

RAISING THE GREEN CURTAIN: SEAN O’FAOLAIN, EDWARD SAID AND THE DEFENCE OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL*

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This article primarily aims to highlight the importance, in the current context, of revalorizing the figure of the public intellectual. The current crisis can be interpreted as not only economic but also intellectual and in the light of this I revisit, and suggest as exemplary, Sean O’Faolain and Edward Said. Specifically, a Saidian “close reading” (Said 2004: 62) is undertaken of the public intervention of O’Faolain in relation to a 1950s controversy in Ireland around the issue of Church influence in the public sphere. I read O’Faolain’s polemic “On a Recent Incident at the International Affairs Association” in dialogue with the ideas on the public intellectual outlined in Said’s Reith Lectures and with the conceptual vocabulary of the Palestinian intellectual, so participating in the broader debate of Ireland in relation to postcolonial critique.

Keywords: *Public intellectual, Sean O’Faolain, Edward Said, power, secularity.*

Este artículo tiene como propósito principal destacar la importancia de revalorizar en el contexto actual la figura del intelectual público. La crisis actual se puede interpretar no sólo como de índole económica sino también intelectual, y ante esta realidad pretendo visitar y así resaltar como ejemplares a Sean O’Faolain y Edward Said. En concreto, se hace una lectura en profundidad, o “close reading” (Said 2004: 62), según el modelo del mismo Said, de la intervención pública de O’Faolain en relación con una controversia surgida en la Irlanda de los años 50 en torno a la influencia de la Iglesia

en la esfera pública. Partiendo de las ideas sobre el intelectual plasmadas por Said en sus “Reith Lectures”, interpreto la polémica de O’Faolain, “On a Recent Incident at the International Affairs Association”, en dialogo con el vocabulario conceptual del intelectual palestino, así participando en el más amplio debate de Irlanda con la crítica postcolonial.

Palabras clave: *Intelectual público, Sean O’Faolain, Edward Said, poder, secularidad.*

Edward Said, in his signally important series of 1993 BBC Reith lectures, subsequently published as *Representations of the Intellectual*, offered the following reflection on the role of the intellectual in his penultimate talk, “Speaking Truth to Power”:

No one can speak up all the time on all the issues. But, I believe, there is a special duty to address the constituted authorized powers of one’s own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in deliberate programs of discrimination, repression and collective cruelty. (72-3)

While Said’s words undoubtedly possess a potent resonance when considered in relation to parts of the world in which conflict and abuse of human rights are an everyday concern, and where even the very notions of “society” and “citizenry” barely achieve pragmatic traction, they are also potentially valuable in the context of the Western world. This is particularly so in view of the manner in which events of recent years have served to seriously compromise the confidence of citizens in the institutions of democracy and in the effective working of a political model whose crisis seems to have assailed the great majority of Western populations by stealth. Said also argues that one of the primary ills afflicting the world is the dominance of a model of professional and technocratic intellectual who is primarily concerned with personal advancement rather than broad social welfare

and liberty. It can be argued that both phenomena are linked: hegemonic models of intellectual and academic participation -in which “the duty” of the intellectual to be public has been largely lost, subsumed by professional ambition- have decisively contributed to the current crisis which is as much intellectual as economic.

In both a spirit of sympathy with Said's views, and in a conscious attempt to highlight the value of the individual, public intellectual as participant in the public sphere, while also seeking to illuminate our current dilemmas through recourse to examples from other times, in this paper I wish to revisit the Irish intellectual Sean O'Faolain and consider particularly his public participation in relation to the ideas on the intellectual articulated by Said. I will here specifically address O'Faolain's defence of individual dissenting intellectuals in the context of Ireland in the 1950s and in relation to Catholic Church power at the time. By doing so, and by proposing such a dialogue with Said, I aim to positively appraise O'Faolain not just as an important writer of fiction but as a public intellectual, and draw attention to and so implicitly critique the current absence in Ireland of intellectuals of such characteristics,¹ while also aiming to further the fruitful engagement between Ireland and voices from what we can call the postcolonial sphere.²

