Liam O’Flaherty

–A Chronicler of Self, Nature and Nationhood–

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Liam O’Flaherty might be compared to an ancient Irish scholar who hunted for words as sedulously as his cat for mice and exerted himself to inscribe his country and countrymen in his writings. It would not be an overstatement to say that, with his distinctive style, tenacious pursuit of Irish themes and fecund career, O’Flaherty left an indelible mark on the post–colonial scene of Irish literature. Some of his novels and stories, equipped with the mixed charms of rugged energy and dainty sensibility, are still capable of providing a delightful reading experience. Despite the noteworthy contribution, however, the Irish novelist remains relatively unknown outside the English–speaking cultures. Even in Ireland, his name has been left drifting into oblivion, deprived of means to prove its value: his novels and short stories had long been out of print until some of them began to be reissued in recent years. Unluckily for him, his fiction on one hand received little lasting recognition from critical circles. On the other, his accomplishments are ever overshadowed by those of his compatriots who bestride the history of not only Anglo–Irish but also world literature as behemoths of fiction, poetry and/or drama.

Indeed, for all her diminutive size and limited resources, Ireland has been a cradle of an amazing variety of writers in the past centuries. Her list of celebrated literary figures includes Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Lawrence Sterne (1713–68), Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74), Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), James Joyce (1882–1941), Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Iris Murdoch (1919–99), and Seamus Heaney (1939– ), to name only the cream of them. Much to the chagrin as well as the pride of the nation, these masters and mistresses won their way into the mainstream of English literature and in extreme cases left their ethnic identity trailing far behind. It is known that some of them wrote fervently in assertion of their cultural distinctions and that some, on the contrary, aspired to serve greater gods and exiled themselves in foreign lands in quest of them, but the majority seem at least outwardly to have shared the frame of mind in which Swift resentfully called his transference from London back to Dublin ‘banishment’ (Jeffares, 25). For the last group, who strove to be better Englishmen than Englishmen despite the derogatory name of ‘shoneen’ hurled at them, shedding or disregarding Irish backgrounds was ironically the genuine sign of being Irish.
While Liam O’Flaherty may not commonly be admitted into the Irish pantheon of literature, his work charts a certain dimension of Irish culture and writing in a unique way. Scrutiny of his fiction is of great interest and significance in itself and also casts light on the shades of the psyche and spiritual milieu of the nation as a whole. This essay intends to formulate an overview of his life, work and ideas.

1. Life

The details of Liam O’Flaherty’s life remain vague and elusive. His biography has never been published if attempted, possibly for two obvious reasons. First, his commercial value has dramatically waned as his popularity plummeted after his death. Secondly, there is a dire scarcity of information about him, chiefly due to his personal trait as an extremely private person, the trait which led him into an increasingly seclusive lifestyle at the prime of his career. When a quirky personality is conjoined with an idiosyncratic habit, the situation will be disastrous for a biographer. O’Flaherty’s frequent change of address and more frequent change of residence to the point of having no address help to make his footpath all but impossible to track down chronologically. This results in lapses, gaps and blurry spots in his biographical data. The final phase of his life was spent virtually as a recluse in the city of Dublin. What went on inside him lies beyond retrieval and can only be conjectured.

Articulate by nature and verbally exuberant by choice, O’Flaherty rather freely set forth his views and opinions during the early years of his career. His reviews and articles are now all located, his letters amassed, and his conversations recollected. He even let out the crucial twists and turns of his own life in such essays of obviously autobiographical vein as Two Years (1930), I Went to Russia (1931), and Shame The Devil (1934). All this would leave an impression that there is a deluge instead of a shortage of information on him. But these documents and materials actually serve more to camouflage than elucidate his personal life and views. Scholars and critics go as far as to complain that, by his volubility and indulgence in personal revelations, the secretive author intended to confound or forestall future projects on his biography.

O’Flaherty himself hardly concealed his detestation of biographers. He avers in one of his autobiographical volumes how he was filled with fury when he started to read a life of Paul Verlaine at a restaurant in Paris:

Can anything be more obscene than these literary grave-robers? Tchekoff (sic) said that critics were like gad-flies worrying a labouring horse, but these men who write biographies of eminent writers nowadays are far more vicious. *(Shame The Devil, 93)*

According to A. A. Kelly *(The Letters, 7)*, O’Flaherty ordered people close to him not to keep his letters
and took pains himself not to leave his traces behind. The immediate members of his family consented to his request: his correspondence, for example, with his daughter Pegasus was all destroyed. But not everybody quite conformed to his wish. Most of his letters to Edward Garnett, his literary mentor, and Catherine Harding Tailer, his longtime American companion he nicknamed 'Kitty', survived his fastidious concern with confidentiality. Towards the end of *Shame The Devil*, he boasts in a sarcastic tune that '...should I be considered worth a biography, I have robbed grave—robbers of their beastly loot' (284). The statement betrays the speaker more than he purports, given the fact that O'Flaherty himself already authored a biography, *The Life of Tim Healy* (1927). His views, placed at the mercy of his moods and tempers, rarely accorded with his behaviour. Consistency was quite foreign to his impulsive and volatile disposition.

Consequently, his pseudo—autobiographical writings ought to be approached with some caution and reservation: as a matter of fact, *Two Years* reads somewhat like a picaresque novel laden with episodes of romance and adventure, and *Shame The Devil* like a first—person narrative with a novelist—protagonist struggling to overcome a writer's block. Under the pretension to taunt biographers, O'Flaherty managed to entertain himself and his readers but failed to compose a reliable account of his inner development as a writer, although John Zueimer has set forth the opposite view (191—92). The author's sincere version of a portrait of the artist as a young man ought to be found elsewhere.

Like any other artist, O'Flaherty coveted laudation, fame and material comfort. He felt elated by his celebrity status as anybody else would in his situation. Urban life, with its gaiety, refinement and allure of frivolity, appealed as much to him as to any other men of cultivated tastes. But at the same time he never forgot his origin. He remained a man of Aran, incorrigibly independent, proud and even haughty under a semblance of courteousness. He was above all a self—conscious man perpetually alerted to the presence of a shy, awkward boy of the humblest birth inside him. The howls of wintry winds over his island and the thunderous roars of waves against its cliffs continued to resound in him as an intermittent reminder of who he was. Interactions of primitive innocence and civilized arrogance may have been culpable for O'Flaherty's fanatical preservation of privacy.

