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Extremism in Poiesis and Praxis: Hugh MacDiarmid, Malcolm X, and Barry Goldwater, Oxford 1964

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Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

—Oxford Union Debate, December 3, 1964^[1]

This motion was adapted from Barry Goldwater's speech at the Republican National Convention on July 16, 1964, in which he accepted the party's presidential nomination. One month after Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory over the firebrand conservative, the motion was debated in an altogether different though no less performative context. Amongst those speaking for the motion at the Oxford Union were two unlikely bedfellows: the poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, an avant-gardist in the cultural sphere and vanguardist in the political, outspoken Scottish nationalist, and professed communist ideologue, and the political activist and cultural icon, Malcolm X, former Nation of Islam minister, revolutionary black nationalist, and, increasingly during this period, anti-colonial internationalist.^[2] Just a few minutes before midnight the motion they had supported was defeated 228 votes to 137. Nevertheless, in MacDiarmid's thirteen minutes of diverse, emphatic aphorisms, and in Malcolm X's thirty minutes of careful exposition on the depth and breadth of global injustice, the poet and the activist revealed a common cultural-political agenda.

Through close analysis of the respective speeches, the motion and its resonances, and thorough cultural and political contextualization, this article identifies a unique opportunity in this televised debate: to imagine a new way in which modernist avant-gardism and political vanguardism of the interwar period might relate to the Civil Rights Movement, anti-colonial struggles, and human rights discourses emergent in the early 1960s. While both MacDiarmid and Malcolm X make for controversial representatives of these respective cultural-historical moments, their fleeting and entirely arbitrary allegiance during this singular event in Oxford reveals that in their defense of "extremism" they each rejected the conventional ontologies of political action, supplanting ends with pure means. This focus on process and commitment would allow them, at least in rhetorical terms, to advocate for a revolutionary political consciousness while rejecting "moderation" for its perceived cynicism and instrumentalism, and for the so-called "common sense" arguments that are frequently invoked in support of it.

The debate has attracted substantial attention among Malcolm X scholars, particularly with respect to the development of the activist's worldview in these final months of his life. However, MacDiarmid scholars, and critical treatments of the afterlives of modernist thought more generally, have not made much of the event. This article does not make great claims for the significance of the debate in understanding MacDiarmid's political views in isolation; rather, it claims that this event, and others like it—public debates and the displays of virtuosic oratory they invite—might provide a new and distinct forum for examining the afterlives of the interwar avant-garde, in this case, in the crucible of an applied and concrete political discourse. An additional point of departure it promotes is the public debate as an underexplored but valuable resource that cultural critics might look to in reconciling ideological and aesthetic precepts with public discourse. Modernist studies, in particular, has long dealt with the rift between compositional sophistication and popular reception. Furthermore, the familiar notion of literature as intellectual speech-act can be said to invite its inverse: the intellectual speech-act *as* literature. The subject of this article provides a test-case for these critical frameworks.

The most striking feature of this particular event is its unique convergence of personalities, ideologies, and setting: the motion from a Cold Warrior Senator defended by a black nationalist and a Scottish communist, in front of an audience made up largely of ascendant UK elites, in an establishment institution historically complicit in British colonialism, broadcast by the BBC for a public recovering from a general election marked by divisive campaigns on immigration and race. By isolating this event, we might strike upon connections between the artist and the activist as understood by two figures who dedicated enormous efforts to understanding the respective revolutionary potentialities embodied by those vocations. This proximity of purpose can help us to understand MacDiarmid's own conceptualization of the typically modernistic turn from grand historical *ends* (in political or poetical terms), towards *means* as non-relational and self-contained. It can also help us to map out one convergence between this modernist scepticism towards the confluence of actions and ideals, and the immanence of active political struggles in the post-war era (from Harlem to central Africa). How, in this context, can revolutionary strategy conceived in abstract and delivered in aphorism (MacDiarmid), and that born of personal hardship, racial cosmology, and the experience of political and cultural leadership (Malcolm X) align? And why is it that this alliance is not concerned with clear or common definitions of “liberty” or “justice”?

Arguing on the side of the poet and the activist was Eric Anthony Abrahams, the outgoing President of the Union. Opposing the motion were Christie Davies, president of the Cambridge Union; Humphry Berkeley, at that time Conservative Member of Parliament for Lancaster; and Lord Stoneham, a Labour Peer. This thoroughly establishment opposition appealed to an appetite

for measured, dispassionate compromise in place of the seemingly instinctive and unthinking absolutism of the zealots. Their approach was bolstered by the proponents' reputations for hyperbole. Consider MacDiarmid's assurances that he "would sacrifice a million people any day for one immortal lyric," and Malcolm X's notorious response to news of John F. Kennedy's assassination: "a case of 'the chickens coming home to roost.'" [3] It was against this backdrop that both Berkeley and Stoneham were able to invoke the pragmatism of political and parliamentary experience in contrast to the remit of artistic vision, civic resistance, or full-blown revolution. In his opening salvo, Berkeley set out to caricature the unholy alliance with which he was faced:

And I must say to this house, Mr. President, that any motion that can unite an apostle of racial absolutism with an apostle of economic absolutism must, in my view, clearly be wrong [applause and laughter]. Particularly when they are joined together to defend a thesis propounded by a man who voted both against civil rights and anything remotely suggestive of socialism. This seems to me to take cynicism almost to the point of absurdity.

MacDiarmid and Malcolm X were, however, careful not to allow the integrity of their arguments to be undermined by emotive pleas, nor rendered "academic" through ideological (or, simply logical) abstraction. In avoiding the polar risks of these conventional modes of persuasion—*pathos* and *logos*—they sought out a line of argument characterised by a wilful elevation of dissent over agreement and commitment over compromise. Their speeches were at once violent, droll, and even metaphysical. They gave wide berth to the prescribed roles of the over-earnest, shirt-rending sentimentalist and the dispassionate, conjectural dialectician, and instead deployed a subtle argumentation by *ethos*—that is, by the particular authority afforded by the perceived duties, and insights, of the artist and the activist. They thereby performed in debate a confluence of revolutionary strategy, though they spoke with the authority of different types of social actors, through the accumulated weight of divergent intellectual and political traditions, and in voices that found their form and ideation in different struggles.

