Robert Lynd, paradox and the Irish Revival: ‘acting out’ or ‘working through’?

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Modes of representation of Irishness consistent in part or in whole with negative stereotyping of Ireland and ‘the Irish’ have long outlasted nationalist Ireland’s formal political domination by the English/British. One particular critical commentary on the Irish Revival depicts it as a parallel mode of acceptance, or ‘acting out’, of aspects of a stereotype of ‘the Irish’ previously created by the British, or at least limited by a discursive space framed by British sources. As David Cairns and Sean Richards suggest:

Although conventionally referred to as the Irish literary revival or Renaissance, it was, in essence, a decisive engagement with an agenda whose items had been inscribed in the course of the nineteenth-century ‘war of position’ as English and Anglo-Irish intellectuals attempted to avert ‘The coming crisis’.

There is, in other words, a suggested dimension of the Irish Revival that involved reifying the stereotypical otherworldliness of the Celt and pursuing it as a political and cultural objective, through essentialist drives to purge Ireland of crass modernity, impurity and British materialism. To summarize crudely, while British stereotypes suggested that the Irish lacked the practical hard-headedness to succeed in the commercial and capitalist spheres, revivalists are sometimes depicted as responding: ‘Yes, that’s true: but it’s the best way to be.’ This essay will explore some of the obstacles to avoiding the ‘acting out’ of such stereotypes in critical commentary on the Irish Revival, and the locations from which such crude pre-defined ethnic compartments and stereotypes may be ‘worked through’ or escaped. In particular, the work of the essayist Robert Wilson Lynd (1879–1949), whose career and prominence was cognate to the Revival, is scrutinized, firstly, for the

presence of ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’, and, secondly, to suggest that Lynd’s work and personal narrative offer some insights for Irish and non-Irish commentators and readers alike into the possibilities of ‘working-through’.

An important theoretical perspective on the issue of ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ can be gleaned from Dominick LaCapra’s essay, ‘Writing history, writing trauma’. For LaCapra, the possibilities in historical writing about certain ‘limit-events’ parallel, and may even facilitate, modes of identification based on such events. LaCapra argues that an individual (or group) traumatized by an experience – especially in the extreme mode of repetition compulsion – is clearly not in a desired state, either for themselves or others. LaCapra, however, suggests that to ‘work through’ traumatic experiences, or to base processes of identification on experiences other than a past trauma, may be problematic: certain ‘limit events’ are in fact so troubling that to ‘work through’ them in the sense of regarding the events as ‘closed’ would be deeply inappropriate. Similarly, individuals in a position to attempt to ‘work through’ may be held back by a sense that it would constitute a desertion of other, or particular, victims. LaCapra’s application of an overtly psychological meaning of ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ to collective as well as individual traumatic experiences has a resonance in the present context on account of the links in Irish history and culture between stereotyping, processes of identification, and experiences perceived (albeit often retrospectively) as traumatic, experiences by no means limited to obvious candidates such as the famine. In such a context, ‘acting-out’ can constitute marking oneself as Irish by conforming to a pattern of behaviour bequeathed by a historical trauma. The misrecognition of such behaviour as ethnically determined in institutions, conventions or markets indeed can make it difficult to contest stereotypes and can inspire fears that a personal attempt to subvert a stereotype would leave isolated those subjected to the fullest objectifying force of such representations.

Traces of such possibilities of ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ can be located in the work of Robert Lynd. Lynd is to be associated with the Irish Revival for a number of reasons. Both Lynd and close associates such as James Winder Good contributed prominently to the revivalist Ulster-based periodical Uladh in the early twentieth century. He reflected on the Revival’s themes, personalities and literature, by his own confession idolizing George Bernard Shaw. Most importantly, Lynd’s work, in important ways, can be represented as cohering

with concerns commonly identified as Irish: in addition to a large output concerned with Irish politics, culture and society, Lynd's prose and journalism arguably encapsulated an approach that to many contemporaries fitted an assumed typology of 'literary Irishness'.

