Competing Traditions: The Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Irish Literatures between Realism and Experimentation

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It will barely be an overstatement to claim that the Irish novel arrived on the international scene in the aura of experiment, as *Ulysses* (1922), after initially slogging in the doldrums of the Western literary consciousness, quickly came to be mentioned in the same breath with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1924), Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924). The fact that Joyce faced enormous difficulty publishing each of his novels seems testament to the trenchant tastes of Ireland's literati but also shows that realism was and, to a large degree, is the mode of choice among Irish audiences. The case with poetry is largely similar, as W. B. Yeats quickly realized. It was his early, broadly Romantic poetry that popular audiences cherished; so much so that by the early 1920s he declined to read his all-time favorite "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (Foster 418), which was a staple of *Poems 1889-1908*, a collection that remained his most reissued and remunerative volume throughout his life. Yeats, however, is now best known for his post-1908 work, especially for the myth-infused poems of *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

For a literature born in the fires of formal experiment, the Irish novel, more so perhaps than poetry, was dominated in the years after World War II by realism and formal conservatism. Writing of contemporary Irish fiction, Eve Patten has suggested that "[f]or the most part, it remained formally conservative: beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signalled a haunted or traumatised Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche" (259). The traumas have invariably included the dysfunctions of state, church, and family. In effect, what Gerry Smyth calls "New Irish Fiction" (177) is dominated by a sociological purpose, mapping out the domains of crisis at various stages of Ireland's progress in the post-war periods. While Joyce, Beckett, and Flann O'Brien made Irish prose a hallmark of the unexpected, unclear, elusive, and difficult in the sense Theodor Adorno gave to the term in his essay on *Endgame* (136), the generation coming into its own since the 1950s has clung to realism. John McGahern may be the most salient example but even John Banville, despite his Nabokovian panache (Murphy 8), can hardly be counted among formal experimenters, although his notoriously unreliable narrators and his painterly language (Murphy 79) fly against the more traditional realism of

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McGahern, Edna O'Brien, Aidan Higgins or, from amongst more contemporary novelists, Anne Enright and Colm Tóibín.

It therefore comes as something of a surprise that the last decade has brought a resurgence of interest in the early twenty-century avant-garde novelists, with the acclaimed debut of Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) being directly compared to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). The experimental torch has also been carried with no little aplomb by Mike McCormack in his *Notes from a Coma* (2005) and *Solar Bones* (2016). Somewhat grandiosely, McCormack has claimed in an interview that "[his] generation were a bit wary of picking up the challenge those old fellows [Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien] had laid down for us" (qtd. in Boland). Even if such a quick dismissal of the experimental writing of the likes of Roddy Doyle must raise an eyebrow, McCormack makes a valid point that the re-orientation towards more daringly avant-garde techniques can more readily be detected among the younger novelists. Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* (2011) and *Beatlebone* (2015), Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), as well as Anna Burns' *The Milkman* (2018) are just a handful of examples of prose that is keenly aware of its own linguistic potential that defies the strictures of traditional realism. It is therefore a legitimate contention, as the essays collected in the present issue indicate, that a resurgence of avant-garde prose is taking place before our very eyes. Regardless of how we choose to categorize Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien: modernist (a commonplace tag), postmodernist (regarding the latter two) or past-modernist (an insightful remark on Beckett by Gontarski 19), the three "old fellows," to use McCormack's term, are being rediscovered and to wonderful effect.

The tension between tradition and experiment has registered at least as powerfully in Irish poetry. Whereas the last hundred years have ostensibly been dominated by Yeats and then Seamus Heaney, the voices of the "broken line," as Alex Davis has termed the Irish 1930s modernists Denis Devlin, Thomas MacGreevy, and Brian Coffey, have increasingly been heard. Apart from this trio, Louis MacNeice's work has been identified as a resource for the more experimentally-minded writers such as Paul Muldoon. Also, the more demanding later work of Thomas Kinsella is fraught with tensions between a realist mode of depiction and an experimental implementation of language. Therefore, while contemporary Irish poetry is occasionally (and simplistically) seen as an affair of a handful of poets associated with the Ulster renaissance—Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, predated by realist Patrick Kavanagh—it is in fact a complex field, in which the ethos of experiment has in no sense expired, as the 2016 special issue of the *Irish University Review* devoted to experimental poetry has shown, bringing together

