Incomparable Poetry
Robert Kiely

Published by Punctum Books

Kiely, Robert.

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Donal Ryan began writing his debut novel *The Spinning Heart* in the summer of 2010, while he was working in Limerick as a labor inspector for the National Employment Rights Authority to enforce employment rights compliance. Published at the end of 2013, Ryan’s novel received wide acclaim and many awards. It narrates the effects of the economic downturn as they ripple through an Irish village. Many of the village’s laborers were flush with cash during the boom, but they have been left in the lurch now that the local developer and the biggest employer in the area, Pokey Burke, has skipped town. As a reviewer notes, “here, the global crisis wears the face of your neighbour.” This narrow focus means it is a book wherein international economic crisis is transmuted into emotional crisis, like turning a beach into nothing but sand. The crisis in the novel is intimate, a neighbor


3 Ibid. See also Emily Rapp, “‘The Spinning Heart’ by Donal Ryan,” *Boston Globe*, March 14, 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2014/03/14/
rather than a stranger, and in both cases an individual rather than an impersonal set of relations. The recession has been painstakingly delimited to the local level. What I’m trying to get at is that Ryan’s book has a microcosmic scope, focusing on a small village where only one property developer is to blame, Pokey Burke. Bromides from the mainstream media sneak into the text and the characters wrestle against them — as they do not have a means at their disposal to deal with or counteract this mainstream narrative. The narrative we get is a familiar one,clarioned by the mainstream media and politicians. People got greedy, there were a few bad eggs, the good times were uniformly good for every social group, and now, times are uniformly bad. If these chants were overt, they might run: What do we cut? The Public Sector. When do we cut it? Now! Those chants delivered by what Lordan calls “high-toned Pinochets” have been quantitatively mapped by Julien Mercille.4 Although Ryan’s book is emphatically not a poem, it is worth looking at it to get some context on how those chants register in literary texts.

The novel collapses into solipsism, with no interest in representing the crisis as a complex net of relations and emergent abstractions engorging themselves on living labor; it merely aims to chart the psychological impact of that crisis. We are getting a representation of a consequence, not a representation of the crisis. One reviewer notes that Ryan sketches

the internal response to external disaster: there is a queasy, fatalistic lack of surprise among the villagers that the bubble of good fortune has burst, twisted up with ‘the whole mad Irish country thing’ of fearing being taken for a fool, and the bitter pleasure of being proved right by disaster.5

5 Jordan, “The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan — Review.”
This folds into a general concern about volition, complicity, and the economy.

Ryan’s book is a melodrama from start to finish, with individuals bound up inexplicably in strange exchanges, often acting in a fashion which is not in their self-interest but in the interest of a sensational plot. This is not so much for the reader but the imagined community of the village’s gossiper, who the character Riain dubs the “Teacup Taliban.” Each chapter has a narrator who has been affected either directly or tangentially by the collapse. It deals with ghost estates as well as infidelity, inheritance, bosses running away with money, and people emigrating to Australia. It shows how the lives of many individuals have been impacted by the recession and in particular how a middle-class uses it to squeeze lower-class employees. For example, Hillary ends up doing more work for less money, while Kate, who runs a business, is happy that, due to the recession and a climate of fear among employees, people are willing to work for less than minimum wage. One reviewer bemoans that the book is “a harangue against those who powered the crazy speculation of the boom years and got away with it.” While Lordan’s poetry displays some elements of much-needed harangue, it is absent from Ryan’s novel. It is a very anxious and troubled meditation of the complicity of a small community in their own oppression by virtue of the absence of solidarity and through subtle policing of themselves and each other. This is most discernible in looking at how the text and its characters internalize and attempt to fight back against clichés. In the book Triona notes that “[p]eople say things like shouldn’t we be counting our blessings that we at least have our health?” Hillary muses: “Aren’t you lucky to have a job? That’s the stick that’s used to beat us now.”

