

IN-BETWEENNESS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN DOUGLAS DUNN'S POETRY

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This paper examines the ways in which Douglas Dunn combines the love lyric, the landscape lyric, and historical references in constructing a narrower identity for North-East Fife and a broader identity for Scotland in *Northlight* (1988, henceforth: *N*). In particular, I will consider theories of "in-betweenness" and definitions of "nation" in relation to Dunn's work. I will argue that by exploring the spaces between different dimensions and different apprehensions of time, Dunn constructs his regional and national identity via launching an open-ended dialogue with landscape and history.

In the poems published in *Barbarians* (1979) and *St Kilda's Parliament* (1981) Dunn's articulation of a republican sentiment has come to be seen, in retrospect, as an essential contribution to the 1970s and 80s public debate about whether Scotland should continue to remain part of the UK. Though in 1979 a referendum was held where a narrow majority voted in favor of a Scottish assembly, the number of "Yes" votes failed to reach the 40% limit of the electorate required by Westminster. It is now a widely shared view that after the failure of a political declaration of independence a "unilateral declaration of independence" took place in the creative arts. Dunn's work of the early eighties has been chiefly read in the context of this imaginative self-expression, though he did not even live in Scotland at that time. He had been resident in Hull, England, for the best part of two decades apart from relatively short periods spent in France and the USA—but after the death of his first wife he relocated to Scotland, and in 1984 he settled down with a new partner in Tayport, North-East Fife. Though he has moved homes since then, he has stayed in North-East Fife, to which he has developed a profound and lasting affiliation. 1984 was also the year when some of the poems later collected in *Northlight* first appeared in print. The book is a private record of his new love relationship and a public statement of his recovered bond with the native soil, for which the "lyric hills" of Fife (*N* 1), views of the Firth of Tay and its two bridges, and the view of Dundee and, beyond that, the hills of Angus provide the principal setting. Though attempts at identity constructions for the self in the context of a redefined solidarity with the wider community are at the forefront in *Northlight*, the two forms dominantly applied in this collection—the love poem and the landscape poem—demand a fundamentally different approach from those that have been applied to discuss Dunn's political engagement in the two earlier volumes named above.

In the opening poem, “At Falkland Palace,” Dunn explores the gap between linear and cyclic views of time. In his own comment, it is a poem about “being in a particular place at an affirmative moment in a relationship” (“Writing” 94). Symbolically, that “particular place” is a historic location: in the sixteenth century Kings James IV and James V rebuilt Falkland Palace, which had belonged to the Stuart family since the end of the fourteenth century, into a fine renaissance palace. Concerning the poem’s background, Dunn admits the importance of historical imagination in a gently ironic way: “in the compositional fantasy found and enjoyed in writing the poem, I was, momentarily, a fake Stewart grandee of the late sixteenth century when Scotland was still itself, and [...] this Caledonian hidalgo found himself in Falkland Palace with his lady, in 1982” (“Writing” 94). As he also notes, the poem is “about returning to Scotland” (“Writing” 94), and in this act of solidarity his historical imagination has a crucial part to play. Even the stanza form he applies has unambiguous historical echoes: it reverberates the tempo of the fourteen-line stanzas used in Alexander Montgomerie’s famous poem “The Cherry and the Slae,” and so it points to a period—the sixteenth century—which saw both the flourishing of this particular Stuart palace and generally the Scottish nation under Stuart rule. Dunn’s diction is resonant with the modes of expression of medieval spring songs in the first half, and chivalric poetry in the latter half of this energetic, and both stylistically and technically accomplished poem:

Everything’s birth begins
 On the moment of the May’s
 Creaturely origins
 —I’ll live for these good days
 Love leads me to
 In gardened places such as this
 Of the flower and the apple-promise,
 Lark-sung, finch-wonderful;
 Edenic circumstance, not fall,
 Walking with you.
 [...]
 These native liberties propose
 Our lives, rose by unbudding rose,
 A song-crazed laverock
 Whose melodies unlock
 Audible sky.
 Dynastic stonework flakes,
 Weathers and fails, withdraws
 From shapely time and shakes
 A gargoyle’s severed claws
 At visitors.
 Here wrinkled time’s abolished house
 Perpetuates a posthumous
 Nation, monarchy’s urn
 In which the Stewarts mourn

What once was theirs.
 In a country like this
 Our ghosts outnumber us:
 [...]

