

Margin and Centre: Scottish/English Literary Negotiations¹

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The dooble tongue has spoken and been heard.

Hugh MacDiarmid²

In this paper I examine the relationship between Scottish and English cultural identity. My main area of concern is the presence of this relationship in Scottish literary writing of the present century, although I begin by indicating how the most everyday of personal experiences can manifest the tensions inherent in the relationship, before proceeding to investigate how the presence of a larger and more powerful neighbouring nation has influenced the work of particular Scottish writers. Readers unfamiliar with Scottish/English cultural debates may find it helpful to consider the relation between some Latin American countries and the United States as somewhat analogous. The analogy is far from perfect as far as language and politics go (Scotland and England share both a language and political institutions), but useful in terms of the existence of similar economic imbalances and corresponding differences in cultural influence and power.

I

Permit me to commence with an *exemplum* culled from (my) everyday life.

A few years ago, accompanied by my wife, I took an overnight train from London to Glasgow. I should explain that England had, at that time, been my adopted country for about a decade, and that my wife is herself English. Our visits to Scotland, the country of my birth and upbringing, were and remain brief and entirely recreational in nature. On this occasion, shortly after we had set foot on the platform at Glasgow's Central Station, we were approached by a man of similar age to myself. He asked us a very simple question, which for the convenience of the non-Glaswegian reader I reproduce here in Standard English: "Have you any idea from which platform I can get the train to Wemyss Bay?" My reply (also standardised here) was instant and lacked elaborateness: "Yes, I often used to take that train myself. Unless they've made big changes around here, you want platform thirteen." The man thanked me and walked away.

The response of my wife to this briefest of conversations was one of extreme puzzlement. The exchange had been conducted in a *patois* which she (a relatively skilled linguist, incidentally) found incomprehensible. Indeed, her initial assumption

¹ This paper has simultaneously been published in Portuguese as "Utopias, intransigências et duplicidades: a questão nacional em negociações literárias e lingüicas", in *IPOTESI: revista de estudos literários*, 11 (1), January/June 2007, pp.49-59.

² Hugh MacDiarmid, "To Circumjack Cencrastus", *To Circumjack Cencrastus, or The Curly Snake* (1930); reprinted in *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), vol. 1, p. 182.

was that this was a language wholly different from any that I (a person with little skill in foreign tongues) had previously demonstrated an acquaintance with: it sounded, she remarked, like her idea of Polish.

Readers whose cultural and/or linguistic situatedness is analogous to my own will have similar fabular anecdotes to tell, and hardly need to have the moral of this one spelled out. To be brief, its lesson is (at least) dual, and treats the linguistic example cited here as only the most obvious of several problems in cultural translatability. The first point is that those who migrate from a peripheral to a hegemonic culture (or otherwise live their lives in similarly constant negotiation with it) seldom *abandon* the culture of the periphery, but almost inevitably *repress* it to some degree: one indication of the degree of their repression is how readily they re-embrace the original culture once immersed in it once more or, conversely, from within the marginal culture, how much they yield to the insistent external pressure of the centre. The second point, notwithstanding the first, is that, while operating within the hegemonic culture, this repression, for some, can be so thorough that it gives every appearance of abandonment.

