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978-1-107-04184-4 - *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation and Violence in Early Modern Ireland*

Patricia Palmer

Excerpt

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The river flies
 Were busy on specks of blood, in clouds upon the hair;
 But where her praise was fixed upon his face
 No one had died, the flesh was adequate;
 And on a mouth that seem alive
 Only the smile was anti-clockwise.

Padraic Fallon, 'The Head'

The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue tackles one of the most disconcerting conjunctions in human culture by examining what happens when violence and art collide. To do so, it focuses on that baleful manifestation of extreme violence – the severed head. Bouncing, winking, cursing, crying out, such heads haunt the extraordinary range of literary works that emerged from the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. The book's principal concern is less with fictional violence per se than with the way real violence bleeds into literary depictions of warfare and decapitation. In his magisterial study, *Culture and Sacrifice*, Derek Hughes observes that 'literary human sacrifice rarely has much connection with the real thing.'² In late-sixteenth-century Ireland, however, the connection between the literary severed head and 'the real thing' was unnervingly close. As the political and military stakes rose – the future of English colonialism, the westward expansion of Protestantism and the survival of Gaelic and Catholic Ireland were all in play – *heads* on stakes marked out the desolate landscape of all-out war.³ Moreover, real heads on poles were soon joined by severed heads on the page. Among those driving home the conquest was a remarkable number of writers.⁴ Edmund Spenser's definition of *The Faerie Queene* as a 'historicall fiction'⁵ encapsulates the way in which art and fact were spliced together by writer-fighters crossing back and forth between military faction and literary fiction. Propagandists, pamphleteers and self-promoters (John Derricke, Barnaby Riche, Thomas Churchyard,

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and Thomas Gainsford, among others) fed their home audience's hunger for sensation; literate Lord Deputies and senior officials filed briefings; Spenser penned exculpatory dispatches from a massacre, sketched a blueprint for genocide and brought *The Faerie Queene* to its abrupt conclusion;⁶ and a bit player in the conquest (Sir John Harington) and a military mastermind of its devastating conclusion (Sir George Carew) translated, respectively, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Ercilla y Zúñiga's epic of the conquest of Chile, *La Araucana*. These conjunctions provide a unique opportunity for exploring how violence gets written and how atrocity gets translated into art.

Ever since the head of Orpheus, slashed from its body by shrieking Maenads, floated towards Lesbos in full-throated song, the image of the singing death's head has spoken of the troubling symbiosis between beauty and violence while gesturing towards the power of art to assuage and heal. In an Irish tradition clamorous with heads that pour scorn, issue warnings or even call out for morsels of grilled salmon, the singing head of the poet Donn-bó sounds an arrestingly plangent note.⁷ His story is told in *Cath Almaine*, 'The Battle of Allen', as an annal entry for 722 A.D., but here history is suffused with mysticism. The annalist wrestles beauty from a dimly remembered incident of historical violence and uses the severed head as an index not of violence but of the restorative power of art. The story begins with Fergal mac Mael Dun, King of Leth Cuinn, planning a raid on Cathal, King of Leth Mogha. One after another, however, Fergal's champions refuse to go on the expedition unless the beautiful youth, Donn-bó – a matchless poet, unequalled at harnessing horses, setting spears and plaiting hair – goes too. Donn-bó's mother refuses to release him to the wars until Fergal swears by St Columcille for his safe return. With Donn-bó's presence secured, the Ulstermen march into Leinster and pitch camp by a church in Allen. It is the eve of battle, but Donn-bó refuses Fergal's request to make music for him; he will sing for him the following night, wherever night finds them. The next day, the northerners are bested in the battle. Hua Maiglinni, the king's entertainer, is surrounded and ordered to make a jester's shout (*géim drúith*). As he yells his loudest, his head is sliced off and his *géim* hangs in the air for three days. Shortly afterwards, Donn-bó, too, is killed and after him Fergal:

At midday in Allen, contending for the cattle of Brega, the red-mouthed sharp-countenanced Badb uttered a shout of exultation around Fergal's head.⁸

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In short order, all but one of the Ulster nobles lie dead.