There are many reasons for praising Lynd. Although a Presbyterian from Belfast and the son of a unionist, Lynd became a nationalist, and his books and columns in English publications (principally the Nation, the New Statesman and the Daily News) made a sustained contribution to putting forward the case for Irish independence (though unable to prevent a partition he passionately opposed).11 Unlike some products of the Revival, however, Lynd was by no means narrowly obsessed by insular political causes.12 He was at times a brilliant writer. His 1916 New Statesman essay 'If the Germans conquered England' particularly worthy of mention for its debunking of self-congratulatory narratives of English history and subtle advancement of Sinn Féin's aspiration to an independent Ireland, while still fulfilling the conventions of British war-time propaganda.13 He also reported on other grave events such as the economic depression in the north of Britain in 1923.14 On less serious issues, he was idiosyncratic and often amusing, with his prose being punctuated by his obsessions with birdsong,15 horse-racing,16 and tobacco (Lynd smoked a hundred cigarettes a day),17 and by irritation with such features of life as customs barriers.18 Modest self-deprecation throughout his work did not prevent him from making occasional points of real weight, and his readers had many reasons to regard his prose with affection. Lynd wrote in the British press for over four decades, with his own conquest of the commanding heights of British journalism mirroring the prominence of Shaw, Yeats, O’Casey and a striking number of other contemporary Irish writers and journalists, and thus the achievements of the Revival itself. As Lynd's half-Irish wife Sylvia, a poet and critic worthy of attention in her own right, wrote in 1923: 'The Irish novel indeed is not a lovely maiden in need of a rescuer; but a dragon that is devouring the novels of both England and America ... Irish literature has never been more alive than it is at present.'19

In the present context, however, it can be suggested that three aspects of Lynd's writing and literary persona involved 'acting out' certain modes of Irish

stereotype. These are, firstly, moments in Lynd’s depiction of Irish society, secondly, Lynd’s suspicion of science and of modern technology, and thirdly, Lynd’s predilections for paradox and levity, which occasionally reduce his prose to little more than flippancy. In each case, the fact that the prose of a subtle writer such as Lynd moves in the direction of ‘acting-out’ demonstrates the inherent difficulty of avoiding such a process in Irish writing, especially in this period. However, in important particulars, Lynd ultimately tackles this difficulty more successfully than many authors, including more recent writers.

In describing rural Ireland in his 1909 book Home Life in Ireland, Lynd remarked on the poor quality of home maintenance in many parts of Ireland:

... if a window is broken or a spout injured, some hopelessly inefficient steps will often be taken to stave off the critical day when a new window must be put in or the spout properly seen to. People who do not examine into the causes of things look upon this untidiness of the country-side as a deep-seated Irish characteristic, born of Irish blood rather than of Irish conditions. There could not be a shallower thought. The Irish farmer originally became untidy in self-defence. He knew that, if his house looked beautiful and his hedges trim, the quick eye of the land-agent would soon size him up as a prosperous man, and raise his rent accordingly.20

At first sight, this appears to be an essentialist vision of Irishness consistent with discourses of the Revival and of subsequent formations: the inefficiency of an archetypal ‘Irish farmer’21 is not queried, merely depicted as ‘functional’. What redeems Lynd’s passage, however, is the greater subsequent flagging of counterinstances.22 In particular, he evinces a sense of how such a national reputation had been overstated by both maligners of, and those identifying with, Ireland:

Pro-Irish politicians, wishing to make a pitiable and sympathy-winning show of the country, have dragged forward the dirtiest and most dismantled mud hovels as demonstrations of the wretched condition of the people. Anti-Irish politicians, on the other hand, have called up these same dirty and dismantled hovels as witnesses to the fact that the Irish are a half-savage and worthless people, less fit than any other in Europe to be trusted with the government of their own land ... All sides have agreed to judge Ireland by its worst, and have held up as the typical Irish home not anything like the average Irish home, but the most tumbledown and ill-kept Irish home they could find.23

