

Forms of Culture in Hugh MacDiarmid's 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa'^[1]

Michael Whitworth

The debate concerning the relation of high to low culture, and the larger debate concerning the relation of culture to society was particularly vigorous in the early 1930s. While its roots can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century, as they are in Raymond Williams's classic study, *Culture and Society*, the early 1930s saw the publication of several significant texts: F. R. Leavis's *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), and, co-authored with Denys Thompson, his *Culture and Environment* (1933); Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); and the first issue of *Scrutiny*, which appeared in 1932. Hugh MacDiarmid was aware of the debate, and contributed to it directly in his prose and more obliquely in his poetry, including 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa' (hereafter 'Etika'), which first appeared in *Stony Limits and Other Poems* (1934). For MacDiarmid, the most significant questions about culture were how elite art forms could engage a mass audience without losing their value as art, how increased leisure in the 'leisure state' would affect culture, and what happens to aesthetic values in an era of mass production. MacDiarmid was certainly aware of the *Scrutiny* school of criticism: he reviewed Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) in September 1932, and later incorporated several lines from it in 'On a Raised Beach'.^[2] He was also aware of the debate about how the rhythm of life might be affected by growing mechanisation. In the journal *Purpose*, to which MacDiarmid contributed in 1930, one writer remarked on the need for life to maintain a 'human rhythm' in an era of 'accelerated' events.^[3] F. R. Leavis expressed the opinion that man should be governed by the 'seasonal rhythm' of his relation to his environment.^[4] In the *New English Weekly*, in an article that took *Fiction and the Reading Public* as its starting point, H. J. Travers opined that 'We cannot expect to evolve a culture without leisure. Leisure pre-supposes a self-determined rhythm of life, and its test is a capacity for solitude'. Few individuals, however, could stand the test: 'Our life-rhythm is determined by the machines'.^[5] MacDiarmid read Travers's article, and, as I have shown elsewhere, incorporated these lines into 'On a Raised Beach'.^[6] 'Etika' focuses more specifically on cultural production in the era of the culture industry and of

mechanical reproduction; as these phrases suggest, in my reading of ‘Etika’, MacDiarmid’s thinking anticipates that of Theodor Adorno. The present article is also concerned to show how MacDiarmid builds the poem by selectively plagiarising prose sources. MacDiarmid’s selection creates a pessimistic vision of the present, while holding out hope for a cultural future in which individual genius can contribute to a unified culture without being compromised.

The debate concerning high and low culture, and the potentially limiting effects of each, overlapped with one of MacDiarmid’s longer-established concerns, the expansion of human consciousness. The idea that the purpose of art was the expansion of human consciousness, implicit in ‘The Assault on Humanism’ (1923), was more explicitly articulated in ‘Art and the Unknown’ (1926).^[7] Set in contrast to the idea of ‘expansion’ is that of the ‘short-circuiting’ of human consciousness. Both ideas appear in MacDiarmid’s 1932 review of F. R. Leavis’s *New Bearings in English Poetry*; the idea of the expansion of consciousness informs his endorsement of Leavis’s remark that ‘Poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time’.^[8] The idea appears more explicitly when MacDiarmid considers Leavis’s idea that ‘mass culture’ is destroying the capacity to read poetry. Leavis remarks that ‘The ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to be able to read poetry. In self-defence amid the perpetual avalanche of print he has had to acquire reading habits that incapacitate him when the signals for unaccustomed and subtle responses present themselves’.^[9] Echoing Leavis’s physiological language of signals and responses, MacDiarmid concurs that ‘the short-circuiting of human consciousness’ is a matter of ‘urgent concern’.^[10]

In ‘Etika’, MacDiarmid borrows from texts about two popular cultural forms, the cinema and the theatre, one in the ascendant, the other suffering from its competition. The possibility that the poem borrowed from a prose source was first raised by W. N. Herbert, who suggested that the lines ‘one step in a *Kino* [...] 3/4 *Takt*’ (CP, I, 409) might derive from a film review.^[11] In fact a significant section of the poem derives from a critical survey of the career of the German director G. W. Pabst, written by the American Marxist film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, and published in *Hound and Horn*.^[12] The poem also borrows extensively from three other prose sources, two of them also articles in *Hound and Horn*. One of the articles concerns the Yiddish theatre of New York, while the other concerns performances by the Indian dance troupe and musicians working with Uday Shan-kar.^[13] The third source is a critical text on Anton Chekhov, from which MacDiarmid borrows both phrases from Chekhov’s notebooks and phrases from the critic. The sources for ‘Etika’ range across many different art forms and are international in scope. However, MacDiarmid’s compositional process is highly selective, sometimes allowing glimpses of the territorial diversity of the sources, but at other times concealing them.

The date of the last of MacDiarmid's sources, in *Hound and Horn* for 'January-March 1933', gives a broad indication of the earliest possible date of composition of the poem.[\[14\]](#) However, it appears that the poem was given a title only shortly before MacDiarmid sent *Stony Limits* to its publishers. *Etika Preobrazhennogo Erosa* was a work by the exiled Russian philosopher Boris Petrovich Vysheslavtzev (1877-1954), published in Paris in 1931. It is almost certain that MacDiarmid knew of the work only through an article by Nathalie Duddington that appeared in *The New Atlantis* in January 1934; MacDiarmid's 'Genethliacon for the New World Order' appeared in the same issue.[\[15\]](#) In Duddington's review the second word of Vysheslavtzev's title is mistakenly given as 'Preobrazhennavo', and MacDiarmid followed her error. Duddington's translation of the title was 'Ethics of the Transfigured Eros'; Vysheslavtzev's philosophy, or Duddington's account of it, is relevant primarily to the poem's references to spiritual aspiration and the sublimation of the self in a larger force.