The Speakers in 1964

In the context of the political mainstream of the mid-1960s, to be comfortable with the term "extremism" was to challenge perfectly legitimate feelings of fear and anxiety with solutions that spoke to sheer will and obstinacy. The scale of Goldwater's defeat in 1964 was due in large part to the ubiquity of this perspective. A climate of "hate" was said to have killed Kennedy, and even Republican commentators took to comparing Goldwaterites with groups such as the Nation of Islam (NOI), to which Malcolm X had belonged. The comparison was not simply a rhetorical

flourish; it was substantiated by policy—specifically, a common rejection of racial integration. This dynamic of unlikely associations seems comparable to Marcus Garvey’s negotiations with Edward Young Clarke of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922, and the NOI’s with George Lincoln Rockwell of the American Nazi Party in 1961.[4] Perhaps Garvey and the NOI thought it would be easier to speak in clear terms with murderous reactionaries than with those who acknowledged the injustices their communities strained against, but did not recognize the imperative of action. These “extreme” antagonists, by circumventing the hypocrisy and Machiavellian maneuvering of professed “moderates,” were able to exercise a kind of positional parallelism. MacDiarmid and Malcolm X would adapt and develop this notion in their Oxford speeches.

Malcolm X had broken publicly with the NOI and with the teachings of its prophet, Elijah Mohammed, in March of 1964. He established his Pan-Africanist “Organization of Afro-American Unity” (OAAU) in affiliation with the anti-colonial Organisation of African Unity (a precursor to the African Union) in June of that year. Following his pilgrimage to Mecca, and numerous visits with spiritual and political leaders across Africa and the Middle East, Malcolm X came to reject many of his former positions, and now embraced an emphatically internationalist perspective, binding the global anti-colonial struggle to domestic movements for racial equality, and even incorporating the language of contemporary socialist and anti-capitalist movements.[5] As he discarded the eccentric cosmology of the NOI and embraced orthodox Islam, his political worldview became more secular; his religious work found its focus outside of the OAAU, in the Muslim Mosque Incorporated (MMI, est. 1964). The evolution in Malcolm X’s thought is famously encapsulated in an episode recalled in the *Autobiography*, in which he comes to regret his response to an over-eager privileged white student’s offer of solidarity and support: “‘What can I *do*?’ she exclaimed. I told her, ‘Nothing’” (394, emphasis in original). Some years later, wishing that he might contact this student and revise his answer, he reflected: “Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people!” (496). In recent publications marking the fiftieth anniversary of the debate, historians have distinguished the Oxford Union speech as the apogee of Malcolm X’s political thought, in what were to be the final months of his life.[6] He would be assassinated at the hands of NOI agents in New York on February 21, 1965.

The Oxford Union debate has been awarded less prominence among MacDiarmid scholars. In Alan Bold’s biography it features as only one among a long series of public engagements attended by the “grand old man of Scottish letters” in the mid-1960s.[7] By 1964, MacDiarmid had long since produced the great bulk of his poetic corpus, and his most celebrated works had been published more than thirty years previous. Associated primarily with the interwar Scottish literary renaissance, and with a program of cultural nationalism conceived to resist the ascendancy of the English literary canon, reconnecting with contemporary European innovations

in terms of literary form, intellectual ideas and the purposive nature of art, and with the frontiers of philosophic and scientific enquiry, in 1964 MacDiarmid was the figurehead of a cultural-historical moment that seemed to an increasing number of the younger generation of writers long outmoded. His collected works were being collated, his early lyrics were increasingly anthologized, and his work won the recognition of the literary establishment in receiving the Foyle Prize in 1963. Given his emeritus status, his standing in literary history was increasingly out of his control, more the subject of scholarly monographs, and broader academic discourses. This is not to suggest that these critical works were overwhelming in number, weight, or extent, or that MacDiarmid has always enjoyed an uncontested place in the modernist canon, but that discussion had started to proceed without him in this period. MacDiarmid's appetite for public controversy was, however, unabated. He had attacked the emergent generation of Scottish writers at the 1962 Edinburgh International Writers' Conference for their cosmopolitanism and their failure to produce material of sufficient political heft. In the few months preceding the Oxford debate he had engaged in a protracted assault on the popular folk revival in the opinion pages of the *Scotsman* newspaper.^[8] In October, MacDiarmid had stood in the UK general election as the Communist candidate for Kinross and West Perthshire in opposition to the sitting Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Polling only 127 votes (fewer even than the 137 at the Oxford debate), he went on to take Douglas-Home to Election Court under the Representation of the People Act (1949), ostensibly for having procured more exposure for his platform on BBC broadcasts than was made available to the poet-politician.^[9] MacDiarmid relished any opportunity to vex the British Establishment, to puncture the orthodoxies of conventional political posturing and propriety, and to transgress any limiting conceptions of the public life of the artist.

In December 1964, therefore, the poet-contrarian and the activist-orator were set on inverse career trajectories. While both would establish lasting legacies, MacDiarmid was rearticulating a familiar vision of the committed artist that could easily be taken as retrospective justification for a lifetime's work; Malcolm X was still seeking out the correct expression for a nascent political-ethical worldview. Both men had been under the surveillance of their respective nations' Security Services, and both had evolved publicly in their respective political and spiritual allegiances: MacDiarmid's early interest in Fascism gave way to his idiosyncratic interpretations of communist doctrine; Malcolm X's disillusionment with the NOI and his embrace of Sunni Islam was widely reported, as were his efforts to manage a tabloid reputation as the "angriest Negro in America" (*Autobiography*, 483). At the Oxford Union, Berkeley took great pleasure in elaborating on his opponents' contrivances:

The two visiting proposing speakers tonight have at least one thing in common, neither is appearing under his own name. One has a pseudonym which has apparently been plundered

from the Gaelic poets, and another has a pseudonym which has apparently . . . been plagiarized from the works of Kafka.

The comparison is trite given the motivations behind these assumed names—one, admittedly, part of a deliberate poetical and political persona, but the other a marker for an unknowable heritage, lost to the violence of colonialism and slavery. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worthy of reflection that neither Christopher Murray Grieve nor Malcolm Little would likely have been invited to the Union, and that in both cases, their public personae played a calculated role in the pursuit of a politico-cultural agenda.^[10]

