

## Book Reviews: Writers at Work in Ireland and England

*Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland between Fantasy and History.* By Stan Smith. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005. x + 238 pp. \$65.00 cloth, \$29.50 paper.

The world is not wanting in histories of Irish poetry, or even of twentieth-century Irish poetry in particular: I know of at least ten since 1988. Nevertheless, Stan Smith's *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity* represents an important accomplishment. Smith's color title, "Ireland between Fantasy and History," suggests precisely what he's after—the ways in which poetry has functioned in the self-conscious shaping of modern Irish identities. Smith's interest in what he calls, while discussing Padraic Fallon, "the compounding and interpretation of story and history" (39), develops from the work he's undertaken in such books as *Inviolable Voice: History and 20th-Century Poetry* (1982) or *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (1994). Smith has always attended to how ideology yokes together signifier and signified. In this book, however, perhaps because questions of tradition and nation have been more overtly a part of nation-building in Ireland than in Britain, post-structuralist and post-colonial theory have inflected Smith's attention in ways rather more dramatic than I have seen in his earlier work. Theory is rarely Smith's overt topic; it shows up rather in his ability to see organization rather than organicism, history subjected to question rather than nature subjecting us. He proceeds from the implicit assumption that national identity is never "natural," any more than could be any expression of it. In this way the relation between his sustained political emphases and more recent post-structuralist interventions feels seamless, and wholly in the service of his critical readings.

Here is a book about how "tradition" and arguments about nation function in Irish poetry that manages never to get lost in the grimpen. As Smith establishes how efforts to inscribe a national identity have informed Irish poetry, he demonstrates as well the participation of Irish poetry in global Modernism, where at any given juncture we can discern several pertinent contexts. There is no one story to be told here, except perhaps the struggle of multiple voices to narrate one overarching story. His discussions of Irish poetry often deploy useful comparisons to contemporaneous Modernist work, English, Continental and American all. The word "magisterial" has become a cliché in academic reviewing, but how else to describe

work that so modestly displays a lifetime of learning?

Such talk is not merely metaphorical. As Smith explains in his introduction, his original intention here was merely “to collect most, if not all, of my writings over the last quarter century, published and unpublished, in the field of Irish literature” (ix). But as he undertook that task he soon found himself rewriting almost everything in view of what he had come to recognize as a sustained interest. That is, this politically-minded scholar found himself interested in “the role of Irish Modernist writing in constructing the model of a specifically Irish modernity” (xi).

Smith’s book is organized chronologically. The first chapter takes up the volume’s color title and establishes the importance of our recognizing what Samuel Beckett knew so clearly more than half a century ago: that “‘history’ is both events and the narrative in which we inscribe them” (2). Events “are the shape we give to time” and, nodding to Joyce, “our common experience is constructed out of language” (14). Events have meaning only in discourse. Poems, in this way, don’t record history—they make it.

Consequently, the second chapter is called “Making It Up: W. B. Yeats.” Smith is obviously having fun with Yeats’s *Vision*, but this is serious fun. The title might also suggest Yeats’s response to the quarrel begun when, as Auden famously conceived it, “Mad Ireland hurt [him] into poetry.” Opening with a reading of Swift’s *Tale of the Tub*, where “the text keeps the cultural exegete, or partisan appropriator and fabulator of narratives, from laying violent hands on the commonwealth of ‘interpretive community’” (17), Smith submits its pertinence to Irish Modernist writing. In particular, with Yeats, “*the meaning* of his texts is often just this contention between conflicting interpretations, a struggle for hegemony within the poem itself” that models the struggle, contemporaneous and contemporary, to form Irish character. Succinct readings of several key poems follow, and Smith marshals them to make his points about history. But his overarching purpose comes with the subchapter, “The Irish Construction Industry”:

Yeats’s essential role in the construction of an Irish national identity, both in his agitations, propaganda and writings in the decades before independence, and in a handful of poems in the vein of “Easter, 1916”, did not end with his death. He has continued, as a discursive practice, to play a similar part ever since, as the site of a contention as to what constitutes an “essential” Irish identity. (27).

