

TROUBLES AND TRAUMAS REVISITED: SEAN O'FAOLAIN, EDWARD SAID AND THE ANTI-COLONIAL TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Sean O'Faolain, writer, intellectual and prominent public figure throughout the twentieth century in Ireland, is known above all as one of the most influential critics of the Irish nationalism hegemonic in the decades following the declaration of Independence in the 1920s. Nonetheless, in spite of this reputation and the frequent identification of him as a "revisionist," his writings on the Anglo-Irish conflict allow for an interpretation which, far from cementing his reputation as a revisionist, reveals ideological positions more in tune with the postcolonial critique which in recent decades has marked debates on Irish culture. Invoking particularly the critique of Edward Said, this article examines O'Faolain's autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, and attempts to demonstrate how the mature reflections on the anti-colonial movement from this ex-member of the IRA allow us to reinterpret his reputation in a manner which has important consequences for our understanding of the intellectual politics of twentieth century Ireland.

KEY WORDS: Sean O'Faolain, Edward Said, postcolonialism, revisionism, Anglo-Irish War.

RESUMEN

Sean O'Faolain, escritor, intelectual y figura destacada de la vida pública irlandesa a lo largo del siglo xx, es conocido sobre todo como uno de los más influyentes críticos del nacionalismo irlandés hegemónico en las décadas posteriores a la declaración de la independencia en los años veinte del siglo xx. Sin embargo, a pesar de esta reputación y de ser frecuentemente calificado como un "revisionista," sus escritos sobre el conflicto Anglo-Irlandés nos permiten una interpretación que, lejos de cimentar su reputación como revisionista, revela unas posturas ideológicas más afines a la crítica poscolonial que en las últimas décadas ha protagonizado los debates sobre la cultura irlandesa. Invocando sobre todo la crítica de Edward Said, este artículo examina la autobiografía de O'Faolain, *Vive Moi!*, y pretende demostrar cómo las reflexiones maduras sobre el movimiento anticolonial de este ex-miembro del IRA nos permiten una reinterpretación de su reputación que trae importantes consecuencias para nuestro entendimiento de la política intelectual de la Irlanda del siglo xx.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sean O'Faolain, Edward Said, postcolonialismo, revisionismo, guerra angloirlandesa.



Edward Said, in his afterword to *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, the single most important collection of essays on this critical tendency yet published, stated that:

All over the world, in as many societies as one can think of, there is a struggle over the national narrative, what its components are, who its main constituents are, what its shaping forces are, why some elements have been silenced and why others have triumphed, what lessons about the nation identity -if there is such a single thing- can be learned. This struggle has taken many forms, some academic and discursive, others collective and organized. Often, the intellectual is asked to choose between the blandishments of a synthetic whole and the uncertainties of a discontinuous, fraught contest between the powerful and the powerless. (180)

Such struggles are very apparent in the Irish case and specifically in relation to the legacy of Sean O’Faolain. Take, for example, how, in the same volume, Seamus Deane, perhaps the key pioneer in the use of a broadly postcolonial idiom in the Irish critical context, makes reference to O’Faolain, indicating that from the 1930s some Irish intellectuals concluded that the supposed early failure of the Irish Free State could be attributed to “the cultural regressiveness of a polity that had rephrased spiritual supremacy into Catholic triumphalism and a provincial, censorious and illiberal hatred of modernity. Out of this conjuncture came the new historical revisionism, led by Sean O’Faolain’s two books on great Irish leaders of the past, Hugh O’Neill and Daniel O’Connell” (111-112).

More recently, in *The Quest for Modern Ireland: The Battle of Ideas 1912-1986*, a book which attempts to chart the key intellectual strains of 20th-century Ireland, O’Faolain is again awarded a significant protagonism, as the author, Bryan Fanning, a social scientist based at University College Dublin, asserts forcefully that over the period intellectual life in Ireland was characterised by a “post-colonial intellectual schism” manifest as a “sustained conflict between what are commonly described as ‘revisionist’ and ‘anti-revisionist’ perspectives” where the former, as well as challenging the official histories of the Irish Free State, and “the fantasy of folk mythologies,” attempted to represent “the real Ireland in plain terms” (5). This was particularly achieved by O’Faolain when, during his 1940s period as editor of the influential cultural magazine, *The Bell*, he gave some priority to “non-fiction” and “factual” contributions.

