

ERNEST BOYD, A SEMI-DETACHED INTELLECTUAL

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study is the account of a man of many talents diverted by a success too easy and a failure too hard to allow full realization of any of them. Ernest A. Boyd started his literary career as a distinguished critic and historian of the Irish Literary Renaissance. He ended it as a querulous and irresponsible detractor of everything he encountered. The twenty-three years between these events were crowded with bibulous and productive days.

Chapter I outlines the intellectual atmosphere which the youthful Boyd, just released from the British Consular Service, found himself breathing deeply with exuberant and optimistic expectation of success in the gay first-city of the New World...the laughter and license, the serious, the impudent and the bawdy forces of intellectual and artistic revolt that characterized the fabulous twenties and comprised his first audience.

Following a review of his critical writings on Irish poetry, drama, and personalities, Chapter III surveys his work as an American Drama Critic, begun in 1920 and resumed after several intervening years as editor, translator, and essayist.

Chapter IV finds him at the height of his popularity--urbane, lionized, an intimate of the new school of young writers and critics that gathered around Mencken and Nathan and the American Mercury. New standards of criticism were being established and the old pruderies and obscurantism of the Puritan era were being overthrown or outrageously violated. Boyd found himself in the middle of this movement--one into

which he fitted with facile and articulate charm. But already resentment at the robust heterodoxy of the Menckenes was beginning to build into a reaction which was to cast Boyd adrift in the depression period, without an audience and with but few, though powerful, exponents of authoritarianism left to fight.

The impertinences of Boyd's productive period of literary satire, traced in Chapter V, were soon to fall upon ears deaf to anything but a "message" that promised release from the pains of economic collapse. Chapter VI finds him entering the last of his literary "periods"--the fight for the freedom of the mind. That freedom which he and his youthful associates had exercised with such glib carelessness of established institutions became for him an institution in itself, suddenly threatened from all sides by the stultifying advocates of conformity. Political and social "isms," psychology, militant theology, labor, and big business--all polished their lures in preparation for an all-out offensive against the free mind now stunned by the exigencies of financial distress.

Writings which would today have placed Boyd in the vanguard of political essayists proved no match for the rising tide of proletarianism, the return to dogmatic religion, and the inflated cheerfulness of Blue Eagle paternalism and Booster Club zeal. America was pulling herself up by her worn economic bootstraps and the intelligent reader who once appreciated expression of the verities of freedom and truth now concentrated his interests on the methods of economic survival. Boyd's periodical contributions diminished rapidly in the late 30's and his last published article appeared in The Saturday Evening Post.

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CHAPTER I

INTELLECTUAL MILIEU

FOR SALE OR RENT
WITH IMMEDIATE POSSESSION
A SEMI-DETACHED INTELLECTUAL

A well furnished intellectual. Accommodation: six living languages; well-arranged commodious ideas commanding uninterrupted view of surrounding problems; widely developed experiences; mental fittings have recently been thoroughly overhauled and redecorated. Body in excellent repair; clear of incumbrance. Concrete ideals. Personal inspection if desired. Full particulars as to price, etc., on application to sole agents, Messrs. Judas & Iscariot.

Ernest A. Boyd¹

In September, 1920, Ernest Augustus Boyd was thirty-three years old, impeccably bearded and dressed, erudite, arrogant and testy. But recently resigned from the British consular service to devote himself exclusively to a literary career, he was intellectually independent as well. So when a well-meaning but ingenuous young advocate of literary independence called upon him in behalf of the Friends of Intellectual Freedom, Boyd was irascibly amused to learn that the only hope for freedom of thought in our time lay in a return to the system of literary patronage. Boyd immediately wrote the above advertisement to be run in all literary journals offering himself body and soul to the highest bidder. Whether or not he ever received such a visit (certainly the advertisement did not run), the reporting of the incident provided him with an amusing piece for The Freeman, and gives us an early glimpse of the qualifications of E.A. Boyd on the eve of what certainly proved to be the decade

¹E.A. Boyd, "The Newest Freedom," Freeman, v.2, September 15, 1920, p.9.

of greatest ferment in American letters.

What was the literary scene upon which this talented young Dublin scholar and historian of the Irish Literary Renaissance was about to stamp his iconoclastic and enlightened cynicism with an exuberance more commonly associated with athletics than with studious criticism? Dreiser had only begun to collect his quota of extravagant praise and blame. Jurgen had just been suppressed and Cabell was enjoying a brief martyrdom pending its quick release by the beleaguered censor. Main Street was just off the press. Mencken's Prejudices, Second Series had appeared to swell the popularity of unpopular opinions which he was to enjoy for the next fifteen years. Stuart Sherman was still in Urbana, Illinois, fighting the good dogmatic fight against the heresy of inquiry into the more firmly established concepts of American Puritanism. Nathan, abetted by Mencken, flourished in the impertinence of The Smart Set. The Little Review was well launched and Broom, Secession, and the Wave were about to be born. Burton Rascoe had just come east from Chicago. Henry Seidel Canby, Christopher Morley and William Rose Benet were in charge of the New York Evening Post's "Literary Review," perfecting their already not inconsiderable talents in preparation for their subsequent masterminding of the Saturday Review of Literature. Carl Van Doren edited the Century. Dial and Freeman were going strong and The New Yorker was years away. There was no Book-of-the-Month Club; people interested in the intellectual life of the time subscribed to and read and wrote letters to the editors of the little magazines. Overlying the country club extravagances of the "lost generation" was a rich intellectual curiosity, similar in kind and intensity to youth's inquiry into the social, sexual, religious, and

economic taboos of its elders. Doors long closed, not only to polite practice but even to speculative thought, were being thrown open with a soul-satisfying bang in the care of young Boyd, for so long knowledgeable and nihilistic but without the fertile field of an awakening continent in which to sow the seeds of his incredibly informed dissatisfactions.

Ernest Boyd, by virtue of his cosmopolitan background and his intermediate age, stood midway between the youngsters, avid for knowledge, and the elders, heavy with disillusionment or alarm. He was always to stand between something and its opposite. Never, except by adoption, a member of flaming youth, neither could he ally his massive erudition with the elder intelligentsia of the period who were fighting a losing battle against the encroachments of free inquiry and a disturbing reluctance to pay homage to age and precedent alone which characterized the more thoughtful members of the new "golden age." Boyd was equally repelled by self-conscious "modernism" and stuffy tradition. The answer to his dilemma lay in the early development of an extravagant style with which he adorned his essentially moderate critical judgment. This extravagance of expression was to win him many enemies and adversely influence many people; yet for all its apparent railings, his criticism is essentially temperate when compared with the extremes of dogma which it was his purpose to oppose.

Burton Rascoe, long a devoted friend, was to comment sadly almost ten years later on the essential disharmony of Boyd's scholarly background and the type of critical work in part demanded by the taste of the period and in part adopted by Boyd himself out of the bitterness of disappointment and unrealized ability:

This benignity of countenance and this harmony of exterior are not, however, indices of the inner man.

He is far from benign and he is out of harmony with much of the spirit of his environment. A great linguist, conversant with a dozen languages and a distinguished scholar, his proper sphere would be that of some ancient library with companions of the mind and temper of George Saintsbury, Quiller Couch, Edmund Gosse, Anatole France, Salomon Reinach, and Marcel Schwab. Instead he finds himself more often in an atmosphere of jazz and wise-cracking. The result has been, that just to the degrees to which he has been successful, a source of inner disturbance begins. This inner disturbance finds an outlet in a bitterly witty and cynically amused attitude in his conversation and in an occasional acerbity--an acerbity that is not due to impatience with the subject at hand, but to an impatience with the whole hectic and too fluent intellectual milieu in which he makes his living.²

Ernest Augustus Boyd was born in Dublin, June 28, 1887, of Scottish, Irish, and Spanish ancestry. Educated privately, he worked on the staff of the Irish Times from 1910 to 1913, when he entered the British Consular Service. During the First World War he was accused of being a Sinn Féiner, a charge against which he successfully defended himself despite known sympathies for that group's avowed objectives, and he continued in that government's service until 1919. Already the author of three books on Irish culture: Ireland's Literary Renaissance (1916), Appreciations and Denreciations (1917), and The Contemporary Drama of Ireland (1917), he had been introduced to the leading literary lights of the New World in 1913 by H.L. Mencken, who encouraged him to devote more time to critical writing. His publisher in this country, Alfred A. Knopf, was interested in the brilliant young man, and that interest promised to provide a profitable outlet for his varied talents. It is characteristic of young Boyd's personality at this time that in a personally inscribed volume of Appreciations

²Burton Rascoe, "Contemporary Reminiscences," Arts and Decoration, v.30, January, 1929, p.56.

and Demerolations, he mis-spells Mr. Knopf's name and double-underlines his own--this despite an already notorious preoccupation with accuracy which, throughout his literary life, was to mark his work and criticism, particularly in translation.

Boyd was always something of a dandy, affecting in dress only those shades of brown best designed to show his prominent ginger beard to advantage. Distinctive though this facial adornment was, it gave him a remarkable resemblance to both Christopher Morley and Monty Woolley and later led to mistakes of identity which infuriated him; not enough however, to cause him to shave it off.

Emily Clark, founder of The Reviewer, a short-lived "little" magazine of the South, retains vivid impressions of the younger Boyd who, with customary gallantry, responded to her appeal for free contributions with a brief outline of a busy career:

I am now (1922) literary adviser for foreign literature to Alfred A. Knopf (he had learned to spell the name) and a Reader of Foreign Plays for the Theatre Guild. I have translated Les Femmes d'Alceste by Paul Goll, Der Untertan by Heinrich Mann, and Hanneke Vilger by Gustav Wied, and I am bringing out the definitive English edition of Maupassant's novels and stories in 15 volumes...I cannot remember anything more.³

An ambitious program for a newcomer to American letters, spiced with a steady flow of essays for the little magazines written in his now fully developed, ramunctious style, and alternating with an active social life among the young litterati of the City who had immediately welcomed Boyd into their society as a master iconoclast and wit. "Ernest alone of our contributors," complains Miss Clark, "was exigent in this matter of seeing

³Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, Alfred A. Knopf, 1931, p.149.

proofs of his articles...to a degree which compelled even me to mail him his galleys promptly when he demanded them...⁴ Small wonder, this, since the sweet literary lady got the title to one of his major works wrong in her direct transcription of his biographical data. This insistence upon accuracy, she complains, obliged her publishers to buy the printer a complete set of foreign accents for the benefit of Ernest's contributions. This same lady neglected to mail either proofs of a copy of the first issue containing Boyd's initial contribution, an oversight which so enraged him (in spite of his gallantry toward impractical and doting ladies) that he had to entrust his protests to the offices of his wife Madeleine and his friend Carl Van Vechten. However, she recalls, Boyd took her under his wing with great charm and urbanity when, a year later on a trip to New York, she was snubbed or ignored by the cognoscenti who regularly foregathered at the Algonquin in preparation for the rounds of cocktail parties and speak-easies to follow. It is safe to conclude from this incident that Miss Clark, for all her impertinences and oversights, was quite pretty.

This urbanity--indeed humanity--on the part of one of the most ruthless of critics, has so far never failed me. I left New York the week that I met him, convinced of the truth of a statement later made to me by Elinor Wylie. "Ernest," she informed me, "appreciates persons of breeding." Before I left I went book-hunting with him, where, in spite of his beard and the erudite, cynical and sophisticated personality I had been told was lurking behind it, an expression of innocent enjoyment irradiated his entire countenance.⁵

All his intimates seem to agree that Boyd's social personality was quite

⁴Ibid., p. 151.

⁵Ibid., p. 154.

distinct from his critical one. Van Vechten describes him as:

"...one of the most interesting literary figures in America...an Irishman. I pause after this word and wonder if any man can be an Irishman who speaks eight languages fluently and reads sixteen others, including Danish, Zend and Hawaiian, with a fair amount of ease. He informed himself and others about everything from Dadism to the Samoan Secessionists and the Salon d'Automne of Helsingfors. In his easy, fluent style, he passes in comparative review from George Moore to Kama Sutra. He reads the new books of d'Annunzio and those of Francis Carco and Baroja. He is acquainted with Knut Hamsun in the original. I don't suppose there is anything he doesn't know; he puts the proper accents on Magyar substantives; he is aware of the burial place of Kryloff; he can tell you what John Eglinton likes for dinner and the name of André Gide's tailor. He is privy to the feminine endings in Pennsylvania Dutch; he can conjugate the Yiddish irregular verbs; and he can order alligator pears in Persian. Withal he is a delightful and charming companion and can spin a sullied yarn with the best-spoken longshoreman and drink a cup of anti-legal ambrosia with the habitual gobletman. If his qualifications were essential to membership in the Academy of Arts and Sciences, he would be the only member..."⁶

Remarking on Boyd's party manners, Miss Clark notices:

He annoys certain fellow critics by combining a completely careless social life and frank hatred of serious topics at parties, with an appalling amount of knowledge of such topics when he is not avoiding them... Ernest is a solace to any hostess whose parties include purely frivolous guests--he is hopelessly perverse, impractical and uncalculating. The knowledge that the friendship of a person might be valuable to him is sufficient reason for him to avoid that person eternally. He can flatter delightfully, but never when it would profit him to do so. Mingled with his perversity there is an odd gentleness...perhaps this is Irish for I have been aware of the same thing in James Joyce, AE, and Joe Kerrigan of the Irish Players.⁷

⁶ Ibid., Vechten quoted, p.158.

⁷ Ibid., pp.159-60.

Miss Clark expresses a genteel disdain for excesses in drinking, yet admires Ernest's capacity:

I do not quote other persons in like condition but I shall quote him in this condition because Ernest is one of the rare people who say anything worth repeating in this condition. Irritated by an argument in progress at a table where he was dining with a dozen other people, he abruptly decided to put a stop to the discussion. "Je suis ivre!" he exclaimed in a stentorian tone, threw up his hands, leapt from his chair and dashed down stairs to the lower restaurant. "Ireland and the Confederacy must stand together," he shouted at me, grasping my arm with ferocity. "Divided we stand. United we fall. Lincoln's address before Gettysburg," he further informed me, "is a string of platitudes. It goes like this: 'We are here today and gone tomorrow. The quality of mercy is not strained. Yes, we have no bananas.'" Taxis were called and the party broke up...⁸

For the fact that Boyd changed little in the decade of the 1920's we have the words of a thumbnail biographer, Benjamin de Casseres, writing in 1931:

In Boyd's case, the style is not the man. He is pronounced, decisive and often blood-curdling in his verbal opinions and judgments. He booms his edicts from abysmal lung vales. I have seen him sweep Walt Whitman off Olympus with a single blow between two ditties from "Patience." But his literary style gives no indication of the Dionysian and heavily charged electronic Boyd. It is a style that is deft, sure, studied, low-spoken...in fact he abounds in gems. The rapier, the bludgeon, the dirk he seldom or never uses. His mind is a melting pot for all the books produced in the world... In appearance he is a pre-Raphaelite Parnell, a Victorian Shaw, a Titian Nazarene...⁹

And indeed, Boyd's benign, saintly expression had led to his choice, during boyhood, to sit as the model for the young Christ in the Stations of

⁸Ibid., pp.163-164

⁹Benjamin de Casseres, "Portraits en Brochette," Bookman, v.73, July, 1931, p.491.

the Cross paintings at Dublin Cathedral. In later years his long, thin, ascetic face was to broaden and coarsen, so that with the small, inflamed eyes and the bitterly writhing, thin-lipped mouth half lost in a grizzled beard, he was to appear more satanic than saintly. But that time was as yet unforeseen--he was admired, lionized, his work sought by every literary periodical of the time, his days bustling with work, his evenings brilliant with conversation and bright, good fellowship. He had much to say to a new generation eager to hear it. His literary career was impressively launched. Hardly a reference to the period by cultural historians, social chroniclers or political essayists omits mention, either admiring or resentful, of this supercharged critic, essayist, political commentator, social historian, and man-about-town. The year 1944 found him spending the majority of his waking hours in a booth at Pete's Bar and Grill on the corner of Irving Place and East 15th Street. The purpose of this thesis is to determine why.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIAN OF THE IRISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE

Boyd's first published work, and a major one--Ireland's Literary Renaissance--is a young man's studious history of the nationalistic literature that began after 1848 and the decline of the Fenian movement; even more than this, it is a young literary nationalist's defense of Anglo-Irish letters, first against the snobbery of English comparative criticism, and equally, against the narrow-mindedness of Irish political nationalism and the Sinn Fein purists who, with an arrogance and stupidity greater than that of any traditional English critic, were quick to deny those poets and playwrights of their own country and political persuasion who wrote in English rather than Gaelic. The cultural and political situations are clearly drawn in this generally placid appraisal of Irish nationalism and letters. It was precisely this internecine conflict between literary men of truly national culture and those of merely violent political conviction which prompted Stephen Dedalus to compare Ireland to "...the old sow that eats her farrow."¹ Ernest Boyd in this work allows himself no such sweeping simile for, as a young Foreign Office appointee in the English Consular Service, he is writing on a then delicate subject under at least partial wraps. This fact is evident from a comparison of the introduction to the 1916 edition and that pre-facing the revised edition of 1922, after he had resigned from government service and was well-launched on his career of free-lance chronicler

¹James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, N.Y., Random House, 1928, p.238.

of arts, sciences, manners and mores of the civilized world. In 1916 he wrote: "The purpose of this book is to give an account of the literature produced in Ireland during the last thirty years, under the impulse of the Celtic Renaissance."² In 1922 he was more forthright: "Since the Easter rising of 1916 there has been renewed in Ireland that sense of national identity which never fails to assert itself in the Irish people when the spirit of nationality seems near the point of extinction."³ Cultural revival is then openly equated with violent resistance to oppression. Yet, disdainfully he says of the self-ordained patriots: "Irish criticism is too largely the monopoly of the patriotic, whose unimpeachable sentiments concerning Ireland are regarded as entitling them to pass judgment upon questions of aesthetics."⁴ As always, the young Boyd is caught between warring factions, but in this instance he is not alone. All his life he was to identify himself with the objectives, personalities and points-of-view of the Anglo-Irish school--men of intelligence and ideals caught between the extremists of left and right. Perhaps his intellectual bent was formed before he ever came to America. Always thereafter he was to react with increasing violence against authoritarianism and dogma wherever he encountered it. Perhaps, too, it was here that his standards of excellence were formed--the standards which were to earn him the reputation, even among his admirers in America, of a pitiless and excoriating detractor. For he was a close witness of one of the great literary revivals of any century or place. This revival was a small voice in a mean place at a bad time. But it was no less human and gay

²E.A. Boyd, "Preface to the First Edition," Ireland's Literary Renaissance, N.Y., Knopf, 1922, p.9.

³Ibid., "Preface to the New Edition," p.5.

⁴Ibid., p.7.

for being disparaged both at home and abroad and seemed even to thrive in that rich isolation between the two humorless sterilities of Irish and English nationalism. Several of their talents were fully realized within that environment, and in spite of his rebellion, even Joyce derived some confidence from it to stand against a larger critical world. By education, temperament, and ambition, Boyd was destined to seek an outlet for his own talents outside the only school he might have attended with real success. But Ernest Boyd remains the file-hard conscience of the Celtic revival, even when commenting on the "meagre" accomplishments of a non-Celtic playwright, novelist or poet.

The Anglo-Irish writers fought English culture with Celtic invention; they fought English politics with an almost non-political hatred and resentment of all rule. Boyd was a part of that tradition. He was barely a part of the belligerent land that bred it. He was looking for bigger things. Too late he realized there was to be nothing bigger in his time.

