

## IRISH MYTHS AND IRISH WRITING

ROGER MCHUGH

THE uneasy relationship between Irish writing and Irish myth a half-century ago may be seen in a controversy carried on by some leading Irish writers in 1899. It was concerned with the question of what the subjects of a national drama should be. To get the setting right one should recall that the year of the controversy was the year of the foundation of the Irish Literary Society, that the Abbey Theatre was still unborn and that a discussion about what directions an Irish dramatic movement might take must have seemed to most people outside the literary circle which had conceived it rather like a discussion between a newly-married couple about what profession their son would follow, if they had a child and if it was a boy and if he lived to become a man.

By that time, of course, the stimulating power of Irish myth and legend had been shown in the early work of Yeats and other poets of the Irish Literary Revival. The controversy began when John Eglinton, one of the best critics of the movement, suggested that this might not be the case with dramatists. 'The ancient legends of Ireland undoubtedly contain situations and characters as well suited for drama as most of those used in the Greek tragedies which have come down to us', he wrote, 'but these subjects obstinately refuse to be taken out of their old environment and be transplanted into the world of modern sympathies. The proper mode of treating them is a secret lost with the subjects themselves.' Yeats immediately challenged this opinion and Eglinton modified it by stating that modern artists would have to bring a modern approach to such material; Finn and Cuchulain, if they reappeared, would have to take on their broad shoulders something of the weariness and fret of our age. But in so modifying it almost out of existence Eglinton expressed his real fear: that the poet or dramatist who looks to the past may write not the literature of re-vivification but the literature of escape; better, he argued, to look to contemporary life and to the problems of his own heart, as Wordsworth did.

This reply, perhaps because of the thrust at escapism, perhaps

because of the reference to Wordsworth, drew Yeats's fire upon a succession of moving targets; popular poetry, utilitarianism, Wordsworth, moral maxims in verse, and physical science as the basis of bad poetry, all of which he seems to have identified with a desire to diminish the importance of mythological material. But he did not wish to make it the exclusive material of Irish writers. 'I believe', he concluded strongly, 'that the difference between good and bad poetry is not in its preference for legendary or unlegendary subjects or for a modern or archaic treatment, but in the volume and intensity of its passion for beauty and in the perfection of its workmanship.'

William Larmine and George William Russell joined in at this point and the discussion concerned itself with transcendentalism, nationality and cosmopolitanism in literature. But here we may leave it, after observing that the qualms of Eglinton were probably shared by Edward Martyn and George Moore, while Yeats's convictions created a tradition of heroic dramatic literature which Russell, Lady Gregory and Synge were to follow in their individual ways and with varying degrees of success. The naturalistic tradition and the mythological tradition in Irish dramatic writing were thus anticipated by Eglinton and Yeats.

Since then, the treatment of Irish myth and legend has become a recurrent feature of Irish writing, and the need for controversy about it has gone. Synge has shown that such material can be humanised in terms of contemporary Irish life. The children of the Revival have turned to it repeatedly. Stephens is full of its magic transformed by his own subtle, transcendental and whimsical vision. Since 1925 Austin Clarke has opened a fresh vein which the Revival writers had neglected, that of medieval Ireland with its mixture of Christian and pagan traditions, which Clarke uses in his plays as a framework of reference for satire or commentary upon contemporary Irish affairs and attitudes. In prose satire, Eimar O'Duffy has used mythological figures with similar effects; *King Goshawk and the Birds* (1927) brings one of them back to modern times to lead the resistance movement against King Goshawk, the financial wizard who plans to plaster the face of the moon with advertisements and to buy up all the songbirds in the world. In *Finnegans Wake* James Joyce, the *enfant terrible* of the Revival, takes his birthright with the hands of Esau and sings of it with the voice of Jacob; so that, for example,

Cuchulain slaying his son, the theme to which Yeats returned so often and so nobly, provides Joyce with many of those ironic echoes which ring out from his spinning-wheel of cyclic history and myth, becoming by turns Buckley shooting the Russian general, Ireland downing Parnell, one sun-myth devouring another, and a dozen other Protean shapes still awaiting the fetters of Ph.D. dissertations.

