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Exile and Belonging in Douglas Dunn's Political Poetry

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In analysing *Northlight*, Douglas Dunn's 1988 collection, Dave Smith writes that the poet "arrives at a poetry of his own place" (91). After the intense articulation of grief in *Elegies* (1985), *Northlight* is informed by domestic happiness, and joy in having returned to live in Scotland. The collection's first poem, "At Falkland Place" is written for his second wife, Lesley Bathgate, whom he married in August 1985. Here the poet feels a sense of belonging so completely that physical and metaphysical, self and environment, are joined in a synaesthetic rush: the world is "a sentient/Botanic instrument,/Visible prayer", while

> In the hollows of home
> I find life, love and ground
> And intimate welcome:
> With you, and these, I'm bound
> To history. (163–5)[1]

In celebrating this "Country in which to reconstruct a self/From local water, timber, light and earth" (183), as "Here and There" describes it, Dunn describes his own recovery from grief, but also his renewed social and political commitment.

Resolute connection is liberating, and from the desire to be "a landmark, something fixed" (12) in the Glasgow landscape in the 1969 collection *Terry Street*, to the inhabiting of "latitudes" that "Enlarge me, comfort me, and make me whole" (186) in *Northlight*, and the "quite unexceptional, perfect peace" achieved in a place which is all "*my* property!" (80) in *The Year's Afternoon* (2000), Dunn's work has been consistently concerned with the notion of belonging. In his 1981 *Viewpoints* interview with John Haffenden, Dunn said that "'I think my main commitment to place is to the place where I come from'" (16), and with regard to the possibility of a return to Scotland, he said that "'I think to a large extent it's inevitable, I don't think there's any point in postponing it. I know where I belong, where

I should be'" (28). Yet Dunn's "commitment to place" is just one aspect of his multilayered loyalties, as he described in a piece written for P. R. King's *Nine Contemporary Poets* in 1979:

> Over the years my writing has tried to keep a promise with a Scottish, rural, working-class background. It is a promise I don't remember making. What the precise nature of that promise is, I also don't know. I am certain it is more than a social or political gambit; and I am sure it means more to me than an act of sentimental fidelity. Nor is it an example of one of these manic, wished-for but impossible returns of an uprooted Scotsman. To persevere with the art of poetry is to pick up a bet you make with yourself. Nationality and background are involved in the bet I made. (221)

Dunn's allegiances offer conditions of completeness and belonging, anxiety and exile, and here he identifies the sense of isolation that can come from "fidelity" to class, poetry and the rural. "At Falkland Place" insists that the poet has come home to a place of "Edenic circumstance, not fall" (163), but throughout his work, from *Terry Street* to *The Year's Afternoon*, as Dunn explores the nature and possible loss of the vision of "ideal communities" (*Terry Street* 30), he is keenly aware of how allegiances may become "sentimental", and how political and cultural thinking can lapse into pastoral dimensions.

In a dichotomy of belonging and exile, it is very difficult to avoid an engagement with pastoral and anti-pastoral, and these themes are so enduring in Dunn's work because pastoral, in its many forms, is so problematic. Frank Kermode suggests that "The first Condition of Pastoral is that it is an urban product" (14), observing the necessary distance between the urban and the rural, but pastoral thinking in general is characterised by distance. Actual distance from a home causes nostalgia and an ideal view of that home, or a melancholic, chronic desire for return, a state of belonging that Dunn describes above as "wished-for but impossible". Peter Marinelli argues that "Essentially the art of pastoral is the art of the backward glance" (9), but it can also look to the future: the absence of political independence, for instance, may result in the unrealistic conviction that independence is idyllic. In turn, during periods of suffering, exile and political subordination, as the poet examines of ideas of improvement, whether seeking restoration or consolation, what is being sought may be dismissed as idealism. This perception may create political apathy or disillusionment, as Dunn identified in a 1990 interview, speaking about the issue

of Scottish independence:

> We could get independence in Scotland next week if enough people took two or three days off work in the middle of the week to go on the streets.
> But the idea of somebody in Scotland taking two or three days off, unpaid! There's something tremendously conventional and respectable in Scotland, which people from outside Scotland don't know about, mainly I think because intelligent people in Scotland are ashamed of it. They keep it quiet. (O'Brien 74)

Although light-hearted, Dunn's comment has a serious point, in that what is perceived as impossible idealism by some is seen as extremely easy to achieve by others: independence may be an ideal situation, but the ideal is reasonable.

