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Glasgow ou l'Écosse urbaine dans les poèmes de Hugh MacDiarmid

Béatrice Duchateau

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Hugh MacDiarmid is nowadays considered to be one of the greatest Scottish poets of the twentieth century. His poems, books and articles paved the way for the Scottish Renaissance and participated in the modernist movement. Although MacDiarmid is sometimes still thought a parochial poet, probably due to the fact that his work on urban predicaments has been largely forgotten, he dealt at length with the city of Glasgow in the 1930s. On the isle of Whalsay (Shetland), in 1934, facing financial difficulties and a nervous breakdown, he “was writing a new long poem, to be titled “The Red Lion”, projected as an urban counterpart to *A Drunk Man*, dealing with the slums of Glasgow and the whole range of contemporary working class” (Bold, 1990, p. 373). In 2005, the independent Scottish scholar and poet John Manson made new discoveries about this planned Glasgow sequence:

“The Red Lion” was never published in full and it may now be impossible to discover all the constituent parts which were intended and “their proper setting” [...]. “In the Slums of Glasgow” and “Nemertes” were published in 1935. “Third Hymn to Lenin” and “The Glass of Pure Water” were both originally seen as “Glasgow” poems and parts of “The Red Lion”. Several poems entitled “Glasgow” and “Glasgow is like the Sea” also belong to the project. (J. Manson, 2005, pp. 123–4)

In 2007, John Manson discovered the existence of a typed manuscript entitled “Glasgow 1938” in the University of Delaware Library, USA: it is a 20-page long poem with annotations by MacDiarmid himself. The poem combines the three poems entitled “Glasgow” published in *The Complete Poems* in 1985 [1978] (p. 647, p. 1048, p. 1333) but the stanzas are organised in a different order and fused with unpublished material. We will focus on this poem with reference to other Glasgow poems.

In his Glasgow sequence, MacDiarmid, along with many other writers in the 1930s, provides a totally renewed definition of Scotland as an urban nation. His definition is founded on two contradictory movements:

destruction and construction. Firstly, in MacDiarmid's "Glasgow 1938", Scotland is poetically and mercilessly deconstructed: Glasgow is no longer "a dear green place", Scotland no longer a land of peasants but urban hell where filthy disease and dirty capitalism spread around, murdering creation and culture. The stones of Glasgow reveal the betrayal of old Scotland, whose imaginative voice has been muted by sentimentality, Anglo-Scottish education and Calvinism. But even through scathing criticism, it is the need to "re-write" Scotland as a cradle of cultural and political change that emerges in a second movement. How to "re-write" a nation? By letting anger and its poetical rhythm redefine Scotland and turn it into a communist city of light. The style and syntax of the Glasgow poems tend, not only to express meaning, but to perform. MacDiarmid's emotional writing embodies the desire for poetry to be performative. To "re-write" Scotland means to "re-create" it. Post-industrial Glasgow urges the whole country to "re-write" itself and the canonical representation of rural Scotland to fade away.

If published in the 1930s, MacDiarmid's Glasgow sequence would have participated in the "breakthrough of working class fiction, or proletarian fiction" (Burgess, 1998, p. 110) in Scotland. It would have answered George Blake's 1956 call: "In the meantime, Scotland had been most miserably industrialised [...]. So we ask the contemporary writers had to say about this almost melodramatic sense of affairs [...]. Was there anybody in Scotland to tell the truth about what was happening?" (Burgess, 1998, p. 27) The 1930s saw the publication of several "Glasgow novels": Dot Allan's *Hunger March*, Alexander McArthur's *No Mean City*, George Blake's *The Shipbuilders*, Edwin Muir's *Poor Tom* and James Barke's *Major Operation*. In poetry, apart from MacDiarmid, William Jeffrey's *Fantasia written in an industrial town* was the only other attempt to poetically deal with Glasgow. MacDiarmid's "Glasgow 1938" condemns the image of Glasgow that officials were trying to convey in the 1930s, especially through the 1938 Empire Exhibition¹ which was "one aesthetically striking manifestation of the need to project the city's commitment to progress and modernisation during difficult times" (Maver, 2007b, p. 271). In addition, the Exhibition was "serving as a showcase for Scottish enterprise as well as a marketing device for Empire trade" (Maver, 2007a, pp. 255–6). The Exhibition was hiding the deprivation of the slums. The second epigraph of "Glasgow 1938" blasts away the glamorous nickname of Glasgow, "Second City of the Empire": "The second city?—Aye if Hell's the first! (Gl. 1938, p. 1)

1. The Exhibition was held at Bellahouston Park, one of Glasgow's largest parks, and attracted 12,5 million visitors between May and October 1938. It promoted the technical achievements of the British Empire and its industry.

and introduces MacDiarmid's vision of Glasgow as hell in which the "diabolic arts" of the Karaunas create the "hell-black cores of their origin" (p. 3).² Hell pushes Glasgow into the abyss, "in the *fondacci, bassi*, and *sotterranei* of the slums" (Gl. 1938, p. 6). The ternary rhythm, the heaviness of the word "*bassi*" and the length of "*sotterranei*" irremediably drag the slums down while Glasgow seems to be tuned to Dante's *Inferno*, thanks to the use of Italian. Glasgow and the poet are trapped in a downwards movement: "Many times while going to and fro / I have to grasp at a wall or a tree / To recall myself from this abyss" (p. 7). Glasgow is "telescoped down endless chutes of disease and dissolution" (p. 4), the consonances in "d" and "s" quickening the unavoidable fall towards disease and death, which slowly pervade the whole poem.³ Glasgow is assimilated with a corpse: "with face and fingers / A cadaverous blue, hand clasp slimy and cold / As that of a corpse" (p. 8) and the smell of death perfumes the streets of the city, "smelling now like the dissection of innards" (p. 5). In the "Third Hymn to Lenin", the poet asks Lenin:

Do you know the haunting slum smell? Do you remember Proust's account
[of urinal's dark-green and yellow scent,
[...]
Slum stench. A corpse beside is a violet.
(*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, pp. 895–6)

Sensory disgust is exposed by synaesthesia, the smell being characterised by the colours of decay, green and yellow, which foreshadow the grimy line "A corpse beside is a violet". MacDiarmid then quotes an extract from the journalist William Bolitho's "Cancer of Empire" (1924). It was one of the many official reports that helped fix the stark legend of the slums and which influenced MacDiarmid. In "Glasgow 1938", "the smell reminds me / Of the odeur de souris of Balzac's Cousin Pons, / Or Yankee adverts about halitosis and underarm odour" (p. 8). Halitosis is mentioned again in the advertisement-like slogan "If you ever kissed yourself / You'd be more careful of your breath" (p. 6). It connects the smell of the slums and the Burnsian "hell of all diseases" (p. 16), toothache. The pervading imagery of teeth threateningly dominates the whole poem in a

2. The stones of Glasgow are "possessed of geological devils" (p. 4) and are described as "stones of Sisyphus" (p. 5), rolling in the hilly streets of Glasgow where the poet asks "what psychologist here has discovered Hell?" (p. 5) In the "Third Hymn to Lenin", the poet acknowledges that "the whole of Russia had no Hell like this. / There is no place in all the white man's world / So sunk in the unspeakable abyss" (*The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, Volume 2, p. 895).

3. The stones are eroded by the cruelly alliterative "Cancers of Calvinist commercialism" (p. 3) while the city is "devastated by cholera-Capitalism" (p. 6). The inhabitants are "to all appearances dead and yet still alive, / [...] / Cold as corpses, with wide open-eyes" (p. 6).

dangerously personified world: “Looking down a street the houses seem / Long pointed teeth” (p. 8).⁴ Complementing the images of death and rot, toothache is the symptom of an absence too. In the ironic slogan, “Let a Colgate smile get you out of it” (p. 2), Glasgow’s shining grin is an attempt to cover a hideous void. While dental problems were a reality in Glasgow at the time,⁵ MacDiarmid uses this as a potent symbol for much more:

An impacted wisdom-tooth tortures Glasgow
 But Glasgow prefers to endure its constant pain
 (Being at home with “the hell of all diseases”
 Since toothache is the most unintelligent of pains.
 —Or as Shestov says a man has toothache
 And is incapable of anything. [...]
 The cursed pain [...]
 Clothes the whole world, the whole universe,
 In its grey torturing colours. (p. 16)

Thanks to the hypallage “torturing”, toothache becomes a grey veil that obscures the light of wisdom. The pun on wisdom-tooth connects lack of intelligence and toothache. Continuing to destroy pervasive Scottish *clichés*, the narrator unveils the most important problem in Glasgow: the tragic absence of intellect and culture.

Glasgow “thinks nothing, and is content to be / Just what it is, not caring or knowing what” (Gl. 1938, p. 2). Thanks to the cruel run-on-line, the city is reduced to mere existence, “being”, and is associated only with negativity through “nothing” and “not”. Glasgow is “the poorest city in the world / In everything worth having” (p. 2). The misery of the slums is the metaphorical reflection of a cultural one, of the Glaswegians’ “terror of ideas”, “hatred of intellectual distinction” (p. 15). The arts have no place there:

Blocked out by Robertsons and Rosslyn Mitchelle,
 By Raits and all the Hopeless Hope street rabble!: Who knows in this infernal
 [broth-like fog
 There may be greater artists yet by far than we,
 Unheard of, even by us, condemned to be invisible
 In this Tarnhelm⁶ of unconscionable ignorance [...]? (p. 10)

4. In Glasgow, “Gloom [is] masticating every light” (p. 4).

5. In the poem, MacDiarmid quotes Dr. J. Forbes Webster, Dean of the Incorporated Glasgow Dental Hospital in the 30s: “Glasgow is absolutely notorious for its bad teeth, and is rated as the city with probably the worst teeth in Britain.” (p. 16)

6. Magic helmet in Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848–74).

Amusingly picturing a Glasgow street to denounce a hopeless lack of culture, the narrative voice then condemns “The unflagging and nauseating garrulity / Of professors with the minds of keelies, of teachers who know nothing but what they impart / To children” (p. 11). The professors are assimilated to “keelies” and the purveyors of instruction become ignorant violent boys, evocative of *No Mean City* clichés. They are no better than “any razor-slasher” (p. 11). The violent gang culture of the 1930s usurps the place knowledge should play in Glasgow.⁷ The obsessive focus on knowledge was probably the most important life-long concern of MacDiarmid’s career and is undoubtedly reminiscent of ‘In Memoriam James Joyce’, written in the same period as “Glasgow 1938”, which stages the same omniscient narrative persona. The poet is the projected reincarnation of his hero, the “greatest proletarian seer”, Lenin (“Third Hymn to Lenin”, *Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 895). But the seer is alone against his enemies:

The very thought of hurling myself once more
Against the obstacles raised by the crass stupidity
Of my opponents [...] ah no! I am too old.
[...] and as for Scott,
The only other “whole and seldom” man I know here,
[...] The cabal of his foes gives all this senseless welter
Of a city an expression of idiot fury.
All the fools whose jobs impinge on music here
Howl: “If he becomes popular, where will our compositions be—our
[arrangements rather?
(Scott popular?—Scott whose work is *di essenza popolare*, [...])”! (Gl. 1938, p. 9)

The poet introduces his friend, the Scottish composer Francis George Scott and his difficulty in imposing his art in Glasgow. The musical Italian phrase, the sonorous embodiment of Scott’s art, is confronted to the trochaic “howl” which clashes on the light rhythm of the Italian words. Music hints at another problem inherent in the absence of knowledge and culture: the lack of creation and creativity. The compositions of the “howling fools” are “arrangements”, betraying their mere ability to organise already existing materials rather than creating new ones.