Boyd's critical writings on the literature and authors of Ireland are so distinct in tone from his other critical essays that they require separate consideration. While he continued to contribute an occasional piece on Irish letters and the political problems of Ireland up to the mid-thirties, most of his critical work in this field was completed by 1922 when he revised the 1916 edition of Ireland's Literary Renaissance--a painstaking review of the sources of the Revival and its major and minor contributors in the poetry, drama, and essay of the Anglo-Irish literary movement. In this book there is no hint of the mature style which was to characterize his writing from the early twenties on. The epigrammatic, satirical turn of phrase, the infuriating or delightful

excesses of his later pronouncements, are entirely absent from this scholarly review of the background and maturation of contemporary Irish literature. Regardless of their relative merits and with no attempt at absolute evaluation, Boyd gives full credit to each contributor to the Revival. He is repetitious and almost callowly enthusiastic in his praise of the leading lights of the Renaissance; yet the work is illuminated with that scholarly meticulousness that always remained an element of his writings, even when their style and content had become radically altered by the iconoclastic interests of the New World's "lost generation."

The Boyd of the Renaissance period saw his native art as the inheritor of a proud and mighty tradition. Each element of the rebirth of that tradition took on an historical significance and shared in the achievement of the group. He saw Irish literature clearly and he saw it whole. But his real talent was as yet unsuspected. His later genius was to see Art crippled and diseased and to articulate that vision as no other critic before or since has ever done. The time was soon to come when it seemed he literally despised everything "creative"--so that the very act of writing on the part of someone else became to him an offensive invasion of critical integrity. He was impressively fluent only when he was being inflammatory and detracting. He attacked brilliantly; approved in an ordinary manner.

Almost twenty years after the appearance of Ireland's Literary Renaissance, he was to look back to that clearly defined period, brief and strange in his angry life, when in gentleness and mutual respect he looked out from the fastness of friendship and youthful ardor upon a world to be made. In that remarkable series of short Portraits⁵ the

⁵E.A. Boyd, "William Butler Yeats," Portraits Real and Imaginary, N.Y., George Doran, 1924.

mature Boyd affirmed his youthful judgment of his Renaissance peers. He sees them dedicated to a pure and not narrow, though nationally circumscribed, culture. Not gleefully, but mournfully, he notes the deterioration of Stephens' later work; unabashedly, unenviously and with love he calls Yeats great. Here he is not concerned with minor irregularities of meter and syntax. He is impressed by the men, by what they stood and fought for.

In this group, perhaps more than any other since the Greeks, Art of the purest and highest order was more a way of life, a spiritual maturation, than a cult or a shrine. Intellectually raised among such men, Boyd was always to have difficulty in separating the individual from his "Art." He was forever intolerant of pretention, of formulae, of bad craftsmanship, and cultivated obscurity. Here was no closed circle of garland-traders, but an open-shop of individual artists where mystic and realist enjoyed respectful exchange of ideas, where mysticism and economics and fiercely national politics made parts of the same strong root of culture. Hence his contempt for the narrow cultists, the waste-landers, the self-publicised obscurantists and aesthetes, the literary communists, the literary agrarians, the literary primitives. Among friends, we find the genuine sweetness and love of which the untroubled Boyd was capable and which his disenchantment was always in later years at such trouble to strangle or subdue to make way for his rhetorical bitterness and hate.

In one of the Portraits, there is a passage filled, for those who knew Boyd to the last, with an odd and painful prophecy. He describes Yeats, a shy, retiring man, at a noisy ovation given by his American admirers. Surrounded by the football cheers of his Irish-American

admirers and that typically American demand for autographs, Yeats is seen as "having taken flight from his ignominy in a species of trance, leaving the shell of himself to pay the penalty for greatness."⁶ Soon thereafter Boyd would begin a similar withdrawal into obscurity not, as Yeats had done, for an hour or a day, but forever, strangled by the same capriciousness of public taste whose earlier demand for bias and vituperation had led to the critical excesses for which he was briefly famous, harshly criticized, and at last neglected and forgotten.

Throughout Ireland's Literary Renaissance, the theme is one of a truly native Irish literature struggling to free itself from both English literary tradition and the strictures of purely political Irish nationalism. Boyd traces the genesis of Anglo-Irish writing from the occasional, unrealized Gaelic sources used by Callanan--for the most part an imitator of the anglicised Thomas Moore--through a generation of increasingly national consciousness which saw the works of countless literate and unlettered poets in Charles Gavan Duffy's The Nation--the first medium of Irish literary nationalism.

The poets of The Nation, for all their intensity of patriotic feeling, followed the English rather than the Celtic tradition, their work has a political rather than a literary value, and bears little upon the development of modern Irish verse. The literature of the Revival is no longer concerned with the political revolt against England. It has lost the passionate cry of aggressive patriotism, the wail of despair, and has entered into possession of the vast field of Irish legend. Here, in the interpretation of the Celtic spirit, it has found a truer and more steadfast expression of Irish nationality

⁶Ibid., p.242.

The circumstances propitious to such outbursts as characterized the patriot poets of the mid-nineteenth century have altered. Patriotic revolt is not a sufficient guarantee of good poetry, and the Irish Muse has found a quieter and more lasting inspiration.⁷

Concurrent with this folk-lore verse, rooted in this word-of-mouth awareness of Irish tradition, were the scholarly essays of Thomas Davis and others, who sought to revive, in a people ignorant and enslaved, a sense of the past achievements of their race.

The first utterance of Celtic Ireland in the English language was the work of Mangan, drawing upon contact with the single, unbroken stream of Gaelic literature. His successor, Sir Samuel Ferguson, carried this knowledge of Gaelic sources to its full realization in Anglo-Irish poetry. Concerning Ferguson, he quotes Yeats, whose own first book of verse appeared in the year of the former's death, 1886:

The author of these poems is the greatest poet Ireland has produced, because the most central and the most Celtic. Whatever, the future may bring forth in the way of a truly great and national literature...will find its morning in these three volumes of one who was made by the purifying flame of national sentiment, the one man of his time who wrote heroic poetry.⁸

In this way Yeats pays youthful homage to nationalism in Irish letters while yet himself still enamored of Arcady and India in his own verse.

⁷Ireland's Literary Renaissance, p.17. This insistence on Art before "message" was to characterize Boyd's critical thinking throughout his life. Chauvinism in literary criticism never failed to infuriate him. Among the worst offenders in this respect were the literary communists, the New Humanists and the Thomists or, as he called them, the New Mediaevalists. He found them equally guilty of cowering to the propagandist intent of their associates, with a consequent weakening or loss of strict principles of literary excellence.

⁸Ibid., p.25.

Thus, also, does Yeats, by his own admission, disavow his right to the title of author of the literary revival in Ireland—a credit which is frequently and erroneously given him.

The real initiator of the Revival was Standish O'Grady, "...a name which has ever since been familiar by its constant association with every form of literary, political and economic activity, that called for noble enthusiasm and lofty idealism."⁹ O'Grady's History of Ireland's Heroic Period, which appeared in two volumes, 1878 and 1880, is the actual beginning of the Literary Revival. This prose work provided the starting point for a rich vein of nationalist poetry based on both English and Gaelic forms:

Standish O'Grady sees the gods and demigods, the heroes and kings of Irish history, with the eyes of an epic imagination. He is not concerned with deciding the exact point at which the legends merge into history, but embraces the whole epoch, assimilating all that is best and most lordly in the Bardic compositions with the knowledge gleaned from all manner of sources, contemporary documents and recent commentaries. The result is an astonishingly vigorous narrative, which rolls along with a mighty sweep, carrying the reader into the very midst of the great life of the heroic period. The past lives again in these pages, lit up by the brilliance of a mind stored with a wealth of romantic vision.¹⁰

George Sigerson and John O'Daly were two other founders of the Revival. They were most active as translators of Bardic poets. The material covered by their translations spanned 2000 years, including all the great epochs of Irish history: the Age of Cuculain, the Age of Finn, the Age of Ossian, the dawn of Christianity and the Gaelic-Horse period. "With such an ancestry, the poets were emboldened to proclaim themselves

⁹Ibid., p.27.

¹⁰Ibid., p.32.

as voicing something more than a mere province of England.¹¹ Sigerson's studies successfully recreated the Irish rhythms and rhymes which, basically, are foreign to the English language. They showed, in the ancient Druid incantations, the existence of rhyming verse in Ireland at a time when such forms were undreamed of in other countries. Sigerson attempted to explain the underlying sadness of Celtic verse. "Filled with the beauties of this dream world (Irish mythology and legend), once a reality, their minds dwell in sadness upon the altered destiny of the race."¹²

Douglas Hyde, another pioneer, furthered national consciousness of everything Irish--music, literature, games, and customs. He wrote the most comprehensive work of its kind: The Literary History of Ireland (1899), as well as plays, poems, and fairy tales in Gaelic; historical and cultural essays in English. The decline of the peasantry threatened the rich store of unwritten literature, in the folk-songs of Ireland, with extinction. Hyde, and his Gaelic League, preserved it. Thus, while he is most closely associated with the Gaelic language revival of the political patriots, he helped bridge the gap between them and the exponents of Anglo-Irish literary nationalism. Ernest Boyd, while praising Hyde's contribution to the Irish Literary Renaissance, deplores his followers, who tended to champion everything Irish simply because it was Irish, without always showing the discrimination necessary to excellence and sound appreciations of the arts.

In addition to the ardent and narrow idealisation of "Irishness" and of the Gaelic tongue, Boyd sees some real justification for an early

¹¹Ibid., p.58.

¹²Ibid., p.62.

resentment of Anglo-Irish writings. For a time, Irish works in English were associated with comic situations and cheap buffoonery--the "stage" Irishman, invented by early Nineteenth Century novelists, Charles Lever, Samuel Lover, Gerald Griffin, and the Banims. The works of William Carleton were an exception. Boyd regards him, in 1922, as the greatest novelist in Irish literature. The Revival succeeded in recovering Anglo-Irish literature from its early association with cheap caricaturing situations. Hyde's Songs of Connacht rendered old Gaelic Folk-Songs in the English of the peasantry--a significant contribution toward dignifying Anglo-Irish language. These fine renderings are filled with the eloquent, rhythmic phrasing later identified with the works of J.M. Synge.

The "Young Irelanders" movement, which rallied around Davis' The Nation gradually was succeeded by the Fenians and their journal, The Irish People. Charles Kickham, John Casey, Ellen O'Leary were prominent in this group. "Instead of the vehement, rhetorical passion of the Young Irelanders, we find a plaintiveness, a sad, idyllic note, which suggests the transition to the manner of the contemporary Irish poets."¹³

In 1893 Stopford Brooks addressed the London Society on "The Need and Use of Getting Irish Literature into the English Tongue." The essential tasks were: translation of the Gaelic texts; moulding of the various historical and mythological cycles into an imaginative unity, after the fashion of Malory; verse treatment of episodes and tales involving heroes of the supernatural and heroic world; and the collection of Irish folk-tales. Here were the principal branches of the Revival movement

¹³Ibid., p.80.

formally stated and recognized by one of the several interested societies both in Ireland and England. The movement was well under way.

Many transitional works followed this early awareness of the necessity for recovering Ireland's great traditional and mythological background. Always was the conflict between the young school, early headed by Yeats, and the older Nation group, with Gavan Duffy at its head. The latter, president of the Irish Literary Society, retained the standards of the politico-literary groups of his youth. Yeats defended nationality, as distinguished from the strictures of political nationalism, in literature. In a sense this difference followed the usual conflict of youth versus age. The "New Irish Library," collected by Duffy and his followers, contained little of interest to literary minded Irishmen beyond the generation of 1845.

The first genuine offering of the Literary Revival was Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland, 1886. The bulk of this book was work of the young writers: Douglas Hyde, T.W. Rolleston, W.B. Yeats, Katharine Tynan, Rose Kavanagh, and John Todhunter. The volume as a whole represented a high level of workmanship.

The peasantry have associated the Bardic divinities and heroes with the saints and wonders of Christianity. Sacred and profane legends have become so identical a part of the belief of the rural population that the one has infused the other with a certain breath of poetry. This fact partially offsets the fact that the externals of Irish life immediately demonstrate how slight is the artistic influence of Catholicism in Ireland. Irish Catholics have none of the easy tolerance and freedom of religious majorities elsewhere, but have the narrowness and hardness of a small sect. All the repressive measures of Puritanism are heartily enforced in emulation of the efforts of the Puritan minority.¹⁴

¹⁴Ibid., p.109.

Katharine Tynan is an example of this softening and amelioration of the stringencies of the Catholic peasantry in the literature of the Revival. But she is the only Catholic poet of any importance in Ireland, and hardly ranks with the best of that group. "Irish Catholicism is necessarily a shallow vein of inspiration, and even at best, it has not created, and cannot create, great poetry."¹⁵

Now Boyd turns, after brief consideration of some of the lesser figures of the Revival, to Yeats, and finds the generally held opinion that Yeats' work is the origin and substance of the Revival to be erroneous. Yeats was, and remained, essentially a poet. He made little mark on the form of Irish drama, his own plays standing outside those of other Revival playwrights. His stories and essays carried great weight in the formation of Renaissance thought, but little weight or influence on the actual works of his contemporaries. His earliest poems distinguished Yeats from the other writers of the period. "They have that glamour and sense of mysterious reality which are peculiar to Yeats' verse at its best, and haunt the memory like a subtle, intellectual perfume."¹⁶ Yeats was early influenced by Spenser and Shelley and sought his inspiration in medieval Spain, Arcady, and romantic India. But his surest inspiration was to come from his own literary and heroic national background.

The Wanderings of Oisín was his first significant work. While not influenced by the style of Ferguson, Yeats was among the first to recognize the validity of Ferguson's return to the inspirational sources of Irish heroic history and urged Ferguson's cause in his early writings.

¹⁵Ibid., p.112.

¹⁶Ibid., p.124.

"From Ferguson and Allingham Yeats learned what Irish poetry could be made, once the political note was softened or entirely silenced."¹⁷ It is interesting, now, to read the opinion of a sensitive critic in 1916, that The Wind Among the Reeds, following several earlier volumes of verse and a Collected Poems in 1895, is "probably the most complete expression of Yeats...where the highest point of progress is reached."¹⁸ Students of his later work may wonder at the reputation he enjoyed even at this early date when, certainly, the poetry for which he will be known for all time was still years away. Shrewdly Boyd notes:

Mysticism to Yeats is not an intellectual belief, but an emotional or artistic refuge. His visions do not convince us, because they are obviously "literary" rather than spiritual. The concepts which are realities to Blake, or to Yeats' contemporary, AE, are to him symbols, nor do they strike the reader as being anything more. Of symbolism--even mystic symbolism--there is plenty, but of mysticism hardly a trace.¹⁹

And again:

The skillful economy of words, the almost conversational tone, have led English critics to speak of the exhaustion and tenuousness of Yeats' later work. What one feels is the self-disciplined austerity, the restraint of a poet in his maturity who is perhaps a little too conscious of the generous sins of his youth. If the freshness of those colourful early poems is gone, here is the deep mellowness...²⁰

Boyd does not, with many other critics, mourn the loss of Yeats' poetic quality to the Irish theatre. He sees in that medium one of the natural

¹⁷Ibid., p.128.

¹⁸Ibid., p.137.

¹⁹Ibid., p.139.

²⁰Ibid., p.144.

outlets for some of Yeats' finest poetry--not as drama, but as a setting for things which might otherwise not have been written, or if written, would not have had the dramatic impact they find within the framework of a play. Many of the themes of Yeats' plays are fundamentally incapable of dramatic expression. But as literary drama, they are high points in his poetic career.

In the long course of experiment which has constituted the relation of W.B. Yeats to the theatre, he has now arrived at the point of seeking an escape from that defiant institution...he declares he has discovered at last the solution of the problem presented to him as a poet--dramatist by the modern stage: "My blunder has been that I did not discover in my youth that my theatre must be the ancient theatre made by unrolling a carpet or marking out a place with a stick, or setting a screen against a wall."²¹

With Yeats' critical success, came a great revival of poetry in Ireland: Lionel Johnson, Nora Hopper, Mair O'Neill, Ethna Carbery, and others. While none attained to the excellence of Yeats, they helped swell the national recognition of an Anglo-Irish literature not founded primarily on politics, yet informed with the spirit of Ireland's past.

Still another group, distinguished from the poets and dramatists of the Revival, added to its rich expression. These were the mystics of the theosophical movement: G.W. Russell (AE), Charles Johnson, John Eglington, and Charles Weeks. Particularly of AE, Boyd speaks respectfully, even lovingly, despite their very wide divergences of temperament and literary interests, not to mention Boyd's lifelong suspicion and disrespect for all things esoteric or non-classical in method and expression. He gives AE's rather misty poems and essays more admiringly critical space than he

²¹Ibid., pp.163-164.

accords to any one of Yeats' literary fields and in this seems to agree with almost everyone who knew and wrote of this remarkable personality.²²

The reminder of Ireland's Literary Renaissance is a record of the consolidation and refinement of earlier gains, in the theatre, in poetry and finally, in the appearance of a new, vital and hardy prose fiction. The poets: Seumas O'Sullivan, Padraic Colum, James Stephens, Joseph Campbell, Austin Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh and others; the playwrights, directors and producers: Edward Martyn, George Moore, W.G. Fay, J.M. Synge and Padraic Colum, the Abbey Players and Playwrights and the Ulster Literary Theatre--all sought to bring to fruition the relatively brief flowering of the Irish Revival. They gave bulk and authenticity to the earlier withdrawal of truly national Anglo-Irish writers from the stultifying political nationalism epitomized in the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin. Their heirs, the young Irish novelists and short story writers, have completed this divorce of politics and letters, of bard and saint, and there now is available to all English-speaking peoples, largely through the services of English and American publishers, a moving and literate record of one country's successful fight for national literary expression against antagonistic forces from within and without its geographic borders.

Neither of Boyd's other two published works on Irish literature, Appreciations and Deprecations (1917) and The Contemporary Drama of Ireland (1917), can compare with his comprehensive Literary History. They are evident extractions and enlargements of sections of that earlier

²²Almost twenty years later a sarcastic, embittered and cleverly brittle Boyd was to insert in an otherwise largely contemptuous and disparaging collection of Portraits a warm, almost grateful eulogy of AE, based, no doubt, on the recollection of former times spent among his peers in that earlier, happier period.

work, poorly printed and cheaply bound. Appreciations and Depreciations was, at least, published in Dublin--an achievement in itself by a young writer outside the exclusive Gaelic League Group. In neither of these works, any more than in the History, does Boyd show the style or asperity that marks his work only two years later in the American periodicals. Nor is the term "depreciations" justified in the title containing it. That book is a series of uninspired encomiums, lacking even the scholarly precision of the History, to his associations in the Anglo-Irish movement. He even chides gently certain "defectionists" from that cause. It is an entirely respectful and well-behaved little book, as is the Contemporary Drama, which is simply an extension of his chapters on the Irish Theatre taken from the History. Appreciations and Depreciations is interesting for its personal sidelights on members of the Renaissance by one who was intimately acquainted with them. Thus we see a Standish O'Grady who would:

...have us move violently backwards in a return to responsible aristocracy, but he was driven forward, helpless, by the laws of social gravitation. He came too late into a world too old but he has not failed to leave his imprint on the best in a contemporary Irish literature and politics.²³

This picture of the aristocratic conservative is especially interesting when compared with a similar portrait of his American counterpart which appeared some seventeen years later under the title "Dolichocephalic." This prototype of the New England aristocrat is given some small credit for the contribution of his forebears to America's period of colonization and the age of the pioneers, but he is represented more as the bumbling antiquarian, ignorant or impervious to the real issues of his time, than

²³Appreciations and Depreciations, Dublin, Talbot Press, 1917, p.8.

as a distinguished and admirable anachronism such as Mr. O'Grady.

AE is described as "The greatest personality in Ireland at the present time..."²⁴ and Boyd quotes from AE what might well have been his own critical Credo, had he lived in another time than the early 20th Century and another place than post-war America.

No blazoned banner we unfold -
One charge alone we give to youth;
Against the sceptred myth to hold
The golden heresy of truth.²⁵

for such was Boyd's own true temperament of open-mindedness and intellectual honesty before the tastes and disillusionments of an angry, impatient place and time had worked their malignancies upon him.

Of John Eglinton, Boyd writes: "One of the most beautiful writers in English...the Irish Emerson."²⁶ The mature Boyd would have been hard put to find such unqualified praise even for Shakespeare, much less for Mr. Emerson himself.

