# Joep Leerssen

*A Commodious Vicus of Recirculation:*
*Irish Anthologies and Literary History*

Joep Leerssen is professor of Modern European Literature at the University of Amsterdam and Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences Professor.

A COMMODIOUS VICUS OF RECIRCULATION:
IRISH ANTHOLOGIES AND LITERARY HISTORY


Joep Leerssen


The writing of literary history emerged in the course of the eighteenth century. It was based partly on the model of antiquarianism, dealing with vernacular balladry, romance and other remains that stood outside the time-hallowed (and in a sense timeless) canon of Biblical and Classical texts; partly it drew on the genre of poets' biographies, which in turn followed, ultimately, the template laid down by Vasari. Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* is, in a way, a spin-off of Vasari's *Lives of the Painters.*

These two source traditions determined two deep-seated assumptions in literary historiography: that the development of literary history was part of a process of unfolding modernity, and that this process was driven by the personality of the author. I use 'modernity' here, not in a sociological sense, but as the notion, vindicated in the Battle of Ancients and Moderns, that art and civility are not timelessly determined categories fixed by the example of Biblical and Classical antiquity, but that they are developing processes with an intergenerational dynamics and with shifting and developing standards from one century to another. This anti-classicist, dynamic view of art (including literature) as practices predicated, not only on regularity but also on innovation, became dominant in the climate of the Enlightenment, and indeed survived the Enlightenment in that it was also adopted in Romanticism. Vasari's widely influential celebration of the painters, sculptors and architects of the Italian Renaissance as heroic innovators, each new generation learning from, and surpassing, their predecessors, fed into this innovatory paradigm; that view was further strengthened by the Romantics' image of the artist and poet as a Promethean, Faustian, questing spirit, always extending the boundaries of received experience.

It is in the context of this outlook that literary historiography emerged in the decades between 1780 and 1840 – between Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781) and Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781) on the one hand, and Gervinus's *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (1835-1842) on the other. Literary history, one might say, emerged on the basis of a fundamental assumption that literature is not timeless, is anything but timeless.[1]

Another deep-seated assumption in literary history-writing is that a literary corpus is properly defined by the language of its expression. The idea that language forms the primary category of human culture (and not, for instance, religion, gender, class or race) was, again, a product of the decades between the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism. It had been advanced most notably by Herder, who, in debates on the origin of language, insisted that the most salient quality of human language was its capacity for diversity and diversification. The generation of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacob Grimm intensified Herder's linguistic and cultural relativism into a comparative-anthropological notion that a language constitutes the cognitive operating system of an individual or nation. The 'native language' (intergenerationally transmitted in the most intimate parent-child bonding of early infancy) thus establishes language-specificity as a category as fundamental as the distinction between, say, an engine running on electricity, diesel or petrol, or a computer running under Windows, MacOS or Linux.[2] By extention, literature was seen as deeply and substantially determined by its language, relating to it as the flower does to the root of a plant. In the new university system (as devised around 1810 by Humboldt), *philology* was institutionalized as the joint study of that Siamese twin, Lang and Lit. Literature thus acquired a nationality (linguistically determined) at the same time that it acquired a historicity, and most literary history-writing followed a philological model of national historicism.[3]

---

[1]Cf. generally René Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), and *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950* (8 vols; London: Cape, 1961-1992); Bernd Witte, 'La naissance de l'histoire littéraire dans l'esprit de la révolution. Le discours esthétique chez Schlegel, Hegel, Gervinus et Rosencranz', in *Philologiques I: Contribution à l'histoire des disciplines littéraires en France et en Allemagne au XIXe siècle*, ed. M. Espagne & M. Werner (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1990), 69-87.

[2]Pierre Caussat et al. (eds.), *La langue source de la nation. Messianismes séculiers en Europe centrale et orientale (du XVIIIe au XXe siècle)* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 1996).

[3]This has been discussed more fully in my 'Literary history, cultural identity, and tradition', in *Comparative Literature now: Theories and practice / La Litterature comparee à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*, ed. S. Tötösy de Zepetnek, M.V. Dimic & I. Sywenky (Paris: Champion, 1999), 389-397; 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism,

In recent decades, the limitations of both the national and the historicist paradigm have been sternly exposed. What, it has been asked, do Chaucer and Pinter have in common, or Boccaccio and D'Annunzio, that should outweigh the links and similarities between Chaucer and Boccaccio? Does the 'English' in the phrase 'English literature' refer to a language or a country? The question is nugatory for authors who belong to both categories, language and country (Shakespeare, Benson, Hardy), but more troublesome for Walt Whitman, Hugh MacDiarmaid and Seamus Heaney (who belong to one category but reject the other), and most troublesome perhaps for those authors who move between those categories and do not seem to acknowledge their divergence (Walter Scott, Henry James, W.B. Yeats).[1]

Irish literature, as a corpus and as a tradition, poses a standing challenge to the national historicism that is so deeply embedded in the craft of literary historiography. Written in three languages (Latin, Gaelic and English) over turbulent centuries of constitutional uncertainty and strife, it has traditionally placed the literary historian into that predicament whimsically phrased in the doggerel verse of William Allingham:

> An Englishman has a country
> A Scotchman has two
> An Irishman has none at all
> And doesn't know what to do.

A daring and in many ways triumphant attempt to break through this paralysing uncertainty has been made recently by the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (CHIL), which unites chapters on the various languages of Ireland, the literary traditions (oral and written) in those languages, and their interaction. Yet even it follows the implicit assumptions of literary historiography: although the category of nationality is here allowed to accommodate different languages and different constitutional loyalties, it is still seen as the primary one. Joint 'Irishness' is the

---

Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', *Modern Language Quarterly,* 65 #2 (2004): 221-243, and 'Philology and the European Construction of National Literatures', in *Editing the Nation's Memory: Textual Scholarship and Nation-building in 19th-century Europe*, ed. D. Van Hulle & J. Leerssen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 13-27.

