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## OUTSIDE IN THE THEORY MACHINE: IRELAND IN THE WORLD OF POST- COLONIAL STUDIES

Eoin Flannery

In the Monty Python film, *The Life of Brian* there is a scene in which an ‘anti-imperial’, Judean resistance cell furiously affirm their title as the ‘People’s Front of Judea’ and emphatically not the ‘Judean People’s Front’ or the ‘People’s Popular Front of Judea.’ Without wanting to reduce the gravity of current academic debates within Irish and postcolonial studies to such inane levels, the tenor of certain aspects of contemporary cultural theory, specifically postcolonialism, seem to generate similar circuitous dialogue. There is a marked willingness within many critical analyses to persistent deferral; too often the security of abstraction and conceptual circuitousness disabuses theory of its practical potential. The reading strategies of postcolonial theory are trained on the ethics of identitarian power structures, specifically the disenfranchising disparities of colonial subjugation. Equally, postcolonial theory as a battery of discursive resources, explicates the teleologies and ideologies of the postcolonial nation-state. While its genesis in Western academic constituencies was characteristic of a reductive textualisation of inherently ‘material’ concerns, latterly postcolonial theorisation has evolved to a consideration of the contextual specifics of diverse socio-political communities.

The advent of an Irish franchise of postcolonial studies has produced a contentious as well as progressive commerce of ideas and theoretical paradigms within the broader discourse of Irish Studies. The ongoing work of Declan Kiberd, Luke Gibbons, Richard Kirkland, and Colin Graham provides signally enabling mechanisms for Irish cultural inquiry. These critics are emblematic of the most perceptive facets of Irish, and indeed international, postcolonial criticism, and are indicative of a postcolonial cathexis within Irish studies.

Luke Gibbons embraces cultural materialism in his dialectical relation to both modernisation theory and revisionist historiography. Culture is no longer benign and ethereal; it is of course profoundly political. His critical project is targeted at preventing the deflection of creative energies into a rarefied aesthetic or “imaginary” realm entirely removed from the exigencies of everyday life (Gibbons, 1996, 8). The cultural critic is charged with the task of recovering marginal or “unrepresentable” politico-cultural formations and narratives that can serve to problematise the modernising certitude of official discourse. Homogenised “official knowledge” operates in an institutionalised and self-perpetuating manner and engenders a form of discursive certainty. Consequently, Gibbons envisages a materialist contextualisation of literary

and historical texts that does not simply represent but is representative; that is not simply formative but formed within and by the material conditions of their provenance.

Gibbons offers a tentative, and potentially subversive, theoretical alternative to the normative "vertical mobility from periphery to centre" (1996, 180). Postcolonial theory has undeniably "travelled", usually from a Western-sanctioned centre to peripheral contexts. By invoking the *Distant Relations* art exhibition, Gibbons gestures to the possibility of "lateral mobility" (1996, 180). Through this cultural exchange, he identifies the germ for a cross-periphery solidarity, in which postcolonial cultures can interact in mutually edifying cultural exchanges. Indeed, the pursuit of such "unapproved roads" can be extended to include not just artistic exchange, but equally to encompass the formulation of radical theoretical innovation. Gibbons' more recent publication <sup>1</sup> goes some way towards crystallising a definite theoretical trajectory for such a transgeographical project. He encourages a trans-geographical engagement with memory and tradition as a means of forging "new solidarities in the present" (2002a, 105). These "new solidarities" extend from his previous counsel on the exigency for laterally mobile postcolonial criticism. Ireland's "Third World memory" should therefore operate within a polyvocal discourse of egalitarian "historically grounded cosmopolitanism" (2002a, 100). Critical authority must be re-constituted in marginal postcolonial contexts rather than administered from the ivory towers of Western academia.