Said's voice, in the above quotation, does not, crucially, presume to possess final authority. Throughout his Reith lectures, and indeed throughout his whole life's work, his tone is often provocative and certainly oppositional but always so in a manner which aims to engage the other and to relate to and, in effect, converse with places, peoples and ideas other than those of the self. Such an attitude is reflected in his constant desire to contest insularity, particularly that tendency to be “completely adrift in self-indulgent subjectivity” resulting from “taking refuge inside a profession or nationality” (1994: 72). Certainly it is problematic to define Said in anti-nationalist terms, as his own activism in favour of Palestinian national independence offers clear testament, and indeed he stresses how the natural position from which most people and most intellectuals engage with “the world” is from within the framework of the nation state and the national community. However, as is apparent in his contention that when the public intellectual speaks out on key issues “the intellectual meaning of a

situation is arrived at by comparing the known and available facts with a norm, also known and available”, we can see that fundamental to his vocation as an intellectual is the need to make connections beyond the place of belonging, particularly of nation or profession (73). A case in point being his proposal of salutary debate between the specific or national and the universal framework provided, for example, by international charters of human rights in order to establish the realities, the facts, of illiberal and exploitative practices visited on peoples around the globe. This we can consider as reflective of perhaps his overall metier, that of speaking truth to power in order to facilitate societies in which liberty and welfare are given value above notions of loyalty to tribe, caste, class or the privileged cabal. For Said “The goal of speaking the truth is, in so administered a mass society as ours, mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles -peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering- applied to the known facts” (1994: 73).

In turning from the heightened discourse of Said, apparent also in his interventions on Palestine, to the “Dreary Eden” of de Valera’s Ireland in the early decades after independence, it is important to emphasise that the extent of restrictions on liberty exercised by governing elites varies hugely across different sites. Notwithstanding the differences between situations such as Ireland and Palestine, when examined closely a striking similarity in the overall tenor of the public discourse of both of the intellectuals we are here examining, O’Faolain and Said, is apparent. As we now turn to O’Faolain we will reveal a common pattern of a persistent if nuanced and sometimes strained insistence on universal ideas of liberty and justice moulded to local needs, hand in hand with a concern for human welfare and a complex relationship to national identity.

Writing in a collection of essays on Ireland’s “lost decade” of the 1950s, Booker prize winner author John Banville recalls an incident from his childhood when what he calls “a mild form of witch-craze” gripped his native county of Wexford (2004: 24). This came about because a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses had arrived in the town, had settled and begun to proselytise, much to the annoyance of the local Catholic clergy. Eventually, one of the priests accompanied by a spirited mob descended on their house, “dragged out the husband and

beat him up on the pavement, to the encouraging shouts of the mob, while the poor man's wife looked on" (25). Banville's sense at the time was that the codes of this society were those of a force which appeared eternal, impregnable and as strong as nature. His perception was that escape could only be achieved by escape from Ireland.

Later, by contrast, he came to realise this reality was man-made, and much of the fault for this unchanging stasis lay at the feet of the lack of will of liberal intellectuals and the "triumph of will among reactionary intellectuals, led by the redoubtable corporatist politician and amateur mathematician, Eamon de Valera" (26), whose overriding desire was to control the new nation, including its potential for violence. He explains:

The republic which [de Valera] founded with the aid and encouragement of John Charles McQuaid,³ was unique: a demilitarised totalitarian state in which the lives of the citizens were to be controlled not by a system of coercive force and secret policing, but by a kind of applied spiritual paralysis maintained by an unofficial federation between the Catholic clergy, the judiciary and the civil service. Essential to this enterprise in social engineering was the policy of intellectual isolationism which de Valera imposed on the country. And essential to that policy were the book and film censorship boards, which from 1930 onwards virtually sealed the country off from the rest of the world, as well as keeping a foot firmly on the necks of our native writers. (26)

This oppression is not an absolute abstract but is, so to speak, a reality on the ground. The foot Banville refers to may be metaphorical but the oppression is not. Just as the specific aggression enacted on the Jehovah's Witness demonstrated how acts of rebellion would be punished, the intellectual's resistance to the orthodoxies of the state, and the addressing of public issues meant peril.