[1]Early problematizations of the language-based taxonomy of literary traditions were raised by the case of Belgium and led to the idea of *littératures secondes* (cf. Hugo Dyserinck, *Komparatistik; Eine Einführing* 3rd ed. Bonn: Bouvier, 1991, 94-5). For the more recent idea of literature as a 'polysystem', involving multiple overlapping subdivisions, some of which are linguistically determined, others by different constituencies, cf. Itamar Even-Zohar, 'Polysystem Theory', *Poetics Today*, 1 (1979): 287-310.

one category that links the various authors and texts together, and the structure of the volumes chronologically traces the progress of the literary preoccupation with, or expression of, Irishness across the centuries. CHIL as a whole is a demonstration that the case of Irish literature can be encompassed within the assumptions, scope and working principles of literary historiography.[1]


*Production-oriented Literary History (PLAI) and Irish Perplexities*

The traditional mode of literary historiography is, then, a genetic history of literary *production*, with *language* as the main category for the constitution of the text corpus, *authorship* as its the main organizing principle, and *innovation* as the main driving force. For many literary traditions – French, Danish, Portuguese – these production-language-authorship-innovation (PLAI) assumptions are unproblematic to the point of seeming obvious or 'natural'. This is largely so because PLAI assumptions are shared by authors and historians alike, or have been since the Renaissance. The average French, Danish or Portuguese author works self-consciously in a sense of filiation, with knowledge of his/her forerunners and traditions, and with a historical sense of the generational dynamics of which he/she is positioned. That this should be so is in turn linked to the fact that literature, and print culture in general, form part of what we may call, in Habermas's sense of the term, a public sphere. By the same token, however, literary traditions and corpuses emerging from societies without public sphere (and that includes pre-print European literature and much of pre-colonial world literature) may not work within those PLAI assumptions, which as a result may be awkward when applied to them as an analytical frame.

Indeed, a PLAI perspective proves uncongenial in many respects to the Irish text corpus at large. Gaelic texts hardly reached the printing press at all until the end of the nineteenth century, and have reached us through centuries of manuscript transmission flanked (in the case of verse) by oral transmission, with all the attendant philological pitfalls this entails: substantial textual variants and substantial uncertainties as to authorship. Yet it is precisely this corpus, hard to pin down in terms of authorship, date of origin or textual variant, and understandable to the vast majority of modern readers only in translation – from *Táin Bó Cuailnge* to the Jacobite *aisling* – which is usually seen as the most authentic embodiment of true, native Irishness in Irish literature, with none of the categorical cross-over problems that we encounter in the case of known and datable authors like

---

[1] Margaret Kelleher & Philip O'Leary, eds. *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Eriugena, Luke Wadding or Jonathan Swift.

This state of affairs presents many perplexities. The corpus of the *Táin*, accessible only by a *via philologica* rather than as a text generally present and available for straightforward reading, necessitates ever-renenewd efforts at translation, none of these apparently being definitively satisfactory, from Lady Gregory to Ciaran Carson by way of Thomas Kinsella each vying with the other. Again, certain perennial 'classics' of the Irish tradition such as the 'woman's complaint' entitled *Dónall Óg* have no known author, no fixed date of origin, and even in their textual substance are variable: the order of the stanzas, the stanzas' appurtenance to this or that version or parallel poem: all that differs considerably from MS to MS. Much like the situation of performed art (jazz, folktales) we can at best extrapolate an ideal-type textual template from a shifting praxis of diverging performances.[1] Literature here shades into popular performative praxis, and as a result the classic *Dónall Óg* has somehow failed to get a mention in CHIL – which is comparable to Wordsworth's Lucy poems going unmentioned in a history of English literature.

Not only does this illustrate the intractable difficulties of writing a Literary History of a literature that often has no identifiable authors and no precise datability of its texts, and that ran its course before the uncongenial PLAI assumptions of literary historiography were fixed – it also means that to us who have been raised in those assumptions, Irish literature presents itself as a problem: elusive (obscure or anonymous) authors writing in different languages and in a country where one entire linguistic tradition had no access to the theatre, to the printing press or to a book trade or to the sanctuary of libraries. James Joyce's symbol of the 'cracked looking-glass of a servant' is often applied to the bifurcation and discontinuity of Ireland's literary past: Gaelic and English halves, Ó Rathaille and Swift, that share a frame but somehow do not match up, presenting the onlooker with only a fractured and riven self-image. In recent decades this has become an important principle in the post-colonial approach to Irish literature: the story of colonial self-estrangement and the literary reflections of, and responses to, that condition.

*Canonicity*

In all this, some important literary genres have been left out of our field of vision: the genre of philological edition and translation on the one hand, and that of the

---

[1]Cf my 'For a Post-Foucauldian Literary History: A Test Case from the Gaelic Tradition', *Configurations* 7 (1999): 227-245.

anthology on the other. They form an important part of the Irish literary tradition (as indeed my reference to successive *Táin* translations already indicated), yet they are often neglected in the our way of looking at literary history. That is probably because they do not fit the PLAI perspective: anthologizing and text-editing are instances of literary recycling and re-production rather than of production; the author is here subservient to the editor or compiler; and (as I shall argue in greater detail in what follows) the anthology and philological edition is a genre that can surmount linguistic cleavages, presenting works from one to readers in another language.

