

# As Mirrors Are Lonely



As Mirrors Are Lonely:  
A Lacanian Reading on the Modern Irish Novel

By

Peter Guy

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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Peter Guy

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Dedicated to my parents for their lasting support and in memory of my late grandparents, Pierce & Celia Guy and Patrick & Ellen King.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The central conceit of any concept is, by nature, problematic. As Mary McCarthy once wrote: ‘There are no new truths, but only truths that have not been recognized by those who have perceived them without noticing.’<sup>1</sup> That is the nature of academic scholarship: to present a truth as something that everybody can be shown to know or to challenge yourself and create a new truth of your own. For this book, I would propose two separate ‘truths’ of my own, firstly what I term the reinvention of the modern Irish novel, which I would argue took place in the late nineteen fifties, to be superseded by more speculative trends in the late eighties; and secondly the importance of Lacanian analysis in the context of this timeframe, where the focus is upon uncertainty, alienation, sexual relations and the deconstruction of such totalizing forms as patriarchy, identitarian ideologies and primacy of the religious orders.

To enter into an epistemological debate on the Irish novel, to attempt to place it into set patterns of linearity, would be foolhardy indeed. That is not my concern. What I term the ‘modern Irish novel’ may be construed as something of a misinterpretation to begin with. Should we not, logically, begin with James Joyce? Naturally this would seem to be the case, but my concern rather is on the resurgence (renaissance is too loaded a word) of the Irish novel in the late fifties when the post-colonial experiment was deemed a failure, when the totemic influence of Joyce had overshadowed his subsequent successors and the novel form could be dismissed by a writer such as O’Faoláin as unsuitable in the face of a shattered world where the short story (In Ireland, at least) was in the ascendancy.<sup>2</sup>

By 1982 however, the novelist and critic Thomas Kilroy could write:

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<sup>1</sup> Mary McCarthy, *On The Contrary*, p.47.

<sup>2</sup> Sean O’Faoláin, ‘Fifty Years of Irish Writing’, pp. 102-103.

There is the widely accepted view nowadays among the historians that contemporary Ireland derives from the late fifties, that from that period one can trace the economic, social and cultural changes by which the country.... moved from being essentially rural-based, tradition-bound society to something resembling a modern, urbanized, technological state.... Something important appears to happen in the arts, too, in that decade.<sup>3</sup>

This is a field that has invited much contemporary research but not, perhaps, as a unified whole. I view this period, from the mid-late fifties to the early nineties within set boundaries that can be delineated by a number of key events: in the religious sphere, the furor over the Mother & Child scheme in 1951 proved to be the apex of Catholic Church's supremacy. In the timeframe I propose, we see a gradual decline, from Vatican II through to the acrimonious debates on contraception and divorce right up to the resignation and disgrace of the Bishop of Galway, Eamon Casey, in 1990. In the political sphere, we witness the resignation of Eamon De Valera and Richard Mulcahy, bastions of civil war politics, and the accession of Lemass' brand of *Realpolitik* in 1959. In the intervening years, Irish politics went through a period of upheaval culminating in the election of Mary Robinson as our first female President in 1990.

To further develop this argument, and to quantify Kilroy's observations I wish to first turn to the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his work on language and the national epic.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin is of particular interest as his observations segue in rather suggestive ways with those of Lacan, particularly in terms of the notion that all transcription systems are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meaning they seek to convey. For Bakhtin, there is no such thing as a general example of language, a language spoken by a general voice divorced from a specific meaning. Language, when it means anything at all, is simply somebody talking to somebody else. Lacan would argue that there is no stable one-to-one correspondence between signified and signifier, an inherent ambiguity which is at the heart of all discourse and indeed, in the formation of the unconscious. In Lacan's words: 'Language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kilroy, 'The Irish Writer – Self & Society', in Peter Connolly (ed.), *Literature and the Changing Ireland*, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> For this section, I am indebted to the work of Gerry Smyth and his seminal text, *The Novel; & the Nation*.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book II*, p. 244.

At the heart of Bakhtin's work is the duality between the centrifugal forces which aim to keep things apart and the centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere – the result of these forces at work can be found in the development of the human language and the best transcription of language can be found in the novel. The two contending tendencies are not of equal force – the centrifugal draw is, in Bakhtin's theory, the reality of actual articulation whereas the centripetal force is something akin to what anthropologists regard as the activity of culture in modelling a complete different order called nature. What results from this conflict is in part the inherent fragility of language complicated by a more durable resistance where language, stratified into wider nets of meaning penetrates into deeper levels of actuality, eventually becoming an almost living breathing organism. It is alive and forever developing, forever in process of *becoming*. As Bakhtin states:

Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.<sup>6</sup>

Bakhtin uses the word *raznorečie* – heteroglossia – to describe the fundamental manner of all communicational and some of the fundamental ambiguities within the theory of language. While transcription must be a more or less fixed system, one must also bear in mind that the power of any particular utterance is in the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made and the context of any given situation can add or subtract from the amount of meaning the utterance may be said to have. Expanding his theories onto a national level, Bakhtin claimed all western societies experienced a struggle between two contradictory politico-cultural tendencies. All such societies will tend towards monoglossia – one language – to centralise the verbalideological word to the point where language and meaning merge into an almost organic unit. Irish society in particular demonstrated such a tendency, for the success of any anti-colonial movement depends upon monoglossia: the subjects of the state speaking the one language, the same questions and eventually coming up with the same answers. The key medium for expressing the drive towards centralising national discourse is the epic, which encapsulates an imagined

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<sup>6</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p.272.

community partaking in a single straightforward narrative, in Bakhtin's words: 'creative consciousness...realised in closed pure languages.'<sup>7</sup>

