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 Edited by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes
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Introduction

MARJORIE HOWES AND DEREK ATTRIDGE

Semicoloniality

In the sixth chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, Shaun appears in the guise of one Professor Jones, delivering a lecture on the superiority of space to time. To gain his audience's attention for the fable of The Mookse and The Gripses by which he means to exemplify this hierarchical opposition, he announces:

Gentes and laitymen, fullstoppers and semicolonials, hybreds and lubberds!
 (FW 152.16)

With his customary brilliance, Joyce here articulates in a single phrase a variety of binary oppositions that divide human communities. A gender opposition is obvious in the half-heard phrase "Gentlemen and ladies" and class distinction is present in the appeal to "high-breds and low-breds," the latter conflated with the equally derogatory "lubbers." Religious difference is evoked in the allusion to "Gentiles" and "laity," the first suggesting a Jewish classification, the second a Christian one – and both terms implying exclusion from a defined religious group, and thus the contrast between insiders and outsiders. Working in concert with all these is a categorization disguised under the familiar distinction between full stops and semicolons: the opposition between permanent and temporary inhabitants of a colonized country, or "stoppers" and "colonials."

At the same time as oppositions multiply, suggesting the interconnectedness of all these ways of dividing social groups into exclusive compartments, the very structure of opposition is questioned, in a move that is typical of *Finnegans Wake*'s method. In the opening phrase, for instance, "men" is switched from its normal place in the first word to the second word, thus producing gender confusion instead of polarity. What is more, while the natives are "full"-stoppers, the expatriates are only "semi"-colonials; and the members of the high-bred upper class are also – Joyce here seems to have foreknowledge of current discussions of

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colonialism – “hybrids.” (Another punctuation mark is implied here too, this time, appropriately enough, one that registers simultaneous connection and division: the hyphen.) We might note also that Joyce raises the issue of nations and nationality at the very beginning of the announcement: for the Romans, *gens* signified a people or a country, and its plural, *gentes*, could be used to mean “foreign nations.”

This strategy of evoking and simultaneously complicating oppositions is entirely characteristic of Joyce’s writing and of his attitude to political and ethical issues. Philosophically he could be said to have been both a separatist and a unionist, thinking constantly in terms of oppositions and that which dissolves (or reverses) oppositions. He even extended this preference for undecidability or hybridity to the very opposition between separation and union as distinct principles of thought (as well as practical policies), so that even these terms cannot finally operate in isolation from each other. To identify points of difference, for Joyce, is to articulate a kind of connection. Political (and, more specifically, Irish) separatism and unionism, nationalism and anti-nationalism, therefore, are not for Joyce entirely separable, but neither can they be conflated; to identify wholly with one side is as stultifying as it is irresponsible to make no distinction at all. Joyce’s lectures and articles on Ireland dating from his time in Trieste – a constant reference in recent commentaries on his politics – evince the same doubleness, and have been read as both strongly supportive of Irish nationalism and highly critical of it. Emer Nolan, in articulating her position on these writings in *James Joyce and Nationalism*, perhaps speaks for all the contributors to this volume when she says that “his writings about Ireland may not provide a coherent critique of either colonised or colonialist; but their very ambiguities and hesitations testify to the uncertain, divided consciousness of the colonial subject, which he is unable to articulate in its full complexity outside his fiction” (130).

In the Wakean sentence above, the opposition between native and colonizer is both strongly articulated and decisively challenged, and this remains true of the fable that follows. The Mookse (Aesop’s fox, and another manifestation of Shaun) is, in historical terms, a conflation of King Henry II of England and Pope Adrian IV, the Englishman Nicholas Breakspeare, who represent the early colonization and domination of Ireland by England and the Roman Catholic Church. The bunch of grapes desired by the fox is associated with Shem and called – in continuation of Shaun’s attack on his brother as beggar and complainer – the

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Gripes. In terms of the opposition between invader and native, he stands for the Irish population (he is called the Mookse's "Dubville brooder-on-low"), but he is by no means the hero of the story, which ends with the falling of dusk and the transformation of the protagonists to humble articles of clothing carried away by two women, at once Valkyries bearing off the dead in battle and Dublin washerwomen at their daily work. The initial opposition between English and Irish, invader and native, colonizer and colonized, upper class and lower class, space and time, dissolves in the murk of evening, and a different (and equally temporary) opposition structures the conclusion of the story: that between, on the one hand, the warring oppositional males, now impotent, and, on the other, the preserving female community.