Gibbons' employment of the literary trope of allegory is justified on the grounds that it constitutes an "indirect and figurative discourse" through which recalcitrant or previously unrepresented areas of experience can be rehabilitated and become formative elements in a re-figured Irish identity (1996, 18). By engaging with the trope of allegory in terms of a cultural historicist methodology, Gibbons locates allegory within the politics of the unverballed, in which it becomes a figural practice that infiltrates everyday experience, giving rise to "aesthetics of the actual" (1996, 20). The certainty of identity is replaced by figural ambiguity as, to echo Seamus Deane, the real and the phantasmal coincide (1998). There is instability of reference and contestation of meaning to the point where it may not be at all clear "where the figural ends and the literal begins" (Gibbons, 1996, 20).

Gibbons' mobilisation of allegory within a postcolonial theoretical paradigm emphatically politicises an ostensibly literary trope. As justification for such a manoeuvre he claims: '[a]ll culture is, of course, political, but in Ireland historically it acquired a particularly abrasive power, preventing the deflection of creative energies into a rarefied aesthetic or "imaginary" realm entirely removed from the exigencies of everyday life'. (1996, 8)

Allegory is not canvassed as a textual device, but further diagnoses the ritualistic or theatrical fabric of allegory; allegory as dramatisation of

marginalized cultural discourses. Linking Gibbons, Kiberd, together with Seamus Deane, and David Lloyd is the sense that narrative discontinuity is a fundamental, if not *the* fundamental, Irish condition. Most explicitly, Gibbons attempts to trace politico-cultural accretions that fail to register or that are wilfully excluded from legitimate narrative representation. These critical inquiries that focus on concepts such as allegory, lateral mobility, solidarity, and adulteration, are not simply textual ruses but constitute radical efforts to intervene in a modernising teleology, a teleology that too frequently diminishes subaltern or peripheral politico-cultural constituencies. Theory is not a form of academic therapy, and what Gibbons canvasses is an attention to the rituals of anti-colonial cultural representation in all its forms. Identity, then, is not “a conscious, psychic choice, but developed as and through a series of acts”, and equally through what might be termed “an apprenticeship of communal activities” (Gibbons, 2002 b). Allegory, then, enables Gibbons to trace “the oblique and recondite” socio-cultural formations which have been categorically elided from officially sanctioned, nationalist narratives, both during the processes of anti-colonial resistance and in the post-Independence period (Gibbons, 1996, 16). By definition, narratives are as markedly exclusive as they are inclusive; the mechanics of selectivity and elision underwrite all narration at all levels, whether in terms of the individual, the local community, or the nation-state. This insuperable problematic is transfused with a caustic political temper within, and indeed because of, Irish postcolonial studies; access to verbal representation is synonymous with political representation.

In his capacity as director of the Yeats Summer School from 1985-87, Declan Kiberd can claim a share of responsibility for the direct importation of postcolonial criticism into Irish cultural studies, and indeed Irish academia. By inviting the so-called “godfather” of global postcolonial studies, Edward W. Said, to deliver what became a seminal/controversial paper on “Yeats and Decolonization”<sup>2</sup>, Kiberd literally opened the door of Irish literary studies to the critical methodologies of postcolonialism. Postcolonial criticism had “travelled” to Irish shores by the mid-eighties, yet still retains a profoundly contested valency, having never been unilaterally sanctioned within Irish academic or intellectual discourse. Kiberd exhibits an unequivocal commitment to a comparative perspective; he embraces a theoretical vista that straddles diverse crucibles of anti-colonial struggle, and postcolonial re-constitution. Ireland’s status as the first English speaking postcolonial society is assumed; indeed it is a fundamental precept of Kiberd’s entire diagnosis that, “the example of the Irish renaissance has been followed across the post-colonial world” (Kiberd, 1999).

The intention of Kiberd’s criticism is to achieve an equilibrium between the aesthetic and the political; to probe the points of intersection and to identify the latent, mutually beneficial elements of artistic creativity and socio-political enterprise. Primary among Kiberd’s critical targets is the

crystallisation of a "bogus unity" in the form of reactionary state apparatus'; central to this, then, are his critiques of nationalism and conservative statism in terms of both colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory. The idea of exploding tendentious unities or monochromatic cultural discourses is at the core of Kiberd's discursive interventions, and central to this matrix is the invocation of a distinctly comforting fabric of Irishness: the patchwork quilt.

