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Attila Dósa

“The kind of poetry I mean”:
Notes on Douglas Dunn’s Criticism of Scottish Poetry

The title is a reference to Hugh MacDiarmid’s *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961), which offered itself almost instinctively when I was reading the following paragraph by Douglas Dunn:

Sensuously imaginative phrase-making is not what is expected of a Scottish poet. Burns’s lyricism is of the precise sort; it is direct, human, justifiable, colloquial and explicable. Hugh MacDiarmid’s ghostly miniatures in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* (such poems as “The Watergaw” and “A Herd of Does”) come closer to the kind of poetry I mean. But if some of that earlier impulse survived in the lively and, indeed, exceptionally imaginative meditation, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and here and there in later writing, it was not long before his poetry deteriorated, or was in any case radically modified by pressure of politics, personality and ambition into his “poetry of facts.”¹

Dunn cites Burns’s poetry and MacDiarmid’s early lyrics as examples for “the kind of poetry he wants,” a poetry of inspiration as opposed to a poetry shaped and determined by external compulsion. The title of Dunn’s essay also suggests an analogous rhetoric with Edwin Muir’s *Scott and Scotland* (1936), subtitled *The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*. In their respective essays

¹Douglas Dunn, “The Predicament of Scottish Poetry,” *TLS*, 18 March 1983, p. 273. Henceforth *Predicament*.

both poet-critics comment on what Muir calls “the lack of a whole mind”² in Scottish letters: Muir from a linguistic and cultural, Dunn from a purely literary perspective. “That the nature of Scottish society is not particularly helpful or relaxing to a writer is undeniable,” Dunn argues in “The Predicament of Scottish Poetry” (p. 273). “National caricatures were preferred to realities, truth and aspiration. It can hardly be denied that an element of that persists,” he writes almost a decade later.³

In “The Predicament of Scottish Poetry” Dunn throws light upon the potentially destructive effects which the stress of restrictive social and political expectations implanted in the Scottish mind might have on a poet. He condemns the cultural environment in Scotland in which the inhibiting influence of non-literary expectations, stereotyping, prejudices, and other restrictive conditions create a psychological obstruction in the poet. Reading Dunn’s criticism the following questions emerge: what is his opinion about the effects of such social/political expectations and prejudices on poetry?; and: How is it possible for the poet to withstand or avoid them? In the present essay I shall seek to find answers to these two questions, focusing on Dunn’s ideas in “The Predicament of Scottish Poetry,” which, I believe, is a central text in the post-MacDiarmid criticism of Scottish poetry.

In his essay Dunn makes a distinction between a kind of poetry which relies on a purely aesthetic impulse (what he broadly terms “lyricism” elsewhere) and a propensity to yield to more particular social influences in poetry. The negotiation between these oppositional effects is usually seen as a central element in Dunn’s verse. Colin Nicholson draws attention to Dunn’s “uneasy dialectic...with a lyrical self in tension with public utterance.”⁴ More recently, Sean O’Brien has identified what he calls “the permanent standoff between private life and political engagement” as a “strategic necessity” in Dunn’s writing life as a poet.⁵ This dialectic, however, does not restrict itself to Dunn’s poetry; its discussion also forms a significant part of his criticism. And it should not be confined to an opposition merely between the public and the private aspects of art. It is a complex dilemma, which affects genre, voice, subject matter, imagination, and engrosses such questions as those of conscience, poetic truth, and the responsibility of the writer. Dunn’s dialectical

²Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (London, 1936), p. 22.

³Dunn, “Language and Liberty,” [introduction to] *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, ed. Douglas Dunn (London, 1992), p. xxxiv. Henceforth Faber.

⁴Nicholson, “Dimensions of the Sentient” [interview with Douglas Dunn], *Poem, Purpose and Place: Shaping Identity in Contemporary Scottish Verse*, Determinations (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 184. Henceforth Nicholson.

