



Pied Beauty

Bríona Nic Dhiarmada

Trén bhFearann Breac: An Díláithriú Cultúir agus Nualitriocht na Gaeilge

Máirín Nic Eoin

Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, 2005. 580 pages. ISBN 1-901176-51-7

Hugo Hamilton's recent best-selling memoir was entitled *The Speckled People* (2003). Hamilton, the child of a German/Gaeilgeoir family who grew up in Dublin in the 1950s and 1960s, explains its title's provenance thus: 'We are the new Irish. Partly from Ireland and partly from somewhere else, half-Irish and half-German. We're the speckled people, he says, the "brack" people, which is a word that comes from the Irish language ...'¹

- 1 Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People* (London and New York, 2003), 7
- 2 See Lillis Ó Laoire, 'Níl sé Doiligh é a Iompar! No Load to Carry: A Personal Response to the Current Situation of Irish', in Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, ed., *Who Needs Irish?* (Dublin, 2004), 61, quoted in Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 245.
- 3 Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 18

Hamilton's use of 'brack' (Irish *breac*, 'speckled') has an echo in a recent essay on identity and the Irish language by scholar and *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire, who commented that 'the world we live in today is a speckled world and we must realize that we are all *breacdhaoine* "speckled people"'.² And likewise, Máirín Nic Eoin employs the word in a similar sense in her enormously significant new work, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, the title translating as 'Through the Speckled Land'. The title comes from a poem of the same name, 'Trén bhFearann Breac', by contemporary poet Colm Breathnach, which, according to Nic Eoin, clarified for her the central theme of the book.

In all of the above cases the word *breac* operates as a gloss on hybridity, a concept popularized in cultural and literary discourse by post-colonial theory. Indeed, the stated aim of Nic Eoin's work is to examine modern and contemporary literature in Irish using analytical methods that recognize the socio-linguistic reality in which those who write in the language operate. Nic Eoin's subtitle, *An Díláithriú Cultúir agus Nualitriocht na*

Gaeilge (Cultural Dislocation and Modern Literature in Irish), makes overt a concern for another preoccupation of post-colonial criticism — dislocation. Tellingly, while post-colonial perspectives have been at the centre of the most lively debates in Irish Studies in recent years, this is the first full-length book in Irish to enter those debates. This is perhaps surprising given the historical circumstances of the language and literature. Nic Eoin herself draws attention to the apparent resistance of Irish-language scholars to position themselves within this debate:

Is beag scoláire nó criticeoir Gaeilge atá tar éis páirt a ghlacadh sa phlé agus peirspictíocht na Gaeilge a thabhairt ar ghné ar bith de na hábhair imris is argóna a chothaigh an tionscnamb. Is beag criticeoir Gaeilge atá tar éis seasamb poiblí a ghlacadh faoin mbunargóint maidir le bailíocht choincheap na hiarchoilíneachta mar bhunchoincheap léirmbíithe agus stair chultúrtha na hÉireann, nó stair chultúrtha agus liteartha na Gaeilge, faoi chaibidil.³

Fionnuala Ní Chiosáin
Infant View
2001
acrylic, oil, gouache &
sumi ink on aluminium
56.5 x 76.5 cm
courtesy of the artist and the
Kerlin Gallery

Few Irish-language scholars or critics have participated in the debate or brought the Irish-language perspective to the points of argument and disagreement that underpin the enterprise. Few Irish-language scholars have taken a public position on the basic argument about the validity of the post-colonial as a basic interpretative concept when discussing the cultural history of Ireland or the cultural and literary history of the Irish language.

The reasons why this might be so, although addressed, are not fully answered here, but Nic Eoin's book opens the door for further enquiry. Questions might include the following: Was it the case that, in the contemporary period, some Irish-language critics and writers were eager or anxious to distance themselves from the tenets of what could be seen as an outmoded and narrow version of cultural nationalism and the old binary opposition of Gael and Gall and preferred to ignore the political nature of Irish-language literature, which then became somehow naturalized or unproblematized? Or, on the other hand, did Irish-language scholars take it as read that Irish-language literature belonged *de facto* to the pre-colonial, the (anti)colonial and the post-colonial and that therefore in a sense it was a non-debate?

