Institution is one of several examples (cf. CULTURE, SOCIETY, EDUCATION) of a noun of action or process which became, at a certain stage, a general and abstract noun describing something apparently objective and systematic; in fact, in the modern sense, an institution.¹

(Raymond Williams)

It's a terrifying notion that history is a process which is working to articulate an idea, to express that idea in an institution.²

(Tom Paulin)

INTRODUCTION: INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTITIES

The paradoxical relationship of the institution to history constitutes an uncomfortable intersection for cultural theory. As set against Tom Paulin's anxiety about history as 'process', that seamless progression of events leading ultimately to an expression of institutional totalitarianism, Raymond Williams's sense of the 'apparently objective' status of the institution allows for a moment of potential realization. In this model the concept of the institution reads itself as foreclosing: a black hole absorbing the light of materialist historiography and giving back nothing but its own self-evident eternity. How then, in the face of such pervasive constructions, to chart the history of institutions themselves? Williams's sharp perception that the concept of the institution is
itself institutionalized tells us much about the tautologous rhetoric that surrounds it but little about how to overcome such strategies. Indeed, with this the suspicion emerges that it is in such terms, as a symbol of monolithic cultural formation denying the possibility of historical method, that the institution is most often invoked within Irish cultural theory. Such usage has a rhetorical emphasis. The institution as monolith can function as part of an opposition which emphasizes the break into more disruptive discourses and vigorous modes of analysis. In this it remains of course beyond analysis; a monument to its own permanence. It will be my contention in this essay that the rise of the post-colonial concept of hybridity as an evaluative criteria of identity in Irish cultural theory is a phenomenon located centrally at this point of contradiction and that analyses of such instances allow a greater understanding of the ideologies that surround the institution itself. While tracing this development it is then encouraging to take into account Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s sense of crisis as being ‘the moment at which you feel that your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself’ if only because of the proviso she adds: ‘These are not necessarily moments of weakness’. By tracing the usage of the concept of hybridity and the heterogeneous in a number of recent and important studies of Irish culture I intend to explore the shifting negotiations between the individual critical act and the institutional position that enables that utterance. While this raises difficult issues of complicity (an accusation which can of course be levelled at this essay as well) it also suggests that hybridity can be read as a form of containment that can allow the play of the heterogeneous while containing it within certain, largely unexamined, methodologies. Readings of Irish culture in terms of hybridity are deeply implicated in the process of the institution and yet are marked by a concomitant desire to make such implication appear as discreet as possible. However, taking account of Spivak’s awareness, we may choose not to see this as a moment of weakness, but rather as a moment of (as yet unrealized) potential within the discursive practices of Irish studies.

This tendency then can be understood as a highly specific emergent cultural phenomenon but this should not be to deny the larger resonances of the development. At the time of writing the faltering peace process in Northern Ireland has stalled at a point of irreducible difference as the recognition of ‘diversity’