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Stanley Edgar Hyman

THE LANGUAGE OF SCOTTISH POETRY

FOR A GENERATION self-consciously concerned with the relationship between modern poetry and a tradition, one of the most significant experiments going on is the little group of poets who have, over the past third of a century, been writing in Lowland Scots, a language they call "Lallans." According to Neil McCallum, who chronicled the movement in an article, "Lallans," in *The New Statesman and Nation*, back in 1949, they number some two dozen, of whom about half have published volumes of verse. The others appear in magazines like the *Scots Review*, the *Voice of Scotland*, and the *National Weekly*. Almost none of this work has been published in America, but American readers are apt to be familiar with the reputation at least of the movement's founding father, C. M. Grieve, who calls himself Hugh MacDiarmid, and perhaps to know some of the poetry through such anthologies as MacDiarmid's *Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* and Maurice Lindsay's *Modern Scottish Poetry*.

If an American innocent of linguistics may believe what he reads in partisan introductions, Lowland Scots or Lallans is not a dialect or a Gaelic-English hybrid but an authentic language, the most northern of the three varieties of Middle English (of which the midland form developed into modern English, and the southern form, spoken in Kent and Devon, substantially died out) with accretions of words from French (the language of the Scottish court) and Gaelic (the language of the Highlands). The immediate association is with Burns, but much of Burns is, sad to say, merely English spelled as Scots, as Dr. J. A. H. Murray pointed out as early as 1873, in his *Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland*, noting that "Scots wha ha'e" is merely "Scots who have" fancied up, whereas the Scottish would be

variously "Scottis at hes," "Scottis quhilkis hes," or "Scottis quha hes"; and so on throughout.

Poetry was written in Lallans from 1200 or earlier to about 1603, when James succeeded to the English throne and English became the language of his court and of Scotland's poets. Lallans poetry had another burst of life in the 18th Century with Burns and his fellows, and died again at the hands of his imitators in the 19th Century; it was once more revived in this century as an aspect of the Scottish nationalist movement. The relationship of literary Lallans, which is itself not standardized, to any language spoken in the Scottish Lowlands is obscure: John Speirs, in his book *The Scots Literary Tradition* (1940) argued that literary Scots was impossible at the time because there was no spoken Scots; in the rash of letters to *The New Statesman* occasioned by McCallum's article, Caledonians forcibly argued for and against the existence of spoken Lallans, with the consensus of opinion seeming to be that some of the poets' usages were current in speech, some were not and never could have been. Discussing Lallans purely as a literary language, Maurice Lindsay argues in the introduction to his anthology that it "can express nuances in Scottish life and thought which English could never do," that its "rich, resonant sounds" are unique, but that it suffers from being "less susceptible to the use of sensuous imagery, and continually menaced by the ease with which a careless diminutive can tumble it into a sticky morass of sentimentality."

Many of the words in the tradition of Scottish poetry seem irresistible. What treasure in Barbour's "hamwartis" for "home-wards," Henryson's "maculait" for "spotted" or "polluted" (Mr. Eliot has already adopted it), Dunbar's Joycean "armypotent" for "omnipotent" applied to Mars, Douglas' "bustuously" for "vigorously," Lyndsay's "lychtlyand" for "lightlying" or "making light of" and "widdiefow" or "gallowsful" for "rascal." How can we get along without Bellenden's "fang" as a verb, James V's "smaix" for "sneaks," the ballads' "skinkled" for "sparkled" and

“twined” for “parted,” Ramsay’s “barlickhoods” for “drunken rages” and “gillygapus” for “fool”? Surely any poet worthy of the name needs Mallet’s “grimly” as an adjective, Skinner’s “tyce” for “to move slowly and cautiously,” Fergusson’s “mouse-webs” for “phlegm” and “waesuck” for “alas,” Beattie’s “luckydaddy” for “grandfather” and Wilson’s “spentacles” for “spectacles.”

Who can fail to envy a poetry able to say “gaf the gast” for “died” and “kobbyd in his crope” for “choked,” all of it done in “twenty deuil ways”? The Scottish poets describe voices as “rawk as ruik,” picture a champion “as brym as he had bene a beir,” call a stallion “the stoned steed,” know “black veritie,” and ejaculate “The Devill dryte in thy gambis!” Their language may, of course, sometimes become so tapselteerie and whigmaleereish as to be unreadable, as when William Hamilton writes “With my auld felny packy pash” in the 18th Century or Charles Murray writes “Weariet nae doot noo a’ my darg was deen” in the 20th. If we welcome MacDiarmid’s “how-dumb-deid” for “the very dead of night,” are we to go along with Douglas Young’s “howdumbdeidsunsheen”?