The true importance of anthologies and editions only becomes visible if we allow literary history to consist of *reading* as much as *writing*. Until we do, we shall remember Walter Scott mainly as the auhor of *Marmion* and *Ivanhoe*, and allow his editorship of Thomas the Rymer's *Tristram*, or his *Border Mintrelsy*, to remain overshadowed; or remember Southey (unkindly so) for his own poems rather than for his edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

In actual practice, reading is a much more important factor in literary history than we allow it to be. It is the very essence of canonicity: for only those works which are enduringly read (and which accordingly, for one reason or another, merit inclusion in a literary history) can be called canonical. Canonicity cannot maintain itself as a static given: no work ever made it into canonical status on the basis of a prestigious first edition followed by a fixed, unchanging spot on the library shelves. Canonicity is a 'swim or sink' condition: works must be continuously updated to successfully meet fresh generations and audiences amidst changing circumstances of taste and media technologies. Shakespeare remains a famous author, not only because of the Stratford performances of the Royal Shakespeare society, but also because of film adaptations and spin-off repercussions as far and wide as the debate in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode in *Ulysses*, *West Side Story*, *Shakespeare in Love*. These are not anomalies or epiphenomena but part of the dynamics of canonicity – for in the deepest sense of the term, canonicity is a dynamic process, not a static condition.[1]

This means that canonicity as a process is a legitimate and even necessary part of the business of literary historians. And canonicity is always posterior to textual production: texts are not born canonical, they become so after having left their author's hands. Canonicity is not a mode of textual production, but a mode of textual circulation – specifically: an enduringly successful mode of textual

---

[1]Similarly, John Guillory, in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), argues: 'An individual's judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers' (p. 28).

circulation. And it is in the difference between textual production and textual circulation that interesting things happen in literary history, and particularly in Irish literary history.

In order to bring these processes into focus, we must look, then, not at a PLAI history of textual production but rather at one of textual *reading, reception* and *recycling*. In order to give a condensed idea of this model I refer the reader to the 'flowchart of textual production and literary canonicity' appended at the end of this essay. In such an reception-oriented view of literary history we can take due note of the important role played by literary endeavours such as textual editing and, above all, anthologizing.

*Anthologies*

The genre of the anthology is not often encountered as a topic in literary histories (nor is it, for that matter, in CHIL). But it antedates by many centuries the rise of print culture and the rise of the author.[1] The genre receives its name from the great prototype, the Greek Anthology (that collection of Greek epigrams and poems made by Meleager in the first century AD, and continuously added to until well into Byzantine times). The Bible itself may be seen as an anthology containing a collection of texts belonging to many different genres. Any medieval codex can be seen as an anthology of sorts, a collection of texts , almost never organized by author but by the preference of the scribe, the needs of the readership or the availability of material. And the anthology is perhaps the pre-print genre that has most successfully survived the Gutenberg revolution. Anthologies are still being published in great numbers, from school collections to the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*..

Anthologizing has remained an important part of literary practice. In

---

[1] The notion of authorship has, of course, its own historical dynamics which I only mention in passing. Originally the word 'author' was tantamount to 'authority' and referred to the texts invoked to bolster an argument. Later on it came to stand specifically for the individual who had written those texts. The 'authors' known as individuals were originally philosophers and Church Fathers; they were also the earliest 'authors' to be given *opera omnia* editions of their works as somehow forming a coherent corpus held together by the informing personality of their individual mind. The earliest secular and non-philosophical writers to become personally known as authors were the poets of the twelfth and following centuries. It was in the context of print culture that the individual author became the premier marker of a text's identity; the first secular poet to be given an *opera omnia* edition being Giovanni Pontano. The centuries between Dante and Pontano present the period of the 'rise of the author'. Cf. generally also Seán Burke (ed.), *Authorship from Plato to the postmodern: A reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

particular in the field of poetry we may surmise that the canonicity of certain poems owes more to their being anthologized than to reprintings under the poet's own authorship.[1] In the canon of English verse, the influence of set anthologies used in school and university courses (Oxford Anthology, Norton Anthology etc.) is one obvious, institutional factor; but even outside educational settings, in the wider literary market-place, collections such as *Palgrave's Golden Treasury of English Verse* and the *Oxford Book of English Verse* have been formative in shaping tastes and preferences, as well as registering the shifting poetical outlooks, of succeedings generations of readers. Palgrave brought out his original *Golden Treasury* in 4 volumes in 1861, followed by a second series in 1897 and a supplement in 1921. Laurence Binyon added a volume in 1931, C.D. Lewis one in 1954, Christopher Ricks produced a Penguin version in 1994 and a new *Golden Treasury* was published in 6 volumes by Oxford University Press in 1994. That same Oxford University Press had throughout the twentieth century been running the competing *Oxford Book of English Verse*, originally edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1900 and re-edited in 1939, with new editions coming out in 1972 (Helen Vendler), 1990 (John Wain) and 1999 (again Christopher Ricks). Both the frequency and the august editorial roll-call indicate the undemonstrative importance of poetic anthologizing.

A similar role of 'canonization by re-selection and recycling' was played by certain anthologies in Irish literature over the last two centuries. The anthology *Éigse: Duanaire na hArdteistiméarachta* (ed. Breandán Ó Conaire, 1974) was the set anthology for Irish literature courses in secondary school and presented school pupils with the canon of Gaelic literature; a similar use was intended for the three-volume *Nua-Dhuanaire* (ed. Pádraig De Brún, Breandán Ó Buachalla & Tomás Ó Concheanainn, 1975 ff.). For the wider English-reading market, there were formative and influential collections such as Hoagland 1947, Donagh Mac Donagh and Lennox Robinson 1948 (given a new profile in Thomas Kinsella 1986), Frank O'Connor 1959, Derek Mahon 1972, Seán Lucy 1973, John Montague 1974, Brendan Kenelly 1981, Paul Muldoon 1986 and Michael Longley 2002. (NB In mentioning examples of Irish anthologies I use editor's name and year of publication to refer to the checklist appended at the end of this text.)

Again, the frequency is striking, as is the high-prestige nature of the writers involved; any poet of note seems to have been approached by some publisher or other to lend his name to an Irish anthology over the last half-century. Some of these may even have been commercially driven potboilers, aimed at the literary

---

[1] A point also made by Leah Price in the introduction to her *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

tourist market at a period (roughly 1960-2000) that 'Anglo-Irish Literature' was one of the country's main export products; and one gets the impression that editing an anthology was an even more efficient marker of canonicity than being merely included in one. W.B. Yeats himself, with his epoch-making edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) may have acted as a role model. In fact, many succeeding generational shifts in Irish literature and Irish poetry have been signalled, not only by the emergence of new authors, journals and periodicals, but also by way of the anthology as self-presentation. Poets who individually were relatively powerless newcomers in the literary marketplace could make a more forceful entrance on the scene by collectively showing their colours. That practice reaches from the days of the Irish Literary Revival to the feminist assertions of women poets: from W.B. Yeats 1895 to Ailbhe Smyth 1989, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne 1995, and Katie Donovan, Norman Jeffares & Brendan Kennelly 1995, and of course volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day Anthology* (2002). Similarly, in the 1970s, the Northern Irish troubles and their literary repercussions gave rise to important anthologies of 'Ulster poetry', e.g. Pádraic Fiacc 1974 and Frank Ormsby 1979. Thus, anthologies in their own right can document, not only the recycling of past literature, but also the emergence of new currents.

