

Jim Ferguson

That is all my Bum

Thoughts on Contemporary Irish Fiction

"It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters. The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort; the novel was self administered in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before—usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblegriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. Conclusion of explanation. That is all my bum, said Brinsley."

At Swim-Two-Birds, Flann O'Brien

One: In relation to the works of Joyce, Yeats and Beckett the obsessive, petty and often futile Literary Criticism Industry, which has grown to surround these writers with so many theses from academics makes some folk sick to the point of brain fever and hospitalisation for the nervous disorder of paranoid exasperation. However, only the truly simple-minded would reject all history as useless.

Two: The Southern Tiger and the Peace Process. Revisionist Criticism and the All Male School of Macho Celtic Writing. The economic and political developments taking place in the 32 counties are deeply significant. They change so much of the ideological and social landscape. All kinds of hope and ways of thinking are possible. The position of women, the influence of the Catholic church, whithersoever Unionism? all manner of historically entrenched positions are open to question. This is why contemporary Irish fiction has an extra dimension of interest in addition to the purely artistic/ aesthetic considerations of novel writing.

Three: Fluctuations concerning the sense of identity of the inhabitants of the Island of Ireland. There is the theory of multiplicity of identity, that people have layers of it, the auld onion simile would indeed be a handy illustrator, aye. "I am a Glaswegian and a Scot." "I am an Ulsterman and British." Of course the onion falls to pieces with the "Citizen of the World." Only to reassert itself in astronomical terms. Suffice to say there are shifts and differences in sense of identity from place to place, and varying within one place according to social status, historical tradition, systems of religion, political beliefs and so on. Not



Dermot Healy Photo: Steve Pike

unconnected to this is the language question on the Island with reference to the status of Gaelic. Is Irish writing in English really Irish writing?¹

The African-American novelist Alice Walker uses the metaphor of quilt making to describe the relationships between the characters in her novel *The Colour Purple*. This metaphor can be extended usefully to Ireland with regard to the patchwork of existing Irish identities; it could be argued that there are differences in the practice of literary art corresponding to the sense of identity of individual authors. "Autobiographical angles on history seem as inescapable in Irish criticism as in Irish literature."²

Four: The problem of gender. This is highlighted in no uncertain terms by the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane, published Derry 1991. This one hell of a book. Three volumes covering centuries of literary output. All kinds of stuff; religious, political, poetic, dramatic, novelistic. Mammoth is its range but it contains not one single, solitary, poor auld cunt of a hoor's daughter of womanhood. Not one single wee lassie or mammy. Ah the boys would never be so patronising as to add a token girlie. In this regard Edna Longley's *The Living Stream*, provides some excellent insights. Ms Longley travels a hard critical road, particularly in relation to Seamus Deane and the *Field Day* project. She is somewhat soft on Unionism and hard on unreconstructed republicans. There are interesting ideas in there though, and folk really ought to wonder in amazement how and why the *Field Day Anthology* forgot about the existence of women.

One might say that Flann O'Brien was taking the piss (somewhat ironically) out of ideas in literary theory which would later come to the foreground in the work of Jacques Derrida and other post-modernists. While literary theory is enlightening and informs us greatly about the theory of theory, there is much to be said for taking a step back from this position; which is largely academic and institutional, and engaging straight-forwardly with the text. "Irish literature presents an inter-disciplinary

challenge to which vulgar theory can be insensitive."³

Indeed, the character Brinsley in O'Brien's novel has a good point with his utterance "That is all my bum." At the same time it is important to be aware that there are deeper levels and ways of looking at things imbedded in a text which may not be placed there intentionally by the author.

As with multiplicity of identity, a multiplicity of readings of a text may also exist. There lies the quandary and the space for argument. Such a space is a good one; it is the *space* between the empirical data (in the case of literary criticism this data being the text) and talking about the text discursively. Who knows exactly what this space is? possibly the moment of cognition; possibly the moment of imagining; possibly the moment of realising the possibilities of what a text suggests as you read it; possibly the pleasure in the process of discovery; all of what the human imagination is capable of must be considered. And yet, such is an impossibility for any one individual, and this is what I think Flann O'Brien was driving at in the above quote.

