Introduction: A Weak Theory of Transnationalism

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"World is suddener than we fancy it," Louis MacNeice writes in "Snow," in a striking phrase that captures the "various" nature of what is outside our windows and our walls.[1] Beyond our immediate environs is an "incorrigibly plural" reality that impinges, inspires, and interrupts what appears to be uniquely ours, sealed off from the outside. Things are inescapably different from each other ("There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses"), and yet there are no sharp lines separating one object or space from another, for the glass of the window doesn't quite hold the snow and roses apart, despite the poet's insistence otherwise. Without doing too much of an injustice to MacNeice's delicate imagery in "Snow," the phrase "world is suddener," with all its implications, could stand as an epigraph for this collection of essays dedicated to unearthing and analyzing the myriad ways of reading the world into and out of Irish literature and culture. As each of the chapters that follow will show, it is, as a practical matter, almost impossible to conceive of "Irish" cultural production outside transnational, comparative, global, or planetary frames: the borders of nation and state (already contested on the island itself) no longer serve as sufficient hermeneutic boundaries in a world of ideas and forms that travel widely and rapidly.

A brief survey of recent Irish prose, for example, reveals work written by Irish writers scattered across the globe, or in which Irish characters travel to far-flung settings: an incomplete sample would include Caoilinn Hughes's *Orchid and the Wasp* (2018), Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times* (2020), and Jamie O'Connell's *Diving for Pearls* (2021). At the same time, there is a proliferation of novels by Irish authors who seek to imagine a world far beyond the daily experience of Ireland: Edna O'Brien's *Girl* (2019) or Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* (2020), for example (both the subject of Fiona McCann's chapter in this volume), or earlier work like Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist* (1999).[2] Equally, the literary field has been expanded by recent fiction in which characters from overseas end up on Irish shores, like

Melatu Uche Okorie's short story collection *This Hostel Life* (2018), Donal Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet* Sea (2018), or Adrian Duncan's *The Geometer Lobachevsky* (2022). While novels may be the most visible and most read form, they do not have a monopoly on transnationalism, and the chapters in this volume range across fiction, drama, film, and poetry.[3] In the case of poetry, crossing borders comes perhaps even more easily, in part because of the place of both translation and imitation as viable aesthetic statements. Jahan Ramazani, in his study of what he calls "transnational poetics," writes that "poetry may seem an improbable genre to consider within transnational contexts," given the long history of dismissing it as inevitably local, regional, or even familial.[4] But, as Ramazani proves in his most recent study, *Poetry in a Global Age*, the bricoleur aspects of poetic composition lend to each poem a transhistorical and transnational scale.[5] Sinéad Morrissey's work, with its attention to form and shape drawn from a wide array of sources, is a case in point (addressed by Nathan Suhr-Sytsma in this volume), or Nuala ní Dhomhnaill's global orientation in the Irish language, or Seamus Heaney's long devotion to the work of his eastern European counterparts (discussed by Aidan O'Malley in Chapter 10).

The guiding figure in the field of Irish poetry that is transnational in orientation might be James Clarence Mangan, whose "translations" from Turkish and Persian are now experiencing new life in Turkey, being translated "back" into Turkish.[6] The example of Mangan, however, offers a note of caution on three discrete fronts. First, many of his translations were apocryphal, proving that what may at first glance appear to be cosmopolitan reach can just as easily be read as a mixture of hubris and appropriation. There is no guarantee that an attention to transnational scales results in a deep imaginative engagement with a life that is distant from and not derived from our own. Second, while the examples I have offered so far have almost entirely been written very recently, Mangan's work reminds us that our contemporary moment has no monopoly on transnational thinking – indeed, we can often find far more prolific border crossings before borders themselves became hardened by modern nationalisms. Third, given that many of Mangan's translations from Irish were just as apocryphal as those from "Chippewawian," there is no stable, ontological definition of transnational literature and culture – it does not form an identifiable genre or block, distinct from national or regional literature and culture. Rather, transnationalism is a reading practice, an orientation of the critic toward comparative, transnational, global, and planetary scales in the setting, composition, publication, and reception of Irish literature.

