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Culture and Leisure in Hugh MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach'[1]

The meaning of culture in a 'machine age' was widely debated in the late 1920s and early 1930s. If, as many believed, mechanised production promised greater leisure time, did leisure threaten high culture, or promise to revitalise it? How, asked cultural commentators, could the working and lower middle classes be weaned off the mass-cultural nutriment provided by the newspapers and other print media, by the radio, and by the cinema? Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public*, F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment*, and essays in *Scrutiny*, the *Criterion*, and the *New English Weekly*, were among the works exploring such questions. The new cultural commentators recruited some of the vocabulary of the Victorian sage writers: the term 'culture' itself, as well as ideas of 'philistinism' and an antipathy to mechanisation.

Hugh MacDiarmid, writing for journals such as the *Criterion*, the *New English Weekly*, the *Free Man*, and *New Britain*, as well as reading them, could not have avoided such questions, and his views on them may be reconstructed by reference to his essays from the period. Of course, for a Scottish writer, the collapse of English cultural coherence was not the catastrophe that it might have seemed to his peers south of the border. Likewise, for a man largely self-educated, the collapse of cultural authority did not pose the same problem that it did for the products of the public schools and of Oxford and Cambridge. Nevertheless, in his prose MacDiarmid shared some attitudes and approaches with those writers. A fuller account of this question in MacDiarmid's prose needs to be made, and this essay makes some contribution to the task. However, the central issue in this essay is the relation of the debate about culture to 'On a Raised Beach'.

The starting point is the prose source for certain lines in 'On a Raised Beach':

> A culture demands leisure and leisure presupposes
> A self-determined rhythm of life; the capacity for solitude
> Is its test; by that the desert knows us.[2]

The source is an essay by H. J. Travers from the 'Views and Reviews' section of *The New English Weekly* for 28 July 1932;[3] MacDiarmid's poem 'Cheville' appeared in the same issue. Though MacDiarmid takes fewer than twenty words from it, a consideration of the whole essay brings hitherto neglected elements of the poem into the foreground.

CULTURE

The identity and gender of Travers remain a mystery,[4] but his discourse – assuming Travers to be male – derives from the same Victorian sage lineage as the discourse of the Leavises. He begins by considering Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public*. He praises its 'exposure of the lower strata of contemporary fiction', but questions the idea that the only hope of 'cultural regeneration' came from the 'highbrows'. He also questions the division of the cultural terrain according to high and low brow, and does not believe that 'highbrow' or 'minority culture' is sufficiently coherent to be treated as a single entity. Rather, it is characterised by the absence of 'any authoritative code of values, and the consequent outcrop of a jungle of individual idioms, all with highly technical origins'.[5] The interest in idioms with technical origins is not something on which Travers expands, but was sure to have interested MacDiarmid, engaged as he was in the creation of 'synthetic English'. 'The minority writers of to-day', Travers goes on to say, 'inhabit diverse zones of culture, and demand each a different apparatus of perception'. The lack of any agreed code of values he illustrates with reference to the war of the reviews between *transition* and *The Enemy*. The discourse of his diagnosis is unmistakeably Arnoldian: 'Our anarchic culture is certainly ill-equipped to redeem the organised philistinism of Fleet Street and the bestseller.' Later in the essay he complains, in terms that recall both Carlyle and Arnold, of 'our passion for doing everything by machinery', a passion which had resulted in the growth of such machinery of government as censorship, as exemplified by the Defence of the Realm Acts. Travers's solution to the multiple problems

of philistine culture, of a censorious governing class, of a heterogeneous cultural elite, and of a growing mechanisation of cultural life draws on the example of John Middleton Murry and other followers of Lawrence: writers should abandon 'wish-fulfilment' in favour of 'life-fulfilment'.

> Only a great life can support great literature. Here feeling may have a chance of breaking through the limitations of language, as it does repeatedly in the work of D. H. Lawrence, whose development might have been different in a more sympathetic age. What we need is a dose of healthy barbarism such as we sometimes get from Joyce when he can be persuaded to forsake his philological laboratory. The present age has no reason to be afraid of coarseness, which if it be a vice, is at least a man's vice. The suggestive prurience pervading the uninspired mass of our films, newspapers and novels is a vice of adolescence.
>
> We cannot expect to evolve a culture without leisure. Leisure pre-supposes a self-determined rhythm of life, and its test is a capacity for solitude. How many modern individuals can stand this test? A negligible fraction. Our life-rhythm is determined by the machines. Somebody has turned on the radio and we don't know how to turn it off.

The 'radio' stands here for much more than wireless telegraphy: indeed, the centralised and high-minded broadcasting regime of the Reithian BBC was a far less frequent target for those criticising mass culture than were the cinema, Fleet Street, and sentimental literature. The 'radio' stands for a mass-cultural signal which cannot easily be evaded, and for the all-pervasive effects of cultural standardisation. When set in contrast to Travers's Lawrentian ideal of 'life', it stands for a mechanised rationality which suppresses natural human vitality. The question which arises directly from Travers's essay is how the writer can turn off the radio. The more sceptical question which might arise is whether one needs, not to turn it off, but to change the content of the broadcasts. 'On a Raised Beach' offers a range of answers to these questions.

