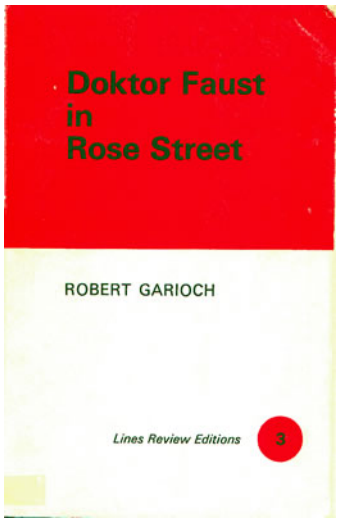
On *Doktor Faust in Rose Street* (1973) by Robert Garioch

Ken Cockburn



Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting Poets' Pub (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*
1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English* (with Robert Garioch)
1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*
1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*
1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*
1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*
1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*
1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with abridgements, corrections and amendments.

The Book

Garioch, Robert
Doctor Faust in Rose Street
(Loanhead: Lines Review Editions, M. Macdonald, 1973)
215x139mm, paperback, 74 pages

When assembling his *Collected Poems* (1977), Garioch felt 'free to arrange [his poems] in groups which largely cut across chronological lines', and did not retain the order of his individual collections, which themselves did not present work chronologically. This re-ordering was followed and developed in the posthumously published *Complete Poetical Works* (1983), edited by Robin Fulton. The order of the poems in *Doctor Faust in Rose Street* is as follows (dates of completion where available are taken from Garioch's notebooks and published in *Complete Poetical Works*):

<u>Poems - One (14 poems)</u>
'... That is stade in Perplexitie...'
Faustus Afore Act I, Scene I (24.3.65)
Doktor Faust in Rose Street (15.2.71)
Perfect (CPWN, 21.10.70)
Cooling-Aff (in the poem itself, 14.9.72)
By the Young Poet... (1.7.71)
Whit Mainner of Lives?
Oil-Strike? (6.12.71)
Twa Fuils (Feb.-Mar. 1967?)
1941 (1.5.67)
The Nostalgie (5.1.48)
Myself When Old (26.11.47)
The Revenant (3.5.67)
Lesson (15.1.73)

<u>Poems - Two (13 poems)</u>
Ane Guid New Sang... (13.12.72)
For the Translation into the Gaelic (26.8.68)
Two Festival Sketches (1.9.71)
Chalk Farm 1945 (written when?)
Thor's Oh! (24.6.68)
Dreary Circle (14.9.72)
Deevil, Maggot and Son
Scunner I
Scunner II

Scunner III (2.9.64)
Calling All Hypocrites (Oct-Nov 1970)
Sonnet (29.5.68)
Ten Couplets (5.3.67)

Translations (19 poems)
Proem & Inscription for a Hermes
Hesiod: Anatomy of Winter (1954)
Goethe: Prometheus
Belli: Twelve Sonnets
Apollinaire:
Deleted Passage (Sept. 1968?)
Autumn (7.9.68)
Victory (23.9.68)
A Phantom of Haar (18.9.68)

Listing the poems chronologically it becomes clear that, although they cover a period from the late 1940s to 1973, the year of publication, the majority of the poems were written after the publication in 1966 of Garioch's Selected Poems, his first substantial collection.

The Title

The title poem is the third to appear in the book. It appears after '...That is stade in perplexitie...', which considers the relationship of tradition to the present, and another Faust poem, 'Faustus Before Act I Scene I'. This first Faustus, before he has made his pact with Mephisopheles, is adrift in the contemporary world which his students are at home in; a magic world of beer cans, Mediterranean holidays, paper money and a 'new-biggit brig' (perhaps Garioch has in mind the Forth Road Bridge, completed in 1964). When they leave, 'Faustus conjures till his heid is sair'. In Act I Scene I of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the mage dismisses all branches of learning except necromancy, and is then confirmed and supported in his choice by his old friends Valdes and Cornelius, who are name-checked in Garioch's poem. Together they plan to hold sway over the riches and empires of the world. In Garioch's poem, they make this choice not because they are so far in advance of the knowledge of their times, but because they are so far behind it.

