

American-Irish Literary Relations

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In 1953, a year after the director John Ford's film *The Quiet Man* drew international audiences with its vivid story of transatlantic return, Irish-American author John A. O'Brien published a volume of essays in the United States, *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World*, that expressed grave concerns about the future of the Irish. The collection called for urgent action to halt rural depopulation and mass emigration from Ireland and comprised, in part, commentaries and recommendations as to how the Irish government might best respond to this emergency. 1953 saw the first *An Tóstal* celebration, a festival that called home the diaspora in a celebration of Irish culture and hospitality and issued a particularly warm welcome to sons and daughters in America. In August of the same year, *Life* magazine led with the dramatic headline 'Irish Invade Fashion World' and featured a richly illustrated fashion editorial to celebrate the rapturous reception of Sybil Connolly's designs in New York, a fashion moment that formed a new impression of Irish sophistication and style. While each of these events contributed to the developing consciousness of the Irish-American diaspora and shaped ideas of Irish-American identity in Ireland, the story of transatlantic exchange took on an even greater public visibility in the 1960s with a Hollywood star joining the firmament of Irish-American returnees in the brief sojourn of Grace Kelly, by that time Princess Grace of Monaco, to Ireland in the summer of 1961, and the official visit of President John F. Kennedy to Ireland two years later, which included a pilgrimage to his ancestral family home in New Ross, County Wexford.

This was also a period when Irish-American literary relations acquired a new complexity in both the reception of the work of Irish writers in the United States and the emergence of a distinctive and authoritative Irish-American voice. In his essay on 'Irish American Modernisms' Joe Cleary draws a number of twentieth century American writers into conversation with late Irish modernism:

[...] An Irish American literary modernism cannot be conceived in the same way as the roughly contemporaneous African American or Irish modernisms. The Irish Americans did not share an equivalent sense of regional or racial

identity, and there was no equivalent either to an Irish or Harlem Renaissance that served as a common crucible of cultural renewal; in fact, Irish American literary historians have lamented that the modernists did not write about Irish American subject matter.¹

Cleary goes on to trace a history of delicately woven Irish-American modernist legacies, taking F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941-42), and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) as his primary case studies. He offers a compelling model for thinking about the points of confluence, both explicit and subtle, between the Irish and Irish-American literary tradition. In *American Literature and Irish Culture 1910-55: The Politics of Enchantment*, Tara Stubbs develops related lines of inquiry in a comprehensive study of the importance of Ireland and Irish literary culture to American literature in the first half of the twentieth century; her case studies include Marianne Moore, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and Wallace Stevens, and investigate the differently calibrated relationships of these writers with Ireland over time.²

This chapter examines some key developments in Irish-American literary relations from the middle of the century to the 1980s. I am especially interested in what those literary connections reveal about the distinctive contribution of Irish and Irish-American writers to the development of the short story as a form in the United States, a process mediated and galvanized by the cultural influence of the literary magazine *The New Yorker*, the natural habitat of writers such as John O'Hara and Maeve Brennan and, later, Elizabeth Cullinan. Further to this I examine the expansion of the Irish-American literary canon from mid-century onwards and explore how key figures such as Edward McSorley, James T. Farrell, Mary McCarthy, and Mary Gordon sought to engage with or contest influential Irish and Irish-American literary inheritances. I suggest that these writers' commitment to social realism invented a new version of Irish-America during these decades of cultural transition, one that often deliberately set itself apart from previous received scripts and mythmaking.

O'Brien's *The Vanishing Irish* serves as a letter from an Irish American worried that his motives in mobilizing a group of writers, Sean O'Faolain amongst them, to address the emigration crisis might be misunderstood. He writes in the introduction to the edition of the book published in Britain in 1954:

Since publishing our first study on *The Vanishing Irish* we were surprised to discover that some Irish people construed this effort to awaken the citizens of our ancestral homeland as an act of hostility in our part. We hasten to assure them that the exact opposite is the case. Our four grandparents came from Ireland, and the love for Erin has never ceased to burn within us. For years we have spoken and written for the freedom of Ireland.³

Whatever the limitations of its social scientific analysis, *The Vanishing Irish* remains a valuable historical document of American-Irish relations, revealing the anxiety of a member of the diaspora who dared to intervene in home affairs, and constituting a reminder of how Ireland and Irish America held up a mirror to each other in the same period.