Glasgow is an “*arida nutrix* of hundreds of thousands of callous Scots” (Gl. 1938, p. 11). The absence of cultural creation is symbolised by sexual

7. Stupidity is so dangerous that it turns into Death’s bridesmaid: “Everything is dead except stupidity here; / Stupidity—and Death with his aphrodisiac in one hand” (p. 5). Glasgow’s partying and drinking tradition is compared to an infamous Biblical episode: “What a pity they’re not like Salome / Who threw a wild party and got up / With a real head next morning!” (p. 19) Instead of getting a morning hangover, it would be better to improve one’s intellect.

impotence in the poem: the narrator mentions “imaginary pregnancy”, the oxymoronic “high-sounding impotent words, / Words like a parrot, words with nothing else behind them” (p. 11). The vision of Glasgow is “soul-gelding ugliness [which] would chill / To eternal chastity a cantharadized Satyr” (p. 8).⁸ Cultural impotence is connected to the influence of English education in the quotation from Rolfe’s ‘Hadrian The Seventh’ (1904): “the gelded English which muscleless feckless unfit-for-handicraft little sciolists acquire in school-board spawning beds” (Gl. 1938, p. 1). The educational system is endangered because it is submitted to the power of England. The British Empire is then debunked through the apparition of Queen Mary launching the ship the *Queen Mary*, trying to create a “miracle of Clydeside industry” (p. 12). In the original typescript, MacDiarmid first described the boat as “An epic in three words, “The Queen Mary” (p. 13), but he then crossed it out to replace it by “The Mother Mary”, clearly suggesting a hidden connection to Virgin Mary. He robs the queen of her title first but ironically stresses the notion of birth giving as well. The miracle of birth cannot be achieved by the English queen who has “stricken all mankind daft!” (p. 13) Even the introduction of the noun “mother” in the name of the royal ship unbalances the pre-existing iambic rhythm by adding an extra syllable to the fourth foot. Musically, the naming process, the birth-giving miracle, is a failure.⁹ The other major bad influence on Scotland is religion and Calvinism. The ministers know how to play golf, the national sport, but “are all at the furthest possible remove / From Dante’s concept of a theologian as “sant ‘athleta”, / An ace in intellectual activity—something a clean man can respect” (p. 12). Human incarnations of Calvinism are physically fit, but their health is a mask to cover their lack of intelligence and the corruption of their soul.

Calvinism and English domination on education have had terrible consequences for Scotland. Imagination has disappeared in the buildings of urban Scotland: “The imaginative meaning we attach to stone and water / In relation—speak not of these in Glasgow” (Gl. 1938, p. 5). The Scots’ understanding of their own nation is hampered as they “are oblivious to all those intranational differences” (p. 12). In their eyes, Scotland is a monolithic cultural landscape. In addition, throughout “Glasgow 1938”, runs a terrible feeling of anguish: the inhabitants of Glasgow are “incommunicable as handwriting” (p. 2) and the houses resemble an

8. In the “Third Hymn to Lenin”, “a sense of general impotence compels” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 899) in a country whose people MacDiarmid declares “the prize eunuchs of Europe” (p. 897).

9. Not only stressing the dangerous influence of England, the reference to impotence and the *Queen Mary* discloses the terrible effects of the Depression on Clydeside industry (especially ship-building): the order for the *Queen Mary* was cancelled in 1931 (R. Finlay, 2004, p. 89).

“unspeakable smile” (p. 8) which echoes the “unspeakable abyss” of the “Third Hymn to Lenin” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 895). The reality is so preposterous that it cannot speak about itself. Scotland’s representation of itself is muted. Its voice only survives in “words that communicate no thought” (“Third Hymn to Lenin”, *Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 900), in “patter off, class shibboleths” (Gl. 1938, p. 11). Scotland’s words are reduced to empty linguistic signs. Glasgow and Scotland spin in linguistic chaos, in “a babel of stupid voices” (“The Glass of Pure Water”, *Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 1043). Expression even disappears in “Glasgow 1938”:

[...] all the noises of the city,
The sounds of life, the splendid aspirations voiced,
Are sucked through the vile aborting recesses of the stone and trickle from it
[again in endless leuchorrhoea. (p. 4)]

In a ternary gradation, the noises become sounds which in turn metamorphose into voice. Meaning gradually enters the city and successful expression for Scotland seems to be at hand with the use of the past participle “voiced”, suggesting a form of achievement. But hope is immediately dashed down in the following lines: the brutal gap between the subject and its verb maintains the hopeful upwards movement of the “aspirations” for a while but the passive form of the verb “are sucked” belittles these aspirations that die in awful “leuchorrhoea”. The voice of Scotland dissolves in physical excretions. To be heard, Scotland is reduced to caricaturing itself as a sentimental country.

