
IRISH STUDIES
ROUND THE WORLD - 2010

Patricia A. Lynch (ed.)

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Reflections on Irish Writing in 2010

Patricia A. Lynch

As incoming editor of the Irish Studies reviews for this prestigious journal, I am more than grateful to Rosa Gonzalez and the editorial committee of *Estudios Irlandeses* for entrusting me with the task. It is with some trepidation that I take up in the footsteps of David Pierce, who in the previous issues fulfilled that role with distinction. I am indeed grateful for the tips which he supplied to me to carry out the task, and for the examples given through the previous issues. 2010 has turned out to be a very interesting year for me, a retired faculty member in English Studies/Irish Studies from the University of Limerick, and one of the longest-serving members of IASIL (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures). At times, this reviews editorship involved a learning curve, which I hope will benefit readers of subsequent issues.

Over the years, I have had the double pleasure of becoming friends with many Spanish academics via IASIL, and also by acting as Erasmus Exchange teacher at the University of Alcalá de Henares for short periods over five years. There they have a thriving Irish Studies section which is the area of research choice for many of their postgraduates. There was also the invaluable experience of hosting Spanish academics on return Erasmus exchanges to the University of Limerick. Both formally and informally I have had many animated discussions of various Irish authors and critics with Spanish professors. Over the years there has been cooperative work with academics in Spanish in my own former School, that of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, at my home university. All of these combined gave me a huge respect for various approaches to Irish Literature in English emanating from Spain. In particular, I have had very interesting conversations and correspondence with Dr. Marisol Morales Ladrón. Secondly,

I have been in touch with another Spanish academic, Carolina Amador Moreno, about our mutual work in Irish-English (Hiberno-English) and the use of this dialect in Irish literature. Both her *Analysis of Hiberno-English in the Early Novels of Patrick McGill* (2006) and her second book *An Introduction to Irish English* (2010) will prove invaluable to any researcher interested in the subject. A reference to Dr. Amador's work would not be complete without sending sympathy to her and other friends of the late Dr. Anne McCarthy, which occurred very recently. Though I never had the pleasure of meeting her, it is clear that her death will be a great loss to Spanish research into Irish Studies.

The past year has seen devastating changes in Ireland's political life, its economy, and in its concomitant loss of some sovereignty in money matters. There were also other troubles such as volcanic ash preventing air flight, severe weather in December of both years, and massive emigration. All make 2010 a year to forget, and to look forward to 2011. However, not everything has been black. In the matter of literature, there have been great achievements, as seen by the following examples. Literary festivals have taken place and were adjudged as successful, for example, the Cúirt festival in Galway last April, which was opened by author Roddy Doyle. In spite of the aforesaid problems with flights due to volcanic ash, there were many great names in the world of books prepared to give readings from their works. Later in the same month, the sixth annual Heinrich Böll memorial weekend took place on his beloved Achill Island. Journals of Irish Studies have appeared as usual. So many conferences in Irish Studies have been held, in Ireland, in various European countries and in places much further away that it is impossible to name all. Books of original literature have won praise and awards. These include Emma Donoghue's *Room*, shortlisted for

the Man Booker Prize, and Paul Murray's *Skippy Dies*, longlisted for the same award. In my home city, I have had the experience of going to buy copies of both, hearing other customers making the same request, and finding that both books were sold out, awaiting new supplies. In other fora, public readings by authors are as frequent as in previous years, and long may this continue. Many works of literary and cultural criticism have also appeared, some of which will feature in the individual works reviewed below. Postgraduate students in universities and colleges in Ireland and beyond are still applying in more than satisfactory numbers to research aspects of Irish Studies. These produce valuable informative books on a regular basis.

It is always difficult to decide on particular works to review, especially in a field so prolific as Irish Studies. In the texts chosen for this issue, I have attempted to go for a broad sweep, of original works of fiction and poetry, of literary and also cultural criticism, and of life-writing in the form of the correspondence of writers. I tried also to use a mixture of reviewers from different countries, both male and female, of new reviewers, and some who have already had work published in this journal. Another factor has been the willingness or the opposite of publishers to supply review copies. The reviewers in this issue are owed gratitude for their willingness to undertake the task, their hard work and patience, and for returning the pieces on time. Any errors in this section of the journal should be attributable to me.

Books I have especially enjoyed this year in fiction include Emma Donoghue's *Room*, shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, as mentioned above. Inspired to some extent by the notorious Fritzl case in Austria, this begins nonetheless as a happy book because it is seen through the eyes of a five-year old boy. With his mother he is imprisoned in a converted garden shed by a man referred to only as "Old Nick". She nonetheless provides the child with a very loving environment, shelters him from any contact whatsoever with their captor, and for him "makes one little room an everywhere", as John Donne once said ("The Good-Morrow"). In their room, their day is divided into time zones, and the child is taught literacy and numeracy to an

advanced level. "Ma" is extremely creative at using the very few resources at her command to teach Jack a variety of other subjects entirely through play. To Jack, all of the objects which surround him seem an integral part of his life, so items such as Bed, Table, and even Room itself are referred to without a definite article, and seem to have a life of their own: "I stroke Table's scratches to make them better; she's a circle all white except gray in the scratches from chopping foods" (p. 7). Pain, darkness and suspense appear when the boy's developing mind and the captor's threat to starve them prompt a change in the mother's teaching. Jack moves from protected child in an almost Oedipal relationship to one who must know about the dark side of his life. Very quickly he is coached in preparation for a dangerous role, becoming his mother's knight who will rescue them. When they are eventually rescued, paradoxically some of their most unhappy experiences occur; the mother's courage is at length eroded to the extent of taking an overdose. Finally, with legal matters being carried out and a reunion with the extended family, Jack requests his mother to let him visit Room once more, but the happiness he experienced there is gone. He summarises: "It's not Room now" (p.400), and ceremonially says goodbye to every part of it.

Family recurs as thematic in this novel as in many Irish works of fiction, but it is unusual as the father is seen as no more than a forcible sperm donor, and the child is not aware that he has a second biological parent. "Old Nick" is also responsible for the death of a previous child, and altogether is at the extreme of patriarchal cruelty. Secondly, in the mother's own family she was an adopted child, and her stepfather is kinder to her than her adoptive father. There are parallels here with Claire Keegan's short novel, *Foster*, much of which I had the pleasure of hearing the author read at the IASIL conference in Maynooth last July. The child protagonist's parents are either neglectful or positively indifferent towards her, and the couple who take care of her for a couple of months give her a whole new perspective on life and family contentment. In this novel, too, all is seen through the point of view of the child. Just as Jack has to leave behind a time of happiness to

face an uncertain future, the girl in *Foster* has to go back to her previous state, but now with a vision of a happy home lost. She does not accept it with equanimity, as in the final part of the work she races to cling to the departing foster parents in a way that demonstrates her loss. In both novels, the Eden of youth has to be left behind. The name of the Keegan novel also provokes thought. Could it be a verb, to take care temporarily of a child from another family, or in another sense to foster thoughts and feelings that were barely there before?

In a third novel which featured also on the Man Booker list, Paul Murray's *Skippy Dies*, families are remote from most of the action. At 655 pages it is rather long, and seems to divide into two sections. In the first part, it is a comedic portrayal of fourteen-year-old boys in a fee-paying middle-class school, which has a high profile in social and educational circles. These are counterparted by the similar girls' school divided from the boys by a wall, a sort of St Trinians in duplicate. (People who know south Dublin may possibly think of a location.) The schools are mirror images of each other, and this is highlighted by the experience of three boys who break into the girls' school in pursuit of a mythic ghost-ridden locked room: "Everywhere they look there are analogues of their own school – classrooms with cramped benches and scrawled blackboards, printouts on the notice boards, trophy cabinets and art-room posters – almost identical, but at the same time, somehow not, ... as though they've entered a parallel universe" (p. 380). The action and dialogue are often reminiscent of comic features such as "The Bash Street Kids", or boys' fiction, with incompetent abusive teachers who are there to be defeated by smart kids, stereotypes such as the nerd who also has resemblances to Billy Bunter, the bully and the bullied, the sports heroes and studs (in their own minds), nicknames and casual cruelty, midnight adventures, explosions, and hormonally charged encounters with girls in the other school. The most hilarious episode is the happening at the Hallowe'en Hop of the second-years from both schools, when two supervising teachers take off for a tryst, and return to find a truly carnivalesque scene, rampant sexuality due to drug-poisoned punch. Paralleled with this are

the attempts of the school prodigy and his friends who experiment with trying to find a portal into an eleventh universe, using computers but also mythology and ghost stories, in an absurd combination of science and various beliefs.

The hinge of the action lies paradoxically in a prologue, in which the boy Skippy dies. As readers still do not know the personages involved, the tragedy does not take full hold of their imagination, so the story then takes up with the events leading to this intrusion of horrific reality. The second part of the novel is much darker, though still with some comedy. Many of the young people are now forced to confront guilt and punishment, death and the meaning of life. So do the teachers, as the complexity of causes and responsibility for the boy's overdose have to be faced.

The type of mirroring mentioned above is a constant feature of the novel. Deeds and misdeeds of the pupils are repeated by the teachers, many of whom are old boys who were in the same school class. The situation of the triangle of lovers occurs in both. The teachers have a local pub, and the boys have "Ed's Doughnut House". There is an ironic coincidence in that the song "Another brick in the wall", which the acting principal and his group once sang at their school concert, is replicated by the present-day counterparts. The latter part of the novel shows the school to be a microcosm of many institutions in Ireland which are self-perpetuating systems of the wealthy, and who all band together to protect themselves and hide their falsities and abuses.

In poetry, Seamus Heaney's *Human Circle* lit up some of the dark days of the Christmas period for me. Readers familiar with Heaney's work will find many of the previous themes given a new perspective. Just as in other collections, he uses older Irish customs redolent of Irish Catholicism such as wakes ("Death of a Painter"), crafts ("Eelworks"), placenames ("The Riverbank Field"), and images of children of his family flying kites ("A Kite for Aibhín"). However there are more contemporary references, such as in the title poem "Human Chain", in which he celebrates aid workers in a third world country passing sacks of food, but conversely sees this as reminiscent of farm

harvest tasks of his youth (O’Riordan). The route to Hades takes place through a Belfast Saturday shopping scene: “Then racks of suits and overcoats that swayed/ When one was tugged from its overcrowded frame/ Like their owners’ shades close-packed on Charon’s barge” (“Route 110”).

