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Despite the fact that Ireland's intricate, and occasionally convulsed, history has always been the object of international attention and the island's extraordinarily rich literary output has been duly acknowledged and praised, for a long time interest in Irish culture tended to be emotionally charged and guided by instinctual rather than scholarly parameters. However, the last two decades have seen a remarkable surge of academic interest in Irish studies, leading to the publication of a profusion of critical material and the setting up of Irish studies programmes in universities across the globe, as well as national and transnational associations for the study of Irish literature and culture.

The current fruitful deployment of theoretically informed approaches within the field of Irish studies can be traced back to the publication, in 1991, of the landmark *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Apart from making a large number of canonical and obscure literary and political texts available, the annotations and critical introductions of academics and cultural theorists Terence Brown, Luke Gibbons, Declan Kiberd and W.J. McCormack sparked off an intense debate over the question of Ireland's colonial/postcolonial status and stirred up the contentious arena of gender politics, which hitherto had lain dormant as a result of the persistent and overriding focus on the 'national issue'.

The essays that make up *Postcolonial and Gender Perspectives in Irish Studies*, edited and introduced by Marisol Morales, the current Chairperson of AEDEI (Asociación Española de Estudios Irlandeses), and handsomely published in the Amergin Irish Studies Series of Universidade da Coruña, were solicited from eleven Spanish scholars, with a view to taking stock of the state of Irish Studies at the start of the twenty-first century, and to contributing to the ongoing critical discussion within this thriving area of study. As the editor states in the preface, the starting point lies in the lack of agreement regarding the postcolonial status of Ireland. Whereas critics like Declan Kiberd consider Ireland "a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters" (1996:1), the geographical proximity of the island to Great Britain, as well as its small dimension and the affinity of language, culture and race, have been said to confer uniqueness on Ireland and have nurtured a controversy that defines it as a "different" state (Boehmer 1995), "anomalous" (Lloyd 1993) or "atypical" (Graham 1994; Said 2003). On its part, the well known study *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literature* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) had no hesitation in putting Ireland, Scotland and Wales on the same level and stating that "while it is possible to argue that these societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in Britain's imperial

enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as postcolonial”(33).

From the very beginning Morales also makes clear the main purpose of the book: to collect different approaches to the matter and, above all, to open a critical debate on the different contributions to the so much questioned ‘Irish postcolonial condition’ over the last four decades. She argues that this publication has covered a critical vacuum in Spain, intertwining (Northern) Irish postcolonial and gender studies. The editor’s aim to put together both approaches is adequate, each of them being traditionally analyzed in a separate and individual way. And the book undoubtedly achieves its aims: the postcolonial-cum-gender critical approach that underlies each contribution acts as a unifying factor and provides the close readings of particular texts with illuminating insights.

Prefaced by a chapter entitled ‘Postcolonialism, Language and Gender’, which maps out the state of the question in Irish critical thought in connection to issues of language and gender in the postcolonial context, the rest of the contributions are organised around generic clusters such as Poetry, Fiction, Drama and Cinema. The contents are wide-ranging but not scattered. They are deftly connected by the essays’ ascription to a number of guiding assumptions: they are informed by feminist concerns, they focus on Irish texts as cultural expressions of postcolonial sensitivities and worries, and all the texts discussed have been produced in the last four decades, a momentous period of change and reassessment for Irish society. The organization of the contents does not contemplate any division between the literary output of Northern Ireland and that of the Republic, though separate chapters are devoted to Northern Ireland poetry, novel and short story. We miss some debate on this matter, since the concept of literary *northern-ness* has proved another controversial issue that critics hardly confine to the limits of the province. Quite the opposite, the cultural continuity of the island and the interaction between North and South hold many important contributions to the subject, blurring the barrier delimitation between both, (Foster 1974; Pelaschiar 1998; Jeffers 2002; Peach 2004). In this reader’s opinion, a brief survey of the North-South relations and the position of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom would have provided a clarifying frame for the matter.

Opening the collection, Isabel Carrera, in ‘La teorización postcolonial de Irlanda’, provides a well informed and multi-angled survey of the increasing refiguration of Irish writing in postcolonial terms, and regrets the long-standing asymmetry in Irish culture between the elevation of Irish women to national icons and the narrow construction of family and sexuality within the normative discourse of Irish nationalism. Carrera calls for the productive integration of feminist theory and the postcolonial paradigm, in line with the recent work of Elizabeth Butler-Cullinford (*Ireland’s Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish and Popular Culture*, 2001), Claire Connolly (*Theorizing Ireland*, ed. 2002) and Claire Carroll and Patricia King (*Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. 2003). In fact, the postcolonial-cum-gender critical approach will underlie the work of the remaining contributors and invest their close readings of particular texts with illuminating insights.

