

SOME ASPECTS OF IRISH LITERATURE

Now that the libraries have yielded up so much of the buried treasures of Irish literature and that so much more which has not yet seen the light of day has been surveyed and appraised by competent authorities, one is better able than one was even so recently as ten years ago to fix a value and attach a definition to Ireland's contribution to the world's vision of beauty. One is able to form some idea of what distant horizons have been scanned by Irish-speaking men, what heights scaled, what depths sounded. And when our knowledge is just a little wider and deeper than it is at present it will be found that an amazing thing has happened. It will be found that the literary history of the world, what is commonly accepted as literary history, has left out of account one of the great literary peoples. Just as the rediscovery of the buried cities of the East has made it necessary for us to re-write social and political history, so will the rediscovery of this buried literature of the West make it necessary for us to re-write literary history. And it will mean not only a re-writing of literary history, but a general readjustment of literary values, a general raising of literary standards. The world has had a richer dream of beauty than we had dreamed it had. Men here saw certain gracious things more clearly and felt certain mystic things more acutely and heard certain deep music more perfectly than did men in ancient Greece. And it is from Greece that we have received our standards.

How curiously might one speculate if one were to imagine that when the delvers of the fifteenth century unearthed the buried literatures of Greece and Rome they had stumbled instead upon that other buried literature which was to remain in the dust of the libraries for four centuries longer! Then instead of the classic revival we should have had the Celtic revival; or rather the Celtic would have become the classic and the Gael would have given laws to Europe. I do not say positively that literature would have gained, but I am not sure that it

would have lost. Something it would have lost: the Greek ideal of perfection in form, the wise calm Greek scrutiny. Yet something it would have gained: a more piercing vision, a nobler, because a more humane, inspiration, above all a deeper spirituality. One other result would have followed: the goodly culture and the fine mysticism of the Middle Ages would not have so utterly been lost. And, thinking of the effect of literature upon men's lives and conduct, one may add that the world might not have proved so untrue to so many of its righteous causes.

Now I claim for Irish literature, at its best, these excellences: a clearer than Greek vision, a more generous than Greek humanity, a deeper than Greek spirituality. And I claim that Irish literature has never lost those excellences: that they are of the essence of Irish nature and are characteristic of modern Irish folk poetry even as they are of ancient Irish epic and of mediaeval Irish hymns. This continuity of tradition amid all its changing moods (and the moods of Irish literature are as various as the moods of Irish climate) is one of the striking things about it; the old man who croons above a Connacht hearthplace the songs he made in his youth is as definitely a descendant of the elder bards as a Tennyson is of a Chaucer. I propose to illustrate what I mean, and to show how an attitude characteristic of Irish-speaking men in the days when they shaped the Táin is reproduced in the song in which an Irish peasant woman of to-day reproaches her lover or keens over her dead child.

What I have called here clearness of vision is part of a great sincerity, a great feeling for ultimate reality, which the supreme poets always have. The clear sheer detection and statement of some naked truth, the touching of some deep bedrock foundation, the swift sure stroke at the very heart of a thing: that is what I mean. There is sometimes a harshness in the relentlessness of this truth-telling, a pain in the pleasure of this revelation. The heart shakes, because for a moment one sees with the awful clearness with which God sees.

The passage in the tale of 'The Sickbed of Cuchulainn and the only Jealousy of Emer' in which Fand and Emer both beg to be rejected by Cuchulainn, whom they love, because neither will have half his love,

shows this understanding and this sounding of the depths. 'If thou followest this woman,' said Emer, 'I shall not refuse thee to her. For indeed everything red is beautiful, everything new is bright, everything high is lovely, everything common is bitter, everything we are without is prized, everything known is neglected, till all knowledge is known. O youth,' she said, 'I was at one time happy with thee, and we should be so again if I were pleasing to thee.' 'Thou art pleasing to me,' said Cuchulainn, 'and thou shalt always be pleasing to me.' Then said Fand: 'Let me be rejected.' 'Nay, it were fitter to reject me,' said Emer. 'Not so,' said Fand, 'it is I who shall be rejected, and long have I been in peril of it.' And Fand bade farewell to Cuchulainn, and went back to her own country.

