

Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr.: On "Spenser's Ireland"

The Irish-American response to its Irish heritage has long been an intense, and at times bellicose, pride in Ireland's capacity not only to endure but to impose significant aspects of its highly sophisticated culture on America's eclectic society, mixed, paradoxically, with a quiet bewilderment at the unwillingness of the Irish to accept the kinds of pragmatic compromises that have characterized American history. Complicating most attempts at defining the ambivalence in this attitude is the recognition that, in America, much of the Irish mystique arises from a popular identification of the race with a trait that is variously praised as perseverance and damned as intransigence. Perhaps the most subtle and articulate statement of Irish-America's perception of itself and its ambivalence occurs in Marianne Moore's "Spenser's Ireland," a meditation on Ireland and the Irish and on their influence upon a person who shares with them only the most tenuous of cultural and biological bonds. Borrowing material from both the distant and recent pasts, Miss Moore directs our attention initially to Spenser's experiences, especially, we soon learn, to his frustration with Ireland's resistance to change, only to redirect us, in a footnote, to "Ireland: The Rock Whence I Was Hewn," a magazine article by Donn Byrne in which she found a wealth of incidental information and a wry viewpoint which helped to generate the self-conscious irony in her conclusion.

Irenius, commonly accepted as the character voicing Spenser's opinions in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, displays great sympathy for, and empathy with, the Irish while at the same time lamenting their unreformed and apparently unreformable behavior. He complains to Eudox, the second speaker in the dialogue, that no matter how often the Irish are shown the proper, responsible way of life, "beinge straighte left unto themselves and their owne inordinate life and manners they eftsones forgote what before they weare taughte and soe sone as they weare out of sighte by themselves shoke of their bridles and begane to Colte anewe more licentiouslye then before." Part of the purpose in Miss Moore's poem is to show that the licentious colting is merely a symptom whose cause lies in a deep-rooted, almost visceral impulse against submission.

Organized into six stanzas, "Spenser's Ireland" refines its author's basic conception stanza by stanza, from the naturalness of the first through the obduracy of the second, disunion of the third, supreme belief and care of the fourth, and possibility of reform in the fifth, to her ironic resolution through dissatisfaction in the sixth. Her choice of a syllabic rather than accentual meter—with eleven lines of 4, 8, 8, 6, 9, 7, 11, 4, 5, 5, and, echoing the Spenserian alexandrine, 12 syllables—allows her to achieve striking linear and morphological effects while employing traditional syntactic patterns. By incorporating the title into her first sentence, Miss Moore creates a continuous thought pattern and integrates what is normally considered an appendage, although an important and necessary one, into the very body of her poem:

[quotes lines 1-11]

What at first appears to be an uncomplicated, lyrical tone set by the assonance and alliteration of the opening lines soon proves to contain suggestions of tension in the ambiguities of its diction. This process formally begins with a reversal of the reader's

expectations by using "never" where "ever" is anticipated. But even before this, greenness implies not only the inevitable allusion to Ireland's visual splendor, but also, especially in conjunction with the implicit reference to Spenser's criticism, an immaturity or lack of development. Suspicions that the poem is something other than a simple paean to Irish beauty become even more justified when Ireland is personified as a "culprit" whose fear is neither names nor sticks and stones, but silence. The traditional Irish love of conversation, even via multi-person monologues, is suggested, as well as the poet's implied admission that her incriminations are doomed, since they will not be felt because her very articulation of them is a victory for the accused.

The naturalness of the Irish has two aspects. One is their undeveloped greenness, an idea which is reinforced by the disused sleeves which follow the syntactic digression in lines nine through eleven. The digression itself cites a primary cause for the greenness, an excessive and inhibiting reliance on mythology. The second element of the naturalness lies in the close association of the Irish with nature, an association which the poet will later project as a possible source of regeneration. Throughout the opening stanza Miss Moore has catalogued the major charges both Spenser and the twentieth century have brought against Ireland: latent Celtic paganism, the dislike of more work than necessary for survival, the use of mythology to escape rather than to understand reality, and the failure to exploit twentieth century technology. The remainder of the poem is an attempt to evaluate these charges by examining the author's reactions to them.

