
IRISH STUDIES ROUND THE WORLD - 2009

David Pierce (ed.)

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Reflections on Irish Writing in 2009

David Pierce

2009 has been a year for reflection, filtered in part through the publication of letters and correspondence. A year ago I was writing about the economic downturn, but this has now been augmented by the loss of something as profound. Ireland is facing another period of radical adjustment, the outcome of which will remain uncertain possibly for years to come. What gives a certain edge to recent events is that bishops can resign and reforms be announced, but all that is on the basis of something painful, which is continuing. For cultural historians and those dealing in time-lines longer than the present, the revelation of abuse has come not so much as a shock as a recognition that the ‘Troubles’ has a wider application than simply being about politics or the North. Equally, the enormity of the abuse has highlighted once again the role of the Church in post-Independence Ireland. One conclusion we might legitimately draw is that the concentration of power and the lack of transparency have contributed in no small measure to the current malaise. Of course, many of the young have long since stopped looking to the Church for guidance, so there is some other kind of vacuum or hollowing out now beginning to clamour for attention. It will be for later historians to determine whether what is happening forms part of a larger crisis associated with loss and the struggle for a new identity.

If the scandal of recent sexual abuses highlights the deformity in relations between the private and the public, then the correspondence of Samuel Beckett underlines the importance of the private as a defence against the public world. Indeed, there is no better place to return us to ourselves than by attending to the Irish writer who, above all others, hated cant and pomposity and who constantly stops us in our tracks. “How can one write here,” Beckett confides to Tom McGreevy on returning to teach at Trinity

College, Dublin, “when every day vulgarises one’s hostility and turns anger into irritation and petulance?” (49; 5 October 1930). To my mind, it was appropriate that *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940* were published to mixed reviews this past year, for Beckett never fails to defeat expectation. If anyone was hoping to behold a writer in the making or in full flow, they would have been not a little disappointed. By way of contrast, D.H. Lawrence in his letters frequently reaches the same pitch of heightened prose that we encounter in his novels, but this is not the case with Beckett in the 1930s. That said, there is enough of interest for the student of Irish Studies to ponder and value.

On display throughout these letters are Beckett’s difficulties in writing, of putting pen to paper, in his home country. In turn, those difficulties become the whetstone not only for Beckett understanding his plight but also for developing his imagination. In that 1930 letter just quoted, it isn’t that he is hostile to the world but that the world vulgarises his hostility. This is the Beckett country we are familiar with, where plight and imagination become inseparable. We are inside the folds of his personality. This is Beckett one step removed not from reality but from the world, both of which - both reality and the world - are then redefined. In 1932, as if anticipating one of the leitmotifs of his later work, the despairing Beckett tells McGreevy, “Nothing seems to come off” (121). Wherever he turns, he meets with little success and receives what he thinks is more than his fair share of rejections from publishers and editors of literary journals, but he cannot allow the matter to rest there, turning rejection slips into humour at the expense of those who didn’t see a Nobel prize-winner for Literature in the making. Chatto and Windus is recast as “Shaton and Windup”, a phrase that wouldn’t be out of place in Lucky’s speech in

Waiting for Godot, and it is one of those quips to lift the heart of all aspiring authors undergoing similar treatment. The publishers thought his novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, was wonderful, he tells McGreevy, but “they couldn’t they simply could not” (125). For non-native speakers of English, the humorous distinction here between ‘couldn’t’ and ‘could not’ is worth pondering, for in certain contexts, as here, the distinction is not about formality or informality but about a hardening in attitude and how this gets to be represented in writing.

It is not without interest that Beckett insisted that only those letters pertinent to his published work should be made available. It would be difficult to know what constitutes the line between relevant and irrelevant – or pertinent and its opposite – when it comes to any author but especially to Beckett. So I’m not sure Beckett got this one right. In Beckett, the private acts as a bulwark against the world and provides not only a defence against, but an entry-point into, the public world. In that sense he redefines the line between the public and the private.

His correspondence, for example, is full of problems with digestion and the limitations therefore of the body, and it is fitting that we should read about what is happening to him physically, for this constitutes the material and crucible of his imaginative vision. “Dies diarrhoeae” (124), a day of diarrhoea, he writes amusingly at one point echoing the ‘Dies Irae’ of the Requiem Mass of the Dead. Elsewhere, as yet another reminder that he was ill-at-ease with himself, we read of panic attacks he suffered at night.

As expected, the letters shed further light on his relationship with Joyce, though not on his relationship with Joyce’s daughter Lucia. An early reference to his writing “stinking” of Joyce reminds us of his need to swerve away from the father figure, and, appropriately, it is expressed in terms of odours (81). In a phone call from his hotel in Paris in 1937, he stumbles across a domestic scene of the great man shaving and being protected by his wife: “I rang up Shem now and was engaged by Norah [for Nora] while he finished his shave” (562). ‘Shem’, the son in *Finnegans Wake*, and the figure most closely associated with Joyce himself, is the name

Beckett used as a shorthand for ‘Mr Joyce’ when speaking with those like McGreevy inside the circle. After an evening at the Joyces in early January 1938, he observes, “He was sublime last night, deprecating with the utmost conviction his lack of talent” (581). The following week, Beckett is stabbed in a street in Paris and hospitalised. The “lovable” Joyce was very solicitous for his fellow countryman, arranging for his medical care (though there’s no letter about this here), sending him bunches of Parma violets and going to visit him. That same month, it is clear that Beckett is well on the way to recuperating when, in a sentence which ends with the painter Jack B. Yeats, whom he much admired, he writes about his chronic inability to understand a phrase like “the Irish people” or “to imagine that it ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever” (599).

Some readers might be tempted to conclude that Beckett’s antipathy toward Ireland in these letters was the final word on the subject. In *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (2009), Stephen Watt concurs with Deirdre Bair: “Beckett had no pride in his Irishness; national identity meant nothing to him” (199). According to Watt, by December 1931, “Beckett could no longer tolerate Dublin and escaped to Germany and then Paris” (198-9). The letters tell a more complex story, where frustration is accompanied by yet more frustration. The idea of a series is important here, for no single attitude emerges. His confidant in these letters was a fellow Irishman, the poet and art critic Tom McGreevy, who also acted as confidant to Yeats’s wife George in the 1920s. But while George Yeats sometimes betrayed her feelings of frustration about her husband to McGreevy, Beckett is reporting on his plight as a person and an aspiring author to someone who shared much of his worldview. (There is a photograph of McGreevy and Beckett in London in the early 1930s in my *James Joyce’s Ireland*, page 203).

I would find it difficult to believe Beckett would ever allow a sentence such as “I have no pride in my Irishness” to be his final word on the subject. He hated grand statements, but he also had things inside him which couldn’t — no could not — be articulated in such a way, and to some extent Irishness was one of those things.

McGreevy would have understood this and allowed his friend to sound off. Let me put this another way. If Beckett took no pride in his Irishness, why did he spend so much time in correspondence with someone like McGreevy and mixing with an Irish writer like Joyce or talking up the work of an Irish painter like Jack B. Yeats? And there is enough in these letters which speaks of his pride in what the country has to offer the visitor, such as Galway (“a grand little magic grey town full of sensitive stone and bridges and water” 127), or seeing Clonmacnoise for the first time (“indescribably beautiful” 324), or walking in the Dublin mountains and discovering “a lovely small Celtic cross” (489).

I felt somewhat unsure reading the first volume of Beckett’s correspondence as to how many relevant letters were missing, and I cannot say I was fully reassured by the editors in their introduction. Tipping the balance towards a more comprehensive coverage leads to a different problem as exemplified by the publication this past year of the second volume of T.S. Eliot’s letters. Many of the letters, written between 1925 and 1927, are business letters written by Eliot in his capacity as editor of *The Criterion* and director at Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber). Fortunately, there are glimpses of humour in the midst of all this, and in one of the letters we learn something more about his relationship with Joyce. In the summer of 1923 Joyce was on holiday in the seaside resort of Bognor in Sussex. The previous year the two writers had published their most famous books *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. How would the leading American modernist living in London address the leading Irish modernist living in Paris? The answer: light-heartedly, with a dig at his own text. “I want to get a car one day when I am at Fishbourne and fetch you over and show you some of the waste lands round about Chichester” (29 June 1923). As it happened, Joyce did his own exploring round Chichester, but this was largely undertaken through reading what was to hand in a book such as the Ward Lock guide to the area. It was there that he came across in the churchyard in Sidlesham the name of Earwicker, the name he lifts for the main protagonist of *Finnegans Wake*. If the Roman remains at Fishbourne had then been known, I’m

sure both Joyce and Eliot would have found room for them in their writing, but Joyce would have been happy just reading about them in the newspaper.

The title of *Love’s Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie Letters and Diaries from the Love Affair of a Lifetime 1941-1973* (2009), edited by Victoria Gendinning with Judith Robertson, is slightly at odds with the tender love story on display inside its pages. Not entirely, however, for the title does mirror a lengthy correspondence over three decades between the Anglo-Irish novelist and the Canadian diplomat, who conducted their relationship in secret. Interestingly, Bowen and Ritchie spent very little actual time together, but there is a sense that they made up for this by writing, at least in Bowen’s case. Her letters are full of the world around her and full of her love for him, while his diary entries are inward-looking and fairly terse, coming alive for this reader only after her death.

E is a third person initial for Ritchie, while in her letters he is always you. Forms of address can betray so much in love letters. “The fact is that happiness and tenderness and love don’t evaporate from the place where they’ve been strongly; one’s left with something stronger than memory, a feeling of something still going on – don’t you think?” (131-2) In the Index there are no separate entries for ‘reality’ or ‘presence’ or ‘absence’, yet perhaps there should be, for these are Bowen’s overriding themes, here in these letters as in her novels. As for the physical side of love itself, we learn she had “a love of touching the nape of the beloved’s neck or of having the nape of my neck touched” (347), which is followed by a series of elliptical points. I couldn’t determine, here and elsewhere in the book, if these points are cuts by the editors or suspension marks by Ritchie.

Because Bowen is such a sharp observer of the social scene, there is little or no sense when reading these letters of prying into things that don’t concern us. Certain attitudes, such as those toward social class, we are familiar with or we could guess what she thought. She was against the Labour Party landslide victory in 1945, which gave her a “psychic shock” (53), agreed with the Swiss, in the lead-up to the subsequent

general election in 1950, that the British being socialists bored everybody, and, from her patrician background, she was in favour of the Conservative Party taking on Big Business. At the same time, because of her Anglo-Irish identity she was able to recognise her own position, which she could subject to humour. “I’m that awful paradox, a dowdy snob” (153), she admits at one point. Coming away from a morning shopping at Harvey Nichols, she imagines the clothes she has bought might look like “a plate of dessert” (226). London is her abiding passion. Of all the many cities she writes about, Madrid, where she stayed in October 1954, comes off the worst in this book, a city that assaults the senses, where church bells smash the silence to smithereens and “all the people look most fearfully common” (193), which she puts down to the Franco-Fascist atmosphere. It is a rare lapse for in general “doing the rounds” in the manner of the Anglo-Irish normally allows her to see something of value on which to report.

Throughout these letters there are nice moments, sometimes quite unexpected. She is struck, dining with the Duke of Leinster in London in 1946, how Ireland’s premier duke is ending his days in a “baroqued-over St John’s Wood kitchen” (98). Visiting Edinburgh in 1950, Bowen wonders about “the whole ‘British’ concept”, given the need for Scots to have their own Home Rule (167-8). As for writing and other authors, she particularly admired Flaubert’s letters and his ability to capture the sensation of writing (see 361), and she read with interest *David Copperfield*, a novel that gave her “an almost terrifying illumination about her own writing” (440). There are in addition valuable portraits here of other Irish writers including Molly Keane and Iris Murdoch. What surprised me were the occasional comments about the leading psychological novelist of her generation not being interested in people or in her own “interesting personality” (181). The letters betray something else, and that too is intriguing, such as when she claims in a letter written in 1950: “I might ‘live for others’, but I could never live for my work” (176).

Those with an interest in Irish Studies shouldn’t overlook the *Letters of Ted Hughes*, which appeared in paperback in 2009. Hughes’s friendship with Seamus Heaney is well-known, but the ten letters here to the Irish poet Richard Murphy are worth noticing for their varied insights into Hughes’s verse, into the work of other writers and also into the Irish landscape. The period he spent in Ireland in 1965 provided Hughes with a way out of the impasse in his writing, which was to lead to the poems in his celebrated volume *Crow* (1970). The influence of Yeats on Hughes is also to the fore here in the letters, not least in Yeats’s stress on reading aloud. When he was young, we learn that Hughes encountered Yeats’s first volume of verse *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and in a letter in 1992 he recalls what it meant to him: “I was swallowed alive by Yeats” (625). In passing, we can see that the rhythms in Hughes’s early verse also betray a debt to the Irish poet. What particularly attracted him to Yeats was the use of myths and legends, as well as his passionate devotion to the occult and to the esoteric tradition in Western culture.

The only occasion I had an opportunity of talking with Hughes was in Waterstones bookshop in York in the early 1990s. We spent about twenty minutes chatting, and most of that time was taken up with the occult. I must have been at work on *Yeats’s Worlds* (1995), which includes a chapter on the occult. For me the topic was simply of academic interest, but I could tell from his line of questioning that Hughes was a believer, someone who swallowed things alive. Each to his own, I came away thinking, conscious at the same time of a presence I had no wish to get too close to. Not surprisingly, here in the letters he defends Yeats against those critics such as Auden who would dismiss the occult as “embarrassing nonsense” (426).

As someone who lives in York, the correspondence that has given me the most pleasure this last year, published in two volumes and edited by Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, has been that of Laurence Sterne. Sterne is essentially a York or a Yorkshire writer, but he does have links with Ireland. He was born in

Clonmel in County Tipperary, and spent his early years in Ireland when his father was stationed there with a British regiment. In the village of Annamoe in County Wicklow, where Synge was later to spend his summers, can be seen the remains of a mill-race that once swept up the young Sterne and nearly killed him. In 1765, as an adult, when taken to task for ridiculing his Irish friends at Bath, Sterne, now the famous author of *Tristram Shandy*, resorts to the clincher: “Besides, I am myself of their own country: —My father was a considerable time on duty with his regiment in Ireland, and my mother gave me to the world when she was there, on duty with him” (430-1). The tongue-in-cheek attitude suggests he wouldn’t go to the stake over his identity, but Ireland is nonetheless real for him. This can be seen in little things in *Tristram Shandy* by his use of names, for example, such as Corporal Trim, or in the choice of tunes such as the Williamite ‘Lillibulero’, which is whistled by Uncle Toby whenever difficulties arise or he has to express an opinion. And it’s not surprising to learn in these letters that Sterne was offered clerical appointments in Ireland by his friend the Bishop of Cork and Ross (638).

But what intrigues me most reading these letters and their accompanying intelligent notes is the real-life incident that seems to lie behind Yorick’s encounter with the Monk in *A Sentimental Journey*, and how the abbé who came to the aid of Richard Oswald, a young Englishman dying of consumption in Toulouse, was of Irish descent and called not O’Leary but O’Leary (306ff). The incident clearly moved Sterne, especially “the great fellow feeling he shew’d to our friend” (307). So Sterne’s changing attitudes and altered disposition toward Catholicism seem to belong in part to his sojourn among European Catholicism, a Catholicism which was itself shaped by the Irish driven into exile in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on account of their religion. The local curé initially refused to allow the young man a church funeral because he was not a Catholic but, as the editors suggest, he seems to have relented when Sterne offered him money. The curé confirms Sterne in his prejudice against Catholics but it is the abbé with the French-Irish name who finds his way into fiction. Always with Sterne it is

through contact that feeling comes, and it is feeling that changes the world, in this case, of anti-Catholic prejudice, to which he himself was subject. One suspects he could have made more of the Irish connection in *A Sentimental Journey*, but Sterne gives the impression that Irishness is behind him, part of the past, an already discovered or known country, ripe for humour, while European emancipation, in the clean shape and presumably intended symbol of the caged bird, is ahead of him, somewhere in the future.

