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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

To write – as to read – is to enter a sort of exile from the world around us. But to go into exile from the world around us may well be a signal to write. Although Ireland has produced many authors, it has on its own land-mass sustained less writing than one might be led to believe. Even a great national poet like Yeats managed to spend more of his life outside the country than in: and the list of artists-in-exile stretches from Congreve to Edna O'Brien. Nor was exile solely a condition of those who wrote in English. Much of the literature produced in Irish during the 'revival' in the early decades of the seventeenth century was composed and published in the cities of continental Europe. It is almost as if Irish writers found that they had to go out into the world in order to discover who exactly they were.

The problem faced by many was the discovery that an 'image' had preceded them to their first overseas encounter. There may be no essence of Irishness, any more than there is of Jewishness, but both peoples have had a common experience – that of being defined, derided and decided by others. If you want to know what an Irishman is, ask an Englishman, for the very notion of a unitary national identity, like that of a united Ireland as an administrative entity, is an English invention. Small wonder, therefore, that some of its staunchest supporters have borne such sturdy English surnames as Pearse and Adams.

The Stage Irishman was a caricature got up in England, based on ignorance and fear of the Other but also on a suspicion that that Other knew better how to enjoy the world. Such a cartoonish creation had its racist overtones but also the merit of making some sort of relationship possible. Out in the world every person is met first as a stranger, with all the simplification which that implies, for we can classify acquaintances in a way that we never would classify close friends. Only much later, after those initial meetings, do we come to know others more subtly, whether as intimate enemies or fast friends. Even as we break through to the true

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nuances of a relationship, some of the original stereotypes retain a certain authority. That is why Sigmund Freud once said that there are four persons in every relationship – the two actual people, but also the fantasies, entertained by each of the other. As he joked, a bed could sometimes seem a very crowded place. Much the same is true of that bed which has been Anglo-Irish relations, a relation complicated by endless play-acting on both sides or, as Elizabeth Bowen sighed, 'a mixture of showing-off and suspicion, nearly as bad as sex'.

In such a condition of perpetual image-making, it might seem that power lies always with the shapers of discourse, but that has not invariably been so. At the start of the nineteenth century, Hegel suggested that the slave may know more than the master, in the sense of knowing what it is like to lose but also of being able to observe what it must be like to win. Poets and visionaries have repeated the point – in the words of Emily Dickinson, 'success is counted sweetest / by those who ne'er succeed'. The Irish, for two centuries, have read their own newspapers as well as those of England, and savoured the differences with which all parties report on the same event. This has produced in them a sense of the suppleness of language. Hence the strange mixture of insolence and reverence which they bring to the English literary tradition (or, as Liam O'Flaherty's English landlady once put it, 'servile when you must, insolent when you may'). For every character who went *ag sodar i ndiaidh na nuasal* (trotting after the nobility), there was another who mocked the gentry, often by an imitation so exaggeratedly perfect as to constitute a ferocious parody. If Englishness could be so easily performed, then it could not amount to much to begin with. It was even possible that it was more a caricature of an idea than the real thing. That element of performance was rooted in the fact that many colonial agents were out in the tropics precisely because they did not 'fit' back home, either through an excess of creativity or criminality. In the new setting, strangely enough, they were expected to emulate those average home-country types they had so patently failed to be. No sooner did the native notice the element of play-acting, this Stage English aspect of colonialist culture, than the game was up. Perhaps the English were ultimately too self-divided to run a lasting empire.

Underlying that self-division was the strong suspicion that the Irish or Indian personality contained the Englishman's lost spiritual aspect. So it came to pass that the natives could enact what Oscar Wilde called the tyranny of the weak over the strong, 'the only tyranny that lasts'. The Stage Irishman arose from deep and dire needs in the English personality, for a foil which might set off the domestic virtues of efficiency, order and

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reason: but in that process the feeling for poetry and emotion was projected onto the native. Given that no coherent philosophy bound the English into a unity, this had to come from fighting the Other. The usual paradox ensued: the English depended for their identity on fighting, yet somehow projected a reputation for bellicose behaviour onto the Irish.

