Studies in Scottish Literature

Volume 49
Issue 1 *Hugh MacDiarmid at 100*

Article 7

2-2024

Linguistic Islands: Archipelagic Perspectives in Hugh MacDiarmid's 'Vision of World Language'

Fiona Paterson
University of Glasgow

LINGUISTIC ISLANDS: ARCHIPELAGIC PERSPECTIVES IN HUGH MACDIARMID'S 'VISION OF WORLD LANGUAGE'[1]

Fiona Paterson

In 1924, under the pseudonym J. G. Outterstone Buglass, Hugh MacDiarmid imagined 'there was no England and never had been, and Scotland was, like Ireland, an island off the coast of Europe'; 'Scotland', he continues, 'is coterminous with the universe', foregrounding, through the over-accentuation of Scotland's archipelagic nature and its coastal border with Europe, the intrinsic universality of island experience, defined less by isolation and more by an openness to cultural, linguistic and political connections.[2] Experiences that followed, namely MacDiarmid's 'virtual expatriation' in Whalsay, in Shetland (1933–42), built upon this speculation, irrefutably shaping the vision of world language which would emerge in *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955).[3]

This essay foregrounds MacDiarmid's island encounters – both in Shetland and in the travels which informed *The Islands of Scotland,* the Batsford travelogue published in 1939 – as integral to MacDiarmid's relationship with language. The preoccupation with local distinction in his Scots poetry in the 1920s is first explored as foundational to the development of this perspective, before turning to the trialling of Norn and local dialect in *Stony Limits* (1934) as an example of linguistic specificity in Shetland. The priorities that are further revealed through *The Islands of Scotland* and made applicable to an idea of world language are then discussed, followed

---

[1] This essay is largely informed by research undertaken for a chapter on MacDiarmid's engagement with Gaelic in the 1930s and 1940s in an ongoing doctoral project. MacDiarmid's increased interest in and attentiveness to Gaelic culture was influenced by his experience of Scotland's islands, including the Hebrides.

[2] J. G. Outterstone Buglass, 'Arne Garborg, Mr Joyce, and Mr M'Diarmid' (September 1924), *The Northern Review,* in *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume I,* ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), pp. 233-38 (p. 234).

[3] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (Manchester: Carcanet, [1943] 1994), p. 41.

by consideration of the specific capacities of the collage poem to capture such networks of interrelation and particularity, and an investigation of the anti-imperial implications of reading *In Memoriam James Joyce* through the lens of an archipelagic perspective.

Responding to research by Alexandra Campbell and John Brannigan in particular, who themselves build upon John Kerrigan's notion of 'Archipelagic English', this essay argues for the centrality of an archipelagic framework to the priorities of decentralisation and particularity which informed MacDiarmid's vision of world language.[4] It was through confrontation with the archipelagic that MacDiarmid's earlier linguistic methods and enquiries were refocussed and streamlined, resulting in the epic, open curiosity of *In Memoriam,* and its simultaneous appeal to local and global identities.

Local Distinction and Diversity in MacDiarmid's Poetry

MacDiarmid's early poetry is characterised by its engagement with multiplicities of Scottish identity, related to and revealed through the local linguistic distinctions which he brings together in a constructed synthetic Scots, supplemented with both translated and non-translated vocabulary. MacDiarmid advocated for the necessity of particular language to describe particular experience – recognising that 'Words are a product of physical functioning and no mere intellectual devices' – as he did the centrality of language to an understanding of the world, arguing that 'language not only expresses but to a large extent determines thought'.[5]

In his early Scots lyrics MacDiarmid sought to combine 'strong views in regard to the literary uses of the Vernacular' with a 'great delight in words', recognising that it was not only an ideological incentive for literary revival but, within or alongside that, 'the obsolete, the distinctively local, the idiomatic, the unusual' that 'attract[ed] me strongly'.[6] It was this urge that resulted in the lyrics of *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926), condensed yet rich verbal exercises which aimed, as Scott Lyall puts it, 'to culturally legitimise and connect […] divergent, provocative

[4] See John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[5] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Braid Scots and the Sense of Smell', *The Scottish Nation* (15 May 1923), in *The Raucle Tongue, Vol. I,* pp. 72-74 (p. 73); Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Neo-Gaelic Economics', *The Scots Independent* (February 1928), in *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume II,* ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 63-67 (p. 67).

[6] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'North-Middle Scots', *The Dunfermline Press* (30 September 1922), in *The Raucle Tongue, Vol. I,* pp. 30-33 (p. 31).

vernacularism'.[7] In his close attention to the environments engaged with in these poems MacDiarmid attunes his language to what Louisa Gairn calls a 'vivid and intimate sense of the local' as 'embedded in the Scottish landscape' and reflected in 'Scots vocabulary', with ecological and linguistic concerns and traditions intertwined.[8]

This sets the precedent for the prioritisation of multiple localities within a linguistically hybrid poetics which emphasises the value of cultural exchange both within Scotland, and between Scotland and the world beyond it. As Svend Erik Larsen has observed 'We talk about the whole world, but use a local language to do so, and this world permeates our language'.[9] MacDiarmid's language, while approaching the nation, the world, and a sense of the cosmic universe beyond that, is self-consciously local, and even when the localities it relates to are multiple, his early poetry is suggestive of firm priorities around which an archipelagic vision would organically develop. Its outward-looking perspective – rooted in Scotland's distinct regions, yet in comprehension of what lay beyond perceived boundaries – articulates the archipelagic perspective that Campbell recognises as 'Encompassing plural identities and fluid environments' and acknowledging 'the reciprocal relationship between the regional and the planetary'.[10]

