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Worlds of Their Own: Autonomy and Anxiety in Contemporary Irish Fiction

by GEORGE O'BRIEN

My question to myself ... is why has the cult of estrangement become such a convenient form of heroism in our writing?!

I

While Thomas Kilroy’s question emerges from a general inquiry into the relationship between literature and society in contemporary Ireland, it has particular relevance for a discussion of the contemporary Irish novel. For although the novel is traditionally the literary form in which the norms and terms for a reconciliation between self and society are rehearsed, and despite the fact that “during the last thirty or so years, an impressive growth in the number of Irish novels and Irish novelists has occurred,” the relationship between fictional product and social matrix in Irish fiction during the period in question has remained revealingly ambivalent, uneasy and inconclusive.

The relationship’s problematic character can be discerned from two complementary standpoints. From a social perspective, Irish society over the past forty years has seen numerous significant administrative, legal, demographic and economic changes brought about by such historic developments as membership in the European Community, the civil disturbances in Northern Ireland, increased urbanisation and the recent tigerishness of the Irish economy. Generally speaking, however, such changes and developments have largely fallen on fiction’s deaf ears. Very seldom are the protagonists of recent Irish fiction members of either the country’s nouveau riche entrepreneurial class or of new recruits to the traditional professional classes. All too few contemporary Irish literary novels portray the shifts in class structure, the political fallout, the moral challenges, the conflict of outlooks that have typified Irish life of late, and in doing so has lent the airs and graces of modern

democracy to Ireland at the present time. Rather, these phenomena have become the remit of a type of writer new to Irish society, the cultural commentator, whose work, whatever its merits and regardless of its obvious social value, has the effect of intervening in the complicated interaction between news data and the novel form.4

One reason for this general avoidance of the forward march of Irish society may simply be that if “Poets with progress / make no peace or pact,”5 the same goes for novelists. Or it may be that the changes which have come about are largely the products of forces from outside the nation state of Ireland and therefore are, in various ways, alien to the novelists’ imaginative landscapes. Another reason could be that the Irish novelist has traditionally been averse to attempts at a national perspective, preferring instead to work within the regionalist approach which is one of the mainstays of modern Irish fiction after Joyce—assuming, of course, that Joyce was not simply an Irish novelist whose region was Dublin! (In contrast, contemporary fiction from Northern Ireland is much more inclined to be panoptic.6 Although Northern Ireland is itself as regionalised as the Irish Republic.) Other factors which a systematic sociology of Irish fiction and Irish novelists would be obliged to consider are the effect of the higher international profile which Irish literature generally now enjoys, the impact of the growth of Irish publishing on the development of contemporary Irish fiction, the type of industrialisation of fiction familiar from the English and American markets that has come about through the publication of best-sellers by some Irish publishers, and the substantial increase in readings, fiction workshops, and short story prizes. No such sociology has been attempted, however, leaving fiction to speak for...
itself as best it can, a state of cultural affairs which may also be an aspect of the estrangement noted by Thomas Kilroy. Or it may just be that Irish novelists typically reflect the fact that "[t]here is no society in Ireland as there is elsewhere; no sense of continuity, tradition, legacy, except one that is jagged, broken."7

On the other hand, considering the state of Irish fiction from a literary point of view reveals a body of work in which there appears to be little common ground between structural social change and individual destiny. The rising tide of prosperity, which when it first began to fill in the 1960's was thought to be capable of raising all boats, has in the eyes of Irish novelists brought much more flotsam and jetsam than smooth sailing with it. The notes struck when Irish fiction speaks for itself are those of skepticism, mockery, impatience and insecurity, while dislocation, marginalisation, emigration and isolation have typified its thematic and formal preoccupations. This is a fiction in which Dublin is represented by Dermot Bolger’s Finglas and Roddy Doyle’s Barntown, enclaves that are remote in every sense from the city center and its international sheen of new financial institutions and visiting film stars. Ancient history, known not only in terms of the origins and consolidation of the state but as a shaper of personality within the compulsory disciplines of such experiences, continues to exert a strong imaginative hold. The past’s presence may be seen not only in the work of authors who are its immediate heirs, such as John McGahern, whose novels can in certain respects be regarded as an extended agon with this inheritance, culminating in Amongst Women (1990). It also finds expression in the work of much younger authors—the protagonist in Neil Jordan’s Sunrise with Sea Monsters hears his father “mutter darkly about De Valera as the embodiment of satanic guile, as the murderer of Michael Collins,”8 while in Desmond Hogan’s The Leaves on Grey one of the characters reports that she “dreamt about the tri-colour last night. I dreamt that I was caught by it as though by a huge bird, that it had enfolded me and that I was trying, trying to break free from it. I woke. I was sweating. There was blood on my hands.”9 The violence, claustrophobia and psychological torture of this portrait of Leda and the flag are typical of Hogan’s sense of historical terminus and personal vulnerability.

Less graphic moments in less rhetorically ambitious novels than Hogan’s provide additional shading to the general overall picture. For instance, the circumstances in which Pauline Kennedy, the protagonist of Ita Daly’s novel, A Singular Attraction, finds herself pinpoint some representative oscillations of feeling. Initially, “I’m free,” she had thought as she closed the door on the

house in Drumcondra, ‘I’m free,’ as she carried her suitcase over the threshold of her new flat.”

These thoughts will perhaps strike readers as a rather untraditional way for Pauline to mark her mother’s recent death. Now aged thirty-eight, a virgin who is determined not to be a martyr, Pauline has “embraced independence” (65) and is keen to find concrete evidence of her liberation. But all she can come up with is her sterile new apartment, “built in the grounds of a convent” (21). Despite having her amorous adventure, the main lesson that Pauline learns from her belated transition from home to world is not only in how best to go it alone but in the fact that there is no alternative to the world of her own which is her basic, unavoidable inheritance.

