

WILLIAM DUNBAR¹

TO Dunbar Chaucer has become the 'rose of rethoris all'; the phrase is sufficient to awaken doubt as to the substantiality of Dunbar's appreciation of Chaucer. An examination of his poetry reveals that as a poet he is in fact as different from Chaucer as it was possible for another mediæval poet to be. Plainly, to begin an account of Dunbar from a comparison between his work and that of Chaucer would not be to the point, unless to bring home the inaccuracy of styling Dunbar a Scottish Chaucerian. He is at a still further remove from Chaucer than Henryson, and, being nearer the European centre in his time than the latter, he belongs to the very latest mediæval phase.

But to find the explanation of Dunbar's power in the influence, already, of the Renaissance would, again, be a misrepresentation. What gives him (in spite of, and because of, his 'lateness') his extraordinary power, whereby he is perhaps the greatest Scottish poet, in his skilled command of the rich and varied resources of language open to him, and, related to this, his command of varied metres adapted from what were by his time the rich accumulation of mediæval French and mediæval Latin verse, as well as, and often united together with, indigenous alliteration and assonance used as Hopkins rather than as Swinburne uses it. This variety of language and of metres has its counterpart in a variety of modes so bewildering that our first difficulty must be to determine where the centre of Dunbar's work as a whole is. It is my object in this paper to suggest that the core of his living achievement, that part of his achievement which we read as if it were contemporary, consists, not of the ceremonial poems, *The Goldyn Targe*, *The Thrissil and the Rois*, but of the comic and satiric poems, *The Twa Mariit Weman and the Wedo*, *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis*, the goliardic blasphemies, *The Flyting*, *The Satire on Edinburgh*, and the more acrid and radical satires that

¹*Scottish Poetry from Barbour to James VI*, edited by M. M. Gray (Dent & Sons).

The Poems of William Dunbar, edited (with a good introduction) by W. Mackay Mackenzie (Porpoise Press).

merge into the saturnine poems that give his work as a whole its dark cast.

These comic and satiric poems are not less traditional than the ceremonial poems. The difference is in the nature of their several traditions, or, to put it otherwise, in the ways in which they are traditional ; and this again works down to a difference in their language the social and moral implications of which should appear. The language of the comic and satiric poems is essentially the language of what was living speech in Dunbar's 'locality,' which was not without its place in the still homogeneous mediæval European community ; whereas the 'aureate diction' of the ceremonial poems of Dunbar, the court poet, is at a distinct remove from living speech, and therefore from life, including Dunbar's own, in any locality ; is in fact *purely* 'literary' or 'poetical,' rootless, without actuality. The difference between the former and the latter is in consequence that between a greater and a much lesser degree of inherent life. Without life informing it, language, however brilliant its surface, and however aristocratic its lineage, is mere idle verbiage.

Yet *The Goldyn Targe* and *The Thrissil and the Rois*, though they may be pressed to one side, for the lively reader, by the vitality of the comic and satiric poems, are what in Dunbar's case had become of the direct line of European allegorical poetry descending from the *Roman de la Rose*, and on this ground they demand some attention in any attempt to give an account of Dunbar's work as a whole ; this attention I prefer to give them at the beginning rather than the end of this paper. To Dunbar himself and to his contemporaries they doubtless seemed the centre of his work, as indeed they might be if the value of a poem is in proportion to the amount of conscious effort that seems to have been expended on it. But even to Dunbar's first readers I doubt if they were the poems which really yielded the most enjoyment.

The terms of Dunbar's celebration of Chaucer and Gower at the end of *The Goldyn Targe* are inappropriate in everything else except that they fit their context. It is Dunbar himself in the *Goldyn Targe*, not Chaucer, whose 'termis' are 'enamelit' and 'celicall' and whose 'lippis,' 'tonguis,' 'mouthis' are 'sugarit,' 'aureate,' 'mellifluate.' He goes wrong here as a critic at the same time unconsciously revealing why here he goes wrong also as a