Kiberd's postcolonial criticism is characterised by his analysis of literature in terms of its social context, but equally he deems literary criticism as the basis for engaging in a critical discourse about Irish society. He has embraced a particular distillation of anti-colonial discourse, a tendency that is manifest in his consistent default to the work of Said, Fanon, and Memmi. By invoking such a discursive *doxa*, Kiberd strives to execute a strategic political sidestep; Fanon, in particular, does not emphatically disavow the long-term legitimacy of nationalist postcolonial projects. His politico-philosophical teleology registers the limitations of intractable oppositional or "mimic" nationalisms, while never explicitly jettisoning the radical potential of the popular discourse of nationalism and its conceptual archetype: "the nation."

Underlying Kiberd's Fanonian inflection of twentieth century Irish literature is the conviction that the post-independence state did not answer the cultural, and therefore political, needs of a newly liberated nation. The state structure that crystallised in the 1921-22 period straitjacketed the critical and creative dynamism of the erstwhile literary renaissance. Accordingly, Fanon's tri-partite modulation of the decolonising dialectic was hamstrung by a "state apparatus [that] remained unmodified since British days and condemned many citizens (as it was designed to do) to live like an underground movement in their own country" (Kiberd, 1998). This insularity was reflected in the broad economic temper of de Valera's state and equally in the "moral minesweepers" of his Ireland: the Catholic Church. Kiberd's critical logic, then, germinates in the fact that a decolonising phase, wherein bilateral engagement between cultural and economic discourses, has yet to actualise in Ireland. Indeed, Kiberd signals, in an Irish context, what Benita Parry has diagnosed in a broader theoretical context: "the need to renew or reactivate memories [which] is distinct from the uncritical attempt to conserve tradition" (1993, 74).

Such programmatic sentiments lead directly to Kiberd's most recent demand for an Irish "national philosophy" (2002). Re-iterating his unrestrained admiration for the cultural self-confidence that occasioned the Irish literary revival, Kiberd suggests that if such cultural assurance could be married to the prevailing economic success in Ireland, then a more representative and genuinely *postcolonial* Irish identity would emerge. He discerns the existence of a discursive hiatus between economic modalities and the creative impulses of the cultural sphere. Again, Kiberd's discourse is draped in the tropes of a distinctly materialist postcolonial analysis: culture is

the active agent in the broader social context. Fundamentally, then, Kiberd sings from the same postcolonial “hymn-sheet” as both Gibbons and Lloyd in attempting to re-present those “minority groups who didn’t form part of the main script [and were] edited out” (Kiberd, 1999).

In canvassing such a radical imbrication of discourses, Kiberd’s work neatly intersects with Gibbons’ recent co-edited publication, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*<sup>3</sup>. The advent of an economistically biased public sphere in Ireland has, according to the editors, circumscribed the potential for radical social thought in this country, and the logic of the collection is guided by a fundamental desire to re-infuse cultural discourse with a socially transformative aspect. The title of the edition, together with both the tropes and conclusions included, are overt critical “curtsies” to Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland*. Gibbons and his fellow editors diagnose the convergence of culture and economic forces, a trend that has “diminished [the] public sphere, and [silenced] an uncritical Academy” (2002, 17). However, given the emergent imbrication of culture and economy, the critical potential of cultural discourses has effectively increased. As culture is assimilated and wedded to economic forces and becomes a constituent of the market economy, a sense of destabilising intimacy is amplified.

