The Gender of Modernism

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Hugh MacDiarmid (1888–1978)

Introduced and Edited by Nancy K. Gish

In 1922 Christopher Murray Grieve took the pen name Hugh MacDiarmid as a deliberate identification with Celtic tradition. As Grieve he had been writing imitative and undistinguished poems in English. Under the new name he suddenly began publishing startlingly original modernist lyrics in Braid Scots, the language of lowland Scotland. Although he remains even now relatively little studied in America, he is widely acknowledged as one of Scotland’s most important poets, along with Burns and Dunbar, and unquestionably Scotland’s greatest modernist writer. He attempted—largely successfully—to re-generate Scots as a sophisticated literary language; he almost singlehandedly created and sustained the Scottish Renaissance of the twenties and thirties; and he wrote some of the finest lyrics and long poems of the modernist period.

His poetic experiments with Scots began in 1922 with “The Watergaw.” Two collections of lyrics, Sangschaw and Penny Wheep, appeared in 1925 and 1926, followed in 1926 by his masterpiece, “A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle,” a tour de force written in part as a response and challenge to T. S. Eliot’s Waste Land. Using many of Eliot’s techniques, he turned them to his own purposes to demonstrate the range, flexibility, psychological acuity, and contemporaneity of Braid Scots. Even in the early twenties MacDiarmid had read and commented on both Ulysses and The Waste Land, in both cases recognizing
them as fundamental shifts in literary conception and lasting works of a new modern style. His own goal was to recreate a serious Scottish literature for the modern world. He defined the problem as both linguistic and political:

There are no contemporary Scottish poets writing in English equal, and, therefore equally deserving of critical consideration, to the best contemporary English poets (who are not all Georgians)—largely because English is not a language in which any Scotsman can adequately express himself, but even more because of the provincialisation of Scotland and the consequent inhibition of the highest potentialities in Scottish culture. (MacDiarmid, "Sir Ronald Ross" 24)

The Scottish writer, MacDiarmid felt, was caught in a bind: Scots lacked modern forms of expression, but English was incapable of revealing Scottish character and experience. He set out to restore his own language by writing what he called "Synthetic Scots," that is, a reconstructed national language drawing on any regional Scottish dialect and any period of Scottish history. He used archaisms and obscure terms, and he joined the phrases of Aberdeen with those of Fife or Ayrshire. He ransacked Jamieson's etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language and made poems directly from it. His return to sources had as its aim not only an encompassing and flexible linguistic instrument but an alternative canon, a Scottish tradition freed from English linguistic and literary hegemony. He based his methods in a claim for the intrinsic power of Scots words, a power he compared to Joyce's multilingual experimentation:

We have been enormously struck by the resemblance—the moral resemblance—between Jamieson's Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish language and Joyce's Ulysses. A vis comica that has not yet been liberated lies bound by desuetude and misappreciation in the recesses of the Doric: and its potential uprising would be no less prodigious, uncontrollable, and utterly at variance with conventional morality than was Joyce's tremendous outpouring. (MacDiarmid, "A Theory of Scots Letters" 183)

MacDiarmid's call for an aesthetic revolution based on a restored national language became a lifelong struggle against cultural and linguistic marginalization. Though his late long poems are in English, notably "On a Raised Beach" and "Direadh I, II, III" in the thirties, it is a "synthetic" English, intended like Joyce's to extend the possibilities of language. In Memoriam James Joyce (1955) is a massive tribute to world language.

Marginalized himself, MacDiarmid recognized in Scottish women writers a double marginalization of culture and gender. Though he often took a sexist position on language and literature, he also encouraged, published, and reviewed many women poets, paying the (perhaps dubious) compliment of criticizing them as severely as men. "The total output of our poetesses of any quality at all has been extremely slight," he wrote, having said the same of men poets. "The position to which women were so long relegated accounts,
of course, to a very large extent for this" (MacDiarmid, "Muriel Stuart" 48). Writing of Violet Jacob, he deplored the limits placed on her work by "over-Anglicised circumstances" (MacDiarmid, "Violet Jacob" 10). And despite his objections to Rebecca West's novel, he wrote in 1926 that "The Judge remains—unfortunately—the best Scottish novel of recent years" (MacDiarmid, "Newer Scottish Fiction (I)" 109). This backhanded compliment reveals his frustration at multiple forms of marginalization. Yet in writing of West he found himself caught between two forms of suppression.

