



Literary visions of multicultural Ireland

The **in** **temporary**

Edited by Pilar Villar-Argáiz

Literary visions of multicultural Ireland

The immigrant in contemporary Irish literature

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In memory of
Pablo Manuel

For Pablo Manuel



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Foreword: the worlding of Irish writing

Declan Kiberd

There has been much talk in recent years of the worlding of Irish writing, in line with the proclamation of Ireland's as one of the most globalised economies in Europe. But it's not at all clear just how worlded Irish writing now is. Certainly, more writers are living abroad and writing about overseas life than were doing so in, say, 1990. The decade which followed that year was one in which Irishness became sexy, as people used Celtic pubs, the memoirs of Frank McCourt or the spectacle of Riverdance to connect with their inner Paddy.

That was, of course, a mixed blessing, for it was more often the simplified forms of identity that passed through the filters of the international circuits. Global capital might be breaking up rural communities but its sponsors in their leisure time still wanted to read about local colour; and so McCourt's thematic – that Ireland was as desperately interesting and as interestingly desperate as ever – fell on receptive ears. The more inflected rural depictions of John McGahern didn't sell anything like as many copies. Whereas McCourt felt able to heighten colours to a point of caricature, scaling things up to make them interesting, McGahern took the view that Irish life was inherently so extreme that the artist had to scale things down to make them credible. His US publishers have shown a consequent nervousness about how to market his books. His last great work of fiction *That They May Face the Rising Sun* had its title altered to *By the Lake*, lest American readers might think that it was a tour guide to Japan.

All of which might recall for us something that W.B. Yeats wrote in 1900: 'Every Irish writer is faced with a choice – either to express Ireland or to exploit her'. Yeats saw that choice as one made between using native material for the condescending amusement of a largely overseas audience addicted to comedy and bucklepping¹ on one hand or the more arduous task of expressing a people to themselves with all the ensuing dangers of theatre riots and outright censorship.

The decade prior to Yeats's declaration had seen, if anything, too much worlding of Irish writing. Bernard Shaw was fast becoming the most famous writer in the world but at the price (he said himself) of being 'a faithful servant of the English people'. And before Shaw's rise, there had been Oscar Wilde. In Yeats's mind, both men, for all their genius, were reduced too often to the status of mere performers. They wished to be artists, keeping one eye resolutely on their subjects, but felt compelled to keep the other eye on their audience. Like the black man in American cities, both men got fed up of the feeling of being perpetually 'on'; and then Wilde, anyway, was put off. For Yeats, the only realistic answer was to bring it all back home: to found a theatre and publishing company in Dublin, as part of a programme to gather a national audience.

Yeats had his wish: but if you are uncharitable enough to measure the time which this leader of the national revival spent at various locations, you find that he spent more months and years out of Ireland than in. Shaw had, after all, said that as long as Ireland produced men with sense enough to leave her, she did not exist in vain.

Once the censorship system of the new State took away from many writers the slim chance they had of earning a living as full-time authors among their own people, there was a new choice – either to become a teacher or get out. Anyone who wonders why so many stories and novels of the mid-twentieth century are set in schools should take due account of that. For those who left, Frank O'Connor spoke most eloquently when he said that he liked to return to Ireland every year or so just to remind himself what a terrible place it was.

When I began reading novels in the 1960s, I noticed a strange thing. Despite Yeats's best efforts, there were few native publishing houses, other than those devoted to coteries of poets; and the work of all the leading Irish prose writers was displayed in Hannas, Hodges Figgis or Eason's bookshops in alphabetical order alongside that of overseas authors: O'Brien alongside O'Hara, McLaverty close to Mailer. Even though the first chair of Anglo-Irish Literature was founded at University College Dublin in 1964, the booksellers of Dublin did not seem to regard Irish writing in English as a distinct category. Perhaps they feared offending those lingering purists who asserted that the national mind was available only in the Irish language.

