Whoops from the peat-bog?:
Joseph Campbell and the London avant-garde

ALEX DAVIS

Thursday, 22 March 1923: Joseph Campbell, interned in a ‘Tintown’ at the Curragh, listened to Francis Stuart read his poems. ‘Faint murmer of his voice à la Golding and Ezra Pound’, Campbell recorded in his clandestine prison diary, adding parenthetically, ‘(Talked of Ezra’s dressing-gown, beard, one gold earring in ear).’ This quiet recital and colloquy between the two prisoners faintly recalls a far more dramatic reading at the Poets’ Club in London, nearly thirteen years previously, at which Campbell ‘delivered [Pound’s] “The Ballad of the Goodly Fere” in full sonorous grandeur clad in bardic robes’. 2 Campbell’s flamboyant appearance on this December evening in 1910 was at one with his pre-war London image of kilted Irish bard. 3 In such apparel, as Walter Baumann observes, 4 Campbell more than matched his friend Pound’s Kensington wardrobe of velvet jacket or grey overcoat with square buttons of lapis lazuli, purchased with the £5 Pound was paid by the English Review for his ‘Ballad’ and other poems. 5

Such dressing up, of course, was the badge of many members of the London avant-garde. One of the foundational narratives of early modernism is by the English Review’s editor, Ford Maddox Ford, whose recollection of his initial meeting with Wyndham Lewis – proffering his ‘Wild Body’ narratives to Ford – pays

---

particular attention to Lewis’s resemblance to a Russian anarchist, clad in black coat and cape and Latin-quarter hat. Campbell’s *outre* garb, however, would seem to differ from that of Pound and Lewis in that it acts as a mark of national identity: kilt and robes are clear indices of turn-of-the-century Irish cultural nationalism (with its ‘cult of the kilt,’ in Declan Kiberd’s words), whereas velveteen jackets and Russian-looking black capes would appear to signify a cosmopolitanism restless with the mores of Edwardian culture. The latter dress-sense would appear to function as a sartorial signifier of the pre-war avant-garde’s internationalism, of an aesthetics that, for a writer like Pound, interrogated national as well as artistic boundaries.

Campbell’s brief sojourn in London, from 1906 to 1911, coincides with the early stages of the avant-garde Imagist movement, which emerged in the wake of T.E. Hulme’s self-styled ‘secession’ from the Poet’s Club in 1909. Early practitioners of and commentators on Imagism were keen to emphasize its cosmopolitan freedom from provincial and national traditions. In his 1913 article, ‘Imagisme,’ F.S. Flint stresses that the Imagists’ ‘only endeavour was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time, – in Sappho, Catullus, Villon.’ In a related vein, Pound’s preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1916* links Imagism to artistic movements on the European continent, wherein he tartly comments: ‘It is small wonder that Imagist poetry should be incomprehensible to men whose sole touchstone for art is the literature of one country for a period of four centuries.’ Pound’s remarks are of a piece with his 1917 assault, in the pages of the *New Age*, on ‘Provincialism the Enemy,’ among his targets ‘the whole Irish business, and in particular the Ulster dog-in-the-manger.’

From kilt to the Curragh, the Ulsterman Campbell remained committed to the ‘Irish business’ Pound airily denigrates. His presence, therefore, alongside other politicized Irish writers, including Padraic Colum, among the ranks of the cosmopolitan London avant-garde is of considerable interest in considering the complex relationship between the Irish literary revival and early modernism. Campbell’s ‘Irish Imagism’ can be seen as a dimension to the vexed debate, within the revival, of whether the creation of a national culture was reinforced or diluted by internationalism, a discussion being conducted in the early years of the century between Yeats, D.P. Moran, T.W. Rolleston and John Eglinton, among others. Furthermore, Campbell’s commitment to Irish nationalism and, in his

---

most achieved verse, avant-garde poetic devices, finds a corollary of sorts with the increasingly ‘provincial’ – in Pound’s sense – cultural politics of the avant-garde in England, and on the continent, as the Great War broke over Europe.

Prior to coming to London, Campbell had been involved with the literary revival initially in Ulster, where the movement had prompted the creation of the Ulster Literary Theatre (1904) and the journal *Uladh* (1904), and subsequently in Dublin. By 1906, Campbell had published *Songs of Uladh* (1904) – a collaborative venture with the composer Herbert Hughes, for which Campbell provided English-language lyrics to Donegal folksongs collected by Hughes – and two volumes of poetry, *The Garden of the Bees* (1905) and *The Rushlight* (1906). On arriving in London in 1906, Campbell’s literary activities were not confined to the Poets’ Club and its offshoots; he assisted at the Irish Texts Society and also became secretary for the Irish Literary Society. Campbell would reside in London until 1911, when he returned to Ireland and to Irish revolutionary politics.

