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**MINORITY VERSUS MAINSTREAM:
SIR SAMUEL FERGUSON, JAMES CLARENCE MANGAN,
AND THE ANGLO-IRISH LITERARY CANON**

One of the most fashionable concepts of contemporary literary criticism – and indeed, in broader terms, of much of modern philosophical, sociological, and political discourse in general – is certainly that of “rediscovery”: cultural theorists devote much of their time to exposing a multiplicity of forms of political and cultural marginalisation, bookshops are full of publications focusing on minority art and cultures, and universities put on increasing numbers of courses in post-colonial, black, women’s, or gay and lesbian studies. In the literary world, the trend translates into the creation of specialist publishing houses (such as, in Britain, the Virago Press), the publication of critical series such as *Rereading Literature* or *Key Women Writers*, and the proliferation of research into areas of literature that until recently tended to be overshadowed by the work of established canonical writers – more often than not, DWEMs: Dead White European Males. In consequence, the notion of the literary canon has itself come under scrutiny: to what extent is it indeed a body of texts of universal value (and what sort of common universal value can be ascribed to texts so different as *The Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*, and *En attendant Godot* anyway?), and to what extent is it merely an ideological construct reflecting the beliefs and prejudices of those in political and/or educational authority?¹ Parallel to the process of the questioning, and indeed of the deconstruction, of

¹ Cf., e.g., Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone, 1991), and Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

traditional canons is that of the construction of alternative (sub-)canons, sometimes incorporating selected authors from the "mainstream" canon (a case in point being the adoption of Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf as early heroines of the feminist movement, or the prominence in the Anglo-Irish sub-canon of such writers as Jonathan Swift, William Butler Yeats, or Samuel Beckett), but just as often bringing to light the work of writers who would otherwise remain mere items in catalogues of copyright libraries. What are, however, the ramifications of this kind of process; does it (and, if so, how does it) affect our reading of the writers in question and, in a more general sense, our perception of the minority cultures we are through the reading of their works invited to get to know?

Issues of this kind are central to much of our perception of Irish literature in English – closely related as it is to the literature of England, and for centuries constituting part of the English/British tradition, it has in the course of the last hundred years or so asserted its prominent position as a significant independent component of the literary heritage of the English language. Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel, to name but two of the most prominent Irish writers working today, are emphatically Irish – and yet Heaney still publishes in the London house of Faber and Faber, and was happy, in the late 1980s, to accept one of the highest literary accolades the British establishment has in its gift, the post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford; in a rather similar way, the plays of Friel achieve as much (or indeed more) of their resonance through productions in London as they do when performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin or by the Field Day in Londonderry. The further we look into the past, the more complex the subtleties of the relationship between the Anglo-Irish and the British/English literatures become – and the more interesting, too, as examples of the very process of the definition and redefinition of canons that is so much part of our modern perception of literary and cultural traditions.

By way of illustration, let us begin with two poems by the mid-nineteenth-century Irish poet and antiquarian, one of the most prominent representatives of the tradition of Celtic revivalism, Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–1886) – on the one hand a leading figure in the establishment of Victorian Dublin, a QC, Deputy Keeper of the Public Records of Ireland, and President of the Royal Irish Academy, and at the same time one hailed by Yeats as "the greatest poet Ireland has produced" and the "most Irish" of Irish writers, with whom, as with Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan, Yeats wants to be "counted one", as he states in his poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times." The first of the two poems is one of the most frequently anthologised, and therefore best-known of Ferguson's works (there has, for over thirty years, been no modern edition of his poetry in book form), a translation of an Irish song entitled "Dear Dark Head":

Put your head, darling, darling, darling,
 Your darling black head my heart above;
 Oh, mouth of honey, with the thyme for fragrance,
 Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?
 Oh, many and many a young girl for me is pining,
 Letting her locks of gold to the cold wind free,
 For me, the foremost of our gay young fellows;
 But I'd leave a hundred, pure love, for thee!
 Then put your head, darling, darling, darling,
 Your darling black head my heart above;
 Oh, mouth of honey, with the thyme for fragrance,
 Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?