In the 1930s and beyond, MacDiarmid incorporated obsolete and unfamiliar vocabulary in his poetry with increased frequency, drawing upon a multitude of languages in recognition of the perspectives and knowledges which they related to, and the specific experiences and identities which they might invoke within a multilingual vision of world language. In the proposition of a diverse world language which retained local markers and distinctions, MacDiarmid's project aligns with Danish critic Georg Brandes's assertion in 1899 that 'The world literature of the future will become all the more captivating the more the mark of the national appears in it and the more heterogeneous it becomes, as long as it retains a universally human aspect as art and science'.[11] The universal appeal in

---

[7] Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 64.

[8] Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 83.

[9] Svend Erik Larsen, *Literature and the Experience of Globalization: Texts Without Borders* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 12.

[10] Alexandra Campbell, 'A World of Islands: Archipelagic Poetics in Modern Scottish Literature', *The Poetics of Space and Place in Scottish Literature*, ed. by Monika Szuba and Julian Wolfreys (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 165-85 (p. 177).

[11] Georg Brandes, 'World Literature', in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Theo D'haen, César Dominguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 23-27 (p. 28).

MacDiarmid's work, be that in Scots, English, or a combination of languages, is in its recognition of each distinct language, culture, and identity as belonging to a wider global network of shared experiences and struggles for expression, despite local differences. The cross-pollination of various vocabularies which is enacted within his poetry speaks to the synthetic nature of all language as fluid and developing, a living thing to be contributed to through the purposeful hybridisation of literary discourse.

MacDiarmid's experience on the 'burnt-out star' of Shetland and of travels around the Scottish archipelago in the 1930s embeds the necessity of an archipelagic framework of language and identity deeper within his perspective.[12] Having put physical distance between himself and the nation as he knew it, MacDiarmid's time on Whalsay was an opportunity to immerse himself in an alternative manifestation of Scottish identity, divorced from his prior experience and yet sustained by the same central ethos, that he was 'no further from the "centre of things"'.[13] It was here, Lyall argues, that MacDiarmid 'located a Scottish Republican tradition opposing centralisation', an incentive which permeates the language of his Shetland poems and, subsequently, his vision of world language as opposed to the centralised authority of a standard English.[14]

Appealing to the linguistic particularity of Shetland in *Stony Limits*, MacDiarmid experiments with Norn, geological terminology and Shetlandic dialect. MacDiarmid's Shetland poems illustrate an attachment to place like that which Nicholas Allen considers to be symptomatic of the archipelago, 'locally grounded but at the same time involved in a network of cultural exchange'.[15] MacDiarmid incorporates language which is borne out of a local familiarity with, and knowledge of, the environments that he confronts, and involves this in a hybrid poetic discourse. Whilst the significance of MacDiarmid's engagement with geological terminology is an integral stage of development, it is the prominence of Norn and the dialect of the Shetland fishermen that this essay is primarily concerned with.[16]

---

[12] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Shetland Islands', *New Britain* (18 October 1933), in *The Raucle Tongue, Vol. II*, pp. 510-12 (p. 510).

[13] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'In the Shetland Islands', in *Complete Poems, Volume I*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017), pp. 574-75 (p. 574).

[14] Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*, p. 117.

[15] Nicholas Allen, 'Introduction', in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-20 (p. 12).

[16] On MacDiarmid and geology see Roderick Watson, 'Landscapes of Mind and Word: MacDiarmid's Journey to the Raised Beach and Beyond', in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*, ed. by Nancy K. Gish (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 231-52. Also, Julian Murphet, 'Astonied: the mineral

In adopting Norn, which declined following Scotland's acquisition of Shetland and Orkney from Norway in the mid-fifteenth century and was considered to be extinct by the mid-nineteenth century, MacDiarmid, in 'On a Raised Beach', acknowledges the necessity of looking back in order to better understand the present. It provides an example of what Matthew Hart has defined as MacDiarmid's attempts to synthesise 'the language of the future from the debris of the past', an appeal to local knowledge embedded in the landscape which complements his incorporation of geological terminology, representative of a more modern scientific approach.[17]

Borrowing from the argument of Faroese linguist Jakob Jakobsen, who is referenced in *The Islands of Scotland*, MacDiarmid recognised the Shetland dialect to share a resemblance with 'Lowland Scotch', 'interspersed with a great many Norn words and phrases', with 'a distinctly Scandinavian accentuation and pronunciation'.[18] Unlike the Scots of his earlier poetry, however, here MacDiarmid deploys Norn vocabulary in a catalogue form which accentuates the foreignness of the language. The poem's speaker evidently recognises its value and yet is not equipped with the fluency to successfully use it:

> I try them with the old Norn words – hraun
> Duss, rønis, queedaruns, kollyarun;
> They hvarf from me in all directions
> Over the hurdifell – klett, millya hellya, hellyina bretta,
> Hellyina wheeda, hellyina grø, bakka, ayre, –
> And lay my world in kolgref.[19]

Whilst MacDiarmid is believed to have used Jakobsen's 1908 study as a source – republished in 1928 and referenced in *The Islands of Scotland* –, engagement with the Norn language in this manner does not permit him full access to understanding. Despite the poem's pursuit of closeness, therefore, the language remains undefined, the meaning inaccessible, and a distance from the environment is maintained. His inclusion of Norn suggests an aspiration for knowledge rather than the achievement of it and yet, as Campbell has argued, it remains integral as evidence of MacDiarmid's

---

poetics of Robinson Jeffers, Hugh MacDiarmid, Francis Ponge and Muriel Rukeyser', *Textual Practice*, 34.9 (2020), 1501-17.