The debate at which they appeared has been long remembered in the Oxford Union itself—a fiftieth anniversary debate in 2014 featured Cornell West and Angela Davis speaking for the same motion.^[11] And while it has come to represent the best of the Oxford Union in its timeliness, its timelessness, and its virtuoso performances, for the poet and the activist it was neither a familiar nor a comfortable forum for debate. In a letter dated a few days after the event MacDiarmid wrote of the “Tories” he and Malcolm X had faced, and of the student body: “quite incredibly callow: all they want on such occasions is plenty of giggles.”^[12] The recordings of the debate do nothing to dispel the Union’s reputation for pomp and ceremony, haughtiness and self-satisfaction. We might speculate that this culture of self-assurance comes with the promise of accession to a long-established elite, but to these particular speakers it no doubt seemed a concentrated site of the kinds of assumptions and conventions against which they had struggled in contemporary literary and political cultures.^[13] Indeed, the characteristic in-jokes and superciliousness of the Union contrasted with the poet’s defiantly dour tone, and the activist’s relaxed and sometimes comedic self-awareness. Each of their approaches might readily be explained by any number of factors: the symbolism of the Union as a training ground for the House of Commons (a so-called “playground of power”), the privilege they observed in the audience (“members only”), or the great opportunity afforded by the BBC’s coverage to broadcast their diagnoses and cures for modernity’s maladies. This said, in MacDiarmid’s aloofness, and Malcolm X’s calm, plain-spoken engagement with the other speakers, each conveyed that the familiar thrust and parry of the institution was beneath them, unworthy of their arguments. Their attacks would not be *ad hominem*, nor would they rely on puns, nor couch their criticisms in perfunctory posturing. The stance they assumed in relation to “extremism” would have appeared insincere and the purpose of their excoriating tone would have been lost, had they conceded to any of these performative conventions.

The Motion

On the surface, the motion debated at Oxford employs a common rhetorical device in its adoption of the terms of an ideology it is designed to discredit. In this case, two pillars of the liberal tradition, liberty and justice, are at once left undefined and placed beyond reproach. This might give us some clue as to the potency of the statement and the expansive discursive possibilities it invites, not least when its discussants move beyond a surface reading and into context, ideation, application, and ethics. “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue” is a deceptive apophthegm. Its syntactical structure affects a self-contained and self-evident kind of logic that does not withstand much scrutiny. It approximates a chiasmus—a device familiar to Malcolm X: “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock; the Rock was landed on us.”^[14] However, the implied formal symmetry of the statement is not substantiated. The object is changed from liberty to justice. Furthermore, the negative affirmations (*no vice; no virtue*) only tell us what these combinations of means and ends are not. They do not necessarily imply the inverse (that extremism in defense of liberty is virtuous). The flow of the maxim, then, disguises its complexity and evades the burden of definition that must come with any pronouncement on liberty and its costs. John F. Kennedy’s celebrated chiasmus, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” described the relationship between two variables.^[15] Goldwater’s contains six: extremism, moderation, liberty, justice, virtue, and vice. The rhetorical effect of the chiasmic structure is to suggest that all tenets of the underlying argument have been considered (that is, all *two* sides). But given the variety of abstract concepts and syntactical ambiguity, Goldwater’s notorious aphorism falls far short of its implied exhaustiveness. If glossed, it reads as an elegant yet violent dismissal of nuance, though it neglects to replace that nuance with the kind of readily graspable message that so-often characterizes reactionary political discourse. It remains a puzzle.

The implied parallelism of the two halves of the statement asks us to set extremism and moderation, and vice and virtue, in opposition—that is, only questions of *method* and *merit*. Liberty and justice can, in different circumstances, be seen as either hostile or harmonious. Furthermore, their inclusion introduces ideology to the proposition, even if in equivocal terms. Were these ideals removed, those opposing the motion might have made more use of Aristotle’s Golden Mean, where virtue is the median between polar vices of excess and deficiency—bravery between recklessness and cowardice, for example.^[16] However, in Aristotle’s spectra of human qualities and their relative intensities is a descriptive formula for behavior, rather than an invocation of ends and means. The motion’s implicit claim for principle and steadfastness combined with its grammatical and conceptual ambiguity inspired a debate that would not settle on its terms or its topic.

The word “extremist” is usually exonymic. Certainly, it lends itself to rhetorical posturing. It dictates the parameters of a given discussion by identifying what lies outside of the accepted bounds of reason, morality, or simply proportion. It describes the dynamic between ends and means, aims and objectives, strategy and tactics. Any defense of “extremism” therefore, is also an implicit acceptance of the often inflexible and unfathomable taxonomies that delineate the “moderate” and the “extreme.” In short, it means accepting the parameters of those who would adopt the term as a pejorative, and it means explaining why propriety is not the primary metric for value or virtue. The criteria for “extremism” went largely undefined at Oxford, though examples of “extremism” *as* violence—both hypothetical and historical—provided applied models both for and against the motion.

During the Oxford Union debate, one recurring stance among the opposition was to emphasize subjective perspectives on “liberty” and “justice.” Davies suggested that the motion ought to have been adapted to “Extremism in the defense of liberty *as defined by me* is no vice.” This issue had been pre-empted by Abrahams, who offered this definition: “men are free when they regard themselves as free.” It follows that “men should have the right to protect what they regard as freedom.” Of course, this retreat to a fully devolved freedom leaves the motion open to a predictable retort: if every conception of liberty is legitimate, then competing and even contradictory liberties must engage in an endless struggle where no authoritative arbitration can be exercised. While this might appear to be a familiar dimension of postmodernity—a sweeping relativism, or radical de-centering—it finds its expression (through Abrahams) not as part of a wry, mocking, or otherwise self-aware pose, but as a severe limitation on the horizons of political discourse: to the self and its projections, and no further. Unimaginable horrors can therefore remain perfectly defensible according to this reading of Goldwater’s dictum. These arguments do not, however, trouble MacDiarmid and Malcolm X. For both, the validation for “extremism” is precisely in the fact that it is an untameable yet inevitable historical force. As MacDiarmid puts it, “our liberties such as they are, have been hard won, and must be *continually re-won* if they are to be retained, let alone extended.” If this debate is principally about ends and means, they do not claim to see a clear path to the ends they have in mind; they only know that all means must always be available. In this vein, “by any means necessary” was somewhat of a refrain in Malcolm X’s oratory, not just at Oxford.