As part of Fanning’s schema, O’Faolain is very explicitly fitted into a tradition which also contains the proponents of the “scientific method” of historical enquiry, T.W. Moody and R.D. Edwards as well as their later heir, Roy Foster, with this intellectual genealogy pitted in explicit opposition to the likes of Daniel Corkery and later Richard Kearney or the abovementioned Seamus Deane, all of whom broadly defend an anti-colonial tradition and, to differing degrees, a republican or nationalist ideology. In defence of this position, Fanning briefly makes reference to one quotation from O’Faolain’s autobiography *Vive Moi!* and summarily sentences that as a young man he had been caught in a labyrinth of nationalist symbols, but that “O’Faolain’s sojourn in this labyrinth was, at best, temporary,” emphasizing instead that he had grown up in Cork with “no consciousness of Ireland as a separate entity,” so allowing Fanning conclude that his subsequent “attachment to



revolutionary republicanism” was short-lived, giving way to a later presentation of himself as “a sort of citizen of the world” (65).

Such an assessment of the ideological parameters of the editor of *The Bell* is largely canonical. Whether coming from a critic in explicit sympathy with the anti-colonial project such as Deane, or from a social scientist like Fanning who is keen to suggest O’Faolain gains “intellectual accountability” through “a homespun empiricism” totally at a remove from the heightened, symbolic discourse of nationalism, there is largely a consensus as to which side, so to speak, O’Faolain is on (45). However, for much that the Corkman is consistently proposed as a key intellectual influence in 20th century Ireland, his work is much neglected, hence the frequent tendency in critics to casually invoke what is, in truth, a much bowdlerised version of a very complex figure. In this paper I propose, by examining a key chapter of his autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, the single text in which the author attempts an explicit self-definition, to show the extent to which such canonical interpretations of O’Faolain’s values are skewed, and particularly how they fail to take into consideration his mature attitudes, most especially when the grip of the nationalist hegemony had somewhat loosened and he no longer felt compelled to contest its excesses.

In “College Days,” the *Vive Moi!* chapter preceding his descriptions of his time in the IRA, O’Faolain had recalled his experience of drilling with the Irish Volunteers in a deep glen southwest of the city of Cork:

It was an autumn day of sun and shower, and just as he began to speak to us a faint, gentle sprinkling rain began to fall on us, and then the sun floated out again and sparkled on every leaf and blade of grass as if some invisible presence had passed over us with a lighted taper, binding us together not only in loyalty and in friendship but in something dearer still that I am not ashamed to call love. In that moment life became one with the emotion of Ireland. In that moment I am sure every one of us ceased to be single or individual and became part of one another, in union, almost like coupling lovers. It was a supreme experience to know that you may not only admire your fellow men, or respect them, or even like them, but that you can love them so much that they have no faults, no weaknesses, so that you will never distrust them even for a second [...]. This extraordinarily heart-lifting revelation, this gaiety, this liberation of the spirit, was to stay with us all through the exciting years to come. (135)

However, when we turn to “The Troubles and My Trauma,” and his reconsideration of his period as a rebel, we find that here the language takes a marked shift from the romantic depiction of starry-eyed young volunteers at one with nature and Ireland to the “realities” of war. Yet, crucially, O’Faolain’s attitude is far from one of rejection of the anti-colonial struggle or of disapproval of the ability of ordinary individuals to embrace a liberationist ideal. It is, one strongly feels, appropriate to quote extensively from O’Faolain’s text in order to get a “clear picture”¹ of just how

