

# THE NEW DIRECTION IN IRISH LITERATURE

by Seán O'Faoláin

ONE does not see a wood any the clearer by felling the trees. Yet there is a great deal of that being done in the Ireland of today. There are for example many who would clarify the position of Anglo-Irish literature in modern Ireland by deriding almost everybody who has contributed to it. This curious, but not I think uncommon, *volte-face* in nationalistic feeling deserves consideration.

One must remember that the modern Irishman is, politically speaking, a very self-conscious person. He is like a man who having worked hard for success wakes up one morning to find himself famous and does not quite know what to do about it. The struggle for emancipation had, it is true, a long if intermittent history behind it, when, in a great burst of nationalistic fervour, the modern generation began another offensive. That history was indeed of great help in supporting and encouraging the latest phase of the struggle; but history has a way of suddenly closing a chapter and becoming out of date. Nobody was less prepared for political freedom than those who had been longest demanding it. It was always one of the most encouraging signs of the young Free State that its leaders did have some definite ideas as to what they wanted. The mass of the people, however, had not the slightest idea either of the responsibilities or the opportunities involved in their autonomy. And it was one of the next most encouraging signs to find that there were men in control in

Ireland who were prepared to risk a great deal to teach the people what these responsibilities were.

Politics are politics, however, and one cannot, as Burke might have said, suddenly make a nation out of a people who have acted, and unhappily been treated, as a rabble for some three hundred years. There comes, too, a period when the pupil begins to stretch his wings for himself. The Mayo library affair is a case in point and one very pertinent to the present discussion. A Protestant girl was appointed on a County Library scheme. The local councillors objected. The Government in an attempt to be just refused to yield, and as a result the local public bodies refused to act at all and the whole scheme became moribund. Teachers went unpaid for months and the affairs of the county fell into disarray. Finally a commissioner was appointed, the librarian resigned strategically to undertake another post in Dublin, and Mayo has won its point at the expense of being governed by a commissioner. Other cases in point are the famous banning of Shaw's works in Galway, the banning last year in many places of the *Daily Mail* because it published a sympathetic review of a materialist life of Christ, and the seizure by Guards a few months ago, in Limerick, of the *Sunday Times* because it contained an article on birth-control by Lord Buckmaster.

These acts may be read as signs of intolerance and bigotry, but, Shaw excepted, there

are after all various points of view on the propriety of such things and Ireland is not the only country in which a censorship has been, on occasion, stupidly enforced. It would be more correct to say they are the outcome of a kind of uninstructed Puritan Catholicism whose sin is that it will allow no point of view but one. There is, for instance, a movement on foot to ignore Bank Holidays in favour of Catholic holy days; and when in Wexford a non-Catholic councillor protested on behalf of the minority he was brusquely told "this is a Catholic country". Intolerant or not, however, these actions can be more interestingly considered in another way. They may be taken as so many blind gropings towards the creation of a national mind.

So we return to the new attitude toward Anglo-Irish literature. There appeared recently, from the pen of a professor of English in the National University, a book on Synge in which this attitude was formulated for the first time. It was a good book as far as Synge went, but it was marred by a propagandist abuse of almost every other Irish writer; or where it praised a few, it praised them because, like Synge (as distinct from the "Dublin set" as they were called—the AE-Yeats school), they "went into the huts of the people and lived with them". The implication is clear. Anglo-Irish literature is here held in disdain as a partial and inadequate interpretation of Irish life. The Celtic Twilight is to be thrown overboard and another formula, to which Synge is apparently the nearest available approximation, is to be substituted. The writer cries in substance, Away with Joyce, away with O'Casey, AE, O'Flaherty, Robinson, Yeats, and the rest.

Nobody can fail to be struck by the Russian parallel. A political ideal of what constitutes, or ought to constitute, Irish life is

first erected. By this idol all literary efforts are to be judged, and to it everything of the freedom of the artist must be sacrificed. It would be odd to find a professor of literature announcing such a doctrine if one did not feel that what really was involved, though sadly confused with a welter of political and religious prejudices, was an appeal for greater artistic integrity. There has been, without any doubt, too much of the "Misty road to Killary" and the "Fiddler of Dooney". But when a professor goes so far astray as to confuse O'Casey and O'Flaherty with this too-easy, conventional treatment, into what morass, one asks in dismay, will the uneducated public (e.g. of Galway and Mayo) fall?