Nevertheless, the ability of literature itself to create such a space cannot be denied. This is the space where art lives. Where the emotions are stirred, where the language is made to connect with feeling, with being alive; where it reveals both its social and individual nature, its ability to transform and stimulate, to give pleasure, annoyance and pain, to shock and pacify. This, my friend, is the nature of the fucker. That which cannot be precisely pinned down but leaves a gap for important question about the way people live on the ball of atoms called planet Earth.

The foregoing outpouring came into being as a result of thinking about three novels written by Irish men in the 1990s. Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, Dermot Healy's *Sudden Times* and Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*.

Seamus Deane: born Derry 1940. Educated at Queen's University, Belfast and at Cambridge. He is the author of *Celtic Revivals: Essays In Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*, *A Short History Of Irish Literature and The French Revolution and Enlightenment In English Literature 1789-1832*. He has also published four collections of poetry.

Dermot Healy: Born Finea 1947, currently living by the sea in Co. Sligo, is a playwright, poet and prose-writer. Published work includes, *Fighting with Shadows*, *A Goat's Song*, *The Bend for Home* and two collections of poetry. He has worked on building sites in England and this experience partly informs the fiction of *Sudden Times*.

Roddy Doyle: Born 1958, Dublin. Educated at University College, Dublin. Former school teacher, his six novels have been noted for their wit, honesty and lack of sentimentality.

Doyle's *A Star Called Henry: Volume One of The Last Roundup* is the first person narrative of Henry Smart, born at the turn of the century and brought up in the slums of Dublin. The story is related from the perspective of an elderly man looking back on his childhood. Doyle uses real historical events and characters as he sees fit to give voice to the character. James Connolly and Michael Collins appear as large as life. The 1916 Easter rising and subsequent civil war are the backdrop to much of the action. However, History, or historical accuracy, is not the question here. Henry is the "Glowing Baby pink and cream;

every little movement [of his] adorable fists or face seemed to predict a bright future.⁴ It is the life of Henry Smart that is the centre of the novel.

Henry's father is a one-legged, poorly-paid bouncer and assassin working for a brothel owner. His mother is ground down by ill-health, poverty, childbirth and miscarriages. His Granny is the only adult character he keeps in touch with over the course of the novel. Henry and his young brother Victor live as "Street Arabs" always on the look out for ways to scam money and food. They are at the arse end of society and the only thing that appears worse than life on the street is to end up in the orphanage. Victor dies of TB and this helps foster a rage in Henry which burns brightly until, in the end, he can do no more fighting:

"It was too late. I'd taken men up to the mountains over Dublin and shot them. I'd gone into their homes—because I'd been told to. I'd killed more men than I could account for and I'd trained other men to do the same. I'd been given names on pieces of paper and I'd sought them out them out and killed them. Just like my father, except he'd been paid for it."⁵

One of the most interesting characters in the book is Miss O'Shea, also known as "Our Lady of the Machine Gun." She is a woman prepared to pursue her own agenda, not satisfied with making the tea and griddle cakes while the boys get on with the action.

Doyle cleverly draws out the political and religious forces at work and the concomitant differences in perspective within the nationalist movement. He not afraid to show brutality, bravery and compassion. On the down side there is a certain cartoonish quality to some of the writing. One cannot help but smile wryly at Henry's precocious sexual talents, irresistible good looks, charm and superhuman strength; this makes for good entertainment but little of real impact. However, the depictions of poverty, work on the docks and the 1916 rising are enough to make up for these moments of weakness on the part of the author. Then again, Henry is narrating his own story and perhaps he likes to think of his youth as containing some romantic power to mitigate the brutality. In that sense it is difficult to be certain about the positioning of the narrative voice. How much is Henry Smart and how much is Roddy Doyle?

Often things appear to be what they are not. The use of a first person fictional narrator enhances this sense of uncertainty and engenders in the reader the sense of a life really being lived.

Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* comes from a similar narrative stand-point, that of an adult looking back on childhood and trying to understand how things come to happen the way they do. The setting is Derry's Bogside and the time span is from 1945 to 1971, though the novel is chiefly concerned with the '40s and '50s. Again there is the same element of uncertainty, of some-

how not knowing why the world is the way it is. The struggle of a child to grow into and understand the world. There is also a mixture of mythology and 'real life' but Deane's young Catholic boy is rooted in the reality of his community and his family. Family ties and family life being investigated more deeply than in *A Star Called Henry*. The boy relates to his father and mother, to aunts and uncles, his brother and sister. Yet the book is haunted by characters who aren't there—"My father's mother, long dead, came to our house soon afterwards..."⁶

The most important of these absentee characters is uncle Eddie; the circumstances surrounding his mysterious disappearance in 1922 still haunt the adults of the family as well as the boy himself, firing his curiosity to separate fact from myth. There is a prevailing sense of sadness, death and being possessed by history; haunted by the past, both real and imagined. The memories of the family's IRA connections, stretching back to before the civil war, are impossible to escape. In some way the political conflict has scarred each generation of the family.

Deane does hit some lighter notes, especially in the section called "Maths Class" where the pupils are at the mercy of a tyrannical bam-pot teacher.

Reading in the Dark comes from a male perspective, the woman characters have less of importance to say. The mother is defined by her silences. Only aunt Katie has much to say, "Because Katie had no children to look after..."⁷ implying that women only have anything worth uttering where the matter concerns children.

Nevertheless, Katie has a fine repertoire of stories to entertain the boy and his siblings. In particular the story of two changeling children is right out there in the world of the occult. This story within the story is set "away down in the southern part of Donegal where they still [speak] Irish, but an Irish that [is] so old that many other Irish speakers couldn't follow it."⁸ The Gaelic language itself is like one of the missing characters. The language question still being part of an unsettled historical score.

This is a story of betrayal in a family, wrapped in a society in which history itself appears as a betrayal. Yet Seamus Deane faces this situation with clear-sighted compassion. In the end neither fact nor myth appear satisfactory: myth is not fact, fact itself is grim. And the reality of the beginning of the 'Troubles', where the novel ends, brings with it the need for such clear-sighted compassion, if ever the cycle of conflict and grievous suffering is to be broken.

Stylistically, Deane has a gentle, lyrical touch, his prose is both direct and beautiful. He also has amazing brevity which strengthens the novels impact.

In *Sudden Times* it appears Dermot Healy is in

about a whole different bag. Again though, there is the first person narrative stand-point giving a feeling of dislocation; of things not being what they appear to be on the surface. The concern with family, with identity and where one comes from is also important.

Ollie Ewing, Healy's narrator, is labouring under post-traumatic stress, trying like fuck to hang on to reality. To the everyday. Ollie would really like for things to make sense. For everything to be awright. For his father to love him. For his brother Redmond to be...

The novel is set in Sligo and London. London from Ollie's perspective is a very weird place. Folk are up to strange acts of violence and corruption. Reading this book is entering into somebody's dream Everything is like... like being drugged without your knowledge. The sense of rattled, raw nerves, the atmosphere of... ..the paranoia, but: Is it?

"After London it was serious.

I lay low.

I stayed with the mother a while, pottering in the garden, walking the beach with all these images in my wake. I dropped into Gerties pub the odd time, but people were wary of me at the beginning. Then I suppose they got used to me again. But in my mind's eye I kept seeing Redmond serving behind the bar. And I found it hard to talk to anyone with that constant argument in my head. Argument with the father.

Then would start the lament: *if I had done this, none of that would have happened. If I hadn't. If I hadn't. If I had.* It went on till I was sick of my own consciousness.

The guilt was stalking me.

I could not get by the first dream."⁹

The world is strange and surreal with few adjectives. It is there and not there. Ollie's head? Funny things with time and place?

"The top part of me was death. The bottom of me was life. My head was deathly cold. The upper part of my trunk had come free. And my groin was warm. If I could fit the two together I'd save myself. And if I didn't do it sudden I was dead."¹⁰

"I'll start again. I had been living in the hostel since myself and this lady Sara broke up, sharing rooms with travellers from all over the world, and that was fine.

One night we were in Australia, another night in the forests of Maine. I found it hard to sleep what with trying to put the pieces back together again.

The intimacy you once had with someone is hard to forget at the beginning. It returns stronger than ever before.

I would say I was not right in the head.

