



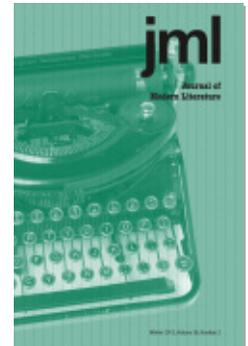
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MacDiarmid and Muir: Scottish Modernism and the Nation as Anthropological Site¹

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The cosmopolitan and international dimension of European modernism was often paradoxically bound to an acute concern with local and national cultures. Marinetti's projected renovation of Italian culture, Yeats's politically engaged drama and poetry, and Joyce's attention to the minutiae of Dublin's life and language suggest that an engagement with questions of national identity forms a crucial part of the modernist project. Such questions are particularly acute for historically colonized nations such as Ireland but also for a country like Scotland, for long a willing partner in the United Kingdom, but one where incipient national aspirations lacked the autonomous institutions necessary for political expression: only in 1997 did Scots vote for the restoration of limited self-government. The question of forging a post-imperial identity for Scotland arose much earlier in the century, however, and the contemporary devolution of powers within the U.K. is prefigured in the work of many modern Scottish writers, none more than C.M. Grieve, better known by his pseudonym, Hugh MacDiarmid. Both modernism and nationalism in Scotland found their major exponent in MacDiarmid, whose 1926 poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* offers a searching exploration of Scottish identity. MacDiarmid's major Scottish contemporary, Edwin Muir, assesses the possibility of national independence from a much more skeptical perspective in his poetry and cultural criticism. Muir's achievement has not been fully assessed in the context of Scottish modernism, which has tended to be identified almost exclusively with MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance movement. Consequently, the profound affinities in their diagnoses of the modern Scottish condition have not been explored, yet it is here that the two

poets can be seen to belong most fully to a shared cultural formation, in which lack of nationhood, linguistic division, and the problem of historical development are urgent issues demanding sustained analysis and imaginative redress. From the discipline of anthropology, MacDiarmid and Muir both appropriate ethnographic methods to analyze Scotland's national identity. Their analyses paradoxically reveal a nation stunted by its treatment as anthropological site from the discipline's Enlightenment origins through the twentieth century. While appearing to approach Scotland as ethnographers, MacDiarmid and Muir make a powerful indictment of ethnography itself, revealing its deleterious effects on living communities and national aspirations. This consciousness of the impact of ethnographic practices on collective history distinguishes Scottish modernism from other, more aesthetically oriented modernisms, such as that of T.S. Eliot, for whom anthropological investigations yield mythic forms transcending history.²

The origins of twentieth-century political nationalism in Scotland coincide with the rise of a modernism powerfully influenced by Frazer's comparative *Golden Bough*, but when modern Scottish writers take an anthropological perspective on their nation, they typically employ ethnographic methods to critically assess Scottish culture and society, including its earlier antiquarian leanings. The meanings of anthropology in Scottish culture change with the development of the discipline itself. Beginning with antiquarian investigations into local customs and practices in the eighteenth century, British anthropology becomes an imperialist, comparative discipline during the Victorian era, before refining its ethnographic methodology during the modern period. From the Enlightenment onward, anthropology in Scotland plays an unusually prominent role in constructing the nation's cultural identity, as Robert Crawford and others have shown.³ Writers as diverse as James Macpherson, Robert Burns, and Sir Walter Scott approach Scottish society as a proto-anthropological site rich in endangered cultural practices, to be textually preserved and passed down as part of a continuous Scottish identity. Macpherson's *Ossian* fragments and the ballads collected by Burns and Scott are early examples of what would later be called fieldwork in a residually oral culture. Their efforts anticipate the work of professional anthropologists like Sir James Frazer, who "knew also that his own land was invested with sacred sites, and that topography, lore, and landscape were bound together" (Crawford 157). A common theme uniting Macpherson's *Ossian*, Scott's *Waverley*, and Frazer's *Golden Bough* is the persistence of the "primitive" in spite of the relentless progress of modernity, and this is intimately linked to Scottish Enlightenment ideas concerning the development of societies "out of barbarism into refinement" (Nairn 111). In *Waverley*, for example, modern Scotland is born out of the defeat of Gaelic culture in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion, but Scott provides a detailed picture of Highland life and customs. These anthropologically inflected imaginings of

Scotland are not, however, recognizably nationalist in the Andersonian sense. Benedict Anderson suggests that the elusive and often paradoxical character of nationalism is best understood by approaching it “as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion,’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (5). Working “[i]n an anthropological spirit,” he famously defines the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (5–6). It is only as Scottish literature becomes less overtly antiquarian and anthropological that it imagines the possibility of Scotland as a sovereign political community. This is due in part to the sublimation of political aspirations into imperialist and anthropological projects by Scottish intellectuals over two centuries.

