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IRISH IDENTITY IN SEAMUS DEANE’S 
READING IN THE DARK

Peter Jasinski

In Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark, Deane presents us with the childhood of an unnamed narrator who tells the story of his troubled family in postwar Northern Ireland. As the boy stumbles through the complexities and ironies of the adult world, he slowly increases in social and political awareness. The novel takes its title from a scene in which the boy, after the lights are turned off, tries to imagine the story he had been reading. The image of reading in the dark expresses the difficulty of reconstructing the past from fragmentary accounts available in the present: the narrator’s family history “came to [him] in bits, from people who rarely recognized all they had told” (236). He uncovers only a partial picture of the truth as he tries to put together the tragic, mysterious past of his family.

The story is concerned with the complexities of how we know, particularly how we know ourselves. For the boy, knowing himself requires knowing and situating himself in his family’s history and Ireland’s history, both of which prove to be elusive. The boy’s search for identity parallels author Seamus Deane’s broader attempt in his nonfiction to explore the mystery of Ireland’s past and its present identity, an attempt which is particularly evident in Deane’s political work in the Field Day enterprise.¹ It therefore may be tempting to read

¹Deane is one of the directors of the Field Day Theatre Company. Established in 1980, the company quickly expanded into pamphleteering and publishing. Field Day seeks solutions to the crisis in Northern Ireland “by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation” (Ireland’s Field Day vii). Deane has been the editor of the recently published Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature (1992). As might be suspected from the inherent social and political aims of Field Day, much of the theory behind their work leans on Marxist criticism, as apparent in the fifth series of Field Day pamphlets, Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature, a collection of essays by Marxist scholars Terry Eagleton, Frederick Jameson, and William Said.
Reading in the Dark as a movement to produce a nationalist reconstruction of Ireland's history. But in Reading in the Dark, Deane is not attempting a simple reconstruction, or rereading, of Ireland's history in the darkness of the present. Rather, Deane illustrates—that is, gives an aesthetic form to—the problems and paradoxes of defining Irish identity.

As with many perceptions of identity, the model for Irish identity explored by Deane is built on binary oppositions. Binary oppositions are pairings of opposites—such as black/white, good/evil, masculine/feminine—that allow for simplistic identification. Deane explores key binary oppositions that make up Irish identity, including Irish/English and Catholic/Protestant, that are inherited from history and perpetuated in present-day Ireland. When these binaries are aligned with good/evil, for example, and then used to construct identity, they can be and, indeed, have proven destructive. Although ultimately impossible to eliminate, such binaries form a destructive model of Irish identity. Deane seeks to find new, less-destructive approaches to these categories and the complex, heart-wrenching conflicts they represent. I shall discuss three binary oppositions that characterize Deane's wrestle with Irish identity, reading Reading in the Dark as an artistic expression of the political ideas found in Deane's nonfiction.

That Deane would discuss the Irish identity through literary and not historical precedent is not surprising, considering the current conflation of the history/literature binary. Echoing Louis Montrose's "Historicity of Texts, Textuality of History," Deane asserts the impracticality of the history/literature binary:

Literature can be written as History, History as Literature. It would be foolhardy to choose one among the many competing variations and say that it is true on some specifically historical or literary basis. Such choices are always moral and/or aesthetic. They always have an ideological implication. ("Heroic Styles" 45)

For Deane there is no such thing as an unbiased history, and because histories are no more valid than fictions, no single version of history can be privileged over another. In an introductory essay to Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature, Deane applies his assessment of the history/literature binary to nationalist literature. He argues that insurgent
nationalists use literature “to create a version of history for themselves.”
In such a manufactured history,

their intrinsic essence has always manifested itself, thereby
producing readings of the past that are as monolithic as that
which they are trying to supplant. They are usually, as in Ire­
land, under the additional disadvantage that much of their
past has been destroyed, silenced, erased. (“Introduction” 9)

Deane acknowledges that the Irish need, but can never achieve, an
accurate understanding of their past. At least, the effort to create to
respond to the oppressor’s version of history with one’s own is fraught
with paradox.