¹ Fanning suggests, in support of his overall thesis that Ireland was split between two clear bands of antagonists, that the intellectuals in opposition to the anti-colonial tradition sought to use



as a man in his late years he saw and interpreted the formative struggle in which he had taken part and to contrast the evidence from the autobiography with the prevalent view of him as an uncompromising revisionist energetically engaged in a “battle of ideas” conceived on clearly oppositional lines of division against what Fanning calls “the anti-colonial tradition,” and with the notion that O’Faolain’s attachment to this latter tradition had been merely “temporary.” O’Faolain writes:

There was only one thing that every one of us knew he could do well, and must do well if called on to do it, the least active rank-and-filer, the humblest citizen. If arrested and condemned for any or no reason, each man knew that he could die—‘For Ireland!’ This is not romanticism; the time for being romantic about those years has long since gone; and any young man of those years, and they were enough, who died facing a firing squad may well have been white and terrified at the end. But it must surely have helped him to know that he was dying for something he believed in as fervently as we believed in Ireland then. I wish to God I could believe in anything as fervently now. (138)

O’Faolain is, then, uncompromising and direct about the “realities” of war:

I think there was only one thing we really feared in our bones -torture. The Black and Tans in their dark jackets and khaki trousers, and the Auxiliaries, [...] a much finer body of men physically, in their Glengarry caps, tight waists, riding breeches and puttees, their guns strapped to their thighs, could be bastards at this. Nobody wanted to contemplate being stripped, having his testicles rhythmically beaten with a swinging revolver butt, his eyeballs persistently rapped with the ends of fountain pens, bayonets stuck in him, his feet stamped to pulp, his toenails pulled out, and more; all the things that English gentlemen just do not do, nor French, nor Jews, nor Irish, nor Americans, nor anybody, but are done by them all, are being done, one need have no least doubt, somewhere at this moment, and will always go on being done in the time of war. (138)

He thus highlights the particular brutality of the British troops in Ireland but is also anxious to emphasise the disturbing universality of the practice of torture. This widening of the framework to look at the particular happenings of Ireland in global terms allows him then depict the struggle as unequivocally anti-colonial. The prism is not that of an all-encompassing generality suggesting such events are just the common stuff of humanity alone. He draws very clear parallels with other explicitly anti-colonial movements around the world, clarifying that the Irish/British case was not simply a sort of internecine conflict but was the result of native resistance to colonial power, while in a characteristically measured, nuanced manner, serving both to show the particularity of the Irish case and express solidarity with

a language which prioritised clarity. From O’Faolain’s *The Bell* he quoted, specifically from a report on teaching standards but in terms which applied to the magazine as a whole, the expressed desire that the aim was “to give the reader a clear picture of what was happening” (46).



other anti-colonial movements, he stresses the structural similarity but divergence in respect of the extent of the oppression suffered:

The Irish Troubles have been overdramatised, partly because they were the first successful fight against colonialism. In fact we got off lightly by comparison with later anti-imperialists like the Cypriots, Algerians and Africans. What would our lot have been supposing we had been a Mediterranean island fighting France after Europe had become thoroughly inured to the savage techniques of total war? It is true that fighters often had to live under conditions of almost unbearable strain; but for most of the people the Troubled Times [...] bore no comparison to the experiences endured so long and so tenaciously by later revolutionaries elsewhere. Think alone of the mere length of the Algerian struggle against France. In point of time our people did not have to suffer the full voltage of British military oppression for much more than the one year and a half that lay between the spring of 1920 and the truce of 1921. I remember the happy holiday Eileen and I spent in Cape Clear Island even as late as the summer of 1920. We were, indeed, aware, along the way, of the occasional presence of those new strange-looking units, half soldiers, half policemen, in khaki trousers and black police jackets, but we had as yet no suspicion of the brutalities of which this scum of England's earth was capable. (139)

The language here is emotive. It is clearly not the language of a man whose "attachment" to revolutionary republicanism had ended more than 60 years before he rewrote the second version of his autobiography. "A sort of a citizen of the world" was how Fanning saw him from the mid 20s, and while it is true that O'Faolain's whole life was marked by a sustained opening to the world, a curiosity for its variety and a rejection of the exclusively inward turn, this, one must stress, was not an unanchored embrace of an emotionally neutral universal space, but involved an intellectual and real journeying back and forth evident in the comparative optic he here employs. That which allows him make intellectual and emotional connections with, for example, other colonial sites, while offering both similarities and differences before bringing those back to bear on his native place, his own identity, and by extension that of his nation.