It is also certainly the case, as Nic Eoin mentions, that Irish-language scholars whose work deals quite overtly with the impact of colonialism and conquest on literary production, but who did not necessarily cloak their work in the theoretical attire and discourse of post-colonialism, have been left outside the debate, however relevant their work might be. Nic Eoin herself states that her own approach is based on the premise that the term or classification 'post-colonial' is of little importance within the Irish-language critical context. She acknowledges at the same time that the post-colonial project is one that has much to offer to Irish-language critics, who might, she

suggests, creatively ally themselves with its practitioners. She quotes Martine Pelletier's 1999 essay on Field Day, where Pelletier, speaking of 'Ireland's literature generally, and the Field Day plays in particular', noted that they clearly evince several of the characteristics most often perceived as central to post-colonial literature: an obsession with identity which often translates into an anxiety about origins, a questioning of authenticity, an interest in hybridity, a form of in-between-ness or *entre-deux*, which is indeed inseparable from the experience of colonial occupation. Concurrently there exists a fascination for language in many guises, where the post-colonial can meet the post-modern.⁴

Nic Eoin takes these same themes to be central in both modern Irish-language literature and criticism but goes on to assert that this literature offers another perspective, a different insight from that of Irish literature in English — the perspective of 'a language community who have suffered minoritization in their own country'.⁵

One might validly make the point that, almost a decade on from Pelletier's remarks, there have been enormous changes in Irish life: the peace process in the North, the continued economic boom in the South, and the new populations of immigrants and migrant workers. These changes are beginning to have consequences for the post-colonial debate — with questions of hybridity and multiculturalism becoming, if anything, more critical than ever before.

Nic Eoin most importantly does put forward the idea that the type of textual criticism that came to the fore in the 1960s in Irish was an attempt to escape from the cultural prescriptions of the Corkery school and of the Revivalists. She is not here concerned with questions of ideology as with supplying a new paradigm for the 'state of the language of literature in Irish'.⁶ What Nic Eoin seeks to do is not simply to redress

- 4 Martine Pelletier, 'Field Day and "The Irish-English Collision"', *European Journal of English Studies*, 3, 3 (1999), 332, quoted in Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 45
- 5 Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 45
- 6 Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 13

- 7 See Gearóid Denvir, ‘Ó Shíolteagasc go Critic: Litríocht Dhioscúrsúil na Gaeilge san Aois Seo’, *Léachtaí Chólm Cille*, 26 [Léann na Gaeilge] (Maigh Nuad, 1996), 178–218.
- 8 Cathal Ó Searcaigh, ‘The View from the Glen’, *Irish Pages*, 2, 2 (2004), 229–35
- 9 Chinua Achebe, ‘The African Writer and the English Language’, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), quoted in Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 23
- 10 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London, 1986); Michael Hartnett, *A Farewell to English* (Loughcrew, 1975)

the balance but to change the very nature of the debate and the whole thrust of literary criticism in the language from the old binary opposition between ‘traditionalists and modernists’, as Gearóid Denvir has called them, or ‘nativists and progressives’ to use Philip O’Leary’s terms.⁷ Nic Eoin seeks, however, to correct what she sees as the overcompensatory nature of modern and contemporary criticism in the Irish language with its insistence on the primacy of the text as the site of analysis — itself a necessary response to the fetishization of language/linguistic purity both as ideology and aesthetic — to a critical stance that would concern itself with the linguistic *context*, that of minority/minoritized discourse not simply as sociological or historical backdrop but as a signifier itself inscribed, according to Nic Eoin, in every aspect of textuality. In the hands of more literal and less theoretically adept critics than Nic Eoin this might become seriously reductive, a return to the old days of the ‘language and cultural police’, the ‘linguistic McCarthyites who inspected your grammar and your syntax’, as Cathal Ó Searcaigh put it in a recent essay.⁸

