

HEROIC STYLES: THE TRADITION OF AN IDEA

It is possible to write about literature without adverting in any substantial way to history. Equally, it is possible to write history without any serious reference to literature. Yet both literature and history are discourses which are widely recognised to be closely related to one another because they are both subject to various linguistic protocols which, in gross or in subtle ways, determine the structure and meaning of what is written. We have many names for these protocols. Some are very general indeed — Romanticism, Victorianism, Modernism. Some are more specific — Idealist, Radical, Liberal. Literature can be written as History, History as Literature. It would be foolhardy to choose one among the many competing variations and say that it is *true* on some specifically historical or literary basis. Such choices are always moral and/or aesthetic. They always have an ideological implication.

Similarly, both discourses are surrounded — some would say stifled — by what is now called metacommentary. History as an activity is interrogated by the philosophy of history; literature as an activity is scrutinised by literary criticism which, at times, manages to be the philosophy of literature. In Ireland, however, the two discourses have been kept apart, even though they have, between them, created the interpretations of past and present by which we live. It is always possible to see in retrospect the features which identify writers of a particular period, no matter how disparate their interests. The link between Yeats, Spengler and Toynbee is obvious by now. They all speak the language of a particular historical 'family'. The same is true of Joyce and Lukács. What I propose in this pamphlet is that there have been for us two dominant ways of reading both our literature and our history. One is 'Romantic', a mode of reading which takes pleasure in the notion that Ireland is a culture enriched by the ambiguity of its relationship to an anachronistic and a modernised present. The other is a mode of reading which denies the glamour of this ambiguity and seeks to escape from it into a pluralism of the present. The authors who represent these modes most powerfully are Yeats and Joyce respectively. The problem which is rendered insoluble

by them is that of the North. In a basic sense, the crisis we are passing through is stylistic. That is to say, it is a crisis of language — the ways in which we write it and the ways in which we read it.

The idea of a tradition is one with which we are familiar in Irish writing. In a culture like ours, 'tradition' is not easily taken to be an established reality. We are conscious that it is an invention, a narrative which ingeniously finds a way of connecting a selected series of historical figures or themes in such a way that the pattern or plot revealed to us becomes a conditioning factor in our reading of literary works — such as *The Tower* or *Finnegans Wake*. However, the paradox into which we are inevitably led has a disquieting effect, for then we recognise that a Yeatsian or a Joycean idea of tradition is something simultaneously established for us in their texts and as a precondition of being able to read them. A poem like "Ancestral Houses" owes its force to the vitality with which it offers a version of Ascendancy history as true in itself. The truth of this historical reconstruction of the Ascendancy is not cancelled by our simply saying No, it was not like that. For its ultimate validity is not historical, but mythical. In this case, the mythical element is given prominence by the meditation on the fate of an originary energy when it becomes so effective that it transforms nature into civilization and is then transformed itself by civilization into decadence. This poem, then, appears to have a story to tell and, along with that, an interpretation of the story's meaning. It operates on the narrative and on the conceptual planes and at the intersection of these it emerges, for many readers, as a poem about the tragic nature of human existence itself. Yeats's life, through the mediations of history and myth, becomes an embodiment of essential existence.

The trouble with such a reading is the assumption that this or any other literary work can arrive at a moment in which it takes leave of history or myth (which are liable to idiosyncratic interpretation) and becomes meaningful only as an aspect of the 'human condition'. This is, of course, a characteristic determination of humanist readings of literature which hold to the ideological conviction that literature, in its highest forms, is non-ideological. It would be perfectly appropriate, within this particular frame, to take a poem by Pearse — say, *The Rebel* — and to read it in the light of a story — the Republican tradition from Tone, the Celtic tradition from Cuchulainn, the Christian tradition from Colmcille — and then reread the story as an expression of the moral supremacy of martyrdom over oppression. But as a poem, it would be regarded as inferior to that of Yeats. Yeats, stimulated by the moribund state of the

Ascendancy tradition, resolves, on the level of literature, a crisis which, for him, cannot be resolved socially or politically. In Pearse's case, the poem is no more than an adjunct to political action. The revolutionary tradition he represents is not broken by oppression but renewed by it. His symbols survive outside the poem, in the Cuchulainn statue, in the reconstituted GPO, in the military behaviour and rhetoric of the IRA. Yeats's symbols have disappeared, the destruction of Coole Park being the most notable, although even in their disappearance one can discover reinforcement for the tragic condition embodied in the poem. The unavoidable fact about both poems is that they continue to belong to history and to myth; they are part of the symbolic procedures which characterise their culture. Yet, to the extent that we prefer one as literature to the other, we find ourselves inclined to dispossess it of history, to concede to it an autonomy which is finally defensible only on the grounds of style.