In emphasizing the conflict between primitive and civilized as foundational of modernity itself, Scottish writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries draw attention to the conditions necessary for nationalism. Tom Nairn persuasively argues that nationalism arises in response to “the unpalatable, humanly unacceptable, truth of grossly uneven development” attendant on the rise and spread of capitalism (96). As capitalism imposes itself on less developed areas, its latent imperialism “forces mobilization against it, even on the part of those most anxious to catch up and imitate” (101). The belated rise of political nationalism in Scotland during the 1920s occurs amid the continuing decline of Britain’s empire and in the wake of the General Strike. Scotland had evaded the nationalist and revolutionary currents that swept through Europe during the Romantic era, owing in large measure to its precocious modernization during the Enlightenment, which transformed the country “from fortified castles and witch-burning to Edinburgh New Town and Adam Smith, in only a generation or so” (109). As elsewhere, this rapid modernization came only at enormous human cost, the extirpation of traditional Gaelic society in the Highlands and especially brutal industrial conditions in the Lowlands. (Edwin Muir comments that the early Scottish industrialists “are only conceivable as thoughtless or perverted children” [*Scott and Scotland* 75].) During the nineteenth century, Scotland’s affluent middle classes were able to enjoy the fruits of industry and empire, but as modern Britain’s imperial twilight offered fewer opportunities for advancement and escape, painful economic realities at home fostered political radicalism. By 1928, the National Party of Scotland—precursor of the contemporary SNP—had been formed, and Scots had witnessed “the appearance of the epic poem of modern Scottish nationalism (a distinguishing badge of this, as of most other European nationalisms), MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in 1926” (Nairn 95). Although Alan Bold has influentially argued that MacDiarmid’s poem imagines “Scotland as a country with the potential to liberate itself from centuries of defeatism,” Nairn more acutely recognizes that, unlike most epic nationalist poems, *A Drunk Man* is really a “great national poem on the impossibility of nationalism” (*Thistle Rises*

xv, Nairn 169). This impossibility is due, in part, to Scotland's self-imagined status as an object of ethnographic enquiry.

The problematic relationship between Scottish nationalism and modernity is also a major preoccupation of MacDiarmid's most important Scottish contemporary, Edwin Muir, particularly during the 1930s. While his interest in states of consciousness, mythology, and historical process is self-consciously modern, Muir's poetry is formally and linguistically conservative when compared with MacDiarmid's. The deep continuities between Muir's and MacDiarmid's thought on Scotland have been further obscured by the poets' dispute over language. The publication of *Scott and Scotland* in 1936 effectively ended Muir's previously friendly relationship with MacDiarmid. In it, Muir argues that Scotland's "linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another; that their emotions turn to the Scottish tongue, with all its associations of local sentiment, and their minds to a standard English which for them is almost bare of all associations other than those of the classroom" (20–21). Margery McCulloch observes that Muir's dichotomy of thought and feeling "is strikingly similar to Eliot's theory of dissociation of sensibility" (92), but it might be more accurate to say that Muir transposes Eliot's theory onto Scottish culture, arguing for a sixteenth-century dissociation anticipating that of the seventeenth century in England. The controversy between MacDiarmid and Muir hinged on the latter's proposed solution to Scottish linguistic division: "Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English" (178). This pessimistic view of the cultural possibilities for non-standard English provoked the ire of MacDiarmid, who countered: "No recent Scottish poet writing in English has written poetry of the slightest consequence; their contemporaries who write in Scots have shown a far higher creative calibre in the opinion of the highest critical authorities of many lands" ("A Reply to Edwin Muir" 193). It is one of the ironies of literary history that MacDiarmid was already abandoning Scots for English in his own poetry, but the narrowness of Muir's perspective is revealed by both contemporary and subsequent writing in a rich variety of Scots. While the language debate is central to the poetics and cultural criticism of both poets, beyond it lies a shared sense of Scotland as a nation trapped in an identity constructed out of antiquarian and ethnographic data.

