

Dialogue Without the Other?

A Reply to Francis Mulhern

Luke Gibbons

Condemning national values has a different meaning depending on whether one lives in a little country (one's own) in the orbit of another, larger one, or whether one lives abroad, in a third country, where one is – where one believes oneself to be – free from any threat from a more powerful neighbour. Paris is undoubtedly a propitious place for a euphoric renunciation of nationalist values; Sofia much less so.

Tzvetan Todorov

Anthologies are frequently subject to the paradox of realism which, according to Umberto Eco, vitiates so many life-like waxworks in American museums: the more one tries to include, the easier it is to notice what is left out. The initial reviews of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Faber and Faber, 1991) in the press and popular periodicals were cast very much in this mould, with the editors of the various sections being taken to task for acts of omission and exclusion, particularly where women writers were concerned (though as Siobhan Kilfeather pointed out in her acute early review, it contains by far the most comprehensive selection of Irish women writers to date).¹

In recent discussions (now that reviewers have had some time to digest the 4,000 pages of the anthology), the focus has shifted not so much to what is excluded as to what is actually placed before the reader.² Francis Mulhern's review article in *Radical Philosophy* (65) belongs to this trend, and is welcome insofar as it shifts the debate onto a new critical plane, examining the principles of selection and the multiple organizing narratives which inform and 'cross-cut' the anthology. Not least of the merits of Mulhern's approach is his emphasis on the *diversity* and range of the project, countering the simplistic view of the anthology as a literary panopticon, in which nothing escaped the all-seeing eye of its general editor, Seamus Deane (or, for that matter, any one of the other twenty-three editors who contributed sections): 'The effect,' Mulhern writes, 'is of an irreducibly plural history, polyphonic and differential, in which voices are echoed or answered by other voices, are heard again, and differently. ... Old English, Anglo-Irish and Ulster Protestant traditions participate on equal terms with Gaelic Ireland and its rivalrous posterity.'³

However, as Dr Johnson remarked, it is unlike the Irish to speak well of one another, and already in this expression of praise it is possible to detect the sting in the tail. While all voices are equal, one, it would seem, is less euphonious than others – 'Gaelic Ireland and its rivalrous posterity'. The other three (representing historically, let it be noted, different intensities of conquest) are evidently bearers of sweetness and light: but the natives alone are fractious and unruly. It is to be expected, then, that when Mulhern comes to the sections I edited in the anthology, in which I try to complicate this picture of what it means to be on the receiving end of colonialism, his tone becomes less magnanimous. Whereas it is usual in debates on post-colonial writing to refer to subjugated or 'subaltern' cultures in relation to, say, the experience of India or Algeria, Mulhern will have none of this where Ireland is concerned: for native culture over the centuries, he suggests, read 'dominant local tradition' (26). I would like to ask: *dominant* over whom? Over the Protestant Ascendancy? Over the might of the British empire? We are getting very close here to the spoof on Irish revisionist history in a Dublin periodical some years ago, which suggested that it was the Landlord class who suffered excruciatingly during the Great Famine, while the peasants were having a field day, so to speak, at their expense.

Divested of its more rhetorical asides, Mulhern's main objection to my sections in the anthology on twentieth-century cultural debates in Ireland would seem to be that they belie the traditionalist view of Irish nationalism as conservative, rural, priest-ridden, misogynist – the unholy trinity of land, nationalism and religion. The merest suggestion that 'nationalism is plural' is dismissed as 'grossly tendentious' and 'phantasmagoria'. Yet in his anxiety to place Irish nationalism in the dock, Mulhern is inconsistent even in terms of his own argument. Having first complimented the anthology for being 'polyphonic and differential', he then proceeds to expose in my sections 'the motivating conviction of the anthology' (27). This turns out to be a heterogeneous and open-ended concept of Irishness which I trace in the neglected writings of, among others, the 1916 leader Thomas MacDonagh, and which distances national identity from any purifying or monocular vision. One would have thought that this, as a 'motivating

conviction', would accord with the 'irreducibly plural history' which Mulhern welcomes in the anthology. But not so. With an unqualified generalisation (derived, perhaps, from the 'universalist' standpoint which he appears to endorse), he declares that not just Irish nationalism, but *all* nationalism, is characterised by a closed, unrelieved homogeneity: 'the rhetoric of nationality insists on closure, on the ultimate sublimation of class and gender antagonisms in the sameness of national 'difference'. There is no room, he concludes, for any kind of otherness in 'this strictly-plotted cultural narrative' (26).

