Incomparable Poetry

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There was a minor downturn in the Irish economy from 2001 to 2003, symptomatic of a global downturn, and at the time many believed that the Celtic Tiger had come to an end. But later virtually every commentator would extend its lifetime to 2007. It was assumed to be the same Celtic Tiger, but in fact the Irish economy pivoted slightly to partake in the global property bubble, and this was clear even in 2003, as the following example shows. On October 16, 2003, the liberal pundit David McWilliams and astringent Austin Hughes (puppet of International Investment Bank at the time) went head to head in the confines of Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)’s *Primetime* debate about whether house prices in Dublin would rise or fall. A panel of three prospective homebuyers, Kate Fennel, Jason Ryan, and Patrick Flynn, watched the debate live in the RTÉ studio. McWilliams insisted that rising property prices in Ireland were not reflecting their real value. Hughes pleaded that there was no bubble. McWilliams admonished the panel of prospective homeowners: rent is low, and it is going down. “Keep renting,” he said. Hughes claimed that they should “invest now” in property and later “make a return.” The presenter Miriam O’Callaghan turned to the homebuyers to see who they sided with. Patrick Flynn said: “We do realize we are in a false economy.” What he meant was that everyone knew that the price of houses no longer reflected...
their value, as McWilliams claimed. Each of the three citizens agreed with McWilliams. They nonetheless said that they would purchase property, before prices rose further. Perhaps they understood better than McWilliams that house prices and rent have a relationship. As Jason Ryan put it, “I don't do a lot on the stock exchange. My house will be an investment.”

In May 2007 realtors in Ireland knew the housing bubble would burst.¹ Years of speculation, fueled by the government, bankers, and builders, turned sour. On September 30, 2008, days after becoming the first Eurozone country to enter recession, Ireland responded to the Lehman Brothers collapse by guaranteeing €440 billion of liabilities at six Irish-owned institutions and a foreign-owned bank. With the taxpayers of Ireland as guarantors, Irish banks continued to access loans on the international market. To Europe’s irritation, the guarantee provoked similar guarantees across Europe to prevent capital flooding to Ireland.² Much of the Irish commentariat have tried to present the later bailout in Ireland as an external imposition, when it in fact followed on logically from this bank guarantee. As the historian Conor McCabe points out, the bank guarantee was the work of “an indigenous middleman or comprador class with business interests concentrated mainly on financial administration and property speculation” that used the full power of the Irish state to protect themselves from their own profit-seeking strategies in the context of a serious crisis in profitability.³ This class was willing to countenance the financial collapse of the state before they would downsize their houses and lifestyles.⁴

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³ Ibid., 49.
⁴ To give context for Irish classes in the late twentieth century, we must look back to the nineteenth century. At that time, Ireland, still a colony, failed to industrialize and was wracked by the Irish Potato Famine. Marx suggested that after the Act of Union in 1800: “Every time Ireland was about
Ireland continues to be dominated by a comprador class which has “positioned itself between foreign capital and the resources of the state.”\(^5\) In October 2008 Finance Minister Brian Lenihan boasted that Ireland’s government had delivered “the cheapest bail-out in the world,” and it looked like he might be right, because Fitch, the credit rating agency, retained Ireland’s triple A rating.\(^6\) On December 21, 2008, the government said it would inject up to €7.5 billion into the country’s three main lenders; Allied Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland, and Anglo Irish Bank. At the beginning of 2009, Lenihan felt assured enough to boast: “The steps taken have impressed our partners in Europe, who are amazed at our capacity to take pain. In France, you would have riots if you tried to do this.”\(^7\) In April 2009 Lenihan announced the creation of a “bad bank” to deal with the risky property loans of financial institutions, taking them off the books of private companies. The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) was established in October 2009, ready to take on bad assets and loans.

to develop industrially, she was crushed and reconverted into a purely agricultural land. [...] Middlemen accumulated fortunes that they would not invest in the improvement of land, and could not, under the system which prostrated manufactures, invest in machinery, etc. All their accumulations were sent therefore to England for investment [...] and thus was Ireland forced to contribute cheap labour and cheap capital to building up ‘the great works of Britain’” (Karl Marx, “Outline of a Report on the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London,” December 16, 1867, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867/12/16.htm). As Friedrich Engels noted in his 1845 study of the working class in England: “The rapid extension of English industry could not have taken place if England had not possessed in the numerous and impoverished population of Ireland a reserve at command” (Friedrich Engels, \textit{The Conditions of the Working Class in England} [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 101). Indeed, the Industrial Revolution was predicated on the devaluation of Irish labor and welfare and using Ireland as a source of food.

