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François Sablayrolles

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Sean O’Faolain and de Valera’s ‘Dreary Eden’

François Sablayrolles

Université Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas

In his article entitled ‘To Some Old Republican Somewhere: From Another’ published in the *Irish Times* as Ireland was readying itself to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, O’Faolain proposed to revisit the nature of Pearse’s vision of a republic. Underlining what seemed to him a definite lack of clarity and practicality as to the definition of this ideal, O’Faolain denounced the betrayal of the republican cause, which started as early as 1927, when ‘republicans’ decided to enter the *Dáil*. The profoundly unequal Irish society that emerged in the wake of Ireland’s independence, O’Faolain claimed, was thus nothing but a bleak replica of the ‘ancient world’, only with ‘Irish names’ pasted over ‘English ones’, alien to the cause that had inspired the heroes of 1916:

We have set up a society of urbanised peasants, whose whole mentality, whose image of life is, like an antiquated society, based on privilege; a society run by a similar minority of ambitious business-men, “rugged individualists” looking down at, fearing even hating “the men and women of no property”, thriving on the same theory of God-made inequality, welcoming and abetting, by the same self-interested silence, the repression of every sign of individual criticism or reconsideration of the social and moral results of history.¹

As we can see, the seasoned intellectual had lost nothing of his fire, bitterly concluding his contribution by saying that although they were about to elect a new president, the Irish people had been ‘disenfranchised’. In many respects, this article is a ‘synthesis’ and a ‘reminder’ of the flagship arguments O’Faolain relentlessly put forward throughout his career, be it in his essays, fictions, or biographies. This paper, therefore, will examine how ‘resistance’ against a morally repressive and politically conservative Ireland acts as

¹ Sean O’Faolain, ‘To Some Old Republican Somewhere: From Another’, *The Irish Times* (17 February 1966), 12.

a driving force behind all his writings. After a brief overview of the evils he targets in his fictions, it will identify the motives underlying his interest in historical biography and history writing. Making passing references to O'Faolain's accounts of the lives of Constance Markievicz and Éamon de Valera, this article will focus on *King of the Beggars* and *The Great O'Neill*, his biographies of Dan O'Connell and Hugh O'Neill published in 1938 and 1942, respectively, to show how the author's revisionist ambition and his desire to formulate commentaries **on the past and on present politics** cause intrinsic tensions in his biographies, giving them great entertainment value but also threatening to **defeat their purpose.**² **Indeed, such comments may betray the presence of a subjective reading of the past in light of contemporary considerations, that can hardly be reconciled with the more restrained and scientific approach expected of history writing.** We will then see whether the true force of O'Faolain's 'counter-discourse' does not more convincingly lie in the style of these biographies, rather than in their arguments.

Writing as resistance: an embittered young man doing battle with the Censor

O'Faolain belongs to the generation of writers born at the turn of the twentieth century, who after having embraced the nationalist ideals of the cause of independence, later experienced a great feeling of disillusion in the first few years of the Free State. This disenchantment translates in his work into a bitter and dark tone that was to become the hallmark of Irish realist fiction:

The steps are clear already – Yeats and romantic poetry, Joyce and the bitter literature of regret, O'Casey, O'Flaherty, O'Connor, O'Donnell and the brutal

² Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars* [1938] (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1980) and *The Great O'Neill* [1942] (Cork / Dublin: Mercier Press, 1997).

literature of despair. That is an exaggeration, a rough caricature. But it is, at bottom, true enough as an outline.³

His short stories give a heartrending insight into a society caught in a state of crisis. Conveying a sense of geographic, cultural but also intellectual entrapment, they depict a people crushed by a brutal and cynical Catholic church. Either apathetic and oblivious to the tragedy of their own condition, **or frustrated at being deprived of any opportunity to achieve self-fulfilment**, characters often seek refuge in exile or alcohol.

