

Fifty Years of Irish Writing

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WHEN the editor of *Studies* kindly invited me to write an article on the fortunes of Irish literature over the past fifty years I presumed that the main interest of anything I might have to say would lie in the fact that I am an Irish writer who was born in 1900, which implies, I suppose, that, within the limitations of my personal oddities and idiosyncrasies, what I here say cannot fail to be, at any rate to some degree, representative of the views of the generation after Yeats. In other words I am, very happily, presenting myself and my views as a type-specimen. I feel obliged to say this at the outset, to give myself full freedom of expression by making it quite clear to my readers, especially to readers outside Ireland, that some of the things I have to say must be displeasing to my host. I might otherwise seem to be taking an unfair advantage of his hospitality.

I do not propose to say much about the earlier part of the last fifty years. What was written in that period, say 1910–1921, is well known and has been much discussed. It was the hey-day of the Abbey Theatre. The riots over *The Playboy* were over and the battle won—the play was now being produced without opposition, largely through the tough courage of Yeats and the gallant support of his players. Prose was flourishing—Moore, Stephens, Canon Sheehan, Somerville and Ross, lesser entertainers like George Bermingham, and, to move on a bit in years but still within the general 'period', Eimar O'Duffy, Shan Bullock, Conal O'Riordan and others. I am aware that to move on outside date-brackets is always tricky in dealing with a literary period, but, in the first place, dates and 'periods' rarely coincide in literary history. (For example, the eighteenth century period in English literature did not end with the year 1800.) And, the second, and for our purposes, more important point here is that the whole story of latter-day developments in Anglo-Irish letters is very much a story of pioneering and overlapping. (Joyce's *Dubliners*, for example, appeared in 1914 but he is alien to most of our literary traditions before him, though he was fully contemporaneous with Yeats as a young Dubliner.) Poetry, too, in the opening ten years of our chosen fifty was flourishing—Yeats, Clarke, Higgins, Campbell, Seamus O'Sullivan; though here again I am over-leaping dates, to keep the sense of period. Clarke and Higgins both were born in 1896. Clarke did not publish his first book *The Vengeance of Fionn* until 1917.

The general mood of that period, before the establishment of the Irish Free State, was romantic, nationalist, fervid, critical of others, especially of one's political opponents, whether native or foreign, but not very critical of ourselves—apart from the sort of rather superficial satire one got from plays like William Boyle's *The Eloquent Dempsey*—and it was quite uncritical in matters literary, historical and what would nowadays be called sociological. This absence of a deep-cutting critical objectivity was, I think, the great weakness of the so-called Irish Literary Movement. It made it, as some of us at the time kept on saying worriedly, without being able to do anything about it, a movement of feeling rather than of thought. As one looks back over the prose of the period one sometimes wonders whether our writers ever took off their green glasses. Exceptions will, no doubt, be offered, such as O'Duffy and O'Riordan, yet, on re-opening such novels as *The Wasted Island* or *Adam of Dublin I*, for one, still feel that nothing in them is at all as tough and clear-sighted as, say, *The Real Charlotte* (Somerville and Ross) or *A Drama in Muslin*. This last, and to most readers I feel sure, unexpected title, may make my point clear.

George Moore was a flippant Bohemian; the novel is not a good novel; it is melodramatic, often absurd, even penny-novetteish; yet to what other novel of that time can one go for such a clear observation of the formative social factors behind, and responsible for, the grimness of Dublin life as depicted, but never explained—it was not his interest—by Joyce in the *Portrait* and *Ulysses*? Moore, trained by Zola and Flaubert, saw, displayed and eviscerated—an amazing feat for a man normally without an iota of responsibility in his composition—the real forces, social and economic, which had infected Ireland with the state of spiritual paralysis that so disgusted Joyce and produced in contemporary Irish writing so much verse that if not actually a form of compensatory escapism is dangerously close to it. To the Irish Literary Movement, taken by and large, the evil enemy was England, holding down and frustrating all that was lovely and worthwhile in the Holy Land of Ireland whose beauty the poets endlessly chanted. Moore, whose relations with Ireland were consistently those of *odi et amo*—with at times an almost psychopathic stress on the *odi*—saw that the real source of infection was the native middle-classes, and—religion apart—all their tawdry, snobbish, and provincial, social values. Events were to support Moore's contention to the full.

