

Book Reviews

Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitkin, eds., *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, 2 vols. London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1978. pp. xxii + 1485. £20.

In 1962, Kulgin Duval, a young wine waiter who had a part-time rare-book business for wealthy Americans staying at the Ritz, was rummaging through a Mayfair second-hand bookshop when he found the manuscript of a poem. Duval paid a few shillings for the manuscript and left the store. Later he established that it was Hugh MacDiarmid's fine "Bracken Hills at Autumn." It had been lost for thirty years. This is indicative of the problem that, until now, has faced anyone who wanted to know the entire range of MacDiarmid's work. While the Lallans lyrics of the early 1920's have long been praised, MacDiarmid's later "poetry of fact" has simply not been available in sufficient breadth. In the past, therefore, MacDiarmid's poetry has usually been approached from the wrong end, and his reputation has been based on the wrong works. But now Michael Grieve, MacDiarmid's eldest son, and W. R. Aitken, his long-time friend and bibliographer, have done the necessary spadework for us, and the poems of MacDiarmid's maturity, especially the long poems upon which his reputation as one of the major meditative poets of our century may ultimately be based, are available to us. Ironically, then, *The Complete Poems*, published just shortly after the death of the poet, is only the beginning of a true assessment of his work.

To suggest that the poetry of MacDiarmid's maturity is his most important is not to disparage his earlier achievement in the lyric form. Written in "Lallans" (or braid Scots), his lyrics exhibit a rare density and resonance of concrete expression. With these Lallans lyrics, MacDiarmid effected a "renaissance" in Scottish cultural life and gave Scottish poetry a proud *European* reputation. However, the Lallans lyrics occupy no more than five years in the entire range of MacDiarmid's fifty to sixty-year career. Seen as a whole, as it now may be, his work shows a search for a larger form that can contain a wide-ranging philosophical and political content. "North of the Tweed," from the book-length grab-bag of poems *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), is an early success, and the long poems such as "Whuchulls," "On a Raised Beach," "Lament for the Great Music," "Direadh III," and "On Reading Prof. Ifor William's 'Canu Aneurin' in Difficult Days" show high points of achievement in the long, open form. In these and many more of his meditative poems, the thematic development is based on a deep-seated confidence in the power of man's own indomitable spirit to overcome the conditions that limit him. His art is promethean.

MacDiarmid's shift from the Lallans lyrics to the extended "poetry of fact" becomes consistent and inevitable as we follow the chronology revealed in these volumes. The impact of works of the late-1920's such as I. A. Richards' *Science and Poetry* and Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* is readily seen, especially Whitehead's argument that the "aesthetic apprehension" of the scientific fact's "emergent value" is a responsibility of the modern artist. Besides, MacDiarmid had accepted by then Wordsworth's, Arnold's, Whitman's and Tolstoy's arguments that a knowledge of the truths which science reveals gives the poet a more secure foundation upon which to build his "criticism of modern life." For him, one definition of man's alienation was his ignorance of the

sciences that had so drastically altered his world. That ignorance was also a definition of his inability to live up to the MacDiarmid ideal: for each man to be "of his own mind the ruler." Without scientific knowledge, nature "will work its will" on man. Thus, in "The Kind of Poetry I Want" MacDiarmid states that the truly modern poet must be:

Not unaware of our great crisis of opportunity
 nor unfit fully to seize it,
 Nor ignorant like those who prate of 'empty air,'
 Unaware of its ceilings and vaults, the Heavyside
 Layer and the Appleton Layer,
 Along which the sound-waves run as tho' along
 vaults of stone,
 And against which we can throw things and have
 them bounce back,
 Our shelter also from the torrent pelting outside;
 A structure so strong and sound it throws back waves
 Which, if they got through, would sweep away
 All life from the surface of the earth;
 A structure sturdier than Earth's horrendous stone. . . .
 (II, p. 1009)

"If fact disappears," he wrote, it "leaves a silly fable in its place." The result of this *credo* is a refreshing absence of existential *angst*. To read his mature poetry is to experience a mind that grapples with the problems of knowledge in a world not devoid of meaning but tantalizingly *full* of meaning. As George Steiner has suggested, MacDiarmid's mature poetry is one example of a literature that is "both disciplined and under the stress of the future."