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essays on Trevor Joyce, Maurice Scully, Catherine Walsh, and Geoffrey Squires. Unlike the novel, which experienced a realist heyday in the latter part of the twentieth century, poetry has been nourished by the avant-garde impulse quite steadily, even if the critical mainstream has at times failed to pay heed to it, too preoccupied with the erection of the canon (cf. Keating). Such monographs as Alan Gillis's *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (2005) and Tom Walker's *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (2015) have vastly complicated the map of modern Irish verse, inadvertently showing where the experimental impulse in the youngest Irish poets has originated. Sinéad Morrisey, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Conor O'Callaghan, to name but a few, contribute to a current of Irish writing that departs quite radically from the more realistically-inclined work of the likes of Heaney and Eavan Boland.

Creative intersections between tradition and experimentation have also served as catalysts for the development of Irish drama and theatre. When Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, they famously stated in their manifesto, "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory" (qtd. in Gregory 378). This became the key feature of Irish national theatre, which, as Robert Welch notes, is "commonly defined as being predominantly realistic and verbal" (213) and deeply rooted in the oral tradition. This did not prevent Yeats from experimenting with dance, Japonaiserie, and symbolism in his dramatic oeuvre or later Sean O'Casey from adding an expressionistic flavor to his own plays. The consequent tension between verbal and bodily expression, the oral and the visual, also became a productive source of creative innovation in the 1990s and later decades, as seen, for instance, in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) or in Thomas Kilroy's *Christ Deliver Us!* (2010).

Other, similar tensions can be found in the formal solutions introduced by Vincent Woods in *At the Black Pig's Dyke* (1992). Tackling the centuries-long Irish sectarian conflict, the play combines realistic and symbolic forms of representation and revives the Irish folk theatre traditions of mummers, wrenboys, and strawboys, which were largely neglected by the early twentieth-century revivalists. In a sense, Woods's experimental aesthetics, which blends twentieth-century theatre conventions with earlier folk traditions can be called "paleo-postmodern," a term coined by Catriona Ryan to describe Tom MacIntyre's plays which she perceives as a combination of "traditional Irish themes with an experimental format" (111). The experimental form of MacIntyre's groundbreaking plays created in the 1980s, such as the famous stage adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's 1942 poem "The

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Great Hunger," can be seen as milestones in introducing physical and devised theatre in Ireland.

Having mentioned the significance of non-verbal elements in Irish drama and theatre, we should not neglect language as a prolific area for experimentation, starting from J. M. Synge's use of the language of Irish peasantry to more contemporary experiments with the vernacular, such as Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (1996). Called by Richard Knowles "an almost incomprehensible idiolect that combines an extremely thick Cork patois with elements of a kind of Irish teen rap (or dub poetry) and a private language of baby talk" (195), *Disco Pigs* accentuates the protagonists' separateness, non-conformity, and isolation from society and underscores their unique perspective.

As in Walsh's play, the question of point of view, which has an important role in empowering members of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to share their experiences, is also essential in relation to a number of other contemporary Irish dramatic texts and performances. The female perspective, which remained much neglected in patriarchal Irish society on both sides of the Irish border, gained prominence thanks to, among others, Anne Devlin, the Charabanc Theatre Company, Marina Carr, and many more. It, for instance, played a crucial role in reviving the stories of women incarcerated in the infamous Magdalen laundries, which became heard thanks to Louis Lowe's site-specific performance *Laundry* (ANU, 2011), and the lesser known plays of Patricia Burke Brogan *Eclipsed* (2008) and Valerie Goodwin *The Magdalen Whitewash* (2002).

The voices of people with intellectual disability resonate strongly in Christian O'Reilly's play *Sanctuary* (2012), which was later adapted to film under the same title (2016, dir. Len Collin). Playwright Rosaleen McDonagh combines the perspective of a wheelchair user and a member of the Irish Traveller community. In his work as a playwright, actor, theatre director, and the founder of Arambe Productions, Ireland's first African theatre company, Nigerian-born Bisi Adigun acquaints his audiences with African cultural values. The Indian perspective has found a reflection and recognition on the Irish stage thanks to the works of Ursula Rani Sarma, while Polish Theatre Ireland has been instrumental in giving voice to Polish migrants.

