SYNTHETIC VERNACULAR: HUGH MACDIARMID'S POST-ETHNIC ANTISYZYGY

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Abstract: One of the paradoxes of modernist literature is that, after the Great War – also known as the War of Nations, national identity is confirmed not by validating a tradition based on a rediscovered ethnic coherence of a given cultural space, but by proposing a utopian alignment of folklore, literary precedents, and linguistic innovation into a post-ethnic metaphor. Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry in synthetic Scots can be considered an intellectual fantasy about an emancipated, polydiscursive, but idealized mindset. The paper aims to show that synthetic vernacular, a result of mythopoeis just like the national myth, marks the end of the latter in the very process of representing it, and MacDiarmid's case illustrates this.

Keywords: folklore, syzygy, utopia, Scots, national myth

If we are to believe Freud well into another century, we need to play, and we need fantasy. And artists need to write just as much as their readers need to delve into a book every now and then and lose themselves in somebody else's fantasy looking for a familiar persona to identify with. The need to escape reality leads to looking for efficient ways to induce and maintain a trance, and all nations and cultures have their preferred methods, more or less ritualistic, more or less democratic: shamanic practices, religious fervour, spiritual grace, artistic practices, the use of drugs or even alcohol. All have now been recognized as invariably legitimate ways to look for a parallel order of things, whether in individual attempts or collectively. If the former have the privilege of subjectivity, personal freedom and unrepeatable instances of artistic expression, the latter become prominent when intertwined with some political interest. Nationalism is an old reality, albeit a recent theoretical concept, but its underlying narrative invariably comes down to a product of fantasy.[1] Communities bound by a common language, commensality, a given territory, a common form of worship and a shared set of traditions identify themselves with a myth at a collective rather than individual level. This myth may include references to some particular aspects in the life of those communities, ie. personal relationships, social dynamics, a set of values and a pantheon of ancestors, but its main purpose is to set apart a group of people by special features that differentiate them from any other group at any given time.

Long before the time when the word nation took Ernest Renan's meaning and before the first theories of nationalism, the idea of national identity justified territorial claims, wars, inheritance rights, cultural purism, and claims of (at least) cultural superiority. Still, as Manning Nash shows in his book *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World*,[2] it was more than mere commensality and shared beliefs: a community was considered a nation if it also shared loyalty to the same authority ruler.[3] Scotland first became a united kingdom in 850 AD. Before King Kenneth I (MacAlpin), the territory was divided between small kingdoms with a mixture of populations of diverse origins and languages. In order to justify

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. For reasons of space limit, this is not the place to elaborate on the theories of nation and nationalism The idea of imagined unity is important, see p.184 in particular.
[2] An extract of this book features in John Hutchinson, *Ethnicity*, pp. 24-28.
[3] Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe (900-1300)*, p. 253.

territorial claims and alliances with the Catholic Church and other Christian kingdoms, king Constantin II (900-943) decided it was now time to take measures to create a national identity. He commissioned his bards to put together a text that was designed to be delivered as a national myth. The myth "traces" an Egyptian princess named Scota, daughter of Pharaoh Ramses II, who "left Egypt shortly after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. She wandered for 1,200 years in the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean, before crossing to Sicily and making her way through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), through Spain and then across to Ireland. In her baggage she brought the block of sandstone, weighing 152 kilograms, which was reputed to have been used as a pillow by Jacob when, according to Genesis 28, he had his celebrated dream about Jacob's Ladder ('I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed'). From the east coast of Ireland, Scota beheld her own Promised land – Scotland – and crossed over to it with Jacob's sacred Stone."[4]

This was just the earliest record of royal mythopoeis, with a clear political purpose in mind. Other attempts followed in the Middle Ages (the Bruce, William Wallace), the Enlightenment (Bonnie Prince Charlie), in Romanticism (the Antiquarians and bards), and in modernism.

