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Recharging the Canon: Towards a Literary Redefinition of Irishness

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Abstract

By adding volumes four and five as a supplement to its anthology, *Field Day* was both acknowledging its own attenuation of a tradition, and at the same time, valuing at another dimension, the very plurality of traditions cited by Deane in his general introduction. Ironically, this supplement enhances the epistemological claims to inclusivity even as its causation was due to accusations to the contrary. It is this plurality of tradition and canonicity that I will explore in this essay, examining exemplary aspects of the work of Yeats, Joyce and Heaney in terms of how these writers valorise that very plurality.

The logic of the supplement

The canon has become a supercharged term in the discourse of the academy across literary studies in general. Originally seen in terms of an aesthetic criterion of texts deemed worthy of study within a culture, the increasing contextualisation and theorisation of the field of literary studies has redefined the term by taking into account its socio-political

ramifications. Terry Eagleton, in his seminal *Literary Theory*, underlined the ideological effect of the literary canon on the British imperial project in India stressing its value as an instrument of hegemonic control of the native Indians.

Postcolonial, Marxist and Feminist critics have further unravelled the lineaments of ideological control from within this once isolated aesthetic structure, seeing exclusion as both a cause and effect of canonical structures. Thus, the paucity of representation of female, native and working class voices has come to be seen as an eloquent silence in terms of various strands of canonicity. This is all the more true in the context of Irish Studies, where there are further layers of vexed political ramifications which far exceed the academic norm. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* is a *locus classicus* of these ramifications, and this chapter will contextualise the effects of such politicisation in terms of the anthology itself, and then in terms of the political influence of some texts by William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Seamus Heaney. Far from seeing the *Field Day* experience as a negative, I will demonstrate that the so-called 'Field Day controversy' is in fact an exemplary text underpinning the crucial role of literary and critical thinking in terms of the pluralisation of tradition and of notions of identity.

To even attempt to assert the epistemological nature of a 'canon of Irish writing' is to enter a lexical, semantic and ideological minefield. Given the process of colonisation and linguistic transition that were coterminous with the development of Irish writing, any attempt at inclusivity would seem to be problematic to say the least. Three of the greatest Irish writers, for example, Joyce, Yeats and Heaney, all were born British citizens, thereby

deconstructing any *echt*-nationalist attempts to incorporate them as key Irish figures in a cultural-nationalistic pantheon. Yet all three are, demonstrably, Irish as opposed to British, writers, as all three have enunciated this form of identity. The fact that they wrote in the English, as opposed to the Irish language, was certainly problematic for nationalists, especially in the case of Yeats, writing at the time of the revival. This very point is addressed in another Field Day publication, Seamus Heaney's *An Open Letter*:

for, be advised
My passport's green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast *The Queen*....
...But British, no, the name's not right. (Heaney 1983, 9,13)

On the other hand, Heaney also notes the British dimension of his work. He is more than aware that his own credentials on the issue of nomenclature are complex. He reminds us that his 'anxious muse' had been called British before and had 'acquiesced' (Heaney 1983, 7). He is also aware that his own writerly and publishing context, as somebody who publishes texts in 'LRB and TLS / *The Listener*', in other words, whose audience is 'Via Faber, / A British one', would seem to place him in the position of being 'characterized / As British' (Heaney 1983, 9).

Heaney's text is a liminal one in that he refuses to come down on one side or the other of any simplistic Irish-British identitarian ideology. In this sense, his text is one of the first examples in the Field Day *corpus* of what Seamus Deane has termed an exemplary text. For Deane, such a text is both a culmination of a particular process and at the same time an

incipient sense of disruption, a n originating moment in the subversion of that process (Deane 1997, 1-3). In this sense, *An Open Letter* is both a nationalist attack on the British establishment, albeit of letters, and at the same time, a hint that Heaney's writing will never be at home in any monological form of national Irish identity. The *Field Day Anthology* is just such a text, acting as a culmination of a particular sense of the totality of Irish writing, while at the same time paving the way towards a gendered disruption of such a view.

