

Certain Good of Words

[Review of *Irish Poetry Under the Union, 1801–1924*, by Matthew Campbell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)]

Matthew Campbell's book reads the Irish poetic tradition over the long nineteenth century, attending simultaneously to the forces at play within poetic form as well as cultural politics. In an account which engages with some influential contemporary literary theories, the author characterizes this poetic tradition as it arrives in English, examining the 'emergent moment' represented here by the process triggered by Samuel Ferguson and Francis Sylvester Mahony.

The subject is situated within major historical and political contours using contemporary postcolonial theory along with exposing that theory to a subtle critique. Especially in the first four chapters, speaking as if from within the poetry and the music as they developed in response to political changes, Campbell reveals a unity slightly different from what the biological metaphor of hybridity would suggest in relation to the lending, borrowing and fusing among cultures. Rather than hybrid, this unity is 'throughther' or 'through-other' – a Hiberno-English word used by Gerard Manley Hopkins in the poem 'Spelt from Sybil's Leaves' to describe disparate parts mingled and difficult to disentangle. Gesturing toward the executed Thomas MacDonagh, who described the birth of this kind of unity in his theory of prosody,¹ Campbell says, nevertheless, that disentangle them we must.

Discussing the 'synthetic Irish thing' or a poem 'that would have been unimaginable within the confines of one or other culture'² in Jahan Ramazani's idea, Campbell renews the distinction between the approach of a critic like Ramazani, whose outlook is global, and the specific qualities of the poems' national provenance that become apparent when we focus on the transactions going on through the poets' engagement with traditional poetic form. Campbell focuses on 'the technical products of those Irish roots and English soil, English stock and Irish graft, Gaelic melody and English lyric, English poetry in Irish accents' as they are displayed and documented on a few writers who have adapted the cultural heritage to their own needs, among them, Thomas Moore, Francis Sylvester Mahony, Samuel Ferguson, James Clarence Mangan, Aubrey de Vere, Thomas MacDonagh, Austin Clarke, and W. B. Yeats. Using examples of literal translations from languages other than English, intentional forgery, self-ironical pastiche as well as achieved poems of song-like quality, the author shows that they made frequent recourse to precedents far outside the national realm, long before a poet like W. B. Yeats appeared. These writers' critical intensity and commitment to cultivated public speech made it possible for posterity to cast a retrospective look and to draw on poetic resources beyond national limits.

In contrast to previous critics, Campbell keeps in view the idea that the synthetic aspect of this poetry is synthetic in a different manner than how we might usually understand it. Many lyrics were taken from Scots and Irish and rearticulated in English, their musical nature preserved either in musical notation or in lyrics subjected to experiments with poetic form. Large historical,

1 Thomas MacDonagh, *Thomas Campion and the Art of English Poetry* (Dublin: Talbot, 1912).

2 Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 53.

cultural or literary syntheses of the period have been found to suppress the particulars leading to their invention in favor of practical generalizations. Other critics who have written groundbreaking works about Irish poetry, such as Seamus Deane or Harry White, are criticized for their strong affinity with nationalist ideology but finally appreciated for their minute observations on phenomena like the ‘auditory imagination’ of the poets discussed which are fundamental for the distinctions on which the argument of the book is built. These seemingly insignificant aspects of the imagination are crucial in showing how the hard stuff of politics transforms and is transformed through poetic form in contact with English poets who have occupied themselves with Irish subject matter such as Matthew Arnold, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne and Gerard Manley Hopkins. As a result, the aspect of ‘synthetic’ which is used here has really more in common with artifice (in the sense of craftiness, an ability to juggle several disparate qualities at once) than with *technē* (as mere formal dexterity).

Campbell moves between the insight of exiles after his chosen period of 1801–1924 (like Samuel Beckett and James Joyce) and the political divisions found in the action of poets and critics during this time span (beginning with the image of the young Edward Bunting collecting lyrics from blind old Irish harp players and Wolfe Tone organizing a public celebration of the fall of the Bastille, himself unable to bear the sound of the harp; both were Protestants). At the outset, he warns that a reading against the grain is required and goes on consistently juxtaposing moments of historical violence with lyrics concerned, on the surface, with love and nostalgia, always paying close attention to the evasions of poetic form. Suffice it to say that he debunks a writer’s strategy in misunderstanding another writer, in this case that of Samuel Beckett relating the condition of Austin Clarke. Austin Clarke lived in an adversarial professional relationship with Yeats, his most influential contemporary, which qualifies him, in Campbell’s view, to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant critical discourse regarding the state of the art at the time. Disguised as the fictional persona of Ticklepenny by Beckett, Clarke serves as a link between poetic composition, psychoanalysis, and alcoholism – symptoms, cures, and diseases. Campbell uses the situation of Clarke, a Catholic who suffered a mental break-down after the execution of Thomas MacDonagh in 1916, to cast light on the nearly absent middle ground in Irish poetry during the nineteenth century. What follows is an attempt to supply a narrative thread woven from the output of W. B. Yeats’ Irish precursors: ‘a century of prosodic innovation’ (24) seen with an awareness of the ‘politics and anthropology of our condition.’³ Poets like Mangan or Clarke who were previously estimated as less important gradually step out from the shade, made by a historiography dependent on positions of power, to claim their rightful part.

