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*'The Song Is Drowned': On Michael Donaghy*

LATELY I'VE BEEN TELLING PEOPLE that the best poet of my generation is dead. No doubt it's ludicrous of me to nominate anyone as 'the best poet of my generation,' a phrase born of eulogistic hyperbole, however true it may feel. Yet when I re-read Michael Donaghy, a poet I knew and who was my senior only by a few months, and when I think of his death at age fifty in 2004, I flounder in the magnitude of the loss. Of course the loss to his wife, Maddy Paxman, and their son, Ruairi, beggars what the rest of us may experience, but I would still like that amorphous entity known as 'the poetry world' to acknowledge Michael's talent and accomplishment. And I hope more readers will discover the pleasures and depths of his work. He was a poet of bountiful erudition, energy and delight. Even his haunted moods, his premonitions of an early death, came on with the brightness and wit of an Ariel.

A misguided review of these two books in the *TLS* (August 14, 2009), treats Donaghy as a second-rate Paul Muldoon, and puts me perhaps too much on the defensive. Anyone who heard him perform—always from memory—will never forget his spontaneous gestures, the way his recitations felt like inventions. His best poems and prose pieces remain as performances even without his voice tipping them so precisely into our hearts. He was a clown in the best sense of the word, an irreverent, mercurial magician. He would have laughed at anyone who thought such qualities beneath the dignity of a poet.

Donaghy held three passports—Irish, British and American—yet in the US where he did most of his growing up he is still too little known, while in England he was celebrated widely. British papers covered his passing with a breadth and thoroughness no living American poet would receive in his homeland; that and the posthumous publication of these two indispensable books demonstrate something of his impact. Yet I can't help feeling more needs to be said. Donaghy was one of the contemporary masters of dramatic voice in verse, and this is true of his lyrics as well as his sequences and dramatic monologues. His best poems succeed not just on the level of subject, line and stanza, but as dramatic contrivances, entered into and shaped with ecstatic precision. If readers occasionally feel bored by the leaden sincerity of American poetry, they could do with a dose of Donaghy.

The modern era has given us plenty of mid-Atlantic writers whose nationality is sometimes difficult to pin down, from Henry James to T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Donaghy was an American whose language found an angularity and freshness in part from his appropriation of British and Irish idiom. His urban settings, particularly New York, Chicago and London, seem engulfed by his personality—or perhaps I should say his personality was enlivened by their environs. He was born in

the South Bronx in New York, a rough neighborhood that left him with memories of ‘horrific street violence’ and racial tension. His parents were Irish immigrants who worked at a hotel in Manhattan—his mother as a maid and his father in the boiler room. When he was still quite young they made a stab at repatriation to Ireland, but gave up when work failed to materialize. Back in New York, they found jobs again, played Irish music and conveyed an autodidactic appreciation for the arts. A favorite story about Michael happened in his teens when he worked as a doorman on Park Avenue—material he would use in his poem ‘Local 32B’: ‘The rich are different. Where we have doorknobs, / they have doormen—like me, a cigar store Indian / on the Upper East Side, in polyester, in August.’ Already a poetry aficionado, he kept a volume of Hopkins hidden under his uniform cap. When none of his employers was looking, he removed the hat, opened the book and read. One day he was caught in the act and promptly rewarded for his transgression. The wealthy woman who discovered his taste for poetry bought him a season pass to the reading series at the 92nd Street Y, where he got his first look at some famous writers.

Friends like Timothy Murphy and Jon Mooallem have observed that Michael had the spirit of a busker, but we shouldn’t romanticize his life as a performer so much that we forget his education. His undergraduate diploma came from Fordham University in New York, and he went from there to a prestigious PhD program at the University of Chicago—stopping short of that degree because the language and politics of the theory-ridden academy gave him the willies. Nevertheless, it remains clear from Michael’s writing that some intellectual rigor—part Jesuit and part academic—stuck to him in spite of his rebellion. He knew what the fashionable theories were about, and his mind was supple enough to appreciate multiple types of poetry. He even edited poetry for *The Chicago Review*, which no doubt gave him a very good look at American literary politics. Yet until he took on creative writing work in London in the last decade of his life, Donaghy made his living as a traditional Irish musician. Performing was in his blood, and the attendant drugs and alcohol were in his blood as well. He was something of a wild man until fatherhood compelled him to settle down.

