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Joanne S. Norman

A Postmodern Look at a Medieval Poet: The Case of William Dunbar

Recently, Umberto Eco, that well-known postmodernist critic/writer, has lamented that "'postmodern' is a term *bon à tout faire*. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer."¹ Although I do not share Eco's negative response to this development, I do agree with his observation and, indeed, intend to take the "postmodern" term back in time, not to Homer, but at least to fifteenth-century Scotland. It is true that I happen to "like" the poetry of William Dunbar, but I also believe that postmodernism offers more than a chic term of approbation to be used carelessly across the literary spectrum. If modern readers/critics are applying the concepts of postmodernism to an ever-increasing range of literary and non-literary works, the reason may be that such concepts offer a model of interpretation that liberates the text to provoke new readings, new responses.

This freeing of the text is possible because postmodern models of "recording" or "inventing" are processes based on contingency, multiplicity,

¹Quoted by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction* (New York & London, 1988), p. 42.

fragmentation, discontinuity that result in an "unfixing of certainties."² They offer multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed, unitary concepts while recognizing the appeal of those concepts. In practice, postmodern writing uses and then subverts the conventions of art to put in question any desire for absolute order or truth through imagination. Art can not be defined entirely as either autonomous artifice or as a reflection of the "real" world.³ Following the principles of deconstructive reading that form a fundamental part of postmodernism, texts reinvent the past from the present point of view, creating the past as a construct; they employ difference to defer truth/meaning, creating flux.⁴ Umberto Eco's own *The Name of the Rose* provides ample illustration of what this means in a modern text.

Are such processes, however, limited to the last twenty years of our century? Derrida's famous/infamous assertion, "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," explicitly transcends historical periodization. Critics like Zumthor would maintain that any use of tropes or figurative language is ultimately a form of masking or veiling that attempts to reduce complex diversity of meaning and experience.⁵ We are trapped in a "cool web of language"⁶ that enables us to

²Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, 1988), p. 19. Studies that either define the philosophical concepts of deconstruction and postmodernism or analyze specific literary works according to their principles are far too numerous to be listed here. Three very useful surveys are those by Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzick and Wallace Martin, ed., *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis, 1983); Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (Normal, OK, 1985); and Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York, 1983). A convenient source for examples of postmodern criticism of a variety of literatures is that of Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema, ed., *Exploring Postmodernism* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia, 1987). However, in the course of preparing this paper I found that Canadian postmodern criticism, usually applied only to contemporary Canadian fiction, identified traits and writing techniques that seemed most applicable to the Middle Scots poet. I have tried to suggest at the end of this paper a possible reason for that parallel.

³Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern*, pp. 9-10.

⁴Lola Lemire Tostevin, "An Interview with Christopher Dewdney," *Poetry Canada*, 10 (1989), 1.

⁵Paul Zumthor, "Les Masques du poème. Questions de poétique médiévale," *Masques et déguisements dans la littérature médiévale*, ed. Marie-Louise Ollier (Montréal, 1988), pp. 15-6.

⁶Robert Graves, "The Cool Web," *The Practical Imagination*, ed. Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, rev. edn. (New York, 1987), p. 9.

order experience and thus retreat from it. The awareness, conscious or unconscious, of imposed limited representation of contradictory experience results in a rejection of one-dimensional meaning or form. Thus Zumthor discerns in medieval discourse a constant need to evade the literal, invert the mimetic order of phrases, break tonalities, contrast registers, juxtapose *sic* and *non*—a fundamental need for discontinuity, for controlled skid, that is a source for diverse forms of irony, including the practice of parody.⁷ For him, such "masquing," far from being trivial, defines what it is to be human,⁸ and his response to parody in medieval literature is mirrored by the postmodern critic, Hutcheon, who states that "to include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose."⁹

It is precisely this double focus or ambivalent meaning that has continually surfaced in responses to the poetry of William Dunbar.¹⁰ A very simple example will demonstrate how traditional critical approaches to his poetry seem driven by binary oppositions that may indeed block or oversimplify what is taking place in the text. At the Stirling conference in 1980, Elizabeth Archibald and I both presented papers on Dunbar's parody using the "Dregy" a our base text.¹¹ I believe our papers were, quite fortuitously, more complementary than opposed, but they in turn provoked a later "Reappraisal" of the "Dregy" by Judith Ting.¹² She begins her article by carefully emphasizing an essential difference between Archibald and me that she perceives in

⁷"... un besoin constant du discours médiéval de s'évader du littéral, d'inverser l'ordre mimétique des phrases, de rompre les tonalités, de contraster les registres, de juxtaposer le *sic* et le *non*—ce besoin foncier de discontinuité, de dérapage contrôlé, source des diverses formes de son 'ironie'... de ses pratiques de la parodie." Zumthor, p. 16. All translations/paraphrases of the French texts are mine.

