



# Identity Parades

Northern Irish Culture and Dissident Subjects

Richard Kirkland

# Identity Parades

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Identity Parades

Northern Irish Culture  
and Dissident Subjects

RICHARD KIRKLAND

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

First published 2002

Liverpool University Press  
4 Cambridge Street  
Liverpool, L69 7ZU

Copyright © 2002 Richard Kirkland

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publishers, except by a reviewer in connection with a review for inclusion in a magazine or newspaper.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A British Library CIP Record is available.

ISBN 0-85323-626-7 *cased*  
0-85323-636-4 *limp*

Set in Stone Serif and Sans by  
Koinonia, Manchester  
Printed in the European Union by  
Bell and Bain Ltd, Glasgow

For Emily Nadira Jones, with love

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	1
<b>1</b> Cultural Identity and the Bourgeois Spectacle	12
<b>2</b> Identity, Image and Ideology in Film	31
<b>3</b> Violence, History and Bourgeois Fiction	78
<b>4</b> Three Forms of Camp	125
Notes	167
Bibliography	186
Index	193

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their help, support and advice: David Alderson, Michael Allen, Simon Bainbridge, Emma Clery, Anne-Julie Crozier, Colin Graham, Conor Hanna, Ken Hirschkop, Eamonn Hughes, Edward Larrissy, Declan Long, Michael Parker, Shaun Richards and Helen Stoddart. Keele University's decision to grant me a junior research award was of immense help in the completion of this book and I owe a debt of gratitude to all the members of the English Department of that institution and to the members of the Keele/Staffordshire University Irish Studies collaboration.

Much of my discussion of Northern Irish film derives from the experience of teaching a remarkable group of final-year Keele undergraduate students for a course on modern Irish cinema and I would particularly like to thank Sharon Collis, Jeanette Cutland, James Daniel, Oliver Mitchell, Helen Riddell and Sophie Rudkin for their scholarly perception, dedication and enthusiasm.

A section of Chapter 3 was originally published as 'Bourgeois Redemptions: the Fiction of Glenn Patterson and Robert McLiam Wilson', in Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds), *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), and is reproduced by permission of Palgrave. A section of Chapter 2 was originally published as 'Gender, nation, excess: reading *Hush-a-Bye Baby*', in Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket and David Alderson (eds), *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (Routledge, 1999), and is reproduced by permission of Routledge. The publishers are also grateful to Faber & Faber for permission to quote from 'Off the Back of a Lorry' by Tom Paulin from *Liberty Tree* (Faber & Faber, 1983) and to Blackstaff Press for permission to quote from 'As You Like It' and 'Because I Paced my Thought' by John Hewitt from *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (ed. Frank Ormsby, Blackstaff Press,

1991). Every effort has been made to trace copyright owners and the publishers would be grateful to be informed of any errors or omissions.

# Introduction

The question of 'speaking *as*' involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, or as a feminist, the ways in which I will speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalise myself, make myself a representative, trying to distance myself from some kind of inchoate speaking *as such*. There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in. So that in fact, for the person who does the 'speaking as' something, it is a problem of distancing from one's self, whatever that self might be.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>1</sup>

We live in an age in which it is practically impossible to speak of politics without speaking also of identity. Identity provides us with a sense of who we are, where we have come from, and, more importantly, where we are going. It mediates our personal memory in terms of collective inheritance and provides the platform from which we launch ourselves on an unsuspecting world. Understood in these terms, identity offers itself, almost uniquely, as a means of ordering the chaos of our experience. It can assimilate the unlikely event, the crisis-wracked history, the piece of outrageous good fortune and find in this material not merely a story but an explanation. Perhaps more importantly, within this function identity is *forgiving*; it justifies the visceral response, smoothes over the contradictions of our prejudices and constitutes the final refuge from which we can argue our case and vindicate our position.

At the same time, however, identity has its limits, not least in the fact that it never quite seems to coincide with the incoherences, the ambivalences and the gaps out of which we make ourselves. Indeed, Spivak's awareness of the 'distancing' involved in asserting any statement of identity is salutary in that it suggests something of the

fundamental contradiction implicit in such utterances. As she notes, identity assumes this monolinear position because it is based not on the question 'who should speak?' but rather on the more pressing issue of 'who will listen?'. In its ideal form identity is a point of contact, a mediation between competing material forces and interests and, as such, is necessarily rooted in antagonism. It exists neither with the speaker nor with the presumed listener but occupies a site somewhere in between. There are possibilities as well as limitations identifiable in this positioning. While identity, in Spivak's terms, does not come close to answering the complexities of memory and affiliation at a personal level, its role as a strategy allows for the negotiation of political interests while protecting more vulnerable discontinuities. The essential 'thereness' of identity, the manner in which it dissolves any distinction between what already exists and what *should* exist, masks confrontation and becomes the point from which politics can emerge.

So why does identity – as Spivak's frustration suggests – never seem to come good on these promises? The essential unity of self and utterance it appears to offer at one level is never realised since both remain stubbornly in excess of identity's strategies of containment. For Terry Eagleton, the gap that emerges from this conjunction is painfully ironic because identity politics emerge from what he terms 'oppositional politics' and are thus 'ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists.'<sup>2</sup> Developing his argument, he notes: 'Our grudge against the ruling order is not only that it has oppressed us in our social, sexual or racial identities but that it has thereby forced us to lavish an extraordinary amount of attention on these things, which are not in the long run all that important.'<sup>3</sup> While Eagleton advocates embracing this irony as a strategy of resistance, at the same time this repeated investment in identity politics as a means of encountering, and sometimes overcoming, opposition can also engender a certain exhaustion. Understood as such, identity becomes the darkling plain where the confused armies of competing interests clash by night.

A feeling of exhaustion is, of course, by no means uncommon for those who engage in the identity politics of Northern Ireland. As an example of identity's ability to disable communication just as it simultaneously appears to enable it, the North has become a byword for all that is most restrictive, least constitutive and ultimately fossilised in cultural exchange. While such fatalism in itself indicates a certain fatigue, at the same time the fact that the normative 'two traditions'

version of Northern Irish culture has proved incapable of reimagining the sectarian polarities of the province is now almost axiomatic. Indeed, when faced with the all-pervasive nature of identity politics in the North, it can be argued that the critical project that might chart a possible move beyond this totality has yet to begin. However, if one assumes that the only thing that can overcome identity is the inevitability of its own implicit lack, as Spivak perceives it, so the terms of any critical intervention are clearly revealed. Rather than search for the moment of revelation or propose an identitarian 'solution' through which the North can emerge into the daylight of a 'modern' sensibility, it is more productive to see such analyses as, in themselves, symptomatic of a form of theoretical despair: the critical equivalent of drawing a line in the sand beyond which anachronistic identity formations will not be allowed to pass. A more productive critical encounter, it can be argued, is one that encounters the cultural manifestations of identity politics not with the aim of locating their obsolescence but rather with the objective of tracing their implicit inner contradictions – Spivak's 'problem of distancing' – and it is with this imperative that *Identity Parades* seeks to make an intervention.

Firstly, however, other contexts need to be asserted. In arguing that symptoms of cultural and identitarian saturation in Northern Ireland do not derive from the inability to reconcile difference but rather have their genesis within the frame of competing interests through which such utterances are made possible, it becomes necessary to examine what can be termed the underlying totality of bourgeois ideology that gives expression to these seemingly antagonistic meanings. Taking this wider perspective, the status of bourgeois ideology in Northern Ireland cannot simply be reduced to the outlook and perceptions of a self-interested middle class, as Bill Rolston has argued,<sup>4</sup> but becomes rather the register through which all identitarian negotiations in the North take place. Bourgeois ideology provides the language for aggressive assertions of identity intended to challenge the dominant order just as it provides the means through which the state seeks to neutralise these threats. For this reason the cultural conflict in the North cannot be read in terms of an opposition in which a state-complicit liberalism seeks to promote a depoliticised sense of identity at the expense of sectarian or class-based solidarity, but rather should be understood in terms of the possibilities and deformations implicit in identitarian politics as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Such a model is reliant on Roland Barthes' perception of bourgeois ideology as an 'exnominating phenomenon',<sup>6</sup> the

point at which 'all that is not bourgeois is obliged to *borrow* from the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk.'<sup>7</sup> Imagined in this way, bourgeois ideology's moment of triumph is the same moment at which it appears to be absent, while it is only rendered visible in its failures.

It is partly for this reason that the significance of bourgeois ideology in the constitution of Northern Irish cultural politics has been little considered. Indeed, perhaps the instinctive response when apprehending the relationship between the two is to think of the wilfully uncomprehending editorials of British broadsheet newspapers when faced with the latest crisis at Drumcree or an impasse in negotiations about prisoner releases. Such persistent tut-tutting is reducible in the final instance to the question Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd have critiqued in a perceptive essay: 'Why can't you get along with each other?'<sup>8</sup> There is, though, more at stake in this manoeuvre than the guilt complexes of British bourgeois ideology. The urge to perceive Northern Ireland as beyond the remit of bourgeois law is a strategy that not only protects the integrity of British political discourse but is also crucial to those Republican discourses within the North itself that seek to assert an ultimately irreducible difference. Equally anxious to sign up to this unlikely coalition is the discipline of Irish Studies, which, with its codifying energies, often defines the object of its study either as a pre-bourgeois enclave or, increasingly, as a location that has moved from the pre-bourgeois to the postmodern without having had cause to enmesh itself in the transitional period of the industrial bourgeois economy.<sup>9</sup> On this reading Northern Ireland offers itself as an implicit critique of both the bourgeois liberal British state and the triumph of the bourgeois-nationalist project in the Republic; it becomes the border beyond which these ideologies cease to have efficacy. As Kumkum Sangari has observed, 'the stifling monologues of self and other [...] remain the orderly discourses of the bourgeois subject'.<sup>10</sup>

The persistent strategy behind this manoeuvre is one that recognises the argument to which I have already referred. In circumscribing bourgeois ideology, the presence of the North simultaneously renders it visible and in so doing fatally weakens its powers. Similarly, on the rare occasions when the bourgeois is seen to declare itself *within* Northern Ireland the effect of its presence has to be anxiously policed. Ronan Bennett's Republican analysis of the role of bourgeois culture in the North in his essay 'Don't Mention the War: Culture in Northern Ireland'<sup>11</sup> is illustrative of this tendency:

In the North of Ireland it is possible to see *The Wind in the Willows* at the Lyric Players Theatre, *Oliver* at the Grand Opera House, *Romeo and Juliet* at the Arts Theatre, *A Room with a View* at the Queen's Film Theatre. You can see Ken Branagh's *Hamlet* at the Waterfront Hall, hear Handel's *Messiah* at the Ulster Hall, or watch the Duchess of Kent open Castleward, the North's cut-rate version of Glyndebourne. This is the culture of the affluent and educated citizenry; it is Belfast masquerading as Bristol or Leicester. Middle-class taste in the arts is what you would expect to find in any provincial centre. It is liberal, non-sectarian and draws heavily on metropolitan influences, those of London and, to a lesser extent, Dublin.

The 'Troubles' scarcely figure. Not in art, not in life. The neutral middle class can afford to be aloof. The North's well-to-do have managed to come through the conflict almost completely unscathed: they live in pleasant residential suburbs that see no rioting; they are not arrested or raided; they suffer no casualties.<sup>12</sup>

The disgusted rejection that gives momentum to Bennett's analysis at this point is based solely on the recognition that the Northern Irish middle classes are behaving in a middle-class manner. Moreover, the Northern bourgeois culture that they embody is seen not only as English but as an ersatz copy of Englishness at that. Their Belfast becomes a provincial location copying another provincial location. This indicates something of the extent of Bennett's disdain. Not only is the Northern Irish middle class repellent in itself, it is not even any good at being middle class. However, underlying Bennett's furious self-righteousness is a more profound sense of reassurance. The logic that drives his intervention is ultimately dependent upon an opposition between the readily identifiable symptoms of bourgeois culture – symptoms that are so self-evident as to require no further explication – and the North's social violence, which, as his argument develops, will metamorphose into 'the political'. As the latter is inimical to the former so the bourgeois is again circumscribed as little more than a few morbid symptoms. To return to Barthes, this dwelling on the traces of an ideology renders the bourgeois vulnerable to critique insofar as it seeks to render it visible and yet this strategy can only be achieved by subscribing to bourgeois ideology's own inability to declare itself as 'political'. Understood as such, 'Don't Mention the War' is an anti-bourgeois critique that articulates its argument in a thoroughly bourgeois manner; another manifestation of Sangari's 'stifling monologues of self and other'.

How, then, can this strict demarcation be complicated? What can be gained through a relocation of Northern Irish cultural politics in

terms of the persistent strategies of bourgeois ideology when perceived as the frame through which even anti-bourgeois dissidence articulates itself? In the first and last instance such a critique has to take as its primary aim a desire to disrupt 'the orderly discourses of the bourgeois subject'. The persistent divisions of bourgeois ideology – divisions between thought and feeling, politics and culture, common sense and theory – have to be re-encountered and the various symptoms to which they give rise identified as part of an overall organising principle. This is a less gruelling activity than it first appears if only because of the quicksilver nature of bourgeois ideology itself. As the bourgeois, to return to Barthes, functions as an 'exnominating phenomenon' so it can be defined not by its uniformity but by its restlessness, its ability to assume ever more unlikely manifestations and to transgress into what may seem increasingly unpromising forms. This is a necessary process, for the moment at which the bourgeois ceases to reinvent itself is also the moment at which it is most vulnerable, the moment at which it can be recognised as such.

This suggests the critical trajectory of *Identity Parades* itself. While this book is primarily an analysis of bourgeois formations within Northern Irish cultural discourse – formations that invariably make themselves manifest through the tropes of identity – the range of texts it considers is more diverse, including indigenous and non-indigenous film, popular fiction, autobiography, critical analyses and government publications. Drawing these disparate texts together is a recognition of the shared aspects of their expressive form. The material considered is at once both concerned with identity and with explicating the meaning of identity in modern Northern Ireland, and, at the same time, unable to apprehend the frameworks of identitarian consciousness through which it signifies. In this respect, the perception of aesthetic activity in this book ultimately subscribes to David Lloyd's and Paul Thomas's broad awareness that 'from its inception, aesthetic culture defines a set of practices which at once define and moralize the bourgeois public sphere'.<sup>13</sup> This act of definition can, of course, never be completed and, indeed, it is tempting to argue that it is precisely because the exnominating function of bourgeois ideology is placed under such strain in Northern Ireland that its particular aesthetic manifestations are so polyvalent, insatiable, and very often fantastical.

Having defined the remit of the argument in these terms it may seem curious that *Identity Parades* omits any extended analysis of what is often considered to be the most significant cultural activity arising

out of Northern Irish society: poetry. This is not because the complexities of the phenomenon known as the Northern Irish poet are somehow inimical to anti-bourgeois analysis; indeed the construction and then disavowal of 'Northern Irish poetry' as a meaningful category capable of explicating the complexities of poetic allegiance and aesthetic resonance accords closely with a perception of bourgeois ideology as able to contain and explicate dissidence within its own frameworks. Instead this omission arises from a wariness about the extent to which the paradigms of Northern Irish poetry have been allowed to function as a metonym for the wider strategies of the culture in recent analytical work. To take an obvious example, by this reading John Hewitt is perceived as the poetic voice of Protestant Ulster and Seamus Heaney as his Catholic counterpart,<sup>14</sup> and in this way they are not simply rendered as embodiments of a community but become mutually defining. That this critical preoccupation has led to the neglect of other forms of cultural activity in Northern Ireland is largely unarguable. However, what is, perhaps, more important is the extent to which this concentration on poetry has not merely overwhelmed the development of other modes of Northern Irish cultural analysis but has also imposed an interpretative template upon many of those wider analyses that do exist, imposing continuities where material interests suggest there should be fracture and finding through the workings of the individual text itself a mode of critical self-sufficiency. For this reason, then, *Identity Parades* is in dialogue with the frameworks established through criticism of Northern Irish poetry, but at the same time it seeks to suggest something of their ultimate obsolescence through a strategic relocation of focus.

An analysis that begins with the assumption of the pre-existence of bourgeois ideology has then a clear critical imperative: to stem what Barthes terms the 'unceasing haemorrhage'<sup>15</sup> of meaning from the concept of the bourgeois formation and to identify the various forms by which it has made itself known within identity politics. As will already be evident, the process of rereading identitarianism in *Identity Parades* gains its intellectual momentum and vocabulary from post-colonial theory's codification of the various subject positions that can be occupied in relation to the state, as it is through these procedures that identitarianism has been most thoroughly analysed. Alongside this, however, the desire to reduce cultural artefacts to little more than symptoms of irreducible liminality must be resisted, as must the temptation to reconfigure their significance as paradigmatic through

the deployment of analogies. The faultlines between Irish Studies and postcolonial theory are never more clearly revealed than in the tendency of the former to cite decontextualised postcolonial paradigms (the very term being oxymoronic) in a manner reducible to that of 'use'. In this way, the appellation 'postcolonial theory and Ireland' is expressive of a presumed absence within the discourse of Irish Studies while being similarly indicative of irreducible difference. To express this differently: such a conjunction should not so much engage us in a debate as to Ireland's postcolonial status<sup>16</sup> (on the subject of which much energy has been expended) as force us to rethink how the post-colonial can be encountered through Ireland in the first instance. Aijaz Ahmad's assertion that 'we should speak not so much of colonialism or postcolonialism but of capitalist modernity, which takes the colonial form in particular places and at particular times'<sup>17</sup> is not, in these terms, merely an expression of annoyance with postcolonial theory's presumed refusal of materialist methodology, but a recognition of the necessary and welcome syntheses implicit in the development of cultural theory in its critique of subject positions.

If, in this way, it is possible to assert the necessity of cultural theory as a mode of analysis reinvented but not superseded by postcolonial theory, so there is an imperative to return to and update materialist critiques of bourgeois ideology and its persistent, although adaptable, governance of what gets said and what it is possible to say within Northern Irish cultural discourse. Here a greater silence is identifiable. While the (often highly self-conscious) importation of postcolonial theory into Irish Studies has provoked a unique version of the 'theory war' that dominated much of the debate as to the future of English Studies in Britain and the United States during the 1980s,<sup>18</sup> there has been no equivalent controversy about the possibilities and limitations of a critique of specifically Irish bourgeois subject positions and formations. This could be, of course, because few such studies exist.<sup>19</sup> While Irish literary criticism at least has proved willing to rethink its modes of analysis in terms of what can loosely be defined as Marxist orthodoxies, the assumption still remains that Ireland's uneven development in relation to capital prohibits more extended considerations (this despite the fact that Gramscian materialism is uniquely able to take account of and, indeed, make a virtue of such 'unevenness'). For this reason embryonic critical discourse on Ireland and postcolonial theory, despite the controversies implicit in the ethical reading of Ireland's status it demands, distorts rather than furthers a distinction

between orthodox Marxism and postcoloniality understood as a *condition*. As Joe Cleary has observed: 'What one misses most in contemporary Irish discourse is any real assimilation of the rich heritage of Marxist critical theory which – at its best – has developed an altogether less one-sided and much more dialectical conception of modernity, one which attempts to sort out the matrix of oppressive and emancipatory forces involved.'<sup>20</sup>

It is, however, equally necessary to be suspicious of any strict demarcation between what can be seen as previously assured critical orthodoxies and 'new' modes of analysis. In a recent waspish moment, John Goodby criticised nascent Irish postcolonial criticism for its 'monotonous dependence on Friel, Heaney and Banville', implying that, despite such theory's 'iconoclastic pretensions', it still finds itself most comfortable with 'a narrow range of canonical works and authors'.<sup>21</sup> The point is persuasively argued and it can be suggested that a similar 'monotonous dependence' is observable in Northern Irish Cultural Studies as it groups its analyses obsessively around such texts as *The Crying Game*, the popular thrillers of Colin Bateman and the series of Northern Ireland Office television advertisements from 1994 designed to encourage the use of its confidential telephone line service. *Identity Parades* is guilty of revisiting the first two of these clichés but does so in the hope that new contexts can be asserted. The self-reflexivity of Cultural Studies, the manner in which it can redefine itself as a discipline according to the object of its study, is at once its most attractive and yet its most frustrating characteristic. To put this another way, while, as Barthes remarked, 'literature' is 'what gets taught',<sup>22</sup> there has always been the nascent possibility in Cultural Studies that it can form itself around 'what gets said', and this should remain its organising principle.

To express these reservations is not, then, to agree with David Miller's recent bizarre assertion that 'the standard of academic, media, and popular commentary on the Northern Ireland conflict remains abysmal'.<sup>23</sup> While it has become common to find academics and cultural commentators declaring in moments of vexation that the North has become over-researched and over-analysed (or over-agonised) and that some academic version of a fishing quota should be applied in order to protect stocks of increasingly rare research material, the state of Northern Irish Studies in all of its various disciplinary formations has never looked so vigorous nor so diverse. That said, the requirement for any new critical work to shoulder a