

‘That Ancient Self: Scottish Modernism’s Counter-Renaissance

Scott Lyall

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Abstract

This essay argues that the twentieth-century movement of literary and cultural revival known as the Scottish Renaissance was, like the Irish Revival lead by Yeats, a counter-Renaissance against the anti-national ideals of the Renaissance; it was also, somewhat paradoxically, a lament and a replacement for the Renaissance that Scotland supposedly did not have in the early modern period. Whilst two of the main protagonists of the modern Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir, disagreed fundamentally over the future direction of Scottish letters, they both agreed that the Golden Age of Scottish literature occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth century period of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar. They, and others of the modern Renaissance, also agreed that the Reformation was a disaster for Scottish creativity. This historical pessimism of the Scottish Renaissance Movement is related to its Modernist context.

Keywords

Renaissance; Scottish Renaissance; Hugh MacDiarmid; Edwin Muir; Henryson; Dunbar; Reformation; Modernism; Yeats; Irish Revival; Postcolonial

Young men teaching school in some picturesque cathedral town, or settled for life in Capri or in Sicily, defend their type of metaphor by saying that it comes naturally to a man who travels to his work by Tube. ... As they express not what the Upanishads call ‘that ancient Self’ but individual intellect, they have the right to choose the man in the Tube because of his objective importance. They attempt to kill the whale, push the Renaissance higher yet, outthink Leonardo; their verse kills the folk ghost and yet

would remain verse. I am joined to the 'Irishry' and I expect a counter-Renaissance.¹

(Yeats, 2008: 388)

W. B. Yeats's hope, expressed in 'A General Introduction for my Work' (1937), that the Irish Literary Revival he spearheaded would form a counter-Renaissance to modern, Renaissance-inspired individualism has important implications for the interwar, twentieth-century literary movement known as the Scottish Renaissance. Yeats sees his poetry as being in search of 'that ancient Self', by which he means both a reconnection to the spiritual wisdom of the past and a rootedness in Irish culture. Writing of the inspiration he gained from Young Ireland poets such as Thomas Davis (1814–45) and the nationalist leader John O'Leary (1830–1907), eulogised by Yeats in 'September 1913', Yeats (2008: 380) says he admires them 'because they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people; behind them stretched the generations'. Yeats's poetry, even at its most intimately personal, is fundamentally national. The Scottish Renaissance Movement, particularly in Hugh MacDiarmid's hands, was deeply influenced by the Irish Revival. Both movements looked back into the cultural past in order to kick-start a new national future. This essay will concentrate mostly on prose polemics by modern Scottish Renaissance writers, rather than creative work, in order to illustrate its main argument that the Modernist literary revival in Scotland represented a twentieth-century national Renaissance of Scottish cultural forms as well as a counter-Renaissance against metropolitan cultural and political dominance.

Claiming in his important essay 'English Ascendancy in British Literature', first published in T. S. Eliot's *The Criterion* in 1931, that 'The problem of the British Isles is the

¹ However, as G. J. Watson (1994: 118–22) points out, from 1907, when he first visited Italy with Augusta Gregory, until the 1920s, Yeats had also been drawn to the courtly ideals of the Renaissance as a means to ennoble his aristocratic conception of the Protestant Ascendancy tradition in Ireland.

problem of English Ascendancy' (MacDiarmid, 1992: 63), MacDiarmid goes on to argue that 'It is time, so far as Scottish Literature in particular is concerned, to do as the Irish have done in their case, and reverse the attitude that has hitherto prevailed' (MacDiarmid, 1992: 69) – that is, forego Anglicisation and recover the suppressed Celtic and Gaelic elements of the cultural inheritance in order to offset and oppose English Ascendancy. MacDiarmid believes that the revival of national cultural production that 'has happened in Ireland can also happen in Scotland and Wales' (MacDiarmid, 1992: 77), and he identifies three 'conditions for the success of a Renaissance movement' in Scotland: 'a rising tide of Scottish national consciousness'; 'a thorough-going reorientation, in our schools and universities and elsewhere, on the study of Scottish Literature; and 'the necessity to bridge the gulf between Gaelic and Scots' (MacDiarmid, 1992: 73). MacDiarmid (1992: 79) ends his essay by proposing that one means of breaking English Ascendancy is 'the possibility of "getting back behind the Renaissance"', and quotes from Daniel Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* (1924) – 'that fascinating study of the Munster bards of the Penal Age' (MacDiarmid, 1992: 71) – to sustain his argument.

