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The Distance of Irish Modernism: Memory, Narrative, Representation (2022) by John Greaney

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John Greaney's *The Distance of Irish Modernism: Memory, Narrative, Representation* explores a point of tension in Irish studies between modernist aesthetics and postcolonial historiography. Challenging the theoretical paradigms prevalent in contemporary Irish Studies, the book invites us to interrogate the meta-historical and political narratives that inform our reading of literary works by Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen, John McGahern, and Kate O'Brien.

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The Distance of Irish Modernism: Memory, Narrative, Representation by John Greaney is an ambitious meta-critical study keen to mark a discrepancy in the field of Irish modernism by challenging presumptions to do with how cultural memory and postcolonial historiography inform our reading of literary works. It bears the mark of a fresh scholarly perspective looking to extend critical parameters and to provide theoretical justification for its field of study.

Greaney's introduction very helpfully addresses the nomenclatural complexity of the term 'Irish modernism,' a term currently in fashion despite its prior characterization as oxymoronic. The mid twentieth-century institutionalization of modernist studies tended to preserve the same cosmopolitan biases as underpinned Ezra Pound's famous dismissal of Joyce's Irishness.¹ Later, with the postcolonial moment, this rigorous separation of the nation from experimental literature was significantly revised: once form was recognized as ideological and formal unevenness viewed as a means of political critique, modernism became a coherent expression of Ireland's semi-peripheral culture. Greaney pitches the prominence of the term *Irish* modernism today as a late flourishing of the Field Day orthodoxy formulated by Edward Said, Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson.² The problem it raises concerns the conflation of modernism with modernity and the ceding of literature to a version of history where the super-narrative of the (albeit fractured) Irish nation too often wins the day. Greaney's ambition, then, is vitally destructive. His is an attempt to reinstate the destructive element into the literary and to pay attention to the work that literary language does to distance itself from reductive social narratives.

Greaney is not alone in challenging the postcolonial paradigm in Irish Studies, of course, and I felt his brief introductory foray into World literature and transnational approaches to Irish texts might have been extended and integrated alongside his more familiar recall of Derrida and deconstruction. For instance, given the emphasis on distance in her works on Beckett and 'The Irish Paradigm,' Pascal Casanova's influential version of transnationalism might have been fruitfully engaged with in more detail. 'Beckett,' writes Greaney in chapter one, 'is a fitting exemplar of ... the radical potentialities of an Irish modernism which allows for its texts to be read as both relative and different to the historical realities they supposedly represent' (61). Here, Irishness becomes a question of spacing, a geographical and historical interval which has no simply positive expression. What is additionally interesting, though, is how this

¹ Ezra Pound, 'The Non-Existence of Ireland,' *Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce, with Pound's essays on Joyce*, Ed. F. Read (NY: New Directions, 1967): 32-33.

² I refer to the Field Day pamphlet republished as Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

view works alongside recent attempts to politicize Beckett. Greaney warns that the invitation of the political should not overwrite style, reticence and the untranslatable, and he restates Beckett's project as a fundamentally Flaubertian one. There is a very good reading of *Mercier and Camier*, via Jacques Rancière, which invokes the specter of ironic encyclopedism in *Bouvard and Pecuchet*.

The next chapter on Flann O'Brien builds on the work done on O'Brien and deconstruction by Maebh Long.³ Greaney focusses on the pseudonymous, the fragmentary and 'metaleptic play' in O'Brien/ O'Nolan/na gCopaleen's corpus. Again, he concentrates on how such devices resist or make impossible 'the representation of localizable extratextual origins' and he proposes an Irish modernism without Ireland (83). Instead of offering a close reading of one or more of O'Brien's works, this chapter offers a summation of O'Brien's singular, if unnamable, literary accomplishment. Chapter three on 'Elizabeth Bowen's modernist history' usefully takes the opposite approach, staying throughout with a single novel, *The Last September*. Here the challenge of complicating the novel's relationship to the metanarrative of Irish independence is also a provocation to a critical tradition. The originality of Greaney's intervention is especially evident in the second part of the book. In chapter four, he includes Kate O'Brien in the problematic of Irish modernism, not on the grounds of her Irishness but because of the self-conscious artificiality of her narrative strategies of omniscience. The disjunctive aspect of Kate O'Brien's work is raised and developed through readings of three novels *Mary Lavelle*, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Land of Spices*. O'Brien's queer narratology struck me as an exciting avenue of thought and might have merited more space than this single chapter allowed. The fifth and final chapter offers a compelling reading of John McGahern, concentrating on the pronominal and narratological devices of *The Dark* and *Memoir*. The social realist McGahern is seen for his modernist characteristics, and his place in the canon of postwar Irish literature is supplemented by consideration of his more distant literary inheritances.

Overall, this book is a plea for greater hermeneutic reflection in Irish Studies. Behind its main question of whether Ireland's dominant historiographical narrative of post-coloniality can be qualified by the aesthetic strategies of modernist fiction lies a more wide-ranging interrogation of institutional and disciplinary norms (14). In Irish Studies, context doesn't stink enough! And this is because there is too little interrogation of the way that Irish Studies on the one hand overestimates the value of literature, reading it again and again for its diagnostic ability to refer to and imaginatively fix what is wrong in modern Irish society, and on the other hand sublates the peculiar devices and

³ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

strategies of literature within a scholarly frame that has only one transdisciplinary outcome: History. If we have not yet awakened from the nightmare, it is because of how we read. I believe this book would have been even more impactful if it had developed its own theory of reading at the outset and provided a stronger assertion of its meta-critical intent. For instance, the author might have established how the disciplinary history of theory he invokes as a riposte to the default postcolonial approach to Irish literature itself has a complicated history. Everybody knows that ‘theory’ had its heyday in English Literature Departments in the 80s and 90s; and that in Irish Studies we had Seamus Deane. Yet Deane is only mentioned twice in this work, and both times in the notes. The Field Day legacy – Irish Studies’ great Enlightenment moment – its fallout, especially around the relative absence of women’s writing, and the legacy of Deane’s own ambivalent commitment to theory against the Burkean traditionalists, inheritors of great traditions, heroic gentlemen stylists and the like, would have been an especially instructive lead-in to the positions offered here. Greaney’s defense of theory is very different from Deane’s. In fact, his nods to Derrida, pointing further to a linguistic and hermeneutic tradition deriving from the German Romantics, have the capacity to make Deane’s binaries, especially those between tradition and modernity, seem caricatural. It is true that we no longer labour in the shadow of the *Field Day Anthology*; but there remains a litter of anthology texts and edited collections in Irish studies offering coverage rather than critique, and which seem to prefer extension and anecdote to disciplinary reflection. Might it be that the field lacks new arguments? In Greaney’s work, gratefully, we can see the foundation for one.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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