Such a bleak vision of de Valera's 'Dreary Eden', as O'Faolain called it in the title of a chapter of his 1939 biography of the statesman, undercuts any idealised vision of Irish life. Needless to say, it didn't sit well with the powers-that-be, and brought him into conflict with the Censor.⁴ His first collection of short stories, *Midsummer Night Madness* (1932), as well as his novel *Bird Alone* (1936) were banned.⁵ After having spent time in the United States and England between 1926 and 1933, O'Faolain's return to Ireland, therefore, can only be interpreted as an act of resistance.

O'Faolain's interest in history and theses

O'Faolain's targets are numerous, but two may nonetheless be singled out as transcending the others. As noted in the quote from his 1966 article, he fundamentally challenges a vision of Irish identity supported by a biased reading of Irish history. As early as the nineteenth century, not only historians, but also journalists, writers,

³ Sean O'Faolain, 'The Re-Orientation of Irish Letters', *The Irish Times* (21 September 1935), 7.

On the same point, see also: 'Essentially, I do believe, O'Flaherty is, like every known Irish writer, an inverted romantic. If he were a true realist he would look at life, and whatever faults he found with it, he would write of it with gusto. But there is in O'Flaherty less gusto than disgust. If he were a true romantic he would not see reality at all, he would see only his own dreams'. (Sean O'Faolain, 'Don Quixote O'Flaherty', *The London Mercury* 37/218 (December 1937), 173.)

⁴ The *Film Censorship Act* and the *Censorship of Publications Act*, had been respectively voted in 1923 and 1929.

⁵ Sean O'Faolain, *Bird Alone* [1936] (Dublin: Millington, 1973), and *Collected Short Stories*, 3 vols., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982-1986).

revolutionaries or politicians had put forward their own version of history which sought to establish a form of continuity through Ireland's past in its fight for independence. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the Irish-Ireland movement, spearheaded by intellectuals such as D. P. Moran and Daniel Corkery popularised an idealised but also inaccurate and sectarian definition of Irishness as being exclusively Gaelic, Catholic and rural,⁶ the writing and teaching of Irish history was to be instrumentalised to foster a feeling of national pride and identity.⁷

This narrative of the past, which dominated Irish historiography, was nonetheless challenged by a number of intellectuals and historians, like George Bernard Shaw or Edmund Curtis, who argued for more rigorous methods of investigation and greater objectivity. In 1923 George Bernard Shaw in *The Irish Statesman* took issue with erroneous and 'romanticised' versions of Irish history while Edmund Curtis, in a speech delivered before the *Dublin Literary Society*, denounced popular accounts of a partially fictionalised history of Ireland, riddled with myths and legends, peopled by 'immaculate saints', 'invincible heroes', 'ponderously perfect scholars', and pleaded for a more "'scientific history", founded on fact and judicial research'. In the 1930s, under the leadership of T. W. Moody and R. D. Edwards, historians from Trinity College, UCD and Queen's University began to articulate an academic response to nationalist history.⁸

Therefore, it is precisely the desire to nuance versions of history devoid of factual accuracy and to identify the causes of the stark contrast between the stifling gloom of

⁶ See Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* [1924] (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1925) and David Patrick Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1905).

⁷ Roy Foster notes that if W. E. H. Lecky's *The History of Ireland* was compulsory reading among educated circles, A. M. Sullivan's *The Story of Ireland* (1870) was a reference book in a great many household. (Roy F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, [1993] (London: Penguin, 1995), 13.) Other nationalist versions of Irish history included the works of Standish O'Grady, A. M. Sullivan, Alice Stopford Green or Daniel Corkery.

⁸ The *Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies* and the *Irish Historical Society*, respectively affiliated to Queen's University in Belfast, and to Trinity College and University College Dublin, started publishing their research in a joint journal, *Irish Historical Studies*, founded in 1938.

Ireland in the 1930s and the exaltation of past heroes, that spurred O'Faolain to join in the historiographic movement that would later be qualified as 'revisionist'. As John V. Kelleher explained in *The Bell* in 1945, the study of Irish history and realist fiction were inspired by the same motives:

They are not, then, realists and students of history for profit. Their motives are artistic; their resolution, moral. They are trying to give Ireland a literature wholly expressive of itself as it is today, in the belief that good health begins with candid self-recognition. And because most of them cannot see in standard romanticised Irish history any living roots of the country they know, they are trying to discover the history that actually did produce the small familiar democracy.⁹

Thus, while realist fiction emerged in reaction to an idealised Ireland and displays a distressed vision of Irish society in crisis, O'Faolain's historical biographies of O'Connell and O'Neill wrong-foot an official discourse by developing alternative theses.

