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Alien Voices from the Street: Demotic Modernism in modern Scots writing. Roderick Watson

Modern Scottish writing in Scots has been characterised by two apparently contradictory impulses: an interest in direct and demotic utterance, and a move towards a degree of linguistic estrangement. In either case, the end result has been to destabilise the cultural and expressive hegemony of 'standard English' and to liberate a sense of linguistic and imaginative energy.

Of course there will always be a degree of defamiliarisation in any attempt to catch the actual phonetics of street speech—as in the poetry of Tom Leonard—but a more self-consciously literary and modernistic dislocation can also be found in the prose of James Kelman and Alasdair Gray, neither of whom are any less concerned than Leonard is with the position of the ordinary 'man in the street'. (The gender bias of this idiom is, for once, accurate.) Leonard and Kelman have been particularly articulate in their opposition to 'English' and the prevailing middle-class systems of culture and education which have done so much to silence or to undervalue the truths and aesthetic merits to be found in the speech rhythms and idioms of every day usage,¹ and yet they are both 'experimental' writers, too, with a clear understanding of late modernism in European and American culture. (Leonard has written on William Carlos Williams for example, and Kelman's familiarity with Beckett, Camus and Kafka is not in doubt.)

It could be argued that Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' (1926) was the herald of 'demotic modernism' in 20th century Scottish literature, but the roots of the culture's engagement with both the folk voice and linguistic estrangement go much further back. Why this might be so, and what its contemporary manifestations look like, is the subject of this essay.

Actually the inclusion of Scots in any discussion of 'non-standard Englishes' would once have provoked (and still might) cries of alarm and execration. In the early days of the modern Scottish literary renaissance it seemed particularly necessary to insist on Scots as both a language and a literary tradition entirely separate from English, and that position is upheld to this day by a number of scholars. And yet Scots has always had one eye on the locutions of its southern neighbour, from the very moment when Gavin Douglas's great translation of the Aeneid promised to speak 'our awin langage . . . as I leirit quhen I was page', but acknowledged, too, 'Nor yit sa clene all sudroun I refuse. . . or than be dum, / Sum bastard Latyne, Frensch, or Inglis oiss, / Quhar scant war Scottis I had na wther choiss.'

Douglas's words remind us that all languages are 'bastard' affairs, and that there are real problems of definition whenever the chimera of a 'standard' language is evoked—can any poet, for example, ever be said to have used a 'standard' language? (Which is not the same thing, of course, as a standard orthography or lexis.) In fact even orthography and lexis were hot issues for the literary renaissance in modern Scotland, with writers in the 'traditional' camp claiming priority for intelligibility and dialectal consistency, as opposed to those who espoused a 'modernist' programme for a synthetic Scots to be called 'Lallans' and drawn from a variety of geographically and chronologically diverse sources.² Then again, twenty years later, some of the Lallans modernists became traditionalists in their turn, to condemn the vigorous Glasgow demotic of the new wave of Scottish writers as an 'impoverished and bastardised Scots', no more than an urban slang or patois.³

In fact written Scots had long been associated with the voice of the streets, and that voice has often been used to speak for the common people in poetry—from Alan Ramsay's brothel-keeping 'Lucky Spence' in the eighteenth century, to Robert Garioch's phlegm-ridden old toppers discussing the Edinburgh International Festival in the 1960s:

'Whu's aw thae fflag-poles ffor in Princes Street?
Chwoich! Ptt! Hechyuch! Ab-boannie cairry-on.
Seez-owre the wa'er. Whu' the deevil's thon
inaidie, heh?' . . .⁴

The essential character of Scots in this respect is not a matter of 'standard' or 'non-standard' morphology, but its long historical association with the utterance of the common folk—with those, indeed, who have so often been presumed to be denied a voice in conventionally 'cultural' production. In this context Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of folk life can be most usefully brought to bear, with its celebration of the vulgar body and the Rabelaisian spirit of carnival, both utterly at odds with the monologically narrowing discourses of Academy, Church and State. With strong roots in community, festivity and subversion, the Scottish literary tradition has had more than its share of Rabelaisian excess—consider, for example, the parabola from 'Christis Kirk on the Green', to 'Tam o' Shanter' and 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', not forgetting, of course, Sir Thomas Urquhart's own version of Gargantua and Pantagruel. But the Bakhtinian analysis of the Scots tradition goes far beyond matters of 'carnival', to touch on how the authority of any discourse is destabilised in the face of multiple and competing languages and registers of speech.

