

## *Introduction: A history of the Irish novel, 1665–2010*

Countless are the novels of the world.

(Franco Moretti)<sup>1</sup>

While some literary critics have traced the origins of the novel back to ancient Greece,<sup>2</sup> the modern novel as an access to the narratives of bourgeois modernity emerged into Western culture in the late seventeenth century. The struggle of the bourgeois towards definition and the striving to articulate its character is central to the novel and the stories it tells. Its novelty is found in a formlessness that nonetheless aspires to some idea of order and unity. Indeed, the energies of the early modern novel form can be discerned in its constant assertion of narratives that enact that search for completeness while also allowing for a kind of mourning for the security that older, traditional forms and stories allowed. Thus, novelists, then as now, revel in the possibilities that formal innovation permits, while their characters find themselves forced to acknowledge the newness of their world and their experiences in that world. The novel's link to news, as something immediate and pertinent, is obvious as it self-consciously craves to be the chronicler of the here and now, each novel trying to encapsulate the urgency of being indispensably relevant. And yet, as Franco Moretti argues, while traditionally tied to the codification of bourgeois values, the novel is actually a means for the pre-modern imagination to continue to inhabit the modern capitalist world.<sup>3</sup> In other words, while the novel encapsulates Enlightenment thinking in its exposure of the inner machinations of the individual consciousness, and of laying bare all that had been until this moment hidden, it also harbours within it that which opposes such revelatory actions, suggesting realms beyond positivist knowledge, hinting at mysteries outside accepted epistemological structures. Thus, the destructive elements of the pre-modern picaresque – the character that would dismantle the codes of polite society even as he or she apes them and who would, in their blatantly self-centred individuality, simply ignore communal values – are

never quite abandoned by the novel. Nor is the adventurous possibility of the romance and the fantastic quite subdued in the modern moment, with the potential of magic always lingering just over the next rainbow. Thus, while the modern world is a place of the mundane and mediocrity, characters still harbour a desire to be adventurous heroes.

Randall Jarrell defines the novel as ‘a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it’,<sup>4</sup> capturing perfectly this sense of profound confusion and contradiction surrounding the form. It is, in many ways, a devastating remark because it blatantly challenges some of the more stereotypical notions about a literary form that have been most associated with the idea of stability. The novel is basically awash with contradictions and, perhaps, beyond any final definition<sup>5</sup> as it wilfully plunders various forms and genres for its own ends. Indeed, it could be argued that it is these contradictions which energise the novel – its rage for order straining against a shapeless form endlessly and necessarily redefining itself, its desire to map the emerging middle-class individual contrasting dynamically with the novel’s ability to focus on society. The novel undoubtedly celebrates the flourishing of the individual as the new measure of all things, and yet it also suggests the peculiar condition of modernity as one of ‘transcendental homelessness’:<sup>6</sup> the ability to be anywhere and anything means that one is finally nowhere and a nobody. What is being questioned, too, is the notion that the novel’s evolution is linked only to certain places and certain cultures, and that it perfectly reflects the developments of those particular places and cultures. No longer need the novel be thought of as singularly attached to modern metropolitan life;<sup>7</sup> rather, it becomes a vehicle for investigating the periphery, those neglected spaces where, perhaps, contradictions abound. What is clear from much recent criticism is that any history of the novel must be pluralist and open to the reality that many more people were writing novels other than those that are integral to the traditional canon.

The potential for uncertainty that this characterisation of the novel affords resonates profoundly alongside the idiosyncrasies of the Irish experience, meaning that it is writ large in works of fiction that emerge on the geographic, political and cultural margins of Europe. Thus, writing and reading the Irish novel are acts fraught with the confusion and contradiction that underpins the novel form itself. This is so because of the numerous circulating misconceptions about the form generally and in Ireland particularly. The major misconception is that there is no such thing as an Irish novel. Or if there is, it is but a pale imitation of what a real novel ought to be. Until very recently, one result of this mistaken belief was that the novel inhabited a peculiarly tangential position in Irish writing when compared to the more evolved theorisation

