

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES IN THE NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES OF JOHN MCGAHERN, COLM TÓIBÍN, AND CLAIRE KEEGAN

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A constant and distinctive trend in the political, economic, and cultural history of the Republic of Ireland has been a hovering between opposing poles, variously identified as: tradition and modernity, colonial subjugation and independence, city and rural or small-town life and mentality, institutionalised religious practices and pagan rites, emigration and immigration, local values and global markets. The recent collapse of the Irish economy and the country's need for an EU-sponsored bailout, only a few years after the unprecedented economic growth and cultural and political confidence brought about by the Celtic Tiger, encourage a reflection on these radical oscillations and on their impact on people's lives.

Contemporary Irish novels and short stories translate, or refract, the tensions and the implications of these polarities into physical and mental fluctuations of the characters, who revolve between different locations and temporal dimensions. Fictional men and women move in space – from the countryside to the city, from one's house to that of a neighbour or a relative, from the family home to the university or a job abroad – and in time – through the different stages of their lives, from present experiences and perceptions to memories that anchor them to the past and dreams that project them into the future. Arrivals and departures, thus, provide crucial structural devices for plot-building, as well as poignant metaphors of the country's social, cultural, and economic instability.

This essay will concentrate on the paradigmatic use of arrivals and departures in the fiction of three important contemporary Irish authors and will suggest a reading of their characters' individual mobility and instability as a symptom and a symbol of Ireland's complex attempt to come to terms with its historical legacies, to mediate the encounter between the old and the new, ultimately to define and to accept its own identity. Attention will be paid to the importance of history and commemoration and to the simultaneity or the contamination of past and present, which characterise contemporary Irish cultural discourse.

Though belonging to different generations and coming from heterogeneous personal backgrounds, John McGahern (1934-2006), Colm Tóibín (b. 1955), and Claire Keegan (b. 1968) present striking similarities at the level of artistic concerns and narrative techniques. Following their characters' trajectories in space and time, in McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1990) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), in Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992) and *The Empty Family* (2010), and in Keegan's *Antarctica* (1999) and *Foster* (2010), I shall explore the deeper significance of these

cultural products of the two decades that have witnessed the Republic of Ireland's free fall from boom to bust, from glamour to gloom, from confidence to shame, a stretch of time that these novels and short stories partly predate but certainly – though perhaps indirectly – express.

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The recent past of the Irish Republic constitutes a favourite and recurring concern of contemporary Irish fiction writers – as the object of the characteristically retrospective look that they cast, through their works, on the years of their childhood and adolescence (Patten 259). The centrifugal and centripetal forces that bind the individual to his or her family and homeland also emerge as of paramount interest for contemporary Irish novelists and short story writers. The structural and symbolic relevance of arrivals and departures in these narratives, therefore, can easily be appreciated. John McGahern's acclaimed novel *Amongst Women* (1990) tells the story of a veteran of the War of Independence who lives with his family in a small farm ironically called Great Meadow. The narration of this patriarch's slow decline, attended to by his wife and daughters, frames the extended flashback that recounts the growing up of his children, their departures for Dublin or London to study and work, and their frequent trips back home at weekends and in the summer. These visits tellingly reveal that, while living at home, Moran's children feel an urgent need to disentangle themselves from the claustrophobia and the oppression of their father's household, but once they leave, they seem to be drawn back by very strong pulls. From the distant and anonymous city, in fact, Great Meadow and the annual haymaking take on an idyllic aura (Quinn 88), and the intertwined feelings of fear and love inspired and demanded by Moran all blend and blur (Kennedy-Andrews 3). As for the sense of superiority he instils in his daughters, it can only function within the boundaries of his small kingdom, therefore their return home also acts as a therapeutic ritual through which these young women see their sense of identity and belonging confirmed and validated:

For the girls the regular comings and goings restored their superior sense of self, a superiority they had received intact from Moran and which was little acknowledged by the wide world in which they had to work and live. [...] within [their father's] shadow and the walls of his house they felt that they would never die; and each time they came to Great Meadow they grew again into the wholeness of being the unique and separate Morans. (*Amongst Women* 93-94)

