

## Chapter 28

# Don Paterson and Poetic Autonomy

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In *Identifying Poets* Robert Crawford speculates that ‘the poet who constructs an identity which allows that poet to identify with a particular territory is the paradigmatic modern poet’, adding that ‘the position of poets in Scotland is typical of this situation’ (Crawford 1993a: 142). One purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the limits of a Scottish literary criticism preoccupied by the search for ‘poetic selves that may be identified with particular territories’ (Crawford 1993a: 3). This approach is, at best, unaccommodating of the poetry of Don Paterson, which evinces no organic bond between voice and place, and tends not to repay critical interest in ‘the articulation of cultural difference and the construction of territorial voices’ (Crawford 1993a: 9). Though Paterson playfully engages with Scottish topoi and locales, and writes occasionally in Scots, he departs from Crawford’s notion of the identifying poet as realising ‘a voice which articulates the culture of the place which is [his] home’ (Crawford 1993a: 2). In his introduction to *New British Poetry* Paterson asserts:

It has long been my own contention that ‘voice’ – that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of the age – is an extraliterary issue. The word ‘voice’ might usefully denote that characteristic tone whose identification can aid the reader in keeping the poems of a single poet in dialogue with one another; but more often its use is purely political. Personally, I don’t believe the difference in a poet’s cultural or sociosexual experience is necessarily the most significant or interesting thing about them. (Paterson and Simic 2004: xxxvi)

An aphorism from Paterson’s *Book of Shadows* carries this objection a step further. ‘Only the insecure age valorizes the individual voice’, Paterson writes, ‘partly because it encourages the radical artist towards a speech far easier to identify and suppress’ (Paterson 2004a: 32). Continuing to ‘identify’ Scottish writers ethnographically on the basis of their culturally distinctive voices, subjects and themes is effectively to suppress the aesthetic possibilities of their work. Another, equally pernicious effect of this critical habit is suggested by Paterson in ‘The Dilemma of the Peot [sic]’, where he explains that ‘the development of the “individual voice” . . . in part depends upon the *repetition* of strategies’ (Paterson 1996: 161). The critical game of recognising a poet’s Scottishness entails a mode of reading highly attuned to continuities, reiterations and consistencies, whose assiduous reinforcement by the traditionalising critic serves ultimately to homogenise the ways in which Scottish poetry is read. Paterson’s poetry seldom makes recourse to the categories this paradigm smiles upon – voice, place, identity – a fact which in itself seems to disqualify him from consideration as a Scottish poet, as though his work were insufficiently forthcoming about the cultural anxieties its author is assumed to harbour. This has

resulted in a somewhat anomalous critical reception: Paterson is a highly acclaimed, recognisably Scottish poet, but is seldom regarded as a major 'Scottish poet'.

Paterson himself, it should be noted, seems relaxed about this apparent discrepancy. In email correspondence with the present author he has noted that 'there are really two countries for a Scottish writer: Scotland, and the Anglophone community. Their values are different, and so different things are valorised. Reputations aren't smoothly carried between the two at all, and only the latter is capable of anything resembling disinterested literary criticism based on, if ye like, denationalized criteria.' My aim here is not to uncover the hitherto neglected 'Scottishness' of Paterson's work, but to use the discrepancy in its reception to highlight the stifling implications of the critical practice of 'detecting' and affirming symptoms of a pre-digested Scottishness. It is not simply a question of 'denationalising' the poet's reception, as Paterson himself acknowledges: 'Inevitably, being Scottish – *well* Scottish, i.e. a Nationalist and someone who can relax into an accent strong enough to be incomprehensible to anyone outside St. Mary's, Dundee – infects my writing, though not, I hope, to a self-conscious degree. It's this self-consciousness I object to' (Friel 1995: 192). For the first part of this chapter, Paterson's poetry will figure as a foil to this self-consciously nationalising way of thinking and reading. In the second part, the self-sufficient qualities of his work will come into focus and present a very different approach to imagining selfhood and territory, one far less dependent on the recognition of already familiar accents. In my view, Paterson's work insists on the transformative power of the imagination precisely where the literal, empirical, dot-joining mind encounters the limits of perception.

