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

Stephanie Lehner

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Following in the footsteps of Irish Studies, over the last two decades a number of attempts have been made at linking Scottish literature with postcolonial theory. Often, however, these applications have been viewed with scepticism: can Scottish literature *really* be thought of as postcolonial? Is this this *really* an appropriate way of thinking about Scottish culture? Such have been the recurring responses. As Michael Gardiner writes in his recent introduction to *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, 'there has always been a suspicion within postcolonial studies that the complicity of individual Scots in empire has made the connection [with postcolonialism] invalid "at source"'.¹ Nonetheless, there have been a series of significant interventions in Scottish postcolonialism since the late 1980s which have opened out the critical potential of the term – from early interventions by Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull (1989), Roderick Watson's engagements with Bakhtin's heteroglossia and representation of voice (1996 and 2006) as well as often-cited articles by Berthold Schoene (1995) and Michael Gardiner (1996). Alongside these, however, have been a host of other voices cautioning careful usage of the term, including Liam Connell (2003) and Scott Hames (2007).² It is out of this critical trajectory that Stephanie Lehner's book emerges.

In her introduction, Lehner comments that 'This book harnesses the ethical potential that contemporary Scottish, Northern Irish and Irish fictions offer for exploring the social inequalities, inequalities and disruptions that are part of

the current restructuring of the global capitalist system.' She goes on, 'it considers these works through a comparative postcolonial approach as part of a wider insistence that the issues addressed by these writings are, if specific to a national situation, not solely reducible thereto' (2). According to Lehner, therefore, her own approach to postcolonialism, what she terms her *aesthetical* approach, provides a way of examining the role of the subaltern subject in a way that attempts to get beyond dependence on a national framework. However, Lehner is also quick to point out that this 'beyondness' is not linked to a postnationalist or postmodernist agenda – such approaches, she points out, tend to 'efface the continuing inequalities and disenfranchisements by translating them into a grammar of pluralism and inclusiveness' (7).

Lehner's subaltern subject appears in a variety of contexts, from 'counter-histories' in the work of James Kelman, Robert McLiam Wilson and Patrick McCabe, in re-readings of the Northern Irish peace process in the work of Glenn Patterson and Eoin McNamee (drawing on Derrida's notion of 'archive fever' in doing so) and in gendered critiques of the nation, in which she examines the work of Roddy Doyle, Janice Galloway, Jennifer Johnston, Alasdair Gray and Patrick McCabe once again. In these readings, Lehner shifts the emphasis away from the national to the subjective experience of individual characters, their experiences of dispossession and dislocation. It is perhaps here that some sceptical critics might intervene and ask a series of questions: 'how subaltern can the Scottish subject really be?' Are Gayatri Spivak's conceptions of the Indian subaltern subject, for example, really applicable from such different, clearly more privileged vantage points? Is it more useful, perhaps, to think about the isolation of a character such as Joy Stone in Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* in feminist terms than in particularly subaltern ones? Might this Scottish application represent a watering down of the political efficacy of the term as described in its original context? Who gets the right to be labelled 'subaltern' in these Irish, Northern Irish and Scottish texts? And would this Western appropriation, for example, really be palatable to postcolonial critics working in non-Western contexts, in other parts of the globe?

These debates have, of course, been well-trodden in Irish studies, where terms such as the 'subaltern' are well-established in the critical terminology. If this representation of the subaltern offers a mode of viewing the

dispossessed subject through a different lens, alternative ways of thinking about marginalisation and dislocation, then the strategies as mapped out in *Subaltern Ethics* arguably provide useful ways of reading against the grain. If postcolonialism provides the opportunity for global anti-imperial critique, then, as Lehner asserts, following Slavoj Žižek, it is important to recognise which Scottish, Northern Irish and Irish voices have been 'effectively foreclosed by today's postmodern post-politics' (27).

However, another question for the post-colonial sceptic might be 'what does Lehner's *aesthetical* reading specifically bring to this approach?' It is here that the theory might get rather confusing for the reader uninitiated in the ethical debates stemming from post-structuralism in the last few decades. Here Lehner draws on a kaleidoscopic variety of critics and philosophers in order to map out her own approach, just a few of whom include: Levinas, Althusser, Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, Ranciere and Derrida. Often discussion of one philosopher moves very quickly on to another, so that the reader may feel disoriented by the pace and juxtaposition of ideas presented. This is also the case in the discussion of the literary texts in each of the main chapters, where Lehner tends to move incredibly swiftly from one philosophical idea to another. While Lehner's *aesthetics* stems from her reading of many of the above writers and thinkers, as a means of uncovering this 'shared matrix of politico-ethical concerns', at times it is difficult to discern her own position in a clear light apart from that of all of the others.

Subaltern Ethics is an ambitious book with admirable intentions (setting out counter-histories, reading history 'from below', and so on); one which will certainly be keenly read by all those working in postcolonial studies in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. In terms of the practical application of *aesthetics*, though, the reader might wonder about the wider viability of this reading strategy and the possible extent of its application beyond the covers of this book. While this is Lehner's first monograph, perhaps subsequent ones will go on to map out the possibilities of this theory in more detail.

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Notes

- 1 Gardiner, Michael, Niall O'Gallagher and Graeme McDonald (eds) (2011), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.4.
- 2 Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull (1989), *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*, Edinburgh: Polygon, Roderick Watson (1996) 'The Rage of Caliban: the "Unacceptable" Face and the "Unspeakable" Voice in Contemporary Scottish Writing' in H. Drescher and S. Hagemann, (eds), *Scotland to Slovenia: European Identities and Transcultural Communication*, Verlag: Peter Lang, Roderick Watson (2006), 'Living with the double tongue: contemporary poetry in Scots', in I. Brown, T. Clancy, S. Manning and M. Pittock (eds), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume Three: Modern Transformations: New Identities*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Berthold Schoene (1995), 'A Passage to Scotland: Scottish Literature and the British Postcolonial Condition', in *Scotlands* 2:1, pp. 107-22, Michael Gardiner (1996), 'Democracy and Scottish Postcoloniality' in *Scotlands* 3:2, pp.24-41, Liam Connell (2003), 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Post-Colonial Theory', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1&2, pp. 26-39, Scott Hames (2007) 'Editorial: Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism', in *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3 (Autumn/Winter).



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