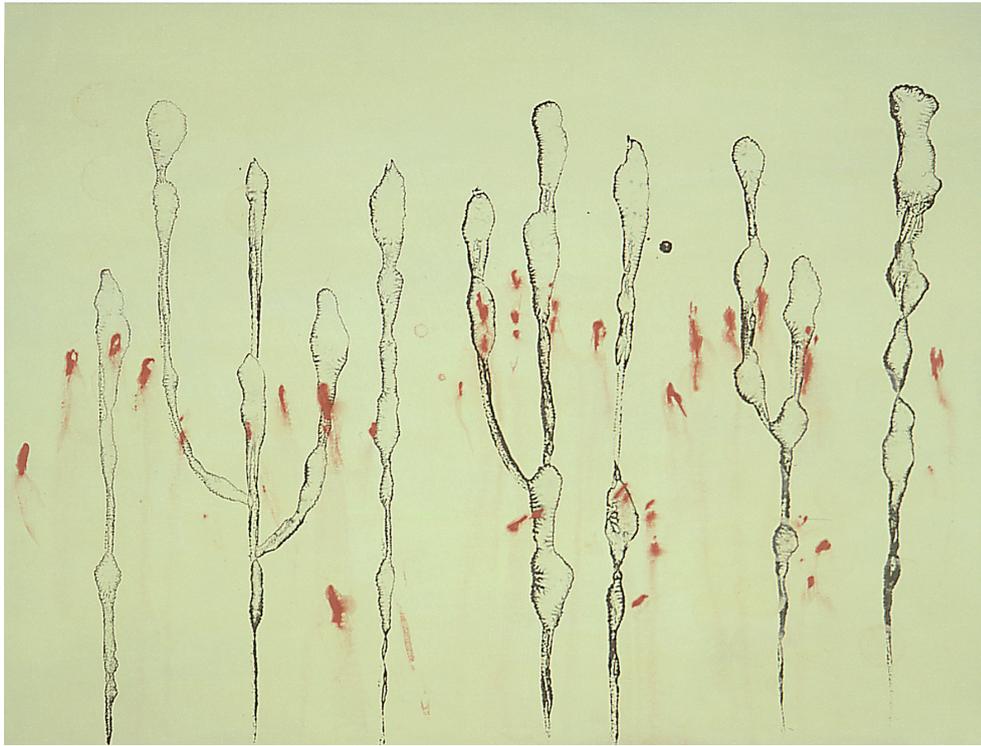
Nic Eoin gives due mention to the work of Declan Kiberd, one of the few critics, post-colonial or otherwise, to work in both languages and literatures. Her own thesis, while forthright in its political/cultural engagement, avoids narrow reductionism. Still, there are blind spots where a comparative approach — a reading across linguistic boundaries as well as within one’s own language tradition might best elucidate the specificity of particular texts. Would it not help us to read Gearóid Mac Lochlainn’s poetry in light of Ciaran Carson’s for example, or in light of Eoin McNamee’s prose, and vice versa; to read Micheál Ó Conghaile in light of Jamie O’Neill or Colm Tóibín, and vice versa: to read Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in light of Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as has been done by Ríona Ní Fhrighill, with her comparative reading of Ní Dhomhnaill and Eavan

Boland), as well as, of course, Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Caitlín Maude?

In her first chapter, Nic Eoin surveys and critiques the rise of post-colonial theory internationally within literary and cultural studies, noting their anglophone tendencies and origins and drawing attention in particular to the marginalization of literary and cultural texts and production in native/indigenous/pre-colonial languages by the very same theoretical practices that sought to chart or unveil the processes of assimilation and acculturation that were themselves a central part of the colonial enterprise.

Nic Eoin argues strongly, however, for a two-way dynamic — if Irish-language critics have something to learn from post-colonial theory, then post-colonial critics and criticism has much to learn from Irish-language literature and criticism. As an example of what an Irish-language perspective could bring to the post-colonial discourse internationally, Nic Eoin cites the debate concerning the use of indigenous languages in African literature, contrasting the very different approach of two writers, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe and Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Achebe writes in English, but a ‘new English’, as he puts it, a world language ‘able to carry the weight of my African experience’.⁹ Ngugi, having initially made his name also writing in English, chose in 1977 to write only in Gikuyu and Kiswahili, two of Kenya’s indigenous languages. In his later book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) he formally bade ‘farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings’, which, although it is not mentioned here by Nic Eoin, is an uncanny echo of a phrase used by Michael Hartnett in his collection *Farewell to English* (1975), where he too bade ‘farewell to English verse / to those I caught in English nets’.¹⁰

Ngugi’s decision to write in Gikuyu has been criticized, however, on the basis of its supposed essentialism by, among others,



Fionnuala Ní Chiosáin
On the Grass
 2001
 acrylic, emulsion and
 gouache on aluminium
 62.5 x 83.5 cm
 courtesy of the artist and the
 Kerlin Gallery

