

NAVIGATING NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: LITERARY RESPONSES TO RECESSION IN DONAL RYAN'S *THE SPINNING HEART*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012) represents the 2008 economic recession, focusing on its effects on rural Irish society in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger. The novel portrays the collapse of the construction industry, unemployment, financial insecurity, debt, abandoned housing developments, and the breakdown of social and institutional trust. Through twenty-one interconnected monologues, Ryan presents the recession through the eyes of different members of a rural community, revealing how economic collapse produces fear, uncertainty, shame, regret, disillusionment, and social fragmentation. The paper argues that Ryan does not represent the recession merely as an economic event but as a crisis that transforms relationships, individual identities, and the sense of community. The novel's fragmented narrative structure and polyphonic voices further reflect the inability of the community to construct a unified understanding of its changing social reality. By bringing together economic, social, psychological, and narrative dimensions, the paper demonstrates how *The Spinning Heart* captures the human consequences of Ireland's transition from the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger to the austerity and uncertainty that followed.

Key words: Narrative, Modernisation, Celtic Tiger, Financial Collapse, Recession

INTRODUCTION

The Spinning Heart is an outstanding book that vividly portrays the damage, the financial crisis had on people's lives in Ireland. Often in moments of hardship you find humour, and Donal Ryan weaves the light and dark of a community dealing with a local murder and the hardships of life during the economic crash in Ireland in 2008. The economy's collapse and particularly the construction industry was catastrophic. "There were seven years there where you could build houses out of cardboard and masking tape and they'd be sold off the plans people queued all night to buy boxes of houses." (Ryan 14)

Bobby feels totally devastated at his condition and feels, "I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. Foreman, I was clearing a grand a week. Set for life. Houses would never stop going up. I'd see babies like our own being pushed around the village below and think: lovely, work for the future"

(13) Building companies went bust and the builders, suppliers and tradesmen were left massively in debt as each had extended their credit with banks for greater and greater rewards. Ghost estates of houses in various states of completeness littered the country. Exactly the scenes that anchor's book.

The structure of the novel is told chapter by chapter in the first person from an array of notable and flawed characters, collectively showing the diversity that exists in a rural Irish community. The image and persona of each character is magically brought to life with wonderful impact. The central character and soul of the novel, is Bobby Mahon, a foreman on a building site owned by Pokey Burke. “What matter what kind of a man he was, once the bank kept giving him money to build more and more”. (13) Following the collapse, Pokey absconded leaving huge debts and his now unemployed former workers are left dazed by the fact that he hadn’t been paying corporation tax or the income tax and insurance contributions for his employees. Ryan provides a reflection on the contemporary Irish society, the perils of the Celtic Tiger years, in particular for rural spaces, but he also offers the readers tales about outcasts, characters who are struggling to find their place in the world. “Ireland was effectively transformed from a pre-modern, peasant rural community to a postmodern, high-technology urbanised society.” (Kuhling and Keohane 1) But, was it really so for all “the constituent members” of Irish society? And, how have all these changes been recently represented in Irish literature? As Susan Cahill believes, the way in which Irish writers have responded to the relationships between past, present and future in the context of Celtic Tiger Ireland has been fraught with complexity.” (Cahill 1). One could argue that the relationship past-present-future is framed within discourses of evolution and involution that have produced multifarious responses, also in Irish writing. As Smyth states, “during the lifetime of the Tiger itself there was much talk in all walks of Irish life about ‘new times’, about the necessity of orienting the nation towards the future rather than towards the past.” (Irish National Identity 135) In this vein, for many, signs of recovery are appearing in Ireland after the crisis and “new hopes have been nurtured of a reformed and renewed Irish society rebuilt on solid foundations.” (Epinoux 1-2) For Cahill, during the Celtic Tiger years the “rigid distinction between Ireland’s ‘traditional’ and ‘backward’ past and its ‘affluent’ and ‘contemporary’ present was valorised.” (Cahill 7-8)