Bakhtin's critique of 'the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word' stemmed in part from his own understanding of the 'polyglossia' of different and competing dialects in the sixteenth century, followed in turn by the 'interorientation' of national languages.⁵ These circumstances aren't so very different from what was happening among writers in Scots from the eighteenth century to the modern literary renaissance, not least because problems of cultural and linguistic identity had been so sharply highlighted by the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. These tensions have been discussed at greater length in another essay by the present writer,⁶ but it will be illuminating to consider what Bakhtin

had to say about the interplay of languages and dialects with the modern Scottish literary experience in mind

In his chapter ‘Rabelais’ Images and His Time’ Bakhtin was writing about the turmoil of Renaissance culture, but much of what he said might equally well apply to the postmodern condition of ‘Englishes’,⁷ and indeed one way of assessing the modern Scottish literary renaissance is to look at it as an early manifestation of the now widely recognised break-up of ‘English’ and the monological authority of ‘the Academy’ in London-based cultural and literary canons.

Bakhtin points to a ‘complex intersection of languages, dialects, idioms and jargons’ from which the literary and linguistic consciousness of the Renaissance was formed, and this ‘new consciousness was born not in a perfected and fixed linguistic system but at the intersection of many languages and at the point of their most intense interorientation and struggle.’ He goes on to note:

Languages are philosophies—not abstract but concrete, social philosophies, penetrated by a system of values inseparable from living practice and class struggle. This is why every object, every concept, every point of view, as well as every intonation found their place at this intersection of linguistic philosophies and was drawn into an intense ideological struggle. . . .

Such an active plurality of languages and the ability to see one’s own media from the outside, that is, through the eyes of other idioms, led to exceptional linguistic freedom. Even formal grammatical construction became extremely plastic. The artistic and ideological plane demanded first of all an unwonted freedom of images and of their combination, a freedom from all speech norms.⁸

I would suggest that this analysis comes very close to what Hugh MacDiarmid was trying to describe in his ‘Theory of Scots Letters’ (published in three issues of *The Scottish Chapbook* in 1923), whose programme emphasised ideological difference, linguistic pluralism and ‘the experimental exploitation of the unexplored possibilities of vernacular expression.’—

Only in so far as the vernacular has unused resources corresponding better than English does to the progressive expression of the distinctive characteristics of Scottish life. . . has it possibilities of literary value. . . if the Doric has not certain qualities which no other language possesses and qualities at that of consequence to modern consciousness as a whole—then all that can be hoped for is a multiplication of equivalents in the Vernacular to work that has already been better achieved in other languages without any special contribution at all from Scotland to the expressive resource of modern life.⁹

The key terms here are ‘unexplored’, ‘unused’ and ‘modern consciousness as a whole’, for innovation and modernity were central to MacDiarmid’s programme for the revival of Scots and this brings us back to the two (at first sight contradictory) terms in the title of this essay. It is no mistake that MacDiarmid cited both D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce

as mentors of modern consciousness and expression in his theory of Scots letters, going on to make a famous observation:

We have been enormously struck by the resemblance —the moral resemblance—between Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A *vis comica* that has not yet been liberated lies bound by desuetude and misappreciation in the recesses of the Doric: and its potential uprising would be no less prodigious, uncontrollable, and utterly at variance with conventional morality than was Joyce’s tremendous outpouring.

In this passage MacDiarmid specifically links the case for an avant-garde expression of states of modern consciousness to the wealth of epigrams, idioms and folk beliefs (suppressed by an Anglo-Scots educational system and ‘polite’ society) to be found in Jamieson. And indeed Jamieson’s dictionary was to prove a veritable storehouse of images which found their way directly into MacDiarmid’s own early lyrics.¹⁰ This is no less than a modern replaying of that ‘victory over linguistic dogmatism’ described by Bakhtin in his celebration of a Rabelaisian ‘freedom of laughter, consecrated by the tradition of popular-festive forms. . . raised to a higher level of ideological consciousness.’¹¹

The most overtly Joycean element in MacDiarmid’s work found expression in his long poem ‘Water Music’, celebrating the inscape of the rivers around the poet’s native Langholm. First published in *The Scots Observer* in 1932, this poem is a tour de force of sound and (obscure) sense, drawn so directly from Jamieson that its Scots words tend to appear in alphabetical order:

Archin’ here and arrachin’ there,
Allevolie or allemand,
Whiles appliable, whiles areird,
The polysemous poem’s planned.

Lively, louch, atweesh, atween,
Auchimuty or aspate,
Threidin’ through the averins
Or bightsom in the aftergait.

