Hugh MacDiarmid and Religion:

a new approach to the poet's work through a study of his recondite spirituality

by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed entirely by myself, and that I alone carried out the research work on which it is based.

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Abstract of Thesis

Chapter One

Although MacDiarmid is, unquestionably, a great poet, the greatness of his work is not widely recognised and appreciated, partly owing to its deep involvement with recondite religious thought, reference to which can elucidate many otherwise puzzling passages, and bring to light an underlying principle of unity, which many believe to be absent from his work. In this chapter, attention is focused on the frequent evidences of religious thinking to be found, both in his earlier and in his later poetry.

Chapter Two

How an avowed Marxist can properly be described as a religious poet, is a question that ceases to perplex once sectarian definitions of religion are discarded. By examining, in this chapter, the differences between the primitive religions and the higher religions, we discover that MacDiarmid's religious thinking belongs entirely to the latter.

Chapter Three

By examining a selection of religious themes from A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle in the light of higher religious teachings, we begin to discern some hitherto unexplored levels of meaning in the poem, consideration of which helps to render intelligible a number of otherwise unintelligible passages.

Chapter Four

As we continue to select and examine religious themes from A Drunk Man, we note that the poet's mind moves with the same spiritual sensitivity among familiar Christian concepts, such as that of redemption through suffering, and strangely unfamiliar Buddhist concepts, such as that of the divine as a complete Void. It also becomes clear that these religious themes have ramifications which extend throughout the whole of the poet's work.

Chapter Five

As we reflect on the poem as a whole, and consider the new areas of meaning that have emerged from our investigations, we begin to realise that the nature of the vision which binds the various parts of A Drunk Man together, is closely akin to that of Mahayana Buddhism.

Chapter Six

In this chapter, we consider how, in the 'Ode to All Rebels', several religious themes from A Drunk Man are developed and transformed under the influence of Leo Chestov's book, In Job's Balances. We note, however, that MacDiarmid's quasi-Buddhist celebrations of the Void take him far beyond the limits of Chestov's thinking.

Chapter Seven

A discursive ramble over some of the vast areas of Eastern and Western thought explored by MacDiarmid, confirms his view that the Eastern and Western elements in his thinking are not antithetical, but mutually complementary.

Chapter Eight

The occasional eruption of apparently irreligious ideas in MacDiarmid's work, is found to have little effect on the basic structure of his religious insights. Such ideas, in any case, never prove capable of combining to form an alternative world-view to that provided by his religious insights. His religious ideas relate to a coherent whole. His irreligious ideas do not.

Abbreviations

Ashv.	The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana, by Ashvagosha
Armstrong.	Plotinus, ed. and trans. A.H. Armstrong
A.V.	Authorised Version of the Bible
A.Y.	The Authentic Yoga, by P.Y. Deshpande
B.C.P.	The Book of Common Prayer
Blake	Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes
Blakney	Meister Eckhart, trans. R.B. Blakney
B.S.	Buddhist Scriptures, ed. Edward Conze
C.B.	The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, ed. E.A. Burtt
C.P.	Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems 1920-1976
C.P.B.	The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, by T.R.V. Murti
C. & Z.	Ch'an and Zen Teaching, trans. Lu K'uan Yü
Feuer	Basic Writings by Marx and Engels, trans. L.S. Feuer
F.N.	Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in drei Bänden
Geeta	The Geeta, trans. Sri Purohit Swami
Happold	Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, by F.C. Happold
Inge	The Philosophy of Plotinus, by W.R. Inge
I.J.B.	In Job's Balances, by Leo Chestov
K. & R.	The Collected Works of St John of the Cross, trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez
L.A.	The Light of Asia, by Sir Edwin Arnold
L.P.	Lucky Poet, by Hugh MacDiarmid
Otto	Mysticism East and West, by Rudolf Otto
Peers	The Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus, trans. E.A. Peers
Per.Phil.	The Perennial Philosophy, by Aldous Huxley
R.M.	Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge, by A.Osborne
Rumi	Rumi: Poet and Mystic, trans. R.A. Nicholson
Singer	The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, in Hebrew and English, popularly known as 'Singer's Prayer Book'.
Stace	The Teachings of the Mystics, ed. W.T. Stace
Tib.B.D.	The Tibetan Book of the Dead
Tib.Myst.	The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, by Lama A. Govinda
T.R.M.	The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi
Up.	The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal
Wolters	The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works, trans. C. Wolters
W.B.	The Wisdom of Buddhism, ed. Christmas Humphreys
W.Z.	The Way of Zen, by Alan Watts
Zaehner	Hindu Scriptures, trans. R.C. Zaehner
Z.D.N.M.	The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind, by D.T. Suzuki

Chapter One

Introductory

It would not be easy to find, in the literature of any country, a poet whose work ranges more widely over human experience, or reaches greater heights and depths of thought and insight, than that of the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid. Unfortunately, this fact is not generally recognised, partly because most of his longer poems (the ones which provide the richest evidence of his wide-ranging powers), are virtually unknown to most readers. The early lyrics in Scots, such as 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn', 'The Watergaw', 'Crowdieknowe' and 'The Eemis Stane', are reasonably well known among those who take an interest in Scottish literature; but most of his longer poems, such as A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, tend - apart from a few fragments that have appeared in anthologies - to be neglected and unexplored, even by many of his admirers. Outside academic circles, it is rare indeed to find a reader who is acquainted with even one such poem in its entirety, and rarer still to find one who can discuss with any degree of clarity and coherence the meaning of what he has read.[1]

It is not unusual for readers to complain that they find themselves frustrated in their efforts to understand the longer poems, not only by the tantalizing elusiveness of MacDiarmid's thought, which abounds in apparent inconsistencies and contradictions, but also by the frequent interpolation of largely unintelligible and seemingly irrelevant material from a bewildering variety of sources. In, for example, Contemporary Scottish Literature by Robin Fulton,[2] published in 1974, the author, while discussing the achievements of the poet Edwin Morgan, takes the opportunity of expressing his irritation with Morgan's senior contemporary, MacDiarmid, whom he regards as an unscrupulous and irresponsible predator on the writings of others:

> MacDiarmid is a predator: with the enthusiasm and frequent inaccuracy of a voracious autodidact he has rifled world literature, history and science for material which can be absorbed into his own prevailing concerns. The movement is inward and fidelity to the sources is not highly regarded. (p. 13)

He accuses MacDiarmid of subjecting 'all his major themes' to 'the same dialectical contrariness' (p. 13), and of indulging in mere 'dialectical zigzagging' (p. 29) instead of presenting clear and consistent lines of thought.

No doubt it is with this kind of criticism in mind, that Alan Bold, in the Introduction to his 1983 edition of MacDiarmid's Annals of the Five Senses (Edinburgh: Polygon), speaks of 'the attempts of critics to classify Hugh MacDiarmid as a contradictory figure and poet eccentrically at odds with himself . . .' And certainly, it has to be admitted, that even such a sympathetic critic as David Daiches, feels it necessary to say of MacDiarmid: 'Self-contradiction is for him a mode of poetic awareness'.[3] Unfortunately, less discerning critics are unable to move on with Professor Daiches, to see 'certain kinds of unity amid all this diversity', and so must rest content with their 'contradictory figure'.

Considering the many difficulties that MacDiarmid puts in the way of his readers, such misconceptions are hardly surprising. In the pages that follow, however, it is hoped that a very different view of the poet and his achievements will emerge, through an understanding of his poetry's intimate connection with one of the 'prevailing concerns' of his life, namely, religion. It will be maintained, that most of the obscurity and inconsistency of which readers complain, quickly disappears once his poems are examined in the light of certain religious and mystical teachings. For these provide an underlying pattern of unified meaning for his work as a whole. It will also be maintained, that the elusiveness of his thought is not entirely owing to wilfulness and wayward perversity, but is at least partly a product of his need to express moods, insights, experiences, which cannot adequately be expressed in words at all, because of their essentially mystical nature. It should be remembered that, in his autobiography, Lucky Poet (London:

Methuen, 1943), MacDiarmid says: 'I think readers of my poetry will not fail to recognise that there are few of the great mystical experiences I have not had' (p. 268). He was, of course, being unduly optimistic. Many of his readers are still very far from recognising any connection whatsoever, between his poetry and 'the great mystical experiences', which, we should remember, are experiences of what the mystic usually calls 'God'. This is why it does not occur to them to search in the strange and little-known regions of religion, for a key to his more baffling utterances, a door into the deeper recesses of his thought.

Nevertheless, for a long time now, discerning critics and scholars, such as David Daiches, Duncan Glen, Kenneth Buthlay, and Edwin Morgan, have been focusing attention, not so much on the problems posed by MacDiarmid's poetry, as on his tremendous, indisputably obvious, creative achievements, consideration of which inevitably disposes of the absurd idea that his poetry was ever dependent for its power and effectiveness on misappropriated odds and ends from other men's work. In fact, it is clear that the reverse was often true. Borrowed, or stolen, words and ideas seldom remained untransformed. They were given a new life, a new significance, in the new contexts he devised for them. This is particularly clear in his use of borrowed material from Plotinus, Luther, Pascal, and Chestov, in the 'Ode to All Rebels' (C.P., I, 487-512).

More recently, writers such as Anne Boutelle, in Thistle and Rose (1980), Walter Perrie, in Out of Conflict (1982), and Catherine Kerrigan, in Whaur Extremes Meet (1983),[4] have been concerned with establishing MacDiarmid's intellectual status, by focusing attention on the bewilderingly vast and varied background of philosophical and religious ideas from which his poetry has emerged. Catherine Kerrigan is particularly clear about the important role played by religious ideas in the poet's thinking. Hence her highly illuminating discussions of the influence exerted on MacDiarmid by the ideas of two Russian Christian writers: Dostoevsky (1821-81) and Soloviev (1853-90). Something of the same awareness is reflected in Alan Bold's MacDiarmid: The Terrible Crystal (1983),[5] which repeatedly focuses attention on the religious constituents of MacDiarmid's poems. When, for example, the author is discussing the 'Ballad of the Five Senses', he says: 'It is not enough, MacDiarmid

feels, to be aware of the phenomenal world; it is necessary to transcend it and to reach, by means of an intellectual vision, to eternity in order to stand face to face with the creator' (p. 70).

But even Alan Bold and Catherine Kerrigan see religion as only one of many ingredients in MacDiarmid's poetry, and, therefore, do not regard it as of central importance. In fact, its central importance cannot be grasped, until, paradoxically, it is seen - as MacDiarmid saw it - as a pointer to something beyond itself, as the indicator of an area of consciousness in which an intense noetic light illuminates every part of life with new meaning, and even, according to the poet, 'Freedom gi'es / Frae Dust and Daith and a' Disease'.[6] It is because of this indicative function of religion, that it has a claim to be considered as of central, and even supreme, importance, for the interpretation of MacDiarmid's work as a whole. The validity of this claim will, it is hoped, become apparent in the pages that follow.

There are certainly plenty of indications scattered throughout MacDiarmid's work, of the central importance of religion in his thinking. The very first poem in his Complete Poems is 'A Moment in Eternity', which first appeared in Annals of the Five Senses (1923), but which the poet considered important enough to repeat in To Circumjack Cencrastus (1930). This poem of 183 lines deals with a condition of heightened consciousness which requires for its expression the symbolical, signpost-language of religion: words such as 'God', 'Godhead', 'Seraphim', 'Paradise', 'Eternity', that have clearly no indicative significance at all at the level of ordinary consciousness. The poet speaks of 'The golden breaths / Of my eternal life' (p. 3), and declares that, while experiencing 'Eternity',

> Light dwelt in me,
> Pavilioned there.
> I was a crystal trunk,
> Columnar in the glades of Paradise,
> Bearing the luminous boughs
> And foliaged with the flame
> Of infinite and gracious growth,
> - Meteors for roots,
> And my topmost spires
> Notes of enchanted light
> Blind in the Godhead!
> - White stars at noon
>
> I shone within my thoughts
> As God within us shines.
>
> (p. 5)

It is significant that the poet clearly identifies himself, in these lines, not with his thoughts, but with a 'light' that shines within them, a 'light' which is the source of their being, and thus corresponds to the God who shines within us, and is the source of our being.

Another poem from Annals of the Five Senses deals with the mental tortures suffered by a Roman soldier on the day after Christ's crucifixion. It contains the following lines:

'My house is crowned with horns
- Transpiercing horns of deer!
As were His brows with thorns.
Between two thieves He hung
Upon His Cross,
As here 'twixt earth and sky
Hang I.
A song a soldier sung . . .

'I nailed Him high
'Twixt earth and sky
And Heaven shut
Its flaming eye
But
Be nights as Hell
I know full well
My way to you, oblivious slut,
Who all my roaring blood shall glut . . .

'And when they loose Him from the tree
At break of day
I shall not care and shall not see
- At break of day
My snoring head between your breasts
Will snugly lie . . .'

But between her breasts he lay
Lost to day,
And between her spent breasts fell
Spent, to Hell!

(C.P., I, 8-9)

In MacDiarmid's next collection, Sangshaw (1925), there are several songs on religious themes, including 'I Heard Christ Sing', 'O Jesu Parvule', and 'The Innumerable Christ', in the last two stanzas of which there is further evidence of the importance attached by the poet to 'the thocht o' Christ and Calvary' (C.P., I, 122):

I' mony an unco warl' the nicht
The lift gaes black as pitch at noon,
An' sideways on their chests the heids
O' endless Christs roll doon.

An' when the earth's as cauld's the mune
An' a' its folk are lang syne deid,
On coontless stars the Babe maun cry
An' the Crucified maun bleed.

(C.P., I, 32)

The 'Ballad of the Five Senses', also from Sangshaw, contains many stanzas which obviously require some religious or mystical explanation. We shall, therefore, be examining it in some detail in a later chapter. For the moment, however, here is one example:

Oot o' the way, my senses five,
I ken a' you can tell,
Oot o' the way, my thochts, for noo'
I maun face God mysel'.

(C.P., I, 38)

In these four lines we have a more or less complete summary of the disciplines that have always been employed by those who seek direct contact with the Deity in mystical experience. The Islamic poet and mystic, Jallal-al-din Rumi (1207-1273), for example, gives the following instructions:

Be without ear, without sense, without thought,
And hearken to the call of God, 'Return!'

And Rosen Takashina, a twentieth-century Primate of the Soto sect of Zen in Japan, explains that

> The living Samadhi[9] of all the Buddhas is no other than that state of absolute absence of thoughts. Taking the words literally, one might think it meant to be like a tree or a stone, but it is not that at all. It cannot be understood by our ordinary consciousness, but neither shall we get it by unconsciousness. We can only grasp it by experiencing it in ourselves.[10]

In the collection known as Penny Wheep (1926), there are at least three poems which deal with specifically religious themes: 'Sea-Serpent', 'Bombinations of a Chimaera' and 'Supper to God'. Even one of them that does not fall into this category, 'Gairmscoile', contains clear Biblical allusions:

> I hear nae 'hee-haw' but I mind the day
> A'e donkey strunted doon a palm-strewn way
> As Chesterton has sung;[11] nae wee click-clack
> O' hoofs but to my hert at ainee comes back
> Jammes' Prayer to Gang to Heaven wi' the Asses;[12]
> And shambles-ward nae cattle beast e'er passes
> But I mind hoo the saft een o' the kine
> Lichted Christ's craidle wi' their canny shine.
>
> (C.P., I, 74)

In MacDiarmid's first long poem, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926), we do not read far before we encounter a reference to 'Christ wha'd ha'e been Chief Rabbi gin he'd lik't', and it soon becomes plain that the poem relies quite heavily on the Biblical insights symbolized by the Garden of Eden ('fenced frae Eden yet', C.P., I, 124), the Burning Bush ('As in the fire the unburnt buss', I, 143), and the Cross of Calvary ('Aye, this is Calvary', I, 134). To Biblical insights too, at least in part, he owes his sardonic picture of Mary as

> A drucken hizzie gane to bed
> Wi' three-in-ane and ane-in-three.
>
> (C.P., I, 126)

By contrast, it is interesting to note the non-Biblical nature of the religious aspiration expressed in these words:

> But let my soul increase in me
> God dwarfed to enter my puir thocht
> Expand to his true size again . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 125)

Obviously non-Biblical too, is his vision of the Great Wheel of Existence: an Indian religious symbol which makes its first appearance in the Svetasvatara Upanishad (c. 800-500 B.C.):

> And as I see the great wheel spin
> There flees a licht frae't lang and thin
> That Earth is like a snaw-ba' in.
>
> (C.P., I, 158)

This Upanishad, which is strongly theistic, stresses that 'It is the greatness of God in the world, by which this Brahma-wheel is made to turn' (VI.1). In his commentary on it, the twentieth-century Indian philosopher, Radhakrishnan, speaks of the rotating wheel as the 'moving image of eternity'.[13]

In MacDiarmid's next long poem, To Circumjack Cencrastus (1930), we find further evidence of non-Biblical influences on the poet's thinking, for he speaks there, with some enthusiasm, of

> . . . yon michty passage in
> The Bhagavad-Gita where
> A' Nature casts its ooter skin
> And kyths afore us, bare . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 212)

Significantly, 'The Gita', according to Radhakrishnan, '. . . attempts to reconcile varied and apparently antithetical forms of the religious consciousness and emphasizes the root conceptions of religion which are neither ancient nor modern but eternal and belong to the very flesh of humanity, past, present and future.'[14]

MacDiarmid's enthusiasm for this Hindu scripture had evidently not declined in the slightest when he came to write In Memoriam James Joyce (1955), some twenty-five years later, for he says there:

> Humboldt had a fine understanding for the individuality
> of Indian ideas,
> Shown especially in his treatise on the Bhagavad-Gita,
> 'Perhaps the profoundest and most sublime work the world
> has ever known.'
>
> (C.P., II, 854)

We should not, however, infer from this, that MacDiarmid's interest in religion ever became restricted to one particular area of religion, Indian or otherwise. Earlier in the In Memoriam James Joyce he makes this clear, when he says:

> As a poet I'm interested in religious ideas -
> - Even Scottish ones, Wee Free ones even -
>
> (C.P., II, 798)

Nevertheless, in his later work, there does appear to be an increasing tendency to turn to the religious and mystical traditions of the East, rather than to those of the West, for inspiration. In To Circumjack Cencrastus, this tendency is already clearly evident. Although the teachings both of the Buddha and the Bhagavad-Gita are treated with considerable respect, those of the Founder of Christianity are adversely criticized:

> Come let us face the facts. He should ha' socht
> Faith in themsel's like his - no' faith in him.
> His words condemned his followers, and himsel' . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 182)

- a criticism which, perhaps, loses something of its point in the light of Jung's essay, 'Christ, A Symbol of the Self', in which he says, 'I have tried to show how the traditional Christ-image concentrates upon itself the characteristics of an archetype - the archetype of the self.'[15]

In To Circumjack Cencrastus, the previously powerful influences of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought are also beginning to be discarded. The poet's interest in Plotinus (205-270), for example, so clearly manifest in 'The Crown of Rock' (1924), (C.P., II, 1241-42) has so far declined that he now speaks of the great philosopher and mystic as 'a fool':

> I hear a fool (Plotinus he is ca'd)
> Say, 'Intelligence was a Unity, but alas
> Didna bide as it was,
> But unkent to itsel' turned mony-fa'd,
> Grew pregnant . . . Wae for its posterity!
> Better there ne'er had been a Secondary!'

And turn to Thocht as wha to a trauchled wife,
Mindit in sair times o' blithe coortin' days
Turns to'r and says:
'Your fond dream little recked o' sic a life.
Yon were the happy days. Wad ye no' lief
Ha'e a' sin syne undune, wi'ts want and grief?'
And hears her say: 'You think I little kent?
I kent a' richt - and yet was willin',
And that's the mood I'm still in.'
And little tho' the cratur's life has meant
- Hers and her man's and bairns' a' meanly spent -
I ken that she is richt and a' her pain
And seemin' waste o' effort better than nane
Tho' I'd fain
Ha'e had her tyauvin' on a different plane
Few folk ha'e ever gained or'll ever gain . . .

(C.P., I, 217)

It is interesting to note the strong resemblance between the thought expressed in this passage, and that of the Russian thinker, Leo Chestov (1856-1938), whom MacDiarmid, in Lucky Poet, describes as 'my favourite philosopher' (p. 28) and 'my master' (p. 163). For example, in Chestov's book, In Job's Balances (1932),[16] we read:

> 'Cur Deus homo?' Why, to what purpose, did He become man, expose Himself to injurious mistreatment, ignominious and painful death on the cross? Was it not in order to show man, through His example, that no decision is too hard, that it is worth bearing anything only in order not to remain in the womb of the One? That any torture whatever to the living being is better than the 'bliss' of the rest-satiate 'ideal' being? (p. 177)

Despite the similarities between them, however, there is one important difference between Chestov and MacDiarmid. The Russian philosopher's search for ideas never took him further East than Jerusalem, whereas MacDiarmid's disillusionment with Western thought impelled him to penetrate into the very heart of Eastern, and particularly Indian thought. In In Memoriam James Joyce , he confesses that

. . . a greater interest in Indian thoughts and ideas
Exists nowhere in the world than in my mind . . .

(C.P., II, 856)

and he quotes with evident approval from 'a book on Buddhism' which says that

> '. . . To give the feelings of an alien religion
> It is necessary to do more than expound
> Its concepts and describe its history.
> One must catch its emotional undertone,
> Enter one's way into its symbols, its cult, its art,
> And then seek to impart these not merely
> By scientific exposition
> But in all sorts of indirect ways.'
>
> (C.P., II, 765)

His own success in doing just this, is evident in most of his longer poems.

He also makes it clear, in this poem, that his growing interest in Indian thought has produced in his mind a growing hostility towards certain aspects of Greek thought. He now believes that

> The influence of Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics
> Over scholastic and modern logic
> Has, on the whole, been unfortunate.

and he laments the fact

> That Aristotle's limitations as a mathematician
> Availed nothing to save him from falling
> Into Plato's undue emphasis upon static unity
> Or consenting to Plato's expulsion
> Of the temporal and contingent
> From the realm of the fully knowable.
>
> (C.P., II, 847-8)

The reasons given by the poet for his dissatisfaction with Plato and the Greeks are slightly puzzling, inasmuch as a great deal of traditional Indian thought, about which he seems so enthusiastic, would appear to suffer from precisely the same supposed defects as those he attributes to classical Greek philosolhy. Could it, for example, be seriously maintained, that the Advaita Vedanta[19] philosophy of Sankara (780-820 A.D.) places any less 'emphasis on static unity' than does

that of Plato? It should be remembered, however, that, at least from 1930 when he published To Circumjack Cencrastus, MacDiarmid consistently showed an intense interest in the later Buddhistic forms of Indian philosophy, which dispense entirely with concepts of 'static unity'. As Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) points out in his Mysticism East and West (Westöstliche Mystik, Gotha, 1926),[18] Indian Mahayana Buddhism,[19] despite its obvious affinities with the Vedanta, differs quite radically from it, in some respects. 'Within Vedanta and Mahayana', says the great German scholar, 'in spite of mutual convergence, there lives an entirely different spirit'. He explains that, whereas the Brahman of the Vedanta is 'static, massive and quietly immobile', the 'highest principle of Mahayana-mysticism' is 'dynamic and vital, with its stimulating influence upon mood, fantasy and creative imagination, and its experience of the wonder of the world and of nature in their beauty. On account of this dynamic character the idea of a static Atman[20] which is indispensable in Vedanta must be passionately rejected here . . .' (p. 149)

The text of To Circumjack Cencrastus makes it clear that, some time before the poem was published in 1930, MacDiarmid had delved so deeply into 'Indian thoughts and ideas', that he had already grasped something of the principles of the profound Yogacara,[21] or Consciousness Only, School of Mahayana Buddhism: a school of thought to which he refers explicitly in 'Further Passages from The Kind of Poetry I Want' (C.P., II, 1034). In To Circumjack Cencrastus he does not name this school of philosophy, but his understanding and acceptance of its teachings is clearly enough demonstrated in the following lines:

> Man here into his ain circumference fa's
> But whatna consolation's this to ane
> Wha kens that Buddhist seers[22] can often reach
> The sun's corona and hoo Swedenborg
> Whiles gaed to ither planets, and visited
> A heavenly body aince that lay ootside
> The solar system a' thegither? . . .[23]
>
> I ken the stars that seem sae faur awa'
> Ha'e that appearance juist because my thocht
> Canna yet bridge the spiritual gulf atween's . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 205-6)

In 'Further Passages from The Kind of Poetry I Want', however, MacDiarmid leaves us in no doubt about the philosophical source of his insights. He speaks there of his realization that the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of 'prajna-paramita (climax of wisdom)' can never be a matter of mere intellectual concepts derived from written documents, but that it is a matter of actually sharing the life of the Buddhas, those fully enlightened beings who have, from time to time, appeared in this world as spiritual teachers and guides. He speaks of

> . . . prajna-paramita (climax of wisdom)
> Meaning not that nihilistic literature which
> Towards the beginning of the Christian era
> Laid the foundations for the great mahayanist systems,[24]
> But the life of the Buddhas according to the Yogacara philosophy,
> And abhisamaya connoting a form of intuition
> Superior to the relativity of subject and object.
>
> (C.P., II, 1034)

'According to the Yogacara philosophy', and, indeed, according to Indian thought in general, no 'philosophy' worthy of the name is ever a purely theoretical matter. It reveals its value only in so far as it develops into an entirely new way of seeing and understanding reality. This meaning is implicit in the use of the Sanskrit word darsana, or darsanam,[25] which is quite inadequately translated into English by the word 'philosophy', for, in phrases such as Vedanta darsana, or Sankhya darsana, it is not simply a system of doctrinal words and concepts that is being indicated, but a new kind of vision which involves, not just the speculative intellect, but the whole being of man. This is why, in his book, The Way of Zen,[26] Dr Alan Watts finds it necessary to explain, with regard to 'the Yogacara philosophy', that

> According to the Yogacara the world of form is cittamatra - 'mind-only' - or vijnaptimatra - 'representation only'. This view seems to have a very close resemblance to Western philosophies of subjective idealism, in which the external and material world is regarded as a projection of the mind. However, there seem to be some differences between the two points of view. Here, as always, the Mahayana is not so much a theoretical and speculative construction as an acccunt of an inner experience, and a means of awakening the experience in others. (p. 92)

Endeavouring, in his book The Authentic Yoga, to describe the nature of such experience, Sri Deshpande of Benares has to speak of 'an altogether different world' which Yoga Darsana brings to light. 'In this world of reality', he says, 'the old intelligence associated with words, verbalizations and inferences has no place whatsoever because it is seen as utterly irrelevant to reality . . .' (p. 69).

This may serve to explain, at least to some extent, MacDiarmid's reluctance to restrict himself to the concepts and terminology of any single philosophy or thought-system, whether Indian or Greek, Jewish or German. Words and ideas are certainly of tremendous importance to him, but never of first importance. What is of first importance is the vision, or darsana, which he has derived from his painstaking study of many different philosophies. It is this darsana he is concerned to convey, and, at his best, does convey, through the words and ideas he has borrowed from a variety of sources, both Eastern and Western. He knows that truth and reality can never be captured within the verbal and conceptual forms of any theoretical system, or collection of systems. No collection of words and ideas, however vast, however carefully chosen, can ever hope to encompass the whole of truth, the whole of reality, though they may, at their best, succeed in pointing towards a special kind of spiritual experience, and become 'a means of awakening the experience in others'. It is, obviously, familiarity with this essentially thought-transcending, and concept-transcending, experience, which enables his 'Drunk Man' to recognise the fragmentary and incomplete nature of all the knowledge he has gathered:

> I dinna haud the warld's end in my heid
> As maist folk think they dae . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

Hence his freedom from

> . . . the cursed conceit o' bein' richt
> That damns the vast majority o' men.
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

If we examine carefully, as we shall be trying to do later, the contents of the poem from which the above lines are taken (A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle), we shall encounter such a bewildering variety of themes and topics, particularly religious ones, that we are unlikely to be able to rid ourselves of the impression of a confusing heap of jig-saw pieces, until we can probe beneath the surface and discover how each one relates to the unifying pattern provided by MacDiarmid's darsana. Indeed, in our attempts to explore and understand any of MacDiarmid's longer poems, we require to engage in two quite distinct and separate operations. First, there is the need to identify the different themes, tracing, wherever possible, quotations, references and allusions to their sources, so that we may understand their possible implications and connotations. Then there is the need to discover how the different themes are related to the underlying thread of meaning provided by the poet's darsana. It is important not to confuse the one operation with the other. For example, we should never assume that a quotation from, or a reference to, some particular scripture, necessarily implies that the poet's thought is, at that moment, wholly enclosed within, and completely explicable in terms of, that scripture. To use Zen terminology, this would be mistaking the finger that points at the moon for the moon itself. MacDiarmid uses the pointing fingers of many different sages, saints and seers, to point, from many widely different areas of space and time, towards the same moon.

The problem of how to understand the pointers and signposts of spiritual teaching when one does not see the moon towards which they point, is clearly recognised by MacDiarmid himself, when he speaks, in 'Further Passages from The Kind of Poetry I Want', about Martin Buber's[27] resolve to translate the Bible into German - 'a task almost unrealizable for the modern man' because

> We are, in fact, convinced that truth can be found
> Only in clear and distinct judgements,
> And how then can we express in our language
> Which has moulded itself in accordance with this
> conviction
> So deeply rooted, what the men saw and heard
> Who still possessed the faculty
> Of entering into contact with the mystery?
>
> (C.P., I, 617-618)

Almost all recent translations of the Bible serve to illustrate MacDiarmid's point perfectly. The translators clearly do not possess 'the faculty / Of entering into contact with the mystery'. Their words are fingers that fail to point at the moon. They are obviously incapable of embodying the profound darsana of 'Moses', 'David', 'Isaiah', and other Biblical seers who possessed this faculty in the highest degree. Their translations may provide the reader with relevant facts and important information, but they fail signally to awaken the kind of awareness and vision enjoyed by the prophets, apart from which the facts may be regarded as of doubtful significance.

One brief illustration must suffice here. The Greek text of Matthew 6:22 contains the following sentence:

ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ἁπλοῦς, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται·

In the Authorised Version of 1611 it is translated as: 'If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' Here the Greek word ἁπλοῦς is given its primary meaning of 'single' (or 'simple' in the sense of being indivisibly one), a meaning accorded to it by Greek authors at least since the days of Aeschylus (? 525-456 B.C.). But the resulting sentence is by no means easy to understand. What does it mean, we may well enquire, to have an eye that is 'single'? Or a body that is 'full of light'? Like many other famous spiritual sayings, this one would appear to be complete nonsense, as far as our ordinary experience and understanding are concerned: a fact to which MacDiarmid mischievously draws attention when, in 'Ode to All Rebels', he announces, with sardonic tongue in cheek, that

> I aince kent a man wi' one eye
> Sae his body was fu'
> O' licht a' through . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 488)

In an attempt, presumably, to make the meaning of this sentence a little more accessible to our understanding, the New English Bible, the Good News Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, and the Revised Standard

Version, all agree to omit the puzzling word 'single', and to replace it with some less puzzling translation of the Greek word, such as 'sound' or 'good'. No one can be in doubt (at least one would think not) about what it means to have eyes that are 'sound' or 'good'. Yet doubts inevitably develop as one goes on to read the second clause of the sentence, variously rendered as 'you will have light for your whole body' (N.E.B.) or 'your whole body will be full of' - or 'filled with' (Jerus.) - 'light' (R.S.V. and G.N.B.). For, if we are to think of the possessor of good eyes as invariably endowed with a body composed of, or filled with, light, we must feel tempted to conclude that sound eyesight is a much rarer phenomenon than we had supposed, if, in fact, it has ever existed at all in this world of ours.

The truth is, that such sayings cannot be clarified simply by modifying a few terms here and there. One can understand them only in relation to that 'mystery' mentioned by MacDiarmid, the divine mystery with which modern man has largely lost contact. Those who are acquainted with that 'mystery', however, have no difficulty in understanding the supreme importance of singleness of vision, the urgent need of everyone to acquire an eye that is 'single', that does not divide its attention between 'two masters' (Matthew 6:24), seeking to serve both 'God and mammon', but which in its divine simplicity sees God alone. 'For', as the great German Dominican monk, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 - c. 1329) says, 'the foundation of spiritual blessing is this: that the soul look at God without anything between . . . knowing nothing but God.'[28]

Baba Kuhi (d. 1050), Persia's earliest Sufi poet, experiencing this undivided singleness of vision, sings of how

> In the market, in the cloister - only God I saw.
> In the valley and on the mountain - only God I saw . . .
>
> I oped mine eyes and by the light of His face around me
> In all the eye discovered - only God I saw . . .
>
> Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,
> But when I looked with God's eyes - only God I saw.[29]

In The Perennial Philosophy, Aldous Huxley quotes the Indian religious poet, Kabir (1398-1518) as saying: 'Behold but One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray.' Huxley finds it

very significant that in the Indo-European languages 'the root meaning "two" should connote badness.' He reminds us that

> The Greek prefix dys- (as in dyspepsia) and the Latin dis- (as in dishonourable) are both derived from 'duo'. The cognate bis- gives a pejorative sense to such modern French words as bévue ('blunder', literally 'two-sight'). Traces of that 'second which leads you astray' can be found in 'dubious', 'doubt' and Zweifel - for to doubt is to be double-minded. Bunyan has his Mr Facing-both-ways, and modern American slang its 'two-timers'. Obscurely and unconsciously wise, our language confirms the findings of the mystics and proclaims the essential badness of division - a word, incidentally, in which our old enemy 'two' makes another decisive appearance.[30]

Clearly, then, the eye that is 'single' is not an optional extra for the spiritual life, but the very 'foundation of spiritual blessing', as Eckhart says. The omission, therefore, of this vital word 'single' from recent renderings of Matthew 6:22, would seem to indicate that modern translators of the Bible, while perhaps successful in making contact with the mind of their own age, have lost all 'contact with the mystery' of which MacDiarmid speaks, and, therefore, with the spiritually enlightened in every age, who clearly discern the close and necessary connection between the eye that is 'single' and, what MacDiarmid describes as

> . . . the moment of divine realisation
> When the self is lit up by its own inner light
>
> (C.P., I, 481)

- this light being, of course, not Wordsworth's 'light of common day' ('Immortality Ode') but rather, that light which, according to MacDiarmid, 'Freedom gi'es / Frae Dust and Daith and a' Disease' (C.P., I, 162).

It is, perhaps, MacDiarmid's own deeply unsettling experiences of 'entering into contact with the mystery' which best explain why puzzled complaints and allegations (about 'dialectical zigzagging' for example) are sometimes made by those who are totally unaware of the existence of any 'mystery'. They are bound to feel irritated and aggrieved, when

they come across lines, and even whole stanzas, which appear to make as little sense as the Biblical saying about the 'single' eye. Probably, however, their anger against these linguistic fingers would disappear entirely, if only they could look beyond them, and see THAT towards which the fingers are pointing. It is modern man's myopic unawareness of THAT,[31] which explains why translation of the Bible is 'a task almost unrealisable for the modern man', and why MacDiarmid's profoundly religious poetry is so little appreciated and understood. It is not surprising that, in 'In Memoriam: Liam Mac'Ille Iosa' (Stony Limits and Other Poems, 1934 and 1956), the poet, painfully aware of his isolated position among people who are complete strangers to the 'mystery', cries out:

> Ad te Domine appello; so even as Pascal against Rome[32]
> No matter what all other men think, desire and feel
> For Scotland to-day we irreconcilables carry our appeal
> Completely over their heads and straight to God home.
> Let them do likewise and we may meet them there
> (For a moment!) - but not elsewhere.
>
> (C.P., I, 416)

Generally speaking, however, MacDiarmid's critics have not been prepared to take up this challenge. They have been content to look at some of the pointing fingers of allusion, reference and quotation, and to speculate on their possible places of origin, without ever feeling the need to take an exploratory journey along any of the divine paths to which the fingers are pointing. Inevitably, therefore, a great deal of the poet's meaning goes 'Completely over their heads and straight to God home'. Only by finding the paths to 'God' indicated by the pointing fingers, have they any hope of finding that area of consciousness, or unconsciousness, in which the underlying principle of unity in MacDiarmid's work can be found, as we shall see in the chapters that follow.

It is not being denied here that, at the level of purely rational thought, and consciously held, consciously manipulated, ideas, no principle of unity can be found in MacDiarmid's work. What we shall be arguing here is, that at the deeper level of intuitive feeling and

insight, where poetry and religion both have their roots, such a principle of unity does indeed exist, and can be found by those who will take the trouble to follow the religious paths repeatedly indicated by the poet himself.

But before we set out, in the next chapter, on this new approach to MacDiarmid's poetry, through the religious and mystical pathways to which he repeatedly points, a cautionary word should, perhaps, be inserted here, with regard to the unfamiliar aspects of the road ahead.

Previous studies of MacDiarmid's work have been mainly concerned with analysis of one kind or another, dividing up his work into periods, dividing up the poems into manageable fragments, and, wherever possible, attaching a suitably informative label to each. Unfortunately, such operations on their own, though vitally necessary, tend to encourage and perpetuate the mistaken notion (implicit in Mr Fulton's criticisms), that MacDiarmid's poems are, for the most part, artificially concocted from fragments of other men's writings, and, therefore, devoid of organic unity. In a Scotsman review (9 April 1983) of Catherine Kerrigan's highly interesting, but heavily 'source'-laden study of MacDiarmid's poetry, Whaur Extremes Meet, Alan Bold expressed misgivings of a kind which must be shared by many readers of recent books about MacDiarmid, in which, so to speak, the wood cannot be seen for the trees:

> The tracking down and elucidation of every random reference is impressive rather than illuminating for MacDiarmid, like Joyce, amounts to more than the sum of his sources . . . The source-seeking critical treatment of his poetry detracts from the poetic shock-effect of his greatest compositions . . .

Since the purpose of the present study is to focus attention on a principle of unity behind the often bewildering diversity of MacDiarmid's poetry, we shall try to ensure that no analytical process employed here is allowed to obscure those recurrent thematic patterns which, if carefully observed, not only indicate the existence of a powerful unifying element in the poet's work, but also tell us a great deal about its nature. Our examination of the kaleidoscopic surface of the poems will, therefore, be so organised as to lead to close observation and careful consideration of the unifying darsana which operates a little below the surface.

Because the purpose of this study differs from that of previous studies, the terminology, the methodology, the conceptual structures employed here, are bound to differ in some respects from those employed in studies which have other aims in view. Any new field of scholarly investigation inevitably demands of the investigator a readiness to adopt new mental postures and attitudes, a willingness to accept new and unfamiliar tools and methods of research. Otherwise, living scholarship becomes an impossibility. A rigid adherence to established modes of thought and expression, simply ensures that nothing really new will ever emerge from any investigation, however thoroughly conducted - nothing, that is to say, which cannot be fitted into already existing patterns of knowledge. It is hoped, therefore, that readers will be prepared to relax their hold on cherished preconceptions, whether concerning the poet, religion, or research techniques, so that they might be open to receive any fresh insights that may come to light as a result of this new approach to MacDiarmid's poetry.

Notes

[1] Even the Scottish poet, Ian Crichton Smith, in 'MacDiarmid and Ideas', The Age of MacDiarmid, (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1980), writes: 'I've always had difficulty with MacDiarmid's longer poems'. Neglect of these poems is, therefore, understandable. This situation seems likely to improve, however, because of the determined efforts now being made by many universities, colleges and schools in Scotland, to bring their students into contact with some of MacDiarmid's greatest work. In Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies, for example, students in their first year tackle the whole of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, under the direction of Professor John MacQueen, who has made a special study of this poem.

[2] Robin Fulton, Contemporary Scottish Literature (Loanhead: MacDonald, 1974).

[3] 'MacDiarmid and the Scottish Tradition', The Age of MacDiarmid, ed. P.H. Scott and A.C. Davis. (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1980), p. 60.

[4] Anne Boutelle, Thistle and Rose (Loanhead: MacDonald, 1980).
Walter Perrie, Out of Conflict (Dunfermline: Borderline Press, 1983).
Catherine Kerrigan, Whaur Extremes Meet (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1983).

[5] Alan Bold, MacDiarmid: The Terrible Crystal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

[6] Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems 1920-1976, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, in 2 vols (London: Martin Brian and O'Keeffe, 1978), I, 162.

[7] cf. Wordsworth's lines:

> . . . In such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shown to us
> The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode . . .
>
> (The Prelude 1805, VI, 533-536)

[8] RUMI: Poet and Mystic, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 74.

[9] Samadhi is a Sanskrit word, used to describe a meditational state in which the meditator becomes wholly identified with what he believes to be Ultimate Reality.

[10] Edward Conze, ed. Buddhist Scriptures (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 138-9.

[11] Chesterton's poem, 'The Donkey', appears on p. 325 of The Collected Poems of G.K. Chesterton (London: Methuen, 1937).

[12] 'Priere pour aller au Paradis avec les Anes' is the eighth of 'Quatorze Prieres' by Francis Jammes, in Le Deuil des Primavères, 1890-1900 (Paris: Mercure de France, 1917), p. 185.

[13] An Upanishad is one of the later books of the Hindu canon of sacred scripture. The earlier books are known as Vedas, e.g., the Rig-Veda, the Atharva-Veda. The name Veda, however, is also the name applied to the whole canon of Hindu scripture. It is impossible to date any of these canonical books accurately, but scholars are generally agreed, that the earliest books of the Veda probably date back to at least 1000 B.C. and the latest Upanishads to about 300 B.C., though there is little agreement as to the date of any particular book. The Svetasvatara is one of the principal Upanishads, but almost certainly of much more recent date than the Chandogya or the Brihadaranyaka, which are believed to date back to the seventh or eighth century B.C. The Svetasvatara Upanishad and Radhakrishnan's commentary on it, will both be found in The Principal Upanisads, ed. and trans. S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953). Both quotations are from p. 743.

[14] See Introductory Essay, The Bhagavadgita, trans. S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 6.

[15] The essay will be found in AION: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self: Vol. 9, Part II, of The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, ed. Sir H. Read, M. Fordham, and G. Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).

[16] In Job's Balances, trans. C. Coventry and C.A. Macartney (London: Dent, 1932). Original version, Na Vesakh Iova (Paris: Annales Contemporaine, 1929).

[17] Advaita Vedanta: In the word Vedanta, the suffix anta means 'end', and so Vedanta means the end of the Veda, that is to say, the Upanishads, which are the last of the canonical scriptures to be written. The word Advaita consists of two parts: the negative prefix a- followed by dvaita which means 'twoness', or 'duality'. Advaita, therefore, means 'Not-Two-ness' or 'Non-duality'. The two words put together form the name of Sankara's strictly non-dualistic formulation of the philosophy of the Upanishads.

17 continued

According to Advaita Vedanta, all things, without exception, are, in reality, Brahman, the Infinite, the Eternal, the Unchangeable. The world, our personal self, our chosen deity or deities, are all simply different aspects of Brahman, who is 'One without a second' (Ekam eva advitiyam), to quote the Chandogya Upanishad, VI, 2, 1. The sensory forms which convey to us impressions of duality and multiplicity are all unreal - the products of maya, or divine magic. Once man is freed, however, from the dream consciousness of ordinary conditioned existence, he sees Brahman clearly everywhere, and in everything.

In Lucky Poet, MacDiarmid himself claims to be an 'Advaitin, holding Sankara's Vedanta philosophy' (p. 408).

18 Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West, (Westöstliche Mystik, Gotha, 1926), trans B.L. Bracey and R.C. Payne (New York: MacMillan, 1932).

19 Mahayana Buddhism: The term Mahayana, or 'Great Vehicle', is applied (by those who approve of them) to the later, more highly developed forms of Buddhism which began to emerge around the beginning of the Christian era. The term Hinayana, or 'Lesser Vehicle', is applied by adherents of the Mahayana to the early forms of Buddhism, though advocates of these older forms completely repudiate the term, preferring to call themselves Theravadins - those who walk 'the way of the elders' (Theravada). The characteristic emphasis of the Mahayana is on self-forgetful compassion for all mankind. The Mahayana saints (known as Bodhisattvas) renounce all ideas of personal salvation, believing that there is no salvation worth having which does not include all living beings. They vow to sacrifice their lives, in whatever way may be necessary, in order to secure the salvation of all. But in so doing, the Bodhisattva discovers a new realm of consciousness, in which this dreaded world of suffering is seen to be identical with the blissful world of the Divine: or, to use their terminology, Samsara is seen to be Nirvana, and Nirvana Samsara. This is only one of the many paradoxes of Mahayana doctrine. For further information, see the article by Edward Conze, 'Buddhism: The Mahayana', in The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, ed. R.C. Zaehner (London: Hutchinson, 1959), pp. 293-317.

20 Atman: This Sanskrit word means the real Self of man, the selfhood shared by all men, which is one with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. What man conceives to be his own separate personal self, is known as the jivatman, to distinguish it from the real Self.

21 Yogacara is the name of one of the two main schools of Mahayana philosophy, the other one being the Madhyamika, the earlier of the two. The Madhyamika philosophy, originally expounded by Nagarjuna (c. 200 A.D.), appears, on the surface, to be a form of Nihilism, whereas the Yogacara philosophy, whose chief exponents were the brothers Vasubandhu and Asanga (c. 300 A.D.), appears to teach a kind of subjective idealism.

21 continued

According to Edwin A. Burtt, however, who used to be Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, 'It is very misleading to refer to these philosophies in terms of such analogies with Western speculative systems, and if the reader approaches them merely in this fashion he will find himself confronted by a baffling conundrum instead of making progress toward significant understanding.' (The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, ed. E.A. Burtt. New York: Mentor, 1955), pp. 167-8).

22 Buddhist seers: In the Mahayana classic, The Awakening of Faith, by the Patriarch Ashvagosha (died c. 100 A.D.), it is said, of these seers or 'Pusas', that 'in an instant', they 'are able to reach all space throughout all the universe', and to 'manifest themselves throughout all points of space for the good of all beings'. (trans. Rev. T. Richard. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1918, pp. 32-33).

23 In his Spiritual Diary (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1978) Swedenborg devotes considerable space to describing an experience in which, he says, 'I was elevated and perceived that I was outside the world of our sun. I also perceived, from the region of the elevation, that I was in a starry world towards the meridional region . . .' (Vol. IV, 4832, p. 220). Again, in Heaven and Hell (London: Swedenborg Society, 1937), he says: 'There are spirits whose sole study it is to acquire knowledges, finding in them their only delight. These spirits are therefore allowed to wander about, and even to pass out of this solar system into other systems and acquire knowledges' (p. 311).

24 The word Yogacara is misprinted as 'ogacara' in The Complete Poems. The original manuscript in Edinburgh University Library, however, shows the word Yogacara quite clearly.

25 According to Sri Deshpande of Benares, The Authentic Yoga (London: Rider, 1978), 'Darsana or Darsanam means looking at, seeing, observing; also knowing, understanding, perceiving; and also inquiry, examination' (p. 1).

26 The Way of Zen by Alan W. Watts (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962).

27 Martin Buber: b. Vienna, 1878; Professor of the philosophy of Jewish religion and ethics, University of Frankfort-am-Main, 1924-33; Professor of Social Philosophy, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1938-65; d. Jerusalem, 1965. A prolific writer on religious topics, particularly Hasidism. His most famous book is Ich und Du (Berlin, 1922).

28 R.B. Blakney, trans., Meister Eckhart (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), p. 79.

[29] Quoted in Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, by F.C. Happold (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 220.

[30] Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1958), p. 23.

[31] In the Indian Scriptures (e.g. in the Chandogya Upanishad, VI, 10, 3), the word THAT (Skr. tat) is used to signify the divine Mystery beyond all words and concepts, to which no name can properly be applied. According to the Indian view, divine names are simply fingers that point at this Moon beyond all names.

[32] MacDiarmid is probably alluding here to what Pascal writes in his notes 'Sur l'obéissance due a l'Église et au Pape', after hearing of Rome's condemnation of his Provincial Letters (trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982):

> Si mes lettres sont condamnées à Rome, ce que j'y condamne est condamné dans le ciel. Ad tuum, Domine Jesu, tribunal appello.
>
> (Oeuvres Complètes. Paris: Gallimard, 1954, p. 1073)

Chapter Two

Hugh MacDiarmid as a religious poet

There might appear to be a certain absurdity in speaking of MacDiarmid as a religious poet, since he was an avowed Marxist and materialist, and therefore, one would think, implicitly opposed to all religion. It depends, however, what one means by religion. What Marx meant when he advocated its abolition, is made perfectly clear in his 'Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', where he says: 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opium of the people . . . Religion is only the illusory sun, which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself'.[1] Religion in this sense is obviously not something which heightens and extends man's consciousness, or deepens his understanding of reality, but which tends, rather, to stifle and stupefy his thought, by alienating him from his real self, and encouraging him to project, in imagination, his own powers and potentialities into some hypothetical 'other world', in the shape of a being called 'God'. Needless to say, religion in this sense - religion as a stupefying drug, as a soothing way of escape into self-alienation - was never of any interest to MacDiarmid. So, when he writes, in 'In Memoriam James Joyce': 'As a poet I'm interested in religious ideas' (C.P., II, 798), we can be quite sure that he has something rather different in mind. We must remember, of course, that the religions which influenced him most deeply were, apparently, those Indian religions which regard 'God' or the Divine, not as something remote from, or external to, man, but as the undiscovered depths of man's own nature - his own real Self, in fact, from which he has somehow become alienated. In the light of Indian religious teaching, it is not too difficult to see how a Marxist poet could, indeed, develop an absorbing interest in religion, and religious ideas, 'Even Scottish ones, Wee Free ones even' (C.P., II, 798).

But however we may care to explain it, it is certainly true - as we shall soon discover, if we can lay aside our a priori expectations long enough to look at MacDiarmid's actual writings - that this Marxist materialist wrote a great deal more about 'God' and religion, than he did about Marx and Marxism. Repeatedly, we find him choosing religious language, religious terminology, religious imagery, religious symbols (such as the Burning Bush and the Cross of Calvary), in order to convey his deepest meanings. Repeatedly, we find him referring to, quoting from, or paraphrasing, the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and other religious writings. More important still, he repeatedly shows his intimate acquaintance with the mystical states of consciousness which belong to the very heart of religion. Perhaps, however, the most significant fact of all, for the discerning reader, is, that if we refuse to recognise the powerful religious elements in MacDiarmid's poetry, we can be left with a fair number of puzzling, if not wholly unintelligible, lines and passages, of which the following are representative examples:

> These are the moments when my sang
> Clears its white feet frae oot amang
> My broken thocht, and moves as free
> As souls frae bodies when they dee.
> There's naething left o' me ava'
> Save a' I'd hoped micht whiles befa' . . .
>
> And e'en the glory that descends
> I kenna whence on me depends,
> And shapes itsel' to what is left
> Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft,
> And still the form is mine, altho'
> A force to which I ne'er could grow
> Is movin' in't as 'twere a sea
> That lang syne drooned the last o' me
> - That drooned afore the warld began
> A' that could ever come frae Man.
>
> (A Drunk Man: C.P., I, 142-4)

> The God I speak o's him wha made
> The warld and ither warlds that are
> As different frae't as Nicht frae Day
> Or Life frae Death
> - The God in whom religions centre,
> No' Him that lifts unkennable ayont
> Creation and Creator baith!

Wha by Divine can think o' nocht but life
Raised to the heichest poo'er, to mair
Than genius is to common sense,
Mid-day to mirk,
Ettlin' to turn into angels syne
As caterpillars into moths,
May grub in a kirk.

The Gowden Eagle disna stegh itsel'
On sic cocoons; the betterment o' man,
And a' that life is or sall become
Are nocht to that God,
But wha for a' Creation cares nae mair,
Nor less, than for a whigmaleerie, tak's a'e step
Alang his endless road.

God the Creator still maun ser'
The mindless fools wha canna . . .
But to see ev'n him as weel as ony man
Can gin he tries
They maun unbig the warld they're pairt o'
And brak' the foond whaur the serpent
As a sacrifice lies,

The immortal serpent wa'd up in life
As God in the thochts o' men . . .

This, at best, is the God that men
Can humanly ken; and the serpent's
The clearest sense o' the nature o' life
To which they can win . . .

(To Circumjack Cencrastus: C.P., I, 244-5)

But the kindred form I am conscious of here
Is the beginning and end of the world,
The unsearchable masterpiece, the music of the spheres,
Alpha and Omega, the Omnific Word.

('On a Raised Beach',
Stony Limits and Other Poems:
C.P., I, 428-9)

. . . Poetry's not written for men
And lies always beyond all but all men's ken . . .

('On the Oxford Book of Victorian Verse',
Stony Limits: C.P., I, 450)

It is the realisation of the light upon which
Not only life but the very existence of the universe
depends;
Not only animal life but earth, water, air.
If it faded it would mean the end of 'everything'.
It does not fade. Our spirit is of a being indestructible.
Its activity continues from eternity to eternity.
It is like the sun which seems to set to our earthly eyes
But in reality shines on unceasingly . . .

It is not lawful to inquire from whence it springs,
As if it were a thing subject to space and time.
It neither approaches hither nor again departs from hence
elsewhere.
But it either appears to us or it does not appear.
So we ought not to pursue it with a view to detecting
Its secret source, but watch in quiet till it suddenly
shines upon us;
Preparing ourselves for the blessed spectacle as the eye
Waits patiently for the rising sun . . .

It is the supreme reality (not the Deity of personal theism)
Standing free of all historical events in past or future,
Knowable - but visible to the mind alone . . .

('Lament for the Great Music',
Stony Limits, C.P., I, 473-4)

One thing these excerpts make clear: the poet is acquainted with a variety of ideas and concepts of the 'Divine', more than one of which he describes as 'God', though he is careful to distinguish between 'God the Creator' - 'the Deity of personal theism', and God as Ultimate Reality - 'Him that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith'. The same distinction is found in the theological writings of Meister Eckhart, who distinguishes between Deus or Gott on the one hand, and Deitas or Gottheit on the other. Similar distinctions are to be found in all developed theologies. In Hinduism, for example, a distinction is drawn between Brahman, 'the supreme reality' behind and beyond all things, and Isvara, who manifests one aspect of Brahman as 'the Deity of personal theism', 'the God that men / Can humanly ken', in contrast to the Brahman, who 'lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith'. In Mahayana Buddhism, the distinction is between Sunyata, the Ultimate Reality, which is pure Emptiness from the human viewpoint, and

Buddha, 'the Deity who is its freely phenomenalised aspect' and (like Christ) 'the principle of mediation between the Absolute (sunyata) and phenomenal beings', as Professor Murti explains, in The Central Philosophy of Buddhism.[2]

MacDiarmid evinces a certain contempt for those 'Wha by Divine can think o' nocht but life / Raised to the heichest poo'er' - an incapacity from which neither believers nor unbelievers in 'God' would appear to be exempt. Hence the difficulty of trying to associate MacDiarmid with either group. His own vision of the 'Divine' far transcends the limits of anything that theists claim to believe in, or atheists claim to disbelieve in. His religious insights are essentially transcendent, and quite impossible to reconcile with sectarianism of any kind.

In the excerpt from the 'Lament for the Great Music', the words, 'Our spirit . . . shines on unceasingly', are substantially those of Goethe, as recorded by J.P. Eckermann in his Gespräche mit Goethe.[3] As Goethe and Eckermann were journeying home one evening, their attention was caught and held by the splendour of the setting sun. Goethe, then aged 75, admitted that the spectacle inevitably reminded him, that his own life was now sinking towards its end. He explained, however, that the thought of death no longer appalled him, because he perceived that

> Unser Geist ein Wesen ist ganz unzerstörbarer Natur, es ist ein fortwirkendes von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit, es ist der Sonne ähnlich, die bloss unsern irdischen Augen unterzugehen scheint, die aber eigentlich nie untergeht, sondern unaufhörlich fortleuchtet.

It should be noted that the theological viewpoint reflected in these excerpts, has an obvious affinity with that of both Eckhart and Sankara, with regard to whom Rudolf Otto says, in Mysticism East and West:

> The seer has to pass beyond 'God' into the silent void of the Godhead itself. That is the highest vision, and whosoever still has 'a God' has not yet reached to the highest and the last. He stands only at the verge of eternity, but not yet within it. (pp. 7-8)

If, however, in spite of all that these excerpts say, we continue to feel that the word 'religious' sounds absurdly inappropriate when applied to MacDiarmid, this could be because of the connotations this word has collected within our own particular society, and because the definition of 'religion' which we, perhaps unconsciously, carry within us, is such a narrow and constricting one, that it inevitably excludes a great deal that would be regarded as genuinely religious by people of other cultural traditions. Not that we should be unduly surprised or ashamed if we discover this to be so; for religion covers such a vast area of human experience (from crude ritual dance to rarified feelings of identity with the divine) that even the most comprehensive definition is likely to leave out something which some religious soul somewhere would regard as of the very essence of religion.

In this connection, the following observations by Professor Herbert V. Guenther of Saskatchewan University are worth pondering:

> It generally has been recognised that true religion, as distinct from the comfortable religiosity of the sham article, overarches the whole of human culture and the whole of life; that it inspires, sustains, and guards man's highest aspirations. In recognising the importance of religion it is, of course, dangerous to conceive of 'religion' in terms of one particular religion or creed which is but the end formulation (and often ossification) of a certain aspect of religion, not religion itself. It is equally disastrous to make religion mean everything and so nothing. Every attempt to define religion in terms of man's 'feeling' or 'sense' or 'attitude', all of which emphasise what is better called 'religious experience', must fail in spite of the fact that such definitions are valuable in a given context, which always means to have singled out a single aspect. Religion, and more exactly religious knowledge, includes and transcends all these aspects. This transcendence certainly has a mystic character, but it is not <u>eo ipso</u> mysticism, which like a creed, may be said to be a systematization, and hence a loss of the vividness and richness of religion. Transcendence must be understood as a dynamic movement, not as a static entity, and therefore by its very nature it transcends the idea that 'all the <u>different</u> things in the world become <u>one</u>, become identical with one another.' It is true that in the writings of the mystics 'oneness' is emphasised, but it is wrong to conclude that this is an existential or ontological oneness; rather it is a noetic oneness.

