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LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN IRELAND

By THOMAS MACDONAGH

[In my article *Criticism and Irish Poetry*, published in the last number of *The Irish Review*, I spoke of "the two fresh languages of this country — Irish (modern Irish, newly schooled by Europe) and Anglo-Irish, English as we speak it in Ireland." I hope soon to publish in these pages a series of studies of contemporary Irish poets. It may be well to clear the way for some points in my criticism by a consideration of this Anglo-Irish language used by some of the most important of them. In this chapter I survey one region of the province].

"OUR morning star," wrote old Archbishop Trench of Chaucer, "he yet ushered in no dawn which was on the point of breaking." The well of English undefiled was for just two hundred years alone the one rich source of English literature. Then many waters broke from the ground of the English language and the stream flowed strong. The date of the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, 1386, is a useful one to count by. English, for quarter of a century the language of the Courts of Law, had then just replaced French as the language taught in the schools. Chaucer's important contemporary, Gower, was on the point of turning from the French and Latin of his previous works to the English of his third poem, *Confessio Amantis*. The promise of an English literature must have appeared fair. Yet the language had to wait long for its fulfilment. It had to go to school again, and to a different school; it had to unlearn and to learn. It had to mellow its voice in silence; it had to train its members in patience, before it could attain the utterance and the gesture of its new youth and its prime. The language of Chaucer had not in his day become the national language. His contemporary, Langland, used a different syntax. The Anglo-Norman people, of which Chaucer was a good type, had to mingle and to weld before its thought and emotion could find expression in the modern English of the last three hundred and fifty years. The literature of a dialect is tuneful only to the accompaniment of a central literature.

It is significant that no English poet of importance has followed in Chaucer's way. He is the best, indeed the only, true narrative poet of the language. He is the least lyric of English poets. In this one quality of his work he is so much akin to French poets

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that one is tempted to set it up with other barriers and divide him from English literature proper.

I urge this matter here with instance because I wish to make clear the connection in Ireland between language and literature, to show that though in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an Irish Chaucer might have arisen, turning from the Gaelic of his clan to the English of the Pale, he would have been only a morning star too, not the rising sun. Of course there are differences in the conditions and the rest, but the main consideration is that a literature with the seeds of succession in it comes in the mother language of the teller and of the listener, of the singer and of those who take up the refrain. The simple fact is that, as, according to a certain Scot, there must always be two parties to a joke, the man who makes it and the man who sees it; so, surely, there must be two parties to the making of a literature; and the second party must be capable of full appreciation. The poet is, no doubt, as I have said elsewhere, his own audience. His poetry is a matter between himself and himself. If others afterwards come and share his joy, the gain is theirs. But he is sensitive to the emotions and sympathies of his country and time. He is, whether he like it or not, the heir of the ages, in possession of the passing period and of the future. He himself is the poet and himself the auditor; but his second self is a critic, and to be a critic is to know other men and to appreciate the tastes of other men, and these others almost of necessity his countrymen. He is most blessed when his countrymen are fresh for literature—which is not to say that a writer, whatever his genius, could initiate a separate literature merely by seeking and finding a people, even his own people, without a modern literature. His doing so depends on the people, on the state of their culture, and more particularly on the state of their ideals, national, religious, mystical. And when he finds them with all these qualities, he must speak not merely of his people, but to them and for them, discovering them to themselves, expressing them for themselves. William Carleton made the mistake, during one part of his career at least, of writing about Ireland for a foreign audience. He hoped, as he says in a letter from London to his daughter, to reach a popularity equal to that of Dickens or Thackeray, “and consequently to have the English publishers at my feet and willing to come to my own terms.” Carleton knew Irish, and might possibly have been the Gaelic *Mistral*—if he had been a patriot. As it was he fell between two stools. The Irish people proper were deaf to his word: the English people listened while moved by the horrors of the Famine of 1847, and then turned a deaf ear too. A Molière

that cannot interest his housekeeper will not interest the passers by.