A second trait in Lynd’s prose that can be seen as ‘acting out’ an Irish stereotype is his self-consciously anti-scientific or -technological disposition:24 the fact that,

in his own words, 'I usually find it rather difficult to believe what the men of science say.' 23 Scientific explanations for inclement weather (a frequent topic in his prose) failed to satisfy him. 24 Lynd also had misgivings about what he called 'The triumph of the machine'. 25 He heard of the development of what was being termed 'radiovision' with 'a pang of regret': 'Let us, then, pass a law forbidding any further inventions, except in food and medicine, for a thousand years. We have invented enough: let us begin to enjoy ourselves.' 26 Similarly, when reporting on the economic depression of 1923 for the Daily News, Lynd's attitude to the technological aspects of the Lancashire cotton industry was almost superstitious: machines were 'the good fairy of the modern world' or perhaps 'demons ... pressed into service by the good fairy. I found them, on the whole, frightening.' 27 All this would appear to connect with anti-modernist aspects of revival Ireland. There are two mitigating circumstances, however, to this feature of Lynd's prose and character. Firstly, while an aversion to industry in an Irish nationalist might be said to fulfill some political stereotypes, such an aversion in a Belfast Protestant hardly fulfilled an ethnic stereotype. Indeed, Lynd elsewhere challenged images of Ulster as a barren industrial landscape, especially in a suggestively titled essay 'Beautiful Ulster'. 28 Secondly, while Lynd may have failed to come to grips with technology, his grasp of economic argument was lucid, and in his depression pieces he articulated a rudimentary version of a Keynesian multiplier. 29

Another possible defence of Lynd's writings on science is that these were deliberately and obviously tongue-in-cheek. But this is suggestive of a third possible mode of 'acting-out' in Lynd's work, by the articulation of arguments which were, or made their author seem, foolish, nonsensical or in jest. These traits are encapsulated in Lynd's fascination with paradox, in the sense of statements which are seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense but which contain or hint at truth. In Lynd's view, 'life was full of such paradoxes' 30 as 'how odious is violence and yet how charming it can be to the imagination', 31 and 'stupidity is not such a bad thing as is generally supposed'. 32 In short, Lynd suggested, 'most of the good things in life are the result of the bad things of life'.

Sometimes Lynd's love of deploying paradoxes could lead to observations of penetrating or even prophetic pertinence. Lynd, for instance, insightfully used comments by Lord Reith, director-general of the BBC, in 1930 to observe that 'if you set out to give the public what it wants, you will probably end by giving it less and worse than it wants'. Another clever essay was inspired by a suggestion that the pattern of near-universal motor-car ownership in the United States was worthy of emulation since it had proved an effective antidote to Communism. If everyone owned a car, Lynd suggested, 'half of us would be unable to get to our offices before lunch owing to the block in the traffic ... [O]n Saturdays and Sundays the south of England would resemble nothing so much as a huge garage.' But the insistent articulation of the paradoxical was also a technique which could misfire and produce misreadings. Lynd often pondered whether the writers of letters to newspapers 'intended to be ironical or serious', and an article by Lynd himself late in his career endeavouring to demonstrate the heavily intellectual nature of English culture evoked similar reactions. Lynd reported that a critic had responded 'on first reading the article, I had grave doubts as to this point, as to whether or not it was supposed to be a satire'. Lynd stated that this had not been the intention, but admitted, 'I have unfortunately little comprehension of logic': 'I ... find it extremely difficult to perceive the flaw in one of my own arguments'.

While Lynd's difficulties in ratiocination perhaps did not constitute a revolt against the despotism of fact, the prominence of the paradoxical in Lynd's prose can make its levels of seriousness, irony and levity hard to disentangle. Combined with Lynd's Irish background, his jokey weekly essays on the lighter side of life could surely have been read by contemporaries as a variant of the 'stage Irish' performance. Such an image could not but undermine the effect of Lynd's more sober pieces, since the consequence of finding a paradoxical good in life's injustices was to depict the world, in Lynd's phrase, as 'a delightful playroom'. Negative attributes such as laziness become in Lynd's columns an 'excellent thing', since 'civilisation is simply an expression of man's desire to make things as easy as possible for himself'. Dyspepsia gave 'a man a new interest in life'. He even appeared to show an exaggerated respect for activities of which he heartily disapproved, such as discarding litter. According to one editor regularly to publish Lynd's work, it was not in his literary persona alone that Lynd found it hard to regard any entity as irredeemably bad: 'I do not believe he really hates the Devil: I doubt if he [even] hates Lord Carson.'