For her, independence turns out not to be the stuff of romance but a rather painfully practical introduction to the singularity of her own temperament. Neither intimacy, friendship, professional responsibility, cultural props such as a women’s group and painting classes—much less the Church—can relieve Pauline of that singularity. Although A Singular Attraction confines itself to “the commonplace” (16), it is not too difficult to see it in the thematic continuum that includes Brian Moore’s Ginger Coffey, on the one hand, and his struggle to find a way of life in Montreal beyond the one prescribed by the hand-in-glove relationship between Church and State—“Ha, ha! cried the politicians, North and South … Hah! cried the archbishops …”11—and Patrick McCabe’s Francie Brady: “Oh now now he says that’s all over you must forget all about that next week your solitary finishes how about that hmm? I felt like laughing in his face: How can your solitary finish? That’s the best laugh yet.”

Whether the circumstances are those of exile, where Ginger Coffey encounters a modernity for which he is quite unprepared, or those of Pauline Kennedy in transit from “the ancestral semi” (50), or those which ratify the butcher boy’s psychopathology by institutionalisation, the sense of dislocation, of abandonment, together with difficulties regarding social affiliation and personal identity, place this unlikely trio of protagonists in the same light. Their collective experience of the rising tide is a wave of loneliness. Together with many of contemporary Irish fiction’s other protagonists, the absence of known authority figures and familiar structures of authority brings about unwonted liberties which, being largely unsought, make life unnervingly, challengingly, open and provisional. Further, it is the apparent failure of the two most traditional and familiar structures of authority, the Church and the family (and particularly the family whose internal politics reflect the

10. Ita Daly, A Singular Attraction (London: Cape, 1986), 47. Further citations given parenthetically in text.


state’s ideological rigidity and hierarchical organisation of power), which contemporary Irish fiction shows to be basically responsible for characters typically ending up with compromised futures in fragile and undependable worlds of their own.

II

The apparent withering away of the Church has been identified as one of the great changes in recent Irish life and is sometimes offered as an incontrovertible instance of how modern Ireland has become. And certainly the Catholic Church has dwindled into a very remote presence in contemporary Irish fiction. Indeed, remote is hardly the word to describe the priest’s status in Irish fiction of the past ten years or thereabouts. In Roddy Doyle’s Barrytown, for instance, the community’s virtual priestlessness seems to be a given, and the idea of a priest having anything to do with the lives of the characters is evidently unthinkable. The erasure of the clergy is all the more telling given something of a prevalence in Doyle’s works of material such as single Parenthood (The Snapper [1990]), marital breakdown (Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha [1993]) and spousal abuse (The Woman Who Walked into Doors [1996]) that once upon a time might have automatically elicited heavy-handed clerical attention.

If a priest takes a prominent role in the community, as in Colm Tóibín’s The Heather Blazing, it is as a cultural worker instead of moral arbiter. Father Rossiter stands out from the novel’s other priests because of his contribution to the creation of the local museum. But while his work is significant and worthwhile, it is by no means unique or decisive. Other priests in the novel are depicted as merely doing their duty, with nothing more to say than what is appropriate to their office, their neutrality echoing that of the period in the novel when they are most in evidence, the 1940’s. The unexceptional and comprehensive level of integration between priest and people in this period of the novel is in marked contrast to the tensions between Church and citizen which is one of the ways the work represents present-day Ireland.

What might be called the a-clerical character of these recent works not only underlines the changing relationship between the Church and Irish society. It can also be seen as an expression of the traditionally problematic status of priests in Irish fiction (which, as it dates from the works of William Carleton [1794-1869], if not before, is as old as Irish fiction itself). More to


the point, it can also be regarded as the culmination of the challenge to the moral, institutional, theological and social orthodoxies of the Church issued by those novels which, forty years ago, initiated a new departure in Irish fiction. In very different ways, Brian Moore’s *Judith Hearne* (1955), Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* (1960) and John McGahern’s *The Barracks* (1963) each features telling breakdowns in the relationship between the Church and the people which are not only significant in terms of plot development but are also noteworthy means of heightening and sharpening the overall sense of private crisis which these novels’ protagonists undergo.

Located in such unlikely places as Moore’s Belfast, McGahern’s western midlands and O’Brien’s boarding school, which had hitherto not featured prominently on the landscape of Irish fiction, these works show how the concept of the faithful—as the Church calls the laity—comes under stress. All three novels articulate this stress in the context of the fate of women’s bodies (as though unwittingly making a complicated pun about the contemporary status of Mother Church’s body of faith), which apart from other considerations is a noteworthy shift in both imaginative strategy and narrative focus for Irish fiction. And in all three novels, the Church is sought out by the protagonists, only to be found wanting.

In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth Reegan, dying of cancer, finds nothing in the Church to console her. Her encounters with the local priest prior to her illness are not encouraging, to say the least—“‘So, my dear woman, you dislike the Catholic Church,’” he remonstrates when Elizabeth declines to join the Legion of Mary, a lay religious organisation. And while the suffering of Christ is a subject for contemplation during her illness, it is not in her nature to dwell on it. She concludes: “There are no answers” (137), which leaves her with the bitter awareness that while “[t]he whole of her vital world was in herself” (179), she is prevented from living to the full in that world of her own. The willingness of the spirit is a victim of the weakness of the flesh. For Elizabeth Reegan, the orphaned nature of her mortal fate is reinforced by her awareness of the utter irrelevance of Mother Church. In the final event, it is the Church’s practices but not its preaching that offer comfort, a formal aesthetic which offsets the bleak existential dread that Elizabeth has to confront on her own:

The rosary had grown into her life: she’d come to love its words, its rhythm, its repetitions, its confident chanting, its eternal mysteries; what it meant didn’t matter, whether it meant anything at all or not it gave the last need of her heart release, the need to praise and celebrate, in which everything rejoiced. (181)

