Irish literature in transition: 1980–2020

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Irish Literature in Transition 1980–2020, edited by Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds, is the final volume in a series of six, which begin with the year 1700 and conclude in 2020. The series is a monumental feat of scholarship overseen by the general editors Claire Connolly and Marjorie Howes. The chapters in the 1980–2020 volume span criticism on recent Irish fiction, poetry, cinema, and drama, while there are dedicated chapters on Northern Irish writing, Irish language literature, and diaspora writing. Section titles vary from the vague and capacious "Times" and "Spaces", to specific aesthetic concerns, "Forms of Experience" and "Practices Institutions, and Audiences". Codas conclude each large section in the volume, providing brief snapshots of paired prominent figures; Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney, Tom Murphy and Brian Friel, and Edna O'Brien with Eimear McBride. Reynolds ends a wide-ranging volume with a slightly hagiographic take on the roles played by Tramp Press and *The Irish Times* in cultivating new Irish writing.

Transition 1980–2020 traces a shift in the cultural atmosphere. The volume's chapters, without seeking to perpetuate a sense of national or historical teleology, often stem from several starting points – the establishment of Field Day, the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, the excesses and fallout of the Celtic Tiger, the waning of Catholic hegemony, and shifting social attitudes in the Republic culminating in the referenda on same-sex marriage and repealing the eighth amendment. This collection is an engagement with how these historical currents have been captured and critiqued across contemporary Irish literature and culture.

While framing the volume between 1980 and 2020 lends a sense of symmetry to the *Transition* series, which has favoured round numbers rather than historically charged years, the sense of contemporaneity at times fails to gain traction; many prominent works from the last decade fall through the cracks. I am thinking particularly of the writers in post-millennial Ireland who highlight the fault lines of social precarity and economic divides; Colin Barrett, Nicole Flattery, Niamh Campbell, Rob Doyle, Lucy Sweeney Byrne, Kevin Barry, Sally Rooney, Danielle McLaughlin, Claire-Louise Bennett, and Naoise Dolan. Hoping for academic engagement with such recent literature might be naïve, but a collection on Irish literature in the twenty-first century without them feels somewhat truncated. The editors admit it was "cheeky" to include the year of publication in the title (2), a cheekiness which appears risky given that the year 2020 has been anything but "transitional". The desire for optimistic transitions and scholarly poise is understandable, but as David Lloyd emphasises in his chapter on "Cultures of Poetry", "Sometimes history rhymes not with hope but with the vicious replay of the violence of dispossession" (50). Lloyd, Stefanie Lehner and Julia C. Obert explore the fallout and trauma of the Troubles through scholarship which further complicates the neatness of transitions, as they focus on the uncomfortable commodification of culture and history alike. Lehner quotes Leontia Flynn's "Belfast", where the disillusioned poetic voice views the city reduced to a series of pithy slogans: "Friendly! Dynamic! Various!" (137).

The editorial thrust of the volume endorses a celebratory attitude towards Ireland's current "golden age" of literature. However, Joe Cleary shows there is room for disagreement. He takes aim at the cosseted careerism of the contemporary Irish author (although his targets appear to be established writers employed in US universities rather than emerging authors). Cleary laments how many "internationally celebrated Irish writers have mostly been consummately professional", creating "another way in which Irish writing marks its distance from the past and reflects back to the contemporary nation's readers a now preferred image of their country" (226). He ominously claims that there is "a price to pay" for this kind of literature functioning as polite diplomacy (226).

The collection's final chapter by Margaret Kelleher also reflects on the economic and artistic integrity of the artist. She examines the arts in relation to public funding and value, how they can create social cohesion, and their capabilities as a politically disruptive force. Drawing on Helen Small's *The Value of the Humanities* (2013), Kelleher navigates the tricky relationship between personal acts of valuing and the emergence of public and shared values, often by crunching the hard numbers. Examining the Waking the Feminist movement, Anne Enright's criticism of gender imbalances, and the same problem in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017), Kelleher argues that "[a]n in-depth analysis of how literary reputations are made" is more necessary than ever, questioning "who confers 'international recognition', and whose scholarship is noticed and by whom" (386).

This question of critical recognition recurs in Anne Mulhall's chapter on inward migration and Irish literature. Mulhall traces how writers of colour have created works which combine a privileging of migrant consciousness with experiments in form, genre, and artistic medium. She examines how these works have begun breaking into the "mainstream". Noting how portrayals of migrants in Ireland have predominantly been written by established white authors, (or that critical attention has been narrowly focused upon them), Mulhall turns her attention to a wide range of migrant writers of colour, such as Ifedinma Dimbo, Melatu Uche Okorie, Ebun Joseph Akpoveta, and Oritsegbemi Emmanuel Jakpa, as well as the emerging voices of Felicia Olusanya, Dagogo Hart, Chiamaka Enyi-Amadi, and Denise Chaila. Emphasising the impact of these new voices, particularly in the spoken word poetry scene, alongside creative and collaborative publishing projects such as Skein Press and the 2019 anthology *Writing Home*, Mulhall concludes that the "literary establishment in Ireland may be learning to listen to the way emergent migrant writers of colour in Ireland are writing rather than waiting for them to write the way we are used to reading" (197).

