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Introduction:  
Tradition and Transition 
in Contemporary Irish Fiction  
by GEORGE O'BRIEN

Puritan Ireland’s dead and gone,  
A myth of O’Connor and O’Faoláin.¹

The passing commemorated by these lines is notable for a number of reasons—demographic, generational, cultural, not to mention artistic (the poet allays the anxiety of influence by rewriting the refrain of Yeats’s “September 1913”). But what is also noteworthy is the prominence the lines give to writers of fiction. So much for Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators”...  

Such prominence is exceptional, the achievements of Joyce, Beckett, and Flann O’Brien notwithstanding. Frank O’Connor and Seán O Faoláin would have been quite surprised to hear that their stories of Irish life and manners attained mythic standing. Actually, it is in these writers' journalism, rather than in their fiction, that the theory and practice of “puritan Ireland” are revealed. But even if this is what Montague has in mind, his lines contain resonances with significant implications for any assessment of recent Irish fiction. The social change to which they refer had inevitable consequences for various literary forms, as the revisionist character of the couplet suggests, and also for the cultural assimilation and critical perception of those forms.²

Despite more highly publicized attainments by contemporary Irish poets and dramatists, the form most affected by, and most responsive to, the changing social and cultural landscape has been contemporary Irish fiction. There, the passing aphoristically disposed of by Montague is shown to be the challenging, complex, unresolved, and problematic phenomenon it necessarily is.³ There, struggles for new individual worlds and new social possibilities are inscribed in the idioms of experience and personality, in the unwritten laws of family and the unspoken needs of selfhood. There, the psychological deposits, historical accretions, and cultural blemishes of post-Independence Ireland are finally

². The lines’ context—the “Fleadh Ceoil in Mullingar,” a 1963 festival of traditional music which was one of the earliest collisions between contemporary Ireland and a more conventionally populist expression of cultural heritage—is symptomatic of the changes in question.
³. Montague himself contributed to the changing face of Irish fiction in his short-story collection, Death of a Chieftain (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1964; Dublin: Poolbeg, 1978). The transition of which the title speaks is to be found not only in the title story’s problems of identity but also in, for instance, the treatment of the Catholic church in “That Dark Accomplice” and of Northern Ireland in “The Cry.”
purged, however imperfectly. In a word, the contemporary Irish novel is carrying out one of the form’s most significant historical tasks by holding, at a critical angle, a mirror to the nature of society. The social developments and class formations which stimulated the novel’s historic mission are not present in contemporary Ireland in their classic form. Therefore, the thematic range and aesthetic characteristics of the novel in its golden age of European realism are not to be found in contemporary Irish fiction. Nevertheless, the novel’s cultural significance as case history and diagnostic probe has to an unprecedented extent been exemplified by Irish fiction since 1960. For perhaps the first time in Irish literary history, there is now an Irish tradition of the novel.

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As Vincent Hurley’s survey suggests, the changes which have come about in Ireland over the past thirty years have left no area of the country’s life untouched. Economic growth, educational opportunity, rapid urbanisation, the industrialisation of tourism and agriculture (with accompanying perceptual shifts in the cultural value of that presumed bedrock of Irish identity, the land): these are only a few of the more obvious areas in which the social character of Irish life has changed utterly. Political events have shown that the rate of change has frequently exceeded the capacity of officialdom to deal with it, producing the sense of drift mentioned by Hurley by way of conclusion. Paralleling that sense, the dismantling of traditional hegemonies proceeds apace, however painfully, on the cultural front.

Hurley rightly points out that these hegemonies were far from being impermeable constructs, though their conservative provincial habitat and the conservative politics in whose image they were created often made them seem that way. The article discusses the fate of two particularly noteworthy hegemonies. One of these may be labelled “the plain people of Ireland,” to the anatomy of whose morally dark-completed lack of plainness John McGahern has devoted his writing career. And though Amongst Women may be read in a number of ways, Hurley’s contextualisation of the novel reveals the extent to which it depicts a hegemony in the process of splintering.

What the phrase “the plain people of Ireland” identifies is an essentially Catholic, Nationalist, collective consciousness, and perhaps unconsciousness, affiliation to which derives from putatively common economic and historical experiences and social ambitions. As long as Ireland did not significantly change, neither did this construct. McGahern adapts the stone and living stream imagery of Yeats’s “Easter 1916” in order to demonstrate the unnatural, yet entirely human, character of such immobility. And instead of a supposedly hegemonic “people,” McGahern presents a society with an elaborately nuanced system of class codes. The very title of Amongst Women is another clue to the diversity of life which the conventions of provincial Irish society, grounded in
specific political requirements and correspondingly limited cultural range, had such difficulty acknowledging.

