SYNGE AND
ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I.
ON ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

OF Synge as a portent in Anglo-Irish literature we can have no clear idea unless we have formed for ourselves some general view of that literature as a whole.

In our youth and even later it used always to be spoken of as Irish literature; and this custom old-fashioned folk have not yet given up: to them Thomas Moore's Melodies are still Irish Melodies. Generally, however, literature written in English by Irishmen is now known among us as Anglo-Irish literature, while by Irish literature we mean the literature written in the Irish language and that alone; to have outsiders become familiar with the distinction is simply a matter of time.

Irish literature—that great mass of writing which for us began to exist, say about 1,200 years ago, and which is being still added to—is adequately covered by its description. It is Irish. It is as Irish as Greek literature is Greek or Russian literature is Russian. But what are we to say of Anglo-Irish as descriptive of that literature which had no existence until towards the end of the eighteenth century? Is that as Anglo-Irish as Greek literature is Greek? If a stranger, say a Russian, become acquainted with this literature, he will not of course ever think of troubling himself with such a question, he will not think of saying: But is this Anglo-Irish literature at all? for of course he accepts it as such. Before such a thought can strike him he must in some way have
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come to know this country, its people, the virtue that is in them. One will not therefore expect enlightenment on such a question from the Russian or any other outsider, least of all from the Englishman; and among ourselves, where it is habitual bodily to take over and use whatever is current in English thought, the question has not been raised. What has been discussed is whether this literature may justly be described as Irish—ridiculous argument to those who know what Irish literature is, whereas by taking the narrower question, whether it can fittingly be described as Anglo-Irish, we may clarify our ideas of the literature such as it is, and consequently our idea of Synge’s place in it.

The answer to the question: Is there an Anglo-Irish literature? must depend on what regard we have for what Synge spoke of as collaboration—without perhaps taking very great trouble to explore his own thought. The people among whom the writer lives, what is their part in the work he produces? Is the writer the people’s voice? has there ever been, can there be, a distinctive literature that is not a national literature? A national literature is written primarily for its own people: every new book in it—no matter what its theme, foreign or native—is referable to their life, and its literary traits to the traits already established in the literature. The nation’s own critical opinion of it is the warrant of life or death for it. Can Anglo-Irish, then, be a distinctive literature if it is not a national literature? And if it has not primarily been written for Ireland, if it be impossible to refer it to Irish life for its elucidation, if its continued existence or non-existence be independent of Irish opinion—can it be a national literature?

To ask ourselves such natural questions is to become at once aware that this literature differs in many ways from the literature of every normal people. If we ask such questions about any other literature—English, French, German, the answers are straightforward; they are what one expects. Every new book written by an Englishman in English is written primarily for his own people; English life and English

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literature as a whole lie behind it; the English cosmos is the tree from which the book, like a ripe fruit, has dropped; and English opinion decrees life or death as its portion.

If we ask ourselves what standards of criticism help the growth of this Anglo-Irish literature, is to be puzzled. When one examines the matter closely one finds that in periods of national exaltation, when the spirit of the land is quickened by struggle, then, as if suddenly aware of the deficiency, Anglo-Irish literature makes an effort to develop a body of criticism of its own. As soon however as the struggle is over, this literature once again becomes a free agent; once again begins unduly to reflect movements and fashions in literature which do not take their rise in this country, which have nothing to do with the mental life of this country, fashions which never in the least degree become acclimatized in this country—as French or English fashions become acclimatized, say, in America; and not alone does it make use of its freedom from any incipient national literary tradition to forage where it will, to take on what colour it will, but once again definitely shows itself scornful of the judgement of this country, such as it may be, shows itself indeed utterly provincial in its overwrought desire to be assessed and spoken well of by the critics of another people. It is therefore not normal, for a normal literature while welcoming the criticism of outsiders neither lives nor dies by such criticism. It abides the judgement of its own people, and by that judgement lives or dies. If this literature then be not a normal literature it is not a national literature, for normal and national are synonymous in literary criticism.

To take another test: a normal literature is written within the confines of the country which names it. It is not dependent on expatriates. The literary annals of almost

1 This word must serve, although of course it is not the right word to apply to such writers as, for instance, Swift, Goldsmith, Shaw—writers for whom Ireland was never a patria in any sense.
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every people will, of course, once in a while give account of their expatriate writers. In these cases the expatriation is hardly ever a life sentence, and expatriation itself is a rare phenomenon in the history of the literature. How different

