

Review Essay

McGarrity, Maria & Claire Culleton (eds.). *Irish Modernism and the Global Primitive*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Series: *New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature*. ISBN: 9 780230 612235

Just out of the press is a collection of essays devoted to the exploration of primitivism, a recurrent though frequently overlooked trope in Irish literature. Under the title *Irish Modernism and the Global Primitive*, editors Maria McGarrity and Claire Culleton have gathered eleven contributions focusing on the strategies of the primitivist discourse and their occurrence or recurrence in early 20th century Irish literature. In her own contribution to the collection, McGarrity states that the “cultural lens of Irish modernism refracts multiple visions of primitives within and beyond its borders, often as a peculiarly reflected portrait of Irish identity and art” (133). Although each of the essays is devoted to particular reflections of this “lens,” reading the volume as a whole provides us with an overview of the multiple masters the strategies of primitivism have served. Reading through the collection will reveal the paradoxes of primitivism, a trope which can be found functioning as an aide both to imperialism and subversive nationalism and assisting in cultural battles within and beyond Ireland.

The editors’ “Introduction” can be considered a chapter in itself, as it brings forward the trope of primitivism and the various uses it has been put to. The introduction presents the essays examining “the intersection of Irish modernism and the global rhetoric of the primitive encounter” (2) and provides readers with the keys to recognize these intersections. Thus, McGarrity and Culleton define the three major converging tropes: primitivism *in* Ireland, primitive alterities *abroad* and *extreme* representations of indigenous others. Among the authors whose works are explored in search of these intersections we find well-known figures such as Patrick Pearse, J. M. Synge, Dorothy Macardle or Elizabeth Bowen; however, it is James Joyce who receives the attention of most essays. This can hardly come as a surprise, taking into account that Joyce

can be seen and is presented as “much an ebullient mocker as an arrogant promoter of primitivism” (5), a paradoxical stance which will become the organizing force of the collection itself.

The collection opens with John McCourt’s essay “Queering the Revivalist’s Pitch: Joycean Engagements with Primitivism.” This is an excellent choice given that McCourt devotes his opening paragraphs to offer a working definition of primitivism illustrated with instances from the history of art, music and literature. In addition, the author introduces the two prevalent models of primitivism in Ireland: the Catholic inspired vision of golden-age Ireland as a land of saints and sages and the secular myth of Celtic Ireland as a land of druids and bards. McCourt accounts for Joyce’s ambivalence towards the latter model, which was at first rejected and later transformed by the Irish author. It is maintained that, in spite of his initial resistance, Joyce did take the “primitive turn” (21) and made it become central in his last works. However, as McCourt argues, Joyce only took this turn once he had demystified and depoliticized primitivism, paring away with the romantic notions and slipping in some irony and controversy. McCourt could be thus accounting for the shift from revivalist Romantic to Modernist forms of primitivism. It is interesting to note that such shift even affected one of the bastions of Irish nationalism. In “Robots and Rebels: Technological and Organic Discourse in Pearse’s Political Essays,” Barbara A. Suess discusses Patrick Pearse’s engagement in the primitivist discourse through the analysis of the speeches and pamphlets he wrote during the last decades of his life. According to Suess, these writings can establish an unacknowledged link between Pearse and the modernity he presented as a threat to Irish nationalism. She defends the notion that, even while invoking a “new old Ireland,” Pearse’s discourse was liaising with modernism through the use of rhetorical figures and arguments which discussed Ireland in materialist, technological and psychological terms.

McCourt’s and Suess’s essays bring forward the relation between primitivism and politics. The trope unavoidably establishes perpetual dichotomies (such as primitive vs. modern, wild vs. civilized, colonized vs. colonizer) which are a fundamental element in (dis)empowering strategies. The recourse to primitivist discourses in order to justify colonization has been recurrent, and the case of Ireland is not an exception. This recurrence was noted and exposed by Joyce in *Ulysses*, as Kathleen St. Peters Lancia observes in “The Ethnographic Roots of Joyce’s Modernism: Exhibiting Ireland’s

Primitives in the National Museum and the ‘Nestor’ Episode.” The essay foregrounds the importance of the National Museum of Ireland and its role in submerging Irish citizens under a colonialist narrative in which primitive and modern were univocally identified with past and present. St Peters Lancia explores how *Ulysses* can be seen as “one artistic response to an emerging museum-oriented aesthetic culture” (82), a response that denounces the vision of Ireland as part of the Empire, remoulded in the conqueror’s image – be it through museum exhibits or lessons at the Dalkey school. Once again, Joyce’s ironic use of the primitivist and ethnographic discourses is highlighted, as St Peters Lancia comments on how the unquestioning acceptance of the cultural hegemony of the Empire, with its monolithic history, is shattered through the constant questioning in *Ulysses*, a history of infinite possibilities.