'One can hope', wrote Christopher Whyte in 1998, 'that the setting up of a Scottish parliament will at last allow Scottish literature to be literature first and foremost, rather than the expression of a nationalist movement' (Whyte 1998a: 284). To revisit Whyte's sunny conjecture almost a decade later prompts some justified exasperation; it will be enough to catalogue a few prominent rehearsals of Whyte's frustration at the 'tendency to read modern fictions of urban Scotland in representative, rather than strictly literary, terms' (Whyte 1998a: 285n). Thus, in an article lamenting the narrowness of James Kelman's critical reception, Laurence Nicoll castigates a persistent 'cultural nationalist paradigm' characterised by the 'inability to think outwith a critical taxonomy the parameters of which are set by concepts of "nation" and "nationalism"' (Nicoll 2000: 79). Janice Galloway, too, has recently scorned those 'who think Scotland, if it has permission to think at all, may only think about itself' (Kernan 2003), and in their introduction to *Scotland in Theory* Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller document a 'lingering parochialism' in Scottish criticism, epitomised by the critical reflex of 'explaining' a novel or poem 'firstly . . . in terms of its Scottishness, rather than in terms of its literary or aesthetic qualities' (Bell and Miller 2004: 11). Finally, Whyte's own *Modern Scottish Poetry* found 'clear evidence that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, both critics and writers continue to be subject to pressures which would have them view literary activity first and foremost in relation to national self-affirmation.' His bold response was to 'set aside . . . issues of national identity, searching for it, constructing it, reinforcing it, along with the illusion that the primary function of poetic texts lies in identity building, and that they are capable of resolving identity issues' (Whyte 2004a: 8). This refreshing approach brings us closer to the still-distant critical condition anticipated in his 1998 article by not just proposing, but indeed taking for granted

that criticism of Scottish literature, in particular of modern Scottish literature, can now abandon militancy for something more complex and more tolerant, at once more honest and more uncertain. The 'question about Scottishness' will never really be negotiable. Along with

other extraneous agendas, it needs setting aside, so that we can concentrate on the agenda that matters most and provokes the most anxiety, the literary one. (Whyte 2004a: 236)

Insisting that 'both history and politics must renounce any privileged status as tools for the interpretation of Scottish literature', Whyte's study constitutes an energising corrective to the 'culturalising' tendency of Scottish criticism by 'reclaim[ing] a degree of autonomy for the creative (in this case, specifically literary) faculty' (Whyte 2004a: 7–8), a move applauded even by critics of *Modern Scottish Poetry* (see Fowler 2004). But viewing Scottish poetry as poetry first and foremost still seems a distant goal; it is revealing that even Whyte's study cannot quite resist the ethnographic impulse that 'the question about Scottishness' implies. Though he takes extraordinary pains to decentre the critical principles underpinning his selection and discussion of poets – emphasising the 'transparent and arbitrary character' of the book's 'aleatoric' structure (Whyte 2004a: 4) – a residual need to typify according to perceived cultural trends creeps back into the final chapter:

The choice of collections and poets to be dealt with throughout this book has been open to discussion, but nowhere is it likely to be more controversial than when dealing with the final decade of the century . . . The wisest course would seem to be to seek out representative figures, those who can manage to give a flavour of what was happening and being written in the 1990s, and consideration of whose output can hopefully raise issues which are also relevant to their contemporaries, any one of whom may well be destined to outshine them in the course of time. (Whyte 2004a: 208)

To query this explanation might seem to prove Whyte's point, but I mean to highlight the rationale operating here, not the choice of poets it generates. My suggestion is that the identification of Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie, Carol Ann Duffy and Aonghas MacNeacail as 'representative figures' has little to do with the autonomous literary agenda Whyte seeks to restore. Rather, the typicality of these poets vis-à-vis Scottish poetry in the 1990s subtly reintroduces the primacy of cultural representativeness in their work's critical reception.

