

‘Something Axiomatic on the Nature of Articulacy’: Don Paterson’s ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ as *Ars Poetica*

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Scholarly study of the British author Don Paterson’s work may be in its infancy, but the poem ‘An Elliptical Stylus’, from his first collection of poetry Nil Nil (1993), has already attracted a considerable degree of critical attention. This essay discusses various appraisals of the poem, within a detailed exploration of the ways in which divides between, and anxieties surrounding, social classes in contemporary Britain are re-evaluated and redressed within the work. It argues that the poem’s stylistic techniques – its estrangement of the ordinary through perceptually transformative use of quotidian detail, augmented by direct address to the reader and use of personae – also serve to expose the frequently mutable, incoherent nature of personal identity, destabilising broader notions of a unified sense of self. As such, the essay proposes that ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ represents an embryonic ars poetica, and should be viewed not only as a crucial poem in the stylistic and underlying thematic development of Paterson’s writing, but as a key poem in the postmodern canon.

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The Scottish author Don Paterson (b. 1963) is widely regarded as the leading British poet of his generation. Between them, his seven collections of poetry to date – *Nil Nil* (1993), *God’s Gift to Women* (1997), *The Eyes* (1999), *Landing Light* (2003), *Orpheus* (2006), *Rain* (2009) and *40 Sonnets* (2015) – have won numerous prizes and accolades. He is the only poet in the

history of the coveted T. S. Eliot Prize to win the award twice, he has received the Forward Prize in every category (Best Collection, Best First Collection, and Best Single Poem) and, in 2009, he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Moreover, his critical stock is beginning to rise: his most lauded collection, *Rain*, commanded lengthy reviews in *The New Yorker* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and essays on his work have appeared in anthologies including *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry* (2009) and a volume devoted to his work, *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays* (2014). By turns dynamic, interrogative and unsettling; crafted yet open-ended; fiercely smart, savage and stirring, his work demands, and will doubtless increasingly attract, much in the way of serious critical attention.

This essay will focus on the poem 'An Elliptical Stylus', from Paterson's first collection *Nil Nil* – a lyrical, swaggering, formally deft, freewheeling polemic of a piece. Though criticism of Paterson's work is at a relatively early stage, such is the complexity of the poem's repeated volte-face and tonal variance, it has already elicited a dizzying array of responses. '[A] grab[bing of] the individual reader by the collar';¹ 'an attack on middle England's complacency';² a poem which 'give[s] us a voice which arrestingly declaims its otherness'³ while also declaring 'chips on shoulders':⁴ these are just a handful of reactions to 'An Elliptical Stylus'.⁵ Where all critics are agreed, however, is on the central theme of the poem. Adam Thorpe put it succinctly, if rather reductively, in a review of *Nil Nil*, singling out this 'sad little story about [the poet's] Scottish working-class father being mocked by a salesman'.⁶

As with much of Paterson's verse and its defamiliarising transformations of the everyday and the apparently straightforward, however, there is much more to 'An Elliptical Stylus' than an emotive tale of masculine pride and posturing. Specifically, the poem is a barbed critique of rigid conceptions of social class; it seems to argue that these views remain residually present in late twentieth-century British society, despite an ostensibly increased level

of social mobility. If, as Judith Butler has argued, the true nature of identity is performative, with ‘words, acts, gestures, and desire produc[ing] the effect of an internal core’, suggesting that identities have ‘no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [their] reality’, what does this mean for an individual with one foot either side of an apparent class divide?⁷ In its disorienting mix of apparent confessionality and ludic flamboyance, ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ fully broaches such complex issues, made all the more complex given that some would question their modern relevance in the first instance. For even before Paterson published ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ in the early 1990s, the beginnings of an ongoing sociological debate as to whether class was now an outmoded concept had already gained momentum. As Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset argued in a paper published in 1991, ‘class stratification implies that people can be differentiated hierarchically on one or more criteria into distinct layers, classes. Class analysis has grown increasingly inadequate in recent decades as traditional hierarchies have declined and new social differences have emerged’.⁸ Yet, as Sarah Broom has noted, if ‘poets of Paterson’s generation have emerged in a social context in which class is not loudly spoken of, in which its significance is uncertain and ambiguous’, it is nevertheless ‘still insidiously present’.⁹