 And history bemoans
 What history postpones,
 The true event.
 (N 1-2)

If the inspiration behind and the setting of the poem is explicitly historical, then its images foreground a celebration of new life in the natural environment. The speaker lauds the “apple-promise” and the “song-crazed laverock” in the month of May in particular, and in general he praises the harmony found in the awakening nature: “Edenic circumstance, not fall.” By contrasting the liveliness of spring with the attractive but deteriorating Stuart palace (“Dynastic stonework flakes”), Dunn clashes two different notions of temporality. A cyclic view based on the annual change of seasons, which supplies the basis of metaphoric apprehensions of time from ancient myths to the Christian calendar, is juxtaposed with a linear view, which is measured with chronometers and is recorded in history books. “At Falkland Palace” suggests that while nature rejuvenates every year, in history there is no such regeneration—or if there is at all, it at least cannot be observed in the present time and at the present place—and that golden age gives way to decline: that once glorious palace of the Stuarts (note Dunn’s deliberately archaic spelling of the dynasty’s name in the quoted passage) is now “monarchy’s urn” and becomes the symbol of the “posthumous / Nation” of the Scots. Sceptically enough, the poem does not suggest a hope of rebirth in terms of the larger community; there is only a constant deferral of action: “history bemoans / What history postpones.” The reader is almost made to feel that no relief can be found, except in a retreat to the private realm of love and marriage and a relaxed enjoyment of nature, which is one of the functions of the pastoral. That, however, does not entail a call for turning one’s back on society, and neither would it be entirely accurate to translate it as Dunn’s overall disappointment with the public function of poetry.¹ Instead of refusing to deal with historical predicaments, in *Northlight* he chooses only to approach them from a different and, at first, seemingly paradoxical direction. Rather than inventing a self in direct relation to his smaller and larger communities, he approaches place and history via lyrical forms—the love lyric and the landscape poem:

In the hollows of home
 I find life, love and ground
 And intimate welcome:
 With you, and these, I’m bound
 To history.
 (N 2)

¹ See, for instance: “I won’t disfigure loveliness I see / With an avoidance of its politics” (“Here and There”—N 25).

In a vast but fragmented, imaginary journey across time and geography recorded in his earlier volume *Europa's Lover* (first published in 1982), Dunn presented the reader with a multiplicity of “Swiss seconds” (*Europa's* 218), as if those were the broken glass of a once grand narrative of history—but in *Northlight* he retrieves a single moment which allows us to view past, present, and future in one great sweep. He first reaches that moment in “The People Before”:

Preliminary moonlight on the Firth
 Casts in-betweenness on the time and light—
 Not now, not then, not day, not night,
 But moonlight's childhood, waterworn;
 And, in one moment, all death, all birth,
 All dying and being reborn.
 (N 8)

While the poem clearly inherits the idea of the infinite cycle of death and birth from *Europa's* monologue, more problematic is what Dunn means by “in-betweenness.” Cairns Craig argues that it is a hermeneutic position in which Dunn “explores [the] in-betweenness of existence, the ‘in-betweenness’ that is the space between known and completed forms and the unknowable significance of the present” (“Northlight” 62). While Craig's identification of in-betweenness as a hermeneutic position from which Dunn launches dialogues with history and landscape is used as a point of departure in the present paper, the following words of caution should be added. On the one hand, it is implausible that for Dunn any form can be “completed”—at least that is what is revealed throughout *Northlight* and most of his other collections, especially *Europa's Lover*. On the other hand, as it may be also clear from the way he underlines the importance of a constant reinterpretation of history in, for example, Sean O'Brien's interview (26), it is also improbable that in Dunn's opinion “forms” can be “known.” Craig's insistence on finite and knowable categories is all the more surprising, since Dunn's skepticism on this point is rather explicitly worded in *Northlight*.² Therefore, Craig's observation will be used here with the modification that Dunn does not take “in-betweenness” for granted; rather, he regards it as a privileged moment which has to be earned, and in which the possibility of comprehending the significance of time, history, and the land may emerge—without trying to pretend that any of these can be “known and completed.”

