

# Hugh MacDiarmid's Influence on the Scottish Literary Revival

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Historians agree that the First World War not only shattered the world but also dissolved earlier belief-systems and familiar ways of life. In response to the general economic decline and the weakening of British imperial ties, the quest for a new Scottish identity emerged as a primary concern:

The young Scots who returned to Scotland after the 1914-18 war were concerned with reviving not only Scottish literature or the arts in Scotland but with reviving 'Scotland -the Nation'; Scotland which was culturally, economically, and socially bankrupt; Scotland which had lost not only its political independence but was swallowed economically and culturally by its larger and controlling partner. (Glen 52)

The interwar period of national revival produced a great variety of literary, critical, social, political and philosophical writings that have commonly been referred to as "The Scottish Renaissance." The term was first used in its new sense in the first issue of *The Scottish Chapbook* of August 1922, published by Christopher Murray Grieve, better known by his pen name, Hugh MacDiarmid. In comparison with earlier attempts to renew Scottish culture, the single most distinctive feature of this movement was the belief that "there could be no regeneration of the nation's artistic culture which did not also involve the regeneration of the social, economic and political life of the nation"(McCulloch xiii).

The Scottish Literary Renaissance movement has been defined in many different ways: in relation to a person (Hugh MacDiarmid), a genre (poetry), a language (Scots), a period (the 1920s, or the twentieth century as a whole), a quality judgment (a rise in the level of literary output, or cultural consciousness in general), a theme (Scottish reality, or Scottish myths) or a political attitude (nationalism).<sup>1</sup> What connects all these many different areas is a heightened sense of national consciousness, which was perceived as inevitable for the development of the country. This paper looks at the impetus of the movement that was primarily fuelled by patriotic sentiments, and at the influence of Hugh MacDiarmid that reshaped the literary tradition of Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> Susanne Hagemann provides a detailed survey of the Scottish Literary Renaissance among a diversity of issues in *Die Schottische Renaissance: Literatur und Nation im 20. Jahrhundert*. Scottish Studies, 13. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992.

## The Scottish Tradition in Literature

In his study *Scottish Literature, Character and Influence* (1919) George Gregory Smith identifies the prevailing characteristics of the Scottish literary tradition. He provides a rather self-conscious description of the Scottish Muse:

Does literature anywhere, of this small compass, show such a mixture of contraries as his in outlook, subject, and method; real life and romance, everyday fact and the supernatural, things holy and things profane, gentle and simple, convention and “cantrip” thistles and thistledown? [...] There is more in the Scottish antithesis of the real and fantastic than is to be explained by the familiar rules of rhetoric. The sudden jostling of contraries seems to preclude any relationship by literary suggestion. The one invades the other without warning. They are the “polar twins” of the Scottish Muse. (Smith 20)

In order to unite these far-flung qualities, Smith coins a new term, the “Caledonian Antisyzygy.” The expression combines the Roman name of Scotland with the ancient Greek word meaning the yoking together of opposites.

This mingling, even of the most eccentric kind, is an indication to us that the Scot, in that medieval fashion which takes all things as granted, is at his ease in both “rooms of life,” and turns to fun and even profanity, with no misgivings. For Scottish literature is more medieval in habit than criticism has suspected, and owes some part of its picturesque strength to this freedom in passing from one mood to another. It takes some people more time than they can spare to see the absolute propriety of a gargoyle’s grinning at the elbow of a kneeling saint. (Smith 35)

Smith specifies the two most prevailing aspects of the Scots as the simultaneous love for the mundane and that of the fantastic and the grotesque. He creates a long line of oppositions in which the beautiful and the grotesque constantly jostle and modify each other. By means of the medieval imagery of the “gargoyle’s grinning at the elbow of a kneeling saint,” Smith juxtaposes a human and earthly reality with its heavenly counterpart. By identifying the oppositional nature of the different personality traits of the Scots, Smith concludes that the Scottish national character is essentially divided. This emotional and intellectual dualism became a dominant trope in relation to Scottish life and culture as a whole, and has commonly been applied to several consecutive generations of poets and writers to highlight what has often been perceived as “schizophrenic tendencies.” In his analysis Smith also relates this anxiety to the foreign influence that has often been held responsible for the many forms of division present in Scottish culture: Scottish art has been “remarkably varied and that it becomes, under the stress of foreign influence and national division and reaction, almost a zigzag of contradictions” (4).