⁸"... tout ce qui nous fait hommes est ainsi jeux et substitutions de masques..." Zumthor, p. 17.

⁹Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 27.

¹⁰All references to titles and texts of William Dunbar's poems are to *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1979).

¹¹Elizabeth Archibald, "William Dunbar and the Medieval Tradition of Parody," and Joanne S. Norman, "Thematic Implications of Parody in William Dunbar's 'Dregy'," *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Scottish Language and Literature (Medieval and Renaissance)*, ed. Roderick J. Lyall and Felicity Riddy (Stirling & Glasgow, 1981), pp. 328-58.

¹²Judith Ting, "A Reappraisal of William Dunbar's *Dregy*," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 14 (1987), 19-36.

the mutual exclusiveness of "seriousness" and "game." In other words, if the "Dregy" is a "private joke," (Archibald) it cannot have any serious meaning (Norman). Ting says, "The distinction is crucial."¹³ But is it? I believe that Ting shows in her article just how naturally we think in terms of opposites that are also hierarchies, in that one term is superior or more positive than the other. Yet I also believe her own text is riddled with contradictory positions that accurately reflect the ambiguous text she is reappraising. For example, Ting presents a detailed footnote¹⁴ whose apparent function is to cast doubt on the widely accepted idea that the poem refers to an actual custom of James IV to undergo some form of severe penance during Lent at the Observantine convent in Stirling. Her purpose would seem to be to contest Archibald's contention that the poem is directly related to James IV and is based on actual court life. Yet Ting also assumes on the basis of a single, inconclusive line in the poem that the piece may have been actually "performed" at court complete with choir.¹⁵ Most of her article is a detailed assessment of other liturgical texts that Dunbar probably used in constructing his parody, suggesting an even more complex verbal tissue of texts than my original paper put forward. Yet despite the "complexity of the range of sources," the distinct "signposts" of the various parodies, and the fact that Dunbar apparently parodies not only actual words and phrases, but also "concepts," the "Dregy" is "first and foremost a courtly game, and is best read as such now, as then."¹⁶ Ting's conclusion implies a dismissal of all her detailed analysis of textual interplay that preceded it as essentially meaningless—or at least it does if we insist on separating "seriousness" from "game." If I have spent some time deconstructing Ting's text, it is only to indicate how such an exemplary study "dismantles itself" and how her article does "demonstrate," as J. Hillis Miller contends, "that literature continually exceeds any formula or theory with which the critic is prepared to encompass it."¹⁷ For the deconstructionist, this is the ultimate purpose of criticism: "to restore the strangeness of literature" and to reveal the "capacity of each work

¹³Ting, p. 32.

¹⁴Ting, note 23, p. 34.

¹⁵Ting, pp. 34-5.

¹⁶The phrases in quotation marks are all used by Ting, p. 32.

¹⁷J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 5.

to surprise the reader."¹⁸ All texts have intertwined, opposite "discourses." It is the purpose of the critic/reader not to accept exclusive binary oppositions, but to erase boundaries and question the order and values implied by the opposites.¹⁹ A single text, and Dunbar's "Dregy" with its complicated series of textual echoes can hardly be limited to that, may be the interweaving of mutually exclusive "readings." A postmodern reading of the "Dregy" would, in fact, question our need for a centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed system of interpretation. Is James IV's sense of guilt and tendency to hairshirt penance negated by the presence of Margaret Drummond, fiddlers, drummers, and a rope-dancer at Stirling? All are equally well documented. Is the poem an attack on the hedonism of the court or the excessive asceticism of the Observantines? Or both? Is it not both witty game and mordant satire? The irony of Dunbar's parody, like that of a modern writer, refuses the resolution of contraries.