Banville then turns to highlight Sean O'Faolain as his primary example of an oppositional intellectual that took on the power of the

corporatist intellectual elite lead by de Valera. He stresses how important O'Faolain's role was in providing any effective resistance and that he undertook considerable risk with great courage and tenacity, while emphasising also that first "he listened to the sound of the factory siren, he attended to the church's summoning bell and set his own bell clanging in opposition" (29). In other words, the content of his participation as a liberal intellectual in the public sphere is absolutely contingent on the reality pertaining, the concrete needs of the postcolonial nation at that particular time. As Banville concludes "had he been in Wexford that day in the 1950s when an ignorant priest with a mob behind him beat up a rival religionist Ó Faoláin would, I have no doubt, have stepped forward and defended the man with his fists if necessary" (29).

Banville's imagined vision of O'Faolain stripped to the waist in an utterly practical and humanitarian fight to ensure an individual's right to freedom of speech and freedom of worship against the authoritarian "applied spiritual paralysis" that characterised the early decades of the Irish Free State is, perhaps, above all a paean to *The Bell*, the key cultural magazine edited by O'Faolain in the 40s and to which he continued to contribute in the 50s.⁴ And if we turn to look at *The Bell*, it becomes immediately apparent just how appropriate Banville's vision is. Banville focussed particularly on the hegemony of power being exercised by the Catholic Church in the country at the time because he felt the key tensions surrounding the power of the Church were exemplary in revealing the situation of Irish society as a whole and of the prerogatives of intellectuals who had to engage with that society. In a similar manner, a close reading of a specific text relating to the exercise of Church power will afford us an exemplary, representative view of the key characteristics of O'Faolain's intervention in the public sphere as a public intellectual.

I will here examine how O'Faolain engaged with the complex issues surrounding Church power and its influence on individual liberty and minority identity in "On a Recent Incident at the International Affairs Association." Although one of O'Faolain's last contributions to *The Bell*, it exemplifies the spirit of his intellectual engagement while comprising specifically his own participation in what he terms "a heated controversy" that animated public opinion

in late 1952 and early 1953 (1953: 517). The controversy arose as a result of the decision of the Papal Nuncio to walk out of a meeting of the International Affairs Association in protest at the opinions of Hubert Butler suggesting the Catholic archbishop, Stepinac, had been deceived by the Quisling, Pavelic, during the German war-time occupation of Yugoslavia.⁵ O'Faolain's reaction is to enter the fray in defence of his fellow intellectuals, in defence of free-speech and to take on the ubiquitous power of the Catholic Church at the time in Ireland.⁶ O'Faolain thus actively and publicly defends the key role of fellow intellectuals in instigating debate and discussion on matters of public concern. Here O'Faolain chooses to come to the defence of the Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocrat, Butler, a member of the same class which elsewhere O'Faolain scathingly refers to as originating from "alien and colonial conquistadors" (1943: 79). The key issue is that, in line with Said's idea of the public intellectual, loyalties are chosen not in the interest of defending an institution of power, an interest group or an ethnicity, but in consequence with a set of vocationally chosen principles where a humanist concern for personal liberty is paramount.

Fascinatingly, O'Faolain, as postcolonial subject, seems to evidence the need to couch his argumentation in favour of individual liberty in a manner designed to avoid totalizing meaning whilst retaining the capacity to exercise universalisms in defence of individuals whose liberty is in real terms being impinged upon as a result of particular, local circumstances. O'Faolain's use of liberty as a key value is unsteady and troubled, like Said he is cognisant of its flawed pedigree and never completely at "home" with it, primarily given its flawed pedigree as an ideological pretext for colonial expansion, but both are aware of its potential for usage as a provisional conceptual guarantor of individual freedom.