Certainly a surprising amount of modern Lallans poetry has been disappointing. The book that began the Scottish Revival, the anthology *Northern Numbers*, produced by MacDiarmid and Compton Mackenzie in 1920, contains, to my taste at least, only one impressive stanza in 130 pages, that the first stanza of Neil Munro’s “Lament for Macleod of Raasay”:

Allan Ian Og Macleod of Raasay,
 Treasure of mine, lies yonder dead in Loos,
 His body unadorned by Highland raiment,
 Trammelled, for glorious hours, in Saxon trews.
 Never man before of all his kindred
 Went so apparelled to the burial knowe,
 But with the pleated tartan for his shrouding,
 The bonnet on his brow.

Modern Scottish Poetry, an attempt to print the best work by

all the contemporary poets through 1945, including those writing in Gaelic and English, contains only four or five Lallans poems that would seem to me assured of a place in any less parochial anthology, among them Marion Angus' beautiful "Mary's Song," William Soutar's starkly economical "Ballad," Robert Garioch's "Ghaisties," and Douglas Young's "Last Lauch" and perhaps "Sabbath i the Mearns," if only for its final line:

The last Yerl Marischal's deid, faan doun his castle waas.¹

I must confess to finding most of Hugh MacDiarmid unreadable, with some of his English poems, like "The Two Parents" in *Second Hymn to Lenin*, so inept as to suggest the charge sometimes raised against Burns, that the Scottish is only a device for concealing poetic inadequacy. Maurice Lindsay was not exaggerating the tendency of the language to promote sentimentality, and a number of Lallans poems, among them Alexander Gray's "Babylon in Retrospect," Charles Murray's "The Whistle," and Mary Symon's "The Echt-Day Clock," all in *Northern Numbers, Second Series*, seem to me merely James Whitcomb Riley in a different dialect. A typical example of a promising poem vitiated by sentimentality is Albert D. Mackie's "The Molecatcher" in *Modern Scottish Poetry*, which concludes two objective stanzas about the "mowdie-man's" or molecatcher's work and the appearance of the dead moles with the editorial stanza:

Sma' black tramorts wi' gruntles grey,
Sma' weak weemin's han's,
Sma' bead-een that wid touch ilk hert
Binnae the mowdie-man's.

One of the most highly touted of the younger Scottish poets, Sydney Goodsir Smith, if he is that good, must have a quality

1. Since this was written, Douglas Young's fuller anthology, *Scottish Verse 1851-1951*, has appeared. It contains a few impressive Lallans poems, among them Garioch's delightful take-off on the Edinburgh Festival, "Embros tae the Ploy," but on the whole conveys and enlarges the same sense of disappointment.

that, like certain wines, defies export. G. S. Fraser, a young Scottish poet who writes in English, reviewing Smith's latest book, *So Late Into the Night*, in *The New Statesman*, January 31, 1953, quotes the lines:

The night is far spent,
I hae heard the chime o three
At my side my dearest luv
Sleeps like a bairn. Sleep on, my wee,

and writes "translated literally into English they would appear trite and sentimental or would fall flat down. But that is a criticism of the scope of modern literary English, not of Mr. Smith: the English poet has no homely direct phrases to hand, like 'my wee,' that express tender emotion without mawkishness." It would be hard to disagree with anything more completely. The Smith lines seem to me precisely trite, sentimental, and to fall flat down; "my wee" seems in context to express tender emotion smarmed over with mawkishness, in Scottish as in English; and the whole seems to be a kind of poetic baby talk not uncommon in Smith.

ONE ELEMENT in the tradition modern Scottish poetry inherits is a folk literature unsurpassed by any in the world, the Scottish popular ballads. Their language is paradoxically the most direct and vigorous imaginable, and yet magical, incantatory. When the Queen of Elfland says to the traitorous Tam Lin:

"But had I kenn'd, Tam Lin," she says,
"What now this sight I see,
I wad ha'e ta'en out thy twa grey een,
And put in twa een o' tree."

the simple word "tree" (wood) has all the complex meaningfulness of, say, Yeats' "resinous." Fair Annie's malisoun is the same combination of the simplest expression with incantation:

“Gin my seven sons were seven young rats,
 Running on the castle wa’,
 And I were a grey cat mysel’,
 I soon would worry them a’.”