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle is a long poem of 2,865 lines in which a drunken man lies on a hillside contemplating a thistle silhouetted against the moon, symbolic of Scotland and its people. Its linguistically riotous, drunken reverie anticipates *Finnegans Wake*, and like the *Wake* it has strong affinities with the genre identified by Northrop Frye as "anatomy," "characterized by a great variety of subject matter and a strong interest in ideas" (365). The poem marks the pinnacle of MacDiarmid's experiments with synthetic Scots, using Scots words drawn from all historical periods and regional dialects, as well as foreign words. It ranges over a rich variety of verse forms, such as triplets,

couplets, and ballad stanzas, and meditates on subjects ranging from sex to Dostoevsky, all with a view to understanding the Scottish condition. The section of the poem known as “The Crying of the Fair” (455–76) relates an annual ritual performed in the poet’s native town of Langholm, the Common Riding. Originally, members of the local noblesse would ride their horses around the burgh’s ancient boundaries, and the present ceremony culminates with a procession in which a giant thistle is brought through the town preceded by cake, herring, and roses:

The bearer twirls the Bannock-and-Saut-Herrin’,
The Croon o’ Roses through the lift is farin’,

The aucht-fit thistle wallops on hie;
In heather besoms a’ the hills gang by. (459–64)

While anticipated by an older local poet, T.S. Cairncross, whose “Crying the Fair” meditates on the passage of time, MacDiarmid draws out the ritual’s symbolic implications in linking poet, community, and cosmos (Bold “Cairncross Connexion” 82–83). As W.N. Herbert observes, MacDiarmid’s account “implicitly places him at the centre of his poem’s symbology as the bearer of the great thistle in this undoubtedly pagan ceremony” (54). In spite of its crucial role in constructing the poet’s identity within *A Drunk Man*, critics have generally passed over the way in which MacDiarmid presents the ritual itself.⁴ The procession occurs “A’ as it used to be, when I was a loon / On Common Ridin’ Day in the Muckle Toon” (457–58). In place of historical time, MacDiarmid’s poem opens onto the timeless space of ritual, in which its present enactment is “as it used to be,” identical with and repeating the processions of his youth.

The obviously sexual symbolism of the “Croon o’ Roses” and walloping thistle suggests a typical fertility ritual of the kind exhaustively documented in Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, but the poet’s approach to the subject is radically different. MacDiarmid was highly skeptical of Frazer’s work, observing in *Lucky Poet* that Frazer, “although he wrote so knowledgably of savages and their ways in *The Golden Bough* (twelve volumes plus supplement), never saw a live savage in his native habitat” (306). Unlike Frazer, MacDiarmid writes of a ritual with which he is intimately familiar. What is striking about MacDiarmid’s ritual narrative is its lack of explanation, a surprising omission in such a discursive poet, and one so alert to the power of symbolic association. He nowhere tells us what this local ceremony means, suggesting a reluctance to subject cherished local ritual to anthropological explanation. Instead, MacDiarmid allows the evocative Scots of the poem to suggest its multiple meanings from the perspective of a native participant. In the introduction to his mother’s dramatic poem, *Savonarola*, published the same year as *A Drunk Man*, T.S. Eliot observes that “the same ritual remaining practically unchanged may assume different

meanings for different generations of performers; and the rite may even have originated before ‘meaning’ meant anything at all” (viii). This interpretive caution in approaching the meaning of ritual distances the modernism of Eliot and MacDiarmid from the explanatory anthropology practiced by Frazer. Ritual meaning changes according to the interpretations of successive generations of participants. The poets’ skepticism towards Frazer’s method is illuminated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who regards Frazer’s insistence on explanation as his fatal flaw: “The very idea of wanting to explain a practice—for example, the killing of the priest-king—seems wrong to me. All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think like he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity” (119). In Frazer’s schema, “these practices” belong to the magical world of the primitive, who has not advanced to a fully religious or scientific worldview. MacDiarmid quite plainly does not regard the Common Riding as a piece of stupidity and prefers to allow its latent fertility symbolism to be evoked through language and imagery, rather than made explicit by means of anthropological explanation. In doing so, he privileges the experience of the ritual participant over the seemingly detached explanation of the social scientist.

More suggestive for reading “The Crying of the Fair” are Wittgenstein’s comments on what such rituals reveal about the nature of “human life”:

When Frazer begins by telling us the story of the King of the Wood of Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that he feels, and wants us to feel, that something strange and dreadful is happening. But the question “why does this happen?” is properly answered by saying: Because it is dreadful. That is, precisely that which makes this incident strike us as dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic, etc., as anything but trivial and insignificant, is also *that* which has called this incident to life.

