

Irish Critical Legacies: Seamus Deane and Terence Brown

Legados críticos irlandeses: Seamus Deane e Terence Brown

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Abstract: *Seamus Deane and Terence Brown have been two of the most significant voices in Irish literary criticism and culture over the past forty years. This article discusses two highly influential studies of theirs, Deane's Celtic Revivals and Brown's Ireland: A Social and Cultural History. I read both works as part of an important phase in the development of Irish literary criticism during the 1980s. I compare three aspects of both studies: the role of politics in the critical approaches taken in both works; the different ways in which they tackle the problem of essentialism in Irish culture; their manner of addressing the question of language, in terms of literary language in the case of Deane and the Irish language in the case of Brown. The article highlights some problems that arise in these aspects of the two studies, while also emphasizing their importance for Irish criticism.*

Keywords: *Irish Criticism; Modernization; Irish Literature and Politics; Language; Essentialism.*

Abstract: *Seamus Deane e Terence Brown foram duas das vozes mais significativas na crítica literária e na cultura irlandesa nos últimos quarenta anos. Este artigo discute dois de seus estudos altamente influentes, Celtic Revivals, de Deane, e Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, de Brown. Li as duas obras como parte de uma fase importante no desenvolvimento da crítica literária irlandesa durante os anos 1980. Eu comparo três aspectos de ambos os estudos: o papel da política nas abordagens críticas feitas em ambos os trabalhos; as diferentes maneiras em que abordam o problema do essencialismo na cultura irlandesa; sua maneira de abordar a questão da linguagem, em termos de linguagem literária no caso de Deane e da língua irlandesa no caso de Brown. O artigo destaca alguns problemas que surgem nesses aspectos dos dois estudos, ao mesmo tempo em que enfatiza sua importância para a crítica irlandesa.*

Palavras-chave: *Irish Criticism; Modernização; Literatura e política irlandesa; Língua; Essencialismo.*

The work of Seamus Deane and Terence Brown was pivotal to Irish literary criticism during the 1980s and 1990s, when assessments of Irish literature were marked in diverse ways by the impact of political violence in Northern Ireland and the culture wars in the Republic of Ireland over the influence of the Catholic Church on state legislation. This essay examines two major books from that period: Deane's *Celtic Revivals* and Brown's *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* (hereafter *Celtic Revivals* and *Ireland*). These studies are forerunners in the Irish Literary Critical Revival of the 1980s and 1990s, which in certain respects, mirrors features of the Irish Literary Revival that had emerged one hundred years previously, while also shaping the development of Irish literary and cultural criticism/scholarship in subsequent decades. That Irish Critical Revival includes influential studies such as Denis Donoghue's *We Irish* (1988), David Lloyd's *Anomalous States* (1993), W. J. McCormack's *From Burke to Beckett* (1994), Edna Longley's *The Living Stream* (1994) and Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995). Pioneering works for this movement as they are, *Celtic Revivals* and *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* are very distinct in style and content. Deane's is in some ways more of a polemic than a critique, offering suggestive readings of key Irish authors that function as a call for a new critical approach to Irish literature, involving a new conception of the political meanings we might attach to it. The work is historically situated in relation to the *Field Day* project that emerged in the early 1980s, producing the multivolume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, the first three volumes under Deane's general editorship, and the *Field Day* monograph series. This enterprise represents a pioneering and disruptive moment in the history of modern Irish literary criticism, creating the impetus for works of similar comprehensiveness in subsequent decades: *The Encyclopedia of Ireland*, *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, the nine-volume *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. In contrast to *Celtic Revivals*, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* draws upon empirical historical and economic data to outline discernible patterns in the development of those social contexts from which literature in Ireland emerged between the 1920s and the 1980s. In this essay, I present some reflections upon the insights and anomalies in Deane and Brown's treatment of politics, essentialism and language as they have borne upon Irish literature and society in the first half of the twentieth century.