But the cultural nationalists would search in vain for a true Irish epic which would serve to demonstrate the unity and coherence of the nation at a formal and generic level for such early and pre-modern texts that existed merely showed a nation bedevilled by a fragmented conception of nationhood. An alternative had to be sought. The nationalists duly experimented with other forms but the novel would remain tainted by its association with British cultural history. The didactic novel also threatened to contradict the fictional representation of our new national reality, where the emphasis on nation-building was paramount. For Bakhtin, the basic characteristics of the novel as a genre have been:

Powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of European civilisation: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships. A multitude of different languages, cultures and times became available to Europe, and this became a decisive factor in its life and thought.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to other forms of transcription, the novel 'can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, the novel tends to exploit the social stratification of language while, in Bakhtin's theory, also emphasising the inherent fragmentation at the heart of the medium, for 'there is no unitary language or style in the novel... the author as creator cannot be found at one of the novel's language levels.'<sup>10</sup>

However, Bakhtin discerned a counter-movement to monoglossia – the aforementioned heteroglossia – which acted as a foil to the centralising ideology. Any national language which is stratified into all manner of social languages and language, in Bakhtin's theory, depends upon the context in which it is spoken. It is therefore dialogic, always in the process of becoming rather than acting as some pre-ordained code. It is perhaps significant to note here that Lacan also posited the difference between a code/indice and that of language/signifier as the fixed bi-univocal

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<sup>7</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

relationship between an index and its referent in contrast to the lack of any such relationship existing between a signifier and a referent. Because of the bi-univocal relation of indices and referents, codes lack what Lacan regards as the fundamental feature of human languages: the potential for ambiguity and equivocation.

For Bakhtin, literary discourse in general, and the novel specifically, developed to introduce heteroglossia into monologic national discourse. After all, a novel quotes from the multitude of languages available within the social formations which it is produced and the author forms these languages into an artistic whole. Here lies the crux of my argument. The traditional society which was consolidated in the early part of the century, began to disintegrate by the 1950s, the monologic discourse collapsing in the face of modernizing trends which undermined the whole symbolic system, forcing it into an abrupt *volte-face*. Why did this happen? There were a number of political and religious changes which altered Irish society forever, complimenting James Whyte's observation that since the 1960s: 'Ireland has moved from being a traditional, predominately agricultural and rural society to being a post-industrial society.'<sup>11</sup> And what was the nature of the catalyst?

The simple answer to that question is that Ireland, prior to the early sixties, was a failed entity. For Brendan O'hEithir: 'The 50's meant repression, emigration, clerical dominance, spurious patriotism and an educational system that seemed to train people to be physically fearless and morally cowardly.'<sup>12</sup> The facts illustrate that O'hEithir was not engaging in hyperbole. Net emigration per annum between 1951 and 1956 was 39,353 or 9.2 per thousand of the population. That figure increased to 42,401 between 1956 and 1961 – in total, about 400,000 emigrated during that decade.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the lack of confidence in the economy, 'associated with falling employment and population, created an atmosphere unfavourable to the enterprise required for successful entry into export markets.'<sup>14</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, in his short-lived paper *Kavanagh's Weekly*, spoke in his first editorial about the 'victory of mediocrity' in Ireland. In later editions however, he appeared to rage against the spread of despair, believing that 'something is still possible in

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<sup>11</sup> James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual*, p.92.

<sup>12</sup> Brendan O'hEithir, *The Begrudger's Guide to Irish Politics*, p.122.

<sup>13</sup> James Meehan, *The Irish Economy Since 1922*, p.204 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Kieran Kennedy, *Economic Growth in Ireland: The Experience Since 1947*, p. 218.

this country', illustrating the mounting frustration that was building up amongst the Diaspora generation:

We came to the wake that had been going uproariously for at least thirty years and at the moment we are trying to get the family to remove the corpse – the corpse of 1916, the Gaelic language, the inferiority complex – so that the house may be free for the son to bring in a wife. Will they take our advice or will the wake proceed to explosion point...<sup>15</sup>

Bakhtin's theories on movements are invaluable when discussing this period. In the words of Terence Browne, the Irish novel, with its origin in an enclosed oral tradition, was 'a fiction that, delighting in objectivity, was undisturbed by the subjective or psychologically complex, unless they can be embodied in concrete actions.'<sup>16</sup> Prior to the nineteen-sixties, the Irish novel had grown out of an agrarian, pre-modern culture antipathetic to the conventional realist novel with its roots in an industrial, stratified society. The dominant tone of Irish fiction from 1920 to 1950 was one where:

The oral voice, having survived the shift in the early twentieth century from the tale of countryside and farm, to the story set in shop, convent, school and presbytery, set in short in the petit bourgeois world of post-revolutionary Ireland.<sup>17</sup>

As Bakhtin illustrated, the epic was the key medium through which national discourse could be centralised for it offered an idealised picture of a harmonious world, where the individual is at one both with society and his environment. With the advent of the fifties and sixties and the fragmentation of Irish society – an inevitable trend given the social condition already illustrated – Irish writers were forced to contend with the rupturing of this epic world into heteroglossia.

By 1991, John McGahern could state: 'I see Irish society as healthily fragmented, as no longer cohesive...'<sup>18</sup> The writers that I am covering in this book – Broderick, McGahern and Moore – were thus faced with the task of bridging this gap between pre- and post-modern Ireland, and the extent of their success will be measured over the course of this text. While

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh, Man and Poet*, p.129.

