Dermot Healy's Endless Quest for the Absolute

Eamon Maher

Institute of Technology, Tallaght, eamon.maher@it-tallaght.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.dit.ie/ittbus

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Dermot Healy's Endless Quest for the Absolute

EAMON MAHER

I had long been aware of the high esteem in which the writer Dermot Healy was held, but it was not until his untimely death in 2014 that I decided to read his books. My task was greatly facilitated by the invaluable work of Keith Hopper, Neil Murphy and the Dalkey Archive Press in bringing out a special edition of his collected stories (a task in which Healy himself collaborated) and the wonderful critical essay collection that they compiled under the title *Writing the Sky: Observations and Essays on Dermot Healy* (2016). This article owes much to the latter work in particular, which argues convincingly for a reappraisal of the place of Healy within the literary canon.

One of the things that attracted me most to Healy was his appreciation of landscape, so movingly conveyed in the TV documentary, *The Writing in the Sky*, where he is filmed at his home in Sligo, located beside the breathtakingly beautiful and windswept Atlantic ocean, and where he discusses, among other things, his fascination with the Barnacle Geese who spend winter on the Irish shore before migrating to Greenland for the summer. Seeing Healy in his natural environment, listening to his resonant voice as he speaks of life's vicissitudes, looking at the weather-beaten face and the brightly eloquent eyes, learning about his literary ambitions, his acute awareness of the landscape, gave me a real desire to read his novels, short stories and, above all, his beautiful memoir, *The Bend for Home*, with its evocation of places in Westmeath and Cavan that were important to him as he grew up.

Finea, in Westmeath, comes in for special mention. Like
Heaney’s Bellaghy or McGahern’s Aughawillan, Healy succeeds in immortalising, not just Finea, but the surrounding area and all the places he spent time in and sucked inspiration from. At the end of *The Bend for Home*, one comes across the following description of the route travelled by the funeral cortege on its way to his mother’s burial in the cemetery in nearby Castletown:

On the far side of the lake from Crover, up the Inny river, is the village of Finea where both hearses stopped a second time for a moment outside the old family home, where my father’s funeral had paused for a moment thirty-one years ago before going on.... The day my mother was buried the fields were filled with snow. After we took the bend round Myles the Slasher’s monument the house looked cold and damp and unlived in. All the trees had been cut. The ivy that used stir round the windows at night was gone.¹

There can be little doubt that Healy was here seeking to immortalise his native place. Naming is a sort of prayer and the attention to detail in these lines is such as to provide a roadmap for the area around Finea: Crover, the river Inny, the traditional customs of the inhabitants, the fields, the trees and ivy are all mentioned because of how they are linked to Healy’s memories of his parents and of the time the family spent together in this place.

**ASSOCIATIONS WITH PLACE**

The local colour, so well encapsulated in such meticulous descriptions, transports the reader to a scene that has a universal relevance. Finea is therefore not just a village in Westmeath, but a place that is immediately familiar to anyone from a conventional Irish rural background. It gives one the reassuring (or uncomfortable)

feeling of returning home, of reacquainting oneself with lives once lived in such surrounds. In a recent book on Seamus Heaney’s prose writing, Eugene O’Brien remarks that associations with place are created through language and ideology:

Instead of just identifying with one place, and telling the story of a people in that place, poetry is also able to create, through language and imagery, another place ‘where the mind could take shelter from the actual conditions’.

Taking shelter ‘from the actual conditions’, as Heaney expresses it, is something that Healy also sought to achieve through his writing. Place is an essential trigger in this process, as it has the capacity to evoke resuscitate images and memories that can open out onto the transcendent, or onto some higher artistic plane. Keith Hopper, in an enlightening essay on Healy’s sense of place, refers to Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney’s comments in the 2011 RTÉ documentary about Healy, *The Writing in the Sky*, where he extols his former protégé as the poetic heir to Kavanagh: ‘Kavanagh was the poet of, as he said, ‘the passionate transitory’, bits and pieces of the everyday snatched out of time. He was the poet of praise for those things. It isn’t just nature poetry, it’s gratitude for the whole gift of existence in Healy.’

This gratitude often has a spiritual resonance, as shall be seen in the discussion of a couple of Healy’s texts that we will undertake now.