I register these elementary, personally-rooted observations here because they seem to me to have the force of a paradigm. Those who dispute the validity of the core/periphery model in the sociological analysis of culture - or in any analysis - will concomitantly repudiate the argument that "success" for the culturally marginal has usually required them to be incorporated (tacitly or explicitly, partly or wholly, resisting or acquiescent) by the cultural centre. Their counter-argument is often based on a Hegel-derived dialectic, in which the so-called centre is paradoxically dependent on the so-called margins, the apparently static binary poles of the opposition thus entering into a fluid, dynamic interrelation in which the margins have considerably more power than might be supposed. Even where the binary model is accepted - the ascendancy of the core and subordination of the periphery acknowledged - it is often subject to a classically liberal ideological optimism, in which the periphery is seen as providing those vitalising cultural juices which the vampiric core continuously requires to preserve itself from outright ossification. Those of us who would describe the paradigm less sophisticatedly than a Hegelian and with more scepticism than a liberal - that is, who see a cultural centre's relations with its margins predominantly in terms of hostility (worst case scenario), or patronage (best case scenario), but also, in either case, given the excessive disproportions of economic power usually involved, as characterised by the routine exercise of *force majeure* - have few qualms about progressing to an investigation of the individual cases it governs. The most interesting of these, it turns out, are those which display a multitude of unexpected variations and irregularities without, we feel, fracturing the general validity of the model. In what follows, I will examine one such case, namely the relation of Scottish (periphery) to English (core) literary culture, and attempt to demonstrate the pertinence to such a relationship of the cultural repression/quasi-abandonment spectrum which, by means of an admittedly more quotidian example, I have already defined. My specific analyses concentrate on linguistic issues, but these are to be seen, synecdochally, as symptoms of a more general cultural condition. In particular, I draw parallels between linguistic choices and political options in twentieth century Scotland.

II

Having begun by focusing on language, let me continue. With apologies in advance to my translator, I offer the first of several quotations of which the attempt to reproduce a Scottish vernacular version of English is the most immediately noticeable feature:

But even that was wrong cause he couldnay sit about waiting I mean if he was fucking waiting what was he waiting for, it was here right now man know what I'm saying, if ye wait, it's got to be for something. Naybody waits to get surrounded. He wasnay gony wait for that christ almighty if ye knew ye're gony get captured then ye get to fuck, ye get fucking out man know what I mean ye get to fuck, ye dont fucking wait; that's the last thing. Ye get to fuck. Cause nothing went back to normal. There was nay fucking normal, whatever the fuck it meant, normal, stupit fucking word. Whatever the past was it was ower and done with. There wasnay gony be nay fucking big cuddles, nay kiss-and-make-up scenes; that was out the window, as far as that went, it was all washed up. So okay. So it was now. So he needed dough. He had to get squared up. And he didnay have the time to wait. That other wee bit of business, he could maybe push it through; he just needed a start, if he could punt the shirts; a knock-down price, it didnay matter, just something, he just needed something. Once he got that. But even without it.³

The passage is chosen, on account of its linguistic representativeness rather than its exceptionality, from the Scottish novel of recent years which has attracted more popular attention than almost any other. The narrative situation - a blind Glasgow down-and-out is attempting to convince himself that his run of bad luck might be reversible - is not particularly important. Nor need we concern ourselves too much with the technique: no one familiar with the stream-of-consciousness mannerisms to be found in most national variants of literary modernism will be perplexed by Kelman's fusion of first and third person perspectives. But those habituated to reading prose fiction in Standard English, or unfamiliar with the *patois* of the Glasgow working class male which he seems to be transliterating, are likely to experience a considerable sense of estrangement in the presence of Kelman's style. If they don't know Polish, some of this may look like their idea of it.

These readers usually have to work hard to decode (or, if one feels the process requires a stronger verb, translate) Kelman's vernacular into the linguistic norms with which they are familiar. Understandably, they often fail to ask (because they mostly cannot hope to know the answer) if Kelman's attempt to reproduce the *patois* is accurate, contestable or misleading. Indeed, by default, they invariably assume accuracy. It is possibly his placement in such a cultural and linguistic position that leads one (German) reader to commend Kelman's "uncompromising critique of the

³ James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), p. 273. A dialect glossary might help: "couldnay" = "couldn't"; "ye" = "you"; "naybody" = "nobody"; "wasnay" = "wasn't"; "gony" = "going to"; "didnay" = "didn't"; "stupit" = "stupid"; "ower" = "over"; "punt" = "sell". Incidentally, this passage demonstrates what I understand to be a unique feature of Glasgow English: is there anywhere else in the anglophone world in which "fuck" is a place to which one may be commanded to go?