In addition to the problems of distance or estrangement which pastoral thinking causes in political issues, pastoral as a form is the site of political contention. In their introduction to *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, John Barrell and John Bull identify the alienating effects of pastoral, in that it may offer "a *mythical* view of the relationship of men in society, at the service of those who control the political, economic, and cultural strings of society" (4). Pastoral harmony is the represented vision of control and subordination, and this is a view to which George Crabbe objected in his 1783 poem "The Village", where "the Muses sing of happy swains/Because the Muses never knew their pains" (43). The aim of Douglas Dunn's political pastoral is to disillusion the pastoral form, to contract its constitutional distance or overcome its intrinsic alienation in the achievement of reasonable pastoral. If pastoral generically inscribes an unequal system, wherein the urban poet writes inaccurately about the rural, be it harmonious or primitive, reclaiming the form is a political act. Dunn continually revises the nature and function of pastoral, and describes the complexity of his own problematic relationship to the form: he describes the failure of urban pastoral in *Terry Street*, contests the idea of poetry as a pastoral form in *Barbarians*, and assesses the use of provincial and national pastoral in *Northlight* and *The Year's Afternoon*, aiming to create poetry which does not need to justify itself in the face of prejudice or opposition.

Much of Dunn's early poetry was taken up with the desire and failure to belong — geographically, artistically, socially, politically — and the sequence of "Terry Street Poems" from his first collection describes the disappointment of idealism in the face of the reality of urban, working-class life. "Young Women in Rollers" features this kind of

social analysis:

> I want to be touched by them, know their lives,
> ... At night, I even dream of ideal communities.
> Why do they live where they live, the rich and the poor?
> (*Terry Street* 30)

Dunn described his position in this place to John Haffenden as being "Not just a spectator, but something of an outsider" (15). The disjunction between himself and the community comes partly because of what is understood by "ideal communities": Dunn concludes this poem by writing, "There are many worlds, there are many laws." "The Clothes Pit" carries this feeling of disparity, where the fashionable clothes of the young women Dunn is watching show that they dream of other places, "an inarticulate paradise,/Eating exotic fowl in sunshine with courteous boys" (*Terry Street* 13). As three girls walk down the street, "The litter of pop rhetoric blows down Terry Street,/Bounces past their feet, into their lives." The poem's syntax allows for two readings of "an inarticulate paradise": either the dream is an inarticulate paradise, or Terry Street is, or could be, such a place; belief in the kind of pastoral offered by the former actively inhibits the achievement of the latter. The pastoral dream the girls hold is the stuff of "pop rhetoric", a common, courtly fantasy of wealth, fine food, country houses and old-fashioned romance, but Dunn's dream is different, one of urban social equality. The girls carry neither a copy of the *International Times* nor any work by the Liverpool Poets, Dunn writes, but still they have an idea of something wider than their community. It may be difficult to avoid condescension when writing about this subject, but that is not Dunn's intention; Dunn has said that "These poems were never intended as 'scenes from working-class life'" (King, 221). The Liverpool Poets and the *International Times* offer an egalitarian viewpoint, a kind of political, artistic and social pastoral acting in opposition to the idea of culture and political power monopolised by the privileged. The contest between a cultural vision of equality and a cultural vision of affluence for the minority is unequal: most people choose the popular rhetoric. The archaic language and ideas of that pop rhetoric imply that although this may be a future dream, it is a vision of the past; or, in other words, belief in this scheme keeps people living in a terminal condition, deprived and powerless in the "litter" of an inaccessible dream which others enjoy.

However, the girls' dream is not deliberately chosen, necessarily. Dunn describes the

kind of resignation that living in a poor community can produce. In "The Silences", he writes of a passive acceptance of the impossibility of change, which "is baked over their eyes like a crust" (7). Several poems mention dust and the fact of decay: they feature women who "find themselves stiff and rotten at fifty" ("Tribute of a Legs Lover", 8); the "street tarts and their celebrating trawlermen" who are "the agents of rot" ("After Closing Time", 6); a man who "rots in his snoring" ("From the Night Window", 6), and "Discarded things" which "rot on the ground" (10). This last phrase is from the poem "Horses in a Suburban Field", which is insistently unpoetic in its repetition of decay: the horses stand under "a dried-up hawthorn/With dust on its leaves", and "wander through the dust,/The dead dreams of housewives." Reality cannot be modified into transcendence, dreams can never condense into reality. Indeed, as Dunn points out, this is not beautiful poetry, and "There are no poems in *Terry Street* which are written in rhyme and metre" (Haffenden 21).

