

Yeatsian Shades In Ó Direáin and Macgill-Eain

CAOIMHÍN MAC GIOLLA LÉITH

ABSTRACT

Michael Hartnett's grandiloquent valediction 'A Farewell to English', first delivered from the stage of the Peacock Theatre in Dublin in 1974, announced the thirty-three year-old poet's decision to cease publishing in his native English, the language in which he had already earned a considerable reputation, in order to devote himself henceforth to poetry in Irish.

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I say farewell to English verse,
to those I found in English nets:
my Lorca holding out his arms
to love the beauty of his bullets,
Pasternak who outlived Stalin
and died because of lesser beasts;
to all the poets I have loved
from Wyatt to Robert Browning;
to Father Hopkins in his crowded grave
and to our bugbear Mr. Yeats
who forced us into exile
on islands of bad verse. (Hartnett 1984: 61)

Michael Hartnett's grandiloquent valediction 'A Farewell to English', first delivered from the stage of the Peacock Theatre in Dublin in 1974, announced the thirty-three year-old poet's decision to cease publishing in his native English, the language in which he had already earned a considerable reputation, in order to devote himself henceforth to poetry in Irish. His insistence that to do so he must turn his back on the canon of English verse was not without precedent. It echoed the advice offered in his well-known poem *Fill Arís* ('Return Again') by a poet of the preceding generation, Seán Ó Ríordáin, the leading innovator in an unexpected renaissance of Irish Gaelic poetry during the 1940s:

*...bain ded mheabhair
Srathair shibhialtacht an Bhéarla,
Shelley, Keats is Shakespeare.
Nigh d'anam is nigh
Do theanga chuaigh ceangailte i gcomhréiribh
'Bhí bunoscionn le d'éirim. (Ó Ríordáin 2011: 154)*

...Unshackle your mind
Of its civil English tackling,
Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare.
Wash your mind and wash your tongue
That was spancelled in a syntax
Putting you out of step with yourself.

Fill Arís is implicitly addressed in the first instance to the poet himself and by extension to all Irish writers and to the Irish people in general. Such purist rhetoric was understandably discomfiting to some otherwise sympathetic Irish poets writing in English. Seamus Heaney's response to the poem's argument, for instance, was one of characteristically gentle dissent in a lecture from 1983, in which he provides the no less characteristic translation just quoted (Heaney 1983: 18–21). What is notable in the litany from Hartnett's isolationist manifesto, however, in which even European masters encountered in English guise must be ruefully abjured, is its singling out of W.B. Yeats for particular reproach. While a resentment of Yeats's stifling influence, actual or imagined, was not

unheard of among Hartnett's peers, the antidote he opts for, of abandoning English forthwith, is extreme. (It was also short-lived, lasting little more than a decade, after which he proceeded to publish in both languages.) Besides, the prevailing view of Yeats among Gaelic poets of the generation before Hartnett, in Scotland as well as Ireland, was far from negative, and his precedent was generally seen as enabling rather than disabling. Máirtín Ó Direáin, the other leading light of Irish Gaelic poetry in the 1940s, acknowledged a significant debt to Yeats on more than one occasion, as did his Scottish contemporary Somhairle MacGill-Eain, author of a fine elegy, *Aig Uaigh Yeats / 'At Yeats's Grave'*, though the latter also expressed some telling, not to say typical reservations about Yeats's character. Despite significant divergences in sensibility between the two Gaelic poets (the similarities between Ó Direáin and Ruairaidh MacThómais, for example, are more obvious) the shadows cast on their work by this eminent precursor may serve to point up some intriguing parallels and overlaps.

As it happens, both poets have left us comparable pithy summations in verse of their long-term commitments. MacGill-Eain's comprises section XII of *Dàin do Eimhir*:

*Do cheathrar dan tug mi luaidh
do cheathrar seirbheis caochladh buaidh –
an t-adhbhar mòr agus a' bhardachd
an t-Eilean álainn 's an nighean ruadh.*

Four there are to whom I gave love,
to four a service of varying effect:
the great cause and poetry,
the lovely island and the red-haired girl. (MacGill-Eain 2011: 107)

Ó Direáin's apologia, *Ionracas* ('Integrity'), on the other hand, was famously prompted by a stinging remark made by Ó Ríordáin on Irish national radio, and is given here in full:

*Dúirt file mór tráth
Go mba oileán is grá mná
Ábhar is fáth mo dháin;
Is fíor a chan mo bhráthair.