In his opening defense of the motion, Abrahams explained that the notoriety of the statement was not due to its true meaning, but due to “what was meant when it was said.” However, in the course of the debate the intentional fallacy was dispensed with swiftly. The original statement might be understood simply as an ill-conceived slight aimed at the “moderate” wing of the GOP who had supported Nelson Rockefeller for the presidential nomination and who had decried

Goldwater and his followers as “extremists.” Goldwater’s opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, his recklessness on Cold War diplomacy, his association with William F. Buckley Jr.’s *National Review*, and his unwillingness to distance himself from the support of Robert W. Welch Jr.’s John Birch Society, helped this charge stick. However, in the context of Goldwater’s oratorical repertoire, the question of political “extremism” was moot. It was “a synonym, if anything, for ‘principle.’”^[17] John C. Hammerback describes the rhetorical import of the speech itself: “Goldwaterites labeled as extremists had become noble harbingers of the people, enlightened resisters of slavish conformity, and brave evangelists of the truth.”^[18] In Goldwater’s own book, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), ghost-written by his speechwriter L. Brent Bozell, traditional conservative political values were refashioned for a younger generation who responded well to call-to-arms rhetoric and the elevation of Freedom, Autonomy, and Authenticity as mobilizing watchwords. His was a movement that insisted on its mission to “preserve and extend freedom,” taking account of the “whole man,” not only of his material well-being but his “spiritual nature,” secure in the knowledge that “to regard man as part of an undifferentiated mass is to consign him to ultimate slavery.”^[19] This particular strain of libertarian conservatism, and this justification for “extremism,” was therefore characterized by an irresolvable tension between the atomized demands of individuals, and the prerogative of a political philosophy to account for the collective: the whole of man, and not just the whole man. Decrying the materialism of the socialist and the economic obsessions of the liberal, Goldwater conservatives identified with an ill-defined notion of man’s spiritual dimension, of his place in accordance with an always capitalized, and thoroughly elusive, Nature.

Nevertheless, even Goldwater came to recognize the problem of connotative meaning and sought to clarify his position in a letter to Richard Nixon:

If I were to paraphrase the two sentences in question in the context in which I uttered them I would do it by saying that whole-hearted devotion to liberty is unassailable and that half-hearted devotion to justice is indefensible. (quoted in Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 505)

This mitigated version seems to respond more sensitively to the social and geopolitical concerns of the day, as well as to the expediency of internal party politics. However, in doing so, it removes questions of *method* and *merit* entirely, and retreats to “devotion,” a measure of love, loyalty, or enthusiasm rather than an instrumental question of means. “Vice” and “virtue” are replaced with the “unassailable” and the “indefensible,” qualities that can be readily deployed outside of an ethical framework. In short, Goldwater’s professed context results in something resembling the following: “It is difficult to argue against fidelity to the ideals of liberty and

justice.” MacDiarmid and Malcolm X would, I think, have held no truck with the revised version. The aspects of the original that made Goldwater vulnerable to criticism—the disarming ambiguity and the implied violence—were the very qualities that enlisted the support of the poet and the activist.

Signalling his concern with means over ends, MacDiarmid had no trouble agreeing with a statement of general principle without sharing the conceptions of liberty or justice promoted by its author. Beyond Goldwater, he gave two further examples at Oxford. First, Kennedy, from his inaugural address: “Let every nation know . . . that we shall pay any price, bear any burden . . . support any friend or oppose any foe, [in order] to assure the survival and success of liberty.”^[20] Second, Churchill: “[V]ictory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however hard and long the road may be.”^[21] Malcolm X went still further in his assessment of Goldwater’s forthrightness: “I have more respect for a man who lets me know where he stands, even if he’s wrong, than the one who comes up like an angel and is nothing but a devil.” In his *Autobiography*, he channels Niccolo Machiavelli and Cicero to make a similar point: “If it had been Goldwater [who won the 1964 election] . . . the black people would at least have known they were dealing with an honestly growling wolf, rather than a fox [Lyndon B. Johnson] who could have them half-digested before they even knew what was happening” (492).^[22] In this sense, MacDiarmid and Malcolm X insist that a statement of general principle can be misapplied, or even accurately but reprehensibly applied, and still stand. With Goldwater, they hold the hypocrite in common contempt. They oppose those who would outwardly balk at an invocation of ends justifying means, even while they exercise their power only in order to sustain it, thereby conceiving power as its own end and dodging the issue.^[23]

Extremism and Revolution

MacDiarmid’s most commonly cited pronouncement on extremism is also inscribed on his headstone. It comes from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926):

I’ll ha’e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur
Extremes meet—it’s the only way I ken
To dodge the curst conceit o’ bein’ richt
That damns the vast majority o’ men.^[24]

In these lines his “extremism” encapsulates a philosophical stance. It is, at least in part, an expression of his understanding of dialectical materialism. Like other aspects of MacDiarmid’s

political philosophy, however, it is not easily reconciled with ideological orthodoxies. In the context of the poem, and in Oxford, it makes him hostile to the posturing of the middle road, and immune to the narrow, short-lived satisfaction of “being right.” After all, this impulse to “be right” only leads the “vast majority o’ men” to articulate a provisional, fleeting kind of truth, provable under only the most circumscribed conditions. As critics have long understood, MacDiarmid’s wilful tone and his professed absolutism is liable to distract us from the creative instability and adaptability of his thinking.[25] His dialectic is evocative of Wyndham Lewis’s in *Blast*(1914):

We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure
of adolescent clearness between two extremes.

We discharge ourselves on both sides.

We fight first on one side, then on the other. But always for the SAME cause,
which is neither side or both sides and ours.[26]

The Vorticists’ series of “blessed” and “blasted” phenomena performed a partly satiric function with some items listed in both columns and therefore, in some sense, self-cancelling. However, the persistent feature of this sequence is the self-referent: “we,” “ours.” *Blast* claims to be at once iconoclastic, disinterested, and thoroughly partisan in its advocacy for the avant-garde.[27] MacDiarmid shared this conviction, though in his case it made simultaneous claims to the terms of Marxist-Leninist vanguardism, venerating the working class for its historical agency: “Only by the severest intellectual discipline / Can one of the bourgeois intelligentsia win / Up to the level of the proletariat” (“Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa,” *Complete Poems*, 407).[28] Where Lewis had erected his flamboyant contradictions in violent opposition to Marxism, MacDiarmid conceived of his in an effort to imaginatively encapsulate dialectical materialism, though he encountered problems in retaining the privileged vantage point of the artist.[29] The result was a revolutionary politics and aesthetics that were thoroughly sceptical about the direct influence of collectivism or democracy in either field.

MacDiarmid’s contribution to the Oxford debate began, characteristically, on the offensive:

[the] doctrine of Moderation in all things seems to me the most abominable, anti-vital doctrine that has ever been promulgated in the history of mankind. I prefer to take Blake’s dictum, that “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom and is the only road that does.”[30]

Already it is clear that the poet does not need the provisos of liberty or justice to give grounds for his pursuit of the extreme. In the speech that followed, MacDiarmid echoed the compositional methods of his own later prose and poetic works, offering up a patchwork of quotations, from the Book of Revelation through “The Declaration of Arbroath” (1320) and Mao Zedong All in service of a forceful commitment to the role of poetry and the intellectual vanguard in pursuing his principal and stated end: the “extension of human consciousness.”^[31] Conveniently, it is an end without an endpoint.

