

Undermining National Identities: A Review Article of New Work by Gutiérrez Arranz and Barbeito, Feijóo, Figueroa, and Sacido

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## Montserrat MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA

### Undermining National Identities:

#### A Review Article of New Work by Gutiérrez Arranz and Barbeito, Feijóo, Figueroa, and Sacido

In this review article I discuss two collected volumes dealing with the construction of national identities and identity formation: *A Multicultural and Multifaceted Study of Ideologies and Conflicts related to the Complex Realities and Fictions of Nation and Identity Represented in Contemporary Literature Written in English*, edited by José María Gutiérrez Arranz (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) and *National Identities and European Literatures / Nationale Identitäten und Europäische Literaturen*, edited by J. Manuel Barbeito, Jaime Feijóo, Antón Figueroa, and Jorge Sacido (Peter Lang, 2008). The parallel reading of the volumes provides a comprehensive and exhaustive framework on nation and national identity as each text tackles the issue from a dissimilar viewpoint. Whereas the former pays particular attention to the portrayal of nation and identity in contemporary literature written in English, namely to the literary field in the United Kingdom and North America (U.S. and Canada), the latter broadens its scope to depict identity within the context of European literatures.

Since the emergence of nationalism as a political ideology in the aftermath of the French Revolution, concepts such as nation and national identity have come to the fore in an abrupt and stubborn manner. If, at first, they were spread by the dominant classes as a vehicle to legitimize the new political doctrine and were welcomed by the masses with open arms as an antidote to all-pervading social crises, time proved the presence of an on-going imbalance between theory and reality. In fact, the so-called social unity was fractured between those prone to preserve the nationalist tenets -- power binaries, hierarchies, rules of behavior, authority and logocentrism -- and those raising their voices against the concept's and its practices' fallacies. In this sense, literature and especially the novel, stood out as a means of underpinning the monolithic and monolingual established order, but also, as a tool of subversion and challenge. This is precisely what the selection of articles included in these volumes attempt to argue for.

The volume *A Multicultural and Multifaceted Study of Ideologies and Conflicts* is subdivided into three parts, each of them organized around a thematic aspect: "United Kingdom? The Celtic and British Isles," "Imperial Heritage and Postcolonial Hybridity," and "The American Melting Pot." The first part opens with an article entitled "The Undermining of a West Briton: The Deconstruction of Joyce's Gabriel Conroy" and the authors, Setsuko Adachi and Michael Kearny, examine the thorny subject of identity formation in colonized countries such as Ireland to show the colonizer-colonized relationship together with the operativity of the British Empire, using Lacan's theory of the Symbolic Order in the make-up of identity as well as Derrida's concept of difference. Through the re-reading of *The Dead*, Setsuko and Kearney offer two complementary, although opposed interpretations of Irish identity. To remain in Ireland in the nineteenth century implied, paradoxically, to sink to stagnation and mental paralysis through the subservience before the core of Britishness, London, and the core of Catholic religion, Rome; as a consequence, Irish identity was a synonym of relinquishing one's own identity within the suffocating British imperial power and therefore of betrayal. On the contrary, to advocate for an Irish nationality meant leaving behind English cultural models and starting anew on the continent. This was Joyce's experience: had he remained in Ireland, he would have ended up ensnared a fate of insecurity and weakness preventing him from calling into question the power structures. However, *The Dead* surprises the reader with Irish characters who do not respect the clear-cut and absolute distinctions fixed by colonialism. Patriarchy collapses when Gabriel Conroy is confronted with three women -- Lily, Miss Ivors, and his wife Gretta -- who subvert his identity, his false superiority and most of all, the British ideological apparatus he represents. In "Imaginative Fiction, Cultural Memory, and the Traumas of Armed Conflict: Representations of the Violent Past in the Irish Troubles" set also in Ireland, Graham Dawson explores two war novels, *Beyond the Pale* (1981) by William Trevor and *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) by Deirdre Madden to reflect upon the way war has fractured private and public identities in Ireland through the British state's demystification and his political propaganda war against Irish Republicanism. Contextualized within the history of the Troubles and the 1993-1994 peace process, both textual readings shed light on theories of cultural memory and trauma. Furthermore, Dawson emphasizes the historical confrontation between Ireland and England and the contrasting versions each country has written about it: while Ireland has identified with a narrative of oppression and trauma inflicted by English and British colonialism, England has seen her imperial mission as an adventure to civilize the world, to promote justice, and to enforce the law. The analysis of both novels reveals the characters' painful predicament, their efforts to reconcile

within themselves war memories, the impossibility of fully achieving it, and the lonely path they have to walk in the healing process.

