

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES IN THE WORK OF OWEN MCCAFFERTY

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In *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century*, David Pierce identifies the main issues debated in twentieth-century Irish literature: history, politics, religion, the city and the countryside, culture and identity, colonialism and post-colonialism. He also mentions a certain number of sub-themes including violence, Northern Ireland, popular tradition and tales, gender, homosexuality, childhood, and homecoming. Many of these tropes can also be applied to the four plays by Owen McCafferty that I have chosen to study here: *The Waiting List*, *Mojo Mickybo*, *Closing Time*, *The Absence of Women*. Indeed *The Waiting List* (1994) and *Mojo Mickybo* (1998), both set in Belfast, deal with history, politics, violence, identity, and childhood. *Closing Time* (2002) deals with violence and gender; *The Absence of Women* (2010) deals with working abroad, returning home, and repressed homosexuality. In fact, the Belfast playwright often portrays characters who are stuck in a situation that they have not really chosen. At the end of *The Waiting List* the main character is afraid of the arrival of loyalist paramilitaries who might come to his house to kill him. He is contemplating the idea of fleeing Belfast at the time of the random murders of the 1980s, a period that I will examine in detail later. In *Mojo Mickybo*, the two boys fantasise about running away to Bolivia like their heroes Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and also to Australia like Mickybo's uncle; however, their outdoor games lead them nowhere and they run in circles, always ending up back home. In *Closing Time* and in *The Absence of Women*, the characters are stuck behind the counter of a pub or a table; they dream of leaving but cannot find the energy to do so and keep rambling on while drinking beer or tea.

Emilie Pine has written that "Irish playwrights are unanimous in their attempt to dismantle the harmonious or heroic myth of return; Ireland is an idealised and therefore impossible destination" (Pine 319). In this essay, I will examine this question and focus on how the characters experience their feeling of dislocation when living and working abroad (in England), as in *The Absence of Women*; how they navigate between "here" and "elsewhere" in their dreams or in reality, as is shown in *Closing Time* and *Mojo Mickybo*; and how the only character of *The Waiting List* experiences a process of self-acceptance while waiting for a possible attack by paramilitaries in his home. In so doing, I will illustrate how Owen McCafferty creates the atmosphere of isolation and a craving for departure in his characters.

Dreams of Departure

In the 1970s Belfast was a divided city. Although McCafferty does not consider his work as part of “Troubles Theatre,” the four plays studied here are dealing with the legacy of this period. In fact, from the nineteenth century, and especially at the time of the Great Famine, many Catholics arrived in the West of Belfast to look for jobs, thus creating rivalry with the established Protestant community. As mixed marriages were extremely rare, the different quarters became exclusive territories to be defended at all cost. Throughout the nineteenth century an incursion into the others’ territory led to riots. What are known nowadays as “interfaces” comes directly from the mapping out of Belfast at that period (Hutchinson 105). In the late twentieth century, Belfast remained a patchwork of well-defined enclaves and nowadays to know someone’s address is still to know, with a fair degree of certainty, whether this person is Protestant or Catholic (Taggart 67). In the 1970s certain Protestant paramilitary organisations were held responsible for the violence which reinvigorated the IRA campaign. According to Barry White, “with their siege mentality, common to most extreme Unionists or Loyalists, they [the Protestant paramilitary groups] regarded any challenge to the status quo – even a political one – as subversive, and a cause for retaliation” (White 182). This led to openly sectarian attacks to terrorise the Catholic population, but direct action also reminded the authorities that they were opposed to radical political change. One of the most notorious groups of that time were the *Shankill Butchers*, who used to kidnap their Catholic victims at night and kill them after torturing them.¹

