CHAPTER SIX

The Modern Scottish Literary Renaissance

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This chapter analyses selected aspects of the modern Scottish literary renaissance in the foundational 'first generation' years between 1920 and 1945, looking most especially at key texts that deal with the nature of identity from Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), Nan Shepherd (1893–1981), Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1901–35) and Neil Gunn (1891–1973). The renaissance agenda made much of looking outwards, but arguably the versions of identity offered in these works go so far 'outwards' as to leave 'Scottishness' behind, and to problematise the conception of identity itself.

This is not to say these authors initiated the outward perspective nor even the Scottish revival of cultural confidence. Its stirrings can be traced back at least as far as Patrick Geddes's (1854–1932) 'Celtic renascence, now incipient alike in Literature and Art' which he announced in 1895 as the best way towards 'the revival and development of the old Continental sympathies of Scotland'[1] – a line MacDiarmid was later quick to adopt. Nor should we forget the paintings and designs of Charles Rennie Macintosh and Margaret and Frances Macdonald in Glasgow, which had wider links to the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, the Jugendstil of Belgian Victor Horta and the Catalan Modernisme of Antoni Gaudi. In short, a certain 'renaissance' was in the air by 1900, its 'modern', outward looking and theorised elements already established by visual artists. In these circles, the organicism of 'Celtic' art in Scotland was losing its twilight associations, mixing genres and incorporating elements from numerous centres of culture to be re-appraised in what amounted to internationally proto-Modernist terms. The same impulse had the Scottish Colourists looking to French Post-Impressionism. J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961) in particular theorised a link between the Fauves' vividness, Bergsonian movement and his understanding of 'rhythm' in art (which he later associated with a Celtic sensibility). This led to his becoming art editor for the avant-garde journal *Rhythm* in London in 1911. Fergusson associated what he took to be the characteristically dynamic graphic line of Celtic art with the most modern in the *Rhythm* group's agenda:

> Our intention is to provide art, be it drawing, literature or criticism, which shall be vigorous, determined, which shall have its roots below the surface, and be the rhythmical echo of the life with which it is in touch. Both in its pity and its brutality it shall be real.[2]

Fergusson's vision was resolutely international. He commissioned illustrations (with Fauvist, Rayonnist, Vorticist and Cubist elements) from Samuel Peploe, Natalia Gontcharova, Gaudier-Brzeska and Picasso. On eventually returning to Scotland in 1939 he took up the same cause as art editor of *Scottish Arts and Letters*, for five issues between 1944 and 1950, going on to illustrate the Maclellan edition of *In Memoriam James Joyce* in 1955. The pioneering and cross-disciplinary 'renaissance' of visual artists in the first decade of the century should be better recognised than it is in literary circles, though Tom Normand's study *The Modern Scot* is an indispensable guide.[3] MacDiarmid, then, was by no means first to propose 'to get rid of our provinciality of outlook and to avail ourselves of the Continental experience.'[4]

It is, nevertheless, difficult to imagine the then-modern 'renaissance' and rise of Scottish cultural and socio-political self-confidence, without the indefatigable if vividly various and uneven theoretical and critical inputs from C. M. Grieve and his newly discovered alter ego 'Hugh M'Diarmid' as they came to be published in *The Scottish Chapbook* in 1922 and in 1923 in *The Scottish Nation*. Following Gregory Smith's 1919 study *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, MacDiarmid's 'Theory of Scots Letters' made much of 'the Scottish instinct' represented by a psychology and a vernacular language seen as 'the perfect expression of the Scottish race'. The overtly essentialist aspects of his case have generated understandable reservations among critics ever since. Yet the actual *products* of that agenda have often actually challenged the notion of any single stable national, cultural, psychological or personal identity, despite (or perhaps because of) its new definition of 'Scottishness'. MacDiarmid's espousal of the notorious 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' spoke for instability and contradiction at the heart of identity; this is the creative core paradox of Scottish cultural nationalism, at least in its earlier years and its best productions. From this position a case can also be made, as we shall see, for the renaissance's contribution to literary Modernism's emergence.