That orientation may sound easy, if not altogether obvious, but another important note of caution in relation to transnational orientations in the study of Irish literature and culture can be found in Kate O'Brien's *Land of Spices* (1941), set in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century. The novel thematizes the tension between Catholic cosmopolitanism, represented by Belgian nuns, and a driving nationalism represented by the bishop of the diocese in which the nuns' school is located. O'Brien's famously coruscating vision arrests any sense of a self-congratulatory transnationalism. The Reverend Mother at the head of the convent is English, and her experiences among the Irish lead eventually to a withering assessment: "The Irish liked themselves and throve on their own psychological chaos . . . They were an ancient, martyred race, and of great importance to themselves." Though she feels that her view is "held in gentleness and with much admiration," it would be useless to try to mitigate the effect of the criticism by reference to similar idiosyncrasies in "England, Scotland, France or Greece," for "about Ireland there was no appeal to the comparative method; no detachment was regarded as just."[7] The Reverend Mother's damning observation rings true even in much of contemporary critical work on Ireland, in which the nation as exceptional space still looms large.

That nation, as it is now obligatory to point out, has changed dramatically since O'Brien wrote *Land of Spices*. Not only has the power of the church collapsed, but the demographic makeup of the island has been transformed. With 20 percent of the population of the Republic of Ireland having been born overseas, and the continued reality of a wide diasporic network of Irishness, the grounds of Irish culture have shifted rapidly and likely irreversibly in the early years of the twenty-first century. In the north of Ireland the ratio of those born on the island to those born elsewhere is lower, but questions of citizenship and belonging are just as sharply felt across the entire population in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit: to be Irish on the island of Ireland is also to be transnational. These demographic changes have not come about without conflict, and Ireland north and south struggles with the transition to a pluralist society, especially in terms of the integration of migrants from outside Europe into cultural, political, and economic life. Ireland's experience with rapidly increasing inward migration lays bare the racial underlay of Irish identity, and makes manifest on the island a racial positioning (and profiting) that was always visible when white Irish traveled overseas. The challenges are as much imaginative as they are political: how can Ireland build a future that is properly multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual, and in which it is not the job of a native-born population to "welcome" those born overseas,

rather to imagine them as always having an equal claim to live on the island of Ireland? Transnationalism is now an everyday feature of the daily lives of all those living on the island, as well as for those overseas with an affinity for the island. *Transnationalism in Irish Literature and Culture* seeks to set out a series of paradigmatic studies that engage in a robust fashion with the realities of a world in which nation does not any more define the contours of everyday life, if it ever did. As Tanya Agathocleous, writing of the field of Victorian Studies, suggests, "the main question for many critics is not whether to depart from the national paradigm but how best to do so."[8] The remainder of this introduction will consider some ways to approach that very question.

One way to "depart from the national paradigm" would be to start with the fact of the rapid expansion in the movement of goods and services across the world that we call "globalization," along with the migrations of people and transformations of culture that go along with it. The future study of Irish literature and culture will necessarily involve the interrogation of the continued relevance of something called "Ireland" in the face of such global and planetary challenges as financialization and economic crisis, widespread and increasing unsettlement of millions of people within and beyond the borders of their places of origin, and climate collapse. And the effect of this on the literary field is to invert, or at least unsettle, Fredric Jameson's formulation on imperialism at the turn of the last century. No longer is it precisely the case that "a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is ... located elsewhere ... in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world – very different from that of the imperial power – remains unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power."[9] The wager that Jameson made that modernist aesthetics emerged in the face of the resultant loss of meaning in the imperial metropole (and in different ways in Ireland) has been an influential one, but its usefulness as a theory of literary production in today's world is less clear. According to Joe Cleary, "globalization has produced a situation in which developments in the different continents increasingly impress themselves on the everyday lives of peoples in other continents," meaning that the distance that was so key to Jameson's argument has largely been eradicated, and the structure of the globalized economy is visible to all.[10]

The signal moment when globalization impinged upon the cultural scene in Ireland, if we are to believe recent work by a cluster of scholars, was the apex of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent financial crisis that began in 2008. A highly exposed and vulnerable (hyped up at the time as

