

Irish Society and Culture in the Twenty-First Century

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I will first try to give you some kind of overview of the relationship between two things which sometimes we think are the same thing, but actually, I would suggest, are opposite: art and culture. Art and culture in Ireland have quite a fractured relationship and in looking at some aspects of that relationship perhaps we can get some sense of where Irish culture and Irish art are now in the twenty-first century.

An interesting moment to start might be the high point of the worship of art in twenty-first century Ireland. It was in May 2002 when the Irish Minister for Culture, a woman called Síle De Valera, the granddaughter of Eamon De Valera, arrived at Dublin airport. Eamon De Valera was the dominant Irish nationalist figure for much of the twentieth century; he had been in the 1916 Rising, the founding heroic moment of the Irish state, and dominated Irish politics of most of the twentieth century. His granddaughter was Minister for Culture in 2002 and in this capacity she came down the steps of the airplane carrying a sacred scripture with historical delicacy and everybody gathered to look at it and take photographs. It was a moment of pure ritual, which was perhaps the most sacred moment in Irish culture since the Pope arrived at the same airport and came down and kissed Irish land. What is interesting was that what she was carrying were the manuscripts of James Joyce for which the State had paid twelve million euros. And there was a certain historic paradox in this. Her grandfather had ruled over Irish culture during the period in which James Joyce's books were not sold or read officially in Ireland. *Ulysses* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, these great novels themselves, had been excluded officially from Irish culture, and then you have this moment of cultural embrace: not only was Joyce being officially recognized as a great Irish artist but indeed was being sanctified.

This represented something broader which was the way in which, in a culture that was losing faith in all its institutions, art certainly had to take the place almost of religion and nationality. A simple example of this is what you do when you build a new bridge. In Ireland in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, if you built a new public monument or bridge or railway station you had to name it either after a Catholic saint, maybe a Catholic Bishop, or after a nationalist hero; so all the train stations for example in Ireland, are named after nationalist martyrs, and most other major public buildings have a religious or a national connotation. In the last years nobody named buildings, bridges, etc. after

Catholic saints or national martyrs; they were named after the new saints who were the writers. The last three bridges built over the river Liffey were Sean O'Casey Bridge, James Joyce Bridge and Samuel Beckett Bridge, which is a good place for waiting if you want to meet someone. There are even jokes about them and other monuments. On the day they were opening Samuel Beckett Bridge one of my colleagues reported that someone in the crowd said: "You know, you should call the stretch of the river from the Samuel Beckett Bridge to the James Joyce Bridge 'stream of consciousness'."

In the iconography of Ireland, this naming phenomenon means the replacement of religion and smashed politics with literature. You may say this is in some ways a great improvement. I'm not at all averse to the idea of celebrating Ireland's great writers. But there's something slightly uncomfortable about this because I'm not sure it necessarily represents the process of real engagement with the nature of literature or with the ways in which the writers themselves are critical of Irish culture. I think it represents more an impulse of what you do in a society which is not faithful to religious and political institutions: you use art to fill in that gap in the culture. This is part of my point about the relationship between art and culture. In English we use these words sometimes as if they mean the same thing. Typically if you have a government department, it is the department of Art and Culture, if you have a newspaper section, it is Culture and Art. Art and Culture is a nice little coupling, but in many ways although they are very much related, they are in fact in tension with each other.

By culture we mean all the assumptions that a society makes about the world and about itself. Culture is a whole set of ways of seeing the world and culture is most powerful when it is entirely unconscious; the things that mark any culture are the things that people don't know. Culture is almost in that sense, pre-conscious. Art is the opposite. Art is about questioning assumptions. Culture is about the familiar, and art is about making the familiar strange. Culture is entirely social, it is about what is shared. Art is often about the individual challenge to what is shared. I'm not saying they are totally separate. Culture shapes art and art shapes culture. It is useful sometimes remembering that they are in tension with each other.

What I want to suggest is that, within Irish culture, this relationship between art and culture is a complex one and it is one that has changed in many ways over time. If we want to understand where we are now, trying to situate where this relationship lies, might be important. And one of the issues about this embrace of art that I have been talking about over the high period of the Irish economic boom, would be to suggest the appearance that at this time art and culture came into alignment, that culture was embracing art in a way that it had not done before. But I also suggest that this is somewhat illusory, and that actually the relationship remains angular.