In the four plays selected all the characters are confronted with violence (fear of kidnapping and murder in *The Waiting List*; killing of the father in *Mojo Mikybo*; a bomb blast in *Closing Time* and mention of the sectarian and violent city of Belfast in *The Absence of Women*) and they have all been traumatised to some degree. About the four plays one can also say that almost all the characters dream of changing their lives by either leaving a place or a person. The powerful, albeit frustrated desire for departure in all the characters appears to work as a trope similar to the frustrated desire for Moscow in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1900). This comparison may be surprising at first sight, but, in fact, Chekhov has had a great influence on many Irish playwrights and spectators. At first it took a while for theatre-goers in Ireland to appreciate productions of Chekhov, but at the end of the twentieth century there had emerged the Chekhovian homage play, with contributions to the genre from Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness, and Tom Murphy. Friel once declared that provincial Ireland resembled provincial Russia as described in Chekhov’s plays (Tracy 64-77) and remarked:

1 Their chief, Lennie Murphy, joined the UVF in 1970 and was arrested in 1976. When he was released in 1981 the random murders immediately started again. He was finally killed later that same year. It is estimated by Malcolm Sutton (*An Index of Deaths*) that 670 Catholics were assassinated by Protestant paramilitaries and 151 Protestants were murdered by Republican organisations between 1969 and 1993.

I'm not sure why I find nineteenth century Russians so sympathetic. Maybe the characters in the plays behave as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever – even though they know in their hearts that their society is in melt-down and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them. (Friel 179)

Some of McCafferty's work also seems to be pervaded by the Russian writer's ideas and style. Without going so far as to say that an explicit parallel can be drawn between the Belfast playwright and Chekhov, one can say that in the four plays under consideration ideas and specifics of atmosphere are nonetheless reminiscent of his work. Although McCafferty's characters usually come from the working class, as opposed to those of Chekhov, who are *bourgeois*, the behaviour, preoccupations and dreams of McCafferty's characters have many affinities with Chekhov's more educated *bourgeoisie*. Both dramatists find poetry in everyday life, portray characters in a vacuum, between two worlds or two loves, and have developed their special form of tragicomedy. However, "laughter through tears" is a tradition of Irish theatre that one can trace back to Synge and O'Casey.

In *Closing Time*, Robbie, the owner of a pub, and Vera, his partner, both dream of going away, but they blame each other for not doing so, as the following extracts indicate:

VERA: my case has been packed more than once/I've one lyin in the back a the wardrobe from years back – packed an all/nothing in it bloody fits me now/but sure what would he do/he'd be in the gutter – left on his own/couldn't leave 'im – couldn't bring 'im with ya. (*Closing Time* 3)

And later:

VERA: big plans Robbie an still stuck here/must be hard for you is it
ROBBIE: the four corners a the earth dear – only a had you on my shirt tail. (10)

Vera, whose name ends with an 'a' like that of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (Olga, Irina, Masha), finds all kinds of excuses not to leave her partner Robbie, whom she does not really love, and the pub where she works. Like Irina, she expresses her profound dissatisfaction with her life and her work but cannot act alone, because, in fact, she expects her other lover Iggy to help her. Since Iggy rejects her as a possible long-term lover, she lacks the courage to go away. She needs a man in the same way as the men in the play need alcohol – for moral support or to add spark to their dreary lives.

Escaping Trauma

In *Mojo Mickybo*, Mickybo's father dreams of emigrating to Australia like his brother-in-law in order to escape the violence of 1970s Belfast and says to his son that that country "would be better than this fuckin kip" (*Mojo* 25). Mickybo's mother also wants to see her family safe, but the way she talks about leaving the city remains humorous and imaginative. She tells her son that spacemen have talked to her on the radio and that "they're shipping them to a planet where there's no dishes the stew makes itself