This leads me to explain why, as I see things, the story of Irish writing since 1900 falls into two parts: growth and decline.

Though nobody could have observed it at the time, the causes for this decline began to operate immediately the Irish Free State was founded, in 1921. Their effects were, however, held at bay for a time

by the continuing momentum of nationalist excitement persisting after the revolution was over. Sean O'Casey's plays illustrate this. His *Juno and the Paycock* was staged in 1924, and his *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926, both of them dealing with the revolutionary period which was finished and done with. It is true that there was a theatre-riot over the latter play, but nobody attached any special significance to it. If anything one took it for a good omen. It was like the old days of the *Playboy* riots. It promised a continuity of tradition. '*Plus ça change,*' we said. But we were wrong. It was not *la même chose*. There was a fundamental difference between the circumstances surrounding O'Casey and those surrounding Synge. One might build on the two riots a parable of the reasons for the later decline in Irish writing.

In the old days—to keep, for the moment, to the example of the Theatre—an élite had been in the saddle. The whole of Yeats's outlook had been aristocratic though nationalist, just as he had always been both European and Irish, as excited by the *Axel* of Villiers de l'Isle Adam as by the peasant folktales of Bidy Early. He had said several times that his sort of theatre should be as hard to get into as a secret society. He liked small audiences. The poetic drama he admired could never have become popular, and in so far as the Abbey Theatre did become a popular or people's theatre, he felt that he had failed to create what he set out to create. So, he had always struggled against the popular taste for so-called 'realistic' drama. In spite of every inevitable concession to that taste he dominated his ambiguous creation as a poet with a poet's ideals. This all began to change immediately a native government was established. The type of people who had, long ago, protested against Synge's *Playboy* had had no political power. The people who objected to O'Casey had political power. (It is to be remembered that the new Irish Government decided to subsidize the Abbey Theatre; which, at the time, seemed to us all a splendid gesture—disillusion was to come slowly with the gradual realization that when governments give money they receive influence in exchange.)

Moreover, in those 'old days' the Catholic Church had had only a limited amount of political power because the government had been an alien and non-Catholic government, and the foreign Gallio, like all pro-consuls, had kept the ring with the tolerance of total indifference. Now the Church could wield almost unlimited power because the native government was composed of men who respected, loved, and feared it. It is evident that the new intellectual atmosphere depended on the sophistication, cultivation, and tolerance of both the native Government and the Church, the new élite. Unfortunately, centuries of depression had bred in both not only a passionate desire for liberty—each with its own interpretation and its own aims—but the antithesis

of that natural desire. It had induced a nervy, sensitive, touchy, defensive-aggressive, on-guard mentality as a result of which patriotism became infected by chauvinism and true religious feeling by what most Irish writers after 1921 tended to call 'puritanism'. I imagine that I am describing something which happens commonly in all countries which have emerged from a revolutionary phase, and that it does not involve any special criticism of Ireland or the Irish nature. (An intellectual Jew in contemporary Palestine, an intellectual Cypriot in Cyprus, would probably nod his head in understanding and sympathy if he were to read my summary.)

The simplest illustration of what happened was the establishment of a severe Literary Censorship, in 1929. Its aim was, and its aim no doubt still is, a blending of the moral and the patriotic: the desire to protect from corruption this infant nation born out of so much hardship. Within twenty years thousands of books were banned as indecent or obscene. It will be noted that the reason for banning was not political and it was social (and religious) only in so far as books and periodicals were and still are banned if they advocate, or advertize, contraception, abortion, or the artificial insemination of humans. Within recent years this early fervour for banning has been much abated, thanks to the nomination of intelligent censors, following prolonged protests by writers and the general public. Most of the books now banned are ephemeral and their absence from the public libraries and bookshops is no loss. This may be acknowledged and welcomed as a sign of a growing sophistication in contemporary Ireland.

