The Inner Life of Charles O'Donnell, CSC: Let His Poetry Speak

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Charles O'Donnell was an important person in the history of Roman Catholic higher education in the United States. Born in 1884, a native of Indiana, he was educated at Notre Dame and at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He taught in the English department at Notre Dame and trained hundreds of students in the writing of poetry. When World War I broke out, O'Donnell volunteered to leave the shelter of his university in order to minister to American troops in Austria and Italy. He served with honor. His helmet hangs today in Sacred Heart Basilica on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. He served for six years as president of the University of Notre Dame during the Great Depression when times were difficult for universities across the country. O'Donnell was named first president of the Society of American Catholic Poets, and he was a close friend of Joyce Kilmer, whose poem "Trees" has remained a staple in American anthologies for almost a century. O'Donnell hosted William Butler Yeats at Notre Dame and counted among his acquaintances many American poets of the first half of the twentieth century. These facts about his life are interesting, but what can we learn about the man himself from his poems? Among the scores of religious poems that he penned, can we find any that speak to us about the man Charles O'Donnell himself? I think we can.

That he was a public poet we already know. His three books of poetry were re-published in 1942, eight years after his death. His nephew Charles Carey edited this volume and included in it poems that had appeared in journals but had never before been

gathered into book form. A new edition of O'Donnell's poetry (2010) reprints not only all the poems from the 1942 edition, but also all the poems found in two archives on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, poems which had never been published in book form before. Dozens of the poems had never, in fact, been printed anywhere and can now be read by O'Donnell fans for the first time.

Of the 260 poems that we can definitely attribute to Charles O'Donnell, a handful speak to his personal side, not his theological or traditionally spiritual side. We can, for example, learn much about his social relationships by reading carefully "On Meeting a Lady" and "At Tivoli," two poems that were probably written about the same time in his life. The former poem describes the poet's visit with a woman he had not seen in years. She is unidentified, but in sixteen lines O'Donnell portrays her as someone who has suffered but has kept her troubles to herself with a quiet dignity that seems more stoic than resigned. It is not that O'Donnell finds her uncluttered face distasteful so much as he finds it puzzling that she has lived through much but shows no signs either way of life's effects. Is she the mother of a World War I soldier O'Donnell may have known in Europe? Is she a former lady friend? We do not know. We only know from the poem that she was a real person and O'Donnell had known her earlier in life. Anything else we might pull from this poem would be conjecture. The poem has a certain coldness.

On the other hand, there is much more human warmth in "At Tivoli," a poem printed near "On Meeting a Lady" and thus feeds off it in a reader's mind. The "we" of the Tivoli poem is O'Donnell and a companion wandering the rooms of an Italian villa probably converted into a museum. The place is "haunted" and "moldy" and seems to "ache with an emptiness no words can tell." Suddenly there is a change in the poem:

Only one little ray of light came breaking
across the marble gloom, a joyous breath
to answer centuries of vague heart's aching
and turn to rose the dusty air of death:
standing before some poor god's sculptured form,
by chance I touched your hand, and found it warm. (ll. 9-14)

The poem is a Shakespearean sonnet with the volta occurring after line 8, as more generally happens in an Italian sonnet. We first think that the ray of sunshine is literal, but O'Donnell ends the poem with a second volta when he reveals that the light is actually metaphorical and comes from his inadvertently touching his companion's hand. In the cold gloom, warm flesh revitalizes him. Most sonnets are love poems, so one is tempted to read much into this sonnet, but again we must stop short at hypothesis because there is simply not enough information in the poem to identify O'Donnell's companion. Nor is the companion gender-specific. Before we conclude that he has touched a woman's hand, we must concede that O'Donnell may have been traveling with a priest-companion. Could we date the poem specifically and match it to the biographical work already done on O'Donnell and resting in ten neat manila folders in the Indiana Province Archives at Notre Dame, we might be able to identify the "companion" in the poem. What we can deduce, however, and this is infinitely more valuable than a historical identification of that mystery-persona, is that O'Donnell experienced a human moment and captured it so vibrantly in poetry that we can easily recreate the scene and the emotion today.