with us! Expatriation is the badge of all the tribe of Anglo-Irish literary men; and in nearly all cases it is a life sentence. It has ever been in vogue, and is still as bad as ever, or, it may be, worse. Even as I write, who knows if one other—we still have one or two left—may not have taken ship for New York, Paris, or London? Where to-day are those wild geese of the pen: Padraic Colum, E. A. Boyd, Joseph Campbell, Lyle Donaghy, J. B. Pagan, Frank Harris, Ethel Colburn Mayne, Geoffrey Phibbs, Thomas MacGreavy, J. H. Cousins, Gerald O’Donovan, John Eglington, Stephen Mac Kenna, Eric Dodds, Conal O’Riordan, Alfred Percival Graves, E. Temple Thurston, Monk Gibbon, Con O’Leary, Austin Clarke, James Joyce, D. L. Kelleher, James Stephens, Lord Dunsany, Seumas MacManus, Sean O’Casey, Patrick McGill, W. P. Ryan, Shane Leslie, L. A. G. Strong, Robert Lynd, St. J. Ervine, C. K. Munro, George Moore, G. B. Shaw, Liam O’Flaherty—others? 1 Here without any searching into the matter is a list of over thirty names: it would be impossible to make a list quarter as long as that of home-staying writers. Furthermore it is to be noted that whereas most of those expatriate writers live by the pen there are hardly more than one or two of the home-staying writers who do so; so that in a way we have no home-staying writers at all!

Why our writers have to go abroad is obvious: a home market hardly exists for their wares. Now unless one can show that the demands of the alien market are on all fours with those of the home market, how can this literature be Anglo-Irish? How can it be a national literature? The question is not: Can expatriates produce national literature? but: Can expatriates, writing for an alien market, produce

1 This list probably is not quite accurate. Sometimes an expatriate writer returns and remains for a little while. The name of W. B. Yeats is not included as it is not his habit to spend the whole of any year abroad.

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national literature? For our literary expatriates differ from those of other peoples. Ibsen lived in Rome, in Munich; but he wrote for no alien market. Turgenev lived in Paris, but it was for Russia he wrote. So of Rolland, of Unamuno, of Ibanez, of many others. At the present time a colony of American writers, pleading the lower cost of living, make their home very foolishly in Paris; it is however for America they write. Those expatriates then are not like ours, for whom practically no home market exists. In no sense do our expatriates write for Ireland as Ibsen wrote for Norway or Turgenev for Russia. Some of them, of course, have cut away their own land as summarily as Henry James did his. Shaw, Ervine, Munro, others, are of this class. They however are not the type. The typical Irish expatriate writer continues to find his matter in Irish life; his choice of it however, and his treatment of it when chosen, are to a greater or less extent imposed on him by alien considerations.

A foreign critic, that Russian we have instanced, knowing that more of our people live outside than within our shores, would naturally imagine that our expatriates find their market in the larger Ireland beyond the seas. But, flately, they do not. That greater Ireland does not know even their names. Indeed the strange thing is, and how piquantly strange it is, those few of the Irish abroad who keep abreast of the fortunes of Anglo-Irish literature in the world, are those who most likely have severed all except academic connections with Ireland itself. They are not those who hasten home to do their bit when an insurrection is on; they do not contribute to the funds of any political group in Ireland, and their contributions to Irish cultural establishments are so rare that we can remember only one or two in our lifetime. Such exiles as these are above the battle. They are those who, in the United States, fling the taunt ‘professional Irishman’ at those whose efforts in the past have made such vast difference in the political status of Ireland. To all this it will be replied: They have cut off from political Ireland but not from cultural Ireland. The
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statement seems comprehensive until one reminds oneself that Ireland’s culture for them, in almost all cases, consists of little else than this very literature we are considering.

Anglo-Irish literature then, as the phrase is understood, is mostly the product of Irishmen who neither live at home nor write primarily for their own people. Furthermore the criticism by which it is assessed is not Irish, nor even Anglo-Irish. These facts admitted, the foreign critic would recall how powerful are the moulds of a literature, how tyrannically, when once established, they shape out the subsequent individual books although these may come to be written under altered conditions and even in newly-discovered lands.

That foreigner would reason thus: Anglo-Irish literature is a homogeneous thing, first fashioned in Ireland for Ireland, pregnant of Irish mind, of the genius of the isle. Those expatriate writers are Irishmen, he would continue, steeped in the traditions of this literature: its idiom is their idiom, its thoughts their thoughts; expatriation, it is true, may be having some distorting effect on the moulds, but native moulds are not easily changed, hardly ever shattered: the literature then that those expatriate writers, helped by these moulds, produce, is Anglo-Irish literature.