Coinneod féin an t-oileán
Seal eile i mo dhán,
Toisc a ionraice atá
Cloch, carraig is trá. (Ó Direáin 2010: 114)*

A great poet once said
That the island and love of a woman
were my poem's only grounds;
My brother spoke true.

I will keep the island
a while longer in my poem,
Because of the integrity
of rock, stone and strand.¹

It is difficult to imagine what residual influence, pernicious or otherwise, distant echoes of the early Yeats might have had on the less resourceful of Hartnett's generation by the 1970s. That said, the epitome of Hartnett's 'islands of bad verse' is surely Yeats's 'Lake Isle of Innisfree', and the sheer popularity of lines such as 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.... And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow...' allowed them to resound across language

¹ All translations from Irish are by the writer, unless otherwise indicated.

lines, a generation earlier, in Ó Direáin's early *Faoiseamh a Gheobhadsa*, written shortly after Yeats's death in 1939.

Faoiseamh a gheobhadsa
Seal beag gairid
I measc mo dhaoine
Ar oileán mara,
Ag siúl cois cladaigh
Maidin is tráthmóna
Ó Luan go Satharn
Thiar ag baile. (Ó Direáin 2010: 27)

I will find peace
 For a short while
 Among my people
 On an island in the sea,
 Walking by the shore
 Morning and evening
 Monday to Saturday
 At home in the West.

The crucial distinction signaled here by the phrase '*mo dhaoine*', which is similarly deployed elsewhere by Ó Direáin, as well as the end-line '*Thiar ag baile*' ('At home in the West'), which closes both stanzas of this poem, is that for him, unlike Yeats, this is a return as much as an escape, however temporary, from the city life he was reluctantly enduring, having abandoned his native Aran at the age of eighteen. (Ó Ríordáin's rhetorical injunction to 'return again' to the South-West Kerry Gaeltacht was not so conveniently sanctioned by biography.) This romantic vision of an island idyll did not, however, remain untroubled or unquestioned. Seamus Deane's contention that 'Yeats began his career by inventing an Ireland amenable to his imagination...[and] ended by finding an Ireland recalcitrant to it' (Deane 1985: 38) is dramatically rendered in microcosm and telescoped into a few short years as Ó Direáin registers with dismay the rapid changes in Aran life through the 1940s. The succession of serene, picture-postcard images of traditional labour on the western seaboard presented in a lyric like *An tEarrach Thiar* ('Spring in the West') contrasts with the bleak account of such backbreaking activities provided, for instance, in the short stories written during these same years by Ó Direáin's contemporary Máirtín Ó Cadhain. Yet Ó Direáin soon conceded that such consoling memories and sentimentalizing images of traditional life could not withstand the reality of a rising tide of emigration. *Árainn 1947* ('Aran 1947') echoes the formal structure of both *Faoiseamh a Gheobhadsa* and *An tEarrach Thiar* in its use of a repeated end-line as binding agent. But in place of the fond affirmations in the closing lines of each stanza of *An tEarrach Thiar* (*Binn an fhuaim /San Earrach thiar,...Niamhrach an radharc /San Earrach thiar*, etc.: 'Sweet the sound/ In Spring out west'... 'Brilliant the view / In Spring out west' etc.), we find a weary negation, as the various sounds of community are silenced one by one with the line: *...an tráth seo thiar níor chualas* ('...this time out west I did not hear.') The earlier poem's strong emphasis on the visual is reflected in its almost painterly attention to colour, light and shade (*Is an fheamainn dhearg / Ag lonrú / I dtaitneamh gréine /Ar dhuirling bhán*, 'And the red seaweed/ Glistening / In the shining sun / On a white shore.') This contrasts with the subjugation of sight to sound in *Árainn 1947*, whose accumulating references to (the absence of) '*feadail*' ('whistling'), '*amhrán*' ('song'), '*uaill mhaíte*' ('boastful roar'), and '*liú*' ('joyful shout') – *i.e.* loud sounds heard at some physical remove, and mostly at night – amplify the poem's sense of distance and disembodiment. The death knell in the closing couplet, which provides the poem's coda, is an ironic inversion of the opening lines of Yeats's 'Byzantium', as Ó Direáin despondently acknowledges that his narrow, windswept island is no longer a country for young men.