No one doubts Yeats’s central role in the formation of Irish poetic tradition. But in narrating Irish poetry in this way, Smith takes issue with the likes of Patrick Crotty, whose *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology* (Blackstaff, 1995) contends that Modern (as opposed to Modernist) Irish poetry maintains a “quarrel . . . with the overbearing example of W. B. Yeats.”

That Crotty is himself a youngish poet may explain something of his perspective; it's interesting to see him pick up on Auden's metaphor, almost in the manner of a Freudian slip, as though Yeats had hurt *him* into poetry. In any case, Smith (who in this book doesn't overtly discuss Crotty) sees a vastly more complicated story—one in which the relation of Irish poetry to Yeats's ghost affords a singularly rich way to discern their individuality. Thus he observes how Peter McDonald turns to a Yeatsian antithesis of "poetry" and "rhetoric," or how Gerald Dawe "poetry is founded on the invigorating conviction that the way forward lies in a collapsing of the centre in upon itself" (158), or how Derek Mahon summons "ghosts from the vasty deep" (177). Yeats has no single meaning for Irish poetry, but in his afterlife he has come to function as a trope of varying significance and power, serving whatever purposes later poets have required of him, but proving invariably meaningful.

In this regard, Smith's chapter on Louis MacNeice, who is, especially in the U.S., more often associated with the Auden group than he is with Irish poetic tradition, is of special interest. MacNeice's 1941 study, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, was written less than three years after Yeats's death, but already he was focused less on what than on how Yeats argued. He paused with particular purpose over the contradictory ways in which Ireland has been imagined: the Irish "character could best be expressed in a set of antinomies . . . We could say, for example: *The Irish are sentimental* (see any popular songbook) but we could also say: *The Irish are unsentimental*." From this line of thinking, MacNeice deduced, as Smith puts it, that Ireland "is in reality a set of *discursive practices*. Its conflicted heterogeneity is, in the words of Yeats's sonnet 'Meru', only 'brought / Under a rule, under the semblance of peace / by manifold illusion'" (71). What follows is Smith at his best:

These antithetical definitions, each of which can be backed up with persuasive examples, are the indisputable site of the ideological. *Antithesis*, the balancing of irreconcilable opposites, mutates into *paradox*, which holds together two opposing possibilities in an impossible union, to become the literary trope of a political and ideological dilemma. Paradox is a strategy for reconciling real, historical incompatibilities at the level of *discourse*, in a verbal device. Yeats's 'antithetical vision', MacNeice suggests, has its origins in an ideology of conflict only resolvable in this way. (72)

In one sense, this passage offers a familiar enough version of older ideas about how ideology works. Fortunately, Smith is less interested in the principles than in how it informs poetic practice—both the practice of writing and the practice of reading. Later, in the first of his two chapters on Heaney, Smith notes how Heaney writes "of poems that are 'about the

way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them” (113). What Smith argues here is not so much that Heaney carries on Yeatsian tradition (although he obviously did) as that part of what marks Yeats and Heaney both as Irish poets is the way they exploit the ability of poetry to sustain mutually incompatible readings.

But if this legacy is Yeats’s gift to Irish poets, a distinct way to be an Irish poet, it is also a way of ceasing to be a distinctively Irish poet (how very Joycean: one becomes an Irish writer only by leaving Ireland). One way of understanding this destabilizing impulse is to associate it with Swift’s *Tale of the Tub*, as Smith does. Another way of understanding it is to see it as a characteristically *Modernist* impulse, which Smith also does. Consider how, for Yeats and Heaney both, as also for Eliot, Pound, H.D. and other Modernists, the point isn’t even that a poem can sustain incompatible readings as that it must. Smith doesn’t argue that all Modernism evolves out of Yeats and Joyce, but he does suggest that the historical and ideological conditions within which they forged their art prove pertinent for us in other places and in our time.

