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Author(s): Nancy Gish and Hugh MacDiarmid

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH HUGH MACDIARMID

*Conducted by Nancy Gish*

It is becoming increasingly clear that Hugh MacDiarmid belongs in the company of such poets as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound. MacDiarmid has written a great deal and edited little; much of his work is uneven and some is simply bad. But at his best he rivals his great contemporaries. If some of his work is not the best, he is not bothered by it; to repeat an often quoted remark of his own, "My job, as I see it, has never been to lay a tit's egg, but to erupt like a volcano, emitting not only flame but a lot of rubbish." That he acknowledges the "rubbish" is rare modesty in the public man, who has spent a lifetime writing scathing, often bitter attacks on anything sentimental, mediocre, weak, or wrongheaded in Scottish life, letters, and politics, and on everything English. The private man is different, if my talk with him is indicative. He is warm, sincere, honest, and direct about his own work and that of others, and always unabashedly certain of exactly how to evaluate both.

This interview took place on July 13, 1977, just under a month before his eighty-fifth birthday on August 11. We talked in the living room of the small farm cottage where he has lived since 1951. A place he calls "a shrine to my vanity," the room was filled with papers and books, and with photographs, drawings, and paintings of himself. A coal fire burned in the small grate, and the conversation was punctuated by the tapping of MacDiarmid's pipe on the table, the crackling coals, and the coming and going of his wife, Valda, who injected wry comments and offered single malt Scotch. My deepest impressions were of MacDiarmid's intensity, his rare wisdom, and his

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undiminished passion for poetry, politics, culture, life. At eighty-five he is, in his own words, still “opening out,” “still incorrigible.” If the “incorrigible” critic who took on every establishment and institution of his country and the gentle man I met seem at odds, that is only one of the oppositions that pervade MacDiarmid’s life and work. He is a paradox: a communist elitist, an international nationalist, a poet who joins every political fight, and a political writer who says of poetry in “Second Hymn to Lenin,” “Ah Lenin, politics is bairns’ play / To what this maun be!” He is the embodiment of the phrase often used to describe his work, “the Caledonian Antisyzygy.”<sup>1</sup> Like Yeats he sees reality as created out of conflict, opposition, contraries, and he has no difficulty in holding simultaneously opinions others find irreconcilable. All this may help to explain the relative neglect of the greatest—perhaps the single great—Scottish poet since Burns.

It is a commonplace among those who know and respect his work that it no longer need be introduced or justified, that his place is now established. Yet outside Scotland he still seems little known and less read. Certainly, critical attention has hardly reflected his stature. There are several possible reasons for this: most of his major work was done in the twenties and thirties when his outspoken radicalism lost him outlets for publication—his *Collected Poems* was not published until 1962. His poetry is, moreover, difficult by any standard. The early lyrics, which many consider his best work, are in Braid Scots, or Lallans, and the later long poems are filled with highly technical and scientific vocabulary, as well as words and lines from many languages including Gaelic and Old Norse. Yet Braid Scots is less difficult than Middle English, and complexity is almost a definition of the modern poem; great poetry, moreover, can be created out of any philosophic or political frame. Perhaps it is simply due to the general neglect of nearly all serious Scottish writers other than Burns, a neglect difficult to explain. The fact remains that we have in MacDiarmid one of the masters of the modernist movement, and his poetry is becoming increasingly available.

It is a poetry that, in its diversity, richness, and fusion of contraries, reflects MacDiarmid’s intellectual quest for what he calls “the center of cosmic development.” This unifying quest has centered on

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<sup>1</sup>This term, coined by G. Gregory Smith, refers to the uniting of contrary qualities Smith felt to be characteristically Scottish: “Almost a zigzag of contradictions; a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn.” *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1919), p. 4.

language itself, the value and significance of words, and on the relation between the vast and the infinitely small, the universe and the “Bonnie Broukit Bairn”<sup>2</sup> which is earth in space. He moves in a line or phrase from a vision of all reality to the tears of that bairn, or to the thoughts of a drunk man, and makes them one. It is his ability not only to do this in a line or phrase but to sustain, develop, and pursue that union to its furthest implications that makes him, despite unevenness, frequent didacticism, and even occasional doggerel, a major poet. For his own words say it best: he has never laid a tit’s egg, and the rubbish of his volcano is nothing to the flame.