The Irish-Irelanders, O'Faolain wrote in 1936 in *Ireland To-Day*, peddle the myth of a Gaelic Ireland for want of 'personal courage to be what we all are – the descendants, English-speaking, in European dress, affected by European thought, part of the European economy, of the rags and tatters who rose with O'Connell to win under Mick Collins – in a word this modern Anglo-Ireland.'¹⁰ On the other hand, O'Faolain's biography of Daniel O'Connell, *King of the Beggars*, postulates that the treaty of Limerick in 1691 signed the death warrant of Gaelic Ireland and that Daniel O'Connell, who 'had closed his titanic struggle to lift [the people] out of beggary',¹¹ has to be credited with the emergence of modern Irish democracy whose identity is irredeemably Anglo-Irish.¹²

⁹ John V. Kelleher, 'The Future of Irish Literature', *The Bell* 10/4 (July 1945), 337-353.

¹⁰ Sean O'Faolain, 'Commentary on the Foregoing', *Ireland To-day* 1/5 (October 1936), 32. This article was a response to Fr James Devane, who had acted in support of the vote on *The Censorship of Publications Act* 1929. See James Devane, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?', *Ireland To-Day* 1/5 (October 1936), 21-31.

¹¹ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, *op. cit.*, 146.

¹² This contention is very much indebted to Frank O'Connor's thesis, developed in a conference given at the Irish Academy of Letters on 3 March 1935 and which was published in 'The Gaelic Tradition in Literature: Part II', *Ireland To-Day* 1/2 (July 1936), 31-40.

Similarly, *The Great O'Neill* depicts a chaotic Ireland, riven with tensions between Gaelic clans, 'old English' and colonists, and challenges the patriotic myth of Hugh O'Neill as a stalwart nationalist. 'The late-nineteenth century invented a myth', writes O'Faolain 'about O'Neill – the usual romantic patriot myth, all enthusiasm and glory and idealism and trustfulness in Ireland's cause. The truth is almost at the opposite pole'.¹³ Raised in England by Sir Henry, future Lord Deputy of Ireland, O'Neill had initially been seen as a factor of Anglicisation of Ireland. O'Faolain portrays a cautious, scheming and self-serving figure, long faithful to the English Crown, who did not rise against Elizabeth I until after Red Hugh O'Donnell's rebellion in 1594. Only then did he become a rallying figure leading the Irish in the Nine Years War (1594-1603).

But O'Faolain's historical biographies run counter to nationalist historical discourse by challenging a specific methodology. In 'The Meaning of History', published in *The Irish Times* in 1942, O'Faolain questioned the 'retrospective reading' of Ireland's past since the Act of Union in terms of the sustained struggle of Gaelic Ireland to emancipate from British domination: 'Such an optimistic view of History as a divine grand strategy gradually unfolding itself to our awe-struck eyes',¹⁴ O'Faolain argued, did little justice to the haphazard course of events as they unfolded, by imposing a narrative informed by a contemporary nationalist agenda.

Splitting the Critics: trenchant reactions to O'Faolain's work

The diversity of reactions to these biographies speak to their achievement and impact as controversial writings. In 1944 Hayes-McCoy, in *Irish Historical Studies*, praised *The Great O'Neill* for being a well-documented and serious piece of work, having

¹³ Sean O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, 153.

¹⁴ Sean O'Faolain, 'The Meaning of History', *The Irish Times* (1 May 1943), 2.