6 Donal Ryan, The Spinning Heart (Dublin: Doubleday Ireland, 2012), 88–89, 98.
8 Ryan, The Spinning Heart, 153.
9 Ibid., 88.
Here, austerity is a linguistic hand-me-down. An abstracted, putatively homogenous group of people, the plain people of Ireland, say these things, or an anonymous other uses a phrase to beat someone down, to stop them from asking for more. As Triona says:

[I]f we were all in the black we’d all be in the pink. The air is thick with platitudes around here. We’ll all pull together. We’re a tight-knit community. We’ll all support each other. Oh really? Will we?10

Everything is pulverized into set phrases. Cliché is a cloak which veils, and possibly makes livable, serious problems, and those problems escalate significantly in the book. When a child is kidnapped, Bobby’s wife Triona meditates on the effect the kidnapping has on the community:

The missing child didn’t put anything into perspective for anyone the way they were all saying it did, he was just tacked on to the end of the list of things that just showed you how terrible it all is and how the country is pure solid destroyed and there’s no end to the heartbreak and aren’t we a right show now with the television cameras and the place crawling with guards. God, I’m gone awful cross. People are scared, that’s all. I know that.11

Riain gets angry, momentarily, and it is difficult to tell if the anger is justified or whether it has any kind of ameliorative function. She bemoans the fact that tragedies are added to a pile, an account, rather than understood on their own terms as irreducible losses. After working herself into a fury, she cancels that fury out before it has even fully begun and makes excuses for her peers. The cliché’s tire the characters out in Ryan’s text, even though they always return to them. Such as this:

10 Ibid., 154.
11 Ibid., 155.
Every bollocks is going around cribbing about the country being fucked. It'd wear you out, so it would. The country's fucked, the country's fucked, the country's fucked; the same bollockses that were going around cribbing that the whole country was gone mad for money a few years ago. They do be below in the shops, standing in miserable circles, comparing hardships. I'd love to tell them all they're a pack of miserable wankers only they're the same pricks I'll be looking for a job off of if things pick up or London doesn't work out.12

Here is internal policing at its most rigorous. Characters must police themselves and comport themselves for the possibility of future employment, hedging bets in case there really are no alternatives. It is tiring to repeat the clichés that the country is fucked, and even more tiring to unpack what that cliché reveals and elides.

Because it is a melodramatic and microcosmic text, the world-historical causes of the crash are not referenced. Instead, the crash is repeatedly attributed to the very people who suffer the fall out or immoral (implicitly exceptional) characters who could have ameliorated the crash by behaving in a different manner. That attitude was and remains common, most famously it was exemplified by the remarks of Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach who was in office from 1997 to 2008, that is, during the Celtic Tiger period. In a 2015 interview, he blamed the mishandling of the Irish economy on the plain people of Ireland, “Joe and Mary Soap,” who allegedly bought second, third, and fourth homes while snorting lines of EU credit. In the aftermath of the crisis, the simple fact is that the consumerism that Bertie Ahern would lay at the door of the Soaps was never anything but their own debt peonage and a revenue stream for housing magnates, banks, hedge funds, and multinational companies.13

12 Ibid., 109–10.
Ryan’s book is documenting specific lives, the lives of those impacted by the recession. The cause of the recession is a person, Pokey Burke. There is no sense, in the novel, either that a class of people or a government may have been responsible or that transnational capital may have had an impact. The novel is blinkered in that regard and this is crystallized in the character Lloyd’s attitude. One might say that the novel itself is an exercise in the kind of solipsism that Lloyd subscribes to in the following quote:

I remember when I told Trevor I’d decided to be a solipsist. He laughed like a fat, retarded duck. He **honked** at me. Wow, he said, that’s like a really good excuse to give yourself for not having a **job**. I disgusted myself by suddenly dropping my cloak of aloof superiority and becoming defensive. I can’t help the economy, I said, in a pathetic, loser voice. **Pardon**, the bastard said, with glee in his eyes, you can’t help the economy? But didn’t you **create** the fucking economy, being a solipsist?14

Here is an explicit self-condemnation. Lloyd, or Ryan, who knows or cares, has created all of this. He creates little homunculi and pushes them around on the page. This crystallizes the kind of thinking which is pretty prevalent in most accounts: individual people’s desires for houses led to this. The builder Pokey Burke running off with some money led to this. Didn’t you create the economy, with your desires and needs? And might the crash therefore be your fault? But another explanation for the crash is offered too. And the novel stops there. This is not necessary for the novel, there are examples of novels moving beyond such personalized accounts. The most accurate account would be one that holds all the variegated and sometimes conflicting desires of individuals and the power of government and that greater power of foreign direct investment, the neoliberal International Monetary Fund, and transnational capital in hand all at

14 Ryan, *The Spinning Heart*, 106.
once. How to do that? How to refrain from blaming individuals? How to deal with people as the personification of sets of relations? Many of the poems I am discussing demand to be read in light of these questions. Moving toward the world, they attempt to describe the world as it is, without concocting a fantasy or scaling it down to allegory, complete with singular bogeyman. Although Ryan's fantasy is instructive, he is probably more right than he realizes when he insists in an interview that his book isn't about the crash, and ergo not about anything at all.15

In Ryan's text literature is useless, it is not a weapon that can counter cliché. Rather, one character Rory rebukes himself for cliché and dribble and compares his own narrative to the "auld shite I used to write in English."16 There is a sense in the book that literature cannot offer a way out, that from the age of twelve the "auld shite" written in English class was preparation for a job market and implicated in the whole mess of neoliberal statehood. But the book is cowed under by this and exhibits a tendency towards regression and silence.17 If Ryan's novel is modernist, it is so in the vein of Joyce's Dubliners, offering another image of complete paralysis and stasis. But Ryan's derogation of literature is only justified in the narrow confines of Ryan's own creative practice.