The production of volumes four and five, and their causal connection to the intense debates on the gender politics of the first three volumes, has become something of a *cause célèbre* in the field of Irish Studies. Indeed, as an ironic consequence, the verb 'to field day' has come into popular usage (in academic circles at least), to connote any situation where women are seen to be under-represented. The irony here is that the absence of women's writing in scholarly circles would never have come to the fore of academic debate without the Field Day publication: as Deane has said, writing 'is a system that produces audiences as well as works of literature' (Deane 1991, xxi). In many ways, it is through the critiques of the first three volumes that the other two came into being, as a result of demands from the audience of these volumes. These latter volumes can be seen as a supplement to the former, and in this context the meaning ascribed to this term by Jacques Derrida is worth examining:

For Derrida, '*supplement*' has a double signification. Firstly, it 'adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence' (Derrida 1976, 144). Secondly, however:

the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. (Derrida 1976, 145)

Thus, once the latter volume was published, they both added to the original and altered the epistemological status of the original at the same time. In this sense the volumes echo the point made by Heaney when speaking about the difficulty of trying to escape what he calls 'cultural predetermination' where he tended to think of English and Irish as 'adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and' (Heaney 1999, xxiv). Heaney, in his translation of *Beowulf*, and in his later poetry and prose, espouses this 'both/and' paradigm. By offering a plurality of linguistic aspects of Irish writing, in Irish, English and Latin, and from both the colonisers and the colonised, the anthology was attempting to follow the same course by providing a plenitude, a culmination of a process of cultural definition. However, by attenuating the role of women in this process, the anthology actually precipitated a moment of disruption of that process, thus leading to volumes four and five at a pragmatic level, and to a further pluralizing of the enunciation of Irish writing at an epistemological one.

As Deane has put it on the previous page of his general introduction, the selection of texts in this anthology has not been 'made from a preordained "tradition"; it is selection which ordains the tradition(s)' (Deane 1991, xx). The parenthetic terminal 's' in this quote is crucial as Field Day, thorough this creation of a plurality of traditions, has attained its greatest achievement. This notion of being both part of one tradition and at the same time

part of another is precisely what makes the anthology an exemplary text, and which is also echoed in the writings of Joyce and Yeats. Through its own lacunae in terms of gender representation, the anthology foregrounded an unenunciated area of the socio-cultural and then, through volumes four and five, renegotiated its own parameters and redefined the tradition of Irish writing. By responding to the demands of its audience, Deane and his fellow editors participated in an act of cultural recuperation which is central to the emancipatory role of the aesthetic with respect to the political.

It is this dialectical relationship between the text and the audience that is of interest here as it serves as a metonym of how canonical literary structures are produced. In any systematic attempt at nation-building, cultural productions attempt to interpellate readers into their hegemonic ideological agendas. Literature is crucial in terms of what Benedict Anderson has termed 'imagined communities.' The modality of these creations or inventions, what Anderson terms 'the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson 1991, 6), is crucial if we are to come to any understanding of how nations utter and fashion themselves. To quote Geoffrey Bennington: at 'the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin' (Bennington 1990, 121), and there can be no doubting that this reflexive form of narrative is an important constituent of the epistemology of the canon of any culture. The coercive force of cultural hegemony has been noted by Deane, who speaking about the connection between politics and culture, notes that the connection's 'oppressive nature and function has always been visible' (Deane 1991, xx). However, there is another epistemological dimension to the segueing of the literary with the political, namely an imperative towards complexity and plurality which is almost inimical to the ideological

nature of canon-formation. The Field Day anthology attempts to as Murray Krieger has put it to show that: 'the aesthetic can have its revenge upon ideology by revealing a power to complicate that is also a power to undermine' (Krieger 1992, 258). This is probably the most important political effect of the literary.

Ireland, in its history and politics, is very much the anomalous state of which David Lloyd has written, as it deconstructs all categories in the socio-cultural paradigm. As a first world country only recently decolonised; as a colony which is ethnically and racially similar to its coloniser; as the only colony to achieve representation at Westminster; as a country whose response to linguistic castration was a return of the repressed in terms of a panoply of distinguished writers in the language of the coloniser, Ireland has always been aberrant in terms of the British context. By adding volumes four and five as a supplement, Field Day was both acknowledging its own attenuation of a tradition, and at the same time, valuing at another dimension, the very plurality of traditions cited by Deane in his general introduction. Ironically, this supplement enhances the epistemological claims to inclusivity even as its causation was due to accusations to the contrary. It is this plurality of tradition that I will explore in this chapter, examining exemplary aspects of the work of Yeats, Joyce and Heaney in terms of how these writers valorise that very plurality.

