

REVIEWS

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Issues of Representation: The Irish Anthologies

John Montague, ed: *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (London, 1974)

Paul Muldoon, ed: *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, (London, 1986)

Frank Ormsby, ed: *Poets from the North of Ireland* (Belfast, 1990, second edition)

Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, eds: *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Harmondsworth, 1990)

Seamus Deane, ed: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry, 1991)

In the twentieth century the publication of anthologies has two main features: representing and canonizing. An anthology is constructed with the intention of being representative of a given culture, genre or group of people. (This aim is what always, necessarily makes an anthology exclusive.) Also, anthologies are a means of articulating identities. In a relatively homogeneous culture, or in a culture that willingly recognises diversity,

anthologies are less controversial issues. In a society that "lacks a common identity" the attempt to construct a book that is representative is a dangerous and at the same time challenging enterprise. Representation then leads to canonization: the value-judgement of including or excluding prevails among the literate.

It is very well known that one element of the cultural tension in Ireland is the problem of tradition.

Social, political, religious, linguistic and literary traditions are all crucial and problematic issues. The last is my concern here, though these terms easily converge.

The problem begins with the definition of literary tradition in Ireland. Three writers have dominated the literary landscape of twentieth century Ireland: Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. (Edna Longley calls them the “obvious pillars”¹ of Irish literary heritage) All of them were Irish yet all of them represent a problematic aspect of Irishness.² Joyce spent most of his life outside Ireland, Beckett wrote many of his works in French, and Yeats, though he was the main figure of the Irish Revival, had no grasp of the Irish language. However, despite the ambiguities, it is very acceptable that these writers should be given the term “pillars” of the Irish literary tradition. Whether the writers living in Ireland north and south would equally claim them to be their “forefathers,” is another question. Polarised writers will have a polarised audience and a polarised community will invent a literature which reflects its own preoccupations.

Literary heritage in Ireland definitely includes English literary tradition. According to Declan Kiberd, “If England had never

existed, the Irish would have been rather lonely. Each nation badly needed the other, for the purpose of defining itself.”³

One of the main sources of a nation’s self-definition is literature. Speaking the English language the Irish have become part of the English tradition. However, this heritage is not valued to the same extent everywhere on the island. Those who claim a stronger relationship with England will probably claim a more obvious linearity in the literary tradition as well. And the contrast does not merely lie between English and Irish: Irish writers are sensitive also to a threat to their identity posed by the international character of the language in which they write. As John Hewitt, speaking about the Ulster writer, remarked: “He must be a *rooted* man, must carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream.”⁴

There is a contrast between being “a rooted man” and “an internationalist.” These are two different, and perhaps ambivalent, identities which coexist in the Irish writers’ unconscious. (“The English language is the speech of millions. There is no limit to his [the writer’s] potential audience. Yet I believe this

had better not be achieved by his choosing materials and subjects outside or beyond those presented by his native environment.”⁵

In contemporary Ulster poetry both attitudes towards the English tradition coexist. The first generation of the Ulster poetic revival (itself a much debated term) inherited much from the English “Movement.” The Belfast Group that attracted the poets Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley was actually led by an English critic and poet Philip Hobsbaum, whose “primary formal allegiances were to clearly-cut Movement patterns.”⁶ There are other poets, however, who seem to be less “influenced” by the English heritage (eg. Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian). What may contribute to the fact that there is a “poetic revival” in the North is that these poets write in an international language about (controversial) national features. And by national I mean something that distinguishes them from the other English speakers, and not something that would necessarily be a uniting factor. All these poets are evidently Irish but they do not necessarily share the same Irish identity.

Catholic and Protestant traditions are other divisive factors. Being brought up as a Catholic or as a Protestant makes a huge difference in

Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland.⁷ For much of this century equal access to education in Northern Ireland was denied to the Catholic population. It has been argued that Protestants were “more likely to have marketable skills and to have higher educational qualifications than Catholics.”⁸ Primary and secondary level education were religiously segregated, and I consider this to be an important contributory factor to the diversity of the literary tradition. The tradition of religious segregation found its way into literary criticism as well; the discussion of Catholic and/or Protestant; “nationalist” vs “revisionist” literature has been long on the agenda.