The chapter on Lord Dunsany is unusually dull, quoting extensively from his works and detailing the stages of his literary acceptance. "After so much quotation, but few words are necessary to refer to Lord Dunsany's style--the more so as quotation is by far more illuminating in his case than analysis."²⁷ This is careless, even bad, English. And how oddly modest to let the author speak for himself beyond all ability of the lowly commentator to measure his work. Ernest certainly was not yet himself as a critic.

²⁴Ibid., p.26.

²⁵Ibid., p.27.

²⁶Ibid., p.44.

²⁷Ibid., p.99.

Shaw he sees as having no roots in Ireland. He sought his material in England and the only national characteristic of his work and life are in his inborn Puritanical Irish Protestantism. His practical, unemotional attitude toward the war in the face of hysterical patriotism shows "the unemotional, purely rationalistic devotion of the Irish loyalist to England."²⁸ Here Boyd makes an acute analysis of the essential alienism of the Irish Protestant. He cannot feel completely at home in England and yet recognizes his advantage is in English loyalties. Boyd prefers to call this form of expatriatism "level-headedness" as distinguished from the excesses of Irish nationalism. Here speaks the cautious British public servant. Boyd admits that Catholicism in Ireland is puritanical and inert--that the task of thought and education has naturally fallen to Protestantism there. Of Shaw he says: "In normal circumstances he might have been the most powerful force in contemporary Irish life, whereas he is merely the impatiently tolerated satirist of a community in which he is a stranger."²⁹

All in all, these are modest and respectful appreciations. Nowhere is there a trace of that violent and almost frenzied fluency of attack that is characteristic of his later criticism. He is simply feeling his way from what was already an enormous erudition into the vehicle proper to its use in the critical world. Because he knew, understood and liked these men, he "appreciated" them. Less than five years later he would be laying about him with weapons crude and subtle as the case demanded--but always with irresistible verbal force and originality--a figure to be reckoned with in any critical discussion from comic strip to Karma.

²⁸Ibid., p.107.

²⁹Ibid., p.121.

Boyd continued his occasional contributions to strictly Irish criticism throughout his literary career, and his attitudes to that literature remained those of an Anglo-Irish literary nationalist. Accepted in America in the dual role of expert on Irish national affairs and on Irish Renaissance literature, he contributed to American periodicals as early as 1918, when he alternated with other Irishmen in writing "Our Dublin Letter" for The Dial. There he noted a shortage of books in Ireland due to the printers' strike and remarked that the Talbot Press (his own publisher in Dublin) was drawing the attention of those interested in the Irish literary movement. Although stationed abroad with the British Consular Service, he kept in close touch with the literature of several languages. He notes in John Butler Yeats' Essays Irish and American a growing tendency toward "...many pleasantries at the expense of our Philistines...urbane wit, not moved to fierceness and an irrepressible love of country."³⁰ However, the Irish censor continued his vicious work and in the same "Letter" he wrote:

The Censor's blue pencil is the sword of Damocles hanging over the head of anyone who attempts to spread outside this realm the political ideas which most insistently preoccupy the mind of Ireland; and as the political and historical literature in question most accurately reflects these preoccupations, the safe and sane course is to avoid detailed reference.³¹

Already the prose was becoming more noticeably polished and the edge of sarcasm was making itself felt in his style.

³⁰E.A. Boyd, "Dublin, November 16," The Dial, v.65, December 14, 1918, p.558.

³¹Ibid., p.559.

On the basis of George O'Brien's The Economic History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, he takes Mr. Shaw to task for describing the young Irish nationalists as "romantic dreamers unacquainted with the economics of history."³²

Mr. Shaw's ignorance of any Ireland other than that he abandoned thirty years ago is notorious among Irishmen; so it is not surprising that he should fall into an error which a knowledge of the education and ideas of the younger generation would easily dissipate. Mr. O'Brien's book is a profound chapter in a history which makes it difficult to accept the comfortable pretense that there has been no deliberate policy of destruction on the part of the English in Ireland.³³

Obviously young Mr. Boyd's letter of resignation from the British Foreign Office is in.

The same "Letter" calls attention to a

...provocative work entitled The Sacred Egoism of Sinn Fein. This little book has been ascribed to various hands, including my own! ...a Nietzschean indictment of pseudo-democracy, full of pungent comment at the expense of all belligerent nations, not excepting Ireland, whose right to satisfy the egoismo sacro of nationhood is proclaimed with sardonic and cynical humor. It may be recommended to all exasperated individualists.³⁴

It is an interesting speculation that the exclamation point in the last quotation was a sly admission of authorship. Could it have been in this little pamphlet, "full of pungent comment at the expense of all belligerent nations" that Boyd found his voice to be most resonant as that of a

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., p.560.

³⁴Ibid.

semi-detached intellectual? He was in trouble with his superiors for sympathizing with, if not actually belonging to, Sinn Féin. Might this imputed authorship have featured in that accusation? There is no positive evidence of the truth of such a supposition, but from the time of his resignation from the Consular Service he pulls no punches when writing of English-Irish relations, and much of that writing is in the vein of "a Nietzschean indictment of pseudo-democracy."

Another "Letter" assures American readers that there is yet time for literature in Ireland among

...German plots, anti-conscription campaigns, the innumerable crimes thrust upon the patriotic by the ubiquitous Defense of the Realm Act. The military press censorship is more severe even than the civilian establishment in England. An interesting library of banned or mutilated works awaits the return of happier days for publication.³⁵

The extent of Boyd's friendly tolerance, and even respect, for theories and opinions completely at variance with his own temperament and beliefs, so long as these theories are held by members of the Irish Renaissance, is evident in his review of AE's The Candle of Vision--an attempt by George Russell to describe his occult avenue to creative experience. Boyd goes so far as to suggest that all the "visions" of AE could probably be explained by the combined functions of imagination and memory, the former working unconsciously on the data of the latter to yield matter of sufficiently remarkable content to justify, in a person of AE's mystical leanings, the interpretation of metaphysical origin.

³⁵Z.A. Boyd, "Our Dublin Letter," The Dial, v.65, September 5, 1918, p. 154.

If, in the end, The Candle of Vision brings us no nearer than before to the solution of the profound mystery of being, it renews an old approach to the mysterious problem which challenges the intelligence of humanity.³⁶

These are vague words from one who hated, with an almost mystic intensity, vagueness. Elsewhere, as if to show the open-mindedness of which he was then capable, Boyd favorably reviewed A Garden by the Sea--stories and sketches by Forrest Reid. Mr. Reid, of Northern Ireland is "the only articulate Irishman who has no feeling for politics...only the passion of a writer for his craft."³⁷ One senses beneath this apparently left-handed compliment, an admiration by the critic for such single-mindedness. Years later he pays similar homage to Mr. George Jean Nathan for daring to be utterly indifferent to everything except gracious living and the expression of that fully-detached intellectualism in his critical writings. This is still another form of extremism to which Boyd frequently looked with cynical longing but to which he was never quite able to attain; an utter aristocratic detachment from all concern with the moral, social, political, economic, and personal pursuits of the human race.

For the next few years and intermittently throughout his literary life, Boyd continued to write resentfully, bitterly, and sarcastically of Irish-English political relations. For example:

Out of the purest altruism one hopes that the Glamour of Dublin will not be missed by English readers who, it appears, are looking coldly upon Irish and Russian literature because of the political heterodoxy of these

³⁶E.A. Boyd, "Imagination and Vision," The Dial, v.66, January 5, 1919, p.33.

³⁷_____, "Dublin, March 6," The Dial, v.66, April 5, 1919, p.358.

two countries. So, in literature, as in politics, our hope lies with America.³⁸

The newly emancipated critic was kicking up his political heels. The process of Americanization had already begun, inspired by the heady airs of New World iconoclasm and revolt. Following his resignation from the Foreign Service, Boyd's articles were particularly virulent, appearing almost monthly in such periodicals as Dial, Century, Nation, and Freeman. "Free Ireland and you free Ulster,"³⁹ he wrote in a well-documented defense of South Ireland's demand for a united and autonomous Ireland. He contended Ulster was more a political than a geographical concept as used by the English to beg the question of Home Rule. Self-determination and an Irish Parliament were meaningless unless they encompassed all of Ireland. English opposition to these long-awaited measures rested on a false division of Ireland into Catholic and Protestant. No such division existed geographically. Ulster proper still had a Catholic majority, only three of its counties showing a preponderance of Protestant population as measured by Parliamentary representation. Nor was Ulster, as the English said, a relatively prosperous section that would have been victimized by inclusion in an over-all Irish Free State. However they were regarded, the just interests of all Irishmen, of whatever religion, occupation, or geographical location, were best served by sharing the common duties and privileges of Irish government.

For all his strong feelings on the subject, Boyd recognized the irreconcilability of the extremes represented by the Sinn Feiners and

³⁸Ibid., p.360.

³⁹E.A. Boyd, "Ireland versus Ulster," The Century Magazine, v.98, September, 1919, p.584.

"that peculiar disease known as 'Ulsteria.'"⁴⁰ An answer to this apparent impasse lay in the proposals of the Irish Dominion League's three point program: Dominion status, representation in the League of Nations, and representation in any Council, Conference or Parliament that the Empire might have set up. There was a growing tendency among Irish leaders to look to America for help out of their dilemma "since no European nation is in the least disturbed by the accustomed behavior of John Bull. There are so many glass houses in Europe that the pleasure of throwing stones is kept within decorous limits."⁴¹ Sinn Fein turned its attention to the American public, but this effort was doomed to failure because Americans would not advocate a policy designed to so weaken England that Ireland might free herself. The Irish Dominion League was, Boyd thought, a realistic compromise. However, no leading political group would accept that compromise. Sinn Feiners would entertain no less thought than absolute freedom for all of Ireland. The Anglo-Irish literary nationalists opposed the league. The victims of "Ulsteria" were against it despite the fact that the League would have offered constitutional guarantees to Ulster so that it might effectively protect itself "...from the savage tribes which inhabit the twenty-nine counties of Ireland outside the northeast corner."⁴²

From this single article one might relate Mr. Boyd to the small number of moderates on the Irish question. Not so with his reaction to the ethics of English domination. A few months after his plea for

⁴⁰ _____, "Reconcilable Ireland," The Nation, v.109, December 13, 1919, p.751.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.751.

⁴² Ibid., p.752.

reasonable reconciliation he snarls:

We Irish are surely a strangely ungrateful people. Alone amongst the races of the civilized world we have failed to do justice to the glorious achievements of Anglo-Saxon culture and the benefits bestowed by the generous hand of our imperial neighbor: we can have freedom of speech, as befits imperial citizens, provided we wish to think imperially; we can have trial by jury as long as juries are sure to give anti-national verdicts; we share in the bounties of the British exchequer, so long as the taxes extorted from us exceed those from any other independent country of the same size.⁴³

There was one benefit of the British conquest, however, that had not been so shabbily unappreciated--the flower of Irish Protestantism. Always Ernest Boyd flew into a towering fury and frothed a little when this cat's paw of English politics was extended into a conversation. Now he continued acidly, "Ireland is a Catholic country. It is claimed as the triumph of English principles that only Protestants can flourish there."⁴⁴ Commenting on the excellencies claimed by English propaganda for its favorites of North Ireland--superior education, prosperity, intelligence-- and the need for protecting these advantages from the barbarians of the South, Boyd declared:

Facts from the area where they dominate--Northeast Ulster--statistically deny all that is claimed on their behalf. ...the criminal statistics are worse... average of wealth per capita lower than in Catholic provinces...figures of illiteracy, illegitimate births, unsanitary housing, and sweated wages are similarly excessive.⁴⁵

⁴³ E.A. Boyd, "Ireland's Anglo-Saxon Heritage," Freeman, v.1, June 2, 1920, p.276.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.277.

The Irish Protestant, he said, compared intellectually to the Negro revivalist in America.

His religious exercises are his only form of spiritual consciousness. The walls of his home bear the signs of his faith: "To hell with the Pope." His religion is a tribal superstition, whose outward manifestations are appropriately primitive. When these howling dervishes of Puritanism, these apostles of freedom and culture have become sufficiently keyed up by whiskey and patriotism, they invariably terminate their religious feast by beating up the Catholic population. ...in short the spectacle of that part of Ireland in which the great heritage of Anglo-Saxon evangelism has prospered is hardly calculated to inspire us with any desire to become anglicized.⁴⁶

He is no less abusive when he turns from the Irish Protestants to the Irish Catholic priests who

...condemn a woman to a series of Caesarian sections because, as celibates, they are authorities on such matters as sexual love and gynecology. Everything that is as plain as a pikestaff to an Irish... peasant is completely beyond the comprehension of their narrow minds.⁴⁷

Thus was Boyd emotionally involved with the political and religious problems of his homeland in violation of all his yearnings toward the tranquillities of an informed and urbane cynicism. In vain does he launch another calm and dispassionate appraisal of the Irish question. Within the first three paragraphs he is fuming; once into the work, he is spewing invective, attacking personalities, sputtering disdainful

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ E.A. Boyd, "Apostolic Blows and Knox," The Nation, v.137, July 12, 1933, p.53.

and damning statistics. The carefully cultivated urbanity is lost and but for the remarkable felicity of his expression, he might be holding forth in the center of Union Square with the near hysteria of a lost radical. On the subject of Ireland's freedom, Mr. Boyd is neither intellectual nor semi-detached. Perhaps this powerful spirit of resentment, born of England's smug victimisation of his land and people, was responsible for the quick-rising gorge, the ready asseveration, the ruthless vindictive expostulation of incredulous disgust which marked his reviewer's style at its peak. Certainly it is as much his genius for swinging, rhetorical fluency of abuse as it is the acuity of his critical insight that makes him unique in an age of wide-ranging critics and readers of criticism.

With the apparent decline of the Irish Literary Renaissance in the ferment of agitation for Home Rule and the expatriation of the younger Irish writers who were forced to look to England and America for publishers and readers, the demand for Irish literary criticism declined and, with it, the frequency of Boyd's writings in this field. In 1933 he returned for another look at the younger Irish writers and concluded that while the spirit of Anglo-Irish literature still lived in the prose works of many of them, the period of great Irish poetry and drama, with the full realization of Gaelic sources was in the works of men like Yeats, Synge, AE, and Stephens. This article coincides with the removal of the censorship ban on James Joyce's Ulysses and Boyd took this occasion to note the "...somewhat extravagant enthusiasm and highly exaggerated claims for its importance"⁴⁸ on the part of non-Irish critics.

⁴⁸ J.A. Boyd, "Joyce and the New Irish Writers," Current History, v.39, March, 1934, p.699.

It is true, Mr. Joyce has made a daring and often valuable technical experiment, breaking new ground in English for the development of narrative prose... But the European interest of the work must of necessity be limited to its form, for its content is so local and intrinsically insignificant that few who are unfamiliar with the city of Dublin thirty years ago can grasp its allusions and enter into its spirit.⁴⁹

He praised Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, seeing in Ulysses a continuation of these studies of Dublin types--and a little more. He minimized the importance of the symbolic dimensions of the latter work, declaring the emphasis on the correspondences between Joyce's Ulysses and its classical model to be of primary interest only to non-Irish critics and commentators who missed so much of the realism of the work through ignorance of Dublin and of Dublin life. "Irish criticism, on the other hand, is more impressed by its simple realism, photographic in detail and documentation..."⁵⁰ He regarded Joyce as the first and perhaps the last Irish Expressionist, akin in some respects to the Germans, Walter Hasenclever and Georg Kaiser. Boyd paid homage to the "...wonderful fantastic imagination which conceived the fifteenth chapter of Ulysses," but said Joyce "also has the defects and qualities of the French Naturalists of the Zola school, which prompt him, for example to catalogue all the various streetcar lines and to explain with the accuracy of a guidebook, how the city obtains its water supply."⁵¹ He said Joyce had little or no influence on other Irish writers, a fact he found not surprising in view of Joyce's abdication from anything Irish, even to refusing membership in the newly

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.702.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.703.

established Irish Academy of Letters, set up to protect Irish writers against the savage censorship of the Free State.

Looking at other young Irish novelists, Boyd regretted their lack of an audience or even a publisher at home. They were relegated to English and American publishers and readers by the vicious Irish censorship and by being disowned by Irish Nationalists because they wrote in English rather than Gaelic. Still, he noted, their work was basically national, the works of Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Casey and Peadar O'Donnell being drawn from first hand experience in fighting against the Black-and-Tans.

Much that is sordid and cruel, much that is brutal and brutalizing in Irish life has at last found expression in a literature which, whether through accident or design, has heretofore concentrated on what W.D. Howells, in a well-remembered phrase, called "the more smiling aspects" of existence. ...despite the censorship and the dead hand of obscurantism, the creative vitality of Anglo-Irish literature has not been crushed.⁵²

And so, almost within his lifetime, did the inheritance, flowering, and decline of modern Irish literature take place. He had known and loved all the great ones. About what he had written of them, at least, there were no regrets, no almost visible self-reproaches inscribed on a tavern wall, at the bottom of a whiskey glass, in a spiteful ex-wife's memoirs, or on the darkening horizon of his finally grieving and embittered soul.

⁵²Ibid., p.704.

CHAPTER III

ON THE AMERICAN THEATRE

Always, in reading Ernest Boyd's drama criticism, it must be remembered that he was not, like most of his fellow critics, comparing the plays under review to those of a similar type seen within the critics' theatre-going lifetime. He brought to the judgment of each play a vast erudition, a thorough knowledge of the best and the worst in the dramatic history of ten literary languages. His criteria were absolute and non-contemporary, or at least not limited to contemporary yardsticks. This quality was most evident in his reviews of dramatic imports from France, Germany, Ireland, Scandinavia, Spain, and Italy, and in his evaluation of various classical revivals. France he found retrograde in drama, England prolific but brittle and enervated, Germany given too much to experimental and affectedly Expressionistic posturings. Europe generally had fallen on to bad days as a producer of significant drama. While most American plays were bad, they had nothing to gain by imitating European models and he saw in America the raw material for an indigenous drama which, if realized, would far outstrip in vitality and significant relationship to the life it represented, anything being done elsewhere in the world.

Unlike his essays in other fields, Boyd's writings on the theatre were never collected with a view to illustrating a philosophy of dramatic criticism. Taken in order of their appearance, they cover a Broadway and off-Broadway repertory from Diamond Lil to Faust. Such general theories as emerge are necessarily fragmentary, limited by the space

allotted the periodical column in which he frequently covered as many as half dozen current stage offerings.

For the most part, Boyd reacted disgustedly to the theatre of the period from 1921-1929. By contrast with the badly written, badly produced dramas and drawing room comedies, Boyd delighted in musicals, which he pronounced gay, fast, vital, altogether delightful and marked with a stamp of professionalism and good taste rarely found in other types of stage offerings. He attributed their excellence to the skill and charm of the performers and the relatively minor importance of the author, which left unhindered the talents of the bright young men and especially the bright young women of the cast. In fact, about the only thing in the theatre for which Boyd consistently offered encouragement and praise was its attractive young ingenues, provided they did not compromise their beauty in something pretentiously arty, so long as they were content to be bright and avoid the claim to intellectuality. Thus Present Arms and Here's Howe received warm recommendations, while Strindberg's The Father and Andreyev's Waltz of the Dogs were sourly mourned, the first for morbidity and bad translation, the second for an utter lack of talent in the original. Of The Father Boyd speculated as to its chances even if properly translated and produced. "There is a certain kind of conjugal ignominy which we apparently prefer to laugh at, as we do in musical comedy, or to conceal, as we do in real life, either by divorce or acquiescence." And he continued:

Somebody should compile an American philosophy of life and sex from the quips and allusions of our leading

comedians...We are soothed by the bland cynicism which underlies most of the dialogues and many of the scenes in our musical shows. If it is the spirit of Broadway, then Broadway seems to speak for thousands who do not even live on the island of which it is so small, if loud, a part. Perhaps that is why stern moralists object to the theatre. It is a school of wisdom and it is not the kind of wisdom they want broadcasted. Let me make a nation's musical comedies, and let who will make its laws.¹

It was for the pretentionously literary playwrights, and especially those associated with an artistic "school" or movement, that Boyd reserved his most caustic criticisms. Of Georg Kaiser's Oktobertag, translated under the title The Phantom Lover, he wrote: "One of the worst translated plays ever...likewise one of the most commonplace and dreary and least dramatic situations ever regarded as the nucleus of a play. (An unwed mother names a stranger, seen at a distance, as the father of her child.) Who cares," asked Boyd, "how this imbecile came to conceive either the idea or the child?" Incredulously he marveled: "He cannot really have written such piffle as that? But he did," he sadly concluded, "and who is sophisticated now?"²

Boyd particularly despised these "arty" imports and the fatuously respectful audience they commanded solely on the strength of their geographical exoticism. He criticized them for errors and awkwardness in translation, for sentimentality disguised as sophistication, mawkishness masquerading as some kind of stylistic "ism" for lack of vitality, understanding and conviction. He was always in the foreground of the movement gaining strength and momentum during the 20's in America, which sought to

¹ E.A. Boyd, "In Defense of Musical Comedy," Bookman, v.67, January, 1928, p.564.