None of these patterns is specifically Irish; they merely serve to highlight the important, albeit under-recognized role played by anthologies in the dynamics of literary history. There are, then, important parallels between Irish and English anthologizing, and, indeed, crossovers, from Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* to Seamus Heaney's and Ted Hughes's *The Rattle Bag* (2005). But in addition, anthologies in Ireland also have a specific function, and a longer and richer history, which I propose to highlight now.


*Irish anthologies: Cultural transfer, cultural memory*

I have earlier referred to the discontinuity syndrome in Irish literature, often symbolized by the 'cracked looking-glass of a servant' as coined by James Joyce. Ireland's history is indeed riven by a fundamental disjunction: the decline and near-extinction of its senior language, Gaelic. While the historical memories of an aboriginally Gaelic Ireland were retrieved and re-appropriated by the majority of the country's population in the nineteenth century, informing every nationalist movement after Daniel O'Connell, the voices which had expressed that Gaelic tradition had become incomprehensible. The very culture which, in the nationalist view, constituted Ireland's main title to sovereignty and self-determination, had been locked out of reach into the sealed-off sarcophagus of a strange, dying language. It is no coincidence that the most succesful phase of Irish separatism

should have been triggered by, precisely, a language revival movement; or that that language revival movement itself should have been triggered by Douglas Hyde's lecture with that interestingly-phrased title, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (1892, presenting Gaelic and English as opposing ends Ireland's language-cultural see-saw).

Much of nineteenth-century Irish culture was deeply engrossed in acts of translation: in the root sense of the word, the relocating of something from one place to another; in this case: the salvage of Gaelic literature and Gaelic culture from the wreck of the Gaelic language and helping it to a new lease of life in an English-speaking social setting. It amounts, almost, to a brain transplant: an entire personality, character, and life-story is lifted from one body and fitted into a new one. Even so, the Irish writers at the latter end of that process (who, for all that they are native speakers of the language of Shakespeare, have de-Anglicized their sense of affiliation to the extent that they acknowledge Gaelic-language forerunners such as Aogán Ó Rathaile as 'us' while they disavow Milton or Wordsworth as 'them') are uncomfortably aware of the discontinuity within the Irish tradition, the crack in the servant's looking-glass.[1] Thus, Thomas Kinsella, in his essay 'The Irish Writer' encounters a 'great cultural blur' when he looks for 'the past in [him]self': 'I must exchange one language for another, my native English for eighteenth-century Irish'. Kinsella sees this bifurcation in his cultural memory as if he comes, 'so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, [in] being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives'.[2] John Montague plays on linguistic discontinuity as trauma in 'A Severed Head' (part of the celebrated cycle *The Rough Field*, 1972): 'To grow a second tongue: as harsh a humiliation as twice to be born'; and Brian Friel's *Translations* remains, despite its wilfully counterfactual distortion of cultural change in nineteenth-century Ireland, widely accepted as a valid 'poetic' representation and interpretation of real-world events: linguistic alienation as a deliberate instrument of colonial hegemony.[3]

---

[1]Cf. Michael Cronin, 'The Cracked Looking Glass of Servants: Translation and Minority Languages in a Global Age', *The Translator* 4.2 (1998): 145-162, and various essays in Maria Tymoczko & Colin A. Ireland (eds.) *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Boston, MA: University of Massachussetts Press: ACIS, 2003).

[2] Thomas Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer', in *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), 57-70.

[3]Martine Pelletier, in her article '*Translations*, the Field Day Debate and the Re-imagining of Irish Identity' (in *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, ed. Anthony Roche; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) defends Friel against his own errors and against his critics with more attitude than argument. For recent studies of the role of the

However, this view of radical disruption and irretrievable loss holds true only in a PLAI-style view of Irish literary and cultural history. The remarkable fact is that in Ireland (in contrast to properly colonial histories, where native languages and the entire cultures contained in them could indeed be subject to utter eradication), salvage operatons began almost as soon as the Irish language came under real threat. Keating's *Foras feasa ar Éirinn* was translated into English as early as 1723. A historiographical tradition based on native sources emerged in the eighteenth century: abbé James Mageoghegan's *History of Ireland* (Paris, 1758-1762) or Sylvester O'Halloran's *General History of Ireland* (1778), who in turn informed nationalist historians like A.M. Sullivan and John Mitchel in the nineteenth.[1] Intellectuals versed in the antiquities and philology of the native tradition did much to communicate its riches to metropolitan scholars and academics; a process starting in the eighteenth century and leading from Aodh MacCruitín, Charles O'Conor and Theophilus O'Flanagan to the great nineteenth-century figures of Eugene O'Curry and John O'Donovan.