‘collected, sifted and studied the available sources’ including studies and biographies by historians such as Lecky or Froude as well as numerous witness accounts.¹⁵ In the same periodical a few years earlier, R. M. Henry, had noted the ‘honesty’¹⁶ of *King of the Beggars*, just like Daniel Anthony Binchy, for example, who claimed in *Studies* that it was ‘one of the most solid contributions to the history of modern Ireland that have happened in our time,’ as the biography presented with ‘ruthless honesty’ ‘too many unpalatable truths’ to be included in schoolbooks.¹⁷

However, reviews also pinpointed a number of limitations. Hayes-McCoy noted approximations and anachronisms. In addition to a lack of clarity between historical facts and conjecture as well as the lack of rigour expected of historians, he deplored O’Faolain’s desire to produce literary effects that sapped historical perspective, thereby touching on a major intrinsic ambiguity of these biographies. In *Studies*, Michael Tierney (politician and Professor at UCD) even stressed O’Faolain’s lack of impartiality, accusing him of deliberately exaggerating the sinister depiction of eighteenth century Ireland to better emphasise the extent of O’Connell’s achievement.¹⁸ Indeed, the intellectual and political change of heart between O’Faolain’s shamelessly hagiographic first biography of de Valera (suffused with laudatory comments like ‘He has unsheathed his sword for Ireland. He was destined not to sheathe it again while he lived’¹⁹) and his far more critical treatment of Markievicz and de Valera in his second biography, bear witness to his shift from youthful idealism to a more mature belief in pragmatic politics, and to the

¹⁵ G. A. Hayes-McCoy, ‘Review: *The Great O’Neill: A Biography of Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, 1550-1616* by Sean O’Faolain’, *Irish Historical Studies* 4/14 (September 1944), 200.

¹⁶ R. M. Henry, ‘Review: *King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O’Connell, The Irish Liberator, in a study of the rise of the modern Irish democracy* by Sean O’Faolain’, *Irish Historical Studies* 2/5 (March 1940), 101.

¹⁷ Daniel A. Binchy, ‘Comments on “Politics and Culture: Daniel O’Connell and the Gaelic Past”’, *Studies* 27 (September 1938), 368-372.

¹⁸ Michael Tierney, ‘Daniel O’Connell and the Gaelic Past’, *Studies*, 27 (September 1938), 362.

¹⁹ Sean O’Faolain, *The Life Story of Eamon De Valera* (Dublin / Cork: Talbot Press, 1933), 21.

political angle that underpins his approach as a biographer. As Fiona Dunne has aptly noted, O’Faolain sees O’Connell as an antithesis of de Valera.²⁰ O’Connell and O’Neill are praised for their realism and federating qualities as they gave birth to a sentiment of national unity to an all too fragmented Ireland. De Valera in the 1939 biography is on the contrary ‘the great splitter’, the man who divided *Sinn Féin*, the IRA, *Cumann na mBan*, or *Clan na Gael*, and who, for this reason, is at least partly accountable for the Civil War.

The numerous parallels which O’Faolain draws with contemporary events, comparing for instance the atmosphere in Dublin in 1798 with the terror caused by the Black and Tans in 1920-1921,²¹ confirm that attempts at commenting on the present constantly underlie his historical account. *King of the Beggars*, Daniel A. Binchy observed, ‘is at the same time a masterpiece of biography, a masterpiece of historical evocation of the past and a masterpiece of what, for lack of a better word, may be concrete criticism of the present’.²²

In addition, O’Faolain’s commentaries are at times deliberately provocative. In his article ‘Mr. De Valera – Rebel or Reformer?’ published in *The New Statesman and Nation* in 1932, he derides idealist rebels such as Robert Emmet, Patrick Pearse, Constance Markievicz or Éamon de Valera before placing Oliver Cromwell on an equal footing with Daniel O’Connell and Michael Davitt as one of the three personalities whose influence radically changed the condition of the Irish people.²³

²⁰ Fiona Dunne, ‘*King of the Beggars*, “A Perfect Onion of Worlds within Worlds”’, *The Irish Review: Sean O’Faolain, Reassessments* 26/1 (Autumn 2000), 30-37.