The present Troubles continue to provide material for creative writers to ponder. *Five Minutes of Heaven*, a television drama shown on BBC2 in April 2009 and now released as a film, was a particular highlight for me. The play/film, which was written by Guy Hibbert and directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, starred James Nesbitt as Joe, the younger brother of a Catholic murdered in 1975 by Alistair, a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, who is played by Liam Neeson. Years later Joe and Alistair come face to face in a television show (an imagined scene at the Truth and Reconciliation process), and this encounter is the subject of the film. Sensibly, the emphasis is on encounter, not resolution, and this is given a further twist by the fact that Nesbitt, who comes from Ballymena and who as a boy took part in Protestant marches on 12 July, plays a Catholic, while Neeson, who played Michael Collins in the film of that name, took the part of the Protestant killer. Everything contributes, then, to the tension in the drama. As if the murder was still fresh in his memory, Joe fumes, while Alistair, who has changed as a person, characteristically expresses the best line in the play: “The years just get heavier.”

Renewed interest in the North, especially from a Protestant perspective, shows little sign of abating. *Irish Protestant Identities* (2008) is a useful collection of essays, three of which can be noted here. In “Assessing an Absence: Ulster Protestant Women Authors 1900-60”, Naomi Doak argues for a revision to the conventional view that Protestant women writers came only from the Ascendancy. In an essay listing her chosen authors, she also shows how Ulster literary biographies will need to attend more closely to the issue of gender (and by implication social class). A second essay that caught my eye

was Peter Day's "Pride Before a Fall? Orangeism in Liverpool Since 1945". In his conclusion, Day notices how numbers marching in support of the annual Boyne parade in Liverpool have fallen from 20,000 in 1980 to around 5,000 today, but the question he seeks an answer to is how we should interpret this, as a sign of a changing world or as a sign that people now believe but don't belong. Stephen Hopkins's essay "A weapon in the struggle? Loyalist paramilitarism and the politics of auto/biography in contemporary Northern Ireland" contrasts the personalisation of the Irish republican tradition with the absence of such a tradition among Protestants. However, as Hopkins points out, the list of autobiographical texts included at the end of the essay suggests a different story in the making.

Fintan Vallely's *Tuned Out: Traditional Music and Identity in Northern Ireland* (2008) continues this reassessment of the Protestant contribution to modern Irish culture. He writes well about Jackie Boyce, a Protestant singer from Comber in County Down, and quotes the singer saying "I must be the only person ever to have been called a Fenian bastard and a Protestant bastard in the one night – in the same pub, all for playin' Traditional music" (34). Only since the advent of the Troubles has there been an aggression about the music, and we are reminded of the way sectarianism once threatened to overshadow every aspect of the culture in Northern Ireland.

Frank Ferguson's *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology* (2008) deserves to be better known. In a short but generally persuasive introduction, Ferguson provides a justification for his anthology, motivated as it is by two questions: what is meant by the term 'Ulster-Scots' and what texts would constitute an anthology of Ulster-Scots writing? Ferguson is aware of the contentious field he is seeking to map, but in some respects that makes for this book's appeal. I particularly enjoyed seeing again W.R. Rodgers's "Epilogue to 'The Character of Ireland'" surrounded by other Ulster-Scots writing:

I am Ulster, my people an abrupt people
Who like the spiky consonants in speech

And think the soft ones cissy; who dig
The *k* and *t* in orchestra, detect sin
In sinfonia, get a kick out of
Tin cans, fricatives, fornication, staccato talk,
Anything that gives or takes attack,
Like Micks, Tagues, tinkers gets, Vatican.

This is the kind of verse you want to read out loud or hear someone from Belfast reading, for what we have here is English as a spoken language on display. The glossary at the end of the anthology contains more spiky consonants, and I cannot resist quoting some for the letter *k*. Keckle for cackle, ketched for caught, kilt for clothes well tucked up, kimmer for male companion, kipple for couple, kittle for tickle or irritate, krisnin for christening, kythe for show or display. We might not agree how we define this language, but there's nothing "cissy" about this anthology.

Other pieces I've enjoyed this past year include Anthony Cronin's essay on Beckett's Trilogy in Christopher's Murray's collection *Samuel Beckett Playwright and Poet*, published by Pegasus Books in 2009 but first issued in 2006. In the same volume there is a well-judged essay by Terence Brown on Beckett's middle-class Protestant background. As for Cronin's poetry, this receives particular acclaim by Paul Durcan in *The Poet's Chair: The First Nine Years of the Ireland Chair of Poetry* (2008): "It's the prose basis of his poetry that makes Cronin's poetry such pure poetry" (179). But I would have liked Durcan to have proved this in the passages he quotes from Cronin's verse. A review of *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (2009) is included in this issue below, but let me add something of my own. As Dennis O'Driscoll's essay serves to confirm, Heaney's politics continues to provide critics with several options, none of which can be at this stage definitive. Justin Quinn finds Heaney's engagement with Eastern European poetry "profound on the level of theme and superficial on the level of language" (102). In an intelligent and generally supportive essay, David Wheatley takes issue with Heaney's view in *The Redress of Poetry* of Larkin's 'Aubade'. And Neil Corcoran's essay on Heaney and Yeats threatens to provide the final word on the subject.

The burden of Calvin Bedient's *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion* (2009) is that "each artist shines the more by comparison" (21). Bedient is attracted to the Nietzschean feel for sensation and sees this in the poet, while on the other side there stands his brother Jack B. Yeats with his pursuit of the multiple. It would be difficult to disagree with the claim that the Yeats brothers disturb the living stream and that they don't fit easily into liberal views of tragedy, but I must confess I don't respond terribly well to the Nietzschean view of Yeats. There are, however, insights here which can only come from long periods of exposure to this line of thinking, as when he claims that Jack's work "thrives dangerously close to nothingness but stops short of rage, ill-will" (280), or that removed from social constraints, the poet's loneliness "discovered a desire to destroy its enabling conditions" (280).

For a contrasting view of Yeats and Modernism, published in 2004, I am reminded of Sinéad Garrigan Mattar's *Primitivism, Science and the Irish Revival*, a study which had its inception in the phrase about "our proper dark" from Yeats's poem "The Statues". With Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats in mind, Garrigan Mattar's interest lies in squaring "their instinctively romantic primitivism with the findings of comparative science" (19). Where Bedient uses the Yeats brothers as a platform for something else, Garrigan Mattar's inquiry is essentially about a return to history and its late-nineteenth-century contexts. This is also the place to mention two other recent contextual studies. Nicholas Allen's *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War* (2008) focuses on the decades after Independence and what he calls the "post-imperial landscape" (143) for an understanding of the Yeats brothers, "Irregular Joyce" and early Beckett. Mary Burke's *Tinkers': Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller* (2009), which includes a detailed discussion of the representation of the Irish traveller in the work of Synge, Bryan MacMahon, Juanita Casey, Rosaleen McDonagh, Tom Murphy, and Perry Ogden, is at the same time a timely shot across the bows of the scholarly community for its neglect of "the country's most marginalized minority" (274).

Heinz Kosok's *Explorations in Irish Literature* (2008) gathers together a range of essays written over a period of some thirty years and more. Inevitably, some are more distinguished than others. In an essay on the Great War in Irish drama he provides a valuable inventory of plays and where those plays were first staged. In another essay he argues for a reassessment of Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), while at the same he has some (unnecessarily) harsh things to say about Thomas Moore. In a final essay on the oldest of the New Literatures in English, Kosok underscores the exemplary role of Irish Literature for other emerging literatures round the world. He supports his argument by suggesting that colonial literature in Ireland and elsewhere begins in the subjective vision of lyrical poetry and in the more objective view of travel writing.

The reference to Croker's work calls to mind the continuing use of folklore in modern Irish writing. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's comments in *The Poet's Chair* focus in part of her origins as a poet: "I have always been fascinated by folklore, though I wouldn't have always called it by such a lofty name. What were they but little stories stitched into the everyday narratives around me, a five-year-old exile, back in my aunty Máire's house in Cathair an Treantaigh in the parish of Ventry in the mid-fifties" (146). In this regard I should also mention Davide Benini's thoughtful essay "A Voice from the West: Rediscovering the Irish Oral Tradition in 'The Dead'", which can be found in *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture* (2009), a book of essays reviewed below.

2009 has also been a year for celebrations. The Samuel Beckett Bridge, connecting Sir John Rogerson's Quay on the south side of the river Liffey with Guild Street and North Wall Quay on the north side, was opened by the Lord Mayor of Dublin in December. Brian Friel's eightieth birthday was celebrated in style by both the Gate Theatre and the Abbey Theatre with tributes, new performances of his plays, and a bronze plaque of his handprints to join those of Luciano Pavarotti, John B. Keane, Milo O'Shea, and Niall Tobin. The revival of *Waiting for Godot* at the Haymarket Theatre in London in May 2009,

with an all-star cast of Ian McKellen as Estragon, Patrick Stewart as Vladimir, Simon Callow as Pozzo, and Ronald Pickup as Lucky, was also something of a celebration. On display throughout was McKellen's Lancashire accent, a reminder that the Irish writer's play can incorporate so many different accents and yet still be itself. This production, directed by Sean Mathias, also brought out the way Lucky's speech draws attention to words and phrases already introduced earlier in the play. In that respect, it's a play full of connections like beads on a chain.

This is an appropriate moment to thank all the reviewers for their contributions to this issue and all the previous issues. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with so many different people from around the world who have given so generously of their time. This is also the place to thank Rosa Gonzalez for allowing me the space to carry out the reviews section for this journal over the last five years. That

estudiosirlandeses.org is now a flourishing journal is down to Rosa. This is her achievement and her legacy, to have got something off the ground on behalf of the Spanish Association for Irish Studies (AEDEI) and to make the journal available without subscription to students and scholars across the globe. Indeed, wherever Irish Studies is taught, the name of this journal will be known. I told Rosa some time ago when I retired that I would be relinquishing my editorship. This is largely because I am no longer in sufficient contact with people in the field. I see new books in Irish Studies appearing almost every week, and I think to myself, "I cannot do justice to the field now opening up. It's time to hand over the reins to someone who can." So this is what I am now doing. As a footnote, you always know it's time to go when you start writing memoirs, and this is what I've been doing since October 2009.

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David Pierce, now retired, lives in York. He has written books on Yeats and Joyce and on fiction and social class. He has also edited a four-volume edition of Yeats criticism for Helm Information as well as a Reader in modern Irish writing for Cork University Press. His most recent books are *Light, Freedom and Song: A Cultural History of Modern Irish Writing* (Yale University Press, 2005), *Joyce and Company* (Continuum, 2006; Paperback 2008) and *Reading Joyce* (Pearson Longman, 2008).

Brooklyn by Colm Tóibín (New York: Scribner, 2009)

ISBN: 978-1-4391-3831-1

Price: \$25

Reviewer: **Claire Bracken**

Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* tells the story of Eilis Lacey, a young Irish girl who emigrates from Enniscorthy, Wexford to Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s. The narrative begins in Ireland, as we are introduced to the very shy and retiring Eilis, who lives with her older sister Rose and elderly mother. Eilis's family is one marked by death and emigration; her father died a few years previously and her three brothers have all left for work in Birmingham. Jobs are scarce in the depressed economy of 1950s Ireland and Eilis, finishing a bookkeeping course, is struggling to find work. Her only option is a Sunday job in the shop of autocratic Miss Kelly, whose lashing tongue softens only for customers perceived to be of the 'right' social standing. Rose's pride in her sister, her desire for her to succeed and be treated with the respect she deserves, brings about a change in the narrative direction, as she sets in motion the wheels for Eilis's emigration. The passivity of Eilis's character in responding to this momentous and life-changing event generates real pathos in the story, as the reader is brought into contact with her unarticulated fears and repressed anxieties: "Even when she woke in the night and thought about it, she did not allow herself to conclude that she did not want to go" (30). However, go she must; Eilis embarks on a week-long, sea-sick journey across the Atlantic, arriving to her new home in Brooklyn, New York. Father Flood, an acquaintance of her sister Rose, has set Eilis up in employment as a shop assistant in the department store Bartocci's, and has her housed in an Irish boarding house. After an initial period of cultural climatisation, Eilis begins to settle in and get used to her new

surroundings and the narrative poignantly portrays her subjective development, as she navigates the different social and cultural terrains of 1950s post-war US society. Spanning just under two years, Eilis's time in Brooklyn facilitates her engagement in various sorts of friendship making (and breaking), church dancehall events, bookkeeping classes at Brooklyn College, and beach trips to Coney Island. She also falls in love. However, family events in Ireland require Eilis to return and the concluding sections of the narrative raise questions regarding what constitutes 'home' in the emigrant imaginary.

Like Tóibín's Henry James in his 2004 novel *The Master*, Eilis is constructed as a restrained character, guardedly watching life around her as it unfolds. The third person narrative is restricted to her viewpoint. Through this narrative device the reader gets insight into the dynamic relations between observation and act, thought and material reality. From the outset, Eilis is configured as a spectator in her own life, reflecting on herself, others and external situations. The opening line, holding resonances of the beginning of Joyce's short story "Eveline", reads: "Eilis Lacey, sitting at the window of the upstairs living room in the house on Friary Street, noticed her sister walking briskly from work" (3). The narrative establishes a specific philosophical relation between action and reflection, as Eilis responds to the happenings of her life, particularly her new life in Brooklyn, in terms of the need for contemplative space: "She could not wait to be alone, away from him, so she could contemplate

what he had just said” (148). Letters function in the narrative as the means through which the immediacy of material reality is re-packaged via thought, as Eilis reflects on her new world to her family at home: “She began to take note of all the details, thinking ... how she could include an account of them in a letter to her mother and Rose” (79). However, the directional relationship of happening leading to reflective thought is not only one-way. Rather, thought is also constructed as preceding the actions of material reality. As Eilis notes on her return to Enniscorthy and her family home: “she knew that her mother had been planning this moment when they would both stand in this doorway” (211). The novel repeatedly and insistently constructs this two-way relationship, thus demonstrating the way thought is embedded in the material reality it apprehends, innovatively configuring the materiality of thought itself.

However, it is not just the materiality of thought that the novel seeks to articulate, but also the materiality of society and social life. One of the extraordinary features of this novel is its skill in historical recreation. The textures of 1950s culture, in Ireland and the US, are made vitally present throughout, facilitated through detailed representations of material culture, particularly consumer objects. These objects are presented as active forces in the production of cultural meaning. This is particularly evident in a scene where Bartocci’s, the Brooklyn shop where Eilis works, introduces “Red Fox stockings”: “Coloured people are moving into Brooklyn, more and more of them ... We’re going to welcome coloured women into our store as shoppers. And we’re starting with nylon stockings. This is going to be the first store on this street to sell Red Fox stockings” (114). The material object of the nylon stocking functions here to reflect “the change going on outside the store” (114), while also actively participating in that change, by enabling shifts in the power and class structures of race relations. The material object is shown to have force in the actual enactment of social change.

