

## John Davidson and Unstable Scottish Identity<sup>1</sup>

Hisayo NAKASHIMA

Division of General Education, Kyushu Women's University

1-1, Jiyugaoka, Yahatanishi-ku, Kitakyusyu 807-8586, Japan

(Received 29 May, 2017; Accepted 5 July, 2017)

### ABSTRACT

John Davidson is a Scottish diaspora poet of the nineteenth century. The era was harsh for Scottish writers to recognize their own identity, due to the drastic social and economic changes in Scotland, the cultural diminishment after Burns, and a question about Scottishness caused by the diminishment. Davidson's unstable Scottish identity is observed through his "Ayrshire Jock" and "A Ballad in Blank Verse". In the autobiographical "A Ballad in Blank Verse", Davidson's ambivalence of defiance and attachment to his native place is described. A young man as Davidson's persona criticizes his parents' religion and pursues his own existential philosophy. At the same time, however, the beautiful nature of his hometown satisfies him and celebrates his awareness of being an independent man and artist. In the other autobiographical "Ayrshire Jock", Old John, a wretched scribe, criticizes Burnsian followers and struggles to gain a new identity by abandoning the Scots language. But his struggle is never personal. He is one of those pursuing his own identity under the shadow of Burns. Davidson's personas of the two poems reveal the poet's recognizing his own unstable Scottish identity, and embody 'Caledonian antiszygy' as a tradition of Scottish literature.

**Key words:** John Davidson, Literary Ballad, Scottish Identity, Caledonian antiszygy

John Davidson (1857-1909) was born in Greenock in Renfrewshire, Scotland, and, in the history of Scottish literature, has been acknowledged as one of the typical bicultural writers who moved from Scotland to England in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Davidson arrived in London in 1889 with the ambition of making a living by his own pen. His medium of expression was not Scots, but colloquial English. Old John, the narrator in Davidson's "Ayrshire Jock" (1891), confesses the

reason why he refused writing in non-dominant Scots and chose English to create a new identity in the tradition of English poetry: ‘They [Burnsian followers] drink, and write their senseless rhymes, . . . / In mongrel Scotch’ (73 & 75), ‘But I am of a strong wing, . . . / I rhymed in English, catching tones / From Shelley and his great successors’ (83 & 85-86).<sup>2</sup> However, the poet’s own identity, affected by his career as a diaspora writer, was unstable. Davidson’s antipathy and attachment to his own country, and his unstable identity under the shadow of Burns will be discussed by analyzing his two poems.

### 1. “A Ballad in Blank Verse” — Antipathy and Attachment to the Country

Davidson’s biography and some of his works tell that he rebelled fiercely against his father’s Evangelicalism. “A Ballad in Blank Verse” (1905) is a kind of mental autobiography, where we can follow the religious conflict of a youth with his parents and his break with their Christianity. The ballad was originally written in 1894 under the title of “A Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet”, whose content and title Davidson refined when he issued *Selected Poems* towards the end of his life. The main character, a young man, is ardently required to take Communion by his parents, but he is fundamentally opposed to his father’s narrow-minded personality which is, according to the young man’s understanding, given by the father’s religious devotion:

His father, woman-hearted, great of soul,  
Wilful and proud, save for one little shrine  
That held a pinch-beck cross, had closed and barred  
The many mansions of his intellect. (49-52)

The father patiently asks his son to accept Christianity by saying ‘My son, have you decided to the Lord? / Your mother’s heart and mine are exercised / For your salvation. Will you turn to Christ?’ (57-59), and his mother moans about her impious son by saying ‘Almighty God! — / Almighty God! — Oh, save my foolish boy’ (94-95). However, the young man is totally indifferent to what they are crying for. He cannot hear their persuasion, but he is seeing visions of Greek myths, where ‘Apollo on the Dardan beach’ (82) is reluctantly building the Trojan walls, or ‘the Cyprian Aphrodite’ (104) is holding dead Adonis in her warm embrace. The parents’ hope and the young

man's future vision never meet; his artistic desire will never be replaced by the parents' religion. But persuasion by the father is repeated again and again after the mother died of 'anguish for his sins' (132), and the young man accepted Communion once. He could experience nothing spiritual when the ceremony was done. Instead, he again saw a mesmerizing vision of mermaids beckoning him when he was walking by the purple firth:

. . . ; beneath his feet the earth  
 Quaked like a flame-sapped bridge that spans the wave  
 Of fiery Phlegethon; and in the wind  
 An icy voice was borne from some waste place,  
 Piercing him to the marrow. (204-208)

At this moment, the vision of mermaids gives him a revelation. He understands what he is searching for:

'I'll have no creed'  
 He said. 'Though I be weakest of my kind,  
 I'll have no creed. Lo! There is but one creed,  
 The vulture-phoenix that for ever tears  
 The soul of man in chains of flesh and blood  
 Rivetted to the earth; . . . (215-20)