The purpose of this essay is three-fold. Firstly, I will offer a reading of Paterson’s ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ that explores the ways in which class divides and associated anxieties are not only re-evaluated, but ultimately redressed within the poem. In turn, I will discuss how this serves to destabilise broader notions of a unified sense of self, through the poem’s exposition of the conflicting, sometimes incompatible facets of a given individual’s mutable identity. Most crucially, I will argue that in spite of its unusual theme (the issue of social class is nowhere else as apparent in *Nil Nil*, and almost entirely disappears in Paterson’s second collection, *God’s Gift to Women*), ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ can be seen as a kind of embryonic *ars poetica*, pivotal to the stylistic and overarching thematic development of Paterson’s poetry in later volumes.



The initial setting in ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ is the speaker’s uncle’s house, where father and speaker-son are given a proud demonstration of the eponymous stylus, a superior needle that enhances the sound quality of a vinyl record player. The poem sets up a conventional dynamic: while both the speaker’s father and uncle are portrayed as voicing approval with a stereotypically working-class, Scots-inflected tone (“‘Aye, yer elliptical stylus – / fairly brings out a’ the wee details’”¹⁰), the speaker recalls the experience with atmospheric, almost florid, descriptive finesse:

Balanced at a fraction of an ounce
 the fat cartridge sank down like a feather;
 music billowed into three dimensions
 as if we could have walked between the players.¹¹

The immediate precursor here is Seamus Heaney’s ‘Digging’, the opening poem of his debut collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).¹² Both poems find the articulate poet-son remembering his non-literary father in an attempt to find common ground and continuity between their generational, educational, and vocational differences. The difference between the poems, however, is that where the narrator of ‘Digging’, despite his admiration, finds he has ‘no spade to follow men’ like his labouring father, resolving instead to ‘dig’ with his pen,¹³ Paterson’s poem sees father and poet-son sharing in an artistic experience. As Sarah Broom notes: ‘the father hears the quality of sound produced by the elliptical stylus [...] and wants to buy one for “our ancient, beat-up Phillips turntable”’.¹⁴ The implication is that, rather than the distant and anonymous father figure in Heaney’s ‘Digging’, present only as ‘a clean rasping

sound’,¹⁵ the poet’s father in ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ is of a certain sophistication, someone who can ‘appreciate the difference’.¹⁶ Instead of Heaney’s fiercely individual image of the ‘squat pen’, which remains a symbol of his solitary artistic seriousness in spite of attempts to metaphorically connect that object with his father’s spade, Paterson’s deployment of the stylus, of ‘music billow[ing] into three dimensions’, evinces a sense of collective aesthetic appreciation. It suggests that the poem’s overt focus will not be the class divide between father and son, but the broader class anxieties that the speaker not only recalls from childhood, but also finds apparent in his later adult life.

The poem’s second stanza sees father and son arrive at the shop. Met with condescension from the owner given the obvious age of their record player, the poet-narrator recalls how ‘we had the guy in stitches: “You can’t ... / er ... you’ll have to *upgrade your equipment*.”’¹⁷ The stanza’s pathos is palpable: the speaker notes how the middle-class owner ‘sent us from the shop’, implying a clear social hierarchy, while the box of needles they end up with are ‘thick as carpet-tacks, / the only sort they made to fit our model’. This detailed quotidian descriptiveness sets the scene and supplies the emotional resonance that draws the reader into the poem. The part-joke, part-dejected tone also makes the sudden, disorienting turn which follows – a characteristic feature of Paterson’s writing – all the more effective and jolting. It is at this moment that the poem’s title also takes on added metaphorical dimension: as well as the literal needle on the gramophone player finding an abstract equivalence in the nib of the poet-speaker’s pen, it suggests something of the character of the verse Paterson intends to write. ‘Elliptical’, after all, refers as much to the sharp, puncturing brevity of expression that characterises much of the poem, as it does to the productive ambiguities of meaning that Paterson’s style is able to deliver.

