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PRESENTS

LETTERS FROM THE NEW ISLAND

FRANK RYAN

JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE

Michael O'Loughlin

Frank Ryan was born in Co. Limerick in 1902. One of the major figures in the Republican movement after the Civil War, he fought against the fascists in Spain and after his capture was sentenced to death. He was secretly released from prison to travel to Germany which was actively trying to build links with the IRA. He died near Dresden in 1944.

This short portrait of Frank Ryan examines the contradictions in his life and recognises his significance as one of the few Irishmen in an inward looking age who understood that what was happening in Spain in 1938 and Germany in 1939 was more important for Ireland than what was actually happening in Ireland itself. Exploring the relationship between Ireland and Europe and bringing in such figures as Joyce, Beckett and Stuart, this pamphlet sees that, while Ryan was an obvious failure on one level, he still remains an important anti-hero and more contemporary figure than, say, DeValera to a modern Irish nation frequently living in disillusionment, alienation and exile.

Frank Ryan: Journey to the Centre

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In his biography of Mozart, Wolfgang Hildesheimer spends page after page complaining of the impossibility of biography, our inability to know an historical personage. But, in a way, his argument is irrelevant. We only have to place a record on the turntable and we have as much of Mozart as we need. With political figures it is more difficult; but they also have their monuments, the outward form of our everyday reality. As for the ordinary nameless masses, they exist under the palimpsest of our daily life, in its structures, in our language, in our flesh and bones.

But what about Frank Ryan?

He blows through Irish history like a ghost, leaving no stone turned. In his self-appointed historical mission, he was an almost total failure. His view of Ireland's place in the world has had no noticeable influence on the policy makers of Iveagh House. His contribution to Irish politics was to poll a few hundred votes in Dublin City South in 1937. Now Ireland has her border and her social problems still, because politics of Frank Ryan's kind makes nothing happen. And yet there is no denying Ryan's strange presence in the minds of many Irish people. He is a footnote, but as has been said, the history of our time may be bound in footnotes.

That Ryan had a presence in the minds of his contemporaries also is obvious from writings from that time, memoirs and biographies. He occupies an amount of index inches completely disproportionate to his concrete political achievements. He made an impression on everyone he met, from Irish politicians to Spanish prison warders to German intelligence agents. He possessed what we commonly call charisma, something which by definition cannot survive death. Reading about him we cannot experience his personality, any more than we can hear the voice of a nineteenth century diva. After his death, what has continued to fascinate is the bizarre, and ultimately tragic, narrative of his life and death. This can be seen, both physically and

symbolically, as a journey to the centre. But also as a journey to the margin, to the edge. It is this ambiguity, I believe, which makes him so important to a certain concept of Irish identity, and also so completely irrelevant. Ryan is a kind of national hero, which means that his narrative is woven into another narrative, what they called, in the early years of this century, "The Story Of Ireland". "The law of this life, for which one yearns, is . . . that of narrative order", wrote Robert Musil. A nation is a story that it tells itself, and I think the case of Frank Ryan can tell us something about the nature of the story we are now telling ourselves. Paradox creates a space in which freedoms can exist, and I want to investigate what kinds of freedom the paradox of Frank Ryan makes available to us.

Seen solely in terms of the "story of Ireland", Ryan's life is a journey from the centre to the margin, and literally, right off the edge. It begins, in the standard way, with Ryan being born and brought up in what a certain type of narrative would call a "strong nationalist household". He was just old enough to participate in the war of independence and the Civil War where he was lucky to escape death. It is easy to imagine him dying at this stage, becoming another name on a roll call central to the narrative. A photograph taken at this stage shows him to be like a thousand others, one of the shadowy Homeric heroes of a nation's birth, its epic age. But Ryan survived the Civil War in another way too. For many people, it was a defining experience, though meaning different things to different people. Some, like Ernie O'Malley, would never quite recover, but would live their whole lives like Ossian *i ndiaidh na fianna.* For others, like Sean O'Faolain, it led to a kind of maturity. Still others were to internalise it: they managed to balance the past conditional with the future tense in such a way as to obscure their real nature in the present — and these were the people who gained political power, and could claim to be the mainstream of Irish life. Those who were unable to balance those two tenses were to some extent disenfranchised, and these people, for whom independence and the Civil War were little more than inconveniences in their daily lives, would always remain outside "The Story of Ireland". After the civil war, Frank Ryan begins in this mainstream. There is a photo of him in the UCD Gaelic Society with De Valera and Douglas Hyde. Here, he is a nationalist *pur sang.* The man we meet in these years through letters and photos is not a very attractive figure: dogmatic, fanatical, intolerant ("No free speech