MacDiarmid died on September 9, 1978.

*Q.* I’m interested in your whole concept of poetry of ideas. In the introduction to *In Memoriam James Joyce* [1955], you say that you have given up the distinction between poetry and prose. What is poetry if you don’t make that distinction? How do you define it?

*A.* Through the completeness and intensity of the organization of the elements. It goes far beyond anything that can be achieved in prose. I agree with T. S. Eliot, for example, that complexity—the complications of modern life, pace of living, and so on—is so great that it can’t be reflected in the older forms of poetry. So we’ve got to break them down and regroup the whole thing in a way that the emphasis is less on what have hitherto been regarded as purely aesthetic effects and more on the message that you’re putting across. If your poetry can’t reflect the conditions of modern life, then it can’t be the poetry of the whole man, and I’m anxious that it should be the poetry of the whole man. I’ve done quite a bit that kind of exemplifies this. Have you seen a book of mine called *The Kind of Poetry I Want* [1961]? It’s quite a considerable book. Also, I want my poetry, of course, to be highly political. I’m a Communist, a member of the Communist Party. That is not an obligation upon me to speak to the understanding of the mass of readers. I don’t have to come down to their level, you know. But, at the same time, my general political attitude must be consistent, and it is.

*Q.* Well, do you think that the poetry primarily exists to put across an idea? Why is it done in poetry instead of in prose?

*A.* Because poetry can put it across much more effectively than any

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<sup>2</sup>*broukit*, “neglected”

prose medium can do. But I don't say—not as a final position would I say—that poetry exists to put across a message or a meaning. That must be the ultimate effect of it; it's not the primary consideration. Aesthetic effects are primary.

*Q.* Aesthetic effects *are* primary?

*A.* *Are* primary. Yes.

*Q.* But, at the same time, ultimately the idea has to come across?

*A.* Yes, well, the element of selection comes in. If you're selecting according to a particular political standpoint, of course, you choose otherwise than people who have opposite views.

*Q.* Isn't sound the primary element of selection?

*A.* Well, it was for a very long time. As a younger man I was fascinated with sound. I'm a Borderer: that is to say, I belong on the frontier between England and Scotland. And when I was a small boy, the people in the little town that I belonged to only a few miles from England all spoke Scots. And we weren't allowed to use it in the classrooms at school. We were punished if we lapsed into it. But as soon as the school day was over and we were out again in the streets or the fields, of course we spoke Scots. So it was these early sounds that became sort of shibboleths to me, what I wanted to do. The English elide the *r*. The *r*'s are absolutely essential. I've told you that remarkable phrase that this fellow at Glasgow University used the other day about the aesthetic values of a series of unvoiced, velar fricatives. I don't know the meaning of these terms at all. I'm not a phonologist, phonetician. But it is so. It was the sound, and I said that again and again in some of the early prose, of course, sound, not sense patterns, the *r*'s. I grew up; that was an early belief. It still persists in some degree, but it's not an overriding belief now. I'm far more concerned with sense than I am with sound.

*Q.* And you feel that poetry can convey sense much more fully than prose?

*A.* Yes, much more quickly. It's much more concentrated than any form of prose.

*Q.* Would it be accurate to say that you're trying to do the kind of discursive work usually done in prose with the greater clarity and

force of poetry?

A. That's true. Yes, that would be quite accurate. That's what I am trying to do, but I would object if you were going to take as an illustration of that position anything that I've published so far. That may be my aim and I may think it can be done, but I'm not claiming to have done it.

Q. Is there any place where you feel you've come closest to it?

A. Do you know the poem of mine called "On a Raised Beach"? Well I think there I do.

Q. I'm interested in what you said about sound being one of the main predilections in your earlier work. Do you think, now that you have moved on to a greater consideration of sense rather than sound, that political ideas have had a greater direct impact on the form and structure as well as the ideas of your poetry?

