

Korpaková, Renata

**"The waste land" and "A drunk man looks at the thistle" : a confrontation of two intellectual milestones**

*Brno studies in English.* 1983, vol. 15, iss. 1, pp. [139]-147

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104009>

Access Date: 20. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## 'THE WASTE LAND' AND 'A DRUNK MAN LOOKS AT THE THISTLE': A CONFRONTATION OF TWO INTELLECTUAL MILESTONES

*Renata Korpaková*

Any consideration of the literary and, in fact, the whole cultural scene of the Twenties in Britain, any analysis of twentieth-century poetry, inevitably confronts us with Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888—1965) and Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve 1892—1978). Their fields of activity, as well as their influence, reach far over the British Isles and stimulate new generations of readers.

*The Waste Land* appeared in 1922 in London, causing a kind of aesthetic and intellectual revolt. It marks, at the same time, the starting point of Eliot's reign as the leading figure in poetry written in English and as an authority in criticism that, in a sense, has existed in Western European literary circles until the present day. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* appeared in 1926 in Scotland, the author's native land. Its immediate public was not very wide, yet its importance was equally decisive: it presented the new artistic credos tightly bound up with a committed attitude to patriotism, as one of the greatest works of the growing Scottish Renaissance movement.

During the political, social and ethical chaos of the first two decades of the century the traditional artistic conventions had to be discarded as equally invalid. Europe brimmed over with new movements; in the British Isles these changes were approached, as usual, in a more restrained manner.

Already Ezra Pound (1885—1973), an American who chose to live in England some time before Eliot did, had disturbed the intellectual public with his original ways of reaching out to tradition and seeking the most exact ways possible of including it in the contemporary consciousness. Eliot, also an American — from a respectable Missouri family with a New England education — found in Pound an understanding friend. (The main vital impulses for the development of the contemporary cultural life in Britain in general come from non-English artists — a symptom that several critics observe). Pound was the first reader of *The Waste Land*; he reduced the poem by more than a half and reformed its structure.

The fact that Eliot acknowledged these drastic changes so willingly has,

it seems, a broader significance. The changed attitude of the contemporary author to his work (opposed to the romantic one) occurs also in *A Drunk Man*: MacDiarmid, too, mentions a point while writing the poem when he "had ceased to be able to see the forest for the trees... All it amounted to was that Scott [Francis George Scott, the composer, MacDiarmid's teacher, then friend who set many of his lyrics to music — RK] read the great amount of verse I'd written, advised me . . .".<sup>1</sup>

O I ha'e Silence left.

- 'And weel ye micht.'

Sae Jean'll say, 'efter sic a nicht'

(DM, 102)<sup>2</sup>

The final point may have been supplied by Scott, after an all-night sitting, putting the poem together from separate lyrics over a bottle of whisky . . .<sup>3</sup>

Such an attitude to creation reflects an urge to find a new relation between the artist and society; not just a contact, but a fusion. The poet "must be very conscious of the main current" and "the mind of Europe — the mind of his own country" is "much more important than his own private mind".<sup>4</sup>

Eliot's and MacDiarmid's numerous non-poetic activities testify to their feeling of a serious responsibility towards their contemporaries. Eliot, first a teacher and then a bank clerk, managed to provide an excellent platform for "persons who have an impersonal loyalty to some faith not antagonistic to my own"<sup>5</sup> in his quarterly *The Criterion* (to which MacDiarmid contributed, too) and was a critic himself. MacDiarmid — originally a newspaper reporter on local papers in the provincial atmosphere of the Scottish Borders, acquiring his extensive knowledge mostly by self-education — gained publicity among all social classes in Scotland as a journalist, a politician and activist in the Scottish National Party and in the Communist Party. An attempt to find a remedy for "the present system" that "does not work properly"<sup>6</sup> is equally important for both of them.

A closer look at Eliot's and MacDiarmid's concrete objections and suggested solutions is made the more interesting by the existing points of contact and a certain common basis. This will reveal that the differences are essential, however akin the artistic and technical mastership, the revolutionizing imagination, in short, the talent and the profundity of analytical insight.