Following Berkeley, who had just attacked him as “America’s leading exponent of Apartheid,” Malcolm X was launched helpfully into his exposition of the complex of attitudes and assumptions that have, over centuries, helped to reaffirm and reify imperialism, racism, and other modes of oppression. These factors, so entrenched in the West, and particularly among the privileged “type” of which Berkeley was, for him representative, are revealed to have repeatedly frustrated moderate, measured efforts to defend liberty and pursue justice. Malcolm X set the debate in both its synchronic and diachronic contexts: cumulative histories of oppression and discrimination were set against the contemporary realities of the Congo Crisis (with extensive reference to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and US interests in the region) and the nexus of struggles—ideological, organisational, rhetorical, constitutional, and legal—associated with the US Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm X spoke in more concrete terms than his poet-ally, and the range of his historical and contemporary referents, the poignancy of his examples, and the precision of his language, mean that his argument gathered force as it revealed a complex interplay of personal and geopolitical histories.

MacDiarmid, like Malcolm X, subscribed to the need for thoroughgoing transformation, though his approach was more instrumental, more deliberately reconciled with revolutionary strategy. He was insistent on the scientific character of his socialism, distinguishing it from the kind of “emotional humanism” he found in traditional liberalism and in the English New Left that had emerged after 1956: his was not a fiery Jacobin moralism, but a cool, revolutionary logic (MacDiarmid, *The Uncanny Scot*, 161). If History is *a priori* amoral it follows that any defense of questism can be dismissed as a kind of surrender or dereliction: hopeful notions of “progress” are wholly insufficient. In this way, the poet and the activist inverted the predictable critique levelled by the moderates, who insisted that their conciliatory approach was validated, and the revolutionary approach rendered fantastical, by the constraints of the real world and the realpolitik. In this, it is the “moderates” who summon Machiavelli: “the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation.”^[32] MacDiarmid and Malcolm X professed to welcome such “self-destruction” if

that was the cost of holding to what “should be”; the primacy of “self-preservation” was precisely the problem.

Malcolm X articulated a more intuitive notion of collective resistance, through widespread education and mobilization. His speech at the Oxford Union took place in precisely the post-NOI moment that his thinking is said to have converged with Frantz Fanon’s, especially as represented in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).^[33] Fanon’s account of the psychological effects of colonialism and his proposals for the revolutionary mobilization of the lumpenproletariat in the anti-colonial struggle was consistent with Malcolm X’s rejection of the philosophy of nonviolence and his disregard for the radical potential of the black bourgeoisie, but it would not sit comfortably alongside MacDiarmid’s misinterpretation of the role of the intellectual cadre from the traditional Marxist-Leninist line, as one that functions outside of—or even in opposition to—the proletariat. This strategic divergence can also be observed at the level of their rhetoric at Oxford: the poet made dense modernistic use of literary allusion, and the activist deployed a more conversational tone and a non-specialist, even idiomatic lexicon. MacDiarmid was convinced that a spearhead of artists and intellectuals would be required to create the imaginative space needed to dispel false consciousness. In contrast, Malcolm X performed a role more in the model of Antonio Gramsci’s “organic intellectual,” making his appeal from among the great mass of the people, showing them their own capacity for revolutionary thought without abstraction. The first step in Malcolm X’s activism was to check the hypocrisy embedded in the language of the hegemonic system of oppression, exposing the distance between its stated values and its practices. The strategic upshot was to reveal that even the kind of “moderation” that leads to incremental amelioration of some of the most overtly oppressive practices is tantamount to complicity, reinforcing and sustaining systems of power by giving them space to reformulate and absorb their structural threats.

The need for “extremism” was, then, predicated on the false consciousness of the people. For MacDiarmid and Malcolm X, threats to liberty and justice were not confined to the most overt manifestations of state power but were part of the fabric of socio-political hegemony.

MacDiarmid reminded his audience that “persecution, bullying, intimidation, humiliation and cruelty, are forms of mental violence,” and Malcolm X described the “language of violence” spoken by the “racialist.” In doing so, they pre-empted and contextualized the opposition’s elision of “extremism” and “violence.” Malcolm X also referred to the use of “extremism” as a “label.” If you were known as an “extremist,” all of your behaviour was that of an “extremist,” whether or not a given act had anything to do with your political agenda. It is worth noting that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose legacy is so often set in contradistinction with that of Malcolm X, was also frequently described as “extremist.” Just one week after the Oxford debate

King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), he professed to have “gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. . . . [T]he question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.” After all “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”^[34]

Malcolm X developed his notion of the “label” into an exposition on the apparatus of the dominant political ideology, its manipulation of “images,” the propagandist role of the press, and the imposition of a universal “yardstick,” or ethical framework, sanctioned by established power. Tracing these phenomena in his own reputation, in contemporary coverage of the civil war in Congo, and in the political structures of the US, he arrived at the hypocrisy that characterizes, but ought to undermine, these forces:

[The black man is] supposed to sit passively and have no feelings, be nonviolent, and *love his enemy* no matter what kind of attack, verbal or otherwise, he’s supposed to take it. But if he stands up and in any way tries to defend himself, [chuckles] then he’s an extremist.

MacDiarmid made a similar point when he lamented “the continued confinement of the people of these [so-called Christian] countries to a mere earthly eudemonism.” Eudemonism is a system of ethics basing moral value on the likelihood of actions generating happiness. It is close to the Christian ethics of “love thy neighbour,” and “turn the other cheek,” that were, for Malcolm X, simply part of the apparatus of consent: what he called “brainwashing” and MacDiarmid called “false consciousness.” To explain the importance of combatting ignorance and apathy among the people, the poet called on Mao for a most incisive diagnosis:

What is the strength of the imperialists? It lies only in the unconsciousness of the people. The consciousness of the people is the basic question, not explosives or weapons, or atom bombs, but the man who handles them. He is still to be educated.^[35]

Malcolm X reflected on a similar awakening in his *Autobiography*: “My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black man in America” (274). In this context, the term “extremism” can be used to delineate those transformative means that have not been absorbed, and therefore neutralized, by established power. Both the poet and the activist couched their defense of “extremism” in relation to broad historical processes and the need to overturn false consciousness of one form or another. Malcolm X and MacDiarmid both advocated unity in

theory and praxis, and this meant collapsing ends and means into one another. To separate them was to allow for the possibility of holding to ideals without pursuing them, or, it was to narrow one's horizons so far as to exclude all action but mere self-preservation.

