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Dialogues of Desolate Men: Narrating the Conflicted Self in the Dialogical Poetry of David Lyndsay and William Lithgow

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Literature in early modern Scotland was a medium for education which stemmed from the king and court to the wider community. Historically, Scotland's literature conveys a penchant for moral and social reform in which the king acted as a spiritual figurehead used to represent the self and society as a whole, enabling the literature to centre around an identifiable exemplar. The parallels between David Lyndsay and William Lithgow are few – they wrote in very different times and were very different men – however, their poetry displays the unease they both felt in their kingless Scotland. The monarchical void forced both poets to identify themselves outwith the influence of the King and Court and to resituate their voices within the new political and cultural landscapes. This paper explores the way in which both poets used the form of dialogue to restructure the method of didactic transmission from taking the monarch as the spiritual moorings, to looking to reason and, as they believed to be the moral epitome, God.

Dialogues are prevalent in all studies of life, from the scientific study of interaction between subject and stimuli to prove life, to the existential consideration of the interactions between people to prove

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existence. The structure of dialogue presents two (or more) speakers and the communication and interaction between them, i.e. the conversation. By interacting, by conversing, the speakers mutually create a form which exists in a separate space, creating a platform on which the pluralities of existence can be explored. Mapped onto the self, dialogue turns inward and allows the different facets of an individual's existence to be considered as independent speakers, thus provoking an examination of the interaction exhibited in the individual's internal dialogue. It is this plurality of self-awareness which causes the individual to recognise the independent forces operating within the self and which expands the dimensions of the self, enabling the internal dialogue to reconcile disruptions in the authority of the individual's fundamental perspective.

Writing enables a certain kind of dialogue to come into play by superimposing the metaphor of dialogue onto the self, allowing internal voices to be separated into characters and their interactions to be dramatised. In David Lyndsay's *Ane Dialog Betwix Experience and ane Courteour*, 1554, and William Lithgow's *A Conflict Betweene the Pilgrime and his Muse,* c.1607, dialogue is used as a method to externalise these internal voices and use their conversation to exhibit a deliberation within the self. Experience and the Muse, respectively, are allegorical characters, a particularly medieval poetic device which intended the character to be interpreted as an embodiment of the particular quality they were named after. The nature of this technique, used to "represent what is immaterial in picturable terms",[1] is most relevant when applied to inner dialogues as it allows these abstract voices to be personified and perform the internal dialogue of the persona for the reader in recognisable terms of rhetoric. The literarification of these voices allows them to operate in a reading space where abstract concepts can be examined outwith the immediacy and consequences of reality. This practice of reading allegory and symbolism made a connection between the writer and

[1] C.S Lewis, 'Allegory' in *The Allegory of Love*, (Oxford, 1936), pp. 44 – 111, pg 44.

their audience, providing established methods which used literature as a conduit for moral and social education.

The Pilgrime and the Courteour are respectively the personas who narrate the poems. By using the first person narrative, the audience is invited to 'wear the mask' and adopt the role of the persona in the poem. By expanding the 'I' into two voices, the writer amplifies the model of dialogue and uses it as a cathartic and provocative mode of expression. The internal disruption in the self is impossible to talk about without using some form of metaphor, and "as the conflict becomes more and more important, it is inevitable that these metaphors should expand and coalesce, and finally turn into a fully-fledged allegorical poem".[2] Where the character of the king, with whom a Scottish audience would readily identify, is lacking Lyndsay and Lithgow use characters who are in search of something, immediately casting them into the role of the student who will learn to relocate their moral moorings within themselves and God.

