

Susanne Hagemann. *Feminism and Territoriality: A Bifocal Case Study of Literary Irelands*. Schriftenreihe Literaturwissenschaft 67. Trier: WVT, 2005, 356 S., € 32.50.

In her study *Feminism and Territoriality*, Susanne Hagemann introduces a new method for the analysis of literary texts. While her theoretical approach is informed by “multidisciplinary feminist theory” (16), her textual examples consist of literary representations of Ireland, as she proposes to combine “two foci, both relating to marginality but only one directly to gender, one providing the theory and the other the corpus” (16). Bifocal analysis – employed in order to enhance “complexity” (27) – is supposed to yield a “grammar of representation” (17) that takes account of gender and territory with an emphasis on “identities and positionalities”, “binary oppositions” and “questions of language and language use” (17). Hagemann employs the term ‘territory’ because it lacks connotations of marginality and because it “obviates the need to distinguish between region and nation, as well as between the regional and the regionalist, the national and the nationalist” (18). The term is used “to refer to any geographical space that is constructed as, in the widest sense, culturally distinct” (18). Literary texts are privileged in order to emphasize the narrative foundation of identity. While Hagemann focuses on literary Irelands, she neither intends to “make a contribution to the writing of Irish literary or cultural history”, nor to “aim for consistent historical contextualization” (30). Neither does she propose to draw on the findings of “postcolonialism, theories of nationalism, or critical human geography”, because the “specific objectives of bifocality can only be reached by a theoretical focus on feminism” (31).

Selecting her corpus of texts, Hagemann chose texts relating to Ireland which bring “different territories into contact” (45), i. e. “contact texts” rather than “monoterritorial texts” (269), because the gendering she is looking for “happens at interfaces” (45). Ireland is a particularly interesting case because it “includes a number of cultural-cum-geographical hierarchies” (44) – structures which are repeated on higher and lower levels in a manner Hagemann terms “fractal” (44) in metaphorical appropriation of a concept taken from modern geometry. Hagemann’s corpus consists of the following texts: Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond* (1817), Gerald Griffin, *The Collegians* (1829), diaries by Elizabeth Grant, begun in 1840 and edited as *The Highland Lady in Ireland* (1991), Anthony Trollope, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), Joan Lingard, *The Twelfth*

*Day of July* (1970), Brian Friel, *Translations* (1980), Spike Milligan, *The Looney: An Irish Fantasy* (1987), Diana Norman, *Daughter of Lir* (1988), Eithne Strong, *The Love Riddle* (1993), and John Banville, *The Untouchable* (1997). All texts, with the exception of Grant and Friel, are “contact novels” (64) dealing with Ireland, taken from various periods and cultural backgrounds and written by male and female authors from the British Isles. Hagemann introduced a random element in her selection by choosing “the first that came to my attention (on my bookshelves, in literary histories, in conversations with colleagues, etc.)” (64), adapting the selection for reasons of balance but not subjecting it “to a pre-test of its bifocal accessibility” in order to make her “samples amenable to objective testing” (65).

The following three chapters, “Identities and Positionalities”, “Nature/Culture and Their Cognates”, and “Language” each begin with a survey of the feminist theories which will be foregrounded in the subsequent “territorial readings” (60) or “bifocal fractal reading[s]” (106): the essentialism/constructionism debate, positionality and identity politics, performativity and lesbian and queer theory in the ‘identity’ chapter, the feminist philosophical critique of binarism, the ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ perspectives, *écriture féminine*, the gendered notions of ‘being’ and ‘doing’, ecofeminism and cyberfeminism in the ‘Nature/Culture’ chapter, and feminist debates about androcentric language, sexism in language, conversational and register analysis, ‘writing the body’, *parler-femme* and the feminist appropriation of post-structuralist psychoanalysis in the ‘Language’ chapter. Taken together, these overviews amount to an impressive history of feminist thought. The concepts developed in feminist theory are then applied to issues of territory, which is done deliberately without recourse to previous work on the issue:

My concern [...] is not, or not primarily, with theorists of territoriality (from Homi Bhabha to Gayatri Spivak, from Benedict Anderson to J. Hillis Miller, from Declan Kiberd to Edna Longley). Nor is it with those among them who explore the intersections and interstices of place and gender in general, or the avatars of Cathleen Ni Houlihan in particular. (79)

Instead, for example, Hagemann draws on “Diana Fuss’s deconstruction of the essentialism/constructionism dichotomy and Judith Butler’s concept of constitutive exclusions” (79) to show that superficial expressions of Irish essentialism in Owen’s *The Wild Irish Girl* cover an awareness of the constructed nature of national identity latent in the text, or she shows with recourse to Judith Butler’s study *Excitable Speech* that “territoriality in *The Collegians*, like homosexuality for the US military, can be shown to have a performative dimension” (108). Equally, Mary Daly’s radical feminist concept of ‘woman-identified woman’ as expounded in *Gyn/Ecology* “offers a starting point for a reading of Irish-identified Irish characters” (109), or the Norman invaders in Diana Norman’s feminist historical novel *Daughter of Lir*, who seem monstrous to the Irish with their pointed iron helmets with nasals, can be identified as “Norman protocyborgs” (168) with the help of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”. Throughout the book, each of the eleven corpus texts is “analysed in at least three different feminist contexts” (267). Hagemann draws the general conclusion that

the primary texts do have a tendency to feminize Ireland, but this is not the only type of gendering process discernible. Ireland is feminized by features such as its

affinity with lesbian studies, its remoteness from science and technology, its construction as a site of holism, its closeness to nature, its propensity for passivity and spatial confinement, and its association with ‘women’s language’ – from onomastics to concepts of alienation and alternatives to alienation. (268)

Having said this, however, Hagemann insists that the “tendency towards feminization is accompanied by pronounced complexity” (268) and that her corpus of texts is not large enough to allow for final conclusions based on statistic numbers.

Readers should make up their own minds whether they find Hagemann’s approach ultimately convincing. From my own point of view, I will identify some problem areas which limit the usefulness of the ‘bifocal’ approach in my opinion. The first problem concerns the vagueness of some terminology. Denoting various types of geographically defined entities, ‘territoriality’ as a concept seems at times to be adopted less for its heuristic value than with a view to sidestepping the findings of previous work on nation, region, topography, space and place. This is related to the second problem, which is the randomness, or otherwise, of foci. Hagemann should have been clearer about whether she is presenting a “random pairing of feminist theory and territorial text” or whether it is the “starting point for my bifocal readings, that femininity is an epitome of marginality” (271). Thirdly, bifocality is preferred to postcolonialism because “situated as it is at a higher level of abstraction than postcolonialism, bifocality has a greater potential for bringing contact as such to the fore” (277). Even if I knew what “contact as such” is supposed to be, the level of abstraction – speaking about such notions as identity for example – is often so high that the conclusions become all but meaningless. As Hagemann ends up writing sentences like “[I]dentity politics results from a choice to assert an identity” (86), or “[b]oth lesbian studies and Irish nationalism are characterized by resistance to marginalization” (132), the specific heuristic value of feminist theoretical concepts is sacrificed for very uncertain gain.

The fourth problem concerns the lack of literary and cultural contextualization and historicization, so that we hear little or nothing, for instance, about the gendered discourse of nineteenth century philanthropy with regard to Elizabeth Grant’s diary, Friel’s dialogue with the Irish dramatic tradition, or the political and cultural agendas of Diana Norman’s feminist rewriting of historical romance and Spike Milligan’s satire on discourses of Irishness. In Hagemann’s view, Milligan “subordinates” (271) territoriality to humour, so that the “interrelation between different identity categories [...] is less complex, and more reliant on stereotypes, than that in *The Love Riddle*” (129) – presumably because Lord O’Goldstein is avaricious, Shamus Looney rapes his wife and Sean Higgins has sex with cows. It seems that the bifocal approach has little to say about fictional texts which have already taken account of cultural debates about othering and stereotyping, choosing to revisit them in a humorous vein. Concerning cultural context, it would also have been helpful to mention some of the important work on collective and cultural memory recently done with regard to studies of collective identity, especially given the historical bias Hagemann notes in her ‘corpus texts’. It becomes particularly clear at this point that the study was begun in the early 1990s, which is also visible in the bibliography, and that more recent critical developments have not consistently been addressed.

Having said all this, Hagemann’s idiosyncratic book will resonate with readers looking for fresh and unconventional combinations of theory and literature. There

is undoubted charm in “applying a lesbian or queer approach to the role of the Ulster Scots” (272). Apart from the lucid and concise summaries of feminist theory, Hagemann is at her best when offering close readings of novels, like her analysis of activity and passivity in *The Wild Irish Girl* (178 ff.), where the feminist philosophical framework of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ recedes into the background as the specific character of the fictional narrative is thrown into relief.

BASEL

INA HABERMANN