² _____, "Are We Sophisticated?" Bookman, v.68, November, 1928, p.324.

establish as significant and independent a native American literature, and to draw away from the well established literary habit of deference to European letters which had characterized criticism prior to that decade. Thus his unfailing admiration for that peculiarly American form, the musical comedy.

Among the imports to receive Boyd's contemptuous appraisal was Ferenc Molnar's Olympia which expired after a brief run. "The only question in mind," he remarked nastily, "is the mystery of this Hungarian Sardou's reputation amongst people who think of themselves as sophisticated."³ Lillian, he found, had some elements of reality but Olympia was built around a preposterous situation. The same author's Mina with Lenore Ulric fared no better with Boyd who characterized Molnar as "...a purveyor of Budapest servant girls' romance."⁴ Nor was French drama any better off when it presented sub-standard offerings under the sophisticated banner of a Continental setting. "Parisian Novelties" he called two imports put on by the Theatre Guild. "...these gentlemen (the playwrights) flourish in Paris like green bay trees; books are written about them and they inevitably end up in the Academy. English and American critics--with the honorable exception of Mr. George Jean Nathan--never venture to question their eminence, and their works sooner or later appear under the auspices of the Theatre Guild over here."⁵ Boyd attributed this fact to a condition of snobbism, aggravated by an inferiority complex. Even the better qualities of these cleverly

³E.A. Boyd, "Mid-Season," Bookman, v.68, January, 1929, p.668.

⁴_____, "To Act or Not to Act," Bookman, v.68, February, 1929, p.685.

⁵_____, "Parisian Novelties," Freeman, v.4, December 21, 1921, p.352.

produced boulevard plays evaporated in English translation. Closer than average scrutiny of such foreign light-weight vehicles was called for; yet just the opposite policy was followed by American publishers and producers. Elsewhere he remarked: "French musical comedy flitted across the scene and is now doubtless at work once more in the French provinces where it properly belongs."⁶

Boyd pursued this course in his drama criticism for the Bookman, almost without exception. Earl Carroll's Vanities were praised and Noel Coward's This Year of Grace got from him an expression of weariness. Thus Boyd writes of the latter: "I was bored more often than amused... Mr. Coward can do so many things that he ought not try to sing..." Bea Lillie pleased him, but he was strongly annoyed by Coward's attempt to poke fun at "peppy" American musical comedy. "It is precisely that speed and energy and good looks which are lacking in This Year of Grace", he rumbles.⁷

Not all American musicals received Boyd's recommendation however. Even Gertrude Lawrence in Treasure Girl fell short of the mark of real quality because of an idiotic libretto and Gershwin at his second best. As much as he appreciated the lovely and unclothed beauties of Earl Carroll's Vanities, he resented any attempt to substitute physical display where acting ability was called for. "Congai," he wrote, "is, I suppose, good merchandise of its kind, but Miss Mencken has been seen to better advantage, if never quite so unclothed..."⁸

⁶ E.A. Boyd, "Eugene O'Neill and Others," Bookman, v.69, April, 1929 p.181.

⁷ _____, "Mid-Season," Bookman, v.68, January 1929, p.568.

⁸ _____, "To Act or Not to Act," Bookman, v.68, February, 1929, p.686.

Nevertheless, with very few exceptions, he always pointed out the superiority of the musical show to the ordinary comedy or drama, because the former succeeded in doing what it aimed to do. Actually, Boyd required less of a musical show than he did of serious drama. It is not an indication of frivolity that he praised the musical Rainbow with music by Youmans and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, while pronouncing the stage version of Elmer Gantry "feeble, repetitious..." filled with the shortcomings of the original "standing out in ghastly relief." Hearing the end of the Season of 1928-29, he remarked that although Elmer Rice's Street Scene was a tragedy "not unworthy of Chekhov or Gorki," it was the tunes from Follow Thru and Helle Daddy that made good box office. "Thus one emerges, at the end of another monthly survey, remembering more gratefully the composers than the dramatists. Can it possibly be that they know their business better? Ask the box-offices; they know."⁹

A strong strain of classicism marked Boyd's assessment of attempts at serious playwriting and helped to account for the preponderance of destructive criticism in his writings on the drama. He was sincerely appalled at a revival of Goethe's Faust, which was badly rendered and stupidly cut for presentation. "Obviously," he snarled, "one does not offer such a work to the first hack to translate. Messrs. Graham and Rawson omit passages as important as Hamlet's soliloquy...omissions not obscure and subtle, but those which a ten year old child knows and admires."¹⁰ January, 1929, found Boyd praising the taste and intelligence displayed in a current production of Major Barbara. Shaw, he noted, was

⁹E.A. Boyd, "The Survival of the Fittest," Bookman, v.69, March, 1929, p.83.

¹⁰_____, "Classical and Modern," Bookman, v.68, December, 1928, p.455.

good box-office, a fact which did not entirely fit his own theory that "the theatre is no place for the presentation of esoteric ideas, for the exploitation of themes which are not immediately felt and recognized by the overwhelming majority of the people. Once anything (on the stage) has to be explained and justified intellectually, its appeal is lost..."¹¹ This theory was based on a distinction between the individual reader and a theatre audience. Book-readers, he speculated, comprise a selective audience. Theatre-goers are a cross-section of the public and will not, as a group, permit playing fast-and-loose with their cherished illusions and superstitions, their traditions and sentiments. Another exception to this principle was Front Page by Hecht and McArthur, a play so fast-paced and lively that the audience never had time in which to be affronted. In this play there was no pretention to dramatic literature and consequently Boyd, with the rest of the audience, could for once relax his critical faculties and enjoy the mayhem, along with the knowledge that the playwrights were getting away with something good. He said, "In fact, it is so good, that had it been any duller, the mob would have felt duty bound to be shocked."¹²

Of the one serious and highly talented American playwright of the period, whose works Boyd might have been expected to approve without qualification in comparison with those of his contemporaries, Boyd's critical pronouncements were mixed. He refused to employ relative criticism when reviewing the plays of Eugene O'Neill, judging them by an absolute standard of good and bad. Thus The Straw he calls "a comedie

¹¹E.A. Boyd, "In the Order of Their Appearance," Bookman, v.68, October, 1928, p.212.

¹²Ibid., p.211.

Larmoyante whose copious tears are not of the crystalline kind warranted to move the average audience...depressing, unpleasant and vulgar." He found its highest moments conducive "neither to facile laughter nor sympathetic tears. It is just a painful piece of life..."¹³ Bad production further compounded the shortcomings of the text, which, as written, left an element of suspense important to the play, but which was destroyed by the director's introduction of a single give-away line. For Anna Christie, on the other hand, he foresaw a certain and merited success. While the fourth act was painfully anti-climactic, "three of its four acts were masterly pieces of playwriting, and Miss Pauline Lord, in the title role, reveals herself as an actress of the first rank."¹⁴ Eight years later he joined George Jean Nathan and other critics in deploring the deterioration of O'Neill's talent as represented by the essentially melodramatic and juvenile Dynasty. "For the first time, I think, since his rise to fame, Mr. O'Neill has been strictly scrutinised, tried and found wanting. It has always seemed to me that O'Neill's strength lies in his capacity for feeling and projecting onto the stage simple, elemental emotions. When he attempts to treat ideas dramatically, he is lost."¹⁵ Boyd saw the masks used in The Street God Brown as present only because Mr. O'Neill considered them to be somehow intellectual and profound. Strange Interlude, of course, is enwrapped in so many novel stunts that it is impossible to say what the author would

¹³E.A. Boyd, "Mr. O'Neill's New Plays," Freeman, v.4., December 7, 1921, p.304.

¹⁴Ibid., p.305.

¹⁵_____, "Eugene O'Neill and Others," Bookman, v.69, April, 1929, p.181.

have made of the same idea if he had presented it in orthodox form.¹⁶ This criticism did not stem from an ignorance of expressionistic form, but from a disapproval of its use as just another device in an otherwise conventional play. In another essay, Boyd mentions Hasenclever's Mankind as the "most perfect example of Expressionist drama. Until Mankind has been seen upon the American stage we may refrain from wasting our astonishment or our indignation upon lesser wonders."¹⁷

Boyd very often praised an actor despite an impossible dramatic vehicle. Margalo Gillmore and Otto Kruger were complimented for their parts in Eugene O'Neill's The Straw. He regretted that Edward G. Robinson was not given an American play instead of the lead in Hugh Walpole's The Man with Red Hair of which he said: "Sadism is, to my mind, the dreariest of bores and the dramatic possibilities of pain a little too obvious."¹⁸ The actor Berensford rather than the author Milne was credited with creating a live one in The Perfect Libi, and Katherine Cornell was considered the sole salvation of another, to Boyd always ill-advised, adaptation--Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence. Peggy Hopkins Joyce received an appreciative side glance from the sparkling Boyd eyes as he disposed of her vehicle (Jacques Natanson's The Lady of the Orchids): "Roses, raptures and despair of the univirtuous--splendid advertisement for firms supplying the habiliments of sin worn by Miss Joyce."¹⁹

He repeatedly distinguished between the art of acting and the fre-

¹⁶ E.A. Boyd, "Eugene O'Neill and Others," Bookman, v.69, April, 1929, p.151.

¹⁷ _____, "Expressionism without Tears," Studies in Ten Literatures, New York, Scribner's, 1927, p.245.

¹⁸ _____, "Mid-Season," Bookman, v.65, January, 1929, p.569.

¹⁹ _____, "To Act or Not to Act," Bookman, v.68, February, 1929, p.685.

quent substitutes of personal charm and magnetism, delivered by their owners with repetitious disregard for the dramatic requirements of the given roles. Hope Williams was described as scoring a success in a mediocre play (Philip Barry's Holiday) and doing it without any device of acting except that of being herself. "I should not be surprised," he remarked sarcastically in unconscious anticipation of the enervating Hollywood star system, "if Miss Williams from now on is called upon to give this impersonation of herself in a succession of comedies."²⁰

The genuine love Boyd felt for the theatre and the high seriousness with which, under the cloak of sarcasm and vitriolic phraseology, he approached his job as drama critic, was occasionally evident when he turned aside from criticism of plays and wrote about the theatre itself-- its management, hangers-on, and its paying customers. This, from "Making a First Night of It:"

The psychology of a first-night crowd in a New York theatre is an alarming exhibition of the abdication of all reason and critical judgment... Hardly surprising that in hard times the newspaper-fed mob revolts against the misleading insinuations of its press-masters and refuses to pay for seats at plays which first-nighters and their journalistic megaphones endorse...²¹

He waxed lyrically violent at the sight of indiscriminate approval by the claque which frequently were herded into first-nights for the purpose of insuring the enthusiastic reception of some piece of dramatic hack-work.

²⁰E.A. Boyd, "To Act or Not to Act," Bookman, v.63, February, 1923, p.654.

²¹_____, "Making a First Night of It," Freeman, v.4, January 18, 1922, p.446.

The gang was all there at the Plymouth Theatre the other evening when Mr. Ben Ami's altar was decked with flowers of indiscriminating applause and watered with the libations of cheap criticism. Every columnist, back-slapper and hanger-on of the arts was present...it was a regular family party of "regular fellows"...all doing their darndest to put over Mr. Ben Ami and all armed with their canes which they brought into the theatre, having, apparently, left their critical faculties in the cloak-room instead.²²

It was, he noted, disgustingly like the reception accorded the latest proletarian novel by the critics of that school. And in a statement which might well have been his own critical credo he concluded:

Criticism is, after all, a nasty, cold-blooded thing, which will, at best, take refuge in silence, where speech might involve a too violent clash with the purely human emotions of friendship.²³

Because of his uncompromising exposure of shortcomings wherever he found them and because he never wrote so well as when he was launching an attack, Boyd appeared to be a most severe critic. Actually, he never stinted his praise of excellence of whatever sort--acting talent, writing, production, montage--where it was merited. His scrupulous honesty, and the rather lifeless repetitiveness that characterized his style when writing favorably of anything, earned him the reputation of a sour detractor. In fact he knew too well the labor and the love that go into the creation of something fine and the infrequency with which such success is met, in our time or any other, to squander his plaudits on such mediocrities as the press-agents were hired to defend.

²²Ibid., p.447.

²³Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

NEW YORK'S LITERARY DANDY

To understand the exuberance of Boyd's early American writings--the noisiness and the brutal drive of his largely satirical pronouncements--it is necessary to remember that he was freshly released from the restrictions of British Foreign Service and all the necessities for indirection and tact implied by that employment; that he was recently arrived in the bright, gay, and hyperactive New York City of the early Twenties from the dampness and poverty of Dublin, the shabby gentility of Barcelona, and the frigid quaintness of Copenhagen. Immediately upon his arrival in the city, he was welcomed by the elite of its socio-literary life, feted, praised, lionized. His continental urbanity and the ease with which he could discourse on any subject at any level endeared him to the society of Manhattan's and Long Island's young intelligentsia. He had a good job with Mr. Knopf's publishing house, a wide acceptance among the periodicals as both an expert on foreign affairs and a published literary critic and historian, and dozens of writing projects were crowding his fertile brain. Thus was bred an arrogance, an impatience with men of temperament and capabilities less than (or radically different from) his own. Mencken and Nathan had found an eager audience for their impertinent iconoclasm. Hospitably, they ushered Boyd into the fold. Beard up, spats twinkling, and cane a-twirl, he followed their charmed steps over literary streets that were, for the moment, paved with gold.

For all their harsh assertiveness, Boyd's writings are free of

the frenzied agitations and posturings of the self-conscious aesthete. Art to him--and he could comment on it idiomatically and knowingly in every language of Western civilization--was never the inviolate figurine whose high priests could claim immunity from attack. To him, Art was just another human pursuit. Thus did he stand, loud and argumentative, at the foot of his Century's artistic Sinai, breaking such false tablets of false gods as he could lay his critical hands to: the frippery "commandments" handed down from the shabby foothills of labored triviality under such various banners of Dadaism, Symbolism, Realism, Neo-Humanism, Thomism, Proletarianism, and the like. What a pity that Existentialism came into the literary world too late to receive the illumination of his analysis!

Many commentators on Boyd were to find fault with his unfairness, his misrepresentation, his disrespect, his aggressive negativism. But never, after his introduction to the freedom and luxury of New York's literary world, would it be said of him, as it was in a review of one of his early works:

There is no dearth of information--he knows all the facts and all the names and all the dates. The only thing lacking in this little book is the element of style. To write without eloquence of such masters...! Criticism should be not merely informative but persuasive also. What is the use of setting down in print such uncontagious sentences...?¹

If contagion was wanted, they, and he, had come to the right place. Not since the Nineteenth Century battle between the Romantic poets and

¹Clayton Hamilton, in the department "Ten Books of the Month," reviewing Boyd's The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, Bookman, v.45, April, 1917, p.193.

the Classical critics had so many periodicals opened their doors to expression of the cultural differences of opinion of the time.

He never pretended to be fair. His objective was literary holocaust: for the Puritan, an acid bath of contumely; for hypocrites, a rack of contempt; for the merely pretentious and incompetent, the stinging knout of scorn and disgust. That his nature led him to serve literature more with the knives of sarcasm and satire than with admiration, was a literary risk perhaps calculated to be great, but never balked at. It was his specialty, this brilliant, acidulous exposure of imposture in writing, society, government and morals.

Spiritually and artistically it was a desolate time in America at the beginning of the Twenties. The new crop of novelists, poets, and essayists that was to distinguish the decade was just beginning to emerge from the patriotic obscurity of the first World War. American critics of the younger generation were arming themselves for the fight against Puritanism and Victorianism. Extremism flourished. Boyd was in the middle. Attempts, usually derogatory, to brand him with the label of a school, are not convincing.

Some wise observer of blooded lines has said: "Nothing runs faster downhill than a thoroughbred." Boyd hit the decline at a dead gallop, and rode down the Twenties with what at times must have been a terrifying foreknowledge of failure. But he was free, and the wild winds of non-conformity whipped his ginger-beard.

CHAPTER V

LITERARY SATIRE

Much of Ernest Boyd's critical writing was cast in a strongly and often broadly satirical vein but with such scholarly glosses of reference and documentation that, to his secret glee, all but the most discerning fellow critics swallowed them as sincere expressions of their author's lamentably unorthodox opinions and spluttered in outrage at the shocking effects of the dose. With a pen sharpened on his Irish political satire, he picked as his first antagonist that doughty literary institution, Henry James. "A vast outpouring," he sneers, "has greeted these volumes... With a solemnity as fatuous as that of the writer of the letters, critics have discussed them and no one has dared to admit that only a mouse emerges from the mountain of words of which the letters are composed."¹ This sentence alone was enough to elicit anguished yells of protest from the faithful ranks of the Anglophiles on both sides of the ocean. But Boyd, with this critical baring of his teeth, had only begun to nibble at the base of this plump and stately eminence:

Exposing a personality all too commonplace, James' letters show that he led a privileged existence from the beginning to the end of his career...without ever knowing the pressure of those exigencies which usually hamper the artist. At no period had James to face and surmount the heartbreaking and formidable obstacles which bar the way of most great artists. It has been given to few men to pursue so independently the aims which he had set before him. It is natural to expect

¹E.A. Boyd, "Henry James, Self-Revealed," Freeman, v.1, August 25, 1920, p.563.

that the correspondence of such a man will be a delightful revelation of all that those privileges, combined with genius, can mean for the full development of character and personality. Unfortunately, there is no trace of such revelation. James has scarcely a word to say that will linger in the memory. In his early youth there are some few glimmerings of critical observation and humour. In the main his accounts are no better than those of the society gossip in the fashionable periodicals, the average American social climber or the diner-out. This gentleman of letters is perpetually amazed at his own good fortune in being allowed to breathe the refined atmosphere of English society. In short, he was possessed by precisely that vulgarity from which he proposed to escape by abandoning his own country.²

Now Boyd the cynic becomes the chiding humanitarian, and continues:

Human life had apparently no interest for him. The greatest events of public importance passed by unnoticed so far as can be judged by the letters... The great war is the sole exception and that merely demoralized him. He collapsed, without ever really understanding what the issues were. His views were crude simplifications of the gutter press. Whenever he talked about the war he lapsed into the stereotypes of the headlines... this aloofness from life, this silence on every vital event of his time, is not compensated by any evidence of an intelligent participation in the literary and artistic life of the period. He apparently never heard of Shaw, or Yeats, or Synge or Remy de Gourmont, or Anatole France, so far as his correspondence shows. He was moved to the shallow depths of his bourgeois soul by the horror of being associated with the "Yellow Book"... Anything vital, humorous and strong was shunned by James as he would shun disease. He preferred the elaborate politeness of the most formal friendships and felt happy only in the cloistered society of spinsters of all ages and both sexes... Through all this atmosphere of spinsterhood runs the plaint of an intellectual hypochondriac with a grievance... grievance that his books did not sell. Always he craved the success of the tradesmen of fiction. When his

²Ibid., p.564.