The poem has attracted little more than passing comment from critics, with the majority overlooking its interest in cinema, and focusing instead on class. For Gish, it is one of a group of shorter philosophical poems; she quotes only the lines about coming closer to the working classes (CP, I, 407). Oxenhorn also focuses on class, quoting lines from the opening paragraph (II.9-13) about the intelligentsia winning up to the level of the proletariat. He too groups it with the shorter philosophical poems, which, by contrast with 'On a Raised Beach', he views as 'pedantic' and 'brittle'. Bold discusses the more visionary aspect of class consciousness, focussing on the lines in which the narrator leads up the mountain to the 'great summit' (CP, I, 410). Herbert, the only critic to mention the cinema, is concerned more with technical questions, 'Etika' being one of the poems in which MacDiarmid begins to introduce found personae and 'found material'.[\[16\]](#) While it is true that the poem lacks the verbal fireworks that make the synthetic English poems so distinctive, and while it must be conceded that MacDiarmid's invocation of the cultural superiority of Russia is complacent, nevertheless, there is much more to the poem than the issue of being at one with the working classes. As in many of MacDiarmid's poems, the argument is digressive: it begins with the question of how the intelligentsia might unite with the working classes, but moves on, first to the question of how cinematic art can represent the working classes honestly and profoundly, without superficial technique overpowering the content; this leads to the next question, focussed on the Horatian tag 'exegi monumentum aere perennius', of the durability of art; finally, the poem moves to its visionary invocation of Russia, where MacDiarmid believes the individual to have been merged into the larger process or rhythm.

The poem's opening paragraph presents several puzzles:

Miseducated and more articulate,
Sensitised by what numbs their fate
And raised up by what keeps them down,
Only by the severest intellectual discipline
Can one of the bourgeois intelligentsia win
Up to the level of the proletariat [...] (CP, I, 407)

There is a grammatical ambiguity: as ‘more articulate’ clearly invokes comparison with ‘the proletariat’, it would be possible to read ‘their fate’ and ‘them’ as referring to the working classes. The opening sentences would then suggest that the same agent sensitises the intelligentsia and numbs the proletariat. Alternatively, ‘their’ and ‘them’ might refer only to the intelligentsia, in which case the poem is presenting a paradox: how can the same agent work such diverse effects? I prefer the second of these two readings, but the grammatical ambiguity enacts one of the poem’s larger questions: how much separates the intelligentsia from the proletariat? Are the intelligentsia really as superior in their sensitivity as they have been brought up to believe? More important than the grammatical puzzle is the identity of the agent which both sensitizes and numbs. I would suggest that the agent is culture, and that the paradoxes may be resolved by consideration of some of its internal divisions.

One might identify the sensitising agent with high culture, and the numbing agent with mass culture. Certainly there is much in the rest of the poem to encourage this reading. However, ‘culture’ can be divided in other ways. In a contemporaneous essay, MacDiarmid suggests that the education of the masses is hindered by the existence of ‘a parasitical “interpreting class”’ which talks down to the working classes. Such cultural interpreters ‘insist that the level of utterance should be that of popular understanding, and jeer at what is not expressed in the jargon of the man-in-the-street’; it is not the producers of difficult works of art who are ‘the enemies of the people’, but the interpreting class; ‘what their attitude amounts to is “keeping the people in their place”, stereotyping their stupidity’. [17] In this reading, ‘they’ are sensitised by works of art themselves, but numbed by the interpreting class. MacDiarmid views the interpreting class as part of a larger ‘socio-economic-politico-journalistic’ conspiracy to prevent mass education. The ‘journalistic’ component is significant: mass culture in the form of journalism interposes itself between human subjects and the world, filtering experience, preventing genuinely new thought.

MacDiarmid’s borrowings from Potamkin begin in the poem’s second paragraph. Although they are extensive, providing about 150 of the poem’s words, they are, when measured against Potamkin’s essay of about 5000 words, selective. It should be emphasised that there is no evidence that MacDiarmid was familiar with the films discussed in the article. I have translated

their titles for the sake of convenience – Potamkin himself sometimes gives German titles, sometimes English ones – but I have not summarised their contents, on the grounds that such summaries would be superfluous. MacDiarmid engaged with the idea of film through Potamkin's critical discourse.