Similarly, when Moore’s *Judith Hearne* has recourse to the Church, she meets with responses so shopworn and impersonal that the priest making them verges on self-parody. Baring her soul in confession, Judith not only

acknowledges her alcoholism and her religious doubts, she makes a plea for human solidarity by asking for advice regarding her utter loneliness, only to realise, “He’s not listening.” Very shortly thereafter, confession comes to a formulaic end, “[a]nd she was alone in the darkness. Shriven, her sins washed away” (145). The juxtaposition of the two truths here does not seem intended to give the impression that Judith has been relieved of the burden of her isolation. The sacrament’s restorative promise does not seem to have reached her, nor does she appear to have been illuminated by her confessor’s exercise of his pastoral responsibilities. It is undoubtedly true of Judith that “her problem is not just whether Belfast can give her a husband, but whether being can give her a sign, an earnest of transcendence.” But that problem is compounded by her discovery that the very agency that might offer her some relief seems lacking in the spirit necessary to do so. The Church intensifies Judith’s already dreadful loneliness. And her attempts to negotiate her isolation land her not in a state of grace but in a nursing home.

In comparison, the experiences of Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan in The Country Girls seem trivial. The behavior which draws down the nuns’ institutional wrath and results in their expulsion from boarding school simply reflects Baba’s coltishness and Cait’s uncertainty, impressionability and insecurity. Immature as the girls’ conduct inevitably is, the novel also shows that the nuns’ reaction is hardly adult. The inflexibility of the school’s code is a much more powerful instrument, capable of greater coerciveness and of inflicting much more damage, than any dirty rhyme composed by Baba and placed in prayer books. And while the novel’s focus is clearly on the two spirited girls, with the boarding school just one of their numerous collisions with tradition and convention, the fact that the authority of the Church substantiates and justifies the nuns’ regime gives this particular run-in an emblematic emphasis.

Once more, the Church’s self-described mothering role—emphasised here by the students addressing the nuns by the honorific convention of “Mother,” as well as by the fact that Caithleen’s mother has died—is found to be inadequate. Like Elizabeth Reegan and Judith Hearne, Caithleen Brady has to find a means of mothering herself. And as with Elizabeth and Judith, Caithleen is uprooted and dislocated. Dublin may be for her “the world I wanted to escape into,” where before long, “I ... stopped going to Mass and Confession and things” (178). But this world of her own, in which she and Baba quickly develop the misleading impression of themselves as “grown up and independent” (143), is rather less easy to make her own of than she imagines. The nexus of skepticism, impatience and criticism of the Church created in these

three inaugural novels is sustained to varying degrees in these authors’ later fiction, particularly in the case of Moore and McGahern. Edna O’Brien invokes Church and clergy rather more intermittently, though on those occasions when her work has an explicitly Irish setting their presence reasserts itself as a fundamental dramatic and critical resource, as in *A Pagan Place* (1970) and a work that seems at least partly inspired by Ireland’s recent clerical scandals, *Down by the River* (1996). Of Moore’s work, on the other hand, it has been noted that “the Catholic faith is as undeniable as the weather, with its prevailing winds of depressed feeling and moral demand affecting the psychological temperature of almost all his protagonists.”19 And while it is true that Catholicism recurs consistently in his novels—*Catholics* (1972), *Black Robe* (1985), *The Color of Blood* (1987) and *No Other Life* (1993) even have clerical protagonists—Moore’s emphasis has shifted from the critical perspective of *Judith Hearne* and particularly *The Feast of Lupercal* (1958), where in addition to the emptiness of ritual and the bankruptcy of dogma, the sectarianism of middle-class Catholic Belfast is sharply revealed, to the perspective of an intrigued agnostic dramatising the phenomenology of faith and the transcendent.

IN CONTRAST TO THE MORE speculative approach of Moore’s later parables of faith and doubt, McGahern has adapted some of the influences of his Catholic upbringing to artistic purposes.

I was born into Catholicism ... and brought up as a Roman Catholic.... I have nothing but gratitude for the spiritual remnants of that upbringing, the sense of our origins beyond the bounds of sense, an awareness of mystery and wonderment, grace and sacrament, and the absolute quality of women and men underneath the sun of heaven. That is all that now remains. Belief as such has long gone.20

McGahern’s fiction is striking for its sense of the sanctity of the vernacular. In *The Barracks*, for example, the word “grace” itself occurs as a key integer of perception, a sensory sheen which transmutes the merely secular quality and status of circumstances and places them in a stronger light. Elizabeth Reegan not only recollects such moments from her own experience, particularly her experience of love in England, she also desires to honor those moments’ very possibility and potential, particularly given her awareness of the seeming odds against their shining through their unpromising contexts. It is not merely McGahern’s depictions of the Church’s institutional limitations, which emerge with increasing explicitness in his second and third novels, *The Dark* (1965) and *The Leavetaking* (1974; rev. ed., 1984),21 that have caused him to be identified as a “post-Catholic” Irish writer.22

McGahern would more than likely reject any such identity, quite understandably, since the tendency towards the post-Catholic in his work, however widespread, is much less systematic than glib labelling allows, as well as being an important component of contemporary Irish literature in general rather than of McGahern’s fiction in particular. Further evidence for the trend may be found not only in those works about the priesthood previously noted, where the emphasis is on the man behind the collar, and on the intellectual doubts and existential perturbations to which he is heir. Questions of faith and of the reality of the numinous are also to be found in the fiction of John Banville, Neil Jordan and Desmond Hogan, with Banville, in particular, a perhaps unexpected but central contributor to the trend.

The unexpectedness of Banville’s contribution, the nature and interest of which can be most readily appreciated from his *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), is due not only to these two works’ having nothing to do with the relationship of clergy and laity; their subject matter seems explicitly to avoid the time and place of contemporary Ireland. Clearly these novels, like Banville’s output as a whole, are noteworthy for, among other significant elements, their European dimension, their learning, the manner in which they honor the imagination and their Faustian reflections. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore that stargazing revolutionaries Kepler and Copernicus carry out their work in conditions of general historical turmoil. In the world of these novels, the clash between reaction and progress finds expression in a violence that frequently justifies itself through religious sectarianism. And the astronomers’ visionary findings are obviously in conflict with the orthodoxies of clerical cosmology.