This seems to me to be the authentic note of great imaginative psychology. And I find equally authentic, albeit startling in the audacity of its sincerity, the psychology and the imagination which in the tale of the 'Tragic Fate of Cuchulainn,' when the hero is being drawn forth to his doom by the din of phantasmagoric battles, make Emer, in the last forlorn hope of saving him, send to him that very Fand—the woman whose power over him she had such good reason to know. How differently inferior artists would have imagined either of these episodes! How a conventional sentimentality would have balked at making Emer capable of that great sacrifice! Sheer clear naked truth, the great reality of love and sacrifice, the miracle of the sacrifice by love of itself, the breaking down of strong barriers in the presence of some awful issue—again and again through the centuries have Irish-speaking men seen and described these things. I will show you what I mean again in a mediaeval poem—the 'Parting of Goll and his Wife.' I quote it in Miss Hull's verse translation in her recently-published 'Poem-Book of the Gael,' though Mr. MacNeill's more literal prose-translation in his 'Duanaine Finn,' where the poem was first printed, is equally excellent. Goll and his wife are hemmed in by Fionn on a sea-girt rock without chance of escape.

Goll speaks:

The end is come; upon this narrow rock
 To-morrow I must die;
Wife of the ruddy cheeks and hair of flame,
 Leave me to-night and fly.
Seek out the camp of Fionn and of his men
 Upon the westward side;
Take there, in time to come, another mate:
 Here I abide.

Goll's wife replies:

Which way, O Goll, is my way, and thou perished?
 Alas! few friends have I!
Small praise that woman hath whose lord is gone,
 And no protector nigh!

What man should I wed? I whom great Goll cherished
 And made his wife?
Where in the East or West should one be sought
 To mend my broken life?

Shall I take Oisín, son of Fionn the Wise,
 Or Carroll of the blood-stained hand?
Shall I make Angus, son of Hugh, my prize?
 Or swift-foot Corr, chief of the fighting band?

I am as good as they; aye, good and better,
 Daughter of Conall, Monarch of the West,
Fostered was I with Conn the Hundred-Fighter,
 Best among all the best.

Thee out of all I loved, thee my first master,
 Gentlest and bravest thou;
Seven years we lived and loved, through calm and tumult,
 And shall I leave thee now?

From that night till to-night I found thee never
Of harsh or churlish mind;
And here I vow, no other man shall touch me,
Kind or unkind.

Here on this narrow crag, foodless and sleepless,
Thou takest thy last stand;
A hundred heroes, Goll, lie rotten round thee,
Slain by thy dauntless hand.

In the wide ocean near us, life is teeming;
Yet on this barren rock
I sink from hunger, and the wild briny waters
My thirst-pangs mock.

Fierce is our hunger, fierce the five battalions
Sent here to conquer thee;
But fiercer yet the drought that steals my beauty
Midst this surrounding sea.

Though all my dear loved brothers by one caitiff
Lay slaughtered in my sight,
That man I'd call my friend, yea, I would love him
Could thy thirst ease to-night.

Eat, son of Morna, batten on these dead bodies,
This is my last behest;
Feast well, gaunt Goll, then quench thy awful craving
Here at my breast.

Nought is there more to fear, nought to be hoped for,
Of life and all bereft
High on this crag, abandoned and forsaken,
Nor hope nor shame is left.

Goll speaks:

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Oh! pitiful how this thing hath befallen,
 Little red mouth!
Lips that of old made speech and happy music,
 Now dry and harsh with drought.

Ever I feared this end; my haunting terror
 By wave and land
Was to be caught by Fionn and his battalions,
 On some stark, foodless strand.

Depart not yet; upon this barren islet,
 Beneath this brazen sky,
Sweet lips and gentle heart, we sit together
 Until we die.

