Recent Fictional Perspectives on Provincial Ireland

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James Joyce never wrote “Provincials,” the book of short stories with which he planned to follow Dubliners.¹ Emphatically a Dubliner of cosmopolitan interests and self-mythologizing instincts, Joyce had limited knowledge of and less sympathy for provincial Ireland. It is likely that the book would never have been written: Joyce was merely attracted by the symmetry of creating a counterpoint to Dubliners. But it is also tempting to speculate that one of the reasons Joyce may have abandoned the project was his realisation that such a book already existed: George Moore’s The Untilled Field, which Joyce had read and disparaged.²

Since Joyce’s time, the world of provincial (rural, small-town) Ireland has been extensively treated in Irish fiction. It has been the backbone of the Irish short story in particular—the impact of The Untilled Field (with Dubliners one of the twin roots of modern Irish fiction) cannot be overestimated. But the work which has been almost paradigmatic in defining the fictional treatment of the provincial Irish world is Brinsley MacNamara’s novel, The Valley of the Squinting Windows (1918). In this novel, a personal tragedy culminating in murder and destroying the lives of two families is played out against the sharply etched background of an all-seeing, deeply censorious society. The book was a cause célébre, being publicly burnt in the author’s native Delvin, County Westmeath (thinly disguised as the novel’s Garradrimna) and having lasting repercussions for the author and his family.³ But Garradrimna was not just Delvin, it was Everyvillage; and, ironically, the reaction which the book provoked resoundingly confirmed its portrait of a closed, vindictive, parochial society.

This view has persisted, more or less unchallenged, for most of the century, and to some extent still persists. There was clearly a considerable foundation of truth in it. The strong farmer class which emerged as the dominant force in post-Famine Ireland was socially and politically conservative. It provided the political and ecclesiastical leaders who articulated and enforced the prevailing ethos. But the picture was never as simple or clear-cut as it may sometimes have

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¹. The project is referred to in a letter of July 12, 1905, from Joyce to his brother, Stanislaus. See Richard Ellmann, ed., James Joyce: Selected Letters (London: Faber, 1975), 63.
². “I have read Moore’s ‘Untilled Field’.... Damned stupid.” Letter to Stanislaus, 19 November, 1904. Ellman, op. cit. 44.
appeared. Provincial Ireland was not homogeneous. Even at its most hidebound (a point which may be located in the middle of the grey 1950's), there was a good deal of unacknowledged diversity. Since then, Irish society has become much more obviously fragmented, having passed through a period of profound economic and social change.

The change began in the 1960's and gathered pace after Ireland joined the European Union (the Common Market as it then was) in 1972. It has seen the end of traditional, labor-intensive, farming methods, reliance on the extended family as a labor-pool being replaced by mechanisation. Farming has become more a business and less a way of life. The advent of more widespread industrialisation—often heavily grant-aided by the government and by EU development funds—has made the small towns less dependent on servicing their agricultural hinterlands. And change has created as many problems as it has solved. Increasing population at a time of falling labor demand has led to a renewal of emigration since the 1980's. The momentum of the "flight from the land" has increased inexorably as young people, abandoning poor rural districts and the unattractive way of life they offer, have continued to swell the population of the cities and towns. In turn, urban areas are now often host to unemployed and disaffected young people, and problems of drug taking, vandalism and petty crime have disturbed their once somnolent air. Many of these issues and the conditions that give rise to them are now being addressed by Irish novelists.4

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JOHN MCGAHERN, BORN in Dublin in 1934 and raised in the West of Ireland, has long been a keen-eyed observer of the changing mores of his native place. His most recent novel, Amongst Women (1990), is set, like so much of his work, in the upper Shannon region of counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo—the "high ground" of one of his best-known stories. Moran, the dying patriarch who presides over Amongst Women, is an upright, unbending, pietistic man who dominates, even tyrannises, his family: "This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and marriages and children and houses of their own in Dublin and London" (AW, 1).