15 "I don't think writers necessarily have a responsibility to address social issues, but to be clear-eyed and compassionate if they happen to do so. I don't mind being described or seen as a social commentator, but I hope it's obvious that my main interest lies in the chaos inside us all, in the terrible, beautiful humanity we're all afflicted with. Recession or no recession, the storms will rage on" (Kate Appleton, "True. Right Down to My Ghost. The Donal Ryan Interview," Three Monkeys Online, http://www.three-monkeysonline.com/donal-ryan-interview/). And since the current lot of humanity in Ireland is historically conditioned by the crash, and there is no transhistorical human condition, we must concede that he is right: his book isn't about anything at all.
16 Ryan, The Spinning Heart, 59.
17 "Why can't I find the words?" asks Bobby, struggling to articulate his hatred for his father and his love for his wife. He has been silenced repeatedly throughout his life, and as the book ends is lost for words again, in the worst possible circumstances" (Jordan, "The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan — Review").
The mixture of anger and resignation in Ryan’s novel is also on display in Rachel Warriner’s response to the crisis. Warriner is an art historian, curator, and critic who has published on contemporary feminist art. Warriner’s Eleven Days is eleven poems, each written on one of the eleven days the IMF spent in Dublin. It was published in 2011 by RunAmok Press, a small press run by James Cummins and Rachel Warriner that would later publish Trevor Joyce. The chapbook is a response to that visit to Dublin as well as the protests that occurred and flurry of changing news articles that tried to document what was happening. The pamphlet offers a poetry of lyric protest and agency and fury, but also fatigue. I remember this time, the sense of outrage everywhere as the government revealed that the IMF was bailing out the country and was actually physically present in Ireland, going back on an earlier denial, and I think “20.11.10”’s lines “yesterday’s news / discredited” refer to this. But I can find no reference to this in newspaper articles right now. Ireland’s status as a peripheral economy is front and center: “23.11.10” mentions “peripheral at best” and “uncomplicated / peripheries.” Later on this period is referred to as “our ‘Weimar moment’” in the poem. The implication is that, like the Weimar Republic, Ireland will suffer economically at the hands of other Europeans and possibly fall into fascism. But the comparison is closed off by brackets and trademarked, no sooner stated than salable or buyable in the intellectual-property market. That German banks are imposing this is another example of history’s tendency to rhyme. The poem mentions “krona comparisons,” referencing the comparisons between the situation in Iceland and Ireland. One of the poems documents Warriner’s return to Cork from a protest held in Dublin on November 27, 2010, and Trevor Joyce had organized an anti-state/anti-IMF protest in Cork city to coincide with that national protest.

19 Ibid., “23.11.10,” “18.11.10.”
20 Ibid., “18.11.10.”
If Warriner’s sequence has an overall tone, it is one of disappointment. It is disappointed with Irish politicians, the Irish public and, perhaps most interestingly, the protestors. It is not the kind of work which, say, Jodi Dean would decry as a mere celebration of protest as a transformative personal moment, after which everyone just goes home. Indeed, Warriner seems dissatisfied with the protest form itself. For example, the poem “26.11.10” seems to *declare* in the lines “we stride forth / in fury exhibition,” but the bombast of “stride forth” is in irreducible tension with the “fury exhibition” — the “fury” is undercut by the “exhibition,” as it is fury *performed* rather than simply fury itself. The protest enters the clean, clinical, white space of a gallery opening. This sense of disappointment in protestors is also present in “27.11.10”:

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halfmasked drinkers
  crush cans in shows of fury
  and small children
  riot over who
  holds the sign
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If this section might also be read as an image of unbounded energy, the general tone of the poems seems to be one of fatigue (the final line closes off in a very final ending, “sold out and done”) alongside a righteous anger which is finding it difficult to select and maintain its sights on a valid target. It is a poetry of protest, but it is also one suspicious of this self-fashioning.