*Introduction: A history of the Irish novel, 1665–2010*

3

of drama and poetry. The reasons for this marginal position are many and varied, as are the consequences of it. The flawed mirror through which literary critics, especially, have usually approached the novel in Ireland is an invention of the 1940s and 1950s. Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, in keeping with the notion that the novel was a harbinger of order and stability and mesmerised by the thought of a 'grand tradition', argued that the novel form was best suited to 'made' societies and cultures. Therefore, the argument goes, the prose form best suited to articulating the Irish experience of becoming, along with the provisional nature of modern Irish culture, is the short story.<sup>8</sup> The short story's obvious links to orality also suggests its distinct receptiveness to rendering an Irish reality. What might be overlooked is that neither O'Faolain nor O'Connor were particularly adept in the art of the novel and it suited both to champion a rationale for their inability to express themselves expertly within the form. More importantly, though, is how both wed their aesthetic theories to a wider critique of Irish society and the lack of development in Ireland when compared to the modernity of, seemingly, everywhere else; or everywhere else that mattered to them, which was Britain and America especially. Their quarrel is not with any aesthetic notion of what the novel can or cannot do, or with their own and other writers' inadequacies as would-be novelists; rather, their quarrel is with Ireland itself and its lack of societal depth and normality. This manoeuvre of connecting Irish society's progress with art, and also inferring a need to constantly compare Irish efforts with what is going elsewhere, suggests artists, and literary critics, need not expose themselves or their own art and their own pronouncements to any serious critique. It is society's failing, not theirs. They link the novel to a notion of cultural and communal stability with the form at once reflecting and, in many ways perhaps, creating a sense of coherence and stability for its readers. Such thinking can lead to an interpretation which charts Ireland's cultural progress towards a moment of well-adjusted and acceptable conventionality so that, as a recent work of contemporary history suggests, Irish short stories eventually, and belatedly, have become novels.<sup>9</sup> The implication, of course, is that there is some accepted level of normality going on elsewhere which ought to be aspired to and emulated. Applying this kind of thinking to the novel in Ireland means that any true appreciation of it is doomed from the outset as its various expressions are already condemned to be pallid imitations of a flourishing form existing elsewhere.

Much of this type of critique is a dangerously simple misreading of the novel form itself which, while certainly attuned to worlds where shared ideas and commonly held beliefs exist, actually has always revelled in and amplified anxiety and uncertainty rather than merely reflecting mundane constancy. Indeed, O'Connor's and O'Faolain's theories are born out of

their immediate past, looking narrowly to the realisms of the nineteenth-century novel as the ideal to be copied, forgetting that the form's original power emanated from the vulgar chaos of the picaresque and the whimsy of romance. Their opinions are coloured, too, by the outstanding transformative success of the literary and cultural revivalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who celebrated especially the Gaelic possibilities of poetry, as well as by the immediacy of impact offered by theatre. The novel being the uncouth reflector of rude modernity seemed, perhaps, too wedded to popular concerns and sentiment, thus running counter to the hoped-for presentation of elevated and serious Irish character and emotion beyond the merely comic and stereotypical. Another influencing factor is that, despite O'Faolain's and O'Connor's desire for an Irish novel, they secretly abhor its utterly disposable nature with its obvious link to the mediocrity of the present moment, and how it runs counter to the prevailing revivalist desire to raise literary efforts into the realm of immutable art.

Recent scholarship has begun to reassess the novel in Ireland, to excavate and engage with the myriad novels that have been produced from the seventeenth century to the present day.<sup>10</sup> What is clear from the varying perspectives through which the Irish novel is being currently viewed is that such confusion about the form is not exclusively an Irish phenomenon. What the novel is and where it might occur are questions increasingly being raised, even concerning what has been viewed as the traditional canon.<sup>11</sup> This wholesale re-evaluation of what the novel might be is important because the stranglehold of supposed traditional traits has severely restricted the conception of the form and where it might flourish. Indeed, beginning to read the Irish novel as a part of this general reappraisal breaks down the idea of universalities, of single movements such as romanticism or modernism, opening up the possibility of romanticisms and modernisms. Different cultures and different societies bring indigenous issues and concerns to bear upon literary and philosophical fashions and movements. Irish writing, therefore, is both a part of these wider mainstream currents and simultaneously apart from, and at an angle to, those various flows and eddies, meaning that the Irish novel consciously occupies a space that challenges easy assumptions about the form.

