1. Introduction

The present article takes a look at recent developments within the field of contemporary Irish fiction and the relation of these developments to the canon of Irish literature. It is not, however, primarily concerned with the extent, the validity, or the inherent aesthetic qualities of this canon – or even its justification –, but rather with the way in which a literary tradition is reflected in, challenged, or transformed by single literary works. To be precise, I set out to investigate the question how the socio-economic changes of the past three decades – the Celtic Tiger years of the 1990s and 2000s with their unprecedented prosperity as well as the repercussions of the eventual crash of the Irish economy in 2008 – are reflected in contemporary works of fiction, and if the fundamental nature of these changes may lead to a departure from key aspects of said canon. I will concentrate on three novels, all written after the Celtic Tiger years and treating the effects of the recession in one way or another: Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012), Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018).

Canonisation is traditionally linked to questions of value and conceptions of Literature with a capital L. The present paper follows Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, and Simone Winko in their call to apply a radically historicised and pragmatic theory of literature that includes a wide range of texts and thus expands both the concepts of literature and the literary canon (Jannidis, Lauer, and Winko 2009, 3). I do not judge or argue for or against a canon, but I take its historical existence and its norms as my starting point to investigate the impact of this canon on individual works. This is all the more important since the logic of the Irish canon differs quite substantially from that of other national literatures. In order to understand the significance of the Irish situation and to take the impact of present-day socio-cultural history on contemporary Irish fiction into account, the general history and theory of canon formation itself needs to be considered.

The historical stages of the theoretical reflections on Western national canon formation may be described in the following manner: since the 1970s and 1980s national literary canons have come under attack from feminist and new historicist scholars for their conservative and patriarchal structures. In the wake of this criticism, the essence, role, and function of canons changed fundamentally. Race, class, and gender were increasingly considered, and subsequently national canons became more inclusive and less biased. The conviction that the construction of a canon rests solely on aesthetic quality and value today seems merely archaic, as Gabriele Rippl and Simone Winko state in the introduction to their comprehensive *Handbuch Kanon und Wertung*: "Als widerlegt gelten ältere Auffassungen, nach denen literarische Texte allein aus Gründen ästhetischer Qualität kanonischen Status erhalten" (2013, 1). In the 1990s, the focus changed again and emphasis was put not on the question of exclusion.
or inclusion but rather on the social and political circumstances a canon represents, replicates, and, thus, perpetuates. In his 1993 study Cultural Capital, which is based on Pierre Bourdieu's theories, John Guillory states:

The most interesting question raised by the debate is not the familiar one of which texts or authors will be included in the literary canon [...]. Where the debate speaks of the literary canon, its inclusions and exclusions, I will speak of the school, and the institutional forms of syllabus and curriculum. I will argue that evaluative judgments are the necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of canon formation, and that it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries. (1993, vii)

The question of inclusion, hence, depends only to a certain degree on the value of a given work or the oeuvre of an author. According to Guillory, a much larger role must be conceded to the canon's function of perpetuating a given social order and hegemony. Historically, this form of literary canon has its roots in the 19th-century establishment of national literatures and national philologies, and it is based on the rise of the bourgeoisie and the development of class struggle. In other words, aesthetic, political, and economic factors have to be taken into account when talking about literary canon formation. Theoretical reflections on the topic are still relevant today: recent discussions have focused on the impact of media change on literature and canon formation (Jannidis, Lauer, and Winko 2009, 3-37), the disintegration of national canons, and a renewed interest in the theory of world literature (Damrosch 2014).

Regarding the formation of the canon of Irish literature in the 19th century, however, Guillory's arguments and his emphasis on class and cultural capital are still valid, but they only partly apply to a context where social and political circumstances differ fundamentally from a culture like, for instance, the English. This important difference is stressed by Declan Kiberd:

Whenever one order falls and another eventually takes its place, there is in art a period of 'latency' when forms go into meltdown and all kinds of innovation are attempted. In most parts of Europe, the transition from aristocracy to bourgeoisie happened with relative speed, so that the new forms of literature thrown up by the changes (notably the form of the novel) soon stabilised into formula. In Ireland, however, conditions were somewhat different. The native aristocracy was toppled after 1600, two or more centuries before equivalent events elsewhere in Europe, but a truly comprehensive native middle class didn't emerge until well into the twentieth century. (2006, 12-13)

