Talking Heads

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The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation and Violence in Early Modern Ireland, by Patricia Palmer, Cambridge University Press, 193 pp, £50, ISBN: 978-1107041844

For the Irish reader, the Renaissance can often feel as though it happened somewhere else. The Borgias scheming around the throne of St Peter, Michelangelo prone on his scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel, those apocryphal cloaks in the mud at Elizabeth's feet – all the famous vignettes are from a pageant played out not only long ago, but very far away.

The few familiar glimpses of this island in the sixteenth century depict a life removed from the flowering of culture going on elsewhere. Drama affords us Shakespeare's Captain MacMorris digging trenches on the battlefield for Henry V, and touchy about his Irishness: "What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a basterd and a knave and a rascal … Who talks of my nation?" The official account has Edmund Spenser, colonial bureaucrat as well as poet, writing policy documents to further the "tempering and managing of this stubborn nation of the Irish, to bring them from their delight of licentious barbarism unto the love of goodness and civility". Henry Sidney, lord deputy of Ireland, described the landscape in a letter to his queen: "never saw I a more waste and desolate Land … such horrible and lamentable Spectacles there are to behold, as the burning of villages, the ruin of churches … the view of the bones and skulls of dead subjects, who partly by murder, partly by famine, have died in the fields." It seems a long way from the scientific advances, the lavish art, the giddy wordplay, with which Renaissance humanists celebrated all the potential of man.

This will transpire to be something of a sleight of hand on the part of the recorders of history; however, there is another sense in which Ireland's Renaissance really did take place at a distance. Just beyond the Spanish Steps in Rome is the steep turn up the Pincian hill. The lower slopes house Santa Maria della Vittoria where Bernini's Saint Teresa swoons in stone; near the summit is the college of Sant'Isidoro. This is another church in the baroque style, but the frescos flanking the great entrance depict St Patrick and St Brigid, rather than Peter and Paul, and the inscriptions above them are written in Irish. Sant'Isidoro was established as the Irish Franciscan house in Rome in 1625, and in its library, its marble side-chapels, its aula decorated with portraits of the great Irish scholars of the early modern period, we can see, safely preserved beyond the reach of Henry Sidney's famine and fire, the image of Ireland in the age of learning.

The disjunction between these rival versions of early modern Irishness is something which scholars have been working for a generation to reconcile. There are two short answers which have been identified and elaborated in many remarkable histories over recent years. One is simple: that sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland was a battlefield, a state of existence which does little to encourage the cultivation of the arts. The other is more complex, being concerned with the reliability of evidence. It was in the interest of witnesses like Spenser to see a barbaric culture in need of taming, and their accounts reflect their agenda. But literary critics have long read the *The Faerie Queene* (and indeed, the whole period) through a lens formed of colonial sources only. The readjustment of admitting Irish sources to the debate sounds embarrassingly obvious, but its effect has been revolutionary. Setting Seathrún Céitinn's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* [History of Ireland] next to the State Papers from Dublin Castle does a great deal to bring the Irish Renaissance into view.

Patricia Palmer's new book is a valuable addition to this ongoing project. As in her previous monograph,

Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland (Cambridge University Press, 2001), the focus is on the sixteenth century – in this case, a narrow span of years in the 1580s and 1590s. The historical emphasis, however, is something of an accident of form. Palmer makes clear in an accomplished and lyrical essay from 2005, "Cross-Talk and Mermaid Speak", that her real concern is with a continuing problem. The dislocation Stephen Dedalus felt when the English dean of studies rendered the word "tundish" unfamiliar in his mouth, or the weary sense of encroachment when the *Telegraph* casually included three Irish writers on a recent list of "Twenty Best British Novels of All Time", is Palmer's subject: the early modern period just happens to be where it all began. Palmer's work deals with definitions – how the English colonists defined the Irish, and vice versa – and while it is far from heartening to see the same disputes played out, with a little good humour and a great deal of bitterness, in the comments below the *Telegraph* article, it does serve to indicate the continuing relevance of her enquiry. After a few days of controversy, the newspaper changed the title on the webpage (it is now a list of the twenty best British and Irish novels) but the comments continue to gather. The disjunctions have not been smoothed away, or not yet.

