

With Ian Hamilton Finlay's death earlier this year we lost one of our most distinguished contemporaries. He was a remarkable artist with an international reputation, but his work is not easy to categorise. He was really a poet who turned to visual art to extend what he wanted to say in his poetry. He was also essentially a pastoral poet. Mankind in nature was his subject.

Words remained at the centre of what he did. But the vision that drove him to push beyond the conventional boundaries of poetry was a moral one. He had a radically incisive view of the muddle of compromise and self-delusion in which we live and expressed it with devastating lucidity. He also had great integrity and if he felt it was compromised could produce the most incandescent polemical response. His letters excoriating the perceived backsliding of the Scottish Arts Council, or the philistine hostility that he suffered from Strathclyde Regional Council, or whoever else he joined battle with over the integrity of his art, are legendary. They are in the noble and uniquely Scottish tradition of flyting, the art of poetic insult. In private, however, he was courteous, gentle and funny.

He did start as a visual artist, but he turned early on, first to poetry and then to concrete poetry, poetry where the form of the words on the page contributes to the meaning of the poem, or where the image makes a pun on the words, indeed where word and image are indivisible. The Little Seamstress, for instance, is a sailing boat tacking across the sea. By its nature, concrete poetry also favours brevity, but that suited Finlay. "Swallows, little matelots" is a poem in just three words, but its imagery is vivid. A French sailor is a matelot. The red, white and blue of a swallow's plumage matches the colours of his uniform, while the shape a swallow makes against the sky matches the anchor he wears on his sleeve. The swallow becomes a marvellous, aerial sailor.

Another wonderful poem, "Star Steer", consists of just two words. Throughout his career Finlay produced individual works in several different forms, very often in simple letter press as prints and pamphlets. The most telling of several versions of Star Steer is a print in silver ink. The word 'star', repeated one word to a line, descends the page in a rippling silver column like starlight on water. Then finally at the foot of this column where a boat might be riding on the waves, 'star' changes to 'steer'. There is nothing else, but nothing else is needed. The words and the image they conjure invoke the whole of mankind's relationship with the heavens. This begins with the idea of navigation; ships, and especially fishing boats are a constant theme in his work. Sea-fishing for Finlay was a form of the pastoral; but then this poetic image reaches beyond simple marine navigation to suggest the unchanging order of the stars as a model for an ideal of order by which we must navigate our moral lives.

This is lapidary poetry and some of his finest poetic art works actually are inscriptions in stone. The position of his garden at Little Sparta, high up on the

bare Lanarkshire hills, and its status as a metaphor for much else in our world, is summarised by the single word, *Fragile*, carved on a stone where the garden joins the moorland above. Brevity is also the soul of wit and his concrete poems and epigrams are often very funny.

Finlay always described himself as a neoclassical artist. Classicism and neo-classicism both reflect a vision of an ideal higher order and Apollo personified it. Apollo was also a gardener and appropriately he is the presiding deity of Little Sparta, a garden that is also an extraordinary extended concrete poem in the true pastoral mode. Gardening, however, is a battle to create order out of nature's constantly encroaching chaos. "A garden," Finlay wrote in one of his epigrams, 'is a process not a state.' He saw the French Revolution as driven by the same neo-classical pursuit of order; the Jacobins were the gardeners of history. Correspondingly, following this surprising analogy with gardening, the French Revolution was one of the key sources of Finlay's imagery. The warlike images in his art are a metaphor for the struggle against disorder. He needed the metaphorical tanks to fight constantly encroaching compromise which, as it muddies the fierce clarity of the ideal, allows chaos to advance, just as he needed actual scythe and shears to fight the ever encroaching weeds. But the gardener's relationship to external nature is also a metaphor for nature within us. Finlay was quite clear about that; there are also enemy tanks lurking in the undergrowth of our own unreconstructed humanity ready to take us by surprise. They are the armour of the forces of darkness and in his art they carry the Nazi insignia. We need to be vigilant.

But much of the apparent anger of Finlay's military and revolutionary imagery was really no more than the necessary rhetoric of art. He never lost the love of nature that is the basis of the true pastoral. Once when I visited him I found him in a state of distress. Cattle had broken into the garden. "Cows just have no aesthetic sense, poor things!" he lamented. His idealism was philosophical. It was tempered by humour and his humanity enriched his art.

On that occasion, which was just a few years ago, the cows had broken into the lower south east corner of the garden, the last part that he developed. Clearly, he knew it would be the final part, too, and characteristically included in it several valedictory pieces. There is a stone bridge across the burn here, a rustic construction of two stone piers and three flat slabs of a kind that might easily appear in a painting by Claude. On one pier a 'W' is inscribed and on the next the word 'Ave'. Together they read 'wave'. That might refer to the water, but a wave is also a farewell while 'Ave' is the Roman greeting, 'Hail'. So as the bridge joins and the burn separates, we get 'Hail and farewell', a line from the beautiful poem that Catullus wrote on visiting his brother's grave: "Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale." (And so into eternity, brother, Hail and farewell.)

As well as this valediction, there is also an even more personal work in this part of the garden. It is a sheep fold, an enclosed square of dry stone wall. The

word Eclogue is inscribed on the gate and on a slab set in the wall behind is written 'The Last'. As you look over the gate the two together read, the Last Eclogue. Virgil's last Eclogue is the Tenth. It is never called the Last, however. That is is Finlay's own coining and so the sheepfold is his own last Eclogue, his own last pastoral, but the Eclogue reference is nevertheless also an invitation to consider the sheepfold in the light of Virgil's poem. Finlay had already used the poem elsewhere. There is a lovely fountain nearby, for instance, inscribed: "Hic gelidi fontes, Hic mollia prata/ *Here are cool springs, Here soft meadows.*" It is a beautiful line from the poem, but it is also a modest boast. There are soft meadows here now, but before this was all just barren hillside.

The poem suggests a more poignant message in the sheepfold, however. The Tenth Eclogue is a lament for the lovesick shepherd, Gallus. Finlay never missed a pun and 'gallus' is a Glasgow word for someone a bit full of himself. That piece of gentle self-mockery however also suggests that Gallus is to be identified with Ian Hamilton Finlay himself and in the poem Gallus, and thus the artist-poet, anticipates his own death saying:

"Yet will ye sing, Arcadians, of my woes
Upon your mountains

O then how softly would my ashes rest,
If of my love, one day, your flutes should tell."

Thus through Virgil's pastoral Ian Hamilton Finlay quietly enjoins us to remember him and indeed I am sure we will.