for traitors!"). We can easily imagine him taking part in the Abbey riots, making speeches full of Pearse-like rhetoric, affirming the necessity of "the restoration of the Irish language". However, he was unable or unwilling to take the steps taken by De Valera, in order to gain real political power. And during these years, he is becomingly increasingly marginalised, like the other republicans who did not join Fianna Fail. But something else is happening too. He becomes increasingly aware of social issues, and of an international context for his political ideas. What it was exactly which turned the green one red we do not know; but it would be nice to think that it was his observation of the everyday wretchedness of life in Dublin in those years. This personal transformation was to have the result of marginalising him even more. The hazy dramas of those years ended in total failure. He had a vision of Ireland, but he could not achieve it, perhaps because it was impossible. By 1936 he had nothing to show for long years of agitation, propaganda, organisation, effort.

Then came Spain.

The Spanish Civil War has continued to fascinate, not because it was a sordid war fought in a backward country, but because it was a crucial event in European intellectual history. The man who is one of the greatest, and perhaps the most representative poet of our century, Cesar Vallejo, wrote that if Spain fell, then the world fell. It did, and it did. The fall of Spain was a kind of death, the beginning of a loss of innocence, a process completed by Hiroshima and the holocaust. For the Spaniards themselves it was, to some at least, a clear issue; as the poet Machado put it, a struggle between a Spain which wants to be born, and one which is dying. For the European intellectual it was equally clear-cut, a battle between good and evil, the past and the future. In Spain, words like "Libertad", "Cultura", even "La Idea", had, and perhaps still have, an aura of primal innocence. They could be uttered without equivocation, without irony, without distancing, without sinister overtones. Vallejo's great poems about the war could not have been written in English. When Auden quickly withdrew from Spain, it was not a case of *trahison des clercs,* but its opposite. As a poet, as a living guardian of the language's core, Auden saw correctly that Spain and the Civil War was no place for the English language.

Frank Ryan's motives in going to Spain were no doubt the same as those of other European intellectuals and political activists. Ryan and the other Irish people who went to Spain were

predictably criticised for leaving unfinished work behind them to fight in a foreign war. By going to Spain, never to return, Ryan was abandoning the central concerns of Irish political culture; and thus becoming irreversably marginalised in Irish life. But he was also moving from the margin into the centre. He went to Spain to fight for a political culture which had not taken root in Ireland. Ryan's language was Dutch to Irish politics; it was the lingua franca of Republican Spain. If we read his letters and look at the photographs from that time, we see a change. Gone is the young gunman, the political outsider. He looks at ease, relaxed, matured. He has come home. In Spain, he found a common language — he writes to his sister. "It would be funny if I were to be on the winning side for once". He achieves high rank, has important responsibilities. But all along, in the background, a tragic aspect is waiting and Frank Ryan, like the rest, has begun to lose his innocence. In June 1937 Ryan was back in Ireland, wounded, and talked all night in confidence to one of his former comrades about the nightmare that Spain had become — the treachery, the splits, the political manoeuvres, the death of idealism. It is easy to imagine his loneliness; there can't have been many people who could believe, if they could even understand, what was going on in Spain. With immense courage, Ryan returned to Spain, knowing that he was facing defeat. The world had become a very complicated place. He is captured, and begins a long period of imprisonment with fellow Spanish Republicans. An "Irish" note appears briefly in the narrative, like a hornpipe in the filmpit orchestra when Barry Fitzgerald appears on screen; Ryan does not share his fellow-prisoners' anti-clericalism, confusing his guards. From here on, the narrative acquires a special character; we know all the facts, but they are so surprising and implausible that there is always an aura of suggestion around them, that there is some other secret narrative in which they figure in another light. Attempts are made to secure his release, through a number of channels, without apparent success. Despite the paranoiac attitude to Communism in Ireland, the Catholic church, even, seems to be involved in these, not to mention the men who are supposed to be his direct political enemies. At this stage, the war has begun, and Ireland is officially neutral. The Spanish authorities will not release Ryan. German intelligence expresses an interest in working with him. So, he is unofficially allowed to escape into France, and the custody of the Germans. All this, unbelievably,

