

## ‘Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again’: Irish fiction and autobiography since 1990

*Liam Harte*

[B]oomtime Ireland has yet to find its Oscar Wilde or its Charles Dickens or even its Evelyn Waugh. The strange place we now inhabit does not seem to yield up its stories easily. . . . What has happened, essentially, is that the emergence of a frantic, globalised, dislocated Ireland has deprived fiction writers of some of their traditional tools. One is a distinctive sense of place. To write honestly of where most of us live now is to describe everywhere and nowhere: system-built estates, clogged-up motorways, a vastly expanded suburbia, multinational factories, shopping centres such as Liffey Valley where the food court is called South Beach and is decked out with stray bits of Florida like an Irish pub in Germany is decorated with newly-minted old authentic Irish street signs. With an English high street here and a bit of America there, the passage to a distinctive Ireland is strewn with obstacles.<sup>1</sup>

It is simply not possible to write purposefully, let alone comprehensively, about the swirling abundance of themes and trends in contemporary Irish fiction and autobiography in the space allotted to me here. Every *tour d’horizon* must be hedged about with qualifications and hesitations, every typological gesture thwarted by the fact of thematic and stylistic diversity.<sup>2</sup> In short, the closer one looks for continuities and correspondences, the more one becomes aware of kaleidoscopic variety. Indeed, the motifs of fragmentation and incompleteness are themselves among the most recurrent in recent Irish writing, being especially marked in the contemporary short story, a genre which has proved highly effective in rendering the discordant juxtapositions of post-1990 Ireland. Collections such as Anne Enright’s *The Portable Virgin* (1991), Mike McCormack’s *Getting it in the Head* (1997) and Keith Ridgway’s *Standard Time* (2001) show how the short story’s combination of lyric compression and novelistic amplitude, coupled with its preference for

the particular over the cumulative, make it ideally suited to capturing prismatic fragments of the radically disjunctive consumerist society which Fintan O'Toole describes above. In looking for a Dickens rather than a Maupassant, however, both he and critics such as Declan Kiberd, who has lamented the absence of a 'Trollopian *The Way We Live Now*, much less a Tom Wolfe-style *Bonfire of the Vanities* even among our younger writers',<sup>3</sup> appear to be still in thrall to the very anachronism which O'Toole invokes: the Great Irish Novel. If that mythical beast stalks contemporary Irish writers less intimately than it did earlier generations, it may well be because they rightly recognise the futility of the quest for definitive calibration of a national culture and self-image experiencing a prolonged refashioning under a plethora of pressures and modalities. Even John McGahern, hailed as 'the best cartographer of the physical and metaphysical landscape our generation, and Ireland as whole, has moved across over the past sixty years',<sup>4</sup> remains primarily committed to the local, albeit with a keen, Joycean awareness that 'In the particular is contained the universal'.<sup>5</sup>

In an important sense, the period under review begins and ends with the work of McGahern, a novelist who, by general consensus, has produced 'the most impressive body of work of any Irish writer in the second half of the [twentieth] century'.<sup>6</sup> His death in March 2006 brought forth a welter of tributes which portrayed him variously as 'a poet of ordinary days',<sup>7</sup> 'the voice of a generation',<sup>8</sup> 'a true stoic',<sup>9</sup> 'a moralist, a historian and commentator'<sup>10</sup> and a reluctant revolutionary who 'never wanted to break down the doors, just to pick the locks'.<sup>11</sup> In the last fifteen years of his life McGahern published four small masterpieces in three different genres: *Amongst Women* (1990), *Collected Stories* (1992), *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and *Memoir* (2005). This quartet inscribes subtle patterns of repetition and reprise, recapitulating not only themes and motifs but also phrases, idioms and scenarios in ways that mirror the circadian cycles and seasonal rhythms that frame so much of his work. Indeed, when *Amongst Women* appeared in May 1990, reviewers were quick to note the extent to which it recast characters from the earlier fiction. Michael Moran is an archetypal domestic tyrant in the mould of Mahoney in *The Dark* (1965), a father whose hold over his family is 'pure binding'. As a veteran of Ireland's separatist struggle he has an obvious affinity with Sergeant Reegan in *The Barracks* (1963), whose bitter disenchantment with independent Ireland he savagely echoes: "What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod."<sup>12</sup>

Other narrative details – Moran’s second, childless marriage to a middle-aged spinster, his Catholic devotion, his capricious violence – reinforce the impression of the novel as a summative achievement. Yet *Amongst Women* is also a work of powerful originality which contains one of the most fascinating and intimately drawn portraits of destructive, charismatic fatherhood in modern Irish fiction.