"Following Rebecca West in Edinburgh" (reprinted here) was published along with "The Watergaw" in 1922 as Hugh MacDiarmid's second appearance in print. An odd fictional dialogue between a somewhat bombastic Scots speaker who theorizes on how to reclaim language and literature and an intrigued English-speaking interlocutor, it functions as a quasi-review of The Judge. The dialogue is especially interesting for its concern with writing and difference, both cultural and sexual. What the Scots speaker claims is that the vernacular has a greater capacity for expression than English, but he goes further to appropriate that capacity exclusively for men. This move into what Gilbert and Gubar call "sexual linguistics" is marked by a deep uncertainty and unease. Wanting to claim, for "Scotsmen," the vis comica of the vernacular as a tool to release the deepest character of Edinburgh and Scotland, the Scots speaker feels a concomitant need to resist West's handling of the subject. What the piece reveals is both anxiety and ambivalence about the need for male control of language. MacDiarmid attempts not only to recuperate stolen linguistic force but accurately to identify the thief. Yet the Scots speaker's recourse to gender difference as a basis for asserting linguistic power ultimately fails.

It was altogether likely that West, as well as her novel, would raise mingled respect and anxiety in MacDiarmid. With a Scottish mother and an Edinburgh education, West left Scotland at sixteen for London and remained in England. Like MacDiarmid a socialist and radical journalist, she was also a feminist. And though the protagonist of The Judge, Ellen Melville, is Scottish and speaks in distinctively Scottish rhythms and phrases, the novel is written in English. Yet it is hardly idealized or "pretty" in its depiction of the harshest side of human experience—illegitimacy, abandonment, marital rape, child abuse, and women's oppression. Despite this, the Scots speaker of "Following Rebecca West in Edinburgh" objects to it as a "luxury production," a sweetened and "lady-fyed" treatment of what is really crude, coarse, tumultuous, even brutal in its vitality. He depicts Edinburgh as carnivalistic, wild, and tragic; West, he claims, never touches that quality of life. One must almost assume that the very choice of women's issues draws this attack; yet he attributes his concern initially to a failure of language: West is not to blame since "ye cannie play Beethoven on an Almanie whistle," that is, a very small toy whistle. Her difficulty, then, is the lack of an adequate instrument, the attempt to capture the life of Edinburgh in a thin and conventional language.

But the attack soon shifts ground to conflate linguistic inadequacy with gender inadequacy, West's inability as a woman to handle the violence, ugli-
ness, and shame beneath the surface of life. It takes a “man tae write aboot Edinburgh . . . an’ he’ll need the Doric tae get the fu’ aifer” (exhalations from the ground on a warm sunny day). The shift from a cause to a mere conjunction, “an’,” suggests the weakness of his position. For in fact no evidence is offered that men have greater linguistic force.

The effects of language and gender follow a confused path in this dialogue from linguistic inadequacy to gender inadequacy to an undetermined force, “Joyce’s virr” (vitality). In the end, the Scots speaker’s position lapses into confusion, since he admits his own inadequacy as well. Having conflated a supposed feminine delicacy with the linguistic limitations of English, he finds himself faced with like limitations despite being male and speaking Scots. He too fails the city, which appears as a giant woman overpowering and emasculating him or a massive apocalyptic horse he cannot ride, leaving him in an anguish of self-contempt. Having enacted the conventional strategy of shifting femaleness from subject to object of writing, he finds it still a threat.

MacDiarmid’s own position is ambiguous, for he is not clearly identifiable with either speaker. Moreover, the subtitle is “A Monologue in the Vernacular,” suggesting an internal debate. In any case, the overt claim of the Scots speaker is not sustained by the fictionalized form of the dialogue. As a theorist, the Scots speaker asserts gender difference in language; as a character, he collapses into impotence and frustration, for maleness—even with his command of the vernacular—cannot assure his power over language.

