

Osip Mandelstam

Verses on the Unknown Soldier (1937)

1.

I call this air to witness—
His long-range firing heart—
And the ocean, windowless matter, busy,
Omnivorous in the dug-out.

How inquisitive these stars,
Constantly looking—wherefore?—
In condemnation of judge and witness,
At the ocean, windowless matter.

Rain, a grudging sower,
Its anonymous manna will recall
How a forest of small crosses marked
The ocean or salient of battle.

Cold, sickly men will kill,
Will chill and hunger,
And in his renowned grave
Has been put the unknown soldier.

Teach me, you feeble swallow
That have unlearned flying
How I can master this aerial grave
Without helm, without wing.

And on Lermontov, Mikhail,
I shall draft a bulletin:
How the grave corrects a stooping man
And its air pocket draws him in.

2.

These worlds, like moving grapes—
It is us they are menacing,
And hang like stolen townships,
Golden slips of the tongue, sneaks,
Berries of poisonous chill,
Tents of expandable constellations,
Golden sky-gobbets of fat.

3.

Through the decimalised ether, the light
By bright pain made transparent
And the moth of zeroes, brings
A number's commencement.

And beyond the field of fields a new field
Flies on like a three-cornered crane:
By a light-dusted path the message flies on,
And there's brightness from yesterday's battle.

By a light-dusted path the message flies on:
I am not Leipzig, Waterloo,
Or the Battle of the Nations—but new:
I will light up the world.

In the depth of the black-marble oyster
Is snuffed the gleam of Austerlitz;
The meridional swallow narrows its eyes,
Pestilent sand of Egypt clots.

4.

Arabian mish-mash, jumble,
The light of velocities ground into a ray—
And, with its oblique soles,
The ray stands on my retina.

Millions expendably killed
Have trampled a track in the void;
Good night and bless you, good luck to them
On behalf of the earthworks.

Over the craters, embankments, loose earth,
Among which befoggingly he loitered—
The sullen, pockmarked and downtrodden
Genius of ravaged graves.

Unsubornable sky of the trenches,
The sky of grand-scale wholesale deaths,
After you—away from you integral—
I haste with my lips in the dark.

The infantry die well,
The night chorus sing well too
Over Schweik's flat smile,
Over Don Quixote's avian lance,
Over the knightly avian metatarsus.

6.

7.

Have the vessels of comeliness
 Been laid up in empty space
 So that the white stars may rush
 Back into their abode
 With a tincture of red?
 And conjuring my essence
 With half trance-like existence,
 Is it I who without choice consume
 This broth and my head under fire?
 Do you make out, night, stepdame
 Of the starry gypsy encampment,
 That which is now and to come?

Aortas filled with blood; there flew
 Along the ranks a small whisper:
 "I was born in ninety-four,
 I was born in ninety-two . . ."
 And in my fist clutching hard
 My dog-eared year of birth,

With the mob and the multitude,
I whisper with blood-drained mouth:
"I was born on second/third,
January night of ninety-one,
A most unreliable year,
And centuries hedge me with fire."

Note: The Russian word for moth ("mol") also signifies gram-molecular weight.

NOTES & TOPICS

The Israelis & their Enemies

“Uncosy” Zionists, “Easygoing” Arabs—By MAX BELOFF



THE HISTORY of Zionism and of its creation the modern state of Israel has inspired a huge literature; but not surprisingly it is overwhelmingly the work of Jewish writers, whether in Israel or the Diaspora. Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien's lengthy and learned work¹ is thus a notable exception to the general

rule. He has brought to his task not only the discipline of the professional historian and the eloquence of one of the outstanding political journalists of our time, but also a practical experience of the world of politics, gained in the affairs of his own country—Ireland—and in the service of the United Nations both as an official and as a national delegate.

No one who has been able to detach himself sufficiently from the nationalism of his own country to see how it fits into the general story of European nationalisms in the last two centuries can help but illuminate the story of another nationalism with even deeper and more complex roots and with even more serious unresolved problems. No one who has not seen at first hand the subordination of peaceful settlements by all the member-states of the United Nations to more immediate considerations of national rivalries and domestic politics could fail to arrive at the pessimistic conclusions about a solution to the problem of Israel's relations with her neighbours that dominate Dr O'Brien's analysis of the current situation.

To see where we go from here (or fail to go from here) depends in large part on one's evaluation of the history of how we got here; and it would be a pity if concentration on Dr O'Brien's necessarily personal and subjective reflections in his 20-page epilogue—it has already infuriated British arabophiliacs and will, I suspect, not cause joy in most respectable quarters in Israel—were to detract from the 640 pages of solid narrative and analysis that precede them. To dispute the conclusions, one would have to fault either the narrative or the analysis, or both. It would be curious if so ambitious an undertaking were flawless; the question is, rather, how much the flaws matter.

While immersion in Irish history has sensitised Dr O'Brien

to some aspects of his present theme—above all to the religious dimension—he does not seek to draw too close a parallel. Herzl saw himself as a Jewish Parnell. And indeed both illustrate the familiar truth that the leaders of national movements very often come from sections of the nation that to some extent stand apart from the masses in whose name they operate and from whom the movement derives its power: Herzl, the westernised, assimilated Jew, idolised by the huddled masses of the Pale and the rest of Eastern Europe; Parnell, a member of the Protestant ascendancy; Mahomed Ali Jinnah, a sceptical secular-minded politician, as far removed as can be imagined from the Islamic roots of the idea of Pakistan—and other names spring easily to mind. Furthermore, Dr O'Brien elaborates on an idea put forward by one of Israel's most considerable authorities on Arab affairs, Yehoshua Porath: that in some circumstances an Arab Parnell might arise in Israel, and that the Knesset would then prove as vulnerable as was the British House of Commons to the purely political exploitation of the Party situation by the followers of Parnell and Redmond.

What is perhaps surprising is that Dr O'Brien nowhere draws what seems an even more obvious parallel: that between the *Yishuv* (the Jewish immigrants to Palestine as organised during the British Mandate) and Protestant Ulster. After all, both are majorities within a defined area, but both think and behave (understandably) as do threatened minorities. And if it be argued that the Israelis have more grounds for their sensitivity to anything that might alter the balance to their disadvantage, since the Arabs outnumber them by so much more than the combined populations of the Irish Republic and the Catholic community in the north outnumber Protestant Ulstermen, if Irish-Americans are taken into account the balance is not all that different.

The reason for calling attention to this parallel is not to provide answers for an imaginary examination—“Compare the Reverend Ian Paisley to Rabbi Meir Kahane”—but because it does seem to me that there is a difference between those nationalisms that have been concerned with overthrowing foreign domination over their acknowledged home territory—Czechs, Poles, Indians—and those that are concerned with the preservation of an area of settlement whose very title is questioned (even after the lapse of centuries)—Ulstermen, Israelis, Boers. Of course, the original circumstances were different in each case, as was the set of ideas governing their settlers' attitudes, thus giving rise

¹ *The Siege: The Saga of Zionism and Israel*. By CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20.00.