“Lady Maisry” is not one of the best ballads, but little in our literature since the Jacobean dramatists can equal its terrifying end:

“O I’ll gar burn for you, Maisry,
 Your father and your mother;
 And I’ll gar burn for you, Maisry,
 Your sister and your brother;

“And I’ll gar burn for you, Maisry,
 The chief o’ a’ your kin;
 And the last bonfire that I come to,
 Mysel’ I will cast in.”

Even the most commonplace speech can have qualities of incantation, as in Earl Percy’s odd and curiously moving terms in “The Battle of Otterburn”:

“I will not yield to a braken bush,
 Nor yet will I yield to a brier;
 But I would yield to Earl Douglas,
 Or Sir Hugh Montgomery, if he were here.”

The Johnnie Armstrong who, living, says to the king

Saying, Asking grace of a graceless face—
 Why there is none for you nor me.

and, dying, says to his men

Saying, Fight on, my merry men all,
 And see that none of you be taine;
 For I will stand by and bleed but awhile,
 And then will I come and fight againe.

is manipulating the words and rhythms of common speech in

the service of the highest "rethorie."

If we seek language that is simple, sensuous, and passionate, a corpus of more than a dozen tragic Scottish ballad texts constitutes almost a classic tradition. I think of "The Wife of Usher's Well," "The Twa Sisters," "Edward," "Clerk Saunders," "Sir Patrick Spens," "Johnie Cock," "Mary Hamilton," "The Bonny Earl of Murray," "Child Maurice," "Young Waters," "The Baron of Brackley," "Lamkin," "The Cruel Mother," "The Twa Corbies," and "The Daemon Lover." Alongside these there is a body of Scottish folk song and rhyme in other forms that adds up to as rich a poetic heritage as any we know. There is the irresistible swing and lilt of the nursery rhyme about the fox and the hen:

As I gaed by by Humbydrum,
By Humbydrum by dreary,
I met Jehoky Poky
Cairryin awa Jaipeery.

If I had haen ma tip ma tap,
Ma tip ma tap ma teerie,
I wadna looten Jehoky Poky
Cairry awa Jaipeery.

Or the absolute simplicity of a rhyme from Angus:

The blue coo's luppen the dyke
And in among the corn,
And oor guidman's hitten me
And I'm awa the morn,
Tae follow Hielant Donalie
And cairry his poother horn.

Many of these, of course, *are* charms and incantations, but all of them have a continuing verbal magic. A nursery rhyme from Lanark that appears to be nonsense has delicate, almost inaudible overtones of serious concern with fairies and changelings, death and rebirth:

Hallowe'en, ae nicht at e'en,
 A caunle an a custock,
 Doon Dons has got a wean,
 They ca it Bessie Aitken.

Some ca't a kittlin,
 Some ca't a cat,
 Some ca't a wee wean
 Wi a straw hat.

It gaed tae its grannie's
 Tae seek a wee bit breid;
 The grannie took the ladle,
 And brak it ower its heid.

"O," says the mither o't,
 "Ma wean's deid."
 "O," says the faither o't,
 "Never you heed.

"Gang oot by the back door,
 In by the tither;
 Through amang the green-kail,
 Ye'll sune get anither."

All three of these are taken from *Sandy Candy and Other Scottish Nursery Rhymes*, edited by Norah and William Montgomerie, but Montgomerie's own poems in *Modern Scottish Poetry* exhibit few of their qualities.

Scottish folk poetry has been involved with fakery since it was first collected. The early editors either could not recognize the obvious broadside additions to a ballad or were not averse to adding their own. Here is a stanza in Peter Buchan's text of the fine ballad "Hind Etin":

Charles, Vincent, Sam, and Dick,
 And likewise James and John;
 They called the eldest Young Akin,
 Which was his father's name.

When Lady Wardlaw of Pitreavie wrote and palmed off as authentic the long fragment "Hardyknute," it proved so persuasive to her contemporaries that Robert Chambers, the Edinburgh antiquary, credited her with having written *all* the good ballads. We cannot envision any gullibility that could survive the first stanza:

Stately stept he east the wa',
 And stately stept he west;
 Full seventy years he now had seen
 With scarce seven years of rest.
 He lived when Britons' breach of faith
 Wrought Scotland mickle wae,
 And ay his sword tauld to their cost
 He was their deadly fae.

