

FROM LYRIC INTO NARRATIVE

Robert Falck notes in his study of the lyric that beyond the lyric of immediate experiencing there is the lyric which reaches farther into society or politics from a ‘confessional’ foundation.¹ Robert Lowell’s ‘For the Union Dead’ may be considered a poem of this kind. ‘For the Considerate Dead’² would be a further example. Dramatic poetry, or the poetry of masks or of imagined *personae*, on the other hand, is a version of the lyric which tries, on principle, to emancipate itself from the poet’s ‘empirical’ self. This is also the path of ‘Decisions’,³ where each person can be seen as an extension of the self, fighting its own private war. It was fear of the worldly autobiographical which led poets such as Yeats and Eliot to strive for impersonality. A similar fear impelled me toward a poetry of mask, a poetry of imagined *personae*. In this section I will detail some key influences on my use of narrative verse. Firstly, there was the U.S. influence.

In 1985 in the eleventh issue of *The Reaper*, a magazine founded in 1980 and devoted to the resurgence of narrative poetry in the U.S., Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell presented a checklist of the ten elements that a new narrative poem needed in order to be successful: ‘A Beginning, a Middle and an End’, ‘Observation’ (with narrator as witness), ‘Compression of Time’, ‘Containment’, ‘Illumination of Private Gestures’, ‘Understatement’, ‘Humour’, ‘Location’, ‘Memorable Characters’ and ‘A Compelling Subject’. Each of these ten elements were elaborated on by Jarman and McDowell.

The tenets of the ‘New Narrative’ are hardly new: My use of narrative would draw on the views of Aristotle as outlined in his ‘*On the Art of Poetry*’⁴ as much as from the ‘New

¹ Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature*, chapter 6, ‘Towards a True Postmodernism’, p. 156.

² Ennis, *Down in the Deeper Helicon*, pp. 81-83.

³ Ennis, *In a Green Shade*, pp. 8-25.

⁴ T.S.Dorsch, TR. *Aristotle/Horace/Longinus, Classical Literary Criticism*, pp. 65-69, ‘Epic Poetry’.

Narrative’. As for the art of representation in the form of narrative verse, Aristotle says that its plots should be dramatically constructed, like those of tragedies; they should centre upon a single action, whole and complete and have a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that like a single complete organism the poem might produce its own special kind of pleasure.

Thus, ‘Decisions’ and each section of ‘Decisions’, follows the above mode. The single action is contemplated, together with its unfolding and its consequences, by Boru, Roderic O’Connor, the O’Neill, the Apprentice Boy, James Lett, and finally by Pearse, who walks the short distance to surrender. Each section has a beginning, a middle and an end. Also, when taken together as an exploration of the military male psyche over a millennium in pursuit of some form of ‘national’ identity, the poem moves from a Holy Thursday (pre-Clontarf) through to an actual Saturday surrender in 1916 in Easter Week. The ‘pleasure’ afforded by this structured arrangement was specifically referred to by Brendan Kennelly in his adjudication on the poem for the Open-Poetry Competition at Listowel Writers’ Week, 1985.⁵ The ‘dynastic’ theme of ‘Decisions’ also brings into focus what must be considered one of the most basic elements of epic from Vergil onward, its consciousness of history. Andrew Fichter outlines in his book, *Poets Historical: Dynastic Epic in the Renaissance*,⁶ how the narrative strategy of the dynastic poem reflects the presumption of an historically-oriented mind that the present may be construed as the denouement of a course of events put in motion in the remote past.

The dynastic ‘prophet’ is ‘an analyst of historical experience. He bestows on himself as historian the same privilege Horace grants him as narrative poet, the privilege of shaping his material so that “beginning, middle and end all strike the same note”.’ The note may well be

⁵ Kennelly, *Listowel Writers’ Week Report*, Appendix C, pp. C3-C4.

terrifying as, after the depiction of a psyche stretching over a millennium, Pearse walks off the stage to his execution:

‘Off I’m goose-stepped
To light the silent
Fuse of the surrender’.⁷

In an essay on Russian Formalism in *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson further elaborate: they refer to the influence of the Greek tragedians on narrative, the tragedian drawing upon traditional stories which consisted of a series of incidents. They refer to section 6 of the *Poetics* where Aristotle defines ‘plot’ (‘mythos’) as the ‘arrangement of the incidents’. A plot is seen as the artful disposition of the incidents which make up a story. A Greek tragedy usually starts with a ‘flashback’, a recapitulation of the incidents of the story which occurred prior to those selected for the plot. In Vergil’s *Aeneid* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the reader, on the other hand, as we know, is plunged *in media res* (into the middle of things), and earlier incidents in the story are introduced artfully at various stages in the plot, often in the form of retrospective narration: thus, Aeneas narrates the Fall of Troy to Dido in Carthage and Raphael relates the War in Heaven to Adam and Eve in Paradise.