Eliot divided *The Waste Land*, a poem described by critics as a dramatic

<sup>1</sup> H. MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept*, London, 1966, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Page numbers in quotations from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* refer to *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology*, ed. by Michael Grieve and Alexander Scott, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan Glen — quoting from an unsigned article in the *Scots Review*, January 1947 - in *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance*, Edinburgh and London, 1964, 214.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot. *Points of View*, London, 1942, 27.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot in a letter to Herbert Read. In *T. S. Eliot, the Man and his Work*, ed by Allen Tate, London, 1967, 21.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot quoted by H. MacDiarmid - without giving a source - in *At the Sign of the Thistle*, London, 1934, 110.

lyric or an epic, into five parts, *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water* and *What the Thunder Said*, with concluding *Notes on the Waste Land*, which I regard as an integral, however special, part of the poem. The difference from any existing poem of similar length — 433 lines — is considerable: structurally, the poem appears to be made up of unrelated impressions (indeed, some contemporary critics called *The Waste Land* a set of poems) varied in language, in attitude, producing a strong, deeply moving and at the same time confusing effect. The Notes with all their factual information only add to it. The fact is, the poem works according to a new principle, dictated to Eliot by the need to catch "the main current". Innumerable statements paid tribute to this achievement, like that of Stephen Spender: "So *The Waste Land* was exciting in the first place because it was concerned with the life which we felt to be real."<sup>7</sup>

The critics kept discovering the poem's relations to everything from Ovid to the *Diaries* by Maria Larish. Hardly any line in *The Waste Land* but could be dissected for allusions, parallels or at least resemblances from older literature, philosophy or contemporary scientific research. Among the more important, the myth of the maimed Fisher King whose land becomes waste, and the Grail Legend of the rescuer who can save it by inner purity and sacrifice build up the scaffolding. Eliot recognized the death-and-rebirth cycle as "the common principle underlying all manifestations of life"<sup>8</sup>. The scholarly research in this field (the poem makes it clear that it was not even meant as a primarily private experience) inspired Eliot to poetry for which he found a perfectly fitting formal approach: a fragmentariness that reflects the equally disrupted reality.

'On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.'  
la la  
To Carthage then I came

(WL, 74)<sup>9</sup>

The search for links with all possible sources is, admittedly, fascinating. But let us consider the share that this knowledge will have in the appeal of the poem. To what extent is *The Waste Land* a poem standing on its own, and the use of symbols, metaphors etc. a device subordinate to the artist's goal of shaping a new work? Eliot himself suggests:

The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. ed. by A. Tate, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, New York, 1959, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Page numbers in quotations from *The Waste Land* refer to *Collected Poems* by T. S. Eliot, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Essays*, London, 1956, 289.

The refined structure of *The Waste Land*, working simultaneously on more than one level, inspired many later poets. In places, however, the images seem to be anchored so deep in their symbolical meanings — and dependent on our recognizing this — that they may be sentenced to death as soon as the cultural consciousness of the reader changes.

'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
 'You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère!'

(WL, 65)

This strong urge to make the entire human consciousness immediate and one — and, at the same time, the feeling that in our time it is impossible — was recognized as a more generally accepted attitude to the depicting of reality and called modernistic. The question of *The Waste Land* and also *A Drunk Man* in connection with modernism, the current that branded English thought in such an interesting way, cannot be omitted. Philip Larkin observes that the (Western European) aesthetics of today "continues to stem from the 'modern' of forty years ago"<sup>11</sup>; it would be really difficult to aspire to a detached point of view in our present time. Yet it might certainly be asked how MacDiarmid could set out to reach the masses and at the same time write in a language the only user of which was apparently he himself. I return to this question later.

Where Eliot plunges directly into a symbol or an image, MacDiarmid wants to observe the process of how it comes into being:

I lauch to see my crazy little brain  
 - And ither folks' - tak'n itsel' seriously,  
 And in a sudden lowe o' fun my soul  
 Blinks dozent as the owl I ken't to be.

glow  
(DM, 27)

Where Eliot gives the impersonal universality of an image

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, ...

