

# LECTURES

## The Concept of an Academy and the Celts

In the second half of the nineteenth century, two justly famous writers, Ernst Rénan and Matthew Arnold, both wrote penetrating studies on both the concept of an academy and on Celtic literature. Neither noticed the curious affinity between those two subjects, and yet that affinity exists. Some friends of mine, when they read the title of this lecture, assumed I was merely being arbitrary, but I think that this affinity is profound and that I can justify it.

Let us begin with the concept of an academy. Of what does it consist? In the first place, we think of a language police, authorizing or prohibiting words. This is trivial, as we all know. Then we think of the original members of the French Academy who had periodic meetings. Here we have another theme—the theme of conversation, literary dialogue, and friendly discussion—and the other aspect of the Academy, which is perhaps the most essential: organization, legislation, the understanding of literature. I think that this is the most important part.

The thesis that I am going to expound today—or more exactly, the circumstances that I am going to recall—is the affinity of these two ideas: the Academy and the Celtic world. Let us think of the literary nation *par excellence*. That country is obviously France, and French literature is not only in French books but in the language itself. One need only leaf through a dictionary to feel the intense literary vocation of the French language. For example, in Spanish we say “*arco iris*”; in English, “rainbow”; in German, “*regenbogen*,” arch of rain. What are all these words next to the tremendous French one, as vast as a poem by Hugo and shorter than a poem by Hugo—*arc-en-ciel*—which seems to raise an architecture, an arch in the sky?

In France, a literary life exists—I don’t know whether more intensely;

for that, one would have to enter into its mysteries—but certainly in a way that is more conscious than in other countries. One of its magazines, *La Vie Littéraire*, is read by everyone. Here, in contrast, writers are almost invisible; we write for our friends, which can be fine. When one thinks of the French Academy, one tends to forget that the literary life of France corresponds to a dialectical process, that literature functions within the history of literature. The Academy exists to represent tradition, and so does the Goncourt Academy, and the cenacles that are themselves academies in turn. It is curious that the revolutionaries have begun to enter into the Academy, that the tradition continues to enrich itself in all directions and through all the evolutions of its literature. At one time, there was an opposition between the Academy and the Romantics; then, between the Academy and the Parnassians and Symbolists; but ultimately they all formed part of the French tradition. Moreover, there is a kind of equilibrium: the rigors of the tradition are compensated by the audacities of the revolutionaries. For that reason, French literature has more extravagant exaggerations than any other, for each writer must deal with an adversary, much like a chess player. But in no other part of the world has literary life been organized in such a rigorous manner as among the Celtic nations, which I shall attempt to prove, or more exactly, recall.

I spoke of the literature of the Celts: the term is vague. They inhabited, in antiquity, the territories that a remote future would call Portugal, Spain, France, the British Isles, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Lombardy, Bohemia, Bulgaria, and Croatia, as well as Galicia on the coast of the Black Sea; the Germans and the Romans displaced or subjected them after arduous wars. Then a remarkable thing happened. The true culture of the Germans reached its maximum and final flowering in Iceland, in the Ultima Thule of Latin cosmography, where the nostalgia of a small group of fugitives rescued the ancient mythology and enriched the ancient rhetoric. Celtic culture took refuge on another lost island, Ireland. We know little about the arts and letters of the Celts in Iberia or in Wales; the tangible relics of their culture, particularly in language and literature, must be sought out in the libraries of Ireland or Wales. Rénan, applying Tertullian's famous sentence, writes that the Celtic soul is naturally Christian; what is extraordinary, almost incredible, is that Christianity, which was and is felt with such ardor by the Irish, did not erase their memory of the repudiated pagan myths and archaic legends. Thanks to Caesar, Pliny, Diogenes Laërtius, and Diodorus Siculus, we know that the Welsh were ruled by a theocracy, the Druids, who administered and executed the laws, declared war or proclaimed peace, had

the power to depose the king, annually appointed magistrates, and were in charge of the education of the young and the ritual celebrations. They practiced astrology and taught that the soul is immortal. Caesar, in his *Commentaries*, attributes to them the Pythagorean and Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls. It has been said that the Welsh believed, as almost all people do, that magic could transform men into animals, and Caesar, misled by the memory of his readings in Greek, confused this superstitious belief with the doctrine of the purification of the soul through death and reincarnations. Later we will see a passage in Taliesin, whose indisputable subject is transmigration, not lycanthropy.

