Callanan's 'The Outlaw of Loch Lene'

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O many a day have I made good ale in the glen,
That came not of stream or malt, like the brewing of men:
My bed was the ground; my roof, the green-wood above;
And the wealth that I sought, one far kind glance from my Love.

Alas! on that night when the horses I drove from the field,
That I was not near from terror my angel to shield!
She stretch'd forth her arms; her mantle she flung to the wind,
And swam o'er Loch Lene, her outlaw'd lover to find.

O would that a freezing sleet-wing'd tempest did sweep,
And I and my love were alone, far off on the deep;
I'd ask not a ship, or a bark, or a pinnace, to save —
With her hand round my waist, I'd fear not the wind or the wave.

'Tis down by the lake where the wild tree fringes its sides,
The maid of my heart, my fair one of Heaven resides:
I think, as at eve she wanders its mazes among,
The birds go to sleep by the sweet wild twist of her song.[1]

I

THIS is a romantic poem, and a translation; it looks straightforward enough, with none of the verbal intricacies which demand exegesis for the difficult poem. But we may still ask 'What is it for? What is it meant to convey?' and find that the answer is not nearly as obvious as we may at first suppose. To account for its effect in terms simply of the music of its verse — to dismiss the poem as 'this rather empty thing that sounds so nice' — is to overlook the fact that its poetic meaning is not restricted to the apparent thinness of its intellectual content. 'For a conscientious critic', says G. S. Fraser rather pessimistically, '*all* poetry is difficult.'[2] In learning to admire poems (like those of Donne and Hopkins) which our intellects judge to be powerful because packed with unexpected meanings, we run the risk of

[1] From *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, 1942, no. 646.

[2] G. S. Fraser: 'On the Interpretation of the Difficult Poem', in *Interpretations*, ed. John Wain, 1955, p. 221.

underrating those (like Callanan's) whose argument is easy but whose evocations are compelling or at least captivating. This is a minor poem, but it will not do to dismiss it too lightly.

No exaggerated claims need be made for it. The sixth line is typical: rhythmically awkward and drab in diction. There is a tongue-tripping mouthful of monosyllables 'That I was not near' and then the clumsy metrical inversion 'from terror my angel to shield'. 'Angel' is a *cliché* for the more sincere 'loved one' or 'darling', and 'shield' is at best a dead metaphor for 'protect'. Moreover the sense is imprecise: one protects someone from something that may inspire terror, hardly from the terror itself. The line requires elucidation, but is expressed so drably that the reader is not encouraged to pause and think it over.

In the final couplet, however, there is a haunting strangeness which continues to delight and mystify even after the intellect has dealt with all it apparently has to say.

> I think, as at eve she wanders its mazes among,
> The birds go to sleep by the sweet wild twist of her song.

The appeal of these lines must surely derive from something more substantial than their sound. Aodh de Blacam writes:

> [Callanan's] music was Gaelic, something new to the English Language. He did not satisfy an ear that sought formal, classical measures, but he enchanted the Irish ear. 'The birds go to sleep by the sweet wild twist of her song' is a line that no English poet would write; it is pure echo of Irish, and poetical as classic English verse seldom can be.[1]

From this the reader would gather that the line is poetical because of its enchanting rhythm. But at least the major part of the spell must come from the meaning the line has in its context.

We seek, then, a meaning for the poem that will account for, and perhaps define the extent of, the captivating influence it exerts over us when we read it. This influence derives not from such elements as rhythm or imagery alone, but from the totality in which they are effective, and which may be described as the 'poetic meaning' for which we are looking. Nevertheless we must recognize that this poetic meaning cannot exist without either our interpretation of it or the poet's intention.

Thus it is sometimes argued that since we have the poem and not the mind of the author in front of us, what the poet intended

[1] Aodh [Sandrach] de Blacam, *A First Book of Irish Literature*, Dublin and Cork, 1935, pp. 185–6.

is irrelevant: the poem should be allowed to speak for itself.[1] This view certainly saves trouble, especially in the case of a translation, where there is more than one poet whose intentions would otherwise have to be examined. It has better justification in the fact that in the working poet's mind there are likely to be many associations that are not relevant to his finished production; these would have to be pruned. They explain, too, how it is that a poet may misinterpret his own poem; he may imagine he has said what he has only thought. At the same time a poem is the expression of a poet's, or of poets' intentions, for without them it would not be written.

