

## Sites in the poetry of Northern Ireland and the postcolonial debate

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The paper offers a reading of a number of poets from the North of Ireland and analyses them within the context of the current debate on the applicability of the postcolonial paradigm to Irish culture and history. The author's intention is to make a contribution to this debate by focusing on the spacialities inscribed within the chosen poetic texts. The concept of spaciality is pursued in the readings of the poets through the issues of territoriality, sense of place and the border. On the evidence of the way these markers of space are inscribed within the poetic texts the author is able to take a stand regarding the postcolonial debate. Throughout the paper the author insists on the fact that his reading is positioned as a cross-cultural reading and that this accounts both for its possible shortcomings but also for a specific access it enables him to the Irish texts.

### Spatiality and Irish identity

By way of a beginning I want to bring to the fore the intercultural nature of the following reading and its consequent effect of distance which will always prove a limiting factor when one seeks to grasp, from the outside, the daunting complexity of the phenomenon of culture. Positioning itself as an intercultural transaction, my overview recognizes its impoverished foreknowledge and the lack of access to archival information which are both necessary ingredients for the retrieval of the thick context of cultural phenomena. These are its limitations. However, as I hope to point out in the discussion, this does not imply that the gaze from the distance does not bring with it certain benefits. On the contrary, the need to recognize the alterity of Irish culture from an extraterritorial locality, possessing its own agenda of priorities and interests, demands that one not only seek out its specificity but also those elements that distinguish it from the Britishness into which it has all too frequently been submerged.

The role that I assign to issues of spatiality in my reading does not only accord with a conspicuous realignment of priorities within different critical discourses which have

reasserted the significance of spatial issues but, more to the point, I am of the opinion that it offers an advantageous and relatively stable positioning from where to reflect on the distinctive nature of Irish identities. As far as the interest in spatial matters is concerned let me mention Foucault's seminal article "On Other Spaces" where he made the following observation: "I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" (23). Derek Gregory, working in the field of human geography from whence profound contributions to the interdisciplinary exploration of space have been made, holds that "an interest in place, space and landscape... has become one of the focal concerns of the humanities and the social sciences as a whole" (80). Finally, I want to draw the reader's attention to Edward W. Soja's book *Postmodern Geographies, The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* whose title encapsulates the essential thrust of these various endeavours.

In line with this reassertion I propose to show how a specimen of Irish texts engages issues of space and place and how these issues can be seen to be constitutive of Irish cultural identity. Taking for present purposes literary texts as media of cultural self-exposition whose horizon determines the way they relate to what is foreign to their cultural matrix (Bachmann-Medick 9) I am of the opinion that this horizon can be reconstructed in part by the spatiality that is inscribed in them. The spatial parameters I bring to the textual analysis are, needless to say, not restricted to Irish literature but will yield fruitful insights when applied to other literary material as well. Additionally, and this is the second point of my argument, the findings in this particular case will evince a specific constellation which will enforce upon us the necessity of voicing an opinion regarding the question of the applicability of the postcolonial paradigm to the Irish problem.

The focus on spatiality offers a way of engaging an issue which has come to the forefront of recent Irish cultural and literary studies. If certain critical approaches question whether, and if so, to what extent Ireland can be spoken of as a postcolonial entity, my standpoint is that the foregrounding of spatial factors provides irrefutable evidence of Ireland's colonial past and the traces of this past in its postcolonial period. Space as it relates to Irish culture and identity and the way in which are manifested as postcolonial features are issues which have, needless to say, received prior critical attention. My purpose is to underline the fact that they are intimately interrelated and that spatial evidence corroborates the postcolonial paradigm.

In his study *Irish Literature: a Social History* (1990), Norman Vance makes an observation which is of central importance to my reading: "There is much to be said for basing notions of Irish tradition not on language but on responses to topography and geographical location on the extreme western periphery of Europe. The map of Ireland's physical features and Ireland's place on the map of Europe are possibly the only constants in Irish affairs"(7). Gerry Smyth, in his study of recent Irish fiction, makes a similar point regarding the role of land in Irish culture and history:

Land has held a perennial interest for people living on the island of Ireland. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that from the time of the first inhabitants

there has been a materialistic interest in the limited amount of available land. Interest became obsession, however, under the colonial dispensation beginning in the twelfth century. In fact, the issue of ownership and organisation of the land may be said to underpin much of the subsequent Irish-British conflict, culminating perhaps in the land agitation of the late nineteenth century but still active at the end of the millennium in the question over the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. (Smyth 166)

The repeated emphases that have been accorded to what Vance, in the above cited passage, terms “responses to topography and geographical location” justify the assignment of a position of central importance to issues of spatiality when discussing the distinguishing factors of the Irish polity. Regarding the historical backdrop outlined in Smyth, on the present occasion I will offer only a brief instalment of the story of Ireland’s land.