<sup>16</sup> Terence Brown, 'John McGahern's *Nightlines*: Tone Technique and Symbolism', in Patrick Raftery and Terence Brown (eds), *The Irish Short Story*, p. 290.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Jackson, 'Tales from the Dark Side', in *Hot Press*, p.20.

each of these authors grappled with modern modes of literary expression, I would argue that there remained a thread of nostalgia throughout their fiction, a hankering after this fallen world where matters were, perhaps, more clear-cut. As David Lloyd states:

One of the problems of the Irish novel, precisely insofar as it conforms to the symbolic mode of realism, is the sheer volume of inassimilable residue that it can neither properly contain nor entirely exclude.<sup>19</sup>

Such a tone exists in McGahern's last novel, *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, in Broderick's uncompleted trilogy based on the Athlone of his childhood and in Moore's novella *Catholics*. As such, there remains a certain frisson in the work of each author – the clash between experimentation with new literary forms and the traditional monological language possible only in the pre-modern society which produced the epic. What has been the result of this experiment? That is, how successful were each of the authors in ordering the numerous voices in their fiction and what has been excluded as a result? Such questions can be integrated into a Lacanian reading of the text and I will demonstrate the value of such a reading in the next section of this chapter. Suffice to say, Bakhtin is invaluable for demonstrating a much more flexible criticism with the English novel acting as a centripetal force, centralising the disparate voice of which it is composed, with the Irish novel and the emergence of the modernist tradition linked rather to the centrifugal tendencies in Irish fiction. As Bakhtin has perceptively observed, language, especially in its literary incarnation, is a powerful tool in the deconstruction of such centralizing drives, as the 'uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward' alongside the language of 'verbal-ideological centralization and unification.'<sup>20</sup> In Ireland, cultural nationalists attempted to appropriate the novel as a medium through which a monologic experiment could be conducted. The failure of such an experiment gave rise to the emergence of what I refer to as the modern Irish novel, capable of articulating and resisting both a colonial mind-set *and* a nationalistic discourse. Bakhtin's theory of metalanguage is extremely complicated but he is invaluable in any investigation discussing Lacan, for as much as Bakhtin referred to the primacy of speech – what he has to say about the novel becomes incomprehensible if the emphasis on utterance is not kept

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<sup>19</sup> David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>20</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p.272.

in mind – Lacan also argued that speech is the only means of access to the truth about desire – ‘speech alone is the key to that truth’ – and if there is any one concept which can claim to be the very centre of Lacan’s thought, it is the concept of desire.<sup>21</sup> The next question that arises is: why this time-frame in particular?

For one, it is during this period that Irish culture morphs into a novel-driven discourse and the other forms of expression, the oral tradition, poetry and the short story form, have either been subsumed into the greater metanarrative or have been made wholly redundant. This may be because the novel, in the words of Bakhtin, is the ‘only developing genre and therefore reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process.’<sup>22</sup> The Irish nation was one of the first to begin a concerted effort in decolonisation and the novelist, in any decolonising formation, must also be a teacher; their task is to interrogate and expose the received narrative of the dominate culture, and to educate the oppressed population as to the alternatives.

Robert Welch, in his *Changing States: Transformations in Irish Writing*, notes that ‘Irish culture, now, and for the last one hundred years, has been preoccupied with the question of continuity, and this at a time when it seems that the idea of continuity and the related one of community are cracking up irremediably.’<sup>23</sup> In a nation, dominated by the colonizers’ life and thought, the English novel acted as a dialogic, centripetal (centralising) force to the voices it was silencing and the Irish tradition reacted in an erstwhile centrifugal (decentralising) pattern. These are terms used by Bakhtin, who was describing the bind between the centralising tendencies of colonial power and the decentralising exchange with the colonised nation. Ergo, in order to command a central dialogic voice, it becomes necessary to reach out and silence the disparate voice of which it is itself partly composed, which is in itself, a centripetal action. This bind becomes more complex when we realise that the Irish novelist attempted a similar exchange in the drive towards modernism and helps explain somewhat, the stop-start nature in the development of cultural trends.

Homi Bhabha wrote that ‘colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (1977) p.172.

<sup>22</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Welch, *Changing States – Transformations in Modern Irish Writings*, p.37.



visible.<sup>24</sup> Bhabha opened up ‘the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.’<sup>25</sup> It should allow us to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.<sup>26</sup> Externally, the Irish were indistinguishable from their colonial masters. Yet the master text of English literature needs an ‘other’ to construct itself. The cultural nationalists of the nineteenth century looked back with fondness towards the Gaelic bardic tradition as the high water mark of Irish culture. What was inherent in Irish expression soon mirrored the Irish psyche – the carnivalesque, playful society was not conducive to the complexities of the traditional form and hence the emphasis on drama, poetry and short fiction.

The critic Luke Gibbons wrote: ‘Celticism...was an attempt by a colonial power to hypostasize an alien, refractory culture in order to define it within its own controlling terms.’<sup>27</sup> In his innovative *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Gibbons further develops this notion. Influenced by Fanon’s theory of national movements, Gibbons posited the theory that historians drew on a discourse of race to advance the notion of ‘an original native purity’ which they could control by blocking out the ‘impure’ influences of colonial discourse. The past was not part of recorded history, rather it was tied up in the oral tradition, where words were ‘not about history but part of history.’<sup>28</sup> The text existed in an open-ended space, where ‘reality...becomes dislocated from structures of signification, and takes the form of the random impression.’<sup>29</sup> Because of Ireland’s close proximity to England, with Dublin as the centre of a ‘metropolitan colony’, our culture was far more deeply affected by English literary

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<sup>24</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Differences, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism’, in Houston A. Baker et al, *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> Luke Gibbons, ‘Challenging the Canon: Revisionism and Cultural Criticism’, in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing – Volume III*. p. 563.