Or barmybrained or barritchfu’,
Or rinnin’ like an attercap,
Or shinin’ like an Atchison,
Wi’ a blare or wi’ a blawp.¹²

‘Water Music’ marries onomatopoeic sound effects and an alliterative and rhythmical flow with a dense succession of Scots terms, each of which has a quite specific and often rather abstruse meaning. —The result is an odd combination of driving general movement with a more static specificity, and I have argued elsewhere that this is a model for the paradoxical nature of the ‘stream of consciousness’ as it was conceived in literary

terms, and also by the French philosopher Henri Bergson who pointed out that the inner flow of *élan vital* could not be experienced and analysed at the same time, for of course the analysis would stop the experience dead in its (dictionary) tracks.¹³

MacDiarmid welcomed the same ‘feast of reason (or unreason) and flow of soul’ in Sydney Goodsir Smith’s *Carotid Cornucopius*, a prose extravaganza in which *Finnegans Wake* joins forces with *Ubu Roi* and Sir Thomas Urquhart’s *Rabelais* to describe the sexual and alcoholic diversions of the ‘Lug-Beguifou Auktor’ from ‘Edenberg’, namely ‘Maister Carolus Carotid Caro Mio Caramel Romeo MacCrambo Cornucopius (sex seas over), impocabil, maculoperfuctionate sighon, firefather, badginning and endpint of a lang tail of bibulopals and babbelopills’.¹⁴ Smith’s ‘drammantick, backside, bogbide, bedride or badside buik’ may lack the textual and conceptual sophistication of Joyce, but its typographical experiments and its ingenious, obsessive and relentlessly Rabelaisian energy do meet MacDiarmid’s claims for it as, in effect, an attack on bourgeois values in the spirit of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, as ‘alive as a hilarious old tinker—a fine reeking haggis of a book—the entire obscene horripilation of Edinburgh beautifully paid out for its Anglo-Scottish snobbery, sycophancy and sanctimoniousness. . .’.¹⁵

It seems very likely that the linguistic freedom celebrated by MacDiarmid and Smith (and indeed by Joyce himself) does indeed stem from what Bakhtin saw as ‘the ability to see one’s own media from the outside, that is, through the eyes of other idioms’, the other idioms in this case being an awareness of the sometimes uneasy and sometimes highly creative coexistence of Scots, Gaelic, Anglo-Scots and English modes of expression. Robert Crawford has illuminated this issue from a related direction in chapter five, ‘Modernism as Provincialism’, of his recent book *Devolving English Literature*,¹⁶ but an equally important part of the modernist agenda was its concern with flux and the inexpressible fluidity of existence. (The central core of MacDiarmid’s work, after all, was his pursuit of ‘Cencrastus’, the curly snake whose endless, Celtic coilings symbolise the simultaneity and multiplicity of being.)

It was Lewis Grassie Gibbon who invoked the speech rhythms of his native North East to convey something of what he saw as the interpenetrating flow of inner and outer experience. Thus the prose style of Gibbon’s trilogy *A Scots Quair*, (published between 1932 and 1934), mixes speech, thought and narrative in an internalised and colloquial narrative style in which Chris Guthrie’s personal voice and the voice of her community and the impersonal authorial voice are all contained and immediately familiarised by the use of ‘you’, and the cadences of North East Scots speech—even if conveyed through a largely English vocabulary:

But for days now the wind had been in the south, it shook and played in the moors and went dandering up the sleeping Grampians, the rushes pecked and quivered about the loch when its hand was upon them, but it brought more heat than cold, and all the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming. Up here the hills were brave with the beauty and the heat of it, but the hayfield was all a crackling dryness and in the potato park beyond the biggings the shaws drooped red and rusty already.

Folk said that there hadn't been such a drought since eighty-three and Long Rob of the Mill said you couldn't blame this one on Gladstone, anyway, and everybody laughed except father. God knows why.

Some said the North, up Aberdeen way, had had rain enough, with Dee in spate and bairns hooking stranded salmon down in the shallows, and that must be fine enough, but not a flick of the greeve weather had come over the hills, the roads you walked down to Kinraddie smithy or up to the Denburn were fair blistering in the heat, thick with dust so that the motor-cars went shooming through them like kettles under steam.¹⁷

This was how Gibbon solved a perennial problem of narrative voice in Scots fiction, which was how to unify diagetic and mimetic discourse: to narrow the gap, in other words, between description in English and reported dialogue in broad Scots. Since at least the time of Walter Scott this was a gap which seemed to be redolent with assumptions (intended or not) about the authority of 'standard English', with additionally implied class distinctions between the author and his 'characters'. Gibbon's move towards free indirect narrative discourse (his novel is mostly told via the sensibility of its protagonist), went a long way towards validating the rhythms of Scots, and incorporating the demotic force of 'voice' within the narrative plane.