Here one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like. (121)

Wittgenstein has in mind Frazer’s eerie description of the sacred grove of Nemi, where

a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. (1)

Not content with accepting that the violent succession at Nemi reveals “what human life is like,” Frazer surveys the practices of cultures throughout historical time and geographical space, with the stated aim of explaining the ritual murder at Nemi (2).

MacDiarmid’s festive description is in keeping with the atmosphere of the Common Riding, but it leads to a sudden recognition of the “dreadful,

magnificent, horrible, tragic” depths of human consciousness that give rise to such ritual enactment:

But noo it's a' the fish o' the sea
Nailed on the roond o' the earth to me;

Beauty and Love that are bobbin' there;
Syne the breengin' growth that alane I bear; (465–69)

The imagery of fish and nails suggests the crucified Christ, symbolically identified with the poet who must bear the burden of the thistle “alane,” but such a figure also suggests Frazer’s sacrificed fertility god whose death ensures the continuing “roond o’ the earth” and its seasonal change. In its transition from the familiar landscape of “a’ the hills” to the mysterious sea, from the bannock and salt herring to cosmic vision, MacDiarmid’s poem shifts from a consciousness of the waking, social world to a reverie that charges his imagined role in the Common Riding with cosmic resonance. It does so not by explaining the ritual’s meaning, but by evoking “what human life is like” through symbolic language.⁵

MacDiarmid’s poem stands in a different relationship to the Common Riding than *The Golden Bough* does to its rituals. It is an example of what the ethnographer Tal Asad calls “*productions* of the original and not mere interpretation: transformed instances of the original, not authoritative textual representations of it” (159). Gregory Castle has shown the usefulness of Asad’s notion for reading modern Irish writing, but it seems especially apt for reading Scottish literature, which abounds in “versions” of pre-existing compositions such as songs, ballads, and tales, as well as more explicitly anthropological undertakings. The Common Riding is transformed in MacDiarmid’s poem into a symbolic enactment of those elements of human life characterized by Wittgenstein as “dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic, etc.” For MacDiarmid, as for Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, they are inescapable powers shaping Scottish destiny, and as the Drunk Man bears the thistle, he is shadowed by “Scotland followin’ on ahint / For threepenny bits spleet new from the mint” (467–68). The thistle may be an emblem of Scottish nationality, but, significantly, Scotland is paid to join its procession. MacDiarmid satirizes a stereotypically Scottish frugality, but the lines also represent Scotland as a nation whose loyalty is bought. This reflects a conventionally nationalist attitude towards the Union of 1707, in which Scotland surrendered its parliamentary autonomy in negotiations marked by extensive bribery. The anti-Unionist sentiment is most famously expressed by Robert Burns: “We’re bought and sold for English gold’—/ Such a parcel of rogues in a nation” (552). In MacDiarmid’s inversion of this motif of betrayal, the participation of Scotland in its own local and patriotic ceremonies is nonetheless paid for in cash.

MacDiarmid concludes his brief account of the thistle procession protesting his symbolic burden: "Drums in the Walligate, pipes in the air / The wallop' thistle is ill to bear" (469–70). The poet who chooses to assume the burden of Scotland's identity suffers for it. In a contemporary prose tale that MacDiarmid wrote for *The Glasgow Herald*, the character Yiddy Bally obtains the honor of bearing the giant thistle on Common Riding Day, only to collapse beneath its prodigious weight:

"Gang on wi' the Common Ridin," he cried, in a voice that soondit richt owre the Market Place. And we did. But Yiddy was deid before his voice had stoppit echoin'!—and whiles I think it hesna stoppit yet. ("The Common Riding" 351)

This melodramatic regression into the Kailyard genre MacDiarmid railed against ends on a curiously tragic note, with the death of the hapless Yiddy. His death gives a mythic resonance to the structure of a seemingly benign civic ceremony. In transforming ritual into narrative, MacDiarmid constructs a Frazerian myth of human sacrifice, a rite that *The Golden Bough* posits as the origin of folk rituals across Europe. Significantly, MacDiarmid evades the question of ritual origins as he does all such explanation; the victim's death occurs in the present, suggesting the persistence or return of the archaic within modernity. In *A Drunk Man*, the speaker avoids Bidy's fate, and ultimately rejects the public festivity of the Common Riding in favor of private erotic fulfillment:

But I'll dance the nicht wi' the stars o' Heaven
In the Mairket dance as shair's I'm livin.

Easy to cairry roses or herrin',
And the lave may weel their threepenny bits earn.