5 McCabe, “False Economy,” 47.

6 Ibid., 53.

The newly built Samuel Beckett Bridge, designed by Santiago Calatrava, is modeled on a harp, and the coat of arms of Ireland is a gold harp with silver strings on a blue background known as Azure a harp Or, stringed Argent. If you visited Dublin during the crisis and looked through the cable stays of the bridge, named after Samuel Beckett, you would have seen the unfinished headquarters of Anglo Irish Bank, which began to wind down after nationalization in 2009. In July 2011 it merged with the Irish Nationwide Building Society, forming a new company named the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation. Michael Noonan, the Minister for Finance at the time, stated that the name change was important in order to remove “the negative international references associated with the appalling failings of both institutions and their previous managements.”8 The negative associations were also, obviously, local. Anglo Irish Bank specialized in massive loans to a small body of buddies, and the bank and its lendees were central to the overheating of the property market.9 There is an elective affinity between the bank and what the bridge cannot help but represent, as an immense piece of fixed capital funded by the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government, Dublin City Council, and Dublin Docklands Development Authority to the tune of €59.95 million. Both this bank and Beckett exemplify the muddying of failure and success. This link between financial culture (in which risk and failure are perceived as preconditions for profit) and Beckett’s writing can be seen in books such as Jean-Marie Choffray and Charles Stephen Brown’s Fail Better!: Stumbling to Success in Sales & Marketing — 25 Remarkable Renegades Show How (2008), and Pahud de Mortanges’s Ever Invested. Ever Failed. No Matter. Invest Again. Invest Better: Thoughts, Facts and Rules for Learning by Investing (2017). These texts use a quotation from Beckett’s Worstward Ho (1983) in their titles, a work of dizzy-


ing negative substitutions in which the “said” is to be replaced by the “missaid,” in which “better” is equivalent to “worse” and “well” to “ill.” The text is deeply attuned to the constitutive power of language in narrative: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”10 Beckett’s work, initially not necessarily categorized as “Irish,” has since been recuperated (accurately or inaccurately) during the Celtic Tiger. Remarking on this in 2006, Steven Connor offered a rebuttal to Irish Studies, saying that he did not want to encourage assertions of the “regionality of Beckett’s work,” i.e., “its ‘Irishness’, its ‘Protestantism,’ and so on.” He observed that “Joyce and Beckett have become the PR darlings of the Celtic Tiger.”11 For Connor, this scholarship is deeply intertwined with the Celtic Tiger discourse and is essentially a branding exercise. Increasingly, nations are acting like corporations. Nation-states are increasingly both cowed under by, and trying to imitate, corporations and firms, as there is “tighter subordination of most states to the dictates of capitalist agencies.”12 And literary heritage for many states is simply one wing of a massive advertising campaign to attract capital.

A close relationship between aesthetics and the economy is a striking feature of neoliberalism, and it is possible to trace this in the language of the reports of the Irish government’s Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural, and Gaeltacht Affairs.13

13 Neoliberalism is a theory of political economy which suggests that human well-being is best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms with private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The state’s role is to uphold this and to create markets. See David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2. See also Sarah Brouillette, Literature and the Creative Economy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
When the International Monetary Fund (IMF) arrived in Ireland in 2010 to negotiate the terms of a loan, the nation let out a long exhalation. After that visit in late 2010, there was an increasing neoliberalization of the Arts sector in which literature was put in service of the economy. A government consultation document published in 2016 on a new National Cultural Framework Policy entitled Culture 2025 states that “culture creates tangible societal value, promotes wellbeing, and provides a positive direct and indirect economic impact.”14 In the foreword to this document, Heather Humphreys asserts that culture drives innovation and contributes to the “economic wellbeing” of Irish citizens.15 Similarly, the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht’s Value for Money and Policy Review of the Arts Council (2015) notes “the spill-over effects for the economy.”16 This is a marked difference from the Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism John O’Donoghue’s preface to Public Art (2004), where art simply adorns walls of buildings, making “an impact” and creating “lasting memories,” and no profit-motive sneaks in.17 Irish government reports have also commended the cultural sector for responding in “imaginative” and “creative” ways to loss of government funding, and thereby not only is austerity made into an edificatory tool for that sector, but that sector serves as a model student to others.18 In congruence with this, Colin Coulter has observed that after the financial crisis, academic and intellectual circles were called on to reinvigorate Irish cul-

15 Ibid., 3. 
18 An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta, Gnóthai, Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta, Culture 2025, 4.
ture and, by proxy, local apparitions of transnational capital.19 None of this is unusual or surprising, and it echoes a similar strategy used throughout the Blair years in Britain, which celebrated “Cool Britannia” and attempted to stimulate a “creative economy” in the UK.20