He cries a declaration of emancipation from any kind of creed, which the vulture-phoenix tearing human beings' bondage symbolizes. His creed is now to have no creed. The emancipation of himself accelerates more audacious affirmation of his own existence. He is conscious of his own self: that is, he is completely independent:

Henceforth I shall be God; for consciousness  
 Is God: I suffer; I am God; this Self,  
 That all the universe combines to quell,  
 Is greater than the universe; and *I*  
 Am that I am. (226-30)

The son seems to compare himself to Nietzschean Zarathustra. Hearing his son's blasphemy, the father died in despair. But when the young man was again walking on the shore of the firth where he knows 'every rock and sandy reach' (381), he noticed that a God may be a creed, and cried 'How unintelligent, how blind am I, / How vain! . . . A god? a mole, a worm!' (391-92). Towards the end of the story, he reaches the two essences of his creed as no creed: the one is completely apart from any commitment. He says 'No creed for me! I am a man apart: / A mouthpiece for the creeds of all the world' (426-27), and 'A trembling lyre for every wind to sound' (435). The other is, although it seems contradictory, the acceptance of the whole universe:

I am a man set by to overhear  
The inner harmony, the very tune  
Of Nature's heart; (435-37)

Within my heart  
I'll gather all the universe, and sing  
As sweetly as the spheres; and I shall be  
The first of men to understand himself . . . (443-46)

Thus, a poet was born. The newborn persona created by Davidson is totally indifferent to any kind of creed, but still remains his own self as the center of the universe. He has acquired a kind of existential philosophy. Carroll V. Peterson labels it as 'a sort of center of indifference', which is a basis of Nietzschean 'eternal questioning' (42).<sup>3</sup>

As well as antipathy towards Evangelicalism, Davidson despised his hometown. Davidson gained acquaintance with an English poet, A. C. Swinburne through John Nichol, Professor of English literature at Glasgow University, under whom Davidson studied in around 1877. Davidson was infatuated with the poet, and ardently sent his poems and letters to the poet. In a letter of 28 March 1878, Davidson mentioned his antipathy to his native place as the 'Philistinism' and 'murky atmosphere of Greenock'.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Greenock was a slummy local town in Davidson's days, and had two contradicting faces of a nostalgic spot for romantic Scotland recalled by Burnsian Highland Mary's monument, and of a pioneering area of the steam age as the birthplace of James Watt. John Sloan's brief explanation of the town is enough to

understand the reality Davidson faced and the reason why he created “Thirty Bob a Week” (1894) in which a poor clerk working like a mole in a big city monologizes of his pride in the plight:

Greenock was at that time a thriving Victorian seaport, and as was often the case, an important centre for the foreign missions. Its main industries were shipbuilding and sugar-refining, but it also had engineering works, iron forges, cooperages, tanneries and cotton mills. Its population had almost doubled during the first thirty years of Queen Victoria's reign to nearly 40,000. As in other Victorian towns, prosperity and squalour were to be found together. There was a high incidence of alcoholism and violent crime. John's father — a well-known temperance reformer — may have been drawn there for this reason. Large numbers of men were to be found in Greenock at any one time — sailors from around the world, as well as immigrants from Ireland and the Western Isles who arrived looking for work. (6)

Part of the harsh reality cited above comes from what Davidson seemed to have experienced and witnessed in his teens. At the age of fifteen, Davidson worked for Walker's Sugarhouse, and the next year he moved to the Public Analyst's Laboratory, 'which had been established to check the levels of adulteration by sugar manufacturers such as Walker's' (Sloan 9). After leaving the laboratory, he was hired as a pupil teacher at the Highland Academy. Education in those days was esteemed as highly as it is today in Scotland, but the reality was that 'pupil teachers earned between 4 and 10 shillings a week' and he might have managed 'the classes at the school averaging between fifty and seventy pupils' (Sloan 10). 'Prosperity and squalour' lay right by Davidson.

Contrary to the antipathy to the environment of his hometown, however, Davidson begins “A Ballad in Blank Verse” with deep satisfaction which the beautiful nature and vibrant atmosphere of his hometown gave him:

His father's house looked out across a firth  
Broad-bosomed like a mere, beside a town  
Far in the North, where Time could take his ease,

And Change hold holiday; where Old and New  
Weltered upon the border of the world. (1-5)

The old house in the North stands overlooking a vast firth, along which the young man walks each time he has religious conflicts with his father. Davidson seems to have expressed that same nostalgia for which a modern Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, sharply criticized nineteenth century Scottish poets:<sup>5</sup> Time passes slowly, and there is no change. He is fully satisfied with the region, and regards the firth as the birthplace of his future. He naively cries on the shore:

'Now may my life beat out upon this shore  
A prouder music than the winds and waves  
Can compass in their haughtiest moods. I need  
No world more spacious than the region here: (10-13)