The second hegemony identified in "Recent Fictional Perspectives on Provincial Ireland" is "the Protestants." This label also has had misleadingly monolithic connotations, deriving from its virtually exclusive provincial use. The withering away of this community, a scenario which has engaged William Trevor throughout his career, is not merely a noteworthy historical and sociological phenomenon. It also has cultural repercussions. The label may be not so much inapplicable (people of various Protestant persuasions continue to live in Ireland) as irrelevant to the cultural vocabulary of a society which is becoming increasingly secular. The two-way traffic of assimilation may be seen not only as a comment on one possible social fate for Protestants, but as a keenly imagined moral riposte to sectarianism, made at a time when the politics of sectarianism (Green and Orange) have shown what a recipe for sterility they are.

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EAMON GRENNAN'S DISCUSSION of McGahern's "post-Catholic" acknowledgment of the numinous shows how critical realism may liberate language and sensibility from its traditional institutional imperatives. McGahern himself has provided a context for such a perspective on his work:

I have nothing but gratitude for the spiritual remnants of that [Catholic] upbringing, the sense of our origin beyond the bounds of sense, an awareness of mystery and wonderment, grace and sacrament, and the absolute equality of all women and men underneath the sun of heaven. That is all that now remains. Belief as such has long gone. 5

"The Country Funeral"—the story which is the article's main focus—is a title in whose simplicity a Joycean richness resounds. Its intimations of personal mortality yield to the birth of a mode of personal perception. Like "The Dead," the story speaks on behalf of the living: the brothers' westward journey enables the mind's eye to focus in a manner which graces and consolidates human potential.

At uncommon intervals of attention
we remember ourselves
at one with this world: we enter
the network. . .
inside the wire fence containing the graveyard
spray after spray of blossom
to stagger the eye 6

Yet, if consolidation is expressed by identification with, and perpetuation of, one's native ground—as Philly's decision to return to the family's rural property suggests—it is not to be thought of sentimentally, any more than liberation is to be considered a synonym for revolution. The ethos characterised by Eamon

Grennan is indeed spiritual, but it is actively aware of the worldliness of its sense of conservation, renewal, and keeping faith with what is given, unpopular and unprofitable as that may be. In other stories, particularly those in the collection *High Ground* (1985), this ethos is used to counteract the opportunism, careerism and mindless materialism which the author sees blighting the life of present-day rural Ireland, a world in which “a politician lives outside the village, and the crowd that once flocked to the presbytery now go to him instead.”

* * *

RENEWAL, KEEPING FAITH and the individual embodiment of the dignity which an adequate sense of social values may cherish and nurture may be difficult to arrive at for McGahern’s characters. But it is that very difficulty which gives his works their narrative tension and their cultural significance. In contrast, the terminal cases which people William Trevor’s fiction embody conditions from which no good comes. McGahern, the moralist, considers the individual at sea in the flux of social happenstance. Trevor, the moralist, considers the individual at bay in a desert of impersonal historical circumstance.

As Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt suggests, one of the repercussions of Trevor’s thematic interests is formal. Her sense of Trevor’s use of “parable” draws attention to not only the travail of the spirit in *Reading Turgenev* and “Lost Ground” but to the secular emptiness, masquerading as religious affiliation, in which both works have their origins. It is the realities which underly the the stories’ structural interplay of ordinariness and awfulness that give these works their haunting relevance. Here, Trevor seems to suggest that certainty is at the heart of a losing cause. Thus are hearts turned to stone. Blind faith leads down blind alleys (hence McGahern’s “vision and revision”). A discourse of redemption is subverted to produce living hells.

Trevor’s provincial settings, his unexceptional shopkeepers, his mild, pastoral, landscapes, and the detached, even, tenor of his narrative voice seem to place his work at a considerable remove from the large historical issues suggested by a subject like the dying out of Protestant Ireland. It is through the very modesty of the characters circumstances, and in the narrowness of their moral and imaginative range, that the banality of evil may be most effectively revealed. Trevor has written that “nationality seems irrelevant in the loose, uncharted world of art, then suddenly raises its voice; fiction insists on universality, then equally insists that a degree of parochialism can often best achieve this.”

The local may act as a parable of the universal, as fiction may for history, particularly the history that is so seldom otherwise available, the history of loss. In the land of loss, perhaps the internal exile—“mad” wife or victimised youngster—is the exemplary citizen.