Language is another significant element of the Irish situation. There is the question of linguistic heritage and the actual usage of language. Ulster English has obviously been under the influence of Scots and Gaelic (and British English). There are a few people who speak Gaelic and even fewer who speak Scots, nevertheless, this cross-fertilization came up with a hybrid English which is not found anywhere else in the world. From other perspectives, language is a controversial issue. Above all, it is highly political so that, for instance, discourse about Northern Ireland requires acute

sensitivity to the subtle gradations of linguistic meaning. Paul Arthur and Keith Jeffrey in their introduction to a contemporary history of Northern Ireland state: "In writing about Northern Ireland we are sharply aware that language, like everything else in Ireland, has a political dimension."⁹

Nationality, the other crucial term, also evokes important questions. In trying to define what nationality in Ireland means, one might assert that in this island there are Irish and British nationalities. Both are controversial and exclusive terms for obvious reasons. Reflecting upon the Belfast graffiti "Brits out" Arthur and Jeffrey write: "'Brits out' begs the question of who exactly the 'Brits' are: does this group merely comprise members of the administrative and security forces who were recruited in Great Britain, or does it include all those who see themselves as 'British'? This latter group might include over a million people; more than one-fifth of the population of the island."¹⁰

The basic problem is of course that claiming one national identity (either Irish or British) is a clear-cut political statement, and claiming more than one national identity questions the meaning of nationality itself. "The great advantage of living

in Northern Ireland is that you can be in three places at once"¹¹, says Edna Longley, but I am not sure that it really is an advantage in the political sense.

Professor Longley believes in a "denationalized landscape"¹² where difference and division is not forced into one accommodating identity but is "faced up" because "this would actually help the North to relax into a genuinely diverse sense of its own identity."¹³ (I wonder whether a "genuinely diverse sense of identity" could ever be relaxing. I see it rather as an element of tension which, when faced by the sensitive mind, may lead to a productive creativity.)

The questions of national identity and religious affiliation blur into each other with crucial force in Northern Ireland: "religion remains a key social and political determinant in the province. It is not a question of religious belief but one of social and political identification."¹⁴

Indeed, the religious debate has long ceased to be about transubstantiation, purgatory or the veneration of images. Religious difference is almost an ethnic difference - you are *born* a Catholic or a Protestant. In Ireland being an "atheist Catholic" or an "atheist Protestant" is not in the least considered to be a controversial

identity. According to Gerald Dawe, "Ironically this condition [of a self-divided society] has very little to do with politics since there is very little *real* political discussion in the north. What clusters around the religious distinction between Protestant and Catholic is a desperate longing *for* identity in a society that lacks a common one."¹⁵ The society cannot have a common identity because of the historical segregation between Catholic and Protestant. But the lack of such a common identity reinforces the need to have a homogeneous identity on a personal level, which then further widens the gap between the two traditions. This creates a particular dilemma for writers who come under pressure either to give up searching for an identity ("Irish identity has to be sacrificed to facilitate the achievement of Irish unity"¹⁶) or to adhere to an image of identity, whether national, religious, linguistic or all of these together, which eventually has its danger of exclusion and aggression. Gerald Dawe remarks that "Ireland, the place where we live, *is* a sectarian place and we are all sucked into its perversity from childhood."¹⁷

If we now turn to the famous/notorious *Field Day* collection and four Irish poetry anthologies, we may see how

political, national and religious ideas permeate the approach to anthologising in Ireland, and may also observe the different possible ways of understanding the relationship between literature and politics. I do not want to trace actual politics in literature (though to trace literature in politics would be an interesting enterprise). I believe that political and social tensions call forth creative responses, but I am not saying that the response results necessarily in good literature or that good literature necessarily comes from such tension.

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing [henceforward FDA] was published in 1991 with Seamus Deane as its general editor. The three volume anthology "stretches over 14 or 15 centuries and includes more than five million words."¹⁸ Its avowed aim to cover "Irish writing" - and the way it did so - evoked fierce criticism. *Field Day* is not an anthology of Irish literature - it is an anthology of Irish writing. ("This is less a distinction between writing and literature than an attempt to include the idea of literature within the idea of writing."¹⁹ - S. Deane) It includes political speeches as well as poetry, fiction, drama and literary criticism. In the following pages I will outline

some aspects of the “Field Day debate.”

