SILESIAN STUDIES IN ANGLOPHONE CULTURES
AND LITERATURES 1

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Writing from the Margins of Europe

The Application of Postcolonial Theories to Selected Works by William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge and James Joyce

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Introduction

Background and Aims

In 1171, a fleet of ships under the command of King Henry II of England set sail for Ireland. Arriving in County Waterford, the Normans attempted to subdue the native kings, claiming the island for the English Crown (Dudley Edwards and Hourican 2005: 33–35). This invasion marks the onset of a complex, often fraught relationship between the two islands of Ireland and Britain, scarred by acts of economic exploitation and territorial encroachment which have led to a perception of Ireland as the first site of British colonisation.

Yet, if the relationship between both countries has been damaged by the belligerent incursions of the British, on the one hand, and Irish resentment at British domination, on the other, it has also been determined by the interaction of their two cultures. The task of forging appropriate representations of Irish identity given such a complex set of culturally-determined circumstances has invariably fallen to writers, who have consequently been charged with a certain degree of social responsibility in terms of addressing some of the traumatic events which have informed Ireland's history.

It is evident that the political and cultural dynamics which have influenced the relationship between Britain and Ireland have provided a central focus for much Irish writing. However, application of the term "postcolonial" to Irish literature has been met with a certain degree of critical dubiety. The implication that an ostensibly white, European literature may be analysed on the same terms as non-white, non-European writing has – at least until quite recently – provoked unease amongst certain postcolonial theorists and literary critics including Elleke Boehmer and co-writers of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. The British Imperialist project, it is argued, could not have been played out on the same scale or on the same terms over a territory with which, geographically and culturally, Britain already had so much in common. Moreover, the complexity of the relationship between the two countries – the long, convoluted history which had witnessed centuries of British intervention in Ireland – was markedly different from the relatively recent dealings of the British Empire in Asia and Africa. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have asserted in considering not only

Ireland, but also Scotland and Wales within this context: "While it is possible to argue that these societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial" (31–32).

In spite of the doubts expressed over the analysis of Irish literature and culture in terms of postcolonial theory, developments within the scope of that theory itself have taken a more inclusive direction. This has, at least in part, resulted from the observation that a denial of the plurality of postcolonial experience will ultimately lead to a prescriptive, limited theoretical framework which may well overlook the inherent differences of cultural specificity. Indeed, the extent to which theorists have come to reappraise the expression "postcolonial" in terms of its range of application is demonstrated by the most recent edition of *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) with its additional chapter, "Rethinking the Post-colonial":

> The attempt to define the post-colonial by putting barriers between those who may be called 'post-colonial' and the rest, contradicts the capacity of post-colonial theories to demonstrate the complexity of the operation of imperial discourse. We have suggested … that we need to ground the post-colonial in the 'fact' of colonial experience. But it is probably impossible to say absolutely where that experience and its effects begin or end. (200)

The imperialist project functioned according to an opposition which pitted coloniser against subaltern: dominant nation against subject state. Yet, it has been argued, this opposition could be adjusted in terms of the cultural and geographical alternatives it encountered. In fact, Ireland has increasingly come to be regarded as a test-zone for the strategies of subjugation which would later be applied in other areas of empire. Chapter Two, for example, considers the conceptualisation of the Irish as "Other" to the cultural "norm" which the English believed they alone supplied. In this respect, historically-determined perspectives of the Irish as savage, perverse or intellectually-inferior fed into nineteenth-century models of evolutionary hierarchy which provided imperialism with its self-proclaimed raison d'être: to bring civilisation to the less enlightened peoples of the world.

The criminalisation of indigenous cultural practices and the denial of political independence occurred in Ireland both during and even prior to the emergence of imperialistic ventures in other territories. The penal laws of the early eighteenth century, for example, legally enshrined the opposition between Anglo-Irish ascendency class and Catholic population which would set the tenor of relations between Britain and Ireland for the next two centuries[1]. The teaching and usage of Irish Gaelic was forbidden by the 1831 Education Act, while Dublin Castle became a symbol of British rule until the onset of independence in 1922.

