

# Identity and Interpretation in Literary Practice

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People involved in the practice of literary art are often asked about their sense of identity, their sense of place; do others interpret their work correctly? what is it about their background etc? what makes them want to be writers?

These questions are sometimes shot-through with marketing spin. Nevertheless, there is no denying that they are important. Whether the answers to the questions are of any use is debatable, but the process of trying to answer, of thinking about them, is certainly useful. What follows is a collage concerning these issues.

### From Robert Burns to W. S. Graham: Beyonds, Roundabouts & Backwards

Whilst making some biographical notes on the Paisley poet Robert Tannahill (1774-1810) around 1995 I put the following in brackets—

It is time to forget about the unhelpful categorising of some writers as local, minor talents and others as wonderful magicians of universal truth.

This was around the time Tom Leonard's *Reports from the Present* was published by Jonathan Cape. Leonard, in a superb series of 3 essays titled "Art as Encounter"<sup>2</sup>, tackles issues relevant to the above head on.

There is an e.e. cummings poem which says—  
since feeling is first  
who pays attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you



What this meant to cummings himself I have no idea, nor can I remember which poem it comes from or in which book it appears. But to me it is saying something akin to the arguments put by Leonard. That is, of course, if one first of all dispenses with a literalist interpretation based on classical Cartesian duality. There is a political dimension to these lines, just as there is in Leonard's essays: so, let me say something political:

Control of political institutions means control over language.

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In light of this, W. S. Graham's question "What is the language using us for?" takes on an extra dimension, additional to being an exploration of the possibilities of communication.

I say this silence or, better, construct this space  
So that somehow something may move across  
The caught habits of language to you and me.  
From where we are it is not us we see  
And times are hastening yet, disguise is mortal.  
The times continually disclose our home.

Here in the present tense disguise is mortal.  
The trying times are hastening. Yet here I am  
More truly now this abstract act become.

from *The Constructed Space*, W.S. Graham

*But at a deeper level it was one of Shakespeare's great statements about art, that he knows he's doing this for you, he knows that you know it, and what he's saying is that Art is so precious because only in it can an object come to have human life in your presence.*<sup>3</sup>

Robert Burns (1759-96), magnificent writer that he was, has become a national icon more tarnished than the most garish, phoney tartan. The marketing of Burns has everything to do with tourism and nothing to do with literature. Burns is the quintessential symbol of the commodification

of a writer. The same *thing* has been inflicted on Shakespeare by the English/British State/Establishment. Only a fool, or someone who whole-heartedly supports the underlying assumptions of free-market capitalism, would not lament this state of affairs. To put it in those free-market terms, every *thing* must have a realisable market value, from a person to an art work to space exploration, there has to be some means of extracting a profit. But before this can happen the thing must be objectified, made part of that value system or canon and stripped of its inherent value as a *thing* in itself. Autonomy must be suppressed.

This is the assumption which underlies how the global market is run and it is underpinned by the principle embodied in the previous statement that:

*Control of political institutions means control over language.*

*Control over language means control of political institutions.*

It is for this reason that the "local" is so important. It implies a sense of place and experience of life that can be, to some extent, controlled and apprehended on an ordinary human scale. This can help folk find their own sense of identity and give them the confidence to move further into the world beyond their locale, assured of the intrinsic value they have as human beings. As folk who can act to make the world the better (or worse) the way they want to.

In a certain sense, all the particular localities are different and the same simultaneously. Flannery O'Connor, Robert Burns, Robert Tannahill, all of us really, are most honest about ourselves (or most ourselves?) when engaged closely with our immediate social surroundings.

In light of the note in bold at the start of this section, the Edinburgh-based writer Dilys Rose suggested I look at the work of the American writer Eudora Welty. This is what Welty said about the use of the local as a limiting term to pigeon-hole writers:

"Regional" I think, is a careless term, as well as a condescending one, because what it does is fail to differentiate between the localized raw material of life and its outcome as art. "Regional" is an outsider's term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life.

