

‘Star Shine in the Boghole’: A Note on the Poetry of Joseph Campbell

by David Burleigh

When the poet John Hewitt reviewed the state of Ulster writing in the 1940’s in his important essay on regionalism ‘The Bitter Gourd,’ he lamented the dispersal of local poets. Hewitt himself had grown up in Belfast, but his immediate forbears, he noted, had gone away, ‘Cousins to Travancore, Campbell to the Wicklow Hills.’¹ The elder of those poets, James Cousins (1873–1956), formed a substantial connection with Japan which I have examined previously. In this essay I am aim to trace a more distant Japanese influence on a slightly younger poet of that generation, Joseph Campbell.

Campbell was born in Belfast on 15 July 1879, into a Catholic [family of Nationalist leanings. Both the poet’s parents were well versed in the Gaelic poetic tradition, in which Joseph then became intensely interested. Like his father, Joseph first earned his living in the building trade, though there was no aversion in the family to artistic or intellectual pursuits. John Campbell, the poet’s brother, became a woodblock artist and later provided illustrations for Joseph’s books. Joseph himself joined the Gaelic League, and took part in the Irish Literary Revival when it spread to Belfast. He was one of the editors of a short lived journal, *Uladh*, and contributed to the newly founded Ulster Literary Theatre. He acted occasionally, and wrote one play himself. His sister Fanny married Sam

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Waddell (1878–1967), better known as the playwright Rutherford Mayne, and eldest brother to the scholar Helen Waddell (1889–1965).

Campbell's own work was done mostly in poetry, however, and it was in spare lyrics that he was at his most accomplished. Taking as model the songs translated from the Gaelic by Douglas Hyde, he tried to create equivalents in English. According to Austin Clarke, Campbell 'disciplined himself by setting words to traditional airs.'² Some of his songs are still popular, and sung at concerts, though the author of them has been forgotten. The chaste lyrics of the English poet Robert Herrick, who is quoted in the epigraph to one of Campbell's books, undoubtedly served him as a model too. But I wish to investigate a different influence on Campbell's work, one that had its origins in neither Ireland nor England.

Though Campbell's first volume of poetry had already appeared by the early 1900's, he was unable to obtain suitable work in Belfast, mainly because of his religion. When a new collection, *The Rushlight*, appeared in 1906, and was well received, he moved to London. He had visited the city with his brother five years before, but now he took up residence. Having already acquired some reputation as a speaker of poetry in Gaelic and English, he immediately became involved in the activities of the Irish Literary Society that Yeats had founded. Campbell earned his living partly as a teacher. The next year, 1907, he published two new books of poetry, *The Man-Child* and *The Gilly of Christ*, which consolidated the achievement of his earlier collections. Norah Saunders and A. A. Kelly, the authors of a monograph on Campbell's work, claim he was the 'poet who first attempted to write English poetry in a religious Gaelic manner.'³

Campbell lived in London for five years, and served for a time as secretary to the Irish Literary Society. It was through this connection that he met his wife Nancy, a London-born girl of Irish descent. It may

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also have been at meetings of the Society that he first encountered the English philosopher T. E. Hulme, and the American poet Ezra Pound, both of whom were to exercise some influence on his development as a poet. This came about through the Imagist group which Hulme founded in 1909, and for which Pound then supplied a name.

The first meeting of the Imagists took place in Soho in central London on 25 March 1909, and Campbell was among the eight or nine people present. It is worth noting an account of the group's aims written by F. S. Flint, another member, several years afterwards:

I think what brought the real nucleus of this group together was a dissatisfaction with English poetry as it was then (and is still, alas!) being written. We proposed at various times to replace it by pure *vers libre*; by the Japanese *tanka* and *haikai*; we all wrote dozens of the latter as an amusement; by poems in a sacred Hebrew form; ... by rimeless poems like Hulme's 'Autumn,' and so on. In all this Hulme was ringleader. He insisted on absolutely accurate presentation and no verbiage ... There was also a lot of talk and practice among us, Storer leading it chiefly, of what we called the Image. We were very much influenced by modern French Symbolist poetry.⁴

Yet, despite Campbell's presence at the group's inauguration, he is not included in any of the group's anthologies,⁵ nor does he receive more than a passing mention in accounts of the Imagist movement or the influence of Japanese literature on literature in English.⁶ It might then be assumed that Campbell's participation in the group's activities was slight, or that he was unaffected by its ideas. It is known that he took an interest in other European literatures during the period he spent in London, and these might be thought to have absorbed him more. But I would argue that

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there are several poems among those he wrote in 1909 and after that are very clearly Imagist in style.