### **Territoriality, sense of space and the border in the poetry of the North**

As an initial step I want to target a body of poetic texts and seek out the territorial, cultural and psycho-emotional relationships that they inscribe towards the geographical site of Ireland. I offer here only a sketch of a problem whose full analysis would undoubtedly demand a broader array of textual examples and a more elaborate theoretical apparatus. The very appellations that have been used when making references to the body of poetry represented below stage a scene of different territorial designs, varying degrees of emotional investment into the spaces of Ireland and the boundaries that overlap through the polity. Expressing praise for the “new spirit” which came to the fore in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion subsume the chosen texts under the general label contemporary British poetry (12). Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, on the other hand, address many of the same authors in their anthology *Contemporary Irish Poetry*. Other designations, such as the poetry of Northern Ireland, the poetry of Ulster, or, simply, the poetry of the North, each reflecting decisions which can hardly be said to be intrinsic to the texts themselves, highlight the misgivings and the different paradigms which vie not only over the identification but obviously also over the appropriation of this space of cultural activity. In what follows I have chosen figures from both the Catholic and the Protestant Northern traditions. I do not claim that the passages which will be mentioned below are representative of the chosen poet’s entire output but rather they have been chosen as sites illustrating prevalent positionings in the poetry of the North towards the space of Ireland.

A case can be made for reading different aspects of Seamus Heaney’s work as related to the issue of territoriality understood as the geographic expression of influence and power. In a very broad sense territoriality “is not only a means of creating and maintaining order, but is a device through which we experience the world and give it



or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (Sack 19). As such, territoriality is the preeminent factor and the enabling condition of constituting the geographic context within which human beings form and maintain their relationships to space.

One of the most immediate of such relationships is the sense of place which I have elsewhere described as “the psycho-emotional response to or the human experience of terrestrial habitats” (Grgas 146). The title of the booklet of poems *The Planter and the Gael*, which came out of a tour of readings sponsored by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1970, featuring John Montague and John Hewitt, synecdochically positions two different senses of place. Although the occasion purposed to show an alternative to the sectarian exclusivity and violence endemic to the troubled North, the poetry itself could not but register the undertow of historical disputes over the possession of Ireland.

As John Montague, the spokesman for the Gael tradition, afterwards wrote in *The Rough Field* (1972) “one must start from home” which to him is a “Catholic family in the townland of Garvaghey, in the county of Tyrone, in the province of Ulster”(vii). Notice should be made of the last syntagm which signals the poet’s sense of the North as a province of Ireland. As the referant of the deictic markers of his poetry (“this place”), the five parishes of the North function as the ultimate matrix of Montague’s numerous identities. Like the fiddler’s music in the fourth section of the sequence, the poem itself honours a “communal loss”

& a shattered procession  
of anonymous suffering  
files through the brain:  
burnt houses, pillaged farms,  
a province in flames. (38)

Montague’s sense of locality, steeped in historical memory and accompanied both by an enriching rootedness and by a frustrating parochialism explores the range of emotional investment into a place humans identify as home.

On the other hand, in the poems in which John Hewitt, from Planter stock, explores his relationship to the North, he shows an inability, in Terence Brown’s words, to “fully resolve his troubled awareness of a problem historical inheritance” (163). The movement within his short lyric poem “Once Alien Here” illustrates this ambiguity. I quote the first two stanzas:

Once alien here my fathers built their house,  
claimed, drained, and gave the land the shapes of use,  
and for their urgent labour grudged no more  
then shuffled pennies from the hoarded store  
of well rubbed words that had left their overtones  
in the ripe England of the mounded downs.

The sullen Irish limping to the hills  
bore with them the enchantment and the spells  
that in the clan's free days hung gay and rich  
on every twig of every thorny hedge,  
and gave the rain-pocked stone a meaning past  
the blurred engraving of the fibrous frost.

