JOHN GREANEY, *The Distance of Irish Modernism. Memory, Narrative, Representation* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic 2022)

John Greaney has a constant interest in modernist studies, Irish studies and critical theory. At the intersection of these fields, he elaborated two crucial reflections on the literature written by modern Irish writers: *Irish modernisms: gaps, conjectures, possibilities*, edited in collaboration with Paul Fagan and Tamara Radak (Bloomsbury, 2021) and *The Distance of Irish Modernism. Memory, Narrative, Representation* (Bloomsbury, 2022). His most recent study challenges the traditional perspective on Irish literature as an expression of Irish modern history, in the framework of the Irish national metanarrative.

The book starts with a series of questions regarding the role that we assign to literature. Does literature serve as a reflection of the past? Is fiction a particularly effective means of preserving historical memory, acting as a conveyance for cultural recollections? Does the concept of a nation have the ability to explain an artistic movement? By examining the works of five Irish modern writers, the author illustrates that the connection between literature and Ireland's history is notably intricate and nuanced. Furthermore, these texts reveal a tendency towards indirect and ironic perspectives on the history and geography they aim to depict faithfully. They maintain "a perverse relationship to nationalist projects and projections, and, through their respective and unique aesthetic modes, leave the question of state formation and sovereignty open rather than enact and reinforce its enclosure" (p. 4).

John Greaney's introductory reflection on *Vicinities of Irish Modernism* analyses the ways modernism was defined along the decades, correlated with different paradigms. He notices an important turn, from 1990s, when due to their interdisciplinairity, the New Modernist Studies shed some light on dimensions that were previously unclear within the older definitions. Drawing inspiration from disciplines such as affect studies or transnationalism, scholars of modernist literature view modernism as "both a mode of world literature as well as a breeding ground for phenomenological presence" (p. 5). The author also derives this shift, which encompasses both transnationalism and affect, from Jean-Michel Rabaté's characterization of Irish modernism as a means of redefining history while simultaneously immersing itself in the nuances of language ('Editor's introduction', *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 2 (2015): vi.). Expanding on these dimensions of Irish modernism, following on Rabaté's footsteps, Greaney (re)gauges the complicated relation between political and aesthetic in literature.

However, modernist literature is considered a return towards language itself, a matter of style, self-referentiality and autonomy of language, which has no duty to intersect the things it refers to. On the other hand, when viewed through the lenses of historicism and

materialism, literature brings to the forefront social issues, as it is inherently intertwined with concerns beyond the realm of literature itself. How Greaney resolves this paradoxical dilemma is quite interesting. He explores the significance of translation studies within the framework of world literature, considering it not only in the conventional sense, but as a process that involves reinterpreting reality within the realm of literature. The author argues that the literary representation is to be understood through Pascale Casanova's concept of translation and Derrida's supplement. According to Casanova, literature originates from political roots and addresses political and national issues, which are then "translated" into aesthetic forms, whether they are poetic or narrative. Consequently, the external, extratextual reality is not simply mirrored in artistic expressions but is instead refracted, meaning it is reinterpreted and transformed. Being a matter of both proximity and distance, translation in Casanova's account goes with the Derridean concept of supplement, in the sense that a literary text is a testimony of an absence, being neither the object it derives from, nor something different from it. Thus, a literary representation renders visible the influence of its political source by translating it into language.

As methodology, John Greaney pleads for close reading and formal analysis not as a way of erasing the historicist and political framework of a literary text, but rather questioning "literary language in its historical context to establish an ethics of reading" (p. 25). Thus, on the methodological framework of what he calls *flexible formalism*, which is a (new) way to understand the potential of the aesthetic level of the text, the author conducts five case studies, emphasizing the significance of literary form as a valuable tool to elucidate the complex and paradoxical connection between history and its representation in literature.