"Guy Domville" failed, the wretched author actually came before the curtain to receive the howls and cat-calls of the exasperated audience. This was his only contact with the wicked world outside the charmed circle of his incense-bearers who played up to his curious cult of himself...the intellectuals have a perverted trade-unionism which makes them conspire to conceal the emptiness of such a life as that revealed in the letters of Henry James...³

One reason for Boyd's continued irascibility where Henry James was concerned is found buried in the above review. James is quoted as having written: "I don't believe much in the Irish. I can't but think they are a poor lot."⁴

The delightful impudence of this piece brought the expected deluge of outraged letters of protest. Mr. Thomas R. Coward declared, in effect, that James was so a first-rate artist and that Boyd had exaggerated his snobbishness and provincialism. Also that James had too heard of Anatole France, and he referred him to two letters in which France's name was mentioned. A Mr. Claude Bragon wrote:

Mr. Ernest Boyd succeeded admirably in revealing himself. The fulsome obituary and the funeral oration in the guise of criticism are pretty bad...but less so than the method of prosecuting attorney which he himself has chosen. It is amazing that Mr. Boyd's essay, so full of incontrovertible truth, can yet be so utterly untruthful. ...very few of us understand what happened to the talent of Henry James. It vanished into a higher dimension. ...he has desecrated the grave of Henry James.⁵

Boyd's diplomatic service stood him in good stead in reviewing the works of political writers to which he brought a cynical knowledge of the inner workings of government offices. He was beside himself

³Ibid., p.564.

⁴Ibid., p.563.

⁵Claude Bragon, "Letters to the Editor," Freeman, v.1, September 8, 1920, p.619.

with delight at the unwitting and naive revelations contained in Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's My Diaries: Being a Personal Record of Events 1888-1914. In his review, Boyd described Blunt as "...an English gentleman in the narrowest British definition of the term. ...all his life...passed in the most intimate contact with the 'best people', most of whom are happily unconscious of such scruples as have turned him into the severest and most authoritative critic of British imperialism." His notes, in diary form, "...are worth a ton of conscious propaganda by destructive critics, for their worth lies in the deadly significance of the writer's dispassionate accounts of what his friends and acquaintances said and did."⁶ He quotes Blunt as writing blandly: "While the public amuses itself with the illusion of political freedom, the oligarchy governs."⁷ Among other matter-of-fact accounts of little-known "atrocities" of British imperial rule, Blunt had told the story of Kitchener's acquisition of a Mahdi chieftan's head which he fancied as an inkwell. "The mutilation of the body seems to have come of a mere bit of rowdy nonsense on the part of certain young English officers,"⁸ he guesses casually. "Readers will learn," promises the reviewer "how discretion and good form have saved England from the fate of countries unhappily deprived of government by gentlemen."⁹

One of Boyd's chief objections to well-entrenched American criticism in the early 20th Century was its idolatrous reception of most literary offerings bearing the stamp, "Not made in the U.S.A." He

⁶E.A. Boyd, "The Indiscretions of Mr. Blunt," Freeman, v.2, September 29, 1920, p.67.

⁷W.S. Blunt, My Diaries, quoted by Boyd, Ibid., p.67.

⁸Ibid., p.68.

⁹Ibid., p.68.

said:

The literary stars all rise in the east, and it is only the eyes turned in that direction which are glamoured by the sight of prodigies. The new comets of literature swim into the ken of America with a tail composed of nothing more substantial than a series of carefully selected press-clippings, or perhaps with a tale that is told by some ingenious press agent. ...frequently the genius of the latter is more positive than that of the candidate for fame. As with most of the phenomena denounced as American corruption and vulgarity, the creation of artificial publicity is familiar to Europe.¹⁰

He described the usual method in England as involving formation of a mutual admiration society of writer and critic. The former missed no opportunity to recognize the perspicacity and analytical power of the latter, and he, in turn, pronounced the writer a man of imaginative genius. The writer contributed to the critic's periodical, and each became the London correspondent for different American reviews. Lecture tours in America followed; they condescended to colonial literary efforts, expressing a knowledge of American letters that Mr. Boyd said stopped "with Emerson, except for a few of the more obvious best sellers." And American editors threw open their pages delightedly "to receive their inspired comments, which quickly abandoned the subject of American literature for the more lucrative fields of self-advertisement. For whatever else they do not know about America, there is one thing of which they are certain, that the American public never tires of hearing tenth-rate Europeans rated higher than first-class Americans."¹¹

¹⁰ E.A. Boyd, "The Enchantment of Distance," Century Magazine, vol. 101, November, 1920, p. 32.

¹¹ Ibid.

Translations were another matter. Boyd said that some mysterious process of selection operated here, although the overall result was the same: "namely, the exaltation of the imported mediocrity above the native genius."¹²

Who will define the erratic law which governs the selection of translations? ...not the local fame of the authors...not genuine merit, for the most significant are mostly untranslated.¹³ Why is the Robert W. Chambers of Spain an American best seller, while the French equivalent of Harold Bell Wright is ignored?¹⁴

Boyd summed up the complaint of a whole new generation of American critics and readers in the conclusion to this article:

The guardians of the sacred literary traditions in America look coldly upon all criticism of the cult of the foreigner... The chief beneficiaries of this idolatry are the Britishers, whose wares enliven the department stores and women's clubs, and whose doings are reverently chronicled by the reviewers. The sad truth is that the excessive zeal of the colonial mind is largely to blame for the too eager receptivity of the American public where the reputation of unimportant English writers is involved. The whole trend of the literary mandarins is toward an unquestioning belief in the superiority of the foreign product as compared with the native. Distance...lends an irresistible enchantment to their view of contemporary English literature. Until they can appreciate the significance of an original American writer against an utterly conventional and imitative Englishman, literature will remain the one department of American life where hyphenation is encouraged.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., p.33.

¹³It was Boyd's task to translate much of this significant Continental literature: Balzac, Flaubert, André Gide, Maupassant, Gustave Wied, Heinrich Mann, Paul Gsell, Engel Alexander, as well as to edit such works as Comte de Gobineau's Five Oriental Tales and Strindberg's Confessions of a Fool.

¹⁴"The Enchantment of Distance," p.33.

¹⁵Ibid.

Again:

When America realizes the individuality and superiority of her own national literature, other countries will be glad to try to understand the secrets of her genius. Attention will no longer be diverted to the modern pupils of the colonial professors.¹⁶

A year later, still strangely defending the claims of American literature against indifference at home and disparagement abroad, he writes of Galeworthy's To Let: "The roughest labor of some pioneering beginner over here has more promise of vitality than this literary landscape gardening."¹⁷ It is strange, indeed, to find as one of the leading exponents of American literary self-respect an Irish expatriate squared off against the deans of American criticism in the defense of native letters.

Boyd's literary life for the next few years was intense and productive. As reader of plays for the Theatre Guild, he was in constant touch with the theatrical world; he continued as advisor on foreign books to the Knopf publishing house while editing and translating the works of Maupassant in 18 volumes; he became editor of reprints of translations from the Continental field of literature for Viking Press, and he contributed pieces on dramatic criticism, foreign affairs, literature, and social satire to the current periodicals.

Even editors apparently were not immune to the Boyd blarney.

Harner's Magazine quite seriously asked the question:

What are the books which every man and woman of cultivation should read? Outlines of literature

¹⁶E.A. Boyd, "American Literature or Colonial," Freeman, v.1, March 17, 1920, p.15.

¹⁷_____, "See American Fiction First," Bookman, v.59, October, 1921, p.160.

and a hazy memory of school and college reading are not enough for those whose minds did not die when they were handed their diplomas. In a series of articles reassessing English literature from Shakespeare to Hardy, Ernest Boyd, the eminent critic, will advise Harper readers what masterpieces of their language they should surely make a part of their mental equipment.¹⁸

It is impossible to believe, from this innocent promise to its readers, that Harper's editors had seen even the first of this series of classical "reassessments" which appeared serially under the title "A New Way With Old Masterpieces." By the time they realized its direction and effects, it was too late. Boyd dismembered the classics in a wild orgy of critical surgery, and blandly followed his jaunty cane out of the editorial door leaving Harper's to cope with a flood of humorlessly outraged "letters to the editor," the echoes of which had hardly died down when the entire collection was re-issued between hard covers as Literary Blasphemies to start the outcry all over again.

The explosive effect of Boyd's satire lay in its persuasiveness. He quoted extensively from the classic under review, with a damning selectivity, the utter unfairness of which was apparent only to one whose intimate knowledge of the author's works approached his own. The result was a great bawling of wounded lovers of the classics, as if they, and not their sacred cows, had suffered the bland butchery of New York's most merciless and original literary satirist. Innocently, he prefaced the collection with the statement:

These essays do not aim at being exhaustive or impartial, nor at proving that the writers discussed are worthless. Most of the classics have survived

¹⁸Editors of Harper's Magazine, "1925: A Forecast," Harper's Magazine, v.150, December, 1924, p.127.

frequent and harsher criticism, so that it is quite unnecessary to remind me that Shakespeare will be remembered long after I am forgotten. In fact, if some degree of immortality did not attach to them, I should not have discussed them, for a similar examination of contemporary reputations would be pointless, since current criticism deals with the living precisely as I have tried to deal with the dead. What I have attempted is something easier, perhaps to define than to execute. I have assumed that an adult reader, familiar with modern literature and modern ideas, had heretofore been able to ignore the classics and is vaguely aware that professors speak of them with respect, but that the average person does them reverence very much as the average Christian does reverence to Christ...¹⁹

Always, when about to commit a literary outrage, Boyd assumed a mantle of innocence. Thus:

Is there, I ask myself, any honest reason, apart from the educational superstition of the age, why normally happy men and women should be troubled by the immortal glories of literature? We accept so much on trust that one may well hesitate to complicate life by suggesting the innovation of cultural self-determination.²⁰

And so, with disarming candor, he proceeded to a shrewd and blasphemous mockery of:

Shakespeare

Having declared his own devotion to neglected and misunderstood literary giants of the past, Boyd quoted several critical precedents, among them Voltaire and Tolstoy, for his own contention which follows: Shakespeare was a barbarian with a gift of gab. The irresponsibility

¹⁹ E.A. Boyd, "An Address to the Indignant Reader," Literary Blasphemies, Harper and Brothers, New York and London, 1927, pp.3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., p.17.

of his men and immorality of his women make those of Dreiser's novels (which were then under attack by the critical custodians of Puritan morality) seem tame by comparison; as a "philosopher" he is smug, platitudinous, and a humbug; he is a social snob, self-revealed in countless dialogues; his statesmanship barely attains the level of after-dinner oratory; he is a born Rotarian and a "booster" as his admiring representations of material and practical achievement repeatedly illustrate; he can and does bore us with page after page and scene after scene, if our adulation would but permit it.

He had no message for mankind and his humor is frequently so feeble that a bad burlesque show is brilliant in comparison. Where he is unintelligible it is rarely worth while to decipher him, for the actual defects in the text have long since been repaired and the rest is merely the arid diversion of Professors. If he is irresistible it is because he is a musician of words so lovely that the English tongue is forever illuminated by his use of it...²¹

Milton

If Shakespeare, for all his glaring shortcomings, is considered worthy of being read, not so John Milton, who was the second of the greats to appear in the series.

Milton shares with Shakespeare the distinction of being the most profoundly cherished glory of English literature. In a sense his fame is even more inhumanly secure, his reputation more sacrosanct, because he liked biblical subjects in his moments of relaxation from the writing of those dreary political pamphlets which actually occupied the best years of his life and are as extinct as

²¹Ibid., p.17.

the conditions out of which they arose.²²

Mr. Boyd reminds us of another critic's snidely respectful allusion to "Paradise Lost"—that of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who said that "'Paradise Lost' is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. No one ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure."²³ Then, after blithely quoting a bit of verse written by Milton at the age of fifteen to show that he had no native talent or sensitivity, Boyd proceeds to describe his apprenticeship for the job of Great Poet, which he "set about becoming...with the gravity of a pedant qualifying for a learned profession."²⁴ Milton's early poetic efforts were meager, yet it is in them, Boyd points out, that we must look to find whatever genuine poetry is in him. By the time he finally worked his way through years of feckless political pamphleteering, and got down to "Paradise Lost," "...he was a disgruntled Puritan trying to remember that he once was a poet."²⁵ As to his famous tracts in defense of divorce and free speech, Boyd attributes them to spiteful or selfish interest, rooted in his own domestic and publishing problems, the principles of which were repeatedly violated by Milton himself whenever it was to his advantage to do so. Of Aeronegistica:

I suspect its survival is due to the fact that it is the one document that it is possible to read out of the mass of cheap political hack writing and topical propaganda upon which Milton lavished the years for which, as we have seen, he had so

²²Ibid., p.43.

²³Ibid., p.46

²⁴Ibid., p.47

²⁵Ibid., p.49.

carefully prepared himself to live the life of a great poet.²⁶

After noting Milton's intolerable condescension to all members of the female sex, his cringing favor-seeking and political turncoatism and his hypocritical sanctimony, Boyd quotes parallel passages from the Carmen Paschale of Sedulius, published in 1475, and "Paradise Lost" to show the extent to which the latter was made up of fragments lifted from context and closely transliterated from the original work. This, with his debt to three Christian Latin poets, Dracontius, Victor, and Avitus, is designed to brand Milton's chief work (in the eyes of all but scholarly readers) an outright plagiarism, at least by implication.

Mr. Boyd goes on to describe Milton's Adam and Eve as a respectable, typically Puritan couple, his Heaven as a celestial barracks-room, his God as a mannerly Stuart King. He says it abounds with a schoolboy's paraphrases of the classics, drawing on Homer and other classical authors for many of the similes which are clumsily out of place in the settings where they appear.

It was addressed to an audience who shared the author's beliefs, and who respected the work because they thought it was a profound and beautiful interpretation of life. To a modern audience no such appeal can be made; we are asked to acquiesce not in beliefs but in illusions, whose absurdity, even within their own limits, is accentuated by the author's total lack of humor, his unnecessary ignorance, and his incongruous pedantry.²⁷

My own view is that Milton's fame rests upon the simple fact that, instead of joining the witchhunters

²⁶Ibid., p.54.

²⁷Ibid., p.62.

of Salem, he stayed at home and became the one great post Puritanism ever produced. As such he has the rarity and interest of those strange antediluvian reconstructions which adorn the prehistoric departments of museums for the amazement of gaping crowds on Sunday afternoons.²⁸

By now the editors of Harper's Magazine were aware of the direction of Mr. Boyd's "reassessments" and they remark weakly in the editorial column: "Many a reader will take exception to his arguments; but if his devastating wit leads us to throw aside our preconceived opinions of Milton, and to view 'Paradise Lost' without academic bias, he will have done us a good turn."²⁹ If they hoped, by this indirect suggestion, to leave the impression that Mr. Boyd was only fooling, they were not successful. Most readers saw in his statements more sacrilege than wit, and said so. Ernest calmly proceeded with the disrespectful disposal of Lord Byron--not so much a poet as a lawless, jingling rogue; of Dickens--a best-selling novelist whose works no person of mature mind and tastes can possibly get through; of Poe--whose ludicrous posturing on "the pallid bust of Pallas" alternated with storms of self-sympathetic weeping on the shoulders of lady patrons whose memoirs strove to conceal the weakness and self-indulgence of his personal life; of Henry James--whom he seeks to defrock and chase back into the spinsterish obscurity from which he freakishly emerged. Only Swift and Thomas Hardy receive any measure of critical acclaim and Ernest Boyd proceeds to:

²⁸ Ibid., p.69. In 1933, Boyd compiled a list of books he had never read at the request of the editors of The Nation (v.137, Nov. 8, 1933), "Books I Have Never Read, A Symposium." Among them is "Paradise Lost."

²⁹ "Personal and Otherwise," Harper's, v.150, March, 1925, p.511.

Whitman

Perhaps the greatest critical hoax ever perpetrated by Boyd was his essay on Walt Whitman. The leather-jerkin bard was just in the process of being deified. His works were being salvaged from the narrow censure or the smug indifference of a generation of Victorian critics. Unfortunately, foremost in the ranks of saviors were those same effete young men against whose opinions and precious reviews so much Boydian satire had been directed in the past. Boyd might, by selective quotation and suave innuendo, have satirized Whitman within his own sophisticated frame of reference, but that would have been the easy way. Instead, Whitman is used as a means of pillorying more modern exponents of esoteric verse. The essay began by making the Master responsible for his "school:"

Walt Whitman was the first of the literary exhibitionists whose cacophonous incongruities and general echolalia are the distinguishing marks of what is regarded as poetry in aesthetic circles today. He was the herald and forerunner of that ultra-violet literature, in prose and verse, which sprawls its eccentric typography and linguistic barbarisms over the pages of reviews that "make no compromise with the public taste." In his own day, he was charged with immoralities which now make us smile, but we, in our turn, must charge him with a responsibility which neither his friends nor his enemies could have foreseen. They either bewailed or rejoiced at the fact that the Poet of Democracy found no audience with the plain people of his affections. How could they have seen in him the father of the Higher Illiteracy, destined to engender a horrid progeny of cénacle versifiers, who do not differ from him in any excess of naiveté, save, perhaps, in his belief in the masses?³⁰

³⁰Literary Blasphemies, p.186.

If the reader was perplexed at the references in the above quotation, he was not long left in doubt. Boyd quoted extensively and irrelevantly, from an extreme avant garde magazine of the time, a poem by Marianne Moore and an even more obtuse, lengthy paragraph of criticism of it which confuses whatever few similes are not already involved in the original poem. "Here, then," he jibed, "is the barbaric yawp, modern style, with overtones of Harvard, Henry James and the Café du Dome. The 'simple, separate person' is now the cosmopolitan provincial, butchering several languages more deliberately than the master, but at liberty to print because the way has been prepared for literary illiteracy."³¹

His selected quotations from Whitman's prose, particularly his letters, might generously be described as extreme mental cruelty. Of such stylistic atrocities Boyd remarks: "...what were the ingenuous weaknesses of the unlettered Walt are now the acquired and laborious mannerisms of his followers. To use the jargon of the schools, Whitman's tapeinosis has degenerated into cacozelon, and parenthyron and periergia take place of sense and poetry."³² Here was a determined effort to tie Whitman into the whole school of free-versifiers and poetic experimentalists:

The typographical eccentrics of the present time profess an analogous contempt for accurate scholarship and learning, while making a vast parade of otiose erudition which sometimes seeps over into appendices as lengthy as the work they are supposed to elucidate. They become entangled in French reflexive verbs as Whitman involved himself in catalogues of things American. T.S. Eliot remains unmistakably a native son of St. Louis, Mo., as the

³¹Ibid., p.189.

³²Ibid., p.192.

comic-strip, burlesque humor of "The Waste Land" testifies. Whitman, with his dream of representing the "ouvrier" class of America, remained as remote from it as that bilingual phrase.³³

The fact that no critic before him had so much as suggested a connection between contemporary poetry and the work of Walt Whitman bothered Boyd not in the least. He states the relationship as if it were the most obvious thing in the world:

Amongst the unjudicial...his memory is as ill-served as his purpose. The poet with a message, a gospel, who said "I don't value the poetry in what I have written so much as the teaching," is now the idol of the unhappy few to whom we owe a literature of barren aestheticism without beauty.³⁴

"Tertiary Whitmanitis," Boyd calls the informal poets then publishing in the little reviews and while damning the Master with faint praise, damns his own contemporaries with vivid expressions of revulsion, as if there were an actual connection between the two objects of his disapproval.

Perhaps the most sensible reaction to this series came from the editorial columns of The Nation. There, under the title, "A Literary Executioner," Dryden is quoted to the effect that good verse should tickle even while it hurts. Applying this principle to satire, the writer finds:

Such a piece of excellent prose is Ernest Boyd's article...on the followers of Walt Whitman. ...we freely admit the joy we have taken in the spectacle of Mr. Boyd's sheer skill in denunciation. He is all

³³Ibid., p.199.