He believes that his self-satisfaction can create a greater music than nature does. However, at the same time, the young man surely notices that some further development might be brought to him as he witnesses and appreciates the old and the new jostling each other even in a familiar place:

The sloping shores that fringe the velvet tides  
With heavy bullion and with golden lace  
Of restless pebble woven and fine spun sand;  
The villages that sleep the winter through,  
And, wakening with the spring, keep festival  
All summer and all autumn: this grey town  
That pipes the morning up before the lark  
With shrieking steam, and from a hundred stalks  
Lacquers the sooty sky: where hammers clang  
On iron hulls, and cranes in harbors creak  
Rattle and swing, whole cargoes on their necks;  
Where men sweat gold that other hoard or spend,  
And lurk like vermin in their narrow streets: (18-30)

The young man describes in detail the shores full of light and colors, like an impressionist painting. He appreciates the life force of the villages along the shores: surviving in the hard winter, they enjoy warm seasons. But at the same time, he clearly records how the hometown is industrialized. Hundreds of stalks are belching shrieking steam and making the sky sooty; hammers and cranes are working with a loud noise; and workers in the densely-populated town are sweating to earn money. The young man repeats again 'This old grey town' (31) . . . 'Is world enough for me' (36). Both the natural beauty and the unpleasant views of industrialization nurture the aspiring young man. The old and the new create his existence.

"A Ballad in Blank Verse" adopts ballad in the title, but it has neither a ballad stanza, a characteristic ballad style of refrain or repetition, nor a ballad motif, excepting the opening lines of 'Far in the North, where Time could take his ease, / And Change hold holiday; where Old and New / Weltered upon the border of the world' (3-5) repeated three times, and the picturesque dawn in the town repeated twice, in the monologue. After his mother 'died in anguish for his sins' (132), his father reproached him saying 'You killed your mother, you are killing me' (137). But the young man only repeats the opening lines with a detached tone:

For this was in the North, where Time stands still  
And Change holds holiday, where Old and New  
Welter upon the border of the world,  
And savage faith works woe. (139-42)

'Savage faith' tells the poet's strong aversion to the faith of his parents. And one more time, after his father followed his wife crying 'If his sin / Be not to death . . . Heaven opens!' (352-53), the young man again puts the same lines with the same detached tone;

Thus he died;  
For this was in the North where Time stands still,  
And Change holds holiday; where Old and New  
Welter upon the border of the world,  
And savage creeds can kill. (353-57)

'Savage faith' (142) is altered slightly into 'savage creeds' (357), as an incremental repetition of a ballad technique, which intensifies his aversion and irony.

In lines 36 to 48 where the young man is confessing that the region is world enough for him, the picturesque dawn, the glorious seasonal changes of the region, and the ideal deeds of men and women living there are minutely described: 'Here daily dawn / Burns through the smoky east' (36-37); 'here winter plies his craft, / Soldering the years with ice' (40-41); 'And here are men to know, women to love' (48). The aspiring young man is conscious of being closely united with nature. However, at the end of his monologue when a Nietzschean 'eternal questioning' poet was newly born shouting 'No creed for me!' (426), the same beauty, glory, and ideal encourage him:

And lo! to give me courage comes the dawn,  
Crimsoning the smoky east; and still the sun  
With fire-shod feet shall step from hill to hill  
Downward before the night; winter shall ply  
His ancient craft, soldering the years with ice;  
And spring appear, caught in a leafless brake,  
Breathless with wonder and the tears half-dried  
Upon her rosy cheek; summer shall come  
And waste his passion like a prodigal  
Right royally; and autumn spend her gold  
Free-handed as a harlot; men to know,  
Women to love are waiting everywhere.' (447-58)

His hometown not only nurtures the aspiring man by giving him satisfaction, but also celebrates the birth of the self-independent and 'eternal questioning' poet. The blissful nature of Scotland undoubtedly forged Davidson's identity as a Scottish man and poet.

Thus, the monologue poem has two repeated parts of the opening lines and the picturesque dawn. They intensify the young man's consistent detachment from any creeds, and his unchanged integration with nature. Let us remember again Sloan's explanation of the historical reality of Greenock. Davidson, knowing well the harsh reality of his hometown, describes its gorgeous surroundings and industrialized vibrant atmosphere. Greenock must have provided Davidson with mundane conflict and lyrical



impulse: facing the radical change and the squalid reality of his native town, and at the same time being irritated at his father's religion and convention, Davidson was excited by the beauty of the town. Davidson's identity was nurtured in the total contradiction: as Hubbard says, 'Davidson despised equally the dour philistinism of Scotland and the fashionable languor of London' (75). Greenock, in the early stage of his life, provided the Scottish poet with an unstable identity.

