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Editor's Introduction

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Claudia Luppino

Introduction

The year 2011 was marked, both in France and in Ireland, by a series of dramatic events that forced the two countries to deal with heavy postcolonial legacies and with the challenges of shifting populations in a globalised world. In Ireland, one of the effects of the dramatic post-Celtic Tiger recession, and of the consequent EU-funded bailout of the country, was the departure of many immigrants who had arrived only a few years earlier from Eastern Europe and Africa. Ireland, a former colony and once known for massive emigration had, during the boom, become a magnet for economic migrants. Now a casualty of the shifting balances of global economy and international financial speculation, emigration is once again a feature of Irish life. Following the 'Arab Spring', some major dictatorial regimes in North Africa fell and others faltered, opening up new hopes for democracy. At the same time, large numbers of people were prompted to cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life in Europe. Many chose France because of its economic and linguistic bonds with its former African colonies. But, at a time of international economic crisis and job losses, new waves of right-wing extremism, xenophobia and protectionism have altered the internal dynamics of the European Union to the point where many are now questioning the open frontiers policy enshrined in the Schengen Agreement.

Revolving around the pivotal common denominator of change, the articles presented in this edition of *JOFIS* provide a wide and diverse range of perspectives and challenging critical reflections on how the winds of change that have swept France and Ireland at crucial historical moments have affected the cultural production stemming from these countries and from their peripheries.

The first of three sections in which the journal is divided is titled "A view from afar: changing perspectives on Irish and French culture in the new millennium". Whether focusing on the production of Irish or French authors living away from their native countries, or on the experiences abroad of their characters, the articles grouped in this section all approach the issue of change in connection with emigration.

In “ ‘Breakfast-time back home’?: ‘New Irish’ poets Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall”, Ailbhe McDaid examines emigration to America at the end of the eighties. While providing an in-depth analysis of the poetry of Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall, probing the ways in which their individual relocations have affected their work, McDaid casts an insightful look on the heterogeneous nature of the subsequent waves of Irish emigration, and ultimately questions the peculiar absence of poets based outside of Ireland from the Irish literary canon. Interestingly, reference is also made to some contemporaneous advertising campaigns that reinforced entrenched attitudes to emigration by deploying traditional and familiar tropes of parting and reuniting, the promotion of familial bonds, and the comforting images of home.

In “Change as threat: Envisioning the E/end in Colum McCann’s two collections of short stories”, Cécile Maudet also deals with the theme of emigration and in particular with the often apocalyptic change experienced by migrants, who are uprooted from the old world they leave behind and transplanted in the new one they move to. Written in the period that marked the end not only of a century but also of a millennium, and hence characterized by febrile expectations in the popular imagination, the stories of *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and *Everything in this Country Must* (2000), stage different types of change – the end of a relationship or of a way of life, emigration, death – and Maudet’s analysis concentrates on the ways in which McCann lingers on these ends and on how they are all experienced by his characters as tragedies.

A different perspective on the changes connected with emigration, namely the belief in its ability to offer a chance of renewal and re-invention, especially at times of economic and political, but also individual crisis, is offered by Catherine O’Brien in “The Emigrant Experience: Sebastian Barry’s *On Canaan’s Side* (2011)”. The writings of Jacques Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha are used to interpret the emigrant experience as embodied by the protagonist of Barry’s novel, as well as the narrative strategies she employs to report such an experience. In doing so, O’Brien reflects on the performative character of identity, particularly in the post-colonial context, and fosters a revisionist approach to history.

The diverse spectrum of perspectives on emigration afforded by the first section of

this collection is completed by Sheila Walsh's "A Prophetic Voice? Albert Memmi's *Portrait du décolonisé arabo-musulman et de quelques autres*". The focus, in this case, is on the decolonised subject living in former French colonies or as an immigrant or a child of immigrant parents in the West. Unlike the widely respected and frequently cited *Portrait du colonisé précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (1957), its 2004 counterpart gained its author a muted, if not hostile, response. While acknowledging the flaws of Memmi's recent work, Walsh nevertheless attempts a critical reappraisal of its prophetic diagnosis of the corruption and of the social, political and economic instability of countries such as Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia. In the light of the so-called 'Arab Spring' of North-African and Middle Eastern countries in early 2011, but also of the riots that struck French and English suburbs in 2005 and in 2011 respectively, Walsh's assessment of Memmi's work proves a useful and suggestive reminder of the important social and political changes taking place in the present time.

The second section of the journal is devoted to "Historical change and individual crisis: Irish identities on stage" and features articles that investigate the alternative responses of twentieth-century Irish dramatists to change.