Poiesis and Praxis

Both speakers felt that the “education” or expanded “consciousness” they fostered was in the ascendant in 1964. Malcolm X warned that “many people who have been in positions of power in the past don't realise that the centres of power are changing,” and MacDiarmid spoke of recent “revolutions, which have changed the balance of world power,” and of ongoing “national liberation movements on three continents.” Neither seems to have based his predictions for the future, or his revolutionary program for the future, on any sanguine belief in the fixed nature of humankind, as Goldwater had in *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Indeed, MacDiarmid made a point of emphasising that the scale of the contemporary historical transformation would “profoundly change the whole nature of man.” This said, the impatience with which the poet and the activist responded to any talk of ennobling virtues or human nature in promoting “moderation,” does not necessarily cast them as the cynics in this contest. It was, after all, their opponents who could not imagine a political philosophy that was not formulated in terms of compromise between competing interests. MacDiarmid's call for “transformation” over “humanism,” and for “a great human mutation,” was variously articulated with the words of Nobel Prize-winning physicist J. J. Thomson, the celebrated neurologist Walter Russell Brain, and the industrialist and automotive pioneer Sir Leon Bagrit. A degree of mechanized abstraction is, therefore, implied in his vision at Oxford, and this was made explicit in the scientific registers of much of his middle-period poetry (for instance “On A Raised Beach” and *In Memoriam James Joyce*). In this formulation, MacDiarmid seems to concede that the revolutionary change required might be affected on more than one front; by circumventing as well as confronting the limitations of the collective consciousness of the masses.

MacDiarmid's promise to avoid the half-way house and “aye be whaur extremes meet” was part of an attempt to see the true historical scale of things. In a late interview he explained:

The variety and the enormity of the world and the infinite possibilities of the human mind are such that contradictions are inevitable for anyone who has a certain depth of intellectual perception. Only shallow minds fancy that they are being consistent. And they can only be consistent within a very narrow ambit. As soon as they endeavour to take in the whole . . . they are lost, completely lost. [36]

In the debate, the poet blamed our collective “unconsciousness” for the fact that “our harmonies and solutions [are on such] contemptibly narrower a level than the conflicts and tragedies which encompass our lives.” Malcolm X reinforced this point:

The only way one can really determine whether or not extremism in defense of liberty is justified is not to approach it as an American, or a European, or an African, or an Asian, but as a human being . . . most people usually think in terms of extremism as something that’s relative, related to someone whom they know or something that they’ve heard of—I don’t think they look upon extremism by itself or all alone. *They apply it to something.*

The need for extremism must be abstracted, protected from contingency and particularized circumstances, and taken as a statement of general principle. To demonstrate that it leads to contradictions, that its absolutism is dangerous, and to advocate moderation in its place, is to *apply it to something*, and so to neuter it.

The failure to apply “extremism” to something concrete—a failure MacDiarmid may be found guilty of in his speech, though Malcolm X could not—is not equivalent to decoupling it from action altogether; rather, it means applying it in ways appropriate to its character. It becomes a corrective, perpetually reminding the poet and the activist of the need to confront the ubiquity of the structures that demand their active resistance. In the closing portions of their speeches both MacDiarmid and Malcolm X set out their commitment to the reconciliation of philosophy and praxis, denying their opponents a convenient line of argumentation—that the respective remits of poetry and activism do not allow for the mundane tangle of Bismarck’s dictum: politics as the art of the possible. In articulating this commitment, each drew from the work of poets they had long admired: Malcolm X from Shakespeare, and MacDiarmid from MacDiarmid.^[37] In turning to poetry they lifted the discourse out of the field of hypothetical and historical thought experiments, beyond the *applications* of stated scenarios, and onto a near-metaphysical level that at once contains and transcends these contexts.

Citing a long discursive poem, “To the Young Poets of the World To-day,” MacDiarmid’s speech ended:

Man can find his own dignity only in action now.

Most people live by a social discipline become intolerably artificial,

A construction whose only merit is its security;

They feel that; they feel the pettiness and emptiness of a social form
Repeated beyond the day of its absolute necessity;
But they fear the possible chaos that would always threaten those who break
through a form;
They are right to fear it—for every creation risks being a destruction
only;
Yet as long as there is strength for creation creation must be risked.

This poem had appeared in extract in MacDiarmid's *Lucky Poet* (1943), a meandering, dense, and heavily intertextual autobiography or "self-study in literature and political ideas." Under the chapter title, "The Ideas Behind My Work," this excerpt continues at some length ("Wipe out the false word 'humanism'; our art is not to be /Misericordious, toothless, pacifist"), it is also set alongside other passages from "Third Hymn to Lenin" ("Our concern is human wholeness"), and early drafts of *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) ("Mine is the antipathy of . . . the doctrinaire to the opportunist, / The potential fanatic to the 'practical man'").^[38] In combination, this series of poetic extracts anticipates his later defense of "extremism." He elaborated at Oxford: "the arts *know no compromise*. The rootlessness and eccentricity of the artist knows no limit. That is the only possible model we can take in this matter."

Naturally, Malcolm X's legacy is one caught up in the symbolism of philosophy and action reconciled. His *Autobiography* has been crucial in promoting the story of a life in terms of transformations and epiphanies, the gradual acquisition of a dispassionate and penetrating diagnostic gaze.^[39] As if accounting for this personal resolve as well as for the motion at hand, Malcolm X closed his speech with an idiosyncratic reading of Hamlet's soliloquy:

"To be or not to be" [pause], he was in doubt about something [laughter]. Whether it was nobler in the mind of man to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Moderation. "Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles, / And, by opposing, end them." And I go for that. If you take up arms, you'll end it. But if you sit around and wait for the one who's in power to make up his mind that he should end it, you'll be waiting a long time.

With some irony, Malcolm X finds in Hamlet's words a summary of the dilemma between "extremism" and "moderation," between opposition and sufferance. Of course, the soliloquy

continues without him: “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, / Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, . . .

Thus conscience does make cowards—
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment,
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.[40]

MacDiarmid and Malcolm X did not pretend that their commitment to “extremism” is unproblematic in *application*, but they believed that the “name of action” must be retained even if it requires some abeyance of foresight. In his speech, MacDiarmid prefigured Malcolm X’s Hamlet with these famous lines from James Graham, the first Marquis of Montrose (1612–1650):

He either fears his Fate too much,
Or his Deserts are small,
That dares not put it to the touch,
To gain or lose it all.[41]

We might speculate on the intended effects of these closing lines from both speakers: one, perhaps the single most recognisable passage of English literature, the other, a rather self-indulgent passage of proclamatory abstracts from MacDiarmid’s later, less successful and less accessible “poetry of facts.” Malcolm X’s use of Shakespeare is prefaced with some causal posturing (“I read once, passingly, about a man named Shakespeare”), and was perhaps designed to taunt the Union audience by interpreting these vaunted lines as a hymn to political action.[42] MacDiarmid’s reading, on the other hand, seems to have been deployed to demonstrate the confluence of philosophy and praxis his work had long argued for, and to reaffirm the role of the poet in reconciling the universal and the particular.

