

*You campaign in poetry; you govern in prose*  
Mario Cuomo.<sup>1</sup>

“With a gun to their heads [...] nearly all poets find something remarkable to say about their subject”.<sup>2</sup> So write Don Paterson and Clare Brown as co-editors of *Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, an exploration of “mini-essays” written by poets about poetry.<sup>3</sup> To say that a gun to the head is the catalyst required to provoke a poet to discuss their art, however, seems extreme; a multitude of successful poets throughout history have volunteered writings about poetry, from Horace, through Pope, to Kathleen Jamie’s wonderful anti-statement that gives Paterson and Brown’s collection its name. Paterson himself willingly proffers what “might constitute a contemporary *ars poetica*” and is prolific in his discussion of poetry.<sup>4</sup> So why this discrepancy? And what is Paterson attempting in his poetry and poetics? The first part of this essay will examine Paterson’s theoretical writings in relation to some of his poetic work in some detail; the second will put this discussion more broadly in conversation with readings of Paterson’s poetry. Paterson’s aphorisms, the “literary equivalent of ringing the doorbell and running away”, will not be fully discussed, instead being alluded to as a means to illuminate his other writings.<sup>5</sup> The aim for both sections will be to propose what Paterson may have meant by defining his *ars poetica* as “contemporary”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/postscript-mario-cuomo>.

<sup>2</sup> Don Paterson and Clare Brown, eds., *Don't Ask Me What I Mean* (London: Picador, 2003), xv.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Don Paterson, “The Empty Image”, 1, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/finaltropes.pdf>. (Henceforth “E.I.”). See: <http://www.donpaterson.com/otherwriting.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Don Paterson, interview by DH Maitreyabandhu, personal interview, London Buddhist Centre, May 2012, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/42500918>.

<sup>6</sup> “E.I.”

# I

*ut pictura, poesis...*

*(As is painting, so is poetry)*

Horace, *Ars Poetica*.<sup>7</sup>

Language, for Paterson, “is a dynamic system, and each word changes according to its contextual employment [...] and its ‘semantic infection’ from its near neighbours”.<sup>8</sup> This “semantic infection”, Paterson argues, is a consequence of etymological “shadows” inherent in each word, found in the protean applications and definitions of any word throughout history.<sup>9</sup> “The deeper our understanding of [...] etymology,” writes Paterson, “the longer and stranger the shadow [a] word casts, and the more complex the patterns of overlapping shadows become”.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, in identifying his theoretical writings after Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, Paterson is doing more than creating a solipsistic allusion – a symptomatically “Postmodern” practice Paterson provocatively condemns as an “inept foregrounding of form or formal strategy over content”.<sup>11</sup>

In his poetry, too, Paterson mocks works “consisting solely of exceptions”.<sup>12</sup> Paterson challenges the reader to see “things [...] exactly as they seem”, paralectically engaging “self-reflexion” and the ironically assumed “charge of being clever, coy or cute”, in “A Talking Book”.<sup>13</sup> Responding to a particular, synchronic “Postmodern” poetry, Paterson implores the reader to “relax” and take a “Talking Book” as denoting a talking book and connoting nothing, to find both meaning and no meaning.<sup>14</sup> Paterson presents a hyperreality to the reader by asking them to denote a poetic “real” that has no origin in “reality”, an impossibility that will be

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<sup>7</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. D. A. Russell, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch et al. (New York: Norton & Company, 2010), 130; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Don Paterson, “The Lyric Principle”, 24, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/2.html>. (Henceforth “L.P.”)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Don Paterson, “The Dark Art of Poetry”, 18, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/1.html>. (Henceforth “D.A.”)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Don Paterson, “A Talking Book”, ll. 28-31; all poems cited by Paterson.

<sup>14</sup> “D.A.”, 4-5; “A Talking Book”, l. 30.

explored in Part II.<sup>15</sup> Both in his poetry and his critical writings, Paterson is keenly aware of cultural and historical contexts. In order to establish what aims Paterson may have with his “ars poetica”, then, one necessarily must first examine the “shadows” the term itself casts.

According to Vincent Leitch, Horace’s *Ars Poetica* is “less a formal verse [...] than a conversational poem about poetry” and should be recognised as “neither a systematic exposition of a coherent theory of poetic composition nor a comprehensive textbook for aspiring writers [...] but as] an argument for poetry as a craft”.<sup>16</sup> In using the term “ars poetica” Paterson is stating that he wishes to consider what poetry is to him and how poetic composition should be appreciated. Unlike Horace and many who have imitated *Ars Poetica*, Paterson writes not a “poem about poetry”, but a discourse on poetry in prose.<sup>17</sup> Since Paterson’s *ars poetica* is not constrained by poetic form, indeed, one can say that it is more conversational in its discussion of poetry than even the most “conversational poem”.<sup>18</sup> Paterson’s colloquial text regularly invites the reader’s reaction, making the reader an active participant in the textual conversation, “if [they] like”.<sup>19</sup> The active reader is often conjured in Paterson’s poetry, too, since a “poem’s initial purpose is to stress/the specificity of its address” to allow the reader to engage with the poem as “a little psychometric test”.<sup>20</sup> Conceptions of reader complicity in poetry will be examined more thoroughly later, but first we must explore Paterson’s *ars poetica* in detail.

According to *Ars Poetica*, the purpose of poetry is to “gains [one’s] point, [and] by a fine and artful connection [...] make a new word out of two already known”.<sup>21</sup> One repeatedly finds a similar concept articulated in Paterson’s *ars poetica*. Various, to Paterson, poetry:

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Michigan: University Press, 2006), 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> *The Norton Anthology*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; *Ars Poetica* has been imitated by writers as diverse as Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Alexander Pope and Archibald MacLeish. I call Paterson’s work *ars poetica* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica*.

<sup>18</sup> *The Norton Anthology*, 120. Especially if one counts Paterson many interviews.

<sup>19</sup> “D.A.”, 18; see Paterson’s discussion of a President Bill Clinton speech in “L.P.”, 26.

<sup>20</sup> “A Talking Book”, ll. 76-77, 90-93.

<sup>21</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. Alfred Lord Tennyson, in *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome*, A.A. Markley (Toronto: University Press, 2004), 34.

“is just language’s self-corrective function [...] whenever language encounters a reality it can’t properly articulate”<sup>22</sup>

“is a small thing that says a big thing”<sup>23</sup>

“is a document of an epiphany *as it’s happening*”<sup>24</sup>

“tr[ies] to say things normally inaccessible to speech”<sup>25</sup>

“is the art of saying things once”<sup>26</sup>

“[exists to] articulate the inarticulable [sic]”<sup>27</sup>

“[is] a translation from silence”<sup>28</sup>

“[exists to] make sure that language stays adequate to our experience of reality”<sup>29</sup>

“is just a little machine for remembering itself”<sup>30</sup>

“aims to make the texture of our perception malleable”<sup>31</sup>

“[endeavours] to place a new unity in the language”<sup>32</sup>.

These excerpts all attempt to articulate the same thing: poems should seek to define something previously undefinable and, in so doing, become vessels of their own iconicity or “machine[s] for remembering [themselves]”.<sup>33</sup> Poets themselves are “experts in the failure of language” and, according to Paterson’s peer Charles Simić, make their business “translating what cannot be translated: being and silence”.<sup>34</sup> A good poem, Paterson says, exists “intact and perfect” as its own definition, while one “merely recall[s] a string quartet or a film or a painting”.<sup>35</sup> Following this logic, one can speculate that the above statements are so varied precisely because they are

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<sup>22</sup> “E.I.”, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Attridge, “Form in Poetry: Interview with Don Paterson”, in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays* edited by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: University Press, 2014), 76; (Interview henceforth “Form in Poetry”; Pollard (2014) henceforth *CCE*).

<sup>24</sup> Don Paterson, “Advice for Beginners,” 1, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/arspoetica/7.html>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “L.P.”, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Don Paterson, “Fourteen Notes on the Poetic Version”, in *Orpheus* (London: Faber, 2006), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Paterson, interview by Maitreyabandhu.

<sup>30</sup> “D.A.”, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. I use Paterson’s definition of “iconicity”, asserting that words exist within a synaesthetic tent of connotation: all aspects of a word are systematically connected to its meaning by denotation and connotation, including phonostemes, pronunciation, linguistic signs, appearance, etc. See: “L.P.”, 19-20; “E.I.”, 7.

<sup>34</sup> “D.A.”, 15; Charles Simić, *Unemployed Fortune Teller* (Michigan: University Press, 1994), 109. See: Paterson, interview by April Pierce, May 16, 2013, <http://www.occt.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/on-translation-v-don-paterson-16-5-13.pdf>. Sup.

