

# *The Ontological Imperative in Irish Writing*

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***Abstract:** There is a tendency to engage with Irish writing and culture in terms of identity. Epistemological concerns are therefore foregrounded with the emphasis on the intellect and the imagination and how it creates and apprehends itself in relation to the world about it. Identity, then, in either the political or historical sphere becomes a matter of narrative. This, it could be argued, fits neatly with Ireland's conception of itself primarily as a culture where the act of story-telling is celebrated above all else. I want to argue that in the last thirty years there has been a recognition of ontological concerns in Irish writing; in other words, a shift in emphasis away from epistemology toward a questioning of Being – of what it is to exist. Of course, Being can only be imperfectly accessed through language so that words and narrative still remain of paramount importance. Yet, this shift signals a self-reflexive consideration of the ontological status of the text itself. Thus the act of writing is interrogated and its relationship to the 'real' world probed. Form now becomes important as writers struggle to find and sustain a structure/model in either poetry, prose or drama that will adequately express their predicament. John Banville's novels are the most obvious example of books about the writing of books. Yet, in looking at the work of some other contemporary Irish writers like Brian Friel, Seamus Deane, Tom Murphy and Eilís Ní Dhuibhne it can be observed that each of them struggle with the telling of their stories, with attempting to give final shape and meaning to their narratives.*

There is an overwhelming tendency to engage with Irish writing and culture in terms of identity. Epistemological concerns are therefore foregrounded, with the emphasis firmly on the intellect and the imagination and how it creates and apprehends itself in relation to the world about it. Identity, then, in either the political or historical sphere becomes a matter of narrative. This, it could be argued, fits neatly with Ireland's conception of itself primarily as a culture where the act of story-telling is celebrated above all else. Indeed, at some level Irishness is actually bound up with the performance

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of narrative: one knows the usual clichés of the ‘Irish being great talkers’. There are a number of implications of this being the case in an Irish situation.

Edward Said famously argued that the colonial territory is always viewed ‘institutionally’; that is to say, the colonial space is defined and framed through the institutions of ‘law’ and the court, education and prison. Obviously, this underscores the epistemological; i.e. these institutions (as all institutions do) base themselves on knowledge and knowing and the power – and empowerment – that goes along with an institution. As he says, “Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing” (Said 1978, 41). In an Irish context James Joyce was very aware of this: we need only think of his powerful use of the institutional image employed in his essay, “Ireland at the Bar” (Joyce 2000, 145-7) which presents his namesake, Myles Joyce, caught uncomprehendingly in the glare of an alien legal institution in whose frame his story, his words, his plea, could not be heard.

The project, then, of resistance and decolonisation is one of challenging and overcoming this deployment of knowledge. There is, consequently, a situation set up where there exists a tyranny of knowledge: a tyranny of epistemological concerns where there appears to be an endless testing of ‘Irishness’ itself – what it is, or was, or might be in the future – and, also, perhaps more crucially, an endless testing and querying of the validity of the very processes by which we view and create ‘Irishness’. Thus, a common debate in Ireland is not so much about the ‘reality’ or ‘factuality’ of events or a situation, rather the debate revolves round the nature of the category by which that event is engaged with: it is history, for instance, or is it fiction or something else?

There is, then, an over emphasis on ‘narrative’ or, in contemporary parlance, spin. Thus, the stories or the story surrounding an event or happening becomes just as important as the actuality of the happening or event. As was said earlier, this fits neatly in with the conception of Irishness being bound up with the act of storytelling. For instance, the ‘land’ in an Irish context has more to do with the stories associated with place than with any environmental relationship to or with the land. A case of, not what one can do with it the land, or indeed, how one can physically own the land, but rather a case of what stories can be told about the land and thereby grant a sense of cultural and imaginative ownership (See Hand 2000).

All of this, surely, is nothing new: the power struggle in Irish culture is one of narrative: is one of who speaks and what they speak about. In short, stories and storytelling are paramount, or at least, have in terms of a critical approach to Irish culture and Irish writing been the main focus.