convention in English fiction of draping the ‘third-party voice’ in a neutral guise, whereas in most cases it colludes through its adoption of Standard English with that sociolect’s élitist value system”. His unverified conclusion is that Kelman’s style is systematically subversive of such “average fiction”.⁴

Such a conclusion is certainly the one which would be drawn by any reader prepared to trust Kelman himself, speaking here in promotion of his own work:

How do you recognise a Glaswegian in English literature? He - bearing in mind that in English Literature you don’t get female Glaswegians, not even the women (sic) - he’s the cut-out figure who wields a razor blade, gets moroculous drunk and never has a single solitary (sic) “thought” in his entire life. He beats his wife and beats his kids and beats his next door neighbour. And another striking thing: everybody from a Glaswegian or working-class background, everybody in fact from any regional part of Britain - none of them knew (sic) how to talk. What larks! Every time they opened their mouth (sic) out came a stream of gobbledygook. Beautiful! Their language a cross between semaphore and morse code; apostrophes here and apostrophes there; a strange hotchpotch of bad phonetics and horrendous spelling - unlike the nice stalwart upperclass English hero (occasionally Scottish but with no linguistic variation) whose words on the page were always absolutely splendidly proper and pure and pristinely accurate, whether in dialogue or without. And what grammar! Colons and semi-colons. Straight out of their mouths. An incredible mastery of language. Most interesting of all, for myself as a writer, the narrative belonged to them and them alone. They owned it. The place where thought and spiritual life exists. Nobody outwith the parameters of their socio-cultural setting had a spiritual life. We all stumbled along in a series of behaviouristic activity (sic); automatons, cardboard cut-outs, folk who could be scrutinised, whose existence could be verified in a sociological or anthropological context. In other words, in the society that is (sic) English Literature, some 80 to 85 percent of the population simply did not (sic) exist as human beings.⁵

As an implied manifesto this makes an adequate show of being “uncompromising”, even going so far as liberally to commit to paper a fistful of elementary grammatical errors to shake defiantly at the linguistic standardisers it attacks. The paradox which has consequently to be explained is that a reader of Kelman’s work who is intimately familiar with the *patois* of the Glaswegian working class - and the present writer can claim the distinction of having thrived from the ages of three to fifteen in a public housing district which a character in one Kelman novel knowledgeably calls “an awful place to live”⁶ - is highly unlikely to find his rendering of it “uncompromising”. Indeed, the reaction of this very particularly positioned reader to Kelman’s handling of Glasgow speech is virtually the reverse of those I have been describing. For me, reading Kelman is rather akin to looking in a mirror which, although it sends back an image of oneself which is recognisable, does so with a flatteringly soft focus. I am aware that this is so remote from all standard comment on Kelman that it may appear outrageous. The obligatory analysis therefore follows.

⁴ H. Gustav Klaus, “Kelman for Beginners”, *Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle* 22 (Summer 1994), p. 135.

⁵ James Kelman, “The Importance of Glasgow in My Work”, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), p. 82.

⁶ James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), p. 315.

If we were to ask how well the passage quoted from Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* actually captures the *patois* under discussion, in terms of the dialectal and accentual accuracy of its transliteration, it would be difficult to arrive at an answer which honours Kelman's ear. Admittedly there are felicitous congruences between demotic Glasgow speech and Kelman's version of it. *Couldnay, ye, nay*, and *stupit* are all acceptable attempts to render the appropriate Glaswegian pronunciation, respectively, of *couldn't, you, no* and *stupid*. Similarly, the passage incorporates a number of recognisably local dialect terms: *cause* (*because*); *gony* (*going to*); *to get squared up* (*to get even, or to get tidied up*); *wee* (*little*); and *punt* (*sell, get rid of*). One's reservations about Kelman's abilities in this regard, however, rest on many more examples, and can be distilled into three categories.

