Dónal Óg
(To Seminar)

Mick Wilson

Dónal Óg

Produced on the occasion of the exhibition
To Seminar, 10.03.–21.05.2017
BAK, Utrecht (NL)

To the Seminar

Is this a real site or an imaginary one? Neither. An institution is treated in the utopian mode: I outline a space and call it: seminar. It is quite true that the gathering in question is held weekly in Paris, i.e., here and now; but these adverbs are also those of fantasy. Thus, no guarantee of reality, but also nothing gratuitous about the anecdote. One might put things differently: that the (real) seminar is for me the object of a (minor) delirium, and that my relations with this object are, literally, amorous.

Roland Barthes from *The Rustle of Language*

The Rhetor's Share

Dónal Óg has been sung and recited in both Gaelic and in English. Historically, it was performed throughout Ireland and Scotland and then spread along respective migration routes. It is now produced in vernacular and in professional performance contexts. Familiar versions range in length from six to fifteen verses. At least one 'floating' verse appears in another song. It is performed by both male and female singers, with and without accompaniment. It is realised in a wide variety of lyrics, melodies, tempos and colours. Speaking of "versions" in this manner, suggests there is a primary or essential core that is transmitted in different ways. This seems unsatisfactory. The song has a dispersed ontology, comprising a distributed network of instances, in multiple registers, that are still in motion. It is not finished.

I refer to it, as "it", the song Dónal Óg. I tell people, the few who ask, that I am bringing it to *To Seminar*. However, I don't know if that is a correct thing to say. Barthes writes that "in the seminar … no discourse is sustained (but a text is sought)". Dónal Óg is not a text. The work here is not a reading. It is a relay of addresses.

The song itemises and instantiates a series of calls, a sequence of direct and indirect hailings, in various forms, from animals, people, and things: "O lad…"; "in your name calling…"; "I whistled and called you…"; "my mother ordered…"; "my mother will ask you to name your people". The song hails me because it moves from the crossing of water to the projection of utter loss. It calls. It transfers. It operates. It is a not a right thing.

Dónal Óg

[This is a version of the text as sung in informal vernacular and professional settings, including several commercial recordings.]

O Dónal Óg if you cross the ocean
Take me with you when you are going
And fair day or market you'll be well looked after
And you shall sleep with the Greek king's daughter

O lad of fairness, O lad of redness
O lad untrue my mind is on you
When I think of another in your name calling
The top and the bottom of my hair starts falling

You said you would meet me, but you were lying
Beside the sheeling as day was dying
I whistled and called you, twelve times repeating
But all that I heard was the young lambs bleating

My mother ordered that I should shun you
Today, tomorrow and on Sunday
Too late, in vain o'er spilt milk grieving
Closing the door on a bygone thieving

If you come at all, come when stars are peeping
Rap the door that makes no squeaking
My mother will ask you to name your people
And I'll say you're a sigh of the night wind
weeping

The last time I saw you was a Sunday evening
Beside the altar as I was kneeling
It was of Christ's passion that I was reading
But my mind was on you and my own heart's bleeding

For you took what's before me and what's behind me
Took east and west from all around me
The sun, moon and stars from me you've taken
And God himself if I'm not mistaken

Dónal Óg

[*The Grief of a Girl's Heart*, 1918, translated by Isabella Augusta, Lady Gregory, and indicated as from an anonymous eighth-century Irish poem.]

O Donall og, if you go across the sea,
bring myself with you and do not forget it;
and you will have a sweetheart for fair days and market days, and the daughter of the King of Greece beside you at night.

It is late last night the dog was speaking of you;
the snipe was speaking of you in her deep marsh.
It is you are the lonely bird through the woods;
and that you may be without a mate until you find me.

You promised me, and you said a lie to me,
that you would be before me where the sheep are flocked;
I gave a whistle and three hundred cries to you,
and I found nothing there but a bleating lamb.

You promised me a thing that was hard for you,
a ship of gold under a silver mast;
twelve towns with a market in all of them,
and a fine white court by the side of the sea.