Hence, the development of the Irish canon has to be seen in the context of the political situation, especially of the 19th century, during which Ireland was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The works of literature written in Ireland,
particularly in the wake of the Act of Union of 1800, must therefore be regarded in the context of the political struggle with the English colonisers:

In a land where there were two contested versions of reality, neither side enjoyed complete dominance. The English planters had control by virtue of military power, but they were nervously aware that the native Irish constituted a four-fifths majority of the population. (Kiberd 2006, 19)

This also explains the idiosyncratic quality of the Irish literary canon. Although the question of value and also of masculine hegemony plays a crucial role in its formation, another feature is quite striking: the themes are predominantly political, and the works deal with questions of national and cultural identity, social struggles, and the legacy of history. The recent development in the Republic of Ireland in the wake of the Celtic Tiger hence begs the question whether these historical and political topics are still as powerful as they were in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This also explains my particular focus. I am not primarily interested in the formation or the legitimacy of the Irish literary canon, questions of value, inclusion, or exclusion. My main interest is in the impact of the Irish canon on individual works, and whether these works either reflect the canon or even challenge it. In the Irish context, the existence of the canon has implications for any text written under its sway; it influences authorial intention, editors, or publishers who want to place a new work on the literary marketplace. This aspect, namely that any individual work is in some way always related to the literary tradition, was first highlighted by T.S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this classic essay, Eliot argues that any new addition to the canon is not only influenced by previously written works of literature but in turn also influences, if ever so slightly, the entire architecture of the canon itself (Eliot 1972, 71-76). I will not go this far, but rather ask how the three recent novels I will analyse reflect the Irish literary canon and the political heritage. In order to contextualise my reading of these texts, I will first describe the historical dimension of the Irish literary canon.

2. The Canon of Irish Literature

The boundaries of the canon of Irish literature are notoriously fuzzy. Although certain topics seem to be typical of Irish literature, the canon's borders remain surprisingly open and permeable. First of all, Irish literature is predominantly inter- and transnational in its outlook and the way the works are marketed. Looking at contemporary literature, it is hard to decide if the novels by authors like Emma Donoghue, who has been living in London, Ontario, since 1998, or Colum McCann, a New York-based writer since 1996, are Irish, Canadian or US American respectively, or indeed transatlantic.

But not only the geographical borders are flexible and open. Another obvious reason for the difficulty to define and thus demarcate the canon is the question of language, maybe best expressed by James Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In this novel, Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's alter ego, famously muses about the difference

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2 For an overview of Irish literature see Deane (1986); Hand (2011); Kelleher and O'Leary (2006); Wright (2010).
between himself and the English Dean of Studies and their respective use of the English
tongue:

His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I
have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the
shadow of his language. (Joyce 1992, 205)

The irony of this passage is of course that Stephen had used an English term –
"tundish" – that the Dean of Studies was unaware of. It is clear that Stephen masters
the English tongue in a way that his English opponent will never be able to. Although
Stephen's mother tongue is indeed English and not Irish Gaelic, this passage underlines
the conflict between two coexisting idioms.

The dominance of English, not only as it is spoken in Ireland itself but also in the
international marketplace, is also the reason why scholarly books on Irish literature
often tend to focus on the Anglo-Irish tradition. Thus, histories of Irish literature often
set in with either Jonathan Swift in the first half of the 18th or later with the novels of
Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Morgan at the turn of the 19th century, although the
mainly oral tradition of Gaelic Poetry and Epic Literature reaches back well into the
Middle Ages. Furthermore, in contemporary literature as well, there are bilingual
writers such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne publishing both in English and in Irish.

Despite the openness of the canon at its fringes, there is at the same time a sense
that it exudes a dominant and sometimes even smothering power on individual works.
Next to the geographical and linguistic aspects just mentioned, there are also matters
historical and political that need to be considered in this context. These aspects are
particularly important because their influence is indeed pervasive in Irish literature.
Themes abound which relate to Irish history, politics, nationalism, and identity
formation, in particular under the sway of the troubled relationship of Ireland and
England, and they often refer to key events reaching back for centuries. 3 British
landownership in Ireland began at the turn of the 17th century with the Ulster plantation.
From the mid-17th-century conquest of Oliver Cromwell onwards, landownership
in the rest of the island changed hands from the Catholic Irish majority to Protestant
English landlords, which led to the rise of the Protestant ascendancy. In its wake, the
population was further subdued by the so-called penal laws, which prevented Catholics
from having a vote, becoming MPs, or from becoming barristers. This relationship
fraught with tensions eventually found its climax in the Union in 1800, when Ireland
became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The name already
betrays the strains and conflicts of and within this new political unit, as Ireland became
part of the United Kingdom but not of Great Britain.