The poem does not seem particularly complex, even if readers keen on allegorical/political interpretations of all things Irish will perhaps relate it to the tradition of the *aisling*, a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century type of vision poem in which Ireland was represented as a woman, deprived of her property, sometimes even attacked and ravished by brutal enemies, but still proud, beautiful, immortal – the sort of image that gave way, for example, to Yeats's vision of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Whether this is an overinterpretation of the poem or not, one thing remains clear – “Dear Dark Head” is not exactly very good as poetry! Most readers of the poem will have no Irish to compare it to its Irish original, but again this is perhaps less than relevant: as a poem in its own right, Ferguson's translation is less than fully successful, to say the least: the “sweet” imagery feels positively too sugary for modern tastes (“mouth of honey”), the rhythm of the middle quatrain breaks the smooth flow of the first four lines without much good reason, and the speaker's self-description as “the foremost of our gay young fellows” sounds, in what is after all supposed to be a love poem (whatever else it might be besides), not just bizarre and even arrogant, but also desperately clumsy. Not a poem to be remembered for its own sake, one would have thought – and yet a survey of eleven twentieth-century anthologies of Irish poetry demonstrates that “Dear Dark Head” is in fact the second most frequently reprinted of Ferguson's poems: it appears in seven of the anthologies, second only to the political elegy “Lament for the Death of Thomas Davis,” which features in as many as ten anthologies.

By way of comparison, another poem of Ferguson's – “At the Polo-Ground: 6th May 1882”:

Not yet in sight. 'Twere well to step aside,
 Beyond the common eye-shot, till he comes.
 He – I've no quarrel under heaven with him:
 I'd rather it were Horster; rather still
 One higher up than either; but since Fate

Or Chance has so determined, be it he.
 How cool I feel; and all my wits about
 And vigilant; and such a work in hand!
 Yes: loitering here, unoccupied, may draw
 Remark and question. How came such a one there?
 Oh; I've strolled out to see the polo-players:
 I'll step across to them; but keep an eye
 On who comes up the highway.

Here I am

Beside the hurdles fencing off the ground
 They've taken from us who have the right to it,
 For these select young gentry and their sport.
 Curse them! I would they all might break their necks!
 Young fops and lordlings of the garrison
 Kept up by England here to keep us down:
 All rich young fellows not content to own
 Their chargers, hacks, and hunters for the field,
 But also special ponies for their game;
 And doubtless, as they dash along, regard
 Us who stand outside as a beggarly crew. –
 'Tis half past six. Not yet. No, that's not he. –
 Well, but 'tis pretty, sure, to see them stoop
 And take the ball, full gallop; and when I
 In gown and cocked hat once drove up Cork Hill,
 Perhaps myself have eyed the common crowd,
 Lining the footway, with a similar sense
 Of higher station, just as these do me,
 And as the man next door no doubt does them.
 'Tis very sure that grades and differences
 Of rich and poor and small men and grandees
 Have all along existed, and still will, –
 Though many a man has risen and thriven well
 By promising the Poor to make them rich
 By taking from the Rich their overplus,
 And putting all on a level: beggars all.
 Yet still the old seize-ace comes round again;
 And though my friends upon the pathway there –
 No. Not he neither. That's a taller man –
 Look for a general scramble and divide,
 Such a partition, were it possible,
 Would not by any means suit me. My share
 Already earned and saved would equal ten
 Such millionth quotients and sub-multiples.
 No: they may follow Davitt. 'Tis Parnell
 And property – in proper hands – will win.
 But, say the Mob's the Master; and who knows
 But some o' these days the ruffians may have votes
 As good as mine or his, and pass their Act
 For every man his share, and equal all?
 No doubt they'd have a slice from me. What then?