That foreign critic in reasoning thus would be certain he was right; we know he would be wrong. He would be taking for granted that this expatriation is a new thing; that the moulds of the literature were laid before it began; that there was a time when Anglo-Irish was a normal literature, written at home for the homeland. Of course there never was such a time. The moulds are not native to us for they were never fashioned at the bidding of the people of this land: in their making the intention, whether willing or unwilling makes no difference, was not to canalize some share of Irish consciousness so that that consciousness would itself. The intention was rather to discover some easy way in which the strange workings of that consciousness might entertainingly be exhibited to alien eyes. Expatriation is not of to-day, nor of yesterday. It has been

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a chronic disease from Goldsmith’s time, Steele’s time, Sheridan’s time, Burke’s time, Moore’s time, Prout’s time, Wilde’s time, to our own time of Shaw, Joyce and Moore. Expatriation is, therefore, an older feature in this literature than the very moulds of it. The moulds can have been fashioned only by expatriate hands, and such expatriates as we have described: writers who did not labour for their own people. From the beginning then though we may think of this literature as a homogeneous thing, we cannot think of it as an indigenous thing. Its moulds therefore cannot have been fashioned to express the genius of Ireland in the English language. If in later years certain writers tried to do this, as some have tried, the unnatural homogeneity of these moulds proved their greatest enemy, so inflexible they have ever been.

II.

We know the outlines of the history of this literature. Its earliest moulds cannot be distinguished from those of contemporary English literature. Later, it certainly did develop somewhat different moulds, which can be distinguished. These second-period moulds we may speak of as Colonial moulds. The earliest writers never thought of themselves as cut off from English life or letters; the Colonial writers felt they were; they frequently protest that they are as truly English as the English born in India, as those who have gone thither: their writing at all is often an effort to keep in communion with their kind. Their books may be all regarded as an account of this strange country they are condemned to, written not for their brothers and co-mates in exile—not even for them!—but for their kinsfolk in England. Maria Edgeworth’s Castle Rackrent is the best specimen of this style of literature. No other book did as much in the creation of what was to prove the most favoured of the moulds which subsequent writers were to use. This Colonial literature was written to explain the quaintness of
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the stress of the literary moulds of his time wrote Colonial literature.

In Ascendancy literature the leading theme from the start
the stress of the literary moulds of his time wrote Colonial literature.

In Ascendancy literature the leading theme from the start

there has been: the decline and fall of an Ascendancy 'Big House.' Maria Edgeworth started this here also, and the hunt still
there has been: the decline and fall of an Ascendancy 'Big House.' Maria Edgeworth started this here also, and the hunt still
goes on. Within the last few years we have had The Big

goes on. Within the last few years we have had The Big

House of Inver by Somerville and Ross, and The Big House

House of Inver by Somerville and Ross, and The Big House

by Lennox Robinson; and in perhaps every decade of years,

good friend, another, and the hunt still
by Lennox Robinson; and in perhaps every decade of years,

from Miss Edgeworth's time to our own, one can discover a

from Miss Edgeworth's time to our own, one can discover a

book with the self-same theme. Synge, in his simple way,

book with the self-same theme. Synge, in his simple way,

unaware that this was the leading theme in Anglo-Irish

unaware that this was the leading theme in Anglo-Irish

literature, thought that he had discovered the theme for

literature, thought that he had discovered the theme for

himself; he writes: "... and if a play-wright

himself; he writes: "... and if a play-wright

close to go through the Irish country houses he would find

close to go through the Irish country houses he would find

material, it is likely, for many gloomy plays that would turn

material, it is likely, for many gloomy plays that would turn

on the dying away of these old families."1 It is as well he

on the dying away of these old families."1 It is as well he

himself never wrote such a play, for he had no feeling for

himself never wrote such a play, for he had no feeling for

history, and the theme is historical, the recognition of which

history, and the theme is historical, the recognition of which

fact makes the moderns, like Mr. Lennox Robinson, treat it

fact makes the moderns, like Mr. Lennox Robinson, treat it

very differently from the older writers, like Maria Edgeworth.

very differently from the older writers, like Maria Edgeworth.

Sweet are the uses of adversity! Castle Rackrent falls from

Sweet are the uses of adversity! Castle Rackrent falls from

generation to generation because the family had lost their

generation to generation because the family had lost their

virtue, but Mr. Robinson's Big House falls because the whole

virtue, but Mr. Robinson's Big House falls because the whole

Ascendancy had lost their virtue.

This difference between Castle Rackrent and Robinson's

This difference between Castle Rackrent and Robinson's

Big House or Somerville and Ross's Big House of Inver—

Big House or Somerville and Ross's Big House of Inver—

the sense that in telling of the fall of one 'big house' they

the sense that in telling of the fall of one 'big house' they

are describing the fate of the whole Ascendancy, teaches us

are describing the fate of the whole Ascendancy, teaches us

that this Ascendancy literature is not impervious to the

that this Ascendancy literature is not impervious to the

teaching that comes with the passing years. For all that,

teaching that comes with the passing years. For all that,

The Big House of Inver is quite as much written for the

The Big House of Inver is quite as much written for the

English people as Castle Rackrent was, more than a hundred

English people as Castle Rackrent was, more than a hundred

years before.

years before.