Many of the topics of Irish fiction have their roots in this centuries-old history. First,
there are general topics that haunt Irish fiction: questions regarding identity formation,
nationalism, and religion. This led to the establishment of entire literary genres such as
the national tale (Ferris 2002). Then there are more specific topics such as the
relationship of landlords and tenants, which finds endless variations in the genre of the
Big House novel, a tradition originating with Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent in the

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3 For an overview of Irish history see Moody, Martin, and Keogh (2011).
Romantic period (Connolly 2012). In other words, from the very onset, Irish literature, and particularly Irish fiction, has been "political fiction" (Egenolf 2009). Together with the Irish famine in the 1840s, the rise of Fenianism, i.e. radical Irish nationalism, and eventually the struggle for independence and the Easter Rising in 1916 as well as the subsequent war of independence and the short but very significant civil war, the topics concerned with the Irish question, as the Victorian English called it, are still dominant in many Irish novels and short stories written and published in the 20th century. All in all, the sense of history and politics does not only seem to be overtly present in Irish literature; there are voices that claim that it dominates all other topics. In the introduction to the Penguin Book of Irish Fiction, which he edited in 1999, the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín, for instance, writes:

In all the surveys we have of the canon of Irish fiction [...], Ireland, from the time of Jonathan Swift to the present, has been, it seems, awash with 'national and intellectual mood', especially national mood, so that those writers who have sought to evade the opportunities to interpret this, who have sought to deal with the individual mood, however trivial, perverse and fleeting, seem now oddly heroic and hard to place. The purpose of much Irish fiction, it seems, is to become involved in the Irish argument, and the purpose of much Irish criticism has been to relate the fiction to the argument. (1999, ix)

This conception of canonicity – informed by Irish history, politics, and religion – has an important influence on works of any literary period, as Norman Vance points out:

The sense of tradition itself is a major dynamic of Irish writing. The literary work of any given period needs to be read with some sense of Irish history not just because it is historically produced, responding to and reflecting particular historical circumstances, but because memory, including the memory of earlier literary modes and concerns, is one of the constant themes of Irish writers and a sometimes intolerable pressure upon them. (Vance 2002, 4)

Wrapping up his introduction, Tóibín states that he hopes that the future of Irish Literature will be "post-nationalist," (1999, xxxiii) a term that is also used by Eve Patten in an overview of the state of affairs: "the fiction of the contemporary period is better categorised as post-national" (Patten 2006, 259). Hence, at the turn of the millennium, Colm Tóibín writes a piece in which he hints at Goethe's concept of Weltliteratur and which contains a call for a post-national Irish Literature and for a new literary canon. Looking at contemporary Irish fiction, I wish to put Tóibín's outlook to the test. Twenty-odd years after he wrote his text, it is apt to ask if Irish Literature has freed itself from the shackles of typically Irish topics, i.e. nationalism, the relationship with the English, the Catholic Church, the nuclear, yet dysfunctional family, etc., or whether Irish literature is still characterised, not to say haunted, by these themes.

This fresh look is all the more interesting because events in the past decades have influenced and changed Irish history in an unforeseen manner. During the 1990s, the abuse scandal almost completely destroyed faith in the Catholic Church as an institution providing moral and ethical guidance:

The speed with which the Catholic Church's reputation and status dissolved in Ireland is startling, especially for those [...] old enough to remember the immediately preceding
period – the 1960s and 1970s – when the power and the sway of the Catholic Church was as strong as it had ever been. The priesthood was still a relatively popular career choice in Ireland in 1980; by 2010 Ireland was having to import priests from Africa and other parts of the world in order to service the dwindling number of people who still observe Catholic ritual. (Smyth 2012, 134)