Yeats, Europe and tradition{s}

For Yeats, imagery of Europe and of the Renaissance, allied to a critique of some of the mythopoeic writings of the literary revival, presage a desire to accept a responsibility for an address to 'otherness' in what he calls this 'blind and bitter land'. Joyce, too, by framing

his work in terms of some of the most abiding narratives in the western tradition, sets up a dynamic between the fixed certainties of an identity of sameness, and notions of alterity. Both writers share a language which, in Bauhinia terms, is heteroglossic in that different voices and different languages are allowed to confront each other and achieve some kind of dynamic interaction, or dialogization (Bakhtin 1981, 263).

Yeats, with his immersion in the world of fairies and folk-tales, is also involved in an enunciation of plural traditions. His early involvement with poetic traditions is achieved through folk and fairy tales. Yeats established a strong foothold in this genre, publishing *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888, and *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems and Stories from Carleton* a year later. In 1891 he published *Representative Irish Tales* while in 1892, he published *Irish Fairy Tales and The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*. In 1893 he published *The Celtic Twilight*. This immersion on the world of folk and fairy tale has generally been seen as part of his Juvenilia, works which involved him staking his claim to a sense of Irishness, albeit in the English language. However, if we take into account Angela Bourke's telling critique of the societal value of folk and fairy tales, then Yeats's early work becomes cast in a different light.

Writing in her seminal *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Bourke sets out a challenging epistemology of fairy tales, seeing them as examples of a subaltern counter-discourse through which people who are liminal to, or located outside of, a mainstream literate and literary tradition, can have access to a form of structuration and discourse. She notes that:

Fairy-legends have been denigrated as superstition, and trivialized in ethnic stereotypes; like any other art form, however, they carry the potential to express profound truths express profound truths and emotions. As we have seen they are particularly suited to the expression of ambivalence and ambiguity. (Bourke 1999, 206)

For Yeats, his involvement in the creation of a canon of such work was very much directed towards the enculturation of traditions which hitherto had not formed part of any written cultural discourse. His involvement in the revival was predicated on that very plurality of traditions which was discussed by Deane in the introduction to the Field Day Anthology. For Yeats, it was never a question of valorising one side of Irishness over another, rather was he attempting to give voice to the culture of the people as much as to the culture of the Anglo-Irish echelon of society.

At a further remove, his sense of the value of the Celtic note in his work is also far removed from any monological idea of an autochthonous tradition; indeed quite the opposite. Writing in an article for the *Irish Homestead* in 1895, he saw Celtism as a pan-European movement, an 'international brotherhood of Celts' which took in 'Renan, Lamennais, Chateaubriand and Villiers' (Foster 1997, 186). Clearly here, Celtism became part of a broader definition of Irishness, wherein the transcendental perspective of Europe could provide a broader perspective on identity; it is another aspect of that Derridian supplement which fills a gap in Irish identity that had not been heretofore recognised. So, while others were seeing the Celt as part of an essentialist centre of Irish identity, Yeats was positing an alternative notion which would redefine that identity.

Indeed, in *A General Introduction for My Work*, written in 1937, Yeats specifies his attitudes to nationalism, declaring 'I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons' (Yeats 1980, 269). For him, the myths and legends of Ireland are protreptic in theme, connecting Irish mythology with that of Europe. In his use of Celtic and Gaelic mythology, he seeks to establish a rhizomatic relationship between Ireland and Europe; rather than have his Celtic heroes and heroines speak with a nationalist Irish voice, he would have them speak in a European accent, a point he makes about the Countess Cathleen, who, he notes, could speak a blank verse which he had 'loosened' for her because he thought of her 'as mediaeval and thereby connected her with the general European movement' (Yeats 1980, 268). Of course the fact that these sagas were being read in translation further reinforced Yeats's argument. The ambiguity and plurality which Bourke sees as central to the generic structure of the folk or fairy tale is being foregrounded here in Yeats's view of the cultural value of the literature which he is writing. He also saw mythology as connecting Irishness to Europe, and the world, noting that tradition is 'always the same. The earliest poet of India and the Irish peasant in his hovel nod to each other across the ages' (Yeats 1989, 97), and through such contrasting perspectives could be used to define each other dialectically.

