

Katharina Rennhak (ed.)

NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

# **Irish Studies in Europe**

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7

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E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

Dedicated to our dear friend Werner Huber  
(20 July 1952 - 28 April 2016)



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## INTRODUCTION: NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

**Katharina Rennhak (Wuppertal)**

In an article in *The Guardian*, entitled “This much I Know” (2009), Sebastian Barry emphasises the social importance of the storyteller:

Not everyone is a storyteller, but every group of people needs one. It's an ancient, campfire thing. Storytellers are necessary in the dark, around the fire – someone needs to take responsibility to drive away the terrors of darkness. Or sometimes to help explain the darkness, and even help you embrace it; realise that it's not all black, that there's always a seam of beauty. (Ferguson)

This statement, which daringly reassembles a number of stereotypes about storytelling, no longer casts twenty-first-century authors as poets who “are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (Shelley 535). Neither does it envision the author, as W. B. Yeats did, as predominantly a dramatist who writes for a “theatre where the capricious spirit that bloweth where it listeth has for a moment found a dwelling-place [and has, as a consequence,] good right to call itself a National Theatre” (414). In the twenty-first century the author whom “every group of people needs” is first and foremost a storyteller. Percy Bysshe Shelley would, of course, have considered his *Prometheus Unbound* and (some) other dramatic texts as poetry, just as well as Yeats is, more generally, interested in “Literature [...], the ultimate creator of values” which can manifest itself in “every movement of imagination in song or story or drama” (414). Drawing on the terminology of Wellek and Warren, one could say that Shelley, Yeats and Barry emphasise one “generic mode” – the lyrical, the dramatic and the epic – which dominates their respective (literary) cultures. Significantly, these “generic modes” are neither dependent on nor necessarily correlative to “the generic forms” or “these ‘ultimates’ – poetry, fiction and drama” (229). *Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media* sets out to trace the narrative dominant through twentieth-century and twenty-first-century fiction, poetry, drama, film, TV and the World Wide Web.

One may take issue with a number of aspects of Barry’s thesis or seek clarification of some of its implications. Unlike social theorists, who argue that every individual constantly engages in acts of self-narration which contribute to the ongoing process of shaping personal and group identities, for example, Barry reclaims the idea of an extraordinarily gifted storyteller. Does Barry’s storyteller, as the fire metaphor might suggest, indeed partake of some Apollonian inspiration? Is it only a particularly talented and creative storyteller who can unite his or her audience by entertaining and distracting them, or by interpreting the enigmatic and frightening presence, or again by providing psychological support and aesthetic delight? Why fashion the contemporary storyteller as a descendant of the traditional campfire-storyteller, at all? – others

might ask. Such questions need not be settled here and now; some of them will reappear in different forms within the confines of this volume and are approached and answered differently by the various contributors. What Sebastian Barry's evocation of the storyteller certainly demonstrates, however, is that the contemporary author's power and responsibility are seen to lie in his ability to narrate, rather than to sing, rhyme or "bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland" (Gregory 402).

To literary and cultural critics this comes as no great surprise, of course. After all, there is hardly a discipline in the Humanities and Social Sciences which has not been affected by the 'narrative turn' that took place over the last two decades of the twentieth century. More than fifteen years ago, in 2000, Conor McCarthy, for example, analysed "the work of contemporary Irish activists in the field of culture – writers, critics and film-makers in this case –" (11) by approaching them with a terminology and methodology that builds on Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" and on Homi Bhabha's "idea of the nation as a narrative" (qtd. in McCarthy 33, 39). In the process his *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1962-1992* even begins to sense and contribute to the "gradual movement from emphasising the profoundly problematic nature of narratives (taken to impose order violently on the chaos of reality) to a sensibility characterized by accepting storytelling as an irreducible aspect of human existence", recently located and analysed by Hanna Meretoja in her *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory* (2). As McCarthy noticed more than fifteen years ago,

the [postmodernist] crisis could be said to be one of narrative. If the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an explosion of interest and identity groups, based on religion, sex and class, each such group sought to legitimate itself in narrative terms. Narratives help to locate communities historically, spatially, politically, metaphysically, mythically, ethically. Narratives permit communities to plot their futures. They can be understood as assertions of the will, of power. Narratives can be normalising or liberating. (198)

Even though McCarthy acknowledges the community-building function of narratives, for him and other critics in 2000 the "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the ensuing proliferation of micro-(hi)stories is still conceived of as a fundamental crisis. In Sebastian Barry's conceptualisation of the storyteller in 2009, by contrast, the act of storytelling and the storyteller's unifying power are contextualised with a cosy campfire setting and regarded to be a reassuring cultural necessity.

While Barry's image of the camp-fire storyteller invokes a moment in which somebody tells a tale (potentially in prose or in verse), his own writing practice demonstrates that storytelling is an activity not bound to a particular literary genre or communicative medium. In the wake of the narrative turn (as McCarthy's *Modernisation* also demonstrates by investigating "writers, critics and film-makers"), storytellers are conceived of as narrators who can tell their stories in verse or via monologues, dialogues and the actions performed on the theatrical stage, on the TV or movie screen, or in fiction.

This collection of articles entitled *Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media* is intended as a contribution to a by now well-established tradition of literary and cultural research that regards narratives as all-pervading structures of meaning-making and focuses on the narrative construction of national identities. What, then, is the need for this volume? What new perspectives does it bring to bear on the relationship of ‘narratives’ and ‘narration’ on the one hand, and ‘Ireland’<sup>1</sup> on the other? In the pages that follow, Irish literature and culture are approached by scholars with an interest in exploring the various narrative strategies, narrative patterns and/or communicative frames that characterise genre- and media-specific ways of storytelling. They do not use the term ‘narrative’ solely as a rather vague (Lyotardian) synonym for discourse formations, but explore how defining aspects of narratives and narration – such as emplotment, narrative voice and focalisation, or the inextricable correlation of identity and narrative discourse<sup>2</sup> as well as that of narrative space and time – are fashioned and refashioned in different genres and media.

The opening essay by **Elke D'hoker** raises our awareness of an Irish genre tradition that has received surprisingly little attention: the short story cycle. While the short story – characterised by Declan Kiberd as “the natural result of a fusion between the ancient form of the [orally transmitted] folk tale and the preoccupations of [a textually sophisticated] modern literature” (42) – is widely held to be “the prose form best suited to articulating the Irish experience of becoming, along with the provisional nature of modern Irish culture” (Hand 3), the short story cycle “as a narrative form with distinct interests, patterns and characteristics” (D'hoker, below p. 17) has yet to be discovered. D'hoker's essay makes a significant contribution to this discovery. It outlines a brief history of the Irish short story cycle, introduces the main features of this neglected genre and reflects on potential aesthetic and community building functions of a narrative form that invariably juxtaposes the singular and the plural while striving to establish unity through fragments. In addition, the author's careful analyses of the interaction of plot and character as well as narrative space and time in Val Mulkerns's *Antiquities* (1978) and Mary Beckett's *A Literary Woman* (1990) provide two case

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- 1 No need to mention in this series that ‘Ireland’ is a term at least as multi-facetted and contested as ‘narrative’. Suffice to say here that in line with recent conceptualisations of national and post-national identities, the articles assembled in this volume regard Irish identity to be in a permanent state of becoming and, thus, to contribute to the ongoing discussion and simultaneous construction of ‘Irishness’. Or to put it with Jennifer M. Jeffers, it would be “naive to think that we can [...] finally nail down ‘Irish Studies’: Irish culture is in a state of becoming. [...] it is for that very reason that we must continuously create new contexts and new ways of understanding texts, historical situations, and cultural change” (7).
  - 2 Cf. Paul Ricœur's concept of narrative identity: “The person, understood as a character in a story, is not an entity distinct from her ‘experiences’. Quite the opposite: the person shares the condition of dynamic identity peculiar to the story recounted. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character” (147-148).

studies that demonstrate how two short story cycles draw on a Dublin setting to negotiate various aspects of the interaction among individual, family and national identity constructions.

**Fiona McCann** shares D'hoker's interest in the narrative representation of space and time. Taken together, the two articles that open this collection can be regarded as a significant contribution to the analysis of narrative chronotopes in constructions of Irishness. McCann's article shifts the perspective from Dublin to the Irish North and to the narrative construction of decidedly literary versions of Belfast and Derry. Contemporary novels and short story collections from Northern Ireland, McCann argues, experiment with new narrative forms which she situates in the genre tradition of dystopian allegories and apocalyptic narratives. Fruitfully combining rhetorical and narratological analyses, her article teases out the different ideological inflections of Sean O'Reilly's *Curfew and Other Stories* (2000), Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* (2007) and Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* (2010).

In their articles **Hedwig Schwall** and Anton Kirchhofer both discuss the relationship between traumatic experiences and narratives. In "Trauma and Narrative Techniques in Contemporary Irish Fiction", Schwall's analyses of Seamus Deane's autobiographical *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Anne Enright's novel *The Gathering* (2007) demonstrate that the traumatic experience of the Northern Irish Conflict as well as that of socially unacknowledged instances of child abuse find a particularly adequate form in experimental, non-linear and fragmented narratives; drawing on Suzette Henke's psychoanalytical concept of 'scriptotherapy', Schwall also shows how the traumatised narrator-protagonists of these narratives provide examples of how to cope with and how to work through traumatic experiences by experimenting with different forms of storytelling. As instances of scripttherapeutic exercises, Schwall claims, such trauma narratives "can also show a way forward by offering models of empathy" (below p. 47-48). They thus help to create a social climate that no longer represses and silences traumatic memories, but is beneficial to healing processes of national importance.