What exactly can we conjecture about O'Donnell's personal attitude on love? "Out of the Idylls" is another sonnet that could be read simply as an intensely beautiful love poem were it not for the strong association with Tennyson in the title. England's poet-laureate created a set of Arthurian poems called "Idylls of the King" that were immensely popular in Victorian England and have never been out of print. Clearly O'Donnell was referencing the Tennyson poems in this little sonnet: the "two dreamers" in the poem are Lancelot and Guenevere, who broke the rules of courtly love by consummating their union:

> They were two dreamers, tangled in a vision
> that looked one way—but what shall crush the heart?
> Not any force of time's unspent derision.
> Christ and His love shall break those bonds apart.
> The Queen's grave pilgrims held a holy spot,
> and there are those who pray to Launcelot. (ll. 9-14)

A reader can easily see that O'Donnell is not parroting received opinion on royal adultery. Even though hearts may recognize the greater love of Christ as a requisite for heavenly love, O'Donnell the realist allows some wiggle room in that he opines, rather wistfully it seems, about the sacred love that Guenevere shared with Lancelot. It is a strange allowance from a Catholic priest, but once again the human side of the poet snakes its way into a poem that compromises canonical injunctions with proscribed liaisons. A similar O'Donnell sentiment figures in an earlier lyric called "Lancelot's Song." Were it not for the title, the poem could be read as a narrator's sadness over any love lost. Written from Lancelot's point of view, the poem still resonates with a

humanity that is odd coming from a celibate priest. It proves once again that readers who go to O'Donnell for pious refreshment may find more sentiment than they bargained for. O'Donnell was a poet before he was a priest.

Of the dozens of poets that Holy Cross has produced, the two most prominent remain Charles O'Donnell and Sister Madeleva, but these two are not cut from the same poetic cloth even though they were born within three years of each other and shared roughly the same literary time period. O'Donnell died at age 49 in 1934, however, and Madeleva would live for almost another thrity years dying in 1964 at the age of 77. Her poetic corpus is, of course, sizable, but most of her subject matter is pious, and she thus has a limited readership today. O'Donnell, on the other hand, while he did produce plenty of pious poems, cast his poetic net wider, and thus his readership should be larger than Madeleva's, although truth be told she has always benefitted from a more loyal Holy Cross following than O'Donnell has enjoyed. The quality that limits Madeleva's work, I think, is its extreme self-effacement. One is hard put to discover her persona behind the poems, and although she reveals more of her personal self in her 1959 autobiography *My First Seventy Years* than O'Donnell ever revealed of himself anywhere, were we to rely only on their poems, we would know more of Charles O'Donnell the man than we ever would of Sister Madeleva the woman. For example, in her entire 1955 collection *American Twelfth Night*, only two poems speak about her own person: "Possession" and "Holy Communion in a Hospital." But the "I" of these two poems is radically different. In "Possession" the narrator is faceless:

> I cannot chant the angels' hymn
>
> As did the hosts of seraphim.

I cannot even cross the wild

As shepherds did, to find the Child.

I cannot shine, a living star,

To guide grave magi from afar.

I have no incense, myrrh, or gold

For gifts as had the kings of old.

In all the world there is nowhere

A place so poor, a spot so bare

Save the rude cave at Bethlehem town

Where Christ, my Savior, laid Him down.

Because I am like that mean stall

I may possess Him most of all. (p. xiv)

This "I" could be anybody. It could be you, given the proper sentiments. I could be I myself. She uses the generic "I" to carry the poem, making it beautifully impersonal so that readers abstract the feeling of the poem and feel it rising from their own soul. In other words, the identification of "I" is with the reader rather than with the poet.

Madeleva has sacrificed herself to create a persona that readers adopt instantaneously, making the poem their own. Madeleva herself is erased from the poem.

