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## **“Dreams of Weeds”**

Ian Hamilton Finlay, edited by Ken Cockburn

THE DANCERS INHERIT THE PARTY.

Early stories, plays and poems

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In the decade before he became known as a concrete poet, a sculptor, a maker of verbal-visual objects, and the creator of the literally fantastic “garden” in Dunsyre in Lanarkshire known as Little Sparta, Ian Hamilton Finlay wrote short stories, plays, and even some conventionally rhyming lyric as well as the animal poems collected in *Glasgow Beasts An A Burd*, written in Glasgow dialect, with accompanying woodcuts inspired by the Japanese poet Shimpei Kusano. Thirteen of the twenty-one short stories, dating from the early 1950s and reprinted for the first time in this new edition of *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, appeared in newspapers and journals, such as the *Scottish Angler* and the *Glasgow Herald*. Of the three plays included, two are reprinted from *New English Dramatists* (1970), while a third is published here for the first time. Ken Cockburn’s edition also includes seven previously unpublished poems, but these are slight examples of *vers de circonstance* and will not appreciably change our understanding of Finlay’s remarkable concrete or one-word poems of the sixties like

HILL

Top

where, by Finlay's own account in a letter to Ernst Jandl, the words contain "the idea of a spinning-top, the hill as a clean, green top, the sense (which one has on a hill) of the world spinning, the sound of a spinning top, and the wind on the hill, as if one felt the world spinning in space." Nor does a previously uncollected poem like "Lucky," which begins, "I first read Tolstoy's 'The Snow-Blizzard' / In a wooden shed," quite prepare us for Finlay's later terse, riddling inscriptions, like the following set of nine words, carved on a tripartite wooden bench, built around a large old tree at Little Sparta:

THE SEA'S WAVES  
THE WAVES' SHEAVES  
THE SEA'S NAVES

Here the metaphoric relationship of waves to corn sheaves swaying in the wind is clear enough, but in what sense are the waves "the sea's naves," given the decenteredness of the wave image? The relation, as so often in Finlay, is not visual but etymological: *nave* comes from the Latin *navis* for *ship*, and it is the ships that occupy the sacred watery spaces of the poem.

It is the short stories of the 1950s, rather than the early poems, that prefigure Finlay's later verbal-visual emblems and epigrams, and their publication here is thus of great importance, not only to Finlay aficionados, but to anyone interested in the concrete, conceptual, and minimalist poetry of the later century, especially that of Finlay's American friends Lorine Niedecker, Louis Zukofsky, and Robert Creeley, the last of whom the foreword to the 1996 edition of *The Dancers*. In the magical "Boy with Wheel" (1953), for example, the first-person narrator is walking home from the village one evening:

It was just growing slightly dark. Owls were hooting in the brown fir-woods on the one side of the road; and bats, those nocturnal swallows, were swerving and diving above my head. On the other side of the road, beyond

the sharp dyke, the fields were filling up with blue dusk. It seemed to be trickling out of the woods like smoke from a wet or dying blaze.

The writing seems reminiscent at first of D. H. Lawrence, but the blue dusk and hooting owls provide the backdrop, not for a particular incident or even an individual meditation, but for the poet's fixation on a particular inconsequential object--a detached bicycle wheel, used by a neighboring village boy to keep himself company on the long, dark way home:

It was an ordinary silver-coloured bicycle wheel, rusted in a few places but with all its spokes seemingly intact. He had it gripped on the end of a few feet of fence-wire that secured it but did not interfere with its running. The wheel was, in a way, like a dog on a rope. There was no tyre on it, of course.

The wheel becomes a kind of icon: both man and boy, isolated though they are from one another, are fixated on its silver circle spinning in the dark and later by the scrunch the wheel makes when their journey hits a bad patch of road. In what is essentially a Cubo-Futurist composition, a painting, say, by Balla or Malevich, the bicycle wheel is juxtaposed to the "four rubber-shod wheels" of a car coming along the road, and emerges as mysteriously more pristine: "It was as if we had the first wheel of all, the archetypal wheel," one that sets the pace for man and boy as they come down the dark hill to their respective cottages, exchanging no more than a few words about their anticipated dinners. Yet however powerful the icon, which calls to mind Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, this silver object is discarded as soon as the boy reaches his cottage:

He birlled it once or twice round his head, and when he let it go it rose at a steep slant and hit the top of the bank. That was where the house had its rubbish pit. I heard the wheel strike on what was probably an old rusted kettle or a basin in the pit. Simultaneously, or an instant after, the back door of the house was banged shut.

