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Some means of situating magical realism in contemporary Irish writing

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The publication of Eimear McBride's novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) offers a promising starting point in identifying when it is that women's writing achieved centrality in Irish literary criticism. In 2015, the #wakingthefeminists campaign protested the lack of women playwrights rostered on the Abbey Theatre's centenary programme, and in the same year the then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny appointed Anne Enright as the Laureate for Irish Fiction. At a number of the events which Enright presented in this capacity, Sinéad Gleeson's promotion of forgotten and emerging women's writing was cited as crucial to a new, praxis-oriented understanding of women's literature, both for Enright herself as well as the broader Irish literary ecosystem. The campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Irish constitution would have made clear to anyone working in the publishing industry that there was a significant cohort of women who felt strongly enough about their exclusion from certain aspects of public life, including cultural expression, that they were motivated to march, protest or canvass. In all this, we should also consider the ongoing efforts of journals such as *Stinging Fly*, *Banshee* and *gorse* to afford parity to women's writing. Whether or not the emergence of a significant number of serious and formally challenging novels and short story collections by women writers around this time can be directly attributed to these broader social dynamics is unclear; but the deferral of any question of direct causality will be familiar to any scholar of literary history.

Beginning with McBride necessitates a consideration of the role of modernism in all of this. In his review of Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond* (2015), Brian Dillon defined what was currently underway in Irish writing in these terms (Dillon, 2016), but if Dillon was to review Bennett today I am not so sure that he would reach for this definition. I have written elsewhere about how the identification of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett as McBride's primary influences risks reproducing a rote critical narrative more attributable to her being born in Ireland and being sympathetic to a particular type of avant-gardism (Beausang, 2019) even though, as Nina White has noted, McBride's work has as much to do with an experimental tradition which arises from within British drama (White, 2018).

Having said that, that there are of course other women writers, such as Bennett, Sara Baume, Niamh Campbell and Joanna Walsh whose works are fragmented, reflexive and referential in a manner which clearly owes something to a modernist orientation, suggesting that we should not be so quick to dismiss modernism as altogether irrelevant to contemporary Irish writing. As with McBride however, even if the works of these authors are influenced to a significant extent by a particular type of experimental writing which arose in the early twentieth century, it could not be said that this is the *only* thing that is at work in their writing and the notion of a contemporary modernism begins to run out of road once we begin to use it as a definitive means of grouping all these writers together.

I won't be able to provide a clear definition of one of the most overdetermined concepts in the social sciences. However, I will contend that the most robust definitions are those which do not proceed on the basis of a shared orientation or sensibility, tending towards an eclecticism against which much has been written (Altieri, 2012, 767-78; Brzezinski, 2011, 113-4), but rather historical context. Perry Anderson attributes the development of literary modernism to the prominence of revolutionary politics expressed in a global labour movement, the abiding of the European *ancien régimes* within industrial modernity, and the transformations wrought by rapidly developing

communications technology (Anderson, 1984, 104). These three factors are emphasised in Marxian critics' attempt to account for the paradigmatic literary movement; that modernism's heyday corresponds to the charnel-house that was the early to mid-twentieth century in western Europe, and the passing of global hegemony from Britain to the United States, is too good a co-occurrence to pass up – and this is despite the fact that most modernist writers were deeply ambivalent in their personal feelings towards the working class and decolonisation. It is one of the major weaknesses of western Marxism as a literary-critical school of thought to assume the synonymy of political and aesthetic progress, as Sinéad Kennedy notes (Kennedy, 2007, 127).

On whatever terms we might choose to criticise Anderson, his model at least incorporates both prior and future accounts. Any of the thousands of books written on the genesis of literary modernism will take some facet of one or more of these three as the decisive factor. In order to understand the formal logics at work in contemporary Irish women's writing, we should seek to identify the same motive forces. Here, I attempt this identification, specifically with regard to a particular strain of magical realism in Sue Rainsford's *Follow me to Ground* (2018), Nicole Flattery's *Show Them a Good Time* (2019) and Cathy Sweeney's *Modern Times* (2020). I do not seek to account for these works from the point of view of their content or through close readings. Rather, I attempt to command a synoptic viewpoint on the basis of these texts' shared features in order to pinpoint what lies behind the revival of this particular genre in an Irish context, beyond the fact that it seems to form part of an international trend in contemporary literature (we might think here of Carmen Maria Machado, Patricia Lockwood, Ottessa Moshfegh and many, many others.)

Rainsford is in certain respects the odd one out in this instance. *Follow me to Ground* is a novel, while *Modern Times* and *Show Them a Good Time* are short story collections. This has the consequence that the sense of disjointure in Flattery and Sweeney's works is more foregrounded, for the obvious reason that these collections contain a larger number of discrete narratives. Despite this, continuities remain; across all three works, the narrators cannot be said to manifest clearly demarcated emotional states or motivations. When a social context does emerge, it remains blurry and is either relatively lacking in any regional or temporal identifiers or emphasises contradictory ones. In Sweeney's 'The Palace', to provide one example, we see a mass media complex co-exist with a seemingly autocratic or monarchical system of government. Sweeney's stories are also geographically wide-ranging; nested folktales and satirical treatments of the patriarchal sadism of the upper middle-class English family, as in 'The Celebration', seem to channel the type of thought experiments or closed systems one might encounter in the work of Jorge Luis Borges.