On one level the insistence on materiality works to make this beautifully wrought novel of the 1950s immediately vital and alive for the reader. However, it also functions to rework dominant conceptualizations of the material as passive object. The danger of such a conceptualization is poignantly drawn through the character of Eilis. After asking Father Flood why he helped her in the emigration process, she is told that “we need Irish girls in Brooklyn” (81), thus positioning her as an object of exchange between cultures. Just like her letters, she crosses and re-crosses the Atlantic. The tragedy of her story lies in her positioning by others as an object with no power. *Brooklyn* works to caution against such pacification of what is constituted as material, functioning as a critique of the objectification of bodies, particularly women’s bodies, in a consumerist culture, something which speaks not just to the past but also to the present day. Furthermore, by intersecting consumerism with an emigrant narrative, the novel interrogates the construction of emigrant bodies as passive material objects that provide sustenance to the nation in which they arrive. *Brooklyn* reworks such cultural constructions through a powerful first-person narrative, which renders the material vital, energised and alive.

Claire Bracken is Assistant Professor of Irish Literature and Culture in the English Department at Union College, New York, where she teaches courses on Irish literature and film. She is currently co-editing a collection of essays on the contemporary fiction writer Anne Enright (Irish Academic Press, forthcoming 2010) and a book on Irish film and visual culture (forthcoming 2010). She is also working on a monograph entitled *Irish Feminist Futures?*

Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture by John Brannigan
 Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009
 ISBN: 978 0 7486 3883 3 (hardback)
 246 pp. £65.00

Reviewer: **Patricia Coughlan**

Complex processes have constructed white Irishness, and we are only beginning to understand these. This excellent book is a welcome addition to the slowly-growing literature on this subject. Brannigan's premise is that race is and has been a category actively at work in Ireland, at least since the foundation of the State. Specifically, he argues that Irish national identity, as a social formation, always was founded on what are, in effect, recognizable as racial assumptions: this has its roots well before 1922, in Herderian, more or less essentialist, positions about organic identity. From the outset he distinguishes his own project from some influential post-colonialist criticism, noting the partial blindness of the latter to the active workings of racism and racialised perspectives in Irish culture and society from even before the achievement of independent statehood. The racialisation of the Irish has been well elucidated, but scarcely at all that by the Irish: Brannigan adds his enterprise to those already fostering this uncomfortable realization. He questions the idea that "a people secure in their national philosophy", in Declan Kiberd's phrase, will thereby be all the more capable of solidarity with ethnic others, but rightly acknowledges a 1990s counter-current within post-colonialist criticism (e.g. Deane, Innes, Lloyd) towards making common cause with other formerly colonized peoples.

The book does not attempt a full, chronological history of Irish representations of race, but rather analyses specific nodes of cultural production and of race-sensitive events and transactions, over eighty years or so, with a

short prefatory look at the earlier twentieth century. It draws on the important social-science scholarship on race in Ireland (by Lentin, Garner and others), and internationally by David Theo Goldberg, as well as historians' elucidation specifically of the numbers, circumstances and experiences of Jews in Ireland and of Irish anti-Semitism. Brannigan's work is contiguous with that of other recent investigators (e.g. on Travellers, Hayes and Lanter) in the gradual constitution of an anatomy of Irish racisms.

But his own focus, as a literature scholar, is cultural: he reads race as a cultural construct and argues eloquently, and hopefully, that it depends upon the aesthetic sphere for its authority and affective power, and therefore can be resisted by the cultural intervention of alternative and dissident voices. In literature, he discerns and implicitly endorses a moment of critique of the predominant vision of community as "repressively homogeneous and stiflingly insular". He shows convincingly that the operations of Irish nation- and identity-construction are clearly – and most often oppositionally – revealed in writing (and painting). He analyses literary and theatre texts of varying stature, ranging from *Ulysses* (a particularly rich and compelling discussion), O'Flaherty, and (briefly) Beckett, through Edna O'Brien, Aidan Higgins and Behan to more minor work including MacDonagh's 1921 comedy *The Irish Jew*, fiction by MacManus and Plunkett, and Clarke's satire "Flight to Africa"; a case-study of Dublin black rock musician Phil Lynott ends the final chapter.

The argument is also sustained by other kinds

of documents. Archives include the Harvard physical anthropologists' mid-'30s phenotypical study of Irish faces, with their disturbing eugenics-inflected implications; there are also fascinating records from the 1922 Paris Congress on the Irish Race, with its speeches by both Yeats brothers, 1925 reports on the State's first deportation (of a self-styled "Prince of Abyssinia"), and the 1960s government's dismissive responses to persistent discrimination against African students.

Chapter 2, the longest, is entitled "Face Value". At its centre is the Harvard study, which curiously combines empirical measurement and positivistic classification of racial types with value-laden assumptions concerning ethnic purity and other social-symbolic meanings. Brannigan appropriately prefaces his discussion of this archival material by recalling that disturbing equation of Irish identity with Western racial hegemony, Yeats's "The Statues" ("measurement began our might..."). The anthropologists' findings are placed in the context of facial representations in O'Flaherty, Jack Yeats and Beckett: the latter two robustly reject the notion that the human face can legitimately be read as a racial sign. Particularly good is the tracing of Yeats's development away from illustrative art (shown at its strongest, and most directly nation-oriented, in the Synge collaborations) towards his mature modernist-expressionist style. This transformed his rendering of the face and perhaps also stripped his Irish faces of ethno-national representativity.

This strategy of contrasting these radical aesthetic and ideological visions with 1930s phenotypical assumptions is highly effective. Brannigan's reflection on the face in Levinas and Wittgenstein is a little too elliptical and its implications for the overall argument obscure. A more concrete issue this chapter explores well is the warm welcome given the Harvard study by both Free State and Northern governments; Catholic suspicion of eugenics discourses seemed overcome by the flattering attention (in both jurisdictions) of these distinguished scientists and the prospect (congenial, as Brannigan shows, to Free State ideology) of a vindication of Irish ethnic purity.

Derrida argues: "there is no home without the foreigner": Brannigan's third chapter analyses the nation-state as constituted by the exclusion of others even while guaranteeing rights to its own citizens, a troubling paradox widely explored in the theoretical literature on racism. A "racialising" State is identified in the developing 1930s-'40s struggle between *ethnos* and *demos*, where a "civic, modernising nationalism" meets a "recalcitrant" ethnic one with intensifying anxieties about the infiltration by "strangers" of a national character often defined in terms of organic authenticity. In the Free State imaginary, "the foreigner" played a role grotesquely out of proportion to the minuscule numbers of actual foreigners; we see how in these decades, fears of a notional cosmopolitan rootlessness merged with pre-existing hostility to the former colonising power, shadowing the notional ideal of Irish hospitality.

The "alien" is a significant trope in Johnston's 1932 *Moon on the Yellow River*; there are effective readings of the challenges posed by female foreigners' transgressions against bodily containment and regulation, in later fictions (by Kate and Edna O'Brien and John Montague). Higgins, by contrast, rejects the "exotic fantasy of the foreigner as agent of social change" with his sexually predatory, parasitic Otto Beck in *Langrishe Go Down*. A 1956 Plunkett story about the social marginalisation of a Polish refugee character completes this suite of texts which are said to expose "the figural limits of the nationalist project". While Brannigan sees an "exhaustion of imaginative and ethical resources" in the mid-century Ireland these fictions *represent*, he argues that they can *themselves* be read as contesting such limits and such exhaustion.

Chapter 4 argues that 1960s-'70s Ireland evinces continuing "prescribed" racial figurations which hinder the recognition of heterogeneity. While Behan's *Richard's Cork Leg* stages a black character who might be meant to "dislodge fixed identifications", his blackness is an unstable trope, skirting stereotype, and 1972 reviewers were underwhelmed, as also by Desmond Forristal's 1974 debate-play about missionaries and Nigeria, which revealed the

ambivalence of Irish gestures towards cross-racial solidarity. The discussion here is more sketchy and is unavoidably foreshortened by the as-yet-unfolding impact of multi-cultural immigration.

Clare Boylan's *Black Baby* (1988) and Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum! Asylum!* (1994) broke new ground in examining Irish welcomes from the perspective of racialised "others", but before the concrete reality of such others' presence. Brannigan ends by reiterating the key role of race within the "social glue of the nation-state". He also restates his governing imperative: that Ireland must find ways to imagine community and integration "beyond the terms of national or

racial affiliation". On the other hand he reads, in Irish culture's recurring expressions of radical doubt – from Joyce onwards – about the "ideological legacies of nationalism" and "the validity and efficacy of racial ideologies", signs of hope.

Prof Patricia Coughlan teaches at University College, Cork and has published widely on Irish literature. She is currently completing a monograph on subjectivity, gender and social change in Irish literature 1960-2005.

Making Ireland Irish: Tourism and National Identity since the Irish Civil War by
Eric G. E. Zuelow (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009),
HB ISBN: 978-0-8156-3225-2
328 pp. \$39.95

Reviewer: **Joan FitzPatrick Dean**

Making Ireland Irish uses tourism as a cultural and political measure of how Ireland imagined itself and how it wanted to be seen by others. To survey eighty-five years since Irish Independence, Eric G. E. Zuelow draws on archival work in Dublin, Cork, Belfast, and elsewhere, including the National Archives, the Bord Fáilte Photographic Archive, and the Public Records Office, Northern Ireland. His extensive research is indispensable because tourism, an especially sensitive barometer of Irish culture and self-image, sought consensus between the private and public sectors, between a cosmopolitan centre and the storied provinces, between centralized authority and regional initiative.

Zuelow's first three chapters provide a chronological overview of tourism between 1922 and 1994; his last chapter, "Tourism and the Tiger", considers the historic changes in not only tourism but also Ireland between 1994 and 2007. Intervening are three thematic chapters devoted to culture and language, to the construction of the Irish history, and to the treatment of landscape.

Tourism is an especially engaging subject because it brings together the least likely of bedfellows: politicians and artists, hoteliers and newspaper editors, civil servants as well as the brewers of Guinness. Zuelow begins with key questions: was tourism in the national interest and, if so, what image should Ireland project to the world? Both questions proved central after Irish Independence, not only to tourism, but also to theatre, literature, music, and the visual arts.

Competing and sometimes mutually exclusive

notions of to whom and toward what Irish tourism should direct its energies vied for state funding, corporate partnership, and popular support. Should resources focus on attracting those interested in the Irish language? How could state agencies negotiate between tourist's expectations for a quaint, "authentic" experience and yet avoid kitsch-laden, theme-park "Paddywhackery", especially at events such as the Puck Fair in Kerry? What images best represented Ireland's past, present, and future?

In the tumultuous early years of the Irish Free State, the Irish Tourism Association superseded regional tourism boards. Despite the Cumann na hGaelheal government, the early years of the Irish Tourism Association was dominated by what one of their number C. S. Andrews described as "a coven of ex-IRA men" (16). By 1929, no fewer than thirty-six separate publications hoped to attract domestic as well as foreign tourists. In fact, until the economic impact of tourism was undeniable, some, including E. T. Keane, editor of the *Kilkenny People*, aggressively opposed encouraging foreign visitors and any tourist scheme that might drain government resources.

A crucial moment came in the 1960s when "Irish *poverty* was reformatted to symbolize Irish *purity*" (117; original italics). Zuelow effectively synthesizes regional and national initiatives, the workings of a host of government agencies (as various as the Office of Public Works, the National Graves Association, the Department of Finance, and the Department of Foreign/External Affairs). Beginning in 1962, Bord Fáilte promoted Ireland as a "land of

festivals” (133) and awarded grants to regional sponsors in support of events like the Yeats Summer School, the Dublin Theatre Festival, and the Cork Film Festival.

Twentieth-century Irish tourism was shaped by legislation, not only by governmental fiscal appropriations but also by such as the 1929 and 1952 Tourism Traffic Acts, the National Monuments Act, and a host of other thoroughly-debated legislation. A persistent challenge to tourism was the construction of a version of Irish history “that would not offend outsiders while also assuring equanimity within Ireland itself” (153). That political opponents in Fianna Fail and Fine Gael might disagree on any account of Irish history, especially events from the early twentieth century, seems self-evident. No matter. In many instances, “little attention was paid, either by tourists or the Tourist Association, to the actual history of the sites/sights in question” (138).

One of the most interesting case studies in *Making Ireland Irish* is the restoration of Kilmainham Jail and its eventual development as a tourist destination. For nearly two decades the work of a private voluntary group, the Kilmainham Jail Restoration Society, kept alive the vision that Kilmainham could be restored. More than just restored, Kilmainham Jail was transformed: what was once a site of oppression and suffering was recast as one of heroism and triumph. Zuelow’s coverage ends in 2007, but the Pearse Museum and St. Enda’s Park in Rathfarnham, which the Office of Public Works opened in late 2008, offers yet another instance of the striking transformation of an historical site.

Zuelow’s contribution can also be read as an overview of the development of one of Ireland’s most important industries. Although some efforts to attract foreign visitors, such as the Aonach Tailteann in 1924, 1928, and 1932 might have been more fully documented, a singular strength of Zuelow’s study is the remarkable spectrum of media covered. Print publications, such as *Ireland of the Welcomes*, festival programmes, guidebooks, postcards, advertisements, as well as pageants, films, radio broadcasts, and even postmarks (that urged “See Ireland First”) all figure in Zuelow’s highly readable analysis. *Making Ireland Irish* joins several recent publications – including *Ireland’s Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity* (2005), edited by Mark McCarthy (to which Zuelow contributed) and Guy Beiner’s *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (2007) – in an ambitious project to map Irish heritage.

Joan FitzPatrick Dean teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In spring 2010, her book *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth Century Ireland* will be available in paperback.

Love and Summer by William Trevor (London: Viking, 2009)
 212 pp. £12.99
 ISBN: 978-0-670-91824-9 (hardback)
 978-0-670-91825-6 (paperback)

Reviewer: **Constanza del Río**

Faithful to his practice of alternating short stories and novels, after his collection *Cheating at Canasta* (2007) William Trevor has recently published a new novel, *Love and Summer* (2009). In it Trevor chooses provincial Ireland - the Ireland of his short fiction and life experience, the Ireland of the small town and scattered farms on the hills - to stage a moving drama that develops during a hot summer in Rathmoye, Co. Tipperary, in the 1950s. The world of the Big House, so central in many of Trevor's previous novels about Ireland, has become in *Love and Summer* just a ruined and ghostly presence, but one that will nevertheless play a crucial role in this novel's unexpected denouement. Most of the narrative, though, is infused with the feel of the small town and the farm; a world of tractors, cows and Rayburns, of pubs, lodging houses, Bovril and Bisto.

Rathmoye seems to be a place where nothing happens, or so its people say. Yet, a knowing narrative voice soon ironically alerts the reader: "That nothing happened was an exaggeration too" (3). After an initial section of omniscient narration and bird's eye view to present the town and some of its inhabitants, the focus starts to fall alternately on the main characters, all of them introduced with economy of means coupled with psychological depth, this being an art in which Trevor excels. Thus we learn that in Rathmoye there is indeed a lot going on, if only emotionally, under a calm surface. Some characters are haunted by their pasts and corroded by guilt, resentment or a sense of failure. Others, it is true, are content with what they have since there is so very little they have been taught to expect from life. For ones and the others, things will change with the arrival in

town of a stranger, Florian Kilderry, a young man who will inadvertently set in motion the characters' desires and feelings, including his own.

There is Ellie, a young, beautiful, childish and innocent foundling, the heroine of the novel. Raised in an orphanage where furniture, clothes and schoolbooks had all been passed on, and educated by nuns, she has learnt to accept and be grateful, and considers that she is fortunate to have been hired as a maid and then proposed marriage by Dillahan, a widowed farmer older than Ellie whom she does not love. Ellie's discovery of love with Florian plunges her into an emotional turmoil from which she will emerge, if not unscathed, at least more experienced.