The strain of literature just described forms the mass of

The strain of literature just described forms the mass of

Anglo-Irish literature—if it be correct so to describe it. It

Anglo-Irish literature—if it be correct so to describe it. It

is all written for their motherland, England, by spiritual

is all written for their motherland, England, by spiritual

1 In Wicklow and West Kerry, by J. M. Synge.
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exiles. Personally many of those writers would deny this description of themselves, but it is in their works and not themselves we are to go by. It is not however to be thought that all the books which make up this mass of Colonial literature are all equally colonial. Many of the writers did it more naturally, like Sir Andrew Ague-cheek, and we can readily segregate the more Colonial from the less Colonial books by asking does the book live by English or Irish suffrage? Castle Rackrent for instance lives by English suffrage, but Gerald Griffin’s The Collegians lives by Irish suffrage. Again, the work of Somerville and Ross lives mostly by English suffrage; while Carleton’s work—written quite obviously under Ascendancy influence—lives by Irish suffrage; and so one may go through the list.

III

The end of a boat is wreckage, says the Irish proverb, and certainly the end of an Ascendancy is downfall. When we meet truly Colonial work written in our own day, like that of Somerville and Ross, we feel ourselves in the presence of a survival: for just as Ireland has won far from the flamboyant political oratory of forty years ago, so too we are winning away from the shameful literary tradition of the Frout, Maginn, Lover, Lover school of writers. For very many years past, Anglo-Irish literature has been sitting between two stools: when the land is under the stress of a national movement the literature makes an effort to seat itself on the truly Anglo-Irish stool,—the writers make an effort to express their own land; but when it is again at peace, the literature returns to the Colonial stool—an attitude that pays better—with less work besides, for to ‘explore’ your own land for the foreigner, as Donn Byrne did, is far lighter work than to express it to itself, as Charles Kickham attempted to do, however clumsily.

Those who know of this literature only through modern specimens of it should recollect that these have all been

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written in a period of national revival: while writing those specimens the writers were sitting on the Anglo-Irish rather than on the Colonial stool. All the work done for the Abbey Theatre from its beginning to 1922 may be reckoned as Anglo-Irish literature, for, whether good or bad in itself, it made an effort to express Ireland to itself. Naturally the writers of plays that were to be performed in Ireland, in a national theatre moreover, were under geasa to keep close to the national consciousness; and in general all the work done in this period—with some exceptions, the work of Somerville and Ross, for instance—is free from the Colonial strain: much of it is freakish, much of it is written under the domination of English literary fashions, yet one does not feel in it that Ireland is being exploited for the foreigner. But then it was nearly all amateur work, indeed ‘prentice work; and one cannot help noticing that in recent years, the national movement having temporarily collapsed, such of its writers as had reached the professional standard, so to speak, have, quite in the old manner, turned their eyes on the English or American markets. The work, mostly amateur, done for the Abbey Theatre between 1902 and 1922 was for Ireland’s self; it was, in intention, genuine Anglo-Irish literature, but more than that one cannot say. We must not be waylaid into thinking that because it shed for the nonce its Colonial character it became genuine Anglo-Irish literature, or that because the world accepts it as Irish literature, it may really turn out to be Anglo-Irish literature, or that because it is neither quite English nor quite Irish it must be Anglo-Irish. Obviously to no Irishman is it as Greek literature is Greek or Russian literature Russian. It may best be described as “something escaped from the anchorage and driving free,” a craft that thinks no harm of the kindly port it is registered in—let us be thankful!—but prefers for all that to keep its eyes, more especially in these later years, on the foreign merchants who are to purchase its wares. It may be that it is no more than an exotic branch of English literature.
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One cannot expect an outsider to agree that a certain literature is exotic just because he is told as much. The native of the isle who tells him so is aware that it is not enough to say to him: Take up and read! For how is the outsider to know what is or what is not exotic to the genius of both the Irish and the English peoples? If indeed he be acquainted with other exotic literatures—that of the old New England school for instance—he may be asked if this literature of ours has not the same airs and graces—the same scorn of native criticism, the same ineptness in dealing with the material round about it, the same leaning towards the fanciful, the same scorn of the homely? The Irishman looks in the face of his own people, hears them utter themselves with intimacy, knows what is deep in them, what is merely fleeting, has old-time knowledge why they are such and such; knows finally, in some queer way, his own consciousness, has discovered in his heart some guidance to the matter at issue: aware of himself thus advantaged, as with those reasons which the intellect knows not of, the Irishman feels it in his bones that Ireland has not yet learned how to express its own life through the medium of the English language. If he be a literary Irishman he knows that whatever moulds exist in this literature are not the inevitable result of long years of patient labour by Irish writers to express the life of their own people in a natural way. If he be not a literary man he can but feel that something is wrong. But how bring it home to the outsider that all this is true?

