

THE VERNACULAR COUNTRY CLUB: TRADITIONAL EXPERIMENT. EXPERIMENTAL TRADITION AND LES MURRAY'S *THE BOYS WHO STOLE THE FUNERAL*

DEAN KILEY

'what do you mean by "getting *The Boys* out of my system"?'
Les: to Paul: (Kavanagh 210)

FROM the blurb on the back cover of *The Boys*:

Les Murray solves triumphantly the perennial long-poem problem of how to square the demands of a prolonged narrative with the reverberating full-stops of lyric and meditative verse.

From the (inevitably) punny front: 'A Novel Sequence'. Even before a page is turned, an interpretive frame is in place for the reader, with *innovation, convention, opposition* and *resolution* at each corner. Within these parameters, the text develops a dynamic of *tradition versus, despite, with, in and as* experiment, inflected by what has been aptly called a 'radical conservatism' (Taylor 145). Both frame and dynamic, however, are then changeably calibrated in generic, formal, structural, narrative, narratological, thematic, mythological (myth/+ideology) and epistemological modalities. At a Lowest Common Denominator level, *The Boys* could be characterised as original not due to any one or more putative constituent technical novelties, but because of its geometric progression of permutations – through all modalities – of tradition and experiment. This is Murray's credo of convergence and its enactment on the most ambitious scale: it is performative historiography, a Northrop Frye-ation of his entire oeuvre. Given its complexities, simply placing it comparatively beside a shopping-list of conventions or a family-tree of antecedents is not an option. We will have to deal with modalities and their interanimation via the analytical construct outlined above.

The term 'modality' clarifies some aspects. Where genre is concerned, for example, it is not feasible to hermetically seal the text off as a long narrative sonnet sequence. Similarly, other poetic modes are not merely secondary or segmented within the text: there are overlaps, transformations, amalgamations, alternations, multiplications and supplementations of long-established forms (including lyrical, pastoral, elegaic, meditative, discursive, epic). This bravura inclusive modal play is itself experimental, let alone the further exploration of their more flexible, open modern variants.

The lyric mode subsumes those sections which celebrate the quotidian (e.g. Ss. 37, 41, 112) and most frequently conform more closely to expected sound-patterning, rhyming, metrical and general prosodic conventions: these are often used for structuring and pace (e.g. Ss. 37, 49, 51, 63, and 70 as the dead centre, etc.). Pastoral modulations occur throughout, frequently threading through lyrical passages (S. 31, S. 67, S. 111) and even a ballad (S. 81); as meditative meshes with discursive, mythopoetic *topoi*, rhetorical tropism and novelistic structure as underlay. Separable modal combinations have their

own OzLitcriture precedents, including Lehmann's *Ross' Poems* and Campbell's *Works and Days* for the lyrical; and FitzGerald's *Essay on Memory* or Hope's *Letter* for discursive. Murray here operates within/against competing traditions and models, particularly qualified/provisional deglamorised, mode-mixed Australian pastoral. The closest small-scale ante-text for such formal multilateral variability would be Slessor's *Five Visions of Captain Cook*, without that work's compartmentalisation. In *The Boys* there are no fully-dismantlable sections or 'clean' modes or 'pure' forms and, again, originality is realised in capacious inclusiveness and suspension of pluralities, enabling contextualisation, disambiguation, patterning and architectonics.

Variable degrees of scale and elements of epic from the 'voyager' poems and the quest motif (even Brennan's psychosocial version) resonate through *The Boys*, most overtly the Bildungsroman manhood-initiation journey which is also a spiritual and sociological and psychic quest for truth, reality, role and identity, escaping from metropolitan to provincial, city to country. This is a narrative, thematic and mythological variant with an extensive history in Murray's poetic, prose and interview work. Here it is accompanied by other epic bits, often as actantial as narrative/dramaturgical: clan fealty, the hubris against fate (S. 2), one off-stage battle (with feminist Furies: Ss. 2, 11, etc.) and one bikie(?) skirmish (Ss. 13, 14). The customary series of tests/ordeals emerges, here mostly inquisitorial and verbal, with urbanites cast as warrior-heretics (journalist in Ss. 46-47, 59, parents and Noeline in Ss. 3, 4, 62, 64, 65, 72, 92-93, 95, 97, 99, 101-103, 108-109). The community and its key players conduct a trial-by-slang/ethos/praxis/worldview/etc. of the boys as potential Country Club members (Ss. 20, 22, 30, 32, 33, 50), guiding and midwifing transitional rebirths. The result, as with rallies, is the induction ceremony with its symmetrical liturgical/oath question-and-reply section (S. 35 and 36), membership confirmed by the transformative new modes of understanding which open up to Kevin immediately after (including dream in S. 37, empathetic communion in Ss. 49, 51 and sudden vision in S. 72) and rubberstamped by Community Endorsements, like yarning in S. 43, working in S. 53, and chiacking in S. 79.