You promised me a thing that is not possible,
that you would give me gloves of the skin of a fish;
that you would give me shoes of the skin of a bird;
and a suit of the dearest silk in Ireland.

When I go by myself to the Well of Loneliness,
I sit down and I go through my trouble;
when I see the world and do not see my boy,
he that has an amber shade in his hair.

It was on that Sunday I gave my love to you;
the Sunday that is last before Easter Sunday
and myself on my knees reading the Passion;
and my two eyes giving love to you for ever.

My mother has said to me not to be talking with
you today, or tomorrow, or on the Sunday;
it was a bad time she took for telling me that;
it was shutting the door after the house was
robbed.

My heart is as black as the blackness of the sloe,
or as the black coal that is on the smith's forge;
or as the sole of a shoe left in white halls;
it was you put that darkness over my life.

You have taken the east from me, you have taken the west from me;
you have taken what is before me and what is behind me;
you have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me;
and my fear is great that you have taken God from me!

Ó, Ó, Ó

In some of the Gaelic language versions, the lament or apostrophe ”ochón” is used at a certain point in the song. The term “ochón” has an equivalent usage to the English ”alas” or ”woe”. The phrasings ”O Dónal Óg” and “ochón ’s ochón o” (a recurrent construction in Gaelic folklore) have this repetition of the accentuated ”ó” vowel sounding in them. The word ”ocean”, in the typical first line of English versions, begins with a similar sounding. The syllables with the ”ó” sound in them, are in most cases sounded over more than one note. The technical term for this is ”melismatic”. In certain instances this melismatic singing can have intense comic effect.

This comedic tendency may also be a matter of sentimentalism – a romanticising of peasant folkways that seems inauthentic because of the explicit and clichéd orchestration of affect. The self seriousness of orality can seem silly sometimes, especially given that one may no longer use singing as an integral moment of making and re-making everyday living.

Barthes seminar is a kind of sing-song that has deprived itself of singing. It is thereby allowed to take itself serious. Barthes keeps telling us that he is a great lover. Sometimes singers try that line out also.

From the *Oir*ish

Lady Gregory's version is featured under the title "Broken Vows" in the film *The Dead* (John Huston dir., 1987). It is also included in *The Rattle Bag* (1982), the poetry anthology edited by Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. In both instances, the first verse of Lady Gregory's translation, beginning "O Dónal Óg", is removed.

Ted Hughes indicated a special attachment to this poem, on more than one occasion. He wrote that: "My favourite poem is 'Donal Og' in Lady Gregory's translation. Why is this my favourite? I think no short poem has ever hit me so hard, or stayed with me so closely. That's my reason why."

James Joyce often made fun of the appeal to Gaelic and peasant language stylings by authors such as Lady Gregory, Yeats and Synge. This relates in part to a tradition of "stage *Oir*ishness" that emerges in previous centuries as a racialising lampoon within British imperialist culture. This becomes re-valued and re-coded as a patriotic signification in early 20th century Irish cultural nationalism. The themes of orality, the comic and the dynamics of colonial modernity are in play here. This is not always as funny as it could be.

‘I picked it out of my arse’

”Just, as Drummer would say, ‘I picked it out of my arse’.” This is a line from the September 2008 recordings of Anglo-Irish Bank executives defrauding the Irish state of billions of euros. It echoes this double aspect of ”stage *Oiri*shness”: performing both the internalised racialising lampoon and the cultural nationalist script interweaving aspects of orality, the comedic and the disdaining/opportuning of the state apparatus bequeathed by colonial modernity.

The speaker indicates the arbitrary construction of the figure 7 billion euros, cited to secure the Government bail out: "I picked it out of my arse". This number is a fiction to ensure State complicity in constructing a much greater debt. This will lead to austerity, trans-generational impoverishment and dispossesion of those already without wealth. The phrasing indicates a boyish desire to emulate the Anglo-Irish Bank CEO's (David Drumm) comic rhetorical framing of this act of extreme social violence.