⁵O’Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1998), p. 65.

view of literature, which may seem eccentric for some, follows a conventional *Kunsttheorie*, which culminated in György Lukács's *Heidelberger Philosophie der Kunst* (1912-14).⁶ In Dunn's opinion, the inherent division in art can be reconciled in "a workable disinterestedness," which implies the poet's keeping a distance between his or her lyrical convictions and the "bothersome distractions" of public matters.⁷

Richard Price joins those who emphasize the division between private lyricism and public commitment in Dunn's view of poetry when he discerns such oppositions in Dunn's criticism as those between "a willed poetry and an organic kind," or "a *mystical* understanding of the creative act and an understanding of poetry as inherently political."⁸ But Price's description of Dunn as "a leftist pragmatist who will not be pinioned by the programmatic in politics or poetry," (Price, p. 170) is a more useful point of departure in reading Dunn's criticism than those opinions which suggest a sense of anxiety. Dunn is one of the most independent-minded writers of his generation. Obviously, he does not assume that poetry should be isolated from everyday social or political life, and it would be absurd to suggest that such isolation could ever be possible, because, as Dunn indicates in his essay on Edwin Morgan's sonnets, "[f]orm is not entirely disinterested, or not always."⁹ But in his criticism Dunn makes attempts at excluding non-literary viewpoints from discussions of poetry, or at least he tries to reach a compromise between an aesthetic preference and an unavoidable social/political contextualization of the work of art. Although he deals with public issues occasionally, Dunn does not subscribe to any particular political agenda: he said to Nicholson, "involvement with social and political subjects in poetry often means that people think you are involved in politics, which I am not, in any practical way" (p. 192).

Dunn is sensitive to the influence of political expectations on art. He believes that any political conviction of the poet can be artistically restrictive inasmuch as it may harmfully interfere with interpretations of his or her works. Thus political loyalty on the part of the artist may dramatically reduce the horizon of expectations of his or her readers and Dunn argues that if the poet is "engaged in social and political subjects, then people are likely to react to a poem in much the same way as they react to political ideas; they are likely to

⁶Darmstadt, 1974. (*Werke*, Band 16: Frühe Schriften zur Ästhetik I).

⁷Dunn, "Writing Things Down," *The Poet's Voice and Craft*, ed. C. B. McCully (Manchester, 1994), p. 91. Henceforth Writing.

⁸Price, "Taking Exceptions: Douglas Dunn's Criticism," *Reading Douglas Dunn*, ed. Robert Crawford and David Kinloch (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 169. Henceforth Price.

⁹Douglas Dunn, "Morgan's Sonnets," *About Edwin Morgan*, ed. Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 76.

reject it because they respond to the political significance of the piece of writing rather than to the piece of writing per se" (Nicholson, p. 192). Immersion in politics may not only be restrictive in the interpretation of the work of art, but it can also affect comprehensiveness of subject matter. "In a country like Scotland, where nationalism is an active political force, and not just in the Scottish National Party, the temptation is that Scottish subjects should be foregrounded explicitly and at the expense of poetry's inclusiveness," writes Dunn about the restraining influence of one of the prevailing political discourses of the day on art (Faber, p. xlv). He also insists that later Scottish poetry has not benefited from the contemporary atmosphere of public life, which seems to have demanded political explicitness and side-taking from the poets: "In the relatively recent past, Scottish poetry tended to look like too much of a special case. It suffered from its own introverted publicity" (Faber, p. xlv).

Social influences on poetry also may be embarrassing, especially in the work of the younger generation. Considering the work of younger poets collected in *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*,¹⁰ he remarks that "given the social obstacles in the way of occupying your own vocal space—issues such as gender, sexuality, skin colour, religion, class, language and accent—perhaps the real achievement of *Dream State* is that it should exist at all."¹¹ He discerns a lack of embarrassment with their themes in the younger poets similar to that which is exhibited in the writing of Liz Lochhead, Kenneth White and Stewart Conn, members of what Dunn terms the "middle generation" of Scottish poetry. In particular, he recognizes a "newer confidence" in the handling of subject matters in Robert Crawford's poetry (Faber, p. xlv). However, neither voice, nor confidence, not even honesty can counterbalance the absence of artistic sensitivity in poetry. Dunn may be comfortable to read poems in *Dream State* that are more straightforwardly extrovert than might have been the case before, but on the whole he misses "an aesthetic dedication comparable to MacCaig's, Brown's, Smith's, Morgan's, or MacLean's" (Caledonia, p. 24).

