I aye saw mair in life nor micht Be fund in books--a drucken nicht, A Free-kirk service, dacin' floo'rs, A woo'in' in the wee sma' oors, A merridge or a birrial, Wid hyst me mair than books e'er shall; But twae books gied me something strange Ne'er fund in a' my warld's range-- Yin by an Irish chield ca'd Joyce, And yin by you in Doric voice. Guidsakes, I never thocht tae see The Scottish Muse stravaig sae free Through a' o' Yirth and Hell and Heeven And oot-and-in its ainsel even, And in my tongue and in my time Hear life's bambaizement set tae rhyme.

So Albert Mackie(1904-1985), (1) in the poem To Hugh M Diarmid (Mackie 1928: 42-45); the 'yin by you in Doric voice', as he specifies in a footnote, is A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (MacDiarmid 1926; Buthlay ed. 1987). (By Doric he meant simply Scots: the commandeering of the term by the North-East to stand exclusively for the dialects of that particular region post-dates Mackie's poem. (2) From the day of its first appearance, A Drunk Man was recognised as revolutionary. MacDiarmid's previous collections of lyrics, Sangschaw and Penny Wheep, had attracted attention by their startling imagery and bold and innovative use of Scots vocabulary; but the mark they made on the Scottish literary scene was as nothing compared to the Drunk Man-, an extended metaphysical rhapsody with an imaginative and intellectual range not seen in Scottish poetry since--arguably at least --the literature of the Stewart period. (3) Mackie's implied bracketing of it with Joyce's Ulysses demonstrates his estimation of its stature as a literary work and its importance as a landmark text.

And indeed, as Mackie was by no means alone in recognising, MacDiarmid's poem was radically innovative in several respects. Linguistically, it built upon and further extended the technique which he had used to good effect in his earlier work, that of combining the language of the Ayrshire-Edinburgh axis of the eighteenth-century Vernacular Revival (the stock medium of Scots poetry from the death of Burns until late in the nineteenth century) with words from his own Border dialect, from reference works (principally Wilson 1915, Watson 1923 and of course Jamieson 1808) and from his wide if unsystematic reading of the late-mediaeval Makars. R. L. Stevenson (1887), in a much-quoted passage from his preface to Underwoods, had expounded his practice of using Scots words from whatever region for their expressive power regardless of dialect consistency: MacDiarmid ranged widely in time as well as space for his vocabulary, (4) and by so doing greatly extended the expressive range of the language. The short lyrics of his first two collections readily illustrate the eclectic nature of his word-stock (several of them are patently showcases for an interesting word or phrase from one of his favourite reference works); but the much larger scale of A Drunk Man afforded far greater scope to his linguistic inventiveness; and the result is a kaleidoscopically varied register fully equipped...