²¹ ‘He was fortunate to be in Dublin, with a kind of Black-and-Tan atmosphere spreading over the countryside, where, in the words of Abercrombie, the English Commander-in-Chief, ‘every crime, every cruelty, that could be committed by Cossacks or Calmucks’ was being perpetrated by the ‘licentious’ military – the adjective being, again, Abercrombie’s’. (Sean O’Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, *op. cit.*, 92.)

²² Daniel A. Binchy, ‘Comments on “Politics and Culture: Daniel O’Connell and the Gaelic Past”’, *art. cit.*, 372.

²³ Sean O’Faolain, ‘Mr. De Valera – Rebel or Reformer?’, *The New Statesman and Nation* 4/77 (13 August 1932), 173.

This taste for irreverence and derision is materialised in the text. Indeed, these commentaries are carried through stylistically by the use of irony and caricature.²⁴ Thus, Constance Markievicz becomes a form of hybrid creature, 'partly flesh / partly metal', who 'blather[s] away like a machine-gun'.²⁵ The characters' noses, in particular, are subject to a multitude of deformations. In *King of the Beggars*, O'Faolain sketches Wolfe Tone simply by evoking his 'hooked nose to the west'.²⁶ The length of the old spinster's nose to whom O'Connell's uncle 'Hunting Cap' planned to marry him suffices to explain both the attraction she exercised for the old man and the repulsion she inspired in the nephew: 'a wealthy spinster in Cork, whose nose, unhappily, was as long as her purse'.²⁷ John Toler, Lord Norbury, famously nicknamed 'Hanging Judge' for his cruelty in Irish courts is depicted as a 'cruel buffoon'.²⁸

The depiction of such particularly shallow peripheral characters whose personality is encapsulated through a couple of physical traits therefore stands in sharp contrast with the study of the biographical subject whose inner mechanisms are scrutinised as if under the lens of a microscope. Deprived of any 'inner depth' and judged on their deeds only, they seem to be constructed according to the 'legal rules' specific to satire. Indeed, Marc Martinez recalls that if satire as a genre has disappeared, it still survives as a mode.²⁹ The literariness of O'Faolain's biographies thus sheds light

²⁴ 'If I were a political cartoonist I should sum up the position by depicting Mr. De Valera turning in perplexity from the irreverent business of sword-sharpening to face the shade of James Connolly, the one constructive Socialist mind among the 1916 leaders, and being offered by him the cloak that he in turn had taken from John Mitchel and James Fintan Lalor; behind would be the astute farmers wondering what it will all mean to them'. (Sean O'Faolain, *Ibid.*, 173.)

²⁵ Sean O'Faolain, *Constance Markievicz* [1934] (London: The Cresset Library, 1987), 83.

²⁶ Sean O'Faolain, *De Valera, A New Biography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), 44.

²⁷ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, *op. cit.*, 109.

²⁸ 'This cruel buffoon, pitiless to the law-breaker, indifferent to such considerations as provocation (which in such a time should have been primary considerations), would mingle with his remarks constant jokes, original or borrowed from the penny jest-books'. (*Ibid.*, 98.)

²⁹ Sophie Duval and Marc Martinez, *La Satire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000).

on the coexistence of two distinct 'regimes', as if these works sometimes obeyed a biographic dynamic and sometimes a satirical one.

Therefore, it appears that the value of the 'counter-discourse' O'Faolain voices through his historical biographies deserves some qualification. The numerous commentaries as well as the instances of irony or literary effects sit uneasily with revisionist claims to greater objectivity – all the more so since they contribute to making the biographer's presence in the biography very palpable, even obtrusive. 'The biographer's own personality keeps breaking in. We are never unaware for long of his presence at our elbow', the historian, F. S. L. Lyons noted.³⁰

While O'Faolain constantly addresses the reader directly and shares his emotions, irony, as explained by Roland Barthes,³¹ interferes with history in the sense that it is laden with a moral dimension whereas history should only distinguish between 'true' and 'false'. In this respect, one may also wonder if, for all his criticism of the retrospective reading of nationalist historiography, O'Faolain's parallels between past and present do not also impose a form of anachronistic coherence and logic over historical events.

