

Céad Áit: 'Rún Oscailte'.

Is dán iontach é seo a phléann fadhb shean-bhunaithe ar bhealach a mheascann cur chuige comhaimseartha le stíl inste thraidisiúnta. Níl a roghnú sa chéad áit bainteach le *zeitgeist* an 'mise leis', ná ní cheart go mbeadh áit ag an *zeitgeist* riamh i mbreithiúnas ar ealaín. Pléann 'Rún Oscailte' ceist dháiríre – mar a dhéanann na dánta duaisbuacacha eile – agus pléann í ar shlí fhíor-éifeachtach trí fhoirm nach fuirist a lámhseáil: dán atá ina scéaldhán agus ina dhán próis araon, dhá fo-sheánra nach mbíonn mórán ratha orthu de ghnáth. Léiríonn an file crógacht agus í ag dul i muinín abairtí fada fochlásálacha, rud nach dual do dhán, agus éiríonn go seoigh léi. Tá an dán lán de ghreann dubh agus léiríonn sé ardchumas láimhsithe timpeall ar na sainréimeanna agus tuineacha a mbaineann le cúlchaint agus ráflaí faoin tuath, chomh maith leis na sofhriotal a úsáidtear (“*timpiste* na sluaiste”). Taispeánann an file ról lárnach an tosta i mí-úsáid trí shaghas *reductio ad absurdum* (“... mar nár labhair aon duine faoi mar nárbh ann do na focail agus dá bharr sin bhí cailíní óga ann nár chuala na focail nár labhradh...”), ach leis an magadh ag teacht go leaba an dáiríre i gcónaí. Agus is deacar, tar éis a hOdáisé fhada fulaingthe, gan liú gáirdis a ligint leis an tseanbhean nuair a scaoiltear an chuing uirthi ag deireadh thiar.

This is a wonderful poem which deals with a long-standing problem in a manner combining a contemporary approach and a traditional style of narration. It has not been selected for first place because of the 'Me Too' *zeitgeist*, nor should the *zeitgeist* ever have a place in artistic judgement. 'Rún Oscailte' examines a serious matter – as do the other prize-winning poems – and does so very effectively utilizing a form not easy to handle: a poem which is both a story poem and a prose poem, two sub-genres which seldom achieve great success. The poet displays bravery in her use of long sentences full of sub-clauses which in general use seldom add up to poetry, but due to careful handling work to great effect here. The poem is full of black humour and shows the poet has a great ear for the registers and tones of rumour and gossip in Gaeltacht Irish, as well as the euphemisms employed (“the *accident* of the shovels”). She also points up the role commonly played by silence in abuse through a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* (“...because no-one spoke about it because the words did not exist, and so because of this there were young girls who did not hear the words which were not spoken...”), but with the humour always in service to a serious message. And it is hard, after the old woman's long Odyssey of suffering, not to let a shout of victory on her behalf when she is released of her burden in the end.

Tarna háit: 'Beidiúnach'.

Is dán den scoth é seo a thugann faoi cheann de na dualgaisí is tábhachtaí a bhaineann leis an bhfilíocht: dínit a bhronnadh ar chuma éigin – más déanach féin é – ar dhuine a dhein an Saol Mór faillí air, ag insint a thaobh-san den scéal ar son an té nach bhfuil urlabhra aige anois, agus b'fhéidir nach raibh an cumas sin urlabhra aige riamh agus é ina bheo. Léiríonn an dán an díobháil déanta do dhuine, agus é ina ionadaí ar na mílte, nár oir an córas righin géar scoile dá bhuanna féin nár bhain le focail ná mata. Tugtar aird ar chúrsaí foirme ón gcéad véarsa, mar atá pátrún bhriseadh na línte ag cruthú rithim a dhéanann aithris ar na garsúin ag tabhairt a léim “ó rachta go rachta” an bhotháin. Braithim, leis, magadh géar faoi mhana baoth polaitiúil d'ár linn féin – cruthaithe go cliste sa dán trí chamóg a fhágaint ar lár – mar mhalairt tuisceana ar abairt amháin, agus an file ag trácht ar “seachaint comhluadar daoine ag éirí roimh éirí na gréine.” Cuireann an cur síos ar áilleacht agus uaigneas shaol Sheáin mar aoire sa chúigiú véarsa roinnt de luathfilíocht RS Thomas go mór i gcuimhne dhom: moladh nach beag. Agus dar ndóigh, tá consaeit snasta sa tslí go dtagann an dán timpeall, ag críochnú mar ar thosnaigh, le Seán ag

crochadh ó na frathacha, leis na focail chéanna a chuir tús leis an dán, ar nós sean-laoi Fiannaíochta.