Language is another perplexing issue in poetry. It has been difficult to avoid this issue in twentieth-century Scottish literature, since language and literature, as other forms of the cultural self-consciousness of a nation, can hardly ever be separated. Unquestionably, the affirmation of the linguistic difference of Scotland (in whichever of the country's languages) from England is another form of the affirmation of Scottish cultural independence. Dunn suggests, though, that living up to linguistic expectations (either "respectable" or nationalist) in poetry through the choice of language and register might also be harm-

¹⁰Ed. Daniel O'Rourke (Edinburgh, 1994).

¹¹Dunn, "Caledonia Dreaming," *Poetry Review*, 84 (Spring 1994), p. 23. Henceforth Caledonia.

ful. The choice of Scots, for example, may clearly convey the sense of cultural dissimilarity from England, but in so doing, "it perpetuates all those characteristics which prevent Scottish writers from reaching a more complete imagery" (Predicament, p. 273).

Considerations of linguistic difference from English have been important in this century's Scottish writing. Since Edwin Muir's much-debated critique of Scottish life and letters in *Scott and Scotland*, Scottish poets have felt themselves compelled to vindicate the status of Scots as a self-sustaining language and to assert its independence from English. Induced mainly by Muir's essay, the phrase "language question" was originally used to denote the debate about Scots, as well as the right to claim for it the privilege of a functioning or potential national language. Since the Scottish Literary Renaissance, the capacity of Scots as a self-sustaining language has been proved in literature. Thus the phrase has come to indicate a primarily linguistic debate to determine the status of Scots amid the prevailing confusion of its designation. There can be observed remarkable inconsistency in the application of linguistic terminology in traditional designations like "Braid Scots," "the Vernacular," "the Scottish dialect," "the Scottish tongue," and several other labels. The current debate about Scots—initiated by the publications of J. D. McClure and A. J. Aitken in particular¹²—involves the revision of these labels. Linguists are also initiating a project for the standardization of Scots, devising a language norm and putting that norm into practice.

More recently Scottish writers seem to avoid direct engagement in that purely linguistic debate. Poets take the presence and the uses of the language for granted, as it has come down to them from earlier generations—fresh, invigorated, expressive, and playful—whereas some critics interpret the elusive status of Scots with the help of more recent, relativist literary theories. The poet-critic Robert Crawford explains the linguistic situation in Scotland with the Bakhtinian term "dialogized heteroglossia,"¹³ which, he argues, reserves a theoretical space for a free interplay between the languages of Scotland. Crawford rejects the idea of standardizing Scots, which he claims would solidify the position of the language, and would put an end to its fruitfully evasive status. His aggressive dismissal of attempts at standardization is indicative of an emotionally perturbed cultural atmosphere. Crawford's rhetoric also recalls Hugh

¹²See, for example, J. D. McClure, "The Concept of Standard Scots," *Chapman* 23-4 (1979) and "The Debate on Scots Orthography," *Focus on: Scotland*, ed. Manfred Görlach (Amsterdam, 1985)—both reprinted in McClure, *Scots and Its Literature* (Amsterdam, 1995); or McClure, A. J. Aitken, D.A. Low, *The Scots Language: Planning for Modern Usage* (Edinburgh, 1980).

¹³Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-century Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 7. Henceforth Crawford.

MacDiarmid's strenuous linguistic proclamations in the early phase of his career:

Enlightenment Scotland may have been preoccupied with purifying its language, but we're not. We know that impurity of language matters as much as purity; because in impurity lies richness, imagination and the seeds of new growth. Homogeneity—who needs it? Dictators, racists, *Scots Style-sheeters*, prescriptivists who want us all the same (Crawford, p. 162).