<sup>35</sup> “D.A.”, 2.

written in prose and, thus, “encounter a reality [of feeling that language] can’t properly articulate”.<sup>36</sup>

During this struggle for articulacy, Paterson’s language verges on violence and suggests that a poem is not an “artful connection”, but an “exploded view [...] of a new word”.<sup>37</sup> Such a term implies great physical strain in the act of composition as well as what Paterson calls “synaesthetic representation”, being an attempt to create a poem that is wholly iconoclitous.<sup>38</sup> Paterson appears to be revitalising Horace’s endorsement of “unity in the arts” within a horizon of contemporary art.<sup>39</sup> One’s mind is drawn to artist Cornelia Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (fig.1.), in which Parker creates new forms by exploding the old.<sup>40</sup> In Paterson’s statement, the onomatopoeic “exploded” recreates the effort and violence inherent in the act of creating a new word from the rubble of two unconnected terms. (“Exploded”’s sibilant [eks] of burning fuse falls to a fleeting occlusive stop [plo] blasting the staccato vowels forth and leaving the intervocalic [f] and final plosive [ed] to mirror the falling of debris).<sup>41</sup> Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter* literalises this idea and stands as an example of synaesthetic representation. The viewer is placed in a *tableau vivant* in which they are compelled to infer the overwhelming visual, aural and olfactory engagement of being caught mid-explosion, while simultaneously acknowledging the piece’s measuredly fixed visual and temporal state. Parker envisions Paterson’s argument that if “we allow silence to reclaim [...] objects [and words...] they reassume their own genius”,

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<sup>36</sup> “E.I.”, 8. Unlike Pope, say, whose poem *Essay on Criticism* creates a mimetic demonstration of subject matter through his use of form.

<sup>37</sup> Horace, *Stateliest Measures*; “Dark Art”, 18.

<sup>38</sup> “L.P.”, 22. i.e. meaning gained through interaction with all the reader’s senses.

<sup>39</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 120, 130. See Paterson’s work with Alison Watt: *Hiding in Full View*, Nov. 2011–Jan. 2012, Ingleby Gallery.

<sup>40</sup> I doubt Paterson directly alludes to Parker here, but “the explosion” has particular cultural currency in the late twentieth-century. See: Michael Longely, *An Exploded View* (Littlehampton: Book Services, 1973); Sebastian Barker, “A Drink with Muldoon”, *Long Poem Newsletter* 7 (1998): 1–4.

<sup>41</sup> Attridge’s *Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982; 285–290) comprehensively critiques the commenting on semantic, emblematic functions of language, as I have done here. For brevity, I cannot address such ideas here. Instead, I turn Paterson’s own critical perspective on itself. See: Attridge *Moving Words* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 78–85.

allowing humanity to re-familiarise with “eternity”.<sup>42</sup> Both Parker and Paterson, artist and poet, proclaim the need for “an exploded view” of older forms in order to create “something that [is currently] totally beyond our [...] emotional control”.<sup>43</sup> Similarities are evident: that which Parker defines as “beyond our control”, Paterson identifies as “a new unity” in abilities of expression.<sup>44</sup> As the “painting” of Horace’s era evolved from detached, two dimensional pieces, Paterson seems to suggest, so poetry must adapt to the sensory demands of a technological age.

In Parker’s work, new forms exist in the spaces that now engulf the old; Paterson, too, explores the relationship between physical, artistic space and poetic form. Paterson writes in “The Sense of Sound” that poetic form is “essentially a codified pattern of silence. We have a little silence at the end of the line, a bigger one at the end of a stanza, and a huge one at the end of the poem”.<sup>45</sup> Space as it is to Parker is silence to Paterson. These silences are highly personal, and Paterson’s speaker ends mid-stanza in “Filter” to remind readers that “whatever [he does] with the black/is [his] business alone”.<sup>46</sup> As silence and darkness is subjective and intimate to the speaker of Paterson’s poem, so it must be to the reader. Further to this, Paterson writes that silence is integral to any commendable poem, being the “acoustic space in which the poem makes its large echoes”.<sup>47</sup> These ideas can be expanded upon when examined with two of Paterson’s more idiosyncratic poems “Unfold” and “On Going to Meet a Zen Master in the Kyushu Mountains and not Finding Him”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “D.A.”, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Cornelia Parker, “Cornelia Parker: on *Cold Dark Matter*”, Tate, accessed November 6, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949/text-audio-transcript>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.; “L.P.”, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>46</sup> “Filter”, ll. 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> “L.P.”, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Henceforth Paterson’s silent poems.



Fig.1: Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*. 1991. Various; 4000x5000x5000mm (unconfirmed). Tate, London. From: Tate, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949> (accessed November 3, 2014).

Both of these poems are blank pages, measured silences:<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Interpreting silence and the implications of calling a piece a “poem” are explored later.

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Unfold

*i.m. Akira Yoshizawa*

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<sup>50</sup> “Unfold”.

Dedicating “Unfold” to origami grandmaster Akira Yoshizawa suggests that Paterson is again addressing the difficulty of artistic composition.<sup>51</sup> As well as a performance of silent grief, as one reviewer believes, “Unfold” can be interpreted as an analysis of preconceptions of the “artistic”.<sup>52</sup> That “Unfold” – a blank piece of paper – is dedicated to a grandmaster origamist ironises the popular conception that art “happens” spontaneously by presenting what many would believe as the tools for origami as worthy of a grandmaster’s name.<sup>53</sup> Not only does “Unfold” force the reader to consider and define for themselves at what point the quotidian – George Perec’s “infra-ordinary [...] not the exotic, but the endotic” – stops and art begins, but Paterson stresses that artistic work is laborious.<sup>54</sup>

Origami, however intricate, will return to a commonplace piece of paper when unfolded. To a layman, Yoshizawa’s work comes from and returns to nothing, but that “nothing” (the paper) retains subjective value. Having been through the toil of artistic processes, it can be presented to the reader. Similarities can be found between “Unfold” and the work of Ryan Gander, to whom “art is an attempt to see beyond the internal referent”.<sup>55</sup> Gander’s *C++* (fig.2) appears to take art away from itself. *C++* stages a number of paint pallets used in painting subsequently destroyed portraits to question “what [people] expect painting to be”.<sup>56</sup> “Unfold” and *C++* present the toil of artistic labour as art, literally making “the texture of our perception malleable” by questioning where value lies within a work of art.<sup>57</sup> It is this malleable, synaesthetic perception of which Paterson writes that makes analogues of Gander, Parker and Paterson’s work, through the shared interest in artistic value and creation.

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<sup>51</sup> The topic recurs in Paterson. See: “Why Do You Stay Up So Late?”, “The Poetry”, “Poetry”.

<sup>52</sup> I.E.Sawmill, “Rain by Don Paterson”, review of *Rain* by Don Paterson, *The Literateur*, November 26, 2009, <http://literateur.com/rain-by-don-paterson/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Unfold” (*Rain*) is editorially arranged to be two blank sides, making one blank page; “D.A.”’s title reflects the same idea.

<sup>54</sup> George Perec, “Infra-Ordinary”, trans. John Sturrock in *Espèces d'espaces* by George Perec (London: Hawker Publications, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Mark Beasley, “Focus: Ryan Gander”, *frieze*, Issue 86, October, 2004.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*; *C++*’s title has connections to Paterson’s poems being “little machines”, but similarities are limited: *C++* suggests that the means of creation are valuable, while Paterson’s “machines” are creations in themselves.

<sup>57</sup> “D.A.”, 1.



Fig.2:Ryan Gander,*C++*.2012.Glass,paint.Lisson Gallery,London.From:Lisson Gallery,<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/ryan-gander/gallery/980>(accessed December 10,2014).

Gander and Paterson stress that creative effort “is not a calling [but] a diagnosis”.<sup>58</sup> Paterson wishes to oppose the “populists [who] infantilise the art [of poetry]” by blurring the line between poet and reader.<sup>59</sup> The punning title of “Unfold” reinforces this idea, since it could suggest either that Yoshizawa has left his last and greatest work unfolded (incomplete), or that the work and life itself of Yoshizawa have been unfolded by death. “Unfold” makes the reader acknowledge the toil of artistic labour and linger in the silence of death with Yoshizawa by confronting them with what could be facetiously read as his life’s work.

Similarly, in “On Going” form and silence become the poem:

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<sup>58</sup> Don Paterson, “Letter to a Young Poet” (BBC Radio 3, *The Essay*, September 12, 2014, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03pdg5g>).

<sup>59</sup> “D.A.”, 6.

“ On Going to Meet a Zen Master in the Kyushu Mountains and Not Finding Him

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<sup>60</sup> “On Going...” .

