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Introduction

Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds

In the final decades of the twentieth century and into the first years of the twenty-first, both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland experienced dizzying societal changes. At the beginning of the period at hand, in the early 1980s, conditions across the island seemed drearily familiar: the Irish economy was mired in recession, outward emigration was on the increase, social and political policy in the South continued to align with Catholic doctrine, sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland persisted, and the hard border between the Republic of Ireland and the North remained a fraught space of armed and ideological struggle. Yet halfway through these decades, on the cusp of a new millennium, the Irish economy was so strong that it had been anthropomorphised as the Celtic Tiger, inward immigration outpaced emigration, the longstanding moral authority of the Catholic Church had been destabilised, and the Good Friday Agreement indicated that the violence of the Troubles would diminish or even cease entirely.[1] By the end of the period covered by this book, the near present, the Irish Republic's economy had crashed and stutteringly restarted, Northern Ireland is no longer defined chiefly by sectarian violence, both countries are adapting to changing patterns of migration, and the majority of Ireland's electorate has supported several progressive social initiatives while remaining enthusiastic adherents to the European project, even as the open border between the Republic and the North is under threat within the intricate negotiations over the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Amid the remarkable social and political oscillations characterising these years, Irish culture on both sides of the border has emerged as a global phenomenon, one endeavouring to represent, as well as to intervene in, the rapidly changing contemporary conditions in which it is produced.[2]

It is little exaggeration to assert that these decades are rife with transitions so dramatic they seem themselves the stuff of fiction. Taking in tow the various complexities that are inherent to studying the contemporary,

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this final volume of *Irish Literature in Transition* aims to elucidate the central features of Irish literature during the long turn of the twentieth century, from 1980 to 2020, covering its significant trends and formations, re-assessing its major writers and texts, and providing path-making accounts of its emergent figures. The essays that follow identify broad patterns found across these decades, even as they consider what makes each stretch distinctive, placing, for example, the apparent insularity of the 1980s in contrast to the global turn of the early 2000s. Each historical era has its complexities, but approaching Irish literature of the vertiginous near-present through the long lens of 'transition' presents manifest challenges and opportunities. The contemporary moment is too near at hand; it has barely happened yet; we encounter it perpetually in mid-stream. From one angle, contemporary literature is all transition: seen from the inside, the overwhelming immediacy of the present can make locating any particular transitional node a difficult task since a vantage on a historical or cultural transition is obtained from some moment in that transition's future. A shift or pivot is apprehensible only when we can see with relative clarity the conditions both before and after, and can thus retrospectively recognise the point on which matters turned. Such a stance is not quite possible when looking at the literature (or any other cultural production) of our own historical moment.

So even as this volume marks broad transitions across recent decades, we acknowledge the impossibility of grasping completely the future meanings of those changes. As such, the date range of this volume – covering a period amidst that of its moment of publication – is meant as a somewhat cheeky admission of its necessary inadequacy or provisionality. By many measures, for instance, 1980 seems an odd starting point for the contemporary moment in Ireland. It does not feature a world-historical event, such as Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the economic crash of 2008, or the election of the Republic's first openly gay Taoiseach in 2017. Nor does it have a particularly obvious literary-historical resonance. It may, in fact, be a year most notable in the public consciousness for Johnny Logan's victory in the Eurovision Song Contest. But, when actively fashioned into a meaningful, though perhaps interim, node, the year 1980 can powerfully demonstrate the critical and creative possibilities of retrospection amid the present, the value of locating certain literary and cultural transition points and claiming them as significant – even as they remain within our immediate purview, with their full implications still unfolding.

