



## *The Narrative and Obsession with the Game Remains*

A conversation with David Peace  
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By Dermot Heaney

With the publication of his *Red Riding Quartet* and the first two parts of his *Tokyo Trilogy*, DAVID PEACE has won and consolidated deserved acclaim as a crime writer of great originality and power. With his two football novels – *The Damned Utd* and *Red or Dead* – he also joins a very select group of mostly northern writers who have written intense and original works about aspects of English sport and social class.

In a daring stroke, each of these novels recasts a famous and highly successful modern-day football manager as the central character of a literary work on the world of British football. The first, *The Damned Utd* (2006), takes the reader into the heart and mind of Brian Clough as he sets about dismantling the once proud team of Leeds United in revenge for a perceived slight by their former manager Don Revie; the second, *Red or Dead* (2013), describes the tenacity, self-sacrifice and utter dedication of Bill Shankly, Shanks, the manager who gradually transformed Liverpool F.C. from a middling Second Division team into serial league champions and cup winners and who attained almost mythic status in the process.

Part of the fascination of these works is witnessing how the author takes larger-than-life public celebrities and transforms them into truly memorable, autonomous fictional characters in their own right. It is true that not all Peace's readers have responded



quite so enthusiastically to this tension between reality and fiction, particularly in *The Damned Utd*: Peace has had to defend himself from accusations of undue harshness from Brian Clough's family and from some real-life 'models' of other characters in the novel, who claim that the author simply got it wrong. The author has answered these charges by pointing out that the work was a portrait and not a photograph. While detachment may not be possible or even desirable for the Clough family or former players like Johnny Giles, it is difficult to ignore the peculiarly original aesthetic experience afforded by these two novels, which not only create unforgettable characters, but deploy adventurous stylistic resources, both in the interests of characterization and as a means to render the excitement, intensity, violence and suspense at the heart of football.

For this issue David Peace has very kindly agreed to talk to *Altre Modernità* about his football novels and football in general. In a wide-ranging conversation, he touches on football as a prism through which to view various aspects of social change. He also comments on the manner in which the economic forces shaping the modern game are changing the traditional identity dynamics that have underpinned the sport for so long, altering fans' expectations, involving new subjects and alienating others. From a more literary perspective, he explains why he has chosen to focus on football managers as subjects and talks about the technical challenges involved in writing about this sport in a fresh and compelling way. The author also provides insights into his literary influences, and describes the role both of traditional sports reporting and poetry in forging an appropriate prose style for conveying the experience of football on the field, in the dugout and on the terraces.

These insights and comments not only confirm football's continuing social relevance, they suggest that the divide between mainstream and popular culture is, and perhaps increasingly needs to be, blurred. A vibrant form of "popular" culture like football can inspire writing of striking technical sophistication, originality and even poetic intensity; celebrity working class heroes like Brian Clough and Bill Shankly can legitimately take their place alongside other memorable characters gracing the national portrait gallery of fiction.

**D. Heaney:** David, I would like to start by asking you about sport and the contemporary English novel in general. In an interview with Nicolas Wroe in *The Guardian*, you said: "The novel seems the perfect form to examine what has happened in real life, the things that have deeply affected ordinary people and reflected the times they lived in". In what way did sport, and particularly football, affect you and people you knew growing up in Yorkshire?

**D. Peace:** football was, and still is, just an ever-present, all-consuming narrative for so many people. To speak very broadly, and very obviously, the changes in the game also



reflect the changes in the wider society; for example, the break in the link between the clubs and the communities from which they were originally born, with the destruction of those communities and their industries, the ensuing demonization and exclusion of working-class supporters, the present excessive levels of club debt and their precarious finances, the reliance on television money, the rolling twenty-four hour news and commentary, and the rise of the celebrity footballer, and so on. Through it all, the narrative and obsession with the game remains for many people, myself included. And it has always dominated my conversations with my father, and now the same is true with my own son.