It is a captivating novel set in the aftermath of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, a period of rapid economic growth in Ireland. The story unfolds through the perspectives of various characters, each affected by the recession in a different way. The novel is sited in rural Ireland during the recession. The economic downturn has left the community reeling, and the once-prosperous local building firm has collapsed. The central character, Pokey Burke, was the crooked boss of the firm. He flees the country, leaving his employees betrayed and financially devastated. With the barest thread of a story line, the book suggests an intimate oral history of a moment in time, its rotation of voices — sharing regrets and desires along with town gossip — reminiscent of William Faulkner’s “As I Lay Dying” and Edgar Lee Masters’ “Spoon River Anthology.” Instead of Masters’ cemetery, these individuals populate a metaphorical ghost town, haunted by the dead, the departed and phantom prospects that have vanished overnight. “There are forty four houses in this estate. I live in number twenty three. There’s an old lady living in number forty. There’s no one living.” (Ryan 42) The young single mother, Realtin, lives in a “ghost estate” — an empty residential development where she is stuck with a hefty mortgage and an unfinished house. Damage is everywhere, from abuse passed down the generations to the shadow of schizophrenia. This damage is both economic and psychological. It points to trauma, bitterness and toxic family dynamics that are inherited across generations within the small Irish community. The estate is almost entirely deserted except for her and a few isolated residents. This shows Realtin’s central conflict. She is trapped paying a masive, crippling mortgage on a property. Ryan reaches back to the archetypes of Irish literature, the terrible father and the wanton country girl; the peat-black comedy of Flann O’Brien and the dramatic rhythms of Yeats and Synge, as well as more recent traditions.

NARRATING SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF TRUST IN *THE SPINNING HEART*

Social trust rests on established community traditions that regulate the ways in which the members of a community interact with each other. One could also say that the performance of trust is context-bound. “Attitudes of trust are always embedded in a system of other values and attitudes, which in turn are realised or not realised within the framework of concrete relationships.” (Hartmann 82)

This is reflected in the novel when Bobby Mahon notices that his trust was not warranted and raises the question: “What reason would I have ever had not to trust Pokey Burke?” (Ryan 10) Bobby feels that “I should have known something was up the day last year when Mickey Briars came in asking about his pension.” (10) Effective trust, however, operates in realms that are not or only very tenuously connected to cognitive knowledge. Bobby ponders that “He [Pokey] was young when I started working for him – three years younger than me – but the whole parish had worked for his oold fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping.” (10) He senses that trust rests to a considerable extent on established social structures. Trust in Pokey seemed to be warranted, firstly, because he represents a family business with a long history as the most important employer in town and, secondly, because of his economic success. Bobby feels, “What matter what kind of a man he[Pokey] was, once the bank kept giving him money to build more and more.” (13) With Pokey’s betrayal of trust when the company goes bankrupt, such established structures of trust are eroded. “There were tears in his[Mickey’s] yellow eyes. He was after being shafted . Robbed.” (10-11) Mickey’s response reveals that Pokey’s betrayal is not merely financial but also destroys the workers’ confidence in the social and institutional structures in which they had relied.

The novel hints at the communication of trust through social practices and stories rather than discursively. In a passage with metafictional and meta-performative implications, at the end of his narrative, Bobby relates how he and his wife Triona negotiate their trustful relationship through the common experience of watching plays. Bobby clearly shows that watching a play with his wife holds more importance than the play itself. “We went to a play inside in town one time; I can’t remember the name of it.” (20) Generally, Bobby has great difficulty expressing himself: “I wish to God I could talk to her the way she wants me to, besides forever making her guess what I’m thinking. Why can’t I find the words?” (15) Fortunately, however, Bobby and Triona sometimes go to the theatre together. Bobby remembers a night when he was so overwhelmed by a performance that on the way home his affective reaction to the play turned into a physical demonstration of his deep desire to express his feelings of love and trust to Triona.