There is no doubt that one of the things that Ireland has got out of an economic boom was some genuine sense of society as a whole valuing its artists more than it had ever done before. When I look back to the early 1980s it is hard to imagine why Ireland had an international reputation for artistic work, particularly for literature. It's hard to

imagine how impoverished the official provision for the arts in Ireland was even in that period. For example, in the early 1980s, 1981, the Republic of Ireland had only eight theatres in the entire country. Eight theatres. It had no National Concert Hall, no Opera House, no National Museum of Modern Art and the National Library was full of boxes and boxes and boxes of manuscripts because there was nobody to catalogue them. Ireland's reputation in the arts was completely out of pace with its official provision for cultural infrastructure. And that is one of the things that changed in the 1990s and in the last ten, fifteen years in particular: during this period there has been a process of catching up in the infrastructure, which is still not as lavish as you will find in many other European countries, but at least it is respectable by international standards. And there are very good aspects of the cultural scene. I'm not criticizing it but I do want to suggest that, because the culture is beginning to embrace the artist, it doesn't mean that the artist's relationship with the culture is necessarily simple or that that conflict is over. This is a very, very crude, schematic way of trying to sum up many a hundred years, a hundred and twenty years, but let me suggest four triads, four threes, which give you some idea of the way in which this relationship perhaps has been configured, intellectually.

The first triad is James Joyce's famous formula in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where he thinks about how to be an Irish artist, how to forge the conscience of the race in the smithy of the soul, and the weapons he gives himself are Silence, Cunning and Exile. And they are strange weapons. There is a huge contradiction implicit in that. His ambition, he states, is to be the national artist, not simply to be 'a' national artist but to be 'the' national artist. And indeed not even to be an artist in the narrow sense, but to actually create the entire modern psychology of art. Joyce is nothing but ambitious. And he would think, therefore, that one of the weapons to form a nation's consciousness, Silence, doesn't sound like one. Cunning is a word for a very evasive kind of intelligence, it's a word for strategically thinking your way out of trouble and getting where you want to go by very devious routes. And Exile is physical removal of yourself from the country whose consciousness you are going to form. This immediately should alert us to the fact that there is a difficulty here. But in many ways, Joyce's weapons, which he chooses, become in effect, the weapons by default of most Irish artists for the first forty years of the existence of the Irish State, from 1922 onwards. Why do you need Silence, Cunning and Exile? Silence doesn't refer to silence artistically, it means, in a sense, a kind of public silence, silence that you are not going to be the spokesman for a political movement, or for public affairs, in that sense. But why did he choose these weapons? Well, effectively I would suggest that, after the 1920s, Irish artists did not really choose them. They were silenced and they were silenced very simply by censorship. In Irish society for most of that period the only real way to honour a writer was to state that their books had been banned. If you were not banned, you were doing something wrong: it followed that you have to be cunning, you have to think your way around censorship, you have to ask yourself how you can exist as an artist. It's a very problematic idea. There are two forms of exile: either physically or spiritually;

there's physical exile and internal exile. I think it's fair to say that not just writers, but the vast majority of Irish artists, in different forms over the first half of the existence of the State, existed in one or other form of exile. So, the first triad – Silence, Cunning, Exile – is the way of being an artist.

The alternative to this was the official definition of an Irish artist. It was one which was formulated in the 1930s by a short-story writer and intellectual, Daniel Corkery. Corkery was probably the nearest thing that Ireland had to an official artist. If Corkery was in the Soviet Union he would have been the president of the writer's union; his mentality was very much the official nationalist orthodox Catholic idea. Corkery's famous book called *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* is an attack against the Protestant writers who were founders of the Irish Renaissance. In his book he basically defines them as not really being Irish and he defines an Irish artist by three things; again a triad. The first is Land and relationship to the Land, so you have to be essentially rural, agricultural; this is fair enough, perhaps closer to most people in Ireland. Secondly, Religion, then. Effectively Catholicism, but you have to have a relation to Catholicism; and Nationality, a relationship to the Irish nation. These are the three pillars of an official Irish culture – you could look at them in comparative perspective. The official conception of the artist is biased in many ways. It has the sense of praise, of being racy of the soil, connected to the soil, connected to the people, all that stuff is there. And in a way you have a sort of dialogue in Ireland between Corkery's triad of Land, Catholicism, Nationality and Joyce's triad of Silence, Cunning and Exile. And the interesting thing is that, by and large, it is Silence, Cunning and Exile which are more effective.

