ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

Relations and Comparisons between Irish and Scottish Poetry: 1890 to the Present Day

Author: Edna Longley

Volume 1, Issue 1
Pp: 221-229
2007
Published on: 1st Jan 2007

1495

ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Relations and Comparisons between Irish and Scottish Poetry: 1890 to the Present Day

Edna Longley

This paper sets out the way in which we[1] conceive one of the comparative projects being undertaken as part of Phase 2 of the AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies. It mainly concentrates on the broader rationale for exploring 'relations and comparisons' between modern Irish and Scottish poetry. The project's intellectual seed was the possibility of linking two fields in which we are interested: modern poetry and Irish-Scottish studies. Its institutional seed was the possibility of linking the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, established three years ago in the School of English at Queen's University, with Phase 2 of the AHRC Centre at Aberdeen. The Heaney Centre, directed by Ciaran Carson, runs poetry readings and conferences. It sponsors research by staff and graduate students, and is home to the School's Creative Writing MA. The idea behind the Centre, founded in celebration of Heaney's Nobel Prize, was to promote the writing and reading of poetry in conjunction with critical thinking about modern poetry.

As regards poetry in English – to which the project is not confined – much of that thinking has been dominated by the Anglo-American academy. Recently I gave a talk in Cambridge on the theme 'Anthologising (Modern) British and Irish Poetry'. My talk involved a critique of certain aesthetic concepts associated with contemporary 'neo-modernist' poets such as 'the Cambridge School': concepts that derive from a particular version of literary history. In this context I argued that American constructions of modernism have frequently led to skewed or restricted narratives of modern poetry. I noted, for instance, that modernist narratives often misrepresent W. B. Yeats by assimilating his work to the theory and practice of Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot. In fact, as the Preface to his Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936) indicates, Yeats's relation to these poets, and to what was later dubbed 'modernism', is dialectical at best, oppositional at worst. To get a sense of alternative narratives, let us recall a literary-critical

[1] This paper was written by Edna Longley in consultation with Fran Brearton in March 2006; they are the project leaders for this strand of Phase 2 of the AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, being undertaken in Queen's University, Belfast.

moment in 1919 when American, Scottish and Irish perspectives on poetry briefly intersected.

In *Devolving English Literature* (1992) Robert Crawford shows that Eliot's influential essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', was itself influenced by G. Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), which he had recently reviewed, and which stresses 'the debt of each poet to his predecessors, individually and corporately'. Eliot had also just reviewed Yeats's *The Cutting of an Agate* (1919), a volume that includes Yeats's 1907 essay 'Poetry and Tradition'. This essay, among other verbal parallels with Eliot, speaks of 'seeing all in the light of European literature'. So it was cheeky of Eliot to begin 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' with the sentence: 'In English writing we seldom speak of tradition'. Perhaps, however, the suppressed remnant of that sentence is: 'but in Scottish and Irish writing they often do'. More probably, as Crawford argues, Eliot as an American in London, is conscious of competing 'provincial' claims to metropolitan authority. Hence the way in which his Anglo-American 'we' appropriates 'English writing'. Hence the fact that his Smith review is headed 'Was There a Scottish literature?' and his Yeats review 'A Foreign Mind'. Eliot speaks as self-appointed defender of a 'powerful literature with a powerful capital' ('Was There a Scottish Literature?').

There would be further twists and turns in the Eliot-Yeats relationship, and Hugh MacDiarmid would make selective use of both. But my point is that retrospect on poetry and poetry criticism *circa* 1919 could have various tilts. Of course, this equally applies to 'English' poetry understood in a stricter sense. Anglo-American critical models have not necessarily touched all the interpretative bases for modern English poetry. An Irish-Scottish orientation could open up perspectives inherent in MacDiarmid's fine phrase about literature 'broad-basing itself on all the diverse cultural elements and the splendid variety of languages and dialects in the British Isles' ('English Ascendancy in British Literature', 1931). Thus there might be questions about Crawford's splicing of Eliot, Pound and MacDiarmid under the rubric 'Modernism as Provincialism'. This is not to reject an interesting argument, but to observe that it retains 'modernism' (a term whose instability has been exposed from other angles) as a fixed point of reference unmodified by Irish or Scottish poetic practice, while it also occludes aspects of that practice. Perhaps the language questions associated with Irish or Scottish poetry do not neatly map on to the language questions associated with American-defined modernism – even if MacDiarmid did take inspiration from identifying Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* with *Ulysses*: actually an Irish-Scottish 'relation', including