**D. Heaney:** in that answer you have touched on a number of issues affecting contemporary football and society that I would like to pursue with you, David.

One facet of the game you touch on is the issue of football and local identity. Although, I am a lifelong supporter of a club in the UK, since leaving my hometown, whether in the UK or abroad, I have always felt the need to support the local team, finding that it made me feel grounded in some way. As a writer who is based abroad, has this been your experience, too? To what extent, do you think, football, and sport in general, is an important but undervalued avenue for social and cultural integration?

**D. Peace:** yes, I agree that football, through its innate tribalism, remains a potentially powerful (and undervalued, as you say) source for social and cultural integration. On a personal note, I think my son, whose mother is Japanese, certainly sees football – he supports Manchester United, unfortunately – as a way of connecting with his “English roots” and it was also – rather than literature, for example – his main motivation for learning to read English so he could follow the news and reports!

But try as I might, I have never managed to feel much passion for any J-League team. After over twenty years abroad, Huddersfield Town remain “my team”, as they were for my father and grandfather. But as I say, unfortunately, they are my son’s “second team”.

**D. Heaney:** my next question approaches the issue from the other side. A number of local, or core, fan-bases are finding it increasingly difficult to identify with their clubs, precisely because they have become successful, foreign-owned concerns offering a product to an increasingly global audience. There have been instances of fans transferring their allegiance from Premier League clubs to local, minor league clubs in an attempt to re-establish a communal bond with a club. What has football got to offer, even as a media product, if it alienates its core fans?

**D. Peace:** sadly, I do think many of the “big clubs” undervalue their original support; I think they fail to recognize that what often attracts a global support is the urge to be part of that shared history and passion of the original, local support. The Kop at Anfield is a huge part of the global appeal of LFC, for example, and if you continue to price



those people out of the game then that will be lost and, in owner-speak, “the brand” will suffer as the atmosphere evaporates. So it is no wonder – and also an inspiration in so many ways – when you see the rise of a team such as FC United.

**D. Heaney:** *The Damned Utd* and *Red or Dead* are both set in a time before football had fully morphed into what Laurence Wenner calls a mediasport, fracturing into a kaleidoscope of media events: punditry, transfer updates, post-match interviews, rumour mills, etc. Are these two novels in some way elegies for football as was and not as is?

**D. Peace:** yes, that is a huge part of *Red Or Dead*, particularly, but also I hope the book is more than just an elegy; as I have said before, I also hope it is an inspiration, a call to a return to the values and the work that made that club and football, and society in general, what it once was.

**D. Heaney:** it is interesting that you mention how football fosters communication between fathers and sons. The sports writer Duncan Hamilton even describes it as the only way he had of communicating with his father. In your experience, what kinds of bonds are established when parents talk to their children about football?

**D. Peace:** it is many things, but obviously a huge part of it relates to what we are discussing here; shared histories, handed down, and the sense of belonging such stories create, not only within the family, but in the wider community, even country. Also, in many ways, the ups and downs of the histories of clubs also act as “modern fairy tales”; you learn a lot about life and what to expect supporting a team like Huddersfield Town!

**D. Heaney:** with your two novels on football management, you have joined a select group of English novelists who have been inspired by sport. Why do you think the most memorable English fiction about sports comes from the north Midlands and the North of the country? Have the works of Silletoe and Storey been an influence?

**D. Peace:** again, I think the obsession with sport often seems at its most intense in the North, originally in the working-class communities, and still now in those places, and so I’m sure that is what drove Alan Sillitoe and David Storey to write about sport and yes, they were both big influences on me. In many ways, I saw *The Damned Utd* as a homage to *This Sporting Life*, hence the references within the text, and also Brian Clough himself was a big admirer of Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, and hence again the quotes within my own novel.

**D. Heaney:** as regards your important contribution to British fiction about sport, could we start with some general questions about *The Damned Utd* and *Red or Dead*?



Your sport fiction focuses on football managers. What is it about such figures that appeals to you as a novelist?