Such features of colonial existence have their parallels in other areas of Empire where, for example, the English language became the tool of education (see Chapter Four), Protestant Missionaries established Anglican Churches in an attempt to oust indigenous forms of religious practice and local autonomy was suppressed[2]. As the Australian critic C. L. Innes observes; "The inclusion of Irish literature under the postcolonial remit takes account of changing perspectives which are to some extent revising the earlier frameworks for viewing postcolonial writing" (2007: 14). Thus analysis of such writing may explore the re-inscription of colonial discourse within given geographical and cultural contexts. It may also reveal the extent to which writers in different areas of empire influence one another in terms of the development of resistance to the discursive models of imperialism.

In view of the fact that such correlations can be drawn between Ireland and other societies colonised by the British, postcolonial theory appears to offer a relevant interpretive framework within which such power relations might be analysed. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), scholars working within this field have attempted to outline the discursive strategies which a dominant culture uses in maintaining its control over a subaltern people. Not all such critics have adopted the poststructuralist approach demonstrated by Said. Materialist critiques of colonial and postcolonial relations have been offered by theorists such as Benita Parry, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advocates the deconstruction of imperialist discourse alongside an awareness of the need for forms of political representation (see Chapter One). Such varying and occasionally conflicting approaches to the issue of colonial/subaltern relations offer considerable potential for analysis of British and Irish cultures given the complexity of their shared histories.

Postcolonial literary theory appears to offer a credible approach to analyses of Irish literature in view of this capacity for self-interrogation of its own intentions and methods. The debates and arguments which characterise this field of study – the contrast between materialist and deconstructive lines of critical inquiry, for example, and the insistent questioning of theory's relevance to cultural and political realities – ensures that it does not impose a monolithic narrative of postcolonial experience upon a particular society or culture. Instead, it attempts to comprehend the processes through which a subaltern community comes to terms with its own history and forges an awareness of its cultural identity. As the literary text is frequently regarded as a discursive entity in which political, cultural, social and aesthetic forms of representation may be given free reign, postcolonial analysis of Irish literature emerges as a feasible and even in some respects as an inevitable scholarly project.

It is this perception that postcolonial theory carries methodological relevance for criticism of Irish writing which has led to its use by certain Irish literary critics. Amongst the first to identify the influence of colonial politics upon literary production was Seamus Deane who, in his introduction to *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature* (1990), makes this point quite explicitly:

> Ireland is the only Western European country that has had both an early and a late colonial experience. Out of that, Ireland produced, in the first three decades of this century, a remarkable literature in which the attempt to overcome and replace the colonial experience by something other, something that would be "native" and yet not provincial, was a dynamic and central energy. (3)

Deane's assertion that socio-economic and political factors feed into the literature of Irish writers offered a new direction for analyses of Irish literature, notably in the case of Joyce, whose use of linguistic innovation could now be read as an act of political subversion: an appropriation of the language of the coloniser (see Chapter Four). Declan Kiberd has also made considerable use of postcolonial theory in his analyses of Irish literature, particularly in a major contribution to studies in this field: *Inventing Ireland – The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995). Relying upon theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Kiberd offers convincing readings of writers ranging from Maria Edgeworth to Samuel Beckett in an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which Hibernian and British identities were inter-relational in origin.

Taking a definitively political focus to his work, Joe Cleary, a former student of Edward Said, attempts to locate Irish cultural activity within the context of geo-political relations and argues for parallels between the partition of Ireland and that of other postcolonial territories, including India and Pakistan and Palestine and Israel. Cleary then offers readings of contemporary Irish literature in relation to this concept of a divided heritage in *Literature, Partition and the Nation State* (2002). Other Irish critics who have made use of postcolonial theory include Emer Nolan, who adapts the research of Indian scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty during her analysis of representation of Irish nationalism in *Ulysses* in "State of the Art: Joyce and Postcolonialism" (2000: 78–95). Certain British and American critics have also come to regard debates in the sphere of postcolonial theory as relevant to discussions of Irish literature. Among these, Terry Eagleton's text *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995) draws heavily on analyses of the power imbalance between the Anglo-Irish governing class and the Irish population, despite Eagleton's disavowal of postcolonial theory at an earlier stage in his scholarly career[3]. The American critic, Gregory Castle, has done a great deal to promote postcolonial readings of J. M. Synge's drama and prose works, particularly in his volume *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (2001).

Other scholars taking a similar approach to Irish literature include Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes in Britain, along with David Lloyd and Leonard Orr in the United States.