Firstly, there is an overall lack of consistency of treatment. Why is the contraction *dont* printed without the apostrophe to mark the point of elision it would have in Standard English (*don't*) while *it's* appears throughout in its Standard form? Why are *got to* and *get to* printed in their standard forms (Glaswegian dialect: *goty* or *go tay* and *getty* or *get tay*) while *going to* is rendered in dialect (*gony*)? Secondly, why are some accentual features, which one would expect to see indicated by non-standard forms, consistently standardised? The most pervasive example of this practice is in Kelman's treatment of the verb ending *-ing* (represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet as [ɪŋ]), which one would have expected him to transliterate regularly as *-in* [ɪn]. One would have anticipated that the personal pronoun *I* [aɪ] would have been rendered as *A* or *Ah* [ə], but it appears throughout as it would in transliterated Received Pronunciation (i.e. the most prestigious non-regional accent spoken in England, often referred to as "BBC English", actually spoken by only 7% of English people). *Wis* [wɪz] would be a more defensible rendition than *was* [wɒz], *oot* [u:t] more likely than *out* [aʊt], *wi* [wi] more satisfactory than *with* [wɪθ], *windy* [wɪndɪ] more probable than *window* [wɪndəʊ], and *noo* [nu:] more appropriate than *now* [naʊ]. Thirdly, the orthography of a number of Kelman's forms, although deviant with respect to Standard English, arguably fails to convey the requisite pronunciation: examples are *naybody* (I would argue for *naybiddy*), *wasnay* (*wisnay*), and *ower* (*oor*). In short, the evidence from this representative passage is that, far from representing demotic Glasgow speech consistently, in mainly non-standard forms, and with due regard for the potential of deviant orthography accurately to indicate local pronunciation, Kelman is often demonstrably doing the opposite. He actually renders cognate forms so differently that his procedure at times appears random; he uses considerably more standard than non-standard forms; and many of the non-standard forms he does adopt are open to question. Indeed, we would be giving Kelman's handling of the vernacular its due if we were to call it *pidgin Glaswegian*.

Kelman has occasionally attempted a more dedicatedly phonetic approach, in short texts such as "The Hon" and "Nice to Be Nice". But these are early experiments. The first appeared in an amateurishly produced, limited edition pamphlet, the second in a collection issued by a small Scottish publishing house.⁷ In Kelman's debut with an *English* publisher,⁸ there is nothing so linguistically *outré*. Nor has there been in the many fictions that have since been published from London on his behalf.

⁷ To be found, respectively, in *Short Tales from the Night Shift* (Glasgow: Print Studio Press, 1978) and *Not Not While the Giro* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1983).

⁸ James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray, *Lean Tales* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).

Kelman's pidgin is not to be scorned on the assumption that he is technically incapable. On the contrary, it is a carefully modified version of the *patois*, one that renders it acceptable to the reader attuned to the forms of Standard English without abandoning the defamiliarising effects (for such a reader) of occasional deviations from those forms. To the reader conversant with the *patois*, on the other hand, Kelman's fictional discourse is one which conspicuously signals its repression of that marginalised vernacular in the very limited and inadequate ways in which attempts to preserve it within a predominantly standardised range - in its relatively *easy translatability*, one might say. Repression without abandonment is, as I have said, a common syndrome of the culturally marginalised, and, once placed under scrutiny, Kelman's writing certainly appears to abrogate - more than it advocates - Scottish language. It is trapped in such a contradictory double movement by its desire to maintain the international audience (which reads texts predominantly in Standard English) it originally won - and this is the paradox - by its appeal to that audience's hegemonic patronage of the seemingly culturally aberrant. By what other means could his work have fared so well at the hands of London reviewers, or performed so creditably in the best known annual competition of the English literary establishment, the Booker Prize for Fiction?⁹ Nor is Kelman the only example. The one Scottish novel of recent years which can claim to have reached an even larger international audience than anything by Kelman - Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* - offers a similar patchwork, in which an apparently self-sufficient vernacular voice necessarily yields to the insistent code-switching demands made by the standard: "He wis takin nae mair notice though. Ah stoaped harassing him, knowing thit ah wis jist waistin ma energy. His silent suffering through withdrawal now seemed so intense that thir wis nae wey that ah could add, even incrementally, tae his misery."¹⁰ Note in particular the concession made to the written standard here by the placement of the adverbial phrase (which would have appeared at the end of the sentence were the intention to transliterate spoken language), and how the narrator's *-in* endings are freely interchangeable with *-ing*.

