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Ireland’s Difficulty, the Novelist’s Opportunity?

Sean Ryder

Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce
Emer Nolan
Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007
xxiv + 240 pages. ISBN 0-815-63175-8

Thomas Moore saw bright prospects for the Irish novel in the nineteenth century: ‘Ireland bids fair to be the great mart of fiction,’ he wrote in the Edinburgh Review in 1826. Unfortunately for Moore, what was good for novelists was not necessarily good for poets; as he saw it, the growth of fiction was accompanied by the desertion of ‘the fair springs of Poesy’ across Europe, and the impossibility of creating poetry at all in Ireland in its present condition. ‘The same causes,’ he complains, ‘that have embittered and degraded the history of Ireland, so as to render it incapable of furnishing any safe or worthy theme for the poet, have brought the character of its
people, both moral and social, to a state which is eminently favourable to the more humble aspirations of the novelist.¹

This formulation of Ireland’s difficulty as the novelist’s opportunity is an interesting reversal of the famous renunciation of fiction by Maria Edgeworth, who complained that party and sectarian division made it impossible to produce fiction in Ireland in the 1820s. Moore too acknowledged the ‘great concert of discord’ produced by Ireland’s colonial condition, but, unlike

Edgeworth, believed that the results — the 'inverted and unnatural' institutions, the gentry's 'vulgar arrogance', the people's historically induced 'low, circumventing cunning' — were all valuable grist to the mill of fiction (as opposed to poetry), and that in combination with the 'lively temperament of the whole nation' there is 'plenty of small game for the satirist and observer of character'. If the novelist's role is to be a 'sketcher of human nature', then no country could provide 'more original subjects for his pencil, more mixtures of lights and shadows, or more of that sort of picturesqueness, towards which (in morals as well as painting), utility and order are the last ingredients requisite'. And politics, far from being a distraction to a fictional narrative, Moore assumes to be essential to the understanding of those manners and morals. For him, the recent fiction of John and Michael Banim and other Irish authors did not transcend politics but made a necessary vehicle for them: 'It is pleasant after ages of bad romance in politics, to find thus, at last, good politics in romance.'

Set alongside the mostly negative assessments of the early nineteenth-century Irish novel by previous generations of critics, one might think Moore's comments to be strangely utopian, misguided, or facile. At worst, the usual story goes, the nineteenth-century Irish novel is just a clumsy and practically unreadable attempt to imitate the great realist novel that flourished in England and continental Europe. At best, it is a heroic failure that simply found it impossible to represent the turbulent and recalcitrant conditions produced by a colonial history within the formal conventions of the classic realist text, what Terry Eagleton calls the 'contention ... between English convention and Irish experience'. This 'failure' may even have its own virtue — in so far as it confirms the value of an insurgency that disrupts English literary forms as well as colonial political and economic structures. It is commonplace to argue that these novels' plots are incoherent or circular, constantly interrupted by digression or prolixity. The characterizations are shallow and typological rather than individualized and organic. The writing is uneven in register and voice, the moral structure marred by political concerns. The writing may even be 'duplicitous', in the sense of calling for the rejection of native barbaric violence and superstition while in fact generating reader sympathy for those very energies of the unreformed past — like Milton, being of the devil's party without knowing it.

Interestingly, Moore's own benchmark for fiction did not correspond to that of the realist novel. Instead of the features of bourgeois realism — for instance, the narrative of individual progress, social improvability, harmony between the individual and society, reader identification with character, and a reduction of politics to a career option or plot device — Moore imagines the novel to be a mixture of social satire, incidental variety, character 'observation' (rather than identification), all crafted into a form that has a utilitarian dimension. He assumes that political conflict and historical intrusion are part of the very fabric of the life to be represented, and therefore inescapably part of the fiction. In such writing there may be little distinction between foreground and background, characters may take on allegorical meaning, and human behaviour may be deeply shaped by collective activity and communal structures.