<sup>28</sup> Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p.135.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

trends and political traditions. But while the postcolonial stance affirms the value of otherness, radical decolonisation remains ‘caught within the very terms that are being disputed.’<sup>30</sup>

This bind lends credence to Gerry Smyth’s assertion that:

The peculiar political formation of post-colonial Ireland... is characterised by insecurity and a constant need for self-identification, conditions which are themselves left over from colonial times: Who am I in relation to the groups and the beliefs and the political affiliations I perceive around me? Who am I in relation to the past from which I believe myself to have emerged and the future towards which I believe myself to be moving?<sup>31</sup>

Post-independence, novelistic discourse was in danger of being overwhelmed by a sort of anthropological discourse in which, as part of a general decolonising programme, Irish writers used their intimate knowledge of the manner and morals of the nation to combat negative and disabling colonial representations. Throughout this early period writers like Sean O’Faoláin would boast that ‘we have explored Irish life with an objectivity never hitherto applied to it, and in this Joyce rather than Yeats is our inspiration.’<sup>32</sup> Between the publication of *Ulysses* in 1922 and *Finnegans Wake* in 1939, we witness perhaps the first stage in the evolution of the modern Irish novel post-independence. This is an assertion shared by Maurice Harmon who suggested that ‘modern Irish prose fiction may be said to have begun with George Moore and James Joyce and to have developed thereafter in two separate generations, that of the twenties and that of the fifties.’<sup>33</sup> Joyce’s influence predominates this period, as Darcy O’Brien affirms: ‘To say that portrait has influenced subsequent Irish writing is like saying that *A Preface to Lyrical Ballads* influenced the English romantic movements.’<sup>34</sup>

In order to structure this book, a more manageable timeframe is needed and if I have chosen to overlook this earlier phase it is partially due to those themes which Robert Caswell aptly describes as ‘exile and resignation’ that predominate this period, with exile personified by

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.137.

<sup>31</sup> Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation – Studies in the New Irish Fiction*, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Klaus Lubbers, ‘Irish Fiction: A Mirror for Specifics’, p.101.

<sup>33</sup> Maurice Harmon, ‘Generations Apart: 1925-1975’, in Patrick Raffroidi and Terence Brown (eds), *The Irish Novel in our Time*, p.49.

<sup>34</sup> Darcy O’Brien, ‘In Ireland After A Portrait’, in Thomas F. Stanley & Bernard Benstock (eds.) *Approaches to Joyce’s “Portrait”: Ten Essays*, p.214.

Stephen Dedalus and resignation embodied in Leopold Bloom.<sup>35</sup> Here, the development of the novel branches off into more torturous passageways overshadowed always by Joyce and later Beckett – it was during this period that the heady expectations of independence were met by a narrow, chauvinistic, self-protective brand of nationalism. As Frantz Fanon illustrated in *The Wretched of the Earth*, anti-colonial nationalism was locked into Western imperialist modes of thought. The intellectuals and social-elite that were responsible in leading the nationalist drive were the ones who, once they came to power, quickly reinstated the systems of hierarchy and privilege that had characterised the colonial policy.<sup>36</sup> The flight from colonial discourse only served to extenuate the divide between the elite and the working class. Those who could master the language of the colonists were the ones who betrayed their own ideal, as Fanon asserts: '[t]he native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work' and failing 'to realise that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country.'<sup>37</sup>

For writers, the harshest result of the new puritanical ethos was the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929, which further alienated the native author, with the result that two separate strands emerged from this period, a quasi-realist strand which aimed to expose these puritanical tendencies and a fabulist strand which sought to escape or satirize them. Thus the resurgence of the Irish novel in the fifties owes as much to the failure of its predecessors to escape from the spectres of nationalism and the disappointment of the emerging state than to any faltering approach to form. For those experimental writers, the case of Joyce's influence is different. The reaction of subsequent Irish writers to his work exemplifies Harold Bloom's notions about 'the anxiety of influence,' with the later writers overshadowed by their great literary father, and in the best Freudian traditions, subsequently seeking to kill him off in a figurative and symbolic sense.<sup>38</sup> Some Irish writers of this period, such as Kate O'Brien, felt compelled to deny, rather unconvincingly, Joyce's influence altogether: 'The Joyce influence, which is or has been everywhere in Europe, is not now very evident in Irish writing. It is as if there is a kind of

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Caswell, 'The Irish Novel: Exile, Resignation or Acceptance', in *Wascana Review*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, p. 137.

revolt against his greatness<sup>39</sup>; while Brinsley Sheridan's 'Novelist' in *The Various Lives of Marcus Igoe* boasted: "'I'll beat Joyce at his own game!'"<sup>40</sup>

Another reason why I aim to focus upon the period 1955 – 1990 is that many cultural nationalists in this earlier period felt that the novel was inadequate to the task of representing the nation, and it therefore retains a more problematic relationship in itself than the one which I am attempting to resolve. Given the distortions of which it was capable, and the kind of readership it seemed to attract, the novel was seen as a debased cultural form wherein it was impossible to address the serious concerns of nation-building. Bakhtin spoke of struggle between two contradictory politico-cultural tendencies as a clear demand towards centralizing the verbalideological world. He claims that this is typical of the way power has traditionally operated within Western societies, and its effects can be discerned in all manner of cultural and political discourses. For Bakhtin, literary discourse in general, and the novel specifically, developed to introduce heteroglossia (many/voices, or those which a nation uses to measure its sense of identity) into the monologic (essential truths in the essential language) national discourse. Thus, in this early period, the novel is too often seen in Jameson's term as an 'allegory', a straightforward statement appropriated by writers to perform monologic ideological tasks for which it was palpably unsuited.<sup>41</sup>

It is only in the period 1955–1990, where we witness an increased eclecticism and internationalism of influences and perspectives. This is one of the keys to the expansion of my argument, which I shall discuss later in this chapter. Some of the more notable examples include Aidan Higgins *Langrishe, Go Down*, which is more clearly influenced by Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* than by Beckett or Joyce and, like its literary forebear, it offers a multifaceted and highly complex examination of a number of interrelated themes: the relationship of man to nature, the idea of property and ownership, the nature of the family and the nature of inheritance. William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* similarly shared Faulkneresque influences, notable in that, as in *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the crucial stream of consciousness narrators in the novel is Imelda, the deranged young offspring of incestuous pairing. There were others in this

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<sup>39</sup> Kate O'Brien, 'Imaginative Prose by the Irish, 1820 – 1970', in Joseph Ronsley (ed.), *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, p.312.

