

Difficult Ancestors: Modern Irish Poets and Their Elizabethan Predecessors

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It has in recent years become something of a critical commonplace to point out the extent to which both the strengths and weaknesses of modern Irish poetry can be linked to a persistent awareness of predecessors. That awareness helps account for the totemic value which a term like 'tradition' has long acquired in Irish critical discourse; it underlies the critical vindication of 'intertextuality' as a 'natural' condition of Irish literature (Longley 1990: 26); and, insofar as it is often experienced as constraint, limitation, or as a source of anxiety, it has led to suggestions that a Harold Bloomian notion of influence might find its 'natural' laboratory in a particularly convoluted Irish poetic tradition (Brown and Grene 1989: *passim*; Longley 1996: *passim*; Homem 1996: 175-177).

This relational pattern of literary descent has proved easier to identify in the play of desired and spurned parental and filial relationships which characterises much of twentieth-century Irish literature –and in particular in the attitude of several authors towards Yeats and Joyce as alternative father-figures. Such quests for identity have, of course, marked political and cultural implications, rather than being a mere search for a sense of personal belonging in a literary lineage. But, thus understood, the relationship established to other and more remote predecessors may also prove enlightening –as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, concerned as it will be with the representation of sixteenth-century English poets in twentieth-century Irish poems.

The degree of foreignness of those literary predecessors is, of course, a moot point: after all, the modern Irish poets who invoke Elizabethan predecessors are poets of the English language, and may not –in most cases will not– discard a literary heritage in which they share. A British or in any case an Anglophone education will also have ensured that, for most modern Irish poets, what Derek Mahon once declared of Yeats –that only a lobotomy could remove the Yeatsian line from his brain (Johnston 1985: 24; Scammell 1991: 5)– will be even truer of (to cite the topmost canonical instance) Shakespearian blank verse; as it will also be true of the representations which diverse areas of human experience are given in Shakespeare's work, as also (in more general terms) in some other highly canonical texts of the drama and lyric of sixteenth-century England.

We thus find a poet like Seamus Heaney resorting to Tudor and Elizabethan precedents to write about key moments in his experience –be they erotic, political, academic, etc. The tenth and last of his "Glanmore Sonnets" evokes Heaney's first night of married love by quoting the famous coquettish rhetorical question – "how like you this?"– as a synecdoche of the sexual offer celebrated in what is

probably Wyatt's best-known lyric, "They flee from me..." (Wyatt 1978: 116-17); and the same sonnet will also allude to *The Merchant of Venice* by representing the poet and his wife as "Lorenzo and Jessica in a cold climate" (Heaney 1979: 42). "Westerling", a poem on a westward journey, first across Ireland, then to America and across the North-American continent to California, will seek an enabling intertext in John Donne's "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" (Donne 1971: 329-31; Heaney 1972: 79-80). A poem already written from the standpoint of the institutional weight which Heaney would come to have in American universities will represent the poet in a professorial position –but theatrically proposed: "He stands in a wooden O. / He alludes to Shakespeare" ("Alphabets", Heaney 1987: 2). And, years before, the political unrest in Northern Ireland, and the poet's perplexities as to his role in the midst of that, had made *Hamlet* a particularly useful reference, not just for quotation of somewhat predictable passages like "the times are out of joint", but rather for more extended analogies:

VIKING DUBLIN: TRIAL PIECES

IV

(...)

I am Hamlet the Dane,
skull-handler, parablist,
smeller of rot

in the state, infused
with its poisons, [10]
pinioned by ghosts
and affections,

murders and pieties,
coming to consciousness [15]
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering.
(Heaney 1975a: 23)

It is not, however, with the mere identification of Elizabethan intertexts in modern Irish poems (of which many more examples might be given) that this paper will be primarily concerned, but rather with an inter-authorial design which is super-imposed upon, and at times looms larger than, those specific intertextual links. What is meant by this is that some recent Irish poets, and in particular those whose Northern origins have made them more prone to reflection on the role of the poet when faced with historical adversity and political violence, are regularly haunted by Elizabethan predecessors to the extent that those 'ancestors' took part in, connived with, or were somehow related to acts of repression in Ireland. It is a perplexity which grows out of a fundamental difference in the way poets relate to the sphere of action. Those poets who, against the backdrop of the Northern Irish Troubles, have shown signs of being more disturbed by the ruthlessness which is known to have characterised some Elizabethan literary figures, produce their work in a context in which poets are only rarely involved in active politics, and also rarely use their poems to pronounce explicitly on political matters; a context, furthermore, in which opinions are divided between considering the crossing of poetry and politics an "unhealthy intersection", in C. C. O'Brien's famous words (O'Brien 1975), and considering it impossible for any utterance to be devoid of political import, even when its referent is ostensibly 'non-political', in a narrower sense of the word. On the other hand, in an Elizabethan context the involvement of poets in public concerns cannot be seen as an unfortunate coincidence, much less as a wanton transgression of some unwritten law, but rather as the inevitable consequence