The outline of his life and career, however, is known. Liam (the Gaelic form of William) O'Flaherty was born on 28 August 1896 in the village of Gort na gCapall ('the field of horses') near Kilmurvey in Inishmore (spelt also Inishmór or Inis Mór), the largest of the Aran Islands in County Galway. Afloat forlornly in the Atlantic Ocean and exposed defenselessly to the ruthless buffettings of the elements, the islands make life a constant challenge for survival. J. M. Synge's plays and account of Aran evoke a vivid picture of the everyday life of the islanders around the turn of the twentieth century. He remarks in his travelogue:

A week of sweeping fogs has passed over and given me a strange sense of exile and desolation. I
walk around the island nearly every day, yet I can see nothing anywhere but a mass of wet rock, a strip of surf, and then a tumult of waves. (277)

It has become a critical commonplace to emphasize the influence of this environment over O’Flaherty’s literature, as demonstrated by Paul A. Doyle [17]. The villages scattered on the rocky islands were a living witness to appalling misery and destitution. There is an old archive recording the frank voices of a parish priest who described those villages as ‘the most poverty–stricken hamlets in the kingdom, probably in the world’ (Sheeran, 15). O’Flaherty’s family was ‘one of the poorest of the poor’ (ibid, 18). O’Flaherty’s father, Michael, was a peasant, a Land Leaguer and a staunch Fenian, feared and revered in the island for his rebellious temperament. His mother, Margaret, was a superb storyteller who, the author recalls, ‘would gather us about her at the empty hearth and weave fantastic stories about giants and fairies, or mime the comic adventures of our neighbours, until our hungry little bellies were sick with laughter’ (Shame The Devil, 18). She remained an object of sheer adoration and love throughout his life. His ‘Lovers’, an exquisite story which crystallizes the relentless cruelty of life, draws on the turbulent courtship and wedding of his parents. He recollects his mother telling him

how her handsome young lover came at night on horseback to her father’s house and abducted her, at the very moment when another suitor from the mainland was there for her hand; how she was married at dawn in the chapel and went to live in an old deserted house in our village, penniless and unforgiven by her parents. (Shame The Devil, 17)

O’Flaherty’s superb achievement in schoolwork soon attracted the attention of David O’Callaghan, headmaster of his school, who instructed him to pursue the priesthood. Sean O’Faolain has discerned a marked shift which occurred around 1850 for elevation of the social standing of Catholic priests in Ireland (107–28). In the wake of this new trend, the religious vocation provided bright sons of poor peasants with a good opportunity of success: it definitely promised them the surest means of survival and security. Best of all for the young O’Flaherty, education given that way cost practically nothing. He held O’Callaghan in the highest esteem (Sheeran, 45–46) and modeled the titular hero of Skerrett (1932) after him. As the novel unmistakably shows, the craggy scenery of the island, the seasonal toils in farming and fishing, and the figures of priests and teachers left a permanent stamp on the author’s formative memory. Not only do the people and nature of Aran furnish a familiar background for a number of O’Flaherty’s works, but they are also highlighted and even ‘foregrounded’ in some of his stories and novels whose location is set in the countryside.

347 (14)
In 1908, O’Flaherty left home at the age of thirteen to be enrolled at Rockwell College in the county of Tipperary. The school was one of the biggest missionary institutions in Ireland. His short story titled 'The Parting’ poignantly envisages the fear, sorrow and helplessness of a young boy in moving alone to a distant city. O’Flaherty continued to excel in studies, particularly in writing and languages. But the rebellious streak which critics claim he had inherited from his father reared its ominous head in him. He refused to take the soutane, the first significant step to ordination, and infuriated the faculty of the school. But the young O’Flaherty was convinced right from the beginning that all he wanted was education, not a life dedicated to missionary activities in foreign countries. In 1913, he was transferred to Blackrock College in County Dublin as a boarding student. He proceeded to Holy Cross College at Clonliffe in 1914, perhaps for a second attempt at the priesthood. In the same year, he entered University College Dublin upon a scholarship he had won. Finding himself unable to settle in the academe, either, he joined the Irish Guards of the British Army and took part in World War I in the following year. He fought in France and Belgium as a private in the infantry and received a wound from a shell explosion at Langemarck in 1917. The physical injuries were healed but the psychological trauma of shellshock was to haunt him and torture his nerves with melancholia acuta, a sudden fit of panic and depression, for many years to come. Looking back on his experiences in the war, O’Flaherty opines, as usual, in contradictory voices:

It was merely the riot of a mob in celebration of the victory of a mob over another mob, equally senseless. That barren and inglorious war, whose record is mud and noise and obscene poison, ended in a common debauch of drunkenness, gluttony, and fornication. (Two Years, 74)

No matter how we may curse the war, my generation was fortunate in being given this wonderful lesson in the defects of the European system of civilization. Had it not been for my participation in the war, I might still be a petty Irish nationalist, with a carped outlook on life, one of those sniveling patriots who would prefer an Irish dunghill to an English flower garden in full bloom. (Shame The Devil, 21)

After a brief stay back home, he set out to travel widely abroad between 1918 and 1921. While doing an assortment of odd jobs, he visited London, South America, Turkey, Canada and the United States. This period of his life is recounted in Two Years. Then he went back to Ireland to join the Republicans in the Civil War. His socialistic credo led him to organize the seizure and occupation of the government building commonly called the Rotunda in O’Connell Street in 1922. As the leader of a small army of unemployed men, he fought valiantly but was driven out after three days. He had managed to flee to Cork with two
companions (*Shame The Devil*, 22) before heavy bloodshed took place.

