

Author's Response: Theory as Agent

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Firstly, I would like to begin by thanking Tony Corbett for a generous and detailed reading of this book. One always hopes for readings which will engage with the seminal aspects of a text and in this case, I have been fortunate in my reader. His essay has raised many thought-provoking issues and in this response I hope to address some of these. His point about the sometimes difficult relationship between the areas of theory *per se*, and Irish Studies is well taken. Despite the proliferation of theoretical courses in the academy, and the gradual increase in theoretically driven papers at gatherings like the IASIL and ACIS conferences, there is still, I would contend, a *lacuna* in the area of theoretical engagement with the motivating issues of the study of Irish literature. Even the last phrase, 'Irish Literature' is a hermeneutic minefield (as indicated by the change in nomenclature from IASAIL to IASIL some years ago), and it is in need of constant conceptual unpacking.

Such conceptual unpacking was a motivating factor in the writing of this book, concerned as it is with those almost hoary tropes of Irish identity and the writings of Yeats and Joyce. As Corbett has suggested, these issues have been discussed *ad nauseum* and yet, it seemed to me, not within a theoretically driven intellectual paradigm which might tease out some of the nuances within them. It was my hope to defamiliarize some of these 'givens' in a discourse paralleling that of Brian Friel, who, in *Translations*, acknowledges the need for constantly renewing our relationship to language and the images of the past embodied in language. Otherwise, as he puts it, 'we fossilize.' My own efforts in the field of renewal relate both to language and ideology, using theory as an agent of defossilization in terms of Irishness in general and Irish nationalism in particular.

The particular *organon* of theoretical approaches to be used presented something of a difficulty. The postcolonial is very much the theoretical paradigm of choice in terms of methodology in contemporary Irish Studies. Through scholars such as Declan Kiberd, Gerry Smyth, Shaun Richards, David Cairns, David Lloyd and Colin Graham, postcolonial theory has become fruitfully intertwined with the matter of Irish writing, shedding new light on hitherto darkened corners. However, in attempting to examine Yeats and Joyce with respect to Irish identity, I deliberately used an alternative theoretical focus, as Corbett outlines. The connection of the thought of Derrida, Adorno and Levinas was a motivated one, as I felt that each of these writers has undertaken Friel's defossilization in different areas of epistemology. Corbett

has offered an intelligent conspectus of my *raison d'être* for choosing all three, and in so doing, he raises the interesting and crucial question of categorisation.

The theoretical *ordo cognoscendi* of Derrida's differential and relational epistemology was crucial to my reading of Yeats and Joyce. Perhaps the ground of the methodology is provided by his transformation of his now axiomatic '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' in *Of Grammatology* into '*Il n'y a pas de hors contexte*' in *Limited Inc.*, which validated a reading of Yeats and Joyce against their cultural context of the Gaelic revival and the rise of nationalism. These central tenets of the early 20th century Irish identity construction have been taken as givens, with Yeats being commonly seen as a participant in the creation of essentialist Gaelic and nationalist attitudes, while Joyce, in Dedalian manner, is seen as avoiding them almost completely, history being the nightmare from which both author and character are trying to awake.

However, the thrust of this book is to demonstrate the levels of transformative engagement between Yeats and Joyce and these twin centres of nationalism and Gaelicism. Derrida's *hauntology*, as pointed out by Corbett, offered a model of a difference within the core of sameness which is crucial to my reading of the Yeatsian and Joycean critique of essentialism in terms of Irishness, and his discussion of my use of the centripetal and centrifugal as metaphors of different vectors of Irishness is an intelligent conspectus of my argument. The same can be said of his comments on Levinas:

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.

Given that so much of Irish history and literature has been defined adversarially in terms of what Corbett terms the 'Irish-not-British-not-Irish loop,' I was anxious to find a theoretical parallel to the role of the 'other' in the work of Yeats and Joyce, and Levinas provided that role. His complication of the identity of selfhood and alterity allows for an interstitial ethical relationship which I have found throughout the work of both writers, whose work 'is the location of a point of alterity...that cannot be reduced to the Same.'

Given Levinas's view that the imperative to enter into some form of relation with alterity can turn poetry from an aesthetic discourse into an ethical one, which brings forth the necessity of critique then literature as genre can serve as a penetrating critique of the ethicity of socio-political discourses. This view of literature is one which figures largely in this discussion. The works of Yeats and Joyce stimulate readings which critique the narrow essentialisms of a centripetal notion of identity which looks to the past or to pre-existing categories as sacrosanct, almost quasi-religious *doxa* in which one must believe. Instead, their work protreptically invokes the other in a dialogue which explicitly opens a place, or a site, for the voice of alterity.