While the tropes and paradigms of postcolonial theory as politico-cultural resource are gaining currency, concurrently there is a burgeoning concern with respect to the structural lexicon or theoretical idiom of the discipline. Specifically, critics such as Kirkland and Graham, among others, have initiated a self-reflective dialectic within Irish postcolonial studies. In effect, there has been an identifiable expansion from a concerted discursus of the micro-details of theoretical inquiry to the elucidation of a metacritique of the macrostructural paradigms of postcolonial analysis. Gerry Smyth outlines, at length, the charges laid against post-colonial theory: “its elision of history, its textual fetishism, its exorbitant prose, its inability to register outside the institution, and its lack of self-consciousness with regard to its own function within wider politico-economic temporalities” (1999, 212).

Principal among Graham’s critical targets is David Lloyd’s alternative to hegemonous nationalism, wherein “he [Lloyd] re-inscribes nationalism as a subversive force in cultural theory” (1996, 367). Lloyd’s critique of nationalism is centred on the concepts of “adulteration” and “melancholy survivals”, both of which are restless and residual manifestations of marginalised discourses. Lloyd, like Graham, is committed to problematising the homogenising *telos* of the nation-state; he does not believe that the teleology of nationalist struggle is necessarily enshrined in the formation of the state. However, as Graham points out, Lloyd fails to sanction any *telos* other than perpetual discontinuity and fragmentation. Lloyd constructs a corollary fetish of the subaltern itself by “ethically endowing” the notion of subalternity. Lloyd’s interpretation is limited by his assertion of the presumed

naturalness of the subaltern class and its fetishisation as an ethically pure formation. Graham's re-situation of the subaltern as a conceptual tool of postcolonial critique provides prescient elaborations on previous theoretical interventions. Graham's admonition is a *caveat* for postcolonial criticism as a whole; he concludes "if nationalism is subaltern only when it is unsuccessful (still insurgent, rather than in the process of forming the state), then there is a serious intellectual danger of celebrating the subalternity of subaltern groups" (1996, 368).

Graham diagnoses a peculiarly troubling facility in Ireland's proximate relationship with Britain; as both colonial victim and perpetrator, Ireland is signally a most fertile context in which to read Bhabha's subversive cultural politics. Concepts such as 'the fetish', mimicry, and hybridity acquire singular valency within the Irish context. Therefore it is on these bases that postcolonial analyses should proceed, not simply on empirical, ethnic, or geographical qualifiers or disqualifiers. Graham is indicative of a deepening of postcolonial theorisation vis-à-vis Ireland and its Anglo-Irish relations. He argues: "on a metacritical level the question is: how does criticism of Irish writing proceed beyond the justificatory argument for the value of postcolonial paradigms". (2002, 32-33)

Criticism, therefore, needs to evolve beyond the defensive postures of "positions" and towards a realisation that postcolonial theory is not, and never was, as insidious a political stratagem as has been widely canvassed. Instead, it is time to consider the potentially illuminative theoretical mechanisms within which one can read transcolonial analogies as well as illuminate, as Graham notes "the contours of Irish particularities" (2002, 32-33). Simply, it is the ability to identify "transcultural movements and interactions" (Graham, 1994, 41), as well as a capability to look "beyond the safe simplicities and binarisms" (Graham, 1996, 33) which marks postcolonial theory as a potentially productive intervention in Irish culture, and that has seen postcolonial theory emerge, as Joe Cleary contends, "as an attempt to dislodge the certainties of modernisation theory" (2002).

Richard Kirkland asserts: "postcolonial theoretical terminology has become normative within Irish Studies...[for] many critics what is troubling in such a development is... the fact that despite Ireland's status as one of the first nations to decolonise, the incomplete nature of this project has, until recently, inhibited the development of what can be considered an indigenous mode of postcolonial thinking". (2002, 53)

As we have seen, one of the primary indictments of postcolonial theorisation is its "easy transferability"<sup>4</sup>, within which the concrete, material circumstances of postcolonial societies remain undifferentiated. Kirkland offers a suitably metacritical counsel for Irish postcolonial discourse, urging, "that the postcolonial can be perceived through Ireland rather than, crucially, Ireland being perceived through the postcolonial" (2002, 53). While

accepting the employment of broadly comparative theoretical models, Kirkland does so only in so far as the integral specificities of (post) colonial contexts are differentiated<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, in deference to the materiality of postcolonial analyses Kirkland resurrects Fanonian anti-colonial discourse. However his inflection of Fanon's discourse differs sharply from Kiberd's strictly modular version; such a modulated "transfer" is an anathema to the specificity of place and sensitivity toward divergent material conditions canvassed by Kirkland.