Moran has forcefully realised Reegan’s elusive dream of becoming master of his own house, Great Meadow, which stands, like its owner, separate and proud in the Leitrim landscape. Having failed to cut a figure in the Free State army, Moran has retreated to this domestic fortress where, as Antoinette Quinn puts it, he ‘directs his frustrated drive for power into a diminished form of home rule’.<sup>13</sup> As this phrase suggests, the novel is a critical exploration of the workings of power, fear and devotion within a rural Catholic family which is also a metaphor of post-colonial Irish society. By masterful use of militarist language and imagery, McGahern shows the ex-guerilla leader deploying the tactics which served him well in wartime in his campaign to establish emotional sovereignty over his wife and daughters, who respond by devising flexible strategies of resistance and appeasement of their own. Yet as the daughters’ collective governance of their father increases as he ages, so too does their emotional dependency upon him. Their continual homecomings are not just a mark of Oedipal attachment; they also signify their need to reconnect with the hallowed ground that reaffirms their uniqueness. Even Michael, the wayward youngest son, ‘looked to Great Meadow for recognition, for a mark of his continuing existence’.<sup>14</sup> The sole dissenting voice is that of Luke, whose defiant assertion of autonomy through exile is both a permanent rebuke to this cult of family solidarity and a reminder of the dissonant centrality of the migrant in McGahern’s novels and in contemporary Irish fiction more generally.

Robert Garratt has recently observed that *Amongst Women* is pre-eminently a novel about memory and history, yet there is a contrapuntal movement imaged in the fact that the narrative begins and ends with the future made incarnate by Moran’s daughters, who are at once carriers of their father’s complex legacy and harbingers of a new, semi-feminised social order.<sup>15</sup> The conclusion deftly evokes the ambiguous emotional repercussions of Michael Moran’s charismatic brand of patriarchal parenting. Although the actual moment of his death is conspicuously anti-climactic – he ‘slipped evenly out of life’<sup>16</sup> – its impact is shown to be potentially seismic. His physical interment in the Leitrim clay is eclipsed by the attenuated transmittance of his patriarchal essence to his wife and daughters, each of whom ‘in their different ways had become Daddy’.<sup>17</sup> This closing vision of emergent androgyny

anticipates a future of manly daughters and womanly sons, as Sheila's contemptuous backward glance transforms the male mourners into frivolous women. The ending also casts new light on the novel's opening line – 'As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters'<sup>18</sup> – by suggesting that the dying despot foresaw the awful, human legacy of his autocratic will in his own, female flesh and blood, and with it, the adulteration of a hypermasculine paternalism.

Eamonn Hughes is one of several critics to read *Great Meadow* as 'a metonym for Ireland: the displacement of Moran by his daughters and the complex gender play of the novel from its title to its final words is almost a fictional preparation for the 1990s Ireland of Mary Robinson's Presidency'.<sup>19</sup> Almost, but not quite, since that Ireland remains in shadow in *Amongst Women* as it does in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. McGahern's treatment of contemporary social change seldom moves beyond the oblique in either novel and is always subordinate to the dialectic which pervades his entire oeuvre: the testing of fragile human relationships against the inexorable bass rhythms of nature and planetary time. *Great Meadow* exists in a 'changeless image of itself' where 'Nothing but the years changed'.<sup>20</sup> Only when he is on the threshold of death is Moran granted the intuition to contemplate with wonder his own mortality against the radiantly durable life force that suffuses his flourishing fields: 'To die was never to look on all this again. It would live in others' eyes but not in his. He had never realized when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of.'<sup>21</sup> *That They May Face the Rising Sun* embodies a more sustained sacramental vision. The lake, the novel's central protagonist, enfolds the community in its redemptive elemental embrace and the natural world subsumes all to its relentless pulsion, such that the characters seem to be mostly engaged in 'turning each day into the same day, making every Sunday into all the other Sundays'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, linear time shades into cyclical time, which mutates in turn into a kind of transcendent timelessness of the kind McGahern found so exemplary in Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileanách* (1929):