Against this background of a general process of 'cultural transfer', the anthologizing recuperation and appropriation of Gaelic literature in an urban, English-speaking setting takes on added resonance.[2] While the written production of Irish literature languished and stalled, in a slow decline that would lead from Aogán Ó Rathaile (†1728) by way of Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (†1837) into the Famine, the Irish anthology became an increasingly potent vehicle for literary salvage. Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry: Consisting of Heroic Poems, Odes, Elegies, and Songs, Translated into English Verse* (1789) is recognized as a 'classic' in Irish cultural history, but usually for other reasons than for what it fundamentally is. It is seen as a manifestation of Grattanite-Patriot appreciation of Gaelic antiquity; as part of the Irish vindication against Macpherson-style Ossianism; as an Irish counterpart to Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* and, as such, as part of the climate of Irish antiquarianism; as a first benchmark in

---

Ordnance Survey in Irish cultural history, see: Gillian M. Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey. History, Culture and Memory* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004); P.S. McWilliams, 'The Ordnance Survey Memoir of Ireland: Origins, Progress and Decline' (PhD thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 2004); Stiofán Ó Cadhla, ed. *Civilizing Ireland: Ordnance Survey 1824-1842. Ethnography, Cartography, Translation* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

[1]Generally, Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate on the Celtic Past in Ireland, c. 1750-1800* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004).

[2]It is striking, for instance, how many *anthologies* have been discussed in Bob Welch's studies of *translations*: Robert Welch, *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish, 1789-1897* Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1988). For the idea of 'cultural transfer', see the seminal collection by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et IXe siècle)* (Paris 1988).

the history of translations from the Irish; and indeed it is all those things. But first and foremost it is one of the first, and greatest, Irish *anthologies*. Brooke's *Reliques* are the prototype of the great showcases retrieving and re-presenting the riches of the native tradition, such as Charles Read's *Cabinet of Irish Literature* (4 vols., 1880) and Seamus Deane's *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3+2 vols., 1991/2002).[1]

Even more importantly, perhaps, her collection, in deliberately straddling the Gaelic-English linguistic divide, is the mainspring of similar anthologies which, since then, have formed crucially important stepping-stones in the development of Irish literature as a bilingual system: *e.g.,* Hardiman 1831, O'Daly & Walsh 1844, O'Daly 1849 and 1860, Ferguson 1864, Brooke & Rolleston 1900, Greene & O'Connor 1967, Ó Tuama & Kinsella 1981, Bolger 1986, Kiberd & Fitzmaurice 1991. All of these present texts from one language for readers in another, often giving original and English translation side by side on facing pages – a procedure first devised by Brooke, in an obvious denunciation of Macpherson's reluctance to produce the originals for his Ossianic 'translations', and still followed by Kinsella and Ó Tuama in their highly influential *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed* of 1981. These anthologies thus in themselves bring two languages together, that of the text and that of the reader, often indeed in their very textual substance and page lay-out, and thus form an almost Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the opposition between Gaelic and English: their polarity is simultaneously enshrined and transcended.

And that, too, was their function, certainly in the nineteenth century-process of rediscovering Ireland's Gaelic past. The work of Hardiman, O'Daly, Ferguson and Sigerson is generally recognized as being of cardinal importance in this process, yet hardly thematized as forming part of a concerted praxis and tradition; yet without their anthologizing, the poetic rise of Mangan, or the boom of patriotic verse by the poets of *The Nation* (themselves largely disseminated by canonical and oft-reprinted anthologies like *The Spirit of the Nation,* 1843, and its spin-offs), would have been unthinkable. The process is known as 'productive reception': the fresh production of Irish texts in the English language taking themes, topics, inspirations and settings from the Gaelic cultural inheritance – in short: an entire Gaelic *cultural memory* – retrieved and appropriatied in a reception process.[2]

---

[1]On Read's *Cabinet*, and on anthologies in general: Margaret Kelleher, 'The Cabinet of Irish Literature: A Historical Perspective on Irish Anthologies', *Eire/Ireland* (2003):68-89

[2]On 'cultural memory': Ann Rigney, 'The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts between Monumentality and Morphing', in *Cultural Memory Studies:An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).

*Anthology, Philology, Manuscript Tradition*

That reception and retrieval process was carried by philologists and anthologists jointly, throughout the nineteenth century. The source-referencing notes to Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* – an early instance of productive reception – feature antiquaries like O'Halloran and anthologists like Brooke; Thomas Davis's mid-century verse and critical essays are replete with similar references to antiquarian, historical and anthologized literary sources; and philological text editions like those of Standish O'Grady as well as anthologies like Douglas Hyde's *Love Songs of Connacht* and *Religious Songs of Connacht* (1893 and 1906) inform the drama and verse of the Irish Literary Revival.

Indeed, in order to place the activities of anthologists, from Charlotte Brooke to Charles Read, in their proper and congenial context, we should consider them, not just as an adjunct to the production of fresh literature, but alongside the rise of the philological text edition. Text editions, too, are a form of retrieval and recycling; they, too, often bridge the gap between the language of the text and the language of the reading audience; they, too, had the dual role of bringing a receding, no-longer-active cultural tradition back from oblivion and re-integrating it into the literary imagination of a different (urban, modern, English-speaking) society. And they rose almost conjointly with the Irish anthology. Indeed, with her *Reliques*, Charlotte Brooke stands godmother over the philological-editorial tradition as much as over that of the anthology. The first great editorial works were undertaken around the mid-nineteenth century under the aegis of the Royal Irish Academy and its spin-off, the Irish Archaeological Society (later merged with O'Daly's Ossianic Society),[1] the high points being undoubtedly John O'Donovan's edition of the Annals of the Fours Masters,[2] and the edition of the Brehon laws by W.N. Hancock and others, made on the basis of preparatory work by O'Curry and O'Donovan. From these beginnings rose the discipline of the Celtic philology; and in many cases its early achievements (certainly when non-authored verse or imaginative-fictional texts like legends or myths were assembled thematically, edited and translated) were almost indistinguishable from the anthologizing tradition highlighted here – *e.g.*, Montgomery 1846, O'Grady 1892, Sigerson 1897, Meyer 1901, Hull 1912. After independence, T.F. O'Rahilly (1925/26),

---

[1]Damien Murray, *Romanticism, Nationalism and Irish Antiquarian Societies, 1840-80* (National University of Ireland Maynooth: Department of Old and Middle Irish, 2000).

[2]Bernadette Cunningham, 'The Nineteenth-century Legacy: Publishing the Annals of the Four Masters', in *Writing Irish history: The Four Masters and their World,* ed. E. Bhreathnach & B. Cunningham (Dublin: Wordwell, 2007), 68-73.