Yet the same period has seen the treatment of myth decline steadily in the Abbey Theatre, and decline as a result of the naturalistic movement which Eglinton and Yeats viewed so differently from the other side of this century. It began well with writers like Padraic Colum, T. C. Murray and Lennox Robinson; by the 1920s it had hardened into realism and the stereotyped play with P.Q. or Peasant Quality. By now Peasant Quality has certain easily recognisable components: the scene, a country kitchen or pub, unchanged throughout; the chief 'props', real tea in a real teapot or real bottles of stout; the characters (created with one eye on the local amateur dramatic societies) five men and three women, of which characters slightly more than half are serious in tragedy, the reverse in comedy; the action, whether tragic or comic, concerned with somebody's land, somebody's will, a horse-race or a misunderstanding with the neighbours. This recipe, which was also used to provide many plays about small-town society, has proved so popular for so long that despite the arrival and departure of O'Casey, Carroll, Denis Johnston and Teresa Deevy it has continued to provide the staple diet of Abbey audiences for thirty years. Legend, on the other hand, is invariably used to provide the basis of the annual Abbey Theatre pantomime in recent years; but as it is there mingled with scat-singers, topical jazz songs in Civil Service Irish and the jokes of last year's films, this is a tribute which it could well do without. Some good revivals of earlier heroic plays in this theatre, stimulated mainly by the competition of Austin Clarke's verse-drama group, give slight hope for the future.

But to argue from this that Irish myth and legend has been exhausted or has become obsolete as a subject for Irish writing would be a serious mistake. One would have to ignore the fact that modern Irish poets like Padraic Fallon are still drawing inspiration from it and that some of the younger playwrights, increasingly dissatisfied with realism, are sure to turn to it. In

different ways and for different purposes French writers like Sartre and Camus, American writers like Eugene O'Neill have turned to a treatment of classical legend and have used its themes directly or indirectly in their plays. While there is little danger that Irish dramatists will follow the first two in creating the old theme with a modern message, there is every chance that they will approach the old material with individuality, as Eglinton demanded. And this may well happen with themes which have been treated already by the early writers. Has Deirdre nothing new to say to us? In the oldest version of the legend, she lives for a year in the power of the man who has slain her lover. What were the events of that year? Why is it that it is only when that man gives her to another that she kills herself? Did he plan a really diabolical revenge, making her believe in his love during that year, winning hers, then betraying it as he felt she had formerly betrayed his by deserting him? Such are the questions which new writers may ask before their nature compels them to provide the answers.

And if this may happen with well-known legends, what is one to say of the rich store of pagan and of medieval Christian legends which have never been treated but which are becoming increasingly known through the work of the scholars? There is the legend of Mad Sweeny, for instance, the king who was cursed by one saint and shriven by another; Sweeny, the bird-man, condemned to wander through the air above the heads of his fellows, chased by the heads of the men he had slain, yet gifted with prophecy and poetry. There is the story of Mac Datho's Pig, with its strange mixture of chivalry and savagery which might fit only too well into a modern connotation. There is the story of the cursing of Tara by Saint Ruan, the climax of a bitter conflict between Church and King. And there are many others of equal fineness.

The characteristics of early Irish literature have been described as 'an incandescent vision, a wildness of imagination, sensibility to sound and colour and form, sometimes perceived as signs of an ideal beauty; and human passion, love, sorrow, or anger, often expressed with a sincerity and directness which can still persuade us.'<sup>1</sup> There is little doubt that, although contemporary life may engage the attention of many of our writers, these qualities will provide again not the literature of escape but of re-vivification.

<sup>1</sup> Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*.