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"The Spiritual Secularized": A Reading of Jeffery Donaldson's "Museum"

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How often does one turn the page of a volume of contemporary verse, and come upon a poem which one recognizes, even at a tentative first reading, as a major work worthy to take its place in a venerable tradition, with literary ancestors stretching back to the beginnings of western culture? Such was my experience in 2008 when I encountered a poem entitled "Museum" in Jeffery Donaldson's third volume, *Palilalia*. I had much admired his earlier books, *Once Out of Nature* (1991) and *Waterglass* (1999), and realized his importance as a Canadian poet intent upon preserving the finest qualities of the modernist movement, but one who wrote in an up-to-date idiom while drawing upon the experience, and even the wisdom, of past literary achievements. "Museum" seemed to me a stunning though complex and intellectually challenging example of his work at its best.

In the following pages, I hope to justify this response in an exploratory reading. I do not apologize for reviving the no-longer fashionable methods of "practical criticism" which seem appropriate for the matter in hand, but must insist that this does *not* imply following the extreme procedures of North American "New Criticism." I do *not* confine my attention to the poem as a self-contained object—a "well-wrought urn"—but recognize its all-important defining context and the historical predecessors which it evokes and upon which it depends. The poem can be appreciated on its own yet, like all but the simplest of lyrics, makes both personal and cultural extensions beyond its own boundaries which need to be understood if it is to communicate its full force. I shall therefore begin with an introductory section providing background information before attempting a commentary on "Museum" itself.

Donaldson's early books were mainly remarkable for a clipped detachment communicating cultural breadth and keen artistic intelligence. Their titles provide clues to his main poetic interests. *Once Out of Nature*, echoing a central line in W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (217-8), focuses on the age-old dichotomy between Nature and Art, and celebrates, to quote another line from the same poem, "Monuments of unageing intellect." He

includes poetic explorations of (among others) Monet and Vitruvius, while the book ends with a sequence of poems devoted to Mahler. *Waterglass* continues in the same strain, with flowing water as an emblem of the ever-changing natural world and inert glass representing the created human product that preserves it within an (again Yeatsian) "artifice of eternity." Focused more specifically on the fine arts, it contains memorable poems on Bonnard, the Secessionist Exhibition of 1902, and a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, but it is framed by a more personal opening poem ("The Gift of a Water-Clock") and a closing study of the last days of Freud which together emphasize a related dichotomy between Time and the passing of time. Here once again the longer and more distinctive poems are generally presented in tercets and quatrains, with lines remaining within hearing distance of orthodox blank verse. The language is sometimes almost disconcertingly prosaic, but interspersed with unexpected metaphors or aural effects, and laced with occasional surprises (a sestina, a delicate lyric, or intricate displays of rhyme).

One finds a similar intriguing mixture in *Palilalia*, though this book is far more autobiographical in reference. First, however, why "Palilalia"? The title, if one lacks an extensive medical vocabulary, is off-putting, and the back-cover blurb, explaining it as "disordered speech" and announcing that Donaldson "offers poems about Tourette's Syndrome," hardly invites an immediate enthusiastic response. Yet I, for one, persevered—and was amply rewarded. Palilalia is defined in the Oxford dictionary as a verbal tic that results in "an involuntary repetition of words, phrases, or sentences"; Tourette's Syndrome is characterized by "multiple tics, both motor and vocal." In a number of movingly personal poems scattered through the book, we find that the poet himself suffers from this affliction, and that it has been passed down, through heredity, to his son. However, lest readers get the wrong impression from his references in the title-poem to "unruly tongue-clucks, snorts, and growls" (17), I should perhaps add that, on the few occasions when I have met Donaldson, such a condition did not seem evident, and was certainly not conspicuous.

I dislike being urged to read poetry for socially-approved but non-literary reasons, so my initial response was wary. But it then occurred to me that, while Palilalia may be "disordered speech," is not that a possible definition for poetry itself? If Donaldson is acknowledging a sickness, might it not be what past ages regarded as a "sacred sickness"? In any event, what he achieves here—with a combination of doggedness, boldness, and sheer savvy—results in the transformation of a potential liability into a creative opportunity.