The poet can no more be ignored than the reader can. It is misleading to hypostatize a poem, as if it were an individual existing in its own right. It exists only when someone is reading or remembering it; so it boils down after all to an interchange between poet and reader: a poem is a reader's attempt to think a poet's thoughts. But he need think only those thoughts which the poet has conveyed in the words that constitute the poem. Hence it does not theoretically matter that he cannot ask a dead poet what he intended, or that he might not get a satisfactory answer if he asked a living one. Scholarship, that illumines a poet's background and the literary context of his poem, may account for the presence of meanings which a perspicacious reader can derive for himself from what he reads, but it cannot put meanings into the text which otherwise would not be there. It may sharpen a reader's insights, but it cannot be indispensable to understanding, otherwise communication would be a hazardous business at best.

Since this poem of Callanan's is a translation, it may be thought that it can be understood only in the light of a comparison with its source. But even if the source is still available,[2] comparison

[1] Cf. Sanford B. Meech, *Design in Chaucer's 'Troilus'*, New York, 1959, p.v.: 'Conjecture about an artist's purposes, as I am uneasily aware, has been stigmatized as the intentional fallacy. What he meant in the heat of inspiration, it has been said, is indeterminable even by himself; and, even were it determinable, quite immaterial, for the product must be taken for what it is regardless of the creator's aspiration. I cannot but feel, however, that the intentions of the creator of a masterpiece are worth seeking and that the major ones, at least, can be plausibly inferred from the work itself in its ordered perfection.'

[2] Material accessible to me does not suggest that it is. It was probably an oral folk-tale which Callanan's translation rescued from oblivion.

with it would at best provide only a useful guide to Callanan's intention, which would in any case have to be verified from the translation. The chief value of the comparison would be to exemplify Callanan's method of working when translating; such a study, however interesting, is not relevant to the meaning of the poem.

Jeremiah (or James) Joseph Callanan (1795–1829)[1] was another of the short-lived Romantic poets of the era of Keats, Shelley and Byron, but one little known outside Ireland. He died in Lisbon of tuberculosis, apparently contracted because of the vagrant life he spent collecting folk tales from the Irish peasantry:

> . . . He spent his time in wandering about the country, collecting from the Irish-speaking inhabitants the wild poems and legends in their native tongue which had been handed down orally from father to son for generations. These he clothed in all the grace, beauty and sentiment of the English language, of which he was master.[2]

In Callanan's own words:

> Though loftier minstrels green Erin can number,
> I alone waked the strain of her harp from its slumber,
> And glean'd the gray legend that long had been sleeping,
> Where oblivion's dull mist o'er its beauty was creeping.[3]

The quality of his poetry has been variously assessed. A biographer writes: 'Like most Irish poets, Callanan was a pure lyrist, with no reach or depth of thought, no creative imagination, and no proper originality, but endowed with abundance of fancy, melody, and feeling.'[4] Geoffrey Taylor's assessment is more favourable:

> It is . . . on his lyrics and particularly on his translations from the Irish that Callanan's reputation has always rested. Here he showed originality and genius. He . . . was the first to transmute not only the verbal meaning but also the rhythms, something of the emotional charge, and the alien spirit of the poems into English. By this very considerable achievement, in which he has never been surpassed, he shares with Tom Moore the credit of having started an independent Anglo-Irish literature.[5]

[1] The date of his death is wrongly given as 1839 in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, 1942, p. 764. The list of contents, p. xxiv, contains the correct date.
[2] Chas. A. Read: *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, 1903, II, 65.
[3] 'Gougane Barra', II, 27–30.
[4] Richard Garnett, *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen.
[5] See *Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (Muses Library), 1951, pp. 58–9.

Encouraged by the assurance that Callanan's poetry has a historical and antiquarian interest, and intrigued by the novelty of its 'emotional charge' and 'alien spirit', we may the more sympathetically investigate the intrinsic interest of his 'Outlaw of Loch Lene'. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to establish its poetic meaning. Value judgements will be avoided as far as possible, because the nature of meaning is independent of them. But in practice they lie behind every choice of one meaning in preference to another.

II

The four stanzas may be reduced to a minimum as follows:

1. A homeless outlaw has lived a long time alone in a glen, separated from and missing the girl he loves.
2. One night when he was driving horses from a field she swam across Loch Lene to find him.
3. He wishes he were alone with her on the stormy water; he would not need a boat or fear the elements.
4. She lives in the wood down by the lake, where she sings in the evenings.

Thus reduced, the subject matter seems trite and disjointed. We can hardly take the third sentence seriously: of course the man would need a boat; of course he would be afraid. Can we sympathize with one whose reaction to the situation is so obtuse? Here we are given only the barest outlines of a story. He drove horses and she swam the Loch. That is all we are told of it. The fourth sentence seems oddly out of sequence. We might have expected it to precede rather than to follow her dramatic excursion. As a result, instead of a beginning, a middle and an end, we have only a beginning, a middle, and then another bit of the beginning.