A curious pattern can be discerned from the orbit of O’Flaherty’s youthful adventures and struggles. The key words for this part – and also the rest – of his life might be ‘devotion’ and ‘desertion’: there is a period of his concentration and dedication, which is brought to a premature end by his total abandonment of the causes he has worked for and is followed by his abrupt disappearance. In his own explanation, his life was simply governed and dictated by what he called the ‘instinct for self-preservation’:

“Drop everything and fly,” it said. “If you stay here you are lost. Get back to your rocks where the devil can’t tempt you. Banish from your mind everything that worries you. Get rid of all responsibilities. Make a fig at whatever duty you owe society and your dependents. Only one thing is important to a living being, and that is life. Preserve it.” (*Shame The Devil*, 11)

This might have been the prime mover of the author’s seemingly split persona punctuated with peculiar inconsistencies of speech and conduct. In response to the elemental call of his instinct, O’Flaherty dropped everything at the age of twenty-six. He came to terms with himself through a painful understanding of the darker sides of human nature as revealed in his involvement with religion, politics and ideology. He bid adieu to the practice of Catholicism, Republicanism and Communism, roughly in that order, though he remained sympathetic to the last two credos for the rest of his life.

Now he turned his attention toward literature. After some false starts and aborted attempts confessed in *Two years*, he once and for all resolved to become a writer in 1922. He went to London, where his first work of fiction ‘The Sniper’ appeared in the *New Leader* in January 1923. It is a short story cast somewhat in the mold of O. Henry’s fiction and furnished with a stunning ending where the young hero discovers that the enemy he has shot dead is his own brother: O’Flaherty might be indebted here as in many other places to Shakespeare, whose 3*Henry IV* (2.5) has family members fighting in opposite camps. Fortunately, the story captured the attention of the writer and editor Edward Garnett, whose protégés included Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence and many others who went on to become writers of consequence. Under Garnett’s guidance, O’Flaherty embarked on an energetic career as a novelist. The wandering soul at last discovered the mission destined for it, though the itinerancy of the body was to last for many more years. With the publication of *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* (1923) commenced O’Flaherty’s tremendous output in composition, more than 30 books in three decades. It was also Garnett who helped O’Flaherty discover the value of the Aran Islands as a subject to write about: Garnett was to O’Flaherty what Yeats had been to Synge. But O’Flaherty’s lofty pride did not allow him to admit it. He maintained that, while walking around in London, he all of a sudden realized his duty to be the ‘spokesman’ of the simple life of his people: ‘So I rushed back to the house, sat
down to the typewriter and began to write about Aran’ (Shame The Devil, 38). There was born another writer devoted to Irish themes no matter who was the midwife.

O’Flaherty’s private life after he took up writing continued to be in turmoil, noticeably in the fields of finance and romance. Simply out of pecuniary necessity, he displayed a keen interest in how his fiction was received and tended to be oversensitive to the reactions of reviewers and readers. In a letter (16 July 1925) to Garnett, he declared, ‘To hell with them – but one must earn a living’ (Cahalan, 8). It is undeniable that art was compromised for practical needs more than once in his career. Despite his frantic pace of production, he rarely succeeded in pulling himself out of financial penury, and Garnett assisted him in this area, too. His change of agents and publishers originated from his invertebrate suspicion about their financial dealings. In the meantime, O’Flaherty was involved in a series of turbulent relationships with women, and that was where his instinct of self-preservation functioned most readily and potently. Before his career took off, Mrs Casey, a long-term sympathizer with Republican activists, invited him to stay in her house in London. With some success gained from the publication of Thy Neighbour’s Wife, he proposed to her daughter, who had herself been a fierce admirer of his talents. But after a while he suddenly broke off his engagement with her for the reason that he wished to devote himself entirely to writing. His change of mind elicited stringent words of contempt and reproach from the indignant mother: ‘You have the characteristics of a low-born Irish peasant. Servile when you must, insolent when you may’ (Cahalan, 10). The reader might be taken aback when he finds the second sentence inserted in a passage discussing ‘cowardliness’ in The House of Gold (219).

After a torrid affair with Mrs Morris in England, O’Flaherty moved back to Dublin and met Margaret Barrington. She was then the wife of a famous historian, but divorced him and married O’Flaherty in 1926. The couple had a daughter but separated in 1932 due to their irreconcilable discrepancies in lifestyle. The wife remained emotionally attached to the writer and refused divorce to the end of her life. Around the same time, his partnership with Garnett started to languish after a decade of close correspondence: there is no surviving letter between them after 1932. It is assumed that O’Flaherty spent the subsequent years in the United States, mostly in Connecticut, and returned to Dublin in 1946. Kitty Tailer by then occupied a significant place in his life, looking after him in practical matters like finance and copyrights. He settled permanently in the city in 1952. Early 1950s witness the rapid decline in his literary productivity. A. A. Kelly states that ‘O’Flaherty’s letters to Kitty reveal his distress at his waning creative powers as old age progressed, though he continued trying to write until his mind failed’ (Letters, 10). He strove to withhold another onset of his instinct of self-preservation, but this time passion had deserted him. The eloquent author was forced to retreat into a lengthy period of silence, dejection and perhaps self-doubt. Except for occasional outings including trips to London and Paris, he was rarely seen in public. His embattled soul was finally discharged from its prolonged services in storytelling in 1984. O’Flaherty was aged 88.
2. Works

The following is a chronological list of Liam O'Flaherty’s writings conflated from the bibliographies compiled by A. A. Kelly (*The Storyteller*, 138–40) and George Jefferson (17–59 for novels, 83–97 for collections of short stories):