Formally and thematically, as Robert Crawford writes, the *Terry Street* poems are about "a poverty of limited horizons, eroded aspirations" (278), the kind of melancholic capitulation Dunn described to John Haffenden. These poems outline

> a true observation of a very large sector of the British working class: the same sector perhaps that votes people like Margaret Thatcher into power... a kind of defeated resignation before the facts of their own existence — facts which, to a large extent, they don't recognize. (17)

The submission is automatic. In "New Light on Terry Street", the poet records an afternoon with the first sunshine for three weeks; children stop playing inside and come out to the street. Yet when the fathers come home, the women return inside to cook dinner, and suddenly life is empty of "great ambitions", like living in a "dried-up riverbed, a throat that thirsts." (*Terry Street* 14). Despite this, there is no protest against conditions, since the "dust" of the environment is too fine to be noticed, and the inhabitants are unaware they have "grown too old to cry out for change." The poem offers a temporary glimpse of the ideal community, voices mingling in the street, before the return of economic reality and silence. This brief joy is mirrored by the flashes in "Men of Terry Street", where "They quicken their step at the smell of cooking,/They hold up their children and sing to them" (4), and in "On Roofs of Terry Street", where a builder is fixing a roof: "He kneels upright to rest his back,/His trowel catches the light and becomes precious." (5) The respite lasts only as long as the light that catches the builder's trowel. Under such

relentless conditions, the idea of improvement, of idealism and ideal belonging, is almost impossible to sustain. In "A Removal from Terry Street", a man moving house is taking a lawnmower with him, even though there is no grass in the street:

> The worms
> Come up cracks in concrete yards in moonlight.
> That man, I wish him well. I wish him grass. (5)

The man is unlikely to be moving anywhere that does have grass, and his action may be a hope against hope, or simply the desire not to give up a possession. Aspiring and not aspiring come to the same thing, and something of this restriction, this flatness, is present in the hard, grating sensation of a lawnmower passing over concrete. The natural element is a symbol of a better life, a pastoral vision, and this is refused in the poet's cynicism.

The poet is himself in danger of falling into disillusionment, and in "A Window Affair", Dunn seemingly mourns the passing of his harmonious vision of urban living, or the urban pastoral: "I used to crave the ideal life of Saturdays and Sundays", he writes, a life of "high-living among the northern bricks" in a "gay, short lived country". Throughout the collection, the window marks the ideological disjunction between the poet and the people of Terry Street, but here the poet must move away before disenchantment and frustration become chronically disabling forces. He has to leave because "some ideals have passed far out of my reach/... I grasp only the hard things, windows, contempt". He "does not want to love, and does not care." There are "Thin shifts of dust" — that emblem of resignation — "on the sunning glass" (*Terry Street* 33-4). In this place, Dunn's conception of ideal but achievable social conditions — the absence of economic exploitation, a government which cares for its electorate, improved living conditions — is solidifying into unattainable idealism, and temporary exile from the achievable state is becoming insurmountable exile, as the poet's conviction becomes buried by dust.

Resignation or disillusionment creates the distance that underpins a conception of improvement as remote idealism, but Dunn emerged from the alienating experience of *Terry Street* with three rather angry collections — *The Happier Life* (1972) *Love or Nothing* (1974) and *Barbarians* (1979). Although he may lament temporarily in "The Happier Life" that "Community's a myth" (*The Happier Life* 43), and in "Syndrome" that "The only answer is to live quietly, miles away" (*The Happier Life* 33), there is no real danger of withdrawal or apostasy. In *Barbarians*, Dunn moves from frustration with the subjugated

of *Terry Street*, to anger at those who condition their thinking into defeatism. For Dunn, barbarians serve a positive force. In his definition, they are "people who contest the Establishment and the degeneration of the State" (Crawford and Kinloch 93). The poet himself is a barbarian: the people of *Terry Street* do not contest anything, but he does. In their poetics, these pieces aim to offer a radical social model, demonstrating, for example, that one kind of enfranchisement and belonging is possible: it is possible for a working-class "barbarian" to write the privileged form of poetry. What appear to be rigid social, political and cultural divisions — the instruments of pastoral idealist thinking — are actually very easy to demolish. *Terry Street*'s lack of "poems written in rhyme and metre", as they describe resignation, is changed here into technically adept, technically rigid poetry, with savagely indignant subject matter, instances of how dispossession has been overcome.