The play was about a man and wife; they just sat on the stage on either side of a table facing the audience, talking about each other [...]. For a finish, they were both old and their lives were near spent, and at the very last, your man turned around and admitted he thought the world of her; he’d always loved her. He put his hand on her cheek and looked at her and cried. Christ, your man was some actor. On the way home in the car, tears spilled down my face. Triona just said oh love, oh love.” (20)

Ryan’s novel opens with Bobby’s monologue and ends with Triona’s. The married couple’s reflections thus frame the nineteen other monologues. This frame narratively unfolds matters of trust rather than “precise[ly] articulat[e]” (Luhmann 29) them in the characters’ conversations or the narrator-protagonists’ monologues. *The Spinning Heart* thus presents a marital structure of trust that – unlike so many other structures of trust in this novel – proves intact, even though matters of trust are never discursively negotiated between Bobby and Triona. At the end of the book, the reader learns that, unlike most of the other characters,

Triona never believed that her husband Bobby killed his father; nor did she ever pay much heed to the rumours that he had a sexual relationship with another woman whose home he was improving with some of his former co-workers. Triona had always believed that her trust in Bobby was well placed: “I knew he wouldn’t betray me in a million years.” (Ryan 148)

Each chapter is told from the viewpoint of a different character, allowing readers to explore the recession’s impact from multiple angles. Through these internal monologues, we gain insight into the confusion, fear, and uncertainty experienced by the characters. The novel constitutes an exemplar of the representation of new individual and community realities within discourses of upheaval, provincialism, nostalgia and involution after the Celtic Tiger times. It represents Maher’s and O’Brien’s idea on “how to move from boom to bust” and “how this affected” people and representation in writing. Their struggles mirror the broader societal crisis. The linguistic richness of the novel is comparable to Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*, as it weaves together various voices and shared histories. Ryan’s novel represents one of these cases, as it portrays a rural Irish community that suffers from the recession and is about to recognise a new situation unknown to them before. This paper contends that the rural community portrayed offers new nuances in societal terms in 21st-century Ireland—especially after the crisis—which fails to address the idea of modernisation.

This paper draws on three main theoretical frameworks that help in the analysis of Ryan’s narrative structure, thematic content and style. The first one puts the use of language and speech by Ryan’s characters at the centre of the analysis. Ryan infuses speech and language in his novel in a distinct way: Ryan’s ear for an authentically crackling colloquialism is as sharp as ever. (Foster). For Emily Rapp, the “great strength of the book is Ryan’s ability to capture the vernacular of contemporary Ireland and its diverse citizens (Rapp). As Mianowski argues, “the various ways in which the English language is spoken and mastered appear as an additional filter through which the characters and narrators perceive reality”. (64). Accordingly, the monologues, which are the only way through which characters express and develop, are fraught with colloquialism, slang, introspection and an internal dialogism. For Foster, Ryan’s skill with language flicks out slang and abuse with a masterly touch, though sometimes an oddly flowery or philosophical note breaks the spell. With all this, Ryan shows the inability of these individuals to react as a community to the demise of the Celtic Tiger years that Ireland as a nation endured.

SETTING AND PLOTTING PERFORMATIVE STRUCTURES OF TRUST AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE PRIVATE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL

Post-Celtic Tiger fiction clearly sets out to negotiate practices not only of personal but also of institutional trust. Narrative fiction mostly focuses on the relationship between the individual and society, integrating the personal and the political; social-realist novels such as *The Spinning Heart* – and many other post-Celtic Tiger novels – do so by definition. While they often establish individual characters as representatives of institutions, there are other narrative means of integrating the private and the institutional. In fact, storytelling in general, and narrative fiction in particular, arguably help to reflect and negotiate the complex entanglements of private and institutional practices of trust in particularly subtle ways. Many post-Celtic Tiger novels achieve the effect of interrelating generalised, particularised and institutional trust by juxtaposing a private and an institutional setting. In Tana French’s police procedural *Broken Harbour*, for example, the reliability of the rule-bound practices of the fictional Dublin murder squad are tested when detective Mick Kennedy embarks on solving the brutal murder of an upwardly mobile middle-class family that found itself stranded in a ghost estate after the financial crash. Anne Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz* squarely situates the story of an extramarital affair in the context of the property boom and bust, demonstrating