³⁴Ibid., p.211.

but unique...a rare phenomenon in these lean days of satire... The circumstance that Mr. Boyd is wrong in most of his inferences and facts has nothing to do with the value of his article as art. It is not to the satirists...that we go for literary history or even for literary criticism. And so there should not be too much cause for resentment in Mr. Boyd's careless connecting of Whitman with the "aesthetic" circles whom he so heartily despises today. His processes seem to have been simple enough. He hated Whitman. He hated The Dial and Miss Marianne Moore. So he pretended to prove that The Dial and Miss Moore are the progeny of the Manhattan bard. Actually to prove this would require labor of a soberer sort than satirists have ever been known to undertake.³⁵

There is an ominous note in the sentence: "It is not to the satirists that we go for literary history or even for literary criticism." Boyd, who began his literary career as a distinguished literary historian and critic, is here almost carelessly and with a tolerant chuckle, dissociated from those distinctions on the strength of a single, brief, witty satire. Boyd was rapidly becoming a literary maverick, an "original," a source of naughty glee among the sophisticated, youthful product of emancipation. Was it a little too easy? Perhaps he felt that any day he would entertain the fact of greatness--the big work, a vision of artistic evolution, would become present to his hand--and fame would follow, with the inevitable pairing of his name with that of the other giants of literature. But in the meanwhile, literary editors were clamoring for his little works; Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, George Jean Nathan, Thomas Beer, Bergesheimer, a score of intimates were charming, properly admiring and provident of the extended cocktail hour. His magnificent voice was never still. And so he tarried, dispensing vocal

³⁵ Editorial, "A Literary Executioner," The Nation, v.121, December 15, 1925, p.696.

and charming acuity, savoring vicariously the reputations of his famous friends, awaiting only the hour, the moment when he must surely grasp his own. But Duty moved him not and somewhere in the revelry of that long night his destiny passed him by.

It is dangerous to take Mr. Boyd too seriously, but nevertheless there is in his essays a spirit of bravado and deliberate iconoclasm which detracts from their value, if not from their quality as entertainment.³⁶

Mr. Boyd...has a grudge to satisfy, chiefly against the pedagogues who, as usually with this school are synonymous with college professors... In proving his points, almost any argument will do for he has complete equipment of stock devices resorted to by the biased and dishonest critic, chief among them the half-truth, the mean innuendo, false emphasis and the magnification of unimportant facts. He wants merely to parade his ego, to make sharp points at the expense of the dead. Knowledge there is, of course, but it is merely sufficient information to establish a thesis and prejudice. Here, indeed, is a dog who not only barks but bites, a heretic...a disgruntled misogynist so wrapped up in his job of idol-smashing that he leads himself astray as well as others.³⁷

The two quotations above span the ten year period of Boyd's greatest productivity, during which time he continued to write, despite protests from conservative corners, with brilliant and irresponsible asperity of books, plays, people, and institutions. Undoubtedly such conservative reactions to the popular, heretical judgments of the day were cause for high glee in the glittering dining room of the Algonquin where impious symposia provided heady vapors for the coterie of young writers, publishers

³⁶Edith Walton, "Critics and Critics," Bookman, v.67, April, 1958, p.100.

³⁷L.B. Hessler, "On Bad Boy Criticism," North American Review, v.240, September, 1935, pp.214-224.

and literary dilletantes. But there was truth and warning in the asperities of these advocates of more responsible criticism and Boyd must have known it with many a sharp pang of impending disaster, even as he plunged headlong deeper and deeper into the superficialities of popular literary agnosticism. The glitter was still on those golden streets of Messrs. Nathan and Mencken, but the ugly cobbles were beginning to push through.

New Inconveniences

Not long before the first of his controversial series on the classics appeared, Boyd had made official an association with H.L. Mencken which had existed unofficially since their first meeting in Baltimore in 1913. Nathan and Mencken had closed down The Smart Set and Mencken was looking for something to take its place, something wider in scope, a contemptuous organ of satirical and sarcastic destruction to pit against the smug customs and institutions of Victorian and Puritan America. Thus was born The American Mercury. Its statement of editorial purpose and policy may well have been written by Boyd as his own literary credo:

It comes into being with at least one advantage over all its predecessors in the field of public affairs: it is entirely devoid of messianic passion. They will not cry up and offer for sale any sovereign balm, whether political, economic, or aesthetic, for all the sorrows of the world. The fact is, indeed, that they doubt that any such sovereign balm exists or that it will ever exist hereafter. The world, as they see it, is down with at least a score of painful diseases, all of them chronic and incurable... The Forgotten Man--the normal, educated, well-disposed, unfrenzied, enlightened citizen of the middle minority--when he is recalled at all is...recalled only to be placarded as infamous. The normal agencies for relieving psychic distress all pass him over. The Liberals have no

comfort for him because he refuses to believe in their endless series of infallible elixirs; most of these elixirs, in fact, only help to multiply his difficulties. And the Tories who perform in the great daily newspapers and in the Rotary Club weeklies and in the reviews of high tone--these prophets of normalcy can see in his discontent nothing save subversion and worse. ... It is only when theories begin to enter into the matter that counsels are corrupted--and between the transcendental, gibberishy theory of a Greenwich Village aesthete and the harsh, moral, patriotic theory of a university pedagogue there is not much to choose. Good work is always done in the middle ground, between the theories. The middle ground now lies wide open...³⁶

Mencken, with his usual talent for stirring up a hornet's nest, chose as the leading article in his first issue a violently satirical "imaginary" portrait by Ernest Boyd: "Aesthete: Model 1924." This study, characterized as a "reconstruction," purports to be a composite characterization, of archetype of a whole literary "ism." One suspects, from some of the very specific mannerisms and affectations attributed to this "collective" personality that Boyd was paying off several old debts and composing his aesthete of the large parts of several real models. For example:

He is a child of this Twentieth Century, for the Yellow Nineties had flickered out in the delirium of the Spanish-American War when his first gurgles rejoiced the ears of his expectant parents. If Musset were more than a name he might adapt a line from the author of *La Confession d'un Enfant du Siècle* and declare: "I came too soon into a world too old." But no such doubts trouble his spirit, for he believes that this century is his because he was born in it. He does not care who makes its laws, so long as he makes its literature. To this important task

³⁶ Editorial, The American Mercury, v.1, January, 1924, pp.28-29.

he has consecrated at least three whole years of his conscious--or rather self-conscious--existence, and nothing, as yet, has happened to shake his faith in his star...³⁹

His thirtieth birthday is still on the horizon, his literary baggage is small or non-existent--but he is already famous; at least, so it seems to him when he gazes upon his own reflection in the eyes of his friends and fingers aggressively the luxurious pages of the magazine of which he is Editor-In-Chief, Editor, Managing Editor, Associate Editor, Contributing Editor, Biographical Editor, or Source Material Editor... The essential fact is that he has an accredited mouthpiece... a secure place from which to bestride the narrow world in which he is already a colossus.⁴⁰

It is a cutting and hilarious portrait of the young convert to New Englishism, slopping through Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, meeting an "arty" bunch, writing some rather "daring" poetry in an experimental form, traveling to Paris and meeting the more esoteric of the expatriate American writers, picking up a smattering of language and returning to don the mantle of the New World aesthete. In this guise he conducts himself as follows:

If a piece of sculpture is distorted and hideous, if the battered remains of a wrecked taxi are labeled "La Ville Tentaculaire," the correct attitude is one of delight. One should "make no effort to describe" what is visible, but clutch at the "altogether contemporaneous" element, indicating a masterpiece... The Aesthete holds that a cliché, in French for preference, will dispose of any genius. One should make play with le cote Puccini and le faux bon.

The Aesthete tries to monopolize the field of contemporary foreign art, and he is accustomed to respectful submission or the abuse and indifference of pure ignorance. When he needs a more responsive victim he turns his attention to the arts adored by

³⁹ E.A. Boyd, "Aesthete, Model 1924," Portraits: Real and Imaginary, G.E. Doran, 1924, p.11

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.12.

the crowd, the "lively" arts...as if the Fifth Symphony were depressing. The esoteric reviews publish "stills" of Goldwyn pictures... The knees of Ann Pennington, the clowning of Charlie Chaplin, the humors of Joe Cook and Fannie Brice must now be bathed in the vapors of aesthetic mysticism.⁴¹

Let him discuss "The Waste Land" and his erudition will rival the ponderous fatuity of T.S. Eliot himself. He will...quote the more obscure hymn of Hesiod...and conclude with a cryptic remark from the Fourth Ennead of Plotinus. Yet, somehow one suspects that even the parasangs of the first chapter of Iamblichus's "Anabasis" would strain his Greek to the breaking point.⁴²

Here the Aesthete departs from the traditions of the species at his peril. Hitherto his technique has been perfect, for it has been his practice to confine his enthusiasm to works of art that are either as obscure or as inessential, or both, as his own critical comment. He realizes that it was unsafe to trifle with subjects about which his public might be better informed than himself. Now his incantations lose their potency when applied to matters within the experience and comprehension of the plain people, and one cubit is added to the stature of William S. Hart, so far as his devotees are concerned, by the knowledge that his name is pronounced with aesthetic reverence on the Left Bank of the Seine.⁴³

Finally:

The process of change is at work, for the transitional youth is already in at least one editorial chair, frowning upon the frivolities of the Jazz Age, calling for brighter and better books, his dreams haunted by Sodom and Gomorrah. The Aesthete, meanwhile, is retiring with...a revulsion against the wild delights of his former debauchee. He is refreshed by a journalistic bromo-seltzer. There is pep in the swing of his fist upon the typewriter as he sits down to a regular and

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁴²Ibid., p. 19.

⁴³Ibid., p. 24.

and well-paid job...⁴⁴

Quotations from this article are extensive for two reasons. First, because it is an example of Boyd at his satirical best--or worst--and second, because of the far-flung repercussions that greeted it--far louder and more resentful than the furor occasioned by any other single piece of his satirical writings. The issue containing this essay was hardly on the streets when Boyd began receiving local and long-distance (some trans-atlantic) calls from muscular young aesthetes who were quick to try on this repulsive shoe of characterization and find the fit intolerably accurate. The first caller at least showed the courtesy or courage of identifying himself as Mr. Malcolm Cowley, who demanded an interview for the purpose of discussing certain aspects of the essay. When put off by the busy Mr. Boyd:

...he expressed his opinion of me in language so filthy that, when his oaths and obscenities were exhausted, I asked him if he had not written a poem for one of the esoteric magazines... Upon which, Mr. Cowley offered to come around and "beat me up." For a week or more Mr. Malcolm Cowley, Mr. Matthew Josephson, Mr. Kenneth Burke and others, male and female, telephoned me at frequent intervals, repeating the threats and abuse which had first indicated to me that something was rotten in the state of Greenwich Village. Anonymous telegrams, facetious and abusive, also arrived, but, owing to the pruderies of the Western Union Telegraph Company, these could not be expressed in the same vigorous, hooligan style as the telephone messages. I discovered the names of more outraged aesthetes than even I, in my pessimism, had suspected, and I received the most dramatic confirmation of my generalizations concerning the type. Another burden was added to my life, however, for I have since made it my business to read the writings of these inglorious, but never, I regret to say, mute Miltons...

I should hate to leave this matter under a cloud

⁴⁴Ibid., pp.24-25

of obscenities and threats. Gentle hearts, it seems, do beat beneath the rugged breasts of these literary coal-heavers. Thus the toughest and most militant--from a distance--finally sent me the following graceful apology: "Please excuse me for having used such extravagant language to describe you. I only meant to say that you were a sneak, a coward and a liar!"⁴⁵

Commenting on the furor, another critic and friend of Boyd, Burton Rascoe, writes with rock-epic glee:

The whole edition was gobbled up within ten hours and another edition put on the presses; most of the readers were young writers who assumed at once that they had been personally and specifically libeled in the article. East Nineteenth Street swarmed with younger poets, and when Boyd set out on his morning constitutional he was greeted with a fusillade of ripe tomatoes, riper eggs, sticks, stones, and copies of "SUN" and barely escaped back into his house with his life. There he was kept a prisoner by expediency for three days while Dadaists pushed his door bell, kept his telephone abuzz, scaled the walls to his apartment and cast old cabbages and odor bombs through the windows, sent him denunciatory telegrams and rigged up a radio receiving outfit with an amplifier through which they broadcast the information that he was a liar, sneak, thief, coward, and no gentleman...⁴⁶

The other Portraits met with less violent reaction. The "Reconstructions"--more archetypal studies--included "A Literary Lady," "A Mid-Western Portrait," "A Literary Enthusiast," "A Modern Maecenas," "A Press Agent," "A Critic," and several others typical of groups then active in Boyd's New York society. All show a similarly sharp and caustic observation of personal eccentricity and affectation. But one suspects that after the hubbub caused by the first essay, anything else

⁴⁵Ibid., p.155.

⁴⁶Ibid., p.163.

was doomed to anti-climax, and their author to a sense of boredom with the sequels.

When, almost a year later, a group of students rallied around an older "aesthete," Walter S. Henkel, the lampeooning critical magazine they brought out was called Aesthete, 1925. Since this periodical died with the first issue, it is difficult to judge just what its editorial purpose was, if it had one. Certainly a part of its inspiration lay in a smarting resentment at the excellent job done by Boyd in satirising the young cultists of the period. Allen Tate contributed a piece in their defense, the gist of which was that the young aesthetes were not effete as charged because several of his acquaintances were married and even had children; Matthew Josephson, former Parisian expatriate and Dadaist, inserted an article which he had prepared nearly a year before in rebuttal of "Aesthete, 1924 Model" but which, because of their "bias" against straight thinking and, in particular, the plot against him personally, had been rejected by the editors he sent it to. Squeakily, Josephson described "Aesthete" as "...written with left-handed irony...lacks almost entirely vigour...its reasoning is of the most commonplace order...vulgar yappings..."⁴⁷ He had planned, he said, "to applaud him generously for all his bad qualities and thus subtly to annihilate him allegorically." Boyd was spared the effects of this fearful plan by the minute circulation of this one-issue periodical.

Of the "Real" Portraits, which make up the remainder of Portraits: Real and Imaginary, the most interesting are those of Nathan, Beer and

⁴⁷Matthew Josephson, "Ernest Boyd, Critic," Aesthete, 1925, v.1, February, 1925, p.10.

Hergesheimer, largely because of the light they throw on Boyd's conception of the full and happy life. About Nathan, Boyd wrote almost wistfully:

He touches the stage at all points but the routine humdrum world at none. When this pure aesthete is compelled to listen to the conversation of Mencken he assumes that slightly distressed and bewildered air which most of us had as children when we were taken out of the theatre into the streets, the glare of the footlights still in our eyes, the glamour of impossible landscapes and gaudily beautiful women contrasting with the sordid aspects of the city about us.⁴⁸

Boyd wrote this with the indulgent condescension one usually reserves for a child whose precocious charm compensates for a more than ordinary degree of impudence or irresponsibility. But he said it, too, with no little friendly envy and admiration. Boyd could never divorce himself from the real world fully enough to attain to the pure aesthetic enjoyment of his make-believe loves: literature and the theatre. It was not for him, the indifferent and relaxed cynicism of the true cosmopolitan. Where Boyd was filled with the spites, follies and hatreds of life and sought in the arts a release from their intolerable realities, Nathan was uninvolved in them emotionally because he was unaware of them in fact. This is a superficial portrait, abounding in word-play and puns with which Boyd always mixed even his most profound observations. But although it tells us nothing about Mr. Nathan that he has not already told the world about himself, it does reveal the basic struggle of Boyd to free his own natural charm, enthusiasm and great-

⁴⁸E.A. Boyd, "George Jean Nathan," Portraits, p.202.

heartedness from the perpetual frustration of an involuntary awareness of all the force of ugliness, morbidity, and carelessly destructive thinking abroad in the world.

In the picture of Thomas Beer, Boyd evidently admires not only his eccentricities of dress and manner (which came near to matching his own) but his aloofness from the contemporary maze of politics, platitudes and just plain patter. Always Boyd admired and respected real intellectual impartiality while failing himself to attain it, much too powerfully caught as he was in the vise of real experience and emotional involvements ever to achieve the detachment of a God-like condescension to man's folly. In the study of Hergesheimer, too, we find the envious picture of an instinctive pagan and bon vivant, concerned not with ideas but with life. Wars, religions, aesthetics, political and economic systems--these are all in the realm of ideas; they hardly take into account people or knowledge of people. Boyd could never escape ideas. They hounded him out of the hedonistic way of life to which he aspired and into the painful incompatibility of conscience versus pleasure.

For years Boyd continued to turn out "bad boy" literary impertinences couched in scholarly reference and spiced with denunciation. Much of his work was done under the aegis of Mencken, so much, in fact that there was a common tendency among other critical schools to place him in the same classification with this chief of his literary sponsors. There was little in Boyd's own attitude toward Mencken to discourage this tendency. On several occasions he paid his respects to the Sage from Baltimore, including a book-length biography published in 1925. "It is true," Boyd wrote, "that he (Mencken) has made himself famous

by means of unpopular ideas... He has not yet displaced Dr. Frank Crane as the spokesman of the inarticulate multitude, but his works are displayed in the bookstores where the obscener psychoanalysts and the Marxian philosophers lure the youth of America from the ideals of the Pilgrim Fathers and their noble successors, the efficiency experts."⁴⁹

In a series of articles for Harper's Magazine, Boyd departed the literary scene and took a satirical look at some aspects of society and character. Commenting on the peculiarly American right to, and fruitless, though unfailingly optimistic search for, "happiness," he attributed the motive and the spirit of the pursuit to the fact of Pragmatism supplanting Puritanism in the active life of the ordinary American. While most Americans continued to pay lip-service to the more revered institutions of family, church, and state, actually their principal objective was the attainment of money, fame, or at least notoriety, as the right and duty of every American who can obtain them within the law.

This philosophy extends itself, Mr. Boyd said, into the American conception of happiness in marriage. "The victims of the matrimonial myth are perhaps the most remarkable examples of the American capacity for the illusion of happiness."⁵⁰ Divorces increase by leaps and bounds as the grounds become more frivolous and the search for irresponsible marital bliss grows more frantic. "America's clamor for happiness is the expression of a childish dissatisfaction with life as it is. The country is full of Peter Pans... Keep that schoolgirl mentality!"⁵¹

⁴⁹E.A. Boyd, "Mencken, or Virtue Rewarded," The Freeman, v.2, February 2, 1921, p.491.

⁵⁰E.A. Boyd, "Happiness in Every Box," Harper's Magazine, v.152, March, 1926, p.458.

⁵¹Ibid., p.459.

Americans, he speculated, don't love money. Their materialism is really pragmatic idealism--they believe that everything is real and that every problem has a solution. They are devoted to happiness, not wealth. Happiness must exist, or why would they be trying so hard to achieve it--thus the search proves the existence and attainability of the goal, in the minds of the pursuers. The early colonizers came to this country to escape misery. It seemed logical to them that its opposite awaited them here. Their descendants still believe it and immigrants still expect it.

Those first voyagers, however, had an advantage over all their successors and a great majority of their descendants. They defined their happiness first and sought it afterwards. They had not come too late into a world too new.⁵²

There is a temptation to wonder at the possibility of Boyd unconsciously applying the last sentence, a paraphrase of Musset's line "I came too soon into a world too old," to himself and America. Certainly he was having, at the time, what might be called a popular success but somehow most of his work was escaping significance. His intense intellectuality was finding it difficult to discover a genuine expression through the endless round of parties and the easily written, readily accepted diatribes against Philistinism. Even intellectuality itself came in for a satirical and somehow spiteful outburst in the next Harper's offering:

A tolerant intellectual is a contradiction in terms, for the intellectuals are, by definition, professional traffickers in ideas and theories, and they have a

⁵²Ibid., p.460.

thousand reasons for being intolerant where the average man has one... What they have in common is their ability, by fair means or foul, sooner or later, to inflict normal people with their obsessions and the inevitable sequel is an outbreak of intolerance.⁵³

It is in this otherwise wildly satirical piece that we find one of Boyd's rare expressions of his concept of the "common man."