“Following Rebecca West in Edinburgh” articulates both an anxiety about women writers and an uncertainty about masculine possession of language at the same time that it provides a dazzling display of dictionary Scots calculated to demonstrate its difference and expressive power. The Judge represented an intersection of nationality and gender suppression that tested MacDiarmid’s tenuous recognition of women’s double marginalization and revealed his ambivalent response to the notion of gendered language.

NOTE

1. Braid (Broad) Scots is not a dialect of English; it developed from Northumbrian Old English as modern English developed from Midlands Old English. Although the primary differences are in pronunciation, spelling, and rhythm, Scots also has a large vocabulary of words that do not exist in English. Most versions—as in Burns’s poems and most of MacDiarmid’s—are easy to read. MacDiarmid’s work sometimes requires a dictionary.

WORKS CITED

Following Rebecca West in Edinburgh: A Monologue in the Vernacular

Whatna fearfu' image is that like a corpse out o' a tomb, that's makin' a' this rippet for the cheatrie instruments o' pen an' ink?"

"Yech! (contemptuously) A cockalan! . . . She's made a silk purse oot o' a sow's lug, an' (with an effort towards gaiety) I dinna haud wi' vivisection—sin' the sow's alive. Forbye,—there's nae ca' for sic baffles. It's what they lads at the Mound ca' 'luxury production' an' a' art worth the name maun be 'production for use.' "

It was a brave effort; but his attempt to carry it off lightly was pathetic. I had set him off, and we both knew it. He could not help himself. He had Edinburgh on the brain—pondering and re-pondering its great black problem for ever. I could see the passion crowding into his face. Perhaps it was cruelty on my part. He looked at me as though to say "I ken weel eneuch what yer ettlin' effer—dinna!—Ech ye deevil!" For the thing was done and could not be undone. I had no more to do—no need to force the pace—he was silent awhile. I looked anywhere but at him. I knew the struggle that was going on—but he was never the man to say the first thing that jumped into his head. At last he rose, quietly enough, yet most dramatically, crossed over to the window, pulled the curtains aside, and shut up the lower half. A rough, black lump of Edinburgh was visible, hairy with light.

"Look!

'Thou scowry hippit, ugly averil,
Wi' hurkland banes aye howkand throu' thy hide!' "

I had to admit the grisly exactness of the description. He shut down the window again and came and sat opposite me, leaning towards me as if about to give a confidence—as he was.

"She's an allagrugous auld city in this allerish licht! . . I'm no blamin' Miss West—but ye canna play Beethoven on an Almanie whistle! It tak's an almark like Joyce* tae write aboot Edinburgh. The lassie never gets amidward. She

*James Joyce's *Ulysses* was published in France by Sylvia Beach.

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canna be fashed wi’ a’ its amplefeysts—she hesna’ got the necessary animosity. Mebbe Edinburgh

’Wes in his yhowthyede
A fayre, sweet, pleasant childe,
At all point formyd in fassoun,
Abil, of gude conditione.’

But ye cannna analite it tae Arcady noo. . . . Na! Na! It’s black abies that, an’ crookit an’ croodit. (He was obviously thinking of sundry pretty little descriptions of Edinburgh in “The Judge.”) . . . This michty coutribat o’ stanes an’ souls! . . . Mony’s the ablachs glowrin’. . . . An’ ankerly auld toon, ‘spyrin’ a’ airts, filed wi’ the bachrams o’ the ages, wi’ its cranglin’ streets whastlin’ like stirks i’ the backdraught, an’ its mchystartuple-o’stobie o’ life an’ death, its chowkin’ guff o’ humanity. Look at the ca’ o’ the stanes, man! Shoggin’ frae the flair o’ the sea tae the crap o’ the earth! . . . It’s a’ assopat aneath her style. Corbautie ne’er comes in at a’. Her wark’s clean-fung eenuch in a way, but she’s far owre clocksie, wi’ her tongue gae’n’ like the clatter-bane o’ a goose’s hass. Edinburgh’s black wi’ fleas that there’s nae clapper-clawin’. . . . Man! It’s a fearfu’ thing for a bit lasslock like yon tae wee an’ wale a toon like Edinburgh, makin’ incidental tae a gowpenfu’ o’ bodileess bodies—a toon that has poodered its hundreds o’ thousands o’ leevin’ souls. . . . A’ her breeze an’ busk o’ words, as if she was bagenin’ wi’ the Almichty. . . . It’s a disease, is Edinburgh. An’ (his queer wild humour breaking out again—laughingly!) the kind o’ the disease, if ye’ll observe, is an attrie bile strikin’ oot i’ mony heids an’ plukes. (Waving his hand towards the window). An attrie face a’ boundened up wi’ wrath! . . .”

