

Subaltern Ethics in Contemporary Scottish and Irish Literature: Tracing Counter-Histories

Stefanie Lehner

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The applicability of postcolonial approaches to Ireland and Scotland as long-standing victims of English “internal colonialism” in the British Isles has been discussed since at least the 1980s. Despite continuing controversies, postcolonialism has now been part of the mainstream in Irish Studies for quite some time. Scottish postcolonial studies has developed much more slowly, but is currently also experiencing a boom phase. To some extent, Stefanie Lehner’s *Subaltern Ethics in Contemporary Scottish and Irish Literature: Tracing Counter-Histories* is part of this trend. She expressly acknowledges postcolonialism as a strong influence on her own approach, but also criticises dominant strands of postcolonialism for focusing too exclusively on national or cultural binarisms (coloniser versus colonised, Ireland/Scotland versus England, etcetera), and national or cultural marginalisation and emancipation, while neglecting other factors like class or gender which significantly complicate the landscape of social identities, marginalisations and emancipatory needs. Assumptions of national(ist) unity and progress often overlook, and even directly oppose, the concerns of people who are marginalised on non-national grounds (e.g. women or the lower classes). Lehner aims to offer a corrective by relying heavily on approaches privileged/propounded by subaltern studies based on the writings of Antonio Gramsci and on subsequent work by the Subaltern Studies Collective. This collective, founded by postcolonial South Asian scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak in the 1980s, criticised the way in which the historiography and politics of the post-colonial nation state marginalised the concerns (and agency) of women and the lower classes. According to Lehner, this critique is applicable to Irish and Scottish contexts.

She also criticises postmodern and post-national approaches that celebrate pluralism and inclusiveness while neglecting continuing conflicts and power imbalances, prematurely deconstruct subject positions before these are even possessed by the margins (where strategic essentialism may be required), and appropriate all difference for their own totalising theoretical purposes. Lehner aims to develop an ethical approach to literary criticism that is sensitive to multiple power imbalances and multiple forms of resistance. Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics are a major reference point, but Lehner is more positive about the ethical potential of art and aesthetics, for instance as a space for expressing and negotiating

important social concerns, including those of the marginalised who are often silenced elsewhere. She also highlights the potential of art to trigger political responses. Moreover, she inflects Levinas' ideas with a feminist perspective, and adapts his ethics to achieve what she feels would be a more equitable and reciprocal relationship with the Other. Her approach is further informed by Theodor Adorno's and Jacques Rancière's political aesthetics, and by materialist dialectics. Subaltern ethics is posited as an approach for committed criticism capable of "mapping individual experiences of disempowerment and oppression onto the network of power structures that constitute a social whole" (22). For Lehner, the merits of postcolonialism lie in a comparative perspective that recognises the specificity of geographical, cultural and historical frameworks, but also enables us to go beyond that and critically address these local circumstances as manifestations of the more general problems created by global capitalism.

In line with this theoretical framework, Lehner offers close readings of two short stories and nine novels from Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic which criticise not only English hegemony over their own nations, but also (and especially) internal power imbalances within their respective countries—imbalances which are based on class and gender. This critique is reflected in both the form and the content of these texts. The "Introduction" and Chapter 1 outline the book's theoretical and methodological frameworks. Chapter 2 continues this theoretical groundwork and offers the first literary case studies: the short stories "Naval History" by James Kelman (1991) and "The Dreamed" by Robert McLiam Wilson (2003). These illustrate the need for counter-histories that reflect subaltern perspectives which are often ignored by mainstream discourses of post-colonial nations (and by colonial discourses before them). They also question the optimism that constructs post-colonial nation-states (or the partial statehood attained through devolution) as a cure for all social evils.

The subsequent chapters focus on novels. Chapter 3 continues to explore problems of history and to deconstruct optimistic notions of national/post-colonial/capitalist progress, this time with regard to Kelman's *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2005) and Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* (1995), which focus on Scottish (diasporic) and (southern) Irish protagonists. Chapter 4 (a slightly revised reprint of an article first published in the *Irish Studies Review* in 2007) explores the fictionalisation of recent Northern Irish history, and the role of historical archives, memory, falsifications, uncertainties and amnesias in the ideological climate of the Peace Process, through Glenn Patterson's *That Which Was* and Eoin McNamee's *The Ultras* (both 2004).