Such a view of the Other was a neurosis, for the neurotic is one who behaves as if the identity of his antagonist is all that determines his own (just as male hysterics act as if their masculinity is in all things the reverse of that which is called 'feminine'). Many narrow-gauge Irish nationalists bought into this reactive thinking, patenting an Ireland that was less a truly liberated zone than a sort of not-England, in which every virtue of the colonising country had its equal but opposite Irish counterpart. In that depressing context of endless oppositionism between both parties, the Stage Irishman was of some limited value, offering a recognisable figure through which both sides could at least begin to negotiate. Even though the figure had been created by a succession of English playwrights, there was a very real sense in which Irish people chose to occupy the assigned role, if only to complicate and ultimately to challenge it.

Seamus Heaney's redefinition of the 'bog myth' might be cited as a nuanced contemporary example of the same process, probably modelled (in his case) on the 'black-is-beautiful' movement which he witnessed in Berkeley in the early 1970s. The phrase 'bog Irish' was first applied by English imperial soldiers to those natives who lived on poor land ('bog' is the Irish for 'soft') onto which they lured their armour-clad enemies for battle: but it has been in more recent times internalised by Irish people themselves, so that the word 'bogman' is often used by smart cits to describe an awkward fellow of rural background. For Heaney, this linguistic history would have been further complicated by the knowledge that the 'Bogside' was the Catholic–nationalist enclave of Derry, near which he was educated at St Columb's boarding college.

The tactic was to take a racist stereotype, occupy it until it became one's own, and thereafter invert its meaning, wearing the old badge of defeat with a sort of defiant pride. It should never be forgotten that it was Irish artists themselves who developed many of the simian archetypes in *Punch* magazine of the nineteenth century, and Irish actors who often played Stage Irish roles on the boards of London and Manchester. They may have done so because the stereotype not only precipitated some discussion of the underlying reality but also generated a counter-claim – as when the London Irish objected so strongly to the portrayal of Sir Lucius O'Trigger in the opening production of Richard Brinsley

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Sheridan's *The Rivals* that the play had to be taken off and reconfigured. Like much else in English life, from the architecture of the buildings at Westminster to the conventions of social comedy, the figure of the Paddy owed a lot to the ingenuity of Irish minds.

The huge contribution made by Irish immigrants to the shaping of modern Britain has yet to be fully recognised – from soldiers to nurses, architects to politicians, journalists to academics, they have mastered many preserves except the judiciary and police. When loyalists insist that 'Ulster is British', they are – whether they know it or not – conceding that it is Irish by that very virtue. Irish poets like Heaney and Muldoon have been professors of their subject at Oxford in recent times, just as presenters with class-free Irish accents have enjoyed the freedom of Britain's airwaves. A reciprocal process has long been evident in the Irish Republic, where most 'national' rituals seem to be shot through with British thinking, whether it be the annual rivalries of Gaelic football teams playing for counties based on the 'shire' system or the rules of procedure in Dáil Éireann which are so faithfully copied from Westminster.

These types of cultural fusion have long been rehearsed in Irish writing. This collection begins with an essay on the fate of the Stage Irishman as a register of the state of Anglo-Irish relations. Then it moves on to track in a number of essays the confluence of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literary traditions in the art of storytelling, in the poetry of Yeats and Synge and in the prose of George Moore. Of all literary forms, the short story seems to tap most fully into the energies unleashed by fusing the oral tradition of tale-telling with the writerly virtues of English narrative. If oral tale and bardic poem are forms of the aristocracy and the novel that of the bourgeoisie which succeeds it, then in the period of transition between both orders there may be a phase when the forms of literature go into meltdown. In England, France and Germany that transition occurred rather quickly, but in Ireland it has taken centuries from the fall of the Gaelic princes in 1600 to the establishment of a vibrant middle class in the decades after independence. Throughout this period, the classic novels, so-called, have really been collections of micro-narratives, from *Gulliver's Travels* to *Castle Rackrent*, from *Ulysses* to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, from *Molloy* to *Cré na Cille*. The astonishing persistence of the short story or monologue as the base-narrative in each of these works is to be observed also in many of the foremost contemporary dramas, from Friel's *Faith Healer* through Murphy's *Bailegangaire* to McPherson's *The Weir*. As the old gifts of recital and storytelling pass out of everyday life, they make a

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compelling reappearance on Stage. For this reason, it seems worthwhile to include some essays which show just how fully these Gaelic traditions survive in English-language laments for their passing.