Moving on to the Scottish context, but still on the Celtic fringe, five articles are presented: in "Selves and Corners: Personal Identity in Willa Muir's *Belonging*" Carmen Luz Fuentes studies the complex process of identity through the autobiography of Willa Muir, one of the most gifted Scottish intellectuals of the twentieth century. Muir's dilemma came from the urgency to belong but concurrently to be free enough to escape the nets that groups and communities, especially national ones, impose on people. Although she was totally devoted to her husband Edwin and they belonged together, Muir's sense of physical and psychological displacement was a constant throughout her life. This resulted in a contradictory personality, full of tensions and uncertainties, aware of the need to belong but at the same time alert to the very nature of that process, always dynamic and never-ending. Fuentes's article is enlarged when read in the light of Kirsten Matthews's "'Lucky Poet' or 'Eternal Man': Hope and Humanity in the Autobiographies of Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir," analysis of the autobiography of Willa Muir's husband, Edwin Muir. In his autobiography, *An Autobiography* (1954), as well as in his other writings, Muir tried to uncover what a human being was through a process that swung between self-examination or particularism and generalization or universalism. This was basically the same argument that underlay MacDiarmid's autobiography, *Lucky Poet* (1943), in which he was concerned with himself as far as his personality was a bridge to know and understand others. Consequently, both authors were interested in the creation of identity beyond the limits that national communities tend to set on people. If Matthew's article affords the reader a glimpse into MacDiarmid's and Muir's prose, "Epic Imaginings from the 'Celtic Fringe' of Britain: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid" by Daniela Kato is an excellent way to revisit MacDiarmid's epic poetry and his sense of identity in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955). As a modernist poet, MacDiarmid was committed to recreating both his Scottish culture and the culture of the world, that is, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Generally speaking, he aimed at placing Scotland within an international context not only to transform the literary space through a new language, a new subject, a new tradition, and a new audience, but also to develop a cultural and political program that would recognize and foster Scottish national identity, sidelined for so long to the periphery. In short, he criticized the aesthetic and discursive practices in force in Scotland in order to break free from English hegemony and to subvert the logic of centre and margin.

In a similar vein, Ricardo J. Sola Buil stresses in his article "Herbert and Scotland: Forked Tongue" W.N. Herbert's attempts to reaffirm Scottish identity through the invention of a poetic language, specific to the Scottish background without necessarily rejecting the use of the English language or shared cultural markers. With this attitude, Herbert overcomes radical political stands by finding a happy medium between those authors who write very English poems or very Scottish poems that nobody outside those cultures can understand. The last article addressing a Scottish writer, "National and Social Warfare in Arthur Conan Doyle's Historical Romances of the Fourteenth Century," by Antonio José Miralles Pérez, reminds us once again that identity is always comprised of a multiplicity of features, as was the case of Doyle, whose personality mingled contradictory historical influences, divergent cultural traditions or Saxon, Norman, Irish, Scottish, English, and French traits. This amalgam appears in his medieval fiction where he handles multiple and conflicting loyalties in an effort to balance them, teach fraternity, and encourage peace in the Victorian era characterized by racial and cultural superiority.

The last section of the first part of the volume closes with articles about the process of identity experienced by two English writers: T.S. Eliot and Lawrence Norfolk. The former article, "The Identity of the Modern(ist) Self: T.S. Eliot between Philosophy and Literature" by Miguel Ángel Crespo Perona highlights that the quest for the unity of the individual self reached its peak in modernism but also its nadir. Eliot spent his time trying to find a balance between cosmopolitanism and emotional attachment to US-America and England and this tension led him to solve doubts through philosophical and poetic discourse. However, his sense of fragmentation did not disappear but the reverse occurred since he found himself immersed in an unstable position between different poles and, consequently, between personal identity and national heritage. In "Salvestro's Destination: A Herring Identity" José María Gutiérrez Arranz treats the topic of instability in identity formation in Lawrence Norfolk's *The Pope's Rhinoceros*. The Rhinocero's capture as a reward for Pope Leo X is the starting point from which Salvestro undertakes an unreliable adventure, symptomatic of an unreliable past and of an unreliable personality, giving place to his "herring identity."