This is an excellent poem which undertakes one of the most important duties relating to poetry: to somehow bestow dignity – even if much belated – on someone whom the world has oppressed and betrayed, telling that person's own side of the story when they have now not the ability to give it voice themselves, and perhaps never had in life either. The poem shows the damage done to a person – a test case for many thousands – whose gifts were neither mathematical nor verbal and which did not fit within a rigid, severe school system. Attention is paid to form from the first verse, when the pattern of line breaks imitates the rhythm of the young boys swinging “from rafter to rafter” around the shed. I sense, too, sharp ridicule of a contemporary political slogan as an alternate reading of one sentence, created through the clever omission of a comma (this is untranslatable). The account of the natural splendour and loneliness of the shepherd's life in the fifth verse is beautifully expressed, reminding me of some of the early poetry of RS Thomas: no small praise. And there is a polished conceit in the way that the poem comes full circle, finishing as it started, with Seán hanging from the rafters, ending with the same words with which it began, in the manner of an old Fenian lay.

Triú Áit: 'Más ann duit'.

Tá cuma aon tréan-ruaig agus ruthag cainte ón dtraidisiún béil ar an dán fíorchumhachtach seo, ag scuabadh an léitheoir leis lena tonnta focal. Ach ar an tarna agus an tríú léamh tá raidhse fianaise de thuiscint dhoimhin ar fhilíochta liteartha na Gaeilge le brath ann. Tá sruth rithime agus saibhreas cainte éachtach síos tríd an dán, chun nach féidir gan a shamhlú go bhfuil an file á chantaireacht mar ortha seachas á rá mar dhán, agus í ag iarraidh bunóc a ghairm amach chuici ón Saol Eile réamhbhreithe, gan feidhm á baint as rud ar bith ach neart agus meallacht a friotail. In *An Duanaire*, luaigh Seán Ó Tuama gur léir go bhfuil an-chuid de na horthaí i dtraidisiún na ndaoine bunaithe ar mhúnla orthaí réamh-Chríostaí, go háirithe iadsan a lorgaíonn cabhair nó cosaint áirithe ar leith. Is amhlaidh leis an dán seo chomh maith céanna. Ach anuas ar an mBean Feasa, tá sinsir liteartha sníofa tríd mar dhán. Tá idir cheol agus chlisteacht amhráin na mórphilí Muimhneacha ón 17ú Céad le brath ar línte ar nós “Is fada mo chumha 's an uabhar mícheansa, / óir slad ar mo shnua gan ua, ní ansa.” In áit eile, tá na línte atá ag geallúint áilleacht an dúlra don leanbh ach é a theacht, tá cuid acu seo a ardaíonn ceisteanna comhaimseartha faoi staid an dúlra céanna: “Dá mbronnfainn ... bróinte leac oighre ort ... crotach is tradhnach...” Leis an téamh domhanda is fada go bhfeicfear leac oighir tiubh, tá an tradhnach imithe agus meath mór leanúnach ar an gcrotach. Fágann na fíricí seo go dtiteann na gealltanais seo isteach i réimse an tsaghais suantraí Gaelaí ina ngealltar rudaí nach féidir, nó nach ann dóibh, don leanbh, seánra go bhfuil 'Seothó, a Thoil, ná Goil go fóill' le hEoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin ina shampla maith dhe.

This poem feels like the headlong rush and verbal onslaught of *extempore* poetry from the oral tradition, sweeping the reader along with its waves of words. But on second and third readings much evidence of a deep understanding of the literary tradition of Irish poetry also emerge. There is a great current of rhythm and a wonderful richness of expression present throughout the poem, so that one cannot but feel that the poet is chanting what is essentially a spell, rather than reciting a poem, as she endeavours to summon an infant to her from the pre-birth Otherworld using only the sheer force and charm of her words. In *Poems of the Dispossessed*, Seán Ó Tuama mentions how many of the traditional Irish prayers in the vernacular tradition were clearly based on a pre-Christian template, particularly those prayers which directly requested specific aid or protection.