There is Dillahan, Ellie's husband, a silent man always kind and gentle with Ellie. Permanently worried about his farming and the new field he wants to buy, Dillahan is secretly haunted by a sense of shame and guilt for the tragic accident in which he ran over and killed his first wife and child. His only solace is his young new wife who, as he confesses, has made it easier for him by helping him to confront his irrational fears.

Florian Kilderry is the stranger, a young Protestant man in search of his own destiny and a place he can call home. When he cycles for the first time into town to photograph Mrs Connulty's funeral, he immediately attracts Ellie's and Miss Connulty's attention. Only son of bohemian and gifted parents - lapsed Catholic Italian mother and Anglo-Irish father - he nostalgically idealises his dead parents, their lifestyle and their mutual love and devotion. He feels he failed them in their artistic expectations

for him and he moves through life letting things happen, only realising the consequences of his thoughtless acts when it is frequently too late. Now he has made the decision to sell the family country house and immigrate to Scandinavia. Burning and disposing of the contents of the house convey Florian's symbolic goodbye to his parents and memories of the past, and his intention to start from scratch and find his way in life. Yet, while getting ready for his final departure and chosen exile, during the hot season he gets involved in an adulterous love affair with Ellie. For him, this relationship is just a summer friendship; a casual relationship similar to previous ones and pursued for the same reasons, that is, to help him forget his unrequited love for his Italian cousin Isabella: "This beginning was as previous beginnings had been, its distraction potent enough already. Isabella would never be just a shadow, but this morning an artless country girl had stirred a tenderness in him and already his cousin's voice echoed less confidently, her smile was perhaps a little blurred, her touch less than yesterday's memory of it" (84).

The novel starts with Mrs Eileen Connulty's funeral and the reader is soon offered an insight into her daughter's consciousness. Miss Connulty is a middle-aged single woman, whose hatred and resentment at her unsympathetic and domineering mother and secret joy in her death are superbly expressed in how she fondles her mother's jewellery, now finally hers. Miss Connulty keeps her past secrets too: in her youth she had a love affair with a married English man who disappeared leaving her pregnant. Against the mother's will, Miss Connulty's father took her to a Dublin chemist's shop to terminate the affair. Fond as she is of watching people from her window, Miss Connulty soon realises that something is going on between Florian, "a plunderer" (88), and innocent Ellie. Influenced by her own experience, Miss Connulty will try to protect Ellie from a destructive liaison, as if Ellie were the child she could never have.

There are in *Love and Summer* other secondary characters, such as Joseph Paul Connulty and his devoted secretary, Bernadette O'Keeffe, excellently realised, but one deserves special mention for the role he will unwittingly

play in the novel's conclusion. This is Orpen Wren, the fool, the madman who tells the truth even when he is fantasising or confusing the present with the past. Orpen was librarian of the St Johns, the Anglo-Irish family who left the county many years before. Only the gate-lodge remains now of Lisquin, the St Johns Big House, but, loyal to the Anglo-Irish family, Orpen still awaits their return and lives "in both the present and the past" (42). So potent is his desire that it is materialised when he mistakes Florian for George Anthony St John, old George Freddie's grandson.

With these characters and these raw materials Trevor weaves a drama where chance, loneliness, bitterness, nostalgia, guilt, shame, acceptance and generosity play a fundamental part. While the reader follows the protagonists in their daily chores, tasks or activities, magnificently and realistically detailed and narrated, s/he glimpses their innermost desires and feelings as well. There is irony in the narrator's approach, but sympathy too. At the end of the novel, one gets the feeling, and this differentiates *Love and Summer* from previous novels by Trevor, that the characters are finally spared a tragic fate. The events of that hot summer bring about a sense of catharsis in some characters or the ability to learn and mature in others that redeem them and help them accept and confront life. This is a novel to be relished, read and reread. Only William Trevor can write a passage such as the following one: "The events of that day had not receded for Miss Connulty. Her cruelty to the dead was their ceremonial preservation: the time for pain was over, yet her wish was that it should not be, that there should always be something left – a wince, a tremor, some part of her anger that was not satisfied" (76).

Constanza del Río is Senior Lecturer in British Literature at the University of Zaragoza. Her research centres on contemporary Irish fiction, narrative and critical theory and popular narrative genres. She has published on these subjects and on writers Flann O'Brien, Seamus Deane, Eoin McNamee, William Trevor, Jennifer Johnston and Kate O'Riordan. She is co-editor of *Memory, Imagination and Desire in Contemporary Anglo-American Literature and Film* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter. 2004).

Painting Rain by Paula Meehan (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009)

Reviewer: **Luz Mar González Arias**¹

The (Un)Reliability of Poetry

Paula Meehan's sixth full-length collection to date, *Painting Rain*, opens with two quotes, the first of which is taken from the Buddhist text *The Diamond Sutra*: "Words cannot express Truth. That which words express is not Truth". These two sentences function as a useful piece of advice on how to approach poetry in general and the poems in this collection in particular. Reading poetry has conventionally involved an exercise in bio-criticism that inevitably links the "real" life of the poet to what the poetic persona is experiencing in the texts. Unlike novels and plays, poems – that are supposed to stem from the guts, from the deepest regions of the poet's inner landscapes – hardly ever offer the practitioners of the genre an artistic shield to protect their privacy. The biographical reading of poetry is at odds with postmodern conceptions of language as a constructed, mediated means of apprehending the world and has often deprived poets of a feeling of safety within their own creations. The quote above, however, problematizes any aspirations of poetry to convey "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth", and fosters instead a reading practice that moves between the private and the public, the real and the imaginary, the historical and the fictional. This blurring of boundaries becomes particularly relevant when approaching Meehan's collection, concerned as it is with youth, trauma, death and the possibilities of healing through language and memory, in other words, the very stuff that has traditionally nourished bio-criticism.

The second quote that opens the book – "[t]he

1. The author of this review wants to acknowledge her participation in the Research Projects FF12009-08475/FILO and INCITE09 204127PR for the study of contemporary Irish and Galician women poets.

mysteries of the forest disappear with the forest" – is provided by Irish poet Theo Dorgan and addresses the issue of environmental damage that is going to underpin a good number of the texts. The aggressive proliferation of building sites during the years of the Tiger together with international debates on global warming have turned the so-called eco-critical perspective into a very relevant artistic and academic discourse, and Paula Meehan has arguably become the poetic voice most frequently associated with that agenda in Ireland. Her poetry resists the mere invocation of landscape as a bucolic site for nature's equilibrium. The eco-political poetics of *Painting Rain* is presided over by that crossing of boundaries previously referred to, so that the preservation of landscapes is intimately linked to the preservation of the history of the community and/or the individual. In "Death of a Field" (13-14), for example, the world of nature and economic interests form a binary opposite that leaves no space for reconciliation. A litany of nature's losses – dandelion, dock, teasel, primrose, thistle, sloe, herb robert, eyebright – lies in poignant contrast with the artifacts of consumerism – Flash, Pledge, Ariel, Brillo, Bounce, Oxyaction, Brasso, Persil – and results in an apocalyptic mantra: "The memory of the field is lost with the loss of its herbs"; "And the memory of the field disappears with its flora". In a similar vein, in "The Mushroom Field" (87) a "ten storey apartment block / and a shopping centre" are built at the expense of the eponymous field the poetic persona and her father used to walk. Poetry here becomes the archive of memory that nature itself should be if preserved and respected: "our footsteps, // the vestiges I lay down on this page / side by side, in the same rhythm, now; / making a path through autumn rain".

But what makes the collection quite unique for its ecological potential is that this agenda is brought to the heart of the city. In her previous work Meehan had found creative impulse in the urban landscapes of her native Dublin's North Inner City. *Painting Rain* is no exception in this respect and the poems go back to Dublin – Seán McDermott Street, Bargo Road, the areas around Parnell and Gardiner streets – as it looked before the redistribution of urban spaces brought about by the boom and the massive arrival of economic migrants. The city is at times the site of gender and class oppression, as in “When I Was a Girl” (52) and the “Troika” sequence (74-80), but it is also a space whose natural elements become palimpsests of memory that record the different stories they witness. And so, in the sequence “Six Sycamores” (28-33) the trees acquire the same archival potential as the flora of the fields usurped by the building sites. In Meehan's urban contexts nature is that “spring blossom falling like snow” (33) that, in Joycean reminiscence, functions as a pervasive presence embracing the wealthy and the underclass, the male and the female and, once more, the nationally public and the personally private alike. Meehan's Dublin clears a space for the representation of previously invisible collectives. If the statue of Molly Malone in *Dharmakaya* (2000: 25) became a symbol for “the cast off, the abandoned, / the lost, the useless, the relicts”, in *Painting Rain* the Christmas tree in Buckingham Street preserves the memory of the children who died from drug addiction “[h]ere at the heart of winter / Here at the heart of the city” (47-48). The same streets “that defeated them / That brought them to their knees” (47) are utterly transformed by nature to become a monument to societal problems associated with the north side.

Painting Rain is also remarkable for its inscription of physical pain in a good number of its pages. Meehan has always shown a special interest in the elegy as a means to come to terms with loss and grief. However, the articulation of emotional pain is here complemented by the representation of physical distress, pain and suffering. Elaine Scarry's seminal work on the body in pain pointed at the poignant silencing of these experiences in art and literature as, she contends, the body in a state of decay shatters linguistic articulation, that is, it has the capacity

to resist language. Dealing with illness has often confronted artists with the validation of this subject matter as poetic material, not to mention the ethical dilemmas such a thematic choice might involve. Meehan, however, bravely introduces uneasy physical experiences into her lines and creates a space for previously silenced forms of embodiment. The poetic persona of “From Source to Sea” (70) caresses the scars of a tortured body whose pain is “beyond comfort of song or poem” and enlarges the meaning of beauty to encompass its distortions and deviations: “I trace its course from neck to hip, its silken touch, / its pearly loveliness”. Similarly, the effects of chemotherapy or the physical descriptions of sexual abuse and trauma find a space in poems such as “Cora, Auntie” (38-48), “Peter, Uncle” (41-44) and “A Reliable Narrative” (76-78).

Meehan can be described as a very formal poet for whom rhythm and the breaking of the line are at the centre of creation. However, her poetry does not exclusively come out of verbal fluency. As she herself has acknowledged, she is not “attached to either received forms or free forms. I will use whatever the poem demands” (González-Arias 195). For anyone attending one of Meehan's readings the texts read will never be the same, impregnated as they become by the rhythms of the poet's breathing, by her intuitive – although often very formally accomplished – breaking of the lines. In this respect, *Painting Rain* is an eclectic collection that reflects Meehan's interest in the symbiotic relationship between form and content, and where the line at times resists the constrictions that the poetic persona is finding in class consciousness, in trauma and in grief. And so, the suggestive “How I Discovered Rhyme” (74-75) makes use of images with a high evocative potential – the shape of Ireland, Christmas dolls, grass, “feathers like some angelic benison” – but turns them into signifiers for a new rhyme, a new poetic form that brings the marginal into the centre of representation.

As it was only to be expected from any new poems by one of Ireland's most acclaimed voices, *Painting Rain* has already attracted a lot of critical attention and the special issue *An Sionnach* devoted to Paula Meehan (edited by Jody Allen-Randolph, 2009) includes many

essays that look at the poems here reviewed. After reading this substantial collection we cannot but reflect once more on the choice of quotes that precede the poems. All the seemingly autobiographical material the poet may be drawing on is presented without the protective aid of mythical shields. Even a sequence such as “Troika”, that explicitly uses the Greek pantheon as a starting point for what is to follow, does not deploy this background as a means of escaping historical commitment through a comfortable distance. The narratives represented in this collection are “reliable” (76) but “not confessional” (78), leaving the reader in that limbo between the real and the imagined, the truth and the fiction or, in other words, the reliable and the unreliable. This liminal space is

part and parcel of the limitations of good poetry. It is also its main source of strength and pleasure.

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Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009)

Edited by Nessa Cronin, Seán Crosson and John Eastlake

ISBN: 9781443801522

274 pp. €43

Irena Grubica

Exploring the multifaceted ways in which, as the editors of the book point out, “modern Irish culture has navigated its way through the ‘surrounding seas of orality’” (4) this outstanding collection of essays embraces interdisciplinary approaches ranging from ethnography, literature, visual art, history, music, film, theatre and women’s studies and sets out to animate one of the most debated topics in the history of Irish society and culture, the interrelation between the oral and the textual and their role in the formation of modernity. The most challenging vehicle for this brave voyage through the impressive array of heterogeneous material is the application of the concept of orality informed by Walter Ong’s theoretical work to different intersecting cultural discourses. This invites various methodological approaches and paves the way for rejecting the oversimplified dichotomy between orality and textuality by which orality has traditionally been aligned with “the Irish language, the traditional and rurality, and print literacy with the English language, modernity and urbanity” (4), in order to point out at their co-existence in various forms of cultural production.

The nineteen essays included in the collection are the fruitful product of the conference organized by the Centre for Irish Studies, National University of Ireland, Galway in 2006, which gathered both emerging and established scholars in the field. The distinctiveness of this event, which is also reflected in the collection, is a choice given to speakers to present in one of the Ireland’s main languages, Irish and English, according to their own preferences and enabled by the simultaneous translation facilities, so that

English speaking scholars could engage with the works of their Irish speaking colleagues. However, we can note with regret that only one essay in the collection is printed in Irish accompanied with its English translation.

A personalized authorial voice resonates throughout the opening essay by Gearóid Ó Cruaí and the closing essay by Henry Glassie, referred to in the contents as the ‘prologue’ and the ‘coda’ of the collection, which give a vivid account of their living and work in Cork and Ballymenone respectively and how various people and events informed their methodology and understanding of storytelling. Featuring also as authentic narratives about the rich fieldwork experience of these two leading figures in folklore research, their essays appropriately provide a compositional frame into which other essays are embedded and dynamically interrelated.

A diverse yet coherent nature of this collection is achieved by the division of essays into three sections. The first section *Ballad, Song and Visual Culture*, energizes the whole collection not only by exploring interesting relations between tradition, authenticity, orality and the visual but also by providing reassessment of some contentions long taken for granted and by inviting the possibility of new approaches. Thus, in the opening essay Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg proposes to re-examine the possibilities the folk tradition can offer for the study of the agrarian oath-bound secret societies of pre-Famine Ireland such as Whiteboys and other less known illegal, clandestine groupings arguing that “vernacular source materials, the great bulk of them oral and in the Irish language, have been

more or less ignored” (27), although “they offer exceptional insight into the mindset of people and communities involved in agrarian protest” (27). He undertakes a microhistorical examination of one incident of agrarian protest showing how history, seanchas and memory work in the representation of “the battle of Cèim an Fhia» in County Cork and makes the point that «the worm’s eye view of popular protest has still to be written” (27). In similar vein Julie Henigan emphasizes the need to diverge from the most common use of the terms oral and orality among Irish folklorists and folksong scholars. Instead of restricting their reference only to the means of transmission and performance she proposes to consider them as a “phase of cultural and cognitive development” (41) providing interesting analysis of “folk” vs. “literary” in some eighteenth-century Irish songs.