Old Moran himself fluctuates, but his movements are not so much in space, as in time: once the leader of a flying column of guerrilla fighters, highly respected and admired by his soldiers for his strategic ability, he is now embittered and disappointed by the ways in which the country for which he risked his life has evolved and by the diminished role of farmer and father that he has tailored for himself in that country:

'What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.' (*Amongst Women* 5)

Moran's alienation does not derive from geographical exile, from a physical distance from known and cherished places; it is, rather, the manifestation of his emotional displacement, of his psychological detachment from, and inability to cope with, what he perceives as a disappointing present. As a result, he tries to resist the inevitable process of change, in the typically human effort to arrest the flow of time, desperately clinging to his authoritarian power at home (Sampson 224) and to the thrilling memories of his times as a military leader.

A similar alternation between different spatial and temporal dimensions can be observed in Colm Tóibín's novel *The Heather Blazing* (1992). The protagonist, Eamon Redmond, is a Supreme Court Judge who tries to come to terms with the rapidly changing mores of the society around him, having to deal with the inadequacy of the Irish Constitution to reflect and regulate a nation that has undergone a radical transformation since the writing of its fundamental laws in 1937. In a similar fashion, he is confronted with change within his own family, particularly through the relationship with his children, an activist for civil liberties and a single mother. The traditional Irish trope of the conflict between tradition and modernity is thus investigated both in the public and in the private sphere, while the erosion of the Wexford coast significantly provides an intense topographical analogue and a penetrating metaphor of the "dualities of concealment and exposure, fixity and change" that permeate Eamon's life (Harte 65).

The use of a double setting, both in geographical and in temporal terms, powerfully reflects these frictions, translating them into a complex structure, with some chapters set in Dublin and in the present, others set in the town of Enniscorthy and in the coastal village of Cush and focusing on Eamon's childhood and adolescence and on his holidays. Interestingly, two different versions of the protagonist are associated with these two scenarios, namely the authoritative and self-confident public figure who masters the law and public speeches as opposed to the private man, hurt and made aphasic by early bereavement and unable to communicate with his wife and children. His very name, alluding simultaneously to both Éamon de Valera and the Wexford-born MP John Redmond (Patten 262), has a double resonance. The fate of this one individual is finally connected to the broader historical and political development of his nation by means of the backdrop of strong nationalism and personal commitment against which Eamon grows up, his grandfather and his uncles having taken an active part in the Easter Rising and in the Civil War and his father having been a history teacher and a Fianna Fáil activist. Such a link is further reinforced by the numerous references, throughout the narrative, to important events in Irish nationalist history, such as the 1798 rebellion, the Easter Rising, and the IRA activities in the 1970s, and to prominent Irish politicians like Éamon de Valera, Seán Lemass and Charles Haughey.

Arrivals and departures also feature insistently and significantly, both as spatial and temporal movements and as metaphors for change and conflict, in the fiction pro-

duced in the late 1990s by that younger generation of Irish authors of whom Claire Keegan is an outstanding representative. That paradigm can be identified and explored in some of the short stories from her debut collection, *Antarctica* (1999), and fruitfully applied to the analysis of the generational and gender conflicts and of the rites of passage from childhood and innocence to adulthood and disenchantment, with which her subtle and sensitive fiction engages. The protagonist of “Quare Name for a Boy”, for example, is a young Irish woman who lives in England, where she is working hard to make ends meet and to be a writer. An unplanned pregnancy pushes her to go back to Ireland – possibly for good – and to confront the women in her family. Unlike them, she refuses to give up all her desires and ambitions; she has no intention to marry the father of her child, whom she barely knows. Her arrival back home and in her homeland will not interfere with her search for personal fulfilment and independence, nor will it plunge her back into the domestic, caretaking, and subordinate role traditionally imposed upon women that she has so carefully departed from: “I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he’s a boy. That part of my people ends with me” (*Antarctica* 101).