Devil the star! It's Jean I'll hae
Again as she was on her wedding day . . . (471–76)

The theme of returning to Jean, the Drunk Man's wife, recurs throughout the poem at moments of acute distress or pessimism. Although frequently humorous and lending formal unity to the poem, these dreams of marital harmony tend toward the same kind of sentimentality seen in "The Common Riding"—a retreat from the irresolvable paradoxes of Scottish life and culture. For now, the poet finds consolation in sexual fantasy. W.N. Herbert notes (55) that the image of the poet dancing beneath the stars anticipates the cosmic imagery of the next section, in which MacDiarmid proclaims that "The thistle yet'll unite / Man and the Infinite!" (481–82); throughout the poem, the metaphysical union anticipated in the thistle, symbolic of a reborn self and nation, is deferred indefinitely.

As the site in which the national emblem is symbolically borne aloft, the “Muckle Toon” of Langholm serves as a synecdoche for Scotland itself. Its ritual space cannot participate in the historical process, however, being outside time and characterized by cyclical repetition. In spite of the festive atmosphere, the image of modern Scotland that emerges from “The Calling of the Fair” is of a nation trapped in a cycle of self-reiteration, unable to progress beyond the repeated articulation of a static national identity. What strikes MacDiarmid first about the contemporary enactment of the Common Riding is that it is “a’ as it used to be,” the same as it ever was. This stasis is reflected in the form of the section, rhyming couplets which even such inventively Scottish rhymes as “herrin/earn” (pronounced approximately as *hairn* and *airn*) are unable to break. Elsewhere in the poem, MacDiarmid speculates: “Mebbe we’re in a vicious circle cast / Mebbe there’s limits we can ne’er get past” (1026–7), anticipating the cyclical vision of history in the concluding sections. His failure to find meaning in the public sphere drives the poet to seek it in the inner spaces of imagination and erotic revery. MacDiarmid’s gaze turns inward on Scotland, and behind its rituals and symbols discovers a void. This theme is first introduced in the opening passage of *A Drunk Man*, in which the poet complains about the low quality of Scotch whiskey in the early decades of the twentieth century:

And a’ that’s Scotch aboot it is the name,
 Like a’ thing else ca’d Scottish nooadays
 — A’ destitute o’ speerit juist the same. (18–20)

Scotland’s destitution of spirit is not confined to diluted whiskey, which is symptomatic of a far deeper spiritual and psychological condition symbolized by the thistle:

This Freudian complex somehoo slunken
 Frae Scotland’s soul—the Scots aboulia—
 Whilst a’ its *terra nullius* is *betrunken*. (318–20)

The nation is a *terra nullius*, a nothingness which spews the thistle emblematic of “the Scots aboulia,” the “pathological indecision” which traps Scotland in a powerless performance of national identity, leaving only such stereotypical figures as “Harry Lauder (to enthrall us)” (2610). MacDiarmid’s linguistic heteroglossia is nowhere more compressed than in these lines, which combine psychoanalytic discourse with Scots, and Latin with German, verging on a meaningless babble that is fitting speech for his *terra nullius*. The apparent incongruity between the poem’s linguistic complexity and the speaker’s low social status reflects the incongruity of Scotland’s strong educational traditions with its failure as a nation:

(Gin you're surprised a village drunk
 Foreign references s'ud fool in,
 You ha'ena the respect you s'ud
 For oor guid Scottish schoolin') (435–38)

Such incongruities produce much of the poem's verbal humor. The Drunk Man's contemplation of the nothingness symbolized by the thistle suggests the symbolic method of one of the poet's heroes, Herman Melville, particularly Ishmael's meditation on "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby Dick*: "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?" (195). MacDiarmid's drunken persona is also stabbed "with the thought of annihilation," by the prickling thistle that embodies "the heartless voids and immensities" of Scotland itself.

Edwin Muir's vision of Scotland as a nation in stasis, as an anthropological site whose inhabitants are trapped in a ritualized performance of national identity, parallels MacDiarmid's own, but without the militantly nationalist perspective. Muir in fact "rejected Scottish Nationalism on the grounds that without a Socialist economic order it was frivolous, while the achievement of Socialism would make it superfluous" (Robertson 139). In his 1936 study *Scott and Scotland*, Muir's ostensible subject is Sir Walter Scott, and he seeks "to account for a very curious emptiness which [he] felt behind the wealth of his imagination" (11). Muir blames Scott's empty imaginings on his cultural environment; like MacDiarmid, Muir tropes Scotland as an absence. Scott

spent most of his days in a hiatus, in a country, that is to say, which was neither a nation nor a province, and had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it. But this Nothing in which Scott wrote was not merely a spatial one; it was a temporal Nothing as well, dotted with a few disconnected figures arranged at abrupt intervals [. . .] (11–12)