I recall being in Thurles at a hurling match for the championship of Ireland. There were 30,000 onlookers. They were as typical of this nation as any of the great crowds that assemble of Saturday afternoons in England to witness Association football matches are typical of the English nation. It was while I looked around on that great crowd I first became acutely conscious that as a nation we were without self-expression in literary form. The life of this people I looked upon—there were all sorts of individuals present, from bishops to tramps off the road—was not being

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explored in a natural way by any except one or two writers of any standing. And even of the one or two, I was not certain, their efforts being from the start so handicapped. It was impossible to feel that one could pose such Anglo-Irish writers as the world knows of against that multitude. To use the American phrase, the writers would not belong. One could not see Yeats, A. E., Stephens, Dunsany, Moore, Robinson, standing out from that gathering as natural and indigenous interpreters of it. On the other hand there seems to be no difficulty in posing Galsworthy, Masefield, Bennett, Wells, against corresponding assemblies in England. Those writers do belong. They give the crowd a new significance: through them we may look with better eyes at the massed people of England. The crowd equally deepens the significance of the written word: what stranger, learned in English literature, recollecting it, would not be glad to find himself in their midst, viewing them, listening to them? He might surely well forget the footballing.

Some one here may say that literature is not a mirror of the mob mind. But one does not think of such English writers as we have named as mirroring the mob mind, nor of its being mirrored by the writers of an earlier day—Meredith, George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray. We are not thinking of the crowd as such, but as an assembly of a number of the nation's individual souls. Those English crowds are 100 per cent. English; and the writers who best express the individual souls that make them up are 100 per cent. English. It was never otherwise, it never will be otherwise. The writers in a normal country are one with what they write of. The life of every other people they gaze upon from without, but the life of their own people they cannot get outside of. That is why they belong. The position they thus occupy in the life they deal with has no resemblance to the position occupied by the world-famous Anglo-Irish writers in the life they are supposed to deal with.

At this point it may be well to recall Rupert Brooke's: If I should die—
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IV.

We have said that one or two living writers may be excepted from this general condemnation—for instance, Padraic Colum and T. C. Murray. They have come not from the Ascendancy but from the people. And yet even in the case of these, which is equivalent to saying in the case of all, one may well be doubtful, the difficulties in creating genuine Anglo-Irish literature are so immense. It seems indeed an almost impossible task.

The difficulty is not alone a want of native moulds; it is rather the want of a foundation upon which to establish them. Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish; as will be understood if one think a while on the thwarting it undergoes in each individual child of the race as he grows into manhood. Though not quite true, let us take it that the Irish-born child is as Irish in his instincts, in his emotions, as the English child is English: the period of education comes on: all that the English child learns buttresses, while it refines, his emotional nature. Practically all the literature he reads focuses for him the mind of his own people; so also does the instruction he hears. At a later stage if he come to read a foreign language he seizes what he reads in it with an English mind. He has something of his own by which to estimate its value for him.

How different with the Irish child! No sooner does he begin to use his intellect than what he learns begins to undermine, to weaken, and to harass his emotional nature. For practically all that he reads is English—what he reads in Irish is not yet worth taking account of. It does not therefore focus the mind of his own people, teaching him the better to look about him, to understand both himself and his surroundings. It focuses instead the life of another people. Instead of sharpening his gaze upon his own neighbourhood,
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emotional nature out of action, or, at the least, drugs it with a sense of its own impotence. In the case of writers sprung from the Ascendancy their emotional nature differs from that of the Irish people (differs also of course from that of the English people) and such as it is is also doubtless thrown out of gear by the educational mauling it undergoes. They therefore are doubly disadvantaged. To become natural interpreters of the nation they need to share in the people’s emotional background; moreover they need to become possessed of a culture based on that emotional subconsciously. In the case of the writer sprung from the people all that is necessary is a mental equipment fitted to shape the emotional content that is theirs, as well as the nation’s, into chaste and enduring form.

V.

If this reasoning is right we now know why that crowd of 3,000 human souls I saw in Thurles—a crowd with a national tradition behind them—are still left unuttered in literature. And we may in the light of such reasoning begin to understand curious traits in the literature as it exists, traits that make it appear exotic, not national, not normal, not natural.