Corkery's book was important to MacDiarmid and, as we shall see, is a key, though unacknowledged, source for some of the ideas informing his *Albyn: or Scotland and the Future* (1927), a long essay central to MacDiarmid's propaganda for a Scottish Renaissance Movement and one that envisions a more Irish, Catholic Scotland of the future which draws inspiration from Scotland's Catholic, pre-Reformation past. MacDiarmid (1996: 1) concedes that 'The forces that are moving towards a Scottish Renaissance are complex and at first sight incompatible' and characterises the movement as being 'at once radical and conservative, revolutionary and reactionary'. Such a Janus-faced definition does little to dispel MacDiarmid's reputation for contradictoriness. However, his thinking is more sophisticated than such an apparent paradox may at first allow and, indeed, can be aligned with his

deployment of Synthetic Scots in his poetry. MacDiarmid's Synthetic Scots, as Matthew Hart (2010: 55, 59) puts it, imagines Scotland 'via what Bhabha calls the "unsatisfied" nationalism of a cosmopolitan vernacularism, in which the past is a springboard to an imagined future', and is 'an attempt to render immanent within the body of a disordered Scots lexicon, the polyphony and metalinguistic abstraction of international modernism'. MacDiarmid was by nature, and by the necessity of his historico-cultural position, a synthesiser, and the modern Scottish Renaissance can be seen as a movement of historical synthesis that seeks to make Scotland whole again.

This of course assumes that the nation is broken, and in the historiography of the Scottish Renaissance Movement, some of the key periods in Scottish history – the Reformation (1560), the Union of Crowns (1603), the Union of Parliaments (1707), even the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution – are interpreted as episodes of catastrophic historical loss to the imperial forces of Anglicisation and the contamination of commercialisation. The modern Scottish Renaissance is an argument against the direction taken by Scottish history, illustrated by MacDiarmid's (1996: 17) elegiac hope that the movement 'may also regain for Scots literature some measure ... of the future that was foregone at Flodden', where King James IV died in 1513; similarly, Edwin Muir (1982: 44) claims in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) that 'The Scotland of James IV shows us a coherent civilization' that has since fallen into decline. R. D. S. Jack (1972: 90) argues that 'Scottish poets after the Union [of Crowns in 1603] began to compose pre-dominantly in English; making the transition for the most part with astonishing smoothness. They ceased to think of themselves as specifically Scottish poets.' However, the Scottish Renaissance Movement's harkening back to the medieval period is more than simply a resistance to Scotland's Anglicisation. MacDiarmid's adoption of 'the Spenglerian philosophy' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 2) and Muir's use of 'coherent' demonstrates their shared belief in the organic nature of

cultures, against which Scottish culture must in these terms seem fractured and failed; but it also shows a broader distrust in the universalising linearity of modern history since the Renaissance proper, a distrust shared by much postcolonial criticism.² Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, now commonly translated as *The Decline of the West*, appealed to MacDiarmid amongst other writers in the Modernist period: Yeats's *A Vision*, for instance, shared its cyclical view of history, and helped inspire 'The Great Wheel' section (l. 2395–2658) of MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). According to Spengler (1991: 74) 'Every Culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man. Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age'. For George Orwell, writing on Yeats in 1943, the idea of a circular history, as opposed to historical progress, is ultimately Fascist (Watson, 1994: 129) – a politics both Yeats and MacDiarmid were admittedly attracted to.³ Yet Orwell may be blind here to the suffocating imperial certitudes of linear history and the appeal to writers of so-called marginal cultures of conceptions of history that challenge that particular absolutism.

'Renaissance' in the phrase Scottish Renaissance Movement means re-birth after the downfall of a decrepit civilisation and so the possibility of a new order, one based on the

² Said (1988: 7) argues that 'there was no significant divergence from the Renaissance on' in attitudes of Eurocentric superiorism to the colonised world.

