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Denis Saurat's 'The Scottish Renaissance Group' / 'Le Groupe De "La Renaissance Écossaise"': An English Translation

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Denis Saurat

'THE SCOTTISH RENAISSANCE' GROUP/ LE GROUPE DE 'LA RENAISSANCE ÉCOSSAISE'[1]

Translated from the French by Paul Malgrati

A new literary movement has emerged in Scotland, which is one of the most stimulating, promising components of Anglophone writing in present times. Whilst still young, this movement has already produced outstanding works, with strong energy in the field of lyrical poetry. No doubt, its literary aims seem tied with the renewal of Scottish national sentiment.

This movement comprises three main organs. *The Scottish Nation* is a weekly propagandistic journal. It was heavily political in its inception but has since given way to literature. *The Scottish Chapbook* is an exclusively literary monthly whilst *Northern Numbers*, published annually since 1920, is an anthology of Scottish poetry. Those three journals are led by the same writer, C. M. Grieve, whose youthful, dashing character, blending revolutionary intellect with poetic mysticism, would deserve a separate study.

Alongside Grieve, more than fifty writers – including some famous names – have rallied the movement in the name of Scottish autonomy. Here we shall focus exclusively on the issue of literary autonomy, leaving the politics aside. According to the leading thinkers of this group, Scotland can raise a new, original voice in European literature – a voice as distinct from English literature as that raised by the Irish school during the last forty years. Scotland must free itself from English intellectual influence, playing an independent role in world culture. This is a noble vision, which transcends the narrow bonds of Scottish culture, aiming further than the mere resurrection of local customs, traditions, and beliefs. Indeed, whilst past folklore fuels the movement, the emphasis lies not only on racial self-awareness but, more fundamentally, on the creation of a genuine form of universal culture. Every event in the world of culture will now be judged from a Scottish standpoint. Likewise, whenever something significant arises

[1] Denis Saurat, 'Le groupe de "la Renaissance Écossaise"', *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, no. 4 (April 1924), 1–13. Unbracketed footnotes below are in Saurat's essay; footnotes with commebnts added by the translator are indicated by brackets and signed P.M

in the arts and literature, the world will now need to ask, not only 'What will the English think?' but also 'What will the Scots think?'.

Certainly, this ambition is vast and largely incomplete. But already *The Scottish Renaissance Group* stands as flag-bearer of the nation. What have they achieved to justify such a role?

First, they were bound together by shared interests in the Scottish element of English literature – or in the Scottish element proper – and in Robert Burns, more specifically. Such focus was not new. But then, Scottish writers also came together with present aims in mind. They rallied well-known Scots, already famous in English literature, as well as lesser-known writers: from John Buchan, the historian of the Great War, to the poet-General, Sir Ian Hamilton, to Neil Munro, Charles Murray, G. R. Malloch, John Ferguson – whose poetry collection has been reedited annually since 1911 – to many others. New names were summoned too: the names of those who did not dare publish or did not know how. Painters also joined with their inexhaustible palette of Scottish landscapes. So did sculptors, including the King's Ordinary Sculptor and poet, Pittendrigh Macgillivray. So did musicians, including Francis George Scott, a student of Ravel and Ducasse whose indubitably unique work blends the most subtle French technique with the raw materials of Scottish folklore. Indeed, the clarion call was heard even by the distinguished Assyriologist, Prof. A. H. Sayce, who suddenly remembered his Scottish roots.

What then is the message of Scotland's well-staffed Muse, whose striking profile was etched by Pittendrigh Macgillivray on the front covers of the latest *Scottish Chapbook*? Her body leans heavily, her face is dour and hard, her limbs are firm and muscular; she contemplates her capital's strong rock, by the screaming seas of her coast, reminiscent of Dürer's old *Melancholia*. Her worldview comprises three elements: realism, pessimism, mysticism – a mélange of her own. Realism dominates with a tough, strong manner unmatched by English literature; it is also more fundamental than pessimism – something which is due to a joyful, subtle form of realist humour, blending crudeness and refinement. Yet pessimism seconds realism: at the heart of the Scottish soul lies the deep-rooted sentiment that all is for the worst and that all human efforts are vain compared with our universal debacle. And yet human effort persists, abidingly, tenaciously, foreseeing our defeat but refusing to cease. Finally, mysticism is also a form of realism, inventorying the occult events that have always haunted this sombre, half-demented, weather-beaten race. Eschewing any hopes of relief, mysticism further adds to pessimism by weighing down on life with the fear of the incoming unknown. Indeed, the combination of those three elements is shaping the profile of Scotland's distinctive soul.