In the first article of this section, Amy Burnside's "'He thinks he's entangled in a net': The web of continental associations in *Waiting for Godot*" offers an original reading of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece. Moving from the narrow and provincial conceptions of Irish literature and identity that characterised much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Burnside focuses on the three chief areas of thought dealt with by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* – religion, philosophy, and history – and on the Irish and French influences on each of them. The impact of European secularity but also of Irish cultural Christianity and of Beckett's own family's religious background are, thus, taken into account, along with the ways in which European philosophy (in particular Sartre's and Camus's thought) and Irish and European history are incorporated in the play. A brief but insightful analysis of the linguistic 'Irishness' of Beckett's text is also provided.

In "'Winds of change' in *The Moon in the Yellow River* and *The Dreaming Dust* by Denis Johnston: staging identity in a crisis", Virginie Girel-Pietka focuses on Johnston's

participation in the debate surrounding Irish identity and its representation in the plays staged by the Abbey and the Gate theatres in their first years of existence. In contrast with the stereotypical 'misrepresentation' of Irish people as buffoons or villains in the colonial dramatic tradition, but also at a remove from the idealized versions of Irishness fostered and staged by nationalist playwrights, Girel-Pietka argues, Johnston's plays acknowledged and incorporated international trends and concerns, thus broadening the narrow scope of the Irish protectionist culture of the 1930s and 40s. By unsettling conventional stage language and stock characters, both *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931) and *The Dreaming Dust* (1940) ultimately reflect upon the elusive nature of man's identity.

The portrayal of Irish identity is also at the core of "Incomplete initiations in Brian Friel's plays", in which Chu He draws an interesting parallel between the condition of Ireland and its people at crucial times of change, such as the 1960s and the 1990s, and that of the main characters of Brian Friel's plays of those years, *Crystal and Fox* (1968) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994). Focusing on the drastic changes experienced by Friel's characters, Chu He highlights the limbo, or the *impasse*, in which they find themselves, stuck between an irretrievable past and an uninhabitable future, reading their transformations in terms of 'incomplete initiation rites' and their resulting alienated and unstable condition as reflecting Irish society's unresolved tension between tradition and modernity, both under de Valera and in the Celtic Tiger years.

The third and final section of the journal deals with the different "Images of a changing society in late 19th- and in 20th- century Irish and French literature".

Lauren Clark's "Rev. George Brittain and Joris-Karl Huysmans and sensitive subject/object matters: Literary representations of cultural change?" concentrates on two controversial and critically neglected, nineteenth-century authors and on their imaginative responses to Irish and French national history respectively. By a comparative analysis of Huysmans' and Brittain's novels, *Là-Bas* (1891), *Marthe* (1876) and *Irishmen and Irishwomen* (1830), Clark argues that through sensitive subject matters, such as anti-Catholicism, Satanism, prostitution, provincial humour and shabby suburbs, these two authors fictionalized – sometimes to the point of parody – the contentious aspects of life repressed

by the dominant French and Irish institutions and ideologies. Clark's illuminating analysis, finally, connects Brittain's and Huysmans's fictional renderings of nineteenth-century France and Ireland with French structuralist and poststructuralist thought.

The urban landscape of mid-twentieth-century Dublin is the subject matter of the poems by Patrick Kavanagh analysed by Marjan Shokouhi in " 'If you even go to Dublin town...': Kavanagh's urban flânerie and the Irish capital". Highlighting the poetic sketches of the city and the memories associated by the poet with the different places he walks through, Shokouhi argues that through such poems Kavanagh liberated Irish poetry from the romanticized nostalgic and idealized versions of Ireland, Irishness and the Irish poet produced by the Literary Revival.

In the final article of this collection, "An aestheticising of Irish Peasantry", Hana Khasawneh examines the crucial role of peasant culture and of its antagonism to modernity as a rich source of inspiration to W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde and other authors of the Revival. The change is, thus, detected, in the literary representations of Irish peasants, from poor, ignorant and vulgar victims, to the noble and solemn repositories of the essence of national Irish culture.

The idea for the theme of this issue of the *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies* originated almost two years ago, when the events in the international stage prompted a reflection on the broader notion of change, how it occurs, the ways in which it affects people's everyday life, as well as the artistic and intellectual production it fosters. At a relatively early stage, some changes occurred within the composition of the editorial team itself, which delayed but did not hinder the project.

Held together by an apparently thin but in fact consistent *fil rouge*, namely the investigation of change as experienced and as reflected by different writers in different parts of the world, at different moments of history, and through different genres, the scholarly writings that feature in the present volume also retain a style and a vantage point that is unique to each of them. In the attempt to respect the heterogeneous styles and the diverse perspectives provided by each author, a rich and eclectic collection of essays were assembled that make an important contribution to the current cultural debate around the

transformation of the globalised world and the shifting balance of its internal powers and voices.



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