As such, the poem's third stanza sees the poet-narrator invite – or in truth, rather forcibly *direct* – the reader to ‘eavesdrop’ on the poem he instead might be writing, were he the shop owner's son. The parody is sharply executed:

(Supposing I'd been *his* son: let's eavesdrop
 on ‘Fidelities’, the poem I'm writing now:
*The day my father died, he showed me how
 he'd prime the deck for optimum performance:
 it's that lesson I recall – how he'd refine
 the arm's weight, to leave the stylus balanced
 somewhere between ellipsis and precision,
 as I gently lower the sharp nib to the line
 and wait for it to pick up the vibration
 till it moves across the page, like a cardiograph ...)*¹⁸

Several critics have explored what Alan Gillis has called this ‘striking [...] parenthetical stanza’,¹⁹ finding in its delicate and controlled nostalgia a clear send-up of the perceived qualities of middle-class verse: ‘restraint, precision, clarity, balance’.²⁰ There is also a disruption of dichotomic preconceptions, as the poet-speaker, having previously asserted his working-class credentials, subverts them (and any easy judgements) in a falsely empathetic, barbed, yet accomplished description of middle-class inheritance. The title of this alternative poem is immediately telling. In its witty punning on the superior quality of sound the elliptical stylus produces, ‘Fidelities’ not only gestures towards that which father and son have been denied, but also serves to mock naïve notions of poetry as a means of capturing ‘true’ feeling and meaning through apparently faithful representations of a reified conception of actuality. The poem's delicious lampoon of such an approach – ‘lower[ing] the sharp nib to the line’, as

if the stylus (but also the poet's pen) might 'pick up the vibration' of authentic feeling 'till it moves across the page, like a cardiograph' – is thus a subtle refusal of documentary truth, in favour of what might be termed poetic truth. Rather than a persistent attempt to 'accurately' describe, in these terms, poetry is characterised by its interrogation and destabilisation of conventional representations and received ideas, so as to deliver a transformative payoff that alters the reader's preconceived perceptions.

Discussing the difference between poetry and prose, Paterson has asserted his belief that 'poetry is vertical, invocatory, [...] things are called down from above by the mere intonation of their names'.²¹ He goes on to conclude that 'for me, there's no "as if" in poetry. In the beginning was the word, not the world, and poetry reminds us of this continually.'²² Bearing this in mind, Paterson's send-up in 'Fidelities' can be read on two levels. While the parenthesised meta-poem is clearly a parody of what Peter Robinson labels 'the sensitively adjectival plain style of an upwardly mobile Movement-period poetic',²³ it is also a criticism of those conventional notions of meaning that can often accompany such a comfy aesthetic. Specifically, Paterson is attacking the naïve idea that language, in spite of its being a suspended system that constantly defers any fixed meanings in the free play of its signs, still gestures towards transcendental meanings and truths that exist, independent of language, in the outside world. But if the only reality we truly know is that which language generates, this is impossible. Language *is* our reality. Of course, this is not to put forward the untenable idea that there is *no* reality beyond language. Rather, it is to acknowledge that language constructs the narrowly human reality which we habitually perceive and inhabit. As Paterson suggested in his 2004 T. S. Eliot lecture, 'poetry is a function of language' – one that, in his view, serves to 'unite us with what is not us, or rather what we had forgotten was us; it allows us to know ourselves as an expression of the universe – a word of its living speech – not a book it once wrote and discarded'.²⁴

At first glance, acceptance of this might seem to render the writing of poetry a fruitless pursuit. In fact, the opposite is true: it demands recognition that innovative use of language can effectively serve to *re-make* the world as we perceive it. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have argued, the writer must ‘be a sort of stranger *within* his own language’, if he is to produce work in which ‘very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can’t be said’.²⁵ Consequently, any insistence on ‘accurate’ or ‘precise’ poetry not only betrays a refusal to acknowledge this, but also offers a limited perspective on poetry’s capacity to widen our stock of available reality. As Paterson has stated in interview:

I think the imagination is how we correct reality for error. Reality’s all the stuff that just happens to face up, and be relatively well-lit. It’s also just what human evolution has chosen to extract from the totality of things. [...] All I’m saying is that when you think of it like that, then it seems a luxury to think of the human imagination as *distinct* from reality, given reality is completely dreamt up in the first place. When we introduce these alternative universes into the world through our poems, they don’t just change ‘the way people look at the world’ – because ‘the way people look at the world’ is all there is of the world. They change reality itself.²⁶