O'Faolain's defence of individual liberty and welfare is varied but it is perhaps especially significant that he should come out so publicly in defence of an Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocrat. In a sense Butler was a non-aligned party in terms of the context within which this particular debate took place. O'Faolain points out that Butler's participation was in response to a paper read by Peter O'Curry, the editor of *The Standard*, a publication which, as O'Faolain clarifies, describes itself as "Catholic Ireland's National Weekly", with the

result being that, with regards to the controversy in question, O'Curry was "bound hand and foot" in discussing such a matter (1953: 518). O'Curry's duty is clearly to the institution which he is serving, the Catholic Church. His intellectual participation is compromised by his loyalty to its values and particularly to the hierarchy that determines the distribution of power within that institution.⁷ Patently one cannot claim the same of O'Faolain. His intellectual activity is not circumscribed and determined by a professional loyalty or a loyalty to any side in this controversy, or to his community of origin, that which especially at this point in history was being identified with Catholicism and the cult of the Gael.⁸ Instead, he decides to champion the cause of Butler, so introducing a discordant note that challenges the authority of the powerful Catholic Church in 1940s Ireland.

In his "Holding Nations and Traditions at Bay" Reith lecture, Said emphasises that the role of the intellectual should be to resist the excesses of dominant powers in society and particularly to defend the individual whose rights are impinged upon. Said defends some of the ideas proposed by C. Wright Mills in *Power, Politics, and People*:

C. Wright Mills's main point is the opposition between the mass and the individual. There is an inherent discrepancy between the powers of large organizations, from governments to corporations, and the relative weakness not just of individuals, but of human beings considered to have subaltern status, minorities, small peoples and states, inferior or lesser cultures and races. (17)

Some may balk at a definition of the erstwhile "big people" of the Anglo-Irish masquerading as postcolonial oppressed, but to a considerable degree the position of the Anglo-Irish Butler was now that of the minority whose interests were newly subaltern to those of the dominant Catholic community, the newly hegemonic ruling caste of Irish society which openly discouraged opinions contrary to the dominant value system. It was thus often difficult for this minority to achieve a platform from which to engage with the mainstream. In this context it would appear that Spivak's question as to whether or not the subaltern could speak is appropriate in the case of Butler who is

effectively gagged by the all-powerful Catholic Church (Spivak 2010).

O'Faolain's reaction is to address the issue publicly and engage critically with the specific detail of the controversy in question. Said states that:

At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public. (17)

However, this attitude of the intellectual also involves what Said calls “a steady realism” that takes account of the need to balance the urge to speak out with the difficulties that arise as a result of the intellectual's belonging to a particular tradition or nation (17). Similarly, O'Faolain is cognisant of the overwhelming power of the Church at the time and of the need to take into account the loyalties of his audience and so does point out that the lack of tact displayed by the Association, in inviting the Papal Nuncio to such a discussion, was key in precipitating the incident, given that, like other ambassadors, he is bound by protocol to verbally protest or leave the meeting if the state he represents is slighted. An apology from the Association to the Papal Nuncio was not out of place but “they should have apologised for their own gaffes, rather than have made Mr. Butler their whipping boy” (518).

O'Faolain then goes on to state the following: “Of course, we all see quite clearly why His Excellency and other Catholics have been deeply moved by the statement that Archbishop Stepinac was duped, Loyalties were involved. The antagonists are not seen as Marshal Tito and Archbishop Stepinac; they are seen as Satan and Christ” (518-519). This tendency to reduce the affair to an axis of totalized conflict is seen by O'Faolain as a natural gravitation on the behalf of people towards the pole of the opposition to which they readily identify, that of their religious or ethnic filiation. However, he unequivocally

subjects this reaction to a critique in which he outlines some of his key beliefs as an intellectual:

Loyalty, however -it has been one of the more profound observations of Mr. Graham Greene- is one of the worst possible guides to Truth: wherefore he maintains that it is the duty of writers to be disloyal-meaning that once a writer commits himself irrevocably to any party-line he must, sooner or later, commit a sin against the truth. Which is one reason why politicians, and I suppose Churchmen, are not particularly enamoured of writers, or anybody else who puts Truth before Loyalty. In Russia they bump them off or buy them off. In the West they suffer them uncomfortably. In Ireland we ostracise them. (519)

Two things are immediately apparent: O'Faolain clearly manifests an attitude congruent with Said's dictum "never solidarity before criticism" (1994: 24). Also, the ideas of "Loyalty" and "Truth" in Ireland take on meaning according to local circumstances, and in what is a stunningly clear statement of Ireland's marginal postcolonial position, he asserts Ireland's difference to the West. As Said suggests, the outward-looking vision that latches on to a universal standard that may help to prevent abuses against individual liberty must still take account of local conditions.