Politics

Comparing the two studies, a simple paradox is immediately apparent. Deane is explicit in calling for a political form of evaluating Irish literary works, at odds with the formalist approaches that dominated English literary criticism in Britain, Ireland and North America

for most of the twentieth century. No such call is made in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, yet the attention that Brown gives to such obviously political matters as state policy, demographic and economic patterns in Irish society since independence is entirely absent in *Celtic Revivals*. This absence raises important questions about the political nature of the critique that Deane envisaged in his study. It implies a suspicion of empirical data as complicit with pre-existent institutional authorities, designed in the Irish case to validate the constitutionalist delimitation – both nationalist and unionist – of revolutionary discourse. Such a critical perspective of empirical research as self-ratifying points to the influence of *Of Grammatology*, where Derrida identifies the centrality to the empirical method of an explicit opposition or indifference to philosophy: “The thought of this historical opposition between philosophy and empiricism is not simply empirical and it cannot be thus qualified without abuse and misunderstanding” (*Of Grammatology* 162). Although he retained the concept of social totality that Derrida abandons, Theodor Adorno objected to data-based analysis in the social sciences on similar grounds in 1969. Essentially an attack on behaviourism and structural functionalism, Adorno identified stand-alone empirical data as conceptually redundant (and complicit with the orders of power) (*Sociology* 176-77). When considered in light of these major interventions in philosophy and social science, the different approaches adopted by Deane and Brown become far more than matters of style.

Deane identifies a strategy in the literature of James Joyce, whereby colonialist, nationalist and religious frames of reference in Ireland are re-worked through a creatively self-conscious use of language. He observes in Joyce the transformation of diverse Irish historical narratives into a meta-narrative process of perpetual fictive reinvention. Deane considers this to be the most impressive precedent in literary imagination for a politics of radical emancipation in Ireland because of how explicitly it shows the fictive nature of political rhetoric: “In revealing the essentially fictive nature of political imagining, Joyce did not repudiate Irish nationalism. Instead he understood it as a potent example of a rhetoric which imagined as true structures that did not and were never to exist outside language” (*Celtic Revivals* 107).

In the decades between the first publication of *Celtic Revivals* and the present time, a lot of important criticism has emerged in which Joyce’s treatment of nationalism and the colonial situation in nineteenth-century Ireland is reassessed.¹ There is a strong sense that Deane brings his awareness of life in Derry city during the worst phase of the Northern Irish conflict in the early 1970s to his reading of Joyce, Ulster being a terrain in which the linguistic essence of political experience is immediately apparent in the perpetual naming contest: Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland and Ulster/the Six Counties.

Taking as its point of the departure the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 rather than the period of the Irish Literary Revival, Terence Brown's study lays its emphasis upon state policy and the features of Irish social life conveyed through historical and economic historical studies that offer a backdrop against which intellectual and literary reflections in the independent state are set over the course of sixty years. Like Deane, Brown identifies the conservative nature of Irish society as the key challenge for the intellectual life of the nation over this period. Whereas Deane locates this in the mentalities inherited from the system of British economic and juridical power in Ireland – culturally enshrined in the aesthetic of the Big House – Brown situates it in relation to a Catholic middle-class, an agrarian social formation characterised by religious devotion and economic pragmatism.

Invoking Joyce as cultural exemplar, Deane also follows Joyce's rejection of the Irish Literary Revival, which first offered Joyce a forum as a writer with the publication in 1904 of "The Sisters", "Eveline", and "After the Race" in *The Irish Homestead*, which he later termed "the pig's paper" in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses* (Joyce 246). In contrast to Joyce's stance, however, the issue for Deane has not been the stultifying presence of what Heaney – ventriloquizing Joyce – calls "your peasant pilgrimage" in *Station Island* (Heaney 93). On the contrary, it has been the way in which the Irish Literary Revival shaped culture in Ireland according to an aesthetic originally founded upon a memory of Protestant aristocratic pre-eminence in a pre-democratic age reshaped to channel forces for social change through the cultural medium of romantic traditionalism. Deane interprets this memory as a Yeatsian gentrification of an eighteenth century bourgeois social formation. Hence, he gives emphasis to Edmund Burke's description of the Irish Protestant landowning classes as "a plebeian oligarchy" (*Celtic Revivals* 28-37). For Brown, by contrast, Irish farmers and tradesmen were the key constituents in accounting for the conservative profile of Irish society as it emerged from rebellion, guerrilla war and civil war in the 1918-1923 period (*Ireland* 23). While both Deane and Brown align ideology with social and economic circumstances in a largely deterministic manner, they are distinguished by emphasis. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* constantly moves back to social and economic circumstances for its understanding of the political and literary cultural dynamics at work in the Irish Free State since its inception. Tracing pervasive forms of self-perception and self-understanding in twentieth century Irish society back to the legacies of those political and social formations from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, *Celtic Revivals* is more interested in the power of those forms themselves as shaping influences on the present.