The London branch of the Irish Literary Society had considerable overlap with the embryonic London avant-garde. Hulme’s ‘Secession Club’ from the Poets’ Club first met at the Café Tour d’Eiffel, and present among the Irish contingent, according to Flint’s ‘History of Imagism’, were Joseph Campbell and Florence Farr. This ‘forgotten school of 1909’, as Pound later dubbed it, also gathered at the Irish Literary Society, as Ronald Schuchard has discovered. Schuchard has argued cogently that, through Farr, Yeats influenced the course of Imagist theory and practice, including the work of Campbell. Farr famously aided her friend and, briefly, lover Yeats in experiments in chanting his verse, experiments which culminated in the attempt to set the poetry to scores written for a psaltery made for Farr in 1901 by Arnold Dolmetsch. Yeats and Farr’s determined dissemination of their ideas, through numerous lecture tours, found a responsive audience in many members of the Poets’ Club, Campbell among them. According to Schuchard, Hulme’s early theories, which argued for the necessary visuality of poetry, were formulated in reaction to the ‘auditory poetics’ of Yeats and Farr. Hulme’s lecture on modern poetry, probably delivered to the Poets’ Club in 1908, contains an explicit counterstatement to Yeats and Farr’s prosody in his confident assertion that, ‘from this standpoint of extreme modernism’, the ‘new art’ of poetry is ‘read and not chanted’; ‘I quite admit that poetry intended to be recited must be written in regular metre, but I contend that this method of recording impressions by visual images does not require the old metric system.’ Schuchard’s crucial observation is that, with Hulme’s exchanging his literary for


philosophical interests in late 1909, Yeats and Farr’s pressure on the development of Imagism would entail the centrality of rhythm or cadence, though not metre, to the movement’s attempts at self-definition in the manifestoes of Flint and Pound in 1913. But by that date, Campbell had removed to Dublin to marry and passes out of the history of the London avant-garde.

Campbell takes back to Ireland a poetics that is moulded out of two contrary forces, which in England would shortly fuse in Imagism. On the one hand, is the ‘new art’ of which Yeats writes in ‘Speaking to the Psaltery’, a rhythmic musical art; and, on the other, is that which, perhaps echoing Yeats, Hulme also terms ‘the new art’, a visual proto-Imagism. Campbell’s receptivity to both currents of ‘new art’ parallels Pound’s; where Pound’s desire to ‘make it new’ differs from Campbell’s in the nationalist dimension to the Irishman’s project. Pound had little time for Irish nationalism, as several comments in his articles for the New Age make apparent. He would hold fast to his conception of Ireland as an ‘unspeakable and reactionary island’ throughout the war years and into his unspeakable and reactionary commitment to Mussolini’s fascism. In a 1916 review of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Pound’s antipathy towards literature informed by nationalist sentiment can be gleaned from his comment that, ‘If more people had read The Portrait and certain stories in Mr Joyce’s Dubliners there might have been less recent trouble in Ireland. A clear diagnosis is never without its value.’ For Pound, in the same context, Joyce’s novel transcends nationality: it is a ‘permanent part of English literature – written by an Irishman in Trieste and first published in New York City.’ Pound’s transnational view of the Portrait is a cornerstone of the edifice of ‘International Modernism’, so-called, the erection of which would be completed as modernism entered the canon in the middle of the century. Of the ‘masterpieces of International Modernism’, opines one of the chief architects of this monolithic edifice, Hugh Kenner, ‘None of them, certainly not Ulysses, can be claimed for the literature of its author’s country: no, they define a tradition of their own.’ Kenner’s cultural internationalism has its roots in, among other soils, Wyndham Lewis’s political argument, in Paleface (1929), for the desirability of national ‘muscagnisation’ in the face of the artificial principle of european separatism (of all

the Irelands, Ulsters, Catalonias, Polands, Czecho-Slovakias and the rest'). As an instance of the artificiality of the case for ‘separatism’, Lewis refers his reader to his deconstruction of Matthew Arnold’s notion of the ‘Celt’ in *The Lion and the Fox* (1925), a racial concept that is, says Lewis, ‘a complete myth … staged [by Arnold] as an ironical drama for the John Bulls and Fenian Paddies of his time.’