A. Oh, yes, I think so. I became more and more political, of course, in my poetry.

Q. The "Hymns to Lenin," for example?

A. Yes, the "Hymns to Lenin." But that poem I was talking about, "On a Raised Beach": most people couldn't make anything of it at all. The best critique of it I've seen, the best appreciation, is by Professor MacKinnon, who is the professor of divinity at Cambridge, and he points out rightly that it's an entirely atheistic poem. It repudiates any idea of a hereafter or a godhead or anything like that, you see. But he says there's no reason why materialism shouldn't produce great poetry because like religion it has an ontological basis. And he thinks that in that poem I've succeeded in writing a materialist poem that answers all the requirements of real poetry. He gave a series of lectures in the University of Edinburgh, and then he summed up all he'd said in these lectures in a small book called *The Problem of Metaphysics*.<sup>3</sup> It's a very good essay, very perceptive essay. And he devotes a whole chapter in that little book, it's a pretty small book, a whole chapter to that particular poem. I think what he says about it there represents the best criticism that later work of mine has had anywhere at all.

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<sup>3</sup>The reference is to D. M. MacKinnon's *The Problem of Metaphysics* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974).

*Q.* Have you always been an atheist and materialist? The reason I ask is that in the *Chapbook* and other places you published quite a lot of neo-Catholic poems, and you even contributed some sonnets.

*A.* Yes, well that was a sort of spin-off of the interest I had then in Maurras, the French nationalist, you know. And that didn't last long. But if I had been attracted to any form of Christianity, it would certainly have been the Roman Catholic Church. It seems the logical. . . .

*Q.* There was another thing connected with that. I noticed that several places in your poems you use the line "the alone with the alone," which I assume is from Plotinus.

*A.* It's in Plotinus, yes.

*Q.* What do you mean in applying that to your poetry?

*A.* Centering my poetic effort on what I conceive to be the center of cosmic development without any implications of godhead, deity, or worship, certainly. Worship is abhorrent. The mere idea of worship repels me.

*Q.* You seem to be very interested in your early prose writing as well as in your poetry in the technical points of poetry, in prosody and form; I was fascinated with your translation of *The Birlinn of Clanranald* [1935] and with the introduction. In your later poetry there's less of that experimenting with techniques of prosody. Did you come to think that less important?

*A.* I think so. I think my overriding concern with certain bodies of ideas made it impossible for me to maintain the same detailed interest in merely technical matters. I don't apologize for that. Technical matters are available if people care to study them and acquire them, whereas the particular bodies of ideas that I'm concerned with are not. They don't appeal to everybody, you know, and they can't. I'm not anxious that they should. All I'm concerned with is to express them to my own satisfaction. But I'm not interested in who reads them.

*Q.* Do you feel about your own poetry the way that you say Sorabji feels about his work, that it doesn't matter if no one but yourself knows it?

A. Yes, well, I do feel that to an extent, but then my friend Sorabji,<sup>4</sup> of course, after forty years has suddenly changed his opinion.

Q. Oh, does he allow his work to be played now?

A. He did. There was a TV program of it the other day. He got a couple of very good exponents, very difficult work, you know. And he got one in particular, John P. Sullivan, who demonstrated on the piano how he played Sorabji's work. Quite fascinating. I wrote to Sorabji, but I haven't heard from him yet. I don't know what has induced him to change his mind.

Q. Do you feel that in something like *In Memoriam James Joyce*, even without metrical variation or musical form, you are, in fact, able to attain the clarity and intensity of poetry? What makes it have that clarity and intensity? Is it the selection?

A. Yes, and the sheer tenacity of the development of intellectual ideas. That tenacity itself is infinitely valuable. Instead of having little thinks, you're having a process of thinking. And the process itself can be fascinating, like watching some movement, movement of a ship, an animal, horse. I think that in itself is sufficient.

Q. Someone said to me that poetry never presents ideas; it presents the experience of thinking, and I asked him, "What about the works of Pope or Johnson?" and he said that those are poems which present what it feels like to think. Would you say that's true of your poetry, or is it the end product rather?

A. I think I have it both ways; direct statement of ideas and so on, showing the development of ideas from one position to another or from one application to another, and also the process of thinking. I think my poems have both of them, not fully developed perhaps, but that's not the point. The point is that's what I'm trying to do.

Q. If you were going to state which of your published works so far

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<sup>4</sup>Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is a pianist, critic, and composer of long, complex works, including *Opus clavicembalisticum*, which is dedicated to MacDiarmid. In the 1930s he banned public performance of his work as a repudiation of "fashionable tendencies" in modern composition. In 1976 he lifted the veto on performance of his work.

you wanted to stand by as your most important work, what would you say?

