INTRODUCTION

Valentin Iremonger (1918 – 1991) is the quiet man of 20th century Irish poetry in English. He is mentioned occasionally in political biographies (e.g. Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Memoir: My Life and Themes*) as a civil servant and diplomat. In literary history he is on the margins: his help with Old Irish tree lore was acknowledged by Robert Graves in the Foreword to *The White Goddess*; he had a notorious row with P J Kavanagh who accused him of being the author of an article in a newspaper against which Kavanagh took out and failed in a libel action; he made Brendan Behan famous through his recommendation of *Borstal Boy* to a London publisher; and he wrote critical essays for Seán Ó Faoláin at *The Bell*, where a verse play on Robert Emmet was published, subsequently finding its way to a BBC radio performance.

Although Iremonger wrote his name as Valentin, he had been baptised Valentine and pronounced it that way. He was known to family and friends as Val.

When he was in his late 60s he stopped writing almost completely after a fall which caused a traumatic brain injury. This necessitated surgery to the frontal part of his skull, and clearly the 'frontal' injury was responsible for his subsequent loss of initiative (which has been attributed to alcohol misuse – not uncommon in embassies with lavish drink budgets – but until the accident the effects of this misuse were relatively contained, although it was not wise to go drinking with Brendan Behan…). After the accident, Iremonger wrote only one known poem in English, but a number of poems and translations in Irish. As a diplomat living with his family abroad (First Secretary in Britain, Ambassador in Sweden, India, and Luxembourg), he was in no position to promote his poems, but nor was it his temperament to do so.

I came across his work in 1962 in an Oxford bookshop. The book was *The Dolmen*, a 'miscellany of Irish writing', which contained three of his poems, including 'Invocation' with its theme of waiting for inspiration, which was the subject of Robert Graves's lectures at the time, and translations of two poems by an unknown Breton French poet, René Guy Cadou. (Here one remarkable but not well known poet had discovered another: only recently, long after his death, has Cadou come into his own in the canon of French poetry). Iremonger, who was Irish attaché in London, attended a lecture given by Graves that year. What remains of one side of their earlier correspondence from 1943 to 1948, only a few letters from Iremonger, is now among the Graves papers at St John's College, Oxford. Iremonger had started by sending Graves some of his poems, and then wrote: 'You were generous, you know: I suppose I did know all about them, as you say, before I sent them – but it is very helpful to have another's opinion.' This opinion apparently included pointing out some 'rhetoric', but if Graves liked a person's poems, he opened up on other things. Iremonger continued: 'If, as you say, poetry is a sharing of secrets, today these secrets are proscribed and it is not by shouting and tearing one's hair or by roaring through a microphone they will be shared.' And 'We have lost the capacity to "see real miracles" as Laura Riding [Graves's former companion and Muse] says. One of war's results seems to be that poets make a frontal assault on Truth and attempt to state, beyond yea or nay, general definitions and moral judgements. To me this doesn't seem to be the poet's job.'

Iremonger's own poems show the attachment to what Blake called 'the minute particular' which defines poetry also for Graves. And in keeping with the urgency of Ó Faoláin and other contributors to *The Bell* about Irish literature having to be realistic and to turn its back on the Celtic Twilight created by such as Yeats and AE, Iremonger wrote to Graves (who loathed Yeats) that 'the huge Celtic fabric built up by Yeats and his disciples was fake. It couldn't stand up to an economic depression, much less armour-piercing bombs.' But later in 1944 he wrote to Graves about 'what you indicate is our only salvation – the elements of myth: the gods and goddesses, the ghouls and ghosts, beast, bird, fish, roots.' He also referred to the Welsh poet Alun Lewis whose poems, after his death, had been edited by Graves: 'Lewis, honouring the sacrificial rites of his country…. Here in Ireland we cannot so readily accept the mythology… The currency of our sagas has been debased by Yeats, AE, and the remainder of that and the succeeding generations who followed their lead. For my own part I feel that I must fight it and conquer it first.'

This was a fairly subtle position: Iremonger at the age of 26 rejected the fakery of the Celtic Twilight in favour of realism, yet still looked for something in mythology. It must also be remembered that his Irish was already good from school and university in Dublin, and it would become excellent as he learned more from his wife Sheila Manning's family in the Kerry Gaeltacht and began to write in Munster Irish. Yeats knew very little Irish. All in all, Iremonger's position in his essays for *The Bell*, taking off from his correspondence with Graves, was not likely to make him popular:

> Mules have nothing on poets when it comes to stubbornness; and the effort of others to direct the writings of poets have always met with the equivalent of the Dubliner's exasperated "Who d'ya think you're shoving?" So that if my work has tended (as a friend said) to become less concerned with general definitions and moral judgments and more concerned with the apparently trivial and insignificant (a girl on a bed noticing Spring, a childhood memory, a chance phrase thrown against my ears in the street, a walk up the garden, a girl on a mountain tying her scarf, saying, "I'm going down") all I will say is, with Dedalus, 'Signatures of all things I am here to read.'

Later in the same passage, Iremonger refers, as in his letter to Graves, to poetry as an 'encirclement movement' and concludes that 'It is doubtful if the classical acceptance of what we call "evil" is ever possible again, yet without this acceptance we cannot even begin to see life in the round.' And again, 'Poetry is the sharing of secrets, of secrets that today are proscribed. This proscription

makes it more difficult now than at any previous time to write freely, and it is the sense of oppression, of impending disaster, that accounts for the rhetoric that fogs so much contemporary verse.'

This is not the tone of a future diplomat! His poems, too, although often quietly spoken, show a disturbing realism and detail – and, yes, a sense of evil, with no consoling fakery.

This introduction will not examine Iremonger's poems or the few critical comments that exist about them. The poems, to use a phrase Iremonger applied in a review, are from 'the only place where poetry can be found – in the everyday life of the people around [the poet]'. And they speak for themselves, in a particular voice. Ó Faoláin said of Irish poetry of his time that 'one rarely hears a modern idiom, a modern speech. (I find it in the tense poetry of W R Rodgers and in the hesitating rhythm of Valentin Iremonger).' For myself, I am most impressed by how long Iremonger's sentences are: his poems are the epitome of 'feeling thought'.

As for the critical comments, they fall short of being genuine criticism, as when Dennis O'Driscoll, who concludes that Iremonger deserves 'a modest space on the bookshelf', is bothered by 'a sombre recess of the psyche', by 'fearful rather than cheerful anticipation', and by 'youthful despondencies': in other words, by an absence of the rhetorical fog of optimism. It seems that the secrets are still proscribed if they entail facing a reality that may be gloomy. And 'the rest of his meagre output consisted mainly of wilful efforts to revive his old afflatus.' Which is precisely what Iremonger never gave into: when his inspiration stopped, he stopped. If he had only so many poems in him, well then, that was what he had. But even his last poem, 'By the Waters of Yamuna', although gloomy – it's about death, after all – asserts something about life:

'…their eyes filled
Not with despair – like hope here irrelevant –
But a dubious trust, each day renewed,
In simple survival….'

Every age has its flash poets. And every age has its quiet poets who win through in the long run. (Think of Clare as distinct from Shelley, Hardy as distinct from Tennyson.) As the poet (in Irish) Máire Mhac an tSaoi put it after his death, 'Valentin Iremonger, both as a poet and as a human being, radiated integrity.' Iremonger, not only as an Irish poet in English but as an English poet in the older linguistic sense, and briefly as an Irish poet in Irish, takes his place in a few dozen remarkable poems. And the less remarkable poems still have something to say. Valentin Iremonger is a real poet for real times – or if the times are not real, for real readers.

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