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As an example of such fashioning, we might turn to Brian Friel's play *Translations*, which premiered at the Guildhall in Derry in 1980, and which inaugurated the influential work of Field Day and its search for a cultural 'fifth province' beyond political conflict.[3] Without positioning *Translations*, or Field Day for that matter, as the foremost literary-historical cause or origin point of the contemporary, we can use this occasion as one means to identify, unpack, and better understand certain significant transitions across these decades. Set in 1833, but premiering in the midst of the Troubles, *Translations* fictionalises the circumstances surrounding the Irish Ordnance Survey in its depiction of the historic colonial relation between Ireland and England. As such, it conveys the tendency of writers in Ireland to face the dilemmas of the present through the prism of the past. The play's attention to colonial legacies signalled the genesis of Field Day's influential postcolonial critique, while the subsequent production history of *Translations*, which has been staged across the globe, as well as Field Day's own international reach, might be regarded as an example of the 'worlding' of Irish culture. Pushed even further, this premiere might be read as predictive of a changing mood that would accept and even welcome peace and reconciliation: its premiere at the Guildhall, the symbol of unionist power in Derry, was seen as a moment of cultural unification, especially after the Protestant Lord Mayor launched the final standing ovation, and despite the nationalism underlying the play, a point that tended not to be pursued by early reviewers. In this light, *Translations* – both its textual substance and its unfurling context – becomes a means to understand the contours of the period, shedding proleptic light on the course of Irish literature and culture to come. But this case, as the essays on view skilfully demonstrate, is simply one of many sites – among them encounters, individuals, objects, texts, happenings, genres, media – that can be read in retrospect to illuminate the broader alterations in contemporary experience and the complex temporalities of those shifts. Such an approach signals, for us, the important role that the past plays for contemporary Irish writers and critics in understanding the present and imagining the future, as well as serving as a reminder that the transitions we emphasise here are adapting and adaptable to ever-changing conditions.

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The past forty years have seen the overt manifestation of what scholars have labelled Ireland's belated modernity, a period in which social and cultural life in the Republic and – to a different degree and at a different pace – Northern

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Ireland have been transformed by new material conditions in each polity, as well as by ideological shifts in the way people understand themselves and their relation to the world.[4] Perhaps the most dramatic changes of these years occurred within the political and social conditions of Northern Ireland. From the late 1960s until the verge of the twenty-first century, the North was wracked by the violence of the Troubles. Following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the country achieved peace and established a power-sharing government, although one that has been as notable for its long periods of suspension as for the substance of its governing. The ending of the Troubles brought about a slow and often tortuous process of coming to terms with the legacy of thirty years of strife, especially concerning the remembrance of the victims of the violence and the status of its perpetrators. As essays by Julia C. Obert and Stefanie Lehner show, Northern Irish writing gained especial prominence within the broader context of the Troubles, and writers have powerfully articulated the dynamics of the conflict and helped to shape its ongoing resolution.[5] A varied and rapidly changing media landscape has, even more influentially perhaps than the literary field, offered representations of the North during these years to audiences at home and abroad and demonstrated the profound influence of popular culture on understandings of contemporary Irish culture. During the Troubles, widely distributed commercial films, such as Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) or Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996), represented the North's political violence and strife as singular, an exceptional space characterised by sectarian violence and heroic protest. Such works continue to appear in the wake of the Troubles, as in the film *Hunger* (2008), directed by Steve McQueen, which graphically displays the bodily suffering undergone by the 1981 hunger strikers.

However, with the Good Friday Agreement two decades old and the large-scale violence seemingly relegated to the past, new ways of approaching and representing late-twentieth-century Northern Ireland have taken hold. This shift can be seen clearly in the comic television series *Derry Girls* (2017–), which follows the everyday exploits of snarky adolescents in the 1990s. The show does not shy away from the complexities of sectarian culture, political belief, and the intricacies of intergenerational family life within a highly divided culture. Yet it neither flattens the reality of Troubles-era Derry by reducing the city to a fixed backdrop for assorted teenage hijinks, nor requires that every feature of plot and characterisation depend on the conflict in Northern Ireland as the explanatory mechanism or determinative frame. In this series, available to international audiences through streaming services, the Troubles can be viewed from a distance,

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even from a wry angle, rather than with the adamant immediacy that characterised many depictions of the North in the 1980s and 1990s. Such fresh representations of the Troubles do not suggest, however, that the conflicts that fuelled those years are entirely resolved; this notion falls apart in light of the ongoing anxiety over Brexit and the future of the relationship between Ireland and Britain, as well as the overt re-emergence of socio-political divisions that were thought to have receded. In particular, the possibility of the return of a hard border between the Republic and the North, is – at the time of writing – a major topic within Irish political debates. In addition, the April 2019 murder of journalist Lyra McKee in Derry, which took place during a series of riots after police attempted to seize arms from dissident Republican groups in advance of parades commemorating the Easter Rising, has heightened tensions significantly even as the groups thought responsible have been roundly condemned.

