

JAMES JOYCE, EDWARD WALSH AND THE DEATH OF ANCIENT IRELAND

James Joyce, in "Ireland of Saints and Sages" wrote that:

Ancient Ireland is dead just as ancient Egypt is dead ... The old national soul that spoke during the centuries through the mouths of fabulous seers, wandering minstrels, and Jacobite poets disappeared from the world with the death of James Clarence Mangan ... It is well past time for Ireland to have done once and for all with failure. If she is truly capable of reviving, let her awake, or let her cover up her head and lie down decently in her grave forever. (Mason and Ellmann 173-174)

This rather nostalgic view of Mangan shows us not only Joyce's admiration for the nineteenth century poet at this time, but also the presence of a concept in his thought, that of "ancient Ireland". When speaking of this it is remarkable that Joyce does not speak of Gaelic poets, writing in Gaelic which would be the most normal if one is to speak of the entity, "ancient Ireland", the ancient Gaelic culture but of Mangan, a poet who translated Gaelic poetry into English. In the following we shall show that Joyce's rather negative attitude towards the revival of Gaelic Ireland, as revealed in the passage above contrasts with others who not only believed that "ancient Ireland" could be "reanimated" but also associated the writer's literary identity with his racial origins.

In late nineteenth, early twentieth century Ireland there was a movement for the revival of the Irish language, the Gaelic League, founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893, which "had as its aim the "de-Anglicization of Ireland", mainly by reviving the general use of the Irish language" (Beckett 417). Hyde in his essay "The Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland" writes that the first writers from the native Catholic population in English did not have any effect on the Irish peasantry, "it was a most brilliant effort, but the old bark had been too recently stripped off the Irish tree" (O'Conaire 158), in other words the Gaelic culture could not be replaced so quickly in the minds of ordinary Irish people. In his plea for the return of the Irish language to Ireland, Hyde ignored the facts. He ignored the popularity of Irish themes in English translation in nineteenth century Ireland and the popularity of poets such as Mangan and Walsh.

Of course, Joyce and his contemporaries, would not have learnt Gaelic at school as Ellmann's biography makes clear, when the writer's school subjects and grades are listed (751 and 752). The Irish language was in decline at the time when Joyce lived in Ireland. Beckett in tells us that the national schools introduced by the British government in 1831 whilst doing a lot to abolish illiteracy discouraged the use of the Irish language in Ireland (Beckett 313). Terence Brown writes that in the years 1881-1926 "the number of Irish-speaking persons in the country had dropped by 41 per cent" (Brown 62). We can conclude from this that Joyce's familia-

riety with “ancient Ireland”, as was the case of his contemporaries, was due at least in part to his reading of Mangan and Moore and Walsh for example, and the English versions of Gaelic poems. Any direct contact with Gaelic literature in the Irish language would not have been possible for him.

Mangan, Moore and Walsh were among the first from the Catholic, native population to write in English¹. Both Walsh and Mangan have been associated with the Young Irelanders, because of their writing for this group’s paper the *Nation*. The Young Irelanders staged an abortive revolution in 1848. But what is most interesting about them, from our point of view, is the interest they took in Gaelic culture. In the poetry from the *Nation* newspaper, published in book form in *The Spirit of the Nation*, we find a lot of verse based on Irish themes. This type of poetry became extremely popular in nineteenth century Ireland, as J. Pope-Hennessy tells us. Pope-Hennessy writes that the memory of the past was kept alive in Ireland by a national literature more truly popular than any literature of the kind in Europe (Pope-Hennessy 932)². These poems generally contained two themes of interest to us here, nationalism and Ireland. The poems written on Ireland’s Gaelic past are not in the original Gaelic text but refracted into translated form. Rafroidi writes of this refraction in nineteenth century Irish literature in English that it “conformed to the aesthetic canons of Romanticism in several ways” and that a certain

number of motifs were already appearing as peculiar to Ireland or, at the very least, were charged with a significance or resonances unknown elsewhere. Take, for instance, the symbolic trinity of the harp, the shamrock and the swan. (Rafroidi 284-285)

To somebody from Ireland these motifs have now taken on a certain tacky air, the green shamrock and the harp having become associated with plastic souvenirs and that garish greenness of the Emerald Isle. But in the nineteenth century the Gaelic culture was preserved in English in popular idiom, and especially in song.

