

Editorial: The Contemporary Ballroom of Romance

Author(s): Wanda Balzano and Moynagh Sullivan

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Editorial:
The Contemporary Ballroom
of Romance

WANDA BALZANO and MOYNAGH SULLIVAN

With terms like ‘post-feminism’ used liberally in the media, and young women and men under the vague impression that we all live in an equal world – because, in the world of consumer choice, all seem to have equal opportunities to spend it in order to be ‘worth it’ – it becomes even more of the essence to keep the discourses of gender and feminism alive and open. Until the old issues have been resolved and the movement towards social justice has ceased to be relevant, this question remains one of the central grounds of contention in modern society. If the use of the term ‘post-feminist’ reveals in its ‘consumers’ a desire to be at all costs modern, and post-modern, in other words progressive and trendy (shedding the old clothes is seemingly the fastest way to abandon things of the past and urgently embrace a carefree, fashionable attitude), then this dangerously mirrors the more alarming aspects of a winning Celtic-Tiger mentality. One cannot but remain unconvinced of this kind of entrepreneurial, self-congratulatory, *à la mode* feminism that follows the capitalistic model closely and is an indulgent form of bourgeois individualism, encoding a contradiction in terms that pits the group (women) against the self (woman).

It is the responsibility of educational analysts to revitalize the defining terms of the feminist question and to regenerate a critical discourse that is at risk of being hijacked by conservative political forces. Resistance to conformism through grassroots organization and social activism needs to be complemented by other, more widespread, gestures coming from academia, so that there will not be an ideological division, but a more concerted effort among various types of study and activism. In third-level education this also means that the field of Irish Studies within and outside the island invariably has to include the discursive construction of gendered

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identities as well as, for instance, that of minority groups and the disabled, in the past, present and future, so that literary studies, cultural studies and gender studies can be considered to be a relevant part of a cross-categorical and genealogical grammar of the representation of Ireland. Often, however, the field is not recognized as standing on its own and, because of the multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approach of feminism, it is consequently (dis)regarded as broad and not deep. That is why in universities and colleges Women's (and Gender) Studies have found it difficult to be included in the curriculum; apparently, that is also why they are relegated to a marginal position within the institutions, dwelling in centres and programmes more regularly than in departments. Similar reasons for the exclusion of Women's Studies are given by its detractors within Irish Studies. Such diffidence is also reflected in the compilation of some recent compendia and encyclopaedia of Irish culture, where, regardless of the growing attention to its subject matter, feminism is not included as an entry. Yet, in spite of these unconstructive responses, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the vitality of the contemporary feminist debate in intellectual circles, as it has been there for a long while, being laid bare amidst the controversies surrounding the publication of the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology* and then sharpened with the publication of volumes IV and V, devoted to Irish women's writing.

In July 2005, during the Irish Seminar of the Keough Centre of the University of Notre Dame, which took place in Dublin, the exchanges that followed Siobhán Kilfeather's Madden-Rooney Public Lecture on 'Genealogies of Irish Feminisms' illuminated one of the fundamental problems faced today by feminist scholarship in Irish Studies: was the male standard, or canon, a compromisingly influential point of reference for Irish feminism? In the course of that informal debate, Joe Cleary suggested that many Irish feminists treated the initial publication of the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology* as pivotal, or even as a starting-point, to its own detriment. While he was voicing some people's view of the project, the question could be addressed more productively from a different angle: must feminist scholarship give up the territorial claims of public visibility and leave the canonical status to patriarchal texts altogether, while trying to claim a different space? Would that not be seen as a self-marginalization? Why should there be a separate space? Since the first three volumes of the anthology were promoted in America as 'the most comprehensive exhibition of the wealth and diversity of Irish literature ever published',¹ with the claim of being inclusive and diverse, why should feminist scholars and intellectuals be made to relinquish public ground and therefore seek a separate territory of their own? It is of course the case that

the ostensibly shared agendas of the two sets of *The Field Day Anthology* are in fact structurally underwritten by very different visions and subject identities. While the three-volume anthology is a good example of Irish writing (mainly by men) in historical contexts, the two new volumes appropriately reflect the main strength of modern feminist thought: its multi- and interdisciplinarity, and its resistance to easy categorization.