takes place under the supervision of the Irish ambassador to Spain. When Ryan "escapes" from Spain there is an identity crisis. How can a man of socialist principles be working with the Germans? Who is he? A citizen of a neutral country offering neutral advice? Secret liasion man? Adventurer? And who is the enemy? The Germans are fighting against England. The Soviets are their allies? Ryan was not alone in his sense of disorientation. A few years earlier Robert Musil had written of his hero: "A whole man no longer stood against a whole world, but was a human something moving in a diffuse culture-medium". When thinking of Ryan, we must keep this formulation in mind, over and above questions of passports and protocols.

Ryan's actual position at this stage, working in Germany with German intelligence can be seen from the point of view of a number of narratives. One is "The Story of Ireland", and this provides the tragedy. We perceive tragedy when we, believers in free will, see a man locked into a narrative which is inexorable, which will not release him, we feel pity and terror. Frank Ryan in Hitler's Berlin is like a nightmare rerun of Wolfe Tone in Napoleon's Paris. Frank Ryan in his U-boat is like Casement, is like Tone on his French ship. But the context has changed. He is like one of those cartoon characters who run off the edge of a cliff and keep running in mid-air till they drop like stones. His role here is the Irish political exile, working with a friendly foreign power (Spain, France, Germany), believing that "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity". And this is what he does for the next, the last years of his life. A man of uncertain status in the centre of a disintegrating empire, involved in various half-hearted schemes to further German interests in Ireland. Sometimes merely offering his interpretation of Irish affairs. A citizen of a neutral country.

The other narrative is a more complicated one: it involves Ireland's relationship to Europe, the notion of exile, and the question of neutrality. To begin with the last one, this is a question which has been the subject of much discussion recently. A minimum consensus by commentators would seem to be this, limited as it is; those in favour claim that it was the only possible course for a nation so weakened by recent history, so precariously held together; those against claim that our neutrality was only made possible by Britain. It could be argued that it was morally wrong; but there are few examples of a nation entering a war on any other grounds besides that of self-interest.

However, all agree that neutrality had a unifying and healing effect on the Irish State, confirmed it in its nationhood, and incidentally, reinforced partition. It is also claimed that it cut us off from the mainstream of European culture. Running through these discussions, however, there is a note which I can only call the 'amateurism' of being Irish; as if Irish identity is an Irishman's hobby. It appears because Irish history is usually seen as being the history of Irishmen *in Ireland*.

Once Hugh O'Neill has climbed into his little boat in Lough Swilly, he vanishes from the pages of Irish history. The wild geese are lamented, but not encouraged to return. The tradition continues: hundreds of thousands of Irish people live abroad, but can not even vote in Irish elections, the radio does not broadcast to listeners abroad.

This is linked to the peculiar Irish notion of exile. I have always found it amusing to hear people, including literary scholars, refer to James Joyce's "exile". Exile from what? By leaving Ireland he found readers, publishers, collaborators, patrons, a sympathetic milieu. If he had stayed in Ireland, that would have been a true exile: exile from himself, from the James Joyce he became. There is a real issue here which characteristically, was pinpointed with unerring instinct by Brian O'Nolan, in his portrait of James Joyce in Skerries. But his humourous treatment has led people to miss the tragic point he was making, as in some of the Irish Times columns which refer to the war, and coat despair in bar-room facetiousness. The themes of exile, amateurism, and neutrality come together in a well-known humourous anecdote from the war. An Allied plane is on a bombing mission to Berlin. The bombardier is Irish, and is having a furious argument with his British colleagues, who are criticising Irish neutrality while he defends it. As the plane drops its bombs and pulls away, the Irishman, in exasperation, points down to the inferno beneath them, and shouts: "Say what you like about De Valera, but he's kept us out of all of this!" When I think of this joke, I see Francis Stuart a few thousand metres under the Irish bombardier, writing this poem:

IRELAND

Over you falls the sea light, festive yet pale
As though from the trees hung candles alight in a gale

To fill with shadows your days, as the distant beat
Of waves fill the lonely width of many a western street.
Bare and grey and hung with berries of mountain ash,
Drifting through ages with tilted fields awash,
Steeped with your few lost lights in the long Atlantic dark,
Sea-birds' shelter, our shelter and ark.

