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Exploring the now and here of Irish literature:
A review of *The Routledge Companion To Twenty-First-Century Irish Writing* (2024)

Published in 2024 by Routledge, *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First-Century Irish Writing* proposes to analyse the production of Irish literature from the past two decades, which has been rising in popularity among readers of all ages worldwide, across different genres, styles, and narratives. The collection was edited by Anne Fogarty (Professor Emerita of James Joyce Studies at University College Dublin, current editor for the Irish Writers series for Bucknell University Press. She has co-edited several collections of essays on Joyce and published widely on aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish writing, especially on the Revival period and on women authors) and Eugene O'Brien (Professor of English Literature and Theory and Head of the Department of English Language and Literature in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, and editor for the *Oxford University Press Online Bibliography* project in literary theory and of the *Routledge Studies in Irish Literature series*.).

The Introductory chapter of the companion, written by the editors, opens by quoting Ulysses by James Joyce, arguably the most impactful piece of Irish literature – “Hold to the now, the here through which all future plunges to the past” (Joyce 1986, 153). With such, the editors present the intention behind the curating process of the chapters was to hold to ‘the now, the here’ of Irish writing, despite the risk of the vertiginous that Joyce warns about.” (p. 20). Although Irish canon has got its fair share of impact worldwide, Fogarty and O'Brien argue the importance of bringing into attention questions presented by contemporary Irish

writing, such as issues of genre, periodicity, the creation of grand narratives, the validity of canons, and the need to decolonise the curriculum, which come into play in making such an assertion. The authors draw attention to the importance of engaging with the contemporary, although it is often plagued by negativity, and the rapid political and cultural shifts in the country over the past few years, citing Irish Journalist Fintan O’Toole to stress Ireland’s lack of fixedness. The goal of the collection, then, is to approach the analysis and reflection of Ireland’s traditional cultural themes in the current literary landscape differently. Divided into four sections, three dedicated to the genres of narrative, poetry, and theatre, as well as one dedicated to new voices and forms, the book is composed of 35 essays covering all the names that have stood out in the past few decades in Irish bookshops and at readers’ hands, signed by specialists from all areas. With such, the curators encourage the readers to explore and go for areas in which they do not have expertise, in order to get a fuller grasp of all creative works being commented on and “be exposed to what is unknown and surprising about current Irish cultural contexts”.

Section one, “Narrative Imaginings Between Ideology and Resistance”, mostly concerns itself with novels and cultural commentary on collective spaces, gender, and the socioeconomic situation of the country. Liam Lanigan attempts to explore the creation of Urban Spaces in the literature written post-crash of the Celtic Tiger. Using Paul Murray’s 2015 novel, *The Mark and The Void*, as an example, Lanigan dissects the creation of Dublin as a cultural space, in comparison to the ‘initiatory blankness’ it used to have, and how such change has affected the subjection of Irish space to the logic of finance as a response to the economic changes, but also the cultural deterioration that resulted from such rise and clash of the nation.

Taking a religious turn, Eamon Maher focuses on the Catholic trope and its representation in Irish Literature Post-Catholic Ireland. Maher talks about how the role of the Catholic Church has changed dramatically, while still retaining its influence on the personal and public sphere of Irish society. Máire Ní Annracháin talks about four Irish novels published in the Irish language. The chapter opens through a historical vein, focusing on the work of Patrick Pearse, an Irish nationalist and important character to the path of Irish Independence, and his strong positioning on the debate on the future of Irish Language literature that was essential during the beginnings of the Irish Revival. Through analysing

the works, Ní Annracháin focuses on the incorporation of Irish tradition reimagined in novelistic conventions and the Europeanisation of recently published fiction.

In the following chapter, Katharina Rennhak uses Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015) and Donal Ryan's *The Queen of Dirt Island* (2022) as objects to emphasise the relevance of social interaction, especially in the family environment, for the formation of the Self. Rennhak operates within the framework of the 'networked subject', as coined by Bracken (2020), to explore the concepts of conversational ethics and aesthetics while decentring the individual without compromising the subject's individuality, focusing on the basic Genettian questions 'Who speaks?' and 'Who sees?' on all levels of the narrative.