Though these figures dealt in absolutes, they were comfortable with the mess of contradictions, controversies, and contortions that this produced. And they succeeded, in this Oxford Union debate, in glimpsing larger processes than those accessible to the champions of compromise, diplomacy, and moderation who sat across the chamber. Prompting some mirth, MacDiarmid

cited his favourite quotation from the Bible, from the Book of Revelation: “because thou art neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm, therefore will I spit thee out of my mouth.” As a reflection on the duty to seek resolve it sits close to the sense of that aphorism commonly attributed to Malcolm X: “if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.”

In the context of global decolonization, the US Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and escalating conflict in Vietnam, MacDiarmid and Malcolm X demonstrated a common understanding of historical processes, and the “extremism” that might be required to intervene on their behalf. Though their conceptions of these principles were very different, together they set out a more equivocal, less dogmatic case for “extremism” than that their opponents were able to construct for “moderation.” The debate transcripts can be read as a performed exploration of the relationships between rhetoric and action, and between abstraction and manifestation.

MacDiarmid’s defense of “extremism” could not have been more abstract; Malcolm X’s could not have been more concrete. Their combined referential reach included allusions to, or citations from, scripture, Shakespeare, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, American and French Revolutionary doctrines, Romantic poetry, Seán O’Casey, Kennedy, Churchill, leading lights in contemporary science, and the tabloid press. In combination, therefore, they made an unwilling and perhaps unknowing concession to the nascent cultural norms of postmodernity: their performances were pointedly self-reflexive, and in their efforts to establish the immutability of their position and the myopia of their opponents’, they risked collapsing discrete historical signifiers into one another, eliding the distinctions in context that would characterize a conventionally materialist analysis. They did not mount a purely rational appeal, nor an emotive one, but they did insist that their respective roles, as poet and activist, afforded them perspectives that superseded the myopia that conceives of only compromise and concession.

Extremism was for them *necessary*, in the mode of W. H. Auden’s “necessary murder.”^[43] *In extremis*, the argument goes, extreme responses are apposite. The question that emerges is not “should we be extreme?,” rather, we are asked to calmly and deliberately acknowledge the vast horizons of such states of *extremis*. After all, their pervasiveness and their seeming permanence surely prompts us to assume a more extreme posture in response, in anticipation, and, perhaps, in perpetuity. This constitutes a thorough rejection of the established liberal ontologies of political action.^[44] In arguing for means without ends, MacDiarmid and Malcolm X refused to situate themselves in the discursive landscape sketched out by their opponents (and by the motion): they bristled at the condescension that comes with finding common ground in ideals, ends, or great causes ill-defined; and they understood the dividing line in the debate to be of more significance than a matter of extenuating circumstances, or narrow considerations of tactics and instrumentalism. In this sense they anticipated Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the political as a

kind of perpetual potentiality, a “sphere of pure means,” and they formulated their arguments appropriately. Drawing from Aristotle and Marcus Terentius Varro, Agamben sets out “production,” (or “poiesis”) as having an end other than itself, and “action” (or “praxis”) as being an end in itself.[45] He also states: “Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.”[46] In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844), Marx elaborates a similar function for “criticism”: “no longer an *end in itself*, but now simply a *means*. *Indignation* is its essential pathos, *denunciation* its principal task.”[47] At Oxford, the poet and the activist demanded immediate and utter transformation precisely because they acknowledged the structural, phenomenological, and metaphysic distance between the present and their projected revolutionary futures. In thinking through the motion’s stated ends, these nebulous abstractions, “liberty” and “justice”; through the implicit relativism of “extremism” and “moderation”; and through the seemingly categorical ethical binary of “virtue” and “vice,” they arrived at commitment in spite of everything and because of everything. It is not simply that liberty and justice are endlessly contestable and that “moderation” is little more than an inflexible and unproductive rule of thumb. Whatever liberty or justice are, if they are to be extended, they cannot be repeatedly diluted and adulterated in the interests of a diminished continuance, at least, not in the work of the poet or the political activist. Theirs is a striving maintained in full knowledge that, ultimately, it cannot be satisfied. In embracing this endless deferral with such intransigence, MacDiarmid and Malcolm X divested themselves of any cover that might excuse them of unmet ends, or forgive them for extreme means. At the Oxford Union, they asserted that to concede to any less than “by any means necessary” was not only a failure of the imagination, but a dereliction of the duty of the poet to create (and destroy), and of the activist to advocate (and resist).

Notes

Versions of this paper were presented at Medgar Evers College (CUNY), the University of Edinburgh, the University of London, and NUI Galway. My thanks to those who gave feedback at those events, and to Alex Thomson for advising on an early draft.

[1] All quotations from the December 3, 1964, Oxford Union debate are from the author’s own transcription. The full sound recording can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhAmObHbjuc>.

[2] MacDiarmid's interpretation and application of Leninist-Marxist orthodoxy was uneven. His commitment was full-throated, but his advocacy did not speak of a systematic reading of doctrinal literature. In his prose, it was often opportunistic, and in his poetry, it was typically expansive and metaphorical. Malcolm X was formerly a black nationalist, but at this juncture, was reorienting his thought to encapsulate a broader struggle against colonialism and capital, hence the consolidation of a form of *revolutionary* black nationalism.

[3] Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Uncanny Scot* (London: MacGibbon and Key, 1968), 161; Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; rpt., London: Penguin, 2001), 410–11. The statement on Kennedy's death marked the peak of Malcolm X's visibility as an NOI spokesperson. As he disentangled himself from that group's cosmology and its recruitment tactics, his public statements became more precisely targeted; less cruel, but equally inflammatory.

[4] See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 22, 199–201.

[5] See Marable, *Malcolm X*, 297–417.

[6] See Saladin Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: A Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). See also Jeremy Matthew Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), which traces the intellectual, political, and literary resonances of the Haitian Revolution in the twentieth century. Its conclusion examines Malcolm X's use of *Hamlet* at Oxford in depth.

[7] Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve, A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), 422.

[8] See Corey Gibson, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) for a detailed analysis of this opinion-column debate.

[9] See Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 239–53.

