

In Memoriam

Anthony Cronin (1928–2016)

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The passing of Anthony Cronin on 27 December 2016, just one day short of his 88th birthday, brings an end to our living connection with the literary scene in Dublin of the 1950s, a scene dominated by the larger-than-life figures of Patrick Kavanagh, Brian O’Nolan, and Brendan Behan. Tony was a poet, a novelist, a critic, and a cultural activist. He was a lovely man, kind, pensive and amusing yet our loss seems less because he succeeded so well in recording all he knew and understood about those others both as writers and as mortals in *Dead as Doornails* (1976) and *No Laughing Matter* (1989) – books which, together with essay-collections such as *A Question of Modernity* (1960) and *Heritage Now* (1982) comprise an indispensable guide to modern Irish writing. His longer poem *RMS Titanic* (1961), which was anthologised for Penguin Poems in 1966 along with others by Auden, W. S. Graham, Hugh MacDiarmid, George Barker and Kavanagh. Among a dozen poetry editions, his sonnet series *The End of the Modern World* (1989) exhibits a glittering knowledge on the history of modern times. His *Collected Poems*, published by New Island Press in 2004, garnered wide plaudits though his reputation never gelled into that of a major Irish poet. His debut novel *The Life of Riley* (1964) supplies a sardonic account of the exiguous lives of Irish men of letters in the era of *The Bell* and *Envoy* as well as glimpses of literary London at the end of the age of ‘little magazines’ – one of which (*Time and Tide*) he served as literary editor in the late 1950s. Spells as writer in residence and visiting professor on American campuses in the 1960s reinforced an overseas perspective which accounts in some measure for the cosmopolitan turn of mind so pervasively evident in his way of viewing Irish society and culture, like Seán O’Faolain before him.

One of the chief fruits of that perspective was the *Irish Times* column ‘Viewpoint’ which he wrote during 1974–80, and which came out from Brandon Press as *An Irish Eye* in 1985. The influence of that circumspect reflection on Irish arts, history, and politics for a generation of readers was immense: here was a modern way of looking at things without defecting from the values of the newly independent nation. It was by reason of that influence on my own mind, as a post-graduate in Dublin writing on James Joyce, that I later invited him to give an inaugural lecture at a conference on *Hearts and Minds: Ireland under the Union* held in the Princess Grace Irish Library in Monaco in 2000. With extraordinary modesty he began by telling an audience mostly comprised of Irish historians that he was ‘keenly conscious’ of the presence of those ‘in whose special field I must to some extent trespass’ while expressing the hope that, in case of trouble, he could ‘retire to the higher and safer

ground of literature.¹ He need not have worried. The lecture he delivered was a typically well-informed account of the political dynamics involved in the passage of the Acts of Union in 1800–1801, followed by a compelling discussion of its merits and demerits, all conducted with his hallmark clarity and wit. Cronin argued the Union was largely based on the 'necessary fiction' that Ireland was just like England – a fiction which broke down dramatically in the succeeding decades – before finally suggesting that Ireland gained much by the prolonged immersion in British democracy at Westminster, acquiring there the parliamentary skills needed to weather its own Civil War. Yet, at the same time, he cast doubt on the ability of the Grattan's Parliament to pave the way to real democracy without the intervention of the British state instanced by the creation of the Maynooth Seminary and, much later, the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and the Land Acts which rendered Ireland the only territory in contemporary Europe where landlordism had been outlawed by 1904.

The double movement of Cronin's mind in that exemplary lecture stands in evidence of a remarkable capacity for intellectual balance which he brought to everything he undertook. Of his work in different literary genres, Rita Kelly has rightly said that 'they all overlap into one large intelligent nebula.'² What is discernible in his handling of each – and he was prolific – is the operation of a clear mind which grasps facts and connections and locates them in a framework of interpretation that reveals him as a modern Irish intellectual *pur sang*: more 'modern' than 'modernist,' perhaps, but emphatically averse to the kind of mystification which underpinned the legacy of the Irish Literary Revival, and which each of the three 1950s writers already mentioned combatted in his own way. Among them, Cronin, a strict contemporary of Behan but considerably younger than Kavanagh or O'Nolan – respectively 24 and 17 years his elder – survived the longest, outliving Kavanagh and O'Nolan respectively by 49 and 50 years. The standing monument to this fact is the monochrome photo of Cronin with those two and some others, all posed before the Sandymount Martello on the First Bloomsday Tour which the literary publican John Ryan organised in 1954. (Two years younger than Cronin, Ryan died in 1992.) Nor is this a hollow recitation of biographical dates since the bodkin that did for the others was a concoction of alcohol and tobacco – at least in Kavanagh's case, with an all-too occasional egg boiled in a tea-kettle, which course of life Cronin wisely eschewed. He was a survivor, too, in the sense that he broke free from the parochial enclave of Irish letters in the newly-born Republic of Ireland – formally declared in 1949 – and became, in his own phrase, 'the man who went absent from native literature.'³ Correspondingly, he also engaged with the idea of modernity in all his writings – though Joyce and Beckett must clearly be acknowledged to have preceded and excelled his endeavours in their own works and, for that reason, elicited his reverence.