Given this intricate web of ideas lurking behind the poem’s surface play, it is perhaps unsurprising that no critical account of ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ has seen fit to comment on the way in which its parenthetical stanza not only posits but actually *creates* a parallel universe, reminiscent of those in a number of the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Yet ‘Fidelities’, like ‘An Elliptical Stylus’, is pointedly introduced as ‘the poem *I’m writing now*’. This may seem a trivial distinction, but it is key to a detailed reading of the poem. In interview, Paterson has commented how ‘Borges is just as big an influence, possibly more of an influence, than any

poet' on his work and, indeed, 'An Elliptical Stylus' is one of several poems in *Nil Nil* that combines the quotidian with a labyrinthine Borgesian conceit to startling effect.²⁷ In 'An Elliptical Stylus', this conceit specifically recalls the divided self of 'Borges and I', in which the narrator becomes aware of the disorienting dual life he leads as both author and individual. In Borges' story, a singular first-person voice narrates, but its identity is divided, between one that inhabits the suspended medium of language, and another that lives an everyday life unavoidably detached from the former's literary creations. Yet, as the story implies, while author and individual may not be identical, neither are they, as facets of the one person, fully separate or distinct. As the narrator states, it is impossible to know 'which of us has written this page'.²⁸

In this sense, 'An Elliptical Stylus' can be seen to interrogate the false distinction between the ostensibly real and the symbolic, or more specifically, to shake us from 'the human dream'. This is Paterson's Heideggerian coinage for what he views as the perceptually-limited human condition, whereby the labelling-gun of language makes 'everything appear purely in the guise of its human utility, and held in place by its human name.'²⁹ The philosophical implications of 'the human dream' have come to dominate Paterson's later work. '[W]e are the source, not the conducting element' claims the speaker in 'The White Lie', a philosophical treatise of a poem from Paterson's fourth volume, *Landing Light*;³⁰ similarly in 'The Error', from Paterson's sixth book, *Rain*, mankind finds that the 'world is just the glare / of the world's utility / returned by his eye-beam'.³¹ Yet it is also worth noting that this fascination with the deceptions of routinely-perceived reality and apparent normality are broadly present in an early poem such as 'An Elliptical Stylus', where the fluid shiftings between everyday false dichotomies (in this case, working-class and middle-class stereotypes) expose reductive thinking to the complexity of truths beyond habitual human encounters with the world.

In reading the parenthetical excerpt from ‘Fidelities’ less as an imaginary flight of fancy, and more as a poem by *another* poet who, inhabiting a possible parallel universe, is selfsame to the speaker yet was born the son of a middle-class shop owner, its narrative purpose within the context and complex argument of ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ becomes much clearer. But first, let us return to the poem’s narrative. The fourth and final stanza returns to deflated son and father, driving home from the shop ‘slowly, as if we had a puncture’, with ‘my Dad trying not to blink, and that man’s laugh / stuck in my head’.³² This too, we are told, is where ‘the story sticks’, and where the poem’s argument comes to the fore. The loose rhyme scheme and forceful anapaestic meter underline the poet-narrator’s refusal of

any attempt to cauterize this fable
with something axiomatic on the nature
of articulacy and inheritance,
since he can well afford to make his *own*
excuses, you your own interpretation.
But if you still insist on resonance –
I’d swing for him, and every other cunt
happy to let my father know his station,
which probably includes yourself. To be blunt.³³

Responses to this concluding stanza exhibit an understandable degree of bafflement. Having carefully developed an emotive familial recollection (now crucially labelled a ‘fable’, as if to suggest its possible, though nonetheless purposeful, artifice) it seems odd that the poem should deny – or at least seem to *want* to deny – the reader a pithy, summarising conclusion. As Gillis questions: ‘What else is such a poem for, if not “something axiomatic on the nature / of

articulacy and inheritance””³⁴ Paterson’s own thoughts may go some way towards illuminating the situation:

The poem [...] was intended as a deliberate inversion of the current practice of inviting the audience to ‘share’ the experience; I’m terrified some well-heeled wee bugger will come up to me afterwards and tell me how much he enjoyed it. I think there are some grudges which need to be renewed annually; poetry is a good way of making palatable things that should remain indigestible, making certain kinds of crime easier for both the perpetrator and the victim to live with. There are a lot of sub-[Tony] Harrison types about who see their poetry as lending dignity to the working-class experience [...] when what they’re really dealing with is their own embarrassment with their social origins, and their awkwardness in using the language of their superiors. It’s depressing to see the working-classes patronise *themselves* in this way.³⁵

This correlates with Gillis’s somewhat cautious reading of the poem’s ‘aesthetic poise’ as ‘a retrospective “swing” for the salesman’.³⁶ The final reversion to a stereotypically working-class response of aggression is viewed to be the result of a dissatisfaction with the poem’s earlier appropriation of measured, stereotypically middle-class poetic technique. Apparently, this leaves the poem on the defensive and with a desire to ‘out-articulate you, the reader, and then perhaps swing for you anyway’.³⁷ Other critics, most notably Broom, are broadly in agreement, though more reductively find it to ‘imitate [Tony] Harrison’s sonnets in its confrontational stance towards the literary establishment and its assumption that “received” poetry is inherently linked with class’, while also arguing that ‘it is even more directly aggressive towards the reader’.³⁸ In fact, it is worth noting that a faintly apologetic tone may be detected in the poem’s final line. As Peter Robinson has suggested, in reading the poem as an act of self-criticism: ‘The speaker [...] appears bruised by the exercise of class-based

consumerist relations outside himself. [...] Reading the last line [...] as a muffled or tacit self-address produces a psychological bruise more resonant'.³⁹ But the most illuminating reading of the poem must surely pay attention the poem's paradoxical refusal *and* acceptance to offer the reader a conclusive moral, a stance that is both in line with, and a volte-face of, that 'deliberate inversion [...] of inviting the audience to "share" the experience'.

The poem's defining feature is the manner in which it continually remains one step ahead of the reader. It achieves this in a typically Patersonian estrangement of everyday quotidian detail, but also with its insistence on direct address, and its subtle use of personae. To begin with, the reader is comfortably ensconced within the poem's commonplace *mise en scène* and class dynamic. But in convincingly adopting the persona of a stereotypically middle-class poet, the poem conjures its parenthetical parallel world, destabilising the straightforwardly emotive anecdote that precedes it. The poem then withholds the fable's expected *précis*, before the poet-speaker threatens to 'swing' for us, employing a direct address that insists on a more attentive, active and clear-eyed engagement with the poem. In so merging the staple technique in *Nil Nil* of estranging ordinariness with this use of personae and direct address to the reader, the poem becomes a gauntlet, thrown down to any reader who thinks of poetry, as Paterson has put it in a lecture on the art form, as 'a kind of straight-faced recognition comedy', having 'no need either for originality or epiphany'.⁴⁰

The role that poetry's direct immediacy of address plays in securing its felt authenticity and consequent longevity is central to 'An Elliptical Stylus'. It is also a key early example of the influence that Michael Donaghy has exerted on Paterson's writing. Donaghy – a contemporary and admirer, but also a close friend of Paterson's – once stated in his *ars poetica* essay 'Wallflowers': 'For the reader, the shared language of the poem functions as a compass or map to assist us through the terrain of a new idea [...] [while] phrases exploit the reader's or audience's expectations'.⁴¹ As such, Donaghy's practical understanding and deft application

of the power of the poem as ‘properly a dialogue with the reader’,⁴² in both his critical writings and the poetry collections published in his lifetime – *Shibboleth* (1988), *Errata* (1993), *Conjure* (2000) – have clearly left their mark. But where a typical Donaghy poem employs a more straightforwardly simpatico persona to cajole and coerce (‘Bear with me. I’m trying to conjure my father’⁴³; ‘Can I come in? I saw you slip away’⁴⁴), Paterson’s approach is usually more steely-eyed, insistent, and even threatening. As Peter Howarth has stated, his narrators can often seem to make ‘every would-be casual reader into a sparring partner’.⁴⁵ In ‘An Elliptical Stylus’, we find the refined example of Donaghy’s direct address to the reader adopted by Paterson to his own, distinct artistic ends. The everyday yet unstable world of the poem refuses to reflect the comfortable perceptions and reductive preconceptions a reader may bring to bear upon it.