how social structures of trust that have a personal and a sociocultural dimension are built, demolished, and rebuilt in old and new, luxurious, mobile and unsellable family homes, hotel rooms and office spaces (Mianowski 45–59). Caoilinn Hughes's *The Wild Laughter* is set mainly on a small family farm which goes bankrupt because of the pater familias' naïve investment in a dodgy international business venture. The larger socio-political relevance of the main protagonist's experiences, the youngest son who strives to save the farm, become unmistakably clear in the novel's final scenes that are set in a court room and dismantle the juridical system as an institution which is as unreliable as the protagonist's family. Similarly, Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* is set in a courtroom, where Tristram St Lawrence, the first-person narrator-protagonist, appears in front of the judge and jury as a central player in a corrupt property investment scheme funnelling international money through the shell-company "Castle Holdings," which Tristram had set up in his ancient family mansion. The constellation of settings here integrates the trial of the untrustworthy last son of an Anglo-Irish big house family with an indictment of the failure of various institutions – the government, the global economy, the banking system, and the law – to either prevent or (later) punish those who betray their established practices of trust. Interrelating matters of particularised, generalised and institutional trust, French's, Enright's, Kilroy's and Hughes's novels thus use narrative settings not only to symbolise the private and social fallout of the financial crisis but also to depict a Hartmannian society in need of trust.

Of major relevance to the novel's representation of institutional trust is the kidnapping plot that dominates its "two central chapters" (Mianowski 72), as it demonstrates that the local police are well able to deal with a case of child abduction. Significantly, it is the combination of police procedures and the reliability of the local policeman, Jim Gildea, that leads to the discovery of Réaltín's little boy Dylan in the flat of the psychotic Montessori teacher Trevor. More precisely, the boy is found because, against his personal wishes, Jim must "stay put in the village" to provide it with "an operational hub" (Ryan 134). Also, he gets the decisive hint after a routine (and seemingly pointless) search of the area, during which Timmy (a local who suffers from a mild form of intellectual disability) witnesses and tells Jim how Lloyd, Trevor's partner in crime, makes a suspect phone call. Skilfully reading the social performances of the townspeople, Jim trusts Timmy and realises that he "isn't half as thick as people make out" (137), while he mistrusts Lloyd, "that twitchy prick and [Trevor,] the Montessori teacher [who] are kind of, I don't even know how to put it – the same [...] type of a fella, kind of brainy and a bit odd" (136). As Triona, appreciating the local policeman's trustworthiness, summarily puts it: "It was [...] Jim who found the child. [...] He couldn't put his finger on it; he just had a feeling." (155) Still, the construction of the kidnapping plot suggests, in fact, that the case is solved by a combination of institutionalised routine procedures and Jim's personal engagement.

Third, and conclusively, the murder plot serves to prevent any notions of a nostalgic longing for pre-Tiger structures of trust. This plot again involves Bobby – wrongly accused of having murdered his father, Frank; and Denis, the murderer, a broke and desperate sub-contractor of Pokey's, who frantically follows Bobby, assuming that as Pokey's ex-foreman he knows the whereabouts of his debtor. Denis ends up murdering Frank, whom he only wanted to frighten but actually kills when "[h]is laugh reminded [him] of [his] own father" (Ryan 124). Paternal violence and neglect are, in fact, a central topic in *The Spinning Heart*: the novel is peopled by characters who suffer from the consequences of their fathers' physical or psychological cruelty. "I'll never forgive him for the sulking, though, and the killing sting of his tongue. He ruined every day of our lives with it... Sober, he was a watcher, a horror of a man who missed nothing and commented on everything. Nothing was ever done right or cooked right or said right We couldn't talk freely or easily." (18)