In much of Yeats's mythological writing the ghostly voices of different Irish traditions hover *hauntologically* over any monological strand of essentialism. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses what he terms *hauntology*, in answer to his question: '[w]hat is a ghost?' (Derrida 1994, 10). In this book, he discusses the spectrality of many areas of meaning, seeing ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. One might compare his

hauntology to the paradigmatic chains which hover over (haunt) the linearity of the syntagmatic chain. But Derrida makes one important distinction, in that he sees spectrality and time as closely connected. He makes the point, speaking both of the ghost in *Hamlet*, and the ghost that haunts Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (where the first noun is 'specter'), that: '[a]t bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back' (Derrida 1994, 39). This is very much true of Yeats's views on different aspects of tradition. Much of his sensibility has been shaped in the English literary tradition. He lived in London for much of his life. As he puts it himself, his soul has been nurtured by Shakespeare, Spenser, Blake, and perhaps William Morris, and by:

the English language in which I think, speak, and write...everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate. I am like the Tibetan monk who dreams at his initiation that he is eaten by a wild beast and learns on waking that he himself is eater and eaten. (Yeats 1980, 263)

In this sense, Yeats attests to the 'presence' of the face of the other (Levinas 1969, 188), and exemplifies the dialectical criticism advocated by Adorno in that he is part of the culture of Ireland, but he is also apart from that culture, separated by a sense of Englishness. In short, he is attempting to provide some form of redefinition of the centres of Irish identity, so as to include the oral native tradition *and* the written Anglo-Irish tradition, as well as facing outward towards European culture which will provide a point of transcendence from which Irishness can be further, negatively, defined. These traditions, far from being seen in binary opposition, are in fact supplementary to each other. For

Yeats, this allows his writing to take into account the historical actualities of colonisation without being in any way attenuated by them.

This definition will be plural, and will be open to the alterity 'English'. Perhaps the most overt example of this attempt to define Ireland in European terms is to be found in a poem which was written as Yeats's most telling contribution to the Hugh Lane gallery controversy, in which a collection of neo-impressionist paintings was offered to the people of Ireland if they would finance a gallery to house them. This controversy bespoke a refusal on behalf of much nationalist and bourgeois opinion to proffer any openness to alterity, in the form of the Anglo-Irish Lane, the French impressionist paintings, or the Bridge Gallery, designed by the English architect, Edwin Lutyens. Yeats deliberately chose to invoke Renaissance images to undercut the insularity which he saw as rife in Dublin at that time in his poem, bearing the title *To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures*. This poem, which appeared on the letters page of the *Irish Times*, on January 13th 1913, contains allusions to Duke Ercole de l'Este of Ferrara who had five plays by Plautus produced during the wedding of his son Alphonso in 1502 (Jeffares 1968, 127); Guidobaldo di Montafeltro, Duke of Urbino, who built a palace known for its art treasures, especially books bound in gold and silver, and Cosimo di Medici who commissioned the architect Micholozzo to draw up plans for the Library of Saint Mark's in Florence. All were Renaissance patrons of the arts, and all were undeniably foreign (an allusion to Lane's preferred architect, Lutyens, being English). Clearly, their presence in the poem offers a

critique of narrowness and insularity posited in terms of temporal, spatial and cultural images of alterity.

Here again, we see a sense of a broadening of canonicity in terms of what has been perceived as otherness – the logic of the supplement is again invoked as literature provides a guideline to politics in terms of a dialectical interaction between notions of selfhood and these of what has been perceived as alterity. Fairy and folk tale, Irish writing in English, the Anglo-Irish tradition, the English literary tradition and that of European high culture all exist in supplementary relationship to each other, and they all hauntologically inform his notion of Irishness. The same imperative can be discerned in the work of his contemporary James Joyce