By this alone, we can see Mulhern's indifference to any form of cultural specificity. If there is a recurrent motif in discussions of narrative forms in Irish culture, it is that 'closure' and 'strict emplotment' are, to say the least, rare achievements indeed. A rage for order, and a sense of an ending, are hardly pre-eminent among Irish contributions to the cultural canon. In constructing his 'ideal type' of nationalism, it may be that Mulhern is thinking of the orderly procession of events that keeps in place the cherished continuity of English nationalism. If so, he could reflect on the kind of alarmist prefaces that were frequently attached to general histories of Ireland designed for Victorian readers brought up on the comforting linear narratives of the Whig interpretation of history:

The history of Ireland is marked by peculiarities which do not affect that of any other history. It comprises the remotest extremes of the social state; and sets at nought the ordinary laws of social transition and progress, during the long intervals between them. Operated on by a succession of *external* shocks, the internal advances, which form some part of all other history, have been wanting; and her broken and interrupted career, presents a dream-like succession of capricious and seemingly unconnected changes, without order or progress.⁴

This, written in the shadow of the catastrophe of the Famine, hardly bears witness to the conditions of a strictly emplotted national narrative. Such enclosure as existed in this period in Ireland took the form of land clearances rather than its more orderly narrative equivalent.

The question of narrative voices is central to Mulhern's critique. Having, as we have seen, initially commended the anthology for its array of 'polyphonic' voices, he then changes his mind and discovers that underneath this cultural colloquy, one voice, that of monological nationalism, has been subtly orchestrating the exchanges all along. Espousing any form of national identity, on this reasoning, would seem to be monological and thus inimical to entering into cultural dialogue, as if polyphonic discourse and openness towards the other somehow requires the obliteration of one's own identity. This may be one understanding of internationalism and universalism, but to me it seems like an alibi for erasing all cultural difference. The difficulty with national identity is not when it speaks from a subject-position, but rather when it entertains delusions of superiority and universality, aspiring to the omniscience of his master's voice. To the

extent that Irish nationalism, in the name of faith and fatherland, foreclosed self-criticism and pursued a stultifying homogeneity, it is indeed a monologic discourse.⁵ Mulhern's case against me rests on the imputation that I subscribe to such a fundamentalist ('self-evident truths' (27)) and ahistorical ('perennially valid' (27)) concept of identity, but this is an inexplicable misreading of my arguments. My contribution to the anthology (however 'maverick') was precisely to afford *another* set of possibilities, tracing a dissident line of nationalist thinkers at the turn of the century which included figures as diverse as George Sigerson, Frederick Ryan, Thomas MacDonagh, Arthur Clery, Thomas Kettle, James Connolly, and Aohd De Blacam. Many of these embraced both socialism and feminism, and all of them, in different ways, trenchantly eschewed racist, sectarian or, indeed, any 'monologic' forms of identity. Given that these writers and activists (with the obvious exception of Connolly) have been virtually written out of history, and ignored in the secondary literature, I would have thought that bringing these 'dialogic' voices back into a debate noted for shrillness and intolerance would have been welcomed. But not so. Mulhern prefers the old rogue's gallery, full of zealots, revanchists and other hearts with one purpose alone. For all his critique of sameness, in the end he wants more of the same.