O'Donnell uses the same generic narrator in most of his first-person religious poems. "The Porter" begins "I am the porter of a little door, / a swinging wicket in the walls of sky. / I open and I close a light-latched door" (1-3). "Harvest" begins:

> I shall have nothing but my sorrow
> when judgment comes, whenever that may be,
> no fruit, no flowers, no sheaves—myrrh only,
> and bitter as the sea. (ll. 1-4)

This sacrifice of the self is more pronounced in Madeleva than it is in O'Donnell because in the priest-poet there are enough really personal poems to color the dozens of non-personal poems surrounding the personal ones. At her most revealing, Madeleva can almost paint herself into a lyric, as she attempts to in "Holy Communion in a Hospital":

> Today you will come to me here
> in this room half-lighted,
> curtains a little drawn.
> Never before have You sought me so,
> brought me Yourself at dawn.
> Now You are helplessly here more
> than I, to feed me, to comfort, to bless;
> Infinite, patient to bear with me
> pain's relentless caress;
> Clothing me with Yourself, in the

vesture of helplessness. (ll. 12-22)

We can somewhat see Madeleva herself in a hospital bed waiting for the Communion minister to arrive, but the poem lacks any intimacy, and the focus remains more on Communion than on the communicant.

O'Donnell, on the other hand, can excel at a human touch in poetry. One of his poems of obvious personal human warmth is "Farewell," an early work printed in his first volume (1916). With an "ave atque vale" opening ("Forget me, and remember me, O heart!"), the poem today teases readers who would very much like to know the details of "our one sure hour of bliss" mentioned in line 5. It is a poem surely of fond recollection, but at the same time it establishes a clean break from the acquaintance whom the poet addresses as "my fair" (line 9), probably a girlfriend from O'Donnell's pre-seminary days. Although genderless, "fair" is traditionally appropriated by a female partner, although it need not be. One way or the other, the relationship has been broken off with a final promise to reunite "in some far valley of the timeless air," presumably heaven. That person may or may not be the same subject of "The Woof of Life," wherein the poet envisions Christ (or God) as a weaver creating the cloth of O'Donnell's life, a quiet unassuming life that the poet figures having "the grayness of the moth" (line 4), but into which cloth the supernatural craftsman has woven "the red rose of your face" (line 6). This has to be a human face, not a divine face, because O'Donnell is always very careful to capitalize possessive adjectives when they refer to a divine being, and again the object of the narrator's affection is probably female because "red rose" was a Victorian and early twentieth century commonplace epithet for a woman. The poem was probably not

presented to the person addressed ("your face"), but there should be little doubt, I think, that the subject was indeed a real live human being.

Another poem with undoubtedly a real live human being behind its subject is "A Chance Bouquet," a late poem, possibly one of the last poems O'Donnell selected for his published volumes. It is one of the closing poems of the 1928 book *A Rime of the Rood.* The narrator enters his room (probably in Corby Hall at Notre Dame) to discover someone has put a bouquet of flowers there, but the poem is not addressed to the unknown donor: it is rather addressed to an O'Donnell traveling companion who accompanied him on a Mediterranean trip—"past Madeira to the tide / Gibraltar fronts, past Elba's iron doom, / to spring and Italy" (lines 3-5). The pair wandered away from the guide and tour group "and gathered memories in the spread perfume / that made the earth a garden" (lines 8, 9). The scene settles in Ravenna with Dantesque allusions (Francesca, Paolo, Beatrice) although the allusion to Keats and Shelley in the final line ("while in these violets Keats and Shelley dwell") could localize the scene to either Florence (Shelley) or Rome (Keats). Both English poets are buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome. Again, this sonnet rides on waves of loving sentiment that carry the poet deep into the human condition. Someday we may be able to identify O'Donnell's traveling companion if, as I have already pointed out, we can reconcile the dating of this poem with notes in the nascent O'Donnell biography held in manuscript in the Indiana Province Archives.