Building upon the work of critics of Irish literature and postcolonial scholars alike, **the main aim** of this research is to establish the extent to which postcolonial theory may be successfully applied to the works of W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and James Joyce. It is the author's contention that postcolonial interpretations of their texts will foreground their political and cultural preoccupations. With regard to this aim, it must be stated that critics such as the aforementioned Deane, Kiberd and Attridge have made substantial contributions in the field of Irish literary research through their use of postcolonial theory as an interpretive tool. This has particularly been the case with regard to James Joyce, although postcolonial readings of Synge and Yeats have also become more acceptable. *Writing from the Margins of Europe* aims to build upon such writer-focussed analyses. It remains at heart, however, a theory-oriented study which differs from previous critical enterprises in the sense that it is structured entirely in relation to theoretical concepts. In this way, it sets out to determine whether the application of postcolonial theory is appropriate to the literature of Yeats, Synge and Joyce, or whether, given the intellectual and philosophical currents which characterise twenty-first century thought, it is an anachronistic project.

This is not to suggest that any artist who touches upon the issue of colonial/subaltern relationships may be automatically labelled "postcolonial." Attempts to enlist Yeats, Synge or Joyce to a theoretical cause or project will prove limiting and ultimately futile. Each writer resists such forms of generalisation, be it through textual ambiguity, or through the circumstances of their own actions and attitudes which may prove irreconcilable with the critical expectations of much postcolonial scholarship. Such difficulties are, however, fundamental to the overall aim of this research, the intention of which is not to somehow manipulate its subject until it fits a prescribed theoretical formula but to apply theory to literature in a way that will ascertain its limits and usefulness in relation to the texts of Yeats, Synge and Joyce.

As **a supplementary aim**, a comparative study of Yeats, Synge and Joyce within the given theoretical context is offered, which traces points of textual consensus and divergence. To some extent, a critical line has been drawn between the project of the Celtic Revival – defined in terms of its engagement with an exclusively Gaelic cultural legacy – and the pluralistic vision of Irish history presented in Joyce's work. Thus, Yeats and Synge tend to be associated with the former, more nationalistic and essentialist vision of Irish identity. *Writing from*

the Margins of Europe explores the extent to which such a clear-cut division between Joyce and the work of his immediate literary predecessors is justifiable. In seeking to establish a correlation between political belief and textual production, it may be hypothesised that postcolonial theory is capable of revealing lines of continuity between these three writers, just as it can contribute to analyses of their differing approaches towards the issue of national identity and Anglo-Irish relations.

Why Yeats, Synge and Joyce?

The decision to focus on Yeats, Synge and Joyce is based solely on the literary focus shared by these three writers: Ireland. The transformation of political and cultural attitudes which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century in this country found expression in a veritable literary renaissance. Such aesthetic developments were, however, frequently compromised by a nationalist rhetoric which refused to interrogate its own political origins and attitudes, or its social responsibilities. In this respect, Yeats, Synge and Joyce appear at odds with the expectations of their peers as a result of their refusal to represent Ireland as blameless victim. Even Yeats, least compromising of all three writers on the question of cultural identity, expresses alarm at the political bias of certain contemporaries and interrogates his own public responsibilities as an artist. In reaction to the violence which had erupted in Dublin as a result of Queen Victoria's visit to the city in 1900, he writes:

> I read in the morning papers that many have been wounded; some two hundred heads have been dressed at the hospitals; an old woman killed by baton blows, or perhaps trampled under the feet of the crowds … I count the links in the chain of responsibility, run them across my fingers, and wonder if any link there is from my workshop. (1916: 277)

Evidently, Yeats was concerned that his work could serve as a catalyst for a nationalism so uncompromising that it would ultimately destabilise Irish society. Yet, the distrust of nationalist rhetoric demonstrated by Yeats, Synge and Joyce was equalled only by their resistance to the ideology of British imperialism. It would be a mistake to describe any of these writers as simply "anti-nationalist," for their work bears witness to an awareness of the suffering endured by a colonised society. In this respect, new lines of inquiry have been established by developments in literary interpretation, for as Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes maintain with regard to Joyce: "The critical practice of contrasting Joyce's tolerant, cosmopolitan

