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Seamus Deane: Between Burke and Adorno

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At a seminar on his work at NUI Maynooth in early 2003, Seamus Deane, in response to a question from Joe Cleary, suggested that he reckoned his most important intellectual influences to have been Edmund Burke and Theodor Adorno. This essay will try to triangulate Deane's position between these two very different thinkers, tracing their influences in his criticism and looking at ways in which their thought might intersect in his own.

Seamus Deane is undoubtedly Ireland's premier critic. No other single figure, not even Denis Donoghue, has combined the same scholarship, critical acumen, and disciplinary influence as Deane, who can reasonably be described as having decisively shaped Irish literary studies over the last quarter-century. And yet Deane's critical work in itself has attracted relatively little sustained attention. Irish metacriticism still mostly takes place on the sidelines of conferences, in the nudge-and-wink at the bar, and in the scarcely different nudge-and-wink of book reviews. A handful of younger scholars, among whom Colin Graham, Richard Kirkland, and Gerry Smyth stand out for the intelligence and seriousness of their efforts, have in recent years begun to broach this topic.¹ But in comparison with the situation elsewhere in the Anglophone world, the study of Irish criticism is still in its infancy.

This is all the more mystifying when one considers the combination of ambition and methodological and theoretical self-consciousness that has often characterized Deane's project. As Terry Eagleton puts it, reviewing Deane's 1995 Clarendon Lectures in English Literature, published as *Strange Country*, no other Irish critic can range as confidently and with such insight from Madame de Staël to Daniel Corkery.² I would go so far as to suggest that Deane is perhaps the only Irish critic to have a full-blown 'theory' of Irish literature. He produces a narrative, gapped and damaged by his own account, of Irish writing that has a founding and shaping moment in the late eighteenth century, and a continuity to the present day. Quite simply, no other Irish critic has that reach or vision. But Deane is not only ambitious: his criticism has also been innovative in terms of both method and function.

¹ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001); Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996); Gerry Smyth, *Decolonization and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

² Terry Eagleton, 'Rewriting Ireland', *Bullán: An Irish Studies Journal*, 3.2 (Winter 1997/Spring 1998), 129–38.

This essay will argue that the book based on his doctoral dissertation, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England 1789–1832* is foundational in terms of Deane's *oeuvre*, though it was published only in 1988. In this book can be found discussions of Burke, of revolution, of intellectuals, of what Edward Said famously called 'travelling theory', all of which can be seen to be formative of a great deal of Deane's other work. Not merely this, but *The French Revolution* is unusual in that it is mostly a study of the political philosophy of English Romantic writers and of their reception of French revolutionary political thought. Already, in this work, Deane was bringing literature and political theory together in a way that is rare in English studies.

This essay will also explore the manner in which Deane has been influenced by Theodor Adorno in his pursuit of these projects. Deane came to intellectual maturity in the 1960s, at a time when, in Ireland and Britain, Leavisism and the American New Criticism were still the predominant academic forms of literary investigation. New theories of literature and culture were nevertheless in the air: French structuralism and post-structuralism began their conquest of American academia, one could say, with the famous Johns Hopkins conference of 1966. The rise of the New Left in England and America led to renewed interest in the intellectual heritage of Western Marxism: Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School thinkers: Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, and Leo Lowenthal. To a critic like Deane, these will have seemed exciting new intellectual and analytical resources with which to step beyond the institutional sclerosis of Anglo-American criticism.

Deane, of course, came to criticism and to intellectual work from a very particular context. His origins as a Northern Irish nationalist and republican inflect his work in various ways, but it seems reasonable to suppose that a member of an uneasy minority of a sectarian statelet would have a sense of both the weight and the brittleness of authority, whether that authority be cultural or political. By this I mean that Deane's sense of culture as a realm of ideological contest is derived in part from his sense of outsiderhood in Northern Ireland; his sense (and that of his community) that the state did not belong to them, that they lived outside 'official' culture (which was self-consciously British). In addition, Deane has spent most of his working life as an academic critic in the Republic, where, to a politicized member of the Northern nationalist minority, the mainstream political rhetoric of unity will have seemed hollow and mendacious. So Deane's circumstances have put him 'outside' culture for much of his life: it would seem inevitable, then, that he should be drawn to philosophical traditions that express a deep scepticism of traditional notions of culture as, in Matthew Arnold's famous formulation, 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'.³

³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 79.