Ní don óige feasta
An sceirdoileán cúng úd. (Ó Direáin 2010: 74)

The myth-deflating poem of disenchanting return to a native isle was of course not unknown among Ó Direáin's Scottish Gaelic contemporaries, though they tend to strike a more sardonic note. Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn's familiar *A' Dol Dhachaidh* ('Going Home') is a case in point. MacGill-Eain's less familiar 'Road to the Isles' is another, and while there were more than enough mawkish Scottish predecessors to gall him – the poem's overt target is Marjory Kennedy-Fraser – Yeats's 'Inisfree' also springs, once more, to mind:

Thèid mi thun nan Eileanan
is ataidh mi lem bhaothalachd
mu bhruthan sìth an Canaigh 's Eige,
mu ghusgal ròn an Èirisgeidh,
mu chlàrsaichean 's mu Eilean Bharraigh...

I will go to the Isles
 and inflate with my vapidity
 about fairy mounds in Canna and Eigg,
 about the wailing of seas in Eriskay,
 about 'clarsachs' and the Isle of Barra... (MacGill-Eain 2011: 14–15)

Turning from '*an t-Eilean álainn*' to '*an nighean ruadh*', and from '*oileán*' to '*grá mná*', much might be said about the Yeatsian echoes of regret and recrimination in certain poems addressed to unnamed women by both Ó Direáin and MacGill-Eain, and the affinity is explicitly acknowledged by the latter:

Thug Yeats dà fhichead bliadhna'
gu tric 's cruaidh a' fiachainn
ri annas aon aodainn
chur an caoine bhriathran.

Thug mise còrr 's dà bhliadhna
am faoine a' cheart fhiachainn,
agus thàrrla dhòmhsa
searbhadh, bròn is iargain.

Yeats spent forty years
 struggling repeatedly and doggedly
 to set down in skilled words
 the rarity of one face.

I gave in excess of two years
 to the same futile attempt,
 and what has befallen me is
 bitterness, sorrow and woe. (MacGill-Eain 2011: 50–51)

Of course there is no comparison between the sustained intensity of MacGill-Eain's *Dàin do Eimhir*, on the one hand, and Ó Direáin's intermittent lyrics on unhappy encounters or soured relationships with women, on the other. Nevertheless, the Irish poet was equally capable of '*searbhadh, bròn is iargain*'. After all, implicit in the declaration of renewed commitment to his beloved island in *Ionracas*, on account of its inherent integrity, is the suggestion that the object of his '*grá mná*' may not be similarly favoured because she cannot be similarly characterized. As the title of the poem *Do Mhnaoi ar bith mar Í* ('To any Woman Like Her') suggests, and various later poems confirm, Ó Direáin found it all too easy to extrapolate from the behaviour of individual

women who had somehow offended him and generalize his distrust, disdain, or, in the extreme case of the epochal long poem *Ár Ré Dhearóil* ('Our Wretched Era'), outright disgust. The image of the embittered, misogynistic barfly in *Blianta an Chogaidh* ('The War Years') can by no means be taken as a self-portrait. Yet it gains in poignancy by being presented, in a poem governed from its opening line by the first person plural ('*Ní sinne na daoine céanna a...*' 'We are not the same people who...'), as simply an extreme manifestation of a general attitude with which the poet is complicit.

*Thuig fear amháin na mná
Is é a thuig a gcluain thar barr,
An bhantracht go léir a thuig,
I gcrot aon mhná nach raibh dílis. (Ó Direáin 2010: 114)*

One man understood women,
He knew their guiles so well,
All womenfolk he understood
In the form of one unfaithful woman.