Joyce's voices and traditions

In the *Cyclops* chapter of *Ulysses*, the absorptive tendencies of the advanced nationalist ideology are parodied mercilessly. The hyperbolic and surreal humour of the passage is obvious, but its epistemological import has received comparatively little attention. He outlines a list of 'Irish' heroes, which begins normally enough, detailing real and imaginary figures from the Celtic and Gaelic pantheons: 'Cuchulin, Conn of hundred battles, Niall of Nine hostages, Brian of Kincora, the ardri Malachi, Art MacMurragh, Shane O'Neill, Father John Murphy, Owen Roe, Patrick Sarsfield, Red Hugh O'Donnell, Red Jim MacDermott, Soggarth Eoghan O'Growney, Michael Dwyer, Francy Higgins, Henry Joy M'Cracken' [*sic*] (Joyce 1989, 244). So far, we would appear to be in the familiar generic territory of the revivalist project. A list of figures, both mythical and historical, is generated

through their association with a particular vision of Ireland. It is from the next name on, that the essentialist appropriation of past history into an ethnocentric socio-cultural narrative is parodied in a manner which undercuts through hyperbole, the assimilative and absorptive tendencies of the Celtic and Gaelic revivalist ideologies:

Goliath, Horace Wheatley, Thomas Conneff, Peg Woffington, the Village Blacksmith, Captain Moonlight, Captain Boycott, Dante Alighieri, Christopher Columbus, S. Fursa, S. Brendan, Marshal MacMahon, Charlemagne, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the Mother of the Maccabees, the Last of the Mohicans, the Rose of Castile, the Man for Galway, The Man that Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, The Man in the Gap, The Woman Who Didn't, Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Bonaparte, John L. Sullivan, Cleopatra, Savourneen Deelish, Julius Caesar, Paracelsus, sir Thomas Lipton, William Tell, Michelangelo Hayes, Muhammad, the Bride of Lammermoor, Peter the Hermit, Peter the Packer, Dark Rosaleen, Patrick W. Shakespeare, Brian Confucius, Murtagh Gutenberg. (Joyce 1989, 244)

This list of '*Irish* heroes and heroines of antiquity' is an example of a specific form of writing: that of a 'catalogue verse' wherein a list of entities is used to show progression, generation or, in this case, commonality. The genre can be traced back to two of Western civilization's canonical works: the genealogical list in the *Book of Genesis* and the list of Trojan War heroes in Homer's *Iliad*. In *Ulysses*, this catalogue is placed in the *Cyclops* chapter wherein Irish nationalism, in the *persona* of the monocular 'citizen', and by extension, the essentialist nationalist ideology of Irish identity, is being placed under critique. That this critique is phrased in humorous terms in no way negates its power, in

fact, I would argue that the impact is heightened through the ironic exfoliation of the 'Irishness' of the heroes and heroines involved.

These embody that supplementary process which has been traced through this chapter. Given the complete lack of connection with any notion of Celticity in, for example Goliath, Velasquez, Captain Nemo, Napoleon Bonaparte, the first Prince of Wales, or Thomas Cook and Son, the motivated nature of these choices gradually exfoliates in the satire, as we are forced to expand our definition of the Irishness involved.

Joyce is including alterity within sameness, he is creating an identity that is different from itself and also reconstructing the paradigms through which cultural nationalism was constituted. He is providing a classic example of what Derrida sees as the necessity for 'opening, uncloseting, destabilizing foreclusionary structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other' (Derrida 1992, 341). By placing people who are demonstrably *not* part of 'tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity', in this catalogue, Joyce is reinventing the definitions of Irishness, and by extension, of identity as we know it. The very fact that the English language is being used as a form of expression demonstrates an alterity that inhabits the core of what is seen as essentialist rhetoric. It is through English that most Irish people have knowledge of these multi-cultural figures in the Joycean pantheon. Through this linguistic *protrepsis*, Joyce is presaging a cultural one, wherein the English language is not seen as a colonial imposition, but rather, as an ethical imperative towards alterity which frees Irishness from the prison-house of sameness and monological essentialism.

As examples of this definition of identity, three figures from the above catalogue stand out, namely, 'Patrick W. Shakespeare, Brian Confucius, Murtagh Gutenberg'. The identity that is encapsulated in these proper names allows for the expression of an Irishness that is plural, and certainly far from the subsuming absorption that is part of the essentialist project. Thus, while such juxtapositions are quite comic in themselves, they do make a serious point. The whole nature of identification is oppositional, in that to be Irish is not to be English, or to be French is not to be German. Following logically on this thread is the desire to differentiate through language, culture *et al* so that it becomes clear on which side of a particular opposition the individual belongs. Over a period of time, such differentiations take root in the epistemology of the culture in question, and become reified. Their differential status is etiolated, and instead there is a Heideggerian *Versammlung* (gathering) of such qualities in favour of an ethnocentric valorisation which make the *Volk* the *Volk*. This privileging of a form of reified sameness is, for Joyce as for Derrida, the very antithesis of what identity should be. Derrida, speaking at Villanova University in 1994, made the point that this privilege which is granted to 'unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole' can be seen as a 'danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics' (Derrida 1997, 13). Making the point that cultural identity is not the 'self-identity of a thing', he goes on to say that 'the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself', adding that a 'culture is different from itself' and that 'language is different from itself' (Derrida 1997, 13).

