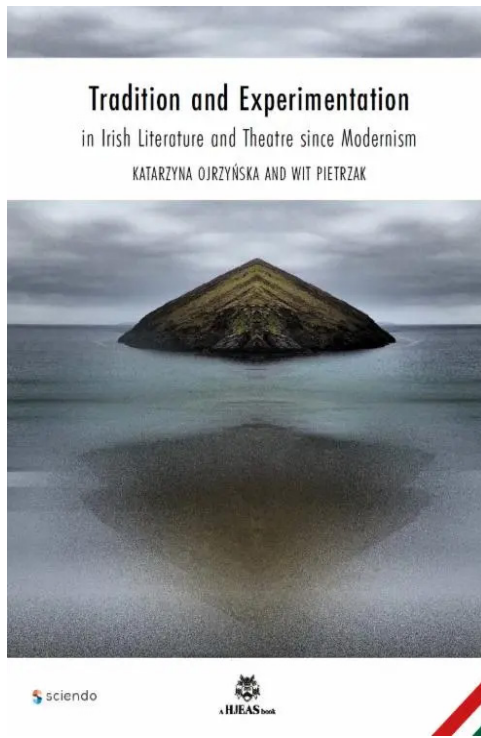


## BOOKS

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**Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Wit Pietrzak (eds.), *Tradition and Experimentation in Irish Literature and Theatre since Modernism*, Sciendo, 2024, 170 p.**

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Within a global context that demands of its artists nothing less than the thorough integration of old and new practices, the present volume emerges as a testament to the (r)evolutionary relevance of Irish cultural productions. As noted in the acknowledgments, the collection marks the expansion of a collaborative project that first assumed its textual form in 2019, drawing a portion of its chapters from a thematic section published in the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*. In moving beyond the paradigm of “Competing Traditions” promoted in the initial journal block, the extended editorial stewardship by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Wit Pietrzak was meant to respond to a recalibrated academic scope. Divided into four distinct sections, the structure of the volume highlights the main critical spheres wherein the interplay of tradition and experimentation, rather than their unequivocal separation or “constant battle” for dominance<sup>1</sup>, has constituted the main driving force in the evolution of Irish letters.

Each contribution articulates new arguments demonstrating why a multifaceted exploration of this dynamic tension continues to be a pertinent discussion within the field of Irish Studies. Notably, the volume opens with Nicholas Grene’s chapter that showcases how on the occasion of the Easter Rising centenary the contemporary Irish



stage transformed into a space where divergent notions of national identity were actively renegotiated in dialogue with the spectators. Whether describing a locally revered, yet “painfully orthodox”, production such as *Thomas Kent, 1916 Rebel*, or a “knowingly metatheatrical” play ostensibly titled *It’s Not Over*, Grene’s attention is mainly captured by how each degree of conventionality and/or experimentality prompts the audience to reconfigure the revolutionary narrative. In his assessment of revisionist interpretations, Grene also highlights the plays’ alignment with contemporary cultural and political movements. Echoing the *Waking the Feminists* mandates, site-specific productions such as *Signatories* eloquently honored female agency during the insurrection by bringing marginalized perspectives in the guise of three female signatories to inform our understanding of the Kilmainham Gaol episode.

In league with this endeavor of escaping restrictive scripts, Deirdre O’Leary Cunningham’s chapter, “Fraught Bodily Topographies: Watching Eva O’Connor’s *Mustard* as Unintentional Covid Play,” points out how specific framings of conventional stagings paradoxically led to the amplification of visceral resonance during the COVID-19 lockdown. Made available to the confined audience via a virtual venue, the digital recording of O’Connor’s play, *Mustard*, shifts from a mere substitute of the collective, sensory experience of live performance to a potent vehicle of timely worries related to the “shared materiality” of the spectators (26). Even though Cunningham’s argument reads as a particularly subjective account of her theatrical experience, it also manages to capture how poignantly the dynamics of pandemic-era spectatorship bear on the sense of physical isolation and separation that mirrors the Irish women’s status within contemporary theatre.

In the case of Elliott Mills’s chapter, “‘I always make a point of following the works of Mr Eliot’: Radical Tradition in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*”, the crystallizing modernist tradition becomes Flann O’Brien’s subject of stylistic exploitation. Mills turns the ambivalent stance of the emergent experimental writer into the focus of this chapter, exploring how O’Brien’s use of elusive references to his modernist precursors can only be placed under the sign of Derridean undecidability. By embedding them into the radically open situations driving *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O’Brien manages to encode his seriocomic attacks on the incongruent ideological attitudes displayed by these literary figures, at the exact moment when the very movement they stood at the vanguard of was gaining momentum. In light of these findings, the following chapter seems to suggest that the modernist legacy was never “to be reckoned with as solidified masters, movements, or eras” (Mills 53) but, in harmony with O’Brien’s subversive radicalism, as an inherently malleable tradition, mutating as a direct reaction to the ongoing crises of the coming century.