Ireland: A Social and Cultural History is a remarkably dexterous work of scholarship, moving from discussion of government policy to statistics on schooling, Church building,

emigration, and industry. The range of writers and intellectuals addressed in relation to these considerations is wide: Patrick Pearse, W.B. Yeats, Æ, Douglas Hyde, Horace Plunkett, Patrick Kavanagh, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien). Brown's book is an exemplary work of interdisciplinarity for it addresses language policy, the influence of the Catholic Church, and economic change over the course of a fifty-year period. That said, there are noticeable tensions within the study, the elaboration of which is important to evaluate its political and cultural critique. Most immediate and pervasive in this regard is that tension between Brown's sense of inevitability about the way Irish political, social and cultural affairs developed in the early twentieth century and his sense of disappointment with the course of these developments. Brown makes a compelling case that Irish society in the decades after independence failed to create artistic freedom and economic opportunity. Rather than inaugurate a programme of economic, social and cultural renewal, Government policy in the first decades was largely cautious, seeking to conserve and consolidate rather than expand and experiment.

Brown identifies three sources for the political character of the new Irish state: 1) the conservative nature of the most powerful groups in Irish society that emerged in the decades after the Famine: farmers, shopkeepers/publicans and traders; 2) the pressing need for the new Irish Government to stabilise politics after the ravages of guerrilla war and civil war in the 1918-1923 period; 3) the influence of the "Irish Ireland" philosophy that emerged during the period of the Irish Literary Revival. This assessment raises some challenging questions. If the traditional character of Irish society in the latter half of the nineteenth-century rendered inevitable the conservatism of the new Irish government after 1922, is it not pointless to lament the failure of a radicalised polity to emerge after Ireland became an independent Free State? Furthermore, if this conservatism of the Irish Free State was an inevitable consequence of the conservative nature of Irish society, how can it also be regarded as a necessary response to the radically unstable nature of the Irish political situation out of which independence and partition emerged? On several occasions in his book, Brown sees the policies of the Irish Free State during the 1920s in such a light. It is possible to explain this anomaly in terms of that historical combination of Catholic conservatism and political subversion within the militant Irish Republican tradition.

The devout Catholicism of IRA activists like Dan Breen in 1920s Tipperary or Billy McKee in 1970s Belfast are two striking examples of this combination.² Even taking these examples into consideration, it is still a shortcoming of *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* that Brown does not fully conceptualize the paradox of deeply conservative social formations in Ireland in the 1918-1923 period generating revolutionary political conditions. By situating

the Irish experience within the general framework of modernity, Joe Cleary regards “modernisation via colonization” as preceding “modernisation via industrialization”, the former being “as destructive to any idea of an organic stable community” as the latter would be (“Ireland and Modernity” 7). This idea can account for the confluence of traditional attitudes and social practices in early twentieth-century Ireland with revolutionary transformations of the constitutional situation in the country.