The dichotomies elaborated in the two stanzas create not only an opposition between two ways of life but imply value judgements. Therefore, the agency of the poet's forefathers is foregrounded in the evocation of their constructive labours (lines 1-2) but the impact their arrival had on the native Irish is not given adequate expression. The elision of the causal link between these two scenes, lost in the blankness separating the two stanzas, attests to a hesitancy and repression. The same ambiguity is evident in Hewitt's prose piece "No Rootless Colonist" where his writing evinces a hesitation to designate the point when a colony, as he says, ceases to be a simple colony and becomes "something else." Having eventually to confront this evasion Hewitt, moved "by intuitions, intimations, imaginative realisations, epiphanies", chooses to designate it a "valid region" (Craig 130). As far as I am concerned this still begs the question regarding the status of Northern Ireland and elides, in taking it out of historical realities of state and nation and transposing it onto an imaginative plane, the region of the North from existent configurations of geo-political relations.

Albeit in a mocking tone, Michael Longley in his poem "Letters" registers a positionality towards the native Irish which addresses similar issues. Let me draw attention to the second stanza in part two:

In order to take you all in  
I've had to get beneath your skin,  
To colonise you like a land,  
To study each distinctive hand  
And, by squatter's rights, inhabit  
The letters of its alphabet. (77)

The problem of the Protestant identity relating to the Irish land is alluded to in the poem "Self-Portrait": "Peering back to the people who ploughed the Long Field/ My eyes are bog holes that reflect a foreign sky" (183). In the poem "On Slieve Gullion," addressed to a fellow Protestant, the speaker makes an indicative and revealing identification on the backdrop of the land: "Both strangers here" (198). Recalling Heaney's strategies of reappropriation, for instance the use of the possessive in the opening line of "Anahorish" (My 'place of clear water'), and Montague's use of deixis one cannot help but notice the revealing use of the words "foreign" and "stranger." Such markers of enstrangement, in addition to the itinerary nature of Longley's poetic voices, evince a sense of place very different from the one to be found in the poets coming from the Catholic community.

More so than in these poets, the sense of place inscribed in Derek Mahon's poetry transcends the confines of Ireland and seeks to encompass a global setting in which to negotiate the relationship between self, poetry and the world. Of course, one could contend that the excessive insistence on the metropolitan setting in itself bespeaks an insecure positioning. This tension in Mahon's work can be illustrated by the poem "After-lives." The first three stanzas of part one are spoken from London, significantly marked by the deixis "our element", a syntagm I doubt Catholic Irish writers would use in reference to the imperial center. There Mahon develops a utopian vision which is shattered, amidst an awakening, in the fourth:

What middle-class twits we are  
To imagine for one second  
That our privileged ideals  
Are divine wisdom, and the dim  
Forms that kneel at noon  
In the city not ourselves. (50)

The distance traversed between the final pronoun and the earlier "our" sets moving an undertow of hesitant insecurities which prepare the reader for the second part of the poem in which Mahon describes a return journey to Belfast. The poet proceeds to evoke the ship coming to shore and a city "so changed/ By five years of war" (II, 14-15). However, between the opening phrase "I am going home" (II,1) and the repetition of this destination in the closing stanza a shift of tonality has intervened which problematises the project of reclamation:

But the hills are still the same  
Grey-blue above Belfast.  
Perhaps if I'd stayed behind  
And lived it bomb by bomb  
I might have grown up at last  
And learnt what is meant by home. (51)

The earlier move from utopian promise to disenchantment is paralleled here in the modal shift from the indicative to the subjunctive. The modification gestures to a specific psycho-emotional relationship to Irish space, one which can easily be matched with and differentiated from those considered earlier.

The historical backcloth for the urgency of territorial issues and for the variant senses of space is provided by the English dispossession of the neighbouring island and, more to the point, the 1923 border arrangement with the consequent volatile situation in the North. It is this border which provides the broader context of the corpus of texts from which I have chosen my examples. In their typology of borderlands, M. Baud and W.V. Schendel designate the area as an "unruly borderland" providing the following explanation: "Here in the late 1960s a Protestant elite backed up by the British state lost its ability to control a Catholic population. Neither British armed forces

nor Protestant vigilantes could contain the armed insurrection of a section of the population that sought to merge the border region with the neighbouring Republic of Ireland” (Baud and Schendel 228). Although I am aware of the challenges mounted by the revisionist against forms of cultural nationalism which see the continuing partition of the island as the central fact of Irish identity, I believe that in order to highlight Ireland’s difference, especially within the discipline of Irish studies as practiced outside of Ireland or the United Kingdom, this border truncating the island should receive our utmost attention.

