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Irma S. Lustig

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*bury Tales*, this is never investigated further, and we are left with the simple yet mysterious fact of existence.

Certainly Willa Cather did not need to look for preconceived models for her characters, but the fact that, consciously or not, she uses the Chaucerian idiom in her descriptions is proof once again both of the richness of her imagination and of her sure instinct for selecting the most fitting frame of reference for the material at hand.



AMERICA AND APOLLONIAN TEMPLES:  
CONVERSATIONS AND CORRESPONDENCE  
WITH SEAN O'CASEY

By IRMA S. LUSTIG

**I**N THE SPRING OF 1950 I expressed to my friend, Barrows Dunham, what I thought a hopeless wish to meet Sean O'Casey while I was studying in England that summer. Himself an author, Barrows persuaded me that writers were not besieged by admirers, and that O'Casey might respond warmly to my attention. But still timid, never having approached a renowned figure before, I delayed asking for an interview until I had been in England for over a month. I was overjoyed at the response to my letter:

Tingrith, Station Road, Totnes, Devon July 27.50

My dear Mrs. Lustig,

Sean asks me to answer your letter. If you can manage to get to Devon on August 7th, 8th, 9th, or 10th, we will be pleased to have you — it will mean staying overnight and I can also put you up for the night. Can you tell me which night you will be coming? I hope you have had a good time in all ways on your trip, and saw some good theatre. Our best wishes until we see you.

Sincerely,  
Eileen O'Casey

In the interval of this exchange of letters, my husband informed me that he could join me in Europe earlier than we first had planned. Believing that two guests would be an imposition

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— England was still subject to food rationing — I explained to the O'Caseys that we would now be two, and arranged to stay at an inn overlooking Totnes. When I called their home at our arrival, Mrs. O'Casey invited us to dinner the next evening, August 16th.

I kept no notes of that occasion, and faltered in my plan to photograph the O'Caseys. Because I wish not to confuse what occurred with memories from the *Autobiographies*, I limit myself to details of which I am certain. I recall an easy and comfortable room filled with pictures. The famous portrait of Sean by Augustus John dominated a long wall opposite the fireplace. We dined at a rectangular table set in a bay overlooking the garden. Eileen O'Casey seemed to me one of the most beautiful women I had known; their tall, thirteen year old daughter, Shivaun, was already lovely.

Conversation was casual. We talked about their two sons, who were not at home, and described our work, and my studies in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama at the University of Birmingham program in Stratford-on-Avon. The O'Caseys were interested, of course, in the plays I had seen there, and in London (a windfall: Sir John Gielgud in *Julius Caesar*; as an unforgettable Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, and a lesser Lear; Sir Laurence Olivier in *Venus Observed*; and a stylish, uproariously funny production of *The Beaux Strategem*). Sean added informative notes as we recounted the delights of the day: climbing the narrow winding streets of Totnes, through its bustling center, to the old red stone church with its fine altar screen, and beyond it to the walled Saxon keep, and back again to the Guild Hall; riding the river Dart through steep banks carefully farmed, to cross the river from Dartmouth by ferry and exclaim at the beauty of the fields and sparkling Channel as a bus carried us over the twisting roads to Brixham. There we had tea at the bottom of a cobbled street, and longed to buy fish at the quay, where overlooking the harbor stands a statute of "King Billy," as Sean called him when he lovingly described these same scenes in *Sunset and Evening Star*.

It must have been at dinner also that Sean told us appreciatively of the young American soldiers — I remember his specifically mentioning students from Harvard — who during World War II dropped in to see him as they were en route to Plymouth. Few readers came to Devon now. Though our other

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conversation eludes me, one memory remains strong: being moved at a dessert of pineapple, which was scarce at the time.

The evening comes sharply into focus at Mrs. O'Casey's announcement that Sean liked to go to his study after dinner. Would we care to join him? Eagerly we followed Sean's tall but spare and slightly bent figure up the stairs to a room walled floor to ceiling with books. He had kept his youthful vow never again to be dependent upon lending libraries. Sean took his seat behind a large desk also overspilling with books. We sat to his right, my husband diagonal from the far corner of the desk, I at the near one. Sean turned to me, and now I see the strong, lean face behind thick glasses, and the familiar heavy sweater and skull cap; I hear the "th" in his speech which clarified for me the dialogue of his plays (flutther; tittherin').