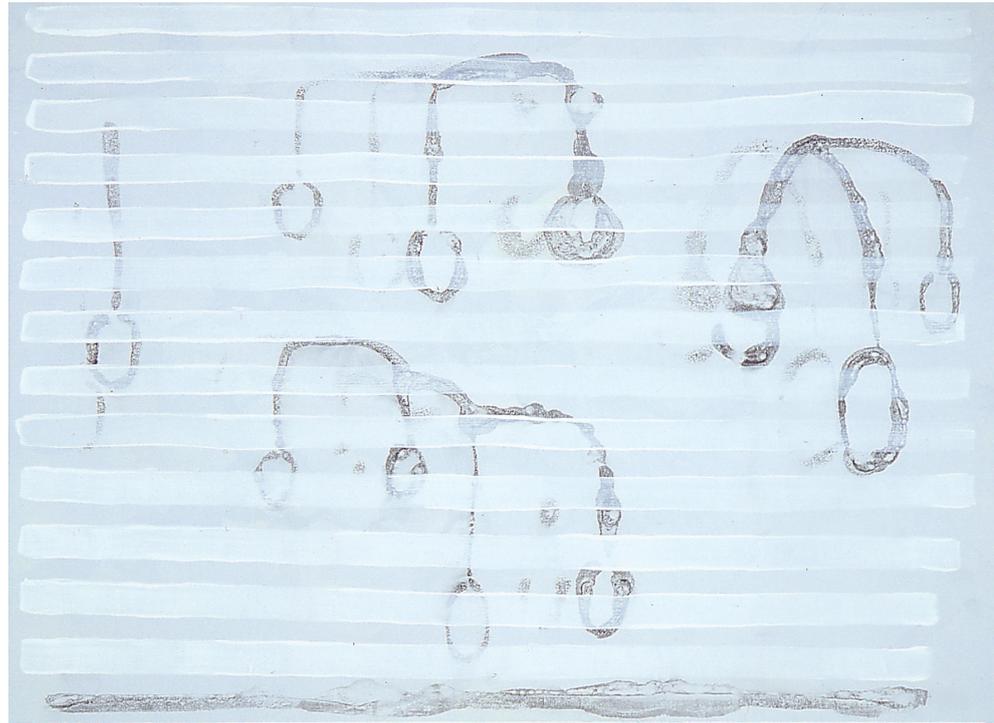
Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) fame, one of the founding texts of post-colonial literary theory, which of course was concerned with uncovering the subversive strategies by which English was being reshaped or appropriated by Asian and African writers from the imperial ‘standard’ language to a ‘neutral’ vehicle capable of transmitting the post-colonial experience. Nic Eoin strongly contests their equation, and indeed conflation, of a return to the native language as a return to some ‘essential cultural identity’ that does not exist, as outlined both in their Introduction and in their selective choices from Ngugi’s work in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1996).¹¹

Nic Eoin, on the other hand, sees both validity and points of comparison with the Irish situation in Ngugi’s claim for the recognition of what Nic Eoin terms ‘current living cultures’ and Ngugi’s insistence that (post-colonial) literature should not further the process of devaluation instigated by the

colonial project itself. She draws explicit parallels between Ngugi’s stance — which, she claims, has more to do with issues of educational rights and communication rights for [native] language communities than any essentialism — and the stance of certain Gaeltacht writers in Ireland in the 1930s, when similar issues were sources of both worry and anger to them.¹² Nic Eoin makes the point that the Irish experience, in particular the fact that a modern literature exists in Irish, with some Irish-language writers having achieved international recognition, has much to say in relation to debates around language in general and the role of indigenous languages in the post-colonial setting in particular. She notes specifically the deafening silence surrounding these issues from established Irish post-colonial critics working in an international context. Nic Eoin does acknowledge that major theoretical figures within post-colonialism such as Gayatri Spivak, for example, have what she terms ‘an accurate understanding in the abstract’

- 11 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back* (London and New York, 1989) and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, comps., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York, 1995)
- 12 Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 25

Fionnuala Ní Chiosáin
Window
 2001
 acrylic and sumi ink on
 aluminium
 62.5 x 83.5 cm
 courtesy of the artist and the
 Kerlin Gallery



