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irlandaise contemporaine

Introduction

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Introduction

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“The Blessed Virgin and Cathleen Ní Houlihan were probably the two most dominant female icons in my thinking – the one being religious and the other poetic and romantic”, Edna O’Brien¹

“a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before”, Eavan Boland²

- 1 The decline of second-wave feminism in Western societies, the legacy of neo-liberal capitalism in general and of the Celtic Tiger in particular, and the emergence of a more liberal Irish society thanks to legislative changes decriminalising homosexuality and legalising divorce, along with the transformation of the cultural and media landscape, have given rise over the past few decades to a new discourse that can tentatively be called postfeminist. It is clear, however, that our understanding of this term requires the utmost prudence as the postfeminist movement has a tendency to posit equality between men and women as a given and the feminist struggle as no longer relevant³. Angela McRobbie has highlighted what she calls “the forces that have been at work in recent years to make feminism something unpalatable and non-transmissible, a social movement of which there is little likelihood of it being revived or renewed⁴” and Rosa Braidotti has pointed out the ways in which “[a]t the end of postmodernism [...] new master-narratives have arisen: the inevitability of ‘free’ market economies as the historically dominant form of human progress and biological essentialism, under the cover of genetics, new evolutionary biology and psychology. They help define the salient features in contemporary gender politics and they constitute a disjunction, not a synthesis⁵”. For McRobbie, “the attribution of apparently post-feminist freedoms to young women most manifest within the culture realm in the form of new visibilities, becomes, in fact, the occasion for the undoing of feminism”, a disavowal which “permits the subtle renewal of gender injustices, while vengeful patriarchal norms are also re-instated⁶”. However, according to Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra⁷, postfeminism is more a series of diffuse attitudes to be found within the media and related to second-wave feminism's

attachment to the past than an ideology or a form of activism. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily a backlash or a violent reaction against feminism since postfeminism acknowledges the complex relationships between culture, politics and feminism and is in itself “inherently contradictory⁸”, simultaneously constructing feminism as a thing of the past and pointing out its traces in the present.

- 2 The fact remains, however, that one of the characteristics of postfeminism is its positing of a gender equality which is far from being experienced by Irish women, whether in relation to employment⁹, access to certain professions, salaries or political representation¹⁰, among other issues. Indeed, one might well wonder to what extent the advent of the discourse of postfeminism, which, as Ging and Tasker and Negra assert, heralds a colossal paradigmatic shift from the political to the cultural¹¹, has usurped a feminist discourse in Ireland which was already tenuous enough¹². Moreover, according to Tasker and Negra, “this limited vision of gender equality as both achieved and yet still unsatisfactory underlines the class, race and racial exclusion that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values and lifestyles with which it is associated are universally shared and, perhaps more significant, universally accessible¹³”.
- 3 Although the situation has certainly evolved positively since the publication of “Irish Women – Chains or Change” in 1971 by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, in which the authors called attention, among other issues, to the fact that Irish women were worse off married since they were considered as their husbands’ chattel, – the election of Mary Robinson marking a watershed in 1990 – and the continued unavailability of abortion for Irish women today serve as a constant reminder of the gender inequalities enshrined at the heart of the Irish constitution. The gradual secularisation of Irish society and the unshackling of Catholic church discourse may have enabled new discursive approaches to the body and sex to emerge¹⁴, but as Ann Rossiter documents, approximately 5 000 women from the Republic and a further 1,500 from the North, continue to travel out of the country each year to have abortions they cannot have at home¹⁵. Even aside from the thorny issue of abortion, it is debatable whether “[s]exual liberalisation and advanced secularism have [...] resulted in an all-encompassing freedom¹⁶”. The new media landscape, as Debbie Ging has shown, presents the image of a hypersexualised girl/woman¹⁷, while some male discourse tends to converge more than ever towards essentialism and biological determinism, even prompting one notoriously misogynistic journalist to claim with no trace of irony that “[b]iologically, whether feminists like it or not, boys are genetically more disposed than girls to achieve academically. On average, men’s brains are 15 per cent larger than women’s, which is roughly twice the difference in physical proportions¹⁸”. One might therefore contend that although Irish women may rightly have felt liberated from the weight of religion, they now have to struggle against the weight of an essentialist and consumerist discourse which threatens to annihilate a fight for rights that they (in some cases) have never really obtained.
- 4 The Celtic Tiger and the economic boom which accompanied it provoked an unprecedented wave of female immigration, notably from Eastern Europe. An inevitable confrontation then emerged between Irish women in search of fulfilment and consumerism and a foreign population which was isolated and vulnerable and in search of a freedom that all too often boiled down to psychological subservience and physical violence. As the Immigrant Council of Ireland has stipulated, a number of women are moving as primary migrants and not, as is usually thought, as wives or daughters of male