The legacy of the border has had a devastating impact on the society of the North. It is the ultimate cause of its endemic violence, the basic issue on the agenda of attempts to arrive at a negotiated settlement and the referent of the sectarian divisions within the Northern community. Without it we would be hard put to understand the symbolic import of the much-reported Loyalist parades which, according to Allen Feldman, “synthesize historical symbolism, the command of space, and boundary transgression. This synthesis raises the conjuncture of commemorative history and sectarianized space to the heights of ritualized resolution” (Feldman 29). To return to poetry, without it we would not feel the tension and the sense of imminent violence and violation harboured by those watching from the other side so aptly described in Heaney’s poem “Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966” in the “Singing School” with its threatening final image of the air “pounding like a stethoscope” (68). Nor could we fathom the experience of trespassing the demarcation lines which compartmentalize the two Belfast communities as Ciaran Carson describes it in the prose piece “Question Time” from *Belfast Confetti* (1989). Heeding not the emphatic warning *Never go by Cupar Street* the Catholic youth ventures into forbidden territory: “One day I did come home by Cupar Street, egged on by a fellow pupil. Nothing happened, and we felt the thrill of Indian scouts penetrating the British lines, the high of invisibility. We did it again; it became addictive, this perilous sin of disobedience and disappearance” (Carson 59). In the prose poem “Intelligence” Carson, using Bentham’s *Panopticum* as intertext, writes about the broader context of surveillance and control in which this transgression is staged: “We are all being watched through peep-holes, one way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car ’phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index” (78). The military metaphor and especially the identification with Indians in relation to British power anticipate the next stage of my argument where I will use these concerns with space to address the issue of postcolonialism.

### **Ireland and the applicability of the postcolonial model**

Introducing a collection of essays dealing with the poetry under consideration here Neil Corcoran makes the following observation: “If it seems to fit completely success-



fully into neither an exclusivist Irish account nor an exclusivist British account, then, this is one clear reason why the contemporary poetry of Northern Ireland earns its place as a special case” (9). I have doubts about assigning it this kind of a special status and believe that such a judgement elides the broader configurations of power in which these texts, synecdochical of a cultural setting, are enmeshed. Instead of begging the question one ought to identify the nature of this special case. My contention is that it is special not in the sense of unique, exceptional, unlike any other but in the sense of, if I am allowed some leeway, a place */a/part* with all the connotations that the term, transcribed in such a manner, brings to mind: both at a distance but also sundered, separate(d) but also a part of another. The “liminality of the north” (Jarman 47), as a part of yet parted from both Ireland and England, is an arena staging a late episode of the engagement between two historical projects, triggered by the first expansionist move of English hegemony.

Although the above overview of some of the constellations of the cultural geography that can be derived from the chosen texts is anything but complete, it may hopefully serve to convince the reader that there is more to the issue of space than one may have anticipated. I would suggest that these spatialities provide not only an interesting point from which to approach culture but show how problematical and, in the present instance, contested is the very notion of culture itself. The theoretical sophistication attendant on the recent culturalist turn very frequently lands us into a dizzying array of textuality. This is one of the reasons why there has arisen within different scholarly endeavours something which might be labelled a kind of “spatial vogue”:

There is a sense in which the geographical is being used to provide a secure grounding in the increasingly uncertain world of social and cultural theory. As some of the age-old core terms of sociology begin to lose themselves in a world of free-floating signification, there is a seductive desire to return to some vestige of certainty via an aestheticised vocabulary of *tying down*, *mapping* our uncertainties and looking for *common ground* (Pile and Keith 12).