Ó Direáin and MacGill-Eain's common commitment to a poetry of public conscience, as well as private hurt, is also indebted to Yeats, as signaled most obviously in the title of the former's poem *Éire Ina bhFuil Romhainn*, lifted straight from Yeats's 'To Ireland in the Coming Times'. Despite their varying degrees of indignation at social injustice, all three poets were prone to 'daring sympathies with power', as Wordsworth put it in a rather different context. MacGill-Eain's heartfelt socialism can sometimes sit awkwardly with his reverence for the traditional hierarchies of the old Gaelic order. Similarly, Ó Direáin's strong sense of social injustice and natural empathy with the marginalized or oppressed is complicated by a fascination with the figure of the *Übermensch* – he offers his own '*an t-osfhear*', *nó an sárffhear*, *nó an tréanfhear*' as translations of Nietzsche's term. This is especially evident in the long poem *Ó Mórna*, which most critics number among his finest achievements. His affinity with the Yeats who enjoined his peers to 'Sing the peasantry, and then / Hard-riding country gentlemen /...Sing the lords and ladies gay / That were beaten into the clay / Through seven heroic centuries...' ('Under Ben Bulben') is overtly acknowledged in *An Dá Aicme* ('The Two Classes'), in which he also invokes Nicola Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874–1948), the erstwhile Marxist revolutionary who later spoke out against the oppression of the Bolshevik regime and ended life as a Christian mystic in exile in Paris:

*Thuig Yéats is dhearbhaigh
Gurbh iad scoth an dá aicme
A chothaigh aithinne is lasair.
Berdyaev níor dhearmad
An sách is an folamh
A chur ar dhá cheann na meá... (Ó Direáin 2010: 196)*

Yeats understood and declared
That it was the best of the two classes
Who guarded the embers and the flame.

Berdyaev did not forget
to put the well-fed and the starving
at both ends of the scale...

Despite his unease with aspects of Yeats's politics, it is clear from remarks such as the following that Ó Direáin was reluctant to condemn the older poet outright (the phrase '*más maith leat*' is disingenuous, but hardly disarming):

Bhí Yeats é féin ag suiri le faisisteachas, más maith leat, nuair a tháinig na Léinteacha Gorma anseo agus Eoin O'Duffy. Bhí Yeats agus is dóigh go raibh filí riamh anall, ag smaointeamh ar rudaí mar sin. B'fhéidir gur thúsáigh sé in aimsir na pátrúntachta, na taoisigh, níl a fhios agam. (Ó Direáin 2002: 131)

Yeats was flirting with fascism, if you like, when the Blue Shirts came here and Eoin O'Duffy. Yeats and, I think, poets since the beginning of time, have thought about such things. Maybe it began in the age of patronage and chieftains, I don't know.

Like Yeats, Ó Direáin and MacGill-Eain assembled personal pantheons of exemplary forebears. Ó Direáin composed poems in honour of various figures whose virtues and values he felt were sorely missing from the Ireland of his day ('Yet they were of a different kind / The names that stilled your childish play...', as Yeats put it in 'September 1913'). These include the nineteenth-century Archbishop John MacHale, the writers John Millington Synge and Seán O'Casey, and above all, the leaders of the 1916 Rising, Pádraig Pearse and James Connolly, whose imagined conversation famously forms the basis of Yeats's 'The Rose Tree'. The last-mentioned of these provides a particularly intriguing point of comparison with MacGill-Eain.

In *Dàin do Eimhir XVIII*, subtitled *Úrnaigh*, MacGill-Eain's roll-call of heroes of the left comprises the English soldier-poet John Cornford, the Bulgarian trade-unionist and communist leader Georgi Mikhailovich Dimitrov, and the Scotsman James Connolly. Connolly is invoked in an explicitly Irish context in Part V of *An Cuilithionn* ('*Tha Ó Conghaile in Èirinn / ag èirigh thar àmhghair...*' / 'Connolly is in Ireland / rising above agony...') alongside Lenin, Liebknecht and John MacLean. In Part VI of the same poem, he appears again as a crucial player in the history of Irish rebellion ('*S mise Clio na h-Èireann / ...'s mise Chlio mhòr uallach, / óir chunnaic mi Ó Conghaile 's am Pearsach, / Wolfe Tone, MacGearailt agus Emmet.*' ('I am the Clio of Ireland / ...I am the Clio of great spirit, / for I have seen Connolly and Pearse, / Wolfe Tone, Fitzgerald and Emmet.')). Here the grouping of Tone, Fitzgerald and Emmet is borrowed directly from Yeats's 'September 1913'. In Part VII MacGill-Eain's pantheon of visionaries, again including Connolly, is further augmented by the addition of the eighteenth-century Haitian revolutionary Toussaint l'Ouverture, as well as the respective authors of *Das Kapital* and *Utopia*.