"Irma," he asked quietly, "have you crossed [or sailed?] the Mississippi?"

"No," I replied. "I haven't."

"Then what are you doing in Europe?"

I was startled by the sharp question. But as a brash, unknown, young James Boswell wrote in his journal after gaining admittance to Voltaire's home at Ferney, and challenging him on the subject of religion, "For a certain portion of time there was a fair opposition." Sean asserted that there was nothing important to learn from Europe. It was archaic and decayed; its great monuments were relics of human exploitation. The United States was young, democratic, and vigorous. We must study our own country, appreciate its culture and history, and our people. My husband and I argued that we were wholly conscious of the privileges and abuses represented by castle and cathedral, but that they were the creation of men, and therefore wonders that we must know. My husband was a developing city planner; I was a student and teacher of English literature, particularly of the Renaissance and eighteenth century. Britain, France, and Italy, the countries in which we would travel, were important to our understanding. Sean disapproved: we were lingering in the past. And though he shared our objection to the Korean war, he believed that we judged our country too harshly. Knowing that he had helped stage *Within the Gates* in New York in 1934, we thought his image of the United States strongly marked by the spirited efforts in that period at economic and social reform.

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The argument was long, but stalemated. It led to national and international issues, and to practical politics, such as the blunders of the left parties which had isolated them from the people. Sean recalled wryly the Communist Party's sending a London intellectual to organize the Devonshire farmers, despite his objections. We asked him why he thought prominent American left-wing labor leaders of the '30s had joined the Establishment in the Cold War. Sean explained it by corruption through association with power. Parnell, he told us, understood this. As leader of the Irish representation in Parliament he rigidly proscribed contact between his party and the English members. Finally, though Sean spoke of the sins church officialdom had long committed against the common people, we were surprised by the vehemence with which he defended the Catholic religion.

It was midnight, we discovered to our embarrassment, when we came downstairs and said goodbye affectionately to our generous hosts. We did not try to see them again. After we returned to the United States we wrote to them, and sent a gift of *American Renaissance*, by F. O. Matthiessen. We received the following response in Sean's urgently slanted hand.<sup>1</sup>

Tingrith, Station Road, Totnes, Devon  
Mr. Mort and Mrs. Irma Lustig  
New Jersey, U. S. A.

28th November 1950

Dear Friends,

Thank you so much for the book by Matthiessen, talking about old American friends of mine, Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne — Thoreau I knew only by name. I am reading it during snatches of leisure I slice from a very busy time. So little time, so much to do, and I grow tired more swiftly than I used to — my head is bending low; but it can shoot up now and again to face things and fight them. I'm writing to the USSR Embassy here, suggesting they should get "American Renaissance" for Moscow Library. Several times they have asked me to suggest books to them; but it is seldom a good one shows a sail. I don't think the American people are "mad." Like us, here, they are stupefied at the possibility of another war; and the last one gave them an inkling of what the next would be like. It won't be like anything that has gone before, for, if it does come, it will bring about what the profiteers, the politicians, and the Press want to avoid — world revolution. This will come — is actually here — anyway; but I'd prefer it to come quietly, as it can, if men be sensible. Personally, I don't think there will be a world-war; opinions — even the silent ones — are too strong against it. War has lost all its bright and gorgeous banners, and now carries

<sup>1</sup> In reproducing O'Casey's letters, I have silently corrected minor errors in spelling, punctuation, and typing.

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only a black flag. The bright and thrilling banners are carried now by Peace. It is she who now wears the coloured garments, sings the song, and is loved openly by the many, and secretly by all.

