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## Introduction: France and Ireland: Cultures *en crise*

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## Introduction

### France and Ireland: Cultures *en crise*

As countries with ancient and complex histories, France and Ireland have of course experienced *crise* or crisis in innumerable forms. However, given the financial and housing crises that besmirched 2009 and that continue to dominate current affairs and political rhetoric, the topic of this issue of *JOFIS* seems timely. As the recent, uncontrolled increase in Irish National Debt, the Irish banking crisis, and the subsequent EU/IMF intervention in the Irish economy show, many of the crises that affect the individual in society are largely outside of that individual's control. Yet as the contributors to this issue demonstrate, crisis—whether it be social, ethical, or psychological—has given rise to some of Ireland and France's finest literature, philosophy, art, film, theatre, and critical writing.

Time and time again, French and Irish writers have responded resiliently to crisis. The stifling and destructive period of British colonial rule bred the remarkably fertile production of the so-called Celtic Revival. In the first decades of the twentieth century, and with the establishment of the Irish Free State, Kate O'Brien and countless other writers felt the economic, social and cultural policy of 'ourselves alone' so stultifying that it brought a crisis of creative inactivity. The response to this crisis for many authors was to go into exile in France and elsewhere in order to view their native culture from without, to escape and examine its effects upon domestic literary production. Those authors who remained in Ireland in the early 1920s sought relief in constructing models of understanding to render crisis optimistically as a turning point in Irish civilisation. Reactions to the crisis of Irish partition can be felt in Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1920) and George Russell's *The Interpreters* (1922).

More than forty years later, Irish and French literary and theoretical responses to the outbreak of the troubles in Northern Ireland and the Paris riots of May 1968 were marked by an outpouring of some of the most exhilarating thought of that generation. By summer 1968, heated exchanges in *Tel Quel*, *Change* and *La Nouvelle Critique* addressed the consequences of the supposed “television revolution” in France. In Northern Ireland, the launch of Rev. Ian Paisley’s *Protestant Telegraph* and the Campaign for Social Justice’s *Campaign Newsletter* gave air to views pertaining to crisis, the scars of which would be felt for generations. Superficially then, it might be said that while crisis can involve the interruption of artistic production, the responses to these interruptions in French and Irish culture have been regenerative and forward thinking. And as the articles in this *JOFIS* issue attest, this complex process of inhibition and regeneration can open up to an extremely fruitful exchange of ideas addressing various aspects of Franco-Irish studies.

In 2004, Charl lie Couture, a musician, artist and author from Nancy, released a song entitled “Appel   l’aide (Les Peurs)”. In its opening lyrics, the song lists some of the aspects of the apparent crisis in mid-noughties suburban French life:

Pneumopathie ou tueur en s�rie	Pneumopathy or serial killers
Armes chimiques ou mondialisme	Nuclear weapons or globalism
Peur des sectes et du terrorisme	Fear of sects and of terrorism
Ou retour de l’antis�mitisme	Or of a return to anti-Semitism
Peur du cancer, peurs nucl�aires	Fear of cancer, nuclear fears
Peur de l’Anthrax dans ton thorax	Fear of anthrax in your thorax
Peurs aux fronti�res ou dans les avions [. . .]	Fear on the borders or inside aeroplanes [. . .]

Peur de la came et des dealers mafieux	Fear of drugs and Mafia outfits
Montée de l'islam dans les banlieues	The growth of Islam in the city outskirts
Peurs des rappers des rappers, des rats	Fear of rappers, rappers and rats
Peur des rats et cætera	Fear of rats et cetera
Peurs dans les caves	Fear in the cellars
Et devant le collège, peur des cailleras	And in front of school, fear the jobs who
Qu'on pas peur des keufs	Have no fear of the boys in blue
Pour de vrai, pour de faux,	Whether true or whether forged
Ils attisent la parano.	They forge the paranoid.

The lyrics are delivered throatily against a background of sampled outbursts in *verlan* from disembodied voices, and the effect is disturbing: yet Couture's single fell short of the *Hit Parade*, and subsequent singles from the album *Double Vue* had small mainstream success. *Pour de vrai ou pour de faux*, the fears (Les Peurs) that Couture describes and the crisis that he evokes, found little purchase with his French listeners. This edition of the *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies* seeks to reposition the paradigm of crisis in a range of French and Irish contexts from the sixteenth century to the present—and even beyond.

The rich variety of scholarly writing that this edition of *JOFIS* has attracted addresses matters as diverse as disorder in Descartes and Voltaire, the application of French theory to Brontë and Rhys, cloning and the gothic novel in Ireland, crises of identity in Joyce, the healing potentials

of reading, the political crises of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland in short fiction, and the linguistic disarray in contemporary Irish theatre. These wide-ranging and innovative scholarly responses will be presented in three sections.

Section one approaches the fertile territory of “Contemporary Political, Theoretical and Linguistic Crises in Irish Fiction and Drama.” Here, Claudia Luppino probes the religious and political segregation of the 1970s and 1980s in Ireland as represented in the short story and the sociological theorisation of a pre-multiculturalist state. Analysing the short stories of John McGahern and William Trevor, written on the brink of the arrival of the Celtic Tiger, Luppino explores and complicates identity crisis as represented in Irish fiction with border demarcations. Luppino argues, in fascinating detail, that this crisis of identity amounts to an Irish discomfort at the foreignness felt between native Catholics and Protestants: “the foreigner’s condition is existential: being far from one’s family, country and mother tongue produces a feeling of otherness, of strangeness. [ . . . ] Different types and degrees of foreignness and otherness [ . . . ] mark the dynamics of the Irish social texture.”

