

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON *AND AGAIN?*

Munira H. Mutran

Sean O'Faolain, one of Ireland's most celebrated short-story writers, has published a new novel (*And Again?* London, Constable, 1979) which has puzzled and delighted readers with its exciting plot, its treatment of setting, and its play with narrative focus to reveal character. Younger, the sixty-five year old protagonist is offered a chance by the gods of Olympus to live a second life. If he accepts, he will not be allowed to keep any significant memories from his previous life; he will live backwards from sixty-five until the age of zero, when he is "whisked back into the womb of Mother Time" Through the restrictions attached to his second chance, the themes of illusion/reality and of the plurality of the self emerge. The events lead to patterns of repetition: after Ana's death, Younger has a love affair with her daughter Anador, then with Nana (Anador's daughter) and then with Christabel Lee (the action takes place between 1965-2030) It is also through plot that many aspects of Time are explored: time goes backwards for Younger, and forwards for the other characters, so that Anador's past, for example, is Younger's future; the timelessness of the gods is contrasted with human time, and Younger is sometimes aware of "the time of the dark memory"

As I enjoy the privilege of the acquaintance of Mr. O'Faolain, I took the opportunity of sending a letter to him with a few questions on this work. His answers to my questions not only revealed to me some aspects of the novel itself, but also threw a new light on the novelist's own approach to the process of fiction-writing. With the author's permission I give below passages from his letters of January 2nd and March 1st, 1980.

M.M.: In your letter of January 2nd, 1980 you write:

It was such a joy to step into the shallop of imagination bound for no destination and just watch, and record on one's log whatever it should be that had to happen as it (presumably *inevitably*) happened. Every first step dictates the next unto the last? More — even before

the first step, in the womb it is all (all that is important) decided. We are free within the boundaries of our given natures — and within the bounds of nature itself? I did not know (realise) when I began (for example) that it is impossible even for the Fates so to alter fate as to allow a man to live the same life twice — it just would not be the same Horse Race if one knew what horse was to win. No act, a kiss, a hand's touch, a temper, a mountain climb ever repeats itself. Which makes life always new and strange. And yet (it transpired) (or "and so") one does the similar thing over and over differently I should have used as the epigraph of the novel Paul Valery's line (in *Le Cimetière Marin*): "La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée." Always the same, always various. So Younger "recommences" — an old love affair, another with her daughter, another with her's. Even their names repeat.

M.M.: So, you see, it seems that you have learned *while* writing the novel *And Again*? Isn't this a very interesting view of the novelist? Is your statement about the composition of a literary work close to what Yeats wrote to O'Casey that "Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of that education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself and had altogether different beliefs. A dramatist can help his characters to educate him by thinking and studying everything that gives the language they are groping for through his hands and eyes, but the control must be theirs...?"

O'Faoláin:

Does an artist learn as he writes or paints, etc.? I would think so: technically at the very least. Does this work, does that? Can one not see this happening from novel to novel, story to story when reviewing the whole corpus of, say, Chekhov? But also is he not in exploring life submitting it to analysis learning more about it?

One must be careful however with Yeats and O'Casey because Yeats did not have much interest in what O'Casey would call character, e. g. man seen in war, or competitive business or any combativeness such as concerns society, e. g. social justice or the like. Yeats was interested almost exclusively in what he called personality. So was his father. By P. they meant something like a personal distillation of the Self, the inner spiritual nature of a man, whose opposite would be the social Will. I think old John Yeats put this into his letters to Willy somewhere, holding that the English were splendid on things of the Will and public or social 'Character'; but not himself caring at all for that side of life. Yeats was a poet, introverted, soul searching, living imaginatively. So he and O'Casey would be quite at cross pur-

poses. (You must be familiar with Yeats's idea that in moments of high passion all 'character' falls away and one is left with the pure gemlike flame of soul, i.e. personality. For example in Racine. O'C. used realistic characters to make us see the human and humane sufferings of mankind through them.)

I find that I am more on Yeats's side than O'Casey's because like Y I am a romantic. Moreover the short story deals with the inmost essence of selves, distils a life down to a moment. But, on the other hand, I am not a poet but a proseman, who has to rely to a large extent on realism. I thus have to and want to balance the visible against the invisible, the seen against the unseen, the analysable against the unanalysable, the poem against the prose, very carefully as one must balance oil and vinegar in a salad dressing, or minute grains of chemicals in making a bomb, or pill.

Therefore learning while writing is a very deep question. O'Casey in that way did not learn much, I think. He got caught up in theories. His plays after the first two splendid plays do not improve. They are even at times propagandist. (This was where WBY was right about the *Silver Tassie*. O'C. was airing his ideas rather than turning them into dramatic expression of them.)

M.M.: Is *And Again?* a fantasy, an "imaginative flight" like, for example, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*?

