

## Coming to terms

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Certain moments in a scholar's life sometimes stand out with particular clarity as helping to shape a career. One such moment occurred in 1961 when I was reading Donne's *Essays in Divinity* in the British Museum Library. After referring to two Renaissance thinkers – Pico and Giorgio – Donne goes on to explain their concern with number symbolism. For a moment I hesitated whether or not to read these authors for myself, since a subject of such interest to a man like Donne was bound to have some bearing on Renaissance poetry. Yet to do so entailed reading them in a French edition from 1579. Nevertheless I decided to do so, and this decision led to my discovery that symbolic numbers could determine the structure of many Renaissance texts in prose or verse. After having pursued this subject for a few years, it dawned on me that numerical compositions may exhibit purely verbal kinds of structuring – that numerical and verbal structures in fact usually coexist, and that priority should be given to the verbal patterns. I changed my perspective accordingly.

To my great mortification I found that this point simply had failed to register; scholars continued to refer to my "numerological" studies.

In one of my many discussions with Roy T. Eriksen – then a Research Assistant at the University of Oslo – I challenged him to invent a term that would be more appropriate. And so he did. The very next day he proclaimed the virtues of the term *topomorphical* coined by his fertile brain from the Greek words

## Coming to terms

*topos* and *morphe*. *Topomorphs* and *topomorphical* are the only appropriate terms for textual structures created by the location of *topoi* within the body or *morphe* of a text. This felicitous coinage has received a stamp of approval from many quarters, although the tendency to favour "numerology" strangely enough still persists, for example in several reviews of my recent book on *Configurations. A Topomorphical Approach to Renaissance Poetry* (1994). Throughout these 600 pages I show again and again that priority should be given to the verbal texturing, but clearly to no avail. I seem destined to remain a "numerologist". True, the word is no longer a term of abuse or contempt, but even so I cannot come to terms with it. If any kind of pre-planned textual structure is felt to have a basis in symbolic numbers, then such a belief is plainly wrong and misleading.

While considering this terminological confusion the other day, a new idea came to me. I try it out here for the first time. For quite a long time now, Eriksen and myself have felt that the kind of structuring we investigate is closely connected with *concepts*. I have myself used the phrase "topoi or concepts" on many occasions. The poets I have studied for so many years reveal a habit of thinking in terms of concepts; their focus is on the analysis, not of characters but of concepts. This is true even of Fielding's "comic epic poem in prose", *Tom Jones*, so that one critic has referred to his characters as "walking concepts". I believe that Fielding was indebted to Renaissance romance epics to a considerable extent, and my study of *Configurations* shows that the romance epics written by Tasso and Spenser are firmly based on textual structures that are partly verbal and partly numerical. But how is it possible that concepts can be just as important in realistic fictions as in allegories? One would think that they would be the prerogative of allegory alone. The dilemma can be resolved by positing the presence of a third mode, distinct from the allegorical and the realistic but capable of enriching realistic as well as allegorical fictions. I would

refer to this third mode as *conceptual*. It is my hope that this third mode will enable me to come to terms with terminology by clarifying the issues involved. Clear thinking calls for clear terms.

Does this mean that topomorphs should be abandoned in favour of the conceptual mode? By no means. Both terms are called for, so that we must learn to discriminate. Topomorphs are a structural phenomenon, whereas a conceptual mode is far more comprehensive. The conceptual mode bears on the way in which a narrative is handled in general, yet it undoubtedly favours pre-planned textual structures. Topomorphical compositions often display a rhetoric based on ethical concepts that are submitted to close logical analysis. It is clearly as a consequence of this fusion between logic and rhetoric that concepts are so significantly foregrounded in the texts I had studied, and these texts range from Augustine to Milton and Dryden.

What I have just said will be more easily understood by adducing examples.