its problematic aspects. In Crawford's thesis the metropolitan critical magnet pulls MacDiarmid, as it does Yeats. Similarly, I wonder about the title of Margery Palmer McCulloch's invaluable assemblage of 'source documents for the Scottish Renaissance' (2004): *Modernism and Nationalism*. The actual documents open up many fissures between the title's components. Patrick Crotty has already done some bracing comparative work on what he calls the 'fetishisation of modernism' ('a kind of streetwise variation on cultural nationalism') in criticism of Irish and Scottish poetry: i.e., a strategy for transcending and outflanking 'the English lyric'.[2]

I began with that moment in 1919 because we envisage this project as potentially having significance for readings of modern poetry, beyond the rereadings of Irish and Scottish poetry that a comparative frame might promote. As for comparison itself: it seems time for Irish-Scottish literary studies to move into a more consistently comparative phase. Despite shining exceptions, our unscientific impression is that historians have done more strictly comparative work than literary scholars. The programme for the Crosscurrents conference at Queen's University in April 2006 shows that graduate students still largely stick, or are kept, to separate national slots. And at the last Irish-Scottish Academic Initiative (ISAI) conference (University of Edinburgh, September 2004) there was a shamefaced parade of senior Irish critics who said they had meant to read some Scottish texts but hadn't quite got round to it. I admit I have plenty of homework to do myself, especially in the criticism of modern Scottish poetry. Without comparative enquiry, and given the temptation to easy analogy-spotting, dominant categories of Irish and Scottish literary studies will survive their encounter intact, rather than mutually complicate one another.

There is a warning in a recent book on the visual arts edited by Fintan Cullen and John Morrison: *A Shared Legacy: Essays on Irish and Scottish Art and Visual Culture* (2005). The book's not unexpected topics include nationality, 'political space', and land. Reviewing *A Shared Legacy* in *Irish Studies Review*, John Turpin keeps saying things like: '[Luke Gibbons's study of] Ireland and colonial identity in the self-portrait of James Barry and his portrayal of Edmund Burke . . . would have benefited from a study of Scottish artists in London'; and, regarding Murdo McDonald's 'fine analysis of portrait images of Burns': 'A comparison to the portraits of Tom Moore and images of his

[2] See Patrick Crotty, 'Shameless Bards and Mad, Abandoned Critics', in Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes and Des O'Rawe (eds), *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons* (Belfast, 2003), 77–85.

poetry would have opened up Irish visual Romanticism'. Rather desperately, Turpin suggests that 'readers [will] have to make whatever shared connection they can identify, depending on their existing knowledge'. And he ends by pointing to 'the potential of comparative visual studies where the issues of convergence and divergence can be explored'.[3] The terms convergence / divergence seem apt. Evidently, no comparative Irish-Scottish project should take 'sharing' for granted. 'Comparison' is about difference, about distinctiveness, as well as identity. But what do they know of Scottish or Irish poetry who only know these rather shaky canons? Has Scottish or Irish exceptionalism been the enemy of Scottish or Irish particularism? Academics are often interested in poetry because it is 'Scottish' or 'Irish', not because it is poetry.

This does not apply to the two most recent surveys of modern Irish and Scottish poetry: John Goodby's *Irish Poetry since 1950* (2000) and Christopher Whyte's *Modern Scottish Poetry* (2004). Nevertheless, these books inhabit largely different universes, and this despite similar trajectories whereby both critics point, and see the poetry they discuss as pointing, outwith a national base. Indeed, 'beyond Scotland!' or 'out of Ireland!' is now the common cry of Irish and Scottish literary studies more generally. But while Whyte and Goodby again fetishise modernism, there is relatively little detail about relations to American practice, to any Celtic 'other', or to contemporaneous English poetry. Whyte quotes Russian and French poets, and stresses that 'Comparative readings, readings which step across the boundaries between national or linguistic traditions, are of particular importance within the field of Scottish literature'. Yet he makes few textual comparisons, not even in the Gaelic sphere, although he provocatively proposes that, 'for the past four centuries . . . the significant intertext, rather than writing elsewhere in Scotland, would be writing in the Irish language of the same period'.

