



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	"No Such Genre": Tradition and the contemporary Irish novel
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	2000
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2000) "'No Such Genre": Tradition and the contemporary Irish novel.' In P.J. Mathews (Ed.) <i>New voices in Irish criticism</i> . Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. 45-52.
Publisher	Four Courts Press
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/719

Downloaded 2024-05-14T17:32:21Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



No Such Genre': Tradition and the Contemporary Irish Novel

JOHN KENNY, NUI, GALWAY

If a single area of literature has encouraged a view of Ireland as an anomalous State, a strange country, a place that has been, and still is, busy inventing itself, it is the novel genre and the relatively small body of theory and criticism it has generated. While this latest and most diverse of genres does not usually enjoy the same unitary forces as poetry, drama, or, as is one of the standard arguments in the Irish case, the short story, it is surely time to complement the synchronicities of the review pages, where the novel dominates, with more academic assessments that attend to its diachronic aspects. I think it necessary, for my purposes here at least, to resist the prohibition by formalist genre theorists of correlations of the novel with immediate social contexts,¹ and, instead, to insist that the genre's evolution is culturally specific and that, therefore, a localized tradition of the genre, and of attitudes to the genre, may be established. I am with Bakhtin's historical method on this: 'a genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology of genre'.²

While there have been some useful books and collections published that cover various regions, periods, subgenres, modes and individual novelists, there has in fact been only a single book-length effort to provide a panoramic survey of the genre's history as a whole.³ Before I comment on the contemporary Irish novel—by which I mean here the novel since the sixties—and examine why there has been a resistance to the notion of a comprehensive tradition and go on, then, to make some suggestions as to how this may be rectified, I want to quickly try to provide a potted survey of about two hundred years worth of the genre and some of its assessors.

Important as it is to insist that perceived historical periods are not neatly self-contained, academic work on the novel has established four fields of concentration up to the contemporary period: the nineteenth century, the Revival period, Joyce, and the post-independence decades.

While there were some isolated novels written in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁴ the publication of Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* in 1800

1 I have principally in mind here Alastair Fowler, who gives too rigid a sense of what non-formalist analysis might be in his comment that the relation between genre and social context is 'almost certainly far too complex to be explained by any simple model of "superstructure"'. See *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 36. 2 M.M. Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle, fwd. Wlad Godzich (1928; Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1985) 135. 3 James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988). This book, it seems to me, is more a survey than a critical analysis of the novel tradition; nevertheless, the foundational usefulness of Cahalan's work should be acknowledged since he includes indispensable documentary material and mentions many unfamiliar novelists. 4 See Ian Campbell Ross,

is usually taken as the inauguration of a native genre. In her wake came some by now familiar novelists, all writing to one degree or another about Ireland: Lady Morgan, the Banim brothers, Gerald Griffin, Mrs Hall, Lover and Lever, Kickham, and perhaps most famously, William Carleton and the two masters of the Gothic, Maturin and Le Fanu. Considering whether one of these could be placed in any close generic relation with the others, W.J. McCormack has argued that 'the apparent solidity of the novel tradition in Ireland is largely an illusion generated in the minds of recent historians', that 'it is difficult to point to a period when more than two or three novelists of any ability were at work simultaneously', and that nineteenth-century novelists are thus "better regarded as "a scattering of incoherent lives"⁵ McCormack would seem to be more pre-emptive than descriptive in his point about a contrived sense of tradition however. At the time he was writing, the standard work on these novelists was still Thomas Flanagan's book, which concluded that 'the nineteenth-century novel established no tradition'.⁶ Even when McCormack's point on the scattered nature of the nineteenth-century novel has been patently contradicted, critical strategy has generally confirmed the problems with discovering any continuity, the predominant practice being to deal with the writers in monograph form or through chapters dedicated to one writer at a time.⁷ In relatively recent times however, renewed efforts have been made to deal with the nineteenth-century novel as theorizably cohesive or as providing a usable tradition for the following century.⁸