In this context of transatlantic encounter, I want to assess, first of all, the profile of the Irish and Irish-American short story in the mid twentieth-century decades. During Maeve Brennan's years as a fashion copywriter at *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1940s, she occasionally encountered Irish compatriots in the pages of the magazine. True to the blend of literature, style, and domestic advice that characterized the magazine in the period, stories by writers such as Frank O'Connor sometimes appeared in between fashion editorials and advertisements for cosmetics. For example, O'Connor's story 'Song Without Words', which centres on the friendship of two Irish monks, was published in the January 1944 issue. It appears somewhat incongruously next to an advertisement for the fashionable Bonwit Teller department store. Mary Lavin also published a number of stories, including 'The Will' and 'The Handkerchief', in *Harper's Bazaar* during the same period. The contrast between provincial Ireland and cosmopolitan America that emerged from the pages of the magazine would not have been lost on the young Brennan, who would herself go on to follow in the footsteps of writers such as O'Connor, Lavin, and Benedict Kiely by publishing her work in *The New Yorker* in the 1950s, 60s, and beyond, and who rose to prominence in New York literary and social circles in the same decades.

Frank O'Connor, in his own ascent in American literary culture in the same period, struggled with a dilemma facing the Irish writer in the United States. In an essay written in 1961, O'Connor describes being pressed to address the matter of

place in his work, and appears troubled by a recurring theme in readers' responses. He notes:

Ever since I came to this country I have been haunted by that question, 'Why don't you write about America?' It has always made me feel awkward, like a failure to repay hospitality, or worse a deliberate flouting of it. It was as though I didn't think America worth writing about, when indeed it was modesty more than anything else.⁴

At *The New Yorker* O'Connor sometimes found himself pushed in the other direction by editor Harold Ross when it came to the setting of his stories. Ross's famed fastidiousness extended to the matter of place. In *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made*, Ben Yagoda draws attention to 'Ross's unshakeable belief in the need for what he referred to as "pegging" – the establishing, as early as possible, preferably in the first paragraph, of a story's setting. Ross's query sheet on a 1949 Frank O'Connor short story called "The Idealist" began, "This pretty darned good story. Must be pegged, of course. ... Could put in Irish-sounding name here, and then say at (1a) something along the line *us lads in Ireland* or *us Irish lads*'.⁵ By the 1950s, when O'Connor was in demand as a speaker and lecturer on the American University circuit and William Shawn was at the helm of *The New Yorker*, a very different relationship with writer and editor emerged, one finely attuned to the sensitivities of place and the nuances of O'Connor's writing; this is documented in the published correspondence of O'Connor and Maxwell in *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right: Letters of Frank O'Connor and William Maxwell 1945-1966*. In his letters to O'Connor, Maxwell occasionally reminds O'Connor of the need to place his stories for his American readers, but his interventions are gentle and his editorial suggestions subtle in nature.⁶

If O'Connor's relationship with *The New Yorker* raised questions about writing Ireland for a transatlantic audience, by the 1950s short story writer and novelist John O'Hara had laid claim to new territory as an Irish-American writer, making a foundational contribution to the genesis of the short story at the magazine. In his memoir *Here at the New Yorker* (1975), fellow Irish-American Brendan Gill goes so far as to insist that O'Hara was one of the writers who 'helped to invent what the world came to call the "*New Yorker*" short story, though nobody who has written

a short story for *The New Yorker* would ever admit that there was such a thing'.⁷ David Remnick characterizes the elusive qualities of *The New Yorker* short story as 'a quiet, modest thing that tends to track the quiet desperation of a rather mild character and ends in some gentle *aperçu* of recognition or dismay – or dismayed recognition'.⁸ In a recent anthology of work from the magazine in the 1950s, the American author Jonathan Franzen expands on the quiet spoken, restrained qualities of the short story in this period:

The fifties were a key decade in the evolution of American magazine fiction. [...] What made a story *New Yorker* was its carefully wrought, many-comma'd prose; its long passages of physical description, the precision and the sobriety of which created a kind of negative emotional space, a suggestion of feeling without the naming of it...⁹