### What is the matter with Franz Kafka?

*I wonder if there is anything the matter? precisely that is what is the matter. If there is nothing the matter I wonder why, yet if there is something genuinely making me ill I am puzzled as to what to do. Always what ails me is my mind. I am mentally ill, the illness in my lungs is merely a manifestation of that affliction.*

*It is immaterial that I am ill.*

*The gulf between those two worlds; the world of the dreaming mind where my imagination might release me from the physically dishevelled actual world, is sometimes preferable. To occupy the gulf itself is a pleasure; though this pleasure does not last as it impossible to remain a long time at that place. The place I have titled the gulf. Only there am I released from the purgatory of the physical.*



How am I to know this for sure?  
There was, I assure you, a time when I  
wished that Louise would kill me. The  
strength of this feeling was not,  
however, always constant.  
Sometimes it vanished completely.  
Then I was forced to consider the  
reliability of my own thought  
processes. This, I imagine, is what  
mortals, live human beings all suffer  
from; and it is easy to understand  
how such is related to the general  
propensity of people to exercise free  
will. The indulgence of which may be  
seen as a certain source of  
satisfaction. Imbuing one with a

feeling of wellbeing.

Again, as I sat musing on some problem, the case of another, another afflicted with lung disease and wishing to claim, quite correctly, their entitlement from my employers, The Insurance Institute, I wondered what was the matter with me.

*I have never been afraid of asbestos.*

*I have failed myself and others in various different ways which in reality amount to nothing but a dark street, empty and lifeless. Of course I have spent time studying the law, took a slight interest in the Gaelic language. It has surrounded me. I know it in a certain sense though it is not mine. Language is not really to be possessed at all. I think not. Again and again I wondered what was wrong with me. What was the matter? Possibly cancer. Maybe weakness. General weakness of the spirit. Magnified debility. The inability to overcome.*

*Yet not so. Such was not in my public demeanour. Not in any obvious way. Yet if what is the matter is that there is nothing the matter then evidently there is something the matter. A sentence can take on its momentum. Go in a direction one is not at all sure of. Not all writing is deliberate. Nor is every word put down with conscious intent. The fact is that a very many people know this and yet do not appear to be aware of it at the same time; if such is the case then fact it is not.*

*What is the fact of a thought?*

*Where did the small group of students go? They too studied law. Were vaguely acquainted with myself. If the night was wet it might be that they simply had gone indoors. Entered into a...*

*It cannot be possible to mistrust so greatly, that both the mental and physical realities of life are cast into doubt. Yet all language is unreliable; English, Gaelic, French, Czech, German, Yiddish, Hopi. All of it. Or perhaps none. And how to translate between all and none, or from one person to another, without a loss somehow of clarity.*

*Is it true about my thought processes?*

The fact that Kafka did not come from Germany but an émigré community in Prague possibly contributed to the originality of his voice<sup>4</sup>. He was in a marginal community, and marginalised still more within that community because he was Jewish. Prague German was not an identical language to the standard German of the time.

### Place, Peers & Tradition

Where does one place oneself? I don't know: in a certain sense, that of geographical location, being in a country or a city is irrelevant but at the same time it is one of the most important facts in the formation of what is called identity, person-hood or sense of self. This contradiction<sup>5</sup> arises for the following reasons—

While I love Glasgow and



Who the fuck cares? Mad and obscure auld bastard that I am. Wondering where asides fall in and out. What does that mean? What does that?



Scotland I am always disappointed with where I live and happen to have been born. Whether this is a personal failing I do not know but it is associated with feeling a lack of freedom. There is an awful lot of cramping of creativity, for all sorts of reasons, but mostly I think to do with social class, religion and negative attitudes towards others connected with sexism and race snobbery. This is mixed with other judgmental attitudes and stereotyping; poets are gay, writers are mad or eccentric, if you're not making much money why do you do it? Just a complete lack of understanding of what it is to be a literary artist. (Or any other practising artist).

