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Cataloging, *Dinnseanchas*, and the Lyricism of Tony Curtis

One of the oldest rhetorical strategies in Irish poetry is the catalog or list, the accumulation of details, qualities, objects, or people meant to create a larger vision of a whole from a set of heterogeneous parts. In the bardic literature of pre-Christian Ireland, the catalog became a useful means to impart *dinnseanchas*, which John Montague translates as "place wisdom," a "sense of the historical layers and legends which give character to an area" (Montague 56). We see it most obviously on display in Amergin's so-called "Alphabet Calendar," the *rosc* that defines the Ogham alphabet through the personal identification of the bard with the objects associated with the individual Ogham letters (e.g., "I am a stag," "I am a wind," "I am a flood," etc.).[1] Then, too, the many place names in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* emerge from the lists of names of those who battle with Cúchulain and perish.[2] In both of these instances, place wisdom emerges from a cataloguing of human interactions with particular places, one reason why the British effacement of Irish place names in the middle decades of the nineteenth century (poignantly explored in Brian Friel's *Translations*, 1980) represented such a vicious attack against Irish history and therefore, Irish identity as well.

Yet the catalog as a poetic strategy cannot be relegated to the distant Irish past. W. B. Yeats employs it to memorable effect in some of his most famous meditative poems. In "Easter, 1916," for example, the actions and then the names of the Rising leaders become instrumental in defining the "terrible beauty" "born" as a result of the revolt. The poem concludes with a list

encapsulation ("I write it out in a verse—/MacDonagh and McBride/And Connolly and Pearse") to equate the rebels, the wearing of green, and the refrain (74–6). The emphasis on human action (the Rising and its aftermath) defines the poet's Dublin walk, which occasioned the meditation in the first place. A similar gathering of people occurs in the late poem, "At the Municipal Gallery," in which Yeats meditates on his past associations and defines the period of youthful creativity in reference to paintings he sees again and the people he once knew. By cataloging thirteen paintings from Hugh Lane's collection and elaborating their personal associations, Yeats posits a kind of closure during what became the last year of his life.

The cataloging strategy persists in contemporary Irish poetry. To gauge its current vitality and flexibility, one need look no further than the work of Tony Curtis, whose poems similarly define place wisdom as a unification of objects and locales with the human interactions supplying them with meaning. A member of Aosdána, Curtis is the author of eight well-received collections, most recently, *Folk*, which was published in January 2011.[3] Although it has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves, his work has garnered significant recognition in Ireland and abroad. Curtis won the Poetry Ireland/Friends Provident Irish National Poetry Prize in 1993 and with designer Conor Clarke, the Robert Horne Award in 2007. In 2003, Curtis received the Varuna House Exchange Fellowship to Australia, to which he regularly returns, and since 2007, he regularly has been a distinguished visiting writer in the Skagit River Poetry Project, which places well-known poets into public schools in the Skagit and Whatcom counties of Washington state. A consummate performer, he gives on average more than 175 readings per year in venues as various as universities, primary and secondary schools, prisons, public libraries, mental institutions, churches, and other assorted poetry gatherings. Moreover, like the

bards of the distant Irish past, he delivers his poems from memory, without the aid of written texts, and holds audiences spellbound.

While list poems represent only a small portion of Curtis' oeuvre so far, they form an important group, in that they both embody part of the Irish poetic inheritance and showcase Curtis' ability to transform everyday matters and materials into passages of compelling lyrical grace. The latter phenomenon is immediately apparent in the poem, "A Quiet House," from *Three Songs of Home* (1998). Composed while his wife, Mary, was away on a trip, the poem is a love song anticipating reunion:

> Since I've moved to the hills
> I've stopped sleeping naked,
> but taken to planting flowers;
> not just in the garden
> but in cooking-pots, buckets,
> any old containers.
> This year, when you return,
> there will be laburnum, iris,
> seven types of fuchsia,
> to waken to each morning.
> And I make this promise to you now:
> I have done with traveling.
> I am mending the wood
> in the window, the tap at the sink.
> I am letting the clocks run down.
> This time, the house will whisper
> when you sleep, and it will take, at least,
> nine hours of moonlight to waken you.