The close attention paid to the Troubles during these decades does not mean that the North alone was the site of trauma. Long the arbiter of morality for Irish citizens, the Catholic Church in Ireland was exposed during these decades as systematically failing to protect its constituents and enabling the abuse of its most vulnerable subjects. In the 1990s, the disclosure of widespread child abuse and sexual assault by Catholic priests and within Magdalen Laundries, Industrial Schools, and Mother and Baby Homes fractured the bedrock of Catholicism and provoked an island-wide grappling with the past and its seeming sureties.[6] Sexual abuse, institutional as well as familial, has been a pervasive topic in recent Irish writing, and this subject has required writers to adapt their styles and modes of representation as they seek to understand and analyse such shattering maltreatment and cruelty. From the black humour of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and the heightened emotion of *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) to the sardonic realism of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) and the Beckettian dialogue of THEATREclub's *We Don't Know What's Buried Here* (2018), writers, theatre practitioners, and film-makers have drawn from the spectrum of genres and styles to evoke and critique the horrifying cycles of violence and systemic abuse permitted and long concealed by so many institutions across Ireland.

In such ways, contemporary literature has demonstrated its capacity to intervene in history. For example, the 1984 death of 15-year-old Ann Lovett, as she gave birth to her stillborn son in a grotto, was memorably reconsidered several years later by Paula Meehan in 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' (1991). This poem, which asked readers to engage once more with the sufferings of this neglected teenager, was

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embraced by the Irish public as a necessary critique of church and state, and it went on to influence subsequent debates surrounding reproductive choice. Crucially, some of the most important texts to emerge in this period have been not works of literature but governmental reports, most notably the Ryan Report (2009) and the Ferns Report (2005), which documented the systemic abuse of children by priests and within Catholic institutions. Emilie Pine's essay in this collection urges the importance of closely and critically reading these disturbing reports via the methodologies of the digital humanities. By asking more of readers, Meehan's creative work and Pine's scholarly research are political in the best way: they do not operate as propaganda for an ideological position, but rather aim to represent and concretise the complexities of lived experience within systems that are unjust and oppressive to stir an aesthetic and intellectual response that might, however indirectly, buttress political action.

The revelations of shocking systemic failures and their devastating consequences have altered the ideological underpinnings of Irish society and have probably stoked the progressive nature of twenty-first-century Irish politics. Recent years have seen a remarkable rate of social change within a country long considered to be one of the most conservative and traditionally minded in Europe, a transformation perhaps most evident in matters of gender and sexuality. Over several decades, the Republic of Ireland has shown itself to be socially inclusive and forward thinking in many ways, a pattern initially symbolised by the election of Mary Robinson to the Irish Presidency in 1990. Yet in other instances, the country seemed to lag behind more liberalised attitudes towards gender equality and sexual freedom characterising much of the West during the late twentieth century; for example, contraception was only fully legalised in Ireland in 1993 and divorce in 1995. Today, however, Ireland finds itself at the fore of progressive initiatives on such matters, with two recent popular elections signalling the whiplash-inducing rate of cultural change. In the Republic, homosexuality was only decriminalised in 1993; yet in 2015, it became the first country to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote, leading to the establishment of the Marriage Equality Act. A constitutional amendment banning abortion was passed in Ireland in 1983; yet in 2018, women were granted the right to legal abortion with the repeal of the eighth amendment of the Irish Constitution, again by popular vote. Notably, while the North decriminalised homosexuality in 1982 and introduced civil partnerships before Ireland, same-sex marriage remains legally unrecognised there, and legal abortion is currently prohibited. So

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once again, despite the increasing traffic – literal and imaginative – between north and south during these years, important social and cultural differences obtain.