In "A Theory of Scots Letters" MacDiarmid advocates unsentimental experimenting with Scots, and also speaks out against language purists: "The real enemy is he who cried: 'Hands off our fine old Scottish tongue.'"¹⁴

Dunn is less convinced about the benefits of a heterogeneous linguistic environment for the poet. He is much of a Continental spirit when he recognizes the absence of language as "one of life's given stabilities" in Scotland (Writing, p. 87). Rather than regarding it as a potentially fruitful experience for the poet, in the same essay he goes on to describe the problems that may arise from sociolinguistic self-consciousness. However, he does not involve himself in the linguistic debate about the status and the normalization of Scots in any way. Dunn makes a statement in defense of the independence of Scots in a purely diachronic argument:

The language of Lowland Scotland was known as 'Inglis' until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and only after that as 'Scottish'. English and Scots are both dialects of the same original language stock. Gaelic and Norse are additional etymological sources, as are Brythonic Welsh and Pictish, especially as far as place names are concerned, which form an important part of any country's linguistic atmosphere. Geographical, climatic and other domestic and historical forces contributed to its distinctive vocabulary, the extent of which is recorded in Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue and The Scottish National Dictionary (Faber, p. xxiv).

Such diachronic advocating of dissimilarity from English with an in-built etymologizing perspective is nothing new; David Daiches adopts the same strategy in his *Literature and Gentility in Scotland*.¹⁵ At the same time, Dunn's inconsistency in the labeling of Scots is evocative of MacDiarmid's approach. In his well-known manifesto of the Scottish Renaissance (1923), MacDiarmid attributes four different designations to Scots within one paragraph (Theory, p. 19). Writing about the medium of MacDiarmid's cultural enterprise, Dunn argues:

¹⁴Originally published in *The Scottish Chapbook*, 1923; rptd. in Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester, 1992), p. 19. Henceforth Theory.

¹⁵(Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 29-30.

Vernacular, Doric, Braid Scots, Scots, Synthetic Scots, Plastic Scots, Aggrandized Scots, or Lallans, were and are (but, by and large, they are all one) instruments with which to cleanse the Scottish psyche of generations of English influence (Faber, p. xxi).

In this case Dunn identifies various partial, or even different, aspects of Scots with the language itself: Doric is a specific dialect of Scots (as it is spoken in Aberdeenshire), whereas Braid Scots refers to a characteristic Scottish accent, and Synthetic Scots is a term used to describe MacDiarmid's early (dictionary inspired) poetic language. Such inconsistency may be disconcerting for the reader. In statements such as "Lallans is not quite the loyal, brave and historically valid choice adherents make it out to be, no matter the fine verse written in Scots" (Predicament, p. 273); for example, it is unclear whether the two labels refer to the same form of speech, or in this case "Lallans" is used to indicate either a geographical or stylistic variety of Scots. In his essay, MacDiarmid attributes an incomparable expressive power to Scots, to the disadvantage of some other languages, especially English:

There are natural occurrences and phenomena of all kinds which have apparently never been noted by the English mind. No word exists for them in English. For instance—watergaw—for an indistinct rainbow; yow-trummle—meaning the cold weather in July after sheepshearing... (Theory, p. 24).

His argument does not lack a pinch of nationalism of course, as we may find such untranslatable words or expressions in any language. In "A Theory of Scots Letters" MacDiarmid continues the same argument he initiated in his editorial entitled "Hugh MacDiarmid," published a few months earlier.¹⁶ If this editorial serves to demonstrate the expressivity inherent in the Scots language, then in "A Theory of Scots Letters" MacDiarmid advocates an autonomous, unprejudiced utilization of that expressivity. In order to achieve that poetic freedom, he suggests that "a revival of the spirit as distinct from a mere renewed vogue of the letter" (Theory, p. 19) is necessary, or we should say the two should go together. However critics nationally less biased than MacDiarmid have also been enthralled by the verbal density and potential energy of literary Scots—an obvious example is the German scholar Kurt Wittig's *Scottish Tradition in Literature*.¹⁷ So is Dunn when he remarks about the language of MacDiarmid's "Water Music": "the poem is contrived from...a devotion to its exuberance and peculiarity" (Faber, p. xxiii). Dunn genuinely admires the

¹⁶C. M. Grieve, "Hugh MacDiarmid," *The Scottish Chapbook*, 1922, rptd. in MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, pp. 9-12.