Scotland is a Nothing with a blank for capital, just as for MacDiarmid it is variously a "*terra nullius*" or even an "abyss" (320, 1725). Muir's most sustained poetic exploration of this Nothing is his poem "Scotland 1941," published in 1943. Traditional readings of the poem, such as Peter Butter's, tend to universalize its message at the expense of its national specificity (203). Muir's pentameter lines explore how Scottish history deformed the national community, wasting its energy first in religious violence and then in material acquisition. Its title visually recalls that of *The Waste Land*, which in most of its printed editions is followed by the date 1922.⁶ The implied identification of Scotland as a waste land is anticipated by MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

T.S. Eliot—it's a Scottish name—
 Afore he wrote "The Waste Land" s'ud ha'e come

To Scotland here. He wad ha'e written
 A better poem syne—like this, by gum! (345–9)

MacDiarmid humorously presents Scotland as an historical waste land that would have provided Eliot with the material necessary to write a “better poem.” Elsewhere, he laments that birth control will make “Scotland turn Eliot’s waste—the Land o’Drouth” (1650).⁷ Muir, in *Scottish Journey*, similarly laments that “Scotland is gradually being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art and innate character” (3). His complaint suggests the historical conditions grounding MacDiarmid’s identification of Scotland as waste land, but also that the condition of Scotland can symbolize the wider cultural crisis of modernity anatomized in Eliot’s poem. MacDiarmid’s modernist poem uses Eliot parodically, announcing *A Drunk Man*’s modernist affinities while deflating the high seriousness associated with the modernist long poem. The “star” of Robert Burns is thus “banged like a sixpence / ‘Twixt Burbank’s Baedeker and Bleistein’s cigar” (71–2). Burns is debased both by his vulgarization in modern culture, and by the modernist poetics of Eliot’s poem—another image of Scottish culture trapped by popular sentimentality and its inability to adapt to modernity itself.

“Scotland 1941” opens with an anthropological vision of the Scottish people as a “tribe,” but it is an identity lost in an irrecoverable past:

We were a tribe, a family, a people.
 Wallace and Bruce now guard a painted field,
 Where all may read the folio of our fable,
 Peruse the sword, the sceptre, and the shield. (*Collected Poems* 97)

Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” published in the previous year, commemorates the poet’s aspiration “To purify the dialect of the tribe,” but the Scots language of the medieval poets Barbour, Henryson, and Dunbar is for Muir part of the tribal past (Eliot *Collected Poems* 218). The heroism of Scottish history is now of merely antiquarian interest, imaginable in painting and folio, but ultimately no more connected to the present than any other symbols of Scotland’s lost chivalry and sovereignty. Muir’s poem, like *The Waste Land*, is a kind of textual museum, pointing to the disjunction between past and present even as it preserves cultural memory and artifacts. It conducts a fieldwork of the imagination, seeking the historical reasons for the disappearance of Scotland’s tribe, or at least of its tribal identity. This authentic Scotland, rooted in defense of community, is contrasted with the inauthentic sentimentality shaping modern Scottish identity. He denounces Burns and Scott as “sham bards of a sham nation” that has “No pride but pride of pelf,” the spoils of capitalism and empire (97). If ancient Scotland was “a tribe, a family, a people,” its modern successor is a hoax produced by a kind of false consciousness masking its participation in

British imperialism. Muir's association of inauthenticity with both the figure of the bard and with nationalism points to the eighteenth-century origins of modern Scottish identity, particularly Macpherson's partially forged Ossian poems. As Katie Trumpener has shown in *Bardic Nationalism* (1997), this strand of eighteenth-century antiquarianism created a vogue for the figure of the bard as "the mouthpiece for a whole society, articulating its values, chronicling its history, and mourning the inconsolable tragedy of its collapse" (6). The literary appropriation of Scots oral tradition comes under fire in Muir's "Complaint of the Dying Peasantry", where

Scott and Hogg, the robbers, came
And nailed the singing tragedies down
In dumb letters under a name
And led the bothy to the town. (CP 262)

What eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians saw as an act of cultural preservation, Muir views as a betrayal of the communal culture from which the ballads sprung: "The singing and the harping fled / Into the silent library" (262). Muir calls into question the proto-anthropological fieldwork conducted by Burns, Scott, and Hogg, showing an acutely modern awareness of the detrimental effects such participant-observers can have on the traditions they seek to record. If subsequent generations of Scots passed the bardic mantle onto Scott and Burns, "Scotland 1941" challenges both the validity and the relevance of this romantic cultural construct divorced from communal aspiration. Modern Scotland lacks the sense of community which would give meaning to the poet's bardic role, and the modern Scottish poet is as alienated from the people as poets elsewhere.