**Anton Kirchhofer**'s article "Beyond the Comfort Zone" unfolds an insightful short history of Irish narratives of child abuse, identifying different phases of the discourse on child abuse in Ireland, which has changed considerably in the early 1990s. Carefully commenting on the significance of dysfunctional communicative structures, unreliable narrative voices and non-linear emplotments in James Joyce's "The Sisters" and "An Encounter", Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Kirchhofer also demonstrates that all these literary narratives are characterised by an approach to child abuse which differs substantially from the non-literary public discourse on this phenomenon. While, as Ian Hacking has shown, the latter is predominantly "conducted in medical terms" (Kirchhofer, below p. 64), Joyce's, McCabe's and Enright's fictional stories disentangle the larger social implications of handling abuse in Irish culture.

In my own article I set out to demonstrate how Sebastian Barry's rather idiosyncratic way of constructing a literary puzzle by continuing to write the history of individual members of his family across (and against) different genre traditions contributes to re-narrating Irish identities. Situating Barry's poems, plays and, most prominently, his novels about members of the Dunne family in the tradition of the national tale and drawing on Martha Nussbaum's concept of 'poetic justice', I interpret Barry's adaptations of familiar plotlines and his – often slightly odd – handling of narrative mediation so as to shed new light on the function of the sentimental tendencies in his works, which many readers seem to appreciate but which have also been the target of severe criticism from literary scholars.

**Anna Hanrahan**'s article turns from fiction to drama. She explores how Irish identity is narratively constructed in Dermot Bolger's Ballymun trilogy and discovers a project that is in certain respects similar to Barry's narrative Irish puzzle. Based on the assumption that the ability and opportunity to talk about one's experiences is a prerequisite for any self-empowering act, Hanrahan analyses the struggles of Bolger's characters to find a voice and narrate their own stories by drawing on those influential cultural narratives that are most readily available to them. In addition, she demonstrates how Bolger's plays orchestrate an impressive array of individual life-stories on the stage so as to turn his plays into multi-layered narratives that help the marginalised inhabitants of Dublin's Ballymun to establish a communal identity.

While Hanrahan focuses on the narrative representation of the social milieu of the Dublin high-rise scheme Ballymun in a trilogy of plays, **Christian Huck** turns to the unlikely combination of poetry and the suburb. In his article "Ireland, Lost Between Country and City. Eavan Boland in the Suburb", he analyses how Boland's lyrical evocations of ordinary lives in suburban estates construct an Ireland that diverges substantially from the dominant myth of Ireland as the Emerald Isle, on the one hand, and the alternative narratives of urban Ireland as imagined in Roddy Doyle's novels or Ciaran Carson's poems, on the other. Challenging the conventional attitude to the suburb in literature, literary criticism, and theory, where suburbia is usually regarded to be a bleak and eminently 'unpoetic' space, "a place of utter mundanity, a dystopia of domesticity" (Huck, below p. 117), Huck reflects on the lack of narrative qualities associated with the suburb. Boland's poetry and prose which revolve around suburban scenes and details, he claims, establish the suburb as an object that can be narrated in the first place and, secondly, endows it with the lyrical grace and existential significance which it deserves as the place where Irish lives are "lived here and now, for better or for worse" (below p. 116).

**Sarah Heinz** is also interested in the narrative construction of contemporary Irish spaces. She turns to critical representations of Celtic Tiger Dublin in a play and a film respectively – Sebastian Barry's *The Pride of Parnell Street* and Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam and Paul*. Her article "Celtic Tiger Ireland and the Politics of Disgust" squarely situates Barry's play and Abrahamson's film in the context of the dominant

narrative of Dublin in movies of the 1990s and early 2000s which establish the Irish capital as a recent addition to the hippest urban localities on the map of a global consumer culture. Using Ange-Marie Hancock's concept of 'the politics of disgust' to identify "the blind spots of this construction of normality in the recent Irish national narrative" (Heinz, below p. 136), she carefully analyses the plot lines and narrative logics of time and space in the stories told by Barry and Abrahamson in order to demonstrate how the play and the film re-perspectivise Celtic Tiger Dublin in stories of "stigmatypes" (below p. 141). Such narratives, she argues, vitally assist in de-essentialising the more glamorous representations of Irish Celtic Tiger identity.

In his reading of the very popular sitcom *Father Ted*, **Rainer Emig** sets out to "inquire into both the specifics of *Father Ted* and the question in how far the sitcom as a form of narrative may contribute to images of national identity as well as their subversion" (Emig, below p. 152). Reflecting on the cultural function of stereotypes in different contexts and media and identifying the narrative features of sitcoms, he explores how stereotypes of the Stage Irishman are reproduced and subverted in *Father Ted* and proceeds to weigh the ideological consequences of his findings. Emig's article concludes with a comment on "the limitations of current narrative theory with regard to sitcoms" (below p. 159-161).

In her article which further pursues the question of how Irish stereotypes are narrated, **Claire Lynch** turns to 'Cyber Ireland' and investigates how postcards, Barack Obama and Google Doodles, i.e. "fun, surprising and sometimes spontaneous changes that are made to the Google logo" (Google), have been instrumental in recent constructions of Irish identity as they have evolved in online forms. Her look at the narrative power that icons and images unfold is accompanied by a critical investigation into practices of narrating Ireland in social networks like Facebook™. Paying particular attention to the intersection of the national with other identity categories, Lynch demonstrates that communicative structures provided and encouraged by social networks in the World Wide Web serve to "lead people into 'local' frameworks" (Lynch, below p. 175) rather than to integrate Irish and global online narratives.

*Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media* is the result of a fruitful synthesis of two major research interests at the Wuppertal School of Humanities: Irish Literature and Culture on the one hand, and Narrative Research on the other. The project, which has now found its final form in this collection of articles, started out as a lecture series titled "Narrating Ireland" which was held at the University of Wuppertal in 2010 and organised by the English Department in cooperation with the Wuppertal Centre of Narrative Research. During the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century Prof. Heinz Kosok and Prof. Rüdiger Imhof had firmly established Wuppertal as one of the strongest Irish Studies centres in Germany. In 2010 it was uncertain whether this tradition would continue to thrive. The enthusiastic scholarly support of all those colleagues who came to Wuppertal and participated in the lecture series during the rather hot summer of 2010 – Claire Connolly (then Cardiff; now

Cork), Rainer Emig (then Hannover, now Mainz), Luke Gibbons (Maynooth), Christian Huck (Kiel), Rüdiger Imhof (Wuppertal), Claire Lynch (London), Nell McCafferty (Dublin), Chris Morash (then Maynooth; now Dublin), Shaun Richards (Staffordshire; Twickenham), Mark Schreiber (then Siegen; now Klagenfurt), and Hedwig Schwall (Leuven) – was indeed decisive in ensuring that the tradition of Irish Literature and Culture is still alive and kicking in Wuppertal. I am most grateful to all of them for generously sharing their insights and stimulating inspiring discussions.

For their invaluable support with the organisation of the lecture series I would like to thank Anna Hanrahan and Anna Lang. Further thanks are due to Nicholas Hurford for his advice on matters concerning English academic style. I am also very grateful to Daniel Becker, Eva Kerski and Pia Martin who have helped with proof-reading and formatting many of the articles assembled here.

I should also like to thank the Bavarian State Library Munich where I was given access to the special reading-room area for research to work on this project during the summer of 2015.

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My final, heartfelt thanks go to all contributors. Especially to those colleagues who were part of the project from an early stage on, I express my deepest gratitude for their patience. I would also like to thank everyone involved for their outstanding scholarly commitment, for their intellectual vivacity and stimulating contributions, as well as for the smooth and always friendly cooperation during the editing process.

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## **NARRATING IRELAND IN PROSE FICTION**



## NARRATING THE COMMUNITY: THE SHORT STORY CYCLES OF VAL MULKERNS AND MARY BECKETT

Elke D'hoker (Leuven)

### Introduction

It was my first collection of short stories and I thought I'd invented the form of a sequence of short stories. In fact, J.D. Salinger got there first! I intended them to reflect and inter-reflect one another, slightly shifting the focus with every new story just looking through a kaleidoscope. It was very interesting because I've never liked the idea of a narrative from A to B. (Paschel 162-163)

This is Val Mulkerns, talking about the form of *Antiquities*, the short story cycle she published in 1978. Apart from indicating some characteristics of this narrative form, which Mulkerns herself refers to as *A Sequence of Stories* in her subtitle, this quote also highlights the lack of critical awareness about the short story cycle in Ireland. Although in an international context, Joyce's *Dubliners* is recognised as one of the two "archetypes" of the genre (Nagel, "American Short-Story Cycle" 9), in Ireland no sense of a genre or tradition seems to exist. This does not mean, however, that no short story cycles have been written in Ireland. Mulkerns could in fact have looked much closer to home for predecessors in the form she thought to have invented: apart from Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), also such well-known books as Jane Barlow's *Irish Idylls* (1892), Somerville and Ross's *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1898), George Moore's *The Untilled Field* (1903), James Stephens's *Here Are Ladies* (1913) and Samuel Beckett's *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) would qualify as short story cycles, as would several other, lesser-known works.