This passage reveals one of the reasons why Joyce's writings can be called "semicolonial": in their dealings with questions of nationalism and imperialism they evince a complex and ambivalent set of attitudes, not reducible to a simple anticolonialism but very far from expressing approval of the colonial organizations and methods under which Ireland had suffered during a long history of oppression, and continued to suffer during his lifetime. The allusion to punctuation, furthermore, reminds us that Joyce's handling of political matters is always mediated by his strong interest in, and immense skill with, language: the two domains are, finally, inseparable in his work. The fable of the Mookse and the Gripes demonstrates, as would any passage from *Finnegans Wake*, the way in which language's potential for multiple suggestiveness is used to make connections between the political and historical domain and the domains of, among many others, myth, religion, popular culture, high culture, and philosophy. To write in this way is not to reduce politics to language, but to use linguistic forms to stage political issues with an openness to manifold outcomes that is impossible in the purely pragmatic sphere.

Our title also invokes the disciplinary field of postcolonial studies, in recent years one of the most productive areas of literary and cultural criticism. The adjective "semicolonial" signals our sense of a partial fit between this set of approaches and Joyce's writing. Rather than claiming that the issues raised and models offered by postcolonial studies can illuminate every element of Joyce's works or supersede other interpretive or theoretical frameworks, we believe that it is precisely from the limited compatibility between them that the most interesting lessons can be drawn – for both readers of Joyce and theorists of colonialism.

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Another – related – justification for the use of “semicolonial” lies in the fact that Joyce’s writings emerge from, and take as their major historical subject, a country whose status *vis-à-vis* the imperial power, although it can be illuminated by the colonial model, cannot be understood straightforwardly in its terms. Ireland’s relation to current theorizations of imperialism and postcoloniality is a problematic one, and we take up this issue in more detail below. Other reasons for the caution expressed in our title include the way in which Joyce’s encyclopedic appropriations of the material and textual worlds around him exceeded the boundaries of Ireland, and the importance of historical factors other than imperialism in shaping his literary production. Joyce spent by far the larger part of his life out of Ireland, which also contributed to the semidetached nature of his relationship to its national politics, and any literary *œuvre* as complex and inexhaustible as Joyce’s will always offer alternative avenues of reading to pursue and interpretive knots that refuse to be untied. Finally, in its evocation of the hilarity of *Finnegans Wake*, the term “semicolonial” reminds us that Joyce, however weighty his concerns, is nothing if not a comic writer, and that critics forget this at their peril.

“Semicolonial Joyce” could also name a series of recent debates among Joyceans. The rise of postcolonial perspectives in Irish studies has generated a good deal of controversy, nowhere more so than in Joyce scholarship; in a 1996 review, Colm Tóibín quipped that “the battle for the soul of Joyce has become almost as intense in recent years as the battle for the GPO in Easter Week” (“Playboys of the GPO,” 15). Our volume is not intended to mirror this battle; we have chosen to collect work that finds it useful to engage, however critically, with postcolonial paradigms, instead of simply rejecting them. In this introductory chapter, we offer, as background to the chapters that follow, a brief account of the debates in Irish studies and Joyce studies that center on questions of colonialism and postcoloniality.

