[Book Review]


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Abstract: A book review

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This book, *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* (Head of Zeus Ltd, 2017; Harvard UP, 2018), is the collected essays of Declan Kiberd, from Beckett to the present; a decade before Kiberd had published the collection of essays, the earlier book to me being more concerned with the Postcolonial theory. What I mean is that I see more essays on theory-oriented essays in it, while the recent book’s essays focus

In *After Ireland* there are 29 chapters and 8 interchapters, on 22 authors (Friel is discussed in three chapters each on *Philadelphia*, *Faith Healer*, and *Lughnasa*). The first and last chapter are with a question mark: “Introduction: *After Ireland*?” and “Conclusion: Going Global?” The full title of the book sums up its general theme: *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present*. The authors discussed in the chapters include: Beckett, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Edna O’Brien, Frank O’Connor, Richard Power, Friel, Seamus Heaney, John Banville, Michael Hartnett, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, Derek Mahon, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaíl, Eavan Boland, John McGahern, Roddy Doyle, Seamus Deane, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Joseph O’Connor, Conor McPherson, Claire Keegan, and Kate Thompson.

The book is a good introduction to many Irish writers of importance, whom we are not that familiar with, and if you are interested in social and political backgrounds of the works by these writers, this seems to be one of the best recently published.

Granting that this is a great introductory book on these writers and their works, I find something that lacks as literary readings of some writers. Indeed, some of the essays in this book seem very interesting, adding up to aim at the general theme of the book, “writing the nation” and/or the language: that is, English, Irish, Gaelic, French, which a writer writes in. But it seems that none of the essays in the book addresses literature or the literary work *per se* (except for the problem of language) and its excellence from the perspective of a writer’s competence and excellence with which one is born with. Look around in history: one becomes a good writer as one is born that way, not because he speaks English or Irish or Korean. In ancient Korea: “Choe Chiwon (857-10th century), ... philosopher ... poet of the late
Unified Silla period (668-935),” went to Tang China at the age of 12 and passed the Tang imperial examination before he became 22 years, and “rose to high office there before returning to Silla, where he made ultimately futile attempts to reform the governmental apparatus of a declining Silla state” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choe_Chiwon accessed 14 April 2018). To become an official in ancient China and Korea, students take the exam, in which the applicants write poems on some issues; without literary competence and without understanding history and different issues of his nation and others, it is impossible to pass the exam. In England, Shakespeare seems a good example that goes beyond “writing the nation,” despite his historical plays; he is not interested in critiquing Ben Johnson or others. He is born as great playwright and poet. In Ireland Yeats, Synge, Beckett, Heaney seem to me to be indifferent to “writing the nation” in their work: they do their best to create good work as writers dealing with humanity in general in particular terms. It seems to me that even in “Easter 1916” Yeats is not addressing the rising itself, but human weakness bared in the broader stream of history by describing what happens in Nature.

In Ireland, after Yeats, Michael Hartnett’s response to Yeats’s literary legacy seems intriguing to me, if he is really a great writer, as well as Kiberd’s commentary on Hartnett:

*Hartnett’s move to Irish makes sense* [my emphasis], as a way for the gifted young poet to fight free of the Yeatsian legacy, and there is a palpable sense of relief in the lines through which he casts off those chains. The lines also read like a rewrite of Kavanagh’s insult about college learning and the ‘breed of fakes’ — and Kavanagh was timid enough in the end to remove that sonnet from his *Collected Poems* — but Harnett, more intrepid, gives the attack on Yeats a central billing in his farewell poem:

Chef Yeats, that master of the use of herbs
could raise mere stew to a glorious height,
pinch of saga, soupçon of philosophy,
carefully stirred in to get the flavour right,
and cook a poem around the basic verbs.
Our commis-chefs attend and learn the trade,
bemoan the scraps of Gaelic that they know:
add to a simple Anglo-Irish stock
Cuchulain’s marrow-bones to marinate,
a dash of Ó Rathaille simmered slow,
a glass of university hic-haec-hoc;
smell and stand back and proudly offer you
the celebrated Anglo-Irish stew. (Kiberd 191)

In the same context, Kiberd seems to have classified Yeats and some
others as Anglo-Irish writers. What does he mean by this? Yeats is not an
Irish writer? It seems to me that Yeats is an Irish writer who worked in
English and that English is a mother tongue to Irish people who were born
in Modern Ireland and today as well. Similarly, how about Beckett and
Synge? Beckett is a French-Irish playwright? And Synge a Gaelic-Irish
playwright? A writer could write in any tongue one is born in or one is to
speak if/whether he or she wants it. To me, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill could also
have been a great poet in English, but she chose to write in Irish (she was
born in England and moved to Ireland at the age of 5). Irish did not choose
her, but she did. To classify writers by a language does not make sense as
far as excellence in literary work is concerned; we have to concentrate on
understanding and appreciating literary work as literature, instead of treating it
as something else. A literary work counts as literature, not as an evidence of
a historical or political phenomenon.
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Ireland is suffering from a crisis of authority. After Dublin burned in 1916, Samuel Beckett feared “the birth of a nation might also seal its doom.” In Waiting for Godot and a range of powerful works by other writers, Kiberd traces the development of an early warning system in Irish literature that portended social, cultural, and political decline. Edna O’Brien, Frank O’Connor, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Hartnett lamented the loss of the Irish language, Gaelic tradition, and rural life.