When Donaghy arrived in London in the 1980s he had published a single chapbook of poems, but he was quickly taken seriously on that side of the Big Pond. One of his roles was that of ‘village explainer,’ interpreting American poetry trends to baffled Brits. He became a prime exemplar of that ‘mid-Atlantic voice’ I mentioned—other such poets include Sylvia Plath, Anne Stevenson and Thom Gunn. But Michael may have seemed something new—traditional and postmodern all at once, charming and riotously funny, turning sedate literary attitudes on their heads. He must have seemed a challenge to established writers even as he inspired younger ones. In America he was virtually unknown until the West Chester University Poetry Conference introduced him to an enthralled audience. To this day his work has yet to find a major American publisher or significant critical champion on this side of the water.

*Shibboleth*, his first full-length collection, was published by OUP in 1988, winning the Whitbread Prize as well as the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. Donaghy would later admit that the book was over-praised in comparison to *Errata* (1993), his second. Some poems in *Shibboleth* do strike me as shallow exercises, but others remain among his most memorable. The management of conceit in ‘Machines,’ for example, comparing bicycle riding to harpsichord playing, echoes the Metaphysical Poets. (The *TLS* critic objected that Purcell didn’t write harpsichord pavanés, but in fact he did write at least two pavanés, one of which Michael could have heard performed on a harpsichord.) Or the saucy defiance of ‘Pentecost’:

See? It’s something that we’ve always known:  
Though we command the language of desire,  
The voice of ecstasy is not our own.  
We long to lose ourselves amid the choir  
Of salmon twilight and the mackerel sky,  
The very air we take into our lungs,  
And the rhododendron’s cry.

And when you lick the sweat along my thigh,  
Dearest, we renew the gift of tongues.

That leap into apparent nonsense with ‘the rhododendron’s cry’ may irritate some readers, but it arises from the intimate glossolalia of sex. Makes perfect sense to me.

The title poem, ‘Shibboleth,’ with its mix of collusion and alienation as soldiers try to suss out spies, attracted readers looking for a postmodern stance—playful, skeptical of resonance:

By the second week of battle  
We’d become obsessed with trivia.  
At a sentry point, at midnight, in the rain,  
An ignorance of baseball could be lethal.

The morning of the first snowfall I was shaving,  
Staring into a mirror nailed to a tree,  
Intoning the Christian names of the Andrews Sisters.  
‘Maxine, Laverne, Patty.’

Readers of early Auden and Ashbery would be at home with this, as would theorists fond of discussing ‘language communities.’ Even as he writes of ‘Intoning the Christian names,’ Donaghy is irreverent. In the same book we find him inventing a medieval Welsh poet, Sion ap Brydydd (d. 1360) and offering seven of his poems.

He loved hoaxes and poking fun at the pretense of critics, who, as he implies in his one major essay, are like wallflowers at a party.

For me the two best poems in *Shibboleth* are ‘Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night,’ a devastating dramatic monologue, and ‘The Tuning,’ which touches on self-destruction with a Keatsian awareness of beauty. In the former, Donaghy echoes Homer, Pound and Cavafy, who in ‘Dareios’ also wrote about the politically compromised career of the poet. Donaghy’s speaker is fascinated by Odysseus, but in the king’s absence he can’t help befriending and entertaining the suitors. Most ironically, he is not even present for the central drama of his life:

I know you came to hear me sing about the night the king came home,  
When hero slaughtered hero in the rushlit hall,  
Blood speckling the white clay walls wine dark.  
I can’t. I’d stepped outside when the music stopped mid-tune.  
Alone in the dark grove, I heard no sound but distant insects,  
And the sound of water, mine, against the palace wall.  
And then I heard their screams, the men and women I’d spent  
that summer with.