This turning away from a tradition that dominated much of Irish education and culture coincided with the economic boom termed the Celtic Tiger. Both events fundamentally changed the reality of the people living in Ireland. The outlook of the citizens became more secular and free from traditional constraints as their prosperity increased. Getting a job suddenly no longer seemed to be an issue, people did not need to emigrate anymore, and instead immigrants came to the country in order to find work. Yet, a novel like Anne Enright's *The Gathering* of 2007 already betrays that not all was well. Enright's book described the rotten core of this neoliberal society: it was as patriarchal as ever and devoid of any true and lasting values. Gerry Smyth sarcastically comments on the frenzied consumer capitalism of these years:

> Whatever the causes of the take-off into economic growth, the effects were there for all to see during the nineties and early noughties. Low unemployment and rising incomes combined to produce a buoyant economy. People could afford to buy lots more stuff, and they did buy lots more stuff: cars, more cars, holidays, more cars, houses, more houses and more cars! (2012, 132)

The collapse of the economy in 2008 brought back the old problems with a vengeance: unemployment, poverty, the need to emigrate. There is, however, something different: the old system of moral guidance, embodied by the Catholic Church, no longer has its former authority. This has prompted Smyth to call for a new form of Irish identity that no longer depends on either church or economy:

> From my perspective, however, the cornerstone of any new definition of Irish identity must be the development of a new moral vision. By this I mean a model of Irish national identity in which ideas such as responsibility and sustainability have a positive resonance; a model in which the concept of ‘value’ is not so completely dominated by economics; a model in which the question of what it might be right or wrong – acceptable or unacceptable – to do in any given situation is not left to politicians, bankers or civil servants. But where is such a vision going to come from? (Smyth 2012, 136)

It can neither be the purpose of this paper to provide a possible answer to this nor to judge Smyth’s suggested solution – the universities as cultural centres –, but it is interesting to see if and how recently written and published works of Irish fiction tackle the problem.

Looking at the current literary field, one of the most important aspects to consider is indeed the economic situation. Investigations of contemporary Anglophone literature in any other context – especially fiction – usually make use of a vocabulary that also characterises the aesthetic qualities of these works. Whereas these studies often describe contemporary literature as post-postmodern or meta-modern, to randomly pick just two fashionable labels, contemporary Irish Literature is described in a different, predominantly economic, manner: as either written during the Celtic Tiger years or after, i.e. as post-Celtic Tiger fiction. This classification highlights the social and cultural impact of the years of extraordinary prosperity as well as the sudden shock in
its aftermath caused by the bursting of the bubble in 2008. In the following, I will analyse three contemporary novels as case studies and investigate if they are indeed characterised by a transition from national to post-national, as Tóibín suggests. The question is whether the Celtic Tiger initiated a new phase in Irish Literature, namely a turning away from Irish history, politics, and national identity as the core of the literary canon, towards a more open kind of post-national literature.

3. Donal Ryan, The Spinning Heart

Among the three novels discussed here, Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* treats the economic problems after the crash of the Celtic Tiger in the most open manner. It addresses the key question if and how Irish society copes with the crisis, as Asier Altuna-García de Salazar suggests:

> The post-Celtic Tiger years have brought about the discussion of how a newly modernised, reinvented, cosmopolitan and even postmodernist Irish society is coming to terms with the tremendous upheaval not only in economic but also in cultural and, more importantly, social terms of the last decade. (Altuna-García de Salazar 2019, 90)

Each chapter is narrated by a different character in a small rural Irish community; and the novel aims to paint the picture of the whole society in miniature. Nearly all characters suffer from the closing of a construction company and the corrupt neoliberal manner in which the owner betrayed his employees. As a result, the individual characters are unemployed and some suffer from depression. Marriages and families are broken, and violence is pervasive. In the course of the novel, a little child is kidnapped and an old man is murdered without any apparent motivation. Thus, *The Spinning Heart* presents a society that is "stuck between amnesia and nostalgia and cannot find the way ahead in a new future" (Altuna-García de Salazar 2019, 97). One key feature of this society is gossip, and it is this gossip that ties people together and that also drives the plot. The protagonist is a man named Bobby Mahon, who hates his father Frank and even has thoughts about killing him. And yet it is absolutely clear that he would never lay hands on him. Bobby is married to Triona, and the two chapters devoted to them frame the entire novel. Both also stand out as moral examples; Bobby is an almost saint-like figure who keeps on working although there is no money to be made; Triona never fails to believe in him although people start to gossip about him having an affair with a resident – Réaltín –, whom he helps out, and about having actually murdered his father. Both claims are not true, but they highlight the suspicion that has infected society and destroys it at its core. At the centre of disintegration is the very visible decline of the housing industry as described in the chapter on Réaltín:

> 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 in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I'm stranded, she's abandoned. (Ryan 2012, 42)

As a result of the recession and the collapse of the economy, the Irish past seems to come back with a vengeance. With the housing industry gone, the people in that community have only emigration left in order to find work. Brian, otherwise a not very significant character, ponders about having to leave for Australia to get a job there:
So I'm going to Australia in the context of a severe recession, and therefore I am not a yahoo or a waster, but a tragic figure, a modern incarnation of the poor tenant farmer, laid low by famine, cast from his smallholding by the Gombeen Man, forced to choose between the coffin ship and the grave. Matty Cummins and the boys were blackguards; I am a victim. They all left good jobs to go off and act the jackass below in Australia; I haven't worked since I finished my apprenticeship. He has to go to the far side of the planet to get work, imagine, the mother does be saying to her ICA crowd. How is it at all we left them run the country to rack and ruin? How's it we swallowed all them lies? (Ryan 2012, 57)

Brian accuses the neoliberal bankers of having ruined the country, but what is really significant in this passage is that the ghost of 19th-century poverty returns to haunt the present with innuendos of the famine, evictions, coffin ships, and starvation. The passage seems to suggest that the Celtic Tiger years merely covered up a past of suffering and victimhood that has never really been gone.

The same is true for the depiction of violence in The Spinning Heart. Violence and hatred are passed on from fathers to sons in the novel. Frank Mahon's father beat him violently to teach him a lesson, and Frank, who never hit his son Bobby, tortured him nonetheless, albeit psychologically with words and his erratic behaviour. Frank's actual killer Denis only murders Frank because he reminds him of his own father. This lineage of hatred and violence is stressed in the chapter narrated by Jim Gildea, the town's sergeant:

Madness must come around in ten-year cycles. That time, there was two shootings and a fatal car crash in the space of two months. Now we have another murder and a snatched child; well, a child from here snatchted, and you can sense the potential for more. It's in the air, in the way people are moving around each other with grim faces and shining eyes, either all frantic activity or standing in tight groups, talking quietly and looking at the ground. This must be how things were the time of the war against the British, when a crowd outside of Mass would suddenly explode into a flying column, guns appearing from under overcoats, killers appearing from inside of ordinary people. They were good killings, though – the Tans burned churches and creameries, interfered with women and shot little children. That was a time when killing was for good, for God and country. That time is long gone. But aren't we still the same people? (Ryan 2012, 137-138)

This passage suggests not only that violence is passed on from generation to generation, but it also tells a story of origins. Violence does not merely affect individuals and families, it is at the heart of Ireland as a nation; indeed, the Republic of Ireland was, according to this passage, built upon the foundations of carnage. In the 1916 rebellion and the subsequent war of independence, the Irish fought against their oppressors, and this killing of the oppressor England led to a lineage of hurtful and murderous behaviour down to the present. Donal Ryan's novel therefore suggests that Ireland is not post-national at all, but that the post-2008 crisis merely unearthed an old cruelty that is deeply ingrained in the Irish nation and is thus treated in contemporary fiction as well, as Altuna-Garcia de Salazar suggests:

Indeed, Ryan's approach to contemporary rural Ireland exudes discourses of crisis, uncertainty, nostalgia and involution and can also be incorporated into many of the recent Irish literary productions on those topics [...]. These responses to today's Irish society in
writing represent and evince the lack of solid foundations, certainties and referents. (2019, 92-93)

Just like Gerry Smyth, Altuna-García de Salazar concludes that the current crisis has ancient roots but that post-Celtic Tiger Ireland wanted the ethical foundations to deal with the uncertainties. In Ryan's novel, it is the slightly unconvincing example of the characters of Bobby and Triona and their stress on love – the final word in each of their chapters – which provides some form of moral guidance; while the distress and hopelessness of the other characters seems utterly more compelling. The Spinning Heart, hence, is a novel that suggests that post-Celtic Tiger Irish literature may signify a return to traditional national topics and to the violence as part of the genetics of Irish identity that the individual characters do not seem to be able to shake off. While Donal Ryan's novel is deeply influenced by key aspects of the traditional Irish canon, Anne Enright seeks a different path in The Green Road.