sky rains beer and the hills are made of bubbies” (31). Mickybo, who is afraid that his family, his friend Mojo and he himself may be murdered in their beds, wants to shelter them in a hut that he has built with Mojo in the park. Mickybo and Mojo, who are children and only have a vague notion of geography, also suggest different possible destinations. For example, Mickybo says to Mojo that they could move to Australia or Bolivia, just like their cinematographic heroes Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.² That is the reason why they go on a bus journey to Newcastle, County Down, a place they believe could be Bolivia. Mojo would prefer to move to America and says it would not matter if Mickybo were in Australia because “they are connected by a bridge or something” (34). In fact, the only person who manages to go away is Mojo’s mother, who eventually leaves her unfaithful husband for a while. After his father’s death Mickybo is with his former enemies in the hut he built with Mojo. From heading the ball against the wall, as shown in the opening scene, he ends up in a place surrounded by walls: from playing alone, but still free to choose his friends, he has become a prisoner of prejudice and hate. In between, he embarked on a journey with Mojo, based on friendship, energy, and hope, which led them from Belfast to Newcastle and allowed them to dream about leaving Ireland for Bolivia, Australia, or America. In the end, Mojo and Mickybo both return to the confines of their own communities; Mickybo is not alone, but his “friends” are just vicious liars. The feeling of protection he may feel in the hut while being with them is fragile, like the timber used to build it. Mickybo’s father has been killed by Protestant paramilitaries, and Mickybo has been running in circles. However, the play does not end there. Owen McCafferty adds an imaginary scene in which Mojo and Mickybo are back in the hut together again. Instead of the ending described before, they prefer to die together like their heroes Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. They challenge and face their enemies, shouting the name of a famous footballer of the 1970s. The last stage direction reads: “As in the last scene of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid we hear a call to ‘Fire,’ followed by a volley or rifle shots. Another volley of shots. Louder. The sound of the rifle shots becomes deafening” (50). The word “rifle” is repeated twice, the word “shots” three times within only two lines. The author implies here that violence has taken over and at that point there is no going anywhere for the people of Belfast stuck in a dead-end place where communication between both communities has become impossible. The play stops at the beginning of a conflict which is going to separate the communities for about 30 years.³

In *The Waiting List* one character expresses his present anxieties by plunging into his past to try to find the trace of events that could explain why paramilitaries would want to kill him. His speech is jerky and nonlinear; in fact, McCafferty often uses lists of

2 See the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), directed by George Roy Hill.

3 It is interesting to note that in *Quietly* (2012), premièred at the Abbey Theatre in November 2012, McCafferty examines how characters that could easily be those he left as enemies at the end of *Mojo Mickybo* are involved in a difficult process of reconciliation some 40 years later.

words that produce tragicomic effects, but may also have another function: they show how memory filters images or events and how trauma recreates them, that is to say bit by bit, sometimes by referring to absurd and ridiculous ideas. In this text we move seamlessly from the trivial to the brutal and vice versa. The first lines of the monologue set the tone of the story, when the character begins to question the list: “they have a list – a shopping list for taigs fenians popeheads pan-nationalists republican catholics” (*Waiting List* 53). The author compares the list of people to be killed to a shopping list in which Catholics are treated like different brands of the same perishable commodity. This phrase also indicates that despite the threats and the danger to be felt in some parts of Belfast, there exists “a business as usual mentality.”⁴ What the character in the play remembers is mainly some of his previous actions that he imagines could be the cause of his possible condemnation by loyalist paramilitaries. It awakens memories of his youth and eventually unearths a thought related to a love affair with a Protestant girl that was treated as antisocial behaviour at the time (the late 1970s); or, as the Republican hardliners, who seem to monitor everybody, put it: “We’ve been told you’re seeing an orangewoman – please refrain from this anti-social activity” (57). In this play, the only stage directions at the beginning of the text indicate “an empty stage except for the frame of a pram. The actor should be in his mid-thirties and wearing either a dressing gown or pyjamas” (53). The simplicity of the stage directions was reflected in the first staging of the monologue by David Grant in 1994, as it creates immediately a feeling of solitude and seclusion, the pram being used as a barricade behind the door and to recall some objects or situations from the past. The on-stage vacuum suggests the impossibility of escape from a confined and narrow entrance for a character experiencing his worst fears, but also immersed in memories and thoughts which are at times amusing. Through the often sarcastic and ironic ruminations of this unique character McCafferty paints a disturbing picture of paramilitaries, whether loyalist or republican, because it seems that their violence is not really fuelled by the political or social injustice that they may feel but by absurd and petty details of everyday life such as the way you dress, the colours you wear, your name, the place where you live, the persons whom you frequent, or what you buy. At the end of the play, the protagonist has assessed his life and invited the audience to share his memories of some of the places of his youth. After a trip to the United States, he is once again in Belfast. Therefore, he is the only character in these four plays who returns back home to Belfast. However, the picture he gives of its inhabitants is that of people who prefer to ignore what is going on as best they can, especially since the situation is totally beyond their control. “I’m thinking this place isn’t so bad so long as you stick to a routine”; “it’s like you can be here and not really live here – you look but you don’t see – you hear but don’t listen – and you think but don’t question – it’s great” (61, 62). Of course, it is not a matter of the indifference of the Northern Irish population *vis-à-vis* the “Troubles,” but such attitudes suggest sur-