of a politics of literary production in which the court as the seat of power is also the paramount site of literary recognition, and writing is often just one of several strategies to 'seek preferment' at court. That preferment would in some cases come in the form of specific political assignments, or positions as administrators –positions as crown agents; in one form or another, poets like (most famously) Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir John Davies and Sir John Harington, among others, would thus seek their fortunes in Ireland.

John Montague is one of the modern Irish poets who has most persistently evoked the many historical instances of repression in Ireland, whilst highlighting the involvement of English literary figures –in particular in his 1972 book *The Rough Field*, whose title translates the name of the place in rural Ireland where the poet grew up, but is obviously meant to be descriptive of the whole country and of what it has historically witnessed. Montague's method of dealing, within a volume of poetry, with a history of recurrent disaster, combines (in Graham Martins' words) both Pound's and Yeats's 'solutions' –respectively "to include, not so much 'history' as the stuff from which it is constructed: historical documents", and "to compose Sacred Books out of a series of personal poems which carried an implicit narrative or linking debate engaging a contemporary historical crisis" (Martin 1983: 380-1) In *The Rough Field*, poems are juxtaposed with an intermittent historical record of massacre and dispossession, a record which is both verbal –mostly epigraphs and *marginalia* quoting descriptions of Ireland, and of military campaigns in Ireland, by contemporary observers, some of whom were poets– and visual, in the form of reproductions of a series of woodcuts published in 1581 by John Derricke, as the second part of his *The Image of Irelande*, entitled *A Discoverie of Woodkarne* ("woodkern" being a name given to the native Irish rebel).

Derricke, whose skills as an engraver seem to have been far greater than his literary gifts, was (as Montague explains in his preface) a follower of Sir Henry Sidney, whom he accompanied to Ireland during his stay there as Vice-Treasurer, Lord Deputy, and during his campaigns in Ulster against the O'Neills (Montague 1972: 9). He was also a friend of his master's son, Sir Philip Sidney. The woodcuts Montague reproduces are particularly graphic about some of the atrocities committed by English soldiers, much attention being given to beheadings –with no sign of Derricke's either wanting to denounce brutality or of being in any way moved by it. Two lines of Derricke's own verse (also transcribed by Montague) actually reflect amusement at such practices –an amusement enhanced by the ballad metre which underlies it: "To see a soldiour toze a Karne, O Lord it is a wonder! / And eke what care he tak'th to part the head from neck asonder" (Montague 1972: 32). On the same page, Montague balances this callous admission of soldierly brutality with a statement by Sir John Davies (probably taken from *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Entirely Subdued*, a text published in 1612 which would prove influential throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries –Deane 1991, vol.1: 216-20). This passage is again about a beheading –this time ascribed to the native populations rather than to English soldiers:

Our geographers do not forget what entertainment the Irish (...) gave to a mapmaker about the end of the late great rebellion; for, one Barkeley being appointed by the late Earl of Devonshire to draw a true and perfect map of the north parts of Ulster (...) when he came (...) the inhabitants took off his head. (Montague 1972: 32)

As some recent studies have shown, mapmaking in Ireland was seen and represented in Elizabeth's and James's reigns not just as a scientific and administrative venture, but rather as a way of signalling a triumph over the rebelliousness and wilderness of the land and its inhabitants, "a form of political and ideological appropriation" (Klein 1996: 208; also Breen 1994: *passim*); in short, a matter of symbolical import, but also with definite economic implications, since it would be decisive for the material appropriation of a rural wealth which would be impressive –according to a passage from

George Hill's *An Historical Account of the Plantation of Ulster* which Montague inserts between Derricke's and Davies's extracts. And the three extracts, taken together, serve as an extended caption for the woodcut on the previous page, showing soldiers with the cut heads of rebels either in their hands or stuck on their swords, whilst other soldiers, in the background, seem to be driving a herd of fat cattle. The picture combines human and animal flesh; the manner of inflicting death upon the former seems to bear an emblematic significance which goes, therefore, beyond a strictly practical concern with securing military victory; but the appropriation of the latter is a confirmation of sheer greed and theft, enhanced by the very simultaneity of the two actions - no matter what the author's intentions may have been.

