

Secular Spaces and Religious Conflict. Sean O’Faolain, Edward Said and the Irish University Question

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*I*n the parlance of popular Irish nationalism, independence, achieved in the first years of the 1920s, brought an end to “700 years of colonial oppression.” The important caveat of Northern Ireland notwithstanding, the dominant view was that the long historical struggle for independence had achieved its logical terminus and the harmony of the native Irishman with his mostly rural environment was now a *fait accompli*. Notably, in the decades following Irish independence, an official discourse in apparent consonance with such a sense of completion gave priority to texts, whether literary or visual, which reinforced a largely static conception of national identity that, in effect, gave testimony to the fact that the Gaelic, Catholic peasant was now free to take his place in his natural realm, the unchanging, even spiritual place to which he belonged¹.

We have, then, an accommodation of temporal and spatial paradigms which eventually led to an ideological conservatism reflected in the decreased protagonism of national subjects in favour of the authentic landscape. With liberation apparently achieved on independence there was, quite simply, no longer the same need for activism on the part of the people, public protagonism could be left to the spiritual leaders, whether the religious clergy or the political elite headed by Eamon de Valera, with public participation largely consisting of little more than the reiteration of the tenets of an identity expressed in quasi-religious terms.

Where it existed, dissent against these hegemonic values increasingly took the form of a discourse of modernisation and a liberal humanist

defence of a universalism which decried the dominant nationalism as symptomatic of backwardness and underdevelopment. Here Sean O’Faolain is generally held to be crucial, particularly his role as editor of the key magazine *The Bell* which was seen to consistently offer intelligent critiques of the key tenets of the autarkic Free State. Both at the time and in later critical assessments, particularly through his association with the so-called revisionism, O’Faolain is often linked with a discourse of modernisation which can, however, be criticised for failing to give due account of the degree to which alternative spatial conceptualizations serve to disrupt teleologies of progress which are fashioned to the model of the metropolitan centre. In this paper I propose that such evaluations fail to take account of the strategic quality of O’Faolain’s intervention². Here I will examine a number of his *Bell* editorials to demonstrate how, in line with the spatially inflected model of subjectivity proposed by Edward Said, his intervention can be seen to be secular, a concept understood as potentially productive of spaces of interaction and public participation subversive to the Free State’s dominant geopolitics³.

A signal example can be found in O’Faolain’s dealing with the controversies surrounding the universities. “The University Question”, a 1944 *Bell* editorial, was where O’Faolain first looked in depth at the ecclesiastical ban on Catholics attending Trinity College. Certainly the “ban” is a difficult departure yet, as he highlights, the institution of the state is continuously “inventing” crimes and in fact the prohibition isn’t new in itself, but had merely become obsolete because applying for permission had ceased to be the normal practice (1-2). Similarly, he notes, lest Protestants feel aggrieved, that previously all universities were denominational and Irish Catholics had been denied university education from the Reformation to approximately 1793 (3-4). Exploring much of what was developed in the later “The Priest in Politics”, O’Faolain examines why the efforts for a Catholic University had failed for so long and, inspired by what Cardinal Newman wrote of the intransigence of the Irish clergy, particularly with regards to the involvement of the laity, he concludes: “The contentious questions were of the order of Episcopal control over organisation, clerical censorship over professors, strict denominationalism, and the unwillingness of Trinity College to co-operate” (4).

Hence we had a very clear clash between two institutions determined to shore up their power base with an evident disregard or distrust of initiatives to open up to outsiders. O’Faolain emphasises that although the

current problem originates from the Catholic side, in the past some Catholic clergy had attempted to bridge the divide but had been frustrated by Protestant protectionism. The immediate purpose of his historical contextualising is apparent as he remarks: “It might help to soothe hurt feelings if the present Regulations were regarded in the light of these events” (6). His intervention with regards to the “University Question” can thus be seen as aimed at enhancing relations in society and as compatible with Said’s view that “every intellectual whose *métier* is articulating and representing specific views, ideologies, logically aspires to making them work in a society” (*Representations of the Intellectual* 82).

Similarly, by giving us the broad picture, O’Faolain is avoiding any rush to interpret the situation in terms of a morality play with clearly defined lines of antagonism, so facilitating the practical application of his secular model of engagement. The specific roles of each side are not historically fixed but are complex and mutable and he attempts to move his audience away from polarisation and uncritical identification with either of the sides, so avoiding the existing clash resulting from an excessively defined politics of identity that separates Protestant from Catholic. Fundamental to this effort is his attempt to link these religious institutions through an appeal to a common humanity. The common human bond isn’t however, new, it having marked inter-religious relations in the Free State’s first decades:

The question therefore which must trouble our fellow-countrymen is not ‘Why?’ but ‘Why *now*? Why, in 1944? When the two universities have existed side by side so fraternally for over thirty years? When students have long interchanged hospitality, and professors interchanged knowledge? When the course of politics has gone so far to obliterate distinctions and differences of all kinds?’ (6-7)

O’Faolain concludes:

For the thing the history of these disputes teaches us is that religion, held by ordinary human beings in ordinary human circumstances, however divine in its origins, is human in its course. Though, surely, if *any* ideal does not follow the contours of human nature it must evaporate, and both ideal and humanity be the loser? (6-7)

This is a most interesting passage and reflective of much of the writing of O’Faolain. Where local conflict arises out of the clash between ethnic or religious groups, ethnic loyalty, that sense of exclusive belonging,

dislodged through an appeal to a common humanity, while simultaneously he firmly stresses the need to link any ideal or abstraction of humanity to its particular local significance. Consequently, O'Faolain's utilisation of the overarching human framework isn't done at the expense of local detail, "humanity" doesn't automatically enfold particular differences to an overall dominant narrative but does here act as a bulwark against the excesses of idealistic, totalized ideas of ethnic identity and may engender a space of dialogue where these "ethnicities" may engage with each other.