We have only to read such borrowed lines as

Drinking the blood-red wine
 Late, late yestreen I weened in peace
 On Norway's coast the widowed dame
 May wash the rocks with tears—
 May lang look o'er the shipless seas
 Before her mate appears.

to know not only that it is a fraud, but precisely which ballad has been rifled.

Ramsay, Pinkerton, Cunningham, and many others faked ballads, but the worst fouler of the nest was certainly Scott, who seems to have been unable to let any text go through his hands unimproved, fell for every fake sent him, and when he had the time, produced his own. We can see Scott's calligraphy everywhere in his texts, from a line like

Her hands for dule she wrang

in "Johnie Cock," through the "conjectural emendations" in

“Jellon Grame” and the hash of stanzas added to “Sir Patrick Spens,” to a joke about an earlier Sir Walter Scott written into “The Outlaw Murray” and the faking of the whole of “Kinmont Willie.” We find it difficult to imagine how contemporaries could miss this Scott forgery, which stands out like the incredible broken line he wrote into “Johnie Armstrong”:

Because they saved their country dear
Frae Englishmen. Nane were sae bauld.

The answer seems to be that the romantic movement, coming to the ballads under the total misapprehension that they were free, irregular, individual, and wild—rather than rigidly conventional, absolutely regular *as words to music*, communal, and classically formal and disciplined—seems to have accepted anything as possible to a ballad (as do, still, a little group of romantics around John Berryman at Princeton). When John Jacob Niles offers American folk songs or the left-wing guitar brigade rewrites them for social content, they are able to bring this tradition of fakelore down to the present because they can still rely on the survival of romantic delusions about the wild and unpredictable nature of folk art.

Where Scottish poetry in the past drew on its folk tradition without faking, we get something like John Ewen’s use of incantatory repetition in “The Boatie Rows,” the vigorous popular speech of “The Kail Brose of Scotland” by Alexander Watson (the Aberdeen tailor who made Lord Byron his first pair of pants), or the nursery-rhyme world of James Tytler’s “Lass, Gin Ye Lo’e Me.” Burns may or may not have consciously suggested the folktale motif of the *vagina dentata* when he had the pretty witch with the cutty sark in “Tam o’ Shanter” snap off the tail of Tam’s horse, but he certainly drew consciously on the ritual of rural festivals in such poems as “Hallowe’en” and the language of incantation in such songs as “Whistle and I’ll Come to You.”

THE LITERARY TRADITION modern Scottish poetry has to draw on begins with the semi-legendary Thomas the Rhymer of Ercildoune in the 13th Century, and continues through Burns and the peasant poets in the 18th. It is most readily available in an invaluable seven-volume anthology of selections, the Abbotsford Series of the Scottish Poets, edited by George Eyre-Todd in the 19th Century, although a few poets are badly represented or not included at all. An important element of the tradition is epic and dramatic poetry on a scale so heroic that we cannot comprehend it without reminding ourselves that Gavin Douglas lost two hundred kinsmen of his name at Flodden Field, that one of the poets, James V of Scotland, was offered Norway as a dowry, and another poet, Sir William Alexander, received a gift from James I of England consisting simply of the whole of Canada. John Barbour's 14th Century epic *The Bruce* has a Homeric dignity:

Tharfor I pray yow euirilkan
 That ye amang yow chess me ane
 That be honest, wiss, and wicht,
 And off his hand a noble knyght,
 On Goddis fayis my hart to ber
 Quhen saule and corss disseueryt er.

Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, half a century later, in its fury against the perfidy of England, rises to the tragic simplicity of the ballads, as in one spot more than a little reminiscent of the child's malisoun in "The Cruel Mother":

The sawyls that he gert slay down thare
 He send quhare his sawle nevyrmare
 Wes lyk to come, that is the blys,
 Quhare alkyn joy ay lestand is.