Seemingly, the Papal Nuncio hadn't taken account of local conditions, perhaps mistaking Ireland for the West. O'Faolain goes on to emphasise the ramifications of risky public participation for intellectuals:

Now, may I say that I believe, I certainly hope, that His Excellency the Papal Nuncio had not, up to the incident I am discussing, fully appreciated just how severe the penalties are in this country for people who, like Mr. Butler and Dr. Sheehy-Skeffington, appear to put Truth before Loyalty. It would, at any rate, be entirely understandable that he would not have foreseen the sequels his protest would evoke. In America,

certainly, had an Archbishop walked out of a public discussion there would have been no such sequel. Indeed the discussion would not have been interrupted. In the Irish Republic it is sufficient for any Churchman to utter a whisper, not only to stop all discussion, but to produce the subsequent fury of the laity against the offender. (519)

O'Faolain stresses how the context is so important. In Ireland the Church was all powerful with the result being that the consequences of the Nuncio's action may in fact have proven radically different to what was intended: "Moreover, the saddest effect of His Excellency's protest has been one with which he can surely have no sympathy -the throwing of yet another stone on the cairn erected, stone by stone, over the last twenty-five years, on the grave of an adult, informed, intellectual, Catholic conscience" (519-520). This striking image of a metaphorical stoning is consistent with that of an almost totalitarian regime depicted by Banville as discussed earlier, and it becomes clear that under the guise of loyalty to the nation and to the Church, the particular content being "thrown around" was oppressive and restrictive of individual liberty. O'Faolain proposes instead free speech and liberty of discussion which reaches out to the people. His opinion is that "Such a conscience can only live where full liberty of discussion is permitted to the laity, whose fundamental Loyalty to their Church and Faith must otherwise be as useless as the Loyalty of an ignorant, untrained and unarmed army of mercenaries, unfitted to defend the Truth" (520).

It does seem significant that the Church should be one of the key targets of O'Faolain's attacks. Clearly the degree of self-effacing institutional loyalty demanded of the servants of the Church ran counter to the very nature of his intellectual project. In this he fits in with the model outlined by Said in which unthinking faith is particularly conducive to the totalized thinking that tends to precipitate cultural clash rather than dialogue, and, ultimately, was at the heart of the whole colonial adventure as he so thoroughly outlined in *Orientalism*. In the Reith lectures, Said very explicitly and repeatedly links his model of intellectual to a secular ideal in which religion is a private matter to be respected but resisted in the political sphere:

In and of itself religious belief is to me both understandable and deeply personal: it is rather when a total dogmatic system in which one side is innocently good, the other irreducibly evil, is substituted for the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange, that the secular intellectual feels the unwelcome and inappropriate encroachment of one realm on another. Politics becomes religious enthusiasm -as is the case today in former Yugoslavia -with results in ethnic cleansing, mass slaughter and unending conflict that are horrible to contemplate. (84-85)

Uncritical loyalty is what will lead to such extremes. Instead of, as in O'Faolain's example of Satan and Christ, rendering complex reality into totalized simplicity, for Said the intellectual should resist the simplification and think "of politics in terms of interrelationships or of common histories such as, for instance, the long and complicated dynamic that has bound the Arabs and Muslims to the West and vice versa" (1994: 88-89). Said goes on to clarify his ideas in a manner strikingly suggestive of the overall intellectual vocation or project of O'Faolain:

Real intellectual analysis forbids calling one side innocent, the other evil. Indeed the notion of a side is, where cultures are at issue, highly problematic, since most cultures aren't watertight little packages, all homogenous, and all either good or evil. But if your eye is on your patron, you cannot think as an intellectual, but only as a disciple or acolyte. In the back of your mind there is the thought that you must please, and not displease. (89)

When O'Faolain refers to the editor of *The Standard*, Peter O'Curry, he undramatically but effectively shows how, at bottom, he is an acolyte and compromised by his institutional affiliation: "He could, indeed, be objective, but only on one side of the argument" (518). O'Faolain himself, by contrast, demonstrates how belonging to institutions such as the university or the Church need not preclude critical thinking, and perhaps more than anything this "secular"

attitude is what defines him as an intellectual.

