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Michael H. Whitworth
University of Oxford

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**MACDIARMID THE SPACEMAN: EXTRATERRESTRIAL
SPACE IN HUGH MACDIARMID'S POETRY FROM
SANGSCHAW TO A DRUNK MAN LOOKS AT THE
THISTLE¹**

Michael H. Whitworth

Periodisations of Hugh MacDiarmid's career conventionally place a break somewhere in the early 1930s, when he began to write poems in synthetic English as well as synthetic Scots; the first fruits of the new approach were collected in *Stony Limits and Other Poems* (1934). Extended analyses of MacDiarmid's interest in science have largely focused on poems from the later part of his career such as 'On a Raised Beach', 'The Kind of Poetry I Want', *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), 'To a Friend and Fellow Poet', and 'Stony Limits'.² The present article considers the extent and the nature of MacDiarmid's interest in science in the earlier period, between *Sangschaw* (1925) and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). Although the two periods are linked by a common 'linguistic strategy', the rejection of standard literary English, MacDiarmid's early adoption of synthetic Scots might seem to have impeded engagement with modernity whether urban, technological, or scientific.³ This essay also considers what we know of his scientific knowledge, and, in the interests of comparing his use of science to Thomas Hardy's, it documents how far he took an interest in the English

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the Leverhulme Trust for granting a Research Fellowship in support of his research project 'Science, Poetry, and Specialization, 1900–1942', from which the present article derives.

² Edwin Morgan, 'Poetry and Knowledge in MacDiarmid's Later Work' (1962), in *Essays* (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1974), pp. 203-13; Robert Crawford, "'The Glow-worm's 96 per Cent Efficiency": Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry of Knowledge', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 87 (1995), 169-87; Robert Crawford, 'Poetry, Science and the Contemporary University', in *Science in Modern Poetry: New Directions*, ed. by John Holmes (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 67-83; Michael H. Whitworth, 'The Use of Science in Hugh MacDiarmid's Later Poetry', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 97-110.

³ Crawford, 'Glow-worm', pp. 172-73.

poet's work. Hardy deeply admired the Romantic tradition but had also absorbed a mechanistic and deterministic materialism from Victorian science. Both poets negotiate these tensions, and both play one set of expectations against the other.

The moon, the stars, the planets, the *licht* (the light) and the *lift* (the sky) appear frequently in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, and appear at pivotal moments in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. How do these references to extraterrestrial space and to the planets signify? How we should best read them? In particular, given that space and spacetime had been widely discussed in the early 1920s in the context of Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity, how far should that knowledge form part of our interpretations? While acknowledging the presence of then-recent science, we also need to ask how far MacDiarmid's extraterrestrial references draw on older and other traditions: a Romantic association of space with the spiritual and the sublime, for example.

An indication of what might be at stake comes in the second stanza of 'Empty Vessel' in *Penny Wheep* (1926):

Wunds wi' warlds to swing
 Dinna swing sae sweet,
 The licht that bends owre a' thing
 Is less ta'en up wi't.⁴

The collocation of 'licht' and 'bends' had – in its English form – become well known in 1919 and the years immediately following. In November 1919, the Astronomer Royal, Arthur Eddington, had announced the experimental proof of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, in which spacetime warps around massive objects, and in which, in consequence, light bends as it travels. Other critics have detailed the various newspaper headlines and non-technical accounts of General Relativity that used phrases such as 'light caught bending';⁵ it is possible in addition to identify sources that MacDiarmid read or that were available to him. The collocation of 'licht' and 'bends' in 'Empty Vessel' might derive from scientific discourse, but it does so in a subtle and ambiguous way. Unlike, for example, the 'geoselenic gimbal' or other recondite terminology in MacDiarmid's synthetic English poems (*CP*, p. 391), it does not immediately announce its scientific status; it is not exclusively technical, even if the collocation was strongly scientific. We need to tread carefully: while Louisa Gairn, discussing

⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 volumes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993, 1994), p. 66. Hereafter cited in-text as *CP*.

⁵ Alan J. Friedman and Carol C. Donley, *Einstein as Myth and Muse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 10-17; Katy Price, *Loving Faster than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 16-41.

'Empty Vessel', is quite right to refer to the *licht* as 'inter-stellar', it is easy to imagine a reader missing the reference and yet connecting with the poem's emotional core.⁶ A reader innocent of Einstein might think of the bending light as the curve of a rainbow; 'Empty Vessel' shares with 'The Watergaw' the feeling of loss and of a half-articulated feeling existing beyond (*ayont*) what is immediately perceived. Yet such a reader would have missed something.