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Before proceeding to "Museum," it will be helpful to examine two poems that appear earlier in the volume and provide a significant context. The first, the autobiographical "Ultra Sound" (3-5) which opens the collection, is in many respects typical in its vivid but potentially allegorical representativeness. It takes place in a medical clinic and involves four characters: the narrating husband, his pregnant wife, the unborn child whose image is uncertainly discernible on the screen, and a highly efficient technician who "measures out a line / and takes a pulse, notes any obvious stress, / counts the number of feet" (5). (A literary-minded reader will immediately notice the use of words—"line," "stress," "feet"—that are equally applicable to *poetic* technique.) This is a poetry in which modern technology is accepted without question as part of everyday life and as a clearly valid literary subject, and one which Donaldson handles effortlessly and with aplomb. At the same time, he clearly belongs, as we shall see, to an endangered species as a poet who carries around in his memory a host of quotations from most of the major poets.

Art and science, then, are cogently juxtaposed within an intimately human situation. We are offered images of both creation ("Darkness moves / over the face in your mother's waters" [3]) and annunciation ("white-smocked angelic messenger, / of the days to come" [3]). The vague shape on the screen recalls a "drifting astronaut's ghostly face / behind glass dome reflections, lost in space," and is presented (in language adapted from St. Paul) as "extraterrestrial, image pressed / to the see-through dark glass" [4]) that will eventually be seen "face to face" (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12). A twenty-first-century scene that takes state-of-the-art science in its stride but has yet maintained its connections with the cultural traditions that keep us human.

The baby, when born, turns out of course to have inherited the tics, and the title-poem "Palilalia" (16-17), positioned immediately before "Museum" and dedicated to his son, reveals itself as an extraordinary tour de force. It contains eight quatrains, in which fourteen individual lines each repeat themselves once (with only slight variations) as we move through the poem, while one line recurs (with greater variations) four times. But these repetitions are by no means "involuntary." Nor, it needs to be said, are they self-imposed straitjackets from which the poet can show off his skill by trickily extricating himself. These accumulated repetitions are not only meaningful but central, since repetition is itself central not only to the poem but to the volume to which it belongs. The poem begins: "Do I hear an echo?" Donaldson has here put a new spin on the story of Echo (the word, incidentally, echoes within "Museum" [18, 20, 23]), and the trope

will never be quite the same again. In this case, the book-cover blurb is helpful in pointing out that palilalia, as harnessed by Donaldson, can become "a meditative mantra that focuses and intensifies thought."

"Museum" itself begins—unexpectedly yet appropriately, as we shall see—with an epigraph about poetry from Northrop Frye, which embodies the literary theorist's two main subjects of interest: the literary imagination, and the importance of religious awareness within any full life. "[T]he wisest of poets," he writes, "have always insisted that…all poetry that is worth listening to has been written by the gods" (18). A confident, courageous, even potentially hubristic opening, one might think, for a modern poem by a poet who, though known and respected by many of his fellow practitioners, has not yet been accepted by others as an unquestionably major voice.

We soon discover, however, that the poem is set in the Museum subway-station in Toronto, located under Queens Park with the Royal Ontario Museum on one side and Victoria College in the University of Toronto on the other.[1] The geographical and intellectual associations are alike crucial. The poem relates to earlier poems involving a descent into an underworld, a world of the dead, in search of wisdom and understanding. Donaldson's ultimate model is doubtless Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus speaks with the ghost of the prophet Tiresias (a reference to Odysseus's wife Penelope appears in the poem [25]); but, as the opening lines reveal, a more immediate influence is clearly the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, the first two books of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Dante, "in the middle of a life" (*Inferno* 1. 1), is guided through Hell and Purgatory in the direction of Paradise by the shade of the poet Virgil.