In “Sisters” we are presented with two women who grew up together, but whose lives took very different routes: Betty, the eldest, never married and dedicated her life to caring for her father and for the family farm and land; Louisa, the younger and the better-looking, lives an apparently perfect life in England with a wealthy husband and their two children. Louisa’s return home every year for the summer holidays upsets the balance and routines of Betty’s unpretentious life and triggers off a confrontation between the two women’s destinies, unfulfilled desires, and hidden jealousies. Once again, the characters fluctuate between love and resentment, between common memories of the past and very different lives in the present, without ever finding a balance or a compromise.

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In the works of fiction published in Ireland at the beginning of the new millennium, when the Celtic Tiger arguably started to lose momentum, arrivals and departures continue to provide effective structural devices and metaphorical representations of the characters’ and of the nation’s condition of instability and uncertainty. John McGahern’s last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), portrays a year in the life of a small community in north-western rural Ireland. The main characters are the Ruttledges and the Murphys, two elderly couples who live on opposite sides of a small lake. Their frequent visits to each other and to other neighbours around the lake, their trips to a nearby small town or to the local pub, even their phrases and gestures in conversation, reflect the circular and cyclical character of nature, of farming, and of the liturgical year, in a perpetual repetition of the same which is never boring or redundant, but, on the contrary, promises, as it were, regeneration and eternity. To mention but one significant example, the opening lines of the novel are repeated

in the second half of the narration with only slight variations: “Easter morning came clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire Easter world to themselves” (*That They May Face* 251). The echo produced by this repetition of the exact same words marks the passing of yet another year by the lake, while those slight variations reinforce the sense of renewal associated with the regeneration of nature brought about by spring and by the belief in resurrection that underlies the Catholic rites of Easter.

Several characters in this novel left the lakeside community where they were born and went to look for better jobs elsewhere: this is the case, for example, of Jamesie and Mary Murphy’s son, who lives in Dublin, or of John Quinn’s children, who all live and are successfully employed in England. Though marginal in the overall economy of the novel, such figures provide an insightful reminder of the long-standing tradition in rural areas of poverty and emigration and of how that tradition stretches, sadly, up to very recent times. As for Jamesie’s brother Johnny, his departure was connected, interestingly, with a troubled love story, and, like Moran’s children in *Amongst Women*, he goes back to Ireland every summer; the excitement and the preparations that precede his arrival are as intense as the relief that follows his departure at the end of his holidays. Joe and Kate Rutledge themselves have also moved, but in the opposite direction, from the city of London to a remote corner of the countryside in County Roscommon. The theme of the returned emigrant, already hinted at by McGahern in his previous novel through the figure of Moran’s second wife, Rose (who spent several years working in Glasgow before returning to her native soil in rural Ireland), is a frequent thread in recent Irish fiction and one that offers interesting insights into the cohesion and the processes of identity-formation of a small community. The figure of the returned emigrant is a challenging one, in that he or she partakes of both the insider’s and the outsider’s perspective and sensibility, and jeopardises the notions of home and identity (Geffer Wondrich 9-11; Smyth 146-147; Ryle 127-136).

Another negotiation of the theme of arrivals and departures in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* can be detected in the contiguity and coexistence of Catholic and pagan practices and beliefs, which is particularly evident in the decision to bury Johnny according to the ancestral custom of putting the dead in the ground with their heads in a westward position so that, when they wake on Judgement Day, they will face the rising sun – hence the novel’s title (Kiberd 173; Maher 128).

Colm Tóibín’s latest collection of short stories, *The Empty Family* (2010), provides yet another perspective, demonstrating how contemporary Irish fiction, though often remaining formally anchored to traditional modes and techniques of writing, proves ready to tackle and to incorporate current issues and ideas in its contents. The stereotypical image of the traditional Irish family, fixed by literature and by the broader cultural and political discourse of the newly independent state, is questioned and revisited

by Tóibín's recent short fiction through the inclusion of gay partners, absent mothers, and foreign caretakers. The very notion of home is expanded and interrogated by his narratives, which appear to accept the possibility of a happy existence abroad (as opposed to the more conventional alienation and homesickness of the exiled or emigrant) and the fact that affection for friends and acquaintances can sometimes be stronger than that for family members.