These essays were written in the later 1970s, during years when I prepared my Oxford dissertation for publication as *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979). The background to my analysis of the interaction of two traditions was not only the 'troubles' of Northern Ireland but also the linked debate about the need for a new national pedagogy, addressed in 'Writers in Quarantine?' The case made there for a plural, multi-disciplinary Irish Studies placed an emphasis on those authors who wrote well in both Irish *and* English: Douglas Hyde, Patrick Pearse, Liam O'Flaherty, Flann O'Brien, Brendan Behan, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Michael Hartnett. But the deeper point was that most of the great Irish writers were bicultural in the manner of Swift, who based his Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians on a Gaelic tale, or of Ó Ríordáin, who brought the techniques of Hopkins and Eliot into lyric poetry in Irish.

A central theme in all these essays and studies is that cultural forces which appear to be opposites often turn out to be doubles. My exemplar in all this was Giordano Bruno who wrote in the sixteenth century that 'every power in nature seems to evolve its own opposite – but from that opposition springs reunion'. So the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish worlds, often seen in the past as inimical, are shown to have fused, with new kinds of hybrid art appearing in both languages.

That this scholarly debate located itself along the axis of Anglo-Irish relations was predictable. Most of my generation had grown up reading Enid Blyton and Frank Richards, the *Victor* and the *Wizard*. Though aware that our grandfathers had liberated the country from British rule, we loved the popular culture of the neighbouring island, whose practices we often took for the very definition of a human norm. But the world out of which I came was somewhat different from that British one of which I often read. I was born in Eccles Street, Dublin, in 1951 and given a liberal Catholic education by the standards of the time at local schools in Clontarf. My mother's family had been involved in the Gaelic League and Easter Rising and she herself had been a student at the first Gaelscoil (all-Irish language school) for girls, Scoil Bhríde, under the tutelage of Louise Gavan Duffy. My father's family were, despite their German origins, keen supporters of constitutional nationalism and my grandfather for many years was photographed by the newspapers laying a wreath on behalf of the Parnell Commemoration Committee at the grave of 'the

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Chief' in Glasnevin cemetery. Despite these Hibernicising influences, the world of my reading suggested a Britain that was an epitome of all things human and 'normal'. It was only in the 1970s, when I lived and worked in Oxford and Canterbury, that I began to realise how stressed and abnormal Britain really was – still exhausted from running an empire and fighting two world wars. By then I had also travelled in France, where newspapers casually advertised first-communion outfits for children, reassuring me that being Irish was not a completely odd condition. But the appalling intensity of the violence in Northern Ireland through that decade ensured that the Anglo-Irish axis remained paramount to most intellectuals. These were the years when people rather naively suggested that much of the northern problem could be solved by proper education – hence the worthy BBC and RTÉ documentaries that sought to challenge the myths cherished by both sides.

Working from this idealistic analysis, I wrote my essays and studies out of a deep conviction – that if the children of Protestant unionists were to study Irish, they would find that tradition far more open to their ideas than nationalists had often made it seem. Similarly, if the Catholic students in the Republic were exposed more fully to the writings of Swift or Goldsmith, they would find there just the sort of practical humanitarianism which animated young people all over the world in the aftermath of 1968. Culture was the common ground on which the various political traditions of the island might meet, not in some spurious unity but in a zone of free debate which allowed for an intelligent savouring of the differences as well as the similarities between the groups. The studies of Estyn Evans on material lore had long convinced me that Ulster Protestants had more in common with their nationalist neighbours and southern 'enemies' than they had with the distant power elites of London.

Yet there were many people of goodwill in the 1970s who did not feel such hopefulness. The provost of Trinity College, Dublin, F. S. L. Lyons, argued at a time of deep gloom in his Ford Lectures at Oxford that the more you excavated cultural traditions, the more antagonistic and irreconcilable they all began to seem. Far from leading to dialogue, he averred, it was culture itself which had produced the anarchy all around us. Lyons's analysis had, nonetheless, the merit of transcending, to some degree, the idea of just 'two traditions'. Instead, he identified sharp distinctions within unionist politics between working-class loyalism and a more patrician Anglo-Irish upper crust, and equally deep splits between constitutional nationalists and militant republicans. I felt that one could

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have added further strands to that configuration (traveller culture, Gaeltacht life and the southern proletariat among others).

