

González-Arias, Luz Mar Ed. 2017. *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 248 pages.<sup>1</sup>

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Luz Mar González-Arias's collection, *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*, brings together a number of essays presented at the X International AEDEI Conference, held at the University of Oviedo in May 2011. With a clear focus on contemporary issues, the book concerns itself specifically with Irish fiction from the very end of the 1990s onwards. Published by a major international press, González Arias's volume is a most welcome addition to the field of Irish Studies in Spain. Thematically, the study –with its problematisation of canonical identities and its exploration of the marginal and dysfunctional aspects of Irish society– shares similarities with other recent collections edited by Spanish scholars: Marisol Morales-Ladrón's *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film* (Peter Lang, 2016), Asier Altuna-García de Salazar's *Ireland and Dysfunction* (Cambridge Scholars, 2017) and Pilar Villar-Argáiz's *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* (Palgrave, 2018). It is a distinctive feature of the field of Irish Studies in Spain to concentrate almost entirely on contemporary writers and on issues of social justice and inclusion.

The study opens with a chapter by Luz Mar González-Arias, who establishes the theoretical principles underlying the contributors' approach to Irish culture. Societies, González-Arias explains, tend to reconstruct their past and redefine themselves whenever there is a substantial break in tradition and social mores. Such a substantial break occurred in Ireland during the "Celtic Tiger" years (1994-2008), when the economic boom developed, notions of tradition were rejected, and Ireland re-imagined itself as a modern, inclusive and progressive nation. Irish artists, though, not only dramatised the ways in which greed, corruption and class oppression still persisted, but also how these negative attitudes increased in some cases. As González-Arias argues, Irish writers turned to descriptions of "the

imperfect” as a “strategy of resistance against the tendency to turn the collective memory of the country [...] into a record of glossy images that could never account for the darkness hidden behind its shining surface” (4). In Irish literature, this hidden “darkness” of the Celtic Tiger, González-Arias suggests, is often shown through the characters’ personal histories, which unsettle official versions of both past and present, offering alternative renditions of contemporary life in Ireland.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 make up Part One of the study, entitled “The Tiger and Beyond: Political, Social and Literary Fissures.” In Chapter Two, Ciaran Benson looks at the boom of the construction industry in Ireland, commenting how, in times of plenty, the newly affluent Irish wanted to have their own “Big Houses” –emulating the wealth and social status of the former British colonisers– while discarding the “humble cottage,” an icon of Irishness for much of the twentieth century (30). According to Benson, both the social attitudes and economic policies of those years created strong social divides which could only reveal the flimsy foundations of well-established notions of Ireland as a “fair,” “egalitarian” and “tolerant” society (33). In the third chapter, through an analysis of Petter Cunningham’s *Capital Sins* (2010), Juan F. Elices takes us to the scenario of the recent economic crisis in Ireland. Cunningham, in Elices’s words, offers in his novel “a bitterly farcical portrail of Ireland” through characters that allegorise the “capital sins” of Celtic Tiger Ireland; namely, “foolishness, stupidity and corruption” (38, 39). As Elices observes, Cunningham suggests that “the responsibility of the crisis should not be uniquely placed upon the political authorities or the bankers but upon the ordinary citizens” (46). Chapter Four traces the evolution of John McGahern from his first to his last novel in his depiction of the imperfect in Irish society. Anita Morgan explains that, whereas McGahern’s *The Barracks* (1963) engages with the “physical and emotional scars of a fractured society” in post-independence Ireland (53), *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2003) incorporates the idea of the imperfect in more subtle ways, in the “negative forces inherent in human nature” (61). McGahern’s last novel, Morgan indicates, points to the “need for a genuine shift in attitudes and his vision of a more becoming Irishness” (62). All in all, the three essays in Part One foreground the socio-political imperfections of Celtic Tiger Ireland,

which, in turn, disturb the complacent and self-congratulatory social attitudes of this period.

Part Two of the book deals with the imperfect in the literary renditions of the Irish family. In the fifth chapter, Patricia Coughlan analyses sibling relations in the contemporary Irish novel; a very original approach, given that most studies on the family focus on intergenerational relations. Coughlan demonstrates how, in recent novels by authors such as Colm Tóibín and Anne Enright, there is “a noticeable shift in representation from mainly vertical family relations towards sib and sib-like ones, including alternative, non-traditional formations” (74). Literature, Coughlan relates, expresses “fundamental issues in social thought” (72); thus, the problematical sibling relations in the stories she analyses come to represent specific imperfections of Irish society. Chapter six, by Marisol Morales-Ladrón, concentrates on Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010), a novel which recalls the terrible case of Elisabeth Fritzl in 2008. Morales-Ladrón makes use of the concept of psychological resilience in order to characterise the bond between mother and son during their captivity and their first years trying to adapt to society. As Morales-Ladrón shows, it is thanks to the resilience of mother and son that readers become aware of the imperfections of “received interpretations of child bearing, parenting, social values, the manipulation of the media [and] regular schooling” (84). In the following chapter, Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides offers a feminist reading of Mary Rose Callaghan’s *A Bit of Scandal* (2009), which describes an illicit affair between a priest and a woman, a relationship that comes to an abrupt end when she becomes pregnant. Here, Pérez-Vides explores the notion of the imperfect through Callaghan’s denunciations of society’s double standards and “the androcentric stereotypes of womanhood that epitomize religious-based manipulations of the traditional codes of gender politics” in twenty-first century Ireland (101). The essays in Part Two, therefore, share a concern with the micro-politics of families and personal relationships. In the novels analysed here, the individual’s predicament becomes a site of cultural contestation and ethical resistance.

