Hugh MacDiarmid: Sangschaw and A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle

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Hugh MacDiarmid:

_Songschaw_ and _A Drunk Man_

_Looks at the Thistle_

_Songschaw_

What interests me about _Songschaw_ (among many other things) is that it was very well received by the supposedly primitive and often maligned Scottish Press. G. R. Malloch writing in the _Scotsman_ of 16th November, 1924, says: "Not only is the 'Watergaw' poetry but poetry of a very high order. The form, the language and the thought embodied, match perfectly with the fugitive beauty of the image: the whole has that extraordinarily moving quality that we find only in the highest order of lyric . . . " He calls MacDiarmid a poet of genius.

George Kitchin writing in the _Scotsman_ of 4th November, 1924, mentions MacDiarmid's "high seriousness." The _Glasgow Herald_ says: "Mr. Hugh MacDiarmid's little snatch of eight lines, 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn,' is that rarest of things, a poem not to be measured by its length—humour, wit, magic and revelation mingled as in an April rainbow."

It seems to me that Scottish reviewers come well out of this confrontation. They point to the correct qualities in this book and also to the best poems. There is no doubt in my own mind that the book shows quite clearly a major talent of outstanding power and linguistic variety.

All the poems except one are written in Scots. The exception—"Glasgow"—which is written in English seems to me to be an excellent poem, though perhaps lacking in that intimate warmth which we get from the Scots poems. A curious fact is that this intimate warmth—on a much lower level—is what one gets in kailyard poems but in MacDiarmid we sense what one can only call a serious playfulness which guarantees the detachment of an interesting mind.

Altogether there are twenty-eight poems. Of these perhaps four seem to be of the highest order, a remarkable proportion.

One notices a great number of poems about the Moon or about planets (or containing planetary imagery) which are set against earth poems. "The Bonnie Broukit Bairn" is a planet poem. "The Watergaw"
is a sky poem. “Moonlight Among the Pines” is a moon poem. There is a set of poems called “Au Clair de la Lune.” “The Eemis Stane” is a planetary poem (i.e., sees the Earth as a planet from outside).

Contrasting with these are poems of an earthly intimacy as, for instance, “The Sauchis in the Reuch Heuch Hauch” (which seems to me to be a delirious play with a newly discovered Scots language). “In the Hedge Back” is a poem poised between sky and earth. “Overinzivar” is a nice little poem with good domestic imagery illuminated by lightning which destroys the kailyard element. “Country Life” is another of the same kind with marvellous Scots words and an excessive linguistic detonation. “Farmer’s Death” too has a good deal of farm imagery. There is quite a lot about hens and worms in these poems. MacDiarmid transforms this domestic imagery by interpenetrating it with spatial imagery (a device which he will use more freely in “A Drunk Man”). A poem—not I think a good one but one which shows his technique—is “Ex Vermibus”: it unites Earth and Heaven in a typical manner:

**Ex Vermibus**

Gape, gape, gorlin’,
For I ha’e a worm
That’ll gie ye a slee and sliggy sang
Wi’ mony a whuram.

Syne i’ the lift
Byous sparrils you’ll mak’,
For a gorlin’ wi’ worms like this in its wame
Nae airels sall lack,

But owre the tree-taps
Maun flee like a sperk
Till it hes the hail o’ the Heavens alunt
Frac dawin’ to derk.

This is not a good poem, but the idea of birds feeding on worms and creating their songs from them is the insight of a major poetic mind.

The broon hens keckle and bouk
and syne wi’ their yalla beaks
for the reid worms houk

shows the opposite pole. Between the stars and the farmyard, the earth and the sky, the book lies in equipoise.

There are a number of poems which seem to me to be inferior, e.g., “I heard Christ Sing,” “The Scarlet Woman,” “Ballad of the Five Senses,” and one or two others which, though reasonable, are not the best MacDiarmid.
What one senses in general is an energetic playfulness with language, a warmth and intimacy which are not sentimental, an intellectual power not divorced from feeling, a truly metaphysical mind which thinks in poetic terms, a curious simplicity of technique (that is to say, at this stage MacDiarmid seems able to write poems without effort and almost without conscious technique), a boldness of image and an unexpectedness of comparison. Let me examine for a moment a poem which has not so far as I know been studied in much detail. It is called "Moonlight among the Pines."