What Mary Fitzgerald Hoyt draws attention to at the formal level may also be observed of Trevor’s work at the generic level. Its parables of personal frailty,

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post-lapsarian social vulnerability and moral corrosion of a community in search of a wider society also coincides with the decline of the Big House novel, a mainstay of Anglo-Irish (nominally "Protestant") fiction since the days of Maria Edgeworth, who inaugurated the genre.\(^9\) It is as if Trevor himself, without relinquishing his origins "on the edge of things"\(^10\) (and perhaps because of it) has had to negotiate the tension between assimilation and the alternative. The artistic fall-out of such negotiation is the meditative care which informs his language, a disposition which is the equal and opposite of the hysteria to which his most sympathetic characters so frequently succumb.

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The dubious viability of being Irish—encoded by the history of Irish society's definitions and constraints of its inhabitants—is expressed as variations on a theme of exile. Trevor's characters are frequently deracinated, declassed, impoverished. Loss befalls them, which prevents them from being actual exiles, whose losses are self-inflicted. Brian Moore's characters, as Denis Sampson writes, are well aware of their own part in shaping their reality. Questions of identity, which tend to be problematically deferred in Trevor, insist on an answer, however provisional, from Moore's protagonists. And the international venues in which these questions arise, replete with the material props which Trevor's characters lack (and McGahern's frequently disdain), highlights the shifting ground on which a self-generated identity stands. The un-puritan metropolises into which the Fergus Faddens and the Mary Dunnes escape are looking-glass worlds, reflecting the uncertainties of self-fashioning rather than ratifying the integrity of an authorised, home-bred, communal version of self. Moore dramatises an agon between insistent surface and uncertain core.

If exile is a subtextual ghost in Trevor's work, thoughts of home haunt Moore's. Belfast is not always the site of home, but even when it's not—as in the spare, enigmatic, parable-like novels dating from *Black Robe* (1985)—it is a place of piety, duty, authority and structure, a secular complement to local Catholic rigors. Supplanting this landscape of communal obligation with one of personal freedom gives rise to the flights of desire and fantasies of independence which animate Moore's characters. Isolated in a hollow geometry of time and space and self, they fret for the land of the father. Yet, despite the anxiety which autonomy produces, Moore's characters persist. In this they make a perhaps unwitting contribution to the dismantling of Fortress Ulster—a mindset which each community has encouraged the other to develop. For, while it would be an exaggeration to claim that Moore's work is loud with the sound of mind-forged manacles being snapped, the disarming of the father, the representation of the past as a source of terror and interrogation, the quest for faith beyond sect, the privileging of the body as a medium of self-expression and delight, do seem to

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9. Trevor has not been a particular exponent of the Big House novel, whose passing provides the backdrop for two of the most accomplished post-war Irish novels, Aidan Higgins' *Langrishe, Go Down* and J.G. Farrell's *Troubles*.
be additionally noteworthy for being part of a Northern Irish novelist’s repertoire. Or even a Southern novelist’s.

Those aspects of Moore’s work are also noteworthy because versions of them are to be found in the work of other Northern Irish novelists. Much more so than their Southern counterparts, authors such as Maurice Leitch, David Martin, John Morrow, Ian Cochrane have in various ways exposed Northern mentalities. This highly selective list is compiled with a view to artistic trends as well as to thematic originality—as Glenn Patterson has noted: “There is more than one way to live in Northern Ireland and more than one story to be told” (11).

As often as not, these authors do not directly address the North’s civil unrest. Rather, their concerns are what might be called psycho-cultural. One persistent set of preoccupations is with the status of father figures, the authority of maleness, the sturdiness of a seemingly Protestant ethic of individualism. Male sexual anxiety, central to many a Moore protagonist, is present in these authors to a disturbing degree.

Leitch’s early works, in particular—The Liberty Lad (1965) and Poor Lazarus (1969)—is an angry unveiling of whitened sepulchres. Their strong undertow of sexual pathology is brought to the fore in his most powerful novel, Stamping Ground (1975): later works, including Burning Bridges (1989) and Gilchrist (1994), seem somewhat less penetrating. One of the more striking literary aspects of Leitch’s work is its generic hybridity, in particular the manner in which it unnervingly mixes Naturalistic dissection with deleterious and often blackly comic farce. The same mixture, in different proportions, may be found in the fiction of John Morrow and Ian Cochrane.

Morrow is particularly unsparing in his mockery of some of the historical shibboleths and cultural pieties of the true believers on both sides of the sectarian divide. With Michael Foley, better known for his poetry than for his prose, Morrow was an early exponent of the comic-book approach to narrative style and structure adopted with such success by the Dublin novelist Roddy Doyle. Morrow’s novels—The Confessions of Prionnsias O’Toole (1977) and The Essex Factor (1982)—do not sustain the anarchic momentum of his short stories, particularly those in his first collection, Northern Myths (1979).