“On Going” acts as a Rorschach test upon its readers, with responses ranging from praise for its “maximal minimalism” to “uncomfortable silence”.<sup>61</sup> Undoubtedly influenced by Paterson’s “hugely sympathetic” interest in the precepts of Buddhism, “On Going” has obvious implications to Paterson’s thoughts on poetic composition when seen in relation to *Writings from the Zen Masters*.<sup>62</sup> Since he holds an interest in Buddhism, it can be assumed that Paterson uses a close knowledge of Zen kōans to create a synaesthetic poem that is, at least partially, about poetic composition.<sup>63</sup> The kōan “Bells and Robes”, for example, states that to achieve enlightenment “one need not follow sound or colour or form [...] to understand [Zen] one should see sound”.<sup>64</sup>

“On Going” presents the reader with its own kōan: in order to progress to the next poem, they must “read” the silence. Jo George notes that “On Going” is like “the [Buddhist] concept of *ma*, a negative space, that offsets and lends meaning to the substance that surrounds it” and that Paterson “understands that music [and poetry] can only be appreciated in relationship to silence”.<sup>65</sup> In order to “read” this musical silence, Paterson makes the reader acknowledge the implicit silent space surrounding the poem, as well as “reading” the form of the poem proper.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, silent poems exacerbate this challenge, since they can be consumed instantaneously, having eliminated the need to actively decode written symbols. “On Going...” toys with readers expectations of an exotic school of thought that “hasn’t found proper articulation in the West”, raised by the Eastern setting and inclusion of Zen, by presenting an anti-poem.<sup>67</sup> Anticipation of

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<sup>61</sup> Ondioline, “On Going ...”, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://musique-concrete.tumblr.com/post/67037949197/on-going-to-meet-the-zen-master>; Nicholas Wroe, “Leading Light”, *The Guardian*, November 26, 2006 (henceforth “LL Interview”).

<sup>62</sup> Paterson, interview by Maitreyabandhu.

<sup>63</sup> “LL Interview”; see also interview by Attila Dosa, personal interview, February 28, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Reys, ed., *Writings from the Zen Masters* (London: Penguin, 2009), 24; similar themes of synaesthetic hermeneutics are found throughout the book, see: “Enlightened Man”, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Jo George, “On Spirituality and Transcendence”, *CCE*, 104.

<sup>66</sup> There is a connection between silence, time and space in the silent poems, but one that I cannot explore here. I would hazard, however, that the reader must measure not only the silence, but the time spent “reading” and “contemplating” the poems. I frame the poems with quotation marks, which Paterson does not do. See: Attridge, *Rhythms...*, 76-84.

<sup>67</sup> “LL Interview”.

enlightenment narratives and assumptions of the foreign are ridiculed and the casual reader is mocked for expecting anything so easily from either a Zen master or a poem. Paterson creates a hierarchy of readership and subverts “populist” ideas by suggesting that the enlightened reader of poetry, of which “there are [not] enough”, becomes a Reader, while an unenlightened, casual reader remains lower-case.<sup>68</sup>

If, as Paterson says, “silence is the acoustic space in which the poem makes its large echoes” then “On Going” is a space that echoes only the Reader’s response to it and makes them an active part in the act of artistic composition.<sup>69</sup> And just as analogous ideas can be found in contemporary art, a similar concept can be found in the aleatoric works of avant-garde composers. While an obvious example of audience complicity in its own right, John Cage’s *4’33”* is particularly relevant to this example, owing to Cage’s awareness of, and influence by, Buddhist writings.<sup>70</sup> With both “Unfold” and “On Going”, Paterson forces the reader to acknowledge and become complicit and active in the silence necessary in the composition of art and thus creates a synaesthetic text of sight, sound and being.

Such an attention to silence in Paterson’s work does not weaken his belief that “sound and sense are the same thing for poets”, but strengthens it.<sup>71</sup> One can see parallels between Paterson and Pinter, who believed that silence could be the only honest speech while the “speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear [...] a necessary avoidance” of truth.<sup>72</sup> Thematic and formal silences thrive in Paterson’s work, particularly when he writes about “metaphysical horror

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<sup>68</sup> “D.A.”, 2; “...to a Young Poet”. I continue this distinction throughout the paper.

<sup>69</sup> “Lyric Principle”, 12.

<sup>70</sup> See: Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (London: Routledge, 2003), 70.

<sup>71</sup> “Advice”, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Harold Pinter, in *The Language of Silence* by Leslie Kane (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 132.

[in...] terrified poems of damage and threat”.<sup>73</sup> Suggestive silences and the Patersonian fatalism of “the human dream/handing us from dark to dark” are epitomised in “The Air”.<sup>74</sup>

While Paterson has stated that the poem is concerned with metaphysical “emergence” and how it’s “cool, that you can have a bunch of whole gas and just leave it for 14 billion years [...] and you end up at the present”, its final lines distil this argument into pentameter:<sup>75</sup>

“When will the air stop breathing? Will it all  
come to nothing, if nothing came to this?”<sup>76</sup>

Balancing upon a caesura after two feet, the poem contains multiple chiasmi. Perhaps the most obvious chiasmus is the metrical one, changing the feet from trochees to iambs after the caesura and placing the stresses of the line on “come” “no(th)”, “no(th)”, “came” and “this”.<sup>77</sup> This metrical change is combined with a chiasmus of temporal and verbal sense, rapidly changing the reader’s perspective from the future (“will it all/come...”) to the past (“nothing came”) to the present (“this”).<sup>78</sup> Future’s “nothing” merges with the “nothing” of the past and the present, leaving the line to begin with and end with “nothing”.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the metrical stresses around the comma caesura ensure that textual and conceptual nothingness holds the centre of the line. The caesura reinforces this idea, by compelling the Reader to pause and contemplate the void between “nothing” and “nothing” – between two unstressed syllables – between future, past and present, even going so far as to rest on a subtle guttural stop of the first “-ing”.<sup>80</sup> In reading, this guttural and occlusive stop thrusts the poem’s fatalism upon the Reader and makes

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<sup>73</sup> See: “Phantom”, “Rain”, “The Handspring”, “Seed”, “Newtyle”; Suzi Feay, “Big Bloke’s Book of Metaphysics Bloke”, review of *Selected Poems* by Don Paterson, *The Independent*, May 27, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/selected-poems-by-don-paterson-7791199.html?origin=internalSearch>.

<sup>74</sup> “The Swing”, ll. 26-27. “Air” used as a case study, see: Appendix I.

<sup>75</sup> Don Paterson, “Don Paterson The Air”, YouTube Video, 1:33, posted by “Edinburgh University Literature Society”, May 21, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llGtLjCyyvl>.

<sup>76</sup> “Air”, l. 13-4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; Parentheses denote devoiced phonemes.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

them enact it. By physically making the Reader perform a stopping of breath, a “nothing”, and to take another breath before nominally progressing to the “nothing” of the present, the line becomes iconicitous.<sup>81</sup> The signified nothing of the poem is performed in the reading of the poem.

Equally, in the penultimate line, the Reader is asked “when will the air stop breathing”, which ends on another occlusive, guttural stop and a caesura.<sup>82</sup> Both stoppings of airflow in the Reader are reinforced by being direct rhetorical addresses, making them personal. There is a parallel that the Reader must perform two deaths: that of the air around them and that of themselves. For the final line, the Reader is hanging in a self-made vacuum, before ending their own breathing.

Paterson linguistically making the Reader scrutinise the void in, around and between their own existence is a concept strengthened when one recalls Paterson’s description of poetic form. In order to read the poem, the Reader must do so synaesthetically, taking breath out of text.

Moreover, taking poems – as Paterson does – as patterns of silence, “Air” makes the Reader contemplate both the future “nothing” that begins the poem and the past “nothing” that concludes it.<sup>83</sup> “Air” is not only chiasitic, but cyclical.

One could go further. Paterson has said that “inspiration has given spontaneity an undeservedly good name” and one should “mistrust” it.<sup>84</sup> With this in mind, one could read “Air” metaphorically being about the poetic process itself, much like “Unfold” and “On Going”.<sup>85</sup> A poem is drawn from nothing and that, since “a poem means ‘a thing made’”, one must simply “make it”.<sup>86</sup> Existence, Paterson has stated, was created by “nothing [...] no supernatural interference” and the same is true, Paterson says, of poetry.<sup>87</sup> “Air” itself can be seen as coming

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.,13.

<sup>83</sup> “L.P.”,13; “Air”,14. Sup.

<sup>84</sup> “...to a Young Poet”.

<sup>85</sup> Sup.

<sup>86</sup> “...to a Young Poet”.

