Towards a subaltern aesthetics: Reassessing Postcolonial Criticism for contemporary Northern Irish and Scottish Literatures. James Kelman and Robert McLiam Wilson's Rewriting of National Paradigms

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Borders and Boundaries: these terms appropriately describe a certain tendency prevailing in Irish and Scottish Studies which delineates and thus delimits their field in terms of national concerns. While postcolonial criticism shows the potential to adhere to national boundaries whilst embedding them in an international context, this paper aims to shift its relevance from questions about the nation to the sectional interests of subaltern concerns for a reading of contemporary Irish, Northern Irish and Scottish literatures. A postcolonial approach for these cultures is problematic, as both Ireland and Scotland were themselves part of the colonisation process. Whereas Irish writing has been increasingly refigured in postcolonial terms, Scotland remains overlooked. Contemporary critical examinations of the crosscurrents between Scottish and Irish literatures emphasise, as Marilyn Reizbaum justifies her own cross-marginal approach, 'their status as minority cultures' with 'comparable "colonial" histories with respect to England' (Reizbaum, 1992, p.169). The predominance of issues of identity, which traverse through Irish and Scottish Studies respectively, seems to justify the preoccupancy with national paradigms. However, these, as this paper will argue, have proven the capacity to subsume identity markers such as class and gender. As postcolonialism has tended to uphold a resurgent nationalism which recuperates colonial structures, the method of the Subaltern Studies Group offers possibilities to trace affiliate concerns within the socio-cultural archipelago of my survey. Concerns such as class and gender permit the establishment of affiliations between writers that circumvent the naïve equation of nations as already agreed concepts.

This paper will discuss the contentious use of postcolonial theory in Irish and Scottish Studies in order to illuminate the problematics inherent in a postcolonialism which centres its analysis around the monolithic terminology of the colonial divide and maintains the teleological discourse of the nation as the main and only level at which the postcolonial seems to be of any relevance. In challenging the previous limiting usage of postcolonial criticism, my work aims to re-access its potential as an enabling ethical criticism for cross-archipelagic studies through the insights of subaltern concerns. Thus, in conclusion, I will point out how this approach can be used for reading the work of the Scottish writer James Kelman and the Northern Irish writer Robert McLiam Wilson.

To begin with, it is important to emphasise that the emergence of a resurgent nationalism plays an important role in the anti-colonial struggle for liberation. One of postcolonialism's foundational texts, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965), privileges nationalism, in the words of Leela Gandhi, 'as the principal remedial means whereby the colonised culture overcomes the psychological damage of colonial racism' (Gandhi, 1998, p.111). As postcolonialism has tended to postulate the postcolonial nation as 'the only legitimate end of decolonisation' (1998, p.111), such a conception of 'post'-colonial seems in regard to its implicit temporal dimension – as often marked by the use of a hyphen – to imply a linear logic of progress, which shows the potential to obscure the unchanged power-relations within national formations. While Fanon already warned of the 'empty shell' of its ensuing bourgeois ideology, a more succinct critique of the nationalist project has come from the Subaltern Studies Group in India. Its name, deriving from the terminology of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, connotes its alignment with oppressed social groups that have been subjugated, excluded and oppressed by the hegemonic classes. By foregrounding how class issues intersect with other marginalised identity formations related to gender, sexuality and ethnicity, the Subaltern Studies method ruptures the notion that a resurgent national culture can somehow resolve the vexed issues of identity and belonging.

While Subaltern Studies actually facilitates a postcolonial understanding across the national divide, many academics have however proven reluctant to abandon the comforting paradigms of national cultures and literatures, and continue to position the work of writers within nationalistic enclaves. Furthermore, the claim for a postcolonial reading of Irish and Scottish culture is contentious with regard to their relation to Britishness and the British Empire. Thus, one of the key texts of postcolonialism, *The Empire Writes Back,* asserts: 'While it is possible to argue that these societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial' (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, 2003, p.31-2). Consequently, their inclusion under *their* definition of 'post-colonial' is denied. The historical, political and economic relations of Ireland and Scotland in the imperial project complicate the easy allocation postcolonialism seems to make in terms of 'coloniser-colonised'. Thus, while postcolonialism's major strength lies in its role as an ethical criticism, which evaluates the political and historical situation of colonial relationships in their fundamental inequality and continuing political outcomes, the uneasy fit Ireland and Scotland present to this crucial ethical examination illuminates a major problem for the application for postcolonial theory.

