A DRUNK MAN LOOKS AT THE THISTLE

1 I amna fou' sae muckle as tired — deid dune. Ḉ
It's gey and hard wark coupin' gless for gless
Wi' Cruie and Gilsanquhar and the like,
And I'm no' juist as bauld as aince I wes.

5

The elbuck fankles in the coorse o' time,
The scheckle's no' sae souple, and the thrapple
Grows deef and dour: nae langer up and doun
Gleg as a squirrel spoils the Adam's apple.

10

Forbye, the stuffie's no' the real Mackay.
The sun's sel' aince, as sune as ye began it,
Riz in your vera saul: but what keeks in
Noo is in truth the vilest 'saxpenny planet.'

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1 Cf. Burns: 'I was na fou, but just had plenty' ("Death and Doctor Hornbook"); 'We are na fou, we're nae that fou, / But just a drapie in
our e'e' (Willie brew'd a peck o' maul'). By beginning his poem with this
plea of mitigation on an assumed charge of drunkenness, MacD suggests
to the reader that he is on familiar Scots ground before ca'in the feet frae
him: see lines 21-4.

3 Cruie and Gilsanquhar are the Drunk Man's drinking
companions, 'called as was the custom not by their surnames but by the
names of their farms' (Note to MacD's English translation of the poem)

4 Bauld was apparently blate in MS and was substituted for the
latter when Pittendrigh Macgillivray queried it. 'That was a stupid and
quite unaccountable use of the wrong word altogether. I can't imagine
how I've passed it so long without noticing it.' (Letter to Macgillivray,
28 Sept. 1926)

8 Cf. the Gaelic proverbial saying: cho grad ri feuèraig-Chèitein, as
quick as a May squirrel.

9 The real Mackay, the genuine article. Current in Scotland by 1870,
but the origin of the phrase is uncertain.

10 'In the footsteps of Burns he [James Hogg] did follow,
faithfully, if far behind, reflecting a broad ray of his literary sun.
Writing of his friend and comrade, from Abbotsford on June 8, 1817, to
Lord Montague, Sir Walter [Scott] declared: "There is an old saying
of the seaman's, 'every man is not born to be a boatswain', and I think I
have heard of men born under a sixpenny planet, and doomed never to
be worth a groat. I fear something of this vile sixpenny influence had
gleamed in at the cottage window when poor Hogg first came
squeaking into the world.'" (W. H. Spence, 'The Shepherd', Northern
Review, I, no. 2, June–July 1924, p. 122) John Buchan made use of the
same quotation in the Introduction to his Northern Muse (London 1924).
Note that MacD links this 'saxpenny planet' with 'the star o' Rabbie
Burns' (lines 70, 77). For Burns himself, in his drinking song 'Then
Gudwife count the lawin', it was the 'blude-red wine', rather than the
whisky, that was 'the rysin Sun'
ll. 131–2. Cf. Dostoievsky, Notes from Underground, I. 8: ‘Reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational part of man’s nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole life, that is, of the whole human life including reason and all the impulses.’

ll. 141–2. Whaur extremes meet: the basic philosophic stance adopted by the Drunk Man. It is reminiscent of both the writers, Nietzsche and Dostoievsky, whose influence will emerge most prominently as the poem progresses. It was specifically with Nietzsche in mind that A. R. Orage declared that ‘in all great natures extremes meet’ (Nietzsche in Outline and Aphorism, Edinburgh 1907, p. 12), and Leo Shestov said of him that ‘at almost one and the same moment you can find him at two diametrically opposite poles of human thought’ (Dostoievsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, Ohio 1969, p. 294). Dostoievsky’s ‘method of evolving a new style by the fusion of extremes’ was pointed out by D. S. Mirsky in A History of Russian Literature, London 1927, p. 225; and the novelist himself claimed that the ability to encompass extremes was a Russian characteristic. He said of himself, ‘Everywhere and in everything I go to extremes’ (letter to A. N. Maykov, August 1876), and he had some of his characters declare like Alyosha Karamazov that they ‘admit of no halfway house’, or like Mitya, also in The Brothers Karamazov, Book 3, 3, that ‘God makes nothing but riddles [where] extremes meet and contraries lie down together’

ll. 143–4. Quoted elsewhere by MacD (Annals of the Five Senses, Montrose 1933, p. 14) as the ‘curst conceit of being right which kills all noble feeling’, opposition to which he associated with his favourite philosopher, his ‘master’, Shestov.