Potamkin presents Pabst as a director divided between a social and ethical sense and an aesthetic one: the former was most prominent in *Westfront 1918* and in *Kameradschaft* ('Comradeship' [1931]), while the latter tended to dominate *Pandora's Box*. Potamkin distrusts not only the glossy surface of some of Pabst's films, but also the derivative quality of *Pandora's Box*, and the allure of psychological drama. Through selective quotation, MacDiarmid emphasises Potamkin's criticisms, while neglecting his praise for the 'ethical' films, *Kameradschaft* above all. MacDiarmid is interested, like Adorno, in the triumph of facile technique in the culture industry. MacDiarmid's borrowings begin tentatively. Potamkin writes in his opening paragraph of the mood of 'self-pity' that overtook the petty-bourgeois class in Germany after 1918, and sees Pabst's first film, *Die freudlose Gasse* ('Joyless Street' [1925]), as arising from this social and cultural context: from these paragraphs emerge MacDiarmid's lines '*Die freudlose Gasse*, a simplistic cry / Swimming in petty-bourgeois self-pity'. Potamkin views Pabst's early period as an apprenticeship in which he 'was gaining his cinema knowledge': in phrases which MacDiarmid borrows almost unaltered, Potamkin describes Pabst as having 'worked within the double tendency of the German *lichtspiel* toward the real, away from the real' (Potamkin 294). The following sentence, which MacDiarmid does not explicitly use, is also of interest: Potamkin blames 'the dominant control' in Germany (meaning by 'control' something like 'die Kontrolle' in the sense of surveillance) and 'the straitjacketed studio-mind' for turning the 'energies' of *Die freudlose Gasse* into "ingratiating virtuosities", billows and columns of light, engineering pomposities architectural shells, remarkable but vain'. The idea that works of art might be distorted or adulterated by forces beyond the artist's control was one that interested MacDiarmid in 'Problems of Poetry To-Day' and elsewhere, particularly with regard to mass culture.

In his next paragraph, Potamkin examines Pabst's turn towards a more psychological drama, first in *Geheimnisse einer Seele* ('Secrets of a Soul' [1926]), then *Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney* ('The Love of Jeanne Ney' [1927]), *Abwege* ('Crisis' [1928]), and *Die Büchse der Pandora* ('Pandora's Box' [1929]). Potamkin presents the German middle classes at the time as self-indulgent and decadent, 'whirlpooling the individualized neuroses that flattered and satisfied the middle class'. Pabst himself had been 'ricocheted into this vortex' (Potamkin 295). From this passage come MacDiarmid's lines 'Routines of literary closets, Abwege, ricochettings / Into vortices of pseudo-psychologisings' (CP, I, 408). The next lines come from Potamkin's dissection of the failings of *Pandora's Box*, which he attributes in part to Pabst's technique having developed beyond the

demands of his material, and in part to Pabst's literary sources lacking depth. His sources 'were not profound relationships but only exhibits, more effete than Pabst's earlier ones and therefore more treacherous: they stop Pabst at the surface of his films, entice him to exploits chic, pseudo-intellectual, seeming so subtle yet really saying nothing' (Potamkin 296). This argument MacDiarmid condenses into 'Not profound relationships but only exhibits, / Chic, treacherous, effete' (CP, I, 408). The shift of register which occurs when MacDiarmid's speaker's expresses his exasperation with fetishised technique – 'For Christ sake let us cease being subtile' – is all MacDiarmid's own, but the archaic spelling of 'subtle' derives from something later in Potamkin's article.

In his next paragraph, Potamkin considers H.D.'s comparison of *Die freudlose Gasse* with the work of the Russian director Kuleshov.^[18] H.D. had preferred Pabst because, in her words, he took 'the human mind as far as it can go', while the Russian took the spirit '*further* than it can go'. Potamkin comments that 'Pabst would not subscribe to her fear of the maximum'. In the poem, these lines serve to introduce the theme of the journey of the spirit towards the 'great summit' (CP, I, 410). MacDiarmid transforms them into the following:

Fear of the maximum? Oh, ho!
You are no way near it.
It won't serve to take the human mind
Just as far as it can go.
You must take the spirit
Further . . . (CP, I, 408).

MacDiarmid's transformation of the prose source eliminates the explicit comparison between the German and the Russian director, with the result that the appearance of Russia in the poem some paragraphs later is unexpected.

The theme of the 'maximum' at this point also suggests Vysheslavtzev's philosophy. In Duddington's account, Vysheslavtzev was concerned with 'the insufficiency of the "ethics of the law".^[19] A morality based on 'prohibitions and imperatives' might alter a man's conduct, but it could never alter his heart. She goes on to explain: 'It is only through the love of the moral ideal, conceived not as an abstract ideal but as a living Being embodying the fulness of perfection, that human nature can be sublimated, and its creative activities released in the service of the Highest.' In practice, 'the moral regeneration of man consists in raising this "Eros" from the lower to the higher range of values, until the whole of our nature is transfigured and sanctified.' Of course, at

this point in the poem, there is no hint of Vysheslavtzev's vocabulary of transcendence, but the reference to spiritual aspiration prepares the ground for the poem's concluding section.