There is an interesting moment in Seamus Heaney's essay 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh' when he refers to Tony Cronin in these terms:

I am aware of a certain partisan strain in the criticism of Irish poetry, deriving from remarks by Samuel Beckett in the 1930s and developed most notably by Anthony Cronin. This criticism regards the vogue for poetry based on images from a country background as a derogation of literary responsibility and some sort of negative Irish feedback. It was deliberately polemical and might be worth taking up in another context.⁴

It is certainly true that Cronin eschewed Irish landscape in his own poetry and that Heaney turned it into the touchstone of his imagination under the guise of 'Sense of Place'⁵ – a very innocent idea which managed to breathe new life into the Irish literary nationalism and which, one might say, allowed Cronin to concentrate more freely on the cross-play of cosmopolitan ideas which went into the making of his sonnet-collection *The End of the Modern World* (1989). In the 'Introduction' to the essays in *Heritage: Irish Literature in the English language* (1982) – the nearest thing to a conventional academic work he ever wrote and still an ideal students' primer – Tony makes liberal concessions to the claims of nationalism while adding a characteristic assertion about the independence of the best writers from all that it entails:

The present writer does, as it happens, believe that it is important for Irish people anyway to recognise the 'Irishness' of their literature. The reflection any country or people obtains from its literature is at least as important a means of strengthening and exploring identity as is anything else. The possession of a literature is as important as is the possession of a language. Again, the establishment of an independent literature is at least as important as the establishment of an independent state; and it could be argued that in many matters the authors have so far shown more signs of independence than the state has.⁶

He then goes on to offer a provisional account of literary qualities of Irish writing: 'The principal characteristics of the best of our literature in English have been its daring, its humours, its humanity, its true internationalism, its willingness to face ultimates and go to extremes.'⁷

It is really in his negotiation of the questions of nation and identity in literature that Cronin makes his most permanent mark. If the deep-seated affinity with Joyce and Beckett are paramount, he found much fuel for this approach in the writings of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen who perpetually interrogated and otherwise joshed the tendency of Irish *literati* to assert their national and ethnic, or even religious, credentials at the least bidding. Meanwhile, in his unjustly ignored novel *Identity Papers* (1979), Cronin tested vigorously the idea that national history assigns roles to individuals with the comic tale of a young student at Blackrock College – the secondary school from which both Cronin and Eamon de Valera graduated in different epochs – who finds himself lumbered with the paternal legacy of Parnell's journalist-

betrayed Richard Piggott, adopts the appropriate character, and only later discovers that he is no relation at all.

In a fine pamphlet on Cronin in 2003, Brian Fallon – another highly-cultivated warder of the doors of Irish memory – has written that Cronin's life of Flann O'Brien came as a disappointment after *Dead as Doornails* if only because the 'pen-portraits' in the second-named leave little room for expansion or improvement.⁸ This is hardly true if one considers the thrust of the title – *No Laughing Matter* – as a summary diagnosis of the predicament of O'Nolan's generation of educated Irishmen (and Irishwomen, one might parenthetically add) when faced with a choice between settled employment in the Free State or the profession of agnostic doubts and artistic rebellion in the manner of Stephen Dedalus. The result, in a certain sense, was 'Flann O'Brien.' Similarly, Cronin nailed it when it came to expounding O'Nolan's relation to James Joyce, regarding whom he adopted a 'solution' devised by Niall Montgomery: 'Joyce and his challenge would be defused by making him a mere logomachic wordsmith, a great but demented genius who finally went mad in his ivory tower.'⁹ A final curiosity in Cronin's book on O'Nolan is the fact that the author claims the right to call himself the originator of the idea of making electricity from potatoes which figures in Flann O'Brien's *Slattery's Sago Saga*.¹⁰ This clever trope, reflecting the shortage of mineral resources in Ireland other than turf and 'taties, figures among 'the enthusiastic schemes' of a character in Cronin's *Life of Riley*.