This is likewise the case here. But as well as the Wise Woman, there are literary forebears threaded through the poem. Both the music and verbal wit of the great 17th century poets of Munster are present in lines such as “Is fada mo chumha 's an uabhar mícheansa, / óir slad ar mo shnua gan ua, ní ansa.” Along with this, some of the lines promising the child the wonders of the natural world if only they will come over the threshold, some of these raise contemporary questions about the state of that nature: “Were I to bestow on you ... millstones of ice ... curlew and corncrake...” With ongoing global warming it is long since we saw thick ice, the corncrake is effectively gone, and the curlew in rapid decline. These facts push the promises in question into the range of the type of Irish lullaby in which the impossible or imaginary is promised to the child, a genre of which 'Seothó, a Thoil, ná Goil go fóill' by Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin is one example.

Gearrliostaithe: Joseph Williams, Quaker

Sa dán breá seo tugtar ómós do laoch stairiúil nach bhfuil ina ghné de phaintéon laochais na nGael ná na nGall, ar an mbonn nach raibh a iompar laochúil ar an tslí thraidisiúnta throdach. Ach don té a thuigeann litríocht na Gaeilge, cífidh sé gur léir go gcloínn Williams go docht le dhá cheann de thrí bhunthréithe na Féinne: 'glaine ár gcroí' agus 'beart de réir briathar'. Tugann an file malairt sampla dúinn ag tús an dáin, mar a nascann sé an t-Athair Ó Murchú – laoch traidisiúnta '98 de chuid na nGael – le gníomh foréigin: dó na dtithe mhóra. Cé gur fíor go raibh cúis intuigthe ag Gaelaibh seo a dhéanamh, léiríonn na línte seo an bhearna idir an rud a mhúin an sagart agus an rud a chleacht sé, i gcodarsnacht leis an bhfear de chuid Chumann na gCarad. Tá rithim agus rogha focal an dáin fíor-thomhaiste, ar aon dul le hintinn agus gníomhartha Williams féin, rud a chabhraíonn leis an léitheoir teacht isteach ar mheon an fhir úid. Cuireann an meafar sínte talmhaíochta álainn sa tarna véarsa leis an éifeacht seo, agus críochnaíonn an rann sin le himeartas cliste focal: “ag riar go fial na beatha / ar lucht píce agus pice araon.” Léiríonn an dán go paiteanta an chrógacht is an deacracht a bhaineann le díreach fianaise a dhéanamh ar an éagóir.

In this fine poem homage is paid to a historical hero who does not feature in the heroic pantheon of either the Irish or the English, for the reason that his deeds were not heroic in the traditional martial sense. But to those who are familiar with Irish literature it will be clear that Williams clearly fulfilled two of the three fundamental qualities of the Fianna: 'purity of heart' and 'deeds in accord with words'. The poet gives us a sample of the opposite at the beginning of the poem, where he links Father Murphy – the traditional Irish hero of '98 – with an act of violence: the burning of the big houses. Although this action is certainly understandable, it nonetheless underlines the gap between what the priest taught pastorally, and his actions. This is in contrast with the Quaker Williams. The rhythm and choice of words through the poem are measured, mirroring the mind and actions of the subject, something which helps the reader inhabit his mind and experience. A beautiful extended agricultural metaphor in the second verse adds to this effect, and finishes with a clever untranslatable play on words. The poem portrays very well the bravery and difficulty which attends the one bearing witness to injustice.

Gearrliostaithe: Tuar.

I lámha eile d'fhéadfadh an dán seo ar eachtra beag éaneolaíochta a bheith leamh go leor, mar is fuirist do chur síos ar eachtra spésiúil nó suaithinseach a bheith ag ligint air gur filíocht atá ann, seachas tuairisceoireacht ghlan. Ach éiríonn go diall leis an dán seo de bharr aclaíocht

shamhlaíoch an fhile, ag briseadh ó na fíricí loma, go háirithe sa véarsa deireanach. Tá an tagairt do Chathal Bhuí Mac Giolla Gunna a bheifí ag súil leis in aon dán Gaeilge faoi bhonnán ann, agus imeartas deas focal tras-teangach sa líne: “ach don *least bittern*, ar an gceann is lú ...”. Cuireann an file mí-ádh an éin buailte suas taobh le lúcháir 'lucht na n-éan', rud as a eascraíonn ceist faoi nádúr na spéise atá acu sna héanlaithe: an cuma leo faoin éan seo, nó faoi cíocras a tsúl féinig amháin? (ceist a bhaineann linn ar fad maidir leis na rudaí a mbíonn snadhm laistigh iontu againn, dar ndóigh). Ach is sa véarsa deireanach a thugann an dán faoi eitilt go hard ar sciatháin an chomhbhá shamhalta, ag fágaint talamh an cur síos laistíos de. Tá an ghuí dheireanach tomhaiste díreach ceart, ag seachaint bhaol an mhaoithneachais iomarcaigh, ach ag cur a tsaghaid cruinn díreach isteach i gcroí an léitheora.