It would be much too reductive to regard these Banville novels as parables of Irish conditions in the shocking 1970’s. Nevertheless, the protagonists’ persistence in attempting to bring into being new, more complex and more rational structures of order through the agency of what might be called their own individual “reading” of inherited systems, has an undoubted, even if unwitting, contemporary resonance. One of the essential features of their astronomy is autonomy of mind, a property which obviously places them at risk socially and isolates them in the world of their theories—as Copernicus affirms: “I believe in mathematics ... nothing more.”23 The result is frequent bouts of self-doubt and insecurity (it might even be claimed that this autonomy of mind of theirs is a precondition of an anxiety which goes well beyond the personal; in it we see the onset of the modern).

“Thus does Rome transform into ritual the horrors of the world, in order to sustain the fictions” (172). While it would obviously take more than this comment from a character in *Doctor Copernicus* to make it a post-Catholic novel, this is a work which communicates a keen interest in what the grounds for faith may be in a world broken by history. The possibility of, and even necessity for, a “supreme fiction,” allowed for not only by the protagonist but

by the quotation from Wallace Stevens’s “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” as the novel’s epigraph, signifies at least an inclination towards the transcendent. And Copernicus’s visionary apprehension of “the vivid thing” (3),24 even if it is ultimately understood as the fiction of “redemptive despair” (239; italics in the original), still hints at the possibility of a metaphysical gleam residing within the material universe in a manner that does not seem wholly at odds with McGahern’s glimpses of the same phenomena in more mundane settings.

An argument may be made for at least a thematic connection between the attention paid to matters of faith, doubt, individuality and insecurity as they are calibrated and integrated by McGahern and Banville and the journey westward in Neil Jordan’s *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, which in addition to its Joycean echoes reprises elements of both his first novel, *The Past*, and the short story “Tree” in *Night in Tunisia*. And from a more general perspective and in more contemporary contexts, the restlessness and transient experiences of Desmond Hogan’s young characters (“all the vulnerable children of the fifties or whatever age they were begotten”25) express in their own way the inner life of an Ireland which, as one of Hogan’s characters has it, “was the saddest country on earth, because it didn’t know its own soul.”26

### III

**If Contemporary Irish Fiction** no longer sees Mother Church as a source of saving grace for human nature—ratifying, forgiving, sheltering, sublimating and assisting in, or indeed justifying the fact that, in the words of Banville’s Copernicus, “the world will not bear anything other than acceptance” (239)—but on the contrary as more intent on saving its own complacent and well-preserved authoritarian face, leaving her children exposed to whatever existential wind that blows, the view of Mother Ireland is just as negative. Or rather, given the manner in which it is structured, the view is even more hostile and rejecting. For while, as already noted, there is little concerted fictional treatment of the Irish state, as such, in operation, its impact is represented with raw, unnerving intimacy.

Instead of being represented as a polity, the state is imagined as both a vaguer and more pressing presence. Its vagueness derives from a sense of how little difference actual social policy seems to make in characters’ lives, how little appeal there is to public discourse, and how little interest the state seems to have in deploying its resources so that citizens are enabled by them. On the other hand, characters tend to be suffused by an awareness of not only the state’s existence but its genesis and development, the moral nature and historical role of its founding fathers, the promise of freedom in which it was

24. The phrase is used to register Copernicus’s intense perception of various aspects of his life. On the first occasion it’s used it refers to his mother; later it is applied to Copernicus’s theories.
born, and an array of other related considerations which make themselves felt not as matters of public record or ancient history, but in the vivid immediacy of familial conflict. These private scenarios may of course be fiction’s reflection of the claim that “[w]hat we have seen in Ireland since Independence … has been the failure to create a public realm.” And they may also be the imaginative response to problems with the transfer of authority which every society inevitably finds complex, particularly one like Ireland which has had little experience in developing cultural and psychological mechanisms for this continuing process. But the overall effect of the dynamics of distance and intimacy is a set of problems associated with affiliation, legitimacy, succession, tradition, identity and self-consciousness. It is as though “the chronic sovereignty neurosis,” for many years a justification for the stagnation and timidity of Irish life, has been transferred from the political realm to the inner lives of citizens.

The family is virtually the sole venue in contemporary Irish fiction in which matters of power and authority are addressed, and the clearest sense of their problematic nature emerges from the relationship between fathers and children, and in particular between fathers and sons. Here too, as in novels questioning the Church’s credibility, mothers and mother figures are few and far between. In their absence, fathers loom very large, not only as figures of authority embodying a familiar and predictable paternalism, but frequently as figures who act as though their authority has been vested in them by the state. In Edna O’Brien’s *The Lonely Girl*, not only does her father rescue Caithleen Brady from her lover, Eugene, but on the train home from Dublin a consensus of their fellow-travellers ratifies the legitimacy of doing so by singing the patriotic ballad “Kevin Barry,” Eugene being “bloody English.” Later, Caithleen’s father has an opportunity to denounce Eugene in person on the same grounds: “this is our country and you can’t come along here and destroy people who’ve lived here for generations …” (160). On this occasion, the father’s bluster is even more blatant than usual, and the terms in which he represents himself more transparently rhetorical. Not knowing how best to address the fact that Caithleen has violated all known conventions concerning a daughter’s duty to her father, Brady bases his claim for authority on grounds that merely reveal their, and his, inauthenticity and confirm Caithleen in her choice, however uncertain, to live in the world offered by Eugene. And although Eugene’s statement to Caithleen that “we both need a father” (144) seems in its own way to owe more to rhetoric than to plausibility—and in view of Eugene’s being much older than Caithleen suggests some of their relationship’s emotional complexities—it does pinpoint some of the problems of inheritance and affiliation which vitiate any possibility of

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Caithleen’s attaining autonomy on her home ground. Caithleen’s willingness not only to forsake her native place but to do so in a manner that rejects the atavistic political rhetoric of nativism and enters into the complications of her own choices implies that autonomy is worth the anxiety that accompanies it.