[17] Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 59.

[18] Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland: Hebrides, Orkneys, and Shetlands* (London: Batsford, 1939), p. 53.

[19] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'On a Raised Beach', in *Complete Poems I*, pp. 422-33 (p. 427).

rejection of 'homogenising narratives of place', an indicator of particularity as a priority.[20]

It is significant then that MacDiarmid returns to Norn in *In Memoriam James Joyce*, including vocabulary also borrowed from Jakobsen within the global plethora of languages and distinct localities that the poem invokes within its heterogeneous vision. Here, however, MacDiarmid's deployment of Norn vocabulary is more self-assured than in 'On a Raised Beach', evident in the provision of definitions which suggest a greater comfort in unfamiliar expression. The vocabulary that is included is also referenced in *The Islands of Scotland*, in a catalogue of words relating to the naming of animal sounds and 'all the elements of nature'.[21] Rather than 'try[ing]' the Norn words as he did before, here MacDiarmid 'know[s]' them, and uses them as if he does.[22] He identifies 'the various names / Applied to all the restless movement of the sea', beginning with '*Di*, a wave' and '*Da mother di*, the undulations / That roll landward even in calm weather' and ending on '*Draag*, the drift of a current' and '*Roost*, a rapid flowing current', before turning to 'the several names applied to the sea bottom / *Flör*, *maar*, *jube*, *graef* and *ljoag*'.[23] It is notable that the vocabulary referenced indicates terms used to describe the sea, indicative of the cross-cultural currents which characterise MacDiarmid's poetic language. Brannigan encourages the reader to think of the sea as a 'space of connection and communication'; in *In Memoriam*, MacDiarmid appeals to this perception, affirming the poem as a fluid textual space that encourages connection and communication through the juxtaposition of various forms of language and knowledge.[24] The inclusion of Norn within the multilingual poetics of *In Memoriam* affirms the centrality of subjective locality within its sprawling global vision, one that, as Gregory Baker discerns 'would not threaten parochial idioms or diminish the importance of national literary expression'.[25]

MacDiarmid's concern for 'parochial idioms' is further present in his 'Shetland Lyrics', a materialisation of the poet's 'dream[s]' of a poetry that would do the local fisherman of Shetland 'justice'.[26] The poems, written in

---

[20] Campbell, 'A World of Islands', p. 169.
[21] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 89; the vocabulary included in *In Memoriam* is listed on p. 90.
[22] Hugh MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam James Joyce*, in *Complete Poems, Volume II*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), pp. 737-889 (p. 763).
[23] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam James Joyce*, pp. 763-64.
[24] John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 11.
[25] Gregory Baker, *Classics and Celtic Literary Modernism: Yeats, Joyce, MacDiarmid and Jones* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 223.
[26] MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, p. 52.

Scots and also published in *Stony Limits*, mark an appeal to the local expression and knowledge of these fishermen, whose speech MacDiarmid replicates with 'an optimism' about using the 'less flamboyant, less consciously estranging' language as a point of contact between himself and his subjects.[27] The integration of dialogue represents a more immediate, contemporaneous appeal to particularity, notably, again, associated with the seas as a rooted and yet fluid space and identity.

MacDiarmid includes the dialogue of the fishermen, which he would have encountered whilst out on their boats, in 'With the Herring Fishers' – '"Soom on, bonnie herrin', soom on," they shout, / Or "Come in, O come in, and see me,"' – recalling, through their language, the men in 'Deep-Sea Fishing' 'wha's coarser lives / Seemed proof to a' that appealed to me'.[28] Such speech highlights the particularity of language used not only in the Shetland archipelago as a marker of local identity, but of the specific forms of expression and knowledge associated with a particular profession. As he notes in *The Islands of Scotland*, it was, quite specifically, among fishermen that such styles of speech were maintained: 'Many of these special haaf words are still used by the fishermen at sea, just as the Manx fishermen still use the old Manx language in making up their catch'.[29] The language is distinctly situated, yet connections are drawn, the archipelagic nature of Celtic languages both across the British Isles – on this instance in the link to Manx – and Scandinavia – in reiterations of Shetland's commonalities with 'Norway and the Faroes' – emphasised.[30] The notion of a Celtic archipelago, underpinned by a geological commonality that connects 'Cornwall, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys and the Shetlands', sees the coincidence of an archipelagic perspective with increased attention to Scotland's Gaelic cultures, as returned to later in this essay.[31]

The Scots speech of MacDiarmid's 'Shetland Lyrics', situated in a modern context, provides a balance to his calls upon obsolete or less popular Norn vocabulary, signalling the archipelago as a place simultaneously associated with history and tradition, and dynamic, adaptable economies and cultures. MacDiarmid would later argue that 'primitive and modern are found side by side in the Shetlands', a duality that is revealed and reinforced through the language used to engage with the archipelago and with an archipelagic perspective of national and global identities in his poetry.[32]

---

[27] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, p. 163.
[28] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Shetland Lyrics', in *Complete Poems I*, pp. 437-43 (pp. 437, 438).
[29] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 53.
[30] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 53.
[31] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p.2.
[32] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p.55.