Of course, nobody can cover all the angles. But in preparing this paper, we have noticed a pattern whereby some Scottish commentators – on cultural politics too – rhetorically invoke Ireland, only to move on fast. Meanwhile, most Irish commentators don't mention Scotland. Lady Gregory's joke still seems relevant: when asked about 'the meaning of the Celtic movement we were said to belong to', she 'used to say it was a movement meant to persuade the Scotch to begin buying our books while we continued not to buy theirs'.[4] In the context of poetry, a passage in the introduction to Douglas Gifford's and Alan Riach's anthology *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation* (2004) might illustrate

[3] *Irish Studies Review*, 14, 1 (February, 2006), 154–6.

[4] Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1913; Gerrards Cross, 1972), 21.

Scottish rhetorical use of Ireland, and perhaps subtextual frictions also noticeable elsewhere. Having said that 'comparisons make it clear' that the theme of Scotland is more pronounced in Scottish literature than the national theme in any other literature, Gifford and Riach continue: 'Comparison with Ireland may be particularly instructive. The feminised nation, Kathleen ni Houlihan or Mother Ireland, is an idea so potent that many songs were made, and motives forged, that would send men and women to martyrdom for it. Scotland too shares some of that, particularly in its Jacobite legacy, but the modernising trend towards imagining Scotland as a possible state (a 'Dream State' perhaps) is a recognition of the pluralism the country is capable of encompassing, not a call for constricting uniformity.' That appears to leave Irish poetry in a perpetual archaic posture of Jacobite political incorrectness, and may even carry a trace of the pro- and anti-enlightenment tensions evident both between and within Irish and Scottish literary studies. In fact, a poem praised by the editors is a contemporary Gaelic version of Kathleen ni Houlihan. And it would now be difficult for anyone outside Sinn Fein or Notre Dame to publish an Irish anthology entitled 'Poets and the Nation', even if Ireland were pluralised and the island's internal tensions emphasised. I note that Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah also highlight Scottish poetry's exceptional devotion to Scotland in their introduction to the *New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (2000): 'Scottish poetry radiates, to a degree unmatched by any other substantial national literature, a passionate love of country, a sense of joy in its belonging'.

Such expressions of exceptionalism have parallels in Irish quarters, and could be another focus for genuinely 'instructive comparison'. This brings me to the word 'modern' in our project's title. Another unscientific impression is that comparative or relational Irish-Scottish literary studies are taken a bit more for granted where earlier periods are concerned, where they fold into seventeenth-century, eighteenth-century or Romantic studies, for instance. Here, forms of 'New British literary history', archipelagic criticism or 'Atlantic' textual cartography are fairly well under way, even if approached or theorised in diverse terms. To frame the modern period in the same manner appears a more problematic enterprise. That period has been critically demarcated by how the Irish and Scottish revivals asserted the link between literature and nationality: or asserted it in a new way – according to the premises of European cultural nationalism. And perhaps latterday identity politics and multiculturalism have actually reinscribed habits of national segregation. Thus the anthological and critical formula now usually applied to the contemporary poetry of these islands, 'British and Irish' or 'From Britain and Ireland', has

not brought poetry criticism much further. For example, Sarah Broom's recent book, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* is structured according to cultural themes and along the lines of 'There was an English poet, an Irish poet and a Scottish poet'. Similarly, Broom's insistence that poets are 'constantly working within and against . . . systems of representation' occurs in a chapter where Benjamin Zephaniah, Jackie Kay and Moniza Alvi are grouped under 'Race and Ethnicity'. Obviously there are issues here not just of critical categories but also of critical values and criticism as value or evaluation.