Craig further elaborates the same concept in his later critical work, tracing it through the work of paradigmatically “peripheral” writers such as W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Tom Leonard, James Kelman, Dunn, Liz Lochhead (peripheral by way of her

² For example, see “The People Before”:

Make what you can of it, for no one knows
 What story's told by winter-misted hills
 Or how a river flows
 Against the tide in white scribbles.
 (N 8)

female voice), Edwin Morgan, and Sorley MacLean, and applying it in his discussion of Scottish national identities. Craig concludes on the following consequential point:

The condition of "being between" is not the degeneration of a culture but the essential means of its generation. The upsurge in regionalism in British poetry in the past thirty years may be a mirror-image of the vernacularisation of Englishes throughout the world but it is a mistake to see that mirror-image of the centre and the periphery as something new: all cultures exist not in themselves—in the autonomy and the autotelic trajectory of their own narratives—but in the relations between themselves and others. Culture is not an organism, nor a totality, nor a unity: it is the site of a dialogue, it is a dialectic, a dialect. It is being between. (*Out of History* 205-206)

This is a more nuanced take and will prove more useful in the present context, because in arguing for the deferral of categorical definitions in the identity construction of the former peripheries of the British Empire, Craig puts forward a non-finite image of a multicultural and multidialectal Scotland. While Craig's distinction of "self" and "other" and his installation of a dialogic relationship between them clearly establishes a bridge with Bakhtin's dialogic theory (then very popular among Scottish scholars), Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (also hugely influential on the 1990s debate about Scottishness) obviously affected his attempts at definition to a major degree. Bhabha stresses the problematic nature of defining the concept of "nation":

The "locality" of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as "other" in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/ inside must always itself be a process of hybridity. (4)

At the root of the dislocation of nationality there is what Bhabha calls "conceptual indeterminacy" (2) or, in other words, an infinite postponement of signification, which in turn leads to a potentially endless negotiation of meanings in "*in-between* spaces," such as "between cultures and nations, theories and texts, the political, the poetic and the painterly, the past and the present" (4).

Both Craig's and Bhabha's attempts at defining large-scale communities are bound up with identity, culture, and temporality and, as such, they together set up a practical framework in which to discuss Dunn's take on the "locality" of nation and history. While in Dunn's work "in-betweenness" is a fleeting moment of special insight, it is also a representative point in time: a moment that reflects on what is permanent in the changing selfhood of the community. It is a fixed but momentary perspective in an infinite, open-ended, and ever-changing negotiation with spatial, temporal, and cultural dimensions of both small and large communities: family, neighborhood, and village on the one hand, and tribe, kingdom, region, and nation on the other hand. In Dunn's imaginative historical survey most of these categories emerge at various stages, but the present paper is concerned with Dunn's identity construction for his region and the metonymical extension of this

identity to the widest and most inclusive—and, indeed, most elusive—of the above categories, “nation.”

In essays and interviews Dunn has more than once referred to the nineteenth-century French thinker Ernest Renan’s definition of “nation”: “a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (19). This definition may be widely known among scholars—though what may bring us even closer to working out a definition of Dunn’s national sentiment is not the dictum itself but the context in which it is supposed to be understood. Renan wrote:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (19)

It is indicative of the abiding relevance of Renan’s definition that his essay features as the first chapter in Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*. But equally relevant and more specific to the present context is that another key text of nineties critical debates about Scottish identity, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, also considerably draws on Renan when it interprets the nation as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). Anderson adds that nations are “imagined” or “invented” as long as “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...], yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). What is shared in both Renan’s and Anderson’s terms is that the identity of a community is a fictitious or imagined product, and its existence depends on public consent. “Solidarity”—or, in Anderson’s words, “comradeship”—acts as the major force of continuity in the life of a nation by linking past heritage with future aspirations, and as such, it always belongs to the present time, in which it is continually adjusted, revised, and reinterpreted. There is an endless negotiation of their identities and there is an on-going dialogue between the different (spatial and temporal) dimensions of larger communities. In this dialogue both the subject and the nature of solidarity is likely to be transformed inasmuch as national culture and history is neither fixed (as argued by Craig) nor unitary (as described by Bhabha). As a result, there is both an infinite quest of meaning and an infinite constitution of the meaning of that solidarity—or in other words, there is both a constantly repeated series of attempts at and a constant deferral of finalizing the identities of large-scale communities such as nations.