"The Come-on" is one of a series of "Barbarian Pastorals", in which the act of writing poetry undermines the privileged system from within:

> Brothers, they say that we have no culture.
> We are of the wrong world
>
> ... We will beat them with decorum, with manners,
> As sly as language is...
> One day we will leap down, into the garden,
> And open the gate — *wide*, *wide*. (46)

These sentiments echo the message of internal subversion in part two of Tony Harrison's "Them and [uz] II", where the speaker declares, "So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy/your lousy leasehold Poetry" (123). Yet the word "leasehold" may suggest two things simultaneously: Harrison both excoriates the idea of poetry as a privileged form, as being owned by a particular group, while implying perhaps that the idea of the ownership of poetry will not disappear. Dunn's poem suggests, in its image of openness, a more complete destruction.

"Gardeners" gives another example of pastoral revolution. It alludes to the tradition of country house poems, and the conception of pastoral as an aristocratic fantasy which obscures the reality of rural communities, to which Raymond Williams objected in his 1973 book *The Country and the City*: to take one example, Williams writes that "It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral, was

written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants" (22). Dunn makes use of the pastoral symbol of the garden. In gardening, the real, or a natural condition, is made artificially harmonious and aesthetically pleasing, and this reflects the landlord's artificial control of his subjects. Refusing to be complicit in their own subordination, the gardeners burn down the house but leave the garden untouched, as a symbol of the repossession of the pastoral form, and hang the lord "somewhere in its shade" (50).

For all the formal mastery demonstrated in *Barbarians*, the themes are rather clunking, and Edna Longley accuses Dunn of choosing "soft and well-riddled targets", complaining that the poetry shows only occasional flashes of "a lyrical talent waving above the ideological compulsions which threaten it" (64–5). In turn, Sean O'Brien objects that "Dunn's work has never found a political future to match his dramatic grasp of the past" (71), and indeed the title of Dunn's next collection, *St Kilda's Parliament* (1981), described a lost ideal community. There may be some justification in these views, but perhaps the vital energy of these poems is what matters. After the stasis of *Terry Street*, Dunn writes of people coming into states of possession, of land, language and an art form, from a previous condition of exile or dispossession. These examples and their guiding force are necessary for Dunn to make the transition to writing the poems of belonging in *Northlight* and *The Year's Afternoon*, where the dominant energy is one of confidence and celebration, in writing a particular kind of poetry which, after an eclogic defence in "Here and There", does not need to argue for its existence. Although in a 1999 interview with Attila Dösa, Dunn said that "It's not that I've tried deliberately to disengage myself from the political side of my poetry, but after the effort of writing *Elegies*, I found what I had to say politically wearing a bit thin" (32), he has continued to write political poetry. The ideal, achievable state of belonging is not lamented or longed for, but actually inhabited and described. Pastoral is no longer constituted by distance.

Dunn returned to live in Scotland after the period of devastating grief recorded in *Elegies*. Living outside Scotland had produced the dichotomy of exile and belonging in Dunn's early work. In "Clydesiders", a poem from *Love or Nothing*, Dunn wrote of his need to belong, his desire that "My poems should be Clyde-built, crude and sure" (*Love or Nothing* 14); in "Landscape with One Figure", the Glasgow landscape offered a sense of belonging so perfect that the industrial can become natural, where "The shipyard cranes have come down again/To drink at the river, turning their long necks" (11). In "Renfrewshire Traveller", Dunn lamented his status as a mere "visitor" to Scotland, returning for

funerals, "To a place of relatives,/A place of names" (31). However, in one of Dunn's most explicit poems on the subject of Scotland, there is a great anger directed towards his countrymen: "An Address on the Destitution of Scotland" from *St Kilda's Parliament* is set at a time of high unemployment and industrial decline, especially in shipbuilding. Political discontent is figured in the disfigurement of the environment. The speaker describes a return to his homeland, to its "shabby encampments", its "fields abandoned to old supermarket trolleys,/An ancient soot, the Clyde returning to its nature." He berates his countrymen for their "outcast silence", and asks them to

> Share with me, then, the sad glugs in your bottles;
> Throw a stolen spud for me on the side-embers.
> Allow me to pull up a brick, and to sit beside you (74–5)

The pollution of a pastoral scene reflects dispossession by a political system. Rather than shepherds in a place of natural beauty, the homeless and unemployed sit around a fire, amongst industrial decay.