Although Davidson's identity was unstable, he undoubtedly kept his Scottish blood. In 1886 before leaving for London Davidson wrote a historical drama, *Bruce: A Drama in Five Acts*, glorifying the national hero Robert the Bruce and conveying enthusiastic patriotism. In the opening scene Edward I is alarmed at Bruce's rebellious spirit: 'He goes to Scotland, and his guiding star / Is that same beacon of rebellious light / Built up by every burning Scottish heart.' (1. 1. 11-13) The drama ends with the victory of Scotland at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, when Scotland defeated England led by Edward II, and was reestablished as an independent nation. Davidson's 'burning Scottish heart' was also witnessed and scorned by W. B. Yeats, who met Davidson at a society of poets called 'the Rhymer's Club' in London. Against Davidson's criticizing the club as lacking in 'blood and guts', Yeats ironically mentioned Davidson's violent energy as 'a fire of straw' and 'useless in the arts' (*Autobiography* 392).<sup>6</sup>

## 2. "Ayrshire Jock" — Unstable Identity under the Shadow of Burns

Davidson had Scottish 'blood and guts'. However, compared with Walter Scott, Davidson's Scottish predecessor, whose national identity was never wavered, Davidson was always defiant of Scottish identity. One of his early poems, "Ayrshire Jock", tells the instability and defiance. The poem was written in the late 1870s when Davidson was in a literary circle led by John Nichol in Glasgow, and was issued in *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems* in 1891 in London. The narrator Old John is a struggling writer living in a garret in Glasgow: his writing-gear, ink, and tallow-candle are miserable, and his 'heart and brain are nearly dead' (15). As Davidson in an essay "On the Downs" in *The Man Forbid and Other Essays* wrote 'When the Scotsman finds himself at cross-purposes with life, what course does he follow? . . . He either sits down and drinks deeply, thoughtfully, systematically, of the amber spirit of his country, or he reads philosophy' (248), Old John, struggling with loneliness and poverty in the life of

a poet, is drinking whisky, analyzing the standpoint of a Scottish poet, and justifying himself. Deprecating his own situation in monologue, and being accompanied by whistling wind in every muffled chimney, Old John suddenly experiences a vivid hallucination about his old home. Sitting in the harsh reality, he sees in his vision the simple cottage-like home with drooping eaves, bronze thatch, and sea-green shutters. But the poet turns his back on the vision. The reason why he would not see the old place might lie in his awareness of the big gap between the present and the past. By seeing the vision, John's monologue accelerates into the climax where he confesses the cause of the predicament of Scottish poets.

That's good! To get this golden juice  
 I starve myself and go threadbare.  
 What matter though my life be loose?  
 Few know me now, and fewer care.  
 Like many another lad from Ayr —  
 This is a fact, and all may know it —  
 And many a Scotchman everywhere,  
 Whisky and Burns made me a poet. (57-64)

Old John is clearly aware of himself as a beggarly alcoholic, and of being abandoned in a society, but he defends his being a social outcast by saying that this is the result of the great influence of the Bard of Ayrshire, Robert Burns.

Just as the penny dreadfuls make  
 The 'prentice rob his master's till,  
 Ploughboys their honest work forsake,  
 Inspired by Robert Burns. They swill  
 Whisky like him, and rhyme; but still  
 Success attends on imitation  
 Of faults alone: to drink a gill  
 Is easier than to stir a nation. (65-72)

Old John is one of the unsuccessful Burnsian followers. As well as Old John, many other Scots dreamt of becoming 'a ploughman poet' like Burns, but they were merely

epigones, and therefore, unlike Burns' poems, their works had no power to encourage their readers to reevaluate the lost nation and the lost national pride since the Union of Parliaments in 1707. They just took refuge in drinking because it is 'easier than to stir a nation.'

They drink, and write their senseless rhymes,  
 Tagged echoes of the lad of Kyle,  
 In mongrel Scotch: didactic times  
 In Englishing our Scottish style  
 Have yet but scotched it: in a while  
 Our bonny dialects may fade hence:  
 And who will dare to coin a smile  
 At those who grieve for their decadence? (73-80)

Moreover, the epigones of Burns have not noticed that their weapon of Scots was invaded far more extensively by English, while they imitated the nostalgic atmosphere of Burns' famous song, "There was a lad" (1787) which begins with 'There was a lad was born in Kyle'.

These rhymesters end in scavenging,  
 Or carrying coals, or breaking stones:  
 But I am of a stronger wing,  
 And never racked my brains or bones.  
 I rhymed in English, catching tones  
 From Shelley and his great successors;  
 Then in reply to written groans,  
 There came kind letters from professors. (81-88)

The end of the poor epigones might have been 'dung' in a slum city, who made their living as scavengers or coal miners, as is stated in his *The Testament of a Man Forbid* (1901): 'You are the dung that keeps the roses sweet.'(122) Old John was never so stupid as to follow in their footsteps. He refused writing in non-dominant Scots and chose English to create a new identity in the tradition of English poetry.<sup>7</sup> Old John neither stuck to Scots nor national pride. He pursued a realistic way of life, and made

maximum efforts.