For many Irish prose writers, for those who would actually aspire to writing a novel as opposed to those who critique its alleged absence, a consequence has been the presentation of themselves in the brilliantly modernist move of being utterly self-created. Maria Edgeworth, for instance, initiated her own tradition with *Castle Rackrent*, consciously ignoring the reality that there were many novelists before her and, in doing so, staking a claim for the total originality and innovation of her own work. James Joyce would do the same

over one hundred years later. While such a contrivance is perhaps *de rigueur* for any author, surprisingly for many years the majority of literary critics, with very few exceptions, took Edgeworth and Joyce and others at their word and constructed a very narrow Irish novelistic canon from 1800 onwards. And yet paradoxically, in the face of this seeming critical disregard, Ireland has produced some of *the* globally recognised great examples of the novel form: writers such as Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett and John McGahern have demonstrated how wide-ranging Irish prose fiction has been, and can be. But even this obsession with the singular achievements of certain writers has itself been part of the problem when approaching the form, skewing the literary landscape by suggesting that when Irish writers bothered at all it was only to write great novels. Such a limited focus obscures the work of those minor contributors to the form. Indeed, this is a problem in the study of Irish writing in general. That many of these writers (such as Joyce and Edgeworth) produced works that seem to test, stretch and break the boundaries of what a novel is thought to be – in fact, might be thought as not being novels at all – means the impression still lingers that the novel is singularly unsuited to the task of rendering the Irish world and Irish experience.

Within this context, this history of the Irish novel is a history of the struggle towards articulation, of making the novel form express Irish stories and Irish concerns. It is also a history of developing Irish identities, of misrepresentations and the effort by writers to offer something genuinely authentic and complicatedly real. The novel – its sheer size – allows for the bringing together of difference in terms of native and visitor, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, Catholic and Protestant, aristocrat and peasant. Thus the pages of the Irish novel are where issues concerning identity are played out repeatedly. Ireland's colonial relationship to Britain is obviously figured in this confrontation between differing identities and differing loyalties. It will be possible, in addition, to reflect on Irish culture's developing relationship not only to Britain but also to Europe, America and the wider world in the contemporary moment of globalisation. A history of the Irish novel is a history of power and authority, a history of questions concerning colonial and native narratives, and of questions surrounding who speaks and writes and who is spoken and written about. A gradual movement from exclusively Anglo-Irish authors up to the nineteenth century, to the emergence of Irish authors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries registers that shift in power and its consequences for a culture imagining and reimagining itself. The novel in the nineteenth century, for instance, becomes a medium through which the nascent middle-class Catholic population can aspire to power and

political position – the relative straightforwardness of the novels being written is a literary manifestation of that desire. On the other hand, for the Protestant novelist the form has been, from its inception, something to be approached with apprehension – for a class that increasingly imagines itself in aloof aristocratic terms, the novel's vulgarity and its access to the privacies of the inner world of the consciousness signal a loss of power rather than its realisation. For some, then, the novel is not a means for revealing truth; rather it allows truths to be concealed. Indeed, this is something quite peculiar to Irish culture where, since the enactment of the Penal Laws in the seventeenth century, there has been the incongruous situation where the hidden world is always in full view. This is evident most obviously with regard to political, economic and religious scandals, though the notion that that which is hidden actually exists in plain view permeates all aspects and levels of society. The difficulty for the novelist is to negotiate between this reversal of the public and private spheres, to make the novel's thirst for exposé relevant in a culture where, at some level, there is nothing to uncover.

A history of the Irish novel is furthermore a history of a changing landscape. This transition can be observed, obviously, at the level of content and story: stories that recreate Ireland as a rural space on the margins, to stories that subvert that often stereotypical representation, to narratives centred on the urban and city space. But novels also interrogate the idea of landscape, showing how notions of Irish space have been manufactured and how the meaning of the Irish landscape has altered over the years, as changing ideologies and circumstances project their peculiar meanings onto it. The move of the Irish novel's location of action from the south-west of Ireland, those midland spaces of Munster which in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were where English and Irish culture coexisted and intermingled on a daily basis, to the wilds of the west coast, and Connaught especially, displays this altering conception of where stories can be told from and what they might signify. Ireland as a space is at times teeming with life and then suddenly depopulated and devoid of human activity. This is true, too, of how the city operates in the Irish novel.

Novels tell stories and this study is a history of the stories that have been told. Different types of stories emerge, from different perspectives, and different genres impose themselves on the Irish frame. The prevalence of certain types of novel at particular points in time offers an insight into underlining concerns and attitudes of authors at any given moment. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, novels dealt with the notion of Ireland as an ongoing project, a place to be improved and modernised, mirroring the underlying desire of the colonial vision. The Irish