**D. Peace:** I think it is difficult to write about football from the narrative perspective of the footballer, as the game is so fast and so instinctive, with little time or space for reflection, and as a supporter you are always only a spectator, always that step removed, no matter how you might feel. The manager, though, is trapped in an awful limbo between these two points of view, both participant and spectator, behind the scenes and the edge of the touchline, and so I feel there is that necessary narrative space and time, usually a very claustrophobic and unpleasant space, and always only one game away from the sack, in jeopardy yet impotent and helpless.

**D. Heaney:** to pick up on your last point, both Clough and Shankly worked at a time when managers could expect significantly longer tenures than is the norm today. Now statistics indicate that a change of manager actually leads to an improvement in a team's short-term performance. How do you think this constant search for the quick fix has affected the way fans identify with their club and team?

**D. Peace:** a big question, Dermot! I mean, for example, I never thought I would ever see or hear Arsenal supporters booing their team with the regularity they do at the Emirates. But I think this relates to a wider "sense of entitlement"; the kind of people who can afford to have a season ticket at some grounds seem then to naturally expect a certain "value for money", basically always to be winning. It seems to me that society seems to view "entertainment" as the only criteria with which to measure things, and that applies to literature, too! Sadly, we seem to live in a world where so many things – be it sport or the arts – are judged only on prizes and sales. As always, football then just reflects the changes in the society in which it is played.

**D. Heaney:** Duncan Hamilton writes that both Bill Shankly and Brian Clough 'created personas for themselves' with the help of the media, and that this 'forced them to live up to the typecasting'. Are your novels about them an exploration of the real men behind the public and media masks?

**D. Peace:** I hope so, and also because they themselves were very self-aware of the differences in their public and private personas and, at various times, often very uncomfortable with that split.

**D. Heaney:** did the complaints from real life people who appeared as characters in *The Damned Utd* influence your treatment of the characters in *Red or Dead*?

**D. Peace:** more in the way my publisher and I approached the publication of the book; I really did not think that the Clough family would be interested in reading a novel about Brian Clough, and nor had we any notion it would become so popular, or be



made into a film. And so before the publication of *Red or Dead*, I sent the manuscript to the Shankly family. And I was very, very fortunate, and am very, very grateful that they were so positive and supportive. But of course, *Red or Dead* is, in the first half at least, more celebratory, but that was driven by the urge to write something that was less a criticism and hopefully, for once, more of an inspiration.

**D. Heaney:** can we now move on to talk about some of the themes running through the two novels? Both books are marked by a keen sense of class conflict, seen in the relations between board members and FA officials and the club managers. Was the popularity of Shankly and Clough that of working class heroes who were not cowed by football's ruling class and whose main sense of duty and loyalty was to the players and the fans?

**D. Peace:** for Bill Shankly, absolutely; everything he achieved at Liverpool Football Club was for the supporters, particularly "the boys on the Kop", and the supporters saw that and adored and revered him for it. And still do. Brian Clough was more complicated; he certainly saw himself in a class conflict with the men who ran the game. But Clough was also motivated by the sense of failure and frustration of his own career being cut short by injury, and the way he was then treated. I think he wanted to prove a point, almost as a very intense form of personal revenge. Many supporters at Derby and Forest, and among the wider public too, certainly liked his outspoken way of taking on the men in charge of the game, and they also enjoyed of course the success he brought their clubs, but it was a very different relationship to the one between Shankly and the supporters of Liverpool Football Club.

**D. Heaney:** the characters of Both Clough and Shankly are self-confessed socialists, though each appears to embody that spirit in markedly different ways. Would it be fair to say that of the two, Shankly is the more truly, even idealistically socialistic, while the socialist loyalties of Clough are overshadowed by an almost desperate individualism? (In putting that question, I am also thinking back to the end of *The Damned Utd*, which coincides with the arrival of Margaret Thatcher in Downing Street; does that change possibly chime with some of the ruthless opportunism displayed by Clough in his ascent?)