1) Novels

*Thy Neighbour’s Wife* – October 1923

*The Black Soul* – April 1924

*The Informer* – September 1925

*Mr. Gilhooley* – October 1926


*The Assassin* – May 1928

*The House of Gold* – September 1929

*The Return of the Brute* – October 1929

*The Puritan* – January 1931

*Skerrett* – July 1932

*The Martyr* – January 1933

*Hollywood Cemetery* – November 1935

*Famine* – January 1937

*Land* – May 1946

*Insurrection* – October 1950

2) Short Stories

*Spring Sowing* – 1924

*The Tent* – 1926

*The Mountain Tavern* – 1929

*The Wild Swan* – 1932

*The Short Stories of Liam O’Flaherty* – 1937

*Two Lovely Beasts* – 1948

*Dúil* – 1953

*The Stories of Liam O’Flaherty* – 1956

*Liam O’Flaherty: Selected Stories* – 1958

*Selected Short Stories of Liam O’Flaherty* – 1970

*Irish Portraits: 14 Short Stories* – 1970

*The Short Stories of Liam O’Flaherty* – 1971

*More Short Stories of Liam O’Flaherty* – 1971

*The Pedlar’s Revenge & Other Stories* – 1976

’*All Things Come of Age’* – 1977

’*A Test of Courage’* – 1977

3) Fantasy

*The Ecstasy of Angus* – 1931

4) Autobiography

*Two Years* – 1930

*I Went to Russia* – 1931

*Shame The Devil* – 1934
5) Drama

_Darkness: A Tragedy in Three Acts_ – 1926

6) Essays

_A Tourist's Guide to Ireland_ – 1929

_A Cure for Unemployment_ – 1931

7) Biography

_The Life of Tim Healy_ – 1927

In addition, O'Flaherty contributed a number of reviews and commentaries to newspapers, journals and magazines. The oeuvre thus ranges widely in genre, style and viewpoint but can be compressed, for convenience of discussion, into the three dominant categories of novel, short story, and others.

O'Flaherty realized early in his career that drama did not exactly suit his style and disposition. Neither did literary criticism please him too well: his achievement in this field is limited to _Joseph Conrad: An Appreciation_ (1929). A unique place in his corpus is occupied by _The Ecstasy of Angus_, which is not a novel in the strict sense of the term but something else that might be called a fable or fantasia. A manifestation of O'Flaherty's fundamental concept of humanity, the work compounds Christian and pagan factors into a new genesis of the universe. The result is a concoction of eroticism, Arcadian innocence and Nietzschean nihilism in a receptacle of Gaelic design as if opposed to the Catholic dogma. Like Oisin, Angus, God of love, loses his youth and life force when he succumbs to the carnal temptation of the seductive fairy Fand. His downfall paves way to the arrival of a new world, in which the birth of a mortal life is announced under the eternal curse of the dying god. O'Flaherty's imagination, set free from the constraints of reality and history, gesticulates in an outburst of creation through its association with Celtic myth and legend. The same cultural heritage is utilized in his short story 'The Mermaid'. If he had made further use of it, his artistic vision could have attained a wider scope and his career a longer life. In the meantime, O'Flaherty finds an outlet for his humorous side in essays. His autobiographical writings and _A Tourist's Guide to Ireland_ emit a wry sense of humour and a sharp satirical spirit. Perceivable in them are the influences of fishermen's and old housewives' tales he heard over and over again as a child. Synge's travelogue here again give testimony to the time-honoured tradition in which people of Aran told stories in the vernacular language as a means of recreation and communication.

A fluent speaker of Irish and an ardent if erratic exponent of its status as the national tongue, O'Flaherty was one of the very few professional writers who could compose in the language with grace and gusto. But
the situation surrounding Irish was far from favourable despite the combined efforts of nationalistic movements like the Gaelic Athletic Association (founded in 1884), the Irish Literary Society (set up by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in 1891), and the Gaelic League (established by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeil in 1893). At the end of the nineteenth century, Irish was spoken, mostly in rural areas, by no more than fifteen percent of the population, and those speakers were commonly illiterate (Cahalan, 12). The commercial value of the language was therefore virtually nil in O’Flaherty’s days. The proportion of its speakers is now further reduced down to a few percent of the entire population. ‘Dúil’, O’Flaherty’s story highly lauded in the circles of Irish-speaking people, is unapproachable to ordinary readers in Ireland today, although it has the English version rendered by the author himself under the title of ‘Desire’. This essay deals with his fictional writing in English to the exclusion of the rest.

As a novelist, O’Flaherty draws in a large measure on his own observation and experience. He certainly conducted research and investigation before and during concentrated periods of composition, but his imagination never ventured too far into a terrain totally unknown to him. He tended to found his narratives on what he had seen, heard or done. In this sense, he may be classified as a distinctly personal writer. His war novels, *The Informer, The Return of the Brute, The Assassin*, and *Insurrection* are based more or less on his insider knowledge on World War I and the Civil War. His familiarity with rural life and scenery is put to use in *Thy Neighbour’s Life, The Black Soul, The Wilderness, The House of Gold, Skerrett, and The Martyr. Famine* and *Land* evidently stand outside his immediate experience but come within a geographical and historical range he felt comfortable with. His brush with the cinema industry bore fruit in *Hollywood Cemetery*. *Mr. Gilhooley* and *The Puritan* dramatize the gloom and hollowness of modern life the author detected in Dublin in the wake of the Civil War. His short stories, for which he is more renowned, also rely on his first-hand knowledge and experience. They can be divided roughly into three groups according to their subjects: war (e.g., ‘The Sniper’, ‘The Mountain Tavern’, ‘Wolf Lanigan’s Death’, ‘Civil War’), nature (e.g., ‘The Conger Eel’, ‘The Cow’s Death’, ‘The Wild Swan’), and peasants’ life (e.g., ‘Going into Exile’, ‘Patsa, or the Belly of Gold’, ‘Red Barbara’).

Constructed in the propinquity of his own life and consciousness, O’Flaherty’s fiction is circumscribed in characterization, location and topic. His heroes are a kind of replica of his own self or someone he knew or admired personally. They hail from Aran or its vicinity or at least from provincial areas. They can be profiled as ‘young, rebellious, of peasant stock’. Among his protagonists, those who are intellectuals flee to or reside in the countryside for self-discovery. Those who are not dream about their home village at crucial moments. On the run for his life, Gypo Nolan longs for ‘the mountains and the wide undulating plains and the rocky passes and the swift-flowing rivers’ where he instinctively knows there are ‘freedom and solitude and quiet’ (236). Prior to his final charge against the Imperial Troops, Bartly Madden perceives that ‘Images
of stark beauty, from his native earth and sea, passed in solemn procession across the horizon of his memory’ (188). At some significant stages of his life, O’Flaherty himself went back to Aran for solace, protection and inspiration though he left it each time with a stronger conviction that he was an outcast, a stranger to his own village.