Throw oot your shaddaws
Owre the heich hillsides,
A' ye lang trees
Quhair the white mune rides.

My spirit 'ud darken
The sun in the East
For ay, gin my luve
Laid bare her white breist.

O shaddaw that dernes
In my hert till a sicht
O' Luve sends it plun'ggin'
A' else into nict.

MacDiarmid's lyrics appear simple till one begins to examine them. Then one finds that they are extremely complex in thought. I don't think this is one of his best lyrics: I would class it perhaps in the second rank. One can see how it works but it's not so easy as all that. The difficulties begin in the second verse. The "white breist" is apparently equivalent to the moon. The two previous lines are complicated. If his love laid bare her white breast then he would blaze with such passion that it would dazzle even the light of the sun. The last stanza is also tricky. It can only be explicated by comparing "a sicht o' Luve" to the moon which plunges out of the clouds as Love plunges all else into shadow for him. The shadow dwells in his heart till a sight of the moon darkens everything else. This poem seems to be written totally and instantaneously by a sight of the moon blazing in the sky plunging in and out of clouds. The way in which it progresses purely on the level of the imagination shows a very high poetic talent.

He writes a lot about the Moon (as indeed does Yeats with whom, in certain periods, he is akin). The Moon is a key image in the book. MacDiarmid must have been doing a lot of night-walking at this time. It is interesting to find how he develops the moon image in "The Drunk Man." Many of these early poems are poems of the night. Another short
poem of imaginative strangeness is No. 3 in "Au Clair de la Lune,"
entitled "The Man in the Moon."

The moonbeams keltar i' the lift
An' Earth, the bare auld stane,
Glitters beneath the seas o' Space
White as a mammoth's bane.

An', lifted ower the gowden wave,
Peers a dumbfous'ered Thocht,
'Wi' keechin' sicht o' a' there is,
An' bodily sicht o' nacht.

The second stanza seems to me to be on a very high imaginative level
and suggests the source of MacDiarmid's power, the way in which the
physical images body forth the mental.

As well as this he has a curious interpenetration of the sophisticated
and the eerie which seems to me to be exceptional. Not, of course, that
he is by any means wholly spiritual. Nothing could be more physical
than the poem "In the Hedge Back" which ends:

It was a wild black night
But o' the Earth we
Kept juist eneuch underneath us to ken
That a wart' used to be."

Taking the book as a whole, however, the best poems seem to be "The
Bonnie Broukit Bairn," "The Watergaw," "In the Hedge Back," and
"The Eemis Stane." It might be worth discussing three of these.

The Bonnie Broukit Bairn

Mars is braw in crannmary,
Venus in a green silk gown,
The auld mune shak's her gowden feathers,
Their starry talk's a wheen o' blethers,
Nane for thee a thochtie sparin',
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!
—But guer, an' in your tears ye'll droun
the haill clainjamfrie!

It is interesting to notice how close this might have come to kailyardism
which is often an affair of diminutives as here, "nane for thee a thochtie
sparin'" and the dangerous use of "bonnie." But, of course, this is not
kailyardy since the word "thochtie" is perfectly appropriate to the child
and the child too is seen against a background of immense space.
Earth, the child, is overwhelmed by chattering women, one in green,
one in red and one with a host of golden feathers, the moon. (Mac-
TWO BOOKS BY MACDIARMID

Diarmid succeeds somehow in making these women sound vulgar and garish.) To the earth the conversation of these women is a wheen of blethers as it might be for a real child. There is an Edinburgh bourgeois tone about these women. Beside these the child is neglected and lost as if what they are saying is too important for it to know. Yet the child (earth) is far more important than these women (planets) for if it should cry they would all be drowned. Without human consciousness these planets could not even exist. What is interesting, however, is the way in which MacDiarmid makes the whole thing intimate and familiar and how, by using Scots, he reduces these women to size. This poem again shows MacDiarmid’s gift for yoking together the spacious and the intimate, for, in a sense, Scotticising space itself.

"The Watergaw" is, I think, of a higher order again.

Ae weet forenicht i’ the yow-trummle
I saw yon astrar thing,
A watergaw wi’ its chitterin’ licht
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 richt—an’ nane i’ mine:
But I ha’e thocht o’ that foolish licht
Ever sin’ syne:
An’ I think that mebbe at last I ken
What your look meant then.