MacDiarmid's remarks in his prose on questions of culture also offer a relevant context for the poem. The governing imperative, one recurring throughout MacDiarmid's prose, is the expansion of human consciousness. The idea, implied in 'The Assault on Humanism' (1923) and more explicitly articulated in 'Art and the Unknown' (1926), informs MacDiarmid's appraisal of the limitations both of mass culture and of 'high' culture.[6] MacDiarmid reviewed F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* in September 1932.[7] It was

a work he would come back to in 1933: as Ruth McQuillan has noted, he incorporated phrases from it into 'On a Raised Beach'.[8] In the 1932 review, MacDiarmid's idea of the expansion of human consciousness underlies his endorsement of Leavis's remark that 'Poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time.'[9] Leavis's idea of vitality was one that MacDiarmid would have previously encountered in Travers's article. MacDiarmid introduces the idea of expanded consciousness more explicitly when he considers Leavis's idea that 'mass culture' is destroying the capacity to read poetry. Leavis remarks that '[t]he ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to be able to read poetry. In self-defence amid the perpetual avalanche of print he has had to acquire reading habits that incapacitate him when the signals for unaccustomed and subtle responses present themselves.'[10] Echoing Leavis's physiological language of signals and responses, MacDiarmid concurs that 'the short-circuiting of human consciousness' is a matter of 'urgent concern'.[11]

Shortly before he departed for Whalsay early in May 1933, MacDiarmid published in the *New English Weekly* an essay, 'Science and Culture', that anticipated the poems in 'synthetic English' that he was to write there. MacDiarmid wrote that, as a poet 'concerned with the position of poetry in the world today', he was 'constrained to take all the cognate phenomena' into account, not the least science. He rejected the idea of a 'world-language' (by which he presumably meant Basic English), speaking of it as another 'short-circuiting of human consciousness'. By contrast he defended 'the increasing exploitation in all literatures of dialect and archaic forms, specialised vocabularies of all kinds, and the various other sorts of linguistic experimentation so prominent today'. MacDiarmid rightly recognised 'an essential parallelism' between 'the untranslatability' of much advanced literary work, and the 'growing incomprehensibility' to the non-specialist of work in physics and astronomy; but, by a questionable twist of logic, he took the 'parallelism' to mean that science and poetry were 'going hand in hand to an unprecedented degree'; he might as well have argued that specialisation was leading to their divergence. He was certainly aware that specialisation was a problem, and commended A. N. Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1926) for having emphasised creativeness rather than 'narrow specialisms'; creativeness allowed 'a corrective sense of totality'. His more concrete proposal was that the *New English Weekly* should begin to take science as seriously as it took politics, economics, and

the arts. Although there is little evidence that his call was heeded, the heterogeneity of discourse contained within other literary and generalist reviews offered to MacDiarmid a model for a future poetry that took all 'cognate phenomena' into account.

Later in 1933, having made substantial progress with the poems that were to form *Stony Limits*, MacDiarmid wrote further essays which were, in effect, manifestoes for the poetry contained in that volume. He begins 'Problems of Poetry To-Day' (21 and 28 September 1933) by criticising Theodora Bosanquet, who had praised Paul Valéry for eschewing 'scientific vocabulary' in his poetry, in spite of his scientific education. Bosanquet's praise, MacDiarmid observed, was 'just a variant of the old insistence on a "poetic diction" and a parallel to the old and persistent notion that certain sorts of subject-matter are inappropriate to poetry or less appropriate than other sorts'. MacDiarmid rejects the idea that the inclusion of scientific language in poetry would lead to a 'hybrid vocabulary', saying that 'All vocabularies are hopelessly hybrid; only that of the man-in-the-street is so in a different direction than that of any scientific specialist.' As well as addressing Bosanquet on Valéry, these remarks may be taken to be in dialogue with Travers. For Travers, the 'jungle' of individual idioms was a sign of cultural disintegration. For MacDiarmid, the key to cultural reunification is the development of a poetic language incorporating all conceivable idioms. 'It is time that poets abandoned the anti-intellectualist pretence that the jargon of average mentality is preferable to [that of the scientific specialist]; or that some special virtue attaches to restricting our linguistic medium to a miserable fraction of our expressive resources.'[12] The expansion of human consciousness is to be carried out by an expansion of poetic diction. In part, for MacDiarmid, the expansion of expressive resources addresses the problem posed by 'the enormous range and multitudinous intensive specialisations of contemporary knowledge'.[13] However, the expansion also aims to counteract the culture created by the mass media. What is notable in MacDiarmid's cultural analysis is his recognition that the 'masses' are not the agents of their own cultural oppression. He questions whether most contemporary poets believe poetry to be 'vitally important', and whether they are prepared to stand up to the sensationalism of the press.

> They acquiesce in the socio-economic-politico-journalistic debauching of educational interests – the organised subversion and stultification of even those beginnings of popular education on which so much public money is spent; but

> poetry ought to be the mainstay of these educational interests. [. . .] it is the parasitical 'interpreting class', those who 'talk down to them' and insist that the level of utterance should be that of popular understanding, and jeer at what is not expressed in the jargon of the man-in-the-street, who are the enemies of the people, because what their attitude amounts to is 'keeping the people in their place', stereotyping their stupidity. The interests of the masses and the real highbrow, the creative artist, are identical, for the function of the latter is the extension of human consciousness. The interests of poetry are diametrically opposed to whatever may be making for any robotisation or standardisation of humanity or any short-circuiting of the human consciousness.[14]

The phrase 'short-circuiting of human consciousness' signals that MacDiarmid is continuing the line of thought begun a year earlier in response to Leavis's book. Unlike the Leavisite Travers, MacDiarmid does not feel it necessary to divide between 'vitality' and linguistic experimentation: the 'philological laboratory' which Travers had condemned in Joyce was for MacDiarmid not a problem, but part of the solution, a sign of literary vitality.

