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David Williams

**"They will not leave me, the lives of other people"
The Poetry of Douglas Dunn**



The publication earlier this year of Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* and a collection of his short stories, *Secret Villages*, gives the reader of contemporary poetry an opportunity to review the development of Dunn's poetry so far, and identify some of the main achievements and characteristics of a writer who is generally acknowledged to be one of the leading poets of his generation in Britain.

A central facet of Dunn's achievement is his compassionate and inward portrayal of the lives of those at the bottom of the pile: the lonely, the outcasts, the slum-dwellers, the humiliated, the lost and nameless of history, all those whose lives have been marginalized either by their own weakness and infirmity or by the arrogance of the rich and powerful. However, compassion cannot, of itself, produce good poetry; Dunn combines this with an empathy which enables him to assimilate himself imaginatively into the lives of the neglected and then articulate their feelings through a variety of literary techniques: sympathetic authorial

commentary and meditation, embittered or disabused monologues coming from the voices of the oppressed, or fictionalized narrative poems illustrating moments of humiliation and condescension in the lives of the socially or culturally excluded.

The greater part of his well-known first book, *Terry Street* (1969) was devoted to a series of poems which recorded in a plain, almost documentary style events in the lives of the inhabitants of a run-down back street in Hull. A large part of the appeal of these poems lies in Dunn's unsentimental and balanced response to the way of life of the people of Terry Street. He stresses their resilience, their individualism and their indifference to the latest intellectual or sartorial fashion: "They do not need to be seen/ Carrying a copy of *International Times*,/ Or the Liverpool Poets, the wish to justify their looks/ With things beyond themselves."¹ He admires their capacity for hope, even when surrounded by the unpropitious environment of Terry Street, as for example in "A Removal from Terry Street" where the initial, detached itemizing of the leavers' possessions modulates gradually into a final, touching recognition of fellow-feeling:

On a squeaking cart, they push the usual stuff,
 A mattress, bed ends, cups, carpets, chairs,
 Four paperback westerns. Two whistling youths
 In surplus U.S. Army battle-jackets
 Remove their sister's goods. Her husband
 Follows, carrying on his shoulders the son
 Whose mischief we are glad to see removed,
 And pushing, of all things, a lawnmower.
 There is no grass in Terry Street. The worms
 Come up cracks in concrete yards in moonlight.
 That man, I wish him well. I wish him grass.²

Yet he also detects in their lives an exhaustion and passivity, as if they are somehow uncomprehending of the system of which they are a part, unwitting victims of it. Moreover, they are seen as consumers of a mass popular culture that is merely a distraction for them, not a stimulus:

They disappear into the house they came to visit.
 Out of the door rush last year's hits,
 The music they listen to, that takes up their time
 In houses that are monuments to entertainment.³

in a poem like "Under the Stone" which explores the unwilling sense of recognition and similarity which the appearance of the down-and-out evokes in the employed and well-fed:

No one wants to see them, in a grey dawn, walk down
The empty streets, an army of unkept appointments,
Broken promises, as drab as fog,
Like portents meaning bad harvests, unemployment,
Cavalry in the streets, and children shouting
['Bread! Bread!'

But they mean nothing, they live under the stone.
They are their own failures and our nightmares
Or longings for squalor, the bad meanings we are.
They like it like that. It makes them happy,
Walking the rubble fields where once houses were.⁸

As a Scot Dunn is particularly aware of a tension in Scottish life between its Puritanism, its respect for hard work, austerity and self-discipline, and a countervailing tendency towards despair and self-neglect which expresses itself in drunkenness and vagrancy. In an interview with John Haffenden, Dunn noted how much he had been aware of drunkenness, "Having grown up near Glasgow"⁹, and went on to speak revealingly about his mingled sympathy and awe for men who had almost seemed to choose to exile themselves from society:

. . . the sight of such low deprivation, the sight of people having reduced *themselves* to it as much as having *been* reduced to it by other things, has always impressed me and always moved me. I've been drawn towards that . . . and it's not *nostalgie de la boue* . . . I've seen it all my life, and I've always been drawn to it . . . even in a kind of *fin de si'ecle* way, perhaps. My imagination is drawn to it, it's not a political choice or anything like that. I still have the belief that these people know truths that I don't know, and I'd like to know what they know.¹⁰

This humane sympathy and concern, filtered through the point of view of a compassionate observer, and expressed in a careful and unembroidered diction informs all of Dunn's portraits of failure and dereliction in his first two or three books.