That's right."¹¹

Ollie is constantly trying to piece things back together but they never really fit right. The reader has to travel with him and let the thing unfold.

Time bends and shifts. Healy shows consummate narrative skill in his handling of time, in his structuring, his ordering of events of a disordered nature, keeping things in disordered order. It is reminiscent of Spinoza's *Ethics*: somehow accumulative, somehow mathematical, somehow a leap into proof.

Mister Healy has a wonderful black sense of humour. Ollie's experiences at the hands of the police and in court are extremely funny. But what about the evidence? The proof? The truth? Everything is so very slippery, as soon as it appears to be known it changes.

Sudden Times, in common with the other two novels, is driven by the violent death of people related to the main character. Driven by brutal trauma and how that comes to haunt the survivors. The grief and suffering. How to cope? How to hang on?

The reader is presented with an array of characters, some funny, some sad, some frightening. And in the course of Ollie's conversation with a German psychiatrist questions of religion and language pop up:

"Tell me this, I asked him, did your father ever surrender? No. And you tell me this, Ollie. Vot is it like to speak in the language of the conqueror? I had no answer to that."¹²

"To be is to sin"¹³

There is so much to be taking in in *Sudden Times*. It is the poetry of Ollie Ewing's mind;

"*National Front*

I don't know much about them. I'd say they were the dangerous bastards in the blue jumpers."¹⁴

It is difficult to understand clearly the affect social and political change may or may not have on individual literary artists. Some are more politically aware than others. But each of these books could be interpreted as being about something bigger than the story (or text) itself.

Each author presents a largely male world wherein certain aspects of maleness are to be regretted, accompanied by some attempt to understand women. Questions of sexuality, language and history are raised. In *Sudden Times* the underlying assumption that young people have to emigrate to make good is challenged: there is racism against Irish people in London and racism within the Irish community itself.

These novels have both overt and subtle political messages. They look for possible ways out of conflict and suffering at the individual and family level. This in turn must kick on into the overarching habits, attitudes and activities we call culture.

Quotes from recent critical essays concerning literature, Ireland et cetera:

"Time and place are central to all cultural experience. Regardless of how humans choose to measure time or chart place, the consciousness of the human perceives such things as being real. However or by whatever theories any culture devises to understand the basics of space and time; whether through myth or science or literature. This make western literature peculiar in that it embraces both the mythical and the scientific."¹⁵

"a terrorist is no psychopathic aberration, but produced by the codes, curriculum and pathology of a whole community."¹⁶

"Modernity in Ireland means a range of precious things

like feminism, pluralism, civic rights, secularisation. It can also mean being shamefaced and sarcastic about one's historical culture. Specific cultures in Ireland are acceptable in the eyes of most liberal pluralists when they are gay, but not when they are GAA."¹⁷

"The UK and the Republic find themselves guarantors of communities more Unionist and more Nationalist than themselves for whose neurotic pathologies their own incoherence is much to blame."¹⁸

"That is all my bum."¹⁹

Notes

1. See Seamus Deane's *Introduction to A Short History of Irish Literature* and Willy Maley's essay 'Varieties of nationalism: post revisionist Irish Studies', in *Reviewing Ireland*.
2. Edna Longley, *The Living Stream*, Bloodaxe, Newcastle, 1994, p.10.
3. *Ibid.* p.66.
4. Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1999, p.22.
5. *Ibid.* p.318
6. Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark*, Vintage paperback, London, 1997, p.51.
7. *Ibid.* p.60.
8. *Ibid.* p.61.
9. Dermot Healy, *Sudden Times*, Harvill, London, 1999. P.3.
10. *Ibid.* p.48.
11. *Ibid.* p.46.
12. *Ibid.* p.37
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.* p.199
15. Terry Eagleton, 'Crazy John and the Bishop', *Revisionism Revisited*, CUP/Field Day, Cork, 1998.
16. Edna Longley, *The Living Stream*, Bloodaxe, Newcastle, 1994, p.55.
17. Terry Eagleton, 'Crazy John and the Bishop', *Revisionism Revisited*, CUP/Field Day, Cork, 1998. p.312
18. Edna Longley, *The Living Stream*, Bloodaxe, Newcastle, 1994, p.186.
19. Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Penguin Modern Classic Edition, p.25.