Alternatively, he enlists Fanon's work in terms of its commitment to, and resolute belief in, "the total liberation [which] concerns all sectors of the personality" (2002, 55). The postcolonial imperative is sanctioned to the extent that it addresses the diversity and particularities of given historical, colonial contexts. Postcolonial perspectives enable specific historical readings of specific colonial conditions, and postcolonial theory provides a battery of discursive resources with which to address these issues<sup>6</sup>. Kirkland echoes Smyth in his overt conviction that postcolonial theory has compromised its integral, and founding, relation with "decolonising practice" (2002, 62).

Following Graham's disavowal of an "ethically endowed" subaltern, Kirkland broaches another lexically postcolonial condition or typology: hybridity. By invoking the concept of hybridity, Kirkland firstly interrogates a key trope within postcolonial and cultural studies, and crucially examines its deployment at the level of institutional or academic discourse. What is at stake for Kirkland, then, is not only the radical deconstruction of hybridity as a viable critical trope, but equally the active forms it assumes within Irish postcolonial studies. The development of an effective meta-critique of postcolonial theory is at least partly predicated on the policing of both its terminological politics, and its specific and comparative applications. Thus, Kirkland's explication of hybridity, and its functions, is part of a larger critical constituency that is designed to foreclose the facile domestication or partial "celebration" of postcolonial idioms. By encasing hybridity in a form of apolitical and celebratory pluralism, postcolonial critics endow artists with "a prophetic function...one which operates at a level remote from 'practical politics'" (Kirkland, 1999, 223). Again, we return to the notion of discursive fetishisation that canvasses the idealised margins or the purified peripheries. Essentially, it is an effort to destabilise the prevailing normativity of postcolonial theoretical tropes within Irish literary and cultural studies, a process of normalisation that disabuses criticism of its interventionist responsibilities.

Hybridity is canvassed as a potentially enabling and subversive discursive, as well as political, location within postcolonial studies<sup>7</sup>. Its syncretic fabric is demarcated as a site of "slippage" and cross-pollinated potency in both the colonial and postcolonial societies. The hybrid identity, then, operates within a Saidian or Foucauldian continuum in which naming or identity recognition



constitutes a form of controlling hegemony. The instability of reference thus enshrined in hybrid identities is perceived as a means of liberatory cultural politics. In an astute appraisal of such a discursive programme, Kirkland identifies serious elisions in what is ostensibly a liberating conceptualisation. Kirkland adumbrates the proximity of hybridity and institutional self-propagation, a process through which, "we merely buttress the prevailing academic discourse against its other by restricting the play of the hybrid to a *containing metaphor* [my italics]" (1999, 220).

Just as Graham registers the limitations of Lloyd's fetishised subaltern, Kirkland notes just such an operation in both Gibbons' *Transformations in Irish Culture* and Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*. Through a methodology grounded in cultural historicism, both critics point to the possibility of creative, and by extension political, liberation above and beyond both the rhetoric of traditional nationalist expression and liberal modernisation. Kirkland's intervention, then, is motivated by the need to transcend any simple *recognition* of cultural hybridity. By merely registering the subversive potential of allegory, or adumbrating the Fanonian architecture of "the literature of the modern nation", neither Gibbons nor Kiberd "allow the recognition of the hybridised identity to question the frame of the relationships between subaltern, institution and nation" (1999, 222). The hybrid is not an applied or generic term or state, but an unpredictable, ambivalent series of differentiated instances, processes, and utterances. Significantly then, Kirkland questions the sociality of the hybrid as operative within postcolonial theory, he concludes, "from an institutional perspective the postcolonial framework of the hybrid as it is emerging often appears totalising and contextually insensitive due to an inability to recognize the full epistemological instability it engenders" (1999, 225-226).