In “People & Power — Collapse of the Celtic Tiger,” produced by Al Jazeera, journalist Fintan O’Toole says that the arts are immune to the recession. The documentary offers a new gallery space in Dublin, called Block T, “an artistic and social enterprise and a one stop shop for all things creative,” as an example.21 The post-recession mentality is encapsulated by this attempt to turn to the arts as a resource for the creation of material wealth. The ship may sink, but once some coral grows on it, future divers will pay through the nose to behold it. Literature is one of the few places in which misery is itself a commodity rather than a by-product of augmenting commodities. This problem is felt acutely by poets such as Dave Lordan, who asks: “How can we make art from suffering without making that suffering something beautiful and therefore admirable?”22 Newspaper articles stressed that there has been an uptick in the market for Irish literature and labelled it post-crash. The term subtly implies that there is a zero-sum game between cultural and financial capital.23 The Irish financial downfall is the necessary precursor to a rise in literary quality. Echoing Taoiseach Eamonn de Valera’s famous speech during the Anglo-Irish trade war of 1932–37, the

underlying assumption is that financial penury is necessary for the land of saints and scholars to fulfil its manifest destiny of stage-Irishness, with fulsome *cailín*s riverdancing at every flyover. This is inherent to the logic behind these newspaper articles and their use of “post-crash” as a term.

A need to write relevant work may be symptomatic of an incursion of economic thinking into the arts. Writers must respond to the conditions under which they write, but the conditions under which they write often foreclose a great many answers. The place of economic discourse in the contemporary Irish cultural imagination has ballooned. It is not a case of writing taking a more important role in everyday life following the crisis but of economics taking a more important role in literature. Consistent attempts to engage directly with economic thought may mean that literature will lose sight of its intrinsic advantage — its ability to handle incommensurables, things which evade quantification and standards of measurement. But literature or writing is probably most useful as a tool when it tries to quantify, and in its attempt renders visible gaps which we must attenuate and break in practice and thought. Its status as an exception to economic imperatives is itself economized and justifies how we all live. Art is posited as a haven for particularity, idiosyncrasy and non-fungibility to legitimate its opposite in the name of a spurious autonomy. Irish literature is engaged in a collective attempt to purge economic language and thought from our collective lives by emptying that language into literature. There is an excessive interest in economics in Irish writing, and this is both symptom and cure, a collective shedding of the economic discourse through overuse. Literature has been funneling capitalism’s own image back to itself relentlessly in the hopes that the fumes will damage the car and not the passengers. If literature was suffering, and perhaps continues to suffer, from the pervasive influence of a certain form of economics, we cannot blame the work made under these conditions or the writers. We cannot blame the poisonous gases in the mine on the dead canary. Neither is the dead canary a manifestation of resistance to the conditions in said mine.
On the evening of 1 Frimaire CCXIX the NAMA was established. The Taoiseach Brian Cowen then confirmed on live television that the European Union, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund troika would be involving itself in Ireland’s financial affairs. Support for the Fianna Fáil party crumbled. In Cork, the poet Rachel Warriner was writing a breath-taking sequence entitled *Eleven Days* (which we will return to in section 5) and attended an anti-IMF protest. On November 28, 2010, the European Union, International Monetary Fund and the Irish state agreed to a €85 billion rescue deal made up of €22.5 billion from the IMF, €22.5 billion from the European Financial Stability Facility, €17.5 billion from the Irish sovereign National Pension Reserve Fund and bilateral loans from the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden.\(^{24}\) When the IMF arrived in Ireland in 2010 to negotiate the terms of a loan, a major Irish newspaper editorial articulated the outrage of the petty bourgeoisie by opining that Ireland’s freedom fighters had died for nothing, taking a quotation from W.B. Yeats’s “September 1913” as a title for their lament: “Was it for this…?” Utilizing this poem, which meditates upon Ireland’s revolution and nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, the editorial suggested that Ireland’s revolutionaries died for national sovereignty, only to have it given to German banks. The *Irish Times* editorial stated:

The true ignominy of our current situation is not that our sovereignty has been taken away from us, it is that we ourselves have squandered it. Let us not seek to assuage our sense of shame in the comforting illusion that powerful nations in Europe are conspiring to become our masters. We are, after all, no great prize for any would-be overlord now. No rational European would willingly take on the task of cleaning up the

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mess we have made. It is the incompetence of the governments we ourselves elected that has so deeply compromised our capacity to make our own decisions.