My essay 'Dialectics of "Voice" and "Place"' proposed that a frequent impulse of Scots literature since the eighteenth century has been to convey this sense of 'voice', and indeed to privilege 'speaking' over 'writing'. This direction has been particularly evident in the work of recent younger prose writers such as Gordon Legge (*In Between Talking About The Football*); Duncan McLean (*Bucket of Tongues*); Irvine Welsh (*Trainspotting*); Janice Galloway (*The Trick is to Keep Breathing*); and longer established authors such as Ron Butlin (*The Sound of My Voice*) and of course James Kelman. As with Tom Leonard's poetry, James Kelman's prose has done much to give demotic speech its own presence and dignity in written form. 'Nice to be Nice', for example, like many of the stories in *Not Not While the Giro*, is narrated in the first person:

Strange thing wis it stertit oan a Wedinsday, A mean nothin ever sterts oan a Wedinsday kis it's the day afore pey day an A'm ey skint. Mibby git a buckshee pint roon the Anchor bit that's aboot it.¹⁸

But Kelman's prose can make a much more complex amalgam of narrative voice and inner and outer dialogue than this, to the point where a host of different 'voices': oral, written, formal, informal 'literary' and 'demotic' meet and compete in the text:

He grinned, taking the food from her, and he began to eat. Back at the oven she got the kettle; then she laughed suddenly. Rab — God — mind I was telling you about Doreen the cleaner the other day? the one with the three grandchildren? what a scream she is. This afternoon at tea-break — you know how Mr Buchanan's away down in London just now — o God. Sandra laughed. Jean had sent her out for cream doughnuts, for herself and me and Mrs Monaghan...

And Sandra continued with this tale about the cleaner coming back from the baker with the 4 cakes and going on about this the cakes, her coming back with the cakes and not the cream doughnuts it was, she was continuing on about this, the Cleaner Being Sent For The Cream Doughnuts And Not The Cakes while Mr the erstwhile fucking Buchanan was off down in London on a Brief Business Trip very strictly speaking in all probability not playing about at all, no, just being forced into it of course, he would much rather be staying at home in the nice Suburbs having by no means any notion of gallivanting about the place, yes, 1 thing about auld Bufuckingcanan, he's the salt of the bastarn Earth. I don't know what it is with you Sandra I really dont I mean... He shook his head. He had glanced away from her. And he placed the soup and the bread up on the mantelpiece. Then he turned: I mean something definitely stinks about sending a woman like Doreen out for cream fucking doughnuts; Jesus christ almighty! He flung the Evening Times from his lap and grabbed the tobacco, getting the lid off the tin, seeing the fingers twitch, the fingers twitching away, in their grasp at the lid, of the tin.

DANGER: HM Govt. Health Depts' WARNING

THE MORE YOU SMOKE

THE MORE YOU RISK YOUR HEALTH.

The door closed. The door had been closing. And its bang. He pressed a forefinger against a nostril of his nose and blew through the other. There is a gas-fire such that 3 sections exist, each containing 24 toty rectangles behind which lurk several 100 pointed particles of an unknown nature but that they glow whitely when at hot heat; this gas-fire can be leaking mysteriously. The occasional whiff 1st thing in the morning. It is the gas. The inhalation of such fumes doth annihilate the white corpuscles of one's bloodstream. Hence the cause of death.¹⁹

The subtext of this passage has to do with the passing of a small flash of boredom, absurdity and rage within a married relationship. But the Beckettian complexity of Kelman's prose also serves to celebrate and equally to mock the conventions of prose narration itself by evoking Hines's own boredom with the tale his wife is telling him by capitalising the tale of a 'Cleaner Being Sent For The Cakes', and by setting the parodic middle-class register which speculates on a boss's business trip ('strictly speaking in all probability not playing around at all') against the internalised working-class rage of 'auld Bufuckingcanan. . . the salt of the bastarn Earth'. Then again, orthographic conventions are upset by the use of numerals ('1 thing'; '1st thing'), while narrative conventions are equally destabilised by switching registers from the parodically Hemingwayesque terseness of 'The door closed. The door had been closing. And its bang', to the mock formal pedantic eloquence of 'There is a gas-fire such that 3 sections exist, each containing 24 toty rectangles behind which lurk several 100 pointed particles of an unknown nature but that they glow whitely when at hot heat', or 'doth annihilate the white corpuscles', and so on.

The end result of these many interpenetrating narrative voices is to give a saving comic energy to the passage, and a literary force that can evoke the vitality and cohesiveness of inner experience, and the constant presence of a dynamic life in even the most ordinary situations, without ever 'writing it up' or condescending to 'working-class experience'.

Joyce managed to create epiphanies in the grubby streets of Dublin by the power of his stream-of-consciousness prose, and Kelman has managed a similar feat through his grasp of the changing registers and the sheer stylistic speed and fluidity available to the demotic voice whether uttered, unuttered or in narrative mode.

