



Don Paterson

An interview with Don Paterson

Don Paterson was born in Dundee in 1963. He is the author of *Nil Nil* (1993), *God's Gift to Women* (1997) — winner of both the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize — and *Landing Light* (2003), which won both the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Whitbread Prize for Poetry. *Rain*, his most recent collection, won the Forward Prize for Best Collection in 2009, the same year that he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

Harlequin: You have been fairly outspoken on the divide between so-called 'mainstream' and 'avant-garde' poetry, to the extent that you are sometimes viewed as a kind of figurehead for the former school. One could argue that the point where one ideology shelves into the next is almost impossible to define, and would be identified differently depending on who was asked. Do you believe there is any real use in such distinctions?

Don Paterson: So long as certain factions within the avant-garde continue to identify themselves as not-the-mainstream with self-approving titles like 'linguistically innovative poetry' or (my favourite) 'non-conformist verse'— the non-avant-garde are obliged to speak up, if only to say 'it really isn't that simple'. But no, I don't think there's any real distinction; my position has changed there. However I think there is a healthy and perhaps necessary dialectic between 'experimental' and 'broadly successful' verse — sorry, I kid! I kid because I love — between avant-garde and 'mainstream' verse, but it can only exist when people are prepared to caricature their positions a little.

H: You've said of the very avant-garde that it risks less. Do you think the criteria by which we recognize 'good writing' and 'bad writing' is obscured (or perhaps just irrelevant) in this 'safer' poetry, or is the risk more to do with emotional gambits ... the risk of appearing sentimental?

DP: Not just risking sentimentality — risking looking foolish and uncool and pretentious and ridiculous and clichéd. Personal risk. Having some rough paraphrasable sense, then being broadly understood, and then revealed as having nothing to say. If you aim for clarity, all your worst traits risk being publically revealed. But a 'mainstream' poem will also fail because the rules of its game are known, and it's fallen badly short: it's lyrically confused (i.e. it doesn't integrate its music) or it over extends its conceit, or it scans poorly, or it's about five things instead of one, and so on. Just about the only genuine criticism you still tend to hear from most critics of an avant-garde poem is that it fails to innovate. But innovation is a neutral attribute. It has nothing to do with success. That really isn't good enough. No rules, no game; no game, no

verifiable success; no success, and it's all great, or it's all bad, or it's all mediocre. And there's no point.

H: The argument often centres on questions of accessibility and of breaking ground. To what extent do you believe it is a poet's responsibility to leave a door open for his or her readers? Or to extend the form?

DP: I don't understand this talk of responsibility, really. Poets have a responsibility not to be bad or boring or stupid, like any other artist. But yes — for me, the poem is ideally an unstable sign that has enough polysemy to be made the reader's own, but not so much that they can make anything of it at all. So there's some built-in, judicious slippage. Form will extend, morph or adapt when it has to, and I think we don't need to worry about it. Again, there's no intrinsic merit in 'technical innovation'. Most folk who consciously 'extend the form' tend to end up ploughing a very lonely furrow, and for a good reason. I believe in a more organic, less self-conscious relationship between form and the language. Forms adapt or innovated themselves through linguistic necessity, either at a personal level or through the cultural evolution of the language.

H: Does a poet *have* any particular responsibilities?

DP: Not to lie. To themselves first.

H: Has Pound's order to 'Make it New' been over-emphasised, do you think? Many poems that are being published seem to value that one piece of advice over anything else ...

DP: Amusingly, it's been this way for a long, long time. But, aye, agreed. My own definition of originality is that it has to be part-known, otherwise the original part of the thought can't be measured or even recognised. We work through the known towards the unknown. That's still 'making it new'. Otherwise it's mere novelty again.

H: As hard as poetry often works to provide affirmation to dichotomy and ambiguity, are you ever frustrated with the response which simplifies that affirmation into something on either side of the fence? The common misreading of "The Road Not Taken", for instance.

DP: Well, that's maybe a bad example, as Frost pretty much deliberately created a trap for the waggy-tailed unwary. He enjoyed that kind of thing. Simplification is the problem; especially when the poet enjoys making complex things from simple language, the inclination of some readers — either through snobbery or stupidity — is to assume the poem is correspondingly simple. But my inclination is always to blame poets, not readers ... We're usually to blame for not having made our intentions more clear.

H: I know you don't like the term 'creative writing' to mean the composition of poetry, and I've heard you don't much like calling yourself a poet. Merely saying 'I write poems' seems a less pretentious and more accurate description of what's going on, but it seems that many people nowadays are striving to earn the right to call themselves poets — or authors — by looking at creative writing courses as apprenticeships into a profession. Do you think our relationship with the page is suffering at all because of this, or is the posterity boom creating a richer community of writers?

DP: I think that's well put, though I don't know what you mean by 'the posterity boom'. There'll be a posterity boom when they drop the bomb. 'I don't write poems' would be more accurate in my case, since that's what I spend most of time doing. Poetry isn't a job; unlike a 'novelist' or 'composer' you can't do it all the time. My brother's a sculptor and he works every day. There's no profession. What they call 'the poetry profession' is a Ponzi scheme. With similar financial rewards. We've certainly created a richer and more competent form of mediocrity, which makes the good stuff harder and harder to spot. It'll sort itself out; it always has in the past.

H: One final question — In the introduction to your recent commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets, you mention that it was 'a hideously exposed bluff at a party' which caused you to go back to the sonnets and really get to know them. Has the pain of that memory softened enough for you to share what happened?

DP: Let's just say it involved the transposition of a couple of lines from different sonnets to create a whole new couplet. Which I then tried to pass off as a witticism. And failed to. And leave it at that ...

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