Nevertheless, postcolonial theories have become increasingly applied in readings of Irish literature and culture. In order to justify Ireland's postcolonial status, Irish postcolonialism has made its claims through boasting its originality (Ireland was the first to be colonised and to decolonise), or its outright exceptionalism (Ireland is the last to be decolonised) (Graham, 2003, p.246). This sort of privileging emphasis on Ireland's 'anomalous' status, has, to use Bart Moore-Gilbert's remark on 'postcolonial claims', led to a 'distasteful […] beauty parade [of] the most oppressed colonial […] or the most "truly" postcolonial subjects' (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.12). In this '"compare and contrast" attitude to imperial

suffering', Ireland, in contrast to Scotland, has argued its case for an acknowledged place on the postcolonial agenda (Graham, 2003, p.245).

As Irish postcolonial readings have often focused on the constituting influence English colonialism had on anti-colonial Irish nationalism, they have tended to fall back on what Edward Said has termed the 'rhetoric of blame' (Said, 1993, p.19). Field Day's critique of the '"ultimate failure" of Irish cultural nationalism' seems at first an astounding echo of the Subaltern Studies' criticism on the postcolonial nation (Deane, 1990, p.3). However, its endeavour to establish a counter-hegemony in opposition to British cultural imperialism seeks, in Deane's words, to retrieve 'a meta-narrative which is […] hospitable to all the micro-narratives' (Deane, 1991, p.xix). This establishment of a national canon preserves not only the ideological necessity of the nation as the essential and even liberating unit of culture, but also replicates the same excluding structures as colonialism. Thus, Deane's inconsistent stance towards Irish nationalism relies, in his reluctance to disparage with the nation, on re- indulging in the ethics of the colonial divide: to simply blame the British for its failure (Graham, 2001, p.88-89). While the predominance of the 'nation'-narrative for postcolonial identitarian politics has subsumed other issues such as class and gender, it presents in the Irish context further problematics in terms of its political implications in the polarized debate between Revisionism and Nationalism.

As Richard Kirkland suggests in his recent *Identity Parades,* instead of fitting Ireland within a pre-existing paradigm, it should be used as a force to rethink the postcolonial. This is exactly what Graham seeks to propagate in his salient approach for an Irish postcolonialism. By invoking the Subaltern critique on nationalism, Graham recognises how the 'critical turn' in postcolonial studies enabled liberation from unilateral power dynamics. In particular, the renowned work of Homi Bhabha complicates the colonial discourse by disclosing its inherent ambivalence, which breaks the ultimate opposition of the colonial divide through mimicry, irony and subversion. In following Bhabha's notions, Graham's advocacy of the 'liminal spaces' of the colonial encounter enables a postcolonial reading of Ireland as well as

Scotland, which, instead of treating them as homogeneous entities comprised entirely of oppressors or victims, acknowledges their inner differences and specificities.

However, Bhabha's post-structuralist intoned hybridity has been severely criticised for its ahistorical stance, in short, as Aijaz Ahmad points out, the neglect of any 'material coordinates' (1996, p.287). Ahmad's attack on a postcolonial theory that is 'remarkably free of gender, class [and] identifiable political location' foregrounds how these issues, which are often in conflict to nationalist discourses, mark important sites of resistance against (neo-)colonialism (1996, p.287). The radical potential inherent in a postcolonial criticism which combines the material focus of a Gramscian-influenced Subaltern method with Bhabha's post-structuralist notion of cultural difference is able to undercut the unitary fabric of postcolonial readings which maintain the teleological necessity of the nation. Thus, by resuscitating the dissidences subalterneity noisily brings into the postcolonial debate, such an approach is able to expose affiliate disempowerments across and within national boundaries.