So it is that Smith understands Heaney to be “remaking himself as a story which speaks of Ireland only in transcending its ideological antitheses” (109): “incredible to myself / among people far too eager to believe me/and my story, even if it happened to be true.” Such deliberately unstable moments characterize, at its best, much of the poetry Smith discusses, and the deliberate forging of such moments he suggests is one characteristic feature of twentieth-century Irish poetry. Part of what differentiates Irish poetry from other contemporaneous Modernist poetry is that these moments so often have to do with political questions, with questions about what comprises the nation, and what it means to be Irish.

To write that Ireland “is in reality a set of *discursive practices*” is in effect to put language before nation, and this formulation of course sets up a radical reappraisal of “tradition.” “Nation” is a function of language, rather than language being the expression of nation. Smith, in this way, unpacks the political from the textuality of poetry, rather than interpreting poems by putting them in some purportedly agreed on and already known political context.

But politics in Smith’s presentation come with a sense of humor. The titles of his various subchapters are often punning, or at least grinning: “The Groves of Blarney” in the chapter on Ciaran Carson is followed by “The Twilight Zone”; his treatment of the devotional poet, Denis Devlin, is framed in largely political terms, with subchapters carrying titles like “Precarious Guests” or “Embassies Not Understood.” The first chapter on Heaney ends with what sounds like a parody of one of Ronald Reagan’s pat phrases— “there he is, going on again” (118). Hugh Kenner once defined

Irish “bull” as being where the hand of man never set foot: there’s plenty of that kind of humor here. Smith is a lively writer, as well as a formidable critic and there’s no mistaking his admiration for the poets who are his subject. With them he shares the delight of discovery, and the invigoration of insight. As is so often the case, his humor serves as a vehicle for delivering serious purpose.

The volume begins by explicating an exchange from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* concerning how to find a place to start, when Estragon breaks the dialogue by retorting, “I’m not a historian.” Smith proposes that “this antithesis offers a parable for two contrary impulses in Irish history and literature”: for Vladimir the past tells us who we have been, while “for Estragon the past is suppositional, a figment invented to keep others happy.” Smith’s volume essays both purposes. It does indeed offer a history of twentieth-century Irish poetry. But that it is more than that is clear in such moments as his cold observation that, “having opted for Arthur Griffith’s ‘constitutional’ Free State, [Yeats] came to despise the parochial, exclusivist Ireland which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, because of his Anglo-Irish Protestant background, he was reviled as little more than a crypto-Brit by the ‘Catholic Celtic’ Nationalist irreconcilables of de Valera’s IRA, and his life was threatened during the Civil War” (27). In moments like this we can see the Estragonian dimension of Smith’s history, in whose service Smith exercises his theoretical lightness of touch. Reading Irish poetry as he does can serve the cause of peace. What Smith observes about the ability of poetic texts to give form to and sustain incompatible readings offers a model for the state. Stan Smith’s *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity* is at last a deeply humane book, as sensitive to the cultural and ideological functions of literary criticism as it is to forms of poetic endeavor.

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*Revisiting “The Waste Land.”* By Lawrence Rainey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xiv + 205pp. \$35.00 cloth.

Think of your favorite unanswerable question—What is truth? Do I have free will? Is there a God?—and imagine somebody coming along, before you die in ignorance, not only to tell you the answer but to support it with reams of incontrovertible evidence. This is what Lawrence Rainey has done for those of us who are hopelessly fascinated by *The Waste Land*. No, his *Revisiting “The Waste Land”* does not profess to settle at long last what the poem means. On the contrary, it leaves the poem more satisfyingly and profoundly obscure than ever. Even jaded readers of T. S. Eliot will find that Rainey refreshes *The Waste Land* for them precisely by making them