That night, the Leinstermen celebrate their victory. Their champion, Murchad, offers a reward for whoever will fetch a trophy head from the battlefield. A young warrior named Baethgalach dons full armour and heads for the moonlit meadow where the fallen lie. As he approaches Fergal's body, he hears a proclamation ring out: 'Ye have been commanded from the Plain of Heaven to make minstrelsy to-night for your lord.' Then the music of poets, harpers, horn-players and pipers fills the air; never before has Baethgalach heard such harmonies. 'Then he heard a voice in the wisp of rushes, and sweeter was that tune than the tunes of the world' (59). He goes to the rushes and sees that the song issues from the lips of a severed head: 'I am Donn-bó', says the head, 'and I have been pledged to make music tonight for my lord, that is, for Fergal, not by any means for Murchad. So do not annoy me.' Part of the delicacy of this tale comes from its meticulous choreography of reciprocation, of promises made and kept. Now, Baethgalach and Donn-bó, too, agree to terms: Donn-bó will go, provided Baethgalach pledges to 'bring me again to my body'. Baethgalach duly carries the head back to the hall and Murchad has him set it down on a pillar. Assuming the traditional posture of the Gaelic poet-performer,

Donn-bó turned his face to the wall of the house so that it might be dark for him, and he raised his *cruinsech* on high so that it was sweeter than any melody on earth's sward; and all the host were weeping and sad at the pit-ousness and misery (*ria truaigi 7 ri taidiuri*) of the music he sang. (62–63)

Leaving behind an audience limp with sadness, Baethgalach returns to the battlefield with the head. Donn-bó commends the warrior and instructs him to 'join my head to my body'. Baethgalach scrupulously fits head and body together and they fuse seamlessly. By fulfilling *his* obligation, Baethgalach ensures that Fergal's promise, too, is kept: Donn-bó returns in one piece to his mother.

The story of Donn-bó is a wistful imagining of the healing possibilities of art: through his bewitching music, the young poet sings his severed head back onto his shoulders. W. B. Yeats' short-story, 'The Binding of the Hair', drew on the tale of Donn-bó, turning its otherworldliness into the lush aesthetics of the Celtic twilight. Its hero, the poet Aodh, cannot resist the invitation to sing on the eve of battle and, in keeping with Yeats's own self-consciously mannered telling, he aestheticises violence:

Building a sorrowful loveliness
Out of battles of old times.

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But when death comes, Aodh's art has no power to countervail it. His severed head, singing with 'ecstatic lips' from among the dead, cannot replay Donn-bó's triumph of art over nature: the Badb-like crows who smite his lips 'with the points of their wings' knock his head from its perch and it rolls in the dirt to the feet of his queen.⁹

The fin-de-siècle romanticism of John Butler Yeats's accompanying illustration attests to the artistic allure of the severed head. Aodh's head floats above the rushes, backlit by a radiantly starry sky. His gaze is steady and directed heavenwards. His mouth opens in song with the round sweetness of a chorister's. Suggestions of shade encourage the viewer to infer the ghostly outlines of a right shoulder and a throat. We are in the realm of portraiture rather than death.¹⁰ The Aodh evoked by Yeats *père* hovers between worlds, between the bush from which he is suspended by a silky strand of dark hair and the wispy reeds; between earth and heaven. It is this liminality that gives the severed head its hold on the imagination and explains something of its attraction for poets and painters. Staked in the no man's land between life and death, it seems suspended between this world and whatever lies beyond, between selfhood and annihilation. There is a potent difference between a severed head and a skull. If a skull is a memento mori, the severed head is a memento vitae. It is its resemblance to the living, while being utterly drained of life, which disturbs us. In Rubens's *The Miracle of St Justus*, the young martyr cradles his own freshly severed head in his hands. The thumb and forefinger of the boy's right hand delicately support the chin; the blood-spattered fingers of the left draw the head protectively against his chest, at the top of which gapes the neat and terrible cross-section of his sliced neck. The face has the pallor of death but the eyes stare out in arrested terror and the boy's soft mouth struggles to speak.¹¹ When Bernal Díaz del Castillo entered Tenochtitlan at the end of the siege of Mexico, he reported that:

In one of the houses there were some upright posts on which [the Aztecs] had put the heads of many of our Spaniards whom they had killed and sacrificed during the recent battles. Their hair and beards had grown much longer than they were in life.¹²

Faces fixed in the rictus of death seem haunted by the ghost of their lives. The title page of a newsletter celebrating the collapse of Cahir O'Doherty's insurrection in 1608 and his subsequent execution shows two heads staked at Newgate in Dublin (fig. 1).¹³ O'Doherty's brow is crinkled, his eyes