Yet "Museum" belongs to an even more specific poetic subgenre in which a poet encounters a mysterious figure, usually an eminent dead poet, who proffers advice that is sometimes helpful but often frustratingly ambiguous. A more immediate source for Donaldson is the second section of "Little Gidding," the last of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*,[2] which itself draws heavily on Canto 15 of the *Inferno*. Moreover, he is also indebted to the final section of Seamus Heaney's "Station Island" in which Heaney imagines himself as meeting, among others, the shade of James Joyce.[3] But in "Museum," while waiting on the subterranean platform for the next train, the speaker (clearly Donaldson) is presented as encountering a spirit, highly reminiscent of Eliot's vision of "some dead master" ("Little Gidding," l.92), whom we soon recognize as Northrop Frye himself, who taught at Victoria College for over half a century, and with whom Donaldson had studied.

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The complications and interconnections here are extraordinary. First, the subway setting has Eliotic precedent, recalling an earlier passage in *Four Quartets* ("East Coker," l.118) about the underground train that "stops too long between stations." Second, Frye was a scholar resembling Dante's Brunetto Latini rather than Eliot's "familiar compound [but poetic] ghost" ("Little Gidding," l.95), yet one preoccupied with the relation between the word (literary) and the Word (theological). But whereas Eliot's "concern was speech" (l.126), Donaldson's interests are different again—here presumably poetic and literary-critical yet also medical. Third, Frye had published a short book entitled, simply, *T. S. Eliot* in 1963 which, perhaps because of its emphasis on archetypal structure and political attitudes rather than sufficient "concern [with] speech," provoked the displeasure of its subject. At the same time, Frye was a confirmed admirer of Eliot's poetry and considered this particular section from "Little Gidding" the finest adaptation of Dante in English.[4]

"Adaptation," be it noted, is not in any way "imitation." And this is an appropriate place to make the point that, while Eliot's section *suggests* an exercise in Dante's *terza rima* (mainly through the layout on the page), it lacks regular rhyme and is in fact Dantesque in tone only. Similarly, Donaldson wisely employs quatrains rather than his equally favoured tercets. We are continually reminded of the *Inferno* in terms of reference and allusion, but not otherwise. (Indeed, as we shall see, Donaldson's tercets, which he uses often in other poems in *Palilalia*, including "Ultra Sound," would seem to be one of the debts that he owes to Heaney.)

Furthermore, "Museum" is set "in a dark corner" (clearly the equivalent of Dante's "dark wood" (*Inferno* 1. 2) where "The line vanished into the underground / in two directions" (18)—doubtless past and future. Donaldson is clearly depressed, uncertain about his poetic prospects. Suddenly he becomes aware of "a conjured presence" (20) who is never explicitly named but is easily recognized by "chunky glasses // and electric hair" (21), and his admission that he "was never much / for small talk" (23). Donaldson asks, not Eliot's "What! Are *you* here?" ("Little Gidding," l.98, echoing the *Inferno* [15.30]), but "what are you *doing* here?" (22). He acknowledges Frye as "old sky father, old officer of art!" but admits that he has read him closely in the hope that he might show "the way chosen ones take / to the spiritualized secular" (22)—an insight that implicitly sets him apart from orthodox United-Church Frygians. The questioner is concerned with the decidedly sceptical religious thinker as well as the literary commentator.

At this point it is convenient to leave Dante and Eliot for a moment and turn to Heaney's "Station Island."[5] Five of the poems in Heaney's sequence are written in unrhymed tercets, and Donaldson seems to have learned from him a serviceable verse-form occupying an appropriate middle way between the extremes of traditional iambic pentameter and the potential formlessness of free verse. Heaney's tercets employ a flexible syllabic verse in which the norm of ten syllables is varied to allow lines of nine and eleven, and (exceptionally) more or less. This method enables the syntax to flow freely and often colloquially without unnecessary constraints, yet it can be overlaid, when desirable, with the kind of rhetorical flourishes—metaphors, repetitions, and the like—that I have already noted in Donaldson.

Other similarities are also worth mentioning. Both Heaney and Donaldson were in their forties while writing the poems under discussion here, so share Dante's situation "in the middle of a life." In addition, Donaldson's just-quoted greeting of Frye as "old sky father, old officer of art" is surely an intentional echo of the famous final sentence in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" (253). And Joyce, as I have already indicated, is the final "ghost" that Heaney encounters in the last section of "Station Island."