Berlin, 1944

The bombardier in his plane; a few thousand metres below him, Francis Stuart and Frank Ryan; in occupied Paris, Samuel Beckett; James Joyce, a dead refugee in Zurich. And neutral Ireland. Who are the Irish? Which one is the "real" Ireland? For a long time now, the standard answer to that question has centred around the rural and catholic inhabitants of the island. A writer who is relevant here is Patrick Kavanagh. All the questions mentioned above come together in his long poem Lough Derg, a poem which I believe sheds much light on Ireland's relationship to Europe. The theme receives a number of different treatments in his work. One famous poem, "Epic", is often mentioned in the context of Kavanagh's paradoxical theory of parochialism. In this reading, the "local row" of the Duffys and McCabes is contrasted with the "Munich bother", and deemed to be more important. But what Kavanagh is actually saying is that the "local row" is more important than the "Munich bother", for his literary purposes. A more relevant treatment of the subject is in the poem "I had a future" set in nineteen forty. It ends with a striking image:

It is summer and the eerie beat
Of madness in Europe trembles the
Wings of butterflies along the canal.

O I had a future.

This is interesting for a number of reasons: Kavanagh clearly sees an organic relationship between political events in Europe and the very fabric of everyday life in Ireland. An idea which contradicts the notion of neutrality, and fits in with the numerous testimonies to the effect that the war had a debilitating effect on

culture in Ireland for years afterwards. Kavanagh himself seems to associate this image with what he thinks of as his own "failure". The image also calls up a whole galaxy of associations around the idea of the centre and the margin, and their relationship. In the poem it is clearly Europe which is the centre and Ireland which is the margin. Ireland receives the fall-out of bombs detonated elsewhere. On one level this interpretation might seem to contradict Kavanagh's notion of the parochial — unless we take it as referring simply to a practise in literature, a technique, rather than as a critique of culture in general. That Ireland is on the margin in this sense is self-evident: it is literally, physically on the edge. It is also marginal in the sense that it does not have any major military or economic contribution to make to Europe. The recent referenda and economic crisis have shown how precarious our grip on a European way of life really is. We will always be an outlying province of an empire whose centre is elsewhere. It is only by accepting this fact that we can begin to investigate what freedom is still allowed us. And the dialectic between the centre and the edge is by no means straightforward. Look at Berlin, or Byzantium. Today's frontier outpost is tomorrow's Rome, and vice versa. Empires begin to break up at the edges, not the centre. It has recently been convincingly argued that Australian art, for example, is the most advanced art of our time, the one most expressive of a post modern sensibility. Its apparent naivety, in the view of the centre, of which Irish art is also often accused, could be due to a freedom, a clarity of vision, accorded by its distance from the centres of power, whose propinquity, if you like, can be both blinding and soothing. If Ireland is at this margin, what is at the centre? As I suggested earlier, the usual answer to this question involves notions of Irishness closely linked to the rural way of life, catholicism, the survival of ancient patterns of feeling and perception, a survival made possible by remoteness. Part of this has led a separate life in a fascinating example of dialectic between the edge and the centre: I mean the episode of the Ossianic material, itself once very much of the centre, surviving in the marginal areas, reintroduced back into continental Europe, where it marks the beginning of the Romantic age, which in turn, came back to Ireland as nationalism and the celtic revival.