The spatial parameters I offer as ways of interpreting a corpus of poetic texts have been mustered in order to lend support to my position in the postcolonial controversy. As the cursory glance at the texts mentioned above ought to make clear, the spaces and the culture we are dealing with are far from homogeneous. Rather, they inscribe procedures of reclamation, contention and dispossession, tensions and negotiations. The sites that are voiced in the literary texts are both geographical givens and human constructions while the culture their interaction gives rise to is fractured, a process and not a unitary totality. However, despite the contradictory diversity of this cultural space I believe that there is a common denominator which can serve as the matrix of the diversity. A perspective marked by geographical considerations will see the specificity of the North as the ambivalent heritage of English colonialism. The border in that case becomes the embodiment of this heritage. However, far from being an agreed upon assumption, as the spatial element would imply, the question of the applicability of the

postcolonial paradigm to Irish literature and culture has produced contentious discussions.

To begin with there are those who suspect the general appropriateness to the Irish situation of the theory itself. The main thrust of their critique is that the theory cannot give the necessary precision to engage the specific complexities of the Irish situation. However, the obvious question to ask is whether any such theory exists. Considering the very general definition of the “postcolonial” which guides John Thiene in his *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996) as “resistance to, or at least movement beyond, colonial agendas” (1), it comes as a surprise that he excludes Irish writing from the said selection. One of the possible explanations for this exclusion could be that the colonial relationship usually correlates geographically distant sites, homogenizing, at the same time, European agency as it relates to its global other. Readings of the global relations of power such as are implicit in Thiene’s selection erase from view those sites of imperial intervention which have intermittently marked intra-European political realities and contributes to the perpetuation of a revised version of a restricted Eurocentric elitism.

Summarily stated, the term “post-colonialism” has surfaced in the attempt to theorise the dismantling of the colonial setup and its aftermath. Geographically speaking, the post-colonial generally refers to those territories which have in the past been colonised by European powers. One ought to note that there are strong racial implications in this binary opposition between the European and other spaces. It is within this framework that Ireland is oftentimes elided as a colonial site. Some authors are equivocal. For example the writers of *The Empire Writes Back* approach the issue with reserve saying “The literature of Ireland might also be investigated in terms of our contemporary knowledge of post-colonialism” (Ashcroft 45). In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* Elleke Boehmer differentiates Ireland in a way that I find rather unconvincing: “Ireland too is believed to represent a different case because its history has been so closely and so long linked to that of Britain. However, as its resistance struggle was in certain other colonies taken as talismanic by nationalist movements, occasional references to Ireland will be made in the course of this study” (Boehmer 4). Interestingly enough, the writers of the earlier *The Empire Writes Back* include in their later influential anthology *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* excerpts from Cairns and Richards propounding a colonial reading of Ireland which might justifiably be read as a revision of the earlier equivocation (Ashcroft 178-180).

Historically speaking, compared with the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain most of the other British colonies were short lived affairs so that one must be wary of the argument which advances the issue of spatial proximity as a reason for excepting the case of Ireland from the practice of and the discourse on postcoloniality. I draw attention to the possibility that the ploy which excepts or brackets the Irish experience from the colonial enterprise, notwithstanding blatant historical evidence, bespeaks a suspect racial criterion. The status of the colonized is reserved for those of other than white skin pigmentation. One could say that both the English writers who

seek to exculpate their country's role on the neighbouring island and those Irish authors who offer revised accounts of their country's subjugated history evince a need to demarcate an identity distinct from the plight of the non-European others.

In the inaugural issue of the journal *Interventions*, Luke Gibbons states that Ireland is conspicuous by its absence from most theoretical assessments of the postcolonial. He goes on to draw attention to work being done in Irish studies which demonstrates how "Ireland's anomalous position at once within and outside Europe gives issues of race, nation, class and gender a new complexity . . . Considering Ireland in a postcolonial frame is not a matter of including one more culture within existing debates, but reworking the paradigms themselves" (27). Ireland as a place which cannot take its spatiality for granted, a place that has been or is contested and contained, marginalised and exoticised, provides an exemplary case of a colonial transaction. However, regardless of the evidence provided, there are those who persist in disclaiming Ireland's entrance into the postcolonial theoretical paradigm. Neither would the postcolonial paradigm be accepted by another group of people, precisely those who would position themselves at the opposite end of the revisionist school. These would be the radical nationalists who harbour visions of a united Ireland. Immersed in the ideology of a suffering and despoiled nation they would erase the post-prefix because, of course, for them the North is still colonized.

Needless to say, there are many authors who view the broad outlines of Ireland's past as a calamitous history, marked by outside interference and the violence attendant on imperialist expansion. In his introduction to the joint venture book *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* by Eagleton, Jameson and Said where they read Irish literature in the post-colonial context, Seamus Deane made the following observation: "Ireland is the only Western European country that has had both an early and a late colonial experience" (3).