³ Indeed, the passage I quote from Yeats (2008: 388–9) at the opening of this essay goes on: 'When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred arises; in four or five or in less generations this hatred will have issued in violence and imposed some kind of rule of kindred.' This dark prophecy would take less than two years to be fulfilled. An unsigned book review in the *Modern Scot* 2.2 (1931) of Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* says: 'being good Nationalists, [we] are very interested in Hitlerism. Adolf Hitler is the most remarkable political figure in modern Germany' (McCulloch, 2004: 331). Given his interest in Nazism (Lyall, 2006: 128–34), this review is likely to be from MacDiarmid's hand.

recurrence of a Scottish cultural golden age. For MacDiarmid and Muir that golden age was the pre-Reformation medieval period of Scots Makars such as Robert Henryson and William Dunbar. Muir, believing that ‘The prerequisite of an autonomous literature is a homogeneous language’ (Muir, 1982: 7), locates an organic Scottish literature in the fifteenth century and argues that, whilst Henryson’s ‘Testament of Cresseid’ is an example of ‘a homogeneous literary language’ (Muir, 1982: 11) in which poetry, prose and criticism are all written in the same language and continually inform each other, the work of Burns, Scott and Stevenson displays a divided sensibility. MacDiarmid disagreed vehemently with Muir’s conclusion to *Scott and Scotland* that Scots writers should write in English, but in essence he agrees not only with Muir’s pessimistic assessment of Scott and Burns, but with the Orcadian’s view that, ‘after the sixteenth century’, Scottish poetry lost irreparably ‘a quality which might be called wholeness’ (Muir, 1982: 32). Scots, having ‘disintegrated into dialects’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 14), can only be a medium for sentimentality; indeed, Muir believes that Scottish dialect poetry indicates ‘a regression to childhood’ (Muir, 1982: 42) and ‘provincialism’ (Muir, 1982: 111). In the period from Dunbar to Burns we witness ‘the loss of the whole *art* of poetry’ (Muir, 1982: 25) in Scotland.

Claiming that ‘The influence of Burns has reduced the whole field of Scots letters to a “kailyard”’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 7), MacDiarmid (1996: 14) advises his Scottish literary peers ‘to recover for themselves the full canon of Scots used by the Auld Makars and readapt it to the full requirements of modern self-expression’. This is the root of his oft-cited slogan – central to MacDiarmid’s programme for a Scottish Renaissance – ‘Not Burns – Dunbar!’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 14). MacDiarmid articulates the arguably essentialist belief that ‘English is incapable of affording means of expression for certain of the chief elements of Scottish psychology’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 14), and claims that ‘a certain unique intensity of feeling, [and] the power of expressing that passionate and peculiar force ... distinguishes and

differentiates' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 10–11) the Scots from the English. Dunbar's poetry is an exemplar of a Scots 'utterance [that is] simple and straightforward' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 9), which is 'pre-Renaissance' in quality: 'Braid Scots is a great repository of the pre-Renaissance or anti-Renaissance potentialities which English has progressively forgone' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 10). Having previously cited Burns's 'Mary Morison' as an example of a 'peerless directness of utterance' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 9), MacDiarmid goes on to quote Burns's 'To W. S*****n, Ochiltree' on the virtues of 'plain braid Lallans'. Positioning Dunbar alongside the unadorned vernacular of Burns somewhat undermines MacDiarmid's argument that the Scottish Renaissance Movement is seeking to get 'back behind Burns to Dunbar' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 4); it would also seem to contradict MacDiarmid's view, expressed in the Introduction to his 1952 edition of Dunbar's poems, that Dunbar is 'a superb technician' (MacDiarmid, 1952: 1), a sophisticated modern poet of court and urban life as opposed to the rural, folk environment inhabited by Burns and his imitators. The Dunbar of MacDiarmid's *Albyn* is being drawn into the rubric of Scottish canonical essentialism identified by Jack:

Writing in Scots	(The language of the Scot)
Writing unpretentiously	(The down-to-earth Scot)
Writing on Scottish themes	(The patriot Scot)
Writing from a democratic viewpoint	(The democratic Scot)

(Jack, 2008: xi)

But by the early 1950s when MacDiarmid was publishing long, difficult poems in English such as *In Memoriam James Joyce*, he had decided that his 'Not Burns – Dunbar!' dictum of the 1920s had represented 'a call for the intellectualization of Scots poetry rather than for an

imitation of Dunbar's language' (MacDiarmid, 1952: 1). What ultimately concerns MacDiarmid in his attempts to recover Scots is cultural 'differentiation' (MacDiarmid, 1996: 12) from England. MacDiarmid (1996: 13) believes that 'the cultural exhaustion of English' exemplifies the Spenglerian decline and fall of an imperial civilisation, and is consequently the ideal moment for a Scottish Renaissance to bloom. This parallels his opposition to the Renaissance:

The future of the Scots spirit may depend upon the issue of **the great struggle going on in all the arts between the dying spirit of the Renaissance and the rediscovered spirit of nationality**. Today there is a general reaction against the Renaissance. **Observe the huge extent to which dialect is entering into the stuff of modern literature in every country. Dialect is the language of the common people; in literature it denotes an almost overweening attempt to express the here-and-now. That, in its principle, is anti-Renaissance.**

(MacDiarmid, 1996: 9)

Like Yeats's Irish Revival, the Scottish Renaissance as envisioned by MacDiarmid is a movement of counter-Renaissance against the cultural standardisation wrought by the European Renaissance and practised subsequently by Western European imperial cultures.

