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DICTIONARY
OF IRISH
LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Ireland is a small, wet island about four hours to the west of England if you travel by the mailboat from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire. The island was not considered important enough to conquer by Julius Caesar, but ever since then it has been thrusting itself upon the world's notice. Indeed, despite its small size and population, its negligible mineral resources, and its minor strategic value in time of war, Ireland has taken up a remarkable amount of the world's attention.

The country's richest contribution to the world has been its emigrants. Otherwise, Ireland has been, until quite recently, mainly absorbed by itself. Sometimes it has seemed to assume that the world would find that subject equally interesting, and, despite moments of exasperation with that "most distressful country," the world usually has been interested and often fascinated.

Perhaps the reason is that there is an Irish Problem. One caustic thinker shrugged the matter off by remarking, "The Irish problem—there is always an Irish problem. It is the Irish." The Irish themselves would probably say that the problem is the outsiders. For centuries, they would point out, their little bit of heaven has been overrun by outsiders who have victimized, exploited, and oppressed the inhabitants. The oppressor may have been the Danes, the Normans, the English, or American blue jeans, hamburgers, vulgarity and affluence.

The world's view is somewhat similar: Ireland is an ideal; we regard its fields as greener, its virgins purer, and its poets wittier than any others anywhere ever were. It is the repository of whimsy, charm, and geniality, and yet. . . . And yet something diabolical is always going on in that little bit of heaven. The Potato Famines of the 1840s, to take but one example, were probably the most effective decimation of a race until Hitler turned his

attention to the Jews. Perhaps the Irish decimation was even worse because it happened not by madness or any overt policy, but simply by not caring. Then there have been all of the other diabolical instances—the assassinations, the wars, and the continuing petty turmoil that is a microcosm of the world's turmoil.

In our hearts we probably know that every place is a ravaged Eden, but in Ireland we seem to see more clearly our own plight, our own faults, and our own fate. Yet why do we see it there? Why has Yugoslavia, or Wales, or Chile, or Iceland not so held the attention of the world? Why have there been so many memorable and resounding voices from this country which today numbers only about four million souls?

Any answer must be speculative and subjective, and this book attempts only part of an answer. That part is concerned with why Ireland has been blessed with such a proportionately startling number of extraordinary writers. In philosophy, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and practically every branch of human endeavor, the Irish contribution to the wealth of the world's wisdom has been, as one would expect, minor. In literature, however, in decade after decade and in century after century, this small country has produced men like Swift and Burke and Berkeley, Sheridan and Goldsmith and Wilde, Shaw and Yeats and Joyce, Synge and Fitzmaurice, O'Casey and O'Flaherty, O'Connor and O'Faolain, Bowen and Behan and Beckett, and many, many others. This volume attempts to tell something about these Irish writers and their work, but this introductory essay will attempt to suggest something more—to suggest why there were so many who were so good.

The qualities that have formed the Irish writer are the qualities that have formed the Irish man. Among them are:

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The effects of geography and climate upon Ireland have been crucial in its history, its economy, and the character of its people.

The landscape of Ireland is often startlingly beautiful and extremely various. The weather is statistically, if not convincingly, temperate, but the perennially falling rain may at any moment be dissipated by the most dramatic appearance of blue sky to be seen anywhere in the world. The combination of mountain and bog, lake and lowland with a gentle climate and abundant rain has made the country most profitable for the growing of grass and the grazing of cattle. Hence, it has had a major effect upon the Irish economy. The combination of geography and climate upon people is perhaps even more important. Much of Ireland has a stark grandeur or a sensual beauty that can elevate or delight and that often does. However, the effect of the landscape is inevitably tempered by the weather. A good deal of the sombre and brooding character of the Irish landscape seems due to the quality of the light, to the constantly shifting and low-lying masses of clouds, and to the rain, the softly falling and ever-present rain. The psychic

effect upon people must be subliminally schizophrenic—a depressed elevation, a dull delight briefly shot through with instants of manic joy. One might well argue that those are the tones of Irish literature.

One might almost say that those Irish novels that start off by describing a hot and sunny day usually turn out to be either exaggerations or simple entertainments. At any rate, one can say that descriptions of landscape in Irish literature impart not only the striking beauty of the country, but also even a spiritual overtone, an extra meaningfulness, much as landscape and weather, heath and storm, enrich the meaning of *King Lear*.