For his part, Asier Altuna addresses the linguistic dimension of Irish culture in ‘The Irish Language and Issues on Postcolonialism: An Approach’. In the present context of

increasing globalisation – in which English, seen as the former hegemonic aggressor in the anti-colonial struggle and early postcolonial nation-building has long been nativised while the use of the indigenous language, Irish, has greatly receded – Altuna encourages individuals to take an active role in the preservation and revival of Irish rather than leaving the issue to the government and institutions. Furthermore, he advocates a threefold perspective: bilingualism, hybridity and translation as a sensible, viable way to safeguard the Irish language and the culture embedded in it. To support his views Altuna resorts to authors Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill as examples of adaptability to the new circumstances and of cultural and linguistic confidence.

The essays ‘Northern Ireland: the Poetry in Between’, written by Manuela Palacios, and ‘*Acts of Union: El discurso del amor en el texto poético de autoras irlandesas (1980-2005)*’, by Luz Mar González Arias, constitute the poetry section in the volume and provide highly-nuanced interpretations. Drawing on the notion of borderland as evoking both division and the possibility of encounters, while eschewing the pitfalls of monolithic binarisms, Palacios considers poems by Northern Irish Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian, as well as southerners such as Paula Mehan or Eavan Boland, focusing on geographical, political, religious, class and gender divisions, but avoiding any Manichean polarities. González Arias looks at the work of female poets of the Republic from the prism of the discourse of love – as theorised among others by philosopher Umberto Galimberti, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, and critical theorist Linda Hutcheon – as an ideologically charged social practice rather than as the a-cultural and a-historical feeling portrayed in traditional poetry. The marked gender asymmetry that has traditionally prevailed in Ireland – encapsulated in the recurring metaphor of the feminisation of the land, whose possession and rape act as a correlate for the plight of the colonised subject – recurs as a subtext in many of the poems written by Eavan Boland, Eithne Strong, Katie Donovan, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Paula Meehan, Dorothy Molloy, Anne Hartigan and Leanne O’Sullivan, and analysed by González Arias, who calls for a thorough contextualisation in order to grasp the public reverberations intertwined in the private musings of the poems.

The section devoted to fiction is, quite appropriately, the longest, as it takes stock of novel writing in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, as well as the island’s distinctive contribution to short prose fiction. Irish writers’ special propensity for the short story has been variously accounted for by critics and practitioners of the form. Early complimentary assertions arguing for the existence of a distinctly Irish short story tradition – which was largely attributed to the length and strength of the island’s oral tradition, as well as a supposed weakness for writing novels (Bates 1941; Mercier 1964; Kilroy 1984; Rix 1988) – have been qualified, eschewing judgmental pronouncements about the status of the genre in relation to the novel (Bolger 1993) and highlighting the fact that since “the short story frequently deals with marginal figures on the outskirts of society [it constitutes] a subtle means for submerged population groups – in Frank O’Connor’s phrase – to address and challenge a dominant community” (González 1994: 161). As Margarita Estévez Saá shows in her fine essay ‘The *Seanchai*: Short Fiction by Irish Women Writers from the Republic’, Irish women writers, emerging as they are from a long silence in Irish social and cultural life, have revived the traditional art of

storytelling, adapting it to new realities and to their own personal predicaments. Moreover, refuting the oft-repeated claim that women writers confine themselves to realistic and autobiographical modes, Estévez Saá draws our attention to a number of texts published in the last decade. Insofar as they display “a wide spectrum of narrative forms and styles, stories set in rural and urban landscapes of Ireland and abroad, told from the perspective of adults and of children” (148) and supersede, both formally and thematically, “regional and national concerns and circumstances” (152), they could and should, according to Estévez Saá, be read and interpreted in the broad frame of the postmodern condition.