Of course we remember that the atmosphere of the poem is just as important as anything that happens in it. So we examine the emotive associations of the words used: 'wealth' in l. 4, for example. There are no literal riches in a kind glance, but the favourable associations of the word 'wealth' image the emotional value that the glance has for the outlaw. Here the meaning is widened further by the context. The imaginative equation of the kind glance with wealth implies that if the outlaw makes a living

out of stealing horses, as l. 5 may suggest, then love, or even an unconsummated imagining of love, is worth more to him than his occupation: such a claim, however implausible, suggests passion. So does the stance in stanza 3, which, however absurd, is heroic; indeed, the more absurd, the more heroic: he will brave overwhelming odds for love of her. And no doubt she is worth it, as the words used to describe her imply: her singing is 'sweet', her glance is 'kind', and she herself is 'fair', like a heavenly 'angel'. But these terms are all shallow: they have the face-value of *clichés*. Because they do not convey much feeling, they are deficient also in meaning, and the description of the lady is consequently without much content. Except that she was sufficiently in love to swim over Loch Lene, we know nothing objective about her, not even what she thought about her lover as she sang in the woods at evening. We certainly cannot picture her, and know only that he admired her.

It follows that there is nothing concrete about the feeling of love in the poem. It is a vague passion because the ideas that suggest it are too commonplace to make it powerful. Nor do the lovers' actions persuade us to the contrary. He sits making ale in the glen and she wanders about the lake singing the birds to sleep. They make no effort to meet, other than the evidently abortive one referred to in stanza 2. The love is unconsummated on the practical as well as on the emotional level.

Odd as this passive acceptance of separation may be, their separate activities are even odder. She apparently spends her evenings wandering in the wild woods, although 'resides' suggests she has a house, where one imagines she might be better employed. He, who has no house (his 'roof' after all is the 'green-wood'), spends his days brewing ale, of a necessarily unconventional sort, considering his circumstances. Thus the poem stands on its head: he is an outlaw who behaves like a resident, she a resident who behaves like an outlaw.

Furthermore, her song has the peculiar effect of putting the birds to sleep. Birds are the epitome of song: she sings them to silence. Even as the exaggerated fancy of an infatuated lover, this performance is neither convincing nor very relevant to the love theme. The birds would go to sleep in the evenings whether she sang to them or not. The fiction that she is responsible tells us

perhaps how much her lover admired her singing, but not much about his love for her, and even less about hers for him. For would he not as a lover prefer to imagine that the song had some reference to him rather than to the unconscious birds?

Meanwhile, he is busy making ale; a strangely sedentary occupation for an outlaw who on at least one occasion drove horses from a field. Of course we are not to think of him as an honest drayman going about his business: he was stealing the horses, hence his outcast status. His treatment of the horses is clearer than the nature of his ale: what sort is it that is made neither with water nor with malt — that is neither Adam's ale nor beer?

We have no quarrel with his conduct as an outlaw: he is obviously a good representative of his class, and that is what the poem asks him to be. But it also asks him to be a good lover, and on that score we may well condemn the attitude he expresses in stanza 3. Here is an outlaw lover, who in stanza 2 was willing to give up his horses to shield his beloved from terror, now apparently wishing he could subject her to the freezing sleet of a storm out in the middle of the lake, preferably with no boat to save them. And why? Evidently in order to demonstrate his own fearlessness and ability to swim her to safety. One imagines she would rather take such prowess for granted than have it proved to her. Perhaps it was just as well that he 'was not near' (stanza 2) when she needed to be shielded from terror!

The factual details of the poem seem incomplete and contradictory and the passion implicit in the situation is hardly represented: if the poem is to yield a satisfactory meaning, we must find another way to read it. It would be too facile to imagine we had shown that such appeal as it has depends more on sound than on sense. For if the events and emotions are read for what they symbolize, we shall see that the poem acquires a meaning on an imaginative level which is not nullified but enhanced by apparent contradictions on the literal level. To say so does not mean that awkward details may be explained away allegorically. Otherwise we might claim, for instance, that the lovers' abortive attempt at reunion, frustrated as it was by lake and woodland, represents the soul's inevitable subjection to natural limitations in its quest for ideal happiness. If we want such an interpretation, we must write our own poem for it. Rather, we should attempt to interpret

the poem by examining the imaginative associations of the words and imagery within the natural structure of their arrangement in the poem.

