

ON PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

by James Crichton

“Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”

The mixture of seriousness and facetiousness contained in the Eliot quotation above serves as a very good introduction to the subject I should like to consider here. I should like to look at certain attitudes towards the act of writing, the responsibilities of the writer in so doing and his opinion on what such a work can achieve both from the point of view of expressing satisfactorily his original concept and the extent to which he can expect a “correct” interpretation of that concept on the part of the reader.

This will probably seem a most esoteric question. Perhaps time would be better spent in studying the actual works, the author’s life or the history of the age but I believe it is a point towards which our minds are continuously teased whenever we give other than a superfluous consideration to a work of art or when we read statements of certain writers, seemingly exaggerated, about the pains and responsibilities of creative writing.

Many British writers have talked of the difficulties in beginning a work. Milton and Wordsworth include these thoughts at the beginning of their works but perhaps the idea is best expressed

by W. B. Yeats "Coole Park and Ballylee"

"That stormy white
.....

So arrogantly pure, a child might think
It can be murdered with a spot of ink"

when he talks about the whiteness of the page emphasising the sullyng effect which expression can have, as though by choosing certain phrases we necessarily reject others and thus limit and determine our ideas and limit our concept of the truth. The blank page containing nothing contains the possibility of everything and thus any statement, no matter how broad, will limit and in some way vulgarize that concept. By our words we attain logic at the expense of truth which is "dispossessed in the utterance."

We can perhaps see a similar concern in John Keats when he talks about the criticisms levelled at some of his work. He is not so much concerned with the critics themselves whom he dismisses thus,

"The fact is they have no real taste ... the cowardliness of the Edinburgh is more than the abuse of the Quarterly,"

but he does feel a responsibility towards the poems themselves and to those who are truly competent to judge. In the preface to his "Endymion" he says,

"He will leave me alone with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written

with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.”

and later,

“Knowing within myself the manner in which this poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public.”

T. S. Eliot rejected the idea that there was any such thing as “free verse” for the writer who wanted to do a proper job and thought that “inner necessity” would force an agreement between the writer and his material so that the final work would have an inevitability and “justness” about it which would preclude any laziness or unconcern on the part of the writer. The correct application of inward disciplines would render any external “literary laws” superfluous. Surely Shakespeare, throughout all his work, demonstrates the application of this idea; his disregard of the “laws” only serves to underline the justness of his action.

Similar ideas will be re-iterated in this article but I hope that these are enough to help define the point I am trying to make. This is that many writers have hesitated before beginning a work, realising that once they have disturbed the equilibrium of silence by particular statements and that of stillness by particular actions, they have a certain artistic responsibility to balance the disturbance they have made. The answers they adopt to this problem are various but their concern and realisation of the problem’s existence

are peculiarly common.

I believe that another way we can look at this hesitancy is to take that phrase which Yeats puts at the beginning of "Responsibilities."

"In dreams begins responsibility."

This I take to express the poet's recognition that he has, before beginning his work, a complete and somewhat frightening freedom and power. He is not bound to factual truth or to the limits of his material. He has freedom to make anything and any of his mistakes will be truly his. At the moment, the work of art is perfect and unexpressed. Now he must embark on his expression and all the consequent definitions, limitations and choices which perhaps will prove to be wrong. Every decision will affect the finished result and like Robert Frost's two ways in a narrow wood, "make all the difference." He cannot hope to express all his concept but he must try to avoid abusing it. In Shelley's metaphor of the "fading coal" his expression cannot hope to catch the fullness of his inspiration which at the time of expression is already weakening. He can, however, try to describe it truly if not fully.

Many artists do not have this freedom and responsibility to such a great extent. A sculptor, painter or musician is more limited by his materials and what he can achieve is, to some extent, limited by them. His freedom is less but so is his responsibility. We have been warned that a novel can contain everything becoming "all inclusion" and it is the abundance of riches that is embarrassing. This is true, although perhaps to a lesser extent,

of all literature. I should like to look at some different writers and types of writing and see how they deal with this realisation that they have great freedom, great responsibility and, having chosen to speak, have the difficult task of ensuring that if this difficult expression cannot contain all the truth it at least will not harm it more than necessary by brutalising the general into the particular in such a way as to distort the shape of the original concept.

One way of avoiding this difference between the general and the particular is to insist that the particular is an expression of the general and that both express the same truth. This device can sometimes be seen in Greek drama where the play often seems to portray life and certain truths as a continually true situation rather than as a dramatic sequence of events. In spite of many single dramatic actions I believe that this is the case with "Oedipus."

