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Abstract
A key text in twentieth-century poetic debate in Ireland is Samuel Beckett’s 'Recent Irish Poetry', published in 1934. Beckett was then twenty-eight years old and in the midst of what his poem 'Gnome' calls the 'years of wandering' before his decision to settle in Paris in 1937. Entirely out of sympathy with Free State Ireland, he used the essay to offer a damning analysis of the complacency and simple-mindedness of the great majority of its poets. Depending on their reaction to 'the new thing that has happened, namely the breakdown of the object' in contemporary culture, Irish poets divide for Beckett into two groups, 'antiquarians and others'. The former greatly outnumber the latter, and are subjected to acid derision. While T.S. Eliot called for the extinction of personality, Beckett demonstrates how Irish poetry was lacking even enough personality to extinguish:
DAVID WHEATLEY

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The device common to the poets of the Revival and after, in the use of which even beyond the jewels of language they are at one, is that of flight from self-awareness, and as such might perhaps be described as a convenience. At the centre there is no theme. ... But the circumference is an iridescence of themes – Oisin, Cuchulain, Maeve, Tir-nanog, the Táin Bo Cuailgne, Yoga, the Crone of Beare – segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness.¹

For Beckett, neo-Revivalist use of Irish mythology is little more than embarrassing fancy dress. In opposition to antiquarian mummers such as F.R. Higgins, James Stephens and Austin Clarke, Beckett holds up the achievement of three poets, Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin, the latter two ‘without question the most interesting of the youngest generation of Irish poets’.² This group is often described as Ireland’s poetic modernists, and Beckett notes with approval the influence of Corbière, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Eliot, Pound and the surrealists on their work. Deliverance from the antiquarian plague seemed at hand.

Looking back more than sixty years later, it is difficult to take the youthful Beckett’s Manichean judgements entirely at face value. ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ is certainly revealing of his pugnacity, and his desire to attack what he saw as Irish provincialism and smugness, but as a piece of criticism, I would argue, it is not a little misleading. Were matters really as black and white as Beckett suggests? Many of the poets he insults are talentless Celtic Twilighters, now forgotten, but several are anything but the second-hand
Yeatsians he makes them out to be. The most interesting case of Beckett’s injustice here is Austin Clarke. Clarke is also on the receiving end of an annihilating portrait in Beckett’s 1938 novel *Murphy*, in which he appears as the pitiful homosexual Austin Ticklepenny. The reason for Beckett’s extreme animus against Clarke has never been discovered, but it’s worth remembering that the qualities for which Beckett dismisses Clarke – his interest in mythology, his experiments with traditional Gaelic metres – are by no means incompatible with poetic styles that can be described as modernist. To give only one example, Hugh MacDiarmid’s modernist innovations in Scottish poetry during these years share many aspects of Clarke’s cultural nationalist revivalism.

Beckett’s position becomes all the more unfathomable when we recall that the three poets he hails as moderns, MacGreevy, Coffey and Devlin, were far from anti-nationalist or anti-traditionalist in outlook. Coffey and MacGreevy were fervent Catholics whose work appeared in devotional magazines, and MacGreevy was an ardent nationalist, whose patriotism had been awoken by the execution of the 1916 leaders. Beckett does not allow these considerations to enter the argument of ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, since to do so would complicate his neat polarity of inward-looking Irish traditionalists and cosmopolitan experimenters. In contrast to Coffey and MacGreevy, Clarke was a lifelong anti-clerical satirist, railing against censorship and the sexual prurience of the Free State. This would have made him a natural ally of the iconoclastic Beckett, one would have imagined. But no.

Beckett is also careful not to quote over-extensively from the work of his modernist exemplars, since in reality there wasn’t too much of it in print to quote from – MacGreevy’s one and only book, called simply *Poems*, appeared later that year, while Coffey and Devlin had only a joint-authored pamphlet of gushingly neo-Romantic juvenilia to their name, published in 1930. It is almost as if Beckett is more interested in what these writers aren’t, or what he wants them not to be, than in the reality of their achievement. Having quoted some lines of Devlin’s, perhaps the most talented of the three, he observes: ‘It is no disparagement of Mr Devlin to observe that this is still too much by the grace of Eluard. What matters is that it does not proceed from the Gossoons Wunderhorn of that Irish Romantic Arnim-Brentano combination, Sir Samuel Ferguson and Standish O’Grady, and that it admits – stupendous innovation – the existence of the author.’ It’s hardly the securest rock on which to build the church of Irish poetic modernism.

The careers of MacGreevy, Coffey and Devlin in the years immediately following 1934 did nothing to suggest imminent victory over the forces of antiquarianism. Far from going on to lead Irish poetry into the modernist promised land, they remained on the fringes. MacGreevy abandoned poetry, Coffey endured decades of silence, and only Devlin had anything like a conventionally successful poetic career – in the United States. 1935, the year after ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, saw the publication of first volumes by two writers who place Beckett’s dichotomy of ‘antiquarians and others’ under even more strain: Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice. Kavanagh too, like
many of the 'antiquarians' wrote on rural themes and dabbled in mythology (more classical than Irish), but was just as ill-disposed as Beckett to pasticheurs of Yeats. MacNeice too was healthily sceptical of Yeats, and wrote with a witty and urbane detachment unheard of among the 'antiquarians', but never described himself as a modernist. Introducing Kavanagh and MacNeice into Beckett's schema helps us to understand why it would be impossible today, even were it desirable, to separate contemporary poets into 'antiquarians and others'. Even in 1934, there were too many strands in Irish poetry for such an argument to do it justice.

