

# *Deconstructing the Question of Irish Identity*

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**Eugene O'Brien. *The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*. Lewiston New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001. pp. 281. ISBN: 0-7734-8237-7**

This book interrogates Irish literature written in English, refracted through the lens of postmodern theory. The application of the ideas of Derrida, Lacan, Levinas, and others to Irish literature is not new, but it is a branch of criticism which is still in its infancy. The use of theory divides critics sharply. More traditional critics see theory as an unnecessary intrusion on literary scholarship, while younger critics dismiss the older as liberal humanists, unable to come to terms with radical ideas. Irish scholarship is complicated further by the incursion of politics at almost every level of both literary output and critical comment. O'Brien's book will prove, I think, an interesting addition to the debate, and to the field of Irish studies. His status as unreconstructed, indeed, enthusiastic, postmodern theorist will irritate as many as it will impress, but this is, when all is said and done, an impressive first book.

*The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce* is a cumbersome but accurate title. The book is at least as much about notions and definitions of national identity as it is about Yeats or Joyce. In fact, 122 of its 251 pages of main text are concerned with the means by which national identity in general, and Irish identity in particular, is constructed. Having spent the initial two chapters exploring these constructs, O'Brien's central thesis is that the constructs are, if not deconstructed, then certainly problematised in the writings of Yeats and Joyce. To further this end, O'Brien employs a variety of theoretical perspectives.

One of the principal deconstructions of the book is of the fixed idea of nationalism. The importance of this cannot be overestimated in the field of Irish Studies, and, perhaps, for conflict studies in general. By challenging the idea of a fixed, immutable centre, by demonstrating the instability of such sacral national touchstones, the absurd contradictions, and elisions at the heart of all nationalism become exposed.

The first section of the Introduction is entitled 'Negative Identity: Adorno, Levinas, Derrida'. In this he begins, not with any of his theorists, but with Shakespeare's

line, spoken by the Irish captain M from *Henry V*: ‘what ish my nation?’ (O’Brien: 1). Using this oft-quoted question as his beginning, O’Brien proposes a theory of negative identity for the Irish, following Adorno. This in itself is not a new idea. The notion that the uneasy and often violent relationship of Ireland with neighbouring Britain was a crucial factor in solidifying notions of Irishness has emerged before, it was recently reiterated by Declan Kiberd. What O’Brien does, and I think this one of the most important contributions to the debate, is that he gives the definition a theoretical framework, reaching out to continental thinkers in a manner that avoids the Irish-not-British-not-Irish loop. In the Introduction, O’Brien establishes his ‘two vectoral imperatives at work in the process of defining national identity’ (6). These are the centripetal and centrifugal vectors. These he carefully and minutely defines in a densely argued Chapter One. Beginning with the Greek ‘kentron,’ meaning ‘goad’ or ‘spike’ (34), he illustrates how, in the centripetal vector, the centre defines the circumference. In this model of nationalism, one is continually looking inwards towards a fixed, identifiable, and unchanging core of national characteristics. Balanced against this is the meson, the midpoint of a Greek shield, where the weight was equally balanced. This, O’Brien maintains, is a circle which is defined by its circumference, in opposition to the mathematical model, which defines the circumference by the position of the centre (42). These diametrically opposed versions of the relationship between the midpoint and the circumference become for O’Brien images of the different models of nationalism. The first, which he refers to as the centripetal vector, is the model which, in Derridean terms is logocentric (37). It focuses inward to a ‘predefined central *locus* which is itself beyond the play of...time, place, social class, or historical situatedness’ (37). Taking his impetus from Derrida, Lacan, and Adorno, O’Brien calls the opposing vector ‘centrifugal’. Here, the centre is not an invariant core, but a point in a set of relations, any of which may change, with the consequent change of relations with all the others. In other words, new centres of national identity arise in response to changing social, political, and historical forces. Applied to Irish history, these become an essentialist and a theoretical reading, respectively. The essentialist reading would see Irish history in traditional terms, as largely the history of the struggle to repel the invader, the ‘hated Saxon foe’, to coin a phrase. A theoretical reading recognises the alterities of history. The original invaders were Norman, or as O’Brien puts it: ‘variously called English, Normans, Anglo-Normans, Cambro-Normans, Anglo-French, Anglo-Continental, Saxons, Flemings, Men of Saint David’s [*sic*], Men of Llanduff’ (47). Each of these titles places a different emphasis on the essentials of Irish history, questioning the received core.