However, in *Barbarians* (1979) and *St. Kilda's Parliament* (1981) the tone becomes more angry and resentful, the hatred of injustice more pronounced as Dunn summons up some of the victims of exploitation and condescension, now and in history, particularly in the history of Scotland. Many of the poems in these books are monologues which aim, literally, to give a voice to the nameless and humiliated, those who have been oppressed or blithely dismissed; just as the Greeks dismissed as "barbarians" all those who could not speak their language. The two books illustrate different manifestations of injustice and unearned superiority, ranging from simple economic exploitation to the more subtle indignities and daily humiliations inherent in the relationships between, say, employer and employee or patron and artist.

The more obvious injustices of the wage-slave system employed throughout so much agricultural history: long and back-breaking work, low wages, exploitation of child labour can be seen at the end of a poem like "Washing the Coins" where Dunn remembers a boyhood job gathering potatoes from seven in the morning until dusk, when he was paid by the farmer's wife; the grim epiphany at the end of the poem illustrates the boy's sudden comprehension of the nature of the system for which he works:

She knew me, but she couldn't tell my face
 From an Irish boy's, and she apologized
 And roughed my hair as into my cupped hands
 She poured a dozen pennies of the realm
 And placed two florins there, then cupped her hands
 Around my hands, like praying together.
 It is not good to feel you have no future.
 My clotted hands turned coins to muddy copper.
 I tumbled all my coins upon our table.
 My mother ran a basin of hot water.
 We bathed my wages and scrubbed them clean.
 Once all that sediment was washed away,
 That residue of field caked on my money,
 I filled the basin to its brim with cold;
 And when the water settled I could see
 Two English kings among their drowned Britannias.¹¹

In the same way, in his wonderful poem "Green Brecks" Dunn portrays the ruthlessness and nervous condescension of the late eighteenth century Scottish aristocracy towards an urban poor whom they both feared and yet affected to despise. In

this poem Dunn meditates upon the significance of a passage from J.G. Lockhart's *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott* where Scott remembers a boyhood fight, in 1783, between the sons of the professional classes of Edinburgh and a band of poor children led by a "boy-barbarian" whom Scott's companions called "Green Breeks". In the course of the fight Green Breeks is slashed across the head by one of Scott's friends: "To save a flag, the honour of his class." Beneath what Dunn sees as Scott's later affectations of amusement and indulgence at this childhood incident Dunn detects an underlying fear and admiration for the figure of Green Breeks, an admiration which will surface in Scott's depictions of the Scottish poor in his fiction. Dunn ends his characteristic retrieval of this unknown and heroic figure by defining the significance that Green Breeks has come to assume for him as an ideal representative of the Scottish people: defiant, self-aware and unclouded by mystification or false consciousness:

What did he do? Where did he live, and die?
That life can be imagined. I let him *be*.
He is my light, conspirator and spy.
He is perpetual. He is my country.
He is my people's minds, when they perceive
A native truth persisting in the weave
Of shabby happenings. When they turn their cheeks
The other way, he turns them back, my Green Breeks.¹²

In poems like these Dunn succeeds in writing a convincing and memorable 'political' poetry. The indignation at injustice, compassion for the downtrodden and belief in a more equitable society are not factitious, doctrinaire and abstract, but rather are embodied in the narrative detail of each poem and inherent in the language and rhythms of the poetry.

Dunn's sympathetic imagination is also drawn to the frustrations and disappointments suffered in the past by men and women from the working class who had aspirations to education and high culture, and who may even have hoped to become artists themselves. The predicament of the man of humble birth who loves European art and literature, but who is yet excluded from that culture by representatives of the middle and upper classes who have appropriated it is portrayed with great insight and poignancy in Dunn's work. He often dramatizes these experiences of exclusion by describing them through the voices of people who have been on the receiving end of humiliation or dismissal; the context of the interdiction may vary, but the underlying message of it

is the same: "keep out, don't try to understand or practise an art which doesn't belong to you." For example, in "The Student" the speaker is a working man, bent on self-improvement, who studies Tacitus in his Mechanics' Literary Club: "It takes all night/ At this rough table which I always scrub/ Before I sit at it, by candlelight,/ Spreading my books on it." But whilst the student's cultural allegiances are with the world of Tacitus and "difficult Latin" his political sympathies are with his own class. He joins in a demonstration which is dispersed by the Hussars, as if the forces of authority feel threatened by his thirst for knowledge of "their" culture:

Beneath our banners I was marching for
 My scholarship of barley, secret work
 On which authority must slam its door
 As Rome on Goth, Byzantium on Turk.
 I'm left to guess their books, which precious line,
 Eluding me, is never to be mine.¹³