In my view Paterson is the Scottish poet whose work most demands and rewards the denationalised approach Whyte proposes. Before turning to the autonomy of Paterson's poetry, however, it is worth demonstrating the limitations of the nationalising paradigm when applied to his work. Timothy Donnelly's essay on the 'Scottish psychology' of Paterson's first two collections – *Nil Nil* (1993) and *God's Gift to Women* (1997) – takes as its starting-point that hoariest of supposed giveaway Scotticisms, 'the dominant motif of doubling' (Donnelly 2004: 81). '*Nil Nil*'s double-consciousness may at first suggest the belated "split perception" or "double vision" of the colonized', Donnelly observes, but might the doppelgänger trope not equally 'correlat[e] to Scottish post-nationalism' and its 'rejection of a unified, "authentic" conception of self' (Donnelly 2004: 77)? Before we have encountered a single line of a poem, Paterson has been assimilated to the 'identifying' taxonomy: the critical distinction at stake is which phase or trajectory of nationalist identity politics Paterson's work embodies. That his poetry should be read primarily as cultural-political spoor, reified to a bundle of Scotch 'symptoms', literally goes without saying. It is suggestive that Donnelly adopts the model of Crawford's *Identifying Poets* as 'a particularly enlightening one, for in the course of an investigation of the ways in which Paterson constructs in his poetry specifically Scottish identities, the complicated heart of the work appears to unfold' (Donnelly 2004: 80). As we shall see, this totalising diagnosis

of 'specifically' Scottish 'identities' actually traduces the formal and intellectual specificities of Paterson's work.

The next move of Donnelly's essay betrays an even more suspect feature of this critical game, namely the unfalsifiability of its inductions. Distinguishing the tartan fingerprints of Paterson's first collection from those of his second, Donnelly suggests that

the relative infrequency with which doubles appear in *God's Gift to Women* speaks to the book's more explicit Scottishness which, while never contradicting *Nil Nil's* implicitly post-nationalist stance, train-tracks through the book, artificially securing a more cohesive, less fragmented voice. (Donnelly 2004: 77)

The fudging phrase 'speaks to' is appropriate to this sub-Freudian gesture. Acknowledging the non-occurrence or attenuation of an 'unmistakably Scottish' pattern merely attests to the significance of its omission or evasion; the apparent absence of the distinguishing watermark is read as a sort of negative lack, implying a heightened, compensatory Scottishness at another level of the text. The 'explicit Scottishness' Donnelly alludes to is Paterson's conceit of naming eight (and a half) of the collection's poems for 'the stations of the old Dundee–Newtyle railway' (Paterson 1997: 57), hardly a national signifier. This misstep echoes Donnelly's hypernymic reading of Dundee in 'Heliographer', where 'the world beneath: / our tenement, the rival football grounds, / the long bridges, slung out across the river' (Paterson 1993: 7) unaccountably 'invites us . . . to identify the geography stretched out beneath the speaker as a representation of Scotland' (Donnelly 2004: 84) rather than Paterson's hometown.

Following the same pattern, Ruth Padel's description of Paterson as 'a latter-day Burns' is read by Donnelly not as a dismal critical narrowness, but as an incisive comparison of the two poets' 'craftsmanship and perennial subject matter' (Donnelly 2004: 79). Would this affinity suggest itself if Paterson hailed from Shropshire? 'Also important to Padel's comparison', predictably, 'is Burns's famous patriotism, his assertion and preservation of Scottish identity' (Donnelly 2004: 79). Since, as Crawford has complained, 'Scotland is allowed only one poet' (Crawford 2002: 16), and Burns was a patriot, all Scottish poets lazily compared to Burns can be assumed to be buttressing Scottish identity. The poet is not an artist, but a sort of cultural mascot. Paterson has edited his own, notably literary selection of Burns's poetry, and his attitude to the sorts of 'assertion and preservation of Scottish identity' Donnelly thinks the two poets share can best be gauged by Paterson's comments in its introduction: 'Nations in abeyance have a far greater need for the fripperies of nationhood than do active ones, and perhaps one day we will see the ludicrous post of "national bard", along with the *Flower of Scotland*, the *Gathering of the Clans* and *Edinburgh Tattoo* all go down the same plughole. Then, perhaps, Burns will be accorded his true place in the literary constellation' (Paterson 2001: xviii).