"dynamic" and "open") national economy in the Republic collapsed, and economic sovereignty was ceded to the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank. As this crisis unfolded, new cultural forms emerged. Matt Eatough diagnoses this argument in his chapter for this volume, writing that "many observers have traced the beginnings of [a renaissance in Irish literature] to the financial crisis of 2008, which is credited with shattering the sense of complacency that had permeated Irish society during the years of the Celtic Tiger." At the same time as it transformed the economy north and south (though in different ways), the financial crisis and the Great Recession that followed it exposed the Republic of Ireland's trading of sovereignty for financial success during the Celtic Tiger years, revealing the futility of holding on to any sense of national integrity (at least in economic terms). In their introduction to a recent issue of *Radical History Review* on Irish and world histories, Peter Hession and Aidan Beatty highlight the ironies of pursuing a dual agenda of cultural nation-building and economic globalization: "as the republic set out to celebrate its road to independence in 2012, it found itself temporarily stripped of its sovereignty." This irony marks a need, they argue, to "globalize Irish history."[11] Moving beyond disciplinary boundaries, Renée Fox, Mike Cronin, and Brian Ó Conchubhair, in much harsher terms, also point to the financial crisis as the starting point of a reconsideration of the "privileged place" of the idea of nation in the interdisciplinary field of Irish studies. The field has been nation-struck, they argue, its objects and methods "rooted in sectarian divisions, fantasies of cultural and racial homogeneity, and imagined insularities that belie the realities of Ireland in the contemporary moment."[12]

In each of these recent examples, the financial crisis is a powerful origin story for recent global or international turns in the study of Ireland. The crisis appears as an opportunity as well as a warning sign, forcing a transnational, comparative, or global turn in the study of contemporary Ireland. But there is something of a circular logic to this argument, since the only way to respond to crises of globalization seems to be more globalization. There is also an inherent assumption that any and every recent attention to the outer reaches of Irish culture is inevitably authorized or necessitated by globalization. To assume so is to tie all transnational critical work to one (admittedly important) shade of thinking beyond borders, and to turn a fallacy (that globalization is the only route to supranational thinking or action) into reality. This has been quite effectively countered by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in particular in her work of imagining alternative configurations of the world that point to an

as yet emergent future.[13] "Planetarity," in Spivak's formulation, is a world-spanning scale at which to organize political action that is explicitly not tied to globalization. Contemporary globalization does not have a monopoly on global-scale world-making; one need only think of Marxist internationalism, for example, as an at-times dominant discourse in the twentieth century. The promise of socialist internationalism was cut short in the 1920s by the adoption in the Soviet Union of a doctrine of socialism in one country, but its traces remain in the language of solidarity that underlies a great deal of collective political (and climate) action oriented toward overturning a global political order. To hitch any transnational turn in the study of literature and culture to globalization is to overlook alternative modes of transnational thinking.

It is also the case that global thinking is not an achieved thing, economically or politically. The shock of Brexit, combined with racist nationalist movements throughout the European Union, in the United States, and elsewhere, reminds us that "thinking and feeling beyond the nation" (to use a redolent phrase from Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins) remains an elusive goal from the standpoint of both progressive solidarity and global capital.[14] The nation and its fantasies endure despite globalization, and "the heart's grown brutal from the fare."[15]

The implication of the argument that the crash of 2008 precipitated greater attention to scales and sites and stories beyond the nation is that this was something of a new direction in both cultural production and criticism. But the many chapters of this book that focus on the nineteenth and the early twentieth century lay out a series of ways to read transnationalism before the current crisis. In many cases this work is in implicit or explicit dialogue with a critical approach that has had an outsized impact on the Irish critical field in the past four decades – postcolonial studies. Beginning a decade or so before the era of the Celtic Tiger, with the groundbreaking work of Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, Emer Nolan, Luke Gibbons, Enda Duffy, David Lloyd, Marjorie Howes, and many more, postcolonial studies has been a guiding light for Irish literary studies in its engagement with the world.[16] It was, and arguably still is, the most transformative critical framework for engagement with transnational thinking in the field of Irish literary and cultural studies. Its defining and foundational feature was a comparison of Ireland to other sites of (primarily British) empire, and an attention to the cultural forms that emerge in those sites and from those comparisons.[17] Joe Cleary has written recently that, for its advocates, postcolonial studies offered "an opportunity to open up new connections

to peoples and cultures beyond the narrow Anglo-American pale to which so much of contemporary Irish cultural production and scholarship . . . confined itself."[18]