Throughout his career, MacDiarmid denounced Kailyardism in Scottish literature and its harmful influence on the country psyche. Here, again, in the 1930s, he insists that the artists Scotland needs “can be good natured without being sentimental” (Gl. 1938, p. 2). In a remarkable ironic antithesis, sentimentality is attacked: “Their ‘replacement of intelligence by sentimentality / Is yet a lovely virtue, and a country like Scotland is happy / With so many of its people resolutely devoted to that’” (p. 16).¹⁰ For MacDiarmid, sentimentalism is part of a much larger Scottish strategy of “eternalised fraud” (Gl. 1938, p. 3) to cover its emptiness. Scots are constantly playing a part, wearing “masks of toothache, masks of suffering” (p. 3) or “masks of fraud” (p. 16).¹¹ Glasgow is full of “Stooges for real live people” (p. 18). Sentimentalism is the mask that covers up the tragedy

10. In the “Third Hymn to Lenin”, the country is filled with “endless loving sentiments to mask the facts” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 895).

11. They metaphorically follow: “the fashion for high-moulded demands / To give the necessary bosomy effect / Like those brassieres for the flat-chested that have / Cunning little net-rosettes tucked inside them!” (p. 17)

being staged in Scotland: cultural emptiness, misery and dehumanisation. Dominated by a personified and empowered city, the inhabitants are constantly animalised: they are compared to “insects” (Gl. 1938, p. 10) and to “ducks” (p. 14). MacDiarmid disagrees with Coriolanus that “the people are the city”¹² (Whyte, 1993, p. 17): “The houses are Glasgow, not the people,—these / [...] Are simply the food the houses live and grow on” (Gl. 1938, p. 2). Human beings are crushed by the city that confines them to passivity and paralysis. The stones reduce humanity to slavery as they are “gorgonised memories of the slavedriver’s whip” (p. 3).¹³ The “cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime” stones of “On A Raised Beach” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 1, p. 427) have been perverted by the urban world: “They have been formed in monstrous moods, vile spasms / Of soulless energy, petrified hatred, greed and cruelty” (Gl. 1938, p. 3). They stultify Glasgow and imprison people in “their specific aboulia” (p. 15). Glasgow is paralysed.

To accept modern Scotland and Glasgow was excruciating for MacDiarmid. The opening quotation of “Glasgow 1938”, T. S. Eliot’s “Agony in Stony places!” (p. 1)¹⁴ introduces a certain modernist despair in the face of new urban society and a struggle in accepting modernity. In the 1930s, for MacDiarmid and other Scottish writers (especially for MacDiarmid’s arch-enemy, the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir), to re-write Scotland was to face an unbearable reality and go through terrible agony. In the “Third Hymn to Lenin”, the rejection of Glasgow is violent: “Proud of our country with this open sewer at our door” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 897). The narrator wishes Glasgow to be a place that would have crossed the boundaries of Scotland and locked itself behind solid walls.¹⁵ However, Glasgow is not well identified as a separate entity in the poem. The poems constantly oscillate between attacking Glasgow and criticising Scotland in general, blurring the borders between city and nation. Despite MacDiarmid’s hate for Glasgow, he uses it as an effective synecdoche for Scotland since “here where Glasgow all Scotland gathers” (“Glasgow is Like the Sea”, *Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 1349). The narrator’s disgust at the city on the Clyde is displaced by that against his country: “I am homesick after my own kind. / Home to many deceits, / Home to old lies and new infamy” (Gl. 1938, p. 15). Glasgow is thrown into wider poetic space and

12. William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, III, i.

13. And the stones are “gorgonising the mindless generations” too (p. 3).

14. *The Waste Land*, section V.

15. In “This Scotland is not Scotland; These people are not Scots”, the narrator declares: “I’d believe I belong to Scotland / If only Scotland and I were really there [Glasgow and Edinburgh] / [...] This Scotland is not Scotland” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 1435).

becomes the reflection of Scotland's shameful secrets and the depository of the poet's anger.

The picture of 1930s Glasgow drawn by MacDiarmid is very bleak. However light survives in Glasgow and in the heart of the slum people:

These slum folks' lives are full of similar touches too,
Even in the unsightliest and most debased of them,
And there a few keener delights in the world, I think,
Than changing every now and then on such a little gem. (Gl. 1938, p. 4)

Thanks to the rhyme between "them" and "gem", the inhabitants of the slums can shine and the negative adjective "debased" can metamorphose into the positive noun "delights".¹⁶ The essence of life survives in the slums. In "In the Slums of Glasgow", the poet declares that "it was easier to do this in the slums, [...] / Life is more naked there, more distinct from mind" (*Complete poems*, Vol. 1, p. 562).¹⁷ The void allows life to exist only in its essential aspect, to be purer. However, the eyes of the slum people are too weak a source of light for the salvation of Scotland.

To MacDiarmid, there is only one available option to save his country from the hellish predicament it has fallen into: communism. Scotland is the slave of capitalism: Glasgow "contains a million slaves" (Gl. 1938, p. 1) and is "bogged in wage slavery" (p. 19). Glasgow is the convenient symbol for Capitalism: "Glasgow—the capitalist system—can exist indefinitely" (p. 13). With its involvement in the Empire slave trade in the 18th and 19th century, its crucial role in British commerce, namely the steel and ship industry, it is the ideal vehicle for representing capitalist Scotland. In the city resonates the "slang of man of commerce" (p. 1) and the voices of "Merchant's incorporations" (p. 6). The stones bear the memory of "glut-tonous proprietorship", "of the slavedriver's whip, / Cancers of Calvinist commercialism" (p. 3) and are gnawed at by "cholera-Capitalism" (p. 6). Scotland needs to be healed to have a future. For MacDiarmid, this future belongs to communism and that is how Scotland should be re-written: "Everyone knows that the future belongs to Communism / And that the present system is rotten from top to bottom" (p. 14). In "Glasgow 1938",

16. The narrator tells the people of Glasgow: "Life passes through Glasgow too. And most of you—simply let it pass" (p. 17).