In *Northlight* Dunn is concerned with outlining the subject of that solidarity by occupying a space which is in-between different forms of temporality. If in “At Falkland Palace” he explores the hiatus between linearity and a cyclic view of time to establish a hermeneutic perspective, in “Memory and Imagination” he tries to create imaginative access to the single representative moment between the unfinished past and the unborn future in constructing an identity for North-East Fife in time:

Who cares what year it is
 When what you see
 Turns parish, river and chronology
 Into the inside-out of Caledonia's
 Cognitive acres stripped of time and laws?
 (N 67-68)

But the lyrical self comes to the understanding that this hermeneutic identity is far from being finite—it transforms, expands, or develops with the change of times while, at the same time, retaining a part or ingredient that is essential to its self-identity:

Works that were made two thousand years ago
 Portray their age
 But do not cease to grow
 In modified enchantment, like a tree's
 Lifetime of lifetimes of its species.
 (N 66)

As a consequence, the constitution of cohesive semantic systems necessarily—and desirably—remains an infinite process, and Dunn maintains the open-endedness of this dialogue by remaking and reinventing—and reliving—history rather than merely preserving and recording it:

[...] wind and water's rituals
 Invent and reinvent
 Somnambulistic thoughts,
 Chimeras, ecstasy, delirium,
 The visionary and its sacrament.
 (N 65)

The other chief outcome is that these and other poems in the book—for example, "Daylight"—imply that in Dunn's intuition poetic imagination has the potential to secure continuity in that endless process in order to defy the temporal fragmentation of collective consciousness:

Wordless symposia, in tongues
 Informed beyond mere rights and wrongs;
 Luminous discourse, shade by shade,
 Its meaning light-and-water-made
 Or turned by wind and by what happens
 Into a foliated sense—
 A mind could catch at them, and try
 To understand that dot of sky
 Balanced on Buddon's easternmost
 Outreach of military coast [...]
 (N 11)

To counter fragmentation and create a fixed perspective for developing a hermeneutic dialogue across time, the poet is made into a representative subjectivity. The presence of the lyrical first person singular is an intellectual and spiritual rather than a physical presence in the landscape. In some of the landscape poems—for instance in “Daylight,” again—the self merely exists as a point of view:

The big white arms of dawn are cool
 In their embrace, and merciful
 First blue dispels the estuary’s
 Possessive, tenemented greys.
 (N 11)

Moreover, since geography and topography are also due to change across historical times, the land supplies more than just an actual and physically perceptible view in the present moment. The same poem cited above suggests that the eyes of the poet can see more than what the naked eye can see:

The gleam on Buddon Ness protects
 Survival where sunlight reacts
 With sand and private history,
 With window-coloured dawn and sea.
 Enormous world, this little place
 Observes its vulnerable trace
 On time, topography and globe [...]
 (N 11)

If the first person singular functions as a partly fictitious visual perspective, it also becomes both the voice and the memory of the people who lived before him and who populate the land now. In several poems of the collection, the memory of this representative subjectivity reaches back to the time of Pictish ancestors who once populated parts of the territory known today as Lowland Scotland, including North-East Fife, which Dunn terms “Pictish Coast” in the poem called “75°” (N 18). Partly due to the fact that (though in all probability they formed a literate society) practically no record remains of their written culture, the Picts have been regarded as a somewhat mysterious people, which adds to the uncertainty—and even elusiveness—of the historical dimension in Dunn’s hermeneutic quest. Moreover, the lack of evidence of their ancient speech form serves as an interesting parallel with today’s linguistic situation in Scotland, where the majority of the people speak English (with a Scottish accent) but the land’s indigenous tongue (Scots) is not the country’s official language at present and, as such, is practically invisible in official records (even though it is not inaudible in the Scottish Parliament).