Douglas Gifford has written of darker paradoxes within the so-called renaissance, pointing out how soon the prevailing spirit of cultural renewal and rebirth changed to one of acute pessimism, from Edwin Muir's (1887–1959) vision of Scotland as a place of 'smoke and dearth and money everywhere' presided over by Burns and Scott as 'sham bards of a sham nation' ('Scotland 1941'), to the deeply pessimistic 'rejection of Renaissance values' that characterised post-war Scottish novels, even (or especially) George Friel's and Robin Jenkins's brilliant work.[5] Gifford's is a persuasive critique of canonical

reputations, refreshingly recognising tensions implicit in a movement of reinvention whose later output served only to revisit *The House with Green Shutters* (1901) and George Douglas Brown's old cry of pain. Similarly, Gordon Williams's *From Scenes Like These*, as late as 1968, might seem the final blow to any possibility of rebirth in a ferociously forensic Balzacian dissection of Scotland as a place of agricultural brutalism, damaged masculinity and ugly, provincial urban hopelessness.

Having said that, early renaissance writing presents a more complex, nuanced, theoretically alert account of identity, meaning and being than either the movement's strategic, but often limiting and potentially essentialist, emphasis on unique 'Scottishness', or the realism and despair of later 1930s literature might suggest. In fact, there is a Modernist energy and optimism in MacDiarmid's espousal of the concept of antisyzygy, and simplistic notions of origin, truth and identity (Scottish or otherwise) are actually deconstructed in Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse* (1930), Gibbon's *Scots Quair* (1932–4) and Gunn's *Highland River* (1936).

If we leap ahead a little, we gain a sense of the day's prevailing critical and cultural values (and what the renaissance set out to overthrow) by touching on MacDiarmid's and Muir's quarrel over the publication of *Scott and Scotland* (1936). Apart from Muir's analysis of the history of Scots, and his odd notion that one might think in one language and feel in another, as if language did not of itself dictate either mode (assuming 'feeling' is a linguistic act in the first place), there is, throughout the text of *Scott and Scotland*, a repeated and revealing assumption about homogeneity and autonomy as cultural imperatives:

> The prerequisite for an autonomous literature is a homogeneous language [. . .] For this homogeneous language is the only means yet discovered for expressing the response of a whole people, emotional and intellectual, to a specific body of experience peculiar to it alone.[6]

The quasi-imperial assumptions behind such a monological definition of culture and experience,[7] blind as it is to internal differences of region, class and gender (not to mention the manifestations of Bakhtinian polyphony that are implicit in the novel form itself), soon become all too clear in Muir's statement of blunt intent:

> A Scottish writer who wishes to achieve some approximation to completeness has no choice except to absorb the English tradition [. . .] if he thoroughly does so his work belongs not merely to Scottish literature but to English literature as well.[8]

Muir meant well in his hopes of modernising Scotland, of course, although his recommendations are disturbingly similar to Lord Macaulay's in his 'Minute on Education' (1836):

> No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence.[9]

Muir's stance may also be influenced by Matthew Arnold, whose *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), while praising Celtic languages for their past literature, pronounces them unfit for the modern world, urging their extinction:

> I must say I quite share the opinion of my brother Saxons as to the practical inconvenience of perpetuating the speaking of Welsh [. . .] The sooner the Welsh language disappears [. . .] the better for England, the better for Wales itself [. . .] For all modern purposes [. . .] let us all as soon as possible be one people; let the Welshman speak English, and, if he is an author, let him write English.[10]

Also talking about literature's crucial role as intermediary between education and culture, MacDiarmid's 1931 essay, 'English Ascendancy in British Literature', anticipated elements of postcolonial theory by pointing out that Britain itself was culturally and linguistically plural, and the stronger for being so:

> The reading publics of Great Britain have been blinded to four literatures full of very distinctive values, of absorbing technical interests, and of very diverse potentialities, and the further development of these four literatures have been practically inhibited. Surely all this represents an enormous loss.[11]

Few critics today would deny MacDiarmid's opening point that 'there are many varieties of English' nor that 'a racy native turn of speech is better than any stilted phraseology, especially for literary purposes'.[12] Cairns Craig has explored the implications of this and argued extensively that the Scots tradition's cultural and creative strength, then and now, lies in this heterogeneity:

> In Leonard, Kelman, Dunn and Lochhead – and many others – writing in Scotland becomes the exploration of the intersections between, and the spaces between, a multiplicity of different dialects and grammars. It is the very lack of unity in Scotland's linguistic situation which makes their writing possible.[13]

More recently this insight further developed into an argument that the condition so deplored by Muir, and regularly seen as sadly divided and unstable, was the forerunner of what we would now call a much broader postmodern condition.[14] Those texts of dysfunctional division – going back at least to Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* – have

been reinterpreted as subtle critiques of the Enlightenment project and harbingers of modernity, or indeed postmodernity. Thus what was once seen as a peculiarly Scottish pathological condition has broadened its critical and theoretical scope to reflect on the contemporary human condition. In a post-structuralist and postcolonial critical context, it is Muir's unhealthy fascination with a 'whole people' and their notionally homogeneous, autonomous and singular culture that now seems deeply suspect.

MacDiarmid began as wholly engaged with internal heterogeneity, instability and flux. The six prose 'psychological studies' of *Annals of the Five Senses* were completed by 1919 (largely composed by 1917 while he was serving in Salonika), but not published until 1923. The dates are significant: they show Grieve had a powerful vision of creative psychological complexity, simultaneity and dissonance before ever encountering Gregory Smith's case for 'Caledonian Antisyzygy'.[15] Every story in *Annals*[16] describes a common sensibility, on fire with different impressions and thoughts in a swirl of ceaseless activity, multiple, various, eclectic and finally, paradoxically, coherent. The following examples, all from 'Four Years' Harvest' (which has an autobiographical element), will illustrate the work's spirit:

> He was like an ant-heap stirred: thoughts and memories ran about in all directions at the same moment [. . .] (p. 41)

> And now his mind was like a hayrick aflame [. . .] (p. 56.)

> So his moods came and went [. . .] like grasses in the winds [. . .] and he heard the voice of his overself, deep within him, with the 'unwinded clearness and unnatural sequence' that informed the controlled and muffled notes of Farmer Oak's flute 'boding an incommunicable thing' (p. 60.)

I have written at length elsewhere that the 'incommunicable thing' these stories try so brilliantly (if unevenly) to communicate is ultimately the internal experience of Bergsonian flux, *durée* and *élan vital*.[17] Indeed, the protagonist of 'The Never-Yet-Explored' recognises that '"the essence of life lies in the movement by which it is transmitted"', a direct quotation from *Creative Evolution* (1907), translated in 1911. The reference to that 'incommunicable thing' at the end of the story and the mention of Gabriel Oak, with a paraphrase of Hardy's lines from Chapter 2 of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, introduce another aspect of this extraordinary collection of stories, which Grieve admitted he had 'designed' rather than written. Unreferenced quotations, both marked as quotations and unmarked, proliferate, amounting to a densely intertextual exercise and prophetically poststructuralist insight into how literary texts, and indeed our own consciousnesses, are generated:

> The old lady described Shakespeare as being 'full of quotations.' So are my studies [. . .]
>
> As fish are seen through an aquarium so these perhaps strange fish of mine are discernible almost entirely through a 'strong solution of books' – and not only of books but of magazines and newspaper articles and even of speeches.[18]

MacDiarmid was to return to his 'strong solution of books'[19] in the writing of *Lucky Poet* and as the guiding structural principle in his later 'poetry of fact' with its epic catalogues and extensively unacknowledged prose borrowings. Critical debate about whether this is plagiarism or a new kind of writing continues,[20] but MacDiarmid's shift from the essentially late-Romantic – if defamiliarised – utterance of his early lyrics towards his epic later work's intertextual and impersonal collaborative texts does have a claim to critical credibility in terms of poststructuralist theory like Barthes's claim that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.[21]