MacDiarmid's next verse paragraph borrows more heavily than any other from Potamkin's essay. Potamkin attributes a change in Pabst's work to his having seen Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion and Death of Joan of Arc* (1928). In this film he found 'a maximum of intensity of conscience and intensiveness of treatment'. To summarise the change, Potamkin resorts to a distinctive metaphorical language which transforms the formal properties of film into a quite different register: 'The artist of keen nerve-ends could no longer yield to his periphery, to topographies that gave neither the lay of the land nor its consistency'. These lines entered the poem almost unchanged. Potamkin argues that the source for *Pandora's Box* was already too far removed from reality to be used as a source for a film, being 'a network of negotiations and not the experience of people'; in consequence the film consisted of 'figures of speech stalking as men and women' (Potamkin 297). In the conclusion to the paragraph, Potamkin creates another striking metaphor for the fault in Pabst's film art: *Pandora's Box* is 'skin drawn over a hollow body, and, though tantalizing contours are etched on the parchment, they are ephemera, illusive momentarily' (Potamkin 298). This paragraph of the essay yields the first six lines of MacDiarmid's verse paragraph:

The artist of keen nerve-ends
Can no longer yield to his periphery;
To a topography that gives neither the lie of the land
Nor its consistency, where figures of speech
Go stalking as men and women, skins drawn
Over hollow bodies, ephemera, momentarily illusive. (*CP*, I, 408)

Within the poem, the phrase 'skins drawn / Over hollow bodies' refers back to the earlier phrase about producers trying to 'get under the skin', but revitalizes the clichéd phrase by elaborating it. Potamkin goes on to describe how Pabst overcame the fetishisation of technique, how he 'broke through this aura'. In *Westfront 1918*, 'he had produced the least showman-like of war-films, a picture intensive in its character-convergence, sharply attenuated in its character-relations, not spreading like valiant steam into an ominous yet compelling universe' (Potamkin 298).

MacDiarmid's main transformation is to recast Potamkin's perfect tense as a series of imperatives:

He must break through that aura—he must give
Intensive character-convergence, make outstand
Character-relations that do not merely spread

Like valiant steam into an ominous but compelling world,
And stop being just a bloody showman
Of guilt or innocence stuffed with straw (CP, I, 408)

While, in the fifth line, ‘showman’ derives from Potamkin, the shift into the demotic register of the rest of the line is apparently MacDiarmid’s invention; the six lines acquire an urgency that was not to be found in the original essay. ‘Stuffed with straw’ might suggest Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’, but derives from a later paragraph in Potamkin’s essay. The paragraph consists mostly of praise for Pabst’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (known in English as ‘The Beggar’s Opera’ [1931]), and of its maturity and ‘bold figures’; MacDiarmid however, picks out the one phrase that makes a contrast with the artificial characters of the earlier films, ‘merely guilt or innocence stuffed with straw’ (Potamkin 299).

Potamkin goes on to consider *Kameradschaft* in some detail, but MacDiarmid uses only a very few words from this section of the essay, and these are from a phrase that criticises the prevailing tendency of German cinema. Pabst, Potamkin remarks, ‘is always close to the ethical fiber of the event, and from this steadfastness emanates the artistry—a significant development in Pabst and the German *kino*, sluggish amidst lost-glory and bockbier films set to goosestep measures and 3/4 *takt*’ (Potamkin 302). Potamkin concludes his account of *Kameradschaft* in the following paragraph, remarking that the film, ‘because it re-establishes the cinema on the firm ground of the concrete record of an event of mass-reference, and that outside the land of the proletarian rule’, is ‘of mighty significance’. He goes on in the following paragraph to return to H.D.’s phrase about ‘the maximum’, and asks whether there will be ‘a step beyond this maximum’. He compares Pabst favourably to Erich Pommer, suggesting that they represent the two poles of contemporary German cinema, and that around Pommer will gather ‘the ingenious composers of sophisticated *kino-doggerel*’, while around Pabst will gather ‘the poets’. Somewhere between the two he places Leontine Sagan, whose *Mädchen in Uniform* (‘Girls in Uniform’ [1931]) had been widely praised. The phrase about a ‘step beyond [the] maximum’ provides the framework for MacDiarmid’s last significant borrowing from Potamkin:

That is the way – one step in a *Kino*
Sluggish amid jingo lost-glory and *Bockbier* films,
Set to goosestep measures and 3/4 *Takt*;
One step at least on grounds of mass-reference,
Outside the land of proletarian rule at that!;
All the difference between Pabst and Pommer;

Between an artist and the ingenious composers
Of sophisticated *Kino*-doggerel. (CP, I, 409).

It is possible that ‘sincere’ in ‘No matter how “sincere” the creative act’ also quotes Potamkin’s description of Sagan as ‘sincere but cautious’, but no other words in this or the adjacent lines obviously derive from Potamkin. At this point MacDiarmid begins to ask questions which dismantle the various distinctions accumulated along the way: all artistic facts become ‘a sop to Cerberus’.

MacDiarmid extracts from Potamkin’s prose a distinctive vocabulary of cinema-critique, composed both of technical jargon such as ‘character-convergence’ and ‘mass-reference’, and of more vivid and individual tropes such as topography and skin. The accumulation of this vocabulary suggests that cinema can and should be taken seriously as a medium, and that it is possible to distinguish between a superficial cinema and one which searches for the truth. However, the poem accumulates a vocabulary consisting largely of negative judgements and gives little clue as to how the truth might be reached; Potamkin’s article contained a quite different balance. MacDiarmid’s selective reading of Potamkin builds an argument in which cinema consists largely of showmanship. The poem’s imperatives suggest that the full potential of cinema still lay in the future, and had not already been achieved.