However, in the end, his plight of being a struggling alcoholic poet is the same as that of Burns' followers. Old John is a parody of John Davidson himself: Old John abandoned the old identity symbolized by 'mongrel Scotch' and tried to create a new one through English, and Davidson left for London only to fall into mental disorder in the tumult and loneliness of the metropolis. Old John got 'kind letters from professors' in return for his groaning in English, but Davidson in reality, being excited by meeting Swinburne in Glasgow, wrote a dozen letters with his poems to ask Swinburne to help him start a poetic career in London, but unfortunately had no reply from the established poet.<sup>8</sup>

Old John's plight is shared not only by Davidson, but also by some other Scottish writers in the late nineteenth century. Scottish literature after Burns has been 'neglected' (Gifford, *Scottish Literature* ii). The cultural diminishment was not caused by the fact that Scotland had lost the great national poet. Kurt Wittig begins his literary history in the nineteenth century with mentioning the social change of that time: the tremendous pace of industrialization and the rapid increase of Anglicized Scottish writers as its result (239). And Edwin Morgan coherently explains the results of this social change in "Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century": 'the absence of commanding creative figures'; 'the lack of good critics who might have stopped a slide into sentimentality'; 'the decline of the famously sharp literary journals like the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*'; 'a rapid downturn in the intellectual and cultural sprightliness of Edinburgh'; 'a diaspora' of Scottish writers; and 'questions about a poet's "Scottishness"' (*History of Scottish Literature* 337). After the 1840s, discussions of national identity disappeared in Scottish literature, and instead, the rise of romanticism and sentimentality attracted attention from outside Scotland. Although it is said that 'the promotion of these images had political connotations' of establishing Britain and of disguising social change and urbanization 'by the success of Kailyard representations of timeless Scottish villages with gruff, eccentric, but ultimately worthy and devout peasant[s]' (Gifford, *Scottish Literature* 324), it is true that social change cast a considerable impact on the literature of Scottish writers at that time and under its influence the Kailyard school was born, which exploited sentimental and romantic images of small town life in Scotland, with much use of the vernacular language.

Under the shadow of Burns, however, the nineteenth century writers had an

achievement: that is, like John Davidson, or Old John, they faced and criticized the era when they lived to embody their plight in a changing and unstable society in their work. In "Glasgow" (1857) by the Glaswegian poet, Alexander Smith, the powerful image of the industrial city is described, the workers and himself being compared to the ebb and flow of the tide:

Black Labour draws his weary waves  
 Into their secret-moaning caves;  
     But with the morning light  
 That sea again will overflow  
 With a long, weary sound of woe,  
     Again to faint in night.  
 Wave am I in that sea of woes,  
 Which night and morning ebbs and flows.

(17-24, from *The Poetry of Scotland*)

Another poet, Janet Hamilton, who spent her whole life in an industrial town in old Lanarkshire, vividly describes noises from factories and the din in the town using Scots in her "Oor Location":

A hunner funnles bleezin', reekin',  
 Còal an' ironstane, charrin', smeeikin';  
 Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,  
 Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;  
 Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies,  
 Firemen, enginemmen, an' paddies;  
 Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin',  
 'Bout the wecht wi' colliers battlin',  
 Sweatin', swearin', fechtin' drinkin',  
 Change-house bells an' gill-stoups clinkin'; (1-10)

Rough and lively Scots, alliteration, and the rhyming couplet traditional to Scottish poetry since Barbour's *Brus* create a picture of working people and their tough lives in a rapidly industrializing town.<sup>9</sup> A common attitude among Davidson, Smith, and

Hamilton is identified: they never decorate the harsh reality with Arcadian retrospect, but see the reality they are set in, and straightforwardly tell their indignation against their circumstances. Smith calls Glasgow his destined place:

Then wherefore from thee should I range?  
 Thou hast my kith and kin,  
 My childhood, youth, and manhood brave —  
 Thou hast that unforgotten grave  
 Within thy central din.  
 A sacredness of love and death  
 Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath. (130-36)

And also Hamilton, with the same lively rhythm, sings ‘the havoc in the nation, / Wrocht by dirty, drucken wives’ (30-31), ‘bairnies’ lives / Lost ilk year through their neglec’ (32-33), or ‘sae many unwed mithers’ (37), and in the end, positively affirms the sin and death, people’s poverty, and heavy drinking generated by the city:

Thick and thrang we see them [sin and death] gaun,  
 First the dram-shop, then the pawn;  
 Over a’ kin’s o’ ruination,  
 Drink’s the king in oor loation. (53-56)

Hamilton is skillful enough to remind readers of the opening scene of a folk ballad, “Sir Patrick Spens”: ‘The king sits in Dumferling toune, / Drinking the blude-reid wine’ (1-2, Child 58A). Thus, Old John’s monologue represents the sincere confrontation with the plight of both the people and his contemporary writers in Scotland.