One implication of this is the situation now where we have the ‘tyranny of theory’ (and this is not confined to the Irish Studies scene, but perhaps its effects are felt more acutely or keenly in an Irish context), as critics cast about for a convenient theory through which (almost institutionally) to perceive Ireland and Irishness and come to some understanding about it. In a way, this tendency can be understood as a means of

considering the Irish story or narrative with the help of other stories and narratives. What we witness is a tendency to become beguiled by stories – or theories – from elsewhere which might help us explain and know ourselves. This is a difficulty in so much as that these stories/theories from elsewhere can sometimes obscure, as well reveal, certain aspects of the Irish experience.

Perhaps what I am detailing here is a nightmarish version of the postmodern world where ‘the-thing-in-itself’ is ignored in favour of the endless and distancing utterances that whirl about it. If this, in fact, were the case, then it would seem that in Ireland the situation is experienced at an extreme level.

Set against this epistemological bias or emphasis in Irish writing and culture is what can be termed an ‘ontological imperative’: that is, a reaction to this tyranny of knowledge. What can be observed in certain texts is a desire to get beyond knowledge and to gesture toward a new way of knowing and engaging with the world. On one level this impulse can be thought of as a need to get back to basics, to begin again at the very start. It can also be thought of as an acknowledgement of knowledge’s uncertainty, even if that does appear to be somewhat contradictory and paradoxical.

In a recent TV documentary Seamus Deane pinpointed 1972-1973 as a crucial moment in Irish writing and culture: a moment after which he claimed, ‘nothing would be the same again’ (RTE 2001). Obviously Bloody Sunday of January 1972, and indeed, the issue of the north of Ireland in general would have a much to do with this contention. Brian Friel’s 1973 play, *Freedom of the City*, might for some seem to be a failure because of its closeness to the events it depicts – Bloody Sunday – and thereby lacking the critical distance that might somehow bestow greatness. On the other hand, its very proximity to these events and its attempt to make sense of the immediacy and the reality of violence and death, make it an interesting text for consideration, despite its faults.

In relation to the argument being made here, Friel’s play can be understood as dealing with the impossibility of true knowledge. It is a play that dramatises various forms of ‘knowledge’: the audience is presented with different forms of discourse – legal discourse, journalistic discourse, sociological or academic discourse, and popular discourse in the form of ballads. It is not a case that these varying discourses are in conflict with one another – that might imply that one is privileged and allows an engagement with the truth of the events in the Guildhall in Derry. Rather, what Friel does – and I think successfully – is present each as a discourse that alienates the audience from the truth: the truth being what the audience views the three characters enacting. The more that is said, the further one gets from that initial truth. Friel, in other words, recognises the limitations of knowledge in the Irish situation – or recognises the ‘end’ (or uselessness) of some forms of knowledge and, while not perhaps articulated fully or coherently, registering the absolute need for a new form or a new way of engaging with reality. The final scene that sees the three characters standing with their hands above their heads, caught as in a freeze-frame, with powerful beams of light shining on them and the sound of gun fire blazing, in its lack of movement is a stark visual reminder of

the necessity of discovering a means of making sense and communicating the facts of history. Coming, as it does, at the end of the play, this might be understood as a moment of possible transition – these three figures and their lives and what happened to them, still remain to be translated.

John Banville's 1973 novel, *Birchwood*, is one text specifically mentioned by Seamus Deane as one of those reflecting this paradigm shift. Indeed, it could be argued to be one of the primary examples in that it registers its 'break' with tradition in a highly conscious manner. The opening lines of Banville's novel *Birchwood* encapsulate this shift: "I am, therefore I think" (Banville 1994, 11). In this playful reversal of seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes' famous dictum, Being is privileged above conscious Being: ontological concerns are given precedence over epistemological ones. Banville, though, is not simply dismissing Descartes and his enlightenment values – as might be expected of a postmodern writer. Instead, he could be said to be tapping into the revolutionary and experimental spirit of Descartes. For the philosopher had the audacity to set out in his *Discourse on Method* to take nothing for granted in what he knew and, importantly, how he knew. In other words, he desired to get back to fundamentals – forget everything he had inherited and taken for granted as true and begin afresh with a 'new' method. Thus, Banville acknowledges that desire in the opening of *Birchwood*, by declaring that in an Irish situation a new world needs a new perspective.