(WL, 63)

Mac Diarmid reaches the universal through an intimate, close transformation of himself:

In wi' your gruntle then, puir wheengin' saul,  
 Lap up the ugsome aidle wi' the lave,  
 What gin it's your ain vomit that you swill  
 And frae Life's gantin' and unfaddomed grave?

complaining  
repulsive slop  
if  
yawning  
(DM, 27)

*A Drunk Man* matured as long in MacDiarmid's mind as did *The Waste Land* in Eliot's. MacDiarmid saw a comprehensive, complex and long form ("what menaces the deepest interest of the masses is all that would 'keep

<sup>11</sup> P. Larkin quoted - without giving a source - by John Press in *A Map of Modern English Verse*, London, 1969, 3.

'them in their place', spoon-feed them"<sup>12</sup>) as the only real alternative for the future, and a long epic as a permanent sign of artistic maturity in poetry.

*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is a poem of nearly 3,000 lines. The reader meets a drunk Scotsman on his way home from the pub and follows the meanderings of his all-night polemic with the Thistle on the hillside, the moon, himself and nearly everything else in the universe. The effect here is naturally different from that of *The Waste Land*; the drunk man, rooted no less in the Tam O'Shanter tradition than in everyday life, arrests our attention by talking, as it seems, on an immediate impulse. From the formal point of view, on the other hand, it works with "the logic of imagination"<sup>13</sup> like *The Waste Land*.

The relationship of *A Drunk Man* to modernism as well as its genesis in the Scottish scene is extremely interesting. Scotland in general was less prepared for any real change than England, as the slumber had been much longer. The signs of unrest after World War I could not predict the coming of such a revival of the Scottish national consciousness as the Renaissance movement.

MacDiarmid's mind took its own way, never following any group or movement in art, selecting only what it required. So while the Surrealists on the Continent or the Imagists in England looked for fresh resources for a new language in poetry, MacDiarmid brought to life a completely "new" one. Scots — or Doric, as it used to be called half jokingly — deteriorated in the course of the nineteenth century to a group of dialects fit, as it seemed, just for everyday simple topics and "acquired by nature".<sup>14</sup> The poetry written by the Scottish Georgians, which aspired to reach the domestic reading public, was correspondingly provincial.

MacDiarmid approached Scots from an entirely different angle: he rejected the "kailyard" tradition with the sentimental picture of Burns surviving in the Vernacular Circles. He seized on the Makars, on Scotland's Gaelic tradition (hence the pseudonym), on its independent, non-English individuality; on the language, finally, as the source of "words and phrases which thrill me with a sense of having been produced as a result of mental processes entirely different from my own and much more powerful", and "which cannot be reproduced in English".<sup>15</sup> Besides his native south-west border Scots, Mac Diarmid used all accessible sources: the other dialects, older literature, and works of scholarly research including Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary*. The effect of this approach is, to my mind, rather different than was the case with Eliot.

MacDiarmid always wanted to include the social and political aspect — here, the fight for the Scottish language of today as a medium for serious and complex communication equal to English — along with the artistic aspect:

<sup>12</sup> H. MacDiarmid, *At the Sign . . .*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, op. cit., 16.

<sup>14</sup> D. Glen, op. cit., 21.

<sup>15</sup> H. MacDiarmid quoted "from several essays, mostly from the twenties and thirties" - without giving a specific source - by Roderick Watson in *Hugh MacDiarmid*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1976, 13.

I have always believed in the possibility . . . of the act of poetry being the reverse of what it is usually thought to be; not an idea gradually shaping itself in words, but deriving entirely from words . . .<sup>16</sup>

By using Scots he consciously strives at solving the problem of adequate expression in general: to find a means, a way of communication that would become a "seamless garment" with the message.<sup>17</sup>

In stating that Joyce in Ireland, for example, or Eliot in England "did not draw upon anything equivalent to the colloquial resources of Scots",<sup>18</sup> and thus their achievements in language must appear relatively more modest, the critics headed a long list of advantages that they found in MacDiarmid's life which, in fact, were no advantages but huge and apparently unresolvable problems that would make others despair.

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!

