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The Nightmare of History: Hugh MacDiarmid and the Problem of the Past

History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

(James Joyce, *Ulysses*)

On 11 November 1918 Hugh MacDiarmid wrote to a friend from a Malaria camp near Dieppe where he had been invalided, "News came today of the cessation of hostilities. It was taken very, very quietly —incalculable relief but no mafficking."[1] That the troops held no victory celebration was hardly surprising, the price paid in human carnage was so awful — so far beyond the power of the mind even to imagine — that the idea of heroic victory must have seemed nothing more than a cruel absurd joke.

During the war MacDiarmid served with the Royal Army Medical Corps, mainly in Salonika, but in the closing months he was stationed as medical orderly at a Casualty Clearing Station in the region of the Somme. In a short prose sketch entitled, *Casualties*, one of the few pieces he wrote on his experience of the war, he described the French landscape in the aftermath of battle:

> Up to that ridge wandered the indescribable waste of the countryside, trenched and pitted and ploughed until it had become a fantastic and nightmarish wilderness. But the grim legacies of man at war were countless — chaotic and half-buried heaps of his machinery, munitions and equipment, and the remains of his hasty meals. And he himself lay there, shattered in thousands, to give a lurking horror to a treacherous and violent surface of mud and slime and unlovely litter. The very weeds which might have graced the desolation refused such holding-ground...beside the compelling splendour of the reddening day showed the yellow stabs of our guns...and only the long road, never varying, told that the unspeakable harvest of the Somme was still being gathered in.[2]

MacDiarmid's description of human destruction in a land laid waste leaves little doubt about his attitude to the war. He had never championed the war and had despised the patriotic propaganda which had swept Britain, so much of which had been produced or infuenced by his fellow countrymen, John Buchan and J.M. Barrie.[3] MacDiarmid did not join the army until 1915 and only did so then because it had become impossible for "a young man physically fit to remain in 'civvies' ", not for ideals of " 'patriotism' " or any " 'fight for civilisation' ".[4] In the pre-war years MacDiarmid had been a socialist and much in sympathy with leaders like Keir Hardie who had denounced the war on the basis that all wars were wars of capitalism.

It was in the immediate post-war period, when he was waiting to be demobbed from the army, that MacDiarmid began writing in earnest and making plans for a literary life. Despite his obvious condemnation of what had taken place he did not, like his contemporaries Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, go on to make the war the subject of his writing. That he had immersed himself in the fact and fiction of the war is clear from an early semi-autobiographical piece, *A Four Years Harvest*:

> He had feverishly devoured every book, magazine, pamphlet, newspaper, Government paper and statistical report dealing with the war on which he could lay a hand. He had read bushels of briefs, barrels of explanations, pounds of technical data....He had read the White Papers of England and Germany,the Grey Papers of Belgium, and the Orange Papers of Russia. He had waded through Mr Bernard Shaw's harangues, Mr Arnold Bennett's reply and Shaw's rebuttal. He had listened to Mr Hilaire Belloc's world without end. He had seen it through with Mr Britling. Mr Rider Haggard's articles had excited his ghastly amusement, and Mr Harold Begbie's his nerve-shattering detestation....And he had heard Mr Lloyd George passionately aver...that this war, like the next war, is a war to end war.[5]

MacDiarmid clearly recognized that official papers and speeches were not likely to provide any understanding of what had happened, but what was more disturbing was that those who should have been trying to break through the morass of misrepresentation — the leading imaginative writers of the day — were equally unreliable. They too were caught up in the general conspiracy of lies:

> There was so much to be read that there was hardly time to think. How could he digest the marvellous, the epoch-making truths which every day put before him! And the still more marvellous lies! The war-time lies, the press bureau lies, the eye-witness lies, the lies of accusation and the lies of defence; thousands of lies, nations of liars, conscience-

impelled liars, and liars for the love of art! The truth as an abstraction had disappeared.(95)

MacDiarmid did recognize that there were some writers who were trying to get at the truth, but their works were being stifled by "the very people...who were most ecstatic early in the war at the thought of the masterpieces which would be produced by contact with reality..."(81). To believe that war should serve a "higher" artistic purpose was to him a measure of just how far removed contemporary writers had become from the facts of everyday life, or indeed, from any sense of social morality. To MacDiarmid, the idea that the suffering and horror which had taken place could be reduced to fodder for the arts was the ultimate in spiritual hypocrisy. He saw such attitudes as an example of the decadence which had pervaded the pre-war world and which had now erupted into a crisis of the whole of Western society.

MacDiarmid's condemnation of so much contemporary writing sprang from his conviction that only those who had experienced the war had any idea of what had actually taken place. But he also understood that even those with first-hand knowledge would have difficulty assimilating and communicating the experience and that it would be some time — if at all — before any substantial work would be produced. At heart, he believed that a continuing preoccupation with the war would breed a despair about the future and that that despair was potentially far more destructive than the effects of the war itself. The task as he saw it was not that of recapturing the horrors of the war experience, but of reconstruction. MacDiarmid understood that the age of heroic idealism was over and that the vision of limitless human progress which had informed it was at an end. The old model of history had collapsed, was perhaps even responsible for what had taken place, it was time to shake off this perception of the past and start to rebuild on a more human foundation.