The mode of recognising poets as spokespeople for their nations is hopelessly reductive, and the transfigurative dimension of Paterson's work stands against it in every possible way. Whereas the 'identifying' procedure thrives on recognising, restating and verifying a preconceived Scottishness, Paterson's work scorns any mode of repetition which does not transform, however slightly, our perception of the already familiar. It is felicitous that practices of recognition should figure so centrally in the discourse of 'identifying poets' and the populist strand of modern British poetry Paterson has most outspokenly criticised. His polemical introduction to *New British Poetry* complains that the British mainstream 'has been shaped and narrowed by the closing banks of that

cheery and generally none-too-clever verse of recognition humour' (Paterson and Simic 2004: xxvii); in a lecture of the same year, he upbraids the 'kind of straight-faced recognition comedy . . . [which has] no need either for originality or epiphany' (Paterson 2004b). Philip Larkin's 'Fiction and the Reading Public' precisely captures the 'familiar' qualities of this verse: 'Choose something you know all about / That'll sound like real life' (Larkin 2003: 34).

Paterson's disdain for recognition verse is not mere snobbery, but related to a fully articulated sense of the transformative duty of poetry. For Paterson 'the poet's job is to make the commonplace miraculous' (Paterson 1996: 158), and 'the current practice of inviting the audience to "share" the experience' (Friel 1995: 193) amounts to a dereliction of this duty. As Paterson explains in an interview with Liliias Fraser, 'whatever you're talking about has got to be transformed at the end of the poem, and you're not going to do that if you're not on some kind of pilgrimage, some transforming process that the reader has to make with you' (Fraser 2000: 103–4). The critical game of recognising a poet's Scottishness by means of shoehorning salient features of their work into a predetermined national taxonomy shares in the consequences of recognition verse in so far as it sidelines the revelatory potential of the artworks which are its critical objects. Matched-up correspondences and continuities become ossified at the expense of any potential shift in perception. Louis MacNeice – once named by Paterson as his 'favourite poet' (Kellaway 1994: 21) – shared this insistence: 'The poet is a maker, not a retail trader. The writer today should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct' (MacNeice 1968: xxi).

Paterson graciously responded by email to a series of questions on this theme. On being asked whether he thought it was dangerous to construct and reinforce cultural traditions mainly on the basis of recognising stalwart motifs, a habit which seems to flirt with reducing art to 'culture', he replied:

Yep – unless the work has a clear historical or political focus, i.e. *that's what it's about* (like some of Douglas Dunn's, for example) – all you're doing is limiting the possibilities of the culture by insisting that the work can only make its relevance to that culture known via the display of certain signifiers, certain agreed hand-signals, all trivial: the odd dialect word or bit of idiomatic syntax, the mention of a place-name, a bit of local flora, the voice's exhibition of an identifiable . . . uh, 'national trait'. Work which displays a superabundance of those gestures is embarrassingly overprized in Scotland right now; maybe that's always been the case, and maybe it's just that the identity of smaller nations always has to be a little overconstructed.

If 'homogeneity is the enemy of Scottish culture' (Crawford 1993a: 162), critics ought to resist homogenising what can be recognised as 'Scottish' in the first place. The 'identifying' paradigm not only stifles the terms of nationalist criticism, but effectively limits the available modes of *artistically* engaging with the issues of identity this approach trivialises. At its worst, Paterson continues, this pattern amounts to

misreading a work by focussing on a relatively unimportant aspect of it, and, on that basis, recruiting it for your project of reinforcing a cultural prejudice. I find this conversation very depressing. We're hovering on the edge of human extinction, and are going out of our way to avoid listening [to] what our poetry *might actually be saying to us* – to find time to talk about important but entirely tangential concerns that are all being far more interestingly debated elsewhere, in their primary arenas. It's some feat.