The extracts and the woodcut open a section of Montague's book in which poems on a twentieth-century landscape which exhibits the signs of historical fracture are followed by vignettes about the great O'Neills - "a name more in price than to be called Caesar", according to another epigraph, this time by Sir George Carew (another English participant in Elizabeth's Irish wars, and a friend of Raleigh's). A note common to all of these is English bafflement at the habits and appearance of the Irish -in particular at their supposed primitivism, as when, in the vignette about Shane O'Neill appearing before Elizabeth's court, "her fine-hosed courtiers" are described

Star[ing] at his escort
Of tall gallowglasses,
Long hair curling
Over saffron shirts
With, on each shoulder -
Under the tangle of
The forbidden glib -
The dark death-sheen
Of the battle axe.
(Montague 1972: 36)

In this passage Montague represents as manly pride and energy (Shane O'Neill himself is described as "Swarthy and savage as / The dream of a conquistador") what, from a British standpoint, was for centuries viewed as backward and outlandish: the mass of matted hair (the glib) worn over the eyes, the habit of always carrying such a heavy weapon as an axe... Some of these characteristics had, in fact, become commonplace since such an early text as Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hibernia*, a twelfth-century account which proved so influential as to see both its accurate points and its mystifications repeated over and over, in successive texts about Ireland, at least until the mid-seventeenth century (Leerssen 1996: 32-76). But Montague again balances the echoes of such prejudice with English surprise at Irish sophistication, as when Sir John Harington, who served under Essex in Ireland, is described as being listened to in absolute silence, by children and adults alike, when, at the table of the great Irish nobleman Hugh O'Neill, he reads a passage of his translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Montague 1972: 36-7).

To the extent that they have to be construed into a unified perspective on the past, the episodes and the texts which Montague thus brings together are proposed as analogous to the territory itself, whose own account of history, in the form of the hard evidence which the land has itself accumulated, is waiting to be adequately read:

All around, shards of a lost tradition:

(...)

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited; [35]
(Montague 1972: 34-5)

This representation of the relationship between writing and the land itself as a quest for a meaningful past is not dissimilar to Seamus Heaney's *topos* of excavation as an archaeology of identity, both individual and communal, in which the emblematic ground is the bog as "the memory of the landscape", in Heaney's own words (Heaney 1980: 54) –a mode of writing which strongly marked his work in the early 1970s. And, as in Montague (or even more so than in the older poet), that memory bank now and then delivers into Heaney's poetry the disturbing sayings and posturings of Elizabethan poets like Spenser or Raleigh. The former is glimpsed towards the end of "Bog Oak", one of the poems which exploit the metaphorical potential of the peat bog's preservative qualities –as shown in huge blocks of wood which, after many centuries, can be retrieved from that ground intact and with their qualities of resistance enhanced. But the poem drifts from such material evidence towards other findings:

(...)

Perhaps I just make out
Edmund Spenser,
dreaming sunlight,
encroached upon by

geniuses who creep [25]
"out of every corner
of the woodes and glennes"
towards watercress and carrion.
(Heaney 1972: 15)

Lexical choices like "encroached upon" and "carrion" ensure that the reader will be alerted to the less than idyllic quality of this glimpse of a great poet immersed in a natural environment. Before commenting on these lines any further, the point should be made that Spenser is probably the Elizabethan literary figure whose involvement in Irish affairs has more persistently been a source of unease. After all, as recent texts keep reminding us, "Spenser spent virtually all his creative adult life in Ireland" (Hadfield and Maley 1997: xii), from 1580 to 1598 –a period which would witness his upward movement from a position as secretary to the Lord Deputy to the more enviable status of substantial landowner in the province of Munster. Spenser would be made sheriff of Cork in 1598, the same year, however, in which he would be forced by Hugh O'Neill's rebellion to flee to England, where he would die the following year (Hadfield and Maley 1997: xiii-xiv). The suggestion that an acknowledgment of the consequence of Spenser's Irish experience in his writing, and in particular in *The Faerie Queene*, should not limit itself to well-defined passages has in the past two decades gained a broad critical acceptance, having probably been stimulated by Stephen Greenblatt's assertion, in 1980, that "Ireland is not only in book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*; it pervades the poem. Civility is won through the exercise of violence over what is deemed barbarous and evil, and the passages of love and leisure are not moments set apart from this process but its rewards" (Greenblatt 1980: 186). In the 1990s, this critical trend "runs the risk of ushering in a new critical orthodoxy which may turn out to be as restrictive as the interpretative approaches which it is trying to replace" (in the words of Anne Fogarty, introducing a special issue of the *Irish University Review* dedicated to the theme *Spenser in Ireland* –Fogarty 1996: 204). But, despite such risk, it has had the merit of allowing us to balance it against those 'interpretative approaches' which would, in general, try to insulate Spenser's poetry

