on the same side with Malcolm X, defending extremism. Eliot Weinberger remembers that “The words he wanted on his tombstone were ‘A disgrace to the community.””


from A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle

Vast imbecile mentality of those
Who cannot tell a thistle from a rose.
This is for others . . .

SACHEVERELL SITWELL

[Sic Transit Gloria Scotiae]

I amna fou’ sae muckle as tired—deid done.
It’s gey and hard work coupin’ gless for gless
Wi’ Cruiveil and Gilsanquhur and the like.
And I'm no’ just as bad as aince I wess.

5 The elbuck fankles in the coorse o’ time,
The sheekle’s no’ sae souple, and the thrapple
Grows deaf and dour: nae langer up and doun
Cleg as a squirrel spells the Adam’s apple.

Forbye, the stuffie’s no’ the real Mackay.
The sun’s sel’ aince, as sure as ye began it,
Riz in your vera saul: but what keeks in
Noo is in truth the vilest “saxpenny planet.”

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And as the worth’s gane doun the cost has risen.
Yin canna throw the cockles o’ yin’s hert
Woot hau’ en’ cud feel noo, julosin’ what
The wife’ll say (I duma blame her fur’).

It’s robin’ Peter to pay Paul at least . . .
And a’ that’s Scotch aboot it is the name,
Like a thing else ca’ed Scottish nooadays
—A destitute o’ specular juist the same.

(To prove my saul is Scots I maun begin
Wi’ what’s still deemed Scots and the folk expect,
And spire up sune by visible degrees
To heichens where the fules ha’ never recked.

But aince I get them there I’ll whummele them
And sune the craturis in the nether deeps,
—For it’s nae choice, and ony man sa’d wish
To dree the goat’s weird tae as weel’s the sheep’s!)

Heifetz in tartan, and Sir Harry Lauder!
What’s Isadora Duncan’s dancin’ noo?
Is Mary Garden in Chicago still
And Duncan Grant in Paris—and me fou’?

[Sic transit gloria Scotiae]—a’ the floorers
O’ the Forest ar weede awa’. (A blin’ bird’s nest
Is abhins biggin’ in the thistle thoo . . .

And better blin’ if it’s brood is like the rest!)

You canna gang to a Burns supper even
Woot some wizened scrunt o’ a knock-knee

Section titles were added at the publisher's request to MacDiarmid's 1962 Collected Poems; they were dropped in the final Complete Poems, but for reasons of convenience in referring to the poem we have supplied them in brackets. Our annotations make use of MacDiarmid's glossary in the Complete Poems; we are also indebted to Kenneth Buthlay's edition of A Drunk Man (Edinburgh, 1987).

Epigraph: Sacheverell Sitwell (1897–1988) was the younger brother of the poet Edith Sitwell.

Title: “Thus passes the glory of Scotland” (Latin). “Sic transit gloria mundi” (“Thus passes the glory of the world!”) is said, as has been symbolically burned, during the ceremony for the coronation of a new Pope.

1 fou’: drunk; sae muckle: so much; deid done: dead beat
2 gey and hard: very hard; coupin’: upending
3 Cruiveil and Gilsanquhur: the speaker’s drinking-companions, “called as was the custom not by their surnames but by the names of their farms” (MacDiarmid).
4 baud: strong, healthy
5 elbuck fankles: elbow becomes clumsy
6 sheekle: wrist; thrapple: throat
7 deep: numb
8 Gleg: gager; spellis: climbs
9 Forbye: besides; the stuffie: whisky
10 aince: once
11 keeks: peeps
12 saxpenny planet: Sir Walter Scott wrote in a letter of the Scottish novelist James Hogg: “There is an old saying of the seaman’s, ‘every man is not born to be a boatswain’, and I think I have heard of an old man born under a saxpenny planet, and doomed never to be worth a groat [a coin worth fourpence]: I fear something of this vile saxpenny influence had gleamed in at the cottage window when poet Hogg first came squeaking into the world.”
Hugh MacDiarmid

70. I’m haverin’, Rabbie, but ye understaun’
It gets my dander up to see your star
A bauble in Babel, banged like a saxpence
Twixt Burbank’s Baedeker and Bleistein’s cigar.

75. There’s nae sae ignorant but think they can
Expantiate on you, if on nae ither.
The sumphs ha’e ta’en you at your wurd, and, fegs!
The foziest o’ them claims to be a—Brither!

