Statement of Intent

CREATIVE:  *Eli Eli: Stories*

CRITICAL:  Great Reckonings in Small Spaces: Time, Structure and Form in the Short Fiction of David Means

September 2010

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STATEMENT OF INTENT

I – On intent and writing

Invited to give a talk to a group of students, Flannery O’Connor began by talking about the problem inherent in any attempt by a writer to talk about their work:

‘…when a writer talks on this subject, there are always misconceptions and mental rubble for him to clear away before he can even begin to see what he wants to talk about.’

I have a piece of rubble to clear away. It is anchored to the question of intent and writing, specifically the way in which a requirement for a statement of the former can have inhibitive consequences for the latter. The brief remarks that follow should be viewed as reflections on PhD practice. I include them not to argue with that practice but to raise, in passing, ways in which a Creative Writing PhD can affect the activity it is designed to encourage. The statement proper begins with section II, below.

David Means puts it bluntly. ‘I can’t write fiction out of an intention. That’s when it goes flat.’ Flannery O’Connor addresses the issue with more tact when writing about ‘Good Country People’:

‘When I started writing that story, I didn’t know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realised it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg. I brought in the Bible salesman, but I had no idea what I was going to do with him. I didn’t know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines

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before he did it, but when I found out that this was going to happen, I realised it was inevitable.\(^3\)

This is a fairly accurate representation of my own practice. As can be seen it makes small allowance for intent: *I merely found myself… before I realised it… I had no idea… I didn’t know he was going to.* To give two examples from my own work: ‘Marta’, emerged from the image of a man sitting in a hospital in a foreign city in the dead of night; ‘The Man Who Lives in the Woods’, from a man lumping a heavy weight to the boot of his car. In neither case did I know anything beyond the fact that I had come upon a storyable incident; the story itself emerged/is emerging in the writing.

This year, I have found myself struggling against that practice, drawn by the proposed requirements of the PhD to attempt to *know* the entire story – and how it might fit into the schema of a putative collection – before setting out to write a single word. As a consequence, I have found my writing constrained by a perceived need to adhere to a system imposed – by myself, admittedly – from outside the writing. This is by no means terminal, but it is a valid problem, particularly in the case of short fiction, where many of the traditional architectures – plot, character, development, resolution etc. – are, if not absent, perhaps less present.

David Means, talking about the way a collection of stories comes together, speaks of the ‘deep coherence’\(^4\) buried inside, a coherence that cannot be written towards and only emerges when the stories are complete and lined up, the one against the other. The requirement to state intent, then, has at times seemed a requirement to

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impose that coherence from the outset, prescribing a limit on creative possibility and – crucially – affecting a story’s openness to those things, to borrow from O’Connor, about which we have no idea. When thinking about the purpose of a Creative Writing PhD, these are consequences worth reflecting on.

II – On the selection of a form

It is necessary to sketch a context for the adoption of a form, in this case, the short story rather than the novel. This has nothing to do with the critical skirmish between the two forms, in which proponents of the shorter defend it from the accusation of being intrinsically less capable than the longer, but has everything to do with recognising that they are significantly different, as unalike from each other as the novel from the sonnet. Yes, they employ similar materials, but they do so to achieve very different ends, in the sense of both purpose and conclusion. Jonathan Culler, speaking of genre, proposes that, when it comes to writing:

‘The activity is made possible by the existence of the genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is nonetheless the context within which his activity takes place.’

While better referred to as a form containing genres rather than a genre itself, there have been many deliberate attempts to define the conventions of the short story.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Poe started it, of course, in 1842 with his talk of ‘highest genius’ being ‘most advantageously deployed’. For summaries and examples, see Shaw, Valerie, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983) pp 1-28. Perhaps the best defence of the story position comes in Alberto Moravia’s ‘The Short Story and the Novel’, in which he intimates that like needs to be compared with like: ‘Quantitatively speaking, Maupassant’s world is wider and more varied than the world of Flaubert, his contemporary; Chekhov’s more so than Dostoevsky’s.’