The emboldened passages above are plagiarised from the opening pages of *The Hidden Ireland*, in which Corkery argues for the vitality of national cultures, particularly those currently rediscovering their distinctly national vein, such as Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and of course Ireland, against 'the pale meadows of death' represented by Renaissance universalism (Corkery, 1925: xvi). Corkery claims that, 'Since the Renaissance there have been, strictly speaking, no self-contained national cultures in Europe. The

antithesis of Renaissance art in this regard is national art' (Corkery, 1925: xiv). For Corkery the Renaissance 'is dead', and it had to end because it was 'artificial from the start, rootless' (Corkery, 1925: xvii). The etiolated cosmopolitanism of the Renaissance had no secure purchase in national life making it doomed to wither, to be replaced by 'a return to national standards' (Corkery, 1925: xvii). Corkery (1925: xv) characterises this movement from the transnationalism of the Renaissance, with its 'borrowed alien modes', to what he repeatedly calls 'national standards' as being Romantic: 'The personal note, the overweening subjectivity that marks such movements is a protest against the externality of Renaissance moulds. The local colour, the religious *motif*, the patriotic *motif*, these are an adventure in rough life' (Corkery, 1925: xvi). Corkery (1925: xvi) believes that 'every Romantic movement is right in its intention: it seeks to grow out of living feeling, out of the here and now, even when it finds its themes in the past'.

Seen in Corkery's terms, it is tempting to view the Scottish Renaissance as a Romantic movement of national recuperation, an early twentieth-century version of the Romantic nationalism that Tom Nairn (1977: 103–107; 148–69) complained was absent from Scotland's development in the nineteenth century due to the nation's investment in the British Empire. However, there was always a belatedness, not to say, a pessimistic quality to the Scottish Renaissance Movement, especially in Edwin Muir's polemical work such as *Scott and Scotland*. In 1919, in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, G. Gregory Smith (1919: 130) had asked 'whether Scottish literature, in the more complex conditions of modern life, can recover, or should try to recover, what it has declined or forgotten' at the beginning of a chapter significantly titled 'The Problem of Dialect'. Smith's book influenced MacDiarmid, but Smith's tone here seems sceptical as to the possibilities of the recovery of a Scottish vernacular tradition. In spite of the founding of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, which was heavily influenced by the cultural nationalism of the 1920s, the Scottish

Renaissance Movement did not achieve a similar level of success in its own period as did Yeats's Revival in Ireland.

Contemporary critics of Scottish literature and culture have adopted a revisionist approach that has sought to challenge the historiography, the canonical legacy, and the pessimism of the Scottish Renaissance Movement. Crawford Gribben (2009: 5), for instance, argues that 'Muir and MacDiarmid were reconstructing [Scottish] history along with the literary tradition' in their rejection in particular of the alleged negative cultural inheritance of Calvinism and the Scottish Reformation. For Gribben (2009: 17–18) 'Muir and MacDiarmid constructed a thesis that is turning in upon itself' because to propose cultural recovery on the basis of the disparagement of significant periods of Scottish history and important Scottish literary figures can only be self-defeating: 'Despite its nationalist claims, the revisionist thesis [of the Scottish Renaissance Movement] presupposed the accuracy of a long tradition of anti-nationalist propaganda, and provides yet another example of Scots colluding in the marginalization of their own culture' (Gribben, 2009: 6). In other words, the Scottish Renaissance is not a progressive movement towards a positive view of Scotland and its cultures, but one of the most recent key factors inhibiting such a view; it is not a postcolonial movement, such as Edward Said (1988) argues for Yeats's Irish Revival, but an essentialist cultural moment still caught in the self-incriminating thrall of colonial stereotype and self-hate.

Another consideration of recent critics is the manner in which the modern, twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance has usurped the Scottish Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Walter Pater, one of the key nineteenth-century definers of the Renaissance, along with Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt, gives the classic definition:

The word *Renaissance* ... is now generally used to denote not merely the revival of classical antiquity which took place in the fifteenth century, and to which the word was first applied, but a whole complex movement, of which that revival of classical antiquity was but one element or symptom.