End of story. No plot, no characterization, and not even the sort of epiphany we find in Finlay's better-known story "The Sea-Bed," in which the "great cod," spied by the young hero on a fishing outing, becomes an

emblem of universal beauty. Indeed, "Boy with Wheel" is more lyric than narrative, discriminating as it does between natural and mechanical, movement and stasis. The moment recalls Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": for example, "When the blackbird flew out of sight, / It marked the edge / Of one of many circles." It is that edge we witness in such minimalist texts as "THE SEA'S WAVES / THE WAVES' SHEAVES/ THE SEA'S NAVES."

Like Little Sparta, with its unique mix of the bucolic and the violent—with urns that turn out to be World War II hand grenades or a garden plaque depicting a machine gun that bears the words, "FLUTE, BEGIN WITH ME ARCADIAN NOTES / VIRGIL, ECLOGUE VIII," Finlay's seemingly pastoral idylls are tinged with menace. "The Blue-Coated Fishermen" (1953), for example, presents a perfectly ordinary fishing expedition, undertaken by a twelve-year old boy, as a journey that cannot quite evade the squalor of daily life. The boy travels on a dreary Glasgow tram, wearing "Wellington boots which he hoped would be taken for waders." He is too poor to have the right clothes, the right bait, or the right "burn" to fish in. To reach the world of woods and fish burns, for that matter, he must rub shoulders with the unpleasant townspeople en route to football games and films: «The boy watched the platform in the titled mirror on the stairs; and when he looked the other way he saw the oily hair of a standing passenger squeezed against the glass, leaving round dirty marks on it like a ball.» The sense of ugliness and revulsion recalls the James Joyce of *Dubliners*, but Finlay's realism quickly gives way to fantasy. "The tram moved with a choppy motion like a boat in a swell," and a bit later, "it pointed its bow into open country." But—and here the perspective changes again—there is nothing bucolic about the fishing scene that follows. "The clean water had soiled . . . Under every stone there were ants, and twisted white roots, but not a worm was to be seen in the dry soil." Still, the day is saved by the

encounter with the “blue-suited fishermen” of the title, who not only give the boy worms and a sip of tea from their billycan but six of the little trout they’ve caught, threaded together on a string so that “They looked like coloured clothes pegs dangling on a line.” The boy is elated, but his joy is soon tempered by the return trip on another crowded tram, past picture-houses and factories, railway-bridges and mean streets. Back at his tenement, he proudly shows his mother the trout he claims to have caught, but she is only annoyed that he’s so late. At story’s end, the boy is alone, pouring himself the stale tea left for him, and “improving” it by adding more leaves until the brew thickens, resembling “the real thing” that the blue-suited fishermen had put on offer, the “good tarry brew!”

“I hate autobiography and biography both,” Finlay declared in a letter of 1983 to Yves Abrioux, “because it seems to me that *much* of one’s life is only nominally related to oneself, yet the telling of it seems to assume that it is telling about the person in a ‘true’ sort of way.” Yet again and again, the poet’s early stories concern young fishermen and farmers, whose families have, like Finlay’s own, fallen on hard times. Fishing, in these tales, is less a trade than a mental escape from the poet’s nagging, small-town poverty. In “Advice from the Author,” an impoverished young artist, living on a farm, is invited by a well-known author to make some illustrations for his new fishing book. The narrator promptly decides to accept the invitation and arranges to go to Edinburgh to meet the famous man. He borrows the train fare from his shepherd, changes trains three times, and “Having only seven shillings in the world I thought I would take a taxi to the well-known author’s house.” It turns out to be the wrong house, and when the right one is found the famous author seems skeptical of the narrator’s talents. His main conversation seems to consist of advice to the young artist as to how to catch the right tram back to the train station. Once home, the artist

proceeds with his work and dispatches the drawings to his patron. Now, as in most of Finlay's stories, comes rejection:

His reply came back by return of post. He liked the drawings, but there were just one or two small points that had him worried. One of these was that I had drawn him as a small boy, looking about nine years old, whereas the manuscript clearly stated that he was only seven and a half. A second point was that I had sketched him looking down into a trout pool, but would the reader, he asked me, be quite sure to know it was a trout pool? Where, in fact were the trout?

This line of reasoning is, of course, entirely absurd: no "drawing," no matter how "realistic" can convey such "facts" as the physical difference between a seven-and-a-half-year-old and a nine-year-old boy. Whatever the reason, in any case, the publisher turns down the drawings. Yet—and this is the Finlay signature as we come to know it in such later visual poems as *Homage to Malevich*, whose not quite square shape (thirteen letters down, fifteen across) parodies Malevich's famous *Black Square* in its variations on the words lack/block/black, "defeat" is greeted with a sigh of relief. Who, after all, really wants to produce these tedious illustrations? Realism, Finlay is implying, cannot be his *métier*. Thus the visit to Edinburgh has been a kind of blessing. for "I still had several halfpennies to jingle in my pocket, owing to the famous fishing author's most helpful advice about the tram."