[10] The first appearance of “MacDiarmid” in 1922 marks the emergence of the major modernist poet, a departure for Christopher Murray Grieve, who had been until this point a small-town journalist and middling Georgian poet. On Malcolm X receiving his “X,” see *Autobiography*, 296.

[11] It is also worth noting that the Cambridge Union hosted another high-profile debate the following year that addressed some of the same issues Malcolm X discussed at Oxford. The

debate was between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., over the motion: “Has the American Dream been achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?”

[12] Hugh MacDiarmid, *New Selected Letters*, ed. Dorian Grieve, Owen Dudley Edwards, and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), 404.

[13] On the culture of the Oxford Union and its relationship with the British establishment, see David Walter, *The Oxford Union: Playground of Power* (London: Macdonald, 1984) and Fiona Graham, *Playing at Politics: An Ethnography of the Oxford Union* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2005).

[14] From “The Ballot or Bullet” speech, Washington Heights, New York, March 29, 1964. Not to be confused with the more famous speech of the same title at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, April 3, 1964.

[15] From John F. Kennedy’s “Inaugural Address,” Washington, DC, January 20, 1961.

[16] In a rhetorical flourish Lord Stoneham spoke of moderation as the “golden mean of justice” and of the “Goldwater mean”: the “means of extremism and injustice.”

[17] Rick Perlstein notes that the passage itself, which came from Harry V. Jaffa, one of Goldwater’s speechwriters, caused some consternation in the nominee’s inner circle. Goldwater, however, settled things emphatically, having the passage underlined twice (*Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* [New York: Nation, 2001], 390).

[18] John C. Hammerback, “Barry Goldwater’s Rhetorical Legacy,” *Southern Communication Journal* 64, no. 4 (1999): 323–32, 328.

[19] Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, ed. C. C. Goldwater (1960, rpt., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6, 2, 2, 3–4.

[20] As MacDiarmid describes in his speech, this quotation is also inscribed on the memorial stone to Kennedy at Runnymede.

[21] From Churchill’s first speech in Parliament as Prime Minister on May 13, 1940, three days into the Battle of France.

[22] In Cicero and Machiavelli, the cunning and manipulative fox is opposed with the brute force of the lion, rather than the wolf.

[23] This is not an original insight. See, for example, Montesquieu, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt, on power as its own end.

[24] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, ed. Michael Grieve and William Russell Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 1:87.

[25] MacDiarmid’s politics have, like W. B. Yeats’s, Ezra Pound’s, and T. S. Eliot’s, inspired much debate, and some hand-wringing, among critics. Scott Lyall’s monograph, *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Poetry and the Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh:

Edinburgh University Press, 2006), was the first book-length study to approach the poet's work through the critical lens of his stated political beliefs. MacDiarmid's work has historically been the site of much debate over the cultural politics of Scottish nationhood, though recent work emphasizes an international comparative approach which prioritizes his modernist credentials. See *The Age of MacDiarmid: Essays on Hugh MacDiarmid and his Influence on Contemporary Scotland*, ed. Paul Henderson Scott and A. C. Davis (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1980) and *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) for a sense of the ways in which critical discourse around the poet has changed in recent decades.

[26] Wyndham Lewis, "Manifesto I," *Blast 1* (1914, rpt., Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 1992), 30–31, 30.

[27] On their respective dialectics and conceptions of the avant-garde, see Alex Thomson, "The Asymmetry of British Modernism: Hugh MacDiarmid and Wyndham Lewis," *Modernist Cultures* 8, no. 2 (2013): 252–71.

[28] On the role of the vanguard in the proletarian revolution, see Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*, trans. Nicholas Jacobs (1970; rpt., London: Verso, 2009), 24–37.

[29] Frederic Jameson famously unpacks Lewis's novels to reveal a similar, though far more sophisticated, dynamic embedded in narrative and style in *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 18.

[30] MacDiarmid is here quoting from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790).

[31] From "Art and the Unknown," published in A. R. Orage's *New Age*, May 20 and 27, 1926. Reproduced in MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, 39.

[32] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (1532; rpt., London: Penguin, 2003), 50.

[33] See, for example, Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 46; Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008), 234–53; Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 18, 185; Reiland Rabaka, "Malcolm X and/as Critical Theory: Philosophy, Radical Politics, and the African American Search for Social Justice," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 145–65; William W. Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994); James A. Tyner and Robert J. Kruse, "The Geopolitics of Malcolm X," *Antipode* 36, no. 1 (2004): 24–42.

[34] Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963. In the 2014 anniversary debate at Oxford Cornel West argued that “to be human is to be an extremist for love.”

[35] MacDiarmid’s quotation is taken verbatim from the reportage of Anna Louise Strong (1885–1970), in particular, her “Letter from China” no. 10, “Why I Came to China at the Age of 72,” dated July 26, 1963, which also describes Mao’s infamous “paper tiger” metaphor for the spectre of capitalist reactionaries and their vulnerability in the storm of History.

[36] Interview with Walter Perrie on September 19, 1974, titled “Metaphysics and Poetry,” also published in Alan Bold’s anthology *The Thistle Rises* (1984). Reproduced in MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, 276.

[37] Since the first appearance of “Hugh MacDiarmid” in 1922, he had enthusiastically reviewed his own work under his given name and under other pseudonyms. As his corpus grew, so did his capacity for extensive self-reference.

[38] Hugh MacDiarmid, “The Ideas Behind My Work,” in *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas, Being the Autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Alan Raich (1943; rpt., Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 312–62, 335, 312, 320.

[39] Marable’s subtitle advances this notion still further: “A Life of Reinvention.”

[40] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Q2, from *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006), 3.1.69–70, 82–87.

[41] James Graham, “My Dear and Only Love” as cited by MacDiarmid at Oxford. See also Mark Napier, *Memorials of Montrose and His Times*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Maitland Club, 1849), 239.

[42] Malcolm X had read Shakespeare in prison and had taken part in debates over the Bard’s identity. See Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 281, and Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 116–20.

[43] W. H. Auden, “Spain,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 2001), 57.

[44] The conception of MacDiarmid’s “extremism” that this essay unpacks sits in alignment with much extant scholarship on the poet’s political thought. The aim is not to mitigate his most forthright statements either with convoluted close readings or with the weight of political and intellectual context, rather it is to describe a conception and performance of means over ends. My sense of “endless deferral” is akin to Scott Lyall’s sense of the poet’s “impossibilism” and Bob Purdie’s account of his utopianism. See Lyall, “Hugh MacDiarmid’s Impossible Community,” in *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. Scott Lyall (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 82–102.

[45] Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–62, 56.

[46] Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Politics,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 109–20, 116.

[47] Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 59. Emphasis in original.