It is not surprising, in this connection, that the shrillness appears in his own voice in proportion as he misrepresents my arguments. 'Gibbons,' he writes, 'cannot venture the absurd claim that they [i.e. socialism and feminism] are merely radical variations on patrician liberalism.' This indeed would be an absurd claim, but the difficulty is that, again, I make the *opposite* argument. The position I advance in the anthology is that it is *not* always necessary to look to liberalism alone⁶ to release the progressive potential of socialism and feminism in Ireland, but that many radical possibilities were also latent *within* certain innovatory strands of nationalism and the anti-imperialist movement, which may have been marginalised for that very reason. By virtue of his essentialist categories, this is impossible for Mulhern, since nationalism is *a priori* incompatible with any form of diversity or otherness. 'Socialism must be domesticated and feminism silenced outright' (26) by nationalism, he proclaims (note the disparaging use of 'domestication' – I would imagine that many socialists would consider its domestication long overdue!). The intricate and variegated network of alliances and differences between nationalists, feminists and socialists in Ireland at the turn of the century (which still awaits detailed research) is simply ignored.

Instead of excluding one history of resistance *tout court*, I would prefer the approach, adopted by critics such as Cora Kaplan,⁷ which avoids reifying class, gender, race and, I would add, nationality, as pure, mutually exclusive abstractions, but rather considers them as 'cross-cutting' political projects (to use Mulhern's own term), splicing each other in determinate historical situations. Of course, this does not mean that they are always equally balanced, and some sites of struggle may be more strategically placed

at stress-points in society than others. In a momentary lapse, Mulhern concedes that in certain conjunctures even nationalism may come to the fore: 'An unresolved national question encourages nation-centred cultural tendencies' (the unresolved national question being precisely why national narratives in Ireland *lack* closure, contrary to his earlier pronouncements). But in case we run away with the idea that he has softened his line, he adds quickly: 'yet [a] principled, democratic response towards the one [an unresolved national question] does not entail indulgence towards the other: certainly not in the south, where the valorization of Irishness as the main collective identity is more often than not repressive' (27).

This repression he lays primarily at the door of the Catholic Church, or rather Catholic nationalism, but this conveniently overlooks the key role of British rule in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in securing the hegemony of the Catholic Church. So far from acting as the ideological arm of separatist movements, the Catholic 'devotional revolution' sought to suppress them (hence its immense appeal for, and support from, the colonial administration).⁸ When it was apparent that nationalism was gaining the upper hand, the Catholic Church, never one to miss backing a winner, shifted its allegiance, thus laying the basis for the narrow-gauge nationalism which became the orthodoxy of the new partitionist state. Under conditions of partition – 'the single greatest English contribution to the topography of the modern world', as Christopher Hitchens has described it – sectarian politicians both north and south were able to build their own versions of confessional states, demonising each other in the process. As Hitchens points out, the big losers in all of this, whether

in Ireland, in India, in Cyprus, and in Palestine were precisely those secular and tolerant forces, in the shape of editors, trade unionists, public officials, and intellectuals, upon whom real and lasting peace treaties actually depend.⁹

These are the silenced voices which I tried to recover in my sections of the anthology, but which evidently do not fit in with the manifest destiny of Mulhern's theocratic nationalism.

It is striking that, in order to discredit by re-negotiation of Irish culture from this perspective, Mulhern finds it necessary to attribute my excesses to 'post-structuralism' and 'mid-Atlantic' identity politics (which would seem to be somewhat at odds with his conviction that I am also fretting in the shadow of traditional nationalism). I would like to think that Marxist critical theory is capable of 'emplotting' its position in these narratives of resistance, and particularly that it does not derogate all questions of cultural identity to post- (or pre-) Marxist intellectual currents. It may indeed be necessary to go beyond existing paradigms of nationalism, but only after having absorbed their insistence on difference, and the specificity of historical time and cultural space. Hence the importance of Paul Willemsen's argument that 'discourses of nationalism and those addressing national specificity are not identical'.¹⁰

Mulhern, however, does not accept this distinction: as he sees it, Irish nationalism can only wither away with the 'obsolescence of the "Irish nation"' (28) itself. From this it would seem that his difficulty is not just with nationalism, but with 'Irishness' and, indeed, with the very existence of Ireland as a nation. If this is the logical outcome of the 'shared appeal [by Marxism] to some version of "internationalist" or "humanist" or "Enlightenment" values, (26) which he invokes, then it is no wonder that Marxism is in such serious trouble worldwide.