from dubious political implications, and, in particular, from any ‘contamination’ by the text in which he famously and rather shockingly addressed the Irish question in explicit terms, his prose dialogue *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, written in 1596 and privately circulated in the following years, but not published until 1633.

It is precisely from that work that Heaney is quoting towards the end of ‘Bog Oak’, and the passage in question is one of the most notorious in Spenser’s text, dealing as it does with a situation of famine which occurred in the province of Munster during a rebellion. The situation was so serious as to drive the populations to cannibalism, according to the account given in *A View* by Irenius, the character who, from a well-informed position, instructs the Englishman Eudoxus on the ills from which Ireland suffers, and on the possible cure for those ills. Irenius claims to have witnessed the events described in the passage in question, and propounds the view that they are the victims’ own fault - that it is only Irish improvidence that causes such crises in a country that is wealthy. He argues that, therefore, *any* means (even deliberately making the native Irish go through war and famine again) are justified to subdue them into acceptance of civilised (*i.e.*, English) rule and laws.

The fact that Irenius’s characterisation makes him sound like a *persona* of Spenser himself, and the intellectual and rhetorical sophistication in which the most ruthless measures are advocated, have decisively contributed to the complex reputation of this “poet’s poet” (Fogarty 1996: 203), this exponent of lyricism who could at the same time propound such inhumane strategies. It is not by chance that some more words from the same infamous passage from *A View* – a simile representing the famine-stricken Irish “as anatomies of death” – will appear in another poem of Heaney’s significantly entitled “Traditions”. It is a poem concerned with the demeaning stereotypes of Irish identity – Shakespeare’s Captain MacMorris, best-known instance of the stage-Irishman, turns up with his celebrated question, “What ish my nation?” – and with the irony that the English spoken in Ireland exhibits so many traces of Elizabethan English, the language of the oppressor at a time of particularly blatant oppression; a poem which, moreover, opens with a representation of the superseding of Gaelic by English in terms that suggest rape – or at least the physical enforcement of one linguistic/literary tradition upon the other: “Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago / by the alliterative tradition” (Heaney 1972: 31).

Wily seduction and rape were, after all, in Irish representations of defeat at the hands of the English, dominant analogies for the ways in which England (at different historical moments) came to subdue Ireland. Such analogies would, in fact, inform the standard complaint of the young woman who conventionally stood for Ireland in the tradition of the *aisling*, the Gaelic dream or vision poem which in the eighteenth century gained a predominantly political direction. In a poem included in his 1975 volume *North*, Heaney would bring echoes of that tradition together with an Elizabethan intertext made obvious by the title “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, which brings into play Sir Walter Raleigh’s “The Ocean to Cynthia”. Heaney’s poem, however, will play on Raleigh’s actions, rather than on Raleigh’s poetry; and if “The Ocean to Cynthia” was, in Gerald Hammond’s words, “a sustained complaint at the way [Elizabeth I] (...) treated Raleigh” (Raleigh 1984: 283), “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” will prove a sustained denunciation of the way the Irish were treated by Raleigh himself, and by Raleigh as an historically embodied metonymy of English power.

The historical and political associations which Raleigh has for Heaney were already made clear in a prose poem contemporary with “Ocean’s Love to Ireland”, in which a Northern Irish Protestant boy levelled sectarian abuse at some of his Catholic counterparts whilst riding... a Raleigh bicycle, “with its chrome insignia and rivetted breastplate of Sir Walter Raleigh in his inflated knickers” (Heaney 1975b: 14). “Raleigh’s inflated knickers” could, indeed, be a darkly humorous motto for the first section of a poem which summons the *topos* of the seduced or raped maid, the specific intertext being an episode narrated in his *Brief Lives* by John Aubrey, according to whom Raleigh “loved a wench well”, and would once have pushed “one of the [Queen’s] Mayds of Honour up against a tree in a