Edward Said's Gramscian reading of Arnold illustrates this point very well. Said demonstrates how for Arnold culture was very much a force for and of the State. Culture was the best that was known and thought, the best self of Man, and the State was its institutional manifestation. So a triumphant and dominant culture is a form of hegemony. Thus, the power of culture is potentially that of the State itself. For an intellectual or writer to have the honorific title of 'culture' conferred upon his work is to be endowed with an authority originating in the State. Said goes on to suggest that the coincidence of state authority and cultural legitimacy results in a sense of centrality, confidence, the sense of majority, community, belonging, and 'home' in cultural production. To lie outside this legitimate culture is to be 'homeless', irrational, anarchic, beyond representation. So it is that the processes by which certain practices are deemed culturally legitimate are as much a matter of exclusion as of inclusion.⁴

It has been Seamus Deane, equipped with a mordant view of this idea of culture, who has anatomized the importance of Burke for Arnold. In 'Arnold, Burke and the Celts', Deane argues: 'Liberal Victorian intellectuals — Arnold, John Morley, Leslie and Fitzjames Stephen and Lord Acton — adopted a view of the Irish problem which owed a great deal to Edmund Burke.'⁵ Deane continues:

Arnold [. . .] established a link between Burke's view of Ireland — first formulated in the early (1760-5) and posthumously published *Tracts on the Popery Laws in Ireland* — and what we may call the Gladstonian view of Ireland, conceived in the run-up to the election of 1868. (p. 22)

This comes just after a formulation of the nature of 'tradition', indebted to the work of Ranger and Hobsbawm, which is worth quoting at length:

If tradition, in the good sense, does not exist, it is necessary to invent it, even if it means building on the ruins of tradition understood in the bad sense as discontinuity and fracture. This the Irish did. The hypothesis of a tradition may be frail, the felt necessity for it is very real and powerful. Knowledge of the past affects it, but the demands of the present activate it. It is an enabling idea and of its nature involves a degree of idealization. The Ireland we live in is only a proximate version of the entity to which we refer in literary, historical or political discourse. The *idea* of Ireland permits us to observe and comment upon the *fact* of Ireland. The reverse is also true. As a result, there are no isolated facts; they all subserve the dominant idea. (p. 19)⁶

This passage is notable, coming where it does. It occurs in the first essay in the collection *Celtic Revivals*, and it therefore serves as a setting-forth of an interpretative model for Deane in much of the rest of the book, and indeed

⁴ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 10–11.

⁵ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880–1980* (London: Faber, 1985), pp. 17–27 (p. 21).

⁶ See *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

in much of his criticism overall. This is entirely of a piece, for example, with his much later statement, in the General Introduction to the *Field Day Anthology*: 'There is a story here, a meta-narrative, which is [...] hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island's past and present.'⁷ Deane has a sense that Irish literary and political history is characterized by 'the experience of rupture, discontinuity, break and breakdown'.⁸ He recognizes that 'tradition' emerges to impose a continuity on this shattered narrative and that 'tradition' is as much answerable to the political and social needs of the moment of its production as to its content-matter. But he also and at the same time recognizes that all critical or scholarly work amounts to a re-interpretation or a re-narration of the evidence of cultural history, and that to try to step outside this circle is to try to escape from a Borgesian labyrinth. Therefore he acknowledges that 'selection is not made from a preordained "tradition"; it is selection which ordains the tradition(s)', yet he emphasizes 'the fictive nature of any tradition that asserts continuity while acknowledging its need to do so'.⁹

The point of this discussion of Deane's understanding of tradition is that, for Deane, it is Edmund Burke, more than almost any other writer, who is the founder of this tradition. Burke underlies Arnold's formulation of the dialectic of culture and anarchy, Celt and Saxon on which so much Irish literature and culture has battered ever since. Arnold, of course, used Burke as a model for arguing that British policy vis-à-vis Ireland was wrongheaded and not conducive to the preservation of the Union. Burke, that is, underpins Arnold's argument that hegemonic control of Ireland can be constructed on cultural grounds: the paradox, so typical of colonial literatures, is that Irish cultural nationalism moved along channels outlined by an organic intellectual of the colonial power.

Burke, however, as Deane has been assiduous in showing, was a paradoxical figure. The great critic of tyrannous British colonial rule in India and the Americas, the analyst of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy as 'an Ascendancy of Hucksters', a 'junto of Robbers', was also, most famously, the first and most brilliant critic of the French Revolution. In *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England 1789-1832*, Deane argues persuasively for Burke's status as the mediator of the Revolution to a nervous English audience. But not merely this: Deane argues that in doing so, Burke contributed decisively to the formation of the English idea of national character. Of course, in this, Burke was taking part in a wider historical-philosophical reaction to the Revolution. Hayden White argues that modern historiography was formed

⁷ *The Field Day Anthology*, Vol. I (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. xx.

⁸ Seamus Deane, 'Canon Fodder: Literary Mythologies in Ireland', in *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster*, ed. by Jean Lundy and Aodan MacPóilin (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1992), pp. 22-32 (p. 23).