If academic attention to intercourse between Irish and Scottish literature rises in proportion to periods when the countries cohabit in some kind of union, there can be problems here too. In *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (2004) Michael Gardiner darkly refers to the 'over-adaptive Enlightenment moment'. And Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan remind us in their introduction to *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700–2000* (2005), an outcome of phase 1 of the AHRC Centre: 'To advocate an Irish / Scottish framework is to establish a political – and in some eyes, a polemical – framework for debate. Within Irish studies, the Irish / Scottish comparison is viewed by some as unionism's answer to post-colonial studies.' But conflict between unionist and nationalist models of literary criticism – and, perhaps, conflict based on the perception of such models – is part of the historical story. And politics of whatever stripe should be able to take Cairns Craig's point that concepts of nationality, in these islands and elsewhere, do not stand alone but are shaped by 'a much more complex process of identity formation in . . . cultural exchange between nations'.[5] This has implications for how we read modern poetry on an archipelagic or international front.

From my viewpoint as a poetry critic, national independence, whether partial or 'dreamed', has written and rewritten rather too much literary history. It has closed some literary borders and closed off some crucial data. Since the Irish Revival and Scottish Renaissance were both spearheaded by poets, this has particularly affected the criticism of poetry. In bearing large national responsibilities, poetry has been simultaneously prominent – relative to its status elsewhere – and neglected. In 'Shameless Bards and Mad, Abandoned Critics' Patrick Crotty raises two related questions: how the 'very different legacies of Yeats and MacDiarmid' have affected poetic practice; and how, in both countries, 'the critical urge has become confused in recent years with the patriotic impulse'. A comparative study of poetry criticism would again

[5] Cairns Craig, 'National Literature and Cultural Capital in Scotland and Ireland', in *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society* (Dublin, 2005), 45.

be 'instructive'. But a glance tells us that its weaknesses, similarly lamented by Irish and Scottish poets, critics and poet-critics over the years – that is, by those who desire a value-based criticism – are correlated with the fact that the 'patriotic impulse' in Scotland has largely run with MacDiarmid, whereas the 'patriotic impulse' in Ireland has largely run against Yeats. Hence the way in which Yeats's poetry was for decades handed over to non-Irish critics. Hence, too, the persistence of academic criticism such as Declan Kiberd's which conscripts poetry for a national narrative. Crotty describes Kiberd's approach to poetry in *Inventing Ireland* (1995) as 'less an investigation of the ways poets have invented their country than a process of making up chauvinistic arguments as he goes along, and sneaking a quick – a very quick – glance at the text every now and again to keep the fantasia fired up'.

There is revisionist literary criticism in Scotland as in Ireland. Witness the introduction to *Beyond Scotland: new contexts for twentieth-century Scottish literature* (2004), edited by Gerard Carruthers and David Goldie, where the editors speak of 'the damage wrought by an over-determined, self-defeating essentialism fostered by Scottish criticism's overweening desire for cultural self-determination'. Poetry, of course, can be conscripted for revisionist as for nationalist purposes. No doubt I have done this myself. Whyte's *Modern Scottish Poetry*, like Eleanor Bell's *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (2004), is avowedly revisionist. Thus Whyte seeks to shift the emphasis from Scottish to poetry. Yet he also says that his book is 'designed to balance, counterpose and counteract', and concludes his chapter on 'Alternative Approaches' with the reconciliatory caveat: 'The concepts of nation, national belonging and national identity demand that our relationship to them should also be one of play, of imagination, invention and paradoxical renewal and reversal'. Bell is more interested in the broader field of theoretical paradigms, and here she regards Scottish literary studies as under-theorised in comparison to Irish literary studies – although some might find the latter either over-theorised or selectively theorised.

As regards poetry, there is interesting convergence between Whyte and Bell. Just as MacDiarmid's cry was 'Not Burns – Dunbar', so Whyte and Bell seem to cry 'Not MacDiarmid – Morgan' (a comparable Irish cry might be 'Not Heaney – Muldoon'). Both quote Morgan's revision of MacDiarmid's 'white rose'. With regard to Morgan, Bell resembles Whyte in talking about 'linguistic play and freedom to re-explore the familiar'. In some critical narratives, then, Irish poetry and Scottish poetry have reached the same 'playful' place: a space where internal difference or dissidence is recognised; where poetry is defined

as 're-visioning' in Paul Muldoon's sense; where multiple external links – even with English poetry – are admitted. Changes in the critical fortunes of Louis MacNeice and W. S. Graham would be another 'instructive comparison' or critical barometer. But poets and poems may still outpace academic paradigms – including the 'Not X – Y' structure. On the evidence so far, the role of poetry criticism in Irish and Scottish studies, and the question of how it might 'revise' such studies, remain unsettled.