> Although religion always implies acceptance and commitment, it is more than that as it is also the desire to understand more fully and clearly that to which one has committed oneself or is about to commit oneself. Here, mind does not and must not cease to inquire; thus what is found by such a critical and constructive scrutiny becomes the cornerstone of a more secure and enlightened reconstruction.[4]

Obviously, 'religion' is not something one can easily bring within the bounds of definition. Nevertheless, in order to clarify our thinking, as far as we can, we ought to try to explain, at least to ourselves, what qualities and characteristics distinguish 'religion' from that which is not religion, and divide 'religious' acts, beliefs, or experiences, from acts, beliefs or experiences which are not religious.

To produce a completely comprehensive definition of the words 'religion' and 'religious' may well be beyond our powers, but in the light of such self-questioning, this at least should become clear: despite the bewildering profusion of religions, and of religious beliefs and practices, religion in all its forms is concerned with establishing contact with (or at least heightening human awareness of, and sensitivity to) an area of experience inaccessible to ordinary consciousness. It is an expression of man's feeling of need to find THAT (call it 'God', 'Brahman', 'Tao', or what you will) which lies beyond the boundaries of his own finitude and dependency, and which seems to him to be the abiding Source of meaning and power behind his own essentially ephemeral existence.

This concern with, and feeling of need for, a 'beyond', is well expressed in the ancient prayer from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

> asato mā sad gamaya,
> tamaso mā jyotir gamaya,
> mṛtyor māmṛtam gamaya. (I.3.28)
>
> From the unreal, lead me to the real,
> From darkness, lead me to light,
> From death, lead me to immortality.

The same feeling and concern are repeatedly reflected in the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid. We have already quoted a few examples.

Here is another brief one, from To Circumjack Cencrastus:

> It's no' the purpose o' poetry to sing
> The beauty o' the dirt frae which we spring
> But to cairry us as faur as ever it can
> 'Yont nature and the Common Man.
>
> (C.P., I, 255)

Since not all poetry, however, and not all religion, is concerned with carrying us 'Yont nature and the Common Man', these lines draw attention to the fact that MacDiarmid is not just an ordinary religious poet, but a religious poet with a very special and distinctive function to fulfil. But before we can profitably explore the nature of this function, we must first recall the important distinction that exists between religion in its primitive forms and religion in its more highly developed civilised forms.

Generally speaking, the primitive religions of the world differ from what are sometimes called the higher religions, in much the same way as the roots of a rose bush differ from its roses. Like the roots of the bush, primitive religions reach downward to take a firm hold on the earth. They tend to conceive of man and his 'beyond' in terms of ordinary physical existence, and of human fulfilment as consisting in the gratification of instinctive appetites and personal desires. Their primary aim (never quite achieved, of course) is to enable men, or rather, one particular community of men, to enjoy constant prosperity, contentment, and well-being, both in this world and in the next.

The 'higher' religions, on the other hand, like the roses on the bush, tend to turn their attention away from the earth, reaching upward as if seeking some destination beyond the clouds. 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal', says Jesus, 'But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matthew 6:19-21).

The higher religions see little hope for man within the limits of 'earthly' - that is to say, ordinary physical - existence. 'There is no pain like this bodily existence',[5] says the Buddha, in the Dhammapada.[6]

'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God', says St Paul (1 Cor. 15:50). Man's blind identification of himself with his instinctive desires and cravings, merely leads him, they believe, into states of delusion and grief. As the Jewish Psalmist says: 'Man walketh in a vain shadow and disquieteth himself in vain: he heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them' (Psalm 39:7, Book of Common Prayer). And, as the Buddha reminds us in the Dhammapada, 'From desire comes grief, from desire comes fear; he who is free from desire knows neither grief nor fear'.[7] MacDiarmid himself, in the person of his Drunk Man, reflects on the futility of following instinctive desires:

> Ilka pleesure I can ha'e
> Ends like a dram ta'en yesterday.
>
> And tho' to ha'e it I am lorn
> - What better 'ud I be the morn? . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 110)

Man, according to the teachings of the higher religions, cannot find fulfilment through personal satisfaction and well-being, but only, ultimately, through losing his limited personal ego in the infinite depths of the real Self, namely God. As Meister Eckhart says: 'A really perfect person will be so dead to self, so lost in God, so given over to the will of God, that his whole happiness consists in being unconscious of self and its concerns, and being conscious, instead of God' (Blakney, p. 50).

Though far from being 'perfect', MacDiarmid repeatedly had fleeting mystical experiences of this state. Hence the lines:

> There's naething left o' me ava'
> Save a' I'd hoped micht whiles befa' . . .

and his reference to 'A force to which I ne'er could grow . . . That lang syne drooned the last o' me'. It is, of course, from this same egoless state that St Paul is speaking, when he says: 'I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20).

Only a few points of difference have been mentioned so far between the primitive and the higher forms of religion, but already it will be obvious, that it is the teachings of higher religion rather than those of primitive religion which find the clearest expression in MacDiarmid's poetry; as, for example, in the following lines from 'Song of the Seraphim' (Lucky Poet):

> Only he who hopes nothing more
> From well-being and philistinism;
> Only he who is no longer fettered
> In the coarse material depths;
> Only he who yearns for new needs
> - The needs of the Heights,
> Not the needs of the Depths,
> Immense and seraphic needs -
> He only perceives
> The impalpable and primordial life,
> The Supreme - a life
> Fuller, more real, and warmer
> Than the chaotic deception
> Of the palpable and objective
> Which is apparently only effective
> For everyday lower life.
>
> (C.P., I, 639)

In this poem, he speaks with regret of how man can still be fettered, through enforced poverty,

> In the depths of the material regions
> - In the mechanical, dead, inanimate
> Or animal life of Nature.
>
> (C.P., I, 638)

although 'This life we have now outgrown'. He laments that this 'lower life' still

> . . . lays the veil of the body over the spirit
> And drags everything down to the level
> Of a narrow materiality.
>
> (C.P., I, 638)

But he also points to

> . . . the entire hopeless confortlessness
> Of a satisfied well-being

and sings the praises of

> . . . a holy poverty,
> A super-richness which falls to pieces
> In its own splendour,
> A glowing love
> That presses all fullness to itself,
> Allows all small possessions to fall
> More and more away from it,
> All narrowness in relation
> To things and to self -
> Not from any ascetic discomfort,
> But because of the poorness
> Of these things in themselves
> Such is the glory
> Of holy riches
> And supreme prodigality.
>
> (C.P., I, 640)

With regard to 'the poorness / Of these things in themselves', St Teresa of Avila (1515-1583), one of the most gifted mystics of all time, says, in her book, Way of Perfection, 'If we took care always to remember what a Guest we have within us, I think it would be impossible for us to abandon ourselves to vanities and things of the world, for we should see how worthless they are by comparison with those which we have within us'.[8] Writing at a somewhat earlier date, Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German Protestant reformer, in his commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, emphasises that 'It is the Spirit that causes so many things suddenly to disappear and to vanish into nothingness and to be regarded as worthless by the soul. And the soul that has inwardly turned away from everything seeks with Mary only the one thing needful . . .'[9] - words that bring us back again to the central mystery of higher religion: the 'single' eye that sees, not a world of duality and multiplicity, but God alone:

> Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
> Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
> Change and decay in all around I see:
> O Thou who changest not, abide with me.[10]

It is important to remember, however, that primitive religion and higher religion, though developing in different directions, are parts of the same organic whole. Certainly, the raison d'être of the roots is to be found in the blossoms of the rose bush, but roots can exist without roses: roses cannot come into existence without roots. And it would seem that, humanly speaking, even the highest of the higher religions owes something to its roots in primitive myth and magic, roots with which it may still preserve unashamed contact. For, evidently, it is only at the primitive level that man can initially make contact with religion, and it is obvious that the vast majority of religious people are incapable of ever rising above this level - like those who followed Jesus, not in order to learn how to take up their cross, but simply because they 'did eat of the loaves, and were filled' (John 6:26).

Religion has always had, as Milton says,

> Anow of such as for their bellies sake,
> Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold.[11]

Such people may choose to wear the label of one of the higher religions, and call themselves 'Christians', 'Jews', 'Hindus', 'Buddhists' etc., but it is perfectly evident, from their 'narrowness in relation / To things and self', that they have little idea of what higher religion involves. They are clearly adherents of a fairly primitive cult, which promises nothing more than 'the entire hopeless confortlessness / Of a satisfied well-being', in this world and the next.

It would seem that it is only to the few in any age that the higher viewpoint becomes intelligible, for it is only the few who are able, like MacDiarmid, to see the things of 'everyday lower life' from the point of view of the roses on the rose bush, and thus to recognise, not only 'the poorness / Of these things in themselves', but also the 'super-richness' of that 'holy poverty' known to the saints, which St Paul defines as 'having nothing, and yet possessing all things' (2 Cor. 6:10). Only to the few do the sacred scriptures, hymns, stories, rituals, of their chosen religion, become so clearly translucent and transparent, that 'The impalpable and primordial life / The Supreme'

is able to shine through in all its splendour, bringing with it the strains of that 'impossible' song of God, which MacDiarmid says he values above all others:

> The only song for which I care
> Is one other men may hear
> But cannot understand
> Save as a man may 'share'
> But cannot really bear
> Another's pain . . .
>
> Most men are naturally unable
> To hear a song like that at all . . .

He insists, however, that

> There's nothing else for which I'm fain
> Or care a damn about . . .
>
> Your song, O God, that none dare hear
> Save the insane and such as I
> Apostates from humanity
> Sings out in me with no more fear
> Than one who thinks he has the world's ear
> From his padded cell
> - Insane enough, with you so near,
> To want, like you, the world as well!
>
> (C.P., I, 509-512)

Not that this song is really foreign to any man, for

> It's such a song as all men sing
> Tho' few ever hear themselves
> Or could believe it if they did . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 509)

It is the song of the real Self in every man. If most people find it strange, impossible to understand, this is simply because they have become estranged from their real Self, who is God - the singer of the impossible song in every man's heart. It is certainly 'Your song, O God', but it is also the song of 'all men', for, as the Chandogya Upanishad explains, 'All that is has its self in him alone. Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self.

And . . . THAT ART THOU'.[12] St Paul was obviously aware of this when he wrote: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20). And the Christian author of 'The Epistle of Privy Counsel' says: 'What I am, Lord, I offer you, for it is yourself'.[13] The danger of having a self other than God, in other words, an unreal self, is understood by all the saints. Hence St Teresa's anguished prayer: 'May this self of mine die, and may Another, greater than myself and better for me than myself, live in me . . .'[14]

But man, in his spiritual infancy, has to begin with 'the needs of the Depths' (C.P., I, 639), and with the apparently rational resolve, to seek the well-being of what appears, from the point of view of ordinary experience, to be his self. It is only when he reaches a later stage of development, and discovers the ultimate futility of all his attempts at 'self'-gratification, and 'self'-fulfilment, that he painfully gives birth to 'the needs of the Heights', and therefore cries out for an end to 'the chaotic deception / Of the palpable and objective', the tormenting mirages of the unreal, selfish 'self'. In the depths of his being, the ancient prayer becomes a constant, incurable ache:

asato mā sad gamaya . . .

From the unreal, lead me to the real . . .

until, at length, he discovers the one and only way to real selfhood, through losing his hypothetical personal 'self' in the Divine Self - 'the Supreme' - which is then recognised to be his only true Self, though not his alone, for it belongs equally to all his fellow-beings. Once he has realised, and become, the Self that he really is, he is then able to see, as the Bhagavad-gita says, 'his own Self in all beings and all beings in his own Self',[15] and obey the Biblical injunction: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Leviticus 19:18).

Such insights cannot blossom in the primitive 'Depths' or even on the middle heights of the spiritual life, but only on the very highest 'Heights'. Yet the ascent to the 'Heights' has to begin in the 'Depths'. And man cannot normally discover the 'needs of the Heights' until the 'needs of the Depths' have been fully explored and transcended. It is

important to remember this, because it has been known for the rich and powerful members of society to use the aims of one of the higher religions as a pretext for ignoring or denying the physical and material needs of the poor and underprivileged. Unworldliness and self-denial have been preached to the underfed and overworked. The victims of deprivation and exploitation have been exhorted, in the name of religion, to renounce all desire for proper remuneration, and to accept, instead, the consolations of 'holy poverty', while their masters have gone on growing richer and richer (in material wealth) at their expense. Hence MacDiarmid's insistence that

> . . . the entire hopeless confortlessness
> Of a satisfied well-being
> Must first be lived through,
> Not merely described
> Or held out to the poor
> From afar.
> The lower paradises
> Must be outlived through satiety.
>
> ('Song of the Seraphim', C.P., I, 639)

It was not so much because he was a Marxist, but mainly because he was a spiritual man with a passion for enlightenment, that MacDiarmid detested the prostitution of higher religion for political purposes. He saw that poverty imposed from above could never be 'holy poverty', since 'holy poverty' can be born only out of renunciation and transcendence. But no one can renounce or transcend states he has never known. Until a man has enjoyed, or suffered, a state of 'satisfied well-being' for himself, how can he understand how hopelessly unsatisfying it is, as an end and aim of existence? MacDiarmid wants the choice of 'holy poverty' to be open to everybody, but obviously this is not possible as long as poverty is compulsory for anybody. Compulsory poverty, which inevitably blinds its victims to the glories of 'holy poverty', is, he declares,

> . . . nothing but an outlived fettering
> In the depths of the material regions
> - In the mechanical, dead, inanimate
> Or animal life of Nature . . .

It is nothing but meanness and ugliness,
Stench, corruption, vice, decomposition, and dumbness.

('Song of the Seraphim', C.P., I, 638)

Contemplating the blinding effects of compulsory poverty, he asks, with sorrow,

Does the mighty proletarian assault
Of the poorest today desire nothing
But 'satiety', nothing but 'well-being'
With a smattering of art and education
Built philistine-wise upon it?

Does it not want as it asserts
To overcome the bourgeoisie,
But only to establish it forever
Bourgeoisie itself in everything,
Not a step higher?
And that disgusts the few spiritual men,
But how can it disgust
Those poorest ones?

(C.P., I 640)

How indeed, when they have never been allowed to experience for themselves the emptiness of 'satiety' and 'well-being', the insubstantiality of all the bourgeoisie's 'lower paradises'?

It might be objected, that MacDiarmid's case is weakened by his failure to recognise the power of divine Grace to raise up spiritual giants in any and every kind of environment - even in the strongholds of enforced poverty and privation. In fact, however, his case is not weakened in the slightest by an open admission, that the evil effects of enforced poverty are sometimes neutralised by a miracle of Grace; for we are not entitled to rely on miracles to counteract the natural and foreseeable consequences of our wrong actions, as Jesus made clear in his answer to the Devil's second temptation (Matthew 4:6-7). It is our unavoidable responsibility to ensure that no action, or lack of action, on our part, will expose our brother human beings to stresses and strains that are clearly calculated to impede their physical, psychological or spiritual development.

We may now begin to understand why MacDiarmid saw no contradiction between his religious insights and experiences on the one hand, and his advocacy of Marx's Dialectical Materialism on the other. For he believed

that, in the Soviet Union, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Marxism as a political force was having a little more success in fulfilling the aims of primitive religion than any of the recognised religions had ever had. In these Socialist societies, he believed, every person, irrespective of class, creed or colour, was being given some chance to outgrow those 'needs of the Depths' in which the vast majority of mankind had always hitherto been trapped. On this view, Communist activity and higher religion were not antithetical, but complementary. Both were seen to be performing a religious function, though on different levels of reality. Hence his 'Hymns to Lenin'. And it should be noted that, though, in the second of them, he says to the Russian leader, '. . . Your sphere's elementary and sune by', (C.P., I, 326) and

> Ah, Lenin, politics is bairns' play
> To what this maun be!
>
> (C.P., I, 328)

he admits, nevertheless, that Lenin's task 'comes first, I know it'. (C.P., I, 323).

It should not, however, be inferred from the foregoing that Marxism has a religious significance only at the level of politics and primitive religion. In its philosophical form it has certain obvious affinities with the higher religions. Ironically enough, it shares with these religions their rejection of the 'materialistic' solution to life's difficulties - the naive belief that man can get rid of his basic unease and disquiet through the possession and enjoyment of material goods and the gratification of personal and instinctive desires. Marx speaks of the 'torment' of matter ('Qual' in German) - a concept which he admits he borrowed from the German mystic, Jacob Boehme[16] - and it seems clear that, for him, as for St Paul, 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together' (Romans 8:22), until the moment of Messianic deliverance arrives. But before that moment can come, human society must undergo a process of painful transformation, in the fires of proletarian dictatorship. As a result of this purgative process, according to the Communist Manifesto, 'In the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free

development of all.'[17] Clearly, there is some resemblance here to the eschatological language of the great prophets of the Jewish race (the race into which Marx was born) - Isaiah, Amos, Micah, etc. Isaiah, for example, looks forward to a time when men will 'beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks' (Isaiah 2:4), and his vision is shared by Micah (Micah 4:3); Amos speaks of how 'the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt' (Amos 9:13), once God has purified his people in the fires of earthly history. The Jewish vision, of course, is essentially international. The belief is, that in the children of Abraham, 'shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 22:18). When, eventually, 'the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains', then 'all nations shall flow unto it' ('Isaiah 2:2), not just the Jewish nation. The Marxist vision of international brotherhood conforms to this pattern.

Even Marx's anti-religious utterances are seldom wholly devoid of religious connotations. They tend to reflect a mingling of moral indignation and compassion which is characteristic of the great saints and seers of Judaism. When he speaks, for example, of how the poor and exploited have to try to find in religion 'the heart of a heartless world' (Feuer, p. 304), or when he speaks, in Das Kapital, of how poverty-stricken mill-girls are cheated by their wealthy employers out of the 'surplus value' which their cruelly long hours of work create from the raw materials they handle, it is not difficult to hear some echoes of that divine voice which denounced, through Amos, those 'kine of Bashan . . . which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink' (Amos 4:1), the voice of that Deity who rejected, through Isaiah, the religious practices of that day, associated as they were with economic oppression and exploitation:

> Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.
>
> Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.
>
> And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you:

> Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.
>
> Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;
>
> Learn to do well, seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:13-17)
>
> Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6)

If these are, indeed, the words of God, it is clear that the atheist Marx was 'not far from the kingdom of God' (Mark 12:34).

In this connection, it is interesting to note what William Blake says, in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', about how God speaks to men:

> The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they could be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.
>
> Isaiah answered: 'I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote . . .'[18]

Marxism, however, has affinities, not only with Judaism, but also with other higher religions, notably Buddhism. For Marx's German friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels, like most German intellectuals of his day, had some knowledge of, and interest in, the religions of India. An interesting discussion of these affinities can be found in Professor R.C. Zaehner's article on Dialectical Materialism in The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths,[19] but to examine his arguments in detail here would take us far beyond the scope of this chapter, without adding substantially to the conclusion we have already reached, namely, that Marxism does have a religious significance which is not confined to the level of primitive religion.

What must now be made clear is, that though Marxism is certainly related to the higher religions, it cannot itself be regarded as a higher religion. A study of MacDiarmid's poetry will enable us to

understand why. For, despite their great gifts, Marx and Engels had no knowledge of the mysterious realms which lie 'Yont nature and the Common Man'. Their thinking was confined within a 'World Process', and, as MacDiarmid points out,

> Every 'World Process' that we describe
> Has only a world reality,
> A reality of manifestation and technique.
> We comprehend in it only
> That which is objective and dead,
> Never its life - for all life
> Is incomprehensible.
> Life is greater than all that can enter
> Into the comprehensible.
> Though I know all the limbs,
> Entrails, organs, and functions of mankind,
> Still am I as far as ever
> From knowing 'man'
> Who is more than the sum of his organs . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 642)

Insofar, then, as Marxism restricts itself to the events of a 'World Process', it inevitably excludes itself from the realm of higher religion, to which MacDiarmid's transcendent insights belong.

The language which he uses to explain his point, however, would appear to separate him, not only from Marx and Engels, but also from most of his fellow men. By linking together the words 'objective' and 'dead', he makes it clear that he attributes deadness to that which is 'objective', whereas people in general tend to use the word 'objective' as synonymous with 'actual' and 'real'. MacDiarmid, however, is quite emphatic in rejecting the popular view. He says:

> Whoever regards a 'World Process'
> As a final reality
> Is merely pursuing the anatomy
> Of the corpse of all life.
>
> (C.P., I, 643)

This line of thought may seem rather difficult to follow, for the poet seems intent on casting doubts on the most obvious facts. He seems to be implying that the living world around us is really dead. But is this really what he means?

Unfortunately, a complete explanation of MacDiarmid's puzzling references to the 'objective' world cannot be given here, since they derive from his more rarified religious insights and experiences, which we shall be discussing later, in connection with his poetic accounts of them, and apart from which no satisfactory explanation is possible. What can be said right away, however, is that the poet is not denying the livingness of the living world. His view is, that the world which our senses ordinarily present to us as 'objective' is not the living world. It is a dead world. It is 'the chaotic deception / Of the palpable and objective', and its deceptiveness consists in being a world of death masquerading as a world of life. Every object in it derives from a dead past, and has no destination other than the dead past which, even at this moment, is rapidly devouring all the contents of what we conceive to be a living present. Even as we try to experience these objects, in this hypothetical 'living present', they are swiftly but imperceptibly being slipped away, atom by atom, into the ever-expanding limbo of time past, the tantalisingly inaccessible world of 'has been'.

Friedrich Engels saw this very clearly. As he says, in Anti-Duhring, 'Everything is and also is not; for everything is in 'flux', is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away'.[20] But whereas Marx and Engels regarded this 'flux' as life, MacDiarmid, looking at it from a higher viewpoint, saw it as death. Those who can perceive only that which is 'objective and dead' have no means of recognising its deadness, for its deadness can be perceived only in relation to 'That higher and stronger quickening life' which has 'nothing objective' in it, because it is 'living spirit' (see p. 643). And so, though Marx and Engels could certainly see that 'All created things perish', as the Buddha says (C.B. p. 66), they could not share in that higher perception to which the Buddha refers when he says: 'When you have understood the destruction of all that was made, you will understand that which was not made' (C.B. pp. 70-71). It is a measure of MacDiarmid's greatness that he could share in both perceptions. Not only could he see the constant 'coming into being and passing away' of things in the 'objective' world, but he could also see with the Buddha

that 'There is . . . an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, and were it not . . . for this unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded. But because there is . . . an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, therefore an escape can be shown for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded.' (C.B. p. 113). It is in the light of his clear knowledge of the 'unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded' that MacDiarmid is able to proclaim with such confidence that

> What we call <u>being</u> is only
> The functioning of our consciousness,
> Not the 'final Universal of All',
> But the lowest.
> It is the feeling, groping, consuming spirit;
> Objective, matter-bound, but not living spirit.
> That higher and stronger quickening life
> We seek eternally and today
> Must discover anew
> Eternally transcends the objective spirit
> Because it has nothing objective,
> Only life.
>
> (C.P., I, 643)

MacDiarmid's account of the difference between the 'objective and dead' world and 'The impalpable and primordial life / The Supreme' which 'Eternally transcends the objective spirit', conforms fairly closely to that given by the Indian philosopher, Radhakrishnan, who explains that

> Objectification is estrangement. The objective world is the 'fallen' world, disintegrated and enslaved, in which the subject is alienated from the object of knowledge. It is the world of disruption, disunion, alienation . . .
>
> We cannot . . . become aware of the true life in its unity and multiplicity, in its absoluteness and relativity, if we do not free ourselves from the world of divided and isolated objects. In the objective world where estrangement and limitations prevail, there are impenetrable entities, but in the knowledge where we have fullness and boundlessness of life, nothing is external, but all is known from within . . .[21]

To cast our minds back to Marx and Engels after reading this, is to realise the great gulf that separates them from the world of Radhakrishnan, the world of higher religion, the world to which Hugh MacDiarmid's deepest insights belong.

By pointing out that, to those who know the 'fullness and boundlessness of life, nothing is external, but all is known from within', Radhakrishnan may help us to penetrate at least a little way into the mystery of how the enlightened man is able to see, as the Gita says, 'his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self', and, therefore, to say with Jesus: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (Matthew 25:40). It is only, however, those rare souls who have reached the very summit of the spiritual 'Heights', and have become, so to speak, permanently resident there, who are able to retain their hold on such sublime insights. Other spiritual explorers may occasionally glimpse these truths when their upward route happens to take them across some open part of the mountainside, but when they have to continue their route through some deeply recessed glen or corrie overhung with trees, the ensuing gloom and darkness can cause them to forget, at least for a time, what they have seen in their moments of illumination. MacDiarmid belongs to this category of climber. Although an experienced traveller in the realms of higher religion, he was certainly not a constant dweller on the clear 'Heights', and, therefore, saw the highest truths only intermittently. This is why, far from always seeing 'his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self', he tended, as a rule, to see his fellow human beings as totally alien to himself. In, for example, 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa' (Stony Limits and Other Poems, 1934 and 1956), he confesses that

> It is next to impossible still
> For me to bear any other man close - for deep
> Differences surge up like a blast from Hell . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 407)

and in 'Tam o' the Wilds' (Scottish Scene, 1934), he maintains that

> A'e thing is certain - then as noo
> Save wi' his ain sel' nae man should fash
> Muckle wi' men at a'. Man's proper study
> Is onything but Man and Tam kent weel
> When folk talked o' noxious and dangerous beasts
> Nane answered that description in the haill o' nature
> Better than maist men - worthless and vicious
> To their ain kind and to ilka ither cratur.
>
> (C.P., I, 378)

Nevertheless, because of what he had seen in his moments of illumination, MacDiarmid knew that his misanthropic feelings did not reflect the whole truth about man. And so he adds -

> God save me frae hasty judgement tho' . . .
> For there's nae kennin' what ony man in the mob
> May ha'e, in his hert if in nae ither place,
> Or deeper than thocht or conscious feelin'
> In his sensuous nature and mere animal life
> - Laigh or heich in the scale, however we rate it,
> There's nae point less than anither wi' God's sel' rife.
>
> (C.P., I, 379)

It is precisely because he has - not only through his philosophical studies, but also through his moments of mystical illumination - become aware of the amazing 'rifeness' of 'God's sel'', that MacDiarmid expresses doubts about the misanthropic view he has just put forward. For he knows that wherever the presence of the Divine Self is realised, and everything is consequently seen 'from within', one can no longer distinguish between 'laigh' and 'heich', or 'worthless' and 'valuable', since 'There's nae point less than anither wi' God's sel' rife'; or, as Meister Eckhart puts it: 'In God all things are equal and are God himself' (Blakney, p. 205).

Obviously such statements make no sense at all in terms of ordinary experience, but in what MacDiarmid calls

> . . . the moment of divine realisation
> When the self is lit up by its own inner light
>
> ('Lament for the Great Music', C.P., I,481)

the truth of such statements becomes clear and incontrovertible. The same insight is expressed in non-theistic terms by Eugen Herrigel in The Method of Zen . Describing the Zen way of seeing, he says:

> The first characteristic of the new way of seeing is that all things are of equal importance in its sight, the most trivial as well as the most significant by ordinary human standards. They all seem to have acquired an absolute value, as if they had become transparent, revealing a relationship which does not obtain in the ordinary field of vision. This relationship is not horizontal, linking one thing to another and so remaining within the world of

> objects, but vertical: it plumbs each single thing to its very depths, to the point of origination. Things are thus seen . . . from the origin, out of the 'being' which manifests itself in them. To that extent they are all of equal rank, all possessing the illustrious patents of their origin. They are not objects isolated in themselves: they point beyond themselves, to the common ground of their being . . .'[22]

It was this kind of vision which MacDiarmid would enjoy in his moments of 'divine realisation', when he would be able to perceive the equality of all things in 'God'. But like most spiritual travellers, his experiences of this kind of seeing were only momentary. He was unable to retain the divine vision. It came and went. And his darsana wavered. The moments of soaring light were followed by a drop into darkness. The heights of spiritual vision were exchanged for the depths of 'life in this world', which Plotinus describes as 'a falling away, an exile, and a loss of the soul's wings',[23] Yet, even in his darkest moments, MacDiarmid often retained some glimmering remnants of divine truth - enough at least to make him doubtful about the adequacy of the 'ordinary field of vision' and 'ordinary human standards'.

It is because he knew, not only what obtains 'in the ordinary field of vision', but also, what appears in 'the moment of divine realisation', that MacDiarmid's poetry sometimes expresses doubts, waverings, apparent contradictions and inconsistencies. For sometimes he is speaking from one world of experience, and sometimes from another. Sometimes, in trying to express what he knows to be true in the world of ordinary experience ('maist men - worthless and vicious'), he becomes aware of a discrepancy between what he is saying, and what he has seen in the world of higher vision ('nae point less than anither wi' God's sel' rife'). Hence the doubts and waverings. The apparent contradictions, far from being the product of mere mental confusion, are usually the result of his trying to reflect, as faithfully as he can, the contradictory elements in his own experience. If he had lived exclusively in the world of common experience, no such contradictions would have arisen. Nor would they have arisen if he had lived exclusively in the world of enlightened vision. It is because he alternated between the two, that apparently conflicting and contradictory utterances were occasionally unavoidable.

Unfortunately, the metaphorical expressions we have to use in order to explain MacDiarmid's function as a religious poet - 'heights', 'depths', 'light', 'darkness', and so on - tend to conceal as much as they reveal, because they belong essentially to 'this world' of 'exile', whereas his insights derive from That which lies beyond the limiting boundaries of space, time and relativity. In relation to the 'beyond', therefore, these words can have no meaning. When, for example, using MacDiarmid's own terminology, we speak of his insights as belonging to 'the Heights', not 'the Depths', we inevitably impose on these insights limitations which do not apply to them. A truth which can be confined to one side of a pair of opposites is obviously not the transcendent truth perceived by spiritual vision. As the Jewish Psalmist says: 'If I climb up into heaven, thou art there: if I go down to hell, thou art there also'. (Ps. 139, B.C.P.) And in 'Depth and the Chthonian Image' (Scots Unbound and Other Poems, 1932), MacDiarmid himself says:

> He pits his mind into a double fetter
> Wha hauds this airt or that, no baith thegither.
> You are at aince the road a' the croods ha' gane
> And alane wi' the alane.
>
> (C.P., I, 349)

The phrase 'alane wi' the alane' alludes to one of the most famous passages in the Enneads, where Plotinus ends his description of mystical experience with the words: 'Such is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men; a liberation from all earthly bonds, a life that takes no pleasure in earthly things, a flight of the alone to the Alone.'[24] But in MacDiarmid's view, 'Alane wi' the alane remains / A relative conception' (p. 349); it is not the absolute truth, excluding as it does 'the road a' croods ha' gane'.

In the Bhagavad-gita, which MacDiarmid so much admired, Krishna, speaking as an embodiment of 'the Supreme', says to Arjuna: 'Beyond comparison of the Eternal with the non-eternal am I' (Geeta, p. 81). This is not to deny that the power to discriminate between 'the Eternal and the non-eternal' is essential for anyone who aspires to spiritual vision, for the spiritual life cannot properly begin until the

difference between the two is felt so acutely that it forms a Cross of suffering in the soul; but ultimately, in 'the moment of divine realisation', the divine Fullness (the 'Pleroma' as MacDiarmid calls It) is revealed as the All in All; there is nothing outside It, nothing separate from It, with which It can be contrasted and compared. As long as we retain the power to compare and contrast, we are outside the world of Ultimate Reality, in an unreal world of our own creation.

Yet it is only by using the limited and potentially misleading terms which make sense within 'this world', that we can hope to say anything at all about MacDiarmid's knowledge of That which lies beyond it. All the higher religions have to do this: they have to use terms derived from life in 'this world', in order to indicate the life of the 'beyond'. Misunderstandings arise only when some inadequate verbal expression is seized upon as an embodiment of absolute truth, instead of being recognised as a mere pointer to something beyond itself - an experience that is ineffable. In Zen, as we have already pointed out, there is a saying, to the effect that we must avoid looking at the finger that points at the moon. It is intended to warn us against mistaking that which points toward the goal, for the goal itself. MacDiarmid was very much alive to this danger. Hence his own warnings about the verbal signposts we have to use in order to indicate the Ultimate Reality. He says:

> . . . We draw the supreme Source of Life
> Into the kingdom of Touch and Taste and Speech
> If we signify it as something
> 'Behind' or 'Over' or 'Near',
> Conformably to some spacious picture;
> Or as the 'One', the 'Without Shape',
> The 'Thing in Itself'. These are all
> Materialistic, mediate things,
> But 'the Supreme' and 'life' are immediate.
> Pleroma[25] is immediate, and is far away
> Only from the gropers who seek
> To muffle the infinite
> In limitations and terms.
> But to the high, crushing nearness
> Of my exploding primordial life
> The Supreme is 'that which is quite Nigh',
> That which is without distance,
> Immediateness itself, love-embrace,
> The paradisiacal awareness
> In which all fullness immediate and unredeemed,

> Since all time, is posited timelessly,
> Over 'Being', blessed in 'One'.
> No empty abstraction, but the Life
> Which can never be grasped,
> That is transcendent.
>
> ('Song of the Seraphim', C.P., I, 644)

The state of being in which one becomes aware of the 'fullness immediate and unredeemed' of

> . . . the Life
> Which can never be grasped,
> That is transcendent . . .

is described in religious circles as the mystical state. Immediacy is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Unlike all other states of being, it does not involve the transmission of experience through 'Materialistic, mediate things' - through objects which appear to connect one aspect of Being with another, the outer with the inner. Mystical experience is simply an experience of one's own real Self - 'my exploding primordial life' - without the mediation, or intervention, of any kind of objects. Contrary to popular belief, mysticism is not concerned with such 'mediate things' as apparitions, ghostly voices, colourful reveries and other psychic phenomena, for even such elusive objects as these would have the effect of dichotomizing the Self, separating 'subject' from 'object', that which 'sees' from that which is 'seen', thus destroying the vision of Reality in its wholeness. All non-mystical experience is of this nature: ideas of distance and separation come to divide and estrange us from 'That which is without distance' - 'the high crushing nearness / Of my exploding primordial life'. In mystical experience, there is no dichotomy, no division or duality. Only an awareness of the indivisible oneness of the One - the real Self within all selves. It is only in such a state, devoid of dichotomy, that Reality in its wholeness can be known. In his excellent book, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, F.C. Happold says:

> In mystical experience the dilemma of duality is resolved. For to the mystic is given that unifying vision of the One in All and the All in the One.
>
> There is little doubt that this sense of the Oneness of everything in the universe and outside it is at the heart of the most highly developed mystical consciousness. All

> feelings of duality and multiplicity are obliterated, including the duality between man and Deity. Though it may be expressed differently, this is equally true of Hindu and Sufi mystics, of Plotinus and of the great contemplatives of Christianity. (pp. 46-47)

The problem, however, of how to express an experience of indivisible Oneness and overpowering immediacy, without using words which seem to dichotomise it and to disrupt it with ideas of distance, is the perennial problem of all who have experienced the mystical state.

Plotinus says of the man in this state:

> We ought not even to say that he will <u>see</u>, but he will <u>be</u> that which he sees, if indeed it is possible any longer to distinguish seer and seen, and not boldly to affirm that the two are one. In this state the seer does not see or distinguish or imagine two things; he becomes another, he ceases to be himself and to belong to himself. He belongs to Him and is one with Him, like two concentric circles; they are one when they coincide, and two only when they are separated. It is only in this sense that the Soul is other (than God). Therefore this vision is hard to describe. For how can one describe, as other than oneself, that which, when one saw it, seemed to be one with oneself? (<u>Inge</u>, II, 140)

Unfortunately, this problem will not be understood by those who are unable to think of religion except in terms of doctrinal ideas and propositions, which can be grasped and expounded, or rejected and refuted, by means of the ratiocinative intellect. Blinded by these 'empty abstractions', such people will be incapable of recognising MacDiarmid's pointers to 'the Life / Which can never be grasped'. They can have no conception of his function as a religious poet, since for them, such a function would have to be assessed and evaluated according to his success, or lack of success, in using an approved vocabulary and phraseology to expound what they believe to be the correct doctrinal views.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised, that there is no way of reaching a full understanding of MacDiarmid's function as a religious poet, unless one is prepared to go beyond doctrinal terms and concepts, to become acquainted with the spiritual <u>darsana</u> which he has derived from his doctrinal studies, and with the realm of mystical experience towards which, as we shall see, so many of his more puzzling utterances

point. Those who are unwilling or unable to make the required transition from the world of words, to that world of experience which gives his words their meaning, will inevitably find difficulty and confusion, even where the poet's meaning has been most clearly indicated.

This, of course, is not to minimise MacDiarmid's skill in expounding religious ideas and doctrines, but it is hoped that it will become clear in the course of our study, that his contribution to the understanding of Religion and its Goal far exceeds this limited function. He is not simply an echo of the great voices of the past, or the present. He has a quite unique and distinctive vision of his own to communicate, through the many doctrines with which he deals, and it is this vision - this MacDiarmid Darsana - that he seeks to share with us in his poetry. This is why, without denying the spiritual value of the doctrines he has studied, he makes no attempt to formulate a coherent creed or philosophy out of his vast collection of ideas. He knows that this would accomplish very little except -

> To muffle the infinite
> In limitations and terms.

In his poem, 'In the Slums of Glasgow' (Second Hymn to Lenin), published as long ago as 1935, he makes an important point which is often overlooked. He says:

> I have not gained a single definite belief that can be put
> In a scientific formula or hardened into a religious creed.
> A conversion is not, as mostly thought, a turning towards
> a belief,
> It is rather a turning round, a revolution indeed.
> It has no primary reference to any external object.
> It took place in me at last with lightning speed.
> I suddenly walk in light, my feet are barely touching the
> ground,
> I am free of a million words and forms I no longer need.
>
> In becoming one with itself my spirit is one with the world.
>
> (C.P., I, 563)

It is this mystical experience of all-embracing Oneness which is threatened by verbal formulae, by defining words and confessional phrases.

Hence MacDiarmid's determination to allocate all verbal and conceptual forms to a position of secondary importance: their power to 'muffle the infinite' must be restricted before real 'conversion' can occur. Only when we turn our backs on their pointing can we see That towards which they point. In that moment of 'turning round', the moment of 'conversion', the 'million words and forms' become redundant, for us. We no longer need them. They have fulfilled their function, as far as we are concerned.

Objections to the superficial inconsistencies which occasionally result from MacDiarmid's use of widely divergent ideas and doctrines, are most likely to arise where there is some misunderstanding of his underlying aims, and a tendency to confuse 'the finger that points at the moon' with the moon itself. Objectors might find the words of Rumi worth recalling:

> The lamps are different, but the Light is the same:
> it comes from Beyond.
> If thou keep looking at the lamp, thou art lost: for
> thence arises the appearance of number and plurality.
> Fix thy gaze upon the Light, and thou art delivered from
> the dualism inherent in the finite body.
>
> (Rumi, p. 166)

MacDiarmid knew very well that, superficially, he was bound to create an impression of incoherence if he attempted to deal, in any depth, with the divine Reality he encountered in his 'Moments of divine realisation'. As he says, in 'Ode to all Rebels' (Stony Limits and Other Poems),

> Idiot incoherence
> I ken fu' weel
> Is the only language
> That wi' God can deal.
>
> (C.P., I, 495)

This is not because there is anything incoherent about the experience of 'divine realisation', but simply because even our most comprehensive words and ideas fall apart in fragments when they try to encapsulate within themselves the 'exploding primordial life' of our divine infinity.

Incoherence, therefore, tends to be a feature of the kind of language used by even the most rational and coherent of religious thinkers when they speak of contact with, as distinct from concepts of, the Supreme Reality. In, for example, the fragment of writing which was found sewn into Pascal's doublet after his death, it is clear that this distinguished mathematician and scientist, a master of lucid prose, was able to express himself only in disjointed fragments when he attempted to describe a mystical experience he had undergone:

> Depuis environ dix heures et demi du soir
> jusques environ minuit et demi
> FEU.
> Dieu d'Abraham. Dieu d'Isaac. Dieu de Jacob
> non des philosophes et scavans.
> certitude joye certitude sentiment vcue joye
> Dieu de Jesus Christ.
> Deum meum et Deum vestrum
> Jeh. 20.17
> Ton Dieu sera mon Dieu. Ruth.
> oubly du monde et de Tout hormis DIEU . . .
> Pere juste, le monde ne t'a point
> connu, mais je t'ay connu. Jeh. 17
> Joye Joye Joye et pleurs de joye . . . [26]

This recalls Allah's words of rebuke to Moses, in Rumi's 'The Shepherd's Prayer':

> Enough of phrases and conceits and metaphors! I want
> burning, burning: become familiar with that burning!
> Light up a fire of love in thy soul, burn all thought
> and expression away!
> O Moses, they that know the conventions are of one sort,
> they whose souls burn are of another.
>
> (Rumi, l. 171)

All such words are an echo of what MacDiarmid calls 'The Impossible Song' which, generally speaking, 'other men may hear / But cannot understand'. Those, however, who do recognise it for what it is, and who try to join in singing it, know that it is impossible to find the words they really require. As MacDiarmid says:

We are like somebody wha hears
A wonderful language and mak's up his mind
To write poetry in it - but ah!
It's impossible to learn it, we find,
Tho' we'll never ha'e ony use again
For ither languages o' ony kind.

(C.P., I, 508)

Thereafter, their singing, which must perforce be in the useless 'ither languages', will, from time to time, be disrupted by vain attempts to articulate some of the 'impossible words', and the result will always tend to sound like 'idiot incoherence' to other people. The words which are really needed cannot be found, cannot be spoken. Yet those who hear the singing - even those who are most estranged from the 'impossible' song - may be able sometimes dimly to discern, through the 'idiot incoherence', that some unutterable truth is somehow being uttered; something is being said which, as far as human language is concerned, cannot be said at all. In order to protect themselves, however, from any disturbing message which may threaten to emerge from such utterances, men in general have to convince themselves that nothing at all is being said, that the words they fear never will, and never can, be spoken. Regretfully, therefore, the poet has to admit, that

As far as mankind is concerned
Plotinus, Pascal, and the rest
Who said them never really said
Such things; all men long since discerned
They cannot be said and so they've learned
To treat them as unspoken.

(C.P., I, 511)

Much of MacDiarmid's work is of this nature: it gives utterance to that which, strictly speaking, cannot be uttered at all in the language of men.

In view, however, of what we have already learned, it would seem only reasonable that, before deciding to treat any of his more obscure lines and passages simply as 'unspoken', we ought to try first, to see what meaning they might be able to acquire, if placed in the context of those principles of higher religion, with which he was, evidently, so

remarkably familiar. It is not only his more puzzling passages, however, but his work as a whole, which should be seen as conveying a genuinely religious understanding of life. Readers should recall that, in a critical review of his own poem, To Circumjack Cencrastus, MacDiarmid, concealing his identity behind the pen-name 'Pteleon', speaks of this vast poem as having 'a peculiar interest from the religious viewpoint', and argues that, in this poem, 'a multitude of passages', employing the 'terms of religious philosophy', 'go a long way to counterbalance what Mr John Buchan has well called the failure of Scottish poetry during the past five hundred years to concern itself with religious ideas in the true sense of the term'. While admitting that some pieces in the poem 'will affect readers who lack the writer's intellectual background as blasphemous', Pteleon nevertheless insists that 'all the blasphemy and cheap sarcasm are no more than the froth on the surface of the depths of essentially religious speculation'.[27] Clearly, these words indicate the existence in MacDiarmid's mind of aims and aspirations which are bound to affect, not just one of his poems, but his work as a whole.

Notes

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Basic Writing on Politics and Philosophy, ed., Lewis S. Feuer (London: Fontana, 1969), p. 304.

[2] T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System, 2nd ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 227.

[3] J.P. Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe, in drei Bänden (Stuttgart: Gotta'schen, 1835), I, 109.

[4] H.V. Guenther, 'Some Aspects of Tibetan Religious Thought', Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective (California: Dharma Publishing, 1977), pp. 139-140.
The words quoted by Dr Guenther towards the end of the first paragraph are from W.T. Stace, Religion and the Modern Mind (New York: Lippincot, 1960), p. 63.

[6] The Dhammapada is an ancient collection of sayings attributed to the Buddha. It is thought to have been in existence at least since the third century, B.C.

[7] C.B., p. 64.

[8] Saint Teresa of Jesus, The Complete Works, 2 vols, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, New Ark Library, 1963), II, 117.

[9] Luther: Lectures on Romans, trans. Wilhelm Pauck, Vol. XV in The Library of Christian Classics (London: S.C.M. Press, MCMLXI), p. 226.

[10] From the hymn, 'Abide with me', by Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847).

[11] Milton's 'Lycidas', lines 114-115.

[12] Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, trans., The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal (1948; rpt. New York: Mentor, 1957), p. 69.

[13] Clifton Wolters, trans., 'The Epistle of Privy Counsel', The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 162.
For the original texts see The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Counselling, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, pub. for E.E.T.S. (London: OUP, 1944).

[14] St Teresa's 'Exclamations of the Soul to God', Peers, II, 419. cf. Nietzsche: 'Ich liebe den . . . welche erkennen will, damit einst der Übermensch lebe. Und so will er seinem Untergang' (Zarathustra, F.N., II, p. 282).

[15] The Geeta: The Gospel of the Lord Krishna, trans. Shri Purohit Swami (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 44.

[16] Feuer, p. 89.

[17] Ibid, p. 70.

[18] Poetry and Prose of William Blake, complete in one volume, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, (London: Nonesuch Press, 1961), pp. 185-6).

[19] The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, ed. R.C. Zaehner, (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

[20] Frederick Engels, Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), p. 27.

[21] The Principal Upanisads, p. 98.

[22] Quoted in W.T. Stace's The Teachings of the Mystics (New York: Mentor, 1960), p. 100.

[23] W.R. Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, in 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1918), II, 138.

[24] Ibid, II, 142. Commenting on this passage in The Teachings of the Mystics, Professor W.T. Stace says: 'This is in strong contrast both with Zen and with the best Christian mysticism. The highest development of the mystical consciousness will not represent it as a "flight", but rather as requiring further involvement in "earthly things". For the Zen Buddhist, Nirvana is to be found in Samsara, not apart from it. And the Christian mystic, at his best, feels powerfully the urge to pour out in love to mankind the riches which he has received in the divine union' (p. 123).

[25] The Greek word 'Pleroma', meaning 'fullness', is used in Gnostic theology to indicate the entire spiritual universe, the abode of God and the totality of the divine powers and emanations. The word appears to have come into use in English through St Paul's use of it in the Epistle to the Colossians, Chapter 2, verse 9, where he speaks of τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς Until 1388, the word 'pleroma' was retained in English translations of the Epistle.

[26] From the facsimile in Abbé Bremond's Histoire Litteraire du Sentiment Religieux en France (Paris, 1916), opposite p. 369.

> From around half past ten in the evening till about half past midnight, FIRE. God of Abraham. God of Isaac. God of Jacob. Not the God of philosophers and savants. Certainty, joy, assurance, love, actual happiness. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Thy God shall be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything except God. . . Righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee. Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of joy . . .

[27] The Uncanny Scot: A Selection of Prose by Hugh MacDiarmid, ed. Kenneth Buthlay. (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968, p. 136.)

Chapter Three

Religious Themes in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle

If we wish to find, within the compass of a single poem, convincing evidence of MacDiarmid's wide-ranging religious vision, and his profoundly penetrating religious insights into life, we cannot do better than turn to A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle. It would be almost impossible, of course, to read this poem through at one sitting, and grasp anything more than a fraction of its total meaning. Most readers find that it requires many re-readings, and much reflection, before the profounder meanings begin to show themselves at all, and the poem begins to take on the appearance of a more or less unified whole. This is hardly surprising, since the different parts of the poem were written at different times, and it was only later, with the help of his old friend and former schoolteacher, Francis George Scott, that the poet ultimately succeeded in assembling them into a structured whole. If, then, as readers, we begin by exploring one part of the poem at a time, examining its main themes and motifs, we shall be approaching it in exactly the same way as MacDiarmid approached its creation, and there is no reason why we should not, by this method, come to see, in time, as he did, a single pattern of unified meaning holding all the parts together.[1]

Hints as to the nature of this pattern of meaning are given quite early in the poem. Among its very first stanzas, we come upon the following:

> To prove my saul is Scots I maun begin
> Wi' what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect,
> And spire up syne by visible degrees
> To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked.[2]
>
> (C.P., I, 83)

This reference to 'spiring up' may not seen particularly significant, until we remember that 'upward' is a religious synonym for 'Godward', as in the old hymn, 'Nearer my God to Thee',[3] and that the concept of height is very frequently used in religious circles to symbolise proximity to the Divine. Hence the Christian teaching about Christ's 'Ascension' into Heaven, and Plotinus's description of estrangement from the Divine as 'a falling away. . . and a loss of the Soul's wings' (Inge, II, 138).

Since the 'spiring up' concept plays a very important role in building up, and drawing together, structures of meaning within this poem, it should, perhaps, be pointed out here, that the image suggested by the words 'spiring up', is, in itself, incomplete; it requires to be linked to the other MacDiarmid image of 'the glory that descends' (C.P., I, 144), before it can function as a complete image of the everlasting circuit of divine activity. For it is only because the divine glory, or shekhinah, keeps on descending into our midst, that we experience the urge to 'spire up . . . / To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked'. The complete image, then, is one of divine glory pouring down from the heights, into the human depths, and then 'spiring up' again, through every struggle of the human spirit, to try to find again the divine heights from which it has descended. The image is vividly presented in the following passage from Martin Buber, whose writings were particularly admired by MacDiarmid:

> God is divided into two, through the created world and its actions. He is divided into the ultimate being of God, Elohut, which is remote and apart from the creatures, and the Presence of God, His Glory, the Shekhina, which dwells in the world, wandering astray and scattered. Redemption alone will unite both for Eternity. But it is the property of the soul of man, by means of service, to bring the Shekhina nearer to its source, and to let it re-enter into it. In this instant of homecoming, before it must again descend into the being of the world, the whirlpool which howls in the life of the stars is hushed, the torches of the great desolation are extinguished, the lash in the hand of fate is lowered, and the pain of the world is stilled and listens: the grace of graces has appeared, and blessing pours down into space, till the powers of entanglement begin to drag down the Glory again, and all is as before.[4]

In the light of this passage, it is clear that the man who feels impelled, as the Drunk Man does, to 'spire up' to the spiritual heights, is nothing less than a vehicle of the divine Shekhinah.

The Drunk Man's reference to 'the fules' would also appear to have religious connotations, for, in religious circles, the term 'fools' is very widely used, to denote the spiritually ignorant. In the Bible, for example, we are told that 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God' - a statement that occurs both in Psalm 14 and Psalm 53. In the book called The Proverbs, the author points out that 'Wisdom is too high for a fool' (24:7), a view obviously shared by the Buddha, who speaks, in the Dhammapada, of how 'the man of understanding . . . climbing the terraced heights of wisdom, looks down upon the fools . . . as one that stands on a mountain looks down upon them that stand upon the plain' (C.B., p. 54).

A further hint as to the religious significance of this poem soon follows, when the Drunk Man speaks of the confusion and relative impotence of his own tiny ratiocinative powers, in the face of the vast ocean of divine wisdom:

> I doot I'm geylies mixed, like Life itsel',
> But I was never ane that thocht to pit
> An ocean in a mutchkin. As the haill's
> Mair than the pairt sae I than reason yet.
>
> I dinna haud the warld's end in my heid
> As maist folk think they dae; nor filter truth
> In fishy gills through which its tides may poor
> For ony animalculae forsooth.
>
> I lauch to see my crazy little brain
> - And ither folks' - tak'n itsel' seriously,
> And in a sudden lowe o' fun my saul
> Blinks dozent as the owl I ken't to be.
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

It is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the religious man, that he forms a humbly realistic estimate of human 'reason', perceiving it to be, at most, a tiny, fragmentary reflection of some greater Whole, within which he 'lives and moves and has his being' (Acts 17:28). Hence Solomon's advice: 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and

lean not unto thine own understanding . . . Be not wise in thine own eyes . . .' (Proverbs 3:5, 7). To the religious man, it is all too painfully obvious that 'The haill's / Mair than the pairt', that the vast ocean of Being, from which his ephemeral being arises, cannot possibly be accommodated within any 'mutchkin' of human reason. It is also abundantly clear to him, that, whatever hiw own real being may be, reason is merely a part of it: 'As the haill's / Mair than the pairt sae I than reason yet'. The religious man is, therefore, kept mercifully free from the absurd notion, that ultimate truth and reality could ever be lodged within the narrow confines of his 'crazy little brain'. He is never one that thinks to put 'An ocean in a mutchkin'.

In religious circles, it is not unusual for people to think of the Ultimate Reality as an 'ocean', as the Drunk Man does here. In the Christian hymn, 'O Love that wilt not let me go', by George Matheson (1842-1906), the author says:

> I give Thee back the life I owe
> That in Thine ocean depths its flow
> May richer, fuller be.

In Sir Edward Arnold's Buddhist poem The Light of Asia,[5] it is said that, when the moment of spiritual fulfilment arrives,

> . . . the Dewdrop slips
> Into the shining sea.
>
> (p. 145)

The Islamic mystic and poet, Rumi, thinking of the all-pervading Mind of God, exclaims:

> What worlds mysterious roll within the vast,
> The all-encircling ocean of the Mind!
> Cup-like thereon our forms are floating fast,
> Only to fill and sink and leave behind
> No spray of bubbles from the Sea upcast.
>
> The Spirit thou canst not view, it comes so nigh.
> Drink of this Presence! Be not thou a jar
> Laden with water, and its lip stone-dry . . .
>
> (Rumi, p. 106)

The Drunk Man himself, in a later part of the poem, speaks of being immersed in a 'sea' -

> That lang syne drooned the last o' me
> - That drooned afore the warld began
> A' that could ever come frae Man.
>
> (C.P., I, 144)

It is vitally important that we understand from the first, that the Drunk Man's deepest concern is not really with anything 'that could ever come frae Man', but with that 'ocean' of divine Being which inevitably 'drowns' 'A' that could ever come frae Man', using the word 'drowns' in the sense in which we may speak, for example, of a sergeant-major's voice being 'drowned', by the sudden skirl of the pipes, the roar of the regimental drums. There is no question of the voice ceasing to exist. It is simply gathered up, for the time being, into something greater. So it is with those who experience 'the moment of divine realisation' (C.P., I, 481), in which 'There's naething left o' me ava' / Save a' I'd hoped micht whiles befa' ' (C.P., I, 143).

But whatever meaning we choose to attach to the religious signposts we have been considering, it is quite certain that the Drunk Man's recognition of the feeble inadequacy of human reason places him far outside the ranks of those who would like to replace religion with 'rationalism', and who thereby qualify, according to MacDiarmid, for the title of 'fools'. As he says in 'Thalamus' (Stony Limits and Other Poems),

> Let fools think science has supplanted poetry;
> Rationalism, religion. Even physically
> The older parts are more than holding their own;
> The fools are liars to their own anatomy.
>
> (C.P., I, 412)

If the Drunk Man were a 'rationalist', he would not notice that his 'reason' is only a tiny fragment of his total being and of Life itself. He would have no misgivings about his capacity to cope with the 'ocean' of Divine Life within the 'mutchkin' of his own understanding, for his acquaintance with that divine 'ocean' would be restricted to the 'mutchkin' of it he carries around in his own head. And he would certainly not be able to laugh at the idea of his

. . . crazy little brain
- And ither folks' - tak'n itsel' seriously.

The 'rationalist' is able to retain his owl-like gravity even when uttering the greatest absurdity of all: the 'pairt's' rejection of the 'haill', the 'Dewdrop's' solemn declaration that 'the shining sea' does not exist. Clearly, MacDiarmid's Drunk Man is a stranger to this myopic school of thought. He is, as Chesterton would have said, too sceptical to be an unbeliever of that sort. He is much too rational to take seriously the 'rationalist's' absurd attempts 'to pit / An ocean in a mutchkin'. As we have seen, his thought tends rather to identify him with the religious thinkers who, far from trying 'to pit / An ocean in a mutchkin', are always seeking ways and means of pouring their 'mutchkin' of reason back into the 'ocean' from which it came:

I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Nor does this involve any morbid death-wish. As the Drunk Man himself explains later:

. . . Still the form is mine, altho'
A force to which I ne'er could grow
Is movin' in't as 'twere a sea . . .

(C.P., I, 144)

In this immersion one's real life is not lost, but found. It is in this clear awareness of the 'ocean depths', 'the shining sea', 'The all-encircling ocean of the Mind', that we find, perhaps, the clearest indication, that the Drunk Man's outlook is essentially a religious one.

