Denis Donoghue, 1928–2021

by Adam Kirsch

On the Irish literary critic.

The Irish literary critic Denis Donoghue, who died April 6 at the age of ninety-two, was a devoted admirer of T. S. Eliot, and the news of his passing put me in mind of the lines from Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “We have taken from the defeated/ What they had to leave us—a symbol:/ A symbol perfected in death.” Not that Donoghue was personally defeated like Charles I, the “broken king” of Eliot’s poem. He died “full of years,” in the Biblical phrase, and leaves a legacy of more than thirty books, including a study of Eliot, Words Alone; a biography of Walter Pater; and many volumes of essays on modern English and American literature.

But the critical ideal Donoghue cherished and embodied has certainly been defeated in the academy, where he spent his entire career—first at University College Dublin and then at New York University, where he was the Henry James Professor of English from 1979 to 2013. The headline of The New York Times’s obituary identified Donoghue as a “humanist literary critic,” and while that might once have been a tautology, he was among the last survivors of the breed.

It would sound even more antiquated to call Donoghue an aesthete. The term “aestheticism” is associated with Pater, who set out the movement’s creed in his 1873 study The Renaissance:

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us—for that moment only. . . . How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.
In time aestheticism was reduced to a set of caricatured gestures, like Oscar Wilde’s green carnation. But in Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls (1995), Donoghue made a case for Pater as the “first of the modernist writers” in English, a lover of paradox and provocation who left “a shade or trace in virtually every writer of any significance from Hopkins and Wilde to Ashbery.” For Donoghue, an aesthete is someone whose pleasure in beauty is heightened by trying to understand it.

When Donoghue began to write in the late 1940s, this tradition of serious aestheticism was upheld by the New Critics, who valued ambiguity and difficulty in poetry and believed in paying close attention to how a literary text works. New Critics like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate wrote long essays in literary quarterlies, such as The Kenyon Review and The Sewanee Review, aimed at intelligent general readers. As an undergraduate, Donoghue submitted an essay to The Kenyon Review; he kept the handwritten acceptance letter from Ransom as a prized possession. He continued to write this kind of criticism for half a century in many journals, including The New Criterion, where he last wrote in 2017 about Elizabeth Bishop.

The legend about the New Criticism, created by the young critics who deposed it in the 1960s, is that it was apolitical and ahistorical, interested in the text as an object rather than a moral statement or a document of its times. This was never completely true, and it wasn’t true at all of two other great critics who strongly influenced Donoghue—F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling. Leavis, who taught at Cambridge, and Trilling, at Columbia, were at the height of their prestige in Donoghue’s early years. They were critics in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, for whom art and beauty were intensely moral affairs, though often in conflict with political or religious morality.

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Donoghue is best known as an opponent of what he called, in the title of a 1989 essay, “The Political Turn in Criticism,” but it would be a mistake to confuse this with being indifferent to politics. Take the essay “Beyond Culture,” in his 1994 book The Old Moderns. Here Donoghue examines what he calls “the refusing will” as a theme in modern literature—the sense that life in society offers no worthy objects for the spirit, so that there is no choice left for the sensitive individual but withdrawal. The idea comes from Trilling—Beyond Culture is the title of one of Trilling’s books—but Donoghue gives it a history, tracing it from the Victorians Arnold and Pater, through the modernists Joyce and Eliot, down to Thomas Pynchon and John Barth in the 1960s.

The refusing will is a literary idea, but Donoghue knows that it has profound social and political implications. Along with canonical English poets and novelists, he discusses German social critics
such as Marx, Simmel, and Adorno, just as elsewhere he shows himself completely fluent in Derrida, de Man, and other French theorists. What is apolitical isn’t Donoghue’s mind, but his conclusion: that withdrawal from society is a valid human and literary stance. Aesthetics has its own morality, which—like religion—assigns a higher value to the inner life than to social and political life.