The Irish socialists James Connolly and Fredrick Ryan (interestingly, Mulhern does not mention the truly internationalist but implacably anti-imperialist Ryan at all, though both myself and Seamus Deane include extensive contributions by him) are among the first Marxists to fully engage with these questions, and deserve better than to be 'silenced outright' as mere sycophants of the Second International. Connolly indeed adopted a materialist approach to history, as Mulhern avers, but in a complex manner that prefigures Raymond Williams's attempts to 'de-etherealise' culture, insisting on its effective materiality as a social agency. Connolly's thinking on such issues owed less to the mechanistic socialism of the Second International than to far-reaching debates on the scientific status of political economy in nineteenth-century Ireland, which questioned the dogma that economic laws followed 'iron laws of necessity', resembling nature rather than history.¹¹ Connolly's views on 'Celtic communism', and his insistence on discussing the intractable Land Question not just in formal economic terms but also in the specific historical context of the Brehon Laws, are of interest because they point to the *cultural mediation* of market forces, an awareness that economic necessity does not operate in the same way in the undeveloped periphery (particularly under colonialism) as it does in the metropolitan heartlands. For this reason, there is no universal template for modernisation or, for that matter, socialism, but rather they must engage dialogically with the precise cultural, historical and, dare one say, national conjunctures in which they find themselves. Such an appalling vista fills Mulhern with dismay. 'It is hard to say where, in all of this,' he laments, 'opportunism sinks into sincere confusion: Marxist "theory" must yield to Irish "history"'. Yet in the last instance, Mulhern himself has to accept that even Marxist theory may have occasionally to yield to historical contingency. A concern with national identity, he reluctantly concedes, may be 'in Irish conditions ... if not perennially valid, at least historically pertinent' (27). This, admittedly something of an understatement, is not too far removed from the 'maverick' position which I espouse in the *Anthology*. At times it is indeed hard to say where opportunism sinks into sincere confusion.

Nor does it follow, when Marxist theory takes stock of actual history, Irish or otherwise, that everything native, indigenous, or even traditional is automatically an obstacle on the path of progress – a derailing of socialism onto the closed circuit of nationalism. In a statement which echoes Marx's late writings on Russian village communes, Connolly wrote that those social determinists who espouse rigid

linear conceptions of development

will regard the Irish adherence to the clan ownership at such a comparatively recent date as the seventeenth century as an evidence of retarded economical development and therefore a real hindrance to progress. But the sympathetic student of history, who believes in the possibility of a people by political intuition anticipating the lessons afterwards revealed to them in the sad school of experience, will not be indisposed to join with the Irish patriot in his lavish expressions of admiration for the sagacity of his Celtic forefathers, who foreshadowed in the democratic organisation of the Irish clan the more perfect organisation of the free society of the future.¹²

Connolly wisely points out that only the sympathetic student of history will be prepared to acknowledge forms of social advancement beyond the limited horizons of his or her own intellectual community, however enlightened. Unfortunately, such sympathy is not evident in Francis Mulhern's response to the disparate narratives at work in a culture still trying to come to terms with centuries of colonial domination. If there is any closure or 'strictly-plotted narrative' evident in all of this, it would seem to govern his understanding of socialism. On this reckoning, it is not nationalism but Marxism which has profound difficulties with otherness.

Notes

- 1 Siobhan Kilfeather, 'The Whole Bustle', *London Review of Books*, 9 January 1992.
- 2 See, for example, the critical appraisals by Tom Dunne, 'New Histories: Beyond "Revisionism"', and Kevin Barry, 'Anthology as History: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*', in *The Irish Review*, No. 12, Spring/Summer 1992.
- 3 Francis Mulhern, 'A Nation, Yet Again: The Field Day Anthology', *Radical Philosophy* 65, Autumn 1993, pp. 23–4, 25. (The page numbers of further references will be cited in brackets in the text.)
- 4 James Wills, D.D. and Freeman Wills, M.A., *The Irish Nation: its History and its Biography* (London, 1876), Vol. 1, p. 3. I pursue this argument in 'Montage, Modernism and the City', *The Irish Review*, No. 10, Spring 1991, and in 'Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', *The Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1–2, 1991.
- 5 As David Lloyd has argued, this monologic strand in nineteenth-century Irish nationalism took its bearings from its ruling English model, and, as such, was part of an integrative project within an imperial frame, for all its rhetoric to the contrary: 'Paradoxically, in adopting such a model of cultural identification ... Irish nationalists reproduced in their very opposition to the Empire a narrative of universal development which is fundamental to the development of imperialism' (David Lloyd, 'Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject' in his *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin, 1992). I include a shorter version of this article in the section which I edited in Vol. 3 of the *Anthology*, 'Challenging the Canon: Revisionism and Cultural Criticism'. For a more extended discussion, see also David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1987), esp. Introduction and Ch. 2.
- 6 I make it clear that the liberalism which I have in mind is not

