

REVIEW ESSAY

'HISTORY' VS. 'THEORY': RECENT APPROACHES TO JAMES JOYCE

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Andrew Gibson and Len Platt (eds.). *Joyce, Ireland, Britain*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. Pp. 256. £39.95.

Peter Mahon. *Imagining Joyce and Derrida: Between 'Finnegans Wake' and 'Glas'*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Pp. 415. £42.00.

Len Platt. *Joyce, Race and 'Finnegans Wake'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 222. £48.00.

Two of the most promising recent approaches to Joyce contrast each other in argument and demeanour, along the familiar lines of historicism and 'Theory'. Andrew Gibson and Len Platt explicitly articulate the thinking behind their historicist approach—exemplified by such work as Gibson's *Joyce's Revenge*, and Platt's *Joyce, Race and 'Finnegans Wake'*—in the introduction to the recent collection of essays they have co-edited: *Joyce, Ireland, Britain*. In what amounts to a manifesto, the pair celebrate a criticism of precise historical specificity, claiming that 'the theoretical phase in Joyce studies . . . has largely run its course' (1) and should be replaced 'by the exactitude . . . [of] an extremely detailed knowledge of actual, historical relations' (18–19). While acknowledging the political emphasis of post-structuralist criticism, which made Joyce's texts 'seem less like hymns to universal man than fantastic, hilarious subversions of universalising myths', they argue this project was denuded of the radicalism to which it aspired by a failure to accurately specify Joyce's targets, despite often emphasising the need for specification (1–5). Likewise, the 'Irish turn' of the 1990s, which saw Joyce re-evaluated in a colonial context, is dismissed as overly influenced by post-structuralism in its post-colonial theorising and excessive attention to issues such as textuality or historiography. Instead, Gibson and Platt herald a second birth of the 'Irish Joyce', which eschews the Derridean/Foucauldian heritage in order to get into the 'real' stuff of history proper.

This fighting talk could not be more different from Peter Mahon's 2007 monograph, *Imagining Joyce and Derrida: Between 'Finnegans Wake' and*

'*Glas*'. Building on the noted debt Derrida's work owes to Joyce, a debt often acknowledged by the philosopher, Mahon argues that 'there is an expanded zone of Joyce-Derridean textuality that stands in need of exploration' (10), outside the obvious territory of Derrida's direct commentaries on *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. For Mahon, Joyce's texts embody a kind of 'proto-deconstruction' (2) (of course, it might be more appropriate to call Derrida a 'post-Joycean' rather than *Finnegans Wake* a 'proto-deconstruction'). He argues that *Finnegans Wake*'s ludic disportment with the philosophical tradition of *mimesis* in its representative style represents such a deconstructive strategy, which 'displaces the Platonic order of appearances'. The *Wake* anticipates Derrida's 'metaphysics of presence' by delivering a structured indeterminacy of 'ever-receding pursuit and withdrawal', in which textual content—such as the figure of 'Finnegan'—is, for the reader, in 'the condition of being between presence and absence' (21–22).

Mahon does not provide an account as to why Derrida should have such a sympathetic affiliation with Joyce, but in discovering one here it will become evident that these two approaches are not as antithetical as they first appear. Both Joyce and Derrida experienced a 'semicolonial' youth and young manhood, and this is the common root for their intellectual solidarity (for 'semicolonial' see Attridge and Howes 3–4). Joseph Valente has extensively and admirably shown how Joyce experienced the divisive logic of being an English-speaking Irishman under colonial British rule, with an inescapable and paradoxical commitment to both his mother-tongue and his mother-country, making him a 'semicolonial' figure (*Joyce and the Problem of Justice* 35). Similarly, Derrida, as a 'little black and very Arab Jew' (his words) in 1940s Algeria, was expelled from school, and degraded from French citizen to French subject, because of anti-Semitic quotas introduced by the Vichy regime (*Young Postcolonialism* 295). That is to say, like Joyce, Derrida 'belonged' culturally and linguistically to the imperial power—as a French speaker—but was simultaneously marginalised as a racial other and colonial subject. Moreover, because of their liminal positions, both faced an intensified double-bind of racial alterity in relation to the prescriptions of colonial ideology. They could attempt to identify with the metropolitan culture, and erase their 'other' affiliation, or differentiate themselves from the centre, but only according to the negative identities always already laid out by the imperial power, such as the Irish as effeminate Celts or bestial aggressors, either way unfit for the demands of 'manly' self-governance (Valente "'Neither fish nor flesh'" 97–8). In a further similarity, both French Algeria and Ireland under British rule can be seen as doubly colonised. Algeria was a French annexe, but also under the 'spiritual' guidance of fascist Germany through the Vichy regime. Likewise, as Stephen Dedalus comments in *Ulysses*, the Irish serve 'two masters': 'the imperial British state . . . and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church' (1.643–44). Robert Young has persuasively argued post-structuralism to be,