In "Tannahil" and "John Wilson in Greenock, 1786" Dunn's main characters are Robert Tannahill, a weaver of Paisley, and John Wilson, a teacher of Greenock; both men dreamed of rising from obscurity through their poetry. In both cases, however, their hopes were frustrated by the hostility or ridicule of local dignitaries, leading, in Tannahill's case, to suicide by drowning ("You clutched the papers of your tongue:/ Gone, gone down, gone down with a song./ Pity the mad, darkened with wrong.") and in Wilson's to a bitter and resigned agreement to sign a pledge promising to give up writing poetry in return for a post as Headmaster of Greenock Grammar School:

That day I stood before our magistrates
 And minister, I hushed my heart's debates
 With words and scenery, for I agreed
 To let these pious dumplings intercede
 Against my heard-of and once-printed *Clyde*
 Which they thought damned, and I thought sanctified
 Sights I had seen of water, wood and stone.
 They took me, for I promised to abandon
 'The profane and unprofitable art'
 Of poetry.¹⁴

In these embittered and eloquent life-histories Dunn shows us cross-sections of arrogance and defeat, case-studies of the

fate of people who made the mistake of assuming that the patrimony of Western culture was open to all.

However, a very different view of the effectiveness of Dunn's presentation of working class life and people was taken by John Ash in a review of *St. Kilda's Parliament* in *Poetry Nation Review*. Ash sees Dunn's portrayal of working class people as fatally compromised by middle class liberal patronage and sentimentality: "He presents the northern working classes as the middle class would like to see them, sad and noble survivors of a dying class Who could possibly feel challenged -- let alone threatened -- by these elegiac portraits in sepia?"¹⁵ Ash's objections do have some validity when applied to the title poem of the book "St. Kilda's Parliament 1879-1979" for the representation of the islanders of St. Kilda in that poem can seem rather winsome and literary, as if they are seen through the eyes of an urbanised literary intellectual struck by a sense of his privileged unworthiness:

You also see how each is individual,
Proud of his shyness and of his small life
On this outcast of the Hebrides
With his eyes full of weather and seabirds,
Fish, and whatever morsel he grows here.
Clear, too, is manhood, and how each man looks
Secure in the love of a woman who
Also knows the wisdom of the sun rising,
Of weather in the eyes like landmarks.¹⁶

For the most part, however, Dunn's presentation of working class lives is too full of intensely realised bitterness, waste and frustration to be easily absorbed into a comfortable middle class mythology of a doomed but heroic working class. The voices who speak in *St. Kilda's Parliament* are not just inert victims, passive and ineffective figures accepting their fate resignedly, but rather -- unlike the uncomprehending inhabitants of *Terry Street* -- angry, articulate and unsettling presences, aware of what has happened to them, resenting it and challenging the conventions and expectations by which their lives have been marginalised.

One of the most interesting aspects of Dunn's depiction of these exclusions is his clever and ironic use of the very forms and modes of 'high' literature against its self-appointed custodians, undermining and attacking their authority in an elegance of form and language which they had

thought of as theirs. One part of Dunn's work has always shown an attraction to close, traditional forms: tight rhyme schemes, iambic metres and orthodox stanzaic or poetic forms (e.g. the quatrain or the sonnet). Indeed Dunn takes a craftsman's pride in his handling of different structural conventions; in an interview with P.R. King he relates his use of intricate poetic forms to the reverence for manual craftsmanship of his native Clydeside:

Where I come from is a region noted for work
 Anything jerry-built or done in a hurry not only looks like it, but, in the best traditions of the west of Scotland, is an affront to its maker's self-respect. (This, of course, is not meant to suggest that free verse is inherently slipshod.) I consider it an obligation to make my poems as best I can, in the belief that the people I come from expect the best I can give them.¹⁷

In *Barbarians* and *St. Kilda's Parliament* Dunn's emphasis on the formal properties of poetry is reflected in the sharp, ironic contrasts he sets up between the elegant, privileged diction of the poems and their radical and subversive political content. The contrast is, of course, intended, the aim being to undermine the aristocratic assumptions that 'barbarians' can only express themselves in a crude and inarticulate manner, and that anyone who does use the forms and conventions of high art must necessarily share the social and political beliefs that accompany it. This disjunction between style and content can be seen to best effect in a poem like "Gardeners" where the fierce resentment felt by the gardeners towards their Lord is articulated in a language and rhyme scheme which ironically parodies the ease and urbanity of the Lord's idiom:

Out of humiliation comes that sweet
 Humility that does no good. We know
 Our coarser artistry will make things grow.
 Others design the craftsmanship we fashion
 To please your topographical possession.
 A small humiliation -- Yes, we eat,
 Our crops and passions tucked out of the view
 Across a shire, the name of which is you,
 Where every creature runs upon
 Hills, moors and meadows which your named eyes own.¹⁸

Out of this deliberate collision between form and meaning Dunn produces some remarkable effects in this poem: it's almost as if Brecht had rewritten Pope's "Epistle to Burlington," using Pope's style, but retaining his own political convictions. It is noticeable, however, that at the end of the poem when the gardeners exact their revolutionary revenge on the Lord (the poem is set in England, Loamshire, 1789) the tone of the poem becomes rather stagey and melodramatic, and the final effect is not so much one of justified retribution as of merely wanting to make the aristocracy's flesh creep:

Townsmen will wonder, when your house was burned,
We did not burn your gardens and undo
What like of us did for the likes of you;
We did not raze this garden that we made,
Although we hanged you somewhere in its shade.¹⁹

Indeed it could be argued that Dunn is always more convincing when he shows the impact of injustice on individual lives than when he imagines the oppressed seizing the historical moment and liberating themselves through their own actions. In the same way, when Dunn moves away from his use of historical personae and expresses his political and cultural opinions more overtly the poetry can become rather strident, and the sentiments expressed can sometimes seem to be stemming not so much from anger at injustice, but rather from envy and jealousy. Something like this happens in a poem from *Barbarians* called "The Come-on" where the distinction between author and speaker becomes blurred -- it is hard to tell who is speaking in this poem -- and we find this rather unconvincing and uneasy attack on the ruling class and their culture:

Even now I am an embarrassment
To myself, my candour.
Listen now to the 'professional classes'
Renewing claims to 'rights',
Possession of land, ownership of work,
Decency of 'standards'.
In the bleep-bleep of versicles, leisure-novels,
Black traffic of Oxbridge --
Books and bicycles, the bile of success --
Men dressed in prunella
Utter credentials and their culture rules us,
A culture of connivance,

Of 'authority', arts of bland recoveries.²⁰

For the most part, however, Dunn's analysis of the responses of these 'barbarians' towards a culture which they both love and resent is immensely perceptive and acute, as though Dunn is examining his own ambivalences towards high art through personae who are often, in fact, imagined incarnations of himself at a previous historical moment. For example, in "An Artist Waiting in a Country House" Dunn explores, in a long, densely realised verse-story the mingled pleasures and humiliations inherent in the patron-artist relationship; the artist is seen here waiting anxiously for the arrival of his patron:

He looked behind him. The door had not opened.
 When would it open? He was not sure.
 He wanted it to open, and to smile,
 On standing up, his hand stretched out
 To shake the lady's hand and thank her for
 Her acquisitions of his several pictures.
 Then he was sure. It would be always shut.
 He would be there, sitting, waiting, always,
 The woman always kissed upon her cheek,
 Her husband turning, moving, to his stables
 Or wherever or whatever or whoever
 Was in this private story he had entered
 Like a reader who was half-asleep, one eye
 Reading as the other lived the story.²¹

Like Tony Harrison, with whom he has been compared by Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison,²² Dunn is sharply aware of the conflicts and tensions within the person who has uprooted himself culturally, if not politically, from the world in which he grew up: the danger of divided allegiances between family background and acquired cultural values; the possibility of being stranded between two worlds, belonging to neither and excluded from both; the insidious attractiveness of the world of art and civilisation, and yet the temptations inherent in that world of becoming totally absorbed into it and denying one's history and background. But although Dunn and Harrison are similar in their concentration on this theme there are differences of approach and emphasis between them. The context of Harrison's exploration of these conflicts is much more direct, autobiographical and domestic than Dunn's: where Dunn situates these tensions in stories and events from the lives

of historical alter egos Harrison, by contrast, roots them explicitly in the loving, but uneasy, relationship between himself and his father:

Back in our silences and sullen looks
for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between's
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.²³

Where Harrison focusses on a working-class language and culture from which he now feels separated, and yet upon which he is dependent, Dunn tends to emphasise the elegance and seductiveness of bourgeois culture whilst attacking its custodians for their ruthless arrogance and exclusivity. However, both of them would endorse the moral and political preferences implicit in the epigraph to *Barbarians* from Paul Nizan's *Antoine Bloye*: "The truth of life was on the side of the men who returned to their poor houses, on the side of the men who had not 'made good.'"²⁴