In "Liquid Modernity and Twenty-First-Century Irish Young Adult Fiction", Ian Hickey explores the rise of Young Adult fiction, analysing how three different authors that broke through the charts in the genre - Louise O'Neill, Claire Hennessy, and Sarah Maria Griffin - with works that explored gender and sexuality in contemporary society. Most importantly, Hickey focuses on how the development of the genre hinges on the globalisation of Ireland, and the new contexts and topics that arise from the influences of the internet and transnational modes of communication.

The following chapter, by Jun Du, is titled "The Biopolitics of Emotions and the Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary Irish Writing by Non-White Authors". In it, Du analyses the works by Chinese writer Yan Ge, Nigerian Irish Writer Melatu Uche Okorie, Malaysian poet Amy Abdullah Barry and Irish–Japanese–Canadian writer Clara Kumagai, in order to explore how the works written by non-white writers in Ireland attempt to capture the complex, intimate experiences of immigrants, portraying the parallels between alienation and resilience.

In "Embodied Pasts and Precarious Futures: Somatic Storytelling in *Trespasses* (2022) and *Close to Home* (2023)", Caroline Magennis examines the role of the body, which has been well represented in the history of Ireland, and the symbolism relating to embodiment and the prohibitions regarding the female body by the Irish State and British government alike. Magennis utilises the recently published texts to analyse the pain of the body and the use of it to represent cultural and biopolitical issues such as reproductive rights, institutional abuse, the treatment of migrants, queer lives, precarious work, and the legacy of the Troubles.

In opposition to such a large array of themes, the next chapter concerns itself with one single author – Arguably, the most cited name in the past five years when it comes to Irish contemporary Literature has got to be Sally Rooney. Tasked with exploring her work, Maria Amor Barros Del Rio focuses on the concept of "The Ethics of Care in Sally Rooney's Novels". Through the essay, Barros del Rio analyses the different forms of affect that concern the Self and the Other through the passage of the inner and outer worlds of the characters in Rooney's popular works.

In "Feeling Catty":Reading Animals in Short Stories by Contemporary Irish Women Writers", Anne Fogarty examines an array of publications from the past five years, paying particular attention to the kinds of animals and the roles they occupy or are assigned in the narratives. The chapter hypothesises that there is a form of alliance between animals and female protagonists, and how femininity is embodied by the animals, their treatment, and symbolism. Finally, in "Remapping Ireland in Poems", Lucy McDiarmid shifts genres and uses the works by poets Paula Cunningham, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Nithy Kasa to analyse the plural visions of depicting the country, through its landscapes, history, and ideals.

Section two, A Poetics of the Unfinished and the Transformative, concerns itself with the genre of poetry, working through migration, ecopoetics, queerness, and adaptations of language and performance. Ailbhe Darcy analyses the works of Martina Evans and Fran Lock to explore not only how both poets use their migrant perspectives to reflect on questions of identity, community, and nation, but also how their exiled perspectives differ their work from that of other poets who live abroad, stating that for Evans and Lock, home exists only as a form of fiction.

In "The Art of "Yielding": Contemporary Irish Ecopoetics", Eoin Flannery utilizes the principles of the anthropocene in order to analyse the works of Jane Clark and Séan Lysaght, and how the specificity of their locations in Ireland affect their work and the end goal of producing a work that appreciates the mutualities and the boundaries of human life while being attentive to the key interactions that affect across species interactions.

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh also focuses on the works of two poets, Aifric Mac Aodha and Séamus Barra Ó Súilleabháin, but her chapter concerns the matters of tradition and innovation within the use of the Irish language in poetry. Ní Ghearbhuigh explores not only the matters of the art in itself, but also the performance of it, the different ways in which contemporary

Irish language poets disseminate their work, and the opportunities they are given through scholarships and publications.