Lough Derg is an attempt to deal with these questions. It is a difficult poem to talk about, in some ways, because of the textual problems associated with it. The text we have now is obviously

unfinished, supposedly because Kavanagh could not bring himself to, due to the sensitive theological nature of the material. I prefer to believe that he abandoned it because it contains a number of ambiguities which he was not capable of resolving; it says, perhaps, more than he wanted it to say. On the other hand, he was aware of its existence and made no attempt to destroy it, knowing that it would be published after his death. In a way, it is his testament to us, a glimpse of the innermost workings of life and consciousness in Ireland in nineteen forty two. Almost all of its 639 lines are devoted to an exploration of a peculiarly Irish catholic form of spirituality, what Kavanagh calls "Ireland's secret". This is centred around a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, and various representative characters are explored. On this level the poem is remarkable for a number of reasons, mainly, as Paul Durcan has said, for its understanding of the fact "that ordinary people undergo mystical experiences". However, if this was its only message it would be a far less vital poem. The instructive ambiguities begin even in the title: for Lough Derg, now one of the navels of Irish rural catholicism, was once a node on the spiritual power grid of medieval Europe, and is said to have inspired its central document, .Dante's *Divine Comedy.* While undergoing this personal mystical experience, the poet's mind, like the butterfly's wings, is vibrating to the madness of Europe, its chaos and its bounty. At a number of points in the text, it breaks through the simple prayer-like tone, and totally subverts it.

The imagination which is forming the poem sees the events in Lough Derg in a European context. At one point he seems to discuss this directly:

Then there was war, the slang, the contemporary touch
The ideologies of the daily papers
They must seem realler, Churchill, Stalin, Hitler,
Than ideas in the contemplative cloister.
The battles where ten thousand men die
Are more significant than a peasant's emotional problem.
But wars will be merely the dry bones in histories
And these common people real living creatures in it . . .

To which one might add, if the battles take place at a comfortable distance from the peasant with the emotional

problem! It may be true of Waterloo, but not of Hiroshima. Somehow, the contrast here seems too facile, a facility betrayed by the rhythm, and of course they seem to contradict the more profound grasp of the relationship between everyday life in Ireland and the situation in Europe, which Kavanagh displays elsewhere. But for me, the poem is centred around a line which, once read, emblazons itself on the mind forever:

All Ireland that froze for want of Europe.

To me this line is the heart of the poem, and the root of its difficulty. Kavanagh is plainly disgusted and repelled by the spiritual poverty he sees around him — a spiritual poverty which he explicitly links to an historical poverty. But if Ireland is frozen for want of Europe, a judgement shared by many of his fellow artists, then the kind of life he sees around him, and which he seems to value for its deep spirituality, "Ireland's secret", must be deeply flawed. Either Lough Derg represents all that is most malign in Irish life — subservience, sexual repression, and worst of all, economic and political failure — something which Kavanagh explicitly points out:

The middle of the island looked like the memory
Of some village evicted by the Famine,
Some corner of a field beside a well
Old stumps of walls where a stunted boortree is growing
These were the holy cells of saintly men —
O that was the place where Mickey Fehan lived
And the Reillys before they went to America in the Fifties.
No this is Lough Derg in county Donegal —
So much alike is our historical
And spiritual pattern . . .

— Or it represents a kind of spiritual superiority, unaffected by the events to the east. Kavanagh's self, perhaps, tells him one thing, and his supremely sophisticated imagination tells him something else. He manages to hold the two together in the poem, and that is what gives it its power and tension. It is not surprising that Kavanagh was shocked by his own poem, once it was finished and could not bear to see it again. It expresses perfectly the ambiguity of Ireland's position, like the Irish bombardier above Berlin. Kavanagh could not resolve it, but merely join the contradictions together in a kind of tableau, a portrait with one deliberate flaw which betrays a whole new

perspective, as in a painting by Velasquez. It is a profoundly political document, showing the moral price that had to be paid for neutrality.

In *Lough Derg,* Kavanagh re-wrote Pope's line:

Only God thinks of the dying sparrow
In the middle of the war.

If God and the imagination are one, as Wallace Stevens believed, then the imagination working beneath the surface of the poem, or the imagination forming the narrative, can lead us to that dying citizen of a neutral country, in Berlin. From Ryan's 'escape' from the Spanish prison, to his death, his life becomes more and more unimaginable. What exactly his position is in Berlin is difficult to figure out. While technically working to help overthrow the government of his neutral country, that government continues to take a semi-benign interest in his welfare. It is both moving and somehow shocking. We, the spectators, feel that if only we can get him out of that hell and back to Ireland, we can work something out; perhaps his stated intention is the overthrow of the state, but after all, he is an old comrade of De Valera, etc. If we can get him back to the ark, he can survive the deluge. As Ryan pursues his narrative, he seems oblivious of what is going on around him. His deafness seems to be a touch added by a stage director, to emphasise his relationship to the world around him, as opposed to his sensitivity to the Irish situation. But that is only the Frank Ryan of the narrative. The real Frank Ryan, no longer an Irish revolutionary, is becoming more and more a "human something", moving in an increasingly "diffuse culture-medium". Francis Stuart describes him thus:

"He would sit in a cafe with a cup of Ersatskaffee in front of him, or, as I remember him remarking with one of his grimaces, line up in a queue at the hairdresser's simply in order to know what was happening".