The path of meaning through this poem will be less easily lost, if, in addition to noting the hints and half-concealed religious signposts in the earlier parts of the poem, we are able, occasionally, to discern in it traces of religious themes with which MacDiarmid has dealt in other poems. Such traces may serve to indicate the general direction of his thought, even where definite - or indefinite - verbal signposts are least in evidence. They may also help to draw attention

to, and perhaps reinforce, the indicative function of such signposts. The religious implications of 'spiring up', for example, will be much more quickly and easily grasped, if we have already become familiar with the poet's recurrent use of this theme in other poems, such as 'A Moment in Eternity', where he speaks of 'unexplored / Summits of Paradise', and of how he

> . . . whirled in exultations inexpressible
> - An unpictureable, clear,
> Soaring and glorying,
> Swift consciousness,
> A cosmos turning like a song of spheres
> On apices of praise,
> A separate colour,
> An essential element and conscious part
> Of successive and stupendous dreams
> In God's own heart.
>
> (C.P., I, 5-6)

In 'Song of the Seraphim' also, as we have seen, the 'spiring up' theme is expressed, through references to man's need to find a way from the 'Depths' to the 'Heights':

> Only he who is no longer fettered
> In the coarse material depths;
> Only he who yearns for new needs
> - The needs of the Heights,
> Not the needs of the Depths,
> Immense and seraphic needs -
> He only perceives
> The impalpable and primordial life,
> The Supreme . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 639)

And this human need is shown to be Nature's need also:

> Creation wants today to blossom
> And raise itself to its topmost heights.
> And if we wish to survive and not to suffocate,
> Then in this day we must mount
> An entirely new step higher, a greater step
> Than that from the animal world
> To the world of man.
>
> (C.P., I, 641)

The ludicrous inadequacy of the powers which derive from man's 'crazy little brain', is also a recurrent theme in MacDiarmid's poetry. In 'Ballad of the Five Senses', for example, he says:

> Oot o' the way, my senses five,
> I ken a' you can tell,
> Oot o' the way, my thochts, for noo'
> I maun face God mysel'.
>
> (C.P., I, 38)

And, in 'At the Sign of the Thistle' (Lucky Bag, 1927), he freely confesses that his heart belongs to what lies beyond the limits of human thought and speech:

> The greatest poets
> Never wrote a word . . .
>
> The greatest thinkers
> Passed on nae thocht . . .
>
> Unthinkable Thocht,
> Unsingable Sang,
> To thee for aye
> My hert sall belang
> Type o' His pooers
> Wha's ways are no' oors!
>
> (C.P., I, 177-178)

The last two lines clearly allude to Isaiah 55:8 - 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' This Biblical allusion makes it plain, that the poet's lack of enthusiasm for our human powers of thought and speech, is directly related to the reverence he has acquired, through his acquaintance with 'Unthinkable Thocht' and 'Unsingable Sang', for the powers of the Lord, 'Wha's ways are no' oors'. His dissatisfaction with merely human powers is expressed again in To Circumjack Cencrastus, where he points out that

> There is nae limit to the modes in which
> The minds o' men the Universe construe
> Save that they're only men's - o' a'e wee star
> A'e kind o' its life, and o' that kind as few
> Men hae't, the product - Prima Facie, then
> Scant is the value o' the minds o' men.
>
> (C.P., I, 243)

and he adds

> There's naething that a man can be
> That's mair than imbecile to me
> In the licht o' totality.
>
> (C.P., I, 247)

This theme too, echoes throughout MacDiarmid's poetry, reaching its climax, perhaps, in that passage in 'In Memoriam James Joyce' (1955), where he speaks of

> That which we can only know
> By allowing it to know itself in us.
>
> (C.P., II, 772)

Clearly, no one intent on understanding A Drunk Man, or any of MacDiarmid's other long discursive poems, can afford simply to ignore the existence of such recurrent themes in his work. Many a superficial effect of incoherence, inconsistency, or 'dialectical zigzagging' in his poetry, might well disappear, if viewed in the wider and deeper context provided by these recurrent themes. In the pages that follow, therefore, we shall endeavour to avoid interpreting any part of the poem in isolation from the thematic framework, however rudimentary, which the poet has provided for us, in his work as a whole.

The basic thematic structure of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, would appear to be shaped and held together by a pattern of relationships which we gradually discover to exist between the Drunk Man, the Thistle (at which he is looking), and the Moon (which looks down on them both). Yet we reach the fourth page of the printed text, before we are told anything at all about the Thistle or the Moon, and all we learn then is, that the man is sprawled out 'neth the mune', and that there are 'thistles and bracken' nearby. We reach the eighth page before there is any mention of the Thistle as a possibly significant symbol; the Drunk Man looking at the Thistle discovers that 'The thistle's like mysel'' (p. 90). Yet, in a sense, the Thistle is there from the beginning. The Drunk Man's reflections on the Burns cult, for example, are frequently punctuated by the painful 'jags' of the Thistle:

No' wan in fifty kens a word Burns wrote
But misapplied is a'body's property,
And gin there was his like alive the day
They'd be the last a kennin' haund to gi'e -

Croose London Scotties wi' their braw shirt fronts
And a' their fancy freen's, rejoicin'
That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,
Bagdad - and Hell, nae doot - are voicin'

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,
In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,
And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an
Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' their thochts.

A' they've to say was aften said afore
A lad was born in Kyle to blaw aboot.
What unco fate mak's him the dumpin'-grun'
For a' the sloppy rubbish they jaw oot?

Mair nonsense has been uttered in his name
Than in ony's barrin liberty and Christ.
If this keeps spreedin' as the drink declines,
Syne turns to tea, wae's me for the Zeitgeist! . . .

O gin they'd stegh their guts and haud their wheesht
I'd thole it, for 'a man's a man' I ken,
But though the feck ha'e plenty o' the 'a' that',
They're nocht but zoologically men.

(C.P., I, 84-85)

The Thistle is the symbol of all the painful forms which make up what we call 'life', but which the Drunk Man prefers to call 'living death', as in the lines:

And in the toon that I belang tae
- What tho'ts Montrose or Nazareth? -
Helplessly the folk continue
To lead their livin' death!

(C.P., I, 88)

The Thistle symbolises particularly, those things in our immediate environment, and in ourselves, which we should like to alter, or get rid of, but which are always present with us - inescapable and unalterable. The Thistle is 'this wanrestfu' growth that winna let me be' (p. 91), as the Drunk Man puts it, and it is clearly linked in his mind with 'the Fall of Man', as described in Genesis, Chapter Three, for the final verse of that chapter is echoed in the following lines:

O stranglin' rictus, sterile spasm,
Thou stricture in the groins o' licht,
Thou ootrie gangrel frae the wilds
O' chaos fenced frae Eden yet
By the unsplinterable wa'
O' munebeams like a bleeze o' swords!

(C.P., I, 124)

The verse referred to reads as follows: 'So (God) drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.' In this context, we can understand why the Drunk Man was at pains to point out the resemblance between the Thistle and himself - 'The Thistle's like mysel'' - for the 'ootrie gangrel frae the wilds / O' chaos' is really fallen man himself. It is he, this swallower of the forbidden fruit, who is the 'stranglin' rictus', and it is he who is the 'stricture in the groins o' licht', that 'licht' being the Logos, who was in the beginning with God, and who is, according to 'John', the 'true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1).

Whereas the Thistle represents that which is undesired but unavoidable, the Moon represents that which is desired but inaccessible, longed for but unobtainable. By implication, man's constant quest for happiness and satisfaction in this world, is simply a child's 'crying for the moon', regarding which, MacDiarmid says, in 'Ode to All Rebels',

Let all men laugh as at a child
Crying broken-hearted for the moon
- Fit cause for manly laughter! . . .

The child is right and must not be
Consoled until the world ends
Nor eat nor sleep but night and day
Cry on unceasingly.
In any other child I see
A monstrous brat of death, not Life.

(C.P., I, 511)

It is significant that, although MacDiarmid fully approves of the child's 'crying for the moon', he strongly disapproves of any attempt to 'console' the child, before 'the world ends', with any earthly thing, in which men may mistakenly believe the Moon to be, not simply reflected, but encapsulated. Such an object, such a prize, such a

goal, would merely be a mirage, an illusion, from the religious viewpoint. For, as St Augustine says: 'Fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te'. (Confessions, Book 1, ch. i) Hence the Drunk Man's emphatic rejection of 'ilka goal' -

> Be like the thistle, O my soul . . .
> And manifest forevermair
> Contempt o' ilka goal.
> O' ilka goal - save ane alane;
> To be yoursel', whatever that may be.
> And as contemptuous o' that,
> Kennin' nocht's worth the ha'en,
> But certainty that nocht can be,
> And hoo that certainty to gain.
>
> (C.P., I 136-137)

It is because our craving for the unobtainable, symbolised by the Moon, is really a craving for the divine Source of all Light, ('the Sun beyond all suns', to use St Columba's phrase), that MacDiarmid believes we must avoid all expectations of real consolation, 'until the world (in the sense of the fallen world) ends', or, as Solomon puts it, 'Until the day break, and the shadows flee away' (Song of Solomon 2:17).

Through his symbolic use of Thistle and Moon in 'A Drunk Man', MacDiarmid succeeds in focusing all the rays of the poem on his tragic religious awareness of the inevitability of pain and frustration in this 'fallen' world: an awareness succinctly expressed at one point, in four short lines:

> - The mune's the muckle white whale
> I seek in vain to kaa!
> The Earth's my mastless samyn,
> The thistle my ruined sail.
>
> (C.P., I, 108-109)

These symbols, however, though structurally important, are never allowed to form a fixed, inflexible framework, within which the natural growth of the poem could become stifled, or distorted. On the contrary, the symbols themselves are constantly growing and developing in significance, thereby encouraging and stimulating growth and development in the poem as a whole. Some of the transformations that occur in the Thistle, for example, are described in the following lines:

The thistle like a snawstorm drives,
Or like a flicht o' swallows lifts,
Or like a swarm o' midges hings,
A plague o' moths, a starry sky,
But's naething but a thistle yet,
And still the puzzle stands unsolved.
Beauty and ugliness alike,
And life and daith and God and man,
Are aspects o't but nane can tell
The secret that I'd fain find oot
O' this bricht hive, this sorry weed,
The tree that fills the universe,
Or like a reistit herrin' crines.

(C.P., I, 125-126)

The Thistle's development, from the realm of 'this sorry weed' into that of 'The tree that fills the universe', inevitably alters the scale of the entire poem; perspectives are immeasurably widened and extended; forms, relationships and values are completely transformed:

Nae mair I see
As aince I saw
Mysel' in the thistle
Harth and haw!

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
Legato con amore in un volume,
(Or else by Hate, fu' aft the better Love)
Ciò che per l'universo si squaderna;
Sustanzia ed accidenti, e lor costume,
Quasi conflati insieme per tal modo,
(The michty thistle in wha's boonds I rove)
Che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume.[6]

(C.P., I, 153-154)

If, with the Drunk Man, we can explore the ever-expanding depths, and breadths, and heights of 'The michty thistle in wha's bounds (we) rove', we too may be able to share in Dante's vision of life as an indivisible whole: all the separate pages of the universe bound together in a single volume; the many disparate aspects of existence fused together in a single flame, by Love - not the erotic mirage of the 'silken leddy' (see C.P., I, p. 89), but 'l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle'.[7] Clearly, it is towards some such vision of life in its wholeness, that the Drunk Man's meditations on the Thistle are intended to lead us.

Nor should we be misled into thinking that the reference to 'Hate', in this passage about Love, represents mere 'dialectical zig-zagging'. Those who are familiar with the Bible's frequent accounts of God's wrathful treatment of his loved ones, will find no great difficulty in accepting the proposition, that what we think of as 'Hate', is 'fu' aft the better Love'. As the Prophet Jeremiah says:

> Remembering mine affliction and my misery,
> the wormwood and the gall.
> This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.
> It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed,
> because his compassions fail not.
> They are new every morning . . .
> The Lord is good
> unto them that wait for him,
> to the soul that seeketh him . . .
> For the Lord will not cast off for ever:
> But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion
> according to the multitude of his mercies.
> For he doth not afflict
> willingly
> nor grieve the children of men.
>
> (Lamentations, 3:19-23, 25, 31-33)

The lines from Dante, linked as they are to a vision of 'the michty thistle', may help us to understand why, in an earlier part of the poem, the Drunk Man declares his certainty that

> The thistle yet'll unite
> Man and the Infinite!
>
> (C.P., I, 98)

In fact, the whole poem may be seen as an extended illustration of how this can come about: how the 'ugsome' Thistle can 'spire up' to become the means of uniting man with the blissful Beyond that is symbolised by the Moon. It is in the Ygdrasil section of the poem that this is seen to be accomplished, when the thorny Thistle is transformed into the Cross of Calvary, through which, according to Christian theology, fallen man is reunited to God, the 'infinite, eternal and unchangeable'. (See the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism, Question 4).

There is, of course, a great deal more to be said about the Ygdrasil section of the poem, as we shall discover later. First, however, we shall explore the development of the 'spiring up' theme in other parts of the poem.

Inevitably, the various 'spiring up' movements in the poem cause a certain amount of disorientation in the Drunk Man's mind, in addition to the confusion caused by the drink he has consumed. He becomes like a passenger on a jet-plane that has just taken off. The world below him keeps on swinging round, as if on a huge turntable, from one bewilderingly unfamiliar position to another. He can no longer be sure about the exact location of even the most familiar objects and places. Hence his cry:

> Guid sakes, I'm in a dreidfu' state.
> I'll ha'e nae inklin sune
> Gin I'm the drinker or the drink,
> The thistle or the mune.
>
> (C.P., I, 97)

In these lines, the Drunk Man is almost certainly alluding to Emerson's little poem, 'Brahma', which he would probably learn as a schoolboy. In it, the divine speaker says:

> They reckon ill who leave me out;
> When me they fly, I am the wings;
> I am the doubter and the doubt,
> And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.[8]

Emerson's lines themselves allude to one of the most bewildering and enlightening passages in the whole of Indian sacred literature: it is the account given in the Vishnu-purana, of the return of Ribhu, Nidagha's guru, after a very long absence:

> After a thousand years came Ribhu
> To Nidagha's city, to impart further knowledge to him.
> He saw him outside the city
> Just as the King was about to enter with a great train of attendants,
> Standing afar and holding himself apart from the crowd . . .
> When Ribhu saw him, he went to him and greeted him and said
> O Brahman, why standest thou here alone?
> Nidagha said: Behold the crowd pressing about the King
> Who is just entering the city. That is why I stand alone.
> Ribhu said: Which of these then is the King? . . .
> Nidagha said: He who rides upon the fiery elephant . . .
> Ribhu said: . . . I would know, which is here the elephant and which the King.
> Nidagha said: The elephant is below, the King is above him.

> Who does not know the relationship of borne to bearer?
> Ribhu said: That I may know, teach me . . .
> Straight Nidagha sprang upon the Guru, and said to him . . .
> I am above like the King. You are below like the elephant.
> For thy instruction I give thee this example.
> Ribhu said: If you are in the position of the King, and I
> in that of the elephant . . .
> Which of us is you, and which is I?
> Then swiftly Nidagha falling down before him clasped his
> feet and spake:
> Truly thou art Ribhu, my master.
> For no other spirit is so endowed with non-duality
> As that of my master. By this I know that thou, my Guru,
> art come . . .[9]

The lesson taught to Nidagha is later summarised as follows:

> For as the sky, which is yet one, appears with the
> distinctions of blue and white,
> So also the self, though one, appears illusively in
> differentiation.
> All, whatsoever is here, that is the One, Acyuta.
> From Him, there is no other, nothing different;
> He is I, He is also thou, He is all this.
> Therefore let go the mirage of multiplicity.[10]

The allusion to Emerson, then, may serve to emphasise what the quotation from Dante has already made clear: the poet's desire to give us, in this poem, a vision of Life in all its comprehensiveness, completeness and wholeness. And this he endeavours to communicate, not only through the mysticism of the West, but also through that of the East.

In the course of the poem the 'spiring up' theme is developed on various levels of significance. The man's drunkenness itself represents a kind of 'spiring up' from the dead level of ordinary consciousness; it is a certain kind of heightened state, though of feeling rather than of spiritual awareness. The Drunk Man says:

> . . . whiles when I'm alowe wi' booze,
> I'm like God's sel' and clad in fire,
> And ha'e a Pentecost like this . . .
>
> It maitters not what drink is ta'en,
> The barley bree, ambition, love,
> Or Guid or Evil workin' in's,
> Sae lang's we feel like souls set free . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 127)

Without such ways of escape from the prison of ordinary restricted awareness, life would not be worth living -

> . . . but for drink and drink's effects
> The yeast o' God that barms in us,
> We micht as weel no' be alive.

This is why the Drunk Man exclaims:

> O wad that I could aye be fou',
> And no' come back as aye I maun
> To naething but a fule that nane
> 'Ud credit wi' sic thochts as thae,
> A fule that kens they're empty dreams!
>
> (C.P., I, 127)

Such paths of escape, as the poet makes clear, are valued for the feeling of liberation which one can find in them. Since, however, none of them ever leads to actual liberation, the feeling is pure delusion:

> The wee reliefs we ha'e in booze,
> Or wun at times in carnal states,
> May hide frae us but canna cheenge
> The silly horrors o' oor fates.
>
> (C.P., I, 155)

Those who tread these popular paths of escape must, sooner or later, retrace their steps to where they entered them, and realise that their ecstasies have changed nothing, except that their prison has been made a little more secure and escape-proof than before. Nevertheless, 'Sae lang's we feel like souls set free', in these 'empty dream' states, the dream paths are bound to be desired and sought after; not only because the mere feeling of freedom, however ephemeral, provides people with a temporary respite from the oppressive feeling of being imprisoned, which is their normal state, but also because even a mirage of freedom is a sign that a real oasis of freedom must exist somewhere, awaiting discovery, since otherwise there could be no mirage. Besides, though these paths of pleasure do not lead to freedom - quite the reverse - they can sometimes lead to other benefits that are, for the time being, at least, real enough. As an ancient Chinese thinker, Chuang Tzu, points out:

> A drunken man who falls out of a cart, though he may suffer, does not die. His bones are the same as other people's; but he meets his accident in a different way. His spirit is in a condition of security. He is not conscious of riding in the cart; neither is he conscious of falling out of it. Ideas of life, death, fear and the like cannot penetrate his breast; and so he does not suffer from contact with objective existence. If such security is to be got from wine, how much more is it to be got from God?[11]

Although such experiences are essentially fleeting and transitory, they can hardly be regarded as completely valueless, especially for those who are still far from their spiritual goal. As the modern Tibetan Buddhist writer, Lama Anagarika Govinda, says: 'We do not enjoy flowers less because we know that they are transient. On the contrary: the knowledge of their impermanence makes their flowering all the more precious to us - just as the fleetness of the moment and of human life gives each of them their special value.'[12]

'In vino veritas' may simply be an obvious and ludicrous lie, when spoken, for example by

> . . . rough
> And reid-een'd fules that in it droon
>
> (C.P., I, 89)

but it would appear that the old adage can have a real meaning for those who, through a consciousness heightened by 'drink', are enabled to glimpse a life less restricted than that of 'everyday lower life' (C.P., I, 639), and to 'ha'e a Pentecost like this'. Wine may merely stupefy and depress, but it can also, in some cases at least, help people to 'spire up', for the time being anyway, above their normal state of imprisoned consciousness. Certainly, in his 'Das trunkene Lied', Nietzsche boldly identifies the state of intoxicated elation, however achieved, with revelation and spiritual insight:

> O Mensch! Gib acht!
> Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
> 'Ich schlief, ich schlief -
> Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:
> Die Welt ist tief,
> Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.

Tief ist ihr Weh -
Lust - tiefer noch als Herzeleid!
Weh spricht: Vergeh!
Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit -
Will tiefe, tiefe, Ewigkeit.'[13]

The message Nietzsche brings from the depth of midnight is, that when the boundaries of ordinary daylight consciousness are dissolved by ecstasy in dream-consciousness, we are able (though still far removed from the realm of Ultimate Reality), to realise that the world has greater depths than daylight consciousness would ever lead us to suspect, and that, in these depths, Joy has deeper roots than Woe, and unlike Woe, which cries out for things to pass away, Joy finds its natural context in the changeless world of Eternity.

Insofar, then, as 'drink' (in the wide sense in which MacDiarmid uses the word) is able, at times, to promote the growth of such insights, one can hardly refuse to agree, to some extent, with the pronouncement:

You're richt, auld drunk impenitent,
I ken it tae - the truth's in wine!
(C.P., I, 89)

The 'truth' in wine, however, is never unmixed with error. The illusory nature of 'the wee reliefs we ha'e in booze', is made very evident by the fact that we

. . . speak in tongues
We dinna ken and never wull,
And find a merit in oorsels . . .
(C.P., I, 127-8)

To the Drunk Man's mind, conditioned by Scottish Calvinism, the fact that we find any merit in ourselves is, perhaps, the surest proof that we are deluded. Question No. 19 in the Shorter Catechism asks: 'What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?' and the reply given there is: 'All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.' Freedom from delusion consists in being able 'to see we're worthless and believe it' (C.P., I, 128), for

A'thing that ony man can be's
A mockery o' his soul at last.
The mair it shows't the better . . .

(C.P., I, 128)

This is why the Drunk Man says:

I'd suner be a tramp than king,
Lest in the pride o' place and poo'er
I e'er forgot my waesomeness.

(C.P., I, 128)

These words may seem to contradict the Drunk Man's avowed resolve to 'spire up' towards the heights, but they will seem to do so only if we forget the difference between that which is 'high' or 'low' in the ordinary sense of these words, and that which is 'high' or 'low' in the spiritual sense. According to the religion in which the author of the poem was brought up, Divinity achieved its highest expression in a Jewish child of low parentage; the Supreme Being was born as a baby, in a cave in which, normally, only beasts would be born, 'And his cradle was a stall'. Grown to manhood, this incarnation of the Deity was executed for blasphemy. His execution, however, had to take place outside the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem, because it was thought that his blood would have polluted its sacred stones. Yet, contact with his blood was soon regarded by Christians as the only means of purifying the fallen human soul, and preparing it for entry into the still more sacred precincts of the New Jerusalem, which the Apostle John saw 'descending out of heaven from God' (Revelation 21: 2, 10). Stranger still, the instrument of Christ's execution, devised as a means of shaming and humiliating those whom it deprived of life, was soon being hailed by his followers as the only reliable guide to the heavenly heights. St Paul, for example, in his letter to the Galatians, says: 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world' (Galatians 6:14). On the other hand, the way pursued by those who 'spire up' ambitiously towards wealth and power, came to be regarded by Christians as an essentially downward route, leading only to the tormenting flames of the Inferno. It is against this background of

Christian paradox, that we have to try to understand the Drunk Man's preference for the 'lowest place', the place in which the Highest once lived, and presumably still lives, rather than for any of the exalted places occupied by those who were, and are, the enemies of the Highest.

Since those who 'spire up' successfully towards wealth and power, acquire thereby, fuller and more frequent access to the realms of pleasure, it is clear that the Drunk Man's rejection of this kind of 'spiring up' is a quite deliberate rejection of the means by which he could obtain fuller and more frequent access to his favourite pleasures. Obviously, like all men of religious insight, he has no more faith in pleasure than he has in 'reason', as a remedy for human 'waesomeness'. He says:

> Ilka pleesure I can ha'e
> Ends like a dram ta'en yesterday
>
> And tho' to ha'e it I am lorn
> - What better 'ud I be the morn?
>
> (C.P., I, 110)

Pleasures tend merely to perpetuate the state of ignorance in which suffering thrives. They

> May hide frae us but canna cheenge
> The silly horrors o' oor fates.
>
> (C.P., I, 155)

The pleasures we 'wun in carnal states' may seem to be an exception, for

> Whisky mak's Heaven or Hell and whiles mells baith . . .
> - But sex reveals life, faith!
>
> (C.P., I 114)

The union between man and woman, however, is not - or should not be - simply a matter of pleasure. It is, or can be, a sacramental symbol of something divine. St Paul, though by no means an enthusiast for marriage, saw in it a symbol of the union that exists between Christ and his Church (Ephesians 5:25-32). Rumi, on the other hand, made no

attempt to conceal his enthusiasm for it. He says to God: 'When men and women become one, Thou art that One' (Rumi, p. 33). And in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Yagnavalkya explains to his wife, Maitreya, that when a man is loved by his wife, and a wife is loved by her husband, the real object of such love is always the divine Self, who lives in them both. (See Up. p. 87) The divine Self is both lover and beloved, adorer and adored, in every act of loving sexual union. Yet this loving of the divine Self by the divine Self is no mere static self-contemplation, as of a reflection in a mirror; it is a dynamic outpouring of divine energy, a creative self-giving of one living person to another. 'Sex reveals life, faith!'

The mystery of how love can combine within itself the attributes of both perfect unity and dramatic diversity, is, perhaps, best illustrated in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which finds, within the indivisible unity of God, three distinct Beings: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the Creed of St Athanasius explains:

> The Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
> Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.
> For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost.
> But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.
>
> (The Book of Common Prayer)

According to this Christian view, then, the perpetual self-giving of the Father to the Son, and of the Son to the Father, in and through the Holy Spirit, constitutes a beginningless and endless circuit of divine Love, from which all lesser loves derive their power. This eternal circuit, it is taught, has been brought within reach of fallen man, through the Son's descent, in human form, into space and time, and his offering of himself to the Father on the Cross at Calvary, thus creating, as it were, a permanent power-point on earth for the replenishment of human love.

It is, perhaps, in this Christian context that we can most clearly perceive how 'sex reveals life, faith!' in so far as it allows the

self-giving 'agapé' of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to become embodied in the otherwise blind and self-centred activities of 'eros'.[14] The consequent interpenetration of the human and the divine, brings a new meaning to sexual union:

> Said my body to my mind,
> I've been startled whiles to find,
> When Jean has been in bed wi' me,
> A kind o' Christianity!
>
> (C.P., I, 101)

The 'life' thus revealed by sex, is the divine Life of the Trinity, 'l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle', 'Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance'. It is, as the Drunk Man says, a 'searchin' licht'; it is the 'sheer licht o' life' which 'loups through me like a fire':

> O Jean, in whom my spirit sees,
> Clearer than through whisky or disease,
> Its dernin' nature, wad the searchin' licht
> Oor union raises poor'd owre me the nicht.
>
> I'm faced wi' aspects o' mysel'
> At last wha's portent nocht can tell,
> Save that sheer licht o' life that when we're joint
> Loups through me like a fire a' else t'aroint.
>
> (C.P., I, 146)

Light and 'louping' fire are Biblical symbols of God: the fierce but non-consuming flames of Horeb and of Pentecost, which reveal the inner heart of this fire to be pure love, in the sense of 'agapé', self-giving love. According to the Apostle John, 'Every one that loveth' (in this sense) 'is born of God, and knoweth God', for 'God is love' - ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν (1 John 4:7-8).

Since, humanly speaking, it is union with Jean which brings about the 'louping' of divine fire within him, it is not difficult to understand why the Drunk Man pleads with her to 'be life's licht, my wife!' (p. 115) He is not implying that she personally is the source of that light. He makes it very plain that he regards that light as belonging to Eternity and the Beyond:

Clear my lourd flesh, and let me move
In the peculiar licht o' love,
As aiblins in Eternity men may
When their swack souls nae mair are clogged wi' clay.

(C.P., I, 146)

Nevertheless, Jean is not to be regarded as something separate from the light of life which radiates through her. 'A luvin' wumman is a licht' (p. 102). If this does not sound to us like 'A kind o' Christianity', this could be because we have forgotten that Jesus did not just say: 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12); he also said: 'Ye are the light of the world' (Matthew 5:14). No attempt is made, however, to romanticise Jean's role, or to pretend that the only known function of womankind is to convey light; for the poet is well aware that Woman is no less likely than Man to exhibit, at times, the worthless clay of our fallen human nature in its natural context of darkness:

. . . Whiles I canna look at Jean
For fear I'd see the sunlicht turn
Worm-like into the glaur again.

(C.P., I, 132)

Although 'A luvin' wumman' can be a means of conveying the searching light of divine love, 'That shows a man', by contrast, 'his waefu' plicht' (p. 102), she can also, unfortunately, be the darkness that embodies all the squalid aspects of sexual union:

Auld bag o' tricks, ye needna come
And think to stap me in your womb.

You needna fash to rax and strain.
Carline, I'll no be born again

In ony brat you can produce.
Carline, gi'e owre - O what's the use?

You pay nae heed but plop me in,
Syne shove me oot, and winna be din

- Owre and owre, the same auld trick,
Cratur withoot climacteric! . . .

(C.P., I, 109)

'Cratur withoot climacteric' is a description that applies, not only to 'Carline' or to women in general, but to every being trapped within this fallen world. Despite the desire of some, to rise, to reach some climactic point of change and renewal, there is no possibility of achieving this, as long as we remain attached to this circling world, which Buddhists so appropriately name Samsara . For Samsara is simply an aimless wandering round and round of created things in senseless circles, 'withoot climacteric'. Weighed down like a gramophone needle by his attachment to the things of this world, the 'cratur' can travel only from one part of Samsara's flat surface to another, always stuck in the same groove. There is no possibility of ascent into the realm of transformation and liberation; no possibility of arriving at any real destination. As long as we remain in Samsara, we simply go round endlessly in circles, never getting anywhere.

> And see I noo a great wheel move,
> And a' the notions that I love
> Drap into stented groove and groove?
>
> It maitters not my mind the day,
> Nocht maitters that I strive to dae,
> - For the wheel moves on in its ain way.
>
> (C.P., I, 158)

The only hope of 'climacteric' comes from outside the 'great wheel', from the realm of our real Selfhood - ''Yont nature and the Common Man' - the mere sight of which can be enough to free us from the unreal, imprisoned selves with which Samsara has burdened us. Only when this happens can we cease to be 'craturs withoot climacteric'.

Jean ('life's licht') and Carline ('cratur withoot climacteric') are symbols of universal validity. They symbolise the dual nature of all created existence, which, at certain moments, is the very embodiment of divine light, but, at others, simply the shadow of fallen man's absurdity and degradation. Lesser writers than MacDiarmid tend to stress one of these aspects of created existence, to the exclusion of the other. MacDiarmid's greatness is manifested in his determination, and his ability, to do justice to both.

We have already noted that the Drunk Man's determination to 'spire up' - 'To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked' - is connected, paradoxically enough, with a desire to identify with tramps rather than with kings, with those who are in the lowest places in society rather than with those who are in the places of greatest power and authority. In the light of Christian paradox, this would appear to make sense. But what kind of sense can one hope to make of the four lines that follow? -

> Sae to debauchery and dirt,
> And to disease and daith I turn,
> Sin' otherwise my seemin' worth
> 'Ud block my view o' what is what . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 128)

It is idle to pretend that there is anything elevating - spiritually or otherwise - about 'debauchery', 'dirt', 'disease', or 'daith'. They all pose a threat to man's survival, whether in the 'Heights' or in the 'Depths'. It should be noted, however, that they are also enemies of something which poses an even greater threat to man's soul than they do: namely, 'seemin' worth', which can so inflate the personal ego, the fallen human 'self', that no room is left for the saving activities of the divine Self, the eternal rescuer, whose name, as He disclosed to Moses on Sinai, is always I AM (Exodus 3:14).

It should also be remembered, that the human Jesus, in whom, according to Christian belief, the divine I AM was revealed, deliberately associated himself with the victims of 'debauchery and dirt', 'disease and daith', but consistently spurned the people of 'seemin' worth'. To the leading churchmen of his day, he said: 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' (Matthew 23:33). To 'sinners', however, he never spoke in this way. He refused to condemn the 'woman taken in adultery' (John 8:11), and to one of the criminals who was crucified beside him, he said: 'Today shalt thou be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). Obviously, if the Christian records are to be believed, 'debauchery and dirt', 'disease and daith', could not drive away the divine I AM, but 'seemin' worth' could. From the Christian viewpoint, therefore, the Drunk Man is choosing the lesser of two evils.

But these are puzzling matters, and it might well seem that the Jesus of the Gospels comes perilously close to providing a wrongdoers' charter - almost an incitement to sin. D.H. Lawrence must have felt this, when he mocked Dostoevsky's message by summarising it as 'Let me sin my way to Jesus'.[15] But perhaps Lawrence's gibe merely exposes his own incomplete grasp of the Christian paradox, which restricts the availability of salvation to lost sinners, certainly, but also stresses the transforming power of divine Grace. The benighted sinner who accepts with Jesus the darkness of both human and divine rejection, can be transformed into a saint, one of the lights of the world, as some of the persecutors of the early Church discovered. The defeat and death of the old human self, results in a triumphant rebirth of the divine Self - the Resurrection of Christ, to use Biblical terms. This is the meaning behind Jesus's parting words to the 'woman taken in adultery': 'Go, and sin no more', which should not be construed as a command, but rather, as a parting gift of Grace from the divine Self, Who alone makes such things possible. For, as Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, and many others have made clear, the Christian life is not a life that can be lived by us: it can only be lived in us, by the divine Self, or Logos, or Christos, which is believed to have lived in Jesus. 'I live', says Paul, 'yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20), meaning, of course, not the human Jesus, or any other human being, but the divine Self, described in the Fourth Gospel as 'the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). The trouble about 'seemin' worth' is, that it leaves no room for this divine Self to flourish within us. It inflates man's foolish self-esteem to such an extent, that he imagines his empty ego to be rich, and in need of nothing, like the real Self from which he is estranged. Only in those whose self-esteem has been deflated, by the discovery that their 'seemin' worth' is so much empty air, and that 'A'thing that ony man can be's / A mockery o' his soul at last' (C.P., I, 128), can the divine life grow and develop. Those who think that they lack nothing, can receive nothing from the divine life which is waiting to enrich them. Only if we 'ha'e the thistle's poo'er / To see we're worthless and believe't' (C.P., I, 128), can the divine life fill our emptiness with something worthwhile.

Hence Mary's words, in her 'Magnificat': 'He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away' (The Book of Common Prayer). The word 'rich', of course, has ironic overtones here. It recalls Christ's warning to 'the church of the Laodiceans', as recorded in The Revelation of St John the Divine: 'Thou sayest, I am rich,and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked . . . Behold, I stand at the door, and knock' (Chapter 3:17, 20).

Having had these warning words burned into his Calvinist-conditioned mentality in youth, it is not surprising that the Drunk Man turns away from worldly ways of 'spiring up', and bluntly declares:

> I'd suner be a tramp than king,
> Lest in the pride o' place and poo'er
> I e'er forgot my waesomeness.
>
> (C.P., I, 128)

For it is only a 'self'-diminishing awareness, and constant remembrance, of one's own 'waesomeness', that can keep clear and unobstructed the doorway at which the divine Self knocks. This is the traditional Christian teaching, as preserved in Lutheran and Calvinist theology, amd it is worth noting, that if we remove the above lines from this theological context, they lose all meaning; they cease to make sense, if transplanted into any non-religious body of thought, as, indeed, do so many of MacDiarmid's other utterances.

The theme of human 'waesomeness' comes to the fore again, in that section of the poem where MacDiarmid considers the significance of 'Ygdrasil', the Scandinavian version of 'The Tree of Existence', to which Thomas Carlyle refers, in his essay, On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History:

> Igdrasil, the Ash-tree of Existence, has its roots deep-down in the kingdoms of Hela or Death; its trunk reaches up heaven-high, spreads its boughs over the whole Universe: it is the Tree of Existence . . . Its 'boughs', with their buddings and disleafings, - events, things suffered, things done, catastrophes, - stretch through all lands and times. Is not every leaf of it a biography, every fibre there an

> act or word? Its boughs are Histories of Nations. The rustle of it is the noise of Human Existence, onwards from of old . . . It is the past, the present, and the future; what was done, what is doing, what will be done; 'the infinite conjugation of the verb To do' . . . I find no similitude so true as this of a Tree. Beautiful; altogether beautiful and great . . .[16]

'Beautiful', however, is not a word that finds any place in MacDiarmid's much less enthusiastic account of the great 'Tree':

> What is the tree? As fer as Man's
> Concerned it disna maitter
> Gin but a giant thistle 'tis
> That spreids eternal mischief there,
> As I'm inclined to think.
> Ruthless it sends its solid growth
> Through mair than he can e'er conceive,
> And braks his warlds abreid and rives
> His Heavens to tatters on its horns.
>
> (C.P., I, 131)

MacDiarmid sees the Tree as simply a gigantic form assumed by the pain-producing Thistle he has been contemplating, a nightmarish enlargement of 'the ugsome shape' (p. 121), the 'vile growth' (p. 122), which prompted his anxious enquiry:

> But will a Scotsman never
> Frae this vile growth be freed?
>
> (C.P., I, 122)

The Thistle, as thistle, is dangerous enough -

> There is nae life in a' the land
> But this infernal Thistle kills . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 153)

When, however, it 'spires up' to become the Tree of All Existence, its power to damage and destroy becomes limitless. Whatever glorious worlds man may succeed in building up, they will not, they cannot, last. For, within them, as within all existing things, the little seed of Ygdrasil, slowly but surely, develops massive muscular branches, with

which it easily 'braks his warlds abreid'. Any 'Heavens' that man may discover, or create for himself, on this planet or any other, can have no hope of survival either. With its huge, jagged branches, like the horns of a gigantic bull, Ygdrasil, perhaps unknowingly and unintentionally, but certainly inevitably, sooner or later, 'rives / His Heavens to tatters on its horns'. 'Beautiful; altogether beautiful . . .'? In the light of MacDiarmid's more penetrating insights into the real nature of Existence, Carlyle's words inevitably acquire a tinge of irony unintended by their author. Still more ironical is the fact that it is only in terms of mystical vision, with which MacDiarmid was familiar, and Carlyle was not, that Carlyle's rhapsodic words could be justified. Those, however, who have not just heard about the view from the 'Heights', but who have, like MacDiarmid, actually experienced it, do not usually speak about it as if it were one of the possible views from the cloudy 'Depths'.

MacDiarmid was born at a time when students of the physical universe tended to look with disdain on Calvinist teaching about man's lost state by nature, for they were quite certain of man's ever-increasing ability to explore and illuminate all the mysteries of the universe; and, since most people saw nothing absurd about the belief that the whole material universe would one day be comprehended by one of its own very tiny, and purely accidental products, this euphoric view rapidly gained wide support, outside the churches. It is, therefore, very significant that MacDiarmid, who officially ceased to be a Calvinist while still a very young Sunday School teacher, emphatically rejects, through his Drunk Man, this widely accepted view, and, in stark contradiction of it, stresses man's bewilderment and helplessness in the unintelligible vastness of Creation. Addressing the vast Tree of Existence, he says:

> Thou art the facts in ilka airt
> That breenge into infinity,
> Criss-crossed wi' coontless ither facts
> Nae man can follow, and o' which
> He is himsel' a helpless pairt,
> Held in their tangle as he were
> A stick-nest in Ygdrasil.
>
> (C.P., I, 129)

Far from being an all-seeing master of the universe, man is only a 'helpless pairt' of the infinitely vast web of facts which make up the Tree of Existence, and a very tiny 'pairt' he is. Compared with even the smallest twig on the Tree, he is a mere speck:

> . . . Man at maist o' sic a twig
> Ane o' the coontless atoms is.
>
> (C.P., I, 130)

Only the blind, or the very short-sighted, therefore, could feel at all complacent about the area of knowledge accessible to this creature:

> The less man sees the mair he is
> Content wi't, but the mair he sees
> The mair he kens hoo little o'
> A' that there is he'll ever see,
> And hoo it mak's confusion aye
> The waur confoondit till at last
> His brain inside his heid is like
> Ariadne wi' an empty pirn,
> Or like a birlin' reel frae which
> A whale has rived the line awa'.
>
> (C.P., I, 129)

As Ariadne let the thread unroll from her pirn in order to guide Theseus through the labyrinth back to the light of day, so the human brain unrolls its intellectual thread to enable the soul to find its way, through the labyrinth of facts of which the universe is composed, back to the light of truth and reality from which, according to the religious view, it has become estranged. The brain, however, quickly runs out of intellectual thread: left 'wi' an empty pirn', it is then quite incapable of helping man to find his way out of darkness into light. In any case, unlike Ariadne, it is itself lost in the labyrinth.

Because the reality from which we human beings are estranged is so far beyond the grasp of our tiny human brain, the poet compares it to a huge whale, such as Moby Dick, which, having swallowed some poor angler's bait, proceeds to wrench the line away completely from his rod and its 'birlin' reel'. Our brain becomes like that angler's 'birlin' reel' every time we try to grasp 'the facts in ilka airt / That breenge into infinity'.

The poet is painfully aware, as all religious people are, that man, considered simply as a creature - a microscopic psycho-physical organism thrown up by the vast, impersonal forces of cosmic evolution - has little power or significance in the total scheme of things. He is merely 'A means to ends he'll never ken' -

> O hard it is for man to ken
> He's no' creation's goal nor yet
> A benefitter by't at last -
> A means to ends he'll never ken . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 129)

The 'nature or the purpose' of the gigantic growth in which man finds himself so painfully involved, is wholly beyond his understanding, but even if it were not, there would be little point in his enquiring into such matters, since he must soon be re-absorbed into the 'parent wud' of the Tree that gave him birth:

> The nature or the purpose o't
> He needna fash to speir, for he
> Is destined to be sune owre grown
> And hidden wi' the parent wud
> The spreidin' boughs in darkness hap,
> And a' its future life'll be
> Ootwith'm as he's ootwith his banes.
>
> (C.P., I, 131)

Quietly, but with devastating effect, the poet's last two lines demolish the whole concept of man as merely a product of the physical universe. Man, we are reminded, is something more than the bag of flesh and bones he calls his body, something 'more than the sum of his organs', as MacDiarmid puts it in a later poem (C.P., I, 642, 'Song of the Seraphim'). For, after the cosmic Tree, or Thistle, has absorbed man's body back into itself, the entire cosmic process will then be something wholly external to <u>him</u> -

> And a' its future life'll be
> Ootwith'm as he's ootwith his banes.

If man were simply the body that cosmic evolution has provided him with, it would be impossible for him to get 'ootwith his banes', and for the

process that produced these 'banes' to get 'oot with' him. If he were simply the brain, then he would be, like that organ, a perpetual prisoner of his own 'banes'. But man, as the poet makes clear later, is essentially, not body, or brain, but spirit:

> Let a' the thistle's growth
> Be as a process, then,
> My spirit's gane richt through,
> And needna threid again . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 141)

Man's ultimate freedom from the Tree of Existence, is clearly emphasised in the developed forms of the Ygdrasil myth which appear in the ancient Indian scriptures - writings with which, it is clear, MacDiarmid developed a particularly close and intimate acquaintance.

In Indian religious thought, the Tree of Existence is conceived of, not as an ash-tree, but as a fig-tree, which has its roots, not below, but above, in Brahman, the Supreme Reality. In the Katha Upanishad, for example, we read: 'With the root above and the branches below (stands) this ancient fig-tree. That indeed is the pure; that is Brahman' (II, 3, 1, P.U., p. 641). The Maitri Upanishad, also, speaks of 'the lone fig-tree' which has 'its root above' (VI, 4, P.U., p. 818), but emphasises that, though the Tree is a manifestation of Brahman, it is a very imperfect one, insofar as it exists within the bounds of visible form: 'There are, assuredly, two forms of Brahman, the formed and the formless. Now that which is formed is unreal; that which is the formless is the real; that is Brahman, that is the light' (VI, 3, P.U., p. 817). In the Svetasvatara Upanishad too, it is emphasised that the Tree does not belong to the highest realm of being: 'Higher and other than the forms of the world-tree and time is he from whom this world revolves, who brings good and removes evil . . .' (VI, 6, P.U., p. 745), and 'He is to be seen as beyond the three kinds of time (past, present and future), and as without parts . . .' (VI, 5, P.U., p. 744). In the Bhagavad-Gita, which was written at a later date than any of the canonical Hindu scriptures (perhaps as late as the beginning of the Christian era), it is actually suggested, that the best thing to do with the Tree of Existence, is to cut it down:

> In this world its true form is not known, neither its origin nor its end, and its strength is not understood, until the tree with its roots striking deep into the earth is hewn down by the sharp axe of non-attachment.
>
> (Geeta, XV, p. 79)

Clearly, these developments in the myth of the 'world-tree' reflect a development which took place in India's understanding of the nature of Existence, between the time when the earliest Vedic literature was written down, and the time when the Gita first appeared. This development would appear to have occurred, at least partly, as a result of the emergence during that period of a new religious teacher in Northern India: Prince Siddharta Gautama (died c.545 B.C.), who taught that all existence (in the sense of that which appears to stand out as separate and distinct from Ultimate Reality) inevitably involves man in suffering of some kind, even if it is only in the form of frustrated, or imperfectly satisfied, desire. This teacher, now known as the Buddha, the Enlightened One, believed that 'Suffering is the lot of everyone, everywhere and all the time'.[17] He also believed, however, that suffering can be ended, by the blowing out of the flame of egoism, by the renunciation of all craving for illusory separate existence. The resulting state is called Nirvana, and it cannot properly be described as life, or death, existence, or non-existence, for it completely transcends all antitheses, all attempts to confine it to one side of a pair of opposites. As Sir Edwin Arnold makes clear, in The Light of Asia, Nirvana neither means living nor ceasing to live:

> If any teach NIRVANA is to cease
> Say unto such they lie.
>
> If any teach NIRVANA is to live,
> Say unto such they err; not knowing this,
> Nor what light shines beyond their broken lamps,
> Nor lifeless, timeless, bliss.
>
> (p. 153)

With regard to the man who has reached Nirvana, it is explained, that

> No need hath such to live as you name life;
> That which began in him when he began
> Is finished; he hath wrought the purpose through
> Of what did make him man . . .

> . . . He is one with Life
> Yet lives not. He is blest, ceasing to be.
> OM MANI PADME, OM![18] The Dewdrop slips
> Into the shining sea.
>
> (p. 145)

The man, however, who does not reach Nirvana, who is unable to wield the axe of non-attachment, or extinguish the tormenting flame of egoism, is helplessly trapped in the blazing wheel of alternating births and deaths from which he can find no escape. There he learns the truth of the Buddha's teaching: that 'There is no pain like this bodily existence', and that 'All created things are grief and pain' (C.B., pp. 63, 66). But this suffering itself, may ultimately drive him to make the desperate efforts that will eventually free him for ever from the painful round of births and deaths. And then, knowing

> . . . that things are even so
> As by the Buddha it is taught, no more
> Would he take hold of any form of birth
> Than he would grasp a red-hot iron ball.
>
> (C.B., p. 78)

- until, that is to say, he reaches the Bodhisattva stage of spiritual development, when, out of compassion for others, he voluntarily assumes the painful burden of bodily existence, in order to become a bridge to freedom for those still trapped in useless and meaningless sufferings.

In the light of this teaching about the essentially painful nature of all existence, it is not difficult to understand why MacDiarmid cannot share Carlyle's enthusiasm for Ygdrasil, and why the Bhagavad-Gita considers that the best thing to do with the Tree of Existence is to put an axe to its roots. But paradoxically enough, the axing does not bring about the death or disappearance of the Tree ('The thistle canna vanish quite', C.P., I, 143); it simply brings to light 'its true form', which, of course, cannot be seen or known 'In this world' of imprisoned consciousness, by beings trapped in the tangled twigs of 'A stick-nest in Ygdrasil' (C.P., I, 129). MacDiarmid, of course, being acquainted with higher states of consciousness, did know the 'true form' of the Tree. Having seen its cruciform shape, he did not confuse it

with any ordinary tree. He recognised it as the Tree of Calvary, the tree of cosmic suffering, the cruel Cross to which every Son of God consents to be nailed, so that others may find a bridge between their meaningless everyday existence and the Life Divine:

> Aye, this is Calvary - to bear
> Your Cross wi'in you frae the seed,
> And <u>feel</u> it grow by slow degrees
> Until it rends your flesh apairt . . .
>
> (<u>C.P.</u>, I, 134)

It is in this reference to Calvary, the place where Jesus died his redeeming death, that we find, at last, some indication of real hope in the poet's mind with regard to Ygdrasil. For, if the great Tree can be seen, not just as a vast spider's web in which man is helplessly trapped, but as a holy Cross on which the Son of God offers his body as a bridge to life eternal, the whole sad spectacle of man's apparently hopeless struggle with griefs and pains beyond his comprehension, becomes transformed into a scene of loving, divine redemption by the Lord, 'who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live'.[19]

Notes

[1] Up till now, of course, it has proved extremely difficult, if not impossible, to discover any real principle of unity in the poem. Readers have been more aware of its diversity than its unity. In, for example, The Literature of Scotland, by Roderick Watson (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1984), the author remarks that 'The poem has little formal structure beyond its individual rhyme-schemes and it can be bewilderingly garrulous and repetitious, but particular images do recur to give it a certain thematic coherence' (p. 355). Another principle of coherence, however, is suggested by Harvey Oxenhorn, in Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), who maintains that 'The ceaseless contradictions in tone, mood and creed are reconciled, if at all, by sheer force of personality, holding them all in relation' (p. 60). Outside the sphere of religious thought, there would appear to be no possibility of discovering a single, unified pattern of meaning in the poem, such as we shall be discussing in Chapter Five of this work.

[2] cf. 'Thou must go aloft out of the darkness of thy present state into that which breathes without breathing, that which, though motionless, reaches all worlds. There only wilt thou find the Self'. (Maitri Upanishad, II, 2, trans. J.G. Bennett. Quoted in Diagnosis of Man, by Kenneth Walker. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962, pp. 136-7.)

[3] The final stanza of this hymn by Sarah Adams (1805-48) reads:

> Or if on joyful wing
> Cleaving the sky,
> Sun, moon, and stars forgot,
> Upwards I fly,
> Still all my song shall be,
> 'Nearer my God to thee,
> Nearer to thee'.

[4] Quoted from Buber's Jewish Mysticism, in A Year of Grace by Victor Gollancz (London: Gollancz, 1950), p. 137.

cf. 'It is from above and not from below, that this body is endowed with intelligence . . . Truly, that subtle, intangible, invisible One pervades the body with but a small part of Himself, and that small part is not conscious of the whole, even as a sleeper, before he awakens, knows not the waking state.' (Maitri Upanishad, II, iv and v, trans. J.G. Bennett, quoted in Diagnosis of Man, p. 137).

[5] The Light of Asia, by Sir Edwin Arnold (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1900), p. 145.

[6] The Italian lines in this passage are from Dante's Paradiso (The Divine Comedy), Canto xxxiii, 85-90.

[7] Ibid, xxxiii, 132.

[8] 'Brahma' will be found in The Oxford Book of English Verse, poem No. 680.

[9] Otto (Mysticism East and West), p. 55.

[10] Ibid, p. 56.

[11] The Perennial Philosophy, p. 126.

[12] The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, by Lama Anagarika Govinda (London: Rider, 1969), p. 276.

[13] Also Sprach Zarathustra: Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke in drei Bänden (Munchen: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1955), II, 472-3.

[14] In the New Testament, the Greek word 'agapé' is used to signify selfless Christian love, as distinct from selfish erotic love.

[15] In his poem, 'Fate and the Younger Generation', Lawrence says:

> And the Dostoevsky lot wallowed in the thought:
> Let me sin my way to Jesus . . .

The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence, in 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1964), I, 533.

[16] Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus & On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (London: Everyman, 1929), pp. 257-8.

[17] Buddhist Scriptures, p. 111.

[18] These words are taken from the Buddhist mantra (or sacred incantation): OM MANI PADME HUM. OM, in the Indian religious tradition, signifies the highest divine Reality - Brahman, for example, in the Upanishads. MANI PADME could be roughly translated as 'the Jewel in the Lotus', but really symbolises the divine element hidden in the human mind or heart. HUM is a symbol of the divine Reality from the 'Heights' actualised in terms of the human 'Depths' - as in the

18 continued

Christian concept of God made man, or in the Buddhist concept of the Lord Buddha as a phenomenalised aspect of the Absolute. No translation, however, could encompass more than a fraction of the vast area of symbolic meaning covered by these words. The scholarly German exponent of Tibetan Buddhism, the Lama Anagarika Govinda, requires a book of over 50 chapters: Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism (London: Rider, 1969), to explore the world of meanings contained in this mantra. Certainly, an important part of its meaning finds expression in the words of the Jewish author of Psalm 139: 'If I climb up into heaven, thou art there: if I go down to hell, thou art there also'.

19 From The Book of Common Prayer: the Prayer of Absolution at Matins and Evensong.

Chapter Four

Religious Themes in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (continued)

One of the greatest exponents of the Christian idea of redemption through sacrificial suffering, is the Russian novelist, Dostoevsky (1821-81). It is appropriate, therefore, that MacDiarmid, in the person of his Drunk Man, should follow his references to Calvary with a lengthy address to Dostoevsky, requesting some share of the great man's 'appallin' genius' (C.P., I, 138).

Dostoevsky's creative genius certainly has an appalling and terrifying aspect, which derives from his open-eyed awareness of the nightmare horrors to which human birth exposes us. But it also has another very different aspect, revealed in his penetrating insights into the faith of Christ Crucified, and in his Christ-like compassion for all suffering human beings, the 'good' and the 'bad' alike. In what is, perhaps, his best known novel, Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky introduces us to a poverty-stricken young student, Roskolnikov, who, in a fruitless attempt to obtain enough money to save his sister from a degrading marriage, murders a miserly old woman, without being found out, but thereafter suffers agonies of fear and guilt. He is befriended by a fellow-sinner, Sonya, a very young girl who has become a prostitute in order to save her young sisters and brothers from starving. On one occasion, Roskolnikov, overcome with pity and love for the girl, bows down in front of her, and tries to kiss her feet, seeing in her, for a moment, a symbol of all suffering humanity. In the context of Dostoevsky's Russian Orthodox faith, and his profound understanding of the words of Christ: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (Matthew 25:40), the young murderer's action is not as difficult to understand as it might otherwise seem. For, on this view, Sonya is an embodiment of the divine Christ, and her sacrifice is that of the eternally afflicted Lamb of God, whose sufferings take away the sins

of the world in every age. Looking at Sonya through Dostoevsky's eyes, then, we see, not a defeated, desecrated little human being, submerged in the squalor of a vast uncaring city (pre-revolutionary St Petersburg), but a Child of God, whose tormented love provides a focus for the terrible, transforming light of Calvary.

Clearly, then, MacDiarmid's introduction of what we may call a Dostoevsky theme, at this point in the poem, does not mean that he has forgotten or abandoned the Calvary theme. In a sense, the two themes are one. Dostoevsky's writings can be seen as simply a continuation of the Calvary story, of how the divine love and compassion has become incarnate, has become visible and tangible, in a suffering human being. Ist nicht Mitleid das Kreuz . . .?[1] asks the perceptive Nietzsche. And, of course, he is right. Fundamentally, the Cross is not made of wood and nails, but of love and compassion - not to be confused, of course, with idle pity, for compassion is essentially dynamic and creative, turning even helpless suffering into redemptive action. The answer to Nietzsche's question, therefore, is undoubtedly, 'Yes, compassion is the Cross, to which every lover of mankind, beginning with God, is ultimately nailed'. Or, as MacDiarmid puts it: 'Aye, this is Calvary'. It follows, that only those who know compassion, know the Cross that redeems the world. Others certainly know a Tree of Suffering, from which they would gladly escape if they could, but they are unable to see its 'true form', and so, in their blindness, keep on wounding themselves needlessly and fruitlessly against its jagged branches. Only the compassionate, however, are able to know this Tree as the healing Tree of Calvary, and to recognise it as something rooted within themselves - rooted, that is to say, in their real Self (whatever they may call that Self: Atman, or Christ, or Buddha), the Self in whom, as the Katha Upanishad reminds us, 'All the worlds have their being' (Up., p. 22).

Since the Drunk Man is primarily concerned with 'looking', it is particularly appropriate that the genius of Dostoevsky should be invoked here. For who could be better qualified than he, 'This Christ o' the neist thoosand years' (C.P., I, 139), to teach the difficult art of looking through surface appearances to the underlying Reality? As MacDiarmid says, in To Circumjack Cencrastus,

. . . Few hae's muckle's Dostoevski's een
To see wi' - or be seen . . .

(C.P., I, 233)

Repeatedly, in his novels, Dostoevsky provides outstanding examples of that rare, singularly penetrating kind of looking, to which the well-known prayer from the Sarum Primer refers: 'God be in mine eyes, and in my looking . . .'[2] And, in accordance with MacDiarmid's obvious aspiration, this is the kind of looking that the Drunk Man is ultimately able to demonstrate in the presence of the Thistle.

It is, of course, the pains rather than the benefits of clear sight, that the Drunk Man experiences first:

. . . I can see richt through
Ilk weakness o' my frame
And ilka dernin' shame . . .

(C.P., I, 140)

He has to acquire 'the thistle's poo'er / To see we're worthless and believe't' (C.P., I, 128), and to realise, not just that 'All created things are grief and pain', but that his own created nature is no less grievous and painful than any other created thing, before he can find his consciousness lifted above the level of the Thistle, to that of the real Self:

. . . risen at last abune
The thistle like a mune
That looks serenely doon
On what queer things there are
In an inferior star
That couldna be, or see,
Themsel's, except in me.