As ever, in many poems there is the closeness to Nature first evoked in the young child, though it has a more modern perspective. Driving through the countryside of Co. Donegal, near Mt Errigal, he is not homesick as it is “[a] grant-aided, renovated scene” (“Loughanure”). The passing of time for a septuagenarian sees him look back in perspective at the natural surroundings of his youth, his parents, and forward to his grandchildren. There are many references to the world of his schooling in the local primary school, and at boarding school for second level education. Relationships with his family and his wife are often featured, and adapting a New Testament story, he shows his gratitude to his wife and those who took care of him in his illness (“Chanson d’Aventure” and “Miracle”). There are the inevitable references to the recent political history of Northern Ireland, but these are few when compared to his use of ancient Latin classics, new translations of old Irish poetry, and older writers in English whom he revered.

There is also in this collection a revival of a medieval type of poetry in his nineteen short poems contained in “A Herbal: after Guillevic’s ‘Herbier de Bretagne’”. In view of my own interests in traditional healing, I approached it looking for the use of plants as medicine, but the only example was that of the dock-leaf to heal nettle-stings, as I remember doing in my childhood. Instead, he shows other ways in which plants are important to humans. At first the relationship is not friendly. The grass in the graveyard is always restless, the bracken is secretive, and nettles are “enemies ... / Malignant things, letting on to be asleep” which cannot be understood by young humans, though they are aware of the remedy. This relationship with plants is complex, however; sunshine sometimes tempts plants to trust, there are also refuges where one can confess private thoughts and feelings, the smell of crushed herbs can

soothe, and finally the child’s connection with this world of growing things is natural: “I had my existence. I was there./ Me in place and the place in me”. It is now “an elsewhere place” which in a Wordsworthian way the adult can no longer access. Finally, plants are conventionally seen as natural goods to feed people or cure them, but in a paradoxical way the poet sees humans as nourishing and giving strength to them instead: in the cemetery the plants are “[s]inking their roots/ In all the dynasties/ Of the dead.” A younger Heaney would be unlikely to have expressed this analogy.

In history I have read with great interest John O’Callaghan’s *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-1921*. It is a detailed exploration of the happenings in these years, backed up by an impressive range of sources, from books to witness accounts, contemporary newspapers, police and military reports, and recent dissertations. The author states that his book is one of the first to use the work of the Bureau of Military History (p. 8). There is a very rare photograph on the front cover, of local republicans in uniform standing in a semi-circle, while in front of them sit a group of Cumann na mBan; inside the book, names of everyone in the photograph are given in order. It is throughout written in a cool and objective way, with occasional touches of humour: in one small town’s ballot, “there was extensive impersonation, and even some of the dead rose to vote for Hayes” (p.77).

The author provides a helpful summary of the events leading to 1913 to provide context. In particular, it becomes clear that the tradition of revolution, especially that of the Fenians in the 1860s, local education, the handing-down of attitudes in families and in small local areas all provided the seeding ground for later events. This account, while concentrating on Limerick city and county, often makes us aware of the general situation of contemporary Ireland, and how one area compared and contrasted with the rest. The strongest impression is of the complexity of the situation, the British Army and British-regulated police being opposed in 1914 by “the Irish Republication Brotherhood (IRB), the Citizen Army, the Ulster Volunteers, the

National Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers” (p.1). These groups divide and sub-divide, and include also the Irish Parliament Party, the Sinn Féin party, which itself evolved from four different sources, as well as the IRA, with links with other organisations such as the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and even in the case of Limerick, the local rugby clubs. Over the years, there were so many permutations and combinations between all these groups that it is almost defeats the memory of the reader trying to keep track of them all. As a non-historian, it was the first time that I fully realised that the Irish judicial and local authority systems evolved from the republican groups.

To those of us used to modern means of communication, such as radio, TV, internet, email, and Twitter it seems impossible for the groups to have maintained the degree of contact which they did. The local newspaper, the *Limerick Leader*, played a prime role, as did networks such as local grapevines, the clergy, and despatches by train. In the latter of these, the women’s arm of the movement, Cumann na mBan filled a prime role. While the book is not a history of this group, many pages refer extensively to their essential back-up role, which in at least one case included partaking in combat. The sisters of the Daly family, in particular, were heavily involved. As to the clergy, their role varied, from being outspoken defenders as in the case of Bishop O’Dwyer, to differing degrees of support or condemnation by lesser clergy. In the matter of sectarian attacks, the book shows that there were few or none in Limerick republican groups, in contrast to other counties in Ireland.

In the main part of the book, many of the incidents remind us of events which took place in more recent times in the North of Ireland, especially guerrilla activities, the use of violence, punishments for women who consorted with the British Crown forces, some “shoot to kill” decisions by the aforesaid forces, and the execution of spies and informers. Women fared better in Limerick than in the later twentieth-century North, in that female spies were not executed but ordered to leave the country, and punishments for dating British soldiers were confined to cutting off their hair.

Differences in social class appear. The blue-collar workers and rural workers were the most active in service and often were members of hurling clubs, while the landlord and merchant class, the rugby club set, were less active in Limerick city. In the matter of industrial relations, the book gives details of the nature and extent of what was called the “Limerick soviet”. Famously, the Limerick battalions did not take part in the 1916 Rising, and one battalion voluntarily handed over their arms to the British authorities, but O’Callaghan’s book shows that the activists were far from being cowardly. Here as in many other parts of Ireland, the general failure/contradictions in communications of that weekend had a strong role to play.

This book raises questions. Towards the end of the book, O’Callaghan suggests grounds for another book of history which could evolve from a consideration of whether the IRA was the army of local areas and groups rather than the army of the Republic (p. 204). He himself states in his brief biography that his next book, on the Civil War in Limerick, will take up from there the present leaves off. In conclusion, this book is of interest not only to historians, and to people who live in Limerick, but provides some background to Kate O’Brien’s novels, which feature the landlord/merchant class of Limerick of those times, whose values are religious-based rather than nationalistic. In her novel *The Land of Spices* (1941) based on her own childhood, Bishop O’Dwyer features in a less favourable light, in that his nationalism constricts the feminist and cosmopolitan attitudes of the French order of nuns who run the school. Secondly, it sets some of the context for understanding Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* (1996), who came to live in the city two decades later than the period covered in O’Callaghan’s book, and may help readers to understand place and attitudes in this memoir.

In my own current research interest, Irish traditional healing, works are continuing to appear. The one which impressed me most in recent times is a new book by Ronnie Moore and Stuart McClean (eds), *Folk Healing and Health Care Practices in Britain and Ireland: Stethoscopes, Wands and Crystals*. Most of the

books and journals which I have read concentrate on specific folk healing practices in countries across the world, or are more historically based. This book focuses on England, Wales, and Ireland, but there are examples from at least six countries. However, its great value for me is that it explores the theoretical aspects, the complex relationship between folk-healing, CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine), and scientific medicine, and differing views on the placebo effect. In the editors' own words: "[Folk medicine] is at once a familiar and shared socio-cultural phenomenon, but it also evokes something magical and other, distant and irrational ... " (p.1). The authors show that folk-healing has a great deal of similarity to CAM, and that scientific medicine (which they refer to as "biomedicine"), has borrowed aspects of folk knowledge in its practice. They all overlap in some ways, with biomedicine and CAM largely operated in similar fashion, each in their own regulated field, but folk medicine tends to be more personalised, more rooted in the individuality of the practitioner.

The different articles by the nine authors explore the revival of folk healing and herbal remedies, which were the original remedies used since antiquity all across the world, and are still prevalent in places. They look at its place in a post-scientific world, its links with religion, magic and spirituality in different countries and cultures, where they differ (p.32) from the classic views of Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). Its relationship to CAM is examined. Specific examples are shown of its use in Wales, Staffordshire, the North of England, and Ireland. They also explore the status of folk healing, where payment is not usual or is very small, in a world where medicine is commercially and academically rated, and

finally its position with regard to law and regulation. Most of the contributors give their own definitions of the term. All pay attention to the way in which this knowledge is transmitted, seeing that there is no formal academy; it most often passes down through generations of the same families, and is sometimes learned from others through apprenticeship. Many of the chapters describe how the skills descend through oral archives, where the secret aspects are passed on only to designated successors. Other topics are familiar from previous literature, for example its use of amulets, crystals, transference of illness to other items, and distance healing. In the case of Northern Ireland, it explores its use in one traditionally Catholic area and one traditionally Protestant area. In spite of the very large differences in culture, religion, history and politics, all share the use of methods referred to as " 'the cure' or 'the charm'" (p.111), which are ironically pre-Christian earth-goddess traditions (p.30) in origin (p.115).

Moore and McClean mention a topic of especial interest to me, in which the so-called placebo effect can be used to allow the body to repair itself in a way that is much stronger than the normal human capacity to self-heal (pp. 40, 120). This ties in with the work of specialists such as Prof. Benedetti and others, for example an article in *The Lancet* entitled "Biological, clinical, and ethical advances of placebo effects", published in February 1910. These authors all seek to rescue the placebo effect from implications of deception, and advocate the harnessing of its power to improve patient welfare. If this type of study could be developed more, in my opinion folk-healing might then be able to take its place alongside CAM and scientific medicine.

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Netherland by Joseph O'Neill,
 London: Fourth Estate, 2008
 ISBN 978-0007269068
 247 pp. £14.99 (Hardback)

Reviewer: **Brian G Caraher**

I first caught sight of this intriguing book while observing a family of four in the international departures lounge of “Washington National” on a hot summer day in June 2008. A woman in her late thirties was engrossed in *Netherland*, while her two teen-aged boys larked about with bags of expensive tennis gear and her husband stared blankly at his toyish I-Phone. I awaited a connection through Newark to Belfast, after a consultancy in “research methods” at the Folger Institute, but was thinking about my two young boys and their disaffected mother back home in Ireland. I had been raised within a large, “extended,” immigrant Irish family in the States, yet had encountered for the first time in my life the inner machinations and hidden torments of small, “nuclear”, bourgeois family life in the green tracts of upwardly mobile South Belfast. *Netherland* is composed not only by an Irish author who has lived and worked in Ireland and the United States but comprises a brilliant study of the stories and lives of small families and hidden, often deleterious, deep narratives beyond the boundaries and in the nether regions, the dark labyrinthine caves, of psychic motivations. As Joseph O'Neill's main character and retrospective narrator Hans van den Broek asserts early on: “It is truly a terrible thing when questions of love and family and home are no longer answerable” (p. 21).

Netherland involves a first-person narrative that could well be called “The Adversity of Hans van den Broek,” as O'Neill's self-deprecating narrator ventures to call his own story once he declares he has hit “rock bottom” (p. 212). It is an agonisingly personal story that takes in retrospectively the narrator's young life in The

Netherlands, his early career and marriage in England, and the drift and desolation of his life and marriage in post-9/11 New York City. This fascinating narrative does not involve anything overtly Irish or anything directly rooted in Ireland. However, this third novel by an Irish barrister at work in the US rightfully shouldered its way onto bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic in 2008 and 2009. It brilliantly narrates the murky underworld that opens up when middle-class lives turn brutally bankrupt.