Poets bare their souls most honestly in times of crisis, and for O'Donnell no period in his life was more stressful than his days on the front lines of a real war. Of his World War I themed poems, the three sonnets titled "Message from the Front" are the

most poignant. Each works on the narrator's imagining how his imminent death will affect his lover—there is no other word than "lover" to express the "you" in these sonnets. In the first sonnet, with its opening line derived from Rupert Brooke's famous line "If I should die, think only this of me" ("The Soldier"), O'Donnell imagines that he gets word in his grave that his lover is grieving over O'Donnell's death:

> Only if to my silent home should come—
> by what dim roads—a murmur of your grief,
> then speech should break from lips the dust makes dumb,
> and pain more sharp than death should claim relief:
> if you were sad, however dull I sleep,
> I should awaken in the grave and weep. (ll. 9-14)

In the Brooke poem, made famous as a war-time rallying cry by Winston Churchill, the poet-narrator is happy that his dead body is Englishfying "some corner of a foreign field," but O'Donnell does not see his own wartime death as anything but a sad occasion to evoke in himself tears responding to his lover's sorrow. Some readers may object that the "you" of this poem is a generic reader, but the sentiments are too personal to sustain such a reading and, for that matter, to explain the poet's inspiration in the first place.

Likewise in the second sonnet of this O'Donnell trilogy, there is evidence that the intended audience for these little poems was an audience of one, and that audience is a lover. O'Donnell invokes both Shakespeare and Christina Rosetti early in the poem, the former well known for having written 126 love sonnets, many of them intensely frustrating, to a young man, and the latter known for her unselfish devotion to a dysfunctional family. O'Donnell's narrator wants the living lover to take a new partner,

but not to forget the dead poet—in fact, he wants the lover to bring the new partner to O'Donnell's grave: "So, fare you forth, under a laughing sky, / lead here a new love where these ashes live" (ll. 13,14).

The final sonnet in the sequence continues the sentiments of the previous poem, reprising the idea that the dead poet will not mind his ex-lover bringing a new partner grave-side. In fact, it will be a comfort to the poet to know that his ex has found a new happiness:

> I should be comforted as here you stand
> fast by another and should ask for naught
> except more kindly he should keep your hand
> through the long years, and I be all forgot.
> Thus should I bid you if the dust gave breath—
> and then address me to the second death. (9-14)

That the new partner is male is obvious from the word "he" in line 11, but the gender of the ex is indeterminate: it could be a woman or a man. More puzzling is the "second death" of the last line. It cannot refer to the ex's repartnering because the poet has been at pains to make the point that he wants the ex to be repartnered. It actually refers to the death of his memory within the mind of the ex: O'Donnell is thus saying "please repartner, but don't forget me because that would kill me a second time."

The homoerotic content of World War I poems has only recently been credibly acknowledged by literary critics. Paul Hammond, for example, notes:

> The war of 1914-18 threw together men from different social milieux in conditions of unaccustomed intimacy and horrific stress. Mutual

> dependence, strong loyalty and intense affection forged a comradeship which spoke a language that is not always distinguishable from the language of love. It would be wrong to see an erotic motivation in every expression of devotion and loss, but it would also be wrong to disguise the sexual feelings which inspired the writing of some of the war's major poets: Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon all had strong homosexual inclinations. For many years their writings and lives were edited to obscure this: Wilfred Owen's brother Harold destroyed some letters and censored others, while some of Owen's more obviously homoerotic poems were not printed until 1983; Sassoon contributed to the burning of Owen's letters, and his own homosexuality was carefully excluded from his extensive published memoirs; Graves' autobiography *Goodbye to All That* (1929) is similarly disingenuous. Such reticence is understandable, but need not be perpetuated. (203-204)

Whatever the social impulses that force poets to hide their feelings for other men, the poems of the gay poet Sassoon and the bisexual poet Rupert Brooke have entered the mainstream of English literature. Minor poets of the time like E.E. Bradford, an Anglican clergyman who wrote unabashedly homoerotic poems ("To Boys Unknown" and "The Bather in the Blue Grotto at Capri") must have been heartened to see poems like Herbert Read's "My Company" in print ("It is not thus I would have him kissed, / But with the warm passionate lips / Of his comrade here" [qtd. Hammond 204]), or any of the overtly homoerotic poems of Owen, the finest soldier-poet of World War I. The

times were more sexually vibrant than the remainder of the twentieth century was ready to admit, but today these poets are receiving the attention they have long deserved.