In this essay I would like to make a case for the presence and importance of the short story cycle in Irish literature. A recognition of the short story cycle as a narrative form with distinct interests, patterns and characteristics would allow us to gauge more accurately the form's particular contribution to the literary tradition of narrating Ireland. As I will argue, the particular formal tension between unity and fragmentation that characterises the short story cycle makes the form especially suited to represent the tensions between individual and family, community or nation in Irish society. Since an exhaustive historical presentation of the development of the form is beyond the scope of this essay, I have opted for a two-pronged approach. First, a concise presentation of some of the most important examples of the genre aims to demonstrate the continued presence of the short story cycle in Irish literature. Second, a more detailed analysis of two case studies – Val Mulkerns's *Antiquities* (1978) and Mary Beckett's *A Literary Woman* (1990) – hopes to show more in detail how the formal characteristics of the short story cycle contribute to its exploration of the tensions between individuals, whether in the context of family, community or nation. In an international context too, it has often been observed that the formal tension be-

tween parts and whole, between diversity and unity in the short story cycle reflects a thematic preoccupation with the often strained relations between individual and community. As Michelle Pacht has put it, “the short story cycle can express both the plight of an individual and the fate of a community through its very structure” (1). In an Irish context, these questions take on an additional, national inflection as the plight of local communities is often seen to reflect the troubles and tensions of the larger nation. Before turning to the Irish situation, however, a more general characterisation and definition of the short story cycle will be given.

### Definitions

An awareness of the short story cycle as a distinct literary form can be dated back to the modernist period with the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson. In fact, the latter claimed to have ‘invented’ the form with *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), but this has subsequently been disputed.<sup>1</sup> In any case, these early books inspired a host of other writers and the short story cycle boomed in the interwar period, especially in American literature. Critical interest in the form, however, only emerged in the 1960s and was consolidated with Forrest Ingram’s authoritative *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*. He defined the short story cycle as “*a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of its component parts*” (19, emphasis in original). Subsequent critics further developed Ingram’s definitions, sometimes proposing alternative terms, such as “short story sequence” (Lusher; Kennedy), “composite novel” (Dunn and Morris); “composite fiction” (Lundén) or “novel in stories” (Kelley).<sup>2</sup> Yet all critics agree that the defining characteristic of the genre is that

the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story. (Mann 15)

Because of this duality, the short story cycle typically betrays a tension between “the one and the many”, as Ingram put it (19), between the separateness of the individual stories and the coherence or unity of the book as a whole.

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- 1 As he wrote in his *Memoirs*: “I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer, that it is a form which had been brought in. What I wanted is a new looseness; and in Winesburg I had made my own form” (Anderson 289). Similar claims have been made to argue for the importance of the short story over the novel in Ireland.
- 2 I have opted for the term short story cycle because it seems to be the term with the greatest currency in contemporary criticism. For a more extensive discussion of theories about the short story cycle, see D’hoker (2013).

Apart from this discerning characteristic, critics have also identified other generic signals that mark this narrative genre such as the title or subtitle,<sup>3</sup> a prologue or epilogue, or a specific aesthetic organisation (Mann 14-15). In addition, short story cycles are often classified according to the way in which the different stories are tied together. A basic classification, used by many commentators, discerns three types of unity: by character, place or theme (Nagel, *Contemporary* 16). First, the stories in a cycle may share one or more protagonists, sometimes a family or a different group of people. Mann also talks of a “composite protagonist” (10) when the protagonists of the different stories bear a strong family resemblance to each other. Second, cycles may be unified by locale or setting, as when all stories are set in a certain village, town or region. Unity by theme, third, is a more precarious principle, since also ordinary short story collections may exhibit certain recurring themes. In short story cycles, therefore, this thematic unity is mostly underscored by a recurrence of motifs, phrases, symbols or a specific aesthetic structure. In fact, these formal and structural linking devices are found in most short story cycles, in combination with one of the other three unifying principles.

In an attempt to demonstrate the historical solidity of the short story cycle, critics have traced its origins back to such cycles of linked tales as Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Arabian *A Thousand and One Nights*. Yet the short story cycle in its modern form can more accurately be said to date back to the end of the nineteenth century, which also saw the development of the modern short story as distinct from earlier “tales” and “sketches”.<sup>4</sup> In spite of Anderson's originality claims, critics have argued that the first modern short story cycles appeared as part of so-called regional writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Elisabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853), Ivan Turgenev's *Sketches from A Hunter's Album* (1852) and Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* (1895) as perhaps the best-known international examples. Apart from the difference between sketch or tale and short story, what distinguishes these short story cycles from earlier collections of linked tales, such as Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book* (1819), is that they substitute “internal linking” for “external framing” as the central unifying device (Reid 46). On the basis of these distinctions, the history of the Irish short story cycle can be said to begin, not with the great cycles of Irish mythology, nor with such framed tale collections as J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Purcell Papers* (written between 1838 and 1840, but collected only in 1880) or William Carle-

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3 Subtitles often give generic hints, as do comments by the author. Titles of the kind “... and other stories” are not normally found in the case of short story cycles.

4 Nagel argues for instance, “The modern concept of the ‘short story’ did not appear until the nineteenth century, evolving in the early decades as a form distinct from the ‘tale’, a loosely organized account of strange and often mysterious events, and the ‘sketch’, which stressed character description with little development of plot and little sense of narrative closure” (*Contemporary* 3).

ton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830),<sup>5</sup> but rather with Jane Barlow's *Irish Idylls*, a collection of stories set in a Connemara village.

### Representative Irish Short Story Cycles

Although now all but forgotten, *Irish Idylls* went through eight editions around the turn of the century and its author was hailed as "the Gaskell of Erin" and "the Sarah Orne Jewett of Ireland" (anon. 1893, 1898).<sup>6</sup> The stories that make up the collection are all set in and around the Connaught village of Lisconnel and although there is no central protagonist, most characters appear in more than one story. The stories are also linked through the voice of the narrator who posits herself at once inside and outside the community. In this way, the narrator acts as a mediator between the lives of the Irish peasants she is describing and the middle-class English readers she is primarily addressing (Hansson 61). While *Irish Idylls* thus participates in the Anglo-Irish tradition of representing the truth about Irish life to the outside world, and to England in particular, it can also be placed in the context of the regional short story cycles which appeared in other literary traditions. Zagarell has called these cycles "narratives of community", arguing that they "take as their subject the life of a community (life in 'its everyday aspects') and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity. The self exists here as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unity" (499).<sup>7</sup> Yet whereas Zagarell locates the impetus for these often nostalgic narratives in the changes brought about by "industrialism, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism" (499), in *Irish Idylls*, interestingly, the main threats to the community are starvation,<sup>8</sup> land agents and, in a very ambivalent way, exile. Throughout the collection, the narrator also shows the community to be united in the face of these threats. Other binding elements are common habits, certain expressions, and shared memories. The structure of *Irish Idylls* thus dramatises the structure of the community: while the individual stories narrate the experiences of individual characters and families, the intertextual links between the stories – in terms of characters, habits or events – effectively constitute the life of the community.

5 Discussing these and other nineteenth-century Irish collections, Heinz Kosok also points out that they are only held together by a preface. He identifies Somerville and Ross's *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* as the first Irish collection in which the individual stories are successfully integrated into a coherent whole, but does not mention Barlow's *Irish Idylls*.

6 Zagarell (501) suggests that *Irish Idylls* was a source of inspiration for Jewett, who owned a copy of the book.

7 While Zagarell reserves the term for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, Roxanne Harde's essay collection, *Narratives of Community* extends its usage to all short story cycles concerned with aspects of community.

8 While the famine is present only as a vague but sinister memory in *Irish Idylls*, the stories in *Strangers at Lisconnel. A Second Series of Irish Idylls* (1985) are set in the famine years.

Another Irish short story cycle which narrates the life of a community is Somerville and Ross's highly successful *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, first published in book form in 1899. The collection shares with *Irish Idylls* and other narratives of community an episodic structure, a lack of linear plot progression, a mediating narrator, and a focus on the ordinary yet typical aspects of the life of the community, yet the community of the "Irish R.M." is very different from the self-contained rural villages of Barlow's fiction. While the community is roughly defined in terms of place (South-West Ireland) and class (the Anglo-Irish gentry), its borders are far less strictly drawn and critical opinion has diverged over whether the servants or the middle-class Catholic families can be said to be part of the community depicted in the stories.<sup>9</sup> Still, as in *Irish Idylls*, the community is narratively constructed through an emphasis on traditions and customs, such as the hunt, the races, or fair days as well as through shared knowledge and experiences. An additional unifying element in *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* is of course the central narrator-protagonist, who plays a part in most of the events recounted. In this way, Somerville and Ross's work points forward to later short story cycles organised around one or more main characters, such as Beckett's *More Pricks Than Kicks* or the family-centred cycles of Maeve Brennan.