'Doktor Faust in Rose Street' presents Faust long after Mephistopheles has claimed his soul, again adrift in the present, but now lacking the power to

alter his circumstances. He is an old man sitting in a pub on Edinburgh's Rose Street full of students, whose vehement arguements he can, and wants to, make nothing of. The cynicism which led him to reject all branches of learning in the first place has backed him into a corner, where all pursuit of knowledge now seems pointless. His only contribution, the only consolation he has for selling his soul, is that

> 'Nae thing is pruven, naethin pruvable!'

Even this he has to repeat, unable to gauge the right volume of his voice for the room: the first time it is inaudible, the second a 'yell' which results in 'deid silence'. Garioch's conceit is that, for Faust, this place is worse than hell, and at one level the scene presents an old man in a world which has changed beyond his recognition. One can picture Garioch himself, or MacDiarmid, who had held court in the Rose Street pubs of the 1950s sitting there resentful of the students' restless energy, and out of touch with their concerns. (The figure of MacDiarmid, albeit veiled, apears in such a disapproving authoritarian role in several poems later in the collection.)

At the end of the poem, Faust begs Lucifer to take him 'frae out this mess'. His departure is described in contemporary terms: his plea is transmitted 'on U.H.F.' and he then 'gaes dim, like Doktor Who'. The irony is that the very mechanisms which can remove Faust from the nightmare of the contemporary world are themselves part of that world. The poem's satire of the present is superficial and token: the real object of the satire is Faust himself, unable to cope with the chaotic, living present.

The Decade – 1970s

Garioch had taken early retirement from school-teaching in the mid 1960s. After working at the School of Scottish Studies, part of Edinburgh University, he was the university's Writing Fellow from 1971 to 1973. After an erratic publishing career, his *Collected Poems* appeared in 1977.

Hugh MacDiarmid celebrated his eightieth birthday in 1972, and was the undisputed grand old man of Scottish letters, though younger writers, particularly in Glasgow, were keen to develop a literature away from his perceived sermonising on political and linguistic issues. Tom Leonard's seminal essay, 'The Locust Tree in Flower, and why it failed to bloom in Britain', acknowledges MacDiarmid's achievement but deliberately places it in a much wider context of experimental British and American writing.

The discovery of oil in the sea of north-east Scotland was successfully exploited politically by the Scottish National Party in the early 1970s, with their slogan 'It's Scotland's Oil'. An increased SNP presence in the Westminster parliament from 1974 led to a Labour government bill offering political devolution to Scotland, subject to a referendum. This took place in 1979, but did not lead to devolution.

A contemporary reading

The collection is in three sections: 'Poems - One'; 'Poems - Two'; and 'Translations'. The first section of poems generally deals with the necessity of opening oneself to the present, in order to make a space in which to create; the second section with what might be called 'closed systems'; while the translations offer the poet the chance to speak in different voices, like an actor in a variety of roles. Considerable craftsmanship is evident throughout, and there is a subtlety about the poems which is not always evident on a cursory reading.

The opening poem takes its title, and its closing phrase, from the earliest surviving poem in Scots, an eight-line lament for Alexander III who died in 1286. In the original, it is Scotland 'that is stade in perplexitie', and Christ who is asked to provide 'succoure... and ramede'. In Garioch's poem it is rather the artist's 'perplexitie' which creates an art of consolation through intellectual and creative effort. Garioch also refers to MacDiarmid's short poem 'The Eemis Stane' (from Sangschaw), by way of the word 'hazel-raw', and the two poems have a similar subject, that of deciphering an indistinct inscription on a stone. Garioch's concept is less ambitious than MacDiarmid's, but his poem underlines the necessity of engaging with both tradition and the present. This reference to MacDiarmid's poem, some forty-odd years after it was written, also shows how the modern, in its turn, becomes part of the tradition, another source for the present to draw on. In Garioch's poem, the 'sang' seems to be made not by the creative spirit but revealed by way of an intellectual, analytical process, whose aim is 'to set the thing in time and space'; and yet the 'sang' is immediately described as 'unset' (glossed as 'unexpected'), as if the mind must now cast off from its deliberate workings into the unknown.