The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue, therefore, acknowledges itself to be *in medias res*. The book's title is not from a renaissance lyric – it is from John Montague's *The Rough Field*, published in 1972, another pressure point for national identity. Palmer reaches for her context into both the deep past of the *Táin* and the annals, and the modern world of Yeats, Heaney and post-colonial criticism – the scope of her literary comparisons prevents her argument from settling too comfortably into any one moment of history. Nonetheless, this is a detailed and careful historical account, which owes a great deal to the author's painstaking work with original documents. One of its great virtues is Palmer's eye for the telling detail. She is capable of seeing through official memoranda to the story beyond. So, for instance, in October 1599, the Earl of Essex, defeated by the Irish forces under Hugh O'Neill, was back in England to face the disfavour of his queen. It was left to other men – the new lord deputy, William Warren, and John Harington, planter, poet, and godson to Elizabeth – to sue for peace. They duly set out for Dungannon, the stronghold of O'Neill, and there, while Warren negotiated, Harington was left in the company he described later in a letter: the two sons of the household "dressed in English cloths like a nobleman's sons"; a priest, Fr Nangle; and the boys' tutor, "a younger scholar whose name I know not". Harington presented the boys with a copy of his book, an English translation of Ludovico Ariosto's epic, *Orlando furioso*, extracts of which he would read to his hosts over lunch.

Palmer notes the threat underlying the affable tone of Harington's account of the encounter – the verses he read to his Irish company were a warning about the fickleness of fortune. Success, such as O'Neill's notable victory at Yellow Ford, was likely to be of short duration, and then the victor would get his just deserts. The warning might have been the point of the exchange – however, in the context of Palmer's book, it takes on much greater significance. Harington's blindness to his surroundings becomes emblematic of the blindness which reinforced the colonial enterprise. The two boys were not "like a nobleman's sons": their father's tomb in Rome calls him the prince of Ireland. The velvet which made up the "English cloths" they wore was not English at all: velvet was imported from Venice and Genoa to clothe wealthy Irishman and wealthy Englishman alike. And the "younger scholar" whose name Harington did not quite catch was the most remarkable man in the room: Aodh Mac Aingil, the great poet and theologian, the man who spearheaded the development of the Irish printing press, and one of the small group of Franciscans who managed to gather a library of manuscripts which, after the flight of the Earls, preserved the medieval literary culture of Ireland. But these were texts which Harington could not read. In his own world, he was a charming man, an amusing correspondent, and frequently a friend to unpopular causes. Beyond his world, he exemplified the colonist's world view, which rendered Mac Aingil nameless and unmemorable.

Much of the force of Palmer's argument rests on her ability to identify these moments of wilful blindness, among the Elizabethans in Ireland, but also among those contemporary scholars who have given too much credence to their side of the story. The editor of John Webster's *The White Devil* (New Mermaid, 1996)

rightly receives short shrift for glossing a reference to the "wild Irish" playing football with severed heads by explaining earnestly that "The Irish were notoriously cruel and bloodthirsty". This was, Palmer points out, a convenient fiction: if the Irish were beheading their foes, so were the English. The John Derricke woodcut which illustrates this piece shows English soldiers carrying their enemies' heads on pikes (the one being carried by the hair is a woman's). The difference between them is a matter of perspective: in the official record, "Irish beheadings were barbarous; English decapitations an expression of due process". Palmer has an advantage over those scholars who rely on Webster for their account of early modern Ireland, in that she is capable of reading Irish-language, Latin and Spanish texts – the multilingual nature of her study presents the reader with a wealth of extraordinary poetry, but it also means that the story is told in the round. This doesn't just give voice to figures like the silent Aodh Mac Aingil, otherwise confined to the corners of Harington's consciousness: the examples from Spanish colonial writing serve to set the Irish experience in a wider context. Ireland has always been an anomaly in the study of colonialism – too European, too white, too near. Palmer's expertise in Spanish allows South America, most usefully, to be brought into play as a point of comparison.

Back in Dungannon, Palmer has another observation to make about Harington and his book. His translation of *Orlando furioso*, she claims, is an Irish text. The familiar anecdote is that Harington had begun by rendering into English only part of the hefty Italian poem – the indelicate Book 28, which he had circulated among the maids of honour at the Elizabethan court. Undoubtedly anxious for their moral well-being, the queen had exiled the poet on condition that he could return once he had translated the rest. Harington was assumed to have retired to rural Somerset, where he could get on with his poetry and his other hobbies, which included inventing the flushing lavatory. However, he was also during this time appointed an undertaker to an estate in Munster, and the manuscript of *Orlando furioso* travelled with him. Nor was his the only important English-language poem to which one might lay claim, if, say, one were engaged in compiling a list – Twenty Best Irish Poems of the Renaissance. Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was written in Kilcolman; Walter Ralegh in Cork was scribbling lyrics to Elizabeth I; even that *preux chevalier* of early modern English letters, Philip Sidney, visited his father at Dublin Castle in 1576. He went to Galway to inspect Gráinne Mhaol and ventured as far as Kilcullen to buy some horses. He must surely have tinkered with a few lyrics along the road: *Astrophel and Stella* is unfortunately a bit late, but we might be able to add *Certaine Sonnets* to our tally. Palmer nobly resists this temptation. She does, however, draw attention to one notable quality of the Elizabethan administration in Ireland: its soldiers and its secretaries had a pronounced tendency to double as poets or translators.