Gothic novel in the mid-nineteenth century becomes more comprehensible when it is thought of as an expression of the increasing unease and fear of an Anglo-Irish population whose position of power and authority is being challenged and eroded. The Gothic focus on inheritance and continuity perfectly brings to the fore the anxieties of a class which comes to realise that the colonial project of improvement has all but failed. Thus, the Gothic novel maps a nightmare move inwards, away from outward concerns, concentrating on the guilt and failings of the Anglo-Irish themselves. It is also a manifestation of the darker, denied, aspects of the romantic revolution in the imagination; a recognition of all that Enlightenment knowledge cannot shine a rational light upon. The popularity of the Big House novel, too, especially in the twentieth century, can also be seen as a reflection of the concerns of an Anglo-Irish community feeling increasingly under threat. Other genres that operate quirkily within an Irish context are, for instance, the *Bildungsroman*, where the expected emphasis on the development of a bourgeois individuality shifts between the personal and public spheres, never escaping the concerns of national identity. The influence of the Catholic Church is witnessed in how an emerging sexuality becomes central to these novels of development in the twentieth century especially, as if the sexual act were the only indicator of authentic maturity. The history novel, from the nineteenth century onwards, has possessed a certain weighty, if not oppressive, significance in Irish fiction: history being obviously a major field of contention in Irish cultural discourse. A feature of many Irish novels from the early nineteenth century on is the presence of a potted history of Ireland, as if each new reader must first be acquainted with Ireland's entire story before engaging with any one particular story. Consequently, the facts of who did what and when and, of course, how history is written remain a continuing fascination for both the reader and the writer. The novel also allows for alternative histories to be told, acknowledging the human realities of great events beyond the realm of deadening fact. This enthrallment to history is linked to the prevalence of realism and naturalism in the Irish novel. It is peculiar that for a people who are said to be truly imaginative, in the realm of the novel at least, that kind of creativity appears mostly absent. Many novelists in Ireland are not concerned with fiction-making, but with reality and disguised biography. Perhaps colonisation encourages an anthropological approach to art: each writer laboriously detailing the nuances of their own time and place in an effort to overcome endless caricatures and distortions of Ireland and Irishness. The real act of rebellion, then, is to be found in the power of rendering one's own story in one's own inimitable style. At times, it seems, the imposition of story itself – with beginnings, middles and, particularly, endings – is far too harsh an obligation



on the delicate nature of this act of reproduction. Thus, and here the novel does borrow from the short story, some of the best Irish novels seem formless and without direction: mood pieces rather than strict narratives.

There is a sense in which the present moment or the recent past is the most difficult to capture in art: critical distance and perspective being absent. Yet, it is the modern novel which as an artistic medium is seen mostly to concern itself with the immediate moment: with the here and now. Though, of course, it is not simply the immediacy of capturing the moment that is of significance for the novel or its readers; rather, it is making the novel and its themes relevant to the moment which is pertinent. This is one of the major difficulties with the novel being judged in its own time of production: what might appear innovative and new in any given moment will seem stale and uninspired viewed from the perspective that only hindsight can offer. The novel form's tendency towards the present moment is destabilised and disrupted in an Irish context usually figured as overly concerned with the past and tradition. But Ireland is a place and an idea constantly reinventing itself. Despite the stereotype of the alleged 'backward look' in Irish writing and Irish culture, Ireland has in fact been a place of almost constant transition. Perhaps the Irish novel looks both backwards and forwards simultaneously, and increasingly so in the contemporary period as writers attempt to be faithful to tradition while also wanting to engage with the possibilities of the unknown. This peculiar 'doubleness' of modern Irish consciousness is manifested in the Irish novel. While conflict and difference underpin the Irish experience, it would be a mistake to view the Irish novel as simply reflecting oppositional positions. Its ambiguity in terms of content and form registers the fluid nature of an Irishness that oscillates between the poles of tradition and modernity, Gaelic culture and English culture, between the Irish and the English languages. What can be observed, then, is a negotiation between opposites and the acceptance of difference.

A history of the Irish novel is, above all else, a history of Ireland's modernity. The Irish novel's emergence in the seventeenth century and thus its association with modernity, being indeed a herald of modernity, allow for a mapping of Ireland's relationship to modernisation. But, rather than the reductive assumption previously mentioned which imposes a kind of seamless move towards perfection, what is clear is how the novel form – with all its inherent contradictions and tensions – chronicles the complexities of that movement into modernity. In an Irish context this means that the novel can be thought of as *the* ideal literary form through which to chart the numerous tensions, divisions and diversity within Irish life and culture over the last four hundred years. The novel form, oscillating between



containment and chaos, between the simplicity of narrative progress and the complexity of expression, seems best suited to capturing the energies of an Irish culture which also moves between the poles of stability and social coherence and the ever-present realities of division and conflict.