Yes; as with you, the "Left" here has been, and is, very often very stupid. I've never met sillier or more actively stupid minds than the few local Communists here; all Marx and meddling, without sense or tact or understanding. At the last elections, they not only lost all new seats they stood for, but even the two they had, and spent thousands on trying to do what anyone with sense could have seen was foolish and impossible. They should have concentrated on Peace; and so I told them, but they wouldn't listen. They have to do it now. It is the vulnerable chink in the reactionaries's armour, for all want Peace; or negatively, do not want war. I have thought from the first that Korea will ruin MacArthur. His "our Father" hasn't done the trick yet. More than one Paternoster is needed; and he must be getting tired. I'm sure England will back away from any tussle with China; and that means Europe will follow her. Even the giddy Monsignors preaching to Mothers to give their sons to God and death won't work; the sons have a say in it; and not many of them want to go to Korea; and fewer who are there want to stay. The world is with Peace and us.

My love to you both.  
Yours sincerely,  
Sean O'Casey

A minority opinion, and the political repression of the late '40s and early '50s had isolated early opponents to the Korean war. I thought that Sean's positive letter would give heart to others like ourselves, terrified by the prospect of a third World War as China entered the conflict. I therefore asked him if I might make parts of it public. He replied in a typed letter from Totnes on 11 December 1950.

Dear Irma,

The letter I sent to you wasn't meant for publication — if it had been, I should have been more careful, not about the content, but about the form. However, if it should (or if you think so) have in it any seed towards checking the rush to war, by all means publish it.

But the question goes deeper than General MacArthur's reputation, which is but a bubble; goes deeper than the honour of the disunited nations fighting far from their own countries; goes deeper than any form of "aggression" posterred up now on all the world's walls; the deep question is — Are we going again to bury our young? That is what war will mean; that is what ever war has meant — even in wars that had to be waged as in the case of the war against the maniacal Hitler. But we have gone a long way into sensible consciousness since that grim time. We want now to create a world conscience in which the young will be allowed to live the widest span of life that they may give of their talents and energy for the common good. The banner of the Young is for life and achievement, not for death and destruction. That Monsignor who declared that God wanted the Young to die is either a blasphemous

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omadawn or a blasphemous rogue, ready to toady to the rich and the influential. Take away the profits from war, and war would sicken and die. It is a terrible thing that bigger bottles of champagne should be slapped down on tables, richer fur coats worn by rich women, gaudier gatherings of all things should result from the killing and mangling of the Young. We do not want our dear young to die; we do not want our dear young to be blinded; we do not want our dear young to limp. We want them upright, bright-eyed, active in all things, always singing the song of life. We cannot make an end of youth. There is no hope for life without the Young, for it is the young who carry life on into the future: the young Americans, the young Chinese, the young of England, and the young of Korea. They are the silver trumpets of life.

Oh, silver trumpets, be ye lifted up,  
And call to the great race that is to come!

So Yeats wrote, and so say I. Let the Young live!

All good wishes to you, to Mort, and to all friends, and all enemies.  
Sean O'Casey

This new letter raised a dilemma which accounts, perhaps, for my failing to make either it or its antecedent public. Though Sean had said I might publish the first letter, I believed that the second was meant as a replacement. I would join fervently in his paean to the Young, but I preferred the spontaneous original, a practical analysis with specific references, to the self-conscious literary generalization. I could have compromised by publishing both letters, but after the initial impulse I grew shy about my proposal, and I procrastinated, uncertain, until it seemed too late.

A year elapsed before I wrote to Sean again. During the summer of 1951 my husband and I turned southward for our annual vacation travel. Much of the journey charmed our senses and moved us deeply: history, wrought iron balconies, and silent decay at Harper's Ferry; the mountains of the Skyline Drive; all the evidences of Jefferson's genius (and plantation life) at Monticello and the University of Virginia; the grandeur of the Great Smoky Mountains, the artful weaving and other crafts we watched there. The height of our experience was Norris Dam, where we rowed slowly in the wake of innumerable motorboats, and which we photographed by day and by night. But our pride was mingled with shame and contempt that toilet facilities on federal property were separated "Colored" and "White."