The author’s tendency to rather stereotypical characterization becomes more visible in his depiction of women and hinders him considerably in creation of female characters with verisimilitude. His heroines can be summed up as young women either voluptuous or intellectual. Some of his novels, like The Puritan, The Return of the Brute, Skerrett and Insurrection, are even bereft of heroines. In Famine alone is a female character ensconced in the leading role. His short stories are given a longer tether in this respect. Quite a few of them feature a woman – ‘Josephine’, ‘The Painted Woman’, ‘The Sinner’, ‘Red Barbara’, ‘The Touch’, ‘The Old Woman’, and ‘Mother and Son’. His novels have few old principal characters other than Brian Kilmartin, whereas his short stories are populated by a horde of old folks with unforgettable personalities – ‘A Shilling’, ‘The Wild Sow’, The Pedlar’s Revenge’, ‘Patsa, or The Belly of Gold’, ‘The Stone’, ‘Galway Bay’ and ‘Lovers’. Children assume a cameo role in some of O’Flaherty’s short stories – ‘The Wren’s Nest’, ‘Sport: The Kill’, ‘The Child of God’, ‘Three Lambs’, The Test of Courage’, ‘Desire’, but they are totally left out in his novels. Evidently, the selection of characters is manoeuvred methodically with relation to the form of narrative and the mode of approach. The author’s overt emotional commitment in his novels demands realistic touches and grants little liberty with characters. On the other hand, his short stories, composed from a more objective perspective, fit in with a naturalistic approach and are capable of accommodating a wider spectrum of characters.

The location, too, is restricted to Dublin or the countryside: the former is employed in The Informer, Mr. Gilhooley, The Assassin, The Puritan and Insurrection, and the latter adopted in Thy Neighbour’s Wife, The Black Soul, The Wilderness, The House of Gold, Skerrett, The Martyr, Famine and Land. In the case of the latter, the locale is often designated as Inverara or Nara (the reverse reading of Aran), a fictional place he invented for his novels and short stories. Exceptions to this formula are restricted to The Return of the Brute, whose plot unfolds at a battlefront in the Continent, and Hollywood Cemetery, a notorious byproduct of O’Flaherty’s sojourn in Tinseltown. In the short stories, ‘Indian Summer’, ‘The Backwoodman’s Daughter’, ‘In Each Beginning Is An End’ and ‘Wild Stallions’ are notable exceptions located in exotic places, most of which are none the less referred to in Two Years.

These conspicuous features, which might be called ‘limitations’, are an essential part of O’Flaherty’s fiction-writing. They certainly contribute to both his rise to renown and his tumble into obscurity after his death. His novels interacted so closely with the conditions and affairs of his times that some of them can hardly find a solid footing to stand on any longer. The parameter of society has since shifted at an
unprecedented rate, especially concerning issues of gender and family, and the general public is ever known to be fickle in its taste and patronage. Modern readers may judge O’Flaherty’s fiction to contain too much violence, rage and gloom and his protagonists to be too chauvinistic or too idealized to feel rapport with. For all these drawbacks and shortcomings, however, no one can deny that his fiction is possessed of certain values that lie beyond the pale of an age and society, of something that is fundamental in literature. The pages that follow will be spent for examination of the artistic fibres and virtues of his fiction.

3. Appreciation

Here are two writers who happened to be contemporary to each other, have the same nationality, and endeavour in the same genre of fiction. They were both wunderkinds prominently endowed with gifts for language. They at one time received education to be a priest but later became vigorously anticlerical. They studied, or intended to study, medicine for a little while. They harboured a complicated bittersweet feeling toward their homeland. They wandered from country to country as an exile or bohemian in quest for freedom and romance. They displayed remarkable dexterity in short stories. They seldom if ever sought their subject matter outside their country and countrymen. Their similarities end there. One was rural–oriented, and the other urban–bent. One was a passionate revolutionary, the other a cynical intellectual. One was a perennial loner, the other changed into a family man. One eventually returned home, while the other, except for a few short visits, stayed away from home. One wrote to live, the other lived to write. One condescended to conventions to preserve himself; the other transcended conventions to be himself. One churned out story after story and burned out. The other penned and published with a miserly grip up to his death. One ended up as a peculiarly vernacular storyteller. The other went on to be 'a world author', according to Declan Kiberd (327). The former is Liam O’Flaherty, the latter James Joyce. They met in Paris (Shame The Devil, 196) and, upon Joyce’s insistence, travelled together to Stonehenge in summer 1931 (Costello, 75). The comparison could be cited as a showcase example of differences in professional aptitude, propensity and vision. It has enabled the critique of O’Flaherty to pinpoint his quality and caliber as a writer. From an analysis of the images of a bird employed by the two writers, Patrick F. Sheenan draws the following conclusion:

Joyce’s image is vibrant with mythological meanings. O’Flaherty’s comes straight from the natural world of his childhood. (96–97).

The comparison between O’Flaherty and Joyce will potentially gain further significance as an index to consideration of Irish literature as a whole. Generally, the intellectuals in Ireland, as in Russia, are keenly
aware of a collective fate that defines them as such, of a political and historical bond that binds them together.

