

HUGH MACDIARMID AND EMILY DICKINSON: THE THISTLE AND THE MOONLIGHT

Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) are two dissimilar personalities who inhabited different universes but whose poetry presents many similarities. They even share some influences and it is possible that Emily Dickinson influenced MacDiarmid through Ezra Pound. Theirs is a poetry with a powerful lyrical conciseness and an aphoristic nature that makes possible to define it as *aphoristic haikai*. Apart from their parallel form, they deal with similar themes: Life, Death, God, Eternity, Immortality, Beauty, Truth, Memories and Oblivion. Moreover, Horace's philosophy of *carpe diem* underlies their poetry and their lives. Their work (taking into account that we do not take into account in this paper MacDiarmid's most political poetic corpus) is similar because it shares a universal side. But at the same time, we cannot forget that for Emily Dickinson her universe was her Poetry and her home, whereas for MacDiarmid his universe was Scotland and Poetry. This paper shows how they are very alike, but very different at the same time.

Although the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) and the North American poetess Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) appear to be two dissimilar personalities, who wrote in different contexts in terms of tradition, time and space, they can be connected by the powerful lyrical conciseness and aphoristic nature of their poetry. Moreover, the time cannot be taken as a definite criterion to distinguish them, because Emily Dickinson has often been said to write ahead of her times and be even a Modernist, as MacDiarmid himself was, and in reference to the space, although Dickinson was in North America and MacDiarmid in Scotland,

they both wrote involved in an impressive natural scenery, which provoked the same effects in both of them.

Notwithstanding, the connection between both authors does not apply to the whole of their work, owing to the fact that MacDiarmid -a pseudonym adopted by Christopher Murray Grieve in 1922- presents an evolution in his poetry, and part of it departs very much from Dickinson's work. Therefore, this paper is going to focus on Grieve's early lyrical poetry, mainly that written between the 1920s and the 1930s, for it is in this period that we find a striking and meaningful conciseness in his short poems, and aphoristic pieces of writing in his longer ones. However, we cannot forget his later poems, those defined by Duncan Glen as 'world-view' poems or poems of ideas¹, because in them we can find similarities with Emily Dickinson's letters and longer poems: they reflect upon life and the world and you can extract aphorisms from them. All in all, we are going to compare Emily Dickinson to MacDiarmid the lyrical poet, not the propagandist¹.

Let us consider Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* -the poem that gave him fame- as a starting image. In this poem we find as two main images the *thistle* and the *moonlight*. We can identify MacDiarmid with the *thistle*, as he himself says in this poem ('The thistle's like myself'), because of his nationalism and strong character, and the *moonlight* with Emily Dickinson, as far as she presents reality introspectively, apart from the fact that she always dressed in white, like the moonlight, and embodied a mystical and enchanting image. Consequently, on the personal level Hugh MacDiarmid and Emily Dickinson are eccentric figures that present opposed characteristics. Among other aspects: she was almost a complete recluse whereas he was a real public figure; her main aim was not the publication of her work while he published a huge corpus because he wrote with a strong social commitment; and she was not involved in political issues whilst he was a political figure.

Hence, we observe that these two geniuses inhabited different universes. For Emily Dickinson her house, her family, her garden and her poetry were her whole life, independently from the country or the nation she belonged to, whereas for MacDiarmid it was the contrary:

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid was a poet with a strong political character. He was a nationalist, who worked for the independence of Scotland and helped to found the National Party of Scotland. However, his political life has been defined as contradictory because at the same time he was a communist. Even Lenin said that he was too extremist. Nonetheless, in this paper we are going to focus on the less political part of his poetic corpus.

Scotland was his nation, his house, his family, his life, his poetry. These features, along with the fact that they belong to different traditions, could make us think that their poetry differs to a great extent. However, although Emily Dickinson belongs to the American tradition and Grieve to the Scottish one, Dickinson's poetry departs in many aspects from her tradition, and it does not present a clear environmental influence, although she is rooted in the American provincial life. However, Dickinson does share the transcendentalist interest in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon laconics, which approaches her to MacDiarmid's tradition, MacDiarmid's traditional sources being the Scottish ballads, with their incredible simplicity and intensity.