But there have been two particularly bad results for Irish literature; within a few years there was scarcely an Irish writer of distinction who had not, at least once, been declared the author of obscenity, and he was—and still is—denied recourse to the courts of the land in self-defence. But the worst feature of the Censorship has been that with it there arose a private censorship all over the country in the form of a witch-hunt which no librarian or bookseller could dare to resist by stocking books objected to by these un-official censors. Demos was in the saddle.¹

To form a just picture of this new intellectual atmosphere it is

¹I take, at random, from my files a typical list of Banned Books as published in February 1952. Eighty-nine books were banned. The greater number included cheap American importations of a popular nature, thrillers with sexy titles on the lines of *Make Mine a Virgin*. One Irish novelist was listed, Francis Stuart, for *Good Friday's Daughter*. The list also included: John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, Anita Loos's *A Mouse is Born*, André Gide's *Les nourritures terrestres*, Carson McCuller's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. There has been, for some years, an Appeal Board which has unbanned a small proportion of books. They are usually out-of-print by the time they are unbanned. The Censorship Board is immune from legal action. In any case, writers have no money for prolonged action against the State. Today one still, but rarely now, finds a worthwhile book on the lists.

essential to grasp one other point. The revolution of 1916-21 had been a social revolution. This fact lifts the history of Irish writing over the past twenty-five years out of its apparently local setting and puts it in its proper place as part of a general world-tendency. The idealists who inspired the people to rise against British rule were—as I have said—unaware of the social forces they were working with and releasing. In the nineteenth century these forces had been personified by the impoverished farming community in the Land League's fight for decent conditions of land-tenure. In our day the social forces behind the last stage of the Irish Revolution were personified by the sons and daughters of those farmers—surplus children squeezed into the towns and cities, and finding there that all the power and most of the wealth was in the hands of people of a different religion, racial origin, or political loyalty. Sean O'Casey's plays are thus an exactly true statement of the Irish Revolution whose flag, he clearly felt, should be, not the tricolour, but the plough-and-the-stars flag of the urban labouring classes.

We must, finally, understand that the class that came to power and influence was not a labouring class; the more able among them were *petit bourgeois*, middle-men, importers, small manufacturers—the modern counterpart of Moore's nineteenth century middle-classes—forming a new twentieth century middle-class to fill the vacuum created by the departure or depression of the earlier alien middle-class. These men, naturally, had had very little education and could have only a slight interest in the intellectuals' fight for liberty of expression. They were ordinary, decent, kindly, self-seeking men who had no intention of jeopardizing their new-found prosperity by gratuitous displays of moral courage. In any case, since they were rising to sudden wealth behind protective tariff-walls they had a vested interest in nationalism and even in isolationism. The upshot of it was an alliance between the Church, the new businessmen, and the politicians, all three nationalist-isolationist for, respectively, moral reasons, commercial reasons, and politico-patriotic reasons, in themselves all perfectly sound reasons. The effect on letters was not good. The intellectuals became a depressed group. Possibly they were also infected by the atmosphere around them.

For completeness let us try to look sympathetically on the other side of the picture. Ireland is not a publishing country. All but a number of books, so few that it would be an exaggeration to call them a handful, are published abroad, apart from all primary school texts and most secondary school texts. Practically all our mental food is therefore imported: good food but not native. If there is such a thing as a racial Irish quality of life it is very difficult for it to resist almost

overwhelming external influences, since this local way-of-life is not equipped intellectually to support it. The intellectuals cried out for a bold, adventurous, and thoroughly modern system of popular education, but both the Church and the State feared the results. It is to be said that the Irish way-of-life, though poor, indeed impoverished as to institutions fit to represent it—e.g. publishing houses, periodicals, rich universities—is atavistically powerful, spiritually obstinate, strongly resistant, in a great many ways appealing; it represents precious and lovable qualities, and is eminently worth preservation, provided it expresses itself in achievement and not merely in emotional declaration. The intellectuals' position is that it cannot and will not preserve itself by negative methods, and that it is, in practice, now as in the past, being undermined and corrupted by a lack of moral and intellectual courage.

We can now look at Irish writing against this social, political, and religious background. First, the Theatre:

As we look back over the plays produced in the Abbey Theatre since the First World War we find that the Theatre was still lively almost up to 1932. (This suggests that the momentum of the revolutionary stimulus went on for some ten years.) The lists include first productions of plays by Lady Gregory, Brinsley McNamara, Padraic Colum, Daniel Corkery, Shaw, Lord Dunsany, Lennox Robinson, George Shiels, Sean O'Casey, T. C. Murray, Yeats, Wilde, Rutherford Mayne, Teresa Deevy, Denis Johnston, and Paul Vincent Carroll. Lady Gregory died in 1932. From then onward two or three plays of distinction were produced but no outstanding name is added to the list. In 1935 Yeats, who was ageing and ailing, felt that the theatre needed younger men. His friend, the poet Frederick Robert Higgins, was appointed Director; so was Frank O'Connor; and a significant name also appeared among the directors, an ex-Cabinet Minister, Mr Ernest Blythe. Mr Hugh Hunt, now producer at the Old Vic Theatre, London, was brought in as producer, and from 1935 to 1938, the combination of Higgins, O'Connor and Hunt gave the theatre a new and exciting spurt. It is of interest that in those three years the Abbey produced several non-Irish plays—including plays by Shakespeare, Flecker, Toller, Shaw, André Obey. Yeats died in 1939. O'Connor, feeling unable to cope with influences of which he disapproved, resigned in 1939. Higgins died in 1941. Mr Blythe became Managing Director. Thus, there remained on the Board, to represent old tradition, only Mr Lennox Robinson. Otherwise the bridge with the past was down.

Unless we imagine that literature exists in a vacuum we must see what sort of official influences played on the Theatre at this period. I will give two examples. In 1932 when the Abbey Theatre visited

the United States the usual hyper-patriotic societies there protested against some of the plays, including O'Casey's, and at home Deputies were prompted to ask awkward questions in the Dáil. In reply to one questioner on this issue, Mr De Valera said (26 April 1933) that the Government had made indirect representations to the Abbey Theatre, and that it was hoped that if the Company visited America again plays of the kind objected to by the American-Irish would not be produced. In that year the official subsidy was reduced. In 1934 a similar angry question received a similar reply, De Valera then saying that such plays damage the good name of Ireland. Yeats stood his ground, and was attacked bitterly by the popular press.

The second significant incident occurred in 1938 when the Board of the Theatre decided that plays in the Irish language should henceforth become a regular feature of the work of the Theatre. This, I hold, was a retrograde step artistically, however laudable from the patriotic point of view, since there happened to be no Gaelic-writing playwrights worth mentioning and most of the trained actors could not speak Gaelic. The result showed itself in 1942 when the Government again intervened to ask the Theatre to take over the work of an existing company of Gaelic players called 'An Comhar Drámuíochta' (The Drama Co-operative). After this, so far as I know, no junior players were employed unless they could speak Gaelic, an accomplishment which had as much to do with acting as if they could dance the *can-can*. I record this incident solely to give the reader my impression of the lowering of intellectual standards after Yeats.

Let us now try to define the precise effect on the arts. Fundamentally what had happened was that a social concept of the function of literature was beginning to replace the 'individualist' concept. Compare Yeats, taking him as representative of the first twenty-five years of the Anglo-Irish revival. Yeats had loved all art that was remote and uncommon, 'distinguished and lonely'. He had seen the element of nobility in the simplest people but he had never permitted his affection for familiar life to be confused with a preoccupation with the common or the popular.¹ Thus, writing of the Theatre he had said:

The modern author, if he be a man of genius, is a solitary, he does not know the everchanging public well enough to be its servant. He cannot learn their convention; they must learn his. All that is greatest in modern literature is soliloquy, or, at most, words addressed to a few friends.

This dislike of 'realism' had always been with him. He sought always

¹ So brief a summary is inadequate even to suggest the complexity of Yeats's thought. I put the word *individualist* in inverted commas solely to indicate its inadequacy. See Yeats's attack on the popular idea of 'individualism' in his own record of his famous meeting with The Young Joyce in: *The Identity of Yeats*, by Richard Ellmann, p. 86 foll.

to sublimate reality, and it was in that search for a dissolvent of the flesh that he had formed the distinction between Character, that is, the social, public, moral thing, formed by and for the purposes of organized society, and Personality, which is what appears in all the great moments of drama when this social, functional thing drops away and a man's spirit burns with the 'pure gem-like flame'. So, he had found inspiration in the ancient mind of his people, but it was not a political mind, or a social mind, but a mystical memory, linking man to those ages when life was still a unity, before he became fissured by rationalism and splintered by what we nowadays call psychological analysis.

