

Irish Writing in Context

Mária Kurdi (ed.), *Critical Anthology for the Study of Modern Irish Literature* (Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2003)

The editor of the present volume has prepared an impressive selection from some of the most significant writings on Irish literature and culture. The up-to-dateness of the critical material was made a priority in Mária Kurdi's choice: the extracts from articles and books by Irish, American, and English scholars have been published, without exception, in the last few years. The anthology, including nearly forty texts, was originally conceived to compensate students for the painful lack of critical material in the teaching and studying of Irish Literature and Culture at university Departments of English in Hungary. The editor's ambition with the volume is twofold: besides offering an introduction to the postcolonial, feminist and postmodern readings of Irish literature, by presenting critical texts on issues that concern Irish culture and literature, she also offers, although in a necessarily truncated form, a guide to the history of Modern Irish Literature. The majority of the sources from which the selection was made represents recent Irish scholarship: we can find several extracts from well known and refereed journals such as the *Irish*

University Review or *The Irish Journal of Psychology* and some of the chapters were taken from the volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, perhaps the most grandiose Irish literary project started in the late twentieth century. The difficulties of contacting the most established publishing houses to ask permission to reproduce copyright materials sometimes, unfortunately, created an insurmountable problem in the targeted choice of texts, an external factor which is responsible for the absence of a number of other representative writings which the editor would also have wished to include. The kindness of the publishers and writers of the selected texts, however, enabled Mária Kurdi to come up with an inspiring and useful volume on Irish literary and cultural studies.

After a philosophical-cultural grounding in the first, the studies singled out in the second and third parts of the anthology provide a historical development of the main genres in the colonial period, the Irish Literary Revival, the Postcolonial period and, finally, the contemporary Irish scene. This arrangement also allowed some of the writers to be analyzed from diverse perspectives: by two essays written on his poetry, and two on his plays, the work of William Butler Yeats, for example, features in as many as four articles in the volume. There is a delicate balance between the

purely theoretical and the highly informative essays.

Most articles in Part One try to define Irish national identity, “the Irish psyche,” and the colonial and postcolonial experience of Ireland. The initial extracts are all taken from the most influential texts on Irish postcolonial studies. Grounding their work in the theories of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Irish postcolonial writers such as Richard Kearney or David Lloyd, the selected authors, Declan Kiberd, Seamus Deane and Gerry Smyth, survey the Irish literary canon in the wider social context hoping that, through postcolonial criticism, they can ‘reassess’ the most revered masterpieces by ‘re-inventing’ Irish literature while escorting it from imperial ideological domination. In “A New England Called Ireland?”, excerpted from the introductory section of *Inventing Ireland* (1995), Kiberd explains the dialogic, mutually generative nature of the construction of national identity when remarking that, “If Ireland had never existed, the English would have invented it” (17). In his view Ireland, throughout the centuries, has been seen as England’s ‘unconscious’ and Irish writing always a response to the country’s colonized position, identifying it with “a secret England called Ireland” (19). Similarly to Kiberd, Deane also perceives Irish nationalism as a “derivative of its British counterpart” (23).

His essay was extracted from the preface to a collection of three pamphlets written by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said, originally published individually by the Field Day Theatre Company, and re-published together under the title *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (1990) by Field Day. Deane finds that the first attempt to liberate Irish national identity from its supplementary position was made in the period of the Irish Literary Revival: “The revival, like the rebellion and the War of Independence, the Treaty of 1922 (which partitioned Ireland into its present form), and the subsequent civil war, were simultaneously causes and consequences of the concerted effort to renovate the idea of the national character and of the national destiny. It was only when the Celt was seen by the English as a necessary supplement to their national character that the Irish were able to extend the idea of supplementarity to that of radical difference” (24). In the chapter “The Modes of Decolonisation” excerpted from *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (1998) Smyth, borrowing Richard Kearney’s philosophical model of the ‘Irish mind’, David Lloyd’s critique of the ‘narrative of representation’ as well as his concept of ‘adulteration,’ and Luke Gibbon’s use of allegory as a “figure of resistance” (29n.) for his own argument about the concept of decolo-

nisation applied to the Irish context, offers yet another example in the volume of the role of Irish postcolonial literary criticism which tries to liberate and decolonise the national narrative.

