



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Reviewer's Report on B. A. Thesis

THINKING GLOBALLY:
SEAMUS HEANEY AND DENNIS O'DRISCOLL
by Jan Zikmund

This is a thoroughly researched thesis with clearly defined and logically developed objectives. Dennis O'Driscoll is best known outside Ireland for his book of interviews with Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*. O'Driscoll himself, however, was a prolific poet and a respected critic. Shrewdly concentrating on topics on which the two men disagreed – in *Stepping Stones* but also in their essays and other writings – the thesis reveals much about their poetics and critical thought. While Heaney (especially as critic) is the main focus of the analysis, the thesis presents O'Driscoll as an excellent poet, although of a different sensibility from Heaney's, and a great connoisseur of contemporary poetry in English and other languages (through translation).

A number of other poets are cited, as Heaney's and O'Driscoll's views on them are contrasted, but the discussion in the individual chapters remains attentive to its core theme. Indeed, the focused reasoning, as well as the discerning, intelligent way in which primary and secondary materials have been chosen and applied are some of the features that mark this work as exceptional for a B. A. thesis.

Still, there were moments where, intrigued by the thesis' confident manner, I would have wished for a more personal outlook. What I lacked throughout, but especially in the Conclusion, was a willingness to get entangled in the subject matter and to come up with an opinion. The thesis repeatedly infers that O'Driscoll's views were important for Heaney as they gave him 'a different perspective on his beloved poets' (p. 25) or provided him with 'a different perspective on a theme that was crucial for both Irish poets' (p. 50). But this is not what follows from the presented material. The general argument implied by the work is that Heaney's ideas on the chosen topics (Eastern European poetry, contemporary American poetic scene, and the late poetry of Philip Larkin) were not only less compelling than O'Driscoll's, but also impossible to alter. That for Heaney the critic, however perceptive and brilliant, opinions behind the poems were sometimes more important than the poems themselves. This gets across most clearly in the discussion of the controversy about Larkin's 'Aubade', where it is suggested that if Heaney was always willing to place himself 'on the side of life' (D. Wheatley, quoted on p. 42), it was not only to shelter from the void of death, but, occasionally, to chide poetry which saw life differently. In the light of this, the conciliatory note on which the whole thesis ends sounds perhaps unduly tactful.

But then, tact is requisite in relation to Heaney's legacy, especially his critical work which has only recently become the subject of systematic scholarly attention. In general, the aplomb with which Mr. Zikmund has dealt with his tricky subject is admirable and I look forward to having the opportunity to ask him about his own views on the matter during the defence. In terms of its focus, methodology, and the quality of execution, the work exceeds the requirements and expectations of a B. A. thesis and the grade that I propose is **excellent**.



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Some stylistic remarks:

- One of the best points about the thesis is its clear, readable style. It is written in highly accomplished English, with only few typographical mistakes and occasional lapses in sentence structure (mostly remnants of previous versions). Great care has been taken with the format of the footnotes and references, where the only slight imperfections appear on p. 34 (pagination missing), p. 25 where 'ibid.' is used (in one isolated case), and on pp. 28 and 29 where an abbreviated form of the title of the cited work should have been part of the reference.
- The name of O'Driscoll's wife, writer Julie O'Callaghan, is repeatedly given as 'Julia' (pp. 9 and 39).
- The naturally flowing style of the thesis occasionally strays into a slightly informal and, in my view, unnecessarily conversational tone. On p. 17, Miroslav Holub is referred to as O'Driscoll's 'Czech friend', but there seems to be no evidence of the two poets having been on friendly terms. This is thus either a stylistic or a factual blunder.
- In the discussion, poets are often referred to as nationals (as Irishmen, Englishmen, etc.) which sounds cumbersome and sometimes creates confusion: on pp. 42-3, for example, there are far too many 'Irishmen' to know who the passage is about; on p. 28, O'Driscoll is said to have opined that 'the distrust of experimental writers is typical for most Irishmen', which excludes all Irish women and is unfair to O'Driscoll who actually speaks about 'Irish poets' in the essay ('Foreign Relations').
- John Ashbery is almost invariably referred to as 'the American surrealist'. I found this not only narrowing but highly simplistic. For one thing, the term has often been used by critics to dismiss, even trivialize Ashbery's verse whenever it proved too cryptical, for another, the poet himself has brushed off the label with marked ennui on a number of occasions. Yet, none of this is mentioned in the text to qualify the term.

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