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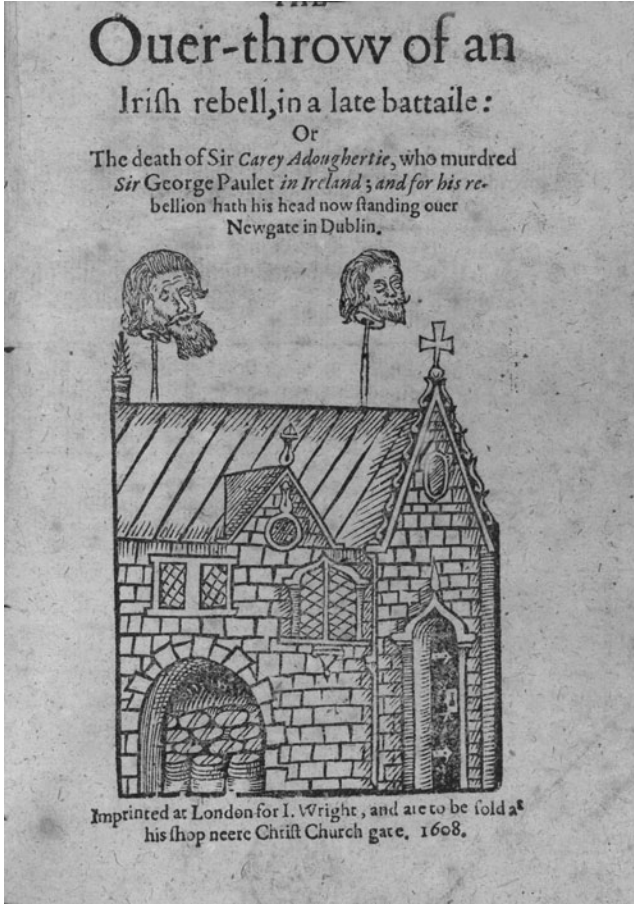
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Figure 1. *The Ouer-throw of an Irish rebell* (London, 1608).

lightly closed; his mouth is open and his lower lip and beard jut forward. He looks for all the world like a *sean-nós*¹⁴ singer absorbed in song or a practised orator hitting his stride. The silence of the beheaded hangs in the air; open-mouthed, the head seems poised to speak.

No other mutilated body part invites such projection; other amputations, with the possible exception of the hand (and the hand never threatens to talk), insist on their irreducible status as dead, repugnant and

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putrefying.¹⁵ If the silence of the severed head invites speech, other dismembered parts strike us dumb, as Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist*, set in the Congo during the struggle for independence, suggests:

Glancing about I see something lying at the edge of the track which looks repellently familiar. It is covered with a heaving mantle of buzzing flies. It is a limb, a leg, severed high up; still attached is part of the pelvic bone. A little further on is a hand, then another one. There is something lying on the grass. A length of twine. I am about to pick it up when a small cloud of flies rises up suddenly and I see it is attached to a man's genitalia. Where is the owner? What agonies did he go through?

Auguste calls to us. We walk back to the trees. He has found Cleophas. The teacher's wide, flat feet are swollen. His killers have left his shirt and tie, but his old patched trousers are gone. And now I know who the owner is. What can we do except stare?¹⁶

The lyricism of *Cath Almaine* makes it easy for us to forget that an entire army lies dead on a plain strewn with body parts; that the raven-figured goddess of war, 'Badb ... belsalach', 'foul-mouthed Badb', kept that foul mouth red by tearing at the human carrion served up to her by 'mighty and manly' slaughter (52). The generic peculiarity of *Cath Almaine* – a wonder tale posing as an annal entry – brings us to an intersection that lies at the heart of this book, the intersection of historical fact and literary representation. In the historical battle of Allen, no head sang from the rushes; if a real Baethgalach had approached any of the countless heads sundered in the actual battle, he, too, would have disturbed a cloud of iridescent bluebottles, humming in concerted frenzy as they advanced the work of decomposition. In the Elizabethan wars in Ireland, likewise, heads did not give 'three bounces' ('tre balzi') or call out in the 'clear voice' ('chi-ara voce') of Ariosto's self-martyring Issabella in *Orlando Furioso*.¹⁷ Yet, for a significant number of those who had seen a 'mantle of buzzing flies' blanketing actual heads, the answer to Bennett's question, 'What can we do except stare?', was to create or translate poems where severed heads did indeed bounce and sing. Sir John Harrington, for example, translated the Issabella episode – although his moralising rather deflated its bounce – and the rest of a romance replete with beheadings, in between colonialist stints in Ireland, first in 1586 as a would-be planter in Munster and then, in 1599, as a captain of horse in the Earl of Essex's 16,000-strong army.¹⁸ To relocate writings which are all too easily abstracted into 'histories of the book' or 'translation studies' within that awkward colonial context, we need to recognise the devastation required to 'dispeople'¹⁹ huge tracts of fertile land and clear the way for successful planters like Spenser as well