These changing registers and multiple ‘voices’ have long been available within the Scottish literary tradition—once again because of the peculiar current status of Scots as a site of polyphony and ideological struggle in which in Bakhtin’s words, ‘every object, every concept, every point of view, as well as every intonation’ is ‘seen from the outside’. This is nowhere more clear than in the plethora of personae and linguistic registers to be found in Sydney Goodsir Smith’s poetry, most especially in his masterful sequence from 1948, *Under the Eildon Tree* (revised in 1954) which swings from the self-conscious rhetoric of high romance, to parody, obscenity and back again, in a densely referential mode, full of literary and classical echoes and allusions, in a spatchcock text of different languages and linguistic registers:

Fou as a puggie I, the bardic ee
 In a fine frenzy rollan,
 Drunk as a fish wi sevin tails,
 Purpie as Tiberio wi bad rum and beerio
 (*Io! Io! Iacche! Iacche, Io!*)
 —Sevin nichts and sevin days
 (A modest bout when aa’s dune,
 Maist scriptural in fact)

Was the Makar on his junketins
 (On this perticler occasioun
 O’ the whilk we tell the nou
 Here in the records, for the benefit
 O’ future putative historians)
 Wi sindrie cronies throu the wastage-land
 O’ howffs and dancings, stews
 And houses o’ assignatioun
 I’ the auntient capital.²⁰

‘Drunk as a monkey’ indeed, the poet mixes his maxims with fine abandon, to produce an intertextually nested Russian doll of allusions and confusions. Thus Smith conflates (and inflates) ‘to drink like a fish’ and ‘happy as a dog with two tails’, to give us ‘drunk as a fish wi sevin tails’, while royally flushed with purple, like orgiastic Tiberius on Capri, re-enacting the seduction of Io by Zeus, who was no doubt himself under the influence of Iacchus (Bacchus) at the time. (Io was changed into a white heifer, and the allusion gains force when we remember that this part of the poem takes place in a pub called ‘The Black Bull’ where the speaker will have his way with Sandra—‘A bonnie cou’.) Adopting the old Scots (and Greek) term for a poet, our protagonist has gone on a spree for as long as God (that other ‘Maker’) took to create the world. This may be a ‘maist scriptural’ reference, but it’s scarcely a ‘modest’ one.

Smith's long poem is constantly interrupted by irreverent parenthetical asides, and these frequently take the form of comments on the text even as the text unfolds. In this passage we find parodic versions of American English ('perticler'), rubbing shoulder with academic English ('future putative historians') spiced with old Scots orthography ('occasioun' and 'assignatioun'), and the final effect of all this is to explode the pedantry of the text as 'record', even as it is evoked. Of course T.S. Eliot had already pioneered polyphony and intertextual allusion in modern verse, and Smith is happy to acknowledge the presence of that 'wastage land', but what sets *Under the Eildon Tree* apart, (like MacDiarmid's earlier 'Drunk Man'), is the colloquial energy, the dramatic cohesion, and hence the 'demotic modernism' of a single mouth speaking with a dozen different voices. Like Eliot before him, Smith also incorporates lines and phrases from several different languages in his poem, and the aesthetic effect of this is to generate a certain opacity in the text—a resistance to immediate understanding. (Smith could not have expected his likely audience to be fluent in Russian, for example.) Of course this resistance has always been present in poetry to some degree or other, but the use of Scots in modern times has served to add an extra layer to this (at least initial) opacity. For the average reader the effect has been to 'defamiliarise' the poem and to destabilise, and hence to highlight, the linguistic, aesthetic and politico-cultural preconceptions we tend to bring to the act of reading and the nature of literary production. Donald Wesling puts it this way:

The theory of dialect is also a theory of glossolalia, at least in the sense that the partial bafflement of the standard speaker-reader is intended. The uncanniness of the sounds and syntax will violate and restructure the table of values, coming as these effects do from another site within the same language.²¹

It should be noted that modern literary Scots in poetry is seldom a dialect in the strict sense of the word, but Wesling's point about 'bafflement' remains valid. —The status of Scots in contemporary poetry is very difficult to define, not least because its nature and density varies greatly from writer to writer, but there's no doubt that as far as most readers are concerned it does arrive from some other 'site' at the edge of what we take to be conventional literary utterance.

With poets such as Tom Leonard (and prose writers like James Kelman) that site is primarily a matter of sociocultural politics, of giving a voice to the 'voiceless':

ah knew a linguist wance
wanst ah knew a linguist

shi used tay git oanty mi
ah wish I could talk like you
ahv lost my accent

thi crux iz sayz ah
shiftin ma register
tay speak tay a linguist

would you swear tay swerr

and not abjure
 the extra-semantic kinetics
 uv thi fuckin poor

ach
 mobile society
 mobile ma arse 22

But there's another strand of modern poetry in Scots where the emphasis might be said to be more on the aesthetic-cultural, rather than sociocultural side, although it must be emphasised that the two elements (here signified as 'demotic' and 'modernist') are both 'political' and cannot and should not be entirely separated from each other—Goodsir Smith, for example, contains both. Hugh MacDiarmid's Scots also moves from the easy colloquial flow of parts of 'A Drunk Man', to the rhythmic play of 'Water Music', to the deliberately knotty and estranged diction of 'Gairmscoile'.