They were not alone in their literary aspirations. Camoens's *Lusiads* was written while he served with the Portuguese militia in Macau; the Spanish colonial forces included in their ranks some of the great authors of their day. The grammarian Antonio de Nebrija accounted for the joint nature of their enterprise by pointing out in 1492 (the year that Columbus took leave of the Spanish court and sailed for America) that "language has always been the companion of empire". He had in mind the notion that a common language was a useful tool in the administration of a large populace (he had a grammar book to sell). However, he could equally have had in mind the interplay between language and empire in a more literary form of expression, the epic poem. There is no genre more closely entwined with history than the epic: poets were consciously engaged in setting out the futures of their own nations through their texts. They found their model in the *Aeneid*. It was not an accident that Rome, the greatest of empires, had been celebrated in the greatest of epics – there was felt to be a symbiotic relationship between military success and the status of the vernacular which supported it. Virgil's poem was the origin-tale for Rome – its hero, escaping the fall of Troy, is guided by the gods through many tribulations (bad weather, clingy women) to the spot where he will raise his city, and thus, found his empire. Along the way, the poet had contrived to turn several pretty compliments to the incumbent imperial family, and he had managed to raise the Latin language to its highest pitch of perfection. The individual elements of genre, language, and politics were inseparable. Early modern writers imitated Virgil because they had been trained in admiration for his Latin, and wanted to import that polish into their own tongues, but they were also keen to harness his power for their

own larger endeavour. There were few professional writers; whatever else it might be, poetry was also an adjunct to public service, and a stepping-stone to patronage and favour. For the cog in the imperial wheel, no further hint was needed. The aspiring empires of the sixteenth century required their own epics to accompany their own campaigns.

In this context, it is hardly surprising to find that the contested territory of sixteenth century Ireland was a breeding ground for epic romance. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is the best known, but besides John Harington's *Orlando furioso* there is also the prose translation of Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga's extraordinary account of the Spanish conquest of Chile, in which he himself took part. This was rendered into English by George Carew, lord president of Munster, while he was also engaged in the violent conquest of the Nine Years' War. Ercilla was a sympathetic witness to the courage and prowess of the Araucanian warriors; Carew was tolerant of difference neither on paper nor in the flesh. Finally, Palmer considers a translation of the *Aeneid* itself, in this instance not by a colonist but by a native of Dublin, the Old English (Norman Irish) writer Richard Stanihurst.

Of these four texts, *The Faerie Queene* is the most familiar. Spenser's time in Ireland was once considered something of an inconvience by critics interested in his neo-platonic learning or his relationships at the Elizabethan court; however, in the past twenty years, it has become a major focus for Spenser studies. There are dozens of books, scores of essays, and even an extremely accurate digital reconstruction of Kilcolman through which interested parties can take virtual tours, all in the service of illuminating the effect of the Irish climate on Spenser's imagination. Palmer's treatment of his historical allegory is useful and intelligent, but *The Faerie Queene* is an unwieldy subject, and she sensibly does not try to say the last word on the poem. Of Harington, however, she notes incisively that his good-humoured translation nonetheless reflects a pragmatic sensibility. Ariosto is a harsh critic of the gun, which he saw as the enemy to epic romance. The hand-to-hand combat of heroes could not survive death delivered from afar by heavy artillery. But Harington was a man on the frontline, and when he develops Ariosto's brusque *brutta invenzion* [hideous invention] into a celebration of "the Culverings to shoot a bullet farre: / The Falcon, Saker, Minion, and the Sling", Palmer shows us the bloodshed of early modern Ireland seeping onto the page, and turning epic into politics. Carew was infinitely more ruthless in his approach to his source text. Where Ercilla had found himself admiring his enemies, and had devoted generous space in his poem to their war councils, their speeches, their partings from their lovers and their noble deaths, Carew ruthlessly excised them. Ercilla's poem is, to a certain extent, a critique of Spanish policy; the Araucanians are the voice of his conscience. For Carew, the Araucanians – the colonised natives – occupied the same imaginative space as the Irish he faced every day, and he was not a man, it would appear, overburdened with imaginative sympathy. His translation is intended to be useful: his interest lies, not in the poetry, but in the advanced Spanish military techniques which underlie the courageous sallies and tragic deaths of Ercilla's poem, and through emphasising these he transforms Ercilla's "increasingly anti-imperial epic into an 'arte' of war".