Osborn Bergin (1970) and Seán Ó Tuama (1981) have continued this editing/anthologizing outreach from the academic into the wider literary field.

A further comment is in order here. Older Gaelic literature rarely fits the PLAI paradigm, and as a result the Irish materials edited by Celtic philologists rarely come in a cut-and-dried author-organized form. Text editions of individual authors certainly do exist: the works of Aogán Ó Rathaille as edited by Dinneen and O'Donoghue, of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair as edited by MacErlean, and of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, as edited by Elanor Knott come to mind (all of them in the publication series of the Irish Texts Society, in 1909, 1910-17 and 1920 respectively); or post-1945 author-based work editions coming out of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies. But these collections had to be assembled, and to be arranged around an individual author, from a disparate MS tradition, and as an editorial-phological endeavour they are heavily overshadowed by editions that are in themselves selections – indeed, philological anthologies. Seen in this light, the editions of poetic materials by Lambert McKenna (also the compiler of the standard English-Irish dictionary *Foclóir Béarla agus Gaedhilge* of 1935) stand out as being of immense value and importance. His collections of 1938, 1939, 1947 and 1951 mark him as one of the unsung giants of the Irish literary tradition.

What is more, often the anthologizing nature of such editions is not just the result of editorial selection from amidst diverse MS sources, but a reflection of the anthological nature of the edited MS itself. McKenna's edition of the 'Contention of the Bards', *Iomarbhágh na bhFileadh* (1917) is a case in point: a corpus always transcribed and transmitted as multi-party controversy between altercating poets. In other cases, what is edited is in fact itself a *duanaire* or poem-book, with texts by different poets organized around the addressee: the patron, or family, to whom such poems were addressed and dedicated, and by whom the collection was kept. Ó Donnchadha 1931, Carney 1945 and 1950, McKenna 1947 and 1951 (poem-books for the Clannaboy O'Neills, Butlers, O'Reillys, Magaurans and O'Haras) are examples in point.

Two patterns emerge from this. One is that early-independence Ireland, for all that it is often perceived as stagnated and unproductive, in fact achieved an immense amount in making literary material from pre-1600 Gaelic literature available for circulation and recirculation in twentieth-century print culture. The other is that this modern anthologizing tradition in Ireland reconnected with a pattern of non-authorial text organization which was in fact a long-standing feature of Gaelic literature itself.

The Gaelic term *duanaire* – signifying 'aggregate of poems' – may already alert us to this. The MS transmission of Gaelic literature rarely proceeded authorially; the usual organization of any MS being in itself a type of scribal

anthology. The most important Gaelic codices from the eleventh to the sixteenth century (Leabhar na hUidre, and the Books of Glendalough, Leinster, Ballymote, Lecan and Fermoy, listed at the head of the appended Checklist, and all of them printed between 1875 and 1937) were, as hinted earlier on, anthologies themselves. After the catastrophic defeat of the Ulster Earls, an anthology-in-exile was produced on the continent around 1630, *Duanaire Finn* – and this collection may stands as a 'missing link' between a retrieval and recycling effort from within the stricken Gaelic tradition itself and the later retrievals heralded by Charlotte Brooke and by the 1795 collection entitled, again with a native phrase, *Bolg an tSolair* ('The Provider's Bag', connoting a cornucopia of miscellaneous 'goodies').

In all these respects, the anthology transcends divisions. It remains a constant in textual (re-) production from the Gaelic scribal tradition to the modern academic and commercial press; it reaches across different literary fields from academic philology to patriotic propaganda verse; and most importantly, it rivets together the two different and competing literary languages of Ireland. In the last two centuries Irish anthologies have truly created, and embodied within their pages, the unity of Irish literature that they often strove to achieve or facilitate. That the lack of such a unity and continuity could at the same time be deplored in other quarters only shows how undervalued and unnoticed the anthologizing tradition has been. If there is, at the beginning of the present century, a sense that despite historical discontinuities and linguistic differences there is such a things as an 'Irish Literature', then the credit is in no small part due to Ireland's anthologizing tradition.

Appendix 1
# A THOUSAND YEARS OF IRISH ANTHOLOGIES
## (A CHECKLIST OF SOME REPRESENTATIVE TITLES)

**pre-1600:**

Leabhar na hUidre, XId, RIA 1844, transcript facs 1870, Best/Bergin ed. 1929

Book of Glendalough, XIIb, BL, facs. ed. Kuno Meyer 1909

Book of Leinster, XII, Killiney/TCD, transcript facs ed. 1880

Book of Ballymote, XIVd, RIA 1875

Book of Lecan, XIVd-XVa, TCD>RIA, facs. ed. Kathleen Mulchrone 1937

Yellow Book of Lecan, XIVd-XVd, TCD, facs ed. 1896

Leabhar Breac, XVa, RIA 1789-1844, transcript facs. ed. 1872-76

Book of Fermoy, XIVd-XVI, incl Roche duanaire, RIA/BL XIXb

**1600-1800**

Book of the O'Conor Don, XVIIb, private.