(Pater, 1986: 1)

Jerry Brotton (2006: 9) argues that, depending on the scholarly locus – art history, literature, or history – the Renaissance can be dated anywhere between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. As such, Jack (2012: 54) asks a pertinent question: ‘Is Henryson or Dunbar a medieval or a renaissance poet?’ Both Muir and MacDiarmid regarded these poets as medieval: Muir, to the detriment of Scottish literature in the same period, equates the Renaissance with the seventeenth century in England; for Muir (1982: 112), Scotland lost its cultural ‘unity’ with James VI. MacDiarmid, as we have seen, rates Dunbar’s qualities as belonging to the pre-Renaissance period. Critics, even of a revisionist nature, have largely followed this chronology. Henryson and Dunbar are central to Bawcutt and Hadley Williams’s *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* (2006), and in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (2012) Alessandra Petrina covers Henryson and Dunbar in her chapter on ‘The Medieval Period’, while Sarah Dunnigan looks mainly at the sixteenth and seventeenth century in her ‘Reformation and Renaissance’ chapter. As Dunnigan (2012: 41) comments, it ‘is a curious twist of cultural history [that] Scotland enjoys a “Renaissance” that began in the twentieth century rather than at some point between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries’. Jack’s work has been seminal in linking early Scottish poets to Continental European modes and ideas, such as the possible influence of Italian humanism on Henryson (Jack, 1972: 14), or the broad context of Renaissance humanism informing Gavin

Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Eneados* (Jack, 1972: 21), a work that Ezra Pound (1931: 45) thought 'better than the original'.

Jack (2008: xxx) has also been instrumental in arguing for a 'continuous literary history' in Scotland, one that does not see Anglicisation and self-conscious artistic artifice as signs of national betrayal, and one that promotes literary quality over questions of politics and identity. Jack (2012: 54) identifies MacDiarmid 'as one of the most belligerent detractors of its [the Scottish Renaissance's] chronological rival for the name'. Yet MacDiarmid himself argued for an 'all-in view' of Scottish literary history that represents 'its Gaelic and Latin elements' (MacDiarmid, 1948: x); and, like Yeats in search of 'that ancient self' that would inspire the revival of Irish literature, MacDiarmid (1948: viii) too sought to link modern Scottish literature to 'its most ancient sources'. In his *Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1940) MacDiarmid certainly includes Dunbar and Henryson, but their contribution does not appreciably outweigh that of the great Latinists Arthur Johnstone and George Buchanan, nor, more significantly in relation to Jack's contention, the Renaissance-period work of William Drummond of Hawthornden and Alexander Montgomerie, author of *The Cherrie and the Slae*; MacDiarmid too was an admirer of Sir Thomas Urquhart, author of *The Jewel* and translator of Rabelais (MacDiarmid, 1993b: 26–56). Although he did not include the work of Edwin Muir in his *Golden Treasury* in opposition to Muir's argument in favour of English in *Scott and Scotland* four years previously, MacDiarmid had for long been a promoter of the English-language poetry of John Davidson (MacDiarmid, 1997: 437–40), whose work influenced the young T. S. Eliot.

The entirely commendable desire of Renaissance scholars such as Jack that the twentieth-century movement should not obscure the earlier Renaissance from canonical view fails to take into proper consideration the context of the Scottish Renaissance Movement within the Modernist period, a context that somewhat dictates that movement's pessimistic,

and tendentious, view of Scottish history. MacDiarmid writes in his long Scots-English poem *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930):

*The relation o' John Davidson's thocht
To Nietzsche's is mair important
Than a' the drivels aboot 'Hame, Sweet Hame'
Fower million cretins mant [stammer].*

(MacDiarmid, 1993a: 261; italics in the original)

MacDiarmid's focus here is aggressively, insultingly non-patriotic; rather, in citing the influence of Nietzsche's thought on Davidson, MacDiarmid is concerned with the crisis of moral, political and artistic values that we have come to know as 'Modernism'. Shane Weller defines Modernism in terms that are appropriate both to a clearer understanding of MacDiarmid's supposed contradictoriness, but also more broadly of the Scottish Renaissance Movement:

Modernism as a whole is a highly complex phenomenon, combining progressive and reactionary elements and being oriented both to the past and the future, while also insisting upon a new sense of the present. Furthermore, there are modernisms of the Left and of the Right, the differences between them often being far from easy to identify.

