

Eamon Grennan 1999: *Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century*. Omaha: Creighton UP. 433 pp.

Jefferson Holdridge
Wake Forest University
holdrij@wfu.edu

As far as ‘theory’ went, it was mostly implicit or explicit versions of New Criticism that excited us in those days at UCD [University College Dublin]. ‘Empson, Richards, Ransom, Brooks’ was all our cry. We relished the activity of ‘text’, the tang of language as actor, agent, even *agent provocateur*. As the readings I’ve done in this collection will show, I have remained more or less committed to the habits of critical response fostered by these early influences.

Eamon Grennan, *Facing the Music*, Preface, xiv.

In his preface to the collection *Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, Eamon Grennan tellingly writes of one early essay, “Careless Father: Yeats and His Juniors”:

I hoped such an essay might be the prelude to a book I planned to call *The Domesticated Muse*. Such a book would have focused on the ways in which Yeats's immediate successors managed to deal with that difficult, often inhibiting influence and, by doing so, how they managed to provide a new beginning for Irish poetry in English. (xiii)

The title of his projected, but uncompleted book, of which these essays are the “lineaments” (xiii), suggests the nature of what follows: an examination of the domesticated muse (the muse of the quotidian) that culminates in Grennan’s discussion of Muldoon’s *The Prince of the Quotidian*. It also involves close scrutiny of the influence of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett on contemporary Irish poets, and the Irish Modernists’ eschewal (Yeats, and to a lesser extent Beckett) or celebration (Joyce) of everyday life. Another element of Grennan’s critical consciousness that is made clear in the preface is his debt to the New Critical practice of close readings. This practice is coupled with an outright suspicion of politically, gender or class-conscious critical points of view; however, Grennan is less polemical in his essays than his opening statements of allegiance suggest. Mahon’s idea that, as Grennan paraphrases it, “a good poem is a paradigm of good politics” (376) provides Grennan with a useful method of defusing the polemic between textual and contextual analysis. Grennan writes of his own relation to Terence Brown’s historical method: “Where Brown gives a historical ‘outer’ reading of the poetry, my aim is to provide a formal ‘inner’ reading. The two are, I hope, complementary” (179). There are many

keen observations of textual nuance throughout this collection, but there is also a consistent awareness of the political and social ramifications of the aesthetic.

The breadth of the collection is worth mentioning. In it there are four essays on Yeats, spanning his career, two on Joyce's poetry and prose (an excellent recent one on "Bloom and the Politics of Space"), others on Edmund Spenser, John McGahern, Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Padraic Fallon, Louis MacNeice, John Hewitt, Thomas Kinsella, Richard Murphy, John Montague, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Michael Hartnett, Paul Durcan, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, as well as general essays on subjects ranging from the American influence on Irish poetry to the sexual and erotic motifs of the Irish and English language tradition. Though Grennan makes an early disclaimer as regards "coverage" (xx), the amount of authors discussed, as well as the clarity of the writing, recommends this book as a thorough introduction to the subject.

The essays on Yeats, although very thorough and attentive to the craft, do not offer particularly ground-breaking theories of the poet's career. Grennan admits as much when he reacts to imagined criticisms "to point to the presence of desire in Yeats's work is hardly going to win the prize for critical originality" (20). I think that his aims are more persuasive than they are analytical. To this end, one finds in these essays emotive readings that do indeed shed light on the poems and help one to trace the growth of Yeats's poetic. From readings of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, through *Responsibilities*, and on to *The Tower*, one encounters Yeats's poetry afresh through Grennan's discerning eyes. Take, for example, his perception of the place of the self in "Meditations in Time of Civil War":

The self is neither subjective nor possessive but, as it were, prepositional: door and window are means of exit or entrance, ways of letting the world in or the poet out. Situated at a threshold between different zones, insisting on a sort of liminality of being, each of these poems portrays the involuntary self, the man caught in circumstance rather than the man forcing his will upon it. (43)

There are also more philosophical reflections on the famous close to the poem "The Tower", in which the poet makes his will and imagines his end among "the deepening shades": "When the masterful ego surrenders its will to dominate its world, all the brutal phenomena of mortal life appear in an almost oriental light, not of negation but of total admission ... a mystical being-at-one with the natural world" (46). This type of textual unveiling more than compensates for any lack of original overarching argument. The eye of the poet is at work.