If the first part of this book centers around the confrontations between the Celtic Fringe and the United Kingdom as an all-embracing term in the formation of identity, the second part, "Imperial Her-

itage and Postcolonial Hybridity," questions the image of Empire and his missionary role by unmasking the devastating effects British nationalism and imperialism has left on its colonies. According to Aubrey McPhail in her article "George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: Towards a Culture of the Dialogic," Eliot's novel constitutes strong criticism of England's racist and imperial trends. As a counterpoint to this high-handed culture, Eliot put forward a world-view based on a dialogic and hybrid culture that would allow personal and collective growth. In tune with this vision, Catherine Wynne explores in "*Trop Vieux Pour Service?: Empire, War and Global Ho[!]mes in the Writings of Arthur Conan Doyle*" Doyle's relationships with home and empire. Throughout many of his texts, the domestic and the international, that is, Europe, the Empire, the colonies and former colonies converge in order to demonstrate the interconnections that shape identity. Cross-cultural influences is the subject matter Esther Lau discusses upon in her "Cultural Hybridity in Cosmopolitan London: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." Lau discusses Asian identity and daily collisions in London, a site of multiculturalism and transculturation, following Bhabha's theory of hybridity. And in the last article -- "Nation and National Identity in the Novels of Chinua Achebe" -- Neena Ghandi illustrates the making of nation and national identity. Ghandi discusses the role played by the elite in the construction of the national order who instead of supporting the native population has taken advantage of its privileged position. On the other hand, contradictions have gradually emerged in the wake of decolonization, disrupting the so-called former unity and arising internal antagonisms. Ghandi reflects upon the critical situation in which decolonized communities are faced with when forging national cohesion amongst people split into disparities of class, race and background.

The last part of the volume, "The American Melting Pot," covers the American (U.S. and Canada) literary field and the multiple overlapping of identity formation that take place within the U.S. and Canada. In "Canadian Literary Identity Revisited: A Multicultural and Feminist Approach to the Novel in English until the 20th Century" Natalia Rodríguez Nieto contends that from 1769 to 1904 female voices in Canadian literature have been silenced and ostracized on the pretext of its lack of literary value. Rodríguez Nieto's analysis gives a valuable insight into the nature of Canadian literary identity, which claims -- traditionally -- to be open, non-patriarchal, and hybrid when in fact has been structured along the centre-margin dichotomy and the politics of inclusion-exclusion. In "Unmasking Nationalism: Transnationalism versus National Identities in American Drama" Steven E. Wilmer examines how minority cultures, made up of African American, Asian, Chicano, and Native American artists, have challenged the nationalistic US-American rhetoric and its essentialist notions of purity and homogeneity to express alternative multi-ethnic and multi-religious identities, as well as the untrustworthiness of imperial and national borders. In consonance with hyphenated identities, we find "Framing African American Cultural Identity: A Look at the first and the last of August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle" by Sandra G. Shannon and "Construction of Hybrid Identity: African and American in Wilson's Plays" by Elvira Jensen-Casado good examples of analyses of August Wilson's drama and of his endeavours to resurrect African culture within dominant Western culture as a way to heal the fragmented African identity through the memory of all the Africans that were brought to America. The preservation of cultural heritage is also the topic of Emilio Cañadas's article "The Cajuns Identity in Tim Gatreaux's Short Stories" and of Javier Valiente Núñez's "Narrating the Nation in Navajo Poetry and Storytelling: Historical and Mythological Memory and the Construction of a Navajo National Identity in Luci Tapahonso's *Sáanii Dahataal*." Whereas the former pays special attention through Tim Gatreaux's stories to the history of Acadians, the latter brings to the fore the narration of nation in Luci Tapahonso's stories and poems so as to recollect Navajo historical memory and, therefore, its national identity. As a closure to this compilation, "E Pluribus Unum: The Quest for Identity in American Literature," José Manuel Barrio Marco reinforces all the previous ideas through a thorough and illuminating examination of the US-American myth of national identity. To do so, he makes a selection of numerous literary writers whose definition and description of the US-American nation, self, and people contrast with the prevailing nationalist ideology.

The volume *National Identities and European Literatures / Nationale Identitäten und Europäische Literaturen* keeps the intense debate on national identity alive by facing the uniform ideology of nationalism with non-essentialist identity alternatives. The editors, Manuel Barbeito, Jaime Feijóo, Antón Figueroa, and Jorge Sacido open the volume with an introduction to processes of identity formation and literature. The articles of the volume are about the configurations and crisis of national and cultural identities in modern and contemporary Europe and the authors address the question of identity. Organized into three parts, the authors of the articles inspect the inextricable link between national identity and literature, seen as the domain from which identities can be re-discovered, imagined, re-configured, or invented. The articles collected in the first and second part of the volume

are about the relation between literature and culture, as well as the decisive, yet ambiguous role that literature has played in the identity formations of nations. The authors of articles in the last part of the volume examine the history and the present relevance of specific processes of identity formation.