poet. The first five stanzas of the poem are a similarly dazzling exercise in the rhetoric, the heavy ornamentation, the overloaded decorativeness, then, in that 'late' century, fashionable. But the poem is inadequate as a poem not because it is rhetoric, but because of the nature of that rhetoric itself. Rhetoric must be something more fundamental, more deeply rooted, than this, to be at the same time fully satisfactory as poetry. Dunbar's highly conscious interest in language carried with it certain obvious dangers. There is here a kind of rootless, mechanical delight generated in the mere verbal exercise but it is not healthy ; it is not the same thing as the life, the abundant energy of the living language which Dunbar elsewhere successfully shares. *The Goldyn Targe* remains a monument to the fact that you cannot make a poem out of an interest purely in language, and the manipulation and arrangement of it ; and when the interest is in 'poetic' language artificially enriched by over-lavish borrowing from alien sources the resulting kind of richness may easily be fatal to life. Where this kind of rhetoric wears off, as in the beautiful passage about a hundred ladies who land in a meadow from a ship, it is significant that the poetry is revealed as something much more like Spenser than even the Chaucer of the translation of the *Roman de la Rose*. Mediæval allegory is here seen changing into something else ; it is the death of allegory, its swan-song.

The ceremonial poems were of course written for ceremonial occasions ; they correspond to the pageants and processions of these occasions. To this extent they correspond to something in the public life of Dunbar and the Scotland of Dunbar's time in which ritualistic pomp and show, pageants and processions played a part such as to suggest, the times being late, that this heightening of the outward forms, this colouring up of the outward shows is the symptom of some inner spiritual corruption rather than simply what it may at first seem, the spontaneous expression of the natural joy of life in a rather primitive people ; there is nothing spontaneous about *The Goldyn Targe*. We cannot afford to ignore this in trying to understand the meaning of Dunbar's work as a whole. Together with the conscious interest in language the ceremonial poems exhibit it may have a bearing on the other poems of Dunbar that are so unlike the ceremonial poems.

At this point we may well have begun to ask whether Dunbar gained anything by being, in his particular place and time, a court poet. What he did gain may be exemplified most purely by the small poem *To a Ladie*. If the ceremonial poems show that he was among other things a professional court poet, the lyric *To a Ladie* shows him capable also of a genuine courtliness. It would seem absurd to claim uniqueness for this trifle, except in the obvious sense that every poem is unique ; but in Dunbar's work it is something of a rarity, something of a surprise in itself ; it is at one end of his range ; in it the main European tradition is alive, not as in the ceremonial poems dead. Nor is it simply a concentration of what Dunbar does diffusely in the ceremonial poems ; it contains something that is not there present ; there is in it a certain unexpectedness, almost wit.

Sweet rose of virtue and of gentleness
Delightsome lily of every lustiness.

You would expect 'lily' where you get 'rose' and 'rose' where you get 'lily' ; they are interchanged ; the lady is virtuous and desirable at the same time. The poem shows Dunbar's skill as a metrist ; but that skill is, here, not merely metrical ; it is part of the unexpectedness ; it contributes, for example, to the surprise of the final line of the first and, again, the second stanza. Allegory and wit are thus brought together, the *Roman de la Rose* and, except that the poem remains in itself completely mediæval, the conceitedness of the sixteenth-century Petrarchian sonnets. This intellectual element in it, balancing the emotional, is exactly what the purely 'local' love songs of Burns are without.

But, as has been indicated, *To a Ladie* is not representative of Dunbar's characteristic achievement. It is in the comic and satiric poems that his energy, which is Dunbar, finds in various shapes and forms, its free and full expression ; and it is (I think) in *The Twa Mariit Weman and the Wedo* that the comic zest, the sheer enjoyment and appetite, reaches its maximum of bursting exuberance ; for this poem, though in the tradition of the *chanson à mal mariée* (This is how these women, when they get together in secret, tear their husbands limb from limb) is primarily comic not satiric ; in it we devour the ripe grapes. The force of vulgar gossip is raised to the degree of art ; ribaldry assumes this proportion. I choose a passage almost at random.

I wald me preen pleasandly in precious weedis,
 That luvaris might upon me look, and ying lusty gallandis.
 That I held in more dainty and dearer be full meikle
 Na him that dressit me so dink ; full dotit was his heid.
 When he was heryit out of hand, to hie up my honoris,
 And painted me as a pacock, proudest of fedderis,
 I him mis-kennit, by Christ, and cuckold him made.