(Weller, 2011: 5)

The Modernist tendency towards the progressive and the reactionary, the past and the future identified by Weller, reminds us of MacDiarmid's argument quoted previously from *Albyn*

that the Scottish Renaissance Movement is ‘at once radical and conservative, revolutionary and reactionary’. I have concentrated mainly on MacDiarmid’s *Albyn* and Muir’s *Scott and Scotland* in this essay because in the context of the modern Scottish Renaissance they are both, to varying degrees, important examples of what Roger Griffin calls “‘programmatic’ modernism’,

in which the rejection of Modernity expresses itself as a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew. It is a modernism that lends itself to the rhetoric of manifestos and declarations, and encourages the artist/ intellectual to collaborate proactively with collective movements for radical change and projects for the transformation of social realities and political systems.

(Griffin, 2007: 62)

Griffin (2007: 62) contrasts ‘programmatic modernism’ with what he terms – after Joyce – ‘epiphanic modernism’, also a ‘modernist rejection of Modernity’, but one ‘of a purely inner spiritual kind with no revolutionary, epoch-making designs on “creating a new world”’. Kafka is the epitome of the ‘epiphanic modernist’. With his wife Willa, Edwin Muir was the first to translate Kafka into English, and much of his own poetry, with its vision of loss, could also be described as ‘epiphanic modernism’. Muir’s early prose non-fiction, written decidedly under the influence of Nietzsche, combines the epiphanic and the programmatic. In *We Moderns*, written under the name Edward Moore (1918: 7), Muir says that ‘The reader will look in vain ... for a system’, but will find here instead ‘an attitude, and a perfectly distinct one’ of – in reality – sub-Nietzschean modernistic moralising. Muir (1924: 86) argues in *Latitudes* that Nietzsche ‘brought a new atmosphere into European thought ... and any thinker in our time who has not breathed in it has ... some nuance of mediocrity and

timidity which is displeasing'. For Griffin (2007: 62), Nietzsche is the most hypnotically *modern* of philosophers precisely because his thought is caught on a pin between the programmatic and the epiphanic, the 'two poles discernible within the modernist sensibility'. As Weller (2011: 5) puts it, 'Whereas programmatic modernism looks to remake the world, epiphanic modernism withdraws from it'.

Modernism, of whatever mode, programmatic or epiphanic, is for Griffin not an expression *of* the modern, but a response to and reaction *against* modernity as such. Modernity can be characterised by a changed perception of history and time, in particular an opposition to pre-modern traditional order. Griffin argues that it is possible

to identify modernity with the localized emergence in late eighteenth-century Europe of the reflexive mode of historical consciousness which legitimated the French revolutionaries' fundamentalist war against tradition and their deliberate attempt to replace it ... with an entirely new epoch.

(Griffin, 2007: 51)

Griffin means by 'reflexive mode of historical consciousness' that, with our greater awareness of time, we moderns now think about *where we are* in history, and determinably identify ourselves as belonging to a new era. Increasing scepticism in the nineteenth century as to the rationalism underpinning the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution 'undermined the myth of progress to a point where for many among its cultural elites modernity lost its utopian connotations and began to be constructed as a period of decline, decay, and loss' (Griffin, 2007: 51). The modernity of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century is 'an epoch not of progress and evolution, but of regression and involution: in a word, of *decadence*'

(Griffin, 2007: 52). Modernism as a cultural, political and philosophical movement is a revolt against modernity, that is, a ‘revolt against decadence’ (Griffin, 2007: 52).

Weller (2011: 1), in a thesis indebted to Griffin’s terminology, contends that ‘all forms of modernism, be they philosophical, political, or aesthetic, are committed to the idea of palingenesis, to the rebirth of culture in a form that is uncontaminated by the spiritual sickness besetting modernity’. Palingenesis is an apt description for the aims of the modern Scottish Renaissance. The word means to be born anew, to regenerate, but it also suggests something that existed before that has come to life again in ‘a second creation’ (Chambers Dictionary, 2003: 1075). (Griffin (1991) connects this ancestral quality to fascism.⁴) Many Scottish Renaissance Movement protagonists wanted to find an essential Scotland that they feared had been suppressed by the course of Scottish history, hence the link back to medieval poets such as Henryson and Dunbar. MacDiarmid’s (1993a: 27) ‘The Eemis Stane’ can be interpreted as a poem that uses old Scots words to attempt the reincarnation of a dead language that had been buried by ‘the fug [moss] o’ fame / An’ history’s hazelraw [lichen]’. Apt, too, is Weller’s phrase ‘uncontaminated by the spiritual sickness besetting modernity’. There was certainly a purist strain in the modern Scottish Renaissance; a need to transcend or ‘get back behind’, in MacDiarmid’s phrase, the historical vectors that were seen to have undermined Scottishness. As Neil M. Gunn (1994: 114) says in *Highland River* (1937): ‘It’s a far cry to the golden age, to the blue smoke of the heath fire and the scent of the primrose! Our river took a wrong turning somewhere! But we haven’t forgotten the source.’ This spiritual ‘wrong turning’ taken by ‘our river’ could relate to modernity generally, modern Scotland specifically, or both, and it reminds us of the happy and free primitives of a diffusionist-inspired pre-civilisation golden age haunting much of the work of J. Leslie