THE MEMORY OF THE DEAD

When a truce was called in the Anglo-Irish war in 1921, the Irish leader Eamon de Valera went to England to negotiate a final peace settlement with the English prime minister, Lloyd George. A story is told about de Valera then, which is too good to be true and yet too Irish to be basically wrong in anything but the facts. Someone asked after several days how negotiations were progressing, and the answer was that de Valera was rehearsing the historical background, and so far the talks had progressed up to the battle of Clontarf.

One Irish novel gives a quick sense of the city of Dublin merely by leaping from statue to statue—from Parnell to O'Connell, to Tom Moore, to Grattan, to Burke and Goldsmith, Davis, Tone, Emmet, and quite a few others.

And, of course, if one is extracting symptoms, there are the innumerable poems and ballads which still are read and sung about Owen Roe, Red Hugh, brave Patrick Sarsfield, bold Father Murphy, and young Roddy McCorley. Then for years there was the constant political evocation of the past—the stirring allusion to, the rousing quotation from, and the frequent reading of the works of Tone and Davis, of Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, of Pearse's essays and speeches. Perhaps the most dramatic, or at least the loudest, evocation of all was the memory of King Billy crossing the Boyne on the Glorious 12th of July, celebrated by the horrific cannonade of the Lambeg drums. Yet, the most quietly telling evocation of all was that until very modern times the cities, towns, and countryside changed little, and so the past was noticeably ever present; one lived in the middle of it.

Culturally, Irish legend and history have been, at least since the Literary Renaissance, a source of pride; politically, Irish history seems remembered as a grudge and a frustration. How deeply and how broadly the sense of history runs through the Irish population is conjectural, but one plausible conjecture would be that it runs more deeply and broadly than it does for Americans. In an ordinarily peaceful time, the great mass of the Irish population probably is rather oblivious to history, but this dormant memory may be readily roused by current events.

The Irish politician by and large uses history rather differently than does the Irish writer. The politician has often evoked the glorious past either for

the admiration of a nobility that has come to be invested in him or for the admiration of heroism in the face of a yet unredressed wrong. No matter that the nobility is tinged by a kind of madness, or the heroism by a kind of hatred, the appeal is to the people's admiration, and the appeal has often worked.

Many novels, stories, plays, and poems have espoused this public view of history, but few of them have been of much literary merit. When the serious writer has turned to historical subjects, his primary attitude has seemed less admiring than critical, satirical, or whimsical. Even a nominally patriotic poem of great power like Yeats' "Easter 1916" when read closely is a most ambiguous statement. There is admiration for nobility and heroism, but there is also the nagging speculation of whether the nobility and heroism may not in the end have been folly.

THE LAND

The one great, pervasive, primary theme of both Irish life and literature is the land. All of the other usual themes of both life and literature—religion, love, patriotism, individual aspiration—seem in Ireland to have been amalgamated with, or attached to, some facet of love for the land.

Perhaps the reason is that the dweller in Ireland, whether Firbolg or Celt, Dane or Norman, or even modern Ulster Presbyterian, always has had good reason to fear that his hold on the land was transitory and tenuous. All of recorded Irish history, down to the Northern troubles of the present, has seemed to revolve around the ineradicable, inescapable, perhaps even irresolvable question of who owns Ireland. The ramifications of this ever different, but always same, situation have been immense, intense, far-reaching, and deep-rooted. Politically, the question for centuries has occasioned invasion, war, rebellion, murder, and violence. Economically, for the small minority it has occasioned riches, cultivation, and absenteeism, and for the large majority, poverty, backwardness, and emigration. Agriculturally, it has been a national disaster, its most horrific embodiment being the Potato Famine when the land itself seemed the nemesis and not the prize.

But if to the Irish man the land was the ultimate glittering prize, to the Irish writer it has often seemed a curse. If the land could cause physical blight and death, it could also cause psychic blight and death. Some of the most powerful Irish plays and stories are those in which a person gives his soul wholly to the land. He may be deadened and animalized by it, as is the farmer in Patrick Kavanagh's poem *The Great Hunger*; he may sell his daughter for it, as occurs in Louis D'Alton's *Lovers Meeting* or John B. Keane's *Sive* or innumerable other places; he may want it enough to murder for it, as the peasant does in T. C. Murray's *Birthright* or even in Keane's modern play *The Field*. To realistic writers, such as those above, an almost tragic pattern attaches to the theme of the land. A man so lusted for it that he struggles indomitably, hardens himself irremediably, and even casts off

every other human tie or desire; but when he wins it, somehow, by death or by psychic death, he loses.