He was purposely using many obsolete words, partly to despite me for forcing him to talk of Edinburgh, and partly because they acted as a brake on his utterance. In any case, he was deliberately inconsequent, allusive, and obscure. As keen students of the Vernacular will appreciate, he was making scores of little experiments in Doric composition and style even as he spoke—subtle adaptations of ancient figures of speech to modern requirements, finding vernacular equivalents for Freudian terminology—all infinitely difficult work but infinitely necessary if the Doric is again to become a living literary medium. His perfect knowledge of Ross’s “Helenore,” Duff’s Poems, the Maitland Poems, Douglas’s Vergil, and the like, stood him in splendid stead; and the dexterity with which he drew upon them delighted me immensely. If any Doric enthusiasts think this is easy enough let them try to translate a paragraph or two treating of introverts, extroverts, complexes and specific aboulias into “gude braid Scots”—and if they do not think this necessary, let them cease to talk of reviving the Doric. Such a revival depends upon the Doric being brought abreast of modern civilisation in every respect and detail. There is no other way. . . . He was silent again for a little; then broke out, speaking somewhat more rapidly, as if excited by his notion.

“Edinburgh Castle is Scotland’s Abbote Unreassone.
Look at it again!"

He flung up the window again; and standing in the corner we could see the Castle over the chimney cans.

"See! ... A' the wild contours an' cullages an' a' the orra outlines o' the stormy geometry o' Scotland, flockin' thegither, chuse them a grund Captaine o' Mischief. ... an' him they crow an' adopt for their King. ... The King, anointed, (and just then a ray of the sun escaping from the clouds put a greasy gold upon the Castle) chooseth forth a hunder steeples an' chimley-stacks an' muckle roofs to wait upon his lordly majesty. Every one of these he investeth wi' his liveryes o' greene, yellow or some ither licht wanton colour, an' as tho' they werenae' gaudy eneuch, they bedeck themsels wi' plumes o' reek an' sparklin' fanlichts an' chackit tiles. This dune, they tie aboot the air a mony bells, wi' electric signs an' winking' bulbs, an' muckle standards wi' bleezin' taps; an' tangle the hall closeeavie wi' upper an' nether nets o' polisht wire. Thus a' things set in order then hev they their hobby-horses, their dragons, an' ither antics ... to strike the devil's daunce wi' a'."

I have no notion what old description of the Liberty of December he was adapting to his purpose; but look over Edinburgh from the window of an upper room at certain times, and you will see the amazing relevance of it all.

"This heathen company, their pypers pyping, their drummers thundering, their bells jingling, their handkerchiefs fluttering aboot their heids like madde men, their hobbie horses an' ither monsters skirmishing amongst the crood. ... dancin' and singin' wi' sic a confused noise that nae man can hear his ain voice; an' thus these terrestrial furies spend the day. (Down below in the street a newsboy was crying "Special Edition. I saw the light of his reckless humour spring into his eyes again, but he continued without a change in his voice.) Then they have certaine papers wherein is painted some babelerie or other of imagerie worke. These they give to everyone that will give them money to maintain them in this their heathenish devilrie; an' who will not show himself buxome to them and give them money, they shall be mocked and flouted shamefully. ..."

This came so extraordinarily pat that we burst out laughing together.

"Larvatis faciebus, they incense wi' stinkin' reek frae the leather o' auld shoon. ... an' 'in choro cantilenas inhonestas cantabat!'"

The strain of a music hall ditty floating up made him add that last parallel. Then he became very grave at all once, consumed as it were with the tragedy of it all.

"I dinna blame the lassie. Let her scuttle aff intae the appen furth. This idle-hole's nae place for the likes o' her. It'll tak a man tae write aboot Edinburgh, as it sud be written aboot, an' he'll need the Doric tae get the fu' aifer."