What emerges from MacDiarmid's essays on contemporary culture is an immense optimism about the potential of art to expand human consciousness. Although MacDiarmid grants a special role to an elite of artists and poets, his is an inclusive elitism, one which sees potential in non-canonical forms such as cinema, and which believes that the consciousness of all men and women can potentially be expanded by great art.[15] Moreover, although he does not employ the terminology developed by later cultural critics, MacDiarmid does not conflate 'popular culture' with 'mass culture'. And though he accepts that the consumers of mass culture have been degraded by their consumption of it, he does not identify them as the primary agents of their own degradation: that role he gives to politicians, journalists, and the 'interpreting class'.

LEISURE

Debates about leisure intersected with questions about high culture and mass culture. It was widely believed that the machine-age would reduce working hours, and that increased leisure time could potentially be used for good or for ill. The title of one article in *Purpose* in 1930, 'Leisure: Its Necessity and

Meaning in this Age of Abundance', summarises some of the main themes.[16] One of MacDiarmid's earliest contributions to the debate came in the same journal, and took the form of a quotation from another writer. Janko Lavrin had expressed the pessimistic outlook: that, 'instead of growing, our age prefers to "enjoy itself", and its vulgar epicureanism is assuming more and more alarmist aspects all over the world'. Lavrin was also concerned that mankind was accepting a doctrine of environmental and economic determinism, with the consequence that 'European and American consciousness' 'is bound to become a victim of economic fatalism, which eventually makes humanity an appendage to its own system, and lowers the individual to the level of the standardised Robot'.[17]

As Lavrin's remarks on standardisation make clear, although leisure was made possible by 'the machine', it was also threatened by it. It is in this context that remarks about 'rhythm' become significant, including Travers's phrase about leisure needing a 'self-determined rhythm of life'. In view of the 'acceleration of events', wrote one contributor to *Purpose*, it was important to maintain a 'human rhythm'.[18] For F. R. Leavis the governing rhythm should be the 'seasonal rhythm' of man's relation to his environment.[19] Such a rhythm would be distinct from that of the machine, but, unlike the rhythm proposed by Travers, would not be self-determined.

The Social Credit journals to which MacDiarmid contributed in the early 1930s, such as the *Free Man* and the *New English Weekly*, saw the economics of C. H. Douglas as the best means of delivering leisure to all. Central to Douglas's scheme was the belief that the then-current financial system had developed in periods when scarcity was the norm. Thanks to the machine, as one reviewer of Douglas's *The Monopoly of Credit* wrote, 'our industrial system holds aloft a cornucopia of Abundance'; 'What looms before us is the Leisured Society if we have the wits to devise a distribution of leisure.'[20] Using 'rhythm' as a reference point, the Douglasite A. J. Penty criticised Russian Communism for having adopted a world-view in which 'life and culture' had to 'accommodate themselves to the demands of the machine'.[21] In the *New English Weekly* in 1933, MacDiarmid denounced 'the economic insanity of poverty in the midst of plenty, and drudgery within the potentiality of the leisure state'.[22]

In early 1933, 'Pontifex', the pseudonymous author of the *New English Weekly*'s 'Credit Forum' column, initiated a lively debate on the subject of leisure.[23] Eric Gill wrote two weeks later to object: 'It is claimed that culture is the product of leisure and that therefore, given leisure, everyone will gain

culture.' Moreover, it was claimed that 'if all the necessary work were done by machinery men would be free for "Higher Things"'. Gill did not relish the prospect of a machine-made world: 'We shall eat machine-made food, wear machine-made clothes, use machine-made furniture and utensils, live in machine-made houses and be entertained by machine-made entertainment in order that we may have leisure for "Higher Things."' But more importantly, he disliked the separation of culture and of spiritual fulfilment from the accomplishment of ordinary daily tasks:

> Hitherto the vast majority of men have gained such culture as they have gained [. . .] by cultivating the arts of agriculture and gardening; cooking and making drinks; weaving and spinning and dress-making; pottery, metal-working and wood-working; building in all its multitude of branches (from chicken coops to cathedrals) and every kind of dance and song and music and poetry. Henceforth these things are not to be man's means to culture.[24]

M. R. Head's contribution to the debate was particularly MacDiarmidian in emphasising the utopia that Social Credit might create. The culture of scarcity had created a 'poverty complex': 'Once this poverty complex has been removed from the human consciousness all this wasted effort will be free to be turned into its true evolutionary channel [. . .] Continents have to be opened up and cultivated, deserts reclaimed, etc.'[25] In other words, Social Credit economics were the precondition for the expansion of human consciousness.

Philip Mairet summarised Gill's position with reference to his pamphlet *Unemployment* (1930), and offered a different vision. Gill believed that culture 'has always and only been created in response to needs. Supply all material needs by machinery on social credit, and there will be no roots from which culture is to grow.' Mairet accepted that culture fulfilled some needs, but argued that it transcended others, and in some cases it created new needs. While Gill had a pessimistic view of man as inclined towards laziness, Mairet believed that it was in 'the nature of man' always to make 'problems that tax his powers to their limit'. [26] Like his contemporaries, Mairet distinguished good and bad culture in terms of rhythm: 'There is all the difference between working a machine and being worked by it – between riding a motor-bike and having to "feed" a machine at its own rhythm.'