4 David Grant, first director of *The Waiting List*, personal e-mail communication, 5 April 2010.

vival reflexes. Nonetheless, it is possible that McCafferty is denouncing some kind of cowardice, too. However, what choice did the population in this region have between 1969 and 1998? McCafferty's characters suggest that whether they stayed or came back to Belfast they felt alienated, a feeling expressed by the character of *The Waiting List* in the last sentence: "this is my community – but it's not – i don't feel at ease here – my whole life hemmed in – jesus what a waste and now there's a list" (62). The play ends with a sense of unease increased by the irrational decisions made by paramilitaries on all sides. Humour seems to be the only way out.

Homecoming or Not Homecoming?

Having long been a country of emigration Ireland in the 1990s became a country of immigration. Irish people from the diaspora and also people from several European countries, especially Poland, came to try their luck in the Celtic Tiger economy. It has to be pointed out, however, that the North, in the early years following the Belfast Agreement, sat rather at a tangent to this (temporary) economic growth in the Republic. *The Absence of Women*, set in the first decade of the twentieth century, is a play about two men who, after a working life spent in England, are considering going back to live in Belfast. However, if Gerry wants to return to Belfast it is not because it has become an economically and socially attractive place, but because he wants to die in his home town with his friend Iggy. Both being alcoholics turned teetotalers, Gerry knows that one last drink would kill them and he says "one last drink in Belfast – tha'll do the two of us – one last crack at it – finished – over – done" (49). Iggy does not want to go back on the drink and is also scared to be left alone in Belfast if Gerry dies and he does not. Unlike Gerry, he has neither nostalgia nor curiosity for the city where he felt unhappy because, as a homosexual, he was rejected. Since then Iggy has repressed his sexual orientation and never confessed to Gerry his love for him, perhaps because he is afraid of his reaction and prefers to keep him as a friend rather than risk losing him completely. He is not tempted to go back either, because he believes the mentality of Belfast people has not developed.⁵ When Gerry suggests that it would be good to see what is different about the city since it had been blown up, Iggy answers: "people don't change – it was a small place full of small people when a left it – they won't have changed" (53). After forty years of living in England working as a navvy, Gerry still has some kind of attachment to his home city, whereas Iggy has none, as the following extract underlines:

IGGY: then stop – just stop – it's not my city – there's no point in this.
GERRY: where is then – here

5 At the end of 2002 two homosexuals were assassinated in Northern Ireland because of their sexual orientation. Homophobia is such that some gays prefer to emigrate. Paramilitaries are partly responsible for this homophobic violence, but they are not the only ones. Following an enquiry, conservative attitudes within Northern Ireland have been highlighted (see Jarman & Tennant).

IGGY: no – nowhere – I belong nowhere – and so do you – you have no one and you belong nowhere – that’s it – that’s who we are. (56)