Old John’s criticism against Burnsian followers is loudly repeated by MacDiarmid. His first step reestablishing Scottish literature and culture in the early twentieth century was to criticize the Burns tradition. In his *Lucky Poet* (1943), MacDiarmid announces that ‘My job in Scotland was to discredit and hustle off the stage a very different kind of poetry — of mawkish doggerel rather, into which the Burns tradition had degenerated.’ (177). And also about Burns himself, MacDiarmid is acrimonious:

He [Burns] owes his unique appeal to the fact that he was a song-writer rather than a poet, and composers invariably prefer poor to good poetry. It is true that Burns pleased — and still pleases — a vast public with his love songs, the horse-sense of his homespun philosophy, and his passionate love of Scotland. But these are all matters of the content of his poems and songs and not of the quality of the poetry as such. (Glen *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDirmid* 178)

MacDiarmid also caricatures those who blindly admire Burns. In *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), a drunken hero, one of the typical characters in Scottish literature,<sup>10</sup> tells his chaotic philosophy with the technique of stream of consciousness.

You canna gang to a Burns supper even  
 Wi'oot some wizened scrunt o' a knock-knee  
 Chinee turns roon to say, 'Him Haggis — velly goot!'  
 And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney.

No' wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote  
 But misapplied is a' body's property,  
 And gin there was his like alive the day  
 They'd be the last a kennin' haund to gi'e — (37-44)

A Burns supper is a historical Scottish gathering to celebrate the national poet, usually held on the poet's birthday, the 25th of January. MacDiarmid ironically sings the fact that a Burns supper is not a proud national event. Burns in the twentieth century is not a cultural symbol, but comes down to an excuse for a party. Everything at the supper is sham. Even Asians who cannot appreciate haggis come and celebrate it. The bagpiper who plays an important role at the ceremony of cutting haggis is not a Scot but a Cockney. It is nothing but a laughingstock that those who neither know nor understand Burns' poems respect them as the property of the world.

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,  
 In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,  
 And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an

Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' *their* thochs.

A' *they*'ve to say was aften said afore

A lad was born in Kyle to blaw about. (49-54)

At Burns suppers held in many places around the world, a toaster begins the ceremony with saying 'Robert Burns' in pidgin English or Scots-like pronunciation, and the toaster himself is just an excuse of a gathering. What they know at best is 'A lad was born in Kyle', the first line of "There was a lad".

The drunken narrator outrageously criticizes the absurdity of a Burns supper. Drunkenness in this work, however, is deliberately introduced by MacDiarmid as a way of developing his main themes: it is a gateway to develop the metaphysical discussion of the synthesis of various antitheses, called 'Caledonian antisyzygy',<sup>11</sup> as the essence of Scottish literature, to enlighten readers on Scottish national identity in the days of the Scottish Renaissance in the early twentieth century, and to cultivate artistically unknown areas of his unconscious.<sup>12</sup> For the drunken hero of MacDiarmid, the cynicism towards Burnsian cultists at a Burns club is a first step to get out of the chaos of declining Scottish culture and to make his way to 'Caledonian antisyzygy'.

Here it should be again mentioned that Old John sees the vision of his good old cottage in his drunkenness:

My waning sight

See through the naked windows pass

A vision. Far within the night

A rough-cast cottage, creamy white,

With drooping eaves that need no gutters,

Flashes its bronze thatch in the light,

And flaps its od-style, sea-green shutters.

There I was born. . . . (34-41)

If the drunkenness is a characteristic representation of facing antitheses, 'Caledonian antisyzygy', in the history of Scottish literature, Old John's drunken vision shows that Davidson has been concerned with the antisyzygy of Scottishness from the beginning



of his poetic career, though Davidson makes Old John strongly disavow his Scottish identity. Old John is a persona who embodies Davidson's fundamental 'antisyzygy.'

The young man of "A Ballad in Blank Verse" and Old John of "Ayrshire Jock" are acknowledged as Davidson's poetic personas. The young man, opposed to his father's parochial religious devotion and the murky atmosphere of his hometown, pursued a kind of existential philosophy. Contrary to the antipathy to his environment, however, he had deep satisfaction which its beautiful nature gave him. The contradiction of his birthplace, which the refrain-like 'Old and New' intensifies, provided him with the unstable identity. Old John also tells the undisguised defiance to his country and the instability of his identity. Despising Burnsian followers who write senseless rhymes in mongrel Scots, he is getting away from Burns' shadow and having another identity in the English language. He completely denies his Scottishness. Contrary to his firm determination of obtaining a new identity, however, his vision betrays the fact that he is in the tradition of Scottish literature. Old John's identity is still as unstable as that of the young man of "A Ballad in Blank Verse". These personas of Davidson embody the poet's fundamental 'antisyzygy.'