Naturally, however, as readers, we do continue to make instinctive stereotypical class-bound judgements of the characters the poem depicts. This is partly encouraged and directed by the poem itself: consider its crafted and crafty use of language, but also its foregrounding of our anticipated judgements, and surface refusal to deliver the tale’s expected neat summary. Yet, while the poem will not make plain its truths on ‘the nature of articulacy and inheritance’, they can be found within the poem, if the reader is willing to look for them. Aggressive it may be, but the ‘resonance’ provided in the poem’s closing lines can be viewed as less a recourse to stereotypical working-class inarticulacy, and more an imperative to think interrogatively about what a poem depicts and suggests. The poet-speaker may appear willing to espouse a comfortable stereotype for a reader who refuses to see beyond simplifying class boundaries, but the implication is that such a reader misses the poem’s purpose, if that is what they insist. ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ therefore demands an understanding: neither the poem, nor its supposed moral or message, can be paraphrased, precisely because its transformative effect *only functions* when the reader is fully engaged in the demanding act of reading and thinking.

Returning to the parenthetical excerpt from ‘Fidelities’, and reading it as a poem written by the poet-speaker in a parallel universe alongside ‘An Elliptical Stylus’, produces challenging instabilities and difficulties around any attempt to formulate a reductive class-bound conception of the poet-narrator. For if we merely entertain the possibility of a world in which the poet-speaker were born the son of the shop owner, yet hold it to be an impossibility, we can continue to subscribe to a conveniently stereotypical working-class view of the speaker. But the poem directs us otherwise: here is the son of a working-class man who is also capable of an articulacy more readily associated with the middle-classes, yet who mocks the affectations of such a style while convincingly embracing them, and whose intellect and self-reflective sophistication can suddenly sour to a stereotypically working-class bluntness and aggression. In other words, this is a lifting of the veil on what social class really means in modern Britain. A concept with little currency given the dubious politics of social mobility, it nonetheless remains; as Ken Roberts has argued, ‘the rate of social fluidity, meaning the social mobility that is not structurally inevitable on account of class differentials in birth rates and changes in the proportions of positions at different levels, is roughly the same at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was at the beginning of the twentieth’.⁴⁶ Moreover, it often leaves those with a foot either side of its reified divisions frustrated, anxious and defensive – their complex, fluid identities bound by the underlying assumptions and prejudices of a society that often refuses to discuss them. As Paterson himself has confessed, in an interview that touches on his previously hostile defence of the so-called poetic ‘mainstream’: ‘[Y]ou’re perfectly correct to identify that neocon[servative] barking as insecurity, and locate it in my lowly origins. [...] [T]he working class is a class by default only, and are broadly aspirational’.⁴⁷

Beyond its provocative and deft dealings with social class, however, we have seen how ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ also emerges as a complexly philosophical encounter with the notion and nature of personal identity. In so estranging the ordinary world of the everyday anecdote with

which it opens, the poem not only exposes the shifting, multi-faceted character of its poet-speaker, but also the impracticality of viewing any individual as harbouring a fixed and stable self. As such, the poem lays the intellectual groundwork on which Paterson's later writing constructs (and plays more freely with) personae in his second collection *God's Gift to Women*, in turn leading to the increasingly autonomous and anonymously-voiced poems of *The Eyes* (1999) onwards. In the Afterword to this latter volume, which comprises loosely translated 'versions' after the Spanish of Antonio Machado, Paterson argues that, in translating a poem, 'the only defensible fidelity is to the entirely subjective quality of "spirit" or "vision", rather than to literal meaning'.⁴⁸ On the evidence of 'An Elliptical Stylus', it might also be argued that in his own original poems Paterson similarly pursues a mode of writing, and advocates a method of reading, that places the perceptually transformative possibilities of individual 'vision' above that of unhelpfully reductive notions of externally verifiable 'meaning'. The salesman in the poem 'can well afford to make his *own / excuses*', after all, and so 'you your own interpretation'.⁴⁹