However, my developing thesis became the reverse of Lyons's: the seeming anarchy of disparate elements, all contending, might lead in time to a genuine cultural fusion. Insofar as there was a split along cultural lines, it existed less between north and south than between east and west, the west being wilder but more conservative, the east more buttoned-down yet at the same time more liberal. This was true whenever you talked to people about issues like divorce, contraception or abortion – the further east you went whether on the upper or lower half of the island, the more likely people were to support these as civil rights; and the further west you went, the less likely.

If politics divided people into warring camps, then a plural vision of culture might help to heal those wounds. This was not a new idea but a return to the fundamental principles of the Gaelic League (founded in 1893), which in its first decade attracted unionists as well as nationalists. In its second decade it began to be co-opted by the forces of militant nationalism with a consequent simplification of the diverse traditions represented by the Irish language, but those traditions needed only to be excavated and then perhaps the possibilities opened by the League's founder, Douglas Hyde (himself a Protestant), could be revisited. My undergraduate studies of Irish and English at Trinity College between 1969 and 1973 had convinced me that both narrow-gauge nationalism and theocratic Catholicism were secondary formations, arbitrarily designated as twin keys to Irish identity only *after* the loss of Irish in many places in the mid-nineteenth century. The equation of 'Gaelic' and 'Catholic' as a basis for 'Irishness' was disastrous in the long term for those who identified with any of these three categories. It led the simple-minded to adopt absurd beliefs – that great republican leaders like Tone and Emmet had somehow enjoyed or endured posthumous conversions to Roman Catholicism, or that there was no word in Irish for 'contraceptive'. These simple beliefs were already helping to generate an equally rudimentary revisionism, which would spend the 1970s and 1980s attacking the cardboard version of Gaelic–Catholic nationalism.

Douglas Hyde had been right in his 1892 lecture on the necessity for de-anglicising Ireland. The great mistake of previous leaders had been to neglect the cultural domain and to be seduced by mere 'politics'. These leaders had bought into a bogus parliamentarianism on the one hand and an even more noxious militarism on the other. Whenever the former failed, the latter was tried, but in the process entire generations had

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substituted the tradition of the fight for the thing fought for. A common error in revolutionary movements, for whom to strike was always to win, this was dangerously seductive of young, impatient souls. In the later 1970s, that great anatomist of Orientalism, Edward Said, began to point to its folly in the case of his own Palestinian people. He expressed impatience with military comrades in the Palestine Liberation Organisation, whom he accused of fetishising arms and neglecting the more cultural values which alone gave their struggle meaning. Just as Hyde was eventually forced out of the Gaelic League, Said finally had to leave the Palestinian National Congress.

Douglas Hyde was in many aspects of his thought a post-colonial critic *avant la lettre*. A century before Homi Bhabha propounded the 'other question' in terms of a native who was 'not quite/not white', Hyde had in his 1892 lecture described a similar pathology. He also registered the pain of being a flawed mimesis of the real Englander, anglicised but not truly English, and he shrewdly attributed the worst cases of Anglophobia to a bitter resentment of those English-speaking Irish against that country which they did so much to imitate. Hyde was a lower-case unionist, certainly not a nationalist, and his analysis applies as forcefully to contemporary unionists as it did to nationalists a century ago. Today's unionists identify with a Britain that has long been historical (if it ever existed) and they fear that their covenant with it may soon be betrayed. Hence the Anglophobia in loyalist communities and the growing distrust of those very rulers whose principles the loyalists claim to uphold. Just as political nationalists a hundred years ago seized on ancient Irish icons like Cuchulain to project their pride and their fear of disappearance, so also have Ulster's uncertain defenders seen in him a figure who defended their province against attack. That rhetoric of 'the triumph of failure' which once appealed to Pearse and his followers now casts its mesmeric spell over them.

My visits to the Gaeltacht in 1978 and 1979 as a young lecturer in Irish at Trinity simply confirmed these hunches. There political nationalism seemed to have made no headway at all. If nationalism really was just a secondary formation to fill a gap left by a lost ancestral language, then why would Connemara people need such a prop? They were Irish anyway and had no need of abstract demonstrations of that fact, which would also explain the lack of nationalist sentiment in many of the great texts of the native language. This lack was a source of constant frustration to those who wished to enforce the dreary equation of 'Gaelic equals Irish'. What was often just a local or regional pietas in the work of a Gaelic poet was

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inflated by nationalist commentators into patriotic feeling: but an integrated course in Irish Studies would, I believed, take such texts out of nationalist quarantine and allow for a more open reading.