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as unsuccessful ones like Harington. This study is, effectively, bookended by two scenes of devastation: the second Desmond War (1579–83) which cleared the way for the Plantation of Munster, and the mopping-up operation which followed the Nine Years War (1594–1603) and left Ulster for the taking. Ben Kiernan singles out the bloody repression of the Desmond War and the policy of confiscation and redistribution which followed it as a turning point where ‘ethnic and annihilationist thinking gained ground’ among the English newcomers.²⁰ Increasing English interference in a culturally sophisticated society shaped by the fusion of Gaelic and Hiberno-Norman elements provoked the lords of Munster, Old English²¹ and Gaelic alike, into a rebellion underpinned by Counter-Reformation ideology. The newcomers’ response was uncompromising, and revolt soon yielded ‘to the dreary viciousness of a war of extermination’.²² That viciousness was monumentalised in the colonnade of severed heads erected by Sir Humphrey Gilbert: Gilbert’s

maner was that the heddes of all those (of what sort soeuer thei were) whiche were killed in the daie, should bee cutte of from their bodies, and brought to the place where he incamped at night: and should there bee laied on the ground, by eche side of the waie leadyng into his owne Tente: so that none could come into his Tente for any cause, but commonly he muste passe through a lane of heddes, which he vsed *ad terrorem*, the dedde feelyng nothyng the more paines thereby: and yet did it bryng greate terour to the people, when thei sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolke, and freendes, lye on the grounde before their faces, as thei came to speake with the saied Collonell.²³

Gilbert’s grotesque installation shows just how artificial the distinction between violence and the aesthetic can be. Here, the atrocious sculpture *is* the atrocity. Meticulously choreographing the *mise en scène* of his spectacle of terror, Gilbert reminds us that violence is not just a frenzied blood-rage, formless in itself and aestheticised only later in a supplementary and parasitical sequel. Aesthetic shape is not conferred on the ‘lane of heddes’ by Churchyard’s prose; it is already there in the savage creativity of the Colonel’s portal to a parlay. Gilbert’s lurid aesthetic of extreme violence brings us to the conjunction that lies at the heart of this book. If, as Richard McCabe suggests, ‘Spenser found violence aesthetically stimulating’,²⁴ he was certainly not alone. For Ovid, violence was the very wellspring of art and he supplied a genealogy to explain their unsettling symbiosis. When Minerva questions the Muses about the origin of their fountain on Mount Helicon, she learns that it lies in a beheading: the waters of inspiration gush from the spot where the hoof-beat of Pegasus

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struck the earth as he sprang to life from the ‘maternal blood’ of Medusa’s severed head (‘materno sanguine nasci’).²⁵ A memory of the Ovidian genealogy which linked poetry to violence through the figure of the severed head flickers in Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* when Artegall rushes to behead Pollente ‘With bright Chrysaor in his cruell hand’ (V.ii.18.2): his sword of justice is named, alarmingly, after Pegasus’ twin, the falchion-wielding warrior who also sprang from Medusa’s severed head. If poetry ultimately flows from Pegasus, only blood will flow from his twin.

The title of *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue* comes from John Montague’s *The Rough Field*, a poetic meditation written

to honour
a communal loss
& a shattered procession
of anonymous suffering. . .
burnt houses, pillaged farms,
a province in flames.²⁶

Section IV, ‘A Severed Head’, focuses specifically on the Elizabethan conquest and opens with an ‘Old Rhyme’:

Who ever heard
such a sight unsung
as a severed head
with a grafted tongue?²⁷

For Montague, actual beheadings not only prepare the way for linguistic colonisation but also emblematised the ‘harsh . . . humiliation’ of acquiring a grafted tongue. Moreover, his choice of illustration – a woodcut from John Derricke’s paeon to Sir Henry Sidney, which shows soldiers triumphantly parading heads skewered on sword-tips – pointedly situates the origins of the language shift from Irish to English in the violence of the Elizabethan conquest.²⁸ My earlier book, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*, told that story by focusing on linguistic policy.²⁹ By taking the violence behind the language shift as a given, it understated its scale and relentlessness. But, as Montague’s stuttering prosody of trauma insists, the grafted tongue presupposes an amputated one:

(Dumb,
bloodied, the severed
head now chokes to
speak another tongue – (39).