migrants. Moreover, these women's "lives are structured around a combination of racial and gender inequalities. They are also overrepresented in the most marginalised and lowest paid jobs. On the other hand, migration has led to positive experiences for women. It has the potential to reshape gender relations and inequalities and enables many women to improve their lives and the lives of their families¹⁹". Part of the challenge for feminists in Ireland today is to address these issues and to espouse inclusive discourse and praxis in an effort to find solutions to all forms of exploitation.

- 5 Anne Enright, one of Ireland's foremost contemporary writers of fiction, has stated that "there's no point in getting involved in linguistic, ideologist arguments about the term 'feminism'²⁰" and the articles in this special issue devoted to women's and feminist issues in contemporary Ireland do not attempt to do so (although this is not to suggest that "linguistic, ideologist arguments" do not have their place in this debate). Rather, they question past and present situations and representations of women and attempt to uncover uncomfortable truths about the past and suggest paths towards a more promising and equal future. As McRobbie posits, "The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom²¹". The articles in this collection, far from "withholding [...] critique", challenge these silences and give voice to the female subject.
- 6 The essays in history and civilisation contained in this volume examine the issues of postfeminism from different angles, all nevertheless converging towards the same conclusion. They highlight particular aspects of the status of women in Ireland, revealing how the obliteration of feminist discourse, in its more traditional form, has masked the historical and more recent inequalities in Irish society as far as women are concerned.
- 7 Eva Urban's article proposes a Marxist-feminist critique of the issue of female unpaid labour within Magdalen Laundries. As such, she analyses the Irish government's failure to take historical responsibility and in its ignorance of the breach of human rights but also, and perhaps more relevantly in this volume, she goes beyond the traditional concepts of Church and State collusion in the treatment and containment of vulnerable women to emphasise the social class dimension. Her analysis uncovers the double class/gender discrimination involved in the limited attention given to the exploitation of the residents of Magdalen Laundries. The article combines historical perspective, feminist critique and human rights issues in order to try and make sense of the patent lack of legal redress schemes.
- 8 Diane Urquhart's article about Ireland's criminal conversation, or adultery, tackles an issue that has not been very much debated within academic circles. It highlights the struggle by Irish feminists to abolish a legal procedure that was based on the notion that married women were the property of their husbands. It shows how second-wave feminists, in the 1970s, mounted a campaign, albeit on different fronts and with different means, to abolish that procedure. Liberal feminists, as well as more radical ones, managed to draw attention to the question nationally and internationally in a context of general reform of family law. The abolition of crim.con in the early 1980s proved that the feminist movement was relevant and the article demonstrates that it could serve as an example for further feminist combat in contemporary Irish society.
- 9 Another dimension of the struggle for equal rights is tackled in Claire McGing's and Timothy J. Whyte's article on gender and electoral representation in Ireland. If postfeminism postulates acquired gender equality in contemporary western societies, the

patent underrepresentation of women within the political sphere in Ireland proves that the empowerment of women has its limits. The article examines the historical obstacles to female electoral representation, both from a cultural and constitutional point of view and then analyses the candidate selection process. The reactions to the impending legislation to redress the imbalance by introducing quotas shows that Irish women still have a long way to go before they can achieve full status as Irish citizens.