As a way of refuting English cultural influence a new literary style emerged and flourished from about 1880 to 1914. Kailyardism<sup>2</sup> represented a popular literary style that was restricted to sentimental depictions of rural and parochial ways of life. Marshall Walker explains the term as follows:

Kailyard writing celebrates the parish minister and his flock of village worthies, the honest farmer and the everyday decencies of church-going community. Although death, disease, and unacceptable outsiders intrude, the Kailyard world is remote from the tentacles of nineteenth-century industrialism with its poverty, alienations and high mortality rate. Essentially nostalgic, such writing is an idealized projection of early Romantic views of the beneficent power of nature over people who were disposed to live simply and morally in an achievable detached Arcadia. (167)

Some of the most damaging aspect of kailyardism were related to its haunting representational force. The kailyard novels portrayed an idealized yet false world, with an isolated rural community frozen into parochial insularity, whose members were only concerned with their own “cabbage patch.”

One of the best-known writers of the kailyard school is J. M. Barrie,<sup>3</sup> who earned international fame as the creator of *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904). The central character of the play never grows up, hence is condemned to live in the motionless and static world of “Never Land” that is not susceptible to change. The central character symbolizes a kind of Scottishness that instead of facing the challenges of the real world, reverts to the safety of an idealized fairy-tale like microcosm. With the example of *Peter Pan*, Cairns Craig points to the obvious shortcoming of the Scottish cultural landscape that instead of moving on and developing, remained outside the influence of its own history (*History* 39-40). Thus, the major incentive of the Scottish Renaissance movement was to call for a revival that tried to alter the false sense of historical and cultural consciousness offered by popular literary pieces of the period.

### **Hugh MacDiarmid's Formative Role**

Although it does not seem to be fair to attribute all the merits of the Scottish literary revival to a single person, there is no dispute that Hugh MacDiarmid<sup>4</sup> (1892-1978) was the leading figure of the movement. He played an essential role as the chief theoretician, propagandist and practitioner of the developments that started in the 1920s. His vision was to renew the language, the culture and the national identity of the Scots.

2 Kailyard in Scots refers to a small vegetable garden where mainly cabbage was grown.

3 Sir James Matthew Barrie's (1860-1937) *Auld Licht Idylls* (1888) became a representative example of kailyard literature.

4 Hugh MacDiarmid was born in the Scottish border town of Langholm. He began his writing career as a journalist before joining the Royal Army at the outbreak of the First World War. His time in the army influenced his political and artistic development to a great extent.

A heightened sense of interest in and the growing awareness of literary language played a particularly important part, similarly to earlier times of Scottish literary revivals. The poet Norman MacCaig (1910-1996) provides a striking visual image about the symbolical transformation of MacDiarmid's personality, which happened as "he got hold of Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* and—Christopher Murray Grieve dived in at one end and Hugh MacDiarmid clambered ashore at the other"(ix). In addition to a new identity, the adoption of a penname expressed the writer's commitment to the revival of Scottish poetry by advocating a unique form of vernacular language.

Central to this vision was MacDiarmid's belief that the Scottish psyche could not be adequately expressed in the English language, and that to develop and write in a synthetic Scots was the only way to achieve a coherent national voice. The Scots used by MacDiarmid was the language originally identical with the one spoken in northern England, which had been developed into a powerful literary medium by the great medieval poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Scotland, notably by Robert Henryson and William Dunbar.<sup>5</sup> As an alternative to Robert Burns's immensely popular but at times sentimental attitude, MacDiarmid praised Scottish mediaevalist poets, by claiming that "their verse, known by court and commons alike, had not only been highly experimental, it had also been a poetry of the intellect" (Kerrigan 77). MacDiarmid compiled his cultural manifesto in a new literary magazine, *The Scottish Chapbook*, which had as its motto "Not traditions—Precedents!"

