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Aidan Higgins's Balcony of Europe: Stephen Dedalus Hits the Road

by EAMONN WALL

AIDAN HIGGINS'S FIRST novel, *Langrishe, Go Down* (1967), was a great success. Bernard Share wrote that it was "clearly the best novel by an Irish writer since *At-Swim-Two-Birds* and the novels of Beckett," and it was awarded England's prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize (Share 163). However, the novels Higgins has published since *Langrishe, Go Down—Balcony of Europe* (1972), *Scenes from a Receding Past* (1977), and *Bornholm Night-Ferry* (1983)—have not fared so well. In the past two decades, while his contemporaries (John McGahern, Edna O'Brien, Brian Moore, and William Trevor) have received favorable notice internationally, Higgins' reputation has gone into a tailspin. However, it is my contention that Higgins is an important contemporary Irish fiction writer who has been misunderstood by critics, and that *Balcony of Europe* is a major novel which deserves serious attention.

First, we should examine some of what has been written about *Balcony of Europe*, and some works that follow it, to see what has been faulted and praised. Seamus Deane writes:

Among Irish novelists, Aidan Higgins in *Langrishe, Go Down* (1967) gave the genre [the Big House novel] a remarkable resuscitation by resiting it in the 1930s and writing of it with an almost incandescent lyricism. But Higgins thereafter turned to a more experimental and, one might say, self-indulgent kind of fiction. . . . (Deane 225)

Bernard Share refers to *Balcony of Europe* as "that mismanaged novel" (Share 162-63). But others have found much to praise in Higgins's later work. The novelist Dermot Healy considers *Balcony of Europe* to be "a master work of portraiture" (Healy 183). Michael Mullen, another Irish novelist, has written:

As the Sixties and Seventies recede, one takes stock of literary reputations. Very few are durable enough to survive a decade. Today, Aidan Higgins's reputation is firmly established both in Ireland and in Europe. He emerged magnificently with the publication of *Felo De Se* in 1960. In these stories the dynamics of his scope and style are well established. It is from these stories that the novels spring: *Langrishe, Go Down*; *Balcony of Europe*, and *Scenes from a Receding Past*. *Langrishe, Go Down* is the most perfect; *Balcony of Europe* the most complex, and *Scenes from a Receding Past* impressionistic and full of soft edges. (Mullen 158)

Deane contends that the quality of Higgins's fiction, beginning with *Balcony of Europe*, deteriorates when the focus changes from the objective to the autobiographical. He believes that when Higgins locates himself at the center of his work, he becomes a "self indulgent" writer. Mullen, on the other hand, does not

believe that Higgins's jump to autobiographical fiction weakens the product, and what Deane calls "self-indulgence" Healy would probably consider development.

Deane's view is the more popular: it carries with it the imprimatur of his reputation as *the* preeminent critic of Modern Irish Literature and would appear to summarize the views of the academic community. Although his books are reviewed and, more often than not, praised in the "quality" Irish and British newspapers, Higgins's work is rarely written about in scholarly journals or discussed in conference presentations. Compounding matters is the difficulty in obtaining his books in the United States: the earlier works are distributed by a small press and his recent work is, for all intents and purposes, unavailable.

When we discuss the fiction Higgins has written since *Langrishe, Go Down*, we should be careful not to generalize. *Balcony of Europe* is sometimes a self-indulgent production, as Deane contends; however, it is not quite as mismanaged as Share would like us to believe. All autobiographical fiction must be self-indulgent to a degree, but we should be careful to distinguish between artful and unsuccessful self-indulgence. That *Balcony of Europe* is thinly disguised autobiography is made clear in *Scenes from a Receding Past*, the novel which follows and continues it, when Higgins defictionalizes his protagonist, Dan Ruttle. But when Higgins describes the slow death of Mrs Ruttle, or creates a colorful mosaic in Nerka, where the Spanish section of *Balcony of Europe* takes place, or explores the intensity of the relationship between Ruttle and Charlotte Bayless, he does so at length and successfully, and with a flair which few writers can equal. However, when he viciously attacks Brendan Behan, who is lampooned on a number of occasions, Higgins is being self-indulgent, silly, and boring. Unfortunately, the attacks on Behan are so obvious and self-serving, rather ironically considering their effect, that they cannot be easily dismissed and they do test one's faith in Higgins.