The relevance of the widespread genre of ballad for Irish folklore tradition is undisputable, but the influence of the printed ballads, according to a ballad singer and collector John Moulder, seems to be overestimated. In his essay he discusses the functioning of printed ballads in nineteenth-century Ireland and suggests that from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century there were two strains of printed balladry, popular and elite. As his research reveals, backed up with some excerpts from the editorials of *The Nation*, The United Irishman and Young Ireland Ballads were mostly elite products, and had less powerful influence than previously noted in the works by scholars such as Kevin Whealen and Seamus Deane because they mostly failed to move into a vernacular milieu among people whose verbal functioning was predominantly oral. As Moulder argues, “they were written for the eye rather than the ear, and consequently unintelligible and unsingable” (61). Their popularity went hand in hand with increasing literacy among the general public and reached its peak toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Equally revealing is Deirdre Ní Chonghaile’s essay dealing with traditional music of the Aran Islands, which shows how the collectors’ opinions of orality, their motivation, and inclination to the myth of Aran shaped the canon of Irish traditional music and our understanding

of it. She makes interesting point that the unpublished elements in their collections reveal “some changes that were then occurring in the Aran musical milieu” (71) while the published elements are more “representations of an ideal than of actuality” (71). Shifting the thematic focus from music to the representation of orality in visual images, Jenny McCarthy’s essay on Jack B. Yeats’s *A Broadside* discusses the important role this periodical had in the preservation of the dying tradition of broadsheet ballads in Ireland and examines Yeats’s first and last illustrations of ballad singers contained therein. The relation between the oral and the visual is further explored in the essay by Sheila Dickinson. Although she does not fully answer the intriguing question mentioned at the beginning of her essay “why have there been no great Irish artists?” (99), referring in particular to the absence of leading women artists, her remarkable analysis of four performances and new media video and projection artworks by women artists convincingly shows how this form of artistic expression articulates the expressive needs of contemporary artists in a country that “continues to function with a residually oral culture” (100).

The essays in the second section *Testimony, Identity, and Performance: Speaking the Self* mostly deal with oral testimony and memoir. These genres encapsulate the complex role of orality in the representation of identity, illustrate tensions between individual and collective identity formation and also enact the issue of gender identity. Ray Cashman’s essay, therefore, appropriately focuses on the construction of local identities through traditional, vernacular speech genres in Northern Ireland, in particular storytelling at wakes, the rare occasions for mixed Catholic-Protestant gatherings. Cashman argues that genres of folklore could serve to dismantle the conventional contentions about the construction of sectarian identities such as opposing Catholic and Protestant identities, the two predominant compound ethnic, political and religious identities, proving that they are not the only possible collective identities in Northern Ireland.

The ensuing two essays by Catherine O’Connor and Yvonne McKenna, perhaps less

appealing to the general reading public than the previous one, but extremely well documented and without doubt of relevance to women's studies, draw on the oral testimonies of two different social groups of Irish women in order to examine the interrelationships between gender, religious and social identity. The first essay deals extensively with the oral testimonies of Church of Ireland Women in Ferns in the time span between 1945 and 1965 arguing that "while women were essential to the preservation and survival of the religious identity of the Church of Ireland during these years, they also acted significantly in the reproduction of gender identity" (135). On the other hand, the second essay explores the construction of Ireland in the oral history narratives of Irish women religious by highlighting the pivotal images of Ireland in the stories of this particularly neglected group of Irish migrants.

Daniel Campbell's memoir, one of the most fascinating narratives of pre-famine Ireland and also one of the few available accounts from a poor layman's perspective, is the focus of Eugene Hynes's essay which argues against straightforward reading of this and similar narratives embodying conventions commonly found in orally transmitted material. It shows that the underlying meaning of the stories is more important than their factual claims and that making sense of "mistakes" in them can give valuable insights since, according to Hynes, "'mistakes' in factual claims provide powerful evidence of what was most meaningful among storytellers and their audience" (156). The section concludes with Sarah O'Brien's essay on narrative encounters with the Irish in Birmingham which demonstrates how oral narrative can "help us understand the events that reconfigured Irish immigrants identity in Britain" (169).

The third section *Origins, Revivals, and Myths: Orality and Literary Production* is in some respects complementary to the first one because it sets out to critically re-evaluate subjects that have already been extensively researched and written about, such as the works of Irish canonical writers Edmund Burke and James Joyce, and could perhaps be considered as

the touchstone of the whole collection. By highlighting the interrelations between Irish literature and the realm of Irish oral tradition and by deepening our understanding of how some genres of oral tradition were mediated in literary production it provides remarkable new insights. Katherine O'Donnell convincingly traces the influence of the oral culture of eighteenth century Munster on Burke's later philosophical and political work giving interesting insights how literary and debating clubs Burke founded while a student in Dublin and a politician in London share some patterns he encountered at poetic and social gatherings in his formative childhood years.

Various relations between music and the works on James Joyce have already been extensively explored in the works by e.g. Matthew J.C. Hodgart, Mabel Worthington, Ruth Bauerle, Zack Bowen and Timothy Martin but the two essays by Lillis Ó Laoire and Davide Benini dealing with Joyce's "The Dead" provide interesting fresh readings of Joyce's short story drawing primarily on the context of Irish oral tradition. Ó Laoire examines "the liminal context of festive performance through dominant symbols of dance, song and general entertainment" (199) in Joyce's "The Dead" and Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* in a comparative analysis of the "rich, sonically keyed textures of their writing" (199). Bennini's essay also seeks to rediscover the Irish oral tradition in "The Dead" attempting to read the story as the "allegory of Joyce's discovery of a model of Irishness compatible with his own artistic self" (205) and convincingly explores the interpretative potentials of poetic genre of *aísling* linked to the medieval tradition of vision poets, as he argues, encoded in the symbolic layers of the story as well as Joyce's possible reference to "the old Irish tonality" (209) in the story as a manner of *sean-nós* singing tradition in Ireland which, as his essay interestingly reveals, might have

been of more relevance to Joyce than it has previously been acknowledged in criticism.

The tension between orality and textuality is further explored in Mary O'Donoghue's essay on Conor McPherson's play *The Weir* and Ronan Noone's play *The Lepers of Baile Baiste* both "propelled by male volubility and its discontents in the theatrical setting of the bar" (217) in which listeners "may be said to perform the most destabilising work" (226). Máirín Nic Eoin's essay, the only one in Irish, gives a comprehensive survey of the influence of oral genres on modern literature in Irish and the section concludes with John Eastlake's remarkable and meticulously elaborated view of the origin of the Blasket Island autobiographies, one of the most unique and distinctive group of texts originally written in Irish. Eastlake is particularly focused on the intricacies of production in which the role of the native, the editor and the translator contribute to the formation and transmission of the text, and his essay is the only one in the collection that overtly

addresses the issue of translation, which perhaps could have deserved more attention and could have opened new horizons to the vast sea of orality these essays graciously glide through.

Anáil an Bhéil Bheo provides an enlightening encounter with some of the defining genres and authors of modern Irish culture. It guides the reader through the discursive space between orality and textuality, present and past, at the junction of many disciplines in a time-span of the last two formative centuries underlying the interconnections and prevailing concerns in the ongoing process of modern Irish cultural production. It serves as a rich, well-documented source and a valuable reference for all the students and scholars of Irish

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Molly Fox's Birthday by Deirdre Madden (Faber & Faber, 2008)
978-0571239658
221pp. £12.99

Reviewer: **Pauline Hall**

“It’s only life”

In this compact, intriguing novel, Deirdre Madden revisits themes that she addressed in an earlier one, *Authenticity*. *Molly Fox's Birthday* also brings to life the artistic sensibility, artistic success, and artistic careers. The anonymous narrator, a playwright, here practises her craft as she “summons up people by thinking about them.” Drama stems from conflict, and amongst these exceptionally cultured characters, conflict is muted, but not absent. By withholding the narrator’s name, Madden is playing with the idea that her identity is bleached out by the two friends she summons, the two friends who fascinate her. Her fascination is shot through with the urge to choreograph how the protean Molly Fox, actor extraordinaire, and Andrew Forde, polished TV art historian, relate to her and to each other. The novel celebrates the magic of the theatre, where artifice is the means to achieve truth. In a lovely phrase, Madden describes how Molly, by enacting the emotion of an imaginary woman, the Duchess of Malfi, calls forth from the audience a real emotion: how, from her lonely stance on the stage, she achieves for the audience “a breaching of loneliness.”

“Things are not quite on the level,” Madden writes. Here, authenticity may be essential, but it is also elusive. The narrator’s is the voice that filters the world of the novel, makes us complicit with her version of events. Unreliable narrators first appeared in mystery tales, like *The Moonstone* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Madden’s book is set on a perfect Irish summer day, yet she deploys some of the same devices as Collins and James did, qualifying the narrator’s reliability by deft planting of tiny details, and holding the quality of surprise right to the end of the book. The narrator’s own artifice in

construction of a self, of a history, cannot prevent the leakage of significant facts. These make her progressively more, not less, interesting and (giving the lie to her self-critical commentary) ultimately more interesting than either Molly or Andrew. Each of them has also constructed the self they present to the world.

In contrast, members of the large cheerful Northern Irish family from which the narrator springs have, apparently, little need of artifice. As a consequence, they seem less evolved. Yet authenticity can be found, even where there is little common ground, as the narrator shrewdly observes, “How important formulaic conversations are to the sustaining of affection.” One example of artifice, Andrew’s dropping of his Northern Irish accent, has significance for the relationship of Ireland with England, where accent is a proxy for class. The narrator does not say if she has done the same: it seems unlikely.

Madden makes skilful use of devices from classical drama, by keeping the action to the time frame of a single day (albeit the longest day of the year), by shifting into flashbacks, by interposing moments of discovery into her chronicle of time past. Scenes from time past are smoothly embedded in the main narrative, the present time of midsummer in Dublin. As she house-sits for Molly, the narrator struggles with writer’s block, traces key moments in the interlinking stories of herself, Molly and Andrew, from their *jeunesse dore* days at Trinity to their current celebrity. The two characters, born (like Madden herself) in Northern Ireland, illustrate and reflect on two versions of Northern Ireland families: a multi-generational bustling Catholic family, and a truncated, more reserved Protestant one. For the narrator, the ethic and the

aesthetic don't line up neatly in the difference between the two kinds of church.

At one point, the narrator wonders: "Who is Molly when she's alone?" The closer she approaches to Molly, the more Molly seems to recede. The house, the garden, and her elegant possessions promise to unlock her essence. But these clues both reassure and unsettle. When the narrator breaks a jug, it heralds other disturbances.

Each of the three main characters has a deep relationship with a brother, relationships summed up in objects given as gifts. Madden excels in describing the gesture of someone holding a small intricate object, and underlining what it communicates. The narrator's brother Father Tom (by far the most sophisticated of her siblings, not cramped by his round of mundane parish duties) gave Molly a small olivewood bowl from Jerusalem. Molly's troubled brother Fergus gave her a miniature chess set. Andrew's ambivalence about his loyalist paramilitary brother Billy and his Northern Ireland heritage shifts when the clumsy signet ring that came to him from Billy is transformed from something he dismissed as ugly and loaded with unhappy meaning, into a treasured moment.

It would spoil the enjoyment of the last third of the novel to say more than that, as in fairy-tales, the narrator receives three visitors, none of them expected. Each opening of the front door in its way disrupts the mood of the day, and counterpoints the memories she has wound and unwound. Each encounter functions as a discovery, forcing the narrator to revise her assumptions, and forcing readers to revise their

assumptions about her story. Fergus, for instance, introduced as someone with serious psychiatric problems, is the character that most exemplifies authenticity, and paradoxically, has, against the odds, retained the most mature sense of self.

As the longest day draws to a close, the narrator moves away from the hall. This, of all rooms of the house, most strongly evokes Molly's public life and success. The narrator achieves a wrap on the emotion that has surged up there. She attends to a simple end of evening ritual: the winding up of the long case clock, whose dark narrow wooden compartment seems to her "to hold time itself", the time of their past experience, as well as the time of the day that unfolded in the novel. Andrew's comment "It's only life" reaches to reconcile past and present. The final passage of the novel pulls the narrator back from her personal dilemmas by a deft opening to the strangeness, the randomness of the natural world.

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Last Train from Liguria by Christine Dwyer Hickey (London: Atlantic Books, 2009)
 Pb ISBN: 9781843549871
 392 pp. £12.99

Reviewer: **James McGrath**

The identities of people, periods and nations are compellingly mercurial throughout Christine Dwyer Hickey's fifth book. Though packaged like a standard historical novel, it defies predictability throughout. Atlantic Books' teacherly blurb is justified in emphasising the sustained confrontation of "how identity and history are both mutable and inextricably linked". *Last Train from Liguria* starts in Dublin in 1924 and concludes in the Italian town of Bordighera in 1995. In the ambitiously wide-ranging cast of characters, only the most incidental are confined to any one nation. Aptly, the main protagonists' names, Edward King and Bella Stuart, connote royal figureheads of mixed national identity.

Fleeing Dublin for Italy after murdering his sister, Edward adopts his name (plus an English accent) after noticing an advertisement for King Edward cigars. In Liguria, blackmailing his former music tutor into giving him an immaculate reference, Edward secures work teaching piano to Alec Lami, the lonely child of an eminent Jewish Italian family. Meanwhile, the Stuarts leave Dublin for London after Bella's adolescent passion for her surgeon father's colleague incurs what remains, for most of the novel, an unspeakable incident. As a thirty-two-year-old spinster in 1933, Bella arrives in Italy to work as a tutor to Alec. Sailing from England, the shy Bella (born Annabelle) contemplates renaming herself Anne ("an indefinite article", p. 19). Edward and Bella, exiled Dubliners, are thus united in Italy while acting as surrogate parents to a melancholy, eccentric child against the backdrop of Fascism.

Throughout the novel, overt parallels emerge between key characters across generations, enhancing their depths via both symmetries and contrasts. In the later settings, Bella ("Nonna") is shown from her granddaughter's viewpoint. As if inheriting the repressed half of Bella's character, the contrastingly unreserved granddaughter is named Anna. However, most pivotal to the novel, albeit less foregrounded, is Alec, "the outsider looking in" (p. 159).

Continuing a pattern well-established in popular fiction of the past decade (Hornby; Haddon) Alec's appearances repeatedly suggest autism – or more specifically, Asperger's Syndrome. However, it is significant that these terms are unused here, and not only because Alec's appearances (confined to the 1930s) predate Hans Asperger's seminal 1944 outline of this condition's manifestations. Dwyer Hickey's novel also appears at the end of a decade in which three books by Dublin-based psychiatrist and autism specialist Professor Michael Fitzgerald have pushed Irish writers including Swift, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett into what seems to be emerging as an autistic canon. Fitzgerald contributes boldly to autism studies in such works (2004, 2005 and with Antoinette Walker, 2006). Yet for me at least, Dwyer Hickey offers more to this field through fiction than Fitzgerald does through speculative biographical reconstructions. Dwyer Hickey indirectly prompts questions concerning Asperger's Syndrome as a condition which – as the term may suggest – exists significantly in the view of the beholder. Here, the novel's quiet emphases

on the fluctuating nature of identity are most poignant and perhaps most important. For the most part, Alec appears “extremely awkward” (p. 163) to those unready to understand him, particularly at school. Conversely, when he is shown with Bella and Edward, Dwyer Hickey’s unobtrusive yet judiciously controlled post-Haddon invitations to autism-spotting largely cease. Thus, through one of this historical novel’s most notably ‘contemporary’ facets emerges a valuable feat in character construction. Unlike Fitzgerald’s James Joyce (*et al*), Dwyer Hickey’s Alec is not ‘autistic’; Alec is Alec.

Inextricably melded to the complex identities of its characters, the novel’s main settings – within and between Ireland, England and Italy – reinforce themes of transience and transition. Trains, hotels, pubs and (in the Lamis’ villa) an atmospheric library-come-apartment feature prominently. The later counterpart for Bella is a darker place of transition: a home for the elderly.

Last Train from Liguria could be superbly stimulating in both universities and book groups. The vast array of minor characters make close reading essential in order to keep up with the constantly-moving plot; but through the almost self-referentially multiple layers of implication, there is much to speculate and indeed debate. Most pertinently, this novel prompts us to consider national identity as both an essential and an existential notion. The dialogue favours the former, with frequent generalisations concerning the English, Americans, Italians and Germans (continuing the “outsider looking in” motif, there are few such comments on the Irish). However, these crude observations are continually revealed as ironic by the broader narrative.