O'Hara was not only named as a key influence at *The New Yorker*. In his introduction to O'Hara's New York stories, the novelist E.L. Doctorow characterizes him as a distinctly Joycean writer: 'O'Hara practices the classic form of the modern short story developed by Joyce and perfected by Hemingway: The entry point is close in time to the denouement, the setting is circumscribed, and the piece ideally yields some sort of revelation or what Joyce called an *epiphany*'.¹⁰ O'Hara published a considerable body of work in *The New Yorker* in the late 1920s and 30s, but ceased after a disagreement with the magazine's editors in the 1950s although he did place a work with the magazine when he resumed writing short stories in the following decade.¹¹

In O'Hara's second novel *Butterfield 8* (1935)¹², which offers an unflinching cross section view of New York society, his alter ego Jimmy Malloy identifies his liminal status as an Irish American and the burden of exclusion he bears:

First of all, I am a Mick. I wear Brooks clothes and I don't eat salad with a spoon and I probably could play five-goal polo in two years, but I am a Mick. Still a Mick. [...] I'm pretty God damn American, and therefore my brothers and sisters are, and yet we're not Americans. We're Micks, we're non-assimilable, we Micks. [...] The people who think I am a Yale man aren't very observing about people.¹³

The fear of being found out as an imposter not deserving of his place in American society is an anxiety that runs throughout O'Hara's work. Many of his stories are elliptical snapshots of New York society, in which O'Hara's Irish-American characters often occupy a precarious position. In 'We're Friends Again' (1960), writer Jim Malloy appears as both an interloper in and observer of New York City, his writing achievements insufficient to secure him membership of its elite circles. O'Hara's notion of the Irish as 'unassimilable' resurfaces when once again attention is drawn to his origins. When asked late in the story if he is Irish, his protagonist offers the rueful, half-defeated reply: 'With the name Malloy I couldn't be anything else'.¹⁴

O'Hara's affinity with Joyce is illuminated in the story 'The Assistant' (1965), which gives voice to an Irish-American Molly Bloom in the figure of Maggie Muldoon. Centred on a former singer who wakes hungover and disoriented after a decadent evening spent reflecting on her life and loves, the story gives way to Maggie's monologue in several narrative digressions that resemble the Penelope episode of *Ulysses* in tone and style. Maggie recalls:

This man I'd been to bed with a hundred times or more, and there he was all wrapped up in an old polo coat that was too big for him. So was his hat. His hat was too big for him, it sort of rested on his ears. And his chin kind of kept moving up and down, even when he wasn't talking. You know, I was brought up a Catholic and thought I got over all that a long time ago, but standing there talking to Jack Hillyer, this man I used to quiver when he touched me, I suddenly after all these years got a guilty conscience. Sin. I committed sin with this old man.¹⁵

Maggie's narrative is part confession, part talking cure, and, like Molly Bloom's monologue, expresses her interior life and private history.

In O'Hara's 'Agatha', which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1963, Mary Moran, an Irish maid, features as a paid companion to her employer Agatha Child. Like the Irish maids in Maeve Brennan's fiction, Mary has an ambivalent status in the domestic power relations presented by the story. She carries out the labour that ensures the domestic ease of the wealthy, three-times married divorcee and yet the fact that the tellingly named Agatha Child (the character's name foregrounds her

infantile tendencies) depends upon Mary so completely gives the Irish maid significant leverage over her social superior. The story emphasizes a related irony in its pointed attention to the ongoing negotiations over Mary's duties: '[...] As a matter of principle she had made it one of her rules that serving was not to be expected of her. She was not very good about taking telephone messages, either; it had taken Mrs Child two years to discover that Mary was ashamed of her handwriting and spelling'.¹⁶ The same revelation exposes both the limited options available to the woman servant and her guile in undermining her employer's social advantage and the story goes on to confirm Mary's status within the domestic sphere of her employer, in spite of her lack of material and social capital, as Mrs Child anxiously aspires to lure her away from a rival family: 'It would have been worth the money to have Mary Moran on a full-time basis, not only for the work she did, but because her coming to work full-time would have been an expression of the approval that Agatha Child suspected that Mary withheld'.¹⁷ The title of the story is deliberately misleading in placing Agatha Child centre stage, as Mary Morgan emerges as the real figure of interest and power in the narrative, and as the primary object of her employer's slow realization that: 'her life was full of small defeats at the hands of people who rightfully should have obeyed her automatically'.¹⁸