The volume shows that there is a key disparity when comparing the status of literature as an ally of politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with literature's lack of influence on the sociopolitical framework. In "Culture and Identity" Terry Eagleton acknowledges that literature and culture have moved away from the centre to the margin of society and changing their leading role into a minor one. Although this is tantamount to admitting that apparently literature has been cornered, Eagleton warns us about the usefulness of literature in any process of identity and about its contribution to the deepening of the creative imagination, as it is only through literature we can empathize with the other and understand other people's experiences. All these assets considered, Eagleton concedes that literature along with literary criticism have been subsumed into politics and replaced by national questions such as national language and other political issues, playing less and less of a part in these processes.

The texts in part two, "Integrity and Recognition in the Context of European and Global Constellations / Integrität und Anerkennung im Rahmen europäischer und globaler Konstellationen. Fünf literarische Analysen" analyse the works of authors who criticize dominant culture and propose alternatives to it, specially (but not only) those concerned with the relationship with other cultural and national identities affected by European ethnocentrism. The articles in this part show that although literature might have lost part of its leading political position, it is still a useful tool to present intersubjective relations and their corresponding systems of social identities. These articles also acknowledge inner differences as a common denominator to all individuals and cultures and denounce the ideological attempt to translate existing diversity within culture into a unitary discourse of binary oppositions such as Western vs. Eastern culture and its presumption that each is coherent and uniform. Thus, in her essay "Ein literarischer Kampf um Integrität und Anerkennung. Juan Goytisolo's Rückforderung des *Conde don Julián*" ("Reivindication of Juan Goytisolo's *Conde don Julián*"), Aldrea Albrecht interprets the central conflict of the protagonist narrator as a "violation of personal integrity" (48) in the light of Axel Honneth's theory "Kampf um Integrität und Anerkennung" ("Struggle for Recognition"). Goytisolo's identification with *Conde don Julián* allows him to recognise the denial of his individual autonomy and to seek a cosmopolitan individuality, instrumental for abandoning an essentialist view of collective identity in favour of an open and dynamic conception.

Next, we come across another dissenter of identity in Uwe Timm's historical novel *Morenga* (1978), analysed by Kora Baumbach in "Supplementäre Anerkennung. Zu Uwe Timms Roman *Morenga*" ("Supplemental Recognition: About Uwe Timm's Novel *Morenga*"). The main character, a military veterinarian, experiences how his own European identity crumbles when he sees the ideal of universal human rights incarnated in *Morenga*, the native other. The novel presents a view of Europe as colonizer incapable of establishing a dignified relationship with the exploited and of assuming historical responsibility for the consequences of colonisation. In "Kollektive Integrität als Integrationshindernis. *Aluda* im Spiegel von *Muzal*" ("Collective Integration as an Obstacle to Integration: *Aluda* Reflected in *Muzal*"), Zaal Andronikasvili contrasts two versions of law as the foundation of society in his study of Giwi Margwelaschwili's *Muzal* (1991). In the first version, the law is sacred and unalterable; in the second lay version, the law is the result of dialogical process of social debate that seeks to reach consensus. Following the communitarian model proposed by Charles Taylor and the liberal model defended by Jürgen Habermas, *Muzal* is a postmodern rewriting of *Aluda Keltelauri* (1888), a novel in which the main character is expelled from his community for trying to establish a relationship with the foreign other. Matthias Beilein's "Auf diesem Markt ist Österreich. Doron Rabinovicis *Ohnehin*" ("The Market is Austria: Doron Rabinovicis's *Ohnehin*") is an analysis of an Austrian author born in Israel, Doron Rabinovici, and his novel *Ohnehin* (2004) which draws multicultural portrait of contemporary Viennese society and highlights the perplexity that the irreversible process of hybridization provokes in the large majority of the Austrian population reluctant to acknowledge that the reality of the other is part of their identity. "'Mooristan' und 'Palimpstine.' Die Integration Europas ein Vabanquespiel säkularisierter Monotheismen?" ("'Mooristan and Palimpstine': The Integration of Europe as a Game of Secularized Monotheisms?") by Horst Turk is the last contribution in part two of the volume. Turk analyzes Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) to question Huntigton's thesis of the Clash of Civilisation through the endorsement of hybridity in a postcolonial and postmodern context. Turk explains how Rushdie uses the effect of estrangement of fiction to force the European reader to reflect on his/her own problems. According to Turk, despite of

all the contradictions concerning identity, as in the case of India -- the coexistence of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religions -- it is still possible to struggle for a utopia of reciprocal influences.