One reason for an insistence on the indeterminacy of the Dunbar's poetry is that we cannot, in spite of both Ting's and my optimistic statements in our articles, know anything about Dunbar's "intentions" outside the text. We can only infer who/what Dunbar is from the discourses that exist connected to his name, and we can only examine the effects his language has in its context—not proceed from there to an analysis of the shadowy "personality" of the author. Indeed, biographical studies of Dunbar are haunted by the problem of textuality. We find ourselves forced by the paucity of extra-literary documentation to return to the poetry to tease out historical/biographical references that may or may not be "true." Yet such "documentation" is itself suspect—did Dunbar really have a headache when he wrote, "My heid did 3ak 3 ester nicht"? Or was he assuming a conventional mask?²⁰ We seem on safer ground when Dunbar is writing explicitly for a specific occasion at court, one that can be cross-referenced to other forms of historical record, like "The Thrissill and the Rois" or the John Damian poems, "The Antechrist" and "Ane Ballat of the Fenzeit Freir of Tunmland." Yet the complex diplomatic maneuverings of a highly political marriage are reduced to an enamelled portrait of anthropomorphic plants and the putative disgrace and

¹⁸ Miller, p. 5.

¹⁹ Ross C. Murfin, ed., *Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness": A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1989), p. 201.

²⁰ Edmund Reiss, "Dunbar's Self-Revelation and Poetic Tradition," *Actes du 2^e Colloque de Langue et de Littérature Ecossaises (Moyen Age et Renaissance)*, ed. Jean-Jacques Blanchot and Claude Graf (Strasbourg, 1978), pp. 326-38.

fall of the "flying abbot" seems denied by the historical records.²¹ What a postmodern critic would remind us of here is that both history and literature are discourses that shape events into "facts."²² Therefore, while we as readers/interpreters must acknowledge the significance of the historical context for the meaning of these poems, we must also accept that our historical knowledge remains problematic. Our culture inscribes what we "know" as history and this itself is subject to change over space and time. We are inextricably caught in our own culture as readers/receivers of a text and this position conditions our response. For example, I do not believe it is possible for any modern reader to confront the "Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo" without being simultaneously aware of the issues raised by feminist politics and criticism. Or, as Derrida states in "Signature, Event, Context," we are confronted in Dunbar's written texts by the absence of the author which leads to a multiplication of meaning by readers and other writers—Archibald, Norman, and Ting among them—who must try to construct a context for the poem in order to provide a ground for the absent writer's intention.²³

This last statement is not intended to suggest that we can simply remake Dunbar's poetry into whatever current or contemporary theme we have in mind. On the contrary, a postmodern interpretative strategy insists on foregrounding the context in which Dunbar's poems were produced, to consider "both production and reception processes and the text itself within an entire communication situation which includes the social, ideological, historical, and aesthetic contexts in which those processes and that product exist."²⁴ Poetry (and all art) does not exist in an absolute vacuum of pure form but has both an aesthetic (formal) and social (use) dimension. The recovery, however problematic, of the specific context of Dunbar's work is essential to understanding how his poems construct their own reality. We need to know why Dunbar wrote those particular poems for those specific occasions. Why did the court of James IV desire/accept/motivate such poems? We need to consider his specific function of court poet as well as his personal relationships to members of the court, to examine how the ideology of a particular poem reflects the actual occasion of its presentation. In other words, the

²¹Kinsley, pp. 341-2.

²²Hutcheon, *Poetics*, pp. 86-101.

²³Sharon Crowley, *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* (Urbana, IL, 1989), pp. 14-5.

²⁴Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 40.

identity of Andro and Walter Kennedy and their putative relationship with Dunbar as it is revealed/concealed in the "Testament" and the "Flying" is of primary importance. In fact, the very topicality and circumstantiality of Dunbar's poetry make it an ideal exemplar of the contextualizing characteristic of postmodern literature and criticism.