In its presentation of the past, "Scotland 1941" is faithful to Muir's bleak vision of Scottish history as "a temporal Nothing [. . .] dotted with a few disconnected figures arranged at abrupt intervals" (*Scott and Scotland* 12). The heroes Bruce and Wallace are followed by a variety of "disconnected figures"—the Reformers Knox and Melville, the Covenanters "Montrose, Mackail, Argyle"—whom most Scots also regard as heroes, but whom Muir condemns for bringing violence and dissent (98). In Muir's vision of a radically discontinuous history, "Knox and Melville clapped their hands, / And bundled all the harvesters away" (97). The process is repeated by the seventeenth century Covenanters, represented by the figure of "Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn," who "Hacked with his beak the starving haulms" (97). It is this elimination of organic community through sectarian violence, rather than the victories of Bruce and Wallace, that Muir chooses as the formative historical episodes in Scottish life: "Out of this desolation we were born" (97). In *Scott and Scotland*, he argues that not since the late Middle Ages has there been an organic Scottish community: "The Scotland of James IV shows us a coherent civilization, and in

the individual writer thought and feeling harmoniously working together. Calvinism drove a wedge between these two things, and destroyed the language in which they had been fused" (73). In "Scotland 1941," the Reformation serves only to "crush the poet with an iron text" (97). Tom Nairn singles out Muir's anti-Reformation historiography as an example "of the oddities of nationalist ideology in Scotland," a form of belated romanticism that fails to question its own ideological underpinnings (122). Accepting the myths of organic community leads Muir and others to conclude that "Scottish society and history are monstrosly misshapen in some way, blighted by Original Sin," variously identified with the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, or the Reformation (122). While Nairn is justified in criticizing Muir's historiography for failing to come to terms with the last four centuries of Scottish history, there is a danger of allowing the romantic strain in Muir's thought to obscure the revisionary, modernist content within his critical and creative project. For all his criticism of the Reformation, Muir is himself a smasher of idols, targeting those shibboleths of Scottish identity that he feels obscure the nation's actual social and cultural conditions. From his scathing 1931 biography of Knox to his rejection of Burns and Scott in "Scotland 1941," Muir is as critical as MacDiarmid of Scotland's lack of national self-knowledge. Both writers challenge the complacency with which modern Scots accept received symbols of national identity. MacDiarmid also shares Muir's sense of the debilitating effects of Calvinist theology on the Scottish character, complaining of Scotland that "Calvinism uses her / To breed a minister or twa" (1332–33) and condemning the Scottish people as "this preposterous Presbyterian breed" (738). In rejecting the Kirk that most Scots traditionally regarded as the center of their communities, however, MacDiarmid and Muir are left with yet another void at the heart of Scottish history and society, one that historical and anthropological knowledge cannot fill.

In their search for an authentic identity for modern Scotland, both MacDiarmid and Muir quite literally draw a blank. The quest for a stable essence of Scottishness lying within the nation's symbols and history discovers a terrifying and dispiriting emptiness. Muir's *Scottish Journey* is one such quest for identity within the waste land of modern Scotland. The book has been praised by the prominent Scottish historian T.C. Smout for its accurate sociological observations, and it differs from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and "Scotland 1941" not only as prose but also in its geographical, rather than symbolic or historical, structure. An important kind of data within the text is ethnographic observation of the Scottish people, part of Muir's ongoing interrogation of the Scottish condition. Muir's social analysis is grounded upon his authority as observer, which draws upon his cosmopolitan experience to explain the habits of those under his observation. He is particularly attentive to markers of class, noting that in Edinburgh,

Even when a man is in other ways incapable, he tries to conform to his particular code of manners, and so drunkenness in Princes Street is quiet and genteel: shown in a trifling unsteadiness of gait or a surprising affability of aspect by which the middle-class Edinburgh man manages to suggest that he is somehow upholding something or other which distinguishes him from the working classes. (14–15)

Muir's authority as an observer in Edinburgh is derived from his liminal status as an insider/outsider, one whose Scottish identity gives him an insider's understanding of national culture and class divisions, but whose Orkney origins, London residence, and writer's occupation enable him to claim a wider perspective. Pierre Bourdieu notes that an "observer who divides a population into classes performs an operation which has its equivalent in social practice," and Muir's observational authority also implies an epistemological hierarchy, in which the poet's social analysis is predicated on his own cultural superiority to those he observes (172). Muir's distancing strategies, in Bourdieu's words, "produce and interpret signifying distinctions," even as he seeks to expose class pretensions (172).