Critic Brian McHale famously makes the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction along the lines of epistemological and ontological concerns (See McHale 1987). The dominant in Modernist writing, he contends, is an epistemological one, whereas postmodern writing is dominated by ontological issues. Certainly, this shift in emphasis can be observed in Irish writing and culture. Banville's work can be productively considered as an on-going meditation on the what is to be: obviously, this has implications in an Irish context, reminding us that, whatever else we might be (or whatever else others might think we are), we are also human. Though, of course, that common humanity is necessarily going to be coloured by local conditions. Thus, "I am, therefore I think" is a declaration of intent, as Banville sets out on his artistic project. I am not saying that Irishness must be negated or forgotten or overcome and that a common or modern or European or International humanity must be embraced: I am not detailing an interaction that positions Ireland on the margins or on the receiving end of ideas from elsewhere. In other words, I do not endorse that usual reading of Irish writing that sees the trajectory of Irish writers – physically and imaginatively – as one that moves away from Ireland. However, it is not just a shift away from questions of knowledge and knowing toward questions of what it is to be – there is, also, the issue of the text and what its status in the world might be. Combined with considering what is to be, this self-reflexive element has many implications for the kind of texts being produced in the contemporary moment.

If we look briefly at Banville's *Birchwood*: there is an uncertainty pervading it in terms of what it actually wants to be. Is it a traditional Irish Big House novel, like

those produced by Elizabeth Bowen, Somerville and Ross? Many see it as such (Burgstreller 1992). Though the second part of novel with its ‘run-away-and-join-the-circus’ narrative would seem to disturb the expected movement within a traditional Big House narrative. Is it a bildungsroman tracing the growth of Gabriel Godkin or is it a gothic extravaganza with hints of incest and dark deeds? It is all of these, and none of them, at the same time. It is both a success and failure. By disrupting the expected narrative trajectory of an Irish novel, Banville forces his readers to consider again, the nature and status of the text being read. It is a warning, too, that a single narrative or genre can never encompass “Ireland”.

In his novel *The Newton Letter* another version of this ontological imperative is to be found. Again, confusion reigns – is this a history written by the unnamed narrator, an historian, or is this a fiction written by narrator obsessed stories and power that stories can confer on their author? This tension between fact and fiction comes to a climax in that moment when the unnamed narrator’s ‘story’ is challenged by Otilie. He strikes out and hits her in the face: but, immediately afterwards it too becomes an element in his fiction making consciousness:

It happened so quickly, with such a surprising, gratifying precision, that I was not sure if I had not imagined it” (Banville 1982, 58)

A moment of ‘reality’, however violent and intense, can be imaginatively incorporated and softened. Yet, this afternoon, as the narrator admits, opens up a tear in the fictional fabric he has woven for himself over the course of the summer spent in the countryside. Once again, Banville shows himself to be aware of the issues and the questions surrounding the difficult relationship between the realms of epistemology and ontology. His work, especially some of his earlier work, manifests formally his own uncertainties and anxieties surrounding this tension. Many of these early works have narratives that are unable to sustain themselves and self-consciously break down. In *Doctor Copernicus*, for instance, the third part made up of letters is preceded by a section that sees the once omniscient narrator lose authorial control of the narrative, as different voices and different styles invade the text. His more recent fiction, while not as formally experimental, continues to offer narratives which interrogate the quest for knowledge, each possessing a character who comes to realise that perhaps they have spent their lives looking for answers in the wrong places.