III

The division of the poem into four four-line stanzas is not dictated by the rhyme scheme (the poem rhymes in couplets), but by the fact that each stanza forms a sense unit whose position is determined by the temporal and dramatic structure embodying the meaning of the poem. It is not enough to say simply that Callanan was working within the formal tradition of Irish poetry: 'All poems were composed in quatrains: the sense must never overlap from stanza to stanza: and a break at the end of the second line was always imposed.'[1] We must examine the effect of this tradition on the poem he has written.

Dramatically, the stanzas are arranged so that there is action in the central two and a static situation in the first and last. Temporally the dramatic part is in the past tense (stanza 2 referring to what happened, stanza 3 to what might have but didn't) and the static part in the present tense ('have' in stanza 1 is present perfect, while the other verbs are past of habitual action: that is, action up to and including the present; the verbs of stanza 4 are all presents). At the same time, because the poem is a monologue, it is all present in the mind of the narrator, who is also the chief character, the outlaw. But although both first and last stanzas refer to a present situation, the first looks back over many days while the last does not, implying that there has been some temporal progress between the two. Hence we may infer that the situation of stanza 4 has come into being since the events of the dramatic centre of the poem, and need not have existed before them, as the situation in stanza 1 plainly must have done.

Thus the formal arrangement of the stanzas on the page illustrates the semantic structure of the poem. An occasion in the past when the lovers came together, even if only in an unfulfilled wish, is circumscribed by a situation in the present in which they are separated. The lone subject of stanza 1 is the outlaw, of stanza 4, the lady: the extent of their separation is measured by the two central stanzas, which contain the account of the effort

[1] Stephen Gwynn: *Irish Literature and Drama*, 1936, pp. 24–5.

they made to come together: she by swimming, he by wishful thinking. The implication of this arrangement is that they are separated by (that is, also, as a result of) the very actions that they had hoped would bring them together.

The two central stanzas are central also the outlaw's experience in that they explain why the lovers are separated. They explain, that is, how the situation in stanza 4 has arisen and why that in stanza 1 continues. When his 'angel' most needed him (stanza 2), he was not with her. Perhaps our dismissal of the word 'angel' as a *cliché* vaguely suggesting 'beautiful loved one' was too cursory. It may suggest 'guardian spirit' in a context concerned with the idea of protection. Here, however, is a guardian angel who needs to be guarded. But in the next stanza the lady does seem to act as a guardian spirit: her hand on his waist would free her lover from fear. Yet in this stanza 3 she is referred to simply as his 'love', a term in keeping with the main sense of the stanza, that she is the object of his protection. Once again, then, we have in the poem a reversal of expected values: a helpless guardian angel, and a creature who should have been helpless proving able to protect. This reversal underlines the frustration of the lovers' efforts to come together. It reinforces the theme of separation. Things have turned out quite differently from what they intended.

What, then, happened to frustrate them? One night she was in terror, but he was busy driving horses instead of protecting her. There is no suggestion in the poem that her terror could have been caused by anything other than her swim over the loch. The wind that took her mantle in stanza 2 becomes a tempest in stanza 3: there, wind and wave are dangers to be feared. These indications sufficiently show what happened on the lake, even though in the economy of the outlaw's monologue 'wind' is hardly more than a synonym for 'air', and 'tempest' is mentioned in a passage describing only a might-have-been. In wishing himself at hand to save her from drowning, the outlaw is imagining a recurrence of the circumstances in which his love was alone, boatless in the freezing middle of the turbulent loch. We may take it she did not survive.

This granted, the lover's apparently preposterous wish becomes intelligible. His willingness to share her ordeal by water and its

consequences reveals the extent of his love for her. Since boats were useless, there were practical as well as heroic reasons for scorning to ask for one. His heroic if hopeless effort to save her would have shielded her from terror to the extent that in her loving reliance on him her terror would have been allayed by his fearlessness. He could not have saved her from the danger that caused her terror. The expression 'from terror my angel to shield' is relevant to her psychological condition; it does not refer to her physical circumstances.

This, then, is the tragic situation in which the outlaw begins his lament. Lines at the beginning of the poem that seem to refer solely to his exile (his ale is not like the brewing of men: his life is one of isolation) are now seen to contain a more poignant sense of loss. Once exile was a bitterness to be enjoyed, not merely endured: his ale was 'good'. Now there comes an irony over 'good', for the ale symbolizes the bitterness of irremedial separation from his loved one. The kind glance he had sought was 'far'[1] originally because of her physical distance from him, but now there is all the distance of death between them.

