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Passer au crible les traces du passé : modèles, cadres
et métaphores

Gerald Dawe, *The Sound of the Shuttle: Essays on Cultural Belonging and Protestantism in Northern Ireland*

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“associative and cumulative” (p. 46), and which is both dazzling and unnerving. Even though the author quotes Roland Barthes, the pleasure of the text is often elusive here, as the reader constantly stumbles upon neologisms and convoluted phrases. For example, speaking about the number of unwanted pregnancies Irish women had to bear with, Campbell contends that this culture “effectively subtended a derogatorily ethnicised association with overproduction first registered in Malthusianism” (p. 97). Such phrases as “sacred laterality” (p. 21), “extra-proscriptive” (p. 44), “a quantal mode of approach” (p. 51), “effetness” (p. 121), “objectal surfaces” (p. 140), “detrital staticity” (p. 154), “to alchemise” (p. 163) may be read as further evidence of the author’s desire to distinguish herself from the mainstream of Irish studies by an elitism which contradicts the proposed “radicality” of her readings and her anti-humanist stance. This somewhat exclusionary pose belies the affective power she rightfully attributes to McGahern’s writing, characterised by its deceitful and disarming simplicity. True, the ideas that Campbell proposes to discuss are extremely abstract and even evanescent, as misty and gaseous as ambient poetics themselves: there is a mystery in McGahern’s writing, and especially in the effect or affect that his writing calls upon in the reader’s mind – or unconscious – that all critics have tried to unveil and resorb, but so far have failed to capture, whatever the theories, concepts or neologisms they have recourse to, and which may in the end amount to what Campbell describes in her typical style as no more than “the residual materiality of post-ideological quasi-substances” (p. 163). Book upon book of criticism is written and published, leaving whole and non-resorbed the beauty, mystery and integrity of the work of art.

Sylvie MIKOWSKI

Gerald Dawe, *The Sound of the Shuttle: Essays on Cultural Belonging and Protestantism in Northern Ireland*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2020, xi-170 p.

The constitutional challenges brought about by the Brexit referendum and the subsequent focus on Northern Ireland and the Irish border have generated a renewal of interest in this corner of the United Kingdom. In this context, the publication of a collection of essays spanning a period from 1983 to 2019 by poet and Trinity College Dublin professor Gerald Dawe appears particularly timely. Several essays take the reader back to the days when, at the turn of the 1990s, Irish studies emerged as a critical field informed by post-colonial theory but also the revisionist reaction to it. These were the days when Edna Longley (who edited with Gerald Dawe in 1985 a collection of essays on “the Protestant imagination” entitled *Across a Roaring Hill*) was picking with the likes of Seamus Deane a historical and theoretical bone which, for all the illuminating points that were made at the time, has probably been picked dry by now. This should not be taken to deny Dawe’s

essays' relevance to the present situation, but the collection of essays does beg the question of what exactly has been gained by historical hindsight. The fact that the original date of publication, as well as the date of last revision, feature only at the end of each piece, tends to obscure its immediate relevance to the present context. There is an interestingly serendipitous aspect to this editing choice as the reader is freer to imagine more echoes and interconnections between then and now, though there are also at times faint but distinct undertones of "told you so" when the original date of publication is discovered.

This is all very much in keeping with Dawe's staunch refusal of critical dogma and his avowed preference for the human angle and the heuristic power of anecdote, "start[ing] from the human story rather than the theoretical premise" (p. 81), as evidenced by the frankness and openness of his tone throughout. Where this might jar is when he refuses to consider that this attitude can be subsumed within the mainstream binarisms of Northern Irish politics, a criticism that has been levelled at supposedly apolitical accounts of the province in the 1990s. Dawe thus quotes then dismisses Joseph McMinn's point that:

"Arguing [McMinn writes] for an apolitical analysis of Irish culture which will be sensible, moderate, rational, unemotional, dispassionate, is to take up a political position without naming it. It is an extension of unionist political values into the cultural area."