Online Discussion Thread

Thread #14957, Message #1110822
Posted by: GUEST, Philippa
06-Feb-04 – 12:31 PM
Thread Name: Origins: Dónal Óg [Young Donald]

The following pages provide a short introductory text and two more versions of Dónal Óg. These were found posted online as part of a music lyric sharing platform. The posting includes a version in Gaelic with verse numberings cross-referenced to the version in English. It also indicates some verses not typically found in the English instances.

Although there is a lot of information in this thread, it is very scattered. I found among my papers a photocopy of a 14-verse rendition of Dónal Óg paired with Seán Lucy's 15-verse translation. Five of Lucy's verses are not in the Irish-language version on the photocopy, and the Irish-language version includes four verses that aren't translated by Lucy. I have re-arranged the Irish-language verses to correspond more closely to the Lucy translation; the numbers in parentheses represent the 'original' order of the verses. Where Lucy has a verse that is not in this Irish-language version, I have inserted that verse in Irish from other sources. Irish-language verses 1, 10, 12 & 13 are not in the Lucy translation so I have bracketed my own rough translation (I'm not very satisfied with my verse 13 translation!).

DÓNAL ÓG

[anon. 17-19th centuries, translated by Seán Lucy]

Donal Óg, if you cross the water
Take me with you and don't forget to;
At fair and market you shall have a fairing
And the Greek King's daughter for your bed-companion.

If you go away I've a way, I've a way to know you;
Two green eyes and the bright fair head of you,
A dozen curls on your top-knot clustering –
Like a bright yellow flag or a rose in flowering.

And late last night the watchdog spoke of you,
The snipe declared you in the deepest bogland,
And you, like lonely wild goose, gone through
the wodlands -
And be lonely always until you marry me.

You made a promise, and you told a lie then,
To come and meet me where sheep are folded,
I whistled loud and I shouted often
With no reply but a small lamb bleating.

You made a promise, one of difficulty,
A fleet of gold with masts of silver,
A dozen towns, in each a market,
And a limewhite palace beside the seashore.

You made a promise, a thing unlikely,
That you would give me fine gloves of fishskin,
That you would give me fine shoes of bird skin,
And a suit of silk, the dearest in Erin.

O Donal Óg, I would be better for you,
Than a noble lady proud and haughty,
I'd milk the cow and I'd turn the churn for you,
And if things were difficult I'd strike a blow for you.

O my grief! And it's not the hunger,
The want of food, drink, or sleep enough,
That has left me so thin and perishing,
But a young man's love that has surely wasted me.

At early morning I sighted my true love
Up on horseback riding the roadway,
He passed me by and he didn't call me,
On returning home again I was crying sorely.

When by myself at the Well of Lonesomeness
Sitting down I make my sorrowing,
I see the world and no trace of my darling,
With the glow of amber on his warm cheeks shining.

That was the Sunday I gave my love to you,
The very Sunday before Easter Sunday,
I was reading the Passion on my knees devoutly
While still my two eyes were sending my love to you.

Mother said to me not to speak to you
Today nor tomorrow nor on the Sunday,
But bad the time she chose for telling me,
Twas locking the door up after the robbery.

Mother, my little one, give me to him,
And also give to him all of your property,
Out yourself and beg for charity
And don't come East or West to find me.

My heart is black as a sloe inside me,
Or the blackest coal that's in the forge there,
Or a dark footprint in the gleaming hallways,
and 'twas you who turned my life so black and bitter.

You've taken East from me and you've taken
West from me,
And what's before me and what's behind me,
You've taken sun from me and you've taken
moon from me,
And my fear is terrible you've taken God from
me.