Let us now see how our new priests have served their ancient goddess.

Gaelic has thus far played a minor role in the *Renaissance*. Only R. Erskine of Marr has published a play, *Fo Chromadh an Taighe*, in this language.[2] Unlike Ireland, Scotland's 'renaissance' is not Celtic in character. The group seems keener to revive the Anglo-Saxon dialect spoken in the Scottish Lowlands instead of the Gaelic spoken only by a minority of Highlanders.

This dialect was once promoted by Burns, founder of the country's literary tradition. But Burns's legacy soon declined, decaying into a popular genre of poetry which failed to pass as literature. The time has come to begin anew. As explained by C. M. Grieve: 'Today, the embarrassment for those who strive to turn the Scottish dialect into a literary language is the deplorable lack of culture of most of its users...We are not interested in voicing the needs of a ploughman but in expressing the culture of a twentieth-century artist, neither English nor Black, but Scottish, Western, and European'. The potential of dialect lies in its abandoned, uncultivated qualities, which are the sign of a specifically Scottish psychology. For instance, a long article in *Scottish Nation* reveals that the Scottish dialect is the richest European tongue for olfactory words. This is certainly a thread worth unravelling. Another article encourages the Scots to follow the wonderful literary effort of Provençal writers. Yet, whilst interesting, such theory would be inane without evidence of a true literature to support it. *The Scottish Renaissance* group has been promoting a dialectal poet, whom it praises as a literary great. Certainly, the newcomer, Hugh M' Diarmid is the most striking figure in this movement.

Until now, apart from a few critical essays in both English and dialect, Hugh M' Diarmid has produced mainly short lyrical pieces. One of his poems, 'The Watergaw' was praised as an instant classic. It was followed by a 'manifesto' (quoted above) thrown in the face of all kinds of sceptics, in both Scotland and abroad. M' Diarmid's piece was even set to music by F. G. Scott. Such brouhaha does not taint the qualities of a poem, which, indeed, appears to me – as one can only provide his opinion here – as a real masterpiece. It is full of simplicity, of essential concision, and of Scotland's vigorous soul. Should more powerful poems like this come to the fore, then the *Scottish Renaissance* group will no doubt fulfil its role and earn its place in Europe.

THE WATERGAW

Ae weet forenicht i' the yow-trummle
I saw yon antrin thing,
A watergaw wi' its chitterin' licht

[2] [The play, whose title in English means literally 'Under the roof of the house', was published by Grieve in *The Scottish Chapbook*, 1.8 (March 1923). P.M.]

Ayont the on-ding;
An' I thocht o' the last wild look ye gied
Afore ye deed!

There was nae reek i' the laverock's hoose
That nicht – an' nane i' mine;
But I hae thocht o' that foolish' licht
Ever sin' syne;
An' I think that mebbe at last I ken
What your look meant then.

It is undeniable that the rhyming effects, like *gied* and *deed*, as well as rhythm and alliterations, like *Ever sin' syne*, and vocabulary, like *antrin*, *chitterin'*, *foolish*, could not be obtained in English and, therefore, justify the dialect's literary existence. With regard to the poem's meaning, I have ventured the following translation, which should be excused like all translation should be:

Comme il avait plu, par un soir de tonte,
Je vis une rare chose:
Lueur d'arc-en-ciel droite et tremblottante
Au-delà de l'averse;
Lors me souvint de ton regard sauvage et fort
Au moment de ta mort.

Ténèbres dans le nid d'alouette inutile
Et ténèbres dans notre maison, cette nuit;
Mais j'ai pensé à cette lumière futile,
Toujours depuis;
Or, il me semble que peut-être enfin je sais
Ce que ton regard me disait.[3]

Here is another poem in a similar style:

THE EEMIS STANE: LA PIERRE BRANLANTE

Dans les minuits froids des mornes durées,
Le monde est une pierre mal équilibrée,
Qui tremble au vent;
Mes souvenirs fous tombent brusquement
Comme la neige d'un ouragan.