The divine and the human must account for each other, the ideal and the real are not held in strict separation but are shown to be fraternal, interchanging hospitality. Homes, houses are thus open to the other who isn't quite the same but is not kept at a radical distance, he is a brother with whom one shares much but isn't obliged to obey. Benefits will accrue locally and on the ground from such a fraternal model of intercommunicating houses, as is evident in the corollary O'Faolain draws:

One cannot, in short -Who should know this better, to our cost, than Irishmen?- touch Religion without touching Politics and affecting Society. We cannot, to give a homely example, tell our children not to mix with our neighbours' children on religious grounds, and at the same time expect our neighbours to believe that we have no personal objection to them. Irish Protestants would have to be angels, not human beings, not to feel a sub-implication that there is something sinister about their creed, and their society [...] this [...] in its enlarged form is of vital importance to us in connection with Partition and the whole political future of Ireland. (7)

In other words, there is no point in paying lip-service to a theoretical, universal human bond if that doesn't take account of particular difference.⁴

Here O'Faolain sells this tolerance as in part a strategic ploy with which to achieve what for much of his audience was the ultimate Holy Grail, the independence of a 32 county state. But also what is apparent is how O'Faolain doesn't deploy this universalising human framework in the interest of maintaining the status quo but rather with an eye on change, on rearticulating relations away from the existing situation of power yet without abandoning the potential for a local "Irish" identity different to the flawed version hegemonic in the Free State. Like other postcolonial intellectuals, O'Faolain is not unaware of the difficulty of buying into a universal model, but equally he can clearly see the benefits that may accrue from it. When O'Faolain avails of the universal language of Western humanism he does so to utilise it as needed locally, in an ongoing dialogue

with the particular. Our examples reveal how clearly this is the case and give the lie to the idea that ultimately he is a liberal humanist in the mould of the apolitical aesthete concerned to move away from supposedly backward identifications with, for example, ethnic or national groups, in favour of a “mature” universal sphere. This distinction is very important to our understanding of the value of O’Faolain’s public participation.

Critics who lament non-metropolitan subjects taking on the tainted universal language of justice, equality, development, liberty and human rights appear to question their ability to know what is good for themselves, projecting an image of passive reception rather than recognising the potential for agency, the active appropriation of tools that may serve particular needs.⁵ This is apparent in the writings of O’Faolain. Liberty, he has written, is different for an Englishman, it is firmly embedded in the solid history of prosperity that goes hand in hand with the project of Empire. For the Irishman it *is* different, yet that doesn’t disallow him from using it. In the April 1942 *Bell* editorial, “To What Possible Future”, O’Faolain uses the example of the English village, stating that as “we” attempt to establish a prototype for the future it would be a great mistake to try and measure “ourselves” in relation to the English model. Irish circumstances are starkly different:

We shall never be a ‘grand’ country. That has been ordained by history and economics and all sorts of things. Grandeur comes from privilege and wealth and has to be paid for dearly. Behind that quiet village, behind the staid dignity of the country town [...] there is the turmoil of Feudalism, the Reformations, the buccaneers of the Spanish Main, the Enclosures, the rise of Whiggery, International Commerce, the trial of Warren Hastings, the peculation of Clive, the whole run of the Industrial Revolution, great colonies, able colonists, enterprise, world-credit, and to balance there is also slums and the Vagrancy Laws and Depressions and slag-heaps [...]. (3-4)

The “balance” of course involves Ireland:

For it is because of empire that in London or Paris or Berlin you could step off the pavement into India or China, and dine anywhere in Europe in one city. [...] If you want to possess Flying Cicoires and Elgin Marbles you must bedew the rocks of Greece with blood. Heaven knows we should understand all that well enough. Trafalgar square was built out of Irish funds and Belgravia rose on the mud dug out of Saint Katherine’s docks by Irish navvies who emigrated to Wapping in the Black ‘Forties. (4)

O’Faolain offers us an “imaginative geography” (Mortimer 54) of colonial grandeur and, along the lines of the “contrapuntal reading” Said makes of canonical metropolitan texts in *Culture and Imperialism*, he reads back from the colonial periphery to reveal the history that metropolitan power was built upon, availing of the cityscape to starkly posit the notion of a clear, visible hierarchy that gains material expression through an “upstairs-downstairs” spatial division with the Irish navvies firmly placed in the mud at the bottom.

O’Faolain was determined to set himself up in the interstices of the nation, to hyphenise his identity, and effectively place himself in the location of the exile. As Said writes in “The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile:” “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that -to borrow a phrase from music- is contrapuntal” (55). O’Faolain himself has this plurality of vision but through his intervention in the public sphere he isn’t just revealing this broad vision as a mark of an uncritical desire for cosmopolitanism of the native elite which accepts without dissent the primacy of cosmopolitan values and is ultimately complicit with the status quo, favouring an axis of modernity and backwardness consistent with colonial power relations⁶. As he uses the language of universal humanism he isn’t merely trying to demonstrate a modernity that apes the metropolitan model. We have seen how he rejects the notion of the village built in imitation of the English model, just as he rejects the autarkic fetishisation of authenticity, evidenced for example in the glorification of the peasant cottage identified as so central to the iconography of the early Free State. Rather than taking either of these dead-end routes, he attempts to construct something alternative and new from an exilic, contrapuntal awareness of complexity. As Said writes:

Necessarily, then, I am speaking of exile not as a privileged site for individual self-reflection but as an *alternative* to the mass institutions looming over much of modern life. If the exile is neither going to rush into an uncritical gregariousness nor sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity. (“Mind of Winter” 54)

Such critical engagement is ultimately the route to the realisation of native subjectivity⁷.

Certainly, O’Faolain demonstrably challenges any uncritical, comfortable rendering of “home”, but equally he does so with regards to the ready-made forms or prefabricated models that in the uneven traffic from the metropolis to the periphery seek to mask their own complex history complicit in colonial exploitation, while attempting to erase native culture in favour of an ersatz reproduction of an original⁸. For O’Faolain, the meanings concepts or ideas take on or produce depend on context, on where they are “housed:” what institutions they emanate from and what the relationship of the speaker is to these institutions. In broad terms, as Said indicates, if we take them for granted, afford them a “natural” self-evident quality and “house” them comfortably, the turn may be excessively conservative and productive of dogma and orthodoxy, a phenomenon apparent in the fetishising of nature in autarkic post-independence states. In contrast, by drawing attention to the manner in which ideas and concepts may take alternative routes to those “naturally” ordained and by using an “exilic” or “contrapuntal” approach to institutional hegemony, we open up the potential for change.