Lyndsay wrote in pre-Reformation Scotland through the courts of James V, Mary of Guise, Mary, queen of Scots and James VI. As an educator of James V, Lyndsay was well practiced in the art of propagating reform through allegorical literature. His poetry spans the genres of *specula principum* to chivalric romance, always with king and country in mind. It is clear from Lyndsay's poetry that he aligned good governance with moral virtue. This was a tenet of the humanist reformers who believed that the King, as governor of men on earth, should strive to perform his duty with Christian judiciousness:

> ...it is pretty well agreed among the philosophers that the most healthy form [of rule] is monarchy; not surprisingly, for, by analogy with the deity, when the totality of things is in one person's power, then indeed, in so far as he is in this respect in the image of God, he excels everyone else in wisdom and

[2] Ibid, pg 60.

> goodness, and, being quite independent, concentrates exclusively on helping the state.[3]

Situating himself securely within these humanist parameters, Lyndsay's "regicentric verse develops the figure of an archetypal Christian king, a just monarch whose sound moral judgement would ensure the temporal and spiritual welfare of all three estates".[4] It is this figure which is lacking in the perceived audience at the time *Ane Dialog* was written. In 1554 the government of Scotland was in a state of flux. King James V died in 1542, leaving the throne to his infant daughter, Mary. The role of moral figurehead was traditionally assigned the male ruler, so one can empathise with a poet who has educated and fashioned his king to a model of this archetype, and who has then been denied the longevity of his rule. Without this archetype, Scotland had been left in "ane cairfull cace".[5] Where Lyndsay had once directed his attention to educating the monarch in self-governance, he now needed to produce a work which would address the lay, as well as the learned, soul of the country, shifting his "implied audience from that of king to the kingdom, his reforming agenda extending beyond the court to the country".[6]

In the epistle and prologue to *Ane Dialog,* Lyndsay sets up structural patterns sympathetic to his didactic intent. The persona conjures images from scripture where God has cleansed the earth to rid man of his sin. Highlighting the causal pattern between man's sin and God's wrath, the persona aligns the punishment of God with the absence of virtue:

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[3] Desiderius Erasmus, 'The birth and upbringing of a Christian prince' in Lisa Jardine (trans. and ed), *The Education of A Christian Prince*, (Cambridge, 1997), 37.

[4] Alexander J. Cuthbert, 'Reforming rhetoric: the immodest proposals of David Lyndsay' (2009) *eSharp: Special Issue: Spinning Scotland: Exploring Literary and Cultural Perspectives*, pp. 18 – 33, 19.

[5] David Lyndsay, *Ane Dialog Betwix Experience and ane Courteour*, in Fitzedward Hall (ed.), *The Monarch and other poems of Sir David Lyndsay*, (London) pp. 1 – 206, l. 11.

[6] Cuthbert, 22.

And cause thame clearly for tyll understand
That, for the brekyng of the Lordis command,
His thrinfald wande of flagellatioun
Hes scurgit this pure realme of Scotland
Be mortall weris, baith be sey and land,
With mony terrabyll tribulation,
Tharefore mak to tham trew narratioun
That al thir weris, this derth, hunger, and pest,
Was nocht bot for our synnis manifest.[7]

This parallel suggests that Lyndsay was highlighting the peril of having no moral guidance, paralleling Scotland's vulnerable situation as a country without a spiritual figurehead and therefore in danger of falling into sin. The "apocalyptic"[8] setting here is much more pronounced than in Lyndsay's other verse. His morality play *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* used a pantomimical satire of bad governance to create laughter in the reading space to provoke reflection and reform. However, there is no room in *Ane Dialog* for humour, as "sad sentence sulde have ane sad indyte".[9] The anticipated reader is not one who laughs, but one who listens.