modernism with the narrow Irish nationalism he rejected is reaching the limits of its usefulness" (2000: 11). To read Joyce from a postcolonial perspective is to encounter a measured attack on the discursive foundations of imperialism. In particular, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, the linguistic pyrotechnics of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) may, in certain respects, pre-empt the appropriation of the English language which contemporary writers such as Salman Rushdie deem so important with respect to their own literary projects. The deliberate subversion of English – its relativisation within a textual framework spanning references to over seventy different cultures – denies it any privileges as a form of cultural signification. Furthermore, postcolonial analysis uproots Joycean characters such as Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom from their non-political roles as aesthete and flâneur respectively, relocating them within the politicised contexts of imperialism and nationalism. Thus Stephen's potential as artist of the future nation can be fully established and Bloom's cultural hybridity and outsider status acquire increased significance when regarded from the perspective of a colonised society (see Chapter Three).

Yeats, Synge and Joyce also functioned within a cosmopolitan artistic milieu which influenced their work. The experience of exile, be it self-imposed or politically enforced, has formed an important aspect of the work of many postcolonial poets and authors. Both Synge and Yeats sought artistic inspiration outside Ireland and, indeed, both met for the first time in Paris. As Andrew Gibson writes of Joyce, "the condition of exile encouraged an absorbed recollection of a particular locality in all its myriad detail" (2006: 64). Hence Yeats, Synge and Joyce all regarded the cultural distance provided by exile as necessary to their literary representations of Ireland. The issue of cultural displacement, so key to any discussion of postcolonial literary theory, is interconnected with forms of diasporic experience and exile: conditions in which these writers were immersed.

The preoccupation with Ireland, the rejection of ideology, the experience of exile; these are all significant areas of overlap in the personal and artistic lives of Yeats, Synge and Joyce. Yet their differences also render a comparative study feasible. Synge and Yeats, both Anglo-Irish writers were brought up in privileged Protestant households. Synge would eventually prove more critical of the nationalist sentiments evoked by the Celtic Revival movement but both he and Yeats produced drama for the Irish National Theatre. Joyce, born into a middle class Catholic family, was more scathing of the Celtic Revival, insistent upon forms of literary representation which continually challenged such homogenising expressions of culture. Such differences are reflected in the texts examined in the course of this book.

History, chronology and the postcolonial status of Yeats, Synge and Joyce

It is the residual elements of historical experience which give the lie to any clear division between the "pre" and the "post," colonisation and independence, a colonial and a postcolonial culture. Were this not the case, there would certainly be no grounds for treating the three writers upon whose work this study focuses as "postcolonial" in any sense. Yeats, Synge and Joyce had all created many of their most significant texts prior to 1922, the year upon which, it could be argued, Ireland began its journey into independence as a "Free State"[4]. J. M. Synge died in 1909, leaving behind a collection of plays which would radically challenge and alter the direction of Irish drama. *Ulysses* had already been written and was published in the same year as the signing of the Treaty which approved the creation of the Free State. Moreover, Yeats had published eight major collections of poetry along with various critical and dramaturgical works before the given watershed of 1922.

The incontrovertible fact of such a body of work having been published prior to the date most frequently cited as the onset of independence for Ireland would indicate that it can hardly be described as "postcolonial" given a literal reading of the term. Yet, history itself appears to offer a challenge to such a definition, which ultimately proves to be both temporally limited and polarising, as Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes have suggested:

> The term postcolonial in particular has generated a multitude of definitional difficulties and critiques. While it apparently begs to be defined temporally, efforts to characterize the relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial in terms of sequentially occurring historical periods rarely produce satisfactory results. If Ireland can be said to have been a British colony … when can colonialism in Ireland be said to have ended? With the treaty of 1921? The 1927 constitution? The 1949 repeal of the External Relations Act? The recent peace accord? Or some future final resolution? (2000: 5)

The difficulty with defining a culture as "postcolonial" is that no historical date can ever be claimed to offer a satisfactory or conclusive moment of transition. This is presumably the case in many states where the proclamation of independence may result in power vacuums, or struggles by various nationalist or neo-colonialist factions for control of government and economy. In the case of Ireland, the signing of the Treaty was immediately followed by a year of bitterly fought civil war over the acceptance of an Oath of Fidelity to the British Crown[5]. It was not until 1949 that the term "Free State" was replaced by "Republic." Moreover, while it is somewhat beyond the scope of this study, it could well be argued that the partition

of Ireland in 1922 left the North of the country a colonial outpost, at least until the 1998 Stormont Agreement, if not, to some degree, to the present time. As Joe Cleary has suggested, the "dualistic opposition" perceived in divided territories such as the Irish Republic/Northern Ireland is "directly inherited from the colonial era and then transposed into stereotypical state identities, and to this extent it represents one of the ways in which colonial stratifications and antagonisms survive into the present" (2002: 60).