In Warriner’s poetry the lyric seems to have a counterforce at its disposal, even as it gobbles down fragments of the everyday chorus and repurposes them, as when in “25.11.10” she writes “i’d cry for you / if the IMF hadn’t seized / my tearducts.” Here, the surreal image paradoxically short circuits any simple attribution

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2011-finding-language-use.
22 Warriner, *Eleven Days*, “27.11.10.”
23 Ibid., “28.11.10.”
24 Ibid., “25.11.10.”
of emotion: the speaker of the poem cannot cry, but as readers we are aware of the seizure of those previously private tear ducts as a violence that produces this lack of emotional reaction.

This poetry drags us right into the fray and namechecks those who are, in their flesh and blood, responsible for imposing austerity or have some complicity with it as well as those who struggled against it—then-EU Commissioner Olli Rehn and the University College Cork Student Union leader Daithi Linnane—and writes under the immense pressure of a historical moment, almost in panic, out of necessity. At around this time, Linnane was organizing a march against the rise in student fees. If the telescoping of Joyce’s poetry makes a weird kind of ethics possible, or draws us to an archaic or possibly problematic one, Warriner’s total investment in the moment, the now of the poems, comes at the problem in another way as protest is critiqued for being too time-bound or inadequate as a spontaneous act or performance in a moment within a time-bound poem.

In Lordan’s “A resurrection in Charlesland,” Lordan names the clichés and other prescriptions given to people during the Crisis:

> Force-feeding ourselves Dan Brown, valium, parox,
> Gerry Ryan and angelology,

> we repeat the neo-liberal prescriptions:
> staying in is the new going out
> and there is no such thing as society

This is practically spat out, embittered, an implicit put-down of Dan Brown, medication, talk-show host Gerry Ryan, and quasi-mystic Christianity. Lordan notes that neoliberal phrases encourage the saving of money and quotes Margaret Thatcher’s sentiment that society doesn’t exist. The neoliberal prescriptions are these clichés, and in Warriner’s “19.11.10,” the poem quotes some more linguistic detritus in order to distance itself from

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the fatalism which certain set phrases foster: “we had a feeling this might happen’ / they say / as if that would help.” This is a poetry of utter contempt and scorn that must ceaselessly beat back against the onslaught of cliché. Lordan and Warriner, then, voice opposition to the cliché by claiming that it does not help to “say” the cliché, and separates it out with quotation marks, while Lordan italicizes it.

Clichés also become fodder in the poetry of Mairéad Byrne. Byrne emigrated from Ireland to the US in 1994. She has been published by presses big and small in the US and Ireland, and there is something resolutely Irish about the clichés that Byrne handles. Her book You Have to Laugh, New + Selected Poems was published in 2013, and on one of its pages we get three poems, each entitled “YOU NEVER KNOW” with a set of brackets after it and a word describing roughly the ways in which the cliché has been worked with. This is the poem entitled “YOU NEVER KNOW (loose)”: 

You never know.  
You never really know.  
You never really know now do you.  
You never know.  
You just never know.  

On the next page is the poem “ARE YOU KIDDING ME?”:

Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?  
Are you kidding me?
Are you kidding me?
ARE YOU KIDDING ME?28

Sometimes nothing changes, as between lines three and four, and other times italics or capitals are added to change emphasis, tone, or meaning. Next in the selected is the title poem “YOU HAVE TO LAUGH”:

You have to laugh
You have to laugh
Ah you have to laugh
You hafta laugh
You hafta laugh though
Don’t you just have to laugh
You hafta laugh
Ah you hafta laugh
You have to laugh
You have to laugh
fuckit29

Why have I beaten you over the head with these repetitive poems? Why has the poet? These poems simultaneously mock our collective tendency to use clichés while pointing to the multiple ways they can be changed, the little modulations which ever so slightly change their meaning. “YOU NEVER KNOW,” “ARE YOU KIDDING ME?,” and “YOU HAVE TO LAUGH” seem to be a sequence, and the final line of the sequence “fuckit” throws all of it under the bus. If this poetry knows it has to start from the toxic clichés circulating around it, it also knows intimately the experience of burnout, tiredness, frustration, giving up. And that seems to me to be an emblematic gesture across responses to the crisis in poetry, to mix extraordinary effort and work, as in the insistent pullulations of clichés, the attempt to give them some pliancy, or soften and manipulate them, or digest them

28 Ibid., 8.
29 Ibid., 9.
and spit them back into the faces of one's enemies. And then the poems give up, they feel sad they have to do this at all, they get tired of it.