Two short story cycles published in the early twentieth century, however, clearly turn their back on the narratives of community written by Barlow and Somerville and Ross. In the "national panoramas" offered by *The Untilled Field* and *Dubliners*, any positive sense of a community is lacking (Cronin 116). Although Moore called his work "A Novel in Thirteen Episodes" (qtd. in Ingman 89), its status as a short story cycle is debatable. While Neil Davidson has recently made a case for the unity and conspicuous sequential organisation of the text (302), Heather Ingman has foregrounded its thematic and stylistic lack of unity (89). What is interesting for our purposes, however, is that in rejecting the idealised mythic image of the Irish peasant, to be found in Barlow and several works of the Irish Revival, Moore also rejects a romanticised version of rural communities. Instead, his outsider protagonists mostly seek to define themselves against an anonymous mass of Irishmen, who are oppressed by the Church and by social convention. A similarly conspicuous absence of community can be observed in *Dubliners*. Clearly unified by setting, theme, structure and symbols (Mann 29-48; Wright), *Dubliners*' lack of unity or connection on the level of characters is quite striking. As Gerald Kennedy has put it, "[f]igures who walk the same streets and whose stories appear side by side nevertheless remain oblivious to each other and unconscious of parallels between their own situations and those of other characters" (196). Community figures here only by its absence and the characters' sense of disconnectedness. Alienation and loneliness are mirrored by the gaps and differences between the stories which *Dubliners* as a short story cycle of course also displays.

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9 See for instance Paul Deane's discussion of the representation of Irish servants and peasants in the stories and Paul Devlin's argument that the middle-class McRory family is finally welcomed into the gentry in the third collection of R.M. stories.

After this flurry of short story cycles around the turn of the twentieth century,<sup>10</sup> the form seems to have largely disappeared from the literary scene in Ireland, only to return in the final decades of the twentieth century. This is somewhat surprising given the success of the short story as a genre in mid-century Ireland in general, with such masters of the form as Elizabeth Bowen, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Seán Ó Faoláin and Mary Lavin. Ireland may be simply participating in an international trend here, since a similar low period for the short story cycle has been noted for Canadian and American literature. One could also speculate, however, that this rejection of the short story cycle on the part O'Connor, Ó Faoláin and O'Flaherty is part and parcel of their dismissal of modernist experiment and the example of Joyce. It is significant in this respect that only Samuel Beckett can be seen to write back to *Dubliners* in his fragmented account of Belacqua's adventures in *More Pricks Than Kicks* (Hunter 84-93).

*Dubliners* returns, however, as an important intertext in several of the short story cycles published by contemporary Irish writers: from Edna O'Brien's *The Love Object* (1968) and John Banville's *Long Lankin* (1970) over Val Mulkerns's *Antiquities* and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1998), to Christine Dwyer Hickey's *The House on Parkgate Street* (2013) and Colin Barrett's *Young Skins* (2013). These examples – and many others<sup>11</sup> – testify to the renewed interest in the short story cycle on the part of Irish writers, if not yet on the part of critics. Again, Irish literature can be observed to partake in an international trend here. In most literary traditions in English, indeed, the short story cycle has become an important genre over the past three decades, with writers seeking to dramatise either the discontinuous personal development of individual characters or the more or less loose networks of individual lives that constitute local communities. While in an American context these communities are often marked out by a strong sense of an ethnic and/or gendered identity (Nagel, *Contemporary*),<sup>12</sup> in Ireland the short story cycle remains much more preoccupied with a national sense of belonging or identity. In order to better understand how Irish short story cycles stand out within international trends, therefore, the second part of this essay will offer a more detailed investigation of two contemporary short story cycles, Val Mulkerns's *Antiquities* and Mary Beckett's *A*

10 Other examples include W.B. Yeats's *The Secret Rose* (in its 1897 edition), James Stephens's *Here Are Ladies* (1913) and Norah Hoult's *Poor Women* (1929).

11 Other examples of contemporary Irish short story cycles are Colum McCann's *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1992) and *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), Keith Ridgway's *Standard Time* (2001), Colm Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons* (2006), Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2013), and Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond* (2015).

12 Well-known examples of the first type are Atwood's *Moral Disorder* (2006) or Alice Munro's *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) belong to the second type.

*Literary Woman*. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which form and content interact in the narrative construction of community and nation.

### Narrating the Nation: *Antiquities*

Being born within a year of one another, 1925 and 1926 respectively, both Val Mulkerns and Mary Beckett have had a writing career in two phases. Having published short stories – and, in the case of Mulkerns, two novels – in the 1940s and early 1950s, both writers stopped writing to raise a family but resumed their literary career in the 1970s, publishing novels, short story collections and, of course, a short story cycle. Of the two writers, Val Mulkerns is perhaps the better known. A founding member of Aosdána, she was associate editor of the literary magazine *The Bell* from 1952 to 1954, and has written criticism and radio broadcasts throughout her career. Mulkerns's family, moreover, is very much a part of Dublin's cultural and literary life: her grandfather worked as a journalist for the *Freeman's Journal*, her father was involved in the Irish Revival and the Easter Rising, and her husband, Maurice Kennedy, was also a writer and critic. Mary Beckett, to the contrary, has always been more of an outsider. Having moved from Belfast to Dublin on her marriage, she set many of her short stories in the North and her best-known novel, *Give Them Stones* (1987), explicitly addresses the Troubles.

Political themes also permeate *Antiquities*. The ten stories in this collection ostensibly deal with four generations of a Dublin family, yet the family's close involvement in Irish nationalism and its being spread out across the different parts of Dublin suggest strong symbolic links between family, city and nation. Although the stories are not united by a single protagonist or narrator who appears in all stories, as in the cycles of Barlow, Beckett or Somerville and Ross, the perspective of Emily Mullens is clearly privileged in the collection. She appears in all but two of the stories and functions as either narrator or main focaliser in six of the stories. The stories in *Antiquities* typically concentrate on one or more of Emily's family members: "A Cut Above the Rest" focuses on her maternal grandfather, who became a recluse in his South Dublin house after the death of his wife, only to be joined at times by his youngest son, Dan, whose financial and other worries we read of in "Loser". The rivalry between Emily's mother and her elder sister Harriet is the focus of "The Sisters". The rich, but childless Harry, who lives in a large house in Ballsbridge, clearly disapproves of her sister's working-class marriage and of her life in an "ugly northside terrace" (120). Emily's fairly happy childhood in this lower-class neighbourhood is also evoked in the opening story, "A Bitch and a Dog Hanging". The story of her father's involvement in the Easter Rising, and as a fledgling poet and actor in the Revival, is told in "Special Category". The five remaining stories are set in the present and focus on Emily's failing marriage to Denis, an architect ("France is so Phoney"), on her witnessing of the historical 1974 bomb explosion in Talbot Street ("Four Green Fields"), and on her reluctant visits to her elderly Aunt Harriet ("Terminus"). The central protagonist of "Summer" and "The Torch", finally, is Emily's daughter, Sarah, who is studying in Paris.

As in many other Irish short story cycles, one of the primary unifying principles in *Antiquities* is the setting. Dublin – its streets, squares, shops and landmarks – figures very prominently in all of the stories to the extent of becoming one of the book's most prominent characters. In thus foregrounding the city and its neighbourhoods, *Antiquities* clearly echoes *Dubliners* and Mulkerns further underscores her tribute to Joyce by calling one of her stories “The Sisters”. Mulkerns, who went to school in Eccles Street, said in an interview: “[w]hen I first read *Dubliners* [sic] there was a tremendous feeling of familiarity. This was my city, the place names were a great means of identification. I knew the streets and the actual ring of the conversation” (qtd. in Paschel 164). In its evocation of Dublin, *Antiquities* is also pervaded by a strong sense of regret at the disappearance of Joyce's Dublin: Georgian houses are torn down to be replaced by “office blocks [...] each [...] more hideous than the last” (43) and beautiful countryside is replaced by “ugly acres of housing”, a “wilderness of concrete” (17). The city, Emily feels, is “mutilated” (9) and she blames the greed of property developers and the corruption of politicians: “[t]hey [the firm of Emily's husband] applied again and again with donations to party funds timed to coincide with the latest appeal and eventually (however long it took) planning permission was granted even in areas scheduled for preservation” (43). This destruction of the city also threatens Emily's private life: her husband is being ousted in his own firm by a more ruthless junior partner. This leaves him quite literally ‘unmanned’ and unwilling or unable to have sexual intercourse with his wife. In other ways, as well, the fate of Emily's family seems bound up with that of the city. The different family members – who are often metaphorically represented by the houses and neighbourhoods they live in<sup>13</sup> – are spread out over the city. Hence the destruction of the city and its former community life is matched or mirrored by the disintegration of Emily's family.

If Emily's family can be read as a symbol for the city, it can equally be said to represent the nation. The family's connections to (revolutionary) nationalism are highlighted in the book: from Emily's grandfather, who wrote for the *Freeman's Journal* and gave his ten-year-old daughter Mitchel's *Jail Journal* to read (71), to her father's imprisonment in Knutsford in 1916 through to her daughter's teenage flirtation with the IRA. Yet *Antiquities* as a whole does certainly not celebrate republicanism. On the contrary, Mulkerns called “the death of romantic patriotism” one of the central themes of the book (Walsh). In “Special Category” Red Mull's fight for his country is still celebrated as heroic and honourable, even though his beliefs are cunningly juxtaposed with those of an Anglo-Irish captain who wants to gain Home Rule through parliamentary reform and with those of a British sergeant who served in Flanders Fields and claims that “Honour – dishonour” are only “[w]ords the quality thinks up over their mulled wine” and that “no country is worth dying for” (84). In “Four Green

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13 Lee has argued: “A third commonality that runs through all of the stories in *Antiquities* is the metaphor of houses. [...] The many different houses are contrasted both overtly and subtly as they function as symbols of the various characters”.