As discussed by Cuthbert, "the opening stanzas of the prologue form an inverted *locus amoenus*, with the descriptions of the transmutability of the natural world acting as a pathetic fallacy to express the moribund and restless state of the mind of the persona".[10] The persona's mind is plagued by the misery which "from day to day in earth... dois increas",[11] the passage of time being particularly relevant to Lyndsay who, nearing the end of his life, had seen the rise and fall the estates but would not live to the see the success of the Reformers. The persona does not meditate on this too long,

[7] Lyndsay, ll. 46 – 54.
[8] Cuthbert, 25.
[9] Lyndsay, l. 210.
[10] Cuthbert, 23.
[11] Lyndsay, l. 119.

however, and proceeds into the traditional courtly love setting of a May morning in the following lines:

> Bot tumlyng in my bed I mycht not lye
> Quhairfore I fuir furth in ane Maye morning.[12]

If the poet had stayed in this metaphoric bed of misery, the persona could not proceed from the ruminative patterns of thought and would be trapped in a depressive state of silence. By writing, by participating in a particular kind of conversation, the opposing voices of the self can be externalised and thus distanced from the individual. This expansion creates a critical and reflective metafictional dimension which exists in the reading space, allowing the self to be examined and furthered, breaking the ruminative pattern of anxiety and self-doubt. The cathartic effect of writing is reinforced by the "medicinall"[13] influence that describing the Eden-like garden of the *locus amoenus* has on the persona. However here, too, Lyndsay exercises restraint and prudence over being distracted by the beauty of nature. The description focuses on the behaviour of Phebus, the god of the sun and the classical figure who portrayed God and the king. Phebus' departure from the sky, the state of "his regioun"[14] in his absence and his return to his "throne imperiall"[15] present a soteriological parallel between the landscape waiting for the return of the sun and Scotland waiting for the return of her king. When Phebus does return the poet is awakened by an insincere and decorative "suggurit sang"[16] which betrays the seriousness of the poem's subject. The poet awakes enlightened, but, paradoxically, this has happened through the rejection of the Eden-like garden which distracts the reader from his moral lesson and the poet from his sombre matter.

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[12] Ibid, ll. 124 – 125.
[13] Ibid, l. 134.
[14] Ibid, l. 148.
[15] Ibid, l. 141.
[16] Ibid, l. 161.

The format of *Ane Dialog* echoes the Catholic teaching method of catechism whereby scripture was taught and learned by rote in a series of questions and answers. This method was also used by Luther in his sermons recorded in *The Large Catechism*:

> In such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervour, so that day by day we relish and appreciate the Catechism more greatly. This is according to Christ's promise in Matt 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".[17]

By invoking this conversation, Luther intended to dispel the elitist nature of biblical study by "presumptuous saints"[18] who asserted their knowledge of the scripture. In Luther's model, the student of scripture would never be finished studying because the goal was not the possession of such knowledge, but the actual act of acquiring the knowledge. By reading and rereading, the voice of scripture would be established in the reader's mind, emphasising the permanence of the lessons and consolidating the faith of the student:

> Let [all Christians] continue to read and teach, to learn and meditate and ponder. Let them never stop until they have proved by experience that they have taught the devil to death and have become wiser than God himself.[19]

It is in this fashion that Experience belies the vain hope of the Courteour for contentment and rest. In the initial meeting the "ageit

[17] Martin Luther, 'Preface' in Robert H. Fisher (trans.) *The Large Catechism*, (Philadelphia, 1959), 3.
[18] Ibid, 5.
[19] Ibid, 7.

man"[20], who is described in Christ-like imagery, beckons the persona to sit underneath a tree with him. The Courteour is glad of this rest being "tyrit of travelling"[21] and, on finding the man's name is Experience, bestows upon him all his woes in the hope of being consoled. The Courteour describes his experience at court which alludes to the voice of Lyndsay whose experience tells him "everilk court bene variant".[22] The Courteour is idealising that Experience can provide the salvation he seeks, becoming Luther's idea of the Christian who thinks he has learnt everything and should be rewarded. His weariness causes him to think in contrarealist, contrafactual terms; causing him to undermine his lifelong quest for salvation by idealising that there could be a more immediately gratifying solution. The Courteour describes the despondence that sometimes comes with philosophy: "Quhen I belief to be best easit/ Most suddenlye I am displeasit".[23] The tone is reflective of a man who has troubled with virtue all his life and now, at his age, feels he deserves some reward. This lost state of wonder and joy at finally achieving salvation is immediately denounced by Experience in his third utterance: "Thow art an egret fuill, soune".[24]