It is unclear precisely *who* is arguing for an apolitical analysis of Irish culture but of all the Heinz varieties of unionism, I have not met one that fits the bill here – sensible, moderate, detached and so on. (p. 19)

This reads like a case of moving the goalposts of the words "(a)political" and "unionism" to preserve Dawe's ideal of artistic integrity, that is, ideological neutrality. Northern Ireland certainly needs its writers to strive for such a stance, maybe even if at this cost, but it is easy to see how this voice and perspective could anger some of those who were more or less closely involved with the more usual definition of "politics" during the Troubles. This makes his account all the more interesting, even necessary, in the current "post-everything" period, but should not preclude a critical examination of how perspectives foregrounding a seemingly axiologically neutral "balm of common sense" (p. 139) are themselves constructs with a (perhaps alternative, but nonetheless existent) ideological filiation.

In the present case Dawe's challenge is to define Protestant identity while being, justly in the Northern Irish context, very critical of the concept itself, which he accuses of being "based upon national self-consciousness" (p. 109) and promoting a monolithic vision of Irishness (p. 5) which ultimately marginalises the Protestant community. There is an interesting reversal at work here, where Dawe is expressing his political vision of Protestants as a minority within Ireland while voicing his bitterness as what he perceives as the hijacking of the relevant conceptual (i.e. post-colonial) tools by representatives of a Catholic, nationalist brand of Irishness who are in effect a majority in the country. One example is hybridity, as Dawe ironically wonders why, of all the hyphenated identities, British-Irish is the only one that is politically unacceptable (p. 95). This explains his strong rejection of theory, which

interprets texts “in terms of certain pre-emptive categories of post-colonialism, ethnicities, gender, sexuality and race [that] become self-fulfilling predictions, a kind of intellectual wiring for ‘sound bites’” (p. 101), and which was a key element in the organisation of Irish studies as a scientific field of enquiry. This has in effect left the Protestant community voiceless, at the mercy of stereotyping by unionist politicians or the British media, where according to Dawe Northern Protestants are fair game for “gross caricatures”, unless communities who are recognised as minorities such the Irish or West Indians (p. 98).

On what intellectual premises therefore might this sense of “Protestant belonging” be built? Tentative answers are given in the last three essays, written in the 21st century. One has to do with an Orwellian attention to the use of words and their role in the formation of collective thought processes. Only then can Ireland access some form of “political reality” (p. 92), as distinct from “messianic strategies” (p. 51). One objection that can be made is that this fidelity to the text by the honest individual mind sometimes resembles less Orwellian common decency than a liberal humanism unconscious of its own privileges and its political standpoint. Dawe himself can use words to conceal rather than reveal political realities, as when he calls “intimate adversity” the relations between the different social classes in industrial Belfast¹, when others would probably have preferred the phrase “systematic oppression”. Finally, while also borrowing from Hewitt-style regionalism (and stressing the relevance of this form of political organisation in a European context), he revives an alternative vision of Northern Protestantism rooted in

[...] the radical traditions of an inherited British working-class socialism of solidarity and its inherited social democratic beliefs in the separation of church and state, educational opportunities for all irrespective of class and creed, and the protection of the welfare state as of right. (p. 154)

This “Northern influence of independent thought” constitutes the common sense that according to Dawe is bound to play a key role in the shaping of attitudes in post-Brexit Ireland. While this counter-tradition within Ireland certainly vivifies the political debate and offers refreshing perspectives, a complete rejection of theory and linguistic constructivism may lead one to forget that one person’s common sense is another’s dogma, something that can be used to prevent the exploration of viable political alternatives. While Dawe uses his reasonable “doubt” to exclude a future for Ireland farther from European institutions, the hardening of national borders imposed by Covid-19 lockdown suggests that the ideological neutral ground of common sense may undergo some seismic shifts in the near future.

Catherine CONAN

1. “The industrial, commercial and historical experience that kept the city together, in often intimate adversity, no longer holds sway” (p. 121).