O'Faolain's intemperate description of the Black and Tans as "this scum of England's earth" is not rendered in the language of dispassionate, scientifically neutral, clear exposition of the "facts" appropriate to the revisionist tradition. He does, however, look for balance. Turning to relate two key incidents of the war of independence, he recalls the "anger" and "shock" with which he had first read of a report that British troops had burned a village to the ground only to later find that the town's market house alone had burned. But he also records that when things "hotted up," any ambush was routinely followed by "a descent of Tans, Auxies and military on the whole area, and while they were berserk every village cowered, every lonely cottage was sleepless, every horizon glowed with houses burned and looted in reprisal" (139). He records the so-called burning of Cork as follows:

That night military, Auxiliaries and Tans, infuriated by an earlier IRA attack, decided to inflict their own private reprisal. One lot descended howling and shooting



like a posse of brigands on the main shopping street of the city [...] set a length [...] of it on fire and looted the shops wholesale; another lot, less interested in looting, burned the city hall. It all made a blaze as comparatively wicked, destructive and terrifying as a bad blitz attack on [...] London. (139-140)

This, however, he explicitly qualifies, pointing to the truth that, horrific and all that it was, there was a degree of poetic licence employed, that Cork had not really been “burned” and that emotions determined both reactions at the time and the manner in which the Troubles were “painted in overdark colours by later writers” (140). O’Faolain is looking for balance as well as emphasising the degree to which the telling of this history is always mediated, always rendered through an interpretation of images and language. By doing so he is sounding a note of caution that the “truth” presented may not be all it seems as the anti-colonial side, for example, represent events in a clearly heightened, subjective manner. He does not, however, redress this situation, or correct it, by the presentation of the objective reality that is definitive. Instead he goes on to tell more “stories” where, far from, in a sense, stopping and projecting a distant, dispassionate optic, with the ability to fix a clear and true picture, we push on to hear of someone else’s explicitly emotional involvement in the events, in what amounts to a very human sort of dialogue where each participant does not always agree.

What we find is a simultaneous attachment and detachment. Just as he registers his emotional reaction to the Black and Tans as “scum,” he makes a determined intellectual effort to stand back from this reaction, critique it rationally and reveal how the stories, narratives and texts of the struggle emerge from a complex matrix of tensions. Yet, as is evident in the following quotation, having just censured the partisan quality of much nationalist representation, he appears to turn back, to forcefully respond to and critique British colonial action through his appropriation of the language of reprobation habitually employed by the colonial power to disqualify anti-colonial movements: that of “terrorism.” This turn we must consider, then, not just with regards to the specific events of the 1920s but also in relation to the interpretations of the decades of conflict that marked the end of the century, and to the reality that as a mature participant in the debates around Ireland’s anti-colonial history, and as someone aware of how his personal, political and intellectual trajectory was routinely invoked by defenders of the anti-colonial tradition, his words here expressed serve to disrupt and resist canonical traditions. Indeed, here O’Faolain also graphically shows the extent to which the “attachment” to this formative anti-colonial struggle was anything but short-lived, as it continued to resonate, involuntarily, throughout his life in the form of recurring nightmares, the trauma resulting from colonial terror:

The truth of it is that they were both wonderful times and nightmare times. Even still, after forty years have blunted my worst memories of them, I still frequently awake sweating from a nightmare that has whirled me back among them again. The worst of it was the war of nerves, for [...] the aim of the British was not only to break the nerve of the fighters but to break a whole people; and before the end came they had, by countless devices, come dangerously close to doing just this.