Hans van den Broek's “adversity” is never explained or, more importantly, explained away, psychologised or ethnicised in some definitive fashion. Layers of familial crises, silences and betrayals emerge from the depths of what appears to be the ideal secondment of a Dutch equities analyst to the “boomtown” of turn-of-the-millennium Manhattan. However, Hans' superficially ideal life conceals faultlines fully contemporaneous with the post-9/11 world of George W Bush, William Cheney, Tony Blair and the assault on Iraq in March 2003: “we were at a crossroads,” Hans' wife Rachel contends “that a great power had ‘drifted into wrongdoing’” (p. 92). As a high-flying oil stocks and futures analyst, Hans finds himself “a political-ethical idiot” in the midst of ethical, political and marital adversities which he seems little able to comprehend, much less command. He turns inward, harbouring for two years (October 2001 to November 2003) on the ninth floor of the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, just north of the Twin World Trade Towers netherworld. The Chelsea, by the way, is the rather bohemian hotel in which Joseph O'Neill, his wife Sally Singer and their three boys have

resided since 1998 because neither parent had a reliable enough credit history to secure a mortgage in the USA when they first arrived.¹ O'Neill's van den Broek, wife Rachel and infant son are refugees in the Chelsea, trapped in their elegant loft apartment by the wreckage and chaos of lower Manhattan in the weeks and months following 11 September 2001 (see pp. 17-29, in particular). "The unfathomable and catastrophic atmosphere" of "a city gone mad" (pp. 18, 20) eats into their dreams, their domestic lives and the future hopes of their marriage. Rachel gives up and turns silently inward (p. 38), while Hans continues to work "for M_____, a merchant bank with an enormous brokerage operation" (p. 23), not unlike Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, or the infamous Lehmann Brothers, all merchant banks with heavily-leveraged brokerage operations that brought the world to the brink of a fathomless financial abyss in mid-September 2008.

Rachel and her son retreat to her parents' home in London; and she indulges in a wasteful, pointless and futureless affair with a self-involved and manipulative restaurateur. Hans works, plays cricket and strikes up an unusual relationship with an eloquent West Indian gambler, the Trinidadian faux-entrepreneur Chuck Ramkissoon.

Chuck's slowly unfolding series of stranger and stranger stories leads Hans deep into the dark underworld of New York's past and present nightmares. On the surface Chuck wants to recover the neglected history and sporting possibilities of cricket in New York City; he lectures immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean on race, cricket and fair play (see especially, pp. 4-16) and tries to secure financing for "The New York Cricket Club," "Floyd Bennett Field," "Corrigan Field," or "Bald Eagle Field" – a project as slippery as its insecure and shifting names demonstrate (pp. 76-9). Hans registers Chuck's "vision" as one of "waste and ice" (p. 79), yet cricket is a crucial point of reference for the two opportunistic friends. Chuck articulates

American as any subsequent sport that now appears as typically American (baseball, basketball, etc.), yet Chuck also makes much of the notion of "not cricket" (pp. 12-3). And the latter notion is the key to the book's darkest vision: lurking in the netherlands of our rhetorics and visions of the future we encounter the impulses, obstacles, compromises and betrayals that turn us from our best selves and talk of fair play toward that which is "not cricket", including infidelities, lies, vileness and evil.

O'Neill tells a tale that stands as *The Great Gatsby* for our contemporary era of economic and ethical boom and bust. Chuck Ramkissoon's vision of the recovered greatness of American cricket is undercut by his own gambling, betrayals and ghastly murder. Hans van den Broeck, O'Neill's Nick Carraway, tells the progressively unfolding stories of personal aspirations and familial horrors, yet he escapes his opportunistic friend's sordid death in the end. O'Neill partners Hans' tale of adversity with final recovery. In a world "far away from Tipperary" (p. 116), Hans finds an unexpected measure of justice beyond the unsettling losses of his life. The end of the book turns away from plumbing the depths of melodramatic horrors toward recognising the small gestures of ordinary lives (p. 247). Perhaps this is the sort of insight and resolution that can only happen in novels, whether Irish or American, but it is moving nevertheless. Hans now knows tragically his own duplicity as well as that of his murdered Trinidadian friend, but he relishes the recognition that "there is to be no drifting out of the moment" of fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, parents and children, who must in the end turn toward one another and embrace and smile again, beyond the netherworld of collapsing towers, fraudulent bankers and self-deluding visionaries.

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1. See the extraordinary profile of Joseph O'Neill and his career and family in Britt Collins, 'We live in a hotel,' *The Guardian*, Saturday, 16 August 2008, 'Family' section, pp. 1-2.

Hand in the Fire by Hugo Hamilton.
 London: Fourth Estate, 2010.
 ISBN 978-0007324828
 288 pp., £12.99 (Hardback)

Reviewer: **Mairéad Conneely**

Hugo Hamilton understands outsiders. His autobiographical novels *The Speckled People* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006) chronicle his childhood and his search for some comprehension of his father's militant stance on the Irish language, and his mother's German heritage. Speckled is in itself an important marker and theme in much of Hamilton's writing to date; its Irish counterpart '*breac*' best describes the notion of being half-covered or half-spotted, suggesting, perhaps, a person or place which is not complete, or of being cognisant of an absence in one's character, for example. In his latest novel, *Hand in the Fire*, we are introduced to a Serbian carpenter, Vid, who is struggling with the linguistic and psychological demands of living in a country where things are very different indeed. However, Vid is not the only character in this novel that is adrift. He meets Kevin Concannon, a lawyer, and quickly realises that the Concannon family, like himself, have their own secrets, their own untold tales. Vid's own past is confused and he details very little of his family's history until quite late in the book, maintaining throughout most of the story that he has lost his memory. When Kevin advises him to go to Dursey Island, 'don't tell anyone that you haven't been there' (4), Vid travels south to find himself lost and even more detached from the mainland he is attempting to understand and integrate into. He is searching for a 'rough guide on how to fit in as much as possible [...] I wanted to belong here' (6, 7). Vid wishes, above all else, to enjoy 'spectacular friendship' (7) in Ireland; Kevin later equates putting your hand in the fire with true friendship,

and yet much of this dark and brilliantly-paced book concerns itself with water, with islands and with the slippery subjects of memory and forgetting.

Vid and Kevin's lives become entangled when Kevin intercedes rashly on Vid's behalf in a street fight. The fracas arises from a clear misunderstanding between the eventual victim and Vid himself, though there is a clear racist undercurrent throughout. Kevin's intervention reveals his darker, more troubled side. Vid is given work in the Concannon family home partly to calm his fears about Kevin's actions on the night of the attack and also to provide him with a semblance of welcome and opportunity. Curiously, Kevin advises Vid that Ireland 'is an island [...] [y]ou can never completely trust what you hear. You have to forecast what's behind the words' (67). Before long, Vid hears about the drowning of Máire Concannon; an aunt of Kevin's on his father's side, who was pregnant outside of marriage, and who apparently drowned and was found washed up on the Aran Island of Inis Mór. Kevin's advice about double meanings and deception rings true as Vid's search for answers leads him to the West of Ireland and to the realisation that his own past has coloured his present. Tracing what happened to the young Concannon girl mirrors his own need to address and come to terms with what happened to him in his earlier life. The girl's story, nonetheless, brings another layer of eerie national history into play; she was denounced from the altar and left to carry a heavy social and personal burden. Her death, either accidental or self-inflicted, and her appearance on the shores

of Aran, poignantly illustrate the ways in which memory is pushed to the fringes and only recovered on the edges. The place where the girl's body washed ashore is known as '*Bean Bháite*', or 'Drowned Woman'; her name forgotten but not her fate. However, Vid does not reveal his search for the truth, nor does he achieve any real closure for himself or the tragic girl. Though the mystery of this story provides the backbone for the novel, it drifts in and out of the narrative and, as suggested by the notes which Hamilton provides, never reaches any satisfactory conclusion. This is attributable, one imagines, to the circumstances of the time of the drowning.

Another mystery continues, nonetheless, in the shape of Kevin's father, and it is Vid, once again, who must confront the uneasiness which the patriarchal figure's absence brings to the family home. The outsider, who is at times stymied by his inability to communicate fully, sees much more than the insider, and the insider, in this case Kevin, embroils Vid further in the difficult history of his own family tree. When Vid becomes the contact point between the Concannons and Johnny (the father and husband), he makes an important observation about the drowning that could just as easily frame his immediate family's narrative: '[o]ver the years the tide brought in more and more rumours after her [...] [l]ike the truth, I suppose, coming and going all the time' (210). Through

his sometimes-fraught friendship with Kevin, Vid is provided with a perturbed understanding of Irishness, loaded with turns of phrase and nuances which may never be learned in full, and yet Vid dives into the depths of his new homeland, aware of the ever-present dangers. His attempts to right wrongs and to bring closure to his own wounded past and to that of Máire Concannon inevitably leads him to comprehend how the unsaid and the unfixable are central to the Irish character. His desire to repatriate Máire's body to Furbo, from where she drowned, best illuminate his own desire to correct his own story. However, too much has happened in the spaces between then and now.

Hand in the Fire is a beautifully-written novel, full of Hamilton's astute observations on the dual nature of the outside-insider. But it is also a dark study of the process of remembering and of living in a country where the past is both glorified and forgotten.

Dr. Mairéad Conneely teaches Irish at the University of Limerick. Her areas of research include Irish language literature, the works of Tom Murphy and Brien Friel, Irish studies, Island studies and Comparative Literature. Her book, *Between Two Shores / Idir Dhá Chladach: Writing the Aran Islands, 1890-1980 (Reimagining Ireland, Peter Lang)* will be published in May of this year.

Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts by Christine Cusick (ed.), with an introduction by John Elder.

Cork: Cork University Press, 2010.

ISBN 9781859184547

269 pp. €39.00 (Hardback)

Reviewer: **John Eastlake**

Irish Studies has seen a proliferation of theoretical perspectives made explicit in the past decade, even while questions linger about the disciplinarity of Irish Studies itself. Whether viewed as a concentration of interests, lines of inquiry based on a foundation of literary and cultural theories, or an emergent discipline, Irish Studies has proved a warm and welcoming environment for the application of multiple theories to familiar subjects. Unlike the growing momentum behind “Transnationalism” in Irish Studies which has resulted in multiple publications in various areas of the discipline, and innumerable panels at the major Irish Studies conferences, Ecocriticism has yet to be established as a major feature of our academic landscape. (For instance, at IASIL 2010, there was no dedicated panel for Ecocriticism.) The volume in hand collects eleven essays, bracketed by John Elder’s “Introduction” and the editor’s interview with Tim Robinson. Ecocriticism has the demonstrable potential to develop into an important area within Irish Studies, as the recent “Ireland and Ecocriticism” conference, organised by Dr Maureen O’Connor, attests. This volume may therefore prove useful in the further development of Ecocriticism in various Irish Studies venues, and will hopefully encourage the development of coursework on Ecocriticism and Irish literature.