Paterson's poetics is not only a valuable rejoinder to this homogenising trend, but a salutary example of what a more truly literary approach to reading Scottish writing might be capable of. According to Paterson, 'poetry is a form of magic, because it tries to change the way we perceive the world, that is to say that it aims to make the texture of our perception malleable' (Paterson 2004b). The poem, or critical reading, which simply supplies recognition of the reader's own experience, values or political outlook renders 'the texture of our perception' less malleable and leads towards imaginative atrophy:

Since it tries to provoke an emotion of which its target readers are already in high possession, it will change no-one's mind about anything . . . Risk, of the sort that makes readers feel genuinely uncomfortable, excited, open to suggestion, vulnerable to *reprogramming*, complicit in the creative business of their self-transformation is quite different. (Paterson 2004b)

This, in short, is the sort of poetry Paterson writes. Its formal and imaginative risks always call upon a degree of prior intimacy – 'for a reader to be blown away by the original phrase, it must already be partly familiar to them' (Paterson 2004b) – but, just as consistently, refuse glib corroborations of the already-known. Paterson's work thrives on near-misses between art and life, where recognisable concrete experience, partly estranged by its strongly formal realisation in verse, brings the reader to a state of unsettled wakefulness by way of boldly mythic, allusive and philosophical conceits. The original, domestic detail is transfigured in the process, and we conclude our reading of the poem not only perceiving it from an altered angle of vision, but with a new, liberating or disturbing awareness of its plasticity.

In 'The Shut-in', from *Landing Light*, an aura of established, 'vernacular' routine is disrupted by an awareness of time which invites seemingly infinite imaginative deferral:

Good of them, all told, to leave me locked  
inside my favourite hour: the whole one early  
I came to wait for one I loved too dearly  
in this coffered snug below the viaduct  
with my dark vernacular ale, Stevenson's  
short fiction, and the little game I played  
of not thinking of her, except to thumb away  
the exquisite stitch that gathers at my breastbone.

The minute hand strains at its lengthening tether  
like Achilles on the hare; the luscious beer  
refills; the millionth page flowers on the last  
of *The Bottle Imp* . . . O Fathers, leave me here,  
beyond the night, the stars, beyond the vast  
infinitesimal letdown of each other!

(Paterson 2003: 39)

We are left here in a sort of worship of delay and not-yetness, 'locked inside' a determinate moment but comforted by the very 'snugness' of the sonnet's formal regularity. The poem rejoices in the 'little game' of these bounds and limits, which are manipulated to produce an altered perception of time and possibility.

As with many of Paterson's crisply lyrical longer poems, some allusive unpacking is called for. In Stevenson's 'The Bottle Imp' (1893), as elegantly summarised by Claire

Harman, 'the holder of a magic bottle can have anything he wishes for, and be none the worse for it, provided he can sell the bottle afterwards at less than he originally paid. If not, he faces eternal damnation, a sort of cumulative punishment for everything done through the bottle's agency in the past' (Harman 2005: 415). Like the sestet of the poem, the curse implies a recursive pattern as the bottle is re-sold for ever smaller discounts – 'infinitesimal letdowns' – which bring the price, perilously, ever closer to zero, and ever closer to staying the same. This precarious threshold between singularity and the infinite, an almost mathematically precise horizon between nothingness and sameness, is Paterson's intellectual stomping-ground. Here, in Matthew Reynolds's words, 'in-betweenness figures not as a situation to be explored but as a kind of faith' (Reynolds 2004: 25).

Paterson's work abounds in such filaments and limits, often tracing asymptotic patterns such as those of 'Nil Nil', where the tale and the voice of its telling gradually '[thin] down to a point so refined / not even the angels could dance on it' (Paterson 1993: 52–3). Similarly, the speaker of 'The Trans-Siberian Express' watches his companion move up the long broken curve of a train:

I follow your continuous arrival  
shedding veil after veil after veil –  
the automatic doors wincing away  
as you stagger back from the buffet

slopping *Laphroaig* and decent coffee  
until you face me from that long enfilade  
of glass, stretched to a vanishing point  
like facing mirrors, a lifetime of days.