Written at the same time as 'A Theory of Scots Letters' and originally titled 'Braid Scots: An Inventory and Appraisalment', 'Gairmscoile' set MacDiarmid's theories into practice in particularly concentrated form, but its premisses underlie many later poems, too, not least the abstruse English diction of works such as 'Stony Limits', which was written in memory of Charles Doughty in the mid thirties. 'Gairmscoile' is a poem in celebration of the rude magic of sound, a poem designed to celebrate primitive chthonic power, and to hasten the end of sentimental versifiers in Scottish dialect, not to mention the hegemony of 'standard' English and the securities of middle-class culture, 'literature' and good taste in general. 'I tak' a bobquaw for the lift' the poet writes ('I choose a quagmire for the sky'), and 'Insteed o' sangs my mou drites earned phlegm' ('shits curdled phlegm'.) The poem ends with a warning to the intelligentsia on both sides of the border:

Ablachs, and scrats and dorbels o' a' kinds
 Ay'd drob me wi' their puir eel-droonin' minds,
 Wee drochlin' craturs drutling their bit thochts
 The dorty bodies! Feech! Nae Sassunach drings
 'll daunt me.—Tak' ye sic things for poets?
 Cock-lairds and drottes depert Parnassus noo.

* * *

Lang ha'e they posed as men o' letters here,
 Dounhaddin' the Doric and keepin' t i' the draiks,
 Drivellin' and druntin', wi' mony a datchie sneer
 ...But soon we'll end the hail eggtaggle, fegs!
 ...The auld volcanoes rummle 'neath their feet,
 And a' their shoddy lives'll soon be drush,
 Danders o' Hell! They feel th'unwelcome heat,
 The deltit craturs, and their sauls are slush,
 For we ha'e faith in Scotland's hidden poo'ers,
 The present's theirs, but a' the past and future's oors.23

Glossary: Ablachs: dwarfs; scrats: puny things; dorbels: anything of unseemly appearance; drob: prick; eel-droonin': clever; drochlin': feeble; drutling: 'applied to a dog or horse that frequently stops in its way, and ejects a small quantity of dung at intervals'; dorty: pettish, sullen; drings: servants, or the noise a kettle makes before boiling; Cock-lairds and drotos: small landowners and would-be gentry; drodlich: a useless mass; dings: strikes; dounhaddin': holding down; in the draiks: 'in a slovenly disordered state'; druntin': drawling; datchie: cunning; eggtaggle: 'the act of wasting time in bad company'; drush: dross; danders: 'refuse of a smith's fire'; deltit: secluded, petted, 'the retired habits of one devoted to a literary life'.

Few if any Scots speakers could follow this poem without the aid of Jamieson's dictionary—the very book in which MacDiarmid found all these terms, mostly grouped, it will be apparent, under 'D'. Clearly the poet's aim was to estrange his language to generate a *vis comica* which was at one and the same time 'vernacular' and 'modernist' and whose final effect was to be, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'utterly at variance with conventional morality'. The Rabelaisian drive of the poem is clear, as is its debt to the middle Scots tradition of 'flyting' (the literary exchange of gratuitous and usually wildly obscene abuse), but MacDiarmid's 'Theory of Scots Letters' also invoked Lawrence and Dostoevsky in his attempt to give native expression to 'those uncanny spiritual and pathological perceptions' which are 'just the very peculiar and subtle effects which modern European literature in general is assiduously seeking.'²⁴

It is just this modernist estrangement which has been taken up again by a number of younger writers of both prose and poetry who are using Scots (as MacDiarmid did) to challenge the ease with which the cultural establishment incorporates, assimilates and recruits the 'difference' of Scottish experience in particular and of literary expression in general to a prevailing middle-class norm of politeness, ease and intelligibility.

If MacDiarmid's early modernist programme for Scots expression has a contemporary presence, then it is to be found in the work of a small group of poets associated with the literary magazine *Verse*, namely, Robert Crawford, W.N. Herbert and David Kinloch, all of whom would recognise a certain debt to MacDiarmid, even if they each might differ on what it was. The one thing they certainly have in common is a post-Saussurean recognition that we must depend on language to put us on touch with the world, and with each other, even as the text itself is a constant force for alienation and the deferment of stable meaning.

