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Padraic Colum: Poet of the 1960s

by SANFORD STERNLICHT

PADRAIC COLUM was a writer devoted to his craft as few others have been. He was a working parish priest of literature who wrote his prayers daily. At the same time he was one of those poets AE called “the soul of the nation.” Irish letters would indeed be poorer had he not been. He lived from 1881 to 1972. For perspective, Brendan Behan was born 42 years after Colum and died 8 years before. Colum began writing poetry in the 1890s, and his last book of verse, *Images of Departure*, was published in 1969, his 61st book, including prose and drama.

In his early works, *Wild Earth* (1907), *Wild Earth and Other Poems* (1916), and *Dramatic Legends and Other Poems* (1922), Colum presented a picture book in regular meter and rhymed verse of half forgotten, late-19th-century rural Ireland in the peasant language of the Midlands. Such poems as “The Plougher,” “A Drover,” and “The Suilier” touched the Irish psyche in such a way as to become a part of the Irish national identity.

The poetry of Colum’s over-50-year American exile added much to his reputation and marketability as a writer, but little of permanent value to his canon. The volumes *Creatures* (1927), *Old Pastures* (1930), *Flower Pieces* (1938), and *The Vegetable Kingdom* (1954) found the poet grasping far afield for new subjects, while the generational re-collections, *Poems* (1932), *Collected Poems* (1953), and *The Poet’s Circuits: Collected Poems of Ireland* (1960) merely stirred a fine old pot once more. In his old age, however, Padraic Colum found his creative Irish voice again and showed the world that he had not been untouched by what had happened to poetry in the 20th century.

The 20 poems of *Images of Departure* are fond remembrances of his dead wife, the critic Mary Maguire Colum, thoughts of his long-deceased mother, and farewells to long life and to his beloved Ireland. New and innovative for Colum in his last work is the subjective, highly personal nature of these poems. He abandons his old technique of sketching types and giving them internal expression—grief, love, happiness, despair—while juxtaposing them with the landscape and framing them in the suits and procedures of their occupations, and then decorating the poems with music in the form of exquisite rhyme.

In *Images of Departure* the poems are personal, Romantic in the first

person focus of the persona, and emphatic in the concern for internal phenomena. They clarify the poet's understanding of his experience and the nature of his own being. Metrically, the thrust now and finally is away from rhymed verse forms and toward blank verse. Now Colum's metaphor becomes amazingly energetic, and for the first time in his long poetic career he employs extended and concentrated symbolization. The poetry is intellectual and often purposefully ambiguous. Never a *flâneur*, Colum attempts and attains a greater depth of profundity than ever previously. The ultimate effect: a caliginous light descending.

The title poem, "Images of Departure," is preceded by an unprecedented (for Colum), long headnote:

The Images of Departure in this poem are taken from a seventeenth-century Gaelic poem by Thomas Costello addressed to Una MacDermott, and from Orpheus and Eurydice, a statue by John Hughes in the Modern Art Gallery in Dublin. In the first the departure is in anger, in the second it is in reconciliation.

In the first half of the poem the persona has returned to Dublin once more to see the old row houses:

Each with a fanlight ribbed above the door,
And (emblem of persistence it could be),
A knocker rounded as an iron wreath.

Colum recalls his wife as a young woman and living in one of the houses:

"And is there one, a student living here?"
.....
No girl will rise from her deep arm-chair
And make a jest of greeting: I look towards
Electric glare instead of oil-lamp's glow.

Electric light glares while oil lamps glow in memory, and sadness is the mood.

However, Colum immediately moves from the realization of his departed Mary and bygone days to Costello's poem through which he continues his adoration of his wife by means of Costello's praise of the MacDermott child.

In the second part of "Images of Departure" Colum, again personalizing the poem by references to the persona's acquaintance with the sculptor John Hughes, sees in the statue of Orpheus and Eurydice an emblem in eternal stone of his lifelong love for his wife:

They have not aged, this pair; they well remember
The eagerness of first companionship,
The dreams, the ardors, and the prophecies.

Peace comes to the old poet through the thought that his love will live on like the statue, but in words, not stone. The poet "knows" profoundly and intimately; the speaker knows the sculpture, he knows the old Costello poem, and he knows the love he shared with his wife. The world of Colum's poem is his own construct.

Another poem remembering Mary Colum (Molly to Padraic) is "Expecting No One." Here the old poet evidences his deep loneliness, the loneliness of the very aged:

. . . expecting no one
From north or south, a pilgrim who is mindful
Of all he left behind, and mindful, too,
Of disrepair in all he has come back to.

Alas, there is little relief for the loss of the love of a lifetime. The pain and grief of loss is hardest for those who have neither chance nor time to find love again. In the end message and meaning come randomly, chaotically from the natural world. The persona stands alone, watching "seagulls making their disordered flight, / Expecting no one from the south or north."

No other poem in the Colum canon approaches "Expecting No One" in its depth of despair. The poem's ultimate image, the disordered flight of gulls, symbolizes the seeming purposelessness of even the poet's life.