To its advocates, including me, postcolonial studies promised an *engagé* articulation of a relationship between Ireland and the world, and between nation and the transnational. It rapidly became the default theoretical position for thinking about Irish literature and culture in transnational terms, offering a ready-made set of comparators for Irish culture throughout the colonial world. At the same time, Irish postcolonial studies was often marked by a paradoxical exceptionalism, given its turn to the centrality of the nation and the exemplarity of the Irish experience. It borrowed paradigms from elsewhere that in the end often served to bolster the special status of Ireland, a move seen in Kiberd's influential *Inventing Ireland*, for example, or in the ways that a phrase by Luke Gibbons that was in its time revelatory (and controversial) was taken up by other critics: "Ireland is a first-world country, but with a third-world memory."[19] In this early work, the question of Ireland's place in the global economy of racial violence was frequently overlooked in favor of a forced equivalence with other sites of colonization (though there were notable exceptions, especially in the work of David Lloyd).

The postcolonial frame remains strong in the study of Irish literature and culture, but the extent to which it points any more to a future, critical positioning of Ireland and the world is up for debate. On the one hand, as Fox, Cronin, and Ó Conchubhair argue, the rapid accumulation of wealth by Irish people and the state (at least south of the border) requires that the "fairly parochial" field of Irish studies, birthed in large part by postcolonial studies, admit that "an Ireland at the forefront of globalized capital would clearly require a new set of critical frameworks."[20] On the other hand, the wider field of postcolonial studies has undergone rapid and profound changes, fueled by critiques from within and without that its radicalism was in a constant state of dilution and collapse.[21] With renewed attention to migration, to critical solidarities across the Global South, and to indigenous knowledges (one of the significant blindspots of an older postcolonial studies), the critical conversation has moved in ways that could, but need not, sideline Ireland as a site of postcolonial analysis. What can the future legacy of the postcolonial in Irish literary and cultural studies be? How can the field's disruptive scales be recaptured and also recalibrated? These questions do not in any way serve to dismiss the postcolonial intervention in Irish studies. The effect is the opposite, rather: to acknowledge the significance of the postcolonial turn in Irish literary and cultural

studies and yet also to register the need to revisit that moment and to augment it, widening the scope of methodological interventions into the study of the integration of Irish and world literatures and cultures.

Cleary sees, post the George Floyd murder, a renewed public life for postcolonial studies in Ireland, as attention is turned again or anew to colonial legacies in everyday life. There is no guarantee that this moment will result in outward-looking, comparative thinking: we need but look at the continued cratering in the US academy of transnational work in favor of US-centric ethnic studies. And yet, "if such work [postcolonial studies] is to have any cumulative purpose, then it must have political and activist dimensions committed to the reimagining and remaking of a contemporary, crisis-afflicted world that imperial power politics and colonial capitalism have done so much to shape."[22] We see the contours of a new postcolonialism emerge in the pages of this volume, in critical and thoughtful chapters by McCann, Kumar, Malouf, and others.

Much (but certainly not all) of the most influential postcolonial work in Irish literary and cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s was focused on what is now often called Irish modernism. Though the male trio of Joyce, Yeats, and (to a much lesser extent) Beckett were the early objects of this work, they are now a subsection of a vastly expanded and energized field. But Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett continue to play an outsized role in how critics think about the mobility of Irish literature (even if sometimes *incognito* as British or international modernists). They are among the canonized few whose work was taken in the middle decades of the twentieth century to speak with authority to and about the world. As a precondition to postcolonial scholarship, and before the boom and bust of the globalization of the Irish economy, the varied routes by which Irish modernism has traveled transnationally offer a complicated version of the story of the imbrication of Irish literature and culture and the world.

It was not, of course, by accident that Yeats's poetry traveled far and wide: there are in-built global scales in his work, as scholars have recently argued. For Jahan Ramazani, Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" is just one example of a "local poem in a global age." Writing of what he identifies as the expansive geography of the poem, from Walden Pond to Fleet Street in London, he argues that "it can be difficult to keep a poem fastened exclusively to one place; even as it evokes a single site, it darts in multiple directions."[23] Rather than preserving the local in amber, the poem "embodies and illuminates the accelerated intermelding of the local and global; a poetic locus often makes legible the multiplicities enfolded within