The attempt to define Ireland negatively is pursued in the third section of Chapter One, ‘Tara to Holyhead: The Centrifugal Vector’. According to Joyce, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ‘the shortest way to Tara was *via* Holyhead’. Stephen is, in O’Brien’s reading, leaving Ireland, not because he wants to eschew Irishness, but because Holyhead as a *locus* gives room for alterity, beyond the centripetal, hypostatized view

of ur-nationalists. O'Brien neatly connects the political points he has been making with the literary investigation he is about to undertake, by reference to Bakhtin's comment in *The Dialogic Imagination* that language also has centripetal and ineluctable centrifugal forces. In Bakhtin's words: '[a]longside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work...the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward' (Bakhtin, in O'Brien: 53). In the remainder of the section, O'Brien applies Bakhtin's model in terms of Derrida's concept of *ontologie/hauntologie*, a pun which works better in French than it does in English. Briefly, Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, claims that all discussions of *ontology* are fundamentally affected by traces, differences, other discussions, and the interference of the past; in other words, by alterity. He calls this a haunting, and coined the neologism *hauntologie* to encompass the pressures on discourse occasioned by culture, context, slippage of meaning and the structure of the language itself. O'Brien very adroitly applies the Derridean concepts to the writings of P.H. Pearse. Pearse, in a pamphlet entitled *Ghosts* (quoted in the aptly names *Ancestral Voices* by Conor Cruise O'Brien), makes the point that the only way to appease a ghost is to do what it asks of you. In Pearse's case, he felt that the ghosts of the earlier Irish nationalists had enjoined him to rebellion. Pearse concludes that the ghosts will take 'a little laying' (O'Brien: 54). Throughout O'Brien's book, hauntology returns as a central concept, underlying his thesis on the presence of alterity in the works of Yeats and Joyce.

He summarises his political and historical stance in the fourth and final section of Chapter One, 'Defenders and United Irishmen: Two Views of Irish Identity'. He characterises the centripetal vector of Irishness from the section in *Chapter Five of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which John Alphonse Mulrennan encounters the old man in the west of Ireland, and the centrifugal vector in a quotation from the United Irishman newspaper *The Northern Star*. He politicises the centripetal vector further by quoting Padraic O'Conaire and Peadar O'Laoighre, both authors who wrote in Irish, the latter a priest, who expressed a desire that Ireland might have a wall built around it to exclude foreign influence. Although O'Brien does not say it, this aspiration was also expressed in a speech in 1928 by Eamonn De Valera, the man who, less than a decade later, framed the Irish constitution, and spent a considerable amount of time and energy trying to keep the infant nation safe from English 'contamination'.

The vector represented by the United Irishmen, on the other hand, is one which not only accepts, but was founded on, alterity, in its embracing of American and European revolutionary ideals. O'Brien traces the historical process by which the centrifugally oriented United Irishmen were absorbed into the *mythos* of the fundamentalist nationalists.

I realise that I have dwelt at some length on the first chapter, but it is the key to the whole book, particularly it is the key to the book's classification, which will pose a problem for librarians. The main Library of Congress catalogue data lists it as 'English Literature – Irish authors – History and criticism'. It lists also sub-categories such as literature and society, Irish national characteristics, Yeats, and Joyce. The first chapter

dwells at some length on these topics, but it is also a work of sociology, of philosophy, of historiography, of poststructuralist literary and social theory, of sociolinguistics. The opening chapter contains all of these elements, in almost equal measure. Classification of the book has escaped the present reviewer, but it would be interesting to note if a consensus emerges among university librarians.