(C.P., I, 141)

To anyone unaware of the Upanishadic teaching, that 'There are two selves, the apparent self and the real Self' (Katha, Up., p. 24), these last two lines could sound absurd. To those who are aware of this teaching, however, it will be obvious that the 'me' mentioned here, is not the man's 'apparent self', but the 'real Self' in whom 'All the worlds have their being'. Having risen, moon-like, to the heights of this Self, he now finds himself looking 'serenely doon' on

the merely apparent self, or empirical ego, as on 'an inferior star' which owes its entire existence to a higher heavenly body. In this heightened state of consciousness, the Drunk Man can no longer identify with the observed Thistle, but only with the observing Moon. In other words, he can no longer associate his real selfhood with any part of his being - body, mind, or soul - which can be an object of his observing consciousness, but only with that observing, though unobservable, consciousness itself:

> Let a' the thistle's growth
> Be as a process, then,
> My spirit's gane richt through,
> And needna threid again,
> Tho' in it sall be haud'n
> For aye the feck o' men
> Wha's queer contortions there
> As memories I ken,
> As memories o' my ain
> O' mony an ancient pain.
> But sin' wha'll e'er wun free
> Maun tak' like coorse to me,
> A fillip I wad gi'e
> Their eccentricity,
> And leave the lave to dree
> Their weirdless destiny.
>
> (C.P., I, 141)

But how, we might well ask, can a man of compassion, acquainted with Calvary, 'look serenely doon' on men 'Haud'n in the thistle's growth', and be content to leave them 'to dree / Their weirdless destiny' - to endure, that is to say, a destiny that is really no destiny, a destiny that has no destination, because it is simply an aimless circling round and round on the painful wheel of existence?

We have to remember, however, that the Drunk Man is now, at least for the time being, 'risen . . . abune / The thistle', risen above all the pains and problems of existence; and that, in such states of heightened consciousness, only the Divine can be seen as fully real. On the other hand, all forms of existence, whether in earth, or heaven, or hell, are seen as fundamentally unreal. Hence the Buddha's words in the Dhammapada: 'All forms are unreal - he who knows and sees this is at peace though in a world of pain' (C.B., p. 66), and Mother Julian of Norwich's admonition, in her Revelations of Divine Love (A.D. 1373):

'It needeth us . . . to hold as nought all-thing that is made, for to love and have God that is unmade . . . No soul is rested till it is made nought as to all things that are made' (Happold, pp. 292-3). And so, just like MacDiarmid's Drunk Man, Mother Julian becomes a moon 'That looks serenely doon' on our world from the heights of mystical illumination, and assures us that 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well' (Happold, p. 298), even though she knows that 'one point of our Faith is that many creatures shall be condemned: as angels that fell out of Heaven for pride, which be now fiends; and man in earth that dieth out of the Faith of Holy Church . . .' (Happold, p. 299). For, in fact, Hell itself is 'nought' to those who are in touch with God. Luther says: 'All who truly love God . . . submit freely to the will of God whatever it may be, even for hell and eternal death . . . They seek absolutely nothing for themselves' (Lectures on Romans, p. 262), and St Teresa says: 'I think it is good . . . for the soul to abandon itself entirely to the arms of God. If he will take it to heaven, let it go; if to hell, no matter since it is going there with its own highest Good . . .'[3] MacDiarmid himself, in an early poem, 'Bombinations of a Chimaera' (Penny Wheep, 1926), stresses the unreality of Hell in the context of the divine presence:

> The sun pits oot a fire
> And the flames o' Hell turn wan
> As through the ugsome place
> Passes the Son o' Man.
>
> He looks aboot him syne,
> Hell isna to be seen,
> But ceases to exist
> As it had never been.
>
> (C.P., I, 63)

Logically considered, this kind of seeing would appear seriously to diminish, or even destroy, the meaning of the Cross, the need for compassion and sacrificial suffering. But, according to both Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism, this is simply not so. They both regard any form of spirituality which does not combine spiritual wisdom with compassion, as hopelessly immature and undeveloped. They

both teach that the highest spiritual state can be reached only when the light from the heights of heavenly wisdom is brought down, in the form of compassion, into the depths of human darkness and suffering. 'If any man will come after me', says Jesus, 'let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it . . .' (Luke 9:23-24). Speaking of 'the highest reality', which he identifies with Buddhahood, the Lama Anagarika Govinda points out that 'those who want to realise it, have to follow the example of the Buddhas: the Bodhisattva-Path, in which there is no place for escapism, no running away from discomfort and suffering, but, on the contrary, the recognition, the understanding and acceptance of the fact that perfect enlightenment cannot be attained without the readiness to take upon oneself the suffering of the world . . . Only by going through the purifying fires of suffering can one attain highest enlightenment and become fit to serve the world . . . He who strives for his own salvation, or merely with a view of getting rid of suffering in the shortest possible way, without regard for his fellow-beings, has already deprived himself of the most essential means for the realisation of his aim' (Tib. Myst., pp. 277-9).

And yet it remains true, as Krishna says in the Bhagavad-Gita, that 'the wise in heart / Mourn not for those that live, nor those that die', for

> Never the spirit was born; the spirit shall cease to be never;
> Never was time it was not; End and Beginning are dreams!
> Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth the spirit for ever;
> Death hath not touched it at all, dead though the house of it seems.[4]

Obviously, there is a paradox here, which only actual experience can resolve. It arises from the difference between the view from the divine heights, and the view from the human depths. From the divine heights, one can 'look serenely doon', because it is perfectly obvious that all is well, and that 'all manner of thing shall be well', inasmuch as all things are in the hands of God, who is all good. From the human viewpoint, however, all is far from well. Man appears to be implicated in a cosmic tragedy, from which he has no power to extricate himself.

Hence the need for a crucified mediator between God and man, a suffering Christ through whom 'The thistle yet'll unite / Man and the Infinite' (C.P., I, 98), and the Drunk Man's resolve, that he at least, like Dostoevsky, will 'open wide (his) hert / To a' the thistle's smert' (C.P., I, 140).

No paradox exists, of course, where either the divine or the human viewpoint is ignored. Hinduism for example, traditionally concerns itself only with the changeless world of divine reality, and tends to ignore this fleeting world of human existence. Marxism, on the other hand, emphatically rejects the changeless world of the divine, and, therefore, concerns itself only with the fleeting and ephemeral human world. In neither Hinduism nor Marxism, therefore, can the perplexing paradox exist. There is no way, however, in which it can be eliminated from traditional Christianity, which finds itself unable to ignore, either the divine heights from which Christ came, or the human depths into which he chose to descend. Innumerable hospitals, hostels, orphanages, schools, leper-colonies, etc., exist throughout the world, to prove how seriously spiritually-minded Christians take the earthly problems and sufferings of their fellow human beings. Clearly, within Christianity, there is no way of separating spirituality from compassion, the divine from the human, the human from the divine. In this age, however, when many, if not most, Christians have escaped from the Christian paradox, simply by abandoning all contact with, and even all concept of, the spiritual heights, it is somewhat astonishing to find this traditional Christian paradox vigorously alive and well in a poem by a Marxist poet; especially as this is by no means the only MacDiarmid poem in which the paradox appears. That his repeated presentation of this paradox is no accident, is made clear in the 'Ode to All Rebels', where he writes:

> Nor if I could wad I tine for a meenut
> Divine in human or human in divine.
>
> (C.P., I, 505)

The tension of apparent alternatives that refuse to be separated, is repeatedly felt in the latter part of this poem. In the lines, for example, where the Drunk Man confesses that

Sic sang to men is little worth.
It has nae message for the earth . . .

(C.P., I, 143)

- another clear indication, that his contacts with the divine heights have not severed his links with the human depths.

The truth is, that he has begun what he later describes, in typically paradoxical terms, in In Memoriam James Joyce (1955), as

The spiritual evolution from vile humanity
To authentic manhood and onward
To participation in self-universal . . .

(C.P., II, 877)

The signs of the 'spiritual evolution' are his repeated experiences of higher states of consciousness, which, of course, inevitably, are expressed also in paradoxical terms. On the one hand, he stresses the loss of self involved in contact with the heights:

These are the moments when my sang
Clears its white feet frae oot amang
My broken thocht, and moves as free
As souls frae bodies when they dee,
There's naething left o' me ava'
Save a' I'd hoped micht whiles befa'.

(C.P., I, 142-3)

On the other hand, he insists that, although at such moments 'there's naething left o' (him) ava'', (unless we count the fulfilment of all his cherished hopes), something of his 'me' does remain behind, like an empty shell on the seashore, and, to this empty shell of his self-hood, the descending sea of 'glory' (from 'self-universal') shapes itself:

And e'en the glory that descends
I kenna whence on me depends,
And shapes itsel' to what is left
Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft,
And still the form is mine,5 altho'
A force to which I ne'er could grow
Is movin' in't as 'twere a sea
That lang syne drooned the last o' me
- That drooned afore the warld began
A' that could ever come frae Man.

(C.P., I, 144)

In other words, when the Drunk Man has been bereft of his narrow sense of 'me', by a greater 'I', the emptied 'form' of his 'me' is then filled with a 'glory' which transcends anything that could be thought of as belonging to him, or to any man. For it is the glory of That which was 'afore the warld began'. The fact that this inflowing glory adapts itself to a 'form' which he can recognise as his own, shaping itself to what is left after he has bereaved himself of all that he had thought of as himself, is, perhaps, best explained by the Biblical doctrine, that the 'form' of man is actually derived from the 'glory' which, in mystical experience, engulfs him. 'God', according to the Genesis story, 'created man in his own image' (Genesis 1:27).

In the lines we have just quoted, the main facts about mystical experience are clearly and simply stated. A kind of death or dissolution of the personal self takes place, as the result of an encounter with a greater Self, who bereaves the mystic of all that he has hitherto meant by 'me'. The 'I'-ness and 'me'-ness of the personal ego is completely washed away by the incoming tide of the Supreme Self ('I AM THAT I AM'), and replaced by His 'I'-ness and 'me'-ness. In Chapter 18 of The Life of Saint Teresa, by Herself, the saint refers to this kind of experience, and says:

> I was wondering when I decided to write this . . . how the soul is occupied at that time. Then the Lord said to me: 'It dissolves utterly, my daughter, to rest more and more in me. It is no longer itself that lives; it is I' (p. 127).

This dying of the personal self, is certainly an essential aspect of mystical experience, but there is another, apparently contradictory aspect, which some mystics tend to ignore, but which most Christian mystics tend to stress, as MacDiarmid does here. It concerns the continued existence of some 'form' of our own being, even after all that we can think of as 'I' or 'me' has been emptied out of us. The floodtide of God certainly washes away, not only 'the last o' me', but also, 'A' that could ever come frae Man', yet 'still the form is mine' into which the descending 'glory' pours. The mystic dissolved in God does not really lose himself: he finds himself, even while

'a force to which (he) ne'er could grow' is moving within him 'as 'twere a sea'. St John of the Cross (b. 1542) tries to explain this difficult matter by pointing out, that a properly cleaned window through which the sun is shining appears to be identical with the sunlight. Similarly, a soul illumined by God 'appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God's as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has an existence distinct from the ray.'[6]

But it is, perhaps, the Hebrew symbol of the Burning Bush remaining perpetually unburnt, which best illustrates the mystery of man's survival in the fires of mystical illumination. The God of Israel, like the gods of the ancient Vedic and Druidic rites, is, as the Scriptures say, 'a consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29), but He is also the saviour of His people, who lovingly 'bears their griefs and carries their sorrows' (Isaiah 53:4), and therefore, preserves their loved forms unconsumed in His 'consuming fire'. Just as Moses looked with amazement at the Bush which 'burned with fire' and yet 'was not consumed' (Exodus 3:2), so King Nebuchadnezzar looked with amazement at the three Hebrews, 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego', whom he had condemned to die in a fiery furnace, because of their refusal to worship an image of gold, when he saw 'four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God' (Daniel 3:25). These are vivid symbols of mystical experience.

On this view, mystical union with God is not mere annihilation of the human in the Divine: it is not simply the obliteration of all diversities in a vast undifferentiated Unity. It is a living participation in the life of a Deity whose indivisible Unity embraces all multiplicity and diversity, since He is the Father of all that lives, and, 'having loved his own which are in the world' (John 13:1), will love them 'unto the end'. But, of course, no living religion can accept the idea of God as One in a merely arithmetical or mathematical sense. The unity of God is not an arithmetical unity, to be conceived and comprehended by the human intellect in terms of any other being or object known to man. No created thing is one, in the sense in which

God is one. As the Daily Prayer Book of the Jewish people says: 'There is no unity in any manner like unto his'.[7] There are, therefore, no grounds whatever, for postulating an antithetical opposition between unity and plurality in the divine Being, especially as the Bible makes it clear that plurality not only survives, but thrives, unconsumed, in the 'consuming fire' of God's unity.

It is in the light of this Biblical vision, then, of God as 'a consuming fire' who actually preserves His loved ones unconsumed in His flames of love, that the Drunk Man is able to see that the loss of his personal ego does not involve the loss of anything that is truly his, but rather, the recovery of his true 'form'. As MacDiarmid explains later to James Joyce, in the words of Tennyson, the 'loss of personality' as it would appear to be, is 'no extinction / But the only true life'.[8] (C.P., II, 834) Whatever burns away in the consuming fire, is no part of man's real Self.

In the light of the consuming fire, it is clear, that everything that truly lives always has lived, and always will live, though, as long as we remain within the realm of time and space, not without changes, both of outward form and inner significance. Only in Eternity can we find the final form and meaning of anything. Hence the Drunk Man's desire, as he thinks of familiar well-loved places in his native Scotland, to see them in terms of the timeless and eternal life of the Divine:

> And as at sicna times am I,
> I wad ha'e Scotland to my eye
> Until I saw a timeless flame
> Tak' Auchtermuchty for a name,
> And kent that Ecclefechan stood
> As pairt o' an eternal mood . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 144)

In this vision, all created things, though burning perpetually towards transfiguration, remain, in their formless divine form, in their invisible and impalpable essence, unburnt and unconsumed. The Lamb of God, who is 'slain from the foundation of the world' (Revelation 13:8), nevertheless, 'shall reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:5), having 'redeemed us to God by (his) blood out of every kindred, and tongue,

and people, and nation' (Revelation 5:9). And the Lamb of God must go on being slain, as long as this world endures. As Pascal says:

Jésus sera en agonie jusqu'a la fin du monde . . .[9]

Jesus will be in agony, till this world ends, because, as long as this world lasts, the 'ugsome' Thistle, the Tree of Existence which fills the whole universe, will go on torturing and killing him, in his faithful people, in his Body, the Church. Yet we should not despair, for, once we penetrate the disguises of the Thistle, the Tree of Existence, we see that it is really the transforming Tree of Calvary, in the flames of which nothing real is ever consumed or lost. In the vicinity of that Tree, everything is redeemed and renewed, its real 'form' salvaged from destruction. In the Burning Bush of the Cross, the muddy ingots of ordinary human experience are transformed into what they really are: the pure gold of divine life and vision.

In this context, it is interesting to recall the following lines from 'A Moment in Eternity':

> I was a multitude of leaves
> Receiving and reflecting light,
> A burning bush
> Blazing for ever unconsumed . . .
> The everlasting foliage of my soul
> Visible awhile
> Like steady and innumerable flames,
> Blending into one blaze . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 3-4)

This may seem to be a very different experience from the one mentioned in A Drunk Man:

> Aye, this is Calvary - to bear
> Your Cross wi'in you frae the seed,
> And feel it grow by slow degrees
> Until it rends your flesh apairt . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 134)

But, in fact, both experiences reflect the same process of love and redemption. The flames of human suffering conceal behind their sooty shapes precisely the same fire that flares in heavenly vision. The

Cross that conceals the love of God, ultimately reveals it more fully than any lost Paradise could ever have done. This is why the Drunk Man resolves to follow in Dostoevsky's footsteps, and probe the very depths of human suffering and misery, believing them to be God's suffering and misery too: 'Aye, this is Calvary', the place where compassion dissolves the barriers between God and man. And so, he says to the Russian:

> (You) opened wide to ruin
> Your benmaist hert, aye brewin'
> A horror o' whatever
> Seemed likely to deliver
> You frae the senseless strife
> In which alane is life . . .
> Sae I in turn maun gi'e
> My soul to misery,
> Daidle disease
> Upon my knees,
> And welcome madness
> Wi' exceedin' gladness
> - Aye, open wide my hert
> To a' the thistle's smert.
>
> (C.P., I, 139-40)

Obviously, it would be extremely difficult to explain the Drunk Man's resolve to 'open wide (his) hert / To a' the thistle's smert', apart from his perception of the link between 'the thistle's smert' and the healing Tree of Calvary. In the absence of such a perception, the most sensible course, surely would have been to shut his heart to the world's pain, using his mystical gifts to withdraw more and more into a sanctuary of inner peace - a course of action or inaction, sometimes recommended by superficial exponents of the Indian scriptures.

The truth is, however, that those who seek 'nae hauf-way hoose', but the ultimate heights of the spiritual life, soon discover that they can never reach their desired destination by following only the path of withdrawal. Confusing as it may seem, they have to learn simultaneously to follow another path, which wends, not inward, but outward and downward, into the midst of human misery and suffering, while they still keep their eyes fixed on the distant heights. Only through this painful bifurcation of consciousness does the spiritual wayfarer ultimately come in sight of his goal. It is because he knows

this to be the case, that the Drunk Man courageously decides that he'll 'ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur / Extremes meet' (C.P., I, 87), where inward peace clashes with outward pain, and the Self from the heights clashes with the self from the depths. 'Aye, this is Calvary'. This is the Way of the Cross which is compassion and cruelty combined. And this, nothing less, is the cost of becoming a Christ, a Buddha - or to use Marx's moving phrase - 'the heart of a heartless world'. Few men, of course, ever glimpse that terrible road 'whaur / Extremes meet', far less find strength to follow it. MacDiarmid's obvious familiarity with it, provides one more proof of the quite exceptional range of his spiritual insights and experiences.

A person who finds this road 'whaur / Extremes meet' will certainly have a deep awareness of the darkness of this world, but he will also experience a growing awareness of the distant sea of glory which lies beyond all things in the heart of God. Sometimes, he will see only the one path, sometimes only the other. Sometimes, one of his worlds will disappear completely, leaving him with a feeling of utter dereliction - 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?',[10] or of mystical ecstasy - 'O sages standing in God's holy fire . . .'[11] Such bouts of alternating light and darkness are likely to continue, until the moment of complete enlightenment finally brings the two worlds of consciousness together into a Unity that is beyond the power of mind to conceive or words to express. Strictly speaking, one can neither know nor see, one can only be, that Unity. Fundamentally, of course, one is that Unity ('THOU ART THAT'); one always has been that Unity; but unfortunately, in the human consciousness, the Unity has become a tragic dichotomy, symbolised by the Cross. It is only by resolutely grasping both sides of that dichotomy, in the shape of the Cross, and thereby defeating the divisive tendencies in human consciousness, that one can begin to discover, in the words of Nietzsche, Wie man wird, was man ist .[12] MacDiarmid's exceptional stature as a religious poet is demonstrated by his evident ability to grasp both sides of the dichotomy, the human and the Divine, and to realise that, as he expresses it in

'The Glass of Pure Water' (Collected Poems, 1962), insofar as one identifies with the sufferings of, for example, 'the world's poorest', or those of 'Sacco and Vanzetti in the death cell', 'One is talking to God' (C.P., II, 1041). Most other writers, religious or non-religious, can grasp only one side of the dichotomy - the human or the Divine. They may write about human suffering, but without any awareness of the fact that 'Aye, this is Calvary', and that compassionate identification with those who suffer leads to a state where 'One is talking to God'. Clearly, no assessment of MacDiarmid's achievements as a poet can be considered complete, or even adequate, which fails to take account of this rare power he possessed, of holding together, not as two, but as one, the separated areas of consciousness we describe as 'the human' and 'the divine'.

It might seem strange that the Drunk Man, who has been intimately involved with 'the glory that descends', should speak as if darkness rather than light is the predominant element in the universe he knows:

> Ahint the glory comes the nicht . . .
> And I'm amused to see the plicht
> O' Licht as't in the black tide droons . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 144)

He maintains that

> . . . In addition to the licht,
> There is an e'er-increasin' nicht,
> A nicht that is the bigger and
> Gangs roond licht like an airn band
> That noo and then mair tichtly grips,
> And snuffs it in a black eclipse . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 143)

Of course, the 'licht' that can be snuffed 'in a black eclipse' by surrounding darkness, is not the Light Divine: it is the feeble light of human knowledge. What man knows, he calls light. What he cannot know, he calls darkness. And so, the infinite light of God, which man in his fallen condition cannot see or know, though it surrounds him all the time, is, to him, darkness. In The Ascent of Mount Carmel,

St John of the Cross speaks of how the soul that spires up towards God encounters a 'dark night', which in fact is 'an inflow of God into the soul', and he asks:

> Why, if it is a divine light (for it illumines and purges a person of his ignorances), does the soul call it a dark night?
>
> In answer to this, there are two reasons why this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but also affliction and torment. First, because of the height of the divine wisdom which exceeds the capacity of the soul. Second, because of the soul's baseness and impurity; and on this account it is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul.
>
> . . . The brighter the light, the more the owl is blinded; and the more one looks at the brilliant sun, the more the sun darkens the faculty of sight, deprives it and overwhelms it in its weakness.
>
> Hence when the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness, for it not only surpasses the act of natural understanding but it also deprives the soul of this act and darkens it.[13]

The 'nicht', then, that surrounds the little 'licht' of human knowledge, and occasionally 'snuffs it in a black eclipse', is actually the blinding light of God, which Dionysius speaks of as 'the super-essential ray of divine darkness'.[14] It is from this 'divine darkness', that the 'glory' of mystical illumination descends.

It will be recalled, that, in the Bible, God in His absoluteness is represented as One who 'dwells in the thick darkness' (1 Kings 8:12) whereas, God in His manifest form is seen as light and fire - as the Shekhina, or 'glory of the Lord' (Exodus 16:10), whose flames were seen leaping on Sinai from the thundering clouds (Exodus 19:16-18). But the primal darkness of the Elohim, and the bright outpouring of the Shekhina, are not really separate, or separable. They are the one Divine Light, divided only in human consciousness. 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one'.[15]

The Drunk Man speaks of how

> . . . this essence frae the clay
> In dooble form aye braks away . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 143)

for, from the human viewpoint, the essence of life and reality, whatever we may call it, always appears under two different aspects: the dark and the light; though, from the divine viewpoint, as the Jewish Psalmist says: 'the darkness and the light are both alike' (Psalm 139:12. A.V.). That which lies within man's knowledge, he calls light. That which lies beyond his knowledge, he calls darkness, though his knowing about his own ignorance is part of the light. Paradoxically, it is only when the tiny flame of man's knowledge begins to grow, that he really becomes aware of the vast areas of darkness that lie beyond his knowledge, and begins to feel himself surrounded by 'an e'er increasin' nicht'. It is not, of course, the night that is increasing, but his awareness of it:

> The less man sees the mair he is
> Content wi't, but the mair he sees
> The mair he kens hoo little o'
> A' that there is he'll ever see . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 129)

The 'e'er-increasin' nicht' is not, of course, a daunting prospect to the man who has actually ventured into the 'divine darkness' and experienced it from within. As the Drunk Man explains later:

> . . . In the darkness them wha's een
> Nae fleetin' lichts ha'e dazzled and deceived
> Find qualities o' licht, keener than ony licht,
> Keen and abidin' . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 148)

This is why Dionysius says:

> Into this supreme and dazzling darkness we pray that we may come, that by not seeing and not knowing we may see and know him who is beyond all seeing and knowing, through this very act of not seeing or knowing; and at this supreme peak of being, by dismissing all things that are, that we may praise him who is himself above all. (Wolters, p. 212).

Such darkness is not the mere negation of light, but a 'dazzling darkness' which contains within itself 'qualities o' licht, keener than ony licht'. Unlike the 'fleetin' lichts' of this fleeting world, the

lights that are glimpsed in the depths of 'divine darkness' do not pass away: they are 'Keen and abidin''.

To be able to find 'qualities o' licht' in the 'divine darkness', however, a person needs to have 'spired up' above all seeable, knowable things, including his own created nature, and discovered what Dionysius describes as 'his simple uncreated, "unbegun" nature', and 'the beauty of the self in its naked, unmade, unbegun state' (Wolters, p. 213). The person who has reached this beginningless state, however, tends to scorn everything that is not unborn, unmade, unbegun. Even the devout Mother Julian, as we saw, felt that she had to 'hold as nought allthing that is made' (Happold, p. 292). And it is for this reason that the Drunk Man goes on to speak rather disparagingly of the Creation and its Creator:

> 'Let there be Licht', said God, and there was
> A little: but He lacked the poo'er
> To licht up mair than pairt o' space at aince,
> And there is lots o' darkness that's the same
> As gin He'd never spoken
> - Mair darkness than there's licht,
> And dwarfin't to a candle-flame,
> A spalin' candle that'll sune gang oot . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 148)

The 'God' mentioned here is not, of course, God in His absoluteness, but only one aspect of God - God as maker of the visible universe - which, it may be recalled, Plotinus regarded as the lowest aspect of the World-Soul (see Enneads II, 3, 17-18). MacDiarmid himself makes it perfectly clear, in To Circumjack Cencrastus, that when he speaks of God the Creator, he does not mean God in His absoluteness:

> The God I speak o's him wha made
> The warld and ither warlds that are
> As different frae't as Nicht frae Day
> Or Life frae Death . . .
> No' Him that lifts unkennable ayont
> Creation and Creator baith . . .
>
> . . . A' that life is or sall become
> Are nocht to that God,
> But wha for a' Creation cares nae mair,
> Nor less, than for a whigmaleerie, tak's a'e step
> Alang his endless road.

God the Creator still maun ser'
The mindless fools wha canna . . .

(C.P., I, 244)

The references in A Drunk Man to the predominance of darkness over light, are really reminders of the contrast between the infinite universe of 'divine darkness' and the little world of 'the God that men / Can humanly ken' (C.P., I, 245). In the vast darkness of the 'unkennable' God, the kennable Creator's light is merely 'a candle-flame . . . that'll sune gang oot'. The extinction of the guttering candle of Creation, however, will not leave man in alien surroundings, for -

- Darkness comes closer to us than the licht,
And is oor natural element.

(C.P., I, 148)

It is known, of course, to everyone who has known the higher states of consciousness, that the Divine, which is what is meant by 'darkness' here, is our 'natural element'; it is the true home of 'the self in its naked, unmade, unbegun state'. As Wordsworth says, in The Prelude (1850):

. . . our being's heart and home
Is with infinitude, and only there.

(VI, 604-5)

If others seem to be unaware of this, it is because, to quote Wordsworth again:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting . . .

(Immortality Ode)

But whether we remember or forget the fact, the 'divine darkness' remains the inner essence of our being, and its necessary environment. Only in it can we find 'our being's heart and home'. We search in vain for any other:

. . . We peer oot frae't
Like cat's een bleezin' in a goustrous nicht . . .
. . . and there is nocht to find
Savin' we turn them in upon oorsels . . .

(C.P., I, 148)

For, in fact, everything external, 'all-thing that is made', must be recognised 'as nought', by the man who wants to be free from alien finitude and find his being's true home. Darkness, in the sense of complete freedom from 'fleetin' lichts' that have 'dazzled and deceived' us, is the only condition in which we can become aware of those 'qualities o' licht' in the divine, inner Self, which are 'keener than ony licht, / Keen and abidin''. This is why MacDiarmid says, in the 'Ballad of the Five Senses':

> Oot o' the way, my senses five,
> I ken a' you can tell,
> Oot o' the way, my thochts, for noo'
> I maun face God mysel'.
>
> (C.P., I, 38)

This too is why the unknown author of the English mystical classic, The Cloud of Unknowing, says 'Try to forget all created things . . . Let them go, and pay no attention to them' (Wolters, p. 61); and why Meister Eckhart points out that

> No man can see God except he be blind, nor know him except through ignorance . . . To this point, St Augustine says: 'No soul may come to God except it come to him apart from creature things and seek him without any image'. . . Therefore, because even the soul is a creature, even it must first be cast out. Indeed, it must cast out even the saints and angels and even our blessed Lady, because these are all creatures (Blakney, p. 200).

Hence the words of Jesus to his disciples: 'It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you' (John 16:7).

It might seem strange that Christians, such as St Augustine and Meister Eckhart, whose religion is based on the belief that God has appeared on earth in the form of a human creature, should be advocating the 'casting-out' of creatures. How can one be a Christian, if one does not reverence the human creature Jesus as the divine Son of God, and the human creature Mary, as Holy Mother of God? But, in fact, neither Augustine nor Eckhart ever ceased to do so; nor did Dionysius, or Mother Julian, or the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing.

This so-called 'casting-out' of creatures, is simply a temporary expedient employed by the Christian pilgrim, to enable him to acquire that clear, unobstructed view of the divine essence which is necessary for anyone who wants to be able to take up his Cross on behalf of all creatures. For nobody has the strength to face Calvary, who has not seen the real truth, who has not experienced the pure vision of God as He is in Himself, which is granted only to those who have been - to use Plotinian terms - 'alone with the Alone'.[16] Hence the temporary need to cast aside the creaturely forms through which, ultimately, God achieves His highest manifestation.

One must never forget, however, that the stage of the spiritual journey at which one feels impelled to cry: 'Oot o' the way, my senses five . . . I maun face God mysel'', is only a preparation for (in the Christian view) that higher stage, where the pilgrim, in the company of his suffering fellow-men, realises that 'Aye, this is Calvary', and resolutely 'open(s) wide (his) hert / To a' the thistle's smert'. Nevertheless, it remains true, that as long as the mind is preoccupied with the objects of thought and sensation, a clear perception of the Reality beyond thought and sensation is impossible, and, therefore, the superhuman strength required to face Calvary is unobtainable.

At every stage of the journey, however, the sustaining power of the divine 'darkness' is felt by those who have once found it. They never lose the awareness that

> . . . Darkness is wi' us a' the time, and Licht
> But veesits pairt o' us, the wee-est pairt
> Frae time to time on a short day atween twa nichts.

It is certainly consoling to remember that 'Licht' (with its attendant swarms of painful images, concepts, thoughts, sensations, which crowd into our consciousness daily during life's 'short day') visits only 'the wee-est pairt' of us, i.e. the 'mutchkin' of surface consciousness, leaving the 'ocean' of our real selfhood untouched, unaffected. The poet would like to help us to see the light of Creation as simply

> That queer extension o' the dark,
> That seems a separate and a different thing,
> And, seemin' sae, has lang confused the dark,
> And set it at cross-purposes wi' itsel'.
>
> (C.P., I, 148-9)

But our confusion about life will undoubtedly grow less, if we cease to imagine that the light of Creation is 'a separate and a different thing' from the divine darkness which is our 'natural element'. To think of it as having an independent and separate existence from the consciousness which observes it, is simply to set the mind 'at cross-purposes wi' itsel''', by introducing division and dichotomy where none in fact exists. For, in reality, 'the darkness and the light are both alike' (Psalm 139), though this fact can be discerned, not by means of any created light, but only by means of those keener 'qualities o' licht' which reside in the darkness of our uncreated being. Certainly, as the poet points out: 'Licht thraws nae licht upon itsel'' (C.P., I, 148). Creation cannot be explained or understood in terms of itself, but only by reference to the divine darkness of which it is a 'queer extension'. In any case, it is clear that - fortunately -

> Licht cheenges naething,
> And gin there is a God wha made the licht
> We are adapted to receive
> He cheenged naething . . .
> (C.P., I, 149)

In other words, Light, in the sense of the phenomenal universe, and the Creator of that Light, if such a being really exists, are quite powerless to alter, in any way, the vast surrounding area of 'dazzling darkness' in which we discover 'Him that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith'. Nothing can ever change Him, the timeless and changeless Unborn and Unbegun, for, as MacDiarmid says,

> . . . A' that life is or sall become
> Are nocht to <u>that</u> God . . .
> (C.P., I, 244)

And yet, the paradox remains: that the 'nocht-ness' we call Creation (and, of course, considered as something existing on its own, it <u>is</u> pure 'nocht-ness'), far from being 'a separate and a different thing', is actually only a 'queer extension' of '<u>that</u> God', by means of which His 'unkennable' heights can become, to some extent, mirrored in certain human lives, and deaths. And so it is that, when one is with 'The world's poorest' and those who serve them, or when one is with 'Sacco

and Vanzeti', or Socrates, or St Thomas More, 'in the death cell', one may well find that 'One is talking to God' (C.P., II, 1041).

Another name for the divine Darkness is Sunyata, or 'Emptiness', the Buddhist term for Ultimate Reality. Yet another name for it is 'Silence'. And Silence is the name that MacDiarmid uses in the final section of this poem, in order to point to That ultimately unnameable Reality which is 'the croon o' a'':

> Yet ha'e I Silence left, the croon o' a'.
>
> No' her, wha on the hills langsyne I saw
> Liftin' a foreheid o' perpetual snaw.
>
> No' her, wha in the how-dumb-heid o' nicht
> Kyths, like Eternity in Time's despite.
>
> No' her, withooten shape, wha's name is Daith,
> No' Him, unkennable abies to faith
>
> - God whom, gin e'er He saw a man, 'ud be
> E'en mair dumfooner'd at the sicht than he
>
> - But Him, whom nocht in man or Deity,
> Or Daith or Dreid or Laneliness can touch,
> Wha's deed owre often and has seen owre much,
>
> O I ha'e Silence left . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 167)

By avoiding the neuter pronoun 'it', and taking care to use the personal pronoun 'Him' with a capital 'H', MacDiarmid makes it clear that the 'Silence' to which the Drunk Man refers is not mere absence of noise, not just a matter of physical sensation or abstract mental concept, but in fact, a living Being who is the crown of all being.[17] And yet, the poet seems explicitly to be denying that this Being is 'God'. Or is he? Is he not just saying, that the living Silence with whom the Drunk Man is left, after his many painful encounters with the Thistle, is not the God who is 'unkennable abies to faith'? This is very far from saying that the Silence is not God in any sense. It will be remembered that MacDiarmid's theology, like all mature and developed theologies, requires more than one concept of God. In his writings, we have already encountered at least three different concepts of God; namely, the God 'wha made the warld', the God 'that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation

and Creator baith', and the God who lives in man as his real Self, and who sometimes succeeds in 'bereaving' man of his merely apparent self, his purely selfish 'me', and drowning in the ocean of Infinity 'A' that could ever come frae Man' (C.P., I, 144). It is this third concept of God which obviously applies here. One cannot speak of this indwelling Self as 'unkennable abies to faith'. Nevertheless, it is 'unkennable' by any of the sensory or intellective processes through which knowledge is normally gained. As MacDiarmid himself explains, in 'In Memoriam James Joyce', it is

> That which we can only know
> By allowing it to know itself in us.
>
> (C.P., II, 772)

It cannot be conveyed by any words or concepts or credal formulae. It is pure Silence, completely unaffected by the confused clamour which is Creation. In relation to our ordinary knowledge, it is pure Darkness - the 'divine darkness', which is 'oor natural element'. 'O I ha'e Silence left . . .'

But is the God who resides in man as his real Self, rightly described as 'the croon o' a''? Should this title not be reserved for the distant and humanly inaccessible heights of pure Divinity? Both Christianity and Buddhism answer 'No'. Both of these religions encourage the paradoxical notion, that Divinity reaches its greatest heights, when it descends into the lower life of humanity, and produces a Christ, a Buddha, a Ramakrishna. In Christian mythology, noted for its daring paradoxes, it is not the God of Sinai, thundering out laws from the cloudy heights, or the God of Bethel, cautiously keeping on the upper side of Jacob's dream ladder, who represents the highest concept of Divinity, but rather, the Boy born to Mary and Joseph in a cave in Bethlehem. From the Christian viewpoint, the highest truth is not that some Being or entity called God exists, but that - to use the hackneyed words of an old carol -

> He came down to earth from heaven
> Who is God and Lord of all,
> And his shelter was a stable,
> And his cradle was a stall . . .
>
> ('Once in royal David's city' by
> Cecil Frances Alexander, 1823-95)

In Christian eyes, it is not the High King of Heaven, but a Child born in poverty, who is 'the croon o' a'. So here, as elsewhere, MacDiarmid shows clear signs of his early Christian conditioning.

If, however, this Self, this Silence, which comes alive in a Christ or a Buddha, is the very heart of both God and man, why is it stated that 'nocht in man or Deity' can 'touch' it? Perhaps because we cannot really speak of one thing touching another unless the two things are separate, and neither 'man' nor 'Deity' is separate from the Self. We, of course, may conceive of them as separate from the Self, but nothing derived from such illusory concepts could possibly impinge on the actuality of the Self. In this sense, it is obvious that 'nocht in man or Deity' can 'touch' that Self who is 'the croon o' a''. It is immune from all interference. It goes deeper, and reaches higher, than any of our notions about God or man. It surpasses all the thoughts and concepts we can have of it. Its freedom is absolute. Its inner peace is indestructible, even when, outwardly, it enters 'the death cell', or is fastened to the Cross, without support from 'man or Deity'. Nothing can prevent or hinder its perpetual resurrections in this world of time and space. It <u>is</u> the Resurrection and the Life. (See John 11:25) The nature of this Self, which in a sense, is both God and man, and, in another sense, neither God nor man, is well expressed by Meister Eckhart, in the following passage:

> I am my own first cause, both of my eternal being and of my temporal being . . . It is of the nature of this eternal birth that I <u>have been</u> eternally, that I <u>am</u> now, and <u>shall be</u> forever. What I am as a temporal creature is to die and come to nothingness, for it came with time and so with time it will pass away. In my eternal birth, however, everything was begotten. I was my own first cause as well as the first cause of everything else . . . If I had not been, there would have been no god . . . In bursting forth, however, when I shall be free within God's will and free, therefore, of the will of god, and all his works, and even of god himself, then I shall rise above all creature kind, and I shall be neither god nor creature . . . I shall thus receive an impulse which shall raise me above the angels. With this impulse, I receive wealth so great that I could never again be satisfied with a god, or anything that is a god's, nor with any divine activities, for in bursting forth I discover that God and I are One . . . Here, then, a god may find no 'place' in man, for, by his poverty the man achieves the being that was always his

> and shall remain his eternally . . . If anyone does not understand this discourse, let him not worry about that, for if he does not find this truth in himself he cannot understand what I have said . . . That we all may so live as to experience it eternally, may God help us! Amen. (Blakney, pp. 231-2)

This could sound like extreme egoism and megalomania, if we imagined that Eckhart was using the word 'I' here to refer to his personal self or ego. But, of course, he is not. He is speaking from the viewpoint of that higher 'I' which Hindus call the Atman, or real Self, and MacDiarmid refers to as 'self-universal' (C.P., II, 877); the Self described in the New Testament as the Logos - 'the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). However strange and provocative Eckhart's words may seem to be, they are calculated, as so often MacDiarmid's are, to help the truth-seeker to 'find this truth in himself', in other words, to discover for himself, and within his own being

> . . . Him whom nocht in man or Deity,
> Or Daith or Dreid or Laneliness can touch . . .

The very next line of the poem, however, plunges us back again into difficulties, for it tells us that this Self (this Silence), who cannot be touched by 'Daith', has, nevertheless, 'deed owre often and has seen owre much'. How can He have 'deed', never having been touched by 'Daith'? This paradox, like all the others we have encountered, is a reminder that, in the poet's vision, life's essence ('this essence frae the clay') 'In dooble form aye braks away' (C.P., I, 143). And so, the Self, in one of its aspects - the divine aspect - knows neither birth nor death, but in its other aspect - the human aspect - is intimately acquainted with both. In the religion in which MacDiarmid was brought up, the Christ is consistently presented in 'dooble form'. On the one hand, he is presented as the eternal Logos, who was 'In the beginning . . . with God and . . . was God' (John 1:1). Hence his statement: 'Before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58). On the other hand, he is presented as the human Jesus, who was born at a particular point in history some 2,000 years ago, and who died a criminal's death about 30 years later. Despite the 'dooble form', however, Jesus and Christ are not conceived of as two

beings, but as one being, called Jesus Christ, who is worshipped as 'true God and true man'. Similarly, in Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is presented in 'dooble form', as being both humanly born and divinely unborn. So too, in Hinduism, are such beings as Rama and Krishna. MacDiarmid's full acceptance of this 'dooble form' is made particularly clear in the great poem, 'Ode to All Rebels', where he says:

> Nor if I could wad I time for a meenut
> Divine in human or human in divine . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 505)

The Self in its divine essence is certainly untouched by Death, but insofar as it manifests itself in human beings, it experiences repeated deaths. As Shelley says:

> The One remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly . . .
>
> (Adonais: 460-1)

The phrases, 'owre often' and 'owre much', reflect the belief held by all the great Indian religions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism - that this life that dies is a disaster. On this view, even if one came only once into this world of sickness, suffering and death, it would be 'owre often'; no matter how little one saw of it, it would be 'owre much'.[18] This is why the main aim of Indian religion is to liberate man from this life of repeated births and deaths. Hence the Lord Krishna's reassuring promise to Prince Arjuna in Chapter Four of the Bhagavad-Gita:

> He who realises the divine truth concerning My birth and life, is not born again; and when he leaves his body, he becomes one with Me.
>
> (Geeta, p. 33)

Here is the authentic voice of the Silence

> . . . whom nocht in man or Deity,
> Or Daith or Dreid or Laneliness can touch
> Wha's deed owre often and has seen owre much.

Notes

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, II, 281

[2] The complete prayer reads:

> God be in my head, and in my understanding;
> God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
> God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
> God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
> God be at mine end, and at my departing.

[3] The Life of St Teresa, by Herself, trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 117.

[4] The Song Celestial or Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Sir Edwin Arnold (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1906), pp. 11, 13.

[5] cf. Paradiso, XXXIII, 127-32).

[6] The Collected Works of St John of the Cross, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 118.

[7] The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations, (Popularly known as Singer's Prayer Book). London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 5722-1962. Page 93.

[8] These words are taken from a letter sent by Tennyson to B.P. Blood, quoted in William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience (London: Longmans, 1902), p. 384.

[9] Pascal's Pensées (Paris: Nelson, 1946), p. 271. (Brunschvicg No. 553)

[10] Psalm 22, verse 1.

[11] 'Sailing to Byzantium', by W.B. Yeats. The Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 217.

[12] F.N., II, 1063. 'How one becomes what one is' - the sub-title of Ecce Homo.

[13] K. and R., p. 335.

[14] 'Dionysius' Mystical Teaching', The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works, trans. C. Wolters, p. 207. For original English translation of Dionysius's Mystica Theologica, see Deonise Hid Divinite, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (London: OUP, for EETS, 1955).

[15] Singer, p. 3.

[16] Inge, II, 142.

[17] For the concept of Silence as a living being, see Radhakrishnan's Introduction to The Principal Upanisads, where he quotes from an Upanishadic text commented on by Shankara, but not to be found among the extant Upanishads:

'Bahva, asked by Baskali to expound the nature of Brahman kept silent. He prayed, "Teach me, sir". The teacher was silent, and when addressed a second and a third time he said: "I am teaching but you do not follow. The self is silence"'. (P.U., p. 67)

The word used for 'self' in the Sanskrit text is, of course, atma, the divine Self which is one with Brahman. It is this divine Self which is Silence: upasanto yam atma.

The great Indian teacher, Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), who was widely regarded as an incarnation of God, taught so effectively in and through silence, that his influence has extended right across Europe and into America, though he himself never travelled beyond a tiny area of South India. A former police official in that area, F.H. Humphreys, described his first encounter with Sri Ramana as follows:

'On reaching the cave we sat before him at his feet and said nothing. We sat thus for a long time and I felt lifted out of myself. For half an hour I looked into the Maharshi's eyes, which never changed their expression of deep contemplation. I began to realise somewhat that the body is the Temple of the Holy Ghost; I could feel only that his body was not the man: it was the instrument of God, merely a sitting, motionless corpse from which God was radiating terrifically . . .' (quoted in Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge by Arthur Osborne; London: Rider, 1954, p. 52)

[18] The Buddha, for example, says:

'Without beginning or end, Brothers, is this Samsara; Unperceivable is the beginning of beings buried in blindness, who, seized of craving, are ever and again brought to new birth and so hasten through the endless round of rebirths.

And thus, Brothers, have you long time undergone suffering, undergone torment, undergone misfortune and filled the graveyards full, verily, Brothers, long enough to be dissatisfied with all existence - long enough to turn yourselves away from all suffering - long enough to release yourselves from it all. (The Wisdom of Buddhism, pp. 60-61)

Chapter Five

Religious Vision as the Unifying Element in A Drunk Man

Now that we have examined some of the main themes of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, we should be in a position to say something about the meaning of the poem as a whole. There is, of course, a danger in trying to do so, for there is no possibility of our being able to paraphrase the meaning of this, or any other poem, in explanatory prose. The most we can hope to do, is to let some aspects of the poem's mysterious life become reflected in our explanations, just as, in the writings of a good theologian, some aspects of God's mysterious Being may become reflected. At all costs we must avoid the dogmatism that declares: 'This and this alone is the meaning: there is no other'. For no matter how deeply and thoroughly we probe, we can never be sure that we have come to an end of the meanings that hide within a particular poem. In even the simplest poem there may exist many meanings that remain hidden to us. Our aim in this chapter, therefore, is not to present an exhaustive account of all that the poem contains, but simply to provide, if possible, a kind of panoramic view of the main area of meaning covered by the poem, and to focus attention on the more outstanding features of this semantic landscape.

Let us begin by recognising that this poem is, at least partly, an extended essay in 'looking' and 'seeing'. Obviously, 'looking' and 'seeing' are not always identical functions. What a person appears to be looking at, is not necessarily what he actually sees. The poet, like the modern physicist, is particularly prone to this dualizing tendency. Robert Burns, looking at 'the dewy flowers', saw his 'bonnie lassie', Jean. ('Of A' the Airts') And Wordsworth seems to have seen Lucy, as he looked at 'A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye' ('She dwelt among the untrodden ways'). Some of the things that the Drunk Man sees, in the course of the poem, seem incredibly remote from the Thistle he is looking at, but here he is

simply following in the visionary footsteps of William Blake, who says, in his notes on 'A Vision of the Last Judgement':

> I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. 'What,' it will be Questioned, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty'. (Blake, pp. 651-2)

Blake's words may recall those of Sir Arthur Eddington,[1] the great English physicist, who delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University in 1927, on The Nature of the Physical World. In the now famous book of that name, he says: 'I have settled down to the task of writing these lectures and have drawn up my chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me - two tables, two chairs, two pens.' He goes on to explain that the first of the two tables, the two chairs, the two pens, can be seen by anybody with eyes, whereas the second of the two, consisting mainly of 'empty space', can be seen only by the trained physicist. He maintains, however, that 'modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific table is the only one which is really there - wherever 'there' may be . . . The external world of physics has thus become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions we have removed the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions . . . It is all symbolic, and as a symbol the physicist leaves it. Then comes the alchemist Mind who transmutes the symbols.'[2]

As the Drunk Man looks at the Thistle, his mind 'transmutes' that symbol in a bewildering variety of ways, and this accords perfectly with the findings of modern physics. For, as the modern research physicist, Fritjof Capra, explains, in The Tao of Physics:[3]

> In atomic physics, we cannot talk about the properties of an object as such. They are only meaningful in the context of the object's interaction with the observer. In the words of Heisenberg,4 'What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.' The observer decides

> how he is going to set up the measurement and this arrangement will determine, to some extent, the properties of the observed object. If the experimental arrangement is modified, the properties of the observed object will change in turn.

The same point is emphasised in a book called Mysticism and the New Physics, by Michael Talbot:

> It will be shown that the new physics believes both matter and space owe their existence to the human consciousness. Reality, itself, is thus viewed as a 'super-hologram'[5] which the consciousness creates for itself. The implications of this view are that the consciousness can enter in and alter the super-hologram to create changes in this reality . . . Thus, according to the new physics, there is no physical world 'out there'. Consciousness creates all . . . Just as the mind can enter in and alter the super-hologram of reality, it can also create new realities.

Whatever interpretation, therefore, we may care to place upon this very unusual poem, we can certainly not dismiss it as a fanciful flight from existing scientific evidence about the nature of the universe. Indeed, it could be argued, that the Drunk Man's experiences serve to illustrate in a concrete way some of the elusive insights contained in such abstract formulas of modern science as Einstein's Relativity Theory and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. The transmutations of the Thistle, and of the man's own selfhood, help to prepare the imagination for entry into the unimaginable world of subatomic physics. As Fritjof Capra has said, in The Tao of Physics:

> Probing inside the atom and investigating its structure, science transcended the limits of our sensory imagination. From this point on, it could no longer rely with absolute certainty on logic and common sense. Atomic physics provided the scientists with the first glimpse of the essential nature of things. Like the mystics, physicists were now dealing with a nonsensory experience of reality and, like the mystics, they had to face the paradoxical aspects of this experience. From then on therefore, the models and images of modern physics became akin to those of Eastern philosophy.' (p. 53)

We have already noted the kinship that exists between many of MacDiarmid's images and those of mysticism and 'Eastern philosophy'.

It is not, therefore, surprising to discover that his thought was also moving in parallel to that of the greatest physicists of his day. It is perhaps significant that it was in and around the year 1926 - the year in which MacDiarmid published A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle - that physicists were to make the most amazing progress in finding means of conveying the paradoxical insights of their science. 1926 saw the publication of P.A.M. Dirac's[6] paper 'On the Theory of Quantum Mechanics' (Proceedings of the Royal Society A, Vol. 112), Erwin Schrödinger's[7] 'Quantisierung als Eigenwertproblem' (Annalen der Physic, Vols 79-81), and Heisenberg's paper, 'Über quantentheoretische Kinematik und Mechanik' (Mathematische Annalen, Vol, 95), which was followed in 1927 by the epoch-making 'Über den anschaulichen Inhalt der quantentheoretischen Kinematik und Mechanik' (Zeitschrift für Physik, vol. 43). And from these it is evident that Heisenberg, Schrödinger and Dirac, lived in precisely the same paradoxical, elusive, foundationless world in which MacDiarmid's Drunk Man looks at the Thistle. Their findings fully support his judgement that -

> The haill damned thing's a dream for ocht we ken,
> - The Warld and Life and Daith, Heaven, Hell ana'.
>
> (C.P., I, 92)

Fritjof Capra speaks of scientists having obtained their 'first glimpse of the essential nature of things' through the new physics. Religion and mystical philosophy, however, have long been acquainted with this 'essential nature of things'. This is why their 'models and images' have acquired a degree of clarity and comprehensiveness not yet achieved by those of atomic physics. Writers, therefore, who, like MacDiarmid, wish to speak about 'the essential nature of things', normally have to rely on the older spiritual sciences, rather on the newer physical sciences for 'models and images'.

Dr Capra, whose book is concerned with exploring the remarkable correspondences between the new physics and the ancient mystical teachings of the East, points out that:

> Modern physics has confirmed most dramatically one of the basic ideas of Eastern mysticism; that all the concepts we use to describe nature are limited, that they are not features of reality, as we tend to believe, but creations

> of the mind; parts of the map, not of the territory. Whenever we expand the realm of our experience, the limitations of our rational mind become apparent and we have to modify, or even abandon, some of our concepts. (p. 167)

There can be no disputing the fact that traditional concepts of matter, space and time, as enshrined in Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry, constitute real obstacles to an understanding of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle. From the 'scientific' viewpoint of yesterday, the Drunk Man's utterances can hardly be regarded as amounting to anything more than the fanciful ravings of a person who is entitled to talk nonsense only because he has been granted some kind of 'poetic licence' by a humane and tolerant society. Modern physical science, however, by destroying the conceptual foundations of this complacent and patronising point of view, has without doubt, helped to clear a path towards the truly profound insights into 'the essential nature of things' that MacDiarmid has presented in this great poem.

In view of Dr Capra's evidence, and that of others, regarding the light that has been thrown on modern scientific experience by Eastern mystical philosophy, let us now consider to what extent the same philosophical principles might be able to throw further light on the Drunk Man's experiences, and perhaps even provide a single unifying pattern of meaning for the poem as a whole.

Certainly, 'looking' and 'seeing' are matters of the most vital importance in Eastern mystical thought. In Buddhism, the very first step on the Buddha's Eightfold Path to Enlightenment is samyag-drishti, which is 'right seeing', 'complete seeing', 'perfect seeing'. For, according to Buddhist teaching, all our suffering, ultimately, stems from avidya, the inability to see what is actually before us, and the tendency to see what is really not 'there' at all. Hence the sensitive observer's occasional suspicion, that 'The haill damned thing's a dream'. (C.P., I, 92) In Taoism also, the vital importance of 'right seeing' is stressed. In R.B. Blakney's translation of the Tao Te Ching,[8] we are told that -

> The secret waits for the insight
> Of eyes unclouded by longing;
> Those who are bound by desire
> See only the outward container.

Again, in The Authentic Yoga,[9] Sri Deshpande explains the prime importance of 'clarity of vision' for those who seek spiritual liberation:

> It is the clarity of vision born of intelligence (viveka), that enables one to see what is truly meant by the words 'seer' (drasta) and the word 'seen' (drsya) or the objective world. The 'seer' is just pure seeing energy. But because of his identification with the sense of 'I-am-ness', man tends to see everything through the veil of his past experiences. Thus the dead past overshadows the living present so completely that the very distinction between the 'seer' and the 'seen' gets utterly confused and man's vision becomes completely distorted. He then forgets that the 'seer' can never be the 'seen' and the 'seen' can never be the 'seer'. To confuse the two in this way is to lose clarity of vision and to invite endless trouble and misery. (p. 7)

Deshpande goes on to insist that, in the absence of such 'clarity of vision', which, as he sees it, is the fruit of the Yoga Darsana, 'Truth, God or Reality must ever remain mere words devoid of any substance or significance'; for 'Reality is not just "what is". It is a creative action that transcends "what is". Man without such transcendence remains a mere animal devoid of any awareness of "that" which animates all beings.' (p. 15)

It is not being suggested, of course, that 'looking' and 'seeing' have no important role to play in Western religious thought. Undoubtedly they have. We need only recall Elisha's prayer for his young servant, who was certainly not blind in the ordinary sense of the word: 'Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw' (2 Kings 6:17); or Jesus's description of the religious leaders of his day as 'blind leaders of the blind' (Matthew 15:14).

But nowhere in Western thought are the processes of 'looking' and 'seeing' accorded a place of such central importance as in Eastern mystical thought, where they are repeatedly subjected to the most intense scrutiny and investigation, sometimes with astonishing results - as in The Tibetan Book of the Dead. In this connection, it is interesting to note, that when F.H. Humphreys, one of Sri Ramana's devotees, attempted to formulate what he had learned about the way to spiritual liberation, he did so in terms of 'looking' and 'seeing':

> Do not fix your attention on all these changing things of life, death and phenomena. Do not think of even the actual act of seeing or perceiving them, but only of that which sees all these things . . . Try to keep the mind unshakenly fixed on That which sees . . .[10]

It is significant that the climax of the Drunk Man's 'looking' and 'seeing' is not mere awareness of anything that can be seen, or even of the act of seeing, but a clear realisation of 'That which sees' - that which is known in Yoga as the Purusha, the indwelling Self:

> Wha's deed owre often and has seen owre much.
>
> (C.P., I, 167)

To begin with, of course, the Drunk Man's seeing is extremely limited: it is everywhere distorted by the ubiquitous Thistle which stands between him and reality. It is only as his seeing power develops, that he begins to see something of himself 'reflected in the herb' (p. 105)

> My ain soul looks me in the face, as 'twere,
> And mair than my ain soul - my nation's soul . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 93)

> . . . A' the dour provincial thocht
> That merks the Scottish breed
> - These are the thistle's characters,
> To argie there's nae need.
> Hoo weel my verse embodies
> The thistle you can read!
> - But will a Scotsman never
> Frae this vile growth be freed? . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 122)

But as his seeing power develops further, he perceives that it is not just his own nation that is affected by 'this vile growth':

> The barren tree, dry leafs and cracklin' thorns,
> This is the mind o' a' humanity . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 152)

It is not only his own mind now, or Scotland's mind, that he sees 'reflected in the herb', but 'the mind o' a' humanity'. The Thistle

has become the mirror of all human existence. What the Drunk Man began by looking at, was only a Scottish thistle, but what he now sees is 'the tree that fills the universe' (C.P., I, 126), the painful Tree of Existence in which every man is caught, as in 'a stick-nest in Ygdrasil' (C.P., I, 129), although, in fact, the 'tree' is merely a reflection of man's own consciousness. Indeed, the entire universe, as the Drunk Man now sees it, is like the retina of a vast, inward-turned eye, which mirrors the contents of 'man's benmaist hert':

> Oor universe is like an e'e
> Turned in, man's benmaist hert to see,
> And swamped in subjectivity.
>
> (C.P., I, 163)

This is the same insight that is expressed through the Buddhist doctrine of Karma. As Rosen Takashina explains, in the sermon from which we quoted earlier:

> In this doctrine, the whole phenomenal universe as perceived by us is understood to be an effect, corresponding to previous thoughts, speech, and physical actions of the individual and of all living beings, which are the cause. In fact the whole phenomenal universe is experienced according to our Karma. (B.S., p. 139)

In modern scientific thought, something of the same insight emerges at times. In The Tao of Physics, for example, Dr Capra, discussing one of the theories relating to the structuring of those particles that are known as 'hadrons' says:

> Such a theory of subatomic particles reflects the impossibility of separating the scientific observer from the observed phenomena, which has already been discussed in connection with quantum theory, in its most extreme form. It implies, ultimately, that the structures and phenomena we observe in nature are nothing but creations of our measuring and categorizing mind.
>
> That this is so is one of the fundamental tenets of Eastern philosophy. The Eastern mystics tell us again and again that all things and events we perceive are creations of the mind, arising from a particular state of consciousness and dissolving again if this state is transcended . . .
>
> This is . . . the recurring theme of the Buddhist Yogacara school which holds that all forms we perceive are 'mind only'; projections, or 'shadows' of the mind . . . (pp. 292-3)

It is clear, then, how closely MacDiarmid's poem follows the philosophical tendency of Eastern mystical thought, and, of course, modern physics, by gradually turning attention away from that which is seen, towards 'That which sees'. But first, of course, the poet has to make clear the painful consequences of remaining preoccupied with the 'seen' objects which constitute the Thistle world, and never acquiring any real knowledge of 'That which sees'. For then indeed, as he repeatedly makes plain, all is dukkha. Then indeed, 'All created things are grief and pain' (C.B., p. 66). He shows us that the life of the Thistle world in itself, is no life. It is a 'livin' death' (C.P., I, 88): a sickening parody of life, in which 'A' thing that ony man can be's / A mockery o' his soul at last' (C.P., I, 128). Only in relation to the mysterious peace and silence of 'That which sees' (and which 'has seen owre much') can the world of the Thistle acquire any real life or meaning. Until, therefore, some relation is established, with that ultimate silence and peace which is 'the croon o' a'' (C.P., I, 166), the only view of life that we can realistically hold is the one expressed in those sombre words for the Burial of the Dead, in the Book of Common Prayer:

> Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.
> In the midst of life we are in death . . .