***The Islands of Scotland*: Priorities and Discoveries**

MacDiarmid's appeal to the distinct languages of Shetland anticipates the formulation of an archipelagic perspective which is communicated most coherently in *The Islands of Scotland.* The book, a travel-guide supplemented with original poetry, anecdote, extensive literary survey, and documentation of the economic, cultural, and environmental realities of the archipelagos discussed – with a chapter each on Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides – reinforces the ideals and ideas of particularity and plurality already explored. Deemed by Brannigan to be 'part manifesto, part travelogue', *Islands* provides the affirmation that 'Scotland is broken up into islands other than, and to a far greater extent than merely, geographically'.[33] Campbell has argued how, 'Through patterns of transmission and travel, the island becomes a porous and interconnected space and for MacDiarmid fuels an emergent archipelagic poetics that emphasises interconnection and interaction'.[34] This essay takes the concept of an 'archipelagic poetics' further, applying its parameters of seeing and understanding to the vision of world language that MacDiarmid imagines and revises alongside the research and travels that inform *The Islands of Scotland*.[35]

In the book, MacDiarmid surveys the characteristics of each island, considering their distinct ecologies, economies, and cultures, alongside their commonalities. Driven by a 'Scotist love for minute distinctions', he exhibits a curiosity which Brannigan suggests to be typical of the modernist appeal of island spaces as both 'distinctively local, and yet bound up with intrinsically internationalist perspectives on the human race and its planetary habits'.[36] This relates to Chris Bongie's description of the island space 'on the one hand, as the absolutely particular, a space complete unto itself and thus an ideal metaphor for a traditionally conceived, unified and unitary, identity' and 'on the other, as a fragment, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile and to which it must be related'.[37] Brannigan notes that the notion of archipelagic identity 'was a question of particular urgency throughout the British and Irish Isles in the 1920s and 1930s, when the very notion of the "wholeness" of "Britain", "England", or the "United Kingdom"

---

[33] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, p. 146; MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 8.

[34] Campbell, 'A World of Islands', pp. 169-70.

[35] MacDiarmid is known to have been drafting the poem that was eventually published as *In Memoriam* throughout his time on Shetland. It is reasonable, therefore, to consider anything explored in other projects of the 1930s and 1940s, namely *The Islands of Scotland*, to have simultaneously informed the approach of the poem.

[36] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 26; Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, p. 150.

[37] Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 18.

was undermined politically and culturally'.[38] This urgency is reflected throughout *The Islands of Scotland,* in which MacDiarmid expresses a desire, if not an anxiety, to relate the distinct island identities to that of 'the greater whole', 'seeking to bring out as clearly and completely as possible the relations of the Islands to Scotland, geologically, culturally, commercially, and otherwise', much as he would go on to explore the world's languages in terms of both their distinction and relation to a 'whole' of 'world language'.[39]

While, as MacDiarmid notes, islands can be 'as like each other as two peas', they 'can nevertheless give rise to the most unaccountable variations', so similarities and distinctions coexist. [40] The discussion of each of MacDiarmid's chapters is thus driven by distinct focal points: in his exploration of Shetland, it is the island's Scandinavian roots and ties that are emphasised; of Orkney, its impressive creative output; in the Hebrides, their environmental diversity. Each island is explored as having a coherent, bounded identity, 'an almost startlingly entire thing' representative of 'a real autonomy in basic matters' which sees the archipelagos instilled with symbolism of an alternative order to 'that centralisation of affairs in London which in all other matters stultifies their local initiative'.[41] Whilst, as Elizabeth Deloughrey suggests, 'colonial writers imagined the island as a European world in miniature, a discursive space in which to perform and experiment with the material realities of colonial expansion' – an imposition from outside – MacDiarmid saw individual islands as distinct within themselves, spaces from which to approach and engage with the outside world.[42] In representing what Brannigan refers to as 'geographical areas which have remained remote from the encroachments of a debilitating (English) modernity', exemplary of a particularity which was not insular, the islands indicate the existence of decentralised authority, much as individual languages later invoked in *In Memoriam* are associated with coherent autonomous identities.[43] Moreover, in his assertion that 'in order to know any island it is necessary to know many islands', MacDiarmid champions plurality and suggests that the particularities of each island – what Deloughrey calls the 'vital and dynamic loci of cultural and material exchange' – can only be appreciated 'through a thorough realisation of all'

[38] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, p. 147.
[39] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 27.
[40] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 95.
[41] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, pp.26, 63.
[42] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, pp. 806-7.
[43] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, p. 163.

the islands in the diverse archipelago.[44] Recognised within an existing polyphonic cultural network, the islands are considered as they contribute to 'the wider realms of global systems of communication and culture'.[45]

It is in this vein that the plurality of languages referenced in *In Memoriam James Joyce* are presented as individually distinct and yet connected, autonomous and yet cooperative, identified within a diverse and fluctuating network:

> They are not endless these variations of form
> Though it is perhaps impossible to see them all.
> It is certainly impossible to conceive one that doesn't exist.[46]

MacDiarmid recognises any 'new' language as being constituted from new combinations or interpretations of existing language, hence why it is 'impossible to conceive one that doesn't exist' in some form already. He also recognises the unattainable prospect of one individual exercising authority over all these 'variations' – hence it being 'impossible to see them all' – yet, as in Mr. D. J. Robinson, who is quoted in *The Islands of Scotland* as 'not pretend[ing] to know separately each of the four hundred eider-ducks on the island' but knowing enough 'among them' to feel that 'I think they know me', MacDiarmid's aim was 'not to learn every language, but to acquire such a body of knowledge and understanding that I could see the poetical output of mankind as a whole'.[47] MacDiarmid's vision is informed by extensive reading, and aspires to an emulation of coherence, unity and completeness, yet the logistical unattainability of envisioned synthesis was built into the intentions of the project, a vision of plurality, diversity and order which was defined by its constraints as much as its ambition.