4. Anne Enright, The Green Road

Enright's novel The Green Road may be read in many different ways, but I will focus on the book as an analysis of the current state of Ireland and as an example of the transition from a literature that is preoccupied with Irish history and national and religious identity-markers towards something new and open which one may call post-national. Spanning the years between 1980 and 2005, The Green Road takes account of the end of the years of poverty and of the economic boom of the nineties and noughties. The novel is about the Madigan family, and, at first glance, one could say that it is predominantly concerned with traditional topics, especially the topic of emigration. The first part of the novel is called "Leaving" while the second part is entitled "Coming Home." A chapter is dedicated to each of the four children of the Madigan family – Hanna, Dan, Constance, and Emmet – and each episode appears like an independent short story. The final chapter of the first part is dedicated to their mother Rosaleen. This adds to the overall theme of disintegration and fragmentation in the days of neoliberal capitalism. Accordingly, Maria Amor Barros-Del Río investigates "the neoliberal context that frames the plot in order to assess how globalisation has affected the concepts of individual, family and home in Irish culture represented in The Green Road" (2018, 36).

The fragmentation of Irish society during the economic boom is openly displayed, and all the characters have an element of allegory to them. Hanna, an unsuccessful actress, is an alcoholic who has lost control of her life; Constance, an upper-middle-class mother of three whose neoliberal lifestyle is dominated by pointless and conspicuous consumption, is suffering from cancer but unable to tell anyone. Typical Irish themes also appear but they are turned upside down. Dan has emigrated to New York, not because of economic hardships, however, but to escape, as a homosexual man, the rigorous Irish Catholic society. It is not without irony that he originally wanted to become a Catholic priest. Emmet, finally, works for international NGOs in countries of extreme poverty but is himself incapable of empathy, human emotions, and true commitment. His calling is more than a hidden allusion to the trauma caused by the Irish famine, as becomes clear in a remark made by his mother: "She had lost her son to the hunger of others" (Enright 2015, 153). All of these characters are metaphorical...
of a society which, whilst critical of its own past, lacks "a new moral vision" (Smyth 2012, 136) and has lost orientation despite – or maybe because of – economic prosperity.

The fifth main character, the children's mother Rosaleen, in many ways metaphorically represents Ireland itself. The name hints at James Clarence Mangan's "The Dark Rosaleen," a nationalist poem which is quoted repeatedly in the novel. *The Green Road*, hence, places itself in a long tradition of literary texts in which Ireland is represented as an old woman. That is not to say that Rosaleen is a flat character that can be reduced to an allegorical depiction of Ireland; she is more complex and ambiguous than that. Every time there is a family crisis she cannot cope with, she takes the "horizontal solution," (Enright 2015, 13) i.e. she takes to her bed for weeks. This is not without comedy, but it also stands for the passivity of a country that is neither able to fight its old demons nor defend itself against the new enemies: the neoliberal corporations that occupy the void created by the decline of the moral institution of the Church and the Irish national ideals. Yet, it is not only Rosaleen who represents Ireland but her house as well – a place all her children associate with memories of belonging while their actual attachment to each other as a family is felt by none of its members. Rosaleen at one point says about her son Dan: "I made him. I made him the way he is. And I don't like the way he is. He is my son and I don't like him, and he doesn't like me either. And there's no getting out of all that, because it's a vicious circle and I have only myself to blame" (Enright 2015, 34). The old and the new generation are estranged from one another, which leads to an increasing disintegration and fragmentation of society.

In the second part, entitled "Coming Home," all the children come back home to Ireland to a family gathering – also a typical Irish literary motif – because Rosaleen told them that she was going to sell their family home, a house that even has a name: Ardeevin. The selling of the house represents the selling of the country, the cutting off of the roots without having anything new to supplant it. The sense of disorientation expressed in the following passage might as well be read as representing an entire society lost in transition:

> But there was something wrong with the house and Rosaleen did not know what it was. It was as though she was wearing someone else's coat, one that was the same as hers – the exact same, down to the make and size – but it wasn't her coat, she could tell it wasn't. It just looked the same.