It is true that most of the poem's emotional power comes from the first stanza and its presentation of a seemingly timeless scene of loss and grieving. One might think that nothing could be more removed than this scene from the modern world of physical theories and scientific discoveries. The implied scene of a desolate landscape, in which the cairn is the only reference point, could belong to any period. The new science is relevant, however, because it allows MacDiarmid to find consolation, and to insinuate that the universe might not be entirely indifferent to loss. If the eternal silence of infinite spaces is as terrifying to poets as it was to Blaise Pascal, then Einstein's universe, finite but unbounded, seems like it might wrap itself around the grieving woman and provide some sort of comfort. The idea of wrapping the sky around oneself might come from T. E. Hulme's imagist poem 'The Embankment', which MacDiarmid had already echoed in 'God Takes a Rest' in *Sangschaw* (*CP*, pp. 32-33), but the idea of connecting it with the curvature of spacetime was MacDiarmid's.⁷ To believe that the curvature of the universe implies some kind of cosmic empathy requires a large leap of the anthropomorphic imagination, and even if we allow ourselves to believe that the universe cares, the larger import of the comparison is that the woman is *more* taken up with her loss than is the bending light. But momentarily it seems as if the universe might be both sentient and empathetic. Moreover, as spacetime curves most tightly round the most massive objects, MacDiarmid obliquely reminds us of the emotional weight of the bereavement.

Nevertheless, the collocation of the everyday terms 'light' and 'bends' is a slender beam on which to build an interpretation. One sceptical objection to literature-and-science criticism is that the scientific ideas are often such

⁶ Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 83; George Bruce, "'Between Any Life and the Sun'", in *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Festschrift*, ed. by K. D. Duval and Sydney Goodsir Smith (Edinburgh: K. D. Duval, 1962), pp. 57-72; Kenneth Buthlay expressed scepticism about Bruce's reading in 'The Golden Lyric', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 2.1 (1975), 41-66 (p. 52).

⁷ T. E. Hulme, 'The Embankment', in *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 267; the resemblance is noted by Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid: (C. M. Grieve)* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), pp. 31-32.

shadowy presences in a literary work that one might doubt whether they are present at all; that, as John Limon has written in relation to fiction, science cannot be assimilated into a literary work, 'except for a few secondhand doctrines that are deprived of scientific force or, in fact, identifiability [...] when metaphorized'.⁸ If one doubts whether General Relativity is identifiable in 'Empty Vessel', identifying how MacDiarmid might have known about it takes on greater importance. On the face of it, one of the books he references in the essay 'The Assault on Humanism', E. W. Hobson's *The Domain of Natural Science* (1923), could have provided a rich outline of current scientific thinking.⁹ As often with MacDiarmid's reviews, all is not as it first appears. The one passage he quotes from Hobson had previously been quoted a few weeks earlier in the *Times Literary Supplement's* review, and, crucially, another of MacDiarmid's quotations consists of the *TLS* reviewer's words, not Hobson's.¹⁰ It seems unlikely that MacDiarmid ever laid hands on *The Domain of Natural Science*.

If MacDiarmid's deceptive re-use of other reviewers' work reminds us to be cautious about assuming that he had first-hand knowledge of the books he referred to, it also reminds us of the rich resources provided by periodicals in the 1920s; reviews were long and often summarised the key ideas of the work under review; journals also published their own original expositions of new ideas. MacDiarmid's familiar reference to the finite but unbounded universe of Einsteinian theory indicates that he absorbed ideas as well as quotations. As a regular reader of *The New Age*, in 1919 he could have encountered R. W. Western's account of relativity theory; in 1920, his account of its metaphysics; and in 1921 A. E. Randall's two-part account of its philosophical implications.¹¹ Many years later, when reviewing Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928), MacDiarmid quoted the concluding passage from the astronomer's earlier work, *Space, Time, and Gravitation* (1920); although there are several possible places in which MacDiarmid may have found the passage, including Eddington's book itself,

⁸ John Limon, *The Place of Fiction in the Time of Science: A Disciplinary History of American Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 23.

⁹ MacDiarmid, 'The Assault on Humanism' (16 October 1923), *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose*, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach, 3 volumes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996-1998), I, pp. 109-12.

¹⁰ Anon., 'A Philosophy of Science', *Times Literary Supplement* [hereafter *TLS*], 6 September 1923, 580.

¹¹ R. W. Western, 'The Principle of Relativity,' *The New Age*, 26.4 (27 November 1919), 54-56; Western, 'Relativity and Metaphysics', *The New Age*, 26.9 (1 January 1920), 137-38; *The New Age*, 26.10 (8 January 1920), 154-55; and *The New Age*, 26.11 (15 January 1920), 171-72; A. E. Randall, 'Relativity', *The New Age*, 28.25 (21 April 1921), 298-99; Randall, 'Relativity, II', *The New Age*, 28.26 (28 April 1921), 309-10.