William Dunbar's other characteristic that also qualifies him as anachronistically postmodern is his consistent intrusion into his poems and his deliberate examination of the nature and limits of art as it confronts the external world. If there is any one consistent thread in Dunbar's presentation of himself or as "other" in his poems, it is that of the alien, the isolate, the outsider. He is equally the onlooker at the "Dance in the Quenis Chalmer," at "Fasternis Evin in Hell," and on "midsummer evin, mirriest of nichtis"; his reiterated complaint seems to be either that he is not treated as one of the king's loyal servants ("Aganis the Solistaris in Court") or that "All erdly Joy returnis in Pane." His marginal position seems confirmed by the scant records of his career at court. I have discussed elsewhere²⁵ the ambiguous role of Dunbar as courtier/poet in which he is both inside and outside the court culture. Hence we have the large number of "occasional" poems from Dunbar that are rooted in the particular context of the Scottish court and the discontinuity engendered by his concentration on short lyrics that encompass a widely contrasting range of topic and mood. His failure to produce a long, "representative" work may account for his continued neglect in modern surveys of English literary tradition.²⁶ A postmodern writer also positions himself/herself at the margins of the dominant culture, often by emphasizing its particular or local aspects—race, gender, class—rather than its universal or central concerns. So too, Dunbar, as a Scot found himself writing in his native language as an individual *makar* who was also part of a much larger, more dominant culture defined either as English or as continental European. Dunbar shares with later postmodern writers an awareness "of the inevitable ideological complicity with dominant forms of culture that [they] wish to challenge."²⁷

²⁵Joanne S. Norman, "William Dunbar: Grand Rhétoriqueur," *Bryght Lanternis*, ed. J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 179-93.

²⁶An informal survey of at least six commonly used North American anthologies of English literature covering the Old and Middle English periods, including the well-known Norton Series, reveals not a single selection from Dunbar, or indeed from any fifteenth-century Scots writer.

²⁷Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodernism*, p. 12.

This challenge takes the form of "deconstructing" the dominant culture from within, often by producing a radical discontinuity at either the formal or the thematic level, or both, in a literary text.²⁸ Postmodernism accepts the principle that all knowledge is contextualized; no object can be studied in isolation, nor can it be contained within certain, defined boundaries. Objects derive meaning from other objects that are both related and different in space and time.²⁹ For a medieval writer such as Dunbar, this means that poems or other texts work within an immediately recognizable tradition that embodies a variety of fixed, defined conventions. Each *chanson d'aventure*, dream vision, moral allegory is immediately recognizable within its genre and is defined by its differences from other examples within that genre. That is, one can only understand "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis" by knowing in what ways it is and is not a dance macabre, a hell vision, and a personified procession of the seven deadly sins; how it is simultaneously a moral allegory and a carnival. Similarly, the women of "Tretis of the Tua Mariit Women and the Wedo" must be read in the context of Chaucer, Jean de Meun, and Villon in order to see how they resemble and yet are not the Wife of Bath, La Vieille, nor la belle Hëaulmiere. The ambivalent role of genre is, in fact, well illustrated by this poem with its deliberate blend of courtly and antifeminist conventions that precludes a single unified response. As Derrida contends in his "*loi du genre*" (law of genre), genre serves both to pull a body of texts together and to keep that body from closing.³⁰ In the case of the "Tretis," the apparent realism of the women counteracts the overt idealism of the setting, but the exaggeration and grotesquerie of the dialogues eventually remind the audience that both women and garden are literary artifices that use/abuse familiar codes of representation. The mixed response of the reader is further exacerbated by *his* forced complicity as an eavesdropper who must participate in making sense of this text:

3e auditoris most honorable that eris hes gevin
 Oneto this uncouth aventur quhilk airly me happinit:
 Of thir thre wantoun wiffis that I haif writtin heir,
 Quhilk wald 3e waill to 3our wif gif 3e suld wed one?

(ll. 527-30)

²⁸Hans Bertens, "Postmodern Characterization and the Intrusion of Language," *Exploring Postmodernism*, ed. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam & Philadelphia, 1987), p. 140.

²⁹Crowley, p. 11.

³⁰Jacques Derrida, "La Loi de genre/The Law of Genre," *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 202-29.

Dunbar's impudent and deliberate confusion between life and art—to wed a woman who is *writtin heir*—is but one of many examples of his transgressing the boundaries between art and the real world to put in question the relationship between text and the historical/social reality it represents.

Dunbar's art then, like that of contemporary postmodernists, uses forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive. He creates "literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present."³¹ At the same time, he is engaged in destabilizing conventions by pointing out inherent paradoxes and contradictions by an ironic re-reading of the art of the past. The "Tretis" could not exist without Chaucer and Jean de Meun, but it is clearly not a simple reflection of either or the tradition they define.