Essentialism

By evaluating the criticism of Irish life by intellectuals and artists in the generation after Yeats against the political character of the Irish Free State, Brown brings out the extent to which the frustrations of that period were rooted in a sense of political failure. Indeed, at one point he even expresses some sympathy for “diehard Republicans” who thought the settlement of 1921 and subsequent administration was a caricature of the freedom for which they had fought (*Ireland* 38). Attending to the ideological forms he identifies in canonical Irish writing of the twentieth century, Deane traces the influence of a romantic aesthetic of heroism as a depoliticising form of literary representation. However divergent their studies are in critical approach, both identify an essentialist habit of thought as one of the most persistent features of Irish culture and the greatest obstacle to emancipatory politics on the island. Brown is quite direct on the matter, identifying the ‘Irish Ireland’ philosophy that emerged during the course of the Irish Literary Revival (particularly in the writing of Denis Patrick Moran), as one of the great distortions in Irish life from the foundation of the state to the beginning of the sixties. For the most part, Deane objects to the aestheticization of heroism in the literature of the Irish Revival in *Celtic Revivals* on the basis that this heroism is essentialist in nature.

One of the most thought-provoking features of both studies is the identification of essentialist propensities even in the most politically radical writers of the 1920s and 1930s in Ireland. Brown, for example, draws attention to the idealisation of the west of Ireland in the work of Communist Internationalist Peadar O’Donnell (*Ireland* 73). Deane saves some of his most biting criticism for Sean O’Casey, Ireland’s Marxist playwright of the later Revival period. He accuses O’Casey of substituting for political critique a sentimentalised humanism against which revolutionary nationalism is contrasted purely and simply as a force of oppression (*Celtic Revivals* 108-12). At first it seems odd that Deane favours Yeats’s esoteric drama *The Resurrection* over O’Casey’s play on the First World War, *The Silver Tassie*, when complaining of O’Casey’s literary posturing (*Celtic Revivals* 113). It makes sense however if we see that the estranging power of language and imagery, which Yeats employs in *The Resurrection*, produces distancing effects that allow one to trace an ideological construction of

reality. Deane is correct in regarding a later Yeats play like *The Resurrection* in this way, but misleading in distinguishing him so drastically from O’Casey on the basis of such a play. *The Silver Tassie*, after all, is the first play in which O’Casey ventures beyond the predominant realism of the so-called Dublin trilogy of his plays from the mid-1920s.

Brown draws explicitly on Clifford Geertz’s notions of national essentialism when reflecting upon the patterns of Irish social and cultural life from the period of independence to the Second World War. He praises the contributions that Ireland made during this period in the field of international relations, looking at its role in forums like the League of Nations in the pursuit of national rights, the maintenance of international peace, and the resistance of small states to puppet-like treatment from larger powers (*Ireland* 140-41). The predominant impression of Ireland during this period that the study conveys, however, is one of a society dominated by the pastoral ideal of traditional Catholic Ireland. Examining this circumstance in relation to Irish language policy, censorship, and the influence of the Catholic Church, Brown’s study demonstrates the essentialist form of this ideal when pointing to discrepancies with Irish social realities. It amounts to a critical assessment of the “Irish Ireland” ideal that received its most well-known expression in De Valera’s St. Patrick’s Day broadcast of March 1943, with its “cosy homesteads” and “the laughter of happy maidens” (“The Ireland That”).

The criticism that Brown directs at the notion of Irish authenticity – to which Irish Governments gave sanction in policies on language, education, censorship and Church influence on the state – is as balanced as it is cogent. As with the tension between lament and inevitability in his reading of political culture after independence, however, there is again a disparity here that might prompt a reconsideration of the question of essentialism. On the one hand, Brown presents a picture of Irish life up to the Second World War as deeply conservative; on the other, he argues that anglicising and modernising processes were rendering Irish pastoral ideals obsolete, both in terms of state cultural policy and of the work of individual artists. Brown argues that “Irish Ireland” values became increasingly difficult to sustain as daily life in the country became more anglicised with the extension of new communication technologies like the radio. During these decades however, bastions of Irish tradition like the Roman Catholic Church and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) grew in strength and influence. Brown observes that the GAA organisation structure brought “the rural world increasingly into contact with large-scale national organization and political movements” (*Ireland* 68). Modernisation in this instance, it might well be argued, assisted rather than diminished the influence of “Irish Ireland” ideas up to the 1960s.³