In concert with these significant social transformations, one of the major features of Irish literature since the 1980s has been the increasing prominence of LGBTQ+ and women writers, which has brought an awareness of experiences once sequestered from view and expanded the compass of literary possibility. If these writers were, and sometimes continue to be, marginalised by the academy, reviewers, and the market, they have during the past forty years more openly and regularly obtained widespread critical and commercial success. Panti Bliss (Rory O'Neill), Mary Dorcey, Emma Donoghue, Frank McGuinness, Jamie O'Neill, Keith Ridgway, and Colm Tóibín are among those who have represented LGBTQ+ lives in diverse forms including historical fiction, drag performance, and newspaper editorials. The feminist turn also has had a massive impact on Irish literature and the study of it, leading to the inclusion of more women writers within the canons and institutions of contemporary literature. This attention to women writers has attracted new audiences to the work of those whose careers began in the mid-twentieth century, such as Jennifer Johnston, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Máire Mhac an tSaoi, as well as to that of more recent figures, such as Marina Carr, Sinéad Morrissey, and Anna Burns. The massive impact of feminism, within and beyond the academy, has also engendered a systemic critique of the gendered ideologies of representational practices.[7] These shifts became apparent in the animated controversies that surrounded the marginalisation of female writers from the first three volumes of the landmark *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), which sparked critiques of the stubborn persistence of masculinist logics in the literary sphere, and spurred the publication of a further two volumes a decade on, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2002). The dramatic alteration in attitudes towards gender and sexuality across these decades is one of this volume's major through-lines; it is apparent in nearly every essay that follows and given focused treatment in Clair Wills's coda on Edna O'Brien and Eimear McBride. Though LGBTQ+ and feminist writing, criticism, and activism are obviously characterised by substantial differences, considered together they demonstrate the massive significance of this shift – in terms of gender, sexuality, the politics of representation, and the textures of lived experience – during the contemporary moment in Ireland.

Another of the central historical dynamics that underlies the essays in this volume concerns the thoroughgoing conversion of the Republic's

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economic life at the end of the twentieth century. The sudden affluence brought by the Celtic Tiger inspired a burgeoning sense of national self-confidence, one that was buoyed by Ireland's changing status on the world stage. With the expansion of the European Union and economic policies sympathetic to foreign investment, Ireland moved in a relatively short time from being a relatively insular society and economy to one of the most globally connected countries in the world. Becoming an equal member of the European Economic Community with eight other European states in 1973, including the United Kingdom, had a transformative effect on Irish diplomacy, economic development, and politics, and the economic growth of the 1990s amplified and quickened changes already under way. With its friendly corporate tax rates, Ireland became a preferred destination for overseas investment and a favoured location for multinational corporations, especially in the technology sector, and open trade and the investment of foreign capital brought widespread employment to an historically underemployed population. That population grew to include many new migrants during a period of unprecedented growth of immigration in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a change that has exposed the limitations, and even the racialised contradictions, of the Republic's putatively progressive approach to globalisation.

As the problematic adjustment of the state to a new migrant population attests, this development has been neither even nor consistent. After the giddy stretch of Celtic Tiger exuberance, the Irish real-estate bubble burst in the wake of the twenty-first century's first global recession in 2008, leaving Irish banks massively overexposed, the Irish government scrambling to guarantee bankers' debts, the entire economy teetering, and a period of crushing austerity in the offing. The swift end of the real-estate and home-construction boom, which was driven by the speculative investments of property developers rather than the housing needs of communities, left behind swathes of ghost estates and a sea of mortgage debt. More generally, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened under Ireland's neoliberal regime and the economy's boom-and-bust cycle. The bust also triggered another wave of emigration, as immigrants who arrived at the height of the Celtic Tiger departed the country alongside young Irish people once again forced to look abroad for a livelihood. The end of the economic expansion, and the austerity measures that followed, severely dented the confidence that had characterised the preceding years, as did the 2010 decision to give over the regulation of the Republic's economy for three years to the Troika (the European Central Bank, the European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund) in exchange for a financial rescue package of €85 billion. In recent years, the

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Irish economy has largely recovered from the losses of the early part of the decade. Today, the impending threat of Brexit means that Ireland has become a destination for corporations seeking a base in an English-speaking common law jurisdiction, a transition that suggests newly complicated economic conditions are on the horizon.