l. 152. Auld Scottish instincts which may be traced through manifestations of the Caledonian Antisyzygy, claimed to be the characteristically Scottish form of the combination of opposites or meeting of extremes.

In wi’ your gruntle then, puir wheengin’ saul,
Lap up the usgome aidle wi’ the lave,
What gin it’s your ain vomit that you swill
And frae Life’s gantin’ and unfaddomed grave?

I doot I’m gellies mixed, like Life itsel’,
But I was never ane that thocht to pit
An ocean in a mutchkin. As the hail’s
Mair than the pairt sae I than reason yet.

I dinna haud the warld’s end in my heid
As maist folk think they dae; nor filter truth
In fishy gills through which its tides may poor
For ony animalcula forsooth.

I laugh to see my crazy little brain
– And ither folks’ – tak’n’ itself’ seriously,
And in a sudden lowe o’ fun my saul
Blinks dozent as the owl I ken’t to be.

I’ll ha’e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur
Extremes meet2 – it’s the only way I ken
To dodge the curst conceit o’ bein’ richt
That damns the vast majority o’ men.

I’ll bury nae heid like an ostrich’s,
Nor yet believe my een and naething else.
My senses may advise me, but I’ll be
Mysel’ nae maitter what they tell’s.

I ha’e nae doot some foreign philosopher
Has wrocht a system oot to justify
A’ this: but I’m a Scot wha blin’ly follows
Auld Scottish instincts,4 and I winna try.
The Grave of All Mankind, II. 1442–50

1. Shudderin' thistle, gie' owre, gie' owre.
2. Grey sand is churnin' in my lugs,
The munelicht flets, and gantin' there
The grave o' a' mankind's laid bare
– On Hell itsel' the drawback rugs! 3
Nae man can ken his hert until
The tide o' life uncovers it,
And horror-struck he sees a pit
Returnin' life can never fill! 4

5. Thou art the facts in ilka airt
That breege into infinity,
Criss-crossed wi' coontless ither facts
Nae man can follow, and o' which
He is himsel' a helpless pairt,
Held in their tangle as he were
A stick-nest 5 in Ygdrasil!
The less man sees the mair he is
Content wi', but the mair he sees
The mair he kens hoo little o'
A' that there is he'll ever see,
And hoo it mak's confusion aye
The waur confoundit till at last
His brain inside his heid is like
Ariadne 7 wi' an empty pinn,
Or like a birlin' reel frae which
A whale 6 has rived the line awa'
What better's a forhooied nest
Than shasloch scattered owre the grun? 6

A Stick-Nest in Ygdrasil, II. 1451–631

In Scandinavian mythology, Ygdrasil is the cosmic ash-tree which supports all the nine worlds. It is subject to both malevolent and benevolent forces (e.g., the dragon and serpents at its roots, the Norns who sprinkle it with holy water), and it has been associated by many occultists with the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. MacD seems to have the latter in mind at the beginning of this section.

1. 1457 Stick-nest is presumably one of the most recondite terms in MacD's vocabulary, since I have been unable to find it in any dictionary. The same applies to shasloch (kasloch in 1928), I. 1489.

2. 1485 Ariadne – who provided Theseus with the clue of thread with which to find his way out of the Labyrinth.

3. 1487 The whale/sea-serpent as embodying the original mystery of creation.