Moran is an emblematic figure, an old I.R.A. man whose actions helped bring into being a State which he despises. He is too unbending to prosper in the new dispensation. His contempt for McQuaid, his former lieutenant, now a Mercedes-driving cattle jobber, is palpable. But he is "too complicated to let anybody know what he thought of anything" (AW, 4). Avowedly Catholic, of strict observance—the nightly recitation of the rosary runs through the book like a knell, marking the passage of time as surely as the changing seasons; and McQuaid's

4. The theme has also been addressed by poets and playwrights. Indeed playwrights such as John B. Keane in Sive (1959), The Field (1965), Big Maggie (1969), and Eugene McCabe in The King of the Castle (1964) were among the first to articulate it, and it has continued to provide a major strand in the multi-layered works of Thomas Murphy and Brian Friel.
flippant anti-clerical remarks provoke a rift which is never repaired—his deepest respect is nevertheless reserved for the Protestant values of hard work and righteousness. His treatment of his own family is harsh and uncompromising. He drives his sons to open rebellion. Luke, the eldest and the closest to his father in character, leaves for London, never to return. The reaction of Michael, the younger son, is more spectacular, but it leads merely to a pattern of periodic squabbling with his father, a sign of weakness rather than strength.

It is the women—Moran’s second wife, Rose, and his three daughters—who represent the steady centre of the novel. Moran’s dominance over them seems virtually absolute, and in many ways he maims and distorts their lives. Yet by enduring they come to exercise a certain measure of power over him in his declining years. In a sense he becomes their child. They humor him and indulge his tantrums and keep him on a tight rein—“you’ll have to shape up, Daddy” is their constant refrain. Their determination not to let him slip from them is so strong that it is almost as if they seek to negate nature: “For the first time in his life Moran began to fear them” (AW, 178).

Many of Moran’s difficulties with his family are rooted in his own resistance to change, his refusal to accept that life moves on—though, paradoxically, this may also be the source of his power over the family. In this he resembles the father in “Gold Watch,” whose bitter refusal to acknowledge that one day he must yield to the next generation leads to the estrangement of his son. Both that story and Amongst Women show such resistance to be ultimately self-defeating, because it goes against nature. The cycle of the seasons pervades life at Great Meadow. A sense of that cycle’s abiding power is the novel’s central motif, and is conveyed with almost Tolstoyan fervor. It makes Moran’s eventual acceptance of the inevitability of death, his realization that all things must pass, a key moment:

The light was beginning to fail but he did not want to go into the house. In a methodical way he set out to walk his land, field by blind field. He had not grown up on these fields but they felt to him as if he had. He had bought them with the money he had been given on leaving the army. The small pension wasn’t enough to live on but with working the fields he had turned it into a living. He’d be his own man here...

It was like grasping water to think how quickly the years had passed here. They were nearly gone. It was in the nature of things, and yet it brought a sense of betrayal and anger, of never having understood anything much. Instead of using the fields, he sometimes felt as if the fields had used him... He tried to imagine someone running the place after he was gone and could not. He continued walking the fields like a man trying to see. (AW, 129-30)

“One day, you’d come perhaps to a more real authority than all this,” muses Maloney, the protagonist of McGahern’s The Dark (1965). Twenty-five years after that novel, John McGahern has indeed come to exert real authority over his

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view of contemporary Ireland, as is demonstrated not only in Amongst Women but in "The Country Funeral," the masterly final story of his Collected Stories (1992).

