

# *Irish Writers and Reputation*

## *— Response to Nicholas Grene*

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*Abstract: The international reputations of Irish writers are often not a reflection of their reputations at home. Readers outside Ireland have differing conceptions of Ireland which attract and sustain them. Despite its range of innovative approaches and the present-day concerns today's Irish writing addresses, it is perhaps the traditional and celebratory nature of Irish literature that readers abroad look to Irish writing to provide.*

I would like to begin my response by thanking Munira Mutran for her invitation to participate in this critic and author series, and to express my delight that my book is being read in Brazil. I also thank Nicholas Grene for his choice of such an intelligent and productive area for discussion.

Reputation - its development and its vagaries - is a mysterious area in critical studies which is as highly nuanced as the creative work which is its source. Critical books about living Irish writers participate in reputation building, and every critical article is an act of intervention in the debate. For this reason the impetus for critical works also needs to be assessed. As Nicholas Grene has indicated, *Contemporary Irish Literature*, commissioned by a publisher in New York, was written in the first instance for a North American readership. The publisher is a commercial concern, not an academic press, although the book was published in the Scholarly and Reference division of that publisher. The book was then purchased by a British affiliate on the understanding that it would have both British and Irish rights. This is a common procedure in such publishing ventures and I only articulate the process in full here to illustrate the book's origins, its initial brief and its eventual range.

The authors chosen for discussion in *Contemporary Irish Literature* are those who are most likely to be on an American or Canadian university curricula. Also included were some whose work *could* be included in some universities, and finally a shortlist of those whose omission from same seemed an egregious oversight, or those whose work is likely to be included in the near future. Both Nicholas Grene and I have found it incredible on a certain level that Tom Murphy's plays are unknown in the US, except within diaspora enclaves. I felt nearly as strongly that Americans should be introduced to the dramatic works of Thomas Kilroy (who was one of my lecturers when I studied at University College Dublin in the 70's.) Also, since I am not a reader who dismisses all hierarchies (in my estimation there is a distinction between great literature, good literature and that which is neither), *Contemporary Irish Literature*, although influenced by commercial, US-centric and by some timely 90's concerns, did not attempt artificial or indeed any means of gender, age or reli-

gious balance in the choice of these authors for discussion.

Irish literature for readers in the US and in Canada, whether they are of the diaspora or have no Irish roots, has a lingering appeal that is fundamentally Romantic, an old world European charm, that recurs like a hunger in subsequent generations of North American readers, regardless of present-day Irish realities. I would think that some South American readers harbor similar associations with different places in the old world. Irish literature also resonates for North Americans of all kinds because of its recurring themes of exile and emigration - for nations comprised largely of emigrant populations this is not a surprising phenomenon. In a similar sense Irish literature also has a natural appeal in Anglophone North America because of its playful, imaginative and lush use of the English language - a language from which our own is derived, but from which it has also now become very different in its two hundred year period of evolution.

The American engagement with Irish literature does not have the same primary requisite as has, say, the French reader's response to Irish prose fiction in terms of innovation, especially of the structural sort. In France Irish prose is raised to a level of prominence the genre has never enjoyed either in Ireland nor among Irish-American readers. Thus Brian Moore, John Banville and John McGahern, like Beckett as novelist before them, command a loyal French following, whereas in the US their work is reverently and intelligently reviewed in premier critical venues and read by very few. This is not a fate reserved exclusively for Irish writers and their reception in the US. It is rather that innovation in fictional modes, as well as the intellectual history of the novel, has little primary appeal for most American readers, who do not privilege this element in the work in their own writers. The European intellectual novel tradition, best typified in America in the work of Henry James, receives much less attention from American readers, inside and outside the university, than does that of Scott FitzGerald, for instance, whose compelling narrative gifts in novels such as *The Great Gatsby* have won him a larger following, a greater reputation, and more readers than James has ever claimed or will. In both Ireland, then, and in America, the ability to tell a story looms large in the determination of reputation.

Perhaps in Latin America the magical, supernatural and religious elements of Irish literature would be likely draw the reader. Does the work of writers from the recent Irish past who incorporated mystical elements from myth and fairy lore, like AE, Lord Dunsany, James Stephens, and Austin Clarke, appeal to Latin American readers? Do new writers given equally to literary prestidigitation, such as Eilis Ni Dhuibhne and Colum McCann, have a large potential readership among the subscribers to this journal?

The realism of the works of Patrick Kavanagh, Brian Friel and John B. Keane, who provide vignettes of rural and small town Irish life, a life which has by now largely vanished, speaks directly to Northern American, particularly Irish-American, hearts and minds. Do plays, poems and novels which feature humble protagonists with seemingly timeless values, those who either endure or who triumph over adversity, have a universal appeal? On the linguistic level, do the machinations of a Flann O'Brien appeal to German and to Scandinavian readers for the same reasons the intricacies of Celtic language verse forms were first decoded in universities there? If so, how is this connection formed when I find that my students, for whom English is a first language, are for the most part completely bewildered by, if not antagonistic to, *At Swim-Two -Birds*?