Fields", however, a Republican counsel who regales his dinner guests with stories of 1916 and the IRA Conventry bombing in 1940, celebrates the Talbot street bombings for "bringing us nearer to the day when there will be a final withdrawal of enemy troops from Ireland" (28). The narrator clearly condemns him as a "big drunken historic ruin of a man" (28) and Emily, who has just witnessed a young family being bombed to pieces, reflects bitterly, "when I was ten [...] I had that man's picture pinned up on my wall at home. With Pearse and Dev and Yeats and Bold Robert Emmet" (29).<sup>14</sup> Yet revolutionary and romantic nationalism are dealt the severest blow by Sarah's death at the hands of the IRA for refusing to cooperate with their violence. As she reminds her Republican acquaintance who seeks her out in Paris: "Returning the fourth green field to Mother Ireland is no good if there's nobody left to live on it, only carrion to suck up the blood" (66).

Interestingly, Sarah's death is not actually narrated in any of the stories. It takes place, as it were, in the gaps between the stories and can only be inferred by drawing out the connections between them.<sup>15</sup> Sarah's great-uncle Dan's suicide similarly happens in the gaps between the stories: while we see him planning his suicide in the third story, this is only referred to as a fact in the last story. Several other life stories, however, are left unfinished: we are neither told about the later life and death of Emily's father, nor about what happened to her brother and sister; we do not learn whether anything happened between Emily and the American she meets on the beach in "France is so Phoney" or what happens to Nanny Sheeran whom Emily cannot bear to visit in the nursing home at the end of the first story. This kind of fragmentation and disjunction is of course an important formal characteristic of the short story cycle as such, one that distinguishes it from the novel. Mulkerns uses this characteristic very skilfully in *Antiquities*, not just to dramatic effect, as with the deaths of Dan and Sarah, but also to underscore the book's thematic evocation of the fragmentation and disintegration of family, city and nation. For the gaps between the stories and the lives they chronicle mirror the increasingly tenuous relationships between the different family members: Dan's failure to find moral and financial support with his many siblings; the deteriorating relation between Emily's mother and her sister, upheld only by the memory of "poor Mother" (34); the disappearance of Emily's own siblings from the stories and the fact that she is the only one of a large family to dutifully visit Aunt Harry. Similarly, Emily's marriage seems to continue only by grace of the couple's

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- 14 Michael Storey argues that Mulkerns's story condemns the dinner guests (including Denis and Emily) as much for their lack of strong condemnation of the violence as Feardorcha O'Briain (the counsel) for his endorsement of it (157). Conversely, *Antiquities* seems to support Sarah's much stronger stance against the violence in "Torch", even though she pays for it with her own life.
- 15 In the sixth story, "Torch", Sarah is threatened by an IRA man, but refuses to go into hiding. In "Four Green Fields", the second story but chronologically the last, Emily learns on television of the "death in mysterious circumstances of an Irish student in Paris" (29). The connection with Sarah is not made explicit but strongly hinted at through the dead pigeon Denis found on Sarah's bed earlier in the day.

"mutual memories for turning over", memories "of Sarah, always of Sarah" (50). A shared past, it seems, is all that keeps the family together and with Sarah's death any remaining investment in the future is swept away. Given the symbolic associations between Emily's family and the nation, that may also be Mulkerns's verdict for Ireland: it is too much preoccupied with "Antiquities", it invests too little in the future.

The deliberately jumbled chronology of the short story cycle further reinforces this verdict: instead of progressing chronologically, the stories seem to go in circles, with the last story revisiting the childhood which Emily evoked in the first one. In fact, the bleak last line of the collection – "But he knew what I knew, that the good times were all gone. For the foreseeable future, at any rate" (134) – suggests a downward spiral in which Emily's family, Dublin and the nation are caught up. Still, as Sarah's fate in Paris suggests, a simple "escape" (89) from family or nation is not possible. And the determined cosmopolitanism of Denis and Emily does not offer a solution to their marriage problems either. Mulkerns seems to suggest, rather, that this negative spiral has to be broken from the inside out. And even though she gives little concrete suggestions of how this may be brought about, saying goodbye to the "cosy myths" of romantic patriotism (66) and replacing a dwelling with "antiquities" with an investment in the future may be a good way to start.

### **Narrating the Community: *A Literary Woman***

A quite different picture of contemporary Dublin can be found in Mary Beckett's *A Literary Woman*. While *Antiquities* announces its generic status clearly in its subtitle, *A Literary Woman* appears at first as but an ordinary short story collection. The opening story tells of the "long engagement" of Judy and her stubborn refusal to make her bare rented room more welcoming. When her fiancé finally agrees to set a wedding date, she realises that she does not want him anymore and resigns herself instead to a life as a spinster, with "a house of her own" (14). In "A Ghost Story" a young couple buy a haunted house because it is cheap. The husband in particular insists on owning a house as evidence of "his status as a citizen and resident with responsibilities in the community" (28). Yet in the end, he gives in to the hauntings and the wishes of his wife and sells the house again. In the third story, "Inheritance", a career girl with a husband and an "expensive", tastefully decorated house (37) decides to give up her job to care for her newborn baby and in "The Bricks Are Fallen Down", Sheila leaves her home in Dublin to visit an old friend in Belfast for the day. As these examples show, the stories in *A Literary Woman* deal with the private lives of couples and families, mostly within the confines of their own homes. It is only gradually that the reader discovers connections between the stories: all houses appear to be situated on the same street in a Dublin suburb and main characters of one story sometimes turn up as neighbours in another. Furthermore, in many of the stories an anonymous letter appears and, in a few stories, drives the plot. The anonymous letter-writer, Miss Teeling, is allowed to give her own version of the events in the penultimate story, "A

Literary Woman", and this central plot development, which is narrated across a number of short stories, further unifies this collection.

While the spiralling movement of stories and themes in *Antiquities* makes it quite literally a 'cycle' of stories, the unity of *A Literary Woman* depends on the chronological order of the stories and the sequential unfolding of the plot. Even more than in Mulkerns's book, therefore, the reader is invited to "successively realize underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme" (Luscher 148). In addition, "Peace Till the Moon Fails", the final story of *A Literary Woman*, provides some kind of closure by dwelling on the death of Miss Teeling and the accompanying feeling of relief on the part of Maeve, in whose house she had rented rooms. The note of quiet happiness on which this story ends thus also extends to the rest of the collection, in spite of the sadness and "generalised sense of danger" (Macken 16) which also pervades the stories.

Although *A Literary Woman* is set in Dublin, the city does not loom very large in Beckett's collection. The stories are set in an unspecified suburb, with tree-lined streets and semi-detached houses and could have taken place in other Irish or European cities as well. Place is only really focused on in "The Bricks are Fallen Down", which sets up an opposition between Belfast and Dublin. Sheila, who came to live in Dublin after her marriage, returns to her native city to find it a desolate place where ordinary life has become all but impossible. Dublin, by contrast, is a safe haven for her, "home": "the rounded sedate hills with their planted forests and the featherbed and their winding roads with streams of lamplit cars. Teenaged cyclists circled lazily on the footpath. Children's window blinds were pulled, shutting out the end of the day" (60). This picture of commonplace domestic happiness is very much the governing ideal of the book and the stories often centre on what threatens or complicates this ideal.

This domestic ideal itself is primarily symbolised by house and home. The identities, lives and experiences of the characters are bound up with their houses: Judy's bare room in "The Long Engagement" is a metaphor for her sterile and lonely existence; the haunted house in "A Ghost Story" symbolises the way in which the couple's problems originate in their different class and upbringing; and Sheila's warm but rather shabby house suggests a happy family, notwithstanding limited means. In all of the stories, the house is also evoked as the primary setting where the life of these couples and families takes place. If in *Antiquities* family denoted a large sprawling entity, stretching across different generations, in *A Literary Woman*, to the contrary, the focus is on the nuclear family: parents, children (in all but three of stories), with only occasional references to other grandparents or siblings. Most stories, moreover, have a female main character and focaliser.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Exceptions are "The Cypress Tree", which tells the story of the 10-year-old Gavin, and "A Ghost Story", which is narrated from the husband's point-of-view.

Although the domestic image which *A Literary Woman* constructs is a fairly traditional one, with women as the primary caretakers in the house, Beckett neither romanticises motherhood nor idealises the life of a housewife. "Heaven", for instance, opens with "To Hilary in her sixties, heaven was an empty house" (107): a house emptied of the need to achieve perfection in the care for husband, children and home. And both "Inheritance" and "Under Control" dwell on the more disturbing and disabling aspects of a mother's love. Still, mothers are depicted as the vital pieces in the construction of a nurturing home and, conversely, having a house and a family seems an important part of the identity of these female characters. Negative examples clearly bring this message home. The only child, Gavin, in "The Cypress Tree" has to come home to an empty house every day because his mother has a career. And even though she does her housekeeping to perfection every night, her boy's future seems bleak. Conversely, Judy in "The Long Engagement" laments the loss of the family she will never have and has to bravely resign herself to the life of a spinster.