\(^6\) Carolyne Lee, writing primarily about pedagogical literature, but also about theoretical literature in general, makes the point that although the differences between the forms appear self evident ‘the writing of fiction is discussed...as if there are not two separate fictional genres’. Lee, Carolyne, ‘A rare brand of intimacy: reconsidering the structure and unique effect of the short story’, *TEXT, Vol 13, No. 2*, p. 2.

Nonetheless, an inadvertent one seems especially useful. It can be found in the distinction drawn by Auerbach between the Homeric and Hebraic narrative modes. As Auerbach has it, the Homeric is ‘clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated, men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible; and not less clear…are the feelings and thoughts of the persons involved …and this procession of phenomena takes place in the foreground – that is, in a local and temporal present which is absolute’\(^9\). By contrast, the Hebraic functions through its strategies of omission, of what it does not tell, of what it leaves to the reader to infer; in Auerbach’s words, through the ‘externalisation of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary…the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are suggested only by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and “fraught with background”’\(^10\).

Charles May, in a recent presentation at the International Conference of the Short Story, put the distinction like this: ‘although there are certainly notable exceptions, it seems indisputable that generally the Homeric has given rise to the novel, while the Hebraic has primarily influenced the short story.’\(^11\) Auerbach’s delineations,

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\(^8\) For exhaustive accounts see Charles May’s introductions to his two anthologies of Short Story criticism, *Short Story Theories* and *The New Short Story Theories*. It is perhaps instructive that in the second introduction he suggests that it might be time to ‘call a truce’ in the dialogue of competing definitions.


\(^10\) *Ibid*, pp 11-12.

then, provide a set of conventions within which and against which my PhD will operate.

III – *Eli Eli: Stories*

The collection, *Eli Eli*, draws inspiration from my passion for a range of story writers from a variety of traditions. Chekhov, Mansfield, Hemingway, Bowen, Borges, Cortazar, Carver, Carter, Bolano, Marias, Lasdun, Ali Smith. From Chekhov, I take an interest in the simplicity of design; from Hemingway, the potential of the symbolic patterning of words; from Borges, the rich possibilities in deviating from the real. The list is partial, but it focuses attention on the attractions of the form: that its brevity allows the writer to operate in a variety of different modes. With this in mind, the collection, although broadly realist in tone will examine how life – lived as much in the imagination as on the streets – has at times a shimmering quality that nudges it towards the mythic.

Javier Marias is expert at achieving this bleed from the posited real into the mythic. In ‘The Night Doctor’ an unpleasant husband ‘even rations out the hot water. Once he used his old bathwater to water the plants, which died soon after’\(^{12}\). It is the final detail that clinches it, pitching the notional realism of what has gone before into a purely fictive realm and so connecting the modern form with its roots in folklore. I would like to achieve something similar in ‘Swim Bladder’, in which a child, accomplishing a seemingly magical act, blurs the line between character and archetype.

The collection is driven by two pre-occupations. On the one hand it will seek to engage with time at the level of structure and subject, employing a range of devices that will consider and destabilize the narrative operation of memory and desire. This is perhaps most evident in the story ‘What Time is it, Please?’ in which a woman awaits her lover. In the telling, a collusion of aspects (past, present and future conditional) enacts a layering of concurrent temporal experiences: remembered, actual and anticipated. It is there, too, in ‘Marta’ where a premonition – a disturbance in the protagonist’s time sense – provokes a reality warp that bends anticipation into certain expectation. In ‘Eli Eli’ an absence of punctuation and other syntactical markers is intended to give a rendering of the consequencelessness of a child’s imagination, notionally adrift from cause and effect.

The second pre-occupation is with story telling itself, which builds on a formal tradition that runs from Poe to Borges to Barth to Marias. In part, this will be an extension of the critical enquiry into the structural mechanics of making storyable meaning. Additionally, it is, I suppose, a sustained attempt to answer the question: why write at all? The question has a particular pertinence for short fiction, an aspect that will be further explored in the critical paper.