If *Ulysses* can be seen as a literary opposition against imperialist hegemony, the revival of traditional Irish sports could act as a social instance of this opposition. As Claire Culleton argues in “The Gaelic Athletic Association, Joyce, and the Primitive Body,” the aim of the GAA was to apotheosize Irish manhood through the practice of Gaelic games. Thus, the members of the association would inscribe their own bodies in the battle against the feminization of the primitive and the emasculation of colonialism, expecting that the images of the Gaelic “athletic” bodies would counteract the vision of the Irish as a feminine and famished nation in need of the Empire’s protection. Culleton also explores Joyce’s reaction to the GAA, conveyed in *Ulysses* through the derisive portrayal of The Citizen. Culleton argues that Joyce’s “sneering” opinion of the GAA has much more to do with the association’s nationalist agenda and, therefore, with its potential to become a third master to be a servant of. The character of The Citizen – based on Michael Cusack, founder of the GAA – will also be relevant in the disclosure of yet another primitivist strategy exposed by Maria McGarrity in “Primitive Emancipation: Religion, Sexuality and Freedom in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*.” McGarrity starts by reminding the readers that the representation of the primitive is mutable and conditional. To the already established models of romantic and modern primitivism, she adds the multiple variations of the concept in Modernist literature and the possibility of finding the primitive not only within the Irish borders (embodied by Celtic past) but also beyond them (in other colonies of the British Empire). McGarrity presents Joyce as an author capable of perceiving those

variations and visions and of making them operate at a political level. She reveals the progression from *Portrait*, where the early primitive rhetoric focuses on the pure savage and Irish missionaries' strive for conversion, to *Ulysses*, where modern primitivism is based on corruption, sexuality and brutality. McGarrity highlights the use of African primitives in Joyce's work as a parody of colonial primitivist strategies and a denunciation of modern physical, economic and cultural savagery on both sides of the border.

A similar perspective lies behind Greg Winston's "Reluctant Indians': Irish Identity and Racial Masquerade," where a connection is established between the Native American nations and the Irish, identified as the Wild West of Britain. Winston first provides an overview of the history of the Irish-Indian parallel, accounting for the similar treatment both ethnicities received from colonialist apologists. He focuses then on how journalism contributed to the dissemination of the primitivist discourse through Wild West tales where English civility overcomes Indian wildness – that is, British cultural superiority wins over the racialized other. Winston refers to the mention of such stories in "An Encounter," making the point that Joyce's intention when making the characters "play Indian" was to expose apparently innocent enactments of imperialism. Therefore, Winston claims, Joyce's gesture must not be perceived as hostile or ignorant, but as a "responsive dismantling of a reductive, racist trope" (168). Winston's concern that Joyce may be accused of misappropriating the Transatlantic parallel becomes ironic taking into account that Joyce himself has been appropriated by other traditions, as M. Teresa Caneda Cabrera reveals in "The Loveliness Which Has Not Yet Come Into the World': Translation as a Revisitation of Joyce's (Irish) Modernism." In her essay, Caneda Cabrera discusses how the construction of Ireland and the Irish in the Galician imaginary has been manipulated in order to legitimize a political and cultural agenda. Once again, parallels become essential; we find here the development of a legitimizing mythology which will establish a panCeltic community united symbolically through the construct of Celtic identity and topographically by the Atlantic Ocean. It is interesting to note that, in the Galician case, the promotion of the primitive would be a way of entering the universal, leaving both past and periphery behind. Thus, Atlantism and primitivism would act as a refuge from colonial entrapment, they would be the product of a generation's urge to acknowledge both true identity and "obsessive feeling for the land" while coping with

the alienation of physical and cultural exile (118). The essay reflects on how natural it is that Joyce and his motifs were appropriated as an ideal literary model, being the author the perfect embodiment of the tension between the traditional and the modern, simultaneously committed to origins and yet universal – just like the city of Santiago de Compostela (123). Caneda Cabrera points out that the translation of Joyce's works into Galician was not innocent and produced a familiar and domesticated *Ulysses* which could be easily added to the Galician literary canon. Her essay accounts for the ways in which translation has been used to manipulate and accommodate Joyce's *Ulysses* to its translators' ideological programme.