The term 'protreptic' derives from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who tellingly puts it that 'language is conversation: one must look for the word that can reach an other person.' Gadamer cites the theory of Jacques Lacan that a word not directed at another person, at an 'other' is empty, and goes on to define language as grounded in this notion of answerability, stating that it is only the answer, 'actual or potential, that transforms a word into a word.' This notion of language as a dialogue with the other, as protreptic discourse, is seminal to Yeats and Joyce, as all of their work predicates an Irishness that is thoroughly open to different forms of alterity. These two British citizens, who saw themselves as Irish, went on to define that Irishness otherwise in order that it should have a place for them within its compass, and it is this process of transformative redefinition that is at the core of my argument. Their negative definitions of Irishness offer a future-oriented paradigm which will allow for diversity and heterogeneity as opposed to a monological narrative of the past which is largely intolerant of anything outside the privileged components. In this context, Corbett's deconstruction of the translation from Joep Leerson was very much a *tour de force* which I would have included had it occurred to me at the time.

The theoretical paradigm constructed in the opening chapter is necessary if one is to read Yeats and Joyce against the grain of much received opinion, hence the constant oscillation in the book between theorists and texts, a point raised by Corbett who sees it as 'unnecessary' and an example of 'over-enthusiasm.' From the perspective of style, he is undoubtedly correct: literary criticism is not in the habit of foregrounding its theoretical *substrata*. Indeed, as Christopher Norris has put it: 'literary critics interpret texts. By and large they get on without worrying too much about the inexplicit theories or principles that underwrite their practice.' Corbett develops this point by stressing that the theoretical strand is disappointing for a reader 'expecting a book of literary criticism.' Again, I would agree, but with the *caveat* that this is *not* a book of literary criticism, rather is it an articulation of theory and literature in order to provide a different, not necessarily better, perspective on issues of Irish identity formation.

Corbett makes the further point that 'classification of this book has escaped the present reviewer', and goes on to muse that it would be interesting if a consensus emerged among university librarians, and here he points to one of my central objectives in the writing of this book, namely to merge generic and disciplinary structures that had hitherto remained largely disparate. The theoretical structure which is set out in the opening chapter is deliberately applied to pieces of literature and to ideological structures which are very often literary in essence and enunciation, but which are often not subjected to a literary analysis. By positing an intersection between the literary decentralizations of Yeats and Joyce, and the theoretical decentralizations of Derrida, Adorno and Levinas, the book points to alternate readings of Irishness through the work of all of these writers. So, if this causes certain classificatory head-scratchings, so much the better, as part of the function of the book is to challenge the hypostasized nature of classifications and categories in general. The book, while not being able to answer all the questions raised,

posits a reformulation of these questions, which as John Banville says, ‘in art, is as near as one ever gets to an answer.’

I argue that the work of Yeats and Joyce challenges insular and reactivist aspects of the different Irish revivals which tended to enact a Manichean paradigm of Irishness as not Britishness, constructing nativist centres composed of Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist strands. Both writers offer culturally-driven definitions of Irishness where the Irish-British binarism is deconstructed through the creation of broader intertextual nexus which positions Ireland within pan-European notion of identity. So Yeats, by looking to renaissance Italy, can imply a connectedness between Ireland and Europe and Joyce, by tracing the ghostly shape of the Danes, early colonisers of Dublin, can enact the same parallel, and can also, writing in *Finnegans Wake*, tell how he ‘murdered all the English he knew’ by translating the imperial tongue into a new language which is ‘nat language at any sinse of the world.’ Both are paralleling Derrida’s *hauntological* epistemology as well as the negative notion of identity promulgated by Adorno in his writings.

In conclusion, I must thank Tony Corbett for a fair-minded and thoroughly scrupulous engagement with my book. He has pointed up its strengths and its flaws: for example an over-didactic approach to the intersection of theory and text which can often result in a metaphorical belabouring of the reader. In my own defence, I can only say that I was anticipating a different form of criticism: namely that the conceptual framework was overly dense and did not fully connect with the readings of the texts. That Corbett should make precisely the opposite critique means that this particular hurdle, at least, has been avoided. His final point, that the book ‘will undoubtedly please some’ while alienating and infuriating others sums up what one would wish from a first book, as well as one’s hope for subsequent works.