Randall's second article in *The New Age* is one of them.¹² Reading the *TLS* for 28 June 1923, he certainly read a review of Eddington's *Mathematical Theory of Relativity* (1923); he reused a passage from the review nearly a year later in *The New Age*.¹³ Reading the *TLS* for 13 April 1922, as we know he did, he could have read a review of Hermann Weyl's *Space-Time-Matter* (1922).¹⁴ Reading the *TLS* for 30 August 1923, as we know he did, he could have read an account of the structure of the atom.¹⁵ One could multiply examples in the period from 1920 to 1926, both of MacDiarmid's reading of reviews of scientific works and, more speculatively, of his reading specific issues of periodicals that carried such material. Moreover, alongside his interest in specific sciences, in this period MacDiarmid had already begun to articulate his beliefs in the necessity of poetry engaging with the fullest possible range of human thought. In 1923, in his 'Causerie' for *The Scottish Chapbook*, he took his cue from Denis Saurat, who had diagnosed a 'decline in the power and prestige of literature', and argued that poetry would only regain its position if it achieved 'the synthesis for which we seek'; in this quest, poetry was working in parallel or in competition with science, which was also 'bending its utmost energies' towards the achievement of the synthesis.¹⁶ In January 1924, he took an interest in the *TLS*'s anonymous leading article 'Art and Science', about the role of genius in both fields; he quoted a passage from it later that year.¹⁷ Like many of his contemporaries, MacDiarmid was envious of and troubled by the epistemic authority of the sciences.

MacDiarmid's interest in space, astronomy, and the planets was not a new development in *Penny Wheep*. *Sangschaw* covers a range of

¹² MacDiarmid (as 'A.L. '), 'The Nature of the Physical World' (8 March 1929), reprinted in *Raucle Tongue*, II, pp. 223-26. The passage had also been anthologised in W. C. D. Dampier-Whetham and Margaret Dampier Whetham, eds., *Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 68, and quoted by Oliver Lodge, *Relativity: a very elementary exposition* (London: Methuen, 1925), p. 41.

¹³ Anon., 'The Mathematics of Relativity', *TLS*, 28 June 1923, 434; C. M. Grieve, 'Contemporary Criticism', *The New Age*, 35.6 (5 June 1924), 65-67.

¹⁴ C. M. Grieve, 'Mannigfaltig: Básníci Revoluchího Ruska – Breiz Atao', *The New Age*, 36.3 (13 November 1924), 31-32 alludes to Anon., 'Alexander Blok', *TLS*, 13 April 1922, 242; see also Anon., 'Complete Einstein', *TLS*, 13 April 1922, 237.

¹⁵ MacDiarmid (as 'Isobel Guthrie'), 'Modern Continental Poetry and Other Topics', *Scottish Nation*, 1.23 (9 October 1923), 8-9, quotes from Anon., 'Two Views of Mr Kipling', *TLS*, 30 August 1923, 568; see also Anon., 'The New Theories of Matter', *TLS*, 30 August 1923, 564.

¹⁶ MacDiarmid, 'Causerie', *Raucle Tongue*, I, pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ Anon., 'Art and Science', *TLS*, 10 January 1924, 13-14; MacDiarmid, 'Contemporary Criticism, II', *The New Age*, 35.7 (12 June 1924), 78-79.

possibilities for the ways that outer space might be used in poetry. Some are non-scientific: the understanding of space in 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' is astrological; Venus, Mars, the moon, and the earth are all personified (*CP*, p. 17). In the second of the 'Au Clair de la Lune' poems, 'Moonstruck', the moon is again personified, but in terms that are less conventional, becoming a crow (*CP*, p. 24). In the third poem in the sequence, the frame of reference is closer to a materialist one, in which the earth is reduced to a 'bare auld stane' (*CP*, p. 24). The materiality of the earth is the key point in 'In the Hedge-Back'. Though, as Catherine Kerrigan has said, the poem is rooted in the ballad tradition, MacDiarmid extends the idea of the 'wild black nicht' beyond its ballad origins and makes it into a scene of epistemological uncertainty; within that scene, the Earth underfoot provides the last connection to sensory knowledge of the world (*CP*, pp. 25-26).¹⁸ In 'The Eemis Stane', the materiality of the world in space is again foregrounded: 'The warl' like an eemis stane / Wags i' the lift' (*CP*, p. 27). MacDiarmid seems to be testing the validity of different ways of understanding space, the stars, and the planets. Each becomes a contested sign, caught between various forms of materialist and spiritual understanding. The materialist accounts emphasise the smallness of the earth and its insignificance.

'The Innumerable Christ' stages the contestation of the spiritual and the materialist very clearly. While the central idea of multiple worlds is taken from J. Y. Simpson's work of theology, *Man and the Attainment of Immortality* (1922), other phrases touch on ideas familiar in expositions of relativity. (Simpson's book itself makes only passing reference to Einstein as a representative of a period of intellectual 'challenge'.¹⁹) Firstly, there is a thought-experiment that asks what our world would look like viewed from a distant planet. Second, there is the idea of light travelling through space. Both ideas pre-date relativity theory by many decades. The two ideas had been given a vivid exposition in *Die Gestirne und die Weltgeschichte* (1846) by Felix Eberty (1812-84), translated into English as *The Stars and the Earth, Or, Thoughts upon Space, Time, and Eternity* (1846).²⁰ Eberty's leisurely exposition notes that, due to the finite speed of light, events occurring in our past would appear to an observer on a distant planet as if they were in the present moment; he calculates how far away an observer would have to be if they were to see, in their present moment, Luther at the Council of Worms, 'our Saviour', Caspar Hauser being taken from his cradle, the shot which killed Charles XII (Charles XII of Sweden, who died

¹⁸ Catherine Kerrigan, *Whaur Extremes Meet: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid 1920-1934* (Edinburgh: Thin, 1983), p. 70.

