

THE CONTEMPORARY IRISH NOVEL

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The Contemporary Irish Novel

Critical Readings

Linden Peach

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For Angela, Hedley and Cynthia

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Preface

This book offers the reader a discussion of selected contemporary novels, the majority of which were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s that make or have made a significant contribution to the literature of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and to the development of the novel in English. (I have tried throughout to use 'Ireland' to refer to the Republic, rather than the island as a whole, and terms such as 'Irish literature' and the 'Irish novel' to refer to both the Republic and Northern Ireland.) Established writers who began publishing in the 1960s and the 1970s but have still produced distinctive and original work in the 1990s – William Trevor (*Felicia's Journey*), John Banville (*Birchwood*) and Brian Moore (*The Magician's Wife*) – are represented alongside some of the important figures that have emerged since the 1980s such as Dermot Bolger (*Emily's Shoes, Father's Music*), Roddy Doyle (*The Snapper, The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*), Emma Donoghue (*Stir-fry, Slammerkin*), Patrick McCabe (*The Butcher Boy*), Mary Morrissy (*Mother of Pearl*) and Robert McLiam Wilson (*Eureka Street*).

Up to a point, the selection of texts is intended to be representative – for example, in terms of style, gender, geography and religion – rather than definitive. It is intended to make a contribution to the wider, fast developing scholarship on Irish writing and, most importantly, contribute to the reader's on-going engagement with Irish literature and the novel generally. I hope that readers will take from this book some ideas that might be developed or might provoke thought and debate. The subjects raised by the discussion of the texts include the mother figure, parent-child relations, domestic violence, child abuse, self-harm, fetishism, modernity and postmodernity. Ostensibly different texts are read in relation to each other and recommended as a way of casting new light even on familiar novels. The selection is intended to reflect the richness and diversity of the contemporary Irish novel, ranging from urban realism, to modern or late modern gothic and speculative narrative.

The critical frameworks within which the novels are discussed are equally eclectic. I draw on work by key European

philosophers, cultural critics, psychoanalysts and linguistic theorists – such as Homi Bhabha, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva – as well as figures, such as the psychoanalyst Dusty Miller, who are less well known outside their discipline. Hopefully the reader will feel that their work has been selected as a starting point for criticism or as providing a framework within which to pursue particular lines of argument because it is relevant and appropriate to the novels under discussion. But the book has sought to avoid a rigid distinction between ‘literature’ and ‘theory’ in the belief that the novel, especially at its most philosophical and speculative, makes its own contribution to theoretical discussion. Directly or indirectly, the Irish novel may be seen as extending our understanding of some of the issues with which theorists such as Kristeva and postcolonial critics such as Bhabha are concerned. But how far European theory, even allowing for Ireland and Northern Ireland’s contribution to European letters and the former’s participation in European culture(s) and politics, is appropriate to the writing and culture of Ireland and Northern Ireland is kept in mind throughout. Moreover, not only is the diversity of Irish culture and writing stressed throughout the book but also the blurred boundaries between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the symbiotic cultural relationships between, for example, Britain and Northern Ireland and between Ireland and America. Many of the novels have been selected for the contribution they make in moving us beyond traditional representations of, for example, the urban and the rural and for enlarging our perspective of the conflicts and antagonisms within, and centred on, Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The first three chapters introduce some of the principal themes and perspectives that underpin the book. Chapter 1 argues that the contemporary Irish novel occupies an especially complex cultural and intellectual space where there is a strong sense of both continuity and disruption. This space is similar to that which one of our leading postcolonial critics, Homi Bhabha, identifies as the ‘in-between’ space or ‘timelag’ which those who have been previously marginalized or silenced enter before they find their new identities. It argues that the contemporary novel in Ireland and Northern Ireland, without eliding their different though interleaved histories and cultures, reflect how there are many groups of people who have found a voice that has been long

denied them. These groups, and many of the writers featured in this book, because they are giving a voice to what was once concealed or denied, find themselves in spaces that are not only new to them but also marked by uncertainty. The chapter asks, what has this done, is doing, to the wider national identity? It also asks, what has been the effect on Ireland, and in different ways, on Northern Ireland's perception of themselves as part of the late modern or postmodern world? These questions are addressed with reference to some important texts about Northern Ireland in Chapter 2. The focus of that chapter is the extent to which notions of 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' prove problematic when translated into the complexity of Northern Ireland and Ireland. Drawing on the French cultural philosopher Jean Baudrillard's ideas, it explores how some key texts engage with, and at the same time resist, postmodernity. 'Modernity' and 'postmodernity' are seen as concepts at once appropriate and inappropriate to Belfast.