One of the very interesting things about the Irish State is its failure to produce official artists. Corkery is very unusual in fact. And there are attempts to do this, but in a way, the culture's contempt for art is so strong that even though it would be in its interest to produce official artists, it doesn't manage to do so. Sean O'Faolain is a fantastic example of this. He would have been a wonderful official artist: he had been a nationalist, a militant, a member of the Irish Republican Army, he was passionately committed to staying in Ireland; he was a Catholic, a very different kind of Catholic, but he was a serious Catholic intellectual, a very good example of someone who could forge an artistic synthesis of Irish nationalism and Catholicism with a certain European intellectual ideology. But the State simply wasn't interested in embracing someone like O'Faolain. Though as a young man trying to write a sickeningly panegyric book about Eamon De Valera, the big boss of Irish nationalism, they weren't interested; they just didn't believe they needed artists at all. We all know that, when O'Faolain applied for a job of professor of English in Cork University, he was simply asked "Do you speak Irish"? So there was simply no capacity to create an official ideology of art; this is ironic, really, since Exile, Cunning and Silence were effective weapons to be used by the exiled artists.

The interesting nature of Irish literary culture from much of the 20th century is the paradox of repression. Not necessarily all of the artists set out to revolt. Joyce did, but a lot of his successors did not set out to revolt. They wanted to be living in Ireland,

they wanted to be official artists, they wanted to have their books read and published, they wanted to have chairs of Literature in universities, but the society would not allow them to do this. And it's contempt for art, which creates artists. And hence my warning about the relationship between art and culture. Culture is so resistant to art that it makes artists better. It will not embrace them; it will not allow them to be comfortable within their society. In this context, the other outstanding example of a would-be official artist is Flann O'Brien, who was a senior member of the Civil Service and worked in the Department of Finance. He was a superb Gaelic language scholar. Gaelic was a major cultural project of the State. He was quite a conservative man politically, and in the way he thought about things. And yet, Flann O'Brien ends up being, in many ways, the founder of the postmodern novel. Why is he the founder of the postmodern novel? Because he couldn't write novels that could be read by Irish people. His brilliant, brilliant book, astonishing book, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, sold I think, three hundred copies. Sean O'Faolain's first book of short stories sold some three hundred and ninety copies. So, what do you do if you are an artist in a society and you have no audience? Flann O'Brien's solution to this, which is in many ways the great Irish solution, is to talk to yourself. You write a novel which is about a novel. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is about a guy who's writing a novel about a guy who's writing a novel – the idea is that all of these characters exist particularly, independently of the writers. The characters are for hire; the writer hires them, brings them in and they all exist independently and they all get mixed up, so you get mythological characters, you get guys from cowboy novels, you get guys from Irish folklore stories. There is no time, time is completely obliterated, space is completely obliterated, you just get the book. And the book eats itself, argues with itself; it is very funny.

I want to suggest that the third triad replaces perhaps these other two into the 1980s and 1990s; instead of Silence, Cunning and Exile, or Land, Nationality and Religion, you get Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll. A self-conscious generation of writers rejects both the previous triads; they have no interest whatsoever in Land, Nationality and Religion, but also don't feel the need to be cunning, or silent, or in exile. The third triad can be seen in films and drama and other forms of art. Writers such as Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle represent the urban, the suburban, and they are very much affected by movies, rock music and by the arrival of sex in Ireland. An Irish politician actually said this in the 1960s, "there was no sex in Ireland before television". So, we got television and we got sex, as a result. This kind of hipper, more cosmopolitan, more deliberately provocative society in terms of its recitation of belonging has a sense of identity which is more angry in some ways, more loose, more oppositional, though it is also rooted. Ironically it is antagonistic to the official culture; but it is Irish in the simple sense that you hadn't had for a long time. You couldn't have had a simple Irish writing, for fifty years, because of all these things I have been talking about; however, in the 1980s you begin to get writers that are just simply Irish, they just write about what they know. And in a way it is local and global, glocalization. The founding moment of this

was Roddy Doyle's book about these kids forming a soul band. It's a perfect metaphor for the international, the cosmopolitan; it is part of the Anglo-American culture, but it is also localized in a very particular part of Dublin. In a way, that sort of triad, to some extent, elbows aside the other sets of terms.