Unlike Boehmer's differentiation of Ireland from other British colonial escapades, the editors of *Irish Studies* hold that Ireland is a case-study post-colonial site: "Issues of continuity and discontinuity in speech and in literature; duality or schizophrenia in cultural experience; matters of essence and authenticity in discussing a 'national' literature: these are but some of the issues which arise directly from a study of the languages and literature of Ireland" (Bartlett 3). Playing with the title of his study of Irish writing and the issue of postcolonialism, "anomalous states," David Lloyd comes to the following conclusion: "For the theory and practice of decolonialization, however, Ireland is, to a sometimes distressing extent, more exemplary than anomalous. One of the earliest post-colonial nations, Ireland has largely conformed to the model of bourgeois nationalism that Frantz Fanon analysed" (7). Suchlike pronouncements attest to the validity of viewing the history of Ireland, the development and configuration of its culture, as well as the tragic events which have so persistently bore witness to the unresolved tensions of a divided island, as consequences of a project of colonialisation and its attendant counterhistories. What I am proposing is that in order to arrive at "some vestige of certainty" (Pile and Keith 12) concerning these developments one must have a grasp

of the role played by issues of spatiality in structuring both Ireland's past and present identities.

If within the spatial perspective Irish history can justifiably be read as a continual feud over land prompted by colonial incursions, why has the applicability of the postcolonial model been contested? Paradoxically enough, it is the spatial determination of colonialism as the relation between Europe and the distant other, which elides Ireland from these considerations. As we have seen in the quotation from Gibbons the incorporation of Ireland would not only add another case study to the mill of postcolonial theory but would necessitate the reworking of the theoretical paradigms. Needless to say theoretical constructs resist such challenges to their explanatory power and frequently overlook blatant data.

One strand of critical theory argues against what they see as the totalizing ambitions of identity politics, questioning the value and validity of nationalist assumptions and voicing a plea for a post-nationalist brand of criticism. In his article "Post-nationalism/Post-colonialism: Reading Irish Culture" Colin Graham discusses how contemporary developments have decentered the discourse of nationality, central not only to Irish culture but also underpinning much post-colonial critical thinking from Fanon onward. However, this does not invalidate the relevance of postcolonial theory to Ireland because the development of subaltern studies "involved in a building critique of the ideology and praxis of nationality in the post-colonial world" (35), as Graham writes in the conclusion to his article

will be able to disrupt the dominance of the discourse of nationality in Ireland, re-invigorating the dissidences of gender and subalternity, undermining the complacencies of historiography, and moving towards a notion of Irish culture which views the dialogic hybridity of 'Irishness' in empowered ways. (37)

Although there is much to be said for this sort of re-invigorating I cannot imagine how we can begin the work of decentering unless we have made the prior recognition that nationality and its strong attachment to land have had a decisive role in the history and culture of Ireland. Again, this is particularly true for those who from the outside are striving to get a purchase on the specificity of Irish literature and culture.

In his collection of essays *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* throughout which he traces Ireland as a site of colonial hegemony and of strategies of resistance Terry Eagleton makes a case for recognizing the specificities of the Irish experience and its "archaic temporality." I draw attention to the following passage from the chapter on the Ascendency: "it was the varied currents of Irish nationalism, from Wolfe Tone to Eamon De Valera, which posed the most formidable challenge to colonial rule, and which were finally to succeed in toppling it" (88). However, in today's political climate Irish nationalism has come under polemical fire and historians have shown a great readiness to arraign its vices. Eagleton goes on to enumerate some of these and continues: "Nor are they much to the taste of a postmodernist theory which celebrates the marginal rather than the mainstream, and so is simply wrong-footed by the fact of a

mass radical movement” (89). Such arraignments of nationalism create blind spots and in the case of Ireland obfuscate the postcolonial framework in which Ireland has negotiated its identity and the significant role space has played in these negotiations.