The poem presents Scotland as an abandoned colony extremely remote from Westminster. Disillusionment with the political system leads, as in *Terry Street*, to apathy, a belief that hope of change is a distant utopian fantasy, and one which therefore colludes in the subordination which is represented by the pastoral form. So, railing against his countrymen and the pastoral form itself, the speaker asks, with ironic deference, to join in this submission:

> Permit me, then, to join your circle around your fire
> In this midden of warm faces and freezing backs.
> Sing me your songs in the speech of timber and horse.

These contemporary shepherds lament the Trojan Horse of Unionism, subjugating themselves in melancholic resignation. As with the work of *Barbarians*, Dunn seeks to revise the pastoral form, to close its constitutional distance or to negate its power of dispossession. Just as pastoral conditions political consciousness into stasis, wherein people look melancholically towards an inaccessible future or an irrevocable past, "An Address on the Destitution of Scotland" also observes the pastoral power relationship in the dichotomous cultural representation of Scotland as either romantic wilderness or uncivilized wasteland.

The Northern Irish poet John Montague attested to this quality in his pastoral sequence *The Rough Field* (1972), which continues the traditional Irish poetry of dispossession, while observing contemporary rural change. In the final poem, as Montague drives south, he surveys this

> Harsh landscape that haunts me,
> well and stone, in the bleak moors of dream
> with all my circling a failure to return
> to what is already going
> going
> GONE (80)

Montague cannot fully return home, because the real conflicts with his — idyllically harsh — pastoral memory of the landscape, and like the dispossessed in Dunn's poem, within him "something mourns" (81) still for what has been lost.

In Dunn's *Northlight*, there is a necessary revision of the dichotomies of the idyllic pastoral form. The poetry of possession marks the end of a period of mournful longing, lamenting or anger; yet it is not consolation for whatever losses have been suffered. Such poetry claims what has been desired or rightfully owned all along, so there is no quality of consolation or substitution. The mood of the poetry changes from melancholic or enraged to celebratory but realistic, and controlling the pastoral form, the representation of conditions, is a form of positive and proud activism. In the company of poems like "At Falkland Place", with its celebration of belonging, "Edenic circumstance" and rhapsodic natural beauty, *Northlight*'s "Broughty Ferry" comments on the use of pastoral as idealism: "I won't disfigure loveliness I see/With an avoidance of its politics" (182). Dunn will not "disfigure" a place by figuring it as a pastoral ideal, ignoring suffering and undesirable elements: the poem takes in a drunk, a blind man and "discontent" young men. Idyllic poetry is "stunned perfection, remote,/Depopulated and complacent", and the poet holds to "Significance that beauty can't erase." Dunn's realist pastoral is an empowered form, and as W. N. Herbert states, Dunn's "move to Tayport has coincided with a sense of deepening independence from both English and Scottish overviews of what constitutes 'British' literature", but it is not a paradisal retreat from political engagement: Dunn's move also renews "a sense of complex responsibilities to what might be defined as [his] ideal community" (135).

Those responsibilities are analysed in "Here and There", where Dunn responds to the views of an English interlocutor, who is quoted in parts throughout the poem.[2] Tayport, the small town community, is represented as an independent location, but one which has imaginative and universal connections in the poetry written about it. Dunn writes, "So spin your globe: Tayport is Trebizond" (183). Although the art is centred in a place, it is not bound by it, but Dunn's antagonist insists:

> '*You'll twist your art on the parochial lie*.'
> I love the barbed hush in the holly tree.
> '*An inner émigré, you'll versify*,
> *Not write. You'll turn your back on history*.'

The danger for Dunn is of course believing in "*the parochial lie*", or even "of becoming lost in his own world" (303), as Robert Crawford writes. However, the poet has shown he has entered many varieties of history, local, national, international and poetic. The proof for his stance comes in the reference to Seamus Heaney's "Exposure", where the small-scale and local can be an oblique reflection of the political and the national, unlike the direct confrontation of social issues in *Terry Street*. In Heaney's poem, the local provides inspiration for oblique engagement with politics, even though the poet's geographical safety may involve the loss of a poetic epiphany which can be gained only by living through "the massacre" (144). Dunn's predecessor in this field, as he was for Heaney, is Patrick Kavanagh. Kavanagh's celebration of the parish is exemplified in "Epic", where the poet asks whether a farmers' dispute is "more important" than "the Munich bother" (*Collected Poems* 136). Homer's ghost appears, to say that "I made the Iliad from such/a local row. Gods make their own importance." For Kavanagh in his essay "Parochialism and the Universe", "Parochialism is universal: it deals with the fundamentals" (*Collected Pruse* 282–3); in his essay "Parochialism and Provincialism", the parochial and the provincial are

> direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis — towards which his eyes are turned — has to say on any subject... The parochial mentality, on the other hand, is never in doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. (*A Poet's Country* 237)

The certainty of Dunn's "parochial" faith is seen in "Tay Bridge", which ends by demon-

strating how pastoral can be a model of the larger world, moving from simplicity to complexity:

> Conjectural infinity's outdone
> By engineering, light and hydrous fact,
> A waterfront that rises fold by fold
> Into the stars beyond the last of stone,
> A city's elements, local, exact. (180)

The rhyme of "fact/exact" is an example of "infinity" being harnessed to the particular, to "stone", yet rising up again towards "the stars", towards transcendence. In this way, the universal comes in and the local progresses outwards, in a fluid process, but where the writing itself is particularly rooted.

In his conviction about poetic form and purpose, Dunn attempts to answer the charge of his antagonist in "Here and There" that "*Literature/Ought to be everywhere...*" (185). As a conversation poem, "Here and There" adapts the eclogue form, but it also recalls the relaxed, epistolary style of many of Horace's *Odes*. Horace consistently defends his removal from Rome to his Sabine estate and the virtues of rural existence. The *Odes* continually comment on political concerns: Horace condemns the lifestyle of Maecenas in Rome, describes his hatred of "the profane mob", writes eulogies about the achievements of Augustus, and at points throughout the second book of *Odes*, he promotes the Augustan policy of post-Actium reconciliation.[3] In his own opinion, Horace's most valuable work was not in advocating personal and political moderation and restraint, but in the cultivation of civic pride and cohesion through his poetics. Horace's estimation of his poetic activity was high, but that confidence was necessary in order to fortify a native poetry uncertain of its worth in relation to its Greek predecessors: in what Derek Mahon calls Horace's "best poem" (79), Ode XXX in Book 3, Horace anticipates the everlasting fame of his work, and boasts that

> From humble beginnings
> I was able to be the first to bring Aeolian song
> to Italian measures. Take the proud honour
> well-deserved, Melpomene, and be pleased
> to circle my hair with the laurel of Delphi. (108)

Horace claims to have naturalized Greek lyric poetry in Latin. Making the mode native proves that the skill of the Greek masters is not beyond Roman poets.

Dunn's reclamation of the pastoral form to stress the validity of "provincial" poetry is similarly assertive. The reclamation rejects the pastoral representation of Scotland — as in "An Address on the Destitution of Scotland" — as idyll or backwater, and determines its own accurate conditions of representation. "Here and There" is a justification of Dunn's poetics, after which no defence will be necessary, because the poems are themselves embodiments of the empowerment and the pride in place that has been reached. On his rural estate, Horace demonstrated how inspiration and great art could grow up from seemingly insignificant experience, thereby implying the significance of every location in the Roman state. In Book 3, Ode XIII, Horace mentions the hitherto obscure fountain of Bandusia, and makes the claim that it will come to be thought equal to Hippocrene, Pirene, Aganippe and Castalia, the fountains of the Greek Muses (92). Similarly, when he mentions locations from his childhood in Book 3, Ode IV, such as "Acheruntia", "the high Bantine woods", and "the rich ploughland of Forentum" (81), the intention is to make such unfamiliar places canonical. Dunn's writing about Buddon Ness, Aberlemno, Abernethy, Broughty Ferry and Tayport in *Northlight* is a continuation of this tradition.[4] Whereas Horace's poetry sought municipal consolidation after the turmoil of civil war, Dunn's poetry attempts to do so after the dissolution of "The Pax Britannica", in the midst of "the imperial slum" (185), instilling pride in a Scotland vastly different from the melancholic and defeated place of "An Address on the Destitution of Scotland".