Calling the father’s rhetorical bluff occurs more explicitly in Brian Moore’s Bildungsroman, The Emperor of Ice Cream, a novel which is an exception to the general trend of powerless fathers in fiction from Northern Ireland. Set in Belfast during World War II, its father-son conflict has not only a social but a historical context. The issues between them concern not merely the realm of personal behavior and (as in Caithleen Brady’s case) both the right of the individual to conduct himself according to his lights and the privacy in which to engage in such conduct. In addition, social, personal and generational difficulties are sharpened here by the fact that Gavin Burke and his father are in conflict about the war. By joining a local A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) unit, Gavin implicitly enlists with the Allies. His father, on the other hand, is given to such statements as “the German jackboot isn’t half as hard as the heel of John Bull,” while Gavin’s Aunt Liz, a hive of militant nationalist sentiment, believes, for example, that “these A.R.P. places will be filled with the scum of the Orange Lodges” (13).

When the Luftwaffe bombs Belfast, Mr. Burke and family leave for the safety of Dublin—his ideological home, as it were. Gavin refuses to accompany them. Some adolescent petulance informs his refusal: “I can live here alone … I don’t need them. I don’t want to see them ever again” (164). But the impact of the blitz on Belfast endorses his decision to go it alone by very suddenly landing him in a world larger, more intense and more demanding than any future envisaged by his father’s outlook (the initial conflict between father and son arises out of Gavin’s failure at school, which means that he has failed to live up to his father’s expectations). Gavin walks through the bombed city:

... going down a silent avenue, past rows of shut, fearful doors, keeping to the middle of the road to avoid falling bricks and slates. He forgot his father, forgot his own feelings of anger and grief. He walked, caught in a cold excitement, feeling himself witness to history, to the destruction of the city he had lived in all his life. (166)

And history is no mere spectacle. Gavin’s A.R.P. duties include handling the shattered corpses which history leaves in its wake. And it is by finding himself able to function at this level that Gavin experiences an appropriate intensity of witnessing, the private and familial counterpoint to which is not only the discovery that the house he grew up in is “condemned” (188) but

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also a different perspective on his father: “Did his father know ... that everything had changed, that things would never be the same again? A new voice, a cold grown-up voice within him said: ‘No.’ His father was the child now; his father’s world was dead” (189). This new voice—individuated, self-possessed, focused—echoes the call of the world (the moral terrain, the historical territory, the international outlook) which grants and authenticates Gavin’s new-found autonomous identity.

As oppressive and reactionary father figures, Mr. Brady and Mr. Burke seem to be two of a kind. But they also seem rather distant from the state to which they claim allegiance, their affiliation owing more to sentiment, perhaps (they both have sisters whose lovers lost their lives in the War of Independence), or to other forms of false consciousness—shared by many characters in contemporary Irish fiction—than to a more complex or active connection. It may be that they subconsciously attempt to compensate for their remoteness by the rigidity, heavy-handedness and denial of difference which articulates their relationship with Gavin and Caithleen. In any event, these two father figures, for all their assumption of power and attempted imposition of authority, are shown to be on shaky ground when it comes to family politics. And the fact that their paternal legitimacy is assailable may be related to their inability to perceive their distorted sense of national politics and hence to adjust it. The more insistently Messrs Burke and Brady express their ideological intimacy with the conventions and clichés of nationalistic generalisations, the more vulnerable and dismissible their putative leadership turns out to be in the eyes of their offspring, and the more inevitably the course of these offsprings’ careers deviate from these fathers’ conception of the straight, the narrow, the true and the good.

Although both Moore and O’Brien do reveal the nature and quality of the clash that occurs when family politics and national politics are underwritten by the same reductive ideology, what is portrayed seems somewhat underdeveloped. The father figures are ultimately one-dimensional, as though they have already been encased in archetypal shells before the action commences. In the novels of John McGahern, however, distance and intimacy, the authority of the past and the delimitation of the future, and the reproduction within the family power structure of the national hierarchical mode are dramatised both through the fathers’ and the offsprings’ perspectives. The view that “[b]oth emotionally and formally, *Amongst Women* shows us how it feels to exist not in the twilight, but in the *afterlife* of an heroic era,”32 may be taken as a gloss on a central thematic preoccupation in much of McGahern’s fiction.

The internalised world of her own to which Elizabeth Reegan is confined in *The Barracks*—the world of memory and speculation, pain and fear, joy and sensuality; the solitary cell of self—is not only an alternative to the world of power and authority with which her husband, as a police sergeant, is iden-

tified. Elizabeth’s spirit is a critique of her husband’s public domain, and part of that spirit is her capacity to acknowledge the bleak terms under which she possesses it. Critical though Sergeant Reegan is of the servile character of public service—“[h]e was growing old and he had never been his own boss” (91)—he finds it difficult to make very much of his independent-mindedness. Yet independence continues to have a bitter and complicated place in his mind. Reegan owes his police career to his participation in the War of Independence. He is not only aligned with the activities of state formation and state stability, he is also a member of “a generation wild with ideals” (90). In addition, however, he is also aware that the ideals have become a mirage, a fetish, a tautology, a yardstick to which nothing measured up.

Reegan’s history, and his denunciation of “this balls of a country” (190), anticipates the attitude of Moran, another veteran of the fight for nationhood: “What did we get for it? … What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.”33 Moran’s case is an intensification of Reegan’s, and presents a much more elaborate complex of connections between the father’s assertion of the legitimacy of his social and moral remit and his earlier nationalist commitments. These connections are revealed in the tense dynamics of Moran’s relationship with his children. The fact that Moran is dying, is slipping beyond the grip that time and space, home and history, have so tenaciously exerted on him, shows these dynamics to have come to a critical social juncture as well as to the end of their natural term. It is time for them to be subjected to the disarmament of revelation. The economy of power in the Moran household is no longer a command economy. Without the centralised authority of one view, one voice, one man, one leader, the psycho-cultural archetype which the Moran household embodies has no future. The departure of the two Moran sons for worlds of their own in metropolitan England means the end of Great Meadow, Moran’s confining kingdom.