⁹ Deane, *Field Day Anthology*, I, xx, xix.

as a scholarly discipline in a context of profound hostility to all kinds of myth, especially political myth:

Both the political Right and the political Left blamed mythic thinking for the excesses of the Revolution. False readings of history, misconceptions of the nature of the historical process, unrealistic expectations about the ways that historical societies could be transformed — all these had led to the outbreak of the Revolution in the first place, the strange course that Revolutionary developments followed, and the effects of Revolutionary activities over the long run.¹⁰

An important part of Burke's defence of the English political and social system was the claim that the English adherence to tradition was because their customs conformed to human nature. From this, Burke argued that the English, unlike the French, had a national tendency towards the natural. English common sense was an advantage in comparison with the inherently changeable and superficial French. As Deane writes,

It did not trouble [Burke] unduly to decide whether the English tradition of liberty had formed the national character or whether the national character had formed the tradition of liberty. The interrelationship between the two mattered more than the priority of one over the other. English history illustrated the national character; national character was an embodiment of English history.¹¹

As Sankar Muthu has recently suggested, this makes for a certain similarity between the philosophies of history of Burke and of Johann Gottfried Herder, arguably the founder of German historicism, and also a crucial thinker in the genealogy of cultural nationalism.¹²

Now, of course, Burke's critique of the *philosophes* and of the Revolution partakes of a number of other strategies, but they are all crucially related to the idea of national character. Voltaire, Helvetius, and others are attacked for their rationalism, while Rousseau is attacked for his new emotionalism and subjectivity. These lines of thinking are, notwithstanding their differences, allies in a grand conspiracy against European Christianity and social order. Further, they are part of a union of professional writers with the urban middle classes against the aristocracy and the peasantry. Unlike Montesquieu — the only French Enlightenment thinker for whom Burke has any time — Voltaire, Helvetius, Condorcet, D'Alembert, and Diderot are all given to ridiculous levity; their thought is concerned with its own shapeliness more than with truth to human nature, it is less interested in morality than in novelty.¹³ Deane points out that as early as 1756, in the *Vindication of Natural Society*, Burke had made the connection between an ill-run society and the

¹⁰ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 122–23.

¹¹ Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England 1789–1832* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 12.

¹² Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 317–18.

¹³ Deane, *The French Revolution*, p. 5.

rise of abstract speculation about politics, and he had also attacked the predilection for theory. In the *Reflections*, according to Deane, Burke redoubled the assault,

finding that the application of a closed system, pure and complete in itself, to the illogical complexity of human affairs is an appropriate analogy for the French revolutionaries' attempts to construct a government on a priori grounds. The constant repetition of words such as *system*, *abstract*, *cold* or *formal* in close relation to one another enables Burke to attribute to both philosophes and revolutionaries a common mentality, thereby insinuating a common link between them. (Deane, p.6)

At the same time, Burke also criticized the French thinkers for their alleged perversion of the intimate sphere of domestic affections. Rousseau was singled out for a brilliant and vicious personal attack: how, Burke asked, is one to take seriously Rousseau's theory of universal benevolence, when he himself abandoned his illegitimate children on the threshold of an orphanage? The spread of Rousseauistic theory into the family, exemplified by Condorcet's corruption of the Dauphin, brings Burke to what Deane suggests is the central image of the *Reflections*, and also of *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* and *Thoughts on French Affairs*: 'The family of Marie Antoinette, travestied by the Voltairean cabals, by Rousseau's wretched treatment of his own children, and by the Revolutionary mobs led by women' (Deane, p. 9).

That is, Burke's critique of the French Enlightenment proceeds crucially by way of rejection of the alleged perversion of natural affections, whether political or domestic, perpetrated by the *philosophes*. But it also related to his thinking on Ireland. Deane argues that Burke 'received the basic elements of his political theory of the affections' from the Second Treatise of Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725). In Hutcheson's 'national love', Deane discerns the origins of the love of the 'little platoon' that is the most famous feature of Burke's organicism. Burke, Deane tells us, saw a direct link between French Jacobinism and the Irish Protestant Ascendancy: 'Much of what had happened in Ireland was a standing rebuke to all that was being attempted in France.' Deane continues:

National love and political affections were being broken or vulgarized by a despotic, enterprising sect which had a persecuting edge to its deeply embedded fanaticism. The French were universalizing sectarianism into a theory of global benevolence and revolution. What the sect had been, the party would become. Neither the sect nor the party, the Ascendency nor the Jacobins, was a true aristocracy. Each was a 'plebian monster'. (p. 17)

Furthermore, Burke saw in the spectacle of Irish Catholics fleeing persecution in Ireland and French Protestants fleeing persecution in France 'a radical dislocation of natural feeling' of the kind described by Hutcheson (Deane, p. 16).