Another question, however, surfaces here, and it has to do with the risk of transforming *The Field Day Anthology* case as a defining *cause célèbre* or as a Trojan horse (as a destructive scheme that masquerades as a benign project) for Irish feminism, as if 2002 was its *ANNUS MIRABILIS* – or, rather, the *ANNUS DOMINAE*, before the Canon (b.C.) and after the Canon (a.C.) – thus deflecting attention from the very values contained within its covers, and from the whole import of the women's movement, both within Irish Studies and Irish society, in theory and in practice. Present-day feminism was not born in 2006 and also, as Hilda Tweedy puts it so well, 'the women's movement was [not] born on some mystical date in 1970, like Aphrodite rising from the waves. It has been a long continuous battle in which many women have struggled to gain equality, each generation adding something to the achievements of the past.'² The issue of public space (in academia, in the media, and in different shaped and sized halls of power) will continue to be a prominent feminist concern until full equality is achieved. The idea of 'sharing', in equal terms, is top priority in any agenda which sees itself as democratic. The fact that women and men are inherently of equal worth is the fundamental belief underlying many definitions of feminism – in Ireland and everywhere else – but what are the issues that continue to impede the realization of this belief?

Patronage is a central problem for feminists. It is a fact that women in the artistic and academic world have emerged in large numbers in the last decade, but they continue to have very limited success when it comes to large-project funding, institutional power and public visibility, resulting in almost secret 'genealogical' lineages in academic circles, where the assumption is that women will look after women, so that the so-called mainstream arena tends to be more sympathetic to young men. Over the years such an attitude has contributed to further polarization of men and women in Irish society and in Irish Studies, with feminists treated with the same sort of distrust accorded to the 'bould wimmen' of Ireland, with all their sexual lures, from the 1920s to the late 1970s. The fear of sexual contamination, to say the least, appears replicated in much of what passes for Irish Studies practice, so that it begins to resemble the same sex segregation of Irish education and social practices of the early Free State. Given that much of the necessary scholarly work on women has been carried out

by women, this sort of distrust of women by men is ever more accentuated. The enriching possibilities of feminist scholarship are minimized, to everyone's detriment: in this ballroom of critical romance, we all, like the character from William Trevor's tale, become Bridies of a sort, men and women both.

Irish education is still segregated in many ways, at least in the way many disciplines are taught, at all levels. For feminism to move on considerably and make an impact on the future generation, education needs to be targeted. No matter how insightful its politics, feminism feels deeply threatening to many people, both women and men. By providing a powerful critique of the idea of a timeless social hierarchy, in which God or nature preordained women's dependence on men, feminist scholarship exposes the historical construction and potential deconstruction, of categories such as gender, race, class and sexuality. Fears that feminism will unleash changes in familiar class, family, sexual and racial relationships can produce antifeminist politics among those who wish to conserve older forms of social hierarchy. In a former colony such as Ireland, suspicion, if not fear, of feminism may result from its association with Western (British) colonialism, or with 'outside' or foreign forces. For some, feminism connotes a form of rampant individualism associated with the worst features of contemporary Western, particularly American, society. Feminism forces all women and men to think about social inequalities and about their own relationship to systems of power. For some, it conjures up the fear of losing taken-for-granted privileges; for others, it brings up the pain of acknowledging lack of privilege. Neither is a very pleasant prospect, especially if feminist-led scholarship is presented in the oversimplified language of male oppression and female victimization. By necessity, the vocabulary will have to change and adapt to new perceptions. Portraying a movement as blaming one group and denying the resilience of another will keep it unpopular, even though feminism at its best offers much more complex interpretations of the dynamics of gender, race/ethnicity, and power. The 'F' word can only be demystified through a proper management of educational strategies.