But Heaney is especially influential, so far as Donaldson is concerned, in terms of subject-matter and treatment. He grew up as an Irish Catholic in militantly Protestant Northern Ireland. "Station Island" is set on an island in Lough Derg, a place of pilgrimage also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, and Heaney, who "went on the pilgrimage three times as a schoolboy" (Macrae 63), imagines himself participating in the traditional act of visiting the Stations of the Cross. (Is it reading too subtly to suggest a connection with Donaldson's locating of his poem in a secular "Station"?) But Heaney is a reluctant, sceptical pilgrim, and the issues of faith, doubt, and renunciation (in more than one sense of the word) are raised in the two most forceful and challenging sequences occurring before and after the pilgrimage itself. In section II, the "old fork-tongued turncoat" (167), William Carleton, author of "The Lough Derg Pilgrim" glossed by Neil Corcoran as "a denunciation of [Catholicism's] barbarities and superstitions" (117), is met on the road leading to the island. He insists, "it is a road you travel on your own" (167, "it" referring both to the actual road—*not* to be taken—and the literary road that any true poet must find for himself). In the final section, on stepping off the returning boat on to the mainland jetty, Heaney meets the ghost of Joyce (another "turncoat") who urges the same course of action: "What you do you must do on your own…Now

strike your note" (192, 190). This is, of course, the way of "silence, exile, and cunning," also advocated at the close of *Portrait of the Artist* (247).

Northrop Frye, ordained as a minister of the United Church of Canada, though ultimately devoting a distinguished life to scholarship and teaching in the cause of imaginative literature, experienced his own religious uncertainties, as we know from the notebooks and interviews as well as, more obliquely, from his later bible-books, *The Great Code*, *Words with Power*, and *The Double Vision*. His whole life and works, indeed, involved a perilous balance between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between the naiveties and vulgarities of popular belief and practice on the one hand, and the sublimities of religious vision (represented for Frye by the art and writings of William Blake) on the other.

This is the aspect of Frye and his work that, forecastably, fascinates Donaldson. It is signposted early in the poem by an adapted quotation of the Victoria College motto, "the truth will set you free" (see 19). Its implications for Frye were clearly ironic—and also, it would seem, for Donaldson. He speaks for others (including the present writer) when he exclaims, crucially:

> …I thought if I kept reading your prose
> you might show the way chosen ones take
> to the spiritualized secular…
>
> (22)

Outside the poem, the same concern is found in the "Introduction" that Donaldson wrote, in his capacity as co-editor, for the collection of essays entitled *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye*, published in 2004. There he sees Frye, both in his books about the Bible and in those devoted to literature and culture, as "the reluctant hero and the benevolent trickster" (3). This refers to Frye's definition of *eiron* in *Anatomy of Criticism* (40), "the man who deprecates himself," whom Frye hails as "a predestined artist." Donaldson stresses Frye's "conception of the Bible as a *secular*, literary document" in his religious books and "his identification with the *spiritual* dimension of imaginative and metaphoric language" in his literary studies ("Introduction" 3; my emphases). His lifelong preoccupation with the relation between the secular word and the capitalized Word at the opening of St. John's Gospel was central.

Donaldson goes on to explain Frye's view of resurrection as "an ongoing personal journey" involving "an understanding that we already have within us what we seem to look for, already embody in our every creative act the life we seek" (5, 9-10), and concludes: "There is in the end a spiri-

tual quality in Frye's writing itself…a sense of the words circling around a revelation that might be inhabited as an act of mind, if not entirely possessed or defined" (16).

"Museum," I would argue, represents a literary "creative act" that embodies the same (oblique) revelation in imaginative terms. The somewhat grumpy ghost on the underground platform urges Donaldson not to "get your hopes up / on clarity" (23). But Donaldson "wanted more" (23) and cries beseechingly, "tell me // what I'll find there *beyond*" (25)—but predictably receives no answer. The situation takes us back to Eliot and his "dead master" in "Little Gidding" (l.92) where the speaker admits, *eiron*-like, "I may not comprehend, may not remember" (l.110), and the "familiar compound ghost" is equally unforthcoming:

> I am not eager to rehearse
> My thought and theory which you have forgotten.
> These things have served their purpose: let them be.
> (ll.111-113)

All he is prepared to disclose are the earthy and unfulfilling "gifts reserved for age" (l.129).