17. Again, in "The Glass of Pure Water", he notices: "But amongst the people in these nearest slums I know / This infinitesimal twinkling, this delicate play / Of tiny signs that not only say no more / Than all speech but all there is to say." (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 1041) In "Glasgow is Like the Sea", the Hebridean speaker describes the potential offered by Glasgow: "Here I am filled with subtle knowledge / Of ways more intricate human lives posses [...] I'd like this in another city perhaps; / [...] / The sea is always water; Glasgow life" (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 1348).

MacDiarmid creates a utopian Glasgow where communism is metaphorically assimilated with the perfection of stockings:

They conform to the body,
Read just themselves to fit, no matter how active you are. No chaffing
[or rubbing, secure, smooth-fitting, snug,
“*White light folded, sheathed about you, folded.*” (p. 17)

Parodying adverts, embodiments of capitalist discourse, the sheath and light of communism envelop Glasgow in a sweet embrace:

Open Glasgow up! Open it up; It is time
It was made sun-conscious.
Give every house
Ceilings and roofs of iridescent glass, windows for walls,
Let great steel-framed windows bring the blaze
Of the sky into every room. (p. 18)

Washed over by communist light, utopian Glasgow allows MacDiarmid to write his dreamed Scotland. Now, if Glasgow and Scotland are asked to react and reject capitalism, can MacDiarmid’s writing actually help in the process?

Indeed, anger and emotion prevail in the poem in “Glasgow 1938”: it is riddled with interjections and very expressive adjectives such as “terrible” (p. 8), “horrible” (p. 5, p. 15) or “awful” (p. 11). Redundant accretions saturate syntactical space: “preaching, money making, administering justice, / The fantastic uniforms of the police, / Soldiers of divers regiments, badges of rank” (p. 5). As if unable to contain its horror, the narrative voice breaks into the rhythm of palpitating rage: writing follows the uncontrollable impulses of a rush of blood to the head. However, to reduce the impact of MacDiarmid’s poem to anger would be unfair. His poetry is led by a perlocutionary urge, by the desire for language to be performative. According to Austin’s definition, a “performative sentence or a performative utterance [...] indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin, 1975, p. 6). Does MacDiarmid’s poem manage “to *say* something” and “to *do* something” (Austin, 1975, p. 12) at the same time? Can the Glasgow poems build Scotland anew? Austin believes that a “performative utterance [...] [is] in a *peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy.” (Austin, 1975, p. 22) No doubt MacDiarmid would have strongly disagreed with this restrictive vision of poetic language. To him, poetry was inseparable from politics. Poetry, above all other linguistic tools, is able to achieve something out of its own sphere, in the real world.

In a letter written in 1928 to the Scottish nationalist R. E. Muirhead, MacDiarmid expresses his faith in poetry: "I am unquestionably doing far more for Scotland when my activity issues in poetry rather than in any other form" (H. MacDiarmid, 1984, 297). To write poetically is to create a new reality.

If MacDiarmid's poetry had an undeniable influence on Scottish writers, it is however very difficult to decide whether it had any real impact on Scotland and its population as a whole. To describe his poetry as performative would undoubtedly be overrating his work, especially when our main object of study, "Glasgow 1938", has not even been published. But we are interested in the poem itself, not its effect on the real world. Indeed, even though the poem is no performative statement *per se*, it shares the underlying pattern of such language: when reality and language can perfectly conflate in a performative utterance, the political poet can only *desire* to merge reality and language in his verse. Hence, we could maybe restrict ourselves to defining his poetry as an "illocutionary act", which corresponds to an act designed to produce something and have an effect on the audience, instead of a "perlocution" which describes a performed act. This illocutionary movement is first conducted by the will of the poet.

The emotional impact of the angry poem relies mostly on the considerable faith of the narrator in the face of adversity, on "that real and persistent purpose, that necessary fanaticism, / That unquenchable zest at that *atemberaubend* pace" (Gl. 1938, p. 13). The hopeful narrative voice never loosens its tight grip on the future. Historical materialism provides the assurance of the coming of a new political system.¹⁸ In a secularised biblical tone, it asserts: "And do not fear to use new materials too. I do not fear" (p. 18).¹⁹ The twenty-page poem finishes on this note: he is "full / Of the violent energy of the minute electron / In the enormous atom, the thrilling vigour of the pentathlete" (p. 20). After describing and criticising capitalist Scotland, the poem now considers the future. In the new house inhabited by the light of communism, the modal "will" slowly contaminates the text: "for colour will be everywhere", "the most utilitarian objects will be unrecognisable / [...]; every room will be enlarged", "the rippling foliage of the trees will dapple your tables" (p. 18). The whole

18. "It is only the cyclical slump—the boom will come; / There are signs that we are turning the corner" (p. 14).

19. Isolated thanks to the run-on-line, the poet seems to be replicating the faith of Psalm 23 of the Bible: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me" (Psalms, 23, 4).

city is transfigured, not only by light, but by the faith and certitudes of the speaker. But this is not enough.

In “In Memoriam James Joyce”, the poet is able to receive the Seamless Garment²⁰, to see the essence of life: “All the knowledge is woven in neatly / So that the plaited ends come to the hand.” (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 872) All the threads come together in his hands. The pen that the all-powerful poet holds in his hand is a weapon to unite the chaotic world. In “Glasgow 1938”, the narrative voice seeks to share this ability by transferring this imagery onto the people:

Foul chaos! Foul people of Glasgow, you have done so much
And worked so hard, yet life is undigested. Now shape it into proportions
[you can handle!]