The concept of rhythm, introduced through the reference of ‘goosestep measures’, is a theme which provides continuity between the sections adapted from Potamkin and the later paragraphs. It also relates the poem to the wider cultural debate about leisure: the choice between the machine age and leisure was often presented in terms of a choice between mechanical and organic rhythms. Cinema was often criticised not for its rhythm as such, but for the related problem of its predetermined tempo: whereas the reader can choose the pace of his or her reading, the cinema-goer cannot alter the pace of the cinematic experience. As one reviewer of Pudovkin’s *On Film Technique* had written, ‘Speed is the desire of an industrial age, and the glittering, rapid world of the cinema screen, ever keeping time with the running strip of celluloid, is an expression of that desire. All is quickened upon the screen, nothing is prolonged save that ultimate “close-up” kiss [...].[\[20\]](#) It is notable that, in one of his few other verse references to cinema, in an epic simile in ‘The Progress of Poetry’, MacDiarmid singles out the moment where the technology of cinema breaks down, and the audience is freed from the predetermined tempo:

as when a film unexpectedly stops running
And dynamic significance is lost and one sees instead

A sharp static beauty and feels after all it is sometimes grand
To look long and intently at one thing at a time (*CP*, I, 456)

Although tempo is not identical to rhythm, those who distrusted the cinema as a medium of mass culture were opposed the authoritarian implications of a predetermined and high tempo and mechanical rhythm. The phrase ‘goosestep measures’ encompasses both.

The tone of ‘Etika’ changes with the conclusion of the section derived from Potamkin. The rhetorical questions suggest that the artist’s freedom is limited, and that the ultimate fate of ‘monuments more lasting than brass’ is to be thrown on the scrap heap. The passage is obscure in several ways:

Yet what
Is this and every such artistic fact
No matter how “sincere” the creative act
But a sop to Cerberus? the “cultural compulsives”
At work on “our fellow travellers”? Rather nods from Homer
Than such kitsch. (*CP*, I, 409)

Surprisingly, given the extent of the plagiarism up to this point, MacDiarmid places key phrases in quotation marks. It is possible that he derived ‘cultural compulsives’ and ‘our fellow travellers’ from the *New English Weekly*, specifically from an article by Gorham Munson and letter in response. The former phrase came from the Marxist critic V. F. Calverton, and referred to those cultural conventions which are beyond an author’s control.[\[21\]](#) Though MacDiarmid read the *New English Weekly* regularly, and borrowed from it in other poems, these sources do little to clarify the passage.[\[22\]](#) MacDiarmid’s use of quotation marks is the most significant fact: neither liberal-individualist ideas of ‘sincerity’ nor Marxist ideas of cultural determinism are adequate to the kind of cinema he wants, or to the philosophy of creativity that he wishes to advance.

The following paragraph, ‘Let us look elsewhere’ (II.93-114), turns to a new source, Moe Bragin’s ‘Obituary’ for Jewish Art Theatre, which had appeared in the *Hound and Horn* in 1932. If it was unlikely that MacDiarmid knew Pabst’s films, it is still more improbable, geographically and linguistically, that he knew the plays to which Bragin refers. Once again, in what follows I have restricted my account to the information available to MacDiarmid in his prose source.

Bragin begins by contrasting the current state of American Jewish culture with the situation in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, when there had been a revival of Yiddish culture.

'That was ten years ago', he reflects; 'All seems clinkers now, with a few of that bewildered generation still poking in the ash'. Some, he remarks, have gone to Palestine, while others have joined 'the Left'; 'the rest have lost whatever idealism they had – a pathological flabbiness in its place pointing nowhere after the prolonged aching priapism' (Bragin 283). MacDiarmid's more colloquial phrases often appear to be his own interpolations: this is the case with the 'bloody' showman earlier in the poem, and again here when he substitutes 'folk' for Bragin's 'generation'; but 'clinkers' comes directly from Bragin. The deletion, at this point, of any clear reference to Jewish culture means that the idealism of post-war Jewish culture becomes MacDiarmid's less culturally specific 'more purposeful existence'; in any case MacDiarmid sees this existence as an illusion, a cog in the larger 'machine'.

Bragin, having set the scene, turns to explain the decline in Yiddish theatre. He identifies three main causes: competition with the 'talkies'; the decline of the Yiddish language in America; and the influence of the director Maurice Schwartz. Schwartz had recognised the vigour and richness of the Yiddish theatre tradition, but had been unsympathetic in his attitude towards it: he 'tried to play each of the various stops on the Jewish flute' (Bragin 285). In adapting this phrase, MacDiarmid again generalises the situation, making the 'Jewish' flute 'old-fashioned' instead. Schwartz's vulgarisation and simplification of a rich tradition comes to stand for any form of culturally exhausted enterprise. 'As well read novels, or newspapers even, or Hansard; / Take Ramsay MacDonald seriously, or go to church' interpolates MacDiarmid, giving Bragin's words a specifically British field of reference.