(Paterson 1993: 35)

The flickering changes in the lover's image as she sheds each 'veil' of distance and distortion achieve a metaphysical conceit for the 'continuous arrival' of the present from the future. The fleeting singularity of *now* becomes a 'vanishing point' where the dwindling future turns into the swollen past, but also where the speaker's perception of time becomes infinitely discriminating; an entire life becomes visible as a sequence of separate days, discrete epiphanies which appear to be identical copies.

The abiding presence of *Scheherazade* in Paterson's early work adds erotic drama to this flirtation with infinity. In 'from Advice to Young Husbands' in *God's Gift to Women*, the poem's chiasmus embodies the sublime renewal and erasure of the sex it describes:

No one slips into the same woman twice:  
heaven is the innocence of its beholding.

From stroke to stroke, we exchange one bliss  
wholly for another. Imagine the unfolding  
river-lotus, how it duplicates  
the singular perfection of itself  
through the packed bud of its billion petticoats,  
and your cock, here, the rapt and silent witness,  
as disbelief flowers from his disbelief.

Heaven is the innocence of its beholding:  
no man slips into the same woman twice.

(Paterson 1997: 53)

The attraction of these recursive patterns, Paterson explained by email, is that 'their presence tends to denote the hard limit of our human interrogation of the world, i.e. the point at which the human imagination has to take over.' The image of an 'exquisite stitch' in 'The Shut-in' captures the duality of this formal gamesmanship: a pleasurable constriction, a cramp which is also a join. As Reynolds puts it, 'in the best of Paterson's writing . . . the feeling of limitation is recognised and made eloquent. The boundaries of verse and of language represent a general human shortcoming beyond which something that is impossible to grasp can be intuited and implied' (Reynolds 2004: 26). The elusive 'beyond' may be inaccessible to experience, but its logical necessity has a powerful and liberating imaginative pull. In 'The Shut-in' the licence of time's 'lengthening tether' is married to the exuberance of the Bottle Imp's inexhaustible fractal 'blooming', self-delighted by its own ceaseless perpetuation and the knowledge that its indwelling rules both trifle with and prohibit closure, terminus, conclusion. The dramatic ballast of Stevenson's story is the punishment for dying without having sold the bottle on: eternal damnation. By contrast, the calculus of 'The Shut-in' relishes the eternal deferral of the next moment in the present one, a pattern of replenishing and 'refilling' time made audaciously concrete by the allusion to Zeno's paradox of motion (according to which Achilles can never catch the hare, because he would first have to traverse half the distance separating them, and before that a quarter, and before that an eighth, and so on ad infinitum). This suspensive, speculative energy carries us beyond the inevitable 'letdown' of the actual, the arrived-at, and into imaginative territory at once more malleable and self-sufficient. This is what I mean by the autonomy of Paterson's work, summed up by the poet himself as follows: 'I like the idea of the poem as a self-contained universe, the national anthem of a wee vernacular Atlantis whose laws, customs, geography and weather could all be derived from its close study' (Paterson 1996: 161). This image of the poem as an apocryphal, self-contained territory cannot but recall a devolved Scotland whose national status, Paterson observes by email, '[is] both dangled before us and tantalisingly withheld'.

There is a stark difference between Paterson's vision of poetry as conscious and imaginative artifice, and that which conceives the poem as a cultural artefact embodying a socially articulated 'voice'. As Paterson insists, 'a poet should be in service to the poem, and while that's the case, nothing exists except the poem; the poem annihilates the poet' (Paterson 1996: 155). Accordingly, poets must recover

the confidence to insist on the poem as possessing an intrinsic cultural value, of absolutely no use other than for its simple *reading*. Perversely, it has been the insistence on poetry's auxiliary usefulness – for example, in raising issues of cultural identity, as a form of therapy, or generating academic papers – that has encouraged it to think far less of itself, and so eroded its real power to actually inspire readers to think or live differently. (Paterson 2004b)

This motif is literalised in two poems from *Landing Light* – 'A Talking Book' and 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' – both of which present speakers standing before 'Apollo's ancient torso'. One reflects 'you must lose some weight'; the other, '*now change your life*' (Paterson 2003: 28, 61). While the banality of the first response derives from a naively literal attempt at identification, in the second poem a consciously aesthetic response honours the imaginative

possibilities both symbolised and concretely instantiated by Apollo's likeness: 'You'll never know that terrific head / or feel those eyeballs ripen on you – / yet something here keeps you in view, / as if his look had sunk inside // and still blazed on' (Paterson 2003: 61).