As the title says, "Identitary Processes in European Literatures," the third part of the volume deals with issues of identity in European literatures. Yet, the thematic block is subdivided into seven articles, all dealing with national identity and so from unlike angles. While the first three essays are concerned with three nation-states -- Britain, Spain, and Germany -- the rest of the articles covers Galicia, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, namely those communities within the Spanish state that regard themselves as nations and seek political independence. The articles "The Ghost of the Empire and the 'English' Postcolonial Identity" by J. Manuel Barbeito and Jorge Sacido and "'No todo se perdió in Cuba': Spain between Europe and Africa in the Wake of 1898" by Brad Epps share the common ground of the end of the British and Spanish empires, respectively, conspicuous in the ghost that was born in both nations as a consequence of the loss of India (1946) and Cuba (1898). In the former article, Barbeito and Sacido argue that the loss of the British Empire went hand in hand with a voiding of identity affecting the construction of Englishness, anxious for restoring its former greatness and international leadership. They begin by examining George Orwell's two essays, "England, your England" (1941) and "The English People," written in 1944 but not published until 1947, the year of India's independence, to closely connect them with Tony Blair's speech "The People's Princess" on the occasion of Lady Diana Spencer's death and make evident the lasting imperial dream that underlies Blair's rhetoric, still present at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, this line of thinking is reinforced through the relationship between England and the USA in two films, *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually*, in order to see to what extent the ghost of empire still haunts collective consciousness. In the latter, Brad Epps wonders if the impact of the loss of the last Spanish colonies was real or imagined, if saying goodbye to Cuba meant economic bankruptcy or, on the contrary, it was simply the fading away of an imperial dream. Undoubtedly, there existed a disparity in attitudes towards the Caribbean and Pacific colonies and the African ones. Although at heart the failure did not entail any political upheaval or aesthetic revolution and things remained basically the same as before, the truth is that much more prominence was given to the defeat in the Caribbean and the Pacific colonies than to the African ones. The loss of Cuba, for instance, affected Spain psychologically and symbolically, and entered everyday language with expressions such as "the disaster," "the generation of 1898," and "more was lost in Cuba."

As previously mentioned, the last four essays in the third part of the volume voice the political and literary claims of those nations without a state within Spain. In "Discourse on National Identity: Notes from Galicia" Antón Figueroa observes that politics pervades all national identity-oriented discourses and that this dynamic turns the scholar into a political agent, particularly in those communities like Galicia in which its national identity and the fight for political recognition is at odds with the consolidated official identity. Similarly, Dolores Vilavedra's main goal in "The Galician Reader: A Future Project?" is to pose a set of questions about a paradoxical phenomenon, that of the low readership of Galician literature. Vilavedra asks herself if it makes any sense to keep on supporting a defensive mentality within the European framework and to continue writing in Galician when readers are an endangered species altogether. Hence, the only alternative is to search for new readers among non-Galician speakers and to produce a literature of integrative ramifications. In "Diglossia and Basque Literature" Jon Kortazar discusses the current situation of Basque literature, language, and culture. Kortazar's argument derives from Antón Figueroa's *Diglosia e Texto*, a book dealing with the influence that diglossia has on literature written in minority languages. Drawing his theory from this model, Kortazar points to resemblances as well as divergencies between the Galician and Basque literary systems. Hence, one of the most significant differences lies in the role played by primary and secondary schools and in the weight speakers give to language. Finally, the closing article, "National Poets and Universal Catalans: Writers and Literature in Contemporary Catalan Identity" Jaume Subirana is an exponent of literature and identity, an intertwining taking place in Catalonia, where the national poet converges with the notion of "universal Catalans," artists achieving international recognition but still proud of their roots and traditions. Nevertheless, Subirana's literary nation is a linguistic nation that does not coincide with political and administrative borders, challenging one of the basic parameters of nationalism, that of political frontiers being coterminous with cultural ones. Subirana also alerts to the function of language when it comes to representing identity and literature, since in the objective of international recognition the Catalan language is usually a hindrance rather than an advantage.

I conclude by stating that the work of scholars under discussion epitomize the complex matter of national identity encapsulated in the struggle between minority and major identities and the

ideological oppositions alive in any society. The authors of the volume question national identity using a variety of perspectives: the discursive consequences of historical situations, aspects of (im)migration and interracial relationships, socio-economic aspects related to the notion of nation, nations without a state, strategies devised to promoting the identification of the population with the idea of people, the role of (public) intellectuals, etc. In this context, literature excels at subverting and destabilizing cultural habits and traditions used to legitimize those in power. Last but not least, the volumes discussed represent in many ways voices from the so-called "periphery," that is, the articles in the volumes are publications by scholars who are not working at institutions in the Anglo-American "centre" from where scholarship, as a rule, appears to flood and -- I would suggest -- "colonize" scholarship world wide.

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