The contributions by chapter, with two exceptions, focus on single authors and selected texts thereof: Eamonn Wall on Richard Murphy; Joy Kennedy-O’Neill on J. M. Synge; Joanna Tapp Pierce on Elizabeth Bowen; Greg Winston on George Moore; Kathryn Kirkpatrick on Paula

Meehan; Donna Potts on Michael Longley; Maureen O’Connor on Edna O’Brien; Miriam O’Kane Mara on Roddy Doyle; and Karen O’Brien on Martin McDonagh. Jefferson Holdridge discusses both Lady Morgan and William Carleton, and Eóin Flannery addresses Irish tourism, colonialism and landscape. The volume is cleanly edited, well presented, and includes both a collated bibliography and a useful index. Though the contributions are of consistently high quality and benefit from being brought into proximity with each other, there is no direct engagement between contributors. Some chapters focus tightly on Ecocriticism, demonstrating its capabilities as a perspective and tool, while others stray further afield in pursuing their readings. As Elder notes, the authors and texts discussed stem mostly from the late-nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, which provides a coherent focus for this collection of essays. In general, Elder’s introduction is laudatory, and pithy. He writes, “There’s a purposeful and dialectical character to this volume’s critical project” referring to his assertion that ecocritical readings have the potential to simultaneously reveal both “the sceptical and debunking energies” of Irish authors, while not “denying their underlying intention to find a more sustaining and positive vision”. He adds that ecocriticism should be “muddy boots crumping into the academy”, riffing off Tim Robinson’s comments in the closing interview, suggesting ecocriticism may be a galvanizing force in the study of literature in the academy on both sides of the Atlantic.

Initially, the lack of an editorial introduction,

laying out, at length, the emergence of Ecocriticism and its applications in Irish literature, may be off-putting to the reader, who is seeking justifications for the project. However, the editor has done her work well, as the chapters are arranged to draw the reader along. Wall's essay opens the collection and does a good deal of heavy lifting in explaining in fruitful summaries the development of environmental studies in the USA, and the manner in which ecocriticism has subsequently become available to critics of Irish literature, especially poetry. And, in Kennedy-O'Neill's essay, (reprinted from *ISLE*), she argues for the utility of ecocritical reading: "by examining Synge's use of nature with an ecocritical approach, one can see that it does not conform to many of the traditions of British writers" and reveals "a blend of uniquely Irish ambiguities towards place". Winston further advances the overarching discussion by examining agrarian spaces in Moore's *The Untilled Field*, acting on a need to push ecocriticism beyond wilderness/civility dichotomies of environment. As well as collapsing and transcending analytical dichotomies, O'Brien (in an essay first published in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*) identifies ecocriticism as a way to address contradictions in representation and mimesis, such as those found in McDonagh's attack on *Man of Aran*, which she argues parallels the "fracture that displaces the interrelationships between the human and nonhuman world". Further on, the links between Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism are introduced and interrogated in both Kirkpatrick and O'Connor's essays. O'Connor writes: "The historical background of another emerging field, in which this current volume makes an important intervention, that of Irish ecocriticism (and ecofeminism), has suffered similar neglect, possibly for a related reason; that is, the humiliating history of British colonial discourse that has both feminised and zoontologised the Irish". While there is no single chapter that recaps the history of ecocriticism, the contributions, in volume form, are admirably efficacious in developing the reader's appreciation and understanding of the origins of

Ecocriticism in environmental studies and literature and its current polyvalent potentials.

A recurring theme in several chapters raises questions about the relationship between ecocriticism and the voluminous body of space/place theory, and as this discussion is left to the background, the argument for ecocriticism's utility in this respect is, perhaps, left unmade. In Tapp Pierce's contribution, Bowen's use of landscape is allowed "to come fully alive" through an ecocritical reading, focusing on the relationship between "literature and the physical environment", but Tapp Pierce also acknowledges the overlap or even interchangeability between it and a reading based on "sense of place" and "neo-primitivist animism". Tapp Pierce goes on to explore the complexities of Bowen's work admirably, teasing apart the differing threads of Bowen's relationship with her family home of Bowen's Court, but in doing so, raises a question about how prominent "physical environment" is when compared with the historical, social, cultural, personal, and familial aspects of place. The legacy of Seamus Heaney's work on "sense of place" is keenly felt, as are Tim Robinson's contributions. While Ecocriticism may be fully compatible with the work of space/place geographers and philosophers, a direct examination of this issue would be most welcome. The lack of a full editorial chapter (beyond the editor's "Acknowledgements") is a missed opportunity for a volume that is described as "an unprecedented integration of Irish Studies and Ecocriticism" on the jacket. Two major areas are left unaddressed as a result: the lack of a chapter on Ecocriticism and Irish-language literature (of any sort); and, a general lack of discussion about the potential "depth" of Ecocritical approaches in Irish literatures in Irish and English. Without any explanation given, that the poetry and prose of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (for example) are not discussed in a volume centred around modern Irish literature and the environment, is simply mystifying. It is alluded to in several of the chapters, and on the jacket copy, that eco-based readings of Irish literature are likely to be sustainable for all periods, not just the modern. The jacket asserts that the

the importance of place “is in fact rooted in ancient traditions of Celtic mythology and place-lore”. This is something of a leitmotif throughout the volume, which perhaps calls for a follow-up volume to argue this assertion that looks at a much broader range of texts including earlier periods and from both the Irish-language and English-language literary traditions.

This volume will serve the interested reader well, marks a stimulating entrance for Ecocriticism into our discipline, and could be the starting point for another sustained discussion in Irish Studies.

John Eastlake is a IRCHSS Postdoctoral Fellow, hosted by Roinn an Bhéaloidis, University College Cork. His research to date has focused on the ways in which native and indigenous peoples have collaborated with others in the production of life-stories and other printed texts. He has a particular interest in Irish and Native American instances of cross-cultural, collaborative productions of printed texts, especially autobiography/life-writing and traditional narrative.

J.G. Farrell – In His Own Words: Selected Letters and Diaries by Lavinia Greacon (ed.)
 Cork: Cork University Press, 2009
 ISBN 978-1859184288
 464 pp. £35 (Hardback) / £15 (Paperback)

Reviewer: **Eoin Flannery**

Less than three months before his untimely death on 11 August 1979, J.G. Farrell wrote a letter dated 8 May to Robert and Kathie Parrish detailing the ongoing domestic chaos at his new home in rural county Cork. Farrell records passing a month by candlelight; “the absence of post”; “a petrol shortage”; and a dysfunctional bathroom (p. 357). The disorder and ill luck, however, cannot negate the genuine contentment that the novelist feels at, finally, arriving at a sense of homeliness in the coastal recess on Ireland’s Atlantic seaboard. His domestic frustrations may be inconvenient, but they belong to him and they are temporary; the final missives from Farrell’s authorial station by the sea, then, reflect both the general temper of uncertainty that characterized his life up to this point, and an impending sense of stability in the months and years ahead. Naturally, with the benefit of hindsight, reading the final letters of 1979 and noting the renovations and the plans outlined therein by Farrell is an experience tinged with pathos. Indeed, the letter immediately prior to that cited above adds to such a feeling, when Farrell, writing to Claude and Anna Simha, enthuses: “The countryside is just beautiful. I haven’t had a chance so far to go fishing, but the locals say that you can catch mackerel right beside me here” (356). And again these last letters document Farrell’s subsequent dedication to fishing on nearby rocks (with some success); fishing competes with his writing for his attentions at various stages in the final months.

Besides these minor local triumphs and distractions in later years, as Lavinia Greacon’s copious volume catalogues, Farrell’s correspondence is suggestive of a dynamic and humorous personality, and of a life rich in cultural experiences and international travel. Following her 1999 biography *J.G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* (Bloomsbury), Greacon performs an act of editorial collations that is becoming anachronistic in the contemporary digital age. Whether reading recently published volumes of letters, such as those at hand or those of Saul Bellow, or, indeed those of long deceased literary figures, one thing is abundantly clear, the appearance of such volumes is in terminal decline. The publication of the letters of a relatively contemporary author such as Farrell is, and will become ever more, a rarity in literary studies. Letter writing is a dying, if not a dead, form of communication; the physicality of pen on paper, dispatch and receipt, as well as the artefact itself have been etherised in the epoch of digital correspondence and self-fashioning. This is not to appear as a neo-Luddite, but simply to remark upon the precious rarity of substantial volumes such as that edited by Greacon. In fact, one of the limitations of the volume stems from the one-sided nature of the letters reproduced here; we only receive Farrell’s voice in the collection, and can only guess at the replies from his subsequent responses. The dialogic electricity of the lettered exchange, thus, is unfortunately lacking in this volume. Nevertheless, there is sufficient material collated by Greacon for both

academic scholar and general reader to yield significant value from the selection.

As mentioned, Farrell led a peripatetic life with periods of residency in the U.S., England, Ireland, and France, as well as research trips to India and Singapore and visits to his parents in Malta. Of course, the volume is, naturally, a symptom of such a lifestyle, but the international theme is also an informant of Farrell's literary tastes, evidenced in these letters. His international consciousness is also palpable in the transhistorical and transcontinental ethic of his fiction writing, which encompasses a range of geographical and historical contexts. In his 1965 application for a Harkness Fellowship to Yale University, Farrell writes: "I am deeply interested in trying to write universal, as opposed to regional, novels; the sort of books in which people trying to adjust themselves to abrupt changes in their civilization, whether it be in Ireland or in Japan, may be able to recognize themselves" (p. 87). There is an empathetic quality to Farrell's authorial ethic here; the materials may be local but the resonances and the vision are universal. This ethic is tangible, in particular, in his celebrated 'Empire' trilogy: *Troubles*, *The Singapore Grip* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*. And it is something that he prized when *Troubles* was first published – he records that the specific details of the novel resound beyond the narrow context of the plot, and he was both heartened and disappointed that only one significant reviewer appreciated his intentions. Elizabeth Bowen's review, Farrell writes in his diary on 1 December 1970, "pleased me very much because she was the only person who noticed, or bothered to say, that I was trying to write about now as well as then" (p. 217). Farrell had met and spoken with Bowen at a literary dinner party in London earlier the same year, and such company becomes more evident in the letters as Farrell's career gains upward momentum. In a similar vein, the letters chart the quirks, irritations and mechanics of the publishing industry and its hinterlands, to which Farrell becomes accustomed, though not without outbursts of

extreme anger. Anticipating royalties, Farrell writes to his agent Deborah Rogers in December 1969 that: "For the past week I've been seething with impotent rage at the non-appearance of £200 which, in my innocence, I imagined I had coming to me from the p'back of *A Girl in the Head*" (p. 187). But with such moments of feverish anger, we also witness Farrell's good-humoured wit; his professions of youthful romantic ardour; and impressions of the erstwhile corners of the British Empire in India and Singapore. The most extended dispatches from international travel are from India, and it is signally illuminating when we re-consider Farrell's writing back to British imperial history. From these letters the most arresting details are personal responses to the subcontinent and its burgeoning urban centres. We read of the author's incapacity to process the abject impoverishment and incessant human decrepitude on display in Bombay and Delhi. India is refreshing and welcoming to Farrell but is frightening and repulsive at the same time: "One feels v. safe here, in spite of the horrors one sees...Even heartless old me finds it hard to get used to," he informs his girlfriend Bridget O'Toole from Bombay in January 1971. The difficulties of this subcontinental research trip are part of the greater authorial trials listed by Farrell, the most persistent being financial troubles. The freedom to purchase solitude and time to write can be tracked from his early twenties onto the preparation for his formidable 'Empire' trilogy. But the financial strife is often leavened by intermittent love letters to girlfriends such as Bridget O'Toole; Sarah Bond (in the U.S.); and an early romantic attachment, Gabrielle (in Germany). These love letters veer from matter of fact details of daily life to mawkish professions of love; and also allude to his consistent devotion to authorial success. One gets the impression that the chase was Farrell's energiser, that he sought communication rather than permanent consummation.