If we look at *Finnegan’s Wake* alone we find a lot of references to song, and to Irish song, but not the type of traditional music we find to be so popular today. Instead, we find Irish popular song translated into English by nineteenth century writers such as Mangan, Walsh and Moore, in other words, in Joyce’s book we find a reflection of popular culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland. Let us take an example of one song which appears in *Finnegan’s Wake*. Samuel Ferguson gave a literal translation of “The Fair Hills of Holy Ireland” in the *Dublin University Magazine* (467). In this literal version of the poem we can search to find the adjective “green” in vain, one of those “motifs” Rafroidi has told us about. The same is true of the metrical version which Ferguson gives in the same number of “The Fair Hills of Ireland” (542). Green, that adjective which has become associated with Ireland

¹ J. J. Callanan, the Cork poet, wrote English translations of Irish verse as did Charlotte Brooke in the eighteenth century.

² He is in fact quoting the words of a Catholic bishop here.

in popular imagination, appears in both Mangan and Walsh's versions of the poems, as well as in a reference to it in *Finnegan's Wake*. Walsh in the poem as "The Fair Hills of Eire Ogh" and the opening line mentions that significant adjective "Beautiful and wide are the green fields of Erin / Uileacán dubh O!" (*Irish Popular Songs* 63-65). If we look at the Gaelic version from which he has taken his translation we do not find the word green in the line of which the above is a translation (62-64). In fact, the title of the poem in Gaelic "Ban-chnoic Eirean ógh", uses the adjective white, as in Gaelic tradition, as a term of endearment, translated by Walsh here as "fair" (63-65). The adjective "green" does not seem to have the patriotic significance that it does in English in the Gaelic version. In Mangan's much longer and freer version of the same poem we find a reference again to this significant colour, and with it an emotional meaning given to the adjective. As the poem is an exile's lament, written abroad, Mangan writes "Her barest rock is greener to me than this rude land; / O the fair hills of Eiré,O!" (Guiney 130). The idea here is that even the most barren part of the Emerald Isle is greener, that is to say more Gaelic than the country the exile lives in.

Hodgart and Worthington have identified two references to this poem in *Finnegan's Wake*, "the grain oils of Aerin" (338.36) and "far away from those green hills ... Ireton" (480.8 Hodgart and Worthington 132 & 155). These writers attribute the song used by Joyce to Mangan. In fact, it seems to have more similarity with Walsh's version of the poem, especially if we look again at the opening lines of Walsh's translation "Beautiful and wide are the green fields of Erin, / Uileacán dubh O! / With life-giving grain in the golden corn therein, / Uileacán dubh O! (*Irish Popular Songs* 63). Joyce's reference echoes Walsh's more in the plural of "those green hills" (*Finnegan's Wake* 480.8) similar to Walsh's "green fields" and the mention of the word "grain" (*Finnegan's Wake* 338.36) which echoes the third line of Walsh's poem, even though this word is also mentioned by Mangan in his version. Joyce plays with the word "grain" giving it not only its literal meaning "grain oil" but also the stage Irish pronunciation of "green isles". It seems as if Joyce is using this popular poem to convey something in the culture of Ireland, the popular culture of shamrocks, harps and greenness, the refracted and changed form which "ancient Ireland" took in the nineteenth century.

But there was nothing stage Irish about Edward Walsh. He expresses opinions and beliefs which are precursors of the ideology of later Revivalists, those whom Joyce found so hard to put up with. In the search for a literary identity for Irish writing in English in nineteenth century Ireland, translation played an important role in the setting up of an independent literary system. Poets like Walsh translated from the Gaelic. He translated Irish popular songs or the so-called Jacobite poetry of the eighteenth century, those poems in defence of Bonnie Prince Charles. So the Irish, whose native language was disappearing, could thus find an indigenous literary identity but expressed in the English language, at this time widely spoken in Ireland. But, as we have said, Walsh was more than a translator, in that in him we find some of the sentiments of later revivalists. He says, for example, in the introduction to *Irish Popular Songs* that the "middle and upper ranks" of Irish society are "aping the manners of the English settlers located among them" and so they have "adopted a most unnational dislike to the language of their fathers" (11). So, the popular songs and ballads are "as completely unknown

to the great mass of Irish readers as if they were sung in the wilds of Lapland" (11). Douglas Hyde, a later revivalist and the founder of the Gaelic League, in his essay "The Irish Language" speaks of the "Catholic gentry ... educated by preference at English schools whenever their parents are wealthy enough, and taught to say as I have often heard them say—I almost blush to repeat it—that Irish is the language of 'cads'" (Ó Conaire 149-150).