Mention of names like Oarke, Kavanagh and MacNeice gives some idea of the direction that Irish poetry has taken since the Thirties. Space is lacking in a short essay like this to give an overview of Irish poetry today, even one as distorted as Beckett's; readers in search of such a guide are directed to Dennis O'Driscoll's 'A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry', published in an Irish special issue of the Chicago journal *Poetry* (November 1995). What there is room to do, though, is look again at some of Beckett's arguments in the light of contemporary developments. In 1934 Beckett thought 'the first condition' of the average Irish poem was 'an accredited theme' and the convention that 'in self-perception there is no theme, but at best sufficient *vis a tergo* to land the practitioner into the correct scenery, where the self is either most happily obliterated or else so improved and enlarged that it can be mistaken for part of the *décor*'. How much has changed?

One thing that has not changed since Beckett's manifesto is Irish introspection and provincialism. This is as much a symptom of the environment of Irish publishing and reviewing as it is of any temerity or conservatism on the part of Irish poets themselves. It is also in ironic contrast to the foreign attention which Irish poets have long seen as their birthright, and which continues to keep Irish Studies programmes abroad happily ticking over. For instance, when English critic Sean O'Brien brought out his *Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British & Irish Poetry* recently, seven of his twenty-five short chapters deal with Irish writers, which led to accusations from some British critics of Hibemocentrism. Whatever the wisdom of the canon according to Sean O'Brien, Anglocentrism, by contrast, has never been a problem among Irish poets or critics. Even the most aggressively marketed New Generation poets, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, are almost unknown in Ireland. Occasionally an Irish magazine might make the supreme effort to bring out an American special issue, but a British special issue would be quite simply unthinkable. Britain is too close for such treatment to be necessary, the argument might run. But while Irish poets continue to publish with English houses and bask in the approval of Hibernocentric English critics, British poets are doing well to get a few dozen words out of an Irish critic at the end of a round-up review in a weekend paper. And as for poets from further afield, Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians, to restrict myself to Anglophones, just getting hold of their books in Ireland can sometimes seem as difficult as getting a Qantas flight into Knock airport, to paraphrase
Robert Crawford. As Peter Sirr has written, discussing Ireland’s ‘export-driven’ relationship to the wider world: ‘An international poetry magazine is suddenly, miraculously, available in Dublin bookshops because it is an Irish issue. We will never see the German issue or the Italian issue, not to mention the Scottish, Welsh or English issue. I have a sense that the more we pat ourselves on the back for our newly discovered “Europeanness” the more we are ensnared in our theme park.’

In a recent *Verse* interview, Eavan Boland confidently proclaimed that ‘there is no real Irish equivalent to language poetry’. This is not strictly accurate, since Ireland does harbour a small number of linguistically experimental poets, but points to a strange anomaly in Irish poetic culture. For all the proliferation of journals, workshops, residencies and readings, there is an almost total disconnection in Ireland today from the great experimental modernist tradition that gave us Joyce and Beckett. With the partial exception of Paul Muldoon and Ciarán Carson, both much given to verbal high jinks, the radical energies of Irish poetry have not translated into a credible *avant-garde*. Eavan Boland is a useful case in point here. Much influenced by Adrienne Rich, she has polemicized at length against the deeply ingrained gender conservatism of the Irish tradition and the ‘hieratic persona’ of the modernist poet. Her response to this has been a radical attention to subject matter that had previously been off the map of Irish poetry, specifically the experience of motherhood in the Dublin suburb where so many of her poems are set. Useful as this has been, it is curious why she has not felt an accompanying impulse to radicalize her linguistic medium, which is doggedly opposed to modernism and its ‘privilege[d .. . ) personae’. Boland seems to consider formalism *per se* implacably opposed to the truth-telling function of poetry: ‘too often the authority of the life is predicated upon the ability of the poet to give it grace or interest’, she has written disapprovingly of Derek Mahon. Beckett complained about the ubiquity of myth in Irish poetry of the Thirties: has the myth of the self and authentic personal experience become a form of ‘correct scenery’ in its own right, somewhere Irish poets must go to decommission their bad old modernist privilege?