The question of the future—very prominent in McGahern’s recurring aesthetic of potential, realisation and becoming (and their attendant anxieties)—is also anticipated in The Barracks. Here, however, it is Reegan himself, rather than his children, who brings it to the fore. The novel culminates not in Elizabeth’s death but in his resignation from the police. No doubt his desire “to come when I want to myself and go away for the same reason” (58) is now nearer realisation. But the form his release takes is complicated by possessing an iconic cultural power that is both being socially atavistic and personally liberating: “He’d buy a small farm and work how he liked for himself” (194). Farming and the turf harvesting he is already engaged in are Reegan’s antidotes to the life the state allows him—“the frustrations and poisons of his life flowing into the clay as he worked” (90).

According to Elizabeth’s local doctor, “the pig-in-the-kitchen days are gone … Now we’re reaping the fruits those men that won us our freedom

sowed” (172). Elizabeth promptly labels such nostrums as “rubbish” (ibid.); neither she nor Reegan lives in the conditions, much less under the dispensation, described. Just as Elizabeth’s autonomy is naturally disabled by her illness, Reegan’s is socially undercut by an apparent inability to identify with, and fully participate in, the country he helped bring into being. Estranged from the world of their social and historical origins, Elizabeth and Reegan are left to search, if not hopelessly, then without guidance or knowledge, for the coordinates of a world of their own, a quest which substantiates the claim that, for McGahern, “[t]he real drama in life is not the public performance but the inner drama of the self.”

IV

But as the small tight group of stricken women slowly left the graveyard they seemed with every step to be gaining in strength. It was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very living centre of all parts of their lives.... Their continual homecomings had been an affirmation of its unbroken presence. and now, as they left him under the yew, it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy.... At the gate they paused firmly to wait for the men who lagged well behind on the path and were chatting and laughing pleasantly together, their children around them.

“Will you look at the men. They’re more like a crowd of women,” Sheila said, remarking on the slow frivolity of their pace. “The way Michael, the skit, is getting Sean and Mark to laugh you’d think they were coming from a dance.”

In their representation within a single family group of continuity and dispersal, fidelity and indifference, inwardness and frivolity, all consolidated in a reversal of gender stereotypes and on one of the few significant occasions in Irish social life when private self and public ritual collaborate, the closing words of Amongst Women may be taken as a vignette of a modernising Ireland. Bearing, gait, the body language of carrying on both in the sense of maintaining continuity and of acting out, hint at the fragmentation of feeling, the disavowal of common ground, the tensions between collective experience and individual reaction which typify the problematic character of the modern. Moran the patriarchal freedom fighter maintains his integrity in his daughters’ consciousness. He lives on not only as a memory to honor but as an endower of identity, a powerful idea of the meaning of home, a provider of that primal ground out of which psyche is nurtured and culture may grow. But, to all appearances, none of this affects Michael Moran. Like his brother Luke, who does not attend the funeral, Michael has, after a considerable struggle, broken from the home ground. His discomposed behavior may be read as not only an expression of unease at an occasion the ethic of whose ceremonial rectitude

34. Denis Sampson, Outstaring Nature’s Eye (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic U of America P, 1993), 58-59. Issues regarding the future, one’s place in society and the generally traumatic nature of being in the world also arise out of the conflict between father and son in The Dark. One of the ways in which each of this novel’s protagonists achieves a truce in the conflict is to realise that “it is only within himself that he will find some kind of certainty amid the images that reflect inner and outer coherence” (Sampson, op. cit., 81).

and communal value he no longer abides by. The sense of his dislocation is enhanced not only by the fact that he has placed himself in the company of Moran’s sons-in-law, Mark and Sean, whose connection with Great Meadow is essentially formal, but also by his behavior’s being disclosed through Sheila’s detached, somewhat distant and bemused perspective.

Marginal, isolated, going it alone (Mark and Sean are said not to share his nervous and uncertain mood), Michael appears to be diminished by his lack of standing in the family circle. He occupies an indeterminate space, a kind of no man’s land between his sisters’ allegiance to, and his brother’s negation of, the father. Yet clearly this space’s inclusion in the text makes Michael’s precarious, provisional world of his own as much an element in the reality of Moran’s passing as the other two worlds between which it is stranded. Michael’s position turns its back both on the renewed tradition of family pietas, embodied by his sisters, and on the obdurate pragmatism of Luke’s metropolitan style. Michael lives in England, but attends his father’s funeral. Michael comes home to a place which no longer offers him life. His behavior is callow, immature, exceptional, unfitting. But its implications of frailty, vulnerability, insecurity, and solitude also point to the troubles inflicted by change. As an emblem of these disturbances, Michael not only represents the major McGahern theme of how “[u]ncertainty has replaced the traditional destinations.”

Michael’s situation is also an instructive image of the transition in contemporary Irish fiction from the existential dread of being cast into the exterior darkness of a world of one’s own to a more willing identification with such a world.