The modernist period saw a search for those elements that illustrate continuity in literary tradition. The first myth of Scottishness is a historical and political fantasy, but the interwar Scottish revival saw an antagonistic co-existence of a nostalgic fantasy and a reaction to it by means of an intellectual fantasy of what Scottish culture should be. But the latter was as much of a fantasy as the former.

Technically speaking, the term fantasy is used in strict reference to a genre of fantastic imagery and population. It derives its characters from mythology and relies heavily upon allegory. If the first national myth of Scotland easily ticks the categories of fantasy, the subsequent national revivals are represented by texts which do rely upon fantasy and mythology, but where the former is a form of nostalgia, and the latter is historical mythology. Heroes are hyperbolized avatars of real people, whereas enemies are equally magnified reflections of historical villains. There is a difference though between folk mythopoeis (for instance, ballads and stories about the likes of Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots, Bonnie Prince Charlie, and Robert Burns himself!) and its intellectual counterpart. With direct reference to Scottish literature, the second includes some famous cases of literary and social forgeries[5] based on a pre-existing corpus of literature not necessarily originating from the same, or a homogeneous, cultural space. The Ossianic series is based on other poems which were edited and complemented with James Macpherson's own verse. Another historic example is Sir Walter Scott's staging King George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822.[6] As a consequence of moving the Scottish Parliament to London within the framework of the 1707 Act of Union, the network of traditions and etiquette around the Scottish monarchy and Parliament had gone into oblivion. In desperation, Sir Walter Scott, baronet, then appointed to organize a pageant for the occasion, resorted to the existing Romantic literature on the Highlands (including his own).

These two examples illustrate a wider interest in myth which goes beyond Romanticism. In fact, Scottish mythopoeis continues well into modernism. But with Hugh MacDiarmid it took a different turn as he reacted against previous lyrical effusions – the

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[4] Magnusson, *Scotland. The History of a Nation*, p. 41. Constantine II himself provided the name Scota and a "husband, Gaedel Glas (Gathelos), a prince of Scythia and ancestor of the Picts." This addition was designed to connect the Picts' genealogy to the Scottish bloodline. It invited the Picts under the Scottish umbrella of the noble origin and gave them a history and an identity as a brotherly gesture while putting a king's authority over them.

[5] I use the term 'forgery' as defined in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, p. 465.

[6] Michael Lynch, *Scotland, A New History*, p. 354.

Kailyard writers and the Burns worshippers.[7] The problem at the time was a declared insurmountable national antisyzygy – a split between mind and spirit, referring to the Scottish writers' inability to produce great Scottish literature in Scots.[8] Despite a living tradition of folklore (demonstrable in tradition, linguistic patterns, folk songs and stories, and costume – albeit debatable) and a constant preoccupation for writing about all things Scottish (not only about the Highlands), the efforts to produce a national literature were blocked by a perceived poverty of local material to draw upon, diglossia, and a sense of cultural inferiority as compared to English literature. This explains the peculiar myth-making fervour around Robert Burns, but only to the extent to which it fulfills a spiritual need to celebrate something which is thoroughly Scottish. The problem, as Hugh MacDiarmid identified it, was that such forms of worship were schizophrenic because, as long as the Scottish language could not be restored at all levels of society and knowledge, the tradition, such as it was, was bound to remain stuck in a myth.[9] In other words, the heroes, otherwise real historical and literary figures, were fast becoming legend material simply because there were few people left to read Scots and capitalize on it. In fact, as he pointed out, his generation was barely able to read Robert Burns in original.[10]

At this point, the Scottish antisyzygy was a metaphor for the gap created by the English system of education between the job-seeking and the folk-promoting, a social pattern which generally coincided with the gap between urban and rural communities.[11] The two possible solutions to close this gap attempted a reconciliatory representation of Scottish culture: to write about Scotland in English for the sake of the contemporary English-speaking audience in Scotland and elsewhere (which prevailed in the end), or to revive the pre-English treasures and educate the younger readers in the tradition of their elders.