Part Three –entitled “Ex-Centric Bodies and Disquieting Spaces”– contains brilliant essays, but one can hardly extract a general

idea common to the four chapters included here. In his chapter, Rui Carvalho Homem analyses Paul Muldoon's collection *Maggot* (2010). In its exploration of the imperfect, *Maggot* offers images of grief, the body in pain and the decay caused by disease: "[Muldoon] discovers human beings in gestures that position them beyond the accepted borders of the human, and this indeed fosters an alertness to the scope of cruelty across those borders" (122). Chapter Nine, by Hedwig Schwall, adopts a comprehensive approach to Anne Enright's oeuvre and demonstrates how her narratives put society's treatment of the female body—in its personal, social and political dimensions—at the centre of all considerations of the imperfect in contemporary Ireland. "Enright's project", Schwall points out, "is certainly deliberate, feminine and aesthetic," and "escape[s] more phallic, static, traditional philosoph[ies]" (144). Aida Rosende Pérez's chapter about Emer Martin's *Baby Zero* (2007) is informed by the 2004 referendum that denied Irish citizenship to children born to immigrant parents, a time when the Irish public opinion turned the pregnant body of the immigrant woman into a "monstrous" other (147). In her chapter, Rosende Pérez aptly illustrates how Martin's novel condemns Ireland's obsession with notions of nationality and citizenship, while underlining the inhumanity to which non-white immigrants and refugees were subjected. In Chapter Eleven, Lucy Collins offers an enlightening overview of the ways in which contemporary poets—Thomas Kinsella, Macdara Woods, Paula Meehan, Eavan Boland, Peter Sirr and David Wheatly—write about Dublin's transformation in the latest decades, and how they denounce the corruption in city planning, the destruction of green spaces, the deterioration of suburbs and the fragmentation of communities. The aforementioned poets, Collins tells us, "record the changing face of Ireland's urban identity" in their engagements "with the imperfect city" (177).

Part Four moves to the film and drama genres, exploring the stereotypes and distortions of Irishness in the UK and the US. In her chapter, Rosa González-Casademont explains how the mass media has, on an international scale, popularised the Irish drinking culture to such an extent that this trend has affected not only the image that foreigners have of Ireland, but also how the Irish see themselves. González-Casademont offers valuable insights into several American, British and Irish films that exploit the stereotype of the Irish

drunkard. This stereotype, with all its imperfections, has been appropriated by the Irish market for the sake of economic profit: “The occasional indulging of whimsical auto-exoticism, including the odd drunken Paddy trope, might be partly aimed at attracting an international audience who relishes the notion of Ireland’s quaint otherness popularized by British and US films” (195). The stereotyped nature of the Irish accent is addressed by Shane Walshe in his chapter about the resurgence of Irish drama on American stages. Walshe highlights the distortions that are produced when non-Irish actors follow manuals to acquire Irish accents for their performances. These manuals generally “perpetuate stereotypes of the Irish, whether about their character or the way they speak” (212). Part Four, while clearly deviating from the themes analysed in the previous chapters, is an important addition to the collection as a whole, as it takes a look at Irish identities from a global perspective, showing the ways in which the liberal market still today promotes stereotypical and, therefore, “imperfect” visions of Irishness.

To conclude, I would like to highlight several characteristics which I find extremely positive about González-Arias’s collection. First, it is a comprehensive study, as it covers a wide variety of texts, genres and topics. Second, all the chapters have a clear focus and all analyses are relevant to the notion of the imperfect, whose political significance and connotations are clearly explained by the contributors. Third, the essays examine not only the work of widely acclaimed authors (e.g. John MacGahern and Emma Donoghue), but also the novels of less known writers who deserve the critical attention given here (e.g. Emer Martin and Mary Rose Callaghan). Last but not least, the essays are well-researched and adopt a sociological viewpoint which makes them informative with regard to the current state of affairs in Ireland. However, because of its focus on the twenty-first century, the volume may give the impression that this foregrounding of the “imperfect” is an artistic innovation of the Celtic Tiger period, which is not the case. In his analysis of 1980s and early 1990s Irish novels, George O’Brien indicates that Irish writers customarily use tales of “personal development” to subvert the social mores of Ireland, characterised by their “rigidity” and “uniformity” (1999: 151). Linden Peach also argues that, unlike liberal discourses that draw a sharp distinction between tradition/oppression and modernity/freedom, the “fiction in the 1980s

and 1990s in Ireland and Northern Ireland [...] submit[s] the whole concept of modernization to scrutiny, tak[ing] a philosophical mirror as well as a critical scalpel to modern Ireland” (2004: 11). Drawing on these analyses, I suggest here that González-Arias’s collection may have benefitted from a more explicit connection to the fiction produced before or in the early stages of the Celtic Tiger. Having said this, I strongly recommend *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature* to any researchers or general readers interested in twenty-first century Irish fiction and culture.

## NOTE

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