The action in "Oedipus" is so beautifully balanced that in the end it denies itself. As the action of the play continues on the stage, Oedipus's self-discovery reaches further and further into the past each one keeping perfect time with the other so that the result, at the end of the play, is that from the centre point of the present we have gone forward in action and backward in self-discovery and memory and the end result is that time has been expressed so fully that it has ceased to be particular and has become general. If the actions become general then they also attain an inevitability, not through a naive fatalism but because past, present and future are seen to be essentially the same as an expression of what truly is and are thus mutually dependent having their *raison d'être* in each other and are all maintained by a web of that "Inner necessity" mentioned earlier. The actions of the Greek play are

thus seen to be the necessary patterned behaviour of individuals who are essentially caught in their own characters and previous acts. We watch their

“awful swerve into the arms of torment.”

as something both inevitable and terrible but,

“You cannot alter this. The gods themselves
Cannot undo it. It follows of necessity
From what you have done.”

Not only can we not alter this but we cannot delay or prevent the action. The “lighter” or “surface” agony of Oedipus comes from the necessity of “following through” his fate. It is impossible for him merely to accept his past behaviour, repent and receive a certain punishment which will end his pain. It is also impossible for him to do any action to expiate his “crime” (a skilfully used ironic term throughout the play as, if all acts are mutually dependent, such a particular name for any one act ceases to have any meaning). What he must do is to see the process through to the end when finally his character, life, crime, action and situation will be complete and perhaps he can find,

“Sanctuary and an end to my tormented days.”

The plays are full of expressions representing this necessary but tragic completion of a process or full circle of a wheel :

“Time is awake, the Wheel is turning
Lifting up and overthrowing.”

“Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?”

“All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing.”

“And none can be called happy until that day
When he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace.”

The dilemma is expressed in,

“Say what you will, the greatest boon is not to be
But life begun, soonest to end is best.”

By the end of the play we will agree with the first statement. The “blank page” of non-existence is best but we will have also learned that the wish expressed in the second half is naive. A particular death will not stop the general truth which demands expression (see the working out of a fate in the other great Greek story that of Orestes and Electra.)

It is the duty and fate of the tragic hero to see through his fate not to any particular “end”, but until the wheel is completed and, if he cannot expect the particular irrelevance of joy, he can at least hope to escape the particular and exacerbating irrelevance of pain as the circle of his life and work is now complete.

“This is the end of tears
No more lament
Through all the years
Immutable stands this event.”

This attitude towards a play does not only exist amongst the Greek dramatists. It was this facet which Anouilh emphasised in his own *Antigone* :

“ Elle pense qu’elle va être Antigone tout à l’heure. Mais il n’y a rien à faire. Elle s’appelle Antigone et il va falloir qu’elle joue son rôle jusqu’au bout.”

“ C’est tout. Après on n’a plus qu’à laisser à faire. C’est propre la tragédie. C’est reposant, c’est sûr. Dans la tragédie on est tranquille.”

“ On est tous innocents en somme... C’est une question de distribution.”

“ Il n’y a plus d’espoir, le sale espoir.”

Again we see the characters committed to their roles with both praise and blame being irrelevant. We see that despite dramatic acts and particular histories, the beginning and end of the tragedy are not really different in kind and the play as a whole has expressed a maintained truth rather than an individual story. The contrast between these two is emphasised in the interview between Creon and Antigone. These two do not oppose one another on the same plane. The answers of the one are irrelevant to the questions of the other. Their minds and arguments never meet but by-pass each other in tragic irrelevance. Thus the story is used to express a situation which remains constant throughout the play and about which nothing can or should be done. No character deserves particular praise or blame and no act alters the truth being expressed. The whole gives an idea of a balanced suspension with no beginning,

middle or end to differentiate or particularise any act or character as being different in kind from the others. In this respect, I believe that the Greek plays almost achieved the "impossible" result mentioned before. They told a story which, although apparently particular in time, place and person escaped these vulgar particulars through masterful use of dramatic skills and devices. The all-inclusive blank page has almost been expressed without being narrowed to the limited and particular.

The Greeks showed one way of creative writing which expressed the whole, or almost the whole, concept. Now I should like to look at two other ways both illustrated by English works. The works may seem extremely strange bed-fellows, being Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and "Gawaine and the Green Knight" but I believe that in the point I want to examine they are both similarly concerned although their answers are completely different. Their concern is "Once we have broken silence by beginning our work, how can we maintain the balance which the blank page had and which particular utterance will apparently destroy?"

If we take Keats first, I believe that in his beautiful ode he, in fact, did not break the original silence but rather suggested various ways in which it might be broken. To me his poem appears as an unbroken wave. It has a beautiful but *suggested* shape and in fact was very careful never to break from the general into the particular. In story, place and character it remains beautifully unfulfilled retaining an air of perpetual possibility. No definite place is given, no act is allowed completion, no knowledge is definitely given. He has avoided Eliot's complaint:

“April is the cruellest month.”

The shape of the urn itself is circular. The pattern begins and ends at the same place. The first two lines,

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness!
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,”

are almost completely made up of ideas which deny or transcend the specific. Quietness and silence are maintained and absolute. Time itself moves slowly and remember that this slow time will merely bring us slowly round the urn. The strange juxtaposition of “unravished” and “bride” is exactly that of Eliot’s “April” and “cruellest” in that a development apparently and usually good is here described as essentially bad in that it starts a process which will involve the person out of the general and into the particular.