Campbell's next collection, *The Mountainy Singer*, appeared in the same year that he attended meetings of the Imagists. While the preceding volumes of his poetry had been lyrical, romantic and sometimes visionary, the new poems had a sharpness and clarity that had not been evident before. Austin Clarke, who edited the posthumous collected edition of Campbell's poems, points out that he was 'the first to write free verse in Ireland.'⁷ The short poem 'Darkness' is a good example:

Darkness,

I stop to watch a star shine in the boghole -

A star no longer, but a silver ribbon of light.

I look at it, and pass on.⁸

But, more than the freedom of its form, the direct apprehension of the subject in this poem marks it, in my opinion, as obviously Imagist in technique.

Imagism, in Flint's account, incorporated ideas from several sources, not only Japanese. Yet the directness and simplicity of its approach, its concentration on a single image, may be said to have come essentially from haiku. Wallace Stevens later expressed this method in the title of a poem: 'Not Ideas about the Thing, But the Thing Itself.' And at least one critic has remarked on Campbell's 'ability to create a poem which seems to be the thing itself.'⁹

There are three other poems in *The Mountainy Singer* that might have been comfortably included in the Imagist anthologies, and are closer to the group's ideals than many that actually were. 'Snow' is the next of these:

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Hills that were dark
At sparing-time last night
Now in the dawn-ring
Glimmer cold and white.¹⁰

Campbell's poetry abounds in references to light and darkness, and the scenery that he describes is generally monochrome. 'The Dawn Whiteness' is a characteristic piece:

The dawn whiteness.
A bank of slate-grey cloud lying heavily over it.
The moon, like a hunted thing, dropping into the cloud.¹¹

In the dawn sky, Campbell finds the moon, which is also frequently referred to. 'Night, and I Travelling,' the last of these pieces, introduces another human figure:

Night, and I travelling.
An open door by the wayside,
Throwing out a shaft of warm yellow light.
A whiff of peat smoke;
A gleam of delf on the dresser within;
A woman's voice crooning, as if to a child.
I pass on into the darkness.¹²

Yet the poet withdraws, and remains a solitary traveller.

Saunders and Kelly note the effect of Campbell's contact with Imagism on his next collection, *Irishry* (1913),¹³ which came out after his return to Ireland. I would contend, however, that the influence is more evident in the previous collection. Nevertheless, Campbell's descriptions of a variety

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of Irish social types in *Irishry*, make use of this new economy. His musical and much anthologised poem, 'The Old Woman,' illustrates this quite well:

As a white candle
In a holy place,
So is the beauty
Of an agèd face.

As the spent radiance
Of the winter sun,
So is a woman
With her travail done.

Her brood gone from her,
And her thoughts as still
As the waters
Under a ruined mill.¹⁴

There are a few more poems only in Campbell's collected works that might be claimed as Imagist, it seems to me. Two of them occur in his short book *Earth of Cualann* (1917), and both of them once more take the sky at night for subject. The first is entitled 'The Welcome':

Blessed the Hand
That set a new moon on the hill for me,
And hung the night with stars -
With white festoons of stars -
Looped from the corners of the world.¹⁵

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The title could easily be omitted here, as it could be also from 'The Moon':

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.¹⁶

Campbell plainly found the darkness comforting.

In Ireland, Campbell worked as a small-time farmer, began to raise a family, and became involved in local politics. In the Civil War that followed Independence, he was arrested and imprisoned. As a result, he spent two years in prison, during which time he wrote a diary but very little poetry. On release, his marriage having failed, he decided to leave Ireland again. He went to America in 1925, and stayed for fourteen years, living in New York. He set up a School of Irish Studies there, though this venture was not finally successful. He continued to read and lecture, and for a number of years taught Anglo-Irish literature at Fordham University. The years he spent in America were not fruitful for his own writing, but he did a great deal during them to foster the study of Irish literature in the United States. In 1939 Campbell returned to Ireland, where he lived in seclusion in a cottage in County Wicklow. He was found dead there by neighbours on 8 June 1944.

A handful of poems that Campbell had written in his final years was gathered and published by Austin Clarke. The penultimate poem in the collected edition is entitled 'Country Sorrow,' and begins:

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In quiet dawn
Across small farms cold with shadow
A cock answers another:
Lonelier than lakewash,
Sadder than lightrise,
..... Ai-ai, ai-oa, ai-ee!¹⁷

The first three lines of this stanza are oddly reminiscent of haiku, or at least of the way that haiku are translated. The same is true of every stanza in the poem, from which the fourth stanza may serve as a further example:

In blueing dusk
On the road to the lighted hamlet
A cart's axle clacks:
Lonelier than dogbark,
Sadder than deadbell.