The history of Scottish literature shows that, in the early 20th century, many young writers start with the second solution from a sense of patriotic duty, but then some of them shift to the first.[12] Young Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve) felt the main priority in creating the premises for a representative Scottish literature was to start from a unified base where there was none. Historically, Scotland is the home of many ethnic minorities of diverse origins, local or immigrant.[13] The language itself shows the same characteristics. Consequently, how can we establish a *pre-English* canon in this context? Of course, pre-English is not necessarily the same thing as Scottish, for that too is a historically agreed convention. MacDiarmid came up with a revolutionary solution: a synthetic Scots derived from all the linguistic sources within the established convention,[14] plus literary precedents and poetic imagery. His first two books of poems under this pen-name are representative for this stage: *Sangschaw* (1925), and *Penny Wheep* (1926). He continued to use Scots after that, but gradually turned to English to write his maturity works.[15]

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[7] See the *Robert Burns* piece in *The Uncanny Scot*.

[8] „Caledonian antisyzygy", Gregory Smith's phrase from his book *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). Here, antisyzygy is an oxymoron pointing to the harmonious co-existence of opposites in the Scottish culture.

[9] In *Lucky Poet*, MacDiarmid accuses his nation of being "a frustrated people, / Victims of arrested development" unable to seize the potential they have (p. 319).

[10] This was not even new to Robert Burns' contemporaries, but the information shocked the modernist generation. Catherine Carswell's biography of Robert Burns suggests that even the Bard's admirers could not read his poems in Scots and were not familiar with his work; her conclusion is that Burns was perceived more like a social fashion than a literary phenomenon.

[11] Hugh MacDiarmid understands an ethnic hiatus between the Border region and the Highlands, as he shows in *Lucky Poet*, p.5 and the next.

[12] See Roderick Watson…

[13] Matt McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, p. 24. It still is, though in a different combination. The idea is that unity in language and literature is a utopia, as it was during the Scottish Renaissance.

[14] The convention was upheld by the Scottish Vernacularists, whom MacDiarmid actually despised for their lack of vision and futility of scope since their only mission was to revive dead words. See John Baglow, *Hugh MacDiarmid, the Poetry of Self*, p. 48.

[15] In fact, MacDiarmid wrote in Scots from 1920 to 1934, but it is not the aim of this paper to study the entire period. After the first two verse collections, the matter of synthetic Scots is hardly surprising to his readers. See Kenneth Buthlay, 'Adventuring in Dictionaries,' in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*, edited by Nancy Gish, Edinburgh University Press, 1993, p. 147.

The poems collected in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* seem to have found a bridge between rural imagery and the outer space (the moon, rainbow, planets), and the atmosphere is intimate, with a familiarity suggested by the playful use of language. The apparent familiarity comes also from the variety of stanza and rhythm patterns that are easily found in the folk tradition of ballads and songs. In fact, these two volumes were initially mistaken for a fresh continuation of the Scottish 'crusade' abandoned midway by the Kailyard writers (J. M. Barrie, Ian Maclaren, S. R. Crockett).[16] The perception was that MacDiarmid "ransacked" John Jamieson's *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1808) because he needed more words to be able to accurately express feeling and thought. In other words, synthetic Scots *was* considered the Scottish revived vernacular, and the initiative was saluted as another attempt of continuing the tradition of Robert Burns.

This is a cultural symptom of fantasy in anticipation in the sense that a poet is in fact expected to search through dictionaries in order to create folklore, and the Doric[17] language was equivalent to proper folklore. This, in turn, indicates a profound fracture in the readers' mental framework, the original meaning of the Caledonian antisyzygy: proper folklore is conspicuously kept separate from contingent expression; it is fantasy in the Freudian sense, it fulfills the need to play and delve in some form of art as a pleasure separated from rational behaviour. They feel entitled to ask for their right to daydream, and poets must oblige. *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* lyrics come with diminutives, the predictable 'bonnie,'[18] a sharp wit and the expected glossary – also a sign of tradition, for collections of written folklore literature had been glossed since the Antiquarians.