The same distortion is discovered at the purely linguistic level in Dunbar's penchant for virtuoso word play at all levels, from the aureation of "The Golden Targe" and "Ane Ballat of Our Lady" to the wild ribaldry and alliteration of the "Flyting" and the "Tretis." Such self-conscious manipulation of language has always raised questions about the "meaning" of a text. For example, we have the extravagant courtly lyric, "To a Lady, quhone he list to Feyne" whose seriousness, according to Kinsley, can only be measured by comparing it to another, more "controlled" lyric, "Sweit Rois of Vertew."³² But surely the first-line title of the lyric mis-speaks the whole body of love poems. When was Dunbar not "feyning" with words in his courtly lyrics? For Zumthor such lexical games or word play is but part of the "*esthétique polyphonique*" of the middle ages that is in turn a universal characteristic of poetic language.³³ All "word play thus aims at the same time to reduce/simplify (*démultiplier*) meaning and to diminish (in extreme cases to nothing) the world of fact."³⁴ Dunbar's verbal display allows for just this doubt or uncertainty of interpretation by disrupting the flow of discourse and making what was transparent opaque. But again, it is the essential function of language to mask or disguise reality.

Zumthor proposes a three-step hierarchical process of analyzing the function of masks in poetry:

³¹Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodernism*, p. 1.

³²Kinsley, pp. 255-6.

³³Zumthor, pp. 16-7.

³⁴"Toute jonglerie, ainsi, vise à la fois à *démultiplier* le sens et à en réduire (dans les cas extrêmes jusqu'à l'annulation) la sphère d'évidence." Zumthor, pp. 14-5.

(1) inventory and analysis of actual masques and masquerades referred to by the text;

(2) analysis of textual elements that function aesthetically or morally as "disguises" of some aspect of the text's meaning;

(3) questioning of the essential nature of the text itself and its function of "dissimulation."

The first stage employs historical documentation. That is, the critic is concerned with the actual presentation/performances of court or non-courtly culture as represented in Dunbar's poetry: the dance in the Queen's chamber, the masquing and burlesque of "Fasternis evin" at court, the tournaments of 1507 and 1508. The second stage reveals the implications of the third stage that have been determined by social-historical factors.

Dunbar obviously worked within a specific role as court propagandist supporting royal policies ("Epetaphe for Donald Oure") and celebrating in verse the public ceremonies that expressed the ideology of the Scottish court ("To the Quene"; "The Ballade of Barnard Stewart lord of Aubigny"). Even more central to his poetry is the construction of the ideal world defined by chivalric and courtly codes. Yet here the "rhetoric of assertion" is often undercut by the text itself: Reson and Dunbar are overcome by Sensuality despite the "goldyn targe" and the dream vision ends abruptly in cannonfire so that "it semyt that the raynbow brak" (l. 241). The intrusion of artillery, even as a complimentary allusion the king's interest in military hardware, draws attention to the illusion created by the text. Similarly, the abrupt ending of the "dance of the sevin deidly synnis" in wailing bagpipes and smoke defuses the potential seriousness of what is a less than flattering burlesque of the court of James IV. For the deconstructing critic, these gaps or inconsistencies of text can be read as systematic or significant in themselves so that the poems create their own double meanings beyond the explicit control of the author.³⁵ Nevertheless, the choice of such *double entendre* was surely Dunbar's, who consciously exploits the interplay of texts that brings into question the relationship between the reality created by this poems and their external referents.

If one can discern any unity at all in the contradictory writing of such a poet, it is in his very insistence on opposition and paradox. Dunbar adopts the quintessential postmodern approach to the past: parody. However, this is not parody defined as a "ridiculing imitation" but as the "repetition with critical distance that allows signally of difference at the very heart of similarity."³⁶ It allows a writer to speak within a discourse without being totally

³⁵Crowley, pp. 6-7.

³⁶Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 26.

co-opted by it. Therefore, parody has come to be in the twentieth century the favored form for writers in places like Canada or writers from outsider/minority groups who must work from both inside and outside a culturally different but dominant context. As a medieval Scottish court poet/cleric who was both part of and alien from the dominant European aristocratic/chivalric culture, Dunbar too found parody a means to identify with and maintain a critical distance from a dominant ideology. The self-conscious irony of his poetry anticipates our postmodern insight that there is only text; no ultimate, absolute and total meaning or center except that created by the language of desire.

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