We can therefore notice a connection between these two authors. This connection flourishes definitely because both Dickinson and MacDiarmid write with a universal background that can be connected with any other tradition. We notice how «in the best of his poetry, [MacDiarmid] rises above all his ideologies, which were, of course, important to him as spring boards from which his poetry rose, and he becomes not only the 'authentic voice of Scotland' but also that of universal man» (Glen, 1964: 53). Therefore, «reading such verse one does not have to concern himself unduly with thoughts of the poet being Scots (...) It is simply great verse; it is free mind, free expression» (Oxenhorn, 1984: 55), just as in Dickinson's poetry. Regarding this, we have to say that one of the main traits that reinforces this universality is the absence of a concrete time and space in their poetry.

Therefore, we are going to take their universal side to connect these two poets, who have a certain philosophic character, a fascinating individuality and a mastery of verse which provides them the skill for writing a concise and striking poetry.

Nevertheless,... which characteristics make their poetry so similar?

To begin with, we have to put forward some underlying remarks. The first one is that Ezra Pound was highly influenced by Dickinson's rhythm and poetic forms and, at the same time, Hugh MacDiarmid recognised to have a similarity and be influenced by Pound. Therefore, MacDiarmid may have received some of Dickinson's characteristics by means of Pound. And perhaps he even read some of Dickinson's work, because we cannot forget that with Eliot's fame, all the American classics were spread throughout Europe. Secondly, Dickinson was flowering at the time of the American Renaissance whilst MacDiarmid was the main figure of the Scottish Renaissance. This means that they were a turning point between tradition and innovation, and they sought for a new poetic style, although MacDiarmid presents a political concern.

In that search, MacDiarmid «began as a poet with both masculine and feminine sensitivity, and eventually allowed the masculine elements in himself to dominate his work (...) becoming less human than he once was (...) We miss in his later poetry a real tenderness, a real feminine love» (Crichton Smith, 1964: 135), traits that in his early poetry recall Dickinson's feminine touch. Nevertheless, the main meeting point is the sexless tone of their poetry, and the fact that they take sensibility to an extent by which every human being in every part of the world would feel affected.

In the same way, both poets possess a personal technique for transmitting beautiful, touching and shocking images by means of short and concise poems, that Edwin Morgan calls lyrical «miniatures» (7), as when Dickinson says: «Soft as the massacre of Suns / By Evening's Sabres slain» (Johnson, poem 1127). As we can see here, they have a mastery of wordiness that allows them to write poems of even two lines. We find some of these poems in MacDiarmid's «From the Scots Anthology» and «The Weapon» from *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930) or in *Stony Limits or other poems* in «Placenta previa, or The Case of Glasgow». In regard to Emily Dickinson, we find them dispersed all through her collected poems, a beautiful instance being: «To Whom the Mornings stand for Nights / What must the Midnights-be!» (Johnson, poem 1095).

There are different formal similarities between these two author's poetry. A first similarity is that most of these poems are constructed by means of independent quatrains (very typical of Dickinson) and ballad stanzas (that in Grieve are an influence from Thomas Hardy, his contemporary source). A second formal connection is their peculiar use of the dash as a punctuation mark, although it is much more numerous and characteristic in Emily Dickinson. One reason for this can be that, in the Victorian times, when Emily Dickinson wrote, the dash was the most used and abused punctuation mark. This attributes a neutrality to the dash that allows for personal interpretation. We can interpret that Emily Dickinson employed the dash as a way of providing meaningful silences between each of her thoughts, so that the reader could grasp and enjoy them. However, these dashes could also mean, and here is where the connection with MacDiarmid springs, that a dialogue was taking place. She was writing to the world, as was MacDiarmid. In general terms, Dickinson employed many more punctuation marks and sometimes MacDiarmid only employed the dash when he changed the topic or wanted to emphasise an idea he was going to introduce, although we cannot forget that the dash is a characteristic punctuation mark for Modernist authors as well -and we have already said before that Emily

Dickinson has arrived to be considered as a Modernist ahead of Modernism. We also find a common formal characteristic in the fact that they finish many of their short poems with an exclamatory mark, which gives more strength to the final and shocking effect of these poems. They also share the feature of using enumeration as a usual device.