'On a Raised Beach'

Because of its opening allusion to *Paradise Lost* and its several references to God and his creation, 'On a Raised Beach' has often been seen as a theological poem, albeit an atheistic theological poem. Its isolated setting and the apparent absence of other human figures – though MacDiarmid does engage in dialogue with an unidentified 'you' – have made it seem, more specifically, an existentialist poem, far removed from the social and political concerns of early 1930s. MacDiarmid's endorsement, late in his life, of the reading by the theologian D. M. MacKinnon has tended to reinforce this view.[27] However, MacDiarmid's collage method opens a window onto a world of political and cultural weekly reviews, and connects the poem at least as closely to contemporary concerns. As well as the explicit interlocutor of the penultimate paragraph – an apparently Christian voice who hopes for resurrection – there are other interlocutors buried in MacDiarmid's heteroglossic text.

In any case, 'On a Raised Beach' speaks of culture as frequently as it does of God. As well as its four explicit uses of the word, it is concerned with the noun 'culture' in its root sense: 'cultivation: the state of being cultivated: refinement the result of cultivation.'[28] 'Out of this stony rubbish, what grows?': the question which MacDiarmid poses in an October 1933 article on the Shetland Islands is as much a cultural as a horticultural query.[29] The poem's various references to plant life may be read in this way. Once the poem's references to culture are recognised, its reference to non-human creators – including the Christian creator – take on other resonances:

> What bricole piled you here, stupendous cairn?
> What artist poses the Earth écorché thus,
> Pillar of creation engouled in me?
>
> (*Complete Poems*, I, p.423)

If 'the artist' referred to here is primarily the agent of long-term geological processes, then the agency of human artists comes a very close second: 'here' and 'thus' point outwards to the Shetland cairn, but also reflexively back to the poem and its own stupendous cairn of words. For all that the poem warns us against indulging in illustrations, making the stones into metaphors instead of simply 'accepting the stones' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.435), the language in which

it describes nature is never free of cultural connotations, and the stones often refer away from stoniness to questions of culture.

The first of the explicit references to 'culture' comes in the paragraph beginning 'O we of little faith', while the remaining three are contained in the succeeding paragraph. The questions posed are framed by distinctly Arnoldian language: the problem is of how to confront 'philistinism', the 'indifference of the masses of mankind' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.430). The position here contrasts with that of MacDiarmid's contemporaneous essays: in the essays, philistinism lay with the 'interpreting class', not with the masses; in the poem, MacDiarmid seems to encourage the reader to identify philistinism with the masses, and the masses with the indistinguishable stony rubbish of the beach. However, the poem grows more complex at this point. MacDiarmid establishes a parallelism only to twist it. The relationship of romanticists to philistines, of thinkers and writers to the masses, and of 'most men' to 'any stone' is complicated by MacDiarmid's remark that 'these stones have far more differences in colour, shape and size / Than most men to my eyes' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.431). Although the phrase might be read as reinforcing the idea of the indistinguishability of the 'masses of mankind', the repetition of 'most men' has the effect of turning the comparison unfavourably on those who would describe the stones, in other words, on the cultural elite rather than the masses. This interpretation is confirmed by the following lines, in which MacDiarmid remarks that the stones are more variable even than those men 'who develop precise conceptions to immense distances / Out of these bleak surfaces'. Indeed, the comparison would seem to return upon the narrator himself. The comparison thus becomes complicated: the parallelisms of the sentence compare the masses to the mass of stones, a trope that would conventionally emphasise the indistinguishable nature of the mass, but MacDiarmid's insight into the variety of the stones suggests that the masses conceal potential variety, and that cultural commentators ought to feel some humility.

The couplet that follows, 'All human culture is a Goliath to fall / To the least of these pebbles withal', may at first glance seem to express extreme pessimism about the ultimate fate of culture. It is a position seen less ambiguously in 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa', where the Horatian 'monument more lasting than brass' is found 'rattling on the scrap-iron heap' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.409).[30] However, the couplet in 'On a Raised Beach' is rather more complicated. Its relative brevity, after the preceding meandering lines, might cause a reader to overlook the incompleteness of the metaphor: MacDiarmid gives us

Goliath and a pebble, but no David; the agent of the giant's downfall is absent. One might view the metaphor's incompleteness as a sign of careless thought, but in modernist poetry such gaps are often a means of posing questions. The question here is whether the masses (pebbles) themselves might fell the giant of culture, or whether they require assistance from another body. It looks, in other words, like a well-established Marxist question about the role of a revolutionary intelligentsia in relation to the proletariat.

The next paragraph, in which the remaining references to 'culture' occur, begins by implying that the beach is a form of desert in which the speaker will achieve clarity of vision. The lines from 'Deadly clarity [. . .]' down to 'burning crystal' derive from John Middleton Murry's essay on Charles Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*;[31] MacDiarmid extracts from them a scene suggesting a prophet in the wilderness. Ideas of solitary revelation and feverish vision are far removed from questions of culture, and at first the words derived from Travers may seem to break off the developing argument: 'A culture demands leisure and leisure presupposes / A self-determined rhythm of life'. As noted earlier, the question of the appropriate rhythm of life was significant to debates about leisure. Through the incorporation of Travers's phrase, MacDiarmid implicitly enters a larger debate about the relations of culture and leisure in modern society. Though a contemporary reader might not have recognised MacDiarmid's specific source, he or she would have been able to situate the remarks within the contemporary debate about leisure. He or she would have known that MacDiarmid's assertion about culture was the opposite, for example, of Eric Gill's; and that the proposition concerning the rhythm of life differed distinctly from that of F. R. Leavis.