Three poems in *Images of Departure* allude to the distant death of the poet's mother: "After Speaking of One Who Died a Long Time Before," "Forget Me Nots," and "Near Legend." The poet always credited his mother for his rich heritage of stories, songs, and legends and for his deep reverence for his Irish sources. Simultaneously, he felt a lifelong anger over the loss of his mother when he was only 16. Colum converts and generalizes his long grief into an understanding of the suffering of others.

"After Speaking of One Who Died a Long Time Before" regrets the inadequacies of preindependence Ireland. Colum deplors the poverty and the lack of dreams in the lives of those like his mother who lived out their time in the nineteenth century. He would:

. . . speak of all she lost in her life's decades.
"She should have had," you said, touched by what held me
"The simple things that we will always have."

In "Forget Me Nots" Colum recalls flowers used in an old-fashioned way, as his mother might have done:

And I had seen their semblance stitched upon
A brim of hat by one who scarcely knew
A holiday from year's end to year's end. . . .

The memories of a mother dead over 70 years are fresh, vivid, full of sentiment but not overly sentimental. In "Near Legend" Colum remembers when an itinerant worker chopped firewood for his mother and nobly did not accept a gift in payment. The event is seen through the eyes of childhood:

We stood by and watched the stranger.
"Now," he said when ceased the onset,
"You have firewood till nigh Christmas."
She came to herself, our mother,

Who had stood there like a statue.
Lifting pot that had geranium
In full bloom, she brought it to him
As thank-offer for his labour.
"No," he said, "I take no payment,
What my adze can do is given."

Colum remains true to his belief in the dignity of the peasant and the greatness of those men and women who are generous with their labor.

In "Sleep and the Laburnum Tree" the poet plumbs with sad and lonely images as he compares the tree with sleep:

The tree whose growth is but to droop
Its blossoms near the grass—
.....
And all its blooms like candle-shine,
If you will droop on me
Your cob-web blooms, O dark-branched sleep
Before the first bird's call!

Sleep is the only way to peace except for death. It alone offers escape for a moment from loneliness and despair. The laburnum tree presents some hope of renewal; it may, like a candle, light the way to the Resurrection.

"In Saint Stephen's Green," the central local in Colum's Dublin, the poet finds

. . . on the tree above
A nest from seasons gone
That keeps in spite of all that blew
A lone, wild homeliness.

and a final image of himself in the very heart of the city of his youth to which both spirit and body have returned. The Fates, like magpies, "patch, probe, and pull" the thread of life until they, sole familiar survivors, help the old poet to make "A homeliness repair."

"Day's End" is about an old poet imitating an old woman calling her chickens. The poet is trying to call back the days of his life which, like stolen chickens, are now gone:

Evenings ten thousand
Were here and are gone,
Foxes that bear off
This one and that one.
"They're out," says the poet,
"Like the flame of the rush-
Candle; they're gone
Like a girl's first blush."

The analogy holds up well. A poet's memory is his stock, as a peasant's fowls are hers. Loss is loss. Metrically conservative and rhymed though this poem may be (and delightfully playful it is with them), the juxtaposed folk tale and the sad allegory evoke bilevel meaning and feeling in a contemporary manner.

“Discovery” summarizes Colum’s lifelong adventure as a discoverer of Life and a recorder of the beauty and the strength of the smaller, humbler things of existence. The reader finds the persona lying “upon a bank of grass / In idleness.” He observes the teeming life in the grass and reflects:

Years have gone by like flight of drones,
 Droning away. Still, as I chance
 On lawn or sward, I bend my wits
 To hear a murmur, rumour near,
 And be again discoverer!

Discovery is the process of life *and* art.

Images of Departure is also remarkable for the extended bird image. Domestic birds, game fowl, birds of flight, exotic birds, all caught Colum’s attention and served to symbolize both the beautiful, graceful presence of nature and the passage of a life. Peace is “a bird down on a branch.” Magpies stand for repair and renewal in “In Saint Stephen’s Green.” “Seagulls fly up from the darkened river” in “Expecting No One.” “Their flight disordered – there is emblem here.” The seagulls, like the old poet, also expect “no one from the south or north.” Seagulls and swifts fly in “Names and Legend,” the former around earthly object, while the latter like souls, “glide . . . until the vault of sky they reach.” The “Wild Duck” symbolizes independence and the corncrake represents survival in “Near Legend.” There are other aviary images in *Images of Departure*. Perhaps the image of the bird departing, its song growing softer in the distance, is Colum’s own final and ultimate image of his departure from love and from life. The book’s last poem (“Australian Tree,” a poem about a flame tree near his brother’s house in Australia) ends with a bird image. An owl-like bird sits at its base. The tree is winter bare of leaves, like a bald old poet finished with creating and almost at the end of life. The bird sits

Impassively as though to say
 “Nothing to wonder at!”

Images of Departure is not only a gracious and beautiful farewell to art and life, it is a testament to Padraic Colum’s endurance and versatility as a poet. Colum spoke as clearly to the 60s generation as he did to the Edwardians. He abandoned the song for direct address, and he modified his verse forms to meet the ways of the changing times. Frank O’Connor knew what he meant when he said that Padraic Colum was “the last of the great Irish writers.”¹

1. James Matthews, *Voices: A Life of Frank O’Connor* (New York: 1983), p. 346.