The center of this deceptively balanced poem turns on three lists of three—of planting containers, of flowers planted, and of household chores—that together might form a larger list we might call, "Preparations for Your Return." This larger list is bookended by four lines of introduction and a four-line sketch encapsulating the rest and care the poet wishes to give his beloved. Yet the gracefulness of the language conceals the studied character of this structure.

Moreover, the title carries two associations: it suggests both the quiet of absence, of a man living temporarily alone as he tends the house, as well as the quiet comfort of presence in the imagined vision of his love asleep in the moonlight. The lists-within-a-list prove critical to the peaceful, unruffled tone of the romantic conclusion, the last lines especially.

While "A Quiet House" provides a glimpse of Curtis' lyricism, other poems employ catalogs of objects in a style of public pronouncement or declaration reminiscent of the bardic literature. One striking instance occurs in "From a Famine Journal," first published in *This Far North* (1993). A poem in ten parts, it belongs to the same poetic family as Seamus Heaney's "For the Commander of the 'Eliza'" (1966), in that both poems strive to convey the pain of the famine years through narrative recreation. In contrast to Heaney's poem, a single episode of rules-governed cruelty at sea, Curtis's chronicles the five-year decline, from 1845–1850, in the fortunes of a land-owning family, the Wyatts. Purportedly the journal entries of Elizabeth Wyatt, the lady of the house, they begin with a brief account of Dublin prosperity just before the full effects of the famine registered; they end with the Wyatt family's relocation to Australia, an abandonment of an "Ireland ravaged by/famine, cholera and five wretched years of misery" ("X: New Australians," 5–6). Fittingly, Curtis prefaces the sequence of journal entries with a verbal snapshot from the middle of the time period—14 November 1848—as the hungry Irish experience first-hand a central cause of their misery, the export of much-needed food. He communicates the sense of helpless futility through the form of a stark catalog of the number of bales, casks, barrels, bags, firkins, and boxes of bacon, pork, oats, flour, cattle, sheep, ham, butter, and eggs leaving Cork harbor (1–12). "We watched it sail into a hungry wind," the speaker concludes in statement of cosmic fatalism (13). This beginning places within a wider

social frame the following narrative, thereby contextualizing the ensuing revelations about Elizabeth Wyatt's private life.

Curtis reverses the pattern, while still commenting on the troubled past of Ireland, in "Preferences," from the same collection. This time, the catalog details the speaker's personal likes, ranging from a fondness for bicycles, to favorite songs, to bodily features, to the natural world. Meanwhile, the public commentary comes in the form of a refrain, "And yet there are days/I drink for Ireland" (12–3, 27–8), which recurs in the forth and eighth strophes, after the speaker mentions his love for the natural world (i.e., "I love the feel of stone/and the colour of grass," 10–11, and "I love the full moon, its white host/against the black body of sky," 25–6). In the final strophe (46–9), after remarking on the calm sea, the speaker voices his final preference—when the sea "goes berserk/like a salty drunk/and rages against Ireland" (47–9). Once again, the list as a structural device allows for the interplay between personal and public, between individual fortune and Irish history.