In the course of this article, therefore, I will seek to show the extent to which Healy’s literary quest was also a spiritual one. Combined with his sense of place, the things which piqued his imagination were those vignettes where human character is revealed in all its tragic, yet also majestic, fragility. Healy himself, as the memoir reveals, was


someone who had experienced his own trials: the premature death of his father who, like McGahern’s, was a Sergeant in the Garda Síochána; the difficulties encountered in school; problems with drugs and alcohol during a period in London; the painful birth of a literary vocation; the slow, debilitating last years of his mother’s life, which required patience and care. Out of it all came a mature understanding of life’s trajectory; the joys and the sorrows, memories, the lived present and uncertain future. Then there are unforgettable insights such as the following:

But what awfulness do we leave out as memory defends its terrain? What images are locked away that only imagination can release? Beyond those wild sexual arousals are other plainer moments, disguised as clichés, hiding from the language of elation. They are the mundane everyday that memory does not espouse. (*The Bend for Home*, p.101)

Wisdom like this normally comes at a price and Healy clearly viewed his writing as a balm, a remedy for the trials that regularly came his way and left him reeling in the dark. The mind is at one and the same time an asset and a danger, the imagination a release valve or a source of despair. The editors of *Writing the Sky* summarise Healy’s art in the following terms:

Moreover, Healy was always fascinated by borderlands and liminal states of mind, and he frequently transgressed the boundaries between poetry, drama and fiction, and between fiction and reality.¹

That thin line between fiction and reality is one that is inhabited by many artists. When writing his memoir, Healy pondered on secrets that should not be told and wondered if reimagining his life would produce a true reflection of the events that shaped him:

'What happened is a wonder, though memory is always incomplete, like a map with places missing. But it's all right, it's entered the imagination and nothing is ever the same.' (The Bend for Home, p.33)

The interaction between memory and imagination is a recurring trope in Healy's work. In a manner that recalls McGahern, there are times when his fiction seems autobiographical and when the memoir appears fictional. The two genres become intertwined and indistinguishable from one another. But they both contain a truth that is indisputable.

**POINTING THE FINGER**

First published in 1994, A Goat's Song is Healy's most highly acclaimed novel. It tells the story of Jack Ferris, a successful, alcoholic playwright living in a cottage on the stormy west coast of Ireland, and of his failed relationship with Catherine Adams, a Protestant from Northern Ireland and the daughter of Jonathan, a retired RUC sergeant. Jonathan, a Presbyterian, married a Methodist, Maisie, who was living in Fermanagh, but originally came from the South. This relationship developed as a result of an injury incurred by the Catholic handyman, Mattie Bonner. The sergeant was called to the incident which resulted in the loss of a few of Mattie's fingers and it was there that he met Maisie for the first time. Mattie would subsequently act as best man at their wedding and later ended up hanging himself from a tree located between the local Catholic and Presbyterian churches. The Catholics were embarrassed that he should have hanged himself facing the Catholic church, which 'meant that he was pointing the finger at them'. ⁵ For Jonathan Adams, this fatal gesture called into question many of his long-held religious convictions. He attended the funeral even though he knew that his presence there was not welcome among the mostly nationalist congregation. His daughters Catherine and Sara swore that they

---

witnessed a strange sight as they looked into Matti’s house. A Sacred Heart lamp was burning and ‘congealed blood began to drip from the heart of Christ in his [Mattie’s] kitchen’. (p. 91) Nothing more is ever revealed of this mysterious vision.

A violent outburst by Jonathan Adams against Republican demonstrators during a riot that was captured on TV footage led to his early retirement from the RUC and the purchase of a residence along the west coast close to where Jack Ferris lived. This is how the lives of Ferris and Catherine Adams intersected, with unfortunate consequences for both. They were both heavy drinkers, emotionally unstable, and ended up loathing each other and inflicting pain on each other. When making the trip south for his wedding ceremony many years previously, Jonathan Adams had noticed the difference between the two parts of the country:

Catholic spires and cathedrals, treeless, flush with Roman excess, sat on the hills while the grey Protestant churches, behind beeches, stood at the end of the old-world streets. (p. 110)

The Catholic Church was the dominant force in the South and it proudly declared that through its spires, cathedrals and numerous churches. It was not the sort of place which would automatically appeal to a former RUC member, and yet when he does make the definitive move south with his wife and daughters, Adams finds it a peaceful and pleasant environment in which to live. There is the added advantage that its beauty is breathtaking:

They drove from Erris Head in Broad Haven Bay down to Black Sod in the south, amazed at the isolation, the white sandy roads that ran by the sea; the Inishkea Islands, holy, absolute, the wind-glazed violent cliffs; the meteorological station; the endless bogs, the rips and cracks through the huge dunes; the black curraghs; the lighthouse that sat perched on Eagle Island
The friendship with Mattie Bonner works because it is not based on verbal communication; in fact, neither really feels the need to talk in the other’s company. Ferris, the brilliant man of words, has no difficulty communicating on a superficial level. However, he finds it impossible to make successful long-term commitments work, as can be seen from this statement: ‘It’s as if life selects two people to go through all the experiences of love so that they will know it is denied them.’ (p. 51)

PROVINCIAL

The existential dilemmas broached by Healy resonate with a wide readership. A *Goat’s Song* covers issues as varied as religious bigotry, political violence, the North-South divide, problematic relationships, alcoholism, spiritual despair. All this is captured on the pages of what might be termed a ‘provincial’ Irish novel, as Neil Murphy points out so eloquently: ‘Healy shows us, over and over, that the depths of people’s loves and sorrows are as profound in Sligo, Fermanagh and Ballintra as they are in Paris, London or Dublin.’

One might even go so far as to say that they are even more profound in these provincial settings, if *A Goat’s Song* is anything to go by. The title of the novel comes from the practice among Greek shepherds of putting the bucks on one island and the nannies on another: ‘Then when the nannies were in heat their smell would come on the breeze to the bucks who rose a mournful cry.’ (*Goat’s Song*, p. 227)

Jack Ferris’ cry fails to arouse Catherine’s compassion: they have inflicted too much pain on each other for there to be any hope of reconciliation. Therefore, at the end of the novel, Jack has no partner and does not even have the comfort of rational thought. Rather, he is reduced to ‘the eerie language of the half-formed and the unsayable.’ (p. 380) Deprived of the comfort that those with recourse to religion can enjoy, he faces the future full of doubt and uncertainty: ‘Was...”

this death, he wondered, when the time came that he did not know in which of the images his consciousness rested? Which was him he did not know.’ (p. 404) What a revealing description of human helplessness this is.

DISTRUST

Healy is a writer who never shirked from the unsavoury, the gross, the intolerable. For him, writing was a means of transcending this world, though not in any simplistic manner. Art came at a high price; the crosses he had to bear were many and varied, but they also made him into the writer he would become. Not for him any simplistic escape into art, however. In fact, he retained a healthy distrust of the ordered and aesthetically-pleasing type of literature where everything has its place and there is a veneer of control on the part of the writer. We read for example in *The Bend for Home*:

We are trapped in what apparently is. We cannot take off elsewhere. But though this [*The Bend for Home*] is not a fiction where everything happened in the so-called world of make-believe, sometimes the mundane everyday seems like an illusion – anything might happen, the authentic is a trick, and the story is not really known until it’s told. (p. 259)

It is sometimes the case that writers gain the recognition they deserve only from beyond the grave. In the case of Healy, I certainly believe that his powers of observation and description, his storytelling capacities, his compassion and empathy make him an author of substance. The ‘mundane everyday’, of which he spoke, can seem like an ‘illusion’, but it is also where authentic truth is most often found. So, while he was in no way what could be considered a traditional ‘religious’ writer, his rigorous and unceasing quest for truth mark him out as someone that one should accompany as he rounds the bend for home and finds more questions awaiting him.
than when he left. Existence has many twists and turns and Healy shows us that answers will only be found beyond the threshold of death.

Believing in life – We believe in Jesus who came to bring the fullness of life, and we believe in a living God who gives life to men and women, and wants them truly to live. Those radical truths of the faith become really true and truly radical when the church enters into the midst of the life and death of its people. Then there is put before the church, as it is put before every individual, faith’s most fundamental choice: to be in favour of life, or to be in favour of death. We see, with great clarity, that here neutrality is impossible. Either we serve the life of Salvadorans, or we are accomplices in their death. And here what is most fundamental about the faith is given expression in history: either we believe in a God of life, or we serve the idols of death. In the name of Jesus we want, and we work for, life in its fullness.

Blessed Oscar Romero, Address on receiving an honorary doctorate at the University of Louvain