Chapter Two concerns language, and to language is applied the same deconstructive apparatus as was applied to history in Chapter One. In O'Brien's own words: 'what is being argued is that...linguistic signifiers of identity can, and do, change over a period of history, but very often, the essentialist *Weltanschauung* refuses to acknowledge these changes, and the result can be the ossification of certain cultural stereotypes' (88). The chapter opens with the politicisation of the Irish language. That the language was politicised at an early point in its development is not in dispute. Even as far back as the Statutes of Kilkenny, the injunctions on native Irish speakers drove a rift between the language and the centres of power. In return, Irish poetry in particular became deeply political. The example O'Brien quotes, from Geoffrey Keating complicates the issue more than the main text admits (89):

Milis an teanga an Ghaedhealg  
Guth gan chabhair choigcríche  
(So sweet a language is Irish,  
a voice untainted by foreign aid)

The quotation and the translation are taken from Joep Leerson's *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork University Press/Field Day, 1996). The translation is, of course, politically skewed. The source of the translation is not immediately apparent from Leerson's critical apparatus, and I assume it is his own, assisted by Máirín Ní Dhonchadha. O'Brien notes in an endnote that the word 'untainted' appears not at all in the Irish version. A literal translation might run: 'A sweet tongue is Irish/A voice without foreign help', which is seriously altered by the translation. Whereas he acknowledges that this is another layer in the politicisation of the Irish language, O'Brien does not pursue the issue in true Derridean fashion – to deconstruct his own discourse even as he is discoursing upon it. The fact that the English language has been used to politicise the Irish poem is a point he does not pursue. While acknowledging that it is not the main thrust of his thesis, it would have been more satisfactory for a reader had he paused to consider what it represents. In this case, it appears that translation from Irish into English is an attempt to introduce an essentialist element not present in the original verse, an attempt to circumvent the drift towards alterity represented by translation.

The Irish Revival, considered in the second section of Chapter Two, is characterised as a centripetal revival. O'Brien is careful to distinguish between the Irish Revival as a *portmanteau* term, and the Gaelic, Celtic and literary revivals of which it was composed. He uses the revivals to interrogate the contested ground of Irishness,

seen by some as necessarily Gaelic-speaking and Catholic, while others, such as Douglas Hyde, himself a Protestant, sought to find a niche within the definition for his tradition, while still excluding other (specifically, Northern) Protestants. O'Brien unearths many examples of ur-Irish prejudice and delusion, a fair example of which is Peadar Ua Laoighre's contention that: '[t]here is enmity between the Irish language and infidelity... If Irish is inside, infidelity must remain outside' (103). Although these kinds of belief were extant in the more trenchant of Irish *chauvinistes* until very recently, they do belong to the outer fringes of the revivalist movement. There were, and are, many balanced and dedicated adherents of the Irish language to whom the above statement would appear merely ridiculous, if not embarrassing. The anti-English sentiment which forms part of the same centripetal belief-structure is scrutinised, and it is at this stage in the book that we realise why O'Brien began with the quote from *Henry V*: the idea of language and nation defined in relation to the other is very strong in this section. If I have a complaint, it is that there are rather too many examples, and some judicious pruning of the quotations, delicious though they may be, would result in a more focused section.

The Third section of Chapter Two begins an exploration of the redefinition of both Irishness and Irish literature, and leads into the final two chapters. Using Derrida's *hauntology*, O'Brien examines a passage from Padraic Pearse in which he criticises Yeats as 'a poet of the third or fourth rank', but thinks, because of Yeats' proposal of an Irish literary theatre in English, that he deserves to be 'crushed' (109-10). By proposing a specifically 'Irish' literature in the English language, Yeats was, according to O'Brien, changing the centre to a *zentrum*, progressing from a model where the centre defines the circumference, to the model where the circumference continually shifts and modifies the centre. This version of the revival was, according to O'Brien, a redefinition of the parameters of Irish culture. The Irishness of Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory and others would be immensely different from that of Pearse and An t-Athair Peadar. It would, through its acceptance of the English language, be haunted by alterities which, even as it wrote of Irish themes and translated Irish sagas and myths, spoke in and of a language beyond Gaeldom.

Towards the end of the chapter, O'Brien introduces, from the writings of Levinas, the term 'ethics', which Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, defined as a questioning brought about by the presence of the Other. In the sense in which it is used by O'Brien, it is very close to 'hauntology', but with the semantic advantage of connection with the logic of moral discourse. It is this ethical aspect of the voice of Yeats which he explores in Chapter Three.

For O'Brien, translation from Irish to English is an ethical act, in that it presupposes the presence of the Other, in this case the other tradition existing on the island. In this sense, translation from Irish to English is subversive of the centripetal vectoring of Pearse and the Gaelic revivalists. According to O'Brien 'it destabilizes the essentialist concept of selfhood that was underwriting the Irish-Ireland outlook, and instead introduces a role for alterity'. It is probably for this reason that he subtitles the

third chapter 'Voices of Myth – Voices of Critique', and concentrates on Yeats' version of Irish sagas.