For her part, in ‘The Anti/postcolonial trace in Some Stories of the Northern Irish Troubles’, Tamara Benito de la Iglesia dwells on short story writing in Northern Ireland, a genre she deems to be particularly apt to voice anti-colonial and post-colonial concerns. She considers how four male writers from different backgrounds – Gerry Adams, William Trevor, David Park and Bernard MacLaverty – address the Troubles, from overt denunciation of abuses on the part of the security forces to the inevitable dehumanisation brought about by the protracted sectarian violence. Esther Aliaga’s contribution, ‘Glenn Patterson and Robert MacLiam Wilson: Two Contemporary Northern Irish Writers and the Question of National Identity’, also focuses on the literary portrayal of the conflict in Northern Ireland, this time using the medium of the novel and optimistically stressing the genre’s potential for social intervention. She undertakes a close reading of *Burning Your Own* (1988) and *Fat Lad* (1992) by Protestant novelist Glenn Patterson and *Ripley Bogle* (1989) and *Eureka Street* (1996) by Catholic Robert MacLiam Wilson. Aliaga highlights the authors’ distinctly non-sectarian approach to Northern Ireland in the post-ceasefire phase of the Troubles, by steering clear of monolithic notions of communal identity in order to adopt a stance that transcends the notion of the parochial to embrace the universal.

The fourth essay in the fiction section, ‘Espacios Femeninos en la novela de la República escrita por mujeres’, is authored by María Amor Barros del Río, who discusses novels by women writers from the Republic from a post-colonial and gender perspective. In a wide-ranging survey that includes, among others, Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* (1960-64), Kate Cruise O’Brien’s *The Homesick Garden* (1991), and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Dancer’s Dancing* (1999), Barros del Río traces the novelists’ search for strategies to voice their own identity outside social and historical constraints, in particular the debasing consequences of the persistent colonial ideological identification of women with the land.

Irish drama from Northern Ireland and the Republic is respectively dealt with by María del Mar González Chacón and Rosana Herrero. The former’s ‘La compañía Charabanc (Marie Jones), Ann Devlin y Christina Reid: Estudio postcolonial del teatro norirlandés contemporáneo’ assesses the contribution of the Charabanc Theatre Company, created in Belfast in 1983 by five actresses, in the highly surveilled and censored panorama of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. González Chacón focuses on eight plays by women playwrights Marie Jones, Anne Devlin and Christina Reid, which she sees as literary expressions of postcolonial worries, variously dramatised in the guise of trauma, exile, or the search of the lost voice of the subaltern.

Adhering to a politically informed postcolonial agenda that views performance “as vindication and exploration of identitarian and cultural pluralities” (181), Rosana Herrero’s ‘Infantilising Staging of Postcolonial Adulthood: A Study of Tom Murphy’s *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant* and Sebastian Barry’s *Boss Grady’s Boys*’, offers a remarkably lucid analysis of modern Irish theatre, taking as guiding motif the nation-child equation, which serves as a metaphor of the prolonged childhood of the Irish State under De Valera. Herrero attends to formal and conceptual aspects, from the vignette-like dramatic structure that enables the integration on stage of peripheral discursive forms such as dreams, dance and story-telling, to the author’s concern to give voice to the dispossessed, forgotten in the so-called *Grand Narratives* of history.

Part five, ‘Postcolonial Ireland on Screen’, written by Rosa González Casademont and wholly devoted to postcolonial Ireland on screen, is an excellent contribution both for its comprehensiveness and its valuable discussion. Although the popularity of the cinema as one of the foremost expressions of popular culture remains uncontested, the crucial role of films in the construction of the Irish imaginary has received little attention, and remains notoriously under-theorised. However, as González Casademont points out, “meanings circulated in mainstream films are frequently dismissed as stereotypical and manufactured, nevertheless they enter into the discursive arena where issues of gender, identity and power relations are being contested and transformed” (208). This is fully substantiated in her exhaustively-documented discussion of the ways in which filmmaking in the Republic and Northern Ireland has engaged with, and negotiated, areas strongly inflected by the colonial encounter such as gender roles, rurality, Catholicism, political violence and the Gaelic language.

In conclusion, one must congratulate the editor on the overall high standard of the publication and on having brought to fruition her stated aim of enriching the ongoing critical debate in Irish studies with analyses that draw on the intersection between postcolonial and gender studies and that encompass the two geographic and political spaces that make up the isle. The fact that the volume is a multi-authored project inevitably leads to occasional reiteration, in particular in the authors’ vindication of the appropriateness of the postcolonial and feminist paradigms in their respective analyses. Still, the insights provided in the eleven essays are consistently original and well argued. *Postcolonial and Gender Perspectives in Irish Studies* bears witness to the thriving state of Irish Studies in Spain, and at the same time makes an outstanding contribution to this academic discipline.

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