It is surprising to see and recognise the extent to which many contemporary Irish writers – be it consciously or unconsciously – confront this issue. Another example can be discovered in Tom Murphy’s play *The Gigli Concert* (1983). This is a play that on numerous levels dramatises rupture and breakdown and challenges the happy and accepted consensus between the play and the audience. In doing so it is one of Murphy’s more successful plays, internalising or intellectualising the naked violence of his earlier days so that – cerebrally – it packs a very strong punch indeed.

It is the end of Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*, which marks it out in contemporary Irish drama. It is – needless to say – a very disturbing close to the preceding action leading up to this final moment. Disturbing, not in that anything untoward is said or presented to the audience that might be construed, perhaps, as offensive (Murphy, it can be certain, is not after cheap theatrical thrills). It is disturbing, rather, in its self-reflexive/self-conscious implications for the nature of this particular theatrical experience but also for theatre and literature in general. One early reviewer of the piece felt that this ending was an “awkward” moment in the play (Harris 1985, 39). Another considered it “too dubious a gimmick to provide the kind of climax the play craves” (Devitt 1983, 57). To be sure when the character JPW sings like Beniamino Gigli the audience is being asked not – as the tradition would have it – just to simply ‘suspend their disbelief’. That would be easy and accessible and, indeed, acceptable. Rather, when JPW sings like Gigli: he literally does in that it is the voice of Gigli that we hear – the same voice that we have heard throughout the play on the record player brought by the Irishman – complete with the hiss and scratchiness of the record. It is so obviously not JPW or the actor playing JPW singing, that the audience might feel conned; or this supreme moment might fall spectacularly flat on its theatrical face. As that critic who felt that this device was ‘too dubious a gimmick’ for the nature of the play as it unfolded, goes to on say: Murphy is justified in taking the risk he does because of the ambition at work in *The Gigli Concert*.

It is this final moment, then, which is disturbing: rupturing the happy consensus between stage and audience, between a resolution to the drama and a radical moment of opening up further interrogation and questioning. For it raises more questions than it answers. It is a final moment that oscillates between success and failure, the miraculous and the mundane, magic and chicanery. And this applies to both the world within the play and the world outside the play. Indeed, it is a moment that breaks and overcomes, explodes even, the boundaries between the play and the audience, fiction and reality. Importantly, and crucially, it is all of these simultaneously: a classic instance of postmodern both/and rather than the traditional either/or model. This, of course, is one main reason why this ending is so disturbing.

It is an ‘end’ that challenges the conventions of the traditional moment of resolution because rather than closing the play by offering a manageable and readily available ‘meaning’, it opens up the play to the audience – making the audience begin to think again about what has just been presented to them. Numerous critics of the play talk of this end in terms of ‘apocalypse’ (O’Toole 1994, 208-27) or as ‘an explosion’ (Kearney 1988, 167) – so shattering of the norms can it be. Certainly, such terminology is appropriate: it is unexpected; it’s presentation – at once miraculous and ordinary – must leave the audience questioning rather than merely reaffirming what they have been witness to. This end, though, is radically open in that any attempt by a critic or an audience to pin-point and fix a definite and definitive meaning necessarily works against what has been presented.

Working back from this moment, demonstrates that *The Gigli Concert* is a play that at its heart is uncertain. Not only in terms of content: i.e. the story being told, but also in

terms of form: that is, the way in which the story is told. It is itself a manifestation of the instability it talks of. As Anthony Roche has pointed out, *The Gigli Concert* mixes – or mixes up – numerous genres. There are hints and gestures that would suggest a gangster movie: we are presented with such things as the Irishman’s hat, the use of light and dark, and setting of a seedy city centre office. Then, it is quite literally a confessional play with JPW who is a kind of psychiatrist and who is in turn a kind of modern day priest (Roche 1994, 162-88). It is also a play that deals with relationship between Ireland and England. It is, as well, a modern day reworking of the Faust myth. It is a play that shifts almost imperceptibly between comedy and tragedy. It is, in short, a fluid play, modifying and mutating as it progresses. It would seem as well that it is a play in which anything can happen, even the most unexpected of things.