I'm not afraid. I'll float. Allow the scums
Rise to the surface, something rises too
Not scum, but Carey; and will rise yet higher.
No place too high but he may look for it.
Member for Dublin, Speaker, President,
Lord Mayor for life – why not? One gentleman,
Who when he comes to deal with this day's work –
No: not in sight. That man is not so tall –
Will find, to his surprise, a stronger hand
Than his controls the rudder, sat three years
And hangs his medal on the sheriff's chain.
Yes, say Lord Mayor: my liveries green and gold,
My secretary with me in my coach,
And chaplain duly seated by my side.
My boy shall have his hack, and pony too,
And play at polo with the best of them;
Such as will then be best. He need not blush
To think his father was a bricklayer;
For laying bricks is work as reputable
As filling noggins or appraising pawns,
Or other offices of those designed
For fathers of our Dublin swells to be.

'Tis twenty minutes now to seven o'clock.
What if he should not come at all? 'Twere then
Another – oh – *fiasco* as they call it,
Not pleasant to repeat to Number One,
But, for myself, perhaps not wholly bad.
For, if he comes, there will be consequences
Will make a stir; and in that stir my name
May come in play – well, one must run some risk
Who takes a lead and keeps and thrives by it
As I have done. But sure the risk is small.
I know those cut-throats on the pathway there
May be relied on. Theirs is work that shuts
The door against approval of both sorts.
But he who drives them, I've remarked in him
A flighty indecision in the eye,
Such as, indeed, had I a looking-glass,
I might perhaps discover in my own
When thoughts have crossed me how I should behave
In this or that conjuncture of the affair.
Him I distrust. But not from him or them
Or any present have I aught to fear.
For never have I talked to more than one
Of these executive agents at a time,
Nor let a scrap of writing leave my hand
Could compromise myself with anyone.
And should I – though I don't expect I shall –
Be brought, at any time, to book for this,
'Twill not be – or I much mistake – because

Of any indiscretion hitherto.
 But, somehow, these reflections make me pause
 And set me only questioning myself,
 Is it worth while – the crime itself apart –
 To pull this settled civil state of life
 To pieces, for another just the same,
 Only with rarer actors for the posts
 Of Judges, Landlords, Masters, Capitalists?
 And then, the innocent blood. I've half a mind
 To trip across this elm-root at my foot,
 And turn my ankle.

Oh, he comes at last!

No time for thinking now. My own life pays
 Unless I play my part. I see he brings
 Another with him, and, I think, the same
 I heard them call Lord – something – Cavendish.
 If one; two, likely. That can't now be helped.
 Up. Drive on straight, – if I blow my nose
 And show my handkerchief in front of them,
 And then turn back, what's that to anyone?
 No further, driver. Back to Island Bridge.
 No haste. If some acquaintance chanced to pass,
 He must not think that we are running away.
 I don't like, but I can't help looking back.
 They meet: my villains pass them. Gracious Powers,
 Another failure! No, they turn again
 And overtake; and Brady lifts his arm –
 I'll see no more. On – by the Monument.
 On – brisker, brisker – but yet leisurely.
 By this time all is over with them both.
 Ten minutes more, the Castle has the news,
 And haughty Downing Street in half an hour
 Is struck with palsy. For a moment there,
 Among the trees, I wavered. Brady's knife
 Has cut the knot of my perplexities;
 Despite myself, my fortune mounts again.
 The English rule will soon be overthrown,
 And ours established in the place of it.
 I'm free again to look, as long as I please,
 In Fortune's show-box. Yes, I see the chain,
 I see the gilded coach. God send the boy
 May take the polish! There's but one thing now
 That troubles me. These cursed knives at home
 That woman brought me, what had best be done
 To put them out o' the way? I have it. Yes,
 That old Fitzsimon's roof's in need of repairs.
 I'll leave them in his cock-loft. Still in time
 To catch the tram, I'll take a seat a-top –
 For no one must suppose I've anything
 To hide – and show myself in Grafton Street.