What the poem seems essentially to represent in the force of the impudent ('lowd thai lewch') natural self rising up from among the people and asserting its right according to the 'law of luf, of nature and of kynd' without respect or regard for moral authority, the dogmas and restraints of the church.

Ladyis, this is the legend of my life, though Latin it be nane.

But the profane figure of the widow in church is an object of purely comic contemplation, a symbol ; there is no hint of arbitrary condemnation.

Than lay I forth my bright book on breid on my knee
 With mony lusty letter, illumynit with gold ;
 And drawis my cloak forward ovr my face white
 That I may spy, unespyit, a space me beside . . .
 When friendis of my husbandis beholdis me on far,
 I have a water sponge for woe, within my wide cloakis,
 Then wring I it full wylily and wetis my cheekis

(The consequence is she is provided with no dearth of lovers in secret).

And all my luvaris leal, my lodging persewis,
 And fillis me wyne wantonly with welfare and joy :
 Some rounis, and some ralyeis ; and sum readis ballatis ;
 Some ravis forth rudely with riotous speech,
 Some plainis, and some prayis ; some praisis my beauty
 Some kisses me ; some clappis me ; some kindness me proferis.

In spite of the dramatization we to an appreciable extent share, we are made partakers of the comforts of 'these creatures of the kyn of Adam,' the delight in 'wickedness,' the stolen delight in unrestrained sin ; the eavesdropper behind the hawthorn is scarcely an intruder.

Apon the Midsummer evin, mirriest of nichtis,
 I muvit furth allane, neir as midnight wes past
 Besyd ane gudlie grein garth, full of gay flouris,
 Hegeit, of ane huge hicht, with hawthorn treis
 Quhairon ane bird, on ane bransche so birst out his notis . . .
 I saw thre gay ladeis sit in ane grene arbeir . . .
 Thir gay Wiffis maid game amang the grene leiffis ;
 Thai drank and did away dule under derne bewis ;
 Thai swapit of the sweit wyne, thai swanquhit of hewis.

There is no essential contrast between the natural scene (described because background, in more conventional language, but still bursting with the opulence of midsummer) and the gossips ; the beauty of nature and the ugliness of vice, as some moralist has suggested. The hawthorn, the birds and the gossips are filled with the same heady wine, the same exuberance of life ; they are equally on the plane simply of nature and instinct.

The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis comes from the same common source in the popular speech, though in another of these traditions and exhibiting another variety of this humour. The humour here is savage, primitive, uncivilized. Its *expression* is conditioned by the dance frenzy in the rhythm.

And first of all in dance was Pride,
 With bare wild back and bonnet on side,
 Like to make wastie wanis ;
 And round about him, as a wheel,
 Hang all in rumpillis to the heel
 His kethat for the nanis :
 Mony proud trumpour with him trippit
 Throw skaldand fyre, ay as they skippit
 They girn'd with hideous granis.

The poem is commonly commended for a fantastic blending of the comic with the horrible, the ghastly, the macabre, but that is to misunderstand the essential nature of this savage folk humour. There is no such dichotomy and no such sophistication in the poem. There is nothing fantastic or supernatural in it either. It shares the vigorous, earthy actuality of the popular sermons of the Middle Ages.

Syne Sweirness, at the second bidding,
 Come like a sow out of a midding,
 Full sleepy was his grunyie :
 Mony sweir bumbard belly-huddroun,
 Mony slute daw and sleepy duddroun . . .

(Gluttony)

Him followit mony foul drunkart,
 With can and collep, cop and quart,
 In surfeit and excess ;
 Full mony a waistless, wallydrag,
 With wamis unwieldable, did furth wag . . .

There is no incongruity, intentional or otherwise, in introducing the figure of the Highlandman at the end ; Pride (‘ bonnet on side ’) and Ire are just as ‘ local.’ But they are at the same time ‘ local ’ against the whole mediæval religious (and ecclesiastical) background.

Whill priestis come in with bare shaven neckis,
 Than all the fiendis leuch, and made geckis,
 Black Belly, and Bawsy Brown.