But if Dunn is a laureate of the neglected and the marginalized he is also a poet very much in the line of Horace, Marvell and the later Auden, a celebrator of the decencies and pleasures of the private life away from the turmoil of the public world. These are two very different themes: a radical, though not specifically Marxist, social concern, and an apolitical delight in the varied sources and manifestations of happiness run parallel throughout his work, seeming to indicate that Dunn does not feel the need to observe strict ideological consistency in his work. In the same way his style and tone can alternate -- sometimes in the course of a single poem -- between the sober, precise and plain and the extravagant, fantastical and witty. Some critics, notably Ash²⁵, feel that Dunn has underused that more playful, Laforguean element to his work, but Ash's arguments seem to me to exaggerate Dunn's achievement in that idiom and minimize the effectiveness of his poems in the plain style. In his second volume, *The Happier Life*, Dunn's subject is the different types of happiness to be found in the private world. One of the most obvious manifestations of this, for Dunn, is love, and marriage in particular. Many of the most touching poems in *The Happier Life* such as "The Philologists" are about the intimacies and loved familiarities of marriage, and the ways in which they build up a personal meaning which makes conversation superfluous:

Familiar with you, for I have studied your life
Like the dead languages we understand but cannot speak,

There is no need for us to talk. We know all that
 Conversational stuff, pleasantries, common things.
 It is silence we love, and the mind asleep
 In the room it goes to after work, the flowers there
 Withered, their broken parts in the dust of the tabletop,
 The yellow newspapers, empty inkbottles, and books
 In the two high bookcases with glass doors that lock.²⁶

But happiness is also to be found in the unspectacular details of daily living. Dunn is always convincing in conveying his sense of the unarmful delights of everyday domestic life; as for example in a poem like "Ratatouille" where he implies, with tenderness and playful urbanity, that the preparation and cooking of ratatouille with one's wife is an infinitely saner activity than the large-scale gestures of the politicians and celebrities of the public world:

. . . men who do not care to know about
 The eight ripe *pommed s'amour* their wives have need of,
 Preparing ratatouille, who give no thought to
 The cup of olive oil that's heated in
 Their heaviest pan, or onions, fried with garlic
 For five observant minutes, before they add
 Aubergines, courgettes, peppers, tomatoes;
 Or men who give no thought to what their wives
 Are thinking as they stand before their stoves
 When seasoning is sprinkled on, before
 A *bouquet garni* is dropped in -- these men
 Invade Afghanistan, boycott the Games,
 Call off their fixtures and prepare for war.²⁷

Throughout Dunn's work there is this suspicion of the behaviour of "public faces" and, equally, a persuasive belief in the priorities and happiness of the private life. Related to this is Dunn's attraction to the Classical theme of retirement and seclusion away from the clamour of the public world. This idea, so strong in the work of Horace and Marvell with their praise of the "green shade" remote from the factionalism and bitterness of politics is a major motif in Dunn's earlier work, as in the concluding verses of his graceful reworking of Marvell's "The Garden":

Here we are perfect. Metaphysical greenbirds
 Perch over sunlit leaves; our feet converse
 With the refreshing grass. And here I am
 A very old man of twenty-eight, glad

Of this random perfection, and you, so still
We are as islands on an island, everything
Ebbing into green around us; we know
Though this might look neglected, it might grow.²⁸

Of course, there are dangers in this praise of the unhurried and uncompetitive private life. It is open to the accusations of complacency and "quietism," a word which Julian Symons used in a review of *The Happier Life*.²⁹ A Marxist critic might also want to point out the ideological implications of this elevation of the private life, note how it divorces the individual from any interaction with history, and is in danger of perpetuating stasis and inertia, leaving "happiness" to exist only in the realm of the inter-personal rather than the social and communal. Dunn is aware of the political implications of some of these poems and, in fact, when asked by John Haffden whether he now agrees with the sentiments of "Syndrome" ("The only answer is to live quietly, miles away" Dunn replied: " I believed it then, but I don't believe it now."³⁰ Some of his poems can seem escapist in their turning-away from the strident, but inevitable, voices of the public domain, and comfy in their praise of the life of civilised pleasure, love and friendship, as in this extract from "Saturday":

Frost sparks refrigerated ploughland to
A fan of silver ribs, good husbandry
In straight lines, going downhill to a point,
A misted earthen star, half-frost, half-ground.
And we are going to our country friends
At Kirkbymoorside, bearing a pineapple,
Some books of interest and a fine Bordeaux.
I wish it to be today, always, one hour
On this, the pleasant side of history.³¹

Nevertheless, any blanket charge of "quietism" cannot be sustained. As we have seen, one of the greatest strengths of Dunn's work is its memorable evocation of lives blighted by injustice and discrimination. His praise of "the happier life" is not a local manifestation of a profoundly conservative politics, as it is in the work of the later Auden, but rather a belief -- stemming perhaps from Liberal-Individualist values--that in the minute particulars of everyday domestic and personal life people can find a source of meaning and value which the grandiose solutions of

politicians, business-men and advertisers too often fail to provide. In his latest book, *Elegies*, we find a reassertion of his belief in the human centrality of married love in a book which is both a testament of the happiness that his wife gave to him and others and an eloquent lament for the passing of that happiness through her death.