The relation of distinct stratifications of language to an idea of world language as a 'greater whole' is a tension which runs through *In Memoriam James Joyce*. As Alan Riach suggests, whilst MacDiarmid 'recognises the plurality of languages he also longs for a metaphysical complementation', something that will 'confer upon' the pluralities 'a more coherent significance and therefore transform them into something that might be understood as unitary'.[48] The image of the archipelago, to a degree, symbolises this endeavour, an example of simultaneous distinctness and

---

[44] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, pp. 25, 8; Elizabeth Deloughrey, 'Island Writing, Creole Cultures', in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature, Volume* II, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 802-32 (p. 802).
[45] Campbell, 'A World of Islands', p. 169.
[46] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 758.
[47] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Key to World Literature' (1952), in *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), pp. 187-90 (p. 189).
[48] Alan Riach, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 128.

interconnectedness in which each island and each language is whole, in and of itself, and yet necessarily, unavoidably, also a member of a wider body or collective.

MacDiarmid emphasises the 'open'-ness of island identities through his consideration of modes of travel between the islands in *The Islands of Scotland.* As such, MacDiarmid's discussion of Orkney is foregrounded with the fact that 'Excursions by sea may be made from Stromness to the southern islands of the group', and that of the Hebrides with the characteristics of the 'three roads to Skye'.[49] Travel, and the renegotiation of ideas and confluence of cultures that it encourages, is integral to MacDiarmid's understanding of the archipelagic nature of Scotland and hugely influential to the archipelagic notions of identity that characterise his subsequent poetry.

This consideration of travel pre-empts the interconnected networks of transmission that run throughout his vision of world language in *In Memoriam,* an assemblage of disparate references which represent very real passages and interactions between cultures. In the first instance, MacDiarmid includes a nod to the archipelago within a catalogue of apparently significant locations:

> Placing the imaginary person
> In London, Paris, Baghdad, Spitzbergen,
> Bassorah, Heligoland, the Scilly Isles,
> Brighton, Cincinnatti, and Niji-Novgorod.[50]

Situated off the coast of Cornwall, the Scilly Isles represent the most southernly point of the British archipelago, yet remain associated with MacDiarmid's own experience of the islands of Scotland through their history of Norse influence and the Cornish language, an emblem of cultural connection despite spatial distance. The archipelago as a site of hybridity is highlighted in MacDiarmid's reference to 'Papiemento, mixture of half the languages on earth' in *In Memoriam.*[51] Papiemento, a Portuguese creole language used in the Caribbean islands, features influence from Spanish, English, Dutch and African languages, a confluence of imperial powers at the centre of the Dutch slave trade. Similar narratives of imperial travel are invoked in a later reference to 'the special Palace language of Siam, / The "language of their own" (R. L. Stevenson tells us)' that 'The nobles in Samoa use'.[52] Stevenson had spent time in Samoa, the Polynesian island country, in the 1890s, integrating himself in the culture. The significance of islands as sites of contested power, authority and cultures is embedded

[49] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, pp. 106, 115.
[50] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 743.
[51] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 755.
[52] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 800.

within the referential reach of *In Memoriam*'s vision, tangible physical realisations of the archipelagic characteristics that MacDiarmid applied more broadly to an idea of world language and the plural identities and voices that contributed to it.

While MacDiarmid concentrated primarily on Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides in *The Islands of Scotland*, his study also acknowledges the 800 islands beyond these which make up the Scottish archipelago:

> They are of all shapes and sizes. No symmetry of effect is obtainable. She [i.e., Scotland] seems to have no control over them. Several groups appear to have escaped from and concerted movement of which she is the centre altogether. And while some remain in groups others are isolated stragglers. It is a chaotic spectacle seen from above.[53]

Authority is not imposed upon the islands from above, which remain 'a chaotic spectacle' despite belonging to a wider network. This archipelagic structure is reflected in *In Memoriam*, which challenges hegemonic organisation and presents a rich plurality of linguistic forms on a non-hierarchical basis, largely made possible by the poem's bricolage, or collage, approach. His vision of world language proclaims to be:

> Concerned at one moment with the whole of *Weltliteratur*
> And equally concerned the next with Vogul,
> The smallest of the Finno-Ugrian language group,
> Spoken by only 5000 people.[54]

Size and usage are not taken as indicators of value, the smallest components representative of the most specific and most distinctive experiences and identities that MacDiarmid argued ought to be preserved in the face of English hegemony. Here, and in *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961), MacDiarmid envisions a poetry, and a language, which hangs

> in the wavering balance
> Between unity and great achievement on the one hand
> And particularism and chaos on the other.[55]