However, when he came to the paragraph in which Bragin surveys Schwartz's failings, MacDiarmid did not remove the specific cultural pointers; so deeply embedded were they in the prose, it would have been impossible to try. Bragin wrote thus:

In "Jew Suss" we find him [Maurice Schwartz] bogged deep in historical treacle and onion tears. Sensationalism and downright vulgarity followed as in "Uncle Moses." The Uncle shows off the rich apartment to the daughter of the lantsman who, though she loathes the suits manufacturer, has become betrothed to him for the sake of her poor parents. We get the scene in the pokey bedroom, the red light symbolical, Moses sweetishly seductive, the whole timing prolonged tortuously when the episode had no purpose in itself. Here the whole preparation delayed as if to bring us all to the climax at the same stroke. The atmosphere as of a stag party with the horn soon to be brought into play. The curtain drops. We shudder, seeing, as if staring unblinkingly at a "mystic photo", painted on the proscenium, on the walls, on the faces of the audience, the poor

lamb being tugged. Even with this, fewer coppers rang in the register. So Mr Schwartz forced down our throats wrenched cheapish humor. An instance: the scene in “Stempanyoo” where the two sons of the rich Jew, the poretz, quarrel and spit into one another’s faces and into the faces of the other characters in the room. (Bragin 286)

Before drawing on this passage, MacDiarmid borrows from another which appears later in the essay. Bragin contrasts Schwartz’s company with the Habima players, remarking that the latter ‘could never have leaned on the crutch of “Yiddishkeit.”’ He also reports that, at a dinner Schwarz gave in honour of the Habima Players, one of them called Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Company ‘a bunch of hams and shysters’ (Bragin 287). These phrases yield MacDiarmid’s bridge: ‘Bunches of hams and shysters, / With all the fat thumb business / And a Yiddishkeit crutch’ (*CP*, I, 410). MacDiarmid then selects from the longer passage to produce

In Jew Süss, *Stempanyov* [sic], *Uncle Moses*
Sweetishly seductive, the poky bedroom, the symbolical red light,
Till when the curtain drops we shudder, seeing,
As if staring unblinkingly
At a “mystic photo” painted on the proscenium,
On the walls, on the faces of the audience,
The poor lamb being tugged. (*CP*, I, 410).

Whereas Bragin had differentiated between the artistically vibrant Jewish theatre tradition represented by the Habima Playerrs and the commercialised and derivative one represented by Schwartz, MacDiarmid’s recontextualisation of Bragin’s phrases does not allow any hope for the future to emerge from Jewish theatre. MacDiarmid makes the scene in *Uncle Moses* represent the prostitution of theatre to powerful financial interests, an appropriative reading that Bragin had only hinted at. Were this paragraph treated in isolation, there might appear to be an anti-semitic undercurrent to MacDiarmid’s reshaping of Bragin: the theatre becomes a shady business indistinguishable from pornographic entertainment and prostitution.[\[23\]](#) Certainly, in a limited sense of the word, his account of Jewish theatre is prejudiced: being entirely derived from Bragin, it relates to plays that MacDiarmid could not have seen performed. However, though MacDiarmid’s use of Bragin is undeniably selective, it is no more so than his use of Potamkin, which produced a similarly one-sided picture of G. W. Pabst.

The paragraph contains several pointers to MacDiarmid’s ideas about culture. The first and most obvious is the reference to the ‘turnbuckles’ that hold ‘us’ in ‘the machine: although MacDiarmid

had remained detached from the concept of the ‘cultural compulsive’, the image of society presented here is unambiguously deterministic. The concluding images of the theatre audience also imply a deterministic view. Although the meaning of the phrase ‘mystic photo’ remains obscure, the rest of the passage implies that it was a device which left a retinal after-image. As such, it is a powerful image for the ability of even the most disposable cultural forms to invade and alter consciousness.

The final two paragraphs of ‘Etika’, though still oratorical, are more balanced and discriminating, and, as verse, move more fluently. It seems possible that the description of the mountains (ll.118-30) is indebted to a review or discussion of a film about mountaineering – several such films were in circulation by 1933 – but, if so, no source has been identified. Although the transition to the three more abstract lines that conclude the paragraph is abrupt, these lines summarise an important idea for MacDiarmid: the proletariat wish to become bourgeois only because they have been ‘half-wakened’ (l.133), and have been kept in their place by the ‘interpreting class’; a full awakening would allow the proletariat fully to become themselves.

The first lines of the final paragraph appear to break with the mountain imagery, interpreting the state of attaining the ‘great summit’ as being the attainment of a form of harmony:

This is the music of humanity
Here ‘where everything is forgiven
And it would be impossible not to forgive’; (*CP*, I, 410)

However, later in the paragraph the ‘outwelling of light’ which moves ‘upwards within itself’ continues the imagery of ascent, though transforming it into a more abstract form. Moreover, a submerged connection to the mountain scene may be found in one of MacDiarmid’s sources. Anton Chekhov had written in his notebooks:

Essentially all this is crude and meaningless, and romantic love appears as meaningless as an avalanche which involuntarily rolls down a mountain and overwhelms people. But when one listens to music, all this is—that some people lie in their graves and sleep, and that one woman is alive and, grey-haired, is now sitting in a box in the theatre, seems quiet and majestic, and the avalanche no longer meaningless, since in nature everything has a meaning. And everything is forgiven, and it would be strange not to forgive.[\[24\]](#)

While the phrase 'the music of humanity' establishes the most important theme of the final paragraph, the source text, once recognised, enriches the theme of engulfment and self-obliteration, and connects it to the mountain imagery.