When, consistent with the “unhoused” vision of Said, we see O’Faolain appealing to a common humanity in order to break out of the impasse arising from the clash between the institutions of the churches and their universities, it is imperative that we recognise this is not just some unselfconscious mimicry of colonial values which at bottom goes against the native Irish interest. Gerry Smyth, in his influential study, *Decolonisation and Criticism*, refers to what he deems a mode of *Liberal* decolonisation which is the sort of resistance where subordinate colonial subjects “seek *equality* with the dominant colonialist identity” (16). This he maintains is historically characteristic of the Anglo-Irish intellectuals who, as he suggests, attempt to *raise* the colony or nation to the level of the colonial centre. Smyth states:

Liberal decolonising discourse is problematic in that the *equality* to be achieved is already overwritten by the values of the dominant subject, and the language in which equality can be achieved is thus always inscribed with, because formed on the basis of, *difference*. Liberal, egalitarian and universalist strategies, therefore, can be of only limited success because even ‘victory’ in these terms necessitates the colonial subject’s engagement with discursive systems which confirm the original opposition between coloniser and colonised. (16)

He then goes on to quote from Albert Memmi:

As Albert Memmi wrote: ‘The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model [the colonizer] and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him’ (1974:120), where ‘disappearance’ amounts to continued native/settler subservience to colonial domination. For the liberal subject trying to *raise* the experience of the colonised up to that of the coloniser, or to locate a non-ideological realm in which coloniser and colonised can converse in an innocent universal language, *equality* ultimately signifies a denial of national validity and adherence to a structure of differences which maintains the economy of power in favour of the coloniser. (16-17)

For some critics this is, in effect, what O’Faolain fell for, trying to *raise* or civilise the uncouth natives, while himself cultivating contacts with the Anglo-Irish such as Elizabeth Bowen or Hubert Butler, and in the form of his dress, mannerisms and even speech perceived as largely trying to ape the coloniser and “converse” in an “innocent” universal language.⁹ Yet, notwithstanding these associations, he shows no evidence of wanting to unproblematically disappear into the model of the coloniser, a reality explicitly evident in the rejection of the “prefabricated” prototype village that would symbolise a total lack of resistance to postcolonial acculturation and ultimately the acceptance by the colonial subject of his subaltern “place.”

Perhaps to the mindset of those caught in the bind of nativism, itself a clearer product of colonialism, O’Faolain may appear a “shoneen”, collaborationist, and if viewed superficially, sometimes his defence of liberal and humanist values that engage with universalist notions appears to follow the Anglo-Irish liberal model. Smyth, although elsewhere he refers to “the subtle negotiations and struggles over disciplinary borders and boundaries that were carried on in the pages of all the journals”, such as *The Bell* (102), subsequently makes a notably less subtle judgement that:

The power of O’Faolain’s discourse lies in its affectation of the sort of holistic insight possessed by pre-revolutionary intellectuals such as Yeats or AE. In the postcolonial era, however, this Arnoldian strategy (of which O’Faolain himself is one of the foremost practitioners) is in itself, regardless of immediate local, insights, a tacit acknowledgement of metropolitan cultural leadership, as ‘Irish’ experience looks to comprehend itself in the ‘universalist’ terms made available by ‘non-Irish’ sources. (116-117)

The notion of “affectation” clearly suggests O’Faolain is somehow trying, in classic colonial fashion, to imitate the likes of Yeats or AE. However, much as he admired both of these great figures, close reading emphatically demonstrates that in no sense is he attempting to do so. To depict his intellectual role in such terms is to greatly underestimate the subtlety of his engagement with some very difficult issues and with the very acute dilemmas of the native intellectual.

For one thing, the cases of Yeats and AE are very different to that of Arnold. The relationship of the former to the political regime of their time was of ambivalent resistance to the power of the metropolitan centre in the name of a perhaps troubled, but ultimately anti-hegemonic nationalism, whereas the holistic focus of Arnold was essentially conservative, designed to build up and fortify already hegemonic institutions like the university and the nation rather than seek to radically transform them. Equally, the supposed holism of O’Faolain is very much based on the people as participants rather than passive representatives of an ideal, with intellectual participation in *The Bell*, for example, involving a broad spectrum of heterogeneous protagonists, and hence completely different to the authoritarian, hierarchical model proposed by Yeats¹⁰.

The relationship to institutions and traditions is radically different, particularly to that of Arnold, as we find O’Faolain’s tendency is always to look to open institutions to outside, critical influences. His attitude and ideological positionings are those of a critical, secular humanism of the sort Said promotes, positionings bearing little resemblance to the Arnoldian desire to define and reinforce tradition in the interest of a manifestly solid national identity, instead subjecting it to a critique that is intended to ultimately facilitate the negotiation and creation of new entities. And crucially, when O’Faolain employs ideas of liberalism or universalism, his use is never innocent or non-ideological. This attitude is crucial given that, as David Lloyd maintains, it is “the very division between politics and culture that is the hallmark of liberal ideology” (qtd. in Smyth 37).

Broadly speaking, in relation to the debates around culture and politics that have taken place in Ireland over recent decades, we can state that the positions taken by intellectuals in the academy either served to largely support existing political and ideological values and structures or to problematise these relations with a view to promoting more enabling reinterpretations. And, as we noted, the influential figure of O’Faolain is usually linked to the so-called revisionists, with this association frequently underwritten by

reference to his supposed liberal humanist values. However, in the degree to which these values express a conservative attitude that is ultimately complicit with metropolitan hegemony, as outlined above by Smyth, O’Faolain fails to fit the mould. Ultimately, far from defending a strict separation of culture and politics, or from evidencing what historian Ciaran Brady has termed, in relation to some revisionists, “a crude unreflective empiricism” (7), happily confident in its ability to cleave history and facts from myth, O’Faolain values the intellectual’s role in bringing about debate and facilitating the reinterpretation of identities, whether Protestant and Catholic or coloniser and colonised, in unforeseen new directions.