The readings of Joyce have a similar type of specific credence. Seeing the early poems of *Chamber Music* as explorations of Joyce's inner self may not be newsworthy, but Grennan's sensitivity to their form and arrangement is commendable, as is his awareness of why Joyce became a prose writer rather than a poet (i.e. his gift for detail was more readily apparent). Grennan's essay "Little Room: Bloom and the Politics of Space", the most recent one in the collection, is even more interesting. In it, we see that though he claims to avoid postcolonial and other similarly political readings, his best essays combine textual and political insights. Analyzing Leopold Bloom's spatial relationships in *Ulysses*, Grennan makes this observation:

Bloom's relationship with these domestic spaces shows how—though free in incidental ways (to feed the cat, to think his thoughts, to walk in the sun, to lust after the serving-girl next door)—he is not in control—as the colonized

individual is never in control—of his own living space and living conditions.
(103)

Later in the essay he comes to this conclusion regarding the redemptive capability of Bloom's mind: "In his own physical and mental self, then, Bloom is a space that literally embodies values opposite to those politically determined value systems that exclude him" (113). Utopian possibilities are also reflected in Bloom's dream of cosmic space, of his own house, ever conscious, as Grennan writes of Joyce's own politics of space, of "rattling implications, human and political, of space denied, free space achieved" (118).

As fine as some of Grennan's work on Yeats and Joyce is, his most powerful remarks, perhaps because he shares certain assumptions and history as a writer, are reserved for contemporary authors. Writing of "post-Catholic" McGahern, Grennan notes that his achievement "is to have raised on that empty space a plausible simulacrum of contemporary 'post-Catholic' Irish consciousness, phantom limbs and all" (129). Of Austin Clarke's move from early faith, through breakdown and loss of faith, on to satire and recovery, Grennan sees how Clarke "altered to meet the needs of his own spirit and imagination in its encounter with the realities of the fallen world he had to inhabit" (154). In a poem that follows this essay on Clarke, one of several literary meditations in verse, Grennan fittingly calls Clarke a "gadfly second best heretic" (157). Later, in an essay on Padraic Fallon, he makes an observation which sets a standard for his reading of the many contemporary poets examined. In Fallon's "best work", writes Grennan, there "... is a commitment to the quotidian [that] prepares an ascent to a revived and now earned sense of mystery" (159). Such a commitment to the quotidian as a basis for an ascent to some form of mystery is essential to contemporary poetry and, one might mention, in no one's work more than Grennan's itself. Fallon's mixture of irony, affection, skepticism and awe foreshadow not only Derek Mahon's work (as Grennan asserts) but many other poets besides.

Other significant post-Yeatsian influences covered here are Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice. In his two essays on Kavanagh, Grennan traces the poet's progress from pastoral to anti-pastoral, and concludes with a description of Kavanagh's rebirth by the Grand Canal in Dublin, showing that this personal rebirth was a type of urban pastoral, in which the language was "at once tough and lyrical" (173). Combining the effects of his satirical and pastoral stages in

... this final pastoral state, *being itself* becomes the poet's unselfconscious prayer, a condition that takes him beyond the mystical raptures of the earlier poems (where innocence can be a kind of lit vacancy) and beyond the sensual nostalgia of the middle group, where prayer is memorial posture present in the imagination by virtue of its very absence in actuality. (173)

However important the peasant setting and action of Kavanagh's poems may be to later poets such as Seamus Heaney, Grennan feels that Kavanagh's anti-heroic posture and specific use of language are equally significant legacies. His gifts were of "rooted speech" and "ordinary experience" (190). Louis MacNeice, on the other hand, gave later poets an urbane language with which to describe life in the city. Grennan's essay concentrates on MacNeice's two-fold relationship to Ireland. "Metaphorically, Ireland represents ecstatic emancipation and dreadful damnation" (193). This is true of both the sentimental south and the brutal north. Like Kavanagh's career, MacNeice's moves from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, in which his "double-level poetry" (200)—this is MacNeice's phrase—becomes a

parable for a lost Eden which can only be regained in memory. Or as Grennan writes, it becomes “a paradise regained of symbolic consolation” (205). Although in different ways, both MacNeice and Kavanagh provide models of personal and national coherence for future poets. Subsequent essays discuss the varieties of coherence in more recent poetry.