Irish studies meets postcolonial studies

Postcolonial studies is perhaps most usefully defined as a series of intractable but productive problems or tensions, rather than as a set of propositions or conclusions. Examining its exchanges with Irish studies and Joyce scholarship can make these problems yield fresh insights, and

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produce new, but fruitful, difficulties. One set of issues confronting any effort to establish how postcolonial studies might offer appropriate conceptual and methodological frameworks for the study of Joyce lies in the now notorious imprecision of the field's major terms. While "colonial" and "postcolonial" are ubiquitous in much current scholarship, one of their most obvious features is that no one is really sure what they mean. The term "postcolonial" in particular has generated a multitude of definitional difficulties and critiques.¹ While it apparently begs to be defined temporally, efforts to characterize the relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial in terms of sequentially occurring historical periods rarely produce satisfactory results. If Ireland can be said to have been a British colony (a question to which we shall return), when can colonialism in Ireland be said to have ended? With the treaty of 1921? The 1937 constitution? The 1949 repeal of the External Relations Act? The recent peace accord? Or some future final resolution?

The question of when a postcolonial Ireland might emerge, of course, is inseparable from the question of what such an Ireland might look like. Postcolonial studies negotiates between two temporal concepts of the postcolonial-as-after-colonialism, one emphasizing change and the new departures of the "post," the other emphasizing continuity and the aftermath of the "colonial." The first has been criticized for being naïvely, prematurely celebratory and for obscuring the ways in which the legacy and effects of colonialism continue to shape former colonies. The second has been taken to task for conceptualizing the complex and varied political, social, and cultural life of newly independent nations primarily in terms of the lingering impact and issues of the colonial relationship, thus repeating the reductive tyrannies of the colonial project. Would a postcolonial Ireland have its face turned towards the past? Would it be best characterized through the ways in which the ghosts of colonialism haunt it? Or would a postcolonial Ireland look towards the future, defining itself by finding colonial paradigms and their nationalist counterparts outmoded? Of course, these options need not be mutually exclusive, but articulating some combination of them often proves difficult in practice.

¹ For critiques of the term "postcolonial," see McClintock, "The Angel of Progress," and Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-colonial.'" For a more wide-ranging discussion of the definitional issues and conceptual categories involved, see Parry, "The Postcolonial."

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The connection Tóibín draws between the Post Office and the post-colonial indicates his assumption, which is fairly widely shared in some Irish studies circles, that much work informed by postcolonial studies represents a continuation of the nationalist tradition in Irish cultural criticism.² Irish revisionism is arguably as difficult to define as postcolonial studies (see Boyce and O'Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History*, 4). But it often seeks to critique nationalist mythologies and to decenter the relationship between Britain and Ireland, and it conducts various critiques of postcolonial Irish studies. These critiques often invoke a contrast between a (postcolonial) preoccupation with defining Ireland in relation to Britain and a (revisionist) ability to move beyond the outmoded centrality of the colonial relationship to think in more varied terms (Tóibín, "Playboys of the GPO," 16). What they fail to see is that both approaches are proper to postcolonial studies, and that the tension between them is an important feature of much postcolonial scholarship.

In response to the aporias generated by efforts to conceptualize the postcolonial as a phase of history after colonialism, other scholars have defined the postcolonial as following the *beginning* of colonialism, collapsing any temporal distinction between the colonial and postcolonial. This way of thinking often treats the postcolonial as a resistant element within colonialism, by identifying anticolonial opposition as postcolonial and/or by designating the instabilities and contradictions within colonialism itself as postcolonial.³ Obviously, such work transfers the problem of periodization rather than solving it; it is no easier to tell when colonialism began than when it might end. When did Britain first colonize Ireland? During the invasions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? Those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? The dissolution of the Irish parliament under the 1800 Act of Union? For many scholars in the generation after Edward Said, whose foundational *Orientalism* was criticized for treating colonialism as monolithic and virtually omnipotent, this version of the postcolonial is attractive because it seems to offer a more enabling, and more accurate, view of colonialism as internally ambivalent and conflicted, and as potentially vulnerable to the various

² See, for example, Foster, "The Lovely Magic," 6. For a critique of this assumption, see Graham, "'Liminal Spaces.'"

³ For example, the general introduction to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* argues that "post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2).