This 'sunk inside' vision is also present in 'The Luing', a compelling emplacement of Paterson's 'wee vernacular Atlantis' on Scottish soil:

When the day comes, as the day surely must,  
When it is asked of you, and you refuse  
To take that lover's wound again, that cup  
Of emptiness that is our one completion,

I'd say go here, maybe, to our unsung  
innermost isle: Kilda's antithesis,  
yet still with its own tiny stubborn anthem,  
its yellow milkwort and its stunted kye.

(Paterson 2003: 1)

'Innermost' suggests a second attempt at the imaginative flight of 'The Shut-in', but the real isle of Luing is also among the 'innermost' of the Inner Hebrides, two hundred yards off the larger island of Seil, in turn connected to the Scottish mainland by 'the bridge over the Atlantic' at Clachan. The island shares its name with a special cross-breed of short-horn Highland cattle developed there. The 'stunted kye' of this anti-Kilda might tempt the culturalising reader with a fashionably pluralist figure of Scotland's projected independence through hybridity. The poem's momentum, however, tends away from glib, finalised equivalencies:

Leaving the motherland by a two-car raft,  
The littlest of the fleet, you cross the minch  
To find yourself, if anything, now deeper  
In her arms than ever – sharing her breath

Watching the red vans sliding silently  
Between her hills. In such intimate exile,  
Who'd believe the burn behind the house  
The straitened ocean written on the map?

Here beside the fordable Atlantic,  
Reborn into a secret candidacy,  
The fontanelles reopen one by one  
In the palms, then the breastbone and the brow

(Paterson 2003: 1)

Here precisely our conception of selfhood is left 'open to suggestion, vulnerable to *reprogramming*': the very skull bones de-fuse and restore the soft membranes of infant perception. The minimal gap defining the home-awayness of this transatlantic native soil marks a self-estrangement, an 'intimate exile' which suspends any correspondence between geography and territory. The 'secret candidacy' of this poem and its landscape, combined with the provisional, unmappable form it achieves, resists any search for identity or 'place' as

accomplished fact. With its title masquerading as a continuous verb, 'Luing' is a particularly striking example of what Paterson calls 'The Dark Art of Poetry': it 'renders the texture of our perceptions malleable by surreptitious and devious means, by seeding and planting things in the memory and imagination of the reader with such force and insidious originality that they cannot be deprogrammed' (Paterson 2004b).

The procedures of cultural recognition implicit in so much Scottish literary criticism impose damaging limits on the possibilities of what can be 'identified' as Scottish poetry. It is a way of reading which renders the texture of our perceptions more rigid, and our perceptions, especially, of what is 'Scottish' more homogeneous and clichéd. Paterson's work, in which the impulse to easy identification encounters 'the productive resistance of the form' (Paterson 2004b), alerts us to the gravely unimaginative consequences of such symptomatic readings of 'Scottishness'. By happy coincidence, 'symptom' and 'asymptote' have antonymous etymologies: the first means 'to fall together', the second a failure to tally. The asymptotic patterns of suspension and deferral in Paterson's work, his miraculous near-misses, suggest a more rewarding critical posture in the devolutionary moment. Hospitality to the contingent and transformative is called for, and impatience with the steadfast 'identification' – and ossification – of Scottish typicalities. Allow me to conclude with a final aphorism by Don Paterson, Scottish poet: 'If we expect our work to survive our death even by a single day, we should stop defending it this minute, that it might sooner learn its self-sufficiency' (Paterson 2004a: 131). This may apply to the rebirth of nations as forcibly as to the deaths of individual writers.