> Rosaleen was living in the wrong house, with the wrong colours on the walls, and no telling any more what the right colour might be, even though she had chosen them herself and liked them and lived with them for years. And where could you put yourself: if you could not feel at home in your own home? If the world turned into a series of lines and shapes, with nothing in the pattern to remind you what it was for. (Enright 2015, 165-166)

Towards the end of the novel, Rosaleen goes for a walk on the Green Road in the Burren in the West of Ireland and gets lost:

> This road turned into the green road that went across the Burren, high above the beach at Fanore, and this was the most beautiful road in the world, bar none, her granny said –
famed in song and story – the rocks gathering briefly into walls before lapsing back into field, the little stony pastures whose flowers were sweet and rare. (Enright 2015, 15)

She takes refuge in an old deserted famine cottage where she is eventually found. Metaphorically, she walks back in time. Selling a house that is "the only physical evidence of that former community" (Amor Barros-Del Río 2018, 41) at the height of the property boom and ending up in a cottage deserted during the greatest catastrophe in Irish history – the Great Famine of the 1840s – symbolically links this crisis with the crash in 2008 and its aftermath. Written years after the collapse of the Tiger, Enright's novel depicts an Irish society in transition; it showcases how the fragmentation of society is the price to pay for a few years spent in an illusion of prosperity and affluence.

This is also reflected in the novel's form: all the typical elements – to avoid the term clichés – of traditional Irish fiction are still here: national identity, the nuclear family, the Catholic Church, even the civil war and family feuds dating back to it. Yet, whilst these elements are nods to the traditional canon, The Green Road itself is almost a parody of what a typically Irish novel is deemed to be like. It is a novel written about the spiritual emptiness in an age of neoliberal capitalism; and a call for a new post-national literature no longer obsessed with memory, guilt, history, nationalism, and Catholicism. Arguably, Sally Rooney's novel Normal People, the novel which I will discuss next and which has been hailed in the press as a 'future classic' and the 'literary phenomenon of the decade,' is an example of such a post-national Irish novel.

5. Sally Rooney, Normal People

Sally Rooney's immensely successful novel Normal People came out in 2018, only one year after her debut Conversations with Friends. It was hailed by the press, and Anne Enright called it "superb" (Enright 2018) in a review written for the Irish Times. It is a novel about growing up, falling in love, sex, misunderstandings, and generally being young, i.e. in your late teens and early twenties. Set between February 2011 and February 2015, it tells the love story of Marianne and Connell. The most obvious obstacle the two have to overcome is class difference. Whilst Marianne comes from a rich yet dysfunctional family, Connell has a working-class background – his mother is a cleaner in the house of Marianne's family. In the rural town they grow up in – the fictional Carricklea in County Sligo –, he is popular whilst she is an outsider with no friends at all. Even after they start sleeping together, both shy away from admitting that they are a couple, and Connell does not even talk to her in public. What connects them, however, is that they are both clever and excel in school and later at university.

Although set in Ireland, the novel feels as if it could be set somewhere else as well, say, in London or in Edinburgh. That is not to say that Rooney's novel is ignorant about its socio-economic and political context – on the contrary; Normal People is remarkably precise in the depiction of place and class and of Ireland as a cultural background. The great difference to Ryan's and Enright's novels and the works described by Colm Tóibín, however, is that its plot is not dominated by these elements. To put it bluntly, Normal People is not smothered by Irish history. In order to stress this difference, I want to look at the elements of socio-economic change typical of an increasingly post- and transnational Ireland in the wake of the Celtic Tiger – and the way they may shape a future post-national Irish canon.
Economic decline is visible everywhere in the novel. It is quite normal, for instance, that parties take place in deserted housing estates that were never finished due to the collapse of the economy:

Last week, Connell mentioned something called ‘the ghost’. Marianne had never heard of it before, she had to ask him what it was. His eyebrows shot up. The ghost, he said. The ghost estate, Mountain View. It’s like, right behind the school. Marianne had been vaguely aware of some construction on the land behind the school, but she didn’t know there was a housing estate there now, or that no one lived in it. People go drinking there, Connell added. (Rooney 2018, 32-33)

The disastrous situation, however, is not described as a typically Irish problem, as both characters blame international neoliberal capitalism:

Four bedrooms.
Jesus.
Just lying empty, no one living in it, he said. Why don't they give them away if they can't sell them? I'm not being thick with you, I'm genuinely asking. She shrugged. She didn't actually understand why.
It's something to do with capitalism, she said.
Yeah. Everything is, that's the problem, isn't it? (Rooney 2018, 34)