This becomes apparent when we realize that the book is thematically composed in such a way as to place historical discontinuity in contrast with the intellectual rancor connecting political opponents from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the disrupted dialogue between artists and critics at the beginning of the next. The conflict or rupture in the Irish poetic tradition is symbolized by Mahony’s invention of ‘a small seminal principle’⁴ – a fertile expression of taste,

3 Seamus Heaney in an interview with Seamus Deane in 1977 quoted in Campbell, 24.

4 Francis Sylvester Mahony, ‘The Rogueries of Tom Moore’, *Reliques*, p. 133. (Mahony’s emphasis in his account of the origins of the fictive priest, Fr. Prout’s, future ‘celebrity’: “a speck on the horizon – a small seminal principle, rather than a formed body”)

sexuality, and appetite – meandering between major intellectuals of the period, incessantly changing forms: from religious satire bordering on sarcasm to translations, forgeries, and poetry on the verge of music. The cultural and political situation described here resembles a pressure cooker. On the one hand, there were intellectuals such as Daniel O’Connell and Thomas MacDonagh involved in Ireland’s politics, on the other, intellectuals such as Francis Sylvester Mahony and Samuel Ferguson who were passing on literary tradition in a controversial manner. Campbell composes their contributions to the historical narrative in such a way as to show how inflammatory these texts may turn out to be when seen in retrospect as the projected feelings of individual men (and women) expressed in words within the confines of a comparatively small cultural space. That is if we get, in Seamus Heaney’s words, beyond the ‘puerile discourse’ of sound, rhythm and meter. What Campbell does, nevertheless, is to show the potential of these qualities of language to absorb and carry the sense of accumulated injustice over within the confines of poetic form.

Whereas Mahony projected his international or at least European consciousness in a series of impersonations on the home front, Beckett, in an opposite movement of the mind, directed his angst against the very capacity of language (and tradition) to represent, imitate or express life in exile. The argument circles issues of essence, the inherent authenticity of cultures, and their effacement. Campbell opposes these with the wit manifest in the historical documents:

The separation of “form” and “content” by late-Georgian conservative skepticism does sound like a contemporary radical skepticism, where the originary product, “the authentic,” the “solid joint” [all from Mahony’s parody] can be neither tasted nor achieved. In Mahony’s *reductio* or transmutation of the argument, all talk of essentialism ends up in a blasphemous parody of liturgy of the burial service, the remembering of the human whose dust doesn’t so much return to dust as emerge reincarnated as a pint pot. (56)

Campbell’s criticism of ‘the synthetic Irish thing’ is otherwise an elegant refutation of something such as ‘a small seminal principle’ being at all possible. But the politics underwritten by the fictional character of Fr. Prout, a tireless opponent of both Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Act in Mahony’s satirical play on the real design of Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* seems to have an afterlife of its own in the subsequent narrative.

In contrast, we have the Protestant and patriotic Samuel Ferguson, collecting data about his choice of Scots and Irish ballads and songs, and translating them into English for a Catholic audience in Dublin. Campbell follows the politics of his translations with a lightness of tone borrowed from W. B. Yeats’ appreciation of Ferguson’s achievement as a precursor. Ferguson’s involvement in ‘making Erin a nation yet’ [from ‘Lament for Thomas Davis,’ 1847] causes him in turn step out of Yeats’ shade, his cultural Unionism coming into clearer focus. Campbell attends to the specific variety of formal means deployed in the Irish songs to express the ‘maudlin jumble’ of desire and pathos which Ferguson was forced to recognize as in fact noble expressions of frenzy and despair under the pressure of the economic crisis in the forties. The thought behind Ferguson’s cultural politics is shown to have developed gradually in articles and translations written for various magazines – *The Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Nation*, *Dublin University Magazine* – educating an English-speaking audience in the excess of sentiment preserved in the peasant culture, thus effectively countering the fierce nationalist or denominational politics of those platforms.