Independence, however long ago it was established, will not be achieved, the writers of the last few articles in Part One claim, until it is also carried out at a social and psychological level. Three articles in part one, two of them being selected from a special issue of *The Irish Journal of Psychology* (1994) devoted to the definition of 'the Irish psyche,' approach the postcolonial experience from a psychological point of view. Geraldine Moane's essay, "A Psychological Analysis of Colonialism in an Irish Context," describes the oppressed status of the Irish mind by likening the operation of the system of colonial domination to a 'feminist view of patriarchy' (40). "Building on strengths," she suggests, can be a common element in feminist thought and decolonisation: "women have gained strengths through subordination" (44). The process of decolonisation, however, must be two-fold: "Thus decolonisation involves not merely overcoming the negative psychological patterns associated with colonialism, but also developing new values and ideas" (45). Liberation from the patterns of 'lack of pride,' 'mistrust,' 'divisiveness,' and 'narrow identity' (43) must be followed by the 'cultivation of creativity,' 'education,' 'openness to

exploration,' a 'sense of solidarity,' and 'collective action' (45). These largely theoretical articles in the first part of the book also serve to function as background materials, "Contexts," as the title of the section indicates, to the better understanding of the postcolonial, feminist and postmodern discourses which inform most of the essays in the following sections.

Part Two, "Irish Literature in the Colonial Period and during the Irish Literary Revival" contains extracts which introduce the colonial histories of Irish fiction, drama, and poetry in the form of thematic essays, historical summaries, biographical overviews and analyses of individual dramatic pieces and poems. Many of the articles in this section refer to postcolonial discourse as a background source. Unknowingly picking up the subject of Ireland as a "female country" in C. L. Innes's concluding essay of Part One, Rosalind Clark's writing traces the history of the sovereignty theme, first in the shape of the Morrigan, goddess of war, in early pagan times then in "aisling" or vision poetry throughout the seventeenth century and its translations in the Anglo-Irish tradition in the following two centuries, and, in the later sovereignty tradition, as in Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in the shape of a poor old woman who dispenses death. The theme of Ireland sometimes as a beautiful young maiden, other times as an

ugly old woman dominates many of the most influential works of Irish literature in the colonial period, which can explain why the article is placed to the front in this section. The comprehensive overviews of Christopher Murray on “Irish Drama Since the Seventeenth Century” and “The Foundation of the Modern Irish Theatre: A Centenary Assessment,” as well as Julian Moynahan’s on Irish Gothic fiction are very informative, providing an all-encompassing picture of the histories of drama and fiction in Ireland. Selected from the first volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Andrew Carpenter’s essay on Jonathan Swift exemplifies how Irish scholars try to re-evaluate and appropriate the careers of early modern Anglo-Irish writers by placing and examining them in a new cultural context. Carpenter recalls the short periods of time which Swift spent in England and concludes that since he lived over half a century in Ireland, it is no wonder that the un-English tone of his works, his fantastic and grotesque imagination, which finds its source in Irish comic tradition (69), is very noticeable: “Anarchy of mind and technique mark Swift and the other Irish writers of the eighteenth century and their unsettled vision of the world brings forth writings absolutely different from those of eighteenth-century England” (71). Although each of the other articles in the volume testifies to

the great care with which Mária Kurdi reshaped the referencing apparatus of the selected pieces to always adjust it to the purposes of the volume, this extract seems to be an exception: we can find references accidentally left in the text which refer to another section, as the reference to Spenser in the sixth footnote (70), or selections referred to that can be found in *The Field Day Anthology* and not in the present volume, (71, 72). Perhaps because of the lack of space this article also appears to end somewhat abruptly, cut in the middle of an intriguing discussion of Swift’s relationship with Stella. In each section of the volume feminist criticism is duly represented: here in the approaches of individual plays such as Maureen Waters’s analysis of Lady Gregory’s play, *Grania* or Maria Keaton’s “The Mother’s Tale: Maternal Agency in *Juno and the Paycock*.”