MacDiarmid's concern with the language revival had become an important issue at the time when the Scots language was reduced to the position of a spoken vernacular that was seen as a most unsuitable medium of literary expression. In his artistic credo the writer claims that:

We base our belief in the possibility of a great Scottish Literary Renaissance, deriving its strength from the resources that lie latent and almost unsuspected in the vernacular, upon the fact that the genius of our vernacular enables us to secure with comparative ease the very effects and swift transitions which other literatures are for the most part unsuccessfully endeavouring to cultivate in languages that have a very different and inferior basis. Whatever the potentialities of the Doric may be, however, there cannot be a revival in the real sense of the word—a revival of the spirit as distinct from a mere renewed vogue of the letter—unless these potentialities are in accord with the newest and truest tendencies of human thought. (MacDiarmid *Scottish* front page)

MacDiarmid firmly believed that a modern Scottish poetry required an adequately up-to-date medium, therefore he created a "synthetic Scots," as a literary version of Scots language gathered from many regional variants.

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<sup>5</sup> The poetry of the Makar poets marked the flowering of Scottish culture and the Scots language in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in a period which shaped the nation's cultural and political consciousness.

MacDiarmid's vision encompassed the revivification of the whole of Scotland by means of a series of political, literary and cultural revivals. In the context of the Scottish Renaissance the belief in Scotland's unity is closely connected with an acute sense of Celtophilia. This approach emphasizes a strong national consciousness as the central feature of the movement that celebrated the ethnic identity of the Scots and advocated a sense of unity grounded on the assumption that all Scots are of Celtic extraction. The central motif of the Scottish Renaissance was a constant occupation with the quest for a new Scottish identity that would reconcile traditions of the past with the expectations of the modern world. In his appraisal of Hugh MacDiarmid as "the first Scottish poet for generations to draw on the full canon of his country's literary tradition," Roderick Watson highlights MacDiarmid's concern to establish national awareness for Scottish cultural values (367). Since MacDiarmid particularly welcomed the notion of the Caledonian Antisyzygy and the elaboration of it into a set of racial characteristics, Smith's above quoted ideas provided the backbone to the development of the literary revival.

Similarly to Smith, MacDiarmid was also inspired by medieval examples; furthermore, he pointed to their similarities with contemporary trends of European thought and art. By placing his national culture into a broader international context MacDiarmid opened up entirely new perspectives of Scottishness. On the title page of his new journal in August 1922 he outlined the principal aims and objects of *The Chapbook Programme*:

To report, support, and stimulate, in particular, the activities of the Franco-Scottish, Scottish-Italian, and kindred Associations; the campaign of the Vernacular Circle of the London Burns Club for the revival of the Doric; the movement towards a Scots National Theatre; and the 'Northern Numbers' movement in contemporary Scottish poetry. To encourage and publish the work of contemporary Scottish poets and dramatists, whether in English, Gaelic or Braid Scots. To insist upon truer evaluation of the work of Scottish writers than are usually given in the present over-Anglicised condition of British literary journalism, and, in criticism, elucidate, apply, and develop the distinctively Scottish range of values. To bring Scottish Literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation. To cultivate 'the lovely virtue'. And, generally, to 'meddle wi' the thistle' and pick the figs.

MacDiarmid's cultural manifesto addresses his central concern of a "distinctively Scottish range of values" in the context of the literary language and criticism of his time. He firmly believed that the more he could revive and employ the Caledonian antisyzygy,—“the great vital characteristic of Scottish literature, which can only shape forth poorly in English, but which is potentially expressible in the Vernacular to which it belongs,”—the more his work would be in tune with European developments (*Scottish* 182). His vision reached a full circle in the 1930s when he expanded the political dimensions of the movement by proposing a union of Celtic nations that would break England's supremacy and bring about a new European balance of power (*Caledonian* 73). In place of the rather limited perspective of the Scottish kailyard, the

Scottish Renaissance called for a resolutely internationalist movement with writers striving to produce works with a more universal outlook and relevance.