Consequently, ‘A-Z’ explores a moment in the life of a writer in obscurity who, suddenly finding himself in the limelight, feels compelled to play up to the role of a writer while giving public account for writing hitherto thought a private act. In ‘The Hole’, a character, a drifter more or less, is taken in by a group of hobos. Using the tradition of the fireside tale evident in, among others, Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories, he is drawn to recount what has brought him there, to tell a story in order to
win sanctuary. In ‘Notes on a Love Story’, told in footnotes radiating outwards from a central moment of grace, a written story comes to seem like a prophecy, as life falls into step with the created world.

This last story, with its interest in endings, their power and their purpose, and, most specifically, the way in which short fictions often ‘refuse’ to end, leads on to the critical thesis.

IV - ‘Great Reckonings in Small Spaces: Time, Structure and Subject in the Short Fiction of David Means’.

The critical thesis begins with the assumption that short fiction, since its inception as a modern form,13 has been preoccupied with time. This is evident in a number of ways: from Poe’s early claim that the story derived its peculiar force from its brevity,14 to its common, if anachronistic, apprehension as an art form dealing in epiphanies.15

This time-focus is not surprising – as Kermode points out shared attitudes about time are one of the things that unite us across cultures; nor is it, on its own, a distinguishing mark between the story and the novel.18 What I hope to argue, with reference to David Means, is that there is a particularity to the contemporary story’s

13 For the purposes of my thesis I place that moment in 1842, the year in which Poe’s review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales first appeared. It was also the year of publication of Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat’, from under which we (short story writers) all emerged, as Turgenev is reputed to have said.
15 Miriam Marty Clark, in her essay ‘After epiphany: American stories in the postmodern age’, advances the claim that epiphany, that ‘point of contact with meaning or wholeness’, once the greatest area of consensus in short fiction theory, is now more distracting than useful, encouraging an imposition of unity where, often, there is no such thing. As the thesis will demonstrate, I agree with Clark’s position.
16 In its original connotation it was used to signify the presence of the eternal, God, within the time-bound, actual world.
18 As Carolyne Lee, among others, has intimated any attempt to prescribe such distinctions is fraught with difficulty: ‘Of course it can never be argued that each genre possesses facets of a totally different kind from the other.’
interest in time – specifically in terms of its alignment of time, structure and subject – that gives it a describably different epistemological function, allowing it to bring the reader up against a different sort of encounter with the world.

My angle of enquiry, in the tradition of the practitioner criticism of O’Connor, Bowen, Gordimer et al\(^9\), is that of a writer. The context for that enquiry stretches back to my early reading encounters with the form. The frequent bafflement I felt – and still feel – on coming to the end of certain stories contains within it the germ of my critical interest. Virginia Woolf marked the bafflement long ago, describing the effect of Chekhov’s short fiction, which:

‘produces at first a queer feeling that the solid ground upon which we expected to make a safe landing has been twitched from under us and there we hang asking questions in mid air. It is giddy, uncomfortable, inconclusive.’\(^{20}\)

From Chekhov’s questions and Joyce’s unfinished sentences\(^{21}\), the history of the form, in spite of Poe’s still critically dominant claim for ‘unity of effect’\(^{22}\), reveals a frequent recalcitrance that rejects completeness even within the confines of story itself. As Trussler has pointed out, that rejection ‘seems to preclude a mode of interpretation that will allow a mediation back into what Bakhtin calls the “normal course of biographical time”’\(^{23}\). In making that rejection, I am interested in the possibility of the form arguing with Kermode’s proposition that ‘right down at root,

\(^{19}\) Charles May, writing in the 1970s, made the point that academic criticism of the short story had failed to provide the necessary ‘unified theory of the genre’. In doing so, he set it against the ‘more helpful suggestions’ of writers themselves who ‘have a less sure but a much more passionate view of the form’. May, Charles, ‘A Survey of Short Story Criticism in America’ in Short Story Theories (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1976) p. 10.


they [fictions] must correspond to a basic human need, they must make sense, give comfort.” For Kermode, that comfort can be found in the existence of a plot that conducts the reader to an end that reflects back and confers meaning and significance on what has gone before. It is a point that has been made by critics of plot and structure from Aristotle to Peter Brooks, who hold as self-evident that the purpose of plot, bound up as it is with the problem of temporality, is to draw the reader along a line of ‘progress towards meaning’.