Grennan incisively investigates Thomas Kinsella’s development from a lyricist to an exploratory poet of fragmentation who admits at every turn the difficulty of achieving personal or poetic coherence. He also writes in a refreshingly honest vein of trying to “experience” rather than “understand” Kinsella’s poems now that he too is “battered and baffled by the actual” (218). Such an experience for Grennan is always linguistic; his sensitivity to language elevates his criticism. For though he does not have the awareness of critical movements and views which a more academic critic might, his work shows that he has long inhabited the poems that are his subject matter. For example, Grennan writes the following analysis of Montague’s famous line “Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people”:

First, I love the truncated, verbless grammar of the opening line, the way it turns the title—which it simply repeats—into a gesture of strong but not strident affirmation (the *sound* ensures that, all those soft consonants and open vowels seem nurturing, protective). Lovely, too, the way the poet tucks his own childhood between the two impressive (quasi-parental) entities—ancient monuments and ‘the old people’ (the definite article in this phrase adds a dimension of grandeur to adjective and noun)—rhythmically isolating it, but putting it protectively within a traditional line of descent. (214)

Grennan also has a sense of the larger significance of the work and notes how Montague, because of his dual Irish and American connections, has combined the influence of the insider Kavanagh with the outsider Synge when viewing his early life in Ireland. He notes similarly of Richard Murphy’s poetry “how intimate a view of his experience the language allows me” (233) while charting the broader implications of Murphy’s split Anglo-Irish identity (the last in a long line of Big House writers), his longing to be Irish, his failure, the use of the Anglo-Saxon caesura as symbol of that failure. Grennan observes that Murphy’s volume *The Battle of Aughrim* seeks to historicize the inner split between Anglo and Irish identities, that the volume *High Island* interrogates the self in order to understand the split, and finally that the volume *The Price of Stone* recognizes this doubleness and integrates it.

Of poets who are his contemporaries, Grennan is equally perceptive. Although somewhat dated, the essay on Derek Mahon nevertheless lays the foundation for an understanding of his work. “The Snow Party” enacts an artist’s disinterestedness and objective reverence in the face of political upheaval. To Grennan, this commitment to the object is part of Mahon’s retreat from history. Though it may be somewhat of an overstatement, especially considering the more satirical recent epistolary poems, Grennan’s argument is convincing: “Imaginative existence-as-speech enables Mahon to move beyond his struggle with history towards a condition where the object is its own justification” (266). This comment seems central to Mahon’s poetry, however much such justification by the object may have been tested of late in Mahon’s work. In a footnote that acknowledges the changes in Mahon’s recent poetry, particularly the social and historical meditations that have somewhat controversially marked the poetry, Grennan perceptively writes,

Since the publication of *Poems 1962-1978* [this is the book first reviewed], of course, Mahon has published a number of collections, chief among them

being the *Selected Poems* (1991) and *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997). Particularly in his last, in which he has allowed the more Juvenalian side of himself free rein, he has made some innovative swerves away from the lyrical road on which most of his work has traveled. He has not lost, however, either the plangency or the panoptic ability informing that lyrical mode. (272)

Perhaps Grennan should have incorporated more recent critical work on the subjects of the older essays that were assembled for this collection. He certainly should have brought them to bear on the body of the essay, rather than relegating them to footnotes. They are too important; nevertheless, his emphasis on the role of the object in Mahon's work continues to have relevance. It is part of Mahon's effort to move from the unspeakable conditions of much of twentieth-century experience to what civility and reverence for beauty may still be possible in society.

Grennan's essay on Michael Longley's civil speech is equally engaging and aesthetically sensitive. While willing to note what he believes is the weakness of Longley's earlier verse—believing that in some poems “genuine emotion is embalmed” (274)—Grennan ably demonstrates what is important about the volume *Gorse Fires*, written after a long poetic silence. It is with this volume that Longley tenses his poetic nerve. “The title of the volume itself”, Grennan writes, “is itself a symbolic action. Brilliant and encumbering [like Longley's previous style], the gorse is burnt off in spring to open a field and render the land more usable” (276). The essays on Michael Hartnett, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paul Durcan, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian are similarly balanced and sensitive to the larger aesthetic project of each poet.

Grennan criticizes Hartnett's “curdled excesses of language, self-infatuated sexism, and a kind of clumsy self-regard in search of appropriate eloquence” (300) and yet proceeds to show how “the poet is willing to take expressive risks that may fail [for] he will be satisfied with nothing less than an idiom unmediated by anything except its own sense of style and ritual” (302). Like his close analysis of Montague's poem “Like Dolmens round My Childhood, the Old People”, Grennan's ten-page analysis of Paul Muldoon's “Making the Move” is expertly done to show how “syntax suggests the nature of the poet's own particular power over the world he has invented” (340). Grennan realizes, however, that Muldoon's tricks and sleights of tongue can be annoying. Like many other critics and reviewers, he finds in the volume *The Annals of Chile* a “coming of age” (349). Writing of the women poets Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Grennan remains acutely aware of the difficulties and strengths of their writing. In spite of his early proviso that he is not writing about gender, he notes that both “insist upon the feminine dimension of the world” (293). Quoting (but not footnoting) Donna Haraway's point that “[f]eminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (293), he believes such a perspective is necessary for an understanding of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's feminism. The following passage from his essay “Mazing McGuckian” shows that this is most probably also a good strategy for understanding the Northerner's poetry:

With McGuckian we are always *in medias res*: things are going on; the continuum of the speaker's existence is interrupted by this voiced and worded fragment of it. Every beginning seems to propel us into some brightly lit corner of a narrative to which no other access has been provided, a narrative that never seems to strain after completeness or closure, that has something of the quality of a stained glass window in smithereens. (352)

Though one may complain that Grennan is resorting to figures of speech when confronted with what he does not understand, it would not upset him, nor I think McGuckian. He, for one, is quite candid regarding what he does not understand and while observing that it can be a weakness on the part of the poet, he believes for the most part where the language shines it is a test of the reader, who must “work against the velocity of the poem itself” (355).

The last section of the collection, entitled “Bigger Pictures”, examines a series of Irish authors under the following rubrics: the virtues and vices of the anthology, the American influence on Irish writing, the erotic strain in Irish poetry, and celebrating Seamus Heaney’s Nobel Prize of 1995. The first essay, “Gathering Poets: The Ins and Outs of It”, is a critique of Paul Muldoon’s *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*. As it stands the collection is a “whimful book (361)” (playing on Muldoon’s coinage for his own poetry). Grennan makes a good point as regards the overly exclusive selection—he thinks it should have been called “Ten Irish Poets” (361)—yet he understands Muldoon’s wish to have a full entry of poems for each poet. He continues in the essay to discuss the idea and examples of anthologies elsewhere, insisting on the virtues of his own liberal but discriminating nature. In the second essay, Grennan begins with a discussion of Whitman’s influence on Yeats and moves through various poets’ attitudes towards American poetry (including MacNeice’s somewhat surprising antipathy, and a thorough discussion of Kinsella’s debt to Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams). He concludes that American influence is synonymous with stylistic and social freedom. Some of this influence is due to the fact that many of the recent poets are part-time residents in America, having lived there for some years, as has Grennan himself. Though the essay is effective, some of the more interesting ambivalences in Irish attitudes towards High-Capitalist America (Mahon’s *The Hudson Letter*, for example) could bear closer scrutiny. Grennan’s collection, not to mention his essays, predates the attacks of September 11, so one would not expect any reference to recent US foreign policy, something which has been very much on the minds of Irish poets since that date. Nevertheless, a great deal happened between the composition of some of the essays (as far back as 1977) and the publication of the collection, which requires additional commentary. Grennan has so many fine observations to make, any absence is keenly felt.

The penultimate essay, “Public Positions, Private Parts”, examines the place of the erotic in Irish poetry, with a solid examination of the frankness of Gaelic sexuality, the revivalists’ rebellion against Victorian prudery, and the attack by Clarke and others on the Catholic state. Grennan’s concluding analysis of contemporary poetry is sharper, as is evident in this look at Seamus Heaney: “by connecting the political with the sexual in an idiom of relationship as he does, he makes subversive use of the sexual to underscore the intimate human truth inside a political reality in the grip of intransigent tribal abstractions” (416). Here, the critical language is probing; it is a fitting example with which to conclude as the last essay of the book focuses on Heaney. According to Grennan, Heaney’s achievement has been one of enlargement, both poetically and geographically, making the regional political and social concerns of Northern Ireland of international significance (431). Nevertheless, Heaney’s Nobel has proved a mixed blessing for Irish poets and poetry, intensifying international attention while at the same time narrowing the scope of interest to Heaney himself, as poets like Mahon, Montague, McGuckian, and Grennan himself, must be acutely aware. This collection of insightful and rewarding essays is gathered from writings produced over a period of twenty years, from 1977-1997 to be exact. The particular results of such a harvest of years are mixed. The collection

helps one to understand the development of Grennan's critical and poetic faculties (the critic is himself a poet of considerable talent) and it charts the course of Irish poetry, but it does nevertheless lead to a certain amount of repetition of phrases, even of critical insights as he seems to have done little to update the essays. Re-editing might have lessened some of this, but a certain amount of overlapping is inevitable and not in the end highly detrimental to the overall high achievement of this book of essays, celebrating, as it does, "the craft of close reading" (xiii).