Struggles over definitions are important. Since 1937 the definition of 'family' and 'woman' has been the source of much contention. The location of women in the domestic setting and in the role of mothers urgently needs revision. Also, the privileged position of the married family in the Irish Constitution should be ended to prevent discrimination against unmarried couples and children. Unmarried couples, same-sex couples, lone parents and children – whose rights are not explicitly recognized in the Constitution of the Republic – experience serious inequalities and suffer discrimination in areas such as taxation, housing, inheritance and welfare

because of the State's failure to recognize their relationships and families. The family based on marriage should no longer be privileged, in order to protect children's rights in particular, while there should be an express right for all persons to marry in accordance with the law and found a family, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. A gender-neutral provision recognizing the work of carers in the home should replace the current outmoded reference to women's domestic 'duties'. As a case in point, it would be an instructive lesson to study the case of South Africa, which in 1996 became the first country to explicitly include protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in its Constitution. Families should be valued for what they do rather than how they are labelled. Quite simply, the children's best interests are served by recognizing and protecting their relationship with their primary carers irrespective of biology, gender or sexual orientation. One can only hope that Ireland will learn from the experience and progress of other countries which have set a leading example in these cases and, again, the intelligentsia must help move things forward.

Has Irish feminism, at this point, passed the historical test of time? Has it been able to redefine itself in response to local and global politics? How is it responding under the pressure of the new influx of immigrants, where non-Western women, from Muslim countries and with different beliefs, for example, are eager to join the national debate as equals? It is of course useful to remember that the fractured tradition of Ireland has always offered the challenge of difficult borders, such as that between North and South, Nationalist and Unionist, revisionist and postcolonial, Irish and English, or academia and community, rural and urban. Yet, the topics of ethnicity and racism offer a new and urgent challenge that should be treated with caution, resisting both the temptation of forced assimilation (rather than accommodation) and discrimination.

Feminism moves forward precisely through dissension about its identity and in different forms, languages and cultural locations. The international exchange of experiences with new generations of women will increasingly pose the question in terms of the relationship between women's subjectivities and the new forms of social and linguistic reproduction in the age of the cyborg. As the relation between 'centre' and 'margin', with a hierarchical division between 'first' and 'third' world, is overturned, our critical thinking will require us to reflect and to act within troubling spaces, establishing unusual connections, living among changing categories that will allow us to make close what is far, and to jump between the borders. The histories, images, the places that women traverse and of which they are agents do not allow essentialist views or simple dichotomies. We are going to enter the space and time of transnational feminisms.

In order to understand the (multicultural) future of women (and of Women's Studies) in Ireland, however, we must appreciate the history of feminism that has brought us to the present moment. The emergence of research projects (importantly) funded by the government of Ireland such as 'The Irish Women's Movement Project' constitutes the measure of a considerable achievement, since this is the first time that any Irish government has funded a university-led study and analysis of the legacy of feminism and the women's movement in recent Irish history. A variety of other projects, such as the 'Women's History Project', the 'Munster Women Writers Project' and the increasing publication of volumes of feminist research – to mention only a few: Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (2002); Linda Connolly and Tina O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave* (2005); Rebecca Pelan, *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South* (2005) – confirm that Ireland has reached a critical stage in the important task of recovery work and appreciation. The fact that many of these projects have established a basis for linking national and international research, websites and archives in the comparative study of the women's social movement has opened up the Irish frontiers to a trans-cultural and transnational dimension.

The records of the Irish women's movement are valuable not only to political activists and scholars interested in understanding social change in Ireland; they are also relevant to the debates among the media, community workers, educationalists and writers regarding feminism and Irish identity. In this issue of *The Irish Review* Ailbhe Smyth, Pat Coughlan, Gerardine Meaney, Maria Luddy, Pat O'Connor, Susan McKay and Ivana Bacik either revisit essays of their own which had significant critical influence within their disciplines, or revisit points in Irish legal, constitutional or social history to illuminate present-day practices and beliefs. The wide-ranging essays assembled here should prove a valuable part of that ever-evolving discussion, reflecting, as they do, upon history, literature, sociology and politics.

Notes and References

- 1 Patricia Ferreira, in 'Claiming and Transforming an "Entirely Gentlemanly Artifact": Ireland's Attic Press', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 19:1 (1993), 97.
- 2 Hilda Tweedy, *A Link in the Chain: The Story of the Irish Housewives Association, 1942–1992* (Dublin: Attic, 1992), p. 111.