Continually in this book one gets the sense of MacDiarmid’s delight in the new world of Scots he has discovered and in his ability to use it for saying important things. Traditionally it had been believed that Scots, by the time MacDiarmid was using it, was inadequate for saying intellectual things. Burns, for instance, tends to be intimate in his Scots and moralistic and “intellectual” in his English. MacDiarmid has discovered a fusion of the intellectual and the imaginative which allows Scots to be used in a very wide-ranging way. MacDiarmid’s delight in the language can be seen in his use of phrases like "yow-trummle" (which is a whole world in itself) and “there was nae reek i’ the laverock’s hoose.” What he does is open out spatial dimensions so that intimacy can be extended to a wider area, so that space can be colonised by Lallans. He does not trivialise these enormous dimensions, he humanises them. (Eliot, of course, does this too in "The Waste Land" but I think in a more studied way. One does not mention "The Waste Land" at random for there is no doubt that by the time he is writing "The
Drunk Man" MacDiarmid is thinking of Eliot's poem a lot and indeed consciously comparing his own poem with it.)

The use of language in this lyric shows a curious vibrating movement like the rainbow itself, as in "I saw yon antrin thing," and "a watergaw wi' its chitterin' licht," and "ae forenicht in the yow-trummlae." I find this poem completely inexplicable on the level of the understanding. Nevertheless, I sense that what is going on is of great importance. One associates death with tears, the rainbow with rain. The rainbow is also theologically a covenant. It looks back from the other side of the storm (the flood) with a wild look. What interests me particularly is the word "foolish." Does he mean that the possibility of survival is, after all, foolish? Is the poem one of hope, the rainbow vibrating beyond the pouring rain, or is it a dismissal of hope? I find, too, indescribably beautiful the assimilation of the trembling rainbow to the trembling of the shorn ewes, and there may be more to the "yow-trummlae" than just a beautiful image for it sounds Biblical too. One keeps returning to this poem to unlock its mystery but finds oneself intellectually defeated but imaginatively satisfied. I rate it among the very finest of all lyrics revealing clearly the kind of transcendental leap that MacDiarmid makes, his habit of uniting earth and sky, the spiritual and the physical, which is the typical equipoise of his early work.

Finally there is the "Eemis Stane."

I' the how-dumb-deid o' the cauld hairst nicht
The waist' like an eemis-stane
Wags i' the lift:
An' my eerie memories fa'
like a yowdendrift.

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

Here the Earth is compared to an insecure stone. His memories are a gale driving down—the opposite of earth drift. If I am interpreting the last lines aright the earth is compared to a tombstone with history's lichen and moss on the memorial. Again, this is not simply a conceit; it is an image of the most intense imaginative kind. There is a strange-ness about the whole poem, a kind of disembodied ballad element suggested by the use of the word "eerie." One must always remember that MacDiarmid comes from the Borders.

In general I would say that the spatial technique in the book allows
MacDiarmid to escape kailyardism. The intimacies of these poems are never sentimental because they are set against a wider dimension. To speak truly and to escape the treachery of parochialism and an intimate Scottish language, MacDiarmid had to go out into space. Also, by using a very wide vocabulary, he widens his range of reference enormously. One of the main weaknesses of previous poems written in Scots was not simply poverty of thought but poverty of language. In order to do what he did MacDiarmid had to extend the range of Scots itself.

It is interesting that he should have concluded with a poem about "Glasgow" as if he sensed that he would have to face industrialism. (The imagery of Sangschaw, where not spatial, is rural.) He was much later to write about Glasgow, a place which he saw in a diseased blue ravaged consumptive light. I don't think MacDiarmid ever really absorbed an industrial world. Few poets have done this, and no Scottish ones. This seems to weaken his Communist theories.

On the whole, then, these lyrics show a poise and control which he would never quite achieve again though he would do many important things. They also show wit, playfulness and delight and, at their heart, a deep imaginative seriousness. I find some of the poems about Christ weak as also a poem like "In the Pantry" except for the lines about Death. In general, however, the book shows quite unmistakably the emergence of a poet of genius, perhaps the only poet of high genius that Scotland has ever had.