In the first case study, titled *Samuel Beckett and the contexts of modernism*, challenging the prevailing postcolonial studies of the recent decades, the author deconstructs the interpretations that suggest direct links between European and postcolonial traumatic histories, such as World War II and the Holocaust, and Beckett's prose. If (literary) language is a symbolic representation, rather than a referential one, Beckett's texts do not address only socio-political issues, but also some refined issues of narrative representation. John Greaney's approach, coming from the historicist-materialist paradigm, goes beyond it, to articulate the textual and con-textual problematics in Beckett's prose. The author delves into *Mercier et Camier* (1970), where he establishes a connection or lineage influenced by Flaubert. This Irish prose recalls *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) not only by depicting a couple of characters in central roles, but also by the iconoclast attitude towards the narrative tradition, meaning that the basics of the conventional way to narrate (in a logical and temporal progression, with a sense of coherence and omniscience) are rejected. Beckett short-circuits the external resonances through what Greaney calls a "debunking of the artifice," a way to satirize the coherent plot-driven narrative by dispersing it in episodic fragments, with an almost absent sense of progression. Another way to put in parentheses the extra-literary (spatio-temporal and other deictic) references is interpreted by the scholar from Beckett's English translation of *Mercier et Camier* (1970): *Mercier and Camier* (1974). As Greaney observes, the way language is used in the English version is far from being neutral. Employing a method of aesthetic diminution that

is akin to Flaubert, Proust, and Joyce, the English translation takes on a self-referential quality, because it takes distance from the geographically and historically detectable references, orienting the text "towards (telling the story of) the conditions of its own making" (p. 45). This perspective is so well-balanced that it deconstructs the cause-and-effect relationship between history and literature, without pretending that historic and political circumstances are absent in text, but understanding their allusive character.

The author also puts the Beckettian prose in relation with the Barhesian concept of *zero degree of literature*, which is related to an artistic expression that concentrates all the potential meanings and does not direct deliberately towards a certain direction. This is what we can infer from Molloy's lack of self self-identification, the confusing spatio-temporal deixis and the rhetorical strategies that deviates the discourse from clear predetermined intentions in the homonymous novel. Again, it does not mean that some textual referents cannot be connected with the Irish history, but they are not to be seen as the central anchor of the text. Through the theoretical frames elaborated by Barthes and Adorno, the Beckettian form becomes an ethical response to both epistemological doubt and historic problems, circumscribing an "ethics of unknowing" (p. 54).

Chapter 2 expands on *Brian, Flann, Myles and the origins of Irish modernism*, analysing Flann O'Brien as a pluri-voice, form his journalistic activity, to his authorship of some pieces of writing, signed with different (pseudo)names. The problem of the name is contiguous with the relation between meaning and referent, in Derridean terms. These alter-egos created much confusion in criticism, who tried to find the real writer behind these masks. Greaney's argument posits that O'Brien's numerous "selves" should not be compelled into a unified and all-encompassing identity. The scholar interprets O'Brien's pseudonyms by considering them as masks that serve as vessels of memory. This interpretation is connected to Nietzsche's concept of the mask proliferating independently of its creator and Yeats' perspective on how masks redefine subjectivity.

Interesting is also the discussion about *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), which addresses the problem of (shared) past and the lack of recollection, which is reflected in the schizoid structure of the novel and even in the chapters order. The lack of a shared history leads to distinct and irreconcilable narratives and individuals, which are fused without forming a cohesive whole. Readers of this text should refrain from seeking a single overarching principle to harmonize these fragments. This text is continually evolving, signifying that its structure is a negotiation between the artificial construction of narrative and the past. This pertains not to historical contexts but, instead, to the peripheral and seemingly insignificant elements that are depicted through a sophisticated literary toolbox. To put it in Barthesian terms, what we are dealing with here is a text that mirrors life itself.