Feel that you have life here, in your hands! (p. 17)

The verbs “shape” and “handle” suggest active and controlling hands. Even if “Glasgow 1938” is often turned towards the individual faith of the poetic saviour, it is orientated outwards too, towards the people and the future. The poem is a prompting to act, to make the reader and the Scots react and rebuild a nation along communist lines. As though he were a patrician orator addressing the plebs, the narrator uses the pronoun “you”. He pities the fact that “They wouldn’t be in the picture if it wasn’t for your votes” (p. 19). The speaker seems to talk to Scots as if they were children in the violent imperative form “Keep your mind of your nose!” (p. 15). He then declares: “Help yourself to happiness!” (p. 17). The imperative form connects the people to the narrative voice: “Open Glasgow up! Open it up. It is time”, “Have chairs of chromium steel” (p. 18). Whereas in the “Third Hymn to Lenin”, the imperative form was addressed to Lenin, now the poet turns to his people. Now, even if the imperative form suggests some specific behaviour to the audience (Benveniste, 2001, p. 6), is it the assurance of performed action? Of course not. The use of the modal “will” and the imperative condemns the poem to be only illocutionary, not perlocutionary. Furthermore, because of the use of the imperative, the identity of the addressee is blurred. Sometimes one can feel that the addressee is not Scottish: “Take another eyeful of the pulchritude!” (Gl. 1938, p. 19) Who is the addressee? Scots? Glaswegians? Companion writers? Non-Scottish readers? The imperative form makes the addressee and the pronoun “you” unstable. This instability of subject

20. “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout” (John, 19, 23).

might prevent the reader from feeling concerned and from acting. Another pronoun participates in this phenomenon: “we”.

From the beginning of “Glasgow 1938”, the narrator expresses his desire to be the voice of a group: “we need artists who live / Somewhere near the human centre” (p. 2).²¹ Who is “we”? Scotland? The Scottish community? Humanity at large? At one point, the narrator precisely defines one use of “we”: “and we—we artists” (p. 13). The collective pronoun seems to be continuously shifting and, as a result, the addressed community becomes unstable. The perlocutionary movement is thwarted again. Moreover, how can one assimilate with and answer the call of a poet whose sense of belonging to his nation is tragically absent? His narrative self is torn between his belonging to and rejection of Scotland, as represented by Glasgow:

It is impossible to really see Glasgow
And not dissociate oneself at once and forever
From the horribly ridiculous thing
That comprises life for almost everybody. (p. 6)

He desires to distance himself from the Scottish crowd in declaring “*I do not ask to see / The distant scene. One step is enough for me.*”²² (p. 14) The poem reveals a paradoxical love/hate relationship between Scotland and its poetic saviour: “I am consumed with love for the people I detest” (p. 17). If the narrator dissociates himself from Scotland, one can ask again to what the pronoun “we” refers. In the “we”, “I” must always predominate.²³ The shifting “we” of the poems is subdued by a narrative self that rejects all connection between “they” and “I”. The pronoun “we” seems to be only encapsulating the “I”: “There may be greater artists yet by far than we, / Unheard of, even by us” (p. 10). This “we” is the expression of a larger self.²⁴ The seer is “large... contain[s] multitudes” (Whitman, 2007, p. 67): “we see an experience which contains a criticism of modern existence” (p. 11). The poetic faith in a massive ego seems to disconnect the reader (already wondering whether he or she is being addressed in the poem) from the narrative voice. In addition, the poem is now and then

21. He reflects on “the imaginative meaning we attach to stone and water” (p. 5) and refuses the selling of “our brains” (p. 6).

22. John Henry Newman, “The Pillar of Cloud”, 1833.

23. “[D]ans « nous », c’est toujours « je » qui prédomine puisqu’il n’y a de « nous » qu’à partir de « je », et ce « je » s’assujettit l’élément « non-je » de par sa qualité transcendante. La présence du « je » est constitutive du « nous ».” E. Benveniste, 2001, p. 233.

24. “[C]e pluriel peut tenir lieu de singulier. La raison en est que « nous » n’est pas un « je » quantifié ou multiplié, c’est un « je » dilaté au-delà de la personne stricte, à la fois accru et de contours vagues [...]. D’une part, le « je » s’amplifie par « nous » en une personne plus massive, plus solennelle et moins définie ; c’est le « nous » de majesté.” E. Benveniste, 2001, p. 234.

very obscure in certain parts such as “I thanked the bozo for you but you told him “nerts”” (p. 14), in the use of complex words (“leuchorrhœa”, p. 5, “the felt supramarginal gyrus”, p. 9,) or of untranslated foreign words (“*E religiosamente attinente al profondo spirito della razza!*”, p. 9).²⁵ Semantic obscurity disconnects the potential addressee, Scotland and the narrator. The relationship between MacDiarmid and his readership betrays a method that does not seem to be adequate to rewrite Scotland. However, this performative failure is counterbalanced by the power of syntax and poetic layout.