MacDiarmid's source was not the Hogarth Press's 1921 edition of Chekhov's notebooks, but a critical study of Chekhov by W. A. Gerhardi. Commenting on Chekhov's lines, Gerhardi remarks upon the 'high indifference of nature to the ultimate importance of our ego'; the 'justification of all life in the balance of obliteration; mercy and stability in the ultimate release of the individual soul; and forgiveness in the thought that eventually no individual deed will matter individually'.[\[25\]](#) Gerhardi's remarks are incorporated with very little change into the five lines running from 'Justification of all life' to 'Eventually matters individually'.

The theme of music, derived from Chekhov, develops the earlier reference to the mechanical and authoritarian rhythms of mass culture, films 'Set to goosestep measures and 3/4 *Takt*', and, more broadly, connects the poem to the wider debate about rhythm in relation to leisure in the 'machine age'. Unlike the 'self-determined rhythm of life' which H. J. Travers had decreed as a prerequisite for leisure, 'the universal pulse' is one over which the individual could have no control; unlike Leavis's 'seasonal rhythm', it has metaphysical overtones.

However, in the final five lines of the poem, MacDiarmid attempts to qualify the self-abnegation implied by the 'universal rhythm':

. . . But who knows this summit, this peak moment,
As Lenin kept his beat in Russia,
Or as one who in the circle of *tabla taranga*
Finds the time between precipitating notes
To arrange a drum that has got off key by a hair's breadth? (CP, I, 411)

If there is a source for the idea of Lenin keeping his beat, I have not discovered it.[\[26\]](#) The passage implies that certain exceptional figures, whether political or artistic, can find freedom within the 'universal pulse'.

In resolving the conflicting claims of the individual and the collective by reference to Indian music, MacDiarmid might be accused of an evasive exoticism. However, the reference to the *tabla taranga* comes from the same issue of the *Hound and Horn* as Potamkin's article on Pabst. There René Daumal had written in praise of the percussionist Vishnu Dass, who provided music for Uday Shan-kar's dance troupe, 'seated within the circle of his ten drums (*tabla taranga*)': 'In the

middle of a stairway dizzy with sound, Vishnu Dass finds the time between two precipitating notes, to arrange nonchalantly a drum which may have got off key by a hair's breadth'.[\[27\]](#) Daumal's reference to the 'stairway' provides another submerged point of connection with the theme of ascent that had begun in the previous paragraph.

The music performed by Shan-kar's troupe was by no means universally praised. It would be interesting to note, if a relatively late date of composition for 'Etika' were to be confirmed, that in November 1933, MacDiarmid's friend Kaikhosru Sorabji criticised the music performed by Shan-kar's troupe for its 'formlessness' and lack of real artistic significance. He gave eloquent praise to the drummer, for his dexterity and ability to produce 'small shreds and wisps of sound more like little patches of cloud than anything else, or swirling bits of vapour'. However, the drummer's technical ability served only to underline Sorabji's main point: 'this amazing virtuoso has nothing at all worthy of his powers upon which to work'.[\[28\]](#) Sorabji's view of the drummer is similar to Potamkin's view of Pabst's glossier work as a triumph of technique over content. If it were possible to show that the final lines of 'Etika' were composed after Sorabji's article reached MacDiarmid, then MacDiarmid's quotation of Daumal is his way of indirectly entering into dialogue with his friend, arguing that not all virtuosity is empty.

'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa' is not simply a poem about the intelligentsia coming closer to the working classes. Nor is it of interest simply as an exercise in the adaptation of prose sources to create fictional personae, though any reading of it must take those sources and that process into account. It concerns cultural forms, their relation to the emerging culture industries, their power to imprint themselves on consciousness, and their power to keep social classes in their places.

MacDiarmid's survey of forms of cultural activity finds much cause for pessimism, and his selective reading of his prose sources accentuates this impression. He suggests that in Pabst's films, a glossy technical facility has triumphed over more profound representations of class relations. He insinuates that in the theatre sensationalism and vulgarity have debased a more subtle tradition. The rhythms of culture are not 'self-determined': they have become mechanised, 'goosestep measures'. Moreover, by drawing on critical texts throughout, MacDiarmid may imply that the 'interpreting class' has successfully interposed itself between aesthetic experience and the subject eager for knowledge. MacDiarmid's turn 'to Russia' for a more hopeful future is not entirely persuasive; though we must concede that his contemporaries were more familiar with the achievements of Russian cinema than the present-day reader, the poem fails in that it provides no concrete account of Russian culture that might balance the negative constructions of Pabst and Yiddish theatre.

Nevertheless, the poem escapes from pessimism. It does so in MacDiarmid's final visionary invocation of a state of culture in which the individual might become partially absorbed into the collective endeavour. The 'universal pulse' might in practice be as oppressive as 'goosestep measures', but the passage describing it allows us to believe that it would be a more organic rhythm, one which would allow the individual performer, like Vishnu Dass, space for virtuosity, without that virtuosity overwhelming the larger endeavour. Gerhardi's lines about the 'release of the individual soul' come to stand for a version of Vysheslavtsev's philosophy, in which human nature is sublimated in the service of 'the Highest.'

Moreover MacDiarmid's poem responds to 'the interpreting class', and their attempt to deny the alterity of the creative work. If criticism works to predigest the experiences of cinema, theatre, and dance, then the poem works to dismantle criticism as a form. The malign influence of the 'interpreting class' is here remedied by MacDiarmid's ability first to identify the most imaginatively intense moments in critical prose, and then to reshape them as a new creative work.

