

## ***DECLAN KIBERD***

### **The Poetry of Padraic Fallon**

After the deaths of Yeats and Joyce, a sense of anticlimax pervaded the Irish scene. Both men had been figures of international stature, and now only a sense of emptiness remained. Worse still, the idea of Ireland as one of the vibrant centres of European culture seemed to have died with them. Samuel Beckett emigrated to the Continent in 1939, with the bleak assertion that he preferred France at war to Ireland at peace.

Ireland during the years of World War Two became a provincial and introverted place, its stasis manifest not only in the political failure to join the fight against fascism, but also in the growing popular contempt for modern art. A reproduction of Manet's *Olympus* was denounced when Victor Waddington put it on display in a Dublin gallery; jazz was banned for a time on Radio Éireann; and Dublin Corporation voted to refuse a gift of Rouault's painting *Christ Crowned with Thorns*.

In such a claustrophobic atmosphere, Irish artists lost touch with European colleagues, critics and audiences. Many of them were degraded in the eyes of fellow-citizens to the level of eccentric aesthetes, performing the role of daft artist for an audience of jeering provincials. Some succumbed to their fate as 'gas bloody men', enacting in pubs the part of writers, rather than confronting in private the anguish of actual writing. Others found in the squalor of bohemian Dublin vague intimations of the dire poverty which surrounded it, and sought uneasily for analogies in Baudelaire and the artists of the French Decadence. But most poets remained

introverted and even happily provincial – unsung victims of the war.

That victimage took many forms: for Behan, Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien it meant a failure to realise in full their original potential. For Padraic Fallon, it meant neglect, marginalization, and a chronic lack of visibility because of difficulties in securing publication. Born in Athenry, Co. Galway in 1905, he worked as a customs official for forty years, writing plays, essays and, above all, exquisitely balanced poems. The latter, however, were not fully appreciated until after his death in 1974, by which time critics as diverse as Donald Davie and Maurice Harmon could agree on the immensity of his actual achievement.

Central to that achievement is a wonderful synthesis of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions within each individual text. Fallon was that most ecumenical of souls, the well-balanced Irishman with a chip on each shoulder, one chip labelled 'Gael' and the other labelled 'Gall'. W. B. Yeats, in a famous essay written in the 1930s, had called upon Irish writers to bring the old Gaelic world of Ó Rathaille, Merriman and Raftery into creative alignment with the Anglo-Irish tradition of Swift, Goldsmith and Berkeley: 'preserve the two Irelands, so to unite, that neither shall shed its pride . . . but that there shall be built a golden bridge between the old and the new'. Only Synge, among the major figures of the Revival, had achieved that visionary synthesis, combining both elements in a seamlessly beautiful unity.

It was Fallon, of all the poets of the 1930s and 1940s, whose work provided the fullest answer to Yeats call. It is fitting that his fine poem, *Yeats's Tower at Ballylee*, should register with final serenity his initially troubled acceptance of that Anglo-Irish inheritance, half-savage, half-glorious:

Here where country blood was split  
Neither earth nor stone cries out, for this is a dream-structure;

All that the brazen Norman built  
To house a store of bullies in black armour  
Deflected and turned to phantasy  
By the boy who brooded on book and paint  
Long mornings in his father's study  
As mediaeval as a saint:  
This is the Tower at last, its passion spent  
And wearied of its own brutality  
Where a boy could dream like Gabriel Rossetti;  
Useless as verse and as magnificent.

But, for all his scruples about that tradition, he concedes  
the usefulness and beauty of Yeats's example:

This tower where the poet thought to play  
Out some old romance to the end caught up  
The dream and dreamer in its brutal way  
And the dream died here upon the crumbling top.  
I know the terror of his vision now:  
A poet dies in every poem, even  
As blossom dies when fruit comes on the bough,  
And world is endless time in which things happen  
In endless repetition, every man  
Repetitive as a pattern, no soul  
But the sprawling spirit of the whole  
Massing upon the careless earth like frogspawn.

Ballylee is a truly comprehensive metaphor of the  
doubleness of Irish experience, since it also encompasses the  
Gaelic world sung by Raftery, the blind Irish Homer who so  
extolled the beauty of a local woman, Mary Hynes, that  
sighted men went delirious at the very thought of her:

**Letter from Ballylee**  
Raftery, a tramp poet,

Sung for the thatches around the homespun girl  
Whose name was Mary Hynes:  
Later, of course, the beauty was debauched  
By some hard-riding nameless  
Country gentleman,  
And dies lost and wrinkled in  
A bog cabin.

The girl goes always to the other fellow.  
Exalt no girl, my friend;  
Flesh no arrow. Witness this man who plumps anew  
The old stone shell by the river.  
Now he sings of God and lesser things  
And studies planetary ebb and flow  
Who saw Helen leave the high wall for  
A quite ordinary lover.