Language is an important issue, one that cannot be avoided in modern as well as historical discussions of Scottish identity. In addition to the hermeneutic explanations outlined above, Craig has also suggested a linguistic account of “in-betweenness.” In his opinion, Dunn’s poems refer to a recess “where the world hovers between the incomplete present and the fulfilled languages of the past, or between the languages of the landscape

and the as yet unexpressed experience of the individual who inhabits them" ("Northlight" 62). Although it remains a point of debate in exactly what sense a language can be "ful-filled," from a diachronic viewpoint it is not impossible to make out a case for Craig's argument. For instance, in "Going to Aberlemno" a language once spoken in the territory now called "Scotland" is set in relation to the (politically) "incomplete present," that is, Scotland's unarticulated political existence in the 1980s:

Through astral solitude
 A Pictish dialect,
 Above a bridged Firth, cries
 For lyric nationhood.
 And horsemen, in a stone disguise,
 Ride through the Pictish wood.
 (N 13)

But it is equally essential to see that for Dunn language belongs to the domain of subjectivity first of all. Just as a dialect of the past can be overheard in "astral solitude," and nationality can be viewed in subjective terms ("lyric nationhood"), he insists on the privacy of the language of poetry when it is articulated in the present moment: "Innermost dialect / Describes Fife's lyric hills" (N 1). Moreover, it is also important to emphasize that the poet's "in-betweenness" is not merely a linguistic position but, probably more importantly, also a very private, even perhaps clandestine, moment in which the various dimensions of life intersect—times, places, and forms of existence and non-existence. See the poem called "Daylight":

I've seen a star poised on the tip
 Of a still leaf, pure partnership
 Here makes with there and everywhere
 Between life, death and forever.
 Last night in Tayport, leaf and star
 —Still, very still—melted together
 In life's delight and woke to this
 Lucidity and genesis [...]
 (N 12)

Certainly, language is more than simply a means of everyday communication: it is also what could be termed a "language of the landscape," that is, both the vehicle and the resulting record of the self's imaginative verbal interaction with and across time and space. The title of "Memory and Imagination"—a key poem in *Northlight*—refers to the unity of historical consciousness and poetic imagination in the context of Dunn's lyrical / public self-definition. Dunn's use of the word "memory" implies a sense of collective memory, which reaches back to the community's mythological and legendary—that is, imagined—origins: the Pictish and, especially, the subsequent Celtic times when "saints [...] navigate on stones" (N 67). If in his earlier *Elegies* (1985) Dunn identified Scotland with the mythological goddess of love, Aphrodite, in "Memory and Imagination" he associates the

narrower region of Tayside with another mythological woman, Artemis, a nature-goddess whose important attribute is virginity. This is just one step away from the rhetorical question Dunn formulates in a later volume: “Is it in love that nationhood begins...?” (*Dante’s* 63)

The other word in the title, “imagination,” reveals that Dunn’s attitude to history is also of a highly aesthetic nature:

Metre’s continuum
 Articulates
 An artless view of water, sky and slates.
 Rhythmical memory,
 Archival drum.
 (N 65)

The parallel presence of the memory of prehistoric drum beat and the rhythm of poetry in the present time suggests that art pervades Dunn’s vision of the whole of human existence, attending us through time in an “aesthetic universe” (N 68). The poet’s representative subjectivity can rise above the particulars of life to a higher imaginative level with the help of art, as is objectified in the poem’s all-inclusive perspective: not only are we invited to survey the quotidian “Over the roofs, past chimneypots / Toward the river’s tidal pulse” (N 65), but as Dunn describes in another poem (“Here and There”), we may also move “on a curve / That’s capable of upwards into grace” (N 29). It is the imaginative—or, in the present case, a quasi-spiritual—dimension of art that makes history (pervaded and remodeled in poetry) the subject of Dunn’s wide-ranging overview. Memory and imagination can meet in any branch of the arts, as long as the artist has the ability to conceive the in-betweenness of the single moment in which the incompleteness of past and future encounter and inform the self in the here and now:

Transfigured fact and elevated dream
 Perpetuate their metrical verbatim
 Into the metronomic clock
 Where here
 Meets there
 And now meets then,
 That hard frontier
 Where pencil, paint, wood, stone
 And numbered rhyme
 Converse with music on the edge of time.
 (N 68-69)