The back streets and drinking clubs of Belfast ghettos constitute Morrow country. Cochrane, in contrast, draws on the rural slums of Belfast’s mid-Antrim Protestant hinterland. This is a world of decaying mills, new housing estates, millenarian religion, purile sexuality, hopeless cases and non-stop television. The titles of Cochrane’s novels may be taken at their word: A Streak of Madness (1973), Gone in the Head (1974), Jesus on a Stick (1975). Their depiction of a tragi-comic dystopia, of a supposedly chosen—though seemingly nescient—

11. The editor regrets that, due to circumstances outside his control, it has not been possible to include a more comprehensive overview of the rich and diverse field of Northern Irish fiction. Works by what might be called the second wave of Northern Irish novelists—Glenn Patterson, Eoin McNamee, Robert McLiam Wilson, Ronan Bennett, and Deirdre Madden—are listed in “Works Cited”. See also Ann Owens Weekes’ article. The Patterson remark concludes a combative critique of some of his contemporaries, “Butchers’ Tools,” Fornight 331 (September 1994): 43-4.
people adrift in a desert, complete with a cockeyed sense of tradition and unbearable vulnerability, attains ultimate definition in *F for Ferg* (1980). Complementing these works are two distressing novels about proletarian but unemployable homeless Irish youth in London: *Ladybirá in a Loony Bin* (1978), and *The Slipstream* (1980). Like their counterparts set in Northern Ireland, cultural anarchy is the norm, and Cochrane captures the urban squats and their emotionally famished occupants with economy, understatement, and uncanny zest.

Leitch, Morrow and Cochrane are not exponents of critical realism as such. Rather their work initiates an anti-pastoral line of development in Northern Irish fiction. For all three writers, landscape and its various codes of territoriality—the settled place, the good earth, the promised land; not to mention the natural man to whom providence has vouchsafed life in such a place—are of prime imaginative importance, not least because of their potential for ironic subversion. David Martin’s saga of the McCart family, recounted in *The Task* (1975), *The Ceremony of Innocence* (1977) and *Dream* (1986), is in some respects a more orthodox artistic approach to the representation of Northern society. Even the taut, thriller-like format of *The Task* is ultimately more interested in the ideological preconditions and cultural formations of the psychic and communal forces articulated by Belfast’s civil strife than in the cheap-thrills potential of its plot. Of particular interest here is Martin’s representation of a spectrum of British soldiers’ attitudes.

The opening sentence of *The Ceremony of Innocence*—“It was Easter when the bombers came”—contains so many Irish historical resonances that it comes as an instructive surprise to find that Martin is talking about the Luftwaffe bombing of Belfast. This novel sees post-1969 Northern Irish history through the lens of an earlier generation’s experience. Such a perspective provides a trans-sectarian panorama of Belfast between one war and another. In *Dream* Martin extends the historical perspective back to the turn of the century and events leading up to the defining moments of modern Loyalism, the Ulster Covenant and World War I. History, public event, ideological commitment, communal affiliation are all detailed with a view to providing a diagnosing and perhaps curing current afflictions. In a chronological sense, *The Road to Ballyshannon* (1981) is very much part of this ambitious sequence. Set in 1922, during not only the Irish Civil War but the inaugural years of the Northern Irish state, its prison-escape plot is centered on characters from both sectarian camps who find themselves inevitably implicated in each others’ fate. As in his other novels, Martin’s portrayal of trans-sectarian interaction and interdependence functions as an allegory of possibility for the present time and lends a repressed but persistent gleam of idealism to his historical imagination.

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12. The relevance of pastoral may be seen in the coordinating power ascribed to “setting” by John Wilson Foster in his *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974).
MALENESS AS CRISIS, inverted heroics, landscapes in which neither blood or soil avails: underlying such themes is a widespread sense of impotence, impoverishment, and the unavailability of tradition to nurture growth and absorb the world’s vicissitudes. And perhaps the generalised sense in Northern fiction of tradition’s desuetude has its artistic repercussions in the inclination to use generic forms—the thriller, the comic book, American country music in the later novels of Maurice Leitch—to frame a novel’s vision.

The interconnections between social and cultural traditions and individual nurture are very much a central preoccupation in the Bildungsromane analysed by James M. Cahalan. Indeed, in this article, some of the central elements of an Irish novel tradition may be observed coalescing. The presence of Joyce and Kate O’Brien as the avatars of a tradition is clearly valuable, not only in view of their artistic practices but because of the note of cultural dissidence which their careers sound. And dissidence is perhaps the most resonant note struck by not only the works by McGahern, Moore and Edna O’Brien with which the article deals but by their careers as a whole.