Gavin Douglas' great translation of *The Aeneid*, written early in the 16th Century, if it is not, as Pound claims, frequently better than the original, is nevertheless a monument of epic writing,

and its opening lines are one of the two or three absolute high points of Scottish poetry:

The battelis and the man I will discriue
 Fra Troyis boundis first that fugitive
 By fate to Italie come, and coist Lauyne
 Ouer land and se cachit with meikill pyne
 Be force of goddis about, fra euery stede
 Of cruel Juno throw auld remembrit feid
 Grete payne in batteles sufferit he also
 Or he is goddis brocht in Latio
 And belt the ciete, fra quham of nobil fame
 The Latyne pepil taken has thare name,
 And eike the faderis princis of Alba
 Come, and the walleris of grete Rome alsua,
 O thow, my muse, declare the causis quhay,
 Qyhat maiesty offendit; schaw quham by,
 Or zit quharefor, of goddis the drery Quene.
 So feil dangeris, sic trawell maid sustene
 Ane worthy man fulfillit of pietie:
 Is thare sic greif in heuinlie myndes on hie?

A lyric strain, embracing pastoral, elegy, and amatory poetry, perhaps more fully shows the rich possibilities of Scottish verse than the deeper but narrower ballad and epic traditions. James I's *The Kingis Quair*, written in 1423, handles metaphor in a fashion we tend to regard as characteristically modern, remote from the labored constructions of medieval allegory:

With doubtfull hert, amang the rokkis blake,
 My feble bote full fast to stere and rowe,
 Helpless allone, the wynter nyght I wake,
 To wayte the wynd that furthward suld me throwe.
 O empti saile! quhare is the wynd suld blowe
 Me to the port, quhar gynneth all my game?
 Help, Calyope, and wynd, in Marye name!

Robert Henryson, whose 15th Century pastoral, *Robene and*

Makyne, is the first in the language, ends its comedy on a note of genuine pathos:

And so left him mayth wo and wreuch,
 In dolour and in cair,
 Kepand his hird under a huche
 Amang the holtis hair.

William Dunbar, writing about 1500, had a range from the tenderness of

“Awalk, luvaris, out of your slomering!
 Se how the lusty morrow dois vp spring.”

in “The Thrissil and the Rois” to the magnificent tolling of his “Lament for the Makaris, Quhen He Wes Seik,” a poem that seems at least as good as anything in Villon. The “Lament” is too well known to warrant reprinting and too long to permit it, but it is impossible to resist quoting one stanza marvelously wrought of Teutonic and Romance words in perfect harmony:

Our plesance heir is all vane glory,
 This fals warld is bot transitory,
 The flesche is brukle, the Feynd is sle;
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

In the 16th Century, such lovely lyrics as Alexander Scot’s “Hence, Hairt” and “To Luve Unluvit,” and Alexander Montgomerie’s two almost-metaphysical sonnets, both entitled “To His Maistres,” helped to create a courtly convention of love poetry, which Mark Alexander Boyd, writing in the last years of the century, could wither into the truth, precisely as Shakespeare did the sonnet convention in his tradition. Boyd is not mentioned in Eyre-Todd, and except for the single “Sonet,” all his work seems to be lost in Latin,² but that one poem gives every evidence of being imperishable. Most readers have discovered it, I imagine,

2. It is available, for those who can read it, in the 1637 anthology, *Deliciae Poetarum Scotorum*.

in Pound's *A B C of Reading*, and it is hard to quarrel with Pound's evaluation there "I suppose this is the most beautiful sonnet in the language, at any rate it has one nomination," even if, as seems likely, he meant the English language:

Fra bank to bank, fra wood to wood I rin
 Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie
 Like til a leaf that fallis from a tree
 Or til a reed ourblawin with the wind,
 Two gods guides me, the ane of them is blin,
 Yea, and a bairn brocht up in vanitie,
 The next a wife ingrenrit of the sea
 And lichter nor a dauphin with her fin.
 Unhappy is the man for evermair
 That tills the sand and sawis in the air,
 But twice unhappier is he, I lairn,
 That feidis in his heart a mad desire
 And follows on a woman throw the fire
 Led by a blind and teachit by a bairn.

Anyone attempting to put Boyd's "Sonet" into our English runs up cold against the strong Scottish passives—"ourhailit," "ourblawin," "ingenrit," "teachit"—and in comparison his own poetic language seems so inadequate that we can hardly blame him if he joins up and goes off to steal the Stone of Scone.

After Boyd we get fine sonnets and madrigals in English by William Drummond among others, but nothing in Scottish except Lady Anne Lindsay's mock-ballad "Auld Robin Gray" (which was so popular in its time that it was performed by a troupe of dancing dogs), Lady Nairne's Jacobite songs like "Charlie is My Darling," and Burns. Most of the 17th Century poets write verse on the order of Sir David Murray's

Being loth such undeserved harm to trust

and Sir William Alexander's

Then, since I love those virtuous parts in thee,
Shouldst thou not love this virtuous mind in me?

or his notable line

Not like French Louis th' Eleventh, who did maintain . . .

