Thomas MacDonagh (1878 – 1916) and UCD

Declan Kiberd

Universities have always been founded on a dubious assumption: that learning and piety are somehow conducive to one another. You have only to study the more ribald lyrics penned by medieval scholastics to see just how baseless such an equation is. When John Henry Newman founded his college in the Dublin of 1854, he did so with the idea of creating a Catholic intelligentsia which might not only consolidate the social benefits of Emancipation in Ireland but also add weight and mass to the crusade for Romanism in the wider British scheme of things.

Yet, little more that half a century later, University College Dublin would produce graduates with a somewhat different set of agendas. Newman's classic conversion-narrative, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, would be rewritten by James Joyce as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, lodging an even more pressing claim for the vocation of art over that of religion. Far from integrating a rationalised, Victorian form of Catholicism into British life, a group of writers emerged whose mystical understanding of that religion was invoked to further a claim to full national independence.

All universities must sponsor a comprehensive syllabus delivered with some semblance of objectivity. But those which evolve a distinctive 'aesthetic' often do so by giving shape to the energies of gifted individuals at a concentrated phase of their development. If the Oxford of the later nineteenth century became an outpost of lost causes, Zuleika Dobsons and dreaming spires, the Sorbonne of the 1960s was a place in which intellectuals sought to seize power and remake the world. If Vanderbilt University in Tennessee became home to the Agrarian poets of the defeated post-Civil War American south, Sao Paolo in Brazil could be cited as the meeting point in the mid-twentieth century for the ideas of European Modernism and those of an insurgent Latin America.

And of course in the writings of Trinity College, Dublin, graduates from Jonathan Swift to Samuel Beckett may be found a blend of bleak wit and cool comedy that characterises an Anglo-Irish caste always willing to view man as if he were some kind of anthropological witness of himself.

What might a UCD aesthetic be and wherein might it be found? One answer could be to locate it in the attempts of a Catholic intelligentsia to evolve a lay version of that religion, at once mystical and modernist, and often executed in a spirit of high playfulness. This is a strain which links writers as disparate as Hopkins, Joyce, Clarke, Flann O'Brien, Coffey or Devlin. It has definite roots in Newman, who was often accused by his enemies of insincere punning, tricksy rhetoric and sheer play-acting. James Pribek has gone so far as to cite the

'trickster' figure as the major link between Newman and Joyce: and there is every reason to believe that this is correct.

Why has this not been more obvious? Why did it take an American Jesuit such as Pribek to make the connection? A determinedly secular criticism has for decades turned Joyce into a carbon copy of itself; and an Irish intelligentsia, smarting under the censorship of the independent state, rapidly came to disconnect the words, 'Catholic' and 'modernist' (ably abetted in that act of disconnection by most of the authorities of the Catholic church). The theorists of intellectual freedom in *The Bell* and other liberal journals were quite unable to admit the technical conservatism of their own favoured art forms (mostly social realist) or to recognise the astonishing formal experimentation of such avowedly Catholic writers as Coffey, Devlin or, indeed, Flann O'Brien. Back in the 1920s the critic I.A. Richards had announced the severance of 'poetry' from 'belief'. The 'radical' intellects of independent Ireland in subsequent decades were so busy seeking a separation of church and state that they were in no mood to sponsor a reconnection of religion and art. Newman had produced his Catholic intelligentsia, all right, but its effects were strangely 'underground'.

Thomas McDonagh (1878-1916)

Today, with that censorship a distant memory, it is possible to marvel at the number of writers produced by UCD who not only evolved a lay mysticism but also integrated an 'Irish Mode' (bases largely on Gaelic syntax and prosody) into the languages of modern English. Here, a line would pass from Clarke and Flann O'Brien through Kinsella and McGahern down to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

All of these traditions seem to come to a point of convergence in the writings of Thomas MacDonagh, who was born in Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, in 1878 and executed as a British prisoner-of-war in 1916. His parents were teachers, the father a cheerful drunkard, the mother a devout convert from Protestantism.

MacDonagh was educated by the Holy Ghost Fathers at Rockwell and returned for some years there as a clerical student. Undergoing a sudden crisis of faith, he produced large quantities of death-obsessed poetry. His early tastes were antique and, like the young Joyce, he made a special study of Elizabethan love songs.