If the strong sense of the day, the endlessly recurring day, gives to the work its timeless quality, it is deepened still more by the fact that people and place seem to stand outside history. There is no sense of national pride. The rumblings of the new Ireland are brushed aside as distant noise, O'Malley's Ireland, or Parnell's or Redmond's or Yeats's or Pearse's.<sup>23</sup>

It takes little critical ingenuity to apply this analysis, *mutatis mutandis*, to McGahern's final novel, which remains resolutely focused on the inner rhythms and densely woven social codes that bind a community

‘marooned’<sup>24</sup> in time, existing at one remove, somehow, from the spirit of accelerated socio-economic, technological and attitudinal change that has come to define the new Ireland, a country which boasts the most globalised economy in the world. McGahern’s influence can be discerned in Patrick O’Keefe’s novellas which, as Vivian Valvano Lynch’s chapter demonstrates, also reveal the intense complexity that underlies the seeming banality of life in rural Ireland.

Yet in affirming a version of Irish pastoral that is at once consoling and increasingly anachronistic, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* also carries the germ of its own critique. A pivotal scene shows Patrick Ryan mocking the arcadian tranquillity so cherished by Joe and Kate Rutledge, before launching into a ‘burlesque of listening and stillness’<sup>25</sup> with Johnny Murphy. His acerbic overture – “‘Will you listen to the fucken quiet for a minute and see in the name of God if it wouldn’t drive you mad?’”<sup>26</sup> – might serve as an epigraph for the many recent fictional portraits of rural and small-town Ireland as places of scarifying dysfunction and maddening, even murderous, tedium. Indeed, the inflection of Ryan’s mordant remark resonates with the vocal cadences of Patrick McCabe’s prodigal protagonists, who are among the most memorably lurid in the contemporary canon. Whereas McGahern’s last novel eulogises a fading world of ‘broken-down gentlemen’,<sup>27</sup> McCabe’s neo-Gothic fantasies chart the grotesque frolics of sociopathic ‘bony-arsed bogmen’ in whose unhinged minds the forces of antimodernity and postmodernity commingle and clash. From one perspective, McCabe’s jaundiced portrayals of provincial alienation echo and update earlier dissections of rural traditionalism found in the novels of John Broderick, Edna O’Brien and indeed McGahern himself. From another, however, his novels mark a definitive break with this realist tradition, not least in the way they remorselessly subvert antiquated fictional stereotypes, cultural clichés, political shibboleths and past social ritual. Widely hailed as master of the so-called ‘bog Gothic’ sub-genre,<sup>28</sup> McCabe’s novels have been convincingly read alongside the plays of Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson as part of a burgeoning aesthetic trend conceptualised as neo-naturalism by Joe Cleary and as ‘black pastoral’ by Nicholas Grene.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, McCabe’s fiction deals not so much in social realism as in asocial irrealism, which is not to say that his guignolesque narratives don’t calibrate the drastic consequences of lovelessness or contain sharply analytical satire. Rather, the socio-economic inequities and psychosexual neuroses of late twentieth-century Ireland are filtered through a phantasmagoric lens to create a fiction of the gleeful macabre. Here is the very thing O’Toole called for: ‘a new way of writing about the place with a rhythm which

matches the angular, discontinuous, spliced-together nature of contemporary Irish reality'.<sup>30</sup>

