

4-1-2005

Ambitions and Text

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cutting-edge contraption. On the tape, P. J. and my father play the box and banjo, and talk between numbers. My father's few comments from that session are all that I have of his voice, and I treasure the sound of him. ("Lost Hearts")

Winch's regret is that he could never record his mother's voice as she had died before this form of technology has become available to him. At the same time as they carried forward a tradition and handed it on to their children, serving as unpaid and underground ambassadors for Irish culture, the men and women of Terence Winch's parents' generation spent their days working on the New York subway system, in the city's grocery stores, as nannies, as school custodians, and as doormen to the wealthy residents of Park Avenue. They were of a generation that had emigrated between the two wars who neither achieved nor sought renown. They populated New York City, spent parts of their summers on the Irish Riviera of Rockaway Beach, all the time serving as a vanguard for a culture and for a way of looking at the world. With great, understated passion Terence Winch has written a beautiful elegy for a gifted and unheralded generation. *That Special Place* is enlivened further by George O' Brien's excellent foreword which places Winch in his American and Irish contexts. Books like this are so important. Without them we would never know how this generation of immigrant musicians lived and loved. The musicians passed on their tunes to their children. Terence Winch has passed on their story.

Also a New Yorker, Daniel Tobin seeks through the long lens of memory to hold up aspects of a Brooklyn childhood into the light:

Remember it all, the strewn uniforms,
divisions
of toy soldiers, muted arguments, that
passage
through our parents' room to leave the
house?

How they raise themselves around us
still, those walls
accustomed to the double-life of longing.
("Pearl Court")

Double Life is an exploration of the complex nature of the individual life in which the Irish-American Catholic, while remaining grounded in family and tribe, also seeks to escape into "a city of ideas." At the same time, and rather ironically, all journeys toward the intellectual life progress through the bedroom of those parents who have given to a son a body, and a consciousness laden with cultural memory. For Tobin, like Joyce, patrimony is challenged by learning and history. In "Homage to Bosch," the collection's opening sequence, a group of schoolboys visiting the Prado are thrown into confusion by "The Garden of Earthly Delights":

swarms of nudes, drunk on the juice of
berries
bigger than balloons, tumbling
in the soft grass among seeds of
pomegranates,
enormous fish, shimmering
bubbles housing lovers, kingfishers,
goldfinches
parading toward the cavalcade
(a bestiary turning back on itself like a
serpent
eating its own tail) circling
the central pool. Was it sin or innocence,
To skinny-dip with dragonflies,
paddle downstream in an apple-boat, or
don the head
of an owl to dance flamenco?

Over time, the young man's reaction to the overwhelming experience of viewing this painting undergoes a series of changes. First, Bosch's vision is seen, in Blakean terms, as a means of celebrating the many sidedness of God's work. Then, as the boy matures into a man, when God as benevolent creator and arbiter has been placed to one side, the vision

of plenty is replaced by one of an immense grief brought on by humanity's penchant for cruelty and self-delusion. Whereas the parents' bedroom and presence may well have seemed stifling and worn, it was, nevertheless, a place of warmth and certainty. For all the visual stimulation of the city of ideas, confusion and chaos lurk under its bright facades. At one level, faith is replaced by myth, with the *Bible* placed on a shelf alongside the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, and this strategy allows Tobin to present many fine poems of objective exegesis, from the *Psalms* in particular, to pay homage to the ancients' sense of order. The movement of "Homage to Bosch," and its division into three parts, indicates a search for a form of Hegelian synthesis; however, no such synthesis is achieved as the poem ends in loneliness, chaos and isolation. In this way, religion and philosophy are methodologies to be tested rather than ideologies to be adhered to:

Bones of the road. A wreckage of
weapons.
In clear light killers tie their victim
to a tree as another man hunkers off,
abandoned to his dream of refuge.
There are lovers in meadows, pipers
in fields. And on a far hill a throng
gathers for an execution. Through this
land
the wanderer passes, his staff edging
back
a rabid dog. . . . Empty One, Unnamable,
only by your command are we sustained.

Throughout this collection, even when it seems to be avoided or buried, time is a central preoccupation. Given the power, influence, revelation and magic of modern science, it is difficult to view the world in purely biblical terms, unless one is of the type Tobin describes in "The Locksmith":

On time nearly to the minute, he drives
up
to my curbside in a van that reads APEX

and the message *Jesus—The Real Key*
scripted
on its side. . .