80. Syne “Here’s the cheenge”—the star o’ Rabbie Burns.
Sma’ cheenge, “Twinkle, Twinkle.” The memory slips
As G. K. Chesterton heaves up to gie’

85. The “Immortal Memory” in a huge eclipse,
Or somebody else as famous if less fat.
You left the like in Embro in a scunner
To booze wi’ thiefless cronies sic as me.
I’se warrant you’d shy clear o’ a’ the hunner

Odd Burns Clubs tae, or ninety-nine o’ them,
And haud your birthday in a different kip
Whaur your name isna ta’en in vain—as Christ
Gied a Jerusalem’s Pharisees the slip

—Christ wha’d ha’ been Chief Rabbi gin he’d lik’t—
Wi’ publicans and sinners to forgeth,
But, losh! the publicans noo are Pharisees,
And I’m no’ shair o’ maist the sinners either.

80. But that’s aside the point! I’ve got fair waun’t.
It’s no’ that I’m sae fou’ as just deid dune,
And dinna ken as muckle’s whaur I am

95. Or hoo I’ve come to sprawl here neth the mune.

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69. haverin’: rambling
71. banged like a saxpence: “Barg went sixpence” is the pay-off line of a comic anecdote illustrating the parsimony of the stereotyped Scotsman in London (Buthlay).
72. cf. T.S. Eliot’s “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar.” “MacD takes these two American tourists to suggest the commercialisation of culture, of which the Burns Cult was a Scottish example” (Buthlay).
74. Expantiate: speak at length
75. sumphs: blockheads; fegs: faith!
76. foziest: softest (of rotten vegetables), stupidest
77. cheenge: i.e., the change from the sixpence of line 71. The song “The Star of Robbie Burns” is sung at Burns suppers.
82. Embro: Edinburgh; in a scunner: in disgust
83. thiefless: profligate; sic: such
84. hundred: hundred
86. bair: baird: baird: lodging or brothel
88. Pharisees: the strictly observant Jewish sect whose members opposed Jesus; self-righteous or hypocritical people.
90. forgeth: meet. For Christ’s parable of the publican (tax-gatherer) and the Pharisee see Luke 18:9–14.
96. shair o’ maist: sure of most of
98. waun’t: quite confused
99. hoo: how; neth: beneath
That's it! It isna me that's fou' at a,
But the fu' mane, the doited jade, that's led
Me fer agley, or 'mo' griffled the world.
---For a' I ken I'm safe in my ain bed.

Jean! Jean! Gin she's no' here it's no' oor bed,
Or else I'm dreamin' deep and canna waken,
But it's a fell queer dream if this is no'
A real hillside—and thee things thistles and bracken!

It's hard wark hand'n by a thocht worth ha'en'
And harder speak'n, and no' for ilka man;
Maist Thocht's like whisky—a thoosan' under proof,
And a sair price is pitten on't even than.

As Kirks wi' Christianity ha'e dune,
Burns Clubs wi' Burns—wi' a' thing it's the same,
The core o' ocht is only for the few,
Scorned by the mony, thrang wi's empty name.

And a' the names in History mean nocht
To maist folk but "ideas o' their ain;",
The vera opposite o' anything
The Deid 'ud awn gin they cam' back again.

A greater Christ, a greater Burns, may come.
The maist they'll dae is to gi'e bigger pegs
To folly and conceit to hank their rubbish on.
They'll cheenge folk's talk but no' their natures, fegs!

[The Barren Fig]

O Scotland is
THE barren fig.
Up, carles, up
And roun it fig.

Hugh MacDiarmid

Add Moses took
A dry stick and
Instantly it
Flo'ered in his hand.

Pa Scotland up,
And who can say
It winna bud
And blossom tae.

A miracle's
Oor only chance.
Up, carles, up
And let us dance!

[Yank Oot Your Orra Boughs]

Yank oot your orra boughs, my hert!

God gied man speech and speech created thocht,
He gied man speech but to the Scots gied nocht
Barrin' this clytach that they've never brought
To anything but sic a Blottie O
As some bairn's copybook might show,

A spook o' soond that frae the unkent grave
In which oor nation lies loups up to wave
Sic leprous chuns as tatties have
That cellar-booed send spindles gropin'
Towards ony hole that's open,

Like wasome fingers in the dark that think
They still may widen the ane and only chink
That e'er has gien mankind a blink