Part Three, the bulkiest in the book, dedicates itself to the period of “Post-colonial and Contemporary Irish Literature.” While introducing the most representative of twentieth century Irish writers, the theoretically well-grounded approaches highlight the diversity of modern Irish literature by showing the richness of postcolonial and feminist issues. As in the previous part, this section also begins with historical surveys and ends in with feminist criticism. Terence Brown’s brief summary of poetic careers covers the period beginning

with the early followers of Yeats in the 1930s, such as Austin Clarke, and reaches to the period in which the poetry of John Hewitt and W. R. Rodgers dominated the scene in the 1960s. This line of the history of poetry, in a later extract, is picked up by Rory Brennan's chapter, "Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Overview," in which he gives an account of the changes in Irish poetry after 1960, admittedly not touching upon the poetry of Seamus Heaney because, "his success has reached the point where a hundred times as much ink as he will ever use will be spilt to explain him" (216). The anthology compensates for this lack in the next inclusion by Alasdair D. F. Macrae, "Varieties of Commitment in Seamus Heaney." The remaining three essays on contemporary Irish poets, one on the poetry of Derek Mahon, another one on Eavan Boland's feminist line, together with Patricia Boyle Haberstroh's introductory chapter on contemporary Irish women poets duly justify Brennan's evaluation of contemporary poetry: "In thirty years we have moved from subsistence to subvention, from bohemia to bureaucracy, from appreciation to popularity. And poets – and I would strongly assert poetry too – have flourished. To propose it is a bad time for poetry, as actually has been done, is more than a little absurd" (219).

More chapters than in the previous parts deal with fiction, the novelistic tradition gaining a greater significance

than before in the Irish literary canon with the appearance of Joyce. In his comparative analysis of Flann O'Brien's novels José Lanteris finds the sources of the novelist's literary techniques in the formal elements of the Menippean satire (182), also employed by, for example, Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. A brief historical survey of twentieth century Irish fiction writers follows Lanteris's essay, mentioning the works of Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Sean O'Faolain, and Elizabeth Bowen and some Northern Irish novelists such as Glenn Patterson among others. Characteristically, Christina Mahony's text places some of the narratives, such as Beckett's *The Unnameable*, in typically Irish traditions, the forerunners of which, according to her, are Swift and Laurence Sterne, the latter of whom, however, lived his whole life in England and never admitted any personal connection with Ireland.

As in the previous sections, we can find an abundance of the selected texts dealing with drama and theatre, the editor's special fields of research. Fintan O'Toole offers a comprehensive survey of the history of drama in the past few decades when he calls the most recent dramatic production of playwrights the "third way": "A second revival, in my own view no less powerful, began in the late 1950s and continued well into the 1980s. It is marked, obviously, by the work of Tom Murphy,

Brian Friel, John B. Keane, Thomas Kilroy and Hugh Leonard. And we have now entered into some kind of third phase. . . In some important respects, this third phase has more in common with the first revival than with the second, yet it is important to stress that it includes the later work of two of the most important writers of the second revival, Murphy and Friel” (292). Gender and identity, play-acting, and myth-making are the main subjects in the analyses of the works of the above mentioned dramatists. Eamonn Jordan’s text focuses on the themes of self-conscious performativity, mimicry, play-within-a-play, all of these being features of metatheatricality in three of the plays of Frank McGuinness. Perhaps symbolically, feminist criticism concludes the anthology: the role of women in Irish fiction writing is discussed in the extract from Anne Fogarty’s chapter, “Uncanny Families: Neo-Gothic Motifs and the Theme of Social Change in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction.” Claudia W. Harris’s overview of the Charabanc Theatre Company and Anna McMullan’s article, “Unhomely Stages: Women Taking (a) Place in Irish Theatre” offer an intriguing insight into the status of feminist plays and female actors in contemporary theatrical life.

In sum, it may be said that, after a thorough reading of the extracts selected for this anthology, one can fairly

admit that the multiplicity of both the subjects and the authors, and the diversity of the perspectives deployed in the inclusions covering the time span of over two centuries impose a perhaps too heavy burden on the reader: while all the papers are cut short, they are, at the same time, very informative and it remains the teacher’s task to fill the gaps necessarily left in the extracts for lack of more space. Although the omissions are marked, it would be a help to know the original length and pagination of the selected materials. The preparing of such a compendium of the critical reception of Irish and sometimes modern literature in general will, however, certainly facilitate the teaching of modern Irish literature at Hungarian universities. The editor of the present anthology, Mária Kurdi, has successfully shown by her selection that mastering and managing such a vast amount of material on Irish literary criticism is possible.

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