A poem that desires to be performative is supposedly turned towards the future but wishful prediction is not enough to delineate a perlocutionary movement. MacDiarmid’s syntax, on the other hand, is able to create it. Some commentators have described MacDiarmid’s late poetry as “chopped-up prose”, which it is. Yet, one should pay attention to the “chopping” process itself. It is there that MacDiarmid’s strength secretly lies, in the spaces that divide sentences and model poetic lines. We already mentioned before some interesting examples of run-on-lines which supplemented meaning. In the two lines “of teachers who know nothing but what they impart / To children” (Gl. 1938, p. 12) for example, criticism against the education system is enhanced by the separation between the giver and the receiver. The flow of knowledge itself is disrupted. MacDiarmid’s use of this poetic device is crucial in his rewriting of Scotland. Critics already rightly noticed MacDiarmid’s tendency to write endless lists of nouns, names or titles of books but maybe did not consider its effects deeply enough. In “Glasgow 1938”, as in “In Memoriam James Joyce” and other late poems, nominal accretion syntactically dominates poetic structure. Verbs are still part of it but run-on-lines tend to nominalise space: “We need / His remarkable ferocity of satire” (p. 2), “who is / The sculptor in anarchy, the sculptor in slime” (p. 5). Verbs even disappear, leaving room for lists of nouns and adjectives: “Poor Glasgow. The poorest city in the world” (p. 2), “Old walls and pavements stained and scoured / [...] / Eternalised fraud and vice in expugnable chasms” (p. 3). Anaphora helps in the process: “the rapid almost dancing movements every here and there, / The little graceful ornaments of action” (p. 4). Even metonymy serves the same purposes:

The fantastic uniforms of the police,
Soldiers of divers regiments, badges of rank,
Ministers ruffling their phylacteries,

25. In addition, the reference to the unexplained concept of “the one thing left untouched” (pp. 13–4) sometimes appears to correspond to aboulia, communism or relations between men.

The coloured hoods of different degrees,
 All the procession of men with their hierarchies and uniforms,
 Their associations and loyalties, and jealously guarded guilds. (p. 5)

Oscillating between metonymical representation of hierarchy (“uniforms”, “badges”, “coloured hoods”) and the concept itself (“regiments”, “rank”, “degrees”, “hierarchies”, “guilds”), the nominal mode structures meaning. Even the verbal form “ruffling” is part of this process. Along with run-on-lines that disconnect verb and object or verb and subject, the -ing form nominalises the poem’s structure²⁶: “—Gorgonising the mindless generations, / Turning them into filthy property” (Gl. 1938, p. 3). The lists of nouns and -ing forms are endless. Similar to the brushstrokes of an impressionist painting in which connecting lines disappear, MacDiarmid’s syntactical choices delete the connective function of the verb and transfer it to the noun, helped by commas, similes, anaphora, run-on-lines, dashes and brackets. Paradigmatic meaning clusters there, defying grammatical structure. Cohesive nominalisation and its temporal consequences play a huge part in the movement towards performative achievement.

According to Benveniste, nominal assertions can be located in intemporality and impersonality; hence, they tend to express absolute truths²⁷. Meaning is thrown into pure essence, laid bare and converted into general truth. This nominal movement is akin to that of an early poem, “A Moment in Eternity”, which is structured on similar lines:

Translucent leaves
 Green with the goodness of Eternity,
 Golden in the Heavenly light,
 —The golden breaths
 Of my eternal life,
 Like happy memories multiplied,

26. “[A]vec -ING, le verbe lexical en lui-même est neutralisé d’un point de vue temporel: il ne porte en effet aucune trace de la temporalité grammaticale [...], [il est] un nominalisateur, c’est à dire un outil chargé de convertir un segment de texte en nom.” (J. R. Lapaire, 2002, p. 414, p. 416)

27. “Dans la phrase nominale, l’élément assertif, étant nominal, n’est pas susceptible des déterminations que la forme verbale porte : modalités temporelles, personnelles, etc. L’assertion aura ce caractère propre d’être intemporelle, impersonnelle, non modale, bref de porter sur un terme réduit à son seul contenu sémantique. Une seconde conséquence est que cette assertion nominale ne peut pas non plus participer à la propriété essentielle d’une assertion verbale, qui est de mettre le temps de l’évènement en rapport avec le temps du discours sur l’évènement. La phrase nominale en indo-européen affirme une certaine « qualité » (au sens le plus général) comme propre au sujet de l’énoncé, mais hors de toute détermination temporelle ou autre et hors de toute relation avec le locuteur [...]. Étant apte à des assertions absolues, la phrase nominale a valeur d’argument, de preuve, de référence. On l’introduit dans le discours pour agir et convaincre, non pour informer. C’est, hors du temps, des personnes et de la circonstance, une vérité proférée comme telle.” (E. Benveniste, 2001, p. 159, p. 165)

—Shining out instantly from me.
 (*Complete Poems*, Vol. 1, p. 3).

Thanks to the use of dashes and nominalised lines, the breath of godly vision sensuously permeates the poem. As different as they seem in meaning and tone, “Glasgow 1938” is a re-enactment of “A Moment in Eternity”. The nominal organisation of the first is the angry mutation of the peaceful rhythm of the latter; divine breath is transmuted into wrathful and merciless fire. But it still expresses truth. The negative description of Glasgow is indeed difficult to counteract: “Looking down a street the houses seem / Long pointed teeth” (p. 8). By distancing verb and object, the run-on-line cancels out the meaning of the verb “seem”. The modal uncertainty contained in the verb does not appear to affect the independent nominal group “Long pointed teeth”. Syntactic organisation makes the poem fall into inescapable truth, Glasgow is a “Foul chaos!” (p. 17) No temporality survives but that of eternity, which paradoxically makes the future possible. The most important actor of that temporality is the run-on-line but it proves to provide other almost antithetical temporal effects.