What is strikingly new in McCabe's fiction is the degree of pathological trauma and destructive psychosis on display, and the mixture of comic exhilaration, tinged by pathos, with which such dysfunctionality is narrated. From Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy* (1992) to Redmond Hatch in *Winterwood* (2006), McCabe's shape-shifting protagonists embody a post-colonial society in a state of chronic fragmentation, restless self-interrogation and profound dis-ease. As critics have noted, his novels expose the disabling residual effects of colonial and neocolonial modes of thought as they are manifested in varieties of psychic, social and institutional deformation.<sup>31</sup> Chief among his persistent concerns are the disquieting consequences of unprocessed historical and personal traumas and the troubling relations they engender between self, place and community. McCabe frequently deploys the Gothic trope of the returning revenant to represent the continuing anxieties that fester behind Ireland's brash façade of new-found capitalist modernity. His novels are permeated by figurations of national history as a precipitating cause of pathology, such that escalating anxieties about the stability of social, psychic and domestic order in the present appear as symptoms of a profoundly brutalising and unresolved past which, having never been fully assimilated as it occurred, returns incessantly in monstrous forms. Thus, Patricia Horton persuasively reads Francie Brady as the personification of 'the repressed legacy of De Valera's Ireland which surfaced so shockingly in the 1980s',<sup>32</sup> and Laura Eldred concurs, interpreting the pathologised society depicted in *The Butcher Boy* in terms of Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection: 'Francie is not just the community's Other, but also the community's abject and its monster. . . . McCabe suggests, however, that the ultimate source of abjection, and the ultimate monster, is the Irish nation itself'.<sup>33</sup> *The Dead School* (1995), *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) and *Call Me the Breeze* (2003) further extend this coruscating critique of toxic nationhood by anatomising the psychotic borderline identities produced by the interplay of multiple and competing ideologies, while *Winterwood* dramatises the lethal effects of repressed historical memory through the spectral persona of Redmond Hatch/Ned Strange/Dominic Tiernan. This mutating monster is at once abused child and abusive adult, doting father and psychopathic paedophile, custodian of 'the authentic spirit of heritage and tradition'<sup>34</sup> and harbinger of a vacuous postmodernity. Such slippage between identities is the mark of a society trapped between the worlds of yesterday and tomorrow, which can neither sustain nor surrender the illusion of itself as unified. The nation's failure to add up to a

readable totality is figuratively condensed in Hatch's television documentary *These Are My Mountains*, hailed as 'an anatomy of a society in flux, a magnificently detailed view of the journey from the almost medieval atmosphere of 1930s rural Ireland to the buoyant postmodern European country as it is today'.<sup>35</sup>

The haunting repercussions of sublimated memory and unprocessed history run like a dark thread through the fabric of contemporary Irish fiction, making the wounded, traumatised subject one of its most representative figures. According to Cathy Caruth, the traumatised 'carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' but which possesses them.<sup>36</sup> This pathological condition is bound up with a profound crisis of historical truth which asks how we 'can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access'.<sup>37</sup> Caruth might be describing here the crisis that afflicts the protagonists of so many contemporary Irish novels, from Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989) to Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992) to Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999) to the nameless narrator of Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), one of the texts discussed by Stephen Regan in his chapter for this section. Trauma in this novel-cum-autobiography is experienced both as a catastrophic knowledge that cannot be articulated and as a memory that simultaneously resists assimilation and demands constant iteration. The boy-narrator's desire to witness himself in the darkness of history, to do what his father fails to do – 'make the story his own'<sup>38</sup> – inscribes an analogous circularity, in that his quest for palpable knowledge amidst whispers culminates in an apprehension of his own impalpability: 'Now the haunting meant something new to me – now I had become the shadow.'<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, ghostliness is reified at the very moment when consolidation seems at hand. The nameless narrator wakes up from an impossible history only to find himself still trapped within history's nightmare.

As Regan's analysis makes clear, *Reading in the Dark* is essentially an abortive autobiography, a novel about the failure of self-representation and the frustration of narrative revelation. As a chronicle of gapped subjectivity it is an exemplary Irish autobiographical text, the boy-narrator's quest for enlightenment being emblematic of a ceaseless struggle for mastery over a mutinous, possibly fictive, history. This struggle engenders in turn chronic feelings of homelessness and homesickness, interlinked themes which resonate through much recent Irish autobiography, the profusion of which led one acclaimed memoirist, Nuala O'Faolain, to assert that 'Ireland, at the end of the twentieth

century, was beginning to allow self-knowledge'.<sup>40</sup> Yet many of the more self-reflexive Irish autobiographies of recent years, including O'Faolain's *Are You Somebody?* (1996) and *Almost There* (2003), testify to a deficiency of self-knowledge, what Deane has spoken of as 'a radical privation' or 'missing agency'.<sup>41</sup> This deficiency is often suggested by the figure of the displaced double or twin which causes a self-generative tear in subjectivity. Thus, in *The Village of Longing* (1987) George O'Brien recalls the frisson of alterity that issued from his uncle renaming him 'Mike' in preference to 'Seoirse', the Irish form of his birth name, and Dermot Healy's *The Bend for Home* (1996) registers a similar sense of self-deferral which was literally and metaphorically reflected in a large domestic mirror:

That mirror had given my family and me a second identity. We ate looking at ourselves in it. We were never fully ourselves, but always possessed by others. . . . Always there were two of you there: the one in whom consciousness rested and the other, the body, which somehow didn't belong and was always at a certain remove. . . . This distance between my mind and my body has always remained and is insurmountable.<sup>42</sup>

Both *The Village of Longing* and *The Bend for Home* are suffused by a muted revisionism which is partly to do with telling stories in ways that disrupt the normative relationship between self, community and nation.<sup>43</sup> They also testify to the difficulties that attend the post-colonial subject's claim to autobiographical agency, as shown by the narrators' repeated acts of decentring and recentring the self. As such, these works properly belong to the performative mode of autobiography in which 'the self is a series of masks and public gestures rather than a function of essence'.<sup>44</sup> Self-improvisation is also one of the governing themes of John Walsh's *The Falling Angels: An Irish Romance* (1999) and Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2003), both of which Regan discusses alongside *Reading in the Dark*. Walsh and Hamilton's shared concern with experiences of cultural hyphenation, both within and outwith Ireland, lead them to construct home as a mythic place of no return, a space between absence and recuperation where the pull of deterministic identity paradigms are complicated by more pluralistic lived forms of belonging. Walsh's title neatly encapsulates the ambivalent fidelities of his second-generation Irishness; the Synge-inspired main title reflects the experience of being 'eternally in transit between one place and another, deprived of a sanctuary, denied a final refuge, never finding a real home',<sup>45</sup> while the subtitle evokes the seductive appeal of a mythologised past that is imagined as a repository of rooted belonging. His 'neither-one-thing-nor-the-otherness'<sup>46</sup> resonates strongly with



Hamilton's speckledness, which is purged of its stigmatic associations to become the signifier for an emergent post-national identity in which dissonance and hybridity are regarded as normative, progressive elements:

He said Ireland has more than one story. We are the German-Irish story. We are the English-Irish story, too. . . . We don't just have one language and one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people.<sup>47</sup>

Whereas *The Speckled People* seeks to valorise new, braided identity formations, its sequel, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), encodes a parallel impulse in contemporary Irish writing, one which is perhaps most marked among writers from the Republic: the longing to break free from the wearying binaries and mystifications of nationalism. Fork-tongued young Hugo's plaintive desire to rupture the Joycean nets – 'I want to have no past behind me, no conscience and no memory. I want to get away from my home and my family and my history'<sup>48</sup> – speaks to a persistent concern of writers such as Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Colm Tóibín, Sebastian Barry and Anne Enright to redraft received versions of the nation as a homogeneous imagined community by dramatising the manifold ambiguities and contradictions that have been elided from the dominant purview. As early as 1986 Bolger complained about an 'idea of nationhood which simply could not contain the Ireland of concrete and dual-carriageway (which is as Irish as turf and boreens) that was a reality before our eyes'.<sup>49</sup> Much of his literary output since then, as novelist, poet, playwright and editor, has been devoted to challenging the dominance of this nationalist aesthetic by re-imagining history from the perspective of disenfranchised social groups: emigrants, the suburban working class, the Protestant minority. In the process he has become one of the leading literary sponsors of a liberal post-nationalism predicated on the need to incorporate cultural difference within an expanded definition of Irishness. Bolger's most recent novel, *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005), shows him extending his critique of the concept of a historic Irish identity through an exploration of the conflicting forms of ideological affiliation and alienation that attended the birth of the state. In this, his most sustained exercise in historical fiction to date, he traces the fortunes of three members of the Goold Verschoyle family, one of whom was the prototype for the former Big House mistress who offers Hano and Cáit sanctuary in *The Journey Home* (1990). But whereas that novel invites us to read this *déclassée* matriarch metaphorically as a renovated version of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, *The Family on Paradise Pier* presents her as a

flesh-and-blood woman whose story, and that of her brothers, forcefully repudiates the notion that history is destiny.