Whereas Muir self-consciously distances himself from those he observes, MacDiarmid is an enthusiastic observer-participant. "The Dour Drinkers of Glasgow—A Letter from Scotland" shows a similar attention to signifying gesture:

We feel no necessity whatever to indulge in any airs and graces, and are not fond of promiscuous conversation, at least of any sustained sort, and if our risible faculties are moved at all by the human spectacle, that movement only adorns our face intermittently with some sort of *risus sardonius* that in flickering across our features barely interrupts the emission of the dense smoke of the black tobacco going well in our clay pipes. It is, indeed, a sort of fleeting facial comment hardly distinguishable from the effect of that gagging which an unwarily deep swig at what passes for Scotch Whisky is apt to etch on the granitic features of even the most hardened soak. (197)

He speaks as a native informant in this prose sketch written for a non-Scottish audience, which appeared in *The American Mercury* in 1952. If MacDiarmid avoids constructing an objectifying, authoritative self in his presentation of a communal Scottish experience, he instead performs a stereotypical version of Scottish identity that is exclusively masculine, taciturn, and hard-drinking. Particularly in his prose writings, as we have seen in "The Common Riding," MacDiarmid was not entirely successful in escaping stereotypical performances of Scottish identity. Muir and MacDiarmid both attempt to reveal the existential realities of Scottish life as a necessary counter to national self-imaginings. Despite the methodological issues it raises for a contemporary reader, Muir's observing self in *Scottish Journey* is more effective than MacDiarmid's

participating self in his occasional prose. Muir's absolute refusal to conform to conventional representations of Scottish identity complements MacDiarmid's linguistic experimentation in pointing the way toward the urban, working class, and feminist preoccupations of much contemporary Scottish poetry and fiction, such as that of Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard, James Kelman, Jackie Kay, and Janice Galloway.

An exploration of the critical anthropological perspectives present in the work of MacDiarmid and Muir reveals the tension between observing and participating in the imagined Scottish community, as well as important continuities with earlier Scottish literature. If a consideration of the perspectives adopted by them helps explain the different role Scotland has in their critical and creative projects, it paradoxically reveals a common understanding of Scotland as a nation paralyzed by its history and self-image—what Tom Nairn calls “this vast tartan monster” (162). For both MacDiarmid and Muir, the monster of Scotland's received symbolic identity is an illusion concealing an absence, but the bleakness of their diagnosis is a painful step toward self-recognition. Muir's contribution to this diagnosis has been historically undervalued, but is nonetheless a crucial component of Scottish modernism's reevaluation of national identity. The articulation of an historically peripheral identity within modernism anticipates in important ways not only contemporary political devolution within Great Britain, but also the struggle of regional identities to find expression in an era of cultural leveling and increasing geopolitical complexity.

Notes

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2. As Jed Esty shows in his recent study, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), late modernism in England also undergoes an “anthropological turn.” As this essay argues, however, in Scotland anthropology had been an important factor in the development of national identity since the eighteenth century.
3. See especially Crawford's *Devolving English Literature*. 2nd Ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.
4. While Harvey Oxenhorn notes that MacDiarmid's self-presentation in “The Crying of the Fair” “prefigures the mature poet who will some day lead a Scots revival,” other critics have tended to focus on its “themes of past Eden, crucifixion, and future paradise” or on its “Dionysian energy” (Oxenhorn 93, Boutelle 115, Kerrigan 119).
5. Kenneth Buthlay identifies “Beauty and Love” as MacDiarmid's “interpretation of the symbolism of the floral crown carried in the procession” (41), but it might be more accurate to say that they represent the transformation of the crown within the poet's imagination.
6. Margery McCulloch regards the dated title of “Scotland 1941” as “unfortunate,” arguing that Muir's cultural critique is a poor fit with contemporary wartime suffering, which included the bombing of Glasgow (97).

7. As Nancy Gish argues, this appropriation of Eliot's authority "establishes Scotland and MacDiarmid in an international context" while performing "a re-inscription in Scottish form" of Eliot's bleak cultural vision (221, 222).

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