The second stanza opens with a question, a significant divergence from the simple statements in the first sentence of the previous stanza:

[quotes lines 12-22]

Two Irish customs gleaned from Mr. Byrne's article, playing harps backward to frighten potential supernatural enemies and evading giants?in this case the iron giants of industry as well as of myth?by swallowing fern seed, lead Miss Moore to wonder if there might not be a similar magic substance to cure Irish stubbornness. But at the same time she finds that the magic which does exist lacks the essential quality of magic: enchantment. Moreover, she believes that the Irish are misusing magic in some way, either, as her own use of it in her wish in these lines implies, by not employing it on the proper objects or by allowing it and their past to preoccupy them to the exclusion of a rational ordering of the present. Morphologically, she illustrates the process she is wishing for by removing the suffix of "unlearning" to the following lines to show how knowledge must be separated for analysis and reevaluation before the integrity of "reinstating" can be realized.

Grandmothers personify the past in hindering their descendants. Their influence, in fact, carries into the following stanza's anecdote:

[quotes lines 23-30]

That "a match not a marriage was made" is characteristically Irish for marriage denotes a union while a match is merely a juxtaposition. The first line of the third stanza is thus a comment on both the second line and the anecdote as a whole. Tradition persists as the author's grandmother is frustrated by her grandmother, herself grandmother?d. "Disunion" recalls the last word of the first stanza, "disuse," but develops the essential Irish nature as more actively negative, or perhaps even destructive, than the earlier word had.

A simple vowel substitution in the thirty-first line further defines the race:

[quotes lines 30-44]

Uncertain of whether the second phrase is coordinate or resultant, we are forced to accept the ambiguity. Fairies have the capacity for bringing either good or evil; furies, both more ominous and more obdurate, are limited to the latter. By enjambing the thirty-third line with the following stanza, Miss Moore stresses the continuing obduracy of her speaker. And, by her use of "sees," she expands our awareness of her interest in the creative possibilities of ambiguity: seemingly intransitive, since it comes at a normal pause, with the effect of appearing to make an extremely general statement, "sees" is actually transitive, offering the paradox that freedom arises from captivity. "Supreme belief," although left purposely vague to avoid theological complications, is obliquely defined by the descriptive passage which follows and by Miss Moore's own practice: the poem itself. The freedom with which she is concerned is not the freedom to act, but the freedom that arises from acting with care and skill, the state achieved by the careful, precise tier of flies. Only by emulating such care as his might Ireland regain its former enchantment.

[quotes lines 45-51]

The hands which "divide / flax for damask" concur both with one another and with the fingers which "tremblingly divide the wings." By working together the hands and fingers offer an example of care and of union. This is the positive participation with nature of which the "natural" Irish are capable. Human care and nature create an object (damask) with human properties (skin). But items which have not been carefully made, such as the jewelry shown in Mr. Byrne's article, cannot compare with nature or, by implication, with that which has been fashioned with care and metaphorically compared with nature.

After proposing the means by which Ireland might change, Miss Moore imagines the results of a reversion to enchantment, but only briefly:

[quotes lines 51-66]

Ireland, regaining its enchantment, would emerge no longer in the delicate guise of the guillemot or linnet, but with the stature of a stag or a "great green-eyed cat of / the mountain." Returning from this reflection to reality, she points to the actual result of Irish metamorphosis, invisibility, and questions the Irish boast of total empathy. By wishing that she could believe this claim, she indicates that she does not. And this is how she remains, "troubled . . . dissatisfied . . . Irish."

In the course of her poem, Miss Moore has created a definition and accepted it for herself. Her own state of dissatisfaction is the lack of union between desire, what she wishes for, and reality, what she will accept; she is therefore disunified. Throughout the poem she reveals her essentially Irish nature, for the poem itself is an expression of her inability to submit in silence, her need to speak out. She betrays her own attitude toward magic and mystery by desiring to use the same means as her subjects?fern seeds and metamorphosis?but to cure rather than hinder; even her last sentence begins with a wish.

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