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[Sumner, Rachael. Writing from the margins of Europe: the application of postcolonial theories to selected works by William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge and James Joyce]

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REVIEW

Sumner, Rachael: *Writing from the Margins of Europe: the Application of Postcolonial Theories to Selected Works by William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge and James Joyce.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014.

The term *postcolonial literature* has changed and evolved over recent years, becoming open and wider, and incorporating a broader range of literary works. The former rejection of such texts was based on the very fact that they were written by authors who lived in what Ewa Rice has termed “white on white” colonies (Sumner, 250). It was largely the case that only literature of non-European authors could be considered postcolonial in the 1990s.

What Sumner tries to show readers through her book *Writing from the Margins of Europe* is an attempt to apply postcolonial theories to selected works written by the Irish authors James Joyce, William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge. The book consists of five chapters, the first of which offers the structure for the overall study and provides an overview of postcolonial theory. The following chapters are based on four major areas: specifically historiography, nationalism, language and physical and psychological displacement.

Rachael Sumner is a lecturer at the State Higher Institute of Vocational Education in Racibórz, Poland, where she teaches British and American literature and culture. Her research is focused on Irish literature, and postcolonial theory and literature, with particular attention to the above mentioned writers. *Writing from the Margins of Europe* is based on her doctoral dissertation and illustrates a comprehensive and systematic approach to the field, indicating a well-rounded awareness not only in the sphere of literature and postcolonial theory but in history and philosophy as well.

If the author’s intention is to highlight the complex relationship between Irish literature and postcolonial theory, then her aim has been achieved. She establishes some basic premises upon which postcolonial theory might be applied to the works of Synge, Yeats and Joyce. She takes as her point of departure key areas of postcolonial theory; namely narratives of anthropology, history and cultural identity, orality and language, and themes of exile and emigration. Furthermore, she manages to compare and contrast those authors as well as to examine the ways in which they influenced each other in terms of their treatment of issues of Irish identity and autonomy. She offers fresh insight into texts that have been analysed from other viewpoints in the past and challenges critical opinions of other scholars, for instance Oona Frawley’s reading of Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen* published in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*. In the field of postcolonial theory Sumner has relied on academics such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant and Benita Parry.

In the introduction, Sumner clearly asserts that she is aware of the possible objections towards her publication, since the application of postcolonial theories to Irish literature, and particularly to the works of Joyce, Synge and Yeats, is risky as they had written their greatest works before Ireland

became independent. Yet, she still believes that she is able to provide different perspectives to this field through her book, and justly so. Yeats, Synge and Joyce, she claims, were all faced with the challenge of reprising Irish history and cultural legacy from historical narratives designed to justify the British subjugation of the island nation. Thus the configuration of Ireland as a place of ‘otherness’ opposed to the cultural superiority of the British mirrors that othering of subaltern nations in other areas of empire. She makes the point that, “fear of the Irish as a less than civilised nation existed, now fused with the imperial teleologies which informed the world-view of many Victorians...Accompanying such crude forms of representation emerged an attempt to “objectively” define Celtic traits, riding a wave of interest in Celticism which was ultimately dependent upon essentialised stereotypes” (82–83). In Joyce, she perceives far more of a departure from the nationalist search for affirmation of cultural origins. Citing the theorist Homi K. Bhabha, she notes that political agency is “acquired through the use of strategies intended to subvert the discursive practices of a given culture. Only a culture which is capable of self-interrogation achieves genuine liberation, freeing itself from the grands récits of nationalism or imperialism and entering a realm which can stake a claim for genuine inclusivity” (163). This is precisely what Joyce achieves in *Ulysses* with its fluid conceptualisation of identity and its moulding of potential new forms of cultural awareness.