'Perfect' is another poem about the creative process, though here the artist is portrayed not as an archaeologist but as a woodworker. While the table, or whatever he might make, is the end-product of his labours, it is the thought,

the craft, the process, the overcoming of resistance in the unwilling materials, the choices which he is able to make according to his mood, which he values more than a mechanically produced artefact. He chooses wood that's 'auld and seasont' which is less resistant, which one can perhaps read as a metaphor for Garioch's relationship to Scots. Clearly he takes it as something to be adapted, however unwillingly, to the needs and concerns of the present, rather than maintained in its original, resistant state. There is a self-deprecating humour to the poem, which sidelines the Luddite tendencies of the character. Having stated, 'I like to mak, say, a table out of a tree', he qualifies this by adding

> When I say a tree, of course, I mean some boards -
> I'm no Robinson Crusoe.

The longest, and concluding, poem in the first section is 'Lesson'. This describes a journey to Leith, the port area of Edinburgh and formerly a separate burgh; a journey which takes 'the samyn gait that [Robert Louis] Stevenson descried'. This route brings initial disappointment, the glories of the past contrasted with the fact that 'Leith's maistly rubble nou'; indeed the speaker admits a wariness of the present with pathos and bizarre humour:

> I yuistae like ships, but nou they're owre real for me.

The journey sparks off a set of associations, to do with Stevenson and his father, a designer of harbours and lighthouses, as well as the speaker's own father, who worked in the shipyards in Leith. The speaker lands in a pub, but it's not as he would have hoped. He reflects on the failure of Stevenson père to secure Wick Harbour, and the tone of loss and failure seems indisputable. The poem ends with him watching the performance, among the dock-workers in the pub, of a go-go dancer. What seems at first to be a diffident description of a sleazy event instead focuses on a figure making a space in which to perform, and in which an audience can accept that performance. The speaker admires her ability to dance even uninspired and compares her to

> ...Tchaikowsky whan stumpt for ideas, makkan-dae wi passage work.

The figure of the dancer, whose 'clean taes acceptit the ordinary stourie flair' affirms the possibilities of the present, and makes the journey, and thus the poem, a present activity rather than a passive lament for the past. It's this small space for creation and reception which Garioch is constantly struggling

to establish in his poems, a space threatened both by present contingencies and stultifying nostalgia.

'Poems - Two' features 'closed systems' poems. The spirit of MacDiamid is again abroad, but it is now the opinionated, bombastic older man rather than the iconclastic, liberating younger poet. The section begins humorously enough, with the spritely 'Ane Guid New Sang in Preise of Professor Gregory Smith, Inventor of the Caledonian Antisyzygy'. Smith's theory, first proposed in 1919, is that Scottish literature exhibits 'a zigzag of contradictions... a sudden jostling of contraries'. The notion was taken up and developed by MacDiarmid, but Garioch sees it all as a justification of 'inconsistency, / hypocrisy or cant', which leads to a homogenous porridge:

> Three cheers! We've got a mixed up grey
> and wear it by the million.

It's a very funny and precisely crafted poem, yet also a serious cry for the artist to see things as they are, rather than mediated through a reductive theory.

Perhaps the clearest example of a 'closed system' comes in the poem 'Dreary Circle', which takes the form of a potentially endless circular poem. The poet considers language to be the root cause of 'hate... envy... wrath', by way of the intellect conceiving of 'a clessifiee'd warld / of twa clesses, / twa alternatives': of opposites, and thus of opposition. There is an echo of Faustus: animals are said to find a suitable base for their actions in what's 'no pruvable, but probable'; while the extreme scepticism of Faust's position, 'nae thing is pruven, naethin pruvable', leads to a system which is 'self-justifeean, wi words, / wi words, and wi words', a closed system conceived without regard to experience. There is a further closed system at play, in the sense that Garioch here becomes critical of his own tool as a poet, language, and seems to question its very ability to counteract the closed thinking articulated in the poem he is writing.

The final poem in this section considers an external dampener of the creative spirit. 'Ten Couplets' began life in manuscript as a group of fourteen couplets entitled 'To Hugh MacDiarmid'. Of the original fourteen, nos. 5, 6 and 9 were rewritten, nos. 11-14 supressed. (They are printed in Complete Poetical Works, pp.308-9) While it's clearer what is going on it the original, the published version still offers a good twist on MacDiarmid: that by example he showed how one must overcome the fear of appearing foolish in order to produce 'onything muckle', before lambasting all those (and in his eyes they

were many) whom he took for fools, thus potentially inhibiting further artistic developments. Garioch's logic is subtle, the opposite of bombast or rhetoric.