Frye's concluding answer in "Museum" is the didactically ambiguous but imaginatively rich "No time" (25); either he has no time left – like the ghost of Hamlet's father mentioned earlier in the poem – or there is no such thing as time in the Beyond. Hardly a resolution, but it leads smoothly into the poem's conclusion. Frye fades at the "skreak and howl" (26) of a coming train which Donaldson prepares to enter. The final phrase, "a door opened" (26), represents only a minimal positive.

In conclusion, two minor but significant issues need to be raised. The first involves additional intriguing interconnections triggered by the just-mentioned reference to *Hamlet*. The opening words put into the mouth of Frye as revenant spirit are

> "Still conjuring ghosts, are you Hamlet,
>
> from the depths of the waiting place?
> Have you forgotten my Shakespeare lecture
> in '81, on how the Danish spook
> is not one jot less real than the made world
>
> he rises in?"
> (21)

We need not digress into academic discussions relating to Shakespeare's attitude to ghosts (thoroughly treated in, among other books, John Dover Wilson's *What Happens in "Hamlet"?*), but it is worth noting that Donaldson is careful to present the Frye of the poem as "a conjured presence whirled out / in tangents from myself" (20)[6] and makes Frye aware that he has been "conjure[d]…in a dream" (21). More important, however, is the similarity within difference between Hamlet's encounter with his father's spirit on the high battlements of Elsinore and Donaldson's meeting with his father in art in the subterranean "waiting place."

Donaldson greets Frye, as we have seen, without Hamlet's agonized doubts, as "old sky father, officer of art" which, as we have also seen, establishes connections with Heaney's last poem in "Station Island." But there is another, subtler reference late in "Museum." Frye, in another *eiron*-like self-deprecating tone, insists:

> You've a way to go
> and it won't be this old crow, cocking
>
> his eye at you under these shady lights,
> who will get you there.
>
> (23)

"…crow, cocking …" Donaldson expects us to pick up the echo of Marcellus's speech just after the appearance of the ghost in the first scene of *Hamlet* beginning, "It faded on the crowing of the cock" (I i 157)—a line that echoes a traditional folk-tale and ushers in an appealing Christian legend very different from the "secular" atmosphere presented in "Museum."

Yet these references also extend outwards towards the modernist cultural world that Donaldson invokes. We are at liberty to think of Joyce's own theory of *Hamlet* and its preoccupation with the more general theme of sons and fathers in the "Scylla and Charybdis" section of *Ulysses*, of Eliot's famous reference in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"—"No, I am not Prince Hamlet…" (ll.111ff.)—and his notorious but brilliant essay on the play in which it is called "the 'Mona Lisa' of literature" and criticized because Hamlet suffers from "an emotion which can find no outlet in action" (*Selected Essays* 144, 146).

My final point is best introduced by way of a comment in Frye's early *T. S. Eliot*: "There is…no hell in *Four Quartets*, which belongs entirely to the purgatorial vision" (77). For me, this has always been a troubling remark; it is true that we do not find there the unequivocal imagery of damnation, but Brunetto Latini's cry quoted from Canto 15 of the *Inferno* and

the similarly borrowed detail of his "brown baked features" ("Little Gidding," l.94) are, to say the least, suggestive. Moreover, the whole atmosphere of the air-raid sequence, including the "dark dove with the flickering tongue" (l.81) evoking a demonic Pentecost—extended later in the "dove descending…With flame of incandescent terror" (ll.200-201)—as well as the rising smoke (l.85) and the fading at the blowing of the horn (l.149, at one level the "All-Clear" at the end of the raid but at the same time Eliot's gloomy substitution for the crowing of the cock in *Hamlet*), all indicate a location for which a term like "hellish" is surely in order. In addition, the "underground train" passage already quoted from "East Coker" (l.118) implies an underworld of some sort—and would seem to have done so for Donaldson.

