Outside Medicine

Doctors and literature

NIALL SHERIDAN

Since the time of Hippocrates, many doctors have made noteworthy contributions to literature, but two towering figures spring at once to mind.

The first is Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82), one of the abiding glories of English literature and the last writer of prose in the grand manner. His *Religio Medici*, published in 1643, won him overnight fame and his passport to immortality. The very title struck a note of paradox at a time when physicians were widely thought to have no religion at all, and rigid orthodoxy was, indeed, very far from Browne's temperament. In his wonderful book he ranges far and wide, delighting in everything, not least the quirks of his own psychology:

"I am no way facetious, nor disposed for the mirth and galliardize of company; yet in one dream I can compose a whole Comedy, behold the action, apprehend the jests, and laugh myself awake at the conceits thereof."

Penetrating insights repeatedly leap from his smooth and ornate prose: "We carry with us the wonders we seek without us; there is all Africa and her prodigies in us." And everywhere he sounds a note of wise scepticism and true tolerance, rare in any age.

Three years later, when the Royalist cause was tottering towards final defeat, Browne once more addressed himself to the public, this time with *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a survey of "commonly presumed Truths which examined prove but Vulgar and Common Errors." Fascinated by marvels, intrigued by mysteries, Browne invited his readers to contemplate a vast collection of popular beliefs—that swans sing before they die; that a badger hath the legs of one side shorter than the other; that the chameleon lives only on air. The book remains one of the most delightful curiosities of literature.

In *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658) he closes the book, bidding us goodnight, with a valediction that only he could have written:

"But the Quincunx of Heaven runs low, and 'tis time to close the five ports of knowledge. . . . To keep our eyes open longer were but to act our Antipodes. . . . The Huntsmen are up in America, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia. . . . Nor will the sweetest delight of Gardens afford much comfort in sleep; wherein the dulnesse of that sense shakes hands with delectable odours; and though in the bed of Cleopatra, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a Rose."

That was his public farewell to literature, for nothing more was to appear during his lifetime. Browne was that rarest favourite of the Gods, a happy man of genius.

Russian giant

The second of these giants—far distanced from Browne by time, geography, and circumstance—was Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov, whose plays made the Moscow Art Theatre famous, and whose mastery of the short story has never been equalled.

He brought to his writing that combination of artistic detachment and boundless compassion that is the hallmark of true greatness. His achievement goes beyond comment or criticism, but his personality remains a perpetual fascination. The grandson of a serf, he survived a childhood and boyhood of bitter poverty to study medicine on a scholarship at Moscow University, while churning out jokes, anecdotes, lampoons, and articles for cheap magazines to keep the family in food. Emerging from such a background, what qualities of mind and heart and character made him the most subtle and clever writer of his time?

Chekhov rarely spoke of his work, and the nearest he came to stating his beliefs was in writing to a friend: "My Holy of Holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom—freedom from violence and falsehood, in whatever form these may be expressed." Though he realised that he must soon die of tuberculosis and knowing, as a doctor, the entire pathological process, he never lost faith in the sacredness of life or the creative potential of the human spirit.

Maxim Gorky, who loved him, as did Tolstoy (in his own autocratic way), gives us some revealing glimpses of the man. There is that vivid description of Tolstoy's reaction to the publication of Chekhov's superb story, *The Darling*—one can see the old wizard, in his peasant smock and high boots, striding up and down with tears in his eyes, singing his praises of the story: "It is like lace made by a chaste young girl. There were such lace-makers in olden times. They dreamt in designs of all that was dear to them, wove all their pure, uncertain love into their lace."

Gorky goes on:

"That very day Chekhov's temperature had gone up and he was sitting there with a high flush on his cheeks, his head bowed, carefully wiping his spectacles. He was silent for a long time, then he sighed deeply and said in a low, bashful voice: 'There are many misprints in it.'"

Chekhov's character is an inexhaustible subject, and no one now can pluck out the heart of that mystery. But Gorky, in an almost casual aside, gives us a significant clue: "In Chekhov's presence, everyone wished to be simple and truthful, to become himself." Here, surely, untouched by dogma, is a secular saint, the most attractive personality in the whole history of literature.

No dynamite of genius

Leaving the Titans on the mountaintop, we have time for only a quick glance at the lesser figures in the foothills. A complete head-count is unthinkable, but a few names taken at random may indicate the relative productivity of the terrain.

We have Robert Bridges, some-time Poet Laureate, who gave up medicine at 40 to devote himself to poetry. And Somerset Maugham, practising only briefly before launching out as popular dramatist and one of the bestselling authors of the century. There is Conan Doyle, probably less remembered by name than Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson whom he created.

I presume people still read Axel Munthe, and the stories of A J Cronin have been given the kiss of life through the miracle of television.

Let us not forget also the tireless and versatile Dr Peter Roget, inventor of a laboratory balance and a calculating machine, and begetter of the great *Thesaurus*. He, at least, should have a lease on immortality while his famous compendium remains useful to writers, and essential for journalists and bad poets.

A mixed bag, crammed with much talent and ingenuity—but not, I think, booby-trapped with the dynamite of genius.

Measure of Irish

Our own city of Dublin has, of course, contributed an interesting and not unworthy chapter to medicoliterary history. It begins with Jonathan Swift, dying in 1745 and bequeathing his estate for the foundation of St Patrick's Hospital for the mentally ill. At different times he was attended by five doctors and, of course, he had something to say about them: "I have esteemed many of them as learned and ingenious men: but I never received the least benefit from their advice or prescriptions. . . . But to conquer five physicians, all eminent in their way, was a victory that Alexander and Caesar could never pretend to." We are far from finished with Swift. His potent ghost still remains to haunt us, and probably always will.