The Dance of the Sins belongs to the grotesquerie of the late mediæval popular imagination.

We shall by this time have observed that there is a good deal of the goliard even in those poems of Dunbar which are not, as *The Dregy of Dunbar* and *The Testament of Kennedy* are, primarily goliardic. The goliardic parodies should be read with Dunbar’s own serious hymn in mind. These latter are scrupulously on the model of the Latin hymns, ritualistic, formal, stiff. The symbolism (I think of the beautiful *Rorate celi desuper*) is the extremely conventionalized symbolism of the Latin hymns. Latinized diction is used ; and lines of Latin are inserted. But the ecclesiastical world, the language of which was Latin, was something actual in Dunbar’s own world : the lines of Latin fit, without incongruity, into even his profane poems, as they would not into the purely ‘ local ’ poems of Fergusson or Burns. The incongruity in the goliardic poems is not essentially between the Latin lines and the others (most goliardic poems were wholly in Latin) but in the clash between sacred associations and the profane sentiments of lustfulness, eating and drinking.

Ego pacior in pectore,
 This night I myght nocht sleip a wink ;
 Licet eger in corpore
 Yit wald my mouth be wet with drink.
 Nunc condo testamentum meum,
 I leiff my saull for evermare
 Per omnipotentem Deum,
 In to my lordis wyne cellar ;
 Semper ibi ad remanendum,
 Quhill domisday without dissever,
 Bonum vinum ad bibendum,
 With sueit Cuthbert that luffit me never.
 A barell bung ay at my bosum
 Of warldis gud I had na mair ;
 Corpus meum ebriosum
 I leif on to the toune of Air.

The blasphemy of the goliardic poems is the complement of the dogmatic belief accepted (there is no reason not to suppose sincerely) in the serious hymns.

Dunbar's satire when it is serious is, as we should expect, predominantly ecclesiastical and, at its deepest, religious. *The Satire on Edinburgh* is not satire of this serious kind ; it is again (unless I am much mistaken, for it has been found scathingly bitter) less satiric than comic.

May nane pass through your principal gaittis
 For stink of haddockis and of skatis ;
 For cryis of carlingis and debaittis,
 For fensum flytingis of defame :
 Think ye nocht shame,
 Before strangeris of all estaitis
 That sic dishonour hurt your name?

 Your stinkand style that standis dirk,
 Haldis the licht fra your parish kirk ;
 Your forestairis makis your houses mirk,
 Like na country but here at hame :
 Think ye nocht shame
 Sa lytle policy to wirk
 In hurt and slander of your name?

At your hie Cross, where gold and silk
 Suld be, there is but crudis and milk ;
 And at your Tron but cockle and wilk,
 Pansches, puddings of Jock and Jame :
 Think ye nocht shame,
 Sen as the warld sayis that ilk
 In hurt and slander of your name?

Plainly Dunbar is here thoroughly enjoying himself, even if the enjoyment is subordinated to a fairly serious and respectable intention. *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is a poem of essentially the same nature. It is a comic *tour de force* of sheer language, but because the language is in this case living language, the coarse-textured vigorous language of the actual popular speech, it does not separate the poet from life but carries him towards it, its own life, wild, savage, uncivilized as its humour again is here :

Thow bringis the Carrick clay to Edinburgh Cors
 Upoun thy botingis, hobland, hard as horne ;
 Stra wispiis hingis owt quhair that the wattis are worne :
 Cum thow agane to skar us with thy strais,
 We sall gar scale our sculis all the to scorne,
 And stane the up the calsay quhair thow gais.

Off Edinburch the boyis as beis owt thrawis,
 And cryis owt ay, ' Heir cumis our awin queir Clerk !'
 Than fleis thow lyk ane howlat chest with crawis,
 Quhile all the bichis at thy botingis dois bark
 Then carlingis cryis, ' Keep curches in the merk,
 Our gallowis gaipis : lo ! quhair ane greceles gais.'