He’s like the dodging clown played by Bob Dylan in Sam Peckinpah’s film, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the sprite who appears so incongruous in a realm of fatalistic gunplay. I don’t think Donaghy was in the least bit nihilistic, but neither did he make special claims for poetry’s usefulness. His poets were jesters, not orators.

‘The Tuning’ opens grippingly: ‘If anyone asks you how I died, say this: / The angel of death came in the form of a moth / And landed on the lute I was repairing.’ As the speaker follows this angel ‘up through the thorn forest,’ she resembles the tiny Pooka in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* somehow bred with the *aisling* of Irish poetry.

That’s when she started singing.  
It’s written that the voice of the god of Israel  
Was the voice of many waters.  
But this was the sound of trees growing,  
The noise of a pond thrown into a stone.

Donaghy breaks through the tissue of reason here, touching the uncanny. There’s a rare sensitivity in the poem, a sense that life is just too painful to be lived:

I found a rock that had the kind of heft  
We weigh the world against  
And brought it down fast against my forehead

Again, again, until blood drenched my chest  
And I was safe and real forever.

I teach this poem among others because I want my students to see real daring in writing, but I have to remind them that, whatever suffering he endured or brought upon himself, Michael was not a suicide. This extremity of feeling so fearlessly rendered comes from a man who wanted to live, whatever the ravages of booze and drugs.

Having said this, I should add that early in his second book, *Errata*, he placed a poem from the lower depths, 'Acts of Contrition':

Here's me opening my wrists  
before breakfast, Christmas day,  
and here's you asking if it hurt.  
Here's where I choose between *mea culpa*  
and *Why the hell should I tell you?*

Me again, in the incident room this time,  
spitting my bloody teeth into your palm.  
I could be anyone you want me to be.  
I might come round to your point of view.

With its violence and provisional sense of identity, the poem seems more than a joke about Confessional Poetry. It's a nightmare cut to sonnet length. He follows it with yet another mask, 'The Incense Contest,' one of his intriguing dramatic monologues.

As I remarked earlier, Donaghy's distinction lies in his mastery of dramatic voice. One source of inspiration in his work was a fraught awareness of other people as well as a tenuous sense of self. As a technician he worked not only by refreshing traditional meters and free verse with an improvisatory flair, but also with a storyteller's instinct for the extraordinary. His strongest poems are never static, but are measured from scenes in motion.

The centerpiece of *Errata* is a sequence of poems, 'O'Ryan's Belt,' about musicians and the life of the itinerant player. Here Donaghy celebrates a tradition akin to the blues—the learning that takes place outside of books, freighted with its own lore of obscure heroes:

I saw this happen. Or heard it told so well  
I've staged the whole drunk memory:  
What does it matter now? It's ancient history.  
Who can name them? Where lie their bones and armour?

The erudition is musical as well as literary, governed by a strong awareness of the ephemeral nature of our lives. The tone of many poems is comic melancholia. Errata, after all, are wanderings, strayings, even sins. The slips, mistakes and lost directions of a life govern much of the book—including a fragmentary sequence on the Franklin expedition. Two final poems about his mother involve stories, songs, and misapprehensions, falls from grace. Though I wouldn't want to claim visionary status for his poetry, he was not without vision—partly that of a lapsed Catholic and a musician trying to get in tune. Someone better equipped than I will take up Michael's metaphysics. For me it's all mood, often sad, though never succumbing to the maudlin.

Like *Errata*, his third collection, *Conjure* (2000) is utterly assured in its manner. Critics have usually singled out the long dramatic monologue, 'Black Ice and Rain,' as a crowning achievement, but I agree with another reader, Jack Foley, that the poem is too close to Browning, too studied in its stance. Instead I prefer more playful work like 'Caliban's Books,' with its wacky opening:

*Hair oil, boiled sweets, chalk dust, squid's ink . . .*  
 Bear with me. I'm trying to conjure my father,  
 age fourteen, as Caliban—picked by Mr Quinn  
 for the role he was born to play because  
 'I was the handsomest boy at school'  
 he'll say, straight-faced, at fifty.  
 This isn't easy. I've only half the spell,  
 and I won't be born for twenty years.