David Means is a useful case, not least because he has thus far operated exclusively within the short form. More than that, his stories, while appearing on the surface to speak in the muscular demotic of the American epical or realist mode, function, in the dizzyingly symbolic elaboration of their structure and sentences, in a manner that reveals a truer allegiance to the lyric mode, as defined by Baldeshwiler. His stories are shot through with brutal violence, deaths described with a balletic grace that does not disguise but rather enhances their savagery. This being the case – and as I am instinctively drawn to Kermode’s formulation of the purpose of fiction – I am interested in analyzing Means with a view to discerning where that comfort might lie, in a form that often denies the reader the very comfort of conclusiveness – in the sense of ‘finis’ outlined by Benjamin in ‘The Storyteller’ – that they seek.

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Means proposes that comfort, or something like it, might be found in structures.

Speaking of a story in his third collection, *The Secret Goldfish*, he has this to say:

‘The horrible characters in “Hunger” willing to go to the very edge to perform heinous acts against a fellow human: where is the deep grace in that story? I’d venture to say it is in the structure of the story itself, in the way it turns back around itself and the way these souls are still out there, moving forward.’

As an extension of the creative enquiry into the nature and purpose of story-telling, the critical paper will perform a close reading of temporal and structural manipulations in the short fiction of David Means. In doing so it will make methodological use of Genette’s taxonomy of time and narrative, especially in terms of order and frequency. Being a writer, however – and emphatically not a structuralist – I am interested in structures not for their own sake, but the ways in which they might be used to enhance and carry meaning; specifically, in the case of Means, the way in which he forms his structures out of his subject and thus blends the levels of discourse and story. Consequently, I will take from Genette certain principles with a view to using them to provoke a critical description that makes a useful interpretative and pedagogical contribution to extant literature on the form. In the process, I will hope to contribute an answer to the question of how, as opposed to what, short stories mean.

The thesis, in three interlinked essays, will focus on three areas of Means’s fiction. The first will consider the function of alternative temporalities proposed in his work. While drawing on a number of other stories, both by Means and other writers, it will
centre on ‘Railroad Incident, August 1995’\textsuperscript{28}, which begins with a man, gripped by crisis, walking a disused railway line. He has abandoned his car, his expensive suit and his tailored shirt. He is coming loose from the plot of life, which, it seems to him, ‘had become a series of … episodes, long searching silences as he tried to recall some image lost to him’. Why is he there? There are myriad reasons, but none of them, the narrative tells us, is ‘reason enough for his actions’. He is, like the story form itself, unexplainable, marooned between cause and effect.

Later, he is set upon and viciously beaten by a gang of youths. The narrative plays along with our desire for comfort – ‘One might wish that it were otherwise’ – before taking a proleptic leap into an alternative temporality in which that desire is realised: the man is saved, by a kindly Reverend, no less. It is, of course, a parody of that old narrative of comfort: that at our end God will save us. It is also one of a number of fictions within the fiction. The man is not saved. He is beaten to death and left on the tracks, where his body, hit by a train, is broken beyond recognition.

The analysis of the story will look at the way in which it exemplifies the temporal problematics of the form itself: the disassociation from context, the refusal of easy interpretation, of linearity and the destabilisation of our way of knowing. The reader ends the story as isolated as the character: surrendered to contemplate ultimacies, ‘last thoughts,’ which, as the narrative avers, ‘don’t come easily.’

The second essay will look at middles. In \textit{The Sense of an Ending}, Kermode proposes the \textit{tick tock} of a clock as a model for thinking about plot, ‘an organisation

that humanizes time by giving it form. In this scheme, the tock is the end-note that confers meaning on the duration in between, and, in Kermode's view, it is a necessary feature of the fictions we tell ourselves because 'we humanly do not want it to be an indeterminate interval between the tick of birth and the tock of death.'