The most glaring negative example in the book is, of course, Miss Teeling, who writes spiteful, anonymous letters seeking to destroy the complacent happiness of the families she sees around her. In the title story, narrated in the first-person, Miss Teeling's account of her unhappy childhood provides some sort of motivation for her actions. Bereft of a solid and warm home as a child, she admits to not having "good memories of any place" and explains that she "got into the way early of hiding in other people's houses" (129). After her mother's death, she even resolves to earn a living by invading other people's homes. As a companion to lonely, elderly ladies, she bullies them into submission and a legacy in their will. Between jobs, she takes up rooms in Maeve O'Reilly's house and sets about to make her life and that of her neighbours miserable. Being an outsider, with no real home, family or friends, she begrudges them their "warm comfortable houses", their "smug houses" (129). She watches the people on the road, listens to gossip in the shop so as to learn "the tenderest place to aim the blow" (127). Miss Teeling's primary motivations are spite and revenge, but also a desire to control and manipulate other people. She enjoys the quasi-divine power this gives her, signing her letters as "A Watcher" (80) and commenting, "Oh He is mighty and He can do great things but I am an independent operator. I can compete in my own small way" (127). It is ironic that Miss Teeling uses letters, a means of communication and reaching out, to foreclose communication and make any meaningful relation impossible. The only relations she seems capable of are those of dominance, manipulation and control. The title of the story and the collection are ironic too, as they establish a link between Miss Teeling and the author, also a 'literary woman' who manipulates characters in a godlike, omniscient way.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Miss Teeling receives fitting 'punishment' in the hands of the implied author by dying a lonely death in her new council house.

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17 In her reading of the story, Christine St. Peter similarly states, "one can say that Miss Teeling creates fictional interventions that literally restructure her environment" (60).

Through the story of Miss Teeling, Mary Beckett emphasises not just the importance of a safe home for personal development, she also uses it to dramatise both the positive and the negative aspects of a community. On the one hand, the community finds itself united against the threat the anonymous letters pose, with neighbours confiding in and supporting one another. This sharing also leads to the detection of Miss Teeling and her expulsion from the community. Yet, for the content of her vicious messages, Miss Teeling relies to some extent on the gossip which is also part of this community and which requires keeping up “a good front”, as the protagonist of “Sudden Infant Death” puts it (88). Moreover, the community’s rejection of the outsider is also shown to be problematic, not just in the story of Miss Teeling’s lonely childhood, but also in the final story, where Maeve wonders, “maybe it was my own fault. I didn’t like her but if I had been nicer to her and chatted to her the way I do to anybody else she might have been all right” (142).

In addition to its morally ambivalent reaction to an insidious outsider, the community in *A Literary Woman* is also shown to be constituted, in a more fundamental way, by the individuals, couples and families that are part of it. Indeed, just as mothers are presented as the primary ‘building blocks’ of the home, so homes and families (more even than individuals) are presented as the necessary ‘building blocks’ of the community. As in *Antiquities*, moreover, we can see how this central thematic dimension of the collection is underscored by its formal structure. Just as the different stories in the collection are arranged to form a single sequence, so the different houses are linked up to form a street, and the individual families come together as a community. Nevertheless, the gaps between the stories are again as important as the connections between them. Far from going up into a unified collectivity, the houses and their inhabitants remain diverse, distinct and separate, as Beckett suggests in “The Cypress Trees” when a magnet which Gavin steals from a neighbouring house refuses to join his “door key”: “They remained separate. Disappointed, he put them both in his pocket” (75). Instead of the almost organic unity of experiences, memories and habits which constituted the community in *Irish Idylls*, the different stories in *A Literary Woman* emphasise the diversity of the community, as each family has its own problems, experiences and values. Also within the family this plurality is evoked in the coming together of individuals with all the frictions this inevitably involves. Still, as the case of Miss Teeling shows, this coming together in a relationship or family is also a necessary, constituent part of a happy and confident identity. And a similar reciprocity is shown to exist on the level of community, with happy homes being constitutive of the community and the reaching out to the community also a necessary part of the happy home. Mary Beckett’s representation of family and community thus reminds one of Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “being singular plural”, which argues that existence is not possible without co-existence. In a different way, this term can also be applied to the genre of the short story cycle which brings discrete and singular stories together into the diversified plurality of the whole.

Viewed from a larger national and international perspective, the diversity sketched by Beckett of course rapidly dissolves as the suburban community she depicts is after all a homogeneously white, Irish and middle-class one. Even though Beckett takes care not to represent the community as in any way idyllic, its very existence depends both on the avoidance of real political conflict, as figured in Sheila's happy escape from a destructive Belfast, and on the removal of the outsider who refuses to conform to the ideal of the middle-class nuclear family. Even though Beckett's short story cycle does recognise some of the tensions and problems accompanying this ideal, from a contemporary perspective her representation of family and community in Ireland as centred in the home inevitably seems quaint. The demographic and economic changes which have marked Irish society in recent years have indeed strongly challenged this traditional ideal. Still, recent works such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012) or Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2013) suggest that the short story cycle continues to be an important vehicle through which the tensions between the individual and various forms of community in twenty-first century Ireland are explored.

## Conclusion

As I have tried to show in this paper, this tension has been dramatised in a variety of ways in Irish short story cycles. If the short story cycles of Barlow and Somerville and Ross mostly managed to convey a very real, if nostalgic, sense of a community of shared values and experiences, in the books of Moore and Joyce, a common identity was mostly defined in terms of lack: a lack of positive interpersonal relationships and of a drive to change. A similar sense of deadlock could also be observed in Mulkerns's *Antiquities*, as a common purpose or identity were primarily defined in terms of the past. In *A Literary Woman*, finally, community turned out to be only possible on the basis of a solid sense of singular identity, located in a warm and loving home. Of course, these are only a handful of examples of Irish short story cycles. Further research has to determine whether this opposition between individual and community, between singular and the plural, can also be found in other works and whether there exists a sense of tradition or "genre memory" in these works (Lynch 5). Still, I hope to have demonstrated that the short story cycle is a rich narrative form which has contributed – and still contributes – in different and interesting ways to the cultural project of narrating Ireland.

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## **'THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT': NEW NARRATIVE FORMS FOR A NEW ERA IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION FROM THE NORTH OF IRELAND?**

**Fiona McCann (Lille)**

In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, an interesting yet still embryonic phenomenon can be observed in some recent fiction from the North of Ireland: a tendency towards dystopian allegories or quasi-apocalyptic narratives. If 1998 marked the end of the 'Troubles', to which the violent conflict is euphemistically and inadequately referred, it did not necessarily trigger resolution. As old wounds continue to fester in spite of (or perhaps because of) a political discourse which calls for a moving on from the tensions and divisions of the past, writers of fiction strive to reflect something of the uncertainties of the present time through experimentation with new narrative forms. Since the very beginning of the contemporary 'Troubles', artists and writers have attempted to make sense of them, to interrogate the multiplicity of identities and to come up with adequate modes of representation through which the various forms of violence which dominated the North for so long might be figured, configured and reconfigured. If poetry has long been the dominant means of literary expression in the North<sup>1</sup>, which boasts of more than a handful of world-renowned poets (not to mention the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney), fiction has grappled with the same thorny questions, and drawn attention to the problems inherent to the representation of violence. Liam Harte and Michael Parker already pointed out over ten years ago the "critical revisioning" at play in the works of contemporary writers of fiction from the North, and the emergence of "tropes of transformation and translation" coupled with a continuing emphasis on place as "a critical, contested signifier [...] inextricably linked to questions of political identity and cultural allegiance" (249-250). Contemporary writers of fiction from the six counties continue to explore place as "a critical, contested signifier", but by displacing the usual signposts and toying with strange and yet somehow familiar topographies: Anna Burns, Francis Hagan and Sean O'Reilly all upset traditional representations of the city besieged by violence and attempt to "construct different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings" (Rancière 102).<sup>2</sup>

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1 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, for instance, states that for "serious literary engagement with the Troubles we tend to think of poetry and even drama rather than fiction" (7).

2 Jacques Rancière is making this point in relation to the visual arts, but given the focus he also places on words and images as all contributing to the creation of fiction(s), his ideas are equally relevant here. All the more so as he underlines the fact that works of art (or literature) cannot in themselves "supply weapons for battles". They can, how-

It could of course be argued that the very act of continuing to write ‘about’ the ‘Troubles’, peripherally or directly, is conservative in itself, honing in (not to say cashing in) on a turbulent recent past and thereby contributing to a stagnation both in artistic expression and in politics. It will be my contention, however, that the narratives produced by these three authors actually participate in the opening up of new perspectives through which the past, but also the future, can be questioned, (re)shaped and (re)written. In short, Anna Burns’s *Little Constructions* (2007), Francis Hagan’s *The Auditor* (2010), and Sean O'Reilly's short stories “Curfew” and “The Good News” (2000), though obviously not apolitical, do move well beyond the all too frequent manichean lens through which the North is usually narrated in fiction and in so doing, pave the way for future narrative innovations in which “[w]ithout rejecting their past, [...] writers nevertheless strain against its sectarian, insularist and monologic claims, migrating beyond local and national boundaries, negotiating beyond the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the local and the international” (Kennedy-Andrews 275).

I do not want to suggest too stringently the generic codes which link the fictional works which I will be analysing, as to do so would involve a totalising approach which these texts work hard to reject. As the prominent theorists of dystopian narratives, Tom Moylan and Raphaella Baccolini, point out, it is essential when dealing with the genre of dystopia to guard against the danger of investigations into critical utopias and dystopias “hardening into a fixed paradigm”. To do so would be to defeat the purpose of this generic choice (9). I do, however, want to suggest that the narratives I will be analysing offer a way out of the clichéd ‘either/or’ or ‘both’<sup>3</sup> which characterise much fiction from this part of Ireland, and that they offer a move towards ‘neither’. <sup>4</sup> In other words, the specific choice of dystopian or apocalyptic genres is fundamental to the project of narrating and thereby re-imagining, though not necessarily favourably, the world.