In Caneda Cabrera's essay we are shown how the tension between the modern and the primitive can be solved by "articulating the 'native' identity through new cultural forms that could be meaningful for the present" (128). In "Visible Others: Photography and Romantic Ethnography in Ireland," Justin Carville offers another instance of the conflict by analysing the use of photography in the intersection between primitivism and modernism. Specifically, he focuses on the ethnographic representations of the Aran Islands provided by J. M. Synge and Charles R. Browne. Once he establishes the opposition between the modernity of photographic image and primitivism, Carville discusses the implications of the predominance of the visual in modernist literature. The use of the visual would give the observer an advantage over the observed, as it establishes the authority and superiority of the visual moderns over the oral or aural primitives. Carville feels that Synge's imaginative geography is constructed of bits of frozen time – or 'still photographs' – which help construct a romanticised or aestheticized image of the Aran Islands, moulding the islands and their inhabitants to the perception of viewers/readers. The exploration of the primitive in the work of Synge appears in Elizabeth Gilmartin's "'Magnificent Words and Gestures': Defining the Primitive in Synge's *The Aran Islands*" as well. The author explores the primitive vs. modern paradoxes that characterise Synge's writing, placing it in the centre of binary tensions and shifting between Romantic primitivism and Modernist literary primitivism. Gilmartin accounts for the features of the primitive in Synge's work, as emblemized in *The Aran Islands*, characterising it as pre-capitalist, sensual, alluring and feminine, and therefore not easily accepted by middle-class urban audiences when taken into drama.

The conflicts provoked by the feminization of the primitive are highlighted in Lisa Weihman's "Female Militancy and Irish Primitivism: Dorothy Macardle's *Earth-Bound*." Weihman discusses Dorothy Macardle's collection of short stories, *Earth-Bound* (1924), as an attempt to supplant British narratives of Irish femininity with a masculinist, vibrant Gaelic culture. As with Synge, Macardle's work alternates between revivalist romantic primitivism and modernist primitive. For Weihman, her stories show a primitive, authentic Ireland coexisting with a modern, inferior Free State Ireland. This essay tries to account for the unrepresentability of women (nationalists) in Irish literature, because of their entrapment in the familial metaphor of the nation which proved useful for the purposes of British imperialism and Irish nationalism alike. The construction of primitivism as a way of trapping the "Other" is also at the core of Phyllis Lassner and Paula Derdiger's "Domestic Gothic, the Global Primitive, and Gender Relations in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and *The House in Paris*." Here, the authors account for the presence of the primitive in domestic spaces and for the uncertainty about individual and national identity this presence provokes. In this case, the clash between the civilizer and the primitive is complicated further by the presence of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy in-between. For Lassner and Derdiger, the Anglo Irish construction of primitivism is a convenient projection that does not only affect the racialized Irish Other, but extends to "upstart women." Finally, the essay also traces the apparition of a new global political primitivism, emblematised by the upsurge of fascism as featured in *The House in Paris*.

By giving primitivism "continuity" after the Modernist period, the essay mentioned above shows – as indeed do the rest in the collection – that we are not before a fixed trope. Primitivism is reinvented in the same way positions are changed in the ongoing battles over cultural power. Taking sides in this battle, the contributors to *Irish Modernism and the Global Primitive* choose to empower their readers. Thus, they issue a forewarning of the multiple shapes primitivist strategies adopt and, maybe more importantly, of the multiple masters these strategies serve. There is no doubt that this collection is a must read if we are to understand and untangle the many paradoxes which lie at the core of modern Irish literature.

VANESSA SILVA FERNÁNDEZ