



***The Boghole Boys*. Gabriel Fitzmaurice. Cork: Marino, 2005. Paperback, 127 pages. ISBN: 1-86023-158-6. \$19.95.**

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The Decadent of Moyvane

The word "decadence," in a literary context, tends to conjure up a vague whiff of Swinburne and scandal, or perhaps images of *The Yellow Book*, with its Beardsley covers and its selections of Arthur Symons and Richard Le Gallienne. The Francophile associates the word with slogans such as *épater le bourgeois* and *l'art pour l'art*. The true connoisseur thinks of Théophile Gautier's rebellion against Richard Hugo's doctrine of art in the service of society. If the connoisseur is particularly pedantic, he may wander over to his bookshelf, pull down Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, and, blowing the dust from its pages, refer to the once-infamous introduction, lingering over the following passage:

Nothing is really beautiful until it is useless, everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the lavatory (2006: xxi).

"From that," says the pedantic connoisseur, "comes all of Mallarmé." He's not wrong, really. If anything is essential to the literary movement of the late nineteenth century we've come to call the decadence, it is the rejection of the idea of art having any end other than art itself. The decadent's ideal art was autonomous, free of any ties to politics, peoples, causes, or commerce.

Despite Oscar Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow" and "Impression du Matin," we tend not to associate decadence of this sort with Irish poetry. Even Yeats, whose early work owed so much to the French *symbolistes*, doesn't really rate as a decadent: his interest in *l'art pour l'art* was always counterbalanced by the claims of national liberation. For every "Sailing to Byzantium" moment in Yeats' work there is a "Byzantium" as retraction; for every aesthete's poem like "The Cloak, the Boat and the Shoes" there's a nationalist's "Easter, 1916." Yeats is far from atypical among Irish poets in having reservations about aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, Irish poetry of the past century has overwhelmingly been written in a tradition other than the decadence's *l'art pour l'art*. From Yeats through Montague and on through Heaney and Eavan Boland, Irish poets have tended to write with a sense of the people's claim on their art. The bulk of Irish poetic achievement over the course of the twentieth century took place within a framework of

heteronomous rather than autonomous aesthetics: at some level poetry served the need of a community (national or sectarian) for self-expression. Declan Kiberd claims that the fundamental question posed by this heteronomous aesthetic tradition in Ireland has been "how to express life which has never yet found full expression in written literature," and he argues that such a question is made most urgent in a nation striving for independence:

A writer in a free state works with the easy assurance that literature is but one of the social institutions to project the values which the nation admires, others being the law, the government, the army, and so on. A writer in a colony knows that these values can be fully embodied only in the written word: hence the daunting seriousness with which literature is taken by subject peoples (1996: 118).

Though we have come to think of decadence in literature as a matter of aesthetic autonomy, of art cut off from anything other than artistic concerns, Kiberd's description of the origins of Ireland's decidedly heteronomous poetic tradition makes one wonder if another kind of decadence is possible. If a heteronomous poetic tradition is born out of colonial circumstances, what happens to that tradition when those circumstances no longer apply? Could the stylistic and emotional gestures of such a tradition fall into decay, inviting a self-indulgence empty of any real vitality? Gabriel Fitzmaurice's latest collection of poems, *The Boghole Boys*, gives us every indication that the answer to the question, in the Irish context, is a resounding *yes*.

Fitzmaurice introduces his book with a short essay sounding the traditional notes of the Irish poet of community. His poems, he informs us, make "the authentic sound of [the] backwater." As he describes his native village of Moyvane to us, he leans back, puts one arm around our shoulders and, gesturing widely at the "teachers and tricksters ... priests and publicans" of the town, looks us squarely in the eyes and tells us, "I seek to give voice to these people." The locals are, he opines, an endangered group, "the forgotten people of the new Ireland." Fitzmaurice's gesture is among the oldest in Irish literature: the defiant preservation of an all-but-extinct culture through the voice of the heroic bard. The Irish poet and critic David Wheatley once claimed that the idea "that old Ireland is dying or dead is one of our most endlessly renewable tropes," (2001: 82) and Fitzmaurice is happy to locate himself in that tradition.

Fitzmaurice's place in the tradition, though, is marginal, and in a powerful sense it is decadent. He has inherited a tradition from colonial times that demands its poets speak for a threatened national community, but he lives in a nation that has become one of the youngest, most economically vibrant and culturally advanced in all of Europe. The central bardic trope of the tradition no longer fits the circumstances of the nation, so in Fitzmaurice's iteration the trope becomes a diminished thing. Instead of protecting the threatened heart of the nation against powerful foreign oppressors, he finds himself the guardian of a relatively unremarkable village against—well, against what, exactly? Against the sneering snobbery of the newly moneyed of Dublin and Galway? It doesn't even amount to that. There's a kind of bathos to Fitzmaurice's aggrieved village patriotism when the worst image of oppression he can summon is that of a man visiting from Dublin who wants to buy him a drink in the village pub:

They shit on us, these upstarts who return
To the pubs in which they drank; I know their breed—

They boast to old acquaintance as they burn
With all the ostentation of their greed.
Fuck off with your money as you stand
Buying off misfortune at the bar;
I'm a celebrant and though you shake my hand
And act as if in friendship, this is war.
I stand up for my people, mind them well,
I know your kind, your money. Go to hell (22).