Nations and indeed continents are themselves effectively characters in this novel, and like the people who represent them here, these concepts are shown in continual change. “Europe”, an American character observes in 1933, is “in foul mood” (p. 100). Anna’s 1995 confession of knowing little regarding Italian anti-Semitism during World War II could have summarised my own viewpoint prior to reading this book. However, *Last Train from Liguria* is both informed and informative, as alarmingly rapid amendments to Mussolini’s racial policies are narrated via the dialogue. These events culminate in Bella’s attempt to bring the half-Jewish Alec to safety in London. The characters’ differing but changing attitudes to racism in Mussolini’s Italy make for unsettling reading on the British mainland in 2009. The evocations of England as, in part, a refuge from the rhetorical poisons of fascism now seem eerily nostalgic.

As the remaining pages of this mysterious novel become fewer with much remaining unrevealed, we are led to expect a spectacular conclusion. This we receive, but not in any predictable novelistic manner. Scope for a sequel is readily apparent – but this does not mean that the plot is unresolved. Equally evident – through the lively dialogue, the charming descriptions of music, and the captivating evocations of time, space and mood—is the potential for this novel to provide the basis for an internationally-themed Irish film for the coming decade (Dwyer Hickey, it is unsurprising to learn, has previously worked as a screenwriter).

Much as national identity is never confined to one land in this novel, the reading experience is not confined to the pages. By turns uplifting and disturbing, *Last Train from Liguria* lingers in the mind like a haunting song.

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James McGrath has recently submitted his PhD at Leeds Metropolitan University, where he lectures in English Literature and Cultural Studies. His thesis compares representations of home, class, nation and religion in the songs of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. He is also pursuing a further research interest, exploring the value of interdisciplinary Cultural Studies toward understandings of high-functioning autism.

The Origami Crow: Journey into Japan, World Cup Summer 2002 by Éamon Carr (Dublin: Seven Towers, 2008)

ISBN 978-0-9555346-5-2 (case bound); 978-0-9555346-6-9 (perfect bound). 75 pp.

Leaf, Sunlight, Asphalt by Ben Howard (Cliffs of Moher, Co Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2009)

ISBN 978-1-907056-13-0 (paper). 69 pp.

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

Two poets from Irish departures enter Matsuo Basho's path. Basho (1644-94) inspires Carr and Howard towards reconciling the mundane with the profound. Basho, known for what Carr calls "the most famous lines in Japanese literature", wrote in one haiku these three: "Ancient pond –/ Frog jumps in/ Water-sound". Drummer, lyricist, and 'conceptualist' for the Irish electric-folk rock band Horslips, after an earlier stint with the poetry collective Tara Telephone, Carr shares with Iowa-born, upstate New York-based Professor Howard a long career in verse. For both, the East lures these Westerners towards a calmer perspective grounded in nature and forbearance. Although this is Carr's first collection, compared with Howard's sixth, both men bring to their slim new volumes a broad range of experience travelling through Ireland and abroad. They integrate popular culture, the toll of aging, sport, and pleasure into their recollections made largely in tranquility.

Carr, now a sports broadcaster and cultural commentator, leaves Dublin having planted seeds in his garden. He follows not only Basho's footsteps but the kicks of the Irish World Cup team during their initial matches in Japan. Roy Keane's dramatic departure from Mick McCarthy's national squad before the games begin devastates all who support the "Boys in Green". The tension between the team's predicament as underdogs and Carr's own pilgrimage towards a quieter example of fortitude adds unexpected force to his summer journey.

In a series of prose-poems, Carr describes the sights and sounds of Japan, mixed with his recollections of the first televised match he saw, that of the soon-doomed Manchester United

team many of whom would die in a 1958 plane crash in Munich. This in turn blends with the memory of his mother, dead from cancer then at thirty-one. Against such frailty, Carr strives to rise to the opportunity provided by his visit.

At the Takasegawa River, he watches the local folks float lit lanterns downstream "to console the spirits of their ancestors" (27). Where Basho honoured his own stay there, so does Carr: "I listen to the music the river makes as it dances over rocks that have been cleverly placed to create just such a symphony and notice how close the twinkling machinery of the heavens seems. I find a key to an ocean of calm beyond the nameless gates of the everyday".

His life tracks the same direction on "the road under a full May moon". As he continues across Japan, the matches go on and Ireland manages to pull two draws to survive in the competition. The team bus airbrushes Keane from its exterior image, "his form by now an ominous black silhouette. A dark star at the heart of the squad's aspiration" (53). Ireland battles on against the odds, and like Carr, perhaps knows that defeat, whether with his mother, ManU, or himself, may loom. Nevertheless, he does not stray from his mission.

His fellow countrymen may not share his direction. In Roppongi, thinking that our narrator heads for a pub, "a man from Sligo" joins him (55). Carr must correct him. He aims for an obscure shrine "where many of the samurai families once worshipped". The next line tells us simply: "I'm travelling alone when I arrive at the shrine, with its grove of camphor trees and ginko".

Frequently on his pilgrimage, Carr seeks the less-travelled road. He finds on "the wide swift

Sumida River' where the old poet "began his journeys. This is the place to which he returned. This is ground he walked on. I sit beneath the basho tree and close my eyes" (67). There in the breeze he hears the same sounds Basho did "every day he sat here". In the wind, "it's a voice I recognise. A voice that calls across the fields, and the years, from among the branches of the trees in a County Meath graveyard". There rests his mother, who died when he was a boy. He seeks for her poor body and great soul the epiphany that the "wind in the basho tree" grants.

Reminiscent of Joyce's "The Dead" not with a general snowfall so much as a gentler rustle, Carr reaches the moment of insight. "It is then. It is now. It is beyond and outside time. There's a growing luminosity. It surrounds a large bright vessel that's overflowing with tears and with light for the world. Compassion and grace. For the dead. For those still living. For us all. For my young mother. And for that boy".

Even if the Irish team had not achieved more than two draws and a win, Carr would have left them on his already charted direction home. The team went on to Korea, fought on to the last sixteen knockout round, but lost to Spain on penalty kicks. "The World Cup remains a dream" (73). His own dream more compact, Carr comes back to his Dublin garden to find "a fine crop of blooms". He learns the same lesson from life as taught by Basho: "While travelling, everything seems temporary.— And of course, everything is transient. Like clouds in the sky, like flower blossoms, like football teams, nothing ever remains the same. — In this impermanent world, we should attempt to hold family, lovers, friends, and heroes in our hearts forever" (75).

By such clarity, Carr leaves on every page here a single haiku, surrounded by such reflections. These episodes do not strive for great drama. In the spirit of their Japanese inspiration, Carr avoids complexity. He aligns himself with Basho's perspective; in the sights seen by Basho, Carr sees his own.

For Ben Howard, *Leaf, Sunlight, Asphalt* extends this poet's own Eastern perspective, sharpened by his own Irish exchanges. A critic of its literature and a practitioner of Zen, Howard places himself at the same crossroads that Carr

meets. For Howard, however, Dublin represents not home as it does for Carr with his garden, but a reminder of a past literary glory and a present but elusive revelation.

"The Glad Creators" opens part one. He wishes he'd been born a decade earlier, "an able novice setting out,/ Equipped with confidence and cautious diction/ But all the same a lamb among those lions/ Who frequented McDaid's and Davy Byrne's,/ Reciting Yeats or Ferriter by heart/ Or bellowing invectives to the rafters/ Or sitting meekly with a ball of malt" (13). He conjures up Behan and O'Faolain, Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien, and Parsons Bookshop with "May O'Flaherty/ Who made a temple of a common shop" (16). Howard takes on his forebears but betrays no anxiety for their influence. He sizes up each lion, and returns each glance steadily.

"Dublin in July" contrasts South Great George's Street, "this street that's no more Irish than its name" filled with panini, tandoori, noodles, and "The cell phone bleating from a stylish belt" (20). Here, he asks: "What has become of that revered, imagined/ Dublin of O'Brien and O'Faolain,/ Its taste as Irish as a ball of malt?" It may be found in Liverpool or Boston or a pint of Guinness, Howard muses, but not among the traffic press of Vespas.

Evanescence flows through these linked poems as through Carr's; both know their return to a place they sought will weaken their memories from what they have read, once revealed as real. Howard fondles his latest poetry volume in 2004, in a place with "bamboo screens suggestive of repose" (22). Yet, its name warns of a lesson learned by Carr. "The Samsara Bar and Café' stands in Buddhist teaching for "the never-ending/ cycle of birth and death, the end result/ of ignorance, aversion, and desire". He contemplates his new book of verse, one more poet with one more added to a long line of Dubliners native and not. He recognizes a truer moral that tempers his morale, sitting in the café with "its sparse calligraphy replete with meanings/ well beyond my ken".

From such moments of comprehension and mystery, Howard creates his contemplation. His verse moves firmly, as confidently as the "cautious diction" favoured by McDaid's lions.

Yet, as with Carr, Howard hesitates. He retreats from hubris. "Leaving Tralee" finds: "As for the page/ I'm writing over tea too hot to swallow/ I see it as a sieve, through which the pungent/ odor of last night's fish" from the clattering kitchen reminds him of the passing patrons in his hotel's lobby, "and all the sights I have or have not noticed/ are passing to their final destination" (27). His yellowing journals remind him of an "aging hymn" and seem "no less formless than a jotted dream".

Part two surveys his Midwestern childhood. "Original Face" takes on the Zen koan: "What was your original face/ before your parents were born?" (31). He concludes, after gazing at a photo of his mother and father on a canoe earlier in their courtship about "the son who can't be seen/ but nonetheless abides/ somewhere in those waters,/ those high Midwestern clouds" (32). He anticipates, in hindsight, "all the hoarded thought of forty years together" that his parents shared.

For now, Howard recalls his own dimming childhood memories. For Carr, these filled with death: ManU and his mother. For Howard, they remain more innocent tastes and smells and sounds. Part three invites Thomas Merton's "lucid silence" to continue such a return to purity. Howard lives near where Merton summered as a poet-critic himself before he entered the Trappists; Howard finds Merton's hard-won wisdom elusive today. Like that English professor turned monk, Howard lingers within nature for solace. "One Time, One Meeting" (also the name of Howard's spare meditations collected as his blog) summons in Zen fashion the entry of the ethereal into the ordinary. It begins: "Picking up the phone to call my son,/ I entertain the thought that every act,/ No matter how familiar or banal,/ Might be construed as unrepeatable/ And all of life as ceremonial" (49). Precisely, Howard as has Carr moves forward on his determined path, to blaze into the everyday a trace of the otherworldly, which in its own universality permeates life.

Life passing, mortality for both poets waits. "What I May Rely On" reads in full: "Turning into nothing, all those days/ Remain in memory as though their patterns/ Persisted when their dyes had long since faded./ Here is the morning sun. And here is dusk/ Consuming every tree on

the horizon".

It continues: "Turning into forms of which I know/ Only a little now, my own two hands/ Tell me that the bones beneath that skin/ Are what I may rely on to continue,/ Whatever may come of mark or wrinkle" (58). Howard finds in his body's reduction to not skin but bones his own sign, a Jolly Roger of sorts to mark his sailing over another ocean towards a port he cannot imagine. Carr came full circle back to his Dublin garden to find renewal as the seeds planted on his departure grew into flowers. Howard circles too, within the persistent patterns of nothingness that endure far longer than any plant's dye, lost in the diurnal glow of savage sun and altering night.

The collection finishes with "Right Livelihood", on the occasion of his retirement from teaching. The speaker fumbles as he struggles to find for his professorial peers the proper tone. He refers to Philip Larkin, who called in his university appointment his supervisor 'Toad', but then opts for a more diplomatic, and Zen-like, address. He chooses 'Frog', but "not the frog that brought/ enlightenment to Basho" (66). He chooses a croaking hungry creature as his avatar. Seeking to ease aspersions rather than to cast them at his colleagues, he calms himself.

Borrowing "a leaf/ from Basho's heritage", he calls his collegial faculty by invoking the Buddhist injunction to Right Livelihood and Right Speech in hopes of truth. He seeks in his verse as in his valedictory speech a signifier "that indicates what's there/ and never what is not;/ that waters seeds of joy/ and equanimity", but one that in truth also calls out "greed and cruelty" when necessary. As with Carr who admires in the refusal to capitulate to defeat Basho's own example of fortitude under pressure, so does Howard evoke the same haiku master's heritage to guide him on a path less directly trod by the Japanese poet and his Irish follower, but one which whether in the streets of Dublin or the corridors of a college in upstate New York keeps to the same fidelity.

John L. Murphy coordinates the Humanities program at DeVry University in Long Beach, California. His current research includes the invention of the concept of 'Celtic Buddhism'.

The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725 – 2001 by Liam Harte
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

344pp £55

ISBN: 9781403949875

Reviewer: **Tony Murray**

In recent years, the Irish have played a prominent role in the popularisation of autobiography and memoir both in Ireland and further afield. This, of course, has been largely due to the extraordinary success of one particular book. In the mid-1990s, *Angela's Ashes*, for better or worse (depending on your opinion) did for Irish literature what *Riverdance* did for Irish traditional music. But, perhaps because Frank McCourt is often accused of being the instigator of the 'miserabilist' turn in autobiography, surprisingly little attention has been recently paid by Irish critics to this deep and rich seam of literary endeavour. Liam Harte went some way to redressing this situation by editing a welcome collection of essays on the subject three years ago. Now he has turned his attention to a specific corner of this canvas by investigating the autobiography and memoir of the Irish in Britain.

In light of the recent upturn in Irish migration to Britain (a projected 25,000 per annum will be making the journey in the next five years), the book has a timely relevance. Beyond the facts and figures about such trends, which can only tell us so much, accounts like the 63 collected in this impressive anthology enrich our understanding of the lived experience of migration in numerous ways. Phrases in his introduction such as "the first recuperative survey" and "open up a largely untrodden landscape" indicate the self-consciously pioneering spirit with which Harte has approached his task. Every migrant has a unique story to tell but, just as importantly, the way in which they tell that story reveals clues to the psychological and emotional impact the experience has had on their personal identity. Harte's approach helps to illuminate this by showing how Irish migrants represented

themselves in their own cultural vernacular, as opposed to the often stereotypical images we are familiar with from both the British and Irish media.

One of the most valuable services the book provides is to problematize the common perception of the Irish in Britain as predominantly victims of exile. The rich heterogeneity of the narratives exemplifies, what Harte refers to as, the "multiple ways" in which migrants reflected on their experience and, as a result, their sense of Irishness. Some of the texts included here will be familiar to scholars of Irish literature: those by writers such as Patrick MacGill, Louis MacNiece and Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, for instance. But others won't, especially the fascinating extracts from works written in the 18th and 19th centuries by colourful individuals such as Laetitia Pilkington, for instance, who vividly describes her nine-week incarceration in Marshalsea Prison in 1742. Likewise, John O'Neill who provides an endearing account of his attempt to track down his father in London's West End in 1808, or the redoubtable Jane Jowitt who recalls her travels around Yorkshire in the early 19th century attempting to sell her poetry. It is notable how women writers are more prominently featured the further back in time the survey delves. Whilst they account for almost fifty per cent of the pre-20th century inclusions (albeit from a smaller sample overall) they only constitute about a fifth of the rest of the anthology. This is surprising given the wealth of female accounts in more recent times. The inclusion of extracts from memoirs such as Nuala O'Faolain's *Are You Somebody* (1998), Bridget Boland's *At My Mother's Knee* (1978) or the autobiographical accounts of their experiences in England by

Katherine Tynan, Eavan Boland or Ethel Mannin would have helped to redress this imbalance.