A national literature foretells the nation’s future. Eighty years ago, sixty years ago, Prott, Lever, Maginn, Lover, others, were accepted by the English-speaking world as the genuine voice of the Irish nation. One wonders if any foreign critic thought it worth his while to forecast the future of this nation in the light of their pages. How interesting now to come on such a forecast! The Irish peasant, with no national assets in his possession outside his own knowledge that he was the native of the isle, during that period fought for the soil of Ireland, and by his own grit and courage, became possessed of it. Not only does he now possess the soil; he also fills the highest offices in the country, in Church, in State, in Learning—everywhere. This the literature of Lover and his compeers hardly promised. Extinction rather than
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of novel, which is little else than an impassioned study of the reactions of individual souls to their social environment, scarcely a single example is to be had. But from what we have been finding out about this literature, its lack of grip on the emotional background of the people, is not this easily understood? How could it be otherwise, if, more than any other form in literature, the novel, for its writing require a thorough intimacy with not only the scene itself and the people themselves but with all that gives one little world a distinctive vitality? The whole topsy-turvy scheme of Irish life makes against this. If we take up the first Anglo-Irish story to hand we can find no Irish homeliness in it: we may discover an attempt at the idyllic—watery gruel! Homeliness being beyond the knowledge rather than the power of the writers, they take refuge in the freakish, the fanciful, the perverse. Brilliance often results; and it is strange, yet significant, that the more utterly expatriate the writer the more brilliantly his pages shine, Sheridan, Prout, Maginn, Wilde, Shaw—those who most summarily dismissed the claims of their own people, being the most brilliant of all. What is the explanation? "Something escaped from the anchorage and driving free,"—that line already quoted from Whitman may help us. Given an acute mind, given also an upbring in Ascendancy circles or adoption into them, or assumption of their ways, with their tradition of insolence, cynicism, recklessness, and hardness, what other note could be looked for from them when they had been received into a people among whom the very word 'home' is like a holy word—a people who in their native land are anything but insolent, cynical, hard, or reckless? The brilliance of such writers is often described as Irish, whereas in reality it may be due to that disparity of intellect and emotion we have already mentioned. Into the English field of emotion, that world of homeliness, they have no entry; they are the creators of literature in which collaboration can have no part, and Shaw or Wilde attempting to do for England what Ibsen did for Norway or Chekhov for Russia, or

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what Molière did for France, is really matter for a Shawian comedy.

Mr. Shaw has described himself as the faithful servant of the English people; is it not a strange thing that servitude to the stranger should eventuate in brilliance? Yet is it not an old and a constant theme in literature,—the jester, just because he is not one of ourselves, is privileged to loosen his tongue—only that the jester in literature has a secret sorrow in the background, as if to preserve the natural roundness of life—heart as well as brain. All those writers were, as much as Mr. Shaw, servants of the English people; one wonders if their desertion of the land that most required their services was not their secret woe? From Prout's bitter gibing at O'Connell—that great if imperfect figure—one thinks it may have been so; that his secret sorrow should have expressed itself not in tears but in tauntings of one who did lay his gifts at his country's feet, must not surprise us, since the jester must find an unusual way.

VII.

The three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being, are: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land.

Now the mentality of that crowd of 30,000 I looked upon in Thurles was chiefly the result of the interplay of these three forces. To let one's mind, filled with this thought, rest on that crowd, scanning the faces for confirmation of it, and then suddenly to shift one's thought on to the mass of Anglo-Irish literature, is to turn from solid reality to a pale ghost. For, for instance, who can name a novel dealing adequately with their religious consciousness? Yet this religious consciousness is so vast, so deep, so dramatic, even so terrible a thing, occasionally creating wreckage in its path, tumbling the weak things over, that when one begins to know it, one
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wonders if it is possible for a writer to deal with any phase whatever of Irish life without trenching upon it. To adopt the convention of Anglo-Irish literature, that is, either to leave it out, or to substitute for it the wealth-like wisps of vanished beliefs that still float in the minds of a tiny percentage of the people, is to cut out the heart of the mystery.

So firm is the texture of that consciousness that one may sometimes think that only about Irish life can a really great sex novel be written in these days; for the subject can have no great attraction for the serious artist except where the moral standards are rigid, and the reactions transcend the lusts and the shiverings of the mortal flesh. (Mr. James Joyce has gone astray—although that very texture we have spoken of nearly succeeded in holding him fast). We may perhaps know that genuine Anglo-Irish literature has come into being when at every hand's turn that religious consciousness breaks in upon us, no matter what the subject, as it does in the Greek plays—comedies as well as tragedies—or as it does in medieval art, grotesques and all.

As for Irish nationalism, how can normal countries understand it? If one cannot live in Ireland long enough to have it penetrate one's being, driving one although quite a foreigner to take sides, as has so often happened, the only other way to get to know it is to learn the Irish language and read the poetry in it; for such is the nature of Irish nationalism that it demands sincerity, intensity, style for its utterance, in other words, poetry. We who have lived in Ireland in recent years, who have seen what we have seen, need no further instruction to believe that prose is no medium to express it in, no more than it was for the Jews in their ancient captivity. Like all forces, it wrecks as well as saves. We here are not concerned with the wisest way of dealing with it; we would only point out that it is one of the deepest things in Irish life, searching into the souls of men, drawing sanction, as it does, from hundreds of battlefields, slaughters, famines, exoduses, as well as from hundreds of heroic lives and the piety of verse. Yet in the eyes of

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the world, taught of what the world calls 'Irish' literature, that force is a thing for derision, fitted rather for comic than for serious treatment in literature. What a curious message for 'Irish' literature to deliver to the world—as if a fishmonger should cry out rotten fish! Topsy-turvy cannot sing, it seems, except in a cracked voice. A stranger, one fancies, could from the pages of Conrad gather a truer idea of the nature of Irish nationalism than from the heaped-up books of this literature the world knows of. One may be sure we are come upon genuine Anglo-Irish literature when, as with the force just spoken of, that spirit of Irish nationalism expresses itself almost in every page, no matter what the nature of the expression may be, direct or indirect, heroic or grotesque, or perverse, but not alien-minded.