### The Birth of a New Cultural Self-consciousness

1922 was the year when James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* were published, and this was also the time when MacDiarmid found his own distinctive lyric voice and applied "demotic modernism" to his vernacular poetry in Scots.<sup>6</sup> Influenced by the ideas of literary modernism and the universal concerns of the post-war period, the Scottish poet created a major epic verse of 3000 lines that encompasses the main goals of his artistic credo. The narrative line of "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" (1926) is in many ways reminiscent of Robert Burns's popular poem about "Tam o'Shanter." After a long night in the pub with his fellows, a drunk man sets out to return home. Unlike Tam, he does not meet any witches, but his own spiritual demons turn against him. He falls into a ditch where he lies looking at a giant thistle by the light of the moon. The rest of the poem reveals his soliloquy on a wide range of existential questions. The motif of drunkenness in the allegorical sense "symbolizes the instability of modern condition" (Baglow 66). The dramatic persona of a drunk man enables the poet to explore a wide range of techniques and ideas in the context of what turns into a metaphysical journey of a Scottish Ulysses (Kerrigan 79).

MacDiarmid's "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" (1926) uses familiar metaphors of Scottishness. The common weed capable of withstanding even the harshest of conditions became the national plant of Scotland. Marked by the effusive beauty of its pink-purple flower heads, the thistle symbolically unites the traits of natural resilience and aesthetic pleasure. The poem exhibits the transformation of the ordinary weed into a tree of knowledge, better known as the Tree of Life<sup>7</sup> that joins heaven and hell and explores the metaphysical aspirations of the poetic persona's mind. In line with Gregory Smith's idea that the continual clash of opposites is the essential characteristic of the Scottish psyche, the poet explores the conflicting elements of human nature such as lust and love, body and soul, passion and intellect, beauty and ugliness, matter and spirit, life and death. In the Scottish context these polarities translate into familiar divisions between Highland and Lowland, nationalist and internationalist, Catholic and Protestant, Gaelic, Scots and English counterparts. The unpredictable and careless mind of the drunk man is at ease in transforming these diverse images: "I'll ha 'e naehauf-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" ("Drunk" 141-44).<sup>8</sup> The poetic persona, instead of evading the

6 In his article "Alien Voices form the Street: Demotic Modernism in Modern Scots Writing" Roderick Watson applies the term to Hugh MacDiarmid's poetic language that combines vernacular language use and the modernist stream of consciousness technique.

7 The Tree of Life is a widespread mythological archetype, closely related to the concept of the sacred tree.

8 These lines have often been read as Hugh MacDiarmid's artistic credo and as such they are engraved on the poet's tombstone in Langhorn cemetery.

conflicting aspects of his personal, cultural and national identity, willingly rejoices in the celebration of a profoundly liberating experience.

Furthermore, by contesting essential differences, the poem evokes a selfhood that mysteriously bonds male and female counterparts. The drunk man's amnesiac journey guides the reader through a number of broken historical, communal and personal relationships. MacDiarmid summarized the topic of his poem: "[t]he general (as beyond the particularly Scottish) theme of "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" is to show 'a beautiful soul in the making'—to trace, that is to say, its rise through all struggle and contradiction till it stands out a self-conscious, self-directing personality—a purified person" (*Voice* 5). Apart from the somewhat essentializing notion of a "purified person" MacDiarmid presents us with highly complex images of identification. The cathartic journey where "extremes meet" delivers a symbolic healing to the drunk man and to the antiszygal Scottish national psyche alike. The closing lines of the poem outline the vision of a cosmic unity that embraces English and Scottish, mundane and spiritual dimensions:

Wha hear a Burns or Shakespeare sing,  
 Yet still their ain bit jingles string,  
 As they were worth the fashioning.  
 Whatever Scotland is to me,  
 Be it aye pairt o' a' men see  
 O' Earth and o' Eternity.  
 He canna Scotland see wha yet  
 Canna See the Infinite,  
 And Scotland in true scale to it. ("Drunk" 2522-30)