The experience of migration might itself be conceived of as a form of narrative. It could be said to have a beginning, a middle and an end. But there is a dichotomy between how such an experience is lived and how it is later recorded. The role of narrative (and the inherent relationship between the facts and fictions of which it is the product) is crucial, therefore, for understanding the way diasporic identities are shaped. In his introduction to *The Literature of the Irish in Britain*, Harte rehearses some of the methodological complexities this presents for researchers. He rightly warns, on the one hand, against the dangers of overly-literary analyses which might dissolve the lived experience of such accounts into “the ether of textuality” whilst, on the other, the danger of reading the testimonies as transparent factual relics of the past and ignoring their undeniable constructedness and aesthetic import. He opts, instead, for an interdisciplinary approach. In the helpful prefaces he provides to each text, he chooses to read his sources as both social history and cultural artefact. So, for instance, where Bill Naughton’s autobiography, *Saintly Billy* (1988), is constructed around the trauma of uprooting from his native Mayo in the early 20th century and is “a compelling exercise in redemptive recollection”, Alice Foley’s *A Bolton Childhood* (1975), a second generation memoir set in the same Lancashire town a few years earlier, incorporates both “documentary description” and “quasi-Wordsworthian” flourishes in its depiction of its subject’s political empowerment.

As both of these texts demonstrate, some of the best autobiography on the Irish in Britain in recent years has been motivated by second generation experiences. It is unfortunate, therefore, that some the most absorbing and critically-acclaimed examples of this from the last decade are disqualified from inclusion by the cut-off date of 2001. John Bird’s *Some Luck* (2002) springs to mind, as do Blake Morrison’s *Things My Mother Never Told Me* (2002) and John Lanchester’s *Family Romance* (2007), both by writers who, whilst often regarded as quintessentially English, nevertheless reveal how their Irish mothers left a profound impact on their lives and identities. It is the sorry lot of anthologists, of course, to never be quite as comprehensive as they or their readers might wish. But, given the inevitable constraints on such enterprises, Liam Harte has clearly taken great pains to be as representative as possible. He should be congratulated for producing such a meticulously researched volume and bringing a fascinating and unduly marginalised genre of Irish literature firmly to our attention.

Tony Murray is Deputy Director of the Irish Studies Centre at London Metropolitan University and co-producer of the film, *I Only Came Over for a Couple of Years...: Interviews with London Irish Elders* (2005).

Disguise by Hugo Hamilton (London: Fourth Estate, 2008)
272 pp. £12.99
ISBN 978-0-00-719216-8

Reviewer: **Paul O'Hanrahan**

In the two decades since his first Berlin novel, *Surrogate City* (1990), Irish-German author Hugo Hamilton has been much concerned with surrogacy and the need to compensate for life's failings by creating alternatives. Published in 2008, Hamilton's most recent novel, *Disguise*, also set in Berlin, is a meditation on personal and post-war German history, which begins with an act of surrogacy. In the chaos and panic of a wartime air-raid on Berlin, a mother loses her child; later, in Nuremberg, her father finds a three year-old in the midst of refugees drifting from the east and offers it to his daughter as a replacement. There follows a shift in the action to 2008 and a scene of apple-picking in an orchard in Jüterbog, Brandenburg, on the southern perimeter of Berlin. The forwarding of the action by six decades allows for a retrospective view of how the foundling child, now identified as Gregor, has fared in his life. In his early development, suppression within the family of questions about his adoption becomes a source of contention. Following a conversation with an uncle, Gregor's discovery that he might be of Jewish origin leads him finally to leave the family home after an unresolved argument with his parents. Gregor's frustrations with a repressive family environment are epitomised by a scene in which he lets off a hunting rifle in the family kitchen, causing minor damage, but illustrating the anarchic violence bred by the suffocating domestic atmosphere. In *Disguise*, Gregor's struggle with an authoritarian father is emblematic of the family conflict which characterised the 1968 generation in Germany; it is also a theme which courses through Hamilton's work, reflecting the author's own difficulties in his upbringing in Ireland when he was forced to conform to the strict nationalist regime of his Irish father.

Gregor's name echoes that of the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Like his namesake in the Kafka story, Hamilton's Gregor inspires familial consternation and paternal antagonism through an identity which he has inherited and over which he has little control. In both cases, a family constructed on conformist expectations is unable to accommodate individual singularity. *Disguise* describes Gregor's unsettled peripatetic life as he seeks to find an environment in which he feels at home. A musician, he becomes accustomed to a travelling lifestyle and, although he has a wife and son, spends long periods away from his own family. The likelihood of another generation being disfigured by the disruption caused by a problematic father is only countered by the successful nurturing of Gregor's son, Daniel. The latter is coaxed through some dysfunctional episodes by his wife, Mara, with the support of Martin, a sympathetic friend of the couple who becomes a surrogate father to Daniel.

The dual Irish-German cultural context of Hamilton's work is apparent when Gregor teams up with an Irish musician. Later he travels to Ireland and looks up his erstwhile musical partner but the indifferent reception he receives is far from the hospitality stereotypically associated with the 'Green Island' beloved of many Germans in the decades after the war. Gregor stays in Ireland and finds work but he is largely anonymous within Irish society and makes no friends, apart from the conversational bond he develops with a Jewish dentist from Poland. The period is significantly defined by Gregor's absence from traumatic moments in his son's development such as his admission to hospital after an overdose. On receiving the news of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gregor returns to Nuremberg to visit his mother, who is

dying. Here an allegorical reading of the narrative is clearly signalled when Gregor's reunion with his mother, at which he is also joined by his own family, coincides with the dawning of German reunification. Reviewing the story, Gregor's wanderings and separation from his own family can be read as a representation of the rootlessness of divided Germany in the post-war period.

Resourceful women, notably including his own mother as featured in his memoir *The Speckled People* (2003), are a recurrent element in Hamilton's work. Research carried out by Mara, Gregor's wife, into her husband's possible Jewish origins reveals her to have a determined, investigative nature comparable to Christa Süsskind in Hamilton's novel *The Love Test* (1995), who pursues enquiries into abuses perpetrated on her and her dissident husband by the Stasi, the notorious East German secret police. Mara's research is inconclusive but is another important act of surrogacy in sustaining the relationship between Gregor's family and his mother in the absence of Gregor himself.

The relaxed and supportive environment of a contemporary orchard around Gregor's narrative has the effect of encompassing the alienation and trauma of Gregor's turbulent past and the wartime stories associated with his relatives. By joining family and friends in a pastoral setting, ultimately Gregor is shown as willing to accept that he is at home and that the people who surround him embody what he has become. Hamilton in this novel is particularly forthright on identity as a construct rather than a birthright and, by presenting his friends as an alternative family who come to constitute Gregor's identity, the narrative asserts how the embedding of personal history in supportive relationships can be as formative as environment and family of origin. As Gregor's friend, Martin, observes: 'His identity is the people he's been living with' (259).

Although Jewishness itself is not probed in depth in the novel, *Disguise* displays the uneasiness of post-war German attitudes to Jewishness, an issue which has come to the fore with unification and the need for Germany as a whole to recognise the country's Nazi past. One of the novel's strengths is the trenchancy of its narrative voice, one example of which is the

confidence of its pronouncements on contemporary Berlin, in which the city is credited for its ability to absorb and learn from its tragic experience:

The city is vivid with history. Layers of it in every suburb, coming up through the streets, in people's eyes. A chamber of horrors, but also a place of monuments and devotion to memory. A place that has no time for greatness any more and celebrates instead the ordinary genius of survival. A wounded place at the heart of Europe, eager to heal and laugh (96).

Praised by critics such as Hermione Lee for the strength and originality of its wartime scenes (*The Guardian*, 28 June 2008), Hamilton's portrayal in *Disguise* of the German civilian experience of war aligns him with writers such as W.G. Sebald and Günter Grass, both of whom have in recent years expressed the need to redress the neglect in recording the suffering of the Germans in the Second World War. As described in *The Speckled People*, Hamilton's sensitivity to German suffering had its reflection in his own youth, when, as a child of mixed Irish and German parentage, he was regularly taunted as a Nazi by some of his peers. The accusation was particularly hurtful as his German mother was herself a refugee from the Nazi regime.

Disguise is a novel which reflects on action and behaviour rather than presenting it directly. This may distance some readers who enjoyed the immediacy of *The Speckled People*, but the strong narrative presence enables the text to function as a novel of ideas, at once showing *and* telling how identity is constructed and can be created. Beginning with wartime destruction and ending in the contemporary discovery of a pastoral place, this is a novel informed by an optimistic vision of our times.

In the second volume of his memoirs, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), Hamilton describes how Berlin became a haven for him when he discovered the city as a young man. Similarly, in *Disguise*, Berlin in the sixties is seen as a site of renewal, the place 'for everyone to begin afresh' (43). Further recognition of the city's emancipatory influence is embodied in the use of a rural Brandenburg setting which reconnects Berlin with the hinterland from which it was severed by the Cold War division of the

city. Reflecting the trajectory of post-war German history and of the generation which has endured and shaped it, *Disguise* shows how friends become more than surrogate in nurturing new forms of family and identity:

Gregor Liedmann has been brought to life by Mara, by his family, by the external story created around him, existing only inside those experiences he has shared with others (254).

Once again assuming the mask of fiction, Hamilton reveals how close the novelist's trade is to the everyday business of constructing our own characters and narratives, and, by advocacy of an ethic of mutual support, would seem to

imply that in understanding how our relationships make us what we are, the better we together have the potential to become.

Paul O'Hanrahan is currently studying at the University of Liverpool for a PhD on the representation of Berlin in English language texts published in the twenty years since the fall of the Wall and entitled *Discovering Berlin: Genre, Space and the Individual, 1989-2009*. He is also a performer who specialises in interpreting the works of James Joyce through site-specific readings and theatrical presentations in Dublin.

The Twelve by Stuart Neville (London: Harvill Secker, 2009)
 326pp. £12.99
 ISBN: 9781846552793

Reviewer: **Laura Pelaschiar**

Stuart Neville's *The Twelve* sits comfortably within the well-known tradition of the Northern Irish Troubles Thriller, a highly popular subgenre which has been thriving in Belfast and surroundings since the early seventies when it first saw the light of day. As Neville's debut novel seems to demonstrate literary genres can only with difficulty survive the end of those very particular and specific political, historical, and social circumstances, which engendered them in the first place.

One would have thought that, after the Good Friday Agreement, decommissioning, and the setting up of the Northern Ireland power-sharing executive, after all the painstaking work that went into the political and cultural steps that make up the Peace Process, that a novel like *The Twelve* might have become obsolete, out of date, out of place, out of literature. Instead literature is an unpredictable organism and what should have been dead and buried has the power to survive against the odds. Given that the advent of the Post-Troubles era which should have buried the Northern Ireland Troubles thriller, Neville's novel comes across as a sort of ghostly apparition. It is therefore most appropriate that the Twelve to whom the title refers are the twelve ghosts of the victims of Troubles violence, each of whom is looking for revenge, having been killed by the protagonist Gerry Fegan – a ruthless IRA killer, who is both feared and admired (“He looked like a killer, the purest kind, the kind who killed more out of want than need” (p. 144). Fegan did twelve years in the Maze and since the last week of his imprisonment has been haunted day and night by each of these twelve victims.

The Twelve could certainly be defined as a gothic Troubles thriller (not the first one in the family: Maurice Power's *Children of the North* trilogy comes, among many others, to mind) both in terms of its belonging to a literary genre which should be defunct, and in terms of its content – the twelve gentle shadows that kindly but relentlessly haunt Gerry, their material killer, in order to force him to kill those they believe are morally responsible for their own deaths (among them, terrorists, priests, politicians).

The Twelve can also be read as a Northern Irish Revenge tragedy with Gerry Fegan playing the double role of ex-killer and current avenger. He certainly fits perfectly into this tradition, as an isolated, alienated, brooding individual who is engaged throughout the novel in pursuing his avenger's task. He is an unusual avenger in that he is also purging his own sins and his sense of guilt. “Memory”, we are told, “cursed him”, and there is no doubt that the death of his unforgiving mother who, after not having spoken to him for sixteen years, died telling him that she was ashamed of him, has a powerful Joycean echo in this sense. The ruthless killer without a conscience is gothically transformed in post-Troubles Belfast into an epic hero with a conscience. After all, the gothic is that literary mode in which the past never goes away but comes back to haunt the present, demanding that old wrongs be put right. But Fegan's revenge plot – with its trail of violence, politics, and inexplicable death – threatens to put Northern Ireland's frail post-conflict peace process in danger and to destabilize the government – before thickening and becoming, like any other respectable thriller, both convoluted and

multilayered. But the Revenge will be carried out, those responsible for the twelve original deaths will meet their unavoidable destiny (including a priest) and the twelve shadows (four civilians – including the inevitable mother and child – five soldiers, one policeman, and two loyalists), will dissolve, one by one, at the end of the novel.

Neville's first novel parades without shame all the most practised clichés and stereotypes of the genre – the psychopathic killer, crooked British politicians, double-dealers, freedom-fighters, secret agents, innocent women, in a mix that has not kept up with the times but seems a rehash of films already seen, books already shelved. Just as Fegan thinks, at a certain moment in the novel that “the cause he once killed for was long gone”, and reflects at the close that “all he knew was this place had no more thirst for war. That had been quenched long ago. Men like him no longer belonged here. Exhaustion washed over

him in a heavy grey wave”, we too might conclude that given that the conditions that provided the context and justification for the Northern Ireland Troubles thriller, with all their political permutations, have now changed so radically, so too should the genre itself. But then again literature is an unpredictable organism and the future of the troubles thriller in the North is still to be decided.

Laura Pelaschiar is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Trieste, Italy. She is the author of *Writing the North, The Contemporary Novel in Northern Ireland* (Trieste: Edizione Parnaso, 1998), and of essays on Northern Irish Literature, James Joyce and Shakespeare. Her most recent book is *Ulisse Gotico* (Firenze: Pacini, 2009).

Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney, Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge U.P. 2009)
 ISBN-13: 9780521547550
 260 pp. £17.99

Reviewer: **Meg Tyler**

The strength of the *Cambridge Companions* lies in the comprehensiveness of the introduction to an author's work they provide to students; in this, Bernard O'Donoghue's *Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* is no different. The fourteen essays comply, more or less, with the intent of the series, as stated on their website, which is to place each writer "in literary and historical context; their major works are analysed [...], and their influence on later writers assessed." However, because Heaney is still living, and writing, his influence on the next generation of poets can only be estimated. More on this later.

The editor, Bernard O'Donoghue, writes lucidly and convincingly about both poet and poems. O'Donoghue rightly observes, for example, the political undercurrents that shape Heaney's work; he writes that *Seeing Things* (1991) "must be seen in the context of an improvement in the political situation in Northern Ireland, culminating in the 1994 IRA Ceasefire." O'Donoghue reads best when he reads closely. For instance, quoting lines from a section in "Squarings" (the car "gave when we got in / Like Charon's boat under the faring poets"), he observes that "the recurrent image in *Seeing Things* is of a false sense of security, or a false sense of insecurity."