For example, lest his defence of the right to free speech of members of the Anglo-Irish elite, such as Hubert Butler¹¹, be misconstrued as deference to a colonial/metropolitan leadership, it should be considered in the light of what he has to say elsewhere, such as in his “Toryism in Trinity” *Bell* editorial. This is a reaction to a pamphlet by Professor W. B. Stanford, of Trinity College Dublin. The pamphlet sets out to voice what the author sees as the legitimate grievances of the Protestant population in the Free State. In his response the editor states that up to the moment the editorials had mostly been written in an impersonal style but that in the light of the effect the Stanford pamphlet would provoke instantaneously in “any average Irishman of, I hope, normal intelligence and tolerance”, the “egoism of the first person” was the only appropriate way to respond (185). His response is thus firmly anchored in the particular, articulated in the light of the specific case of Irish history, and is a clear example of the native subject forcefully asserting his individual identity, demonstrating a vocal, potentially transformative agency rather than an imitative objectivity that presumes to neutrality but, at bottom, seeks to discreetly fit in to the broad machinery of metropolitan power. O’Faolain bristles: “Its burthen is a grievance: a popular subject in Ireland since we are adepts at grievances, but a dangerous one since any Catholic knows more about grievances, ancient and modern, than all the Anglicans of Ireland and Great Britain put together” (185)¹².

He charges the professor above all with lacking “a real sense of history”, reflected, for example, in the latter’s reference to the horrors of the penal century in terms which state there was: “after the 16th century a strong party in the governing classes who had no wish to see all Irishmen enjoy the material, to say nothing of the spiritual, privileges belonging to the ‘official faith’ ” (189). O’Faolain deems this to be a case of “genteelly” passing “over one of the most horrible periods of religious persecution, or

since we are being euphemistic should I say ‘religious discrimination,’ in the history of Europe?” (189). Pressing further on the subject of being euphemistic, he mercilessly attacks as worthy of *The Bell*’s competition for “Famous Understatements”, Stanford’s “elegant euphemism” on the politics of the penal times: “‘a cold policy of exclusiveness’” (189). The editor, barely containing himself, retorts this was rather: “a jungle of the vilest passions that ever disgraced a creed, an abattoir of blood and torture whose effects are still rooted in the marrow of our memory. After that one is not surprised to realise that the Professor seems utterly unaware that behind all this there lies that old historical conflict, Church versus State” (189).

Consequently, when O’Faolain decides to avail of an abstract such as liberty, for example, he evinces the sort of scrupulous subjectivity Said proposes by rejecting an un-critical acceptance of a ready-made metropolitan model and making explicit how, for an Irish Catholic, liberty cannot rise above the “abattoir of blood” of the eighteenth century, or the Irish navvies in the mud fleeing the famine in the 1840s. It cannot magically sidestep the messiness of history and the exercise of power which resulted in long-standing and sustained marginalisation of whole ethnic groups to the effective centres of power. In other words, unlike Stanford, he doesn’t write out the complexity of history or elide rebellious undercurrents that potentially dissent against the idea of a clear narrative of universal progress; instead, he places great emphasis on representing history’s complexities, never rendering it as unproblematic or self-evident and factually transparent.

O’Faolain’s response here to the issue of historical grievance isn’t just something we can pass over while elsewhere asserting that he is an emphatically anti-nationalist revisionist, ultimately caught in the trap of looking to the metropolitan centre to know how to behave appropriately, how to dress, speak, and think. Clearly, O’Faolain is quick to anger at a keenly-felt awareness of how his ancestral people were victims of colonial expansion. He can tap into a deep well of grievance if needs be, and the idea of “an abattoir of blood and torture whose effects are still rooted in the marrow of our memory” remains a live issue. Nonetheless, a very self-conscious intellectual engagement with history and its legacy sees him making the very deliberate choice not to cultivate grievance but instead to search about for ideas, frameworks, models of behaviour and idioms of expression that are potentially more empowering than the sullen cultivation of grievance. Following the spirit of *critique* that Said identifies as the essence of a renewed, radical humanism¹³, to gain a fair sense of what

O’Faolain is trying to achieve, one must go beneath the apparent surface to clarify the true nature of the sort of “quiet village” he speaks of and which masks the mud and blood elsewhere.

In the reaction to Professor Stanford, we find again a clear pattern of engagement. As well as insisting on a broad-ranging take on history that accounts for the narratives of the less-favoured, O’Faolain, like Said, is keen to present facts not just as elements presented in isolation of complex contexts but which give substance to, and flesh out, broad historical narratives. And the facts he presents reveal Stanford has no real case to make:

Thus I have before me a statement made in July, 1924 by Primate Day, that almost legendary figure in the modern Church of Ireland: -‘To say, that Protestants are in any way ignored, despised, or ill-treated is entirely contrary to the facts.’ That was the old Free State. Fourteen years after, in May, 1938, I find *The Irish Times* approving an address by Dr. Harvey, Bishop of Cashel, by saying: ‘In the new Eire Protestants hold positions of high honour in every branch of public life. The first President is a son of a Church of Ireland clergyman. There are four Protestant judges in the High Court: and there is not a town or village in the country in which the Protestant citizens do not exert an influence that is out of all proportion to their numbers.’ (186)

O’Faolain makes it clear that Stanford’s judicious avoidance of notable grievances felt on the part of Irish Catholics, just as he protests Protestant grievance that flies in the face of the evidence, is manifestly disingenuous and clearly part of a strategy aimed to bring influence to bear in the political realm. O’Faolain’s reaction is to warn that “what he is doing is inviting a new rivalry of churchmen for political contacts” (189-190). Our editor is unimpressed to find Stanford “as calm as you please, demanding ‘influence in making government appointments’ and asking for greater ‘economic and political supports’ for Protestantism” (190-191). It appears he is making a pitch for influence on behalf of the elite formation he belongs to, Protestant Trinity College. Stanford’s participation in public appears primarily to be that of the intellectual at the service of the institution he belongs to and not at the service of ethic values. O’Faolain draws a parallel with bodies such as the Knights of Columbanus, the Orange Lodge or the Masonic Order which, in his view, are designed to give structure to hierarchical privilege that is ultimately determined by financial concerns, a core issue bedevilling Ireland at that time. O’Faolain writes of a “so-called Catholic defence of democracy” (191), revealing

how the reality is of a democracy hijacked by such groups to serve the needs particularly of the Catholic middle-classes then dominant, and quite simply Stanford's problem is that he, similarly, is attempting to achieve greater influence for himself and his own kind.