Even the physical shape of this poem suggests temporal continuity. In the same way as poetry forms an imaginative bridge between past and present, the narrow lines scrolling down six pages evoke a sense of spanning across space, while the alternation of the shorter and longer lines bring to mind the concept of time by forming an hourglass shape, as in the quotation above. Moreover, the periodic indentation of the shorter lines as

opposed to the left alignment of the longer lines visually summons up the swing of the metronome (also mentioned explicitly in the cited passage), which we use to mark out and divide the stretch of time in which a musical composition creates an aesthetic effect. Poetry, like music, takes place in time when read aloud (as well as in space, on the page), so it is particularly suitable to express and reflect temporal continuity. The guardian of this continuity is the subjectivity of the poet who stands at the crossroads of temporal and spatial dimensions like a sentinel. It is the sentinel poet's imagination that establishes links between the past and the future of a community by providing it with an identity in the always happening present tense:

A sense, a memory
In all dimensions of the sentient,
Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell,
Imagination's immortelle.
(N 70)

Dunn's historical sensibility merges with a committed attentiveness to spirituality, and like his interest in the past, this spiritual concern, too, becomes affiliated with a specific place. Probably the most striking feature of the book is how its geography is confined to the relatively small and well-defined region of North-East Fife and Tayside. In an essay he describes the places featured in *Northlight*:

The countryside suits my eye and imagination. [...] I don't expect to see unicorns, but on the low hills, silhouetted ridges, in a countryside full of corners and a quick exchange of prospects, it is easy to imagine a glimpse of something mysterious as it peeps shyly from its timeless world and into this one. North Fife particularly invites you to accept its lore. ("Pride of Fife" 44)

If we accept R.P. Draper's division between different kinds of regional poetry depending on whether they are dedicated to a landscape or a community (9), then Dunn's treatment of landscape can be seen as providing for a broader dialogue with everything a land may signify or stand for, including, though seldom directly, its residents. The following extract from another short essay by Dunn may be illuminating of his approach:

Place is more than a stretch and reach as far as the eye can see. Like the way we think about time, place bleeds away from the artificial boundaries of property and administrative tradition. It is self, character, and the bias of mind, imagination and awareness it encourages, the tempo and the run of the grain of identity; it is love, house, hereditary connections, a glimpse of *res publica*, inhabitants, and a *representative of nation and humanity*. ("*Northlight*" 3; second emphasis added)

In the volumes following *Northlight* Dunn's attention turns to the pastoral setting of this typically agricultural region, though at this point it is the view of the estuary—and

especially the light effects over it—that acts as the major catalyst, which he has also emphasized elsewhere. “Where I live faces north-east and I work by the light of its geography and latitude,” he wrote on the book’s inspiration (“*Northlight*” 3). The cover image shows the engraving of an old lighthouse off Tayport which does not operate any more, but in Dunn’s imagination it “survives as a [...] sentinel, a guardian” (“*Northlight*” 4)—and functions as a correlative for the poet’s self, one might add. “Light” is a keyword that occurs in more than a third of the poems in various compounds, such as: “candlelight,” “daylight,” “moonlight,” “northlight,” “roselight,” “waterlight,” “winterlight,” and “worldlight.” Certainly, the book’s title alludes to the preference of painters and artists (such as Dunn’s first wife and also his second partner, whom he married in 1985) for a “north light,” that is, a room lit by a window facing north. For Dunn, as for some visual artists, light is both the principal inspiration and the medium that teases out meaning—in another approach, “light” is both the major catalyst and the chief metaphor of the lyrical moment that provides an otherwise neutral natural environment with subjectivity in these poems.