We are clearly in a completely different literary world here: not very far from Browning, certainly, but also very much in the twentieth century, in a sense; the thoughts of the speaker, James Carey, a member of the Fenian splinter group called the Invincibles and the man who, having turned Queen's evidence, eventually helped to secure the convictions of three other men responsible for the stabbing, described in the poem, of the government officials Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Burke, are represented in a manner that sounds positively proto-modernist (the Browning-style dramatic monologue does, after all, point towards the development, by Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner, of the technique of the stream of consciousness), while the atmosphere of the poem, with its modern urban setting and its theme of political conspiracy, reminds the twentieth-century reader of the world of Conrad's *Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* – not to mention, of course, the political reality that we have seen, over the last thirty years or so, in Belfast, Londonderry, Armagh, and throughout Northern Ireland. The poem is not without its weak points – some of the phrases are perhaps rather too self-consciously “poetic” and in consequence somewhat incongruous with the psycho-intellectual profile of Carey which the poem builds up (“Brady's knife/Has cut the knot of my perplexities”), but the poem as a whole does nonetheless stand out as a very early and yet remarkably penetrating – one would almost wish to say prophetically so – analysis of one of the most disturbing problems of the modern world: the nature of violence and political terrorism.

How does the poem fare in terms of the Ferguson canon though? The answer comes as a major surprise: it is in fact one of the least frequently reprinted of the author's works, appearing in only one of the eleven anthologies surveyed, Thomas Kinsella's *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*. The fact that the poem did not appear in print in Ferguson's lifetime does not seem to offer an adequate explanation: it was first published in Lady Ferguson's 1896 biography of her husband, 10 years after her husband's death, still one of the most fundamental sources of information for students of his work, and by no means unavailable to academic and/or literary editors. Something of a paradox then? Explanations?

The problem with “At the Polo-Ground” seems to be that the poem does not fit in very easily at all with the received perception of Ferguson – the antiquarian, the folklorist, the revivalist, the forerunner of people like Yeats, Standish James O'Grady, or Douglas Hyde, perhaps the Irish equivalent of Tennyson – it was Ferguson who made the *Lays of the Western Gael* (1864) and the story of *Congal* (1872) available to the English-speaking reader – but not someone who, admittedly on rare occasions, but still, was prepared to address issues that sounded, in the

context of Ireland's Romantic revivalism, discordant and subversive, and that were thus potentially dangerous to the Emerald Ideal. It is perhaps not insignificant that Yeats's eulogy of Ferguson, in "To Ireland in the Coming Times," dates back to 1892, four years *before* the publication of "At the Polo-Ground": it was not until a good few years later that Yeats's own perception of things Irish began to acquire the quality of bitter realism that seems to pervade the atmosphere of Ferguson's poem.

One poem is, of course, hardly sufficient grounds for the making of a poet's reputation; it is not the intention of this paper to suggest that Ferguson is a major Victorian poet, or that "At the Polo-Ground" is a masterpiece deserving of a place in the Victorian canon alongside "The Lady of Shalott" or "Dover Beach." Ferguson's status in the broad literary heritage of the English language is relatively minor, and it is only in the geographically and thematically more restricted context of Irish writing in English that he occupies a genuinely prominent place. Paradoxically, however, the perception of his *œuvre* exclusively in the context of his Irishness seems to generate a reading of his work that is not entirely accurate nor entirely fair: the foregrounding of some texts and the comparative neglect of others, if decided primarily on the grounds of compatibility with the specific agenda around which his works are supposed to be read, must necessarily result in a perception that is, to some extent at least, flawed and distorted.

Something rather similar happens in the case of another of the poets mentioned by Yeats in "To Ireland in the Coming Times" – James Clarence Mangan (1803–1849). By far one of the best of his poems is the frequently anthologised "Siberia":

In Siberia's wastes
 The Ice-wind's breath
 Woundeth like the toothed steel
 Lost Siberia doth reveal
 Only blight and death.