**D. Peace:** yes, and that is a big part of what I was saying above, and particularly influenced my portrayal of Brian Clough in the novel; this transition from working-class rebel to more individual self-interest.

**D. Heaney:** if I could slip in a question about technique here, is the use of the first- and second-person narrative a sign of Clough's self-centredness?



**D. Peace:** again, yes. And I hope it also reflects the split between the public and the private man, and the man in the present and the man in his own memory as he saw himself.

**D. Heaney:** *Red or Dead* is a work that reminds us how important the fans are to the identity, morale, and success of a football club. Football fans have often been heavily criticized, particularly in the press, but this novel pays a considerable tribute to their loyalty, generosity, belief, and, of course, humour. Does this reflect positive feelings on your part about this often-maligned aspect of working class culture?

**D. Peace:** yes, very consciously in *Red or Dead*. The hardest part of writing the first half of the novel was trying to convey the communal sense of struggle, and how important the supporters were to the success that Liverpool Football Club achieved under Shankly's management. As I have said, for Bill Shankly it was never about him, it was always and only about the supporters.

**D. Heaney:** another central theme of *The Damned Utd* seems to me to be not social but deeply personal, and that is the antagonism between Clough and Revie, who embody diametrically opposed attitudes to the game: the scheming, methodical and over-tactical Revie versus the emotional spontaneous flair of Clough. Were you aware from the start that these real life figures would develop into characters that would enable you to provide such a powerful depiction of antagonism?

**D. Peace:** very much so, and it was one reason why I was drawn to the story. Early on, Clough had very much looked up to and tried to emulate Revie's achievements at Leeds, but then felt rejected by him and came to despise all that he stood for. And so at one point, Revie was even a contrasting narrative voice in the text, but then in the end was reduced to the odd snippets of text after each league table.

**D. Heaney:** in my final set of questions I would like to ask you about certain aspects of the techniques you have used in these novels.

You have stressed that these two novels are works of fiction. In my view, one aspect of your writing that should immediately remove any doubts as to its fictional quality are the many echoes of other works and even literary genres. As I read the prose of both these novels, David, I was particularly reminded of border ballads, with their stories of grudges, revenge and animosity unfolding in bleak northern landscapes. Is this just one reader's impression, or do you consciously draw on genres like poetry to structure your prose, to create atmosphere and increase intensity?

**D. Peace:** well, it is very kind of you to say that, Dermot, because poetry, in particular, is very important to me, and an influence on all the books I have written. I read much more poetry than I do prose as, to be very honest, I struggle both as a reader and



writer with the novel as a form. I prefer the intensity and rhythms of poetry, and also feel the fragmentary nature of a lot of poetry is more reflective of our lives and thoughts. That said, and as I have said above, *The Damned Utd* was very much meant to be a homage to the Northern working-class novels of Sillitoe, Storey and also John Braine, Stan Barstow and Barry Hines. But Tony Harrison was also an influence, as well as the on-going, ever present influence of poets such as Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Auden and, say, the translations of Ted Hughes of Aeschylus and Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*. However, *Red or Dead* was much more consciously and deliberately influenced by poetry; Shankly's own love of Robert Burns, and also my own obsession at the time with Edwin Morgan's translation of Soviet Poems. Mayakovsky was a huge inspiration in trying to reflect the communal struggle of Liverpool Football Club. And also the notion and origin of poetry as communal, epic, oral history. I often think – and have been told – the books are better heard than read!

**D. Heaney:** what in your view are the greatest technical and stylistic challenges involved in writing a novel with a sporting theme?

**D. Peace:** essentially, simply to try to convey the excitement and the immediacy of a game itself, and then the communal aspect of that game played before a crowd who, in themselves, even a step removed, are actually part of what is going on, and then to try to set all that in the historical moment in which it was played.