Descriptions of the incorporeal quality of light lend a lyrical and spiritual—and sometimes even sublime—atmosphere to most poems, and it is partly for this reason that lyricism deeply infuses Dunn’s representations of the “lyric” and “enigmatic” hills of Fife (*N* 1, 15). However, he can discreetly counteract such panoramic generalizations by returning to Andrew Young’s “botanical sensibility,” which delights in the small-scale poetics of “leaf and bloom,” and which Dunn has encouraged especially in competition with the design of Hugh MacDiarmid’s geological poetry that was for so long the dominant paradigm in the Scottish landscape poetry of the twentieth century (“*Predicament*” 273). Dunn’s dialogue with the “summer’s agents” in the six-poem sequence “75” (*N* 16) comes probably the closest to the poetics of “botanical sensibility”.³

Planthouses force Italian heat
On melon, pepper, peach and vine
And horticultural conceit
Perfects a Scottish aubergine.
(*N* 20)

Furthermore, rather than a reasoning, typically late-MacDiarmidian type of verse that creates a distance between the lyrical first person singular and the subject matter, in his nature poetry Dunn chooses to walk the “paths of inner wanderlust” (*N* 18) in revealing the hidden significance of and expressing his loyalty to the North-East Fife landscape.

In an attempt to be “faithful to what it depicts” (*N* 18), Dunn projects the inwardness of his lyricism onto the northern weather in “75.” But, predictably from the positions he occupied vis-à-vis various communities in his earlier books, here he is prone to maintain this newly-found version of *Innerlichkeit* in relation to the land in the first place rather than to its inhabitants:

³ Just as pertinent examples as that can be collected, though, from several other poems, such as “The People Before”: “A sparrow lifts its startled featherweight / And peals tumble in a cruel slapstick” (*N* 7).

Summer is fragrant this far north.
By night, on Inverdovat's hill,
Visit the gods of wood and Firth
By paths of inner wanderlust
Here on the summer's Pictish Coast
Where half-forgotten festivals
Quicken the half-remembering pulse.
(N 18)

Citing what Dunn has said about the relationship between the self and the environment in Ted Hughes's and Charles Tomlison's landscape poems can be illustrative of his own method in *Northlight*. He has argued that in Hughes and Tomlison "there's an experience of landscape without a predicament of self" and that the poet "in a sense becomes the landscape or a personless purveyor of narrative and description," and has noted that this is an exemplary quality in both technical and ethical terms (Zawacki 17).

If Dunn approaches regional and national identities by the indirect way of developing a lyrical affiliation with the local landscape, then history and landscape also meet and merge in the lyrical poems of *Northlight*. "Fife has a spirit of its own, one that rolls through time and events with an obscure but powerful significance," Dunn has said ("Predicament" 273). Its significance cannot be attained through an analytical mode of understanding but only by way of lyrical reflection and an empathetic identification with the natural environment. The poems discussed above suggest that the comprehension of, and a deeply rooted identification with, the history and the natural environment of a particular area is essential for developing solidarity with one's neighbors and fellow citizens, and, in Renan's terms, for engendering "the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form." The hermeneutic dialogue with the possible signification of one's narrower home, thus, leads to the formation of national identities by way of a metonymical extension of that meaning.

It is possible, then, to make another connection between Dunn's identity construction in *Northlight* and Anderson's hypothesis about the making of national consciousness, according to which "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact [...] are imagined" (6). However, Dunn's concept of temporality opens a metaphysical window in Anderson's understanding of the nation as being the exclusive result of secular imagination. In contrast with earlier notions of simultaneity along a Christian chronology marked out by Creation and Judgment Day at its opposite ends, as Anderson says, our view of nationality relies on a more recent apprehension of time in which simultaneity is "transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24). In *Northlight*, Dunn exploits the in-between position between this synthetic time calculated against the concurrence of other secular events (which is the site of historiography, the focus of his other chief interest elsewhere) and a more archaic and authentic apprehension of time in which familiar places and the past may inform us about the significance of the present. In his later work he makes references to the irony latently present in artificially marked chronology in poems such as "Turn Over a New Leaf" in *Dante's Drum-kit* (6-7). Although attentiveness to temporal and spatial intersections is an obvious resource of that book's

lyricism, the metaphoric apprehension of time in relation to the landscape is tangibly pregnant in *Northlight*, as Dunn's description in prose of his own attitude to landscape and environment also reveals:

Perhaps the best library for a poet is the one that exists outdoors. It is consulted with all five senses as you read the book of place and try to understand its signs and visible dialects, its hundreds of names. *When you do this, you find yourself alive in more time than the one marked on your wristwatch*, which is just a device for calculating forgetfulness. (N 3; emphasis added)