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha highlights that the “‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-

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ever, “sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible” (103).

- 3 Even novels as acclaimed as Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* or, more recently, David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* fall into the trap of carefully balancing the narrative between (at least) one representative of the Nationalist and Unionist communities, thereby perpetuating oppositions even as they attempt to break free of them.
- 4 Although I will not be exploring it here, the prose writing of Ciaran Carson also marks a very interesting departure from the forms of narrative which have dominated much fictional output from the North of Ireland. Even his most recent novels, *The Pen Friend* (2009) and *Exchange Place* (2012), which are “more streamlined and straightforward” than his other prose works, are sites in which an “ambitious meditation upon memory, art, comprehension and misunderstanding” can be developed (Gillis 255). Although non-dystopian, what Carson's fiction has in common with that of the authors under study here is the manner in which it clearly “surpass[es] any simplistic scenario pitting one force against another” (268).

faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity [...]” (4). This statement is particularly interesting in the troubled context of the North of Ireland, which is certainly anything but “unified or unitary in relation to itself” and constantly “Janus-faced”. Any narrative of the North of Ireland automatically stumbles against overlapping and contradictory points of view and fictional texts are a privileged space within which these collisions can, indeed must, provoke significant aesthetic innovations. This paper will explore works of fiction by three northern novelists who have privileged a move away from the naturalist prose which has been the dominant form of fiction in the north, along with the Thriller genre. By defining and interrogating their dystopian, allegorical or apocalyptic narratives of Belfast and Derry, I will consider to what extent and in what ways these authors contribute to emphasising or resolving latent tensions through the writing of space and whether these narratives proffer a vision of hope and resolution, however timid, or despair.

Published respectively in 2000, 2007 and 2010, Sean O'Reilly's *Curfew and Other Stories*, Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* and Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* are all situated in urban environments which are simultaneously strange and familiar. The settings of two stories from O'Reilly's collection, the eponymous "Curfew" and "The Good News" are a city that has, for reasons unknown, become a lawless, endemically violent society. Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* is set in a dysfunctional town named Tiptoe Floorboard in which one patriarchal family wreaks terror even as it violently implodes (an implosion which is inversely proportionate to the centrifugal narrative style). Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* is set in a city besieged by two warring factions and a body named "the Monitors" who are ostensibly engaged in conflict resolution, but who, it is revealed, have vested interests in the perpetuation of the conflict. These chaotic, dystopian or quasi-apocalyptic representations of the city correspond as an ensemble to the definition Gyan Prakash offers in the introduction to *Noir Urbanisms*, a collection of essays on imagining the modern city specifically within a dystopian paradigm: "In these portrayals, the city often appears as dark, insurgent [...], dysfunctional [...], engulfed in ecological and social crises, seduced by capitalist consumption, paralyzed by crime, wars, class, gender, and racial conflicts, and subjected to excessive technological and technocratic control" (1). As Prakash also reminds us, "the dystopic imagination places us directly in a terrifying world to alert us of the danger that the future holds if we do not recognise its symptoms in the present" (2). This is not to say that the novels by Burns and Hagan and the stories by O'Reilly are all strictly speaking dystopian narratives. In fact, if one takes as a frame of reference the definitions given by Moylan and Baccolini in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Burns's novel and O'Reilly's stories are rather anti-utopian texts, and only Hagan's novel corresponds to the definition of a dystopian narrative. Quoting Lyman Tower Sargent, these authors define anti-utopian texts as "both fictional and expository" and "directed against Utopia and utopian thought", in other words as refusing to engage in the creation of any kind of structure which might address the dangers or threats looming large within society. Dystopian texts on the other hand follow "specific

formal strategies" (Moylan and Baccolini 5) which, although quite distinct from narrative strategies employed in utopian and anti-utopian texts, nevertheless bear traces of the same type of social imagining found in utopian or eutopian narratives in which radically different societies are dreamt into being. Chaos is the defining aspect of both Burns's and O'Reilly's fictional texts, both in terms of the diegesis and the formal strategies to which it is buttressed: chronology is disrupted, onomastics are deliberately confusing and an episodic as opposed to linear dynamic all contribute to complicating the reading process. Neither text features a main character *per se*, and no back story of war, revolution or uprising is provided as is the case in Hagan's *The Auditor* and most canonical dystopian fictions. The dystopian staple of misused control of advanced surveillance technology is also absent in Burns's and O'Reilly's fictions and present in Hagan's. Notwithstanding these differences, however, all three authors investigate in exciting new ways and with some degree of generic convergence the consequences of violent conflict and thereby contribute to ongoing reflections into how best one may come to terms with the past and embark upon the uncertain future.

In both O'Reilly's and Burns's texts, the anchoring of the setting in a barely recognisable Derry and Belfast respectively is apparent not so much in terms of the representation of space, but in terms of linguistic idiosyncrasy. As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> both authors use words and expressions which are associated with the vernaculars of Derry and Belfast (such as the locution 'yousens' or the placing of the coordinator 'but' at the end of a sentence in the case of Derry and expressions such as "hitting a reddener" [Burns 71], "a fit of the headstaggerers" [ 89], "dead on" [150] or "Hell, slap it into him" [159] in the case of Belfast). O'Reilly occasionally merges the strange and the familiar in *Curfew* by inserting the names of the odd well-known street in Derry (such as Fairman or Lone Moor Road), offsetting them against a backdrop of buildings "without a front" (160) or "ransacked [...], scratched up and strewn" graves (158). Hagan, on the other hand, renders it virtually impossible to situate his novel in a futuristic version of Belfast. Indeed, he is at pains to short-circuit any attempt to pin the setting down, as his use of names makes amply clear, a point I will return to. However, the obvious parallels between the omnipresent violence and its manifestations in these fictional works and recognisable aspects of the Troubles leave no room for doubt that these authors are all concerned to establish new modes of representation<sup>6</sup> as a means of interrogating the "post-past cit[ies]"<sup>7</sup> of Derry and Belfast.

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5 See Fiona McCann, "Gender(ed) Trouble(s)" and "'The post-past city'".

6 By new modes of representation, I do not mean to suggest that these authors are particularly revolutionary in their approaches to and creation of narrative dystopias, a genre which is very well established and which has yielded a considerable number of fictional works, many of which have become modern classics. I merely wish to acknowledge that recourse to this particular genre is an interesting new departure in contemporary fiction from this part of Ireland.

7 A character in Sean O'Reilly's *Love and Sleep: A Romance* jokingly refers to Derry as a "post-past city" (xvi) in a vague mockery of the frequent contemporary tendency to

Writing about Belfast as it is depicted in Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Men*, Aaron Kelly has highlighted that the novel "recapitulates a [...] regressive notion of Belfast as a fallen city, as a malign architectural projection of the inner landscapes of loathing of its inhabitants" even as it also "functions in a utopian manner in gesturing by means of criminal pattern to the urban totality itself, its social relations, the dialectic of its inequalities and potentialities, its fragmentation and affiliation" (178). I take this remark as a starting point as I think that the fictional works of Burns, Hagan and O'Reilly operate in a similar way, particularly revealing the underbelly of "social relations" and exposing the "fragmentations and affiliation", notwithstanding some major differences, the most important of which is the very difficulty of situating any of these texts in either Derry or Belfast.

In *Little Constructions*, Anna Burns clearly plays with traditional representations of Belfast as outlined by Kelly to better undermine them: "So you see, you didn't, you couldn't – how could you? – know the minds you're dealing with in this dreadful abyss of brokenness, this dead valley of hopelessness, this nethermost pit of faithlessness" (74). The combination here of the narrator's conversational tone, the manner in which she directly addresses the reader, the preclusion of any possibility of understanding the minds of the people of this land and the hyperbolic and extremely clichéd metaphors used to depict this town, reinforced by the ternary rhythm, all contribute to debunking this negative and self-pitying image through overkill. The very name of the town in which the novel is set also calls attention, through ridicule, to the town as projection of the inhabitants' fears:

That's what everybody did in Tiptoe Floorboard. Tiptoe Floorboard, by the way, was the nickname for the town. Its real name was Tiptoe Under Greystone Cliff. People who could take the town or leave the town called it 'that auld shitehole' and those who really adored the place, and who liked their diminutives also, strung out their intimacy with 'Tippy-Toe-Under-Tippy-Toe-Ette'. They're deranged those last people, though. (40)

Apart from the association between this fictional town and Belfast through the allusion to Cave Hill, a basaltic hill (grey in colour) which is situated in North Belfast and overlooks the city, this intervention by the narrator humorously stresses both the notion of the city as an embodiment of the fear in which its inhabitants live and their (albeit absurd) whimsical renaming of the city to suit their opinions of the place. The diglossic dimension of the utterance further highlights the discrepancy between different perspectives of the town and the gap between official and vernacular discourses.