Nevertheless, conscious of the paradox, Deane asserts his own reading
of history, which interestingly enough is concerned primarily with litera­
ture. In “The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing,” Deane maps
out the “process whereby the urge to make what was strange—a recalc­
trant Ireland—familiar, a part of the United Kingdom” (120), an urge that
I perceive as a move to unify the two binaries. Throughout the article,
Deane points out the impossibility of merging several cultural binaries. In
the late eighteenth century, Irish nationalists attempted to meld the
“Gaelic-/ and English-language traditions in poetry, [. . .] an attempt to
reconcile in the field of literature what had become irreconcilable in the
field of politics” (121). In the nineteenth century, Irish writing was seen as
“anachronistic,” in need of being “coerced out of its willfully nonmodern,
even antimodern, condition so that it can be cleared for the initiation of
modernity” (123). This coercion was done by simultaneously recording
and thereby destroying (silencing) Irish folklore. But by the turn of the
century, Ireland’s anachronism became seen “as a unique form of modern­
ity, the form that was opposed to modernization and was, in conse­
quence, culturally richer” (124). Writers turned to Celtic lore as a legit­
imizing source of anachronistic/modern Irishness, a move that only
superficially represents the merging of Protestant and Catholic in the
“Celtic spirit” by writers such as Yeats.² The fallacy of this move, meant to

²Deane states, “Once the Irish revival had, through Standish O’Grady, Sigerson, and
Yeats, established that this ‘Celtic spirit’ was Protestant as well as Catholic, a form of
Protestant dissent that repudiated the modern world just as much as Catholic loyalty
to ancient forms had resisted it, the cultural version of the solidarity of the Irish
national community was complete” (Production 125).
fuse Protestant/Catholic and Irish/English into a single Irish culture, will be discussed below.

But first, let us turn to the novel. Given Deane’s view on history, we should not be surprised that history permeates Reading in the Dark. However, we should be hesitant to interpret the novel (despite its many historical allusions, ranging from Celtic myth to IRA uprisings) as a rewriting of Irish history in order to produce a more authentic, “historically accurate” Irish cultural identity. This is most clearly illustrated by the text the boy narrator reads in the dark, entitled The Shan Van Vocht. The book’s political goal is to retell the rebellion of 1798. After he turns off the light, the boy would “lie there, the book still open, re-imagining all [he] had read, the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark” (20). The boy’s access to the true story of Ireland is mediated by the text, which leaves open “endless possibilities” to its meaning. His imaginings are as important as the text in creating the story he reads. Indeed, he enters into this fictive world, conversing with the heroine, Ann, and refusing to leave her to fight in the rebellion. In the darkness of the present, he can rewrite “history” any way he wishes. The book cannot be expected to reveal a single, true History to the boy; rather, history is malleable, changed by the reader who participates in its creation.

The Shan Van Vocht is a phonetic rendering of an Irish phrase meaning “The Poor Old Woman, a traditional name for Ireland” (19). The boy’s reading is connected to the larger issue of connecting to a true history of Ireland. His text is Ireland, a repressed Ireland. As a translated text, The Shan Van Vocht (or Ireland) is already linguistically and metaphorically removed from its original context, further complicating an attempt to read it aright. The boy’s participation in creating a version of history suggests that reconstructing Ireland’s history is likewise inextricably inaccurate, requiring the reader to fill in gaps with her own narrative. At best, the reader can be conscious of the limits of a text and her participation in creating its meaning.