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forms of resistance with which colonized peoples combat their oppression. It has its potential dangers as well, however: a certain fetishizing of “resistance,” whose recovery can become the reductive goal of every reading, a related and equally limiting dependence on an opposition between resistance and complicity, and a relative neglect of the massive material power and effects of imperial structures in favor of an overly textualist reading of their instabilities.⁴

Neither of these temporal approaches to the postcolonial addresses what is widely regarded as the most central and contentious question in contemporary Irish studies: in analyzing the centuries-long relationship between Ireland and Britain, is it appropriate and useful to call that relationship “colonial” in any or all periods of its history?⁵ One reason for the intensity of this debate is that defining the postcolonial in spatial terms also produces conflicts between equally problematic alternatives. Some critics use “postcolonial” more or less as a replacement for the now unfashionable term “Third World.” This usage usually includes a number of characteristics – poverty, underdevelopment, a non-European culture and language exposed to the depredations of a globalized Eurocentric and/or American culture – which are arguably the consequences of Western global capitalism’s dominance of the world in the twentieth century. But these characteristics are not dependent upon a specifically colonial or imperial form of domination, though they are often connected to it.⁶ Other scholars foreground the sheer fact of colonial domination, a move whose confusing results include a potential characterization of the United States as postcolonial. One version of the postcolonial rests upon a dichotomy between the West and the non-West, and the other invokes an opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. For the former, Eurocentrism is all-important; for the latter, it

⁴ For critiques of the textualist model, see Parry, “The Postcolonial” and Kaul, “Colonial Figures.”

⁵ For example, Smyth begins *Decolonisation and Criticism* by observing that “the most contentious debate in contemporary Irish studies concerns the establishment of the proper basis upon which to address the political and cultural activity of the modern period” and by setting out his claim that “a model of *decolonisation*” provides that basis (9).

⁶ For this reason, Dirlik, in “The Postcolonial Aura,” criticizes postcolonial criticism for repudiating capitalism’s foundational role in history, and even suggests that current postcolonial studies reflects the logic of late capitalism in a Third World context.

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means very little. There is also a debate between scholars who insist on the material and methodological centrality of such binary oppositions and those who focus on troubling and complicating them.⁷

A further reason for controversy over Ireland's relation to the postcolonial is that Ireland clearly belongs on both sides of each dichotomy. While Ireland under British rule was underdeveloped and deindustrialized compared to England, twentieth-century Ireland has far more in common with Europe than Africa or Asia in terms of economic performance and living standards. And in social, cultural, and religious terms Ireland is clearly of the West rather than opposed to it. Ireland did wage a lengthy and ultimately at least partially successful struggle to free itself from British control, and numbers of people involved in or affected by that struggle saw it as an anticolonial one. On the other hand, Ireland, particularly Protestant Ireland, helped build and maintain the British imperial system, and Catholic Ireland enthusiastically pursued the civilizing and christianizing missions that were an important part of the empire. The "anomalous state" of Ireland, to borrow David Lloyd's suggestive phrase, has been variously characterized as that of "a 'first world' country with a 'third world' colonial history" (Foley, *et al.*, eds., *Gender and Colonialism*, 8), internal colonialism (Hecter, *Internal Colonialism*), and a metropolitan colony (McCormack, *Dissolute Characters*). Instead of a colonial model for British–Irish relations, some revisionist history offers an "archipelago" model which casts Ireland as one of several peripheral regions that gradually became absorbed into the centralizing state (Dunne, "New Histories," 11). Liam Kennedy has suggested the word "secession" rather than "decolonization" as a term for what happened when Ireland broke away from Britain ("Modern Ireland," 116), and Ireland's resistance to the center–periphery models that many postcolonial scholars now find increasingly unsatisfactory does indeed suggest its potential connections to studies of emancipatory movements within Europe. Kennedy, who simply equates the postcolonial with the Third World and then offers evidence to demonstrate Ireland's membership in the First World, cites these connections as a way of rejecting postcolonial paradigms for Ireland in favor of the archipelago model. However, one

⁷ The tendency to destabilize binary oppositions is perhaps most closely associated with the work of Homi Bhabha. Critics who insist on the continued importance of the opposition between colonizer and colonized include Benita Parry and Abdul JanMohamed.