If the realistic writer most powerfully criticizes his countrymen's most ingrained desire, the romantic writer makes precisely the same criticism but makes it flippantly. The romantic writer long has idealized the landless man—even the tinker or the tramp. Even such a son of the cities as Sean O'Casey once referred to himself as a wandering road-minstrel. Synge's Nora in *The Shadow of the Glen* leaves her home to go wandering with a tramp. Colum's Conn Hourican leaves the land to his children and takes to the roads with his fiddle. Padraic Ó Conaire in reality left his office in London to wander the roads of Ireland and write short stories in Gaelic. From Synge's *Playboy* to the tinkers of Bryan MacMahon's *The Honey Spike*, there is this glorification of the shaughraun, with only an occasional demurrer like Colum's moving little poem "An Old Woman of the Roads."

Both the realistic writer and the romantic writer, however, seem deeply critical of the Irishman's love of the land, and in that criticism they may have touched the core of Ireland's tragedy.

(There is one other aspect of love for the land that should be touched on, and that is the love of the emigrant. In America or Australia, he usually has little or no hope of ever returning, and so his love for the land is entirely uncritical. Rather, he idealizes it, remembering it as better than it ever was. His nostalgia and also his money have had some economic and political effect at home. His nostalgia has had little literary effect, although it has been the basis for innumerable poems and ballads. If these usually have been mawkishly sentimental, they have been none the less deeply felt.)

RELIGION

There is a traditional story in Ireland of how Oisín, the great, truculent hero of the Fianna, returned from the Land of Youth and met with St. Patrick. One fine modern retelling of their conversations is Darrell Figgis' *The Return of the Hero*, which excellently contrasts the two utterly conflicting attitudes toward life. After many vicissitudes, the spiritual sons of St. Patrick seem finally to have triumphed in modern recorded history. And yet the triumph never has been quite total, as, indeed, the conflict never was quite thoroughgoing. It was the heroic spirit of Oisín that for centuries impelled the various armed and doomed rebellions, just as it was the same spirit that, in another way, impelled the Literary Renaissance.

For most of modern Irish history, the Roman Catholic Church has been identified closely with the people. It was the church of the people, and its priests were as oppressed as the people and sometimes much worse off. Only in quite modern times, following the Catholic emancipation of the nineteenth century, the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, and finally the severance of the tie with Britain, did the Irish Catholic Church become publicly accepted and secure. A symptom of how recent that change is may be noticed in many towns, such as Listowel in Kerry, where the

Protestant Church is set proudly in the middle of the square and the Catholic Church is tucked unobtrusively off to one side. Nowadays, of course, the Protestant Church is most sparsely attended, a dramatic change which is well embodied in Jack White's play *The Last Eleven*.

With the formation of the Irish Free State, the Catholic Church established itself with a vengeance as a social and political force. Its favored position was written into the Irish Constitution, and that clause was only excised in the late 1970s. For the first fifty years of Irish self-government, then, the Catholic Church was probably the most powerful social force in the land. Its influence was so potent and so pervasive that it overtly or tacitly dominated every significant facet of Irish life. The government almost seemed the secular right arm of the church; and should a government, as it rarely did, oppose the views of the church, the government could be toppled. An example is the dissolution of the interparty government in 1951, after the church had opposed a mother-and-child care scheme proposed by Minister of Health Noel Browne.

How much government was a spokesman for the ecclesiastical position may be seen in various instances involving the arts. There was the rigorous book censorship which banned even innocuous references to sex (although it had no violent objections to violence). Among the thousands of books banned were many of little or no discernible merit, but the best of the banned read like a Who's Who of modern literature. The government film censorship acted with similar rigor; to take but one rather late example, *Anatomy of a Murder*, a popular courtroom melodrama of the early 1960s, was reduced to incomprehensibility when all shots of an uninhabited pair of women's panties were excised. There was also the legally unformulated but tacit censorship of the stage; one well-known example is the case of the director Alan Simpson who spent a night in Bridewell for producing Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*. Perhaps just how enthusiastically the government supported the church's views may be seen in the Senate debates over the banning of Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* in the early 1940s. Today the remarks of the government opponents of the book seem almost satirically extravagant.

