

A MACDIARMID BORROWING

This note, dated 20 December 1998, on the advice of Professor Philip Hobsbaum was submitted to the *Times Literary Supplement*. The paper ignored it.

Sir, — I wish to draw the attention of your readers to a resemblance between a passage in an essay by William Hazlitt and a poem by Hugh MacDiarmid. The essay in question is ‘My First Acquaintance with the Poets’. The passage particularly relevant recounts Hazlitt’s return home after hearing Coleridge preach:

I returned home well satisfied. The sun that was still labouring pale and wan through the sky, obscured by thick mists, seemed an emblem of the *good cause*; and the cold dank drops of dew that hung half-melted on the beard of the thistle, had something genial and refreshing in them; for there was a spirit of hope and youth in all nature, that turned everything into good.

The poem by Hugh MacDiarmid, for which this provides the material, is “A Change of Weather” and is possibly one of the last poems that the poet wrote in Scots. It is dated February 1966 and may be found on page 1159 of the *Complete Poems* edited by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken. I quote the first stanza:

Even the cauld draps o’ dew that hing
Hauf-melted on the beard o’ the thistle this Februar day
Hae something genial and refreshin about them
And the sun, strugglin’ airgh and wan i’ the lift,
Hauf-smooored in the grey mist, seems nane the less
An emblem o’ the guid cause.

The similarities between Hazlitt and MacDiarmid are obvious, though MacDiarmid transposes the order of the main details. He also introduces the Scots words ‘lift’ (sky), ‘airgh’ (hesitatingly), and ‘smooored’ (smothered), as well as recasting the whole passage in Scottish speech. Hazlitt’s “thick mists” he changes to the redundancy “grey mist”, and his phrase the “good cause” is not italicised.

The poem appears to have been written approximately one year after a controversy raised in these columns. In a letter published on 21 January 1965, the Welsh author Glyn Jones claimed the Hugh MacDiarmid poem “Perfect” had been plagiarised from his own book of stories, *The Blue Bed*. Details may be found on pages 482-83 of Alan Bold’s biography of MacDiarmid. Both sets of parallels would have been clarified had the poet troubled to append some such formula as

“After Glyn Jones” or, in the present case, “After Hazlitt” to his printed text.

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