This balance is symbolised by an archipelagic framework, in which individual islands retain their particular characters whilst also being united, despite the boundaries of seas and coastlines, by their shared experiences and belonging to a wider system or collective. MacDiarmid's vision of world language, similarly concerned 'less with the past than with the future',

---

[53] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 1.
[54] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 748.
[55] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Kind of Poetry I Want', in *Complete Poems II*, pp. 1001-35 (p. 1012).

functions on an analogous basis of organisation and order, as reflected in the collage form adopted in later poetry, namely *In Memoriam*.[56]

MacDiarmid's composition of poetry that engages with the archipelagic nature of world identities and world language echoes Joe Cleary's suggestion that in 'the most ambitious literary texts' the writer '[does] not simply seek to find a sanctioned place within stable or destabilized literary systems', but rather, has 'a capacity also to draw the structures and dynamics of the system into their own forms, to make them an object of their aesthetic reflection'.[57] Suggested by Duncan Gullick Lien to be read as a 'way of happening' and an 'exercise in consciousness building', MacDiarmid's later poetry adopts a referential collage form in its thematisation of language and reflection upon the duality of particularity and interconnection, appealing to notions of both locality and universality in its proposition of how the components of a world language might be assembled and might interact.[58]

Archipelagic Form: The Collage Poem

It was Edwin Morgan who first identified MacDiarmid's later poetry as a form of 'collage', elsewhere remarking that through this form *In Memoriam* captures the endeavours of 'a man who is looking at everything and trying to find a way of talking about everything'.[59] The collage form, an epic and restless accumulation of references to a broad pool of diverse cultures, is composed from non-translated vocabulary, uncited quotations, reworked prose, and catalogues of proper names, interrupted intermittently with passages of lyrical poetry, some of which appears elsewhere – published independently and subsumed within other texts – throughout MacDiarmid's oeuvre. Referencing languages including Greek, Sanskrit, Kikuyu, Sumerian, Xhosa, and Majorcan, the poem reflects an archipelagic framework in its attempt to bring diverse cultures and languages into association through closeness on the page. MacDiarmid suggests affinities and shared understandings across boundaries whilst retaining the

---

[56] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 20.

[57] Joe Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 47.

[58] Duncan Gullick Lien, 'Rehearsing Better Worlds: Poetry as A Way of Happening in the Works of Tomlinson and MacDiarmid', *Philosophy and literature*, 42.1 (April 2018), 185-200 (pp. 186, 197).

[59] Edwin Morgan, 'James Joyce and Hugh MacDiarmid', *James Joyce and Modern Literature*, ed. by W. J. McCormack and Alistair Stead (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 202-17 (p. 216); cited in Robert Crawford, 'Hugh MacDiarmid: A Disgrace to the Community', *PN Review* 89, 19.3 (1993) <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=3588> [Accessed 31/05/23].

distinctness of each component through the inclusion of names and titles in their untranslated – indeed, non-translatable – form.

John Baglow has suggested MacDiarmid's modernist task to be one of 'recreat[ing] a smashed universe' and proposing a new order.[60] In adopting this approach MacDiarmid takes on the role identified by Jahan Ramazani as the 'bricoleur', the poet who 'enfold[s] varied temporalities in the radially vectored language, techniques, forms, and rhetorical strategies of their work'.[61] In *In Memoriam* he challenges how 'textual *appropriation*' might be considered 'a mode of fresh creation', thematising as it does both the 'smashed'-ness and the act of 'recreat[ion]' within the text.[62]

In engaging with references borrowed from a diversity of sources and original cultures, MacDiarmid grapples with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic concept of 'heteroglossia', defined as '*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way'.[63] Bakhtin recognised 'every language', 'at any given moment' in history, to contain stratifications of 'linguistic dialects' and 'languages that are socio-ideological', a concept that resonates with MacDiarmid's appeal to various linguistic forms – associated with particular localities, professions, tastes and experiences – within his vision of 'all language'.[64] Whilst Bakhtin identified heteroglossia as a characteristic of the novel, due to the incorporation of various discourses in the speech of different characters, arguing that, conversely, 'Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse', Ramazani has suggested that 'to adapt Bakhtin's terms for the novel, poetry dialogizes literary and extraliterary languages, intensifying and hybridizing them, making them collide and rub up against one another'.[65] In *In Memoriam*, MacDiarmid populates his poetic language with an ample variety of allusions from and to alien discourse, disseminating other's voices and dialogising other's language throughout the poem so as to emphasise the multiplicity of

---

[60] John Baglow, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Poetry of Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), p. 16.

[61] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 2.

[62] Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 47.

[63] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 324.

[64] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 320, 271-72; MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 824.