Bolger's desire to give voice to Ireland's multiple cultural and sexual identities as means of counteracting nationalism's perceived homogenising tendencies is further amplified in the work of Enright, Barry and Tóibín. As Heidi Hansson demonstrates in her chapter, Enright's fondness for postmodern strategies such as non-linear narration can be read as the stylistic analogue of a demythologising aesthetic which seeks to renegotiate received meanings of nationality and community in ways that foreground fracture, contradiction and contingency. Both Barry and Tóibín, meanwhile, return repeatedly in their writings to the pressing question of how the past should be remembered and interpreted, unsealing the voices of those whose singular choices and stigmatised identities unsettle authorised narratives of belonging, be they common soldiers, exotic dancers or gay men. 'Barry's people are the footnotes, the oddities, the quirks of history', claims O'Toole,<sup>50</sup> and the writer himself has commented:

Most of the adjectives that traditionally make up a definition of Irishness I can lay scant claim to. So I have been trying to rearrange those adjectives to give me some chance in the lottery of citizenship. It's a hopeless task, but the hopelessness gave me the journey.<sup>51</sup>

As this statement suggests, Barry's imagination is typically drawn to sites of ambiguity, anomaly and dissent, as is Tóibín's, who has been a staunch critic of the exclusivist rhetoric of republican nationalism and conservative Catholicism since his bold journalism of the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Barry's elliptical comment about his practice as a playwright – 'I am interested not so much in the storm as the queer fresh breeze that hits suddenly through the grasses in the ambiguous time before it'<sup>53</sup> – corresponds with Tóibín's contention that 'ambiguity is what is needed in Ireland', expressed in his 1993 review of Roy Foster's *Paddy and Mr Punch*, tellingly entitled 'New Ways of Killing Your Father'.<sup>54</sup> In this polemical essay Tóibín, the son of a nationalist Wexford local historian, sketches his intellectual formation as a liberal revisionist, central to which was his study of Irish history at University College Dublin in the early 1970s. 'Outside in the world there were car bombs and hunger strikes', Tóibín recalls, 'done in the name of our nation, in the name of history. Inside we were cleansing history, concentrating on those aspects of our past which would make us good, worthy citizens who would keep the Irish 26 county state safe from the IRA and IRA fellow-travellers.'<sup>55</sup> His reading of an essay by Joseph Lee, which challenged the notion that Henry Grattan's 1782 parliament constituted Irish self-government,

elicited a moment of quasi-epiphanic enlightenment. Rarely, indeed, can a piece of dry historiography have engendered such liberatory euphoria:

I remember feeling a huge sense of liberation. I photocopied the piece and made everyone else read it. I was in my late teens and I already knew that what they had told me about God and sexuality wasn't true, but being an atheist or being gay in Ireland at that time seemed easier to deal with as transgressions than the idea that you could cease believing in the Great Events of Irish nationalist history. No Cromwell as cruel monster, say; the executions after 1916 as understandable in the circumstances; 1798 as a small outbreak of rural tribalism; partition as inevitable. Imagine if Irish history were pure fiction, how free and happy we could be! It seemed at that time a most subversive idea, a new way of killing your father, starting from scratch, creating a new self.<sup>56</sup>

There are few more succinct articulations of the sense of betrayal and victimisation by history that has proved creatively vital to an adversarial Irish literary revisionism, which has at its ideological centre a deep suspicion towards nationalism in general and a profound repudiation of IRA violence in particular.

Neither Tóibín or Barry is naive enough to believe in the myth of the end of history, however. Tóibín's debut novel, *The South* (1990), dramatises the tensions between his alienated protagonist's desire to be free of the past and her countervailing need to understand it more fully, while Barry's *A Long Long Way* (2005) imaginatively recuperates the deeds of marginalised historical actors – Catholic Irishmen who fought in the British Army in the First World War – only to reveal their vanquishment by the zero-sum imperatives of Anglo-Irish politics. Both novelists would therefore recognise the validity of Terence Brown's assertion that 'the historical itself remained as a crucial category of Irish self-understanding, even in a period of rapid social and cultural change'.<sup>57</sup> So too would Roddy Doyle, whose fiction, as Jennifer Jeffers observes, continually rehearses stories of marginalisation and victimisation in order to challenge the strategic forgetting practised by affluent, 'multicultural' Ireland. Jeffers's chapter focuses on the reconfigurations of identity, and the complex intersections of nationality, gender and race in contemporary Ireland, and shows how Doyle's return to the repressed gives articulation to those left behind by globalisation. Similarly, in Patrick O'Keefe's short fiction the nostalgia for rural life is undercut by its recrudescent secrets, leaving his exiles haunted by a culture that cannot be fully recovered or relinquished. Questions of memory and forgetting are posed most acutely by the aftermath of conflict in the North, and Neal Alexander's chapter examines the ways in which post-Agreement Northern fiction negotiates its bitter legacies. Writers such as Glenn

Patterson and Eoin MacNamee acknowledge both the importance and difficulties of remembrance in a moment of political and social transition, when unresolved issues from the past can overshadow or jeopardise the forward-looking present.