Only rarely, however, does Curtis use lists in such a straightforward fashion as in the poems so far considered. More often, cataloging merely offers a structural frame within which to explore the distinctive qualities of each item, person, or element. In "Three Remedies from *The Magical Book of Winter Cures*," while the opening "Cure for a Broken Heart" presents a straightforward recipe (i.e., "*Seven days when no one calls./Seven nights when nothing stirs./Seven walks in the rain./Seven ferocious prayers. . .*"), the "Cure for Loneliness" reorients readers' perspectives regarding each ingredient by means of an expanded description:

> This is an old Russian cure,
> better than a cup of tea,
> more reliable than pills.
> It was first formulated
> by Leo Tolstoy in the

> long winter of 1869.
> A complex potion,
> the recipe runs to 1,144 pages,
> too long to put down here
> but you'll find it on the creaking
> shelves of any library
> under the title *War and Peace* (1–12)

Curtis recommends this cure be taken "late at night,/beside an open fire,/with a map of Old Russia/and a bottle of red wine" (14–7). He then offers other literary remedies, each one effective at alleviating the feeling of isolation. The elaboration of the item content in this and in other like poems creates a space for meditative thought in the same way Yeats' catalog poems do, by momentarily arresting the flow from one item to the next. The poem gains a greater sense of intimacy and authenticity as a result of this suspension.

Indeed, for Curtis, while cataloging recurs as a spur for imaginative exploration, it never acquires the mechanical feel of mere device or gimmick. If the form of a list were to become too mechanical, the resulting poem would smack of rote execution and become monotonous—as in some passages of Allan Ginsburg's *Howl*, for instance. By contrast, Curtis preserves its form enough to maintain forward momentum and structural coherence while simultaneously allowing for the seeming spontaneity of a natural speaking voice. Curtis avoids monotony by varying how items are introduced and by amplifying them in surprising, witty ways. He thereby maintains the intimate tone of a friend speaking with a friend.

In "Olympians," for example, Curtis imagines a foot race featuring all the poets from around the world and from every era. This lofty imaginative flight begins with disarming humor: "This was never going/to be a glorious race," the speaker confides, "but after the pandemonium/of the heats/let's at least make sure/they're all facing the same way" (2–7). There follows, in the style of a sports commentator, a presentation of some of the major contenders:

Sappho, Bashō, Homer Shakespeare, Dante, Frost, Heaney, and others. Sometimes the poets appear in groups sharing individual lanes, as when the Romantics cast a "shadow" over Shakespeare's selection because they all tested "positive for opiates" (30–6). But more often Curtis gives small sketches that use the overarching race metaphor to capture a poignant truth about the individual and/or evoke a sympathetic reaction toward him or her. The named runners conclude with the "Russian champions" in the "four/by four hundred relay," Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Mandelstam, and Akhmatova—the last, he writes, "brings it home/with tremendous power/and gritty determination" (67–9)—followed by an unnamed army of other poets.

A lesser poet might have ended the poem with the descriptions of the contenders, as if the simple reflections on each contribution were enough to satisfy the burden of what a poem should accomplish. But as so often happens in Curtis' poetry, such descriptions prepare for larger, more poignant examinations of the subject at hand—in this case, the act of poetic imagining:

> And then,
> not with a shot
> or a shout,
> but with a collective sigh,
> they're off.
>
> It is poetry in motion,
> like something out of Brueghel
> the stillness is absolute,
> for no one has moved.
>
> They have closed their eyes
> and are imagining
> the wind on the face
> the sweat on the brow
> the pain in the chest
> the ache in the heart
> the hardship
> the loneliness
> the grief
> that has brought them to this.

> Some are already
> closing on the final line.
> Others will take
> hours, days, weeks, months.
> Some will still be running
> when the crowds are gone
> when the lights are off
> when the stadium's closed.
>
> And some will
> never make it home:
> their words, their faces,
> their lives forgotten.
> They will turn to dust
> where they fall.
> The earth takes back
> what it gives away—
> the lanes run on forever.

Still governed by the controlling race metaphor, the final section captures both the dreaming privacy of poetic making, as well as how some will achieve their best work and the recognition they deserve, how others labor their whole lives without attaining either, and how still others will "never make it home" and become entirely forgotten. The playful metaphor enables this deeper meditation. The seriousness of the final thought—the "lanes run on forever" (i.e., poetry outlasts all poets)—comes as a surprise in light of the earlier humorous descriptions. But Curtis amply prepares for it with the shift in lyrical registers away from the diction of sports commentary to a more philosophical description of the trajectory and significance of poetic making.