They closed life in on us tighter and tighter every month through a varied, incessant and inventive terrorism, constant and often pointless raids and arrests, humiliating and brutal beatings-up in city streets, casual murders on country roads, reprisals both unofficial and official—which usually meant the burning down in public of a sympathiser’s home and business—early curfews [...] after which the Tans, who operated outside every known law and war-convention, roved the dark streets in search of victims or loot. (140-141)

We find in O’Faolain’s representation of the Anglo-Irish struggle, and in the re-interpretations of his role in this conflict which he appears to encourage in his reader, an illustrative example of a double dynamic similar to that proposed by Said where he indicates as appropriate to a developed critical and literary sensibility a sensitivity in readers as to how language is not fixed or finite but achieves meaning in context. In “The Return to Philology,” a key late essay published in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said encourages what he calls a “philological” or literary style of reading which involves two crucial “motions:” “reception” and “resistance.” He first explains “reception” as follows:

Reception is submitting oneself knowledgeably to texts and treating them provisionally at first as discrete objects (since this is how they are initially encountered); moving then, by dint of expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which they exist, to their historical situations and the way [...] certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some currents, some historical and social formulations of their context. Only by receiving the text in all its complexity and with the critical awareness of change [...] can one move from the specific to the general both integratively and synthetically. (61)

It is not only productive to consider O’Faolain’s efforts in, for example, *The Bell* in such terms in order to achieve a nuanced understanding of the magazine’s significance, but imperative when considering his work and his personal profile as a whole and crucially his legacy in relation to its appropriation by often very different intellectual traditions. In his autobiography O’Faolain “moves terrorism,” as Said recommends, to highlight the extent to which it is employed as part of a wider empowered discourse. If in the historical context of Irish/British relations it is normally, or historically, used to render or classify the anti-colonial movement as outside the limits of acceptable “human” behaviour, often in a taxonomy of bestial disqualification that fitted in with the broader phenomenon of racial stereotyping, we find it here redeployed in a way that “moves” the reader to a wider consideration of the interpretative tensions inherent in any reading, and specifically the broad geo-political and cultural framework, that of colonial power relations, and to an understanding, along the lines of Said’s *Orientalism*, of the key role language and discourse have at the heart of the structures that sustain the relationship. And, crucially, such a move is undertaken in clear sympathy with the history of anti-colonialism. In contrast to such a style of “receptive” reading, it would be inaccurate to adduce as indicative of a deep ideological opposition to Irish anti-colonialism in O’Faolain, a series of *Bell* polemics specific to a period of his career without due consideration of how these



relate to or are consistent with his overall career and specifically to his key statement of self-definition, his autobiography. Far more than in his *Bell* polemics, it is in *Vive Moi!* he attempts to move from the specific to the general, and it is consequently incumbent on his readers to afford due attention to such complexity and to faithfully reflect changes resulting from different historical situations.

Also, as we see in the above quotation, against the power of colonial representation O'Faolain looks to the stability of the universal frame of reference of international law and human rights to provide a set of parameters to which to appeal in the name of human solidarity. In this he evidences what Said calls a "resistance" to the empowered discourse of hegemonic formations by widening the horizon beyond the national or British-Irish sphere. This in essence is what he promotes through his idea of "resistance:" the cultivation of the ability to tease out the difference between prevailing shibboleths or consecrated, canonical, institutionally-sanctioned knowledge and alternative more challenging, complex and interacting traditions. Said writes that:

A reader is in a place, in a school or university, in a work place, or in a specific country at a particular time, situation, and so forth. But these are not passive frameworks. In the process of widening the humanistic horizon, its achievements of insight and understanding, the framework must be actively understood, constructed and interpreted. (*Humanism* 75)

As can be seen elsewhere, such as in *The Bell*, O'Faolain values the possibilities provided by "facts," or by relatively fixed frameworks and vocabularies of universal rights and by the deployment of empirical data and indexes of development and welfare even as he simultaneously "moves" to a secular, or in Said's parlance, "philological" positioning of resistance that critiques this "faith" in the transparency, or objective truth of an empirical idea of reality he, and his peoples, are, paradoxically, often the direct beneficiaries of. This seems to be a key pattern we find, with striking consistency, in the public intellectual participation of O'Faolain. Also, the example we have just looked at, where O'Faolain moves the language of terrorism as a tool against the colonial power in an expression of specific native identity with a will to empowerment, while simultaneously appealing to the power of the perhaps totalising narratives of human rights and development, is strikingly reminiscent of Said's defence of Palestine.