These well-known instances are merely a few among many, but they suggest a serious variance between the practices of the church and the opinions of the best writers. There was much bland popular literature that expressed the social attitudes of the church, as there was a good deal of popular hortatory literature to express the establishment political views. But the best work of the best writers either ignored the church or (as in the case of O'Casey) criticized it loudly.

It is curious that the establishment church of this century became so different from the outlawed church of the past. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and much of the nineteenth century (perhaps until the Parnell split), the church had a remarkable sympathetic union with the

people. After the establishment of Maynooth, the national seminary in 1795, and the importation of Jansenistic teachers from France, the church grew more puritanical and identified ever more closely with the current political establishment. For one instance, in the Great Lockout of 1913, the workers of Dublin planned to send a shipload of their hungry children to England where they could be cared for. A line of priests barred the way on the docks, however, and the Dublin children returned to the starving tenements. In other words, when the church grew in power, it grew also to uphold power and often to diverge sharply from the opinions of many of its members.

Nevertheless, the power of the church over Irishmen, until the very recent period, has been enormous. Even when ecclesiastical opinion and popular aspiration were profoundly at odds—as they sometimes were in labor or in political struggles—the rift, though deep, was ignored by the people. Or, rather, the opinions of the church were ignored, but the church was not. In any case, the Catholic Church in Ireland became an intractable and inflexible body, bearing almost more resemblance to a fundamentalist sect in Alabama than to the Catholic Church in other European countries. The 1960s and 1970s, however, were marked by new affluence in Ireland, in the aftermath of Vatican II, and considerable upheaval in world Catholicism. As a result, the influence of the Church in Ireland seems to have waned, and its character seems to be changing.

The influence of the church upon literature generally has been to foster among the best writers an attitude of criticism and opposition. There was, of course, a morally innocuous and patriotically unctuous literature, typified perhaps at its impressive best by the novels of Kate O'Brien or the poems of Robert Farren. But, at the same time, there was the growth of an antiestablishment and frequently anticlerical literature, which contains much of the best of the most remarkable writing in modern Ireland. Probably, then, it is true to say that, if an intractable and puritanic church had not pushed the literary artist into opposition, there would be much less that is individual and exciting about modern Irish letters.

Today, when the church is a much less powerful force in society, how will literature be affected? Thus far, two stages are discernible. The first might be suggested by the early career of a writer still in his thirties, John Feeney. Feeney is old enough to have been formed by the Jansenistic 1950s and young enough to have been a leader in the pale Irish version of the university students' revolts of the late 1960s. His career reflects this division. His punch-pulling, whitewashing biography of Archbishop McQuaid is balanced by his novel outspokenly condemning the establishment, as typified by the national television service; his several-year stint as editor of the journal once called *The Catholic Standard* is balanced by his book of stories whose best pieces are strongly condemnatory of Catholic standards. The second stage might be typified by two older writers who have been exposed

as people and as artists to England and America. In Brian Friel's play *Living Quarters* and in Thomas Murphy's play *Sanctuary Lamp*, the position of the modern church in Ireland is scathingly criticized by the failure of the priests in the plays to do what priests should do. It will be interesting to see how the matter develops.

DRINK

The bellicose and drunken Irishman is as irritating a cliché as was once the allegation of the pig in every parlor. In the nineteenth century, the redoubtable Father Mathew led an extraordinary temperance crusade. Its effects long since have been largely dissipated, and it has been estimated that 10 percent of all personal spending in Ireland today is for drink.

Whether that be an exaggeration, to the observant onlooker it does seem to have some basis. A sociologist or psychologist would be needed to investigate the reasons for Irish drinking, but some reasons seem fairly obvious. Ireland has always been a poor country, and drink is a prime anodyne for the frustrations of poverty, hopelessness, and boredom. The effects of a drinking culture on the country are manifold and undoubtedly pernicious, especially in a psychological sense. The toleration, even the macho glamorization of drink, seems to hold a good deal of the country in the thrall of social adolescence.