Both O’Flaherty and Joyce were essentially Irish with their profound awareness of being Irish. Concerning the national birthmark with which every Irishman comes into being, Stephen Dedalus makes an utterance which has become an epigrammatic warning to the nation:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (Portrait, 469)

As a young man, Joyce persuaded himself to escape from his family, religion and country. The Joycean preoccupation with the forces that hold sway over the formation of the Irish mentality stimulates a slightly modified echo from O’Flaherty. He avers in his usual tongue-in-cheek style that Ireland was led to ruins by four alliterative groups of people – politicians, priests, publicans, and peasants (Tourist’s Guide, 11). In the meantime, Stopford A. Brooke holds that nationality, religion and rebellion are the three factors which serve to characterize Irish society (ix–xxii). Daniel Corkery advocates almost the same view by saying that the tripartite notes of the Irish consciousness are religion, nationalism and land (19–22). According to Sean O’Faolain, there are five branches of forces – new peasantry, the Anglo-Irish, rebels, priests, and writers (73–143). It appears as if Ireland had been immersed in intent self-examination during the first half of the twentieth century. She indeed was. What is urgently required of a nation in the making or in its infancy is establishment of a national identity. Reflection on what went wrong entails contemplation of how it could and should be rectified. Ireland had to confront her past to move anew to a future which had ever eluded her advance. Ironically, what people loathe most defines them best. The past haunts the awareness of individual citizens with a corroding sense of shame and remorse, which in its turn serves to demarcate their collective identity as a nation.

While strictly, almost obsessively, restricting his object of depiction to Dublin and Dubliners, Joyce extracted the mystery of ‘human life’ from the city and the prototype of ‘homo sapience’ from its denizens. ‘Dear, dirty Dublin’ (Dubliners, 82) was for him a stage where a grand human comedy was enacted. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s alter ego, proceeds to recapitulate the dark cloud of unease that hangs over an Irishman – or Everyman for that matter:

History, ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. (Ulysses, 42)

The human consciousness has since the Renaissance transmigrated from ‘to die, to sleep’ to ‘to awake’, although it remains open to interpretation whether the distance between the Prince of Denmark and the
Prowler of Dublin is a matter of rhetoric or a Copernican turnaround. As no traveller returns from the bourn of Hamlet’s ‘undiscovered country’ (Hamlet, 3.1.81), so does no modern man awake from a sleep beset by Dedalus’ nightmare. Borrowing the idea from Shakespeare (Macbeth, 4.1.80–81), Joyce thought that, in the course of her humiliating history, Ireland had made a sow of herself by devouring her own children (Portrait, 470). She was once again about to pounce on her farrow which were showing every sign to rebel against her motherhood. Joyce fled from the impending danger of her attack. O’Flaherty returned home to her lethal embrace.

O’Flaherty had his own idea of the nightmare, invented on the strength of his personal background and experience. It seems that his bad dream sprang from Ireland’s long subjugation to religion, politics and poverty, the two more or less being the cause of the last. The three components could be translated in concrete terms into Catholicism, Colonialism with its lasting aftereffects and peasants’ life. The trio indeed epitomizes the entire settings employed in O’Flaherty’s fiction. Against this backdrop of social and historical reality, he projected the agony of a soul alienated from society and brought to face itself. It has been seen above that the author himself went through a difficult period of rebellion and self-questioning. As he fought his way into manhood, the protagonists of his fictions are all engaged in a battle, either inner or outer. The inner battle is manifested in the theme of self-scrutiny and self-realization, and the outer one in the theme of political contention. The former addresses the autobiographical strain, while the latter bespeaks the outcry of the nation. But both streams flow from the same fountain of Ireland’s acute concern with a national identity, and it is in this sense that O’Flaherty is hallmarkmed as a uniquely Irish writer. His self-avowed detachment from the vanguard of literary theories and movements kept him more markedly within the national boundary.

With Joycean zeal, O’Flaherty put the mirror of literature up to his own self and his motherland. His fiction may be devoid of Joyce’s grand vision of human nature and the universe but gives expression to the Irish psyche at its crucial moments. If taken out of their immediate social and historical context, his narratives, especially novels, would lose most of their impact and relevance. In the same vein, James H. O’Brien interprets O’Flaherty’s novels under the three different banners of Irish psyche, Irish revolution and New Ireland.

O’Flaherty’s personal engrossment with the problem of selfhood is straightforwardly and rather cruelly reflected in his early novels. It is a natural corollary that the plot of Thy Neighbour’s Wife, The Black Soul, The Wilderness, The House of Gold and The Puritan evolves around a young, intellectual hero imbued with some sort of skepticism and absorbed in a vehement internal argument with himself. Hugh McMahon of Thy Neighbour’s Wife agonizes over the chasm between his clerical duty and his illicit love for his former sweetheart Lily, now Mrs McSherry. The spiritual storm that rages on inside him is embodied at the end by a tempestuous sea into which he rows a small curragh. The wrathful elements reject his self-abandonment and
send him back as a man born again. Although the theme is not sufficiently digested and the characters not fully developed, the novel is indicative of the direction in which the author was headed. Fergus O’Connor, called ‘The Stranger’ in The Black Soul, can be assumed to be a more sincere portrait of the shell-shocked O’Flaherty convalescing in Aran after World War I. The protagonist, a highly educated young man devastated both in body and in mind, without much scruple enters an adulterous relationship with Little Mary, a provocative woman married to a peasant. His squalid affair is elevated to a state of spiritual sublimation when he is physically hoisted to the top of the cliff and into Mary’s arms at the close of the novel. The central issue of ‘how to live’ is obfuscated in the plot of sordid love and degenerate life, but here O’Flaherty, allegedly under the influence of D. H. Lawrence’s The Fox, pries deeper into the abyss of a tormented, conscientious soul.

The battle waged against the unbearable uncertainty of existence continues in rural settings. The Wilderness is furnished with the same type of hero but different scenery. The title betokens the internal structure of the hero, whose mind is eventually benumbed to sufferings of its own and silenced in despair. Henry Lawless’ sudden appearance in the lush valley called Fairy Glen stimulates the long-dormant greed and hatred of the local community back into life. His pure but selfish quest for a higher form of being ends up not only fulfilling his wish for self-immolation but also engulfing many others around him into a tragic end. In this novel, the author perhaps deliberately experimented with a highly abstract form of narrative, but its metaphysical discourse goes astray without a clear sense of destination while the hero remains a literary device rather than a character. Skerrett is installed back in a craggy, deserted scene of the countryside but given a different type of hero. As the older, less intellectual protagonist expresses himself more by action than by philosophizing, the novel addresses the theme of self-realization in a deeper voice and accomplishes a greater literary unity. David Skerrett is a man of principle, ludicrously so that he exhibits little fear and less hesitation in jeopardizing his family life and position as a schoolmaster when his personal honour and integrity are at stake. Although Skerrett loses everything and dies howling and cursing in a single cell of a lunatic asylum, poetic justice is administered to his altruistic life dedicated to social and educational causes.