- 10 Marie-Jeanne Da Col Richert's paper examines the consequences of the economic downturn on the lives of women in Ireland, both nationals and immigrants, who had been attracted to the country during the Celtic Tiger years. It shows how the boom created new female representations, with Irish women becoming "career women" while immigrants, mainly from Poland, became carers in the family sphere. This new situation created tensions within Irish society, revealing the gap between on the one hand, a part of the population becoming increasingly well-off while another part was being exploited. The economic crisis hit migrant workers badly, and discrimination rose exposing the limits of postfeminist concepts of equality.
- 11 Artistic production is also central to postfeminism, as Valérie Morisson's paper shows. By comparing gender-related art works and performance artists, both in Poland and Ireland between 1970 and 2010, she analyses how, in contexts of tremendous influence of the Catholic Church and heated debates over issues such as divorce, contraception and abortion, each country has developed a female artistic tradition, in which the female body has become an essential element in challenging patriarchal society and conservative discourses.
- 12 The four literature articles in this volume consider representations of women by both male and female, canonical and non-canonical writers, thus providing a stimulating discussion which reaches across a broad spectrum of contemporary texts and considers the genres of poetry, drama and prose. Investigating the relevance of terms such as "feminist" or "postfeminist" in Irish literature and society, the authors, in keeping with the fluid, protean understandings of these terms, offer illuminating readings of contemporary literary works highlighting both the possibilities and the limits of such concepts, yet without necessarily providing a consensus on their meanings.
- 13 Shane Alcobia-Murphy's article argues that contrary to what some critics have suggested, Medbh McGuckian's poetry is rooted in an exploration of female identity in such a way as to reveal a distinct feminist engagement. Countering those critics who have highlighted what they perceive as McGuckian's perpetuation of traditional Irish stereotypes for women and focusing on a number of close readings, he reveals the strategies used by the poet to uncover the essentialist hallmarks of patriarchal culture, notably her recourse to borrowing from a variety of genres. Alcobia-Murphy analyses how, by incorporating excerpts from texts on women's lives in Renaissance Italy and sociological studies on women and work carried out in the home, McGuckian undermines and subverts patriarchal norms by enabling her female personas to defy the male gaze and re-evaluates in a critical way the role of the housewife. Ultimately, Alcobia-Murphy reasserts the poet's "feminist credentials" by carefully unravelling the layers of intertextuality embedded in her poetry and showing how they are used to illustrate the ways in which "the female subject is curtailed by masculinist ideology²²".
- 14 Michelle Kennedy sheds light on Brian Friel's interest in mentally ill female characters in three of his plays. Focusing on the main female protagonists of *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, *Aristocrats* and *Molly Sweeney* through the prism of Louis Althusser's "Repressive State

Apparatus”, she contextualises the oppression of Irish women and considers the ways in which Friel dramatises the institutionalisation of these characters within a distinctly patriarchal culture. She ultimately contends that the playwright’s choice to dramatises the attempted silencing of subversion participates in a postfeminist movement which endeavours to uncover previously repressed discourses and to subsequently empower and reclaim agency for dispossessed minorities.

- 15 The final two articles investigate contemporary women’s fiction and the potential within the fictional space to both challenge and uphold traditional patriarchal stereotypes. Chantal Dessaint-Payard’s article on novels and short stories by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne investigates the ways in which the author develops a postfeminist viewpoint by eschewing an overtly militant stance and privileging more indirect strategies, such as irony, self mockery and recourse to the traditional oral tale. Dessaint-Payard highlights how Ní Dhuibhne’s choice of a postmodern aesthetics enables her to denounce the commercial excess of the Celtic Tiger era and its consequences for women, even (in a very self-reflexive way) within the literary industry itself, and concludes that the recurrent motif of metamorphosis is an adequate metaphor for the potential reconstruction of a postmodern heroine who is always changing and is in constant evolution. Sorcha Gunne’s article addresses contemporary Irish women’s popular fiction and, unlike the preceding articles, queries the very possibility of using terms such as “feminist” or “postfeminist” when it comes to discussing “chick lit”. Contextualising the emergence and popularity of Irish “chick lit” during the decades of economic boom now referred to as the Celtic Tiger, she considers the interrelatedness of the structures of patriarchy and those of capitalism before going on to argue, with close reference to specific novels, that the spectre of Cathleen Ní Houlihan, to whom Edna O’Brien refers in the epigraph, continues to haunt contemporary representations of women by women in a negative way. She ultimately contends that one should be wary of the ostensibly benign message of these novels which, far from being postfeminist, actually dissimulate “a form of symbolic violence²³” linked to the patriarchal and capitalist status quo.
- 16 It is hoped that the articles brought together in this issue of *Études irlandaises* will contribute to and expand on other contemporaneous studies on Irish women and Irish feminist literatures²⁴ and stimulate further debate on what remains an essential aspect of Irish studies today. In this way, the socio-political realities of Irish women’s lives today and the aesthetics of representation can be addressed and a new, adequate language that is not just “a passable imitation/of what went before” be found with which to consider these issues.