I used to think I was a poet, now I only think that occasionally; where tradition might offer comfort and a sense of fitting in for some people, I have never really felt this greatly. The only thing I know is that I love the sounds of peoples' voices. If there is any kind of "tradition" I feel an affinity for it is the idea of using language in a way that recognises words as sounds, as noises. Even from the page I want to feel the breath of a writer. Their cadences, the song of themselves, to paraphrase Whitman. My peers are interesting, as writers, only in so far as I can feel the breath and honesty of their writing. Of course as human beings they are more important than that. Almost everyone is. A person is much more than the sum-total of their work.

I wish we had more fun in this culture. But then, even the Gloomy Winter<sup>6</sup> has its good points. You always have to be optimistic. Even if it's a bleak kind of optimism. That is what I am for, bleak optimism: I think, maybe, Camus was involved with something like that.

#### Descartes and all that

It is difficult to think about questions of identity without the old dichotomy of the inner and outer life popping up. The psychological and the physical, *the inside the head and the out there*. But maybe that's all just bullshit. Maybe there is no dichotomy at all and everything just is. Outer/inner/ thinking/ other peoples' thinking/ the external physical world, maybe it's all just the one thing, just life: being alive and experiencing what it is to be alive and the argument, so well described by Descartes is just a fine detail, a kind of trivial spectroscopy which in the absolute sense doesn't matter a fuck.

However, even if one were to accept the "wholeness" of it all, it gets us no further forward in the argument as to what it means to have sense of identity, except perhaps that one is less fragmented than folk who have fallen for Descartes.

It seems to me that at a fundamental level identity is accidental, but this quasi-objective viewpoint also has its difficulties: because as individual human beings *who we are*, is so very important. And if we think we know who we are then another kind of dualism comes in. This is the idea of those who are not ourselves being *other*, those who come from a different place, have different ideas and practices, eat different food, use a different linguistic code. Then one should ask the question—What does that matter? Essentially, the problem of difference is the fundamental problem of identity. To have an identity there must be some *other*; there must be a different identity which one can compare one's own against. The real question then is whether this awareness of otherness makes you fearful or curious. If folk become fearful then we have the war situation, the defence response, which is very natural in the animal world. Nevertheless it always appeals to me, as an individual to be curious, to want to know and understand what other people are about. All this is probably self evident, sometimes the obvious is easy, like Newtonian mechanics before Einstein, but it is also easy to overlook.

Who knows? the world is the place where we live, the best I can do is try to make it as good as I

can. Always this will fail; but in the trying maybe folk become better. Maybe they don't become irrational murderers. This is an interminable question, there is no end of it until there is an end to human beings, or we evolve to a state of being which would be unrecognisable to anyone alive at present.

Of course, there are those who believe that all folk need to have to have a sense of identity is a religion. Even such a singular view is fraught with problems: which religion? what for? why? does religious faith make people feel any better?

#### Predestination, Fate, Coincidence and Distance: Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

This story is essentially about a particular kind of morality and world view. The view is Christian. Yet the characters can never live up to the ideals of Christianity and so must suffer. The idea of predestination; that everything is determined by God for eternity and that human's must suffer or love this state of affairs features strongly.

There is a sense of narrative distance—the narrator as God—the voice of the narrator being very detached from the story and the characters; the matter of fact style of narration, one might say bears some relation to a Presbyterian theological outlook. There is also the possibility of a non-Christian fatalism; that the fate of the characters cannot be avoided, whether or not there is a God. It's just that the people in this story, especially the grandmother, happen to believe that there is. For the grandmother God might offer her a kind of redemption in this life by letting her live. But he does not. God is not always merciful. As *The Misfit* said. "It's no real pleasure in life." But then *The Misfit* is clearly not a good man. He is a serial killer with a Messianic complex.