I perhaps need to make it explicit that these remarks on Kelman and Welsh do not constitute, and are not intended to support, a prescriptivist critique of their failure to achieve a pure mimesis of spoken language in their writing. Not only are they under no obligation to do so, but the very notion that there are scriptural conventions which could secure such an unmediated mimesis is, I think, already widely repudiated (as is the related idea that speech is "authentic" language while writing is merely "representational"). My purpose, on the contrary, is merely to discredit, by means of relatively rudimentary descriptivist remarks, any supposition that readers of Kelman or Welsh may have (observation having led me to believe that such readers are legion) that their styles are straightforwardly mimetic of the demotic speech, respectively, of Glasgow and Edinburgh. One can certainly identify linguistic elements which make it clear that the contrivance of mimetic effects is being essayed; but the attempt is demonstrably less thoroughgoing than many readers are aware, and the accuracy of the mimesis considerably more debatable than they imagine.

⁹ *A Disaffection* reached the final Booker shortlist; *How Late It Was, How Late* won the prize and was consequently engulfed by media comment, most of it preoccupied with the novel's repetitive use of taboo (rather than Scottish) language.

¹⁰ Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993), p. 6. "Wis" = "was"; "takin" = "taking"; "nae" = "no"; "mair" = "more"; "Ah" = "I"; "stoaped" = "stopped"; "thit" = "that"; "jist" = "just"; "waistin" = "wasting"; "ma" = "my"; "thir" = "there"; "wey" = "way"; "tae" = "to".

Indeed, as I have already suggested, these writers can just as easily be said to be *repressing* demotic speech. The degree to which they do so can be suggested by citation of a contrary example, whose semantic content, conveniently, expresses an intransigent attitude to the dilemmas of translatability and cross-cultural understanding I have set out to explore. The author is a Glasgow poet, Tom Leonard. His poem (quoted in full) declares a refusal to apologise for the linguistic localism, not only of itself, but of most of the author's other phonetic texts, which are equally inaccessible to ears (and indeed eyes) attuned to Standard English:

GOOD STYLE

helluva hard tay read theez init
stull
if ye canny unnirston thim jiss clear aff then
gawn
get tay fuck ootma road

ahmaz goodiz thi lota yiz so ah um
ah no whit ahm dayn
tellnyi
jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me
stick thi bootnyi good style
so ah wull¹¹

This text, at once demotically ordinary yet poetically extraordinary, ostensibly addresses those readers who are so linguistically positioned that they cannot

¹¹ The last of Leonard's *Six Glasgow Poems* (Glasgow: Other People, 1969); reprinted in Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices 1965-1983* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Galloping Dog Press, 1984), p. 14. I have already apologised to my translator, but similarly to apologise for "translating" into Standard English a poem which refuses to apologise for its own untranslatability would be to expose myself to the accusation that I lack a sense of irony. I therefore offer, wholly without apology, the following (inexpressibly inadequate) standardised version of Leonard's poem, as devoid of punctuation as its original:

GOOD STYLE

extremely difficult to read these isn't it
still
if you can't understand them just go away
go on
fuck off out of my way

I am as good as all of you I am
I know what I'm doing
I'm telling you
just attempt any of your clever language with me
I'll kick you with considerable effectiveness
indeed I shall