One could easily demur at much of this. The Theatre, after all, is the most sociable of all the arts. And, as I have indicated in my opening remarks, there was already too much of this withdrawal-from-life in the first period of the Irish Literary Movement. At any rate our new, ambitious, hardfaced democracy understood none of this aristocratic concept. It understood only 'realistic plays', political plays, representationalism, characterization, explanations, social comedies and tragedies. It is to the credit of some Irish playwrights resident in Ireland that they took the risks of some sort of criticism and satire, and it is to the credit of the Abbey Theatre, even in its decline, that it staged some of these plays. But what we have had even of this 'some sort of criticism and satire' has been so feeble as to extinguish the value of the terms I have used ('realistic', 'political', 'representational', 'social') to describe the sort of plays the new public wanted. Because the new audiences did not really want any of those things; they wanted those things in an *ersatz* form: plays that merely gave the illusion of being political, realistic, social, critical, and so on. They were ready to laugh at plays dealing with the surface of things. They were not ready for plays that opposed what might be called, for short, the new synthetic orthodoxy, or at any rate diverged radically from it, let alone that denied it or rejected it. No social-realistic drama—whether comic or tragic—can thrive in this atmosphere. Mr Brendan Behan, for instance, whether good, bad or indifferent, could not have broken through in Dublin. He first had to break through in London or New York.

But there are even greater and deeper dangers in the writers' battle for honesty. The danger of becoming embittered, or twisted, threatens creativity itself, and here we come to the real battle-ground of contemporary Irish writing. For the first time Irish writers have had to *think* themselves into personal release. Disillusion is also a form of revelation. There is no longer any question of dishing up local colour. (The Noble Peasant is as dead as the Noble Savage. Poems about fairies and leprechauns, about misted lakes, old symbols of national longing, are over and done with.) We need to explore Irish

life with an objectivity never hitherto applied to it—and in this Joyce rather than Yeats is our inspiration. But to see clearly is not to write passionately. An artist must, in some fashion, love his material, and his material must, in some fashion, co-operate with him. It is not enough for an artist to be clinically interested in life: he must take fire from it. This has been the great rub in Ireland for some thirty years. It is not confined to Ireland. Everywhere today, as I see it, literature is facing the same problem: How to transmute into permanent forms a life that one sees critically rather than lovingly.

If this really is an universal problem, why is it so? I think it is so because writers everywhere feel that life no longer has any sense of Pattern and Destination. The argosies set out. They forget why. To give the most naïve example possible of Pattern and Destination: time was when novelists moved their men and women, with a sense of completion, towards a home and a family, in love and marriage. Countless is the number of novels and plays shaped about the thwarting of this journey. All the hypocrisy of the Victorian novel, its sentimental, evangelical piety, its evasiveness exposed itself in this 'Destination' which everybody knows today is only a starting point, another challenge, another problem. No writer dares to play this old tune today. The result is that men of genius have been writing as the matador kills bulls, by virtuosity or by savagery—Joyce, Hemingway, Anouilh, Aymé, Bazin, Julien Green, Mailer, all the writers of the *roman nouveau*; or they impose Pattern and Destination by sheer force—Lagerkvist by his symbolism, Malraux by his mysticism, Sartre by his Existentialism, Bernanos, Greene, or Mauriac by their Catholicism, the later O'Casey by his Communism. One may be lost in admiration of this forcible handling of intractable material, though one does sometimes wonder whether humanity has not emerged from their work literally man-handled, moulded to shape, intellectualized, not men but puppets. The regionalists are in the happier position. Faulkner may still find Pattern and Destination about him, or imagine he can find it.

An Irish writer might expect to find old patterns persisting in his region also. But the dilemma has here taken a particularly sardonic form. My countrymen are so satisfied with their sentimental Pattern that they have no interest in Destination. Everything having been solved they have no further to go—except to Heaven. They are frustrated by the illusory completeness of their own conventions. The novel elsewhere may be frustrated by the certainties of men lost; here it is frustrated by the certainties of men saved. We read with an excited absorption the work of Catholic novelists elsewhere—that is, novelists who work within the frame of the struggle between God and the Devil,

rather than the struggle of man with material evil or impersonal misfortune—and we observe that they deal with characters who are wilful, rebellious, passionate, arrogant, conscious, persistent, reckless—men who put theology to the test of experience, either to uphold it or not as their experiences prompt. We turn, hopefully, to the potential material of Irish novels on the lines of Bernanos or Mauriac. We discover to our dismay that no error has been so great as the popular conception of the Irishman as rebellious, passionate, reckless, wilful, and so on. We are, in effect, very much in the same position as Hawthorne who just managed to squeeze one novel—and it is not really as fine a novel as the professors say; he lacked courage to push his concept of life to its end—out of equally unmalleable material, in a society where, also, sin was furtive, convention rigid, courage slight and honesty scant.