If Deane does not attempt a portrayal of a single, true history in Reading in the Dark, he does use the novel to show how a politicized version of history perpetuates destructive prejudices, prejudices that, again, are based on binaries that deconstruct. The stereotypes that form reality in Reading in the Dark are based on the destructive Catholic/Protestant binary opposition, a dichotomy based on religious vocabulary that disguises political work. Considering this political manipulation, the Catholic/Protestant binary can be seen as being an
arbitrary division of people. It may be surprising that an Irish artist would consider the deeply rooted Catholic/Protestant division in Ireland as arbitrary, political, or destructive. But as Terry Eagleton, writing for Deane’s Field Day enterprise, notes:

All oppositional politics thus move under the sign of irony, knowing themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists. Our grudge against the ruling order is not only that it has oppressed us in our social, sexual, or racial identities, but that it has thereby forced us to lavish an extraordinary amount of attention on these things, which are not in the long run all that important. (26)

While oppositional political binaries may be arbitrary and ironically parasitic (i.e., Catholic is defined as everything “not Protestant,” and vice versa), they are nevertheless undeniably real and, in Ireland, painfully destructive. In fact, Reading in the Dark illustrates how, as Deane states in a Field Day essay, the Northern Irish “communities have become stereotyped into their roles of oppressor and victim to such an extent that the notion of a Protestant or a Catholic sensibility is now assumed to be a fact of nature rather than a product of [...] very special and ferocious conditions” (“Heroic Styles” 54). It is against the perceived “naturalness” of Ireland’s Protestant–Catholic division that Deane argues.

Reading in the Dark opens up a space wherein we can see the artifice of dividing along the religio-political boundary of Protestant and Catholic. We see this particularly in how this ideology (or politically informed “history”) is passed from one generation to another. The novel shows how various ideological apparatuses of the state (family, school, church) inculcate the boy with a destructive, politicized version of history. Deane shows the boy is at first innocent, unprejudiced; he must learn the ideological stereotypes in order to adopt the prejudices against the Protestants. Early in his life, the boy witnesses an accident in which another boy is run over by a lorry. One of the policemen, a Protestant, who is investigating the accident vomits at the sight of the dead body. The narrator feels the same “vertigo” that the policeman feels and thus feels “pity for the man. But this seemed wrong; everyone hated the police, told us to stay away from them, that they were a bad lot. So I said nothing” (11). In contrast to his sympathy with the enemy, the boy feels “scarcely anything for [the dead boy’s] mother or the lorry driver, both of whom I knew” (11). But a year later someone retells the story, this time with the
policemen deliberately running over the boy. The narrator's sympathies transfer from the Protestant policeman to the Catholic mother and lorry driver, and the guilt of feeling pity before for the policeman is allayed. His feelings have been brought into conformity with his community's stereotypes through a politically constructed version of history, reality, and nature.

Since models of identity that depend on binary oppositions are arbitrary and destructive and focus our attention on unimportant differences, they should be abolished. But equally destructive can be the attempt to unify binary oppositions, as in the attempts to unify Ireland and England. *Reading in the Dark*’s epigraph, taken from “She Moved through the Fair,” compares the unification of England and Ireland to marriage: “The people were saying no two were e’er wed / But one had a sorrow that never was said.” According to the poem, marriage, or the unifying of sexual opposites, results in the sorrow of one person in the pair. The parallel between marriage and the unification (cultural assimilation or appropriation) of Ireland and England is evident, with Ireland as the suffering, silent partner. As past efforts show, unifying Catholic and Protestant difference cannot be achieved through rewriting a new political version of history. Though rhetorically sophisticated, unifying oppositions ignores the real, oppressive conditions of present-day Ireland.

*Reading in the Dark* refutes the historical attempts to unify the inherited, divisive stereotypes. Because of the negative results of trying to bring binary opposites together, there is no obvious attempt at political reconciliation between the Catholics and the Protestants presented in the novel. Continuing the marriage metaphor, the book the boy reads in the dark belonged to his mother before she was married. She had written her maiden name on the flyleaf. “The ink had faded, but the letters were very clear. They seemed strange to me, as though they represented someone she was before she was the mother I knew” (19). The boy later learns that his mother possibly went into her marriage knowing that her father, a strong nationalist, ordered the execution of her husband’s brother on false accusations of treason. The boy’s parents’ relationship as a result is strained and fraught with suffering. The unifying of the two families should never have taken place.