[65] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 285, 286; Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 8.

discourses engaged at any one point in a conception of world language. Baker suggests, as such, that the 'polyglossic aspirations' of the poem see MacDiarmid move 'beyond heteroglossia, synthesizing not dialects of the same tongue' but the whole range of world literature – however, in his efforts to conceptualise a whole 'world language', in which distinct stratifications of language interact and intersect, the basics of 'heteroglossia' remain applicable.[66]

MacDiarmid's ambitious attempts to grapple with diverse forms of language result in a multilingual poetics in which associations and order are suggested through the grouping and organisation of references on the page. His approach illustrates Michel Foucault's consideration of how, in presenting 'things that have no relation to each other' in 'sudden vicinity', 'the mere act of enumeration that heaps them together has a power of enchantment all its own'.[67] As Yasemin Yildiz has argued, the existence of multiple languages within a text presents 'a *malleable form* that can be put to different, and contradictory uses', further highlighting that 'the configuration of languages in aesthetic works shapes *how* social formations are imagined'.[68] This is crucial to MacDiarmid's vision of world language, in which order is supplied, necessitated by the bounds of the published poetic form, yet is not confirmed as being definitive or authoritative. Rather, in associating 'Ivar Aasen, Elizabeth Elstob, Rabelais' and 'Browning', 'An excursion among the American-Indian languages', the acquisition of 'Burgos' 'by Aztecs, Mixteks, Zapoteks, […] and Tagálogs', and 'Cimbric' with 'Tibetan inlfuences on Tocharion; / Glottalized Continuants in Nacaho, Nootka, and Kwakiutl', and so on, order is suggestive, reflective of both established and potential passages, interactions and influences.[69] Whilst Morag Shiach considers the resulting vision 'frustrating and frustrated', others have recognised the frustration of these long associative catalogues in *In Memoriam* to be unavoidable: Baker, for instance, has argued that 'given the sheer diversity of language and literatures, only a difficult synthetic medium could resist the "imperial" or broad "ascendancy" model of international language'.[70]

---

[66] Baker, *Classics and Celtic Literary Modernism*, p. 223.

[67] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. *xvi.*

[68] Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 24-25.

[69] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, pp. 741, 751, 759, 763.

[70] Morag Shiach, '"To Purify the Dialect of the Tribe": Modernism and Language Reform', *Modernism/modernity*, 14.1 (2007), 21-34 (p. 32); Baker, *Classics and Celtic Literary Modernism*, p. 221.

In its emphasis upon plurality, *In Memoriam* confronts hegemonic structures and global inequalities with an anti-imperialist approach, informed and incentivised by the decline of British imperial power in the mid-twentieth century. In the poem, MacDiarmid expresses his 'Loath[ing]' of 'all Imperialisms, colour-bars, and class-distinctions', envisioning a world language in which 'No voice [is] not fully enfranchised, / No voice indispensable or indistinguishable'.[71] His demands that 'All dreams of "imperialism" must be exorcised, / Including linguistic imperialism, which sums up all the rest' invokes theories later advanced by Robert Phillipson, who defines 'linguistic imperialism' as the trend in which '*the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages*'.[72] While MacDiarmid relies upon English in the poem, it is not allowed to dominate, supplemented with 'the vast international vocabulary which already exists'.[73] The apparent necessity of this throws its hegemonic authority into doubt, a destabilisation that achieves what Susan Stanford Friedman has identified in the collage poem as a negotiation 'between sameness and difference by setting up a relational structure in which neither is privileged over the other', thus 'defamiliariz[ing] what we take for granted as "universal"'.[74] The resulting assembly of diverse allusions, vocabulary and quotations, impeded as Hart suggests from ever resembling 'the speech of' any 'singular person, place or nation-state', echoes Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's later 'Globalectic' theory, a corrective to Pascale Casanova's history of the 'world republic of letters', that 'there is no one center, all points are balanced and related to one another by the principle of giving and receiving'.[75] With *In Memoriam,* MacDiarmid establishes an aesthetic destabilisation of English through the composition of a multilingual poetics, borrowing translated and non-translated references in an indication of the principles of 'giving and receiving' that he perceives to occur, and that he encourages, between the individual languages that he calls upon. The poem does not claim to outright achieve or realise this decentralised 'world language' but it outlines a stage in the decentralisation of the hegemonic authority of English.

---

[71] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam,* pp. 782, 786.

[72] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam,* p. 790; Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 47.

[73] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam,* p. 790.

[74] Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Towards a Transnational Turn in Narrative Theory: Literary Narratives, Traveling Tropes, and the Case of Virginia Woolf and the Tagores', *Narrative,* 19.1 (2011), 1-32 (p. 7).

[75] Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, p. 38; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 61.

Within his exploration of decentralisation as an alternative to 'linguistic imperialism' in *In Memoriam*, MacDiarmid grapples with the particular archipelagic nature of the British Isles, in which the coexistence of Celtic languages provides an existing model of linguistic plurality that opposes the hegemony of a standardised imperial English. MacDiarmid appeals to the linguistic minorities that make up this archipelago in recognition of the 'plural history of a group of cultures situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier' that John Pocock refers to and that Kerrigan develops in an approach to the 'long braided, histories' of 'three kingdoms, four countries, divided regions, variable ethnicities and religiously determined allegiances'.[76] In confronting the linguistic plurality and interconnection of the 'Gaelic countries' that constitute this Anglo-Celtic frontier, MacDiarmid includes non-translated vocabulary from Scots, Gaelic, Welsh, and Cornish in *In Memoriam*.[77] The Scots language is included sparingly, as in the quatrain beginning 'To fules the spirit…', but elsewhere Scottish Gaelic is quoted – as in '"Is tric a bha na loingis mhór a' crìonadh / 'S na h-amair-mhùin a' seoladh' – and footnoted with a translation.[78] Acknowledgment of Irish languages emerges in MacDiarmid's allusions to the Shelta language (taken from Professor R. A. S. MacAlister's *The Secret Languages of Ireland*), Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, and the recurrence of Joyce as the symbolic subject of the poem's address.[79] Welsh, similarly, recurs in the inclusion of non-translated poetic terminology – '*Cynghanedd lusg, cnghanedd draws, cynghanedd groes*, and *cynghanedd sain*' – and references to 'Dafydd ab Edmund's untranslatable beauties' and 'poems like Pantycelyn's'.[80]