In several other notable poems, the catalog similarly provides a platform from which to spring into new insights. Curtis tends to employ catalogs to this end when pursuing one of two areas of interest. The first is a concern with the synergies between the elemental, material world and human history, often personalized or localized through a focus on generational interconnectedness. Sometimes Curtis voices this interest when writing for particular occasions,

as when, in 2003, an Irish-Australian man asked Curtis to write a blessing for a boat he was building by hand. The ensuing poem, "Currach," which appeared in *What Darkness Covers*, became so popular Irish composer Ian Wilson set it to music:[4]

This is my boat.
I made it
with my own hands.
I took salt
from a bitter wind,
hair from
a horse's mane,
thread from
a woman's blouse.

Three stories
my father told me.
The sideways look
my mother has
when she is
curious and alone.
Her silent prayers.
A few rusty nails
from the kitchen door.

Three views of the island:
one in mist, one in rain,
one rocking in a drunken sea.
No flowers.
My people
had no love of leaves,
they saw boats in trees;
now the boats are gone
and the hills are bare.

At night, I sowed
curses into the oars,
rubbed fish oil
into the wood,
for I knew the journey
that lay ahead.
My people's story
was written on water.
Most of it is washed away.

My grandfather
knew the tale
but he'd not tell it.
His ghost sits
in the stern
saying:

The future
is a steady course,
row strongly.

Here, the blessing—a recipe of symbolic ingredients that go into the construction of the currach—combines both the inclusion of triads, as in "A Quiet House" (e.g., "three views of the island:/one in mist, one in rain,/one rocking in a drunken sea," 19–21), and the supplemental explanations of some items, as in "Olympians." Why "No flowers"? "My people," the speaker explains, "had no love of leaves,/they saw boats in trees;/now the boats are gone/and the hills are bare." The accumulation of details roots both poem and boat in Ireland, the ancestral home, and locates boat-making within a family heritage. As with other such catalogs, the accumulation culminates in an insight about how best to live in the face of a difficult history: "*The future/is a steady course,/row strongly*." Issuing from the ghost of the speaker's grandfather, these words attest to the necessity of determination within the bond between generations, in whatever land they may be.

The other concern, already glimpsed in "Olympians," centers on poetic making—its joys, hardships, opportunities, and the ways in which it connects poets and readers across time. Curtis treats poetic making as a calling within a larger life. "Some people say, 'write what you know,'" he told an audience at a reading in 2009. "I don't follow that at all. I write to explain the world to myself."[5] His treatments of poetic composition stitch the craft into the ever-present materiality of the everyday. In "Bench," for example, Curtis' search for the ideal writing table

defines specific features and characteristics in reference to the kinds of human action they enable or represent:

> I've always wanted a good table
> there in the space by the window,
> there where the sun comes crawling
> in the morning.
> The birds and the moon
> could watch me working.
>
> A cluttered table—
> you can imagine it holding
> books, papers, poems,
> all kinds of scribbling—
> an empty coffee cup,
> the lamp burning long after midnight.
>
> A sturdy table—
> the kind the hero comes in
> and lays his sword upon,
> or the dead body of his son,
> a table strong enough
> to bear sorrow
> to bear fruit,
> flowers from the field,
> a feather dropped
> through the open window.
>
> A poet's table—
> wide enough for the whiskey ballad,
> long enough for the epic.
> It must have a feel for sound.
> The grain should run evenly,
> a seam of gold that curves
> and curves like a river of words
> into the pool of a poem.
>
> A good table—
> I'd want the wood to be smooth,
> pale as the undressed skin of a tree
> so when the wind blows
> over its bare back,
> its soul will waken
> to the memory of leaves and forest.

A useful table—
not a perfect table.
If it is chipped or scratched
it will remind me
of rooks and cuckoo
fox and squirrel.
But I want nothing broken,
nothing that speaks
of the axe, the chisel, or the saw.