That Rupert Brooke was widely admired in his lifetime and more so after his early war-time death is incontestable. In fact, Charles O'Donnell's close friend Joyce Kilmer cited Brooke in a 1917 poem ("The Proud Poet") wherein Brooke is made heroic, among other male poets including Byron, King David, and Sir Philip Sidney, for giving up the writing of poetry in order to go to war. In the same volume (*Main Street and Other Poems*), Kilmer's final opus, Kilmer eulogizes Brooke in an Italian sonnet ("In Memory of Rupert Brooke"), one of the first poems to honor the fallen poet. Brooke died in the war on April, 1915, and Kilmer died in the war on July 30, 1918:

> Today the starry roof of Heaven rings
> With psalms a soldier made to praise his Lord;
> And David rests beneath Eternal wings,
> Song on his lips, and in his hand a sword. (ll. 11-14)

In this same book, Kilmer dedicates a poem ("The Thorn") to Charles O'Donnell, demonstrating even more clearly how aware poets of the period were of each other.

Although O'Donnell wrote no overtly sexual poems, of some lasting interest is a poem that O'Donnell never published but which was published by his nephew Charles Carey, CSC, when the latter edited his uncle's poems for the press in 1942. "Of Poets who Died in the War" commemorates young men who died in battle, and the sentiment is made all the more genuine when we realize that O'Donnell, serving as a chaplain on the European front, would have known and buried many young American soldiers:

> They have had youth, that are so freshly dead,

love and renown, and every gracious sweet
within the reach of questing hands and feet,
and all the hunger of their spirit fed.
They knew not age, but wear its crown instead,
for when life's tale the years at last complete
and dim eyes look out from the chimney seat,
life only lives remembering dear things fled.

In that far time toward the sunset gun,
the veterans shall sit with fancy roving,
winters that must turn backward seeking spring.
But these, these lads who sunk before their sun,
they had their youth, its laughter and its loving,
all, at a moment, that the years may bring. (11-14)

O'Donnell contrasts the reminiscences of living veterans with the condensed joys of the dead, those who died young and had all their "laughter and its loving" compacted into a moment. He does not sentimentalize their deaths, preferring instead to think that all their joys were extant, even though those joys were not protracted over years. It is a thought that has before and since brought comfort to bereaved people, and although its subject is war, the poem is suffused with love, demonstrating once again that Charles O'Donnell was a poet of love, especially at one point in time for his comrades-in-arms.

Finally, we look at an enigmatic poem that seems to probe O'Donnell's mind deeper than first meets a reader's eye, reaching psychological depths that a seemingly

innocent poem masks. There are ideas in Charles O'Donnell's poem "Narcissus in Winter" that he may himself have been only half-conscious of penning, especially when we lay this World War I poem against the larger background of pieces by male soldier-poets in that war who celebrated living and fallen comrades. To dismiss Charles O'Donnell as a minor religious poet with no artistic or psychological depth would be a grave mistake. Anyone who carefully studies a poem like "Narcissus in Winter" has to become aware of levels of meaning that do not surface with a quick surface reading. Ostensibly the piece describes the gentle opening of a spring flower observed by the poet over a period of some days. The narcissus lengthens from green tip to golden bud over the first twelve lines of this finely crafted sonnet, moving gracefully on waves of color and botanical wonder, effected through the machinery of a tightly woven Shakespearean rhyme scheme. It is with the closing couplet, however, that a reader becomes aware that a simple nature poem has supernatural depth as the plant becomes a symbol for the risen Christ: "Process itself turns beauty's very flower— / for birth, for death, One waited for His hour" (ll. 13, 14). There is warning in the abbreviated use of the verb "turns" that we are in for a new twist in the poem because that word "turns" yearns to be a phrasal verb completed by the preposition "into," e.g., "a caterpillar turns into a butterfly." That image alone, carried on its convoluted syntactical wave, would be enough to evoke Christ's resurrection through divine metamorphosis from dead mortal into supernatural marvel, but the verb in the O'Donnell poem is transitive with an end-stopping direct object which seems curiously inappropriate for its subject—until we fathom the basic sense that "process" becomes the thing effected. In other words, we are counseled not to marvel at the flower so much as at the "process" of flower. Thus the final line of the