When W.B. Yeats was shown some of his poems in 1903, he told MacDonagh not to publish, 'but to read the great old masters of English, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Sir Thomas Browne, perhaps Chaucer, until you have got feebler modern English out of your head'. How badly this advice was needed can be judged from a poem called 'Róisín':

Deep in my Irish heart I grieve that I
Know not to sing my lays in Irish tongue;
That here no Gaelic heart before my feet
I place with trusting gladness; - such vain sigh
In hope of change, its offering has wrung
From one who yearns to do thee homage meet.

Yeats went one better and told MacDonagh to 'translate a great deal from the Irish – to translate literally, preserving as much of the idioms as possible. It will help you get rid of the conventionality of language from which we all suffer today'.

MacDonagh was on the road to literary modernism. By 1907 his style had taken full measure of the sprung rhythms and compound words of both Whitman and his disciple Hopkins:

Heart-felt, brain-syllabled, and lip-let-loose –
Sweet-sung to-day, to-morrow harsh and hissed.

However, the major and happiest influence was the poetry of the man who had given the good advice:

None would the service ask
That she from love requires,
Making it not a task
But a high sacrament
Of all love's dear desires
And all life's grave intent.

('After a Year')

That was, however, as good as MacDonagh's poetry got. More often it remained a proof of the Wildean contention that all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling, being brooding, subjective and often indecipherable.

Part of MacDonagh's problem was technical: how to find an objective language for the mystic's states of consciousness. His close collaboration with Joseph Plunkett was based on a shared desire to express the unknown in terms of the known. In an article for *The Irish Review* MacDonagh spoke of the challenge facing 'the mystic who has to express in terms of sound and wit the things of God that are made known to him in no language'. J.M. Synge had confronted the same challenge in the 1890s and had solved it by the expedient recommended by Yeats: word-for-word translation from another language, which if done with integrity would locate the frustrated mystic on a needle-point between official languages. There is reason to believe that Synge shared his ideas with MacDonagh who met him regularly in 1908. MacDonagh recalled that Synge 'read me some of his translations from Petrarch into that wonderful rich language of the Irish peasant'.

Whenever MacDonagh wrote subjectively he wrote badly and without the distinction of a personal style. His poems are often a roomful of old echoes.

But when he translated from the Irish, he conveyed the urgency of a man speaking with full force:

The yellow bittern that never broke out
In a drinking bout, might as well have drunk;
His bones were thrown on a naked stone
Where he lived alone like a hermit monk.
O yellow bittern! I pity your lot,
Though they say that a sot like myself is curst –
I was sober a while, but I'll drink and be wise
For I fear I should die in the end of thirst.

('The Yellow Bittern')

MacDonagh, in discovering such Gaelic folk authors – the Irish equivalent of the Elizabethan songsters – liberated also the frustrated author and artist within himself. He was, like Synge, an example of an artist whose genius was for translating the effects of Gaelic syntax into English, a language often held to be incapable of conveying such effects. MacDonagh really was a case of the translator as a character in search of an author, one who might free him into pure utterance. He was least of all himself when he wrote 'sincere' lyrics, but once given a mask he told a deeply personal truth.

It was out of triumphs like this that Thomas MacDonagh produced his major critical study, *Literature in Ireland*, arguably the most influential work of literary analysis to come out of UCD. In it he produced brilliant versions in English of Gaelic poetry and song, as rendered by Ferguson, Managan, Callanan, Walsh and, of course, himself. He identified an Irish mode, rooted in the Gaelic substratum and characterised by the wavering, delayed rhythms pioneered in English by Tom Moore and perfected by W.B. Yeats. MacDonagh's lectures on this topic were delivered to an M.A. class and constituted the raw material for his book. They deeply inspired one student, Austin Clarke, who would refine the ideas further in his own poetic theory and practice. On a visit to his teacher's house at Oakley Road, Clarke discovered at first hand just how seriously MacDonagh took his idea of a bilingual Ireland. While he stood out on the kerb discoursing on Tudor lyrics, his toddler son, Donagh, cried out as a horse-and-cart flew past: 'Look, daddy, at the capall'.

It was, however, for its definition and description of the evolution of Anglo-Irish literature that MacDonagh's book would be remembered. The subtitle was 'Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish' and the essays asserted the essential continuity of the two, seemingly opposed, Irish traditions. MacDonagh contended that by the time of the Penal Laws Gaelic literature had become decadent, but for more than a century afterwards English 'was not yet able to carry on the tradition or to syllable anew for itself here'. (This was a view to be reiterated for a later generation by Thomas Kinsella.) MacDonagh suggested that it was only with the emergence of a writer such as Synge that one had an art 'at once sufficiently Gaelic to express the feeling of the central Irish tradition, and sufficiently master of English style to use it as one uses the air one breathes'.