These are just a fraction of the topics addressed in Greason's handsomely produced volume. The letters have an ambiguous valence,

in that they suggest a dialogue and a sense of communion between correspondents, but they also emphasize the solitude of the individual letter writer. Greason's edition permits a valuable insight into one of the English language's most accomplished and enigmatic figures in recent times, supplementing her excellent biography. Farrell emerges as a figure that needed people but that for whom letter writing seems to have been an ideal form – communication without absolute commitment.

Dr Eoin Flannery is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of three books: *Colum McCann and the Aesthetics of Redemption* (2011); *Ireland and Postcolonial Studies: Theory, Discourse, Utopia* (2009); and *Versions of Ireland: Empire, Modernity and Resistance in Irish Culture* (2006). He is currently writing two further books: the first on the work of Eugene McCabe; and the second on Irish cultural history, ecology and empire.

Landing Places: Immigrant Poets in Ireland by Eva Bourke and Borbála Faragó (eds.)
 Dublin: Dedalus, 2010
 ISBN 978-1906614225
 270 pp. £ 21.38 (Hardback)

Reviewer: **Luz Mar González Arias**¹

Sixty-Six is a Great Start

Last year saw the publication of *Ten New Poets: Spread the Word*, an anthology of black and Asian poetry, edited by Bernardine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra, to reflect the multicultural dimension of contemporary Britain. The book was a response to the Free Verse report, which revealed that only 1% of the poetry books published in the UK were written by Asian or black poets. The figures are shocking enough, but if we take into account that they correspond to a country that has been racially diverse for generations they are even more alarming, and raise a lot of questions around the issues of representation, authorship and canon formation processes. If this is the situation in Britain, after reading Evaristo's introduction to *Ten*, "Why It Matters" (11-16), expectations of an ethnically and racially heterogeneous poetic landscape are not very high for a country such as Ireland, traditionally schooled in emigration and only recently itself the recipient of migrant communities. The anthology *Landing Places: Immigrant Poets in Ireland* is a good barometer to tackle this issue and has the merit of being the first volume entirely devoted to the poetry of the communities that have settled in Ireland in the last decades.

As the editors eloquently explain in their introduction, there have been several distinctive

waves of immigration to Ireland (xx). However, the unprecedented economic success of the Tiger years resulted in an important increase in the number of migrants, to the point that it looked as if immigration was a completely new phenomenon directly linked with the boom. This anthology puts together sixty-six poets that are diverse in their racial and ethnic identity, social extraction, writing experience, age, thematic preferences and moment of arrival in Ireland. The volume thus reflects the varied human landscape of modern Ireland while it contributes to counteracting the clichéd meaning of the term "immigrant". There is a tendency to associate immigrants with asylum seekers, political refugees and economic migrants exclusively. Alternatively, we think of students and professional migrants as travellers or global citizens and, in his review of *Landing Places*, Dave Lordan uses the term "spiritual immigrants" for those who arrived in the 80s and 90s, mainly from continental Europe, Britain and the USA, looking for a rural Arcadia in the Emerald Isle. In *Landing Places*, however, students like Megan Buckley, and Kristina Camilleri appear side by side with Enrique Juncosa (director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art), Julia Piera (then director of the Cervantes Institute in Dublin) and Angolan-French poet Landa Wo, forced into exile and faced with the difficulties of finding a job in the receiving countries. The undesirable obliteration of difference within such a varied group is avoided

1. I wish to acknowledge my participation in the Research Projects FFI2009-08475/FILO and INCITE09 204127PR for the study of contemporary Irish and Galician women poets.

by means of a small bio-bibliographical note preceding each poet's work and shedding light on his/her singularity.

As is only to be expected in a book like this, the poems anthologised look at the experiences of loss, alienation, displacement and hope that characterise diasporic communities. However, the volume doesn't work as a manual to understand "Otherness", and offers instead multiple themes that surprise the reader: Oritsegbemi Emmanuel Jakpa's "Harmattan" (73-4), for instance, is an imaginative revision of Seamus Heaney's "Digging", and Panchali Mukherji's "Odysseus Today" (126-7) infuses Indian scents in a canonical myth that has shaped the collective psyche of Ireland for generations. There are reflections on illness and the loss of loved ones – as in Theodore Deppe's "Guillemot" (48-9) or in Grace Well's moving "The Dress" (210-11), to give but a few examples. Kinga Olszewska's humorously dramatic "A Site for Sale" (144) tackles the thorny issues of integration and identity, and Nyaradzo Masunda's "Walk My Walk" (108-9) invokes empathic responses on the part of the native inhabitants of the land that received her by means of a poetic mode based on repetition and African rhythms: "Before you walk my walk / Take my boots / Do you feel the tightness? / Do you feel the stones piercing through? / Do you feel the thorns? / This is the walk I walk" (108). Readers are thus presented with an anthology that does not aspire to represent *the* immigrant experience but the artistic sensibilities of poets that currently share the same geographical space. The poems of Irish-Indian Ursula Rani Sarma are a good illustration of this. The poet and playwright has often declared that it is not her intention to write about her "Indianness", which is what many people expect her to do, given her hybrid origins. The editors of *Landing Places* have wisely avoided the mystification of the newcomers under the rubric of "authenticity" and have favoured poetic quality and heterogeneity instead. This is not surprising in a book edited by poets Eva Bourke and Borbála Faragó. Their poetic sensibilities as well as their knowledge of the immigrant experience from within have definitely shaped such an artistically challenging volume.

For many of the poets anthologised – originally from Britain or the USA – English is their mother tongue or has been their main means of communication for a long time. Therefore, most of the poems conform to a standard version of English. Only a few of the authors flavour their texts with the unfamiliar structures of foreign languages. As a reader coming myself from a non-English speaking country, I would have liked to read more of these instances to assess the ways in which the varied linguistic communities that live in Ireland nowadays are leaving an impact on the English language and on the literary text. However, and as the editors contend, many of the recent immigrants are probably writing in their languages of origin by preference (xxi), and some, we may add, may be too busy making ends meet to engage in creative writing at all. I believe we will have to wait for at least ten more years before we witness a more heterogeneous linguistic landscape in the poetry published in Ireland. The anthology serves, however, as an interesting map to tackle the ways in which English is beginning to be altered imaginatively by the new communities. Researchers working in the field of Irish Studies could easily use this volume to analyse whether Hiberno-English, formerly marginalised as an inferior form of the supposedly superior R.P. English, may now be drawn to the centre of representation in the work of all these new voices or to examine the extent of adaptation to Irish-English on the part of poets coming from other anglophone environments.

Several of the poets included in *Landing Places* were already familiar to readers of poetry in Ireland. As Faragó contends, immigrant poets are not new to the poetic scene and approximately 20% of the names included in the "Contemporary Poetry" section of *Field Day Vol. V* "are immigrants or have mixed cultural backgrounds" (2008: 149). Although this is a figure to celebrate, the origins of these poets are often obliterated in such volumes in a process of assimilation to the national mainstream. The anthology here reviewed powerfully counteracts this dynamics. Publishing immigrant poets in a separate volume may be seen as a form of segregation, but at this precise moment, when immigrant writing is still a fairly new

phenomenon, anthologies like *Landing Places* highlight the new creative energies of Ireland and their contribution to what is commonly referred to as “Irish poetry”.

It is also a timely publication. With the end of the economic boom and the leaving of thousands of immigrants, the question that now remains to be answered is the nature of the consequences which it all may have for Irish writing. The anthology witnesses the beginnings of a more diverse poetic community right when a new change was looming on the horizon. Sixty-six is

a good start and we can only hope the numbers are here to stay and grow.

In her thought-provoking *A Small Place*, Antiguan novelist Jamaica Kincaid writes that all human beings are dual in nature, all of us natives of somewhere and strangers somewhere else. It is only a matter of perspective, she maintains, to embody one or the other. *Landing Places* goes beyond the mere representation of the poetic voices of the others to make us pause and reflect on our own otherness, on our own dual character.

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An Autumn Wind by Derek Mahon
 Loughcrew, County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Press, 2010
 ISBN 978-1-85235-486-2
 79 pp. £10.95 (Paperback)

Reviewer: **Karen Marguerite Moloney**

The title for Derek Mahon's latest volume of verse comes from lines in two of its poems. In "Under the Volcanoes," Mahon ends a holiday on the Spanish island of Lanzarote with a sense of "old age starting for real." Then, on returning home to Kinsale, he hears "an autumn wind / shaking the window." The noise disturbs his writing, but he perseveres nonetheless, aiming to produce "a living thing / outlasting winter to a temperate spring." Mahon's second poem to contain the title phrase is "Autumn Fields," his translation of eight-century Tu Fu's reverie on the rewards he finds in exile:

An autumn wind shivers my walking stick
 but peace of mind resides in ferns, flowers,

music and daily habit for equilibrium,
 regular exercise . . .

In the poem's last stanza, the aging Tu Fu observes that the eagles he once intended "to shine among" have been replaced by ducks and geese. Thirteen centuries later, however, Tu Fu's wistful poem still reels us in, and Mahon's wry-toned translation plays no small part in that process. Like the poetry of Tu Fu, Mahon's new collection of autumnal verse should outlast the winter. I might even call my review "Shining among Eagles" if titling it were an option.