Experience is the spiritual conscience of the persona, acting to dispel the presumption of deserved salvation. When this is found on earth in "ryches, dignitie and rentis"[25] it may please the body, but it poisons the mind. The burden of virtue, Experience says, has to be held by all living beings as they maintain their morality in life to gain passage to heaven. The Courteour's questions form the perfect pupil – he demands to be taught by Experience how God will save man from sin. By playing out the role of student and teacher, Lyndsay constructs the perfect scene to model stories from scripture in to an accessible didactic poetic:

[20] Lyndsay, l. 301.
[21] Ibid, l. 349.
[22] Ibid, l. 354.
[23] Ibid, ll. 342 – 3.
[24] Ibid, l. 358.
[25] Ibid, l. 395

> Bot I sall do the best I can
> Schortlie to schaw that cairfull cace,
> With the support of Goddis grace.[26]

The importance of the accessibility of scripture to every level of society was an important Reformist principle. Luther's translation of the Bible from Latin was printed in Germany in 1534, however, the Geneva Bible in English was not published until 1560 and not circulated in Scotland until 1579.[27] In the absence of a Bible in the Scots vernacular, Lyndsay is "establishing his 'lytil quhair' as a Christian handbook as well as a source for social reform."[28] Lyndsay's aim is to evolve the elaboration of Scots to communicate theological and religious thought to the common man as well as the learned. As Cuthbert discusses:

> For this national reform to happen the lay community must have, as the Courteour suggests, the 'bukis necessare' in the Scots 'toung vulgare'.[29]

The didactic intent is to attain a justly governed kingdom through teaching self-governance to all. The lack of a governing figure is a catalyst for this response which bypasses the monarch and looks directly to God for guidance.

The absence of male rule was ended by the infant King James VI (1566 – 1625) after Mary's abdication in 1567. James VI was a dominating figure in Scottish culture and politics. As the Renaissance dawned he made sure Scotland was in the European literary vanguard, merging the penchant for moral investigation with a renaissance aesthetic of artistic expression and linguistic experimentation. James VI successfully negotiated his monarchy with

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[26] Ibid, ll. 335 – 7.
[27] http://www.genevabible.com/introduction.html (04/02/11).
[28] Cuthbert, 26.
[29] Cuthbert, 28.

the clergy by advocating the Bodinian theory of the divine right of kings, re-establishing connections between the kirk, culture and court which had been somewhat lost during his mother's reign. However, after the Union of the Crowns in 1603, which saw the departure of king from his country and his influence from her culture, his voice was muffled by the miles between his English throne and the kirk. Despite the aims of the king, the distinctively independent legal, clerical and linguistic practices in either country prevented the proper integration of economy, culture and society. The carpet had been pulled from under Scotland's feet and now, after sustaining herself through decades of monarchical and governmental uncertainty, her once strong and centred cultural infrastructure had been undone.

As has been seen in Lyndsay, literature in Scotland was a vehicle for moral, religious and political education which emphasised reading as a tool for provoking reflective self-education. Continued into and throughout James VI's reign, the established channel of literature as communication and unification between king and people remained strong. With the departure of the monarch, an absence was created in the identity of the people. As Theo van Heijnsbergen explains:

> …the sovereign provided the most important secular template for virtue, through which individuality could be absorbed in to the community, and for both individual and public identity. Such identities were, moreover, disseminated particularly through textual representation. The collective image that elsewhere neutralised divisions within the nation and the individual (the monarch as both political body and model for an integrated self) in Scotland instead generated faultlines between past and present, Catholics and Protestants, male and female, and Scotland and Britain. Both individual and collective identities were thus left in a decentred condition of displaced or deferred identity, which has appealed to

> other cultures especially in times when certainties are challenged.[30]

And so it is a broken soil from which William Lithgow departs. Continuing in the vein of assessing the effect of the monarch's absence on the writer, William Lithgow's poetry displays a deliberative character who also turns to his faith in God for guidance.