So many elements go into the construction of a literary reputation and its dissemination that it would be a tricky business to predict which Irish writers would be most likely to be accessed by different cultures nor why this might be the case, but to return to Professor

Greene's two literary pairings - Heaney and Mahon, Friel and Murphy - and the great disparity in international reputation found within each pair - I think that part of the reason for the huge international success enjoyed by both Heaney and Friel is that each of these writers, although very modern men, write with a continuing awareness of and respect for tradition, and traditional belief systems. They may, neither of them, subscribe entirely to these systems themselves, but they do not write from outside them. Their work is neither primarily existential nor is it postmodern in sensibility. Derek Mahon and Tom Murphy, however, are at times writers who do work outside traditional parameters, and who are more willing to take readers or audiences to the darker places in modern life.

It is not the case, of course, that Seamus Heaney's poetry does not encompass a fully-developed awareness of grief and alienation. A recent list of the hundred favorite poems of Irish readers, conducted by *Poetry Ireland* and published in *The Irish Times*, lists Heaney's "Mid Term Break", his poignant lyric on the death of his four year-old brother, as the first of Heaney's poems on the list, and the third ranked of all the poems (that this poem has appeared in examination papers may account in part for its imprinting on the collective mind of the respondents, and it would not, I think, be among his poems best loved or best known by international readers). On a less personal and decidedly more political level, Heaney's "From the Republic of Conscience" operates in a postmodern no-man's land bereft of facile consolation. Heaney's reputation outside Ireland, however, does not rest with such poems, and the frequency with which rural lyrics such as "Digging", "Follower", and "Blackberry Picking" appear in anthologies, attests to the type of poem which has the most popular following.

If Heaney can and does isolate humans in moments of pain, despair and confusion, Mahon can equally turn his hand to the joyous in life, as in the recent "Noon at St Michael's" when he evokes a lady love from whom he is temporarily separated, and with whom he imagines a reunion -

for you are the light  
rising on lost islands, the *speir-bhean*  
the old poets saw gleam in the morning mist.  
When you walk down Fifth Avenue in your lavender suit,  
your pony eyes opaque, I am the man  
beside you, and life is bright  
with the finest and best.

One could also look to Mahon's choice of passages to translate from Horace's *Odes*, entitled by the modern poet "How to Live", which closes with this celebratory instruction -

. . . . The days are more fun than the years  
which pass us by while we discuss them. Act with zest  
one day at a time, and never mind the rest.

Such unburdened moments in Mahon's corpus, however, are rare, and alleviate the skeptical stance the poet usually assumes against the threat of a false complacency.

The offerings of today's Irish playwrights are similarly paradoxical at times. Brian Friel's exuberant *Philadelphia Here I Come!* and his life-affirming *Dancing at Lughnasa* played, as Professor Greene reminds us, to an array of international audiences, but his *Faith*

*Healer*, arguably his finest play, is little known outside Ireland. In that play his small forlorn cast of nomads, outcasts from society and all its small comforts, take refuge in delusion and scraps of human love and compassion. Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*, focusing similarly on delusion and marginalization, manages brilliantly, however, to conclude with one of the most crystalline moments of pure human joy ever portrayed on the Irish stage. Most audiences outside Ireland, however, would perhaps be unwilling to have their pre-conditioned idea of Ireland disturbed to such an extent as Murphy's plays demand to experience that transforming final moment of *The Gigli Concert*.

For readers and audiences outside Ireland the darker side of human life is not the emotional or cultural slot that Irish art is meant to fill. We all know those dark places, but we may look, whimsically or not, to Irish writing to illuminate other more reassuring elements of our own experience. In this regard the matter of reputation among Irish writers and the reasons for the great disparity that exists in the reputations of Irish writers of equal merit and accomplishment, I am reminded of a recent interview given by internationally renowned (reputation again!) violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter. When posed the tough choice - "Which do you prefer to play, Mozart or Beethoven?", she responded that although both composers explored both joy and sorrow in full - Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* and Mozart's *Requiem* being extreme examples, in the final analysis Beethoven engaged in a struggle with life, whereas Mozart celebrated life. Therefore, said Ms Mutter, she would, finally, rather play Mozart. It seems to me it is that Mozartian and celebratory quality which informs much of the work of Heaney and Friel and which assures assure their international reputations as Irish writers.

Fortunately for all readers of Irish literature today there is a great deal on offer and also a great variety. This late twentieth-century flowering of Irish writing offers a sense of Irish identity which is remarkably plastic and capable of growth and change, and which has developed a large readership throughout the world, the proof of which is our exchange within these pages.