Instead of trying to unify opposites, Deane exposes ideology by blurring binaries and, in a broader sense, opening up a gap wherein we can see ideology for what it is: a fraud. However, Deane also shows that exposing the artifice of ideology simultaneously destroys those that depend on binaries to construct reality. *Reading in the Dark*’s most engaging example
of blurring binaries—and the destructive effects of doing so—is found in a story told by the boy's aunt Katie. In the story, two orphans, a brother and sister, are sent by their uncle to live with the nanny. The girl "was dark, the boy was fair" (64). The orphans, Francis and Frances, are obviously a binary pair: male and female, light and dark. But when the nanny refuses to let them visit their parents' grave, the distinctions that make them opposite begin to blur. The boy becomes dark-haired and the girl, fair. But when the nanny takes the children to a priest, they switch back before he sees them. Back at home, the children continue to change, until they change sexes: "The boy was a girl, and the girl was a boy" (67). After this, the children swap incidental features, like eye color and height, driving the nanny mad. Finally, the children change back and forth so rapidly before the nanny's eyes, that she could no longer tell "which was the boy, which the girl" (71). The nanny remains mute the rest of her life. Through this tragic story-within-the-story, Deane comments on the danger of rigid dependence on oppositional metaphors that result in muteness and madness.

Obviously, the binaries that form our metaphors are not only sexual; they may just as easily be political. In fact, the lesson taken from the story—that dependence on binaries is destructive—seems to apply not so much to gender, but, again, to Ireland's political strife. According to Eagleton, "If the binary opposition between 'man' and 'woman' can always be deconstructed—if each term can always be shown to inhere parasitically within the other—then just the same is true of the opposition between those other virulently metaphysical forms of identity, Catholic and Protestant" (24).³

Ireland's political strife is represented in the boy's family. Paralleling the nanny's experience, the boy's mother witnesses the destruction of her constructed political reality. Just as the gender lines blur in Aunt Katie's story, the lines between Catholic and Protestant blur in the mother's

³Eagleton shows the parasitic nature as follows: "Catholic, of course, means universal; so there is something curious in using it to define a particular kind of national identity. There is a good Joycean irony involved in establishing one's Irish identity by reference to a European capital. But the claim of the Roman Catholic church to universality is in any case only necessary once that status has been challenged by Protestantism, and so is no sooner raised than refuted, denying in the very act of assertion. Protestantism, on the other hand, is in one sense an aberration from such universal identity, an affirmation of national difference; yet it takes the historical form of a return to the pure universal essence of Christianity which the Church of Rome has supposedly contaminated" (24–25).
world. Because the nanny in the story depends too much on binary oppositions, Aunt Katie says that a “blight’s on that family to this very day” (73). Because the boy’s mother has been taught to depend on Catholics always being good and Protestants bad, she also passes on a blight to her family when this model deconstructs. Her father ordered the death of her husband’s brother based on inaccurate information relating that the brother was an informer. Her knowledge of the execution shatters her association of the Catholic political cause with the right. Like the nanny, the mother descends into madness and muteness. That is, destroying the binaries that form an individual’s reality, and thus her identity, corresponds to a destruction of self. Likewise, if Ireland’s Catholics depend on the Other for defining the self, then destroying the Other (or even the binary) destroys the self. Again, Deane would point us to seek out new metaphors for understanding reality and the self.

*Reading in the Dark* then is not so much Deane’s solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland, as it is his representation of the troubles there. He shows the complexity of the issues, without attempting to simplify them. By putting the conflict in an aesthetic form, Deane makes the novel do political work, exposing the false dichotomies set up by the Catholic/Protestant, Irish/English oppositions. Deane’s solution is articulated by Eagleton, who posits that Marx believed “that to undo this alienation [caused by class] you had to go, not around class, but somehow all the way through it and out the other side” (23). Deane, paraphrasing Eagleton, states, “The oppositional terms it [nationalism] deploys are the very terms it must ultimately abolish. Yet such abolition is not an easy, peremptory gesture. The divisions of English and Irish, Protestant and Catholic, must be lived through in the present” (“Introduction” 4). That is, throwing out the oppositions immediately may have extremely destructive implications.