Rónán McDonald traces the genealogical developments and "discontents" in Irish Studies over the past few decades – from the "greening" of Joyce and Beckett in their formative Irish contexts, to Colm Tóibín provocatively declaring in the 1990s that "it was hard not to feel that Field Day had become the literary wing of the IRA" (335). McDonald argues that preoccupations and disagreements on the "national question" have "sucked oxygen away from vital areas and a more expansive vision of Irish Studies". In turn, "issues such as poverty, sexual ethics, gender rights, migration, and rights for travellers tended to be marginalised", in ways that the field desperately needs to address (333). Resonating with Falci and Reynolds' introductory remarks that "contemporary Irish writing has taken a global turn while remaining keyed to local conditions and events" (16), McDonald proposes that the best kind of Irish Studies "was never provincial, either in its focus or its method" (340). He concludes that Ireland has always "been a node invariably caught up in international networks of movement and exchange", but that academic interests and histories have "provided a new and challenging context for Irish Studies to justify itself" (340).

Sarah Townsend examines the disparaged era of Celtic Tiger literature (often implicitly pitted against the current "golden age") in the context of the global literary marketplace. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Townsend addresses how clichés can illuminate a "persistent attachment to the late capitalist fantasy of 'the good life' despite overwhelming evidence of its unattainability" (245). Examining Enright's *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011) and Tana French's *Broken Harbour* (2012), Townsend compellingly covers the subversive capacities of cliché and eschewing generic expectations. She argues that Enright's playful take on the conventions of romance fiction within a "literary novel", and French's crime fiction consumed by a "literary audience", function to unsettle "the hierarchies of generic and gendered prestige that professional writers (especially women writers) must continually navigate" (258).

Adam Hanna, writing on post-crash Ireland, examines another significant cliché – the "ghost estates" that followed Tiger years of nefarious building practises. Hanna comments on the historical fallout: "Whereas the ghosts that had haunted the Irish landscape in the past – those of the famine dead, say, or of millions of departed emigrants – were those of real people, the ghosts that haunted the Ireland of the ghost estates were, perhaps uniquely, the ghosts of people who had never been there" (125). These "new ghosts" haunt Irish literature from a future that failed to arrive, finding literary expression in works like Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2015), as well as the poetry of Vona Groarke, William Wall, and Joseph Woods. Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh's chapter comprehensively surveys the contemporary conditions of Irish language literature. She notes in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's work a historical concern with the shifting inflections of folklore sources when cast through a postcolonial lens, and the "trauma of language loss" (28).

This sense of Irish literature being temporally conflicted re-emerges throughout the volume, threading together many disparate themes, and echoing Falci and Reynolds' introduction: "The contemporary moment is too near at hand; it has barely happened yet; we encounter it perpetually in mid-stream" (2). Although these temporal disruptions might equally be considered as too rupturing to be contained under the linear trajectory of a "transition" – Falci's coda on Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney refers to them as "poets of the backward glance" (111), as their work suggests "alternate modes of temporality" (113). Christopher Langlois also reflects on Heaney, in terms of the poetic articulation of a "Janus-faced perspective" that takes in both historical violence and healing. This double vision, Langlois argues, "re-inscribes the poetics of self-division and self-scrutiny" in Heaney's work, "that had rendered his poetic voice so vital throughout the preceding twenty-five years of conflict" (264). Turning to representations of trauma in Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) and Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* (2015), Langlois analyses scenes of horrific brutality, while linguistically attending to the "harmonious, disharmonious vocabulary of violence, trauma, and recovery", and the prospects for some kind of solace (276).

The volume's concerns with recent historical trauma is engaged with most explicitly in Emilie Pine's ground-breaking chapter. Alongside a team of digital humanities experts from UCD, Pine uses contemporary narrative practices and technologies to examine the Ryan Report, a 2600 page document published in 2009, which documents how thousands of children were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused in Irish Industrial Schools for over seven decades. Pine details a range of literary and digital tools that renders the Ryan Report more accessible, while stressing the vital importance of maintaining contact with survivors, "to hear directly stories of their lived experience" (287). In doing so, she argues that the humanities can provide the skills necessary to ask crucial questions about Irish history and the ways it is both written and read. "We need to expand our generic inclusiveness and as readers", Pine proposes, "with our reading potentially enhanced with digital tools, take up the responsibility of witnessing in the twenty-first century for as many audiences – embodied and mediated, collective and individual, national and international – as possible" (289).

Writing on Edna O'Brien and Eimear McBride, Clair Wills argues that their novels also engage "in a form of cultural witnessing" (295). Wills proposes that "the climate for contemporary Irish women's fiction' has finally 'caught up with the fiction itself" and that Irish culture might be considered ready to examine its own history and violence of abuse (296). In an argument that constellates with others throughout the volume, Wills claims that this culture is "no longer working against the pull of a society unwilling to acknowledge its own investment in a corrupt and unequal sexual system", the fiction by O'Brien and McBride that exposes and highlights violence and abuse, "now finds itself flowing with the cultural tide" (295).

In focusing on just several chapters amongst a wide range of contributions, I have neglected other vital fields and movements which are covered in this expansive volume – theatre, cinema, and Irish language literature are all given room to breathe. It is a testament to the "increasing diversity of creative work and scholarly analysis" (18) contained within that there is still so much more to be written. *Irish Literature in Transition 1980–2020* stands as a formidable and monumental collection of writing which invigorates these conversations. The diverse and sometimes diffuse critical approaches create an invaluable index on contemporary Irish literature, despite some inevitable absences, and speaks to an Irish Studies capable of examining "the granularities of Irish culture" amidst global and planetary forces (18). Although the editorial emphasis on social progress and financial recovery perhaps downplays the uneasy transitions to come, (the spectre of Brexit hangs uneasily over many pages), the volume captures and engages with a series of literary and historical reckonings that have taken place over the past four decades. These reckonings acutely register the "future's productively uncertain relation to the present world", as Falci writes of Boland and Heaney, and establishes the strengths and challenges of Irish Studies within this unpredictable present (118).