¹⁷Edinburgh, 1958.

kind of gifted, animated diction in poetry which is not subordinated to tenets and prejudices.

Dunn refuses to submit to any kind of tendentiousness, and by implication to any particular trend in literary theory; Mike Watts has quoted him: "It's all summed up in one four-letter word, 'life.' That's what 'isms' assail. They also tend to breed fanatics."¹⁸ Although Dunn is a traditional critic, this does not mean that he is comfortable with fossilized concepts like the Caledonian Antisyzygy and other "characteristics of the Scottish psyche." Dunn rejects employing such surviving categorizations as reference points in contemporary literature: "It is still the habit of many Scottish writers to accept history as an immutable conditioning of the mind" (*Predicament*, p. 273). While Robert Crawford recognizes the continued use of such categories as the Caledonian Antisyzygy as "a measure of the theoretical poverty of much of Scottish literary criticism," (Crawford, p. 42), Dunn is more concerned about their potential effects on poetry from a common-sense point of view. In "The Predicament of Scottish Poetry" he takes issue with David Daiches's argument which he believes forces Scottish literary history into such categories. In *Literature and Gentility* Daiches perceives the development of Scottish literature as a revolt against the polite and the respectable, "manners imported from England" (*Predicament*, p. 273). What Dunn criticizes in Daiches is a prescriptive attitude: "From how Daiches presents his subject it would seem that Scottish poetry is by definition oppositional at least much of the time, as well as direct, functional and colloquial, and that it must make a point" (*Predicament*, p. 273). Dunn argues that such authoritative critical influence may be as frustrating in art as political or social expectations:

Everything, it seems, must have a sting in his tail, be written against the odds, complain, wink with chastening irony, or rebuke someone. Is that not as much a restriction as the censorious finger-wagging of pious kirkmen, dry moralists and life-denying respectability in general? (*Predicament*, p. 273).

Dunn believes that literature itself resists categorizations, though he is afraid external expectations may have compelled a sense of living up to those expectations in the minds of Scottish writers. This may be more latent in younger poets' work, though, as he says, the "younger writer can be forgiven if he or she seeks sanctuary among 'characteristics.'" Because, he continues, it is only "a strong talent which breaks free of that temptation in Scottish writing—MacCaig, Morgan, Smith—or which perfects voice and language within expected modes, adding enough individuality to surprise characteristic expectations, which is what Robert Garioch did..." (*Predicament*, p. 273). Dunn insists that that potentially self-imposed psychological impediment is responsi-

¹⁸"When All is Said and Dunn," *The Chronicle* [St Andrews University magazine], (29 April 1992), p. 15.

ble, among other things, for the irrelevance of landscape poems in Scottish poetry: "Such writing in Scotland is seen habitually as minor" (Predicament, p. 273). However, landscape poetry is but one tangible aspect of an abstract moral dilemma. Dunn discerns a deep conflict between a poetry of the senses and a poetry of the mind in Scottish literature, arguing that social, political, linguistic and religious expectations endorse the latter:

In some ways the largest predicament of all in Scottish writing is that there should be a gross obstacle between a poet and 'sweet feeling', mysticism and the habits of 'soft, meditative disposition'. Worse still is that the hindrance is artificial. The barrier is mental, spiritual (or made to seem so), the accretion of years of lip-service paid to 'characteristics' and traditions. It is demeaning to be stereotyped, more painful still when the insistence comes from within (Predicament, p. 273).

It is important to note that in Dunn's opinion it is a self-adjustment to expectations and a prejudicial public atmosphere that has created a divided mind, with a psychological obstacle between the poet and his or her lyrical self. It is only one of the consequences that there should be an imbalance between the purely aesthetic and the impurely secular, between lyrical voice and public utterance, between honest (even political or social) sensibility and dishonest self-consciousness.