One of the great achievements of *Elegies* is the way it blends together the desolating experiences of grief and bereavement with a celebratory gratitude for the quality of his wife's life. Although the book is deeply affecting in its description of the different stages of grief there is also, characteristically, a sense of remembered delight in the fullness and generosity of her existence, "She taught me how to live, then how to die"³² he says, simply and with dignity. Unlike other *Elegies* where we have only a shadowy conception of the person being mourned we have in Dunn's *Elegies* a wonderfully humane and well-rounded picture of his wife's character, as well as an immensely sensitive exploration of the psychology of grief.

Some of the most affecting poems in *Elegies* come when he remembers, tenderly but without self-pity, the shared final moments of his wife's suffering, as in the poignant rhythms of the sonnet "Sandra's Mobile" where a friend's gift, a mobile of three gulls, becomes, by the end of the poem, an image of a love become spiritualised and transcendent

Those silent birds winged round
On thermals of my breath. On her last night,
Trying to stay awake, I saw love crowned
In tears and wooden birds and candlelight.
She did not wake again. To prove our love
Each gull, each gull, each gull, turned into dove.³³

In other poems Dunn achieves sad ironies by contrasting the state of his own life with the blithe normality of life elsewhere, in Nature or in the day-to-day reality of others' existences. Tom Paulin, in a recent review of *Elegies* has noted how Dunn sets the grief of some of his poems in a context of "agonised ordinariness"³⁴; for example in the precisely observed setting of a local Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths where Dunn goes, with his father-in-law, to obtain a death certificate at the same time as a wedding is taking place: "A young groom is unsteady in his new shoes./ His bride is nervous on the edge of the future".³⁵ In this fine poem Dunn conveys, sadly and wryly, the discrepancy between his eschatological view of the role of

the Registrar and the Registrar's humanly humdrum appearance and questions:

We enter a small office. "What relation?" he asks.
So I tell him. Now come the details he asks for.
A tidy man, with small, hideaway handwriting,
He writes things down. He does not ask,
"Was she good?" Everyone receives this Certificate.
You do not need even to deserve it.
I want to ask why he doesn't look like a saint,
When, across his desk, through his tabulations,
His bureaucracy, his morbid particulars,
The local dead walk into genealogy.
He is no cipher of history, this one,
This recording angel in a green pullover
Administering names and dates and causes.³⁶

Other poems trace these ironies of circumstance in the juxtaposition of the poet's sense of terminal unhappiness with the reawakening energies of Nature in the Spring. In this contrast Dunn is obviously on more traditional elegiac ground which could betray him into easy pathos or stale comparisons, but Dunn avoids these dangers with an unhackneyed sensitivity as in the lyrical and beautifully cadenced "Larksong":

A laverock in its house of air is singing
May morning, May morning, and its trills drift
High on the flatland's abstract hill
In the down-below of England.
I am the aerial photograph it takes of me
On a sonar landscape
And it notates my sorrow
In Holderness, where summer frost
Melts from the green like her departing ghost.³⁷

Like other great elegiac sequences, Hardy's *Poems 1912-1913* for example, Dunn's *Elegies* is full of a sense of the nearness of his dead wife. There is a spectral, haunted quality to some of the poems as Dunn seems to feel his wife's presence about him, permeating the household objects which surround him:

She rustles in my study's palm;
She is the flower on my geranium.
Our little wooden train runs by itself

Along the windowsill, each puff-puff-puff
 A breath of secret, sacred stuff.
 I feel her goodness breathe, my Lady Christ.
 Her treasured stories mourn her on their shelf,
 In spirit-air, that watchful poltergeist.³⁸

At other times her presence is felt not through ghostly reincarnations, but rather in the memories of her preserved in her possessions, for example in her annotations of a recipe book which Dunn comes across as he tries to prepare a meal:

And it is hard for me to cook my meals
 From recipes she used, without that old delight
 Returning, masked in sadness, until it feels
 As if I have become a woman hidden in me -
 Familiar with each kitchen-spotted page,
 Each stain, each note in her neat hand a sight to
 Into this grief, this kitchen pilgrimage.³⁹ [spin me