The war had made MacDiarmid confront the gap between the ideal and the actual at a very early age and while still in the army he had begun to question those large abstracts upon which so much of the rhetoric of the war had been built. Writing once again in response to his friend's celebration of the coming of peace, he said,

> I was greatly interested in what you say of the termination of hostilities and the future you forecast. I myself believe that we have lost this war — in everything but actuality! When I see scores of sheep go to a slaughter house I do not feel constrained to admire their resignation. Nor do I believe that the majority of soldiers killed were sufficiently actuated by ideals or capable of entertaining ideas to justify such terms as 'supreme

self-sacrifice, etc.' I have been oppressed by my perception of the wide-spread automatism — fortuity — of these great movements and holocausts....I more and more incline to the belief that human intelligence is a mere by-product of little account — that the purpose and destiny of the human race is something quite apart from it — that religion, civilisation and so forth are mere 'trimmings' — irrelevant to the central issues.[6]

To MacDiarmid, "Religion" and "civilisation", the value-laden abstracts of the old world, were words — like "truth" — which had lost their meaning. The words had become the "irrelevant" expressions of a past which had been interpreted as the unfolding of an intelligent rational order. What had taken place in the trenches was beyond any rational explanation, it was an experience of chaos. The "automatism" MacDiarmid had witnessed had nothing to do with the exercise of reason. The explanation of what had happened was to be found in the unconscious. He saw the historical process as a working-out of primitive drives over which individuals and "civilisations" exercised little conscious control.

In his profound study of the war and its relationship to modern consciousness, Paul Fussell writes that the pre—war world was one in which "the meaning of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable".[7] In those days, social values formed a coherent whole, giving a sense of stability and security which was reflected in the language. As Fussell notes, "everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honour meant". (21) The war changed all that because those grand abstracts could not possibly square with the reality of technological warfare. The words belonged to a philosophy of history, a religious / idealist conception of the historical process, which had proved false. From the comments quoted it is clear that MacDiarmid saw that contemporary language was consistently failing to give expression to psychological and practical reality, and to the sense of spiritual crisis which so many were experiencing. He recognized that what he was witnessing was the beginning of a wholesale shift in values which would inevitably affect the language and literature of the post-war world:

> The chaos the war caused in the physical world has been replaced in intenser form in the spiritual and all our theatrics and all our forms are either survivals or experiments. Those who retain the old are those whom the war has passed over.[8]

MacDiarmid makes a clear distinction between the old and the new. Those who were untouched psychologically are likely to cling to pre-war models of the past, they represent the remnants of an histori-

cal order which now belongs in the archives. But the new has yet to emerge in any clear form, in its present state it exists only as modes of experimentation. These comments give some indication of the degree to which MacDiarmid felt that traditional literary forms — mainly representational art forms which offered a picture of coherence and continuity — could only be reductive and consequently false. He believed it was impossible to give order to that welter of facts and fictions without distorting and lying about what had actually taken place. The old forms of art belonged to a self-confident age which had seen itself as part of the march of progress in a predetermined historical process, the literature it had produced reflected that order and assurance, but the authority on which it had rested was being challenged by those who survived the war. Indeed, even before the war the momentum for change had been more than evident to some.

Paul Fussell observes that "the Great War was the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless purposeful 'history' involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future.[9] But that is only partially true. Social unrest — and riot — were not unknown in pre-war Britain and neither was radical political thought, albeit the socialism of the day was closer to Morris than Marx. The intellectual climate was also undergoing dramatic changes. Darwin had already dealt the first blow to the human psyche with his theory of natural selection, a theory of origins which challenged the whole idea of history as a rational order which marched in an uninterrupted line from Genesis to Apocalypse. In the pre-war years a string of thinkers — Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Einstein and, of course, Marx, had already thrown down the gauntlet to the concept of a continuous, purposeful history. But it took the war to bring the ideas of the "moderns" sharply into focus, evidenced by the fact that it was not until the twenties and after that their vocabularies began to enter general language.[10]

For MacDiarmid, language itself became the focus of his post-war problems. His earliest literary attempts are in standard English, mainly imitations of the Georgians, work distinguished only by its lack of linguistic energy. MacDiarmid quickly came to the conclusion that the English of his day was effete, it had become, in John Davidson's words (which he was found of quoting), "the hackneyed roadster every bagman mounts." The large abstractions of the language could no longer be used to any effect because their meaning had been devalued. Those abstractions belonged to a social hierarchy, the authority of which had gone unquestioned. When that structure began to collapse,

so too did its abstractions, they lost their authority. Not only was there no consensus on what constituted "Glory" and "Honour," but also those cornerstones of aesthetic experience — "Truth" and "Beauty" —had become suspect. Given these conditions, where then was a post-war writer to turn for a new understanding of the aesthetic?