This is a transition in the process of being made more deliberately and decisively by Ita Daly’s Pauline Kennedy, who when last seen is “one who walks with some measure of serenity and assurance into the autumn sunshine” (144). Her style and manner, visible evidence of an ability and at the very least a covert desire to bear the burden of selfhood, are at least as much to the point as Pauline’s bittersweet and somewhat vague destination. And it is the capacity to go on, to engender and sustain change that provides the plot line of—and indeed even makes plot a more subtle element in—some of those novels of the nineties that mark a new departure in contemporary Irish fiction. In Colm Tóibín’s The South (1990), for example, Katherine Proctor leaves her home, her son, and a marriage in which “it was as though she had been frozen,” for the testing liberation of life in Barcelona, a departure which gains additional impetus and exemplary force for taking place in the 1950’s. The test of her autonomy comes not only in the form of the new relationships to which she commits herself but in the commitment to herself as a painter. And it is because she ultimately is able to give herself to her paint-

ing, is able to cross into the unknown territory of her own responsive consciousness, and can make her own of the landscape of her failed marriage, that Katherine shows the virtue and value and cost of affirming, "I do not want everything to be over with me. There is more. There is more" (180). Part of that "more" is a return to Ireland on terms that neither Church nor State dictates. Now she can be seen for what she is. The return culminates in a successful exhibition of her paintings—and even has an afterlife, thanks to the portrait by her that hangs in Finbar’s Hotel. 38

A different trajectory of autonomy is enacted in Joseph O’Connor’s Desperadoes (1994), which is rather more than “a richly comic novel ... another successful investigation of the similarities and dissimilarities between Ireland and the “Third World.”” 39 Set in war-torn Nicaragua, this is the story of the attempts of Frank and Eleanor, estranged parents of Johnny Little, to find out for certain what has happened to their son. Refusing to believe reports of his death until they see his body, Frank and Eleanor pursue Johnny into the war zone in the company of members of Los Desperados de Amor, a band in which Johnny used to play. After various adventures, not least those that take them into the history of their own failed marriage and a heightened awareness of life’s poignant fragility, Johnny is located. By this time, however, Johnny has obligations of his own, not only those brought about by complications connected with the war, but more notably those signified by his pregnant companion, Pilar. Despite his parents’ wishes, and what it has cost to bring those wishes to Johnny’s attention, he elects to stay where he is, and to face the uncertain and difficult future he has made for himself. The lost son has been alive throughout, living in the light of his own nature and the commitments to which they give rise, a light which the father—bearer-in-chief of old country (Irish) warmheartedness—acknowledges, without being quite able to comprehend.

The overriding of the father is also a marked feature of the novel that perhaps most comprehensively goes down the road on which Michael Moran was last seen lingering, Colm Tóibín’s The Heather Blazing. One of its more arresting features is the presence of a prominent state servant as its protagonist. Judge Eamon Redmond, whose very name combines those of two of twentieth-century Ireland’s most controversial politicians, Eamon De Valera and John Redmond, is not merely a High Court judge. He is also the product of the culture of Ireland’s leading political party, Fianna Fáil, as well as heir

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38. Dermot Bolger, ed., Finbar’s Hotel (Dublin: New island, 1997), 126. Part of the novelty of this sequence of stories is that although the authors are named their contributions are not identified. Colm Tóibín is one of the contributors; he did not write the story in which Katherine Proctor’s picture appears.

39. Declan Kiberd, Inventing Ireland (London: Cape and Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 611. In Desperadoes, “Señora Hernandez [Pilar’s mother] said she was very pleased to meet Eleanor. She wanted to know all about Ireland. She had heard that it was very green, full of mountains and lakes, like Nicaragua, and that everyone there was a poet. ‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ Eleanor said.” Joseph O’Connor, Desperadoes (London: HarperCollins, 1994; Flamingo, 1995), 372. Irish-Nicaraguan connections are not confined to this exchange, as band member Lorenzo indicates, though here, too, personal experience has priority over cultural, political or ideological hands across the sea.
to his hometown’s and his family’s more informal, sentimental, picturesque, but thoroughly self-conscious nationalism.

The novel’s focus, however, by no means concentrates exclusively on the public man. On the contrary, a detailed study is provided of the erosion of personality, or of the emotional vitality and engagement that make personality distinctive and personal, which obedience to the Irish version of the law of the fathers exacts. Redmond not only represents the conscience of the state as he administers its laws, he also reveals the shriveled moral imagination he now possesses as a result of his good and faithful service. Going over one of his judgments, “he realized more than ever that he had no strong moral views, that he had ceased to believe in anything.”

Such a position, allied to the fact that “the idea of God seemed ... absurd to him ... the idea of a being whose mind put order on the universe, who watched over things, and whose presence gave the world a morality which was not based on self-interest, seemed beyond belief” (86), does not prevent him from reaching the most orthodox and socially conservative conclusions on the bench.

A good deal of the novel is spent at Redmond’s County Wexford beach house, the coastline around which is continually eroding. It seems only a matter of time until the Redmond house also collapses, it too being built on sand, and that when this happens all the judge’s powers as a swimmer will not be enough to keep his head above water. Yet the novel declines to follow out what one of its main structural metaphors entails. Its concluding image is of Redmond and his infant grandson, Michael, born out of wedlock to his daughter, Niamh. The judge is introducing Michael to the ocean, an activity to be read not so much as the kind of secular baptism to be expected in a post-Catholic novel but as an unexpected acknowledgement of the child’s reality, Niamh’s choices, and by implication the “changing world” (89) whose complexities he is obliged to adjudicate—a world in which youth and change play an increasingly prominent part, as his professional life shows.

When Michael protests against immersion, the judge returns with him to shore. His protective tenderness towards the child, his willingness to let him have his way, is hardly sufficient evidence that Redmond is no longer stranded in a desiccated, inelastic, crumbling constitutionality. But they do suggest that the private realm can be at least as significant a source of potent images of solidarity and continuity as a character’s public role.

Meanwhile, in a glancing manner reminiscent of the final glimpse of Michael Moran in Amongst Women, Niamh Redmond is seen swimming on her own, apart from her father and her son. “Her movements were swift and decisive” (244), and it is she who encourages the members of the other generations to get in the water together and who leaves them to fend for themselves when they do. As Michael’s mother, Niamh obviously believes in fending for herself. Hers is an autonomy which is apparently unaccompanied

by anxiety. Like Johnny Little and Katherine Proctor, she is not intimidated either by parental expectations, concerns for either the family’s name or image, or the prescriptions of conventional morality. But unlike Katherine and Johnny, her story is an ironic counterpoint to her father’s, with so comparatively little known about it as to suggest that in important ways she can only be considered related to her father in the most elementary senses of the word. Niamh is all the more centrally and credibly an inhabitant of a world of her own for not being the protagonist of *The Heather Blazing*, while the actual protagonist of that novel is also consigned to his world, in the privacy of which he is rewarded not with anything remotely resembling even the symbolic value of Michael, never mind the child’s actual individual worth, but rather with the knowledge that “[h]e believed in nothing now, no soul, no cloudy spirit offered him consolation” (210).