To O'Faolain, this kind of identity politics was hugely damaging to the newly independent nation still trying to assert itself. He resents having to identify himself as a Catholic and the fact that the attitudes of the likes of Stanford drives people to take sides, to establish antagonistic oppositions consistent with the dominant geopolitics that are hugely harmful, and are, in fact, reproductive of the hegemonic binary, colonial structure that Smyth accuses him of underwriting. Indeed, as O'Faolain states in "The University Question," the drive to give precedence to religious identity over political, social or human considerations is productive of the sort of misplaced idealism which draws him to lament "those vast reaches of history east and west during which similar ideals caused untold human misery without achieving the desired result" (7). The key issue is the manner in which such idealism is drawn to the exercise of absolute power. To counter this tendency, he invokes the figure of Cardinal Newman who "Defended the strong democratic spirit of the laity in this whole university question, not only in England but in Ireland; for in defence of the rights of the laity he resolutely opposed the efforts of some of the bishops, of a less liberal mind than his, to get 'the most absolute power over University organisation in every detail'" (8). Here democracy, liberty and rights are concepts that may be invoked across a range of sites to contest absolute power as exercised through institutions. But, as he says, "if ideals do not follow the contours of human nature they evaporate" or, it would seem, are manifest in a totalitarian manner (9).

It is unsurprising to find that he uses Newman as a key reference, given that the cardinal insisted on a traffic of ideas between the spaces of the lay people and the elite clergy, between the people and the university and between Ireland and England. By reaching out to what he himself considers a conservative point of reference such as Newman, O'Faolain evinces the characteristics Said identified with the scrupulous subjectivity of the border, amateur and secular intellectual who is always on the move, always traversing disciplinary and institutional boundaries and as such always attempting to create new spaces of engagement. Clearly not posing as non-ideological, nor attempting to maintain existing situations, or economies of power, O'Faolain's whole intellectual praxis aims to bring

about change, to be anything but conservative. In fact, it seeks continuously to wrestle concepts such as liberty from disabling associations with elite formations, it challenges binary frameworks and institutional discourses that simplify complex realities and inscribe subjects within clearly defined parameters. And, crucially, much as the general perception of his work would have us believe, he doesn't engage in a denial of national validity because of his use of a universal language.

Having outlined the above considerations, having emphatically tagged ideals and abstractions to humanity in its specificity rather than some un-anchored universal sphere, he turns once again to the Catholic-Protestant clash. He now focuses on what may emerge from this engagement with Catholics and Protestants, asking the crucial question: "What is being born here?" (10). Is the conflict a demonstration of the beginnings of a new order emerging? Again he turns to Newman, but now in the person of Bishop O'Dwyer of Limerick, an influential defender of Newman's legacy and inheritor of his intellectual tradition, who had, in fact, backed the idea of a national university containing both a Catholic college and Protestant Trinity College. O'Dwyer had defended the influence of the laity in Catholic education in the belief that the consequently more educated body of men would ultimately strengthen Roman Catholicism.

For O'Faolain, then, the renewed authoritarianism he addresses in "The University Question" is perhaps not unrelated to, even a reaction against, the existence of a potential germ of revolt against clerical control. He perceives a burgeoning defence of "independence" that could shape the nation being formed. "The National University was once the fortress of 'self-government and independence,'" he points out (12). In other words, it was relatively independent of political and clerical influence, however, in the face of contemporary attempts to exercise what Newman called "the most absolute power over University organisation in every detail" (11), the spirit of independence might seek to find accommodation in the university of the erstwhile foe. So, in the light of potential popular, lay resistance to clerical and political power, O'Faolain predicts: "Whichever institution chooses, in the end, to house these principles may well hold the future of Ireland in its hands" (12).

Ireland is thus a project for the future, not a self-evident, existing and fixed reality. In the vanguard of the new Ireland being wrought will be those institutions which accommodate independence or its close relative, liberty. Rather than an absolute abstraction with a fixed location, it may

temporarily, strategically set up house in one institution but is ultimately operational -like O'Faolain's role as public intellectual, and *The Bell's* function as a platform of diversity- in its "spatial" mapping of a new terrain, in its traffic between institutions, as a contingent conduit for engagement between the different elements in the emerging nation which can be "worked out" if, in the words of the Protestant *Irish Times*, we "think not in terms of sectarian interests but of the nation as a whole" (12). Yet this wasn't just the prerogative of the Protestant community and O'Faolain ends this fascinating editorial giving voice then to the other side and so effecting this always mobile intellectual praxis: "That, after all, was Bishop O'Dwyer's attitude when asked if the reason why he sought a Catholic University was simply to strengthen his own Church. 'No! It is not, by any means,' he replied. 'We are Bishops, but we are Irishmen also, and we want to serve our country'" (12).