Nevertheless, as Cahalan carefully points out, the manner in which dissidence is articulated, and the consequences of its being a keynote of the various protagonists’ experiences, differs from work to work. Moore’s perhaps sentimental realignment of Gavin’s relationship with his father, and as a result of Mr Burke’s view of the world, is quite at odds with the subversive, poker-faced, irony which concludes The Dark. And different again are Edna O’Brien’s accounts, in The Country Girls Trilogy, of the desperation and destructiveness which comes from being unable to find a self-validating means of attaching oneself to the world.

But the concerns which unite these works are more significant than the plot developments which differentiate them. As is appropriate for the Bildungsroman, education is a fundamental cultural and imaginative structure for all three authors. Gavin Burke’s experience of crossing sectarian lines in The Emperor of Ice Cream may be temporary, but it clears the way for him to carry out necessary tasks in the process of self-realization, the nature of which he had not so firmly grasped previously. The author’s identification of the individual as the site of growth and potential coincides with the most elementary assumptions of education.

McGahern and O’Brien also share this sense of the individual, but take his and her experiences of education rather more literally on the one hand and, on the other, somewhat more skeptically. If the Bildungsroman may be seen as an offspring of the Romance, a generic development which secularises and domesticates many of the imaginative presuppositions of the Romance, it is possible to regard The Dark and The Country Girls Trilogy as being anti-Romance in tendency. (The “anti” dimension provides an interesting parallel between these works and the anti-pastoralism of Northern fiction.)

The rituals and demands of formal learning seem to be offered by the State as a means of counteracting the benighted practices of the home. By privileging mind over body, academic command over cultural material rather than subser-
vience to unstructured temperament, nurture over nature, education has obvious attractions for O'Brien's and McGahern's protagonists. Yet the effect of education, whether experienced at university as in *The Dark* or at the hands of a surrogate father as in *Girl with Green Eyes*, is to abort the very personal growth whose potential it seemed to ratify. By rejecting not only home's repressive paternalism but its replication at the social level these works reveal their critical realism.

The force of the critique is that it highlights difference. Even if the difference is not an enabling factor in the protagonist's lives, it attains an exemplary force by virtue of its emphases. The most noteworthy of those emphases underline need rather than obligation, process and not product, expressiveness instead of silence, tension between inner questioning and outward conformity, sexuality and isolation instead of self-denial and tribal affiliation. The protagonists' youthfulness, and the innocence of historical and communal struggle which accompanies it, is also of note. The person, rather than "the people," is the zone of conflict. It is in identifying and enacting the conflict of self and world, rather than by the ways in which they resolve it (or, rather, fail to resolve it), that these novels replace the perhaps too understandable interactions between cultural practices and personal behavior in the fiction of O'Connor and O'Faoláin. By resisting tradition, tradition is born.

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**IN ONE SENSE, to speak of a new tradition in Irish fiction is anachronistic, given the tradition of the new—"the Irish counter-tradition"**—which the fiction of Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien is conventionally credited with embodying. The legacy of those novelists—particularly its formal innovations and aesthetic radicalism—has proven difficult either to renew or sustain on its own terms. Brian McIlroy's article on John Banville and Eamonn Wall's on Aidan Higgins suggest something of the nature of that difficulty.

Banville, widely regarded as the most talented and daring Irish novelist of his generation, reveals in his choice of protagonist his awareness of the troublesome nature of tradition and orthodoxy. His Copernicus and Kepler are not merely the perpetrators of revolutionary scientific theories, though the revolutionary and theoretical nature of their work is obviously relevant to their fictional significance, not to mention their historical eminence. Rather more importantly—rather more humanly—they are solitaries, visionaries, prisoners of their own quirky and unamenable natures. Temperamentally, they have more in common with saints, criminals and artists. Banville takes up such resemblances both in *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Ghosts* (1993), developing ideas first broached in the novella, "The Possessed" in *Long Lankin* (1970) and his first novel, *Night-spawn* (1971).

Confined at considerable emotional cost to their own minds, these protago-
ists—particularly the scientists—are fully aware of the weighty presence of tradition, the perils of originality, the visionary’s inevitably Icarian flight. Equally, however, they are painfully aware of being unable to do no other. The scientists carry out their research beset by the strife of sect and the power of superstition. The imaginative arrogance which empowers them to remake the world, to make the nature of things more intensely and more centrally the realm of our consciousness and our experience, acts as a kind of reparation for the destructiveness by which we usually articulate our presence.