As the chapter will demonstrate, a characteristic of certain of Means’s fictions is its refusal to apply that tock. By way of brief illustration, in ‘The Knocking’ an unnamed narrator spends his days alone in a Manhattan apartment, plagued by tapping emanating from the apartment above. There are occasional moments of reprieve, which only add to the torment:

‘Maybe a five-minute reprieve, more or less, because it is impossible to guess how long these silent moments might be when they open up overhead, knowing, as I wait, that the knocking will begin again; if not in the form of his tapping heel, then some other kind of knock.’

What interests me here is the period between the knocking, where the narrator is trapped in an agony of waiting. He doesn’t want the knock but, thinking of it Kermodian terms, he would rather have it than have to wait for it. A number of Means’s stories leaves us adrift, like this narrator, in a disorganized middle, a position that makes awkward the human instinct towards a cumulative mode of understanding and leaves us, as Kermode explicitly suggests we do not want to be, in an ‘indeterminate interval’. In analysing these middles I will borrow and adapt certain features of Mary Douglas’s exposition of ring composition with a view to preparing the ground for an argument against the frequent insistence on the significant end in short fiction.

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29 Kermode, Frank, The Sense of an Ending, p. 45.
30 Ibid., p. 58.
32 The pertinent feature of which is that meaning is located in the middle. Douglas, Mary, Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
Following on from this, the final essay will analyse the function of endings in Means’s fiction, both in the context of the arguments laid out in the preceding two essays and the critical orthodoxy that, in ending, the form must in some way satisfy the ‘human impetus for closure’\(^{33}\). While not disputing the orthodoxy entirely – every text, however open or inconclusive, must have an ending, which, by dint of its being there, at the end, takes on a certain significance – I will seek to refine it.

Chekhov’s ‘Lady with a Dog’ famously ‘ends’ with the characters (and the reader) realising ‘that the end was still far, far off, and that the most difficult part was just beginning’. It is a classic example of the short story’s frequent disinclination to end. Means pulls off a similar ending in ‘The River in Egypt’, which centres on the father of a sick son. As they drive away from the hospital, the son in the backseat, the narrative tells us: ‘But for now, as he entered the town on a beautiful day, the diagnosis was somewhere off in the remote future… “Are we home? Are we home now, Dad?”’

The proposition of a question takes us back both to Woolf on Chekhov and to Kermode. If, as Kermode suggests, the way plots end – and the concordance they show with the events that precede them – constitutes a fundamental aspect of human nature, a way of making sense of the world, what are we to make of contemporary fictions like Means’s, which appear often to deny that concordance? The thesis, in concluding, will examine the hermeneutical implications of Means’s resistance to such comfort, in which might be found the cause of the common complaint that the

\(^{33}\) Lohafer, Susan, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press) p. 98.
short story is a neglected literary form. On the one hand, I will argue this is because it denies the very thing that readers want and that the form’s marginality is encoded in its own way of being. On the other, however, I will suggest that this holding back implies an act of interpretative generosity on the part of the author. To put it another way, life is an accretion of moments, the consequences of which are not known at the time. Narrative imposes a retrospective fixity on those moments, a place in a sequential hierarchy that denies them their original openness. The novel, by dint of its length, does this more than the story, achieving its power through a cumulative orchestration of control which leads to that Benjaminian sense of ‘finis’.

I am interested in exploring the way in which Means’s work, in common with much short fiction, achieves its power by ultimately surrendering control, projecting its details into a hermeneutically open post-narrational future, leaving us poised, as we often are in our encounters with the real, between knowing and not knowing. It is not a place that we, as readers, like to be. As Shestov is reputed to have said of Chekhov: ‘His work murmurs a quiet “I don’t know” to every problem.’

The unspoken corollary of which statement is: “What do you think?”

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34 Charles May initiates a discussion on this fascinating subject in his essay ‘Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They are Seldom Read’.