Balcony of Europe is unconventional for an Irish novel, and this in large part explains its rejection by critics. Instead of following in the realist tradition of his contemporaries, influenced by the Revival writers and by the Joyce of *Dubliners* and *Portrait*, Higgins takes his lead from the mature, modernist Joyce, from *Ulysses* in particular, and creates, along with some notable contemporaries in Europe and the United States, a new, hip, somewhat irreverent, postmodern fiction. If one wishes to understand what Higgins is trying to achieve as a writer, one must consider him in relation to his contemporaries on the international scene and not in relation to his Irish ones. Higgins does not write like a McGahern, Trevor, or O'Brien: he writes like a Robbe-Grillet, Calvino, Fowles, or a D.M. Thomas. Hugh Kenner has argued that Joyce and Beckett belong more to international modernism than they do to Irish literature. Higgins belongs more to international postmodernism than he does to Irish literature. David Lodge points out that "in France the *nouvelle critique* provided a basis for defending and interpreting the *nouveau roman*" and that similar developments occurred in the United States and Great Britain (Lodge 13). Irish critics, on the other hand, remaining loyal to more conservative approaches, based on rather narrowly

formulated views of politics and literary tradition, did not change their views and when *Balcony of Europe* was published in 1972 many commentators lacked the critical tools necessary to read it. Robbe-Grillet's prescription for the postmodern modern novel, which uncannily describes *Balcony of Europe*,

Before the work of art, there is nothing—no certainty, no thesis, no message. To believe that the novelist has 'something to say' and that he then looks for a way to say it represents the gravest of misconceptions, (Robbe-Grillet 141-42)

found few supporters in Ireland in 1972, though it is tolerated today as is clear from the way critics have embraced John Banville's work.

As Frederic Jameson has pointed out, postmodernism can only be defined in relation to modernism and the central issue is whether or not the author approves or disapproves of modernism. Higgins approves and accepts the technical and thematic freedoms inherited from Joyce and others, but he also modifies his inheritance. *Balcony of Europe*, although it is modelled on *Ulysses*, is less complex than its predecessor and it appears to be less serious. Higgins appears to be playing games with form, something which is common in those writers who follow the modernists but who often take their inheritance and run in strange directions with it. A good illustration of this occurs in the opening Dublin section of *Balcony of Europe* where Higgins's Ruttle family is clearly meant to recall Joyce's Dedalus family: the father is lazy, broke, broken, and useless; the mother is dying and finally dead; and the son is wandering through Dublin thinking of the capital as Dedalus had done:

It was late autumn, in so far as there can be an autumn after no summer. For me it was already winter. Everything was grey, lead coloured, not a stir of air, the low clouds releasing a drizzle of snow, the wettest autumn in these parts for seventeen years. (41)

Higgins approves of Joyce certainly; however, he is not content to follow him, as most of his contemporaries have done, he must modify and play with his artistic inheritance. Therefore, *Balcony of Europe* is not merely a postmodern Joycean novel, it is also, following the *nouveau roman* method, an essay and gloss on the fiction of James Joyce, among others.

Harold Bloom, writing of poetry, establishes many types of relationships which bind a poet to his/her precursor, one of which, *Tessera*, appears to describe Higgins's relationship to Joyce, and *Balcony of Europe's* relation to *Ulysses* and Joyce's other works:

A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough. (Bloom 14)

At the close of a memorable scene in *Balcony of Europe*, during which Dan Ruttle has sat with his mother in her last hours of life, Higgins sets out playfully to complete the ending to "The Dead," one of the most sacrosanct modernist/Irish texts:

Inside the ward it was warm. Only my mother was cold. Outside the snow whirled away, over the pubs where she had liked to drink, out over the yacht basin and the harbour. Out over Ireland's Eye. (51)

Irish writers such as John McGahern, who take their literary inheritance with huge high seriousness, have found favor whereas the playful Higgins has not. In the United States, this type of approach that Higgins has used has long been accepted—the “Superfiction” writers and the poets of “The New York School” are good examples, and many of the writers who make up these groups are Higgins’s contemporaries—but it has been slow to catch on in Ireland.

The fact that Higgins’s novel is so closely modeled on *Ulysses* probably contributes to the negative view of *Balcony of Europe*; after all, if one writes a book that is modelled on *Ulysses*, one runs the decidedly unfortunate risk of having one’s book compared unfavorably with Joyce’s. Few Irish writers have taken up the challenge as is evidenced by the dearth of serious longer works of fiction written between 1922 and 1972. *Balcony of Europe* is written in the Joycean manner—a dead mother, a useless father, an artistic son wandering through the city, and an episodic structure. In fact, the English edition of *Balcony of Europe* is even made to look like the Bodley Head *Ulysses*: it is bulky, uses dashes instead of quotation marks, and makes one feel that one is holding *Ulysses*’ little brother.