Banville has disavowed any specific political intent in his writing. Writing of his Big House novel, *Birchwood* (1973), for example, he professes himself astonished—perhaps even a little appalled—to discover how much of the resurgent Northern Ireland ‘troubles’ had seeped into the book without my fully knowing. In the text itself I had not so much as mentioned the North or its ills, but what I had done was to set up a separate reality, a model of the world, the disorders and disasters of which somehow mirrored the world of everyday events. Of course, in this regard it is well to keep in mind that in a mirror, reality is reversed.15

McIlroy’s conception of the paradigm as both an analytical probe for, and an area of discourse within, Banville’s fiction draws attention to some of the other realities which mirroring may model, particularly in view of the fact that its depiction of the scientific mind in action may be regarded as a metaphor for the work of culture. Among those realities might be noted the scientists’ subversive relationship to tradition; the versions of “silence, exile and cunning” in which they work; the vulnerability and resistance of their work to the transience and disruptions of history; their privileging of form, radiance, vision; their dedication to renewal and preservation; their contestation of what is found to be problematic in the norm. These and related concerns with originality, integrity, courage and the power of thought indicate the terms of Banville’s affiliation to the “counter-tradition.” And, as his twin senses of risk and fictiveness make clear, like his illustrious predecessors, he is not merely a novelist of ideas, but a novelist of ideas in crisis.

Some of the scientific preoccupations of, in particular, Copernicus and Kepler, deal with the rearrangement of the coordinates of time and space. Banville reworks this interest in his later novels by focusing on paintings. In the works of art at the center of both *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, it is as if time and space collaborate and suspend their mortal tyranny. Something of the same claims for painting is made in the novels of Aidan Higgins—not by referring to actual pictures, however, but by the values of space and light which this author’s prose conveys. Eamonn Wall notes ways in which Higgins’s *Balcony of Europe* is a painter’s *Ulysses*. Despite the novel’s elaborate chronology, it is its moments of love and lightheartedness, placed in the interstices of complex days and Cold War years, which shine through and by their frank avowal of transience attain completeness (in the experiences of the characters) and permanence (in the mind of the reader). Those condensed, intoxicating, transgressive moments—mini-

tures of desire; medallions struck from passion—may allay for a time thoughts of mortality and presentiments of a Europe which seems to be at a loss, what with terminal options the international order of the day.

But they are not allowed to overshadow the mourning that is their inevitable personal and historical complement. This is the mourning that is Modernism. And Higgins is perhaps the contemporary Irish writer who, tiring at a young age of “the later concoctions of O’Connor,”\(^\text{16}\) has most conspicuously identified his artistic commitment with that of his outspoken and innovative forefathers. He and Banville demonstrate in their work not only an acute awareness of the transitional, the terminal, the solace of space and the tyranny of time. They also suggest ways in which these preoccupations are not only related to those of the great Irish Modernists, but the difficulty—not to mention the necessity—of securing one’s own contemporary purchase on them.

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The complicated intertwining elements of transition and tradition are also implicit in Anne Morrow Weekes’ overview of the themes and contexts of contemporary Irish women’s writing. A simple view of recent activity in this field might be summarized as the evolution of lady novelists into women writers, except that “lady novelist” is a class and gender designation which none of the authors mentioned in the article would accept—quite understandably. As the article indicates, however, the issue of Irish women’s writing is rather more complex. From the point of view of tradition and transition, this area of contemporary fiction can be seen to participate in and radicalise both the critical realist and Modernist strains sketched above.

On the one hand, women’s fiction has focused with particular sharpness on many of the discriminatory practices of Irish society and on matters which has interesting and provocative implications for legal and constitutional civil rights in the Irish Republic. This development has given women’s writing a potent, very audible ideological base, as the article’s discussion of the LIP pamphlets reveals.\(^\text{17}\) Emphasis on the institutional dimension of the status of Irish women has also had the effect of unmasking structures of power within the Irish home and within the Irish male psyche. A certain amount of the fiction addressing domestic and interpersonal issues has represented the abusive tendencies within those power structures in arrestingly experimental form. The works of Dorothy Nelson, Lucille Redmond, and Anne Enright\(^\text{18}\) are noteworthy cases in point.

On the other hand, there has also been a widespread willingness to represent various aspects of women’s experience in as down-to-earth a manner as possible. One of those aspects is women’s sexuality, though the way in which it has been

17. For further discussion of these pamphlets, see Kate Martin Grey, “The Attic LIPS: Feminist Pamphleteering for the New Ireland,” Eire-Ireland 29, i (Spring 1994): 105-123. Ailbhe Smith, “The Floozie in the Jacuzzi,” The Irish Review 6 (Spring 1989): 7-24 is also relevant.
18. For reasons of space, bibliographical references are given “Works Cited” below.
dealt with has anything but the prurient and sensationalist overtones often associated with “down to earth.” Frank avowal of sexuality is accompanied in these works by demystification of its power, exploration of the social provenance of gender, and the assertion of one’s own sexual nature (whatever that “nature” happens to be). While contemporary Irish fiction as a whole does not exactly document a sexual revolution in Irish fiction, in its accounts of the various social, moral, individuating strands which sexuality entails is an area where contemporary Irish women’s writing has taken an important lead.