O’Flaherty chose an urban environment and a non-intellectual protagonist in The Informer and Mr. Gilhooley but carried over the same motif of inner strife. Since modern life has deepened the soul’s sufferings in isolation and insecurity, a sense of despair hangs ponderously in these novels. Gypo Nolan, a clumsy young man of enormous physique and strength, begins to ruminate on the rapid changes of his situation after severing himself from his faith and comradeship. The recognition gradually dawns on him that he has become the most abominable sinner because selling one’s soul by informing is ‘the unforgivable Irish sin’ as Donagh MacDonagh asserts. The novel takes a melodramatic turn at the end: chased and wounded by MacDonagh’s followers, Gypo strays into a church where he meets the mother of the comrade he betrayed.
and is forgiven. But where else could the brutish protagonist be cleansed of his sin, regain his humanity and die in peace? Mr. Gilhooley is tinged in a deeper hue of ennui and nihilism. A chance encounter with Nelly makes the protagonist, a middle-aged debauchee in early retirement, realize that love and assurance are what he has long craved for. But the young woman turns out a femme fatale and precipitates him into a bottomless pit of jealousy and suspicion. In a stupor of despondency, Mr Gilhooley strangles his mistress, wades into a canal and sinks slowly into the muddy water. He stirs a faint image of Othello but his saga of wayward love and lust ends, quite unlike Shakespeare’s tragedy of love, in an absolute ravaging of the soul.

O’Flaherty’s attraction to the moral problems of Irish society grows more explicit in The House of Gold. The focus of the novel is not fixed on the personal development of a single hero or heroine but on the dark aspects of humanity and society. Four men of different ages and professions are drawn into mutual antagonism by their shared interest in one woman. All the five characters are sinners in one sense or another and are goaded into destruction by their selfish motives of a dubious kind. In a society moored to no moral probity, victims and perpetrators can hardly be separated. O’Flaherty went on to tackle the classic issue of crime and punishment in The Puritan. Frank Ferriter, a sickly young man who belongs to a vigilant group of citizens, sets out on a sole campaign to save the lost soul of a prostitute. Hopelessly confused about the line that separates ethical issues in general from personal sentiments, Ferriter opts for slaughter as the last resort to execute his ideal. The hunter of social degeneration, now hunted by the hounds of the law, hears the inner voice repeating the verdict of 'There is no God, but man has a divine destiny' (326). The novel does not delve as deeply as Dostoevski’s masterpiece but lays open some social dilemmas that faced the post–Civil War society of Ireland. The author’s pursuit of Irish themes continues in The Martyr, which throws into relief the contrastive postures of two young men toward the Civil War. Brian Crosbie and Jack Tracy jointly lead the Republican Volunteers, but the former is a devout Catholic and pacifist while the latter is a passionate patriot ready to die for his conviction. In the heat of crossfire, Crosbie is taken prisoner and Tracy severely wounded. Crosbie refuses to beg for mercy and resigns himself to being burnt to death on the summit of a mountain in a manner of crucifixion. Tracy escapes capture by aid of a female volunteer madly in love with him and dreams of preaching on Communism in a New Ireland. O’Flaherty here again fares better in dealing with a man of action than a man of thought.

All these heroes of O’Flaherty’s early novels rebel against themselves before rebelling against religion, society or ideology. Their inveterate doubt about their own selves sets them off in destruction of the status quo. On the other hand, the protagonists of O’Flaherty’s later fictions are victims of circumstances rather than of their own making. They are entrapped in a situation of no return and forced to find their way out at the peril or, in most cases, cost of their life. Philosophical meditation abates and self-reproach subsides, to be superseded by a deepening sense of mission and destiny. In The Assassin, Michael McDara is motivated to
return to Dublin by a single wish to kill. Only through the self-imposed task of assassination can the
anarchist ascertain who he is. The act of cold blood is planned meticulously and carried out to perfection.
Then the protagonist flees to London at the instigation of another mission he creates for himself, the mission
to kill himself. A far more absurd situation is devised for William Gunn, who strays into madness under the
guide of the greater insanity of war. In the midst of a battle, Gunn finds his real enemy not in invisible
foreign soldiers but in the authority of a corporal whose commands are as inscrutable and intolerable to him
as the ongoing battle itself. Whether successful or not as a novel, *The Return of the Brute* is a chilling
illustration of how fragile and cruel man could be under extreme, inhuman circumstances.

The sheer issue of life and death brings Michael Kilmartin into confrontation with the authorities, while the
marriage with him pits Mary against the tyranny of nature. Their combined battle weaves rural scenery,
political struggles and the transition of peasants’ families into a massive epic of human conscience and
survival. *Famine* closes with a bifocal vision, envisaging the end of one mode of being in the collapse of the
starved Brian and the advent of another in the emigration of Michael and Mary. The older generation clings
to land and perishes, and the younger one cherishes life more and survives. Michael O’Dwyer is doomed to
be a rebel by his personal cause of revenge as well as his indignation at the social injustice. His fatalistic
aesthetics in danger and death culminates in his taking his new bride out into a stormy sea and letting her feel,
not understand, his destiny. Patrick Pearse’s proclamation of the Irish Republic delivers to Bartly Madden a
rude awakening into what his life is meant for. The Connemara peasant murmurs to himself, somewhat like
Kent in *King Lear*, ‘I must be on my way’, and carries out an apparently suicidal solitary assault. His
meaningless self-destruction contends that death alone can reply to the ridiculous, unacceptable situation of the
country. The robust masculinity of the legendary hero Cuchullin seems to cast a long shadow over the
characters of O’Dwyer and Madden.

