recourse, or so the familiar critical argument runs, repudiates the “bourgeois” conception of interior life. In A Drunk Man, however, MacDiarmid’s borrowings become the building blocks of an enhanced subjectivity. He uses them to create a poetry that replaces the canny Scot of popular convention (represented in the satirical opening movement by the music hall star Harry Lauder) with a vision of his opposite, the un-canny Scot – a hero of consciousness whose mind is as deep and individuated as the mind of that despised stereotype is shallow and commonplace.

For all his garrulousness and alcoholic decrepitude, the Drunk Man aspires to the condition of the Uncanny Scot, and might even be said to embody it. That is why there is nothing ridiculous about his adoption of Dostoevsky as alter ego: the great nineteenth-century writer at once measures and guarantees the quality of the interior life of MacDiarmid’s protagonist, and the “spiritual inebriation” the novelist divined in the Slav character (a phrase upgraded to “divine inebriety” in line 2012) becomes the justification of his loquacious disciple’s very drunkenness. Far from being used to expose the “constructed” nature of subjectivity, the extrinsic, pre-existing materials drawn upon for key passages of the sequence are conscripted to serve an exalted notion of sensibility that has much in common with the High Romantic conception of genius: here, as elsewhere in his work, MacDiarmid simultaneously confirms and confounds received understandings of the nature of literary modernism.

At a climactic point in the monologue Dostoevsky and the Drunk Man are pictured as vagabonds roaming together through a blizzard that obscures the world:

\[\text{The wan leaves shak’ atour us like the snaw.}\]
\[\text{Here is the cavaburd in which Earth’s tint.}\]
\[\text{There’s naebody but Oblivion and us,}\]
\[\text{Puir gangrel buddies, waunderin’ hameless in’ t.}\]

\[\text{The stars are larochs o’ auld cottages,}\]
\[\text{And a’ Time’s glen is fu’ o’ blinnin’ stew.}\]
\[\text{Nae freen’ ly lozen skimmers: and the wund}\]
\[\text{Rises and separates even me and you.}\]
I ken nae Russian and you ken nae Scots.
We canna tell oor voices frae the wund.
The snaw is seekin’ everywhere: oor herts
At last like roofless ingles it has f’und,

And gethers there in drift on endless drift,
Oor broken herts that it can never fill;
And still – its leafs like snaw, its growth like wund –
The thistle rises and forever will! . . .

(CP 1, 151-52; ll.2215-30)\(^1\)

The imagery of abandoned cottages, roofless hearths and snowy, uninhabited expanses recalls the valley and wider environs of Kildermorie in Easter Ross as the poet knew them in the bitterly cold winter of 1920-21, when he was employed as caretaker of the estate’s shooting lodge and teacher to the gamekeeper’s children. In the aftermath of the 1790s “clearing” of long established communities to make way for sheep, the Gaelic language had gone into rapid decline throughout the area. Lacking a population to submit them to a gradual process of anglicisation, the place-names in the immediate vicinity of the estate – Loch Bad a Bhathaich, Loch A Chaorainn, Breantra – retain an unalloyed Gaelic character. As a child during summer holidays in a more southerly part of Rosshire, on the estate near Strathpeffer where his maternal uncle was a gamekeeper, Grieve had been fascinated to hear his uncle’s second wife speak Gaelic.\(^2\)

Many references in both his English and Scots poetry suggest that on his return to Rosshire in 1920 he was haunted by the emptiness of the landscape and by an awareness of the cultural death to which its ruined homesteads and inscrutable place-names bore witness. Kildermorie maintains a persistent, usually unnamed presence throughout his work, where it tends to be associated with numinous insight (as in, for example, “A Herd of Does” and the concluding lyric of A Drunk Man) or (as here and in “The Glen of Silence”) with the unrealised potential of Scottish Gaeldom.

\(^{1}\) *atour*: all over

\(^{2}\) *cavaburd*: thick fall of snow

*gangrel*: vagrant, vagabond

*buddies*: persons (“bodies”)

*larochs*: surviving foundations of ruined or abandoned buildings

*auld*: old

*fu’*: full

*stew*: swirling

*lozen*: window-pane

*skimmers*: glimmers

*wund*: wind

*ingles*: hearths

*f’und*: found

III: To Circumjack Cencrastus

The connection between Russia and the Gaelic world inaugurated by the comparison to a cleared Highland glen of the scene of the great novelist’s (imaginary) wanderings would be restated in a number of ways in MacDiarmid’s next major enterprise, To Circumjack Cencrastus (1930), which at 3,700 lines outruns A Drunk Man by more than a thousand lines. In ll.333-36 the speaker, very much the poet in propria persona, jokes that he hopes the Perthshire lake Lochan na Mna (“the Woman’s Tarn”) will be more responsive to him than Lake Saimaa was to Solovyov – a reference to the scandal that ensued in the 1890s when a feminine personification of the Finnish lake in one of the philosopher’s poems was misconstrued as a declaration of carnal desire for a young woman. Elsewhere, a comparison of Konstantin Leontiev to the eighteenth-century Highland poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair on the basis of their shared appreciation of the variousness of the natural world (ll.1045-50) serves to introduce a series of Russian-Gaelic pairings (ll.1076-1115) linking Fyodor Tyutchev, Shenshin-Foeth, Andrey Biely and Aleksey Koltzov to their supposed counterparts among Irish poets – Michael Comyn / Micheál Coimín (1688-1760), Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird (fl.1580-1616), Mathgamhain Ó hIlfearnáin (fl. late sixteenth, early seventeenth century) and Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird (fl. late sixteenth century). Derived as they were (in MacDiarmid’s by now characteristic manner) from readily accessible literary historical sources, the Irish Gaelic details have been subjected to little in the way of artistic processing and the poetic partnerings suggested on their basis consequently remain somewhat arbitrary.23

Among these, MacDiarmid’s pairing of Comyn / Coimín with Tyutchev constitutes an exception. Uncertainty as to whether the former’s name should be given in English or Irish underscores the dual nature of his identity: a Protestant land-owner from west Clare who “moonlighted” as a Gaelic poet, he suffered the posthumous indignity of having his manuscripts burned by his son for fear of the family’s being associated with the Jacobitical world of Gaeldom. The parallels with the case of Tyutchev, who conducted his personal and professional lives entirely in French but wrote his poems in Russian, were not only of obvious but of urgent relevance to MacDiarmid, who in the late 1920s was struggling to mine the Lowland lexicon with the success that had attended his earlier efforts, and finding his day-job as a producer of journalistic English

prose increasingly difficult to reconcile with his calling as a poet in Scots.

Initially presented without explanatory comment, the pairing of Russian with Gaelic poetic names receives a sketchy rationale three hundred or so lines later, when we hear of how

the emergence o’ the Russian Idea’s
Broken the balance o’ the North and Sooth
And needs a coonter that can only be
The Gaelic Idea
To mak’ a parallelogram o’ forces,
Complete the Defence o’ the West,
And end the English betrayal o’ Europe.

\( (CP 1, 222-223; ll.1415-21) \)

 Appropriation of Dostoevsky’s Russian Idea in the interests of Scottish national assertiveness may appear more eccentric in retrospect than it did in the inter-war years, when ideologues of all stripes were in the habit of adapting for their own ends the novelist’s neo-Herderian theories with regard to the historical missions of nations. In “World Affairs,” a \textit{New Age} piece of 24 February 1921, for example, “M. M. Cosmoi” (the Bosnian Serb utopian philosopher Dimitrije Mitrinović) sought to justify British imperial rule in India in terms of the necessity of maintaining the east-west balance intrinsic to “universal one-humanness”; he cited Solovyov’s St Sophia along with a range of categories drawn from Dostoevsky to support his case.

Such racially tinged, quasi-millennialist opining is distrusted nowadays not only because of its abstraction and essentialism but because of its association with the ideologies that issued in the Holocaust. MacDiarmid’s variation on it projects hostility towards British unionism and insufficiently Gaelic definitions of Scottish cultural identity onto a pseudo-geometrical vision of Europe that grandly enhances Gaeldom’s position in the scheme of things. Some of the detail missing from the \textit{Cencrastus} outline was supplied in July 1931 in the first part of a two-part essay the poet contributed to the \textit{Modern Scot} under the suitably portentous title “The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea”:

We in Scotland are at the opposite side of Europe [from Russia]. The old balance of Europe – between North and South – has been disrupted by the emergence of Russia. How is a quadrilateral of forces to be established? England partakes too much of Teutonic and Mediterranean influences; it is a composite – not a “thing-in-itself”. Only in Gaeldom can there be the necessary counter-idea to the Russian idea – one that does not run wholly counter to it, but supplements, corrects, challenges, and qualifies it. Soviet economics are confronted by the Gaelic system with its repudiation
of usury which finds its modern expression in Douglas economics. The dictatorship of the proletariat is confronted by the Gaelic commonwealth with its aristocratic culture—and the high place it gave to its poets and scholars. And so on. It does not matter a rap whether the whole conception of this Gaelic Idea is as far-fetched as Dostoevsky’s Russian Idea—in which he pictured Russia as the sick man possessed of devils but who would yet “sit at the feet of Jesus.” The point is that Dostoevsky’s was a great creative idea—a dynamic myth—and in no way devalued by the difference of the actual happenings in Russia from any Dostoevsky dreamed or desired. So we in Scotland (in association with the other Gaelic elements with whose aid we may reduce England to a subordinate role in the economy of these islands) need not care how future events belie our anticipations so long as we polarize Russia effectively—proclaim that relationship between freedom and genius, between freedom and thought, which Russia is denying—help to rebalance Europe in accordance with our distinctive genius—rediscover and manifest anew our dynamic spirit as a nation. This Gaelic Idea has nothing in common with the activities of An Comunn Gaidhealach, no relationship whatever with the Celtic Twilight. It is an intellectual conception designed to offset the Russian Idea: and neither it, nor my anti-English spirit, is any new thing though the call for its apt embodiment in works of genius is today crucial. It calls us to a redefinition and extension of our national principle of freedom on the plane of world-affairs, and in an abandonment alike of our monstrous neglect and ignorance of Gaelic and of the barren conservatism and loss of the creative spirit on the part of those professedly Gaelic and concerned with its maintenance and development.  