Than rynis thow down the gait with gild of boyis,
 And all the toun tykis hingand in thy heilis ;
 Of laidis and lownis thair rysis sic ane noyes,
 Quhill runsyis rynis away with cairt and quheilis,
 And cager aviris castis bayth coillis and creilis,
 For rerd of the and rattling of thy butis ;
 Fische wyvis cryis, Fy ! and castis down skillis and skeilis,
 Sum claschis the, sum cloddis the on the cutis.

Flyting passages, monstrous pilings-up of language,¹ are a feature of both Dunbar's comic and satiric poems, and serve their various ends.

But there are many poems, many of them satiric, and together forming a considerable part of Dunbar's poetry, in which plainly the poet is not enjoying himself. To these we must finally turn to complete the meaning of Dunbar's poetry. At the root of these poems is the overpowering feeling that the times are late and evil everywhere dominant in the world.

¹Compare from *Complaint to the King*

Bot fowll, jow-jowrdane-hedit jevellis,
 Cowkin-kenscis, and culroun kevellis ;
 Stuffettis, strekouris, and stafische strumellis ;
 Wyld haschbaldis, haggarbaldis, and hummellis ;
 Druncartis, dysouris, dyvowris, drevellis,
 Misgydit memberis of the devellis ;
 Mismad mandragis off mastis strynd,
 Crawdone, couhirttis, and theiffis of kynd ;
 Blait-mowit bladyeanes with bledder cheikis,
 Club-facet clucanes with clutit breikis,
 Chuff-midding churllis, cumin off cart-fillaris,
 Gryt glaschew-hedit gorge-millaris . . .
 Panting ane prelottis comtenance
 Sa far above him set at tabill
 That wont was for to muk the stabell ;
 Ane pykthank in a prelottis clais,
 With his wavill feit and wirrok tais,
 With hoppir hippis and hences narrow,
 And bausy handis to beir a barrow ;
 With gredy mynd and glaschane gane,
 Mell-hedit lyk ane mortar-stane.

The monstrous exaggeration develops into caricature, as again for example in *A General Satyre*

Sic fartingailis on flaggis als fatt as quhailis,
 Facit lyk fulis with hattis that little availis,
 And sic fowill tailis, to sweip the calsay clene,
 That dust upskailis ; sic fillokis with fucksailis.

The clerkis takis beneficis with brawlis,
 Some of Sanct Peter, and some of Sanct Paulis.
 Tak he the rentis, no care has he
 Suppose the devil tak all their saulis . . .²

Sic pryde with prellatis, so few till preiche and pray ;
 Sic hant of harlettis with thame bayth nicht and day.³

' This is the end ' is the final feeling conveyed. Distrust infects the air.

Is na man thair that trestis ane uthir . . .⁴

Fra everilk mouth fair wordis proceedis
 In every hairt deception breedis . . .

Flattery wearis ane furrit gown . . .⁵
 The sugurit mouthis with myndis thairfra
 The figurit speiche with faceis twa . . .⁶

The disillusion is mature and deep-seated ; it proceeds from an ultimate dissatisfaction with everything that was connoted by the phrase ' the world.'

. . . the warld, feignid and false.
 With gall in hairt, and honied hals.

I have ventured to call the satire in these poems, directed as it is chiefly (though by no means wholly) against ecclesiastics, not merely ecclesiastical but religious (though negatively so) because of the consciousness in them of the *loss* or *absence* of goodness and of any assurance of spiritual reality. The nearest Dunbar comes to such an assurance seems to me perhaps to be here :

Lord sen in tyme sa soon to come
 De terra surrecturus sum,
 Reward me with nane erdly cure

²*Of Discretion in Taking.*

³*A General Satyre.*

⁴*Tydingis fra the Sessioun.*

⁵*Into this World may none Assure.*

⁶*Of the Warldis Instabilitie.*

But me resave in regnum tuum ;
 Into this world may none assure.

The question to what extent the morbidity in these poems was temperamental, in Dunbar's case, and to what extent it was imposed on his poetry by his world, need not bother us. It is plainly something both profoundly personal and, since it is common to late mediæval poetry, much more than personal. In the *Meditation in Wyntir* it is given unusually *personal* expression. Winter was no doubt, especially for Dunbar, wretched enough in itself but it is explicitly from something more even than winter that he turns with such anxiety to the new season.