A further relevant feature of their poetry is the spontaneity of their mode of writing. Hugh MacDiarmid recognised in an interview with Duncan Glenn that he did very little revision to his poems and that an instantaneous creation is «true of a large number of poets,» including himself (*The MacDiarmids*). This happened to Emily Dickinson as well, and it can be clearly observed in the fact that she wrote even in the back or inside of old envelopes, recipes and even in places in which there was only place for a single quatrain, which sometimes appeared written in a nearly unintelligible handwriting which seemed to have been written in the darkness. This could be due to the eye disease that Dickinson suffered towards the end of her life, but it could also be because she wrote them at night, when she was lying in bed trying to sleep and suddenly, like a bird, an idea crossed her mind and she felt the need to write it down. Therefore, she wrote her feelings and sensations as they came by, at the precise moment she felt them, she «jotted sentences as they occurred to her while she worked in the kitchen or garden (...) She grasped truth in moments of sudden intuition» (Chase, 1952: 23). She wrote poetry in an inductive way. However, Emily Dickinson's poetry remains more spontaneous and fresh than MacDiarmid's because, unlike his, her poems rarely have titles; they remain as they occurred to her, as spontaneous thoughts, reflections.

Nonetheless, in spite of their spontaneity, both poets chose the words they used in their poetry with maximum precision. Theirs is a poetry of words, as far as its main force resides in the choice of words, which they even looked up in the dictionary. In this way, their poetry derives from words that are exact and irreplaceable and show a real genius. Vocabulary is the key of their poetry. Therefore, the richness of the vocabulary they use is basic in order to contribute to the economy and intense brevity these poems present. They express complex ideas by means of a small bunch of words and leave the explanation hidden beyond them though present at the same time.

Also in reference to their poetic language, we have to say that MacDiarmid wrote some of his poems in synthetic Scots. He selected words in a way which could convey much more than an English explanation. He achieved a conciseness that is lost when translated into English. On the other side, Emily Dickinson did the same with English

by means of her mastery of ellipsis, creating a brief language that expresses traits that are lost when we try to explain these poems. We can say that MacDiarmid treated Scots as a living language and transmitted his enthusiasm for Scots through his poetry. Emily Dickinson also tried to create a living poetry by means of a very selected and peculiar English vocabulary. She used Latin words for ideas and Saxon words for perceptions. Dickinson enhanced the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic language, whereas MacDiarmid did the same with Scots.

We can contradict Dickinson when she says in her poem 1472 that «To see the Summer Sky / Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie- / True poems flee-» (Johnson, 623), because their poems can be defined as «True» poetry that lies in a book and is made up of «Word[s] over all, beautiful as the sky» (Nona, 1990: 54), as Walt Whitman's poem «Reconciliations» concludes. When one reads them, one feels deeply inside the greatness of Nature and Life. They have musicality and richness of feeling.

Most of MacDiarmid's and Dickinson's concise poems resemble the economical Japanese *haiku* or *tanka*² in: their ability to use natural scenery to give meaning to a human situation; their insight from suffering and the comfort they find in nature; their mastery of juxtaposition; the use of ellipsis; the association with the quiet pleasures of solitude; the independence of the thoughts they express; how their poems constitute small units which are superb works of art in themselves; their intensity; and how they achieve to transmit so many sensations with such a few words. Moreover, the origin of the *haiku* was a demand of freedom of expression, form and subjects, and that is what both MacDiarmid and Dickinson seek in their style.

However, MacDiarmid's poems are more «energetic, active poems» (Oxenhorn, 1984: 54). In his verse things happen, whereas in Dickinson's poetry there is more contemplation than action. However, we also find poems of meditation in MacDiarmid: «By Wauchopeside», «Whuchulls» and «Depth and the Chthonian Image». But we can also see that Dickinson's *verse is alive*, as she wanted it to be, and her poetry has an essential strong vitality.