Scrutiny of particulars such as the claimed link between “the Gaelic system” and “Douglas economics” reveals these argufyings to be not just “far-fetched” but almost entirely lacking in historical grounding. The first term refers to the “principle of common ownership by a people of their sources of food and maintenance” asserted by James Connolly to have informed Gaelic civilization. One of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising and a major influence on Red Clydeside’s John Maclean, the Edinburgh-born Connolly contended that the “primitive communism” associated by Marx and Engels with hunter-gatherer societies had survived in Ireland until the seventeenth century due to the non-feudal character of Gaelic mores (14-15). The contention is disputed by professional historians, who point to manuscript and other evidence of the strict

hierarchical organisation of Irish (and Highland) life throughout the centuries of Gaelic hegemony.

The second alludes to the Social Credit proposals of the English engineer and reformer Major C. H. Douglas (1879-1952). These were promoted in the *New Age* in the 1920s and would be taken up in the following decade by politicians in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Dismissed by economists as a fantastical panacea based on a misunderstanding of the nature of money, Social Credit held a strong appeal for literary intellectuals of both Right and Left, being as fervently espoused by Ezra Pound as by MacDiarmid (whose recruitment of its progenitor for Scotland appears to have been based on evidence no stronger than the national origin of the Douglas surname.) The components of the Gaelic Idea turn out upon examination, then, to fall some way short of the elements of a “dynamic myth.”

Other Russian-inflected moments crop up here and there in *Cencrastus*. The passage beginning “*Silence is the only way*” (l.1281) mixes echoes of Tyutchev’s lyric “Silentium!” with details from Mirsky’s discussion in *A History of Russian Literature* (1927) of the diplomat poet’s understanding of the relationship between Chaos and Cosmos.26 (Allusions to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* add a further layer of intertextual depth to the proceedings.)

The verbal resonances on which MacDiarmid thrives can sometimes relate, purely internally, to his own work. Thus the *lozen* that *skimmers* in “Frae Anither Window in Thrums,” the emotionally dejected but structurally pivotal section of the 1930 sequence, recalls the identically evoked (if non-existent) shimmering window in the description of the blizzard through which Dostoevsky wanders in the stanzas from *A Drunk Man* already quoted. Though the scene this time is the interior of a newspaper office rather than a wintry exterior, and the speaker a sober journalist rather than an inebriated visionary, the echo proves sufficiently strong to bring the novelist back to the centre of the poet’s discourse:

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Here in the hauf licht waitin’ till the clock
Chops: while the winnock
Hauds me as a serpent hauds a rabbit
Afore it’s time to grab it
– A serpent faded to a shadow
In the stelled een its een ha’e haud o’

Here in the daurk, while like a frozen
Scurl on Life’s plumm the lozen
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Skimmers – or goams in upon me
Wan as Dostoevski
Glowered through a wudden dream to find
Stavrogin in the corners o’ his mind,

– Or I haud it, a ’prentice snake, and gar
Heaven dwine to a haunfu’ haar
Or am like cheengeless deeps aneth
Tho’ ice or sunshine, life or death,
Chequer the tap; or like Stavrogin
Joukin’ his author wi’ a still subtler grin. . . .

(CP 1, 230-31; ll.1664-81)27

Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, enigmatic protagonist of the tragic allegory now usually referred to in English as Demons or The Devils (1871-72), would have been familiar to MacDiarmid from Constance Garnett’s translation, The Possessed (1913). J. M. Barrie’s A Window in Thrums (1889) was a very different – and by any rational measure very much a lesser – kind of novel. One of the “best loved” products of the Kailyard school, it took its title from the commentary kept up by the invalid protagonist Leeby on the comings and goings of the denizens of the north-eastern Scottish town of Thrums as viewed from the window where she sits watching. (Kirriemuir, thought to have been the prototype of Thrums, is situated about twenty-four miles inland of Montrose, where Cencrastus was composed.) MacDiarmid’s adaptation of Barrie’s title for his own eight-hundred-line complaint against the philistinism of small town life blasts the Kailyard tradition’s misrepresentation of Scottish social reality. The pairing of Dostoevsky with Barrie comments bitterly on the low expectations Scots have of their literature and enacts a despondent reductio ad absurdum of the Russo-Scottish parallelisms essayed in the rhapsodic passages on Gaeldom earlier in the sequence.

The three references to Soviet Russia in Cencrastus can scarcely be described as pro-Communist. The first mocks English intellectuals for preferring Lenin to Napoleon (ll.273-274); the second conjures Andrey Byely (as his surname is spelled this time round) struggling to retain his poise “[i]n the teeth of the Bolshevik blast” (l.1115); less negatively, the third (l.2787) cites Lenin alongside Gandhi as a twentieth-century peak in the mountain range of human individuals who have affected the course of

history (the other named summits being Dostoevsky, Christ, the Buddha, Nietzsche, Hegel, Pascal and Dante).

Mentioning significant persons and their achievements can at times seem the whole point of Cencrastus, which frequently gives the impression of being an experiment designed to determine how many cultural and historical allusions can be packed into a stanza or verse paragraph before rendering it immobile. It was probably this aspect of the enterprise that MacDiarmid had in mind when he told his former tutor George Ogilvie on 9 December 1926 that his new sequence would involve “an attempt to move really mighty numbers.”28 (The choice of verb was more telling than Ogilvie can have guessed.) The tension between creating lyrical movement and conveying information generates the best and the worst of a book that is not only the longest but also the most citation-laden of the poet’s Scots works. The fact that a mere three of its many hundreds of references concern the revolution in Russia suggests that communism was a marginal issue for MacDiarmid in the closing years of the 1920s, even if the terms of his invocation of the Russian Idea imply that it was the topicality in the West of the alternatively feared and admired Soviet Union that made the time seem to him ripe for the emergence of a counter-energy at the opposite end of Europe.

IV: Hymns to Lenin and Clan Albann

In 1930, therefore, no-one could have predicted that MacDiarmid’s next volume of verse, published less than fourteen months after To Circumjack Cencrastus, would be called First Hymn to Lenin and other poems.29 Though surprising, the development was not quite the abrupt departure it looked, but rather a stage along the way towards the poet’s eventual enrolment in the Communist Party in 1934. For one thing, the decision to write poetry about Lenin came about more or less by chance, in response to an invitation from the English poet and critic Lascelles Abercrombie to contribute to a new previously-unpublished “poem on an up to date theme, a political theme.”30 For another, the four pieces from 1931 and 1932 that feature the Bolshevik leader were designed to take their

29 To Circumjack Cencrastus (Edinburgh: Blackwoods) was published on 29 October 1930, the First Hymn to Lenin early in December 1931.
30 As MacDiarmid recalled in an interview for Scottish Marxist in 1975 (see The Raucle Tongue, 3: 574). The recollection is consistent with his statement in a letter of 6 June 1938 to John Lehmann that the poem “was written for” Abercrombie’s anthology (Letters, 594), and with the Author’s Note to the First Hymn volume.
place, in important respects a subordinate one, in a constellation of autobiographical poems that was to constitute the first volume of *Clann Albann*, a five-volume work of intellectual self-portraiture.

MacDiarmid’s title for this opening volume, *The Muckle Toon*, honoured “the Muckle Toon o’ the Langholm,” local designation of the poet’s Dumfriesshire birthplace. About four dozen surviving items are identifiable as components of the volume; a number of others, discussed in the author’s correspondence with the composer F. G. Scott, have been lost.  Even in its scattered, incomplete state, *The Muckle Toon* succeeds in elaborating so rich and compelling a myth of evolution (setting the poet’s own development in ironical relationship to that of his class and species) that it must be counted one of the major achievements of the career. Many of the earlier among its constituent parts use a six-line stanza with the highly unusual rhyme scheme *abcbdd*, while a variety of forms is employed after 1931. Early and late, the poems are held in association by the most thoroughly worked system of figuration MacDiarmid ever attempted, a symbolic cluster linking the rivers of Langholm to the scriptural Water of Life, the Bolshevik tide to the Deluge, the Scottish borders to the frontiers of consciousness, and the poet’s boyhood to the infancy of mankind. Further depth is added by a wealth of incidental allusion to the Book of Genesis and St John’s gospel (sources respectively of the Deluge and Water of Life motifs).