Moore's comments point to the fact that the realist novel was not the only model available to or valued by Irish novelists in the nineteenth century, and that using it as a benchmark may be severely to distort the purpose and achievement of much nineteenth-century fiction. Recent critical commentary has reflected similar thinking by paying much more attention to the extensive presence of non-realist genres of sensation fiction, gothic, melodrama, historical romance, didactic 'improvement' fiction and the picaresque in Irish writing — seeing in these forms alternative Irish traditions that may in fact have been more successful and robust, even
if they cannot be assimilated to a Leavisite canon based on classic realist principles.4
Emer Nolan’s stimulating new book returns us to the issue of Irish realism— but not to simply rehearse the existing arguments about its limitations in an Irish context.

Instead, Nolan performs the more difficult task of finding ways in which the attempts at realism by certain Irish Catholic authors may in fact have had some emancipatory aspects. She pays due respect to the fact that these authors themselves took the realist

4 See Jacqueline Belanger, ed., The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century (Dublin, 2005) for a good sample of recent trends; see also J. H. Murphy, Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland, 1873–1922 (London, 1997).
novel as a benchmark, and were conscious of the problems and difficulties they faced. She reads her selected authors — especially Moore, Gerald Griffin, the Banim brothers, Charles Kickham, Canon Sheehan and Gerald O’Donovan — as engaged in more or less deliberate attempts to develop a prose form with a dual purpose; on the one hand, capable of imagining a modernizing Irish society in the process of political, religious and economic ‘emancipation’, while on the other hand, retaining sight of the valuable elements of pre-modern social and cultural formations that persist in Irish rural culture. Their project is a kind of literary equivalent of O’Connellism, in which the native bourgeoisie seek to establish modern forms of civil society (and thus be emancipated from the past), yet paradoxically remain culturally distinct from a ‘modern’ imperial culture (in order to be emancipated from political and cultural oppression). Thus the very cultural phenomena (the rituals, traditions, social structures, religion) that must be valorized as signs of post-colonial national distinction are also those that potentially undermine the building of a modern nation.

There is obviously a powerful tension between these demands, with consequences for literary form that are normally read as aesthetic failure by critics. But by adopting a wider frame as Nolan does, the picture becomes a much more interesting reflection on the intersections of representational form, political strategy, nation-building and modernization.

Thomas Moore is Nolan’s starting point. But she is less interested in Moore’s theories of fiction, or indeed his one real novel (a strange philosophical-theological-antiquarian-Orientalist romance set in early Christian Egypt, entitled The Epicurean), than she is in his hybrid work Memoirs of Captain Rock (1824). Much of Captain Rock was certainly not intended to be understood as ‘fiction’. The bulk of the text is the Captain’s account of several hundred years of Irish history — less a novel than an urgent attempt to set straight the historical record of Anglo-Irish relations. But in the framing devices Moore uses to chronicle this historiography, Nolan detects certain representational strategies that bear strongly on the development of Irish fiction right through the century. By ‘narrating a history of collective consciousness’, Moore gives voice and agency to the rural, Catholic, communal, ‘Whiteboy’ identity without demonizing, sentimentalizing, individualizing or pathologizing it. The result is more dialogic than is usual in nineteenth-century Irish fiction, since Rock’s Irish voice addresses his English interlocutor unapologetically, with confidence, and with an entirely coherent ‘subaltern’ narrative of Irish history.

One effect of this technique, and one where Nolan sees particular originality in Moore, is to validate the communal, the carnivalesque, the customary, and even the rebellious without relegating them to modernity’s category of the primitive, as is common in other nineteenth-century writers, even those sympathetic to the national or Catholic cause. Each of the authors Nolan surveys, however, are shown to have difficulty achieving this — each novel is a struggle to negotiate between the desire for emancipatory modernization and the anxiety about its consequences for Irish culture.