In terms of the exfoliation of English culture throughout the British empire, the teaching of the works of Shakespeare was of seminal importance; indeed, the proper name 'William Shakespeare' functions as a transcendental signifier, as synecdoche for all things English and cultural. The subtle political message that is to be found, especially in the tragedies, namely that those who upset the hierarchy of institutionalized power do so at their own and their societies' peril, was not lost on colonized peoples. Macbeth, Claudius, Regan and Goneril, Oswald, politically, and Othello, racially, demonstrate the fate that befalls such resistance to the given socio-political order, both for the individual microcosm and the socio-political macrocosm, and here we see a stark example of Deane's already noted point about the repressive aspects of canonicity.

The transformation of 'William' to 'Patrick W.' could, at first be seen as a classic postcolonial reversal – the reappropriation of the synecdoche of Englishness through juxtaposition with a synecdoche of Irishness. However, the other non-Irish names in the list of heroes would seem to undercut this reading. In fact, the catalogue verse in the *Cyclops* chapter functions as an *antiphrasis*, with the Irish and non-Irish heroes interrogating each other. This economy displaces the Irish/English and colonial/post-colonial binarisms, the central defining factors of Irish identity, and instead places the names of both nations in a broader world catalogue verse, where they *hauntologically* redefine each other. This catalogue emphasizes the emancipatory function of 'Patrick W. Shakespeare' with respect to essentialist notions of identity: this troped name will validate neither imperial Englishness nor nationalist Irishness; rather will it usher in reciprocity and plurality in terms of political identities.

Joyce sees the nominal troping of 'Patrick W. Shakespeare' as a liberation from that sterile essentialism of contemporary Irish and English political ideologies. In *Finnegans Wake*, he refers to Shakespeare as 'Shikespower...Anonymoses' (Joyce 1975, 47, 19), and later in the telling line 'all the rivals to allsea, shakeagain, O disaster! shakealose' (Joyce, 1975, 143, 21-22). Here the name of Shakespeare is being invoked to empower the shaking loose (again) of the nets that Joyce feels Stephen must fly by, namely those of 'nationality, language, religion' (Joyce 1993, 216). Through this classic microcosmic example of protreptic discourse, Joyce, like Stephen, will attempt to 'fly by those nets'. Here, plural definitions of Irishness are created by literature, definitions which allow a space for alterity such as that of Leopold Bloom. For Bloom to be Irish, then Irishness must be redefinable in such a manner as to include him.

Heaney's 'Traditions'

In 'Traditions', one of Heaney's 'most discussed anthologised pieces' (Crotty 2001, 201), the same process is to be found. The poem begins with an overt symbol of colonisation in sexual terms:

Our guttural muse
was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition. (Heaney 1972, 31)

However, it progresses from this direct binary conflict to more nuanced notions of linguistic diffusion, as the Irish are seen to be 'proud' of their 'Elizabethan English', with some 'cherished archaisms' actually being 'correct Shakespearean' (Heaney 1972, 31). The

interaction is further complicated in the lines which speak of consonants 'shuttling obstinately / between bawn and mossland' (Heaney 1972, 32). As will be seen later in this discussion, the two nouns of the second line are over-determined signifiers in the Heaney canon, deriving as they do from the name of his early home, Mossbawn. Each term has a meaning in Irish and in English, and Heaney will attempt to articulate these oppositions in a manner which will create a hybrid identity. Throughout his work, Heaney does not privilege one meaning over the other. Instead, meanings interact, gesturing towards a new fusion of languages and culture.