When “To Lenin,” as it was then called, made its appearance in Abercrombie’s anthology, *New English Poems*, in October 1931, a footnote explained that it was “From ‘Clann Albann’, a work in progress.” At the end of the year, on expansion of the title and addition of the dedication to Mirsky, its status as part of that larger structure was reasserted:

> These poems are all incidental and separable short items interspersed throughout “Clann Albann,” a very long poem predominantly of a non-lyrical character, a small section of the skeletal structure of which, together with a plan of the whole, appeared in the Summer (1931) issue of *The Modern Scot.*

By August 1933, when MacDiarmid supplied a detailed rationale for *Clann Albann*, in the *Scots Observer*, the venture had already petered out. Under stress of changing biographical circumstances, it had given way to

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33 Hugh MacDiarmid, “Author’s Note,” in *First Hymn to Lenin and other poems* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1931), 7. The “small section” in *The Modern Scot*, titled “From ‘Work in Progress,’” was (not unproblematically) retitled “Kinsfolk,” in *CP* 2, 1147-1150.
the material that would be collected in *Stony Limits and other poems* (1934). His comments on the first two “Hymns to Lenin” in his “explanation” of the abandoned project nevertheless deserve quoting in full: 34

It should be noted that it is part of the plan that each volume consists of different kinds of poetry, and that the whole series is thus designed to represent a systematic progression in the techniques and kinds of imagery and subject matter employed, or, in other words, in each volume a different cast of mind and stress on a different range of interests altogether is involved. The hymns to Lenin which have occasioned controversy have their natural part in the first book, because they are in logical sequence from the radicalism of that Border burgh and my father’s pronounced Trade Unionist and Co-operative sympathies, while, in a wider sense, the return to thoughts of Langholm and my boyhood represents a “return to the people” which has its bearings on the motives which impelled me to use braid Scots and have led me at this stage in my career to my present political position. I would, however, warn all who may be tempted to regard such poems, or those which deal with religious questions, as expressions of my own opinions, to remember that they only form parts of the first volume of this very big scheme and are placed thus early in it of set design – in other words, presented merely as starting points for the attitudes developed from book to book. My scheme, too, renders it impossible for anyone at this stage to jump to the conclusion that I am writing largely under certain literary or other influences, for although these may seem to bulk largely in the excerpts already published, that means that I regard them as elementary, i.e., in keeping with my boyhood, and tend to shed or transmute them into something very different as I proceed. 35

The poems themselves bear out these observations. In the “First Hymn,” for instance, MacDiarmid asserts that it is his identity as a Borderer, and hence an inheritor of the (supposedly) collective consciousness of the creators of the Border ballads, that equips him to gauge Lenin’s importance and avoid individualist bourgeois fallacies with regard to the nature of authorship:

Descendant o’ the unkent Bards wha made
Sangs peerless through a’ post-anonymous days
I glimpse again in you that mightier poo’er
Than fashes wi’ the laurels and the bays
But kens that it is shared by ilka man

34 “Third Hymn to Lenin,” written much later in the 1930s than the first two, has no connection to *Clann Albann* (and a merely numerical one to its two predecessors). 35 Hugh MacDiarmid, “Clann Albann: An Explanation,” *Scots Observer*, 12 August 1933, 10.
Since time began.

\(\text{(CP 1, 298; ll.31-36)}^{36}\)

The typification of the Bolshevik leader in ll.16-18 as one of those coming after Christ who will accomplish “greater . . . things” similarly points to the poem’s context in the larger enterprise by contributing to the web of Johannine references (14: 12 in this instance). The figure of the “mair [more] than elemental force” of mass humanity finding “a clearer course” through the person of Lenin (ll.41-42) fleetingly invokes the Water of Life motif. When MacDiarmid combines Matthew 18: 2 with Marx’s assertion (in \textit{Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right}) that religion is the opium of the people, he adapts celebrated Christian and communist locutions in the interests of \textit{Clann Albann}’s key implication that “mankind is yet in its boyhood” (“\textit{Clann Albann: An Explanation},” 10):

\begin{quote}
Christ said: ‘Save ye become as bairns again.’
Bairnly eneuch the feck o’ us ha’ been!
Your work needs men; and its worst foes are just
The traitors wha through a’ history ha’ gi’en
The dope that’s gar’d the mass o’ folk pay heed
And bide bairns indeed.
\end{quote}

\(\text{(CP 1, 298; ll.43-48)}^{37}\)

The climactic stanza of “Second Hymn to Lenin” invokes the same trope of childhood to put communist claims for the primacy of politics over art firmly in their place, while demonstrating that the “First Hymn” does indeed function as a “starting point” for “attitudes developed” subsequently, albeit within the first volume of \textit{Clann Albann} rather than “from book to book” thereof:

\begin{quote}
Unremittin’, relentless,
Organized to the last degree,
Ah, Lenin, politics is bairns’ play
To what this maun be!
\end{quote}

\(\text{(CP 1, 328; ll.167-70)}^{38}\)

The later poem also nods wittily to the earlier by conducting almost the entirety of its business in the \textit{abcd} quatrain so universally associated with the \textit{unkent Bards} as to be known simply as “the ballad stanza.”

The alteration of the title from “To Lenin” to “First Hymn to Lenin” is at least partly to be understood in relation to the unfolding demands of the

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\(^{36}\) \textit{unkent}: unknown (i.e. anonymous) \textit{Sangs}: Songs (i.e. poems) \(a’\): all \textit{poo’er}: power \textit{fashes}: bothers \textit{ilka}: every

\(^{37}\) \textit{bairns}: children \textit{Bairnly}: Childish \textit{eneuch}: enough \textit{feck}: majority \textit{juist}: just \textit{gi’en}: given \textit{bide}: remain

\(^{38}\) \textit{maun}: must
Muckle Toon. A number of poems and passages explore the influence of the poet’s Presbyterian inheritance, a concern that leads to sardonic deployment of scriptural phrases in titles – “Prayer for a Second Flood,” “The Seamless Garment” etc. The sacral noun hymn sharpens the irony of the latter practice to the point of outrageousness, in response, presumably, to the focus of contemporary press coverage of the USSR on the “godlessness” of Soviet communism. (The material relating to MacDiarmid’s religious formation may not yet have been in existence when the poem was despatched to Abercrombie.)

Though the expanded title’s numerical adjective implies that more hymns are to follow, it is unclear whether or not the second hymn had been drafted when the first was finalized. The earliest record of it is of a copy sent by the poet on 11 February 1932 to that least godless among his fellow practitioners, T. S. Eliot, who replied six days later that he liked the poem “very much indeed” and wished to publish it in the Criterion, where it duly appeared in July. MacDiarmid made an arrangement with Eliot for the plates to be preserved, and later that summer the “Second Hymn” was reprinted as a limited edition pamphlet, “a short separable item” from “my long poem . . . now in course of preparation,” Clann Albann. Three years later again, it was collected as the title poem of Second Hymn to Lenin and other poems (London: Stanley Nott, 1935). The “other poems,” all of them in English, lacked connection either to the volume’s title text or to the Clann Albann project more generally.

If many misapprehensions about the first two hymns to Lenin result from ignorance of their context in the poet’s wider output, the most potentially damaging one about the “Second Hymn” flows from MacDiarmid’s decision to give it the title he did. The poem may be the second address to the Bolshevik leader in Clann Albann, but it is not by any stretch of imagination a hymn. Rather, with four italicized lyric insertions directed over the revolutionary’s head to the reader, it takes the form of a debate between the demands of artistic integrity and political commitment – a debate, moreover, from which Marxist insistence on the subservience of art to the dialectic emerges as the loser. MacDiarmid may at one point (l.49) hail Lenin as the “saviour” of civilization but the tone of

39 Its echoing of phrases from Mirsky’s book on Lenin shows it had definitely not been completed by then – see below.
41 Hugh MacDiarmid, “Author’s Note,” Second Hymn to Lenin (Thakeham: Valda Trevlyn, 1932).
confident equality with which he conducts his argument with him comes as close to reprimand as to reverence:

Your knowledge in your ain sphere
Was exact and complete
But your sphere’s elementary and sune by
As a poet maun see’t.

\[(CP\ 1,\ 326;\ ll.117-20)\]^{42}

It was MacDiarmid and no-one else who chose to use “Hymn to Lenin” as part of the title of three books\(^{43}\) and a pamphlet, and thereby repeatedly to deflect attention from the scope and context of *Clann Albann*’s two addresses to the Soviet founder.