Deane points out elsewhere that Burke wrote about nationalism. He notes that against the cabalistic conspiracy within the state, Burke distinguished between nation and state, favouring the former as ‘an entity which was beyond the range of doctrinaire apprehension or definition but yet was within the experience of all who formed part of its history’.¹⁴ Burke, of course, described the nation as ‘a moral essence, not a geographical arrangement, or a denomination of the nomenclator’.¹⁵ Deane sees that Burke was not an Irish nationalist, but rather ‘the occasion of its emergence in others as a political faith’:

His political creed led him to place so much emphasis on the importance of manners, custom, prejudice, and their influence on the formation of national character that opposition to revolutionary thought became, through him, associated with a respect for history and for the manifold and subtle ways in which it conditioned temperament and the political institutions which reflected the peculiar genius of a group.¹⁶

Yet there is the paradox that while Burke became associated with the conservative defence of the idea of nationality, in Ireland the leaders of that defensive movement were members of the Ascendancy Burke had seen as allies of the Jacobinism they wished to defeat. Instead, Deane argues,

All those elements which went to supply Burke’s liberal theory of constitutional forms which would be a natural expression of national character — antiquity, ‘home-bred affection’, complexity, nostalgia, mystery, and the spectacle of ruin — were all incorporated into the literature of Thomas Moore, Sir Samuel Ferguson and, in an etherealised version, of James Clarence Mangan, thereby leading to the promotion of a sense of Irish cultural identity which was thereafter to rejoin with the revolutionary republican tradition, with its concentration on the notion of a distinct Irish political identity. (pp. 150–51)

It is tempting to see Burke as simply a critic of Enlightenment, but Deane warns us against this. For Burke, the Enlightenment, as represented especially by Montesquieu, had been betrayed by figures like Helvetius and Holbach. Burke ‘understood himself to be remaining faithful to the liberal tradition by resisting the revolution and the abstract theorising which had promoted it’ (pp. 144–45). Burke, according to Deane, predicted that the chaos caused by the Revolution would lead to a dictatorial counter-revolution.

In subsequent chapters of *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England*, Deane demonstrates Germaine de Stael’s importance in the formulation of the idea of a national literature, and national character. Deane argues that

¹⁴ Seamus Deane, ‘Edmund Burke and the Ideology of Irish Liberalism’, in *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, ed. by Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp. 141–56 (p. 149).

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs*, in *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 8 vols (London: Bell, 1876–77), v, 220.

¹⁶ Deane, ‘Edmund Burke’, p. 151.

Mme de Stael sought in her thinking to co-ordinate a balance between national character and cosmopolitanism. She admired the English tradition of liberty and the German idea of profound feeling, but she also respected the social sophistication of France and the communal sense manifest in Italy. In her *De l'Allemagne*, she battled against the new wartime propaganda:

England had once been the revolutionary country; now it was France which starred in that role. Anglophilia in France had been replaced by Francophobia, even xenophobia in England. Mme. de Stael wanted to change this position by reconciling her admiration for the Protestant culture with her love for the Catholic.¹⁷

Deane locates de Stael between her *De l'Allemagne* and her novel *Corinne; ou, de l'Italie*: the first offers a critique of French provincialism, while the latter criticizes English insularity. He suggests that de Stael claims that Protestant reserve is selfish and inward-looking, though it does nourish intensity of feeling. Yet Catholic display, 'while it fosters honour and public consciousness, lacks the strength of personal feeling which is a precondition of liberty'. He continues:

Here she is adapting to national terms the old eighteenth-century argument about the merits and demerits of selfish egoism and social altruism; she puts a moral dispute in the form of a contrast between national characteristics. Having done so, she needs to find a principle of reconciliation between them. (p. 28)

Mme de Stael's word for this principle is *enthousiasme*, and for her, the exemplar of this is Rousseau. The purpose of this notion is to create cosmopolitan tolerance, where particular national chauvinisms had existed. Germany would reinvigorate France with an injection of the Romantic intensity the French lacked. England would gain from Italy the spark of energy it needed. The vehicle for this transfusion process would be literature. Deane tells us that de Stael reckoned that literature could be the force to raise mankind above the personal egoism that was a feature of turbulent revolutionary times:

What is needed is some force to raise mankind above the pettiness of such self-interest. Contemporary literature, especially the writings of Rousseau, provides that force because it is informed by the ideals of service to humanity at large, not to any particular individual, sect, or country. Egoism is the opponent of liberty; literature is its saviour. (p. 29)

Deane points out that both Burke and Mme de Stael argued that the posture of the Jacobins in regard to their enemies in France and elsewhere in Europe was that of the barbarian nations towards Rome during its last days: 'The opponents of the Jacobins actually *needed* the martial and astringent energies of these redoubtable revolutionaries' (p. 29). But, of course, Mme de Stael imagined only a literary invasion of France by Germanic culture; she was

¹⁷ Deane, *The French Revolution*, p. 28.

shocked and distressed that it became an actual military invasion by the Prussians.