The book's forty-two poems are presented in three sections. Part One, the longest with its twenty-four poems, is also the most thematically varied, considering topics ranging from "World Trade Talks" to "Ash and Aspen." Part Two of the collection, *River of Stars*, contains seven translations of T'ang-era poems, three by Li Po, one by Ch'iu Wei, and three, including "Autumn Fields," by Tu Fu. Part Three, *Raw Material*, groups twelve poems Mahon "translated freely"

from a collection of the same name by fictitious Indian poet Gopal Singh. Reviewer Patrick Guinness cites Part Two and Three as Mahon's strongest, a puzzling assessment to my mind. The poems of Part One are certainly as arresting as those by the poet as translator, even as make-believe translator, and all three sections of the volume collect graceful, compelling verse.

Part One opens with "Ithaca," in which Odysseus returns to his native land and vows to bring gifts to Athene if she will let him "live to taste / the joys of home." Though the poems go on to chronicle life in places as diverse as Manhattan ("Blueprint"), "old Delhi after dark" ("Air India"), and Lanzarote, Mahon's "A Quiet Spot" evokes the homely appeals of Kinsale, the "dozy seaside town" where he has retired, the "New Space" of a quiet studio ("a still life restored / to living matter"), and "a knuckly oak beside the spring / reaching skyward like a Druid" ("Growth"). Like Odysseus, Mahon relishes the domestic and indigenous.

In two of my favorite poems in the collection, Mahon muses on topics related to Sceilig Mhichíl, the rocky Atlantic outcrop finally abandoned by Irish monks after inhabiting it for six hundred years. Prevented by rough seas from sailing to the island, Mahon speculates in "At the Butler Arms" on the hardships and "intense belief" of the monks who made it their home. He follows with "Sceilig Bay," a dramatic monologue in which Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, nineteenth-century composer from south Kerry, recounts the tale of another failed trip to Sceilig Mhichíl:

Our seine-boat was a delight that morning,
 high in the waves, six oars at work,

the sail full and the rowlocks slick,
every board alive and singing.

But when Ó Súilleabháin's party reached open sea, "breakers multiplied, / rain threatened," and "Gull Sound / roared aloud like a bull in pain." Luckily, they made it back to harbor, with Ó Súilleabháin again praising the vessel:

Ribbed, tarred and finished by Seán O'Neill,
that little boat will never know harm:
where would you find a finer ship
to deliver you safe from such a storm?

In a less dramatic offering, the three-part "Autumn Skies" also renders tribute, this time to Mahon's fellow Ulster poets John Montague, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley. In these poems, written for his friends' birthdays, Mahon manages fine-tuned, knowing assessments of their oeuvres in succinct five- or six-stanza commentary. In "Art and Reality," a longer, more free-ranging elegy addressed to James Simmons, poet, songwriter, and founder of *The Honest Ulsterman*, Mahon recognizes the reality of Simmons' "dodgy sexual ethic" at the same time that he commemorates his art: "I still hum your songs."

Part Two's seven translations from the Chinese are a more tightly connected group than the poems of Part One. Whether transporting the reader back 1,400 years to mountainous regions where "Even cranes find it hard to come . . ." or to the capital of the T'ang empire, the poems form a moving meditation on longing, friendship, and the loneliness of exile. In "Thinking of Li Po," for example, Tu Fu reflects on Li Po's "harsh banishment / among the malarial swamps beyond Kiang-nan," recalls the companionship he shared with the older poet, and "summon[s] up [his] spirit."

Part Three sends us back to the present, to the contemporary India of an imagined Hindi poet, terrain that includes not only slums filled with "forests of billboards" ("A Child of the Forest") but also fields become "bright gardens of winged dreams" after a rain storm ("A New Earth"). Themes of recycling and reincarnation intersect in "Raw Material" ("Only material forms die / says the *Gita*") and "Recycling Song" ("Swords into ploughshares, us / to birds and bushes, everyone / to topsoil in the end), while "Up at the

Palace" challenges any "curse of karma" projected onto low-caste children:

People, the terrible things you must have done
when you were soldiers of fortune, local kings
or naughty nautch girls in the old days!

Did you crush pearls for aphrodisiacs,
poison your cousins for a shaky throne
or cripple your tenants with a punitive tax?

No, you did nothing of the kind of course . . .

As genuine translations, such work would represent a fine accomplishment; as original poems, spoken in the "distinctive voice" Mahon attributes to Singh but is in fact his own, they only ratchet up our level of delight.

Crisscrossing the collection and knitting together its parts are the aforementioned motifs of exile, recycling, and growing older. But perhaps the most frequent common denominator is Mahon's invocation of water, and in a rich variety of guises. We read of torrential rain in "The Thunder Shower," "Asphalt Roads," and "A New Earth"; submerged Munster farmland in "After the Storm"; the breeze-blown Yangtze in "Thinking of Li Po"; low tide in "Mark Rothko"; a tsunami's "cliff of water" in "The Great Wave" – even a "slowly dripping tap" in "Air India." A long list – but not a comprehensive catalogue of the volume's water imagery. We should expect no less from a poet who retired to a seaside town intent on observing the ordinary wonders that surround him (or that he can conjure up for us in ancient China and contemporary India). After all, in the imagined words of Gopal Singh,

the old gods live on –
not on the high peaks
perhaps, but everywhere day breaks
on water and a washerwoman
sings to her own reflection. ("Water")

Probably my favorite poem, if not the volume's finest, relies on yet another link to water with its "league upon league / of ocean" traveled by the "Beached Whale" dying "on the strand at Timoleague":

The transatlantic dash was nothing to her,
a fine finback, her notion of a trip
some new dimension, gravity defied,
the dive at dusk through the empyrean

whooping and chuckling in her slick and drip,
stinking and scooping up the fry,
rusty and barnacled like an old steamship.

It's the diction, alliteration, slant and exact rhyme, rhythm, pacing, and, over and beyond Mahon's technical control, the glorious deployment of imagination that had me underlining and writing "wow" in the poem's margin.

Mahon is clearly a poet, like the autumnal Yangtse River of Tu Fu's poems, "in full spate," one determined as well to celebrate, with the gratitude of a traveler returned home at long last, "the venerable ideal / of spirit lodged within the real" ("New Space"). *An Autumn Wind* is Mahon's fourth volume of verse in the space of

five years. I anticipate with eagerness more volumes from a poet savoring a home "alive to season, wind and tide" ("A Quiet Spot").

Karen Marguerite Moloney is a professor of English at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, where she teaches Irish literature and modern and contemporary British literature. The author of *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope* (2007), she has also published on Brian Friel, Desmond O'Grady, George Bernard Shaw, and W. B. Yeats. Most recently, she published an interview with Michael Longley. She lives in Salt Lake City and is currently writing creative nonfiction.

"Tinkers": Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller by Mary Burke. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
ISBN 978-0-19-956646-4.
329 pp. \$95/£50/€74.

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

Understanding this misunderstood subject demands clarification of its terms. Professor Burke ends her introduction with an explanation. "Tinker" earns quotation marks "as the construct of the community within dominant discourse" (16). Travellers are those descended from those who practiced a nomadic way of life in Ireland; this term is now used by themselves and the settled population. This term may be a translation of *siúlóir/ siubhlóir* for "walker/stroller," which in Hiberno-English became "shuiler" (43). A Traveler refers to the American descendants of nineteenth-century Irish Traveller emigrants; Gypsy, by comparison, has been misapplied to Ireland's historically indigenous itinerants.

Definitions display the care with which Burke approaches her topic. She begins with "literary antecedents of the Irish Revival Tinker." The "pseudo-historiographical tradition" places Travellers in a Milesian, if exotic, scenario: "The Irish past was another country, and that country was usually in the east." This orientalizing of the Traveller shaped a "proto-ethnic" origin myth. Burke examines pre-Celtic attributions for Travellers, and their continuity in Enlightenment categories of Gypsy, rogue, and "tynker" that define a Romantic-era fascination with the picaresque. Comparing and contrasting the Scott(ish) with the Irish versions of "tinkers," Burke then shifts to Revival dramatizations.

Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907) "upends the binary of pious settled person and impious tinker," to demonstrate the artificiality of who's a nomad and who's settled (71). It places the censorious priest in the same suspicious light

as that which tracked the tinkers. Burke examines earlier drafts, stage directions, and contemporary influences. She shows how the sacred and profane, the chapel and the camp, force the viewer to confront as a unified whole what insular prejudice has kept segregated.

Her third chapter, "Playboys of the Eastern World," explores Orientalist pursuits of Synge and his colleagues into the Aran Islands. Burke places folkloric inventions within Synge's prose narrative next to a previously overlooked impact. Synge linked his faith's loss to Darwin's rise; Burke situates this within Anglo-Irish, late-Victorian Ireland. She suggests that "Yeats, like Synge, constructs the Protestant-led Revival as a compensatory response to evolutionary theory" (115). Prevalent hostility to Darwin and *The Playboy of the Western World* reveals the era's cultural fear of "amorality and nihilism" (122). Chapter Four explains how Tinkers threatened stability via post-Revival entertainment. She examines Seán Ó Coisdealbha's comedy *An Tincéara Buí* (1957), the challenging if uneven Frank Carney play *The Righteous Are Bold* (1946), and Maurice Walsh's novel *The Road to Nowhere* (1934). These tended to reaffirm the dominant social pieties even as they allowed room for Traveller confrontations with them.

Travellers themselves gain the stage, write the stories, and enter the films made after their communal politicization. Their débuts are preceded by Bryan MacMahon's *The Honey Spike*, both the 1961 play and 1967 novel of the same title, which were enriched by his knowledge of Cant (Shelta), the Irish Traveller language. MacMahon reports the language as

everyday communication rather than “exotic archaism,” and Burke finds in its power a portent of the Troubles. Tom Murphy and John Arden’s dramas deal with mobilization among the wider community as Civil Rights issues begin to stir the Irish, as emigrants and natives. Radicalization of those distinguished by “peripatetism” infuses these late twentieth-century plays.

Juanita Casey and Rosaleen McDonagh remind Burke of Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* as feminist and class-conscious responses from those finding their voice. She compares their authority to the madwoman in the attic talking back to Jane Eyre, or Travellers encamped outside the Irish Big House. Casey’s first novel *The Horse of Selene* (1971) and McDonagh’s experimental performance *The Baby Doll Project* (2003) draw on their own lives. These activists speak for their community. From a generation gaining literacy and respect, they assert themselves within and against a patriarchy, at least from stereotyped Traveller and settled perspectives. Their radicalism, however, seems to have not shaped their community’s recent portrayals in British, Irish, and American films. These tend to lag behind Traveller-originated literature and drama, to date, or their entry into Irish and British political arenas.

For almost a century, Travellers have been represented on screen. *Into the West*, *This Is My Father*, and *Trojan Eddie* emerged from 1990s Ireland, but Burke finds them wanting in the conviction that energizes literary and dramatic efforts beginning to emerge from Travellers themselves. *Snatch* gains a wry eye; Burke notes parallels with *The Tinker’s Wedding* in Guy Ritchie’s 2000 film. It suggests prejudice is being projected onto Brad Pitt’s character of Mickey, a “pikey,” by even “more unsavoury associates” (247).