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the thoroughly refined version of the author's two previous writings: 「カレドニア的相反と労働者の詩 — 19世紀スコットランド文学とデイヴィッドソンのバラッド詩 —」 ("Caledonian Antisyzygy and Poetry of Labourers: Scottish Literature of the Nineteenth Century and Literary Ballads of John Davidson") and 「ジョン・デイヴィッドソン 藁が燃えるような暴力的なエネルギーの生涯 — 孤高の詩人の誕生から最期まで —」 ("John Davidson as 'a Fire of Straw': from the Birth of the Independent Poet to the End of his Furious Life"). The present paper was also supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 15H03188.

<sup>2</sup> The titles and quotations of Davidson's poetical works in this paper are from *The Poems of John Davidson*, 2vols., ed. Andrew Turnbull.

<sup>3</sup> 'Thus, the tendency present in Davidson from the very first, that tendency to reject all authority and conventions, his "everlasting no," has now become the basis for a whole philosophy of life, a sort of "center of indifference." Here, indeed, is a real basis

for sympathy between Nietzsche and Davidson — the eternal questioning.’ (42) However, Peterson is careful to point out the limits of Nietzsche’s influence on the poem: ‘Because Davidson did not read German, we must conclude that his earliest thorough acquaintance with Nietzsche came with his reading of the English translations, or perhaps from the analysis of Nietzsche’s thought by Havelock Ellis in three articles published in the *Savoy* in April, June, and August, 1896. Therefore, the apparent influence of Nietzsche on the poem in question ‘Ballad in Blank Verse’, or indeed on any writings up to April, 1896, must be discounted.’ (40)

<sup>4</sup> Davidson asks Swinburne to find a publisher for his poems. Towards the end of the letter, he wrote: ‘You will probably wonder that there is next to no echo — at least I think so — of your style in any verses of mine that may deserve the name of poetry. The reason is that on account of the Philistinism in which I have been brought up, and which is both the nitrogen and oxygen of the murky atmosphere of Greenock — within the veil of which I thank God I did not live, but by the shore — such a volume of ozone as your poetry is regarded as the subtlest poison, and I possessed no golden lightning-rod to attract it to me, so that it is just a year since I began to revel in that divine ether.’ (*Swinburne Letters* 47-48)

<sup>5</sup> In Maurice Lindsay’s anthology *John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems* (1961), MacDiarmid evaluated Davidson as a forerunner of the Scottish Renaissance:

What Davidson, alone of Scottish poets, did was to enlarge the subject matter of poetry, assimilate and utilize a great deal of new scientific and other contemporary material, pioneer in poetic drama and other forms, and recognize thus early the exhaustion of English, . . . and, above all, to write urban poetry . . . . Yet most of our versifiers continued to write nostalgic, pseudo-pastoral rubbish about an Arcadian life which had no relation to the facts at all. (“John Davidson: Influences and Influence” 50-51)

<sup>6</sup> Yeats’ antagonism against and frosty look at Davidson are severely stated in “The Tragic Generation” in *Autobiographies* : ‘I think he might [h]ave grown to be a successful man had he been enthusiastic instead about Dowson or Johnson, or Horne

or Symons, for they had what I still lacked, conscious deliberate craft, and what I must lack always, scholarship. They had taught me that violent energy, which is like a fire of straw, consumes in a few minutes the nervous vitality, and is useless in the arts. . . . With enough passion to make a great poet, through meeting no man of culture in early life, he lacked intellectual receptivity, and, anarchic and indefinite, lacked pose and gesture, and now no verse of his clings to my memory.’ (391-92)

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Millard in *Edwardian Poetry* compares the sense of threat to his native language with the hero’s sense of threat in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): ‘This is a surprisingly Modernist anxiety, one given fuller expression in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*: “His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.” (137)

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Gosse described Davidson’s encounter with Swinburne in *The Life of Algernon Swinburne*: ‘The most gifted of Nichols’s pupils, the unfortunate John Davidson, who was now an usher at Alexander’s Charity, Glasgow, sent Swinburne some of his unpublished verses. Swinburne received him in Nichol’s house with great affability, laying his hand upon Davidson’s head in a sort of benediction, and addressing him as “Poet.”’ (243-44) Sloan introduces some incomplete letters of Davidson around 1878 from Berg Collection, New York Public Lib., in which Davidson hysterically begged: ‘Please read my poems to please me: but do nothing with them or about them save to please yourself. “May you stead me? *will* you please me?” Pity my impatience and answer as suddenly as can be.’ (21) Not Swinburne’s intentional neglect but his ill health might have disturbed their correspondence: ‘From February 1877 to June 1879 he was in a state of constant febrility and ill-health in London, . . .’ (The Life of Algernon Swinburne 244)

<sup>9</sup> The tetrameter couplet is used in the earliest Scots long poem in the fourteenth century, John Barbour’s *The Bruce*, which created the concept of patriotism and the image of the independent nation of Scotland. Robert Burns adopted the same tetrameter couplet in his “Tam o’ Shanter: A Tale” (1790) to emphasize the burlesque aspect of the hero, Tam, and his adventure.