Furthermore, the problematic position of Ulster 'between' its surrounding nationalisms challenges the neat demarcations between national identities. However, while Northern Ireland has repeatedly attained a postcolonial relevance in regard to its 'anomalous state' (Lloyd, 1993), it is ironic then, that David Lloyd recently complained about the lacking attention to 'larger tendencies' and propagates a comparative context beyond 'the insular scholarship within Ireland' (1997, p.87, p.92). But as comparisons with non-European countries tend to cause 'exoticism and orientalism', Graham and Willy Maley suggest that it should be far more constructive to seek comparisons with 'nations closer to home – Scotland springs to mind – from which much could be learned' (1999, p.151). Yet, whereas Scotland's similar historic position within the Empire should grant it, in Maley's term, 'a postcolonial passport', postcolonial readings have been opposed or overlooked in Scotland.

However, postcolonial traces can be found in Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull's *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (1989), as Cairns Craig's *Out of History* (1996) who use Fanon's concept of 'inferiorisation' to explain how an internalised parochial status has lead to 'a profound self-hatred' (Craig, 1996, p.12). Recuperating the idea that a reinvigorated national culture resolves the identity crisis, they show the tendency to subsume other issues under the privileged aspect of the national. This is apparent in Craig's argument that Scotland's inferiorisation is based on 'the colour of our vowels: the rigidity of class speech in Britain' (1996, p.12). There is a risk here of conflating racial discriminations (colour) with issues of class and nationality. This analysis also ignores class distinctions within Scotland – as his concern seems to revolve solely around working-class speech – by privileging the aspect of the national. Berthold Schoene, who argues for the appliance of Fanon's 'evolutionary' stages to the history of Scottish Literature, is, as he states, 'doubtful […] that a postcolonial analysis of contemporary Scottish literature would be at all appropriate' (1995, p.116-7). Asserting that 'over the last few decades [Scottish literature] has ceased to be preoccupied with its postcolonial status', he addresses the notion that the increasing devolution can liberate Scotland from issues of inequality and disempowerment (1995, p.116-7). While Michael Gardiner seems warrantable worried about 'the promiscuous use' of postcolonial theory, he denies Scotland a postcolonial status as he considers its use to be 'always […] undermined by other types of subjective structuring such as class, ethnicity [and] sexual difference' (1996, p.24, p.39).

However, as I have argued above, he ignores the fact that postcolonial criticism has gone in recent years a considerable way to refine and redefine its terms by moving away from crude categorisations in dichotomies of national relevance. Refuting the hegemony of national discourses found in conventional postcolonial criticism, the Subaltern method facilitates a postcolonial analysis that foregrounds such issues as class, race and gender that have been previously overlooked by most

criticism. As such, it provides an enabling critical approach for the work of contemporary Scottish and Northern Irish writers, such as Kelman and McLiam Wilson, which is able to illustrate their political commitment to uncover the iniquitous power relations that exist within national or metropolitan constellations.

Concerned with questions of identity, in particular class and representation, which affect the everyday experiences of ordinary people, both writers explore in their novels the 'liminal spaces' of their native Glasgow and Belfast – both former imperial cities whose increasing poverty has been screened off in their official representation, as apparent in their respective 'City of Culture' campaigns. I will now briefly look at their linguistic and stylistic interventions as a means to resist the prevailing cultural imperialism, that Kelman addressed in his Booker Prize speech wherein he connects his work to an outspoken postcolonial agenda 'towards decolonisation and self-determination' (cited in Chadwick, 1995, p.10). Their working-class backgrounds offer them a critical distance to the language of power and authority in their differing yet complimentary strategies. These are not reducible to some national predisposition, but inflected by issues of class.

Countering the inscribed value-system of a linguistic hegemony, which was demonstrated in the furore surrounding The Booker Prize that he won for *How Late It Was, How Late* (1998), Kelman aims to create what he terms 'value-free prose' (McLean 1989, p. 72). By transforming the English language into, as he states, 'something that could be mine', his transcription of 'the Scottish working-class way of speaking a language' intermingles English with the demotic speech of his local dialect (cited in Talib, 2002, p.16). By including through his use of so-called swear-words previously excluded speech patterns in the written language of his fiction, he exposes the distorting gap that exists between 'official' literary representations and reality. In order to avoid as much as possible the hegemonic implications of any authorial positioning by 'getting rid of that standard third party narrative

voice' and the lack of speech-markers, Kelman's narrative voice resides on an equal level to his characters (cited in McNeill, 1989, 4-5; Craig, 1999).