NOTES

1. “Edna O’Brien interviewed by Helen Thompson”, Catriona Moloney & Helen Thompson (eds.), *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 201.
2. Eavan Boland, “Mise Éire” (1987), *New Collected Poems*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2005, p. 128.

3. In a recent article, Debbie Ging referred to the prevailing notion that “equality is a fait accompli and that feminism’s work is done”. Debbie Ging, “All-consuming images: new gender formations in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland”, Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin & Peadar Kirby (eds.), *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques, Resources*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009, p. 52-70, p. 53.
4. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London & Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2009, p. 150.
5. Rosa Braidotti, *Transpositions*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006, p. 44.
6. McRobbie, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
7. Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
9. Statistics from Central Statistics Office reveal that in 2010, 1.3 million more men were employed than women and that while only 7.5 million men were “on home duties”, 521.1 million women were. See [
<http://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/labourmarket/principalstatistics/personsaged15yearsandoverclassifiedbysexandprincipaleconomicstatus000s/>
], accessed June 20 2012.
10. A report released by the Central Statistics Office in early 2012 entitled “Men and Women in Ireland 2011” is edifying in its revelations about the gender inequalities which continue to prevail in Ireland. The report highlights that although Irish men in general leave school before women and are less highly qualified, “Irish women work fewer hours, earn less and are under-represented in the Oireachtais and in local and regional authorities” (Dublin, *The Government of Ireland*, p. 11). Available online: [
<http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/otherreleases/2011/Women%20and%20Men%20in%20Ireland%202011.pdf>
].
11. Debbie Ging, *op. cit.*, p. 57, Tasker & Negra, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
12. In actual fact, there has been something of a resurgence in feminist activism in Ireland in recent years, as Emer O’Toole points out in her recent article (“The Irish feminist zeitgeist is ready for the challenge”, *The Guardian*, June 8 2012), with a number of feminist networks emerging as sites of discursive and practical activity aimed at countering inequality, among which the IFN (the Irish Feminist Network) which very actively participates in promoting gender equality and “mak[ing] feminism relevant to a new generation of women” (Mission statement IFN, [
<http://www.irishfeministnetwork.org/mission-statement.html> Accessed June 20 2012
], accessed June 20, 2012). This would suggest that a postfeminist discourse has not eradicated feminist discourse in Ireland and indeed, is perhaps indicative of a reaction to the fundamental ambivalence and consumer-oriented doctrines of postfeminism.
13. Tasker and Negra, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
14. Fourteen years ago, Tom Inglis was already calling attention to the necessity as he saw it of “learning to live with [the] ambivalence” of a time when both liberal views on sexuality and the more traditional ones espoused by the Catholic church co-exist, particularly due to the influence the church still enjoys in the education system. See Tom Inglis, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality*, Dublin, UCD Press, 1998, p. 170-175.

15. Ann Rossiter, *The Hidden Diaspora: the “abortion trail” and the making of a London-Irish underground 1980-2000*, London, IASC, 2009.
 16. Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, London, Profile Books, 2009, p. 544.
 17. Debbie Ging, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
 18. John Waters, *The Irish Times*, 27 August 2001, quoted in Ging, *op. cit.*, p. 54. Incidentally, Ging also pinpoints a certain recourse to biological determinism by some female psychologists, among whom Maureen Gaffney who also writes for *The Irish Times*.
 19. Immigrant Council of Ireland. [
<http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/campaigns/migrant-women>
], accessed June 20 2012.
 20. “Anne Enright interviewed by Catriona Moloney”, Catriona Moloney & Helen Thompson (eds.), *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 63.
 21. Mc Robbie, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
 22. Cf. *infra* p. 111.
 23. Cf. *infra* p. 158.
 24. See for example among many others recently published and forthcoming publications such as Maria Luddy, *Women in Irish History from Famine to Feminism: 1850-2000*, London & New York, Routledge, 2012; Geraldine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation*, London & New York, Routledge, 2010; Ursula Barry, *Where are We Now? New Feminist perspectives on women in Ireland*, Dublin, New Island, 2008; Patricia Coughlan & Tina O’Toole (eds.), *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, Dublin, Carysfort Press, 2008.
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