This mixture of vitality and contemplation is typical of *haikais* as well, as it is also typical a tint of humour. MacDiarmid's poetry «has the

² The classical five-line *tanka* and the seventeenth-century *haiku*, of only seventeen syllables in three lines, are the traditional Japanese poetic forms. One of the most famous haikai poets is Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), who gave birth to a whole school of haikai authors.

effect of humour and yet conveys a kind of horror, which makes [his poetry] so original and so truly Scottish» (Glen, 1964: 87). We also have in Emily Dickinson the effect of humour, and we have to regard in relation to this that in her teens she gained among her contemporaries the reputation of an American humorist. Moreover, we also find in her poetry the mixture of a sweet and sour touch that emphasises the force of her poems. We see in their poems thus a fusion of sensibility and thought that «invoke[s] our tenderness but also ask[s] boldly for our judgement» (Welland, 1961: 58). This is due to the fact that they made an effort to understand their relation to the world so that their poetry would help us think about it.

We could define Emily Dickinson's flowerlike pieces of poetic writing pictured onto letter paper as *aphoristic haikai*, as far as she mixes the brevity of her poetry and the *haiku* characteristics with the usual employment of definitions, realistic thoughts and permanent aphoristic statements³. Dickinson's poems have an «aphoristic and apophthegmatic vocation which resembles the best epigrammatic tradition» (Ardanaz, 1987: 44), due to her detailed appreciations of nature which mingle with her moral sentiments and are expressed through delicate emotional perceptions, along with her understanding of the nature of love. All of this appears in the whole corpus of Dickinson's poetry. On the other hand, in MacDiarmid we find the aphoristic *haikai* forms in his short poetry, mainly his Scots lyrics in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Weep*, «Morning» being a clear instance found in the latter. At the same time, the longer poetry of MacDiarmid does not present a coherent structure but can be regarded as a succession of fragments or collection of lyrics, something which also occurs with Dickinson's longer poems, where each quatrain presents a different nature or subject matter. Apart from this, as we have said, in MacDiarmid's work we find the aphorisms in his longer poems, among which I would emphasise: «There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones»⁴ (from «On a Raised Beach») and

³ The term aphorism has many different definitions, and sometimes it is referred to as epigram, saying, refrain, or other similar terms. Therefore, we have to make clear that when we say in this paper that a poem has an aphoristic nature, we are taking as a reference the work by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (1916). It is a collection of touching pieces of poetic prose that transmit philosophical thoughts and reflections about the world (nature, God, love, human beings). They can be defined as literary aphorisms, not purely philosophic ones.

⁴ The meaning of this aphorism has to be interpreted in the context of the poem, the main interpretation being that nature is stronger than civilisation, and that the individual who is closer to nature is better than the corrupted civilised man.

«Clear thought is the quintessence of human life» (from «The Terrible Crystal» and «Once in a Cornish Garden»); or the echo of Franz Marc's aphorisms that we find in «The Diamond Boy».

Sometimes we cannot fully understand a piece of their poetry, as MacDiarmid himself recognises, but, in any case, it impacts us and makes us think. This is because most of their work is «a great experiment in the use of language to convey the incommunicable» (Welland, 1961: 73). Very often, therefore, the conciseness and beauty of the poem impact the reader but the meaning escapes. But we feel that what is said is so deep as what is not said. This happens even with their aphorisms, showing us that a good aphorism says more than a hundred words, recalls a thousand images, feelings, emotions, and memories. It puts us face to face with life and reaches our heart. We are not told what to think. We are just told to look. However, «these apparently simple poems often require and reward close reading» (Oxenhorn, 1984: 54). This is usually because the language employed is allusive, not abstract or indirect or vague, as it could seem. Dickinson wanted to achieve a skill in the use of language that avoided ambiguity and verbosity.

These poems are similar to William Blake in the way they combine words to represent images. At the same time, these three poets present «flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life» (Sewall, 1963: 10). They also share with Blake the idea that «Everything that lives is holy» and that is why they recreate such a great amount of Nature in their poetry. But these are not the only connections they have with Blake. The three of them show dissatisfaction with the reigning poetic tradition and seek new forms and techniques. Anecdotally, neither of them had a university training.