Robert Crawford plays games with the problematics of paraphrase and translation in a number of poems which set his self-consciously constructed and rather literary Scots against an equally contrived English version of the poem, offered to us in a (much expanded) facing-page prose crib. There are many ironies inherent in such a method, and they cut both ways, for although it may seem at first that the Scots is privileged by this approach, (especially compared to the verbose 'English' version), the final effect is more subtle and also more general, for it also parodies the claims traditionally made for Scots

as a succinct and pithy tongue, and then it goes on to ironise all acts of ‘translation’, by leaving what are quite clearly dictionary-defined definitions all too nakedly obvious in the text. The effect is deeply and oddly and creatively ‘alienating’:

The Prez o thi Immortals skites iz loofie
 Doon Sauchihall Street — breenjin doon, renovatin, leavin
 Yon gallimaufray o shoaps an precincts fit
 Fura linguistic atlas, urra very deep
 Strukchur grammar. Chomsky inna tweedy bunnit
 Widnae mind moochin aroon ootside
 M & S oar C & A douce as RP, an takkin notes
 Oan hoo thae gallus queues o gauberty-shells at 30s dance halls
 Still exist, reekin wi cit, jist as if
 Thae wur auld wurd — huddroun, shug-shug, oar broasy-airt —
 Lyin aroon, rippled, yet vieve i thi big
 Goab o thi street . . .

The President of the Immortals skims with force his flat stone shaped like the palm of a hand along Sauchiehall Street — shoving impetuously down, renovating, leaving that general assembly of shops and precincts suitable for a linguistic atlas or a very deep structure grammar. Chomsky in a tweedy flat cap would not mind loitering like a spy outside Marks and Spencers or C & A respectable as Received Pronunciation, and taking notes on how those tremendous queues of goblin people who make a noise like little barking dogs combined with the sound of shells striking against each other at Thirties dance halls still exist, smelling strongly of civet, just as if they were old words — a word meaning ‘slovenly’, a word meaning ‘to jog continuously’, or a word meaning ‘inactive’ — lying around, separated like seeds of flax from the stalk, yet alive in the big mouth of the street . . .25

There are numerous linguistic ironies implicit in such a passage, not least in the extended account of ‘goblin people’, taken directly from the entry under ‘gaubertie-shells’ in the 1825 edition of Jamieson’s dictionary. It was Bakhtin who pointed out the immense importance of translation in the ‘mutual clarification of languages’ in the sixteenth century, and there is a process of two-way translation operating in work of this sort, too. —Here indeed what Bakhtin called ‘exchanges of high ideology and strange objects and concepts’ are ‘disclosed for the first time’ in what amounts to a mutually ‘alien medium’.26 In the last analysis it seems to me that this is another example of the ‘complex intersection of languages, dialects, idioms, and jargons’ by which the linguistic and literary consciousness of postmodern English is being formed.

W.N. Herbert has taken a similar line with a Scots based on his native Dundee speech, and a sensibility equally alert to the history of modernist thought and writing. For example his poem ‘Pictogram 2’, carries echoes of early Imagism:

Auld cairds mairket wi a map o cape Cod complete
 wi spooting whale.

Thi gress sae dreh ut flew up i thi mowir lyk tae dust
or clear ess.

Thi key sae worn doon ut lukeit lyk gowd, thi snib
tae thi door that wiz a hollo tae thi thumb.

Thi doag readin the newspaperis o thi streets; pish
punctuatit by lampies.²⁷

This is not unlike the ‘haiku’ works to be found in Alan Spence’s collection *Glasgow Zen*, and in this respect we should remember that Ian Hamilton Finlay’s little collection of haiku-like poems from 1961, *Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd Haw, and Inseks, an, Aw, a Fush*, was among the first expressions of Glasgow demotic poetry in contemporary literature. Edwin Morgan’s translations of Mayakovsky into Scots (*Wi the Haill Voice*, 1972) would feature here, too. —Once again translation, imitation, and the point at which different discourses and literary traditions meet, can be seen to be a fruitful ground for creative energy, and for insights into both our own culture and the nature of language and culture in general.

As a lecturer in French and something of a ‘wandering scholar’, David Kinloch finds himself in Paris and in a reflective mood in his poem ‘Dustie-Fute’. Here the strangeness of the old Scots words seems to say something about the strangeness of identity itself, and his text, too, like Crawford’s is invaded by the apparent sureties of dictionary definition (Jamieson’s again), which are actually deeply destabilising:

Does the ‘auld alliance’ of words and things stand a chance among the traffic and pimps in the Publicis Saint-Germain? For its not as if *dustie-fute* were my familiar. I could easily confuse *dustie-fute* with *elfmill* which is the sound made by a worm in the timber of a house, supposed by the vulgar to be preternatural. These words are as foreign as the city they are parachuted into, dead words slipping on the sill of the living metropolis. They are extremes that touch like dangerous wires and the only hope for them, for us, is the space they inhabit, a room Cioran speaks of, veering between dilettantism and dynamite. Old Scots word, big French city and in between abysmal me: ane merchand or creamer, quha hes no certain dwelling place, quhair the dust may be dicht fra his feete or schone. Dustie-fute, a stranger, equivalent to *fairand-man*, at a loss in the empty soul of his ancestors’ beautiful language and in the soulless city of his compeers living the 21st century now and scoffing at his medieval wares.²⁸

—Yet Kinloch goes on to recognise that this is is not a place of disaffection or modish alienation, for the demotic drive of common utterance has its own irreverent polyphonous energy—as Goodsir Smith, and MacDiarmid, and indeed Burns and William Dunbar recognised—and within its different tongues and its many voices freedom and spontaneity can be found again:

Yet here, precisely here, is their rendez-vous and triumphantly, stuffed down his sock, an oblique sense, the dustie-fute of ‘revelry’, the acrobat, the juggler who accompanies the toe-belled jongleur with his merchant’s comic fairground face. . . .