With all this in mind, the articles collected in this issue of *HJEAS* explore various creative intersections between tradition and experimentation that can be seen as an unceasing driving force of Irish literature and culture. Nicholas Grene, for instance, looks at the ways in which Irish theatre participated in celebrating of the centenary year of 2016. He analyzes a number of Irish performances that dealt with the Easter Rising and were

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staged in that year. The article explores various experimental and traditional strategies of remembering and commemorating the rebellion whose "terrible beauty" (Yeats, "Easter 1916") still raises a lot of controversies. Focusing on form and content of the centenary depictions of the Easter Rising, Grene's text examines competing understandings of the rebellion and representational strategies that were used in different theatre productions.

The question of national identity, which remains central to the plays discussed by Grene, also strongly resonates in Joanna Jarząb-Napierała's exploration of Tomás O'Crohan's *The Islandman* (1929). Underscoring the democratic nature of native autobiography, she claims that it should be considered a genre in its own right. Jarząb-Napierała further argues that the Blasket autobiography combines foreign and local elements in the way that it takes inspiration from the centuries-long native tradition of storytelling and the Russian autobiographies of Maxim Gorky. In her analysis of *The Islandman*, she examines elements of both local (oral) and cosmopolitan (written) traditions that it features, challenging the tendency to perceive O'Crohan's work as "an epitome of a nationalist approach towards literature."

Different, poetic representations of the Irish West are analyzed in Joanna Kruczkowska's text, which centers on three works that were inspired by specific locations: the Achill Island and the Blasket Islands. These include two poems: Paul Durcan's "1950's Boat (after John McHugh)" (2009) and Harry Clifton "The Year of the Yellow Meal" (2012), as well as John McHugh's sculpture *1950s Boat* (2009), which served as an inspiration for the former. Kruczkowska investigates the tensions between tradition and experimentation as well as nostalgia and futurity, the center and the margin, parochialism and cosmopolitanism, and the illusive revivalist myth and the real experience of these places. She also studies the use of formal strategies and devices, such as magical realism and ekphrasis that make such poetic explorations innovative and productive.

The last three articles focus on fiction, both in English and Irish. Sorcha De Brún analyzes short stories by Daithí Ó Muirí, a contemporary writer of Irish language prose fiction. She opposes those frequently voiced opinions about the author's stylistic conservatism, examining the ways in which his works address a variety of often bleak topics, such as war, violence, and political asylum, combining realism with surrealism. Apart from non-realist narrative modes, her analysis covers a number of other crucial aspects of Ó Muirí's oeuvre, including narrative techniques, religious resonances, and their visual, quasi-filmic quality. In this way, De Brún's work sheds light on the native literary tradition that remains largely unknown to scholars of Irish literature written in English.

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Aran Ward Sell locates his reading of Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) in the broad context of economic, social, and cultural changes that took place in Ireland at the turn of the century. He points to the ways in which the literary work "is thematically coherent with the historical realism" that flourished in the times of the Celtic Tiger but, at the same time, is an example of contemporary resurgent modernism. In particular, Sell shows how McBride's novel is indebted to the Joycean narrative tradition, coining the term "stream of damaged consciousness" to denote a strategy that gives voice to characters who have experienced trauma or mental illness.

Finally, in her reading of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), Barbara Szot scrutinizes the use of mimetic and anti-mimetic strategies of representing Dublin's cityscape. She argues that in his palimpsestic rewriting of the urban landscape O'Brien combined narratives of different ontological status and various representational modes. The conventions used in the novel, as Szot maintains, create the reader's sense of uncertainty and challenge the conventional perceptions of the realistic as real and the anti-realistic as essentially distant from reality.

All of the essays offer insightful and comprehensive analyses of the creative tensions and synergies seen as the driving force of a small nation's literature which has for many decades remained at the Irish crossroads of tradition and experimentation.

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