Dialectical materialism helped MacDiarmid to define more rigorously his conceptions of the submerged spirit of man working toward fulfillment, of the fact that reality is in a process of relentless *change*. Like Yevgeny Zamyatin, MacDiarmid saw nature as genuinely revolutionary, its essence as upheaval and flux. As MacDiarmid put it in "Ode to All Rebels," the "revolutionary spirit's ane with spirit itself." But that is not to say that MacDiarmid (at his best) is a tendentious poet. Although there are many poems that are overtly political (so much so that misguided zealots could publish a volume of MacDiarmid's "Socialist" poems), his vision as an artist cannot be reduced to any exclusive theory. "As a Socialist," MacDiarmid argued, "my real concern is as an artist's organized approach to the interdependencies of life," and in "Second Hymn to Lenin" he stated that politics was more akin to "bairns' play" compared to what poetry was:

. . . the principal question
 About a work o' art is frae hoo deep
 A life it springs—and syne hoo faur
 Up frae'it it has the poo'er to leap.
 (I, p. 323)

The irony, therefore, is that although MacDiarmid is known (and often rejected) as a lyric or political poet, much of his major work is of neither genre. He is a poet of meditation, of introspection, and of nature. The strategy behind such poems—especially those written between 1930 and 1941—is to begin with such a profound awareness of a specific geographical locale that an ordering consciousness is established in the speaker, one that allows the mind to assimilate an evolving myriad of facts that can be culled from Scottish cultural history, from the most obscure texts drawn from many foreign cultures, and from recent

scientific discoveries. The strategy has a dual significance. On the one hand, it focusses awareness on the sublime features of the Scottish landscape (the external particular) that contains its own configuration of energies; on the other hand, it immediately draws the speaker's consciousness into an intense awareness and uniform tone, so that the subject matter, regardless of how wide-ranging and disparate, can be (to use Valéry's phrase) "harmonically related."

Originally, the MacDiarmid canon was to be published by Kulgin Duval, who established himself in Edinburgh as a dealer in rare manuscripts and as a publisher of fine books. His ambitious plans for the project, however, made cost too great a factor, and *The Complete Poems* was published finally by a London firm. It is ironic, then, that MacDiarmid, who wanted to drive a permanent wedge between England and his beloved Scotland, should have an English publisher for the definitive edition of his poetry—and that it was economics that produced such a situation. Accordingly, the binding of this set is weak, the cover unattractive, and the paper inferior. Yet, in spite of this economic cutting-of-corners, it is still very expensive. "With usura," MacDiarmid would have agreed with Pound, "hath no man a house of good stone." Furthermore, the text has its editorial eccentricities. For example, sections of "The Kind of Poetry I Want" appear in different parts of the text, while other passages of this long *ars poetica* have been set apart as individual poems. Moreover, the "Contents" lists several poems in more than one place. Nevertheless, we have all of MacDiarmid before us. If the discovery of MacDiarmid as a great lyric poet is part of our cultural history, *The Complete Poems* offers us the opportunity to discover him, now, as a master of the long philosophical poem, as a Scottish genius whose art transcends borders, whose fame is already world-wide.

Robert Watson

Susan Snyder. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: "Romeo and Juliet," "Hamlet," "Othello," and "King Lear."* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. pp. 185. \$12.50.

In his catalogue of the "gross absurdities" of contemporary dramatists, Sir Philip Sidney particularly deplors the fact that "all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns . . . with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration [appropriate to tragedy], nor the right sportfulness [appropriate to comedy], is by their mongrel tragicomedy obtained." Sidney's harshness is largely mitigated by the fact that the most accomplished English tragedy he knew was *Gorboduc*. Had that skirmish outside Zutphen (a skirmish with a denouement as indecent and indiscreet as any condemned in the *Apology*) not cut short Sidney's career, one wonders what he would have made of the drama of Shakespeare. The admixture of comic elements in Shakespeare's tragedies has long puzzled critics and directors alike. What is one to make of the comic elements in, for example, *Hamlet*, or *King Lear*? How do they qualify our view of the hero? How are they to be realised on stage? Professor Snyder is one of the latest in a hardy line to attempt the difficult—and, in her case, I am happy to add, the rewarding—task of illuminating the inter-relationship of tragic and comic elements in some of Shakespeare's major plays.

Professor Snyder makes two observations at the start of her book which do much to commend it to the reader. One is the eminently sensible contention that, "once Shakespeare had thoroughly explored and mastered the comic mode . . . it

seems probable that he would use the dramatic convention in which he was most at home, the world of romantic comedy, as a point of reference and departure in developing tragic forms." The other is the even more sensible admission of the futility of approaching Shakespeare's plays with square and compasses. The author does not "envisage Shakespeare systematically following some program of deliberate exploitation of the comic for tragic purposes." "There is," she tells us, "no straightforward sequence," and "the justification of my approach must be what it can offer to illuminate *Romeo*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*."