His challenge to totalized thinking is apparent as he states: "For there is not, in fact, an utter chasm between Truth and Loyalty, at least in the domain of religious belief. If there were it would mean that that to which we are Loyal is not the Truth" (520). Ingeniously, in what appears a clear attempt to strategically align himself with his public, to appeal to their sense of faith, O'Faolain then proceeds to depict excess loyalty in concrete specific cases as fundamentally at odds with a core loyalty to the Church in terms of the broad historical framework. He explains:

But two conditions are involved: the first is that we will distinguish between an office and a man; the second, that we do not trade in short-term loyalties for those which we believe to be eternal: in other words we do not play politics in the name of religion, or subserve religion to some passing tactical advantage. Churchmen and laymen have done that before now; and the Church has paid dearly for it. (520)

Said advocates the separation of Church and politics and here O'Faolain does so too but under the guise of a plea in favour of the long term interests of the Church. He cites the example of the Church's use of indulgences as a signal case where short-term political concerns were to have a very damaging and corrupting influence, before proposing his key argument: "Would "Loyalty" have demanded before then that Catholics should not discuss such matters, or condemn such practices?" (520). Unquestionably, this encapsulates the essence of O'Faolain's whole intellectual project. Here he cleverly and strategically uses the pretext of an argument on the issue of loyalty to the Church to propose the primacy of discussion, of what Said calls the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange. The key elements of his argument with regards to the Church are of course relevant to other areas of public life where the participation of the people is defended as a measure against the excessive power of institutions serving an elite hierarchy anxious to reduce popular participation and to demand loyalty to an authoritarian, centralised nexus of power.

Having forcefully argued in favour of the value of discussion amongst Catholics through highlighting the historical example of the use of indulgences, O'Faolain draws attention to the contemporary case of the persecution of Protestants by the Spanish Cardinal Segura of Seville and the criticism of same by some American Catholics. The principle of free discussion means that:

It is equally open to anybody who wishes to do so to praise these same American Catholics for asserting that Catholicism and intolerance are two mutually exclusive things; that the honest individual conscience has rights which must be respected; with all the logical conclusions that follow therefrom, such as that the Church must not coerce others; or that a Censorship, imposed by clerical influence, is to be deplored; or that the Church must not -as Cardinal Segura would- employ the State to enforce its wishes on minorities, or even on majorities; or that the Church and the State has each its own sphere of influence-and, in fact, if any Irish Catholic cares to read that excellent weekly American Catholic layman's paper, *The Commonwealth*, he will find that many intelligent American Catholics lean very much in all those directions. (521)

Here O'Faolain pretends a number of things. First he contests the local hegemony of the Catholic Church by availing of examples, both positive and negative, that open up the framework of reference beyond the national sphere. Secondly, he defends the autonomy of the individual within the institution, anchoring this idea of individual liberty to the idea of individual rights. The corollary of the establishment of these rights is the resistance to the authoritarian enforcement of the will of the elite, and the concomitant contesting of the influence of censorship. Through his employment of the American example he illustrates that the idea of the separation of Church and State is not alien to Catholicism *per se*, so emphasising the contingent particularity of the Irish case, so opening up a space for debate within the Church in defiance of the authority of the Irish hierarchy. If he shows that the Irish version of Catholicism is not equivalent to a universal standard he also points out that the stance of

the Church with regards to political controversies of the day, such as the famous Browne Scheme, also served to alienate what he terms “our Northern fellow-countrymen” so rendering less feasible the prospect of a united Ireland while placing the Catholic minority north of the border in a position of considerable vulnerability (522). In effect, he presents the possibility that the key tenets of mid-twentieth century Irishness, Catholicism and Nationalism need not be synonymous with the authoritarian version then hegemonic in Ireland.