The metaphysical perspective on time in Dunn's lyricism allows a more liberated and more complex view of temporality where national identity is concerned than the calendrical simultaneity described in Anderson. Anderson borrows the idea of "homogeneous, empty time" from Walter Benjamin, who distinguishes it from a "Messianic time," in which the simultaneity of past and future occurs in the present tense. Benjamin suggests:

[h]istoricism contends itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a *causa* is for that very reason historical. [...] A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now," which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (263)

As pointed out, Dunn ascribes a similar prominence to the present moment, which is pregnant with the incompleteness of the past and the promise of the future, in poems such as "The People Before" and "Memory and Imagination." In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson provides another definition (from Auerbach) for what Benjamin means by "Messianic time": "the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is *simultaneously* something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, is something eternal, something omnitemporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event" (24). Common between this theological standpoint and Dunn's lyricism is that they represent the present moment as *both* itself *and* something else. But, certainly, we cannot talk of religious motivation in this instance of Dunn's transgressing secular apprehensions of time. Moreover, he does not attribute a teleological purpose to history, which is otherwise a fundamental assumption in Christian views of temporal linearity. The logical consequence of the potentially metaphysical, and thus open-ended, representative quality of the present for Dunn's identity construction of the nation is that nationality becomes the subject of an endless semantic negotiation. He has been criticized for what seems to be on the surface the idealization of close-knit rural communities and for paying less attention to the social make-up of those communities, and it is a fact that vanishing ways of life have assumed an elegiac constitution in a number of his poems and some of his short stories. But the above proposed

interpretation of "in-betweenness" in *Northlight* as a hermeneutic position that enables both the identity construction of the present tense and its constant deferral to an indefinite future should be instructive of his ideological openness to a pluralist and future-oriented society.⁴

In summary, by achieving a synthesis of the nature lyric and local history, Dunn potentially secures the diachronic continuity of the identity of North-East Fife (the landscape as well as its inhabitants), while in poems such as "At Falkland Palace" and "Memory and Imagination" he metonymically extends this local identity to include perceptions of Scottishness. The identity construction of North-East Fife takes place in in-between spaces, in which the sentient poet has an opportunity to invoke the spirit of the place from local history, mythology, and place names. These in-between spaces function as imaginative bridges between historical eras and languages, and so they ensure a chronological and spatial identity in the continually changing selfhood of the community both on a small scale and on a large scale, but without aiming at essentialism. In-betweenness also has a temporal dimension: it is a lyrical moment which functions as a hermeneutic perspective with signification between systems of thought, languages, historical eras, and perceptions of time. While it is a fixed entity in the fluidity of the interpretive process amid the ever-changing times and our ever-changing perspectives on history, landscape, and language, it is also a special moment of insight in which the various dimensions of life intersect: time and landscape; existence and non-existence; ancestors and descendants; family and neighborhood; and region and nation. Dunn supports traditional interpretations of the concept of "nation," such as the one proposed by Renan, who says that the feeling of solidarity plays probably the most important part in what constitutes a nation. Dunn's emotionally motivated perception of nationality (the feeling of solidarity with a place and a people) strongly underwrites his attitude of an essentially lyrical poet. He makes an attempt to provide the place with a historically situated identity in timeless or aesthetic terms when in an imaginative sense he explores the hiatus between linear (calendrical) and cyclic (metaphorical and Christian) representations of temporality. While this hermeneutic standpoint anticipates an infinitely changing and kaleidoscopic identity, Dunn's botanical sensibility and his deeply felt fidelity to the local landscape and the natural environment provide for a fixed entity in the fluidity of the interpretive process. At the same time, *Northlight* gives a clear proof that it is only the unfinished moment (which is representative of something beyond itself) that may turn into a productive site of "in-betweenness," that is, into an interpretive position in which the lyrical self may launch an open-ended dialogue with the landscape and what it embraces: its past, its future, its spirit, and its people.

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⁴ It is elucidating to read Dunn's words from this angle: "In my mind, the better community is in the future" (Haffenden 29).

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