These writers' fictional engagements with the past calls into question the categories by which it can be examined, at the same time as they refuse to simplify or mythicise complex experiences for the sake of a well-made story. For other contemporary writers, it is the emergence of a post-historical Irish consciousness which is largely indifferent to the national past and its received meanings that compels. The faultlines between inherited mind-sets which valorise Irishness and a new cosmopolitan individualism are beginning to be mapped fictionally with varying degrees of seriousness and levity. In Harry Clifton's short story, 'A Visitor from the Future', for example, the depthlessness of Ireland's globalised culture perturbs Ann, a disaffected university tutor. Her attempt to interest her students in an older Ireland, 'where people were continuous with themselves, and everything could be named', exposes deep attitudinal and generational schisms, leaving her with a 'strange sense that the country she came from was levitating into a weightless, valueless space where everything equalled everything else. These things – disintegration, discontinuity – are not threatening but good, the best of them told her. Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again.'<sup>58</sup> Anne Haverty's *The Free and Easy* (2006) offers a more caustic critique of this Tóibín-esque vision of a present – and, by implication, a future – from which history has been evacuated. The novel, which satirises the narcissism and venality of the Dublin *nouveaux riches*, stages a contest between those who want to preserve – and opportunistically reinvent – the nation's heritage as a saleable commodity and those who wish to jettison tradition completely. What unites these seemingly polarised positions is a view of the past as an agreed-upon fiction. Affluent Irish modernity, the novel suggests, is underpinned by a wilful amnesia and a pernicious effacement of history, traits personified by Seoda Fitzgibbon, the glamorous wife of a corrupt businessman, for whom the perpetual present is the primary ground of personal and socio-economic success. Her pithy annulment of two centuries of history provides an appropriate endpoint for this brief survey of contemporary Irish fiction and autobiography, as well as offering a possible point of departure for future reviews:

'You can forget the last century. And you can definitely forget the century before. Ireland as we know it – and let's thank whoever or whatever – was born some time around nineteen ninety-four. Or ninety-six?' She smiled. 'Let the historians fight about the year. Historians like to have something to fight about.'<sup>59</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Fintan O'Toole, 'Writing the boom', *Irish Times*, 25 January 2001.
- 2 For an informed and commendably brisk survey of the fictional landscape, see Eve Patten, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction', in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 259–75.
- 3 Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 276.
- 4 Eamonn Grennan, "'Only What Happens": Mulling Over McGahern', *Irish University Review*, 35/1 (spring/summer 2005), p. 26.
- 5 James Joyce to Arthur Power, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 505.
- 6 Colm Tóibín, *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xxxi.
- 7 John Banville, quoted in Shane Hickey and John Spain, 'Politics and the arts pay homage to "voice of a generation"', *Irish Independent*, 31 March 2006, p. 10.
- 8 John O'Donoghue, quoted in Hickey and Spain, 'Politics and the arts pay homage', p. 10.
- 9 Nuala O'Faolain, 'He was already embarked on a life of heroic honesty. He already knew what he meant by being a writer', *Sunday Tribune*, 2 April 2006, p. 18.
- 10 Denis Sampson, 'An Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 8 April 2006, p. 17.
- 11 Fintan O'Toole, 'Picking the lock of family secrets', *Irish Times Weekend Review*, 1 April 2006, p. 3.
- 12 John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 5.
- 13 Antoinette Quinn, 'A Prayer for my Daughter: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17/1 (1991), p. 81.
- 14 McGahern, *Amongst Women*, p. 147.
- 15 Robert F. Garratt, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*: Representation, Memory and Trauma', *Irish University Review*, 35/1 (spring/summer 2005), p. 130.
- 16 McGahern, *Amongst Women*, p. 180.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 19 Eamonn Hughes, "'All That Surrounds Our Life": Time, Sex, and Death in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*', *Irish University Review*, 35/1 (spring/summer 2005), p. 151.
- 20 McGahern, *Amongst Women*, pp. 174, 168.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 179.
- 22 John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 41.
- 23 John McGahern, 'What is My Language?', *Irish University Review*, 35/1 (spring/summer 2005), pp. 5, 6. This is a revised version of an essay first published in 1987.
- 24 McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 51.