In the fourth triad, you get a sort of hyper-globalization, from the mid-1990s onwards. With the Celtic Tiger economy Ireland becomes very wealthy, apparently very wealthy, resulting in a different kind of triad formed of complex ideas about Migration, Wealth and Conflict. Migration, a huge turn-around in terms of the way that culture operates is a continental happening: outward migration stops and inward migration starts. For 150 to 200 years one of the main facts of Irish life is that people get the hell out of the place. You have now the situation in which people are coming in to Ireland to look for a job. This is a psychological change of almost total proportions. Outward migration had been part of Irish identity; it's strangely one of the continuities of Irish culture. Poverty is one of the continuities; so much Irish culture is about being poor; it's about the idea of the Irish as outsiders, as an underclass. The typical representatives of Ireland in fiction or in drama are people who are on the edge, people who are either poor farmers or who are working-class people in the cities and that is very much part also of the 1980s. But again, what do you do when you become rich and your identity is of being poor? And the third sort of strange kind of continuity in Irish culture is Conflict; obviously the thirty-year Northern Ireland conflict, which started in the late 1960s. But of course it wasn't just thirty years in itself; it was a sort of recapitulation of ethnic conflicts in the island, the tensions between Ireland and Britain on territorialism, religion. All those questions were rooted much more deeply in Irish culture. These continuities in Irish culture come to an end in the late 1990s. Outward migration is replaced by inward migration. You do still have poverty, but it's replaced in the official imagery of Ireland by wealth, by the fact that we are the richest country in Europe; our self image becomes more of success, economic success. And the Northern Ireland conflict is settled, albeit in ambiguous ways by peace agreements in 1998. So, what I'm suggesting, really, is that you have those four triads, and each of them in turn has unravelled; Silence, Cunning and Exile ran out of steam as a way of being an Irish artist. Catholicism, Land and Nationality never had much purchase, but whatever it had it lost in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll only got so far; people started getting old and didn't want them any more. And the issues around Migration, Wealth and Conflict have also become problematic as ways of thinking about Ireland.

This raises a fundamental question which is about whether the culture in Ireland is one that is reflected in art at all. We tend to make the assumption that there is a simple indirect relationship between society and culture on the one side, and art on the other side, but at some level, the art has to reflect the society. That's true, of course it is, in the Irish case and also in other cultures. One of the things that makes Ireland unusual in Western European culture is that that relationship has always been particularly fragmented and particularly abstract. The simple way of trying to explain this in shorthand is the image of the mirror, holding the mirror up to society. Stendhal, the great French novelist,

in *Le Rouge et le Noir* has the image that “a novel is a mirror walking along a high road”. I suppose that explains the classical idea of what a novel is.

Almost at the same time that Stendhal was writing that, his nearest Irish contemporary, Maria Edgeworth was writing in a letter to Walter Scott, about mirrors in fiction. And she says “it is impossible to draw Ireland as she is now in the book of fiction; realities are too strong; parting passions, too violent, to dare to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature”. And of course, this image of the mirror really rambles through a lot of Irish reflections on the nature of art and society. You find Oscar Wilde later on in his essay “The Decay of Lying”, rejecting the idea of art as a mirror, where he says this idea would, and I quote, “reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking glass”. And then, of course, Joyce picks up the image of the cracked looking glass in the beginning of *Ulysses* where Buck Mulligan is shaving himself as Stephen Dedalus takes the mirror. It is broken and Dedalus/Joyce effectively says, famously, “it is the symbol of Irish art, the cracked looking glass of a servant”. And then, we could even go further with another image of the mirror suggesting the fractured relationship between art and society in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*. One of the characters, this strange mad scientist, experiments with mirrors and is haunted by the idea that if you look in a mirror what you see is not yourself, but it is yourself as you were a microsecond ago. And then he decides, if you could set up enough mirrors you could see yourself, and you could go back, and back and back and eventually see yourself when you were 12 years old. It is a strange haunted idea of the mirror not reflecting anything as it is now, but refracting infinitely back into the past.

So, this basic idea of reflection in Irish culture has always been problematic, and this is one of the things that makes our current situation interesting. Part of the mystery of Irish culture in many ways is why the art has remained relatively continuous over periods of very radical social change. This is not to say that there have not been significant shifts over time, but there’s also a very strong sense of continuity and a very strong sense in which there are ways in which what seems new in Irish culture always has antecedents, and it is almost like the return of the repressed. Let me just give you some sense of this. If you think about the last fifteen years when, in some ways as I said, almost everything changed, some of the fundamental ways in which art reflects society are unusable, such as those ideas about poverty, about exile and about conflict. They have actually not been usable. So, you would expect in a way that Irish art over the last fifteen years should have been again very fragmented, very strange; it should have been capable of producing something almost equivalent, for example, to what Joyce was doing in the early 1920s, or what Flann O’Brien was doing in the 1940s, or what Beckett was doing in the 1950s and 1960s. And one of the interesting things is that there is no equivalence, there are no radical breeches happening in Irish art over the last fifteen years. What you find, actually, is much more continuity than you would expect, and I would suggest that this is precisely because there is not a direct relationship between

what happens in science and what happens in the arts, because the relationship is a complex and fractured one, it is the cracked looking-glass rather than the mirror. And you could see this in some ways.