Wood” (Aubrey 1949: 418), proceeding to rape her. Aubrey, however (mis)represents this act as an eventually consented-upon seduction, by telling how the maid, “as the danger and the pleasure at the same time grew higher” (Aubrey’s own words), could no longer properly articulate her initial protests – “Nay, sweet Sir Walter! Sweet Sir Walter!”. In Aubrey’s callously humourous account, those are distorted into that gross onomathopoeia of copulation – “Swisser Swatter Swisser Swatter” – which is submitted to the reader as supposed evidence of the girl’s ultimate consent. Those sounds are rescued by Heaney from their obscene purpose and turned into an onomathopoeia of the sea washing on the shore, a conventional image of lovemaking whose use does not, in this case, whitewash Raleigh’s rape (despite the attractiveness of the imagery in the third tercet), but rather gives it an edge of political allegory – since, by the end of the first section, no reader will have missed the point that the title should rather be “Raleigh’s Rape of Ireland”, or “England’s Rape of Ireland”.

This ironical play between supposed heroism, with its sublime representations, and the implicit denunciation of the historical ugliness which underlies it proceeds in the second section of the poem, since Raleigh’s “superb crest” – a metaphor for prowess but also for virility, following the first section – aims at more than fame-for-its-own-sake, being propelled rather by those political and material ambitions which Elizabeth-as-‘Cynthia’ might satisfy; as to the nobility implied by the term “crest”, it was seriously tarnished by involvement in the notorious massacre at Smerwick, Co. Kerry, in 1580. “These dark seepings”, in Heaney’s words, would be news of that episode in which a Spanish-Catholic force sent by the Pope to support an Irish rebellion was put to the sword after surrendering (Corcoran 1986: 120). However, it is Spenser rather than Raleigh who is more often remembered in connection with that episode – since, although Raleigh was participating in the repression of the rebellion in whose context the massacre occurred, Spenser had in 1580 just been given the position of secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, who personally made the decision to massacre the Spanish force, and whose propensity to excessive violence in Ireland “apparently horrified courtiers close to the Queen and led to his recall in 1580” (Hadfield and Maley 1997: xiii). The words which Heaney quotes actually come from “an account of the massacre dictated by the English commander, Lord Grey, to his secretary (...) Edmund Spenser” (Corcoran 1986: 121), who would, again rather callously, defend his former employer’s use of violence in passages of his *View of the Present State of Ireland* (Hadfield and Maley 1997: 103-5).

This attribution to Raleigh and Spenser of a joint (even if implicit) historical responsibility for violence – either directly practised or morally sponsored – reminds us that it is the general issue of the role to be played by the poet when faced with political adversity and brutality which has persistently mattered for a poet like Heaney – rather than the levelling of specific accusations as a way of trying to get even with history. The last section of “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” is characteristic of a volume in which the (self-)accusation of “doing and saying nothing” haunts the poet a lot more than a possible opposite charge of producing that intersection between poetry and politics which many would call “unhealthy” (O’Brien 1975). The closing section is reminiscent of a Gaelic order – “The ruined maid complains in Irish” – whose historical end and inability to rise again is associated with dreamy ineffectuality and impotence. The sexual metaphors make for a harsh indictment of native impotence, represented as lack of poetic energy: if the “maid” was “ruined” by the English rapist, and “the Spanish prince (...) failed her” by a military ineptitude represented as premature ejaculation, the native poets devote to her no more than a “somnolent clasp”, exhausted as they are by a self-regarding and self-gratifying onanistic existence. This gesture of self-inculpation proceeds to the end, to the extent that the Irish poets’ disregard for the maid who stands for Ireland causes her to become an immaterial presence, idyllicised out of existence, who “fades (...) Into ringlet-breath and dew” – one of the many stereotypes of Ireland whose idyllic banality has so often been resented by the Irish – and the closing line, with its allusion to the historical recurrence of possession and dispossession, prevents the indictment from being limited to past history.

The passage which is ultimately more disturbing for the author himself is, however, the one which makes clear that, parallel to the native poet's ineffectuality, "Iambic drums / Of English" assert their power. The language and the poetry of the oppressor were previously evoked in the persons of those Elizabethan poets who not always favoured the power of the pen over that of the sword. Both military and literary prowess are represented in that double metonymy "iambic drums" (it should be remembered that it was in the sixteenth-century that iambic definitively became the dominant poetic rhythm in English); a double metonymy which implies that a modern Irish poet of the English language has implicitly to acknowledge the daily renewal, in his own verse, of the victory of those difficult ancestors who helped ravage his country at the same time as they shaped the artistic medium which is now his own - and in which he may now aspire to triumph.

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