‘Antisyzygy’: An Escape Route

By Paul Malgrati

A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o’ his people’s doom
An dee to brak’ their livin’ tomb.

Mony ha’e tried, but a’ ha’e failed,
Their sacrifice has nicht availed,
Upon the thistle they’re impaled.

Such is the famous cul-de-sac where Hugh MacDiarmid parked his superlative, 2650-line poem, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Regularly cited by all manners of vexed Scottish intellectuals, MacDiarmid’s conclusion is perhaps his most significant contribution to Scottish thought. Indeed, those morose lines end the poem’s attempt to unravel Scotland’s contradictory state – in-between fanciful ‘Celtic’ independence and pragmatic ‘Saxon’ subservience. Encouraging both the epic structure of the poem and its blend of variegated tones, this insight initially appears exhilarating. Upon reflection at the poem’s end, however, the drunk man worries that Scotland’s paradox has become a bane for its future development. ‘The only race in History who’ve / Bidden in the same category’ (ll. 2622–23) is impaled on its own rigid thorn and the prescient poet is left stranded in despair.

How to fix Scotland, then? How to *Circumjack Cencrastus*? How to sort the Celtic from the Saxon, the Jacobite from the Covenanter, the colonised from the coloniser, the Scottish Chris from the English Chris, drunken Scots from sober Scots, Doric from Scottish Standard English, the ‘Auld Alliance’ from the Union of Parliaments, the ‘Ayes’ from the ‘Naes’, Glasgow from Edinburgh, Dundee from Aberdeen, Hallaig from Jamaica? Such hackneyed questions have become commonplace in Scottish cultural life since the conclusion of *A Drunk Man.*

Literary scholars might interject at this point to remind us that MacDiarmid’s contradictory style originated in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), in which Gregory Smith coined the term ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ – Scotland’s ‘zigzag of contradictions’ – and claimed its development in Scottish

literature as having occurred ‘under the stress of foreign influence’. Smith’s conception of Scotland was not entirely new, either; it can be traced back to J. C. Smith’s racial dichotomy in *Some Characteristics of Scots Literature* (1912), which itself drew on Matthew Arnold’s *The Celtic Element in English Literature* (1867).

Following the postmodern turn of their discipline during the 1990s, Scottish literary critics rejected the bluntly essentialist, racial tropes of both Smith and MacDiarmid’s ‘Anti-Syzygy’. Yet a closer look at contemporary Scottish literary criticism reveals binary forms of scholarly arguments persisting. For instance, Douglas S. Mack’s *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (2006) contrasts the promotion of imperial Britain in works by Walter Scott and John Buchan with ‘subaltern’ standpoints in James Hogg, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and James Kelman;[1] Cairns Craig’s *The Wealth of the Nation: Scotland, Culture, and Independence* (2018) places the nineteenth-century ‘Xeniteian’ Scots in opposition to the despondent ‘nostophobic’ Scots of the twentieth century, the former having exported Scottish civilisation across the Empire and the latter having rejected Scotland’s corrupted, imperial culture;[2] in relation to the late twentieth century, Scott Hames’s *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution* (2019) positions the ‘grind’ of Scottish politics – eager to secure Britain’s constitution with the pragmatic, half-way house of Devolution – against the literary ‘dream’ of Scottish empowerment, with writers from Alasdair Gray to Janice Galloway having built on this ambiguous socio-political context in their work.[3] Until recently, such patterns of binary argumentation also appeared in my own research: my forthcoming book, *Robert Burns and Scottish Cultural Politics* (2023), emphasises Burns’s paradoxical legacy, caught between radical politics and royalist sentiment.[4]

Certainly, neither these authors nor I are MacDiarmidian. Most of us have taken issue with the poet’s legacy in our work. Yet the persistent appeal of paradoxes in contemporary Scottish scholarship hints at a subtler link between modernist and postmodernist Scottish theories. As I have recently come to understand – and as I wish to argue here – such a link might prove especially problematic for anyone anticipating, with hope, the future of an independent Scotland.

Let me explain. As soon as we agree that contradiction is key to understanding Scotland, it becomes very difficult to consider a future that would be so

miraculous as to free Scotland from what makes it so fascinating. If Scotland is already a comprehensive entity – one which is built, and builds, on an endless suite of creative conflicts – then how could it ever become something more than it is already? Further still, what need is there for cultural independence if all Scottish artistic possibilities can be contained in a few essential paradoxes mirroring Britain's constitutional status quo? Contradictory Scotland appears as an eternal kind of British hybrid, whose monstrosity is only mirrored by the twisted smirk of its hopeless – but justified – cultural elites.

To escape the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' is thornier than it seems. Critiques of its racist, simplistic thesis remain superficial. Aloof attempts to eschew its concept are also unhelpful. Whilst the contents of Scotland's so-called paradox might change, its hackneyed structure continues to fascinate. This is why MacDiarmid's metaphysics must be defeated not on the shallow surface of ethics, but on the solid ground of logic – on the terrain of modern metaphysics, in the land of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, where modern criticism was born.