While the poet’s self-destructive appetite for controversy was nothing new, his indulgence of it in the early 1930s has something especially remarkable about it, given that he was at the time making conscious efforts both to win a wider audience for his work and to establish his reputation as a serious artist. The Scots poetry of the previous decade had been written by a small town journalist, working for £3 a week on *The Montrose Review*. The poems and the vituperative prose that accompanied them had derided Unionism, Protestantism, Anglo-Saxon supremacism (elevation of Lowland / Teutonic over Highland / Gaelic culture) and patriarchy, values they identified as key components of the version of Scottishness that had held sway since the Act of Union of 1707 and which in MacDiarmid’s view was responsible for reducing the country to a state of philistine provincialism. Whatever the accuracy of his cultural analysis and the brilliance of the poetry that conveyed it, telling one’s compatriots they are mistaken in everything they hold dear is an unpromising way of creating a receptive context for one’s work.

After sales even of *A Drunk Man* proved disappointing, it gradually became clear to MacDiarmid that he was operating in a vacuum his strenuous propagandizing was doing little to fill. His wife Peggy appears to have been as frustrated by life in Montrose as he was, if for different reasons, and when in September 1929 the Grieves and their two young children moved to London so that Christopher could take up a position for £52 a month as acting editor of *Vox*, a magazine devoted to the new medium of radio, deliverance appeared to be at hand. The correspondence trail from 1929 indicates that artistic, domestic and financial considerations all played their part in the decision to leave Scotland.

The move to London did not go well. *Vox* failed to attract sufficient advertising and was wound up within five months – but not before the

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\(^{42}\) *ail*: own \quad *sune*: soon \quad *by*: past, surpassed

\(^{43}\) The third was *Three Hymns to Lenin* (Edinburgh: Castle Wynd Printers, 1957).
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acting editor had been involved in a serious accident, falling off the open upper deck of a bus near his home in Highbury. The family began to disintegrate; Peggy embarked on a number of affairs, and a distressed MacDiarmid spent a sparsely documented year from May 1930 alone in Liverpool, where he had found work as publicist for an organization funded by local government and business interests to promote the Merseyside region. Despite being hospitalized for an alcohol-related collapse, he completed To Circumjack Cencrastus and, following an uncharacteristically fallow period, embarked upon Clann Albann in or around April 1931. In May he was dismissed from his post. After a penniless summer back in London, he prevailed upon his novelist friend Neil M. Gunn and the coal merchant William McElroy, Peggy’s new consort, to put up most but not all of the £500 share capital he required to become a director of the newly established Unicorn Press. From September he was employed for a weekly wage of £5 as the firm’s “literary advisor,” with a brief to read submissions, oversee translations and manage contacts with writers.

The recovery in the poet’s fortunes coincided with the burgeoning of his relationship with Valda Trevlyn, the young Cornish woman who would in 1934 become his second wife. His social circle at this period included A. R. Orage, founder of the New Age, the painter Augustus John, the composer Kaikhosru Sorabji, Major Douglas and Eliot. (He introduced the latter two to each other, at Douglas’s request, at an arranged lunch at the Royal Societies Club on 11 November.) By the end of 1931, with an office and flat in Holborn, an expanding network of prestigious contacts, and a major poetic venture under way, MacDiarmid appeared to be conducting a promising career close to the centre of British intellectual and artistic life.44

It was at this point that Unicorn Press, the firm he co-directed, issued a sampling of the best of the early Muckle Toon material in an edition limited to four hundred and fifty numbered copies, along with a special large paper edition of fifty signed and numbered copies. Complete with both a frontispiece portrait and an introductory essay by the Irish poet, painter and mystic AE (George William Russell, 1867-1935), First Hymn to Lenin and other poems was by a considerable measure the most handsome and – in physical terms, at any rate – the most carefully crafted book MacDiarmid had yet produced.

This initial airing of the phrase “hymn to Lenin” may have been designed to attract attention rather than elicit outrage. Separate incongruities temper the profanity of the noun in the titles respectively of the book and the poem. One derives from the fact that a volume ostensibly espousing dialectical materialism features an introduction by the best known philosophical idealist in the poetry world of the time. AE’s brief but perceptive essay draws attention to the irony, at least to the extent of pointing up the contrast between the spirituality and quietude of his own work and the earthiness and disputatiousness of A Drunk Man and Cencrastus. About the poetry in the volume itself AE’s essay has nothing to say. Just before we come to the first line of MacDiarmid’s poetry, the other contradiction interposes itself:

FIRST HYMN TO LENIN
(TO PRINCE D. S. MIRSKY)

Strictly in terms of logic, a poem addressed to a personage, living or dead, should not have a dedicatee. The oddness of the doubled “To” is exacerbated by “Prince,” a clamorously patrician word in the context of an act of rhetorical homage to the twentieth century’s pre-eminent warrior against class privilege. What can Mirsky have made of the printed subtitle? He had responded with grateful enthusiasm to MacDiarmid’s offer to name him as dedicatee, but appears to have known no more about the poem itself and the other contents of the book than Russell did:

I feel highly honoured by your letter. Ever since I first heard of your poetry from Edwin Muir & first dipped into A Drunk Man, I have been keenly aware that you are one of the small number of poets of the European World . . . So I can only feel highly flattered by your wish to dedicate your hymn to me, and greatly impressed by my unworthiness of both the author & the subject. But that you should write a hymn to Lenin is an indication of what is becoming more & more true, that no strong & sincere mind may any longer fail to recognize Lenin as the one leader of the human race. I am all agog to read the poem when it is out (Dear Grieve, 38–39).

It would be unfair to accuse MacDiarmid of tactlessness, given that Mirsky had himself used his aristocratic title for all his English language books before Lenin, which was not published until late in 1931 (and which duly supplied the poet with elements of phrasing for the “Second Hymn”). Though the Russian had privately expressed communist

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45 This is the letter of 26 October 1931, previously quoted, in which Mirsky praises MacDiarmid’s versions of Blok and Hippius.
46 Even Russia: A Social History (London: The Cresset Press, 1931) is ascribed to Prince D. S. Mirsky; the name of the author of Lenin (London: The Holme Press, 1931) is given simply as D. S. Mirsky.
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sympathies by the end of 1929, he went public with his support for the Soviet regime only on 30 June 1931, when his article “Why I Became a Marxist” appeared in the *Daily Worker*. Lack of evidence regarding the date of composition makes it impossible to determine whether MacDiarmid had knowledge of the political conversion of the writer whose books had had such an impact on *A Drunk Man* when he wrote the “First Hymn.” It is conceivable that the *Daily Worker* declaration acted as a prompt for the poem, but more likely that MacDiamid saw the wisdom of associating a poem already sent to Abercrombie with a high profile and personally admired communist intellectual when he learned of Mirsky’s new fealty. (A widespread sense in the early years of the Great Depression that capitalism was in terminal crisis was leading many others in Britain and elsewhere to Marxist commitment at the time). The renewed presence of Mirsky’s literary histories in MacDiarmid’s poetry of the early 1930s may indicate a growing feeling of affiliation on his part with his Russian contemporary.

The similarities between the political positions of the two men in 1931 were more apparent than real. The poet had not yet fully embraced communism, while the critic had become so convinced of the truth of dialectical materialism that he had taken to writing in a puritanical and doctrinaire manner that contrasted sharply with the suave aestheticism of his literary surveys. If there was a touch of fanaticism about both sensibilities, the Russian’s tended towards orthodoxy, the Scot’s towards ever more eccentric heterodoxy.

On his 1932 return to the Soviet Union, Mirsky evidently felt a need to disassociate himself from heretical aspects of the poet’s peculiar variety of revolutionary Marxism. His treatment of MacDiarmid in his published writings about anglophone literature is notable for its particular anxiety in relation to the volume of which he was the title-poem’s dedicatee. His tearing apart of MacDiarmid’s “The Seamless Garment” for an anthology of “English” poetry in Russian translation may reveal a desperate desire to isolate the ideologically “pure” bits of MacDiarmid’s idiosyncratic political vision.

“The Seamless Garment,” a bravura if overly performative set-piece of proselytising communism, takes the scriptural story of the decision by the

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48 See Smith, “Mirskii and MacDiarmid,” as in n. 4 above, 50-51. Smith gives the translator’s name as I. Romanovich. As Mirsky had become a non-person by the time *Antologia novoi angliskoi poezii* was published in Leningrad in 1937, his name as editor was replaced by that of M. Gutner.
Roman soldiers present at the Crucifixion to cast lots for rather than divide between them the seamless garment of Christ (John 19: 23-24) and makes out of it a metaphor for communism’s promise to end the alienation of worker from work. MacDiarmid tethers his biblical figure to the world of industrial production and – literal-minded as ever – to actual cloth by pitching the poem as an address to his (fictional) cousin “Wullie,” a loomworker in a Langholm tweed mill. Mirsky includes unrhymed Russian versions of three of the sixteen stanzas (an even smaller fraction of the whole than the quarters into which the soldiers were tempted to rend Christ’s raiment):

His secret and the secret o’ a’
That’s worth ocht.
The shuttles fleein’ owre quick for my een
Prompt the thocht,
And the coordination atween
Weaver and machine.