'patrician liberalism' (of which I profess to know nothing) but the unreconstructed 'bourgeois humanist' variety, based on notions of the 'autonomous individual' – as one of its exponents, whom I quote in the anthology, puts it. Throughout his review, Mulhern repeatedly takes me to task for utterances and opinions which I cite from others. The fusion of 'Derry with Derrida' which he castigates is not my phrase, but, as I indicate, is of Edna Longley's making; likewise, the opinion that modernisation in its liberal variant has failed to deliver substantial social change in Ireland is not just a nationalist fantasy, but is the view of Conor Cruise O'Brien (whom I quote to this effect). Mulhern states correctly that 'a liberal current generally termed "revisionist" has been salient in Irish culture and politics over the past twenty-five years' (26), but my concern is simply to question that it has a monopoly on progress. Many of the secular and egalitarian influences that have been attributed to liberalism have in fact derived from 'unhealthy intersections' (in Cruise O'Brien's phrase) between the left, the women's movement, and radical strands within nationalism and republicanism. Conversely, in areas such as civil liberties and political censorship, the silence of the liberal intelligentsia (with some notable exceptions such as Mary Robinson) has been deplorable.

- 7 Writing of the 'determinants' of character in fiction, Caplan argues that 'class, race and gender are bound together in the historical development and definition of subjectivity – no abstract, unsocialised characters appear in any piece of fiction anymore than they do in mental life ... but [are] "always, already, ordered and broken up through other social and cultural terms"'. Cora Kaplan, "'Like a Housemaid's Fancies'", *The Representation of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth-century Writing*, in Susan Sheridan, ed., *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London, 1988), p. 56. The quotation within the statement is from Kaplan's 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism', in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London, 1986).
- 8 For the Catholic Church's *rapprochement* with the colonial administration in the eighteenth century, and its crucial support in cementing the Act of Union in 1800, see Tom Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question 1690–1830* (Dublin, 1992). For the Catholic Church's fond embrace of Victorian values in the nineteenth century, see Tom Inglis, *The Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin, 1987). Of course, both Catholic and nationalist mythology would subsequently have it that the Church was always 'agin' the government – a myth which has unfortunately also endeared itself to some of the sternest opponents of 'Catholic nationalism'.
- 9 Christopher Hitchens, 'Still deaf to the Empire's parting shots', *The Guardian*, 7 August 1993.
- 10 Paul Willemen, 'The National', paper delivered at the symposium on 'National Cinema' at the International Communication Association Annual Conference, Dublin, 1990. I am grateful to Paul Willemen for providing me with a copy of this paper.
- 11 See, for example, the formulation in T. Cliff Leslie's critical essay on 'The Political Economy of Adam Smith' (1870): 'Political Economy is not a body of natural laws in the true sense, or of universal and immutable truths, but an assemblage of speculations and doctrines which are the result of a particular history ... so far from being of no country, and unchangeable from age to age, it has varied much in different ages and countries, and even with different expositors in the same age and country' (*Essays in Political and Moral Philosophy*, Dublin, 1879, p. 149). For a valuable discussion of nineteenth-century debates on political economy in Ireland, see Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (London, 1992).
- 12 James Connolly, 'Erin's Hope' (1897), in Owen Dudley Edwards and Bernard Ransom, eds, *James Connolly – Selected Political Writings* (London, 1973), pp. 173–174.