How can that conflict be resolved? Throughout his criticism Dunn argues for the emancipation of the lyrical self in poetry. The kind of poetry he endorses should be able to afford images which are, in Dunn's words, "roundly evoked, described warmly but without purpose other than the design of delight or a surrender to imagination in the knowledge that by doing so a poet discovers and gives" (Predicament, p. 273). Dunn provides an explanation of what he understands by lyricism elsewhere, for example in his inaugural lecture given at the University of Dundee on 28 October 1987:

Lyricism is one kind of poetry, and an effect of that kind and other kinds of poetry in which lyricism can appear. We can say that it is an effect of poetry when the writer succeeds in creating a song-like utterance through spoken or written language. We can say that it is released through feeling, through emotion that is sometimes in touch with intellect, but sometimes disregarding the active or conscious intelligence. We can say too that it is implicated in spacious imagery and figurative ingenuity, and that it is a visual effect of poetry, or else sensuous in ways other than the melodic or the audible, as when a poet can convey the illusion of fragrance or touch. We can also say that it is often spiritual in its implications even when the means of achieving this are profane or factual.¹⁹

¹⁹Dunn, 'Importantly Live': *Lyricism in Contemporary Poetry* (Dundee, 1988), p. 2. Henceforth Lyricism.

In Dunn's understanding the term "lyricism" may refer to a genre in poetry, a kind of poetic effect, a kind of style or imagery, or a poetic disposition. In "The Predicament of Scottish Poetry" he investigates a socially coerced repression of that poetic disposition prevailing in Scottish literature. He acknowledges in his lecture that "[i]ntellect and responsibility seldom encourage the more imaginatively audacious impulses of poetry" (Lyricism, p. 7). This can mean that a necessary social contextualization of the poem, as well as the writer's self-awareness which follows from that, may affect poetic spontaneity and honesty. Thus the repression of the lyrical self may be ascribed to external social, political or cultural influences. But such repression may also come from within. In "The Predicament" Dunn insists that the latter case is symptomatic in Scottish literature: existing prejudices have compelled a desire to meet social requirements in poets. He argues that what Scottish poetry requires is a purposeful independence of mind and a greater degree of self-reliant imaginativeness. That is why he is worried that Scottish poetry lacks what he calls "a restful certitude" (Predicament, p. 273). An evasive term in itself, but as Richard Price suggests in the first part of his essay, that "restful certitude," which Dunn has variously called "a relaxed, open-minded approach to writing,"²⁰ and a "comfortable relaxation,"²¹ is a central element in Dunn's criticism of poetry.

What does "restful certitude" mean and how can a poet achieve it? One of Dunn's basic premises is a requirement of precision in poetry. He argues that "[o]bscurity in poetry is not a virtue, just as a lack of lucidity in prose is never to be though commendable."²² Precision entails more than merely stylistic or semantic clarity according to Dunn; it also indicates moral integrity, a capability of guileless responses to inward impulses and an honest obedience to those impulses in representations of any subject in verse. This is, in Dunn's words, a "sentient, poetic" intelligence (Dunn, p. 116). I believe it is a misinterpretation of Dunn's words to assume the existence of an abstract division between private lyricism and public utterance. He does not perceive a conflict between public and private implications of poetry; as he says in an interview: "The first person singular in a political poem is the same first person singular as you'll get in a lyric love poem. It's just that you're negotiating with a more public subject than your own moods" (Nicholson, p. 184). Dunn's argument in "The Predicament of Scottish Poetry" illustrates that where he believes conflict can

²⁰Dunn, "'Let the God not abandon us': On the Poetry of Derek Mahon," *Stone Ferry Review*, 2 (1978), 20.

²¹Dunn, Introduction, *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle, 1975), p. 2.

²²"Douglas Dunn" [Dunn's note on his poetry], *Twelve More Modern Scottish Poets*, ed. Charles King and Iain Crichton Smith (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 115. Henceforth Dunn.

exist is within the mind of the poet. The incongruity is to be found between the lyrical impulse and the poet's failure to recognize or comply with that impulse. Thus his "restful certitude" should be a state of mind or disposition wherein the poet is capable of recognizing that impulse, relying on it, and achieving it in his or her poetry. It refers to a spiritual as well as artistic autonomy when the poet is content with the way he or she perceives and represents private as well as public issues without being much concerned about influences other than those which come from within.