The haill shop’s dumfoonderin’
To a stranger like me.
Second nature to you; you’re perfectly able
To think, speak and see
Apairt frae the looms, tho’ to some
That doesna sae easily come.

Lenin was like that wi’ workin’ class life,
At home wi’ a’.
His fause movements couldna been fewer,
The best weaver Earth ever saw.
A’ he’d to dae wi’ moved intact
Clean, clear, and exact.

\[(CP 1, 311-12; ll.13-30)\]

The combination of shop floor detail and praise for the Bolshevik leader might have been designed to meet Party standards. Mirsky may nevertheless have been nervous about the description of Lenin’s eschewal of fause movements – fancy footwork he of all people would have recognised as a secularised version of the dance through history of Solovyov’s St Sophia. It would certainly not have been safe for him to have reproduced a Russian version of the stanza that immediately follows:

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49 Some of the poet’s relatives – his paternal grandfather John Grieve and a number of uncles and cousins – worked in the Reid and Taylor tweed mill on the west bank of the Esk in Langholm. None of them was named William.

50 ocht: anything fleein’: flying owre: too thocht: thought haill: whole dumfoonderin’: dumbfounding fause: false
A poet like Rilke did the same
In a different sphere,
Made a single reality – a’ a’e ’oo’ –
O’ his love and pity and fear;
A seamless garment o’ music and thought
But you’re owre thrang wi’ puirer to tak’ tent o’t.

(\textit{CP} 1, 312; ll.31-36)\textsuperscript{51}

This is exquisite in its way, the consonant-free vowel sequence \textit{a’ a’ee ’oo’} providing an inspired verbal correlative for the seamlessness of the poem’s envisioned garment – but it is also daft. The revolution was not carried out so that the masses could read Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), a poet who perhaps more than any European writer of his time represents high bourgeois individualism. (MacDiarmid would publish a belated elegy for him the year he joined the Communist Party.)\textsuperscript{52} A more typical left wing attitude to the author of the \textit{Duino Elegies} was expressed in 1950 by the Chilean communist poet Pablo Neruda, who in Section V of his \textit{Canto General} decried “Rilkean obfuscators of life . . . pale maggots in the cheese of capitalism.”\textsuperscript{53}

Mirsky’s observation in the anthology that “First Hymn to Lenin” contains “a great deal of philosophical idealism,”\textsuperscript{54} makes no sense in relation to the poem itself but very considerable sense in relation to the volume to which it gave its name. He was referring, it seems safe to assume, not just to passages like the Rilke stanza of “The Seamless Garment” but to at least one whole poem, “The Burning Passion,” a work that takes to murderous extremes the Romantic crisis ode’s generic disquiet about the intermittency of poetic inspiration and presents violent revolution as the answer to that psycho-aesthetic problem:

Wanted a technique for genius! Or, at least,
A means whereby a’ genius yet has done
’ll be the stertin’ point o’ a’ men’s lives,

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{a’ a’e ’oo’}: all one wool \textit{thrang}: busy, taken up \textit{puirer}: poverty \textit{tak’ tent o’t}: pay attention to it
\textsuperscript{52} “Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum” in \textit{Stony Limits and other poems} (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934).
\textsuperscript{53} Quoted in Michael Hamburger, \textit{The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s} (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), 245.
\textsuperscript{54} Quoted in Alexander Mackay, “MacDiarmid and Russia Revisited,” in \textit{Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature}, ed. by Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 79. Mackay’s unremittingly hostile essay displays almost as much sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of literature as the Soviet Communist Party did.
“LIKE PUSHKIN, I”: HUGH MACDIARMID AND RUSSIA

No’ zero, as if life had scarce begun,
But to owrecome this death sae faur ben in
Maist folk needs the full floo’er o’ Lenin.

Be this the measure o’ oor will to bring
Like cruelty to a’ men – nocht else’l dae;
The source o’ inspiration drooned in bluid
If need be, owre and owre, until its ra
Strengthen in a’ forever or’s hailly gane
As noo save in an antrin brain.

(CP 1, 305; ll.49-60) 55

If the critic was no match for the poet’s blood-curdling zealotry, it was fanaticism of a more stolid kind, the dour consistency of his communism, that led him to such self-betrayals as the closing sentence of the note on his once admired admirer that he contributed to the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia:

In our times there has been a renewed attempt to revive poetry in the Scots dialect, made by the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym). MacDiarmid is an original poet-philosopher, not devoid of revolutionary sympathy (two “Hymns to Lenin”), but with a confused world-view. His attempt to revive a Scots literary language is nothing more than a whim of the intelligentsia (quoted in Mackay, 90).

Just a few years earlier, as we have seen, he had hailed products of the same attempt as the only “real recreations” of Russian poetry in any form of English. Mirsky would doubtless have rejected the charge of self-betrayal, as he had by this stage in his development dismissed the very concept of self as a bourgeois construct. 56 The fact that he had also repudiated as reactionary idealists most of the writers he had discussed so illuminatingly in his literary histories puts the MacDiarmid of the Encyclopaedia note in excellent company.

Curiously, Mirsky let the poet know about the note, though of its existence rather than content. In a letter from Moscow dated 25 June 1934 he informed him he often spoke about him in his lectures on “contemporary English literature,” and requested that he send copies of A Drunk Man and other works to the underfunded Central Library for Foreign Literature. He concluded:

I have put a few lines about you in the article on Scottish Literature in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (Dear Grieve, 109).

55 ‘ll: Will  stertin’: starting  No’: Not  faur: far  ben in: grown into  floo’er: flower
nocht: nothing  bluid: blood  hailly: wholly  antrin: occasional, rare
56 Or so, at least, appears to be the implication of his response to the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky. See Smith, D. S. Mirsky: A Russian-English Life, 189.
MacDiarmid appears to have been aware neither of the substance of the note nor the fate of its author when, two decades later, he named Mirsky as the third of three dedicatees of his book-length discursive poem *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955):

<And PRINCE D. S. MIRSKY>

*A mighty master in all such matters*
*Of whom for all the instruction and encouragement he gave me,*
*I am happy to subscribe myself here*
*The humble and most grateful pupil.*

*(CP 2, 736)*

V: Russia in the non-Leninist poetry of *First Hymn*

The poet had already in the early 1930s subscribed himself an enterprising pupil of the aforesaid master by adapting his words for three *Muckle Toon* pieces. “The Church of My Fathers,” one of the shorter inclusions in the *First Hymn* volume, takes as its starting point Mirsky’s translation of an 1834 anti-Protestant satire by Tyutchev:

> I like the church-service of the Lutherans,  
> Their severe, solemn, and simple rite.  
> Of these bare walls, of this empty nave,  
> I can understand the sublime teaching.  
> But don’t you see? Ready to leave,  
> Faith is for the last time with us;  
> She has not yet crossed the threshold,  
> But her house is already empty and bare.  
> She has not yet crossed the threshold;  
> The door has not yet closed behind her.  
> But the hour has come, has struck. . . .  
> Pray to God: It is the last time you will pray.*57

MacDiarmid relocates this arch-conservative and somewhat snobbish attack on religious iconoclasm from Germany, where Tyutchev spent most of his diplomatic career, to Scotland. The church of the title is the poet’s own childhood place of worship, Langholm’s “Toonfit Kirk,” which served members of the United Presbyterian Church (from 1900 the United Free Church). His father Jimmy Grieve was an elder there:

> THIS is the kirk o’ my faithers  
> And I ken the meanin’ at last  
> O’ its pea-green wa’s and chocolate pillars

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And am stricken aghast
For here, ready for the road,
Religion was biddin’ goodbye.
Her hoose was toom and she’d turned
Wi’ hopeless een sullen and dry
For a last look roond when a blast
O’ lichtnin’ tore frae the sky
And struck her deid where she stood.
In the dismantled room
Hauf-lifelike still she stands
Decomposin’ in the gloom.
To the faithfu’ seein’ nae difference
She’s in her usual still
And the hoose is fitly furnished
In keepin’ wi’ God’s will.
I ha’e nae doot they’re richt,
But, feech, it’s a waesome sight!

(\textit{CP} 1, 307-08)\textsuperscript{58}

There may be a private joke at work here: MacDiarmid was probably aware that the church had fallen into disuse in 1928 (though his poem’s guiding conceit depends on \textit{the faithfu’} still occupying their pews). The yellow-green walls and brown pillars he remembered from boyhood remained visible until 2001 when (astonishingly, in view of the lyric’s anti-reforming bias) the building was refurbished for consecration as the Roman Catholic Church of St Francis.\textsuperscript{59} Note that while Tyutchev’s personified “Faith” is depicted preparing to leave the building, MacDiarmid’s “Religion” is struck dead by a thunderbolt (from an angry God the Father, presumably) as she busies herself to depart. Both poems see Protestantism as a step on the way from true Christian belief to atheism. The Russian original suggests that Lutheranism hollows out Christianity; the Scottish variation goes further and implies that Calvinism kills it.