With his character of Iggy one cannot say that McCafferty is guilty of repeating the mythologisation of Ireland. On the contrary, he hints at the fact that Belfast – he is not talking about the whole of Ireland – has not changed and the city is still as sectarian as ever. Only here the divide is not between Catholics and Protestants but between heterosexuals and gays. However, the causes of the division seem to be the same. According to the playwright, they are arising from a narrow-minded and violent construction of identities and masculinities that inhibit Belfast people – especially men – to talk. However, masculinities vary, both historically and culturally, between societies and between different groups of men within any one society. But is there a connection between the biology of men and their behaviour? John McInnes argues that masculinity does not exist as the “property, character trait or aspect of individuals” but should instead be understood as an ideology related to what men should be like and developed by both men and women (McInnes 2). Susan Speer has shown how, in talking about sport and leisure, young men draw on a range of particular cultural models of masculinity and thus give a gendered account of themselves. Therefore, when McCafferty accuses Belfast men of not talking he does not mean that they are silent but that they may talk about sport, work, politics or leisure and not about personal problems or traumas. What really matters to them is carefully avoided in order to project the image of a strong man who can endure and live with his problems. With the violent backdrop of these stories male characters are expected to be tough but they are, in fact, trapped in a binary way of being. Actually, McCafferty often shows them bragging one minute, and the next they are lost. Thus, Iggy in the play says that Belfast is “a city built on the notion of not really saying stuff – the main part of it anyway – an then you’re kicked out with not enough words in your pocket” (*Absence* 57). Therefore, the playwright seems to suggest that men – and probably women, too – would benefit from escaping gendered and stereotyped behaviour and that men should learn to talk about personal things.

After a trauma, talking is often part of the healing process, and this idea has been developed in McCafferty’s recent play *Quietly*, in which a Catholic man and a Protestant man confess to each other how they experienced their side of the conflict (one killed the other’s father during the “Troubles”). According to Neil Jarman from the Institute of Conflict Research, much remains to be done to transform the peace process into peace (“Building Peace”). For example, only 7% of pupils go to integrated schools in Northern Ireland, the working-class areas remain highly segregated, and there are 100 security barriers in the peace lines, which create tension. Moreover, governments seem to hope that the conflict will simply go away, and there is no clear strategy on their part to deal with the past: for example, unlike in South Africa, no Peace and Reconciliation Commission has been set up. Now, can the theatre play a role in society to prompt debate? Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly* certainly is a step in the right

direction in order to reconcile the two communities. The play ends with a handshake, a gesture men can offer after a fair fight.

In the introduction I mentioned Emilie Pine's comment that Ireland was "an idealized and therefore impossible destination." This statement may be true for the Republic, but does it apply to Northern Ireland? In *The Absence of Women* McCafferty imagines a character who has never idealised Ireland and who does not feel that being Irish makes him any different, as the following dialogue implies:

GERRY: that's no excuse – we're irish – we're meant to be different

IGGY: no different

GERRY : i'm different

IGGY: different what way

GERRY: different

IGGY: you came over here to work – ended up an alcoholic that's lived most of his life on the street – how's that different – every irishman in this place tell you the same thing

GERRY: you're the same – you're no better

IGGY: i wasn't sayin i was better – it's not a competition – i'm just sayin we're no different. (45-46)

In fact, Iggy is also scared to go back home because he feels ashamed that he has not been more successful in England: "i'd rather people knew nothing about me than know the real story" (51). This is a feeling that sometimes stops many immigrants from returning home, even when they lead a miserable life in their adopted country. The two characters of the play won't make the journey back home, but we also know that they have never felt at home in England either. Their sense of homelessness and dislocation is shown in the play by the setting, composed of a table and four chairs in the middle of an unfinished road. There are shovels about the place, too: tools that can be used to build things as well as to bury things or people. These props reinforce the idea that they have never settled down, never bought any good furniture but always lived in shacks on building sites. Now they are middle-aged men almost at the end of the road reflecting on their lives. Their dialogue is made up of simple words, working men's words, and although their sufferings have been great, their feelings are deep but remain unspoken. The play ends with Gerry reciting the names of streets in London that are similar to the names of streets in Belfast symbolizing his split life: "walked the same streets in two different cities – walked them as two different men" (62).