According to Campbell, such a poem as Yeats' 'The Stolen Child' then owes its existence to 'a pre-Victorian version of the eroticized fairy abduction poem' (88). It seems, however, the other way around: because of the violence, shock or loss gathered into the refrain of that poem, we can follow, with the author, the forces and pressures that molded such poetics decades before the events expressed. The notion that sentiments of this kind, built from the ashes of previous traditions as found in poems collected by antiquarians, should be specifically Irish imperceptibly disintegrates under the pressure of Campbell's suggestion that they are 'concerned to speak the real language of men – in [this] case women' (91). His modern awareness that 'considerations of melody allow both effective translation and an acknowledgement of the histories of textual difference when song and melody have allied themselves without fear of accusations of promiscuity' (85) gains critical force against the clarity of intention established by Samuel Ferguson.

Mahony and Ferguson's pioneering work is superseded by a portrayal of the dismal trajectory of another of Yeats' precursors, James Clarence Mangan, before he could write a testimony in verse of his own lover's plight in 'The Nameless One'. Mangan's works, which ranged from synthetic versions of traditional Irish airs to his own original poems, display a struggle to find a poetic form which would accommodate historical defeats as the defeats of the present. Campbell sums up his situation as 'caught between the finality of a lost past and his own attempts at redemption within it' (130). What a twentieth-century historian might describe as a conflict between conceptions of time in the context of the Anglo-Irish historical narratives is demonstrated on Mangan's work as a relentless activity of composition from whatever sources were at hand: Irish traditional poetry, German romanticism mediated by Goethe, Persian and Arabic poetry, all the while influenced by contemporary English thought and poetry. Mangan is acknowledged as a victim of the famine, yet as one who progressed from making translations to writing his own original poetry miming, in Campbell's words, the contemporary Victorian poetry of will, 'drawn to repetition and its attendant aesthetic claustrophobia' (98). The poems convey a singular poetic strength that stands out from contemporaneous poetry in traditional as well as invented, yet regular, measures. Campbell comments that 'Gothic upset and prosodic ruin such effects might be, but they are also distinctive features of Mangan's style that we have to learn to read again' (97). The personal ruin registered in Mangan's lines is played down as merely personal, yet his innovative work with traditional resources, his capacity to weave together 'loose, Gaelic sound patterns' with a 'mid-Victorian sense of voice and poetic form' renders him indispensable to Campbell's argument. Style might be much closer to the essence, the content of poetry, than we are accustomed to think.

Tennyson and Hopkins' personal engagement with Irish subject matter and their innovations of formal means at the beginning of Yeats' poetic career leads Campbell to consider the wider context of 'the Irish mode' at the end of the nineteenth century as an effect of the contagious anxiety over the fate of the United Kingdom. The subject is treated from the perspective of poetic inheritance and early Christian ethics as mediated through traditional genres such as the *immram*. The spirit of mutual formation and information as fundamental conditions for preserving channels of communication at times of political and economic upheaval relies on a capacity to engage in deadpan humor, here in a conversation between Tennyson and Allingham recorded by the latter in his diary. Being itself subject to political pressure, this account depends entirely on the author's familiarity with poetic form and the possibility it opens to read in all directions at once. 'Let past

be past' is a phrase from Tennyson's *The Princess* and after that from his version of the immram, 'The Voyage of Maelduné.' In this book, however, it is viewed in hindsight in the light of what happened during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and how later poets, Paul Muldoon in particular, joined the genre's topos of medieval Christian journey with contemporary matter. In Campbell's exegesis, as a form dealing with historical wrongs and forgiveness, it remains open for posterity to wrestle. He concludes:

'As English poets skirt around the fringes of the matter of the United Kingdom, poetic form itself is transformed in the contact of margin and centre. The artistic gains, we can suggest with hindsight, are substantial. But the gain is grounded in loss, no matter that it is a loss that cannot be forgotten.' (156)

This loss is both personal and political, as the interweaving of poetic and political meanings employed in the book suggests. The loss of Ireland to the United Kingdom at the time of its institution as Free State, in other words, became a gain for the shaping possibilities of the language of 'the commonweal'. The persistence of the Irish within the UK, however, raises complex political questions to which an analysis of the strengths of poetic tradition and formal poetic discourse such as performed here might hold an answer.

W. B. Yeats' place in the narrative about the development of Irish poetry written in English brings the book back to its beginning – Heaney's essay about through-other things and places. In the poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' published with the essay 'Per Amica Silencia Lunae' in 1918 Yeats lets one of the speakers propose that 'art/Is but a vision of reality' whereas those who love the world serve it in action. Campbell's narrative does represent such a vision – he says provocatively that it is his aim to bring Irish poetry up to the point of the establishment of the Free State (204). As a critic, however, he does more. By showing the impact of individual contributions by poets and critics during the nineteenth century Campbell promotes the renewal of poetic practice on the level of difficulty represented by such varied poets as, in the Anglophone context, Wallace Stevens, W. B. Yeats or Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon.

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