Of the Land as a force in Irish life, we may, the better to contrast it with the same force in English life, recall that according to the late Sir William Butler, there have been no peasants in England since Queen Elizabeth's reign. Over-statement or not, to-day in England only 6 per cent. of the people work on the land, whereas Ireland, in a sense, is a peasant-ridden country, 53 per cent. of the people actually working in the fields. It will then be understood that when under the domination of a national movement, certain writers in Ireland began to deal with this force in their novels and plays, they undertook pioneer service to their country. It also will be understood that while from certain Continental schools of literature they learned a little, from England they learned nothing. It was a doubly new experience for writers such as these, first to have to fend for themselves without help from England, secondly to find they had hitched their wagon to a living force. What wonder that those of them who most deeply sank themselves in their subject wrote far above their accustomed pitch? Darrell Figgis with his Children of Earth; T. C. Murray's Birthright and Autumn Fire; Seamus O'Kelly's Wet Clay; Padraic Colum's Castle Conquer; Lysaght's The Gael may be taken as evidence of this. The Land then is a huge force in
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Irish life. It is not however as universal in it as the other two; one cannot therefore predicate its breaking in upon every page, yet one can understand how when true Anglo-Irish literature comes to be written, if ever, for a long time the Land must lie behind the literature in some such way as the freeing of the serfs lies behind Russian literature—with political rather than social affinities. Only after long years will those political memories drift from the consciousness of the Irish people.

These forces exist in all countries; in Ireland they have however been so hardened and sharpened, given, by centuries of onslaught, such momentum, that only such other countries as have also been or are still enslaved can feel with any fitting comprehension the intensity they have now acquired. For one who has come earnestly to know them, to recognise them in the build, the attitude, the eyes of our men and women—how visibly portrayed they were in those faces in Thurles!—it is impossible for such a one to take seriously such Anglo-Irish literature as exists. So measured against life itself, as it were, it has not begun to be.

VIII

We may be reminded that a good critic, the late Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, having examined Anglo-Irish poetry, named the notes of Religion, of Nationality, of the Peasant as chief among them—\(^1\)—the very notes we have been naming as having had most to do with making the Thurles crowd into what they appeared and into what they were. Therefore, it seems, it is not right to say that these notes are absent in Anglo-Irish literature.

All Anglo-Irish literature, including what is being written to-day, may be divided into two kinds—the literature of the Ascendancy writer and that of the writer for the Irish people.

\(^1\) A Treasury of Irish Poetry in the English Tongue. Introduction by Stopford A. Brooke.

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Roughly, the first kind includes all the literature that lives by foreign suffrage; the second, all that lives by native suffrage. It was in the second class that Stopford Brooke discovered these notes. One is therefore driven to the conclusion that the second class is true Anglo-Irish literature, since in it we find reflected the face of the people of the land. But this sort of Anglo-Irish literature is hardly ever heard of outside Ireland, and this one does not greatly deprecate, for it is not intrinsically good. Such of us as know how these native notes are to be come upon in Irish poetry, never without artistry, intensity, sincerity, style, have no desire to find the world at large experiencing them in the poems of Davis, or Charles Kickham, or even Mangan. These and all their fellows Mr. W. B. Yeats might not hesitate to call "bad popular poets," and he would be right. Yet it is these bad popular poets, in spite of their deficiencies, that somehow, in our poverty, carry the message that is in Ireland's heart. The emotional content in them is sterling; their mental equipment, with its lack of self-criticism, was not, however, strong enough, keen enough, to shape the message into beautiful song. Only seldom is their work not mediocre, and it is never really good. Yet it lives on; and entirely by Irish suffrage. And this happens because its emotional content, as has been said, is right; and Ireland—the Ireland that counts—almost entirely educated, up to the present, in the Primary school, does not see its defects of form. This popular literature probably bears the same relation to the Irish consciousness of our time as the more intense, more sincere, more polished poetry in Irish bears to the Irish consciousness of the eighteenth and previous centuries, when education was of a different brand.

In this submerged underworld of Anglo-Irish literature then, loose in texture, superficial, and mostly unmative in its forms, as it is, it was that the critic discovered those three notes to be of importance. In the world-famous literature the critic may perhaps also discover the same three forces, or rather ghostly echoes from the noisy smithy in which they
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work; but that they were, and are, the deepest factors in the national consciousness of Ireland he certainly never could discover from its pages.