MacDiarmid's appeal to the Celtic archipelago, further affirmation that 'The universal *is* the particular', builds upon the approach of earlier poetry, for instance 'Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn' (1947), in which the poet appeals to the languages spoken by 'young Celts' who 'arise with quick tongues intact / Though our elders lie tongueless under the ocean of history'.[81] Overstating the unity of a Celtic identity in antagonism to 'the indiscriminate English who make / A bolus of the whole world', MacDiarmid incorporates non-translated Gaelic – 'slàinte chùramach' – and Cornish – 'scat bal' ('disused mine'), 'cleghty' ('belfry') – vocabulary

---

[76] J. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 47.4 (December 1975), 601-21 (p. 603); Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English*, p. 2.
[77] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 820.
[78] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, pp.798, 826.
[79] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, pp. 838, 872.
[80] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, pp. 779, 820.
[81] MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam*, p. 845; Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn', in *Complete Poems I*, pp. 704-12 (p. 709).

alongside references to Arthurian legend, the Norse Edda, and Scandinavian mythology, a conscious recalibration of 'British' cultural authority amongst its archipelagic components.[82] In 'Once in a Cornish Garden' (1967) MacDiarmid utilises Gaelic vocabulary in depiction of the garden and his wife Valda: 'Cinnealta, solasta, croidheard, cunbhalach, / Eireachdail, taiceil, clòir-ghlestua, fionghuil, gnìomh-luaineach'.[83] The use of Gaelic to describe Cornish subjects implies a common mode of expression, whilst the provision of definitions in a footnote suggests familiarity without detracting from the distinctiveness of the vocabulary, comparable to the inclusion of Norn in 'On a Raised Beach'.

As later affirmed in an interview (1968), MacDiarmid supported the notion of a collective Celtic identity in that it was 'so utterly different in its values from Anglo-Saxondom', 'and even if it is not superior – and one wouldn't assert that – it is essential […] to maintain it as an alternative to the other because it is all part of the richness of life'.[84] MacDiarmid's proposition and pursuit of an archipelagic identity, perceived in Scotland and the British Isles and projected against the world, was intrinsically opposed to the centralised hegemony of the English language and its imperial implications. This challenging of authoritative structures is reflected in the multilingual 'richness' of his poetry, which does not prioritise 'the central heart' over 'the outlying parts' but appreciates and encourages the protection of the smallest, most peripheral languages and cultures in the constitution of a 'vision of world language' that celebrates plural and diverse voices.[85]

An Archipelagic World Language

It is evident that MacDiarmid's experience of the archipelago impacted his perspective on Scotland as a diversity-in-unity, prompting consideration of the distinct and plural identities which interacted and overlapped across regional boundaries in the constitution of a nation defined not only by physical borders but in relation to what lay beyond those borders. It is evident, also, that his experience of particularity and decentralisation in the

---

[82] MacDiarmid, 'Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn', pp.706, 705, 708.

[83] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Once in a Cornish Garden', in *Complete Poems II*, p. 1102-09 (p. 1104); MacDiarmid's footnote glosses this Gaelic vocabulary as such: 'bright, brilliant, blood-red, constant, handsome, staunch, of tuneful speech, of deft deed, and "wine-blood" (i.e., noble)'.

[84] 'The MacDiarmids – A Conversation: Hugh MacDiarmid and Duncan Glen with Valda Grieve and Arthur Thompson' (25 October 1968), in *The Raucle Tongue, Volume III*, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp. 554-69 (p. 561).

[85] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 5.

islands, as documented in *The Islands of Scotland*, proved to be an integral influence upon the formulation of an archipelagic perspective of global identities and, as such, world languages, irrefutably shaping the 'vision of world language' expressed in *In Memoriam James Joyce*.

The model of the archipelago provided MacDiarmid with a framework of linguistic plurality which, whilst 'no further from the centre of things', enabled peripheral languages, cultures and communities to maintain their local distinctiveness whilst engaging with one another via fluid coastal borders. Individual islands were not presented as being wholly insular, connected via 'invisible bridges', nor did they bypass the 'centre' or the 'whole' to which they were irreversibly related, but their reliability on this centre, as a centre of authority, was challenged in illustration of their coherent sense of identity and viable independent autonomy.[86] Such values are carried over into the polyphonic discourse of MacDiarmid's 'vision of world language', in which each language, culture, individual and text referenced is presented as distinct, whole in and of itself, and yet engaged in plural, dynamic networks and communities, the diversity of which is engaged with and reflected in the fabric of the collage or bricolage poem. Commonalities between languages are suggested through their ordering in the poem, which toes the line between 'particularism' and 'chaos', invocative of a restless curiosity yet confined by the bounded limitations of the published poetic form.

Consideration of MacDiarmid's 'vision of world language' as intrinsically archipelagic in nature, informed by the experiences and linguistic trials explored here, encourages the perception of his poetry as an investigation of global connections and affinities – in ecology, culture, language, and identity – which challenges categorisations, boundaries, and stasis through an emphasis on the fluctuating, fluid, and dynamic nature of the world's pluralities.

University of Glasgow

[86] MacDiarmid, *Islands*, p. 136.