In a \textit{Muckle Toon} fragment known only via the newspaper article that quotes it, MacDiarmid described “Religious history in Scotland” as his “secret, devious, and persistent guide.”\textsuperscript{60} Postures suggestive of Scottish religious precedent struck in his work veer from Covenanting

\textsuperscript{58} wa’s: walls hoose: house toom: empty roond: round deid: dead doot: doubt richt: right feech: Expression of disgust waeome: woeful sicht: sight

\textsuperscript{59} The return of “Religion” to the Toonfit Kirk was shortlived: after a last Mass on 8 December 2010, the Church of St Francis closed due to rising costs and declining attendance.

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antinomianism to Jacobitical devotion to tradition; indeed, they typically cluster round those extremes rather than explore the sprawling middle ground between them. Some of the poetry’s most deep-seated attitudes bear the imprint of the poet’s Presbyterian upbringing, albeit in secularized form. MacDiarmid’s career-long obsession with genius shadows the Calvinist doctrine of the Elect, while the contempt for slumped humanity that accompanies it reflects the related conviction that all but the tiny minority of folk chosen to be saved are destined for damnation.

Such vestigially Protestant tropes coexist with complaints that the Reformation was culturally, politically and intellectually a disaster for Scotland. Anxiety about patriarchy and cultivation of feminine perspectives together form a stubborn if rarely commented upon aspect of his 1920s writing, in prose as well as verse, and appear to have been associated in the author’s mind with Catholicism. “Hymn to Sophia: The Wisdom of God” carries a note directing the reader to Solovyov’s La Russie et l’Église Universelle, a plea for unification of the Eastern Orthodox churches under the leadership of the Pope. “The Litany of the Blessed Virgin,” another early poem in English that attempts to feminize the environs of Godhead, tries on Catholic verbal vestments (which can scarcely be said to fit). “O Jesu Parvule,” one of the subtlest of the Scots lyrics, subverts the willed inelegance of the sacred songs of Scotland’s reformers by using a refrain from The Gude and Godly Ballates (1600) as the basis of a delicate carol which, through its focus on the sensibility of the Virgin Mary, celebrates the anima that Carl Jung suggested was suppressed across much of northern Europe as a consequence of the triumph of Protestantism.

The suspicion of Protestantism in MacDiarmid’s 1920s work was not unique to him. Other writers with whom he was closely associated – Edwin Muir, who came from a similar devotional background, and the Catholic convert Compton Mackenzie – also held the Reformation responsible for an attenuation of Scottish culture in the years since the upheavals of the sixteenth century. In MacDiarmid’s case, hostility to his own religious formation was reinforced by his reading in the literature of the nineteenth-century Russian empire, where opposition to westernisation often took on a specifically anti-Protestant aspect. His tendency to celebrate the feminine as an antidote to Presbyterian patriarchalism was influenced to a degree by the figure of St Sophia, as

61 With its breathless regard for the ornamental diction of Marian devotion and general air of over-excitement, the poem unwittingly effects a parody rather than a recreation of the verbal richness of Catholic ritual. It also mistakes davidica for a Catholic term rather than a Lutheran-derived Anglican one.
featured not only in Solovyov’s thought but also, in more secular guise, in the poetry of Blok.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that some of the most vibrant among the poems of Sangschaw and Penny Wheep take the form of third person explorations of female perspectives (“Cophetua,” “The Currant Bush,” “The Love-Sick Lass,” “Morning,” “Servant Girl’s Bed” and “Empty Vessel”). “The Fairmer’s Lass,” “In Mysie’s Bed” and “O Jesu Parvule” mix third person narrative with first-person vocalization, while “Cloudburst and Soaring Moon,” “Locked” and the “The Robber” (like the Annals prose sketch “The Never-Yet-Explored”) are fully cross-gendered utterances. The extraordinary tenderness and empathy of the lyrics led Iain Crichton Smith to observe in 1967 that MacDiarmid “began as a poet with both a masculine and feminine sensibility and eventually allowed the masculine elements in himself to dominate his work. . . .”62 What Smith arguably missed was the programmatic nature and ideological underpinning of the destabilization of gender in the writing of the early and mid 1920s. Ever the dialectician, MacDiarmid also stylized varying intensities of overbearing masculinity there – in “The Scarlet Woman,” “The Frightened Bride,” “Wheesht, Wheesht” and “Scunner” – though the number of such poems is comparatively small. “Museum Piece,” one of the more mischievous texts in the First Hymn volume, anticipates Crichton Smith by hinting that the poet’s art issues from what he refers to in l.7 as “the woman in me.” (The poem goes on to speculate with regard to the art’s chances of survival when womankind, the museum-piece of the title, has been phased out of evolution.)

In “Clann Albann: An Explanation” MacDiarmid described the “nature of the poetry” in the third volume of his huge self-portrait as “bipsychic (or Tiresiasian [sic]).”63 His proposed title for that middle part of his “five-fold scheme” gave a further jostle to gender categories by applying to his estranged wife rather than to a fellow poet a version of Horace’s salute to Virgil in Odes I, iii, animae dimidium meae (“half my soul”):

The third book, “Demidium Anima Meae,” concerns my marriage (a marriage – since my wife was a Highlander – symbolising the Union of Scotland, the bridging of the gulf between Highland and Lowland, and, incidentally, treating Gaeldom as the feminine principle), . . . and . . . is mainly psychological. (“Clann Albann: An Explanation,” 10)

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63 It may be worth noting that “Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum,” which appears like the “Explanation” to have been composed in the summer of 1933, refers in l.15 to the “gynandromorphic moods” shared by MacDiarmid and Rilke (CP 1, 417).
The envisaged work was never written, and, in the event, the only *Clann Albann* poem specifically to devote attention to Peggy Grieve was among the crop harvested in December 1931. It contains a fleeting but potent allusion to a passage from Mirsky’s account of the life of Dostoevsky:

**Pedigree**

IF I’d to wale for ancestors, I’d ha’e
(Ahint my faither wi’ his cheeks like hines
And my mither wi’ her ‘sad fish’ lines)
Auld Ringan Oliver and the Caird o’ Barullion;
And on my wife’s side – as clear as day
Still in that woman in a million,
Keepin’ me alert while savourin’ wi’ joy
Her infernal depths – John Forbes o’ Tavoy,
For I never see her kaimin’ her hair
But I mind o’ his beard in Drimnior there.

(*CP* 1, 303)\(^64\)

MacDiarmid supplied a substantial footnote on the three historical Scottish figures mentioned.\(^65\) The reader has to consult the last of the books cited therein to discover that what Peggy’s manner of combing her hair brought to her husband’s mind was the stroking of his beard by the eighth Lord Forbes that in 1571 led to the slaughter of twenty members of the Gordon clan. A reader familiar with Mirsky’s *History* might recognise an even more back-handed compliment to the first Mrs Grieve in the implication that in sexual congress she reminded the poet of Dostoevsky’s notorious mistress Apollinaria Suslova:

To the years 1862-3 belongs his liaison with Apollinaria Suslova, the most important love-affair of his life. After the suppression of *Vremya* he travelled with her abroad. It was on this journey that he lost for the first time heavily at the roulette. Mlle Suslova (who afterwards married the great writer Rozanov) was a proud and (to use a Dostoyevskian epithet) “infernal” woman, with unknown

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\(^64\) *wale*: choose, search  
*Ahint*: Behind  
*hines*: wild raspberries  
*Caird*: Gypsy  
*kaimin’*: combing  
*mind o’*: think of, am reminded of

\(^65\) MacDiarmid’s (corrected) footnote reads: “For account of Oliver see pp. 136-140 A. and J. Lang’s *Highways and Byways in the Border*. Billy Marshall the Caird of Barullion, King of the Gypsies of the Western Lowlands, died 1792, aged 120. He had been seventeen times lawfully married and was, after his 100th year, the avowed father of four children by “less legitimate affections”. See note in Scott’s *Guy Mannering* and Mr. James Murray McCulloch of Ardwall’s letter, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, August, 1817. For Forbes see the story of this sequel to the burning of Corgarff in Picken’s *Traditionary Stories of Old Families.*”
depths of cruelty and of evil. She seems to have been to Dostoyevsky an important revelation of the dark side of things. (Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature, 342)

The lack of a footnote to highlight the Russian connection raises a key question in relation to the poetry not only of MacDiarmid but also of such fellow modernists as Eliot (of whom the Scot was an early and vocal admirer): when does a borrowing become an allusion? Once the intertext with the Mirsky passage is registered it becomes part of the meaning of the poem (and can be said always to have been part of its meaning to the author who chose to include it). One surmises at any rate that Mirsky may have been the only contemporary reader of First Hymn equipped to figure out quite what was going on in “Pedigree.”