O'Faoláin:

Is *AND AGAIN?* fantasy or what? I call it a *Romance* in the sense defined by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his preface to *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*. Most of the novels I admire partake of the nature of a Romance: they are, e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, perhaps *Wilhelm Meister* though I only read that as a boy, Patrick White the Australian Nobel in *VOSS*, the later Henry James, e.g. *The Wings of the Dove* or the *Tragic Muse*, all Gogol, Maurice Queneau, Turgenev, Alain Fournier of course. These novels are not basically realistic though (see bottom of page I), they can only flower when rooted in human clay. These novels use life as a painter uses a model, as Renaissance painters used street girls to pose for Madonnas, but their triumph is to pierce through visible life to the mysterious dimensions of the human spirit. The dyed-in-the-wool realist, e.g. Balzac, never does this.

M.M.: At University College Dublin, in 1975, when you read two of your short stories, you said that when the writer emphasizes theme, the tone is serious (for example *Feed My Lambs*), when he stresses cha-

racter, there is humour (*A Dead Cert*) Is this true of a novel?

O'Faoláin:

If one emphasises theme, you say I said in some lecture, the tone is serious? When one stresses character, you say I said, there is humour? I hope I did not say so. I hope I intimated that when a writer stresses humour then 'character' emerges. When he stresses "theme" the tone will sooner or later become serious, 'character' takes second place and the inner personality tends to dominate. Naturally in a novel, or play there can be room and time for more oscillation, and sometimes one will wonder which is happening. This is the fault I find with Balzac (I have just finished rereading *Cousine Bette*): there is no oscillation. Because he is the social realist his people are stamped with rubber stamps on page 1 and never alter. They are in the least interesting sense all 'character'. There is no or little surprise. No *imprévu*, no quivering and changing light plays on them, no mask is whipped off, there is just ONE probe to start — the dominant virtue or disease is exposed — and that is that. I want the fun of variation, impulse, self contradiction, mood, struggle, etc., etc. Which is the pattern in all people of personality (Socially, of course, it makes such people less stodgily comfortable to live with.)

M.M.: The characters in *And Again?* are superimposed on literary, historical or mythological figures: Younger is Ahasuerus, Adam, Faust, Oedipus; Ana is "a miniature Queen Victoria", Pompadour, Emma Hamilton, etc. Is this a reference to "the hero with a thousand faces" (at least there is a reference to the double-faced or four-faced head of Janus in Jana-Juno-Vickingess-Anador)?

O'Faoláin:

My 'Ana' was a woman of personality, but one who had lots of character too. She was a lovely blend of her many fancies and her realistic actuality (painted *sur le vif*) Have you read my story, *The Faithless Wife?* Again both sides, but I kept in the front 3/4ths of the story to her gay wilful side partly because there *is* no space for oscillation in a story but mainly to make the contrast with her other side—her ultimate loyalty to her awful husband: by this simple device I was able to establish the point or theme of the story's ironic title. Ana, private realist, public romantic, tough as old nails when she had to be, or thought she had to be, one moment ruling HER awful husband, at another making up crazy dramas and romances about others, romantically becoming a Catholic, at the next second looking realistically for

secondals to do herself in: so we get humour when she is playing romantic, serious when the theme of inevitable age take the stage. I can assure you that she was never entirely easy to mingle with socially, you never knew where you were, but she was always most amusing because so volatile and in a crisis she would always be relied on to switch on her realistic side.

You ask where did I want to put the stress, on the funny side of life or the serious, in my novel. On both of course. However, one does, as I said at the start, learn by experimenting with one's volatile personalities. (I cannot stand for long those steady over-simplified so-called realistic figures: it is like trying to enjoy a game of cards, say Bridge, where all the cards are dealt out face up.) So, I began with Ana and had no trouble with so comically volatile a person. I hoped to go on then to a satirical portrait of another romantic (Anador) This did not, I discovered (here I did learn something about human nature) work so well: because if one wants to play romantic in this tough world one has to be ruthless or life will ride one down. I realised that Ana was neither ruthless enough nor romantic enough. She tended to play at both. Thus she WAS a larmoyante, had weaker armour than her mother, i. e., had less genius for living. My hope for satire turned to pity She had to fail, be deceived by her husband, make a fool of herself with her baby nightdress in Harrod's, be sentimental about the little boy in Woolworth's, be let down by Younger in favour of her daughter. "Theme" did for her. So, to recompense I invented Nana, who WAS intelligent, had more brains than the other two, gutsy, had sense of humour, was NOT romantic, and was tough enough to push Younger off when he became awkward. She served, together with Christabel, finally to expose Younger as what I intended him to be, just an unheroic, ordinary, Everyman, to whom (the gods were right). Experience does not teach a damned thing. So, en fin, the Romance is partly romantic but ultimately more ironic than funny. I did quote you my epigraph? Paul Valery's (*La Cimetière Marin*), '*La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée*' Life is like the sea always the same, always infinitely various.

What pleases me about *AND AGAIN?* is that it does not cheat. Life is lovely, lifting, urgent, ecstatic, funny, but in between we pay for our joys in fogs, storms, cold, the night. At 80 I feel entitled to say with assurance that I'd live it again, and again, and. Few people care for irony. It will never be a popular novel. What the masses want is Escape.