effectively, a post-colonial philosophy, by demonstrating how many of its major figures spent their formative years in Algeria and other colonies, before and during the struggle for independence. He further argues in the same vein that post-structuralism's target was the 'Hegelian dialectic', which underpinned the management of 'Europe's colonial annexations and accompanying racism or orientalist scholarship' (*White Mythologies* 3). We might go further and claim post-structuralism as a 'semicolonial' philosophy, in which liminal and bifurcated figures implicated in both sides of the colonial situation—such as Joyce and Derrida—undo the dialectics of imperial systems of power and knowledge from within, through the palimpsestic deconstructive strategies common to both writers.

This reading offers an implicit correction of Gibson and Platt's rejection of 'Theory', by complicating their apparent notion of an historical context. If Joyce's 'semicolonial' context—the highly specific reading of his complex relations to Britain, Ireland and Roman Catholicism—can be seen to contain 'theoretical' content—such as Young's 'Hegelian dialectic' in the double-bind of racial alterity—then this is surely 'real' history, which represents an excellent example of the 'exactitude . . . [of] an extremely detailed knowledge of actual, historical relations'. One of Gibson and Platt's abiding concerns is the necessity of using historically 'appropriate' approaches to Joyce, a comment which insinuates that much theory-heavy criticism is somehow anachronistic. However, given the striking contextual similarities between Joyce and Derrida's youths, it would seem perverse to turn aside from post-structuralist interpretations on the grounds of historical propriety. Derrida's work is relevant to Joyce in a far more meaningful way than mere contemporaneity. However, it should not be forgotten that the provocation for Gibson and Platt's outspokenness in *Joyce, Ireland, Britain* is a certain kind of critical writing which ignores or abstracts historical detail. For all its virtues, Peter Mahon's *Imagining Joyce and Derrida* does just this. There is no reason to suppose historicist and theoretical accounts should be mutually exclusive, or that there is a danger of falling between two stools, or that one is more or less valid than the other. Of all texts, *Finnegans Wake* best gives the lie to such views, not least as an admirable example of how to carry out such a synthetic approach to one's material. One way of producing such an integrated, holistic account of Joyce in context might be through a study of his much-neglected humour, and how his style functions as a political response. Not only is laughter a common emphasis of Derrida's (deconstruction is resisted by those with a 'lack of humour'—Roughley 77), but Platt and Gibson both stress humour in Joyce as a key aspect of his 'subversiveness' (an inadequate term for Joyce—'irreverence' would be more accurate). Platt goes so far as to argue that, with *Finnegans Wake*'s 'comedy . . . the authoritarian state collapses' (*Joyce, Race* 162).

Apart from their emphasis on critical autonomy, there is much to praise in Gibson and Platt's work. Platt's work on race deserves to be singled out as

especially useful, in identifying what is clearly a crucial context for *Finnegans Wake*, and plugging the text into several vital discourses of the early twentieth century, such as nationalism, eugenics and historical linguistics. Ultimately, however, the tendency to narrowly define an approach in the manner of the introduction to *Joyce, Ireland, Britain* is particularly ill-suited to a writer such as Joyce. When we read *Finnegans Wake* we need everything we can lay our hands on, and it is entirely contrary to the spirit of the text to restrict oneself to a certain field of knowledge and ethos of interpretation. Further, to blindly claim such autonomy might well be to omit key considerations to one's own declared field of inquiry; as the above analysis of Derrida and 'semicoloniality' has shown, it would be hard to give a competent or complete account of Joyce's historical relations with Britain and Ireland by ignoring the theoretical 'Hegelian dialectic' apparent in the structures of imperial ideology, such as the double-bind of racial alterity. Nevertheless, this problem does highlight the central dilemma in reading *Finnegans Wake*, that one both must and must not restrict oneself analytically in order to make some sense of the text. When discussing a writer who uniquely demonstrates the mutual implication of thought and history, it is both necessary and impossible to follow his example.

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