By the time poetry and drama came to dominate the cultural debates of the later years of the nineteenth century and of the Revival, it was clear that the novel was developing here in significantly different ways to that of other countries, and, further, that its future was uncertain. The handful of early twentieth-century assessments that managed to concentrate for a moment at all on the novel were puzzled as to why Edgeworth's legacy had not been consolidated and were pessimistic regarding the most recent manifestations. In 1912, the Fermanagh novelist Shan Bullock concluded a lecture to the Irish Literary Society on the nineteenth-century novel with a look at the contemporaneous situation and (by the account of a reporter for the *Irish Booklover*) reckoned it was 'not worthy of the country and its people'; in his 1917 study, *The Celtic Dawn*, the American, Lloyd Morris, noted that the Irish appeared to have been particularly

'Introduction', 'Fiction to 1800' *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 1 (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 682-7. 5 W.J. McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 250. 6 Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists: 1800-1850* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1959) 333. 7 See, for instance, John Cronin, *The Anglo-Irish Novel, Vol. 1: The Nineteenth Century* (Belfast: Appletree, 1980); and Barry Sloan, *The Pioneers of Anglo-Irish Fiction, 1800-1850* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1986). 8 See Terry Eagleton, 'Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel', *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995) 145-225; David Lloyd, 'Violence and the Constitution of the Novel', *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993) 125-62. A valuable earlier study is Oliver MacDonagh's pamphlet, *The Nineteenth-Century Novel and Irish Social History: Some Aspects* (Dublin: NUI, 1970).

'deficient' in the manipulation of the genre; and in his 1916 survey of the period, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, Ernest Boyd passed on what came to be the received wisdom about the novel at that time: dedicating only a last short chapter to 'Fiction and Narrative Prose', he called it 'the weak point of the Revival'.⁹

It is at this point in time that the history of attitudes to the genre becomes nuanced. While the nineteenth-century novelists never tired of asserting that their work was a reflection of the realities of the country, what bothered Boyd in particular was an apparent lapse of interest in realism in favour of what he called the 'exuberance of fancy' in the likes of James Stephens and Lord Dunsany and a general 'independence of the traditional forms of fiction'. Similarly, Bullock's complaint was that while other nationalities were successfully voicing themselves in fiction, this country was being 'voiced only by politicians and a school of dramatists which often distorts'.¹⁰ It seems to have been established at that point, then, that the main tradition of fiction should be that which—notionally at least—*isn't* fanciful, that which *doesn't* distort: in short, realism, the version of the novel then well established by the great traditions in England and the continent. While I agree that misreadings of prose tradition can sometimes be caused by a novel-centred conception of fiction, it surely says something about the availability of the realist novel of the time for separate analysis that in the most extensive re-examination of the fiction of the period John Wilson Foster includes (as well as short stories) autobiographies, folktales, adaptations, sagas and romances. Indeed, Foster holds to the theory of generic discontinuity and concludes that the Revival 'did not begin or perpetuate a tradition of the novel'.¹¹

Importantly, by the time Boyd produced the second edition of his book in 1922, he had extensively revised his chapter on the genre. By this time, Corkery, Brinsley McNamara, Eimar O'Duffy and others had all produced significant novels. Most momentously, Joyce had happened; and, lamentably for any easy concept of realism or of tradition, he was about to happen even more so. Other than in regard to this monolith, it has, above any of the preceding periods, been widely accepted that a direct correlation exists between society and the development of the novel in the post-independence period. 'The time for the heroic gesture was over and the future must be as prosaic as the building of a wall', was how Benedict Kiely saw these decades in his full-length study of fiction published exactly at the half-way point of our century. It should be noted that at this point twentieth-century Irish fiction is referred to by Kiely as 'modern', and in this it must be distinguished from the non-realist 'modernist' fiction written elsewhere

⁹ Quoted in John Cronin, *Irish Fiction 1900-1940*, rpt. of *The Anglo-Irish Novel Volume Two* (1990; Belfast: Appletree, 1992) 11-13. ¹⁰ Cronin, *Irish Fiction* 11-13. ¹¹ John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1987) xi. It is interesting here to note the correspondences between Foster's generic concord and the subtitled rubric of the most important synoptic study to include coverage of the Irish novel, Stephen J. Brown's *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances and Folklore* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1916).