Survival, not success, is one's proper aim. The old man in "Over the Short Stones" who steals the rabbit snares from the keeper of the estate where he lives and then sets his own traps for the rabbits, is triumphant when he hears, "in the middle of the moonlit night . . . the shrill, white squeals of a rabbit caught in a snare." "For several seconds his eye on the black stew-pot, he listened. Then, smiling tenderly, he lay down and at once fell fast asleep." "Tenderly," so inappropriate in the context of stealing and killing, is the word that gives this story its particularly piquancy.

Finlay's plays have a similar, but lesser, appeal. Ken Cockburn sees these experiments in theatre as marking the transition between the stories

and the “public” sculptures and garden works: “Inevitably,” he writes, “the writer’s isolation is ended, as he is forced to work with a range of people to realize the work. When produced, it exists not on the page but in the world; in the theatre, or wherever the radio is found.” But in another sense, drama, dependent as it is entirely on the speeches and gestures of a set of characters, is a more traditional form than the “poetic” short stories of the fifties. As Finlay wrote to J. F. Hendry:

Drama? Well, I wrote a one-act play, but it was a disaster. For one thing, it somehow came to include 2,000 sheep. Also, I required a page of stage-directions in order to make one character say—for instance—‘pass the salt’. In short, I like to say what is going on inside the people, rather than to make it appear.

Cockburn, who quotes this disclaimer, admits that the play *The Estate-Hunters*, for example, is less effective than the story on which it is based, “Straw,” in which impoverished father and son pretend to one another to be looking in the real estate adverts for a country property and follow these up with occasional out-of-town forays, knowing full well that they can’t afford to move anywhere. In the short story, the poignancy of this charade is heightened by understated narrative: in the end, the boy knows perfectly well that his father’s nightly notation ritual has no consequences. In the play, on the other hand, the action must be represented in speech, and so Finlay gives the son the somewhat saccharine concluding lines, “There’ll be a little country cottage . . . we can afford to buy quite easily . . . Oh, Daddy, Daddy, it will be so wonderful! We’ll never—neither of us—sleep a wink all night . . . for the rises—of the trout!” And the final stage direction reads rather conventionally, “[*The stage is dark. The window throws its golden light on their faces. They are smiling and crying. Slow curtain.*]

The second play, *Walking through Seaweed* is a somewhat schematic dialogue between two young girls, one crass and common-sensical, longing only to window-shop and go to the pictures, the other, a dreamer who describes walking barefoot through seaweed as the ultimate sensuous

experience. But the third, previously unpublished play, "The Wild Dogs in Winter," is a minor masterpiece. The scene is a village bar on a frosty night; the seven "characters" are expressionist abstractions: Publican, First, Second, and Third Domino Player, The Smith, The Woodsman, and--the only character who is named—MacLeish. The drama revolves around a horrendous tale reported in the local paper about two wild dogs (one a mere puppy) that, having destroyed fifteen sheep, remained at large for a fortnight before their shepherd owner could catch and shoot them. The Woodsman, the play's naysayer, contests this account, insisting, to the disgust of the others, that "It was the shepherd shot the old dog but the young dog—it was shot by MacLeish."

Just as the controversy becomes nasty, a small man carrying a book enters—the very MacLeish named by the Woodsman. Questioned by the latter, he admits to having killed the puppy, but when one of the Domino Players exclaims, "I bet it was savage!", MacLeish responds, "Savage . . . ? No . . . No, it wasn't . . . No . . . Not a bit." Was it on a rope? No, not at all. According to MacLeish, "It was . . . just lying in the corner in the kitchen," and "I just whistled . . . you see . . . and it came along with me . . . as good as gold. Of course, you see, it was a wee bit scared . . . It knew it had done wrong, and . . . And well, you see, it saw I had the gun." And the small man exits into the night, leaving the others totally confused and the Woodsman triumphant that the local paper got the story wrong.

What does it all mean? Is the paper "wrong" because it didn't name MacLeish? Or did MacLeish tell a tall tale to appear important? Or was the dog in fact innocent, in which case MacLeish has committed a bloody crime? What is "truth" in such a context? On a sundial plaque Finlay designed in 1983, we read the inscription, "TOO MANY LAWS / TOO FEW / EXAMPLES," followed by the signature of the French Revolutionary hero Saint-Just. Finlay, we know, has always preferred the examples to the laws—examples

that infuse everyday life with its curious estrangement, its mystery already in abundant evidence in these youthful stories and plays.

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