And now I ask you to observe the same utter sincerity, the same stripping bare of the reality from the surrounding conventions, in a modern poem of the people. A peasant girl, betrayed by a lover whom she had trusted, speaks to her mother:

‘O little mother, give myself to him,
Give all that you have in the world to him,
Go yourself asking for alms,
And do not come east or west to seek me.’

She would abandon herself altogether to her betrayer; and she would do it now with her eyes open, for she says to him:

‘You have taken east, and you have taken west from me,
You have taken from me the path before and the path behind me,
You have taken moon, and you have taken sun from me,
And great is my fear that you’ve taken God from me!’

The Irish strength and truth where the artists of a more sentimental people like the English would have carefully provided a lachrymose ending stand out conspicuously in the conclusion of that surpassing tale, ‘The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne.’ This was pointed out in a

fine study contributed by the late Father O'Carroll to the 'Irish Ecclesiastical Record' a good many years ago. The unknown novelist (for 'Diarmuid and Grainne' is in all essentials what we now call a novel) did not make Grainne die of grief for Diarmuid. She had wooed Diarmuid and may have loved him, and his death had come from that wooing. But love was not the greatest thing in Grainne, if indeed there was love in her at all. Irish literature had given memorable types of woman's love, Deirdre and Emer and Fand and Leadan and Crede, enduring types of the love that is faithful even unto death. But Grainne was no Deirdre or Emer. She is the Hedda Gabler of Irish literature, the woman who craved to have her destinies interwoven with those of a strong splendid man: when Diarmuid's red cheek was white in death and his clustering hair had mingled with the dust Grainne turned to Fionn, the strong subtle man who had slain him. It is entirely in keeping with her character as conceived by the novelist that after Diarmuid's death she should purchase power and splendour by wedding Fionn. 'I trow, O Fionn,' quoth Oisín, 'that henceforth thou wilt keep Grainne safely.' Whereat, concludes the storyteller, Grainne bowed her head in shame. This grimly ironic note is not struck in European literature again until the last half of the nineteenth century.

No great literature has shown a subtler understanding of women than Irish literature. Alike in the Táin and in the fugitive love songs of the manuscripts and of the countrysides we come upon profound intuitions or flashes of imagination which reveal more than many modern novels and much modern poetry. Some of the passages I have quoted will stand as illustrations. And take the couplet of a peasant cradle song which Mr. Yeats has elaborated into a charming little lullaby. A mother says to her child:

'Cad déanfaidh mé gan mo ghiolla beag,
Nuair bheidh tu mór is críonna?'

'What shall I do without my little lad when you will be big and grown?' Or, as Mr. Yeats has it:

‘I kiss you and kiss you,
My pigeon, my own;
Ah! how I shall miss you,
When you have grown!’

There is a real poignancy there which one does not often meet with in poems of motherhood and childhood. Many mothers must have thought just that: only a great poet could have imagined it. One finds the same yearning of motherhood but in a note of high tragedy in the mediaeval ‘Lament of the Mothers for the Slaughtered Innocents.’ Think of what obvious things you and I should have made the mothers say, and then note that the Irish poet makes them say the things that were not obvious, but which when we hear them we yet recognise to be the inevitable things. The second woman cries (I give Mr. Graves’ translation):

‘‘Tis my own son that from me you wring,
I deceived not the King.
But slay me, even me,
And let my boy be.

A mother most hapless.
My bosom is sapless,
My eyes one tearful river,
My frame one fearful shiver,
My husband sonless ever,
And I a sonless wife
To live a death in life.

O my son! O God of Truth!
O my unrewarded youth,
O my birthless sicknesses
Until doom without redress.
O my bosom’s silent nest,
O the heart broke in my breast.’