Turning to the specific case of the individuals who in O'Faolain's words “pursued” Butler and Sheehy-Skeffington, he claims their supposed loyalty to their faith was misplaced, demonstrating how it ran counter to the idea of an informed, intellectual Catholic conscience and so counter to the ultimate interests of their faith. They were unwise, “First: because “feelings” are not enough; one must have concrete proof of the intelligence and worth of this loyalty. Secondly: because everything we observe about us in Ireland proves the contrary -it is an empty, unthinking loyalty which is in the long run of no positive value to any cause” (522). Similarly, Said states “Because you serve a god uncritically, all the devils are always on the other side” (1994: 88) before clarifying:

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 recognises only disciples or enemies. What strikes me as much more interesting is how to keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the part of an alert, skeptical irony (preferably also self-irony). (89)

O'Faolain pointedly refuses to demonise any of the parties involved in the Butler incident: those in Kilkenny are the sort one might have a drink with or kneel beside at Mass, those who in Dublin opposed Sheehy-Skeffington might be met at the dogs or in a bus queue. Rather, they are all potential interlocutors with whom the issues ought to be debated in complexity, and people to whom the argument might be presented as to whether they “really think they have served their church nobly by preventing a University lecturer from talking about the Freedom of the Individual? Are they serving

anything by that sort of behaviour? Or disserving it? Is that true Loyalty?" (89).

Of paramount importance here is the manner in which O'Faolain not only openly solicits the participation of the public in debate but also, through his consistent utilisation of questions, he seeks to try to provoke or solicit consideration of issues at hand and so encourage the possibility of discussion. Just as O'Faolain seeks to draw the antagonists of Butler and Sheehy-Skeffington into debate, so too does he attempt to broaden the spectrum of potential debate by highlighting the fact that Church figures in Italy and France and even, as he puts it "to balance Cardinal Segura", in Spain are dealing with issues such as the "Land Question" and the relationship between social unrest and social injustice as well as asking such pertinent questions as whether "the reason men become communists is because they have 'no longer any hope'" (523). Clearly, the more radical voices in Irish Catholicism would censure such areas of debate. O'Faolain, however, to echo Said, thinks "in terms of interrelationships or of common histories" (1994: 88), while, by his promotion of the value of questioning, he seeks to promote a civil space of active, popular engagement.

Using something as emotively resonant to the Irish as the "Land Question" allows O'Faolain map a discursive space which is not collapsed irremediably into poles of permanent opposition. Clearly, the intention is to create in the reading public a space for doubt with the intention of permitting constantly evolving engagements with issues of identity and loyalty, so reiterating them as a process, not a reified given. In Said's words: "Yes, you have convictions and you make judgements, but they are arrived at by work, and by a sense of association with others, other intellectuals, a grassroots movement, a continuing history, a set of lived lives" (1994: 89).

From the outset *The Bell* sought to develop a sort of grassroots movement of complicit, like-minded individuals capable of creating a network of resistance to the orthodoxy of the new State, and here we see how as O'Faolain addresses his public he seeks to provoke, to activate in them an identification with the model of informed, intellectual Catholic conscience he proposes. The reader is being

invited to critically engage with the issues, to reappraise false loyalties and to reposition him/herself in terms of an evolving debate, an ongoing process that contests the positions of fixity proposed by the authoritarian discourse of the hegemonic elite.

Decisions, convictions are arrived at by work, according to Said. This work is critique, going beyond stereotypes and simplicities and through a model of contrapuntal complexity, deconstructing fixed oppositions such as that of Truth and Loyalty or indeed self and other, a dynamic particularly relevant to the question of national identity to which O'Faolain relates the Butler controversy.⁹ The discourse of autarkic authenticity that is borrowed from the colonial model and had the Free State promote itself as a paradise of purity and Gaelic essence is challenged and critiqued as O'Faolain asks: "What is *our* foreign policy? *Our* contribution? I put it to you that our policy is a mean one. We are slipping into the attitude that our hands are too lily-white, our souls too pure, to touch the muck of the world" (523).¹⁰ He then remarks with irony that Ireland will be protected from the conflicts of the world by "geography, geology, and God's special regard for His chosen people. In short, we are snoring gently behind the Green Curtain that we have been rigging up for the last thirty years -Thought-proof, World-proof, Life-proof. The only people *we* are ready to fight for are the angels" (524).