The themes in the early lyrics are constant features in MacDiarmid's entire work (the poet's mission, nationalism, intellectualism, higher levels of perception, death, love, creative energy, universalism, primordial myths etc.), but the synthetic Scots stage is significant for a number of issues that MacDiarmid explains in many places. As shown above, the poet promotes himself as different from mere Scottish Vernacularists. His first poems are written in English – the 'Grieve stream'[19] as they are called because they were written before the persona Hugh MacDiarmid was firmly established – and, apart from the predictable nationalist view, they prepare the way for a shift to synthetic Scots.[20] The choice itself for the change in language is a poetic decision. A well-established part of Scottish literary tradition is the prolonged use of two styles in direct connection with language. Ever since the Makars, the higher or noble themes had been rendered in anglicized words (or English by the time of Robert Burns), whereas Scots was reserved to the lower-ranking topics and characters. By the turn of the 20th century it was therefore a general understanding that literature in Scots was the realm of rural, second-class, rough, primitive, parochial life outside the range of English education and administration. However, this is a simplistic label even for MacDiarmid's contemporaries. To expect the *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* poems to sound rural in the name of tradition is to seriously overlook the heterogeneous nature of the Scots language. In their own writings and translations, the Makars felt it necessary to borrow not only from dialects, but actually from other European languages (French, Latin),[21] which literally means

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[16] An article in *The Courier-Mail Brisbane*, of 26 January 1935, 'Contemporary Scottish Poetry' (p.12), praises precisely the familiarity in these first two volumes in contrast to the exclusivist language developed in later poems. The year and place are important because, at the end of MacDiarmid's Scots period and more than ten years since *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, when the poet expected his readers near and far to understand his language and his fellow Scottish writers to follow suit, the first impression still prevails. http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/35864381 (28.11.2014)

[17] Generally used interchangeably with other two terms – Lowland Scots and Lallans.

[18] Iain Crichton Smith, „Hugh MacDiarmid: Sangschaw and A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle," in *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, p. 169-179, http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol7/iss3/5 (28.11.2014), p.172.

[19] John Baglow, op. cit., p. 27. The earliest poems published in the *Northern Numbers*, the *Scottish Chapbook* and in other periodicals prepare the *Sangshaw* and *Penny Wheep*, and even at that time indicate a heavy reliance upon dictionaries.

[20] Kenneth Buthlay, "Adventuring in Dictionaries," in Nancy Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*, p. 147-148.

[21] Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland*, p. 29 and the next.

that MacDiarmid's contemporary Vernacularists had an impossible task at hand. To make matters more complicated, underneath the simple elements of the rural tableau, MacDiarmid weaves a network of themes which are anything but parochial, and the network is alive, it changes with every echoing reference to real or imaginary people and stories. His poetry reveals an organic universe of language, feeling and intellect which did not have a historical correspondent in Scotland, but artificially creates a model of union through art, an aspiration fulfilled at the higher level of spirit rather than ethnicity.

The second issue against the Vernacularists is that Synthetic Scots is a collection of folklore from a variety of sources, not just vocabulary. In his autobiography *Lucky Poet*, MacDiarmid reviews the inventory of sources he used to build the synthetic Scots and mythology: Scottish dialects, the Old Norse language and mythology, Gaelic literature, Gypsy loans, Norwegian, the Orkney dialect, Icelandic mythology, Scandinavian poetry, as well as medieval literature,[22] an impressive acquisition from his teenage library readings. Another source is Jamieson's *Dictionary* where he finds a vast treasure of mythology-bound words in Scots.[23] The muse Audhr [approximate spelling],[24] the Deep-Minded, originates in the Old Icelandic *Laxdoela saga*, but is a mixture of The serpent Midhgardhsormr [an approximate spelling], or the Middle-Garth's [Middle-Earth] Snake (a literal translation from the former name, and one of many other names suggestive of its various meanings) which encircles the earth or its variant the sea monster (which appears in *The Sea-Serpent*), and Yggdrasill the tree of life / the sacrificial World Tree that will be developed in the later poems come from Norse mythology, and so does the "mead of poetry,"[25] which can relate to any instance in MacDiarmid's poems where a poet takes alcohol to an excess in order to explore parallel worlds and unleash his imagination. As Heather O'Donoghue shows, MacDiarmid reworks the material in Jamieson's *Dictionary* to make the mythological reference more transparent, and in fact combines elements from Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse Mythology to build various facets of symbolic characters, including Scotland and the poetic voice.