Though Saunders and Kelly consider that 'the influence of Imagism in Campbell's poetry should not ... be exaggerated,'¹⁸ it is apparent to me that the effect of Imagism on his work is distinct and traceable. This is particularly true of the poems in *The Mountainy Singer*, which they have largely overlooked.

It is undoubtedly true that the dominant influence on Campbell's writing came from Gaelic literature, the recovery of which fitted in with the Nationalist political agenda. It has sometimes been suggested that there is a similarity in approach or sensibility between classical poetry in Gaelic, and traditional poetry in Japanese. To what extent this is actually the case can only be established by someone who is proficient in both

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languages. A small example of a certain consanguinity, however, can be found in the first poem written in Gaelic about Belfast. John Hewitt considers this in a free verse poem called 'Gloss, on the difficulties of translation,' comparing it to haiku:

Across Loch Laig
the yellow-billed blackbird
whistles from the blossomed whin.

Not, as you might expect,
a Japanese poem, although
it has the seventeen
syllables of the haiku.
Ninth-century Irish, in fact,
from a handbook on metrics,
the first written reference
to my native place.¹⁹

Hewitt did not know Gaelic, though he would have read more than one translation, and the remainder of his poem comments on the problem of finding equivalents for the original in English. His potent comparison with haiku is reiterated by Seamus Heaney, who has translated Gaelic classics into English, and discusses the same short poem in an essay on early Irish nature poetry. Heaney offers an English version of his own, before observing:

In its precision and suggestiveness, this art has been compared with the art of the Japanese *haiku*. Bashō's frog plopping into its pond in seventeenth century Japan makes no more durable or exact music than Belfast's blackbird clearing its throat over the

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lough almost a thousand years earlier.²⁰

I would suggest that the writers of the Imagist group, particularly Hulme, had the best understanding of haiku then available in England, and that Campbell's exchanges with the group helped him to refine his technique.

By the time that John Hewitt published his essay on regionalism in 1945, Campbell had already died. Campbell's work has not been regularly taken up by anthologists,²¹ but a selection from it can be found in *The Field Day Anthology* (1991).²² The concision and musicality of his lines, the spare lyricism of his composition, find an echo in the work of contemporary poets like John Montague (b. 1929) and Derek Mahon (b. 1941). It cannot be argued that Campbell is a central poet, but he was nevertheless a good poet.

In one of his literary essays, Ezra Pound recounts a story told to him by Joseph Campbell. Campbell had met a man 'in a desolate waste of bogs, and he said to him, "It's rather dull here," and the man said, "Faith, ye can sit on a midden and dream stars."²³ Campbell, as it has been already shown, spent a good deal of time gazing at the stars himself. And it can certainly be said that his commitment to poetry, and his aspirations as a poet, were the equal of much greater writers.

Notes

1. Clyde, Tom, ed., *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), p. 113.
2. Clarke, Austin, *Poetry in Modern Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, c. 1961), p. 28.
3. Saunders, Norah & A. A. Kelly, *Joseph Campbell: Poet & Nationalist 1879-1944* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988), p. 43.
4. Quoted in Hughes, Glenn, *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960; first published 1931), p. 11.

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5. James Joyce was the only Irish writer who appeared in them.
6. See, for example, the introduction to Jones, Peter, ed., *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), and the discussion of Imagism in Miner, Earl, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1958).
7. Clarke, Austin, ed., *The Poems of Joseph Campbell* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1963), p. 2.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
9. Fallis, Richard, *The Irish Renaissance: An Introduction to Anglo-Irish Literature* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), p. 120.
10. *The Poems, op. cit.*, p. 85.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
13. Saunders & Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
14. *The Poems, op. cit.*, p. 166. This poem appears, for instance, in *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse* edited by Donagh MacDonagh and Lennox Robinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
18. Saunders & Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
19. Ormsby, Frank, ed., *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991), p. 129.
20. Heaney, Seamus, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 181.
21. Some of Campbell's poems, including 'Darkness,' appear in *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* edited by John Montague (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), but none of his work is included in *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* edited by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
22. Deane, Seamus, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), Vol. II, pp. 759-62.
23. Eliot, T. S., ed., *Literary essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 383.

This essay elaborates a point I made in a paper given at the 1992 conference of the International Association of Anglo-Irish Literature — Japan Branch, held in

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Kyoto. That paper was printed in Vol. VIII of the association's journal, *The Harp*, in 1993. Since fifty years have passed since Joseph Campbell's death, I assume that the copyright on his work has run out, and have not hesitated to reprint his poems.