This is the story of the brutal murder of six members of the one family; the grandmother, the mother and father and three children. The fact that they appear to end up dead through the actions of the grandmother and her cat may or not be significant. There may be some kind of symbolism involving the cat and the grandmother. If the grandmother had never taken the cat in the car then they would all still be alive. If the grandmother had had her own way in the first place they would have gone elsewhere and still be alive. However, the story unfolds with a relentless logic of its own, a kind of predetermined logic whereby the only thing that can happen is that this family end up dead.

No doubt there are many possible interpretations of this story and its meaning etc. but I agree with Susan Sontag that—

By reducing a work of art to its contents and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is a different kind of interpretation,—perhaps many—whereby one is moved into something of greater consequence and significance than the mere content of the work. It is *that leap* into the almost intangible space where art has a particular impact on individuals and changes them. Where a work moves one to a new place, a different place to that which existed before the encounter.

Another possible interpretation of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* would be that of the corrupting influence of the "American dream." Something that has come to have significance for millions of people owing to the Hollywood effect or US cultural imperialism. O'Connor demonstrates how this materialist striving affects behaviour and warps relationships.

From the offset the grandmother is defeated by the attitude of her son Bailey and his silent wife. It is also significant that the only one she cries for is her own son "Bailey Boy." Maybe this has no significance whatever!!

It certainly is relevant to compare the work of

Ms O'Connor to that of Arthur Miller. This is such a frustrating tale of the chase, just like the chase of Willy Loman. Who could have a daughter called June Star and a son named Biff in their separate works, and not share the same angst?

The magnetic draw of the "American dream" is so romantically approached by the grandmother, when at first she recalls the tale of the lover who arrives every Saturday with the simple gift of a watermelon. Immediately, this is disregarded by the obnoxious children as their grandmother's nostalgic love, yet harks back to a more innocent age. Eventually, the grandmother's naivete (goodness) is uncovered as a mere pretence for her own lack of faith. The choice of destination is sad for the grandmother due to the fond memories she has of Tennessee and Georgia, which she would like the spoiled children to have the chance to experience. Instead, they head off as a family for the promised land of Florida which they have visited before!

En route, she remembers a house, just a few miles from the road they are driving down, she visited as a young woman. In order to persuade the family to indulge in her nostalgia and do the necessary detour she tells the children of a hidden panel where the family who lived there hid all their silver. Immediately the children insist on visiting the house. Driving down the dirt track towards the house the grandmother remembers that they aren't on the right road at all; this journey has taken a wrong turn.

It's completely wild that from this point until the end of the story, which is only a few more pages each member of the family is murdered. It is here that Ms O'Connor reveals the fatalism of the journey; which is symbolic of the dichotomy between materialism and the kind of Christian Fundamentalism found in the American south.

*No one is innocent.*

#### Notes

1. W. S. (Sydney) Graham was born in Greenock in 1918. He died in 1986. Much of his adult life was spent at St. Ives in Cornwall. The best edition I have found of his work is *Collected Poems 1942-1977*, Faber, London, 1979. See also: *Edinburgh Review* #75, Polygon, 1987. *The Constructed Space—A Celebration of W. S. Graham*, Jackson's Arm, Lincoln, 1994.
2. Tom Leonard, *Reports from the Present*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995, pp.19-62.
3. *Ibid*, p.29.
4. In this context there is the ever present problem of translation from one language to another, but I think this problem can be solved to some extent by reading different translators. Though it is always better if one can read an author in the original language.
5. There is also the contradiction between genetic inheritance and learned behaviour. Perhaps, in essence, another form of the argument about free will and predestination.
6. See Robert Tannahill, *Poems and Songs*, Ed. Semple, Gardner, Paisley, 1876, p.198.
7. Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Women's Press Edition, London, 1980.
8. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*.



Images of Franz Kafka's life and death, including some marginal manuscript scribbles.