In an article on ‘The Personal in the New Poetry’ contributed to ‘An Macaomh’ my friend Mr. MacDonagh recently pointed out that the

dramatic lyric is almost as old in Irish as poetry itself, and that poetry had to revolve through a whole cycle before the form came back to Ireland again in modern Anglo-Irish poetry. He quotes the monologue of Eve published by Dr. Kuno Meyer in 'Eriu' as a good example of the early Irish dramatic lyric, 'telling in those vivid nervous lines of the *dán díreach* clear and simple thoughts of passion or emotion—poems that translate so literally into all languages that in translation they appear almost too simple.' Mr. MacDonagh translates this poem almost word for word:

I am Eve, great Adam's wife,
I that wrought my children's loss,
I that wronged Jesus of life,
By right 'tis I had borne the cross.

I a kingly house forsook,
Ill my choice and my disgrace,
Ill the counsel that I took,
Withering me and all my race.

I that brought the winter in
And the windy glistening sky,
I that brought terror and sin,
Hell and pain and sorrow, I.

I quote the poem as an example of the Irish power of clear vivid unadorned statement. Mr. MacDonagh regards it as typical of the early Irish dramatic lyric—only modernly, he thinks, has the dramatic lyric had the intense human thrill of individual subtle character. Yet surely that greatest of Irish dramatic lyrics (and it is as old as the tenth century) has that thrill: I mean 'The Old Woman of Beare.' No doubt that old woman speaks the universal language of old age; no doubt she might say to any old sad woman with memories of a splendid youth what every poet can in a sense say to every reader: 'Unless these words are as much to you as they are to me they are nothing and less than nothing.' And yet she is not a mere type. There is an individuality there,

a subtle self-characterisation. We know her; her sorrow is unforgettable, and the phrases in which she expresses her sorrow linger in the mind as do the phrases of Shelley's 'Flight of Love' or the phrases of Ronsard's 'Quand vous serez bien vieille.' I would place this dramatic lyric among the greatest dramatic lyrics of all literature. Like Deirdre, the Old Woman of Beare will pass into many literatures, and poets in many tongues will vie with one another in giving new breath to her sorrow.

I have spoken of the Irish power of clear vivid unadorned statement. Some of you, remembering the rich and royal redundance of a good deal of later Irish verse, will ask whether clear vivid unadorned statement is really an Irish characteristic. It is. It was an Irish characteristic from the beginning and remained an Irish characteristic as long as *Dán Díreach* verse ruled, and longer; for it remains a characteristic of the best of the peasant poetry. The reserve and severity of the early Irish 'I am Eve, great Adam's wife' are as apparent in the seventeenth-century poem of Keating, 'A bhean lán de stuaim':

'O woman full of subtlety,
Keep from me thy hand.'

The strength and brevity of the language here are as striking as the candour and energy of the thought. Yet Keating was one of those who ushered in the new school in poetry.

There is no such thing as sentimentality in Irish literature. One finds in the later literature, especially in the later poetry, bad taste of various kinds, but never that particular kind of bad taste. The characteristic faults of the later poetry spring from various causes. First, the metres which had been elaborated became a snare. And secondly, Irish poets, most conservative of races, retained an obsolete machinery and an outworn set of symbols long after the machinery had become unnecessary and the symbols had ceased to be convincing. There is a place for symbols in literature, but there can be no excuse for using symbols in which you do not yourself believe. That way lies insincerity, and without sincerity there can be no literature. Let me illustrate what

I mean by a parallel thing which has taken place in recent Anglo-Irish poetry. Either Mr. Russell or Mr. Yeats discovered a certain symbolism in certain white birds spoken of in connection with Angus in one particular passage of early Irish literature. They straightway let loose those birds upon Anglo-Irish poetry, and for many of us since the music of Anglo-Irish poetry has almost been drowned by the needless flapping of those white wings. You never open a new book of Anglo-Irish verse but the birds of Angus fly out. It almost reminds one of the nursery rhyme: 'When the pie was opened the birds began to sing.' When the book is opened the birds begin to fly. And the curious thing to us who know *Irish* literature is that the birds of Angus never trouble us there at all. They are the most unobtrusive fowl imaginable.