<sup>87</sup> Paterson, “The Air”, “Edinburgh University Literature Society”.

from nothing and, in a statement about artistic immortality, potentially returning to the nothing of neglect. From this outlook, the final line's rhetorical question is one the poet poses worryingly to himself and not the reader. Poetic and studious neglect is something of which Paterson is all too aware, as is shown by his studies and interest in Hartley Coleridge, by whom Paterson admits being "too affected [...] to bring much objectivity".<sup>88</sup> Read this way, the final line becomes comically iconic, since it represents the limitations of its own iconicity, aware that the limits of language prevent a full discussion about the limits of language.

"Poetry [...] is *dead hard*", Paterson recalls being told by Sean O'Brien.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, Paterson stresses that poetry is a "discipline [or] science" that can be learnt, one that has suffered from a "determined oversimplification".<sup>90</sup> Whilst there are connections with Formalist theorists defining "a special science of literature" to ensure that scansion, phonemics, and form were "made relevant to the very linguistic fabric of the verse", Paterson uses the term "science" in a less loaded way.<sup>91</sup> To Paterson, "science" is analogous to musical theory: there are firm rules that *can* be followed but *must* be actively understood.<sup>92</sup> Far from being elitist, Paterson argues that many amateur writers of poetry are simply misunderstanding the necessary relationship between poet and Reader. Poets are those familiar with and learned in the "science" of poetry. Poetic Readers are vital in promoting the "interactive art form" of poetry and Paterson's "ars poetica" is insistent on arguing for the reading of poetry as a craft – one currently suffering from "pure intellectual charlatanism".<sup>93</sup>

In promoting this craft, Paterson accentuates the arduousness of poetic creation, the act of "cleaving/ nothing from nothing", finding meaning from silence, and "yearning after negative

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<sup>88</sup> Don Paterson, "Hartley Coleridge", 3, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.donpaterson.com/files/poetry/1.htm>; "Alexandrian Library", ll.147-8.

<sup>89</sup> Paterson, interview by Dosa.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.; "E.I.", 1;

<sup>91</sup> Boris Eichenbaum, *The Theory of the "Formal Method"*, trans. Lee Lemon and Marion Reis in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch et al. (New York: Norton & Company, 2010), 927, 940.

<sup>92</sup> "D.A.", 3-4.

<sup>93</sup> Paterson, interview by Maitreyabandhu; "D.A.", 7.

transcendence” in his theoretical writings and poetry.<sup>94</sup> Artistic parallels are useful in identifying Paterson’s theories’ cultural currency, incidentally modernising Horace’s statement: “*ut pictura, poesis*”.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “Sliding on Loch Ogil”, ll.1-2; Michael O’Neil, “Cleaving Nothing from Nothing”, *CCE*, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*.

## II

*What I resent [...] is the work and humiliation that was required of me*  
Catherine Woodward.<sup>96</sup>

After the notes and two silent pages at the end of *God's Gift*, Paterson gives the reader a secret poem, absent from the contents, "(ix) 02:50: Newtyle".<sup>97</sup>

*"Of this white page, ask no more sense  
than of the skies (though you may believe  
the rain His tears, the wind His grief,  
the snow His sbredded evidence [sic]"*<sup>98</sup>

While there is a blatant irony of "*this white page*" being the only page between four blank pages to contain any ink at all, "Newtyle" – analogous to the silent poems – can help us further examine Paterson's interest in Reader expectations and nothingness. The poem can be seen as manipulating *différance* – Paterson's etymological "shadows".<sup>99</sup> Nothing in a linguistic system is ever present or absent, because meaning is diachronically performed and deferred through the interaction between any signifier's presence and absence, the echoes and differences in every sign of every other sign – what Derrida calls *trace*.<sup>100</sup> A further elision of these ideas can be found in Paterson's aphorisms, a form which is "already [a] shadow of itself".<sup>101</sup> One finds absent meaning in present text; paratext becomes text.

Signs and *trace* that would endlessly be hiding behind the present text are inverted and the reader is invited to find signs in absence in "Newtyle". The hierarchy of presence/absence in understanding text is inverted because there is no earlier signifier on the contents page that the

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<sup>96</sup> Catherine Woodward, review of *Rain*, *Scottish Poetry Review*, vol.2(2010).

<sup>97</sup> "Secret poem" after "secret tracks" hidden at the end of albums. For an apt example, see Nirvana's "Endless, Nameless", hidden on *Nevermind*. See: "Nil Nil", l.73.

<sup>98</sup> "Newtyle".

<sup>99</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology", interview by Julie Kristeva, *Positions*, edited by Alan Bass (Chicago: University Press, 1982), 28-30. "D.A.", 18.

<sup>100</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 156; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 394.

<sup>101</sup> Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2005), 207.

poem exists. Readers can have no expectations and they must approach the poem “blind”. In “Newtyle”, *trace* is not signified through presence-absence, but absence-presence.<sup>102</sup> The poem speaks entirely from absence, from “Otherness”, appearing incomplete by traditional, poetic standards.<sup>103</sup> Within this blank page, though, presence comes from absence; the Reader will inevitably construe it into meaning by engaging their poetic “‘oversignifying’ capability” to find meaning in absence and by speculating upon what would “complete” the poem.<sup>104</sup>

From this interpretation, further *traces* must be yielded upon “Newtyle”; presence ineludibly appears from silence. The “Otherness” from which the absent text speaks becomes the “Self”, since absence and presence are always necessarily symbiotic. It is a favourite theme of Paterson’s, and appears in various forms. Take the ekphrastic, chiaroscuro “Phantom”, in which presence/absence affects both Self, and the value that Self applies to the material, “the Night’s surveillance [...] /switch[ing] off the mirrors in their frames /and undevelop[ing] your photographs”.<sup>105</sup> “On Going...”, similarly, presents another dialectic within *différance*. Following Derrida’s theories, the difference between words cannot only be another word (otherwise, meaning could never be reached, rendering *différance* redundant), indicating that *différance* appeals to signs ontologically. “On Going...”’s absence/presence tension is rooted in the metaphysics of Zen enlightenment, fundamentally connected to hermeneutic ontology, suggesting that Paterson toys with *différance* and its limitations simultaneously.<sup>106</sup>

“Newtyle” utilises loaded “poetic” silence in a *différant* manner, revealing the essence of *trace* and forcing the reader to always-already construe their own meanings. It is the combination of these two aspects of interpretation – “Otherness” and subjectivity – that Paterson calls the “semiotic

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<sup>102</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>103</sup> Ending within an unfinished parenthesis, a sentence fragment and incomplete conceit.

<sup>104</sup> Attridge, “Form in Poetry”, 78; Its being identified as a poem is enough to activate this signifying capability. The concept is popular. See: Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 3-34.

<sup>105</sup> “Phantom”, l.1, 12-3; See: Fiona Sampson, “Rain”, *The Independent*, October 9, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/rain-by-don-paterson-1796030.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Sup.; Inf.

feedback loop” in which individual signs and gestures in the “Thematic Domain [of a poem] take on a deeper and [...] more subtle significance”.<sup>107</sup> Consequentially, Paterson traps Readers within a semiotic feedback loop of their own invention, scrabbling for a comprehensive explanation of the poem.<sup>108</sup>

To indulge my own semiotic feedback: “Newtyle”’s enjambment accentuates the semiotic feedback loop, comforting the reader with passivity before revealing connotative importance.

“...ask no more sense/ than of the skies”.

Seemingly, Readers are encouraged to be passive. Except, “the skies” can convey notions as numerous as humanity’s insignificance or the domain of an almighty being. Thus, “He” may be either the poet, the page his domain, or God, the skies his. “Ask” itself tricks readers, an imperative posing as an invitation. The run-on line epitomises the dichotomy between sense and no sense, posing nothing to Readers before divulging a connotatively explosive *rejet*.

As we have seen, Paterson believes that any “text really is about [the reader], as much as it is the text or its originator”.<sup>109</sup> Paterson “stands squarely behind Mr Derrida” and rails against what he coins the theistic fallacy: “that [one’s] interpretations unconsciously predicate a truth [...whereas] meaning isn’t in residence anywhere”.<sup>110</sup> Paterson adds to a line of criticism keen to establish that the role of the reader is integral to any work.<sup>111</sup> Diana Fuss states that “readers [...] are constructed; they inhabit reading practices rather than create them” and Paterson is interested in the (re)defining of those practices.<sup>112</sup> These practices, Paterson believes, haunt Readers with “that state of mild paranoia that more-or-less defines them”.<sup>113</sup> Again, the poetry Reader is elevated above the casual reader. To be a Reader, nevertheless, cursed with paranoia, seems to be as

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<sup>107</sup> “E.I.”, 35.

<sup>108</sup> The challenge is defiant: a poem must mean something.