One is immediately struck by the fact that O'Faolain ends the argument about the university question by housing his ideals in the nation, a move which clearly demonstrates that his goal is emphatically not that of an unsheltered universalism nor is it manifest as, echoing Bhabha's criticism of Fanon, "existentialist humanism that is as banal as it is beatific" (87). Yet, in part, this housing of his ideals can be seen as strategic and in a sense responds to his profile as an "unhoused" intellectual. This is even more manifestly evident when we return to the "Toryism in Trinity" editorial. As O'Faolain says, the sectarian intervention of Professor Stanford forces him to think of himself as a Catholic, something he strongly resents, and as he says: "I am to my disgust driven to take sides", before going on to state: "One ends up by cursing both their houses" (186). As an antidote, just as he did with regards to the University Question editorial, and crucially in tandem with his earlier proposal of a "common humanity" with which to check sectarianism, he turns to the nation as an encompassing framework that can accommodate both. Thus the focus on common nationality again takes the sectarian edge out of an identitarian politics expressed on religious/ethnic grounds. In the conclusion to his *Representations of the Intellectual* Reith lecture series, Said condemns what he calls "Gods that always fail", suggesting as a blueprint for the intellectual in society an attitude of not being tied in the manner of the zealot to his own creed:

[...] ideally the intellectual represents emancipation and enlightenment, but never as abstractions or as bloodless and distant gods to be served. The intellectual's representations [...] are always tied to and ought to remain an organic part of an ongoing experience in society: of the poor, the disadvantaged, the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless. These are equally concrete and ongoing; they cannot survive being transfigured and then frozen into creeds, religious declarations, professional methods. (84)

O'Faolain's participation, his representations, are emphatically not frozen into a creed, his loyalties don't automatically correspond with his ethnic, religious, or professional institutions. With regards to Protestant Ireland he may be its advocate or its censurer, according to, in Ernesto Laclau's vocabulary, what "particular content" is putting itself about under its guise, and in relation to the ongoing experience in society (107). In other words, what the effects of this particular content may produce in society at any given time: whether it serves to perpetuate discriminatory practices, to fortify elite formations or conversely to interrogate them with a view to facilitating change. Indeed, it is instructive to note that the editorials dealing with the Universities and sectarian issues, "The University Question" and "Toryism in Trinity", in which the editor proposes the nation as the provisional home within which to accommodate different religious-ethnic identities are both preceded and separated by leading articles called "One World" in which the global perspective appears to be given to offset any perception that *The Bell* was somehow insular. Critics frequently highlight these "One World" editorials to come to an easy conclusion that O'Faolain fitted the sort of mould Smyth has for him but without factoring the polemics we have just examined. Such a view fails to give a full account of his, strikingly original, nuanced intervention in which he evokes a plural space and, so to speak, faces both ways. The strategic negotiation, the back and forth dislodging of fixed positions, what Said calls "the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange" (84), seems very deliberate and ultimately defining of O'Faolain's secular intellectual mission. His enthusiastic defence of the Irish nation when dealing with this sectarian clash would seem to contradict his scathing criticism of Irish nationalism elsewhere, but as with the model of intellectual proposed by Said, when we consider it in terms of the dilemmas facing the intellectual in the postcolonial state, and when we look closely at its strategic quality and appraise its radical potential it appears laudably coherent.

Edward Said was an impassioned defender of Palestinian nationalism throughout his career yet he repeatedly highlighted the often reactionary content of nationalism¹⁴. This too could appear to suggest a key incoherence in his public intervention, yet perhaps O’Faolain offers an explanation to such ambivalence. In an appeal to Professor Stanford’s better instincts, he points out that the logical consequence of a politics based on the exercise of power according to religious lines is that each country should be “designated, shaped, and governed by the dictates of a majority Church, and that all in it must accept the political consequences of that dominant power” (190). But for O’Faolain, “the core of the thing” is that what is posing as either Catholic or Protestant interest, for example through the influence of institutions such as the Catholic Knights of Columbanus or the Orange Lodge is in fact “a well-organised interest in profits” (191). So, consequently, we have to deal with a “so-called Catholic defence of modesty” or a “so-called Catholic defence of democracy”, in other words the rule of the majority masquerading as a faux-democracy, operating in the interests of the empowered elite and “separated from the common lives of the people” (192). The key issue, the “core” is thus not some abstract concept of identity but the complex of interests that puts itself about under the cover of Catholicism, Protestantism or indeed Nationalism.

O’Faolain diagnoses that Protestantism was being disabled by reproducing the sort of autarky that bedevilled the Free State as a whole, by remaining within its own institutional borders by, to use his delightfully apt metaphor, “sulking in a vestry” (192). Fascinatingly, this is also exactly what Said also warns against, whether “uncritical gregariousness” i.e. fitting in too comfortably with the group or institution or sitting “on the sidelines nursing a wound;” proposing instead that “he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity” (“Winter” 54). O’Faolain suggests, in an expansive invitation designed to bring about change, that “There is no reason why it (Protestantism) should [sulk in the vestry], for it has many things to offer in the creation of a rich Irish mode of life” (192).

What is apparent is that both O’Faolain and Said are continuously trying to find a way out of the in/out prison. They search for strategies that will allow an ongoing, renewable and fluid cultivation of subjectivity that will engage with received frameworks of identity perceived to be restrictive and totalized, while re-interpreting them in accord with the key values of emancipation and enlightenment. Said writes: “The Exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional.

Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (“Winter” 54). Having quoted from a twelfth-century monk from Saxony, Hugo of St. Victor, on the desirability of going beyond national or provincial limits, Said emphatically insists on the fundamental caveat that draws him away from any definitive “housing” of subjectivity in the unanchored universal sphere and back to the particular, local identity in a contrapuntal dialectic:

But note that Hugo twice makes it clear that the “strong” or “perfect” man achieves independence and detachment by *working through* attachments, not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both. (55)

In the editorial to the inaugural number of *The Bell*, “This is Your Magazine”, O’Faolain invited his public to participate in the public forum that the magazine intended to be by communicating their “love”, their “bond” for their native place but in a manner that was refreshingly free of association with the imagery of a triumphant nationalism. In other words, he was encouraging the cultivation of his own, original “scrupulous subjectivity” that was very self-conscious of attachments, very intuned to the reality of communal as well as individual identity but determined not to allow these attachments become disabling. Said’s words provide a similarly flexible paradigm of behaviour. This “scrupulous subjectivity” is achieved by a “working through” of attachments rather than through the promotion of an unanchored “human” subjectivity that merely camouflages its own particular attachments.