Or the film noir atmosphere (crossed with the Coen Brothers) of his drug-running poem, 'The Drop,' or the pure comedy of 'Local 32B.' Others have singled out 'The River in Spate' as a strong (if unrhymed) sonnet. *Penetrar el espejo*, the dark refrain of his poem 'The Years,' again carries that anxiety about identity animating his poetry from the start.

And 'Haunts' earns its title by addressing the poet's son from a spooky vantage point:

Don't be afraid, old son, it's only me,  
 though not as I've appeared before,  
 on the battlements of your signature,  
 or margin of a book you can't throw out,  
 or darkened shop front where your face  
 first shocks itself into a mask of mine,  
 but here, alive, one Christmas long ago  
 when you were three, upstairs, asleep,

and haunting *me* because I conjured you  
the way that child you were would cry out  
waking in the dark ...

This *Collected* also contains the poems from *Safest*, a posthumous volume, and eighteen previously uncollected poems. I particularly admire ‘Southwestern-most’ and ‘Two Spells for Sleeping’ from *Safest*, and ‘Kaleidoscope’ from the final section. A small poem called ‘Sharks Asleep’ gives me the mournful title of this review. Whatever his flaws and however incomplete his oeuvre may be, I believe Michael Donaghy’s *Collected Poems* to be one of the most significant landmarks in contemporary poetry.

The importance of his criticism is not in its completeness—he left only one certifiably great essay and a few very good ones—but in the level-headedness he brought to aesthetic debates. Many of the pieces collected in *The Shape of the Dance* are brief reviews, answers to questionnaires and other ephemera. They are all lively in their way, especially hilariously confessional pieces like ‘All Poets Are Mad.’ No fewer than five interviews with the poet appear in the back of the book. These tend to repeat material about his life, but contain useful indicators of his sources. By far the best prose from the middle of the book is his lecture called ‘American Revolutions’—a fine survey of trends in American poetry, useful in part because it tries to explain our squabbles to a British audience. Among other things, he puts to rest the myth that the fifties was a decade of academic stuffiness exploded by the Beats and the New York School. Several poets who gained prominence in the fifties published their best work two decades later:

1970 Elizabeth Bishop’s *Complete Poems*  
1972 James Merrill’s *Braving the Elements*  
1976 Bishop’s *Geography III*  
    Merrill’s *Divine Comedies*  
    Wilbur’s *The Mind Reader*  
1977 Anthony Hecht’s *Millions of Strange Shadows*

‘In my opinion,’ he writes, ‘the last four books mentioned contain some of the century’s greatest poems.’

Donaghy’s tastes were, in other words, *formal*, and he mistrusted self-aggrandizement of the sort often found among the Beats. For American poets of our generation, though, these elders were insufficient as models because they felt removed in their cocoons of literary success. That is why, for some of us, the slightly younger Irish masters, especially Heaney and Mahon, became so important. They seemed unaffected inheritors of vital traditions, not slavish about form the way some of the New Formalists appeared to be. In fact, one of Michael’s best observations

about American poetry in the nineties was the rhetorical similarity of two divergent camps—the New Formalists and the Language Poets. Both claimed outsider status and both emphasized a break from a confessional poetic ‘middle ground’ fostered in the creative writing programs. Donaghy understood the Language Poets and their fascination with critical theory without really wanting to be one of them. He felt more attunement with the avowed populism of the New Formalists, but found their proselytizing unpalatable. His own use of meter was more flexible and varied than some New Formalist poets allowed. When he reviewed *Rebel Angels*, a book I co-edited with Mark Jarman, he took full advantage of his international distance:

Looking for convoluted tribal hierarchies, kinship rituals, and creation myths? Why parachute into some unhygienic rainforest when the culture of American poetry is an anthropologist’s Disneyland? Here, segregated into traditions of the Raw, under the totem of Whitman, and the Cooked, under Dickinson, almost every poet declares an allegiance to his or her tribal ‘movement.’