⁴ On Yeats’s fascism, Said (1988: 16) argues: ‘one can quite easily situate and criticize those unacceptable attitudes of Yeats ... without changing one’s view of Yeats as a poet of decolonisation’.

Mitchell/ Lewis Grassie Gibbon (Lyall, 2012). Whilst industrialisation, urbanisation and Anglicisation are all targets for the ire of many Scottish Renaissance Movement writers, the primary ‘spiritual sickness besetting’ modern Scotland issued from the sixteenth-century Reformation.

The extent of the consensus among the main figures of the Scottish Renaissance Movement that the Reformation and Calvinism were disastrous for Scotland and the development of Scottish art is truly astonishing. Opposition to the Reformation is by far the single largest theme that unites the modern Scottish Renaissance as a group. Writing of the central influence on the Scottish literary tradition of Muir and MacDiarmid’s shared hostility to the Reformation, Gribben (2009: 2, 3) points to their ‘canon-shaping rejection of Scottish Calvinism’, a rejection that has become ‘identified as part of the criteria of Scottish essentialism’. Gribben (2009: 9) argues that ‘Muir and MacDiarmid overstated the social hegemony of the Reformed Church’, which he claims actually ‘existed in tension with an increasingly confident and well-organized Roman Catholicism’. Gribben (2009: 10) also says that, while ‘The Muir–MacDiarmid orthodoxy ... has consistently pointed to the reformation’s collusion in the Anglicization of Scotland’, in reality ‘the Reformed movement was not inherently Anglophone’.

Gribben is correct when he says that modern Scottish Renaissance writers often saw the Reformation as a kind of Scottish fifth column opening the way for Anglicisation and so eventual Union with England; as such, the dates 1560, 1603, and 1707 have become linked in an historically deterministic manner. In *Albyn* MacDiarmid (1996: 4) states that ‘the Reformation [has] lain like a blight on Scottish arts and affairs’, and he goes on to claim, with a measure of *carte blanche* towards theological history, that ‘it is useful to remember that the Shorter Catechism, like the concept of the Canny Scot, the myth which has facilitated the anglicization of Scotland, was an English invention’. It is in *Albyn* too that MacDiarmid

positions the Scottish Renaissance Movement as part of the ‘post-war phenomena of recrudescence nationalism all over Europe’ aligned with a ‘wave of Catholic revivalism’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 1), and he argues that ‘From the [modern Scottish] Renaissance point of view the growth of Catholicism, and the influx of the Irish, are alike welcome, as undoing’ (MacDiarmid, 1996: 3) many of the negative aspects of the Reformation’s cultural and social influence in Scotland. I have pointed out elsewhere that some of the main protagonists of the Scottish Renaissance Movement ‘were Catholic converts; many who did not become so remained anti-Calvinist’ (Lyall, 2006: 40). The cause of this alienation from the Reformed tradition was not entirely due to the perceived link to Anglicisation, although Eric Linklater (1935: 53) draws historical connections between ‘English influence on Scotland’ and the nature of the Reformed Kirk, and Muir (1982: 6) blames John Knox – ‘the first Scotsman to write good English prose’ – and ‘the acceptance of the English translation of the Bible’ for the ‘disintegration of the language of Scottish literature and the disappearance of a distinctive Scottish style’. The modern Scottish Renaissance opposed the Reformation because it believed it to have initiated, or to be part of a historical movement that brought about, a general and ongoing malaise of the spirit and imagination in Scotland.