One of the big sets of changes I spoke of before has shifted in Ireland over those years. Time and space, for example, became really quite problematic in terms of the way people saw them. We don't have time to go into all of this, but, in relation to time, for example, you had very strange kinds of time shifts, at the micro-level, the ordinary level of the way people lived. If you go from a relatively underdeveloped economy to a hyper-developed economy in short period of time, it changes people's sense of time. Ireland was very like South America where people don't turn up on time. Ten, fifteen years ago, if we were to be here at 10 o'clock, we would start at half past ten. Now in Ireland you start at ten, because people have got used to an urbanised society, a society in which more people work in offices, more people work in factories, so that the notion of time is much more regulated, and much more pressured. But also at the bigger level, historic time, there have been these big shifts in relation to those continuities I spoke about, in terms of how you understand the continuity of your society; some of the things that you used to measure those continuities with have ceased to function. So, exile, emigration, is usually complicated by the fact that it is now inward migration rather than outward migration. Conflict itself, the settlement in the Northern Ireland, conflict carries a sense of an ending of a certain kind of Irish history. At a bigger level, the idea of a certain post-industrial society, a post-modern culture, has huge effects in terms of the way you think about time. Postmodernism doesn't recognize time as being sequential, it is a culture which is full of pastiche, it is full of the idea of everything co-existing, of all styles and all genres being available at the same time, and of course this also links in with things like the internet that have exactly that same effect. Change is happening similarly in terms of space. In Ireland, you have big confusions about where Ireland belongs. This may seem extraordinarily stupid; however, we may ask, is Ireland part of America, or is it part of Europe? This may seem an extraordinary question. But the notion of where you are becomes quite problematic when almost all your industrial and economic base is coming from North America, when most of the inward investments in Ireland are North-American, when we're making *Viagra* and *Intel* chips which we did not invent – they're American products made in Ireland. This situation was actually expressed politically by a Deputy Prime Minister Mary Harney when she said, "geographically, Ireland is closer to Berlin than to Boston, but spiritually, we are closer to Boston than Berlin". This is a political statement containing all sorts of political messages about what kind of society Ireland should be, but in this kind of confusion of space as well as of time, and physically there's a strange kind of mixture of continuity and discontinuity.

One image that perhaps sums this up, for the last hundred and fifty years maybe, the haunting image of the Irish landscape was the empty house. Because of mass migration, the empty house, which had been abandoned because its occupants went to

New York, or Boston, or London, or wherever, has stood up in the landscape, but obviously it was not demolished, it just remained there. So, you get these kinds of layers of emptiness. And the empty house of the outward migration has now been replaced by the empty house of a property boom gone wrong. In the last Census of population of the State of Ireland in 2006, when the Celtic Tiger was still really roaring at its height, people were building property because this was what you did with money, building property. In a society of four million people, there were 240 thousand empty houses that were built as second holiday homes, or were built as investments by people who never lived in them. So you had this strange kind of continuity/discontinuity. The reason for the emptiness is opposite. One has to do with poverty, the other has to do with too much money. But the physical effect is similar and now the property boom has collapsed. You have this strange physical sensation of large parts of Ireland, not just in the countryside, but in the city, of emptiness. You see these half-built houses, half-built offices whose developers have gone broke. This physical emptiness, which has been somewhat part of the imagery of Ireland for a long time, has returned, but in a very strange haunted way. These things meant that you got certain kinds of repetition in the culture, but being repeated in a different context. I will suggest two things in relation to this: you could argue that one of the characteristic forms of Irish cinema, drama and literature in the 1990s, and in the early part of this century, has been the return of the Gothic. As we know, in the 19th century the Gothic was the mainstream of Irish fiction. It's strange. The English had Jane Austen. We had *Carmilla, the Lesbian Vampire*, by Sheridan Le Fanu, and *Dracula* is the greatest Irish novel of fictional imagination. At present, a return of the ghost story, of the sense of being haunted, of the sense of being displaced can be seen in Anne Enright's novel, *The Gathering*. So, the Gothic is both new and also old. The ghost story remains very much in drama, in a lot of Marina Carr's plays and in Conor McPherson. These plays look new and old; they look new in the sense that they are different from what went before the 1980s, but they are also old in the sense that they seem to recapitulate some of the energies of the past, for example, the continuities of William Butler Yeats's plays into Sebastian Barry's dramatic work in terms of the imagination. This is more about evocation of emotions, moods and spiritual forces than about enactment on stage and drama.