A case in point is a recent collection of essays *Ireland: Literature, Culture, Politics* (1994) in which its German editor makes the following comment:

Ireland, a land where all and sundry are preoccupied with what is known as ‘the national thing’, not always, one must remark in all fairness, to advantageous ends. A foreigner must be forgiven for airing such a view. This concentration upon ‘the national thing’ has, some commentators may feel constrained to note, constituted a limiting factor in Irish culture. It has led to inordinate navel-gazing, and Irish literature has suffered from a refusal to link up with international developments. (Imhof 10)

As another foreigner, one who has from the very start of this reading foregrounded the sense of distance I feel it is necessary to retain in intercultural transactions, I would strongly disagree that Irish literature has suffered from its preoccupation with what the author disparagingly terms ‘the national thing’. On the contrary, it is precisely because its writers have, in various ways, tackled this issue and produced insights, staged dramas and probed the ethical conundrums implied by the problem of nationalism that they have received deserved international acclaim. I suspect that Imhof’s arraignment of nationalism has more to do with German navel-gazing than with Irish literature. In a paradoxical fashion it itself attests to the role nationalism continues to play even if theoretical paradigms have deleted it as a relevant factor in explaining reality. The present reading, contextualized by the different reinscriptions of nationalism on Europe’s eastern fringe which have proven its potency even after it has been written off by theoretical pronouncements, purposes no more than to problematize this deletion and to do this through reasserting spatiality as a factor resistant to the textualization of culture which cuts it adrift in the global circulation of signs.

## Conclusion

I feel that the initial step one needs to make when approaching Irish literature and culture is both to differentiate it from and to relate it to its broader British context. I have argued that this necessitates the foregrounding of the specific relationship of land and identity that has obtained throughout Irish history. I have likewise contended that the cultural geography of Ireland provides an exemplary postcolonial site which is marked by a history of two opposing territorial projects. The emblem of the residue of this conflict is the border dividing the island. The centrality of the border in nationalist discourse undoubtedly simplifies the complexity of the Irish problem on both sides of the border. In a recent article on Thomas Kinsella, David Kellogg makes the following statement regarding this matter: “the persistent focus on this one difference as ‘central’ . . . has obscured the roles of other spatial configurations - domestic, rural, diasporic,

and transnational - in the production of Irish identity. One major effect of this obscuration has been the highlighting of Ulster poetry as such" (145).

The reading I have offered recognizes both the centrality it has accorded the national configuration and the fact that the texts it has targeted replicates the wonted ploy of focusing on Ulster poetry Kellogg warns against. If this amounts to a case of "obscuration" it was prompted by the particular site which has contextualized the reading and its agenda of seeking out the basic parameters with which to isolate the specificity of Irish identity. Seeking the difference within the whole of what the Irish insist on calling "these" and not the "British" "isles" I have persisted in underlying the significance of its differentiating spatialities. Of course, without the postcolonial parameters of reading these entities we would be hard put to establish the distinguishing markers which set off and relate Ireland to the neighbouring island. It is precisely the postcolonial theoretical framework which allows us a purchase on the specificity of Ireland.

Without this preliminary, differentiating step one could hardly presume to undertake "thicker descriptions" of Irish culture. Only after this point of departure has been established is one enabled to undertake what Graham, along with the other revisionists, terms the work of "disruption" or, to return to our main line of argument, the delineation of Kellogg's "other spatial configurations." We ought always to keep in mind that we are dealing here with two stages in the diachrony of the construction of Irish self-identity. Between these two stages there exists a relationship of both temporal and logical dependency that needs to be taken account of when embarking on a project of coming to terms with both the specificity and the complexity of the culture and literature of Ireland.

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## PREDJELI U POEZIJI SJEVERNE IRSKE I POSTKOLONIJALNA RASPRAVA

Članak nudi čitanje jednog broja pjesnika iz Sjeverne Irske i analizira ih unutar konteksta rasprave o primjenljivosti postkolonijalne paradigme na irsku kulturu i povijest. Autorova je nakana pridonijeti toj raspravi usredotočenjem na prostornosti koje su zabilježene u odabranim pjesničkim tekstovima. U ponuđenim se čitanjima pojam prostornosti prati kroz pitanja teritorijalnosti, očuta mjesta i granice. Na temelju načina kako su dotične oznake prostora upisane u pjesničke tekstove autor zauzima stajalište glede postkolonijalne rasprave. U radu se inzistira na činjenici da je ponuđeno čitanje smješteno u odnosu između udaljenih kultura i da je to uzrokom njegovih možebitnih nedostataka ali i specifičnog pristupa irskim tekstovima.