*Duanaire Finn*, XVIIb, MacNeill/Murphy ed. 1907-53

1789    Charlotte Brooke, *Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry*

1795    *Bolg an tSolair*

**1800-1920**

1831    James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland*

1839    Thomas Crofton Croker, *Popular Songs of Ireland*

1843    *The Spirit of the Nation*

1844    John O'Daly & Edward Walsh, *Reliques of Jacobite Poetry*

1845    M.J. Barry, *The Songs of Ireland*

1845    Charles Gavan Duffy, *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland*

1846    H.R. Montgomery, *Specimens of the Early Native Poetry of Ireland*

1846    Denis Florence MacCarthy, *The Book of Irish Ballads*

1847    Edward Walsh, *Irish Popular Songs*

1849    John O'Daly, *The Poets and Poetry of Munster* (with Mangan versions)

1852    William Hamilton Drummond, *Ancient Irish Minstrelsy*

1860    John O'Daly, *The Poets and Poetry of Munster*, 2nd ser. (with Sigerson versions)

1864    Samuel Ferguson, *Lays of the Western Gael*

1880    Charles Read, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* (4 vols)

1892    Standish Hayes O'Grady, *Silva gadelica*

1892    D.O Crowley, *Irish Poets and Novelists*

1893    Douglas Hyde, *Love Songs of Connacht*

1894    Martin MacDermott, *The New Spirit of the Nation*

1894    *Poetry and Legendary Ballads of the South of Ireland*

1895    W.B. Yeats, *A Book of Irish Verse*

1897    George Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and Gall*

1900    Justin McCarthy et al., *Irish Literature* (10 vols)

1900    Stopford Brooke & T.W. Rolleston, *A Treasury of Irish Poetry in the English Tongue*

1901    Kuno Meyer, *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*

1906    Douglas Hyde, *Religious Songs of Connacht*

1909    John Cook, *The Dublin Book of Irish Verse*

1912    Eleanor Hull, *Poem-Book of the Gael*

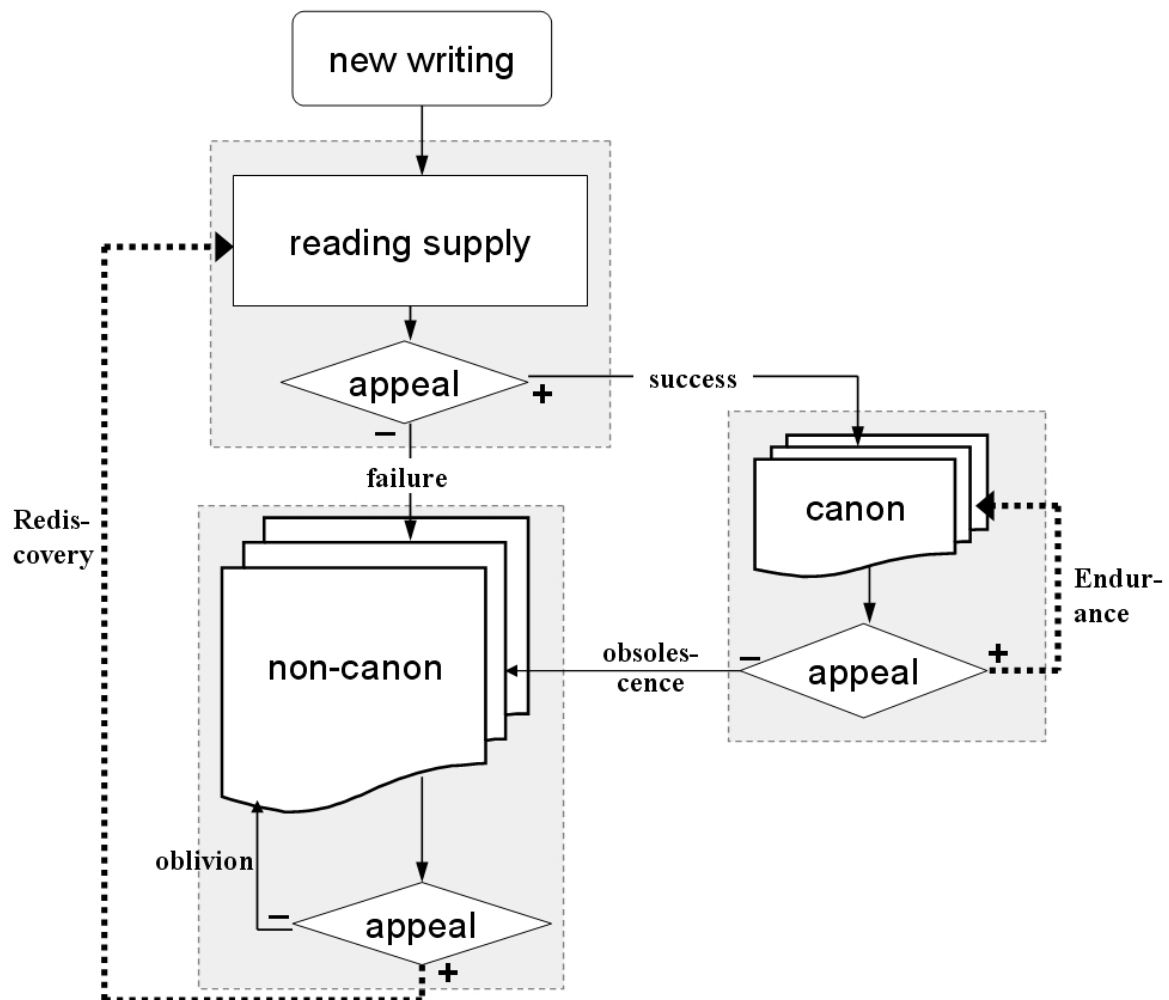1912    Mary J. Brown, *Historical Ballad Poetry of Ireland*