### The Literary Debate between MacDiarmid and Muir

One of the most famous debates about literature in Scotland is connected to the publication of Edwin Muir's *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (1936). Edwin Muir (1887-1959) was born and brought up on the Orkney Islands. He was a largely self-educated scholar, who translated European literature, worked for the British Council abroad and later became Norton Professor of English at Harvard University. Muir as a poet and literary critic was concerned with the problems that modern Scottish writers faced. By taking the example of Scotland's best-known writer, Sir Walter Scott, he came to the conclusion that the predicament of the Scottish writer is seriously hindered by the fact that he lives:

in a country, that is to say, which was neither a nation, nor a province, and had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it. But this Nothing in which Scott wrote was not merely a spatial one; it was a temporal Nothing as well, dotted with a few disconnected figures arranged at abrupt intervals; Henryson, Dunbar, Allan Ramsay, Burns, with a rude buttress of ballads and

folk songs to shore them up and keep them from falling. Scott, in other words, lived in a community which was not a community, and set himself to carry on a tradition which was not a tradition; and the result was that his work was an exact reflection of his predicament. His picture of life had no centre, because the environment in which he lived had no centre. What traditional virtue his work possessed was at second hand, and derived mainly from English literature, which he knew intimately but which was a semi-foreign literature to him. (Muir 11-12)

Muir characterizes the Scottish tradition as a spatially and temporarily indefinite “Nothing.” Instead of the central, organizing force of a capital city, Edinburgh is represented as a blank space. Scottishness is defined in the form of a lacking and empty centre that badly needs to be filled with content and meaning. Muir’s argument raises the obvious question: Where are content and meaning going to come from? The question also points to an answer implying that if Scotland is not a community and it does not have a tradition, then it needs to turn towards England and models of Englishness.

Influenced by T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in another of his essays published in the same year under the title “Was There a Scottish Literature?”<sup>9</sup> Muir claims that the lack of an organic community and a major literary tradition arrests the future development of Scottish literature. He traces the Scottish language as the most controversial aspect of Scottish culture. Muir claims that historical circumstances, most notably the anglicizing influence of the Reformation and the Union (18), had arrested the development of Scots and led to a split between English and Scots usage in Scottish life and literature. He claimed that “The prerequisite of an autonomous literature is a homogeneous language” (Muir 19), but as Scots was not able to express the intellect, it remained the language of emotions (21). According to Muir, Scottish writers were caught between two positions, their power to articulate their experience divided between an underdeveloped Scots and an English, which did not fully belong to them. Until this division was resolved, Scotland would remain “in essence a barbarous country,” (32) and for all practical purposes the only language available to most Scots, capable of being a “homogenous language” (Gaelic was the alternative), was English (32). Muir believed that Scotland could only create a national literature if Scottish writers were writing in English (178). At the end of his book Muir concludes that “the Scots language as a vehicle for literature,” “the Scottish literary tradition” and “the political state of Scotland” are all “unsatisfactory as bases for a genuinely autonomous literature” (176).

In relation to what has been identified by later critics as the Muir versus MacDiarmid debate, it can be concluded, that the two writers approach the dilemma of Scottish cultural development from essentially different perspectives. Defining

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9 Eliot’s article was inspired by the publication of Gregory Smith’s *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). The poet argues that the Scots language and Scottish literature did not maintain a separate existence, and that by the end of the eighteenth century it became a provincial version of English literature.



national identity in terms of racial and historical essence, MacDiarmid missed the opportunity of confirming its changeable thus relative nature. According to MacDiarmid and his followers, locking “Scottishness” into strongly nationalistic attitudes that define national identity in terms of Scottish culture and the Scottish way of life, Scotland could condemn itself to the fate of provincialism. Marking the other end of the scale, Edwin Muir’s view of adopting English as the literary language at the same time had its obvious drawbacks on Scottish literary developments. In essence, the Muir-MacDiarmid debate voices the major concern of the criticism of Scottish literature that in essence can be attributed to “[t]he lack of a clear idea of what Scotland should look exactly like as a nation is the source of a fundamental dichotomy between isolation and openness” (Tukács 4).