Whereas Brown focuses on the dynamics between traditional values and social change in his critique of Irish essentialism, Deane concentrates upon the influence of “heroic styles”

on modern Irish literature. The heroic ideal is where the political and the aesthetic meet most persistently from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century period, which encompass the Literary Revival and its aftermath in the Irish Free State. Deane's critical readings of seminal Irish authors centre on how romantic heroism has caused artistic treatments of Irish political and historical experience to afford little opportunity for understanding the power mechanisms through which its social life has been shaped. Deane's problem with this development is that political and historical considerations have become subsumed under a more fundamental consideration of Irish "character" or "essence". In the process, the complex dynamics of social life are fictively transformed into the figure of a single protagonist, a distinct couple, or an elect "band of brothers" who embody the destiny of the people. Deane's point is that if literature endorses or belittles these prototypes of national character, it denies the opportunity for new artistic forms prompting new kinds of political understanding on the island so long as literature remains organised around this preoccupation. It seems therefore bizarre that Deane saves some of his most damning judgement for O'Casey, the dramatist who attacked most emphatically the heroic cult in *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*. As to the early Abbey Theatre play that sets the tone for so much in subsequent decades, *The Playboy of the Western World*, we can dispute the extent to which Synge was indicting or celebrating the cult of hero worship in Ireland. We cannot, however, deny that his representation of Irish life in the play is structured around that matter.

While Deane takes the Irish Literary Revival's aesthetic of heroism to task for its distortion of political and social realities, in relation to the 1916 Rising itself the dimension of death gives him pause for a reconsideration of its political meaning. Discussing the philosophy of history that Yeats developed in his mystical work, *A Vision* (1926), Deane observes how the struggle opened up by the meaninglessness that death confers upon human existence is transformed in the work of art. In Yeats's aesthetic, Deane sees death instigate both content and form; the confrontation with mortality as the proper subject of poetry, image and rhythm as enactments of its tension (*Celtic Revivals* 42-44). Deane introduces two political contexts within which this aesthetic of death was aligned in the early twentieth century; the Irish rebellion against British rule in 1916, and continental European Fascism. Recognising an intellectual affinity with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in Yeats's poetic engagements with the theme of death, Deane attends to the inclination towards "a savage politics" as part of this identification (*Celtic Revivals* 43). Ultimately, however, he ascribes the political content of Yeats's later aesthetic to "an almost pure specimen of the colonialist mentality" (*Celtic Revivals* 49). For this to be the case, the distance between Yeatsian philosophy and the 1916

revolutionary moment needs to be demonstrated and sustained, a challenge that proves insurmountable in Deane's analysis.

Deane's reading becomes fascinating and strained in equal measure as it confronts the task. There is recognition that the intervention of the 1916 Rising and its leader Patrick Pearse represented something completely new at the level of heroism: "What stalked through the Post Office was a new and specifically Irish version of modern, existential heroism" (*Celtic Revivals* 46). Yet this recognition is beset with uncertainty about how Yeats should respond to it: Deane assesses this as Yeats's need to convert a bourgeois revolution into the aristocratic-heroic terms of his aesthetic philosophy; hence the vacillation of "Easter 1916", Yeats's celebrated poem on the Rising. However, the ethos of chivalry and romantic heroism upon which Patrick Pearse drew aligns him with Yeats at the level of political ideology far more closely than Deane allows. To characterise the Rising as bourgeois is too simplistic – Pearse himself had the Geraldines, the Wild Geese or Robert Emmet to draw upon as historical examples of the Irish aristocrat revolutionary.⁴ Irish Republicanism through the course of the twentieth century might be characterised not as a conflict between militancy and constitutionalism, but between the two concerns to distinguish the focus of Deane's analysis from that of Brown's most emphatically – hero-worship and pragmatism. Michael Collins, for example, embodies this conflict through the contrasting ways in which he is seen in modern Irish history. He has been regarded as a pragmatist who, in signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, accepted that the ideal of a full independent Irish Republic could not be achieved in his lifetime. Yet he is also seen as a hero, a man who became a sacrificial victim during the Irish Civil War when he was assassinated. Beyond this issue of pragmatism and heroism, we can ask whether the predicaments that Deane identifies are not simply the working out of those dialectical polarities of transience and the eternal through which Yeats presents his artistic and mystical conceptions of history. Characterising the "sacrifice" of 1916 as approximating to a species of existential heroism makes it more difficult to dismiss as archaic Yeats's manner of representing the rebellion, given the existentialist aspect to radical and reactionary political movements in twentieth-century Europe.