In *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster*²⁰ Edna Longley (who is vehemently opposed to FDA) argues that the anthology “conjoined literature and politics” and “placed a primary emphasis on cultural decolonization” which, “in the Ulster context ... has a nationalistic political resonance.”²¹ Furthermore, she objected to FDA’s approach to the Ulster poetic revival, arguing that it “sometimes prematurely theorised a literary movement which is still various, fluid and unpredictable ... perhaps to self-canonize.” Referring to Deane’s wish to enable “new writing” and “new politics” which are “securely Irish” Professor Longley says “this surely overstates the need to oppose and depose a distant English critical oppression...” She disagrees with the concept of Irishness in FDA and remarks that “If we talk about ‘Irish literature’ we should do so in a neutral sense, referring to the country not the nation.” (However, “country” itself is an ambiguous term to use here.) Her reaction to Deane’s intention to “include rather than exclude” is: “In my view *all* anthologies are *ipso facto* exclusive, and are a metaphor for the selectivities of Irish politics.” (This

statement makes one wonder whether Edna Longley’s criticism of FDA as a politicized [nationalistic] reading of literature is not, according to her own reading, referable to *any* anthology.) Later she remarks that Irish literary history has not been “properly written yet: partly because too many Americans and too few Irish critics have been on the job” and that she finds “an element of cultural cringe in Field Day’s anxiety both to import gurus from abroad and to impress outside audiences.” The wide range and the fervour of Longley’s criticisms indicate the acute political sensitivities which are entangled in literary discourse in Ireland. (Although tangential to the discussion in hand, one can note that FDA was also subjected to criticism for its marginalisation of women writers.)

Seamus Deane’s attitude towards the relationship between politics and literature is clearly articulated in his General Introduction to FDA “In this anthology, we do not devote ourselves to the truism that all writing is profoundly political. We are concerned, rather, to show how this is sometimes openly acknowledged and at other times urgently concealed.”²²

Naturally one can argue that the political and religious convictions of an editor may influence the process of selection for an anthology. One

criticism of FDA has been that its criteria of selection are not sufficiently pluralist, that is not sufficiently sensitive to the diversity of tradition within Ireland. In response Seamus Deane has stated: "I don't think the answer to this [ie. diversity] is to surrender yourself in a sort of promiscuous embrace of pluralism. I don't think pluralism is an answer to anything. ... Therefore, while I would accept the need for a recognition of diversity, I don't at the same time say that, because things are diverse, ... you can't have a political belief or a religious belief. All I'm saying is that such a belief should strive to be ductile and flexible enough to be hospitable to a great sequence of things."²³

Inevitably, however, the anthology was criticised for not achieving flexibility and because it was not comprehensive enough to be an "anthology of Irish writing." However, Deane believes FDA is comprehensive primarily because of its *size*: "I am perfectly happy with the contradiction [ie. that FDA is a comprehensive anthology] because there are pragmatic reasons for saying it is comprehensive. Nobody has ever done anything as big before and nobody will do it again ..."²⁴ The question remains whether FDA is a gigantic monster, a freak child of the

Field Day project or a noble attempt to represent "a nexus of values, assumptions and beliefs in which the idea of Ireland, Irish and writing are grounded."²⁵

Turning from the Field Day debate we will investigate how poetry anthologies conceptualise their ideas about "Irish poetry." *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*, edited by the poet John Montague, was first published in 1974. The chronological span of the book is extremely wide: the works selected range from medieval mythologies to poems written in the 1970's. There is a lengthy introduction by Montague covering the history of the works he includes. Language constitutes an important element in this writing: the motto of the first chapter is Yeats's famous line "Gaelic is my national language but it is not my mother tongue." Montague publishes in English the works that were originally in Irish. The translation is not accompanied by the original text (as it would be in FDA for example), not even the titles are given in Irish. Though Montague remarks that "after the foundation of the Republic, the majority of Irish poets ... became to some extent bilingual"²⁶, this bilingualism does not appear in the book. It is very telling to have a look at the mottos at the beginning of some of the

chapters. For instance chapter three begins: "Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language; it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it,"²⁷ while chapter six again quotes Yeats: "Every man everywhere is more of his age than of his nation."²⁸

It seems that the question of language and nationality is again at the centre. Montague anthologised early Irish poetry to outline the background and tradition of the modern Irish poets. The whole concept of the book is to create a linearity of tradition; including, let's say, Tadhg Dall O'hUiginn (a 16th century poet writing in Irish) together with Michael Longley in an anthology called "Irish Verse" means that the editor suggest a connection, a linearity between the two poets on the grounds of "Irishness." In this context the exclusion of original Gaelic texts and any contemporary Gaelic poetry is particularly striking. When Montague remarks that "to have included modern poetry in Irish would have been *unfair*"²⁹ [my italics] he actually denies a linearity in the tradition of the Irish language, and defines "Irish verse" as primarily existing in the English language.