In the final section of 'Traditions', and the plural number of this noun is significant, another linguistic and cultural tradition is grafted onto the givens of Irish identity. In answer to the most quoted question in Irish studies, MacMorris's 'What ish my nation'? (Shakespeare 1965, III, ii, 124), Heaney cites the words of Joyce:

And sensibly, though so much
later, the wandering Bloom
replied, 'Ireland,' said Bloom,
'I was born here. Ireland.' (Heaney 1972, 32)

In this stanza, a Hungarian Jew states his claim to an Irishness that must accommodate him as he was born in Ireland. In this seemingly simple juxtaposition of Shakespeare and Joyce, Heaney is in effect setting out a paradigm of identity which is pluralistic, ethically driven and which refuses to be hidebound by hypostasised ideas of a single tradition and instead, remains open to the voice and language of the other who may come into contact with the self. There is a transformative imperative at work here, as the Ireland to which Bloom lays claim is in effect transformed by that very claim into a locus of plural identity. The adverb

'sensibly' carries a weight within this poem, as it defines an obligation to embrace change which is gradual as opposed to violent.

In the appropriately entitled 'A New Song', Heaney seems to develop this consensual paradigm of linguistic and cultural interaction, as instead of one tradition being 'bulled' by another, an image of a more gentle form of sexual intercourse is posited:

But now our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts
To flood with vovelling embrace,
Demesnes staked out in consonants. (Heaney 1972, 33)

This new song is a paradigm of Heaney's own developing attitude to the linguistic and cultural context that surrounds all texts. Just as the notion of English pastoral is being deconstructed in his essay, so too are the seeming simplicities of the Irish-English historical conflict offered to ongoing critique in his poetry. The language that had been foisted upon Ireland as an apparatus of colonisation is also the language through which Joyce gave voice to a new sense of Irishness, a new song in which Irishness became redefined. This process of redefinition through the introduction of a supplementary element is continued apace in Heaney's critique of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* in *Preoccupations*.

What is set out as *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, with all the canonical, imperial, and culturally homogenous connotations that are implied by the proper adjective 'English', becomes something different when placed in a dialectical relationship with the

classical antecedents to which he refers. Such external influences, in this case, far from attenuating the response to the lyrical impulse of the pastoral, thicken our reading of these works by complicating and interrogating how '*English*' this genre actually is. This 'perspective backwards' is also a perspective outwards, pointing up the dependence of what is seen as the English poetic canon on generic and conventional borrowings from continental Europe. It is also a perspective inwards, as these extrinsic features have had a major influence on stylistic and thematic considerations, as well as on the aesthetic objectives of the genre. Here, the interaction between text and context is enacted in the permeation and intersection of the poems in the book and the poems which preceded them; of the English language and Latin and French; of Latin and French and translation; of classical pastoral convention and the English version of it and finally, of the texts that are present in the book, and those enabling translations from the classics, which are absent.

As much of the poetry shares Thomson's notion of 'England as an after-image of Augustan Rome' (Heaney 1980, 178), Heaney has accurately pointed out the weakness of the book, while at the same time providing a strong reading of the genre itself through an interrogation of this absence. Thus, Heaney allows the classical context to imbricate his reading of the English texts in the book, and both present text and absent context permeate and penetrate each other in a fuller exploration in the essay than is given in the book itself. Heaney's reading can be seen, in the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin, as heteroglossic, in that different voices and different languages are allowed to confront each other and achieve some kind of dynamic interaction, or dialogisation (Bakhtin 1981, 263).

He questions whether the editors' 'brisk dismissal' of the further possibilities of pastoral are well-founded, and goes on to suggest valid reasons for the inclusion of other writers – Edward Thomas, Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones, A. E. Houseman – and also wonders about Louis MacNeice's eclogues which 'represent the form as an enabling resource' (Heaney 1980, 180). Finally, he further extends the limits of his critique by multiplying some 'strokes and lines' which figure as political borders, and asks whether such seminal works as Synge's *Aran Islands* (pastoral), Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (anti-pastoral), and Montague's *The Rough Field* are 'not to be regarded just as "occasional twitches"' before finishing the essay with the ironic question 'Or are these latter works held at bay in the term "frontier pastoral"?' (Heaney 1980, 180). Conceptually, this notion of a frontier has resonances of Derrida's idea of the fluid and permeable borderlines of a text: both writers stress the value of writing in terms of breaking down rigid lines of demarcation and instead, suggesting that writing in general, and poetry in particular, exerts a deconstructive leverage over such positions of fixity.