The danger, as diagnosed by Kirkland, is that the "exorbitant prose" of postcolonial theory is becoming more sequestered within a containing lexicon of its own making. Through the creation of an attenuated theoretical idiom of concepts and paradigms, the gap between postcolonial and decolonising practice, and postcolonial theorisation is widening. Consequently, the very real heterogeneity of "the local space" is compromised. Kirkland's express scepticism concerning the deployment of a truly subversive hybridity, coupled with Graham's wariness about the ethically endowed subaltern, brings into focus one of the principal problematics of contemporary Irish, and international, postcolonial criticism. A taxonomy of postcolonial concepts has developed wherein the theoretical tropes have become signifiers for diverse socio-political groups. The facility to cast oneself as "subaltern", "hybrid" has become a *sine qua non* of postcolonial respectability.

Postcolonial theory's remit is *not* to ensure that "its application assumes and underwrites the triumph of the independent post-colonial nation" (Graham, 1999, 3-4). An effective cultural theory radically interrogates the

contemporary structures of both nation and state, as well as the mechanics of its liberation and foundation. The roles of political and cultural representation, then, remain the crucial issues at stake within postcolonial analysis. Clearly, then, intellectuals become tenured within institutionalised formations; at a “macro” level we note the specialisation of academic labour, and increasing alienation and/or suspicion within and between academic disciplines. Simultaneously, there is a definite institutionalisation of critical tropes and methodologies, as political affiliations and investments impede on the gestation and application of competing cultural theories.

The institutionalisation of Irish Studies, within which postcolonial criticism is operative, manufactures homologies of *legitimate* discourse. A familiar vocabulary of intellectual practice evolves through sanctioned academics, approved journals, and hermetic conferencing. As Kirkland diagnoses critical theory frequently operates with its own interests in mind, the “containing metaphors” of academic nomenclature, in this pessimistic view, promise little more than attenuated and conditional identities (1999, 220). The task, then, as articulated in an Irish context by Kirkland, Graham, and latterly Claire Connolly, is to re-present the tropes and paradigms of postcolonial criticism in less trammelled and politically ineffectual guises. In effect, “an awareness of the hybrid, the heterogeneous and the anomalous should not be the catalyst for celebration” (1999, 225-226) but should produce a criticism that reneges such containing fiats in favour of a more participatory cultural politics.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, “The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger” Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds.), 2002 *Reinventing Ireland Culture, Society and the Global Economy History, Theory, Practice* London: Pluto Press, pp 89-106
- <sup>2</sup> Edward W Said’s “Yeats and Decolonization” was subsequently published in, Deane, Seamus (ed), 1990 *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 69-95 This publication is part of the Field Day pamphlet series
- <sup>3</sup> Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds.), 2002 *Reinventing Ireland Culture, Society and the Global Economy History, Theory, Practice* London Pluto Press
- <sup>4</sup> David Lloyd, 1993, *Anomalous States Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment*, Dublin Lilliput Press, 9
- <sup>5</sup> See Young, Robert, 2001 *Postcolonialism A Historical Introduction* Oxford Blackwell Publishers, and with reference to Irish intellectuals see, O’Dowd, Liam, 1988 “Neglecting the Material Dimension. Irish Intellectuals and the problem of identity” *The Irish Review* No 3, 8-17

- <sup>6</sup> See Young, Robert, 2001. *Postcolonialism A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- <sup>7</sup> For instructive discussions of hybridity and colonial identity see, Young Robert J.C., 1995. *Colonial Desire Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge; Bhabha, Homi, 1990 "Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative" *Anatomy of Racism*. D.T. Goldberg (ed.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 183-209, and Lloyd, David, 1993. *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.

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