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WILLIAM TREVOR, BORN in Mitchelstown, County Cork, in 1928, has set some of his novels and a great many of his short stories in provincial Ireland. He is particularly adept at evoking the small towns of Munster which, as the son of a peripatetic bank official, he came to know in childhood. The position of the dwindling Protestant minority in an overwhelmingly Catholic state has been one of his recurring concerns, and he returns to it in Reading Turgenev (1991). Trevor locates his variations on the theme of decline in a precisely imagined environment:

The town was small, its population just over two and a half thousand. A turf-brickette factory had been opened seven years ago, where once there'd been a tannery. There was a ruined mill, a railway station that was no longer in use, green-stained warehouses on either side of the town's single bridge over its sluggish river. . . . Bridge Street, where the pink-washed Hogan's Hotel and the principal shops were, was narrow and brief, becoming South West Street beyond the bridge. The gaunt, grey steeple of the Protestant church rose from a boundary of yew trees that isolated it from its surroundings. A pocket of lanes around the gasworks and Brown's yard comprised the slums. A signpost—black letters on a yellow ground—partially obscured a statue of Daniel O'Connell and gave directions to Clonmel, and Cappoquin, Cahir and Carrick-on-Suir. People who lived in the town knew it backwards; those from the surrounding neighbourhoods sometimes regarded it with wonder. (RT, 6)

It is the wonder of the town which, to a large extent, draws Mary Louise Dallon, the central character, leading her to an unsuitable marriage.

The isolation of that Protestant church is an important concern of the novel. The Quarrys—the family into which Mary Louise marries—are very much the sort of mercantile Protestant family which enjoyed prosperity in the small towns of Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But by 1955, things were changing rapidly: "All over the country wealth had passed into the hands of a new Catholic middle class" (RT, 5). Trevor shows that the Protestant response to the new order is to remain aloof. He portrays a community virtually willing its own extinction. At the end of the novel, Mary Louise is often the only worshipper at Sunday service in that church with the gaunt, gray steeple. Frequently she delays the young clergyman, "the inheritor of five far-flung parishes," from making "the rounds of his sparse attendances, spreading the Gospel over many miles, among the few" (RT, 218).

Against this world of decay, Trevor seems to suggest that only art can offer any form of redemption. The release for her romantic yearning which Mary Louise finds in reading Turgenev to her invalid cousin continues to sustain her

during the long years of mourning and confinement. She finds more freedom in imagining herself a character from *On the Eve* than in her own grim reality. She greets her husband with, "I thought you might be Insarov." (RT, 2).

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**Patrick McCabe**, born in Clones, County Monaghan, in 1955, grew up in the changing world observed by Trevor and McGahern, as does Francie Brady the narrator of his graphic and disturbing novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992). An earlier novel, *Carn* (1989), chronicled the effects of some of these changes on a small border town living in the shadow of the bloody events in Northern Ireland during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, but its form was more diffuse and its impact less forceful.

*The Butcher Boy* is Francie’s own account of how he, a devotee of boys’ comics and John Wayne westerns, came to exact revenge for his own and his family’s outcast status in the town. His inchoate resentment gradually focuses on the snobbish Mrs. Nugent, whom he eventually murders in a gruesome manner. He is caught and incarcerated in a mental hospital, perpetuating his family’s history of institutionalisation. It was the collapse of that fragile family that largely drove him over the edge.

The town is unnamed, but its general character (there is a Diamond, a chicken hatchery, and a pig-slaughtering yard where Francie works) locates it in the Cavan/Monaghan borderlands. Francie seems to know the underbelly of the town better than any of its other inhabitants. He wanders the laneways behind the drab housing terraces, watching all the comings and goings. The adult world he encounters is frequently threatening, but its authority figures—the priest, the police sergeant, Leddy the pig-butcher—are no more than ordinary small-town bullies. With his child’s mind, Francie is unable to view them as anything other than monsters. And his arrested development makes him unable to come to terms with change. As his schoolfriend, Joe, begins to distance himself, his grief and incomprehension threaten to overwhelm Francie:

I climbed in the back of the chickenhouse and just stood in that woodchip world listening to the scrabbling of the claws on tin and the fan purring away keeping the town going. When we were in there me and Joe used to think: Nothing can ever go wrong. But it wasn’t like that any more. (TBB, 131)