<sup>40</sup> Brinsley MacNamara, *The Various Lives of Maurice Igoe*, p.195.

<sup>41</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, p.141

period that followed a similar trend, most notably the three authors who form the basis of this book, John Broderick, John McGahern and Brian Moore.

## **The Authors and their Context 1960 – 1990**

Following on from Bakhtin's theories on heteroglossia, in an essay written for the first Kate O'Brien weekend, Colin Tóibín would question:

How... the novel [can] flourish in such a world? The novel explores psychology, sociology, the individual consciousness; the novel finds a form and a language for these explorations. We require an accepted world for the novel to flourish, a shared sense of time and place.<sup>42</sup>

For Tóibín, Irish history was a series of vignettes portraying our romantic, embattled tradition, but it was a history without continuity and no clear legacy. Fragmentation was integral to the Irish experience. By the dawning of the twentieth-first century, as George O'Brien put it:

The Irish novel – long the poor relation of our literary family, the resort of exiles, eccentrics and other misfits including the not infrequent crawthumper; occasion of the censor's official repression, official and otherwise; by virtue of formal insecurity and thematic ambivalence the very image of the quaking sod – is now the elephant in the room.<sup>43</sup>

Initially, it seemed that an Irish writer had to live somewhere else, like Joyce, Beckett and William Trevor. While they remembered their Irish childhood with affection and wrote about it with great feeling, they lived in exile. This applied also, to a greater or lesser degree, to Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, Brian Moore and Edna O'Brien. John McGahern was forced to emigrate, albeit briefly, as a result of the furore over the publication of *The Dark*. Censorship certainly contributed to this exodus, as did the structures of the Irish publishing industry but, as I indicated earlier, there also seemed to be a certain psychological reluctance. Tóibín's argument is certainly of interest and he would argue that the lack of a sophisticated readership in Ireland meant that authors had no other option but to depart and attempt to find an audience elsewhere. Following on from the essay already quoted, Tóibín suggested:

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<sup>42</sup> Colin Tóibín, 'Martyrs and Metaphors', in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Letters from the New Island*, p. 45.

<sup>43</sup> George O'Brien, 'The Elephant of Irish Fiction', p. 134.

There was no audience for such books. It was not just that Ireland did not offer a shelter between history and destiny for the novelists to pitch their tent, thus causing them to write at one remove from what was happening. But there was no-one to read the books, no set of educated, curious, open-minded literate people. It should not be assumed that censorship did not deeply affect what was written and in what style it was written during this period. The result was a tradition of the novel that was clever, inventive and self-obsessed.<sup>44</sup>

It is a contentious argument. John Broderick, a writer whose first novel was banned by the Censorship Board, spoke on how censorship could adversely affect a writer's style. For Broderick:

[If I had censorship] at the back of my mind... two things then would happen to you. One was that you would write in order to get past the censors; therefore, you would suppress certain truths which you think should have been told. The other one was that you would do something in order to shock them, and both these attitudes upset the artistic balance.<sup>45</sup>

Fiscal considerations would have been a factor. Broderick admitted that if he were a schoolteacher or librarian in Athlone at that time: 'I couldn't possibly have written that [*The Pilgrimage*] book and published it. I would have met the same fate as John McGahern.'<sup>46</sup> The background to the banning of John McGahern's *The Dark* is examined later. It resulted in the writer's sacking from his schoolteacher position for having the audacity to publish a novel which openly dealt with the themes of small town inhibitions and sexual frustration.

Another question which Tóibín poses is whether there was a sophisticated audience for such works. This is again questionable. It is true that there was a pervasive air of anti-intellectualism at play and the Church played a significant part in removing a number of modern classics from the book-shelves. The novelist formed his own moral majority outside the pale of clerical and political influence and was regarded as being something of a subversive force. Did the rolling out of free secondary education, coupled with the decline of Church authority, act as a catalyst? It appears to be an over-simplification but there is little doubt that the

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<sup>44</sup> Colin Tóibín, 'Martyrs and Metaphors', p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland – Censorship and the Irish Writer*, p.40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

changing narratives of Irish life have contributed in helping the novelist transcend the inhibitions that had restricted them since then.

John Broderick, Brian Moore and John McGahern were in the ‘first wave’ of artists who chose the novel as their preferred medium of expression. Curiously, each chose a female character to act as the central protagonist in their first novel – the result was a virtual renaissance in Irish fiction and the publication of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955), *The Pilgrimage* (1961) and *The Barracks* (1963) appeared to herald something of a new departure. Each of these three novels, in part, concentrated on desire and sexuality, clerical ignorance or repression and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the small towns and villages in Ireland.