For Irish literature, the importance of drink is unquestionable as well as, like drink itself, both invigorating and enervating. Some of the greatest comic scenes of Synge, O'Casey, Joyce, and Flann O'Brien have centered around drink, and merely to list the works in which drink is significant would be well-nigh impossible. While drink is only infrequently a central theme, it seems ubiquitous as a contributory theme, and generally a source of considerable excellence.

At the same time, the tales of increasingly sodden writers whose careers are pickled in alcohol are so numerous, that the figure of the drunken Irish genius has become a cliché. For the Irish writer, drink has been a magnificent theme, but all too often a source of personal destruction.

SEX

Perhaps most great writing is in some way or another—and frequently centrally—about sex. Much literature in the Irish language, from the occasional ribaldry of *The Táin* to the inimitable *Midnight Court* of Brian Merriman is unashamedly sexual. Perhaps that fact may serve as one indicator that until modern times sex was more or less a nakedly normal part of Irish life.

Still, given the climate and geography, sex could not be too naked, for the simple reason that it usually was necessary to wear a fair amount of clothing. At the same time, economics, politics, and religion seemed to support each other mutually in inhibiting a free functioning of the sexual man. Economics may well have been the most inhibiting. Given the Irish way of life, the questions of who slept with whom and who married whom

and how many children were born were of prime importance. People married carefully to remain solvent, and, when it was economic freedom versus sexual freedom, economic freedom usually won. For the mass of people, remaining solvent meant coming into a bit of land. That usually was impossible until the head of the household, the father, died or became feeble with age. Therefore, there were many late marriages, although most were prolific, perhaps partly for economic reasons again. The unfortunate younger sons tended either to emigrate or to become old bachelors, a situation reflected eloquently in M. J. Molloy's play *The Wood of the Whispering*. This situation lasted until the 1960s when the effect of relative prosperity and stronger influence from the outside world caused a gradual but considerable change.

Until recently, sex has been treated with reticence in literature. Of course, there are exceptions, the most notorious being for many years Joyce's *Ulysses*. The Catholic Church and the government, acting pretty much hand in glove, contrived to inhibit sexual expression in literature as in life. For many Irish, the effect of a sternly religious education was to extend sexual ignorance, distrust, and even antipathy well into adult years. For about the first thirty years of Irish self-government, a public puritanism was effective and thorough. The later plays of O'Casey are, among other things, simplistic satiric condemnations of this public puritanism.

In 1900, the realistic novels of George Moore were considered anathema. Thirty years later, little had changed; and when T. C. Murray in *Autumn Fire* tackled a theme bordering on incest, he had to treat the topic with a rigid dignity and a profound reticence altogether lacking in the American play *Desire under the Elms*, by Eugene O'Neill, which deals with the same situation. Since the 1960s, the Irish milieu has changed considerably, but even so the novels of the much admired John McGahern and Edna O'Brien, who dealt frankly but hardly luridly or pornographically with sex, were initially banned. (For that matter, one contemporary Irish short story has a character closely resembling Miss O'Brien, who returns to her native village and is viciously raped, the moral apparently being, "That'll show her!")

Despite such anachronistic difficulties, the Irish writer of today can write on practically any topic and from almost any point of view. There may yet be a banning or two, but the euphemizing of sex in modern Irish literature is seen as increasingly quaint.

VIOLENCE

In their popular entertainments and even their serious literature, Americans have a penchant for violence that periodically alarms even them. Although the Irish have not developed the more outré refinements of violence in their entertainments, they do have a similar tolerance for violence. Indeed, "tolerance" may be a less appropriate word than "admiration" or "glorification."

In any society, the active perpetrators of public violence are a minority,

but private violence can seep into ordinary life and color opinions and attitudes. Corporal punishment in the schools and wife-beating in the homes are but two such ways; and, although the toleration of political violence waxes and wanes according to current circumstances, the potentiality for such a tolerance seems well prepared for in ordinary Irish life.

Public acts of violence have deep historical roots in Ireland. When a large majority of the population was politically, economically, socially, and culturally oppressed, any means of temporary or partial redress seemed admirable to them. For centuries, the Irish were in a weak and intolerable position, and they coped with it in two ways: by charming cunning and by covert violence. A play like Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* is only one of innumerable reflections of the cunning guile; and the popular ballads and poems of Ireland offer hundreds of examples of the glorification of the violent hero, who stood up to the oppressors, although often dying in the attempt ("Whether on the scaffold high, or on battlefield we die . . .").