One of the most striking effects of all this on Irish letters in the period before us is the comparative failure of the modern Irish Novel. If one were to exclude Joyce—which is like saying if one were to exclude Everest—and Liam O'Flaherty how little is left! We have, of course, plenty of honourable efforts (perhaps, I might suggest, like my own efforts) but of anything like top-notchers (Joyce's *Portrait* aside) how many others would the really serious critic want to put beside, say, Elizabeth Bowen's Irish novel *The Last September* or whichever one, two or three of O'Flaherty's he would choose for this test? My explanation for this I have already given—that Irish life in our period does not supply the *dramatis personae*, ready for the hard conflicts, the readiness to take anything *jusqu'au bout* in either full or at least some awareness of what is at stake, without which dramatic themes for the novel are missing. We produce spurts of spirit. They end in laughter (the great national vice and virtue) or exile.

This may be why, on the other hand, the Short Story has thriven in the meantime, and this is probably the best product of our period. The successes here have been so numerous that I need not even mention names. They have been wise to choose the smaller, yet revealing themes in the absence of the larger, more dramatic ones.

The Irish novelist who has been most persistent in mining for revolt and passion has been Liam O'Flaherty. He has found his passionate creatures in the west of Ireland and in the Revolution. His best-known novels *The Informer* (1925), *The Assassin* (1928), *The Martyr* (1932) are in the middle of our period. Each deals with the revolutionary upheaval, which was a godsend to all Irish writers until, as in the Theatre, the vein became exhausted around 1932, ten years after the Revolution ended. In that year O'Flaherty wrote *The Puritan*, a study of the new Irish rigorism, and thereafter he chose, with one ex-

ception, which was a failure, historical subjects. It is most revealing that all of O'Flaherty's work is shot through by a wild romanticism—to put it crudely, the romanticism of the Noble Savage. He had to write in this way to gear himself and his characters to action. Since he is so much a Romantic one should not expect intellectual as well as emotional rewards from his work. I regret their absence—as I do in Hemingway: it is an equally pointless regret.

I think my reader will begin to realize the difficulties of writing in a country where the policeman and the priest are in a perpetual glow of satisfaction. He must, however, also see that, to a real extent, Irish novelists have failed to solve a problem. I will illustrate this problem by quoting the comment of an intelligent American critic on his first visit to Ireland. He said: 'This seems to be a very prosperous, comfortable, well-to-do country. We do not get that picture from your writers. Why not?' His comment was not wholly fair. He ignored Emigration, to make but one point, and other things that do not immediately strike the eye. Still, I have failed to present an intelligible picture of contemporary Irish society—acquisitive, bourgeois, unsophisticated, intellectually conservative and unadventurous, rigidly controlled on every side—if the answer to that 'Why not?' is not apparent. I will underline it only by pointing out that the change-over from a stratified society—ranging from aristocrat to outcast—to a one-class society, where there are not native aristocrats and no outcasts (except the writers?), and where the hard, traditional core is in a farming population, rarely induces a fertile awareness either among people or writers. And awareness in literature is an essential. Even before the Revolution Irish writers—Joyce, Shaw, Wilde, dozens besides—felt this, in so far as our awareness was then (as they saw it) all going down the drain of politics and nationalism. They left Ireland for the more interesting life of the island next door. Unawareness itself is, it may be added, not a theme for any writer: it is a negative; it eliminates the element of self-conflict, which alone gives meaning to any theme.

One other obstacle, and of all perhaps the most difficult to surmount, has come between the Irish writer, whether poet, dramatist, or novelist, and his normal material in Irish life. It may be expressed in the words of the poet, Robert Greacen, in a poem significantly entitled *Written on the Sense of Isolation in Contemporary Ireland*. Having called up the 'unfettered great in heart and mind who gave no inch to fate'—Swift, Burke, Sheridan, Congreve, Goldsmith, Moore and Yeats—he says:

*Yet all of these the world for subject took
And wed the fearless thesis to their book.*

We are, it would seem, only just beginning to learn how to be, as

Yeats was, European though nationalist. Hitherto, Irish writers, still tuning-in, as writers always do, to the intellectual stations of the world did so almost like men in an occupied country listening to forbidden voices. The writer who had the feel of the world rose, hitherto, from his grapevine, excited by the sense of the world, then turned to his page to write as he felt. . . . But with what? With whom? What characters would think and speak for him, in his poem, play, or novel? As I have said, the *dramatis personae* were otherwise engaged. Perhaps this is now changing?