Wemmen are a' verra weel i' their way. . . . but Edinburgh'll tak an almark like Joyce—a scaffie like Joyce. There's aye explosions i' a' thae hooses that ye canna acoont for but by the clyres o' civilisation. It's nae wunner sic clowders o' suppression are aye bealin' an' brakkin' oot. There's far ower muckle chapling. It needs a Joyce tae prick ilka pluke, tae miss nowt. . . . aye even tae

'The Kinkhost, the Charbuckle, an' worms i' the chieks!' 

A wheen o' us. . . . no' the feck mebbe. . . . hevna' ony richt at a' tae lat oorsels be brubbed, tae hide frae the truth because it's laithsome."

I nodded to show that I understood. "Ulysses" is not staple fare—but it has made cleanliness and beauty more precious to us hasn't it? The dismally dirty and giggling sexual novels will continue to roll out under a thin pretence of psychological treatment. But Joyce! . . . Somehow that stupendous uprising of the vis comica in his work seemed to be reflected, as I looked in the "breengin' " masonry of the grey Metropolis.

"The verra last thing Scottish literature needs is lady-fying. Gillespie's an idiot!" It needs an almark like Joyce. . . . I'm no' cock-bird-high yet. I'm like a Lilliputian courtin' a Brobdignagian Queen. Ae glisk o' r emasculates me. A mannikan's nae use tae the likes o' yon—a buist o' a wumman! But I'd glammoch her if I'd Joyce's virr. . . . Look at her!

'If she could get hersel' but carl'd
In time o' need. . . ."

(Changing his metaphors carelessly.) see her carvortin' in a licht like this, like yin o' the Fower Horses riderless!

'Whene'er her tail plays whisk
Or when her look grows skeigh,
It's then the wice auld man
Is blythe to stand abeigh.'

But I'm nae wice auld man. God forbid! Scottish literature's had far ower mony o' them. I'm nae auldier than Edinburgh at onyrate an' juist as young an' allryn—if I was only a wee thingie bigger. . . . . . Waving his hand castle-wards.) The Apocalyptic Beast wi' her black hoofs o' a Castle pawin' i' the air an' yon shaggy mane o' cloods hodin' the starnies like nits.

'Auld Reekie cavie't back an' fore
An' flapt her sooty wings.'

Puir Rosenberg's poem is just how I feel when I look at this camsteerie toon—

'No slim form work fire to my thighs
But human life's inarticulate mass

*See Martin Gillespie's review of "The Judge" in the September Chapbook.
Throb the pulse of a thing
Whose mountain flanks awry
Beg my mastery,—mine!
Ah! I will ride the dizzy beast of the world
My road—my way!"

. . . . I’m by wi’ clotchy novels. They’re a delusion and a snare. Their effects have nae lastin’ i’ them. Lichtly come, lichtly gane. If fiction’s the modern reader’s University it’s a schule whaur he learns owt an’ minds nowt—a literary blin’ alley. . . . . Look at yon curn o’ camla-like tenements! A cary-tempered cratur’s nae use. Yon mannie Synge was richt: ‘It may almost be said that before verse cân be human again it must learn to be brutal.’ . . . . The like’s true o’ a’ forms o’ literature. Novels are juist bletherin’ bagrels. Joyce has chammered them a’ for the likes o’ us . . . Ech! It needs an almark like him tae claut a city like this. Na! na! I’d leifer be cuckold than capstridden but. . . . this aigre? . . . . (with intense anguish) I canna dae’t. I canna begin tae dae’t. . . . I dinna blame the lassie. . . . but (with the bitterest smile of self-contempt)

‘Oh had I but ten thousand at my back
And were a man I’d gar their curpons crack.’ "

Scottish Chapbook 1.6 (1922). 68–73.