In several stories, arrivals and departures represent crucial moments in the characters' lives. In a fashion that is reminiscent of the double geographical and temporal setting of *The Heather Blazing*, the people who populate these fictions also stir restlessly, both physically and mentally, back to the places of their childhood, and however much they try to escape from their past, they are always inevitably forced to confront it (Delaney 9-10). Both "One Minus One" and "The Empty Family" focus on middle-aged gay Irishmen who live in the U.S. but have a problematic or, at the very least, an unresolved relationship with their homeland. The protagonist of "One Minus One" remembers his trip back to Enniscorthy six years earlier to witness the death of his mother. Mentally addressing a former partner of his, he reflects on his lack of an intimate relationship with his mother and on his related decision to live far from her and her country, and concludes:

Maybe that is why I am here now, away from Irish darkness, away from the long, deep winter that settles so menacingly on the place where I was born. I am away from the east wind. I am in a place where so much is empty because it was never full, where things are forgotten and swept away, if there ever were things. I am in a place where there is nothing. Flatness, a blue sky, a soft, unhaunted night. A place where no one walks. Maybe I am happier here than I would be anywhere else, and it is only the poisonous innocence of the moon tonight that has made me want to dial your number and see if you are awake. (*The Empty Family* 10)

In the title story of the collection *The Empty Family*, the main character's visits to his native Wexford are more regular and frequent. While living abroad, he is homesick sometimes: "I missed home. I went out to Point Reyes every Saturday so I could miss home" (33). He has held on to a house on the southern Irish coast, near "my own forgiving sea, a softer, more domesticated beach, and my own lighthouse" (34), and every time he arrives there, he feels that "this space I walk in now has been my dream space; the mild sound of the wind on days like this has been my dream sound" (29).

In both stories, however, Ireland is associated with troubled relationships with one's family and with an unhappy love story, and the decision to live abroad appears permanent. As for the famous set designer who is at the centre of "Two Women", her return to Dublin for a temporary job similarly confirms that her real home are her house in Los Angeles and the couple from Guatemala who look after her. In all three stories, emotional bonds and the feeling of belonging are shown to be troubled and often independent from one's places of origin and biological relations, and the traditional notions of home and family are ultimately updated.

Claire Keegan's long story *Foster* (2010) is set in 1980s rural Ireland and focuses on a young girl who spends the summer with her relatives. Initially unsure of what to expect of these new places and company – "But this is a different type of house. Here there is room, and time to think. There may be even money to spare" (*Foster* 13); "I feel at such a loss for words but this is a new place, and new words are needed" (18) – the girl soon becomes very fond of her foster parents and of their busy but quiet lifestyle and affectionate behaviour to her and to each other, to the point that her departure at the end of the summer will prove a very painful leavetaking.

As a final notation, some elements of folklore can be detected in *Foster*, which give this long story the feel of a traditional tale, making the narrative depart, at times, from its contemporary setting and reach backwards, towards ancient beliefs. Two instances are particularly noteworthy in this respect, namely, the description of the girl's first entrance into the Kinsellas' house, which is reminiscent of a birth-scene (the alternation of darkness and light, of coolness and warmth, of smells of food and detergents, and the woman and the child sharing the novelty of being alone together – it is the girl's second birth, as it were, to a new life); and the recounting of the girl's walks to a nearby well with Edna Kinsella as a baptismal ceremony or cathartic rite:

I go down steps until I reach the water. I breathe and hear the sound my breath makes over the still mouth of the well so I breathe harder for a while to feel these sounds I make, coming back. The woman stands behind, not seeming to mind each breath coming back, as though they are hers. [...] For a moment, I am afraid. I wait until I see myself not as I was when I arrived, looking like a tinker's child, but as I am now, clean, in different clothes, with the woman behind me. I dip the ladle and bring it to my lips. This water is cool and clean as anything I have ever tasted: it tastes of my father leaving, of him having never been there, of having nothing after he was gone. I dip it again and lift it level with the sunlight. I drink six measures of water and wish, for now, that this place without shame or secrets could be my home. Then the woman pulls me back where I am safe on the grass, and goes down alone. (22-24)

The girl reflecting herself in the water and drinking some of it, like a baptismal rite, marks the beginning of something new, the woman as godmother, in a sublime mixture of fear and pleasure.