English literature has had some difficulty in getting rid of the phraseology, the inversions, the poetic words, the cumbrous epithets, the mannerisms, of its pastoral and of its genteel days. It has, indeed, not yet got quite rid of them. The English reading of the early Anglo-Irish writers filled their memories with those old, stale things; but the individual Anglo-Irish literature of which I write has no such lumber. It is the record of the speech of the people, the living word—sometimes, no doubt, heightened, to use Wordsworth's phrase, but of a directness that Wordsworth would have adored. Indeed, it would seem that the desire of Wordsworth for a literature written only in the common language of the people is best fulfilled in the work produced in Ireland. His own work rarely attains the perfect balance of such poems as *Michael*: the weak prose of some of his peasant verse errs as much on one side as does the heightened diction of such a poem as *The Affliction of Margaret* on the other. Of course the very latest of the Anglo-Irish writers have had something of Wordsworth's difficulty. Mr. W. B. Yeats, who for all the unearthliness of much of his work, has used in his lyrics the most direct colloquial phrase, confesses this in some of his poems. And in a letter to the writer he has said: "I remember as an important event getting rid of the word 'rife.'" In passing, one may remark that this striving after colloquial directness has its dangers too. The latest poems of Mr. Yeats show that he has failed to recognise an important fact of English grammar, the function of the conventional word order. Admit that poetic licences should be no more allowed than other licences, but examine poetry's charter of liberty before you tear it up. It is an older charter than that of prose.

One of the distinctions of this Anglo-Irish literature that marks it off from the mere epochs of English literature proper is its independence of obsolete species. It matters nothing to Irish writers of the day that English has had in due succession its lyric, its dramatic, its epic, its didactic poetry and then the new lyric of romanticism, inspired by the Celtic breath;* that the Elizabethan prose writers, even Bacon, set no standard, made no lasting moulds, were again morning stars and not day stars; that prose went on many anvils before it was fit for all its uses; that it has to-day become at once keen and flexible only after that long tempering. In spite of the self-consciousness of the age, in spite of the world influences felt here, in spite of all our criticism, the Irish poets and writers (those that are truly Anglo-Irish) are beginning it all over again in the alien

*I am here claiming the influence rather of Macpherson than of Blake and others.

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tongue that they know now as a mother tongue. They delight not in the ink-horn terms of the English literary succession, but in the rich living language of a people little affected by book-lore, a people standing but a little way on the English side of the crossways, remembering something of the syntax or the metaphor of Gaelic, much of the rhythm, inventing mostly for itself its metaphor from the things of its life, things known at first hand.

All this is not to say that this literature can grow and progress now as if nothing had ever happened in the world before—as if, for instance, the Renaissance had never been and as if the Romantic Revival had not changed the literatures of Europe. On the contrary, the things that have happened, especially indeed the things that have affected English literature, must powerfully affect our literature. Indeed it has its beginning partly in the Romantic Revival. To find a literature that had none of its timbers out of a previous edifice one would have to go back to the lament of Adam and Eve on the loss of Paradise or of their son. This Anglo-Irish literature knows the poetry of Romance. It gains thereby. It continues it, and has a chance of continuing in a higher mood, given new freshness of ideas, freshness of race, independence of book tradition, and the advantage of experience shared in common with other English literature. It departs from Romance, and still has had the advantage of using it. But with all this, and by all this, it is a new beginning. Some of its writers, *docti sermones utriusque linguae*, cannot, it would seem, fail to be under current influences. Does this detract from its claim to newness or make it but the going on of an older literature, whether Gaelic or English? Chaucer's work, to cite it again, must have seemed a going on in his day,—part of it a continuation in English of the work of French poets, and part a continuation of the work of the writers of the old chivalrous romances and the like—with a new power and a new note. To some who could best appreciate the work of Langland* he must have appeared a man who "writ no language," as Spenser, in a different light, appeared to Ben Jonson.

Chaucer stands in England at the end of the Middle Ages. Between him and Spenser intervene the barbarous Wars of the Roses, Amurath succeeding Amurath, for all that Shakespeare said. The gay time of the Canterbury Pilgrims was gone, when, in the words of one of Chaucer's editors, those classes whose training fitted and disposed them to take an interest in books were in a

*I have not forgotten that in the matter of vocabulary Langland is almost as much under French influence as Chaucer.

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state of gaiety at once the sequel of protracted military glory and the foster mother of artistic productivity; when songs and pretty things were prized supremely; when luxury was new and not quite understood; when people wore their glories upside down; when the ceremonial of Chivalry still retained the ostentation of devoutness and self-sacrifice. The succeeding time, so barren in literature, was, for all its ugliness, really literature in the making. The last English epic is the group of Histories in which Shakespeare dramatised the century 1385-1485.