Thus, it seems that the greatest merit of O'Faolain's historical biographies is to have developed new perspectives at odds with the nationalist historiography, thereby reasserting the creative dimension of history writing: 'For history is creative', said O'Faolain, 'not a frigidaire. [...] like tradition it evolves and creates; it is not just something that people make. History has gone on abandoning its young. [...] But traditions can die, nevertheless. They die, not for being interfered with but for not being

³⁰ F. S. L. Lyons, 'Sean O'Faolain as Biographer', *Irish University Review*, 6/1 (Spring 1976), 95-109.

³¹ Roland Barthes, 'Le discours de l'histoire', in *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 153-6.

interfered with. Tradition is like the soil that needs turning over, compost, change of crops. It has to be manhandled, shaken up'.³²

Yet, even if all these flaws tend to undermine the historical significance of these biographies, the many stylistic devices at work make them particularly rich studies, to the extent that one may actually wonder whether O'Faolain's technique as a biographer is not, in itself, constitutive of a form of resistance.

Resistance through the 'discourse "of" the method'

In many respects, literary devices will play their part in enabling the biographer to promote other forms of revision. Irony, Virginia Woolf explained, 'stunts the growth of characters' and allows for the creation of texture.³³ When associated with peripheral figures, it can serve to accentuate the looming presence of the biographic hero. But when used against the hero himself, it can help reduce his stature. By doing so, it contributes to returning the characters their humanity. In his epigram to *King of the Beggars*, O'Faolain quotes François Mauriac who explains that: 'La plus grande charité envers les morts, c'est de ne pas les tuer une seconde fois en leur prêtant de sublimes attitudes. La plus grande charité, c'est de les rapprocher de nous, de leur faire perdre la pose'. ['The greatest act of charity towards the Dead, is to not kill them a second time, by lending them sublime attitudes. The greatest act of charity is to bring them closer to us, to make them appear natural.]³⁴

Thus, one notes in O'Faolain's biographic approach a certain bluntness of tone and a desire to evoke all the facets of his subjects. He does not hold back, for instance, in

³² Sean O'Faolain, '1916-1941: Tradition and Creation', *The Bell*, 2/1 (April 1941), 7 and 11.

³³ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in Andrew McNeillie, ed., *The essays of Virginia Woolf*, 4: 1925-1928, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 477.

³⁴ François Mauriac, *La Vie de Jean Racine* [1928] (Paris: Perrin, 1999), 8.

his evocation of O'Connell's taste for alcohol, adulterous romance or libidinous proclivity. O'Connell can show himself to be diabolical or 'eerie', but he is also a 'cheap mountebank'³⁵ that fascinates and seduces: 'Humorous, scurrilous, witty, handsome as the devil, cocking his eye here and there, he slowly wins the rebels to his side, never disdain[ing] a dirty gibe at an opponent, or a trivial occasion to flatter or inflame his friends'.³⁶

In addition to irony, the biographer's greater authority and lack of deference towards his character is telling of a rebalancing of his relationship with his subject, typical of the more literary 'New English Biography'. But it is also a necessary condition to give a faithful account of the character's life and personality:

The vast historical portrait[s], here drawn," commented *The Irish Times*, "[is] all the more convincing because [it is] done by men who [is] unsentimental and capable of a satiric or ironic view of [his] subject[s]. Sentimentalists would be ill-fitted to discover [...] the real O'Connell. A soft nature cannot comprehend greatness. [...] Strong tools are needed to chisel the marble that is worthy of such caryatids of the temple."³⁷

In this respect, Florianne Reviron has observed that Lytton Strachey's use of pictorial elements, contributes to establishing biography as an artistic genre.³⁸ The same could be said of O'Faolain whose numerous physical descriptions and references to portraits, etchings or lithographs give his biographies a strikingly pictorial dimension. In O'Faolain's case, art helps to renew biography as a genre but also plays a part in 'revising' history. Portraits, O'Faolain argues, should faithfully depict the physical

³⁵ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, op. cit., 181.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁷ Anon., 'Lives of the Great: Let us now praise famous men', *The Irish Times* (3 June 1938), 6.