On June 9, 1944 Ryan travelled by train from Berlin to Dresden, through the heart of Germany, along the same tracks which were carrying millions of people to their deaths. He was accompanied by a young German girl. Attractiveness to women was, like military prowess, one of the classical attributes of the hero which he possessed. The next day he died, ending his personal suffering. He was buried near Dresden, a city soon to become its

own funeral pyre, under a cross which bore the names Proinsias O Riain and Francis Richard. It is fitting that he was buried under these names: Proinsias O Riain, Gael, citizen of Eireann, and Francis Richard, Irish revolutionary working with the enemies of England. Neither of these was Frank Ryan, citizen of Ireland. Frank Ryan's narrative ends there. And so does "The Story of Ireland". It peters out in the blacked out heart of Europe, shouting incomprehensible orders in a mixture of Irish and Spanish. Ryan's Irish nationalism was soluble in total war. "The Search for the Republic" in Sean Cronin's phrase, had come to its logical conclusion.

I would like to point out some more aspects of the "Story of Ireland". In its broad outline it is familiar to us, most easily seen in a schoolboy's history book. But to see it in another light we can look at some curious texts, which are strangely never discussed in this context. If we want to know what story of Ireland the Irish really believe, we should look at the books the Irish read, rather than the books about them. A few years ago an American academic sniped at the Irish for being obsessed with writers they don't read. But what about the ones they read? I am referring here to the large corpus of memoirs dealing with the War of Independence and the Civil War. These books have a surprising, almost underground, currency, as can be easily seen by examining how often they have been re-printed, always by small Irish publishers. They range over a broad spectrum of 'literary' styles, from Ernie O'Malley's sophistication to Dan Breen's simplicity, but showing a profound structural similarity. All of these writers are eager to tell their story — one which is identical in structure to the others — so we can assume that this structure is the way that the Irish perceived the events happening around them. It must be then, "The Story of Ireland". At that time, these people experienced what was happening around them as a narrative, and one in which they had a very clearly defined role to play; this was, to liberate Ireland from English rule. This narrative pattern had occurred many times before in Irish history. The difference this time was that the narrative came to an end. Instead of ending in failure, to be repeated again in fifty years time, it ended in success, or semi-success. The books all follow this pattern: it begins with the hero slowly becoming aware of his role, becoming an Irish nationalist. None of them begin as this. Tom Barry is in the British Army, in 1916 Ernie O'Malley almost takes the other side, with his friends in Trinity College. After a

kind of latent period, they begin their fights against the British. This leads to a kind of heroic phase, the Anglo-Irish war; however this period, rather than independence, is actually the climax of the narrative. After this it runs into a crisis. The Treaty and the Civil War disintegrate the narrative: the heroes become fallen angels. In almost all the texts from this time we get the impression of the writer suffering a kind of concussion, running up against a brick wall, just as he is about to enter the Promised Land. We encounter a silence which to me is eloquent of many things. What is interesting is that after these narratives end, there is nowhere to go — except to the Ireland which has just come into being. What is evident from the Civil War is that the limited amount of independence which was granted was enough to bring the narrative to an end, but not conclusively. It was to go on repeating itself in the void, growing progressively weaker and fainter, to the stage where, according to one recent newspaper report, in terms of "The Story of Ireland" there is only one man living who can be regarded as the legitimate elected representative of the Irish people. Ernie O'Malley seems to have been consciously aware of this "Story" aspect, when he divided his seemingly autobiographical books up into sections named after literary styles. Like *Lough Derg* and *The Man Without Qualities,* his work remained unfinished, and perhaps unfinishable. Man may long for narrative order, but reality evades it.