On the other hand, readers who are able to decode the original without considerable effort may rightly demand an apology for a translation which so ineptly travesties it. If so, they prove rather than confute my argument: this poem is really intended for such linguistic *cognoscenti*, but pretends to address itself to *ignoramus* in the thrall of Standard English.

understand it: in an idiom which they will not recognise, it explains its refusal to embody its content in an idiom which they might recognise. The difficulty is compounded by the “non-official” nature of the language in which the poem is written: the beleaguered apparent addressee is unable to resort to the dictionaries or manuals which usually offer assistance in such extremely rebarbative circumstances, for no such help is readily available. But, in fact, the poem is written partly for the spectatorial gratification of those whom it *does not* ostensibly address: its ideal reader is one who, already appreciative of the aurally and visually *recherché* possibilities of its *patois*, responds to the poem’s invitation to redouble that appreciation by considering the hopeless plight of the *seemingly* interpellated reader. In other words (as it were), the poem seems to hail a reader who approaches it from a position “outside” the language in which it is written; yet its achievement is to affirm and approve, for a reader with the requisite “inside” knowledge, the exclusionary power of that language. The reader who has to puzzle over what this poem is saying is peremptorily told, in effect, to get out of the poet’s way: “get tay fuck ootma road” - literally, “get out of the street where I live” - radically emphasises the text’s commitment to localism. The poet meets the prospect of his text being “held up” by/to linguistic standards perceived to be more proper than its own (“jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me”) with the threat of a bruising collision. But “stick thi bootnyi good style” (an impeccably Glaswegian proletarian idiom, incidentally) also enacts the poem’s ultimate irony: the one immediately recognisable English phrase of the poem, used also as its title, acclaims as a “good style” its wholehearted embrace of a vernacular “bad style”, in a total *bouleversement* of the usual power relations between the official language and its marginalised variants. Leonard’s text does not repress its linguistic localism in order to prevent speakers bound by the constraints of Standard English from feeling disenfranchised (neither does it self-interestedly do so to increase its potential marketability). It operates in precisely the reverse manner. One can hardly imagine a Booker Prize judge, sitting in a bay window in Hampstead one fine Sunday morning, weighing up its merits, even patronisingly. Unlike Kelman and Welsh, Leonard hardly takes care to ensure that his vernacular is so moderately signified that it offers no serious obstacle to a reader linguistically placed “outside” it. On the contrary, in the poem, it is such a reader who is envisaged as constituting the obstacle. Leonard’s figurative advice to readers like this is to ignore his work rather than attempt its impossible “translation” into the terms and conditions of the standard. All the evidence suggests that readers unable to understand this advice have nonetheless taken it. Unlike Kelman and Welsh, Leonard has not enjoyed vast international recognition of his achievement. The price of the kind of success which his work seeks is, by definition, this kind of failure.

III

The literature of twentieth century Scotland has always had to struggle to maintain an identity in the presence of its internationally dominant neighbour. Even when a temperamental resistance to the aesthetic models offered by English literary discourse has asserted itself, the brute fact of English economic ascendancy (most acutely felt, by Scottish writers, in England’s virtual monopoly of the publishing industry and consequent control over access to international audiences) means that cultural and linguistic concessions to England and Englishness are perforce the norm rather than the exception. The unaccommodating recalcitrance of Tom Leonard - shared, although