(DM, 33)

Through the whole of *A Drunk Man* the painful awareness is present that "the opponents of Scots" and those doing the most harm to Scotland "practically all come from Scotland itself".<sup>19</sup> And here can be found the key to MacDiarmid's vitality and his activity that brought a nation-wide revival into existence: the potentialities of growth and greatness must lie in Scotland as well. Everything contains everything and man's role is to recognize it and use it:

I'll ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur  
 Extremes meet - it's the only way I ken  
 To dodge the curst conceit o' bein' richt  
 That damns the vast majority of men.

always

(DM, 27)

+ + +

The relevant points where both Eliot and MacDiarmid feel that the state of things can be recognized are those expressing the duality of life. For Eliot it is basically the relation of fertility and sterility, of life and death and of knowledge and ignorance.

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.)

(WL, 72)

The people and voices — the inhabitants of the waste land — all possess only broken bits from the potential unity of existence; the Fisher King and Tiresias represent those conscious of the remaining skeleton. Eliot

<sup>16</sup> H. MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, 1943, p. XIII quoted by D. Glen, op. cit., 76.

<sup>17</sup> "The Seamless Garment", is the title of a poem of MacDiarmid's that appeared in the *First Hymn to Lenin* in 1931.

<sup>18</sup> R. Watson, op. cit., 20.

<sup>19</sup> H. MacDiarmid, *At the Sign . . .*, 173.

willingly stresses their symbolic role — with a prophetic smile at the voluminous analyses of his later worshippers: "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a character, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias." (WL, 82)

Every possible experience was here before; if the whole of the past is made present it can be recognized that

He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience

(WL, 78)

He who is dead is God. We, people, are dying a different kind of death — not from life (we *are* not living, we *were* living); from this state of nothingness, there can be no chance of rescue.

In Eliot's reasoning, one presumption seems to be crucial: one side of the complementary pair (as life and death here) is always the "positive", the needed, because it leads to the ideal. The other side, then, is destructive. The philosophy of Gnosticism (partly melted into the early Christian faith in the Near East) teaches that the liberation of the soul from the "evil" matter can be achieved through knowledge, revelation and asceticism. Eliot's search for a true key to the past and present of humanity, his beliefs, are extremely specific. He traced the proportions of good and evil in the history of this world and that led him to believe in the necessity of God — the external (and thanks to that perfect), ultimate and steady source of the wanted principles that cannot be found in man. That brings him near to the established Church.

MacDiarmid also took the duality of existence as the clue; the thistle grows flowers that are guarded by its prickles, it encompasses strength and weakness, stability and futility, dream and reality, victory and failure.

Spirit o' strife, destroy in turn  
Syne this fule's Paradise, syne that;  
In thee's in Calvaries that owrecome  
Daith efter Daith let me be caught, ...

(DM, 73)

For nothing can be ideal without having the opposite in itself.

Interesting differences in thought and in poetic rendering are revealed by Eliot's and MacDiarmid's use of the image of water. Both chose it as the power bringing life and regeneration; one difference is, of course, that in *The Waste Land* water is the unbearable element that never really comes, while for the drunk man water — or whisky in his case — is attainable when he decides to reach out for it. But MacDiarmid treats his images more broadly; man can stand for water himself ("Like staundin 'water im a pocket o' / Impervious clay I pray I'll never be," (DM, 28)). Any image is a partner to the human mind. It has no limits, or the limits of the imagination only. God, in fact, is as all-mighty and supernatural as you choose to make him:

I tae ha'e heard Eternity drip water  
 (Aye water, water!), drap by drap  
 On the a'e nerve, like lichtnin', I've become,  
 And heard God passin' wi' a bobby's feet ...

(DM, 84)

The first to hear the "sound of water over a rock" (WL, 77) was Eliot. A *Drunk Man* was, along with its other aims, also a carefully weighed and deliberately committed (i. e. subjective) answer to *The Waste Land*. The works of man must be "a creative destruction",<sup>20</sup> any closed order "threatens to put an end to the restless spirit of mankind".<sup>21</sup>

These contradictory attitudes to human experience come to the fore in Eliot's and MacDiarmid's images of a wheel, or a ring, a circle. Madame Sosostris, the waste land's "famous clairvoyante", sees

Crowds of people, walking round in a ring.

