



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976-2006 by Richard Kearney

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about Ireland, but about Germany, and published in the *Irish Press*, not *The Irish Times*?

Dennis Kennedy

***Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976 - 2006*, by Richard Kearney, Dublin: Lilliput, 2006, pp.451.**

The two quotations on the flyleaf to this extraordinary collection of essays are extremely apposite. One is an Irish proverb that extols the value of questioning while the other, from George Russell, celebrates the vitality of cultural diversity in all its manifestations. Clearly Richard Kearney chose his quotations carefully as they embody both the spirit and intellectual thrust of a book that bears wonderful testament to one of the most exhilarating, challenging and articulate critics that Irish culture has been lucky enough to produce. Kearney has long had a reputation for intellectual critical inquiry of the highest level, and *Navigations*, as the title suggests, charts his 30-year engagement with Irish politics, literature, philosophy, cinema and drama in essays that are accessible, readable and bursting with an intellectual enquiry that would revitalise the most tired of minds. It seems a pity that this book came too late to be placed in the time capsule that was placed beneath the Spire in Dublin, as there can be little doubt that Kearney's interrogations over the past three decades have shed a consistently illuminating light on the constantly shifting nature of Irish cultural life.

The book is divided into five parts, each dealing with an important aspect of contemporary Irish cultural life. Part One, for example, entitled "Political Narratives", typifies Kearney's eclectic approach, drawing together an unlikely series of cultural signifiers, ranging from Sean O'Faolain's ground-breaking 1940's journal *The Bell* to the 1981 IRA hunger strikes in an attempt to chart the development of what he refers to as post-nationalist Ireland. The depiction of a diffracted and decentred concept of national identity is one of Kearney's recurring motifs and his indebtedness to Roland Barthe's concept of the crucial role played by myth in the construction of national identities is clear. By identifying competing strands in nationalist

mythologies he seeks to show that, rather than the commonly portrayed seamless emergence of a nationalist dominated history, the reality is that 'our tradition' is more a 'a medley of rupturing, irregular and often suppressed perspectives'.

Kearney's essays on Joyce, Beckett, Heaney and Friel are at all times provocative, illuminating and challenging and there is little doubt that since his early *Crane Bag* days, (a journal he founded with Mark Patrick Herderman in 1977), that the essay is his favoured weapon of academic assault. There is a strong argument to be made that the essay, or journal article, is in many ways the premium academic form in that its brevity forces a cogency and tautness that otherwise might be lost in the sea of words of a longer piece. Indeed, a good many academic books find their genesis in a couple of previously published journal articles, a fact often hidden away in the acknowledgements. How revolutionary (and unlikely!) it would be if a university cut its doctoral word count from 100,000 to 5,000, but how many more PhD theses would be read in return? Kearney, however, is typically and refreshingly honest when he admits (p.88) that, amongst the stellar essays in *The Crane Bag*, there were many that 'sank like millstones into mute oblivion'. It is fair to say that fate does not await any of the essays in *Navigations*.

Part Five of the book relates a series of interviews and dialogues conducted by Kearney over the years and the looser format of the interview allows Kearney's imagination a freer reign than the more structured essay. Chapter 20 is a précis of a fascinating conversation between Kearney and three significant players in their respective artistic fields, Bono (music), Paul Durcan (poetry), Neil Jordan (cinema) and Robert Ballagh (art) in which they muse over the expression of collective identity in their work. Kearney comments in his introductory note that 'the old ideologies of fixed national identity or insular salvation can never suffice again' and the chapter serves as a revealing signpost to a future in which, to quote Brendan Kennelly, 'being at home in a sense of homelessness' will become the *leitmotif* of the next generation.

For anyone who has even the vaguest interest in the development of

contemporary Irish culture, *Navigations* should be right up there at the top of the booklist. Kearney's easy control of his extensive reading and learning could easily be intimidating in the hands of a less effective communicator, but his writing always conveys the impression that it is more concerned with effective communication than supporting a narrow self-serving academic discourse. In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon declare that Patrick Kavanagh's poem, 'Epic' acted as a 'liberation' to subsequent generation of Irish poets and gave 'single-handed permission for Irish poets to trust and cultivate their native ground and experience'.

It can be argued that Richard Kearney's writings have achieved precisely the same effects on a broad range of discourses in the on-going development of contemporary Ireland.

John McDonagh

Among the Reviewers in this issue:

Peter Costello is a biographer, historian and Hon. Librarian of the Central Catholic Library; *Derek Coyle* lectures in English Literature and Irish Studies at Carlow College; *J. Anthony Gaughan* is a parish priest and an historian; *Dennis Kennedy* worked for the *Irish Times* in Dublin from 1968 to 1985, latterly as Deputy Editor to Douglas Gageby; *John McDonagh* lectures in English at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick; *Thomas Morrissey, S.J.* has published extensively in Irish Church history and biography; *David Murphy* has just published *Irish Regiments in the World Wars*; *Breda O'Brien* is a wife, mother, teacher and *Irish Times* columnist; *John Swift* is a former Irish ambassador to several countries.