A. That's difficult. I would stand by *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* [1926].

Q. Why?

A. Well it's—I agree with what another man was saying, a Canberra man in Australia, at Canberra University. We've had a long conflict in Scotland, especially with the universities which have become more and more Anglified or Anglicized. We had a quite independent educational system in Scotland, and that has been whittled away by the increasing preponderance of English and English-educated professors and so on, and it's a long quarrel; it dates back for a very long time. What this man, who is himself a university lecturer in metaphysics and logic, says is this:

The stage seemed set for a compromise which would ensure an honourable interment for the intellectual tradition of the country, when, from certain obscure and extremist sectors of Scottish cultural life, . . . there suddenly exploded a bombshell of a book-length poem, entitled *A Drunk Man Looks at the [Thistle]*, which, in a combination of intellectual verve and imaginative daring unexampled in Scotland for centuries, instantly revived the flagging argument about the possibility of a Scottish renaissance, by exhibiting, *sub specie aeterni*, and with a wealth of lyricism and learning, the potentially international significance for the modern world of this national culture-conflict. . . .the profundity and wit of this metaphysical switchback ride through all creation, taking in on its way heaven and hell and the whole of history, natural as well as human, made it abundantly plain to those with eyes to see that at long last the poets had taken over. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Q. What is that from? *Quadrant*?

A. It's a special number of that journal devoted to fifty years of John Anderson. John Anderson was a Scotsman who spent fifty years in Australia. But he shared a lot of my opinions: he was a Marxist, for one thing. And he was concerned about this reintegration of the *dejecta membra*, of the independent Scottish tradition, you see.

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<sup>5</sup>George Davie, "John Anderson in Scotland," *Quadrant*, 21, No. 7 (July 1977), 57.

*Q.* You place the stress in poetry on overall structure and coherence. I've just read *In Memoriam James Joyce*; I read it quickly yesterday because I couldn't get it, so I don't know it well, but you say at one point in the poem that you want poetry that roams but is essentially controlled. Is *In Memoriam James Joyce* controlled?

*A.* I think so.

*Q.* What's the controlling principle? In *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* one can see the persona of the drunk man and a series of related symbols that work throughout. Is there anything that works like that in *In Memoriam*?

*A.* There's the absolute coherence of the writer's intellectual quest into all the possibilities of the language, more particularly languages of small countries, their past times or dialects. I think personally it's a perfectly complete structure, and I'm not disheartened because many people find the excessive cataloguing of all things unpoetical.

*Q.* Do you think your cataloguing resembles Whitman's, or do you see it as a distinct thing?

*A.* Well, I haven't been much influenced by any other poet, but Whitman is one who probably did influence me—when I was younger. I agree. I'm very interested in Whitman, more so than I've been in any subsequent American.

*Q.* Is that because of his technique or his vision or both?

*A.* His wonderful—I'm looking for the word myself now—he's a Latinist for the significance of words. His use of words is marvelous, you know—a cataloguing passage and suddenly one word just electrifies the whole thing.

*Q.* Do you feel that in the early lyrics you have the same general perception of what you're doing as in the later ones? Is there a consistency, a coherence, that makes all your work hang together?

*A.* I think so. I think there's a consistency in all the kinds of work that I've done. The early lyrics were developed on the basis of love for certain sounds associated with my childhood. I've still got that love, only I'm no longer a child, and it manifests itself in relation to other things than it did when I was writing the early lyrics. I abandoned the lyric and would have done, I think, in any case. The

modern world is far too complex; the issues that arise today are far too pressing and complex. You can't express things in short lyrics as I did in my first three or four books. They become a trick. You lose integrity, you see. And certainly it would have been incompatible with my general position, my ambitions or desires.

*Q.* Is your use of very obscure scientific languages aiming at the same thing?

*A.* Oh yes, yes. The same influence makes me delight in using allusions that began by making me delight in Scots words, finding them in the dictionary, you know. How do you get ahold of words like that? Well, you've got to go where the words are, the dictionary, you know, and I love reading dictionaries, always have done.

*Q.* This is probably a question you've heard many times: with your interest in Scots, your commitment to individual words and their value, why did you stop writing in Scots and shift to English?