What I would like to note here is the fact that the Druids were divided into six classes, the first of which were the bards, and the third, the *vates*. Centuries later, this theocratic hierarchy would be the distant but not forgotten model for the academies of France.

In the Middle Ages, the conversion of the Celts to Christianity reduced the Druids to the category of sorcerers. One of their techniques was satire, to which was attributed magical powers, thanks to the lumps that would appear on the face of the person being satirized. Thus, protected by superstition and fear, the man of letters became predominant in Ireland. Each individual in feudal societies had a precise place; an incomparable example of this were the Irish literati. If the concept of an academy is based on the organization and direction of literature, then there was no more academic country, not even France or China.

A literary career required more than twelve years of strict studies, which included mythology, legendary history, topography, and law. To such disciplines we must obviously add grammar and the various branches of rhetoric. The teaching was oral, as it is with all esoteric material; there were no written texts, and the student had to commit to memory the entire *corpus* of the earlier literature. The annual examination lasted many hours; the student, kept in a dark cell and provided with food and water, had to versify certain set genealogical and mythological subjects in certain set meters and then memorize them. The lowest grade, that of *oblaire*, was given for poems on seven subjects; the highest grade, *ollam*, for 360, corresponding to the days in the lunar year. The poems were classified by themes: destructions of lineages or of castles, thefts of animals, loves, battles, sea voyages, violent deaths, expeditions, kidnappings, and fires. Other categories included visions, attacks, deceptions, and migrations. Each one of these corresponded to certain plots, certain meters, and a certain vocabulary, to which the poet was limited under the penalty of punishment. For the highest poets, versifi-

cation was extremely complex, and included assonance, rhyme, and alliteration. Rather than direct reference, they preferred an intricate system of metaphors, based on myth or legend or personal invention. Something similar occurred with the Anglo-Saxon poets and, at a higher level, with the Scandinavians: the extraordinary and almost hallucinatory metaphor for battle, "weave of men," is common to the court poetry of both Ireland and Norway. Above the ninth level, the verses are indecipherable, due to their archaisms, periphrasis, and laborious images; tradition records the rage of a king who was incapable of understanding the panegyrics of his own learned poets. The inherent obscurity of all cultivated poetry hastened the decline and final dissolution of the literary colleges. It is also worth recalling that the poets constituted a heavy burden for the poor and minor kings of Ireland, who were required to maintain them in the luxury and pleasures appropriate for creativity.

It may be said that such vigilance and vigor can only stifle the poetic impulse; the unbelievable truth is that Irish poetry is rich in freshness and wonder. Such, at least, is the conviction formed by the fragments cited by Arnold and the English versions by the philologist Kuno Meyer.

All of you can recall poems in which the poet remembers his previous incarnations. For example, the splendid lines by Rubén Darío:

*Yo fui un soldado que durmió en el lecho  
de Cleopatra, la reina. . . .  
¡Oh la rosa marmórea omnipotente!*

[I was a soldier who slept in the bed/of Cleopatra, the queen. . . ./Oh marble and omnipotent rose!]

And we have ancient examples, like that of Pythagoras, who declared that he recognized from another life the shield with which he fought at Troy.

Let us look at what Taliesin, the Welsh poet of the sixth century, did. Taliesin beautifully remembers having been many things: a wild boar, a chief in a battle, a sword in the hand of a chief, a bridge that crossed seventy rivers; he was in Carthage, he was on a wave in the sea; he has been a word in a book, he was, in the beginning, a book. Here we have a poet who is perfectly conscious of the privileges, of the merits that can arise from this kind of incoherent diversion. I think that Taliesin wanted to be all of these things, and I also believe that a list, in order to be beautiful, must consist of heterogenous elements. Thus he remembers having been a word in a book and a book itself. There are many other beautiful Celtic images, for example

that of a tree that is green on one side and burning on the other, like the Burning Bush, with a flame that does not consume it, and whose two parts live in harmony.