Regarding influences, one they share -and which can have much to do with the gnomic and epigrammatic nature of the poetry we are analysing- is the influence from the Bible. The Bible, and mainly the proverbs, was Dickinson's basic influence. Both authors seem to have learned from the Bible the mode of juxtaposing elemental concrete things with equally fundamental ideas and feelings. However, they introduce a novelty by achieving universality by means of reducing the Bible's expansive narrative to startlingly compact lyrics. In reference to this, a curious instance in MacDiarmid's first collected works, *Annals of the Five Senses*, is that he extracts quotations from different authors (Shakespeare, Blake...) and also includes some from the Bible.

Apart from this, we observe as a common characteristic between Dickinson and MacDiarmid the mystical and metaphysical nature of most of their poems, which is also characteristic of Japanese *haikai*. The main

trait that made of them mystic poets was their attitude towards nature, which seemed to them a more manifest and more beautiful evidence of God's Will than creeds and churches. They were deeply undergone by the pervasive influence of the rhythms of nature and, due to this, both authors took the imagery of Nature to convey their reflections upon Life and Death. In relation to the imagery, in Dickinson's poetry it usually comes from botany and zoology, whereas in MacDiarmid's poetry it comes from geology. Therefore, in both poets «metaphysical overtones arise naturally out of concrete physical descriptions» (Oxenhorn, 1984: 29), and, at the same time, we observe in their poetry axiomatic products of their reflections upon Life, Love, Death and God. They try to find the meaning of death, what is beyond death. Clear instances are MacDiarmid's «On a Raised Beach» and Dickinson's poem 1493: «Could that Sweet Darkness they dwell / Be once disclosed to us...» In relation to this subject matter of Life and Death, we find in both authors paradoxical instances in which they talk about Death through Life, as it occurs in MacDiarmid's «Farmer's Death», from *Sangschaw*, and Dickinson's poem 1767. We observe in both of them the contrast between the Life that remains and the memory of what has died, which are presented at the same time.

In these poets there is a recurrent concern with the nature of light. They can be defined in this respect as more close to Luminism than to Impressionism, concerning the fact that «if we say that Impressionism is the *objective* response to the *visual* sensation of light, then we can say that Luminism is the *poetic* response to the *felt* sensation» (Farr, 1992: 262). On the whole, we find a great deal of light in their poetry. In this sense David Daiches says about MacDiarmid's poetry that it is «an account of imagery largely of light of an intimate revelation of God and Eternity» (Daiches, 1964: 58), referring in concrete to «A Moment in Eternity». Eternity is a recurrent theme in both authors. Therefore, in the metaphysical level both Dickinson and MacDiarmid were very concerned with attitudes to time and eternity. For instance, in «Letter to Dostoevsky», in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, the juxtaposition between time and eternity, and locality and universality is clear. We also find in *Sangschaw* cosmic images and preoccupations.

In close relation to this, we see how in many of their poems they write about «Immortality». Most of Dickinson's poems, independently from their topic, have a background of her reflections about the possibility of Immortality.

The metaphysical tint springs again in Dickinson's work in the way she mixes Beauty and Truth through poetry. Concerning this, it is remarkable that both poets praise Beauty, which they consider an eternal

thing. Beauty is a recurrent topic in their poems. For instance, MacDiarmid says in «On a Raised Beach»: «I will have nothing interposed / Between my sensitiveness and the barren but *beautiful* reality;» Dickinson says that «Beauty is Infinity» (Johnson, poem 1474). In this sense, they consider that to be a poet means to transmit Truth and Beauty with words. Moreover, MacDiarmid gave also great importance to Truth and Understanding in his poetry, and so did Dickinson, as we can see in the following quotation: «... Truth, outlasts the Sun-» (Johnson, poem 1455).

Memories and oblivion are also a recurrent topic. In MacDiarmid the topic of Oblivion has much to do with the history of Scotland, as we see for instance in «Letter to Dostoevsky», whereas in Dickinson it is more a metaphysical topic. When we read MacDiarmid's poetry dealing with Oblivion we feel the rage that he intends to transmit by the fact that the betrayal that his people has suffered in history can be forgotten, whereas when we read Dickinson's poetry our heart sighs with the universal sad feeling of Oblivion she conveys.