That Said's project, like that of O'Faolain, is much more radical than the sort of anti-colonial struggle that presumes a binary struggle in purely oppositional terms, so largely replicating the existing pattern of power, is often lost on critics who focus exclusively on Said's defence of an oppositional politics. But this, like Fanning's conclusions on O'Faolain's position in Ireland's supposed "Battle of Ideas," drawn from the "non-fiction" or "factual" pieces in *The Bell*, is not the full story. Said is not just an intellectual per se but also a scholar of literature. As we see particularly in "The Return to Philology," he proposes that literature, and the aesthetic in the broadest sense, is key to his world view, to his sense of self and to his belief that a critical understanding of the potential power of literature and art



allows him to go beyond hegemonic frameworks of interpretation, to, in a manner of speaking, go beyond the space of specialism and its tendency to use what he terms a “pre-packaged idiom” (72). Literature he links to the capacity for being critical, for offering a position from which to address or speak to “the world” and, in a word, offer “resistance” to what he calls the “empiricist illusion” around which so much of power and specifically colonial power is arranged.² Such a critical perspective, exemplified in the specifically literary trope of paradox that problematises empirical clarity, is at the heart of what Said considers to be a humanistic criticism, and it is its performative praxis that gives it a key democratic function in the negotiation of new relations of power. This takes place through the voiced participation, the dialogue of different stories that do not just demand the abandonment of subjective identity in favour of an objective truth feigning neutrality, but instead proposes subjective identity as process, as a reality in motion that goes back and forth not in a fixed opposition but as a constantly performed and renegotiated articulation of reality and identity. As Said indicates:

Art is not simply there: it exists intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life, the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. One can call this heightened status for art the result of performance, of protracted elaboration (as in the structures of a great novel or poem), of ingenious execution and insight: I myself cannot do without the category of the aesthetic as, in the final analysis, providing resistance not only to my own efforts to understand and clarify and elucidate as reader, but also as escaping the levelling pressures of everyday experience from which, however, art paradoxically derives. (*Humanism* 63)

Literature is thus fundamentally important. That literature could also be of key importance to O’Faolain should come as no surprise. He is of course a prominent writer of fiction as well as a well-known public intellectual. In *Vive Moi!* as a whole we can perceive how in his presentation of his life story he is anxious to present himself as an artist more than as an intellectual, or perhaps more correctly as a plurality of selves who gain expression particularly through the trope of paradox. He seems to seek to introduce to canonical readings of who or what he is an unclassifiable literary note of discord that serves to upset facile classifications and propose new parameters of interpretation, new possibilities of identity in an exchange, a dialogue, that can be interpreted, in line with the example proposed by Said, as fundamentally democratic.

Reading Fanning’s study one could be forgiven for forgetting completely that O’Faolain was principally a writer of fiction, but not if one pays due attention to *Vive Moi!* It is, in effect, his life “story” and at no stage does he shy away from this. Rather he seems particularly keen to emphasise the fact, his presumably deliberate virtual elision of his *Bell* years perhaps intended as a signpost in this direction. In his

² Ciaran Brady notes that in its less subtle manifestations Irish revisionism tended to produce “a crude, unreflective empiricism” (7).



war years chapter it becomes apparent that, while attempting to present a balanced consideration of some events of the conflict, it is the focus on the power of the possibilities of narrative to bring about reactions, particularly of collective action, and of his capacity to paint his own picture of the war that is central.