When I come to the table
in the morning, I want to feel
like a woodsman hunting
or in the evening, a nesting bird.
What I want is to be lost
in the forest of myself.

Though I've searched for years
I've never found such a table
nor the carpenter to make it.
All I have is this: hear how it creaks.

By this point, the use of expanded catalog items should seem familiar. A small puzzle here, however, is the apparent mismatch between the title, "Bench," and the ensuing search for the perfect writing table. What is the relationship between a bench and a writing table? The placement of the poem provides a clue. "Bench" appears as the second poem in *Folk*, immediately following the title poem of the collection, a meditation on a photograph of the poet's parents taken in Roscrea in 1948. The poem, "Folk," imagines Curtis' parents as a young couple literally taking flight on a motorcycle as they embark on their new life together. The juxtaposition of "Bench" with this family snapshot is purposeful, for "Bench" was the first poem Curtis wrote after the death of his father, Kevin Curtis, in 2004. Elsewhere in his work, Curtis describes how his father "always made and mended things" and earned a living as a woodworker. Kevin Curtis once even told the poet he would never have a work bench but would build his life around a desk instead. Seen within this family context, then, "Bench" implicitly

possesses thematic parallels with Heaney's "Digging," which also explores the complex relationship between the work of father and son. It differentiates Curtis' craft from the manual labor of his father, as described in "The Well in the Rain," and simultaneously establishes a familial continuity that brings both together. Both father and son are attentive to the work defining their lives.

Also like Heaney's famous poem, "Bench" functions as a kind of poetic credo, in that it encapsulates how the poet intends to fit poetry into his life and what he hopes his poems will do. It is as if the poet discovers his aspirations and the kinds of poems he wishes to write as he voices them, a process most clearly apparent in the differentiation of normal wear and tear ("If it is chipped or scratched/it will remind me/of rooks and cuckoo/fox and squirrel") from the violation of separation from the natural world ("But I want nothing broken,/nothing that speaks/of the axe, the chisel, or the saw"). He longs for the work the table would enable as much as, or even more than the object by itself. "What I want," Curtis says, "is to be lost/in the forest of myself" (51–2). Heaney's and Curtis' poems differ most strongly in the degree of confidence they voice in the final lines. While Heaney articulates an almost aggressive determination—"Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests./I'll dig with it" (29–31)—Curtis offers a humbler awareness of the difference between aspiration and actuality. In a surprise move, the longed for bench turns out to be the poem before us: "Though I've searched for years/I've never found such a table/nor the carpenter to make it./All I have is this: hear how it creaks." If the preceding poem "creaks"—that is, if not every line rings of perfection—the poem nonetheless communicates Curtis' workaday attitude toward poetry, how the most mundane circumstances can be imbued with lyrical beauty, and how everyday places and experiences can trigger the associations necessary to render them meaningful. The list strategy is only one means by which

Curtis communicates *dinnseanchas* to his readers; he employs others. But in his cataloging, we see his fine ear for lyric euphony, his sure sense of line and pace, and his knack for easing readers into new relationships with his subject matter. We also see why his poetry merits a greater scholarly attention than it has received thus far.

Notes

[1] See Robert Graves, ch. 12, for an account of this poem. Montague (22) questions Graves' "imaginative reconstruction" of Amergin's song but nonetheless reprints it in his anthology (45), the source for this quotation.

[2] This process of naming occurs throughout the epic. See, for example, the fifth section, which is called "Death, Death!" in the Kinsella translation (92–100) and "Guerrilla Tactics" in the Carson translation (51–69).

[3] See the Works Cited for a list of Curtis's major publications.

[4] Wilson's composition was performed as part of a larger composition, entitled "Harbouring," in Wexford in 2008. For a review of this concert, see http://www.whisht.info/press.htm.

[5] This reading occurred on 12 May 2009 at Seattle University.

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