They did so, let us recall, from a period when Irish sovereignty had never been stronger. Our national debt was negligible. The mass emigration that had mocked our claims to be a people in control of our own destiny was reversed. A genuine act of national self-determination had occurred in 1998 when both parts of the island voted to accept the Belfast Agreement. The sense of failure and inferiority had been banished, we thought, for good.25

“We are, after all, no great prize for any would-be overlord now.” Who would even dignify us by having us as a colony, the Irish Times weeps? Failure and inferiority are the lot of the Irish, the editorial argues. If only “we” could be a colony again, to restore our own confidence in ourselves. But this “we,” which looks more collectivizing than it really is, did not make decisions through market signals, but in board rooms. The “we” is being given traits and a coherent collective agency which it doesn’t have. Indeed, an essentializing discourse with regard to “Irishness” has been a repeated reaction to the financial crisis. In the aforementioned documentary “People & Power—Collapse of the Celtic Tiger,” the voice-over emphasizes that Ireland tends to bow down to particular social groups—priests and bankers are offered as examples—as if to delineate the physiognomy of a race. Anne Mulhall’s article “Mind Yourself” and Conor McCabe’s The Sins of the Father take aim at this particular reaction to the crisis. Mulhall’s article builds on Lauren Berlant’s analysis of neoliberalism’s cruel optimism, which she defines as a continued attachment to a form of life that no longer makes sense, and demonstrates how Maureen Gaffney, a popular media personality, promulgates this cruel optimism for the Irish

25 “Was It for This?” The Irish Times, November 28, 2010.
public.\textsuperscript{26} Well-being and resilience are ideal to forming neoliberal subjects, especially in the context of global deindustrialization. As peripheral EU states were restructured, Ireland proudly wore its quantitative happiness for all to see.\textsuperscript{27} Mulhall shows that there is an essentializing ethnic and racial discourse underpinning statements by prominent media personalities such as Maureen Gaffney, inculcating in the viewing public absurd and unscientific notions about intrinsic properties of happiness and resilience in “Irish” people. Mulhall contextualizes this with research on suicide and self-harm, giving the lie to the assumption that the “Irish” are resilient. Conor McCabe, meanwhile, has analyzed the discourse around the “Irish property gene,” an idea that the intergenerational trauma of losing land to the English meant that the Irish phenotype was particularly susceptible to the vagaries of property bubbles.\textsuperscript{28} “The Irish state has a subtle mono-ethnic basis — in particular, the “Celts” — despite successive invasions and integrations. The \textit{Irish Times} editorial above, like many reactions to the crisis, draws a charmed circle with the crude instrument of the chummy pronoun “we,” sneaking various racial, gendered, and class-based assumptions in under its penumbra. We will see this issue arise in the poetry of Leontia Flynn and we have already seen in complex acts of interpellation and omission in Joyce’s “Capital Accounts.”

In opposition, both Fine Gael (a liberal-conservative and Christian-democratic political party) and the Labour Party could complain about the promissory note, or bank guarantee, given to banks in 2008. Two years later, because of the promissory note, the IMF had to give the Irish state a loan. After the 2011 general election, Fine Gael and the Labour Party formed a coalition government, and did not alter anything. With the so-called Prom Night Bill of 2013, the Irish government shuf-


fled some papers and then concluded that the problem of the promissory note and its legality had been fixed. They rushed a bill through the Dáil, jetting President Michael D. Higgins from Italy to sign it into effect as soon as possible; it was alleged that this was because of a “leak” to foreign media. On TV3, Ursula Halligan said that the “leak came from Frankfurt’s end.” It later emerged that Frankfurt had not been consulted, and the leak was probably non-existent. On the night of February 6, 2013, the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) was liquidated after the Fine Gael/Labour coalition passed emergency overnight legislation through the Oireachtas. The IBRC was the name given to the entity formed in 2011 by the court-mandated merger of the state-owned banking institutions Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society. This was the night before the Irish Supreme Court was due to hear an appeal by David Hall, a Dublin businessman. He was challenging the legality of the bank guarantee. Hall’s argument before the High Court was that the payment of the €31 billion in promissory notes in respect of the now defunct Anglo Irish Bank was illegal as it was not approved by a Dáil vote. The High Court ruled that he did not have the locus standi to challenge the legality of the €3.06 billion promissory note payment that was due at the end of March. As Conor McCabe points out, the Prom Night Bill retrofitted legality onto the actions of the Dáil when it offered the bank guarantee. McCabe refers to this legislation as an exercise in “creative accounting.”29 I think he is right to label it as such. But I also think there are other examples of creative accounting, under which I would include Trevor Joyce’s “Capital Accounts” and Leontia Flynn’s Profit and Loss. My point is not that their poetry is some kind of poetic correlate to the 2013 bill, but that accounting practices are incredibly creative in Ireland and that equally creative writing in Ireland heavily leans toward accounting.

29 Ibid., 230.