<sup>109</sup> “E.I.”, 3; sup.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Taking the reader’s role, author’s death and intention as separate phenomena.

<sup>112</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1990), 35.

<sup>113</sup> Don Paterson, “The Domain of the Poem, Part Two”, *Poetry Review*, vol. 101.1 (2011): 74-5. (Henceforth “DP2”).

terminal a “diagnosis” as being a poet.<sup>114</sup> As a Patersonian Reader, one sees in poetry what “we require of it” and thus one must make assumptions of the text and how it is to be consumed.<sup>115</sup> The anxiety – paranoia – of influence rests upon the Reader, Paterson suggests, not the writer.<sup>116</sup>

While “anxiety” is a regular concern in criticism, Paterson addresses the contemporary phenomenon of “simultaneous enjoyment of and anxiety about our complicity in mass culture” in the consumption of poetry.<sup>117</sup> Poetic “anxiety” arises from the juxtaposition in presenting an inherently “subversive practice, connected with [...]resistance and dissent” in a hegemonic cultural form.<sup>118</sup> Paterson’s position here is unique. He exhibits awareness and distaste of these concerns but, as Picador’s Poetry Editor, Professor of Poetry at the University of St. Andrew’s and “media presence”, is part of the established, pedagogical “institutions [that] shape the landscape of [...] British poetry”.<sup>119</sup>

One could be forgiven for thinking that Paterson manufactures paranoia in readers of his poetry by inviting “the exact opposite of what he asserts”.<sup>120</sup> In “An Elliptical Stylus”, he reflects with nostalgic rage on an episode in which a shop assistant mocked his father for misunderstanding stylus construction:

“[...]I’d swing for him, and every other cunt  
happy to let my father know his station,  
which probably includes yourself. To be blunt.”<sup>121</sup>

Peter Howarth argues that the aggression in these final lines reveals how everyone involved in the poem is a “player in the performance of class and consumerism [inexorable in...] the act of

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<sup>114</sup> “...to a Young Poet.”

<sup>115</sup> “DP2”, 75.

<sup>116</sup> Especially regarding *clinamen* and *kenosis*; Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 25-9, 77-93.

<sup>117</sup> Sam Riviere, “Unlike”, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://pooool.info/unlike-forms-of-refusal-in-poetry-on-the-internet/>.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Relating to product and capital, but with implications to the development of “popular” taste; <http://www.donpaterson.com/bio.htm>; See: Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 219; Peter Middleton, “Institutions of Poetry” (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 262.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Robinson, “Punching Yourself in the Face”, *CCE*, 142.

<sup>121</sup> “An Elliptical Stylus”, l. 34-6.

judging”, but such a sweeping reading misses several key ironies.<sup>122</sup> Howarth’s argument suggests that to remark on, or ponder the poem and the characters within it, is to engage with and perversely celebrate the classist struggle the speaker faces. The reader is trapped in the paranoia of their “own interpretation” and the awareness that to comment is to declare oneself an authority on the speaker’s circumstances.<sup>123</sup> Peter Robinson, too, writes that the speaker is guilty of his own accusation toward the reader and his “swing” itself perpetuates “the story that has humiliated [the speaker’s] dad.”<sup>124</sup>

Subtleties are missed. For one, Paterson keeps his readers at arm’s length, resisting intimacy: one can be a formal “reader”, a caring “my [...] pal” or a “cunt” with no discernible difference to Paterson.<sup>125</sup> The poet encourages distrust within the reader by oscillating unpredictably – and at any moment – between warm welcomes and fierce rebuttals, instantaneously capricious and magnanimous. These swings can be identified in Paterson’s frequent asides, breaking the poetic fourth wall to warn readers that “*this library book/ is already long overdue; hand it back*” or that “this is where [they] get off”.<sup>126</sup> Secondly, the address to “yourself” in “Stylus” is directed at the nearest and most interested party: the reader, inherently on the speaker’s side. Readers become both performers in the meaning of the poem and enemies of it. This does not make readers players of the poem’s distrust, as Howarth argues, but instead provokes response. Direct challenges to readers encourages consideration of the poem not collusively with the writer, but on their own terms. Paterson forcefully disconnects reader from writer, defying them to create their own text as Readers and not passively receive what they read. “Two Trees”, similarly, teases readers by apparently offering a conceit before asserting that “trees are all [the] poem is about”.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Peter Howarth, “Degree of Famosness”, *London Review of Books*, 35.6(2013):32.

<sup>123</sup> “DP2”, 75.

<sup>124</sup> Robinson, “Punching Yourself”, 132.

<sup>125</sup> “Nil Nil”, l.70; “The Waterwheel”, l.3; “Stylus”, l.34.

<sup>126</sup> “The Alexandrian Library”, ll.286-7; “Nil Nil”, l.70; Also: “Book at Bedtime”, “Paradoxes”.

<sup>127</sup> “Two Trees”, l.24.

Provocations of the reader abound in Paterson, who believes that “anything that elicits an *immediate* nod of recognition has only reconfirmed a prejudice”.<sup>128</sup>

These deliberated responses do not require positivity, though. Rather, reading becomes an act of defining one’s own “good”. A problem arises. Paterson demands subjective responses while appealing to a falsely-assumed universal central signifier of “poetic” values.<sup>129</sup> Assuming that Readers will shun what he shuns, Paterson politicises poetic taste by presupposing a poetic “good”.<sup>130</sup> The governor of Paterson’s prose appears. Paterson’s theories to a “better” poetry capture a contradiction that shakes the foundation of the poetic bond between Reader and poet. One is allowed one’s personal responses to poems as long as they are correct.

Internal tensions notwithstanding, we can here return to Paterson’s indictment of the “Postmodern” as exemplified in “A Talking Book”.<sup>131</sup> The denigration of the “Postmodern” and invocation of hyperreality manufactures critical paranoia in readers by simultaneously demanding opposites of them. By challenging the “Postmodern”, Paterson attempts to shake readers out of the receptive mode to which they are accustomed. These modes of reading, and subsequent paranoia, can be traced to the metapoetic and intratextual postmodern forms giving primacy to “the self-importance of the text [and its...] panoply of ‘effects’”.<sup>132</sup> Poems are always-already aware of how they will be read as a poem, placing extra pressure upon readers, preventing them from actively criticising poems.<sup>133</sup> It is this practice that Paterson attempts to dislodge through direct challenges through the fourth wall. We can identify Paterson’s motive for creating his “ars poetica”: to make readers accept their performative position in the meaning of poems and urging them to perform better in this role by acknowledging it.

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<sup>128</sup> Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2005), 178.

<sup>129</sup> “D.A.”, 1-18.

<sup>130</sup> Paterson and Simić, eds., *New British Poetry* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004). See: “D.A.”, 8.

<sup>131</sup> Inf.

<sup>132</sup> “DP2”, 75.

<sup>133</sup> Paterson is at pains to elucidate that poems are “*written* [...] *presented* [...] and *read*” as something other than simply text; “DP2”, 74.

“Prologue”, the opening poem of *God’s Gift*, makes the same point:

“A poem is a little church, remember,  
you, its congregation, I, its cantor;

so please, no flash, no necking in the pew,  
or snorting just to let your neighbour know

you get the clever stuff[...].”<sup>134</sup>

The affected delineation between poet-as-cantor and reader-as-congregation enforces a separation between the two through its allusion to religious practises; the poet holds a position as leader – instructor, again politicising taste – above readers, making them acknowledge their role before embarking upon the collection proper. “Prologue” teases readers by transforming the private, solitary act of reading into a collective, public one. This monastic “heightened speech” is quickly abandoned for the colloquial and physical, as the speaker attempts to “raise the fucking *tone*”.<sup>135</sup> Paterson teases his readers by ensuring laughter, through a rapid and unexpected combination of high and low registers, just as he entreats them not to laugh.<sup>136</sup> In Paterson’s hands, the idiom “do as I say, not as I do” is metamorphosed into “do as I say, not as I am enabling you to do”.

If readers do not pay heed to the poet they could result in the startling realisation of “Postmodern”, in which a “boy gets haud o’ this porno movie”, decides to make a copy and passes it around his friends.<sup>137</sup> Eventually, he watches it again before realising that “he’s only jist taped himself haen a wank”.<sup>138</sup> Paterson continues voicing his dislike of the “Postmodern” (and its passive readers) through a darkly comical and blunt conceit, conflating anything postmodern to a fool watching himself masturbate over someone else’s already questionable work. Defying

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<sup>134</sup> “Prologue”, ll.1-5.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.9,8.

<sup>136</sup> One reviewer was “suspicious [of this...] deliberate obfuscation”, which I argue is exactly what Paterson wants. (Space Bar, September 19, 2007(20:54), comment, “‘Prologue’ by Don Paterson”, *The Spaniard in the Works*, September 19, 2007, <http://spaniardintheworks.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/prologue-by-don-paterson.html>).