In that literary *annus mirabilis*, 1922, MacDiarmid solved his problem by turning to Scots vernacular. There, he found a ready—made vocabulary, a whole storehouse of words — not abstract words — but tough, sinewy, unromantic words, words like "watergaw" (rainbow), "broukit" (neglected), "chowl" (twist, distort), the very sounds of which suggested connections with the hard world of matter. Like Hardy and Hopkins before him (two poets who had also turned to dialect sources) he found incorporated in Scots an extensive vocabulary for the work-a-day world, words for craft and labour.

MacDiarmid exploited the vernacular brilliantly by marrying those concrete words to the spare forms of the *vers libristes* and using the natural image and metaphor of the vernacular to produce a new protean symbolism which could give voice to the shifting parameters of the world he was perceiving. At the same time, he allied his vernacular revival with a new nationalist initiative in Scotland, for just as standard English and the literary canon to which it was attached came under question, so too did the political power of its informing authority. The post-war period witnessed the disintegration of the power of the British Empire and the gradual decentralization of the postcolonial world.

Instead of seeing language as sets of abstract expressions, MacDiarmid believed that language could only exist in some symbiotic relationship to the material world. Language evolved from the contact between human consciousness and the natural world, and therefore could not help but reflect the material conditions out of which it had arisen. In other words, he believed that language was essentially a dialectical process and that the degree of conscious control exercised over that process was limited.

That such a point of view is but a short step from Marx's view of language as a mode of production, hardly needs to be stated. But in fact MacDiarmid's perception of how language works owes more to Darwin than to Marx, at least in the early twenties. The tangled bank is MacDiarmid's paradigm of language, it is the place where potential struggles into form. To MacDiarmid language and its literary forms were — like the process of history — the working-out of sets of unconscious drives which had barely begun to be understood, or even

examined. Thus, he began to see literature as less a series of "master-pieces" in an endlessly progressive tradition, and more than a record of the spiritual evolution of common humanity. Literature was the history of the growth and development of consciousness, a record of the way in which language enacted changing relationships to the material world. Literature arose — not out of the abstracts of "Truth" and "Beauty" — but out of the concrete realities of everyday life, of how ordinary men and women went about the business of survival, and the adaptation and change in their modes of thinking which that survival entailed.

For MacDiarmid this understanding of the relationship between literature and the historical process constituted a new aesthetic, one which — although it shared certain of its ideas with Marxism — did not lead him to adopt social realism as a mode of literary expression. MacDiarmid rejected that route as over-simplistic. Instead, working from his initial concern with language — from what was virtually a return to linguistic first principles — he began to examine the relationship between language structure, perception and consciousness and, particularly in his aptly titled *In Memoriam James Joyce*, began to experiment with poetic forms which would reflect those interconnections.

Confronted on the one hand by an idealist conception of history which the reality of the war had revealed as false, and, on the other, by a conception of literature as a fixed tradition of great writers and timeless works, MacDiarmid was able to free himself from both by articulating an essentially evolutionary theory of both. Against the old idea of progressive continuity he posed the idea of history as the dialectical process of mind and matter, the chief principle of which was the evolution of consciousness through language. For MacDiarmid it was a way of reconciling past and present which offered an escape from the old nightmare of history and opened up — at least for a time — new possibilities in literature and life.

NOTES

1. Letter to George Ogilvie, 11 November 1918, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4540.
2. *Broughton Magazine*, Summer 1919, 15-17.
3. John Buchan's *Nelson's History of the War* (published in twenty-four volumes between 1915 and 1918) was meant to be a contemporary record of the action of the war as events took place. But (like John Masefield's *Gallipoli*) it was more a justification of the British

position, the figures on the dead and wounded being manipulated by Buchan for propaganda purposes. For a fuller account of the part played by contemporary writers in war propaganda see Peter Buitenhuis's excellent article "Writers at War: Propaganda and Fiction in the Great War" in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 45 (1976), 277-94.

4. Letter to George Ogilvie, 20 August 1917, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4540.
5. In C.M. Grieve, *Annals of the Five Senses* (Montrose, 1923. rpt. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1983), 96.
6. Letter to George Ogilvie, 24 November 1918, Acc. 4540.
7. *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 1975), 21.
8. *The Northern Review*, September 1924, 234.
9. *Op. cit.*, 21.
10. While in the post-war period the work of Freud, Jung and Einstein became better known in Britain, Marx's ideas did not really begin to influence British intellectual life until the early 1930s. As late as 1929, A.L. Rowse was arguing that "the greater and not dissimilar influence of Darwin, absorbed attention to the detriment of Marx". ("The Literature of Communism: Its Origin and Theory" in *The Criterion*, April 1929, 423). While this holds true for England, the situation was somewhat different in Wales and Scotland which were both seats of radical politics in the pre- and post-war periods. During the war, following the Russian Revolution, John MacLean, a Glasgow schoolteacher who had been teaching Marx at nightschool and who was appointed Bolshevik Consul in Glasgow by Lenin, was imprisoned for sedition, as were the editors of the Socialist (but not Communist) journal, *Forward*. MacDiarmid had certainly read Marx by the early twenties (he knew MacLean), but did not become a member of the Communist Party until 1932. What his writing demonstrates is the continuity he perceived between the biological materialism of Darwin and the historical materialism of Marx.