**CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY AT A TANGENT**

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To delineate the issues implied in my title, I will begin with some preliminary remarks concerning the place of poetry within present theoretical debates and repertoires.

Even a cursory glance reveals that if one goes by the intensity of theoretical scrutiny devoted to the different literary genres, poetry has been displaced from the position it customarily held within theoretical debates of the Western tradition. One of the reasons that accounts for this is a shift of priorities. We have moved from exploring and defending the aesthetic complexity of literature – its autotelic quality – to looking at the way works of art are ideologically inflected, that is to say, the way they empower or work to undermine social regimes of meaning. Poetry as a genre, has always invested more in the exploration of its own formal constraints and consequently has been less inclined to produce a content whose meaning could be said to be collective or shareable. It has therefore proven to be recalcitrant to those reading strategies that have deployed a theoretical agenda aiming at charting the manner literature negotiates extra-textual concerns and interests. It follows that poetry tends to attenuate the access to its representational content since it proffers a language that is a critical challenge to any direct referential purchase on an extra-semiotic world.

While the theoretical priorities that have displaced poetry to the margins of current literary research and, consequently, to the margins of the university curriculum, may have been important in legitimizing Modernist poetics, one still has to note the considerable drop in numbers of those reading poetry, not to mention the marginal position of the poet within society and the straitened circumstances surrounding the dissemination of poetry. If this mapping of the place of poetry in the present literary conjuncture has any merit, the
question that needs to be addressed is how is contemporary Irish poetry positioned in relation to this literary scene?

**Irish poetry and the cultural imaginary**

Looking at the parameters I have just evoked, one would expect poetry’s position to be a minor one particularly within the field of Irish Studies. However this is not the case for in numerous readings of Irish society, culture and identity, poetry has been and continues to be a powerful archive. Similarly, the reception of poetry, which is the symbolic capital of the poet’s trade with the circulation of his wares, is markedly different in the Irish case when compared to conditions elsewhere. My contention and my point of departure is that contemporary poetry in Ireland stands at a tangent to the general process of poetry’s marginalization it in many other countries.

Just as the theoretical turn has had an impact upon the hierarchy of literary genres, it can be argued that the ongoing theorization of Ireland has prioritized the study of Irish cultural identity in certain scholarly quarters. Theoretically informed studies of decolonization, postcolonialism, postmodernity, to mention but a few, or extravagant titles such as *Deconstructing Ireland*, evince an intensive scholarly debate. Within this burgeoning field of study, literature has often been a point of reference, a repertoire of images and narratives that provide grist to the mill of theoretical research and elaboration. Taking cognizance of the literariness of the construction of Irish nationalism and the importance of literature to the project of identity building, this comes as no surprise. However, if elsewhere it was the novel that proved to be an important agent in the rise of the nation, in Ireland, due to specific socio-economic and historical conditions, this role was taken up by poetry. This is the second way poetry in Ireland stands at a tangent to developments elsewhere. To put it differently, poetry has played and still plays an important role in the Irish cultural imaginary.