Muir (1982: 10) claims in *Scott and Scotland* that ‘the Reformation truly signaled the beginning of Scotland’s decline as a civilized nation’ due to Calvinism’s injunction against poetry and poetic drama. Muir’s 1929 biography of John Knox is even more damning; Gribben (2009: 4) calls it ‘a searing critique of the cultural implications of the Scottish reformation ... in which 1560 became “year zero” in a Scottish cultural revolution’ – a phrase echoing Compton Mackenzie’s (1936: 73) belief that 1560 represented ‘a spectacular attempt at [national] self-destruction’. Muir’s ‘portrait of a Calvinist’ is a work of semi-fictional biography, like Catherine Carswell’s *Life of Robert Burns*, published a year after Muir’s *John Knox*, and written with much the same end in sight: to attack the true

believers. Muir's Knox is 'a perfect type of Protestant' (Muir, 1930: 184) – no compliment; a 'pathological' individual imbued with a 'maddening persistence of will' (Muir, 1930: 187). That, according to Muir (1930: 11), 'The life of Knox is broken in two' between Catholic and Calvinist periods mirrors the rift Muir perceives in Scottish history between the organic, Catholic culture of the medieval period, and the disordered, individualistic sensibility of the post-Reformation era. Damaging dualisms such as this – for instance, between 'the elect and reprobate' (Muir, 1930: 14), and Knox 'the man of action' and 'the servant of God' (Muir, 1930: 76) – persist throughout Muir's book. And just as the MacDiarmid (1996: 12) of *Albyn* decides that the Reformation 'subverted the whole national psychology and made the dominant characteristics of the nation those which had previously been churl elements', so Muir (1930: 100) claims in *John Knox* that Calvinism 'turned Scotland into a Puritan country, to remain so until this day'.

Muir concentrates on what he believes to have been the effects on Scotland of Knox's Calvinism in the final chapter of his biography of Knox. In the century after Knox's death in 1572 – so, into the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Renaissance period – Scotland produced 'nothing' in 'philosophy, profane poetry, the drama, music, painting, architecture' (Muir, 1930: 307), in comparison with the cultural riches of England in the great Shakespearean period. Calvinism, for Muir (1930: 308), 'outraged the imagination', and held it captive until the eighteenth century. Lewis Grassie Gibbon (2001: 163) argues similarly that the Reformation induced 'aphasia of the spirit' in Scotland, a form of speechlessness that might be connected with the decline of Scots, and also implies the death of creativity and the free play of the imagination. Willa Muir (1996: 75), too, thinks the Reformation was a form of 'spiritual strychnine' that considered 'literature and fine arts [to be] of the devil'. Edwin Muir does not go so far as Fionn Mac Colla (1967: 204; emphasis in the original), who proclaims stridently at the end of *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist*: 'WHAT THE

REFORMATION DID WAS TO SNUFF OUT WHAT MUST OTHERWISE HAVE DEVELOPED INTO THE MOST BRILLIANT NATIONAL CULTURE IN HISTORY’; but Muir (1930: 309) does believe that ‘What Knox really did was to rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance’. The modern Scottish Renaissance is ‘a cultural Counter-Reformation’ (Lyall, 2006: 39); a Renaissance Scotland never had – as far as Muir is concerned; and, as a *Scottish* Renaissance, a national and nationalist counter-Renaissance to the universalist modes of the Renaissance.

M. P. Ramsay offered something of a corrective to modern Scottish Renaissance polemics against Calvinism in her *Calvin and Art*. For Ramsay (1938: 1), writing on visual art rather than literature, many ‘writers have tended to over-emphasise the influence of theology on art, and at the same time to misunderstand, or even misrepresent, the spirit of Scottish Calvinism, perhaps through an insufficient knowledge of Calvin’s writings’. Ramsay argues that ‘Given the two essentials of national life, liberty and peace, a nation’s artistic life will accommodate itself to any form of theological teaching’ (Ramsay, 1938: 10), and that Calvin’s ideas ‘were not unfavourable to the growth of a national art’ (Ramsay, 1938: 90). What *was* damaging to Scottish art was the Crown and Parliament going south, and drawing artists with them to London. After all, ‘to have a national art you must first have a nation’, and therefore ‘a Scottish art that is really national and not merely sporadic, individual, eccentric, must wait for the restoration of the Scottish nation’ (Ramsay, 1938: 10–11). Fortunately, the creative writers of the Scottish Renaissance Movement, of whatever political or polemical persuasion, remained uninhibited by what they regarded as Calvinist philistinism, and did not wait for that restoration; perhaps, though, in their refusal of history’s terms, they might just help to inspire it in the future.

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