Chapters 5 and 6 are primarily concerned with gender issues. Chapter 5 discusses the "effects that the traditional gendering of the national imagination [...] has for women" (28) and shows how Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991), and Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) engage in an "un-remembering" or "re-

remembering” (121) of history by uncovering “traumatic herstories” of female oppression. There is also a reclamation of female agency. Chapter 6, which focuses on Alasdair Gray’s *1982 Janine* (1984) and McCabe’s *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), explores the feminisation of male characters as images of the nation, its oppression and redemption. While this partially deconstructs traditional gender categories, it also to some extent reaffirms them by reducing the experiences and concerns of actual women to mere metaphorical abstractions which are instrumentalised for masculine-dominated national(ist) interests.

This is a highly useful study in many respects. The literary examples are well chosen; and the close readings are eminently persuasive and splendidly connected amongst each other. The comparative approach is also convincing: as Ireland has long been a major reference point for Scottish cultural and political nationalism, as well as for Scottish postcolonial criticism, Lehner’s own interconnection of Scottish and Irish case studies is sensible. Moreover, in comparison to much earlier work in postcolonial Irish and (especially) Scottish studies, Lehner’s book is more theoretically informed, referring to a greater range of international postcolonial theorists and showing a less monolithic, more nuanced understanding of the field. Her additional use of various other fields of theory (poststructuralism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, the Frankfurt School, feminism, ethical philosophy) may suggest a danger of over-theorisation, but in fact, this study is remarkably reader-friendly and very lucid even in the most theoretical sections.

Occasionally, however, there is an over-indulgence in neologisms and theoretically loaded spelling changes, as in “imagiNation,” “aesthEthics” and the by now rather familiar “herstories,” but also in the more arcane concoctions of “arkhe-taintment” (which plays on the Greek etymology of the word ‘archive’ as both ‘commandment’ and ‘commencement’, as well as on notions of ‘tainting’ and ‘containing’ the archive) and “sinathion” (Lehner, alluding to a Lacanian coinage, states that “if [...] *sination* would refer to the status of ‘woman’ as symptom of the nation or imagiNation, the [...] ‘h’ (for *homme*) is [...] intended to point to a [...] *masculine* imagiNation,” 194 f). This can, at times, be stylistically unwieldy; moreover, the self-indulgence of clever wordplay can distract from the substance of an argument. It may also be debatable whether the more common theoretical practice of playing with pre- and suffixes is not already sufficient, and whether it is really desirable to take this one step further by an (etymologically *completely* unwarranted) insertion of single letters into random places. Whereas the implications of pre- and suffixes are usually still evident on their own, single-letter insertions like Lehner’s “h” seem a little too weak to carry the conceptual and semantic load she wishes to convey. As a result, her neologism is entirely unintelligible without explanatory paraphrases, and thus appears rather clumsy.

Moreover, while subaltern approaches like Lehner’s, and an increased attention to non-national parameters like class and gender, should indeed be seen as an indispensable part of postcolonial studies in Scotland, Ireland and elsewhere, other postcolonial approaches

which focus on national and cultural forms of marginalisation and emancipation also have a continuing legitimacy and should not be entirely discarded. Thus, Lehner's critique of these approaches arguably goes somewhat too far. While it is important to highlight internal differences and conflicts within cultural and national collectives, and potential collisions between different emancipatory agendas (e.g. national and feminist ones), there are contexts where national/cultural postcolonialism nonetheless does have emancipatory potential. For instance, postcolonial critiques of cultural marginalisation can also be applied to intra-national margins within the post-colonial Irish and Scottish polities, namely with regard to ethnic and linguistic minorities, whether traditional Gaelic ones or more recent (e.g. South Asian diasporic) ones created by immigration. Given her interest in intra-national differences and subalternity, it is somewhat surprising that Lehner concentrates so exclusively on class and gender, while cultural and linguistic minorities are almost completely excluded from view, except for a few very brief and unspecific asides about "ethnic discrimination" and "ethnicity" (5 f). Moreover, the indeed very real danger that postcolonial national(ist) agendas might neglect the concerns of intra-national (cultural, class-based or gender-based) margins does not automatically mean that the 'colonial' system serves these interests any better. Although Lehner recognises this herself, a privileging of class over nation may also be instrumentalised to justify a ('colonial'?) unionist agenda, as has arguably repeatedly happened in Scotland with regard to the unionist agenda of the Labour Party (although the latter has not necessarily delivered satisfactorily on class issues either).

Despite these minor points of criticism, Lehner's study is, all in all, a highly useful, stimulating and convincing contribution to Scottish and Irish postcolonial studies. It is recommended as an important reference point for both students and researchers in these highly dynamic fields.