The impact of Flattery's stories are contained in their greater degree of orientation towards the social; the extent of the attention afforded to work, especially menial work, is significant and suggests, that the root of these stories' ironic or detached tone can be attributed to the more dystopian elements of surveillance capitalism. We see a concrete instance of this in a story which grants the collection its title, in which intimacy of co-workers, old friends and family are mediated more or less exclusively by work. Such social pressures are on occasion personified in the sadistic management who is a model of corporate *politesse*: 'She had lofty, liberal ideas but she was as base as anyone I have ever encountered. She disguised it as fun and games—playtime—but it was tyranny'. Once again we see something of a difference in Rainsford; *Follow Me To Ground* seems to be located in an early modern context but contemporary Hiberno-English colloquialisms or syntax are subtly present in much of the dialogue, both reported and actual: 'You probably don't remember me but I'm Such-and-Such's daughter and we'd say Oh yes we do of course'. As distinct from Sweeney's closed systems or Flattery's critique of contemporary capitalism, Rainsford seems to be dialing into a more long-term account of alterity and identity, particularly from the point of view of the body. In noting that these interests correspond to those of many contemporary critical theorists, we might look to Mark McGurl's account of the contemporary literary landscape in *The Programme Era* (2009). Despite its focus on American literature, McGurl's scholarship is germane in an Irish context in its insight on

how universities now serve as primary focal points for the production and reproduction of literary value and the training and hiring of readers and writers.

More often than not, novels written by Irish authors within the genre of literary fiction (however one feels about the phrase or its conceptual weight) will, if they do not have some qualification in creative writing, have a degree in English literature, or another social science. This has the consequence that all of them will have expended a period of some three to four years, writing assignments which required them to demonstrate some familiarity with the social theories of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler or Theodor Adorno, to take three arbitrary examples. To take an overall perspective, social theory writ large aims to demonstrate the constructed nature of putative 'givens', the unveiling of appearances in an attempt to penetrate into their true nature or functionality. Given that social theory depends for its operation on processes of defamiliarisation, it may be said that theory is itself a modernist phenomenon, and the fact that it has become one of the foremost means through which the study of literature is conducted has the consequence that modernist works have assumed a greater degree of critical prestige. Indeed, one of Raymond Williams' last critical works emphasised how literary criticism had internalised many of modernism's precepts (Williams, 2007, 3-7). Within this rubric, it would be difficult for realism to be regarded as anything other than socially conformist, naively empirical or simplistically mimetic, particularly when received histories of the nineteenth century as 'the Victorian era' are introduced. This takes on another dimension when the reading of literature is further mediated through forms of criticism which are more overtly activist in nature, such as feminism, post-colonialism, queer or critical race theory. The influence of theory writ large on literature does not represent a novel phenomenon in any sense; T.S. Eliot was influenced by Matthew Arnold and Marcel Proust by the theories of Henri Bergson, but there is a qualitative distinction at work in the contemporary moment where possessing a postgraduate qualification is almost a necessity in pulling down even entry-level positions, which has universities to consolidated their position as the primary means through which writers are ideologically and aesthetically developed.

Accounting for the prominence of universities in fulfilling these functions necessitates a brief diversion on the broader political and economic logic of third-level education in Ireland. Indicative literature produced by the Irish government and research-oriented consortia by both within the Irish state and the European Union foregrounds the imperatives of the post-industrial 'knowledge economy', wherein western states intend to remain competitive internationally by incentivising universities to prioritise research which aligns with the interests of private enterprise, such as biotechnology, information technology and financial services. As Kieran Allen has outlined, the objectives of industry and universities are increasingly difficult to differentiate from one another in an age of globalised capital (Allen, 2007, 135-8). Though such policy literature is overwhelmingly directed towards universities' STEM outputs — the more straightforwardly commercialisable research sectors — it is by no means clear that literary studies can be viewed apart from these broader logics. Such things are more difficult to chart empirically. However, anyone who has undergone a period of doctoral study will have noticed the difference between universities in their undergraduate days and how omnipresent both commercialisation and the interpolation of students as consumers have since become; such trends have been extensively documented by Wendy Brown and Stefan Collini (Brown, 2015, 23; Collini, 2018, 1-2). In this literature, the discipline-specific department is consistently invoked as a fetter on the development of a competitive research environment due to its tendency to inhibit the movement of knowledge across disciplinary boundaries – hence, discipline-specific departments are seen as inadequate to tackling problems held to be of global significance such as climate change or 'migrant crises' (Wernli and Darbellay, 2016, 5-7; Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2015, 30-44). This is due to their 'inwardly directed social dynamics' and the fact that the frameworks through which departments assess validity originate from within their own disciplines rather than from without (Mazzucato, 2018, 12-5; Wernli and Darbellay, 2016, 17). It is partially as a result of these trends that we see universities turn towards more diversified portfolios of service

provision in their humanities faculties. Creative writing, writers-in-residence or creative writing scholarships offer the most visible symptoms of the consequences within literary studies.

As far as individual writers are concerned, there is a certain amount of value to be garnered amidst these institutional changes. When the average rent in any of Ireland's major cities costs roughly half the median income, such temporary employment arrangements, as well as precious surplus teaching or marking hours, are crucial for writers seeking to carve out a career. By this means, writers are further integrated into the university system, inadequate though these rates of remuneration often are. It is therefore no surprise that a growing number of Irish writers have entered into that other institution of Irish literary history, writing from exile in European cities where rent controls, though insufficient, at least exist.

The apparent loss of regional designation in Irish magical realism, and perhaps even in Irish literature more generally, may be construed as a commentary on this milieu. As the nation-state loses its status as a primary unit of political or economic sovereignty, local colour in literary expression goes with it. The pessimism of this literature could also be taken to signify the awareness on the part of a generation who are at least intellectually aware of how novel forms of frictionlessness in the global economy are an illusion and in fact necessitate others picking up the slack.

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[About the author here]