## Conclusion

When Grieve/MacDiarmid adopted a new Scottish persona and started using Scots dialect, the writer self-consciously separated himself from the English literary tradition. David Goldie concludes that “in decentering himself in this way—literally rendering himself eccentric to the dominant culture—MacDiarmid allowed himself not only an enabling freedom from literary, cultural, and political constraint but also the possibility of eventually recentering his political and cultural practice in a reconstituted sense of Scottishness” (4). “A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle” is a representative poem that summarizes Hugh MacDiarmid’s emblematic notions of the Scottish cultural and political revival. The dramatic monologue of the drunk man, in addition to exploring “the poetic possibilities of the vernacular” (Kerrigan 81), also addresses the broader political implications of the movement. The leading Scottish writers of the period were concerned with the state of Scotland and did much to take its literary history back from “British” cultural hands. With the growing number of writers the movement became more diverse, to the extent that in the 1930s MacDiarmid complained that the term “Scottish Renaissance” had been wrested away from its original significance and applied loosely to all manner of activities directed towards the creation of “national identity” (*Next* 106). MacDiarmid’s notion of the Scottish Renaissance reveals an essentially postcolonial construction that resists getting absorbed into Britishness by calling for the preservation of a distinctly Scottish national identity. Laura Mulvey emphasizes that writers are commonly held to be the “chronicles of the nation and national identity” (9), therefore, language is not simply the medium of communication, but as the means of representation it shapes the way people perceive themselves. In the case of a Scottish writer the choice between Gaelic, Scots, or English language use is at the same time a political act, so language, similarly to national identity, often becomes a tool of resistance, that helps “defining the border fortifications” between the self and others (10).

As the example of James Kelman, a spokesperson of a more recent literary revival illustrates, this dilemma remains unresolved. Kelman received the Booker Prize in 1994 for his highly controversial novel *How Late It Was, How Late*. The book was mostly criticized for the strong Glaswegian dialect and its excessive use of profanity.

Kelman accepted the prestigious literary prize and used the occasion to propagate his political views on literature:

There is a literary tradition to which I hope my own work belongs, I see it as part of a much wider process—or movement—toward decolonization and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things: 1) The validity of indigenous culture; and 2) The right to defend in the face of attack. It is a tradition premised on a rejection of the cultural values of imperial or colonial authority, offering a defense against cultural assimilation, in particular imposed assimilation.

In postcolonial terms cultural and political identity are inseparable, thus the writer identifies political resistance as the primary role of the literary output. He claims that in terms of cultural representation the local does not equal parochial or inferior, and as a result, it cannot be rejected from any kind of power position that subscribes to the notion of supremacy. The greatest asset of the Scottish Renaissance movement seems to have been the restoration of Scottish national self-confidence that has paved the way for the emergence of a variety of distinct Scottish literary voices. According to Roderick Watson:

At the beginning of the 20th century literary renaissance one of the main drivers of Scottish writing was the socio-political need to establish cultural difference from what was perceived as an English tradition—to make room for one's own, so to speak. In this regard Hugh MacDiarmid's propaganda for the use of Scots to counter the hegemony of standard English has been of immense importance to 20th century Scottish writing. (163)

These ideas established a vital connection between the Scottish literary revival that started in the beginning of the twentieth century and gained new impetus over the past decades. James Kelman, similarly to his ancestor Hugh MacDiarmid, became an ardent “advocate” of more recent Scottish literary developments. From 1980 onwards an unprecedented upheaval of Scottish literary creativity has been taking place with a high number of acclaimed writers like Alasdair Gray, Irvin Welsh, Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy, Alie Smith, Jackie Kay, Alan Warner, Luise Welsh, James Robertson, Ron Butlin, Jenni Fagan and Douglas Stuart. In 2020 the Scottish-American author Douglas Stuart has won the Booker prize for his first novel, *Shuggie Bain*, a story based on his own life that follows a boy growing up in poverty in 1980s Glasgow with a mother who is battling addiction. Stuart claims that Kelman's novel *How Late It Was, How Late* “changed his life” because it was the first time he saw “my people, my dialect, on the page” (Flod).

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