Rejecting Patrick Pearse's doctrine that a national literature could be created only in the Irish language, MacDonagh went on to declare that modern Irish suffered from the very same defects which affected modern English: journalese, cliché, fatigued imprecision (all those elements which would in due time feed the surreal imagination of Flann O'Brien). The ideal solution to this dilemma had been found in the Hiberno-English dialect of Synge which 'at its best is more vigorous, fresh and simple than either of the two languages between which

it stands'. MacDonagh conceded that 'all of us find in Irish rather than in English a satisfactory understanding of certain ways of ours and the best expression of certain of our emotions – so we are expressing ourselves in translating from Irish'. However, he was quick to point out that such translations were just a temporary expedient during the transition to English: 'At present a large amount of translation is natural. Later, when we have expressed again in English all the emotions and experiences expressed already in Irish, this literature will go forward, free from translation'.

Legend has it that MacDonagh was working on the proofs of *Literature in Ireland* during lulls in the firing at Jacobs' Factory through Easter week 1916. A further legend holds that he improvised a game of cricket, using a battered tennis ball, while holed up in the building. Some commentators find it hard to understand how a man who stood so steadfastly for the confluence of two traditions could have become the leader of an insurrection. But MacDonagh saw no contradiction. In his final class at UCD, he simply closed his copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and sighed: 'Ah, lads, there's nobody like Jane!' His rebel comrades also revered English poetry, Pearse sharing his lifelong admiration for Wordsworth, Plunkett his love for Francis Thompson. They were liberal, educated men who simply wanted their country back from a usurping power, much as they had also sought, in their earlier work as a lay intelligentsia, to seize back from the priests of Cullenite Catholicism those godly things which are not narratable in any obvious language.

Like many lay Catholic intellectuals, MacDonagh had his share of disagreements with church authority. He married a Protestant, Muriel Gifford, with the co-operation of a 'modernist' priest who did not insist that she promise to convert, but who enjoined the couple to absolute secrecy. Thereafter, MacDonagh was only a sporadic churchgoer, although it seems that he received the last sacraments before his execution, at which the British officer-in-command observed that 'they all died nobly, but MacDonagh died like a prince'.

After his death, MacDonagh's influence grew rapidly. *Literature in Ireland* was published in Dublin later in 1916, establishing his reputation as a scholar-critic. So worried were the British authorities by the way in which the 'poets' rebellion' was capturing the international imagination that they commissioned special essays from H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett denouncing the cult in American magazines and newspapers. But the tide could not be turned. Even within the British army itself, a young poet from County Meath, Francis Ledwidge, recreated those internal rhymes and assonance favoured by the *filí* in his haunting lament for the men who had done so much to introduce the Irish mode into English:

He shall not hear the bittern cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds
Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,
And pastures pure with greedy weeds,
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

('Lament for Thomas MacDonagh')

In December 1917 *The Irish Times* (no friend of the Easter rebels) nevertheless published a poem by AE/George Russell lamenting two fallen Thomases, MacDonagh dead in the Rising and Kettle in the trenches of the Great War, both of them UCD lecturers:

I listened to high talk from you,
Thomas MacDonagh, and it seemed
The words were idle, but they grew
To nobleness by death redeemed.
Life cannot utter words more great
Than life may meet by sacrifice,
High words were equalled by high fate,
You paid the price: You paid the price.

You who have fought on fields afar,
That other Ireland did you wrong
Who said you shadowed Ireland's star,
Nor gave you laurel wreath nor song.
You proved by death as true as they,
In mightier conflicts played your part,
Equal your sacrifice may weigh
Dear Kettle of the generous heart.

('To the Memory of Some I Knew who are Dead and who Loved Ireland')

Newman could hardly have foreseen all this, least of all a UCD involvement in the Easter rebellion. But perhaps in some oblique fashion, his underlying intentions were carried out. After all, he had always proclaimed himself a defender of threatened traditions and on that basis had declared that, if he had been born an Irishman, he would most certainly have been a rebel.

Perhaps it was the spirit of Cardinal Newman which guided the college authorities to appoint Austin Clarke to the lectureship which his charismatic teacher had left vacant. His own versions of Irish poetry would scale even greater heights, providing in turn the inspiration on which a later translator such as Thomas Kinsella could build.

References

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