The novel takes its title from a ballad sung by Francie’s mother, and in many ways it is an extension and variation upon the ballad’s themes of lost love and violent retribution. The growing horror of the tale is offset by the vibrant language of the telling and by its comic gusto. It contains moments of high Beckettian absurdity—Francie’s running encounters with the drunk fellow, the man with the bicycle, the increasingly exasperated Father Dominic, and the ubiquitous “ladies.” Molloy would certainly recognize this world, as would Flann O’Brien. But at its heart, *The Butcher Boy* contains a sense of loss as intense as anything in Beckett, never more so than in the haunting final passage:
Then he said give me a bit of that stick there like a good man and the two of us started hacking away together beneath the orange sky. He told me what he was going to do when he won his money then I said it was time to go tracking in the mountains, so off we went, counting our footprints in the snow, him with his bony arse clicking and me with the tears streaming down my face. (TBB, 215)

These very different novels each locate the point of change in Irish society in the 1960’s. Reading Turgenev is the most precise chronologically, opening in 1959 and coming to an end thirty-one years later. The novel concludes with Mary Louise Dallon’s release from hospital, and the medical staff’s justification for this course of action—“Those who have somewhere to go are better off in the community, that has been established. In other countries the change came years ago. . . . We’re always a bit behindhand here” (RT, 11)—may be taken as a succinct definition of the central perspective of all three novels.

Amongst Women is set at an indeterminate time in the 1960’s, characterized by significant changes in agricultural practice—the increasing reliance on machinery, the change from making hay to making silage, the development of cattle marts—though Moran’s death occurs some years later. In The Butcher Boy, the general ambience of the early 1960’s is well established through the use of contemporary pop songs on the radio and on café jukeboxes, and through reference to television, still a novel phenomenon at the time. (This element of McCabe’s work provides some interesting points of contact with the suburban world of Roddy Doyle’s Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha.)

All three novels focus on isolated individuals. Moran’s pride, Mary Louise Dallon’s Protestantism, and Francie Brady’s disturbed, almost psychotic condition serve to keep them apart from the wider society. In so far as the traditional community impinges upon them at all, it is only as an observer. When her mother tries to warn Rose against marrying Moran by citing what local people say about his difficult character she responds angrily: “People talk too much about other people around here. Often the talk is just ignorant malice” (AW, 24). Mary Louise’s regular pilgrimages to her cousin’s grave are noted by the townspeople, but they “no longer mention his wife to Elmer [her husband]. In the town she was talked about less than she had been, accepted now as an eccentric person. She was seen regularly on her bicycle, wrapped up closely, a headscarf tied around her head” (RT, 185). “People think the worst of you,” she says to the clergyman near the end of the novel, “and added further that you could hardly blame them” (RT, 220).

The nearest any of these novels gets to the censorious community of The Valley of the Squinting Windows is the chorus of “ladies” in The Butcher Boy. They treat Francie with a mixture of scorn and pity, the town joke who ironically turns into a murderous psychopath. Or perhaps not so ironically, because one of the most significant facts about the traditional community was that for all its meddling, for all its desire to know everything about what was going on, it was ultimately truth-denying.

In the space of a generation, provincial Ireland has moved from being a deeply traditional society, with all that that entails in restrictiveness, to being a modern, fragmented, uncertain society. Yet such a contrast may in fact be too facile:
traditional society, even at its most hidebound, was always pragmatic at heart. It is perhaps merely that the nature of that pragmatism has shifted. No longer is it defensive and inward-looking. Now it has become more cosmopolitan, and fiction necessarily reflects (and reflects upon) these changing conditions. The traditional voice of Irish fiction was that of the individual striving to attain some consciousness of himself (invariably it was “him”) as an individual by breaking away—“flying by those nets,” in Joyce’s defining phrase—from the restrictive forces which threaten to confine him. The persistence of this voice, and the very fact of its traditional status, indicates what a paramount virtue knowing one’s place was in pre-1960’s Ireland. Now the voice of Irish fiction is itself marginalized, isolated, confused. It is a voice which speaks for a society which has lost its cohesiveness, and which has also, perhaps, lost its way.

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