Some quite recent events also can suggest how deeply the admiration for violence runs in the Irish. In the 1960s, the country seemed to be basking in a new and uncharacteristic affluence, and the people seemed interested mainly in acquiring goods and in improving their lot in life. In 1966, the extensive and elaborate fifty-year commemorative celebrations of the Easter Rising seemed largely an empty public self-congratulation. Its rhetoric sounded hollow, and the memory of the glorious past irrelevant to the business of life. References to Ireland's lost fourth green field were lip-service to a rather remote ideal, and what was relevant was tending one's own garden in the three green fields that remained.

Yet before the decade had ended, the civil rights movement in the North had become transformed into a political movement, and the smoldering ashes of nationalism once again had erupted into flames. In the South, some prominent government ministers were involved in a notorious public scandal for supplying guns to the IRA in the North. And for a time, before the subsequent years of cumulative assassination and outrage again disillusioned people, there seemed a resurgence of the old political fervor. Although the overwhelming mass of the people in both the North and the South now seem heartily sick of the violence, the violence is unlikely to disappear, and one of the reasons is that its roots lie deeply entangled in the national psyche.

As violence has been an integral part of the Irishman's historical heritage, it predictably pervades his literature. To take but one extreme example, consider the poems and plays of W. B. Yeats. What could have been so totally unviolent as the early work of Yeats with its roses and *langours*? And who could have seemed so totally unviolent as the lissome young bard with the flowing tie and the lank lock of hair falling over his marble brow? Yet, as Yeats' work developed, it became harder, tougher,

more dramatically combative. The images, the diction, even the rhythms of the late work, are both energetic and abrasive. At the same time, the poet personally grew ever bolder. His apologetic remark to the *Playboy* rioters of 1907 was, "It is the author of 'Cathleen ni Houlihan' who addresses you"; twenty years later, his first remark to *The Plough and the Stars* rioters was the inflammatory "You have disgraced yourselves again!"

From the brawls and ructions in Synge and Fitzmaurice, to the fist fights which conclude a Maurice Walsh entertainment, to the brutalities of an O'Flaherty political novel, and even to the abrasive content of many of the youngest poets and short story writers, violence is everywhere in Irish literature. It is a violence in both subject matter and diction. Synge, Yeats, Joyce, O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien are merely the most distinctive Irish writers to have used words violently, but their uses have forced language from the traveled road of smooth convention into startling new directions. So if violence has been a political and social bane for Irish life, it has been also a major glory of Irish literature.

THE JUDGMENT OF SAINTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOLARS

The cliché that replaced the moronic Paddy of nineteenth-century *Punch* cartoons was the ebullient Wild Irish Boy. The first figure was an amiable Handy Andy idiot; the second is a brilliantly "cute" jackeen. The first figure talked with a charming and quaint stupidity; the second talks with a wild and profane wit. Either kind of talk has an intermittent, not quite tenuous, basis in reality, but neither cliché accords well with the reality of the Irish writer.

There are two types of Irish writer. First is the serious or affirmative Man with a Cause who has a mystic, an oratorical, or a whimsical eloquence; he may be the young Yeats or the ever-young James Stephens; he may be the passionate Padraic Pearse or the dispassionate Conor Cruise O'Brien. On the other hand, the frivolous or negative Man Disillusioned with Causes has a witty, destructive, and satirical eloquence; he may be the young Myles, the middle-aged Joyce, the old O'Casey, or the infinitely ancient Beckett.

Both types talk incessantly and eloquently, and the reasons for the talk seem social, economic, political, and even geographical and climatic. If one has no money, if one is politically impotent and socially scorned, and if the rain so frequently necessitates staying indoors, the major antidote to all of these frustrations is language. In ancient Ireland, language came to be so valued that complicated codes and techniques grew up around it. In historical times, language was one of the few free entertainments in an otherwise bleak world, and so good language was admired and remembered. In other words, a sense of rhetoric grew, and judgment developed.