Nevertheless, she continued to look to literature as a reconciling mechanism between nations, as a kind of new secular religion. Rousseau might be for her the exemplary writer, but it was in Germany that the requisite intermixing of philosophical ideas and literature had developed most fully. The Germans were an austere people, and austerity naturally allied itself with morality, 'a system of obligations and restraints'. But moral philosophy energized by *enthousiasme* would issue in literature of the modern type. Its inherent melancholy was only the sign of the relationship between liberty and intensity of feeling. A socially valuable Romantic literature would produce beneficial effects in direct proportion to its innate sadness (Deane, p. 30).

It is clear, then, that in *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England*, Deane sets out a series of themes that, I wish to argue, have been crucial to the great bulk of his work elsewhere. The first of these would be the fundamental importance of Burke, both as an exemplary political theorist, and as a figure to be argued with. Burke has been important to Deane on a number of fronts, most of which are sketched out above: the link between politics and aesthetics; the linkage of Ireland and the European Enlightenment and revolutionary movements; the 'turn', real or apparent, of the great intellectual from an early radicalism to become a latter conservative; the reversal and baffling of revolutionary hope in Ireland; the critique of Enlightenment modernity; the critique of 'travelling theory'. Burke's work deals with all these areas, and one could reasonably say that he has been Deane's touchstone in these matters, whether to be agreed with or argued against. The second theme, coming out of Burke but also out of de Stael, is that of national character.

In *Strange Country*, Deane renews these formulations: Burke is, in the manner described by Foucault, a 'founder of discursivity', and the *Reflections* is a foundational text for Irish writing. He advances this argument by ingeniously reading the *Reflections* as travel literature, showing how it suggests that after the Revolution, 'France became the foreign country *par excellence*'. France had become foreign because of its institutionalization of a fundamental alienation of humanity:

France was a new territory — the territory of theory. Burke was the traveller making a report on its astonishing bad eminence in the world and urging that world to respond with all the galvanic force that it could call upon to prevent its universal triumph. The literature of travel and the literature of the political pamphlet were conjoined to produce a critique of the despotism of the new France and the emergence of the new world in which the human person, as traditionally understood, was a stranger.¹⁸

¹⁸ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 7–8.

Deane detects in Burke a linkage of national character and territory. Traditionally, that link is between national character and a territory that is felt to belong to an historical community. But in Revolutionary modernity, that territory comes to be defined in 'abstract and spatial terms' and that sense of community is replaced by a theory. While the tyranny of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was not derived from a theory, for Burke, they too had made Ireland 'strange'. Flowing from this are the polarities which Deane identifies as the structuring principles of the Irish literature that was to emerge almost coincidentally with the Union: the representation of a country that is at once 'foreign' and unreal, especially for the English, and yet a part of the British social and political system, fully recognizable and part of the traditional world swept away by the Revolution. Reality must be reintroduced to this country in the form of British civility. Much of Deane's work on Irish literature can thus be described as a prolonged meditation on the idea of national character. It is not that Deane agrees with or believes in this notion; rather he subjects it to a formidable critique, but, as evidenced in his meditation on tradition quoted earlier, he also sees its strategic necessity.

The question now must be asked, how does any of this relate to the thought of Theodor Adorno? At the first and most obvious level, Burke and Adorno both stand as powerful critics of Enlightenment. Their lives and thought book-end the era of Enlightenment modernity quite neatly: Burke, the prophet of the moment of instantiation of reason in the state; and Adorno, the analyst of the apparent collapse of rationality in the form of fascism. Both thinkers could be characterized as not so much enemies of enlightenment as the critics of its betrayal. Adorno's most famous and explicit work of this kind is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944 and co-authored in American exile with his Frankfurt School colleague, Max Horkheimer. This book argues, famously, that while enlightenment always sought to liberate man from his superstitions and release his potential, it has also, at every step of the way, brought with it an increased alienation between humans and the natural world they work to bring under their control. Enlightenment has produced Blakean 'mind-forg'd manacles', even as it has increased vastly the sum of human knowledge: 'The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.'¹⁹

In Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis, enlightenment leads to the progressive disenchantment of the life-world. It is reasonable to see Burke's description of the destruction of the natural affections by the Revolution as a comparable formulation. When Burke attacks Voltaire, Helvetius, and other thinkers for what Deane calls their 'desiccated and impersonal form of rationalism', the parallels with Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), p. 36.

'instrumental reason', which sees the individual merely as an indistinguishable atom within the collective, become clear.²⁰ This is not to say, of course, that Burke's critique, on the one hand, and Adorno's and Horkheimer's, on the other, are the same, or that they are made with the same purpose. Most obviously, for the Frankfurt School philosophers, Enlightenment reason had been betrayed, not only by Fascism but also by capitalist reification and consumerism. Such has been the power both of institutionalized bureaucratic rationality and of capitalist exchange that they have resulted in human beings entrapping themselves in a web of domination that masquerades as enlightenment. But for Burke, there is no analysis of capitalism as such, and the principal means by which this reductive rationalism is put in place is by way of the political influence of the cabal. And yet, as Deane points out in his long discussion of Burke in the opening chapter of *Strange Country*, one of the grounds on which Burke attacks the Revolution is precisely on its alliance between the *philosophes* and the new moneyed interest.