DÓNAL ÓG

A Dhónaill Óig, má théir thar fharraige
Beir mé féin leat 's ná deán mo dhearmad
Beidh agat féirín lá aonaigh is margaidh
Agus iníon Rí Gréige mar chéile leapa 'gat. (4)

Má théir anonn tá comhartha agam ort:
Tá cúl fionn is dhá shúil ghlasa agat,
Dhá chocán déag i do chúl buí bachallach
Mar bheadh béal na bó nó rós i ngarraithe. (5)

Is déanach aréir a labhair an gadhar ort,
do labhair an naoscach sa churraichín
doimhin ort:
Tú id' chaonaí uaigneach ar fuaid na gcoillte,
Is go rabhair gan chéile go héag go bhfaighir
mé. (6)

Gheall tú dhomsa, is rinne tú bréag liom,
Go mbeifeá romham ag cró na gcaorach;
Lig mé fead agus dhá ghlao dhéag ort.
'S ní bhfuair mé romham ach na huain ag
méiligh. (7)

Gheall tú dhomsa ní ba dheacair dhuit,

Loingeas óir faoi chrann seóil airgid,
Dhá cheann déag de bhailte margaidh.
‘S cúirt bhreá aolta cois taobh na farraige. (9)

Gheall tú dhomsa ní nár bh’féidir,
Go dtabharfá laimhinní de chraiceann éisg dom
Go dtabharfá brógaí de chraiceann éan dom
Agus culaith don tsíoda ba dhaoire i nÉirinn.
[based on a verse from Munster in Ó Duibhgeáin*]

A Dhomhnall Óig, b’fhearr dhuit mise agat
Ná bean uasal uaibhreach iomarcach
Chrúfainn bó agus dhéanfainn cuigean duit,
Is dá mba cruaidh é do bhuailinn buille leat. (3)

Och, och ón, agus ní le hocras,
Uireasa bídh, dí ná codlata,
Faoi ndeara domsa bheith tanaí trochlaithe,
Ach grá fir óig is é bhreoigh go follas mé.
[published in Ó Duibhgeáin]

Is moch ar maidin do chonaic mise an t-ógfhear
Ar mhuin chapaill ag gabháil an bóthar,
Níor dhruid sé liom is níor chuir ná stró orm,
‘S ar mo chasadh abhaile dhom ‘sea do ghoileas

mo dhóthain.
[published in Ó Duibheagáin]

Nuair a théimse féin go Tobar an Uaignis
Ag tabhairt an turais ar son mo ghrá ghil -
Níl mo shúil leat inniu ná amárach,
A mhuirnín dhílis, mo mhíle slán leat. (8)

Siúd é an Domhnach a dtug mé grá dhuit
A' Domhnach díreach roimh Dhomhnach Cásca
Is tú ar do ghlúine a' léamh na Páise
Sea bhí mo dhá shúil a' síor-thabhairt grá dhuit.
[verse from Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha]

Dúirt mo mháithrín liom gan labhairt leat
Inniú ná amarach nó Dé Domhnaigh
Is olc an tráth ar thug sí rabhadh dhom –
Is é fál ar an ngort é i ndiaidh na foghla. (11)

A mháthairín dhílis, tabhair mé féin do
Tabhair a bhfuil agat de'n tsaol go léir do
Téigh, thú féin, ag iarraidh na déirce,
Is ná gabh siar ná aniar dom' éiliú.
[Connacht verse published in Ó Duibhgeáin;
I have substituted a Munster line closer to Lucy's
for line 2: Tabhair na ba is na caoirigh go léir do

give him all the cattle and sheep]

Tá mo ghrá-sa ar dhath na sméara
[my love is the colour of blackberries]
Is ar dhath na n-airní lá breá gréine,
[and the colour of the sloe on a sunny day]
Ar dhath na bhfraochóg ba dhuibhe an tsléibhe,
[the hue of the darkest bilberry on the mountain]
'S is minic a bhí ceann dubh ar cholainn ghléigeal.
[it's often a black head was on a bright body]. (1)

Tá mo chroí-se chomh dubh le hairne
Nó le gual dubh a dhóifí i gceárta
Nó le bonn bróige ar hallaí bana
Agus tá lionn dubh mór os cionn mo gháire. (2)

Ní raibh id' ghrá-sa ach mám den tsneachta gheal,
[your love was but a handful of bright snow]
Nó gaineamh i dtrá i lár na farraige,
[or sand of the beach in the middle of the ocean]
Nó feóchan gaoithe thar dhruim na ngarraithe,
[or a gust of wind on the over the garden]
Nó tuile thréan do bheadh t'réis lae fearthainne.
[or a heavy flow after a day of rain (i.e., temporary)]. (10)