Dunn prefers emotional integrity accompanied by aesthetic obligation to "cerebral poetry" (Dunn, p. 116). For example, his remark about the political aspects of poetry in his essay on Edwin Morgan's sonnets—"Political subjects become challenging only when the poet's imagination rises to meet the demands of artistry and originality as well as those of conviction and conscience" (Morgan, pp. 83-4)—should be read from this angle. He argues for the poet's faithfulness to his or her subject matter through an ingenuous loyalty to his or her own lyrical incentives without these being shadowed by one or another political dogma. Dunn's basic belief, which takes precedence even over the premise of poetic precision, is sincerity. He suggests that "poetry is about testing your honesty to its limits in the hope of reaching the truth" (Nicholson, p. 198). In Dunn's view, then, it is possible to achieve autonomy of naming through emotional straightforwardness in poetry. Price remarks that Dunn is "far from being scared of talking about the 'truthfulness' of poetry" (Price, p. 172). Dunn's notion about poetic truth is consonant with eighteenth-century beliefs about the poet's role, as described by Samuel Johnson in *Rasselas*: the poet

must divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country; he must consider right or wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths...²³

But for Dunn, transcending daily issues does not mean ignoring them completely: "Any writer lives and works in a specific intellectual and political climate and it could be damaging were you to take your eye off these contemporary issues for too long."²⁴ The poet must adopt an uninvolved, impartial view of his or her subject—the more so if it is a public issue—in order to reach or recognize the lyrical moment where anything poetic may happen, and where, in Dunn's words:

²³Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwyn J. Kolb (London, 1990), p. 44.

²⁴Attila Dósa, "A Different Drummer: Interview with Douglas Dunn," *Poetry Review*, 80:3 (Autumn 1999), 32.

a poet lives at his or her most important...in which we can...encounter the truthfulness that embarrasses superficial mendacity, ruthless self-interest and controversial expediency, while, at the same time, being disinterested enough not to have to admit to that or any other function (Lyricism, p. 16).

Thus in Dunn's criticism poetic truth is practically equivalent to the poet's freedom of mind from tenets as represented in poetry. It can be achieved when the poet is in the state of mind of "restful certitude" or "comfortable relaxation," and he or she is capable of sincere responses to the inner impulses which emerge in that state of mind.

In conclusion, Dunn's criticism of poetry is characterized by the measure of sensitivity and precision he expects as a standard. His conduct as a critic as well as his critical views have an ethical footing in addition to a strictly theoretical foundation. Although he denies involvement with moral philosophy, Dunn's criticism reveals a closer affinity with it than with any branch of literary theory. Sensitive to claims of the political involvement of poetry, he rejects the poet's complying with obligations other than those which are moral or aesthetic. It does not mean, however, that Dunn is an apolitical critic; he never protests against the presence of political or social concerns in various forms of art, unless the mode of representation of these concerns affects existing artistic convictions. He does point out, however, the potentially harmful consequences of the poet's political involvement for the reader's horizon of expectations, and the interpretation of poems. In his search for compromise between social and aesthetic priorities in critical discussions of poetry, Dunn prefers the latter, but he consistently avoids critical attitudes which appear to be prescriptive. Dialectics can be seen as a guiding principle in Dunn's criticism, in which he establishes and breaks down binary oppositions. Thus it may be misleading to reduce the complexity of oppositions to a tension between public and private references to art. As Dunn suggests, in Scottish poetry a conflict can be found between various external and critical expectations, cultural prejudices, stereotypes, and the poet's sincerity. He believes that such expectations may have a restraining influence on the poet's responses to his or her inmost involuntary impulses, thus affecting the artist's emotional integrity and the truthfulness of a work of art. His criticism justifies the emotional autonomy of the poet against any external influence, and the kind of poetry he encourages is aesthetically committed, intelligent, and thoughtful.

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