In the chapter entitled *Elizabeth Bowen's modernist history,* Greaney reads several key paragraphs from *The Last September* (1929), in order to let the text speak, without assuming a pre-determined ideological reading of Irish history. Belonging to the Irish canon, the novelist's works are still under critical debate, especially because of her narrative omniscience, in relation to the semantic opacity of her texts. The author demonstrates that the referent of the

Irish War of Independence is deferred and obscured through the narrative device, being "an absent presence" (p. 109), thus affirming the frailty of signification and meaning. Within the narratorial montage, the coherence of the evenimential strand (the war) remains under-represented and underdeveloped. Notwithstanding omniscient, the narrator cannot provide enough information, so that unexplained statements remain suspended in the discourse of every character, the textual tissue being made by secrecies and gaps. According to Rabaté's interpretation of modernism, a significant aspect is viewing reality from diverse perspectives, and in the context of war, this means perceiving it as eerie or unsettling, as every familiar sentence is made unfamiliar through the use of narrative devices.

The study *Kate O'Brien's 'flawed' modernism* reconsiders what critics describe as the shortcoming of her writings, namely the outdated omniscience, giving an appearance of a god-like perspective upon the characters which are deprived from decisional power. However, Kate O'Brien's narrative device is far from conventionalism. The scholar identifies a hiatus between the omniscient plot exposure and the autonomy of characters, which tend to individualism and development. Kate O'Brien plays with the epistemological limits concerning the narrator and the characters, Ireland's political turmoil being just a pretext or a background to explore some unconventional feelings and situations (the relation between artistic expression and censorship, the problematic of freedom, queer relations). In *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1941), for instance, the political, feminst and queer engagements are conveyed through the intimate structure of the omniscient narrative technique - analepses, anachrony and intertwined temporal layers - as spectral forms of memory.

Last but not least, in *John McGahern and the limits of Irish modernism*, the author investigates how his study object blurs the borders between realism, naturalism and modernism in terms of writing formulas. Excessively read through autobiographical lenses, McGahern's novel *The Dark* (1965) receives a comprehensive interpretation here, beyond a recollection of a parental sexual abuse. *The Dark* undertakes "a politics of narration" (p. 148), an aspect that was not adequately addressed in literary criticism. The narrative microphone is passed between three narrators: one in the first person, another in the second person, and a third in the third person, all the while utilizing free indirect discourse. This narrative approach effectively portrays the issue of self-disassociation, specifically the inability to identify with the abused self. The text has a fragmented, puzzled narrative structure, questioning the potentialities of literary language to represent trauma. Formally, the text is aestheticized, written in a delightful manner, in order to make the readers aware of the impossibility of literature to represent trauma faithfully and accurately enough. So, the main focus is not concerned with an experience placed before the writing, but with the "ethics of writing trauma" (p. 149). The shift from first person narration to second or third person narration mirrors the incongruence between the act of remembrance and the act of living, the distance between experience and its textual expression. Designed as an *anti-bildungsroman*, the novel also problematizes the modern dissolution of subject and subjectivity, depicting subject's disidentification. In this particular form of analysis, the personal history of abuse serves a role similar to that of Ireland's history in the preceding chapters. The narrative structures employed

create an inherent gap between the events outside of literature (what is being narrated) and their portrayal within the literary context (how they are narrated). This results in a deferral and supplementation of these events.All in all, the book has a well-synthetized theoretical frame, which is continuously correlated with the texts analysed along the chapters, from Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Bowen, Kate O'Brien and McGaher. John Greaney reiterates essential theoretical concepts as often as necessary for the clarity of the argument, and at times, repeats key phrases or quotations to ensure a thorough understanding, even if it might come across as "didactic". In fact, this strategy helps the readers understand that the assumptions of thinkers such as Casanova and Derrida can be employed in the examination of the Irish modernist texts under consideration.

Like modernist painting, which makes us aware of its own materiality (as the colours and the forms refrain from representing the external world), modernist texts shift from tranzitivity to reflexivity, complicating their relation with their external (historical) referents. Literary language should be read beyond the (Irish) contextual realities it refers to, in terms of representational issues, namely how narration, memory, fiction and translation shape our understanding of the world. John Greaney's fruitful perspective challenges traditional reading strategies (consolidated on historicist bases), assuming that form is to be reconsidered in relation with its political and aesthetic potential. Therefore, far from being only structure and style, in a strictly formalist sense, the form engages the deterritorialization of the external referents.

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doi: https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2023.28.2.17