Whether Irish society was ready for this form of catharsis is another matter. The censorship board acted with archetypal heavy-handedness and banned both *Judith Hearne* and *The Pilgrimage*. *The Barracks* was spared as there was no overt display of sexuality in the novel but ironically, of the three, it is perhaps the most subversive. What occurred afterwards was a gradual malaise borne out of frustration on the author’s part rather than that of his audience. Moore abandoned Ireland as a theme in his fiction and became better known as a Canadian author. As he said in an interview with Julia Carlson: ‘The fact that Irish writers didn’t look upon me as a native son is counterbalanced in my mind by the fact that the English have never treated me as a purely Irish writer.’<sup>47</sup> Broderick wrote four novels in rapid succession which represent his best work. But by the late sixties he had retreated into alcoholism and wrote nothing for a period of eight years. McGahern was forced to emigrate after the banning of *The Dark* and he too stopped writing for a number of years afterwards.

A second wave of Irish novelists emerged in the mid to late seventies. Drawn mostly from the disaffected urban communities and seeking a more coherent form of expression, high profile examples includes John Banville, Colm Tóibín, Roddy Doyle Dermot Bolger, Patrick McCabe and Eoin McNamee. As Ray Ryan explains, these novelists drew attention to a world:

[n]either country nor city – these streets possessed no place in the school books and poems we learnt at our wooden desks... This aspect of Irish life, despite being an everyday reality for an increasingly large percentage of the population, was almost totally absent from Irish writing until recently... it is only in the post-1968 generation that the confidence to

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland*, p. 118.

remain true to ordinary modern experience around them finally begins to be displayed.<sup>48</sup>

However, as Joe Cleary has pointed out, the style, subject and setting of Irish literature can be modernized without disturbing established narrative codes.<sup>49</sup> Tóibín's first novel *The South* (1987), concerns a woman who leaves her husband and child behind her to become an artist in Spain. Set partly in mid-fifties provincial Ireland, partly in Franco's Spain, the novel charts Katherine Proctor's gradual and painful process of development as a person and artist. While many of the themes in the novel are divorced from the traditional schema, the established codes evident in the work of McGahern and Broderick are evident also in *The South*: Irish antipathies, memories and repressions are set against a portrait of rural Catalonia and Tóibín duly pays homage to both the 'Big House' genre and to McGahern's studies in isolation, repression and the traumatic effects of war on an individual or community. Dermot Bolger has also consciously set himself the task of redefining the connections between the present crisis and the imagined past. John Banville began by parodying the Big House memoirs of the early twentieth century in *Birchwood* (1973) before embarking on a tetralogy of sorts which plumbs the biographies of great scientists and questions the methods and parameters of scientific inquiry. Roddy Doyle alternates his tragic-comic depictions of inner-city 'Barrytown' with novels about Irish history. Anne Enright's second novel is based on the life of the nineteenth-century Irish adventuress Eliza Lynch – like McGahern, her forte remains the secret sexual histories encoded in families.

It is evident then that the burden of history plays an important part in the development of the modern novel, unsurprising perhaps in a society where the textbooks were replete with the hagiography of Republican martyrs, tales of doomed romantics and perfidious Albion. The triumphalism of Fianna Fáil and the old slogans of spiritual obedience and frugal comforts sufficed for an earlier generation but were wholly redundant for those forced to endure inner-city poverty and deprivation. Curiously, neither McGahern nor Broderick chose to develop this theme in their fiction – their vision is firmly set against the backdrop of the small rural communities they knew best. Indeed, it is one of the reasons why I

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<sup>48</sup> Ray Ryan, 'The Republic and Ireland: Pluralism, Politics and Narrative Form', in Ray Ryan, *Writing in the Irish Republic*, p.84.

<sup>49</sup> Joe Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', in Ray Ryan, *Writing in the Irish Republic*, p.105-129.



chose these three authors for this book. Their oeuvre is built on the repressive nature of the community and the Church, on family trauma and the deconstruction of empty nationalist rhetoric. These are themes that I will develop and examine over the course of the book. I chose the six specific texts as they tie in with each other, offering far better scope for a unified examination on repression, desire, feminine sexuality and the claustrophobic nature of Irish society.

So Broderick's *The Fugitives* can be compared to McGahern's *Amongst Women* or Moore's *Cold Heaven* as an examination of female resistance to patriarchal dominance. The respective protagonists – Lily Fallon, Shelia Moran and Marie Davenport – draw a number of similarities to each other; they are free-spirited, libidinous, they operate successfully within the confines of a male-dominated order and undermine the stereotype of the Irish womanhood as confined to hearth and home. There are a number of similarities between *The Waking of Willie Ryan* and *The Dark*, notably as an examination of secret (and incestuous) sexual codes of Irish families. Judith Hearne's recurrent dilemma on how one may be both a sexual being and a practicing Catholic is shared by young Mahoney in *The Dark*. The claustrophobic nature of a closed society ready to expel any form of sexual transgression is shared by all. As I examine each of these novels, further connections will become equally apparent. Both of Broderick's novels, as well as *Judith Hearne* and *The Dark* collectively offer an image of the social tumult affecting Irish society in the sixties. Moore's *Cold Heaven*, although set in the America, offers an excellent comparative to some of the changes (or lack of them) affecting Ireland during the seventies and eighties. Lastly, McGahern's *Amongst Women* is a fascinating examination of Irish historicity – his view on this period is a contentious though authoritative one.

## Ireland – Society 1960 – 1990

Declan Kiberd, in his *Inventing Ireland – The Literature of the Modern Nation*, dedicates a chapter to 'The Writer and Society 1960 – 1990', detailing how the posture of 'inherited dissent' was dismantled in the early sixties to make way for what Augustine Martin called the 'forces of affirmation.'<sup>50</sup> If censorship, ostracism and exile were the lot of the previous generation of Irish writers, this period proved a turning point.

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<sup>50</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland – The Literature of the Modern Nation*, pp. 580 – 613, p. 581.