One hardly needs to point out that a poem like this represents a diminution of the tradition seen in, say, Yeats' "Easter 1916" or Heaney's "Punishment," poems born of colonial and post-colonial struggle respectively. The tradition born of real hardship lies, here, in utter decay.

We see more decadence in those poems where Fitzmaurice proclaims himself a celebrant of the local. The gesture is part and parcel of the tradition of Irish colonial and postcolonial poetry, but there's a curious emptiness to it in Fitzmaurice's hands. Consider "I Rhyme my Native Village with Cézanne," the book's opening poem:

I rhyme my native village with Cézanne,
The place I live and represent in art,
A poet finds genius where he can,
The picture that he paints is of his heart.
A child, an adolescent and a man
With a vision that the world couldn't thwart,
And still remaining faithful to my plan,
I write about my village, show it warts
And all—I must. But I'm a celebrant,
Not one whose whole ambition's to distort:
Who would grotesque a village like Moyvane
Is painting false, a sell-out to the smart.
I rhyme my native village with Cézanne.
A poet finds genius where he can (17).

Let us leave aside the matter of cliché ("warts and all"), and the matter of straw men ("one whose whole ambition's to distort"). The real decadence here comes from the lack of any particular quality of the village that could be singled out for praise. Fitzmaurice claims to celebrate his village, but there is nothing specific here to celebrate. The localist gesture is simply generic, bland enough to adorn a Chamber of Commerce calendar. Confronted with a poem like this, one really does feel the force of those lines from Eliot's "Hollow Men": "Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion."

Perhaps the most telling sign of the decadence of Fitzmaurice's tradition comes in "For Seamus Heaney." Here Fitzmaurice lifts a glass on the occasion of Heaney's Nobel Prize. "Rejoice! Rejoice! A laureate named 'Seamus!'" he writes. And what does Heaney's Nobel mean? "No longer," writes Fitzmaurice, "can some *Punch* paint us as subhuman." This really is absurd. There was, certainly, a time when the Irish were considered sub-literate, and there was a time

when they were depicted as subhuman, lantern-jawed simians in the cartoons of the English journal *Punch*. Indeed, the Celtic Revival was to a great extent an attempt to combat these stereotypes, to give prestige to Ireland's rich literary tradition. But the Celtic Revival's gestures of defiance were directed at real foes, present and powerful in the world at the time. No British journal would dare publish a *Punch*-like cartoon today, and if there's a popular stereotype about the Irish and literature, it isn't that they are a nation of illiterates. If anything, it's the opposite: that every Celt's a poet, through and through. The very fact that Fitzmaurice has to direct his resentment at a journal that no longer exists makes a powerful statement: the tradition that was necessary a century ago has outlived its use.

Fitzmaurice may, at some level, sense the threadbare nature of his materials. This would account for his book's frequent bouts of defensiveness. Fitzmaurice often anticipates a negative critical reception, and tries to pre-empt it by attacking the critic in advance. "At Fifty" is typical of this side of Fitzmaurice's work:

I court the common reader, not the poet—
The kind who browses, likes a damn good read:
Let poets (at least the kind who think they know it
All) ignore me. It's not for them I bleed.
No! The ones who read me are the kind
Who know that they can trust a fellow who
Opens up his heart, his soul, his mind.
Unlike words, they know that blood is true (20).

The rhetoric here is all son-of-the-soil authenticity. Perhaps I am too much of a poet to appreciate the authenticity of verse like this, distracted as I am by the appalling, nay ghastly, rhyming of "poet" and "know it." So let me take off my poet's hat and put on another, that of a teacher. Fitzmaurice, after all, includes teachers among the humble folk to whom he would give voice. Reading his poem as a teacher, I still find I can't quite praise it. The pronoun-referent problem in "Unlike words, they know that blood is true" gets in the way. It is the sort of thing I'd circle in teacherly red ink if I saw it in a student's paper, before writing "who knows that blood is true here—surely you don't mean that 'the words' know this."

I don't mean to imply here that Irish poetry is doomed to a long process of entropy, or that the best of Irish writing can only come from the most painful of Irish experiences. Far from it. But I do wish to argue that the particular tradition of Irish poetry born of colonial and postcolonial struggle has fallen into decline as the circumstances that gave rise to it have faded into history. Let Fitzmaurice serve as an exhibit in the making of this case. Those interested in an alternative to his faded tradition may wish to refer to the works of a new cohort of Irish poets, people like Randolph Healy, Maurice Scully, Billy Mills and Catherine Walsh. Their work—exciting, vital, and free of the clichéd gestures that so plague Fitzmaurice—takes Irish poetry into new territory, beyond that staked out by the greats of the last century. Give them a look, if you're interested in the new directions of Irish poetry, and leave to the sentimental this decadent of Moyvane.

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