The frontier, denotative of a spatial binary opposition between one notion of place and another, functions here as both a borderline of the anthology, and at the same time, as a point of possibility which will allow the 'English' pastoral as genre, to develop. In a further expansion of these limits, this development would necessitate an ongoing problematisation of the notion of Englishness in the title, as now, some form of 'Irishness' would be included. Of course, as Heaney has already noted, the final poem in the anthology is Yeats's *Ancestral Houses* (Heaney 1980, 177), so there has already been a crossing of the 'frontier pastoral'. It becomes clear, then, that his reading of the conventions of the pastoral

becomes quite unconventional in its implications and in its reading practice. What we see are what Hillis Miller, in his discussion of anastomosis, terms a variety of 'crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides' (Hillis Miller 1987, 7), and I will argue that such transgressive and transgenerative crossings of frontiers are a central feature in Heaney's epistemology of poetry. Indeed, Derrida, in 'Living on: Borderlines' probes the epistemology of the border between text and context in a broadly analogous manner, as he talks about borders in terms of permeability, noting that no context is 'saturable any more', and that 'no border is guaranteed, inside or out' (Derrida 1987, 78).

Hence, for Heaney, the two poles of an opposition, as exemplified here by text and context, are never simply set down in isolation; nor are they placed in a dialectic which produces a definite synthesis. Instead, his work produces readings which set up a relationship which is fluid and interactive, and in which both terms interact and reflect each other. This relationship is what Theodor Adorno would term a *Kraftfeldt* (force-field), which contains transactional and dialectical interplay of different, and sometimes opposing, forces, and which is comprised of juxtaposed clusters of changing elements that, according to Martin Jay, 'resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle' (Jay 1984, 15).

Hillis Miller has made the telling assessment that deconstruction is 'nothing more or less than good reading' (Hillis Miller 1987, 10), and in a recent book on Derrida, Julian

Wolfreys goes on to amplify this by suggesting that 'good reading' may well be reading which 'never avoids its responsibility, and which never falls into reading by numbers' (Wolfreys 1998, 16). In his response to the issues and texts in his prose, Heaney's plural searches for answers means that there is never any question of reading by numbers, or of forcing texts and contexts to bend to a preconceived agenda. I would suggest that for Heaney, the notion of attenuation, of making one's response thinner, more reductive, more simple, comes close to Wolfreys's notion of 'reading by numbers'.

In his own poems, such heterogeneous notions of identity have been a feature from the very beginning. In *Death of a Naturalist*, such liminal intersections are to be found:

Did sea define land or land the sea?
Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
Sea broke on land to full identity. (Heaney 1966, 47)

For Heaney, writing has become an activity which is governed by a self-questioning, a sense of recognising the context that is creative of much of the self, yet which can also be transformed by the recreated text of the self: 'And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed' (Heaney 1987, 6). As Henry Hart tellingly observes, Heaney's 'inclusionary strategies ultimately indict the exclusionary ones being practiced around him' (Hart 1992, 187), and it is to these inclusionary strategies, which see frontiers or borders as liminal areas where different strands of identity can be interrogated and transformed that I now return, as they lead the discussion back to the Field Day Anthology.

In its present state, it has redefined the canon of Irish writing a relatively short time after it had initially defined it. By so doing, this exemplary text has embodied the emancipatory function of literature. By creating supplementary volumes, which themselves, in turn will give rise to other inclusionary texts, this anthology has taken its place in the ongoing enculturation of Irishness in the 21st Century. Like Yeats, Joyce and Heaney, *Field Day* is involved in an ongoing recharging of the canon, a recharging that allows this literary organon of texts to achieve an ethical function by making Irish writing an exemplary text which always gestures towards, but can never achieve, the plenitude of closure.

What connects Derrida's logic of the supplement with the *Field Day Anthology* is the sense that there can never be a fullness of representation. Epistemologically, a comprehensive anthology of Irish Writing is not possible: it is the attempt, the ongoing attempt, that is of value. Deane speaks about the anthology's 'necessarily unsuccessful, but strenuous attempt to be comprehensive' (Deane 1991, xxvi), and it is in this notion of the 'attempt' that the anthology achieves that emancipatory aspect of canon formation that we have also traced through some of the work of Yeats, Joyce and Heaney.

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