The violent purpose which Palmer unearths in the three colonial epics shows how closely involved poetry can be with conquest. However, there is an aesthetics of violence at work alongside its practicalities, and this is the aspect she examines through her study of motif which recurs throughout both the poetry and the politics of early modern Ireland: the severed head. Harington may have had political beheading in mind when he chose the extract he was to read to his host in Dungannon. His poem warns that a man might "see his head, where late he saw his heele", and Palmer suggests that the common motif of being upended on fortune's wheel may have been superseded here by a more literal meaning. Hugh O'Neill would not have been unaware that heads could very easily end up on the ground. During the Desmond rising of 1569, the English commander Humphrey Gilbert had engaged in a particularly grisly form of architecture: his defeated enemies had to approach his tent through an alley formed of the severed heads of their friends and families. This book provides a staggering tally of beheadings, of heads displayed on pikes on castle walls, abused by the townswomen of Kilkenny, or carried in bags to Dublin Castle: it was a common

condition of surrender to prove your good faith by bringing your former ally's head along when you came to sue for peace. Heads sat unsteadily on early modern shoulders – Harington's meaning may have sounded very pointed indeed to the listening O'Neills.

These heads, however, existed in tension with the imaginary ones which also populated writing of, and about, early modern Ireland. Webster's gory game of football in *The White Devil* indicates that, unfairly or not, beheadings were associated with the Irish; even Shakespeare, for all that he has been co-opted as the forward-thinking champion of everything from homosexuality to Israel, was less original in respect of Irishness. When Captain MacMorris had finished airing his insecurities about nationhood, Shakespeare has him make the most predictable of Irish threats, and threaten to cut off his interlocutor's head. There was obviously a pulse of fear beating under these texts, even in distant London. Meanwhile, Irish writers wrote laments for the heads of their kinsmen and patrons, now mounted on poles before them. These heads are documents of real violence, but when, as so often, they speak in the poems, they also gesture towards a literary tradition. Ever since Orpheus was torn apart by the Maenads and set singing on the waves, the head has had its own truths to tell and its own music to make. Palmer refers to the tenth century account of the Battle of Allen, in which the warrior Donn-bó loses his head but still keeps his promise to sing once the fighting is done: the resulting melody is sweeter than anything ever heard on earth. Other literary heads have been truth-tellers, like that of Finn's jester Lomna, who spoke to identify the murderers who decapitated him. The severed head will not speak again, but literature has implied that it has plenty to tell us.

The motif of the head without a body allows Palmer to muse on faces and recognition (Spenser's knights are assailed by faceless Irishmen), and on the way in which literature can serve to distance the reader from horror: heads in epic romance can bounce merrily across a page without ever spilling a drop of blood. Ultimately, however, the severed head speaks to her of silence. Her first book was about misunderstandings: Irish figures in early modern English art and writing who were represented as noisy, but wordless. Their sounds were not decoded into speech; indeed, were not always allowed to be a language. This book circles back to that theme, but from the perspective of the speakers. In the final few pages, she reproduces Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn's lament for Brian and Domhnall O'Hara, executed for treason in 1586. This time, the heads do not speak: whatever truth they might have told has been cut off, and faced with the sight of them, the poet is rendered speechless with horror: "Rugsad mo chiall's mo chuimhne, / rugsad mh'aithne is mh'fhorfhuighle" [it took away my sense and my recollection; / it took away my power of recognition and my elevated utterance.] The history recounted in this book tends to suppress the Irish poet; however, Ó hUiginn was silenced more effectively yet a few years later in 1591, when, in response to a satire he had written about them, some other members of the O'Hara family killed him, his wife, and their child. They also cut out his tongue. Palmer recounts his end at the close of her book – a well-judged inclusion in an account which never strays into angry polemic, but which, in the face of grim statistics, must strain to look even-handed.