Chapter 3 further develops Bhabha's concept of an 'in-between' space when applied to Ireland and Northern Ireland because, often, what has been previously marginalized or silenced in Irish history has also been shrouded with secrecy. Secrecy has been such a feature of Irish cultural life on a national, local and even domestic level that even Bhabha's vision of the nation state as marked in general by 'internal difference', most obviously applicable to Northern Ireland and Ireland, has to be refocused to take this into account. Moreover, it needs revisioning to acknowledge that in Ireland the previously inarticulate, or unarticulated, challenges our understanding of 'modern', especially in cultural contexts where narratives, too, habitually conceal as much as they reveal. Many of the texts discussed in this book involve protagonists who find themselves in an 'in-between' space, inevitably located between what Bhabha calls 'relocation' and 'reinscription'. The chapter introduces a framework in which to discuss the key protagonists in this respect, and what they are analogous of, provided by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. It argues that Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* helps us to understand the self-divided nature of a lot of the cultural discourse in contemporary Ireland and Northern Ireland. For the individual, *Nachträglichkeit* marks the failure of the normal processes of memory in which what is too painful to remember is concealed. The chapter explores ways in which this is analogous of how the

nation might discover its own protective shield of memorializing failing.

The three principal texts of Chapter 4 are linked in their preoccupation with 'mimicry' and its role, paradoxically, in both the maintenance and the secret subversion of authority. In each of these texts, these two principal preoccupations are closely inter-leaved because in each history is read through the interconnection of power, mimicry, authority and subversion. Again, the chapter draws on ideas from the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. But it is argued that, although Bhabha writes primarily with the colonial and postcolonial experience in mind, the relationship between power and mimicry enters more generally into contexts that are dependent upon the maintenance of dominant and subordinate relations. The texts in this chapter recognize, like Bhabha and the critic Edward Said upon whose work he draws, that mimicry is an ironic, secretive interface between the dominant authority, and its panoptical vision of identity and status, and the subordinate subject.

The first four chapters of the book argue for the significance for contemporary Irish fiction of Bhabha's ideas about what happens when the previously silenced or marginalized emerge from the margins. Chapter 5, focusing upon secret and forbidden desires in the work of some interesting women writers, explores how this is particularly relevant to work by women writers which demonstrate the truth of his thesis that previously marginalized voices confront and contradict the dominant discourses that have been directly or indirectly responsible for their silence and marginalization. Bhabha's arguments prompt us to examine the consequences for the Irish novel of it occupying an in-between space from where it questions not only the discourses but also the frames of reference that they employ.

Chapter 6 is a development from the previous chapter in that its texts deal with themes that have not been the subject of serious fiction in Ireland and Northern Ireland previously: self-harm and shoe fetishism. They explore activities which are linked in different ways to maintaining a kind of emotional control and which are shrouded with secrecy. Each of these novels also examines the subject of absence, and, what might be called, the fetishization of absence.

The two novels discussed in Chapter 7 develop the way in which women's writing, in emerging from the margins, confront

and contradict the discourses that have sought to silence them. The subject of this chapter, though, is how the female and the maternal body have been idealized but also rendered abject in western culture. The extent to which female desire is not only located within metaphor but determined and confined by the available discourses in which it is, and can be, articulated is pursued in relation to what has been described by some critics as a 'new realist' or 'dirty realist' novel and to a text, indebted to Susan Sontag's thinking about metaphor, which ultimately rereads the representation of women from the Bible, and revisions some of the concepts of the Virgin Mary, from feminist perspectives.

Chapter 8 examines novels concerned with violence to women – domestic violence, the murder of a woman who is also a mother by a disturbed child, and a serial killer's pursuit of a young woman who becomes an agent in bringing about his suicide. At one level, in giving a voice to previously concealed or half-admitted subjects, these novels, between them, present a critique of contemporary Ireland and Northern Ireland; of post-industrial society in Britain as much as Ireland; and of Americanization and globalization. However, the chapter also discusses how there is an element in these novels which both attracts and repels the reader, especially in the exposition of sexually related violence. In other words, these texts situate the reader in an in-between position, uncertain, for a while at least, of what to make of them. This aspect of our reading experience is anchored not only in the subject matter of these books, but also in their interest in pushing these kind of subjects to the limit. This is explored with reference to ideas provided by the French cultural historian Michel Foucault.

Although the two novels discussed in Chapter 9 explore, in their different ways, the return of what has been shrouded in secrecy or suppressed, what separates their engagement with *Nachträglichkeit*, the Freudian concept introduced in Chapter 3, is their emphasis upon examining the possibility of transcendence. While many of the novels that we have looked at so far involve the movement out of silence, the first of the novels examined here moves into, and redefines, silence as an important stage in bringing a female voice and consciousness out of the silence to which they have been confined by patriarchal discourses and cultural practices. Many of the texts discussed up to this final chapter,

too, have explored the possibility of moving out of an in-between location, as well as examining what it means to occupy such a physical or temporal space within different specific political and historical contexts. The other text discussed here enters a philosophical space that is in-between conventional representations of good and evil and temporal spaces that are outside of linear, and even cyclical, notions of time. Both novels share a rediscovery of the feminine and what is associated with the maternal and the female body.

Acknowledgements

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