*A.* Well, it's very difficult. It's not a one-man job to revive a lapsed language. A man can only do so much. But then my own intellectual development was throwing the weight of my interest on modern scientific matters for which there is no vocabulary in Scots or in English, so I had to use elements of international scientific jargon. I couldn't accommodate. I couldn't write about the kinds of things I felt it necessary to write about in Scots, nor could I write about them in English unless I eked it out with elements of other languages.

*Q.* Is there, paradoxically, a relationship between your nationalism and your shift to the use of other languages?

*A.* No, except we Scots have always been distinguished from the English; we're internationalist in a way the English have never been. The English were an imperializing country or people. We Scots have been tremendously—no small nation in the history of the world, not even the Jews, has been so international as the Scots. Lord Acton, the historian, pointed that out long ago. Nationalism and internationalism go together. The one is inconceivable without the other; you can't have internationalism without having nationalisms to be "inter" with.

*Q.* Did your shift to more scientific language, using English as a base, reflect a shift in the goals of your poetry, a shift in intention or

purpose?

A. Well, I don't think so.

Q. You said in the twenties in the *Chapbook*, I think, that Scots was particularly able to effect the swift changes and juxtapositions that other languages were striving for. Were you referring specifically to symbolist techniques?

A. There is a whole range in Scottish vocabulary—words that have multiple meanings, that can convey not one particular significance but a range. Sometimes they'll be apparently at odds with each other. There was a man on the TV the other day: he was illustrating the work of a good friend of mine who dedicated a huge composition to me called *Opus clavicembalisticum*. Well, this pianist was illustrating Sorabji's work, particularly *Opus clavicembalisticum*, in which he showed the difference between striking a note on the piano keyboard and striking four or five notes at once. Well, that's what I think Scots can do. But it's not a provincial idiosyncrasy, the desire to revive one's native language. The thing's happening all over the world: there's a revival of small languages, often obsolete or obsolescent. They've never been the media of literature before and they're all being revived. So it's not a Scottish local thing at all. It's a challenge to linguistic imperialism all along the line. We won't have the big languages at all. I don't know if you know Professor George Steiner—he has a book called *After Babel*, and he makes that point.

Q. Do you feel that what is called the Scottish Renaissance has changed what's being written in Scotland now in the way of poetry? Do you think more new work is being done than would have been done without it?

A. There's been a considerable development. There are some very good poets, but I think on the whole of a minor degree, minor poets in Scotland, in all the languages—English, Lallans, and so on. But it's only in the last two or three years that a big change has happened. When I was a boy as I told you, we weren't taught anything about Scottish literature at all, nor were we allowed to use our own native language. The same applied to the Gaelic part of Scotland. There were no courses in Scottish literature in any of our own universities. Now there are in all of them. That's bound to have an effect in a generation or two, and it's already begun to show. There's a very considerable number of younger poets writing in Gaelic, for

example, and trying to use Gaelic in a way—modernizing the use of it—that breaks away from the classical Gaelic traditions. Well, all that has occurred, the escalation of the membership of the Scottish National Party, the spread of Scottish literature in schools and universities, all that has happened is evidence of the impetus given by myself and a few others in the early twenties. You see? Well, that's a big development. Whether it's having foreign influences or not I don't know. The traditionalists say, "Well, look at Burns. He achieved an unparalleled worldwide fame on the basis of Scots." All the literati in Edinburgh and elsewhere advised him that if he persisted in his wrongheaded course of writing in Scots, his work would be available only to a very small number of readers of Scots. My work has been translated into twenty different languages and broadcast, and I myself have lectured all over Europe and in China and Russia and elsewhere.

*Q.* Of the poets now writing in Scotland, who do you think is doing the most important kind of work? Would you say people like MacCaig or Smith or MacLean or Robert Garioch?

*A.* I don't like Garioch. I think Sorley MacLean is a very good poet indeed, and if his work had been accessible to a reading public, I think he'd have been recognized internationally. I think he will be yet. I don't think Crichton Smith is as good as Sorley. Do you know the work of Norman MacCaig? He's very good, but he's very English—as a poet. He's a Scotsman all right, and he's writing mainly about Scottish themes, Scottish places, and so on, but the form of expression is almost identical with that of quite a number of English poets. Ted Hughes, for example. Do you call Hughes English, or Philip Larkin?