In Ireland a period intervened between the last days of the Gaelic literature that mattered and the beginning of the new literature in the English tongue, between the hope and admiration that captured the imagination of the people in the days of Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell, then of Owen Roe, then of the Jacobites, and the new hope and anticipation that dawned in the last century and is widened to morning in this. The old Gaelic polity and culture having lost their force and their integrity, Gaelic literature became decadent in the time of the Penal Laws. Whatever the fate of the Gaelic language and literature now may be—whether its long sickness end now in death without issue, or, as some of us confidently hope, in revival and vigorous life, with renewal of the same personality, a second youth, or in the birth of a new language to utter a new literature, destined to take after its Gaelic mother only in some parts, and for the rest to bear the name of bastard in its childhood and of true-born heir in its age, a well of Irish undefiled,—whatever is to be in the unknown future, it would be folly to deny the sickness, the decadence, of the immediate past. And while Irish was decadent, English was not yet able either to carry on the tradition or to syllable anew for itself here. The English speaking population in Ireland had none of the qualities,—social cohesion and integrity, culture, enthusiasm, joy, high and brave emotion,—to stammer and then to utter clearly the new word. That word came to the call of the country. It came in the new language and was heard in the new day. The Renaissance that stirred England to its greatest literature brought the mingling of the cosmopolitan with the national. Here the waters have been stirred by the breath of freedom: the alien language has stirred to expression on the lips of the native people.

The revival of nationalism among the Irish subject majority following the days of the Irish Volunteers, the United Irishmen, the independent Parliament; this nationalism, strengthened by O'Connell with Catholic Emancipation and the franchise; this nationalism, hardened by the austere independence of Parnell, by the land war

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and its victorious close; this, brought to full manhood by the renewed struggle for legislative freedom and the certainty of triumph and responsibility; this, free from alien hope and fear, craving no ease, hearing always the supreme song of victory on the dying lips of martyrs; this produced the unrest, the impetuous, intrepid adventure that shouts the song of joy for the sad things and for the glad things of life. The song in the new language demanded an intellectual effort that gave it a worth apart. English had to be broken and re-made to serve that song. The language that had been brought to perfection for English use, and then worn by that use, that had had the fixing of the printing press and had set the printer's word above the spoken, that language, in order to serve the different purpose of the new people, had to go back to the forge of the living speech. King Alfred, in the first days of English prose, wrote long, awkward strings of words for sentences, with little syntactical order. The modern English author writes well-balanced, well ordered sentences. But the Saxon King expressed more truly his thought; in him the word order imaged more truly the thought order. The modern writer uses counters where he used coin. The modern writer cannot distinguish between his idea and the set phrase that does duty for its expression, though its terms have other meanings. He alludes to things. His prose is a hint, perfectly understood no doubt by others who know the code, but not for all that a true language. Almost perfectly it does duty for a true language to the people with whom it has grown; better than perfectly in its poetry, which gains in suggestiveness more than its loss in concreteness. Compare the prose of this language with the superior prose of French. Compare its poetry with the far inferior poetry of French. It was, in a word, the English language, good for the English people, redolent of English history, even of the vagaries and absurdities of the history of the English people, with practical jokes and puns and stupid grammatical blunders smelling sweet with the aroma of some splendid verse—with golden lads and girls that come to dust, as chimney sweepers, or with deeds of derring-do. This language, now a courser of immortal pace, now a hack between the shafts of commercialism, serving Shakespeare and the stenographer, used efficiently in William Blake's lyrics and in telegrams; this differed in many of the ways of linguistic difference from the language of the Gael. In it the ideas of the Gael did not find easy expression.

But I have been led on a little too far. The language that was brought face to face with Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not the language of English commerce. The Gaelic people had for English tutors the descendants of the old English

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settlers, in whose mouths the language was still the language of Shakespeare. The transplanted slip of a language does not develop as does the parent tree. By comparison it rather ceases to develop. The descendants of the earliest English colonists here were found, by a new Englishman of Elizabeth's time, using "the dregs of the old ancient Chaucer English." So in our day we find in the mouths of the people what such a progressive might call the dregs of the old ancient Shakespeare English. And this was the English that had to be knit into a different complication from the modern complication of the central English language. For the rest, it is not only in Ireland that the phenomenon has occurred: analogous is the use of English by the American booster and by the mystic who has to express in terms of sense and wit the things of God that are made known to him in no language.