usually in less politically provocative fashion, by a very small number of writers (almost exclusively poets) who continue to use Gaelic or Scots or various local dialects as a medium - is an infrequent phenomenon. The position typically adopted - its most conscious and articulate exemplar, in this century, probably being the poet and translator Edwin Muir¹² - is quasi-abandonment of the very notion that a separate, indigenous literary culture can be sustained in the shadow of England. Although this does not preclude the continued use of Scottish motifs, settings or (at least in reported speech) dialect, Standard English is nonetheless the favoured medium of Scottish writers who subscribe to this view. The third way is to seek a negotiated settlement, with varying degrees of linguistic compromise between idiomatic Scots and Standard English: one sees this heteroglossic negotiation being enacted in Kelman and Welsh, but also, earlier in the century, in a writer like Lewis Grassie Gibbon. My intention in this paper so far has been to suggest that the formal radicalism of such compromises is often exaggerated: their repression of the vernacular is every bit as important as their measured vocalisation of it, and the linguistic freedom which they seem, *prima facie*, to signify, can be viewed, under closer scrutiny, as a quite contained liberation.

However, we can note further that these three broad positions within Scottish literary culture are almost perfectly replicated at the political level. The three alternative governmental scenarios in Scotland throughout the twentieth century have been: (a) complete political separation from England (that is, *nationalism*); (b) acceptance of English political rule (that is, *unionism*); and (c) autonomy from England in some, but by no means all or even most, aspects of political life (that is, *devolutionism*). It goes without saying, perhaps, that a Scottish writer who favours Standard English, for example, is not crudely to be designated a unionist in politics. But the clear popular consensus in Scotland, established in the last twenty five years, confirmed by a national referendum in 1997 and the subsequent re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in May 1999, is in favour of a limited devolutionary rather than a nationalist or unionist political future for the country. This is as pleasing to liberal sentiment in England as it is to moderate opinion in Scotland. It is impossible to disassociate this negotiated settlement in the political order from the otherwise inexplicable popularity in Scotland *and* England of writers like Kelman and Welsh who, although concerned at the level of content to depict subcultural or subversive modes of living, do so at the level of form by deploying an *ersatz* vernacular whose relationship to Standard English is calculatedly *devolutionary* in nature.

This picture would, however, be somewhat incomplete if I were to conclude without some consideration of the one twentieth century Scottish writer - Hugh MacDiarmid - who cannot readily be positioned at any point in the tripartite linguistic spectrum I have defined. The Scottish poet Douglas Dunn, in the most judicious recent assessment of MacDiarmid's towering presence in twentieth century Scottish letters, notes MacDiarmid's aim (expressed in *Lucky Poet* [1943]) to write in "quite untranslatable Scots",¹³ by which he meant not a language which anyone spoke, but a

¹² The key text is Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1936).

¹³ Douglas Dunn, "Language and Liberty", *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, ed. Douglas Dunn (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. xxiii, quoting Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London: Methuen, 1943). Dunn points out that *Lucky Poet* postdates MacDiarmid's vernacular verse of the twenties and thirties. It should be added that *Lucky Poet* is itself highly emphatic about the desirability of an internationalist outlook in aesthetic matters. MacDiarmid was no narrow nationalist philistine.

synthesis in which the vernacular was supplemented by elements, past and present, of the various dialects of the Scottish Lowlands. Dunn indicates the profound contradictions to which such an objective gave rise, in particular the irreconcilable attempt both to resurrect a Scottish identity which was perceived as having been overwritten by English culture since the Act of Union of 1707, and simultaneously to emphasise and account for the experience of modernity:

MacDiarmid went far beyond the customary critical task of trying to create the taste in which a new poetry could be appreciated. He leapt from his own unpredictable inspiration towards the would-be deliverance of a nation-language. His action can be seen as extraordinarily generous; or it can be seen as an attempt to externalize an interior bigotry, a great heave of will, or a charge against history's facts and fences. ... [T]he poet was obliged to remake Scottish poetry on the basis of a pre-1707 mentality. That is, *write as if history had never happened*; or write in such a way that history would be rewritten, and unknitted, in the work. Both, I think, are involved. But the first is a forlorn choice, and the second, to say the least, a challenge. In terms of modernism, though, it can be seen as MacDiarmid's Scottish equivalent of Pound's eccentric scholarship, Eliot's literary erudition, or William Carlos Williams's belief in the American Grain.