If one then hold that Anglo-Irish literature has scarcely begun to exist, one may ask: Whether is this unsophisticated popular literature, with its Irish message, or the exotic poetry that Ireland, the Ireland that counts, cares so little for, the better foundation to build upon? Does it not seem that this simple poetry, close to the ground, clumsily endeavouring to recapture the notes that beat, pulse-like, in the nation's heart, is capable of being refined, of being intensified, of being carven into shapely forms? Whereas one may well wonder if the all too sophisticated alien-minded poetry of the Celtic Revival school, dead tired as it is, weary of staring at its own airs and graces in the mirror, is capable of further growth.

Says Mr. Yeats very truthfully, almost as if he were thinking of this:

Nothing but stillness can remain when hearts are full
Of their own sweetness, bodies of their own loveliness.

Such hearts and such bodies, one fancies, are not to be tempted to the adventure of further growth, which so often means pain and disfigurement. If one approach 'Celtic Revival' poetry as an exotic then one is in a mood to appreciate its subtle rhythms, and its quiet tones; but if one continue to live within the Irish seas, travelling the roads of the land, then the white-walled houses, the farming life, the hill-top chapel, the memorial cross above some peasant's grave—memorable only because he died for his country—impressing themselves, upon the imagination, growing into it, dominating it, all this poetry becomes after a time little else than an impertinence. It is not possible to imagine it as the foundation of a school of poetry in which those three great forces Religion, Nationalism, the Land, will find intense yet chastened expression.

As with the poetry, so with the prose. Knockmany, one of the few books which have furnished living figures to the

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Irish consciousness, as the Pickwick Papers has to the English or Père Goriot to the French, is of this submerged Anglo-Irish literature. It is a book unknown except to the Irish; and again one is not sorry for, when all is said, it is only good in parts, and not great anywhere. The emotional content here also is right; the mental equipment, however, that shaped it out was not hardened by culture and discipline. And it may be taken as the type of many other such books, Carleton's—than which it is more popular yet not at all as good—the Banishing and those of others. So that the same question arises: Is the development of this prose literature, in which under-educated Ireland discovers its own image, the way for Anglo-Irish literature in the future, or shall the alien market decide for ever the way of it?

As regards this bulk of popular poetry and popular prose, there is this further to be said: if a foreign student wish to come on Irish history and on Irish life generally as mirrored in imaginative literature, him one must direct towards it and not towards the Anglo-Irish literature that the world knows of. The years as they arrive do not belie its message, which is enough to approve it as of the Irish consciousness. It is obviously the result of collaboration, always unconscious, between writer and people. And the foreign student will find in it the interplay of those great forces—Religion, Nationality, the Land, expressed, clumsily it is true, yet naturally, and without obligations to alien markets; whereas in the world-famous sort of Anglo-Irish literature, of which the Irish people know so little, he will discover that some of those forces are scarcely to be felt at all, and that none of them is expressed naturally with any such intensity as is integral in the force itself.

Having now looked at the humble literature in English that, unknown to the world, finds shelter and affection in Irish homes; and looked also at the literature that goes out from Ireland to the literary world, it is time to bring our
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conclusions together. The underworld literature is infantile; yet one feels that if ever a school of genuine Anglo-Irish literature emerge, it will grow rather from that literature than from its more famous, very distant relation above in the drawing-room. It is against the insolence of this still Ascendancy minded literature we would argue. Our complaint against it is that the mass of it cannot be held up to Irish life as interpretative of it; that its writers do not adhere to Irish life, as English writers to English life or French to the life of France. We complain that the three great forces that work their will in the consciousness of the Irish people have found little or no adequate expression in it, that its genius is set against any sympathetic interpretation of them as a trinity of forces which interplay each one with the two others. We complain that it has thrown up no body of criticism adhering to itself, anxious to assess its value and to place its writers.¹ We complain that it does not foretell our destiny, that it is, contrariwise, surprised with what the years bring to pass. We complain that in it is to be observed a disparity between the emotional and the intellectual background of the writers; that such writers of it as were, like Griffin and Prout, initiates of Irish consciousness, using Ascendancy moulds, went astray; and that those others, not initiates by birth, took no trouble to become so, nor made any use of such intellectual equipment as they possessed, sometimes admirable in itself, for the high purposes of art—the shaping out into chaste and enduring form of a genuine emotional content, personal to themselves but conscionable to the nation. Finally we complain that all those writers would have written quite differently if extramural influences, such as the proximity of the English literary market and the tradition of expatriation, had not misled them from the start. Whether these extramural forces can be withstood as long as England and Ireland speak the same language is another question.

¹ There are really only a few books on the matter—and only one of them really helpful: Ireland’s Literary Renaissance by E. A. Boyd.

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X.

The traits of this literature have been so seldom examined, are so little understood, that without some such study as this just made, we are not aware that Synge, as a portent in its annals, could be treated of. Those to whom his work is already known, begin, perhaps, to see why we may quite justly speak of him as a portent. Here, by one stroke, to show how he stands apart from all his fellow Ascendancy writers, it is but necessary to state, that he, an Ascendancy man, went into the huts of the people and lived with them.