Again, Edward Said's analysis offered a useful parallel. Towards the close of *Orientalism*, he laments the fact that Arab Studies are practised all over the world, especially in the United States, where they are a crisis-driven discipline which may help students understand and ultimately control the peoples of the Middle East. But Said's regret goes deeper – a multidisciplinary Arab Studies is pursued almost everywhere, he says, except in its natural home among the Arabic peoples. The same was and to a great extent still is true of Irish Studies. Just after I published 'Writers in Quarantine' in 1979, I resigned from a lectureship in Irish at Trinity. I had taken it up in hopes that the college would create an integrated course linking Irish and English. This never happened, so I moved to University College where the portents then seemed more encouraging. There also I was to be frustrated. There were many friendly invitations by individuals to give lectures and seminars in Irish to the Celtic faculty but no joint undergraduate courses were developed over the next two decades. The territorial nervousness of academics at the prospect of turf wars was one factor in this stasis. Another was a genuine fear that Irish Studies could easily become another 'Classical Civilisation' course, leading to a decline in disciplinary rigour and linguistic standards as texts came to be studied mainly in translation. Meanwhile, in places like Boston, Toronto, Liverpool, Kent, Aberdeen and Northern Ireland, Irish Studies took off and flourished. The purist approach taken by Irish departments in the Republic has not arrested the decline in the standard of Irish in schools and colleges.

The dedication of Celtic scholars deserves every respect, yet the policy of compulsory Irish in the nation's schools has proved counter-productive. Although conceived in the 1920s by high-minded idealists, its effect was to turn a gift into a threat. There was a time when, if a child failed Irish, that child thereby failed the entire public examination. The early governments of the Free State were never fully confident of their compulsory policy, so they were afraid to commission a poll on the state of public opinion. After the 1970s, it was no longer required to *pass* Irish in state examinations but its *study* was still compulsory and even less popular than ever. Hence the lowered standard of performance, because less time was devoted to it by teachers aware of their students' need to master other languages and of the impatience of many parents with what they viewed as an anachronism. It is probable that if the subject were made optional in

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secondary schools, it might be taken up by as few as one in five students but it is certain that it would be taken by their enthusiasm to far higher levels.

All in all, the fate of Irish is a dire example of how policies based on cultural exceptionalism can be self-defeating. At present the Zulu community in South Africa is seeking safeguards for its language from the African National Congress government, including the right to be lectured in Zulu on a Durban campus. Sponsors of that campaign would be well advised to consider the Irish experience. The National University in Galway is officially Irish-speaking, but few third-level textbooks in the native language have ever been seen in its classrooms. The mistaken basis of such policies was well diagnosed by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, who once remarked 'Tá an Ghaeilge ró-cheangailte le scolaíocht' (Irish is too linked to educational processes). If a society really wishes to protect valued traditions or to challenge bad practices, it is futile to think that these changes can be effected simply by tinkering with the syllabus, unless there is a genuine desire for transformation in the society itself. Schoolchildren and teachers – or even university students – cannot be expected to bear all the cultural burdens of a society.

A similar sense of limitation in the United States has led many intellectuals to despair of ever achieving social change and to regroup within the academy, where their highly theoretical form of radicalism tends to lose touch with the community. Hence the daunting jargon in which many intelligent analyses are written. It is noticeable, also, that those Irish or Indian scholars whose work is targeted mainly at an American postgraduate audience often make a virtue of a complex technical language, whereas home-based scholars, such as Ashis Nandy or Terence Brown, still try to write for a more generalist audience. Perhaps the sheer proximity of riots and bombs has left them with no other choice. The troubles in Northern Ireland had many of the elements of a traditional insurrection and although I was never naive enough to believe that narrow-nationalist history-books would be listed as among its causes, I persisted in the conviction that scholars should develop the sort of pedagogy which might contribute to a reconciliation (or at least be useful in its aftermath). Hence my interest in those early artists of the Abbey Theatre – notably Synge and Yeats – who tried to recreate the performance conventions of bardic poetry on the stage of the national theatre, albeit in English. The idea that every text, whether lyric poem or prose passage, calls for the act of interpretation in active performance is one link between the art of Synge and the 'Sirens' episode of Joyce's

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