He gets by, like  
A hermit crab who blunders in from the blue  
Bristle of the sea.  
Waiting a new skin he hears  
The old shell singing. Pitiful  
The story, how an old love can discompose us.  
Perhaps I should sing God too  
And the partial planets, did this girl allow me  
Who puts me at the disposal of the Muses.

Such hospitality to the two island traditions is exemplary. What lifts Fallon's poetry above such nationalist decencies, however, is its highly unusual blending of Irish historical experience with a genuinely religious vision. Unlike most of his gifted contemporaries, Fallon felt able to draw on the storehouse of Catholic belief and imagery. For Kavanagh, on the other hand, Catholicism was by then a myth, a beautiful but superannuated 'lie', whose slow evaporation left him

without any enabling mythological structure. This led one of Kavanagh's critics to conclude that 'a poet without a myth is a man confronting famine'. Fallon's situation was very different: he wrote out of a centred Catholic spirituality and, by doing so, discovered a linking agent between the Irish experience and the mind of Catholic Europe. This was, in several respects, paradoxical, at a time when for most Irish intellectuals the idea of 'Europe' was bound up with a secularising, humanist philosophy. But the reservoirs of Catholicism, tapped so richly in his poetry, freed him of the provincialism into which others so often and so regretfully fell – and provided also a vibrant antidote to the pagan, and even classical, energies made so richly available in the work of Raftery.

There is, therefore, a tremendous sense of scope and amplitude in the world evoked by Fallon, a sense that that world is very old and very large, that its traditions, though made by men and women, are so immense as to dwarf their individual artistic achievements. Yet he is also possessed by the idea that, although a personal contribution may be infinitesimal, it is infinitely important that it be made. He has the classicist's decorous sense of self-limitation: not for him the fiery romantic declarations of the eternal indestructibility of art. Art is simply something that *expresses*, but something that can never *solve*, the mystery of living. In that sense, Fallon is not simply a poet who writes about religion, but someone more valuable and more rare: a truly religious writer, who uses art, in a strictly subordinate way, to conduct a highly spiritual exploration. He would never, like the modernists, assert the religion of art, but would, like the ancients, see it as a useful and beautiful means of articulating a spiritual vision.

In particular, Fallon captured a significant aspect of rural Catholic piety with unparalleled intensity and complexity: devotion to the figure of the Virgin. Where Yeats, in the

ferocious brilliance of *Leda and the Swan*, offered a strictly pagan annunciation, Fallon renders the Christian version of that story with far more tenderness but with abundant energy:

**Mater Dei**

In March the seed  
Fell, when the month leaned over, looking  
Down into her valley.  
And none but the woman knew it where she sat  
In the tree of her veins and tended him  
The red and ripening Adam of the year.  
Her autumn was late and human.  
Trees were nude, the lights were on the pole  
All night, when he came,  
Her own man;  
In the cry of a child she sat, not knowing  
That his was a stranger.  
Milk ran wild  
Across the heavens. Imperiously He  
Sipped at the delicate beakers she proffered him.  
How was she to know  
How huge a body she was, how she corrected  
The very tilt of the earth on its new course?

These same qualities are to be found, even more directly, in another lyric:

**Magna Mater**

A dove plus an  
Assenting virgin is  
An odd equation; the bird of Venus, the  
Shotsilk wood haunter and  
A country shawl  
In congress to produce

The least erotic of the gods.

Afoot on Sunday, walking green  
The little roads or high  
In the spring carts, they come to Mass;  
Hundreds who know man,  
For whom no string was plucked  
Or any heavens  
Thrown open;

No dichotomy  
Affects the prayer; that heaven  
Should have one love, and earth another seems  
Entirely natural.  
What Troubadour  
Built this country chapel?  
And out of what  
Substance? Harping on what nerves?  
Mothers here  
All virgin, fathers none,  
The child a gift of heaven  
And held in common by  
Each virgin mother.  
O indestructible  
Country mulch the Muses tread  
So delicately, into the earth you go  
Breeding, tending  
Where flowers are born with the names of kings  
You never heard of, pagan fellows  
Whose histories and business  
Are open secrets in your  
Sunshining faces.

There is nothing narrowing, or sentimentally nostalgic,  
about such performances: they issue from a thoroughly

modern sensibility. Perhaps that was Fallon's misfortune – to have been European at a time when Irish writing was introverted; to have been open to both island traditions in an age when a restrictive nationalism held sway; and to have been an unapologetically religious artist at a period when it was fashionable for intellectuals to be doubters or even secularists. Fallon had no ready-made constituency to which, in his lifetime, he could appeal; and it is only in recent years that he has come into his own, as spiritual values re-emerge in the wake of a discredited materialism, in a world which again tries to be at once religious and modern. Perhaps this poet's best times are yet to come: of him it might be said that we are still learning how to be his contemporaries.

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