Neige pressée qui ne laisse pas lire
Ce que sur la pierre on voulut inscrire —

[3] [This is an apt translation of 'The Watergaw', with a fine rendition of MacDiarmid's rhymes and rhythm. The linguistic colour of Scots is not reproduced, however. Nor is the exact meaning of line 7, with the odd addition of 'inutile' (translation: useless) to describe the 'laverock's hoose' in order to create a rhyme with 'futile' (translation: foolish) that does not feature in the original poem. P.M.]

D'ailleurs les mousses de la gloire
Et les lichens de l'histoire
L'ont recouvert dans la nuit noire.[4]

Such romanticism occasionally reaches the delicacy of impressionism. See for instance this amorous exchange:

Sur le gravier blanc comme neige
Flambe des roses le sang rouge…
— Oui, petite, mais je désire
Les lèvres que tu me retires.

Charbons ardents éparpillés,
Les pétales du vent pillés…
— Oui, mais ton baiser si petit
A consumé tout mon esprit.[5]

A similar kind of tacit pessimism can be found in this small depiction of the court of King *Cophueta*, who married a beggarly woman:

Oh ! le roi a perdu la tête,
Pauvre vieux, pauvre vieux…
Faire une laveuse d'assiettes
Reine de la terre et des cieux !

---

[4] *I' the how-dumb-deid o' the cauld hairst nicht*
The warl' like an eemis stane
Wags i' the lift;
An' my eerie memories fa'
Like a yowdendrift.

Like a yowdendrift so's I couldna read
The words cut oot i' the stane
Had the fug o' fame
An' history's hazelraw
No' yirdit thaim.

[Saurat added rhymes to the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza of 'The Eemis Stane', resulting in a rather conventional tone which contrasts with MacDiarmid's raw vernacular. P.M.]

[5] *Aboun the sna white channel*
The bluid-reid roosies bleeze.
– Ai, lassie, but I'd liefer hae
The mou' ye winna gie's.

Like greeshuckle the petals lie
O' roosies lashed tae bits
– But a'e wee cheep for evermair
In flame has rowed my wits.

[The poem is 'The Bonnie Lowe'. Here again, Saurat added rhymes to the first and third lines of each stanza. His translation is elegant, overall, although the poignant meaning of 'evermair' (line 7) is lost. P.M.]

Avec son tablier de soie,
Avec un seau fait tout d'argent,
Elle force bien rudement
Toute la cour à marcher droit.[6]

But realism and humour soon take over, as seen in this other instance of pastoral love:

ELLE. — *Un mort a rarement*
Les pieds bien agiles.
Jock, enterré depuis cinq ans
Doit avoir les jambes fragiles
Bel amoureux, n'aie donc pas peur ;
Il ne troublera pas de sitôt ton bonheur.

LUI. — *La Résurrection, pauvrette,*
Est le danger qui tous nous guette.
Il faudra très tôt nous lever
Si nous voulons lui échapper.
Sinon, quand sonnera la trompette dernière,
Il y aura deux morts dans notre cimetière.[7]

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[6] COPHETUA

Oh! The King's gane gyte
Puir auld man, puir auld man
An' an askypet lassie
Is Queen o' the lan'.

Wi' a scoogie o' silk
An' a bucket o' siller
She's showin' the haill Coort
The smeddum intil her!

[Saurat added rhymes to the first and third lines of 'Cophetua'. His translation is fairly literal, despite a questionable rendering of 'smeddum' as a 'harsh' kind of force. P.M.]

[7] '*A deid man's never*
Feery o' the feet
Jock, five years buried
Maun be far frae fleet.
Sae, lad, ye needna worry,
He'll no hae's in a hurry.'

Aye, lass! but Resurrection's
The danger that dings a'.
We maun up braw an' early
Gin we're to win awa,
Else sune's the trumpet's blared
There's be twa daiths i'oor kirkyaird.

[The poem is 'Feery-o'-the-Feet'. This is another decent translation, although its tone is more conventional than the Scottish original. The phrases 'bel amoureux' and

Such a vernacular treatment of religion – whose solemn theme often turns into an endless source of amusement – is a Scottish characteristic. Here is another vision of Judgement Day:

Je voudrais être à Crowdieknowe
Lors de la dernière trompette,
Pour voir les morts escalader
Les vielles murailles grises.