The essay “Half-Formed Modernism: Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*” by Aran Ward Sell illustrates how McBride’s hybrid narrative gestures to a new trajectory of experimental writing, which, instead of inertially reclaiming the notion of heritage for the modernist tradition, entails an aesthetic reconciliation of competing paradigms. Following its initial publication in 2019, the article’s inclusion in the present volume is attributable to Sell’s positioning of McBride’s novel at the crossroads between a resurgent experimentalist impulse and the more marketable conventions of Celtic

Tiger realism. By reworking the celebrated topoi of the pre-crash period into a disjunctive prose reflecting the abused protagonist's fractured sense of self, McBride's novel pioneers a distinctive technique that Sell coined as "stream of damaged consciousness". Readily identifiable within subsequent post-crash works, this narrative mode reconfigures an inherited Joycean form to accommodate contemporary predicaments (58).

Diana Hirst's analysis, "Experimenting with Tradition: Elizabeth Bowen's Literature Laboratory", leans heavily on the innovative facet of Bowen's prose, relegating its painterly qualities, skewed syntax, and *avant-garde* treatment of cultural references to the experimental end of the spectrum. However, Hirst leaves the corresponding 'traditional' dimension largely unaccounted for, turning the Cubist and Futurist aesthetic into a self-evident analogue for Bowen's iconoclastic use of "dyslocution" (76). Inherited forms become resources that fuel Bowen's linguistic experiments and proliferate "of [their] own accord", as though in a "Petri dish" (75). Only the initiated reader, who requires no prior introduction of the modernist legacy and its parameters, can deduce that the most solid thread connecting this inheritance with Bowen's experiments is the shared commitment to narrative techniques which sustain the phenomenological potency that we associate with Joycean or Beckettian writing and, as Hirst maintains, can generate the unforeseeable, yet aesthetically coherent "shock" effects that individualize Bowen's prose (84).

The first chapter in the section dedicated to the imagined topographies of Western Ireland, "Memorials of the Irish West: John McHugh, Paul Durcan, and Harry Clifton", by Joanna Kruczkowska, maps out how culturally legitimized perceptions of the insular margin are experimented with when the artist commits to time-honored forms of remembrance. Thus, the physical topography of Achill Island and the Blaskets translates into McHugh's sculpture that collides disparate timelines or into Durcan's and Clifton's poetic explorations of evacuated archipelagos and their palimpsestic qualities. Kruczkowska suggests that it is the interweaving of complementary tendencies that activates the archival potential of the salvaged *1950s Boat*, or the stylistic affinity between the Blasket life-writing tradition and the magical realist aesthetics native to another peripheral nation, as played out in Harry Clifton's "The Year of the Yellow Meal".

Kruczkowska's extended geographical orbit is symmetrically anchored by Joanna Jarzab-Napierała's study "Irish Native Autobiography: Tomas O'Crohan's *The Islandman*", which suggests that simply engaging with the canonical Blasket autobiography, beyond its reception as the blueprint for an essentialized fabrication of the West, can reveal productive breaks from what we recognize as the uncorrupted vernacular sensibility of Thomas O'Crohan. *The Islandman* is exemplified as a work where autobiographical strands, valued for their "authenticity", weave through themes that reverberate as far as Maxim Gorky's anti-pastoral autobiographical works. In her comparative analysis, Jarzab-Napierała examines how Gorky's devotion to accurately representing the common people of pre-revolutionary Russia and his rejection of sentimentalism resonated with O'Crohan's approach to storytelling, recasting the "godfather" of the Blaskets as an innovator eager to integrate a continental European heritage into an otherwise parochial biography.

The reader transitions to the last part of the volume via Sorcha De Brún's essay on Daithí Ó Muirí's short stories, acquiring a clear sense of the aesthetic continuum unfolding within Irish-language literature and of its specific dismantling of boundaries between traditional and experimental narratives. The penultimate chapter, "Gaelic Masculinities: Violence and the Experiment with Realism in the Short Fiction of Daithí Ó Muirí", outlines the particularities of this stylistic marriage (128) and subsumes them to what Nic Eoin aptly termed the "pessimistic surrealism" of Irish-language writing (qtd. in 121). In de Brún's reading of Ó Muirí's pieces, this concept is extensively and productively mobilized to redraw the limits of the realist tradition conventionally bound to this genre and erroneously associated with a diminishing Irish-medium audience (128).

If de Brún's exploration derails our expectations regarding the experimental potential of untranslated Irish prose, Sara Romero Otero's chapter invites a critical interrogation of the role of contemporary Northern Irish memoirs in the reconstruction of post-conflict identities. Noteworthy about Otero's contribution, "Narrative Experimentation in Writing the Self and the Northern Irish Border: Liminal Spaces, Memory, and the Body in Kerri Ní Dochartaigh's Memoir *Thin Places*", is her comprehensive interweaving of prevalent notions in memory and trauma theory with frameworks that foreground the embodied and spatial dimensions of grief, suffering, and recovery. As a border narrative, Ní Dochartaigh's memoir becomes an act of self-inscription, where the politicised female body functions as a site of remembrance, inextricably bound to the liminal spaces her wounded selves have once inhabited (133).

That we are far from neatly "tabulating" (1) the entire spectrum of artistic expressions and experiences which have emerged since the period of modernist effervescence is acknowledged through each contribution. The volume serves, thus, as evidence of the Irish historical capacity to synthesize tradition and experimentation and of the contributors' resourcefulness in tracing these dialectical tensions across artistic mediums.

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<sup>i</sup> For further comparison between the overarching framework of this volume and the initial aims of the 2019 thematic block, see Németh, Lenke. "Editor's Notes." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 25, no. 2, 2019: 247–52.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26900003>.