But the refusing will is unacceptable to Marxist-inspired critics—Donoghue’s example is Frederic Jameson—who believe that literature must always be engaged with and against society. “Jameson attacks any literature or art that practices Impressionism, subjectivity, Symbolism, metaphor, aesthetics, unity of tone, the autonomy of individual life and individual consciousness. They are in collusion with the enemy,” Donoghue observes.

Marxism makes a political demand on literature; so, in their different ways, do deconstruction and criticism focused on race and gender. These critical approaches, which have dominated English departments for the last half-century, do what Donoghue warns against in “The Political Turn in Criticism”: “they compromise the literature they read by subjecting it to a test of good behavior. They defeat the literature in advance.” The critic who approaches a text with a moral-political yardstick makes clear that he doesn’t intend to learn from it or be changed by it. Political dogma—of the Right or the Left, though in academic literary studies it is almost always of the Left—precludes vulnerability.

This doesn’t mean that a good reader has no political views. Everyone has them, including Donoghue, who seems to have been on the left himself. (This is a deduction from his writing—I never knew him personally.) In the introduction to his 2005 book The American Classics, he expresses opinions about George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon that would have been welcome in any faculty lounge at the time. But Donoghue didn’t believe in allowing the opinionated self to take the place of the experiencing self. The right question to ask about a poem or novel, he writes, “is not: do I find its political attitude congenial? But rather: am I willing to read it, and to let it at least provisionally read me?”

A further problem with political criticism is that it can’t make sense of pleasure, which for Donoghue was the heart of the matter. In his 2008 book On Eloquence, he notes the difference between eloquence, which aims to delight, and rhetoric, which aims to convince. “The main attribute of eloquence is gratuitousness; its place in the world is to be without place or function, its mode is to be intrinsic. Like beauty, it claims only the privilege of being a grace note in the culture that permits it,” he writes.
In this unusually personal book, Donoghue recalls his earliest experience of eloquence, in the “polysyllabic thrill” of the Latin Mass. As an altar boy, he didn’t understand the words of the service but preferred them to the English translation, which seemed “a feeble thing” by comparison. In this way Donoghue learned to take pleasure in language irrespective of its meaning, which is the main skill required to be a good reader of poetry.

As a boy, the eloquence he responded to was sonorous and exotic, as in Masefield’s anthology piece “Cargoes”: “Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,/ Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine.” But On Eloquence shows that eloquence doesn’t have to mean grandiloquence. There are eloquent silences, too, which Donoghue refers to as “songs without words”—as in The Aeneid, when Dido listens to the self-justifying speech of Aeneas, the lover who jilted her, and then silently turns her back.

Eloquence arrives in such electrifying moments—“sudden gestures, flares of spirit, words breaking free from every expectation.” Lionel Trilling once wrote about Isaac Babel’s story “Di Grasso,” in which the titular actor redeems a bad performance of a bad play simply by the way he leaps through the air, “detached from the earth by an unfathomable force.” For Trilling, art has the same purpose as Di Grasso’s leap—to give us “an intimation of the possibility of freedom” from “the dullness, the passivity, the acquiescence in which we live most of our lives.” That is what Donoghue means by eloquence—language that doesn’t convince us of anything or set anything to rights but simply, unforgettably, is.

Today there is a tendency to see literary authority figures like Donoghue as beneficiaries of various kinds of privilege. So it’s worth remembering that Donoghue was the son of a Catholic policeman in Protestant Northern Ireland, born a long way from the mandarinate. The same is true of Leavis, whose father was a Cambridge shopkeeper, and Trilling, the son of an immigrant tailor in New York. All were outsiders to the academic-literary establishment. That may be why they were so serious about literature, which for them wasn’t an heirloom or pastime but a deeply democratic experience of beauty and truth. Let’s hope that this idea, of which Donoghue is now a “symbol perfected in death,” can never be finally defeated.

Adam Kirsch’s most recent book is Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer?: Essays (Yale).

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