Still in the linguistic field, Eugene O'Brien explores two books by Michael O'Siadhail, aiming to inspect how his works locate the poet, and by extension Irish poetry, as European and as part of a global culture, placing Ireland not in its colonial roots, but as a part of a contemporary, globalised, European culture. Academic and performer Kit Fryatt has a chapter dedicated solely to Queer Poetry. Fryatt touches not only on the specific genre this section is dedicated to, but with Queer history in Ireland in total, and the significant changes brought in the twenty-first century, reflected in how queer Irish poets (more specifically in this chapter, Stephen Mooney, Sarah Clancy, and Padraig Regan) pursue projects both of salvage and self-creation in their works.

In “‘The Art of Losing’: Ailbhe Darcy’s Ekphrastic Touch”, Daniela Theinová analyses the poem by Darcy that titles the chapter, and the matters of ethics and responsibility in the role of the poet. David Wheatley chooses to focus not on one poem or artist, but on the modes of address and generational dialogue in Irish poetry. The chapter examines the use by modern Irish poets of the verse letter (to living writers) and the apostrophe (to dead ones) as a way of situating themselves in a larger community of writers and, beyond that, literary history.

Turning back to the connection of poetry and nature, Lucy Collins focuses on the relationship between nature and gender, analysing the body of the ocean in the works of multiple women poets. Collins considers the sea to be an increasingly important site of imaginative engagement for writers, addressing both political and existential concerns, and prompting innovation in form and technique, facilitating the dismantling of hierarchical thinking for women writers.

To close off this section, Patrick Lonergan starts the transition into the next section with a chapter focused on Ecodramaturgy and the COVID-19 pandemic. Lonergan focuses on the Abbey Theatre’s Adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (2020), defending the choice of having a sombre poem turn into a play, at such a dark time and at the start of the harsher seasons of the year, despite all the criticism it initially got.

Section three, “Theatrical Engagements and Critiques”, focuses mostly on dramatic performances and theatre theory. In the first chapter, Martin Kenny and Miriam Haughton analyse the impacts of the Irish play *THISISPOPBABY* and expectations regarding truth and authenticity within the postmodern era when dealing with both joy and grief. Clara Mallon

goes back to one of Ireland's favourite social and cultural topics of class and the economic crash, focusing on multiple plays by working-class Irish artists and the debates around social privilege within art production.

In “Talking about Sex in Twenty-First-Century Irish Prose and Performance”, Paige Reynolds uses a quote about author Eimear McBride on the necessity of exploring sex and sexual desire beyond the perspective of violence, to talk about some of the taboos and complexities of the depiction of human sexuality in the contemporary Irish literary scene - from erotic poetry to infidelity, hook-ups and sexual abuse.

Lisa Fitzpatrick explores the concept of Ethnotheater by analysing research-led work by the Kabosh Theatre Company based in Belfast. Fitzpatrick utilizes Saldañas (2005) definition of ethnotheatre as using “theatrical craft and artistic techniques’ to mount a ‘live performance event of research participants’ experiences and/or the researcher’s interpretations of data” (300) to analyse the Kabosh productions and how they engaged with neglected social, cultural and political issues in Northern Ireland and essential to generate knowledge and understanding which the artist and company then seek to communicate and share with the audience.

Eamonn Jordan compares three plays by Brokentalkes theatre company, focusing on what he calls Visceral Injustices - in response to the concept of Visceral Inequalities by Mike Savage. Jordan focuses on how the works and the high impact of Brokentalkes in general, lead to a collective contribution to consciousness of political and economic divisions. Following that, Clare Wallace turns into religion with a chapter exploring agnostic spaces and ethical conflicts, stating that there is a strong dissonance between Ireland’s recent past and the contemporary moment, producing “a dynamic and uncomfortable space of agonistic debate both political and cultural” (325), ultimately raising a debate regarding values, accountability, and action within Irish society.