'Agatha' finds particular affinity with the work of Maeve Brennan, who went from reading Frank O'Connor and Mary Lavin in the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1940s to following in their footsteps as she established herself as an important contributor to *The New Yorker* in the 1950s. Brennan's oeuvre moves back and forth across the Atlantic. Alongside her stories that centre on the lives of three Dublin families, she set a significant body of work in the New York suburbs and a large number of essays, written under the pseudonym 'The Long-Winded Lady', in the streets around midtown and Greenwich Village. In doing so, she followed in the footsteps of writers such as John O'Hara and John Cheever in staking out her territory as a New York writer. Her stories set in Dublin are intimate family portraits, sensitively directed dramas, many of which play out within the walls of 48 Cherryfield Avenue. Occasionally, history intrudes upon the threshold of the domestic world of the stories as in 'The Day We Got Our Own Back', set against the signing of the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which sees the English officer who leads the ransacking of a safe house punished when he falls victim to an avalanche of soot from the fireplace chimney. In the main, the stories set in Ireland are keenly attentive to the

emotional complexities of marriage and family life. Brennan's novella *The Visitor*, written in the 1940s, is a parable of the impossibility of return. Anastasia King returns from Paris to her grandmother's house in Dublin following the death of her mother and suffers a slow and painful banishment by her Irish family. Her attempts to settle once more in her childhood home are stymied at every turn and the final scenes of this short but powerful psychodrama see the returnee figure locked out of the house in which she is no longer welcome.

Brennan's years at *Harper's Bazaar* served as an important apprenticeship, not least because she worked there under the formidable influence of fellow Irish woman Carmel Snow. It was during these years that Brennan, in addition to honing her gifts as a writer, cultivated the personal style for which she became celebrated, and developed an interest in the possibilities of self-fashioning so strongly reflected in her later writing. Brennan found her place as an equal amongst some of the most acclaimed writers at *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker* archival records at the New York Public Library contain a postcard from William Shawn in which he thanks her for seeing him off on an Atlantic crossing with a bottle of champagne, while a letter from John Cheever to *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell makes reference to a particularly enjoyable and riotous evening at Maeve Brennan's place.¹⁹ Her position in New York literary culture was further fortified by the precise and elegant mapping of the streets around Times Square and Washington Square to be found in the incisive and artful observations of the Long-Winded Lady in the 'Talk of the Town' segment of the magazine. And more generally in her writing, Brennan's movement between Ireland and America informs how she maps Manhattan with the same kind of encyclopaedic attention Joyce devoted to Dublin, a precision reflected in one of her later essays, 'A Blessing' (1981), where the Dublin district of Ranelagh fleetingly comes into contact with Manhattan as she notices a shadow on the pavement of Forty-second Street, across from Bryant Park in the heart of the City: 'I recognized it at once. It was exactly the same shadow that used to fall on the cement part of our garden in Dublin, more than fifty-five years ago'.²⁰

For all of this exposure to the excitement of New York and its magazine culture, and despite the fact that Brennan herself was a daughter of relative privilege, she did not forget the struggles of her less fortunate immigrant foremothers and sisters, and many of her New York stories attend to the lives of Irish domestic servants in the fictional suburb of Herbert's Retreat. The working-class Irish Bridget had long been a

figure of anxious interest to American popular culture, a necessary but troubling presence in the middle class and upper middle class domestic sphere.²¹ In Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for example, Bridget the 'lazy' and 'sly' housemaid hovers on the edges of the Tyrone family drama, a reminder of the long history of Irish caricature in American writing.²² Against such conventions, Brennan's stories are often revenge plots, servant insurrections in which the Irish maid cleverly gains the upper hand over her negligent or over-indulged employer and disturbs the status quo.