His review admitted some sympathy for the book because he knew how thoroughly such pleasures as meter and rhyme had been rejected by large numbers of American poets. British poets were unable to comprehend why Americans who used such techniques would feel embattled, but Michael patiently explained, over and over again, that such feelings had a basis in reality.

His great essay, ‘Wallflowers,’ subtitled ‘A lecture on poetry with misplaced notes and additional heckling,’ approaches aesthetics from the standpoint of the performer, pitting ‘The Shape of the Dance’ against the blurry conceptualizations of the critic. ‘The terrifying truth is that form *substitutes* for logic. This is the poet’s unique power, to address the passions in their own language, the very power that got us barred from the Republic.’ I can hear some of my academic colleagues tut-tutting that no art exists without the critic. True and not true. The critic cannot say everything the poem can *do*, as only a performer of poems would really know.

For Donaghy, prescribed forms were like a ‘pediscript,’ a drawing of dance steps—or rather, the patterns left by shoes in a dance floor’s dust. ‘A player in such a tradition is expected to improvise, to ‘make it new’, and the possibilities for expression within the prescribed forms are infinite.’ The reason I would make his essay required reading in the academies of writing is that it respects the mind but also represents the nature of artistic expression, the anarchic spirit freed when technique is mastered. Auden called poetry ‘a game of knowledge,’ and Donaghy would have approved of this definition. His essay begins:

All my life I have harboured a weakness for those willfully eccentric philosophical and theological precepts valuable for their beauty alone,



like Swedenborg's fancy that, in their purity and selflessness, angels create space instead of taking it up, thereby dilating the pin on which they dance, or the North African Gnostic idea that all material beings are 3D letters in the penmanship of God, or the Cabalistic fear that when, in the next great age, the Hebrew letter *shin* grows a fourth vertical stroke, a new sound will utter from men's mouths, making pronounceable the hitherto unpronounceable name of God—at which precise moment the world will end.

These affections, he admits, disqualify him 'from the role of earnest philosopher,' but he maintains the right to discourse upon his subject, which is 'the relationship of the poet and the reader.'

I'm not sure his essay presents any new information for students of aesthetics—he quotes figures like R. G. Collingwood, Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel, alludes to Coleridge, Joyce, Borges, Bishop and 'the magus of unsupported assertion, Ezra Pound.' What makes 'Wallflowers' so beguiling is less its matter than its manner, the essay as comedic collage. But one idea undergirding the whole piece ought to be seriously considered by anyone who teaches:

Imagine growing up in a society where one's first and only experience of music occurred in a schoolroom, where the beauty of music was meticulously analysed and explained to you and where you were judged by your ability to explain it in turn. In one sense your appreciation of music would be exquisitely sophisticated because tunes wouldn't be tinkling persistently out of lift speakers or commuters' headphones. Music wouldn't be an 'on' switch away, so you'd be more alert to its nuances when you did hear it. But let's face it, you wouldn't be queuing round the corner for the experience. It would always be more 'improving' than pleasurable.

Of course most of us don't come to music for the first time in school—we've heard it and made it for years before that. It's poetry, not music, that has become an art of classroom indoctrination, especially in the last century. As a first-rate performer, Michael knew that talking *about* the art could sometimes kill it, that the art was sometimes the very stuff that eluded criticism. I don't mean to appear anti-intellectual or to imply that Michael was anything of the sort. He was simply eager to be accurate about what we do when we say or dance a poem vs. what we do when we study it. At some point, theoretical approaches pale in the presence of actual performance.

Saying so will never satisfy 'the earnest philosopher' or a certain kind of critic, nor does it seem you're getting your money's worth when a reviewer like

myself gushes about a lovely turn of phrase. Read him yourselves. Michael Donaghy will bear re-reading like few other poets of my generation. He conjures with a spiritedness that is far too rare among us. Bits of his work can be shrugged off, no doubt, but the best of it emits radiant creative energy. British readers have been lucky enough to have his books for twenty years, and now it is Americans who should learn from what he left.