Irish-American Travelers, often lumped with such associates, earn study. *Traveller* (1997) and *The Riches* a decade later as an F/X cable television series capitalize upon criminals seeking redemption, or those forced to seek it after being forced to do so by “community consensus.” The conflation with “white trash”

within American culture offers abundant opportunities for cliché. All the same, as in *Snatch* and Synge, mainstream characters are shown to be as consumed by amorality as those whom they denigrate.

What contrasts exist between Irish Travellers and Irish-American Travelers? Burke glides past this crux, but she notes that mainstream American whites regard as “natural” the possession of an “Irish and Christian heritage.” For the Irish, the Other turns more towards the Romany as the Traveller is seen to be indigenous, one of their own. Deviance from the norm, it seems, for both nations appears brief for those designated as (or claiming the identification as) Travellers. Future attention to this context by scholars and community activists who study “Tinkers” may clarify what her dense, tenaciously argued, and theoretically aware survey has established by its close reading of primary and secondary texts.

Burke seeks an end to the equivalence of Traveller with marginal. As recent literature and activist campaigns show, the marginalized can get along with the majority. “Otherness” may exhaust those relegated to the edge. Differences can be honored, as in a film by Travellers, *Pavee Lackeen* (2005), without fetishizing this minority. Perhaps their “exotic sameness” will become a new norm, at last.

Prof. John L. Murphy coordinates the Humanities sequence at DeVry University’s Long Beach, California campus. His Ph.D. is from UCLA in medieval English literature. Irish language reception by English-language culture, Irish republicanism, Beckett’s purgatorial concepts, Jews in medieval Ireland, the reception of Buddhism by Irish intellectuals, folk-rock in Irish counterculture, and the presentation of otherworldly, liminal states in medieval and modern literature illustrate his published research. He reviews books and music over a broad range of topics in print and online, and he contributes to *PopMatters* and the *New York Journal of Books* regularly.

The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume I: 1929-1940 by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds.; George Craig and Dan Gunn, associate eds.
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
ISBN 978-0-521-86793-1.
782 pp. \$50/£30/€36.

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

The editors began this project around 1985. Changes in ownership of Beckett's works, negotiations over publication of his correspondence, and the winnowing down of 15,000 letters to 2,500 to be reprinted in four volumes, along with another 5,000 from which excerpts would be used for annotations, demonstrate the care with which this endeavor has been compiled. Beckett may be the last major writer to have his correspondence extant in an entirely non-electronic form. The range of his letters, two-thirds written in English, 30% in French, and 5% in German, attests to the cosmopolitan range and erudite ambition of his determination to imagine himself, early on, into a literary life.

Fehsenfeld and Overbeck explain how they sought a middle way between the minimalist editorial approach of Richard Ellmann for James Joyce's letters, and the maximalist approach taken by John Kelly for W.B. Yeats's letters. Restricted to reproducing those letters that drew directly upon Beckett's writings, the editors nevertheless seek a liberal interpretation of this control. They explain how their first examples display Beckett's desire to connect to correspondents. He delivers less information, and more solidarity, or intimacy, as he tries to forge a literary career – and to keep his distance from one.

As Beckett's confidence grows, and as *Murphy* finally gets published after nearly two years of rejections, his language takes flight. Their content and style soar like kites, above his cities. His words may relax, energize, or recoil.

No wonder "rectal spasms," as the editors note, characterize the physicality of later 1930s letters, with analogies between the act of writing and primal, raw functions within the body.

He begins with coiled frustration. "I am looking forward to pulling the balls off the critical & poetical Proustian cock" (36). His monograph on Proust he regards more as duty than pleasure. He struggles to separate himself from his fellow and elder Irishman in Paris. "Sedendo et Quiescendo" to Beckett "stinks of Joyce in spite of most earnest endeavours to endow it with my own odours" (81). He then promises an editor at Chatto & Windus a scatological comparison to the precise shape of his bowel movements.

Thomas McGreevy received many of the letters included here. They speak of Beckett's indolence: "even if I succeeded in placing something and getting some money I don't think I would bother my arse to move." (158) He would rather lose the world for stout "than for Lib., Egal., and Frat., and quarts de Vittel." (159) he tells McGreevy in May 1933. Yet Beckett wonders why *Man of Aran* lacked any pooten, and soon he spends more time in London, looking toward Paris rather than Dublin for his future.

A year later, he tells Morris Sinclair of his fears, that "no relationship between suffering and feeling is to be found," and any joy comparing his own fortune to those with less "begins to look deceptive" (204). He observes himself as if "through a keyhole," and feels at a distance well away from his own self. "Strange, yes, and altogether unsuitable for letter writing" (205).

He finds the attitude that will infuse his mature work. In Autumn 1934, he informs McGreevy that the dehumanization and mechanical nature of the artist extends to the portraits he studies so intently: “as the individual feels himself more & more hermetic & alone & his neighbor a coagulum as alien as a protoplast or God, incapable of loving or hating anyone but himself or of being loved or hated by anyone but himself” (223).

Still, humor lurks. A spider has two “penes.” The “Kook of Bells” gets a nod. T.S. Eliot spelled backwards stands for toilet. Beckett contrasts the art, plays and concerts he views with English literature. It remains mired in “old morality typifications and simplifications. I suppose the cult of the horse has something to do with it” (250). He tires of vices and virtues. This mood may, in Spring 1935, account for his difficulties with *Murphy*. After analysis with Bion, Beckett rages to McGreevy. “If the heart still bubbles it is because the puddle has not been drained, and the fact of its bubbling more fiercely than ever is perhaps open to receive consolation from the waste that splutters most, when the bath is nearly empty” (259).

Yet, he watches the old men as kite flyers at Kensington’s Round Pond that autumn, and he observes them in his letter with the same detail that will enrich his novel. He tells McGreevy of a friend’s comment: “‘You haven’t a good word to say except about the failures’. I thought that was quite the nicest thing anyone had said to me for a long time” (275).

Tedium shrouds 1936. Working for his brother back in Dublin tempts him briefly. “I am thinking of asking Frank does he want stamps licked in Clare Street. Though I fear my present saliva would burn a hole in the envelope” (320). He informs McGreevy: “I do not feel like spending the rest of my life writing books that no one will read. It is not as though I wanted to write them” (362). Frank asks him after *Murphy* is turned down again:

‘Why can’t you write the way the people want’, when I replied that I could only write the one way, i.e. as best I could (not the right answer, not at all the right answer), he said it was a good thing for him he did not feel obliged to implement such a spirit in 6 Clare St. Even mother begins to look

askance at me. My departure is long overdue. But complicated by owing them £10 apiece (366).

Beckett cannot please possible publishers. “Do they not understand that if the book is slightly obscure, it is because it is a compression, and that to compress it further can only result in making it slightly obscure?” (380). He vows that his next work will be “on rice paper with a spool, with a perforated line every six inches and on sale in Boots” (383).

He roams Germany, refining his fluency, in early 1937. His letter to Axel Kaun in German represents a breakthrough. “It is getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears like a veil which one has to tear apart for me to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it” (518). While this exchange is well-known, within the contexts of travel and growing unease as the Continent’s fate entangles with his own uncertain future, this letter gains resonance. In 1936 he had noted how at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, “all the lavatory men say Heil Hitler. The best pictures are in the cellar” (384). He shifts from London to Paris to Dublin, unsettled.

Recovering from the 1938 attack upon him by a Parisian assailant, Beckett contemplates an offer from Jack Kahane’s Obelisk Press to translate Sade’s *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*. He hesitates, not wanting to do the predictably censorable work anonymously, but reluctant “to be spiked as a writer” (604). He as always needs the money, but the project fades away. His later letters document the rejections given to *Murphy*, and Beckett’s reluctance to stay in Ireland. “All the old people & the old places, they make me feel like an amphibian detained forcibly on dry land, very very dry land” (637).

Even in 1933 he felt an “unhandy Andy” around his family. Frank suffers his own malaise, “with the feeling all the time in the not so remote background that he is strangling his life. But who does not” (369). In 1938, Beckett learns from his brother that their mother is ailing. “I feel sorry for her often to the point of tears. That part is not analysed away, I suppose,” he tells McGreevy. From Paris, he “returned to the land of my unsuccessful abortion,” but only to “keep my

mother company” before he goes back for good “to the people where the little operation is safe, legal & popular. ‘Curetage’” (647).

For Beckett’s own intimacies, this compendium remains discreet. Lucia Joyce and Peggy Guggenheim garner proper mention. Beckett stays reticent regarding his relationship with Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil. He introduces her to McGreevy in 1939 as “a French girl also whom I am fond of, dispassionately, who is very good to me. The hand will not be overplayed. As we both know that it will come to an end there is no knowing how long it may last” (657).

By June 1940, Beckett wonders about their fate, “provided we are staying on in Paris.” He tells Marthe Arnaud how “Suzanne seems to want to get away. I don’t. Where would we go, and with what?” (683). He concludes, c/o the painter Bram Van Velde, with a characteristically resigned, yet defiant set of images and thoughts. As those around him await the Nazi occupation, Beckett cites *Murphy*, and mixes his own predicament with that looming over the recipients of his final letter.

under the blue glass Bram’s painting gives off a dark flame. Yesterday evening I could see in it Neary at the Chinese restaurant, ‘huddled in the tod of his troubles like an owl in ivy’. Today it will be something different. You think you are choosing something, and it is always yourself that you choose; a self that you did not know, if you are lucky. Unless you are a dealer (683-684).

Presciently, an advance notice about *More Pricks Than Kicks* in *The Observer* opined: “Mr. Beckett is allusive, and a future editor may have

to provide notes” (210). Notes expand here. Each letter earns footnotes; profiles of recipients total fifty-seven. Works cited, an index, and George Craig’s French and Viola Westbrook’s German translation prefaces supplement the letters. Contributors credited by the editors fill thirteen pages.

This is the first of four projected volumes. The diligence of those who have assembled this compendium attests to its thoroughness. Spot-checking, I could find only one small slip, an indexed reference that lacked a referent. The immense labor of Beckett, building up his own talent, is matched by the scholars who present his early correspondence, or at least a third of what remains, to an attentive audience.

Prof. John L. Murphy coordinates the Humanities sequence at DeVry University’s Long Beach, California campus. His Ph.D. is from UCLA in medieval English literature. Irish language reception by English-language culture, Irish republicanism, Beckett’s purgatorial concepts, Jews in medieval Ireland, the reception of Buddhism by Irish intellectuals, folk-rock in Irish counterculture, and the presentation of otherworldly, liminal states in medieval and modern literature illustrate his published research. He reviews books and music over a broad range of topics in print and online, and he contributes to *PopMatters* and the *New York Journal of Books* regularly.