The next phrase, 'the capacity for solitude is its test', does undergo a limited transformation. Firstly the pronoun 'its', ambiguous in its reference in Travers's prose, becomes less precise: not only might it refer back to 'leisure' and 'rhythm', but in MacDiarmid's poem it might reach back to 'culture'. What exactly is being tested by the capacity for solitude? The phrase that follows, of MacDiarmid's devising, 'by that the desert knows us', suggests that, ultimately, the test applies to the group designated by the first-person plural, presumably the 'intelligentsia' addressed at the end of the paragraph. The desert context not only exaggerates the solitude that Travers had apparently envisaged in his article, but also radically alters the authority in whose name the 'test' is carried out. In Travers's article the test was ultimately justified in the name of culture, but in MacDiarmid's poem the superior authority of the desert, and by

implication the stones, takes over. However, as we shall see, the paragraph goes on to question the authority of the desert and the stones relative to culture.

The terms 'escapism' and 'escapist' were products of the debate on leisure, and came into the language contemporaneously with MacDiarmid's composition of 'On a Raised Beach'.[32] The next lines engage the debate about 'escapist' mass culture: 'It is not a question of escaping from life / But the reverse'. Travers's article lies in the background to these phrases: he had believed that some cultural products encouraged 'wish-fulfilment', and saw leisure as something that would enable its opposite, 'life-fulfilment'. The negative in MacDiarmid's sentence implies an interlocutor who believes that 'leisure' leads inevitably to the consumption of 'escapist' mass cultural products. MacDiarmid's speaker, on the other hand, believes that leisure creates the opportunity to acquire independent judgement, 'the loneliness, the independence, of stones'. At this point MacDiarmid makes a larger claim for culture. Culture is not inferior to the stones, and not necessarily destined for the scrap-iron heap. The possibility of acquiring the qualities of stones can come only 'from knowing that our function remains / [. . .] fundamental to life as theirs'. Regardless of whether 'we' are the intelligentsia or a larger segment of humanity, 'our function' would appear to be a cultural one. These lines are usefully glossed by the text in the manuscript version of the poem which MacDiarmid sent to F. G. Scott:

> It is not a question of escaping from life
> But the reverse – a question of acquiring the power
> To exercise the loneliness, the independence of stones,
> And that only comes from knowing that our
> Function remains as fundamental to life as theirs
> However we may seem cut off from all other affairs.
>
> (*Complete Poems*, II, p.1462).

Being 'cut off from all other affairs' is more precise than the 'isolated' of the published version, and suggests that MacDiarmid means the isolation of the intellectual (or *clerc*) from public affairs. The idea of 'independence' may also be glossed by 'disinterestedness', which, although it is of Arnoldian provenance, MacDiarmid discussed with reference to a quotation from A. R. Orage: 'No word in the English language is more difficult to define or better worth

attempting to define. [. . .] I venture to say that whoever has understood the meaning of "disinterestedness" is not far off understanding the goal of human culture.'[33]

At this point in the manuscript version, the argument takes a turn which again undermines the value of culture:

> We have lost the grounds of our being,
> We have not built on rock.
> Just as in economics now we can dispense
> With the drudgery of most folk
> – Human labour is needed no longer
> But to most people there is nothing else to have and give
> And unless they can suddenly be made infinitely stronger
> To endure leisure and plenty they will be unable to live –
> So all in all culture is unnecessary work,
> And means no more to human destiny than to these stones
> – False beliefs, vain imaginings, mere rationalisations
> instead of creative thought.
>
> (*Complete Poems*, II, p.1462)

More than any lines in the published version, these draw directly on the discourse of Social Credit. 'Drudgery' was a key-word in the utopian vision of Douglas's followers.[34] However, whereas most Social Credit writers had argued that the leisure state would enable culture, and had treated culture as an unquestioned good, MacDiarmid surprisingly sees the drudgery demanded by the contemporary banking system as analogous to the unnecessary work that comprises culture. Here, as elsewhere in the poem, it would appear that 'culture' covers two distinct entities: on the one hand the 'false beliefs, vain imaginings, [and] mere rationalisations' engendered by the contemporary economic system, and, on the other, the true 'creative thought' that would be enabled by a Leisure State. The four lines of interjected commentary ('Human labour [. . .] unable to live') imply that most people lack the independent 'rhythm of life' which will enable them to endure the 'test' of leisure. They imply that the economy is so exclusively organised around the exchange of labour ('there is nothing else to have and give') that most people lack the cultural capital that would enable them to endure a leisured utopia. The question of whether leisure would be an unalloyed good raised questions about human nature: about

whether humans were naturally lazy or naturally creative and energetic. Some commentators took an intermediate position. To one anonymous reviewer of C. Delisle Burns's *Leisure in the Modern World* it was a 'current platitude' that 'we must now educate for leisure, and not for a faintly prospective employment or in sole obedience to an anachronistic cultural ideal'. If the Social Credit fiscal reforms were to succeed, there would be 'almost as much leisure as there was in the ancient world'. The reviewer believed that 'we must organise our games and qualify our circuses, to make the new leisure endurable and enjoyable'.[35] The emphasis on leisure as something to be 'endured' is similar to MacDiarmid's, though the anonymous review is indicative of trends in contemporary discourse rather than being a direct source.