<sup>137</sup> “Postmodern”, l.1; See: Appendix I.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, l.11.

established “poetic” conventions, Paterson writes “Postmodern” in colloquial Dundonian and in lines of extraordinary length, lacking much metrical unity. Readers find themselves in a similar position to that as in “Stylus” and Paterson once more adds connotations of class struggle. The speaker – of implicitly lower-class, colloquially engaging in conversation on taboo topics in non-poetic forms – confronts the implicitly upper-class reader, who deigns to read the amusing pub anecdote of the Dundonian as a “poem”.<sup>139</sup>

Power struggles are reversed, however: the upper-class reader is pointedly asked “Dye no’ get it? Will Eh hae tae *explain* it tae ye?”.<sup>140</sup> Readers are pressured by the speaker to find both humour and meaning from the episode. The italicised emphasis can be seen as the same patronisation that the embittered speaker faces when discussing art or poetry – “higher” art forms. To ask for guidance or explanation, according to the speaker and to the “postmodern” listener, is humiliating. Paterson mocks the rise of the “Postmodern”: he suggests that such “self-absorbed” works were only successful because they were not comprehensively analysed, a practice Readers should relish.<sup>141</sup> If readers are afraid to search for meaning, “Postmodern” suggests, they will end up praising the equivalent of a video of a displaced man masturbating.

Highlighting the inadequacies of the “self-importance of the text”, Paterson aims to shake readers out of this thoughtless consumption of art.<sup>142</sup> Paterson’s lengthy, non-lyric sequence “The Alexandrian Library” offers a perfect example; Paterson “plays with the verbal apparatus of meaning but fails to derive any”.<sup>143</sup> The poem’s three parts apparently present a clear dramatic teleology to the reader, with themselves as protagonist:

“The lights go up: you find yourself facing  
the wrangle of metal outside the Great Terminus.  
You are poised [...]”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Sup.

<sup>140</sup> “Postmodern”, l.11.

<sup>141</sup> “D.A.”, 4.

<sup>142</sup> “DP2”, 75.

<sup>143</sup> Edward Larrisey, “No-Score Drawing”, CCE, 49.

<sup>144</sup> “The Alexandrian Library”, ll.1-3.

“The level blue gaze of the lovely librarian  
has wrestled your own to the floor,  
[...] coaxing from you,  
the real reason you can’t seem to talk to your father”<sup>145</sup>

“You don’t know it quite yet, but this whistling noise  
is your call up, [...] to that [...] post-coital triste  
known as life.”<sup>146</sup>

Use of varied form, convoluted syntax and teleology, however, means that despite the apparent narrative the reader will never arrive anywhere, discovering solely the “flawed variety” of the journey.<sup>147</sup> The opening of each section drops the reader-protagonist in an unfamiliar *mise-en-scène*, in a visual, cinematic image and coaxes them along until they are arbitrarily abandoned by the poem. Readers are pushed along a quasi-linear narrative that demands concentration, comparable to Tristram Shandy’s “tolerable straight line” of restless discursiveness.<sup>148</sup> A dramatic ontology is suggested, but reverts to nothing. “Library” represents Paterson’s greatest challenge to the reader: to derive meaning from an elaborate tale, the intricacy and precision of which betrays the supposed carelessness – a translucent *sprezzatura* – with which Paterson created it. Just as the reader starts to find meaning, the poem turns on itself and becomes “absolute zero/albedo Fuck-All”, “*the gable-end*” or forces the reader to conjure their own world (“you are where are you?”).<sup>149</sup>

Paterson directly challenges readers to enter a doubled vision of themselves as reader and writer, asserting that they “appear as a poet, a real one” and the poem which they are simultaneously writing and starring in is “the big one, the one that will finally/consolidate everything”.<sup>150</sup> The

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<sup>145</sup> “The Return of the Book”, ll.1-5.

<sup>146</sup> “The Book at Bedtime”, ll.1-5.

<sup>147</sup> Larissey, “No-Score”, 50. “Library”’s form varies wildly from centralised monosyllables, to raked lines to fourteeners and alexandrines.

<sup>148</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (Oxford: World’s Classics, 1998), 365. See: Appendix II.

<sup>149</sup> “Alexandrian”, ll.252-3; “Return”, l.243; “Bedtime”, l.90.

<sup>150</sup> “Return”, l.159, 141-2.

sequence of “Library” is a vast and often self-contradictory piece that consistently represents one thing: a poem aware of its place within cultural conversations of taste and of how it will be received. Paterson engages his readers in an extravagant game in the search for poetic meaning and validation.<sup>151</sup> Provoking active responses from readers, Paterson’s poetry is critical agitprop, “anti-hegemonic [...and] demanding (often rudely) that it is noticed, and attended to”.<sup>152</sup>

Thus we arrive at the one central difficulty. Attridge notes in his analysis of Paterson’s “ars poetica” that Paterson’s interest is “specifically the lyric poem – the short poem [...and is not concerned with] the long poem, whether narrative or didactic”.<sup>153</sup> A lengthy narrative poem of some 600 lines, “Library” is an aberration that stands outside of Paterson’s own theoretical works. In “The Dark Art of Poetry” Paterson writes that in a good poem “an argument or a story [is] quietly but insistently proposed [...and that] you know instinctively there will be a journey”, a journey which, in “Library”, the reader ostensibly controls.<sup>154</sup> In “Library”, Paterson toys with readers established habits and presumptions. The sheer length and volatile form of “Library”, framed with quotes from the spurious visionary François Aussemmain, makes the poem one of the few of Paterson’s which the reader would approach expecting exactly what he espouses for a good lyric poem. As Larissey demonstrates, however, “Library” “unbalances temptation to ascribe value”.<sup>155</sup> The dramatic teleology, or elements of dramatic ontology, evaporates to nothing within a form Attridge categorises as “innocent” of Paterson’s theoretical work.<sup>156</sup> Paterson knows what the reader will be expecting, so duly pulls the rug from under the reader’s feet, rolls them up in it and throws them off a bridge. More fool the reader for expecting anything from a Patersonian narrative.<sup>157</sup> Paterson revels in setting up challenges in uneasily

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<sup>151</sup> See: Larissey, 49-51.

<sup>152</sup> Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 245; Paterson is distinct since he performs this task within the poetic hegemony, sup.

<sup>153</sup> Derek Attridge, “Don Paterson’s *Ars Poetica*”, *CCE*, 22.

<sup>154</sup> “D.A.”, 16-7.

<sup>155</sup> Larissey, “No-Score”, 54.

<sup>156</sup> “D.A.”, 17; Attridge, “Paterson’s *poetica*”, 22.

<sup>157</sup> See: “On Going...”; sup.

jostling terms for whosoever will acknowledge them.<sup>158</sup> His first poem in his debut collection features Paterson “[taking him]self on for the hell of it”, presumably unused to an audience; by the time he writes *Rain*, however, he concedes that such contradictions and games are so “me of me”.<sup>159</sup>

As Woodward’s review demonstrates, Paterson’s games and provocations come at a price; the journey from reader to Reader is not easy.<sup>160</sup> Follow Paterson’s advice in “Prologue” and throughout *God’s Gift*, however, and one arrives – necessarily independently – at “Newtyle”.<sup>161</sup> The title of which could be seen as an inviting pun for Readers: “Newtyle” phonetically becomes “new tile”, the clean slate from which Readers can progress with their newfound appreciation for the reading of poetry, trusted to complete the poem alone.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> See: Pollard, *Speaking...*, 221.

<sup>159</sup> “The Ferryman’s Arms”, l.6; “Handspring”, l.1.

<sup>160</sup> Inf.

<sup>161</sup> Sup.

<sup>162</sup> Sup.



*The deftest leave no trace: type, send, delete,  
clear history.*  
“Web”.<sup>163</sup>

There is yet one counterpoint that we have thus far overlooked. Attridge notes that “for several years, Paterson’s website has announced a future publication [of his] *ars poetica*”, and that “we can look forward to [the time when...] the Patersonian *Ars Poetica* finally makes an appearance”.<sup>164</sup> Paterson, too, is stuck in the future tense in regards to the publication of his “*ars poetica*”, ensuring Attridge that “once [other work] comes out, [he] will write” on the subject.<sup>165</sup> When addressing publication, Paterson heavily qualifies his theoretical work by hinting that it “will likely [be] heavily revised”.<sup>166</sup> But why is this? And why has Paterson’s theoretical work so far remained online?