If Maeve Brennan was well versed in the material realities of the Irish women immigrant, Elizabeth Cullinan, whose work also appeared in *The New Yorker*, displays a different level of engagement with Irish-American themes. Her stories are near relatives of the 'New Yorker story' invented by O'Hara and others, and in an attempt to place her in a line of inheritance *Kirkus Review* went so far as to describe Cullinan's work as 'rough-cut Maeve Brennan'.²³ Cullinan's stories of Irish America invoke an imaginative landscape all their own, while retaining the introspective understatement associated with *The New Yorker* story. Her novel *House of Gold* is an exploration of the intergenerational tensions of the Devlin family and echoes some of the primary concerns of her short stories, collected in *The Time of Adam* (1971) and *Yellow Roses* (1977).

Cullinan's work often announces itself as belonging to a distinctively Irish American cultural milieu, as is the case in 'Estelle' (1976), in which one side of the family is described as being afflicted by the 'Irish way of endlessly and pointlessly finding fault...'.²⁴ A number of Cullinan's stories published in the 1970s explore the tension between traditional Irish America and the desire expressed by her female characters to liberate themselves from the constraints of that same environment. Several stories centre on Louise Gallagher who, in 'An Accident' (1974), pondering her complicated relationship with her married lover, considers: 'His family came from New England; his ancestors were Scots; he'd married a girl of Scandinavian descent. All that had given Louise a feeling of being beyond the pale that it took years to get over; when she did she discovered she liked being beyond the pale; and she got a kick out of rubbing it in...'.²⁵ Louise Gallagher's relationship with a married man – a determinedly modern dilemma – is played out against the moral strictures of Irish-American Catholicism, and the figures of the priest and nun often play a significant part in Cullinan's stories. Modern American values clash with Irish-American

Catholicism in sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle ways. 'The Old Priest' is Nora Barrett's story of the annual visit of Father Stone to the family home, and of her embarrassment when her parents embark on a heated discussion about changes in the Catholic Church while the near deaf priest remains unmoved. Nora's only intervention is to mention to the priest that she read an article about the vernacular Mass in *Vogue*, a confession she instantly regrets as the mention of the fashion magazine forces the different parts of her life into uncomfortable contact. In several of her stories Cullinan turns her keenly-observant gaze on Dublin, as in 'Maura's Friends', 'A Sunday Like the Others', and 'A Swim'. Similarly her novel *A Change of Scene* (1982), inspired by Cullinan's own time in Ireland in the 1960s, is the narrative of Ann Clarke's attempt to find her way in Dublin's literary circles and of the ordeals endured by the returnee.

The self-contained worlds and emotional intensity of Cullinan's carefully crafted stories secure her a place in the history of the Irish and Irish-American short story at *The New Yorker*, and represent a vivid chapter of American-Irish exchange. She belongs to a coterie of writers who can be understood to have contributed, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, to the forging of a distinct version of Irish-America in the literary imagination. This concept, developed in the specific spatial, cultural and personal encounter between the two countries, can be seen to evolve in the post-war era away from a mythologizing retrospect and towards greater recognition of the material and social conditions of an Irish-American existence. The former mode of representation is well represented by Irish-American writer Donn Byrne, whose celebration of his origins, *Ireland – The Rock Whence I Was Hewn* (1927) conjures up a heavily romanticized vision of his homeland as an exceptional place, steeped in ancient spiritualism and Celtic purity. It reads like a hymn to Yeats's Celtic Twilight and registers the emotional effect of Ireland on the sensibility of the poet. Byrne's other major work, a fictional life of the eighteenth century Irish poet Raftery (1924), brings to life a similar fantasy version of Ireland. Tara Stubbs reads Byrne as a key exponent of 'American Celticism' but argues that whatever the excesses of his emotional response to Ireland, his popularity and influence make him a significant figure in the early twentieth-century Irish American canon.²⁶

