

Poetry and the Language of Science: Some Lines of Inquiry

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Two poems by Hugh MacDiarmid

On towards the calculus of ideas then,

[...]

-- Playing with a twenty-four sided polygon

A cardioid design, a catacaustic curve,

And all Jukuthiel Ginsburg's paraphernalia,

Plastic, lucite, alabaster, marble, mahogany,

The endless joys of *Scripta Mathematica*,

Recalling that when young ferns unfold in springtime

They are seen as logarithmic spirals,

When light is reflected under a teacup

A catacaustic curve is spotted,

And so on,

Through all creation's forms forever

(from *In Memoriam James Joyce*, in *Complete Poems* pp.802-03)

It is with the poet as with a guinea worm

Who, to accommodate her teeming progeny

Sacrifices nearly every organ of her body, and becomes

(Her vagina obliterated in her all-else-consuming

Process of uterine expansion, and she still faced

With a grave obstetrical dilemma calling for

Most marvellous contrivance to deposit her prodigious swarm

Where they may find the food they need and have a chance in life)

Almost wholly given over to her motherly task,
Little more than one long tube close-packed with young;
Until from the ruptured bulla, the little circular sore,
You see her dauntless head protrude, and presently, slowly,
A beautiful, delicate, and pellucid tube
Is projected from her mouth, tenses and suddenly spills
Her countless brood in response to a stimulus applied
Not directly to the worm herself, but the skin of her host
With whom she has no organised connection (and that stimulus
O Poets! but cold water!) [...]

[...]

Is it not precisely thus we poets deliver our store,
Our whole being the instrument of our suicidal art,
And by the skin of our teeth *flype* ourselves into fame?

(‘To a Friend and Fellow Poet’, *Complete Poems*, p.1057.

flype: to turn inside out)

If, at the time of her appearance at the surface of the body, you manage to procure an uninjured guinea-worm and dissect her, you will find that from head to tail she is little more than one long tube packed with young. To accommodate the millions of long-tailed embryos nearly every organ of her body has been more or less sacrificed. Although thus devoting herself practically entirely to reproduction, the guinea-worm is nevertheless at this stage in a grave obstetrical dilemma.

(Patrick Manson, quoted by Manson-Bahr and Alcock, *Life and Work*, p. 108.)

J. H. Prynne.

Chromatin

The prism crystal sets towards the axis
of episodic desire: lethargy and depression
cross the real-time analogue: currents level
and historic matching blurs into locked-on
receptor site blockade. Stable mosaic at
adrenal print “you” are in white “I” see a
moving shade by the door it is *my wish* to
be there running on (“mental confusion,
tremors, anxiety”) and breaking the induced
blockade I truly am by the door shaking or
the frame goes to gel. Visual sonar
arrhythmia blocks fading brocade made
pressure crisis you and the flowers in
pliant flicker real time! I surmount
the uptake gradient, cognition by
recount, the homeric icefields unfold.

Critical perspectives on absorption / assimilation

The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of the respective Sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man. ("Preface" (1802), in *William Wordsworth* [Oxford Authors], ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford 1984), p.607.).

I have felt, in reading certain poems of the last ten years, that many of the abstract terms used by the poets have no overtones. It is as if a painter suddenly stuck on his canvas a piece of actual material, cabbage leaf, corduroy, whatever it might be, instead of painting it. The patch, the abstract word snatched from contemporary life, has not been assimilated. (C. Day Lewis and L. A. G. Strong, 'Introduction', *A New Anthology of Modern Verse, 1920-1940* (London: Methuen, 1941), xviii.)

Five factors to consider:

(1) The *utility* of science to the poet.

(2) First-person speaking voice.

- (3) The presence of other ideas and vocabularies
- (4) The *temporality* of scientific knowledge.
- (5) How far is the science present as discourse, and how far as raw 'text'?