Tom Paulin and Bernard O'Donoghue⁴⁰ have both noted that throughout *Elegies* there is a strong sense of the numinous, the spiritual, a world of transcendence and "impacted human soul" as Dunn says in the wonderful poem "Creatures".⁴¹ Indeed in the extracts from "Arrangements" and "Dining" just quoted it is worth pointing out that some of the words and phrases used to describe his dead wife have specifically Christian associations (e.g. "my Lady Christ", "the kitchen pilgrimage"). But despite the overtones of those phrases Dunn is unable to accept the traditional Christian explanations of undeserved and unmerited suffering and any theodicy, any philosophical justification of such apparent injustice remains ultimately unfathomable to him. He expresses this most movingly in the uncompromising bleakness and honesty of "Reading Pascal in the Lowlands," a short story-like poem⁴² recalling an encounter with the father of a boy who is suffering from leukaemia and has only months to live:

I close my book, the *Pensees* of Pascal.
 I am light with meditation, religiose
 And mystic with a day of solitude.
 I do not tell him of my own sorrows.
 He is bored with misery and premonition.
 He has seen the limits of time, asking "Why?"

Nature is silent on that question.⁴³

And yet, despite the desolate refusal of comfort in that last line, the final effect of *Elegies* is not one of unmitigated loss and despair, for the memory of his wife brings not only grief, but also tender remembrance of her love of life and her capacity for happiness and generosity. Dunn's wife was a curator at a gallery as well as being a painter and photographer and his memories of her constantly emphasise her visual sense, her delight in colour, shape and design: "A constant artist, dedicated to/ Curves, shapes, the pleasant shades, the feel of colour".⁴⁴ Her painter's eye for beauty and composition is reflected also in the very objects she chose to furnish their house, a house which, to Dunn seems to embody her taste and sensitivity:

And all my calling cannot bring her back
To this real house, she in so much of it.
Its artistry is cooling from her touch --
The yellow sideboards and ceramic boats,
Her miniatures, her objects for the hand.
A poetry of rooms spun from her heart.⁴⁵

Her unselfconscious pleasure in the life of the senses is shown also in Dunn's memories of her enjoyment in choosing, preparing and eating good food:

My lady loved to cook and dine, but never more
Across starched linen and the saucy pork
Can we look forward to *Confit de Perigord*
How well my lady used her knife and fork!
Happy together -- ah, my lady loved to sport
And love.⁴⁶

Like many other poems in *Elegies* this poem incorporates memories of holidays together in France. Dunn has always been strongly attracted to French civilisation and art,⁴⁷ associating it with intelligence, sophistication and an un-Puritanical enjoyment of life. Something of this personal vision of France is caught in the untranslatable word "jouissance" in the following extract from a very affecting sonnet, "France" where Dunn and his wife recognize sadly that they will never be able to revisit France together:

"It's such a shame," she said. "Too ill, too quick."
"I would have liked us to have gone away."

We closed our eyes together, dreaming France,
 Its meadows, rivers, woods and *jouissance*.
 I counted summers, our love's arithmetic.
 "Some other day, my love. Some other day."⁴⁸

In *Elegies* his wife's instinctive, almost sensual love of life, her "jouissance," is often set, fittingly, in a French landscape of delight as if she embodied some of the particular qualities of a French attitude to life. In "Tursac," for example, her "lusty eagerness and style," her passion and yet her belief in the "glamour" of "right conduct" is located in a French context which mingles sensual abandon and an elegant literariness which his wife's final comment gently debunks:

My love had lusty eagerness and style.
 Propriety she had, preferring grace
 Because she saw more virtue in its wit,
 Convinced right conduct should have glamour in it
 Or look good to an educated eye,
 And never more than in those weeks of France
 Perfected into rural elegance,
 Those nights in my erotic memory.
 I call that little house our *Thebaide*
 (The literary French!), and see her smile,
 Then hear her in her best sardonic style:
 "Write out of me, not out of what you read."⁴⁹

In addition to her immense and varied openness to life Dunn also celebrates, in a bare and unemphatic language, the heroic and exemplary way in which she met her death. In her death, as in her life, she shows the same wit and need for clarity: "She fought death with an understated mischief--/ 'I suppose I'll have to make an effort'--/ Turning down painkillers for lucidity."⁵⁰ To the end of her life she maintains her responsiveness to art and her concern for proper critical standards whilst ordering the disposition of her property with care and dignity:

John and Stuart brought their pictures round,
 A travelling exhibition. Dying,
 She thumbed down some, nodded at others,
 An artist and curator to the last,
 Honesty, at all costs. She drew up lists,
 Bequests, gave things away. It tore my heart out.
 Her friends assisted at this tidying

In a conspiracy of women.⁵¹

The kindness and generosity which marked her relationships with people throughout her life are shown as continuing even on her death-bed as she: "Refused all grief, but was alight/
With nature, courage, friendship, appetite."⁵²

These exemplifications of his wife's love of life and her courage and grace when facing death give to Dunn, and to us as readers, a model of something humane and generous to set against the arbitrary cruelty of her death. *Elegies* is a book which is often heartrending in its exploration of loss and bereavement, but the final impression that it leaves is not one of total desolation, but of grief mixed with gratitude for a life which was so full of beauty, delight and humanity. *Elegies* shows us one of the great strengths of Dunn's work in its compassionate responsiveness to the quality of an individual life and its wish to retrieve and celebrate the significance of that life through poetry. The life in this book is obviously closer and dearer to him than the lives of the excluded and marginalized which he has evoked in his previous poetry, but the empathy and insight are the same, as is the ability to represent the nature of that life in a poetry which combines a specificity of narrative detail with a depth and poignancy of reflection and meditation.

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NOTES

1. Douglas Dunn, *Terry Street* (London, 1969), p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
5. Douglas Dunn, *The Happier Life* (London, 1972), pp. 21-22.
6. Cf. Dunn's "The White Poet. Homage to Jules Laforgue," *Love or Nothing* (London: 1974), pp. 52-55; in the same volume see also his very Laforguean "Variation on the Words 'Solo'"

and 'Exhaust,'" p. 57.

7. Douglas Dunn, *Love or Nothing* (London, 1974), pp. 15-16.

8. *The Happier Life*, p. 53.

9. John Haffenden, ed. *Viewpoints. Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London, 1981), p. 22.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

11. Douglas Dunn, *St. Kilda's Parliament* (London, 1981), p. 25.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

13. Douglas Dunn, *Barbarians* (London, 1979), p. 20.

14. *St. Kilda's Parliament*, p. 57.

15. John Ash, *Poetry Nation*, 34 (April 1983), 44.

16. *St. Kilda's Parliament*, pp. 13-14.

17. P.R. King (ed.), *Nine Contemporary Poets. A critical introduction.* (London, 1979), p. 226.

18. *Barbarians*, pp. 17-18.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

22. Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, (eds.) *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (London, 1982), p. 17.

23. Tony Harrison, *Continuous. 50 Sonnets from The School of Eloquence* (London, 1981), unpaginated.

24. *Barbarians*, title page.

25. *Poetry Nation*, 34 (April 1983), 44.

26. *The Happier Life*, p. 48.

27. *St. Kilda's Parliament*, p. 85-6.
28. *The Happier Life*, p. 12.
29. Julian Symons, "Down to Earth," *London Magazine*, 12 (Aug-Sept. 1972), 140.
30. *Viewpoints*, p. 21.
31. *St. Kilda's Parliament*, p. 36.
32. *Elegies*, (London, 1985), p. 23.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
34. Tom Paulin, "Risks," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 7, No. 14 (1 Aug. 1985), 23.
35. *Elegies*, p. 15.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
40. Bernard O'Donoghue, "Pain in the Balance", *Poetry Review*, 75 (April 1985), 51-2.
41. *Elegies*, p. 33.
42. In his interview with John Haffenden, Dunn talks about his feelings of affinity with the art of the short story: "The critic John Bayley has called some poems by Auden and Hardy 'sung short stories': that's the condition to which I'd like some of my poems to aspire . . . You have to show things in a story; you have to show things in a poem too, but you can *tell* things in a poem. Strangely enough, we consider prose the language of telling, poetry the language of showing, but in contemporary poetry you can tell as much as you show. Sometimes you can show without telling, and that's preferable. Short stories are very close to the spirit of poems, like Chekhov's story 'The Kiss', in the feeling they impart to the reader." *Viewpoints*, p. 32.

43. *Elegies*, p. 45.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

47. In his conversation with Haffenden when Haffenden says "You've denigrated common sense; why is that?" Dunn replies: "I'm a Francophile, I don't believe in common sense; it's an Anglo-Saxon virtue. Scotsmen, like Frenchmen, don't believe in common sense, we believe in intelligence." *Viewpoints*, p. 30.

48. *Elegies*, p. 19.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 26. "Une Thebaide" is a retreat, a hermitage, a place of seclusion.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 28.