It could be understood to be a play that dramatises this need to get beyond narrative and begin to engage with the world on a more direct level. A straightforward reading of the play would see it as one where the movement is one from a position of illusion (or delusion) toward a clearer (truer) understanding. In other words, what is demanded of the characters is that they strip away the fantasies that sustain each of them and confront head-on the reality of their collective predicament: only then, can healing and closure to come to pass. Fintan O’Toole, in applying a Jungian reading to the play, conceives *The Gigli Concert* working in this manner: the illusions each character harbours – but especially those of JPW and the Irishman – need to be escaped from because of their tyrannical and stultifying nature (O’Toole 1994, 213).

The problem with this reading as applied to *The Gigli Concert* is that it ignores those moments of utter joy in these characters’ acts of creation. When the Irishman imagines his youth as Gigli, JPW enters into the game with enthusiastic gusto and zeal. The same is true when The Irishman again invents a narrative about his earliest sexual encounters. The dialogue during these moments is quick-fire and energetic. Despite these being fantasies that are being created, the characters appear to connect with one another at a basic level, something that could be said to be absent at other times in the play. Then, of course, there is the end of play which hovers uneasily between fact and fiction, between the magical and mundane, would seem to raise – as was argued – more questions than offer final answers.

But, there is another powerful moment within the play, that acts as something of a counterpoint to this final end. It occurs just after The Irishman offers his second version of his childhood. This version tells of the brutality within his family and how Danny, his brother, demised his youthful wonder at the simple beauty of the world. Many might see this as the true version of his youth, but in a play that is so much concerned with fictions, that cannot be in any way taken for granted. Directly after this moment: the Irishman breaks down and lets out an anguished cry, giving vent to the all the pain in his life. It is a truly powerful dramatic moment and can be compared with the end of the play in its assault on the audience’s sensibilities. For in this instant of inarticulate expression the Irishman is transformed. In a way he finds his cure. The next

day on his return to JPW's office, he offers his third version of his childhood, denying the unhappy version of the day before and declaring that his was a very happy upbringing. His cure has not led to 'reality' but, instead, simply more story-telling. The hoped for transition from illusion into the fact has not occurred in the manner that might have been hoped for.

In a way, this moment is the 'end' of the play or should be – it is a false ending perhaps, again registering – as does Banville – the inability for a moment to remain outside expression and narrative. What is of note, however, is that once again, an Irish writer's uneasiness with epistemological issues finds expression in the ontological status of the text or work. It is in the 'form' that those misgivings are manifested and articulated.

Another example of this undecidability regarding form can be found in Seamus Deane's novel *Reading in the Dark* (1996). Is this a ghost story, a detective story, a bildungsroman, an autobiography, or a fiction? Is it history? This uncertainty is reflected in the story itself. Knowledge is the object of Deane's novel. Self-consciously, he focuses on the issue of power surrounding narrative and understanding, his unnamed narrator's search for the truth at the heart of his family's secret is what propels *Reading in the Dark* along. The expected conclusion, though, when all should become marvellously clear in a moment of triumph for the narrator is denied. Despite the narrator gaining knowledge, he forfeits wisdom. At the close of the novel, the narrator is able to admit failure in that he is still unable to fathom his father's silence. The words "Oh, father" (Deane 1996, 226) betray the emotion that has been, at some level, curiously absent throughout the novel. The narrator has, instead, been focusing on the discovery of the 'facts' relating to the disappearance of his Uncle Eddie. Along the way he has learned that stories – certainly in an Irish context – can conceal as much they reveal. And yet, despite of all this, he does not possess the meaning of these facts and events. The truth, for him, hinted at perhaps in that emotive intrusion into his narrative is always just beyond his cognitive reach.

One final example of this can be observed in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's recent novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1999). The novel's original source is a short story entitled "Blood and Water" from Ní Dhuibhne's 1988 collection of the same name (Ní Dhuibhne 1988). At the end of that story we have the character looking out over the sea, acknowledging her ignorance about her life and the decisions she has made. Or perhaps, a better way of considering this is to say that reader is more aware of the character's ignorance than the character is herself. Something similar seems to be happening in *The Dancers Dancing* (Ní Dhuibhne 1999). It is as if, at the end of the novel, Orla, the narrator, is unsure of the import of her story, unsure of exactly what it might mean. It is a courageous stance to take for any writer of the novel, a form that traditionally tends toward resolution.