Science has altered our sense of time and Tobin is drawn to this "new time" for its balancing effect when placed alongside family time, literary time, and historical time, which is presented as a litany of horrors and cruelties. What Tobin has absorbed from family time—the time and faith of his parents—has been an ordered world and, as Joyce found out, a bright aesthetic and a luminous series of rituals. In this regard, Tobin's work strongly echoes the poetry of both Thomas Merton and A. R. Ammons who have also wandered fruitfully along these avenues of art and speculation. The position Tobin adopts is similar to that chosen by Seamus Heaney in *Station Island*, and inherited from Joyce's *Portrait*:

I no longer envy such certainty, that I
prefer
the stony ground, the mustard seed of
faith
hollowed by doubt, that it's only the
observance
of words I keep now to stay the soul.
("The Locksmith")

There's a nice tension evident in *Double Take* between the weighty subject matter and Tobin's poetics. To a large extent, these are narrative poems driven by short lines and a strong visual sense of the world. In this way, what is most philosophical is rendered as being most concrete and the rigid discipline inherent in this method is masterfully realized to leave the reader with a book of poetry that is as readable as it is profound. Like Winch's *That Special Place*, Tobin's *Double Take* is one of those important works whose language, ideas, and echoes remain with the reader long after he/she has moved on to another volume. •

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Ambitions and Text

THOMAS DILLON REDSHAW,
Editor

Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague
Creighton University Press, 2004.

Reviewed by
TYLER FARRELL

THOROUGHLY COLLECTED AND SUPERBLY edited, *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague* (edited by Thomas Dillon Redshaw) is a collection of 22 essays that fills a long and deep void in criticism on one of Ireland's greatest living writers. *Well Dreams* serves new and old generations of artists with scholarly essays on works from much of Montague's long and renowned career. It also engages in a patient exploration of subject displaying a wide and serious reading of the writer at hand and his value to our literary and artistic world. The criticism not only addresses many books of poems including

Forms of Exile (1958), *A Chosen Light* (1967), *The Rough Field* (1972), *Collected Poems* (1995) and *Smashing the Piano* (1999), but also analyzes Montague's memoir *Company: A Chosen Life* (2001) as well as collections of fiction, *Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (1964), and essays, *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays* (1989). It is an essential guide to the artistic, prolific and poetic sides of John Montague contained in a collection that professes the importance of this man of Irish letters and the skill and genius in which he works.

While there has been a fair amount of scholarship on John Montague in more recent years, there has never been such a complete forum. A collection such as this will champion the curious and allow the Irish literature community a work to look at and use, a work that informs and instructs. It is a guide mandatory for any scholar of Montague (and indeed Irish Writing in general) with a cross section of ideas and

insight. As editor Thomas Dillon Redshaw writes in the introductory essay, "this partial survey of criticism about Montague and his achievement cannot do more than suggest the past flow and flavor of 'the water there' in the commentary that has welled up in response to Montague's writing over the past four decades" (1). Decidedly this serious study of Montague by respected critics of Irish literature (some of Montague's contemporaries) is long overdue and welcomed by both Irish scholars and interested readers alike.

John Montague as author and poet is a curious subject considering that his American influence is felt almost as deeply as his Irish one. Criticism and original work has been shaped on both sides of the Atlantic allowing the poet the chance at a new form, a new style of writing that incorporates both nationalities simultaneously. Adrian Frazer states, "Less strict than British verse, more formal than American, Montague poems take a great

variety of forms—imagistic description, dramatic monologues, elegies, litanies, quest romance" (*Irish Times* Sept. 25, 2004 p. 13). Montague's wide and influential style has always moved between these two worlds, sliding into America and soaking up culture at Yale (1953), The Iowa Writer's Workshop (1954-55), and the University of California-Berkeley (1956) in order to forge a dual voice in writing that was based in Irish sentiment, but also felt quite uniquely American. After his time in the states he returned to Ireland to work for Bord Fáilte and later to compile *The Dolmen Miscellany* (with Liam Miller in 1962) announcing the arrival of a new generation of writers. Montague has always been a tireless champion of poets and poetry and now his adoring public is able to return the favor. He then worked in Paris as an Irish Times correspondent and continued to hail Irish writers as some of the world's best while inspiring and organized readings, editing books of poetry (*The Faber Book of*

Irish Verse, 1974) and writing his own work. Montague's career is long and highly recognized as a poet's life filled with the travelings, experiences and ideals that are ever present in his work. *Well Dreams* attempts to engage in those themes and does so through concern and adoration for its subject as well as a cherishing of the light that Montague has shed upon the modern poetic world.