*Q.* I think I understand what you mean. I can sense the difference. To what extent do you feel that you've accomplished the program you set out to achieve in the twenties, the revitalizing of Scottish culture and literature?

*A.* Not to a great extent. There's a lot more writing being done in Scots, and as I pointed out to you, there is the educational development in our schools and colleges. But actual production of writing in Scots, no. There are a lot of poets writing poems in Scots, but they haven't followed my example: their attitude to the language is quite different from mine. I think the reason for that is that they're

younger people, and they hadn't, as I had—they hadn't Scots natively. It was my first tongue, you see. They haven't acquired a certain amount of it since. I think they're all minor poets. They're not aiming at major poetry, and I was definitely from the start. I've no use for minor poetry.

*Q.* The other night we heard a poetry reading by a man who has just won a poetry prize. His first poem surprised me because it was exactly like a medieval ballad. It was not simply that it had the ballad stanza, but that it was like an imitation or reproduction, though the end of it was rather like the end of Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." I wonder what you think of that kind of thing being written now. Even when Keats wrote "La Belle Dame sans Merci," for example, he was doing something for his own time, and Auden used the ballad form to write about contemporary life. What do you think of writing something almost indistinguishable from a Scots ballad of the middle ages?

*A.* I've a long ballad myself in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, "Ballad of the Crucified Rose," [about the General Strike in which] I took an active part myself. I was a magistrate, a justice of the peace in the area that I was concerned with, and I was the only socialist either a magistrate or a member of the town council. And I took a very active part. So it was a contemporary issue that I was writing about, and it came across very well in that ballad, at least I think so. But as a general matter, no, and especially if it's written in the way that you said was reminiscent in part of "The Eve of St. Agnes." There's a great gulf between ballads in the Scottish tradition and the English ballads. The poet Sir Alexander Gray wrote a book about European balladry in which he noted the ballad traditions of the various Western European countries, and none of them had ballads like the best of the Scottish ballads. They haven't got that poetic . . . final statement. English ballads are milk and water in comparison with great Scottish ballads, but there's some very great poetry indeed from any point of view in some of the best of the Scottish ballads. You won't find that in England at all.

*Q.* Who of the earlier Scottish poets would you say was most influential or important in your writing?

*A.* Oh, I think Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair. And Duncan Ban MacIntyre, innkeeper of Ben Orchy. I've translated his longest

poem. There's another one who's very anti-English and an early advocate of complete Scottish independence, very political, William Livingstone.

*Q.* When did he write?

*A.* The end of the last century. He wrote long poems, too, and they've never been effectively translated. At that time it was impossible for him to make any headway either in his political ideas or in his Gaelic practice, you see. It would have been much easier today. If a similar poet were emerging, he would certainly find a publisher and find a reading public—a small one, but enough. Not at that time.

*Q.* How would you define the relationship between poetry and politics and culture in general? What effect does poetry have on that? How is it related?

*A.* I think it subsumes all the others: that's why poetry was always regarded as the chief of the arts. There are elements in descriptive passages in poetry that are equivalent to painting. You talk about the music of words. . . . There are elements of all the other arts involved in poetry, but it coordinates them; that is the point of poetry, and it keeps poetry in a position of supremacy to the other arts.

*Q.* What about politics?

*A.* Poetry has always been political. Dante? The great poets have always been political. What about Milton in this country, for example? In Britain? No, I think it's a false idea propagated for their own purposes by the bourgeoisie, by the middle class, that there's something antagonistic between poetry and politics.

*Q.* Isn't that a development of this century?

*A.* Yes, in the development of society the poets, and especially the important poets, have become more and more left wing, and the people in charge of cultural establishments in the different countries have reacted, become more and more reactionary.

*Q.* Actually some of the major poets of the twentieth century in Britain have been somewhat reactionary, have they not? What about Pound?

A. Yes, Pound was a friend of mine, you know.

Q. You don't call him left, do you?

A. I wouldn't call him left in a party political sense, but his criticisms of the financial monopoly were radical enough. They were founded on Jeffersonian democracy admittedly, and on Douglas' Social Credit. That was one of the points he and I had in common because we both knew Douglas personally and were involved in the propagation of his ideas, you see. No, I think Pound was a much greater poet than Eliot. I don't agree with these people who criticize the *Cantos* as a failed attempt at epic, as simply a ragbag of bits. Pound himself was disappointed in it and felt he hadn't been able to carry through his big scheme effectively at the end. I don't think he'd any cause for disappointment.

Q. What do you think is the most important thing about that work? What do you think makes it work?

A. The range of material he takes in and subordinates or subdues to his purpose.

Q. Do you think that is a necessary key to modern poetry?

A. Well, it means to say that work of that kind is reflecting conditions of modern life in a way that more orthodox poetry can't possibly do.

Q. You spoke of Dante; many contemporary poets have been influenced by Dante. Do you feel you have?

A. No, except by the fact that I recognize him as a poet of towering genius: I haven't been directly influenced by him at all. I wasn't directly influenced by any of the English poets either. I was influenced by the German *Arbeiter* poets, Richard Dehmel and others, the other working-class poets, by the Belgian Emile Verhaeren, and above all, because we've a very old tradition of alliance, by the French. But not by the popular French. I was influenced by Valéry, Jean Richepin, Baudelaire, of course, and Rimbaud.

Q. In what sense? Technically in the early poetry?

A. By admiration for their work, more particularly where it deviated from what was accepted by the cultural establishments of

Britain and other countries, by the impetus it gave to experimentation, technical and otherwise.

*Q.* Were you reading them and influenced by them when you were writing *Sangschaw* [1925] and *Penny Wheep* [1926]?

*A.* Oh yes, you can see the influences, in the *Drunk Man* particularly, you know, where I'm quoting them—Blok, the Russian Blok, and others. Oh I was, yes.

*Q.* That's why I asked earlier, when you talked about Scots being particularly capable of certain kinds of effects, if you meant the kind of effects that the French Symbolist poets were striving for?

*A.* Some of them, yes. I did mean that—yes, I think it's true.

*Q.* Do you think that Eliot succeeds in that in his early poetry?

*A.* In the influence on Eliot of Laforgue?

*Q.* Yes.

*A.* To a very limited extent. He seemed to be so dogmatic on narrow theological matters, narrow moralistic matters, that he was incapable of benefiting as a poet from that example. I think the influence on him of the Symbolists was more superficial than one might think. I think it's wrong to call them an influence even. He was aware of them, and he imitated certain of their devices, literary devices, but he wasn't spiritually affected by them to any marked extent. He was falling back all the time on this high Anglicanism of his, which is a bastard religion anyway.

*Q.* How are you defining influence when you say he wasn't influenced by them even though he imitated their techniques?

*A.* Well, I said that was a superficial influence. He didn't seem to be able to domesticate their spirit in his own practice. There was something that prevented him learning from them, except superficially. That element in him hardened as time went on and is exemplified in the *Quartets*, in contradistinction to his earlier poetry. English may have become a world language, but it has lost tremendously in the process. It has lost its availability for creative purposes. I'm very anti-English, and I've got no use for English poetry at all—broadly speaking, you know. I don't know of any good English poet today or

in my lifetime. Pound is the best, and you can't call him an English poet.

*Q.* Well, Eliot's an American.

*A.* He's an American, but he wrote English; he wrote what's accepted by the English as English. And I don't think he's a good poet in any case. I like his earlier work, his very early work right up to *The Waste Land*, but his subsequent religious stuff, of course, I've got no use for. I'm a materialist; I'm anti-religious in any shape or form.

*Q.* That interests me because it seems to me that in form there are certain parallels between your development and Eliot's. By the time he gets to the *Quartets*, Eliot is also writing much longer pieces with large sections that are more or less discursive, while he too began with brief, very intense lyrics. From a purely stylistic point of view, what do you think of the *Quartets*? Or can't you separate that from their content?

*A.* I can't. I don't think much of them at all. The difference between Eliot and Pound, who were very friendly at one time or another, is that Pound kept opening out. That gives the sort of inchoate aspect to his *Cantos*, taking in all kinds of material and so on. Eliot's process was the opposite one; he kept narrowing, becoming narrower and narrower in his basis, his ideological basis. That's where I fell foul with him. I knew Eliot very well and was very friendly with him, but—not that kind of poetry at all. There may be an apparent formal resemblance, as you pointed out, between some of my work and Eliot's, but it's only apparent. The spirit behind it was entirely different.