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle

What strikes me about A Drunk Man is that it seems to be a turning point in MacDiarmid's work, though at the same time a partial continuation of it (for example in the spatial images). Before it he wrote hallucinatory lyrics. After it we find him accepting an unorthodox 'Communism. A Drunk Man shows him in an uneasy poise, whether he should push the hallucinatory to its limits or whether, in order to survive, one must select and categorise. This seems to me to be the main importance of the poem. It can on the whole be explicated clearly enough, and this has been done by other writers. It shows the seesaw movement of a mind. It is, among other things, an attack on the bourgeoisie, i.e., on categorisation. The bourgeois is a contented but dead man because he has made his selection: he has categorised experience. He is like "standing water in a pocket o' / impervious clay." He feeds from the "common trough." MacDiarmid, however, says that he himself is more complex than that: "I'll hae nae half-way hoose but aye be whaur / Extremes meet. . . ." The thistle represents the toruous
ascent towards the creation of a self. The moonlight could be himself perfect and complete. In any case, it represents some kind of ideal.

For ilka thing a man can be or think or dàe
Aye leaves a million mair unseen, unthocht, undune,
Till his pair warped performance is
To a' that micht hae been, a thistle to the mune.

It is this which torments him: to select a persona as the bourgeois has done is to omit all other possibilities. The moonlight is ideal freedom, the thistle represents the demands of morality which contort ideals and development.

The world is swamped in subjectivity: is he himself the thistle or the thistle him? (This kind of thing reminds one of Rilke whom MacDiarmid had at this time read.) The thistle is his "ain skeleton"—"The munelicht ebb and flows wi' his thocht." The thistle is transformed by an extraordinary series of images into bagpipes, alligators, bellows, Mephistopheles in heaven, a skeleton at a tea-meeting, the missing link, and so on. It breeds roses of perfection. It is also the thistle in a bride's hand instead of roses. The moonlight is heaven and himself offscourgings. The thistle is a "knot of nerves." The moonlight is his knowledge of himself and the thistle is himself in the moonlight. The thistle exerts enormous energy in order to put out roses and in this is the principle of creativity. It reminds him also of the Cross. It is like a horse's skin—"aneth a cleg" or the Northern Lights. (It is astonishing how fertile MacDiarmid's imagination is at this stage so that by using the simplest props, a thistle, a drunk man and moonlight, he can juxtapose them perpetually in new combinations. It is like something Charles Chaplin might do with a hat, a stick, baggy trousers and a moustache.)

At the same time he wants to be like the thistle:

Be like the thistle, O my soul,
Heedless o' praise and quick to tak' affront
And growing like a mockery o' a'
Maist life can want or thole
And manifest forevermair
Contempt o' ilka goal.

O ilka goal—save ane alane:
To be yoursell' whatever that may be,
And as contemptuous o' that,
Kennis' nocht's worth the ha'en . . .

The thistle in the moonlight is also like a skeleton with a spirit in it. It is epileptic, a brain laid bare, a nervous system. . . . What does all this mean? On the one page MacDiarmid says that the only worthwhile
task is to be oneself; on the other hand, to be oneself is nothing. "And fain I would be free / O' my eternal me." The poem, of course, proceeds by a seesaw dialectic. It might be worth saying something about this. The dialectic is not a logical one in a Hegelian or Marxist way. What I believe is happening is that the dialectic arises from a conflict between art and life. Art demands form but life is formless. To reconcile the two on the highest level is impossible. Life is continually making art appear minor. Therefore, whenever MacDiarmid makes an artistic statement, he recognises that life can negate it. All human selves are imperfect. The bourgeoisie have made selves but they have done this at the expense of losing life. I do not think that it is the selectiveness of the bourgeoisie that drives MacDiarmid to despair—it is their smugness. It is their lack of recognition that they have, in fact, made a selection.

I think myself that at this very point MacDiarmid was confronted by a problem which is by implication impossible of solution. For all practical purposes when we are confronted by a logical or mathematical paradox we can forget about it: in life we have to live perpetual paradoxes. We cannot dismiss them; we have to endure them.

To select from experience and set up categories is to limit one's experience. Not to select is to die from a plethora of images. What one sees in this poem is a man creating a clearing in order momentarily to exist. There are manic sets of images crowding in on him and these represent the multifariousness of life perpetually raging around him. The creation of the artistic image and artistic order is a strategy by which, for the moment, the poet survives.