The difference is that MacDiarmid was trying to make a nation as well as poetry. He did so with a language that through disuse had become the victim of an inbuilt preterite. Vernacular, Doric, Braid Scots, Scots, Synthetic Scots, Plastic Scots, Aggrandized Scots, or Lallans, were and are (but, by and large, they are all one) instruments with which to cleanse the Scottish psyche of generations of English influence. It was for decades, and remains, a language unexposed to actual contact with changing intellectual and domestic life. It is a language with very few, if any, new words. Indeed, it is a language in which old words are used in poetry with the force of neologisms, the shock of the unfamiliar.¹⁴

The essential point, for my purposes, is that MacDiarmid's vernacular verse is not only untranslatable to the English, but, because dependent on a scholarly philology, also deeply rebarbative to the modern Scots whose sense of national identity it is designed to cultivate. The self-contradiction is evident even in the shortest lyric:

THE WATERGAW

Ae weet forenicht i' the yow-trumple
I saw yon antrin thing,
A watergaw wi' its chitterin' licht
Ayont the on-ding;
An' I thocht o' the last wild look ye gied
Afore ye deed!

There was nae reek i' the laverock's hoose

¹⁴ Dunn, "Language and Liberty", *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, ed. Douglas Dunn (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. xx-xxi.

That nicht — an' nane i' mine
But I hae thocht o' that foolish licht
Ever sin' syne;
An' I think that mebbe at last I ken
What your look meant then.¹⁵

If the test of a text's marginality is the requirement that its own margins be filled with explanatory glosses, even for the readers to whom it could claim to address itself, then this is as marginal as we are likely to get. The comparison with Leonard's "Good Style", whose power derives from playing off readers who are "inside" against readers who are "outside" the *patois*, is revealing, for there is no reader who is "inside" the language of "The Watergaw". The linguistic beauty of the poem, for any reader, derives largely from the alienating, not the familiarising, effect of its vocabulary. There is no Scot for whom "yow-trummle", "antrin", "watergaw" and "on-ding" are all recognisable elements of lexis. MacDiarmid's vernacular poems evidently predispose themselves to a Scottish readership; but even to such an audience they give off a tremendously scholastic, and sometimes antiquarian, whiff. MacDiarmid himself repeatedly expressed the appeal to him of "a poetry full of erudition, expertise",¹⁶ but he never properly confronted the dilemma that such linguistically and intellectually challenging verse, in a country with a small and already highly anglicised intelligentsia, was the narrowest of foundations on which to build an indigenous culture with any pretensions to hegemonic status.

This is, in the end, to say that MacDiarmid's project was, politically, utopian. It attempted, in Scottish soil, to nurture together contraries which can be united, precisely, nowhere: modernity and antiquity, nationalism and internationalism, élite and mass and, dare one say it, margin and centre. Its refusal to accept the three-item linguistic menu from which every other Scottish writer of note in this century has chosen (attempted transliteration of a living vernacular, Standard English, or a pidgin compromise between the two) is as singular and unusual as the occurrence of utopian thinking within a polity bounded almost exclusively by nationalist, unionist or devolutionary possibilities. It is this which makes MacDiarmid's both an immeasurably more restricted *and* an infinitely more expansive cultural initiative than the other literary enterprises discussed herein.

¹⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, "The Watergaw", *Sangshaw* (1925); reprinted in Grieve and Aitken, vol. 1, p. 17. A prose paraphrase might run as follows: "THE INDISTINCT RAINBOW. One wet early evening, in the cold weather after sheep-shearing, I saw that rare thing, an indistinct rainbow, with its shivering light, before the onset of rain; and I thought of the last wild look you gave before you died! There was no smoke in the lark's house that night — and none in mine; but I have thought of that foolish light ever since then; and I think that maybe at last I know what your look meant then."

¹⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961), reprinted in Grieve and Aitken, vol. 2, p. 1019.