In “The University Question”, where O’Faolain sought to trace the conflict of interests around the issue of religious identity and the institutions of power in which these identities were expressed, he posited “a wise statesmanship” to “evolve a solution which can surely, as the *Times* has said, be *worked out* if ‘we think not in terms of sectarian interests but of the nation as a whole’” (12). This is certainly suggestive when considered in the light of Said’s proposal of “working through”, but equally so is the importance attached to the idea of “Statesmanship.” Like Said’s “exile”, the “statesman” is never completely at home but doesn’t reject home, rather he gains definition in the ongoing creation of new “territories”, the

to and fro of the contrapuntal engagement with a range of temporary homes, perfectly exemplified in the manner O'Faolain alternates a focus on "One World" with the possibilities offered by a renewed nation state. Unlike he who, to quote Said, does "not think of politics in terms of inter-relationships or of common histories", the statesman's identity is predicated on making connections (*Representations of the Intellectual* 88). It seems significant that Said ends his Reith lectures on the representation of the intellectual outlining his ideas of what the intellectual's key motivations should be by marking explicitly the difference between the model he outlines and the intellectual who serves what he terms "Gods that always fail." In view of our close reading of O'Faolain's engagement with the issues around religious identity, university and institutional power and the day-to-day controversies they produced in Ireland, Said's conclusions appear indicative of what is a very similar intellectual project, markedly different to that of the "professional" intellectual or the uncritical "disciple or acolyte" (89). Said says:

By contrast the true intellectual is a secular being. However much intellectuals pretend that their representations are of higher things or ultimate values, morality begins with their activity in this secular world of ours -where it takes place, whose interests it serves, how it jibes with a consistent and universalist ethic, how it discriminates between power and justice, what it reveals of one's choices and priorities. Those gods that always fail demand from the intellectual in the end a kind of absolute certainty and a total, seamless view of reality that recognizes only disciples or enemies. (89)

It would appear it is this absolutely self-conscious, if often unsteady, attempt to "work out" a paradigm that will flexibly accommodate local, national and universal attachments that seems to most define the public participation of Said and Sean O'Faolain, with its defining, secular ambivalence ultimately suggestive of what has been called "the postcolonial condition." This ambivalence is appropriately expressed in Said's recommendation of the need to "keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the part of an alert, sceptical irony (preferably also self-irony)" (89). For O'Faolain and Said, ethnic/religious, national identity and universal humanism are ideas that are useful when emancipatory but not so when they demand the elimination of that space for doubt, that liminal sphere allowing the traffic of alternative currents, the space where a "scrupulous subjectivity" can be "worked through."



- 1 Cultural critics emphasise the prevalence of the values outlined above although increasingly, while the dominance of the sort of representations of Ireland that fitted in with official discourse is acknowledged, scholars seek to register a more nuanced interpretation of the period, attempting particularly to reflect the reality of what was, in effect, an ongoing “battle of ideas.” Terence Brown, in his excellent pioneering study, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* notes, for example, that the dominant painting at the time was the school of “Irish academic realism” from which we get “those pictures of countrymen and women, fishermen, small farmers, turf stacks against cloudy skies and cottages in secluded places [...] so representative of the early years of independence” (98). In relation to literary works, Brown suggests that even the likes of Liam O’Flaherty and Peadar O’Donnell’s attempts to realistically represent rural, western life, and to highlight class politics and social analysis “give way before an apprehension of the west as a place of fundamental natural forces, of human figures set passively or heroically against landscapes of stone, rock and sea” (94). However, whereas Brown could summarise that there existed “An attitude of xenophobic suspicion [to] any manifestation of what appeared to reflect cosmopolitan standards” and “an almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism,” in Diarmuid Ferriter’s *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, the author quotes Brown but to suggest “Such emotive rhetoric does little justice to the complex layers of Irish society during this era” (359). Other studies of the period which reflect such complexity include Bryan Fanning’s *The Quest for Modern Ireland: The Battle of Ideas 1912-1986* and Nicholas Allen’s *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War*.
- 2 The association of O’Faolain with the development of revisionism and its liberal humanist values is particularly evident in Luke Gibbons’s introduction to the phenomenon in the *Field Day Anthology*. Here he states that O’Faolain’s *Bell* editorial “The Gaelic Cult” established “many of the underlying critical stratagems in the revisionist approach to history” (562). Chief among these is O’Faolain’s attempt to “deprive ‘the Gaelic Cult’ of its mystique by undermining its basis in tradition” (562). Gibbons does not, however, reflect the complexity of some of O’Faolain’s other writings such

as, for example, his highly original study *The Irish*. Here O’Faolain is particularly influenced by the ideas of R. G. Collingwood, who in turn is invoked by Brendan Bradshaw in what is considered one of the most important anti-revisionist texts, “Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Ireland” (215). Rejecting the revisionists’ “value-free principle,” and their “scientific” methodology, Bradshaw contrasts these with Collingwood’s stress on the need for historians to show “empathy” with the protagonists of the past. Boyce and O’Day, in the introduction to their collection of essays on revisionism, clarify that Collingwood stressed the need for historians to show not only “empathy” with the protagonists of the past but also a “question and answer” process of critical thinking which factors in the context within which the historian operates as well as the specific context of the past under consideration. Consequently, it seems to this current writer that Gibbons, and other writers of important critical texts on O’Faolain such as Harmon (1990) and Arndt (2001), fail to give due attention to the fact that his *Bell* interventions are, above all, polemics designed as much to cause a strategic reaction as to reflect deeply held views of a liberal humanist bent. Ample evidence that O’Faolain is equivocal in his view on modernity is, for example, available in the appendix to *The Irish*, while his autobiography *Vive Moi!* shows his enduring attachment to the idea of an ethnically rooted Irish identity and its historical struggle for liberation from metropolitan power.