Let's get technical. At one end of the avantgardism continuum sits a technique which subsumes generic, formal, structural, narrative and narratological modalities: the filmic logic of mise-en-scene, decoupage and montage. There are textual equivalents to jump-cuts (Ss. 31-32-33-34, 56-57-58), match-cuts (Ss. 15, 33 to 34), pans (S. 3), cross-cutting and tracking shots (Ss. 13, 14, 117, 118), close-ups (S. 25), long zoom shots (S. 6), vistas (S. 16), flashbacks (Ss. 19, 28, 44, 52, 55, 88, 90, etc.), cutaway shots (especially S. 94), bird's-eye views (S. 67), and even a scene-from-space shot (S. 127); with the elliptical connections and editing-for-pacing of cinema. These become imbricated with alternative generic markers and 'specifically' novelistic devices, particularly summary framing sonnets (Ss. 1 and 140) with their anecdotal, oral tradition affinities. Others would include standard narrative structurations like advance mentions (e.g. S. 27), foreshadowing (e.g. Ss. 28, 38), analepses, prolepses (e.g. S. 91), back-stories (e.g. Ss. 47, 82, 87, 89, 90), descriptive episodes, focalisation, characterisation *et al.*; and dramaturgical techniques, deploying the typological introduction of dramatis personae, set-pieces, conflict, climax, denouement, melodrama-reduction (S. 29), suspense-deflation with humour (S. 76) and so on. This type and extent of experimentation, like a pop-up high-rise of technicality squashed flat on the page, is, well, modernist, and far from Traditional Murray.

At the other extreme (tradition as experiment), there is the unorthodox reanimation of a genre long fallen into desuetude, the sonnet sequence. Of the four primary formal conventions (fourteen lines, stanzaic structural options, rhyme and metrical patterning),

Murray adheres always to the first, frequently to the second, intermittently to the third and rarely with the fourth. His deviations out-renovate any Australian precedent, including the *Bulletin* spat in the first quarter of this century and the canonic modernist version. Individual sonnets can contain a complete action, and/or subdivide into dialogue-by-speaker, modes, interior monologues and so on via stanzaic components, yet permit transitions, loose groupings and counterbalancing between sonnets (e.g. Ss. 13 & 14 vs. 117 & 118), flexible, cumulative or cohesive. Alliterative, syllabic, rhythmic, caesural, line-length and stanzaic patterns become allusive or onomatopoeic, echoing plot, character, imagistic, theme, and rhetorical developments.

This is not, however, a unidirectional process, but an osmosis. Along with the standard elements, *place* itself assumes multiple narrative roles, functioning in league with community as imprimatur of events and moral barometer, validated by intergenerational experience and personal associations, providing solace and regeneration, tempting Reebj with a new identity (Ss. 34, 41) and confirming Kevin in the acceptance of his own by supplying rootedness and home. Romanticised Arcadian is preemptively dismissed (e.g. S. 33). Nonetheless, 'site-magic' connects all the modalities at work here, but especially notions of authenticity, certainty, reality and centred identity, and in this it is comfortably ensconced within a major traditional dialectic wherein from O'Dowd down, via the Jindyworobaks, the true Australia and Australians are found, if not located, in the bush or country, in true possession of the land (e.g. esp. S. 58). The usual symbolic-thematic centre/periphery structure is reactivated (see Ss. 24, 63) in the usual OzLit/critique truism, but also with the characteristic Murray displacement and remapping of axes: from time on to space, history on to geography. Moreover, *The Boys* layers divergent ways of knowing your 'place', having 'a place' or a place (Ss. 83, 84) such that it can even encompass, for example, the special-pleading sexist apportioning of women as nurturant domestics (Ss. 22, 23 especially) or third-life licensed substitute-men (Ss. 55, 90).

The crucial intersection between narrative and narratology is focalisation; the way point of view and perspective (logical, spatial, psychological, ideological, etc.) are manoeuvred by a focus through character and narratorial voice. Here we must deal first with what is fast approaching critical anecdote: Murray's 'bardic voice'. Despite often-reductive critical attempts (with Murray as accessory), this is not a unitary voice, nor doubled (Prophet-Jester vs. Bard; Self-Possessed Confident Poet vs. Autobiographical Psychoanalysable Uncertain Man; Reactionary Activist vs. Creative Genius). It is not a voice, it is a universe. With edible irony, it is a High Modernist Joycean textual universe with its own politics, poetics, aesthetics, hermeneutics, intellectuality, historicity, temporality, spatiality, cosmology, philosophy, ecology, theology and theory. Whole intellectual superstructures, mythological arguments (particularly the blood-theology and logic of sacrifice), tropes, approaches, credos, techniques, themes, metaphors and actual quotes move from Murray-the-Solipsistic-Literary-Industry (essayist, journalist, anthologist, editor, reviewer, critic, self-theorist, performer, writer-in-residence, publisher's reader, judge, chairman, litigant, etc. etc.) to the Large-Letter Murray on A&R book-covers. And back again.