Deane develops this version of Burke by comparing the attitude of the revolutionaries to the Queen, Marie Antoinette, with that of financial traders to money:

There is a traditional mode of looking that is specular. In that mode, a person is seen as an emblematic figure in a hierarchical system. But the revolutionaries have a different way of looking at the world, especially at women. Their mode is speculation. Speculation indicates looking, thinking, and gambling. In speculation, a traditional emblem loses its fixed value and becomes vulnerable to risk.²¹

According to Deane, Burke exploits the financial meaning of speculation to imply that the new revolutionary economy is a form of gambling, crazed and hollow in the way it converts real wealth into the valueless paper of the new currency. At the same time, Burke uses the sexual meaning of the word, as he works the imagery of stripping in relation to the French royal family. The stripped body produced by speculation is reduced to a crude and vulnerable condition: it has been objectified and is therefore bereft of its sanctity.

In parallel to Burke's attack on the Revolution's destruction of traditional affect is his characterization of this new economy. As the purity of the familial relationship is besmirched, so financial value is, effectively, devalued:

A paper currency replaces the traditional coinage; a traditional estate is vaporized into worthlessness by an act of vandalism. Gold coin, stamped with the head of the sovereign, the *louis d'or*, is converted into a paper promise; solid land is no longer worth the paper on which it has been transcribed.²²

The Romantic nostalgia in Burke for the organic presence he detected in the economy of the *ancien régime* is very far from anything in Adorno and

²⁰ Deane, *The French Revolution*, p. 5.

²¹ Deane, *Strange Country*, p. 11.

²² Deane, *Strange Country*, p. 12.

Horkheimer, and yet there is in his analysis the hint of the Lukácsian idea, so important for the Frankfurt theorists, of reification: that reduction of people and ideas, under conditions of Western rationality and capitalist exchange, to mere objects.

Of course, in other ways, Burke and Adorno are opposed figures. Deane tells us that for Burke, the English national character was densely interwoven with English political institutions, to the point where it was neither discernible nor relevant which preceded the other: 'English history illustrated the national character; national character was an embodiment of English history.'²³ Burke's implied Whig narrative of the gradual and organic exfoliation and interpenetration of English national character and political structures is a form of what we would now call historicism, and makes the comparison with Herder all the more apposite. But Adorno has a much more pessimistic vision of history. History is, for Adorno, a catastrophic process, a Spenglerian narrative of decline and failure. The potential and hope embodied in enlightenment has resulted in domination and fascism. Only in the realm of art can resistance any more be located. This is a view with which Walter Benjamin would have concurred.

Adorno and Benjamin were anti-Hegelian philosophers, and Deane has announced his anti-Hegelianism on numerous occasions. Most notably, this has come out in his critique of nationalism (a critique far more powerful than those of most of his detractors): 'Nothing is more monotonous or despairing than the search for the essence which defines a nation', he wrote in 1979.²⁴ Further, he has set himself against the idea of essence, 'that hungry Hegelian ghost looking for a stereotype to live in'.²⁵ These declarations bear the imprint of his Adornianism. Adorno famously set himself to oppose 'identity thinking', that repressive reconciliation of the philosophical subject and objective reality which he detects in Hegel: that identification of reality with conceptual knowledge in such a way as to negate the messy complications and particularities of the real world. Over against this kind of thinking, Adorno argued for a 'negative dialectic': a refusal to identify subject and object, a refusal of the linkage of theory and practice, and of a vision of history as a narrative of human emancipation. This leads Adorno to a concept of the aesthetic not dissimilar to that of Benjamin, with a concentration on the non-conceptual moment in art which, Adorno held, is resistant to the conceptual domination of rationalist Enlightenment discourse. One could say that this amounts to a 'non-theoretical theory', a theory of art inspired by music and non-representational literature. True art is held to be that which is not amenable to conceptual abstraction.

²³ Deane, *The French Revolution*, p. 12.

²⁴ Deane, 'Postscript', *Crane Bag*, 3,2 (1979), 512–14.

²⁵ Seamus Deane, 'Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea', in Field Day Theatre Company, *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 45–58 (p. 58).