In other hands this poem about an ornithological incident could have been unremarkable, as it is easy for what is basically a fairly straightforward account of an interesting incident to masquerade as poetry. But this poem succeeds entirely, mainly due to the imaginative agility of the poet breaking from the plain facts, particularly in the final verse. The reference to Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Gunna is present, as one might expect in any Irish poem about a bittern, and there is a nice trans-linguistic play on words in “ach don *least bittern*, ar an gceann is lú ...”. The poet juxtaposes the ill fortune of the bird with the joy of the bird-watchers, raising a question as to the nature of their love of birds: is it for the bird itself, or only for the delight of their own visual enjoyment? This is of course a question which relates to us all with regard to the things we supposedly care about. But it is in the last verse that the poem truly takes off on wings of imaginative compassion, leaving the ground of 'telling' in its wake. The final prayer is judged exactly right, avoiding the danger of excessive sentimentality, but sending its arrow straight into the heart of the reader.

Gearliostaithe: Fáistine na hOllphéiste.

An chéad rud a thabharfar faoi deara faoin dán cumhachtach, léannta seo ná a scúite, lom, spáralach is atá sé – rud inmholta ann féin – gan aon fhocal i láthair nach bhfuil géarghá leis chun an bhó a chur thar áth. Tá an t-údar aitheanta mar dhuine de na ghearrscéalaithe is fearr dá ghlúin, ach is léir anois gur file cruthanta é anuas ar sin. San aois atá ann inniu, glacann mórchuid againn nach ann do dhia ar bith ach sa mhéid is go n-adhraítear é i gcroíthe beo daonna, nó níl aon saol dá gcuid féin ag déithe lasmuigh de chloigne lucht a leanta, agus cé gur níos faide ná 20 bliain a bhíonn ina dtréimhse faoi bhláth, fós go dtagann deireadh lena réimeas ar an saol seo ar nós duine bhásmhar ar bith. Is cinnte go bhfuil blas de 'Ozymandias', den mhagadh faoin éirí in airde, ag baint leis mar dhán. Leis na híomhánna a úsáideann an file: “mná ag friotháil ort, ag tairiscint ceana”, nó “ag éileamh seirce ar mhaighdeana óga...”, d'fhéadfaí a shámhlú go mbaineann seo le haintiarna saolta ar bith, nó b'fhéidir bocanna móra áirithe i Hollywood. Sa mhéid seo, tá an file ag tarraingt ar thradisiún diagachta na Meánmhara, mar a gceaptar go raibh déithe baininne, bainteach le torthúlacht agus an talamh, i réim go dtí gur tháinig na déithe spéire fírinne Oilimpeas is cuireadh an ruaig ar na sean-déithe. Is íomhá de na seandéithe an píotón a mharaigh Apollón ag Deilfe, ach sa dán seo tugtar cead aighnis don arrachtach baineann marbh (tróp a bhí Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill ina ceannródaí aige i bhfilíocht na Gaeilge), ag tuaradh deireadh ré Apollóin agus ag críochnú leis an gcealg nimhneach íorónta: “Ar thairngris sin, / a bhean an oracail?”

The first thing one notices about this powerful, learned poem is how spare and pared down it is – something laudible in itself – without a single unnecessary word beyond what is required to achieve its aim. The author is recognized as one of the finest short-story writers of his generation,

but it is now revealed that he is a fine poet as well. In our age, many of us accept that there is no god except in so far as they exist in the hearts and minds of their human worshippers, and although their time in bloom will be far more than the 20 years ascribed to humans by the *seanfocal*, that their time on earth will still eventually come to an end like that of any mortal person. There is certainly a whiff of 'Ozymandias' about this poem, the derision of delusional pride and might. With the images the poet uses, "women attending on you, offering affection" or "demanding love from the young virgins", it could be imagined that the poem relates to any temporal tyrant, or indeed certain Hollywood bigshots. To this end the poet draws on the history of Mediterranean theology, where the consensus is that a tradition of feminine gods relating to the earth and to fertility preceded the masculine (though not always male) sky gods of Olympus, who drove out the older order. The chthonic monster Python, who Apollo killed at Delphi and who is a symbol of the feminine older gods, is given permission – *cead aighnis* – to speak its own version of events in this poem (a trope pioneered in Irish poetry by Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill), foreseeing the end of Apollo's reign and finishing with the ironic sting of "did you fortell that, O woman of the oracle?".