The basic stimulus to comparative study is the complex of relations between the terms 'Irish', 'Scottish' and 'poetry' in the modern period: a period that has witnessed significant currents of influence and interchange – sometimes strong, sometimes fitful: what I have elsewhere called the 'revival roundabout'.[6] Other elements in the rationale for this project, beyond the wider rationale for Irish-Scottish studies, include the Yeats / MacDiarmid legacies; language questions – not only as regards Gaelic and Scots; common cultural factors that condition poetry, such as religion and its metaphysical fallout; inescapable awareness of the historical 'English lyric'; efforts to escape that awareness; consequent contest over poetic 'traditions'. There are many directions that a comparative approach might take: some have already been opened up; we hope to lay other trails. This paper has touched on the possibility of re-aligning perspectives on modern poetry; the issue not just of 'traditions' but of 'tradition'; comparisons between poetry criticism in each country, and between critical or theoretical paradigms; critical values; the problematics of 'internationalism' and 'modernism'; anthologies; above all, the need for closer comparative and intertextual readings across these islands. Form and genre are obviously central to any study of poetry: other topics on our wish-list are translation practices; poetic migrations; intellectual contexts; influences from elsewhere; relations with song and folk-tradition; relations with the visual arts; regional horizons; poetic topographies; reception and audience; material contexts, including magazines, publishing, reviewing, readings, institutional support, the academy, metropolises. Contributors to the project will bring their own suggestions and interests to an evolving enquiry rather than an initially fixed agenda. We also hope to discover what kinds of comparison are most productive in the Irish-Scottish context.

Over the project's three years, we plan to work towards a collection of comparative essays, partly by means of themed symposia in Belfast and Aberdeen. To involve people in the project, beyond a final essay, we will disseminate the

[6] Edna Longley, 'The Whereabouts of Literature', in *Beyond Scotland* (Amsterdam – New York, 2004), 159.

position papers, given at these symposia, as critical and theoretical work-in-progress. A central element in the project is the appointment of a post-doctoral fellow, Peter MacKay, of Glasgow University and Trinity College Dublin. A translation study conducted separately from the book will be Hugh Magennis's comparison of Edwin Morgan's and Seamus Heaney's translations of *Beowulf* (Heaney's *Beowulf* papers are lodged in the Library at Queen's University). Finally, given the creative as well as critical objectives of the Heaney Centre, and the annual Word festival in Aberdeen, we want to combine the symposia with poetry readings, and to associate poet-critics with the project. Ideally the book would include comments from contemporary Irish and Scottish poets on their sense of the 'other' poetry.

Thus far no poems have been quoted, no poetic comparisons drawn. So, to finish, I will juxtapose poems by Edwin Morgan and Louis MacNeice. Both employ the 'island' trope – an undoubted common resort of modern Irish and Scottish poetry. Eleanor Bell highlights Morgan's sonnet 'Outward Bound', in which 'Scotland begins to move', and thus eludes efforts to pin it down: 'Like a sea-washed log/ it loved to tempt earnest geographers, / duck down and dub them drunk hydrographers, / shake itself dry, no longer log but dog'. There are parallels here with MacNeice's 'No More Sea', written forty years earlier, a postwar poem that derives from a sojourn on Achill Island. 'No More Sea' celebrates 'Islanders whose hearts themselves are islands'. It ends with a retrospect from a darker future condition, in which 'some atavistic scholar' might conceive 'a vague inaccurate notion / Of what it meant to live embroiled with ocean / And between moving dunes and beyond reproving / Sentry-boxes to have been self-moving'. It's possible to read these island-parables as figuring a fluidly diverse, rather than monolithic, Scotland or Ireland. But it's also possible to read them, where they meet out at sea, as warnings about attaching poetry to predetermined academic categories – including Irish / Scottish relations and comparisons.

Queen's University Belfast