While Kelman's 'politics of voice' realise a rendition of his oral culture, Wilson's language use is overshadowed by what Maley calls the Irish 'politics of pronunciation' – as determined by colonial legacies and class boundaries. Thus, Wilson seeks rather to follow the Joycean example, to parody and satirise the English language. This becomes apparent in the opening paragraph of his first novel, *Ripley Bogle* (1989), entitled 'It Begins', which reads as follows:

> *(Enter man with money. He waits. Enter woman, misclothed and passionate. They rut. Exeunt.)*
>
> 'Aaaaaaaaeeeeeeiiiiccchhhh!'
>
> The world's disquiet gets underway. Birth scene. The calm cry of parturition. For the one. The incandescent infant. Mrs Bogle screaming her way through the unwilling production of Master Ripley Bogle, the famed. Splayed knees and bucking loins. Dirty, heavyheaded, eponymous bastard shoving his angry way out. (Wilson, 1989, p.1; in the following abbreviated RB)

Showing an inventive creativity with the creation of new words, such as 'misclothed', the articulate expressions of 'parturition' and 'incandescent' rub rather uneasily against the colloquial 'rut' and 'bastard', as the adjective-noun combination of 'calm cry' or 'incandescent infant' seem equally incongruous. Through this discrepancy between different registers of speech and the unexpected combinations of words, Wilson challenges accepted linguistic norms of English.

This is also underlined in the eponymous hero's destitution as a tramp in London from Belfast's catholic working-class which is put in stark contrast to his stylised use of English. Kelman also uses this contrast of linguistic registers connoted to class and thus power-positions in a scene of *How Late It Was, How Late*, where Sammy is at the end of an interchange with a doctor, whose patronising attitude marks him as the powerless 'other', accused: 'I find your language offensive' (Kelman, 1998, p.225). While it is actually the doctor whose treatment and language is offensive,

Kelman exposes the gap that exists between their unequal power relations. In contrast to Bogle's mimicry which *menaces* in Bhabha's understanding the authority position the mastery of English connotes, Sammy angrily refuses to accommodate his language use to any authority: 'Ah well fuck ye then' (1998, p.225). As Kelman's likewise refusal to take part in their language-power-game enables his close 'facticity' to the actualities of working-class speech, Wilson contrastingly creates a satiric displacement. This produces a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* which aims, as Brecht states, 'to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident' (1940, p.136). This is also achieved through Wilson's use of shifting narrative positions (between first-person and third-person narration) which functions – similar to Kelman's internalised polyphony (through his use of a free indirect discourse) – to multiply the viewpoints, and defies any stable positioning or singular vision of the world. These created double perspectives allow subversions of the unitary discourses of both colonialism and nationalism.

Bogle's defiant claim for a 'hybrid' identity – dubbing himself 'Ripley Irish British Bogle' in opposition to the North's two opposing camps – allows him an ironic mimicry of both Irish and British positions (RB, p.16). This becomes apparent in his solidarity-seeking comment on the continuing colonial politics of the British in Northern Ireland:

> I always felt rather sorry for the British in Ireland. They didn't want to be there. […] Let's face it. Most European countries had their empire at some time or another. Eventually, they crumble and another one comes along. […] The British got it wrong. They grew all philanthropic and noble. They were the only imperial power trying to give their empire back. That was their mistake. We wogs, us wogs, we didn't like that. Not at all. (RB, p.111)

In adopting a sympathetic understanding with the British in his voice, he modulates this perspective with his own Irishness by combining the imperialistic offence of 'wogs' with the communal pronoun 'we'. Bogle's schizophrenic ambiguity between Irish and British positions moves, as he

states, always '[f]rom one extreme to the other' (RB, p.184). Before he flees from his 'beastly birthplace', Bogle rebels against ideological pretensions and restrictions of 'home' (RB, p.190):

> We Irish, we're all fucking idiots. No other place can rival us for the senseless sentimentality in which we wallow. Us and Ulster. The God-beloved fucking Irish, as they'd like to think. As a people we're a shambles; as a nation – a disgrace; as a culture we're a bore … individually we're often repellent. But we love it, us Irish fellows. […] All that old Irishness crap promoted by Americans and professors of English Literature. menace and cupidity. All balls. (RB, p.190)