In his most studied work, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures, and Painefull Peregrinations of Long Nineteene Yeares Trauailes from Scotland to the Most Famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affrka*, a prose text which documents his travels from Scotland across the world, William Lithgow presents himself as a "provokative controversialist"[31] who writes with a single-mindedness and unwavering arrogance that has caused his critics to question the "professed theocentric focus of his writing".[32] In his encounters with foreign lands and cultures, Lithgow asserts his protestant ethics not without a degree of showmanship, such as when he protects a Dalmatian widow from the Catholic Frenchman's "luxurious lust",[33] constructing the narrative around his self-made chivalry. Constantly superimposing his own moral map turns his experiences, from the open-minded observance one may think modern travel writing provokes, into Lithgow's paradoxical education that he uses to reinforce his self, not reassess his position.

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[30] Theo van Heijnsbergen, 'Early Modern Literature in Scotland: The Making and Unmaking of the Nation' (2007) in Bob Harris Alan MacDonald (eds) *Volume 2: Early Modern Scotland, c. 1500 – 1707*, pp. 225 – 242, 241.

[31] James Burns, 'William Lithgow's dalida: a seventeenth-century traveller's departure from Scotland' (1996) in *Scottish Literary Journal*, pp. 1-15, 9.

[32] Theo van Heijnsbergen, the phrase is taken from an earlier unpublished version of ' William Lithgow's "Fierce Castalian Vein": travel-writing and the re-location of identity' (2010) in K. J. McGinley and N. Royan (eds), *The Apparelling of Truth: Literature and Literary Culture in the Reign of James VI* (Cambridge) pp. 223 – 240.

[33] William Lithgow, *The Totall Discourse*, ed. I Okes (London, 1640).

However, Lithgow makes a convincing case for the man who travels with an already formulated view of the world. The traveller with an "unconstant disposition, to whom every accident is a constellation by which best thoughts are diversified"[34] is at a disadvantage. To Lithgow, being too open and changeable breeds the inability to distinguish the true constellations from the false, the latter of which are conceived by passion as "the heart of man is insatiable being set upon whatsoever object, his predominant affection listeth".[35] Lithgow has no anchor in a monarchical or domestic sense, only constellations to guide him. His physical home is unsteady, but this serves him well to his own aims: allowing him to become the "self-justifying Protestant of superior understanding who can travel among the faithless and keep his inner self intact".[36] In the absence of his king, Lithgow turns to his kirk for identity, anchoring himself in his belief in God's plan:

> I never find affliction fall on me
> Without desert, for God is true and just:
> Nor shal it come, and without profit be,
> For God is good, as mercifull I trust.
> Then welcome all afflictions sent from God,
> He whom he loves he chastneth with his rod.[37]

In *A Conflict Between the Pilgrime and his Muse*[38] Lithgow presents a deliberative character without the hitherto single-minded disposition portrayed in his prose. Turning away from the considerations of the external world and his self, Lithgow is exploring the internal conflicts of that self and his conscience. As Reid notes:

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[34] Lithgow, *TD,* 342.
[35] Ibid, 342.
[36] van Heijnsbergen, published version of 'William's Lithgow's "Fierce Castalian Vein": travel-writing and the re-location of identity', 228.
[37] Lithgow, *TD*, 8.
[38] A poem dedicated to Lord Graham, Earle of Montrose, found in *The Pilgrime's Farewell,* Lithgow's first volume of poetry. All references to the poem are taken from *The Poetical Remains of William Lithgow MDCXVIII – MDCLX,* ed. J. Maidment (1863).