Natalie Pollard argues that Paterson is keenly aware of this position, “balancing between professor and poet, editor and cultural arbiter [providing a] particularly instructive testing grounds for the changing facets of contemporary literary negotiation”.<sup>167</sup> That which is available online Paterson admits to having “modified [...] in response to some reasonable complaints” and notes that future publications will be “heavily revised”.<sup>168</sup> Paterson knowingly adapts as the “contemporary” does and reads into the interlinking and unclear relationship between “context” and “contemporary”.<sup>169</sup>

In a space of constant editing, Paterson’s “*ars poetica*” exists, mercurially, in a quasi-official space. Paterson currently hovers above negative criticism, since he can edit and adjust; critics are all too aware that they are analysing a work-in-progress and so cannot comment holistically or

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<sup>163</sup> “Web”, l.1-2.

<sup>164</sup> Attridge, “Paterson’s *Poetica*”, 21, 32.

<sup>165</sup> Attridge, “Form in Poetry”, 82.

<sup>166</sup> Paterson, accessed January 26, 2015, <http://www.donpaterson.com/arspoetica.htm>.

<sup>167</sup> Natalie Pollard, introduction to *CCE*, 3.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> See: Matthew Sperling, “Publishing Poetry”, *CCE*, 149.

hermeneutically.<sup>170</sup> Unlike his book-published poetry and aphorisms, his poetics remains provisional until a unified text finally appears. The internet offers Paterson the chance to remain “contemporary” by not bringing his arguments into hard – and thus inevitably synchronic – form.<sup>171</sup> Paterson’s “contemporary” is fluid and diachronic; promised and happened; happening and yet to happen.

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<sup>170</sup> Attridge laments this predicament and accepts that he can only offer a “foretaste” of later arguments.

<sup>171</sup> Sperling (*CCE*, 151) tickles Paterson into discussing the effects of technology on publishing, but neglects retroactively editable works in the public domain.

*A good critic [...] is a much rarer thing than a good poet*  
Randall Jarrell.<sup>172</sup>

I must now foreground what has heretofore been implicit and address an ongoing dialectic: how is Paterson “contemporary”? In parts I and II of this paper I have taken this to mean both Paterson’s reaction to the pseudo-technocratic world of “nothingness”, whose poetry is diluted by unquestioned “authorities”, and his reaction to the “decidedly passé” late twentieth-century postmodern.<sup>173</sup>

“With a gun to their heads [...] nearly all poets find something remarkable to say about their subject”.<sup>174</sup> So began our foray into Paterson’s work, concluding that the statement was somewhat overzealous. I argue that this is precisely the point and that Paterson writes radical statements to provoke readers into careful consideration.

Readers are integral to Paterson’s “contemporary” vision and must be shaken out of their passive roles and into active response by being reminded of their position as Reader-critic to avoid perpetuating “extremely boring”, denotative poetry.<sup>175</sup> Paterson’s aim is to challenge obsequious readers into becoming Readers – to allow the synergetic, hermeneutic poet-reader relationship to develop.<sup>176</sup>

Feeling that readers have forgotten that “poetry *demands* of us a personal response”, Paterson produces not a statement of poetry as a craft but a statement of the neglected craft of poetry

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<sup>172</sup> Randall Jarrell, “Poets, Critics and Readers”, *American Scholar*, 28.3(1959):277-292.

<sup>173</sup> “The Best Days of Your Life?”, *The Herald*, January 18, 2005, 15, <http://www.heraldsotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/the-best-days-of-your-life-don-paterson-winner-of-the-2003-ts-eliot-prize-and-2003-whitbread-poetry-award-1.65592>; George, “Spirituality...”, 103-111; O’Neill, “Cleaving...”, 70-71.

<sup>174</sup> Paterson and Brown, *Don’t Ask...*, xv.

<sup>175</sup> Paterson and Simić, *New British Poetry*.

<sup>176</sup> <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/don-paterson>.

reading.<sup>177</sup> He may campaign in his poetry, but Paterson's prose reveals a governor, telling us that Readers and poets "need to keep singing, and singing together".<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Faber, 2010), xvii-xviii. Perhaps unsurprisingly, accounting for Government-dictated syllabi supporting "correct [...] answers" to poems. See: Michael Rosen, "Dear Ms Morgan", April 7, 2015, [http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/apr/07/key-stage-1-poetry-assessment-wrecks-poems-for-children?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/apr/07/key-stage-1-poetry-assessment-wrecks-poems-for-children?CMP=share_btn_fb).

<sup>178</sup> "D.A.", 21.

## Appendix I:

Readers can here refer to “Postmodern” and “The Air”. While I discuss them in the paper, my ideas refer to the poems as wholes. Where previously I quoted part of the poem for close analysis – as I believe is sufficient for my readings of the other poems I cite – I feel Readers will benefit from having the poems available here to allow for a more holistic view of them. All poems cited are readily available in various formats.

**The Air** (From: [http://www.donpaterson.com/.](http://www.donpaterson.com/))

What is this dark and silent caravan  
that being nowhere, neither comes nor goes;  
that being never has no hour or span;  
of which we can say only that it flows?  
How was it that this empty datastream,  
this cache of dead light could so lose its way  
it wandered back to feed on its own dream?  
How did that dream grow to the waking day?  
What is the sound that fades up from the hiss,  
like a glass some random downdraught had set ringing,  
now full of its only note, its lonely call,  
drawing on its song to keep it singing?  
When will the air stop breathing? Will it all  
come to nothing, if nothing came to this?

**Postmodern** (From: *God's Gift to Women* (London: Faber, 1997), 51.

Bot gets haud o' this porno movie, heavy Swedish number, broon-wrapper joab, like. Waants tae  
mak a copy o' it  
but he's only got the ae video machine. So he things: Eh ken. Gets oot the camcorder that's been  
lehn gaitherin stoor  
in the cupboard since last Christmas, sets it up on a wee table right opposite the telly, lines up  
the screen in the eyepiece.  
Nae bather. Lets it roll. When it's feenished he checks the start o' the copy jist tae mak sure it's  
recorded okay. Nae sweat.  
Dead chuffed wi' hisel. Taks it doon the pub that night and lends it tae his pal, then *his* pal borrys  
it, exetera exetera.  
A fortnight later a' cunt in the pub's seen it, and some boy he disnae ken hands it back to him,  
Funny smile on his puss.  
Thinks nothin' o' it tho. Onywiy, three weeks later, the boy thinks, Ach, the wife's oot, Eh'll hae  
another squint  
at thon video again. Same as before, oot wi' the big box o' Scotties, the wife's cocoa-butter,  
slaps in the video,  
settles back in the settee, breeks doon, cock oot. So he's sittin' there gien it big licks, a' these  
Swedes gien it laldy on the telly,  
when he notices the reflection o' himself, wankin awa on the screen, clear as day. Then he stops  
wankin. But his reflection disnae.  
That's cuz it's no' his fuckin reflection. He's only jist taped himself haein a wank, huzzee. Dye  
no' get it? Will Eh hae tae *explain* it tae ya?

**Appendix II:**

It is fittingly tangential to mention the similarities between Sterne and Paterson. The “tolerable straight line” of Tristram’s narrative in *Tristram Shandy* is pitted alongside metadata of the “four lines [he] moved in through [his] first, second, third and fourth volumes”:<sup>179</sup>