Heaney's Dantesque emphasis, of course, is purgatorial, and Neil Corcoran cites his acknowledgment of the "ghosts in the *Purgatorio* as a model for his own poem" (115). This is no place to open a debate on the theology of damnation, but it is proper to point out that, in literature, the schoolmen's distinctions are regularly blurred. Hamlet's father claims to be condemned to "sulphurous and tormenting flames" (I v 3), and although he later assures Horatio that it is "an honest ghost" (I v 138) a reference to Hell immediately follows its departure (I v 93); and to add to the ambiguity Faust (mentioned by Donaldson within "Museum" [20]) is saved by Goethe but damned by Marlowe, Mozart, and Berlioz. Furthermore, throughout the western tradition Christian and Classical allusions to the world of the dead are continually intermingled, and Donaldson duly makes a passing reference to "the Styx" (22). His care in acknowledging that the shade of Frye is "a conjured spirit whirled out / …from himself" (20) may be regarded as an attempt to make the apparition psychologically acceptable in the twenty-first century, but we remember that Faust himself conjures up Mephistopheles in the traditional stories.

A brief look at another poem in *Palilalia*, "Cave" (47-8), is relevant here because it conspicuously alludes to all these traditions in small compass. Donaldson is recalling a childhood exploit when he explored what seemed a cave but was actually an abandoned mine-shaft. He presents himself as

> the stout neighbourhood explorer
> of nether worlds, gateways to the bowels
> of the earth, from whose bourn no child returns.

"Nether" implies the infernal, and the last six words quoted are, of course, an echo from *Hamlet* (III i 79-80). He "groped in, and saw…hell," includ-

ing "steps that circled / …down." (Dante's Purgatory involves a spiral journey up from Hell—while Donaldson's poem refers to "depths I would never know, and God / knows never see.") He considers himself "in limbo," in popular parlance a midway point between two extremes, but in Dante's schema the uppermost circle of Hell, home of the virtuous pagans, including Virgil. Donaldson is, however, still on earth with "a perfect heaven opening above his head." "Museum" is structured on the same three-tiered universe, though the heaven seems vague, decidedly less evident than whatever underworld we may imagine.

I have concentrated in this essay on the structural and intellectual aspects of "Museum," but it is also permeated with a broad range of not-yet-mentioned artistic effects: aural versatility ("The clack and crow-screech // of steel wheels echoed" [18]—notice that "echo" again); cheeky puns (Victoria College's "faux-gothic walls hold the city at Bay" [19]—notice the capital), more up-to-date imagery ("like a cell-phone signal / too far from its source" [21]); above all, resonant and allusive vocabulary ("the endless notebook-drafts of plumbed inklings," "You could use some metaphoric roughage / in your diet" [24], "the Penelopian back-ravellings of the unmade" [25]). This is a poem that transcends all arguments about originality and convention, colonial and imperial, the local and the international; this is achieved art.

Notes

1 Here it is necessary to point out that "Museum," which was first published in *Antigonish Review* 151 (Autumn 2007), was written before the dramatic refurbishing of the station in question with reproductions of objects and designs from the Royal Ontario Museum's collection. Previously, though ROM display-cases were occasionally installed at the entrance-level, the station platform itself reflected the standard design of Toronto Transit Commission architecture at that time, dominated by what might fairly be described as lavatorial green tile (cf. 18, st.3).

2 All quotations from Eliot's poetry are from *The Complete Poetry and Plays 1909-1950*.

3 I am indebted here to Donaldson himself. In answer to a letter of mine expressing appreciation of "Museum," he referred to this additional influence, which I might otherwise have overlooked.

4 I rely here on an unidentified quotation penciled into my annotated paperback edition of *Four Quartets* (1959). I have not relocated it in print, and suspect that it was written down from one of Frye's lectures in his "Principles of Literary Symbolism" course.

5 All Heaney quotations are from *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*.

6 Moreover, "whirled" in this context inevitably recalls the famous use of the word in Eliot's "Ash Wednesday": "Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word" (ll.156-7).

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