

1-1-1999

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### Recommended Citation

Fazzini, Marco (1999) "An Interview with Douglas Dunn in 1997," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol31/iss1/10>

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*Marco Fazzini*

## An Interview with Douglas Dunn in 1997

**Fazzini:** *When did you feel that you would become a writer?*

**Dunn:** One answer is “always.” Another—and maybe the truest, or most realistic—is that in 1970, when I was a librarian in the University Library in Hull, I realized that it might just about be financially possible. I lived by my writing for twenty years. Now that I’m Professor and Head of English at St. Andrews, and Director of the St. Andrews Scottish Studies Institute, I no longer call myself a writer.

**Fazzini:** *Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?*

**Dunn:** They neither encouraged nor discouraged me, but let me get on with it.

**Fazzini:** *What do you remember of your period of work in Hull? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?*

**Dunn:** Philip Larkin was more encouraging than not. I lived in Hull for eighteen years, and naturally I had literary friends, some of whom were and remain real friends, like Sean O’Brien, Peter Didsbury and Douglas Houston. The late George Kendrick and Frank Redpath, poets both, were also friends, and Ted Tarling, an editor and small-press publisher. Besides these I knew a lot of artists through my first wife Lesley Balfour Wallace, as well as academ-

ics and musicians. Tom Paulin was just a year behind me as a student at the University. I saw Larkin regularly and was very fond of him.

**Fazzini:** *Have you ever chosen a particular poetical work to inspire your poetry or would you rather speak about a kind of comprehensiveness in your readings and influences? What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?*

**Dunn:** No, I don't. I've always read widely and in subjects you wouldn't associate with me. In poetry I've always been fixated on Shakespeare, Byron, Browning, Auden, Whitman, Frost, and more recently Dante and Rilke. In the essay my first and lasting love is Montaigne. In the short story I dote on Stevenson, James, Chekhov, Mansfield and Flannery O'Connor. But I keep on discovering new interests. Lately, for instance, I've been re-reading Ted Hughes with increased admiration.

**Fazzini:** *Speaking about translations, Valery affirms: "The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into 'language of the gods' and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms." Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?*

**Dunn:** Yes, I do. "Formal intuition" strikes me as a good and accurate phrase. Poems can often begin in mystery.

**Fazzini:** *Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being pre-determined?*

**Dunn:** Yes, but do you know when it's happening?

**Fazzini:** *Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his "Adagia": "After one has abandoned a belief in god [sic], poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."*

**Dunn:** With this kind of statement, I find that I don't have much of an opinion either way. I believe in the old gods, the more the better.

**Fazzini:** *Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?*

**Dunn:** No, because I'm a critic too. Obvious misreading can be irritating. Considering the kinds of fear on offer, though, this is trifling.

**Fazzini:** *The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," says that "the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling.... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind." Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: "Poets often lie"?*

**Dunn:** Poets often lie, of course, but it's a subordination of the literal in the service of truth. I'd find it irresponsible to claim the autonomy of "the word of the poet." In fact, even that phrase sounds aggrandizing and inflated. A poem has to prove itself by its sheer ability to do so.

**Fazzini:** *Could you explain how you came to terms with the task of translating Racine's *Andromache*?*

**Dunn:** I don't know if I did. It was the most difficult task in the literary line that I've ever undertaken. Classic French tragedy is utterly different from its counterpart in English, especially Shakespeare and Webster, Ben Jonson less so. No metaphor, for example, and no great, externalizing poetic sweeps. My method was embarrassingly simple. I translated word for word, slowly, and then revised, for pace, rhythm, and rhyme. Early on I knew that full Racinian rhyme wasn't possible—Racine's vocabulary is incredibly small. Shakespeare's is more than twenty times bigger. Writing with limitations on vocabulary is immensely awkward.

**Fazzini:** *Do you think your translations can be considered a kind of version or interpretation of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?*

**Dunn:** I haven't translated enough to be expert even on my own procedures or intentions. Fidelity to the original, though, whether Racine or Leopardi, is always an aspiration, perhaps, rather than a fact. I like to get to know as much as I can about the authors I translate. It's like acting—you become the other author and live the part. I like the enabling fantasy of that.

**Fazzini:** *As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal "deep structure" underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a recoding or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their intentions, that is "pure language" as Walter Benjamin has defined it. Would you comment on this?*

**Dunn:** I've never believed in the "translation is impossible" theory. Languages and texts are translatable, or transferable, at least to a large extent, even if nationalities and cultures differ enormously—and I'm glad they do—because we're all human, and I think that's what "deep structure" means, or appeals to.