V

The positing of worlds of their own for the protagonists of contemporary Irish fiction, and the concomitant positing of these protagonists’ need and willingness to recognise, identify with and lay claim to those worlds, is one of the clearest and most widespread expressions of how recent changes in Irish society have rendered their artistic account. The appeal of such worlds for authors and characters alike is not difficult to comprehend. But the overall significance of this imaginative departure, consisting as it does of an uneasy combination of rupture and détente, dislocation and desire, is more difficult to assess.

For authors, tales of private concern, individual need, and personal development suggest a desire to tell alternative stories to those sponsored by an exhausted but still memorable national narrative based on hierarchy, patriarchy, myth and sovereignty, the social and cultural consequences of which tended towards rigidity and uniformity. What might be called, for the sake of convenience, the new narrative of autonomy can be taken as a kind of artistic shorthand for the historical inevitability of change, the social acceptability of investing one’s psychic energy in desire and self-realisation, and the culturally liberating presence of diversity. Even if the socioeconomic context of this period of transition is temporary and superficial, some such evolutionary impetus, whether accelerated by the contemporary rush to globalisation or not, was bound to affect Irish society. And even if the result is merely a shift from a time-worn ideological ethos of *sinn féin* (ourselves) to one of *mé féin* (myself), the Irish novel is undoubtedly attempting to find how best to address the novelty of the contemporary. In doing so, it is also producing an informal lexicon of cultural gestures and social attitudes to describe what may be (taking into account recent political developments in Northern Ireland) the end of the inaugural phase of modern Ireland.

The characters who inhabit worlds of their own tend to have a high energy level. There is a certain brashness and freshness about them which goes beyond such skin-deep but obviously high-profile features as the fluency in

The energy is expressive, typically through sex, the power and status of which in contemporary Irish fiction is too complex to go into here.\(^{41}\) Imagination and performative expression are also seen as very important foundations for a world of one’s own, not only in the case of aspiring rock performers like Eddie and Jimmy, but in, for instance, the title story of Neil Jordan’s *Night in Tunisia* (1976) or such stories by Desmond Hogan as “Memories of Swinging London” and “Players.”\(^{42}\) There is also, as noted, Katherine Proctor and her painting, an activity through which she attains a privileged if perhaps precarious autonomy: “She tried to empty her mind, to let nothing in apart from seeing what was in front of her. No ideas, no memories, no thoughts. Just the things around her” (223). In John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* (1990), the protagonist Freddie Montgomery eventually concludes, apropos of his murder victim: “This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible”\(^{43}\)—a realisation which seems additionally noteworthy and chilling in view of the epidemic of child abuse cases that have come to light in Ireland since this novel was published.

While most of the energy at play in contemporary Irish fiction focuses on individual development, it also fuels broader conceptions of self-sufficiency, as in Roddy Doyle’s Rabbitte family. Citizens of Barrytown rather than of Ireland, or even Dublin, on the northern fringe of which their housing development is situated, their only context is the present. Rather than feel cut off from the urban hinterland, where the adults in the family had their origins, or rather than feel adrift and discouraged in an environment which has not been able to generate much in the way of a community sensibility, they go about the complicated business of their demanding but very ordinary lives—business which includes unmarried Sharon’s unexpected pregnancy in *The Snapper* and unemployment in *The Van* (1991)\(^{44}\)—in a manner whose un-

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41. See, for example, Philip Casey, *The Fabulists* (Dublin: Lilliput and London: Serif, 1994).
43. John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1990), 215. Something approaching the redress of the theft which precipitated the murder in question occurs in a bravura passage in Banville’s *Ghosts* (1993), where Freddie contemplates a painting that has all the hallmarks of Watteau’s “Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère.”
daunted and resilient character proclaims that whatever else they may be (even stagey to some extent), the Rabbittes are not victims. Similarly, in The Butcher Boy—set in the early 1960's, perhaps to invoke the chronological consensus as to when the old national order began to disintegrate—Francie Brady finds it impossible not to be aware of the treatment he receives from Church and society at large, and as a result rejects in the most explicit manner possible the victim's role and fate.  

Rather than being an exemplary culminating point, the worlds of their own which have emerged across the broad tonal, stylistic and structural range of contemporary Irish fiction are by now in the process of being taken for granted. Soon they will be starting points, and the contexts in which they were conceived will themselves have dissolved into history. As yet, however, there is no knowing where these worlds may lead, what kind of visions they may give rise to, what new social forms they will reflect, what fresh cultural tropes they will incorporate, what responsibilities and dreams they will engender. When Paddy Clarke's estranged father comes to visit the family home at the end of Roddy Doyle's Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha (1993), his son opens the front door to him and in response to being asked how he is, replies, "'Very well, thank you.'"  

In addition to tacitly endorsing the father's displacement, the response also puts a rather simple, direct, unexceptional face on a difficult situation. As well as stating, in the cool detachment of its undemonstrative politeness, that the old family ways are no longer applicable, it also suggests that a more complicated arrangement has come into being, one implicitly fraught with the awareness that distance and intimacy now constitute a single reality and an unfamiliar context. Something along the same lines may be said about the changing face of contemporary Irish fiction.

45. The playwright Frank McGuinness sounds a note which, if controversial, is heard with increasing frequency: "I'm just cautious about the whole image of victim, because I don't believe we were." "Interview with Frank McGuinness," Studies 87, cccxlvi (Autumn 1998): 273.