This concept of art emerges strongly in Deane's writing about Yeats, especially in the essays 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution' and 'Yeats and O'Casey: Exemplary Dramatists', both collected in *Celtic Revivals*. That this should be so is all the more piquant in that Yeats, in his late poetry, famously cast himself in the ethnic-political line of Burke. But, theoretically at least, Deane's Yeats offers an instance of Adornian negative dialectics. In 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution', Deane begins by pointing out that 'Yeats began his career by inventing an Ireland amenable to his imagination'. By the end of his career, he found 'an Ireland recalcitrant to it'.²⁶ Related to this is Yeats's status as 'one of that long line of European Romantic writers who combined a revolutionary aesthetic with traditionalist politics'. Berkeley, Swift, and Burke composed for the later Yeats an Ascendancy tradition of 'idealism' which he linked with the Irish peasant tradition. He reckoned that each of these 'traditions' had refuted science by way of their understanding of mystery and death:

The peasant and the aristocrat, kindred in spirit though not in class, united in the great Romantic battle against the industrial and utilitarian ethic. The energizing principle for Yeats in this late confection of Romantic notions was clearly that Ireland was the only place in Europe in which the aristocratic and peasant element had a fair chance of winning. (Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 39)

Yeats firmly believed in reincarnation and he had a sovereign contempt for the bourgeois. But his contempt ran deeper than a mere adherence to aristocratic values. Yeats believed that bourgeois culture had negated the apprehension of death, and the contemplation of death was, he thought, a crucial part of artistic practice. 'Death', Deane explains, 'renders life meaningless unless life achieves a form which death cannot alter' (p. 42). In considering death, Yeats works out a theory of art which expresses itself in apparently timeless masterpieces, but which attains that expression by way of the process of change, forming and reforming the personality of the artist over and over again. This, Deane argues, 'is a true dialectic, by virtue of which the term changelessness finds its meaning in its opposite, change; in which eternal recurrence discovers itself through the concept of eternal fixity; the wheel of becoming turns into the phase of being' (p. 43). This conception came under increasing political pressure later in Yeats's life. The Easter Rising transformed his sense of Irish nationalism from being a grubby middle-class politics of the 'greasy till' to a great refusal of bourgeois England and its Utilitarianism and Philistinism. The extraordinary sacrifice of the Easter rebels made the vastly greater slaughter on the Somme look empty and de-spiritualized. For Yeats, Pearse and Connolly had reinvented a specifically Irish form of heroism.

So Yeats wished Ireland to retain its culture in the face of the oncoming tide of modernity, by keeping an awareness of metaphysical issues. As Deane

²⁶ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 38.

writes, 'with Yeats, to be traditionalist in the modern world was to be revolutionary'. To this can be added Yeats's 'almost wilful mysticism'. To be traditionalist in the face of the onward sweep of capitalism is to retain an Adornian awareness of the irreducibility of art as a defence against the encroachments of reification.

I have elsewhere argued that Deane reads this Yeatsian revivalist traditionalism as a form of what Ernst Bloch called 'non-synchronous experience'. Deane deploys Yeats as a powerful example of resistant consciousness and artistic praxis that refuses the universalizing historicism of metropolitan (and Hegelian) world-history. It was precisely Ireland's colonial backwardness and marginality that permitted Yeats to elaborate a powerful critique of imperial modernity from that terrain.²⁷ This argument shifts Deane's analysis from the Irish plane onto that of the wider re-writing of what Robert Young has called, after Derrida, 'White Mythologies'.²⁸

Equally, Deane's Adornian conception of Yeats can also be related to Benjamin's critique of historicism. If for Adorno and Horkheimer, history is a declining narrative of mankind's self-incarceration, achieved paradoxically in the name of a gratifyingly upward-trending narrative of emancipation, then one way to critique this process is articulated famously in Benjamin's thesis 'On the Concept of History':

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger [...]. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it [...]. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.²⁹

The analogies with the Yeatsian project are clear. And yet, of course, this struggle to 'articulate the past historically', to invest the present with a sense of the past, is one that can be argued to be a particularly anti-Burkean activity.

Hayden White suggests that Burke's conception of the sublime can be extended into his vision of history in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Arguing, as suggested earlier, that history took shape as an academic practice in the wake of the Revolution, White points out that an academic discipline must be, precisely, *disciplinized*, and 'discipline consists less of prescriptions of what must be done than of exclusions or proscriptions of certain ways of imagining historical reality'.³⁰ White notes the progressive

²⁷ See my *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969–1992* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 218–19.

²⁸ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in his *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938–1940, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), pp. 389–400 (p. 391).

³⁰ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 68.

downgrading of the sublime and the promotion of the beautiful, as a solution to problems of taste and imagination, in Romantic debates. Related to this process was the regulation of history. Accordingly, as the disciplinization of history necessitated regulation, both as to its proper objects and as to its proper modes of representation of those objects, ‘discipline consisted in subordinating written history to the categories of the “beautiful” and suppressing those of the “sublime”’ (pp. 66–67). While acknowledging that Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) does not deal with issues of social or historical phenomena, White argues that the *Reflections* ‘can be seen as one of many efforts to exorcise the notion of the sublime from any apprehension of the historical process, so that the “beauty” of its “proper” development, which for him was given in the example of the “English Constitution”, could be adequately comprehended’ (p. 68). But for Deane, the interest and power of Yeats lies most notably in his will to reintroduce a conception of the sublime into history. Yeats’s late cyclical and apocalyptic vision of history, most famously articulated in ‘The Second Coming’, is analogous to Benjamin’s ‘conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time’. Just as Benjamin’s Robespierre viewed Rome as ‘a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history’, so for Yeats, Pearse and his comrades, with their distinctly messianic Proclamation, also fused the past and the present in a radical tearing of the ‘continuum of history’. Yeats’s and Pearse’s imaginative conception of history is an instance of the historical sublime, and stands as a counter to Burke’s de-sublimating attack on the French Revolution.