O'Brien makes the very interesting point that critics have tended to dismiss Yeats' early Celtic twilight writing as inauthentic. He cites Harold Bloom who accused Yeats of working from 'a version of a version' in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, producing only English romantic verse with an Irish flavour. What they failed to notice, according to O'Brien, is the transitional nature of the work. Yeats was attempting to inscribe his English-speaking tradition in Irish folklore, and vice-versa. From this point of view, the 'version of a version' decried by Bloom becomes a necessary part of the centrifugal vectoring of Irish culture, the haunting of Celticism by the English language, and, by definition, an act which embraces alterity. This gives one a strong impetus to re-read Yeats' early Celtic poems by a newly politicised light.

In relation to the early poems, O'Brien takes as an example *The Ballad of Moll Magee*. He sees in this a development and an inversion of the political *Aisling*, in which the old woman is not representative of the heroic Gael, but tells a squalid story in which she accidentally smothers her baby, and becomes unhinged as a result. The poem is, as he says: 'a powerful deconstruction of the glib trope of Ireland-as-mother, demanding the sacrifice of her children...' (148). One might also make the connection between Moll Magee and Joyce's 'old sow that eats her farrow', referred to later in the book. O'Brien may go too far in his attempts to rescue the poems, taking issue, if obliquely, with John Unterecker's comment that the poems were not very good in themselves. It is perhaps enough to have placed them in the continuum of Yeats's political development. They do not need to be good poetry. *Moll Magee*, I would contend, is sentimentalised, despite the reality of the horror of death which inheres in it. Likewise the rhythm is gauche, causing stresses to fall awkwardly in the second line. This is a feature of the folk ballad, but is evidence here that Yeats had not yet achieved mastery in his craft. This is a small criticism, but evidence of O'Brien's occasional over-enthusiasm, to which I will return at the end of the review.

The second section of Chapter Three turns on the interpretation of the short poem *A Coat*. O'Brien discusses various interpretations, and finally offers his own, which is very much in line with the interpretation he has taken of the other poems. He sees it a Yeats' dissatisfaction with the narrow interpretation of Celtic mythology, and a declaration of ethical openness. O'Brien sees the end of the poem as Yeats' assertion that he will be open to alterities. Whereas he does not disown the coat at any stage, he appears to have outgrown it, in a sense.

'Cuchulain discomfited' is the title of the final section of Chapter Three. The relationship between Yeats and Cuchulain is a complex one, because he is both the adaptor of the myth, and the artist who gave it impetus for the Irish revival. O'Brien builds the section around a reading of *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea*, and its relationship with the models of Irishness that he has been espousing since the opening chapter. He identifies the parthenogenetic relationship between Emer, the mother and her, son, the Freudian overtones of parricide and phallic mother, the violence and unheroic behaviour

that are at the core of the poem, and the use of language as a tool for control. He makes again, a seminal point that the poem is, in its vision of the Celtic twilight, far from the golden age envisaged by some. Adroitly connecting the poem with the political subjects of the earlier chapters, O'Brien then examines the influence of the Cuchulain myth on Pearse, and the different uses which the two men made of the same myth. Pearse saw in Cuchulain a Celtic Christ, ready to sacrifice himself for his people. Yeats' picture was more complex, and drew on the European mythological and psychological traditions. If I have a quibble with the section, it is that, in his haste to see the details in the political landscape, many of the details of the poem are lost. O'Brien notes how Emer smites the messenger with a 'raddled' fist, but neglects to tell us that raddle is a red dye, so that, even at the opening of the poem, Emer's hands are steeped in red, as in blood. Given that the emblem of Ulster, where the Ulidian cycle is set, is a red hand, there are political implications in this also, but ones not pursued by this book.

The final chapter deals with Joyce. Joyce's uneasy relationship with Ireland has been documented *ad nauseam* by both scholars and students, and it is difficult to find anything new to say about it. It is one of the strengths of O'Brien's book that his theoretical approach has allowed him to deal with basically the same pieces of text in a fresh way. He begins, not with Davin, Mulrennan, or the paedophagous sow, but with the first story in *Dubliners*, *The Sisters*. He compares the originally published first paragraph with the revised one which appeared in book form. O'Brien begins by asserting, somewhat tendentiously, that the changes in the first paragraph of *The Sisters* are:

proleptic of the linguistic difficulties of *Finnegans Wake*, and point towards that work in terms of a reading practice and method. They also point to his notion of a theory of Irishness that parallels Derrida's notion of the *hauntological*, Adorno's immanent and transcendent dialectical cultural critique, and the oscillation between the centripetal and centrifugal that has been part of this book's interrogation of differing notions of Irish identity (185).