poem weds images of both "birth" and "death" into a timeless weaving as the "One" (Christ) becomes a person outside of time who has both waited and waits for the double event of birth and death. (His death in our mortal form becomes his entry birth into another form.) The narcissus is born, in other words, to die, a process necessary for any significant life progress, as the New Testament counsels: "Except the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, it abides alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

So much energy and meaning packed into a little poem. And yet there is more. As we muse on the poem we wonder why O'Donnell uses the narcissus for his basic image and not the tulip or the daffodil or, for that matter, the tiny crocus, which precedes all the rest as harbinger of season. There is, of course, the mythological power of the word "narcissus," bringing to mind without any effort the Greek boy who eschewed Echo's sweet enticements and preferred to bend over a pool the better to study his own beautiful image. This sonnet, therefore, becomes a lot more interesting than we might at first find it to be since we often prefer a certain distance between ourselves and the private lives of our priests. What then can the narcissus flower represent consciously or unconsciously for O'Donnell who watched it form day to day?

There are multiple indications that the flower is being described for special physiological features: its "pale green sheath" which "lengthens" and "swells at the tip," growing above "pebbles" and having "an eager lip." The flower we realize is tumescent: its "leaves unfold" in a "dark" which "befriends" it. The minutes pass "one by one" as the poet ponders the flower's "secret commerce with the sun." The object under analysis is no secret to a watchful reader: O'Donnell has morphed himself, or rather a significantly fertile part of himself, into a poem that starts out botanically and ends

spiritually, riding meanwhile on a crest of penile imagery that may be admittedly distasteful to some unconsciously aroused by O'Donnell's words. I myself doubt that his craft was unwitting, but in the interest of religious sublimity, we must sometimes sacrifice poetic craft for the sake of religious propriety, at least for the sake of those readers who deem sexual interpretations prurient. So be it. I once had a student tell me that I forever ruined the Shakespeare sonnets for her when I informed the class that most of those sonnets were written as love poems to another man. But readers who are squeamish about corporeal sexual tumescence miss part of the power of O'Donnell's narcissus poem. Puritanical readers would deny a holy priest amazement at his own anatomy.

So what can we conclude overall about the poetry of Charles O'Donnell? That O'Donnell was sensitive to loss is borne out again and again in his verses. In "For One Departed" O'Donnell eulogizes a fellow religious whom he does not name but who lived in his same community, probably at Notre Dame. He misses this person, who may have been a kind of "monitor" in the old style, a fellow religious assigned to point out regularly to a religious public or semi-public faults. It is a slight poem, and I do not think it could be any more enriched by our knowing whom O'Donnell is eulogizing. The human sentiment so effusive in O'Donell's war sonnets is something that one never finds in Madeleva poems. I don't know if it is praiseworthy that the nun cleansed herself of earthly love or that it is sad she sacrificed her human emotion to embrace a divine. There will be advocates on either side of her poetry. O'Donnell, however, clearly did not renounce his ability to celebrate human love relationships in poems that nestle side by side with poems as mystically sublimated as the best of Madeleva's. In 1934 when, shy

of fifty years, Charles O'Donnell died of strep infection, he left his work as a poet unfinished. What he would have become as a creative writer had he not been cut down in his prime, we will never know, but he surely would have continued to shape his talent for language into poems as beautiful as the ones he left us. His craft was a vehicle to carry his involvement with the human condition, and we are the better for his extant poems and at a loss for the ones he did not live to create.

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