The third and final section, 'Translations' offers Scots renderings of poems by Hesiod, Goethe, Belli and Apollinaire. Of Garioch's translations Sydney Goodsir Smith wrote that 'no matter who the author of the original was, or in what language he wrote, the translation is always pure Garioch'. As with any poet-translator, Garioch seeks an extension of his own poetic practice in selecting, and writing anew, poems by other writers. He often worked from cribs provided by linguists, whose help he credited, though no acknowledgement is made in this respect for the Apollinaire poems, so it may be assumed that here he worked from the original French.

Garioch translated 120 sonnets (from 2,279 originals!) written in 'romanesco' dialect by Giovanni Belli (1791-1863), working on these from the late 1950s right up until his death. Twelve are included here. They are lighter poems, whose appeal lies in Garioch's ability to write flowing, colloquial Scots within the constraints of the sonnet form. Their appeal to Garioch can be further gauged from their their subsersive and disrespectful, but not revolutionary, attitude to the existing social order.

Perhaps the most interesting of the translations are those from Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) who still seems a particularly modern figure, with his praise for the city, speed and the new machine culture, and one at odds with Garioch's traditionalist tendencies. 'Victory' is a complex and fragmented poem, which may have appealed to Garioch because of its provocative lines about old languages, among which Scots would surely be numbered, and its (in terms of literature) suicidal proposal that in the new age of the silent film all language is obsolete:

> ...thae auld leids... still made to sairve for poetrie
> [are] like seik folk wi nae smeddum in them
> My faith the folk wad suin be dumb aathegither
> Miming daes fine in the pictur-hous

What better way to refute such an arguement than by re-making the poem fifty years on in one of the 'auld leids'? When Apollinaire goes on to call for 'new souns', it may be that Garioch (like MacDiarmid in the 1920s) sees a revived Scots as a way of providing these.

The final poem in the book is a version of Apollinaire's 'A Phantom of Haar'. Again a longer poem in free verse, it offers a street-scene which the flaneur

of 'Lesson' (which clearly draws on the Apollinaire poem) would have appreciated. The speaker seeks out 'gutter-acrobats', a feature of the city in his younger days but now 'kinna scarce'. The poem is mostly a description of the acrobats before they start their routine, and the speaker is struck by the acrobats' past and future which he sees immediately present in their bodies:

> His faither's ashes cam out of him in his grizzly beard...
>
> Wi fingers the neibors of his destined descendants...

Like 'Lesson', Apolliniare's poem culminates in a performance, here an acrobat's cartwheel which displays 'sic a harmonie' that everything which follows is ignored, as the spectators remember or seek within themselves 'the miraculous bairn' the scene has evoked, perhaps a nostalgia for their own innocence, or faith in Christ. The poem concludes with the line 'Century o century of haar', which seems to convey an ambiguity about the 'harmonie' revealed by the acrobat, as if the miracle evoked already obscures the present performance. If Apollinaire's instinctive faith was in the future, and Garioch's in the past, their meeting draws out Apollinaire's nostalgia, and Garioch's contemporaneity.

Further Reading

Garioch, Robert
Complete Poetical Works
Edited by Robin Fulton
(Loanhead: Macdonald Publishers, 1983)

Garioch, Robert
Robert Garioch
Audio tape: poems selected by Edwin Morgan, and read by Robert Garioch, Norman MacCaig and Edwin Morgan, with a commentary written and read by Edwin Morgan
(Glasgow: Scotsoun Makars Series, 1978)

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Lallans
No. 2, Whitsunday 1974; p.18
'A rowth o rhymes' by Donald Campbell
Review of Rhymes o' Auld Reekie, by Douglas Fraser; Doktor Faust in Rose Street, by Robert Garioch; and Twice for Joy, by J.K. Annand.

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no. 77, June 1981
'Robert Garioch 1909-1981', by Edwin Morgan