By the 1970s and 1980s all this had changed. It was as if, by some distant fiat of the *aggiornamento*, Pope John XXIII had licensed not only street-dancing at the Fleadh Cheoil but also the separate cataloguing of Irish writing in the nation's bookshops. Some of the cooler, more hip young people didn't completely warm to this. They wanted an international style; they despised the Abbey Theatre's annual revival of a Synge or O'Casey play for the busloads of tourists; they wanted to be counted one with Borges, Broch and Benjamin, not David, Mangan, Ferguson. This was eventually reflected in a very animated debate

between the two great Johns of the Irish novel, Banville and McGahern. 'I want to open a window on Europe,' said Banville, who had written a superb trilogy about Copernicus, Kepler and Newton. 'Yes,' replied a sardonic McGahern, 'and I suppose you think that I am forever trying to slam it shut'.

The irony, so many years after that exchange, is that we can now see Banville's novels about the collapse of late-medieval Europe into conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism as a none-too-covert rendition of the overwhelming nature of the clash in Northern Ireland and, indeed, of the less dramatic battle to secure for scientific subjects a more central place in the syllabus of schools in the south. I once asked Banville how he could so unerringly recreate the ways in which a world of alchemists and spells in central Europe made way for that of modern science. He laughed and said 'That was easy. I grew up in Wexford in the 1950s.' The other irony, to which McGahern was in his sardonic way drawing attention even at the time of their exchange was that, despite his near-constant focus on the people of North Leitrim, he had in his art assimilated at a very deep level the techniques and themes of Flaubert, Proust, Tolstoy, and Saint-Beuve.

By the onset of full-throttle globalisation in the 1990s, these sub-divisions in Irish writing had become all too predictable. Even as young people from Poland, France, Nigeria, and China flowed into Dublin, Irish authors began to make a point of setting some of their novels in New York, Berlin or Central America. Yet each of them, once featured in the *New York Times* or *London Review of Books*, seemed to get renationalised as fast as any bank. Colm Tóibín became forever, lest we forget, 'the Irish novelist Colm Toibin', just as in the *Times of London* in the 1930s readers were informed of the peregrinations around Rocquebrun of 'the Irish poet W.B. Yeats'. When you consider that one of Tóibín's more successful campaigns in his native country was to have the playing of the national anthem abolished in the Abbey Theatre, you have to admit that there is something plaintive about his fate.

The Ireland that emerged in the later 1990s was in many ways a multicultural place. Even the lowly *Evening Herald* issued every Tuesday afternoon a Polish supplement; evangelical churches for Nigerians opened their doors across the inner suburbs of Dublin; the country came to a regular standstill celebrating the Chinese New Year; and a grand-daughter of one of the Vietnamese 'boat people' took first place in Irish in the country's Leaving Certificate examination. You might, therefore, expect the emergence of new and complex forms of narrative to capture these hybridities and complications. There have been some, well documented in the following pages; and other, less obvious explorations in poems by Seamus Heaney, Medbh McGuckian, and in work by Irish-language poets, who by very definition start as multicultural. Such inflections are found most effectively of all, perhaps, in a play like *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel:

by presenting two plots unfolding at different speeds, this brilliantly solves the technical problem of how to render the phenomenon known as 'uneven development'. This play also registers the impact of 'liberation theology' and of the missionary experience on parish life in Ireland.

But in the novel, the form in which one would expect to find the subtlest exploration of the Irish encounter with the Other, there has been far less than in earlier generations (though honourable mention must be made of work by Joseph O'Connor, Hugo Hamilton, and some others discussed in this volume). Most of the younger novelists, however, have (for perhaps shrewdly judged technical reasons) abandoned the attempt to describe a whole society (despite that society being rather small) and prefer to focus on this or that sub-group – a graduating class from a college, the workers in a restaurant, the members of a musical group, and so on. One of the best of the novelists, Keith Ridgway, summed up the problem in calling one of his books *The Parts*. It is as if authors now write novels about those 'submerged population groups' which Frank O'Connor once thought better-suited to the short story, about the denizens of Dalkey or Coolock or a midlands town. Within Dublin, nobody seems to want to write a 'Wandering Rocks' panoptic narrative, still less one in the style of James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*.