Many of the essays in *Well Dreams* focus on Montague's poetry as well as his comparison and placement with other writers such as Joyce, Yeats, Murphy, and Heaney. Montague is among excellent company, and rightly so. While he is a writer of many styles and genres, Montague will primarily be remembered for his poetry, the bulk of a life work that spans almost fifty years. He even states in the preface to his book of essays, *The Figure in the Cave*, that "poetry always came first" (ix). In the same work he also hails the critic as someone necessary to the art of writing, someone who has a tremendous influence on compiling reviews and analyzing works. "No word is final except the always renewed text, which the critic should serve as enthusiastic mediator... Writers who are sure of their own gift can often show a warming generosity towards fellow craftsman" (ix-x). No truer words have been written which can be directly related to *Well Dreams* and its collection of fellow writers giving admiration to a renowned and respected artist, critics that serve as "enthusiastic mediators" and wordsmiths filled with warm generosity towards an Irish literary craftsman. These authors write about Montague with honor and dignity, relaying feelings admiration and respect. The reader can almost sense each critic's thanks to a man who helped shape twentieth century Irish literature.

Many of the styles, forms, and influences on Montague's writings are commented upon luminously in *Well Dreams*, from Daniel Tobin's superb essay on the "double vision" of Montague's dual identity and the historical, social and political forces acting on his poetry, to Eamonn Wall's look at Montague's *Collected Poems* and how the poet is underrated despite his tackling of poignant themes in a long going and framed career. There are ideas about Montague and his writing that are not always examined enough, but *Well Dreams* digs further into the deep water of the poet's sea clearly exhibiting a certain un-erasable identity, a permanent figuration of language, place, birth and influence. Montague's collections have always been infectious, turning on a generation of writers, but they are also prone to analysis and culminate in a work that tells of his poetic disposition and his long and influential career.

Tobin addresses the notion of Montague

being a poet shaped by both Ireland and America as well as a writer who works inside himself, using this "struggle for imaginative self-possession" (148) to identify a perceptive world of vision, knowledge, and reality. This reality is seen from the American shores looking east to a new Ireland, a new understanding and different source from Montague's echoes of Yeats and the link between the mythological and the real, the internal conflicts of the self in a larger framework. It is an important essay in the Montague rubric of critical discourse and one that analyzes a theme common to most of his work, a central contemplation on the genesis of the poet's personal meditations, the embracement of multiple surroundings and influences. Similarly Eamonn Wall comments on the necessity of Montague's *Collected Poems* and the issues that are raised including the importance of craft, the subjects of politics and history, the illuminating and moving aspects to Montague's poetry and how the writer has "registered the immigrant life so tellingly" (374) in this collection of principal works. The essays allow the reader to see the culmination of subject, the themes and styles in which the writer engages in and how they connect a new sense of art. The clarity and elegance of Montague's writing is only heightened by these essays and their natural standard of vision so clearly defined by these scholars of Irish literature.

It seems that scholars are now finally admitting to Montague's impact and studying him in a way that Yeats, Clarke or Kavanagh (See Thomas O'Grady's essay on "Montague's Tyrone" or Richard Bizot's essay on Montague's *Time in Armagh*) have been analyzed; looking deeply into the poet's style, form and subject matter while also engaging in the commentary of the times of the poet, the ways in which the poet creates, the impact the poet has had on other writers (both American or Irish). These scholarly endeavors address the establishment of Montague as well as his past literary potential and his future necessity of study. Another excellent essay is one by Elizabeth Grubgeld who looks at Montague in the post World War II era of America and the "point of origin" of the poet's style, comparing him to such notable American poets as Lowell, Berryman and Ginsberg while looking specifically at the honest and confessional style that allows the reader to see Montague's emotion and intimacy. His writings often engage the autobiographical and address notions of religion, mythology and history in an aesthetic and transcendental process. According to Grubgeld this voice is present most notably in *The Rough Field* (1972) and *The Dead Kingdom* (1984) and both show new ideals of visual ambitions, sentiment and

development in the poet. After all, Montague's writing (most often his poetry) is daring, visual, elegiac, honest, tribal, important and political or historical especially when placed in the backdrop of the advent of the second Irish revival in 1960's *Dublin* or the culmination of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland in 1969. The formation of Montague's Ireland (or Montague's post-war America) can be directly linked to the formation of the poet, the formation of the self. It is a notion of "place" that allows Montague to preserve memory, to engage in a sort of myth making.