The average man is tolerant. All his intolerances are engrafted upon him by one or another intellectual school. A kindly Providence so devised this scheme of things that, but for the intelligentsia, he would be happy, as incapable of pretending to think as of manifesting intolerance.⁵⁴

With sarcastic wit, Boyd traced the meddling and troublesome faculty of intellect through politics, the press, in literature, art, and society:

When an idea has been dead for two thousand years, it may stink in the nostrils of some connoisseurs, but the average human stomach is strong. An ideal, therefore, is rarely so decomposed that the intellectual cuisiniers cannot cook up a seething broth of intolerance with it. If a crusade for some newly discovered form of Liberty is started, with what speed the crusaders split into little camps, all at variance with one another, and much more concerned about their respective infallibilities than about the cause at issue...⁵⁵

The crimes and abject horrors of the capitalistic press are a constant theme in intellectual circles, even in those that do not profess any interest in the purely economic side of the question. Yet no capitalistic publication could more drastically censor contributions, more deliberately color the

⁵³E.A. Boyd, "The Intolerance of the Intellectual," Harper's Magazine, v.155, July, 1927, p.245.

⁵⁴Ibid., p.246.

⁵⁵Ibid., p.248.

articles published, more unashamedly hamper the free expression of opinion than the publications which live on subsidies and are devoted to the liberation of mankind and the propagation of Absolute Truth...⁵⁶

The intellectual's variant on "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like" is... "I don't know what I like, but I know a lot about Art," and so he becomes vituperative or indignant over differences of opinion, where the ordinary mortal admits that all tastes need not necessarily agree, or be bad when they do not...⁵⁷

In the absence of a principle for which he is willing to make other people die, Babbitt has a code of sportsmanship by which he tries to live. That code, for all its defects and his defections, is the average man's protection against intellectualism with its too frequent corollary: a lack of fair play... Since the airing of personal grievances, real or imaginary, is the chief occupation of certain intellectuals, the betrayal of confidences and self-pitying exhibitionism are the inevitable results.⁵⁸

Boyd saw one salvation for the common man, subjected to the barrage of intolerant urgencies directed at him by the intellectuals. That salvation was popular education. With the knowledge of how to read, the common man, Mr. Boyd thought, could divert himself almost endlessly with comic strips and newspapers and popular magazines and so enjoy whole generations free from any compulsion to think. "His is the tolerance that passeth all understanding. No wonder the intellectuals have to exercise their intolerance upon themselves."⁵⁹ He concluded that the intellectual was without the pragmatic intelligence of the common man. Therefore he is essentially an onlooker at life as

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.249.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.250.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.251.

it is lived by most people. Of course, the intellectual becomes bitter, arrogant, resentful. However he revenges himself by planting a certain portion of his ideas on the mob, who "groan and rave in the throes of that fell disease, a new ideal, another illusion, another burden which is obviously too much for the human brain to carry."⁶⁰

Continuing in his role of the "bad boy" essayist, Boyd wrote an amusing piece in defense of cynicism which unconsciously reveals the kind of intellectual detachment for which he yearned, but which he was by temperament and affections incapable of achieving. "Woman," he noted, "apparently can take refuge neither in cynicism nor drink; they are pure realists. The true cynic, so far from resenting, welcomes all opportunities of cheerfully sacrificing the shadow for the substance. The cynicism of men is the only moral equivalent of the realism of women."⁶¹ Cynicism he says is a kind of tact, a conviction of the indecency and bad manners of believing too strongly in the unbelievable things that occupy the concern of sentimentalists.

It is obviously impossible to hurl oneself during a lifetime against the jagged rocks of reality and feel happy about it save on the same principle as ascetics flagellate themselves, sadists inflict pain, and masochists beg to be hurt and humiliated. Every Cynic knows that his optimism dates from the moment when he began to lose his youthful belief in human perfectibility and his youthful conviction that he was born to help improve it. When we are young we are unhappy

⁶⁰Ibid., p.250.

⁶¹E.A. Boyd, "In Defense of Cynicism," Harvard Magazine, v.157, July, 1928, p.195.

because we believe too many things which are either untrue or unprovable. In disillusionment lies true happiness if one has the good luck to become disillusioned gracefully, that is cynically...⁶²

The future, Boyd saw as hard-boiled and corrupt, but not cynical. Rather sentimentality was sure to grow in proportion as the de-humanization process in business, government, and warfare increased. "The decline of cynicism corresponds roughly with the rise of industrialism, and the Eighteenth Century saw its last finest flowering in literature. It is an ornament, perhaps a chief ornament, of a civilization that is on the wane."⁶³

Annoyed as he frequently was by undignified behaviour on the part of Americans, Ernest Boyd was infuriated far beyond such minor annoyance by any expression of similar disapproval of American manners and customs by a foreigner. Thus while admitting the tendency of our public figures to play up to the cameras and footlights, he rebuts European efforts to point with disdain at such high jinks by citing innumerable instances of ludicrous and crowd-pleasing ceremony and protocol among European rulers and their hangers-on.

To jeer at publicity and to swallow it has become as easy a feat for the American public as to reward richly every person who demonstrates in fiction or drama that they are all ignominious imbeciles, without a rival for sheepish pusillanimity in Christendom. The only way to insult an intelligent American nowadays is to suggest timidly that he and his country are no worse, and in many ways considerably better, than the mythical nations of super-sophisticates beyond the seas.⁶⁴

⁶²Ibid., p.197.

⁶³Ibid., p.199.

⁶⁴E.A. Boyd, "Our Lost Dignity," Harper's Magazine, v.156, February, 1928, p.377.

This emergence of public figures into print, their eagerness to be shown in all aspects of their personalities to their constituency or following has resulted in an early sophistication among Americans without precedent anywhere in their history. Lost dignity has resulted in a new-found, early knowledge of the world as it is.

We no more expect a democratic government to display the remotest concern for the rights which it is supposed to safeguard than we expect a revenue officer to be honest, or a political champion of Prohibition to be sober. So long as we were all dignified, in other words, when we deemed it necessary to indulge in mutual and polite lying...it then took an intelligent person the best years of a lifetime to discover the truth behind the fair appearance. Without even the waste of a thought, youngsters now reach the age of 21 equipped with a healthy scepticism based not on theory but on practice...⁶⁵

In conclusion, Boyd discovered in our lost dignity an expression of strength, independence, and arrogance which can continually put itself to the test because it is so strongly established. "Is America undignified or magnificently insolent in the true fashion of those who think imperially?"⁶⁶

All the while that Ernest Boyd was building a reputation for witty and enlivening impertinencies, he was also hard at work on other, more thoughtful projects aimed at maintaining his original reputation as an informed and serious literary critic. He did not always abandon the medium of satire when writing on subjects of serious concern to him, but there is a difference in tone which is immediately apparent, between

⁶⁵Ibid., p.380.

⁶⁶Ibid., p.378.

his antiracial treatment of matters of real concern and those which are more properly the subjects of sophisticated conversation.

His most ambitious effort, and the only one of this period received with unmixed expressions of critical approval, was Studies From Ten Literatures, copyrighted in 1925 and for some reason not published until two years later. Here were included scholarly and thoughtful appraisals of writers in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish, and Canadian-French. A short appendage discusses the "hyphenated poets"--American-born writers in France. All the authors represented were contemporaries and it is doubtful that any other writer of his time could have singlehandedly brought in review as many widely different styles, languages and subjects, with studious comments on their backgrounds, the quality of existing translations, and their relative importance to world literature. It was a fine achievement in criticism and well received; but like his previous serious efforts, it did not go beyond the first edition and the income from his breezy pieces in the periodicals had to pay the rent.

CHAPTER VI

ERNEST BOYD AND THE FREEDOM OF THE HUMAN MIND

A subtle change had been taking place in the kind of periodical contributions the public wanted ever since the crash of 1929. The high spirits and sense of adventure that had characterized the iconoclasm of the 20's was dashed by the sight of growing depression, unemployment and poverty. More and more, people turned from gay hedonism, from anarchic sophistication, from satirical treatment of established institutions, and sought, instead, some positive reassurances that not all they had associated with American life was going down the drain of economic collapse. With the material proofs of America's power and influence growing daily less evident, even to the formerly prosperous middle class intellectuals, the Menckian "school" was suffering an eclipse. With this new demand for the positive and affirmative in criticism as well as in all the arts and sciences, authoritarianism began to make its comeback after suffering a decade of derisive "exposures" at the hands of the young intellectuals. The conservative, dogmatic, intensely "American" school of criticism which had almost died with Paul Elmer More was reborn under Stuart Sherman and the "New Humanists;" a small group of antiquarians and medieval scholars, led by Jacques Maritain, revived an ultra-reactionary, feudal sort of Thomism termed, by Boyd, the "New Medievalism;" Fascism and Nazism were beginning to extend their tyrannies over the lands and minds of Europe; and the "messengers" of proletarian literature in the United States, closely analyzed and seconded by its own group of chauvinistic critical fellow-

travelers, were coming thicker and faster with each publishing year. Boyd, for all his violent partisanship and merciless pillorying of the opposition on any issue, had still the liberal historian's respect for the hard-won freedoms of thought which it had been the serious objective of much of the criticism of the 20's to recover and protect. All those gains--indeed, it seemed, the gains of the entire civilized history of mankind--were threatened by a new retrogression into the camp of one or another purveyor of Absolute Truth. Ernest Boyd began to fight this kind of militant and stultifying authoritarianism wherever he uncovered it--in literature, in criticism, in religion, and sociology, and politics, and in individuals.

He was quick to defend Irish Catholicism when, under the British guise of defending the rights of the Protestant minority, it was being discriminated against. It was a different matter when the authority of that faith was used to attack intellectual heterodoxy. "When is a dogma not a dogma?" Boyd asked sarcastically, reviewing a book by Father Knox--the answer being, of course, "When it is laid down by the authority of the Church of Rome."¹ The title of the book, Broadcast Minds, Boyd declared to be a term applied by Father Knox to writers who influence public opinion without first soliciting the approval of Saint Thomas Aquinas; and he quotes Samuel Butler: "He proves his doctrines orthodox with apostolic blows and knocks." Boyd scoffed at Knox's contention that there is no conflict between science and religion. "The Catholic Church," the father had written, "has never been a strong-

¹E.A. Boyd, "Apostolic Blows and Knox," The Nation, v.137, July 7, 1933, p.52.

hold of obscurantism; knowledge has never been won in the face of clerical objection; the holy priests have always been the torch bearers of light and learning."² The author admits to one little stumbling block placed in the path of learning--the Church's policy with regard to Galileo. Since then, Boyd reminded him, there had been a "negligible" rift caused by The Origin of Species.

We shall have surcease from the inquisitorial intolerance, the mediaeval ignorance, of Messrs. Wells, Huxley, Mencken, and Russell. But, owing to the Index Expurgatorius, we shall never be able to discover that it was Voltaire, not Napoleon (as Father Knox supposes) who said that if God did not exist we should have to invent him.)

With what may appear to be harsh objectivity, Boyd revealed the dogmatic core of the Jewish problem in an essay which inevitably drew Jewish protests implying that he was anti-Semitic. The New York Herald Tribune had published an article in its Yom Kipper issue declaring that "the most devastatingly effective pogrom in history is in full swing in Russia. Not the Jew but his Judaism is the victim."⁴ This odd insistence on the rights of dogma after generations of Jewish writing designed to prove the assimilability and essentially non-dogmatic character of Jewish populations, infuriated Boyd: "Neither Shaw⁵ nor Stalin has any desire to encourage the Jews in their craving for martyrdom. In the eyes of the orthodox this is an unpardonable offense."⁶

²Ibid., p.53.

³Ibid., p.54.

⁴A.A. Boyd, "The New Grievance of the Chosen People," The American Spectator Yearbook, N.Y., Stokes, 1934, p.281.

⁵Ibid. This article took exception to a statement of Shaw's which Boyd quoted to the effect that the Jews who want to be the chosen race should go to Palestine. "The rest had better...start being human beings." Strange words from representatives of a race (the Irish) for its refusal of cultural amalgamation.

⁶Ibid.

He pointed out that the Russian state accorded Judaism the same treatment as Catholicism and other religions, and commented:

The Jews, it now appears from their comments on Russia, object fiercely to being accepted, assimilated and received on a footing of complete equality with the other citizens... They insist upon having their Semitic cake and eating it. A vast nostalgia for the swords of the Little Father's Cossacks and the lovely ghettos of Minsk, Kiev and Warsaw has seized upon the Chosen People, as they contemplate the horrors of their present position in Russia, where in proportion to their numbers they held the major share of leadership.⁷

Boyd objected to the Jews' efforts to identify themselves with the community while emphasizing everything in themselves which marks them as different. "Perhaps the worst thing to be said of the Jews is that they are responsible for Christianity, for the spread of Judaistic ethics over the Western world. Otherwise, the worship of the Almighty would be restricted to the race that invented him."⁸

Boyd returned to this interpretation of the Jewish problem in his review of two books on the subject (Arthur Ruppin's The Jews in the Modern World and Lewis Browne's How Odd of God: An Introduction to the Jews). Although recommending both books to "everyone who undertakes to discuss the practical problems raised by those recurrent bursts of Anti-Semitism...", Mr. Boyd did not leave the solution of this problem to those two authorities.

Intolerance is essentially the product of religious conviction. Since attachment to his religion is the one thing that sets the Jew apart from his fellow

⁷Ibid., p.252.

⁸Ibid.

citizens, it is peculiar that Jewish leaders insist upon this differentiation and then express surprise if the Gentile world holds aloof or is definitely hostile.⁹

He seems to have been saying: if you insist upon being different from other people, you must expect reprisals. Do you want to be assimilated and liked, or do you want to be Jews and be hated? This attitude does not fit in with his thinking on other issues and one wonders if he was not simply reacting to the particular brand of masochistic, self-mortifying complaints so prevalent among certain Jewish cliques. At that time, too, the Zionist movement was in full cry and more and more pressures were being applied to the Jewish community to stress its peculiarly Jewish characteristics almost in invitation of Anti-Semitic reaction. Boyd would have resented this move, as he did the narrowness of all national, religious, or racial authoritarianism. That his views on this matter were poorly thought out, invented, and uninformed he was reminded by Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn:

We are, and we remain, whether we will it or not, a historic group of recognizable homogeneity. Whenever we have been invited to assimilate we have made an effort to do so. It became apparent both to us and to our Gentile fellow-citizens that we cannot wholly assimilate. The effort breaks us and renders us sterile. Yet it does not satisfy the world. We grow enfeebled and corrupt and anti-Semitism re-arises in its most cruel forms. From this dilemma arose... Zionism. ...there is no virtue in tolerance if as its price you demand of any human being the sacrifice and degradation of assimilation to yourself. Tolerance means tolerance of difference, respect for other and

⁹ L.A. Boyd, "The Dilemma of the Jews," The Nation, v.139, July 11, 1934, p.52.

even alien views. Mr. Boyd should read the Torah with its constant admonitions to love, to protect, to defend the stranger who lives in the midst of Israel. The truth we brought with us full-fledged from the Arabian desert nearly 3000 years ago is still news to liberals like Mr. Boyd...¹⁰

This was Ernest's last attempt to solve "The Dilemma of the Jews!"

If the liberals took exception to his theories about the Jewish problem, few of them could disagree with his reaction to the school of the "New Humanism," resurrected from the ultra-conservative bones of the late Paul Elmer More by Mr. Stuart P. Sherman, whose name graces a chapter title in nearly every history of American literary criticism. Boyd saw in this school another manifestation of Puritanism with its corollaries of moral suspicion and racial hate. It was the same old phobia-ridden suspicion of the stranger and the near-sighted eulogy of whatever bears the bona fides of general acceptance. America, Boyd reminded these "Ku Klux Kritics," is a nation in the process of social, political and literary evolution. Sherman and his group would "exclude whole races and traditions which are becoming, in an essentially American manner, an integral part of America."¹¹ While a national literature was in the process of emerging from the racial and cultural complex that is America, American criticism was proving inadequate to interpret it.

The new national literature, in particular, would shrink to its old provincial status with remarkable rapidity if the literary lynching bees could only eliminate those names which have not the familiar

¹⁰Ludwig Lewisohn, "Letter to the Editor," The Nation, v.139, August 1, 1934, p.131.

¹¹E.A. Boyd, "Ku Klux Criticism," Criticism in America, N.Y., Harcourt, Brace, 1924, p.318.

Anglo-Saxon ring... Ku Klux Kriticism would see to it that American literature be Nordic, Protestant, and blond.¹²

Boyd quoted Sherman in what he (Boyd) calls a declaration of the Ku Klux Kritic's faith: "Mark Twain was an American. To the foreign critic this ultimate tribute may seem perplexingly cheap and anti-climactic. That is, of course, due to the mistaken notion that we number some fivescore millions of Americans. As a matter of fact, we number our Americans on our ten fingers; the rest of us are merely citizens of the United States."¹³ The trouble with this approach to criticism, Boyd thought, was its "fundamental assumption that America is not a nation in the process of evolution, drawing its life from the various races that are helping to build it up, but an Anglo-Saxon colony unfortunately afflicted by the influx of aliens. ...Be Anglo-Saxon or forever silent is the exhortation of the critical Ku Klux to be false prophets of Americanism."¹⁴

Another attack aimed at the very heart of liberal thought because founded, like the tradition it opposed, on intense intellectuality was that of the European Thomists--G.K. Chesterton, Nicholas Berdyaev, Hilaire Belloc, Henry Massis, Jacques Maritain and their followers here and abroad. Boyd saw in this revival of medieval scholasticism, with its ultimate reference of all knowledge to Aristotelian authority and revealed truth, a dangerous resurgence of that rigid formalism

¹²Ibid., pp.313-14.

¹³Ibid., p.315.

¹⁴Ibid., p.318.

and uncompromising intellectual conservatism that had suffered extinction rather than adapt to a non-feudal society. That the membership of this austere and essentially aristocratic circle was limited, no more detracted from its danger to free thought than did the negligible membership in the party that controlled the Russian masses. Boyd recognized the attraction, in an age of anxiety and depression, offered even the finest minds of the period by this rich and seemingly uncircumscribed tradition of culture. He saw behind the "catholicism" of these cosmopolitan gentlemen of letters and the world, the all too familiar restraints invariably imposed on the independent intellect by advocates of authority, however enlightened. While expressing admiration for the incisiveness and brilliance of some members of the Thomist school--particularly Maritain--Boyd deplored the cult growing up around them composed, as he saw it, of young men eager to be instructed in the ways of intellectual cynicism with a pot of gold at the end of life's rainbow. He noted the natural sympathy existing between the basic thinking of the "New Mediaevalists" and "that nondescript group of reactionaries who call themselves the 'New Humanists'".¹⁵ Also, to him, obvious in these two related groups' invocation of authority was a parallel to Communist dogma, although they would "deplore that particular brand of authority as not properly serviceable to their own hopes, fears, and prejudices. They tend, rather, in politics, to turn a lenient if not furtively enthusiastic eye towards Fascism as more nearly approximating their idea of the kind of strong, authoritarian government needed to combat the excesses of liberalism and

¹⁵ E.A. Boyd, "The New Mediaevalism," Scribner's Magazine, v.97, January, 1935, p.46.

democracy."¹⁶ In one of his rare excursions into positive argument, Boyd in this essay presented an eloquent brief for the forces of free thought, as distinguished from the various schools of absolutism:

A generation has arisen which, never having had to fight for an enlightened principle, regards those who did as rather quaint enthusiasts who got wildly excited about irrelevant matters, such as feminism, pacifism, agnosticism, factory legislation...secular education, and so forth. These commonplaces of today, like most other forms of human freedom, were never freely conceded, but were wrested at the cost of much sacrifice and suffering from absolutist and theocratic governments.¹⁷

The attitude of mind known as liberal is quite independent of political parties and a vital factor in the lives of civilized communities. Freedom of discussion is the very essence of liberalism. ...it has virtues which were never so sorely needed nor so admirable as now, when a concerted drive is being made from many different quarters to destroy or discredit it.¹⁸

Unfortunately, what they (the "New Mediaevalists") have to offer belongs to the past; every one of their remedies has been tried before. History records the results... Anti-Semitic to a man, they do not do more than half-protest against Hitlerism, and then only because that fine exemplar of the principle of "authority" has run afoul of the Roman Catholic Church. Whatever system promises the death of liberty and individualism...can count on their tacit or avowed support. The sad spectacle of Europe on the brink of barbarism is obscured in an appropriate blur of classicism, neo-Thomism, and militarism...¹⁹

The enemies of thoughtful inquiry were not limited to political and religious groups. Boyd noted, too, the effects on individuality

¹⁶Ibid., p.47.