One may look therefore for a renewal of the struggle between the realists and idealists of Anglo-Irish literature. The realist attitude has been made clear by O'Casey and O'Flaherty, Joyce, O'Donnell, and others. What ideal picture will replace the Celtic Twilight—itself a lovely and not-to-be-regretted deception—remains to be seen. The Celtic Twilight was invented by a great poet and even in its imitators it had a charm; but poetry seems to have given way for a while to prose fiction and the drama, and a prosy deception is difficult to contemplate. If I were asked to suggest an example of the new ideal I should mention, reluctantly, because the thing is only in process of formation, and because these two books contain lovely things, *Dark Mountain* by Francis Gallagher, or *Stormy Hills* by Daniel Corkery. The reader would do well to judge for himself, but when he has read these two books he might take up what in my opinion is a far superior book to either, *Guests of the Nation* by Frank O'Connor, and draw his own conclusions.

In the first two books mentioned Irish life

is idealized though not poeticized, the idealization being achieved mainly by a process of cunning omission. Mr. Corkery's book is the superior of the two in that he chooses to avoid rather than omit, and he has achieved remarkable success using only the simplest human themes. Sex, one observes, is not treated at all except as a lyric note; and sophisticated and unusual motifs are clearly not within the range of the interests of either author. This toning down to a low relief has disadvantages other than those of a restricted interest and delineation of Irish character as incomplete as that of the scorned "Dublin set". It almost inevitably leads the writer either to sentimentality or, when he suddenly embarks on dramatic themes, to melodrama—the very vice from which this kind of writing is a recoil. There is a story exemplary of

the former in *The Stormy Hills* in which an old blind woman and her idiot son, forced into the city from the country farms, steal from the slums to revisit the valley of their youth; it is a story which a Frenchman *might* dare to attempt, treating it with an extreme of delicacy and irony.

On the other hand should a taste for these quieter motifs develop it might benefit Irish prose by eradicating from it the more stark and brutal elements to which it is partial. There is a great deal of the pendulum movement in the development of literary taste and it may be comforting to regard the present departure as nothing more than a momentary extreme. Between it and the next swing—during the next twenty years in fact—we may well see some of the best Anglo-Irish prose yet written.

---

## CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

---

### *T. S. Eliot Comes Home*

How much T. S. Eliot will be able to give the Harvard undergraduates during his occupancy of the chair of poetry this coming year is perhaps a question; but there is no question that the attention which his visit to this country will excite will greatly increase the size of the audience of his work. We should say that nothing more salutary could happen to the course of literature and ideas in America. Eliot is one of the ablest spokesmen for a point of view and a set of ideas which are only slowly coming to occupy the position to which they are rightfully entitled, whether one rate their intrinsic value high, as we do, or judge them merely by their representative and traditional importance. It is well known that Eliot's position involves a drastic criticism of most of the things that have been the pride of the modern world, and bases itself firmly on a return to the older traditions of philosophy and faith. "The homeward march of the intellect of Europe" is a phrase that has been well applied to one manifestation of the world-wide movement of which T. S. Eliot is so effective and engaging a champion.

As has often been remarked, Eliot's influence during the dozen years of his public career stands in amazing contrast to the small volume of his work. He is gifted to a superlative degree with that peculiar quality of utterance which sends words straight to the souls of readers and makes of them disciples. Since 1920, when his first book appeared, his every pronouncement has been followed with

close attention by an ever increasing number of alert minds, especially by young people in college or just out; one sometimes has the feeling that hundreds if not thousands of young Americans and Englishmen are building their lives around Eliot's work, and that their most momentous decisions can be settled by a casual paragraph of his. His books have been reread and studied as have few others, and his magazine, the *Criterion*, now completing its tenth year, has been without doubt the most influential publication of the post-war period. In poetry, of course, he has been the most widely imitated of all the moderns.

Eliot has certainly not been overlooked or underestimated, but the value of his work is far from exhausted; it is a matter for rejoicing that his return to his own country will surely add to his readers, of both the work he has already done and the work that still lies before him. What will his future work be? We have never been able to decide on the exact location of Eliot's tongue when he announced, in 1929, that he was at work on three books with these titles: *The School of Donne*, *The Outline of Royalism*, and *The Principles of Modern Heresy*; somehow it is difficult to picture Eliot calling a book an Outline of anything. But we may hope that the announcement was serious to the extent of signifying that Eliot will occasionally in the future concentrate into single substantial studies the energies which have thus far gone into a wide scattering of essays and reviews. The fragmentary and elliptical nature of his writing has often been criticized, but surely