This interplay between Burke and Adorno and Benjamin is especially clear in Deane’s essay on Yeats and O’Casey. Schematically, what emerges is a distinctly Burkean O’Casey and, again, an Adornian Yeats. O’Casey, Deane rightly says, is a moralist and a humanist in his plays:

He sponsors, largely through his women, a humanism (with Christian overtones included for the sake of sarcasm or satire) in which one can believe only in so far as it is separated from the political pressures to which his male characters are subjected. (*Celtic Revivals*, p. 108)

The O’Casey solution for the political dilemma is to substitute for politics the humanism that O’Casey shows is forever vulnerable to the encroachments of politics. O’Casey’s questions, that is, presuppose their answers. Deane argues that the figure of the family in O’Casey is an eidetic image, and that it is an ‘illusion’ of the past, to dwell in which ‘is an example of bad faith’ (p. 110). Over against the family are set the abstractions of ‘visionary dreaming’ and political ideology. The family is the locus of all that is human and authentic. Visionary dreaming, most harmfully of a revolutionary political kind but also of the sort represented by a mountebank intellectual like Bentham in *Juno and the Paycock*, is always dehumanizing and reductive of the complex particularities of human feeling. The conflict between the domestic affections

and abstract theorizing in O'Casey is the same conflict as that described by Burke in the *Reflections*, with the link between revolutionary rationalism and libertinism.

Against O'Casey, Deane pitches Yeats. He locates Yeats's drama in a European 'ideological form of drama in which the basic social unit is the individual and the basic deformity is the traditional social allegiances naturally associated with [...] familial bonds, or patriotism, or loyalty to the state' (p. 112). Further, 'despite its esoteric ambitions, its aristocratic gestures and its select audience, Yeats' drama discovers the tragic possibilities of political action and the contemplative alternative to it' (p. 112). Deane reckons that this is especially clear in the *Cu Chulainn* plays, where the hero has the chance to resolve his existence onto a higher plane of being, but instead commits himself to a life of violence which contributes to the tragedy of his life. Yeats crucially deals with this issue by using ritual, which, as Deane says, is 'social, but extra-linguistic'. Yeats does not strive for realism in the manner of O'Casey, but this frees his language from the need naturalistically to mimic a deformed reality. Another way of putting this is to remember that Yeats, while a cultural nationalist, also became a great modernist writer, even as he produced a Romantic critique of modernity:

Many are beginning to recognise the right of the individual mind to see the world in its own way, to cherish the thoughts which separate men from one another, and that are the creators of distinguished life, instead of those thoughts that had made one man like another if they could, and have but succeeded in setting hysteria and insincerity in place of confidence and self-possession.³¹

This passage, quoted by Deane, contains elements both of Romantic organicism and Adornian subjective resistance. As he points out, everything that Yeats wrote was set in opposition to Ibsen, Shaw, and Pinero. Yeats wished to refuse the dead hand of what he considered to be a realism that flattened out its subject-matter in its obsessive attempt truthfully to represent it. Deane's claim for Yeats is a grand one:

Yeats' dramatic career stands as the most exemplary of all in its desire to reshape Ireland through the appeal of a revived formality of stage manner which would represent a new formality of social behaviour and relationship [...]. No drama so clearly offers itself as exemplary of the kind of consciousness which it would like to promote and see prevail. (*Celtic Revivals*, p. 117).

O'Casey, by contrast, is, for Deane, a Zhdanovite who makes 'his literature conform to a stereotyped party line'. Provocatively quoting the later Lukács, Deane argues that it is finally in writers like Yeats, along with the other great modernists such as Kafka or Beckett, that we will find the most effective protest against the 'dismemberment of human consciousness by capitalism'.³²

³¹ W. B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies* (London, 1923), quoted in Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 116.

³² Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. by Edith Bone (London: Merlin, 1972), p. 234.

In conclusion, one might say that to trace the lineages of Burke and Adorno in the work of Seamus Deane is to detect in him a radicalized romanticism, a romantic anti-capitalism of the kind famously named by Lukács and more recently interestingly developed by Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre.³³ In the powerful blend of idealism and anti-humanism that characterizes his work, in the obsessive undertow of its constant return to Burke and the late eighteenth century, in its persistent prioritization of intellectual and writerly autonomy and influence, Deane reveals the roots of the critical project which he continues to elaborate and from which Irish criticism has yet much to learn.

³³ Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001).