**Fazzini:** *Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of "disponibilité" when he states:*

At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him (quoted in Renato Poggioli, "The Added Artificer," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Brower [Cambridge, MA, 1959], p. 141).

*Do you believe in what Goethe called "elective affinity"?*

**Dunn:** Yes. It would be implicated in what I meant by an "enabling fantasy." But part of the attraction is not in affinity so much as in the discovered differences between the translator and translated, and between their two texts. Especially when a big gap in time is involved, then the new text usually serves a different or a rehabilitated purpose. I'm thinking of Pasternak's translation of Shakespeare. But how elective *are* the affinities shared by poets? All good poets, true poets, have a lot in common—they have poetry in common.

**Fazzini:** *What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be skeptical about its value?*

**Dunn:** I don't find myself in the least bit skeptical about the values of art and poetry. I live by them, and teach them. Part of what a poet does is to represent these values. However, I distrust a lot of what is said about poetry these days. There's too much marketing around. It stinks up the atmosphere. Consolation? Redemption? Well, maybe. Like most people, I find these, when I find them, in other things too. Love, sex, whisky, my children, seeing my students graduate, opening the curtains to look over the Tay into the beauties of light and water, nice food, nice wine. Anything that gives harmless pleasure and contributes to the good of the world is just fine by me.

**Fazzini:** *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?*

**Dunn:** I think they're less political than their predecessors, and hearteningly confident and assured. I follow their work with keen interest, especially that of Robert Crawford—who's a colleague at St. Andrews—W. N. Herbert, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson and David Kinloch. They're very good writers,

and I'm proud of them. As for the relationship between aesthetics and politics in their work, I'm not sure if it exists in a clear or meaningful way. Their work is perhaps closer to that of English writers like Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, and a bountiful supply of others, than the "middle generation." The poets of the North-West European Archipelago with whom my affinity doesn't need to be elective—Heaney, Harrison, Longley, Mahon, Paulin, Williams, Hamilton, Raine, Fuller, Reid, and others—have all been involved in an intuitive moral project which hasn't been properly acknowledged or described. Younger poets in Scotland and elsewhere in the British Isles have a quite different instinctive project. As adults they've known no other government than a Conservative one. They've picked up on the ludic side of Craig Raine and Paul Muldoon. Poets like Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, and myself, in Scotland are still almost aggressively political as well as steeped in the aesthetic dimensions of language and verse. I don't find this to anything like the same extent in the younger Scottish poets I've mentioned.

**Fazzini:** *Do you consider yourself as a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?*

**Dunn:** Having written five poems in three years, I wonder if I can even call myself a poet without feeling fraudulent. In poetry, nationality conditions language and some beliefs, habits, and procedures. I'm a Scot who writes in the English-language-with-a-Scottish-accent, that is, in my mother tongue. I don't think of myself as British. I doubt if many people—never mind poets—do. It's an "official" term, a term of governmental convenience.

**Fazzini:** *Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?*

**Dunn:** That is my very deep desire. I think we deserve it. Whether it will happen remains to be seen, and I hope to see it. Nationalism in Scotland is an unusual phenomenon. As I'm fond of repeating, it hasn't killed anyone and no one in this century has died for it. Our "national epics," Barbour's *The Bruce*, and Blind Harry's *Wallace*, are unread—I find this exhilarating. We still sing Robert Burns's love songs, though. The Scots have a reputation as dourly Calvinistic and as scientists, reasoners, philosophers, and soldiers. If the evidence of my experience is anything to go by, then the Scots are hedonistic, benevolent, and really very agreeable people, on the whole. Like everywhere else, though, we have our criminals, psychopaths, perverts, patriots, Conservatives, and bigots. It's the most interesting country I know, very beautiful, and profoundly mismanaged.

**Fazzini:** *Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?*

**Dunn:** First, we have to bear in mind that the Scots contributed more dynamism to the British Empire than anyone else. While there are post-colonial aspects to Scottish history and culture—as well as the consequences of what’s been called “internal colonialism”—Scotland was never itself a colony. We have to be historical about these matters. Bear in mind, too, that R. L. Stevenson wrote two of the stories which comment tremendously on colonialism, *The Beach of Falesà*, and the *Ebb Tide*. Neither is discussed in Edward Said’s great book *Culture and Imperialism*. Instead he discusses Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, this being more glamorous because of Chinua Achebe’s critique which exposed its racism. The Scots have been capable of racism, and still are, but it’s even more of an aberration than in England—it cuts across the true grain of the nation. Unlike the Irish, say, when the Scots emigrate, they assimilate themselves into the host terrain. There’s no Scottish lobby in the USA, for example, despite the numbers of assimilated Scots Americans.