I described these high points of our trip to Sean, but enamored still by the abundance of European culture, I also made

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unfavorable comparisons with our British and continental travels the year before. I complained of the long distances one travelled to reach interesting sites; any ten miles in England provided intellectual or artistic pleasures, in towns, castles, cathedrals. We had driven out of our way to see famous (or as we realized later, well advertised) natural caverns; I was disgusted by the absence of scientific information, and by the guide's cute comparisons of stalactite and stalagmite to slabs of bacon and fried eggs. Ignorant, we had gone looking in the Smokies for American Indians on the reservation advertised in National Park brochures and maps. The "community" of two buildings we discovered was a commercial hoax filled with tourist manufactures; brown-skinned men in contemporary street dress drove by in General Motors cars. Like most tourists, I felt superior to tourism, and was irritated by the inn and shopkeepers's measures to make heyday of a short season. I may have been "victimized" repeatedly in Europe also, but unsophisticated about the economy there, I did not always know it. Centuries of service made manners subtler. And finally, though we had been dismayed at the poverty in post-war Europe, we were most deeply shocked by the primitive existence of white and black people everywhere in the Appalachian and southern states. The ironic contrast with T.V.A. appalled and angered us.

Sean replied to my disgruntled letter as follows:

Tingrith, Station Road, Totnes, Devon 29th November, 1951  
Dear Irma,

Well, my dear, you have seen something of your own country — even if you haven't sailed the Mississippi — and you don't seem to be any the better for it. Travelling in the U. S. A. can be just as satisfying as travelling in Europe, if you keep your eyes and ears open, and broaden your heart. If I got the choice tomorrow of Europe or America, I'd choose America without hesitation, for Whitman's more to me than Virgil. New York is as unique as Rome, Prague, Paris, or Venice, and it is more alive, and more alert, and more a probe into the future. And Europe's history isn't such a glorious one. Take the wars away, and there's little left. The great castles didn't do much for the people; the magnificent Cathedrals did little more; and the grant houses even less. If America has less of a history than Europe, she has the chance of making a far finer one in the future. There's as much monotony in Europe for a European as there is for an American in America. The English towns, for instance, are very much alike — each has its High Street as yours has its Main Street. Even the dignity of our Cathedrals has a lonely woebegone look now: they are shrinking farther and farther into a forgotten past. The new wine of life can't be put into the old bottles.



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I have been very busy with many things — correcting proofs of the fifth volume of biography, *Rose and Crown*, which, by the way, says a few things about America; helping in the house; and working at the last biographical book, Vol. VI.

Barrows was here with his wife and boy — a very charming family; and we enjoyed our time together. He wrote to me, but I hadn't a second to write to him. I will soon. I daresay, he's with you again. Tom Curtins, the New York Drama Critic, was here for a week-end this month; and we journeyed along the streets of Totnes — and New York — together.

I wonder do the friends you mention know anything about what goes on in Altoona? A priest there, Father Sheedy, sent me his blessing when I was in New York in 1934. He was a life-long friend of Dr. MacDonald of Maynooth. I was so busy with Rehearsals that I had time only to write and thank him. I mislaid his letter, and forgot the address. Then it came to me suddenly, when I saw the name of the town in an American journal. He was an old man then; and, I fear, must be dead now. He wrote to me several times while I was in N. Y., and I replied as well as I could in the midst of the furors of a new production. How sorry I am now, I didn't go down to Altoona. Give my love to Barrows and his family. My love to you and Mort.

As ever,  
Sean

On a separate piece of paper, torn from a whole sheet, Sean added the following postscript:

I am, naturally, very pleased that your two friends were interested in my biographical books. There is nothing in them that even insinuates an assault on the Catholic faith. Of course, if one assumes that Bishops form a Hierarchy of Heaven, then there's a lot in them to bring a frown on a Catholic face; a Catholic face without a Catholic mind. Medievalism is gone forever; and a new adoption to life as it is, and will be, must be accepted — as Dr. McWalter of Maynooth so constantly proclaimed.  
S. OC.

The blow of the first sentence may have been too hard. Perhaps it made me self-conscious again about taking Sean's time. I allowed the correspondence to lapse, and as time went on, it became difficult to renew. Motherhood, ultimately combined with final graduate work, and then teaching, filled my life, though I continued to read all that Sean wrote, and whatever I could that was written about him.