A topos can be made poetically more effective by being fused with compatible concepts. Milton connects the beginning, middle, and end of the first, 10-book edition of *Paradise Lost* (1667) by means of the standard epic topos of the marshalling of troops. But in the first book, and the last, he extends the topos by turning it into a marshalling of the deadly sins. As Satan marshals his troops with their 12 leaders or "apostles" the description makes it obvious that they embody the deadly sins. When Adam in book 10 is given his visions of the future of fallen man, these too are visions of the deadly sins as transferred from Hell to Earth. Thus the martial topos is transformed by shifting the weight to Christian ethics.

This technique represents no innovation. Augustine employs it as he begins his *Confessions* (a spiritual epic) by emulating the Virgilian and Homeric topos of the arming of the hero for battle. But in Augustine's epic the arming consists in

## Coming to terms

the various good faculties and qualities bestowed upon him at birth by a benign creator. As in the case of Milton's description of the marshalling of the troops, the Christian interpretation universalises the topos so that the hero becomes an Everyman. Rightly used, the "arms" will assist his voyage back to the homeland he longs for.

Ethical or Christian concepts, then, may enrich standard topos, but what about the relationship between allegory and a possible conceptual mode?

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* Book One, canto i will serve to illustrate the relationship. The allegorical actions are plain enough. Redcrosse first engages with the dragon Error, then succeeds in finding his way out of the labyrinth of the forest, and together with Una and the dwarf he finally finds himself in a supposed hermitage where deceptive visions trouble him throughout the night. The dragon Error is doubly allegorical since no self-respecting Renaissance dragon would be content to spew out books and papers instead of fire and brimstone, just as Morpheus embodies the sin of sloth shared by Redcrosse as he tosses on his bed in the false hermitage. But this sequence of allegorical events is aligned with a sequence of precisely defined ethical concepts: rashness, proper action, and sloth (and sloth connects with lust). Redcrosse's encounter with the dragon reveals his rashness; he proceeds without caution, "full of fire and greedy hardiment" (i. 14) despite Una's warning words: "Be well aware. . . / Least suddaine mischief ye too rash prouoke" (i. 12). The description of their successful exit out of the dangerous forest occupies a single stanza located at the textual centre (i. 28; 27 stanzas precede and follow). Redcrosse proceeds purposefully, sticking to one path "that beaten was most plaine, / Ne euer would any byway bend, / But still did follow one vnto the end" (i. 28). Its conceptual import is to dramatise proper action. The third concept focuses on the sloth personified by Morpheus (i. 42) and embodied also by Redcrosse knight as he is content to remain in bed despite the

ominous character of events in the hermitage. As canto ii begins he is shown to flee from the hermitage before dawn, thus abandoning Una and his quest.

Those who know their Aristotle will already have recognised his famous formula of Virtue as a mean between excess and defect, and Spenser reveals his indebtedness to Aristotle in his prefatory letter to Raleigh where he explains that he has based his epic on the twelve private moral virtues "as Aristotle hath devised". We see, then, that the conceptual framework enclosing canto i ensures a close connection with real life. Rashness is always rashness, regardless of the allegorical dimension of the dragon Error. This interweaving between actions that are allegorical as well as related to life as we know it captivates the attention and prevents the allegory from disappearing into thin air. The Aristotelian concepts may enrich the allegory but can by no means be seen as part of it. The conceptual dimension remains separate. To underline the Aristotelian formula, Spenser has located the key concepts symmetrically to each side of the textual centre showing the golden mean: stanzas i. 14 (on rashness) and i. 42 (on sloth) are placed halfway between the beginning and the middle (i. 14) and between the middle and the end (i. 42). But readers of course get the message without having to count stanzas.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is of particular interest because it shows the connection between biblical typology and the conceptual mode. Thus the crucial image of the chariot of paternal Deity is a type of obedience (*typus obedientiæ*) and types must necessarily be part of the literal level. Milton's description is based directly on Ezekiel's vision of a flying chariot and on the standard theological gloss on its meaning. Biblical typology therefore is an exact analogue to the conceptual mode, but not its source. The popularity, though, of typological sequences for example in sacred art during the Renaissance must have strengthened the tendency to think in terms of a spiritual kernel of truth which prompts the invention

of an episode and its location within the text.