By constructing an encompassing history of paternal violence across the monologues that make up *The Spinning Heart*, Ryan imagines a town community whose social practices and affective structures are still firmly anchored in a patriarchal system – despite all the wide-ranging recent legal and societal steps taken towards social and sexual liberation. Frank’s murder can be read in this sense as allegorically dismissing the patriarchal tradition for good. In Ryan’s austerity narrative, the two sons who are involved in the murder plot contemplate parricide repeatedly without actually committing it. Bobby has so often fantasised about killing his father that he remains unsure whether he has or has not murdered Frank when Jim Gildea finds him next to the dead body with the murder weapon in his hand. Denis thinks he is killing his own father while murdering Bobby’s. In the end, the patriarch is dead, without the sons being hopelessly entangled within a violent patriarchal regime that is routinely reinvigorated rather than ended through acts of parricide. In the context of this murder-plot, which Triona’s monologue clearly establishes (150–151), the final words of the novel, “What matters only love?” can be seen as reflecting a society in need of trust which must continue to search for new ways of negotiating trust, rather than simply promoting a neo-liberal romantic escape route.

NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION AND REPRESENTATION OF CRISIS

The Irish rural society Ryan depicts is still polyphonic in nature – the twenty-one chapters in the novel represent the monologues of twenty-one different members of the community– but find it impossible to articulate a common present and a future for this town after the socio-economic blow of the crisis after years of unprecedented abundance. “Bobby’s intense psychological response to like an orphan child, breft, filling up with fear like a boat filling with water.” (Ryan 10) Ryan’s stylistic use of a “silent dialogising background” advocates the need to found anew what Fintan O’ Toole has termed as “a new kind of collectivism – not the tribal and parochial loyalties that have shaped the political culture, but a wider sense of mutual obligation.” (236) As stated above, the narrative and thematic structure of *The Spinning Heart* finds expression in the tension between the local and the universal. Behind this tension, the novel addresses a nostalgic remembrance of a rural Ireland that has not been able to cope with the events of the post-Celtic Tiger years. As for the concept of nostalgia this research paper adopts as its third framework, it diverts from former critical analyses that attached a memorization of the loss of physical landscape as “a site from which to express the longing for lost culture.” (Frawley 3) Instead the analysis proposed here, then, follows Oona Frawley’s concept of nostalgia in Irish literature in that “when nostalgia extends beyond the individual, it can become a sociological phenomenon that revolves around a longing for lost culture or theoretically unrecoverable past.” (3) This nostalgia works as its best when it presents a time-gap long enough to remind entire communities of former times that were “because of their distance from the unsettled present...safer and more stable.” (4)

Ryan’s novel presents different narrators that are glued together to portray the polyphony of a “cracked looking glass” in an unnamed town in today’s rural Ireland. The economic crisis has hit this town in such a way that narration takes the reader to a mosaic of perspectives and reactions to a post-Celtic Tiger rural discourse. However, no action, no scenes and no actual dialogue inform Ryan’s narrative and thematic structure. Through monologues, indirect speech and rumours does the reader get to know what happens to all these characters in this rural community? Life in this town is “out of joint” and even the spinning heart of the novel’s title is a “flaking, creaking, spinning heart” that “needs to be scraped and sanded and painted and oiled” (Ryan 9), as Bobby, the Synges hero and main protagonist – directly or indirectly – of the novel, expresses. The spinning heart, the wind vane at the low front gate of

Bobby's father's house, represents a valid metaphor both for the narrative structure that takes us from narrator to narrator and also for the way in which, wherever the wind vane points to, the "should have known[s]" – as Bobby retorts in the beginning, desperation, collapse, heartache, disillusion, confusion and uncertainty – reign. Ryan's depiction of the recession and the crisis wears "the face of your neighbour" (Jordan), and even if the book "suggests an intimate oral history of a moment in time" (Kalotay); the inability to act collectively and the primacy of individualism make Ryan's novel an exemplar of social uncertainty, shame, regret and disaffection. The characters' language, idioms, richness, limitations, plainness, breaks, descriptions, vernacular twists, humour and confessions represent Ryan's way of synchronising the crisscrossing interaction between the discourse in art and that in the life of this rural Irish community.

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