It seems like a great deal to extrapolate from some paragraph revisions. The argument which follows is, however, ingenious. Picking the word '*gnomon*' from *The Sisters*, and the words '*epicleti*' and '*hemiplegia*' from a letter Joyce wrote about *Dubliners*, O'Brien constructs a teleological syntagmatic chain, in which the Irish subjects of Joyce's work is haunted both by the English language, and by the spectre of foreignness inherent in Joyce's mature work. The theory thus developed, and it is developed in detail, presents a coherent overview of Joyce and Irishness, which is both refreshingly new and satisfyingly complex. A complaint, however, analogous to the manner in which Yeats's works are treated, is that the three touchstone words which begin the divinations appear to have been chosen at random, rather in the manner of a mathematician solving a problem in the real world by using the square root of minus one. Once inside the calculation, it is both utilitarian and elegant, but it is nonetheless an imaginary value.

O'Brien's words are plucked from the huge *corpus* of Joycean writings, and used, persuasively, and, indeed, elegantly to build a theory more solid than its imaginative foundations.

It would be impossible to approach Joyce's vision of Irishness without visiting the famous quotation from Chapter Five of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'When the soul of man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets' (Joyce 1993: 177; O'Brien 207). It is used here as a means of exploring Joyce's overt references to Irishness, and his complex relationship with the country and its people. This section collects a deal of the oft-quoted pieces from the canon, and, while workmanlike, is probably the least original section of the book. It is followed by a section entitled *Emigration as trope*, which leads, by *commodious vicus of recirculation*, to the final section of the main text, entitled *Patrick W. Shakespeare*. This section explores the alterity inherent in Joyce's writing, taking the *Cyclops* episode of *Ulysses* as its starting point. O'Brien's contention is that, in his list of 'Irish' heroes, Joyce posits alterity in the midst of sameness. O'Brien points out that the list of heroes is analogous to the genealogical tables in Genesis or the lists of warriors in the *Iliad*. These lists also occur in Irish literature; one thinks immediately of the placenames on the route of the Táin in *Táin Bo Cualnge*, or the list of warriors slain by Cuchulain later in the same work. This, of course, merely adds to the point made by O'Brien, that Joyce is manipulating both form and content in pursuit of alterity.

An undoubted fault in the book is the attempt to relate the subject matter to every school of theoretical discourse. While O'Brien is undoubtedly erudite and his comparisons apt, the constant hammering home of the point by reference to Derrida, Lacan, Adorno, Levinas, Bakhtin and so forth is enthusiastic, but unnecessary once the initial point has been made. The arguments and readings proffered by the book are quite strong enough without continual reference to theoretical first principles. There is also a sense of imbalance in the book, if one is expecting a book of literary criticism. This leads back to an earlier point about the difficulty with the book's classification. If one is expecting a close reading of the works of Yeats or Joyce, one will be disappointed. O'Brien approaches few works by either author, but manages at the same time to make his political, social, philosophical, and theoretical point.

One caveat which must be inserted is, I think, the *a priori* assumption that one is either a centripetal essentialist or a centrifugal pluralist, and that to be an essentialist is an ethically untenable position. Indeed, if one uses Levinas's definition of *ethics* (see above), then the essentialist position is, by definition, untenable. Levinas's definition is not, however, the only one available. I am not quarrelling with the position, I merely point out that O'Brien's is undoubtedly siding with the agents of centrifugal pluralism, and this must raise doubts about the ability of postmodern theory to assume an objective position.

The application of theory to Irish literature in English will undoubtedly please some, alienate others, and infuriate a small coterie who still think of Irish literature in



narrow, essentialist ways. To an extent, the measure to which one is attracted or repulsed by this book is an index of the extent to which one's own centripetal attitudes are deconstructed by the book. For those who approach this book with an open mind, and a reliable dictionary, there is an immense amount of value.