The source of tension in Deane's reading of Yeats's later politics lies in the conflicting significations that he attributes to death. Although he judges Pearse's poems as anachronistic in style, they are nonetheless impressive "in light of the fact that he knew he would die" (*Celtic Revivals* 74). By contrast, he implicates Synge in historical colonialism in Ireland to the extent that he considers his plays as essentially a wake for an Irish nation that has died (*Celtic Revivals* 62). Yet what lends Yeats's later poetry its power in Deane's eyes and its quite radical challenge to modern middle-class civilisation is its fearless determination to confront death. Deane regards Yeats's traditionalism as revolutionary in its time when set against "the history of the

disappearance from the Western mind of the sense of eternity and of the consciousness of death” (*Celtic Revivals* 49). Deane’s interpretations of death in the Irish literary context cast light on a particular aspect of the many critiques of essentialism in poststructuralist thought or, more broadly, that of postmodernism.

These critiques offer relativism and difference as alternatives to the certain foundation that essentialism gives to experience and understanding. Deane, however, recognizes that relativism has its own foundation in death: death is a form of ultimate experience that poststructuralism or postmodernism cannot relativize. His reflections on death are the point at which the modern idea of freedom – political, artistic and sexual – shows its complicity with essentialism. That idea receives its most extensive articulation in Heidegger’s ontology of *Dasein* but it persists in the nihilistic dimension to Badiou’s set theory interpretation of the Platonic essence.⁵ The implications for the Irish case are too varied to address here, suffice to say that it bears upon the tensions between the appeal in secular culture to the relativism of human value that death confers, and death as a historical absolute in the field of perpetual political struggle.

Language

The issue of language is addressed in different ways in *Celtic Revivals* and *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*. Deane’s concern is with the political dimensions to the aesthetics of linguistic self-consciousness in modern Irish literature. Brown considers state policy on the Irish language as it developed since Irish independence. These are widely divergent objects of critical attention, yet both studies converge in bringing into focus the ideological dimensions attached to particular stances towards language as the instrument for social representation and in itself. Extending their critical probing of essentialism into Irish cultural imagining and political experience, both Deane and Brown examine the ways in which language (and language policy) developed through the course of the twentieth century in the practices of Irish writers and those of the Irish state. Deane is more interested in style than content: the configurations of language itself prove more telling than the material represented when it comes to assessing the politics of modern Irish literature. Brown presents the issue of the Irish language in terms of state power in the field of education, the character of the political change that accompanied the transition from British rule to independence, and the legacy of an “Irish Ireland” philosophy that developed in the decades preceding this transition.

One of the most interesting aspects of Deane’s treatment of language in *Celtic Revivals* is the contrast between his sympathy for Joyce and his criticism of Synge in their experiments with language as a medium. Deane identifies the failure of a series of political

narratives in Ireland as the point of departure for the revolutions in narrative form we encounter in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (*Celtic Revivals* 106). He also identifies fantasy as the central element in the drama of Synge: Maura's fantasy of a surviving son in *Rider's to the Sea*; Christy's fantasy of having killed his father in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Mary Dhoul and Martin Dhoul's fantasy that they were both beautiful in *The Well of the Saints*. Each is confronted with unpalatable realities: Mary has no surviving son, Christy did not kill his father, Mary and Martin see their real decrepitude. In these plays of Synge, characters eventually move beyond these realities into the realm of artistic freedom. Deane argues that Synge's vitalizing language is the key to realising this freedom. The problem as he sees it is that it leaves in their state of destitution the communities from which these characters depart: "People talk themselves into freedom. No longer imprisoned by sea or cottage, by age or politics, the Synge heroes and heroines chat themselves off stage, out of history, into legend. Yet they leave behind them a community more hopelessly imprisoned than ever" (*Celtic Revivals* 58).