*Q.* You feel that you also opened out?

*A.* Yes. I'm still doing that. Not for much longer perhaps, but still, I'm incorrigible.

*Q.* I think that's wonderful. Do you know the work of Archibald MacLeish?

*A.* Yes, I know him personally, too. I've been to his house in Massachusetts.

*Q.* He interests me because he also has combined poetry and

politics and public life as you have in a way that's very unusual in the twentieth century. Is there something Scottish in that or is it just coincidence?

A. Oh, I'd say there's something Scottish in it all right. Despite his long absence and the distinguished positions he's held in America, MacLeish is passionately Scottish. When I went to see him the snow was on the ground. It's up in the hills, and I was wearing a kilt. He dashed back into the house to put his own kilt on. And I sort of looked around. He knew what that meant. He went and fetched the whiskey right away. I have his *Collected Poems* there; he gave them to me.

Q. Is that commitment to combining two sides of life a Scottish thing?

A. Oh very, yes, I think so. You've got to go further back. Have you read a book of mine called *Scottish Eccentrics*? I'm pointing out there that there always has been in Scotland, when it was independent, before the union with England, that complexity of character, that interest in a diversity of ideas, and particularly in language, quite un-English. It's been bred out of them to a very large extent. I was trying to revive it, you see.

Q. Would you say that's true of MacLeish, that he's retained that?

A. Well, he's hung on to the authentic traditions of Scotland. He may not have exemplified them very successfully in his own writing, but I don't know—not my kind of poetry, you know. You know a woman poet in America called Muriel Rukeyser? I dedicated one of my “Hymns to Lenin” to her. She belonged to a wealthy family, and she broke with them and went to Spain at the time of the Spanish Civil War, serving in a nursing capacity. Then she went back to America and she wrote a very long poem dealing with the dust disease. Now that seemed to me an admirable thing to do. It was a very good poem, and she's written a lot of poetry. I'm very interested in Wallace Stevens. Rather more so than in William Carlos Williams. He had, I think, a vision. He was concerned, in his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” with the basic and essential qualities of poetry and the prospects for poetry in the future in handling modern developments generally. He was very good.

Q. I would think Williams has been a greater influence on younger

American poets. Do you think that's a good influence?

A. I think it's a pity.

Q. Why?

A. Well, he wasn't nearly political enough. And he didn't discard, as Wallace Stevens did, all the rag, tag, and bobtail of romanticism in particular, which informed so much of Williams' work.

Q. How?

A. His preciousness, the preciousness of his use of language, which was very largely founded on a French basis, the application of French terms either directly or less directly in his own vocabulary. No, I think Wallace Stevens was a much more forthright character and was grappling with the problems of poetry in the contemporary world in a way that Williams failed to do entirely. He was influenced by the French writers in a way that Stevens wasn't. Stevens was quite aware of them, but he wasn't influenced by them; he didn't copy, or didn't import into his own work, elements derived from them, recognizable elements, as Williams did, of course.

Q. Williams did go in more for writing long works, such as *Paterson*, than Stevens did. Stevens pretty much stuck to the lyric, did he not?

A. He wrote quite a number of longer poems, and he recognized the necessity to write long poems in his later stages. He didn't go to the lengths that Williams did in *Paterson*.

Q. What do you think of *Paterson*?

A. Not much.

Q. Why not?

A. He didn't seem to me to carry his experiences, in *Paterson*, into the realm of imagination. He left them where they were. He wrote them up, as a doctor might write up his clinical notes, but without carrying them further, showing their universal significance.

Q. Do you think that poetry has to do that?

A. I think it does; it's one of the functions that poetry can fulfill, if it is to revert to or reacquire its original position.

*Q.* Is that why you favor Stevens, because he is concerned with and committed to that?

*A.* Yes, yes. The only thing I don't like about Stevens, of course, is that he was an insurance man. Well, he was wonderful. I think he was right in his major propositions in any case.

*Q.* Who in America today is doing really important poetry?

*A.* Good question. I don't like the Black Mountain school or any of those people at all. I don't know of any really significant poets writing in America. There are any number of them, of course. We'll be very lucky if one emerges from that mass, of really international significance as a poet.