Some other essays of note include David Gardiner's look at Montague and his editing of *The Dolmen Miscellany*, an important anthology not only for its inclusion of famous Irish writers, but also for its understanding of the direction in which Irish writing was headed during the middle of the twentieth century. Gardiner does a superb job of retelling and re-analyzing the importance of such a book and its placement during Ireland's "Emergency" isolation of the soon to be European Union and the economic and political background of a country in an "era of inhibitions" (63). Also something important of note about *Well Dreams* are the two bookended essays by the editor himself, Thomas Dillon Redshaw. Redshaw begins the collection with an essay about the readers of Montague, the scholarly writers who engage in Montague criticism to discover more about the illustrious poet. He also touches on early reasons for Montague's continued and respectable reputation. It is a wonderful and engaging essay filled with historical and literary knowledge of the subject and his provocative poetry. Redshaw essentially gives us a Montague timeline, a look into the criticism and its relation to the book in your hands. Redshaw then finishes the collection with a short essay of introduction for the impeccable bibliography that is to follow. He relays to us the effort involved in collecting information on a poet of Montague's stature and then lets the list speak for itself. It is impressive and telling, a remarkable achievement that will evidently have a formidable impact.

It is interesting to see Montague placed in a huge spectrum of writers. His career is long and extensive as a writer and an editor and some of the most turbulent times in history are his most successful. In his essay Dillon Johnston comments on Montague's readership in the 1960's and 1970's while also telling of his breakthrough with certain books, (most notably *A Chosen Light*, *The Rough Field*, and *Death of a Chieftain*), his reading organized by Liam Miller at The Royal Hibernian Hotel in 1961, his founding of Claddagh Records, his work with MacGibbon and Kee on Kavanagh's writings,

his tribute to Austin Clarke. The history of Montague in the middle of the century is a whose who of writers and artists, a virtual behemoth of Irish letters, a force to be reckoned with. It seems that he worked tirelessly to promote Irish poetry in every shape and form and his extensive career, as well as these essays, reflect these efforts. For new and young practicing poets Montague's career aspirations will long provide a model for many generations of Irish and Irish-American poets. Scholars and poets alike will see how *Well Dreams* exhibits essays that stand to unearth Montague's works from a scholarly angle, but also address the poet's personal quest for freedom as a writer. This work holds stories of an often historical and very real side of a significant writer's extensive and exciting literary life.

In the first installment to Montague's memoir, *Company: A Chosen Life*, he is asked the question, "Do you think you are a poet?" Montague responds, "I deflected this question as delicately as possible, murmuring the old Irish belief that it was an honor only others could bestow, and should not be claimed too loosely by oneself, or some such sententious sentiment" (*Company*, 138). It is safe to say that Montague is not only a poet, (categorized by his colleagues) but also a renowned Irish/American writer. He has been an artist for many years and his influence is greatly felt among Irish scholars and in the world of Irish letters. His poems are intriguing, symbolic, thought provoking and historical while also being personal and internal. Montague has made his career on these ideals and seems to have done it with very little ego or misdirection always channeling a new voice, a unique style that exhibits intelligence and grace. The complexity of the American and Irish poetic adventure is now more understood and Montague can now comprehend that his impact in this realm is greatly felt.

In his essay Eamonn Wall writes that Montague's *Collected Poems* is a "fitting testament to the achievement of a writer who occupies a central place in the narrative of Irish writing as it has unfolded in the last half of the twentieth century" (363). We can safely say that *Well Dreams* has not only added to that placement, but also solidified Montague's career and influence. It is highly readable and a book that scholars and schools will want to order to keep abreast of the best critical writings on Montague. *Well Dreams* is an exploration into great modern Irish literature, a truly necessary and valuable work that spans Montague's long career while commenting clearly and thoroughly on a poet of significant stature and one quite worthy of many future studies. •

—University of Missouri-St. Louis

A Story from the Shadows

NEIL JORDAN

Shade

Bloomsbury, 2004, \$24.95.

Reviewed by
ERIN HADDAD-NULL

NEIL JORDAN HAS EARNED fame and recognition as a film director whose broad range of movies often focuses on how

forces of power intersect with expressions of sexuality. However, many American fans may not know that before he began his career in film, Jordan was already well known for his literary talent. His first major work, the short-story collection, *Night in Tunisia*, was published in 1976 and won the Somerset Maugham award and the *Guardian* Fiction prize. Following this successful first publication, Jordan has

written several novels including *The Past*, *The Dream of a Beast*, *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, and *Nightlines*. Fans of Jordan's movies might also be pleasantly surprised to discover that many of the themes in his films recur in his fiction as well. Just as in his films, Jordan's written work repeatedly depicts characters consumed by loneliness and isolation and whose sexual desires intertwine with social and political forces to

complicate notions of identity.

After an absence of ten years Jordan returns to his roots as a novelist with his latest book *Shade*, a haunting, elegant ghost story set in Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The novel embeds an understanding of how the forces of history, unrequited love, and displaced desire ultimately threaten to envelop the characters in violence. *Shade* offers a new variation

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