By the 1940s, however, the romanticism of Byrne and writers like him was usurped by a new kind of social realism in Irish-American writing, with dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill making a particularly significant contribution to these

developments.²⁷ Fiction also showed signs of a resurgent interest in exploring the material realities of Irish-American life. Edward McSorley's *Our Own Kind* (1947), for instance, is an emigrant family saga which exemplifies the enduring lure of the romantic in telling the story of the McDermotts' journey from Ireland to America, but which offers at the same time an insight into the immigrant experience and the points of contact between the United States and the old country. The narrative thus weighs the themes of heroic endurance against the realities of the family's impoverishment in their adoptive land: 'Bold Robert Emmet was their refuge, their well of courage. Dear Emmet standing there in the courtroom face to face with the British judges that condemned him to his death and ordered his noble head cut from his body and thrown to the dogs in the dirty Dublin streets to be devoured by them'.²⁸ The novel attends to the possibilities of social advancement for the Irish American and to the importance of family and community networks, as Ned McDermott labours to ensure a life beyond that of the working poor for his orphaned grandson. As the title of the novel suggests, *Our Own Kind* is a different kind of exercise in exceptionalism to that found in the work in Donn Byrne, in its earnest attempt to represent the collective Irish immigrant experience through the trials and resilience of a single family. In the same period, other Irish-American writers became determined to distance themselves from anything that resembled romantic mythmaking about Ireland and instead to engage explicitly with the material realities of modern urban Irish America.

Novelist, short story writer, and essayist James T. Farrell also broke ground in Irish-American fiction by embracing the material realities of the immigrant condition and status. His popular *Studs Lonigan* series, published in the 1930s, is an Irish-American *Bildungsroman* developed across three novels. His vivid accounts of the struggle of the working classes in Chicago established him as a new kind of Irish-American voice. A further five-volume series (1936-1953) charts the intertwined lives of the O'Neill-O'Flaherty families, and explores, in part, the world of Danny O'Neill and his literary ambitions amidst the working poor of early twentieth-century Chicago. Farrell's direct Irish influences in this work are extensive. Accounts of his visits to Ireland documented in his journals and letters reveal his interest in the socialist James Connolly and the Labour Movement leader Jim Larkin, and his writings include critical appraisals of Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, alongside expressed admiration for the writers of the Irish Literary Revival: 'Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory and their contemporaries helped bring a note of reality into Irish writing. Their

characters have a dignity and a naturalness of their own. Their language bespeaks this dignity. They are real, not false'.²⁹

In his endeavour to create an Irish-American 'reality' with the same integrity, Farrell took his closest bearings however, from Joyce, whose work he tracked closely both in a series of essays on Joyce and Ibsen and Joyce and Marxism, and in critical studies of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*.³⁰ His engagement with the lived experience of Irish Americans and the focus of his work on ordinary Chicago resists, definitively, the romantic Celticism of writers such as Donn Byrne. In *The Irish Voice in America*, critic Charles Fanning quotes Farrell's dismissal of Donn Byrne as: 'a sleepy traditionalist, weakly repeating Yeats's cry that "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone"³¹ and goes on to read him as self-consciously writing against 'the genteel/sentimental strain of nineteenth-century Irish-American fiction from Mary-Anne Sadlier to Maurice Francis Egan'.³² In this regard, Farrell readily owns to Joyce's influence. *A World I Never Made* (1936) recalls Stephen Dedalus's childhood education in *A Portrait* as Danny O'Neill receives lessons about English rule in Ireland and of the Irish exodus to America, filtered through his childhood innocence as he listens, enthralled, to his grandmother: 'And they have mean men in Ireland. Mean landlords. Me mother's landlord, Mr Longacre, he was so mean that he would make you eat dirt off a shovel. And when the poor people had nothing to pay the landlords, they were put off the land, and they became tinkers, or they came out to America'.³³ Joycean nuances similarly register in Farrell's *Father and Son* (1940), which sees Danny O'Neill navigate the emotional complexities of family life, the struggles of Chicago's working poor, and the power of the Catholic Church. The convolutions of Irish history as seen through Irish-American eyes are captured early in the novel in the inebriated political ramblings of an acquaintance of his father:

'Sir, and answer me, am I or am I not after saying that Woodrow-Wilson is pro-British?'

'What if he is?'

'What if he is, be damned, and Ireland not free.'

'Why did the Irish start all that shootin' in Dublin? I got a brother on the other side. Suppose a German submarine got him? Huh?'

'Sure, me name is O'Malley, and did you ever hear tell of Robert Emmet?'