If it is accepted that Irish culture is in a state of constant transition, then it follows it is always in a state of beginning and ending – a new Ireland is continually being born or is about to be born while an old Ireland is forever passing or about to pass away. From the earliest novels that deal partly or wholly with Ireland, Richard Head's *The English Rogue* (1665) and the anonymously written *Virtue Rewarded; or, the Irish Princess* (1693), this responsiveness to transitional moments is to the forefront, with both of these novels telling stories of new beginnings and possibilities while simultaneously registering the necessary abandonment of an old world and an old culture. Indeed, this emphasis on transitional points in time has allowed for numerous false origins for the Irish novel: does it begin with *The English Rogue* or *Virtue Rewarded; or, the Irish Princess*, or perhaps with Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales, or Instructive Histories for the Happy Conduct of Life* (1716)? Maria Edgeworth and William Carleton in the nineteenth century certainly inaugurate new modes for the Irish novel, and, of course, James Joyce in the twentieth century opens up the Irish novel, as he does the novel form generally, to radically new possibilities. Literary critics search for the first proper representations of, for instance, the Catholic middle classes and many candidates have been put forward: Kate O'Brien's writing from the 1920s, or perhaps Gerald Griffin in the early nineteenth century? Or they search for the first realistic rendering of urban life: is it to be found, not in James Joyce, but in the work of May Laffan Hartley from the 1870s onwards, or in John Banim's *The Nowlans* (1826)? More worthwhile, though, in beginning to talk of a history of the Irish novel – and beginning to come to some knowledge of its particularities and peculiarities – is to consider some particular endings of the Irish novel. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for instance, Irish novels ended in a marriage between characters from Anglo-Ireland and Gaelic Ireland or Britain and Gaelic Ireland. This individual union between old and new Ireland offered an image of hope for the wider political union between Great Britain and Ireland, reflecting a need for reconciliation between the various parties that make up Irish society. From one of the earliest Irish novels, *The Irish Princess* (1693), to a novel such as George Moore's *A Drama in Muslim* (1884), many concluded with a departure from Ireland. The repercussions of such a leave-taking are obvious, signalling an abandonment of Ireland as a site of impossibility and the opportunity of a fresh start elsewhere. But there

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85540-2 - A History of the Irish Novel

Derek Hand

Excerpt

[More information](#)

is another way of considering endings which highlight the centrality of the double perspective of content and form in understanding and appreciating the nature of the Irish novel. Looking briefly at the endings of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), it can be seen how the close of each of these novels upsets the trajectory of each novel in terms of both its content and its form: in terms of the story being told and how that story is being told. *Portrait* ends with Stephen Dedalus's diary entries: a formal precursor to the stream of consciousness employed in the subsequent *Ulysses* (1922). Dedalus's voice is presented to the reader unmediated by any controlling narrator. It is, too, Dedalus 'writing' rather than being written about. However, a diary is not for public consumption: Dedalus, despite his triumphant declaration of his intention to be an artist, is speaking only to himself. At the close of Bowen's *The Last September*, the reader is presented with an image of the burning Big House of Danielstown. Lois Farquar, the main character in the novel, misses this ending, having slipped out of the narrative quietly in the previous chapter. For a novel that dramatises numerous arrivals and departures, Lois's leaving, curiously, is only reported to the reader. The boy at the conclusion of Deane's *Reading in the Dark* has discovered the facts of the secret that has haunted his family, yet he is denied a name and is seen to have gained no true knowledge or wisdom. The striking of a celebratory note that the reader might expect is completely absent. Finally, the narrator at the close of Ní Dhuibhne's novel is singularly unsure as to the import of the story she has just been telling, the narrative finishing on a strangely downbeat note. Each of these endings is disturbing and disruptive; each is radically 'open' rather than 'closed', denying completeness and forcing the reader to reassess what has occurred previously. Of course, all endings are a compromise, an imposed moment of resolution that neatly brings matters to a head, and a finish. But here, there is something other than that kind of concession to formal necessity occurring. Each of these is a profound instance of negation: a reorientation of the entire thrust of the traditional novel form. Each toys with the possibility of undoing the very medium through which the stories are written, each embraces baffled ignorance, signalling certainly the end of things but also the need to begin again. In a culture which has always seen itself as dying or about to die, these endings, consequently, become a way into beginning: beginning to think about the novel in a specifically Irish context.

This history will have a primarily chronological structure. Of necessity, key historical dates and political developments will punctuate the critical