Even more remarkable is the fact that those few authors intrepid enough to dramatise the encounter with immigrants present those immigrants almost invariably as 'new Irish' and almost never for what they are and for what they bring in themselves. Great play is made of Poles or Nigerians who can use a little Hiberno-English. While the State proudly issues citizenship papers, the writers often bring their subjects on an arduous set of seminars in Irish Studies, explaining this or that tradition to polite, accepting receivers. One might wonder for exactly whose benefit these seminars are conducted – for publishers in London or New York still in search of that damned elusive Irishness; or for the authors themselves, who grew up in a revisionist system which took so much of the national narrative away that they must now seize gratefully on the latest incomer as a pretext for teaching themselves what they should know anyway, their own traditions? Some of those authors who helped to junk many national traditions are the very ones now employing novelistic narrative in order to teach them to newcomers. It is as if the contemporary, cutting-edge novel has one primary use for the foreigners: to make them more Irish than the Irish themselves. A new updated Statutes of Kilkenny cannot be far off.

In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva says that we encounter the stranger in others in order to uncover the hidden, untransacted parts of ourselves. She observes that in countries such as France, which receive many immigrants, the right-wing parties are forever fretting about the national culture, the one which ideally (in their minds) the incomers will embrace, whereas

the left-wing attends more to the culture which the newcomers bring with them. Modernity works best when both cultures receive equal attention from all parties and there is a hope of a consequent newness through fusion. Something like that happened in cuisine, music, and literature during the earlier years of the Celtic Tiger up to the year 2002. Many incomers displayed a thoughtful interest in Irish traditions still very new to them, but they also carried their own past with pride and with the hope of using elements of it to connect with Ireland. One of the incomers in those years, Zeljka Doljanin, has observed that after 2002 there was less fusion and less thoughtfulness. As the country fell in thrall to a mindless consumerism, many incomers showed little interest either in the lore of their own ancestors or in that of Ireland. Like some of the Irish, some of the newcomers lost the run of themselves too.

Dr Doljanin has made, however, an even more radical analysis in her doctoral dissertation. The years of transition were also those in which a distinctive Irish currency (many notes featuring writers and intellectuals) was replaced by the euro banknotes, featuring bridges and buildings in the style of the Ljubljana. The loss of a sure sense of identity among Irish people (related to the decline of history as a secondary school subject) made it more difficult for them to deal confidently with the Other, at just that phase in history when there were more Others than ever. Dr Doljanin's study notes the consequent and strangely introverted spasms of those recent novels which often seem to deal with incomers like herself but almost always treating such persons as mere backdrop.

She wanted to write a thesis on the Other in contemporary Irish writing, but found herself driven back to a consideration of the classical rather than contemporary authors. If you want accounts of negotiations with the Other, you have only to read *Gulliver's Travels*, *Castle Rackrent* (which anticipates Joyce in considering the treatment of Jews in Ireland), *Ulysses*, Beckett's writings and, indeed, those of McGahern. These authors all came out of a monocultural Ireland yet somehow – perhaps even because of this – they managed to explore alterity. Perhaps one could guess at what has happened in the years between their time and ours. A few years ago, while reading the closing episodes of *Ulysses* with students in Dublin, I casually asked them if a thirty-eight year-old man of vaguely eastern aspect met them in the Temple Bar at one in the morning and invited any of them back to his kitchen, would they go? 'Not on your life' was the universal answer. That is our loss and theirs. Cities, as Richard Sennett has said, were once places in which the uses of disorder allowed people to dice with their own strangeness. Now there are only suburbs and shopping malls, designed to protect most people from the sort of chance encounters which are the life-blood of all narrative.

Shortly before he died in 2006, I asked McGahern whether he thought Zeljka Doljanin's thesis was true. He thought it was and told a story to explain how a

traditional Ireland that seemed monocultural could nonetheless produce many people able to imagine all sorts of persons quite unlike themselves. 'When I grew up in Leitrim in the 1940s', he said, 'if you got up on a bicycle and travelled ten miles, you were already in a foreign country. The people's way of walking as well as talking, of holding their heads and moving their bodies – it was all so different from what you knew'. A bike-ride, he sardonically added, was not just the prelude to a sexual opportunity in that society: it was also a rehearsal for the emigration which would be the lot of so many. It is an oft-forgotten fact that between 1921 and 1985 one in every two persons born in the Irish State had to leave it. Long before Tiger Ireland, they were 'worlded', whether they chose to be or not.

Declan Kiberd

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Notes

- 1 Bucklepping was defined by Patrick Kavanagh as an act of stage-Irish gymnastics whereby a man walking along will suddenly jump into mid-air, crack both his heels against his buttocks and then proceed to walk on. Kavanagh described the spending of millions of pounds on RTÉ television's budget as 'the national bucklepp'.

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