It is because he is so poignantly aware of these facts concerning the Thistle life, that the Drunk Man exclaims:

> Thou Daith in which my life
> Sae vain a thing can seem,
> Frae whatna source d'ye borrow
> Your devastatin' gleam?
>
> Nae doot that hidden sun
> 'Ud look fu' wae ana',
> Gin I could see it in the licht
> That frae the Earth you draw! . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 105)

Not even the glorious sun, 'hidden' at that moment in night, can avoid being 'swamped in subjectivity' by man's sick mind. Even this glowing symbol of the Divine Life, Source of all life and meaning, must appear wan and woebegone when exposed to the 'devastatin' gleam' of man's Thistle-based consciousness.

This is why it is vitally important to discover, as the Drunk Man ultimately does, that the Thistle and its 'devastatin' gleam' have no real, independent existence. They are projected from the depths of our own deluded nature. They simply reflect the contents of our own 'benmaist hert'. And we discover this to be true, once we begin to use the sight-reversing technique suggested by the poet's words: 'Oor universe is like an e'e / Turned in . . .' We come to see for ourselves, how closely the events and objects of the external world resemble the half-hidden contents of our own psyche, and we begin to perceive how utterly unreal both world and psyche are, compared with 'That which sees'. There is no other way to 'right-seeing'. It is only by turning the light of 'That which sees' back upon itself, that we can discern the true nature of Reality. Until we do this, our view of Reality is inevitably distorted by our innate tendency to confuse one fragment or another of the 'seen' world (and this, of course includes the psyche as well as the soma) with the actual source and centre of seeing. Only by using the sight-reversing process, are we able, ultimately, to see beyond both the world of projected images and the ever-changing psyche which projects them, to the actual source of what Deshpande calls 'pure seeing awareness' (A.Y., p. 14) in the Purusha itself, the cosmic cinema screen of the Self on which the ever-changing scenes of life are projected. Hence the profound importance of the Drunk Man's words.

MacDiarmid's poem traces the Drunk Man's somewhat erratic progress, from a state of painful entanglement in the thorns of Existence, to a state 'whereo' the fules ha'e never recked' (C.P., I, 83), the radiant heights where Silence has his home in the perpetual stillness of endless creativity. This account of the man's progress, though perhaps not consciously derived from what Dr Capra calls 'the fundamental tenets of Eastern philosophy', is, certainly, in complete accord with the teachings of at least one branch of Eastern philosophy: that of Mahayana

Buddhism, which strongly emphasises the 'Thistle' nature of all existence, and the essentially subjective character of the 'objective' world. It seems likely, therefore, that this particular branch of Eastern philosophy might be able on its own to supply a single unifying framework of meaning for the poem as a whole. It is, at least, a possibility worth exploring.

We may recall, that it was because the Buddha saw the whole of human life drenched in the 'devastating' light which is, in this poem, identified with the Thistle, that he declared all existence to be dukkha - a word which can be translated simply as 'sour', the normal antonym of sukha, 'sweet'. (cf. Sukhavati, the name of Amitabha Buddha's 'Pure Land') And it should be noted, that the Drunk Man is in complete accord with the Buddha, when he exposes the 'sourness' latent in all the ostensibly 'sweet' things of this mortal life: from Scotch Whisky ('as the worth's gane doun the cost has risen' p. 83) and the love of women ('each tethered to a punctual-snorin' missus' p. 95), to the joys of social intercourse ('they're nocht but zoologically men' p. 85) and the light of human knowledge ('the mair he sees / the mair he kens hoo little o' / A' that there is he'll ever see' p. 129), he sees nothing that has not been soured, that has not been tainted, by the 'devastatin' gleam' of the Thistle.

It might be thought, that the Drunk Man's observations merely indicate a cynical disposition, or a morbidly depressed mind. Neither cynicism nor morbidity of mind, however, normally culminates in 'the glory that descends', or in that state of 'Silence' which is 'the croon o' a''. It is significant, too, that the man sees in the Thistle, not just a personal or local tragedy, but 'the mind o' a' humanity' and 'the tree that fills the universe'. It is unlikely that a merely melancholy or embittered person would be able to see this. He would be too preoccupied with the state of his own gloomy ego to notice very much that lay beyond its narrow limits. Indeed, simply by learning to look a little further afield, such a person might well be cured of his personal melancholy. It was in the hope of turning Kisa Gotami's personal grief over the death of her child into universal compassion, that the Buddha sent her round the doors to collect little grains of mustard seed from those who had never had a death in the family (See The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, pp. 43-46). Only after trying unsuccessfully

to do so, was she able to see in her own grief and sorrow 'the mind o' a' humanity'. It is the Drunk Man's intense concern, not only with the mind of all humanity, but with life in all its forms, that shows him not to be a blinkered prisoner of personal melancholy and bitterness, but one who shares the Buddha's vision.

This vision is not restricted to seeing that all existence is dukkha, and that even the sweetest things in life are soon soured by suffering. It goes on to reveal the origin of this souring process in man's own being, in 'man's benmaist hert', where trishna, the blind, egocentric clutching and clinging impulse of the heart, prevails over reason and morality. One of man's favourite indulgences it, to imagine that some relatively minor adjustment to outward circumstances, such as an increase in income, a change of residence, a new marriage partner, could easily banish all the misery from his life. Despite repeated disappointments, and disproofs of this fanciful hypothesis, most people tend to cling to this kind of delusion all their lives. This is why it is so important to discover, with the Buddha, where the origin of life's misery, along with its cure, is to be found; and to learn, with the Drunk Man, how to turn the 'eye' of the universe inward until we find the source of all life's 'ugsomeness' in our own 'benmaist hert'. It is to free us from our dangerous delusions, concerning the world confronting us, that he declares the Thistle to be simply an objectification of 'A' the uncouth dilemmas o' oor natur''. It is, he says:

> A mongrel growth, jumble o' disproportions,
> Whirlin' in its incredible contortions,
> Or wad-be client that an auld whore shuns,
> Wardin' her wizened orange o' a bosom
> Frae importunities sae gruesome,
>
> Or new diversion o' the hormones
> Mair fond o' procreation than the Mormons,
> And fetchin' like a devastatin' storm on's
> A' the uncouth dilemmas o' oor natur'
> Objectified in vegetable maitter.
>
> (C.P., I, 116-117)

These 'uncouth dilemmas o' oor natur'', according to Buddhism, all have their origin in avidya or ignorance - ignorance of our own true nature. Not knowing that the objects we want to clasp and hold are,

like the ones we want to escape from, projected from the unconscious depths of our own muddled minds, we become involved in a tantalising game of endlessly pursuing perpetually retreating phantoms. We never manage to lay hands on anything substantial. The reality of what we seek always eludes us, and always will, till we learn how to turn the 'eye' of the outward universe back into our 'benmaist hert'. Only when the darkness of avidya has been dispelled by the light of 'That which Sees', will the blind craving we call trishna cease to torment us. As Dr Alan Watts explains: 'Avidya is "ignoring" the fact that subject and object are relational, like the two sides of a coin, so that when one pursues, the other retreats.' (W.Z., p. 68). Until we come to understand this, we must remain helpless victims of trishna.

According to Buddhism, our dreaded miseries and the objects we desire are both projected from within ourselves. To put it another way, as MacDiarmid does, the Thistle and the Moon belong to the same family. This is what the Drunk Man makes clear when he describes the Thistle as the bastard offspring of the Moon, thus reminding us that suffering is born from the objects of our desire. Here is how he addresses the apparently pure and exalted Moon:

> Dae what ye wull ye canna parry
> This skeleton-at-the-feast that through the starry
> Maze o' the warld's intoxicatin' soiree
> Claughts ye, as micht an affrontit quean
> A bastard wean!
>
> Prood mune, ye needna thring your shouder there,
> And at your puir get like a snawstorm stare,
> It's yours - there's nae denyin't - and I'm shair
> You'd no' enjoy the evenin' much the less
> Gin you'd but openly confess!
>
> Dod! It's an eaten and a spewed-like thing
> Fell like a little-bodies' changeling,
> And it's nae credit t'ye that ye s'ud bring
> The like to life - yet, gi'en a mither's love,
> - Hee, hee! - wha kens hoo't micht improve? . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 104)

Yet, merely to recognise that all our experience, whether superficially pleasant or unpleasant, is conditioned by the same avidya, the

same misery-creating mechanisms of trishna within us, does not really help us very much. The inwardly turned 'eye' must probe and penetrate more deeply still, if it wants to catch sight of the way that leads beyond life's misery and delusion, the way that leads back to 'That which Sees'. This, according to Mahayana Buddhism, is the way of Sunyata, the way of emptiness, the way of the void, the way of No-thing-ness. But though the Sanskrit word sunyata is normally translated as 'emptiness' or 'the Void', the realm of Sunyata is neither empty nor void in the ordinary sense of these words. It is, indeed, the very essence of all that exists, within, above, beneath and around us. It is no thing, but it is not nothing. No 'thing' could help us to get beyond the world of things, the world of grief and pain; for every 'thing' is itself part of the painful wheel of Samsaric existence. There is Something that can take us beyond the world of 'things', but it is not a 'thing'. It does not possess any of the characteristics of 'thingness'. It is the Ultimate Reality within and beyond all 'things'. Only by probing deeply enough to discover this 'No-thing' underlying all things, this Sunyata, which is the realm, not of the 'seen', but of 'That which Sees', the realm of the Purusha, the Atman, the Self, beyond all that the senses can perceive, all that the soul can feel, all that the mind can think, do we find the way to reality and peace. The Buddha says:

> There is, disciples, a realm devoid of earth and water, fire and air. It is not endless space, nor infinite thought, nor nothingness, neither ideas nor non-ideas. Not this world nor that is it. I call it neither a coming nor a departing, nor a standing still, nor death, nor birth; it is without a basis, progress, or a stay; it is the ending of sorrow.
>
> For that which clingeth to another thing there is a fall; but unto that which clingeth not no fall can come. Where no fall cometh, there is rest, and where rest is, there is no keen desire. Where keen desire is not, naught cometh or goeth; and where naught cometh or goeth there is no death, no birth. Where there is neither death nor birth, there neither is this world nor that, nor in between - it is the ending of sorrow.
>
> There is, disciples, an Unbecome, Unborn, Unmade, Unformed; if there were not this Unbecome, Unborn, Unmade, Unformed, there would be no way out for that which is become, born, made, and formed; but since there is an Unbecome, Unborn, Unmade, Unformed, there is escape for that which is become, born, made, and formed.[11]

It is in the light of this Buddhist teaching about the underlying Void, that we can best understand the following advice from the Drunk Man:

> O rootless thistle through the warld that's pairt o' you,
> Gin you'd withstand the agonies still to come,
> You maun send roots doon to the deeps unkent,
> Fer deeper than it's possible for ocht to gang,
> Savin' the human soul,
> Deeper than God himsel' has knowledge o',
> Whaur lichtnin's canna probe that cleave the warld,
> Whaur only in the entire dark there's founts o' strength
> Eternity's poisoned draps can never file . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 147)

The Thistle, considered simply as our Samsaric existence, has no roots in Reality. Nevertheless, from the seeing power trapped within it, it must somehow try to develop roots, which can reach down into the unseen, unknown depths of Sunyata. Otherwise, the 'agonies still to come' will prove unbearable. The world of Samsara produces no antidote for the agonies it generates; it provides no means of escape from itself. Only in the 'entire dark' of Sunyata can a cure be found. In the world which is part of the Thistle, (part, that is to say, of Samsara), we can find no shelter from the lightnings of disaster, no 'founts o' strength' where we can refresh ourselves between bouts of grief and misfortune. Only in the profound depths of Sunyata, where our created being is lost, 'Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft', can we find the required 'founts o' strength', fountains unpolluted by 'Eternity's poisoned draps', by the bitter dregs of a life which once flowed perfect from the heart of life, until some primeval cosmic disaster, or fall, infected it with poison. Speaking of this disaster, Rosen Takashina says: 'Fundamentally our true heart, our true nature, is pure and infinite, like the moon clear in the blue sky. At some distant time past our knowing, it was tainted by passion and became the impure heart, something not our real selves but which came afterwards.' (B.S., p. 141)

The Drunk Man's claim, that it is not possible for anything to go as deep as the 'human soul' must go, is in complete agreement with the Buddhist belief that the world of complete enlightenment, the world of Buddhahood, is normally accessible only to those on the human plane.

In all the other planes of Samsaric existence, there is either too much pleasure or too much pain to permit of the deeper kind of self-exploration which alone can lead to Nirvana.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, there are six different planes of existence within Samsara, corresponding to the six syllables of the mantra of Avalokiteśvara:[12] Om: the realm of 'devas' or gods; Ma-: the realm of the perpetually-warring 'asuras' or Titans; ni: the human realm; Pad-: the animal realm; me: the realm of 'pretas' or hungry ghosts; Hum: the realm of tormented souls in hell or purgatory. In this context, the puzzling line: 'Deeper than God himsel' has knowledge o'', need not be interpreted as a denial of the divine omniscience. It may simply refer to the far from transcendent 'God' of popular belief: a 'deva' whose territory and attributes belong essentially to space, time, and Samsara. From the Buddhist viewpoint, 'devas' are as much in need of enlightenment in their temporary paradises, as any tormented soul in his temporary hell.[13] This is why compassionate human beings on earth recite, on behalf of the devas as well as on behalf of all other beings trapped in the Samsaric world, the liberating mantra

OM MA-NI PAD-ME HUM

which, it is believed, can bring them all into saving contact with the Bodhisattva Avalokita, the Compassionate Lord, who, as many a mandala makes clear, is fully present, and equally free and powerful, in all six realms of Samsaric existence. In Buddhism, the divine omniscience belongs, not to any 'God', but to those human beings who have transcended their 'vile humanity' in order to become vehicles of the Universal Mind: the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The saving power which is associated with Avalokiteśvara derives, of course, from his celebrated vision of Sunyata, through which he himself came to complete enlightenment. As it says in the Heart Sutra:

> Avalokita, the holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of the wisdom which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own-being they were empty. (B.S., p. 162)

This realisation that everything he looked at was sunya - empty, void, brought about his immediate release from the world of birth and

death, and the complete destruction of all the delusions connected with it. He became a living embodiment of the wisdom of the Void - Sunyata. This wisdom is known as The Perfection of Wisdom, Prajna-Paramita, to which MacDiarmid refers, in 'The Kind of Poetry I Want', as the 'life of the Buddhas'. (C.P., II, 1034)

The liberating power of such a realisation, such an awareness of all-embracing Sunyata, is repeatedly stressed in The Tibetan Book of the Dead, where, for example, in Book 1, Part 1, the following words are provided for the guru, or 'a brother in the Faith', to speak to the dying person:

> O nobly-born (so-and-so), listen. Now thou art experiencing the Radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality. Recognise it. O nobly-born, thy present intellect, in real nature void, not formed into anything as regards characteristics or colour, naturally void, is the very Reality, the All-Good.
>
> Thine own intellect, which is now voidness, yet not to be regarded as of the voidness of nothingness, but as being the intellect itself, unobstructed, shining, thrilling, and blissful, is the very consciousness, the All-Good Buddha . . .
>
> Thine own consciousness, shining, void, and inseparable from the Great Body of Radiance, hath no birth, nor death, and is the Immutable Light - Buddha Amitabha.
>
> Knowing this is sufficient. Recognising the voidness of thine own intellect to be Buddhahood, and looking upon it as being thine own consciousness, is to keep thyself in the (state of the) divine mind of the Buddha. (Tib.B.D., pp. 95-96)

The footnote which Dr Evans-Wentz supplies to the above passage reads as follows: 'Realisation of the Non-Sangsara (i.e. Nirvana), which is the Voidness, the Unbecome, the Unborn, the Unmade, the Unformed, implies Buddhahood, Perfect Enlightenment - the state of the Divine Mind of the Buddha.' (pp. 96-97)

The Drunk Man's acquaintance with this liberating 'voidness' is made clear, not only in such phrases as 'the entire dark', 'the deeps unkent', 'the hole whaur the Thistle stood' (p. 99), but also in his descriptions of the effect that the experience of the Void has on man's perception of the Thistle:

> Frae laighest deeps o' the ocean
> It rises in flight upon flight,
> And 'yont its uttermaist motion

Can still set roses alight,
As else unreachable height
Fa's under its triumphin' sight.

(C.P., I, 98)

Clearly, the 'root' of this transformation, the source of the 'rootless' Thistle's new-found power and beauty, is 'nocht but naethingness'. It is Sunyata, the Void:

Here is the root that feeds
The shank wi' the blindin' wings
Dwinin' abuneheid to gleids
Like stars in their keethin' rings,
And blooms in sunrise and sunset
Inowre Eternity's yett . . .

- The howes o' man's hert are bare,
The Dragon's left them for good,
There's nocht but naethingness there,
The hole whaur the Thistle stood,
That rootless and radiant flies
A Phoenix in Paradise!

(C.P., I, 99)

Unfortunately, the soaring Thistle can soar only as long as the Void is clearly seen. Once the mystical 'eye' loses its vision, and the Void disappears, the Thistle soon comes crashing down to earth again. We are trapped once more in its 'ugsomeness', as in 'a sticknest in Ygdrasil'. But having once glimpsed the Void, however briefly, we can never again believe the Thistle capable of filling the vast emptiness that has been revealed within and around us. As the Drunk Man says:

. . . Aince it's toomed my hert and brain,
The thistle needs maun fa' again.
But a' its growth'll never fill
The hole it's turned my life intill! . . .

(C.P., I, 166)

Awareness of the all-embracing Void, though it leads the imprisoned soul ultimately to healing and freedom, can be, at first, a frightening and depressing experience. To those who have learnt nothing about the real nature of Sunyata, the discovery that there is a nothingness, an

emptiness, all around them and at the very heart of their being, inevitably fills them with horror and dread. As the Drunk Man says:

> Nae man can ken his hert until
> The tide o' life uncovers it,
> And horror-struck he sees a pit
> Returnin' life can never fill.
>
> (C.P., I, 129)

How profoundly perception of the Void and its unfillable emptiness can affect a man's sight, is well illustrated in the following lines, in which the poet envisages the body of a woman with whom a date has been made, as merely the rattling skeleton it will one day become:

> It's a queer thing to tryst wi' a wumman
> When the boss o' her body's gane,
> And her banes in the wund as she comes
> Dirl like a raff o' rain.
>
> It's a queer thing to tryst wi' a wumman
> When her ghaist frae abuneheid keeks,
> And you see in the licht o't that a'
> You ha'e o'r's the cleiks . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 112)

According to the doctrine of Sunyata, all we can have of anything or anybody, is 'the cleiks' - only the faintest shadow of what we seek. The actuality always eludes us. For, of course, existence is not the realm of actuality. Everything that exists is basically emptiness. Underlying 'the cleiks', there is 'nocht but naethingness'. It is because we fail to see this, that we find all existence to be, as the Buddha says, dukkha - frustration, pain, unhappiness. Only when the eye is turned, not outward, but inward, can the reality of what we seek be discovered, in the deep 'nae-thing-ness' of our 'benmaist hert', where the thistle of existence finally reveals its true nature, in terms of 'The hole it's turned (our) life intill'. Our first encounters with this Void, however, are unlikely to be soothing or satisfying. In the light of the Void, the light of Sunyata, our customary pleasures begin to lose their attractiveness:

> Ilka pleesure I can ha'e
> Ends like a dram ta'en yesterday.

And tho' to ha'e it I am lorn
- What better 'ud I be the morn?

(C.P., I, 110)

Hence the Drunk Man's 'Contempt o' ilka goal' -

O' ilka goal - save ane alane;
To be yoursel', whatever that may be.
And as contemptuous o' that,
Kennin' nocht's worth the ha'en,
But certainty that nocht can be,
And hoo that certainty to gain.

(C.P., I, 136-7)

From the viewpoint of Sunyata, it is clear, not only that 'nocht can be worth the ha'en', but that, in a sense, 'nocht can be' at all. As the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch, Hui-neng (637-713) says: 'Fundamentally, not one thing exists' (The Way of Zen, p. 112). All that appears to exist, in the sense of 'standing out' as something separate and distinct from the divine Pleroma of No-thing-ness, is illusory and unreal. 'All forms are unreal' (C.B., p. 66). We soon discover this when we want to possess some coveted object or person. All we can grasp is a fleeting shadow. 'A' / You ha'e o'r's the cleiks'. Hence the Drunk Man's conclusion that 'nocht's worth the ha'en'. Nothing is worth having, except certainty that nothing can be worth having, and knowledge of how that certainty can be gained. Such certainty, of course, can be gained only through direct perception of Sunyata, the Void, as the sole Reality behind all the fleeting forms of existence.

Because the Drunk Man is able to perceive, at least intermittently, the all-embracing Void, he realises the nature of the ultimate state towards which he is moving, and does not hesitate to use the Buddhist word for it - enlightenment. He speaks of how, despite all the horrors that crowd round us on the 'wheel' which is Samsara,

. . . we may aiblins swing content
Upon the wheel in which we're pent
In adequate enlightenment.

(C.P., I, 161)

Only the thought of enlightenment can supply a glimmer of hope in the midst of Samsara's darkness:

Nae ither thocht can mitigate
The horror o' the endless Fate
A'thing's whirled in predestinate.

(C.P., I, 161)

And enlightenment consists in seeing, everywhere and at all times,

. . . the licht that flees
Within the Wheel, and Freedom gi'es
Frae Dust and Daith and a' Disease.

(C.P., I, 162)

This liberating light is, of course, the light of the Void, which is active within every cog of the Wheel, within every atom of the massive Samsaric machine. Once we clearly see its movement 'Within the Wheel', we find ourselves released from all the Wheel's imprisoning structures. We are then outside them all. Set free 'Frae Dust and Daith and a' Disease', we are then quite

. . . content to eye
The wheel in silence whirlin' by.

(C.P., I, 160)

For everything, without exception, is then seen to be as it really is - completely void. All the forms, whether pleasurable or painful, which crowd, minute by minute, into our consciousness, and which make up the wheel of existence, are seen to be, like consciousness itself, completely empty. We see than that, as the great Zen (Ch'an) Buddhist masters teach, 'The ultimate nature of all things is emptiness' and 'there is neither the one who is conscious nor that of which there is a consciousness'.[14]

We have always to remember, of course, that this emptiness is not mere vacuity, not mere nothingness. As Hui-neng says in one of his sermons: 'Learned Audience, when you hear me talk about the Void do not at once fall into the idea of vacuity (because this involves the heresy of the doctrine of annihilation).'[15] In Buddhism, however, it is not easy to avoid falling into 'the heresy of the doctrine of annihilation', especially if one keeps in mind this same Master's teaching, that 'Fundamentally, not one thing exists' (W.Z., p. 112), for it is extremely difficult to find the narrow Middle Way between, on the one hand, the erroneous belief in the real, substantial existence

of things, and, on the other hand, the equally erroneous belief, that their emptiness is simply the emptiness of nothingness, the merely relative emptiness that results from the removal, or annihilation, of objects, and which can easily be expelled by the introduction of other objects. Only when our understanding can reach down into the 'deeps unkent' of Sunyata, do we become capable of finding that narrow road that pierces its way between the two errors, the road that leads to complete enlightenment and the joyful discovery that, to quote the Buddhist poet Saraha (c. 850), 'As is Nirvana, so is Samsara' (B.S., p. 179). It is the Buddha's joyful discovery of this truth which is expressed in the following lines from The Light of Asia:

> Ye are not bound! the Soul of Things is sweet,
> The Heart of Being is celestial rest . . .
>
> I, Buddh, who wept with all my brothers' tears,
> Whose heart was broken by a whole world's woe,
> Laugh and am glad, for there is Liberty!
> Ho! ye who suffer! know
>
> Ye suffer from yourselves. None else compels,
> None other holds you that ye live and die,
> And whirl upon the wheel, and hug and kiss
> Its spokes of agony,
>
> Its tire of tears, its nave of nothingness.
> Behold, I show you Truth. Lower than hell,
> Higher than Heaven, outside the utmost stars,
> Farther than Brahm doth dwell,
>
> Before beginning, and without an end,
> As space eternal and as surety sure,
> Is fixed a Power divine which moves to good,
> Only its laws endure.
>
> (p. 140)

Such a discovery, of course, is impossible at the intellectual level. Nor can it properly be expressed or explained in intellectual terms, for one cannot reduce 'the Soul of Things' to the status of a mere object of the intellect, intellect being only one of the contents of the 'Soul of Things'. The liberating truth is not a matter of abstract conceptualising, but of concrete actuality. We cannot think the Void. We can only be the Void.

And to be the Void is simply the natural consequence of following the Buddhist teaching concerning anatta, or not-self, which points out that the body is not our self, our feelings are not our self, our thoughts are not our self - in fact, no thing is our self. We are not any thing. This realisation of our own 'no-thing-ness' helps us to perceive the absolute emptiness of all 'existing' things. We see them perpetually changing, in relation to a 'no-thing-ness' which does not change. We come to realise that the dimensionless emptiness within our own selfhood, is the sole reality underlying the apparently objective universe. This Emptiness is really, of course, the divine Fullness, the Pleroma, from which all things come, whereas, all those things that appear in ordinary experience to be so full, are really empty. But here words fail us. For the Void is really no void, the Self is really no self, God is really no god. We have passed beyond the place where any finger can point at the Moon, for we are in the Moon, we are the Moon. It is in order to reach this state, that the Drunk Man desires to be 'free / O' (his) eternal me' (p. 142). Having reached it, he rejoices that 'I o' me ha'e me bereft' (p. 144).

In the light of the many correspondences we have seen to exist, between the insights of the Drunk Man and those of Buddhism - particularly those of the later Mahayana forms of Buddhism - it is now clear that the entire poem might well be viewed as an extended demonstration of, and apologia for, the 'looking' and 'seeing' approach to Reality which Buddhism adopts and considers so important. The essence of this Buddhist approach is, learning not to turn our eyes away from the Thistle in our lives, but to look at it steadfastly, without flinching, until it begins to give up its hidden secrets, first by disclosing its function as a mirror for the contents of our 'benmaist hert', and then by uncovering the Void that underlies all things - the all-engulfing 'hole whaur the Thistle stood'.

Some Buddhist scriptures show how even the most dreadful effects of Karma can be deprived of their power, simply by looking at them, until they reveal their true nature. We are advised to allow these frightening forms to turn our gaze inward to where they have their origins in our own hearts, and then to continue to probe more and more deeply - 'faur deeper' than any Karma, good or bad, can ever go - until

we find the 'unkent deeps' beneath and beyond the heart, where we may become one with the healing Void, 'the life of the Buddhas'.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, for example, repeatedly advises the dead person not to try to flee from the terrifying forms produced by his own bad Karma, but to look at them fearlessly, until he sees in them what his own past deeds have formed out of the formless Void. In Book 1, Part II, he is urged to pray: 'May I recognise whatever (visions) appear, as the reflections of mine own consciousness' . . . (Tib.B.D., p. 103) and he is assured that 'It is quite sufficient for thee to know that these apparitions are thine own thought-forms.' (p.104) On the fourteenth day of the dead man's ordeal in the 'Bardo of Karmic Illusions', the person who is ministering to him reads the following words:

> At this time when the Fifty-eight Blood-Drinking Deities emanating from thine own brain come to shine upon thee, if thou knowest them to be the radiances of thine own intellect, thou wilt merge, in the state of at-one-ment, into the body of the Blood-Drinking Ones there and then, and obtain Buddhahood.
>
> O nobly-born, by not recognising now, and by fleeing from the deities out of fear, again sufferings will come to overpower thee. If this be not known . . . (one is) awed and terrified and fainteth away: one's own thought-forms turn into illusory appearances, and one wandereth into the Sangsara; if one be not awed and terrified, one will not wander into the Sangsara' . . . (p. 146)
>
> O nobly-born, whatever fearful and terrifying visions thou mayst see, recognise them to be thine own thought-forms . . .
>
> If one recognise one's own thought-forms . . . Buddha-hood is obtained. (p. 147)

It is this technique of looking at the 'Thistle' in our lives, until we recognise in it our own thought-forms, that the Drunk Man illustrates in the following lines:

> My knots o' nerves that struggled sair
> Are weel reflected in the herb;
> My crookit instincts were like this,
> As sterile and acerb.
>
> My self-tormented spirit took
> The shape repeated in the thistle;
> Sma' beauty jouked my rawny banes
> And maze o' gristle.
>
> (C.P., I, 105)

The advice given to the departed by The Tibetan Book of the Dead does not differ essentially from that given to the living by other Buddhist scriptures. With regard to 'looking', for example, there is a verse in the Dhammapada which says: 'Look upon the world as you would on a bubble, look upon it as a mirage' (C.B., p. 61). With regard to 'seeing', the traditional Zen (Ch'an) recipe for enlightenment consists simply in 'seeing into one's own nature' and thereby realising Buddhahood. In The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind, Dr D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), the Japanese scholar who pioneered the teaching of Zen in the West, quotes the following passage from an old Zen scripture:

> A monk asked Chih of Yun-chu of the eighth century, 'What is meant by seeing into one's Self-nature and becoming a Buddha?'
> Chih: 'This Nature is from the first pure and undefiled, serene and undisturbed. It belongs to no categories of duality such as being and non-being, pure and defiled, long and short, taking in and giving up; the Body remains in its suchness. To have a clear insight into this is to see into one's Self-nature. Self-nature is the Buddha, and the Buddha is Self-nature. Therefore, seeing into one's Self-nature is becoming the Buddha.'
> Monk: 'If Self-nature is pure, and belongs to no categories of duality such as being and non-being, etc., where does this seeing take place?'
> Chih: 'There is a seeing, but nothing seen.'
> Monk: 'If there is nothing seen, how can we say that there is any seeing at all?'
> Chih: 'In fact there is no trace of seeing.'
> Monk: 'In such a seeing, whose seeing is it?'
> Chih: 'There is no seer, either.'
>
> (p. 78)

The Drunk Man shows some acquaintance with this extraordinary kind of 'seeing' in which 'there is no seer', when he speaks of the spiritual state in which

> There's naething left o' me ava'
> Save a' I'd hoped micht whiles befa'.
>
> (C.P., I, 143)

because 'I o' me ha'e me bereft'. (C.P., I, 144) He also makes plain the identity of Self-nature and Buddha in this kind of seeing, when he speaks of being

> . . . risen at last abune
> The thistle like a mune
> That looks serenely doon
> On what queer things there are
> In an inferior star
> That couldna be, or see,
> Themsel's, except in me.
>
> (C.P., I, 141)

It is because of our essential identity with that which 'looks serenely doon' from the Buddha heights, that we learn, in time, quite contentedly,

> . . . to eye
> The wheel in silence whirlin by.
>
> (C.P., I, 160)

The serene looking, by destroying 'a' oor auld delusions', finally enables us to 'Lowe in the wheel's serenity' (C.P., I, 163) for all time to come.

In the context of the Buddhist view, that fearless 'looking' is the way to rid ourselves 'O' a' oor auld delusions' and clear the mind for true seeing, it is easy to understand why the Drunk Man's primary concern is not with thinking about the Thistle, or theorising about it, but with 'looking' at it. It is also highly significant in this context that, from the first, he shows his determination to use his perceptive powers to the full, refusing to restrict them to his physical organs:

> I'll bury nae heid like an ostrich's,
> Nor yet believe my e'en and naething else.
> My senses may advise me, but I'll be
> Mysel' nae maitter what they tell's . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

It might be wondered what 'being oneself' has to do with seeing, but according to Buddhism, it has everything to do with it. To be oneself, 'whatever that may be' (C.P., I, 137), is the one indispensable requirement for true seeing. True seeing is the direct result of truly being oneself. As long as one clings to a wrong concept of what one is, the way to true seeing is obstructed. Hence the need to get rid of all the

false concepts which alienate us from ourselves, by applying to every object, including our own body and psyche, the Buddhist formula: Na me so atta - 'this is not my self' - until finally we are aware only of what we are. To be oneself is, in fact, 'to see into one's Self-nature', with the results already described.

The inseparability of being and seeing, from the Buddhist viewpoint, is extensively discussed in the Surangama Sutra, where, at one point, the Buddha says to his followers: 'So, then, just what you and other creatures see now, viz., mountains, rivers, countries, and lands, all this, I say is the result of an original fault of sight . . . on the true and ever-glorious power of sight which I possess' (C.B., p.193). In other words, only by 'Seeing into one's own nature and realising Buddhahood', can one acquire true sight. As long as one is alienated from one's own true nature, one must suffer from faulty vision. True seeing is inseparable from true being. In this connection, Professor Guenther, in his Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective, points out that 'Genuine awareness is not something added to being, but being itself, and that being is not some fleeting content of genuine awareness, but is this awareness itself.'[16] Obviously, it is in the context of such teaching about 'genuine awareness' and 'true sight' that the Drunk Man's declaration, 'I'll bury nae heid like an ostrich's . . . I'll be mysel'', makes most sense.

Within Buddhism, the approach to enlightenment is generally conceived of as divided into three distinct stages, the first being sila - discipline ('Morality' according to Dr Conze), the second, dhyana - 'meditation', and the third, Prajna - (intuitive, transcendental) 'Wisdom', though in fact, the three spiritual states tend not to be clearly separable, for they repeatedly overflow their boundaries and intermingle with one another in a single stream of divine light. In his moments of illumination, the Drunk Man certainly shows his acquaintance with Prajna. And when he speaks of being 'content to eye / The wheel in silence whirlin' by', he makes clear his acquaintance with dhyana. But where, if anywhere, does he show himself aware of the need for sila?

Perhaps the best answer to this question is provided by the following stanzas from the poem, in which the Thistle is overheard engaging in some self-examination:

'What hinders me unless I lack
Some needfu' discipline?
- I wis I'll bring my orra life
To beauty or I'm din!'

Sae ran the thocht that hid ahint
The thistle's ugsome guise,
'I'll brak' the habit o' my life
A worthier to devise.

'My nobler instincts sall nae mair
This contrair shape be gi'en.
I sall nae mair consent to live
A life no' fit to be seen.'

(C.P., I, 119-120)

It is because he recognises the Thistle to be a reflection of his own inadequately disciplined self, that the Drunk Man can so confidently assert, that

The dream o' beauty's dernin' yet
Ahint the ugsome shape . . .

and that

The vices that defeat the dream
Are in the plant itsel',
And till they're purged its virtues maun
In pain and misery dwell.

(C.P., I, 121)

There is, therefore, no doubt in the Drunk Man's mind about the need to practise sila as a step towards enlightenment.

Another question could be raised: How can the Drunk Man's evident preoccupation with 'Christ and Calvary' - 'the thocht o' Christ and Calvary / Aye liddenin' in my heid' (p. 122) - be reconciled with his Buddhist insights? In fact this does not present any problem. The suffering Christ of the Gospels has an obvious affinity with the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism - a Bodhisattva being an enlightened saint who renounces the Nirvana to which he is entitled, in order to suffer alongside others in this world of pain, until he can win their salvation. A humorous reference to this ideal will be found towards the end of the poem, where the Drunk Man is told:

A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o' his people's doom,
And dee to brak' their livin tomb . . .

(C.P., I, 165)

Again, it might be asked, How can we reconcile the man's drunken state with Buddhist insights? For the fifth of the Five Precepts of Buddhism requires the spiritual aspirant 'to abstain from intoxicants as tending to cloud the mind'. (B.S., p. 70) It should be remembered, however, that the Drunk Man does not remain in the clouded state of mind with which drunkenness is associated. The poem represents a pilgrim's determined progress from 'what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect', to 'heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked'. (C.P., I, 83) It leads us gradually away from the make-believe escape routes, such as drink, women, and sloppy sentiment, which Scots are popularly supposed to favour, to the austere heights where real liberation is achieved. The poet's acquaintance with these heights is already made clear in his poem, 'The Crown of Rock', which he wrote in 1924:

In bitter and uproarious winds,
Where naught can stand but stone,
I lift my life that it may be
  Blown clean as bone.

Let whatso may be blown away.
The like I would not own,
But to myself by what remains
  Contented I'll be known.

And what if all be blown away?
So be it - 'tis well gone.
More than most men he sees to whom
  What nothing is is shown.

The sight would please me, but perchance
I'll be a pipe played on
By subtler players than Nescience yet
  Alone here with th'Alone.

(C.P., II, 1241)

Significantly, the final words of the poem echo those of Plotinus in the Enneads, where he describes the nature of mystical experience: 'Such is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men; a liberation

from all earthly bonds, a life that takes no pleasure in earthly things, a flight of the alone to the Alone'. (Inge, Vol. II, p. 142) But it should be noted that even at the beginning of the poem, the Drunk Man insists: 'I amna fou' sae muckle as tired - deid dune'. He is not so much drunk as weary - and who could feel other than weary whose inner spirit has awakened to the fact that it has 'deed owre often and has seen owre much'?

Perhaps enough has now been said to make it clear that, by reference to the doctrines of Buddhism, it is indeed possible to find in this poem an underlying thread of meaning capable of unifying the whole. In the light of these doctrines, we are able to see the significance of many otherwise unintelligible passages; we are able to recognise the real nature of many of the Drunk Man's more elusive insights and their relationship to one another; we may even discover how the precious fragments of truth which he has gathered from Jewish, Christian, Platonic, and other spiritual sources, can be combined and unified within a single pattern of transcendental vision.

It would be unfortunate, however, if these findings led us to exaggerate the importance of Buddhist doctrine. The Buddhist vision is not complete until one perceives the utter inadequacy of all religious and philosophical ideas and doctrines, including all Buddhist ones, as vehicles of ultimate truth and reality. Buddhism, however, is not primarily a matter of ideas and doctrines. This is why widely different, and even contradictory, teachings can be found flourishing within its territories. In fact, its essence is not to be found in any ideas or doctrines, but in the heightened awareness, the clear seeing, which it believes its chosen doctrines and ideas are calculated to awaken. Only insofar as they prove capable of doing so are they regarded as of any value.

This may serve to explain why, in this chapter, no attempt has been made to trace the poet's insights to external 'sources' and 'influences'. We are not at all concerned to prove that the poet must have come across such and such an author, or read such and such a book, before writing the poem. Such academic problems as, how and where, in the early 1920s, MacDiarmid was able to obtain sufficient Buddhist

literature to provide him with so many Buddhist insights, are, to say the least, irrelevant in this context. They can arise only from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Buddhism, and of MacDiarmid's own spiritual stature. Buddhism teaches that spiritual insights do not come from books, or from the assimilation of other people's ideas, but from the Buddha-nature within ourselves. It is not by study, but by 'seeing into one's Self-nature', that the Buddhist goal is reached. So Buddhist insights are not the exclusive property of Buddhists. They are accessible to all whose spiritual aspirations lead them to their real Self-nature, the Buddha within themselves, whatever name they may give to Him.' A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle records the approach of one highly perceptive soul to this divine reality.

Notes

[1] Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882-1944), English physicist, Plumian Professor of Astronomy at Cambridge, 1913-1944.

[2] The Nature of the Physical World (Cambridge: University Press, 1929), pp. xi, xiv, xvi-xvii.

[3] Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 144.

[4] Werner Karl Heisenberg (b. 1901), German physicist; Nobel prize for physics, 1932. MacDiarmid refers to his work in Chapter XI of Lucky Poet, and alludes to it in such poems as 'The Oon Olympian' ('The quantum theory's dung to blauds / The classic picture o' the world . . .'), C.P., I, 360.

[5] A hologram is a three-dimensional photographic image developed with a laser.

[6] Paul Adrian Dirac (b. 1902), English physicist; Nobel prize for physics (jointly with Schrödinger), 1933.

[7] Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961), Austrian physicist; Nobel prize for physics (jointly with Dirac), 1933.

[8] The Way of Life, a new translation of the Tao Te Ching by R.B. Blakney (New York: Mentor, 1955), p. 53.

[9] P.Y. Deshpande, The Authentic Yoga (London: Rider, 1978), p. 7.

[10] Quoted in Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge, by Arthur Osborne (London: Rider, 1954), pp. 102-3.

[11] Quoted in The Tibetan Book of the Dead, trans. Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup, ed. W.Y. Evans-Wentz (London: OUP, 1960, rpt. 1978), p. 68.

[12] Avalokiteśvara (i.e. the Holy Lord Avalokita) is the Bodhisattva whom Buddhists think of as the active embodiment of divine compassion, present in every part of Samsara, and perpetually working for the salvation of all living beings. The mantra by means of which people seek

12 continued

to identify with his work of salvation, is OM MANI PADME HUM, each syllable of which represents a different area of existence, and a different species of living being.

13 MacDiarmid's understanding and acceptance of this viewpoint is made evident when he writes - in the latter part of this poem -

> Then suddenly I see as weel
> As me spun roon' within the wheel,
> The helpless forms o' God and Deil.
>
> (C.P., I, 159)

14 Quoted by D.T. Suzuki in The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind (London: Rider, 1969), p. 63.

15 See 'Extracts from the Sermons', The Wisdom of Buddhism, p. 184.

16 'Towards an Experience of Being through Psychological Purification' Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective, Collected Articles of Herbert V. Guenther (Emeryville, California: Dharma Publishing, 1977), p. 238.

Chapter Six

The Religious Basis of 'Ode to All Rebels'

Few, if any, of the religious themes with which MacDiarmid deals in A Drunk Man make their first or last appearance there. Most of them can be found, in one form or another, in earlier or later poems. The 'spiring up' theme, for example, as we have already noted, can be heard briefly in 'A Moment in Eternity' (1923). Powerful echoes of it are still being heard some twenty years later in, among other poems, 'Song of the Seraphim' (1943). Each time MacDiarmid uses one of these themes, however, he presents it in a new form, and in a different way. The variations thus produced have, of course, more than an entertainment value. In each one of them a different aspect of spiritual thought and experience is reflected. In A Drunk Man, for example, the themes tend to be presented in a fitful and sporadic way, which reflects something of the fitful, sporadic nature of mystical experience. In some of the later poems, on the other hand, he demonstrates an increasing ability to present an orderly, sustained account of his spiritual insights, writing in a way that reflects something of the orderly, disciplined development of a doctrinally based philosophical vision, or darsana.

One of the most impressively coherent of these later poems is the 'Ode to All Rebels' (Stony Limits and Other Poems), in which MacDiarmid extends and develops several of his earlier themes, particularly those from A Drunk Man that express distrust of 'reason' and 'Contempt o' ilka goal'. It must be confessed, however, that the poem owes something of its unity and coherence, as well as some of its thematic material, to the fact that it follows very closely the teachings of the poet's 'master', the Russian philosopher, Leo Chestov, as they are presented in Na Vesakh Iova - In Job's Balances.[1] The title of the poem itself is probably borrowed from Chestov, who speaks

in Part III of his book, of 'the gloomy and surly rebels against the time spirit, who in defiance of possibility emancipate themselves from the might of their age' (p. 252).

Chestov's book is a powerfully sustained attack on the pretensions of 'reason', conceived as the regulator of what he calls 'common consciousness'. It is also a celebration of that uncommon consciousness which he associates with his 'rebels', all of whom are shown to have thrown off the tyranny of reason, in order to become truly themselves, recognising, like MacDiarmid's Drunk Man, that

> . . . As the haill's
> Mair than the pairt sae I than reason yet.
> (C.P., I, 87)

Chestov's 'rebels', who include Plato, Plotinus, Luther, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, are all men who, at one point in their lives, awoke to the awful unreality of the human situation, and groped their way out of the shadowy cave of which Plato speaks in Book VII of The Republic, the cave of 'common consciousness', until they came face to face with the blinding light of reality. All of them suffered, of course, for their temerity, but never again could any of these awakened souls, who had seen the dazzling immensity of the real world, become reconciled to the shadowy life of the cave. From then on, its proffered prizes and pleasures appeared to them no more acceptable or desirable than its pains and punishments. To such men, as Chestov makes clear, 'the state of equilibrium, of perfect achievement, of complete satisfaction considered by common consciousness as the ideal of human thought, is absolutely insupportable' (p. 13). Hence, according to Chestov, the implacable hostility of the rebel, in all ages, towards the sickeningly cramped world of common consciousness, which he so clearly perceives not to be a world at all, but only a narrow cave in which men are kept as prisoners all their lives, deceived by shadows on their prison walls, imagining realities where there is none.

Chestov's concept of what constitutes a rebel may seem to us a strange and unacceptable one, but only insofar as we can grasp it, have we any hope of understanding MacDiarmid's 'Ode to All Rebels',

for, as we shall presently see, the Ode is built entirely around Chestov's concept of the rebel. If, therefore, we try to replace his concept with one of our own, we shall be unable to find access to the deep areas of meaning traversed by MacDiarmid in this poem.

If, for example, we turn to consider the sudden puzzling emergence into this 'Ode to All Rebels' of an 'angel', or at least someone who claims to have 'attained' to 'the angelic state' (p. 498),[2] we may realise that this is of crucial importance, but we shall certainly not be able to understand it fully, except in the light of Chestov's teaching about the debt owed by all rebels to the Angel of Death. According to Chestov, all those whom he calls rebels are visited during their lifetime by the Angel of Death, who presents each one of them with a pair of the eyes with which that angel is covered, and this gift bestows on them more than human powers of perception. Clearly, it is to this Chestovian idea that MacDiarmid is alluding when he writes:

> O the Angel o' Daith is covered wi' een
> But I stand in a guise still mair terribly gemmed . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 506)

The rebel who has been given angelic eyes is, obviously, 'mair terribly gemmed' than the angel who has given him them, because, unlike the angel, he has two entirely different pairs of eyes to see with, and these two pairs of eyes are perpetually in dreadful conflict with each other, as Chestov maintains.

Here is how Chestov himself expounds his idea of how men come to acquire angelic, i.e. more than human, powers of vision. This passage is from Chapter One of In Job's Balances:

> The Angel of Death who descends towards man to separate his soul from his body is all covered with eyes. Why is this? Why does he want all those eyes, when he can see the whole of heaven, and there is nothing on earth worth his seeing? I think that he did not want those eyes for himself. It happens sometimes that the Angel of Death, when he comes for a soul, sees that he has come too soon, that the man's term of life is not yet expired; so he does not take the soul away, does not even show himself to it, but leaves the man one of the innumerable pairs of eyes with which his body

> is covered. And then the man sees strange and new things, more than other men see and more than he himself sees with his natural eyes; and he also sees, not as men see but as the inhabitants of other worlds see . . . The testimony of the old, natural eyes, 'everybody's'eyes, directly contradicts the testimony of the eyes left by the angel . . . And then begins a struggle between two kinds of vision, a struggle of which the issue is as mysterious and uncertain as its origin. . . (p. 5)

The nature of this 'struggle between two kinds of vision' is what MacDiarmid is trying to express in the following lines spoken by the man who has 'attained' to 'the angelic state':

> Measure my een. They're as guid as yours . . .
> Yet they can see naething you say you see.
> I dinna believe it exists ava',
> And I'm shair you canna prove it to me. . .
> And you canna imagine what my een see.
> If I tried to tell, it would seem to you
> - I'm content that it should - sheer idiocy . . .

How comforting it would be to cling to one kind of vision only, but, alas, it is the painful lot of the rebel here on earth to be host to both kinds of vision, to both contenders in the struggle: 'O dooble vision fechtin' in the glass' (C.P., I, 505). He has been chosen by the Angel of Death to live in the midst of never-ending conflict; ever and always to be 'Whaur extremes meet' (C.P., I, 87).

It was, Chestov maintains, this gift of a second pair of eyes from the Angel of Death, which caused Dostoevsky to see so deeply into the human soul, and to perceive whole worlds of bliss and horror normally concealed from mortal sight. And certainly, however we may care to explain it,

> . . . Few hae's muckle as Dostoevski's een
> To see wi' - or be seen.
>
> (To Circumjack Cencrastus, C.P.,I,233)

According to Chestov, the distinguishing mark of all rebels is the extensiveness of their perceptive powers, which, of course, are derived not from single, but from double vision, the gift of the Angel of Death. This unsolicited, and perhaps unwanted, gift compels them to see what the eyes of other men cannot see. Because of the new eyes they have

been given, they cannot remain unaware of the fact that they, and all their fellow-men, in their customary state of consciousness, live only the shadow of a life, deluded prisoners in a dark cave. Unfortunately, they are unable to communicate this information to those of more limited sight, who, of course, see little to be perturbed about. People who have not been visited by the Angel of Death normally imagine their little cave of 'common consciousness' to be the whole world. Hence their complacency, and their complete inability to understand the rebel's strange talk of a bright world beyond the confines of the cave.

It is the rebel's inability to share his exceptional perceptive powers with his fellow-men which gradually, but inevitably, creates an unbridgeable gulf between him and them, however much he may strive to avert this. Whether the rebel happens to be a St Paul or a Micah, a Karl Marx or a John Maclean,[3] makes little difference to the credibility of his stories and visions as far as most prisoners of 'common consciousness' are concerned. As MacDiarmid has remarked, in A Drunk Man,

> The core o' ocht is only for the few,
> Scorned by the mony, thrang wi'ts empty name.
>
> And a' the names in History mean nocht
> To maist folk but 'ideas o' their ain',
> The vera opposite o' onything
> The Deid 'ud awn gin they cam' back again.
>
> (C.P., I, 86)

Chestov, in his chapter on Pascal's philosophy, emphasises this point by quoting the following words from one of the Pensées (no. 378 in the Brunschwicg text):[4]

> L'extrême esprit est accusé de folie, comme l'extrême défaut. Rien que la médiocrité (n')est bon . . . c'est sortir de l'humanité que de sortir du milieu. (Excess, like defect of intellect is accused of madness. Nothing is good but mediocrity. To leave the mean is to abandon humanity.)
> (I.J.B., p. 296)

How closely MacDiarmid is following Chestov as he writes the 'Ode to All Rebels' becomes apparent when the poet too decides to emphasise this

same point by quoting from the same pensée, and quoting precisely the same selection of words from it which Chestov has quoted, omitting only the spaced period by which Chestov has indicated the ellipsis of some fifty-odd words. MacDiarmid, however, shows his acquaintance with the original text by restoring the negative to the second sentence, although in the English translation of the Chestov text it has inadvertently been omitted, 'est' taking the place of 'n'est'.

Without attempting in any way to minimise MacDiarmid's debt to Chestov in this poem, we should, nevertheless, be careful to note, that the plight of the rebel forcibly separated from his fellow-men is probably nowhere more clearly and simply expressed than by MacDiarmid himself in A Drunk Man, a poem written at least three years before Chestov published his book, in a language which MacDiarmid could neither read nor speak:

> Lowsed frae the dominion
> O' popular opinion,
> And risen at last abune
> The thistle like a mune . . .
>
> It's no' withoot regret
> That I maun follow yet
> The road that led me past
> Humanity sae fast . . .
>
> Men canna look on nakit licht.
> It flings them back wi' darkened sicht,
> And een that canna look at it,
> Maun draw earth closer roond them yet
> Or, their sicht tint, find nocht insteed
> That answers to their waefu' need.
>
> (C.P., I, 141, 143)

The rebel's exceptional seeing powers inevitably separate him from most of his fellow men, but they tend to establish a link between him and his fellow-rebels. For all rebels share a common core of experience, however much they may differ in their words and ideas. Plato and Dostoevsky, for example, may appear to be poles apart, because of their very different terms and theoretical conceptions, but the division between them is more apparent than real. In fact, the perceptive Chestov has no difficulty in discerning the link between them. In Chapter One

of In Job's Balances, where he discusses the philosophy of Dostoevsky with particular reference to the novel, Voice from Underground (or Notes from Underground),[5] he points out that 'The same thing happened to Dostoievsky "underground" as to Plato in his cave; His new eyes were opened and found only shades and phantoms where "every one" saw reality; and in that which was non-existent for "the world" he saw the only true reality' (p. 13). He then goes on to speak of Dostoevsky's struggle 'to save himself from this underground place (Plato's 'cave') where "every one" has to live, which every one regards as the only real world, that is to say, the one world justified by reason' (p. 15). And here again he is referring to an experience shared by all rebels, the overwhelming urge to break free from the cave of 'common consciousness' ruled over by Reason, which Plotinus expresses so poignantly in his first Ennead: 'Let us fly to our dear country . . . Our country from which we came is There, our Father is There. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape?'[6]

We may not like the sound of that word 'escape', but Plotinus is faithfully recording here something that all rebels, even the bravest, have to endure, at least for a time: the feeling of utter inability to go on coping with the strains of double vision. They want the comfort of a single vision. The interesting point to note, however, is, that in those moments of despair, it is often his first pair of eyes, his 'natural' sight, that the rebel wants to get rid of, not his second sight, his second pair of eyes, the gift of the angel.

This point becomes very clear in the soliloquies of the 'rebel' turned 'angel'. He has obviously learned how to limit his vision, how to restrict his seeing powers, how to discard his first pair of eyes - along with 'the human form that hauds / Us in its ignominious thrall', to use the Drunk Man's words (C.P., I, 135) - and thus to become blind to'the empty things o' the earth' (p. 498). But he has also learnt the consequences of doing so. He knows that by escaping from the strains of dual vision, from the agonising conflict that is always taking place between the two different kinds of sight, he is also escaping from life and its meaning. He becomes 'a "cheated cheat" o' the Maist High' in danger of being deprived altogether of his part in the 'War' which God in His mercy came to bring - the War which is God's perpetual answer to St Anselm's question Cur Deus Homo?[7]

. . . Trying to be sly
I only curry favour, a spy
Double-crossin' mysel',
A 'cheated cheat' o' the Maist High,
Evadin' the maist cruel war
God can wage wi' me,
That o' leavin' me withoot
The War He cam' to gie.

(C.P., I, 499)

The allusion here is to one of Pascal's Pensées, No. 498 in the Brunschwicg edition, which, however, MacDiarmid may have come across, not in Pascal's book, but in Chestov's, where it is quoted on page 287:

> La plus cruelle guerre que Dieu puisse faire aux hommes en cette vie, est de les laisser sans cette guerre qu'il est venu apporter. (The most cruel war that God can wage with man on this earth, is to leave him without that war which He came to bring.)

The pensée itself alludes to one of the sayings of Jesus: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword' (Matthew 10:34). This saying, of course, has to be understood in the light of that other saying attributed to Jesus by the author of the Fourth Gospel: 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly' (John 10:10).

This makes complete sense, for life is essentially a conflict and a struggle. To be alive means to be involved in a 'War', whether as combatants or deserters, even if we have only the vaguest notion as to who is at war with whom, and why. A life emptied of conflict is not life, but death. Life can exist only where there is a Jacob wrestling with the angel and refusing to let go (Genesis 32:24-32). The fierce dialectic between the earthly and the heavenly, the human and the divine, must be vigorously maintained, or there is no life. If we try to cheat in this 'War' by simply closing our eyes and our ears to one of the contending sides, and then pretending that a peace has been declared, we are merely cheating ourselves of the gift of life, which is inseparable from struggle and conflict. As MacDiarmid sees so clearly, the only way to avoid becomeing 'a "cheated cheat" o' the Maist High' is to revel in the 'dooble vision fechtin' in the glass', resolving that

> Nor if I could wad I tine for a meenut
> Divine in human or human in divine.
>
> (C.P., I, 505)

The Christian connotation of these words should not be overlooked, for they reflect a very important and distinctively Christian concept of God and man: the concept of divinity in humanity and humanity in divinity, God made human and man made divine. They also reflect the consequent Christian determination never to lose hold, whether in theology or philosophy, of either the reality of God or the reality of man.