Finally, Connolly is the subject of the late poem *Àrd-Mhusaeum na h-Èireann* ('The National Museum of Ireland') in which the poet is transfixed by the 'rusty red spot of blood/ rather dirty on the shirt/ that was once on the hero/ who is dearest to me of them all' (*spot meirgeach ruadh na fala/ 's i caran salach air an lèinidh/ a bha aon uair air a' churaidh/ as docha liumsa dhiubh uile*). This poem closes with the image of the wounded Connolly being tied to a chair to be shot:

*...ann an Àrd-Phost-Oifis Èirinn
's e ag ullachadh na h-ìobairt
a chuir suas e fhèin air sheithear
as naoimhe na 'n Lia Fàil
th'air Cnoc na Teamhrach an Èirinn.*

*Tha an curaidh mòr fhathast
'na shuidhe air an t-sèithear,
a' cur a' chatha sa Phost-Oifis
's a glanadh shràidean an Dùn Èideann.*

...In the General Post Office
while he was preparing the sacrifice
that put himself up on a chair
that is holier than the Lia Fáil
that is on the hill of Tara in Ireland.

The great hero is still
sitting on the chair,
fighting the battle in the Post Office
and cleaning streets in Edinburgh. (MacGill-Eain 2011: 270–271)

Though the details of Connolly’s execution are well-known, the specific genesis of this arresting image, which reaches rhetorically back into a common Gaelic mythological past in order to draw together the struggle for social justice and self-determination in modern Ireland and Scotland alike, is particularly intriguing, as the following two stanzas attest:

*Aig bánadh an lá ghil am bliadhna nan Sia-Deug,
tràighte, faoin-lag, cràdhte, fo chreuchdaibh,
ceangailte go dlùth ri cathair nam pian dhut –
seadh, tilgeil t’anam an làthair Mhic Dhè uat,

nan abradh neach riut madainn an là ud
gum biodh daoine an-dràsta air feadh do thìre
bhiodh bochd is nochd; gun an dùil ri aon rud
ach an-shòdh is call, is iad beò an dèirce.*

When the pale day dawned in 1916
weak and dazed, with tormenting wounds,
tightly bound to the chair you would be executed in,
having cast your soul from you before God’s Son,

if anyone could have told you on that morning
that men and women today throughout your land
would be poverty-stricken and naked, with no aspiration
beyond misery and deprivation, living as beggars! (MacGill-Eain 2011: 442–443)

While the editors of the 2011 volume of MacGill-Eain’s collected poems present this as an unpublished early poem by MacGill-Eain, it is in fact a faithful, though abruptly truncated translation of the first two stanzas of a longer poem by Máirtín Ó Direáin, titled *Séamus Ó Conghaile*, the first four stanzas of which are as follows:

*Le bánú an lae ghil i mbliain a sé déag,
Tnáite, faonlag, cráite ag créachtaí,
Ceangailte go dlúth de chathaoir na bpian duit
Is ea teilgeadh t’anam i láthair Mhic Dé uait.

Dá n-abraíodh neach leat maidin an lae úd,
Go mbeadh daoine an tráth seo ar fud do thíre
Bheadh bocht is nochd; gan a gcoinne le haon rud
Ach anró is call, is iad beo ar dhéirce.

Déarfá féin leis gurbh éitheach a fhís duit
Go mbeadh fuíoll gach fuíll arís ag Gaelaibh
Is só is sonas i ndán do gach aon díobh,
De thortha d’íobartha is íobairt gach laoi ch dhíbh.

Ach is trua le n-aithris an scéal atá amhlaidh.
Fiche bliain is cúig ó thit tú go calma;
Fir mhóra láidre is a ndroim le balla
Is ocras is fuacht ar bhean is ar leanbh... (Ó Direáin 2010: 33)*

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... You would tell him that to you his vision was false,
That Gaels would again have wealth aplenty
That comfort and joy would be everyone's lot,
Because of the sacrifice made by all you heroes.

But, sad to relate, this is not so
Twenty five years since you fell bravely;
Big, strong men with their backs to the wall
And hunger and cold among women and children...

Written in 1941, two years after the death of W.B. Yeats, this is by no means one of Máirtín Ó Direáin's most accomplished poems, and was not included in his *Dánta 1939–1979* (Ó Direáin 1980). That said, it is not difficult to see why this elegy for a Scotsman, whose contribution to Irish history Yeats himself had been forced to reassess a generation earlier, should have attracted the attention of Ó Direáin's great contemporary, Somhairle MacGill-Eain.

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