I wonder, to take the metaphor a little further, if we critics do not have a kind of "false sense of security" with our readings of Heaney. The *Companion* offers, with few exceptions, pages of approving wonder; what is conveyed to readers is Heaney's pre-eminence. Patrick Crotty, in an essay on Heaney's reception, points out that this "is manifested by the very existence of the volume for which this essay is written; no other living poet has been the subject of a *Cambridge*

Companion." I think such a decision to collect these essays might have been premature. We (and I include myself) are unable to see Heaney from the necessary critical remove time would provide. The group of writers assembled here – Neil Corcoran, John Wilson Foster, Dennis O'Driscoll, to mention but a few – are for the most part well-established Heaney scholars and friends, and each one has very positive things to say about Heaney. However, there is no singular, no dissenting voice, and no writer whose way of seeing Heaney is remarkably different from the others.

The essays gesture at bigger pictures and contexts, but in fairly predictable ways, and do not bring us closer than previous scholarship to Heaney's poems or to his creative process. As Wordsworth wrote in an 1831 letter to William Rowan Hamilton, "Again and again I must repeat, that the composition of verse is infinitely more of an art than men are prepared to believe; and absolute success in it depends upon innumerable minutiae." And so one flaw in this gathering is that it is not specific enough. Only by focusing wholeheartedly on a particular poem, argues Christopher Ricks in *Poems and Critics*, "can one distinguish between a poem's good qualities and those bad qualities which so tantalizingly resemble them." No essay provides a reading of an individual Heaney poem with the same depth as breadth as, for example, John Crowe Ransom provides in his unsurpassed reading of "Lycidas" (in the essay "A Poem Nearly Anonymous"). Ransom attends to the details of the poem, what intricacies make it work, and by doing so is able to widen the lens, as it were, so we can better see the place of "Lycidas" in not only literary but also in cultural history. He poses a simple question, but one that

reveals the chief concern of poetry, form: “What was the historic metrical pattern already before him, and what are the liberties he takes with it?” Ransom reminds us that “meter is fundamental in the problem posed to the artist as poet.” By asking this question, and answering it profitably, Ransom enables the reader of poetry to understand both the significance of “Lycidas” as a verbal artifice and also to understand more completely the larger question that any poem or poet worth his or her salt must perforce struggle with: how to use the sometimes combustible combination of form and content in both a novel and a natural manner.

As for the individual essays in the collection, Rand Brandes’ “Seamus Heaney’s Working Titles: From ‘Advancement of Learning’ to ‘Midnight Anvil’” advances thought because Brandes uncovers much that is unknown about Heaney’s title choices. For example, the volume *Electric Light* had provisionally been titled ‘The Real Names’, ‘Known World’ and ‘Duncan’s Horses’. Brandes is expert at collecting and gathering about Heaney (he has authored *Seamus Heaney: A Reference Guide* (1996) and *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography 1959-2003* (2008)). Fran Brearton’s “Heaney and the Feminine” is surprisingly engaging – a feminist critique of Heaney’s work is not a new stance, but it provides a starkly different angle from the ones offered by other essays collected here. Justin Quinn’s contribution, “Heaney and Eastern Europe” piques interest but some of his claims are suspect. Of Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass (translators of Milosz), he says they can be numbered with W. S. Merwin as “three of the most important American poets of the last half century.”

Some caveats. A glossary (one as well-positioned as Susan Wolfson’s in her *Cambridge Companion to Keats*) would have been an immense help (if not imperative) to any student of Heaney’s poetry, as the poet draws upon words of varying etymological origin, words from Ulster dialect, and a broad range of rhyme schemes and formal patterns. And if ‘lyrical beauty’ is the vehicle for “ethical depth,” as O’Donoghue attests at both the beginning and the end of his Introduction, then why not include work that amplifies – by close reading – this quality in Heaney’s work? Finally, an important qualifier – how writing about a living writer differs from writing about a dead one – is overlooked in this volume.

What makes Heaney great has yet to make for much great criticism. (Young scholars would do well to look to Christopher Ricks’ marvelous essay on Andrew Marvell in *The Force of Poetry*, in which he offers a view of the Ulster Poets’ lasting significance.) The volume wants to celebrate the miraculous, as we know it, in Heaney, but here there are no departures from the expected.

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Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity by David Lloyd (Dublin: Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame/Field Day, 2008)

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181 pp. £25.00

Reviewer: **Wolfgang Wicht**

Midway through his new book, Lloyd quotes from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972), as follows: "Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the right relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope" (71-72). This comment on the casualties of history can be read as a summary of Lloyd's own persuasive discussion of the Irish Famine and the wider scope of colonial Irish indigence, misery and terror in the economic and political contexts of enclosure, dispossession and eviction. Historical investigation continually turns into present-day political deliberation. As Lloyd has it, "the work of history is not merely to contemplate destruction, but to track through the ruins of progress the defiles that connect the openings of the past to those of the present. For the dead are the contemporaries of every unfinished struggle against domination" (71). In other words, in order to "ground a different mode of historicization" (29), he resolutely contends that the historian must splice together the scholarly study of past oppression and the notion of present-day political and social intervention.

David Lloyd, Professor of English at the University of Southern California, has written a number of books that examine the interrelations between history, culture, politics and the state. *Irish Times* collects six essays, which were, with the exception of the paper on Joyce, previously published elsewhere in 2003 and 2005. The initial three chapters, "Overture: Ruins/Runes," "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery? Mourning the Irish Famine" and "The Indigent Sublime: Spectres of Irish Hunger," re-examine

agrarian production and life in Irish history, focussing on the extreme impoverishment and repression of the rural population in general and the outstanding case of the Great Famine in particular. Lloyd's representation of this traumatic event in Irish memory goes against the grain of "revisionist histories" (30), which have tended to see the Famine as a natural disaster or to make it the object of commemorative mourning. He convincingly shows how "that catastrophe" (30) was the effect of a distinctly colonial matrix of administrative, economic and circumstantial forces which were "suddenly deflected and disequibrated" (30) by the blight. Referring to a number of eye-witness documents, he detects the traces of economic survival and subjective resistance in the midst of the brutality and humiliation of hunger and eviction. However, from these oral accounts of the Famine and the hopes associated with emigration Lloyd purports to find traces of a Messianic vision. This vision of creating "new communities of survival" (37) unfortunately gives rise to an essentialist notion that would have us believe that "the future emerges, changed, out of such catastrophes" (37). Despite this methodological short cut, Lloyd's account of history as a continual process of *transformation* (one of his key terms) is perfectly adaptable to our own age of European and global *capitalist modernity* (another key term). Lloyd nurtures a Yeatsian indignation at the "monstrous violence" (7) of modern technologies and financial accumulation. For this reason, he is also extremely sceptical about the recent negative transformation of Irish capitalist modernization in the form of the Celtic Tiger.

In subsequent chapters, “The Medieval Sill: Postcolonial Temporalities in Joyce,” “Rethinking National Marxism: James Connolly and ‘Celtic Communism’” and “Ruination: Partition and the Expectation of Violence (On Allan deSouza’s Irish Photography),” Lloyd combines historiographic investigation with the discussion of particular literary, political and artistic appropriations of the Irish situation. In the Joyce essay, drawing on aspects of post-colonial theory, Lloyd establishes a conception of the *medieval* as a historical place of recalcitrance and antithesis which, as circumstances dictate, contains the seeds of the modern. The way he discusses the problematic relationships inherent in “the simultaneous coevality and incommensurability of the modern and the medieval” (74) and the acute paradoxes in the modern apprehension of the medieval is a perceptive contribution to post-colonial and cultural theory. But the commentary on Joyce has little to add to the wealth of critical reviews of the ‘political Joyce’, which have been published over the past 20 years or so. Notwithstanding the fresh light he sheds on a number of relevant details, his discussion of ‘medieval Joyce’ curiously ignores the erudition amassed in the collection *Medieval Joyce*, edited by Lucia Boldrini (Amsterdam-New York, 2002). At various points, Lloyd surprises us with eccentric novelties. One of his more spectacular conjectures is, for instance, “that the formal structure of *Ulysses* is one in which the medieval system of correspondences that regulate the relations among things becomes the most acute interpreter of modern colonial capitalism” (92).

Lloyd is at his best, perhaps, when he vigorously counters the postcolonial neglect of the political ideas and practical activities of James Connolly. Emphasizing the Irish Marxist’s notion to integrate the socialist with the nationalist struggle, Lloyd cogently examines Connolly’s concept of Celtic communism in the contexts of colonial rule, the ideology of Irish nationalism and the international working-class movement. Lloyd’s essay might be seen as a

pioneering attempt to reconsider Irish labour history, and Irish radicalism in particular. As the author himself implies, it makes desirable further studies in this field, both analytical and theoretical. This need is, in fact, affirmed by Lloyd’s exciting discussion, and reproduction, of the apocalyptic photographs taken by Allan deSouza of the northwest of Ireland.

Lloyd’s book is a remarkable instance of counter-hegemonic argumentation. It persuasively argues that the singularity of the Irish is not least determined by “an uncanny persistence of a medieval formation in the midst of modernity” (100). But concomitantly, the argument is curbed by its mechanistic ideological design. The author’s helpless rage at the “most extreme ever concentration of wealth in the hands of the global élites” (101) leads him to accentuate the traces of historical disobedience and obstinacy, from which we are summoned in turn to learn our own lessons. Lloyd asserts (incorrectly) that the awareness of the “unfinished struggle against domination” (71), which is also inherent in Irish nationalism, must inspire people “to deploy a selected and canonized version of the past in the service of the political and social projects” (64) of anti-capitalist alternatives. It is, however, deceptive to believe that past desire persists “into the present with some differential significance” (3). Any conception that extrapolates promises of alternatives in the present from social aspirations from the past enters the realm of abstraction, detached from social practice itself.

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The Infinities by John Banville (London: Picador, 2009)

304 pp. £14.99

ISBN: 9780330450249

Reviewer: **Joakim Wrethed**

Picture this: A rather spacious house. A dying scientist trying to hold on to melancholy-tinged memories of the life that slowly seems to be slipping through his fingers. A couple of outlandish characters. A handful of not so outlandish characters. A bizarre sense of dark humour, lurking as a ghost in the text. Erudite allusions scattered here and there. All of the above is conveyed to us in a brilliantly crafted prose, with an occasionally almost more than poetic intensity. If we picture this, we know for certain that we are in Banville-land. With *The Infinities*, John Banville publishes his first novel since the successful Man Booker Prize winning *The Sea* (2005). In the time between the novels, the author has entered the realm of crime fiction, half-heartedly hidden behind the pen-name/persona Benjamin Black. According to Banville's own comment on the distinction between these two author-selves, Black writes swiftly and Banville slowly. This may perhaps be applied to us readers as well. The construction 'swift Banville reader' is in itself a conceptual violation, which I shall comment on below.

But if we initially stick to the contrast between the last two novels of Banville's long and triumphant career as a writer, an interesting aspect of his maturation may be revealed. In *The Sea*, the narration is centred on the experiences of the protagonist Max Morden (male first person narrators, or third person narrators with the point of view of male characters, dominate the oeuvre). In *The Infinities*, the manner of narration is slightly different. Here, the point of view emanates from the Gods (the voice of Hermes) and is therefore more mobile, not restricted to the mind of old Adam, the dying scientist.

We are allowed to float from young Adam (the son) to his wife Helen, to the sad, self-harming

daughter Petra, to old Adam's wife Ursula, and even into the mysterious structures of canine cognition through the family dog Rex. The overall effect of this mobility is partly comical, zooming in on human predicaments from the outside, as it were, which of course raises the ancient question: What is the meaning of it all? The human tragedy presented almost as a practical joke. By introducing this type of narration, Banville achieves two things. Firstly, novelty in terms of possibilities, which, among other things, entails that a great deal of textual space is given to the female characters. Secondly, he maintains faithfulness to his central obsessions as a writer: science, language, reason, the oddity of the ordinary, the intricacies of memory processes, the complexity of perceptual patterns, the mystery of otherness, etc. From a scholarly perspective, this is no mere happenstance. The Banvillean authorship is more than a collection of narratives labelled with that author's name. There is obviously a master plan (speaking of Gods) behind the differences and samenesses of all his writing. The recycling of names and characters is beginning to reveal a more or less coherent picture.

Already in his debut collection of short stories, *Long Lankin* (1970), there is a story called "Sanctuary" in which we have two female characters, one named Julie and the other Helen (eponymous to young Adam's wife in *The Infinities*, which certainly is not a haphazard fact in Banville-land). Furthermore, the two characters are alone in a house when a young man arrives, who obviously is Helen's lover. The relation between the two female characters is never clearly articulated, more than that they seem to live together and that Helen used to be Julie's teacher. The short story's suspense-energy is derived from all that is not said. In *The*

Infinites, we also encounter strange arrivals to the house, particularly that of the Pan-like Benny Grace (one of the more outlandish characters), old Adam's former colleague, who turns up and stirs the same kind of curiosity-mingled fear in Petra as the young, red-haired man did in Julie in "Sanctuary". What I am getting at here is some kind of repetitive scheme, which (in typical Banville fashion) is a holding-on and letting-go at the same time. In the early short story we read about Julie:

In the bedroom she lay with her hands folded on her breast and listened to their voices. Once they laughed, and in a while all was silence. She watched the reflections of the water above her on the ceiling. *They seemed to have but one pattern which constantly formed, dissolved, and reformed again.* A small wind came in from the sea and murmured against the window, and the curtains moved with a small scraping sound (my emphasis).

The names of characters are both important and irrelevant. Sometimes a name is recycled in a new possible world, sometimes there is a new name, but very similar characteristics and experiences prevail. In Julie's perception above there is sameness, "one pattern", but also difference within this sameness, since it "formed, dissolved, and reformed". In *The Infinites*, Helen and Roddy Wagstaff are engrossed in a conversation at the faintly lugubrious dinner:

They are conscious of the summer day outside, its soft air and vapoury light A breeze comes in from the garden and the curtain of white gauze before the open half of the french doors bellies into the room like a soundless exclamation and listlessly falls back.

Humans (characters) come and go in the oeuvre, but the sameness in difference of air, light, rain and weather, billows, dissolves, forms and reforms in intricate perceptual patterns. In the new novel, this kaleidoscopic Banvillean concern is explored from a slightly different perspective. The personification of the Gods, i.e. the fleshing out of the spirit, is a novel way of stretching a dominant and persistent Banvillean preoccupation, which has been there from the start. It is here we may witness the strength of Banville's writing. How he repeatedly finds new variations of this primary textual matter. It also sheds light on the

impossibility of reading his novels swiftly. If the reader does not let herself be pulled into the beauty of the seemingly irrelevant, then most of the reading experience is lost. To *actually* read Banville is a laborious task.

Even though *The Infinites* must be regarded as a tour de force – especially considering the fact that it is probably not a trivial business for a writer to know exactly how to proceed after having won the Man Booker – I would still hesitate to shower the novel with praise, and dub it the crown of Banville's production. I know how to read it and appreciate it as a scholar, but I wonder how Black-readers would read it. I am still waiting for something similar to *The Book of Evidence*, since I think that Banville in that work brilliantly combined his poetic intensity and philosophic ruminations with a plot-driven energy, which makes it a true literary masterpiece.

The most prominent strengths of *The Infinites* are the beautiful wordings, which repeatedly astonish even the most fastidious reader, and Banville's ability to find a viable literary form for the possible world concept. The real–unreal dichotomy is traversed seemingly with ease time and time again. There are other worlds, but they appear in this one. There is sameness in difference. The novel pays homage to the beauty of misery and perhaps we never get closer to life itself than in the form of that oxymoron-like word formation. Banville successfully utilises a chiasmatic rendering of the statement: "For what is spirit in this world may be flesh in another". Like great thinkers and artists, who have managed to make human life less boring and predictable, Banville knows, and (hopefully) persuades his readers into knowing, that the 'real' world is always already metaphysical and vice versa. This may be shocking to some and consoling to others. To be sure, in the intellectual atmosphere of our times it almost comes out as a provocative political statement.

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