Poems such as "Here and There", "Tay Bridge" "At Falkland Place", "Broughty Ferry" and "75°" in *Northlight* offer both strong validation of Dunn's poetic beliefs and evidence of how he has reclaimed the pastoral form. The local faith Dunn displays in *Northlight* may be specifically relevant to the issue of independence. The poet does not have to live in a large urban location to write universally relevant poetry: if the city stands for Westminster or Unionism, and Tayport — he seemingly small, insignificant place — stands for Scotland, independence does not mean provincialism or insularism, as Dunn argues when describing "the uplift/Boundaries give me" (183). In crude terms, Scotland can produce great works, achieve self-sufficiency, and still play a role in world events, without having to remain dependent in a union which defines it as a less than equal partner.

Nevertheless, despite the intense concentration on the local and comfort with the "parochial" pastoral form, the idea of political belonging is not yet settled. In the 1999 interview with Attila Dösa, Dunn was asked whether views he had expressed around the

time of *Northlight* still stood:

> AD: 'Scotland is a political fiction', you wrote in 1988. 'It has its varieties of place, people, temperaments, languages, its cities, landscapes, its business, its employed and unemployed, its rich and poor — it has everything except citizenship.' Would political independence be helpful in bringing Scotland's perplexing view of itself to a solution?
>
> DD: ... Clearly a country needs a nationality and a citizenship to stand behind. Also, a country has to be in a position to take responsibility for itself, it shouldn't have to endure secondary status (30)

In 1998, the Scotland Act was passed, and on 1 July 1999, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament were officially convened. The title poem of Dunn's 2000 collection, *The Year's Afternoon*, explores the advantages of self-possession, as the poet is walking in a field on his day off:

> As the moment of leisure grows deeper
> I feel myself sink like a slow root
> Into the herbaceous lordship of my place.
> This is my time, my possessions, opulent
> Freedom in free-fall from salaried routines,
> Intrusions, the boundaryless tedium.
> This is my liberty among trees and grass...
> Time is my own unpurchased and intimate
> Republic of the cool wind and blue sea. (315)

One of the difficulties in reading Dunn's poetry is that unlike Seamus Heaney in "Exposure", inviting political interpretation of his poetry even though it takes "protective colouring from bole and bark" (144), or is seemingly disengaged from wider issues, Dunn is rather more elusive. In a poem which insists on leisure, on a separation from intellectual work, the language here may be nevertheless politically loaded, in words like "lordship", "Freedom", "Intrusions", "liberty" "Republic" and "hedge-school". Dunn is away from the place of subordination, the place of "boundaryless tedium". Even though the poem describes "my hours of 1993" (316), the poem seems to be commenting on an increased

independence, on making a step further towards definite boundaries.

It is possible to gain a similar political interpretation of "Indolence", the last poem in the collection, since it continues the straightforward conceit of work as subjugation and leisure as liberty. In celebrating leisure in his garden, as a "civilian" — retired perhaps from political struggle — "doing damn all in a deckchair", the poet may suggest a more enduring and luxurious independence, implying perhaps that devolution is only halfway to Scotland's full political autonomy. Dunn's "perfect peace" is "slothful/To a fault", and there is a pride in his own place:

> All this is *my* property! My goods and chattels,
> Impedimenta, my but-and-ben, mine own
> Estate and little home, and all for me (*The Year's Afternoon* 79–80)

As in *Northlight*, Dunn's sense of belonging is abundantly clear, in addition to his comfort with the pastoral mode, that form used to explore the issue of belonging. Alan Robinson points out that "the real issue of pastoral poetry is the possession and civilised enjoyment of leisure" (95): so whether or not the form is applicable to Scotland's politics in particular, it is nevertheless politicised, in that the worker has earned the right to enjoy his own leisure and liberty, not to have conditions imposed upon him. The right of self-determination and self-definition is accessed, but it does not create an ideal republic: as Ellen Zetzel Lambert observes, *otium* means both "leisure" and "peace as opposed to warfare" (28). Dunn's *otium* in his garden is a conditional state: despite the achieved autonomy of "mine own/ Estate", there is still the world of *negotium*, of political work and political problems, to which to return.