So far, then, we have seen that there is a strain in his Irish writing which appears to herald the 'end' of knowledge; works that dramatise the insufficiency of knowledge and thereby the dead-end of epistemological concerns. This might seem to offer a something of a 'dead-end' or intellectual cul-de-sac; but this need not necessarily be the



case. These moments are powerful breaks in narrative, opening up a space for both the writer and the reader to begin to engage with issues and concerns that precede politics and history. They are, perhaps, an acknowledgement of the constant need to recognise the pressures of lived experience prior to any attempt to incorporate that experience into narrative.

Some texts consciously gesture toward a new type of engagement with the world. John McGahern's *Amongst Women*, for instance, suggests that the end of knowledge is actually an opportunity to begin to see the world afresh. Near the close of the novel Moran is able to see the Great Meadow again, as if for the first time:

They found him leaning in exhaustion on a wooden post at the back of the house, staring into the emptiness of the meadow [...] To die was never to look on all of this again. It would live in others' eyes but not in his. He had never realized when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of. (McGahern 1991, 179).

The end is not the end, but it signals the possibility of a new beginning, and a fresh start.

Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* is another text that acknowledges the possibility of some new form of interaction. Dancing signals not only the end of language but the beginning, or perhaps a remembering, of a different method of connection.

Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary [...]. (Friel 1990, 71).

It is important to emphasise that the end of knowledge is not to be confused with an end to communication. Rather, communication and the desire to connect with others is, in fact, brought to the fore. Thus, hopelessness is not to be countenanced or embraced. The "as if" in this quotation is significant, not least because it concedes how impossible it actually is to fully turn one's back on knowledge and epistemological concerns. For Friel, the image of the dance is not enough: words do exist and words are still necessary. The irony then, of course, is that the 'ontological imperative' – this desire to get beyond or behind narrative – can (indeed must) itself become a narrative or a part of one.

As suggested at the outset, Ireland's post-colonial position means that narrative ownership is very much fore-grounded in Irish writing and culture. However, as I have been trying to argue, Irish writers are acutely aware that it is not enough to simply tell one's own story. True possession and authority can only be acquired if form itself is interrogated and opened up. Thus, as has been demonstrated, the contemplation of the ontological status of the work is a feature of much Irish writing. Nonetheless, narrative

issues remain in that the 'ontological imperative' itself enters into narrative. The question then is, what type of narrative?

Certainly, from the examples considered in this paper, there is a sense that the aspiration for a new way to begin imagining the world and Irish realities remains just that, an aspiration. And yet, it is the desire itself which, perhaps, remains crucial, demonstrating a self-awareness about the limits of language and knowledge, recognising that there is always something more to be said, something 'other' that is hidden which needs to be uncovered and expressed. This attitude in turn reveals a wariness of promoting one single narrative as primary or authentic. The constant motif of the formal breakdown of a narrative undercuts any sense of that narrative being definitive or final. The result is a writing that tends toward inclusivity rather than exclusivity: each narrative or voice is one more layer of a wider, evolving narrative. Overall, it could be argued that the 'ontological imperative' is a central element in Ireland's process of decolonisation in that it forms a part of the culture's resistance to imperial structures and thought.

The tension remains, though, between a desire to engage in the act of telling stories and a realisation that, ultimately, the narrative will be unable to sustain itself. It is a tension that encapsulates hope and despair: hope that a story can, indeed, be told and the despair associated with the realisation that there will always be something more to be said. The texts that have been considered in this paper would suggest that this is a productive tension. Perhaps, the true consequence of an ontological imperative is a constant reappraisal of knowledge and narrative, meaning our writers must remain energetically engaged with the possibilities of what has not yet been said and might, hopefully, be said.

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