This Christological thread of meaning in the Ode comes to the surface in several places, but nowhere more noticeably than in the passage on page 505, where MacDiarmid, following Chestov's example, quotes the fourteenth verse of Psalm 22, a psalm which Christians see as a prophetic vision of Christ's sufferings on the Cross: 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels'. (A.V.) Chestov quotes this verse at the beginning of Section 48 of his Chapter on 'Revolt and Submission', in which he explores (evidently in the wake of Luther) the depths of the divine-human mystery expressed in the words of Psalm 22, and particularly in its opening words, which Jesus is said to have repeated on the Cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?': a distressing question to which there is no human answer, except perhaps, the wise words of Meister Eckhart: 'Here . . . a god may find no place in man, for by his poverty the man achieves the being that was always his and shall remain his eternally' (Blakney, p. 232). Chestov's meditations on Psalm 22 lead him to similar conclusions. He says

> . . . Man must experience that dreadful feeling of desolation of which the Twenty-second Psalm speaks in its opening words: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!' There is no God, man is abandoned to himself and himself alone . . . Only a man who has gone astray in eternity and is abandoned to himself and to immeasurable despair is capable of directing his eyes on ultimate truth. Hence Luther's enigmatic words in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: 'Blasphemiae . . . aliquanto sonant gratiores in aure Dei quam ipsum Alleluja vel quaecumque laudis jubilatio. Quanto enim horribilior et foedior est blasphemia, tanto est Deo gratior.' ('Blasphemy sometimes

> sounds in God's ears more agreeable than even Hallelujah or any solemn hymn of praise. And the more frightful and repulsive the blasphemy, the more agreeable it is to God.') The meaning of one of the truths of Ignatius Loyola's Exercitia spiritualia is the same: 'Quanto se magis reperit anima segregatam ac solitariam, tanto aptiorem se ipsam reddit ad quaerendum attingendumque creatorem et dominum suum.' ('The more secluded and solitary the soul feels itself, the fitter does it make itself to seek and attain its Lord and Creator.') (In Job's Balances, pp. 230, 231)

It will be remembered that MacDiarmid incorporates the above quotation from Luther in his Ode, apparently unaware that it has been edited, almost out of all recognition, by Chestov. To clarify matters, here is a modern scholar's translation of the relevant passage:

> . . . For our God is no impatient or cruel God, even toward the ungodly. I say this in order to comfort those who are constantly plagued by blasphemous thoughts and are in very great trepidation. Indeed, because it is the devil that forcibly extorts such blasphemies from men against their will, they are sometimes more agreeable to God than the sound of a hallelujah or an anthem of praise. For the more horrible and horrid a blasphemy is, the more agreeable it is to God if only the heart feels that it does not want to utter it, because it has not freely brought it forth from itself . . . This dread of evil is an evident sign that one has a good heart . . . (Lectures on Romans, p. 272)

Clearly, by lifting certain words of this passage out of their context, and by excising from the passage a number of important subordinate clauses (particularly the conditional clause in the fourth sentence), Chestov has seriously misrepresented Luther's meaning. Nevertheless, to be fair to Chestov, it would have to be admitted, that the teaching of Luther, in his commentary on Romans as in other texts, does indeed lend substantial support to the idea that Chestov is trying to convey at this point: namely, that man is nearest to God, in the sense of Ultimate Reality, when he feels utterly alone, friendless, forsaken, devoid of all hope, and therefore cries out in the anguished words of the Psalmist, even as Jesus did on the Cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' As Luther says elsewhere:

> God is the God of the humbled and oppressed, of the despairing and of those who are utterly destitute; it is His nature to exalt the humble, to feed the hungry, to give light to them

> that sit in darkness, to console the poor and afflicted, to justify sinners, to raise up the dead, to save the despairing and the damned. (quoted in In Job's Balances, pp. 308-309)

Naturally, it is in this context of theological and Christological thinking with which MacDiarmid had familiarised himself, that we should try to understand the significance of his quotation from Psalm 22:

> I am poured oot like water and a' my banes are oot o' joint.
> My hert is like wax; it's melted in the midst o' my bowels.
>
> (C.P., I, 505)

To try to understand it in isolation from the Christological framework in which he found it in Chestov would hardly be wise.

One need not read much of Chestov's book before one discovers that he identifies the living mind of the rebel with Christ, the dead concepts of 'Reason' with the Devil. In Chapter One of In Job's Balances, parodying part of the Gospel account of Christ's temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), he says: 'Reason has taken man up into an exceeding high mountain and shown him all the kingdoms of the world, and has said unto him: All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me. And man has worshipped . . .' (p. 33). That is to say, man in general has worshipped. But this is precisely what Christ refused to do. It is what every rebel refuses to do. He disdains to grovel before something that is obviously more limited than himself; just as the Hebrew heroes of old, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, disdained to grovel before the image of Nebuchadnezzar, preferring rather to be thrown into a fiery furnace - a fitting symbol of the ferocious punishments prepared, in the name of 'Reason', by all societies, in all ages, for all rebels. Jesus faced his fiery furnace on Calvary, Socrates his in an Athenian prison. John MacLean faced his in Barlinnie and Peterhead.

MacDiarmid says:

> I tae ha'e been ta'en up the mountain heich
> And invited a' Earth's kingdoms to see . . .
> . . . yet I've bent nae knee to Reason
> Except in mockery . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 497)

These words are no empty echo of Chestov's. The rebel MacDiarmid did indeed have to face Reason's very real temptations, and this is made clear, in at least one part of the Ode, where he says:

> I used to write sic bonny sangs
> A'body wi' pleasure and profit could read . . .
> Why dae I turn my back on a' that
> And write this horrible rubbish instead?
> - Sustain me, spirit o' God, that I pay
> These seductive voices nae heed!
>
> (C.P., I, 494-5)

The source of the rebel's power to resist temptation and ignore the 'seductive voices', is, ultimately, his 'Contempt o' ilka goal' that Reason can propose. Because his eyes have been dazzled by the light of another life, he can see nothing at all in 'all the kingdoms of the world' that he really wants. It is this lack of desire which is the real source of his heroic strength, or, if we prefer it, his foolish intransigence:

> The angelic state to which I've attained
> Disna lust for bluid and a bowler hat again
> Or for onything else that man can ha'e . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 498)

Anyone who does lust after anything 'that man can ha'e' is hardly likely to be a successful rebel, however revolutionary his intentions. Sooner or later, he is bound to be diverted from his purpose, as the careers of so many Socialist politicians show, by one of Reason's amazing, unrepeatable offers. The only true revolutionary is the man who can truly say, when he is shown 'all the kingdoms of the world', 'I want naething - naething' (C.P., I, 499). In short, only the spiritual man can be a true revolutionary. As MacDiarmid puts it:

> The revolutionary spirit's ane wi' spirit itsel' . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 502)

All real revolutionary change, therefore, has to begin with the prayer of all saints:

> O pauvreté,
> Source de richesse,
> Jésus, donne-nous
> Un coeur de pauvre.

Yet we have not penetrated very deeply into MacDiarmid's meaning, if we imagine that 'I want naething' means merely, that he wants to be without possessions, that he really wants to be in want, or, that he is emptied of all desire. In fact, his words have a much deeper significance. They do express desire, though not for anything that can properly be called a 'thing', but for that impossible, indescribable something which, in terms of the everyday world and the things of 'common consciousness', can only be described as 'nae thing'. If this sounds puzzling, we should cast our minds back to the Buddhist concept of Sunyata - 'the Void', the Emptiness which is the Fullness (pleroma), the nothingness which is the source and substance of everything. We should recall St Paul's words about 'having nothing and yet possessing all things'. Then we may better understand why MacDiarmid says, 'I want naething - naething':

> For oot o' naething what beauty arises
> We poets ken - if we dinna ken hoo -
> Wha only the impossible pursue . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 501)

Chestov reminds us that 'Plotinus discerned God where others could see only the void. So with Dostoievsky' (p. 62). This would appear to be the experience of all who 'in defiance of possibility emancipate themselves from the might of their age' (p. 252). Refusing to recognise Reason's limits, they travel far beyond the boundaries of the cave of 'common consciousness', until, finally, they come to the shining stillness of Sunyata, which they perceive to have, and to be, all that they could ever want. From then on, 'in defiance of possibility', they 'only the impossible pursue'.

It will be remembered that, in A Drunk Man, MacDiarmid eschews philosophy, believing it to be a mere minion of Reason, concerned with keeping men locked up within the confines of what can be explained in terms of 'common consciousness':

> For I've nae faith in ocht I can explain,
> And stert whaur the philosophers leave aff . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

In the Ode, however, his attitude has changed radically; and the reason is not far to seek. Chestov has supplied him with a new concept of philosophy, which frees it completely from its subservience to Reason, and brings it into relation with every significant function of God and man, with Art and Religion, Revolution and Revelation, all the things MacDiarmid values most. Chestov freely admits, however, that this concept of philosophy is not his own, but has been derived from the writings of that great philosopher MacDiarmid once misguidedly dismissed as a 'fool' (C.P., I, 217), Plotinus. Chestov says:

> The best and only complete definition of philosophy is to be found in Plotinus. To the question, 'What is philosophy?' he replies τὸ τιμιώτατον 'what matters most'.
>
> In the first place this definition destroys, apparently quite without premeditation, those barriers which in ancient times separated philosophy from the cognate provinces of religion and art; for the artist and the prophet are in fact also seeking τὸ τιμιώτατον. But apart from this, not only does it not submit philosophy to the control and direction of science; it sets the one in direct opposition to the other. Science is objective, indifferent; it does not consider whether a thing matters of not. It coldly casts its eye over the innocent and the guilty alike, knowing neither pity nor anger. But where there is no pity or indignation, where the innocent and the guilty are alike regarded with indifference, where all 'phenomena' are merely classified and not qualified, there can be no distinctions between the important and the insignificant. It follows that philosophy, defined as τὸ τιμιώτατον, is in no sense science. I would go further. It must necessarily clash with science precisely when the question of sovereignty arises. (pp. 31-32)

MacDiarmid leaves us in no doubt as to his enthusiastic acceptance of this view of philosophy:

> Wi' τὸ τιμιώτατον, wi' 'what maitters maist',
> What else unmisnamed can you stand for, rebels?
>
> (C.P., I, 501)

and he does not hesitate to follow Chestov in describing 'A' the men o' science' as 'the enemies o' truth' (C.P., I, 507).

Clearly, philosophy conceived as anything less than the pursuit of 'what maitters maist', especially if it is conceived as a mere juggling about with intellectual concepts within a pre-arranged framework, is much

too limited an activity to interest anyone who has had even the briefest glimpse of what lies outside Plato's cave. Such a person is invariably interested in gaining his freedom, not in learning any of the games devised to keep prisoners' minds occupied. Inevitably, therefore, his interests 'stert whaur the philosophers leave aff'. To a person such as MacDiarmid, who has travelled far beyond the confines of the cave, the only philosophy worth troubling about is one that incorporates the revolutionary aim of all rebels: namely, to discover and bring to light, whether by life or by death, 'what maitters maist'.

Naturally, Reason urges us to attach a name, a description, a definition, to 'what maitters maist', because, by so doing, we bring it within her boundaries, we reduce it to finitude, and compel it to share the limitations of all the other things that we can name, and describe, and define. By that time, of course, it is no longer 'what maitters maist'. It is some worthless counterfeit. We should, therefore, pay heed to the warning contained in the opening words of the Tao Teh Ching, (as translated by Charles Luk in The Secrets of Chinese Meditation,)[8] 'The Tao that can be expressed in words is not the eternal Tao (and) the name (given to it) is not (that of the) eternal. That which cannot be named is the beginning of heaven and earth'. Hence MacDiarmid's cry:

> And do I seek to speak again
> Even in such a form as this
> The impossible words? - Of course I don't,
> I only say - and say in vain -
> There's nothing else for which I'm fain
> Or care a damn about.
>
> (C.P., I, 510)

When a man begins to lose interest in all the things that belong to the world of 'common consciousness', even those his neighbours most crave for, this is a sign that he has been visited by the Angel of Death, and has been given a new pair of eyes, with which he cannot help seeing the inner worthlessness of 'the empty things o' the earth' in relation to 'what maitters maist'. Since he cannot speak the 'impossible

words' that would convey to his fellow-men the real nature of 'what maitters maist', he has to try, instead, by every means in his power, to expose the trashiness and triviality of 'the empty things o' the earth' that men idolise and lust after. Like the Prophet Elijah confronting the priests of Baal, the rebel confidently directs his volleys of mockery and abuse at whatever idol his contemporaries heppen to be grovelling before at that moment in time, and sometimes his bold efforts, like those of Elijah, are crowned with astonishing success, with a momentary miraculous theophany of 'what maitters maist', and the consequent downfall and disintegration of the popular idol. It is, of course, only the genuine rebel who is able to accomplish this. The cautious Kant, for example, as Chestov points out, was totally incapable, despite his great intellectual gifts, of producing a real Critique of Pure Reason. It took a man who had met with the Angel of Death to bring the idol toppling down, and the man was Dostoevsky. Chestov says:

> If ever a 'Critique of Pure Reason' was written, it is to Dostoievsky that we must go to seek it, to The Voice from Underground, and the great novels which were wholly derived from it. What Kant gave us under this title is not a critique but an apology of pure reason. Kant did not dare to criticise reason, although he believed himself to have awakened under Hume's influence from dogmatic slumber. (p. 21)

Each rebel, of course, has to concentrate his attack on the particular idol that happens to be most popular in his day. Luther, in his day, chose the clergy's most popular and most highly venerated fund-raising device, namely the system of Indulgences, which seemed to offer a very easy way to Heaven, for those with money. Marx, in his day, concentrated his attack on the spurious economic theories and fake moral values before which his society prostrated itself. MacDiarmid, however, as befitted a rebel writing in the age of Freud, Havelock Ellis, and D.H. Lawrence, chose sex as his prime target in this 'Ode to All Rebels', and this choice shows great sagacity, for, unlike religion, or economics, or politics, sex is something with which everyone has to deal. Everyone has to pay some heed to it, at some time. It simply cannot be ignored, for it lives, moves and has its being

within us, and cannot really be destroyed, even if, like poor Origen, driven to desperation, we cut off its external means of expression. Besides, delusions about sex are absolutely necessary, for maintaining the balance of life within the cave of 'common consciousness'. Destroy these delusions, and the whole world of 'common consciousness' is turned upside down; man is toppled into the void, which, of course, is where the rebel wants him to be:

> Into the pit then
> You say a' life maun fa'?
> Precisely. A'thing.
>
> (C.P., I, 495)

> The advice I gi'e you is simply this:
> Keep oot o' a' else except the abyss.
>
> (C.P., I, 502)

In the Ode, MacDiarmid wastes no time in polite preliminaries. He gets down at once to the task of discrediting the idol of sex. He begins with the disturbingly frank reminiscences of a man who, having been twice married, once widowed, once divorced, now feels only nauseated by the thought of sex:

> I've had a' I want o't
> Lang syne, and noo if I visit the haunt o't
> I ken a' action is nocht
> But the habit and haven
> O' the puir or poo'erless in thocht
> - The stranghauld o' the callous and craven.
>
> (C.P., I, 493)

His story is an ironic comment on the fairy-tale belief, particularly favoured and fostered by female inmates of the cave of 'common conscousness', that getting married is normally the prelude to living 'happily ever after'. This twice-married man has found little happiness or satisfaction in either of his marriages. As for finding personal fulfilment in sexual relations, he dismisses this absurd idea, by pointing out that

> Sexual relations arena personal at a'
> But the least intimate things in the world,
> And can be passionately wanted and enjoyed by twa
> Wi' nocht else in common, and living thegither

Is mainly a means o' hidin' frae each ither
- And oorsel's - ahint the silly impermanent
Ties that gin a' their oots and ins were kent
'Ud tell us naething o' sex life even,
Let alane ocht else.

(C.P., I, 493)

In A Drunk Man, it will be remembered, the poet draws attention to both the squalid and sublime aspects of sex. In the Ode, however, only the squalid aspects are allowed to appear. We are told by way of explanation, that

To make sex out ethereal and inspiring
Hides the belief that it's ugly and obscene
In all such sublimation of it only
A variant of the Christian vilification's seen.

(C.P., I, 491)

Like Tolstoy in 'The Kreutzer Sonata',[9] he selects for his attack on sex, a vantage point from which the reader will see only the more repulsive aspects of sexual life: aspects which nobody is likely to want to defend. But then he launches an attack calculated to demolish the entire edifice of sex, though, as he well knows, it houses not just lust, but also love. And as the old song says (echoing 1 John 4:7-8):

Ubi caritas
Et amor
Ubi caritas
Deus ibi est.

In the very first stanza of the poem, our attention is drawn to the potential ugliness and obscenity of sexual desire, when the twice-married man, recalling the death of his first wife, tells how, even while preparing her body for burial, he felt sexual desire rekindling within him and demanding without delay, another partner for the impersonal game of sex. Not unnaturally, he asks:

How could I trust love again if a'
The tender ties twixt us twa
Like this could be wantonly snapt,
While afore her corpse was decently hapt
I was kindlin' ainee mair in a different airt,
My rude bluid warnin' my foe for its pairt
It 'bood ha'e anither wife, and sune?

(C.P., I, 487)

The 'foe' he mentions is, of course, Satan (the Hebrew word for 'enemy' or 'adversary'), who would seem to be thought of here as the controller of sexual life.

Although the man had the decency to feel 'dule and self-scunner', he allowed himself to be activated by a completely different feeling -

> And strauchtened up my muckle animal frame
> That kent what it wanted and kent nae shame
> And stood in a burst o' sun
> Glowerin' at the bit broken grun'.
>
> (C.P., I, 488)

The marriage that ensued was, of course, far from satisfactory. The man could find no intelligible pattern of meaning emerging from the impersonal process in which he had allowed himself to be caught up:

> My previous marriage was juist something I'd dreamed
> Or heard concernin' anither man.
> I couldna fit the two into ony plan . . .
>
> Comparin' my sweetherts' various styles
> The conclusion to which I cam'
> Was that ony o' mony a thoosand
> Forbye the cratur I actually got
> 'Ud ha'e seemed as convincin' and forethought
> And wi' a' their differences the life I'd ha'e led
> Wi' ony ane o' them I micht ha'e wed
> 'Ud ha'e been fell near the same
> As wi' yon particular dame.
>
> (C.P., I, 490)

He began to realise that in the world of sex, individuals do not matter: it 'taks nae accoont / O' the personality o' the folk concerned' (C.P., I, 492). Once people bow the knee to sex, they simply become featureless pawns in a vast game they will never understand:

> In the middle o' oor life thegither
> And the bairns arrivin'
> I kent if they a' suddenly vanished
> It 'ud tak nae strivin'
> For me to forget them as hailly
> And sune as the first. Life'd still be drivin'
> Me awa' frae a' faithfu' standards.
> The auld lusts 'ud be rivin'
> The clod o' my loss wi' new growth.
>
> (C.P., I, 493)

People come and go, but the sex-game goes on and on, quite regardless of who has come or who has gone. For 'Sexual relations arena personal at a''. Sex has no interest at all in distinguishing between one set of pawns and another. Its only concern is, that the game should be kept going, and as smoothly as possible, uninterrupted by the delivery of new, or the destruction of old, pawns.

The poet draws attention, not only to the undiscriminating indifference and blind callousness of the sex-urge, but also to its invariable association with squalor. For, as Yeats says, in 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop', 'Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement'.[10]

> Thank God for laundries. It used to be terrible
> To think o' the things weemun saw.
> A man felt indecently exposed
> While they never kythed ava'.
> He never kent hoo muckle they kent
> As they washed his claes.
> A' he did unbeknown, in the dark,
> Was open to their gaze . . .
>
> Thank God we can live at last
> Equally ignorant o' ane anither.
>
> (C.P., I, 494)

Our attention is also drawn to the ugly fate that sex is sometimes preparing for its devotees behind the smiles and kisses of affectionate intercourse -

> O Love it is a lovely thing,
> Two healthy lads respond.
> But little, little can foresee
> Of what must lie beyond . . .
>
> They turn to meet their natural need,
> One finds domestic bliss;
> The other a lock hospital
> To rot with syphilis . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 490)

This limited, one-sided view of sex is not, of course, MacDiarmid's own view. Already, in A Drunk Man, published in 1926, we have heard him proclaiming how 'sex reveals life, faith' (C.P., I, 114), and have

noted how joyfully he celebrates 'the searchin' licht / Oor union raises' -

> . . . that sheer licht o' life that when we're joint
> Loups through me like a fire a' else t'aroint.
>
> (C.P., I, 146)

And when we come to read 'In the Slums of Glasgow' (Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems), published nine years later, it is perfectly clear that, during the intervening years, the poet has lost nothing of this insight; for, as he contemplates life in this 'trough of Hell' (C.P., I, 895), he sings of how

> . . . every one of the women there
> Irrespective of all questions of intelligence, good
> looks, fortune's favour,
> Can give some buck-navvy or sneak-thief the joy beyond
> compare -
> Naked, open as to destitution and death, to the unprudential
> Guideless life-in-death of the ecstasy they share -
> Eternity, as Boethius defined it, - though few lovers give
> it his terms -
> 'To hold and possess the whole fulness of life anywhere
> In a moment; here and now, past, present and to come.' -
> The bliss of God glorifying every squalid lair.
>
> (C.P., I, 564)

These words which the tortured Boethius wrote in prison before his death [11] are, like the slum-dwellers themselves, a clear reminder that the spirit of man, even in the most appalling circumstances, is sometimes able (or is sometimes in touch with something that is able) to rise above the imprisoning pain, poverty and squalor of this bodily existence, and become a living channel for 'the bliss of God' - that is to say, the love of God, which, according to Christian belief, flows in Heaven from the Father to the Son, and from the Son to the Father, within the circuit of the Holy Spirit, per omnia saecula saeculorum. The poet is trying here, to help us to see, that the ecstasy of self-giving and self-receiving, which is inseparable from true sexual experience (even in what the moralist would regard as its most debased forms), is the closest parallel we can find in human life, to the divine life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Why, then. in the 'Ode to All Rebels', is there no mention of this sublime aspect of sexual life? And how can we hope, without it, to have a balanced and complete view of sex? The simple answer is, that the poet's purpose in writing the Ode is, obviously, not to present a complete and balanced view of sex, but rather, to try to give as clear an account as possible of the origin and development of the rebel mind, 'the revolutionary spirit' which is 'ane wi' spirit itsel''. And, however much we may regret the fact, the rebel mind is never born from feelings of bliss, but from feelings of fierce revulsion against life as it is ordinarily lived. Hence MacDiarmid's use, here, of only the repulsive aspects of sex, as he seeks to explain how the sex-sated man developed into an authentic rebel.

But, surely, the extra powers of perception granted to the rebel should enable him to see, not less, but more, of the sublime dimension of human existence? Perhaps they should, but, at least initially, they do not. What happens is, that, having been dazzled by a sudden glimpse of the brightness of 'what maitters maist' in the world outside the cave of common consciousness, the rebel, for some time afterward, is rendered incapable of discerning the pale reflections of that brightness in the world of everyday human existence. What he does become increasingly aware of, is the dreadful, unnecessary darkness of the human condition. What he does begin to perceive more clearly, are the innumerable barriers (many in the shape of legal, scientific, political, and religious idols) which man is constantly erecting between himself and what MacDiarmid calls 'the free, abundant, intolerable licht' (C.P., I, 507); barriers behind which human beings in their ignorance hide from the ever-present 'bliss of God'; barriers which conceal from them the truth that

> Eden's wide-open, unchanged; and nocht shuts us frae't
> But impious delusions o' oor ain.
>
> (C.P., I, 507)

It is quite true that spiritual vision at its highest point of development does not see this dichotomy between light and the man-made shadows; it knows no duality, no multiplicity, no separate existence, whether of good or evil, whether of God or man, of life or death; it

knows only the blissful, illimitable, oneness of the One. The birth of spiritual vision, however, does not take place on the heights of Advaita. It is born a prisoner in a dark cave, where it is fated, perhaps for many lifetimes, to 'consort with shadows',[12] to engage in constant conflict with the innumerable grotesque idols hallowed by 'common consciousness', 'Until' (to borrow words from the King James Bible) 'the day break, and the shadows flee away' (Song of Solomon 2:17). The newly-awakened rebel is, of course, far from this moment of consummation. It will be some time before he is able to listen to, far less understand, the strange advice he will receive from an elder, wearier, more way-worn brother-rebel:

> Blether nae mair aboot justice and crime,
> Guid and ill, life and daith, man and wumman,
> God and man.
> My een are as guid as yours and see nocht
> O' ony o' these . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 500)

Though such a brother will not have arrived, at least he will be within sight of his spiritual destination.

If we find it difficult to forgive MacDiarmid for putting into the mouth of his awakening rebel an obviously one-sided and unbalanced account of sexual life, we should remember that even that great Christian champion of sexual love, the rebel William Blake, felt impelled, in his 'Songs of Experience', to try to counter the naïve, uncritical attitude to love, with some rather harsh words about love in its non-divine aspect:

> Love seeketh only Self to please,
> To bind another to its delight,
> Joys in another's loss of ease,
> And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.
>
> (Blake, p. 66)

MacDiarmid's rebel says nothing more than this.

But is not the poet's onslaught on sex in this poem really an attack on life itself? Undoubtedly it is. Not that he thinks life, any more than sex, is all bad. He knows perfectly well, that life is, or can be good. But he also knows that it is not the highest good.

It is not the best. It is not 'what maitters maist'. Indeed, like many another good, it can be an enemy of the best, an enemy of 'what maitters maist'. Hence his critical attitude to it.

Other people may be able to cling to romantic delusions about life, but the poet sees, all too clearly and painfully, that life is merely the reverse side of the coin of death, that 'Daith and ayont are nocht but pairts o' life' (C.P., I, 115), and unfortunately, as the Drunk Man reminds us, 'Life and Daith for nae man are enough' (C.P., I, 95). The secondary and subordinate status of life is stressed again in To Circumjack Cencrastus, where we are told that 'a' that life is or sall become / Are nocht', in relation to Ultimate Reality - the God 'that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith' (C.P., I, 244). But only those 'Wha by Divine can think o' nocht but life / Raised to the heichest poo'er' (C.P., I, 244), are likely to feel at all puzzled or perturbed by such disclosures.

To understand the religious basis of MacDiarmid's critical attitude to life, we should recall the teachings of the Buddhist religion, and its concept of Nirvana as the goal of spiritual development. In The Light of Asia, for example, we are told, with regard to the man who reaches Nirvana, that

> No need hath such to live as ye name life . . .
> . . . . He is one with Life
> Yet lives not. He is blest, ceasing to be.
>
> (p. 145)

But this does not mean, as Western religious people sometimes allege, that Buddhism is really enamoured of death, extinction, annihilation - the darkness on the other side of life. This is not so. In the same book from which we have just quoted, it is made perfectly clear, that Nirvana is neither life nor death:

> If any teach NIRVANA is to cease,
> Say unto such they lie.
>
> If any teach NIRVANA is to live,
> Say unto such they err; not knowing this,
> Nor what light shines beyond their broken lamps,
> Nor lifeless, timeless, bliss.
>
> (p. 153)

It is because MacDiarmid has such a profound understanding of this religious teaching, that he is able to perceive so clearly, that 'Life and Daith for nae man are enough'. Apart from the concept of Nirvana, or some equivalent, if there is one, these words would have no meaning, and it would be extremely difficult to explain in any depths why, for MacDiarmid, life is not 'what maitters maist'.

In the Ode, MacDiarmid's critical attitude to life is implicit in his attack on sex. It is also made explicit, however, in the passage where the 'angel' says, 'I'd be better deid? Nae doot! Wha wadna?', and then goes on to reflect on the ineffectiveness of mere physical death, as a means of liberating oneself from life:

> . . . I've deed a wheen times noo and ken
> It'll no help maitters to dae't again . . .
>
> If I could think o' a completely new kind
> O' daith, to try it aince I michtna mind.
>
> (C.P., I, 500)

Freedom from the pain of life comes, of course, neither from resisting it nor attempting to escape from it, but only through making ourselves completely open to it, recognising and accepting it as one with ourselves ('He is one with Life / Yet lives not'), and, therefore, ceasing to impede its free movements, by holding on to one part of it, or by pushing away another, by choosing this and rejecting that, as if we thought life were something that could be divided up and portioned out, to suit individual tastes and requirements. William Blake reminds us of the foolishness of attempting to divide life up into separate, antithetical parts, with, for example, Joy on the one hand, and Woe on the other:

> Man was made for Joy & Woe;
> And when this we rightly know
> Thro' the world we safely go,
> Joy & Woe are woven fine,
> A Clothing for the Soul divine;
> Under every grief and pine
> Runs a joy with silken twine.
>
> ('Auguries of Innocence': Blake, p. 119)

He also reminds us, that

> He who binds to himself a joy
> Does the winged life destroy;
> But he who kisses the joy as it flies
> Lives in eternity's sun rise.
>
> (Blake, p. 99)

Freedom comes simply from observing life as it is, with pure, clear, unconditioned awareness, not seeking to choose, or to change, to judge, or to justify, any part or aspect of it. As the third Ch'an patriarch in China, Seng Ts'an (c. 600 A.D.) says, in his 'Poem on Trust in the Heart':

> The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick
> and choose;
> Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.
> Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth
> are set apart;
> If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never
> be for or against.
>
> (C.B., p. 227)

The postures of 'for' and 'against' are, of course, inseparable from the rebel; they are what defines his life and being. It follows, that he can have no hope of entering 'The Perfect Way', until he ceases to be a rebel; until he has advanced to a still higher stage of spiritual development, and his rebel mind, with its essentially dualistic way of thinking, has been transformed into pure, egoless - and therefore, choiceless - awareness of reality as fundamentally non-dual, indivisible, all-pervading, unalienable in any of its aspects. One of the best contemporary descriptions and evocations of this kind of awareness, is to be found in Father Thomas Merton's Asian Journal (New York: New Directions, 1973), where he describes his visit to the ancient Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon:

> The vicar general, shying away from 'paganism', hangs back and sits under a tree reading the guidebook. I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything,

> rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything - without refutation - without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. (p.233)

Socrates' refusal to run away from death in the prison, and Buddha's refusal to run away from life in the world (after his enlightenment), both stem from this egoless awareness. So, too, does the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done' (Matthew 26:42), and, of course, the strange words in his parable of the Last Judgement: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (Matthew 25:40). That the poet himself shared, at least occasionally, in this kind of awareness, is made clear in such lines as the following:

> I tell you it's a' ane to me
> Whether a man's a murderer or the Pope o' Rome
> Or the King o' England or Robbie Burns.
> I'd as sune be the ane as the ither
> Or them a' by turns . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 502)

MacDiarmid's lines recall the passage in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where the state of the man who has gone beyond his own egohood is described as follows:

> As a man in the embrace of his loving wife knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, so man in union with the Self knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, for in that state all desires are satisfied . . .
> Then father is no father, mother is no mother; worlds disappear, gods disappear, scriptures disappear; the thief is no more, the murderer is no more, castes are no more; no more is there monk or hermit. The Self is then untouched either by good or by evil, and the sorrows of the heart are turned into joy. (Up., p. 107)

But why, it might be asked, should our attention be drawn, in this 'Ode to All Rebels', to a spiritual state that does not, and can not, belong to any rebel? The truth is, that, without giving us some glimpse

of the state that lies beyond that of the rebel, and towards which the rebel's footsteps are gradually moving, the poet's picture of rebel life would be incomplete - rather like a picture of Edinburgh without the Castle, or Moscow without the gold crosses of the Kremlin. We need the poet's occasional references and allusions to Advaita, the state beyond duality, to remind us that the rebel state is not the highest, that the rebel mind does not mark the highest point of spiritual development, that the road the rebel treads is not the 'endless road' of God (C.P., I, 244), it is not 'The Perfect Way' of which Seng Ts'an sings. In that Perfect Way, no separate selves exist; there is no ego to be opposed to, or by, any other ego; there, rebel is no rebel, angel is no angel, the self is no self, God is no God. There one can 'Blether nae mair aboot justice and crime, / Guid and ill, life and daith, man and wumman, God and man', for the divisions indicated by such terms have ceased to have any reality or significance. There, one is in what Seng Ts'an calls

> . . . the Transcendent Sphere, where there is neither
> He nor I.
> For swift converse with this sphere use the concept 'Not
> Two';
> In the 'Not Two' are no separate things, yet all things
> are included . . .
>
> For it is not a thing with extension in Time or Space;
> A moment and an aeon for it are one.
> Whether we see it or fail to see it, it is manifest always
> and everywhere . . .
>
> The One is none other than the All, the All none other than
> the One . . .
>
> I have spoken, but in vain; for what can words tell
> Of things that have no yesterday, tomorrow, or today?
>
> (C.B., p. 230)

Despite the enormous difficulties involved, however, Ch'an and Zen teachers have continued to use words, among other means, to try to convey to their disciples what is seen by those who have entered The Perfect Way. In, for example, the records left behind by Ch'an Master Hsi Yun of Huang Po Mountain (c. 840 A.D.), we find that language such as the following is continually being used, to arouse, or to attempt to arouse, direct awareness of the 'Transcendent Sphere':

> All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but universal mind, besides which nothing exists. This mind, which has always existed, is unborn and indestructible . . . It does not belong to the categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be reckoned as being new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, but transcends all limits, measures, names, speech, and every method of treating it concretely. It is the substance that you see before you - begin to reason about it and you at once fall into error. It is like the boundless void which cannot be fathomed or measured. This universal mind alone is the Buddha and there is no distinction between the Buddha and sentient beings, but sentient beings are attached to particular forms and so seek for Buddhahood outside it. By their very seeking for it they produce the contrary effect of losing it . . . The Buddha is directly before them, for this (universal) mind is the Buddha and the Buddha is all living beings. It is not the less for being manifested in ordinary beings, nor is it greater for being manifested in the Buddha . . .
>
> Our original Buddha-nature is, in all truth, nothing which can be apprehended. It is void, omnipresent, silent, pure; it is glorious and mysterious peacefulness, and that is all which can be said. You yourself must awake to it, fathoming its depths. That which is before you is it in all its entirety with nothing whatsoever lacking. (C.B., pp. 195-197)

Such is the vision of those who have reached 'The Perfect Way', the road that is endless and infinite. Throughout his work, MacDiarmid's acquaintance with this endless road is repeatedly made evident. In To Circumjack Cencrastus, for example, we find him explaining how only the person 'wha for a' Creation cares nae mair, / Nor less, than for a whigmaleerie', is able to take a step along this 'endless road' (C.P., I, 244), and he makes it clear that he regards this road as the only one worthy of the name: 'The only road is endless. Few ha'e ta'en't' (C.P., I, 267). It is with this endless and infinite road in mind, that he parodies some words from John Henry Newman's famous hymn, 'Lead Kindly Light':

> Lead thou me on - to still mair leadin' on;
> There is nae goal, for ony goal 'ud be
> A lauch to last for a' Eternity . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 249)

MacDiarmid saw clearly, that in 'the Transcendent Sphere', every goal has to be transcended. A man cannot remain attached to any spiritual form or ideal he may have discovered, or his transcendence must atrophy

and die. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the spirit' (John 3:8), and as he said later to his disciples: 'It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you' (John 16:7), both statements emphasising the spiritual danger of trying to cling to, or attach oneself to, anybody or anything. For all clinging, all attachment, to any kind of being or object whatsoever, is a denial of the 'Not-Two', an abandonment of 'the Transcendent Sphere' in which there are 'no separate things', no 'I' or 'he', no 'they' or 'she', no 'subject' or 'object', no 'self' and no 'other', no duality or multiplicity, and yet, nothing is missing and no one is absent. And so, as MacDiarmid explains, in the revised version of his poem, 'Diamond Body', as it appears in A Lap of Honour (1967), all the religious and spiritual forms we have learned to venerate, have to be allowed, sooner or later, to melt away into what he calls 'the pure white light / Of the divine body of truth', so that we may be free, free as the wind, to discover and explore the mysteries of the 'great Tao', the Perfect Way:

> The shapes and figures created by the fire of the spirit
> Are only empty forms and colours. It is not necessary to
> confuse
> The dull glow of such figures with the pure white light
> Of the divine body of truth, nor to project
> The light of the highest consciousness into concretized
> figures,
> But to have the consciousness withdrawn, as if
> To some sphere beyond the world where it is
> At once empty and not empty,
> The centre of gravity of the whole personality
> Transferred from the conscious centre of the ego
> To a sort of hypothetical point
> Between the conscious and the unconscious,
> The complete abolition of the original
> Undifferentiated state of subject and object;
> Thus through the certainty that something lives through me
> Rather than I myself live
> A man bridges the gap between instinct and spirit,
> And takes hold upon life, attacks life,
> In a more profound sense than before.
> In the reconciliation of the differentiated
> And the inferior function, the 'great Tao
> - The meaning of the world' is discovered.
>
> (C.P., II, 1087-88)

(With regard to the underlined words, MacDiarmid says, in a footnote, 'See "The Secret of the Golden Flower", a Chinese Book of Life, translated into German and annotated by Richard Wilhelm with a European commentary by C.G. Jung.')

It must be admitted that some of the lines in the above passage are carelessly written, and syntactically unclear. For example, while emphasising the idea, implicit in all forms of advaita philosophy, that attainment of 'the highest consciousness' involves 'the complete abolition' of the 'state of subject and object', MacDiarmid creates a certain amount of confusion and contradiction by seeming to attach the words 'original' and 'Undifferentiated' to the state of mind that is to be abolished, instead of making it clear that these words apply to the state of mind which, according to advaita philosophy, existed before there was any antithetical 'state of subject and object' requiring 'abolition', an 'undifferentiated' state of mind which can now be restored only by such 'abolition' of the 'state of subject and object'. Perhaps if the poet had written 'originally / Undifferentiated', instead of 'original / Undifferentiated', confusion might have been avoided. Despite such occasional obscurities, however, the passage does quite clearly demonstrate the poet's deep understanding of the mysteries of the ultimate Way, or Tao, the road that is beginningless and endless, 'the only road' finally, for those that are 'born of the spirit'. His use, for example, of the phrases 'empty and not empty' and 'Between the conscious and the unconscious' quite clearly reflects the profound insights of the Zen Buddhist experience, as expressed in the passage from a sermon by Rosen Takashina already quoted in Chapter One:

> The living Samadhi of all the Buddhas is no other than that state of absolute absence of thoughts. Taking the words literally, one might think it meant to be like a tree or a stone, but it is not that at all. It cannot be understood by our ordinary consciousness, but neither shall we get it by unconsciousness. We can only grasp it by experiencing it in ourselves. (Buddhist Scriptures, pp. 138-9)

It is MacDiarmid's clear vision of the 'great Tao', 'The Perfect Way', the road that is without ending, which explains why his 'Ode to All Rebels' never overflows to become a hymn of unbounded praise. In the light of the Perfect Way, he sees all too clearly the imperfections

of all rebels. Although, in his view, they are, in a sense, 'the lights of the world in their several generations', to borrow a phrase from 'The Scottish Liturgy' (The Scottish Book of Common Prayer, 1929), he sees that their light comes from beyond themselves. It is 'ane wi' spirit itsel''. It is not their property. They cannot hold on to it. And when it departs, as sooner or later it must, it leaves them as it found them - mere human beings. And what do mere human beings amount to, in the final analysis? According to Nietzsche, whom MacDiarmid recommends as a teacher (C.P., I, 106), they are merely 'one of those diseases' from which the earth suffers: 'Eine dieser Krankheiten heisst zum Beispiel: "Mensch"' (Also sprach Zarathustra. F.N.2, p. 386). MacDiarmid himself repeatedly expresses a similar view. In A Drunk Man, he declares that

> A' thing that ony man can be's
> A mockery o' his soul at last.
>
> (C.P., I, 128)

In To Circumjack Cencrastus, he tells us that

> There's naething that a man can be
> That's mair than imbecile to me
> In the licht o' totality.
>
> (C.P., I, 247)

And towards the end of this Ode, he reminds all rebels that, ultimately, 'the spirit that in us should burn' . . . 'spurns a' men - a' men, even us; / And can mak' nocht o' the word victorious.' (C.P., I, 508)

It may seem unfair that the rebel should ever be 'spurned', after he has served the purposes of spirit; but in fact, the spurning begins with the rebel himself, when he begins to build his own idealogical structures, to replace the ones he has destroyed, or tried to destroy. His spirit then ceases to be revolutionary. In relation to the new structures, he becomes a conservative, and the conservative spirit is not 'ane wi' spirit itsel'', nor can it ever be so. It is essentially a denial of spirit, a wall to protect man from 'the wind that bloweth where it listeth', a shelter from the abyss over which spirit broods, a shield against 'the free, abundant, intolerable licht'. This is the

value of conservatism. This is why it is a necessity in all kinds of human society. For, as T.S. Eliot says: 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality' (Four Quartets: 'Burnt Norton'). Of course, the rebel does not knowingly and deliberately spurn the spirit. He believes that by erecting his theoretical framework he is serving the interests of the spirit. He believes that his dogmatic structures will embody and preserve in perpetuity the blinding vision of the world of spirit once granted to him, the vision that originally transformed him into a rebel. He does not realise that his structures, however carefully and cleverly planned, must inevitably cast shadows across the world of spirit, restricting the area of 'free, abundant, intolerable licht'. He apparently has not noticed how the doctrines of even the most fiery rebels and prophets quickly become gloomy dungeons for dogmatists to languish in. The Christian Church, for example, which came into existence ostensibly to spread the teachings of a revolutionary wandering rabbi who seemed like the light of the world, has frequently used these teachings to bolster up the gloomy walls of dead, pharisaical societies. Again, within the Christian Church, Lutheranism, though founded by a genuine rebel, soon became a theoretical prison, from which truly spiritual souls, such as the great German mystic, Jacob Boehme, were compelled to seek an escape, in order to preserve their lives. This is how the rebel's achievements become a 'mockery o' his soul at last'. He wants, quite naturally, to give his vision permanence. In order to do so, he feels he must convert it into words of 'common consciousness', into a formula that can be approved by reason and understood by everyone. But the moment he achieves this, he brings into existence, for himself and others, a verbal and conceptual prison just as intolerably oppressive as any he has previously escaped from. This is his spurning of spirit, and the beginning of spirit's spurning of him.

Only if the rebel can develop what MacDiarmid calls 'a quality o' mind / Committed to nae belief' (C.P., I, 286), will he cease to be confined to the role of 'rebel' and 'human being', and find that 'Transcendent Sphere', ''yont nature and the Common Man' (C.P., I, 255), where there is no separate being for spirit to 'spurn', since, as Saraha says in his 'Treasury of Songs' (c. 850), 'Everything is

Buddha without exception' (B.S., p. 179). In the sphere of the 'Not-Two' (advaita), there can be no spurning, just as there can be no meaning in 'the word victorious':

> Here 'where everything is forgiven,
> And it would be impossible not to forgive';
> Justification of all life in the balance of
> obliteration,
> Mercy and stability in the ultimate release
> Of the individual soul, forgiveness
> In the knowledge that no individual deed
> Eventually matters individually;
> All the seeming divisions of life
> Merely the glow upon glow in still more lucid glow
> Of this outwelling of light
> - A shape having no beginning or end . . .
>
> ('Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa',
> Stony Limits: C.P., I, 410-411)

The religious import of these lines is unmistakable. 'Forgiveness', 'Justification', 'Mercy', are all words that have become inextricably linked with Western man's experience of contact with the Divine. On the other hand, the conviction that the innumerable 'divisions of life' are merely 'seeming divisions' springs from the deepest religious insights of the East. The 'outwelling of light' and the 'shape without beginning or end' are simply alternative names for the 'Transcendent Sphere' of the 'Not-Two', which the mystics of both East and West have tended to describe as 'the One', though, of course, this term is, like all other positive terms we apply to ultimate reality, inaccurate, since, as Professor Panikkar rightly maintains in his book, The Trinity and World Religions, the 'Not-Two' is also the 'Not-One'.[13] Hence the appropriateness of the Christian formula of Three-in-One and One-in-Three. For though, fundamentally, the 'Not-Two' necessarily excludes all duality and multiplicity, it can be manifest only in and through duality and multiplicity. Like an ocean, it is undeniably one in its depths, but on the surface, it is just as undeniably many, because of the waves and currents that are constantly dividing it.[14] This is why MacDiarmid says, in 'Depth and the Chtonian Image':

> . . . Let nae man think he can see you better
> By concentratin' on your aneness either.
> He pits his mind into a double fetter

Wha hauds this airt or that, no baith thegither
You are at ainee the road a' croods ha' gane
And alane wi' the alane.

(C.P., I, 349)

These lines confirm beyond all doubt, what may be dimly discerned in all MacDiarmid's spiritual utterances, his own profound and intimate acquaintance with the 'Transcendent Sphere', which lies beyond the network of roads that all rebels and other dogmatists tread, and in relation to which, all human achievements, including those of 'All Rebels', have to be evaluated.

Notes

[1] See Note 15, Chapter One

[2] MacDiarmid was obviously familiar with the Swedenborgian teaching, that angels were not originally a separate species, but were all once human beings. (See Swedenborg's Heaven and Hell, section 311.) Hence the line in To Circumjack Cencrastus: 'Ettlin' to turn into angels syne' (C.P., I, 244).

[3] John Maclean, M.A. (1879-1923) was the much-imprisoned leader of the industrial workers on Clydeside, during a period of intense revolutionary struggle in the early years of this century. Both Lenin and Trotsky had a very high opinion of him. He was appointed Russian Consul in 1918. In an article in The Scots Socialist, Nov.-Dec., 1940, MacDiarmid described him as 'this magnificent working-class leader - indubitably the greatest of modern Scotsmen' and in his poem, 'John Maclean' (Stony Limits), he writes:

> As Pilate and the Roman soldiers to Christ
> Were Law and Order to the finest Scot of his day,
> One of the few true men in our sordid breed,
> A flash of sun in a country all prison-grey.
>
> (C.P., I, 486)

See also Hamish Henderson's song: 'The John Maclean March', and Matt McGinn's 'The Ballad of John Maclean'. For further information, and a selection of Maclean's writings, see John Maclean: In the Rapids of Revolution, ed. Nan Milton (i.e. Nan Maclean, John Maclean's daughter), London: Alison & Busby, 1978.

[4] Léon Brunschwicg, the distinguished scholar and editor of the Opuscules et Pensées de Pascal (Paris: Hachette, 1897), devised his own system of numbering and classifying the Pensées. Later scholars generally refer to the Brunschwicg numbers, even when they themselves employ a different system of numbering and classification. The original Brunschwicg manuscript is preserved in the Bibliothèque National, Paris.

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground and The Double, trans. Jessie Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

[6] Plotinus (6 vols), Greek text with English translation by A.H. Armstrong (London: Heinemann [Loeb Classical Library], 1966), Vol. 1, p. 257.

[7] Cur Deus Homo is the title of a famous treatise on the Incarnation of Christ by Saint Anselm (1033-1109).

[8] Lu K'uan Yü (Charles Luk), The Secrets of Chinese Meditation (London: Rider, 1969), p. 163.

[9] Leo Tolstoy, The Kreutzer Sonata, The Devil and Other Tales (London: OUP, 1973).

[10] The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 294-5.

[11] Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy (De Consolatione Philosophiae), trans. 'I.T.' and H.F. Stewart (London: Heinemann, 1946), Book V, Prose VI.

[12] This phrase is used by Plotinus in his first Ennead (6, 8). Armstrong, Vol. 1, p. 257.

[13] Raimundo Panikkar, The Trinity and World Religions (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1970), p. 73.

[14] It is significant that Plotinus, the great proclaimer of 'the One', points out that '. . . A manifold life exists in the All, and makes all things, and its living embroiders a rich variety and does not rest from ceaselessly making beautiful and shapely living toys.' Armstrong, Vol. III, p. 91.

Chapter Seven

The Meeting of the East and the West in MacDiarmid's thought

In our examination of MacDiarmid's religious themes, it has become clear that they derive, not from any single source, but from a variety of sources, both Eastern and Western. Since this meeting and mingling of Eastern and Western religious traditions in his thought could be regarded as a possible source of confusion and misunderstanding - deepening, for some readers, the impression that MacDiarmid is addicted to mere 'dialectical zigzagging' - let us now try to look a little more closely, at the spiritual significance and contextual implications of at least some of those ideas and lines of thought, through which the poet was able to envisage a real meeting of the wisdom of the East with that of the West.

But first, we must be absolutely clear about one thing: MacDiarmid tends to have a bias towards the mystical thinking of the East, and therefore, desires to reflect it as fully as possible in his poetry. Unless we recognise this fact, we may well overlook, (and, consequently, miss the important implications of), the many borrowings from Eastern texts which are to be found both in his earlier and later poems. Much of his meaning is bound to escape us, if we fail to keep in mind that revealing stanza in 'In Memoriam James Joyce' where he declares that

> Unlike you, Joyce, I am more concerned
> With the East than the West and the poetry I seek
> Must be the work of one who has always known
> That the Tarim valley is of more importance
> Than the Jordan or the Rhine in world history.
>
> (C.P., II, 801)

At this point, it is true, he refers only to China, and the valley which once housed its Taoist seers and mystics, but, in 'The Meeting of the East and the West', a later section of In Memoriam James Joyce, he particularly emphasises the importance of India. He declares that

. . . A greater interest in Indian thought and ideas
Exists nowhere in the world than in my mind.

(C.P., II, 856)

He draws attention to the fruitful effects that Indian thought has had on European thinkers over the past two centuries, pointing out that -

Herder expressed his love for the 'tender Indian philosophy
Which cannot but ennoble mankind'; Goethe
In his letter to the French Sanskrit scholar, Chézy,
Tells, in 1830, how 40 years earlier
He 'could not be quiet until I studied it profoundly
. . . Felt myself drawn to the impossible undertaking
. . . I grasp only the inconceivable impression made upon me
Of the most subtle wisdom of life, of the purest moral endeavour,
Of the most dignified majesty, and most earnest contemplation
of God' . . .

(C.P., II, 852-853)

He reminds us too, that 'Schelling's interest for India' -

Was very lively, especially in his later life
When he worked on his 'Philosophie der Mythologie und
Offenbarung'
And placed the Upanishads higher than the Biblical books,
Holding that the latter 'can in no way be compared
As regards real religious feeling with many others
Of former and later times, especially the sacred writings
of India.'

(C.P., II, 854-855)

We are then reminded that

Schopenhauer acknowledges a powerful stimulation from India,
Reading the Upanishads in the Latin translation
Made by Duperron from the Persian 'Oupnekhat.'
His praise of the 'Oupnekhat' is well-known:-
'We breathe Indian air and original, spontaneous existence . . .
Every line is so full of firm, defined, and thoroughly
consequential meaning.'
'Who, however, sees the supreme God live in all beings,
Who never vanishes, when they vanish, who sees him
Is really seeing. For he who sees the same God
Live in everything will not hurt himself,
Through himself, and thus walks the highest path.'

(C.P., II, 855)

It has to be admitted that In Memoriam James Joyce is a late poem, not published until 1955, but 'Indian thought and ideas' are no less evident in the 'Ballad of the Five Senses', published 30 years earlier. In it we shall find many echoes of the Indian scriptures. When, for example, MacDiarmid speaks of how, 'As I ga'ed roon the divers warl'' . . .

> The warl' o' Earth and sea and sky
> And eke o' Heaven and Hell,
> That separate seemed, as separate seemed
> The warl' within mysel'.
>
> (C.P., I, 36)

he is echoing Book III, Chapter xii, verses 7-9 of the Chandogya Upanishad: 'What is called Brahman, that is what this space outside a man is; and what that space outside a man is, that is what this space within a man is; and what that space within a man is, that is what this space within the heart is.'[1] In other words, the world outside oneself, is identical with 'the warl' within' oneself. The one world is no more separate or separable from oneself than the other. The world outside us is within us. The world within us is outside us.

When MacDiarmid then goes on to say

> And time and space and change and daith
> Were neist to nocht to me,
> At will I'd bring the distant near
> At will the deid I'd see . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 36)

he is echoing another passage from the same Upanishad (VIII, iii, 1-2), which makes clear the advantages that accrue to the man who finds 'the warl' within' himself - 'the city of Brahman within the heart':

> Never on earth can a man bring back one close to him once he has departed this life so that he can see him. Yet whatever he may long for among the living and the dead, or whatever else he may long for and cannot obtain, all that will he find if he will but go to that (city of Brahman within the heart); for there it is that his real desires are, (though now they are (covered over with unreality.

> For, just as (a group of people) who do not know the country (aksetrajna) might wander about and pass over a hidden hoard of gold time and again without finding it, so too do all these creatures go on day after day without finding the Brahman-world within them (eta), for they are led astray by unreality. (Zaehner, p. 124)

MacDiarmid says that 'At will', he could, in that state, see 'the deid' and 'bring the distant near'. The Chandogya Upanishad emphasises this same point. It is by 'a mere act of will' that the man who has found his way into 'the city of Brahman' obtains the objects of his desire. In Book VIII, Chapter ii, verse 10, it is clearly stated that, 'On whatever end a man sets his heart, whatever (object of) desire he desires, by a mere act of will that same (end and object) rises up before him and possessed of it, he is duly magnified.' (Zaehner, p. 124) This, of course, is because man, in that state, is one with the divine Self of the cosmos, who dwells in every heart:

> Truly this Self is in the heart. And the etymology of hṛdayam, 'heart', is this: hṛdy ayam, 'He is in the heart'. Hence it is (called) hṛdayam, 'heart'. Whoever understands it in this way, day in and day out, goes to the heavenly world.' (Book VIII, iii, verse 3. Zaehner, p. 124)

It is with this understanding of the essential unity of God and the soul in 'the city of Brahman within the heart', that MacDiarmid writes:

> There was nae movement on the earth
> But frae my hert it came,
> 'Let there be licht,' God said, and straucht
> My een let oot the same.
>
> Was it a tree? I couldna rest
> Till 'neath my hert I kent
> A pooer was pent gin it wan loose
> Its boughs had heicher sent.
>
> (C.P., I, 37)

But, as the desire to see the God who transcends all worlds rises up within him, he is apparently reminded of, what he describes in To Circumjack Cencrastus as, 'Yon michty passage in the Bhagavad-Gita', where the Lord Krishna, before revealing his divine form to Arjuna, says:

Do thou today this whole universe behold
Centred here in One, with all that it contains
Of moving and unmoving things;
(Behold) it in my body,
And whatsoever else thou fain wouldst see.

But never canst thou see Me
With this thy (natural) eye . . .

(Chapter XI, vv. 7-8. Zaehner, p. 295)

Recognising this truth, the poet says:

Yet sune I kent God or the warl'
Were no' for een to see,
Wi' body and saul I socht to staun'
As in Eternity . . .

and therefore exclaims

Oot o' the way, my senses five,
I ken a' you can tell,
Oot o' the way, my thochts, for noo
I maun face God mysel'.

(C.P., I, 38)

But it is not only in isolated stanzas, that we find correspondences between this Ballad and the Indian scriptures. The entire poem reflects certain basic postulates of Indian philosophy: for example, that the so-called 'objective' world is a shadowy, insubstantial affair:

O I wist it is a bonny warl'
That lies forenenst a' men,
But it's naething but a shaddaw-show
To the warl' that I saw then.

(C.P., I, 37)

and that all our experiences of this world are determined subjectively, not objectively; they are determined by what we are, and by what is within us, not by anything outside us:

Leevin' quo' I and deid quo' I
But daith may only be
A change o' senses so's a man
Anither warl' can see.

Or this warl' in anither way
For Heaven or Hell may be
But ither ways o' seein' the warl'
That ony man can see.

And God Himsel' sall only be
As far's a man can tell,
In this or ony ither life
A way o' lookin' at himsel'.

(C.P., I, 40)

The final stanza of the Ballad reminds us of the Indian belief in the essentially formless and invisible nature of the Tree of Life - the Ash-tree, or the Fig-tree, or the Vine, of which we are the branches (John 15:5):

But O I'm fain for a gowden sun
And fain for a flourishing tree,
That neither men nor the Gods they'll ken
In earth or Heaven sall see!

(C.P., I, 40)

But the 'tender Indian Philosophy' of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita was never wholly acceptable to MacDiarmid, with his turbulent Western mind, and 'the thocht o' Christ and Calvary / Aye liddenin' in (his) heid'. Like the philosophy of Plato, Indian philosophy in this form tends to place 'undue emphasis on static unity' (C.P., II, 848), and, like the philosophy of Plotinus, regards life in this manifold world (which MacDiarmid regards with such passionate interest) as an unmitigated disaster, 'a falling away, an exile, and a loss of the Soul's wings' (Inge, 2, p. 138). It does not have the dynamic vision of the Burning Bush, and the transforming Cross of Calvary, which the Kirk, for all its faults, conveyed to the poet. When, therefore, MacDiarmid raises objections, in, for example, To Circumjack Cencrastus, to the philosophy of Plotinus (C.P., I, 127), and, in In Memoriam James Joyce, to the philosophy of Plato (C.P., I, 847-8), he is implicitly objecting also to this older form of Indian philosophy, which, he believes, powerfully influenced Plato (C.P., II, 845-7).

It was in a later, Buddhistic form of the 'tender Indian philosophy', that MacDiarmid found a dynamic spiritual philosophy which he

could fully accept, since it was completely free from the static and negative elements which made the earlier forms unacceptable to him. The important distinction between the older Vedanta philosophy and the newer philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, has already been mentioned, and it may be recalled that some of Rudolf Otto's enlightening remarks on the subject were quoted. As Otto explains: 'Within Vedanta and Mahayana, in spite of mutual convergence, there lives an entirely different spirit'. He points out that the Brahman of the Vedanta is essentially 'static, massive, and quietly immobile', and therefore 'is quite distinct from the highest principle of Mahayana-mysticism, which is dynamic and vital, with its stimulating influence upon mood, fantasy and creative imagination, and its experience of the wonder of the world and of nature in their beauty'. He adds that, 'What would be sheer madness on the basis of Sankara's teaching, namely, that "Nirvana and Samsara are one and the same," becomes necessary and vital to the mood of the Mahayana.' (Otto, pp. 149-50)

Yet, perhaps even more important than the distinction between them, is the 'mutual convergence' of the Vedanta and the Mahayana. Though the Mahayana certainly dispenses with the static elements in the Vedanta, it retains the vital essence of all the Vedanta's traditional concepts and doctrines, absorbing the old ideas into a new and richer pattern of meaning, just as MacDiarmid, though rejecting the apparently static elements in Plato and Plotinus, nevertheless continues, throughout his poetical career, to make use of the rich ingredients of their thought within the context of his own vital and dynamic darsana. MacDiarmid sees very clearly that, as he says in 'The Meeting of the East and the West' (In Memoriam James Joyce), 'the Mahayan Buddhism . . . comes very close / To the Vedanta in its doctrine' (C.P., II, 855). Significantly, he also points out, that the Mahayana 'has features in common / With Schopenhauer's morality of pity in his altruistic ethics' (C.P., II, 855), thus drawing attention to one of the main distinguishing features of the Mahayana: its ability to establish points of contact between itself and other philosophical or religious viewpoints. Schopenhauer's own account of his 'morality of pity' makes no reference to the Mahayana. He refers only to 'the Veda and the Vedanta':

> Readers of my ethical philosophy will know that with me the foundation of morality ultimately rests on the truth which is in the Veda and the Vedanta expressed in the mystical formula tat twam asi (This art Thou), by which is meant every living thing, whether man or animal: it is called the Mahavakya, the great word.[2]

MacDiarmid, however, because of his very clear perception of the essence of the Vedanta teaching within the Mahayana, realises that tat twam asi no longer belongs exclusively to the Vedanta: it is now a vital and indispensable part of that wider and more comprehensive body of doctrine taught by the Mahayana.