Les forts gaillards aux barbes rudes,
Qu'enfant je pleurais rien qu'à voir,
Sortiront des argiles pleines,
En jurant fort.

Ils regarderont de travers
Dieu et toute sa bande d'anges,
Tout ce beau monde un peu français
Et trop étrange!

C'est en vain que leurs pauvres femmes
Chercheront à les retenir.
Dieu n'aura qu'à bien se tenir,
Devant les gars de Crowdieknow.[8]

*
* *

'sitôt ton bonheur' convey a form of polite gallantry absent from MacDiarmid's poem.]

[8]
Oh to be at Crowdieknowe
When the last trumpet blaws,
An' see the deid come loupin' owre
The auld grey wa's.

Muckle men wi' tousled beards
I grat at as a bairn
'll scramble frae the croodit clay
Wi' feck o' swearin'.

An' glower at God an' a' his gang
O' angels i' the lift
– Thae trashy bleezin' French-like folk
Wha gar'd them shift!

Fain the weemun-folk'll seek
To mak' them haud their row
– Fegs, God's no blate gin he stirs up
The men o' Crowdieknowe.

[Saurat dropped all rhymes in the first stanza in 'Crowdieknowe'. Most of the poem's meaning is successfully conveyed, except for line 12, '– Wha gar'd them shift!', which Saurat turned into 'And over strange' in order to preserve the rhyme with line 10. P.M.].

Certainly, the revival of dialect, harking back to primitive racial pith, is the foundation of Scottish intellectual growth. Yet it is only one aspect of Renaissance activities. Despite the utopia of a fully-fledge dialect-based literature, Scottish revivalists could not afford to cut ties with the international, English-reading public. Having asserted their genuine Scottish character, they further aimed to display universal credentials. English was the unavoidable vehicle for this and, as a result, Anglophone works overtake dialect in most Renaissance outputs. Following Hugh M' Diarmid, who instances the revival of dialect, I shall now highlight the work of the editor C. M. Grieve, who embodies the Anglophone soul of the movement.

Like Hugh M' Diarmid, C. M. Grieve is a young, fresh face, who published his first poems only in 1920. Three years later, he published a surprising volume, *Annals of the Five Senses*, which he dedicated to John Buchan, the veteran of Scottish letters who apparently encouraged Grieve's obscure debut work.

Grieve's book comprises five long studies in prose, which can be read as the five chapters of a rather entangled and very much 'cerebral' kind of autobiography. For instance, the first study is a 25-page description of the mental processes at work when a writer strives to complete an article deadline. Grieve stages a both subtle and limpid kind of psychological game, which is merged with curious quotes from innumerable authors in very unusual fashion. His talent as an impressionist is conspicuous. But more noteworthy, still, than this ordinary set of skills are Grieve's poems, sandwiched between his essays. This is especially true for the ten-page long, *A Moment in Eternity*. Grieve's entire book can be read as a precious, passionate pedestal for this one monument.

A Moment in Eternity will one day rank among the great mystical poems of English literature. Alongside them, it will stand out for its chiefly intellectual theme, contrasting with the sentimental tone of most mystical verse. By a feat of imagination, Grieve conceives of a life in God, merging the individual and the Absolute, the temporal and the Eternal in the full light of poetic intelligence, whilst eschewing the vague, convenient veil of sentimentality that so often conceals mystical writing.

United with the Eternal, individuals begin to shift, growing like a tree whose trunk branches out into myriad leaves.

Grieve's poem (in short, free verse) begins thus:

> *La grande chanson cessa,*
> *— Oui, comme un vent qui disparait ;*
> *Et nos cœurs se tinrent tranquilles,*
> *Solitaires, comme les feuilles s'arrêtent de trembler,*
> *Et chaque feuille était une flamme.*
>
> *Mes passions brillantes apaisées maintenant*

Resplendissaient dans la paix soudaine,
Comme des feuilles innombrables,
Vivantes de la sève vive
De l'Immortalité.