¹⁹ J. Y. Simpson, *Man and the Attainment of Immortality* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1922]), p. 2.

²⁰ I am grateful to Alice Jenkins for drawing Eberty's work to my attention.

1718 during the Siege of Fredriksten), and the earth as it existed at the time of Abraham.²¹ The idea of historically significant events being seen from a distant location was adopted by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) in his *Lumen* (1872), translated into English under the same title in 1897; Flammarion, after surveying a long sequence of historical events seen in reverse order by an observer travelling faster than light, focuses on the Battle of Waterloo as the key historic moment that might be seen from space.²² MacDiarmid was certainly aware of Flammarion's name and reputation as early as 1911, though whether he really had a long correspondence with the astronomer, as he claimed to have done in preparation for his early article 'The Young Astrology', remains to be determined.²³

In 'The Innumerable Christ' MacDiarmid takes from Eberty or Flammarion the idea of seeing immense distances in space, and the idea of light flying at a finite velocity. In the first two lines of the second stanza, MacDiarmid considers places beyond the stars 'oor een can see' and places that are 'farther than their lights can fly' (*CP*, p. 32). The poem ends with a third idea that owes more to the nineteenth-century physics of thermodynamics than to more recent developments, though one on which Flammarion had written vividly and memorably: the idea of heat death, and the earth becoming as cold as the moon.²⁴ Alongside these materialist ideas MacDiarmid sets the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem (Matthew 1:2). The uniqueness of Christ's birth is displaced and questioned by the materialist idea of there being innumerable worlds.²⁵ The idea of the insignificant materiality of the earth is one that MacDiarmid pursued prior to *Sangschaw*. In 'Science and Poetry' (1922), the earth is reduced to 'one green-gleaming point of light' (*CP*, p. 1220), while in 'Gildermorie' (1923), the speaker sees the world 'as the Gods may, / Like a grey boulder' (*CP*, p. 1223).

²¹ Anon. [Felix Eberty], *The Stars and the Earth, Or, Thoughts upon Space, Time, and Eternity* (London: Bailliere, 1846), pp. 35-40.

²² Camille Flammarion, *Lumen*, translated by A. A. M. and R. M. (London: Heinemann, 1897), pp. 89-92.

²³ MacDiarmid, letter to George Ogilvie, 24 October 1911, *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 6; 'The Young Astrology' (20 July 1911), *Raucle Tongue*, I, pp. 8-11.

²⁴ Camille Flammarion, *Popular Astronomy: A General Description of the Heavens*, translated by J. Ellard Gore (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), pp. 78-80.

²⁵ For the theological arguments stimulated in Scotland by the many-worlds hypothesis, see Colin Kidd, 'Extra-Terrestrials and the Heavens', in *The History of Scottish Theology, Volume II: From the Early Enlightenment to the Late Victorian Era*, ed. by David Fergusson and Mark Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 390-403.

In his use of extraterrestrial space as a sign contested between materialism and various forms of religious faith, and in his fascination with the idea of the earth as a moving material object in the solar system, MacDiarmid resembles Thomas Hardy. Not only are there many points of similarity between the poets, but the points of difference highlight the specificity of what MacDiarmid is doing. Comparisons of MacDiarmid with Hardy have a controversial history, because they risk seeming to reduce MacDiarmid to an offshoot of an English lyric tradition.²⁶ Like MacDiarmid, Hardy invokes extraterrestrial space in a variety of ways, seemingly mutually contradictory. At times in Hardy's poetry 'the planets' are substitutes for the classical Gods, 'scowl[ing]' on human lives (as in the poem 'My Cicely'); at other times they are material things, and as such are the objects of scientific prediction; however, those predictions are subordinated to a pre-Enlightenment language of portents and divine inscription (as in 'A Sign-Seeker').²⁷ In other places Hardy plays with the tensions between religious and materialist conceptions of space: in 'Drummer Hodge', the 'strange stars' of southern Africa that look over Hodge's grave ought to have a meaning but do not; if the immediate reason for their meaninglessness is their not being the constellations familiar to the European soldier, part of the poem's resonance comes from its recognition that, from a materialist viewpoint, all constellations are arbitrary patterns; none has any ultimate significance.²⁸

Like MacDiarmid, Hardy is conscious of the earth's movement in a constantly rotating solar system. At times this idea enters the poems quite casually: in 'A Spot' (from around 1900), in which the speaker recalls the place at which two lovers were momentarily 'Lit by a living love', one measure of the place bearing no trace of them is that 'The sun and shadows wheel'; the spot is subject to planetary and meteorological changes that take no interest in human feelings.²⁹ Elsewhere, as in 'A Cathedral Façade at Midnight', written in 1897 and published in *Human Shows* (1925), the earth's movement is central to the poem's conceit. The speaker watches the moonlight moving slowly along the sculptures on the cathedral front, figures 'poised there when the Universe was wrought / To serve its centre, Earth, in mankind's thought': he is aware, in other words, of a geocentric model of the universe that has long been superseded, and, like the speaker of 'A Spot',

²⁶ Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, p. 117; the most extended comparison since then comes in Harvey Oxenhorn's *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), pp. 41-53.

²⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 51-54, 49-50.

²⁸ Hardy, *Complete Poems*, pp. 90-91.

²⁹ Hardy, *Complete Poems*, p. 140.

is aware of the movement of the planets.³⁰ In some respects the scene of 'A Cathedral Façade' anticipates that of 'In the Caledonian Forest' and its 'geoselenic gimbal'. Behind both poets' awareness of planetary movement stands Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did my Spirit Seal', and the dead subject of the poem 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees.' It is a poem that MacDiarmid alluded to in *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930) (*CP*, p. 218). Likewise, it is difficult to read Hardy's uses of the word 'diurnal' without Wordsworth's poem coming to mind: the debt is most prominent in 'While Drawing in a Church-yard', where the yew-tree regrets that the living 'ride their diurnal round / Each day-span's sum of hours / In peerless ease'.³¹

MacDiarmid took an interest in Hardy, both as novelist and as poet, throughout his career. In *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923), it is notable that the quotation from John Marston's play *Antonio and Mellida* (c.1599) is also to be found in Lionel Johnson's critical study *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (1894), as is the phrase 'sad science of renunciation' from Hardy's *A Laodicean* (1881) which MacDiarmid quotes a few pages later.³² Independently of Johnson, in *Annals* MacDiarmid also quotes from Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and makes a passing reference to its protagonist, Gabriel Oak.³³ In 1923 MacDiarmid quotes and endorses for the first time Hardy's definition of literature as 'the written expression of revolt against accepted things'.³⁴ The phrase comes from the 'Preface' to *The Return of the Native* (1878); MacDiarmid was to quote and slightly misquote the phrase for the rest of his career.³⁵ In 1924 MacDiarmid also mentions Hardy in passing as the proponent of a pessimistic philosophy.³⁶ At some point MacDiarmid acquires a copy of Vere Henry Collins's *Talks with Thomas Hardy at Max Gate*, published in 1928, the year of Hardy's death.³⁷

³⁰ Hardy, *Complete Poems*, p. 703.

³¹ Hardy, *Complete Poems*, p. 536. See also Hardy's 'A Commonplace Day' and 'Misconception', *Complete Poems*, pp. 115-16, 232.

³² MacDiarmid, *Annals of the Five Senses and Other Stories, Sketches and Plays*, ed. by Roderick Watson and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 76, 79; Lionel Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894), pp. 250-51, 76.

³³ MacDiarmid, *Annals*, pp. 50, 60.

³⁴ MacDiarmid, 'A Theory of Scots Letters, I' (February 1923), *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p. 20.

³⁵ MacDiarmid, 'The Third Factor, IV' (12 February 1925), *Raucle Tongue*, I, p. 250. In *Lucky Poet* (London: Methuen, 1943), p. 232, 'accepted things' becomes 'all accepted things', and it takes this form in 'No Longer Bely Only' (17 November 1972), *Raucle Tongue*, III, p. 515.

³⁶ MacDiarmid, 'The Nobel Prize' (4 December 1924), *Raucle Tongue*, I, p. 200.

³⁷ MacDiarmid's copy is in Edinburgh University Library Special Collections.

From 1933 onwards, MacDiarmid begins to cite Hardy as a poet interested in ‘verbal innovation’, ‘verbal experimentation’ and the use of ‘recondite words’.³⁸ In doing so, MacDiarmid is to some extent establishing an antecedent for his own synthetic Scots, but more importantly he is finding an antecedent for the synthetic English of *Stony Limits*. In highlighting this aspect of Hardy’s poetry, MacDiarmid is undeniably led by Ifor Evans, whose *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century* (1933) he frequently quotes in this context. That MacDiarmid does not discuss Hardy’s vocabulary before the appearance of Evans’s book might suggest that he took little interest in it in the 1920s, but that should not be taken to indicate a lack of interest in Hardy. I would suggest that before 1933 MacDiarmid is more interested in Hardy’s philosophy than his diction.