The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry edited by

Paul Muldoon [1986] avoids the difficult task of defining what "contemporary" and "Irish" mean. Muldoon includes ten poets - two of them twenty years dead at the time. As Edna Longley points out, placing Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) and Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) at the beginning of the anthology was to highlight their influence on later poets³⁰ and shows that Muldoon saw them as literary "forefathers." Muldoon's selection is subjective and apart from the title there is nothing that would suggest an "objective" and comprehensive anthology. Muldoon did not write an introduction articulating his "beliefs." Instead, in a Prologue, he quoted a BBC discussion between F.R. Higgins and Louis MacNeice from 1939. This is his "credo": "MACNEICE: This is an impure age, so it follows that much of its poetry, if it is honest - and poetry must be honest even before it is beautiful - must be impure. ... I think one may have such a thing as one's racial blood-music, but that, like one's unconscious, it may be left to take care of itself. ... I think that the poet is a sensitive instrument designed to record anything which interests his mind or affects his emotions."³¹ Thus Muldoon's aim was to include a variety of *poems* rather than a variety of *poets*. His

book is an “unusually generous selection”³² of works he likes and sees as representative. Muldoon has a poetic approach to poetry; in his “canon” he includes poems “which basically interest his mind or affect his emotions.”

The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry (1990) was edited by Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon. After naming the “forefathers” (Yeats, Kavanagh and MacNeice) the introduction clearly puts forward the editors’ conception: “By ‘contemporary Irish poetry’ we mean poems written by Irish men and women, in English and in Irish, in the course of the past thirty or forty years.”³³ This is not necessarily an unproblematic definition, however, the anthology’s main self-perception is clear. Poets from the Republic as well as from the North are included, thus the differences in defining what constitutes “Irishness” are actually blurred. The concept of the anthology with regard to the relationship between North and South is to minimize difference and diversity and emphasize “unity”: “If the present anthology can be said to have any polemical purpose, that purpose would be to correct imbalances created over the years ... and to dispel the illusion that Irish poetry has been written exclusively by persons of

Northern provenance ... A glance at the cover pages tells a different story: as ever, poets from the North contribute to a national body of work, which, in its turn, belongs to a global community.”³⁴

It would appear that there are two (extreme) tendencies in talking about Irish literature. There is one which creates a term or idea that would cover everything and everybody living on the island. This is usually connected to a belief in national identity. People living north and south are seen as “Irish” and their works are also seen as “Irish.” This tendency has a double mission: to acknowledge and tolerate diversity and to maintain a sense of common, shared identity that would help people see themselves as belonging to the “same group.” The other tendency wants to forget “Irishness” and believes in the distinctiveness of “Northern” and “Southern.” This voice does not believe in a homogeneous identity. It envisages a map of Ireland with different (and clashing) colours and does not believe in rendering identity to geography. There is an obvious tension between these two tendencies and each carries its own particular dangers. Deconstructing a common sense of identity may lead to deeper segregation and/or a false

universalism, while forcing diversity into unity may lead to a pretentious sense of unity and intolerance towards the “other.” The *Penguin Book* apparently belongs to the second tendency with its reference to a “national body” and “a global community.”

That leads us to the fourth anthology, *Poets from the North of Ireland* by Frank Ormsby. As it is clear from the title the editor’s conception was to anthologise poets who *geographically* differ from the others. The title is actually very careful; it avoids using any contradictory terms like Irish or even Northern Irish. However, the introduction is thought-provoking. It starts off by stating: “Written poetry began in the north of Ireland, *as elsewhere in the country*, with the work of the bardic poet or *ollamh*.”³⁵

We have seen that one aim of an introduction is to place the included poems in a framework of tradition. Montague, Muldoon and Mahon & Fallon all named the “forefathers” who were the starting points. Placing the *ollamh* in this same position is telling. When Ormsby later describes the origins of the diversity of present northern literature he is already doing so with a starting point in mind. I myself find his way of tackling the question of Irishness very subtle. By

mentioning the *ollamh* in the first line he brings in the notion of Irishness but by placing it in a historical context he leaves it up to the reader (and writer really) to decide whether this is an “identity” or a mere “historical statement.”