The banning of John McGahern's *The Dark* was significant in that the preceding murmurs of dissent suddenly became a national outcry. A new mood was fermenting and the Church, once unquestioned bastion of moral probity, soon found themselves on the defensive. By the mid-sixties Episcopal decrees were being questioned in a way that was unheard of before; indeed a number were held up to ridicule.<sup>51</sup> The departure of De Valera in 1959 could be seen as a signpost for change and his successor, Sean Lemass, though of De Valera's generation, was a man more in tune with economic and social realities. He oversaw the implementation of T.K. Whitaker's ground-breaking five year plan for economic recovery – a marked development in that the emphasis suddenly shifted from protectionism to free trade, to the encouragement of foreign investment and greater emphasis on industry rather than export-orientated agriculture. Through favourable international circumstances, G.P.A. increased from a one per cent average between 1950 and 1958 to a four per cent average between 1959 and 1973.<sup>52</sup>

With economic expansion came significant social change. A reversal in emigration and a rise of about fifty per cent in material living standards helped towards a rise in the population from 2.82 million in 1961 to 2.98 million in 1971. The number of marriages rose from a trough of 14,700 in 1957 to 22,000 in 1971.<sup>53</sup> The changes, while not spectacular in absolute terms, assumed a historical significance in that they reversed the trend of more than a century. With growth came the increased realisation of the importance of education. An OECD report, titled *Investment in Education*, was published in 1965 highlighting the particularly serious situation which existed at second level.<sup>54</sup> The balance of power between the traditional hegemonic Church and the state began to shift and by 1967, the then

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<sup>51</sup> An example of which was 'The Bishop and the Nightie Affair' as detailed in John Cooney's *John Charles McQuaid – Ruler of Catholic Ireland*, pp. 304-305. See also J.H. Whyte's *Church & State in Modern Ireland*, pp. 331-362.

<sup>52</sup> B.M. Walsh, 'Economic Growth & Development, 1945-1970', in J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1945 – 1970*, p.33.

<sup>53</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912 – 1985*, p. 360. During the 1960s immigration, perhaps the best barometer of Irish society, fell from 43,000 per annum between 1956 and 1961 to 11,000 between 1966 and 1971.

<sup>54</sup> John Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure*, pp.165-166. The OEDC report highlighted a 'test year' which analysed a cohort of 55,000 pupils, of which 17,500 left full-time education at primary level and 13,500 left at Inter-Cert level. Of the 10,000 who sat the Leaving Certificate Examination, only 2,000 entered University.

Minister of Education Donogh O'Malley was confident enough to announce free education at second level without having consulted the cabinet, who were swept along on the tide of public enthusiasm. Between 1966 and 1969 the number of secondary school pupils rose from 104,000 to 144,000, or as much in the previous ten years.<sup>55</sup>

During this period, the Catholic Church in Ireland was distracted by more pressing concerns. Its conservative hierarchy found itself at odds with the *aggiornamento* policies of the Second Vatican Council, and while many Bishops responded by relaxing their older, more autocratic styles of address, there were others who retreated further into more indentured orthodoxy. This set the trend for the next thirty years, with most religious debates internal to the Catholic Church though the hierarchy remained vociferously opposed to the staple concerns of contraception, divorce and abortion. However, this was set against Irish sexual behaviour, both within and outside marriage, which became markedly more liberal; many rights denied to women – such as the right to work in the civil service after marriage – were restored.<sup>56</sup> The right of married couples to use contraceptives as an aspect of family planning had been upheld by the Supreme Court in 1973, but in the teeth of conservative opinion the sale of contraceptives became farcical – they could only be purchased by a married couple on prescription from their GP. ‘An Irish solution to an Irish problem’, as the then Health minister wryly opined.<sup>57</sup>

In 1983, a bitterly acrimonious debate on abortion was held in which the conservatives won something of a Pyrrhic victory and three years later, a similarly divisive referendum on rescinding the ban on divorce was defeated, illustrating that the dominance of the Catholic Church remained battered but ultimately resolute. But the economic climate had changed in the intervening years. By the late eighties, a clear majority of the people

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Breen, *Understanding Contemporary Ireland – State, Class and Development in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 132.

<sup>56</sup> Eunice McCarthy, ‘Women and Work in Ireland’, in Margaret Mac Curtain and Donncha Ó Corráin (eds), *Women in Irish Society – The Historical Dimension*, pp. 104-117. In 1971, working women in Ireland represented only 27.3 per cent (287,867) of the total Irish workforce of 1.1 million - progress during the 1970s was slow but consistent. The Council for the Status of Women was set up in 1973. The Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act of 1974 was a major advance. The Employment Equality Act was passed in 1977 and the Employment Equality Agency was set up in the same year.

<sup>57</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland – Nation and State*, pp.335-337.

were better educated, housed and cared for than ever before.<sup>58</sup> Yet there were nearly three hundred thousand people unemployed and one in three lived below the official poverty line.<sup>59</sup> The sixties revival was checked in the mid-seventies by international recession, fluctuating oil prices and increased competition through our involvement with the EEC. Borrowing to make up the shortfall led the Irish economy into a morass, exacerbated by political upheaval and the spectre of the Northern troubles. Poverty and want had been tolerated before under the cloak of spurious patriotism or through the Church's emphasis on spiritual rather than material comforts, but by now this was no longer an acceptable coda to an increasingly disenfranchised population. The lack of employment, high taxation and a burgeoning debt crisis induced many young people to leave the country and emigration soon began to reach chronic proportions. It seemed clear that new political, social and cultural changes were needed to give voice to the transformation which occurred during the intervening thirty years.