Not only are both poets working out the consequences of scientific materialism, as discussed by Katherine Maynard, but both are fascinated by the image of the earth in space and the question of whether it can be given any special significance.³⁹ MacDiarmid, however, is more conspicuously interested in the idea taken from Eberty or Flammarion of light flying across space, and in the idea of such light conveying information. While that idea did not originate with Special or General Relativity Theory, it acquired a new prominence in the years following 1919. It allows poets to allude to an epic scale of space and time within lyric poetry; it speaks to an anxiety for all writers about whether their writing will survive their own death, and for how long; and it articulates a fear of knowledge always being belated in a modernity where being up-to-date is highly prized.

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle

By the time of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, some of the ideas that are tentatively or ambiguously present in the early lyric poems become more explicit and more fully employed. While the General Theory of Relativity is implicit in the light bending in ‘Empty Vessel’, MacDiarmid’s 1926 gallimaufry makes specific – though passing – reference to Euclid and Einstein, seemingly pairing them as opposite sides of a conceptual antisyzygy; Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity had employed non-Euclidean geometry. The poem also occasionally uses technical terms: the Freudian ‘aboulia’ (l. 319); the ‘composite diagram’ (l. 330); ‘hormones’ (l. 1052); ‘atom’ (l. 1073); ‘particles’ (l. 1079); ‘protoplasm’ (l. 1316); and the

³⁸ MacDiarmid, ‘The Exhaustion of English’, ‘English in the Melting Pot’, and ‘Edinburgh University and Scots Literature’, *Raucle Tongue*, II, pp. 446, 348, 465.

³⁹ Katherine K. Maynard, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid and Thomas Hardy: Local Realities and the “Revolt Against all Accepted Things”’, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 27.1 (1992), 189-202 (p. 189).

‘heicher stratosphere’ (l. 2022).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, when contrasted with MacDiarmid’s work in *Stony Limits* and after, the science in *A Drunk Man* is as elusive as it was in the earlier lyrics, and the technical terms are relatively thin on the ground. MacDiarmid had not begun to delve into dictionaries and periodicals for scientific phrases.

Science comes particularly into focus in two sections of the poem: the first being the section just after the midpoint, ‘A Stick-Nest in Ygdrasil’ (ll. 1451–1631), to give the title from the 1962 *Collected Poems*; the second being the culminating section known as ‘The Great Wheel’ (ll. 2395–2658). In the first of these sections, the thistle is identified with the Scandinavian world-tree, *Ygddrasil*, and its growth becomes a metaphor for human evolution. In the second, the governing metaphor of the wheel is drawn from W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925), which MacDiarmid knew through George Russell’s (AE’s) review in *The Irish Statesman*; whether he knew the book itself is less certain.⁴¹ The wheel of history revolves once every 26,000 years; it also implies a predetermined fate in human affairs. In ‘The Great Wheel’ MacDiarmid seems also to have been influenced by Oswald Spengler’s ideas; the first volume of *The Decline of the West* appeared in translation early in 1926. But on top of Yeats’s cosmology and Spengler’s philosophy, MacDiarmid layers elements from the sciences. In both sections, questions of scale are important, and light is crucial.

‘A Stick-Nest in Ygdrasil’

In ‘A Stick-Nest’ the Drunk Man asks whether there is any purpose to the evolution of man. He outlines an argument that, as Kenneth Buthlay notes, is indebted to Nietzsche, mediated through A. R. Orage’s account of the philosopher: it is hard for man to believe or know (*ken*) that he is not the goal of creation. Man is a means to ends that are unknowable, and their unknowability is a matter of scale: from the point of view of the small forms of life with which man’s body swarms – presumably bacteria – man’s thoughts are as negligible as a cobweb is to a man. The next paragraph takes a different approach to evoking the incommensurability of different scales of existence:

For what’s an atom o’ a twig
That tak’s a billion to an inch

⁴⁰ Line numbers and the 1962 section titles are taken from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle: An Annotated Edition* ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987).

⁴¹ A.E. [George Russell], ‘A Vision’, *The Irish Statesman*, 5.23 (13 February 1926), 714-16. Buthlay notes the source, quoting a long passage from Russell’s review. Buthlay relates other passages in *A Drunk Man* directly to *A Vision*, but there is nothing in them that MacDiarmid could not have found in Russell.

To a' the routh o' shoots that mak'
 The bygrowth o' the Earth about
 The mighty trunk o' Space that spreids
 Ramel o' licht that ha'e nae end,
 – The trunk wi' centuries for rings,
 Comets for fruit, November shoo'ers
 For leafs that in its Autumns fa'
 – And Man at maist o' sic a twig
 Ane o' the coontless atoms is!