If the Irish language did not fare well in the sixteenth century, Hiberno-English was just gathering its energies. The final epic Palmer considers is Richard Stanihurst's exuberant rendering of the *Aeneid*. Stanihurst was a member of a prominent Old English family, and in many ways had a career entirely typical of educated men of his time all over Europe: he was a poet, translator, philosopher, theologian and alchemist. The first of his major works was in history – he contributed sections on Ireland to Holinshed's *Chronicles* in 1577 (given as 1587 in the book – a minor slip in a mass of very accurate detail). By the time the *Chronicles* were being revised for a new edition a decade later, however, Stanihurst was no longer involved in the project. His place was taken by John Hooker, an evangelical Protestant from Exeter, and Stanihurst occupied himself in bringing out a Latin life of St Patrick that same year. The *Chronicles* had emphasised the loyalty of the Pale to England; the life of St Patrick and his other major works (*Great deeds in Ireland* [1584]; a devotional work on the Blessed Virgin [1609]) indicate a shift in sympathies. This change of mood happened during the period that Stanihurst was translating Virgil.

The First Foure Bookes of Virgil his Aeneis was printed in Antwerp in 1582. This work is most famous for the dizzy texture of its language. When Virgil's wooden horse is wheeled into Troy, the suspicious Laocoön hurls a spear into its side, and its hollow womb groans. But mere groaning is insufficient for Stanihurst: in his version, the noise is a "clush clash buzing, with droomming clattered humming". His verbal extravagance has been both mocked and acclaimed: he has been called both a poor judge of poetry and the precursor to the linguistic inventiveness of *Finnegans Wake*. Palmer nods at this debate, but her interest lies in the shape of his poem, which transpires to be that anomalous thing, epic without the empire.

Stanihurst was born into a disenfranchised generation of Old English – the young men who came of age in the 1570s were to discover that the jobs and positions of power which they had thought to be their birthright were now being given to the recent arrivals. Palmer diagnoses a crisis of identity. Stanihurst, like many of his peers, had gone to Oxford for his education. When he returned, the parameters had shifted, and he was no longer part of a community distinct in English eyes from the Gaelic Irish. His work on Holinshed's *Chronicles* is an attempt to assert his society's links with England. Perhaps in the wake of the failure of that enterprise, the *Aeneis*, five years later, seems to reject these earlier efforts.

There was a long-standing tradition of calling London the New Troy. In the medieval poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet summarised the relationship of England to the heroes of the past by stressing blood connections: Felix Brutus, the kinsman of Aeneas, left the ruins of Troy and sailed for England. Spenser was just one of many to pick up this thread and weave it into his own work. His Troynovant is at once a magical city in fairy land and the real city of London. Stanihurst, on the other hand, tells the story of the homeless Aeneas and his companions while they wander the sea after the burning of their city, but they get no farther in his hands. He stops after only four books. His Trojans do not get the chance to morph into Londoners or to anticipate England's imperial ambitions. Palmer, instead, reads his resolutely unimperial heroes as the early modern Irish, dispossessed and wandering, and she notes that Stanihurst, crucially, now identifies with them. The epic was the space in which he worked out his new definition of selfhood and community.

Perhaps for reasons of space – and this is a very focused book, sometimes to abruptness – Palmer does not discuss Stanihurst's other gesture towards epic poetry. In the preface to the *Aeneis*, he refers to a larger project, what he called his *Fin Couleidos*: in other words, an epic poem on the subject of Finn Mac Cumhaill. These stories became important within the Irish communities abroad. In 1626, for instance, Somhairle Mac Domhnaill, a captain in the Irish Regiment of the Spanish army, commissioned an Irish scribe in Ostend to produce *Duanaire Finn*, a manuscript collection of the medieval tales of the Fianna. Mac Domhnaill was obviously taking steps to preserve a national literature, but a generation earlier Stanihurst was using Finn mac Cumhaill in another characteristically Renaissance project – the cultivation of a sense of nation through the medium of the epic poem. The work would have represented an Irish equivalent of the *Lusiads* or *La Gerusalemme liberata* or *The Faerie Queene* itself: a fusion of local and classical learning and an expression of national aspiration. It is, of course, possible that the *Fin Couleidos* was only planned, and never written. Epic relied heavily on notions of empire, and without the possibility of independence, let alone expansion, Stanihurst's muse may have remained stubbornly silent. If it does exist, it will be found abroad, somewhere like Sant'Isidoro or Louvain or the French or Spanish courts – those continental refuges where Irish learning and art took shelter. But while this Irish epic may have to be taken on faith as the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen, its context does not. Patricia Palmer's intelligent and eloquent new book has brought the life and literature of early modern Ireland to the foreground, illuminating the present through her revelation of the past and cementing her own place as one of our foremost cultural interpreters.
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