It is little wonder that MacDiarmid was so taken by Gregory Smith's proposal that Scottish literary tradition tends towards 'the piling up of details' the 'completed effect' of which 'is one of movement', while any apparent literary or cultural unity is revealed on closer scrutiny to be 'under the stress of foreign influence and native division and reaction, almost a zigzag of contradictions'.[22] Such a cultural theory placed his own fascination with such states at the centre of a national literary tradition. Writing in the same year as 'English Ascendancy in British Literature' and making the same point about the need for 'the decentralisation of literature', he 'renewed [the] Scottish plea for diversity as against uniformity in keeping with our essential national genius'.[23]

The contradictions of MacDiarmid's rhetoric are all too obvious here, when his case for decentralisation, variety and contradiction simultaneously invokes the notion of an 'essential national genius'. But in a later passage he cites the ideological importance of 'dynamic myth' (he is referring to Dostoevsky and 'the Russian Idea'). This was to be the most fertile dynamic myth of his own literary production, not least because it links his own and early Modernism's fascination with change, flux and Bergsonian flow:

> The essential point is that all fixed opinions – all ideas that are not entertained just provisionally and experimentally [. . .] every identification of Scottish genius with any particular religion or political doctrine [. . .] and above all the stupid (since self-stultifying) idea that ideas are not of prime consequence [. . .] and that it is possible to be over-intellectual – are anti-Scottish – opposed to our national genius which is capable of countless manifestations at absolute variance with each other, yet confined within the 'limited infinity' of the adjective 'Scottish'.[24]

The *creative* power of MacDiarmid's interpretation of 'antisyzygy' needs no emphasis, since it is the driving inspiration and dynamic force behind his best work from this period, most notably *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). But the foundations of this restless energy were first laid in the 'psychological studies, essays, mosaics (call them what you will)' that were the *Annals of the Five Senses*. Gregory Smith gave MacDiarmid a theory that could marry the poet's Bergsonian drives to a programme of literary and cultural renewal with a claim to historical continuity. Here is a national idea whose founding principle is to challenge the monological stability of just such definitions, along with a wider socio-political argument (with what we would now call postcolonial overtones) in favour of literary diversity and plurality and the 'decentralisation' of all cultural hegemonies. In this, the Scottish literary renaissance's agenda can be seen as an early manifestation of the wider and later postcolonial process by which other cultures developed counter-discursive strategies against dominant European or anglocentric claims to universality, wary of essentialism, and alert to the dangers of simply replacing the 'centre' with the 'margin'. There are Modernist – even postmodernist – aspects to MacDiarmid's case for the provisional, experimental, relative and transient, as expressing the spirit of 'antisyzygy', even as he identifies that spirit with a specifically Scottish identity that his own case's logic would seem to undermine. His argument remains a powerful, necessary, and theoretically telling counter-discourse to the cultural imperialism of Muir's monological vision of culture.

There are still further counter-discourses to be discerned in early Scottish renaissance literary productions, also to do with the destabilisation of autonomous identity, homogeneity and certainty. It is no coincidence that several key prose fiction texts from this period should deal with specifically female identity – as a realm of doubly-marginalised experience perhaps – within the Scottish context's long-standing patriarchy.

In the 'development novels' of Catherine Carswell (1879–1946), Willa Muir (1890–1970) and Nan Shepherd (1893–1981), for example, issues of class, autonomy and freedom of choice loom large – from the imbalance between creative escape and the Edwardian constraints of polite metropolitan society that are such a feature of *Open the Door!* (1920); to the darker machinations of small town bourgeois masculinist society in *Imagined Corners* (1931), with its closing hints of a more radical sexual liberation; to the trajectory of education, escape and a self-discovery deeper than books, while also affirming an almost equally radical return to the resolutely local that is *The Quarry Wood* (1928). In each case and differently, these show characters subverting dominant modes of social – and generic – expectation. But these authors also ask questions about identity that go beyond female emancipation politics. Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson chose a phrase from

Nan Shepherd to characterise this trajectory – 'journeys into being' – citing Patricia Waugh's observation that women writers of this period

> have sought alternative conceptions of subjectivity, expressing a definition of relationship which does not make identity dependent axiomatically upon the maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other.[25]

Arguably some of these female perspectives on alternative subjectivity begin to challenge the apparent stabilities of identity itself, whether we consider ourselves part of the 'imagined communities' of 'men', 'women', or indeed 'Scotland'. This is especially the case in the work of Nan Shepherd, most notably in *The Weatherhouse*, and in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's brilliant imagining of Chris Guthrie. Here again, two early Scottish renaissance foundational texts challenge the very conceptions of identity upon which one might imagine the case for 'Scottishness' would depend – a 'counter-discursive' strategy indeed.