This narrative was prolonged in people like Frank Ryan, and I have shown how it ended. But it was also used as a vehicle to political and cultural power by elements in Irish society. To what extent this was conscious or unconscious is difficult to say. As recent historical studies of people like De Valera have made plain, it is unlikely that they even knew themselves. What is obvious is the result that it has had.

So, what is the significance of Frank Ryan?

As I have suggested, Ryan died in the grip of a dead narrative. But he was also consciously involved with another narrative, one which led through loss of historical innocence to maturity. His journey to the margin was simultaneously a journey to the centre; and somewhere their intersection forms a starting point. He is a footnote to Irish history of the last fifty years, a footnote to our minds; but one which casts a strange light upon it, which calls it into doubt. It is clear that an Ireland which could not accommodate men like Frank Ryan, Joyce and Beckett, was a

country in exile from itself. An Ireland which was not yet Ireland. Frank Ryan's career suggests that Irish culture, in the broadest sense of the word, took a wrong turning in the nineteen twenties. What we took to be the continuation of a narrative was merely its dead echo surrounded by a silence. The story of the Ireland which exists outside this "Story" begins in a vacuum. Some aspects of the main text have recently been highlighted again. It has once again become clear that emigration is a structural factor in Irish society, the most important subject on our hidden curriculum. Its continued existence undermines the entire basis of Irish culture, and reduces questions of Irish identity and traditions, Anglo-Irish and peasant, Planter and Gael to the status of a sideshow, a divertissement, and not always an innocent one. Joyce showed tremendous insight into this problem when he made his hero a jew, thus short-circuiting all the tedious arguments which would still be raging more than half a century later. The essential point is that Irish culture and society, in one way or another, can not accommodate all the people in it. Its continued existence is contingent upon placing itself in exile from its own people, by sending them abroad or by making them 'inner emigrés'. This confirms its own ambiguity, its amateurishness. War-time neutral Ireland had an army of 100,000 men, but more Irish men than that were in the allied armies. As I have suggested, the roots of this ambiguity are in the period around the Civil War. If we are to return from exile, we have to re-examine the assumptions which have been dominant since that time. Any assumption about Irish culture and society which sees it, in the present, as being the direct continuation of "The Story of Ireland", must be mistaken. It is time to start listening to the silence after the narrative ends. I have given some indications, in dislocated images, of how that new narrative might appear. But is that kind of narrative really necessary any more? Or possible? All narratives have their beginnings as a kind of justification and explanation of the society which produces them. At this stage, the Irish narrative can not be reduced to a simple tale with a beginning and end, recognisable heroes and villains, closed in between the covers of a green book with the title stamped in gold (such as the one which infuriated Beckett, containing his 'Murphy'). These kind of narratives create borders which are no longer acceptable. No one aspect of Irish culture can be singled out as central to the detriment of another. Irish culture since the Civil War, has, largely, been based on the lie

that certain kinds of Irish people are more Irish than others, certain kinds of music, certain kinds of sport etc. This is no longer possible. The end of the narrative in its falsely continued form, has been shown in literary works like Dermot Healy's. And yet it is the nature of the human mind to want to keep inventing new narratives, new Irelands. This is a task which has recently begun in Irish culture, taking as its starting point the silences of the last fifty years, the void in which all narratives begin.

Frank Ryan remains a footnote.

A number of images occur to me, with which to end this consideration of the meaning of Frank Ryan's career. The first one is a concert hall in London, New Year's Eve, 1985. There is an audience consisting of hundreds of young people, waving Irish flags. On the stage, a group of young men with Irish names and English accents are singing a song called "At the Sickbed of Cuchulainn", which contains the following lines:

"You pissed yourself in Frankfurt and got syph down in Cologne
And you heard the rattling death trains as you lay there all alone
Frank Ryan bought you whiskey in a brothel in Madrid
And you decked some fucking blackshirt who was cursing all the Yids".

The other image is an image from a narrative, its beginning. People stand on a shore, about to turn inland, to colonise their own country. They have pushed a burning ship, an ark, an emigrant ship, out to sea. Perhaps on board, is the body of the last Irish hero.

The biographical details of Frank Ryan's life are drawn from Seán Cronin's "Frank Ryan", Enno Stephan's "Spies in Ireland", Michael O'Riordan's "The Connolly Column", and Francis Stuart's "Frank Ryan in Germany".

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