MacDiarmid cannot be content with bourgeois life precisely because it leaves out all the savagery and glory of life. On the other hand his life as a poet depends on being as inclusive as possible. The contorted thistle is a compromise. Women (for instance, his wife) prevent him fully from experiencing this inclusive life but again it is only through women that such a life can be sensed. Women are socially conservative but on the other hand biologically they can release one into that wilder world. Sex is therefore very important in this poem. (One might again compare Eliot's use of sex in "The Waste Land" with sex as written of here.) MacDiarmid wants to be free of the control of women and yet only women can save him. Woman tethers him: 'Or dost thou mak a thistle o' me, wumman? But for thee / I were as happy as the munelicht without care . . .'

On the other hand

Ilka evening fey and fremt
(Is it a dream nae waukenin' proves?)
As to a tryling place undreamt
a silken leddy darkly moves.

My own impression of this poem is that it cannot be categorised (or even criticised properly) for the simple reason that its main purpose is to resist categorisation. It is a poem written at a crucial point in MacDiarmid’s life. It is not a distanced poem as “The Waste Land” is. He is implicated in an insoluble problem precisely because it is a life problem. To select is to be untrue to experience (and he wants all experience), but on the other hand not to select (and thus experience everything indiscriminately) is to be destroyed. I think it can safely be said that if MacDiarmid had continued on this level his psyche would have been annihilated.

I have seen essays and reviews of this poem but none which states the central dilemma clearly. They pass aesthetic judgments on an existential poem which demands experiencing. The possible solutions to the life problem in the poem might be that either MacDiarmid would cease to write (is that what the ending means?) or that he would select and categorise. I think that by selecting Communism he did the latter, though perhaps not consciously. From the point of view attained in this poem (admittedly an inhumanly difficult one) the bourgeois and Communism are both betrayals since they both abstract from a plethora of possible worlds. On the other hand, to have maintained the poise of the poem where every statement breeds its opposite and every argument its counter-argument, would have been impossible, for, on the evidence of this poem, MacDiarmid had a capacity for feeling the complexities of life to a far more piercing degree than is common even among poets.

It seems to me now that to compare this poem with “The Waste Land” may not after all be fruitful. “The Waste Land” is a distanced artefact. Though it was produced at a moment of crisis in Eliot’s life (it is interesting that both poets had to have the help of others to cut their work into manageable proportions) he succeeded by an enormous intellectual effort in creating a structure which can stand apart from him more than the Drunk Man does from MacDiarmid. A Drunk Man is a much rawer poem than “The Waste Land,” much more immediate and vertiginous. The sexual passages, for instance, are much more vitally coarse and less contrived than Eliot’s, and where Eliot’s colloquialisms sound artificial (he does not really know about the working classes) the democratic structure of Scotland allows MacDiarmid to be colloquial in a more natural way. Thus MacDiarmid can create a ladder from the primitive to the sophisticated without any sense of linguistic strain.
At a certain stage MacDiarmid was willing or was compelled to open himself out to life and being of an extremely sensitive nature he was nearly destroyed by it. To have sustained such insights would have been annihilating. Yet he wished to retain such insights for he knew that as a poet he was dependent on them. He was being more extreme than one has the power to be—and survive. But to survive—was that worth it when one could survive only as a bourgeois and lead a living death?

Basically, the poem is a confessional poem. It has more to do with Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell than many care to think, and this gives it much of its power, since the Scot finds it difficult to be confessional. I feel that comparisons which do not recognise this are irrelevant since they are merely applying aesthetic categories to what is existential through and through. MacDiarmid is facing a question and living an experience which is crucial for his art. On the answer, if he can find it, depends his future. He is staking his consciousness on the outcome. Of course there is no answer, and this accounts for the feeling one has that the poem could go on forever. There is only the swaying movement of a mind which on its journey uncovers an enormous wealth of interesting and brilliant material.

The hallucinatory power of the lyrics is in this poem, too, but it has come into a head-on clash with the world. If the lyrics are the poems of his Innocence then this poem is the poem of Experience. He has come into the Vale of Soul-making.

Ossian

The Editor regrets that in his previous essay (SSL, VII, 1-2) Mr. Smith's name was misspelled "Ian" for "Iain."