Campbell’s belief in Irish ‘separatism’ from the British empire would seem to situate him as tangential to the course of modernism subsequent to his return to Ireland. However, the remarks by Pound and Lewis quoted above date from the time of the Great War and its aftermath and do not represent the cultural politics of the English avant-garde in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities. In 1914, Pound coined the term Vorticism for Lewis’s emergent group of painters and sculptors, and increasingly identified himself as a fellow Vorticist, contributing to Lewis’s short-lived journal *Blast*. In the same year, Imagism, as a movement, passed largely out of Pound’s control, into the hands of Amy Lowell and crossed the Atlantic. While the fairly genteel cosmopolitanism of Imagism continued in ‘Amygisme’, Vorticism was aggressively chauvinistic. Lewis’s movement constituted an English challenge to the nationalism of the Italian Futurists, who had burst noisily upon the London art scene with an exhibition in 1912. Marinetti’s celebration of technology, war, speed etc. is indissolubly entwined with an advocacy of Italian imperialism; in the words of Paul Peppis, ‘Marinetti publicly affiliated Futurism with the Young Nationalists’ Pan–Italianist advocacy of war and imperial expansion.’ As Peppis demonstrates, Lewis’s counter—*Blast*, despite its anarchist rhetoric of anti-statism and individualism, is itself contradictorily governed by imperialist and nationalist imperatives: the journal, a ‘Review of the Great London Vortex’, contests Marinetti’s Italian jingoism through assertions of England’s greater cultural, economic and military prowess.

Campbell was doubtless cognisant of this avant-gardist muscle flexing. Among the numerous literary gatherings he attended in Dublin was one held by UCD’s newly appointed assistant lecturer in English, Thomas MacDonagh, a poet and critic well aware of developments in contemporary poetry both at home and abroad. Campbell’s and MacDonagh’s shared political views would see both poets on the committee of the Irish Volunteers in 1913, and both cleaved to the minority group after the movement split in September 1914, opposing any support for Britain in the war against Germany. Concurrent with his political dissent from the United Kingdom, MacDonagh was developing the nationalist poetic theory of *Literature in Ireland: Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish* (1916): the idea that

---

there exists an independent, quintessentially ‘Irish Mode’ of poetry, as distinct from what he calls ‘that vague and illogical Celtic Note’.\textsuperscript{30} MacDonagh’s thesis can be interpreted, in an Irish literary context, as related to the shift in Irish poetry early in the century from the ‘Note’ of the Celtic Twilight to more robust folkloric verse-forms, as anthologized in George Russell’s \textit{New Songs} (1904). However, MacDonagh is keen to connect his argument to poetic convulsions elsewhere in Europe:

I am not writing here of European literature in general, or of English literature in particular. I am introducing a movement that is important to English literature, because it is in part a revolt from it – because it has gone its own way, independent of it, though using for its language English or a dialect of English. I am treating it as a separate thing; and all that I have said so far is said rather by way of comparison, to set it in its true light. It enters literature at a period which seems to us who are of it as a period of disturbance, of change. Its mode seems strange to the critics and to the prosodists of the old order. Its mode is not that of the Futurists or writers of \textit{vers libres}; but still, coming with the work of these, it stands as another element of disturbance, of revolution; it is comparatively free from the old authority imposed by the Renaissance, while the other elements in this disturbance are rebelling against that authority … The poets of this mode have till now been ignorant of the parallel movement; they have taken little or no note of the new writers of free verse or of the futurists. Yet their work may appear one with the work of these. And indeed there is a near kinship. The freedom being sought now elsewhere has long been enjoyed here.\textsuperscript{31}

The nationalist ‘separatism’ of this extraordinary exercise in literary history are audible in MacDonagh’s choice of diction: the Irish Mode’s successful ‘revolt’ from English literature has founded an ‘independent’ poetry, ‘a separate thing.’ More intriguing is MacDonagh’s claim that the Irish Mode’s revolution from ‘authority’ finds analogues in early modernism and the avant-garde, in the \textit{vers libre} of the Imagists and the rebelliousness of the Futurists. In terms of \textit{poetics}, MacDonagh’s analogy springs from the disruption of authoritative and/or conventional linguistic and/or generic conventions common to the Irish Mode and the avant-garde. From a \textit{political} perspective, it is noteworthy that the ‘kinship’ between the two ‘parallel movement[s]’ extends to their intense nationalism, that of Italian Futurism busily being aped, even as the Vorticists in London vigorously debunk it. However, the nationalism of Futurism and Vorticism is that of

\textsuperscript{30} Thomas MacDonagh, \textit{Literature in Ireland: studies Irish and Anglo-Irish} (1916; Relay: Tyrone, Nenagh, 1996), p. 4. \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp 5–6.
competing imperialisms, one emergent, the other established, albeit threatened. MacDonagh's further contention that the Irish Mode is a precursor to the avant-garde, in that it has attained a 'freedom' from 'the old authority' that the latter still seeks, thus inverts on the cultural level the unequal relationship between imperial centre and subjugated colony. This bold declaration grants the Irish Mode a freedom the Irish nation, as a whole, is still denied.