In the summer of 1962 we travelled to California with our daughter, then ten. In 1964 we planned a sabbatical ten weeks in Europe, journeying chronologically through Western history and culture, south to north. Greece had been Judy's fantasy land since her early childhood, when we read aloud the myths,

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and illustrated versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. We were all excited by starting at Athens, the Peloponnesus, and Crete, then journeying to Italy, Provence, Paris, and finally England. There we hoped to see O'Casey briefly at his home in Torquay. Though unaware that he was very ill, we were apprehensive that his age made this visit our last chance to meet with him. Our now mutual friend, Barrows Dunham, assured my husband and me that Sean remembered us, affectionately.

In May, fourteen years after our first meeting, I wrote to Sean requesting a second. The letter began,

"We have seen the Mississippi.  
We have even crossed it.  
May we come back?"

Reminding Sean of our conversation in his study, I added that our family's travels in the United States two years before had inspired an increased affection for it which even the tawdry could not diminish. Perhaps, as Gloucester advised in *King Lear*, I had learned to see "feelingly." I concluded the letter, after describing our European plans, with an exuberant account of the professional life which I had only recently resumed. In the previous academic year I had taught *Juno* in the sophomore literature course, now outmoded, which at the University of Pennsylvania each instructor fashioned independently. I had been invited to address the graduate fellows who next year would teach *I Knock at the Door* in the freshman classes; I myself would teach a course in Shakespeare. My cup ran over.

A gray envelope arrived about two weeks later. The postal cancel included a drawing of a husky figure in bathing trunks, prone and smiling under a palm tree. "TORQUAY FOR SUN," said the message on rays over a shimmering ocean. My address, awkwardly typed high and to the left, was concluded ironically, "U? S? A?" The return address, headed "From O'Casey," was written on the back of the envelope in a shaky hand. The typed letter inside had erratic margins on the left and ran off the paper on the right. "Sean," trembling but bold, was written over his full name in typescript, and underscored dramatically with the familiar slash.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I noticed later the initials "E/oc" typed at the conclusion of the letters, on the left. Mrs. O'Casey, to whom I showed the letter in July 1970, said Sean sometimes added her initials "for a cod." She did not type at all at the time; though Breon sometimes helped his father, and a paid typist assisted with his professional work, she was confident that Sean had typed the letter to me himself. The print was that of his typewriter.

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Flat 3, 40 Trumlands Road, St. Marychurch, Torquay, Devon  
30 May, 1964

Dear Irma,

It was pleasant to hear from you after so many years. Your crossing of the mighty Mississippi must have been a thrilling experience, especially if you remembered some of the history of the river in the early exploring days when the French helped by the Irish sailed down towards its wide mouth in search of fresh woods and pastures new. This was during the first penetration of the Deep South. And this river also gave Mark Twain many experiences and many stories to tell his friends and the world.

Far more important to the American People than any old Apollonian temple.

What I most wish to say is that you must put a visit here out of your head, for I am very old, and have energy enough now only to do some work and see a very few who must be seen. It is a nuisance, but the 85 years, as was inevitable, have taken their toll, and one must be resigned.

It is grand to hear that you are well, and that you, your daughter, and all are so well, and have fulfilled the trust of learning something about the strange and wonderful shape and form of your Country.

All good wishes to you, my dear, to you and yours.

Yours very sincerely,  
Sean O'Casey

I was shaken by Sean's report and the visible signs of his physical infirmity. Not until considerably after his death, which occurred just three months later, did I learn from David Krause's account in the *Massachusetts Review* that Sean, totally blind, had been dangerously ill and in a nursing home before I wrote. Pondering his letter, I felt anger even more than embarrassment at my self-centered intrusion. What could it matter to this weary but indomitable man that I was teaching his early works? Yet he was polite, at once direct and deeply loving.

Finally life, as in Sean's plays, commingled laughter and triumph with sorrow and regret. "Far more important to the American People than any old Apollonian temple"! We had come full circle! He hadn't retreated an inch. Wonderful, wise, stubborn old schoolmaster, he was lecturing me still, yoking Milton and Twain with lessons from American history. Now, after seven years of roller-coaster emotions, endless cycles of horror and futility, love and hope, I read again with increased emotion, "It is grand to hear that you are well . . . and have fulfilled the trust of learning something about the strange and wonderful shape and form of your Country."