Yet in Cambridge, it is from this adopted perspective of the 'stamp of downing Celticism' (RB, p.204), that Bogle savagely mocks the dissolved identity of the former imperial power:

> In one of my epic, universal moments, I conclude with rare intelligence that an Englishman's lack of interest in himself naturally precludes any interest in others Remote, impersonal, disengaged. Easy pickings for the dark, concocted vitality of the Celt (i.e. me). (RB, p.202)

This carnivalesque inversion of the established power-hierarchy turns from the mimicry of English colonial authority, in Bhabha's understanding, 'a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to *menace* – a difference that is almost total but not quite' (1995, p.91). Thus, the seemingly innocent 'pet of the smart set' who proves so susceptible to the assimilation of English cultural (pre)conceptions soon exceeds 'the leeway people gave [him] on account of [his] Irishness and hard-boy image'(RB, p.204): 'I persisted on going too far. I picked fights, skipped lectures, told lies, got pissed, taunted dons and made fewer friends. I fucked everyone off in a big way' (RB, p.246). Through Bogle's satiric imitation of the colonial inscription of the barbaric 'other', Wilson exposes this Irishness simply as the copy of a copy, which undermines any notion of an 'authentic' identity.

Both writers parody the conventional paradigms of their respective narrative traditions. Ripley Bogle's autobiographical anecdotes of Belfast

play in a deliberate adulteration on the dominant themes of the Northern Irish thriller (the motifs of 'love-across-the-barricades', exile romance and betrayal of best friend), which he exposes in the end as fabricated versions of his stage-Irish masquerade. Kelman's *A Disaffection* (1989) similarly parodies romantic nationalism, as apparent in Patrick Doyle's search for 'totality' through the old pipes he finds in the beginning of the novel. Seeking to escape his fragmented and isolated existence as a school-teacher, Doyle's retreat into romantic solipsism, as well as his musings on the redemptive qualities of a mystified Scottishness, aims, as with Bogle's *auto-exotic* versions of Irishness, to expose the characters' complicity in escapist constructions which are products of a dominant ideology they seek to oppose. The Romantic 'dream of totality' is – as well as the notion of authenticity – produced, as Lee Spinks reveals, 'by the fragmentation of cultural and political life in the era of late capitalism' (Spinks, 2001, p.98). Chiming with Fredric Jameson's characterisations of postmodernism's 'schizophrenic mood', Doyle who is 'caught between the poles' (Kelman, 1989, p.57) of his insuperable dualism has, as with Bogle, become detached from any interaction with 'the real' or the world of politics.

Both novels investigate the destructive and politically debilitating consequences the ideological systems of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism have on the individual. However, in contrast to previous national imaginings, as to the state-sponsored *re-imagining* that Glasgow and Belfast have seen through their respective redevelopments as part of their 'City of Culture' crusades, both writers are engaged to establish a new urban dialectic between the 'Real' and the 'Imaginary'. Kelman and Wilson's effort to offer their characters possibilities to interpret their city space by creating their own 'mental maps' of subjective orientation points to its urban totality can be related to Jameson's concept of 'cognitive mapping':

> [T]he mental map of the city space […] can be extrapolated to that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads […] urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of local city spaces […] the dialectic between the here and now of immediate

> perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality [...] presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser's great formulation of ideology itself [...] this positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated. (1988, p.353)

Their characters signify the attempts to circumvent the sense of individual alienation, entrapment and displacement from the city's 'absent totality' by trying to understand its network of power-structures. Kelman and Wilson's 'class mappings' thus proffer a political possibility to re-negotiate the empty hybridity of postcolonialism by investigating its galvanisation with capitalism.

This paper has attempted to propose a postcolonial approach for contemporary Scottish and Northern Irish literatures that challenges the predominant focus on the national. The analytical methodology of Subaltern Studies offers a critical framework that helps to understand how contemporary writers engage with disempowerments, contradictions, questions of identity and representations related to issues of class and gender on a sectional level that transgress national borders and boundaries. This methodology, what I want to term a *subaltern aesthetics*, locates the temporal and spatial dimension that connotes the postcolonial within the dynamic of a late global capitalistic class system. It is able to engage with the historical, economic and cultural consequences of imperialism by paying close attention to the subjective structuring of class and gender mappings.

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