So, your question elicits an answer which can only point to the complications involved. Also, Scottish literature is a very old one, just as the Scottish realm is one of the oldest in Europe. “Post-colonial discourse” can throw interesting light on Scottish culture, but it is far from the complete explanation of its remarkable longevity and—or so I would claim—of its remarkable interest.

**Fazzini:** *You have often stated that French surrealist poetry has influenced you in various ways. How do you reconcile the spaciousness of surrealist imagination with the strict metrical control of your latest books?*

**Dunn:** The only way I can explain this is through a) what came to be my own temperamental affection for metrical writing, and b) the fact that Robert Desnos, one of my intimate and obsessive heroes of poetry, managed to combine the two, for which impertinence he had to break with André Breton’s definition of surrealism. I believe in the power of dream, and of the unconscious, as any poet must. For thirty years I’ve been a student of Freud’s work. I love poetry and the human mind best of all when they leap into the unexpected and revelatory. I find this human and interesting.

**Fazzini:** *Would you speak about your first collection called Terry Street? Is it true that Philip Larkin helped you with your first publication?*

**Dunn:** I lived in Terry Street, in Hull, for two years. A few months ago, my poems set in Terry Street were republished by the Hull magazine *Bête Noire* with photographs taken by Robert Whitaker in 1968, when he was the Beatles’ photographer. It was close to being a slum street, and I bought a house there—for £250—when I was a student.

When I had the poems completed, Philip Larkin, who was my mentor—no other word for it—rearranged the poems in the order in which they appear in the book. The title was given to the book by the late Charles Monteith, at that

time the poetry editor at Faber & Faber, but possibly nudged by Larkin. The book was recommended to Faber & Faber by Larkin, and I was under contract to send it to them, by the terms of an agreement which I'd signed when I appeared in *Poetry: Introduction* the year before. You can imagine my feelings—delight, consternation—when the book was accepted by the publisher which issued Eliot, Pound, Auden, Larkin, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and Seamus Heaney. When my copies arrived, I kissed them. It was all beyond my wildest dreams, and I'm a wild dreamer.

Some readers know that book more than others, though, and it's had the complicating effect of typecasting me. Larkin always preferred it to my writing after it, and was never hesitant in saying so. If some of his published letters are anything to go by he was less enthusiastic about the book to others than he said to me. But I was grateful then, and see no reason to be ungrateful now.

**Fazzini:** *Can you tell me anything about the collections you published in the Eighties? Can you speak about a shift of intents and technique in comparison with your previous production?*

**Dunn:** *St. Kilda's Parliament* (1981) was a more Scottish book than previously, and reflected my continued thinking and feeling about Scottish subjects, although I was living in Hull, in England. *Elegies* (1985) was about the death of my first wife, too young, from cancer, and my metrical habits, established in *Barbarians* (1979), and earlier, helped me a great deal in writing poems which I had to write although struggling constantly against an unwillingness, or reticence. By the poems in *Northlight* (1988) my metrical habits had become more or less ingrained and inevitable. I don't see this as reactionary—I'm not that sort of person—but as a consequence of maturity and intuitive preference, consolidated by a happy second marriage and children. In everything I write, the forms and rhythms are demanded by my mood and subjects, and I simply obey what they tell me to do. I don't *impose* meter and form on a poem; I allow them to happen. Loyalty to intuition is what a poet should exemplify, in writing as in life. But I don't like "should" or "ought." I don't prescribe.

**Fazzini:** *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?*

**Dunn:** This is crucial, not just for me, but, I suspect, for any writer who is a native Scot and who inherits a mind characteristic of the country. Scots suspect imagination, even when they possess a good and vivid one. They distrust the made-up—it's too close to make-believe, and too distant from the literal and the actual, from the visible fact. That is why so much of the best Scottish writing is strikingly imaginative—Scott's novels, Burns's *Tam O'Shanter*, Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Dr.*

*Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Barrie's *Peter Pan*, MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and Norman MacCaig's daring metaphorical poetry. You get it, too, in otherwise politicized and realistic novelists like James Kelman, whose novels and stories couldn't exist without both imagination and a very powerful awareness of the real. The same is very obviously true of Alasdair Gray's novels and stories, but more so.