<sup>10</sup> On the drunken hero of Burns' "Tam o' Shanter" (1790), Bold states that 'an epic drinker, . . . finds that pressures and problems dissolve into drink: . . . The scenario, with drinkers protecting themselves from the external cold by warming themselves internally by imbibing before a fire, is familiar from Burns . . . and, indeed, from the Scots tradition' (*Burns Companion* 276). On the hero of MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man*, M. P. McCulloch states that the drunk man persona 'is also a very relevant *persona* in relation to the contradictory and controversial ideas explored: "there's nocht sae sober as a man blin' drunk" (277) reminds the reader that the mythology of the philosophising drunk has a long history and that a drunk man can get away with behaviour that wouldn't be sanctioned in the sober world.' ("Hugh MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir and Poetry in the Inter-War Period" in *Scottish Literature in English and Scots* 522)

<sup>11</sup> G. G. Smith forged the term for the essence of Scottish literature: 'Perhaps in the very combination of opposite . . . "the Caledonian Antisyzygy" — we have a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability, . . . ' (4)

<sup>12</sup> On the disguise of drunkenness, see Gish, 66-67; Oxenhorn, 65-67; Nakashima, "A *Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* — On the Logic of Drunkenness." (in Japanese)

### Works Cited

- Bold, Alan. *A Burns Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1991. Print.
- Child, F. J., ed. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. 5 vols. 1965. New York: Dover, 2003. Print.
- Davidson, John. *In a Music-Hall: And Other Poems*. 1891. Charleston, SC: Nabu, 2010. Print.
- . *Bruce: A Drama in Five Acts*. 1893. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2010. Print.
- . *Testaments by John Davidson*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. Web. 28 Aug. 2017.
- . *The Man Forbid and Other Essays*. Introd. Edward J. O'Brien. Boston: Ball, 1910. Web. 8 Mar. 2014.
- Gifford, Douglas, Sarah Dunnigan, and Alan MacGillivray, eds. *Scottish Literature: In English and Scots*. Edinburgh UP, 2002. Print.

- Gish, Nancy. *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and His Work*. Macmillan, 1984. Print.
- Glen, Dancan, ed. *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969. Print.
- Gosse, Edmund. *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. Macmillan, 1917. Web. 28 Aug. 2015.
- Grieve, Michael, and W. R. Aitken, eds. *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*. 2 vols. 1978. Penguin, 1985. Print.
- Hamilton, Janet. "Oor Location". *All poetry*. Web. 4 July 2014.
- Kinsley, James, ed. *Burns Poems and Songs*. 1969. Oxford, 1988. Print.
- Lang, Cecil Y., ed. *The Swinburne Letters*. Vol. 4. Yale UP, 1960. Print.
- Lindsay, Maurice, ed. *John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems*. London: Hutchinson, 1961. Print.
- MacDiarmid, Hugh. *Lucky Poet*. Methuen, 1943. Print.
- Millard, Kenneth. *Edwardian Poetry*. Oxford UP, 1992. Print.
- Morgan, Edwin. "Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century". *The History of Scottish Literature: Vol. 3 Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Douglas Gifford. Aberdeen UP, 1988. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Trans. Thomas Common. Web. 13 June 2015.
- Oxenhorn, Harvey. *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid*. Edinburgh UP, 1984. Print.
- Peterson, Carroll V. *John Davidson*. New York: Twayne, 1972. Print.
- Sloan, John. *John Davidson, First of the Moderns*. Oxford UP, 1995. Print.
- Smith, G. Gregory. *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*. Macmillan, 1919. Print.
- Turnbull, Andrew, ed. *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2vols. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973. The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 3. Print.
- Watson, Roderick, ed. *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots and English*. Edinburgh UP, 1995. Print.
- Wittig, Kurt. *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*. Edinburgh: James Thin, 1958. Print.
- Yeats, W. B. *Autobiographies*. Macmillan, 1926. Print.

中島久代(Nakashima, H). 「A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle — 酔いのロジックが意味するもの —」 ("A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle: On the Logic of Drunkenness") 『福岡女学院大学紀要』 2 (1992): 309-26. Print.

- 
- . 「カレドニア的相反と労働者の詩 — 19世紀スコットランド文学とデイヴィッドソンのバラッド詩 —」 (“Caledonian Antisyzygy and Poetry of Labourers: Scottish Literature of the Nineteenth Century and Literary Ballads of John Davidson”) 『英文学と道徳』九州大学出版会 (2005): 195-215. Print.
- . 「ジョン・デイヴィッドソン 藁が燃えるような暴力的なエネルギーの生涯 — 孤高の詩人の誕生から最期まで —」 (“John Davidson as ‘a Fire of Straw’: from the Birth of the Independent Poet to the End of his Furious Life”) 『スコットランド文学 その流れと本質』開文社 (2011): 343-59. Print.