- 25 Ibid., p. 77.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., p. 2.
- 28 See, for example, 'John O'Mahony, 'King of Bog Gothic', *Guardian*, 30 August 2003.
- 29 Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2006), pp. 75–6; Nicholas Grene, 'Black Pastoral: 1990s Images of Ireland', *Litteraria Pragensia*, 20/10 (2000): [www.komparatistika.ff.cuni.cz/litteraria/no20-10/grene.htm](http://www.komparatistika.ff.cuni.cz/litteraria/no20-10/grene.htm) (accessed on 1 March 2007). Grene explains: 'Traditional pastoral idealises another space, a prior time, a pristine source of being, measured against the implied present place occupied by its readership or audience. These black pastorals invert such a norm by representing a brutally unidyllic Ireland of the past'.
- 30 O'Toole, 'Writing the boom'.
- 31 See Tim Gauthier, 'Identity, Self-Loathing and the Neocolonial Condition in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*', *Critique* (winter 2003), 44/2, pp. 196–211.
- 32 Patricia Horton, "'Absent from Home: Family, Community and National Identity in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*', *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, 3/1 (December 1998), p. 76.
- 33 Laura G. Eldred, 'Francie Pig vs. the Fat Green Blob from Outer Space: Horror Films and *The Butcher Boy*', *New Hibernia Review*, 10/3 (2006), pp. 65–6.
- 34 Patrick McCabe, *Winterwood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 16.
- 35 Ibid., p. 233.
- 36 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.
- 37 Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 6.
- 38 Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 10.
- 39 Ibid., pp. 10, 217.
- 40 Nuala O'Faolain, *Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman* (London: Michael Joseph, 2003), p. 59.
- 41 Seamus Deane, 'Autobiography and Memoirs 1890–1988', in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day, 1991), vol. 3, p. 383.
- 42 Dermot Healy, *The Bend for Home* (London: Harvill, 1996), pp. 73–4. The motif of human doubles is not confined to recent works of Irish autobiography. Twins and doubles punctuate Irish novels from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to Anne Enright's *What Are You Like?* (2000) and also feature in films, as exemplified by the recent *doppelgänger* melodrama *The Tiger's Tail* (2006). See Jeanett Shumaker, 'Uncanny Doubles: The Fiction of Anne Enright', *New Hibernia Review*, 9/3 (2005), pp. 107–22.
- 43 For more on autobiographical configurations of this relationship, see my edited volume *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

- 44 Ruth Robbins, *Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 167.
- 45 John Walsh, *The Falling Angels: An Irish Romance* (London: Flamingo, 2000), p. 30.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 47 Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 283.
- 48 Hugo Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), p. 7.
- 49 Dermot Bolger (ed.), *The Bright Wave/An Tonn Gheal: Poetry in Irish Now* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1986), p. 10.
- 50 Fintan O'Toole, 'Introduction: A True History of Lies', Sebastian Barry, *Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. xiii.
- 51 Mária Kurdi, '“Really All Danger”: An Interview with Sebastian Barry', *New Hibernia Review*, 8/1 (2004), p. 46.
- 52 For a sense of Tóibín's journalistic style and subject matter, see his *The Trial of the Generals: Selected Journalism 1980–1990* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1990).
- 53 Sebastian Barry, 'Preface' to his *Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. xv.
- 54 Colm Tóibín, 'New Ways of Killing your Father', *London Review of Books*, 18 November 1993.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 409.
- 58 Harry Clifton, 'A Visitor from the Future', in David Marcus (ed.), *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006–7* (London: Faber, 2007), p. 173.
- 59 Anne Haverty, *The Free and Easy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), p. 112. It is generally accepted that 1994 was the year in which the term 'Celtic Tiger' was coined to describe the unprecedented growth of the Irish economy. See Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World*, p. 271.