Ghost Light by Joseph O'Connor
 London: Harvill Secker, 2010
 ISBN: 978-0-4362-0571-2
 246 pp. £16.99 (Hardback) / £7.99 (Paperback)

Reviewer: **Tony Murray**

In recent years, we have witnessed something of a collective “backward glance” in Irish literature. A glut of novels, set in the early to mid-twentieth century, has been published by established Irish writers, only to provoke the ire of their younger peers. Julian Gough recently commented, with some justification, that “reading award-winning Irish literary fiction, you wouldn’t know television had been invented” (Flood 2010).

There has certainly been a gradual turn by some authors towards historical fiction. Playing a prominent part in this have been novels about Irish migration. Last year, there was Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*, set in the early 1950s; three years earlier Edna O’Brien partly set *In the Light of Evening* in the same location in the 1920s. But, perhaps responsible for starting the whole thing off, there was Roddy Doyle’s *Oh, Play that Thing* (2003), again set in the 1920s, this time in Chicago. Joseph O’Connor’s most recent novel, *Ghost Light*, ploughs a similar furrow. But, importantly, it focuses as much on the journey eastwards to Britain as westwards to America, with post-war London providing the key backdrop to the action.

The novel is essentially a love story exploring the unlikely yet intense relationship between the playwright J.M. Synge and the actress Molly Allgood. It is a part-biographical, part-imaginative excursion into a slice of Irish theatrical history, but also an intriguing and absorbing study of the experience of exile. This is most obviously the case with regard to Molly who ended up living in destitution in a Paddington lodging house. But, it is also true, in another sense, of Synge himself who (quite apart

from his sojourns in Paris and Coblenz) saw himself as “a kind of outsider” (51) or as O’Connor pointed out in a recent interview, “as a migrant among the natives” (O’Connor 2010). Like *The Light of Evening*, O’Connor’s novel moves back and forth across time and space, between Ireland, England, Europe and America, between those who left and those who stayed and those who returned only to leave again. In this regard, *Ghost Light* explores themes of diaspora and displacement in Irish life in a more nuanced way than, for instance, *Brooklyn*, which is a more traditional novel of migration told in a rather linear and flat manner. O’Connor, of course, is well-qualified to take on this subject. His early work was informed by his own experiences in London in the late 1980s (O’Connor 1991) and his two outings previous to this one explored similar territory on both sides of the Atlantic (O’Connor *Star of the Sea*, 2002; *Redemption Falls*, 2007)

Ghost Light, however, is possibly O’Connor’s most technically accomplished novel to date. There are moments of striking lyrical intensity which contribute to a moving meditation on love and loss and the role of memory in our lives. His use of simile is particularly inventive and effective. Take, for instance, the way he describes Synge’s censorious habit of using the word “disappointed”, “like a tartish cologne” (89). Perhaps, O’Connor’s most ambitious decision was to write large parts of the novel in the second person, a notoriously difficult register for writers to pull off, but one which seems to work quite well. Initially, one finds oneself asking who exactly the narrator is. Is it a friend of Molly’s, is it Molly’s more famous sister

Sarah, or is it, indeed, Synge? Eventually, one can only conclude that it is Molly herself, in the form of her alter ego, reflecting on episodes from her rather erratic life and career. Such memories flood her thoughts as, like a latter-day Mrs Dalloway, she ambles through the streets of post-war London to participate in a radio broadcast of Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*. Indeed, the foundation of the novel is a "day in the life" of Molly (27 October 1952 to be precise) and a very portentous day it proves to be, as we later discover. From here, Molly's thoughts diverge in extended Bloom-like detours to scenes from her life with Synge: a rehearsal of *The Playboy* at the Abbey; a walk in the Wicklow mountains; a performance in San Francisco. The ghost of Joyce is evident also in Molly's namesake from *Ulysses* who haunts the shape and accent of her thoughts and most markedly in her frank and, at times, bawdy ruminations on her sexual relationship with her "Tramp". Synge, on the other hand, comes across as very much a product of his times and background. Like Yeats, he was essentially a middle-class Victorian gentleman with a reserve bordering on the chilly. But he was also clearly devoted to Molly and, when free from the disapproving gaze of his family and professional associates (including a rather severely drawn Lady Gregory), Synge is portrayed as a man prepared to reveal a modern and liberated self.

If a rather sombre read, the novel is never-

theless very funny in places. This is particularly true in those passages of dialogue where O'Connor gives free rein to the working-class Dublin vernacular. It is apparent in the character of Molly herself but also in the many finely-sketched auxiliary characters who pop up to provide light relief from time to time. O'Connor has a stab at some minor Cockney characters too, although the deft touch he displays when giving voice to the inhabitants of his home town is not quite so persuasive here. At moments, it verges on "Mockney" and the rather quaint off-kilter tones one might expect of a character actor fresh out of Ealing Studios. The real success of the novel is its structure which is a complex mosaic of set pieces that, if chronologically somewhat confusing, is nevertheless entirely justified. We learn about Molly, Synge, their families and acquaintances in a fragmented way, rather as we might in real life. Episodes from their lives come together in jigsaw fashion providing fresh perspectives on their personalities until, by the close, an almost complete picture of their relationship has emerged. Almost complete, because we are still left wondering at the end about precisely what drew these two people together. But, perhaps, this is not necessarily a bad thing. It invites us to complete the story ourselves and, by doing so, play our part in an imaginative journey as important as Molly and Synge's, namely that between the writer and his readers.

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Until Before After by Ciaran Carson.
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 ISBN 9781852354916
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Reviewer: **Keith Payne**

If you were to greet the principal narrator of Ciaran Carson's recent collection *Until Before After* on the street with a friendly "What's the story?" you would be forgiven for turning again at the response. For his is a convoluted tale, with "skein becoming/ ball the yarn// spun into what/ comes next," the whole "unravelling// until ravelled/ into skein" ("Reconfigured"). Nothing is what it seems here. There has been an explosion and the unnamed narrator is left pitching on the boom of the explosion's wake. Set in three sections, each with seventeen sets of three poems, *Until Before After*, among other things, is the narrator's attempt at reaching the stability of the "seventeen steps" of a hoped for homecoming. Then again, since this is the pitch of a Carsonian tune, he may just nod and reply "sound" after all.

The bomb dropped is a piece of news that wrenches the narrator apart. Everything is out of tune, off kilter. He turns to face a babble "of building blocks/ bricks and rubble," ("A babble") The turn is as much a backward look as a turn in the tune of the poems, or as Carson writes: "some of the poems [in this collection] depend on the terminology of Irish traditional music, where the first part of the tune is often called 'the tune' and the second part 'the turn.' A haiku-like turn if you like, where five bars 'in it takes/ a turn into// a darker cadence/ that alters how it// began.'" ("Five bars") The turn gives recourse to cast back over what was until the "almost/ mortal blow," ("For all that") weaving back through the "warp of words," ("Cast a spell") and passing through the threads of the story.

The story takes place, for the most part, in small, interior spaces; hospital wards, halls and

thresholds, hospices and empty rooms where "In your absence," the narrator is left "wandering from/ room to empty// room," with "time measured/ footfall by footfall." ("In your absence") The measuring of time; before, until and after, is the measure of the poetic foot negotiating the aftermath, the poetic form striving to find a foothold. But in "swathe after swathe" of aftermath, this can be like trying to "scale a twisted/ sheet dangling// from one/ shuttered window" ("As in a wall").

If you imagine for a moment a pebble dropped into a well as the event, it sends out ripples from itself; the aftermath. After some space of time the ripples meet the surrounding walls of the well and turn back in on themselves; the unexpected turn in the tune. Since this is Ciaran Carson's ear to which we are tuned, the aftermath is a sonic boom, a linguistic fallout, one that gives the reader recourse to the OED, for all is not what you may think with Carson. To give just one example: the surprising appearance of "calculus" in one of the poem titles gives a Latin etymology of "small pebble," the very same pebble that is dropped in the well, and so back we turn into the story turning in on itself. This is not mere lexical trickery, more serious fun; a telling of the beads. Recalling the visitation from *On The Night Watch*, Carson's previous collection, where "The Day Before:" "three journeywomen/ cloaked in black// came to my door/ armed with distaff // scroll & shears/ one to spin// one to span/ one to snip," we are reminded that for Carson, the life and the story of the life become one and the same thing. Although, more often than not, the story is what goes on after you have "passed over// to the

unseen world” (“An airman”). The three journeywomen incidentally are the Three Fates, daughters of *Night* who measure, spin and snip the story of your life.

We must also remember that Carson’s narrators are almost invariably urbanites, pedestrians traversing and textualising the city in their preambles. Quoting Michel de Certeau in his essay “‘Walking in the city’: space, narrative and surveillance in *The Irish for no* and *Belfast confetti*,” John Goodby tell us “in his essay ‘Spatial Stories,’ he [De Certeau] observes that in modern Athens the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai* and that ‘Stories could also take this noble name: every day they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them.’” (John Goodby in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009. pp.66-85.) What links the stories here is the death, or deaths of loved ones. And yet this story also deals with a near death, walking us right us up to death’s door, but never across the threshold which “is but/ a frame// of words and not/ the thing// itself if thing/ it be” (“At death’s door”).

Carson’s work until now has managed to exhaustively textualise the city of Belfast yet it seems that here he has spun the story into a knot. There are things that simply cannot be told. The story of those who have “passed over” can go no further. Their story can only turn back on itself, following the turn in the tune. There exists then, a city within a city. It is inhabited as much by those who have “crossed over” as by the shadows of your memory, shaded by the poetic feet as they fall into place. This shadow city is the alternative possibility opened up by Carson’s poetic construction; it can be glimpsed just beyond the linen backing, between the interstices of remembering and “remembering remembering”, filled with the many might have beens, or for all you knows. It’s a shadow of the city, and story, that you knew, or that you thought you knew.

In essence, this is the Meta-City of Carson’s own glass bead game – a game that has incorporated over the collections cartography, science-fiction, traditional Irish music, botany,

herbology, the Rev. Dineen’s Irish Dictionary, the OED, Golden Age Dutch and Flemish painting, philosophy, spiritualism, fountain pens and a heady brew called Shamrock Tea. It is a fully connected mnemonic matrix, the continuous present of the poem which demands absolute attention, Zeno’s poem if you like; while still in flight. Carson’s great skill is to lead us into such a complex narrative world and not lose either himself or us between the cracks that open in the pavement. He manages to navigate his way through the city, his eye following “the route from/ gutter pipe to// window sill to/ overhanging// cornice to/ window sill to// parapet to/ rooftop ever// after scaling/ one’s mind// by footholds not/ there until” (“The eye”). Until, from hospital room he returns home where “I open the door

into hall and
over threshold

after threshold
slowly oh

so slowly I bring
you heavy

step by step up
the seventeen

steps of that
flight once trodden

so swiftly as
year over year

to our room
full of light.

(“I open the door”)

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