“Foster child” is neither specific nor exact; the repetition of the “s”s gives the two lines a sibilant quality where none of the consonants are allowed to give disturbing plosives to break the general flow of the line.

Appeals to the senses are all expressed, none are denied but none are fulfilled. Again an action has been kept in the field of the general.

Throughout the poem, questions are continuously asked and remain unanswered:

“What leaf-fringed legend ...?”
“What men or Gods are these?”
“What pipes and timbrels ...?”
“Who are these coming to the sacrifice?”

Not only do these questions remain unanswered but Keats makes the point that, for his poem, any answers would spoil the unfulfilled quality and warns us away from the attempt.

“And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.”

Particular answers to any of the questions would take us out of the general and involve us in the process of particular knowledge, making us miss our chance of comprehending the “all-inclusive.” The character of the urn is of another quality. It can “tease us out of thought as doth eternity” and escape the particulars of time and place. Thus,

“When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
'Beauty is Truth, truth, beauty'—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The last statement is well in character being balanced, indefinite, with the end identical to the beginning.

Thus Keats, although he breaks silence in this poem, does not involve himself or us in any particular or finalised action and manages to maintain almost completely the full promise of the “blank page.”

Next I should like to turn to “Gawaine and the Green Knight” which, I believe, illustrates the most ambitious type of answer to

the problem we have been dealing with. This answer, bolder than Keats and perhaps more gripping than Greek drama in this respect, is to appeal to our sense of balance. We do not feel involved in the vulgarly particular and accidental if the author manages to construct a work of such complex and exact balance that everything is complemented by its opposite or equivalent. For this, both instinctive and conscious skill are needed in the highest degree, as not only must the author balance objects and actions but he must also do the same thing with the feelings aroused in the reader and consummate skill is needed if he is to have control over these.

This large and complex balance, perhaps found more often in music than in literature, I would say gives the main satisfaction to Dante's "Inferno", or to the more generalised "Elizabethan World Picture" which has been called the greatest work of art to come out of that age. I only have time here to suggest again a few of the many balances which permeate the whole of the "Gawaine" poem. The journey of Sir Bercilak and of Sir Gawaine; the comfort of the castle, the hardness of the journey; the acceptance of the kiss and the cut in the neck; the temptations of the lady and the hunts of Sir Bercilak; their balanced degrees of success.

These balances are all easily seen but they are supported by balances of mood harder to illustrate. Sir Gawaine, in contact with the code of "Courtly Love" at many points in the poem, reacts differently according to the situation but always from the same essential character. Looking at his attitude in the scenes of Sir Bercilak's challenge, his discomforts on the journey, his repulsing of the lady's advances, his acceptance of his impotence against the supernatural power of a knight who can put his head back on and the final rueful wearing of the green, we get a beauti-

fully balanced and consistent set of attitudes. Again such qualities as the seasons and various heraldic and symbolic designs add to the intricate, full and closely weaved balance of the whole work giving us the final impression that the all-inclusive balance of the "blank page" has not been abused by being forced into the particular but has actually been added to by the skill of the writer.

Like John Donne in his "Nocturnal upon St. Lucies Day", that peculiar 'construction of nothing', the author has actually increased rather than abused the balance. Perhaps those soap advertisers who claim to make something "whiter than white" should take notice.

I believe that something like this maintained balance is achieved in the balance of moods to be seen in many of the Border ballads where two paradoxically opposite sets of values are held in suspension with neither gaining supremacy. Romance and reality are held together and if we can take Keats's advice over "negative capability" we do not demand that a particular and logical answer be worked out to their oppositions. We rather accept that a fuller truth is expressed if they can be held together and we do not demand a single and particular answer.

I think that we can see three answers to the "problem" of composition with these three works.

In the Greek plays the particular events often serve to express the pattern of the general truth being dealt with. Acts and people through skilful handling lose their particular characteristics. In Keats's poem the ideas suggested are never actually completed and similarly the questions are never answered. Thus the general possibility is never translated into any particular fact. "Gawaine" maintains the balanced possibility by actually increasing it, ex-

panding it with carefully balanced particulars.

In these three ways the challenge of the “blank page” has been met. I think that it is something which should concern writers but essentially it is an art which conceals art. It is something which we would not normally expect the reader to concern himself with. This concern of the writer which he cannot expect the reader to echo is pleasingly seen in Hardy’s comment to Virginia Woolf over “The Mayor of Casterbridge”:

“And did it hold your interest?”

Nevertheless it can be an interesting question which concerns many writers. I would think that Conrad and Yeats are two writers particularly concerned with it, together with Eliot who expresses this maintained truth as opposed to particular perhaps accidental fact in his poem “Burnt Norton.” Having begun with him, it seems appropriate to end in the same way.

“Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness
Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence,
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now. Words strain ...”