As MacDiarmid removed this passage from the published poem, we cannot allow it to govern an interpretation. However, it clearly demonstrates that, at one point in its development, 'On a Raised Beach' was to have been a poem far more explicitly focused on questions of culture and leisure, and the passage lends support to a reading which takes the surviving discussions of these topics more seriously. Moreover, the distinction in the passage between 'culture' as 'false beliefs' and culture as 'creative thought' helps to explain some of the contradictions in the poem.

In the manuscript version, these lines are followed by the nine lines about men 'capable of rejecting all that all other men / think', which, in the published version were moved to an earlier paragraph; there then follows the passage about 'the higher zones' (*Complete Poems*, II, p.1463). In the published poem, without the digression on drudgery and culture, the pronouncement that 'We have not built on rock' leads straight to the 'higher zones' passage:

> Thinking of all the higher zones
> Confronting the spirit of man I know they are bare
> Of all so-called culture as any stone here;
> Not so much of all literature survives
> As any wisp of scriota that thrives
> On a rock [. . .]
>
> (*Complete Poems*, I, pp.431–32).

The phrase 'so-called culture' by itself suggests that the poem wishes to differentiate two forms of culture, and the manuscript passage helps to distinguish them more clearly. One way of interpreting this passage might be to

assume that the 'higher zones' are themselves not worthy of the name. Certainly elsewhere in the poem MacDiarmid is happy to dismantle the contrast between high and low, but here I think the more literal reading is preferable: MacDiarmid sees the 'higher zones' as genuinely superior, but warns that they do not contain the 'culture' which contemporary prejudice would lead one to expect.

Leaving aside the parenthetic remarks about symbiosis, we reach the poem's final explicit remark on 'culture':

> 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,
> My own self, and as before I never saw
> The empty hand of my brother man,
> The humanity no culture has reached, the mob.
> Intelligentsia, our impossible and imperative job!
>
> (*Complete Poems*, I, p.432)

The grammar of the second sentence is not straightforward, and the interjected phrase 'and as before I never saw' makes parsing it particularly difficult. One reading would give the verb 'to have' three objects: the first being the compound 'the beginning and the end of the world', and the others being the speaker's 'own self', and 'the mob'. This reading takes 'as' in 'as before I never saw' to be equivalent to 'because', and the phrase to be an explanation of why the speaker has never before grasped 'the mob'. However, I favour a reading which takes 'as' as a comparative, and in which the interjected phrase is equivalent to 'seen more clearly than ever before'. The verb 'to have' then takes a different three objects: the first two as previously outlined, followed by 'the empty hand' transformed into something never before seen. This reading coalesces round the image of the hand in the speaker's grip: the passage consists of three handshakes, one with the eternal, one with the self, and one with the speaker's fellow man. The phrases 'the humanity no culture has ever reached' and 'the mob' gloss 'my brother man'. What his hand was empty of may have been material resources, but may also have been 'culture' in one form or another. Given that the poem has established a distinction between true culture and 'so-called' culture, the implications of the phrase are ambiguous: is the absence of 'culture', as false consciousness, a good thing? Does the identification of the masses with the rocks imply that they are refreshingly

free of illusions, or that they need to be educated? What looks like a rousing imperative in the final line of the paragraph, 'Intelligentsia, our impossible and imperative job!', functions in effect as an interrogative. It repeats the question that was implied earlier by the incomplete metaphor of David, Goliath, and the stone: what is the function of the intelligentsia in relation to the masses, and, more specifically, what is its cultural function?

The problem is picked up in the following paragraph of the poem. MacDiarmid answers the suggestion of his explicit interlocutor, the 'you' who hopes that one of the stones might move of its own accord, imagined in terms of the stone of Christ's tomb rolling aside. MacDiarmid's response suggests that the interlocutor should be identified not as a Christian, but as a 'detached intellectual' who happens to use Christian metaphors: 'Detached intellectuals, not one stone will move, / Not the least of them, not a fraction of an inch' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.432). This recalls the scenario of the 'romanticists' who, in response to the philistinism of their times, responded with 'Infinite longing' rather than material intervention, 'manly will'. At this later point in the poem, MacDiarmid is more explicit: the intellectuals must 'participate' in reality rather than merely contemplate it. However, the poem shies away from its more Marxist and cultural questions in the lines that follow, as MacDiarmid identifies the reality of the stones with death, and pursues a more existentialist line of argument.

Once the poem's explicit references to 'culture' are recognised, other details become more significant. The poem often hints at the etymological roots of 'culture' – for example, in the reference to 'scriota', or the passage about 'truth' 'brairding' its way through the stones (*Complete Poems*, I, p.430) – and in doing so it suggests that references to plant growth might themselves be taken as metaphors for cultural processes. The transformation of Milton's 'fruit of that forbidden tree' into a 'Carpolite fruit' is a particularly compressed example. The idea that plant life, and, by implication, culture, might petrify into fixed forms, is one that may be glossed by reference to Adorno and Horkheimer's later idea that enlightenment reverts to mythology; that the tools which were intended to free man from superstition become themselves imprisoning superstitions.[36] The specifically Miltonic version might suggest that ethical ideas (the knowledge of good and evil) solidified into 'carpolite fruit', incapable of further generation or growth. This reading allows for a more disenchanted interpretation of the stones: although the poem's speaker happily commends them as emblems of stark factuality, he is at times seemingly hypnotised by