**VI: Later Clan Albann Poems**

“The Church of My Fathers” and “Pedigree” are not major poems but they demonstrate MacDiarmid’s ability to turn to advantage in his art Scottish-Russian parallelisms of a kind that can appear strained and tendentious when presented in terms of abstract argument in his discursive prose. In both pieces a Russian frame of reference illuminates local material in a memorable and even startling way. A more elaborate yoking of “the Russian Idea” to Scottish experience informs “Why I Became a Scots Nationalist,” a lyric greatly in need of rescuing from the incomprehension of Smith and Mackay. It featured in Scots Unbound and other poems as Part II of “Tarras” and was faithfully reprinted as such in Complete Poems, where those commentators found it. Part I had originally been intended as a free-standing Muckle Toon poem, on publication of which in the Free Man of 25 June 1932 an enthused F. G. Scott wrote to MacDiarmid:

C’est magnifique! – the very best thing you’ve ever done! tremendous etc, etc, etc.

A few weeks later this first part reappeared as Tarras, a limited edition pamphlet under the Free Man imprint. At the end of October 1932, Part I found its canonical niche as the longer component of a diptych with “Why I Became a Scots Nationalist” when the Scots Unbound volume, the second substantial gathering of Muckle Toon material, was issued by Eneas

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66 G. S. Smith, as in n. 4 above; Mackay, as in n. 54 above.
67 In the following discussion, “Why I Became a Scots Nationalist” is given in the text as reedited for Complete Collected Poems, volume II (forthcoming), but with the corresponding page number in CP also noted.
68 Letter of 28 June 1932, F. G. Scott correspondence (MS295999), Edinburgh University Library.
Mackay of Stirling. The contents of the book had been composed over the late spring and early summer in the Sussex village of Thakeham, whither the poet had retreated with Valda Trevlyn on losing his position at the Unicorn Press.

The period of financial adversity thus begun was to last almost a decade and to include long stretches of severe poverty. Its early weeks, however, were among the most contented and productive of MacDiarmid’s life. Living in a cottage rented cheaply from the New Zealander Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk (1903-1997), a claimant of the Polish throne then serving a six-month sentence for obscene libel as a consequence of his authorship of “The Lament for Sir John Penis,” MacDiarmid turned again to the Scots lexicon that had provided so unexpected a resource for his poetry a decade earlier. His point of access this time round was the single-volume abridgement of Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* that he had borrowed from Scott. MacDiarmid’s systematic re-engagement with Scots gave rise to poems concerned primarily with the aural and visual qualities of the language rather than, as in the 1920s, its semantic properties and associative possibilities. In three pieces of middle length – the title poem, “Water Music” and the first part of “Tarras” – he brought energy and inventiveness comparable to anything in the earlier career to the advertised task of unbinding the Lowland tongue.

Tarras Moss is an upland bog north-east of Langholm on the ridge separating Eskdale from Liddesdale. A ten-mile-wide wilderness, it is intersected by the steep valley of Tarras Water, a tributary that joins the Esk a little south of the town. The poem that commemorates both Moss and Water extends the gender concerns of the 1920s lyrics to invoke a female territorial deity who outrages bourgeois sensibilities with her unkempt appearance, her openness to all weathers and her cheerful resilience in the face of experience:

This Bolshevik bog! Suits me doon to the grun’!

( CP 1, 337)

MacDiarmid’s characteristic literal-mindedness weaponizes the cliché in the opening line’s second half. The ground down to which the Moss suits the speaker proves to be not just the earth element celebrated elsewhere in *Scots Unbound* (“Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton” and “Depth and the Chthonian Image”) but the soggy, unstable ground of language that facilitates the depiction, each in terms of the other, of peat-cutting and human sexuality. The final stanza of Part I revels in the bog’s exposure of the folly of male pride:

Come pledge her in a horse-punckin then!
Loons to a byssim, pock-shakin’s o’ men,
“LIKE PUSHKIN, I”: HUGH MACDIARMID AND RUSSIA 83

Needna come vauntin’ their poustures to her.
Their paramuddle is whey to her heather.
To gang through her mill they maun pay
Ootsucken multure to the auld vulture,
Nor wi’ their flauchter-spades ettle to play,
Without thick paikies to gaird their cul-ture!
What’s ony schaftmon to this shud moss?
Or pooky-hair to her matted boss?
– Pledge her wha’s mou’ can relish her floss!

(CP 1, 339; ll.52-62)

“We were, indeed, in Langholm in excelsis the ‘hairy ones,’” MacDiarmid was to claim some years later. In the first part of “Tarras” he unbound elements of Scots to create in the “chthonian image” of a female Esau a fitting emblem of the recalcitrance he so admired in his fellow-burghers.

“Why I Became a Scots Nationalist” was almost certainly designed as a comment on the original one-part version of “Tarras”. Like the dedicatory lines to A Drunk Man, it is best understood as a piece of “blokeish” joshing with F. G. Scott, who had helped Part I (as he had the 1926 sequence) find its published form.

Part II draws together a web of intertextual connections to support the jocose claim that the poet is the only man equipped to come vauntin’ his poustures to Tarras and the country of which that forbidding moor comprises a representative tract:

Gi’e me Scots-room in life and love
And set men then my smeddum to prove
In scenes like these. Like Pushkin, I,
My time for flichty conquests by,
Valuing nae mair some quick-fire cratur’
Wha hurries up the ways o’ natur’,

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69 pledge: toast  horse-punckin: print left in soft ground by a horse’s hoof  Loons: Boys  byssim: bawd  poch-shakin’s: last shakings from a tobacco-pouch  poustures: physical capacities  paramuddle: blood supply  gang: go  Ootsucken multure: Toll payable by those who come voluntarily to a mill (ootsucken designates a tenant’s freedom from thirlage to a mill)  flauchter-spades: two-handed spades used to cut peat  ettle: attempt  paikies: doubled animal skins worn to protect peat-cutters’ legs  gaird: guard, protect  cul-ture: Pun on cul, testicle  ony: any  schaftmon: measure of fist with thumb extended (conventionally taken as six inches)  shud: coagulated moss: bog, moor  pooky-hair: thin, scraggly hair  boss: tuft or larger mass of grass, front of body from chest to loins  mou’: mouth  floss: reeds, rushes

70 MacDiarmid, Lucky Poet, as in n. 22 above, 224.

71 On 15 May 1932, Scott suggested the substitution of whey for the manuscript’s white in the quoted stanza, along with a number of more minor changes elsewhere. See Dear Grieve, 44-45.
The title of Part II is integral to the addendum’s meaning, as it provides the only indication that the female figure of Part I has been transformed from a territorial symbol into a national one. The transformation sets up an encounter between the Gaelic Idea and the Russian Idea, and creates a Cencrastus-like pairing of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille with Alexander Pushkin. Ó Rathaille (c.1670-1729) is generally regarded as the greatest master of the aisling, a Jacobite lyric mode in which the speaker has a vision of a spéir-bhean (lit. sky-woman) molested by louts, though betrothed to a high-born suitor from across the sea. The spéir-bhean is taken to personify Ireland, while the louts stand for Anglo-Scottish Protestant planters, and the suitor for the Stuart Pretender. Two years previously, in Cencrastus, MacDiarmid had cited Ó Rathaille’s most famous aisling, “Gile na Gile” (Brightness of Brightness):

Aodhagán Ó Rathaille sang this sang
That I maun sing again;
For I’ve met the Brightness o’ Brightness
Like him in a lanely glen. . . .

(CP 1, 224; ll.1468-71)

Arguably at least, that was no mere rhetorical brag but a reference to the mysteriously numinous eight-month period he had spent with Peggy in Kildermorie, living poetry, as he observed to George Ogilvie at the time, rather than merely writing it. Now, in envisaging his own country as a woman, he implicitly compares himself once more to Ó Rathaille. The speaker of Part II of “Tarras” is the nation-woman’s suitor rather than a passing observer of her woe, however, while she in turn is distinguished by surly resentment rather than heavenly beauty. It is the cold demeanour rather than the appearance of Tarras / Scotland that sparks the indomitable speaker’s interest and spurs him on to ultimately successful seduction.

MacDiarmid may have intended his title for Part II to echo Robert Browning’s title for an 1885 political sonnet, “Why I am a Liberal.” Once

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73 Letter of 24 October 1920, in Letters, 40.
the intertext is activated, the shift from am to Became underscores the speaker’s non-nationalist starting point and his arrival at his partisan position only as a consequence of his country’s unresponsiveness. The poem then emerges more clearly than otherwise as a comment on the penniless exile in Sussex of the author of A Drunk Man looks at the Thistle and other ambitious Scots poems less than enthusiastically received back home. Alternatively – or simultaneously – the title may have been designed to recall the headline over Mirsky’s Daily Worker piece of June 1931, “Why I Became a Marxist.”