In my own work, I see it as a confrontation of the two. My preference—temperamentally, or as I understand myself—is for the lyrical, and the mysterious, perhaps also the spiritual and the naturally religious (those old gods again). At the same time I have a pair of eyes—not too good, and spectacled, but I can see—so I know about the lives and dilemmas of the people around me. I don't drive, and travel from Tayport to St. Andrews—about twelve miles, and forty minutes—by bus. I walk a lot in other towns and cities when I'm there. Because I've appeared on television quite a lot, and my photograph has been printed in newspapers, I'm sometimes recognized on trains, in airports, on streets—"double-takes," as they call them. On the whole, though, I can go virtually with invisibility, and go where I like. This is very necessary to me as a writer of poems and stories, and I couldn't function without my observing participation in the lives of the so-called common people. I think I accepted the chair at St. Andrews instinctively in order to absent myself from the literary world of public exposure. That is, I went into university life in order to ensure an invisibility that was beginning to become less possible, and, perhaps, to help me to prepare for a work which I don't quite know about yet, but which I know is about to begin when its time is ripe.

In other words, I believe in the imaginative, and I believe in the literal. I have to be clever and cunning in safeguarding my ability—such as it is—in being obedient to both of them.

**Fazzini:** *In one of the sections of the sequence called "Disenchantments" included in your latest book Dante's Drum-kit (1993) you say:*

*Depopulated place, its physical  
Selfhood was beautiful; its country shone —  
Sky, water, ruins, five swans, and the still*

*Untimed lucidity my mind moved on.*

*Do you tend to romanticize your country or do you see it in an emotionally non-nostalgic way?*

**Dunn:** I hope I don't romanticize or sentimentalize anything. This takes us back to your previous question. Distrust of the imaginative, and faith in imagination, lead me to question everything I dream or see. The great thing in poetry, of course, is to be positive, assured, confirmed, and honest. Moments when all these are disclosed together and in harmony are, I would submit, rare.

Being at home with myself, my work, my wife, my children, I have no need of nostalgia. Much poetry arises from disturbance, so I might not seem so at times, but I am a happy man.

**Fazzini:** *Would you like to summarize your ideas about the process by which all the privacy and the “famous reticence” of a writer is indiscretely unveiled by a biographer? Were you referring to what they did with Philip Larkin’s life and letters?*

**Dunn:** In “Disenchantments” I was referring to Larkin. Like many of Larkin’s friends I was disappointed about the disclosures in the *Selected Letters* and in Andrew Motion’s biography. At the same time, what else could Anthony Thwaite, editor of the *Selected Letters*, or his biographer, have done, other than be true to the material which they discovered and had to deal with? But I continue to have reservations, less with the *Letters* than the biography. The biography was too soon, and my hunch is that Andrew—a very ambitious man—groomed himself to write the book well in advance of his subject’s death. This could be extremely unfair, but there is something about Andrews’s book—much as I like Andrew himself—which strikes me as unfair, too. But what else could he do, other than suppress the truth? Larkin was a very complicated man and I doubt if the entire story has been told. I was so very fond of Larkin that I feel sure my opinions of him are totally unreliable. He would have hated Andrew Motion’s biography, of that I am absolutely sure. And he’s turning in his grave over the publication of his letters—in which, I am ashamed to say, I assisted in a minor way by contributing copies of Larkin’s letters to me. Perhaps we should modify Yeats’s phrases and speak about the perfection or imperfection of the work in relation to the inevitable imperfection of the life. But it is a subject—biography—which disturbs me, if only because I have so much of which to be ashamed.

**Fazzini:** *Which kind of shame does poetry cause in surviving its author?*

**Dunn:** The writer was, or is, never as good as he or she wanted, or wants, to be. What you write always falls short of the dream of what you desired. Scientists, and some painters, sculptors, and composers, are so much to be envied by poets—and this is expressed in a lot of poetry—because their achievements are very often definitive. Poetry is always provisional. The incompleteness of a life’s work is the most beautiful and pathetic thing about it. I know for a certain fact that I won’t do everything I want to.

**Fazzini:** *If you should think about your poetical production from the Sixties up to now would you find a single character which distinguishes your writing?*

**Dunn:** My desire is always to be open to change. Humanity and compassion are virtues which I hold dear. I wouldn't claim them for myself except as aspirations. My hope, ever, is to be kind and unselfish, helpful, and to avoid vanity and the vicious. I love the world.

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