a singular geographic locus."[24] The portmanteau invention "intermelding" reveals the uncertainty of Ramazani's argument, his formulation signaling something just outside his reach – a comprehensive theory of the local, the global, and their interactions. Ramazani's argument is a delicately balanced affair, alive at all times to the impossibility of rendering precisely, even if we were to want to do that, the means by which literature navigates the distance between near and far, between the specific and the general. Ronan McDonald takes a somewhat different tack in reading Yeats's work, following the routes by which "The Second Coming" has made its way into the world, not only in high literature, but in everyday politics. The poem is built, McDonald suggests, to be portable, arrogating cultural power to itself. Its own vortices and widening gyres attract and subsume a whole series of unrelated cultural crises, "pulling unlike things together around the centrality of its cultural authority."[25] Similarly, Barry Shiels identifies an "international mobility of reference" in Yeats's work.[26] Between Ramazani, McDonald, and Shiels, we learn of a body of work that is designed to travel and to shape itself to accommodate "unlike things." Against this idea of a smoothly (though not by any means effortlessly) portable Yeats, Justin Quinn writes of Yeats's struggle with both the word "world" and the disintegrating planet it connotes, painting him not as a founding figure of world literature so much as the bard of its continuing impossibility.[27]

Whichever way we read the legacy of Yeats's global popularity, we know that the adventures of his work are made possible not only by its inherent features, but also at least in part by institutional structures of publishing, canonization, and education. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's excellent study of Irish poetry in Nigerian universities – via Leeds – is a model of this kind of work, and influential new studies of the institutionalization of modernism in the latter half of the twentieth century have helped us to understand the political and economic forces behind modernism's global growth.[28] In the field of Irish studies, Peter Kuch has uncovered an etiology of the field's globalized present that has been driven by modernist canonicity.[29] The history of the growth of Irish studies as a field (and Irish literary and cultural studies more specifically), Kuch argues, was driven by a generation of early scholars of Joyce and Yeats who established Irish studies programs across the Anglophone academy. There is no spread of the institutional centers of Irish studies (and literature and culture in particular) without the prior work of valorization of a white and male canon. Kuch's contribution to this volume, a chapter on a Bundjalung version of *Waiting for Godot*, is a case study in the successes and failures of Irish modernism's travel,

translation, and adaptation. It is, in a way, a corrective to the institutional history of the field.

Perhaps the most successful part in the story of the institutionalization of Irish modernism belongs to James Joyce, though his position as an Irish writer was not always secure. As Seamus Deane put it rather archly, "James Joyce was invented by Americans. He was part of their foreign policy, of the drive to make the USA a cultural presence and to recruit 'high' culture to its mission of world domination."[30] After a recent year of centenary celebrations of *Ulysses*, though, Joyce is very firmly now also a central pillar of the Global Ireland brand of the Irish state.[31] At the same time, this is the Joyce whose work inspired Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), a forceful voice in the struggle for emancipation in twentieth-century India. But even the Joyce who inspired Anand fits into Deane's skeptical narrative, as a heroic vector of the diffusion of liberal ideals of freedom and self-determination.

Joyce provides a particularly rich case study, appearing to both undergird and undermine structures of power as his work is read, translated, adapted, and reconfigured worldwide. The Joyce industry is built on a shaky foundation that critiques in advance the very idea of canonization on which such an industry is built. New work by Malcolm Sen on Joyce and race is exemplary of this slipperiness of the object of study, and its capacity to build and destroy all at once. Sen starts his reading of Joyce with the 2020 protests over the murder of George Floyd, and engages in a thoroughgoing accounting of Joyce's shortcomings on racial politics. At the same time, Joyce appears to have divined an answer to 2020's racial violence a hundred years in advance, with Sen concluding that "Joyce will have much to say on the changing nature of the *normal*, and what readers *normalize* in their readings of his texts, in the twenty-first century."[32] The argument is careful and convincing, but it also highlights something of the double bind of the Joyce scholar (which I also find myself falling victim to): both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are designed to foresee and forestall a future in which they are no longer relevant, and to shore arguments against Joyce's own demise as a critical force. In this design is to be found a powerful political and aesthetic tool. In this volume, for example, Peter D. McDonald reflects on the *Wake*'s opening up of the possibility of disaggregating language and culture, and on McDonald's own encounter with these ideas in an apartheid South African landscape overwrought with monuments to language *as culture.* In another of the three chapters on Joyce in this book, Udaya Kumar explores "the farthest reaches of Joyce's institution