That the tat twam asi doctrine of the Upanishads has indeed been absorbed into the Mahayana teachings, is made clear in the following passage from what is sometimes regarded as the foundation document of the Mahayana School of Buddhism, namely, the Mahayana sradohotpada sastra, known in English as The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana,[3] said to have been written by the Patriarch Ashvagosha, some time between the first and fourth centuries A.D. This excerpt is taken from the Reverend Dr Timothy Richard's translation, made, with the assistance of a Chinese Buddhist scholar, Yang Wen Hui, in 1894:

> By His nature is meant the Soul of all living beings. The Soul embraces that of saved and unsaved beings and it is this universal Soul that characterises the great school. For it is the Archetype's True Eternal Form which is the nature of the Mahayana Faith; and the Archetype's temporary form in life which is able to make manifest the nature, form and use of the Mahayana Faith . . .
>
> The Soul or mind of the True Form is the great essence of the invisible and the visible worlds. As to the nature of this One Soul it is the same in all forms. To think it is different in different forms is only a false notion of the world. Once we penetrate beyond forms it is discovered that all the different forms of the universe are not real differences of soul at all, but different manifestations of one real power, hence it has always been impossible to speak adequately, to name correctly or to think correctly of this One Soul, the real essence of things, which is unchangeable and indestructible. (Ashv. pp. 3-4)

From these words of Ashvagosha it is obvious that the 'One Soul' of the Mahayana is essentially the same as the 'Self' of the Upanishads,

who is ekam eva advitiyam, 'One without a second', (Chandogya Upanishad, VI, ii, 1), and that tat twam asi applies no less in the Mahayana than in the Vedanta.

Incidentally, Ashvagosha's contention, that 'the nature of this One Soul . . . is the same in all forms', is somewhat humorously echoed in MacDiarmid's poem, 'Whuchulls', from A Lap of Honour, (1967):

> What is oor life that we should prize't abune
> Lichens or slugs' o' which we ken scarce mair
> Than they o' oors when a' things said and dune,
> Or fancy it ser's 'heicher purposes'? . . .
> And if at ony point (a man) stops and says:
> 'My lot has fa'n in mair enlightened days,
> I'm glad to be a European, no' a black
> - Human, no' hotchin' glaur, ahint his back
> Let him forehear as foolish a future set
> Him in a place as seemin' laicher yet,
> Or ten pasts damn him for a graceless get. . . .
> The poet hauds nae brief for ony kind,
> Age, place, or range o' sense, and no' confined
> To ony nature can share Creation's instead.
>
> (C.P., II, 1089)

Incidentally, it is perhaps worth noting, that even here, in a short poem on a subject that would appear to have nothing to do with religion, we find him alluding to religious themes, such as metempsychosis, and the mystical equality of all things in God.

By pointing out the parallels that exist between the Vedanta and the Mahayana on the one hand, and between the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the Mahayana on the other, MacDiarmid focuses attention on a very important point: namely, the ability of Mahayan Buddhism to reach out, so to speak, and establish friendly relations with other forms of religion and philosophy. Buddhism in this form is rather like the central square of a large city, from which roads stretch out in all directions, to bring together into one meeting place, travellers from many different and widely separated towns and villages.

Once we understand this function of the Mahayana, we may better understand the meeting and intermingling of apparently unrelated and irreconcilable ideas and concepts, both from the East and the West, which sometimes takes place in MacDiarmid's poetry. We have already seen how a collection of apparently unrelated themes in A Drunk Man

Looks at the Thistle was able to assume a certain unity of shape and direction, when examined in the light of certain Mahayana Buddhist insights. Now it seems pertinent to enquire, to what extent MacDiarmid's acquaintance with Buddhism in its Mahayana form serves to explain, not only the underlying unity, but also the rich diversity of many of his poems. Obviously, MacDiarmid was no Buddhist, just as Ghandi was no Christian. It would appear, however, that the influence of Mahayana Buddhism on MacDiarmid was ultimately no less profound than that of Christianity on Ghandi.

But before attempting to assess the extent to which MacDiarmid was influenced by the Mahayana, we ought first, perhaps, to look again, and somewhat more closely than before, at this 'alien religion' (C.P., II, 765), and try to understand the way in which it relates to other religions, particularly to the Christian religion, in which the poet was very thoroughly trained in his boyhood.

Let us begin by looking back at the passage that has been quoted from The Awakening of Faith, in which it is made obvious that the Mahayana concept of the One Soul is essentially identical with the Upanishadic concept of the One Self. The full significance of this fact, however, is unlikely to dawn on us, unless we can recall how, in early Buddhism, the doctrine of anatta (Sanskrit anatman), or 'no-self', appeared to impose a barrier between Buddhists and Hindus, inasmuch as the dictum 'sabbe dhamma anatta' (everything is devoid of self), was interpreted as a rejection of the Upanishadic doctrine of the Self, or Atman (Pali Atta), though of course it is not; for, as Alan Watts points out: 'The Upanishads distinguish between atman, the true, supra-individual Self, and the jivatman or individual soul, and the Buddha's anatman doctrine agrees with them in denying the reality of the latter.' In Mahayana Buddhism from the beginning, however, as we have just seen, it is clearly acknowledged that there is indeed Something corresponding to the Hindu concept of a universal Self, existing in all beings. This is the transcendent Buddha-nature, which seeks to manifest itself in everything that exists, and becomes fully incarnate in the Buddhas.

No doubt it was this kind of teaching which ultimately enabled Hindus, in the eighth century after Christ, to hail the Buddha, Sakyamuni, as a divine incarnation - the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, Sustainer of the universe. Visitors to India today will find that both the temple and the Bodhi-tree at Buddha's birthplace are now under the joint care and supervision of the Hindu and Buddhist authorities, who work together amicably to bring honour to one of India's greatest sons. Such co-operation does not, of course, imply the disappearance of real doctrinal differences between the two religions, any more than marriage implies the disappearance of sexual differences between husband and wife.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism, however, are Indian born. It is not too surprising, therefore, that they can achieve some degree of union. But what connecting links could possibly exist between Buddhism in its Mahayana form and Christianity? By what route could a Scottish poet possibly find his way from the doctrines of the Kirk into those of Mahayana Buddhism? And what place could he possibly find in that 'alien religion' for the central symbols of his faith: the Cross of Calvary, and the suffering Lamb of God?

On the face of it, there might appear to be little to connect the two religions. Yet the Reverend Dr Timothy Richard, who translated The Awakening of Faith, found the parallels between them so striking, that he came to the conclusion that they were really one and the same religion; that Mahayana Buddhism was not, in fact, Buddhism at all, but Christianity. In his 'Translator's Introduction' to The Awakening of Faith, he says:

> If it be, as it is more and more believed, that the Mahayana Faith is not Buddhism, properly so-called, but an Asiatic form of the same Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in Buddhistic nomenclature, differing from the old Buddhism just as the new Testament differs from the old, then it commands a world-wide interest, for in it we find an adaptation of Christianity to ancient thought in Asia, and the deepest bond of union between the different races of the East and the West viz., the bond of a common religion. Both Christianity and the New Buddhism hold to the transcendent and the immanent forms of God; but the East emphasises more of the immanent form while the West emphasises more of the transcendent. The almost universal reception of the doctrines contained

> in this book by both the East and the West constitutes to my mind its highest claim to our attention; for thereby we are brought face to face with a solution of the stupendous practical problem of uniting all races in one bond of religious charity! (Ashv., p. vi)

Evidence to support Dr Richard's extraordinary conclusion, that the Mahayana is simply Christianity in Oriental guise, is not easy to find. According to his own story, the idea first came to him when, as a Christian missionary to China, he read The Awakening of Faith in a Chinese translation. He says:

> I . . . sat up reading it till the small hours of the morning. I cried to my friend Hill, who was also sitting up late at work, 'This is a Christian book and most interesting.' 'Christian?' my friend cried with great doubt. 'You are reading your own thoughts into the book!' 'Well then,' I said, 'how do you explain these passages?' pointing to some to which there was no ready explanation.' (pp. x-xi)

Which passages these were, we have no means of knowing, but a careful perusal of Dr Richard's translation of the book is likely to leave us with the impression that Mr Hill was right.

Continuing his story, Dr Richard tells us that,

> Three months later I was in a bookseller's shop in Edinburgh, and looking through his new books I came across Beal's little book on Buddhism lately published. Turning up a certain chapter in it, I found that he referred to the Awakening of Faith as a Pseudo-Christian book which it was desirable to have translated.

Some time later, Dr Richard did embark on a translation of it from the Chinese, and this work seems to have deepened the impression in his mind, that this Mahayana classic was also, in a sense, a Christian one.

It was not from The Awakening of Faith alone, however, that Dr Richard derived what he believed to be textual support for his theory. He had also become familiar with the Chinese version of the Diamond Sutra, and, in the sixth chapter of it, he found 'a very remarkable passage attributed to Gautama Buddha', which he translates as follows:

> Five hundred years after my death there will arise a religious prophet who will lay the foundation of his teaching, not on one, two, three, four, or five Buddhas, nor even on ten thousand

> Buddhas, but on the fountain of all the Buddhas; when that one comes, have faith in Him, and you will receive incalculable blessings. (p. xii)

The facts and supposed facts of Dr Richard's argument are interesting, but they are far from proving the truth of his thesis. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to fly to the opposite extreme, and maintain that there is nothing of significance at all in this Christian missionary's conclusions. No one can read the Mahayana scriptures in any depth, and conclude that Christianity and the Mahayana are totally unrelated.

In The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faith,[4] the great Buddhist scholar, Dr Edward Conze, in his article on Mahayana Buddhism, draws attention to several specific doctrinal features which Christianity and the Mahayana would appear to share, and wonders how this came about. He says:

> How can we account for the observation that Buddhism, just at the time when Christianity itself arose, underwent a radical reform of its basic tenets which made it much more similar to Christianity than it had been before? To show the nature of the problem, I will mention just three parallels between the Mahayana and Christianity. First of all, loving kindness and compassion, subordinate virtues in the older Buddhism, are stressed more and more, and move right into the centre of the picture. This may remind us of the Christian emphasis on 'love'. Secondly, we hear of compassionate beings, called 'Bodhisattvas', whose main claim to our gratitude lies in that they sacrifice their lives for the welfare of all. This may remind us of the Christ who died for us all so that our sins may be forgiven. And thirdly, the Buddhists of this period show exchatological interests, and fervently hope for a 'second coming' of the Buddha, as Maitreya (Pali, Metteyya), the 'Loving One'. Thus we have at least three innovations of the Mahayana, of which each is as near to the spirit of early Christianity as it is to the older Buddhism.
>
> Nor is this all. Occasionally we find close verbal coincidences between the Christian and the Mahayana Scriptures. Just one instance must suffice. At the time when the Revelation of St John was written down in Greek in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Mahayanists produced in the South of India one of their most revered books. The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines. Revelation (V.1) refers to a book 'closely sealed' with seven seals, and likewise the Perfection of Wisdom is called a book 'sealed with seven seals'. It is shown to a Bodhisattva by the

> name of 'Everweeping' (Sadaprarudita), and St John 'weeps bitterly' (V. 4) because he sees no one worthy to open the book and to break its seals. This can be done by the Lamb alone, slaughtered in sacrifice (V. 9). In the same way, chapters 30 and 31 of the Mahayana book describe in detail how Everweeping slaughtered himself in sacrifice, and how he thereby became worthy of the Perfection of Wisdom (see pp. 302-3). This parallel is remarkable not only for the similarities of the religious logic, but also for the fact that both the number seven and the whole notion of a 'book with seals' point to the Judaeo-Mediterranean rather than to the Indian tradition. Here is a fruitful field for further study. At present we cannot account for the parallels between the Mediterranean and Indian developments which occur at the beginning of the Christian era. For the interpretation of the Mahayana they are significant and should not be ignored. (pp. 293-4)

Whatever we may think of these parallels, they certainly serve to illustrate what MacDiarmid meant when he referred to

> . . . the character of Indian culture
> Which is and always has been its universal contacts.
>
> (C.P., II, 1013)

The Mahayana's most obvious link with Christianity, of course, is to be found in its Bodhisattva ideal. In the Bodhicharyavatara of Santideva (c. 600 A.D.), for example, we find the importance of the Christian virtue of self-giving love very strongly emphasised. In it, the Bodhisattva says:

> . . . I would fain become a soother of all the sorrows of all creatures. May I be a balm to the sick, their healer and servitor, until sickness come never again; may I quench with rains of food and drink the anguish of hunger and thirst; may I be in the famine of the ages' end their drink and meat; may I become an unfailing store for the poor, and serve them with manifold things for their need. My own being and my pleasures . . . I surrender indifferently, that all creatures may win through to their end . . . I yield myself to all living things to deal with me as they list . . . Let them make me do whatever works bring them pleasure; but may never mishap befall any of them by reason of me . . . (C.B., p. 136)

No one acquainted with Christianity could read this without being reminded of the young Prince of Glory, who came 'not to be served but

to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). As long as he lived, he was 'to the sick, their healer and servitor'; he 'quenched with rains of food and drink the anguish of hunger and thirst' which afflicted mankind; and, at his Last Supper, on the night before he died, he bequeathed to suffering humanity the sacrament of his body and blood, to be 'their drink and meat' until 'the ages' end'. His desire was, that no 'mishap' should befall any of his enemies, persecutors and slanderers - not even those who finally subjected him to a cruel death. The very first of his Seven Words from the Cross was a prayer, not for himself, but for them: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34).

It is obvious, therefore, that, however we may seek to explain it, a more than superficial resemblance exists, between the Christ of the Gospels and the Bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism. All the available evidence points to a very close relationship indeed between the two religions.

This is very significant; for, historically speaking, Christianity is related to Judaism as daughter to mother, and to Islam as sister to sister; while Buddhism is related to Hinduism as daughter to mother, and to Jainism as sister to sister. It follows, that the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, whatever its nature and origin, brings all six of these religions into a single pattern of relationships. The family, of course, is further extended, through the marriage of Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese Taoism in Ch'an (or Zen) Buddhism.

Clearly, it is MacDiarmid's close acquaintance with Mahayana Buddhism which explains why he never lost his great interest in 'Indian thought and ideas', despite his vigorous rejection of the apparently static, life-denying elements in traditional Hindu philosophy. It also explains why his great interest in these ideas did not, at any time, lead to his abandoning the Christian symbols and concepts which were part of his heritage as a Scot. In the light of his knowledge of the Mahayana, it is easy to understand his insistence that

> Knowledge and, indeed adoption (Aneignung)
> Of the rich Western tradition
> And all the wisdom of the East as well
> Is the indispensable condition for any progress . . .
>
> (C.P., II, 884)

and his interest in Von Hartmann's teaching that

> . . . the religion of the future
> Will be a combination of the abstract pantheism
> Of the Vedanta and the Judaeo-Christian monotheism . . .
>
> (C.P., II, 885)

It should be noted, however, that the term 'pantheism' is applicable to the Vedanta only in the 'esoteric' sense explained by Madame Blavatsky in The Key to Theosophy.[5]

The fusion of 'pantheism' in this sense with Jewish monotheism is envisaged in the lines where MacDiarmid speaks of

> . . . . . the way of the spirit
> . . . to honour whom we must glorify ourselves
> By sending forth once more the reverberating, seven-
> thundered
> Asseveration of the great Jehovah - I AM.
>
> (C.P., II, 827)

One of the earliest and clearest indications of the influence of the Mahayana on MacDiarmid is, as we have already remarked, to be found in To Circumjack Cencrastus (1930), where he says:

> Man here into his ain circumference fa's
> But whatna consolation's this to ane
> Wha kens that Buddhist seers can often reach
> The sun's corona and hoo Swedenborg
> Whiles gaed to ither planets, and visited
> A heavenly body aince that lay ootside
> The solar systems a' thegither?

Here MacDiarmid is alluding to Chapter Three of The Awakening of Faith, in which it is explained by Ashvagosha that the 'Pusas' (saints or seers) 'in an instant are able to reach all space throughout all the universe' and that 'These Pusas naturally possess powers beyond all thought, able to manifest themselves throughout all points of space for the good of all beings' (Ashv. pp. 32-33), a claim confirmed, as we have seen, by Swedenborg (Chapter One, Note 23). And when MacDiarmid goes on to say:

> I ken the stars that seem sae faur awa'
> Ha'e that appearance juist because my thocht
> Canna yet bridge the spiritual gulf atween's
>
> (C.P., I, 205-6)

he is continuing to echo the teaching of Ashvagosha, who repeatedly makes it clear, that all our problems, however physical they may appear, are essentially spiritual in origin. All that we see is dependent on what we are. As Ashvagosha says, 'We should know that all phenomena are created by the imperfect notions of the finite mind, therefore all existence is like a reflection in a mirror, without substance, only a phantom of the mind.' (Ashv. p. 12) And so, though the unbridgeable gulf between ourselves and the stars may seem to be merely spatial and temporal, it is in fact, as MacDiarmid says, a 'spiritual gulf' that exists 'atween's' - precisely the same spiritual gulf that separates us from Buddhahood, for 'the Buddhas have a natural power to manifest themselves everywhere' and their 'divine nature' is one that pervades 'all space'. (Ashv. p. 34)

This same doctrine of the Mahayana, that what we see is determined by what we are, is, as we have noted, already fully embodied in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, although the words 'Buddhist' and 'Buddhism' are never mentioned there. The teaching stands out with particular clarity in the lines we have frequently quoted before:

> Oor universe is like an e'e
> Turned in, man's benmaist hert to see,
> And swamped in subjectivity.
>
> (C.P., I, 163)

The world man looks out on is like an eye, which reflects in its retina the contents of his inmost heart. He cannot, therefore, see there anything other than what is within him. Being estranged from his 'divine nature', he cannot see the divine universe. Being full of imperfections, he can see only an imperfect universe, 'created by the imperfect notions of the finite mind', for, 'all existence is like a reflection in a mirror, without substance, only a phantom of the mind'. This is why 'nocht's worth the ha'en, / But certainty that nocht can be, / And hoo that certainty to gain.' (C.P., I, 137) For all that exists, in the sense of standing out from the 'divine nature', as a thing apart, as a goal to be pursued and perhaps achieved, is merely 'a phantom of the mind', totally devoid of substance. Hence MacDiarmid's 'Contempt o' ilka goal': 'I want naething - naething' (C.P., I, 499).

How deeply this Mahayana concept of the emptiness of the so-called objective world has penetrated MacDiarmid's thinking, is made evident in those lines adapted from Rilke, which we find in To Circumjack Cencrastus:

> For I am right and you are wrong if still
> You covet anything of so-called life.
> We change all this, and see there's nothing here
> In the clear light of our perfected selves.
>
> (C.P., I, 197)

In the light of his perfected or completed self, man can see very clearly that 'there's nothing here', or indeed anywhere else, for him to reach out to, strive after, obtain. 'All existence is like a reflection in a mirror, without substance'. Hence the absurdity of coveting 'anything of so-called life'. The only function of the so-called objective universe, as MacDiarmid makes clear, is to be a mirroring eye, reflecting the contents of 'man's benmaist hert', that is to say, all the thoughts, ideas, feelings and desires which cluster round and conceal his 'perfected self'. Hence Hsi Yun's instructions to those who seek Buddhahood:

> Only awake to universal mind, and realise that there is nothing whatsoever to be attained. This is the real Buddha . . .
> Our original Buddha-nature is, in all truth, nothing which can be apprehended. It is void, omnipresent, silent, pure; it is glorious and mysterious peacefulness, and that is all which can be said. You yourself must awake to it, fathoming its depths. That which is before you is it in all its entirety and with nothing whatsoever lacking. Even if you go through all the stages of a Bodhisattva's progress towards Buddhahood, stage by stage, when at last, by a single flash of thought, you attain to full realisation, you will only be realising your original Buddha-nature and by all the foregoing stages you will not have added a single thing to it. You will merely regard those kalpas of work and achievement as nothing but unreal actions performed in a dream. . .
> If it is held that there is something to be realised or attained apart from mind and, thereupon, mind is used to seek it, (that implies) a failure to understand that mind and the object of its search are one . . . (C.B., pp. 196-8)

To search for something outside the mind, results only in discovery of the 'ugsome' Thistle, which consists of

A' the uncouth dilemmas o' oor natur'
Objectified in vegetable maitter.

(C.P., I, 117)

It is in his emphatic rejection of all the 'empty things o' the earth' (C.P., I, 498), that the influence of Mahayana Buddhism on MacDiarmid's mind is most clearly seen. For the vision of universal 'Emptiness', or 'Sunyata', belongs to the very heart of Mahayana thought and experience. As Dr Suzuki says:

> Sunyata (emptiness) . . . is one of the most fundamental ideas of the Mahayana - so much so, indeed, that the latter altogether loses its significance when the Sunyata idea is dropped from its philosophy. The Hinayana also teaches the emptiness of all things, but its emptiness does not penetrate so deeply into the constitution of our knowledge. (Z.D.N.M., pp. 38-39)

Just how deeply the Mahayana understanding of Sunyata penetrates into 'the constitution of our knowledge', is most fully exemplified in the Madhyamika philosophy of Nagarjuna (c. 200 A.D.), a system of analytical criticism which, by denying all propositions, aims at destroying all theoretical positions and doctrinal standpoints, in order to clear the way for a supra-rational intuition into the Real (not to be confused with Bergson's instinctive, infra-rational type of 'intuition'). But, despite some superficial resemblances, Madhyamika philosophy is not a form of Nihilism. As Professor Murti of Benares points out:

> The Madhyamika does not deny the real; he only denies doctrines about the real. For him, the real as transcendent to thought can be reached only by the denial of the determinations which systems of philosophy ascribe to it. When the entire conceptual activity of Reason is dissolved by criticism, there is Prajna-Paramita . . .

and, as he explains, 'Prajna-paramita . . . is equated with Tathagata - the Perfect Being, God.'[6]

In the closing pages of his book, Professor Murti returns to this theme, pointing out that,

> The Madhyamika rejects speculative (dogmatic) metaphysics, not because there is no real that is transcendent, but because by its defective procedure dogmatic metaphysics wrongly understands the transcendent in terms of the empirical modes; it

> illegitimately extends, to the unconditioned, the categories of thought that are true within phenomena alone. To safeguard the purity of his tattva (Real) it is necessary for the Madhyamika to deny the pretensions of dogmatic metaphysics. His position is akin to that of Kant. Kant's Transcendental dialectic is directed against speculative metaphysics (against Rational Psychology, Cosmology and Theology) not because he did not believe in the reality of God, Freedom and Immortality of the Soul, but because he wanted to make them safe from the unwarranted ascriptions of pure Reason. The difference between the two, as has been pointed out previously, is that Kant seeks to realise these noumenal realities in a non-intellectual mode - Faith and Practical Reason; the Madhyamika does it in Intellectual Intuition - Prajnaparamita. The Madhyamika is spiritual to the core. His absolute is not void, but devoid of finitude and imperfection. It is nothing but Spirit. (C.P.B., p. 332)

The apparent 'Nihilism' of the Madhyamika is, of course, shared by all the great mystics, both of the East and the West. In his Westöstliche Mystik, which is mainly concerned with exploring, comparing, and contrasting, the thought of the German mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart, and that of the Indian mystical philosopher, Sankara (Shankaracharya), who lived in the ninth century A.D., Professor Otto says:

> For here likewise it is the same with the two masters - their halting attempts to describe by negations and contrasts with the here and now an eternal, positive but unnamable One, are taken in all seriousness for mere negations and abstractions, in spite of Eckhart's assurances that such negation is only meant to be negatio negationis, limitationis, privationis. Both teachers end their speculations with similar warnings. 'Wouldst thou be perfect, do not yelp about God', says Eckhart. 'This Atman is silent' says Sankara. (Otto, p. 7)

Hence MacDiarmid's rejection of all credal formulations, as expressed in the following lines from 'In the Slums of Glasgow' (Second Hymn to Lenin):

> Foam, waves, billows and bubbles are not different from the sea,
> But riding the bright heavens or to the dark roots of earth sinking
> Water is multiform, indivisible and one,
> Not to be confused with any of the shapes it is taking.

I have not gained a single definite belief that can be put
In a scientific formula or hardened into a religious creed.
A conversion is not, as mostly thought, a turning towards
a belief,
It is rather a turning round, a revolution indeed.
It has no primary reference to any external object.
It took place in me at last with lightning speed.
I suddenly walk in light, my feet are barely touching the
ground,
I am free of a million words and forms I no longer need.

In becoming one with itself my spirit is one with the world.
The dull, aching tension is gone, all hostility and dread.
All opposing psychic tendencies are resolved in sweet song
My eyes discard all idle shows and dwell instead
In my intercourse with every man and woman I know
On the openings and shuttings of eyes, the motions of mind,
and, especially, life, and are led
Beyond colour, savour, odour, tangibility, numbers, extensions,
Individuality, conjunction, disjunction, priority, posteriority -
like an arrow sped,
And sheer through intellection, volition, desire, aversion,
Pleasure, pain, merit and demerit - to the fountain-head,
To the unproduced, unproducing, solitary, motionless soul
By which alone they can be known, by which alone we are not
misled.

(C.P., I, 563)

This passage is full of direct and indirect references to Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, as reflected in many different kinds of writing. The very first line, for example, echoes a well known stanza from one of the Buddhist poet Saraha's (c. 850) mystical songs:

Whatever pours forth from the mind,
Possesses the nature of the owner.
Are waves different from the water?
Their nature like that of space is one and the same.

(B.S., p. 175)

Behind this, of course, lies the conviction common to all Mahayana writers: that 'all the different forms of the universe are not real differences of soul at all, but different manifestations of one real power', as Ashvagosha says.

MacDiarmid's reference to his inability to compress his insights into any 'scientific formula' or 'religious creed' relates to many different Mahayana writings in which it is emphasised that, as Ashvagosha puts it, 'It is the Archetype's True Eternal Form which

is the nature of the Mahayana Faith' (Ashv., p. 3), the implication being, that acceptance of the Faith involves the relinquishment of all lesser forms, the negation of all those credal structures which conceal the ever present reality of the Archetype's True Eternal Form'. Ch'an Master Hsu Yun (b. 1840), for example, says: 'As to the Dharma' (the Buddha's teaching) 'fundamentally there is no such thing, because as soon as it is expressed in words, the meaning will not be true. Just see clearly that mind is Buddha and there will be no more ado'.[7] Since Hsu Yun regards all thought forms as an obstacle to true seeing, he advises students to abandon them all. It is essential, he believes, that they should understand,

> . . . that the self-nature is fundamentally pure and clean and that distress (klesa) and enlightenment as well as birth, death and Nirvana are all empty names having no connection whatever with self-nature; that phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow; and that the four basic elements constituting the physical body, as well as mountains, rivers and the great earth which are within self-nature, are just like bubbles in the sea.

He says that

> When all our feelings of joy and sadness, of the cold of hunger and the warmth of one's fill, of honour and dishonour, of birth and death, of happiness and misery, of blessing and calamity, of praise and censure, of gain and loss, of safety and danger, and of handicap and help, are all cast aside, this is the true laying down of everything . . . When all concurrent causes have been laid down, false thinking will vanish with the non-arising of differentiation and the elimination of all attachments. When one reaches this state of the non-arising of a single thought, the brightness of self-nature will appear in full. (C. & Z., I, p. 20)

These 'Dharma words' may help to explain why MacDiarmid's 'conversion' did not involve 'turning towards a belief', why it had 'no primary reference to any external object', and why he suddenly became 'free of a million words and forms I no longer need.'

As Professor Murti explains:

> The Madhyamika method is to deconceptualise the mind and to disburden it of all notions, empirical as well as 'a priori'. The dialectic is not an avenue for the acquisition of information, but a catharsis; it is primarily a path of purification

> of the intellect . . . The method is negative. Universality and certitude are reached not by the summation of particular points of view, but by rigidly excluding them; for a view is always particular. It is the abolition of all restrictions which conceptual patterns necessarily impose. It is not nihilism, which is itself a standpoint asserting that nothing is. The dialectic is rejection of all views including the nihilistic.
>
> The implication of the Madhyamika method is that the real is overlaid with the undergrowth of our notions and views. Most of them are 'a priori'; this is avidya, which, in this system is equated with ideal construction screening the real. The Real is known by uncovering it, by the removal of the opacity of ideas . . . Philosophy performs this uncovering function. It is both this process and its culmination . . . (C.P.B., p. 212)

In the light of 'philosophy' in this sense of the word, then, we can fully understand MacDiarmid's abandonment of all mental concepts and categories - 'conjunction, disjunction, priority, posteriority . . . / Pleasure, pain, merit and demerit' - in order to speed direct, 'like an arrow', from the particularities of pure experience, to the 'fountainhead' of all life and knowledge -

> To the unproduced, unproducing, solitary, motionless soul
> By which alone they can be known, by which alone we are
> not misled.

In other words, to what Ashvagosha calls, 'the One Soul, the real essence of things, which is unchangeable and indestructible' (Ashv., p. 4).

It is of this unchangeable, indestructible reality that MacDiarmid is thinking when he says:

> In becoming one with itself my spirit is one with the world.
> The dull, aching tension is gone, all hostility and dread.
> All opposing psychic tendencies are resolved in sweet song . . .

For, as Professor Murti explains:

> The spiritual is a state of undivided personality: the person is not divided in himself; nor does he divide himself from others. The internal conflict between various levels of personality and the external conflict of one's good as antagonistic to the good of others are both resolved. . . In the last analysis, the ego is the root of the unspiritual; the universal is the spiritual. (C.P.B., p. 333)

We should not, therefore, think of the real world of spirit as antithetically opposed to the empirical world, for, to quote Professor Murti again:

> The Absolute is not one reality set against another, the empirical. The Absolute looked at through thought-forms (vikalpa) is phenomenon (samsara or samvṛta, literally 'covered'). The latter, freed of the superimposed thought-forms (nirvikalpa, nisprapanca), is the Absolute. The difference is epistemic (subjective), and not ontological. Nagarjuna therefore declares that there is not the least difference between the world and the absolutely real. Transcendent to thought, the absolute, however, is thoroughly immanent in experience. A critique of experience, like the Madhyamika dialectic, is conscious of this immanence, the phenomenalisation of the absolute. The phenomenalising activity is of two kinds: one through ignorance, through avidya and its satellites, the klesas; and the other is the free conscious assumption of phenomenal forms activated by prajna and karuna. The former is the unconscious activity of the ignorant (prthagjana), and the latter is that of the Enlightened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. (C.P.B., p. 141)

Or, as Ashvagosha puts it, 'Generally speaking, as the world has many different notions, all false, we call this the Unreal Empty Form. But if false notions are given up, this is then the most Real.' (Ashv. p. 5)

Since, then, the phenomenal world freed from the conceptual structures imposed by ignorance is really the eternal world of spirit, it is easy to understand how the Drunk Man came to see

> . . . a timeless flame
> Tak' Auchtermuchty for a name,
> And kent that Ecclefechan stood
> As pairt o' an eternal mood.
>
> (C.P., I, 144)

and how, in 'Depth and the Chthonian Image' (Scots Unbound and Other Poems, 1932) the poet finds himself '. . . looking at a ruined mill and thinking of the highest'.

It is by means of its destructive dialectic that Mahayana philosophy deconceptualises the mind, and thereby frees it from all that separates it from the Real. Paradoxical though it may seem, it is by means of the same destructive operation that the Mahayana prepares a

place of peace and reconciliation for those of other faiths. There is really no contradiction between the friendliness and the destructiveness of the Mahayana, for its dialectic is never directed against human beings, but only against the views which separate them from the Truth, and from one another.

It will now be clear that the inclusive character of Mahayana Buddhism has nothing to do with any attempts on its part to incorporate conflicting viewpoints within a single comprehensive system, such as we find in Jainism, or in the philosophy of Hegel, but that it derives, rather, from the Mahayana's strenuous repudiation of all viewpoints and all systems, as obscuring the transcendent light of Prajna-paramita. Despite its open, welcoming attitude, Mahayana Buddhism has nothing in common with mere syncretism, which simply overlooks or denies the existence of doctrinal differences. The Mahayana takes full cognizance of all such differences, but points to the need to transcend them all, through 'Intellectual Intuition' of a Reality beyond the reach of conceptualisation and all means of expression.

It will also be clear now that when reference was made earlier to MacDiarmid's acceptance of Indian philosophy in its Mahayana Buddhist form, this did not imply acceptance of a number of doctrinal concepts and propositions, but rather, release from all doctrinal forms and formularies, and recognition of the power of destructive dialectic to open up the way to Prajna-paramita. What the Mahayana enabled MacDiarmid to acquire was not a credo, but

> . . . a quality o' mind
> Committed to nae belief.
>
> (To Circumjack Cencrastus, C.P.,I,286)

It made him aware of

> A deep religious impulse moving us, not that
> Interpreted by others through systems of belief
> and practice . . .
>
> ('The Kind of Poetry I Want'
> C.P., II, 1016)

It convinced him that

> Pleroma is immediate, and is far away
> Only from the gropers who seek
> To muffle the infinite

In limitations and terms.
But to the high, crushing nearness
Of my exploding primordial life
The Supreme is 'that which is quite Nigh',
That which is without distance,
Immediateness itself, love-embrace
The paradisiacal awareness
In which all fullness immediate and unredeemed,
Since all time, is posited timelessly,
Over 'Being', blessed in 'One'.
No empty abstraction, but the Life
Which can never be grasped,
That is transcendent.

('Song of the Seraphim',
C.P., I, 643-4)

For MacDiarmid, as for the Mahayana, doctrinal systems merely 'muffle the infinite / In limitations and terms', and they provide the doctrinaire mind only with 'empty abstractions', instead of immediate 'paradisiacal awareness' of 'the Life . . . that is transcendent.'

Yet, as the history of Mahayana Buddhism in China, Japan and Tibet clearly shows, the destruction of doctrinal structures by the Mahayana normally leaves untouched and unharmed the living ideas and symbols contained in these structures. All that is living in them goes on living. The ideas and symbols, liberated from their dogmatic prison, are free to find new meaning in other contexts. In China, for example, the ancient religion of Taoism may now be regarded as little more than a ruin, but the transcendent vision of the Tao lives on in the wider context of Ch'an (Sanskrit 'Dhyana', Japanese 'Zen') Buddhism, which, today, has acquired some significance for the West as well as for the East. Similarly, though in MacDiarmid's mind the Christian doctrinal structures may have suffered early demolition, the living figure of Christ, and the perennial mystery of the Divine in the human and the human in the Divine, survived, to exercise a powerful influence on his thought for the rest of his life. And so, when he speaks, for example, of Calvary - 'Aye, this is Calvary' (C.P., I, 134), 'In Calvaries that owrecome / Daith efter Daith let me be caught' (C.P., I, 135) - he is demonstrating how the Cross has become, for him, universalised, completely freed from the confined dogmatic structure in which he originally encountered it. It is also interesting to note how, in 'Ode to All Rebels', he uses an ancient Biblical symbol, the

Garden of Eden, freed from its doctrinal context, in order to convey his insight into the essentially subjective nature of the evils that surround us, as taught by the Mahayana:

> Eden's wide-open, unchanged; and nocht shuts us frae't
> But impious delusions o' oor ain.
>
> (C.P., I, 507)

The language is unmistakably Biblical, but the thought is just as unmistakably Buddhist. It is precisely because, on the Sunyata view, 'Eden's wide-open, unchanged', that the doctrinal structures we erect to enable us to climb over its non-existent fence may prove to be, not merely useless, but positively dangerous and harmful, since they can imprison us more deeply than ever in our 'impious delusions'. As Hui-neng (A.D. 638-713), the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch, says: 'The Mind as it is in itself is free from ills . . . The Mind as it is in itself is free from disturbances . . . The Mind as it is in itself is free from follies . . .' (Z.D.N.M., p. 20). In other words, 'Eden's wide-open, unchanged'. Here, as in so many of MacDiarmid's sayings, the East and the West meet. The insight of an 'alien religion' from the East, is expressed through a symbol derived from the religions of the West.

It is important, therefore, not to imagine that, when we have identified the source of some term, some concept, some form of words, in MacDiarmid's poetry, that we must, thereby, have discovered the viewpoint from which he is then speaking. For then, every change of concept and terminology would have to be regarded as indicating a corresponding change of viewpoint, and then indeed, there would be grounds for accusing him of 'dialectical zig-zagging'. To understand MacDiarmid's poetry we must be prepared to probe far beneath the verbal surface, until we discover, in the depths of it, a buried stream of thought, which is neither Buddhist nor Christian, Eastern nor Western, but which constantly moves towards that crowning Silence beyond all conflicting viewpoints, the Silence that MacDiarmid describes as -

> . . . Him whom nocht in man or Deity,
> Or Daith or Dreid or Laneliness can touch,
> Wha's deed owre often and has seen owre much.
>
> (C.P., I, 167)

For he is convinced that, ultimately,

> Silence is the only way,
> Speech squares aye less wi' fact.
>
> (C.P., I, 218)

In this imperfect world, however, we have to make use of speech. In our deluded, unenlightened state, we have to try to communicate with what we believe to be other beings, by means of words and ideas which, ironically, tend to become insuperable barriers between us. We have to use words, ideas, doctrines, as what Hsi Yun of Huang-Po Mountain calls 'a temporary expedient' (C.B., p. 202), to help ourselves and others to win free from our delusions, our pious delusions no less than our 'impious' ones, and this is rather like using an imaginary stile to climb over a dream fence which seems to separate us from 'Eden'. But no great harm is done provided we do not allow the 'temporary expedient' to become 'hardened into a religious creed' which could keep us prisoners of our delusions, instead of providing us with a means of freeing ourselves from them.

Just before his final enlightenment, the great Indian saint, Sri Ramakrishna, (1836-86) realised that, despite the real religious progress he had made, he was really trapped in his religious beliefs and devotions; his religion had become a prison. The glowing form of Kali, the Divine Mother, which had hitherto been his guiding light, was now so thoroughly obscuring and obstructing his spiritual path, he simply could not find his way through to the light of Ultimate Reality. He struggled in vain with the beloved image until, at last, acting on the instructions of his guru, Tota Puri: 'I sat for meditation again and, as soon as the holy form of the Mother appeared now before the mind as previously, I looked upon knowledge as a sword and cut it mentally in two with that sword of knowledge' (Sri Ramakrishna, by N. Devdas: Bangalore 1966). Only in this way was Ramakrishna able, finally, to achieve complete liberation (moksha) from the world of illusion. It is in the context of such acts that we have to understand the Drunk Man's question: 'Ha'e I the cruelty I need . . .?' (C.P., I, 145).

The need for such 'cruelty' is perhaps best illustrated in the Buddha's parable of the raft, in which he speaks of his teaching as

a raft designed to carry us across the waters of illusion, to the farther shore of reality - the 'beyond'. He stresses, however, that, when we have reached the other shore, we should then dispense with the raft. On no account should we attempt to carry on our shoulders, or on our heads, the raft which has been carrying us. It should simply be discarded as something we no longer need. (See The Wisdom of Buddhism, pp. 85-6) Hence MacDiarmid's words:

> I suddenly walk in light, my feet are barely touching
> the ground,
> I am free of a million words and forms I no longer need.
> (C.P., I, 563)

This typically Buddhist view of religious doctrine, which no doubt helped him to see his Calvinist inheritance in a new light, is repeatedly echoed in MacDiarmid's poetry.

One of the best examples can be found in First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems (1931), where he speaks with macabre humour of the unfortunate consequences of refusing to free one's religious life from the dogmatic structures it required in its infancy. In 'The Church of My Fathers', he is dealing, of course, with Scots Presbyterianism, which he has previously celebrated in terms of

> The golden casket o' their Covenant, their goal,
> Shrined in a dwelling that ootshines the stars,
> A dwelling o' delight no' made wi' hands . . .
> (To Circumjack Cencrastus,
> C.P., I, 288)

but which he now depicts as nothing more than the mouldering corpse of an unhappy female who has been struck dead by lightening while trying to escape from her sacred prison - a fact of which the worshippers remain totally unaware, because, in their spiritual blindness, they are unable to discern any change in her:

> This is the kirk o' my faithers
> And I ken the meanin' at last
> O' its pea-green wa's and chocolate pillars
> And am stricken aghast
> For here, ready for the road,
> Religion was biddin' goodbye.

Her hoose was toom and she'd turned
Wi' hopeless een sullen and dry
For a last look roond when a blast
O' lichtnin' tore frae the sky
And struck her deid where she stood.
In the dismantled room
Hauf-lifelike still she stands
Decomposin' in the gloom.
To the faithfu' seein' nae difference
She's in her usual still
And the hoose is fitly furnished
In keepin' wi' God's will.
I ha'e nae doot they're richt,
But, feech, it's a waesome sicht!

(C.P., I, 307-8)

The 'blast / O' lichtnin'' would appear to have some connection with the fiery Scottish Reformers, who, before striking Religion 'deid', made 'toom' the Kirk, the house of Religion, dismantling the Altar and every sign and symbol of the Catholic Faith, in order to re-furnish it in what they believed to be its original, barren style - 'In keepin' wi' God's will'. The result was such 'a waesome sicht' that no major poet since the Reformation has been able to identify with the Scottish Church. Burns, Scott, Byron, all turned away scunnered from 'the dismantled room' where the corpse of Religion, 'Hauf-lifelike still' was seen 'Decomposin' in the gloom'. The poem reminds us, that though the Reformation began in Germany as a lively movement towards spiritual freedom, it became transformed in Scotland into one of the most rigidly repressive religious systems the world has known, bringing about a more than Roman subjugation of Religion to cast iron doctrinal formulas. This was why even the great Puritan poet, John Milton, felt compelled to conclude, with regard to Scottish Presbyterianism, that 'New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large'.[8] That Protestantism itself cannot be blamed for the ghastly state of affairs described by MacDiarmid, becomes clearly evident, once we recall the fact that the post-Reformation Church in England was chosen as a spiritual home by quite a large number of poets: Spenser, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning and T.S. Eliot - to name but a few. This fact may not be entirely unconnected with the Church of England's extremely flexible attitude to doctrinal formulas.

Protestantism was, of course, a product of Germany, and, like Marxism, cannot properly be understood, except in relation to German thought as a whole, from Meister Eckhart to Nietzsche. Given MacDiarmid's Protestant background, and his interest in Marxism, it is, perhaps, not surprising that no less than twenty of the European writers and thinkers mentioned in 'The Meeting of the East and the West' (In Memoriam James Joyce) are German. But what MacDiarmid chiefly discovers in these German thinkers, is a quite amazing affinity between German thought and Indian thought. This affinity, remarked on by many scholars, including Rudolf Otto, in his great book Westöstliche Mystik which traces the astonishing similarities between Sankara's thought and that of Eckhart, may serve to explain why so many Buddhist monks such as Lama Govinda are German, and why so many of Europe's greatest authorities on Indian sacred texts are, like Max Müller, German. More remarkable still, many German thinkers, such as Eckhart, Hegel, and Fichte, repeatedly and unmistakably echo Indian doctrinal concepts, even though they apparently had no contact whatsoever with Indian books or teachers. The doctrine of Advaita (non-duality), for example, finds near perfect expression in both Eckhart and Fichte, as Rudolf Otto has pointed out. It is to this fact that MacDiarmid is referring when he says:

> Fichte in his essay 'Anweisung zu einem seligen Leben'
> Comes near to the Advaita doctrine most amazingly
> - So much so that Otto has even attempted to give
> Whole passages of Fichte in the language of Shankara.
>
> (C.P., II, 854)

Fichte's essay is, of course, called Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben oder Religionslehre,[9] though perhaps the title MacDiarmid gives it would have been more appropriate, and might have sounded less presumptuous.

Among the passages from Die Anweisung that Otto quotes, are the following:

> Being is absolutely single, not manifold; there are not several Beings but only one Being. - The obvious truth of this statement must be clear to anyone who can really think. Only Being is, on no account is anything which is not Being or which lies beyond Being.

> This Being is simple, is like unto itself, unchangeable and unchanging; there is in it no becoming nor ceasing to be, no change, or play of forms, but only the same quiet Being and Remaining.
>
> For: what is of itself, that is and is whole, existing all at once, without interruption; and nothing can be added unto it. (Otto, p. 220)

Other quotations illustrate Fichte's grasp of the essential link between 'Advaita' and 'Maya':

> This Being is veiled (avarana) and obscured (tirodhana) in consciousness in many ways according to the indestructible laws of consciousness which are grounded in Being itself.
>
> The whole diversity is here revealed as existing only for us and as a result of our limitation, but in no way as existing in itself or immediately in the divine Being.
>
> All else, which appears to us to have existence - things, bodies, souls, we ourselves (as single subjects) so far as we ascribe to ourselves an independent and self-sufficient existence - is not truly there, but is only existent in the (empirical consciousness) as something felt and thought. (Otto, p. 223)

The similarities between this teaching and that of Indian philosophy in general, and of Advaita in particular, are strikingly obvious. It will, perhaps, be noticed, that the last excerpt gives very clear expression to the teaching of Ashvagosha, as it appears in Chapter Three of The Awakening of Faith, where he says:

> We should know that all phenomena are created by the imperfect notions of the finite mind, therefore all existence is like a reflection in a mirror, without substance, only a phantom of the mind. (Ashv. p. 12)

It should also be noted, that it is in complete accord with MacDiarmid's own assertion, in 'Song of the Seraphim', that

> What we call being is only
> The functioning of our consciousness . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 643)

When, however, MacDiarmid speaks of 'parallels to Indian philosophy in Hegel', he is well aware that his words require some qualification, for these 'parallels' are more apparent than real. Here is what he says:

> There are parallels to Indian philosophy in Hegel too,
> Especially regarding his dialectics and that
> Of the great Mahayana teacher, Nagarjuna.
> (But these parallels are really no more
> Than mere coincidences of particular results
> Arrived at from totally different starting points
> - Of Nagarjuna Hegel knew nothing,
> And all he had heard of Indian philosophy
> Made no impression on him at all.)
>
> (C.P., II, 854)

Although it cannot be denied that some of Hegel's ideas and insights are undoubtedly religious, as is evident from his concept of an Absolute, and his theory of cosmic redemption through Christ (discussed in The Cosmic Christ by Professor Alan Galloway of Glasgow University; London, Nisbet, 1951), it is nevertheless obvious that he has no understanding of the transcendent realm of higher religion, in which we encounter the Brahman of Sankara, the Sunyata of Nagarjuna, the 'One' of Plotinus - that Supreme Reality which transcends all the ontological and epistemological categories created by human thought and reason. As Professor Murti says: 'Hegel takes thought as constituting the very texture of the real', and so it comes about, that what the Madhyamika regards as transitory and unreal, is presented as 'the Absolute of Hegel' (C.P.B., p. 304). Murti defines the essential difference between the Hegelian dialectic and that of the Madhyamika (the philosophy of Nagarjuna) as follows:

> For Hegel, the dialectic is a synthetic movement of the categories for binding them closer; it is within phenomena. For the Madhyamika, the dialectic is the instrument of critical analysis intended for divesting the mind of the categories; it is a movement away from phenomena. (C.P.B., p. 305)

Certainly, the prison of Hegel's dialectic is occasionally illuminated by something resembling spiritual insight, a Vedanta-like vision of the divine 'One without a second', but such glimmerings of light tend to be rare, especially in his later work, and clearly, they occur, not because of, but in spite of, his confusing and constricting thought-structures. After discussing some of the more obvious sources of confusion in Hegel's thought, Professor Galloway makes the following illuminating comment: 'I have tried, as best I can, to show how these

contradictions, which must remain nonsense from the standpoint of systematic, objective thought, can none the less be a significant expression of our existential situation. They show forth what cannot be said in systematic language.' (The Cosmic Christ, p. 184) Consequently, one may occasionally discern 'parallels to Indian philosophy in Hegel', but they are certainly not to be found within the confines of his dialectic. In any case, his philosophical system, with its scant respect for the individual and its exaltation of the State, is implicitly rejected in MacDiarmid's rejection of

> A' short circuiters o' consciousness,
> Believers in ony State or system or creed.
>
> (C.P., I, 508)

Both Fichte and Hegel, however, share the traditional German obsession with the Absolute, each stressing in his own way the All-ness of God and the nothingness of man - an Indian theme very dear to the Protestant heart. Certainly, in Eckhart this theme is counter-balanced by his repeated insistence on the Divine in the human, the human in the Divine, but this balance tends to be completely lost by later German thinkers, notably Nietzsche, who was a Protestant pastor's son. As Rudolf Otto says:

> In Eckhart there remains that curious double valuation of things which is peculiar to all religion: things and men so far as they are creaturely, i.e. as they are of themselves, are valueless and simply nothing. But in-asmuch as they were created by God and are of God they have existence, are good and divine. (Otto, p. 94)

Nietzsche, however, though a person of exceptional sensitivity and discernment, a man of profound religious insight and feeling, was quite unable to see the Divine in the human. He rejected Man completely, as merely one of the diseases from which the Earth suffers: 'Die Erde . . . hat eine Haut; und diese Haut hat Krankheiten. Eine dieser Krankheiten heisst zum Beispiel: "Mensch"' (Also sprach Zarathustra, F.N., II, p. 386). All his hopes rested on That which is higher than Man, That which is more than human - the Übermensch. The All-ness of Übermensch and the nothingness of Mensch, is one of Zarathustra's

favourite themes. He cannot rejoice in the All-ness of God, for Gott ist tot (p. 348) - 'God is dead', and his divinity has been bequeathed to the Übermensch, which is to come, and so Zarathustra says: 'Der Übermensch liegt mir am Hertzen, der ist mein Erstes und Einziges, und nicht der Mensch' (p. 523).

Zarathustra, like Nietzsche himself, could not love mankind. Unfortunately, God could, and did. This was what created God's Hell, as the Devil once explained to Nietzsche: Also sprach der Teufel einst zu mir: 'auch Gott hat seine Hölle: das ist seine Liebe zu den Menschen' (p. 348). And it was this love for mankind that ultimately killed God: 'Gott ist tot; an seinem Mitleiden mit den Menschen ist Gott gestorben' (p. 348). How could God possibly survive, when he had such compassion for mankind? Is not compassion a cruel Cross to which the lover of mankind is inevitably nailed, to die? - 'Ist nicht Mitlied das Kreuz, an das der genagelt wird, der die Menschen liebt?' And so, God had to die. Even he could not go on loving mankind, and live. He is dead, and the cause of death is clear: he died of his love for mankind.

But God dead, is still much more valuable than Man living. No man, however great, can ever take God's place. This is the tragedy at the heart of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy. In one of the most deeply moving songs in Zarathustra, Nietzsche voices an old man's frenzied appeal to God, to come back - 'O komm zurück, / Mein unbekannter Gott . . .' (p. 494), even though he thinks of God as his cruellest enemy (Grausamster Feind), a 'Hangman God' (mein Henker-Gott), a God who inevitably brings agony (Mein Schmerz). The old man is willing to pay any price in terms of suffering, provided God can come back and bring meaning into human life again, by loving mankind. No price is too great to pay for love. No amount of suffering could outweigh the value of love. So he calls desperately to God, the loving God whose love is torture, to come back, and bring all his tortures with him: 'Nein! Komm zurück, / Mit allen deinem Martern!' Here is no short-sighted prayer for ease, or earthly comforts. All he wants is God Himself: 'O Komm zurück, / Mein unbekannter Gott! Mein Schmerz', for he sees quite clearly that God is 'Mein letztes - Glück!' - his ultimate happiness and bliss.

Zarathustra, who represents the opposite side of Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude to the dead God, flies into a fury when he hears this song, and strikes the old man with his staff, calling him a liar, but there is no disguising the fact that the song has come welling up from the depths of the poet's own heart, from the deeply hidden areas of consciousness, where, in fact, God is not dead, but still disturbingly alive.

It will be remembered that MacDiarmid too, burns votive candles to 'an Unkent God' (C.P., I, 148), and, like the old man, is very far from believing that pain and torment constitute the ultimate evil -

> For the eternal evil's no'
> Tragedy, but the absence o't . . .
> No' Hell but no' ha'en even that . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 221)

'O komm zurück! / Mein unbekannter Gott! Mein Schmerz!'

It is easy to understand how MacDiarmid, with 'The thocht o' Christ and Calvary / Aye liddenin' in (his) heid' (C.P., I, 122), came to be so deeply affected by Nietzsche, the tragic proclaimer of the death of God. Unlike the kirk-folk that MacDiarmid knew, Nietzsche was painfully aware that there had been a death in his Church. God was dead, and the whole place smelt of death. The black garments, the black Bible, the musty smell in 'the dismantled room', all spoke of death, the death of God. This was why God was never seen to move, never heard to speak, and gave trouble to nobody. The living God had never been like this. He had always been a God of passionate loves and hates, who gave trouble to everybody, most of all to those who loved Him most. All that was left of Him was a wooden effigy, hammered to a Cross. That God would never trouble anybody again. And people seemed satisfied. They could now sit back and enjoy the quiet museum atmosphere of the Church undisturbed. God's death didn't hurt them at all. But, without a doubt, it hurt Nietzsche. He began to conceive an intense hatred for the community that wanted God only as a corpse. And he decided that if that funeral parlour he attended was really the Church of Christ, then he must be Anti-Christ. He tore apart its stifling walls, its musty pillars, exposing the rotten fabric of the

whole building. He stripped away the solemn furnishings, exposing the empty formulas that had masqueraded as the Gospel of God. He let it be seen that 'the fruits of the Spirit' were now no more than wax fruit, embalmed corpses of the Christian virtues. Love had been replaced by mere charity, 'the Peace that passes understanding' by pious complacency, the 'Joy unspeakable and full of glory' by the tepid amiability of nice, well-to-do people. Who that loved God could keep up these distasteful pretences? The abomination of desolation had to be destroyed, and Nietzsche destroyed it. But when he brought the whole Lutheran edifice crashing about his ears, he was, like Samson in a similar situation, caught and crushed by the falling masonry. On the 3rd of January, 1889, when he was only forty-five years of age, Nietzsche collapsed unconscious in the piazza Carlo Alberto, Turin, and, on recovering consciousness, showed signs of having lost his sanity. From then on, until his death in 1900, he remained in that alienated state, gradually becoming paralysed in body as well as in mind. The painful experience of living with the disease called Man, and without the meaning called God, had finally taken its toll.

To understand MacDiarmid, particularly with regard to his attitude to the Church, it is necessary to understand something of Nietzsche, for MacDiarmid was, as we have already remarked, profoundly influenced by him. A few examples of how the Scottish poet deliberately echoed the language and concepts of the German thinker, may help to make clear MacDiarmid's tremendous respect for the teachings of Nietzsche.

In Zarathustra we are told that the greatest experience man can have is der Stunde der grossen Verachtung - 'the hour of great contempt', in which a man discovers that even his own good fortune and happiness is nauseating and disgusting. (p. 280) In A Drunk Man MacDiarmid says:

> Be like the thistle, O my soul . . .
> And manifest forevermair
> Contempt o' ilka goal . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 136)

and asks,

Ha'e I the cruelty I need,
Contempt and syne contempt o' that,
And still contempt in endless meed
That I may never yet be caught
In ony satisfaction, or
Bird-lime that winna let me soar?

(C.P., I, 145)

That he does indeed have the necessary contempt, is made very obvious in To Circumjack Cencrastus, where he says: 'To hell wi' happiness . . . ' and

Lead thou me on - to still mair leadin' on;
There is nae goal, for ony goal 'ud be
A lauch to last for a' Eternity.

(C.P., I, 281, 249)

The words, 'Lead thou me on', are, of course, borrowed from the hymn, 'Lead kindly light', by John Henry Newman, a disturbed Church of England clergyman who sought peace in the Church of Rome. MacDiarmid's words remind us, however, that the Way of God does not end in Rome, or indeed, anywhere else. We are always in need, therefore, of 'still mair leadin' on'. God's road is an 'endless road' (C.P., I, 244). It is also the 'only road' we can really take. All other roads are pure delusion. 'The only road is endless' (C.P., I, 267). If 'Few ha'e ta'en it' (C.P., I, 267), this is because nobody is able to take the 'endless road', until he has experienced what Nietzsche calls: 'Die Stunde wo ihr sagt: "Was liegt an meinem Glücke! Es ist Armut und Schmutz und ein erbärmliches Behagen"' (F.N., II, p. 280) - 'the hour in which one exclaims: "What does my happiness matter! It is nothing but emptiness and dirt and despicable ease!"' - and so one takes up MacDiarmid's liberating cry: 'To hell wi' happiness!' and in that moment one is freed from the unreality of all earthly 'roads': one sees that there is really only one road to take - God's endless road.