The separation that appalls the lover is symbolized by night, with its associations of darkness and sleep. The reference to his bed and his roof suggests a parallel to the sleep of the birds at the end of the poem. It is evening when she wanders and sings. The theft that kept him from her and the swim that drowned her both took place at night. The separation from consciousness which takes place in the darkness of night appropriately images the separation of the lovers which has been made complete by the death of the lady.

Yet in the last stanza the lover seems to picture her as alive. She resides, she wanders, and she sings. Apparently the wishful thinking in stanza 3 has become a delusion in stanza 4: the separation of the lovers is complete everywhere except in the outlaw's own mind. He knows she is dead, but prefers to picture her still living and accessible down by the lake.

But she is not accessible: that is the point, and his imagination admits as much. 'Resides' we may take as a euphemism for 'lies

[1] Gwynn, op. cit., p. 47, quotes the line as 'And the wealth that I sought, one fair kind glance from my love'. But in the context 'far' is more effective than 'fair'.

buried' — somewhere on the shore, presumably, where her body was washed up. Her soul is elsewhere: the 'angel' has become his 'fair one of Heaven'. An alternative reading in line 14, 'the fair one'[1] for 'my fair one', removes her still farther from her lover's world. In the first half of the line he claims her as his own, 'The maid of my heart'; in the second half she has become as inaccessible as Beatrice in Paradise, 'the fair one of Heaven'. Indeed, had the word 'maid' been left till later in the line to replace 'one', she would have been conceived in terms of the Blessed Virgin. Instead she has become the goddess of the woods, some unclassical Irish Diana at one with her environment. For the same epithet, 'wild', is applied to the trees round the lake and to her song: they are manifestly of the same order of being. Her song has no reference to her lover for he is no longer any concern of hers: the otherness of her nature has separated her completely from him. Her song, however sweet, is not human; it has a 'wild twist' that wrenches its reference away from her human lover to those non-human creatures, the birds, that are wild like the environment of which she is now a part.

Her attempt to rejoin him, then, concluded not merely in physical separation, but in a total and final disjunction of their separate modes of being. When about to swim she stretched forth her arms, the act suggesting also her desire to embrace him: she embraced death instead. She swam to find him, and found instead the birds, the wild tree and the mazes round the lake. She entered another order of being.

But in another sense she has drawn closer to him. She haunts a wild outdoor region symbolically similar to the glen where he as an outlaw is forced to live. Her wild tree parallels his greenwood, her lonely wanderings mirror his exile: she has in effect become an outlaw like her lover. And she is nearer still: she resides in his heart, not merely in Heaven. So the tone of the last stanza is one of reconciliation. There is the settled, homely continuance of 'resides', the calmness of sleep in the last line, and the sweetness of her song. It is all in the mazes of his own mind. That is where she is wandering. His own thoughts give way to thoughts of her, as the songs of the birds give way to her song.

[1] In *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, 1958, 1959 (reprinted), and *Irish Poets of the 19th Century* (ed. Geoffrey Taylor), 1951.

Then he finds peace. Her song calms the birds to sleep. But it has its wild twist still, for he can never entirely forget the pang of separation.

IV

We may now attempt to sum up the meaning of the poem. It records a situation in which a bereaved lover laments the tragic death of his lady, unwilling on the one hand to credit what has happened, but on the other sublimating his loss by making the memory of her part of his spiritual personality. We may describe it as a representation of the psychological ambivalence of sorrow. Sorrow implies a more or less impassioned regret for what might have been but now can be no longer. In one respect it is a useless raging against fate, inhibiting action and obscuring the apprehension of reality. But in another it is the appropriate emotional act of appreciation of the worth of what has been lost, and leads to an increased awareness of reality when the bereaved person, accepting what has happened, is able to transform his physical loss into a spiritual gain.

Of course we need not suppose that Callanan or the originators of the folk tale he translated had formulated these ideas when the poem was produced. But we may conclude that they, sympathizing with the outlaw's experience and faithfully selecting images to embody it, produced a poem analysable in terms of mental processes active even if subconscious in their own minds.

We see that it is dangerous to assume that because a poem looks superficial at a first reading it is not worth following up the imaginative experience it presents as far as investigation can take us. Now that the last couplet, for instance, is pregnant with content, its emotional appeal, which first prompted us to undertake the analysis, is intensified. Even the apparent *cliché* 'angel' is full of meaning, the senses 'loved one', 'guardian spirit' and 'lady in Heaven after death' all being relevant in the context of the poem's total meaning. Doubtless there will be those who, finding the romantic idiom of the poem intellectually unsatisfying, will feel that it dissipates instead of intensifying the power with which the emotion of sorrow should have been expressed. But they will hardly quarrel with the fundamental quality of the theme, or with the economy of its evocation.