(WL, 64)

And in the *Notes* Eliot quotes F. H. Bradley: "In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside;" (WL, 86). This is a trap without a beginning or an end: man's stereotype of existence, his perceptions, are firmly closed.

MacDiarmid makes his drunk man "see noo a great wheel move", where "I sall be moved as it decides". It brings to mind the ever-moving universe (where "Earth is like a snaw-ba'"), but also the inner universe of man:

And organs may develop syne  
 Responsive to the need divine  
 O' single-minded humankin'.

The function, it seems to me,  
 O' Poetry is to bring to be  
 At lang, lang last that unity ...

(DM, 99)

\* \* \*

"Give, Sympathize, Control" was the Thunder's message for the waste land. It might have been Eliot's passionate concern with order, harmony and moral principles that made his perception of chaos, anarchy and lack of faith so sensitive. He searched for his own solution very consistently — opposed, as it was, to the general trend of his days, when the development of the sciences worked in favour of anthropocentrism. The stir and revolutionary activities of the post-war years seemed a horrifying catastrophe, a humiliation of man ("Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" (WL, 77)). Paradoxically, *The Waste Land* was an undoubted creative revolution in itself, a work that proved crucial for the whole of modern art. And Eliot was perceived in this way (before he became, in turn, a stronghold for the conservatives); the best example is that of the committed poets of the

<sup>20</sup> Robert Angus reacting to *A Drunk Man* in 1927 quoted by D. Glen, op. cit., 93.

<sup>21</sup> MacDiarmid quoted — without giving a source — by Kenneth Butlay in an Introduction to Gordon Wright, *MacDiarmid — An Illustrated Biography*, Edinburgh, 1977, 15.

Thirties. After Eliot joined the Anglican Church in 1929, they cried for their Lost Leader with a rage and disappointment equal to that of Browning's (although their own commitment was to develop in equally ambiguous ways). On another occasion it would be interesting to confront it with the analogical indignation of the younger Scottish Renaissance poets at MacDiarmid's decision to write in English.

*The Waste Land*, and especially *A Drunk Man* (in which the means of expression, the perhaps even greater use of sources, for instance, seem to submit more obediently to MacDiarmid's authoritative voice), overwhelm their reader with such a versatility of topics, of approach, of lyrical or humorous nuances revealing the rich personalities of their authors, that they remain a source of endless joys whatever the reader's beliefs. This brief outline has not even tried to do justice to all the problems and touched upon in both poems and has concentrated on the main philosophical and socio-critical purposes and their expression.

Both Eliot and MacDiarmid took such a broad view that it allowed their creative talent to touch the spheres not just of cultural and intellectual life, but also of social questions and politics. *The Waste Land* provides a profound survey of the dead-ends of human power and emotions: *A Drunk Man* found strength and unanticipated potentialities in the profundity of man — man sets the scale to the reality that he exists in.

So while the picture presented by Eliot is so painfully valid MacDiarmid offers alternatives that point to open ways ahead.

## **'PUSTINA' A 'OPILEC HLEDÍ NA BODLÁK': KONFRONTACE DVOU INTELEKTUÁLNÍCH MILNÍKŮ**

Vrcholná díla rané tvorby Thomase Stearnse Eliota, původem Američana, a Skota Hughha MacDiarmida vznikla ve dvacátých letech v kulturním klimatu Britských ostrovů.

V centru článku leží společenský a světonázorový náboj básní. Určité analogie, které však jsou klíčem k zásadním rozdílům, sledují např. u problémů, doprovázejících vznik děl, u formálních postupů obou autorů a při analýze významu, jaký pro ně mají symbol a představa. U Eliota vynikne mistrovství, s jakým zobrazil lidskou bezvýchodnost v době rozpadu všech dosavadních hodnot, jeho důsledná cesta k bohu - vnějšímu, tedy pevnému zdroji autority a záchrany; MacDiarmid nahlédl do nedozírných propastí člověka schopného nekonečných změn, tvorby hodnot, v nichž se sjednocuje tragika a naděje.