Unfortunately, this fight seems only to take the shape of the pursuit of the easy victims Butler and Sheehy-Skeffington. By contrast, O'Faolain, from his liminal critical position which we can describe as in essence "geographical" and "contrapuntal", facing both to the nation and away from it, seeks to raise this "Green Curtain", and in order to do so he goes to the content of the matter, he addresses the facts, and reveals that the reaction of Catholics to the issue has not been based on intellectual engagement with the reality of what happened. Their attitudes are not the result of an informed consideration of the complexities of a context different to their own but come from a confused sense of loyalty. He wonders "whether those Catholics who have been so offended by the suggestion that he (Cardinal Stepinac) did behave unwisely really know what he is charged with having done" (524). Then, after outlining some of the key details in a manner designed to make them understandable to his

audience and not as part of any obscure theological debate, O'Faolain opens a space of doubt, associates one side with another and suggests that, in fact, it might be more appropriate to interpret Butler's remarks as a defence of Cardinal Stepinac than a charge against him. He concludes: "All I am saying is that we should not only be allowed but *encouraged* to discuss the matter freely, on the ground of that Higher Loyalty where the Truth and all lesser Loyalties become, or should become, magnificently one" (527). Said would, no doubt, have readily concurred with such a secular interpretation of matters of a distant realm.

NOTES

- ¹ The issue of the importance of the role of the public intellectual has been addressed most lucidly in a number of speeches by the current President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, notably in "Of Public Intellectuals, Universities, and a Democratic Crisis" (2012) and in Corcoran and Lalor's *Reflections on Crisis: The Role of the Public Intellectual* (2012). Originating in a 2009 symposium held by the Royal Irish Academy, the latter publication includes contributions from Liam O'Dowd -editor of the important 1996 collection of essays, *On Intellectuals and Intellectual Life in Ireland-* and Tom Garvin. Garvin is one of the few academics to address the question of the decline of profound intellectual debate in the universities and its substitution by the sort of managerial rhetoric which he, following Orwell, caustically terms "Duckspeak" (2012). See also Walsh (2012) and in the British context, Collini (2012).
- ² See Said's Afterword to *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* for his reading of Ireland in postcolonial terms.
- ³ McQuaid was archbishop of Dublin and, along with de Valera, generally reputed to have been hugely influential in the promotion of a reactionary Catholicism explicit, for example, in the severe censorship culture characteristic of the state up until the 1960s. See Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland* (1999) and for a general historical overview, Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (2005).
- ⁴ For a recent examination of O'Faolain as a postcolonial intellectual in

The Bell see Matthews (2012). Goldring, (1993: 149-159), highlights *The Bell's* role as a “dissolver” of borders.

- ⁵ The immediate consequence was that the Chairman of the association stopped the discussion and the next day the Nuncio was visited with an apology by two Committee members. Later Mr. Butler was forced to resign his honorary post as Secretary of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society and elsewhere the member who had invited Butler, Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, was banned from a public debate in Dublin with the apposite title “Can the Individual Survive?”
- ⁶ See also “The Priest in Politics” (1947).
- ⁷ Although most obviously an “ecclesiastic intellectual”, in a sense O'Curry is what Antonio Gramsci called an organic intellectual (1971: 6-7) in view of the fact that he is speaking for a specific class except that his class and its values are hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic. One could perhaps argue that the same is true to a degree of Hubert Butler as he defends the Anglo-Irish perspective in the new position of disadvantage it finds itself in the Free State.
- ⁸ See also O'Faolain's *Bell* editorials “The Stuffed Shirts” (1943) and “The Gaelic Cult” (1944).
- ⁹ Said describes “critique” as at the heart of his idea of secular, democratic humanism (2004: 21-22).
- ¹⁰ In relation to Ireland and “authenticity”, see Graham and Kirkland, *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (1999).

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