Walsh also shows that he is finding a literary identity in his racial origins, as we have seen above in his mention of "the most unnational dislike" of certain Irish for the "language of their fathers" (11), thus admitting that an interest in Gaelic culture is also a manifestation of nationalism. In a letter of March 17 1844 to John O'Daly, publisher, about translations for *Reliques of Jacobite Poetry* Walsh comments that he feels "indignantly" and with "all a poet's feeling, the curse and crime of the tyrant". It is interesting that this nationalistic expression of indignation is a "poet's feeling". Being an artist and being Irish seem to be closely bound one to the other, a concept which appears in Ireland later but which in its genesis is seen here.

Ellmann tells us that Joyce in Belvedere College resisted the propaganda of the national revival, "which had filtered down from various organizations like the Gaelic League into the school" (Ellmann 55). We see some of this propaganda manifested in the character of Miss Ivors in *The Dead*. She is described as "frank-mannered" and wears a large brooch with "an Irish device and motto" on it instead of the usual low-cut bodice (127). This description of the badge of nationality, which Joyce implies has hidden her femininity, together with her frank manner prepares us for the lecture which she delivers to Gabriel in the simplistic terms of the totally convinced. In a few words, she hurls at him the deepest insult she can think of, that he has betrayed his nation by writing for an English, conservative newspaper, *The Daily Express*: "'Well, I'm ashamed of you,' said Miss Ivors frankly. 'To say you'd write for a paper like that. I didn't think you were a West Briton.'" (127) Not only does Joyce convey the intolerance and narrow-mindedness of this revivalist, it is also worth noting that she is insulting Gabriel on racial grounds, the term "West Briton" being someone who betrays the customs of their country by imitating those of the colonizer. Miss Ivors' views are very similar to those expressed by both Walsh and Hyde above, the idea of the Gaelic culture reviving often going hand in hand with a schoolmasterish exhortation not to imitate the English.

But yet, as we have seen above in his essay "Ireland of Saints and Sages", Joyce shows a concern with the revival of "ancient Ireland". Let us look at his words again, however, and ask what type of revival is it exactly which he envisages. His idea of "ancient Ireland" is quite romantic and comes evidently not only from Mangan, but also from Walsh, as is seen in his reference to "Jacobite poets", (Walsh, we remember, translated *Reliques of Irish Jacobite Poetry*). He admits that this ancient world disappeared with the death of Mangan, and shows decided impatience with the revivalists saying that if Ireland "is truly capable of reviving, let her awake, or let her cover up her head and lie down decently in her grave forever". This impatience is not only conveyed by the irritable tone, but we also find that implicitly Joyce finds this possible revival rather colourless. If we look at the romantic language used to describe

the ancient world which disappeared with Mangan's death and the mystical imagery used with the simpler language of the above outburst, it is most revealing of Joyce's attitude. It could be suggested that Joyce's vision of "ancient Ireland" is the one he has received from Irish poetry translations to English in the nineteenth century, and that the ethos of the revival movement left him cold. It could also be suggested that an understanding of this is necessary to fully comprehend Irish writing in the early century and Joyce's in particular.

Consequently, the following conclusions can be drawn from the above. The Irish literature which Joyce would have read in English coloured his ideas on Gaelic Ireland. This literature was strong in a nationalistic and patriotic flavour, and contains those romantic motifs of which Rafroidi spoke. These three aspects are reflected in Joyce's romantic views in the essay "Ireland of Saints and Sages" and he reacts against them with the sardonic humour of the references in *Finnegan's Wake*. It was thus impossible for him to escape from a literary identity based on racial grounds, as this was filtered to him through the Irish literature he read, even though his reactions ranged from romanticism to satire as we can see, if only in the examples given above. But whereas he seems to have accepted a romantic view of Irish culture in literature, what he saw as the cold uniformity and narrow-minded views of the revivalists and as expressed by Miss Ivors are anathema to him. Even so, the reaction against this rigid identity imposed by the revivalists, and earlier posited by Walsh, is also an important part of Joyce's role as an artist, the impersonal Dedalus coldly rebelling against religion, country and tradition. In the end, the acceptance of or the reaction against the Irish tradition is necessary to understand the Irish artist, if only because his cultural background contains this marriage of art and nationalism. As Terence Brown tells us in his influential work on the social and cultural history of Ireland two choices were open to the Irish artist in early twentieth century Ireland, to accommodate himself to the home atmosphere or "define his artistic identity in terms of opposition and dissent" (Brown 312-313). But, although both choices are different, they have in common the fact that, as Brown says, "the artistic life involved some meaningful relationship with society which either welcomed or rejected the artefacts that individuals produced" (Brown 313).

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