If the relationship between Protestants and Catholics has formed a delicate axis upon which peace in contemporary Ireland has turned, it is the use of language and silence which moderates identity crisis in the drama of Enda Walsh according to the next piece in this volume. In her innovative application of Julia Kristeva’s *théorie de l’ « abject »*, Jeanne Lebesconte demonstrates the inability of language to express human identity and need in Enda Walsh’s *Bedbound* (2000). Louis-Ferdinand Céline is credited as one of the prime instigators of the violence of *parole*, but Lebesconte attributes the effect of the inexpressible in stage space to Walsh: « Walsh organise le chaos, il travaille la langue et le rythme avec minutie pour représenter par l’écriture ce langage fracturé et insaisissable, celui qui tente de faire tenir une « identité intenable » ». Lebesconte suggests that the inexpressible is anchored in the drama of the absurd, but that bodily, familial and

linguistic crisis in Walsh's drama cannot be adequately addressed without due attention to Kristeva's contribution to *storytelling*.

Mark Corcoran opens the second section, 'French and Irish Identities in Crisis', with a discussion of James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Corcoran considers the way in which Joyce's early protagonists attempt to negotiate the trammelling social forces of early-twentieth-century Dublin, particularly the family and the Church. He examines the way in which these social institutions condition the development of the self while remaining occluded from the subject's self-conception, thus standing as examples of what Lacan describes as the "big Other."

In this way, Corcoran suggests that Joyce's writing predicts the later work of French theorists such as Lacan and Derrida. However, Corcoran argues that Joyce goes further than mere critique, developing a narrative technique—what Corcoran describes as "a Mirror-ring of Mirrors"—that encourages the reader to fill in ellipses and evasions within the text and thus begin to question the "big Others" at work in the reader's own social and subjective experience.

Corcoran's discussion connects neatly with Catherine O'Brien's scrutiny of identity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and William Trevor's short story "Lost Ground" (1996). O'Brien too demonstrates that literary works can help to reveal "the extent to which individual identities can become emaciated to the point of disappearance when confronted with the tyranny of the systems which operate in society." With great attention paid to the theories of Derrida, Lacan, Saussure and De Beauvoir, O'Brien tracks the focal characters of each text to complicate hybrid identities as they exist in Irish literature and French theory. Tracing Jane's "journey to self-actualisation," the symbolic function of Bertha Mason, and Milton's masculinity, O'Brien challenges the tenets of language, gender and ideology in literature to offer a defence of French theory as a tool with which to approach identity crisis.

Kristy Butler's complementary piece, "The Crisis of Voice and Location in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*", draws attention to the unexamined French and postcolonial identities of the

characters of each text. Utilising Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, Butler convincingly argues that French theory opens up to a better understanding of identity in Rhys: "only through intertextuality can Antoinette reclaim her French identity in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the crisis it experiences as Bertha in *Jane Eyre*." In this sense, Butler makes a sound case that the identity of marginal female characters in both texts has been subject to a crisis of ownership, language and environment which can only be exposed through scrutiny of the lingering foreign French culture.

In the final section of the issue we turn to "Crises of Being and Health in Ireland and France." With an impressively broad scope, Michelle Kennedy explores some of the ways in which nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Gothic fiction anticipates contemporary anxieties surrounding human cloning. Focusing on *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *Dracula* and *I Am Legend*, Kennedy argues that in their simultaneous articulation and complication of the absolute distinction between the Self and the Other, these novels begin to dramatise the instability of reactionary conceptions of essential human identity.

Reading *Dracula* in the context of the imperial British constitution of the Irish as Other in the nineteenth century, Kennedy demonstrates that the hegemonic distinction between Self and Other exists only in arbitrary and historically contingent forms. It is suggested that later Gothic works such as *I am Legend* begin to recognise this contingency, but, with reference to the theoretical work of Lacan and Derrida, Kennedy argues that it is with the advent of cloning that the truly artificial nature of absolute, integral identity comes to the fore.

If Kennedy shows some of the ways in which literature begins to stage the crisis of the self, McGrail Johnston explores the potential for literature to help readers respond to this crisis. Drawing on an extraordinarily diverse range of French theorists, particularly Deleuze and Derrida, McGrail Johnston argues that the act of reading need not be coldly intellectual, a "mere 'deciphering' of text," but can involve a "tactile" and even "spectral" contact between author and reader.

In this sense, McGrail Johnston argues, vestiges of what we usually associate with the Gothic—the passionate, the irrational, the outlawed—are to be found in the act of reading itself; and while this “benevolent haunting” may be unsettling to our familiar modes of perception, the Gothic spectrality of reading may also enable “explorations of emotional pathways that allow us to challenge beliefs about the world we inhabit.” McGrail Johnston draws her complex argument into a concrete literary application, discussing passages from three contemporary Irish novelists: Mary Morrissy, John Banville and Seamus Deane.

In the final article, Lauren Clark turns to the French philosophical crises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as exemplified by Descartes’ *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649) and the *Discours de la méthode* (1637), and Voltaire’s *Lettres Philosophiques* (1728) and *Le Philosophe ignorant* (1766). Considering the challenges posed by Descartes and Voltaire to French philosophical method, Clark emphasises the innovation of these philosophers as “literary rhetoricians.”

Analysing the multiplicity of “voices and masks” employed within these works, Clark identifies what she describes as “power struggles” within the text, struggles which suggest a “crisis between form and content.” Working through the tensions and contradictions that arise from her historical and textually analytical approach, Clark concludes that writing through crisis need not imply submission to that crisis.

In their very different ways, each of the contributors to this issue of *JOFIS* demonstrates the accuracy of this statement. Each of the articles underlines the complex productivity that can arise from crisis, whether that be cultural, political, stylistic or psychological. Further, they demonstrate that critical engagement with the literature of crisis opens up new potentials for understanding. From crisis arises criticism and without constructive criticism, society slips into a morass of habit and despair.