NOTES

[1] This essay derives indirectly from the author's research project 'Science, Poetry, and Specialization, 1900-1942'. The author gratefully acknowledges the Leverhulme Trust for enabling the project through a Research Fellowship.

[2] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings in English Poetry', *The Raucle Tongue*, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray, and Alan Riach, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996-97), II, 340-42; 'On a Raised Beach', *Complete Poems*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), I, 422-33 (p.425); hereafter cited as *CP*. The borrowing from Leavis was first noted by Ruth McQuillan, 'Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Akros*, 12.34-35 (August 1977), 87-97.

[3] W. T. Symons, 'Money, Time and Life', *Purpose*, 2.2 (Apr.-June 1930), 65-72. MacDiarmid's contribution to this issue was 'Allen Upward and the Facilitation of Genius', reprinted in *Raucle Tongue*, II, 373-76.

[4] F. R. Leavis, 'Under Which King, Bezonian', *Scrutiny*, 1.3 (Dec. 1932), 205-14 (p.208).

[5] H. J. Travers, 'Views and Reviews: The Modern Echo', *New English Weekly*, 1 (28 July 1932), 357-58.

[6] Michael H. Whitworth 'Three Prose Sources for Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Notes and Queries* 54 (June 2007), 175-77; Whitworth, 'Culture and Leisure in Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Scottish Studies Review*, 9 no.1 (2008), 123-43.

- [7] MacDiarmid, 'The Assault on Humanism' (16 Oct. 1923), *Raucle Tongue*, I, 109-112; 'Art and the Unknown' (20 and 27 May 1926), *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 39-43.
- [8] Leavis, qtd. MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 341.
- [9] Leavis, qtd. MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 342.
- [10] MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 342.
- [11] W. N. Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 124.
- [12] Harry Alan Potamkin, 'Pabst and the Social Film', *Hound and Horn*, 6.2 (Jan.-Mar. 1933), 293-305.
- [13] Moe Bragin, 'Obituary: Jewish Art Theatre', *Hound and Horn*, 5.2 (January-March 1932), 283-87; René Daumal (trans. by Vera Milanova), 'Uday Shan-kar and the Hindu Dance', *Hound and Horn*, 6.2 (January-March 1933), 288-92. Bragin also wrote under the pseudonym 'Ben Field': see Alan M. Wald, 'In Retrospect: *On Native Grounds*', *Reviews in American History*, 20 (1992), 276-88.
- [14] The *TLS* gave a short notice of this issue on 9 March 1933, which would suggest that it became available in the UK only in late February or early March.
- [15] Nathalie Duddington, 'New Russian Philosophy', *The New Atlantis*, 1.2 (January 1934), 96; Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Genethliacon for the New World Order', *The New Atlantis*, 1.2 (January 1934), 96.
- [16] Nancy Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and his Work* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 161-62; Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984), pp. 145-46; Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: The Terrible Crystal* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 159-60; Herbert, *Circumjack*, p. 124.
- [17] MacDiarmid, 'Problems of Poetry To-Day', *Raucle Tongue*, II, 485-86.
- [18] H.D., 'Expiation' (May 1928), *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 125-30 (p.127).
- [19] Duddington, 'New Russian Philosophy'.
- [20] Anon, 'The Art of the Film' [review of *On Film Technique*, by V. I. Pudovkin], *Nation and Athenaeum*, 46 (30 November 1929), 322.
- [21] G.M. [Gorham Munson], 'Literary Chronicle, USA', *New English Weekly*, 3 (18 May 1933), 114-16; David Ramsey and Alan Calmer, 'The Marxism of Mr V. F. Calverton' (letter), *New English Weekly*, 3 (6 July 1933), 286-87.
- [22] See Whitworth, 'Three Prose Sources', and Hugh Gordon Porteous's remark that, '[w]ith a file of A. R. Orage's *The New Age* and its successor *The New English Weekly* at hand, a source-hunter may keep himself profitably occupied for years with this poet' ('Mr MacDiarmid and Dr Grieve', *TLS*, 4 February 1965, p.87).

[23] For other remarks on MacDiarmid's anti-semitism, see Neal Ascherson, 'MacDiarmid and Politics', *The Age of MacDiarmid*, ed. by P. H. Scott and A. C. Davis (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1980), pp. 224-37, and Douglas Dunn, 'Hugh MacDiarmid: Inhuman Splendours', *New Edinburgh Review*, no.52 (November 1980), 17-21.

[24] W. A. Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1923), pp. 30-31; Anton Tchekov, *The Note-books of Anton Tchekhov* trans. by S. S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1921), pp. 80-81.

[25] Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, p. 31.

[26] It is worth noting that in June 1932, MacDiarmid repudiated an article that had described events outside Scotland as the 'brave music of a distant drum': 'Lenin and Us' (11 June 1932), *Raucle Tongue*, II, 398.

[27] René Daumal, 'Uday Shan-kar and the Hindu Dance', 289, 290.

[28] Kaikhosru Sorabji, 'Music: Uday Shankar', *New English Weekly*, 4 (2 November 1933), 65-66. I have not determined whether the un-named drummer heard by Sorabji was Vishnu Dass. MacDiarmid's poem 'At the Cenotaph' appeared in the same issue (p.70).