Proscribed by mainstream philosophy since Aristotle's *Logic*, the principle of contradiction was revived by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his 1807 *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Against Immanuel Kant, who claimed that reality in-itself remains impenetrable for our blinkered humanity, Hegel retorted that reality and human subjectivity are, in fact, consubstantial. Reality and subjective consciousness are tied by their eternal contradiction, according to Hegel. Consciousness is not limited by external reality, for no reality can be thought without consciousness. In other words, if my consciousness is required by its opposite (reality) then, as long as reality endures, so will my consciousness. This means that, contrary to traditional interpretation, Hegel's dialectic is not a vehicle for change but, rather, for permanence and sameness. Consciousness might change shape or states – it might, for instance, turn into a broader, pan-human 'Spirit' – but, ultimately, the eternal persistence of both reality and thought is ensured by their friction. The contradictory amalgamation of both thought and reality remains identical even when its contents change; as such, it is logically (or indeed illogically) eternal.

This critical reading of Hegel, inspired by the contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, can also be applied to Karl Marx, who famously replaced the dialectic between thought and reality with the materialist class struggle.[5] For

Marx, labouring and exploiting classes cannot exist without each other. Their identities are shaped by their opposition. Whilst aspects of class warfare can shift depending on contexts – from ancient slavery to modern capitalism – the principle of class antagonism remains both universal and permanent. Certainly, such a theory fits awkwardly with Marx's hopeful description of a classless, communist future – a development which he can only imagine as a vague, miraculous endpoint of history, jarring with the entire structure of his dialectic materialism.

Such a rehabilitation of contradiction was key for the development of modern ideologies, not only for Marxism, but also for eternalist kinds of nationalisms. Indeed, how to better prove the eternity of one's nation than by building its identity on a permanent division, thus pre-empting all risks of secession? The racist French thinker Charles Maurras (1868–1952) adopted this approach when coining the so-called 'Anti-France' – a force comprising Protestants, Jews, freemasons, and foreigners whose alleged struggle against France's Roman, Catholic self was seen by Maurras as the main plotline of French history. Likewise, in the late nineteenth century, the United States' postbellum identity thrived off the pacified opposition between North and South: racists and liberals, Blacks and Whites, farmers and workers built their shared American identity on the back of their unending divisions. Further still, Matthew Arnold's Hegelian attempt to found English literature on both Saxon and Celtic themes was a rather unsubtle way to manufacture an eternal, pan-British tradition. Disparate works – from Ossian's fanciful Celtic poems to Alexander Pope's caustic 'Saxon' tongue – could now be brought together under the unbending umbrella of 'English'. In other words, by adapting Arnold's theories to Scottish literature, Smith and MacDiarmid imprisoned their subject into a jail of paradoxes that only served the eternalist fiction of Britain's Empire.

However, fictions of eternity are not unshakable – and to debunk them is key for anyone contemplating future liberation. Such a critical path can be found in the postmodern realisation that neither consciousness, nor the class struggle, nor Scotland's paradox can absorb reality's whole. After all, is it not possible that consciousness might die? And that reality as we know it might collapse? Are there no other kinds of gender-based or ethnic divides beyond class inequalities? And should we really use the same word, 'Scottish', to describe both William Dunbar's fifteenth-century Chaucerian poems and Irvine Welsh's 1990s Americanised demotic? This postmodern (or more accurately, neo-Kantian) type of criticism is

currently gaining ground in Scottish academia, where increasing numbers of scholars – from Eleanor Bell to Gerard Carruthers to Corey Gibson – are taking issue with the delusion of grand Scottish narratives.[6]

Yet the scope of such scepticism remains limited. Drawing on Kantian thought, sceptic scholars criticise eternalist readings of Scottish identity on the basis that human understanding always falls short of reality's ungraspable ground. Whilst MacDiarmid's modernist Scotland was in thrall to eternal contradictions, the Scotland of postmodern thinkers has nothing tangible beyond a groundless series of human constructs. Such a position is self-contradictory, however; for if nothing tangible upholds human discourses, then why should anyone heed the all-too-fallible warnings of sceptical academics? Instead, should we not feel free to pursue whatever fiction takes our fancy – with special consideration for cyclical kinds of contradictory stories, whose fascinating power continues to shape Scotland's contemporary self-image?

Against such temptation, a bolder step would be to reinstate the logical principle of non-contradiction. No, an entity cannot change so much as to absorb its opposite and still be called the same. Yes, it is possible to imagine the breakup of Britain, along with the collapse of capitalism, the end of humanity, and the 'big crunch' of our universe. The thought of finitude is arguably the most powerful tool of human consciousness – one capable of both realising and balancing its own power. Our imagination can conceive the end of all things, but it cannot envisage the end of all ends – for such a terminus would always beget the question of its own ending. Only finitude is endless and its power, which is also that of our knowledge, can withstand the irrational appeal of eternal paradoxes.

Neither Scotland nor Britain is forever. In fact, their histories are interspersed with regular endings. From the Kingdom of Alba to Knox's Reformation to Britain's 1707 Acts of Union to twentieth-century devolution to our twenty-first-century Anthropocene, what we call 'Scotland' is not a dumb, permanent force, incapacitated by the historical weight of its contradictory development. Instead, Scotland is a contingent palimpsest of finite realities. Against both MacDiarmid's doomed country and the unreal nation of contemporary sceptics, Scotland's positivity lies precisely in its past, present, and future capacity to finish. Independence cannot blossom atop an endless thorn. Whilst MacDiarmid's 'Renaissance' aimed to fix centuries of Scottish turpitude in search of vain purity,

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(c) The Bottle Imp