I feel profoundly that Greacen's point has much to say about the last thirty years of Irish poetry. There is no loss of technical skill—if anything a far greater verbal sophistication has arrived in Irish poetry over the last thirty years than existed previously. There is no decline in receptiveness. The later work of Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Padraic Fallon, Valentin Iremonger, Thomas Kinsella, Robert Farren, to name only a few, show poetry just as much on tiptoe, ready for flight, as it ever was. All that is lacking is not significant subject, but width of personal vision—and one rarely hears a modern idiom, a modern speech. The voltage of poetry (of any art) must do more than illuminate the local, or bring the barque of the mind happily home. Poetry is a lighthouse calling us to far seas. Clarke, for all his intense nationalism and smoozed piety, often speaks with a far-echoing voice, as understandable to any part of the world as to us. I have always felt that Denis Devlin was a great loss to us: he wrote with a full response to the fulness of life everywhere. So, frequently, does Iremonger.

This need for a larger vision shows itself most poignantly in modern Irish poetry in the Irish language. Within my knowledge I am aware of only three Gaelic poets who are not utterly lost in the Gaelic Mist, trying to extract ore from long-exhausted mines, symbols worn threadbare by the first phase of the Irish Literary Movement. Those three are Máire Mhac an tSaoi (now Mrs Conor Cruise O'Brien), Tomás Óibín, but above all the Seán O'Riordáin of *Eireball Spid-éige*, a delightfully fresh-minded poet irrespective of place or language. Here, again, it is not the subject or theme (as with the novelist) which is important; it is the freedom and scope of the imagination, dealing with any subject. For where the novelist is contained by character the poet is not—he is his own character, his own subject. This O'Riordáin has instinctively grasped and is thereby liberated at once from the old trap of writing *about* Ireland.

The lesson of our time is that Irish writers cannot any longer go on writing about Ireland, or for Ireland within the narrow confines of the traditional Irish life-concept; it is too slack, too cosy, too evasive,

too untense. They must, or perish as regionalists, take, as writers everywhere do, the local (since they know its detail most intimately) and universalize it, as Joyce did—as Kavanagh can do it even when he is writing about a potato-field or O'Riordáin about a hospital-nurse. It is a matter of bravely and clear-sightedly accepting the tensions of one's own being, or relentlessly challenging the life about one with their sharpest questions, of looking, then, far and wide, in time and place, for others who have been in some like conflict—a Stendhal, Balzac, Hawthorne, Forster, Joyce, Trollope, Yeats, Frost, Hardy, Lampedusa, Lorca, Cafavy, Zhivago, whoever it may be anywhere at any time who, one feels, might ironically sympathize—saying to them, 'That was how it seemed to you! Here is how it strikes me,' and seize one's pen, *for them* and one's self.

Men of genius accelerate the processes of time for their country, *if* (which is a challenging, and often the most dismaying conjecture) they can cope with their country. The problem is up to the writers themselves. Nobody outside can help them; nobody inside will help them. They will not evade it by exile—Ibsen did not, and did not wish to. (He had other reasons for his exile.) Nobody need pity them either, since by the grace of God and the savagery of Oliver Cromwell their language is now the English language and if they have anything worth saying that they can say well, the periodicals and publishers of Britain and America are waiting for them with open arms and purses. If they feel that exile is absolutely necessary, they may, alone among the writers of the small countries of the world, emigrate freely. What they have to cope with either way is complex enough. But was there ever a writer whose life and work was plain sailing? Their main worry must be that their worst enemies are impalpable and insinuating: self-pity, bitterness, sentimentality, cynicism, their own unsophistication, barren rage, even their love of country, their love of friends. (It was Ibsen who said that he had to leave Norway because friendship was too expensive: meaning that, for friendship's sake, one refrained from saying things that should be said.) It is improper for any critic to probe into these struggles. They are delicate, intimate, and fearful.