J'étais une multitude de feuilles,
Recevant et réfléchissant la lumière,
Un buisson ardent … [9]

Over the forest of men's thoughts blows the breeze of God's mind:

Les faisant onduler comme des étoiles réfléchies dans les eaux,
Se mouvant dans leur ordre complexe
De couleur et de lumière,
Attendant, ou se hâtant
Ardentes et sereines
Secouées, brillantes aux changements du vent,
Prenant des cataractes de lumière
Dans les lassos de leurs branches roses
[…]
Frémissements d'ailes affolées
Dans les allées de rêves virginaux […]
Et des yeux de Séraphins
Brillants comme des rayons de soleil sur la glace éternelle
Se levaient vers les sommets
Inexplorés du Paradis […]

J'étais un tronc de cristal,
Colonne dans les clairières du ciel,
Soutenant les branches lumineuses
Et la flamme de mes feuillages
Infinis et gracieux —
Les météores à mes racines,

---

9 *The great song ceased*
– Ay, like a wind was gone,
And our hearts came to rest,
Singly as leaves do,
And every leaf a flame.

My shining passions stilled
Shone in the sudden peace
Like countless leaves
Tingling with the quick sap
Of immortality.

I was a multitude of leaves
Receiving and reflecting light,
A burning bush –

[Saurat gives a fairly apt, literal translation of 'A Moment in Eternity', although its overstretched lines lose track of the original pace. P.M.]

Et mes rameaux les plus élevés
Comme des notes de lumière enchantée
Aveugles dans la Divinité
— Etoiles blanches de midi !
Et je brillais à l'intérieur de mes pensées
Comme Dieu brille à l'intérieur de nous.[10]

But in the Forest of God-shaken individuals, one Tree stands still. That Tree is the Thought of God himself, his Word, his divine Scheme: the waves of human trees enhance his glow; and his presence illuminates his human surrounding.

Arbre nouveau, arbre étrange
Debout, merveilleux, en plein ciel — [...]
Et je sus que lorsque le vent s'élèverait
Cet arbre différent resterait immobile,
Multiplié dans sa splendeur, mais immobile,
Et je sus que lorsque passerait le rêve de Dieu,
Lorsque son Impulsion créatrice
Nous parcourrait comme le vent [...]

---

[10] *Rippling them as waters over stars –*
Moving in orderly intricacies
Of colour and of light,
Delaying, hastening,
Blessing and serene,
Shaken and shining in the turning wind,
Lassoing cataracts of light
With rosy boughs –
[...]
Shivers of wings bewildered
In alleys of virgin dream; [...]
And eyes of Seraphim,
Shining like sunbeams on eternal ice
Lifted towards the unexplored
Summits of Paradise [...]

I was a crystal trunk
Columnar in the glades of Paradise,
Bearing the luminous boughs
And foliaged with the flame
Of infinite and gracious growth
– Meteors for roots
And my topmost spires
Notes of enchanted light
Blind in the Godhead!
– White stars at noon!
I shone within my thoughts
As God within us shines.

[The first stanza is well translated although, here again, overstretched lines break the pace whilst Saurat's heavy use of gerunds falls short of Grieve's supple verse. The second stanza is fine, but it omits the cathedral metaphor. P.M.]

Cette lumière demeurerait droite et sans mouvement [...]
Cette lumière brillerait
Méditant l'impondérable,
Révélant de plus en plus clairement
Les dessins de nos réjouissances infinies,
Chacun de nos gestes libérés,
Chaque nuance lumineuse de nos différences. [...]

— Lumière blanche comme un silence
Accompagnant les chants grandioses
— Silence brillant dans lequel Dieu
Voit comme en un miroir
Les miracles qu'il doit accomplir à leur tour.[11]

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[11] *A new tree and a strange*
Stood beautifully in Heaven – [...]
And I knew that when the wind rose
This new tree would stand still
Multiplied in light but motionless,
And I knew that when God dreamt
And his creative impulses
Ran through us like a wind – [...]
One light would stand unmoved – [...]
This light would shine,
Pondering the imponderable,
Revealing ever clearlier
Patterns of endless revels,
Each gesture freed,
Each shining shadow of difference – [...]

A white light like a silence
Accentuating the great songs!
A shining silence wherein God
Might see as in a mirror
The miracles that he must next achieve!

[This is another decent, literal translation, although the suite of alliterations and assonances from lines 11 to 15 of the original is mostly lost.]