Deirdre Flynn wraps up this section with a chapter dedicated to the rise of the Campus novel in Ireland’s literary scene. Flynn states that the genre is specifically interesting as it reflects the abolition of tuition fees during Ireland’s Celtic Tiger period in the late 1990s leading to an 89% increase in student enrolments within a 10-year period – Therefore, through its specific characteristics that touch on class, sexuality, the urban/rural divide in Irish spaces and the elements of *Bildungsroman*, the genre reflects the economic history of the country and the cultural impacts of its changes.

Finally, section four, “New Voices, New Forms, New Modes of Material Production”, concerns itself with multiple genres and topics that have been rising in numbers in Irish publications. Jack Fennell explores the genre of Irish Fantasy Fiction and the parallel of the influence of Ireland’s own folklore versus the international publishing trends, making the works more globalised. Claire Lynch focuses on the rising genre of The Personal Essay and the essential aspects of timing and context for the development of the genre in order to explain why this new trend has been taking over the Irish literary scene.

Molly Slavin focuses on crime fiction in both Irish and Global range, elaborating how, although the genre is considerably old in Ireland, dating back to the seventeenth century, the current growth can be seen as a direct response to the Celtic Tiger and the Good Friday Agreement in the late twenty centuries, thus creating a sense of solidarity with international conversations around colonialism and its legacies. Julie Morrissy turns back to spoken poetry to explore three specific areas of poetry dissemination off the page (materiality, performance, and walking) in the works of poets Bebe Ashley, FELISPEAKS, and Samuel Yakura.

Keeping within the range of poetics, Alexander Muller and Jefferson Holdridge analyse the pivotal influence of poet W. B. Yeats in twenty-first-century Irish poetry and how the cultural impacts can be tracked through the poems in conversation through different generations.

Sandrine Uwase Ndahiro and Victor Pacheco present a chapter on the importance of having more critical discourse around race within Irish literary criticism. The scholars point out that although there has been some growth in the representation due to the up-and-coming presence of Black Irish writers and their undeniable presence in the literary scene, the works are essential for discussions about “alternative modes of identity and belonging within communities, exposing complex questions concerning the meaning of Irishness (404) and thus deserve more recognition.

Back to focusing on specific genres, Elke D’hoker centres her chapter on the Irish Short Fiction through the story of Irish literary magazine *The Stinging Fly* and its undeniable impacts on the literary world in Ireland, from its writing workshops and mentoring programs to the history of being a launching pad to multiple celebrated contemporary writers.

Liam Harrison also concerns the following chapter on literary magazines and journals and the central role they take in the artistic and professional development of writers and the

dissemination of literature in twenty-first-century Ireland, focusing specifically on how these publications become a site for style, collaboration, and creativity development.

Finally, rounding up with a focus on linguistics, Tim Groenland and Margaret Kelleher elaborate on the connections between Languages and Publishing in Contemporary Irish Writing, analysing how the publication of works in multiple languages is essential not only for the Celtic movement but also for the rising immigrant communities in Ireland, allowing then the Irish literary scene to become a more colourful and truthful representation of the country.

Historically, Ireland has been known for its artistic production both in the literary and theatrical fields. Such works have been used to reflect the struggles of a country during and post-colonialism and the battles regarding humanistic pillars of language, identity, and cultural-economic changes before and through globalisation, thus leaving a significant cultural imprint in the world of arts and academia alike. Although many of the studies tend to concern itself with only the canonical, classic works that have shaped the world and its legacy, the collection does a great job in exemplifying and elaborating not only the significance of the new works published in the current century, but also the impacts of it for contemporary society and how they can be used to comprehend the past and frame the future. By presenting chapters that concern not only the classical Irish themes of class, economic disparity, gender, and the role of nature, but also matters of Queerness, race, emigration and immigration, and new rising genres in the literary field, the collection is able to map out a new face of Ireland that the canonical works have shaped but fail to fully picture due to its time frame limitations. The only way to get a glimpse of the new Ireland through its ever-moving unfixedness, as mentioned by the editors in the introduction, is by the exposure of the different authors painting all faces represented on the island, including all of those that had been so far ignored.

Esther Gazzola Borges