their factuality; at other times he achieves a more equal balance, being aware of the possibility of manipulating them. The paralysis brought about by pure factuality is suggested in the later passage, where the speaker denies any hope of a 'fescue' (symbolising education) brairding through the stones: 'Truth is not crushed; / It crushes, gorgonises all else into itself' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.430). It is significant that 'truth' does not simply gorgonise, but gorgonises its other 'into itself': MacDiarmid seems to be imagining a process whereby the Gorgon not only transforms the living process into stone, but then digests it. It is a process that MacDiarmid later imagined in 'In Memoriam James Joyce' in the form of a white dwarf star, so powerful in its gravitational field that the light – which may be read as the light of truth – can never leave it (*Complete Poems*, II, p.742).

I have already noted the opening questions about artistic agency, 'What bricole piled you here, stupendous cairn? / What artist poses the Earth écorché thus / [. . .] ?' (*Complete Poems*, I, p.423). Questions about this larger, non-human agent of creation inevitably open up analogies with human artists, and questions about the extent of their similarity to the forces that created the material earth. One point not always noted by commentators is that the poem concerns a *raised* beach, that is, in the *Chambers* definition, 'a terrace of gravel, &c., marking the margin of an ancient sea'.[37] It is a beach which has been created by one set of forces (tides and storms depositing stones), and then displaced massively by one or more others, such as plate movements causing the sea-bed to rise. There is immense pathos in this underlying scenario, but it is not unfamiliar: whatever the artist's intentions, his or her works will potentially be received in circumstances which were not of his or her making.

The term 'bricole' raises some perhaps irresolvable questions, thanks to the currency of the terms 'bricolage' and 'bricoleur', terms which may seem to be very suggestive in relation to MacDiarmid's do-it-yourself aesthetics of using whatever was to hand, whether it was found in dictionaries or contemporary periodicals. According to the *OED*, these terms became current in English only in the 1960s, thanks to the impact of Levi-Strauss's *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962). Certainly MacDiarmid's *Chambers* did not contain 'bricolage' or 'bricoleur', but the definition it gave for 'bricole' may have led him to recognise the connection with aesthetics: not only did it define it as 'an ancient engine for throwing stones', but also as 'the rebound of a ball from the wall of a tennis-court, an indirect stroke'. While 'bricole' in the tennis sense shifts attention away from the artist's randomly accumulated materials and on to his

methods, it nevertheless suggests MacDiarmid's methods in *Stony Limits* of taking materials intended for one purpose and deflecting them by placing them in his poem.

The most striking feature of the poem, MacDiarmid's construction of a 'synthetic English' using terms drawn from diverse specialised vocabularies, is relevant to the poem's position on culture. As we have seen, Travers had lamented the anarchy of contemporary intellectual culture, remarking the lack of 'any authoritative code of values, and the consequent outcrop of a jungle of individual idioms, all with highly technical origins'.[38] The opening lines of 'On a Raised Beach' recreate for the reader exactly that chaotic situation, but MacDiarmid's point is to persuade the reader that diverse idioms can be held together in a single poem, and, by implication, in a single culture. As he wrote in 'Problems of Poetry To-Day', 'A concerted effort to extend the general vocabulary and make it more adequate to the enormous range and multitudinous intensive specialisations of contemporary knowledge is long overdue.'[39] The 'stupendous cairn' of stones is also a collection of tennis balls, and through his crafty bricoles, MacDiarmid attempts to deflect them towards a single, unified target.

While, if one follows the type of argument about modernist difficulty proposed by John Carey,[40] MacDiarmid's unusual vocabulary may look as if it were intended to exclude a mass audience, MacDiarmid's argument in 'Problems of Poetry To-Day' suggests the opposite: 'The interests of the masses and the real highbrow, the creative artist, are identical, for the function of the latter is the extension of human consciousness.' The only equipment needed to understand this poem is the relatively inexpensive *Chambers* dictionary that MacDiarmid himself was using, retailing in 1932 for 7s 6d.[41] The poem's vocabulary is intended not to deter MacDiarmid's readers, but to challenge them, and to awaken a natural curiosity about words and ideas. MacDiarmid shares the optimistic view of human nature that was voiced by other Social Credit thinkers in the debate about leisure. An increase in leisure would not lead to an increase in intellectual laziness, because, as Philip Mairet put it, it is in 'man's nature [. . .] that he always makes himself problems that tax his powers to their limit'.[42] 'On a Raised Beach' may be seen not only as a poem that includes statements about leisure and culture, but as one written in anticipation of a new Leisure State, peopled by readers who will want to tax their powers to the limit. In writing a poem with the dictionary as its source, MacDiarmid is renouncing much of cultural tradition as suspect, as

'so-called culture', and is setting himself the task of rebuilding a culture from the most basic elements. In 'On a Raised Beach', MacDiarmid's answer to the question of how to turn off the radio is a complex one. As Travers had suggested, the individual must find solitude, free from the noise of contemporary culture. However, it is not only the consumer of mass culture who must do so; the intellectual, particularly the member of the 'interpreting class', must also escape the limitations of high culture. Additionally he or she must respond to contemporary philistinism not with escapist 'longing', but with 'manly will'. 'Manly will' consists of a willingness to be – in slightly anachronistic terms – a bricoleur, someone willing to take existing cultural forms and remould them into something new, which can become material for the renewed radio of culture.