It could be argued that there are other authors and texts that deserve such attention to a greater degree considering the limitations of publishing opportunities in other countries. Irish writers, it must be admitted, can hardly be said to have lacked publicity over the years. The four concepts that underlie the publication; namely historiography, nationalism, language and displacement are valid and provide a useful framework. These are four sites of transformation and agency staked out by postcolonial theorists ranging from Edward Said to Homi K. Bhabha to which Sumner refers:

- With regard to **historiography**, the rewriting of subaltern history has long framed those narratives of alterity regarded as justification for the project of imperialism. It was just this point which made Said’s argument such a compelling one in his seminal text *Orientalism*.
- **Nationalism**, too has proved a sticking point for cultural theorists, adopted by some, including Frantz Fanon, as an avenging force and rejected by proponents of cultural hybridity such as Bhabha.
- **Language**, at its base, carries culture - as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o asserts “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (in Sumner 58–59).
- Finally, **displacement** – whether the physical uprooting of an entire people, or the trauma and psychological damage inflicted by the legacy of colonisation draws attention to the geopolitical outlook of postcolonial theory.

In chapter one, Sumner links her research to academics such as Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton and Declan Kiberd who have done considerable work in the field. This introductory chapter offers a general introduction to postcolonial literary theory. It introduces issues such as discourse theory, nationalism, hybridity, displacement and many others laying out the groundwork for further discussion of the potential points of comparison and contrast between Irish writers and postcolonial authors from other parts of the world. This chapter also paves the way for later subject matter by assessing the adequacy of the term “postcolonial” itself, and its potential remit. Sumner is fully aware that her study “would not be possible were it not for ... developments in postcolonial theory which have permitted Ireland to enter the sphere of the debate” (45). One of the aims of the book is to show the ways in which the postcolonial field might become wider by such a fluid concept of subjectivity.

Narration of Ireland’s histories is the main focus of chapter two; attention is paid mostly to the concept of Ireland as “other” in the works of Irish authors. A comparison of Synge and Oscar Wilde establishes a tendency to compare and contrast Wilde’s works with all three authors which brings the reader to the question of why Sumner did not include this author among those whose works are analysed. Her explanation of the choice of those three writers seems to be satisfactory; it is based

on their shared features such as their focus on Ireland as subject material, their refusal to represent the nation as blameless victim, or their experience of exile. The most interesting part of this chapter is, in my opinion, an analysis of Synge's otherness, his difference from the islanders in *The Aran Islands*. Culturally linked to the islanders through the fact of his own Irishness, he is nevertheless distanced from them by his associations with the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class. Synge emerges as a "fallible and even faintly comic participant in the daily life of the islanders, his role as colonial voyeur compromised by the fact that he is, himself, Anglo-Irish" (98). There is, then, a sense in which Synge subverts narratives of racial stereotypes, and from this perspective, Sumner argues, his work might at least be termed subversive if not proto-postcolonial.

Irish nationalism plays an important role in chapter three and is mostly related to the writers' urges to go back to Gaelic myths and legends and the concept of an idealised past. Of particular value in this chapter is a contrastive analysis of Yeats and Synge versus Joyce in relation to those issues. Sumner's argument is that, while Yeats and Synge still have a tendency to cling to notions of the myth of Irish decline, and the nation's fall from a glorious mythic heritage, Joyce rejects such tired narratives of Irish national heritage and legacy. There is a potential for a genuine remoulding of narrative fabric in Joyce's work which is not so apparent in that of Synge or Yeats.

The fourth chapter, devoted to the analysis of language of the three writers, proves useful when it comes to an understanding of why Joyce, Yeats and Synge decided to write in English rather than Gaelic. Yeats's inability to speak Gaelic, Synge's use of the Hiberno-English dialect and Joyce's linguistic project in *Finnegans Wake* are analysed here. An explanation of Joyce's link to Rushdie in terms of choosing English for the benefit of attaining a wider reading audience connects the publication with contemporary literature and that is to be appreciated. Such helpful comparisons are, however, missing in connection with other Irish writers such as George Moore or Douglas Hyde, who were interested in similar issues. If the authors can be compared to present-day non-Irish writers such as Rushdie, readers might wonder why they cannot also be compared to their Irish contemporaries such as Moore or Hyde.