Irish poetry has of course its symbols, and much of the later Irish verse is fully symbolic—'Eamonn an Chnuic,' for instance, and 'An Druimfhionn Donn Dilis,' and 'An Draighnean Donn,' and, as I believe, 'An Bunán Buidhe.' But here I am concerned with the employment of outworn symbols and the retention of obsolete conventions. So many of the elegies of the eighteenth-century poets are insincere and unconvincing on this account. But there were always poets individual enough to stand apart from this tendency: Seán O Neachtain, for instance, who used the rich and elaborate metres without allowing himself to be caught in their snare, and who went back from artificiality to the joyous artlessness of the first notes of Irish poetry. And my contention here is this: that alike in early Irish literature and in the finest songs of the later peasant poets there is absolutely nothing of this make-believe, but always the clear strong expression of a genuine emotion. The make-believe phase was merely a phase that affected only two or three generations, and not all the poets even of those generations. The style of the eighteenth-century school has no more right to be regarded as nationally characteristic than the costume of the eighteenth century to be regarded as a national costume. Both were phases, and in both Ireland shared to a certain extent with the Continent.

The *aisling* and the *caoineadh*—the vision and the elegy—are the forms in which the dead conventions are most persistent and most wearisome. But what noble vision poetry early Irish literature had

produced! And how reserved, how sincere, how true and right, how free from false sentiment are such early elegies as—I will not take the supreme ones, those of Deirdre and Crede—but the Dirge of Congall Claen in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, or that of Gormley for Niall Glundubh, or those of Mac Liag and Mac Giolla Caoimh for Brian Bóroimhe, or the later elegy on the Irish princes dead at Rome. In these poems there is no conventional machinery, no repetition of outworn symbols. And one finds the same characteristics, the same rightness and sincerity, in elegies made by peasant men and women for their dead lovers or their dead children. Let me quote one at length, a very recent one, made in America by a poet still living for a child of his that was drowned. He sent it to me several years ago and I published it in ‘An Claidheamh Soluis,’ recently I republished it, with a prose translation, in the ‘Irish Review.’ In the Irish original there is a deep melody and an exquisite delicacy of phrase, to render which English prose is wholly inadequate:

‘Ochón, O Donough! my thousand whispers stretched under this sod,
The sod of sorrow on your little body, my utter anguish!
If this sleep were on you in Cill na Dromad, or some grave in the West,
‘Twould soften my suffering, though great my hurt, and I would not
repine for you!

‘Withered and wasted are the flowers they scattered on your narrow bed,
They were lovely for a little time, but their radiance is gone, they have no
comeliness or life;
And the flower I held brightest of all that grew in soil or shall ever grow
Is rotting in the ground, and will spring no more to lift up my heart.

‘Alas, beloved! was it not a great pity, the water rocking you,
With no strength in your pulses nor anyone near you that might save:
No news was brought to me of the peril of my child or the extremity of
his need—
Ah, though I’d gladly go to Hell’s deep flag to rescue you!

‘The moon is dark, I cannot sleep, all joy has left me:
Rough and rude to me the open Gaelic (‘tis an ill sign);
I hate a while in the company of friends, their merriment tortures me;
From the day I saw you dead on the sand, the sun has not shone for me.

‘Alas, my grief! what shall I do henceforth, the world wearing me.
Without your chalk-white little hand like a breath through trees on my
 sombre brow,
Your little mouth of honey like angels’ music in my ears
Saying to me gently, ‘dear heart, poor father, be not troubled!’

‘Ah, desolate! I little thought in the time of my hope
That this child would not be a swift valiant hero in the midst of the band,
Doing deeds of daring and planning wisely for the sake of Fódla,
But He who fashioned us of clay on earth not so has ordered!’

That elegy is in line with the great elegies of the early Irish literature; and I would place it with a poem in Roden Noel’s ‘Little Child’s Monument,’ and with Bridges’ ‘Lines on a Dead Child’ as the three modern poems of my acquaintance which most exquisitely associate the pity of death with the beauty of childhood.