While Synge's composition of speech for performance is governed by a completely different set of conditions to those of Joyce's prose, it is still curious that Deane takes Synge to task for presenting liberation exclusively in linguistic terms while praising Joyce's narratives for that very reason. Indeed, the pattern that Deane attributes to Synge's work could well apply to Joyce himself: freedom achieved at the level of language as Joyce leaves behind an Ireland "more hopelessly imprisoned than ever." This seeming inconsistency might be explained in terms of Deane's aversion to an old stereotype of Irish verbosity that lingers in Synge's drama, one at variance with the strident cosmopolitanism of Joyce. This position is more difficult to sustain in the present than in the 1980s, given the critical attention that Synge has received over the past thirty years. Declan Kiberd, for example, observes the extent to which the power of Synge's language in performance was attributable in part to his knowledge of Irish syntax; as Irish appeared to be dying, its syntactic energies were passing into a new form of Hiberno-English, arguably a new form of language (*Inventing* 174). Adrian Frazier describes *The Playboy of the Western World* as "an astonishing work of genius" in which almost every sentence is worthy of in-depth analysis "of its elegant power to perturb" ("The Irish", 195). Ben Levitas draws attention to Daniel Casey and Nicholas Grene's application of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival to *The Playboy of the Western World* (*The Theatre* 126). Mary Burke draws interesting connections between the controversy provoked at first performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* in Dublin in 1907 and the scandal provoked by the first performance of Igor Stravinsky's, *The Rite of Spring*, in Paris just six years later, in May 1913 ("The Riot" 87-102). Upon observing the connections between the impact of Synge's greatest work and Stravinsky's revolutionary avant-garde opera, Burke identifies a context that brings Synge's experiments

close to those of Joyce, a context also explored in the connections that Shaun Richards makes between *The Playboy* and the most explosive play of the 1890s, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* ("Synge" 21-30).

The question of language was manifested socially in Ireland in state policy on the Irish language after the country achieved its independence. Brown examines the circumstances around which the teaching of Irish in primary schools became mandatory in the early 1920s. He notes how small the opposition was to the policy on the grounds of practicality, and the influence of Fr. Thomas Corcoran, S.J., Professor of Education at University College Dublin, in support of a policy of teaching subjects through the medium of Irish in the national schools. Instigated by Douglas Hyde in 1893 through the medium of *Conradh na Gaeilge* (Gaelic League) and taken on by figures like D.P. Moran in later decades, Brown assesses the project of reviving Irish as a living vernacular in terms of a struggle between humanistic, educationalist tendencies on the one hand, and conservative, authoritarian tendencies on the other (*Ireland* 41-46). Looking at census figures for Irish-speaking areas in the west in the period between 1911 and 1926, he identifies a pattern of decline in the numbers of Irish speakers that went against the aspirations of language revivalists. Confronted with this social reality, Brown observes that the attitudes of language revivalists become increasingly authoritarian (*Ireland* 50). Later he considers changing attitudes to the teaching of Irish within the Irish National Teacher's Organisation in the forties, with criticism of the nationalistic educational policy on the language becoming more pronounced. In Flann O'Brien (himself a fluent Irish speaker), Brown finds one of the most intelligent and acerbic critics of the "Irish Ireland" philosophy to underpin official language policy in Ireland from 1922, particularly through his novel *An Béal Bocht* (*Ireland* 148-50).

Brown's assessment of the teaching of Irish up to the fifties is well observed. Rooted in the rural life of the west, the language became more than a medium of communication. It was a symbol of tradition that became associated with the Irish Celtic Romanticism of such mythological sagas as *Tóraíocht Diarmuid agus Gráinne* (*The Voyage of Diarmuid and Grainne*), or stoic Irish durability in the face of hardship, as in *Peig*, the biographical narrative of a Blasket Islander that had long been required reading for Irish language studies in Ireland's education system. This tradition was rich and worth preserving, but it presented the difficulty of how the language was to adapt to the educational imperatives of modern society, particularly in the fields of science, economics, and mathematics. To render Irish a workable vernacular throughout the country, the language itself was in need of thorough reform. Brown argues that the absence of a wider set of radical policies in Ireland following independence meant that the objective of making Irish the working language of the population was bound to