Alison Lumsden has written specifically on this,[26] although arguably *The Weatherhouse* raises questions of signification, truth and meaning that relate to all being and all knowing, rather than a specifically female struggle between the Kristevan semiotic of 'feminine identity' and the patriarchal symbolic order of language – the law of the father. (The semiotic is not gendered in any case.) Nevertheless, Nan Shepherd was all too aware of the gulf between the world of felt experience and the world of words, as she noted in a letter to Neil Gunn in May 1940, admiring his capacity to bring the two together:

> To apprehend things – walking on a hill, seeing the light change, the mist, the dark, being aware, using the whole of one's body to instruct the spirit – yes that is the secret life one has and knows that others have. But to be able to share it, in and through words – that is what frightens me [. . .] It dissolves one's being.[27]

The Weatherhouse is full of such moments of dissolution,[28] characters coming into contact with a world – or rather realm of being – beyond language, beyond easy distinctions of 'right or wrong' or 'true or false' or the comforts of science or religion, and certainly beyond self.

This is what, in *The Weatherhouse*, the war-wounded Garry Forbes encounters when he sets out to refute what he sees as the lies of fantasist Louisa Morgan and her claims to have been engaged to his now dead friend David Grey. Before the war Garry was an engineer used to seeing the world as a material and wholly calculable thing, a place of binary simplicity and black and white distinctions:

> The complexity of human motive and desire had not come home to him, and he supposed, without thinking much about it, that right and wrong were as

> separate as the bridges he helped to build and the waters over which he built them. But [. . .] limits had shifted, boundaries been dissolved. Nothing ended in itself, but flowed over into something else [. . .] (p. 118.)

Characters realise that the world we live in – even our sense of who we are – is inextricably bound up with the figments of desire. This was the root of Louie's lie, as she constructed herself around an imagined romance, and yet even her feeble fantasy will speak a wider truth:

> 'I am made like that. I live all the time – oh I am going to scourge myself – in what I want other people to be thinking about me, until often I don't know – indeed, indeed, I don't – what I really am and what I have thought they are thinking I am.' [. . .]
>
> Garry was looking in amazement.
>
> 'I should have thought the difference between truth and a lie was clear enough,' he said as she paused.
>
> 'Oh no, no, it's not – not clear at all. Things are true and right in one relationship, and quite false in another. (p. 105.)

Cairns Craig has noted how this novel subverts the nature of writing itself (which is one of the ways in which we try to make an account of reality) by the indeterminacy of such insights and by 'enacting the falsity of the imagination at the level of its own plot':

> Imagination infects and distorts; the narrative of *The Weatherhouse* is a tissue of imaginations, from which the truth has to be redeemed precisely by negating the kind of fictionalising which the characters, in imitation of their author, but in denial of her fundamental values, are only too prone to commit themselves to.[29]

Indeed, the book ends with a profound *jeu d'esprit* about its own operating principle, in which Garry's fiancée remembers her childhood days with Louie and Louie's dog 'Demon' (the name is not insignificant):

> 'Nonsense!' rapped Miss Theresa. 'Louie had never a dog.'
>
> 'But I remember. I can see him. A whippet hound he was.'
>
> 'Nonsense! She hadn't a dog. She wanted one [. . .] And after a while she used to pretend she had it – made on to be stroking it, spoke to it and all.'
>
> Lindsay [. . .] pondered. The dog, bounding among the pines, had in her memory the compelling insistence of imaginative art. He was a symbol of swiftness, the divine joy of motion. But Lindsay preferred reality to symbol.
>
> 'Queer, isn't it? she said, coming out of her reverie. 'I remembered Demon was a real dog.' (p. 199.)