Nevertheless, this is a hubristic extension to a traditional role-juggling act. It goes as far back as Hesiod, the author of *Theogony* as well as *Works and Days*, through Virgilian didacticism and Celtic practice; or as near as James McAuley, the revolutionary social responsibility of the artist vocation, A.D. Hope, the hortatory persona of the spiritual-intellectual elite. But (as always: 'Murray' seems to be a synoptic construction) Murray's voice synthesises disparate ranges and stances from all these. The clan genealogy,

memorialising, mediatory, representative, unifying responsibilities are all exhaustively discharged in *The Boys* and its extraordinarily productive 'voices'.

The intersection of such voices with the modalities of the novel sequence results in declensions of a narrator's voice focalised to varying degrees through all the modes and all the characters. This is a prime example of the 'novel' losing out to the 'sequence', narrative to poetics, character to template, plot to schema, thematics to rhetoric, mythology to dogma. Overcompensatory concessions thus abound. For instance, the profusion of innovative orthographic representations of spoken/unvocalised voice, script-style: Reeby as lower case, Forbutt Snr. riddled with Capitalisations, Noeline grammatically interrogative, Clarrie indented when not spiritually-present; slashes and italics for clarity; caesurae or spatial mimesis as indexes of intonation curves, pitch, pause, volume and so on. Despite these efforts and explicit justifications, confusion remains. Most often, this is due to undifferentiated articulateness and to a dramatic reading-experience close to ventriloquism, dummies and morality play. Just about everyone, regardless of age or maturity or background, is suspiciously (homogeneously) coherent, poetically dexterous and verbally resourceful, with a penchant for puns and quite remarkable dialectic and debating ability (e.g. Ss. 35, 36, etc.).

Murray's (justly) celebrated ability at simultaneous translation from complex ideas to lifelike Australian vernacular is in evidence but all too often submerged into a voracious overarching thematic structure, sometimes fragmenting to allegory. The tendency is centrifugal – out from the poem towards sociology and the extra-textual Les Murray – and characterisation/focalisation is spun out, pressed flat against the sides. It is not only the choric personages who become amorphous (or excuses for commentary) and reading-continuity disjunctions recur. An old-fashioned omniscience seems imminent, is covertly apologised for (e.g. S. 12), and the innovative intricacies of idiomatic, tonal and perspectival shifts are dissipated.

On the narrative plane this has unfortunate consequences, including an over-schematisation and overemphasis on the polemical and homiletic, stretching (and occasionally snapping) plot credibility (e.g. the Whistle Cock man, excuse for S. 17), character motivation, development and coherence. Emplotment is profoundly affected by a sort of Old Testament, syllogistic logic, moving on gears of retributive flow-chart causality. Stacey has abnegated manhood and entered his third life as mere male (see Ss. 64, 101), hence Kevin rejects him as father, Athol steps in to name him Clancy and claim him as son (S. 65), Clarrie (in fourth life: structures abound) guides him, Birroogun and the Njimbini initiate him, the community confirms him and the Victorian peripeteia of inheritance endorses him in the choice of Fathers and Ethics and thus identity and succession. Or, stripped bare to the cogs: because Reeby... then Noeline... hence Jennie... The myth-ideology dynamo chugs it along: national and nationalistic and battler-work ethic (see especially Ss. 11, 35, 36, 47, 53, 68, 133 *versus* Ss. 7, 9, 10, 81, 85) and gender-role/sex-war (Ss. 3, 86, 139 and everything in between) and Athens-Boeotia and out-of-time time and Eliot-Yeatsian centre-holding (see S. 24) and life-*vs.*-Literature (Ss. 54, 91) and blood-theology and Eucharistic reification (see Ss. 17, 18, 57, 59, 69, 70, 73, 84, 104, 108-109, 124-125, 128, 130, 140). What makes sense thematic-structurally – Noeline as usurping (i) priest's role in anti-baptism, (ii) woman's role in abortion/radical feminism, (iii) Clarrie's role as warrior, (iv) every real woman's role as sexual-terrorist seducer; Noeline as demonstration of Reeby's contraries thesis in S. 11; Noeline's tears in S. 109 as revenant real femininity – does not convince as character or narrative. Consequently, certain of the characters (Reeby, Stacey, Noeline, Jennie) are either sacrificed or made into detachable templates (like the 'S' models in S. 102), surreal

caricatures, and the functioning of every narrative element is warped and/or dislocated. A more disappointing disproof of a central tenet of Murray's poetics – that a true poem in Wholespeak is beyond politics and ideology – could hardly be adduced. This, with a thematic, mythological and epistemological determinism fully-functional, is what gives the poem its absolutely ordinary encyclical feel.