Ormsby does not speak much about the “problems” directly. He introduces the poets from an aesthetic rather than a political point of view, though he does not avoid mentioning the actual backgrounds. Talking about the poets gives him an opportunity to approach the question from a distance. The tensions and controversies come up in the introduction as characteristic features of the poets’ life and work. The aim of his introduction, “to give the reader some sense of what the twenty-seven poets in the anthology have in common and how they differ from one another”³⁶ is, in my view, very well achieved. Instead of denying a shared identity or cramming everything into one, he says: “Readers must judge these matters for themselves. This edition of *Poets from the North of Ireland* celebrates the fact that an area once regarded as a cultural Siberia has nourished and continues to nourish a variety of poetic talents. It reflects the *poets’ shared concerns and individual preoccupations* and their

receptiveness to an enriching range of influences. Most importantly, perhaps, it is a gathering of poems which, for the most part, register, directly and obliquely, the time and place that produced them but which take us on rewarding journeys, home and away, from the provincial village to the global village, from the Moy to the universe."³⁷

From the above it is clear that the political and religious divisions in Ireland are reflected not only in the island's politics but also in its literature. It is interesting to note that attempts to accommodate these various divisions has resulted in the constant publication of new Irish literary anthologies. As has been seen from our sample of these anthologies there is no consensus concerning the best way to represent and canonize Irish literature. What constitutes Irish literature, and by extension Irishness, remains the subject of much discussion.

¹ Edna Longley: *The Living Stream*. Newcastle upon Tyne, 1994, 43

² Edna Longley discusses this question in a chapter called "Irish, Irish, Irishest" "From Cathleen to Anorexia" in *The Living Stream*, 175

³ Declan Kiberd: *Inventing Ireland*. London, 1995, 2

⁴ Quoted in *The Living Stream*, 50

⁵ Longley 50

⁶ Longley 19

⁷ In "Writing, Revisionism and Grass-seed: Literary Mythologies in Ireland" (in: Lundy and Mac Póilin, eds: *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster*, Lagan Press, 1992) Edna Longley, on the second page of her essay, [12] says that her views were "possibly always liable to differ from Seamus Deane's" on the grounds of her background. Seamus Deane also mentions his background as being "essentially the opposite of what Edna said about hers." [28]

⁸ Paul Arthur and Keith Jeffrey, *Northern Ireland Since 1968*. London, 1988, 24

⁹ *ibid.*, 3

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 93

¹¹ "From Cathleen to Anorexia" in: Longley 195

¹² See Kiberd 607

¹³ "From Cathleen to Anorexia" in: Longley 195

¹⁴ Arthur and Jeffrey 22

¹⁵ Gerald Dawe: *How's the Poetry Going? Literary Politics and Ireland Today*. Lagan Press, 1991, 83

¹⁶ Charles Haughey, quoted in "From Cathleen to Anorexia" in: Longley 180

¹⁷ Dawe 40

¹⁸ Seamus Deane: "Canon Fodder: Literary Mythologies in Ireland" in: *Styles of Belonging*, 23

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 22

²⁰ All the following quotes are from Edna Longley, "Writing, Revisionism and Grass-seed: Literary Mythologies in Ireland" in: *Styles of Belonging*

²¹ Within Ulster "nationalist" is the term generally given to the catholic minority.

²² FDA Vol.1., p.xxii.

²³ Deane in *Styles of Belonging*, p.32.

²⁴ *ibid* 22

²⁵ FDA Vol.1., xx.

²⁶ *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* 21

²⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *ibid* 27

²⁸ *ibid* 34

²⁹ *ibid* 39

³⁰ Edna Longley in *Styles of Belonging*, 16

³¹ *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish*

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³² *ibid*, blurb

³³ *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish*

Poetry, xvi

³⁴ *ibid* xx

³⁵ *Poets from the North of Ireland* 1, my

italics

³⁶ *ibid* 3

³⁷ *ibid* 20, my italics