**D. Heaney:** your descriptions of play, particularly in *Red or Dead*, are strikingly pared-down, stark and one might also say hieratic. Like the poets you referred to previously, did you reach back to past poetic genres and traditions to help you reinvent writing about sports and to help readers perceive anew the physical hardness, intensity and aggression of the game?

**D. Peace:** yes, but I was also very influenced by the match reports of the times in which the games took place. For *Red or Dead*, I read as many of the reports of each of the games as I could, and what struck me, shocked me, was the level of poetry involved in many of the reports. These reports were largely written at a time when most people reading them had not actually seen the games, and so they were often incredibly vivid; the crowds and their songs, and the weather, for example, were often referenced, and there was also a great deal of repetition and rhythm to the writing. As you read, you see the game. Now that has been lost as most football writers are assuming – correctly – that most people have seen the game on the television, and so all that great descriptive prose has been lost.

**D. Heaney:** comparing the two novels, I noticed that some of the techniques you employ more sparsely in *The Damned Utd* – the lists of players names, the results, the





standings, the repetitions and refrains – structure the prose of *Red or Dead* in a much more noticeable and pervasive way. Why did you think they were particularly appropriate to the subject of *Red or Dead*?

**D. Peace:** I just wanted to try to capture both Shankly's own attention and obsession with detail, and also the extremely, innately repetitive nature of football, with all its rhythms and rituals. Ultimately, that is the incredibly consuming, exhausting narrative of football

**D. Heaney:** in *Red or Dead* I found that your use of techniques like refrain, incremental repetition, chants, and pared down, anachronistic language ('potions' and 'spells', for example) combined to create the effect of an extended ballad, or even epic, on the doings of a folk hero. Is this part of a deliberate attempt to find a style and a genre to match the legendary status of Bill Shankly?

**D. Peace:** completely. I wanted to paint a portrait in words of the man, a man who I believe was a saint!

**D. Heaney:** in my view, one of the most exciting techniques in *Red or Dead* is the relentless recitation of gates, dates, fixtures, scores, times, and standings. This is writing that reminds us that numbers are at the heart of professional sport. As a long-suffering football fan, I immediately recognized the excitement, tension, suspense, dread and anticipation numbers can generate. Was this a feeling you yourself were familiar with, and were you deliberately striving for such an aesthetic effect in this novel?

**D. Peace:** yes, as I have said above, that is what football means to me, and more importantly it was to Bill Shankly, and therefore integral if the portrait was to be realistic.

**D. Heaney:** in *Vertigini della lista (The Infinity of Lists)*, Umberto Eco notes that some lists "must be recited like a mantra" and that "the important thing is to be affected by the sonic vertigo of the list, just as in the litany of saints it doesn't matter which saints are included and which ones are left out; what counts is the rhythmic repetition for a sufficiently long period". Eco calls such lists poetic lists. Is it possible to view the repeated team formations or the names of players involved in moves on the pitch as the poetic litanies of a secular religion, and does this also indicate the kinds of expectations and reading skills readers (and perhaps critics) should bring to a novel like *Red or Dead*?

**D. Peace:** I believe so, yes. And again, that then is probably why it might be better read aloud.



**D. Heaney:** in closing, I would like to return to a question about football managers. Each of the novels reveals the dedication, energy, strain, ruthlessness and desperation involved in moulding a successful football team. One thinks of Shankly's sleepless nights or of Clough's reckless pursuit of new signings. Do you, as an artist, see these men as kindred creative spirits?

**D. Peace:** well, a friend who read *Red or Dead* said it was like reading my autobiography, but would I were a tenth of the man Bill Shankly was! However, for a text or any work to matter, to mean anything, then it surely has to involve complete dedication and obsession on the part of its author. The sacrifice and struggle of men like Bill Shankly and Brian Clough is why they achieved what they did, and that is inspiring and motivating for me, and I hope for others, too.

**D. Heaney:** and lastly, is the world of sport likely to prove inspiration for further novels from David Peace?

**D. Peace:** in a word, yes.

Thank you, Dermot, sincerely, David.

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