When I said in the beginning that had Irish literature been rediscovered four centuries ago instead of Greek and Latin literature, modern letters might have received a nobler, because a more humane, inspiration than they did actually receive, what I meant to suggest was this: that the Irish chivalry and the Irish spirituality which would then have commenced to percolate the literatures of Europe was a finer thing than the spirit of the old classic literatures, more heroic, more gentle, more delicate and mystical. And it is remarkable that the most chivalrous inspiration in modern literature does in fact come from a Celtic source: that King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table have meant more to modern men than the heroes who warred at Troy or than Charlemagne and his Paladins. But how much richer might European literature have been had the story of Cuchulainn become a European possession! For the story of Cuchulainn I take to be the finest epic stuff in the world: as we have it, it is not the most finely-finished

epic, but it is, I repeat, the finest epic stuff. I mean not merely that Conor and Fergus and Conall and Cuchulainn are nobler figures, humaner figures, than Agammemnon and Hector and Ulysses and Achilles; not merely that Macha and Meadhbh and Deirdre and Emer are more gracious figures, more appealing figures, than Hecuba and Helen; I mean also that the story itself is greater than any Greek story, the tragedy as pitiful as any Greek tragedy, yet at the same time more joyous, more exultant. The theme is as great as Milton's in 'Paradise Lost': Milton's theme is a fall, but the Irish theme is a redemption. For the story of Cuchulainn symbolises the redemption of man by a sinless God. The curse of primal sin lies upon a people; new and personal sin brings doom to their doors; they are powerless to save themselves; a youth, free from the curse, akin with them through his mother but through his father divine, redeems them by his valour; and his own death comes from it. I do not mean that the Tain is a conscious allegory: but there is the story in its essence, and it is like a retelling (or is it a fore-telling?) of the story of Calvary. Whether you agree with me or not, you will agree as to the greatness of the theme, stated thus in its essentials; and you will no longer, I hope, think of the Tain as the tale of an ancient Cattle Drive.

In that glorious Anthology 'The Bards of the Gael and Gall' Dr. Sigerson long ago pointed out that the story of Deirdre fell naturally into the five acts of a great tragic drama. Since then four dramatic poets, three in English, and one in Irish, have given us tragedies on the Deirdre story. But the whole Ulster epic falls just as naturally into a great trilogy of tragedies, with a prologue and an epilogue. The Prologue tells of the primal sin and the Curse of Macha; the three great tragedies are, in order, Deirdre, the Tain, and the Death of Cuchulainn; the Epilogue is the Death of Conor. Each of the great tragedies is complete in itself, yet through the whole cycle unrolls in inevitable sequence the doom of Ulster.

It may be said of the Homeric gods that they are too nearly akin to men, but of the Irish heroes that they have in them always something of the divine. The unseen powers have always been very close to Irish-speaking men. I have known old people who lived in familiar converse

with the unseen; who knew as it were by sight and by the sound of their voices Christ and Mary and many familiar saints. Now that intimacy with spiritual things is very characteristic of Irish literature. One finds it in the mystical hymns of the Middle Ages; one finds it in the folk-tales of the Western countrysides; one finds it in many exquisite folk-songs. As Mr. Colum has pointed out, Christ and Mary have been incorporated into the Gaelic clan; and Irish peasant women can keen Christ dead with as real a grief as they keen their own dead. I have many times seen women sob as they repeated or listened to 'The Keening of Mary.' The strange intimacy that connects certain places in Ireland with the scenes of Christ's birth and life and death, and links certain Irish saints and heroes with the joy of the Nativity and the tragedy of the Passion—this is the true Irish mysticism, the mysticism which recognises no real dividing line between the seen and the unseen, and to which the imagined experience is often more vivid than the real experience. A people so gifted must bring in their turn a very precious gift to literature; for is it not the function of literature by making known the real and imagined experiences of gifted souls to reveal to common men all the hidden splendours of the world and to make vocal its silent music?