The last chapter deals with the authors' intentional decision to live and write outside Ireland and offers their ideas of a better future for Ireland, which Joyce and Synge saw in pro-European attitudes, England not included. It is interesting to observe Sumner's contrastive analysis of Joyce and Synge's visions of their native land particularly in non-fictional texts such as Joyce's polemic, "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages", as compared with Synge's semi-autobiographical study *The Aran Islands*.

She locates, for example, Joyce in opposition to the other writers when analysing their views of the Irish peasantry. Synge and Yeats had a very idealised approach to the peasantry, while Joyce was able to see their lack of education and social mobility as well as their poverty.

Sumner has devoted one part of her conclusion to areas for further consideration in which she suggests that postcolonial literary theory can be extended to incorporate other texts written by Irish, Scottish or Polish writers. While she indicates that there is a risk of taking this project too far in terms of diluting the sense of the postcolonial, it may well be applied in other areas. This argument is relevant for other countries in central Europe too. The Czech Republic, Slovakia or Ukraine might also come under the umbrella of white on white colonization.

In terms of its strengths, secondary sources are used sufficiently enough throughout *Writing from the Margins of Europe*, taken from a range of academic sources. Sumner relies heavily on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, both influential literary theorists in the field of postcolonial literature. Another positive aspect of the project is that the amount of bibliographical data presented for the chosen authors is sufficient, but not redundant; Sumner presents only those biographical details that are supportive for an understanding of their works in relation to postcolonial theories. The usual organization of her chapters is point-by-point which encourages a synthetic approach, as each chapter discusses a single aspect of the topics, covering all authors at once. Furthermore, each chapter is grounded in a historical and theoretical understanding of the major issues concerned before attempting analysis of specific texts. Another valuable aspect is that the author works with the writers' poetry as well as prose and drama, allowing the reader to see their works in wider

contexts. This decision to explore a wide range of literary forms is useful, since the same ideas might be expressed in a different manner using diverse genres. The study provides a balanced view of the writers, challenging many traditional interpretations of their works. Furthermore, the three writers are given approximately the same amount of space, without prioritizing any of them.

As far as the book's weaknesses are concerned, Sumner's constant habit of making references to other chapters interrupts the flow of reading, although it might be seen as proof that the volume offers a coherent argument with a certain development.

As Sumner's research is rooted in Bhabha's publications to a great extent, another argument could be raised. Some critics, such as Benita Parry, see Bhabha's definition of postcolonial experience as too idealized, viewing the migrant figure as hybrid, denationalized and liberated. However, recent events, such as the current migrant crisis and Brexit, have given the lie to these ideals and exclusive models of national identity coexist with and often undermine any attempts at viewing postcolonial identity in such an idealistic way.

One further weakness of the book is that it may be regarded as somewhat out of date, in the sense that the field of postcolonial theory has developed and changed so much over the past few years, particularly in response to tangible events such as the refugee crisis. Thus Bhabha's views have been very much rejected in favour of a need for more definite political action and a greater emphasis on the need to acknowledge identity politics as relevant to the field.

As for the notes, these mostly provide explanations of terms, items of information on historical events, or interesting remarks about authors' lives or works. It might be argued, though, that some of them are very important so far as understanding some of the significant arguments of the book are concerned, and should have been incorporated into the main text.

Sumner's aim to offer a new perspective on works by Joyce, Yeats and Synge must be appreciated. What might be considered as a very valuable and up-to-date contribution is the link that she depicts between those Irish writers and contemporary postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Wole Soyinka or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

Although all the terms are fully explained and necessary historical and philosophical hints are presented, it is likely that only readers who are already familiar with postcolonial theory will fully benefit from this publication. Although the introduction offers a basic overview of the area, it might require some prior awareness of postcolonial theory and literature as well as some previous experience of studying the three writers in question.

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