The third issue regards the poetic devices and inspiration from other literary sources. And the first source of literature is, again, Jamieson's *Dictionary*. It is in fact a complex work that goes far beyond the lexicographic interest. By today's standards, the *Dictionary* is a folklore collection in its own right.[26] The entry-words are illustrated in samples, more in verse than in prose, of old Scottish texts in quotation. Additionally, the dictionary provides detailed descriptions of customs and celebrations, which considerably changes the modern perspective on the use of this source. To "ransack" the dictionary for new words is very far from the truth, what MacDiarmid did was to use[27] a ready-made anthology which he himself supplemented with his own readings and even references from music, sciences, the media and, as the long poems (*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *To Circumjack Cencrastus*) and later volumes show, even from literatures and arts from other countries.[28]

Apart from the political propaganda which was not to the liking of his audience, the increasing use of such references made later poems difficult to read. But even with the early ones the problem of glossing and translation returned to plague MacDiarmid himself. He had

[22] *Lucky Poet*, p. 328.
[23] Heather O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History*, p. 175 and the next.
[24] Idem, p. 180. The approximation follows MacDiarmid's own pattern.
[25] Idem, p. 175. O'Donoghue even draws a parallel between the formula of the mead (blood, saliva, and honey brewed together and accidentally mixed with god Odin's vomit, according to legend) and the poet's bad whiskey in the *Drunk Man*. She also mentions an English poet, William Herbert, translator of Icelandic poetry from the original, whom MacDiarmid was familiar with.
[26] Kenneth Buthlay, "Adventuring in Dictionaries," in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*, edited by Nancy Gish, Edinburgh University Press, 1993, p. 149-150. He shows that, in its turn, Jamieson's *Dictionary* used another source, the *Gallovidian Encyclopedia*, considered not a very reliable instrument (p. 158).
[27] Use, that is, take inspiration from, paraphrase, or simply take without quotation marks.
[28] As Kenneth Buthlay shows, Jamieson's was not the only dictionary MacDiarmid borrowed from. He also used George Watson's *Roxburghshire Word-Book* (published in 1923). Kenneth Buthlay, idem, p. 161-163. Other relevant sources are other people's glossaries, such as James Colville, or the drafts drawn-up and published prior to the publication of the *Scottish National Dictionary*.

to operate changes in the glossary of the revised edition of *Collected Poems* (1967) and again to make them suitable for the American readers. The poetic material had become difficult to read even for educated readers (despite the continuous reiteration of his poetics and varying ideas about national culture and literature). It started from a tradition that was largely unfamiliar to its public, and was distorted beyond recognition, to a point where any generation of Scottish readers would find it impossible to play / daydream within the rearranged folklore. In fact, the only familiar tradition remains the homogeneous pocket of parochial songs and customs practiced in the same space by the same tribe. The difficulty for the Scottish traditionalists was that even their vernacularism was cosmopolitan by default. After the future Scottish poetry was imagined in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, it was even further reduced to an echo, for the unintelligible sound of something familiar[29] was what the poet aspired to, which in turn put an end to mythopoeis itself, as it reduced the process to just hearing, but not producing anything coherent regardless of the legitimacy in borrowing from linguistic, literary, or mythological sources.

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[29] Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism and Synthetic Vernacular Writing*, p. 57 and the next.

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