Suffice to say, more than any other poem in *Nil Nil*, 'An Elliptical Stylus' combines Paterson's estrangement of quotidian detail, direct address to the reader, and use of personae in its transformation of the reader's preconceptions and perceptions. Though teasing out the poem's necessarily complex and veiled significance can, as seen, prove less than straightforward, its marriage of the aforementioned techniques in approaching the thorny issues of social class and personal identity makes the poem a particularly vivid, early illustration of Paterson's unusual use of poetry as a mode of knowledge. As Sean O'Brien has noted, 'Paterson's [poems reveal a] determination to use poetry as a kind of thinking, rather than be the passive prisoner of period and style and received ideas'.⁵⁰ Indeed, in much of his writing we are encouraged to 'turn from the light to see',⁵¹ and so the sinister denouement to 'An Elliptical Stylus' not only offers an insistent demand to the reader to think differently about

their existing notions of social class, identity, truth and artifice, but also reveals Paterson in the process of tentatively developing an *ars poetica*.

In the context of the rest of *Nil Nil*, Sarah Broom has noted how ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ ‘seems to assert Paterson’s capacity as poet to be both blunt and elliptical, and all in a very self-aware manner’.⁵² As a loose statement of intent, however, the poem is more than the aesthetic showboating Broom implies. Rather, it appears to represent, on both a stylistic and more broadly thematic level, Paterson coming to terms with what it will take – that is, what his poetics may require – to not only see the world and its objects ‘reconsumed in [their] estranging fire’,⁵³ but also to determine the poetic voice most capable of achieving this – of beguiling the reader whilst remaining authoritative; of being punchy and jokey and to-the-point while also striving to be lyrical, meditative, fiercely intelligent. It marks the beginning of what, according to Paterson in his introduction to *New British Poetry* in 2004, ‘has long been my own contention’: ‘that “voice” – that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of our age – is an extraliterary issue’.⁵⁴ As well as a poem that cracks the ossifying lies of social classifications and exposes the true mutability of identity, then, ‘An Elliptical Stylus’ sees Paterson first broadly working towards a poetics – one as dynamically fluid, flexible and fascinating as the very themes this poem explores.

¹ Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p. 35.

² Vicki Bertram, *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Women and Men Poets* (London, UK: Pandora Press, 2005), p. 188.

³ Alan Gillis, ‘Don Paterson’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Matt McGuire and Colin Nicholson (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 172-186 (p. 178).

⁴ Ian Sansom, ‘Excess Its Own Reward’, in *Poetry Review*, Vol. 87 No.2 (Summer 1997), p. 44. (Review of Don Paterson’s *God’s Gift to Women*.)

⁵ Don Paterson, ‘An Elliptical Stylus’, in *Nil Nil* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1993) pp. 20-1.

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- ⁶ Adam Thorpe, 'Books (Poetry): Antiseptic sceptics', in *The Observer*, 29 August 1993, p. 53. (Review of *Nil Nil*.)
- ⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, UK: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.
- ⁸ Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Are Social Classes Dying?', in *International Sociology*, Vol. 6 No. 4 (December 1991), p. 397.
- ⁹ Broom, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Paterson, 'An Elliptical Stylus', in *Nil Nil*, p. 20.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966; London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1999), pp. 3-4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Broom, p. 34.
- ¹⁵ Heaney, 'Digging', in *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Paterson, 'An Elliptical Stylus', in *Nil Nil*, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Gillis, p. 178.
- ²⁰ Broom, p. 34.
- ²¹ Paterson, 'The Dilemma of the Peot [sic]', in *How Poets Work*, ed. by Tony Curtis (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1996), pp. 155-166 (p. 156).
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Peter Robinson, 'Punching Yourself in the Face: Don Paterson and his Readers', in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 131-144 (p. 131).
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- ⁴⁵ Peter Howarth, 'Degree of Famousness etc', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 35 No. 6 (March 21, 2013), p. 31.
- ⁴⁶ 'As far as we can tell, the rate of social fluidity, meaning the social mobility that is not structurally inevitable on account of class differentials in birth rates and changes in the proportions of positions at different levels, is roughly the same at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was at the beginning of the twentieth.' Ken Roberts, *Class in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 15.

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