First, he recalls the tense atmosphere through which he sought to live a relatively ordinary life, recording that to disobey nightly curfews very likely meant dangerous encounters with the colonial troops. One evening, after leaving his girl home, he was rushing on his way with a few minutes before curfew left when:

A Lancia truck, wire-netted against bombs, loaded with Tans, drew up behind me; three of them jumped out, revolvers drawn, and grabbed me. Then, while the rest of them leaned over the side of the truck with expectant grins, they searched me and questioned me, told me that all students were fucking Sinn Feiners, laughed at my protests that I was a loyal citizen of the Empire (“Wasn’t my own father a Royal Irish Constabulary man?”), threatened to shoot me in the guts, to strip me, to throw me in the river, to kick my balls flat, to throw me into the Lancia as a ‘hostage’ -a common trick of theirs, meaning that I would be tied with my wrists over my head to the peak of the netting, and that if they were attacked during the night by the IRA I would pay for it- and finally, tiring of their fun, they ordered me to prove my alleged loyalty by singing “God Save the King.” I thanked my stars for the days when I used to be a good, pro-British little boy, and used to go with my father on Sundays up to the Victoria Barracks to see the church parade, which always ended with the band blaring out the royal anthem. I threw out my chest, in imitation of those days, and sang it for all my lungs were worth: Send him victorious, Happy and glorious, Long to reign over us, God save the King. “Right,” one long black-visaged fellow said. “Now run, you bastard! You’ve one minute by my watch to get to that corner.” (141-142)

And run he did, with the sound of gunfire after him. Mindful that events such as this often ended with a bullet in the back and a press announcement reporting with factual clarity that the victim had been “shot while attempting to escape,” O’Faolain turns to reflect that the incident “was not even a story worth telling afterwards, except to raise a laugh. The stories that were worth telling produced grim silence or whispered curses: they had blood on them” (142). He seems to be clearly drawing our attention to the manner in which events such as these can be and are selected by the teller with a view to actively shaping the framework of interpretation, to producing meaning, to provoking a reaction in the reader or listener, whether laughter or grim silence rather than simply communicating a self-evident, neutral reality.

With this, he proceeds to draw a contrast between his own insignificant student escapades, the thuggish, terrorising Tans and the activity of those he terms “our regular fighters or guerrillas” (142). The language in the brief portrait of the latter is intentioned and carefully chosen to give a clearly heroic meaning. They were, for example “few in number,” yet they managed to be present both in city streets and open countryside. Not only did they cover all space but also all time: “For these men every day was intense, exhausting and relentless: they could never



slacken” (142). And, we are invited to conclude, never did. If they cover all space and time of what is the nation, in true heroism they take this same nation to its destiny, carrying “the full strain of the fight, day in day out, on their backs” (142). The odds against which they fight were of course great with, for example, Tom Barry’s West Cork brigade fighting the might of “some three thousand war-hardened British military and police, Auxiliaries and Black and Tans” with just thirty-five rifles, twenty revolvers and a tiny amount of ammunition (142). Clearly, the selection of language, imagery and data is designed to “move” the reader to an identification with the heroic cause. The Anglo-Irish war section concludes:

There never was an Irish Republican Army constantly in the field. The fight was carried through by those tremendously gallant few, darting here and there for an ambush, folding back into their ‘normal’ lives until they could get another crack at the enemy. They could not, it must always be said, have done anything without the silence, patience, and loyal help of the whole people. (142-143)

We have thus the gallant guerrillas and the people/nation effectively carrying each other in perfect harmony and unity against the colonial enemy. Having shown that the choice was available for the teller to pick alternative options, he has chosen and drawn attention to this choice in an explicit act of attachment or affiliation which allows him, now an old man, associate himself both with the “guerrillas” and “the whole people.”

When Fanning suggests he belongs to a tradition that is in clear opposition to revolutionary republicanism he is plainly wrong. Towards the end of the chapter “The Troubles and My Trauma,” O’Faolain refers to the 1923 elections when de Valera’s Sinn Fein won 43 seats to the government’s 53 and remarks: “It was an illustration of Republican tenacity that, even to this day, makes my heart leap” (169). And when Fanning confidently asserts that he belongs to a tradition of empiricist positivism he is doubly wrong. In the introduction to the recently published *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, Booker Prize-winning author, Anne Enright, comes much closer to understanding his “belongings” and “affiliations” that, far from “fitting in” with empirical history writing, show him belonging to a very different tribe. She writes:

There is a lingering unease about how Irish writers negotiate ideas about “Ireland” (the country we talk about, as opposed to the place where we live), for readers both at home and abroad. We move, in decreasing circles, around the problem Seán Ó Faoláin voiced in 1948. ‘There was hardly an Irish writer who was not on the side of the movement for Irish political independence,’ he writes. ‘Immediately it was achieved they became critical of the nation. This is what makes all politicians say that writers are an unreliable tribe. They are. It is their métier.’ (xiv)

The issue, then, appears to be not that O’Faolain has somehow grown out of his early infatuation with revolutionary republicanism or its near cousin nationalism to embrace a supposedly more mature, modern, empiricist world view, but that his opposition to this nationalist tradition is as a result of its becoming empowered and



hegemonic with the emergence of the independent Free State.³ When O’Faolain presents us with a vision of a “whole” people in harmony with its fighters in opposition to or in anti-colonial struggle against the dominant British power, he is in favour of, belongs to and solidifies it by his representation in plainly heroic and romantic terms. But when this entity becomes empowered and the holist nation ideal becomes increasingly totalised, with the potential for totalitarian manifestations that are hostile to his republican ideas, then he becomes disloyal. His position is to dissent.

This dissent may take the outward appearance, and manifest similarities with the ideology of Fanning, but at heart it is radically different. Fanning not only places O’Faolain neatly into the empirical, positivist tradition but makes him its cornerstone while also very explicitly counterpointing it, in a misleading dichotomy expressed as *The Bell* in opposition to the key 1970s magazine, *The Crane Bag*. Here the latter of the two journals is taken to represent, in a worryingly totalising conflation, a single literary, mytho-poetic, metaphysical and post-colonial tradition. Its scholarly touchstones were the philosophical and especially hermeneutical tradition of Richard Kearney and to a lesser extent the literary, and broadly postcolonial, criticism of Deane. Fanning correctly identifies how Deane’s literary criticism was “explicitly in solidarity with Northern nationalism” and “Kearney’s thesis was that one could engage with the atavisms of violent nationalism only from within. This required sympathy and empathy with the mythic components of national identity” (5). Significantly, in sympathy with *The Crane Bag* “side,” Fanning also places the anti-revisionist historian Brendan Bradshaw and his opposition to attempts to promote “value-free history” (6). Fanning’s associations and choices of counterparts reveal a very evident determination to create two solid traditions with opposed values in clear opposition.

This he undertakes in a manner which presumes to be able to reveal a clear exposition of objective truth, while again denying, occluding or failing to recognise his own constituting role in partly creating these traditions. As we have just seen, O’Faolain deals with what, in Fanning’s language, are the “atavisms of violent nationalism” from within. He does show, as in his heroic depiction of the struggle of Tom Barry and his men, “sympathy and empathy with the mythic components of national identity” (5). He does affiliate with “the people” conceived as a national whole, and does so, not through the representation of them in “plain terms” or after the manner of “explicitly empirical history” (5-6), but in a self-consciously literary manner.

Thus it is difficult to not, at the very least, feel that Fanning’s categorisation is highly problematic. It is appropriate to emphasise that Fanning’s thesis reflects the current, accepted, canonical interpretation of the role and importance of O’Faolain.

³ This also in part explains how he could, as a logical consequence of his rejection of the treaty of independence, still feel able to identify with de Valera’s Sinn Féin when in opposition but not when it later transformed into Fianna Fáil and became the dominant political force in the country, in O’Faolain’s view abandoning on the way its roots in a genuinely republican tradition.



This interpretation is key to contemporary understanding of Irish national identity and its relation to modernity, history and crucially the Northern Irish conflict which has dominated and inflected all aspects of life in both Ireland and Britain over the last decades. In “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” the final essay in his last book, the stimulating *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said concludes that one of the more urgent struggles that should engage the scholar is the need to “protect against and forestall the disappearance of the past [...] the reformulation of tradition, and the construction of simplified bowdlerizations of history” (141). Views, one feels, that are relevant to any contemporary assessment of the importance of Sean O’Faolain.

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