“Living through” the binary oppositions implies that we can no more ignore the arbitrary difference between them than we could ignore the differences between man and woman. Solutions to the conflict in Northern Ireland must deal squarely with the political realities of the present. At the same time, Deane’s solution implies that another rewriting of history, meant to formulate a new present, is inefficient. Real history is always inaccessible to us; no number of perspectives will get us there. And we especially cannot expect to get at real history through literature, which is unavoidably based on ideology that masks over history with its own politically charged history. Instead of rewriting history, Deane exposes through the novel the destructive
effects of the binaries on individuals. He also shows in literature—so perhaps it can be avoided in reality—what happens when the binaries break down.

“Living through” does not mean to casually pass over the painful, difficult information. It is pursuing as accurate a version of the past, accepting the truth of it, even if it is incomplete, even if it is painful. In a pivotal chapter near the end of the novel entitled “All of It?” the narrator pieces together the fragmented accounts of his family’s past that he has heard throughout his life. With a considerable degree of speculation, leaving some questions unanswered, he eventually arrives at a plausible history of his family that explains the mystery, the silences, and the heartache of his past. Though he has begun to understand his past and himself, the burden of the knowledge, which he shares only with his mother, is difficult to bear. The close of this chapter reveals the central mystery of the novel—the fate of the narrator’s paternal uncle Eddie—and how his mother discovered the secret:

Her father must have told her that; what he hadn’t told her, not until just before he died, was the truth about what had happened to Eddie. She knew it all now. She knew I knew it too. And she wasn’t going to tell any of it. Nor was I. But she didn’t like me for knowing it. And my father thought he had told me everything. I could tell him nothing, though I hated him not knowing. But only my mother could tell him. No one else. Was it her way of loving him, not telling him? It was my way of loving them both, not telling either. But knowing what I did separated me from them both. (194)

But telling, telling one’s own version of the truth, telling one’s pain, may be the only solution. The narrator’s mother tells him of a conversation between her and a Sergeant Burke, who comes seeking corroborating evidence for his police files on her father. Burke says, “Politics destroyed people’s lives in this place. . . . People were better not knowing some things, especially the younger people, for all that bother dragged on them all their lives, and what was the point?” (215). As if in response, after the conversation, the boy imagines a conversation with his mother, one that he wishes he could have: “What you don’t know doesn’t hurt you. . . . What I don’t know and you won’t tell, that does hurt me” (216). For the narrator, not knowing but imagining alternatives to the past is “worse
than having just one set of facts, the one story that cancelled all the others, the one truth she could tell. But everyone who had been there was dead or in exile or silenced one way or the other” (216–17). If any healing is to occur in Ireland, full disclosure of the past as experienced by one generation must be passed on to the next.

For Deane, part of living through the paradoxes afflicting Irish identity is to turn the conflict into art. Reading in the Dark perhaps does not give solutions to the troubles, but may be a solution itself. The memoirs of the unnamed narrator take us back through his personal history. As readers, we too live through the experience. We may not understand perfectly, but we understand better. While the narrator remains unnamed throughout the novel, we are left suspecting that the childhood of the narrator growing up in the 1940s in Derry shares at least some biographical features with Deane, also born in Derry in 1940. For Deane, telling his story, as mixture of fiction and history, is a constructive rather than destructive way of grappling with the impossibly complex emergence of the colonized from the colonizer. In the narrative, the binary oppositions that have long troubled the quest for Irish national identity and the identity of self in Ireland can exist side by side, they can dissolve, fuse into each other, or ultimately be abolished—with results that are instructive. By telling a story, Deane does not have to point fingers and perpetuate a cycle of retribution. By accepting and representing his past, he lives through it and emerges on the other side.

Bibliography