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This brief analysis of fictional works produced during the Celtic Tiger years and in their immediate, catastrophic aftermath – in hindsight, the so-called "Begrudgers" seem to have been right in their distrust of the quick and easy success celebrated by the "Boosters" (*Foster* 8, *passim*) – has demonstrated that Ireland's attempt to mediate between its complex historical legacies and the challenges of the global world is still ongoing. In this respect, the distinctive, conspicuous, and profuse focus on the past in contemporary Irish fiction, both on national history and on individual histories, even at times of radical changes, and despite the gradual broadening of many writers' narrative concerns towards current debates and events, speaks volumes.

Scholars otherwise expressing very diverse and, in some cases, diverging opinions on most other issues appear to move along similar lines with regard to Irish fiction's typical hovering between past and present. If Eve Patten reads the prominence of history in Irish novels of the 1980s and 1990s as a result of "their proximity to a revisionist historiographic culture, and [to] a *fin-de-siècle* interrogation of causality and grand narratives" (Patten 260), Scott Brewster highlights the importance of commemoration throughout the 1990s and connects it to the many anniversaries of that period.¹ Derek Hand has suggested that Irish novelists' frequent "retreat into the past can be seen both as a desire for a simpler, less complicated time and as a means of displaying – by virtue of making the past utterly strange, foreign and disconnected – the absolute originality of the contemporary moment" (Hand 258). Joe Cleary's diagnosis is not dissimilar (Cleary 210). David Lloyd, for his part, identifies the "split" or "double temporality" of Irish culture as a typically postcolonial feature, which derives from the survival of ancient or traditional elements alongside more modern traits as signs of an alternative mentality, as residual traces of a different way of living and working (Lloyd 1). Other commentators have reflected on the continuity and discontinuity that contemporary Irish fiction writers experience simultaneously by applying Homi Bhabha's notions of "timelag" and of "in-between space", as well as Freud's theories about the "return of the repressed" (Peach 38), ultimately pointing out that "the encroachment of the 'new' upon the 'traditional'" does not by any means guarantee the success of the new; on the contrary, the new "is prone to contamination by the traces of the past" (Herron 168).

At the structural level, the works by McGahern, Tóibín, and Keegan analysed in this study as well as much contemporary Irish fiction are characterised by a frequent alternation between linear narratives and circular patterns: as a consequence, the chronological progression of their storylines is interrupted and counterpointed by flashbacks (memories) and – though less frequently – by flash-forwards (desires, hopes, imagination). This entails movement, on the reader's part, throughout the narrative. Similarly, the numerous intra-textual repetitions and extra-textual allusions that punctuate these works subtly guide the reader along the lines of the rich network that connects a story or a novel with other fictional and non-fictional works by the same author, with his or her own life (through the repeated, almost compulsive, literal or imaginative return to the same few places, themes, actions, and characters' names), and with a broader literary tradition.

The images of a "transition" (Kearney 15) or a "conversion" (Foster 37), variously used by scholars to describe the major changes undergone by Irish society and culture over the last few decades, read as strikingly appropriate metaphors for the country's recent evolution. The continuous fluctuation of the characters of Irish novels

1 Notably, the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising, the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine, and the 200th anniversary of the United Irishmen's 1798 rebellion (Brewster 24).

and short stories between different spatial, temporal, and psychological dimensions does not only translate and transpose the instability of the Irish cultural experience into the fictional realm, but also confirms and validates the paradigm of arrivals and departures as a highly symbolic pattern and an effective hermeneutic tool to look at contemporary Ireland.

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