Where does this leave us? One of the things is, strangely, the almost complete absence of an Irish sense of realism. The Irish artistic tradition is not a realistic one. And there are all sorts of reasons for this. But one of the effects of it is a certain kind of strange relationship between culture and art. Do you remember Donald Rumsfeld? He was the American Defence Secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq. He went through this magnificent existential reflection, when he said there are the "known knowns", things we know we know; the "known unknowns", things we know we don't know; and then there are the "unknown unknowns", things we don't know we don't know. In Ireland and Irish society and Irish culture there is a fourth one that even Rumsfeld didn't think about, which is the "unknown known", which is something that you know, but don't

know. And I would suggest that, oddly, all these shifts in Irish society, all these strange things, consist of this phenomenon of things that everybody knows and nobody knows. So, the most terrible example of this is the repression of women and children. In Irish society, what we have been dealing for fifty, sixty, seventy years is the fact that there are huge numbers of children who were tortured, who were enslaved, who were treated in astonishing ways, locked away; very large numbers of women, who simply did not fit into the pattern, or were regarded as being a moral danger. It is a society which had an incredible capacity to deny its own realities, and to punish and lock away anybody that did not conform to those realities. And one of the problems with the absence of a tradition of Realism is that in a sense, one part of what it does contributes to the idea of the “unknown knowns”.

Why does society need the artist while artists don't necessarily need society? It needs the artists to make them know things they don't want to know. Part of what art does is to bring to light, in certain ways, the realities that society itself does not wish to absorb and acknowledge. Now, to some extent, Irish art did this in the 1950s, 1960s when writers like Edna O'Brien or John McGahern, and a whole lot of other writers were redefining an Irish reality. But they were doing so very largely in terms of sexuality and the family – very, very important areas – but tended not to do so in terms of politics, economics, power, public power. So, we have this difficulty in the culture, and it is a difficulty in relation to the way in which there is this tension between art and culture. The lack of a holistic relationship between art and culture has contributed to the difficulty that the society has had in understanding itself and in orienting itself. And I would go so far as to suggest that this actually has contributed very largely to economic disaster. If you don't know who you are, if you don't know how reality is, you are very easily sucked into an idea that this hole is filled by consumerism, by having more stuff, by buying more things, by building houses you don't really want, and of course by believing that there is no future and no past. There's only the present. The present will always be lots of money, lots of fun. And, all this is linked in with the broader idea that took hold of the Western world, that history is over. Boom and bust are over, will never happen again and everything is going to be planned safely from here on. So, the degree to which Irish society got sucked into illusions about itself is related to the fact that there is an absence of a realistic tradition in the arts.

Are we coming into an era in which this relationship between art and society might change again? I will finish with the thought that perhaps there's a possibility when a society goes through a shock, as Irish society is going through at the moment, that it begins to produce within its artists a response to that shock, which may be a kind of delayed response. Sometimes it takes a long time even in settled societies to reflect upon what is going on. Distance is a necessary aspect of the creation of art. And when you add in that distance to an idea of the shock, perhaps we may begin to see a period in which artists do take a more central role in reflecting for the society what its realities have been, and therefore, what they might be in the future. Colm Tóibín recently spoke

about this sense of responsibility: in a society where people don't trust the church, don't trust politicians, don't trust bankers, don't trust business people, who are you left with? And very often what you're left with is your painters, your writers, your filmmakers, your dramatists. And the one good thing about the way in which, for a long time, the society rejected the artists is that the artists were relatively uncorrupted by the embrace of society. Not having been loved sometimes is good for the artists, sometimes it perhaps has given artistic creators a certain kind of steel. If that steel can be brought to bear on the construction of a new relationship with Irish society, in which artists attempt to grapple with the nature of this shifting Irish reality, that may bring an interesting period over the next 20 years.

* Fintan O'Toole's lecture given at the University of São Paulo on 14 September 2009. The editors thank Mariana Bolfarine for its transcription.