'What's his batting average, Paddy?' someone yelled.³⁴

The scene foregrounds the complexities of Ireland's political evolution from an American perspective and the comical footnote that casts Irish revolutionary Robert Emmet as a baseball player is a Joycean gesture of irreverence towards the grand narrative of Irish history.

If Farrell sought to claim to a distinctive and sovereign Irish-American experience, his friend and contemporary Mary McCarthy developed a very different perspective on Irish affairs. Farrell had a very strong relationship with and interest in Ireland and Irish concerns, one documented in accounts of his travels in Ireland and in letters to friends sharing his experiences. In series of letters to McCarthy in the late 1970s he encourages her to visit Dublin to explore its thriving literary scene, making particular reference to the work of Dennis Johnston, Jennifer Johnston, and Seamus Heaney. While considering the possibility of a visit to Ireland, McCarthy is reserved about making acquaintance with Dublin literary circles.³⁵ She shows little inclination to reconnect with any idea of Ireland as homeland – there was certainly no risk that she might have been mistaken for the ‘returned yank’ prevalent in Irish popular culture since the middle of the century.³⁶ If Farrell wrote from the heart of Irish America, McCarthy was a *refusenik*, a sceptic seeking to outrun over-familiar or essentializing narratives of Irish America.

McCarthy's fraught relationship with Irish-American identity comes as little surprise given the suffering she and her orphaned siblings endured at the hands of their Catholic Irish American guardians. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1963) is unflinching in its account of the negligence and cruelty masked with piety that cast a shadow over her early years. Her memoir is an audacious experiment in life writing that deploys various satirical modes in unsettling complacent images of Irish America.³⁷ Later in her writing career she continued to maintain an aloofness towards any sense of Ireland as homeland, and also refused any ready affiliation with her formidable Irish-American literary precursors. In a review of *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, for example, she showed little constraint in dismissing Eugene O'Neill: ‘the return of a playwright who – to be frank – cannot write is a solemn and sentimental occasion.’³⁸

McCarthy's determined attempt to distance herself from her Irish origins and Irish American contemporaries might be explained by what Cleary identifies as a self-

consciousness on the part of Irish American writers in the early decades of the twentieth century:

In the case of the Irish American writer or artist with high cultural ambitions in this period, there were good reasons not to embrace an Irish American ethnic identity. To do so was to adopt a history that smacked of a benighted peasant or working-class past, or of the sanctimony of middle-class respectability, none of these high cultural heritages.³⁹

McCarthy was fully conscious of this in recollecting how, as a student at Vassar at the beginning of the 1930s, she was frequently reminded that the Irish belonged to the lower orders.⁴⁰ She found refuge in the idea of the public intellectual, an interest articulated in her political writings at Vassar and developed both through her own emergence as a key figure in New York intellectual circles and her association with political magazines such as *Partisan Review*. Her literary achievements extended from her celebrated work as a novelist and memoirist to her success as a literary critic, art historian, and political journalist. As a novelist she explored coming-of-age themes through the female protagonists in early work such as *The Company She Keeps* (1942), but is perhaps best known for *The Group* (1963), which pre-empted the literature of the women's movement in its analysis of sexual freedom, personal agency, and women's place in the workforce. While her literary career sometimes risks being overshadowed by her public spats with other writers (most notoriously Lillian Hellman, who sued her for libel in 1979), she also maintained a mature academic company, including an extraordinary lifelong friendship with German philosopher Hannah Arendt, captured vividly in their published letters.⁴¹ McCarthy, then, represents a missing strand in representations of Irish-American women's experience – that of the self-invented public intellectual. She carved out a new creative space for writers after her, including Elizabeth Cullinan and Mary Gordon, whose 1978 novel *Final Payments* engages in its own conversation with the politics of second wave feminism and explores the tension between guilt and family duty and desire and pursuit of personal autonomy in the life of Isabel Moore. Gordon would go on to explore relationships between Irish America and Ireland more fully, both historical and contemporary, in later works such as *The Other Side* (1989) and *Pearl* (2005), two novels that see national and familial histories collide.

With the rise of the Irish and Irish-American short story writer to eminence and the emergence of a diverse range of articulations of Irish America, the middle decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a fresh confidence in Irish-American literary culture. The 1940s and 1950s were marked by a new kind of Irish-American transatlantic exchange and a more frequent overlapping of literary and cultural influences, the generative effect of which would extend into and enrich the writing culture that developed in the period that followed, as Irish and Irish-American writers found and consolidated a place for themselves amongst the literary and intellectual circles of the United States.