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could just as logically pursue them under the aegis of postcolonial studies, which has learned much from feminist, African-American, labor, and gay studies, and whose contiguities with those fields remain important areas of scholarly investigation.⁸ Investigating such connections further will help scholars to articulate colonialism and modernity together, and to think about the extent to which the fractures, losses, and contradictions that individuals and cultures experience under colonialism are versions of or are related to the dislocations attendant upon modernity itself.⁹

Its terminological difficulties aside, another way of defining postcolonial studies is through its intense, ambivalent engagement with nationalism. Postcolonial scholarship conducts a thorough critique of the category and ideology of the nation on several grounds. One is the now well-established argument that nationalism is derivative of imperialism, and that its intellectual structures simply invert and mirror those of imperialism. For some scholars this derivativeness represents a pernicious complicity with imperial power, while for others it merely reveals the necessary and historically determined predicament of anticolonial resistance. Another mode of critique emphasizes that nationalism, particularly cultural or ethnic nationalism, is often homogenizing; it neglects or seeks to erase various kinds of difference among members of the nation. Subaltern, feminist, and Marxist critiques point out that nationalism usually articulates the political grievances and aspirations of the ruling classes, rather than of that fiction, the “nation as a whole.”¹⁰ They concentrate on recovering the specific histories and subjugated knowledges of people whose sufferings and desires are neither addressed by nor included in bourgeois nationalism’s field of vision, such as women and the working classes.¹¹ In Irish studies, such work sometimes appears or is claimed as one of revisionism’s modes.¹² These last two kinds of

⁸ On the relationship between postcolonial and African-American studies, see MacLeod, “Black American Literature.”

⁹ For examples of work in Irish studies that pursues this project, see Eagleton, *Heathcliff*, Gibbons, *Transformations*, and Kiberd, “Romantic Ireland’s Dead and Gone.”

¹⁰ For a sustained Marxist critique of the field’s preoccupation with the national, see Ahmad, *In Theory*.

¹¹ The most prominent examples of such work include the writings Gayatri Spivak and the work of the Subaltern Studies group.

¹² For example, Murphy offers the writing of women’s history as the truly revolutionary revisionism (“Women’s History,” 21).

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critique also generate a tension between the impulse to critique identity thinking in general and the urge to unearth and assert those subaltern identities that trouble the national.

Despite such criticisms, postcolonial studies remains obsessed with the nation, for several reasons. Because historically, most (though not all) anticolonial struggles have been versions of nationalism, nationalism is an important aspect of the conditions and aspirations that postcolonial scholars take as their objects of study. As a result, the nation tends to migrate from the category of the historically contingent to the category of the historically inevitable; as Graham observes, the nation has a “teleological aura” (“Liminal Spaces,” 32). An additional reason for the continuing centrality of the nation lies in the culturalism of postcolonial studies, which is often based in literature departments. Such work tends to privilege culture (rather than, for example, economics or military force) as both an instrument of imperial domination and a vehicle of resistance to it. It usually appeals to a semianthropological conception of culture as cultural difference, and demarcates “national” cultures, literatures, and identities as its objects of investigation, however unstable and hybrid they turn out to be.¹³ In postcolonial Irish studies, a preoccupation with the nation can lead to various forms of Irish exceptionalism, which in turn are contested by revisionism’s interest in regional particularity within Ireland and in Ireland’s similarities to and relations with Europe. They are also countered within nation-centered work in calls for a new comparativism which traces the similarities and exchanges between Ireland and other peripheral or colonized regions.¹⁴

Postcolonial studies has not simply clung naïvely to the nation; it has generated increasingly sophisticated ways of thinking about it. The field has learned much from scholars who study the meaning and process of nation-building in Europe, such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. Rather than a spontaneous or naturally occurring form of collectivity, the nation is, in Anderson’s famous phrase, an “imagined community,” and imaginative styles vary considerably. While some forms of nationalism are narrow, intolerant, and demand conformity, others are more open and pluralistic; some are allied with the state, others

¹³ For an extended critique of this trend and an elaboration of an alternative paradigm see Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

¹⁴ See the last chapter of Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, and the last chapter of Gibbons, *Transformations*.