Notes

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[2] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, ed by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), I, p.431.

[3] H. J. Travers, 'Views and Reviews: The Modern Echo', *New English Weekly*, 1 (28 July 1932), 357–58.

[4] There were no other contributions indexed in volumes 1–4 of The *New English Weekly* under Travers's name.

[5] Travers, p.357.

[6] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Assault on Humanism' (16 October 1923), in *The Raucle Tongue*, ed by Angus Calder, Glen Murray, and Alan Riach, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996–97), I, pp.109–12; 'Art and the Unknown' (20 and 27 May 1926),

Selected Prose, ed by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), pp.39–43.

[7] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings in English Poetry' (23 September 1932), *Raucle Tongue*, II, pp.340–42.

[8] Ruth McQuillan, 'Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Akros*, 12.34–35 (August 1977), 87–97. See also W. N. Herbert, 'To Circumjack MacDiarmid', *Verse*, 2 (1985), 41–46.

[9] Leavis, quoted by MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings', p.341.

[10] Leavis, quoted by MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings', p.342.

[11] MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings', p.342.

[12] MacDiarmid, 'Problems of Poetry To-Day', *Raucle Tongue*, II, pp.484–86.

[13] MacDiarmid, 'Problems', p.485.

[14] MacDiarmid, 'Problems', pp.485–86.

[15] MacDiarmid's interest in cinema is seen particularly in the uncollected essay 'Poetry and Film', *Cinema Quarterly*, 2.3 (Spring 1934), 146–49.

[16] W. T. Symons, 'Leisure: Its Necessity and Meaning in this Age of Abundance', *Purpose*, 2 (1930), 28–35.

[17] Lavrin, quoted by MacDiarmid, 'Allen Upward and the Facilitation of Genius', *Raucle Tongue*, II, p.374.

[18] W. T. Symons, 'Money, Time and Life', *Purpose*, 2 (1930), 65–72.

[19] F. R. Leavis, 'Under Which King, Bezonian', *Scrutiny*, 1 (1932–33), 205–14 (p.208).

[20] Gorham Munson, 'Design for Financial Freedom' [review of *The Monopoly of Credit*, by C. H. Douglas], *Hound and Horn*, 6 (1932–33), 368–74. See also: 'R.L.', 'The World's Most Vital Problem: Work or Leisure?', *The Free Man*, 1.13 (30 April 1932), 3–4.

[21] A. J. Penty, 'The Case Against Communism', *New English Weekly*, 1 (12 May 1932), 84–85.

[22] MacDiarmid, 'The Significance of Cavalcanti' (10 February 1933), *Raucle Tongue*, II, p.344.

[23] 'Pontifex' (pseud.), 'The Credit Forum', *New English Weekly*, 2 (30 March 1933), 558.

[24] Eric Gill, '"Higher Things"' (letter), *New English Weekly*, 2 (13 April 1933), 622.

[25] M. R. Head, 'Leisure as Voluntary Work' (letter), *New English Weekly*, 3 (18 May 1933), 119.

[26] Philip Mairet, 'Mr Eric Gill and Leisure', *New English Weekly*, 3 (13 July 1933), 306–07.

[27] D. M. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp.166–68; MacDiarmid, *Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.676 (15 January 1975).

[28] 'Culture', *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary*, ed by Rev. Thomas Davidson, revised and expanded by J. Liddell Geddie (London: Chambers, 1933). For the importance of Davidson's edition to MacDiarmid, see Ruth McQuillan, 'MacDiarmid's Other Dictionary', *Lines Review*, no.66 (September 1978), 5–14 (p.5).

[29] MacDiarmid, 'The Shetland Islands' (18 October 1933), *Raucle Tongue*, II, p.510.

[30] The translation of the phrase 'exegi monumentum aere perennius' (Horace, *Odes* III, 30) is taken from *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary*.

[31] J. M. Murry, '"Arabia Deserta"', *Countries of the Mind* (London: Collins, 1922), p.139. MacDiarmid's library (Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections) includes a copy of the 1924 impression of Murry's book.

[32] The earliest citation in the *OED*, 2nd edition, is for the adjective 'escapist' in 1930; the earliest citations for the nouns 'escapism' and 'escapist' come from 1933.

[33] Orage, quoted by MacDiarmid, 'Allen Upward', *Raucle Tongue* II, pp.375–76.

[34] In MacDiarmid's own writings, see C. M. Grieve, 'No Going Back; A Horne – But Not of Plenty; The Opportunity of the Unemployed', *The Free Man*, 1.33 (17 September 1932), 5, and 'The Significance of Cavalcanti' (10 February 1933), *Raucle Tongue*, II, p.344.

[35] Anon., [review of *Leisure in the Modern World*, by C. Delisle Burns], *New English Weekly*, 2 (3 November 1932), 65.

[36] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979).

[37] The raised quality of the beach is discussed by McQuillan, 'Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"'; by Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p.126; and by Alan Riach, 'The Idea of Order in "On a Raised Beach"', in *Terranglian Territories: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation*, ed by Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000), p.617.

[38] Travers, p.357.

[39] MacDiarmid, 'Problems', p.485.

[40] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber, 1992), pp.20–21.

[41] Advertisement, *The Times*, 2 December 1932, p.10.

[42] Philip Mairet, 'Mr Eric Gill and Leisure', 306–07.

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