In the most subtle and profound ways, *The Weatherhouse* challenges our understanding of truth and fiction, the real and the imagined as well as our capacity to know them and the very grounds for our own sense of who we are and what the world is. In face of such insights, the question of a specifically 'Scottish' identity seems less than pressing.

On the same issue of 'identity' Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Scots Quair* trilogy provides an all too familiar *locus classicus* in the *Sunset Song* passage about the two Chrisses – the 'Scots' Chris and the 'English' Chris – but in fact the trilogy's engagement with identity is much more subtle and puzzling than this would suggest. In symbolic terms the trilogy makes much of its sense of historical continuity in the way that Chris has a special relationship with the standing stones, the Kaimes, and finally with Windmill brae and the Barmekin, as each novel unfolds. She has a vision of ancient Pictish life on a wild night on the Slug road, and weeps for the Covenanting folk – her folk – persecuted at Dunnottar Castle in the seventeenth century. Yet her own trajectory in the novel is acutely discontinuous – haunted by the past – but seemingly ever more remote from her own sense of who she is, and in her capacity for relationships. After the sad failure of her third marriage – over before it was begun – and facing Ewan's increasingly alienating and alienated dedication to revolutionary politics, she returns to her place of origin to find no comfort: 'her little shelter in Cairndhu a dream of no-life that could not endure', thus travelling full circle to arrive at a deeply ambiguous closing scene in which she either falls asleep or dies on a rainy hillside.

In fact there are several Chrisses in the course of the trilogy – a 'third Chris' and then 'many Chrisses' each one seemingly increasingly remote for her own sense of who or what she is herself. In *Cloud Howe* – pregnant for the second time – she stands by the gravestones in Segget (echoing the standing stones of happier times) in a passage marked, in symbolic terms, by a continuity only of separation and extinction:

> She seemed to stand here by the kirkyard's edge looking back in the stones that marked the years where so many Chrisses had died and lay buried – back and back, as the graveyard grew dim, far over those smothered hopes and delights, to that other Chris that had been with child, a child herself or so little more, and had known such terror and delight in that [. . .][30]

She will lose the child, of course, as the spinners will lose their cause, as her husband will lose his life, as she will even lose young Ewan, her first-born, to the ruthless cause he has adopted. The progress of the trilogy is the slow stripping away of all that has made her what she is. Chris Guthrie, the strongest character in the trilogy, an icon of linguistic and regional identity, ends as enigma. In summarising how Chris has been interpreted over the

years, Isobel Murray rightly declines to see her simply as 'Chris Caledonia', a symbol of the nation, or as 'woman personified'.[31] But if we do entertain this possibility, even for a moment, the implications of such a reading are deeply disturbing. National symbol or not, she is given over to defeat and death in the end, and Chris Guthrie's special affinity to the land (which is an affinity to geological time and change) has led only to her complete erasure. What is 'identity' or 'nationality', after all, *sub specie aeternitatis*? Grassic Gibbon was no Scottish nationalist, of course, but his vision of Chris and the final unknowability of being is more searching than any quarrel with the then-contemporary politics of national reconstruction and identity. It is a counter-discourse that problematises the nature of identity itself, and hence of continuity, tradition and renewal, even as it provides the 'renaissance' movement with a foundational text.

In the many books of origins, escape and return that characterise the renaissance literature of this period, Neil Gunn's *Highland River* stands out, and indeed its mixed narrative tone makes it equally singular in Gunn's own *oeuvre*. Its highly complex modernist narrative structure comprises a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards – a nest of Chinese boxes – often triggered by an image or an associative memory as the text gradually reconstructs a single narrative from a succession of looping strands. Douglas Gifford has referred to this as an 'innovative use of prolepsis and analepsis',[32] while Francis R. Hart calls it 'an intricate "systolic-diastolic" rhythm that plays against the linear river'.[33] This last point is relevant: the controlling trope of the whole novel is that of tracing the river of identity back to its roots in a journey upstream to the 'source'. Yet the time- and perspective-looping narrative structure of the actual book subverts all such conceptions of recoverable coherence and even of continuity itself. It is we the readers who reconstruct Kenn's life (with difficulty), even as he himself struggles to understand his own past life.