The Irish Mode is empirically identifiable, according to MacDonagh, through certain auditory qualities of Anglo-Irish literature that derive from the linguistic and literary history of the Irish language. For MacDonagh, many younger Irish poets, including himself, have produced examples of the Irish Mode, while the work of a few, Campbell among them, 'is constantly of this mode'. MacDonagh thus hears a national poetic mode in the Irish poets of his generation most deeply involved with the pre-War London avant-garde. Campbell's occasional experiments in the cadences of free verse had, in his earliest work, stemmed from the examples of Whitman and the Bible, as J. B. Harmer notes:

This is the dark.
This is the dream that came of the dark.
This is the dreamer who dreamed the dream that came of the dark.
This is the look the dreamer looked who dreamed the dream that came of the dark.
This is the love that followed the look the dreamer looked who dreamed the dream that came of the dark.

The incremental repetition of this poem has a slightly laboured feel, as have the ejaculations and archaic pronouns of 'O beautiful dark woman', an earlier exercise in free verse (collected in The Rushlight [1906]):

O beautiful dark woman, weep no more.
Weep not for thy princes who have gone from thee: they shall come again.
Cease thy crying and thy lamentation.
Thou shalt be raised up as a star-cluster.
Thy hair shall shine as a river in the dusk, and thine eyes as the blue-bough when the summer is full.

Though maintaining an interest in metrical verse-forms throughout his career, the vers libre Campbell composed subsequent to the debates surrounding Farr's

Theories on poetic performance brings to mind the Imagist injunction (as formulated by Pound), ‘to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome’. Consider, for instance, the rhythm of ‘By the brink of water’, from Campbell’s finest collection, *The Earth of Cualann*:

Black bog-mould,
The fledged green of young ferns,
And water covered with brookline.

Water covered with brookline—
The cup-bearers of Conair
Thought that a drink
Worthy of a High King.

This short poem opens arrestingingly with a line or ‘phrase’ of three stressed syllables, and thence modulates its cadence with two end-stopped lines containing four stresses each with an admixture of unstressed syllables. The absence of a metrical pattern does not mean the lines lack rhythm; rather, they possess a ‘musical’ quality that MacDonagh, in the course of a close reading of Yeats’ ‘The lake isle of Innisfree’, describes as ‘a recurrence in this verse, but it is not the recurrence of the foot’. The near-repetition of the third line in the fourth signals a verbal motif, highlighting the phrase’s thematic importance, which is expounded in the final three lines of the poem. The enjambment of the free verse at the close of the poem gives it that ‘conversational tone, which disallows inversions, quaint words and turns of speech’, that MacDonagh heard in poems in the Irish Mode. Yet Campbell’s Irish Mode is not only rhythmical (which is fundamental to MacDonagh’s thesis), but visual. His imagistic practice clearly influenced by ideas imbied from Hulme (his advocated ‘method of recording impressions by visual images’). The opening lines of ‘By the brink of water’ are a case in point, as Campbell attempts that ‘Direct treatment of the “thing”’, in a language shorn of ‘superfluous’ diction, on which the Imagists of 1912, after Hulme, insisted. Likewise, in ‘The moon’, also from *Earth of Cualann*, Campbell conducts an Imagist rewriting of Sidney’s sonnet, ‘With what sad steps’, foregoing the explicative commentary of the Renaissance poet in favour of a foregrounding of the literary devices of metaphor and simile:

The moon climbs and climbs,
Till it is no bigger
Than a moon-penny.

---

Darkness and the hills lie together
As in a bed,
Sleeping lovers.  

Campbell’s fascinating symbolic ‘designs’ to *Earth of Cualann* are of a piece with such felicitous verbal images, by creating powerful exempla of ‘the visible language of modernism,’ in Jerome McGann’s phrase, in this now sadly neglected collection.  

Campbell’s poetics, like MacDonagh’s *Literature in Ireland*, illustrate the fertile cross-pollination between early modernism and Irish literature and literary theory. The militant nationalist politics embraced by MacDonagh and Campbell, which would lead to execution and internment, respectively, find a correspondence in the politics of the avant-garde, at a time MacDonagh saw as ‘a period of disturbance, of change.’

In an enthusiastic review of *Earth of Cualann*, for the *Egoist*, T.S. Eliot tried to convey a sense of Campbell’s cosmopolitan yet intensely nationalist poetry and his Imagistic procedures in a determinedly Irish Mode: ‘Mr Campbell is one of the half-dozen or so writers who are responsible for their being any contemporary poetry. He has established his own style of *vers libre* ... The stuff is Irish, with a peculiar bitter flavour, a dourness, of Mr Campbell’s own. He uses Gaelic names with effect, but none of the poems is simply a whoop from the peat-bog.’

---