One consequence of the conceptual mode is that the focus of interest is found, not in characterisation, but in the interaction between significant episodes and descriptions. It is this interaction which creates the complexity that later ages sought in the portrayal of character, and it is this interaction which helps to explain the fondness for textual structures. Take Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). Fielding divided his "comic epic poem in prose" into three hexads; towards the end of the first, Jones is ensnared by Molly Seagron, while Lady Bellaston performs the same service at the beginning of the third. At the centre of the second hexad, however, our hero is shown between Mrs Waters and Sophia Western, and the presentation is such that Tom Jones is seen to enact the famous choice of Hercules between Virtue and Vice.<sup>1</sup> We should compare and contrast the three seductions, tracing in them a scale of negative and positive values and in the process learning a great deal about women and love. But in this context my chief example will be taken from *Joseph Andrews* (1742). Its many hilarious episodes have so much life in them that the underlying concepts they dramatise with such skill often remain unobserved. For this reason the patterns invented to emphasise them are equally obscure to modern readers. Yet Fielding himself stresses his attention to form by writing a special chapter "Of Divisions in Authors" (Book II, ch. 1). His tone is jesting as he compares his division into books and chapters to the places of rest afforded weary travellers by inns and similar places, a metaphor employed by the Earl of Shaftesbury (*Miscellaneous Reflections*, 1727) as by Putterham (*The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589; see Book II, ch. 4). Readers, then, must observe Fielding's divisions, and if one counts the narrative chapters (excluding the essays prefixed to Books I, II, and III) one sees that a triple centre is located at II.14-16 since the same

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<sup>1</sup> See my essay on «Tom Jones and the Choice of Hercules», *Fair Forms*, ed. Røstvig (Cambridge: Brewer, 1975), 147-77 and 222-26.

number of chapters precede and follow. The center-piece is devoted to the description of three episodes involving three characters. Chapter II.14 is devoted to the memorable encounter between Parson Adams and Parson Trulliber as Adams calls on his fellow clergyman to request the loan of a very small sum. The refusal is as rude as it is prompt. The next chapter reveals the generosity of a poor pedlar who promptly gives all he has to assist a person in need; the unassuming brevity of the action stands reflected in the unusual brevity of this particular chapter. When on the road again in ch. II.16, Adams encounters a fine gentleman whose unsolicited promises of assistance display an unusual generosity. The point, though, is that the promises are never redeemed. The Aristotelian formula is easily recognised. The pedlar, located at the absolute centre at the point of honour, represents the Virtue that is flanked by antithetical extremes of defect and excess.

To try to discover development in the characters of Joseph Andrews or his friend, Parson Adams, is to look in the wrong direction. However much they remain themselves, they are by no means marred by what has been termed «flatness». The many dramatic episodes are cleverly varied so that they afford a complex survey of life as we know it, replete with high and low characters and their appropriate settings and actions. It is the subtle interplay between characters, settings and actions that engenders the sense of richness that so delights us. Perhaps we should begin to speak of Fielding's choice of concepts rather than themes in order to do justice to his own point of view. In his choice of concepts, Aristotle's *Ethics* looms large, but Aristotle can by no means be seen as responsible for creating the conceptual mode, nor can the much later popularity of typological sequences. These may have strengthened and perhaps given direction to an already existing tradition but cannot have created it. Before the roots can be traced with greater certainty we need to know more about ways of thinking and expressing thought in Antiquity.

## Coming to terms

What is abundantly clear, though, is that these ways were structurally oriented and that we have identified some of the more popular structures. Eriksen's forthcoming book (*To Fortify with Words*) provides a number of significant insights into this area, and we may confidently expect further studies from his hand. May his PC never break down.