A more productive dialogue with tradition and selfhood can be found in the work of Paul Muldoon, arguably the most linguistically gifted, resourceful and restless Irish poet writing today. Muldoon has drawn extensively on mythology, from the Gaelic ‘Seanchas’ of his first collection, *New Weather* (1973), to his rewriting of Virgil in his latest book, *Hay*, but could never be accused of producing ‘segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness’ on an ‘accredited theme’. Where Boland attempts to move from the distortions of myth into history, Muldoon emphasizes the ways in which myth and history intertwine, refusing to credit either one with unquestioned access to reality. One level on which this is particularly evident is Muldoon’s use of autobiography. Comparisons with Seamus Heaney have typecast Muldoon as a postmodernist trickster beside the earnestly Wordsworthian older poet, but if anything it is Muldoon who
is the more autobiographical writer of the two. The difference is that Muldoon's writing frequently pursues autobiography to the point of impenetrably private reference, as in the recent long poem 'Yarrow'. Just as frequently, Muldoon poems use the concept of private experience to explore the limits of communicable experience, as in the title poem of his 1983 collection Quoof. 'Quoof', he explains, is a family word for a hot water bottle which he has carried with him through adult life and 'taken ... into so many lovely heads / or laid ... between us like a sword'. In the poem's second stanza he describes one such occasion:

An hotel room in New York City
with a girl who spoke hardly any English
my hand on her breast
like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti
or some other shy beast
that has yet to enter the language.?

As a private word 'quoof' would be less than helpful for entering into communication with the woman; the fact that she speaks 'hardly any English' anyway only compounds its uselessness. Rather than acting as a tool for the seduction and subjection of the feminine (a metaphor employed time and again by Heaney), the colonizing male's language is rendered powerless; a true Beckettian 'rupture of the lines of communication'. As Clair Wills has pointed out, the sestet ends still lacking a verb, 'the "entering" unaccomplished'. Just as the word 'quoof' has yet to enter the language, the poet imagines his hand transformed to the spoor of a yeti, underlining the destabilizing effect on his sense of identity of the encounter. As ever with Muldoon, verbal association is an important influence on the course of the poem, the 'yet' of 'yeti' clearly influencing the poem's last line. Another example is the poem 'Sushi', which obsessively repeats endwords in -rgn ('arrogance', 'oregano', 'orgone', 'organs') without ever mentioning the word which logically underpins them all, 'origin'. By toying with such arbitrary effects, Muldoon highlights the contingency of all points of origin we would seek to uncover in language. Arbitrariness is not the same thing as sloppiness though, and 'Sushi' ends by describing the chef as 'a man unlikely to confound / Duns Scotus, say, with Scotus Eriugena'. Names may whizz by in a point-and-click poem like 'Sushi' but remain resistantly themselves in what Beckett called 'the absolute predicament of particular human identity'. Nowhere are names and identities of more fascination to Muldoon than in his own origins, and it is his obsessive interrogation of them in a volume like The Annals of Chile that makes him one of the great contemporary poets of childhood and family life.

It is unfair, of course, to concentrate on Muldoon at the expense of the many other poets writing in Ireland today. But as an example of a poet who has combined the exploration of origins, both personal and national, with a radically innovative technique, he shows himself to be a complete writer in a way that synthesises the terms of Beckett's 1934 polemic, both antiquarian
and modernist at once. Other writers I could just as easily have concentrated on include Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Michael Hartnett, Paul Durcan, Ciaran Carson, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian or Harry Clifton – to confine myself to poets coeval with or younger than Seamus Heaney. They make a diverse assembly, writing out of imaginative territories as different as Longley’s Belfast and Mayo, Mahon’s courtyards in Delft, Hartnett’s Gaelic seventeenth century, Durcan’s surreal chip shops and midland towns, Carson’s labyrinthine Belfast, Ni Dhomhnaill’s Kerry Gaeltacht, McGuckian’s lushly disguised North Antrim coast, and Harry Clifton’s desert routes. Taken as a whole they represent no school or collective front, none of the ‘sects, schisms or sectiuncles’ on which Beckett gleefully pounced. This is not to suggest that Irish poetry is not a passionately contested territory. The literary historian W.J. Cormack once jokingly suggested little Yeat’s line ‘great hatred, little room’ (‘Out of Ireland we have come, / great hatred, little room’) as the title for an anthology of Irish book reviews; Irish poets are no less querulous than Irish critics, but these days at least face nothing like the same jostle for space. A recent anthology of Irish writers responding to the bicentenary of Giacomo Leopardi’s birth featured no less than 110 poets. There is such a proliferation of Irish poetry journals, in fact, that a shortage of stamps might seem (to the cynical observer) a more serious impediment to getting published than a shortage of talent.

If Ireland’s current receptivity to poetry means many writers will fall by the wayside, so be it. Among the massed ranks of Irish poets, sprinters with their eye on the next poetry competition or festival will always outnumber the marathon runners doggedly pursuing a Collected Poems a few decades down the road. And while it would be premature to place the responsibility for the future of Irish poetry on the shoulders of a pair of twenty-somethings, as Beckett does in ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, there are perhaps four or five younger writers showing signs of eventually matching the achievement of their elders listed above. It’s enough to be going on with, or as Seamus Heaney says at the end of ‘Tollund’ in The Spirit Level: ‘Not bad’.

NOTES

2. ibid., p. 75.
3. ibid., p. 76.
4. ibid., p. 71.