With this sanest of caveats, Professor Snyder proceeds to examine the increasingly complex and sophisticated interweaving of comic and tragic in these plays. Her opening chapter discusses the conventions of Elizabethan romantic comedy, and its roots in romance and Roman comedy. The three chapters which follow trace the influence of these conventions and their "refusal of restraint and finitude" in those plays which depict the more stringent world of tragic necessity. *Romeo and Juliet* exploits the conventions of romantic comedy in order to emphasize the tragedy of the protagonists, and the fact that they are the victims of the world they inhabit. This ironic use of comic conventions is underscored by "the growing irrelevance of the comic characters" after the death of Mercutio. The "brief but complete comic structure" of the early scenes of *Othello* likewise raises expectations only to dash them; Iago is the dark double of benevolent manipulators of romantic comedy. The function of the comic elements in rendering more complex our perception of the tragic hero is especially apparent in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. This function is itself complex; though *Hamlet* presents "the complete inversion of comic values," some patterns in the drama become more coherent when seen in the context of those values and expectations. (So, in Professor Snyder's hands, do Polonius, Osric, the gravediggers, and Hamlet himself, together with many of the other characters.) *King Lear* is even more daring in its reversal of comic elements and expectations. This is the only one of Shakespeare's tragedies to have a comedic source, and it is also the one in which the shattering of the "divine comedy pattern" is complete. The earlier plays showed us familiar comic features "transformed, or discarded, to compose the shape of tragedy"; *Lear* risks the absurd in its audacious juxtaposition of the comic and tragic elements which bring the old king to his bleak eminence. According to Professor Snyder, Shakespeare's daring exploitation of comic conventions serves to emphasize the fact that *Lear* is "a play about religion in the making," and she closes with some very astute observations on the "uneasy coexistence" of the "absurdist" and religious elements in the play.

I do have one complaint to make about Professor Snyder's book, a complaint I make all too seldom—the book ought to be longer. The author suggests a useful way of looking at many plays other than those she mentions. What of the comic presence in *Measure for Measure* or *The Tempest*? The parallels with satiric comedy warrant more than an occasional remark (as does *Titus Andronicus*), and more extensive discussion of the *iron*—and *alazon*—types would not have been amiss. The fact that there are only two references to Marlowe in the entire book disappoints me. What can we learn from the Marlovian model, from the ironic blending of comic and tragic elements in *Edward II* or *Doctor Faustus*? Still, as an honest old scholar once admitted, a big book is a big misfortune, and there are many, many good things in this little one. Professor Snyder has succeeded where many more copious authors have failed; she has written a lucid and lively book, a book to send even the most jaded of us back to the plays themselves, with our curiosity revived, and our appetites renewed.

William Blackburn

Books Received

- BILAN, R. P., *The Literary Criticism of F. R. Leavis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. pp. vii, 338. \$27.50.
- BUTLER, FRANCELIA, ELIZABETH FRANCIS, and SAMUEL PICKERING, Jr., eds., *Children's Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. pp. vi, 212. Cloth \$20.00, pb. \$7.95.
- CHALMERS, JOHN W., ed., *The Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1979. pp. 335. \$14.95.
- FINNERAN, RICHARD J., ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Bridges and W. B. Yeats*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. pp. xviii, 68. \$11.95
- GARRETT, PETER K., *The Victorian Multiplot Novel*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. pp. ix, 227. \$20.00.
- HASSEL, R. CHRIS. Jr., *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1980. pp. xv, 255. \$20.00.
- MALE, ROY R., *Enter, Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979. pp. xv, 128. \$9.95
- NEUMAN, S. C., *Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1979. pp. 88. \$3.75.*
- RAINE, KATHLEEN, *Blake and the New Age*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1979. pp. x, 179. \$17.95
- VANTAL, HERBERT, *Eliza Lynn Linton*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1979. pp. x, 245. \$25.00.
- WAGENKNECHT, EDWARD, *The Personality of Shakespeare*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979. pp. ix, 190. Cloth. \$8.95, pb. \$4.95.
- WARWICK, RONALD, *Commonwealth Literature Periodicals: A Bibliography*. London: Mansell, 1979. pp. xxv, 146. £22.60