But what his detractors have failed to see is that Higgins reinvents and modifies the Joycean cosmos. In the long second section, Dan Ruttle, a postmodern Stephen Dedalus, goes abroad—he has to, since Joyce has already navigated Dublin—and the result, the transposition of the Joycean episodic structure and the Joycean temperament onto the village of Nerka, in Andalusia, is electric and original. Higgins updates *Ulysses*, and this is exactly what an Irish novelist must do. Of course, *Balcony of Europe* is not as good as *Ulysses*, though this does not mean it is the abject failure some critics would lead us to believe. Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* is not as good as *Ulysses* either, but no one complains. Higgins is not as sophisticated a writer as Joyce. He is able to use an episodic structure, but unable to unify his episodes as well as Joyce, and he lacks the master’s classical temper; so his control of simple language is not so breathtaking. But, notwithstanding these faults, *Balcony of Europe* is a very impressive achievement.

* * *

HAVING EXPLORED SOME of the underlying reasons which illustrate why Higgins’s reputation has fallen, we should now examine some of those qualities which make *Balcony of Europe* such a compelling work. In the first part, Higgins continues his exploration of Irish entropy begun in his short story “Asylum” and novel *Langrishe, Go Down*. This section is a long, extended series of epiphanies describing both the Ruttle family and the larger family—Ireland. The Ruttles, like characters from a Beckett drama, are almost exhausted, but continue living out of habit. They are shadow inhabitants of a shadow country:

Flaking distemper fell from the ceiling and lay like snow, a greyish slush, on the damp linoleum that had buckled here and there, by the door that would not close, under the draining-board, around the dented and seldom disinfected bucket that had no handle, before the stove with its coating of thick grease. . . . (15)

When their son Dan and his wife visit them on Sundays they notice that “at two and three in the afternoon we would find them still in bed, the shutters drawn, the light beginning to wane, the fog-horn sounding mournfully out in the bay” (23). The flaking distemper will never be swept up, nor the bucket disinfected.

When his parents speak they do so in clichés: after portraying them individually, Ruttle lists the phrases associated with them. Some of his mother’s favorites are “never-rains-but-it-pours” and “as bold as brass” (30). His father likes to repeat “impudent bitch” and “the wind always blows cold over graveyards” (39). In their conversations they use these pat phrases reverently, with the result that new insights into other people or themselves are impossible. Their world is a cliché summarizing their failure. Both are obsessed by death. Mrs. Ruttle consumes the obituary notices of the newspaper: Mr. Ruttle leads off conversations with his son by informing him of the death of a family friend or acquaintance.

The Spanish section of the novel, the long second part, is full of livelier people and faster paced: Higgins provides us with a rich mosaic. Dan Ruttle is an ideal narrator who spends his days traveling round the village and providing a varied, lively, and ironic commentary. His portrait—of a time, place, and people—is a highly personal but successful one, as Ruttle’s interests are varied and extensive, and because he is able to enter quickly into the confidence of each person he meets.

Ruttle’s narration proceeds in two interrelated ways. His first objective is to provide, in an ironic but sympathetic voice, a portrait of Nerka. He is concerned not just with the expatriate community to which he belongs, but also with the native Spaniards, the topography, weather, drainage system. Nerka is also looked at from the perspective of history. It is part of the Old World that has just emerged from World War II. At present, in 1962/63 when the novel takes place, the world is dominated by America—American warplanes from a nearby naval base fly overhead, and big guns from American navy ships shoot shells out over the ocean. In the 1960s America cast off its puritan mores in favor of a more liberated way of living: the Americans in *Balcony of Europe* have brought their liberation with them to the Costa del Sol. Ruttle sees Europe as being old, decayed, and decadent: America and Americans, on the other hand, are new and lively, though not always to his taste.