13 Nic Eoin, *Trén*
bhFearann Breac, 22

(*cruinntuisceant theibí*) of issues of power and language and of the ‘new colonialism’ of globalized communications, not to mention the dangers inherent in the world dominance and hegemony of English. However, according to Nic Eoin, the location of such critics within Western anglophone academe and their exclusionist linguistic practice of writing theoretically in English and dealing only or primarily with texts in English have contributed further to the marginalization of indigenous/minority literatures and cultural discourse. Discussing Spivak in particular, she draws interesting parallels to what is essentially Nic Eoin’s own situation, and indeed dilemma, as an Irish-language critic:

Ach, ar ndóigh, dá scríobhfadh Gayatri Spivak in aon cheann de theangacha dúchasacha na hIndia, is cinnte nach mbeadh trácht cloiste againne inniu ar a saothar. Ní bheadh ann don saothar taobh amuigh dá phobal áitiúil féin: bheadh sé díreach ar aon chéim le critic na Gaeilge — gan a bheith luaite sna

*hinnéacsanna idirnáisiúnta tagartha, gan a bheith léite ag scoláirí atá ag obair i réimsí gaolmhara trí mbeán an Bhéarla. Seans maith nach mbeadh mórán tráchta cloiste uirthi fú ambáin san India féin.*¹³

Of course, if Gayatri Spivak were to write in any of the indigenous languages of India, it is certain that we would not have heard of her work. The work would not exist outside its own local community: it would be exactly like Irish-language criticism — not mentioned in the international reference indices, not read by scholars working in English in related fields. There is a good chance that even in India she would be pretty much unknown.

And indeed this very book is evidence of Nic Eoin’s own stance concerning the power relations of language in critical discourse and highlights a dilemma for critics working in the Irish-language tradition: should they themselves write in English or Irish?

Nic Eoin has chosen to write here in Irish (although she is not a strict separatist) even though that guarantees her arguments will remain unread or marginalized outside an Irish-language audience. To write in English would risk a further marginalization and impoverishment of critical discourse in the Irish language and might well elicit the charge of pandering to the hegemony of English. Indeed, Nic Eoin's book highlights the whole question of audience. As well as asking ourselves, Who is listening?, we might also pose the question, To whom are we speaking? Nic Eoin here is clearly addressing an Irish-speaking audience when making her critique of post-colonial theory and its marginalization of minority discourse, before going on to give a hugely invigorating reading of much modern and contemporary Irish-language literature. Nic Eoin is particularly scathing when she comes to English-language post-colonial critics within Irish Studies who have made international reputations and who, she claims, marginalize and palimpsestize (a term borrowed here from Gearóid Denvir, as she acknowledges) the Irish language, its culture and criticism. But surely it is these very critics themselves, not to mention those younger scholars and students who read them, who are most in need of hearing, if not necessarily agreeing with, Nic Eoin's arguments. She utilizes David Lloyd's term 'ideological encirclement' to characterize the exclusion of Irish-language concerns from a critical enterprise that claims to uncode minority discourse and to theorize questions

of 'minoritization' and marginalization. Until, however, those working in the field of Irish Studies become fully bilingual, or at the very least fully aware of its necessity, this important and compelling work will remain a closed book to monolingual critics.

If I have a caveat to enter about the underlying thesis in this book, it would be that cultural dislocation as a condition is not confined to Irish speakers alone, nor is linguistic identity monocultural or monolithic: Irish-language writers write from a constellation of identities. The bilingual road signs Kildare/*Cill Dara*; Portarlinton/*Cúil an tSúdaire* etcetera, which are a source of cultural unease in Colm Breathnach's poem as he makes his journey from Cork to Dublin, are also there to be seen by monolingual English speakers, as well as the myriads of new Irish whose native language is Polish or Lithuanian or Latvian or indeed the indigenous languages of Nigeria and other parts of Africa. If anything, the (bilingual) Irish speaker is at an advantage, being able to uncode and decipher both. And here I would come down on the side of the debate that celebrates, or at the very least ungrudgingly accepts, the hybrid, the view of Homi Bhabha that 'the borderline work of culture' — in contemporary Irish terms, the encounter between Irish and English and other linguistic and cultural forces — creates 'a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation'.¹⁴ *Pied Beauty* is always in the eye of the beholder. This book does much to nourish it. ■

14 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, 1994), 7, quoted in Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac*, 261.