in the period that concerns Kiely. This novelist and critic was himself clear on the mode that was bound to follow independence as surely as a pathetic fallacy: 'When enthusiasms die there is room for examination and even for dissection, and [in the twenties] a man with a feeling for the literary future might have been excused for thinking that the novelist, particularly the realist novelist, was in Ireland about to come into his kingdom ... Civil war would almost certainly be followed by a period of national doldrums that would be sore on poets, and with the people of Ireland engaged in various ways in what the newspapers call nation-building the novelist seemed to have open country before him'.¹²

However, excepting Joyce and a few other isolated instances, the first five decades of this century have long been regarded as stagnant as far as the novel genre goes.¹³ This purview is to a large degree the product of a huge theodicy set up in and after the sixties whereby previous decades have been simplified in order to accentuate and ultimately exaggerate the distinctiveness of contemporary Irish writing. Certainly, there were some forays into the idea of continuity on the cusp of this time of demarcation. The most widely noted of these are Vivian Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962), Frank O'Connor's *The Backward Look* (1967), and Thomas Kinsella's 'The Irish Writer' (1966) which made the unusual suggestion that it is the Irish novelist rather than the poet who is at the advantage in terms of patrimony since, monolith or not, it is Joyce who best stands for the Irish tradition 'as continuous, or healed—or healing—from its mutilation'.¹⁴ However, the overwhelming insistence has been, both at the time and since, that established traditions were best thrown off in the sixties. In what I consider to be the central sixties essay on Irish writing, Augustine Martin argued, through his version of the anxiety-of-influence paradigm, that Irish fiction was 'an example of a literary tradition becoming so strong as to impair ... the dialogue between author and environment' and that young writers 'must learn to curb and control the influence of tradition'.¹⁵ While Martin was surely right to encourage a rejection of the idea of the novelist as maverick that grew up under censorship, his strictures would seem to have been taken too generally and too literally by those who insist on defining post-sixties Irish writing against all which went before it. Introducing what is a widely used anthology of contemporary Irish fiction, its editor, Dermot Bolger, promises that it 'sets out to attempt to throw off both the supposed shadow of previous Irish writers and predecimal notions of what is still supposed to dominate Irish writing'.¹⁶ In the face of such determined apostasy,

¹² Benedict Kiely, *Modern Irish Fiction: A Critique* (Dublin: Golden Eagle, 1950) vi. ¹³ Stephen J. Brown's second volume of his synoptic study, posthumously completed, is a welcome aid to students interested in the novels of the period 1918 to 1960. See Stephen J. Brown and Desmond Clarke, *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances and Folklore*, vol. 2 (Cork: Royal Carbery Books, 1985). ¹⁴ Thomas Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer', *Field Day Anthology*, vol. 3, 629. ¹⁵ Augustine Martin, 'Inherited Dissent: The Dilemma of the Irish Writer', *Studies* 54 (Spring 1965): 5, 15. ¹⁶ Dermot Bolger, ed., *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993; London: Picador, 1994) xiii.

the likes of John Cronin's claim that 'Tonally, thematically, linguistically, topographically, contemporary Irish fiction constantly confesses its debt to the past' can seem like touching old-fashionedness.¹⁷

The oxymoronic description that has gained currency of postmodernism as nostalgia for the future applies very much to the way the idea of the contemporary has come to be theorized in relation to the Irish novel. Through his paradigm of the 'transitional', Richard Kearney has tried to establish what he calls a postmodern or 'counter tradition' as the main novel tradition in Ireland, stretching from Joyce through Beckett and Flann O'Brien to the likes of John Banville, Aidan Higgins and Neil Jordan.¹⁸ I'm not sure that such a bifurcate view of the genre is justified, since insufficient work has been done on what we might call the mainstream of the past to establish a tradition against which any alternative might assert itself. Though many of its exponents would not like to be equated with the postmodernists, the postcolonialist viewpoint has also tended to establish a hierarchy within the genre. Often carried out under the misguided assumption that plainly realist forms are implicitly collusive with an oppressively empirical or imperial centralizing mindset, recent excavations for the discovery of postcolonial forms have tended to focus on non-realist manifestations of the genre (what is broadly termed 'magic realism' is perhaps the prominent instance) at the expense of a sense of a wider tradition.¹⁹