GLOSSARY

**Abbote Unreassone** a sort of historic character, anciently exhibited in Scotland, whose actions were inconsistent with reason and meant to excite mirth

- **abeigh** aloof, at a distance
- **abies** in comparison with
- **ablachs** dwarfs (expression of contempt)
- **aidle-hole** a hole to receive cow urine
- **aifer** exhalations which rise from the ground on a warm, sunny day (synonym of “startle-o’-stobie”)
- **aigre** sour
- **airs** points of the compass (“a airts,” on all sides)
- **allagrous** grim, ghastly
- **allerish** chilly
- **allryn** constantly progressive
- **Almanie whistle** child’s small toy whistle
- **almark** a beast accustomed to break fences
- **amid-ward** in or towards the midst of
- **amplefeysts** sulky humours
- **analite** alienated
- **ankerly** unwilling
- **appen furth** the free air
assopat  put to rest
attrie  purulent
Auld Reekie  Old Smoky (name for Edinburgh)
averil  beast of burden
babelerie  idle chatter
bachrams  cow dung
baffles  trifles
baginin'  trifling, dallying, the indelicate toying common between young people of different sexes on the harvest-field
bagrels  small persons with big bellies
banes  bones
bealin'  brakkin'  oot  festering and breaking out
bleeze  an'  bush  great show and decoration
bletherin'  talking nonsense
braid  broad
breengin'  moving impetuously
brubbed  checked, restrained
buist  a thick and gross object
ca'  to drive, “ca’ o’ the stanes”—probably motion of stones by analogy to “ca’ o’ the water,” motion of the waves as driven by the wind
camla-like  sullen, surly
camsteerie  wild, unmanageable, riotous
capstridden  forestalled by another in drinking as the “cap” goes round, cheated
carl’d  provided with a male (used of a bitch)
cary-tempered  probably from “carie,” pliable
cavie’t  pranced
chackit  chequered
hammered  silenced
chapling  the term used when in an election merchants or craftsmen lose their individual votes and go with the majority of their guild or craft
charbuckle  carbuncle
cheatrie  deceitful
chieks  cheeks
chowkin’  choking
clapper-clawin’  attacking with the tongue
clatter-bane  “Your tongue gangs like the clatter-bane o’ a goose’s arse”; spoken to people who talk too much and to little purpose
claut  to scrape together
clean-fung  cleverly done
clocksie  vivacious
closeevie  collection
cloothy  done in a careless or hurried way
clowders  (obs. var. of clutter) crowded confusion of movement; noisy turmoil
clyres  diseased glands
cockalan  a comic or ludicrous representation; an imperfect writing
cock-bird-high very young
Corbaudie the obstacle, used of a plausible hypothesis which is opposed by some
great difficulty
cotribat confused struggle, tumult
cranglin' winding
crap highest part; craw of a fowl
cratur creature
crookit an' croedit crooked and crowded
cullages characteristic marks of sex
curn a quantity, an indefinite number
curpons rump of a fowl; applied ludicrously to buttocks of a man
Doric Scots vernacular
ettlin' attempting, making an effort
fashed troubled
feck the greatest part
flair skate, a fish
forbye besides
glammoch grasp
glisk a passing glance
gowpenfu' as much as can be contained in both hands in a concave form
guff smell
hass throat
haud hold
heid head
hippit pained in the back, loins, and thighs from stooping
hodin hiding
howkand digging
hurkland banes hip bones
Kinkhost whooping-cough
laithsome loathsome
lassock diminutive of "lass," a small girl
Liberty of December December celebrations marked, in the Middle Ages, by the
"liberty" to step outside normal rules and hierarchies and to engage in all
kinds of role reversals, clowning, satire, and parody; the revelry or carnival
was presided over by the Abbote Unreassone
licht light
lug ear
maun must
mochy moist; applied to meat when it begins to be putrid
muckle big
nits nuts
orra surplus; base, low, worthless
plukes pimples
reek smoke
rippet noise of great mirth; uproar in a bad sense
Shoggin’ shaking
scaffie scavenger
schule school
scowry shabby, mean
shoon shoes
skeigh shy; proud, disdainful
spyrin’ soaring, aspiring
stanes stones
starnies little stars
startle-o’-stobie exhalations seen to rise from the ground, with an undulating motion, on a warm sunny day
stirk bullock or heifer between one and two years old; stupid fellow
toon town
virr vitality
wee an’ wale weigh and choose
wheen a number, a few
worms i’ the chieks toothache
yhowthye’de youth