fail. Such reform might have provided the institutional framework wherein the modernisation of the language could have been enacted. It might well be argued, however, that the problem pre-dated Hyde himself and all “Irish Ireland” movements to emerge later. Gearóid Denvir, for example, notes that the main interest in Irish in the nineteenth-century was scholarly and antiquarian, and the dominant sentiment was that of “a romantic, backward-looking attachment to the language” and regret at its decline (“Literature in Irish” 564). The more intractable problem concerned the internal struggle between progressivist and nativist ideologues of language revival among Irish speakers themselves during the first decades of the twentieth century. Addressing this issue, Philip O’Leary also brings to the fore a huge difficulty for any project of systematic language reform – the contest for predominance between differing provincial dialects of Irish, functioning not only with certain differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, but, more dauntingly, differences in grammatical structure (“The Irish Renaissance” 226-69).

Conclusion

Celtic Revivals and *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* were vital contributions to Irish literary criticism during the delightfully dreary 1980s. The polarisation of the conflict in the North following the 1981 Hunger Strikes prompted the Irish Government under Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald to establish the New Ireland Forum in order that some political initiative might develop on the basis of a tacit recognition of the legitimacy of political difference. The fifteen-year recession into which the Irish economy sunk at the end of the 1970s prompted a whole series of strike actions, a renewed pattern of emigration, and a culture war over the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish law. Anne-Marie Hourihane, who campaigned against the Pro-Life amendment to the Irish Constitution in 1983, described the Ireland of that time for a young feminist as “like living in Franco’s Spain” (Ferriter 19). The critical scrutiny to which Irish tradition is subject in both Deane and Brown reflects the political antagonisms of that time in both jurisdictions. Calling for an abandonment of “the literary myths of the Revival” Deane identified habits of thought deeply engrained in Irish life that were derived from a colonial legacy, the violence and bitter hatred in the North bearing testimony to their endurance. Brown’s attention to the religious and economic dimensions of Irish cultural life bears direct relation to the upswing in Irish economic fortunes from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, consequent upon a sustained period of foreign direct investment, accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with the bans on divorce and contraception, intensified with Ireland’s accession to the European Community in 1973. The monumental transformations of the past twenty-five years within Irish society re-configure the significance

of the assessments that Deane and Brown offer in the books discussed here. The critical scrutiny to which they subject old colonialist and nationalist habits of thought was a necessary moment in an Irish society seeking to overcome the political and religious polarisation in the 1970s and 1980s. Within the context of a globalized Irish society that is subject to the recurrent calamities of a crisis-prone world financial system, and in the face of severe economic, epidemiological and ecological challenges worldwide, notions that Deane and Brown target from different angles may now be important contributions to new kinds of politically-conscious artistic perspectives, including eco-critically transformed concepts of romanticism, reconsiderations of heroic virtue in post-human times and reconceptualizations of essentialism in situationalist terms.

Notes

- 1 See Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Leonard Orr, *Joyce, Imperialism, and Postcolonialism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008).
- 2 On Breen's Catholicism, see his account of his wedding in a republican safe-house in Tipperary during the war of independence. *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1981), p. 164. For discussion of McKee's devout Catholicism, see Richard English, *Armed Struggle: A History of the IRA* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p. 112, 135.
- 3 For a discussion of the GAA as a force of modernization, see Richard Holt, 'Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport', *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, ed. Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 33-46. See also, Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2014).
- 4 David Dwan notes how Yeats co-opted John O'Leary for an aristocratic Irish ideal. How far this distorted O'Leary's political philosophy is a matter of debate, but O'Leary would certainly have been included in Pearse's spiritual cabal. *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), pp. 118-19.
- 5 See Heidegger's discussion of 'Being-towards-death' in his account of the ontological structure of *Dasein*. *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 299-311. Badiou's dense discussion of Plato's Parmenides places 'the name of the void' at the centre of his numeric reading of Platonic essence. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 35.

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