The consideration of style is a thorny problem. In Irish writing, it is particularly so. When the language is English, Irish writing is dominated by the notion of vitality restored, of the centre energised by the periphery, the urban by the rural, the cosmopolitan by the provincial, the decadent by the natural. This is one of the liberating effects of nationalism, a means of restoring dignity and power to what had been humiliated and suppressed. This is the idea which underlies all our formulations of tradition. Its development is confined to two variations. The first we may call the variation of adherence, the second of separation. In the first, the restoration of native energy to the English language is seen as a specifically Irish contribution to a shared heritage. Standard English, as a form of language or as a form of literature, is rescued from its exclusiveness by being compelled to incorporate into itself what had previously been regarded as a delinquent dialect. It is the Irish contribution, in literary terms, to the treasury of English verse and prose. Cultural nationalism is thus transformed into a species of literary unionism. Sir Samuel Ferguson is the most explicit supporter of this variation, although, from Edgeworth to Yeats, it remains a tacit assumption. The story of the spiritual heroics of a fading class — the Ascendancy — in the face of a transformed Catholic 'nation' — was rewritten in a variety of ways in literature — as the story of the pagan Fianna replaced by a pallid Christianity, of young love replaced by old age (Deirdre, Oisín), of aristocracy supplanted by mob-democracy. The fertility of these rewritings is all the more remarkable in that they were recruitments by the fading class of the myths of renovation which belonged to their opponents. Irish culture became the new property of those who were losing their grip on

Irish land. The effect of these rewritings was to transfer the blame for the drastic condition of the country from the Ascendancy to the Catholic middle classes or to their English counterparts. It was in essence a strategic retreat from political to cultural supremacy. From Lecky to Yeats and forward to F.S.L. Lyons we witness the conversion of Irish history into a tragic theatre in which the great Anglo-Irish protagonists — Swift, Burke, Parnell — are destroyed in their heroic attempts to unite culture of intellect with the emotion of multitude, or, in political terms, constitutional politics with the forces of revolution. The triumph of the forces of revolution is glossed in all cases as the success of a philistine modernism over a rich and integrated organic culture. Yeats's promiscuity in his courtship of heroic figures — Cuchulainn, John O'Leary, Parnell, the 1916 leaders, Synge, Mussolini, Kevin O'Higgins, General O'Duffy — is an understandable form of anxiety in one who sought to find in a single figure the capacity to give reality to a spiritual leadership for which (as he consistently admitted) the conditions had already disappeared. Such figures could only operate as symbols. Their significance lay in their disdain for the provincial, squalid aspects of a mob culture which is the Yeatsian version of the other face of Irish nationalism. It could provide him culturally with a language of renovation, but it provided neither art nor civilization. That had come, politically, from the connection between England and Ireland.

All the important Irish Protestant writers of the nineteenth century had, as the ideological centre of their work, a commitment to a minority or subversive attitude which was much less revolutionary than it appeared to be. Edgeworth's critique of landlordism was counterbalanced by her sponsorship of utilitarianism and "British manufacturers";¹ Maturin and Le Fanu took the sting out of Gothicism by allying it with an ethic of aristocratic loneliness; Shaw and Wilde denied the subversive force of their proto-socialism by expressing it as cosmopolitan wit, the recourse of the social or intellectual dandy who makes

¹ The phrase is from the penultimate sentence of *Castle Rackrent* (1800):

It is a problem difficult of solution to determine, whether an Union will hasten or retard the amelioration of this country. The few gentlemen of education who now reside in this country will resort to England: they are few, but they are in nothing inferior to men of the same rank in Great Britain. The best that can happen will be the introduction of British manufacturers in their places.

On Maria Edgeworth's reluctance to accept fully the idea of an Irish Catholic gentleman, see the comments by Stephen Gwynn in *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History* (London, 1936) pp.54-6.

such a fetish of taking nothing seriously that he ceases to be taken seriously himself. Finally, Yeats's preoccupation with the occult, and Synge's with the lost language of Ireland are both minority positions which have, as part of their project, the revival of worn social forms, not their overthrow. The disaffectation inherent in these positions is typical of the Anglo-Irish criticism of the failure of English civilization in Ireland, but it is articulated for an English audience which learned to regard all these adversarial positions as essentially picturesque manifestations of the Irish sensibility. In the same way, the Irish mode of English was regarded as picturesque too and when both language and ideology are rendered harmless by this view of them, the writer is liable to become a popular success. Somerville and Ross showed how to take the middle-class seriousness out of Edgeworth's world and make it endearingly quaint. But all nineteenth-century Irish writing exploits the connection between the picturesque and the popular. In its comic vein, it produces *The Shaughran* and *Experiences of an Irish R.M.*; in its Gothic vein, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Uncle Silas* and *Dracula*; in its mandarin vein, the plays of Wilde and the poetry of the young Yeats. The division between that which is picturesque and that which is useful did not pass unobserved by Yeats. He made the great realignment of the minority stance with the pursuit of perfection in art. He gave the picturesque something more than respectability. He gave it the mysteriousness of the esoteric and in doing so committed Irish writing to the idea of an art which, while belonging to 'high' culture, would not have, on the one hand, the asphyxiating decadence of its English or French counterparts and, on the other hand, would have within it the energies of a community which had not yet been reduced to a public. An idea of art opposed to the idea of utility, an idea of an audience opposed to the idea of popularity, an idea of the peripheral becoming the central culture — in these three ideas Yeats provided Irish writing with a programme for action. But whatever its connection with Irish nationalism, it was not, finally, a programme of separation from the English tradition. His continued adherence to it led him to define the central Irish attitude as one of self-hatred. In his extraordinary "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937), he wrote:

The 'Irishry' have preserved their ancient 'deposit' through wars which, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became wars of extermination; no people, Lecky said . . . have undergone greater persecution, nor did that persecution altogether cease up to our own day. No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive . . . Then I