Theme is inseparable from a mode of expression in any type of composition. For his novels, O’Flaherty
developed an elaborate, ornamental style which is dense in melodious lilt and graphic descriptiveness but
liable to decorative redundancy. The reader will almost instantly be captivated or repulsed by it, in either case
in no moderate degree. For a quick taste of his narrative flavour, the following excerpt is taken from *The
Black Soul*:

The nightmares that haunted his soul vanished. He feared life no more. He longed for it, with its
ferocity of endeavour, of suffering and of happiness. Life as he had learned to understand it in
Inverara, to the sound of the sea, strong like the hailstones that pattered on the crags, like the roar of
the storm wind, like the lashing of the breakers against the cliffs. Inverara had rubbed the balm of her
fierce strength into his marrows. She had purified his blood with her bitter winds. She had filled his
exhausted lungs with the smell of her sea. (248)
Salient in the passage is the fusion of image and concept rendered possible by multiple delineation. The hero’s spiritual resurrection is conveyed through reiteration of the idea of nature as a restorative force, as a source of vigour and power. Generally, O’Flaherty’s style is designed to leave nothing unsaid. His penchant for verbal visualization often overrides his craftsmanship, and repetitiveness and gravitation toward externality are the cost that his art has to bear. Mr Gilhooley opens when the eponymous protagonist comes out of a restaurant. He is presented first and foremost by means of an itemized microscopic description of his physical features:

He was a large man, six feet in height, with broad shoulders, lean hips, muscular thighs, a prominent chest, strong jaws and a thick neck that was red at the nape. His face was fair and slightly wrinkled. His eyes were blue, soft and gentle. His eyebrows were white. Around the sides of his head the hair was grey. At the back it was still fair, ...(5)

Appearance weighs immensely in characterization, but O’Flaherty here goes to such a length of it as to imply that Mr Gilhooley is what he looks like as much as what he says and does. Beyond the fine details of the libertine’s face and body looms the landscape of his inner world. O’Flaherty’s narrative style thus sets its charms rather precariously on the borderline between opulence and superficiality, eloquence and grandiloquence.

Curiously, the genre of short story, which O’Flaherty preferred to call ‘sketch’, releases him from the rigidity of his full–length fiction in style, theme and mood. Told in a taut, brisk voice, his short stories bear little vestige of the decorative style of his novels. They also suffer less from the author’s emotionally excessive involvement with the world of fiction. They operate somehow by the rules of their own and bask in the lucidity and tranquility of a rare kind. Some of them, quite unlike their longer counterparts, even admit in a generous dosage of humour. Classified as comical tales are, for instance, ‘The Cake’, ‘The Accident’, and ‘Three Lambs’. The sentiment varies from story to story, but it is handled with measured detachment. Felicity and calamity, affection and hatred, birth and death are presented equally as things beyond mortals’ control, as a destiny. Even acts of extreme cruelty are, as it were, nonchalantly dealt with as in ‘Sport: the Kill’, ‘The Wren’s Nest’ and ‘The Pedlar’s Revenge’. The same attitude is sustained in ‘Milking Time’, ‘Poor People’ and ‘Spring Sowing’, all of which ooze tender feelings of peasants and their family without succumbing to sentimentalism. ‘The Letter’ and ‘Going into Exile’, which capture the painful moments of a peasant’s family disrupted by poverty and emigration, are evocative of the writer’s humanism and socialistic visions. In the received genre of ‘peasant story’ in Irish literature, O’Flaherty inherited the literary legacy of Maria Edgeworth and William Carleton and immensely augmented its value by virtue of the copiousness and
variety of his vignettes. All in all, O’Flaherty’s stories present a kaleidoscope of Irish life with the intimacy and vitality privileged only to a native son.

As a writer, O’Flaherty embodies a mismatch of disposition and discipline, temperament and genre. He is at heart a lyricist who decides to compose epic, a troubadour or rather travelling Gaelic poet who chooses to sing in the voice of fiction. He is a romanticist in the trade of realism. An existentialist stranded between idyllic hinterland and modern suburbia. Frank O’Connor shrewdly observes that O’Flaherty writes with ‘instinct, not judgment’ (38), with feeling, not thinking. Indeed, the instinct of a man of Aran prevails over O’Flaherty’s literature as it does over his life. His novels, inundated with violent passions and actions, are an artifact rough–hewn, not well–wrought, powerful in touch yet brittle in structure. His forte is depiction of life as an ephemeral entity exposed to the menace of a social or historical monstrosity. His heroes and heroines are stripped down to their naked humanity in the process of their chase of ideals and desires. There is in his fictions no love unaccompanied by lust, no human liaison immune from betrayal, no conviction unblemished by vacillations. Even animals and lifeless things are laid bare in the ultimate phase of their nature.

O’Flaherty’s successful fiction retains a delicate balance in a literary no–man’s land where serious and popular literature converge, where metaphysics cohabits with melodrama. When the balance is broken in favour of sentimentalism or sensationalism, his fiction sinks to mediocrity. *Famine, Skerret* and perhaps *Land* attain a certain level of artistic verve and finesse. His ‘war’ novels are slighted as popular fictions, as heavily melodramatic products, but *The Informer* may rank alongside some of Graham Greene’s novels which the versatile author himself has categorized as ‘entertainment’. In the field of short story, O’Flaherty is indisputably abreast with the most celebrated of Irish writers like George Moore, James Joyce, Sean O’Faolain, Frank O’Connor, Mary Lavin and William Trevor. A. A. Kelly’s verdict on him in this respect may not be improper: ‘As a short story writer, particularly, he has a permanent place in Anglo–Irish literature’ (*The Storyteller*, xi). O’Flaherty is not a writer for all seasons. His novels and short stories will resurge at a time of confusion and animosity when inner–groping is called for. At each crossroad of history, Ireland will halt and listen to the old tales of her rebellious sons, to the ancient lullabies of her stubborn daughters. She will then hearken back to Liam O’Flaherty’s lonely voice wailing about the mystery of life and love in the wilderness of the soul.
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