Cleary parallels the historical basis for the division of Ireland and its traumatic consequences for contemporary residents of the province of Northern Ireland with the Western-sanctioned partitioning of Israel and Palestine in 1947[6]. In doing so, he provides an empirically-based model of the 'postcolonial' condition which does not deny the specificity of historical circumstances and therefore chimes with Stuart Hall's conception of the term: that states need not be "'postcolonial' *in the same way*, but this does not mean that they are not 'post-colonial' *in any way*" (in Chambers & Curti 1996: 246).

Since Cleary argues that the location of historical circumstances within a theoretical framework need not preclude their specificity, his research is of immediate relevance to the central hypotheses of *Writing from the Margins of Europe*. A comparison of cultural changes that have taken place following the announcement of independence in such diverse territories will bring to light attitudinal differences to nationalism, language and other forms of cultural expression. However, far from conflating such issues, the debates and tensions which underscore postcolonial cultural and literary theory demonstrate a tendency to resist generalisation. This is borne out in an emphasis on textual analysis which favours attention to the incongruous or irrational and to the narrations of subaltern experience which are otherwise ignored or repressed by the culturally dominant ideologies of imperialism or nationalism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests:

> Just as the "minor" in literature implies "a critique of narratives of identity" and refuses "to represent the attainment of autonomous subjectivity that is the ultimate aim of the major narrative," the "minor" in my use … functions to cast doubt on the "major." For me, it describes relationships to the past that the "rationality" of the historian's methods necessarily makes "minor" or "inferior," as something "nonrational" in the course of, and as a result of, its own operation. (2000: 101)

Chakrabarty re-examines the notion of a "minor" literature expounded by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The minor will always haunt the major, questioning the claims that are made for concepts of a cohesive, homogeneous national unity and the historical narratives upon which such claims are based. In fact, far from serving as a "catch-all" phrase which reduces all cultural experience to an

over-simplified series of oppositions between colonial and non-colonial territories, the idea of the postcolonial offers an interpretive tool which will reveal, rather than ignore, the existence of ambiguity, inconsistency or anomaly present in the literary output of writers such as Yeats, Synge and Joyce. Indeed, interpretation of their work within such a context provides a challenging test-ground for the key-concepts of postcolonial cultural theory, in terms of the potential scope and the range of their application.

The challenges posed by new developments in historical theory to narratives of progress and development, and the temporally-linear models upon which these are based, may also be considered from a more discrete, personal angle with regard to the writers themselves. In a discussion of Yeats's inclusion in debates pertaining to the sphere of postcolonial theory, Jahan Ramazani states that:

> The question of the threshold of postcoloniality bears as much on writers whose postcolonial status is unquestioned as on Yeats, such as V. S. Naipaul, (Trinidad), Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), or R. K. Narayan (India) who were publishing now established postcolonial works long before independence. To shift the criterion from political to cultural independence is unlikely to be helpful, since if "post" means being free from the colonizer's cultural marks and deposits, no anglophone writing is entirely *post*colonial. (2001: 23)

For Ramazani, the criteria according to which a writer or a text may be described as "postcolonial" is not dependent upon the privileging of any decisive historical or cultural milestone. This would entail a retreat into formulations of national identity structured around an inherently flawed division between colonisation and independence. Notions of cultural hybridity, or the deconstruction of nationalist or imperialist ideology and historical narrative, have been core to the thinking of many writers working in colonised societies. These complex, politically-sensitive issues could be overlooked or misinterpreted, given such a patently inadequate conception of the postcolonial condition.

Terminology

The current research project employs terminology which in certain cases may appear nebulous or imprecise unless defined appropriately. Such is the case with conceptualisation of imperialism or nationalism as *ideological* phenomena. This introduction will also define the use of *imperialism* and its relevance to formulations of British and English cultural identities. The term *subaltern* has acquired considerable significance in discussions concerning the power relations between