¹ Joe Cleary, 'Irish American Modernisms', in *Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 175.

² Tara Stubbs, *American Literature and Irish Culture, 1910-1955: The Politics of Enchantment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Other extended analyses of Irish-American literary connections include: Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*, 2nd edn (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), Marion R. Casey and J.J. Lee, *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), Christopher Dowd, *The Construction of Irish Identity in American Literature* (London: Routledge, 2010), Sinéad Moynihan, "*Other People's Diasporas*": *Negotiating Race in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), and Sally Barr Ebest, *The Banshees: A Literary History of Irish American Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013).

³ John A. O'Brien, 'The Irish Enigma', in *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World*, ed. John A. O'Brien (London: W.H. Allen, 1954), p. 13.

⁴ Frank O'Connor, 'Why Don't You Write About America?', in *A Frank O'Connor Reader*, ed. Michael Steinman (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p.318.

⁵ Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York: Da Capo, 2000), p. 204.

⁶ *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right: Letters of Frank O'Connor and William Maxwell 1945 - 1966*, ed. Michael Steinman (New York: Knopf, 1996).

⁷ Brendan Gill, *Here At The New Yorker* (New York: Da Capo, 1997), p. 264.

⁸ *Wonderful Town: New Yorker Stories from The New Yorker*, ed. David Remnick (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. xi.

⁹ Jonathan Franzen, 'Fiction', in *The New Yorker Book of the 50s: Story of a Decade*, ed. Henry Finder (London: Penguin, 1915), p. 597.

¹⁰ E. L. Doctorow, 'Foreword', in *John O'Hara: The New York Stories*, ed. Steven Goldleaf (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. vii.

¹¹ Steven Goldleaf, 'Introduction', in *John O'Hara: The New York Stories*, p. xi.

¹² The capitalised U of the title of the *Butterfield 8* is in keeping with the typographical conventions of the New York Telephone Company instituted in 1930.

¹³ John O'Hara, *Butterfield 8* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 50-51

¹⁴ John O'Hara, 'We're Friends Again', in *John O'Hara: The New York Stories*, p. 332.

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- ¹⁵ John O’Hara, ‘The Assistant’, in *John O’Hara: The New York Stories*, p. 21.
- ¹⁶ John O’Hara, ‘Agatha’, in *John O’Hara: The New York Stories*, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ John Cheever, Letter to William Maxwell, John Cheever Folder, Box 767. *The New Yorker* Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
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- ²⁰ Maeve Brennan, ‘A Blessing’, in *The Long-Winded Lady* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1997), p. 267.
- ²¹ See Maureen Murphy, ‘Bridget and Biddy: Images of the Irish Servant Girl in *Puck* Cartoons, 1880–1890’, in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, ed. Charles Fanning (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), pp. 152-175. For a detailed study of the history of the Irish Bridget see Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).
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- ²⁹ James T. Farrell, *On Irish Themes*, ed. Dennis Flynn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 44.
- ³⁰ Essays collected in *On Irish Themes*, ed. Dennis Flynn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).
- ³¹ Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*, 2nd edn (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p. 257.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- ³³ James T. Farrell, *A World I Never Made* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 44.
- ³⁴ James T. Farrell, *Father and Son* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 59
- ³⁵ Letter from Mary McCarthy to James T. Farrell, October 12, 1978. Personal Correspondence – File 193.16. Mary McCarthy Papers, Vassar College.
- ³⁶ The figure of the ‘Returned Yank’ appears in one of its most complete forms in Sean O’Faolain’s *Come Back to Erin* (1940) and gained international recognition in Ford’s 1952 film *The Quiet Man*, an adaptation of Maurice Walshe’s story of the same name first published in *Green Rushes* in 1933.
- ³⁷ Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 15
- ³⁸ Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), p. 292.
- ³⁹ Joe Cleary, ‘Irish-American Modernisms’, in *Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 178.
- ⁴⁰ Mary McCarthy, *How I Grew* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 218.
- ⁴¹ *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).