It is this energy, the energy of the demotic voice which has characterised the Scottish literary tradition over the centuries, which has lent force, unique grounding and a special coherence to modern Scottish writing in both its demotic and its modernist aspects. Kinloch concludes ‘Dusty-Fute’ by noting that ‘In this revelry differences copulate, become more visible and bearable’; and Crawford ends ‘Scots Architecture in Sauchiehall Street’ with two texts on the same theme which might stand for much of what has been explored in this article:

The whole, healthy language starts up suddenly and noisily as if rising from underwater. Come on, Sauchiehall Street, speak me!

. . . Thi hail leid pouts.
C’moan, Sauchiehall Street, speik me!

* * *

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks. Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1993); also Tom Leonard, Introduction to *Radical Renfrew*, edited by Tom Leonard (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).
- 2 See Douglas Young, 'Plastic Scots' and the Scottish Literary Tradition. An authoritative introduction to a controversy (Glasgow: Maclellan, 1946). The debate became more complicated when it was pointed out that even Robert Burns, patron saint of traditional Scots usage, had assimilated words from different dialects. —The point is that in the eighteenth century, for a variety of historical, political and social reasons, literary Scots was being 'vernacularised' at the very moment when English was being 'standardised'.
- 3 Discussed by Edwin Morgan, 'Glasgow Speech in Recent Scottish Writing', in *Scotland and the Lowland Tongue*, edited by J. Derrick McClure (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), pp. 195-208.
- 4 'Heard in the Cougate', in Robert Garioch, *Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1977), p. 127.
- 5 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 468-71.
- 6 See Roderick Watson, 'Dialectics of "Voice" and "Place": Literature in Scots and English from 1700', in *Scotland: A Concise Cultural History*, edited by P.H. Scott (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1993), pp. 99-125.
- 7 See also Donald Wesling on Tom Leonard and Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Mikhail Bakhtin and the Social Poetics of Dialect', in *Papers on Language and Literature*, 29, 3 (Summer 1993), 303-22. Also Roderick Watson, "'this is me tokn... this is ma trooth.'" Alternative Voices from Dialect to Demotic in Modern Scottish Poetry', in *Literature in Context*, edited by J. Schwend, S. Hagemann, H. Völkel (Hamburg: Verlag Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 183-194.
- 8 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 471.
- 9 C.M. Grieve, 'A Theory of Scots Letters', in *The Scottish Chapbook*, 1, 7 (February 1923), 182-3.
- 10 See Kenneth Buthlay, 'Adventuring in Dictionaries', in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet*, edited by Nancy Gish (Edinburgh and Maine: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 148-169.
- 11 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 473.
- 12 'Water Music', in *Hugh MacDiarmid, Complete Poems*, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), I, 333. There is, of course, an alliterative effect in these lines, too.
- 13 See Roderick Watson, "'Water Music" and the Stream of Consciousness' in *Scottish Literary Journal*, V, 2 (1978), 6-19.
- 14 Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Carotid Cornucopius* (Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1964), p. 23. The first four sections of this work were privately published in 1947.
- 15 'Foreword by Hugh MacDiarmid', *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 16 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- 17 Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Sunset Song* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1988), p. 25.
- 18 James Kelman, *Not Not While the Giro* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1983), p. 30.
- 19 James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (London: Phoenix, 1992), pp. 72-3.

- 20 From 'XIII The Black Bull o Norroway', from 'Under the Eildon Tree', in Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Collected Poems 1941-1975* (London: John Calder, 1975), pp. 167-8.
- 21 Wesling, p. 306.
- 22 'ah knew a linguist wance', Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices 1965-1983* (Newcastle: Galloping Dog Press, 1984), p. 113.
- 23 From 'Gairmscoile', *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 74-5.
- 24 'A Theory of Scots Letters', in *The Scottish Chapbook*, 1, 8 (March 1923), 210.
- 25 From 'Scots Architecture in Sauchiehall Street', in Robert Crawford and W.N. Herbert, *Sharawaggi* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), pp. 98-9.
- 26 See *Rabelais and His World*, p. 470, Bakhtin was of course referring only to the Renaissance.
- 27 From 'Pictogram 2', W.N. Herbert, *Anither Music* (London: Vennel Press, 1991), p. 16.
- 28 From 'Dusty-Fute', David Kinloch, *Dusty-Fute* (London: Vennel Press, 1992), no page number.

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