From a wider thematic perspective, the disturbing mythological economy of Justice, responsibility and recompense, with its orthodox Catholic variants, is foregrounded by narrative and narratological modalities in *The Boys*. This is the balance-sheet of politics, myth and religion: homecoming and recovery and repair vs. exile and dispossession and loss; salvation and reconciliation vs. damnation and vengeance. The thematic structures sometimes seem tailor-made to fit Murray's incurable Big Binary Syndrome, particularly the interminably-protracted Athens vs. Boeotia dichotomy (the opposing kitchens, names, cars, character functions). These economies do not sit well with the late-Romantic and fundamentally Christian holistic epistemology, and overarching myth, of healing, mystery, integration, presence, redemptive rebirth, inexhaustible *numen*; the Boeotian understanding (not knowledge, which is conquest: S. 104) of an insightful right response to the land and animals and place and community and people (e.g. Murchison in Ss. 29, 32, 39, 86, 87).

Nonetheless, some of the entrenched Australian mythologies and national identity constructions are revived in *The Boys* and made echoic by the interaction of atmosphere mediating between plot and place through meditative modes deploying memory and history. Even within this one text, however, over-use can de-animate such a body of masculinist myths (war and marriage seem always a man's only option) and the precarious poetic magic shielding ethos and mythos from deconstruction then breaks down. Turner, Fiske, Hodge, White, Dixon and Summers are not needed: the reader begins to ask the dangerous What's Missing Here questions. You are kidding, aren't you Les, about women's place in this architectonic patriarchalism and narrative phallogocentrism? Of the three cultures in Australia, which misses out on fusion in the final vision of Australia, sails to prosperity over reed-beds of Boeotians, mass-murders the relegated rural, will not eat Common Dishes, eats and exploits (Ss. 130-131) and why? Oh, and why such an obsessive microwave-reheating of habitual national-identity *via* manhood rites (soldiers everywhere) and rights (everyone a battler), *circa* 'radical democratic nationalist 1890s' (despite all the revisionist adjusting to each of the terms in that phrase) or the 1950s war-novel resurgence and reconstructions to familial (patriarchal) and historical pioneers? Mythological and thematic structuration of ten approaches the quality of scrawl.

The visionary strand in Murray's *oeuvre* is diverse yet retains a coherence (convergence again) and in *The Boys* there is a sense in which Kevin's initiatory vision (Ss. 121-132) draws together thematic and mythological elements from a long Murray tradition, and all the modalities from within the text (comprehensively prepared for by Ss. 90, 91, 102, 105 and its urban inversion in 106) but with a new technique: the unifying microcosmic symbols of crystal and Common Dish (sustenance and grail). The names of the two ministrants vary between Aboriginality, clan names and place names, making concrete the intertwining of urban (well, a little), rural, indigenous, cosmological, religious, historical, family, temporal, political and earthy myths, ideologies, 'cant-hooks', creeds, traditions, rituals, liturgies, (physical and otherwise) points of view, anecdotes, epiphanies, symbols, ghost-shows. . . 'Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle' with every nuance multiplied and made explicit and on fast-forward. It almost works. But the ideological chassis cracks too visibly, the programmatic engine deafens and we end up

with poetic. Too much tradition and the experiment fails.

In the standard narrative and discursive (from undergraduate essay to sermon) fashion, the conclusion to the text contains in microcosm all its constitutive elements: the dynamic of tradition versus, despite, with, in and as experiment, all the modalities in all the interaction and calibrations of these. Plot summaries, précised character stories for Reeby, Kevin and Noeline, Catholic ex cathedra dicta on abortion, the two unifying symbols, the this-world enactment of the otherworld vision, life study, Broad Australian version of reality and identity, tentative epilogue, cinematic vignette, novelistic wrap-up, thematic-mythological fitting of all the poem's pieces into place, epistemological confirmation of Boeotian ways of understanding grief and life and transcendence. . . and it closes with 'an invention/ already timeless', the new-fangled wellis co-operatively made to stand firm on country ground.

This final image is a cunningly simple Mitchell-metaphor in, and of, the Murray tradition of experimental traditionalism.

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