In addition, the body-centered character of this discourse gives it an unavoidable political dimension, particularly in a society such as Ireland, where public discussion of the public issues arising out of sexuality is hardly the norm. Another way of thinking about the significance of this work is to view it in the context of the difficult status sexuality has in the work of male writers—though there is not a great deal of evidence that Irish writers who are not women really think of themselves as male writers. The very fact that it has become culturally relevant to distinguish between men’s and women’s fiction is in itself an additional expression of the ways in which Irish literary tradition has proliferated, and in doing so has inevitably begun to articulate publicy generic and thematic nuances expressive of its complexity.

Weekes points out in detail how important it is not to stereotype Irish women’s fiction, and how its range covers not only all areas of contemporary Irish experience but all areas of fictional endeavor—from folk tale to slice of urban life, from family history to events in the day’s headlines. At the very least, Irish women writers have made a distinctive and courageous contribution to the death and protracted burial of “puritan Ireland.”

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I have refused to place these writers in any tradition of Irish writing—beyond the obvious one of generally using the English language far better than anyone else. A tradition—and therefore definition—by its nature can restrict a writer within a narrow focus.19

Such a statement is understandable, and even appropriate, from such an important contributor to the field as Bolger, particularly when “everybody’s doing it.”20

This “everybody” includes not only the emergent generation but what might be termed the generation of 1976. In that year the Irish Writers’ Cooperative was established, foremost among whose members were Desmond Hogan and Niall Jordan. (The latter’s career as a film-maker by no means eclipses his fictional output.) Works to be published by the Cooperative included not only the critical

20. See Fintan O’Toole, “Everybody’s Doing It,” The Irish Times, May 12, 1990, Weekend p. 1, a survey of recent fiction writing. O’Toole is Ireland’s foremost cultural commentator. His essays are collected in A Mass for Jesse James (Dublin: Raven Arts: 1990) and Black Hole, Green Card (Dublin: New Island, 1994). The rise of such commentators—John Waters and Desmond Fennell are others—and the growth in visibility and audibility of an intellectual class represents an interesting division of the labour which creative artists undertook—O’Faoláin’s editorship of The Bell is the definitive instance.
romanticism of Jordan and the prolific Hogan, but self-consciously stylish anatomies of not so much a Dublin nouveau riche as of a generation of young Dubliners who flaunted the amorality which their wealth apparently enjoined. The key text is Ronan Sheehan’s Tennis Players.

The basis for classifying these rather different authors as “critical romantics” is their reliance on language and on an inwardness conceived of in verbal, rather than ideational, ideological, or institutional terms. (There is little talk of education in these works: school is where a youngster kills himself in Hogan’s The Ikon Maker.) The Cooperative’s brief moment is a revealing transitional episode in the evolution of Irish fiction. But this Dublin-based gambit, a response in certain respects to urbanisation and the severing of roots (the status of mothers in Hogan’s fiction is symptomatic here), is also accompanied by the emergence of decidedly non-Dublin writers. Of these, Dermot Healy is particularly noteworthy. The international dimension of Niall Quinn’s tendentiously bleak works, and the tragic inwardness of Liam Lynch’s two novels also have the worthwhile effect of cautioning against too streamlined a sense of cultural and aesthetic development. Also of importance at this juncture in the diversification of Irish fiction is the rehabilitation of Francis Stuart, a phenomenon which requires more extensive analysis than can be provided here.21 Other important influences were the introduction of a “New Irish Writing” page in The Irish Press, under the inspired editorship of David Marcus, and the development of an Irish publishing industry which was not only concerned with literary works as such but with the development of readerships in other fictional areas such as children’s literature and the popular novel.

Ronan Sheehan’s novel may be said to mark obliquely the return of Dublin as a fictional subject. Long the neglected province of Irish fiction—despite James Plunkett’s history of Dubliner mentalities—the capital has made a resounding comeback, as the international success of Roddy Doyle confirms. Popular as Doyle’s four novels have been, the novels of Dermot Bolger say more about similar dislocated communities on the city’s North side. Bolger’s third novel, The Journey Home, is his most achieved effort to date. Like its two predecessors, this is a difficult work for which to find a convenient generic pigeon-hole. It seems to combine elements in Irish fiction which had hitherto been typically at odds, naturalism and romanticism. (One needs only recall the tension between these two imaginative realities in Dubliners.) Bolger, however, strives to combine the ideological sensibility of a Zola with the temperamental inclinations of a Stuart. Dublin may be “a city of the dead” to the hapless mother in A Mother’s Daughter.22 But it is also the site of “the crystal rivulet,” the etymological origins in Irish of Bolger’s native Finglas, one of the more glibly stereotyped of Northside suburbs.