Irish writers have played an important role in documenting these conditions by focusing on the economic shocks and excesses of the past several decades. For instance, the real-estate boom of the Celtic Tiger led to a radical recalibration of the familiar Irish literary motif of the land. Donal Ryan has been the most adamant chronicler of the speculative frenzy that swept through rural Ireland during the real-estate boom, but other novels such as Enright's *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011), Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* (2012), and Paul Murray's *The Mark and the Void* (2015), each appearing after the Tiger's end, also depict the arc of the boom and reflect upon what was left in its wake. A number of writers have focused more precisely on environmental and ecological concerns in the wake of unalloyed development, a topic that Adam Hanna addresses in his essay here. In their reconsideration of these years, writers have lodged trenchant critiques about the perils of Ireland's ready adoption of neoliberal policies and practices while attempting to envisage the future's possibilities and precarities. The rural perspective that has long been central to modern Irish writing has been re-mobilised in an age of environmental catastrophe, and it stretches the full range of Irish imaginative writing, from Michael Longley's ecocritical lyrics to Tim Robinson's compendious volumes on Connemara and the Aran Islands, late reflexes of the *dinnseanchas* tradition in a time of global ecological crisis.[8]

A more sustained source of self-confidence during this era has been provided by Ireland's continued authority in international letters. Throughout this period of dramatic transformation, Irish literature and culture have been on a remarkable global run.[9] Most clearly signalled by Seamus Heaney's 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature, the influence and stature of Irish writers have been vividly evident during these decades. Irish writers and artists have amassed significant cultural capital and international fame, have won a bevy of prestigious awards, and occupy prominent perches at the heart of the Anglophone literary and academic worlds. Those with well-established careers in Ireland, such as John Banville, John McGahern, and Eavan Boland, came to the surface of global consciousness in the 1990s and 2000 even as new generations of Irish writers found broad audiences, and outlets including the *Guardian* and *The New Yorker* have helped to single out younger talents like Claire-Louise Bennett and Sally

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Rooney. Specific Irish cultural products – such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and Bill Whelan's *Riverdance* (1995) – have become blockbusters, and a handful of musical acts have found long-lasting global stardom, a dynamic traced by Stephen Watt in his analysis of Irish fame. Barry Monahan's essay provides a thick description of the wider field of Irish film and television in this period, a moment in which dramatists and film-makers have accrued shelves of BAFTA, Oscar, and Tony award statues.[10] Such popularity carries on, as seen in the celebrated film adaptations of Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009) and Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), each appearing in 2015, or in the continued celebrity of U2 or Celtic Woman, musical performers who profitably embrace the capacious 'brand' of Irishness.[11]

The pre-eminence of Irish work written in English in an increasingly global literary field, both its continuing cachet and its relation to Anglophone literatures, brings to the fore another aspect of the complex uncertainties of studying contemporary literature. The books and authors celebrated in their moment are not necessarily going to be those valued a half century hence. And it is inevitable – necessarily so – that some writer, performer, movement, genre, or style ignored or undervalued in the present will be rediscovered in the future: this is nearly a requirement of literary history, one grimly and gamely faced by any critic of contemporary culture. The difficulty of studying the contemporary is perhaps even more pronounced in this period because of the ever-greater commodification of literature: the lucrative awards that favour the few, the push for writers to brand themselves and their work, the need for publishers (many of which belong to huge multinational companies) to show a profit, and the subsequent promotion of those writers most likely to move product. It is sometimes quite difficult to separate the wheat of contemporary writing from the chaff of its marketing.[12]

Yet canny marketing and touristic appeals to Irish stereotypes alone have not ensured the global success of Irish literature. The capacity of Irish writers to represent contemporary conditions in notable works of art is key to their prominence. However, within those conditions' tense contingencies, that capacity has been tested at every turn. Some of the most highly esteemed contemporary Irish writers have come under significant critique for failing to transform their aesthetics – their thematic, generic, and stylistic propensities – so as to address more adequately the actualities of life in the twenty-first century.[13] To be sure, some of those most celebrated have remained most comfortable in relatively traditional forms: the realist novel with its tendency towards rural melancholia,[14] the first-person lyric

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