We have gone from a view of the Irish novel at the turn of century which argued that it wasn't realist enough, to the view put forward by many now that the Irish novel has been too complacently realist. Those who favour the postmodern turn tend to come armed with a global postmodernist canon (Fowles, Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Eco et al.) which is used to blow out of the rising tide any novelists they find harking back to traditional, and therefore allegedly remiss, forms. It is not my intention to be any kind of academic protectionist, but the chief culprits here are what I would call the 'Euro' school of critics who have tended to employ only travestied notions of words like 'parochial', 'conventional', 'conservative' to refer to pre-sixties Irish fiction and, as presumed antonyms, words like 'experimental' or 'internationalist' or 'postmodernist' to talk about their chosen contemporary exemplars.²⁰ Through such easy antinomies, Irish novelists

17 Cronin, *The Anglo-Irish Novel* 18. 18 Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988) esp. 83-100. 19 See, for instance, Theo D'haen, 'Irish Regionalism, Magic Realism and Postmodernism', *British Postmodern Fiction*, ed. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993) 33-46; and Marguerite Quintelli-Neary, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Twelve Modern Irish Novels* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997). 20 See, for instance, Rüdiger Imhof, 'Post-Joycean Experiment in Recent Irish Fiction', *Ireland and France. A Bountiful Friendship: Literature, History and Ideas—Essays in Honour of Patrick Rafróidí*, ed. Barbara Hayley and Christopher Murray (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992) 124-36; and Klaus Lubbers, "'Balcony of Europe": The Trend towards Internationalization in Recent Irish Fiction', *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*, ed. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok, vol. 3, 'National Images and Stereotypes' (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987) 235-44. See also D'haen, 'Irish Regionalism'.

who wish to employ older modes or styles can be left feeling like epigones. One feels like shunting everybody back yet again to relearn Patrick Kavanagh's distinctions between parochialism and provincialism.

Once the process of aggressive negative definition against the past begins, it accelerates exponentially and eventually reaches extremes. As a moving target, the contemporary is always difficult to classify or describe and we are left either using pre-established terms—in this case the postmodern—or playing with neologisms. The latest book on the Irish novel deals with the products of the late eighties and early nineties and refers to these as 'Robinsonian' novels, after the former president.²¹ Lest we be tempted, however, to refer to the coming decade's genre as the 'Post-Padraic Flynn' novel, it is important, given the de-demonization afoot, in the likes of Brian Fallon's *An Age of Innocence* (1998), of what is usually derogatively referred to as the culture of de Valera's Ireland, that we be more careful about using figureheads as convenient homogenizations of historical periods.

Before we adopt any temporally descriptive terms we must be aware of the comparative histories of national traditions and examine the possibility that what any established theory says of a particular stage of generic development in the mainland European or any other tradition may be applicable to Ireland at a different point in time. I do not think there is much point in insisting, as David Lloyd has done, that influential theories of the genre generally should be transformed because they fail to account for the peculiarities of the Irish situation.²² For instance, something like Benedict Anderson's renowned theory that the novel flourishes when a nation is seeking to imagine itself as a community, instead of being set down as a template over Ireland around the time immediately before and after independence and falling short of explication, might be better used to examine the homologies between the huge growth of the novel here in the last thirty years and the efforts of officialdom since our first application for entry to the EEC to wrap the country up in a packaged image of modernity.