Tony Cronin was appointed Cultural Adviser to the Taoiseach during both of Charles Haughey's terms of office and, in that capacity, he launched Aosdána, the cultural guild whose stipends took the edge of poverty off the existence of many literary and artistic figures in Ireland. If this was socialism-in-action it also bore the aspect of Gaelic patriarchalism with all the bardic trappings of *cnuas* and *saoí*. Engagement in cultural politics of this sort came at a cost, however, and there were more than a few rows around the table at Aosdána – notably in 1991 when Dr Brian Kennedy, the art-historian, wrote in a book that the inspiration of Aosdána derived from the former Arts Council director Colm Ó Briain, with the result that the book was withdrawn and shredded by the then director Mr Munnelly, with more than a hint of prompting by the long-standing Chairman. In 1997, trouble arose again when Máire Mac an tSaoi [Cruise O'Brien] assailed Francis Stuart as an anti-Semite at the hour of his elevation to the rank of *Saoi* in 1997, while Cronin with Paul Durcan and others leapt to his defence. More recently, the art historian and political columnist Bruce Arnold charged that manifold alterations had been made to the publisher's proof of Cronin's biography of Samuel Beckett in the light of research first published in James Knowlson's authorised biography which appeared at almost much the same time.¹¹ It would be false to paper over such episodes which, in a benign view, reveal an Irish man of letters living by his wits – which are, after all, God's best gift in the absence of an academic post or an editorial post on a national newspaper. For some, Cronin's reputation as a cultural angel was deeply besmirched by his stubborn loyalty to Haughey, both as Taoiseach and after his fall. The suggestion of a Borgean benefactor

was hence unavoidable, though the simple verdict of decent witness to the man's cultural achievements was probably justification enough. Indeed, any hostility directed towards Tony Cronin is often found to originate in its owner's animosity to 'The Boss.'

Anthony Cronin will be remembered as the owner of an incisive style charged with clarity and a certain wryness which he lustily employed to express an immense capacity for sound literary judgement, but also as a biographer whose manner was informed by a critical intelligence that stripped away the inessentials and set down the reality in terms of social causation and individual personality. It might be added that he was the product of an educational regime in which the vaunted 'methodology' of university research was less *rara avis* than *res ignotum*. Human memory was still the central resource and, where it failed, the imagination was always ready to supply the deficit. While many Irish academics today actually attain to the standard of literary writing, the biographer who is a writer first and foremost is now a rarity indeed. Anthony Cronin was both the finest and the last example of that breed to have lived in Ireland in our time. In poetry and fiction, criticism, biography and journalism, but also cultural administration, he showed himself to be an eminent member of the profession which Joyce chose to adopt for his own passport, 'Man of Letters.' It is no cliché in this case to evoke Tomás Ó Croímtháin's eulogistic phrase, we shall not see his like again.



Anthony Cronin giving the closing keynote address
(‘Flann O’Brien & Myles: Compartmentalised Modernism’)
at *100 Myles: The International Flann O’Brien Centenary Conference*,
Vienna Centre for Irish Studies, 27 July 2011.
(picture by David O’Kane)

Notes & references

¹ Anthony Cronin, 'Ireland under the Act of Union: A Backward Look,' in *Hearts and Minds: Irish Culture and Society Under the Act of Union*, ed. Bruce Stewart (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 2004), 12.

² Rita Kelly, reviewing *The Minotaur and Other Poems*, in *Books Ireland* (March 2000): 65.

³ See the poem of this title in *Collected Poems* (Dublin: New Island, 2004), 102.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978–1987* (London: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 8.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (London: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 131–49. There is no room here to weigh any further the thrust of that ingenious and influential essay, which has so often been examined with approbation and otherwise.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ Brian Fallon, *Anthony Cronin: Man of Letters* (Coleraine: Cranagh Press [Univ. of Ulster] 2003), 11.

⁹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton 1989), 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹¹ 'From Proof to Print: Anthony Cronin's Samuel Beckett: *The Last Modernist Reconsidered*,' in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 8 [Poetry and Prose / Poésies et autres proses] (Leiden: Brill 1999), 207–19.