- 3 In this current paper Said’s critical paradigms are being used not to “scientifically” prove an underlying continuity with O’Faolain, but with a view to enabling a suggestive, critical dialogue between these two provocative and original thinkers which reveals a strikingly similar search for enabling strategies of engagement with their specific worlds. In his essay “History, Literature and Geography,” Said proposes as enabling a model of consciousness which is primarily spatial. Real agency refuses, for example, the strict classification of peoples into primitive and civilised or backward and modern. Or the alternative of a false resolution or reconciliation proposed by the incorporation of peripheral identity into the dominant metropolitan mainstream. And he proposes that the “overall advance of the dominant mainstream” involves the resolution of contradiction in the shape of the solidification of a simple, clear, and non-contradictory core identity (463). Against this dominant tendency Said defends what he terms “an essentially geographical, territorial apprehension of human history and society” (464), with Antonio Gramsci here serving as the great prototype. In essence, Said proposes, in a manner strikingly consistent with the ideas defended by O’Faolain, that history “derives from a discontinuous geography.” In other words, history and particularly History as a discipline, as much as an objective expression of empirically verifiable truth, or the teleological expression of modernisation, is *situated*, the product of complex social struggles parti-

cularly over territory. And in response to this comprehension of the relationship between culture and politics or power, Said advocates a critical positioning, the development of “a certain type of critical consciousness,” which he believes “is geographical and spatial in its fundamental coordinates” (465). This paradigm also demands that abstract ideas travel, for example from the academy to the “real,” secular world and that culture, literature and poetry become the currency of an inclusive public space.

- 4 This is, of course, the main objection we find in the colonial world to the powerful universalising discourse that emanates from the metropolitan centre and promotes theoretical values of justice, equality and development but which has a poor history of providing a space from which different marginal ethnic groups may achieve a voice that is not completely overwhelmed by the power of the centre.
- 5 Kwame Anthony Appiah points out in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* that contemporary critics of the apparent homogeneity that comes from the spread of Western capitalism and its “universal” values in the guise of globalisation are frequently guilty of just the crimes they are accusing others of. Considering the case of his own “home” country of Ghana he maintains:
When people talk of the homogeneity produced by globalization, what they are talking about is this: the villagers will have radios: you will be able to get a discussion going about the World Cup in soccer, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and hip-hop; and you will probably be able to find a bottle of Guinness or Coca-Cola (as well as Star or Club, Ghana’s own delicious lagers). Then again, the language on the radio won’t be a world language, the soccer teams they know best will be Ghanaian, and what can you tell about someone’s soul from the fact that she drinks Coca-Cola? These villages are connected with more places than they were a couple of centuries ago. Their homogeneity, though, is still the local kind. (102)
- 6 Crucial to O’Faolain’s intellectual development was his period in exile as a young man. Following the cessation of the Civil War in which he ended up on the losing side, and so without opportunities of good employment, he headed for the USA and Harvard University where, with the aid of a fellowship, he undertook a Master’s degree in philology. Initially determined never to return to Ireland, he eventually did but with his sense of identity notably altered. For example, writing to editor Edward Garnett after the publication of *Midsummer Night Madness*, he posited “I am Anglo-Irish now” (*Harmon A Life* 90). His autobiography *Vive Moi!* gives a very clear picture of how influential this period was. While enamoured of the metropolitan lifestyle, he and his future wife concluded that they “belonged to an old, small, intimate and much-trodden country, where every field, every path, every ruin had its memories” (243). Key to this nostalgia was his hostility to the academic values encountered in Harvard. Studying under G. L. Kittredge, O’Faolain described his “regime” as “pedantically specialised, fanatically rationalist, emotionally arid, fundamentally anti-aesthetic” (211). Particularly concerned at how the dominant values discouraged participation from students, he

- found the system authoritarian and sought welcome relief in his engagement with the world outside of the academy. This experience is important when evaluating O’Faolain’s relationship to metropolitan values. Certainly he seeks to open Ireland to the world but this in never a one-way journey, rather it is part of the two-way traffic that shapes his “spatial consciousness.”
- 7 Said points to Theodor Adorno as an example of cultivating a “scrupulous subjectivity,” claiming that, “Ruthlessly opposed to what he called the “administered” world, Adorno saw all life as pressed into ready-made forms, prefabricated “homes” (“Mind of Winter” 54). These he saw as all ultimately commodified, and felt that it was the mission of the exile intellectual to, in Said’s words, “refuse this state of affairs” (54). Adorno also wrote “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s own home” (54).
- 8 In “The Mind of Winter,” before going on to elaborate on his own concept of *contrapuntal* reading, Said acknowledges the influence of Adorno: “To follow Adorno is to stand away from “home” in order to look at it with the exile’s detachment. For there is considerable merit to the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they actually produce. We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy” (54).
- 9 In his autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, O’Faolain points out that an earlier mistake he and his university colleagues had made was to cultivate a certain “shag-giness” in the simplistic belief that to dress well or even to speak well, however they might be interpreted, was somehow to be “shoneen,” a hiberno-English term for collaborationist.
- 10 From the first issue of *The Bell* the editor sought the participation of a broad range of non-professional writers. Subsequently, pieces describing the typical life of a nurse, a mechanic, a prison inmate, an unemployed person, conversations with a sculptor, and a series of articles on family economy, particularly of those on low incomes, among many other diverse themes shaped the character of the magazine. Perhaps the most notable example was the encouragement of Eric Cross’s rendering of the racy storytelling of Tim and Ansty Buckley, subsequently published in book form as *The Tailor and Ansty*. Reflective of the authentic voice of the people, it caused considerable scandal due to its divergence from the official version of a pure, chaste people propagated by the Catholic elites and de Valera himself.
- 11 For his defence of Butler see particularly “On a Recent Incident at the International Affairs Association.”
- 12 In spite of his protestations, the majority of his editorials in fact evidence a constant preoccupation with broadly political issues of the day, with his own voice instantly recognisable.
- 13 In his last major work, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, published posthumously, Said writes: “Humanism should be a form of disclosure, not

of secrecy or religious illumination. [...] At the heart of what I have been calling the movement of resistance in humanism [...] is critique, and critique is always restlessly self-clarifying in search of freedom, enlightenment, more agency, and certainly not their opposites” (73).

- 14 See for example his essay “Nationalism, Human Rights and Interpretation,” published in *Reflections on Exile*.



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