For fear of this all day I droop ;
 No gold in kist, nor wine in cup,
 No lady's beautie, nor luvis bliss
 May lat ne to remember this ;
 How glad that ever I dine or sup.
 Yit, when the nicht beginnis to short,
 It dois my spreit some part comfort,
 Off thocht oppressit with the shouris.
 Come, lusty simmer! with thy flouris,
 That I may live in some disport.

This morbidity in fact explains the Epicurean strain in Dunbar's poetry, the desperate grasping at vivid enjoyments and vivid delights.

Now all this tyme lat us be mirry
 And sett nocht by this world a chirry
 Now, quhill thair is gude wyne to sell,
 He that dois on dry breid wirry,
 I gif him to the Devill of hell.

The frequent images of dancing, music, drinking of red wine,

Sangis, ballatis, playis,

symbolize these delights, and the sprightly *ballade* measures of many of his poems represent them. But just as frequent is the sinister image of the gallows gaping, the violent images of cut-throats and cutpurses, and cartes and dyce associated with evil. It is

here that a comparison with Villon suggests itself. (That it should suggest itself emphasizes again the difference between Dunbar and Burns, who could not properly be compared with any poet outside the Scottish tradition). The obsession with death⁷ was inevitable to some part of Dunbar's poetry coming where it did ; Dunbar inherited a world, part of which was mouldering in decay. That the sense of mortality is not more pervasive in his poetry than it is is due to the force of that tremendous principle of life (represented in *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* and the other primarily comic poems) he could at times share with the peasant people. But where there is behind a clairvoyant recognition of the vanity of earthly things no supernatural assurance of a spiritual reality, the worm of death and corruption finally devours everything that is,

Death followis life with gapand mouth
Devouring fruit and flowering grane.

Thus the procession becomes the procession of Death :

Unto the deid gois all Estatiss,
Princis, Prelatis and Potestatis,
Baith rich and puir of all degree !
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takes the knichtis into the field,
Enarmit under helm and shield ;
Victor he is at all mêlée :
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

That strang unmerciful tyrand
Takis on the moderis breist soukand
The babe, full of beniginitie ;
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takis the champion in the stour,
The capitane closit in the tour,
The lady in bour full of beautie ;
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

JOHN SPEIRS.

⁷*Of Man's Mortalitie* is one of Dunbar's finest impersonal expressions of it.

CORRESPONDENCE

EXACT THOUGHT AND INEXACT LANGUAGE

Sir,

Sir Arthur Eddington takes it 'that the aim of such books [of popular scientific exposition] must be to convey exact thought in exact language. The author has abjured the technical terms and mathematical symbols which are the recognized means of securing exact expression, and he is thrown back on more indirect means of awakening in the mind of the reader the thought which he wishes to convey.' To this Mr. E. W. F. Tomlin in your current issue replies that inexact thought is error.

I believe that Mr. Tomlin's statement reveals a complete lack of understanding of scientific method and scientific practice; that physicists invariably employ inexact language (even when they express their ideas with mathematical symbols) and that they commonly arouse ideas in each other's minds by talking to each other in inexact terms. To say that the whole of physics is error may have some meaning within a prescribed domain of definitions, but to say it at large is very silly.

Let me give a few illustration. I draw a sketch of a bicycle. It will awaken the thought of a bicycle in the onlooker's mind even if it is an inexact sketch indeed. Next, I draw a blue print of a bicycle. This will awaken the thoughts of the pure detail of bicycle construction so powerfully in the mind of an engineer that he will be able to construct an actual bicycle from the print. Yet the print is an inexact picture of the bicycle—if we go down to the ten thousandth of an inch. Incidentally, a blue print is not a work of art and will arouse the emotion 'bicycle' in nobody but an engineer. Next, let us think of the lunar theory. There is no doubt that Newton's law of gravitation is approximately obeyed by the Moon, yet when one attempts an analysis of the lunar motion *as precise as the observations allow* one is faced with small but definite discrepancies. We are able to say that the law of gravitation observed in Nature approaches Newton's exact law within certain limits: and all our arguments about the lunar motion are inexact. Newton's original data were much less exact than those obtainable by modern measurements. Exactness in physics is unobtainable.