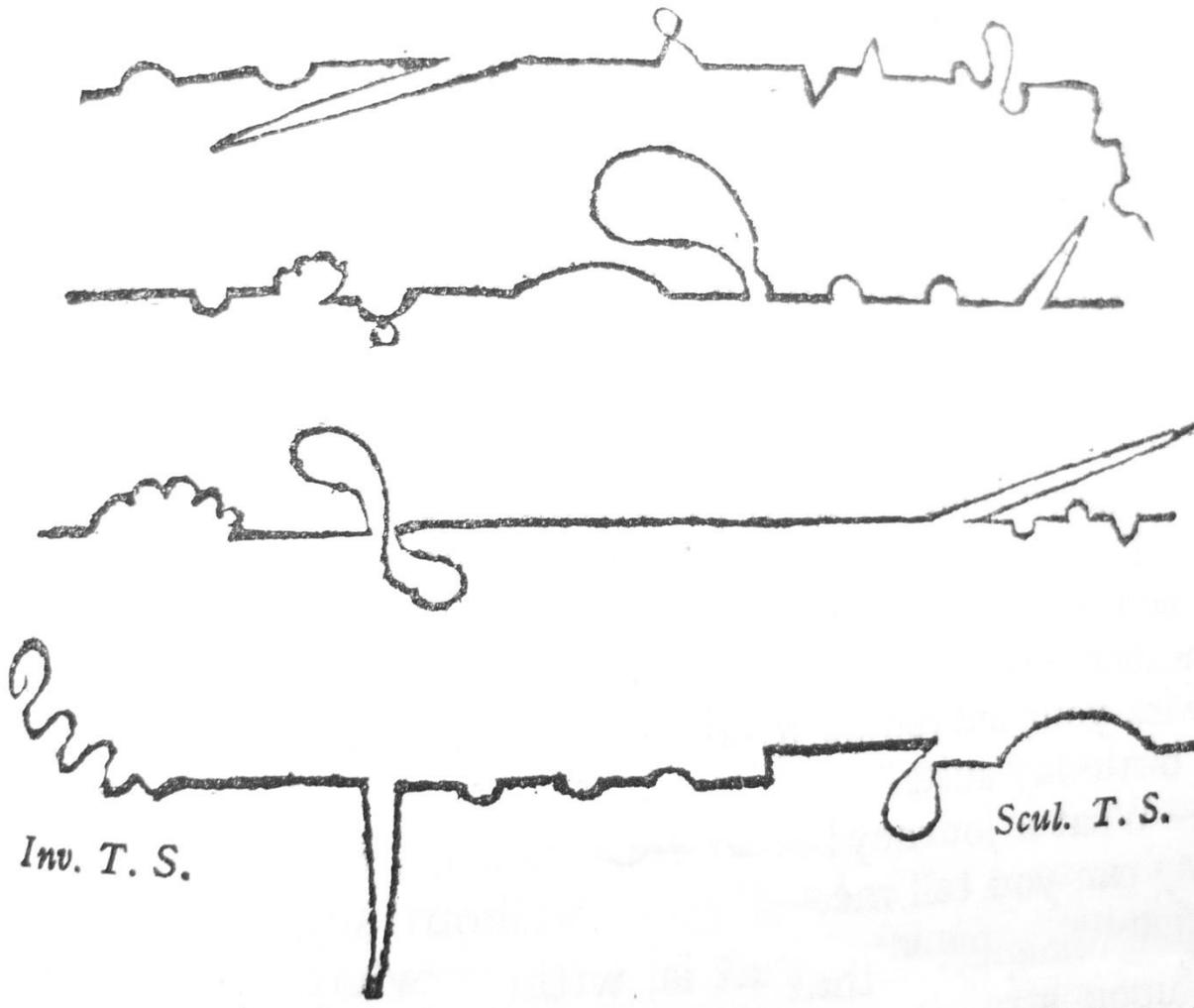


Fig.1: Sterne, “Volumes I-IV”, *Tristram Shandy* vol.VI, ch.40. The International University of Languages and Media, Milan. From: The Tristram Shandy Web, accessed April 22, 2015. <http://www.tristramshandyweb.it/>.

The “very good” fifth volume, discounting a few notable “parentheses”, is seen:<sup>180</sup>

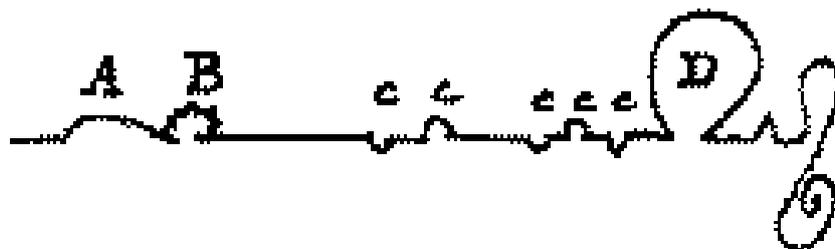
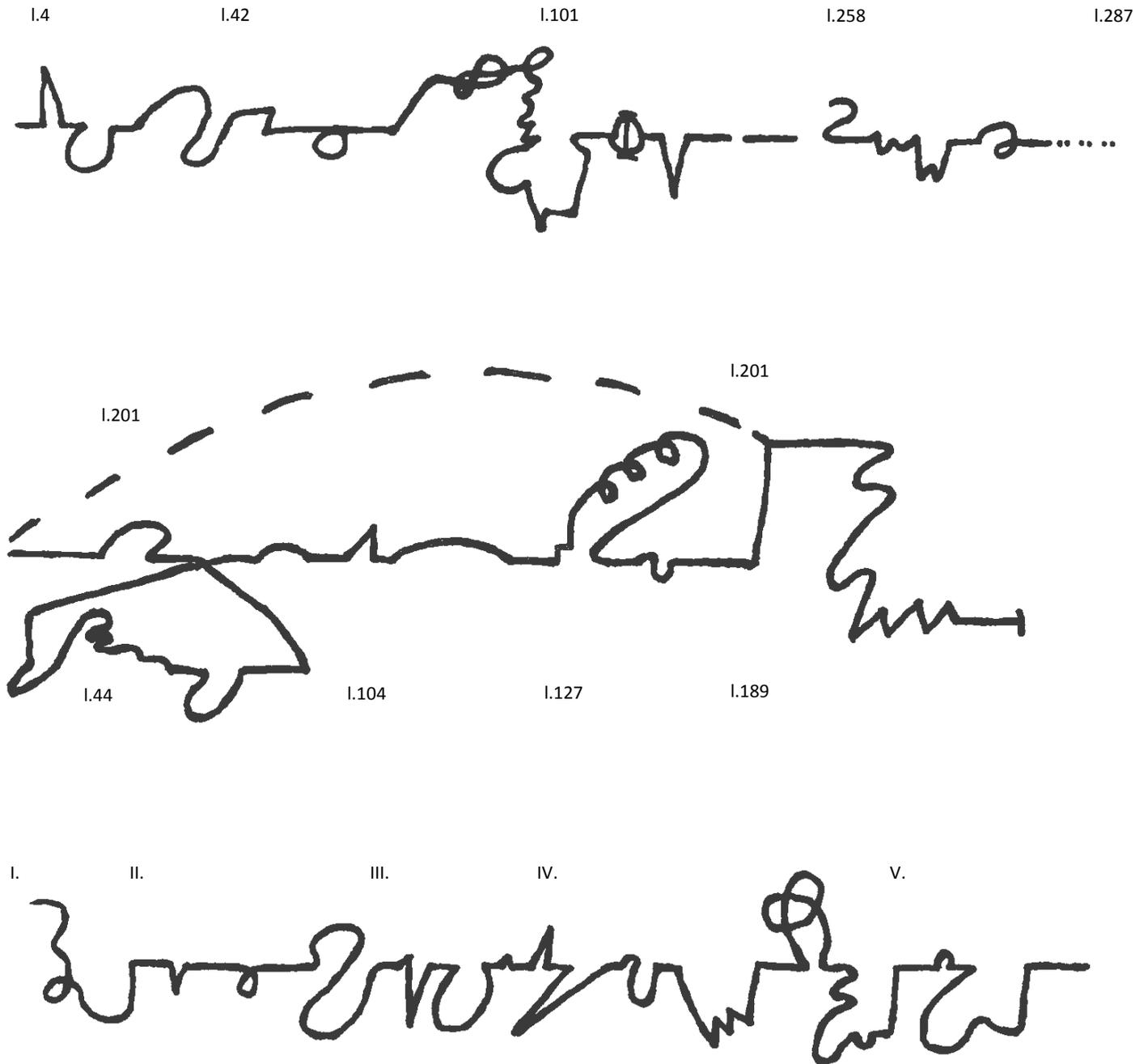


Fig.2: Ibid., “Volume V”.

<sup>179</sup> Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, vol.VI, ch.40.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

Paterson's "Library" trilogy could be drawn in the same way in order to visualise the discursive unpredictability of Paterson's narrative. It may look something like this:<sup>181</sup>



<sup>181</sup> In order: "Alexandrian Library", "Return of the Book", "Book at Bedtime". Line/section numbers are utilised to make clearer the meanings of the deviations, if the reader wishes to follow the poems with these visualisations. Dotted lines indicate diachronic occurrences or intertextual referents. I confess to little artistic or technological ability, but the drawings are my own.

Sterne plays with his readers just as Paterson does. Shandy despairs in his attempts to describe Widow Wadman, throwing the book into a space of collaborative authorship, offering

“paper ready to [the reader’s] hand – [...] paint her to your mind [...] – please but your own fancy in it”.<sup>182</sup>

What follows is a blank page, specifically for the reader to fill with their own description, before the action continues. Tristram himself notes that

“’tis one of the silliest things in [the world], to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception.”<sup>183</sup>

It is a playfulness that resembles Paterson’s silent poems, as collaborative, subjective efforts. Sterne presents these authorial breaks and playful challenges as an attempt to progress “the means of conception”, just as Paterson wishes to “make the texture of our perception malleable”.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, vol. VI, ch. 38.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, ch. 20.

<sup>184</sup> “The Means of Conception”, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.clayfox.com/2006/03/27/the-means-of-conception/;“D.A.”,1>.

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