> Moreover this inner life, such as it is, seems to have a way of detaching him from the world he travels through. I should not wish to exaggerate the personal mark on him of what was after all a highly conventional form of spirituality. Still one feels his experience of faith when he was tortured by the Inquisition brings to a head a sort of religious feeling that turned inwards away from the world around him to God, who is always the same everywhere, annihilating the accidents of geography that travel is concerned with. Equally his occasional stoic meditations draw him away from taking in the circumstantiality of the world. The mind is its own place.[39]

Lithgow's distinction between body and mind parallel the effects of travel on the transmutable physical life and of the Christian view of the resilient eternal soul. This internalisation of a dual existence brings into being the internal dialogue which allows Lithgow to exercise reason over his self-doubt and anxieties about travelling. Where he may be injured in the physical, he is able to "triumph in minde, a figge for care".[40] The Pilgrime always refutes the Muse's worry about the physical pains, threats of homelessness, disease and corruption, emphasising that "to liue below my minde, I cannot bow". [41]This distinction shows that as well as prioritising his spiritual existence over the physical, Lithgow is aware of the internal duality of the mind and body, which at times operate independently of each other, and the control that the mind can exercise over bodily constraints. This recognition further depicts the internal narration of the traveller, indeed of all conscious beings, which is inevitably distinct from the

[39] David Reid, 'What William Lithgow was doing abroad: the rare adventures and painfull peregrinations' in Caie, Lyall, Mapstone and Simpson (eds) *The European Sun*, (East Lothian, 2001) pp. 520 – 533, 528.
[40] Lithgow, *A Conflict*, l. 108.
[41] Ibid, l. 7.

person we portray in external reality. The internal narration can never be truly externalised and what Lithgow presents in his poetry, and sometimes unconsciously in his prose, is a fascinating dissection of what it means to exist, to always and inescapably be with another which is at the same time your own self.

In questioning the Pilgrime's intentions, the Muse is guarding against the Pilgrime's mind mimicking the wandering of his feet:

> I graunt it's true, and more esteem'd abroade
> But zeale growes colde, and thou forgetst the way:
> Better it were at home to serue thy GOD,
> Than wandring still, to wander quite astray:
> Thou canst not trauaile, keepe they conscience too,
> For that is more, than Pilgrimes well can doe.[42]

This alludes to Lithgow's internal struggle between his need to keep travelling and his thoughts of home. Through conversing between will and reason, the Pilgrime is able to overcome his anxieties and sustain a confidence in being able to exist outwith the parameters of his homeland. This practice of self-challenge and self-confirmation is what Lithgow thrives on, led by the belief in God that he will prevail over the "Perrill, Paines, in Trauaile, and in VVandring".[43] In committing the wanderings of his mind to paper, Lithgow is able to create a reinforced role, "realising in a specially intense way one's identity (in a sense) with someone who (in another sense) one is not".[44] By externalising the construction of this 'role' in dialogue, Lithgow is proving and reiterating himself to himself and to his audience, thereby asserting his identity through narrating his reality and thus characterising himself as the spiritual and literary protagonist,

[42] Ibid, ll. 222 – 228.
[43] Ibid, l. 226.
[44] Walter J. Ong, 'Voice as Summons for Belief: Literature, Faith and the Divided Self' in Giles B Gunn (ed) *Literature and Religion*, (London, 1971), pp. 68 – 86, 71.

substituting this for, by analogy, the authorial narrative which was historically centred around the king.

By exploring the structure of the soul of an individual, these poems sought to enlighten their audience by providing an exemplar of faith, in God and in reason. By layering the pluralities within the persona, the poets combine different facets of narrative and open up the space in which the voices operate, inviting the reader to re-enact the dialogue in their reading. This act of conversing, between characters in the poem, the writer and reader, and the intertextuality of the ideas expressed, creates the 'conversation' which breaks the destructive patterning of the individual's perspective and refocuses the fundamental voice. In answer to a crisis of self (and society), both Lyndsay and Lithgow literarified the polarisations within their selves, using the dialogue to mediate between the extremities of their discontent. The social role of their writing and the interpretative traditions in early modern literature meant that these polarisations could be mapped onto their country's decentred identity, providing a didactic model of reason in times of much needed moral authority.

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