The demand for Scots-room in the lyric’s first line is a demand also for Russian room, since the great moor north-east of Langholm had been hailed as a Bolshevik bog in the opening phrase of Part I. That the very idea of spaciousness had Russian connotations for MacDiarmid is suggested by his fondness for a passage from Brückner’s Literary History of Russia that he had put to use in both A Drunk Man (l.2270) and “Second Hymn to Lenin” (l.49), and that he would draw upon again in the “Third Hymn” (l.97). The passage takes the form of a monologue supposedly spoken by the exiled socialist Aleksandr Herzen (1812-1870):

The Russian is hindered by no fence, no prohibition, no gravestone, no boundary-stone. He can go where he will, and knows nothing but wastes and expanses. We are free because we begin with our own liberation, independent, have nothing to love or to honour. A Russian will never be a Protestant nor juste milieu. “The barbarians have lizards’ eyes,” said even Herodotus, for in comparison with the West – the Romans – we are the barbarians, the Teutons. Our civilisation is external. . . . (Brückner, 304)

Line 3’s “scenes like these” refers to the broad expanse of Tarras Moss depicted in Part I, but it also, by repeating one of the most famous phrases in Scottish poetry, contrasts the sexual swagger of the speaker with the pious domesticity of the head of household in Burns’s 1786 sentimental idyll, “The Cotter’s Saturday Night”:

From scenes like these, old SCOTIA’S grandeur springs,
That makes her lov’d at home, rever’d abroad:
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
‘An honest man’s the noblest work of GOD.’ (ll.163-66)

A further “Russo-Scottish” conceit – rejection of Burns’s douce Scottish version of masculinity in favour of the more dashing Russian one exhibited by Pushkin – hinges on the poem’s key intertext, one that MacDiarmid was annoyed commentators at the time failed to spot. Two

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weeks after the *Scots Observer* carried an anonymous review of *Scots Unbound* which made no mention of “Tarras,” the paper published a letter from Valda Trevlyn posing a “test” of the reviewer’s “competence to lecture MacDiarmid”:

One of the poems in *Scots Unbound* is a splendid adaptation of a famous poem. Which?

Mirsky would have had no difficulty answering. Six years earlier he had included in his study of the great poet a translation of a posthumously published fragment on Nathalie Goncharova, the society beauty who, after a turbulent courtship, became Pushkin’s wife in 1831:

No, I lay no value on riotous pleasure,
Sensual ecstasy, fury, and frenzy, –
The cries and shrieks of a young Bacchant,
When, writhing in my embrace as a serpent,
With the impulse of quick caresses and the wounds of kisses
She hurries the moment of the final convulsions.

O how more charming are you my demure (one)!
O how more painfully happy am I with you,
When, surrendering to long supplications,
You give yourself to me, with tenderness, but without rapture.

Coyly cold, you do not answer
To my ecstasies, heedless of everything
And then become inflamed more and more
And at last share my flame against your will.

MacDiarmid borrows the situation of the Pushkin poem but retains only “hurries,” “my flame against your will” and variants of “You give yourself to me,” “without rapture” and “coyly cold” from Mirsky’s wording. Altering the order of the argument in the interest of a more dynamic syntax, he adds a metaphor at the end both to signal the shared moorland setting of Parts I and II and to end the second poem of the diptych at the same implicitly vulvic location as the conclusion of the first. (The first and last lines of Part II refer to their counterparts in Part I.)

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76 “Hugh MacDiarmid Defends and Is Defended,” *Scots Observer*, 7 January 1933, 11.

VII: STONY LIMITS

A Drunk Man and Clann Albann contain the richest fruits of MacDiarmid’s engagement with the literature and history of Russia. Russian materials are used at least as extensively in Stony Limits and other poems (1934), but they are subjected to insufficient artistic pressure there to move them more than half way along the transcription / transfiguration continuum. In its original edition, Stony Limits, the most voluminous gathering of individual poems of MacDiamid’s career, suffered the excision by the publisher, on grounds of obscenity, of “Harry Semen” and “Ode to All Rebels.” These were major contributions to a bloc of Scots writings that operates as a counterweight to a group of lexically adventurous English poems including “On a Raised Beach,” “Vestigia Nulla Rerorsum” and “Stony Limits” itself. The English and Scots constellations explore contrary responses to the challenge posed by the windswept topography and rocky foreshores of the Shetland Islands to the evolutionary faith of Clann Albann. When the poet arrived in the archipelago in May 1933 after an unsettled and unproductive nine months in the Edinburgh region, he found himself surrounded by evidence of a mode of existence insusceptible even to biological development.

The English poems meditate on a world of stone and stasis where the concept of change has no meaning, and posit an equanimity of personality adequate to such a circumstance. The most formidable among them, “On a Raised Beach,” celebrates a terrifying puritanism in which the theatre of the sensibility is shut down, in sympathy (as it were) with the unresponsiveness of lithic reality. It may be less than relevant to prospect for residues of Solovyov’s thought in the detail of the text’s anti-evolutionary vision, as MacDiarmid’s attention focuses not on particular philosophies but on the disposition to believe in ameliorative change that had sustained his own poetry earlier in the decade.

The poems of the Scots group envisage evolution as an ongoing fact but one exhibiting neither teleology nor intrinsic order – as process run wild. Growth that outruns design finds its most powerful metaphor in the disease of the speaker of “Ex-Parte Statement on the Project of Cancer”. Reverberations of the theme are vividly pursued in the pair of allegedly

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78 The poems were excluded, along with three shorter works the publisher feared libellous, from Stony Limits and other poems; they were restored to the volume, with two of the other initially suppressed pieces, in Stony Limits and Scots Unbound and other poems (Edinburgh: Castle Wynd Printers, 1956).
79 For discussion of the relationship of “On a Raised Beach” to Solovyov’s thought, see Ruth McQuillan, “On a Raised Beach,” Akros, August 1977, 87-97; and McCarey, 37-56.
obscene poems removed from the 1934 edition. Where the English writings enjoin suppression of personality, the Scots ones propose its liberation without regard to boundaries, offsetting the austerity and rationalism of “On a Raised Beach” with an imagined surrender to madness.

In Shetland, MacDiarmid must have had with him a copy of Shestov’s *In Job’s Balances*, a work personally drawn to his attention by Mirsky, a close friend of Shestov.80 *Stony Limits* is replete with echoes of Shestov’s book and its pervasive concern with the conflict between mass humanity’s *omnitude* (common consciousness) and the lone visionary’s necessary familiarity with the *abyss*. “Ode to All Rebels,” the longest poem both of the group and the collection as a whole, exploits *In Job’s Balances* more or less systematically, recycling phrases alike from Shestov and the writers that he quotes in a manner that, while pertinent in context, provides relatively little in the way of added value.

VIII: Conclusion

In June 1933, Valda and the infant Michael Grieve joined the poet on Whalsay, and soon the family set up home in a crofter’s cottage near the south-western tip of the island. By early 1942, when MacDiarmid returned to the mainland to take up war work in a Glasgow munitions factory, his creative life was more or less at an end. Much of the material that would make up his two most significant “late” poetic works was already in existence. *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) had been germinating as “In Memoriam Teofilo Folengo” some years before the Irish novelist’s 1941 death, while a longer version of *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) was drawn upon extensively in *Lucky Poet* (completed, 1941, published 1943). A handful of rhythmically alert passages aside, those information-studded expository “poems” disdain poetry’s customary appeal to the ear, though they exhibit more craft in assembling particulars and tessellating and lineating quoted material than they are sometimes given credit for. *The Kind of Poetry I Want* is best read, not in the volume of that name, but in the text interspersed through Chapter III of *Lucky Poet*, where the frequent prose interruptions enhance rather than impair its cumulative impact. The *Lucky Poet* version includes, as Peter McCarey has shown, an extended

(and characteristically unacknowledged) passage on Martin Buber from one of Shestov’s French essays. The most obviously Russian poem from the Shetland period is “Third Hymn to Lenin,” first published in full in the poet’s *Voice of Scotland* periodical in April 1955. Spurning the example of its two predecessors, this final “Hymn” performs the religiose panegyric the title promises, saluting the Soviet leader in terms that operate simultaneously – in a sort of Russian-Scottish anti-parallelism – as a denigration of Glasgow.

The poet’s vociferous support of the USSR in the later decades of his life appears to have been as much a function of his contrarian relationship with respectability as a product of political analysis. At half a century’s remove, few would seek to deny that it involved indifference to evidence on a scale amounting to abdication of intelligence. MacDiarmid was not a member of the Communist Party when, in late 1950, he visited the Soviet Union. There is no way of knowing the extent to which the Russian literature that had helped spark the poetry of his youth and early middle age was on his mind as he was guided round Moscow, the Ukraine and Georgia with fellow members of a delegation from the Scottish-USSR Friendship Society. Indeed, the psychological continuity between the poet of Montrose and the sage of Brownsbank, the cottage into which Christopher and Valda moved in January 1951 and where they remained for the rest of their lives, is one of the great imponderables of modern Scottish literature. Where the poetry is concerned, Russia is no more than one among a number of persistent concerns, albeit one that touches on much of what is most vital in MacDiarmid’s art. Tracking another of his obsessions – Christ, say, or silence – would have offered a very different pathway through the wide and (in literary critical terms) still almost uncharted territory of his poetry. No visa is required for entry, though travellers are advised to take their time and to be prepared for the unexpected.

*University of Aberdeen*

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81 McCarey, as in n. 12 above, 194.