Eighteenth Century Scottish poetry in English is perfectly typified by the Alexander Webster poem that inquires after the girl who will, "when the short raptures are all at an end,"

From beautiful mistress turn sensible friend.

Much of the century's poetry in Scots was devoted to writing genteel words for folk songs deemed disreputable. Thus John Mayne took the fine old song of "Logan Braes" beginning

Ae simmer night on Logan Braes,
I helped a lassie on wi' her clase,
First wi' her stockings

and turned it into his pallid "Logan Braes"; Lady Nairne took what Eyre-Todd calls the "somewhat indelicate ditty" "O when she cam' ben she bobbit" and manufactured her uninteresting "The Laird o' Cockpen."

At its best, in Dunbar, Douglas, and Boyd, Scottish poetry has the purity and simplicity of the finest ballads. Thomas Rhymer's orally-preserved prophecy about the extinction of his line

The hare sall kittle on my hearth stane,
And there will never be a laird Learmont again,

Wyntoun's rendering of King Malcolm's challenge to a traitorous knight

Wythoure four handys and no ma;
Thare-on mot all the gamyn ga,

Henryson's reminder in "The Abbay Walk"

Remembir him that deit on tre,
For thy saik taistit the bittir gall,

all have the beauty of structural strength bare of decoration. A poem like Sir Richard Maitland's "On the Folye of Ane Auld Manis Maryand Ane Young Woman" introduces another note

Quhair seid wantis then men of teilling tyris

that continues undiminished, despite the efforts of the Lady Nairnes, right to Burns's

And I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg
Again upon her.

It is the bluntness of the folk tradition, as we see it in nursery rhymes like the one from Buchan:

Said the haddock tae the skate,
Skip the creel, and shunt the bait;
Said the herrin tae the eel—
Crook yer little tail weel.

In MacDiarmid, the touch is lost and it goes into vulgarity, as in the third stanza of "One of the Principal Causes of War," in *Second Hymn to Lenin*, which is not only tasteless, but, since his menstrual joke has already been made, entirely unnecessary. "Harry Semen" in *The Modern Scot* is a monument of vulgarity and bad taste, its genital topography what Randall Jarrell, I think, in connection with another poet once called "real gardens with real toads in them."

THE FINEST Scottish poetry has always been bilingual in a curious fashion. Douglas the translator, Dunbar using Latin refrains, Boyd writing in Scottish and Latin, Burns writing in Scottish and English, are all poets for whom Lowland Scots was one of the world's tongues, not the language in which God and Adam held converse. As early as Henryson, Dunbar's interplay of language strains is used to produce poetic tension:

Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte
Suld correspond, and be equivalent.

And as for me in my fricative work
I ken fu' weel
Sic an integrity's what I maun hae,
Indivisible, real,
Woven owre close for the point o a pin
Onywhere to win in.

It seems to me that the most hopeful direction for modern Scottish poetry lies in a bilingual enterprise, in the attempt to invigorate poetic English with the resources of Scots, rather than the quixotic effort to write in an artificial and resurrected literary language requiring a glossary in each volume. The best critic of Scottish literature we have (he is also one of the best critics of any literature), John Speirs, is much concerned with these problems of relationship to a poetic and linguistic past in *The Scots Literary Tradition*. Although he was skeptical of the possibility of a literary language with no basis in contemporary speech, and of the whole concept of a poet's consciously acquiring traditional roots, Speirs was still hopeful in 1940 that some successful synthesis could be reached, and he inevitably held out the example of the Irish Renaissance, particularly the work of Synge and Yeats. Neither, we might note, wrote in Gaelic, although Synge, I believe, knew it well. What they took from the Irish tradition was essentially an enrichment of language, in Synge's case the rhythms of folk speech, in Yeats's the incantation of folk song. We cannot expect the modern Scottish poets to write the language of the ballads, or of Dunbar, Douglas, or Boyd. If they can write their own language, which happens to be English, freshened in diction and imagery, simplified and made resonant by the resources of earlier Scottish poetry, they will have come a long way toward achieving that Scottish literary Renaissance, so often heralded, so irresolutely still in the wings.