Is mithid dom féin an baile seo a fhagáil;
[it's time for me to leave this place]
Is géar an chloch 's is fuar an láib ann;
[where the stone is sharp and the mud is cold]
Is ann a fuaireas guth gan éadáil
[it's there I got a call that came to nothing]
Agus focal trom trom ó lucht an bhéadáin.
[and a heavy heavy word from the gossipers]. (12)

Fuagraim an grá - is mairg a thug é
[I declare that love was an affliction]
Do mhac na mná úd ariamh nár thuig é
[to the son of any woman who didn't understand it (?)]
Mo chroí ' mo lár gur fhág sé dubh é
[my heart in my breast is left desolate by him/by it]
Is ní fheicim ar an tsráid seo ná in áit ar bith é.
[and I don't see him on this street or anywhere else]. (13)

Bhain tú thoir dhíom 'gus bhain tú thiar dhíom
Bhain tú 'n ghealach is bhain tú an ghrian díom
Bhain tú an croí geal a bhí ' mo chliabh dhíom
'S is ró-mhór m'fhaitíos gur bhain tú Dia dom. (14)

Dispossessions

The traditional performer may sometimes appear to resort to the use of clichés in variation or composition – she would not see them in this light of course, but would regard them as being almost the standard building-blocks, as it were, of her art. Indeed, as songs were passed on orally from one generation to the next, verses from one song would frequently appear in another. Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella's anthology of Gaelic poetry since 1600, *An Duanaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, includes several examples of such, including the song "Dá dTéinnse Siar" ["If I travelled West"] in which the second verse is the same as a verse from "Dónal Óg".

Seán Crosson, *"The Given Note": Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry*

Of The Singing Thing

In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy. I have never heard any songs like those anywhere since I left slavery, except when in Ireland. There I heard the same wailing notes, and was much affected by them. It was during the famine of 1845-6.

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

If You Cross The Ocean

The simplistic narrative that "well, the Irish didn't own slaves" is shattered when the evidence is examined. ... People from Ireland, representing all classes, creeds and genealogies, have participated in the colonisation of the 'New World' since the late sixteenth century. As the European conquest of the Americas accelerated, so too did the presence of Irish missionaries, indentured servants, labourers, craftsmen, teachers, planters and merchants. The Atlantic slave trade flourished and the dehumanising exploitation of African slaves became a European's ticket to increased wealth

Liam Hogan, *Librarian & Historian. Researching: Slavery - Memory - Power*

https://twitter.com/Limerick1914
Mar 17, 2015

Take Me With You When You Are Going

It is often said, by the opponents of the anti-slavery cause, that the condition of the people of Ireland is more deplorable than that of the American slaves. Far be it from me to underrate the sufferings of the Irish people. They have been long oppressed; and the same heart that prompts me to plead the cause of the American bondman, makes it impossible for me not to sympathize with the oppressed of all lands. Yet I must say that there is no analogy between the two cases. The Irishman is poor, but he is not a slave. He may be in rags, but he is not a slave. He is still the master of his own body, and can say with the poet ... He can write, and speak, and ...

… But how is it with the American slave?... He is said to be happy; happy men can speak. But ask the slave what is his condition—what his state of mind—what he thinks of enslavement? and you had as well address your inquiries to the silent dead. There comes no voice from the enslaved. We are left to gather his feelings by imagining what ours would be, were our souls in his soul's stead.

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

We talk, a tape recording is made, diligent secretaries listen to our words to refine, transcribe, and punctuate them, producing a first draft that we can tidy up afresh before it goes on to publication, the book, eternity. Haven't we just gone through the "toilette of the dead"? … Because we really must last a bit longer than our voices; we must, through the comedy of writing.

Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*

Published by Valand Academy
University of Gothenburg
Vasagatan 50, SE 40530 Gothenburg

Design: Kjell Caminha
Legally responsible publisher: Mick Wilson

ISBN: 978-91-983964-0-9

Printed at Valand Academy in an edition of 300.

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG