

Kathryn Stelmach Artuso. *Transatlantic Renaissances: Literature of Ireland and the American South.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013. xxi + 183 pp. \$39.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-61149-435-8.

Reviewed by Harper Strom

Published on H-Southern-Lit (August, 2015)

Commissioned by Anthony Dyer Hoefer (George Mason University)

The literary history of colonial Ireland is intimately tied to that of the American South, and in *Transatlantic Renaissances: Literature of Ireland and the American South*, Kathryn Stelmach Artuso unpacks the extensive intellectual and aesthetic influences of the Irish Literary Revival upon the Southern Renaissance.

Artuso covers an incredible amount of ground in framing her argument, and her aim is three-fold: recognizing and exploring confluences between the Irish and southern literary revivals; detailing the shared heritage between Irish and southern expressions of place and personhood through the works of Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen; and tracing the aesthetic influences and contradictions of Irish writers upon the Harlem Renaissance. Artuso begins by staking the genesis of the Southern Renaissance with the Fugitive collective of poets and H. L. Mencken's notorious labeling of the South as a "Sahara of the Bozart." The strain of resistance and reclamation fostered by Mencken's early provocation sets the tone for her study.

In her first chapter, Artuso surveys the origins of the Irish and Southern Renaissances, highlighting the role of dawning of national consciousness in each. Particularly insightful are Artuso's explications of the complex and gendered intellectual underpinnings to these nationalist revivals.

Her reevaluation of the work of Lady Gregory points toward a theme she will return to later, namely the necessary intervention of the female author into an often nostalgic, "masculinist martyrology," with Lady Gregory "dramatizing a new ethos of regeneration and wish fulfillment" in her 1920 play *The Dragon* (p. 39).

Chapter 2 sets out to reclaim Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) from the pejorative category of "popular fiction" and mine its "unexpected insights into the project of regional re-enchantment adopted by both Irish and southern writers" (p. 42). Artuso begins by reexamining the public relations campaign that accompanied the release of the film in 1939 and its reliance on the "moonlight and magnolias" mythology that defined the South in the postbellum popular imagination. In arguing for the novel's revolutionary nature, Artuso moves beyond even those critics who have identified its proto-feminism by highlighting the novel's "truly volatile, anti-nostalgic, and revolutionary nature" in shaking off paternalistic readings of the South in favor of a "maternalistic vision of southern identity" (pp. 44-45). By disestablishing male protagonists such as Gerald O'Hara and Rhett Butler, Mitchell, Artuso argues, works through stereotypes of the fiery Celt and the southern gentleman, ultimately destroying "the quintessentially paternalistic southern

male” and positing Scarlett as the true symbol of the South: the maternal, resilient Irish woman.

Chapter 3 examines the friendship and productive literary relationship between Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen. Beginning with Welty’s discovery of William Butler Yeats while a student at the University of Wisconsin, Artuso traces the ways in which “Welty and her fictional female counterparts offered a revision of the Romantic legacy of childhood” (p. 64). Beyond Yeats, Artuso highlights other instances in which the Irish literary tradition informed Welty’s work, including her professional and personal relationships with Diarmuid Russell and Bowen. Both Welty and Bowen “seek to transcend alienation by offering a revaluation of subordinate terms, disrupting the privileged position of the novel and the nuclear family, and elevating the minority status of young children and single women” (p. 72). For both Welty and Bowen, the short story offered a counterpoint to the bombastic style of high modernists like James Joyce and William Faulkner and united the southern and the Irish in the short story’s shared origins in oral storytelling. Artuso unpacks the mythological and Celtic influences in Welty’s story cycle *The Golden Apples* (1949) and highlights its themes of maturation and transgression. Of the final moment in “The Wanderers,” she writes, “Such an initiation into spiritual, artistic, and ethnic hybridity not only embodies a redemptive moment for Virgie by also a transformative, palingenetic moment for the South and for southern literature as well” (p. 83).

Artuso dedicates chapter 4 to further study of Bowen, centering on her novels *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and *The House in Paris* (1935). A friend to both Welty and Bowen, V. S. Pritchett “found in Ireland a site of revelation and revolution that he relocated from the collected to the personal, a reversal of the Irish Revival itself, which had sought to transfigure self-invention into creation” (p. 86). Artuso argues that Pritchett’s very English observations are indicative of

England’s infantilization of the Irish and nonetheless point to “the plasticity of individual and social identity” that Bowen explores in her novels. Both *The Heat of the Day* and *The House in Paris* feature brief episodes set in Ireland, and in casting Ireland as a site of defamilization and revelation for her characters, Bowen “affirms the elasticity of national as well as social conditions, as her characters undermine established stereotypes and create new cultural forms” (p. 89). This destabilizing influence extends to Bowen’s prose itself, and Artuso relates Bowen’s “thematic issues of ontological, epistemological, and linguistic anxiety” to her characters’ recognition of the [power of] “multiplicity, extremity, and hybridity inherent in supposedly codified social, ethnic, and gendered situations (p. 107). While Artuso’s readings of Bowen’s novels are perceptive, she could have drawn a stronger connection to her previous chapter as well as to her overall argument.

In chapter 5, Artuso synthesizes the arguments she has constructed over the previous chapters to bridge the Harlem, Irish, and Southern Renaissances. She makes the claim early that all three movements “sought to overturn malevolent minority stereotypes and offer a creative birth of collective identity through cultural innovation” (p. 109). This direct claim about the intent and purpose of three very different movements might be ill-advised, and she soon follows it up with a similarly broad claim that “the heritage of paternalistic attitudes toward African Americans in the South corresponds to the infantilization of the Irish in the eyes of the English.” While the racialism of the centuries-long imperial project is unquestionable and relates the history of slavery in America to the colonial subjugation of the Irish, Artuso’s conflation of these ideas deserves more theorization than can be accomplished in a chapter. While she convincingly draws together her diverse readings and considerable research, a stronger, unifying critical framework would have more thoroughly illuminated her ambitious and wide-ranging argument. Her final chapter in par-

ticular gestures tantalizingly toward the influence of the Irish Revival on prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance, and her brief reading of Jean Toomer's "[undermining] of patriarchal assumptions about religion" in *Cane* (1923) against Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is among the work's most promising (p. 117).

Artuso's text is a valuable addition to the diverse and growing body of critical work in transnational southern studies, not only for its careful excavation of the shared origins of the Irish and Southern Renaissances but in its gesturing toward the work still to be done in exploring routes of cultural exchange between locations and movements too often considered in isolation. As she demonstrates, even within current critical discussions about transatlanticism and the global South, there remain assumptions to be questioned and idols to be smashed. Her readings of Welty, Bowen, Toomer, and Lady Gregory suggest the multiplicity of avenues that can be explored within such a globally connected literature.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-southern-lit>

Citation: Harper Strom. Review of Artuso, Kathryn Stelmach. *Transatlantic Renaissances: Literature of Ireland and the American South*. H-Southern-Lit, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39038>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.