What could most advantageously be done I think, is to consider, alongside the established great theories of the novel, the progress in native views of the genre. Though formulations have typically been both isolated and undeveloped, there have been some surprising enticements. It might be worth examining, for instance, how and why it was that social conditions were so comprehensively understood by William Carleton to allow him the prescience to forecast that after his death, which came in 1869, there would be for the Irish novel 'a lull, an obscurity of perhaps half a century'.²³ Idiosyncratic kinds of continuity might be beneficially identified by chasing up the implications of the very first sen-

²¹ Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto, 1997) 7, and *passim*. ²² David Lloyd, 'Violence' 129. ²³ Quoted in Robert Lee Wolff, *William Carleton, Irish Peasant Novelist: A Preface to His Fiction* (New York: Garland, 1980) 127.

tence of Frank O'Connor's book on the novel where he says: 'To have grown up in an Irish provincial town in the first quarter of the twentieth century was to have known the nineteenth-century novel as a contemporary art form'.²⁴ It would also be fun to try to find similarities between Ian Watt's correlation of the genre with a vibrant middle-class society and Benedict Kiely's hopes that a period in the 'doldrums' might best provide for the rise of the novel here. Before we begin at all to relate the contemporary period to a pre-established tradition, we should develop the cultural-materialist theory of the genre (gleaned from the unlikely source of Henry James) that Seán O'Faoláin only outlined as an explanation for this sweeping assertion: 'But as for an Irish Novel? If we are using the word generically—the French novel, the Russian Novel, the English Novel—it was [in the nineteenth century] inconceivable in a population cloven in two as irreconcilably as the white landowners and black slaves of the American south before 1865. Even today—I am writing these pages in 1984—there is no such genre as the Irish novel'.²⁵ If that cancellation could be proven to be more than just the self-justification of a man who found it difficult himself to write novels, classified generic terms like traditional and modern would have to be locally and extensively redefined, and it would certainly become a little difficult to prove that the contemporary Irish novel is, just yet, post- anything.

In the meantime, things can be done to answer O'Faoláin's assertion. In a seventies' essay on 'broken' and 'integral' traditions, nicely titled 'Together', Denis Donoghue pointed to the central problem. 'Irish novelists', he said, 'feel the anxiety of influence but not the incitement or the challenge of tradition ... The contemporary Irish novelist looks for a tradition capable of telling him what has been done and how he ought to proceed: instead he finds Joyce'.²⁶ In a development of this train of thought, John Banville has complained that there is no advantageous tradition here of 'minor fiction' against which emerging writers might measure themselves, that while the English novelist has a large number of 'middling' predecessors, his Irish counterpart is faced with 'colossi' who can appear 'more like sports of nature than parts of a tradition'.²⁷ There is no doubt that the novels given greatest academic attention (*Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, *Murphy*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*) are our finest aesthetic achievements, but, if we are to establish any sense of an encompassing tradition of the minor or the middling, as well as being aesthetes of the genre we must be its sociologists and its historians. We must read more behind the colossi and within the liminal areas between established periods. While re-

²⁴ Frank O'Connor, *The Mirror in the Roadway: A Study of the Modern Novel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957) 3. ²⁵ Seán O'Faoláin, *Vive Moil!*, ed. and afterword Julia O'Faolain, rev. ed. (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993) 300. ²⁶ Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: The Selected Essays of Denis Donoghue*, vol. 1 (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) 150. ²⁷ John Banville, 'A Great Tradition', *Sunday Times*, 21 March 1993, sec. 7: 9.

NEW VOICES IN IRISH CRITICISM

examination has well started with the likes of Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin and Elizabeth Bowen, we should try out—and this is only for example—Forrest Reid's sixteen novels, Francis McManus' eleven and John Broderick's twelve and, preferably, tie someone else down to read Katharine Tynan's one hundred and five. We cannot allow the cult of the monolithic writer to continue at the expense of what Walter Benjamin would have called 'lower' culture. While we might not be too convinced of the aesthetic quality of much of this work and argue for the continued veracity of the wit's description of the novel as any extended work of narrative that has something wrong with it, we should at least be encouraged by Frank O'Connor's joking irreverence towards the genre's genealogy. 'Novels', he said, 'were written exclusively by Jane Austen and Turgenev, and the secret died with them, but the substitutes have a lot to be said for them'.²⁸