Throughout Dunn's body of work, the house has been consistently used to figure conditions of belonging or estrangement. In *Terry Street*, the disjunction between Dunn's urban and social idealism and the apathy of his neighbours is represented in the physical barrier of the window. The destruction of the country house in *Barbarians* represents the destruction of the idea of poetry as a privileged, exclusive form of pastoral, while in *Elegies*, the loss of a paradisal existence is figured in the dissolution of the home, as the alienated poet finds a new sense of belonging, "a house protected from regret" (187) in *Northlight*, one which figures his recovery from grief as well as his renewed social and political sense of belonging. The figure of the house in *The Year's Afternoon* is used to explore the idea of both political independence and a more personal, unwanted experience

of independence, in the breakdown of Dunn's second marriage. In the sonnet "Native Meditation", the poet sits alone at midnight in his sitting-room, in "Dinner" he laments "the gluttonies of aloneness", with "the empty table" and "Four hopeful chairs" (*The Year's Afternoon* 61), while the long poem "On Whether Loneliness Ever Has a Beginning" ends with Dunn smoking outside his house, "At 2 a.m. in January"; he is

> Still keeping true
> To some belief or other
>
> I don't know much about
> And have no name for.
> I'll go in soon
> And try to sleep. (*The Year's Afternoon* 56)

At this point in Dunn's life, as the issue of political belonging appears to become more settled, personal harmony disintegrates. *The Year's Afternoon* is a collection of retrospection, attempting to come to terms with domestic failure and the deaths of friends and colleagues. Dunn's lineage involves looking back to his first collection, to consolidate a body of poetic and political convictions. In "*Bête Noire*'s Edition of *Terry Street* with Photographs by Robert Whitaker", Dunn laments his position then as an "Outsider, incomer", stating that

> The hardest understanding, I know, is never to have understood
> Entirely those among whom I lived, and who did not, entirely,
> Understand me, as if a true exchange were not permitted.
> (*The Year's Afternoon* 71)

Looking back at a time of alienation, Dunn thinks about the principles to which he is still connected. In his allegiances to country, poetry and nature, Dunn has reached a condition of ease with a measured form of pastoral poetry which is in "Early Hours in Dairsie" "My local and my universal kiss" (*The Year's Afternoon* 78), one which plays a vital role in celebrating the Scottish landscape, but which is nonetheless fully connected with universal subjects. This poetry does not inscribe artificially harmonious power relations, or represent artificially idyllic or barren landscapes. With regard to Dunn's political allegiances,

The Year's Afternoon shows how some of the gaps in Scotland's powers of self-determination have been closed, but it also attests to the improvements still to be made. Dunn is concerned "still that reform should be seen as a threat/And not as a kiss", and stresses that "the revolutionary momentum within me/Survives as the same idealism, an indestructible cry." The long, resolutely prosaic "*Bête Noire*" poem ends with a deferral to an image: "An interruption to grammar — the poem I'm trying to write/Means memory, means love, means two melodic rooms" (*The Year's Afternoon* 72). Dunn's constant image of the house figures his conception not of an idealism made remote or inaccessible by the idyllic, but of a reasonable, moderate kind of pastoral. The house is a modest emblem of the complex kind of harmony — domestic and poetic, geographical and political — which eluded Dunn in *Terry Street*, and to which his work is still committed more than thirty years on.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise specified, citations from Dunn's work refer to *New Selected Poems 1964-2000*.
2 See, for example, *Odes* 1 ix, 2 vii, 2 xi, 2 xvi, 2 xvii.
3 See Horace, *Odes* 2 xvii, 3 i, 4 xiv, 4 xv.
4 See "Daylight", "Going to Aberlemno", "Abernethy", "Broughty Ferry", "Here and There", in *New Selected Poems 1964-2000* (171, 172-3, 173-4, 180-2, 182-7).

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《SUMMARY》

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For over thirty years, Douglas Dunn's poetry has been consistently concerned with the notion of belonging. Dunn's multilayered loyalties involve class, country and the craft of poetry, as well as a commitment to the rural. Yet as he explores the nature and possible loss of the vision of "ideal communities", Dunn is keenly aware of how allegiances may involve pastoral thinking. If pastoral generically inscribes an unequal system, wherein the urban poet represents an ideal social system, or writes inaccurately about the rural, be it harmonious or primitive, reclaiming the form is a political act. The aim of Douglas Dunn's political pastoral is to disillusion the pastoral form, to contract its constitutional distance or overcome its intrinsic alienation. Dunn continually revises the nature and function of pastoral, and describes the complexity of his own problematic relationship to the form: he describes the failure of urban pastoral in *Terry Street*, contests the idea of poetry as a pastoral form in *Barbarians*, and assesses the use of provincial and national pastoral in *Northlight* and *The Year's Afternoon*, aiming to create poetry which plays a vital role in celebrating the Scottish landscape, but which is nonetheless fully connected with universal subjects. The repeated image of the house figures his conception of moderate pastoral, one that offers an empowered and reasonable vision of poetic, geographical and political belonging.