Other examples of not coming home can be found in *Closing Time*, which takes place behind the closed doors of a grubby pub/hotel in Belfast. There are only two exits, one to the hotel, one to the street, and only two means of communicating with the outside world: through a public pay phone and a television set, the sound of which has been turned down. The first scene opens with Robbie, the owner of the pub, slumped over a table, and Joe, a customer, asleep at the counter; the other two main characters, Vera and Iggy, are coming down the stairs from the hotel. The staircase leading to the bedrooms is the only possible escape for Vera and Iggy: a space allowing a little freedom and sex. When the play starts everybody has spent the night

inside the pub/hotel. The atmosphere is suffocating from the start and we can also imagine the stench of the place. Half-way through the play we learn that Joe has left his house opposite the pub to live in the pub/hotel and has not been back there since his wife left. A few years before the pub had been blown up and only his wife survived. When Joe came back to the pub to look for her she came out in shock and looking haggard. She left him shortly afterwards unable to handle the consequences. Joe, who seems to have enough money to support himself without working, spends his life drinking in the pub vaguely waiting for her. The day he realises that she will not come back he leaves too, but does not return home. In fact, he even arranges with Alec, a secondary character who has lost his wits because he was shot in the head – maybe another victim of the random murders of the 1970s and 1980s – to burn down the place. Later we learn that Joe is leaving, but we do not know where he is going:

JOE: no/bigger than that/has t'be done/right thing t' do/can't go home/has t'be fuckin done/something has t'be done/ exiting/
 VERA: over t'watch the flames Joe
 JOE : no
 VERA: where you goin then
 JOE: don't know
 ROBBIE: that door's getting shut/am closing up
 JOE: doesn't matter/not comin back. (*Closing Time* 59)

By the end of the play Robbie forces Iggy, his partner Vera's occasional lover, who has been left by his wife and kids probably because of his drinking and escapades, to leave the pub. Iggy has lost all sense of dignity and courage and begs Robbie to let him stay, because he cannot bear the thought of going back to an empty house. Robbie is inflexible and Iggy exits. The reader doubts that he will ever return home. Finally, the barcounter which separates Robbie and Vera from the others serves as a kind of rampart against the dangers of the outside world: the seducers, the crooks, the people turned mad because of the consequences of the conflict. In fact, the people who leave the public house do end up totally mad or lost. Robbie, who loves Vera more than he would want to admit, wants to keep her by his side and protect her from herself and her disillusionments. He is like the pillar of the house, the representation of a protective, solid, forgiving and generous male.

Conclusion

In these four plays the characters do not arrive anywhere, but as we saw previously, they almost all dream of departure. What hinders their departure? It is death for Mickybo's father, although one may wonder whether alcohol would not have prevented him from leaving anyway, adding physical weakness to his lack of courage, just like Iggy in *Closing Time*. It is sectarianism for Mickybo and Mojo, who are caught in their narrow-minded communities. It is madness and loss in *The Absence of Women*. In fact, Gerry, who was dreaming of a last binge in Belfast, is left alone begging on the

streets of London and reciting the names of the streets after his friend Iggy has disappeared: we do not know whether he has simply left him or died. It is money and lack of love and courage for Robbie and Vera in *Closing Time*: they end up staying in their grubby pub because they do not have the money to do it up or leave. Joe and Iggy eventually leave the pub: the former because he has finally understood that his wife is not coming back, the latter because Robbie strongly asks him. However, we sense that Joe may commit suicide and we do not know whether Iggy will manage to return home. It is fear in *The Waiting List*: the single protagonist pretends to choose to stay in Belfast at the end of his monologue, but he is also scared to head into the unknown. Despite their desire to leave and get away from it all the characters in these plays either go back to square one, wander around endlessly or disappear. As I have already mentioned, there is something Chekhovian about McCafferty's characters inasmuch as they are definitely not heroes and are sometimes aware that they should adapt to a changing world but are unable to act. However, the feelings of inadequacy, melancholy, and frustrated desire often felt by Chekhov's characters are definitely of a different calibre in McCafferty's work. Indeed, in these plays something more brutal and stronger paralyzes the characters: perhaps fate, as in Greek tragedy, or apathy which may be caused by historical and political circumstances but also by alcoholism. Also, pride may play a role in this stalemate and, as Iggy says in *Closing Time*, confusing stubbornness with courage, "shouldn't fuckin leave/people should stick with it regardless a what the fuck's goin on" (50). Despite their craving for departure, the characters in these plays are immobile, isolated from one another, dissatisfied with their lives and alienated from their dreams, on the verge of madness, suicidal or ending up being murdered.

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