The language of the affirmative writer painted a world better than the existing—whether the early, idealized, pre-Raphaelite embroideries of

Yeats, or Standish O'Grady's tumultuous language of heroism, or the neo-classic order of Burke, or the whimsical fantasies of James Stephens. The language of the negative writer painted a world more extravagantly intolerable than even the existing—whether the savage, absurd reductions of Swift, or the mad caricatures of Flann O'Brien, or the depressing exaggerations of Samuel Beckett.

Exposed to this plethora of rhetoric, the Irishman became a connoisseur of language, a brutal but refreshingly unacademic literary critic. Even the huge sales of a bad volume of florid poems like *The Spirit of the Nation* does not refute the fact; it testifies to an enthusiasm for rhetoric so intense that it occasionally accepts fool's gold for the genuine article. But as many volumes of Great Irish Oratory suggest, the Irishman could genuinely admire the genuine. Emmet's speech from the dock was not admired solely for what it said, but also for how nobly it said it; and the dull writings of a merely noble man like John O'Leary have been little read.

Nevertheless, affirmative eloquence does invite enthusiasm and does tend to squelch discrimination. Fortunately, Irish literature is fuller of negative eloquence which demands niceties of judgment. To take the language of comedy as an example, we might note that all of the great Irish dramatists, save Wilde and Synge, write on various levels of language and that their plays cannot be fully appreciated unless that fact is perceived. *The Rivals* of Sheridan, for instance, has a satire on the language of romance in Lydia, on the language of sensibility in Faulkland, on pretensions to pedantry in Mrs. Malaprop, on contemporary slang in Bob Acres, on Irish bluster in Sir Lucius, and on the inadequacies of the language of rage in Sir Anthony. The play is as brilliant for its levels of language as it is for its abundant comic situations and striking caricatures. In fact, one zealous commentator has asserted that there are potentially 327 laughs in the play arising from the audience's apprehension that a character has misused language.

It has sometimes been stated that all of Shaw's characters talk like Shaw. Actually they do not; they only talk with Shaw's fluency and energy. (See *Pygmalion*, see *John Bull*, see *Major Barbara*, see . . . etc.) It is really only a few writers, such as Wilde and Synge and the later O'Casey, who write in a uniform style, and they write to evoke admiration rather than to provoke criticism.

The same point of the Irishman's nice discrimination about language might be reinforced by noting how acutely the Irish have honed the destructive sub-genres of invective and gossip. The poet's curse, or even the enraged layman's curse, was considered a potent, a fearful, an ultimate weapon. It demanded the full resources of rhetoric, and it worked because those resources were widely appreciated. The language of gossip also, which pervades Irish literature and riddles Irish life, demands the utmost refinements and subtleties, and has a range stretching from the crudest scurrility to the gentlest (and most disemboweling) innuendo.

If this tradition of verbal dexterity and appreciation was originally motivated by frustration, it has long since become self-generated by narcissistic delight—hence lies, hence deceit, hence the most remarkable body of English literature in the world.

There is no such thing as the Irish Race. Generations of invaders have become, like Behan's Monsewer, more Irish than . . . whoever the Irish were. What there is—simply—is an Irish attitude (which is quite different indeed from that caricature of it to be found in the second and third generation of the sea-divided Gael in Boston and New York). The Irish attitude requires that one have lived long enough in the island to be primarily and irrationally affected by its splendors and miseries. Perhaps, too, it finally requires that one reduce the world, as does the excellent *Irish Times*, to the ridiculous and inappropriate and unimportant topic of how the world affects Ireland. (In a biographical novel about Michael Collins, Constantine Fitzgibbon manages to lug in, among many others, T. E. Lawrence, Woodrow Wilson, and Lenin.)

One cannot write fairly or objectively about the country, for one slips unnoticed into the national rhetorical techniques of hyperbole and prevarication. And perhaps also into the snotty innuendo, the fulsome phrase, the empty alliteration. And, worse, into the self-adulation, the pique, the hatred, the remembrance of old hatred, the loathsome sentimentality, and all, all, all the other disgusting techniques and attitudes. Indeed, it occurs to me that the only Irish rhetorical devices which this essay has missed have been wit and eloquence.

Nevertheless, one does what one can, and sometimes one does what one cannot, but the significant point is that the language as used by the Irish, even though it conceals more truth than it reveals, does also create. What it creates is literature, and that in abundance, and in literature truths can be found by those who seek them.

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