¹⁷Ibid., p.46.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p.48.

of the commercial sphere in America. Because of the crushing impersonality of large scale production and standardization, "rugged individualism" was becoming a nostalgic legend rather than a fact. "Individualism that was once rugged is now drugged, drugged with the heady vapors of a terminology that becomes more and more meaningless as the circumstances which inspired it to change."²⁰ American businessmen keep alive the legend of personal freedom while directing, through their "booster" organizations, every form of coercion within their power toward an acceptance of convention and conformity.

Even in Boyd's most sardonic denunciations of American institutions--commercial, religious, political, scholastic--there was a note of affection as of one chiding a fellow club-member for some thoughtless but remediable indiscretion. It becomes more and more apparent that he loved this country and was capable, although he would deny it, of a feeling of patriotism for it. Fascism he treated as the sort of periodic outbreak of mental rabies that inexplicably appears in man's history and disappears again, forgotten in the resurgence of Reason. But it was Communism that he saw as the evil stranger, bent not only on abusing the powers of the free mind, but upon remaking it--cynicism more than a match for his own, more dogmatic than the other dogmas he had resisted, implacably logical and ruthlessly opportunistic. Horrified, he saw the literature he had championed because of its freedom and vitality, its peculiarly American quality, sinking in the neat bog of dogmatic class-consciousness. Idols and institutions he himself had

²⁰E.A. Boyd, "Drugged Individualism," The American Mercury, v.33, November, 1934, p.308.

painstakingly dissected as an adopted American and as an exponent of the tradition of liberal thought were being ripped apart with the dull tools of foreign dogmatism to the hoarse uncritical cheers of the new "proletarian" reviewers. The golden streets of highly articulate iconoclasm were suddenly strewn with the barricades of class-conscious verbiage, masquerading as a new Literature.

Had Boyd's anti-Communist writings appeared a score of years later than they did, he would have enjoyed a great success independent of any of his other work. Coming as they did at the height of the proletarian period of American literature, they could not but add to that large body of conservative critics by whom he was already held in disaffecting, the growing numbers of intellectuals who were making a choice between the Church and the Commissar.

Proletarian criticism, with its bias for "Literature" of the masses, was nothing new to Boyd. It had marked a segment of French criticism in the early 1920's. Writing in The Freeman in the first year of that decade, he protested the extravagant puffs being accorded certain novels solely on the strength of their "messages." The critical process by which this was accomplished reminded him of the promotion of a dental paste or beauty preparation. "The way of the transgressor is no longer hard," he wrote, "for one ounce of radicalism is now worth a ton of literature."²¹ This form of critical "log-rolling" hit the United States in the reviews of Michael Gold's Jews Without Money, and rolled on to a near-climax in The Autobiography of Lincoln

²¹E.A. Boyd, "The New Log-Rolling," Freeman, v.2, September 22, 1920, p.44.

Steffens.

A few of the periodicals still opened their pages to frank criticism of what Boyd, in one of his articles of the period called "The United Affront." Thus, in Scribner's Magazine:

According to Mr. John Strachey, Mr. Granville Hicks is the fine flower and supreme example of Marxist literary criticism in America, and this view seems to be shared by Mr. Hicks himself, if one may judge by the pontifical solemnity with which he distributes his critical awards and reprimands in The New Masses. Trailing clouds of professorial glory, Mr. Hicks will deliver courses on how to write various types of proletarian literature, or make an annual survey of the output of "revolutionary literature" in which each author is credited to the last jot and tittle with his or her success as a class-conscious interpreter of American life...²²

The "great tradition" of American literature is that of a capitalistic, middle-class democracy. It is, therefore, ridiculous to claim that the handful of contemporary American Marxists...are heirs to that tradition.²³

They would like us all to be "fellow travelers," but they overlook the possibility for those not possessed by the demon of Marxist infallibility to live in the same intellectual atmosphere. ... The mere bandying about of words like "defeatism," "social-fascism," "world-weary," "nihilism," and "pessimism" does not alter the fact known from time immemorial, that economic adjustment is only a part of man's problem in the universe. Consequently, there can be no united intellectual or literary front, when the very essentials of man's function as an artist and thinker are ignored or deliberately degraded.²⁴

If a united "literary front" is required, the obvious way to attain that end is to lend all the support we

²² _____, "Marxian Literary Criticism," Scribner's Magazine, v.95, December, 1935, p.343.

²³ Ibid., p.344.

²⁴ Ibid., p.346.

can to those who would preserve the cultural heritage of Western civilization.²⁵

On the subject of so-called "native" American communism, Boyd was particularly vehement. Invariably he represented the intellectual "comrade" as a frustrated individual, at odds with himself and his environment and more concerned with justifying his failures than establishing his--or Moscow's--theories. To Boyd, the American communist intelligentsia were, to the man, persons whose dissociation from society had become intolerable and who had embraced in the Marxist doctrine a fellowship and a submission to authority which offered them at once a means of revenging themselves for society's neglect and establishing in their own eyes the image of themselves as stronger, more knowing and of more importance than any individual has a right to be. That many of them wrote their revolutionary contributions under assumed names while continuing in well-paid employment in Hollywood or on the conservative magazines was, to him, an intolerable hypocrisy.²⁶

His devotion to the Cause never precludes his avoiding every opportunity of making any sacrifice for it... when he thinks of renunciation, it is in terms of giving up a Hollywood job for a Guggenheim scholarship...²⁷

Even when he (the "Literary Comrade") was a Dadaist, bullying waiters at the Dome, he was a great cry baby, readier with his fists than with his brains, cleverer at whining and lying than at facing an issue squarely.²⁸

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ernest Boyd had worn a brown suit and soft hat throughout his Foreign Office service and had ignored a circular placed on his desk advising him that British consular officials were forbidden to write for magazines and newspapers.

²⁷E.A. Boyd, "The Literary Comrade," The American Mercury, v.40, January, 1937, p.78.

²⁸Ibid., n.81.

Often Boyd's derogatory description of an entire class of writers or artists or politicians becomes so specific in its details of "typical" short-comings that one suspects he is actually attacking a hated individual under the guise of summarizing the faults of a group.

The Seventh World Congress of the Communist International had discovered, he reported in 1935, that Russian Marxism didn't quite enjoy a copyright on all forms of anti-Fascist effort. A special dispensation had made possible a new complex of mixed political marriages. Speaking of the Five Year Plan which sought economic alliances with American capitalism, he wrote:

These are acts of the utmost condescension to those of us who have been obliged for years to listen to arrogant denunciations by the Party dogmatists of every form of human activity, intellectual and political, artistic and economic, which does not conform to their own intransigent preconceptions... It would seem that we are all, under certain circumstances, "fellow-travelers" now...²⁹

American Communists have reviled and misrepresented every citizen and every party that differed from them... If they ever counted their votes, they might realize that the task...lies so remotely in the future that it is more than premature to talk and act as if the proletariat were precariously in power--it is downright stupid. More, it is ludicrous to pronounce the anathemas and excommunications of a proletarian dictatorship which does not exist... These are the methods of intellectual thugs.³⁰

Boyd pointed out again and again that America was not a class-conscious country, and that efforts to educate Americans into an awareness of

²⁹ E.A. Boyd, "A Challenge to Communists," The Atlantic Monthly, v.156, December, 1935, p.727.

³⁰ Ibid., p.728.

this non-American concept were doomed to failure.

In Europe the existence of classes is a historical fact, and class consciousness has a real meaning. America is a middle-class republic of one great bourgeois class, to which everybody belongs, whether rich or poor. Some Americans have more money than others, but all hope to have as much as the next, not because a class privilege is thereby conferred upon them, but because the making of money is the one career open to all.³¹

...even the depression has not convinced the average American that he is a desperate proletarian. He merely regards himself as out of luck temporarily. Distress, unemployment, and starvation in a country with America's resources, America's history, America's psychology, cannot be confused with the same phenomena in Europe, except for the purposes of a Communist Party rhetoric. An unemployed American is an American citizen who happens to be out of a job...³²

...nobody except a class-conscious, semi-alien American has ever noticed any tendency on the part of the citizens of this country to draw aside from a man in overalls.³³

And he concluded with a warning:

Not since the Middle Ages has the civilized world been confronted by a sect which claimed to be in possession of the absolute Truth. Mankind revolted against that absolutism and it will revolt again... The liberation of the human mind from dogmas has been the one achievement which justifies a belief in the progress of mankind. We are living in times when that progress seems more doubtful than it has seemed since the Renaissance. Liberty of thought is extinguished over the greater part of Europe and, according to temperament and circumstance, men and nations are taking refuge in the most convenient dogma.³⁴

³¹Ibid., p.730.

³²Ibid., p.731.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p.733.

As a former Fabian, it was not evident that Boyd objected to Marxism as an economic philosophy or even to its political application in a country to whose particular organization and problems it was applicable. The resentment aroused in him by American Communism was primarily due to its derivative nature, its docile following of the Party Line while preaching the stringencies of "native" revolution. He noted the basic differences between Russia and the United States--in education, inter-communication, industrial mechanization--and wondered why, in America, the Communists, like the Socialists before them, had failed to evolve a political theory peculiar to the special needs and circumstances of American life. America, he warned, was potentially a powerful ally to anyone opposed to a totalitarian state. "But it has little use for doctrinaires and is traditionally pragmatic. Too many doses of Das Kapital, too many instructions from Moscow, too much class-consciousness in Union Square--and Fascism will have the enthusiastic support of a bourgeois people."³⁵

Boyd returned to the always hospitable pages of The American Mercury for his last published article on authoritarianism. Titled "The United Affront" and ostensibly a satire on that particular body of presumptuous thought, this article seized the opportunity to point out the common thread of absolutism, obscurantism and authoritarianism that ran through all the schools of thought then competing for the loyalty of the bemused seeker after "positive" thinking.

³⁵Ibid.

In these days, when terrified Marxists are crawling behind the skirts of the democratic governments in the hope of preserving their forces for the future destruction of the principles that may save them; when Fascists, Hitlerites, and every conceivable type of organized fanaticism make their appeal to free-thinking individuals in the names of ideals which all of them have repudiated; when artists and intellectuals are being regimented in support of their deadliest enemies; it is essential to know the unholy scripture of totalitarianism in all its forms... All dogmatic bullies speak the same language and are spawned out of the reciprocal hatreds which their common intolerance engenders...³⁶

All the dogmatists confront each other, filled with deep hostility; when they can safely do so they execute, pogromise, persecute, exile, and oppress those who dare to differ... In a world half-mad with fear and hatred, our ears are deafened by the discordant cries and the irreconcilable claims of sects, parties, races, and nations...³⁷

It is essential that the mind be protected from the pressures of official dogmas, disciplines, and ready-made ideologies...³⁸

If certain groups of the intelligentsia, however, wish to sign the death warrant of the kind of society whose defense is their birthright and the very reason for their existence, then let the Marxians understand that there are several ways besides their own of committing intellectual suicide...³⁹

Once upon a time the intellectuals were content to leave the party leaders and dogmatists the dubious honor of travestying intellectual and aesthetic values in order to capture sectarian support. Now they are eager and ready to...connive at the treason which this abdication of the intellect involves... In a world as complex and troubled as it is today, the necessity for the exercise of reason, for objective thinking, for the maintenance

³⁶E.A. Boyd, "The United Affront," The American Mercury, v.42, November, 1937, p.275.

³⁷Ibid., p.277.

³⁸Ibid., p.280.

³⁹Ibid., p.281.

of traditions and standards which civilization has been slowly evolving since the Renaissance must be obvious to every educated mind. Now, if ever, the intelligentsia should justify its existence... The intellectuals, however, are in flight from reason; they are afraid to think; they ask for action. Instead of directing movements and ideas by the indirect power which has always been the peculiarity of creative minds, they ask only for the panacea to which they can blindly subscribe. Such is the new barbarism of our time...⁴⁰

The quotation above is taken from what was almost the last thing Ernest Boyd wrote in the familiar incensed and rhetorical style. A few more periodical contributions appeared over his name, tamed by the changing requirements of the publishers. Denunciation, however informed by a knowledge of history, literature, languages, or life, was out of style. The golden Avenue was suddenly bare. The Blue Eagle flew serenely over the deserted streets; the little magazines folded their argumentative wings and made way for the flying box-cars of the Writers Project; Mencken had cleared out his file cabinet and gone home. Cabell was amused; Hergesholmer collected his wages from Collier's Magazine and went fishing; Fitzgerald rewrote Tender is the Night and reached for another drink. So did Ernest. He had stopped reading by this time. Proletarian literature--that last object of his devoted critical hate--had won the day. He had sincerely believed in the possibility of a sustained, traditional American culture. He had warned against the conformity that threatens a young nation faced with growing pains--the attractions of dogmatism, the easy peace one's problems can make with the assurances of authority. Every bookstand bore

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.282.

the testimony to his failure to stem the tide of class-conscious "literature"--including some titles which not even he could deny were among the best the period was producing.

CHAPTER VII

NOT WITHOUT TEARS

Thomas Wolfe met Boyd at a private party sometime in the mid-Thirties, as the latter's star had begun sharply to decline.¹ Boyd, recently separated from his wife of 20-odd years, had just been asked by her to read Wolfe's first novel. It was her first piece of business as a newly launched literary agent. The meeting took place shortly after that reading. Presumably Boyd's irascibility was at a higher level than at previous times, but not greatly so. Wolfe has left us with this unforgettable portrait:

"Obviously," Mr. Malone was saying, "obviously!" Oh, how to convey the richness, the sonority, the strangling contempt that was packed into that single word! "Obviously the fellow has read nothing! All that he's read, apparently, are two books that every schoolboy is familiar with--namely the *Pons Asinorum* of Jacopus Robisonius, which was printed by Parchesi in Barcelona in the Spring of 1497, and the *Fontifex Maximus* of Ambrosius Glutzius, which was printed in Fisa the following year! Beyond that..." and his rubber lips did a snake dance all through the thicket of his beard--"of course in a so-called civilization, where the standard of refined and erudite information is governed by the incubrations of Mr. Arthur Brisbane and the masterly creations of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the pretensions of such a fellow pass, no doubt, for encyclopaedic omniscience! ...But he knows nothing!" choked Mr. Malone, and at the same time he threw both hands up as a final gesture of exasperated futility. "He's read nothing! In God's name, what can you expect?"²

He extended a clammy hand, his pale-red lips twisted in a ghastly attempt at a friendly smile. And in this

¹Not to the point that he could be of no use to this unpublished young author.

²Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock*, N.Y., Sun Dial Press, 1940, p.527.

smile there was something that was likewise pitiable, something that spoke of a genuine warmth, a genuine instinct for friendship down below the whole tortured snarl of his life, something really engaging that peered out just an instant behind the uncontrollable distemper of his race. It was there beneath all his swarming jealousies, his self-pity, his feeling that life had somehow betrayed him...and that infamous charlatans, fools, ignoramuses, dolts, dullards, mountebanks of every description were being...fatted up with success...which should have been his! his! his!³

"Of course, to tell the truth, I haven't read it," boomed Mr. Malone, beginning to tap impatiently upon the edges of the sofa. "No one who has an atom of intelligence would attempt to read a manuscript, but I've looked into it!...I've--I've read a few pages!" This admission obviously cost him a great effort, but he wrenched it out at length. "I've come across one or two things in it--that didn't seem bad! ... Compared to all the seven hundred and ninety-six varieties of piffle, treacle, bilge, quack-salvery, and hocus-pocus that are palmed off upon the eager citizens of this Great Republic by the leading purveyors of artistic hogwash, what this young man has written is not bad." Rocking back and forth again, he struggled stentorously for breath, and at last exploded in a final despairing effort. "It's all swill!" he snarled. "Everything they print is swill! ...If you find four words that are not swill, why then--" he gasped, and threw his hands up in the air again--"print it! Print it!" And having thus disposed of a large part of modern American writing, if not to his utter satisfaction, at least to his utter exhaustion, Mr. Malone rocked back and forth for several minutes, breathing like a porpoise and doing the devil's jig of knee and toe...⁴

"But I thought that what I read was--was--" Just for a moment the pale lips writhed tormented in his...beard.⁵

³Ibid., p.528.

⁴Ibid., pp.529-30.

⁵Ibid., p.535--"inky, blue-black..." Even Wolfe made an attempt at disguise.

and then--oh, tormented web of race and man!--he got it out. He smiled...quite winningly and said: "I liked your book. Good luck to you!"⁶

In 1939 Boyd's estranged wife, Madeleine, published her only novel, a distressingly frank account of the most intimate aspects of her life with the critic. In it Boyd is represented as a physical coward and weakling, an unsatisfactory lover, and a selfish hypochondriacal egomaniac. While his talents are noted, they are used to show his wife responsible for what little he actually did accomplish with them. Nor does she omit to detail dozens of near and actual instances of Boyd's cuckoldry at the hands of men described as his superior in such matters. With a plain woman's fatuousness and a Huguenot's predilection to dramatize sinfulness, she saw a venal approach in every handshake and a proposition in every glance. At the same time she indulged herself in an irresistible fantasy of self-sacrifice whenever her own interests in relation to those of her husband occupied her thought.

Certainly this book, a frank autobiography, consisted of notes taken daily throughout her life with the critic. In one dimension, it is a guided tour through the parlors and drawing rooms of the literary greats of the time. Its principal intent and accomplishment, however, is to reveal, in minute detail, the most intimate moments of a patient and practical wife saddled with a neurotic weakling--intelligent but obtuse, extravagantly gifted but even more extravagantly demanding, unpredictable, dirty in his personal habits and leaving much to be

⁶Ibid., p.536.

desired in the normal return of her affections. So inadequate is he in the latter regard that she is obliged to indulge herself in innumerable little escapades of the heart, some trivial, some (if we can believe the lady) of all but indescribable significance. Never quite indescribable, however, for each one is explored, not only for its own titillations, but for any reference it may have to "Michael's" and her relations as husband and wife.

All the persons,⁷ places and events were unmistakable to members of the society in which Ernest Boyd moved. It is a work of self-justification and spite, done with the shamefully revealing intimacy of a personal diary. Although it received bad review,⁸ it is evident from the card of the Public Library that it has seen the inside of many feminine bedrooms on the merits of its "riper" passages. If there were no other disgraces, this one alone could have easily destroyed in a man of Boyd's highly developed sense of personal dignity, the self-respect left him by his literary failure.

⁷These people--Ernest Boyd's friends--that did not attempt to seduce Madeleine Boyd appear under their own names: Yeats, Mencken, Cabell, AE, John Gglinton, etc. There is a preface: "All the characters in this book are drawn from life. Some of them are composite portraits, some, portraits of individuals..." Madeleine Boyd, Life Makes Advances, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1939.

⁸Unsigned review, The Nation, v.148, March 4, 1939, p.276: "This is an imposture as a novel...embarrassing to review... The writing is deadly."

"Resistant Wife," Time, v.33, January 9, 1939, p.59: "Enough to alarm the woman-vary... Latest such old wife's tale is...by the separated wife...of an elegant Manhattan ex-critic. Madeleine Boyd does a thorough job in messing up the portrait of the elegant husband..."

Unsigned review, Boston Transcript, January 14, 1939, p.46: "I object to this sort of thing, not only because of the doubtful taste involved..."

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