³⁸ Florianne Reviron, 'Orlando de Virginia Woolf (1928): une réponse à *Eminent Victorians?*', in Frédéric Regard, ed., *La Biographie littéraire en Angleterre, XVII^e-XX^e siècles* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1999), 117-140.

imperfections of the character, failing which, as in the case of O'Connell, one runs the risk of 'flatter[ing] the character out of existence'.³⁹

Thus, the depictions of the character's face aim to bring to light his soul, which often torn, as André Maurois explained in *Aspect de la Biographie* published in 1928, between light and shade.⁴⁰

In this respect, not only is caricature used to stress physical specificities, it is also exploited to evoke the character's 'machinery of the mind'.⁴¹ De Valera's skills as a negotiator would try the patience of the most seasoned politicians such as Arthur Griffith, John Devoy or Lloyd George, as arguing with him would be like 'chasing a man on a merry-go-round while seated on the horse behind him'.⁴²

Likewise, O'Faolain's description of the lithograph of O'Connell's face that features in the 1938 original edition of *King of the Beggars*, reflects the profoundly divided nature of the 'Liberator', subjected to the dictatorial impulses of an inner 'daemon' that threatens to overwhelm him: 'For Minotaur and Sphinx lie in ambush in his countenance, where, as in that of most men, there is the differentiation of his double nature in the play of his looks. [...] He has made a daemon of his country's genius, and it lives in his face'. The composition of his face does not result from a harmonious combination but from the tension between opposite forces, materialising O'Connell's fight with his daemon: 'and the mobility of his mouth is matched by the cold Fouché-like secrecy of the right eye'.⁴³ Elements on his face produce an impression of fragmentation ('always that right eye had held its secret calculation; always the left had been a

³⁹ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, *op. cit.*, 151.

⁴⁰ André Maurois, *Aspects de la biographie* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1928), 38.

⁴¹ Sean O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁴² Sean O'Faolain, *De Valera, A New Biography*, 1939, *op. cit.*, 70.

⁴³ Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars*, *op. cit.*, 253.

challenge and a doubt'). One part of his mouth gives the hint of a smile while the other seems to offer some resistance and pulls the mouth downwards as if the daemon was taking the upper hand. O'Connell's face then seems to lock itself and deny access to the interiority behind the mask.

While his conception of the 'daemon' governing O'Connell certainly reflects the influence of Yeats's aesthetic, his desire to explore the multiplicity of the character's facets owes much to Virginia Woolf's conception of biography as she stated in *Orlando* that 'a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand'.⁴⁴

This article highlights some of the most striking of O'Faolain's techniques. Nonetheless, the use of irony, as well as the role played by caricature, and more generally the graphic dimension of O'Faolain's technique, exemplify in themselves a form of resistance that is twofold.

Firstly, O'Faolain's satirical approach enables him to devolve their humanity to the characters. By doing so, while historical biographies of the period too often gave rise to a glorification of flawless and invincible heroes so as to foster a feeling of national pride,⁴⁵ O'Faolain renews biographic tradition, thus countering sentimentalised versions of history, but also gives a more faithful account of his characters.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, [1928] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 295.

⁴⁵ For further information on this point, consult Karin Fischer, *L'Histoire irlandaise à l'école en Irlande, 1921-1966*, Doctoral thesis under the direction of Professor Paul Brennan, Université de Caen, 2001, 60.

Moreover, as we have seen, O'Faolain's approach to his characters, his use of pictorial and graphic techniques, as well as his understanding of the biographic relationship, are shaped by diverse artistic influences that account for the resolutely literary dimension of his biographies. O'Faolain's study of the 'inner workings' of the character also allowed for the development of more ambiguous and complex figures in fiction.

This confirms that while he was still nursing his wounds after the censor had banned some of his fictions, biographies were for him a way to bypass censorship and to express his artistic self. They should thus be apprehended as a form of 'intellectual refuge' for the writer, but also as a laboratory for his fiction. It is perhaps in that sense that O'Faolain's biographies may more convincingly be perceived as acts of resistance.

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