Beyond the heroic centuries, the mythological centuries, there is an aspect of Celtic literature that particularly interests us, and that is the sea voyages. The Irish imagined voyages to the west, that is, to the sunset, to the unknown, or, as we now say, to America. I will refer to the story of Conn.

Conn is a king of Ireland; he is called Conn of the Five Battles. One afternoon, he is sitting with his son, watching the sunset from a hill, and he suddenly hears his son speaking with the invisible and the unknown. He asks him with whom he is speaking, and then a voice comes from the air, and that voice says: "I am a beautiful woman; I come from an island lost in the western seas; on that island there is no rain, no snow, no sickness, no death, no time. If your son, with whom I am in love, will come with me, he will never know death, and he will reign over happy people." The king summons his Druids—for this story is older than Christianity, although the Christians preserved it—and the Druids sing to silence the woman. She, invisibly, throws an apple at the prince and disappears. For a year, the prince eats nothing but this inexhaustible apple and is never hungry or thirsty, and he thinks only of the woman he has never seen. At the end of the year, she returns, he sees her, and together they board a glass ship and sail off to the west.

Here the legend branches off. One of the versions says that the prince never returned. Another, that he returned after many centuries and revealed who he was. The people looked at him with incredulity and said: "Yes, son of Conn of the Five Battles. A legend tells that you were lost in the seas, and that, if you ever return to land and touch the soil of Ireland, you will turn to ashes, for the time of gods is one thing and the time of man another."

Let us recall a similar story, the story of Abraham. Abraham is the son of a king, like all the protagonists of these stories. While walking on the beach, he suddenly hears a beautiful music coming from behind him. He turns around, but the music is still behind him. The music is very sweet, and he falls asleep; when he wakes, he finds in his hand a branch of silver with flowers that could be made of snow, except that they are living. (The silver branch is reminiscent of the golden bough in the *Aeneid*.) Returning to his house, he finds a woman who tells him, as in the other story of the prince, that she is in love with him. Abraham follows her, and then the story becomes the tale of his journeys. They say that he traveled over the sea and saw a man who seemed to walk on the water and was surrounded by fish, by

salmon. That man was a Celtic god, and when he walks the sea, he is walking over the meadows of his island, surrounded by deer and sheep. That is, there is something like a double space, a double plane in space: for the prince, he is walking on water; for the king, over a meadow.

There is a curious fauna in those islands: gods, birds that are angels, laurels of silver and deer of gold, and there is also an island of gold, standing on four pillars, which stand, in turn, on a plain of silver. The most astonishing wonder is when Abraham crosses the western seas, looks up, and sees a river that flows through the air without falling, and in that river there are fish and boats, and all of it is religiously in the sky.

I should say something about the meaning of landscape in Celtic poetry. Matthew Arnold, in his remarkable study of Celtic literature, says that the sense of nature, which is one of the virtues of English poetry, is derived from the Celts. I would say that the Germans also felt nature. Their world is, of course, quite different, because in ancient Germanic poetry, what is felt above all is the horror of nature; the swamps and the forests and the twilights are populated by monsters. Dragons were called "the night horrors." In contrast, the Celts also understood nature as a living thing, but they felt that these supernatural presences could also be benign. The fantastic world of the Celts is a world of both angels and demons. We now speak of the "other world": the phrase, I think, appears for the first time in Lucan, referring to the Celts.

All of these facts I have noted lead to various observations. They explain, for example, the birth of the Academy in a country like France, a country with Celtic roots; they explain the absence of academies in a profoundly individualistic country like England. But you may draw better conclusions than I. For now, it is enough to merely note the curious phenomenon of the legislation of literature on the island of Ireland.

[1962]

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## The Enigma of Shakespeare

The two final chapters of Paul Groussac's *Crítica literaria* are dedicated to the Shakespeare question, or as I have preferred to call it here, the enigma of Shakespeare. As you will have guessed, this is the theory that the individual William Shakespeare, who died in 1616, was not the father of the tragedies, comedies, history plays, and poems that are now admired