**post-1920**

1921   L. D'O Walters, *Irish Poets of To-day: An Anthology*
1922   Lambert McKenna, *Dán Dé*
1925   Lennox Robinson, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Verse*
1926   T.F. O'Rahilly, *Dánta Grádha*
1927   T.F. O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta*
1931   Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe*
1938   Lambert McKenna, *Dioghluim Dána*
1939   Lambert McKenna, *Aithdioghluim Dána*
1939   Colm Ó Lochlainn, *Irish Street Ballads*
1945   James Carney, *Poems on the Butlers, 1400-1650*
1947   Kathleen Hoagland, *1000 Years of Irish Poetry*
1947   Lambert McKenna, *Leabhar Meig Shamhradháin*
1948   Donagh MacDonagh & Lennox Robinson, *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*
1950   James Carney, *Poems on the O'Reillys*
1951   Lambert McKenna, *Leabhar Í Eadhra*
1952   Colm Ó Lochlainn, *More Irish Street Ballads*
1958   Pádraig Ó Canainn, *Filíocht na nGael*
1959   Frank O'Connor, *Kings Lords & Commons: An Anthology from the Irish*
1967   David Greene & Frank O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*
1967   Seán Lucy, *Love Poems of the Irish*
1967   Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*
1969   Frank O'Brien, *Duanaire Nuafhilíochta*
1970   Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*
1972   Derek Mahon, *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*
1973   Seán Lucy, *Irish Poets in English*
1974   Breandán O Conaire. *Éigse: Duanaire nua na hArdteistiméarachta*
1974   Párdaic Fiacc, *The Wearing of the Black*
1974   John Montague, *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*
1975-  De Brún, O Buachalla & O Concheanainn, *Nua-Dhuanaire* (3 vols.)
1979   Frank Ormsby, *Poets from the North of Ireland*
1979   Maurice Harmon, *Irish Poetry After Yeats: Seven Poets*
1981   Seán O Tuama & Thomas Kinsella, *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed*
1981   Brendan Kenelly, *Penguin Book of Irish Verse*
1985   Seán Dunne, *The Poets of Munster*
1986   Thomas Kinsella, *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*
1986   Dermot Bolger, *The Bright Wave: An tonn gheal*
1986   Paul Muldoon, *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*
1988   A.A. Kelly, *Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women*
1989   John Montague, *Bitter Harvest*
1989   Ailbhe Smyth, *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*
1990   Derek Mahon & Peter Fallon, *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*
1991   Declan Kiberd & Gabriel Fitzmaurice, *Crann faoi bláth / The Flowering Tree*
1991/2002      *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3+2 vols., 1991/2002)
1995   Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, *Voices on the Wind: Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight*
1995   Patrick Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry*
1995   K. Donovan, A.N. Jeffares & B. Kennelly, *Ireland's Women*
1996   Theo Dorgan, *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*
1997   Seán Dunne, *The Ireland Anthology*

1998 Andrew Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*
1999 Theo Dorgan & Noel Duffy, *Watching the River Flow*
1999 Seán McMahon, *1000 Years of Poetry: A Millennial Anthology*
2000 Gréagóir Ó Dúill, *Fearann Pinn: Filíocht 1900-1999*
2000 Colm Tóibín, *The Irish Times Book of Favourite Irish Poems*
2000 W.J. McCormack, *Ferocious Humanism*
2002 Michael Longley, *20th-century Irish Poems*
2003 Andrew Carpenter, *Verse In English From Tudor And Stuart Ireland*
2004 Stephen Regan, *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939*

Appendix 2
**A FLOWCHART MODEL OF TEXTUAL PRODUCTION AND LITERARY CANONICITY**



Reading the chart from top to bottom, we can trace its processes as follows: *New writing* adds continuously to the available reservoir of *reading supply*. Owing to complex mechanisms (taste, marketing and critical response, prestige of the author or endorsing critic) here subsumed under the notion *appeal*, some of this reading material meets with *failure* and drops into a disregarded, largely unread category here called *non-canon*. There it remains as long as it fails to obtain *appeal*, relegated to *oblivion*.

Other portions of *reading supply*, however, meet with a positive response (*success*) and as a result enter a category here called *canon* (which is, in fact, a

diverse array of different 'canons' current in different parts of the reading market-at-large, with all sorts of crossovers, overlaps and transfers between them). A text's position in that category is, however, subject to constant reappraisal: as long as it continues to obtain *appeal*, its *endurance* in the canon is ensured; once that fails, however, it falls, by way of *obsolescence*, into the category of *non-canon*ical texts.

With the exception of a few works of perennially enduring canonicity (the Bible, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare), a gravitational downward pull seems to draw most texts towards the limbo of non-canonical (unread or unappreciated) texts. The speed and trajectory of that process is unpredictable and depends on recurring and complex 'appeal' moments.

There is, however, an escape from *non-canon*icity: texts may, after longer or shorter periods of obscolescence or oblivion, gain fresh appeal and re-enter the reservoir of available *reading supply* by means of *rediscovery*. Form that moment onwards, the cycle begins afresh: the *rediscovery* may be more or less lasting or successful, depending, once again, on the complexities of what constitutes, among different readers and in different generations, literary appeal

The flowchart illustrates three things.

[1] *Endurance* of canonicity and *Rediscovery* (the thick, dotted arrows) work in the opposite direction (upward in this chart) from the processes of *success*, *failure* or *obsolescence* (downward in this chart). These latter processes are the ones usually foregrounded in PLAI-oriented literary histories; conversely, *endurance* and *rediscovery* come to the fore in the history of reading, reception and recycling rather than of literary production.

[2] It is in these recycling processes of *Endurance* and *Rediscovery* that anthologies play their specific role.

[3] The three sections of the flowchart gathered in grey rectangles are each of them, in principle, monolingual and contain processes within a reading public united by a shared language. The process of *success* may cross a linguistic frontier (translations), as well as the processes of *obsolescence* and *failure* (unread works being unread in any language; and obsolescence possibly occurring as a result of language death). Crucially, the process of *Rediscovery* can cross linguistic borders and ensure texts' passage from one language towards a different-language audience. (The same holds for the *Endurance* process: canonicity can spread or radiate from one language into another, as the cases of Flann O'Brien and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill show.)  This seems particularly suggestive for multi-language literary systems like Ireland.

published titles:

1.   P.J.G. Kapteijn, *Over de Europese Grondwet* (2005)
2.   Joep Leerssen, *The Cultivation of Culture* (2005)
3.   Peter Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Peoples Imagined* (2005)
4.   Iraklis (Hercules) Millas, *Tourkokratia* (2006)
5.   Annie Jourdan, *Amsterdam en révolution, 1795-1798* (2006)
6.   Annemarie van Heerikhuizen, *Een Haagse salon* (2007)
7.   Max Bader, *Making Parties Fit for Democracy* (2007)
8.   C.R.M. Versteegh, *Human Rights Enforceability* (2008)
9.   Eva Navarro Martínez, *Images of Europe in American films* (2009)
10.  Joep Leerssen, *Irish Anthologies and Literary History* (May 2010)