In 1990, Mary Robinson, a feminist and civil rights lawyer, defeated two male candidates in the Presidential Election on a platform that focused on attempting to bring fresh perspectives to bear on traditional concerns. Her victory, as Carol Coulter explains: 'was widely welcomed as a triumph for those who supported a modernising, liberal agenda for Ireland, and as a defeat for those associated with nationalism and Catholic traditionalism.'<sup>60</sup> Shortly after her ascendancy to the Presidency, the Catholic Bishop of Galway resigned in disgrace after it was discovered both that he had fathered a child with an American divorcee and that he had embezzled diocesan funds to pay for her silence.<sup>61</sup> The Bishop Casey scandal, like Robinson's election as President, was a watershed in Irish life. The Church soon found itself facing a barrage of allegations

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<sup>58</sup> Ray MacSharry, *The Making of the Celtic Tiger – The Inside Story of Ireland's Boom Economy*, p.26ff.: 'In 1964, just one in four of seventeen-year-olds were still in secondary education; by 1994 that figure had risen to 83 per cent.'

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38: 'Unemployment rose steadily from 1970 to 1976, where it peaked for the decade with 9 per cent – 105,000 out of work. However the subsequent decline to 7.1 per cent was short lived. And by 1986, a record 226,000 – some 17 per cent of the labour force – were jobless.'

<sup>60</sup> Carol Coulter, *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland*, p.1.

<sup>61</sup> Gene Kerrigan, *This Great Little Nation*, p.44: 'In July 1990 Casey agreed to Murphy's terms: \$100,000 for her, \$25,000 for her lawyer. Casey financed this with £70,669 from a diocesan account. He made up the balance of \$8,000 out of his own funds.'

concerning abuses perpetuated by the hierarchy and the religious orders, lurching from one scandal to another throughout the nineties.<sup>62</sup> By the decade's close, the Catholic Church's standing had effectively collapsed, as much a victim of its own conceited excesses as of its sheer immutability. Fianna Fáil, which at one point equalled the Church in its ubiquitous position in Irish society, was rocked by a series of scandals, mostly notably through the sacking of Minister for Defence Brian Lenihan for lying about the contents of an interview he conducted with a young UCD post-graduate. It was something of a tragic-comic fiasco and effectively cost Lenihan the Presidency. The psychic effects of this cannot be underestimated – the Presidency had been traditionally both a male *and* Fianna Fáil preserve. It would be interesting, perhaps, to draw a comparison between Fianna Fáil and the Catholic Church in this period – both were seen as monolithic institutions, but hopelessly outdated (or perhaps no longer fashionable) and by the early nineties open to increasing ridicule and dissent. Fianna Fáil's status as the ideologically pure 'legion of the rearguard' was destroyed by the revelation of corruption and embezzlement perpetuated by then Taoiseach Charles Haughey and his fellow Ministers. Curiously, while the Church continued to collapse throughout the nineties, Fianna Fáil staged a revival of sorts and have since returned and remained in power since 1997. Some sins are more forgivable than others it seems.

In this period, the Irish novel adapted according to the mood of the times. While upper-class and Catholic novelists continued to emerge, the burgeoning middle-class was much more prominent in both authorship and the readership of the Irish novel. In general, Irish readership today resembles the English readership of a century ago more than the Ascendancy-dominated readership of the nineteenth century. Yet it is striking how many of the earlier subgenres have gained prominence in the novel, say for example the Big House form which has been borrowed by writers such as Aidan Higgins, John Banville and Jennifer Johnson. The *Bildungsroman* has become a common fictional testing ground but the rise in Irish novels by women during this period is certainly noteworthy, expanding beyond the traditional Ascendancy background to incorporate writers such as Edna O'Brien, Janet McNeill, Julia O'Faoláin and Eilís Dillon.

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<sup>62</sup> Ref. esp. Patrick Touher, *Fear of the Collar: Artane Industrial School*, and Chris Moore, *Betrayal of Trust: The Father Brendan Smyth Affair and the Catholic Church*.

Certainly, one can trace a sort of remorseless privatisation of experience during this period, an art which located its interest in the pathology of the alienated individual. Something fundamentally different has overtaken novelistic discourse since the early nineties, combining a willingness to confront the formal and conceptual legacies of a received literary tradition to reflect Ireland's post-modern circumstances. So I would argue that the period I am investigating is the period when modernism moved from opposition to accepted form and the Irish novelist explored the way in which cultural narratives mediated the indelible changes which occurred during the years 1960 – 1990.

### **Belfast and Society**

The passage of the Government of Ireland Act on the 23 December 1920 provided the legal basis for the setting up of devolved state of Northern Ireland. Comprising the six north-eastern counties, it constituted 17 per cent of the land area of the whole island. From the beginning, it served as a sort of middle-space between nationalist aims of unity and loyalist intransigence. When Home Rule appeared inevitable, northern Protestants' settled for partition, self-government and a permanent majority that copper-fastened their supremacy by gerrymandering constituencies and extending additional voting privileges to the property classes – the largest of whom were, inevitably, Protestant. Discrimination in the allocation of jobs and homes kept Catholics in the position of second-class citizens. As Kiberd states:

Life for northern nationalists was hard. Some of their elected leaders boycotted the Stormont parliament in Belfast; and those who took part in it were never embraced. In all the years of Stormont's existence until it was prorogued in 1972, the Unionist party voted in only one amendment proposed by nationalists and that was to a wildlife bill!<sup>63</sup>

Pre-war, depression in the staple industries, linen and shipbuilding, kept unemployment at disproportionately high level – having reached 25 per cent of the insured workforce in 1932, it climbed to 28 per cent in 1938.<sup>64</sup> The war economy brought relative prosperity to Ulster and subsequently the expansion of the British welfare state, together with measures adopted

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<sup>63</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland – The Literature of the Modern Nation*, p. 415.

<sup>64</sup> Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland, 1921 – 1939*, p. 52.