Ruttle’s second objective is to describe his obsessive love affair with Charlotte Bayless. This affair is doomed from the start, as neither of the lovers wishes to leave their spouses, and both realize that they will be present in Spain for no more than a year—the Ruttles will return to Dublin, the Baylesses to New York. However, because the affair is finite it is extraordinarily intense and, for Ruttle in particular, alternatively painful and ecstatic. Ruttle’s Nerka mosaic and his love affair are linked together. Nerka’s landscape and the social milieu, though important and entertaining in themselves, are rendered vital because of the part they play as the backdrop for their affair. In this way, everything that is presented in *Balcony of Europe* is related to the novel’s larger schema. This is not a “mismanaged novel.”

The most important foreigners portrayed are those involved in the Ruttle/Charlotte love affair—Dan and Olivia Ruttle, and Bob and Charlotte Bayless. The rest of the group, though not directly involved, are developed in some detail. For the most part, the group consists of male writers and their ever-changing parade of girlfriends/lovers. Roger Amory is Canadian; Charlie Vine and someone called Exley, who makes a cameo appearance near the end, are Americans; Rosa Munsinger and her con-man boyfriend are Americans and she is a writer of soft-core pornography; the Van-Soutes, he a painter and she a poet, appear and we learn that they spend most of their days high on pot; we also come into contact with Sally Lester, an English showgirl and nymphomaniac. This group parallels the Dubliners Bloom and Dedalus meet on their sojourns. The most detailed descriptions, however, apart from those of the Ruttle/Bayless quartet, are of the two strangest characters, the Baron from Balticum, and Eddie Finch. The Baron is Higgins's version of "The Citizen" from *Ulysses*. The rest of the expatriates show no interest in speaking with these men, but the inquisitive and loath-to-work Ruttle strikes up an acquaintance with both.

But the central part of this section is the extraordinarily intense love affair between Ruttle and Charlotte Bayless: everything else that is described or alluded to exists to add texture to the affair. Nevertheless, despite the central role the affair plays, Dan Ruttle and Charlotte Bayless do not spend a great amount of time alone together. Hence, despite the powerful sexual attraction they share for each other, they make love infrequently. The infrequency of their meetings is what gives their affair its tension. By keeping them apart and then bringing them together in company with other people, Higgins avoids repetition and heightens the sense that this is both a doomed and a passionate affair. Had the two lovers been placed alone together in every episode, the fiction would have been predictable and dull. When they meet in bars in the company of others, Charlotte and Dan communicate with each other by means of innuendo and secret touches, which further increase the sexual tension. And Ruttle's relentless dredging of Charlotte's life and family history makes his obsession with her painfully clear. The progress of the affair is recorded by means of absence and presence, silence and voice, touch and distance, silent reflection and direct statement. It is delicately handled by Higgins, brilliantly written, and very convincing.

In the final section of the novel, the Ruttles have returned to Ireland and it is here that Dan Ruttle exorcises Charlotte Bayless and his depression at being separated from her. This is achieved on a visit to the Aran Islands in a number of beautifully written vignettes which reveal what an extraordinarily evocative stylist Higgins is at his best:

The upper surfaces of the rocks are exposed as the water recedes. The tide is going out. Down in the narrow channel between the rocks I see darker islands of clouds and a speckled veil of light moving quickly into the shadows. The light remains motionless, water withdrawing on either side. Then it too slips away, a narrow shoot of light. Hue of illusion in the vegetable glass of nature. All the light drains out of the pool.

Little by little the tidewater is leaving the pool, the channel and the estuary. All the houses face one way. And the people, where are they? I send you this extraordinary empty landscape. (457)

Ruttle, the modern artist, finds the same elements in the western landscape that the great Revival painter Paul Henry had found. For both of them the interplay of light and water is astonishing. Henry felt that by painting this landscape he was entering into the essence of the pure, benign Irish spirit. Ruttle, although he can appreciate what he sees in Connemara, finds the whole landscape to be “extraordinarily empty” (457). Ireland may look good to the eye, but it is not substantial. It is sexless and cold.

Balcony of Europe is both ambitious and complex. It is, alternatively and simultaneously, a meditation on two countries (Ireland and Spain), two civilizations (the New World and the Old World), a description of three sets of people (the Irish family, the expatriates, and the natives of Nerka), and a recounting of an obsessive love affair. It is also a work that is weakened by the author's ignorance and bad taste (homophobia, in particular); nevertheless, it is a major work by a major writer who not only absorbs literary influence but engages in an intense debate with this inheritance. *Balcony of Europe* is a novel of its time, a companion to the “new novels” written in the United States and France during the 1960s and 1970s, and a leap forward for Irish fiction.

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