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Nothing imposes silence as spectacularly as a beheading, and the victor has not always been able to resist adding symbolic insult to injury. When Marc Anthony displays the head of his fiercest critic, Cicero, to his wife, Fulvia, she sets to work: ‘after abusing it spitefully and spitting upon it, [she] set it on her knees, opened the mouth, and pulled out the tongue, which she pierced with the pins she used for her hair’.³⁰ Trophy heads found in the Nazca city of Cahuachi had their lips sewn together by cactus spines and their severed tongues stored in little pouches strung from their mouths.³¹ The impulse was not unknown in Ireland. In the Munster uprising of 1598, which saw Spenser driven from Kilcolman, native servants turned on their former masters, killing many and leaving ‘some with their tongues cut out of their heads’.³² The severed head does not always remain silent, however, as Donn-bó’s has shown; or, rather, writing about severed heads offered a way of reflecting on violence – on its seductions and dark pleasures as well as on the pain and loss which follow in its wake. In reality, of course, decapitation belongs in the domain of the unspeakable, among those things considered by Sir Henry Sidney to be ‘too loathsome to be written or read’.³³ Euphemism or silence may be the preferred registers of atrocity, but unspeakable acts could be translated into eloquent spectacle. ‘[P]itcht vpon a pole on high . . . To be a mirrour to all mighty men’,³⁴ trophy heads proclaimed their messages of shame and admonition from all the threshold points and eminences of state power. Sir John of Desmond’s head

was cut off and sent to Dublin, and spiked in front of the castle; his body was conveyed to Cork and hung in chains at one of the city gates, where it remained nearly three years, till on a tempestuous night it was blown into the sea . . . [The Earl of Desmond’s head] was . . . sent to London, and impaled within an iron cage on the Tower of London as a sign of terror to the Irish princes and Catholics.³⁵

These conjunctions – art and violence, silence and display – are everywhere apparent in writings from sixteenth-century Ireland. Harington’s seemingly recreational beheadings in his translation of *Orlando Furioso* or Spenser’s decorous ‘headlesse Ladie . . . In her owne blood all wallow’d wofully’ (1.14.3–4) were written by men who carried images of real decapitations behind their retinas. The image of the grafted tongue points to a related conjunction: the grafting onto English of some of the most significant romances of the Renaissance – romances replete with fictional beheadings – by men familiar with real beheadings in Ireland. Harington and Carew would graft *Orlando Furioso* and *La Araucana* onto English in

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ways deeply revealing of the *mentalité* of conquest. Spenser, too, would graft the poetry of Faerielond onto the 'sient base' (5.1.1.8) of historical violence. In examining those writings, this book explores the complex interplay between beauty and violence in a time of conflict. 'Aestheticisation' is increasingly used as a boo word to suggest the beautification, with questionable motives, of something intrinsically ugly. While Spenser's 'headlesse Ladie' wallowing gorgeously in her crimson blood shows that there is truth in that characterisation, it does not tell the whole story. One of the things it leaves out of the equation is the more troubling possibility that violence has itself an aesthetic; that its appeal is sometimes not to mindlessness but to beauty. Equally, our growing mistrust of any alliance between violence and the aesthetic underestimates the potential of art to resist violence, including the possibility of colonial texts interrogating the very violence which they seem to fetishise.

Chapter 1 opens the historical archive to give a sense of just how widespread beheading was in late-sixteenth-century Ireland and how, despite typing it as a peculiarly Irish barbarity, the English used it systematically to advance their conquest. Chapter 2 tries to understand how violence gets translated onto the page before turning to Sir John Harington's translation of *Orlando Furioso*. It explores how exposure to the apocalyptic landscape of post-war Munster (as well as the nationalism which drew Harington into that adventure in the first place) shaped his reimagining of Ariosto's romance.

Chapter 3 turns to *The Faerie Queene*. By giving imaginative shape to extreme violence in Book 5, Spenser releases a set of conflicting energies which capture the deep structures of violence. The metaphysical absolutes of allegory are challenged by the irreducible materiality of their historical analogues. Pitiless violence is haunted by the impulses of a compassion which it battles to contain. Above all, the face – the site of romance recognition and the locus, for Levinas, of ethical responsibility – mounts its lonely struggle against the severed head, the marker of unbounded violence.

Chapter 4 follows the career of Sir George Carew, who epitomises the conjunction of writing and fighting in the Elizabethan conquest. The Master of Ordinance who brought Munster to its knees translated Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga's *La Araucana*, an anti-colonial romance which elegised both the broken resistance of the natives and Ercilla's own broken dreams of honourable conquest. Seeking to turn Ercilla's self-divided epic into a counter-insurgency handbook, Carew brings us up against the contradictions of romance violence and its deployment of the severed head in the service of a poetics of pity.