Again, in Zarathustra, we are told that, though man has travelled all the way up from wormhood to manhood, much in him is still worm: Ihr habt den Weg vom Wurme zum Menschen gemacht, und vieles ist in euch noch Wurm (F.N., II, p. 279). And in To Circumjack Cencrastus, MacDiarmid echoes this thought, when he speaks of how Nature has led man

> Up frae the slime, that a' but a handfu' o' men
> Are grey wi' still.
>
> (C.P., I, 285)

Zarathustra says to Man: 'All previous beings have created something out of and above themselves: do you want to be the ebb of this great tide, choosing rather to go back to the animal stage, than go forward to pass over and beyond the human stage of your evolutionary development?' - Alle Wesen bisher schufen etwas über sich hinaus: und ihr wollt die Ebbe dieser grossen Flut sein und lieber noch zum Tiere zurückgehen, als den Menschen überwinden? (F.N., II, p. 299) MacDiarmid says:

> Man's in the makin' but henceforth maun mak' himsel'.
> Nature has led him sae faur, up frae the slime
> Gi'en him body and brain - and noo it's for him
> To mak' or mar this maikless torso.
> Let him look to Nature nae mair;
> For her will's to create ane wi' the poo'er
> To create himsel' . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 285)

Man, of course, like God, can be a creator only by dying. Only through the death of Mensch can the Übermensch come to birth. This is the law governing all creation. As Jesus says: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12:24). Only by dying to Himself - emptying Himself - could God become man. Only by dying to himself - emptying himself - can man become divine.

Nietzsche gives Zarathustra two friends: the Eagle and the Serpent. He describes the Serpent as das klügste Tier unter der Sonne (F.N., II, p. 290) - 'the wisest creature under the sun'.

MacDiarmid devotes the whole of a very lengthy poem to an exploration of the Serpent's wisdom (To Circumjack Cencrastus), pointing out that

> An image o' the sea lies underneath
> A' men's imaginations - the sea in which
> A' life was born and that cradled us until
> We cam' to birth's maturity. Its waves bewitch
> Us still or wi' their lure o' peacefu' gleamin'
> Or hungrily in storm and darkness streamin'.

> The imagination has anither poo'er - the snake,
> He who beats up the waters into storm
> Wha's touch electrifies us into action;
> In th' abyss o' their origin, their basic form,
> A' oor imaginations partake
> O' ane or th' ither - the sea or the snake.
>
> (C.P., I, 289-290)

And he invokes for himself the power of the snake:

> Stir me, Cencrastus. If the faintest gleam
> O' you kyths in my work fu' weel I ken
> That your neist movement may lowse a supreme
> Glory - tho' I'm extinguished then!
>
> (C.P., I, 289)

Yes, indeed. For death is the indispensable prerequisite of new life. The 'glory' of the Übermensch cannot dawn until the feeble light of Mensch is 'extinguished'. This is the wisdom of the Serpent, which speaks both in Nietzsche and in MacDiarmid.

In Zarathustra Nietzsche declares that the wise and knowing ones must learn how to build with mountains, and that merely moving mountains is a small thing in comparison - 'Und mit Bergen soll der Erkennende bauen lernen! Wenig ist es, dass der Geist Berge versetzt . . .' (F.N., II, 361)

In 'On a Raised Beach' (Stony Limits and Other Poems), MacDiarmid says:

> Let men find the faith that builds mountains
> Before they seek the faith that moves them.
>
> (C.P., I, 427)

But, despite these and other obvious echoes, of which there are literally dozens to be found in MacDiarmid's work, the two writers came to adopt fundamentally opposed attitudes on one important matter - Indian philosophy. As MacDiarmid says:

> Nietzsche through Schopenhauer became acquainted with
> Indian ascetic philosophy,
> But was afterwards a strong opponent of it . . .
>
> (C.P., II, 855)

One of the unfortunate consequences of this was, that Nietzsche, in spite of his outstanding intelligence, never achieved a proper understanding of the difference between the empirical ego and the real Self, as explained in the Indian scriptures. This is probably why, in Ecce Homo, written in 1888, the year before his collapse, it is already painfully evident that Nietzsche's great mind has become unbalanced by extreme egoism. He undertakes to explain such questions as, why he is so wise, why he is so clever, and why he writes such excellent books.[10] In contrast, MacDiarmid is able to say:

> I dinna haud the warld's end in my heid
> As maist folk think they dae . . .
>
> I lauch to see my crazy little brain
> - And ither folk's - tak'n itsel' seriously . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 87)

These lines speak volumes about the importance of 'The Meeting of the East and the West' in MacDiarmid's mind. Without the 'raft' of 'Indian ascetic philosophy', MacDiarmid too might have perished in the swelling tide of egoistical delusion, despite the serpent-wisdom he derived from Nietzsche and others. Hence his wise conclusion:

> Knowledge and, indeed, adoption (Aneignung)
> Of the rich Western tradition
> And all the wisdom of the East as well
> Is the indispensable condition for any progress . . .
>
> (C.P., II, 884)

Notes

[1] Hindu Scriptures, trans. R.C. Zaehner (London: Dent, 1982), p. 87.

[2] Essays and Aphorisms, Arthur Schopenhauer, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 140.

[3] The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana, by the Patriarch Ashvagosha, trans. Reverend T. Richard and Yang Wen Hui (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1918).

[4] The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, ed. R.C. Zaehner (London: Hutchinson, 1977).

[5] The Key to Theosophy, by H.P. Blavatsky, Third and Revised Edition (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920), p. 43.

[6] T.R.V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika, Second edition (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), pp. 218, 224.

[7] 'Master Hsu Yun's Discourses and Dharma Words', Ch'an and Zen Teaching, Series One, ed. and trans. Lu Kwan Yü (Charles Luk). (London: Rider, 1972), pp. 20-21.

[8] 'On the new forcers of Conscience under the Long Parlament', The Poetical Works of John Milton (London: OUP, 1958), p. 439.

[9] Published Berlin, 1806. Translated as The Way Towards the Blessed Life, or The Doctrine of Religion, by William Smith (London: Chapman, 1849).

[10] Chapter One is entitled Warum ich so weise bin (F.N., II, 1070), Chapter Two, Warum ich so Klug bin (1082), and Chapter Three, 'Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe' (1099).

Chapter Eight

Apparently Irreligious Elements in MacDiarmid's Thought

Perhaps a sufficient number of MacDiarmid's religious and mystical themes have now been examined, to enable us to say, without qualification of any kind, that the mystical and religious element in his thinking, whatever we may think of it, is certainly fundamental to his work as a whole. Its removal from his work, if that were possible, would completely destroy the characteristic shape and power of his poetic products. Though often hidden behind masses of material that would appear to have no connection with religion whatsoever, this mystical, religious element tends, nevertheless, as we have seen, to be all-pervasive. It is just as undeniably present in the Three Hymns to Lenin, and the In Memoriam James Joyce, as it is in A Drunk Man, or in any of the early poems such as 'A Moment in Eternity', 'The Innumerable Christ', or 'Ballad of the Five Senses'. If it is not always as clearly evident as we might desire, this is because it corresponds to the bony skeleton of the human body, which, though it shows itself only here and there through the skin and fatty tissue, is, nevertheless, the foundation of the whole structure. Apart from it, the body would be, not just shapeless, but useless.

This is why we cannot isolate the religious element in MacDiarmid's poetry, and discuss it solely in terms of those poems that we suspect to have religious connotations. This is why, in our investigations, we repeatedly find it necessary to move beyond the limits of a particular poem we are examining, on to another, and, perhaps, yet another, in order to ascertain the full extent of the various mystical themes which are the bones of his poetry. These bones, as we have discovered, fit together to form a body of spiritual insights which is, in effect, a complete philosophical darsana, not unlike that of Mahayana Buddhism, though with obvious Christian and Plotinian modifications.

It is not, of course, being denied here, that there are passages in MacDiarmid's writing (though more often in his prose than in his poetry) where he appears to turn his back entirely on his own religious and mystical insights, and proceeds to speak as if he had never heard of 'the glory that descends' (C.P., I, 144), and had never seen anything beyond the contents of the cave of common consciousness. There is, however, one important difference, between the religious themes we have been examining, and what we might call, perhaps, his irreligious themes. The religious themes fit together to form a complete and coherent view of life. The irreligious ones do not. They exist in isolation, not only from the main body of his thought, but from each other. There is no way in which they can be fitted together to form an alternative world-view to the one we have been painstakingly unearthing from his poetry as a whole.

Although everyone who reads MacDiarmid is well aware of the existence of these irreligious themes in his work, it is by no means easy to locate and identify them with any degree of precision; for many of his apparently irreligious statements prove, on closer examination, not to be so at all. It will be remembered, that his scathing references to God in A Drunk Man and in To Circumjack Cencrastus were discovered, on closer scrutiny, to refer only to the concept of God as Creator, not to 'Him that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith' (C.P., I, 244). It will also be recalled, that, in the writings of the Christian monk and mystic, Meister Eckhart, we found equally scathing references to the Creator and his Creation.

To turn for a moment to MacDiarmid's prose, it is certainly undeniable that, in Lucky Poet, referring to the question of spiritual illumination, he declares: 'I do not believe in God at all . . . I know - it is just an experience of myself.'[1] On the face of it, this might seem an emphatic enough denial of his earlier realisation, in A Drunk Man, that he owed his moments of illumination to 'A force to which I ne'er could grow' (C.P., I, 144). But this may not, in fact, be what he is saying. At this part of the book, he has just

been referring to two Roman Catholic thinkers, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, and it is possible that his words simply indicate his passionate recoil from what he regards as unsatisfactory concepts of the divine attached by these men to the word 'God', and his desire to identify himself with the Upanishadic conception of the divine as the real Self (as distinct from the illusory ego) in every man. There is no doubt at all that he understood the religious implications of the phrase, 'an experience of myself', for, he makes it very clear, in this same book, that he has studied Sankara, and has found himself in such intimate agreement with the Indian thinker, that he now calls himself an Advaitin,[2] that is to say, one who accepts the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, which lays particular stress on the essential identity of the human self and the divine self. To the Advaitin, an experience of one's self is an experience of the divine, and MacDiarmid was fully cognisant of the fact.

Another important point to be noted is, that in the Introduction to Lucky Poet, MacDiarmid takes care to explain, that 'The mystic is as cosmopolitan as the man of science, and his experience is not the monopoly of a particular religion . . .' (L.P., p. XIX). Presumably, this is meant to warn us, that we should not expect him to conform all his religious utterances to one particular religious pattern - even that of Advaita Vedanta. He must be free to choose the words and concepts that best suit his everchanging requirements, irrespective of which religious tradition they are borrowed from. When, therefore, we find him forcefully rejecting some particular religious concept, we should certainly not leap to the absurd conclusion that he is thereby rejecting all religion. It simply indicates that, at least for the time being, he feels the need to exchange one religious concept, or even one religious tradition, for another.

Yet, surely, (it might be objected) his total rejection of belief in God, at this point, inevitably implies a total rejection of all religion? Not necessarily so. It must be remembered that some important religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, traditionally dispense with 'God'-concepts altogether. They have always felt impelled to convey their awareness of the divine through non-theistic concepts and ideas. Perhaps some forms of Buddhism are guilty, as the Jains

allege, of compromising with theism on occasions, but this is a charge which can certainly never be brought against the Jains themselves, for they never waver in their conviction, that true religion can flourish only where men boldly declare, as MacDiarmid does in the passage under discussion: 'I do not believe in God at all'. It is by no means easy, therefore, in the context of world-religion, to decide whether this is an irreligious statement or not. In one religious milieu, it would be. In another, it would not. Ultimately, of course, such verbal and conceptual differences matter little. The divine centre of all religions remains unaffected by any forms men devise for its expression.

The problem of deciding when MacDiarmid is speaking irreligiously, can be difficult enough when we are dealing with his prose. When, however, we are dealing with his poetry, it can become almost impossibly difficult; for poetry is obviously much richer in ambiguity than prose. Lines which may, on the surface, seem to indicate a complete absence of religious insight, may, in fact, conceal layers of profound religious connotations. It is relatively easy to be certain when religious insight is present. It is by no means easy to be certain when it is not.

Oddly enough, MacDiarmid's profound and powerful meditation, 'On a Raised Beach', is sometimes thought to provide an example of how he occasionally turned his back on his own religious and mystical insights. It is seen by some readers as a welcome return to reality; a therapeutic flight back to the solid world of material substance, from the cloudy realms of spirituality, where the poet was wont, unfortunately, to linger.

Such a view, of course, can arise only from a fundamental misunderstanding of the poet's spirituality and the nature of the physical world. We must have noticed, that MacDiarmid's spirituality, affected as it was by the philosophy of Advaita, is never dualistic. It never consists in fleeing from one hypothetical world to another. He knows that there is only one world of reality, which we may call, as he does, 'The impalpable and primordial life, / The Supreme' (C.P., I, 639), or which we may rather choose to call 'God', or 'Brahman', or 'the Void', though, of course, no name properly applies to It. Any other 'world' is a projection of the imagination, shaped by 'impious

delusions o' oor ain' (C.P., I, 507). It is simply 'the chaotic deception / Of the palpable and objective' (C.P., I, 639), consisting of 'Materialistic mediate things' (C.P., I, 643) which, unfortunately, conceal from us 'a life / Fuller, more real, warmer . . .' (C.P., I, 639), in which there is 'nothing objective' for It 'Eternally transcends the objective spirit' (C.P., I, 643).

To MacDiarmid (at least, in his moments of illumination), as indeed to all Advaitins, objectivity and reality are incompatible terms:[3]

> - For reality is subjective, personal
> To each one of us, held in
> By the crystal walls of our experience -
>
> ('The Gaelic Muse': C.P., I, 661)

Sri Ramana Maharshi, who, of course, shared this view, has some interesting observations to make, on the thinking that lies behind it:

> Shankara has been criticised for his philosophy of Maya (illusion) without understanding his meaning. He made three statements: that Brahman is real, that the universe is unreal and that Brahman is the Universe. He did not stop with the second. The third statement explains the first two; it signifies that when the Universe is perceived apart from Brahman, that perception is false and illusory. What it amounts to is that phenomena are real when experienced as the Self and illusory when seen apart from the Self.
>
> The Self alone exists and is real. The world, the individual and God are, like the illusory appearance of silver in mother-of-pearl, imaginary creations in the Self. They appear and disappear simultaneously. Actually, the Self alone is the world, the 'I' and God. All that exists is only a manifestation of the Supreme.
>
> The world is perceived as an apparent objective reality when the mind is externalized, thereby abaondoning its identity with the Self. When the world is thus perceived the true nature of the Self is not revealed; conversely, when the Self is realized the world ceases to appear as an objective reality.
>
> That is illusion which makes one take what is ever present and all pervasive, full to perfection and self-luminous and is indeed the Self and the core of one's Being, for non-existent and unreal. Conversely, that is illusion which makes one take for real and self-existent what is non-existent and unreal, namely the trilogy of world, ego and God.

> . . . The names and forms which constitute the world continually change and perish and are therefore called unreal. It is unreal (imaginary) to limit the Self to these names and forms and real to regard all as the Self. The non-dualist says that the world is unreal, but he also says, 'All this is Brahman'. So it is clear that what he condemns is regarding the world as objectively real in itself, not regarding it as Brahman . . .[4]

Incidentally, as Arthur Osborne (the editor of the book from which the above quotations have been taken) points out, we should not allow our categorising intellect to attach labels such as 'atheism' or 'pantheism' to any of these statements, for such ludicrous labels could only conceal the true nature of Sri Ramana's thinking. His words here have no systematic implications. They are simply designed to draw attention to the fact that anything that is known objectively, anything that is experienced as outside oneself, is fundamentally unreal. Even God, if known only as an object among other objects, is unreal - He is simply part of an illusory trinity consisting of God, the world, and the ego. On the other hand, not only God, but even the world and the human self can be truly real, when known, not objectively, but from within, as the 'self-luminous . . . core of one's Being' - 'the Supreme'. One thing is certainly clear: here, in the context of Advaita, where the reality of all objective existence is denied, there can be no room for any pantheistic confusion of 'the Supreme' with the objects of ordinary consciousness.

Obviously, the spiritual science of Advaita knows nothing of a solid, material universe, existing outside and over against the human spirit, but neither, it should be remembered, does modern physical science. It can find no trace anywhere of a solid, substantial material world. The world it investigates consists mainly of masses of whirling particles which, as Fritjof Capra explains, in The Tao of Physics, 'are not made of any material stuff' (p. 214), but are simply 'bundles of energy' (p. 213). Unfortunately this means that

> We can never say that an atomic particle exists at a certain place, nor can we say that it does not exist. Being a probability pattern, the particle has tendencies to exist in various places and thus manifests a strange kind of physical reality between existence and non-existence. (p. 157)

The particle's peculiar kind of reality would appear to be confined to the momentary mathematical role it may play in the equation, $E = m c^2$ (i.e. Energy = mass x the square of the speed of light). But Dr Capra is careful to stress, that

> The concept of a distinct physical entity, like a particle, is an idealisation which has no fundamental significance. It can only be defined in terms of its connections to the whole, and these connections are of a statistical nature - probabilities rather than certainties. (p. 164)

With regard to the important question of material substance, Dr Capra has this to say:

> These dynamic patterns, or 'energy bundles' form the stable nuclear, atomic and molecular structures which build up matter and give it its macroscopic solid aspect, thus making us believe that it is made of some material substance. At the macroscopic level, this notion of substance is a useful approximation, but at the atomic level it no longer makes sense. Atoms consist of particles and these particles are not made of any material stuff. When we observe them, we never see any substance; what we observe are dynamic patterns continually changing into one another - a continuous dance of energy. (p. 214)

In modern physics, declares Dr Capra, 'there is no place for static shapes, or for any material substance' (p. 215).

The theme of the insubstantiality of matter was, of course, already a familiar one in scientific circles in the 1920s, when Sir Arthur Eddington was writing up his lectures <u>On the Nature of the Physical World</u>. In the Introduction to that book, as we have already noted, he remarks that 'The external world of physics has . . . become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions we have removed the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions.' (p. xvi)

So much, then, for the solid world of material substance, which some readers believe MacDiarmid to be contemplating in 'On a Raised Beach'. It is, as we have seen, a world undiscoverable by physical science, and therefore, perhaps, better described as a solid figment of the imagination. The assumption, however, that the poet himself believed in this fiction, is quite without foundation. There are plenty of clear proofs in his poetry that he knew the real nature of the physical world.

In To Circumjack Cencrastus, for example, he writes:

> . . . I've tint my amusement at maitter,
> The quick-change artist,
> Ashamed o' ha'en a'e form instead o' anither,
> And hastenin' to cheenge it - the haste that is
> It's a'e reality . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 283-4)

This was in 1930. Two years later, in 1932, the year, incidentally, in which Heisenberg was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics, MacDiarmid openly rejoices in the power of quantum physics to dispose of the fanciful conceptions of the world which had prevailed in the past:

> The quantum theory's dung to blauds
> The classic picture o' the world.
> Nae shameless syncretism ser's
> Sic humpty-dumpties aince doonhurled
>
> A' the King's horses, a' his men
> Can never cock them up again . . .
>
> ('The Oon Olympian',
> Scots Unbound and Other Poems:
> C.P., I, 360)

Then, in Lucky Poet, published in 1943, as he writes down the term 'too materialistic', he casually inserts the parenthetical explanation: 'as they used to say before "matter" was recognised as a poetic fiction' (p. 92).

In the light of these and other similar examples, it is clear that there are no grounds whatever, for associating the poet himself with the outworn conceptions of matter favoured by some of his readers.

In order to free ourselves from such misconceptions, and to help us to understand the real nature of MacDiarmid's poem, we might do well to familiarise ourselves with the verses addressed by Sri Ramana to the rocky hill of Arunachala (2682 ft), on which he once lived as a cave-dweller, and at the foot of which his ashram still flourishes, some two or three miles south of the little town of Tiruvannamalai in South India. The Maharshi's 'Eight Stanzas on Sri Arunachala' contain, as MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach' does, strange, but deeply reverential language, directed to what would appear to be merely a vast heap of stones. And in, for example, the intercessory verses which the

saint composed when his mother fell ill with symptoms of typhoid, some very strange expressions are applied to the hill: 'Oh Lord! Hill of my refuge . . . Arunachala, Thou blazing fire of knowledge! . . . Arunachala, Dispeller of illusion!' (R.M., p. 70) These expressions, however, begin to lose some of their strangeness, once we realise that the saint sees the hill as a living manifestation of God (Iswara). In one poem he says: 'Only to convey by silence Thy State, Thou standest as a hill shining from heaven to earth' (R.M., p. 47). Where others, even those who believed the hill to be a sacred spot, saw only earth and stones, Ramana saw the Lord. And this may remind us of the song by the Islamic poet, Baba Kuhi, from which we quoted in an earlier chapter:

> In the market, in the cloister - only God I saw.
> In the valley and on the mountain - only God I saw.
> Him I have seen beside me oft in tribulation;
> In favour and in fortune - only God I saw.
> In prayer and fasting, in praise and contemplation,
> In the religion of the Prophet - only God I saw.
> Neither soul nor body, accident nor substance,
> Qualities nor causes - only God I saw.
> I oped mine eyes and by the light of his face around me
> In all the eye discovered - only God I saw
> Like a candle I was melting in His fire:
> Amidst the flames outflanking - only God I saw.
> Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,
> But when I looked with God's eyes - only God I saw.
> I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
> And lo, I was the All-living - only God I saw.
>
> (trans. by R.A. Nicholson.
> Happold, p. 220)

In MacDiarmid's poem too, the apparently strange expressions begin to lose their strangeness, once we realise what MacDiarmid saw in the stones of the raised beach. For, what he saw did not differ fundamentally from what Sri Ramana saw in the stones of Mount Arunachala. He says:

> . . . The kindred form I am conscious of here
> Is the beginning and end of the world . . .
>
> Alpha and Omega, the Omnific Word.
>
> (C.P., I, 428-9)

The significance of these words is unmistakable. No one who knows the New Testament, particularly the Fourth Gospel, could be unaware that the 'Omnific Word', the Word by whom 'all things were made' (John 1:3), is Christ, and that, in the Revelation of St John the Divine, this Christ declares himself to be 'Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last' (Revelation 22:13). The words, 'I am Alpha and Omega', appear no less than three times in this final book of the New Testament (Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), making it abundantly clear that Christ is not just the human Jesus, but, first and foremost, the divinely-begotten Lord who begins and ends the world; the universal Mind or Self who is 'the core of one's Being', and whom St John therefore calls 'the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). Of this Christ, as Professor Panikkar says, 'Christians can lay claim to no monopoly', since He is 'the unique link between the created and the uncreated, the relative and the Absolute, the temporal and the eternal, earth and heaven' and therefore we must recognise that 'Between these two poles everything that functions as intermediary, link, "conveyor" is Christ' (The Trinity and World Religions, p. 52).

Everything? - we may ask doubtfully. Is everything that performs the function of uniting earth and heaven to be called Christ? Even the stones of a raised beach? Is that not just pantheism? If so, St Paul is just as guilty as MacDiarmid or Panikkar of pantheism, for, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, he states quite emphatically, concerning the rock in the wilderness from which God caused water to flow for the thirsty Israelites (Exodus 17:6), that 'that Rock was Christ' (1 Corinthians 10:4). Incidentally, we may also care to note how St Peter, in his First Epistle General, associates the divine life of Christ with stones. He refers to Christ himself as 'a living stone', 'a chief corner-stone', 'the stone which the builders disallowed', and to the people of Christ as 'lively stones' (1 Peter 2:4-8).

In any case, there is no denying the fact that, for MacDiarmid, the stones of the raised beach did function as a living 'link between the created and the uncreated . . . the temporal and the eternal', for he is able to assure us that

> These stones go through man straight to God . . .

> . . . Only in them,
> If in anything, can His Creation confront Him.
>
> (C.P., I, 427)

Where others could only see stones, MacDiarmid saw 'the kindred form' of Christ, the 'Alpha and Omega'. who is the 'one mediator between God and men' (1 Timothy 2:5), the only means by which any man can come to God, for 'No man cometh unto the Father, but by me' (John 14:6). Hence the poet's very natural inference:

> I must begin with these stones as the world began.
>
> (C.P., I, 424)

and his consequent realisation, that

> These bare stones bring me straight back to reality.
> I grasp one of them and I have in my grip
> The beginning and the end of the world . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 432)

- the 'beginning and the end of the world' being, of course, Christ, the first of all things, and the last. 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last'.

If, in this great poem, we do not find 'spiritual issues / Made inhumanly clear' (C.P., I, 431), in accordance with the poet's intentions, this could be because our spiritual 'gates' are not open. For men are apt to begin, at a very early age, to block up their gates of perception with conceptual rubbish derived from their environment and their 'education'. As Wordsworth says, 'Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy' ('Immortality Ode'). And soon men cannot look at anything, without interposing between themselves and 'the barren but beautiful reality' (C.P., I, 431), some religious or idealogical lens which deadens, or completely distorts, what is before their eyes. As MacDiarmid says:

> The inward gates of a bird are always open.
> It does not know how to shut them.
> This is the secret of its song,
> But whether any man's are ajar is doubtful.
>
> (C.P., I, 423)

Men know how to shut their gates, but have little idea as to how to open them again. Most men pass their lives within the dark walls of a conceptual prison of their own making, isolated from the all-embracing, all-pervading flood of life, which alone is real. And so, to learn how to open his own gates to the flood, the poet has to turn away from man, to study the stones:

> I look at these stones and know little about them,
> But I know their gates are open too,
> Always open, far longer open, than any bird's can be,
> That every one of them has had its gates wide open
> far longer
> Than all birds put together, let alone humanity,
> Though through them no man can see,
> No man nor anything more recently born than themselves
> And that is everything else on the Earth.
>
> (C.P., I, 423)

As a human being, the poet cannot see through the open gates of the stones on the raised beach, but by contemplating their silent forms, he begins to see how he too may open his gates. He begins to realise that openness results from dismissing 'all else' - everything, that is to say, except the 'living stone' of which the stones are made; everything except the living Rock of the real Self, from which, in Moses' day, exhausted men drank new life in the desert, and from which, in every age, men whose gates are open can still drink freely, in accordance with the promise made by 'the Omnific Word' himself, in the book of Revelation: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely' (21:6). It is, of course, only because the poet perceives the true 'form' of the raised beach, that he is ready to learn from the stones, and ready to rid himself of 'all else': all 'the empty things o' the earth' (C.P., I, 498), all the clutter of possessions, ambitions, theories, thought-systems, etc., which bolster up man's 'cursèd anthropocentricism / - That worst astigmatism' (C.P., I, 446) and hide from him his true Self. Seeing that the stones have 'dismissed all else', he knows that he too must do the same:

> I too lying here have dismissed all else.
>
> (C.P., I, 423)

And this renunciation has immediate results:

> Already I feel all that can perish perishing in me . . .
> (C.P., I, 424)

This is the natural and inevitable consequence of coming under the influence of the stones, for -

> Their sole concern is that what can be shaken
> Shall be shaken and disappear
> And only the unshakable be left.
> (C.P., I, 427)

It must be remembered, of course, that 'what can be shaken' (i.e. 'all that can perish') includes the ever-changing ego, the deceptive, unstable 'I'. Only the rock of the real Self is 'unshakable', imperishable, 'the fountain and end of all life' (C.P., I, 427). Hence the cry of the Psalmist, in Psalm 61 (B.C.P.): 'O set me up upon the rock that is higher than I' (v.3), and MacDiarmid's earnest resolve: 'I must get into this stone world now' (C.P., I, 426). It should be noted, that the 'living stone' towards which both men aspire, is not simply one fact of experience, among other facts. It is the fact, upon which all the others depend. It is the Truth behind all other truths; not just the truth of the stones, or the truth of the world, but the universal Truth that lives in 'every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). This is why the two poets respond to it as they do. It is the Truth in them responding to the truth in the stones:

> Truth has no trouble in knowing itself.
> This is it, The hard fact. The inoppugnable reality.
> (C.P., I, 431)

Those, of course, who have not found the Truth within themselves, have considerable trouble in recognising it outside themselves. In a sense, only those who have become the Truth, know it when they see it. For it is only Truth itself which 'has no trouble in knowing itself'. The experience of those who live estranged from the Truth, estranged from their real Self (the one 'inoppugnable reality') is best summed up in the two lines:

> We have lost the grounds of our being.
> We have not built on rock.
> (C.P., I, 431)

And here, lest we should forget, we have another reminder of the divine significance attached to rock and stone in the Bible (e.g. 'Who is a rock, save our God?' 2 Samuel 22:32. 'He is the Rock, his work is perfect' Deuteronomy 32:4). The words 'We have not built on rock', are an obvious reference to the passage in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus says:

> Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:
> And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.
> And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:
> And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Clearly, those who 'have not built on rock', are those who foolishly build their lives on sand - on the shifting sands of the ever-fleeting 'I'. Inevitably, such people are inviting disaster, ensuring their own spiritual collapse and downfall, in this world or the next, for they have estranged themselves from 'the grounds of (their) being', the rock of the real Self within them, the Rock who is 'Christ', the 'Alpha and Omega', 'the beginning and the end of the world'.

Although we have looked at only some of the powerful religious connotations that cling to the words of this poem, it is already plain, that theology and geology are inextricably fused together here. We cannot exclude either without causing irreparable damage to the poem's structure of meaning. Unless we are willing to see, as MacDiarmid does, that the true 'form' of the stones on the raised beach, is that of 'the Omnific Word', 'the unique link between the created and the uncreated, the relative and the Absolute, the temporal and the eternal, earth and heaven', much of the language he uses is bound to seem absurdly inappropriate and irrelevant, to say the least. Only in the light of the poet's clear perception, on the Raised Beach, of the divine 'Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last', can we hope to make sense of what must otherwise appear to be wildly exaggerated claims, on behalf of a heap of stones.

One thing is certain. We cannot cite this poem, as an example of how MacDiarmid occasionally turned his back on his religious and mystical insights. In fact, there are few of his poems in which the bones of these insights show more clearly. Since, however, this poem never 'spires up' beyond 'Creation and Creator baith', into the silent void of the Godhead, it is obviously a less profound and less spiritually extensive poem than, say, the terrible 'Ode to All Rebels'. Nevertheless, it is an unmistakably religious poem, at the centre of which is 'The God in whom religions centre' (C.P., I, 244), 'The God . . . wha made / The warld' (C.P., I, 244), 'the God that men / Can humanly ken' (C.P., I, 245), through whom, it is believed, they may ultimately come to 'Him that lifts unkennable ayont / Creation and Creator baith' (C.P., I, 244).

Where, then, are we to look, for clear and unmistakable evidence of MacDiarmid's irreligious themes? As we have already said, these are almost impossible to identify in his poetry, because of the essentially multi-dimensional nature of poetry. So often, what appears on the surface to be irreligious, proves, on closer examination, to have profound religious implications. It is only in the one-dimensional world of his prose that we can sometimes with certainty identify certain passages as irreligious, in the sense of being destitute of religious insight. It might seem tempting to regard such passages as irrelevant to our present purpose, which, of course is to draw attention to MacDiarmid's stature as a great religious and mystical poet, and to uncover the complex religious and mystical structures underlying his poetry, but it is not really possible to draw a rigid line of distinction between his poetry and his prose. No poem of any length is ever all poetry, and it must be admitted that much of MacDiarmid's poetry is buttressed with chopped-up prose.

And so, in our examination of his poetry, which, at its best, ranks him with some of the greatest writers of all time, we must also take some account of his prose, which, unfortunately, has no such claim to distinction, being, in the main, the product of nothing more profound than his ratiocinative intellect, and his polemical public personae. Since ratiocination is not MacDiarmid's strong point, his prose is seldom much more interesting or important than that of many much less gifted writers. In him, as in them, ratiocination merely

blocks the dynamic flow of light and creativity from the deeper levels of the mind. MacDiarmid himself was acutely conscious of this. Hence his frequently expressed antipathy to what he calls 'reason'. In 'Thalamus', for example, a piece of verse from Stony Limits and Other Poems, he endeavours to expose (ironically enough by means of ratiocinative doggerel) the disastrous effects of ratiocination on the human mind. He declares that

> The incapacity and distrust of most people
> For mere reason is well founded . . .
>
> . . . Reason, used or misused,
> Usurps man's consciousness . . .
>
> And tho' a small part of the whole
> Would fain have entire control . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 412)

He maintains that when 'reason' does obtain 'entire control', the more profound aspects of human thought and experience are soon driven out of sight, thrust into oblivion, and then

> Life's other and greater tide flows unseen
> And its presence men hardly guess . . .

although

> . . . That unseen tide now and again
> Lifts into consciousness far greater truths
> Than reason itself can attain.
>
> (C.P., I, 412)

And when these 'greater truths' are lifted into MacDiarmid's consciousness, he invariably turns to poetry, knowing that such things cannot be expressed in his one-dimensional prose, because, like poetry itself, these truths are multi-dimensional, and, therefore, not susceptible of narrow, partisan, propagandist interpretations. This is one reason why MacDiarmid's prose tends to be totally devoid of them, but the poet hints at another reason also (connected apparently with certain innate tendencies in human nature) when he speaks of these 'greater truths' as

> The truths that all greater thinkers have seen
> At the height of their genius - and then
> Spent most of their days denying
> Or trying to scale down to mere reason's ken . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 413)

He makes no pretence to be exempt himself from this disastrous tendency:

> While away beyond this life's scant scope
> In a glorious unseen waterfall
> Pours all but all of life's best,
> We turn our poor mills with the rest.
>
> These mills of Satan; these hellish hives
> In which men sink to the level of slaves,
> Treadmills of rationalising . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 413)

It is when MacDiarmid is turning his ratiocinative treadmill 'with the rest' (instead of being himself, 'whatever that may be' C.P., I, 137), and thereby becoming enslaved to ways of thinking that belong to those who have never seen 'the glory that descends', or indeed anything else 'beyond this life's scant scope', that his utterances inevitably become drained of religious insight, and all 'greater truths'. Ironically enough, whenever, for example, he employs his 'reason' to project his treasured image of himself as a political, cultural and literary guide and guru, he loses touch at once with all that distinguishes him from his fellow men. His egocentric attitude effectively isolates him from his real Self, and so, he is able only to regurgitate the stereotyped ideas with which the minds of his audience are already over-full. Instead of standing out as a leader, he is seen to be treading precisely the same dreary treadmill as his fellow slaves.

Examples of this treadmill type of thinking are not far to seek in MacDiarmid's work, particularly in 'The Kind of Poetry I Want' and In Memoriam James Joyce, where egocentricism gets full sway. One very clear example can be found in a piece of chopped-up prose in Lucky Poet called, 'To the Younger Scottish Writers'. The older writer is explaining to his younger contemporaries, what 'Scottish writers most lack, most need', and he provides a list which includes the following:

> A rich overflowing apprehension of the definite
> Day-by-day content of our people's lives,
> A burningly clear understanding of the factors at work,
> Of the actual correlation of the forces, in labour to-day;
> A Dundee jute mill, Singer's, Beardmore's,
> The ghost towns, ruined fishing villages, slave camps,

> And all the derelict areas of our countryside;
> The writer not first and foremost concerned with these
> Lacks the centrality that alone can give
> Value to his work - he is a trifler, a traitor,
> To his art and to mankind alike,
> A fool choosing flight and fantasy,
> Not to be pitied, but despised.
>
> (C.P., I, 634-5)

Without disputing the importance of any of the things he mentions here, we must nevertheless decline to accept without qualification, the proposition that these are the sole or principal requirements of any writer of stature. Nor are the belligerent denunciations attached to the list calculated to reduce our scepticism. Truth does not require the support of angry anathemas; only blind dogmatism does. If we are unable to forget that the true writer has needs of even greater magnitude and importance than any mentioned in these lines, it could be because MacDiarmid has repeatedly drawn our attention to them himself, as, for example, in 'Second Hymn to Lenin', where he says:

> . . . The principal question
> Aboot a work o' art is frae hoo deep
> A life it springs - and syne hoo faur
> Up frae't it has the poo'er to leap
>
> And hoo muckle it lifts up wi' it
> Into the sunlicht like a saumon there . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 323)

Perhaps the most apt comment on MacDiarmid's idealogically conditioned directive to younger writers, has been supplied by MacDiarmid himself, in some lines from 'In the Shetland Islands' (The Islands of Scotland):

> The newspaper critic was talking rubbish, as usual,
> When he made the shallow gibe, the fool reproach,
> That in resuming his work in the Castle of Muzot
> Rilke with all his insistence on Bejahung
> 'Could only praise life when protected from it'.
>
> If personal participation were to be demanded,
> Privacy forbidden, and any abstention
> From any show of 'life' - from any activity
> Most people indulge in - construed
> As a flight from reality, an insulation from Life,
> All but the most rudimentary forms of life,
> All but the 'life' of the stupidest people,
> Would speedily become impossible.
>
> (C.P., I, 575)

Another example of how the ratiocinative treadmill occasionally blinds the poet, to the 'greater truths' he has seen when his spiritual vision was unimpaired, can be found in 'The Kind of Poetry I Want', where he announces: 'I have found in Marxism all that I need', and then goes on to insist, that the only kind of poetry he can now recognise as poetry at all, is

> A Communist poetry that bases itself
> On the Resolution of the C.C. of the R.C.P.
> In Spring 1925 . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 615)

Such statements can be greeted only with incredulity. It is, obviously, absurd to suggest, for example, that the profound religious and mystical insights which characterise MacDiarmid's work are to be found in Marxism. It is equally absurd to maintain, that such poetic masterpieces as 'A Moment in Eternity', 'Ode to All Rebels', and 'On a Raised Beach', require to be authenticated as poetry by some Communist label, or some 'Resolution of the C.C. of the R.C.P.' Conclusions of this sort can be reached only by minds blinkered by theory and dogma.

We may wonder, as we examine these and other similar passages in MacDiarmid's work, how it comes about, that a person who has repeatedly had his spiritual eyes opened by mystical experience, and who has learned to follow the pointing fingers of so many great spiritual teachers, is, nevertheless, inclined to speak, at times, as if he had never seen or known anything of the spiritual world. How, we may ask, can such a person so easily forget the freedom of the real Self, and so readily accept the shackles of the ratiocinative ego, with its doctrinaire delusions? The Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli, M.D., who spent many years investigating the psychological effects of spiritual development, has thrown some light on these questions, both in the article he contributed to the Hibbert Journal in 1937, 'Spiritual Development and its Attendant Maladies' and in his book, Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques,[5] published in 1965. Dr Assagioli speaks of how 'The opening of the channel between the conscious and the superconscious levels, between the ego and the Self, and the flood of light, joy and energy which follows, often produce a wonderful

release' (p. 43). Such an experience of 'harmonious inner awakening is characterised by a sense of joy and mental illumination that brings with it an insight into the meaning and purpose of life . . .' (p. 46), but the light and joy do not last, in those who are still far from permanent enlightenment. Painful and disturbing reactions follow the state of exaltation:

> Such an exalted state lasts for varying periods, but it is bound to cease. The personal self was only temporarily overpowered but not permanently transformed. The inflow of light and love is rhythmical as is everything in the universe. After a while it diminishes or ceases and the flood is followed by the ebb.
>
> Necessarily this is a very painful experience and is apt in some cases to produce strong reactions and cause serious troubles. The personal ego re-awakens and asserts itself with renewed force. All the rocks and rubbish, which had been covered and concealed at high tide, emerge again . . .
>
> At times the reaction becomes intensified to the extent of causing the individual even to deny the value and reality of his recent experience. Doubts and criticism enter his mind and he is tempted to regard the whole thing as an illusion, a fantasy or an emotional intoxication. He becomes bitter and sarcastic, ridicules himself and others, and even turns his back on his higher ideals and aspirations. Yet, try as he may, he cannot return to his old state; he has seen the vision, and its beauty and power to attract remain with him in spite of his efforts to suppress it. He cannot accept everyday life as before, or be satisfied with it. A 'divine homesickness' haunts him and leaves him no peace. (pp. 46-47)

Dr Assagioli's findings, of course, contain nothing that is really new. Some three centuries before he wrote his book, John Bunyan (1628-1688) makes it plain, in his Pilgrim's Progress,[6] that the path of spiritual development never does run smooth, for, as the pilgrim struggles to make his way towards 'yonder shining light', he has to stumble through the miry depths of 'the slough of Despond'. Earlier still, St John of the Cross warns spiritual travellers, that though their journey may begin in sweetness and light, they must, sooner or later, endure the sufferings, confusions and privations of the Dark Night of the Soul (K. & R., p. 297ff.).

Plato too, as we may remember, speaks, in Book VII of the Republic, of the pain and confusion that would inevitably result, if one of the cave-prisoners were suddenly freed, and forced to look outside the cave,

at the vast world illuminated by the light of the sun, the light of reality:

> . . . Would not his eyes, think you, be distressed, and would he not shrink and turn away to the things which he could see distinctly (i.e. the shadows of things on the walls of the cave), and consider them to be really clearer than the things pointed out to him . . .
>
> Should you not expect him to be puzzled, and to regard his old visions as truer than the objects now forced upon his notice?[7]

In the light of these considerations, it is obviously important that we should not regard MacDiarmid's occasional lapses into spiritual myopia and blindness, as signs of mere irreligion, but that we should see them as symptoms of a not uncommon malady of the soul, requiring diagnosis and treatment in terms of the recognised laws and principles of spiritual development. Perhaps the most puzzling and disquieting of the symptoms that usually accompany his attacks of blindness, is a violent and exaggerated egoism, which sometimes distorts his writing so completely, that it turns into what he himself has described as a 'most exasperating exhibition of overwhelming self-conceit, extremism and impossibilism' (L.P., p. 70). But this is not too difficult to understand, in the context of religious and mystical experience. As Dr Assagioli explains, in Chapter II of Psychosynthesis:

> The inner experience of the spiritual Self, and its intimate association with and penetration of the personal self, gives to those who have it a sense of greatness and internal expansion, the conviction of participating in some way in the divine nature. In the religious tradition and spiritual doctrines of every epoch one finds numerous attestations on this subject - some of them expressed in daring terms. In the Bible there is the explicit sentence 'I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High' . . . The most extreme expression of the identity of the human spirit in its pure and real essence with the Supreme Spirit is contained in the central teaching of the Vedanta philosophy: 'Tat Twam Asi' (Thou art That) and 'Aham evam param Brahman' (In truth I am the Supreme Brahman).
>
> In whatever way one may conceive the relationship between the individual Self and the universal Self, be they regarded as identical or similar, distinct or united, it is most important to recognise clearly, and to retain ever present

> in theory and in practice, the difference that exists between the Self in its essential nature . . . and the small ordinary personality, the little 'self' or ego, of which we are normally conscious. The disregard of this vital distinction leads to absurd and dangerous consequences.
>
> The fatal error of all who fall victim to these illusions is to attribute to their personal ego or 'self' the qualities and powers of the Self. In philosophical terms, it is a case of confusion between an absolute and a relative truth, between the metaphysical and the empirical levels of reality; in religious terms, between God and the 'soul'. (pp. 44-45)

In his hours of unimpaired vision, no one could be more acutely aware than MacDiarmid, of the pathetic inadequacies of his own 'personal ego', in relation to the transcendent glory of the real Self. This is why, in A Drunk Man, he frankly confesses, that 'Fain I wad be free / O' my eternal me' (C.P., I, 142). He sees all too clearly, that 'the glory that descends', being a product of 'a force to which I ne'er could grow', is able to manifest itself only 'Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft' (C.P., I, 144); and that, apart from this divine glory,

> A' thing that ony man can be's
> A mockery o' his soul at last.
>
> (C.P., I, 128)

But, just like the light of the sun, the light of That which, in essence, we really are, can dazzle and blind, as well as illuminate and clarify. Hence the occasional impairment of MacDiarmid's spiritual sight, by the very light from which it derives its existence. The fault, of course, is not in the light, but in the feeble, undeveloped visual powers of those who have not yet ceased to be infected by 'impious delusions o' (their) ain' (C.P., I, 507), concerning their 'personal ego'.

When we speak of MacDiarmid's repeated illuminations by mystical experience, we must not forget the essentially temporary and fleeting nature of mystical illumination. Like the Northern Lights, it comes and goes quite unpredictably, flickering here, there, and then elsewhere, before disappearing altogether. The mystical ascent into light, is quickly followed by a drop into darkness. Even such a master-mystic as Plotinus could not remain on the radiant heights for very long. All too soon, he would experience 'a falling away, an exile, and a loss of the Soul's wings' (Inge, II, p. 138). Wordsworth too, was

often painfully aware of the baffling elusiveness of the mystical illuminations on which he depended for his profoundest insights. As he sadly confesses, in The Prelude:

> . . . The hiding places of my power
> Seem open; I approach and then they close;
> I see by glimpses now; when age comes on
> May scarcely see at all . . .
>
> (XI, 336-9)

We should not, therefore, be surprised, to find in MacDiarmid's work, some evidence not only of his ascents into the heights of spiritual wisdom ('Yont nature and the Common Man', C.P., I, 255), but also of his occasional descents into spiritual ignorance.

It is true that he gradually developed, through his wide-ranging religious studies, a more or less constant darsana, or vision of the truth, but the light of this darsana was not infrequently obscured and overshadowed, by an inflated ego, and by vast accumulations of ego-boosting ideas. This darsana, therefore, was not always effective as an antidote to darkness. In fact, there is only one permanently effective antidote to spiritual darkness, and it can be obtained only by those who go beyond all learning, all knowledge, all philosophy, all theology, all mystical experience, and, indeed, every other kind of experience which has an experiencing 'I' at its centre, until they find a permanent abode in that rarified realm of being which MacDiarmid refers to as 'Whaur I o' me ha'e me bereft' (C.P., I, 144), the place where 'There's naething left o' me ava' (C.P., I, 143). As Sri Deshpande says: 'This is the beginning of "pure seeing" . . . With "I" as the operating centre gone away, it is like experiencing and seeing without either the experiencer or the "seer" . . .' (A.Y., p. 38). The bereavement has to be permanent, of course. There must be no resurrection or resuscitation of the dualizing ego, the source of all darkness. Otherwise, the sun of endless day will remain a prisoner of the clouds. 'The free, abundant, intolerable licht' (C.P., I, 507) of the real Self (which, of course, is selfless) will be unable to show itself, without being promptly smothered by the falling night. Spiritual darkness cannot finally come to an end, until the 'personal

ego' finally comes to an end: until it is finally lost, in the divine 'I, yet not I', of which Paul speaks in the Epistle to the Galatians (2:20).

It is not, of course, surprising, that MacDiarmid had only brief and fleeting glimpses of the world of light, and was never able to establish a permanent residence there. Few men ever do. Only a very few rare souls ever arrive at that state of complete and final illumination which St Teresa describes in the 'Seventh Mansions' of the Interior Castle, where she is at pains to stress the profound difference between the ultimate state of pure non-duality, and the mystic's temporary experience of 'union' with the divine. As the saint explains:

> We might say that union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they give is one: the wicks and the wax and the light are all one; yet afterwards the one candle can be perfectly well separated from the other and the candles become two again, or the wick may be withdrawn from the wax. But here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is as if a tiny streamlet enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself, or as if in a room there were two large windows through which the light streamed in: it enters in different places but it all becomes one. (Peers, II, p. 335)

We may think of MacDiarmid as far from this ultimate state, this 'Transcendent Sphere' of the 'Not-Two', this radiant realm of non-dual reality, yet there is no ignoring the fact that this is the state towards which he aspires when he claims to be an Advaitin (L.P., p. 408); this is the state he repeatedly glimpses in his moments of mystical experience, and attempts to reflect in his poetry, as when, in 'The Terrible Crystal' (A Lap of Honour, 1967), he speaks of 'a single central radiance' revealed in

> - Visions of a transcendental country
> Stretching out athwart the temporal frontiers . . .
>
> (C.P., II, 1095)

Although he knows that one can arrive at this 'single central radiance' only when one's 'consciousness is crucified upon circumstance' (p. 1095), only, that is to say, when one's ego has been sentenced to death, he makes no secret of his overwhelming desire to reach it:

> This is the hidden and lambent core I seek.
> Like crystal it is hidden deep
> And only to be found by those
> Who will dig deep.
>
> (p. 1094)

Only by digging deep into one's selfish and deceitful nature, can one get beyond the 'impious delusions' of the superficial ego, the source of darkness, and reach the real Self, the 'single central radiance', the source of light. Having glimpsed this central source of light, the poet craves for nothing else. He appreciates, but does not hanker after, the fragmentary reflections of this light which appear in the writings of men, in the wisdom of 'seers past and present', for these flashes of wisdom are

> - All, indeed, but broken lights,
> Partial gleams reflecting each in their degree
> Some aspect of the white intensity
> Of that single central radiance,
> But all carrying the same gospel:
> 'When consciousness is crucified upon circumstance
> Give praise!'
>
> (p. 1095)

If, sometimes, MacDiarmid seems disposed to hide his real religious aspirations, behind apparently irreligious words and thoughts, this may have something to do with the demands of friends and comrades, the demands of a society which appears to value the treadmills of logic above those blossoms of life that are called poetry. In the following lines, from 'In Memoriam: Liam Mac'ille Iosa', (Stony Limits and Other Poems), he speaks of the foolishness of choosing logic rather than life:

> I am a poet; our fools ask me for logic not life.
> Scotland has too much logic; but whither are all the
> clouds going
> With which like Scotland our spirits are rife,
> Before Eternity like a great wind blowing

> The race of the piled clouds after a gale
> Across the world, over its cliffed edge, over the vale
> Of Death till they dapple another country
> As if crowding softly, softly, O God, into Thee?
>
> (C.P., I, 415)

From every life that has not been bereft of the 'I', 'me', and 'mine', of 'the little "self" or ego', clouds of delusion and spiritual ignorance are continually arising, but where the ego becomes inflated by self-conscious ratiocination, the clouds tend to become thicker, and more depressingly effective in concealing the sun of life, and 'life's deeper flood' (C.P., I, 412). Fortunately, however, the clouds are no more static than anything else in this fleeting world. They are constantly in flight before the great wind of Eternity, perpetually moving towards 'another country' beyond the 'vale / Of Death', where they will find their true meaning, as all things finally will, by 'crowding softly, softly, O God, into Thee'. The phrase 'vale / Of Death' may have special connotations for those familiar with the Scottish metrical version of Psalm 23, where the words, 'Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale', are followed by the lines:

> yet will I fear none ill:
> For thou art with me; and thy rod
> and staff me comfort still.
> My table thou hast furnished
> in presence of my foes;
> My head thou dost with oil anoint,
> and my cup overflows.

It may seem, sometimes, as if MacDiarmid is yielding to the demands of 'fools' and trying to supply 'logic' instead of 'life', and, therefore, inevitably producing a certain amount of irreligious rubbish, but there can be no real doubt about his abiding aims and aspirations, as expressed in the words he addresses to Liam Mac'ille Iosa:

> O come, come, come, let us turn to God
> And get rid of this degrading and damnable load . . .
>
> Come, let us obey the creative word.
> God will make us flash like the blade of a sword.
> Only that which aspires to a caoin, an edge like it,
> Like a melody tends to the infinite.
>
> (C.P., I, 415)

Obviously, it is 'to the infinite', to the eternal, to God, that MacDiarmid's truly creative work invariably tends, reflecting his own deepest aspirations, for he fully realises with Wordsworth that

> . . . our being's heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there.
>
> (The Prelude (1850): Book VI, 604-5)

whereas, he sees with Goethe that

> Alles Vergängliche
> Ist nur ein Gleichnis.[8]
>
> (Faust, Part Two, 12104-5)

Notes

[1] Lucky Poet, Being the Autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid (London: Methuen, 1943), p. 51.

[2] See Lucky Poet, p. 408.

[3] In To Circumjack Cencrastus, MacDiarmid says:

> . . . we mauna be
> Objective like the Greeks
> Blind o' a'e e'e - and no' the ane
> That humour steeks.
>
> (C.P., I, 220)

[4] The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, ed. Arthur Osborne (London: Rider, 1971), pp. 16, 18-19.

[5] Roberto Assagioli, Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques, Second Impression (Wellingborough: Turnstone Books, 1980).

[6] John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress (London: Bohn, MDCCCLIII), pp. 6 and 13.

[7] The Republic of Plato, trans. J.L. Davies and D.J. Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 236.

[8] 'All that is transitory is merely symbolic'.

Epilogue

Some readers might be inclined to argue that it is a matter of no literary importance, whether we recognise MacDiarmid as a religious poet or not. The only important fact to be recognised, they might say, is that he is a poet. What kind of poet he is, does not really matter. A poet is a poet is a poet . . . Such terms as 'religious' or 'philosophical', 'Communist' or 'Buddhist', have no real significance in the world of poetry. But such a view implies a very limited understanding of the function of poetry, and no understanding at all of what MacDiarmid meant when he spoke of poetry as 'The greatest poo'er amang men' (Second Hymn to Lenin, C.P., I, 326). No poetry worthy of the name exists in a little compartment of its own, isolated from the rest of human life, from the stresses and strains of human thought and activity, and the profound insights of religion and philosophy. No great poetry is ever primarily a matter of verbal skills and techniques. It is, first and foremost, a creative act, whereby human consciousness is heightened to perceive something new and fresh in the actual world of human life. This creative function inevitably implicates poetry in the world of ideas, the world of the intellect, the world of religious intuition, the entire world of human activity. Great poetry is never simply a form of entertainment. It is an enlightenment of the mind, a clarification of consciousness, a catharsis of the whole psyche, awakening a flood of new perceptions, new sympathies, new emotional responses, as the Oresteian Trilogy of Aeschylus does, as Beowulf does, as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight does, as The Canterbury Pilgrims does, as The Testament of Cresseid does, as The Fairy Queen does, as The Divine Comedy does, as King Lear does, as Paradise Lost does, as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell does, as The Prelude does, and every other great work of poetry. Great poetry is inseparable from great ideas, great insights, great extensions of human thought, human feeling, human awareness.

It is, therefore, simply an indication that MacDiarmid is a great poet, when he declares: 'As a poet I'm interested in religious ideas' ('In Memoriam James Joyce', C.P., II, 798). For him, as for Spenser, as for Milton, as for Blake, religious ideas are not simply an optional ingredient to be added to some pre-existing poetic recipe. They are the very stuff out of which his great poetry emerges. Apart from them, his deepest insights would find no means of expression and embodiment. Ultimately, religious ideas and the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid are quite inseparable.

Again, it is likely that some people who feel that they knew the poet well, will maintain that they never at any time encountered the profoundly religious and mystical thinker who makes his appearance in the preceding pages. Their word should not be doubted. As Ouspensky has said: 'The chief feature of our being is that we are many, not one'.[1] The same point is made by a leading contemporary exponent of Assagioli's technique of Psychosynthesis, Dr Piero Ferrucci of Florence, who explains that 'Each of us is a crowd'.[2] In other words, at the level of the empirical ego, none of us is a single person, but rather, a collection of more or less conflicting sub-personalities, which, in order to avoid insanity, we have to try somehow, whether by Psychosynthesis or Yoga, to integrate with our real Self. The poet, who was not, of course, particularly concerned about the spectre of insanity,[3] deliberately cultivated his warring sub-personalities, particularly the more grotesque and repulsive ones, and used them with singular success to divert inquisitive eyes from the sacred domain of his real Self, and to keep secret his inner sanctum of sensitivity, allowing it to be glimpsed only by those before whom he could safely drop his defences.

There are, of course, religious precedents for this kind of behaviour. In Christianity, as we know, 'Sweet Jesus' becomes the stony-faced Judge who commits the wicked to Hell. And in Buddhism, as The Tibetan Book of the Dead makes clear, the all-loving and all-compassionate Buddha hides from wrong-doers wandering in the after-death state, by assuming the grotesque and hideous forms of, for example, 'blood-drinking deities' (Tib.B.D., p. 132). The strange logic behind such religious myths is, perhaps, slightly clarified by

the Tibetan story of a temple-painter's little son, who died, and, while wandering in the after-death state, saw the terrible blood-drinking deities, but, being used to seeing them in his father's paintings, he felt no fear. He ran towards them with a joyous cry of recognition, and stretched out his arms to embrace them. As he did so, however, their dreadful forms dissolved, and he found himself embracing, and being embraced by, the Compassionate Lord himself. The boy's experience was of a kind which no friend of MacDiarmid's could be unacquainted with.

It has not been our aim here, however, to discuss or explain biographical details which are of doubtful literary significance. We have sought rather to focus attention on the unifying pattern of profound religious and mystical thought which underlies, and, to a great extent clarifies, the often complex, difficult work of Scotland's great poet, Hugh MacDiarmid. For, to sense, however briefly and dimly, the nature of the mind within which this vast pattern of insights takes shape, is at once to realise that (to borrow Nietzsche's words), 'Die ganze Tatsache Mensch liegt in ungeheurer Ferne unter ihm'.[4] The work of this great poet points far beyond Mensch to Übermensch, far beyond 'vile humanity / To authentic manhood and onward / To participation in self-universal' (C.P., II, 877), i.e. 'the life of the Buddhas' (C.P., II, 1034).

Notes

[1] P.D. Ouspensky, Conscience: The Search for Truth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 57.

[2] Piero Ferrucci, What We May Be: The Visions and Techniques of Psychosynthesis (Wellingborough: Turnstone Press, 1982), p. 48.

[3] The Drunk Man's words to Dostoevsky should be recalled:

> - Sae I in turn maun gi'e
> My soul to misery,
> Daidle disease
> Upon my knees,
> And welcome madness
> Wi' exceedin' gladness . . .
>
> (C.P., I, 140)

[4] Vorwort, Ecce Homo, F.N., II, 1067.

'The entire fact we call Man lies an immense distance below it'.

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