As the poem gradually comes to an end by imagining utopian communist Glasgow, the illocutionary syntax becomes stronger. Not only does it enhance meaning and help the argumentation, but mimics a performative leap which “does” what it “says”: “until that one thing is touched, that lynch-pin / Removed. We must go for that and that alone” (Gl. 1938, p. 13). Quite similar to the effect of a resultative structure, the run-on-line accelerates the achievement of the denoted process. What is “removable” is now “removed”, isolated from the doubts contained in the previous line. The leap from dream to reality is poetically enacted. The text, now perlocutionary, comprises its own fulfilment in the last pages: “Give every house / Ceilings and roofs of iridescent glass”, “and give / A sense of great space and air”, “Let the eye be bewildered trying to identify / The new aspects of familiar materials”. Here, the run-on-lines separate verb and object, “give” from “ceilings and roofs”, “give” from “a sense of great space and air” and “identify” from “the new aspects” (p. 18). If the imperative forms ask for certain actions, they do not guarantee their completion. However, compounded by enhancing nominalisation, the spaces between verb and object annul the uncertainty included in the imperative form. The vision of the communist system is endowed with a touch of inexorable reality. In the same stanza, the run-on-lines isolate subject from verb:

Let [...] waxed floors
 Reflect window vistas

[...]

Let metal ornaments and glass shelves

Catch and multiply the floods of light. (p. 18)

The dubiety of the imperative form “let” is irremediably distanced from the main semantic verb, as if light had properly entered the poem. The poet brings reality and poetic space closer. They merge in the space of the run-on-lines. Drawing from the a-temporality of its nominalised organisation, the poem engraves itself in the present time, continuing the performative process. There, in “a world of simple, free, / Ungrudging comprehension in which all human feelings / Are now real and genuine” (p. 19), the future ceases to exist, only to be thrown into being, asserted by the powerful verb of existence “be”. The outwards movement of the preposition “to”, turned towards the future, is unnecessary: “every room will be enlarged / To huge dimensions” (p. 18). The jump from the verb “enlarged” to the resulting nominal group “huge dimensions” is already enacted in the run-on-line. The right margin of MacDiarmid’s poems is the place where the leap to the future is achieved and plaits a rope attached to the next step for humanity (in Nietzschean terms). It is the breath of wind that “ripples” the “foliage / Of the trees” (p. 18). If syntax is rooted in both a-temporality and the present time, other devices complicate the temporal pattern of the poem.

In “Glasgow 1938”, the discreet past is surprisingly very present as well. Even though intertextuality, the literary and historical past appears in the poem, we would like to look closely at the articles adopted by MacDiarmid: nouns and concepts are predominantly introduced by the definite article “the” or the demonstrative adjective “that”. He refers to “the zealous senile jabber” (p. 10), “these keelies” (p. 11), “the one thing left untouched”, “that lynch-pin” (p. 13) or “these boobs” (p. 19). Parallel to intertextual or obscure historical references, the articles seem, once more, to disconnect reader and narrator in this unshared knowledge as the deictic reference is exophorical (it does not belong to the discourse of the poem itself). However, the effect could be analysed in a more positive light. The poet’s strategy, enhanced by the striking presence of purely nominal lines, assumes the reader’s knowledge and pretends that the references do belong to a shared cultural background: “*the* refers to what is uniquely identified by shared knowledge.” (Quirk, 1986, p. 271) The articles and demonstrative adjectives in -TH create a symbolic bridge between reader and narrator. In addition, by doing so, it propels the acquiring of this knowledge into the past. It appeals to a shared collective past, albeit a fantasized one. The performative leap that was achieved in the future by “will”, in the present and eternity by the run-on-line, is

now belonging to the past. The dreamed-of knowledge is already being shared by the reader. The violent acquiring of this knowledge happened in a theoretical past and is made obvious in the use of “of course”: “it is of course as Fr. Rolfe says” (Gl. 1938, p. 1), “Yet, of course, it is the element of surprise / That is disastrous in cases of electrical shock” (p. 14). The same techniques are used in the poem ‘In Memoriam James Joyce’, which displays endless lists of nouns introduced by definite articles:

The sycamore in rich straw-gold;
The elm bowered in saffron;
The oak in flecks of salmon gold
(*Complete Poems*, Vol. 2, p. 757)

The reader is supposed to have seen them. Knowledge is shared. The choice of article itself is participating in life which is “externalisation / Throwing an inner ferment outward into definite act and thought” (Gl. 1938, p. 3). The deictic tools hint at an already performed acquiring of knowledge by the community. The mythopoeic creation of a shared collective past disrupts the temporal continuum of the nation, forcing it to destroy its present assumptions, to embrace a new past and a new future. The future of Scotland thus seems to be built out of a very complex and saturated temporal web: grammar, syntax and meaning collude to merge future, present, past and even eternity. This is how MacDiarmid was trying to recreate his nation.

The unpublished “Glasgow 1938” encapsulates the most important of Hugh MacDiarmid’s poetical themes and techniques. This attempt at writing a long poem stems from MacDiarmid’s experiments to rebuild Scotland anew, from his faith in the political and performative power of his poetry. Torn between two conflicting impulses of destruction and reconstruction, the poem moves from the hellish slums of stupid Glasgow and the perverted sentimentality of the Scots to a healed communist city. The constricted urban space of Glasgow was probably an ideal place for staging communist utopia: MacDiarmid was familiar with radical Glasgow, especially the “Red Clydeside” movement, the revolt of 1919 and the renowned figure of John Maclean. He could thus castigate the capitalist city while locating a revolutionary potential there. Symbolically opening the windows of Scottish houses to the light of communism, MacDiarmid’s writing is an attempt to make utopia real. On the one hand, the transfer of his faith in the future to the Scots transforms poetry into an illocutionary act. On the other hand, his choice of syntax and poetic layout (especially run-on-lines) creates a perlocutionary movement. The performative metamorphosis is finally achieved in the use of articles which pushes forward an idealised collective past. MacDiarmid’s performative

“re-writing” of Scotland does not only live in the future, it rests on a desire to inhabit the past, the present and eternity.

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