(CP, p. 130; ll.1482–92)

The metaphor itself is a restless, ever-evolving one. As the atom is to the twig, so the twig is to the harder-to-define 'bygrowth o' the Earth'. 'Bygrowth' is an intriguing word, scarcely ever recorded in this form. In the only other instance I have found, it refers to a plant like ivy, a 'parasitical bygrowth' that does not support but 'compresses and weakens the stem to which it clings'.⁴² I take the word to derive from 'begrown', to be grown over with; the 'bygrowth' is that which has grown over the earth.⁴³ One might at first understand the bygrowth in *A Drunk Man* to be organic matter and the rocks derived from it, but the lines about 'The mighty trunk' and the 'Ramel o' licht' transform it into something less tangible. My understanding of the 'Ramel o' licht' is that MacDiarmid is thinking of the journey of light from the earth out into space as if it were a form of growth; the tree with 'centuries for rings' is a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional phenomenon, of light travelling outwards from the earth into space. The 'November shoo'ers' are both rain-showers and the Leonid shooting stars that occur on 14 November each year.⁴⁴ MacDiarmid's essential point here and in the paragraph that follows is that man's scale is tiny relative to the space and time of the universe. In itself the idea is a commonplace, but its embellishment with images of travelling light prepares the ground for the 'The Great Wheel.'

'The Great Wheel'

That science should be a significant presence in 'The Great Wheel,' the culminating section of *A Drunk Man*, suggests its importance to MacDiarmid's conception of the poem; after 'The Great Wheel' there are only two much shorter sections amounting to twenty-seven lines. The

⁴² Connop Thirlwall, *Remains Literary and Theological*, 2 vols (London: Daldy, Isbister, 1877), 2, p. 56.

⁴³ The *OED* does not include 'bygrowth', except as an incidental part of an illustrative quotations for 'routh', for which it uses this line from *A Drunk Man*; the same is true of the online Dictionaries of the Scots Language <dsl.ac.uk>, [accessed 05/06/2023].

⁴⁴ Flammarion, *Popular Astronomy*, p. 532.

section begins with the Drunk Man declaring that he is weary of the thistle's flower ('the rose', l. 2395) and that he desires a 'deeper knowledge' than the one that he can obtain from 'this noddin' object' (ll. 2396-7). The determinism that the Drunk Man accepts is first articulated in the language of biology:

I ken hoo much oor life is fated
 Aince its first cell is animated,
 The fount frae which the flesh is jetted.
 (CP, p. 158; ll. 2413-15).

As Buthlay has noticed, the words are George Russell's, from his review of Yeats's *A Vision*, though they were put into Scots by MacDiarmid.⁴⁵ In another kind of poem, if the language in the passage stood out from that of the dominant speaker, one might be inclined to see the discourse as marked as alien and as a conceptual counter-point; but MacDiarmid's rendering it as dialect implies that we should see these ideas as being the Drunk Man's.

Russell's review includes several phrases about light, and MacDiarmid seemingly latches on to them to connect Yeats's ideas with material from astronomy. Russell writes about an 'Oversoul' in Yeats's system which, in its 'in-breathing and out-breathing', 'casts a light upon our own being'; one day for the Oversoul may constitute 'the spiritual light of many of our generations'.⁴⁶ Whether or not those phrases are MacDiarmid's starting point, he soon invents something not found in his source. Having paraphrased Russell on the matter of accepting one's fate, he writes:

And as I see the great wheel spin
 There flees a licht frae't lang and thin
 That earth is like a snaw-ba' in
 (CP, p. 158; ll. 2428-30)

As we have seen, the idea of light flying through space at a finite speed, familiar from Flammarion and from other popular astronomy writing, is one that 'A Stick-Nest in Ygdrasil' had previously alluded to. In the Drunk Man's vision of the Yeatsian wheel, God and the Devil are also 'helpless forms' (l. 2439) spun round upon it. So too is Scotland:

And on a birlin' edge I see
 Wee Scotland squattin' like a flea,
 And dizzy wi' the speed, and me!
 (CP, p. 159; ll. 2440-42)

⁴⁵ George Russell [as 'AE'], 'A Vision', *Irish Statesman*, 5.23 (13 February 1926), 714-16, writes 'I know how much our life is fated once life animates the original cell, the fountain from which the body is jetted' (p. 715); Buthlay, 'Notes', in *A Drunk Man*, ed. by Buthlay, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Russell, *Irish Statesman*, 715.

It is typical of the poem's shifts of tone and ideological perspective that in the space of a few stanzas MacDiarmid transforms the Yeatsian wheel from a piece of visionary metaphysics to a comically dizzying fairground ride. MacDiarmid then shifts into something more lyrical:

I've often thrawn the warld frae me,
 Into the Pool o' Space, to see
 The Circles o' Infinity,

Or like a flat stane gar'd it skite
 A Morse code message writ in licht
 That yet I couldna read aricht.

(CP, p. 159; ll. 2443–48)

In the second of these stanzas MacDiarmid produces what looks like an imperfect rhyme: 'skite' versus 'licht' and 'aricht'. In an undated reading of *A Drunk Man*, at this point in the poem MacDiarmid pronounces 'licht' as if it were the English 'light', and 'aricht' as if it were 'aright', thus rectifying the imperfection.⁴⁷ The pronunciation is all the more remarkable because elsewhere in the *Drunk Man* recording, and also in his well-known recording of 'The Watergaw' made on 3 February 1969, he pronounces 'licht' as a Scots word, with '-cht' rendered as /xt/. However, it is appropriate that a passage about unreadability in the sense of interpretability – 'I couldna read aricht' – should pose its own problem of readability in the sense of oral rendering. In common with other poems about starlight from the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as Michael Roberts's 'Sirius B', MacDiarmid's hints reflexively at an anxiety about whether his poem will reach its audience.⁴⁸ The stanzas also rework the image of the earth as a stone or boulder, and question its implication of humankind's insignificance: they transform the stone into an image of something that can be seized by a human hand, and restore agency to the human.