The ‘flashback’ of the Grecian tradition is used extensively in my own work - it is the mode of ‘Decisions’, ‘This Other Umbria’,⁸ and of *The Burren Days*. Some long poems use a combination of ‘flashback’ and ‘*in media res*’ - ‘Letter to Connla’,⁹ which commences, as it ends, with the drowning flashback of the unnamed twin, while the rush of the narrative

⁶ Fichter, pp. 1-8, reproduced in *The Epic: Developments in Criticism, A Selection of Critical Essays*, A.E. Dyson Ed. pp. 164-171.

⁷ Ennis, *In a Green Shade.*, p. 25, Fichter, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁸ Ennis, *Telling the Bees*, pp. 46-60.

⁹ Ennis, *Telling the Bees*, pp. 8-44.

presumes still his headlong flight. A similar technique is used in 'Telling the Bees',¹⁰ the poem ending as it began with bees swarming, the continuous activity of bee-keeping, as in Vergil's *Eclogues* attempting, or suggesting, a new genesis, *in media res*, though the time is hardly 'Augustan'.

Vergil's perceived influence on my work is discussed in Appendix B. In his work, *From Virgil to Milton*¹¹ C.M. Bowra assesses the influence of Vergil's poetic in literature. For Bowra, Vergil's art is similar to modern poetry. Its aim is to pack the lines with as much significance as possible, to make each word do the maximum work and to secure that minute attention which the reader, unlike the listener, can give.

'If the oral epic triumphs through its simplicity and strength and straightforwardness, through the unhesitating sweep of its narrative and brilliant clarity of its main effects, the written epic appeals by its poetical texture, by its exquisite apt or impressive choice of words, by the rich significance of phrases and lines and paragraphs.'¹²

Homer carries us away by the overwhelming movement of lines through a verse passage to a deliberate climax.

'What counts is the singleness of his [Homer's] effect, the unbroken maintenance of a heroic or tragic mood, the concentration on some action vividly imagined and clearly portrayed without reference or second thought or even those hints that lure into by-paths of fancy and suggest that there is more in the words than is obvious at first sight. But in *Virgil*, great though the paragraphs are, compelling though the climax is when it is reached, we are more concerned with the details, with each small effect and each deftly placed word, than with the whole. We linger over the richness of single phrases, over the 'pathetic half-lines', over the precision or potency with which a word illuminates a sentence or a happy sequence of sounds imparts an inexplicable charm to something that might otherwise have been trivial. Of course, Homer has his magical phrases and Virgil his bold effects, but the distinction stands.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 62-100.

¹¹ Bowra, pp. 1-6, 9-14, reproduced in *The Epic ...*, Dyson, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-130.

¹² Dyson, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

It is a matter of composition, of art, and it marks the real difference, between the two kinds of epic, which are not so much “authentic” and “literary” as oral and written.’¹³

I have quoted the above passage in full from Bowra because of its enduring importance to the narrative tradition. Contemporary poets can draw on either mode as the occasion, or style, suits. In their respective narratives, Paul Durcan would seem to favour the ‘oral’, Thomas Kinsella, the ‘literary’. Similarly, any writer can aim at either: in *The Burren Days*, I aimed for the sweep of lines through a whole passage, a singleness of effect, the unbroken mood, as testified to by John Lanchester writing in *Poetry Review* –

‘There are moments in the poem when the oppositions it uses seem to be becoming too stark, its exploitation of contrast too deliberate and wilful – but in the end it is this very relentlessness which make the poem a success, the fact that Ennis does not choose to soften or compromise from executing his long, single-minded unified work –
“a genuine long poem continuing from a single impulse”.’¹⁴

The poem itself gravitates towards the unveiling of the industry’s new Filtermat Drier, ‘the most advanced of its kind in Europe’. The new unit is to replace the old Stork Drier, much beloved by Ray Daly.

The narrative of the poem unfolds over five days; the various experiments and tests are linked to Ray’s state of mind at any one time. The scientific references serve as a kind of ballast for the poem: the cool world of objective testing serves as a fixed point of reference against the erotic free-ranging dream world of Ray Daly, sometimes reigning it in, sometimes, also, liberating it, sometimes reinforcing it, sometimes even leading the perception. The narrative of *The Burren Days* serves, too, as a vehicle for other stories - the mythic retelling in modern context of the story of Diarmuid and Grainne, and their story within the story of changing Ireland with its emphasis on technology, laboratories and exports for survival. The poem is

¹³ Dyson, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.

situated in a time when hundreds of graduate technicians were entering the labour market from the newly established RTCs. No writer was yet telling their story.

At the same time, the poem's narrative revolves around privacy, the right to it, the lack of it, and encroachments into it. Threats of one kind or another hang over the poem - the basic threat to overall existence symbolised by the nuclear submarine cruising offshore. Ray's own position is threatened by the figure of Joyce. There is the threat of poisoning to essential food chains; there is the threat of affluence and effluence. Even within the world of the lovers, the figure of Bosch, the great artist moralist of the Middle Ages, looms.