It certainly haunted one of the major figures on the Dublin literary scene during the nineteenth century—Sir William Wilde, the eminent ophthalmic surgeon and father of Oscar Wilde. Exactly a century after Swift's death, he published an objective and well-researched account of the Dean's closing years, putting his medical knowledge to good use, and unearthing facts and documents not previously available. The book is still worth reading. He commanded a lucid and sprightly style, and he understood very well the first principle of authorship, that the reader must, at all times, be kept interested and entertained. As a consequence, his books proved very popular and some of them are still in print, more than a hundred years after his death. Not a bad test for any author.

As must be obvious, Sir William was a man of many parts, gifted with abundant energy. His short stature and simian aspect proved no handicap in his enthusiastic pursuit of women—a perilous occupation for a man of his position in the Victorian society of the time. In fact, as we all know, he almost came a cropper when hauled into Court by a coquettish patient, a Miss Travers, on a charge of raping her while she was under the influence of chloroform. The verdict went against him, but the lady was awarded only contemptuous damages of one farthing.

Another major figure was Charles Lever (1806-72) Wilde's contemporary and friend. A wit and bon viveur, much given to dancing, fencing, and carousing, it took him five years to get his BA in Trinity College, where he went on to qualify with his MB in 1831. But his heart was never in medicine and he soon launched himself on a highly successful career as a writer. Over a period of 35 years, Lever produced some 30 novels, rivalling Thackeray in popularity, and holding the interest of two generations of readers. Because of his vast output many critics have condemned him as superficial, but this is a facile verdict and critics can be wrong. Did not the mighty Johnson himself say of Henry Fielding that he knew only "the shell of life"—a curious judgment on one of the true giants of English fiction.

In fact, Lever had most of the attributes of a major writer: lively imagination, deep understanding of character, a keen comic sense, and a subtle ear for dialogue. He could be critical, too, of his own work. When a friend praised his last novel, *Lord Kilgobbin* (written when he was dying), Lever shook his head. "Ah, no," he said wearily, "I have been tilting the cask so long that the dregs are coming out very muddy." Had he written less, taking the trouble to prune and edit his work, Lever's reputation would stand much higher than it does. As it is, several of his novels are still being read today.

During the first three decades of our present century Dublin was the centre of tremendous literary activity. The earlier movement, inspired by Yeats, was not yet a spent force when the 'twenties brought a great new burst of creative energy: O'Casey's plays were thrilling Abbey Theatre audiences; Yeats received the Nobel Prize and, in *The Tower* (1928), produced the greatest poetry of his career. And there was the emergence of several major novelists and short story writers.

On this busy scene, the most colourful and versatile personality was Dr Oliver St John Gogarty—surgeon, poet, senator, aviator, athlete, the model for Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*, and friend of Griffith and Michael Collins, founders of the new Irish Free State. Yeats professed to see in him a reincarnation of the complete Renaissance man. And certainly Gogarty had panache, driving a butter-coloured Rolls Royce and piloting his own plane.

When I first met him he was at the height of his fame as a talker, an acknowledged master in circles where the competition was always keen. I was to see (and hear) him in action many times but—even for those who knew him—it is difficult to convey his vivid impact. The lithe, athletic carriage which he retained into late middle age, the sea-blue eyes in the long Celtic face, which could flicker from merriment to melancholy in a blink—above all, the speed, timbre, and timing of his repartee. He was at his very best in the company of his peers, where he had to hone and shape his wit against the whetstone of minds no less agile than his own. Of course, his sharp tongue made many enemies, and some of his medical colleagues never forgave him. Asked his opinion of Dr Ashe, a somewhat pompous Dublin physician, Gogarty snapped back: "I diagnose *folie de grandeur*. Ashe thinks he's the whole cigar."

Contrasted with his talk, Gogarty's prose books seem flabby, verbose, and untidy. In writing, he needed the formal discipline of rhyme and metre. And so it is that his genuine lyric gift found expression in a handful of near-perfect poems, and the flavour of his wit is preserved in a number of incomparably bawdy limericks. These have become part of our oral folklore, and Dublin still cherishes the memory of a gathering at Gogarty's Ely Place home in the early 'thirties. As the guests moved around in groups, two figures stood apart at the end of the room—George Russell (AE), deep in thought, murmuring into his great beard, and Yeats, head thrown back, his hand beating time in the air as he chanted some verse to himself. His arm rose and fell, the great ruby signet ring winking and flashing like a heliograph. What occult message was it signalling? What was afoot between the mystic and the poet? Were we witnessing the birth of yet another Byzantium poem? Could the Second Coming be upon us? (They were, in fact, discussing the last line of a Gogarty limerick.)

Since so many doctors have helped to enrich our common literary heritage, one would expect writers to be well disposed towards the profession. Quite the contrary. Swift was not the first nor the last to sound a caustic note. Countless pen-pushers, great or small, have regarded the disciples of Hippocrates as fair game, with no close season. Indeed, Shaw's massive broadside, *The Doctors' Dilemma*, merely interrupted the continuous rattle of sniper fire.

Of course, there were exceptions, Voltaire, the noblest of cynics, tried to redress the balance: "Men who are occupied in the restoration of health to other men, by the joint exertion of skill and humanity, are above all the great of the earth." But he was swimming against a strong tide, for medicine has (somewhat unjustly) been getting a bad literary press for more than 2000 years. It would be tedious to catalogue that long litany of ridicule. So let us turn from this horde of ungrateful scribes and be content with a parting word from the Irish-American humorist, Finley Peter Dunne, creator of that incorrigible pragmatist, Mr Dooley, who—expounding his views on religion and medicine—had this to say: "If the Christian Scientists had some science and the doctors more Christianity, it wouldn't make any difference which you called in—if you had a good nurse."