The simplicity with which they achieve to deal with such complicated subjects is basic for the style of their poetry. They usually do it by means of the description of familiar things and employing homely terms. They discover «drama in ordinary things» (Oxenhorn, 1984: 54). In relation to this, in the little poem by MacDiarmid «Country Life», great because of its brevity and simplicity, the contrast between the life of nature outside and the homely domestic interior appears. This theme of interior versus exterior is an old Scottish tradition used in a new way by Grieve, as far as he suggests things without developing them, technique that Dickinson also employs by playing with connotations. Moreover, this subject matter is a clear reflection of Dickinson's life and poetry: she wrote about the life of nature outside from her homely domestic interior. From her solitude.

Regarding the idea of solitude, Dickinson lived in her lonely world and she found her society among her poems, flowers and natural phenomena in her surroundings. She preferred them to human beings. This seemed to be also one of MacDiarmid's aspirations, as far as in «On a Raised Beach» he says: «Tho' these stones have more differences in colour, shape and size / Than most men to my eyes-» and also in «By Wauchopeside» when he writes: «There's mair in birds than men ha'e faddomed yet.» In spite of this, Dickinson concentrated more on Nature whereas MacDiarmid concentrated more on Man, as we can see in «The Bonnie Broukit Bairn» and «Empty Vessel». Moreover, «the burden of MacDiarmid's imagination in his later work can be found where he writes about exclusiveness and not where he writes about involvement with humanity (...) It is in this kind of conscious loneliness where MacDiarmid

is most imaginatively convincing» (Crichton Smith, 1964: 132). We cannot forget that he had a productive «exile» period in Whalsay in the Shetlands, and that he thought that «Great work cannot be combined with surrender to the crowd», what is confirmed if we regard Dickinson's life and work.

As a final observation, let us say that both poets reflect to a certain extent the philosophy of Horace's *carpe diem* in the way it appears in the contemporary film *Dead Poets Society*: a *carpe diem* united to nonconformism and literature. They share the philosophy of improving life through poetry. They believe that words and ideas can change the world, and, in fact, both of them talk about poetry itself, about their poetry, about what they seek in poetry. MacDiarmid aims at rising people, «... at awakening the masses of men to full lives» (Glen, 1964: 157). He is more explicit and active. However, Dickinson does this in a sharper way: her poetry makes you grasp life, feel the necessity to «seize the day». We have to consider her as «the heir of romantic tradition» and take into account that in spite of her seclusion, her poetry is rich with profound and varied experience. Moreover, our poetess stated through many of her poems that she preferred earth to heaven. Both poets share the conviction of the frugality of life, which makes them accept death as part of the natural order and try to enjoy life as it comes. This is one of the main topics of MacDiarmid's «On a Raised Beach», in which he even writes: «Let us not be afraid to die». On the other hand, Emily Dickinson once said: «Are you certain there is another life?» Therefore, her concern about the existence of death and the search for immortality makes *carpe diem* spring. However, Dickinson enjoyed a recluse *carpe diem*. She preferred her inner life to the outer world and was happy in her intimacy. In her seclusion she found her freedom. She, as her poetry, was a steady paradox reflected in the following aphorism written by Goethe: «There is no safer way of escaping from the world than art, and art is also the safest way of fusing with it» (163). Therefore, we see how «when Dickinson went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it» (Tate, 1932: 20).

The force of these poems makes one feel the need to open the window and look at nature, to breath fresh air and tell to the world: «In spite of all, I love you!» This seems to be the deeper feeling of these two poets, although for Dickinson the world meant Life and Poetry, whereas in MacDiarmid's case it was Scotland and Poetry. Through her poetry, the *moonlight* makes us see the world in a mystic and rewarding way, projecting very different shadows that we can interpret from a personal point of view, whereas the *thistle* with his puzzling beauty and nature,

his duality and opposing qualities, personifies Scotland and tries to reaffirm his identity in a lyric, touching and universal way.

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