The metaphor of light as transmitting *a message* from the object that emits or reflects it is implicit in the astronomy expositions of the time. Very often the image of starlight as a message highlights the almost miraculous co-existence of the past and the present; the presence of the past implies that sometimes the message does get through. In the context of Flammarion's Waterloo trope, MacDiarmid's references to the historical battles of Bannockburn and Flodden, and to his own active service in Salonika in the First World War, seem like a glance at Flammarion's idea. However,

⁴⁷ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, three-part recording preserved at PennSound, <<https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/MacDiarmid.php>> [accessed 12/04/2023]. The recording of *A Drunk Man* has less reverberation than the PennSound recordings of nine shorter poems from a reading in New York on 4 May 1969, and on that basis appears to derive from a different occasion and location.

⁴⁸ Michael Roberts, 'Sirius B', in *Poems* (London: Cape, 1936), p. 19.

MacDiarmid's dominant argument is that, relative to the great wheel, the wide intervals between such events are reduced to the size of a pin prick (1.2466); he is interested more in questions of scale than in the presence of the past.

At this point in the poem MacDiarmid develops the pessimistic possibility that no message will ever get through, and – as he puts it a little further on – that all the music made by mankind is powerless (1.2487, 1.2488) to escape the planet. The 'skippin' sparks' and 'the ripples' (1.2449) of the skimming stone are no more than scratches on the underside ('Neth) of a relentless Juggernaut (1.2451). Having confronted this pessimistic possibility, the Drunk Man abruptly asserts a more optimistic point of view: he exults at the possibility that our song will one day 'grow wings' that will carry it 'Ayont its native speck o' grit' (1.2491). As Buthlay notes, MacDiarmid seems to imagine a kind of space travel that will allow the sun and moon to be passed as easily as a neighbour's front door ('lintel').⁴⁹ In this phase of the argument, the idea of scale is turned against the stars:

E'en stars are seen thegither in
A'e skime o' licht as grey as tin
Flyin' on the wheel as 'twere a pin.

Syne ither systems ray on ray
Skinkle past in quick array
While it is still the self-same day,

A'e day o' a' the million days
Through which the soul o' man can gaze
Upon the wheel's incessant blaze,

Upon the wheel's incessant blaze
As it were on a single place
That twinklin' filled the howe o' space
(*CP*, p. 162; ll. 2533–44)

This argument allows MacDiarmid to escape from the pessimistic determinism of the Yeatsian wheel. If Yeats is right, then the Great Wheel's day contains many human centuries, but if this is right, whole solar systems are merged together to the human eye.

There are ambiguities at the heart of the astronomy tropes and MacDiarmid exploits them. Light travelling through space might seem to be simply lost, but it might also travel immense distances and the message it carries might be successfully transmitted, connecting past and present. Similarly, although man is tiny and powerless compared to the universe, by a sleight of hand MacDiarmid suggests that the universe might itself be

⁴⁹ Buthlay, 'Notes', in *A Drunk Man*, ed. by Buthlay, p. 181.

reduced to small points of light. It is very far from being a rigorous argument, as it depends on our forgetting that faraway things look small, but it opens up a space for the subjective.

Compared to his later works where MacDiarmid takes phrases from specific scientific texts and takes words from identifiable dictionaries, the uncertainty about his sources makes *Sangschaw*, *Penny Wheep*, and *A Drunk Man* difficult to work with. The difficulty is thrown into sharper relief when we can identify sources for other phrases, such as those taken from George Russell's review of Yeats. One might question whether MacDiarmid's use of 'licht' in combination with 'bends' or 'flying' is sufficiently exact as discourse to qualify as science; even in the case of *A Drunk Man*, where Einstein is specifically named and where terms such as 'hormones' and 'stratosphere' suggest an interest in contemporary science, the allusion is easily overlooked. However, in the context of a poem that invokes non-scientific sources such as Yeats and Spengler, even these fragments of discourse bring with them the authority of science; in doing so, they enrich and complicate the argument. The disjunction between the early and the later poems concerns not science, but the kinds and range of sciences that MacDiarmid draws on. The earlier poems prioritise astronomy, while the later ones draw their distinctive diction from a far wider range of sciences. Moreover, while in the earlier poems the suggestion of immense temporal scales is a function of astronomy, in the later ones that role is given increasingly to geology. MacDiarmid shifts attention from the earth as a pebble in space to the stones on raised beaches.

Merton College, Oxford