Apart from entertainment value, and more than occasional flashes of brilliant prose, there are several reasons why Lynd even at his most indulgent to the paradoxical should not be condemned for ‘acting out’ a stereotype. Firstly, it can be argued that paradox is a defence mechanism for one who associates himself, as Lynd did, with the Irish experience of disadvantage. The counterintuitive nature of paradox means that, in skilled hands, it enables one to hint at the superior intelligence, competence and self-possession of those who appear to be stupid, incompetent or wild. Lynd was certainly keenly aware of stereotypes of the Irish in Britain which incorporated the latter characteristics.

In 1941, recalling his earlier arrival in England, he wrote:

I had scarcely set foot on English soil when an Englishman ... looked at me affectionately and, shaking his head, said: 'Wild Irishman. You're all the same. Always ready for a scrap.' ... Sometimes I have tried to disillusion them; but sometimes the pleasure of being mistaken for a man who loved nothing better than a scrap has been too much for me, and I have accepted the compliment with a fraudulent smile.

One of the passages in Lynd's work most often quoted, written in 1908, had also reflected on such early encounters with the English:

What I especially like about Englishmen is that, after they have called you a thief and a liar and have patted you on the back for being so charming in spite of it, they look honestly depressed if you fail to see that they have been paying you a handsome compliment.

It is suggestive, too, that Lynd so admired Bernard Shaw, the writer at this time of the most famous inversion of the binary opposition between stereotypes of the Irish and the English/British.

A second and more important defence of Lynd, however, is that ethnicity, and therefore the ‘acting out’ of ethnic stereotypes, did not play as large a part in his life or writings as might be thought. Notwithstanding the difficulties hinted at in Lynd’s description of his encounters with the English soon after arriving in the country, Lynd’s personal narrative in Britain was largely one of integration, which certainly entailed ‘working through’ any atavistic sense of Anglophobia. After almost two decades of working in England, even during the opening phases of the war of independence, Lynd could describe himself as ‘an almost fanatical pro-Englishman’. The conclusion of that war seems to have increased

Lynd’s sense of having a stake in England. After the Second World War, Lynd even defended ‘England’ from insular critics:

Now that England has ceased to be the boastful country of the end of the last century there is room for ... a reaction against those who are inclined to see only the virtues of foreign nations and the crimes and faults of their own ... After all, English history, with all its black pages, is the most remarkable that the world has seen since Rome perished.49

Lynd’s admiration of contemporary Irish writing was not inimical to veneration of many aspects of English literature: his favourites included such English worthies as Byron,50 Samuel Johnson,51 and, of course, Shakespeare, whom he paid the following striking compliment: ‘It is, I believe, impossible to prove that Shakespeare smoked, but if he did not smoke, how could he have written his plays?’52 It would have been hard for Lynd to avoid cherishing many aspects of English culture since so much of his career was given up to the appreciation of literature in the English language, notwithstanding his own fluency in the Irish language (a key revivalist objective which Lynd, predictably, pursued while in London).53 Lynd was never an assimilated member of an imagined English nation and continued to reference his Irish background and Irish concerns; but he had succeeded in ‘working through’ any visceral antagonism to English culture.

Larry Morrow was another member of the large group of Irish journalists prominent in London, and occasionally filled in for Lynd in his weekly jovial essay slot in the Daily News.54 Morrow told English readers in 1925, with reference to the reputation of Ireland:

The blame, I’m afraid, must lie with us in Ireland, although on your side you Englishmen have done your best for the legend through Geraldus Cambrensis, Edmund Spenser and James Anthony Froude. We have let you talk and write nonsense about Ireland for almost 500 years, and we have written a good deal of it ourselves.55

Robert Lynd’s writings demonstrate some of the difficulties for Irish individuals, at least in certain locations at certain times, of avoiding the writing of nonsense, and the cognate difficulty of avoiding ‘acting-out’. Ultimately, however, Lynd deserves credit not only for his efforts to ‘work through’, but also for personally adding less to the stock of ‘nonsense about Ireland’ than many others.