Whilst Marianne has a wealthy background and hence does not have to worry about the future – though she has to struggle with her own problems including domestic violence –, Connell has no illusions whatsoever concerning his professional career. Considering which university and which subject to choose, Connell tells Marianne:

Yeah. I'm not sure about the job prospects, though.
Oh, who cares? The economy's fucked anyway. (Rooney 2018, 20)

So he decides to apply not for Law at NUI Galway but for English at Trinity College Dublin, following her to the capital. Sarcastically, Connell remarks:

Alright, I'll put down English in Trinity, then.
Really? she says.
Yeah. I don't care that much about getting a job anyway. (Rooney 2018, 27)

Once they are in Dublin, however, their roles are reversed. Suddenly, Marianne is popular and joins the Dublin upper class, whilst Connell, because of his rural and lower-class background, is an outsider, which makes him both self-conscious as well as aware of class and privilege:

He did gradually start to wonder why all their classroom discussions were so abstract and lacking in textual detail, and eventually he realised that most people were not actually doing the reading. They were coming into college every day to have heated debates about books they had not read. He understands now that his classmates are not like him. It's easy for them to have opinions, and to express them with confidence. They don't worry about appearing ignorant or conceited. They are not stupid people, but they're not so much smarter than him either. They just move through the world in a different way, and he'll probably never really understand them, and he knows they will never understand him, or even try. (Rooney 2018, 68)
The difference between Dublin and the rural West of Ireland does play a role here as well:

Back home, Connell's shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself or create impressions about his personality. If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone. (Rooney 2018, 70)

What these quotes signify is that *Normal People* betrays an awareness of time and place – and in that sense it is very Irish. It reflects aspects of Irish literature – national identity formation, class, Dublin, and the West of Ireland. But the difference is that none of the characters is defined by these aspects. There is no struggle against the Catholic Church, no struggle with nationalism, the nuclear family is no longer considered to be the root of Irish society. The cultural markers are decidedly international: at parties, people listen to Vampire Weekend or Jay-Z and Kanye West, and it is the French film *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* that makes Connell and Marianne cry. The enemies also transcend national boundaries: the novel blames international neoliberal capitalism for poverty rather than the Church or the English oppressors ubiquitous in 20th-century Irish literature.

*Normal People* might well be called a novel representative of a generation that is no longer characterised, shaped, and determined by Irish history. In that sense, this is a novel standing for a future canon of Irish literature that is post-national in Colm Tóibín's sense. Not only does it portray a country in transition but it may also be the harbinger of a literary canon in transition, which, in turn, means that the canon of Irish Literature as defined by Irish history may become a historical object itself.

6. Conclusion

Taking the three novels analysed in this article, it becomes apparent that contemporary fiction written after the Celtic Tiger covers a wide range in its political and social outlook. All three novels investigate, in one way or another, the post-2008 crisis, but they do not give a unanimous answer. Donal Ryan and Anne Enright still draw a connection between the crisis after the Celtic Tiger years and the politics and history of Irish identity formation. Thus, their works negotiate tropes typical of the Irish literary canon identified by Eve Patten:

[The] fiction of the contemporary period [...] remained formally conservative: beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signalled a haunted or traumatised Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche. The dysfunctional family, and within it the child – abused, victimised or emotionally stunted – continued to provide staple metaphors of cultural crisis. A recurrent fictional outlook, meanwhile, was retrospective. Ireland's history, and the recent past in particular, came under intense scrutiny as the testing ground of present-day cultural and political uncertainty. (2006, 259)

Sally Rooney, by contrast, is more trans- and international. Since she is also by far the youngest author – she was born during the Celtic Tiger years – it is a matter of
speculation whether she and the next generation may be concerned with topics that do not fit the traditional definition of the Irish literary canon.

To return to the initial question of the impact of the Irish literary canon on individual works of literature, one can see that the topics of Irish identity formation – history, politics, the (dysfunctional) family – remain formative. The powerful influence of the canon on post-Celtic Tiger fiction is still notable. Yet, one can also discern a certain departure, a critical approach to traditional topics, particularly in The Green Road and more obviously in Normal People as well as in Rooney’s previous novel Conversations with Friends, a more international outlook that merely nods and glances in passing at the canon of Irish literature. Therefore, these works may be seen as representative of a post-national tendency in contemporary Irish literature.

Works Cited