The narrative voice of the novel is equally divided between an immediate, powerful and extensive use of free indirect discourse and a more detached and ironically realised quasi-Godlike authorial voice that seems to observe its own observations in a slightly puzzled manner, as if for the first time. Throughout the book Kenn's memories are triggered by poetic and associative symbols and echoes – we might imagine we are looking back, with him, to spots of time in a golden Wordsworthian youth. Yet the text has a contrary movement and a contrary voice, associated with Kenn the scientist, whose searchingly forensic analysis regards his past self with a degree of detached incomprehension:

> But the small figure does not hear the singing ecstasy in the wings; has no knowledge of the eyes that presently peer at him, noting with scientific care every breath of expression, each detail of the face [. . .]

> For Kenn had forgotten the fear, the wonder, the sudden heart-beat, the strangeness, the sense of adventure, the ominous quality in known things when encountered in lonely places. He had forgotten what it really was to be young [. . .]
>
> Kenn waits in the trees watching him with profound attention, for the little figure out there is himself.[34]

As their correspondence shows, Neil Gunn shares Nan Shepherd's sense of the sheer strangeness of being and unknowableness of the relationship between mind and physical world – not to mention the difficulties of catching this in language. As with Grassic Gibbon (and indeed MacDiarmid's early poems) there is a sense in which the 'bonnie lowe o' Eternity' erases all the petty distinctions of who and what we are in any mundane, socio-political or nationally-determined sense:

> Into the timelessness in which the great ball of the earth revolves and circles and drives onward into space, lit by sunlight and moonlight and starlight, towards an end or an endlessness of which not the slightest glimmer reaches us.
>
> And so in some way past comprehending, the small boy sticking his toe in the mire of the drowned earth becomes one with the grown-up scientist watching that same earth from an astronomical point above it and wondering, as he stares in front of him, Whither? And, occasionally, Why? (p. 108.)

Gunn's final joke about identity in this, his greatest and most challengingly Modernist novel, comes with its conclusion and the Zen-like moment when he traces the river to its actual root, only for that, too, to disappear into the boggy hole of his own subjectivity. The figments of his desire had imagined a beautiful shore, but the reality seems plainer and truer:

> Suddenly, before his very eyes, the stream vanished into the earth. His dismay was vague and ludicrous. From his map-gazing he knew that his river should rise in a loch. He could not have been mistaken. This loch was to have been the end of his journey. Like the Yogi in his pilgrimage to Lake Mànas!
>
> And here it was coming out of the earth itself. The realism mocked him. He had actually thought of a loch with shores of sand and water grey in the evening light [. . .]
>
> He climbed over broken ground. Remembering how they listened-in to the earth when boys, he lay down and put his ear to the ground. Faintly he heard the surge of the stream away underground. So it was not lost! But listening more acutely, he realised that what he heard was the surge of the river of his own blood. (p. 238.)

Nature plays its final joke when the stream reappears further on and Kenn discovers the loch after all. By then Gunn's point has been made about the

elusiveness and the meaninglessness of origins, as Kenn's eye takes him to the mountain beyond the loch. From this mountain one might see the Caithness plain, with the Orkneys beyond; and beyond them, 'the immense chasm of space'; and beyond that 'what lay in his heart and his mind' (p. 241). These passages, with their symbolism of deception, humour and endless recursion, lead only to our own subjectivity, and the figments of our desire, even as we search for those longed-for and impossible roots and origins. The final symbol of *Highland River* is the humble bog-asphodel, guardian of that boggy hole of life and death in ooze. Kenn does not even put it in his buttonhole, but walks off with it, forgotten, in his hand.

It seems appropriate to close with Gunn's Zen joke and doubtless the sound of one hand clapping. The point is that the best creative writers of the socio-political counter-discourse in favour of Scottish cultural identity (at a time when that was under considerable threat) ended by problematising the concept of identity itself. Paradoxically, this may have been the early Scottish Renaissance's most significant achievement as a contribution to Modernism and literary theory.