I believe that if *The Burren Days* is accepted as an effective satire on the mores of modern mild-product Ireland, it will have achieved its success by setting a modern love story in a scientific context astride the old (as opposed to the futurist excursions of Science Fiction) while at the same time keying in to a cross-section of industrial, social, religious and cultural phenomena. Whether, for me, any more particular future forays like *The Burren Days* are feasible is debatable, as is whether such satirical dimension is 'unfruitful prayer', wasted creative energy given the broader destructive environmental context we live in, the real eschatological dimension of our lives and time with the personal seconds ticking to midnight.

The Burren Days, as outlined, is firmly in the narrative mode. In particular, I was interested in the tensions between narrative pull and the concentrated gaze of poetry. Other tensions in the poem become woven into this primal textual (Homeric - Vergilian) tension - the tension between Ray and Grainne as two distinct persons, the tension between Ray and the other

¹⁴ Lanchester, Review of *The Burren Days*, 'From Irish Presses', PR, Vol. 76. Nos. 1-2, 1986, p.115.

technicians, the tension between Grainne and her father, J.J. Flynn, the tension between the lovers and their society, the tension between the old and new Irelands.

The narrative, too, by its sense of wide-ranging freedom stands against the totalitarian mind. Just as Diarmuid once moved outside and beyond the Pale of the Fianna, so Ray Daly is a loner moving outside its modern day equivalents. His mind keeps reverting to three key episodes which he associates with freedom and fulfilment - the Easter weekend, the holiday in Clare and the 'Papal-Visit' occasion when he and Grainne whiled away the hours making love near Maam.

'Orpheus', on the other hand, is densely phrased: there is more attention to staccato effect, the deftly placed word and the 'pathetic half-lines'. 'Orpheus', then, is 'Virgilian' in the manner described by Bowra, rather than 'Homeric' in outlay as is the movement of *The Burren Days*. E.M. Tillyard in his book, *Epic Strain in the English Novel*, wrote of the need for a kind of omniscience in the epic writer when he said that as regards content:

'the writer must seem to know everything before his mission to speak for a multitude could be ratified. He must also span a corresponding width of emotions, if possible one embracing the simplest sensualities at one end and a sense of the numinous at the other'.¹⁵

This 'twinship', I attempted to capture in 'Orpheus', 'Telling the Bees' and 'Letter to Connla'. Tillyard makes a vital point when he says that the epic writer must be rooted in the normal:

'he must measure the crooked by the straight; he must exemplify the sanity that has been claimed for true genius. Only on this condition will the community trust him and allow him to speak for them.'¹⁶

¹⁵ Tillyard, p. 145, reproduced in *The Epic...*, Dyson *op. cit.*, pp. 144-146.

¹⁶ Dyson, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

For Tillyard, true epic work must have an abiding faith in the system of beliefs or mores it bears witness to:

‘Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their willpower to its utmost capacity.’¹⁷

This last point highlights the nub of the contemporary problem of narrative: the lack of any abiding or homogenous ‘mythos’ that can be subscribed to easily by large numbers of readers or writers. Yet it is a problem that must be faced.

Richard Kearney in this impasse advocates the primacy of an ethical imagination which would bid us to continue to tell and retell the ‘story’ of ourselves ‘out of fidelity to the other’. Kearney calls for a ‘model of ‘narrative identity’ which would stand in opposition to one of ‘egological identity’ (which presumes ‘permanent *sameness*’):

‘Such a model constitutes the self as the reader and the writer of his own life ... each one [is] a narrator who never ceases to revise, reinterpret, and clarify his own story - by relating himself in turn to the cathartic effects of those larger narratives, both historical and fictional, transmitted by our cultural memory.’¹⁸

Personal identity is awakened in this way to embrace a communal identity. Thus, the older vision of Tillyard is reinstated. For, in so narrating its story ‘the imaginative self begins to see ‘its *unlimited* responsibility to others.’ This responsibility extends beyond both a personal history and any *I – Thou* dimension to embrace the wider collective history.

In narrating itself to the other, the imagination is humble enough to admit that it is ‘forever in crisis’¹⁹, but in so admitting its weakness it will seek always to embrace ‘some dimension of otherness which transcends it.’²⁰

¹⁷ Dyson, *op. cit.* p. 146.

¹⁸ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, ‘The Narrative Task’, p.395.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 396.

In this way the narrative mode is assured of continuance. As Kearney states

‘we must go on telling [our story] if we are to make the post-modern imagination *human* again.’²¹

To let go this task would be to continue the rounds of empty imitation in literature.

One may discern, with Kearney, an ethical summons at the core of post-modern culture. This summons will also be ‘poetic’ in the sense that the imagination must

continue to create, recreate and to praise and rejoice even at the moment of its own demise.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

²² Ennis, *Near St. Mullins*, section XXXV, Suibne’s final words, ‘Praise/Praise/Praise/ It is enough’. p. 52.