21. Stuart’s name will be familiar to Yeats students. He is the man in question in the lines from “Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad”: “A girl that knew all Dante once/Live to bear children to a dunce.” Stuart’s first wife was Iseult Gonne. Stuart’s essay, “The Soft Centre of Irish Writing,” in William Vorn, ed., Paddy No More (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1978): 5-9 has been extremely influential.

Yet, *The Journey Home* marks not only the arrival of a distinctive sensibility. It is also a powerful dramatisation of the psycho-sexual, as well as the socio-economic, injuries of class. Bolger’s rawness and yearning, his keen sense of the repressive mores and intellectual idiocies of tradition as officially transmitted, his energetic contributions to not only the expressive but also the institutional development of literary activity—in addition to writing fiction, Bolger is also a noted poet, prize-winning playwright, and founder/editor of Raven Arts Press and, currently, New Island Books—are clearly of the first importance. Bolger’s novels dramatize the emotional and cultural costs of deprivation: as such they are a fascinating counterpoint to the fiction of the women writers discussed by Anne Owens Weekes.

They are also mirror images of narratives of liberation which characterize many more recent Irish novels: Colm Tóibín’s *The South* is a strong instance. These narratives take more forms and have more idiocies than can be easily enumerated here. A few common features may be noted: impatience, irreverence, earnestness, styles which are either transparent or throwaway, often (deliberately) inclined to artistic callowness, absorbed by the here-and-now, youthful. Obviously, as soon as such an inventory is compiled, exceptions come flooding in. It may be agreed, however, that in various tones, idioms, and orientations, these works constitute an a-national, anti-traditional anthem. If, as the playwright Thomas Kilroy has noted recently, ‘there is a great deal of confusion in the republic at present... There are a lot of icebergs melting out there, a lot of icons being demolished,’ it is not too surprising the fiction reflects and reproduces such a state of affairs.

To some extent, the general tendency of recent Irish fiction may be seen as an artistic counterpoint to, replication of, and escape from the revisionist dispensations currently operating in Irish culture. It takes the form of novels by the poet Thomas McCarthy dissecting Fianna Fáil, the principle political party in post-Independence Ireland, and of Colm Tóibín’s subtle obsequies for Fianna Fáil mentalities in *The Heather Blazing*. It takes the form of Joseph O’Connor’s sketches of Irish youth abroad, and of the emergence of emigration as a theme in and, more unusually, as a source of Irish fiction. It takes the form of excursions into hitherto unfamiliar border territory in the company of Shane Connaughton and Eugene McCabe, and distressing trips into the hitherto unexplored moral slumlands of the provinces, courtesy of Patrick McCabe. The town life of provincial Ireland is more in evidence than ever before (the playwright Billy Roche’s novel *Tumbling Down* comes to mind). Europe as a

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23. Kilroy’s remarks were made in a forum discussing the state of the Abbey Theatre. An edited version of the discussion appears under the title, “Don’t Worry, Be Abbey,” *Fornight* 336 (February 1995): 332-335.


25. Representative works may be found in Dermot Bolger, ed., *Ireland in Exile* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993).
zone of experience, Irish and otherwise, has also become fictional terrain in the stories of the poet Michael O’Loughlin and the novels of Hugo Hamilton. Formal adventuresomeness is perhaps rarer than might be expected, but the works of Sebastian Barry, Aidan Carl Matthews, and also Timothy O’Grady’s Motherland, have kept alive the spirit of openness, experiment and slightly dangerous fun.

Attempts to provide even some preliminary account of what this spate of activity amounts to have been few and far between, and there is a danger that, as tendencies multiply, artiﬁcultural developments will outstrip critical evaluation. The following essays are offered, therefore, in the conﬁdent hope that they will provide a guide map to some of the themes, departures, and accomplishments of the roots and branches of contemporary Irish ﬁction. If, as Stendhal remarked, the novel is “a mirror in the roadway, reflecting the sky above, the mud below” (a formulation endorsed by Frank O’Connor, among others26), this mirror is no longer Stephen Dedalus’s “symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.” On the contrary, it is a rather more sophisticated, and much less homely, optical apparatus: a prism, through whose complicated planes a new-old, insecure, but fertile culture makes its passage in multi-colored and revealing fragments.

Works Cited

Unless otherwise noted, reference is made to the ﬁrst edition. Asterisk indicates also available in an American edition.


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