The Banim brothers and Griffin are caught in a bind whereby their determination to assert the essential civility of the Irish (in order that they might be seen to qualify for the responsibilities of modernity) is disturbed by the vitality and attraction of the less civil, even criminal characters that populate the Ireland they represent. Griffin’s exemplary modern Catholic hero in The Collegians is so shallow when set beside the more vital if chaotic and dark ‘villain’ of the novel that he seems to be merely ‘lip-synching the music of modernity’, as if Griffin himself cannot write a script for him to believe in. Like Kickham (whom Nolan reminds us, was probably the bestselling Irish author until the 1950s at least), they cannot bring themselves to abandon the energy of the
unassimilated folk, while simultaneously believing that modernization in the form of discipline and progress held the key to national development. The dilemma is captured by Nolan’s quip that ‘Kickham hoped that Irish peasants could be hard-working and provident, and still dance at the crossroads’. This situation, however, is not simply a paralysing contradiction. Kickham’s Knocknagow provided a powerful vision of modern pastoral for a post-Famine survivor class of aspirants to Irish nationhood and proprietorship, in terms that supported a usable, if problematic, Irish version of modernity.

The Catholic novelists of the later part of the century had somewhat different conditions to deal with, following Catholicism’s resurgence and assertion of institutional power, and the emergence of peasant proprietorship. Some, like Sheehan and O’Donovan, created their own versions of the tension between modernization and older cultural forms, expressing through realistic modes their anxieties about the Church’s participation in a crude modernization that had no respect for collectivity and tradition. Emily Lawless in Grania is shown to have adopted elements of the heroic individual of classic realism in order to represent a woman’s story with something like the power of a Jane Eyre, but is brought up short by the genre’s inability to fully represent the context of rural Irish life, including the Irish language. At the same time, George Moore and the early Joyce (like many after them) finally abandon realism for a naturalist style that bleakly subverts realism’s optimistic assumptions, casting doubt over any emancipatory possibilities at all in Ireland. Yet, for Nolan, it is eventually Joyce who has real success in bringing into harmony both modernity and pre- or non-modern forms of Irish cultural practice — by opting for the much riskier and ambitious formal experimentation that earlier writers would not or could not perform. In the creative flux of Finnegans Wake especially, the artificial but powerful distinction between what the nineteenth century sometimes defined as Protestant culture and Catholic anarchy is finally dissolved: ‘the masses achieve consciousness’.8

Partly Nolan’s book is an attempt to counter old assumptions about the nineteenth-century Irish novel’s ‘failure’; partly it is an attempt to model a new way of evaluating the purpose and effect of such fiction; and partly its aim is ‘to supply a missing chapter in the prehistory of Joyce’s distinctive modernism’.9 Its multiple ambitions are its strength but also an occasional source of frustration: while the close readings of the individual texts are remarkably clear-sighted and fresh, the larger implications of the analysis of this very diverse but highly select range of texts sometimes beg for further development.

The theoretical arguments that knit together the disparate writers and historical periods (from the Act of Union to the Celtic Tiger) have sometimes to be left as indicative statements rather than fully demonstrated theses. For example, Nolan notes pithily

6 Nolan, Catholic Emancipations, 177.
7 Nolan, Catholic Emancipations, 177.
8 Nolan, Catholic Emancipations, 179.
9 Nolan, Catholic Emancipations, xx.
that the perception of the Catholic Irish as a violent and indisciplined race before the Famine quickly transmuted into its opposite — a perception that they were the most repressed and sexless people in Western Europe in the wake of Catholic consolidation in the late nineteenth-century. And now, having been for a while the avatars of de Valera’s anti-materialist vision, the Irish are perceived to be model consumers, ‘taking with gusto to the accelerated consumption of the post-boom economy’. ‘These,’ she notes, ‘are recognizable stages of the process of becoming fully incorporated into the system of global capitalism.’

10 Nolan, Catholic Emancipations, 178.