Blight and death alone.
 No Summer shines.
 Night is interblent with Day.
 In Siberia's wastes alway
 The blood blackens, the heart pines.

In Siberia's wastes
 No tears are shed,
 For they freeze within the brain.
 Nought is felt but dullest pain,
 Pain acute, yet dead;

Pain as in a dream,
 When years go by
 Funeral-paced, yet fugitive,
 When man lives, and doth not live,
 Doth not live – nor die.

In Siberia's wastes
 Are sands and rocks
 Nothing blooms of green or soft,
 But the snow-peaks rise aloft
 And the gaunt ice-blocks.

And the exile there
 Is one with those;
 They are part, and he is part,
 For the sands are in his heart,
 And the killing snows.

Therefore, in those wastes
 None curse the Czar.
 Each man's tongue is cloven by
 The North Blast, that heweth nigh
 With sharp scymitar.

And such doom each drees,
 Till, hunger-gnawn,
 And cold-slain, he at length sinks there,
 Yet scarce more a corpse than ere
 His last breath was drawn.

Interpretation? In the view of a prominent contemporary critic, the poem is “a profound metaphor for the state of Ireland in 1846”² – which to an extent it may well be; is this interpretation not, however, somewhat reductive in its implications? To an Eastern European reader, for example, the poem certainly does not sound remotely Irish; its imagery of barrenness, ice, wind, hunger, and suffering, reinforced by the sharp, almost half-frozen rhythm of the short lines, some of them sounding almost incomplete, cut short half-way through (“pain acute, yet dead”), brings to mind associations familiar from so much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures, and indeed from the national mythologies, of Russia, Poland, and other countries of the region. Would it not therefore be rather more appropriate, more inclusive, to see Mangan not so much just in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism as against the background of mainstream European revolutionary Romanticism, which after all flourished exactly in Mangan's time, in the 1830s and 1840s? There is, indeed, in Mangan's work more than “Siberia” to support this view: he translated widely, mainly from the German Romantics, he was fascinated by the cultural

² Robert Welch, *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1980), p. 105.

heritage of the Orient (even though he never himself travelled beyond Dublin and its environs), and he came closer than any other poet writing in English (with the possible exception of Edgar Allan Poe) to becoming a Continental-style *poète maudit*, an early Irish (British?) equivalent of Baudelaire or Lautréamont. If Mangan the Dubliner is made to overshadow Mangan the Romantic, the result is another ideological distortion of a literary-historical perspective, another example of a situation in which a literary sub-canon postulates an adoption of a specific critical standpoint that for all its intrinsic values is nonetheless likely to develop a kind of presupposed critical (neo-)orthodoxy that is very much akin to the orthodoxy of the mainstream canon against which that sub-canon itself has been defined.

What is, therefore, the lesson that can be drawn from the examples quoted? A brief essay is not a place to attempt earth-shattering generalisations; the examples of Ferguson and Mangan do, nonetheless, seem to indicate the dangers that may result from overzealous application of the principle that whatever belongs to a minority sub-canon is by definition more interesting, or at least somehow more morally worthy of being rediscovered, than what for some reason or another does not qualify for any kind of minority status. This is not to say that the mainstream canon is sacrosanct, or that interest in minority cultures and minority literatures has not opened our eyes to numerous aspects of our different heritages that are worth remembering, investigating, and preserving. The point is that "minoritism" of any description, be it cultural or political, Irish, post-colonial, feminist, black, gay and lesbian, or whatever, needs to be developed in a critical, open-minded manner, or else it will turn on itself, and become as dogmatic as the very orthodoxy against which it has developed. It is perhaps appropriate, in the context of the dramatic events that have shaped the history of Ireland over the centuries, and specifically the history of Northern Ireland over the last three decades, that Mangan and Ferguson, a Dublin-born Catholic and a Church-of-Ireland Ulsterman, should be telling us exactly that.