In O'Reilly's "Curfew" and Hagan's *The Auditor*, the city remains nameless. Contrary, however, to Burns's novel, which suggests that Tiptoe Floorboard has suffered from endemic violence for generations, there is a clear suggestion in the other two texts of an era preceding the present time of the narration and a contrast is thus established between a non-dystopian past and a dystopian present. Euphemisms such as "be-

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add the prefix 'post' to any noun or adjective, to the extent that all meaning is lost in the process.

fore all this started" (O'Reilly, *Curfew* 47) or "before all the trouble STARTED" (62) or reference to the past such as "there used to be ornaments in the glass cabinet under the window" (48) call attention to a relatively 'normal' past, without revealing anything about the present in "Curfew", except that it bears traces of some sort of dislocation: The focaliser, a young boy, "took aim and drew back his arm at an old cooker in the street, a lamppost, the window of an empty house, a car door in a tree, some shape at a corner, a beer keg, a coat lying over a gate and launched stones at the darkness itself" (61). The juxtaposition here of parts separated from the whole, and their incongruous positioning, point towards a rupture which does not just derange the present cityscape, but also marks a rupture between a recognisable past and a chaotic present. The violence of this present, the genesis of which is significantly absent from the text, is posited in the verbs used to describe his brother's actions as he joins the other men in a search party (although what they are searching for remains unsaid and perhaps even unknown to them): "Eamon was first out into the field, *slashing* the torch around like a sword [...] *slicing* and *stabbing* the dark with his torch" (67, emphasis added). The alliterative sibilance emphasises Eamon's incisive, trenchant gestures and links them to an overall atmosphere of violent confrontation in the presence of the narrative world.

In Hagan's *Auditor*, frequent recourse to the past perfect serves to bridge the gap between a bearable past and an unbearable present. Using internal focalisation, Hagan allows Kristof Mann, the main character whose name has been found on a death list, to reminisce about the past as he attempts to make sense of the present and his impending death. The situation has clearly evolved from one resembling the 'Troubles' (when two warring groups, named the Blacks and the Whites, names which clearly draw attention to the clichés of manichean representation of the conflict, waged war on themselves and on the community) to an autocratic society under high surveillance in which citizens who threaten the tenuous equilibrium are eliminated. The description of the city itself is sufficiently general so as to correspond to practically any European city: "It was a small city, as European cities went, yet it had its tower, its river and its hill; its Old Town and its New Town; its castle and its cathedral" (13). The generic elements established through the recurrent use of the possessive adjective confer a nondescript essence to the town, while the name of the river which runs through it, the Termin, clearly points towards a deadline or appointment if one takes into account the German translation, or an ending if one considers the Latin *terminalis*. In both cases, the implication is clearly that this city is founded upon its own end, thereby foreclosing any possibility of hope or regeneration in the future, as the end of the novel indicates.

In Burns's novel and O'Reilly's stories, the family (and, more generally, the private sphere) functions as a reflection of external dysfunction, danger and violence. The town of Tiptoe Floorboard contains one Town Hall, one pharmacy, and all the remaining commercial outlets are gun shops. The Town Hall is mentioned only in passing as a place one must go to before getting married to check that the future spouses are

not, in fact, members of the same family, suggesting that consanguinity is prevalent in this town. The numerous gun shops, in which one can buy “tea and buns and guns” (Burns 38), the incongruous association of which is reinforced through rhyme, are revealing of the central place which violence occupies in *Tiptoe Floorboard*: domesticity and brutality are intertwined. This is further highlighted by a rhetorical question posed by the narrator as she muses over male-female relationships:

I know you're thinking, oh, if only we could get our erections and total sexual, emotional, spiritual and intellectual satisfactions from guns, bullets, postage stamps and such-like controllable essences. Wouldn't that be easy? Why can't we? After all, some men do. Why can't women be gunshops? [...] How much safer, how much simpler, how much more predictable going into them then, might be. (52)

Overtly playing here with the association of masculinity and violence,<sup>8</sup> Burns also acknowledges the potentially explosive and unpredictable nature of heterosexual relations, on both a physical and psychological plane.

One of the most disturbing and striking features of *Little Constructions* is the fact that all of the female characters are victims of rape and other forms of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of male family members. This is to be understood in the context of a town dominated by gunshops, the best of which is replaced by a “bra shop” at the end of the novel, a sign of changing times and potential new beginnings where damaged women “deep in the wearing of trauma” are gently “persuade[d] [...] into the changing room to take that trauma off” (252). The metaphor of trauma as clothing significantly underlines then manner in which the psychological impact of violation, although intrinsically linked to the victim, can be shed, divested, just like a piece of clothing. The “ultra-feminine bras” Jotty Doe sells in her shop replace the “super-ultra-masculine bras” (252) victims usually wear and encourage a rethinking of their attitudes to their bodies and their sexuality. As the novel ends with the inhabitants of *Tiptoe Floorboard* “knock[ing] down walls” and “some shops slip[ping] into other shops” (296), it becomes apparent that the “little constructions” (both physical and mental) these characters have built for themselves must be broken down for some form of reconciliation to take place.

In a very different register, Sean O'Reilly's stories “Curfew” and “The Good News” also focus on the family and close community as a reflection of a more widespread violence and a general acceptance of this status quo. Similar to Burns, O'Reilly too focuses on specifically male brutality, although this time it is not women, but the younger generation which undergoes intense psychological and physical violence. The young focaliser of the story “Curfew”, Fergal, refuses to stay indoors after dark and ventures out to observe the men in the community chase after someone who has

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8 One thinks for instance of feminist artist Margaret Harrison's *Son of Rob Roy* (1971), in which the male figure's penis and testicles have been replaced by a gun, while the barrels of the guns he wields in both hands have been transformed into erect penises.

done something.<sup>9</sup> When they find Fergal, he is badly beaten and reality and imagination become intertwined when he hallucinates the following: “He saw his Da looking up into the morning sky and a bird flying past with a clump of his youngest son’s hair in its bloody beak. He saw Eamon chasing burning dogs around the streets with bits of his brother tied to their tails. Harkin and Nuala hid his tongue in a box under the bed [...]” (70; emphasis added). The triple dismemberment he hallucinates, the violence of which is reinforced by the plosive alliteration, reflects not only the physical assault he is being subjected to but also the endemic violence of this community. The circularity of the story mirrors the stasis in time and in space that dominates it. The story ends as it begins in the focaliser’s dark living room, the men (between whom it is at all times difficult to distinguish) talking and he listening. Fergal’s movement once he disobeys the curfew is also circular. This circularity echoes the cycle of violence in which this community of men is caught up: the fact that no indication is given as to why a curfew has been imposed and by whom, the repetitive use of euphemism or indefinite pronoun to refer to the implied enemy and the repeated references to an all-engulfing darkness and emptiness are all suggestive of a meaningless and brutal existence from which there is no exit. The same circularity is also present in “The Good News”, a grotesque parody of the resurrection of Christ<sup>10</sup> in which not only is there no good news, there is “no news” at all from Hanley, the Christ figure, leaving his followers no other option but to continue their violent existence in which death and torture are forms of entertainment. These issues are strongly reminiscent of Beckett’s dramatic and fictional preoccupations and O'Reilly is clearly situating himself in a distinct literary tradition in which dominant modes of narrative representation must be dismantled and re-thought.

Although there are no warring opposites in these stories, they are nevertheless clearly a reflection on the perpetration and perpetuation of violence in the absence of any political or ideological framework. While the title of “The Good News” is highly ironic, that of “Curfew”, while it acknowledges the necessity of quenching the fire of violence, also highlights the possibilities of reigniting conflict through the imagination. After all, this story could also be read as the young focaliser Fergal’s imagination running away with him. The first part of the story ends with a break in the text just after his older brother’s words: “Once upon a time there was this wee shithead who didn’t listen to what his big brother told him. You can make the rest up yourself” (60). Given the elliptic and somewhat larger-than-life narrative that follows, all of which is narrated from the very narrow point of view of the young boy, it is at least possible that Fergal literally does “make the rest up”. This would suggest that no curfew can be imposed on the power of the imagination.

9 My double use here of the indefinite pronoun is indicative of the number of the silences and elisions in this story and of the climate of uncertainty which reigns.

10 For a more detailed discussion of this short story, see McCann, “The post-past city’: Apocalyptic Cityscapes and Cultural Stagnation in the Fiction of Sean O'Reilly”.

Hagan's *The Auditor* is the most easily recognisable allegory of the situation in the North both during the Troubles and since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The death toll in the novel stands at around 3000 (in and around the same number of victims during the Troubles) and territorial boundaries are clearly depicted through the flags hoisted above the various depots (any casual stroll around the streets of Belfast and most other towns, particularly in July, will reveal a host of flags). The situation at first appears highly reductive in the choice of Whites and Blacks as opposing factions who resemble each other so much so that they become indistinguishable. It seems that we are in the presence of traditional representations of Belfast and/or Derry as urban spaces which are plotted along the lines of "sanctuary/barricades – interface/adversary community" which morphed into "militarized configuration" (Feldman 35) as a result of paramilitary involvement. Hagan manages however to sidestep a potentially problematic apolitical position (that would be, in any case, impossible to achieve) situated on a moral high ground by taking care to highlight the class and political issues that resulted in and are the consequences of the current climate of fear, corruption and violence. It quickly becomes clear that the target of Hagan's criticism is neither the ideologies which subtended the Troubles nor the rhetoric of the different paramilitary groups involved, but rather more surprisingly the discourse of resolution which has emerged in the wake of the conflict. As Kristof makes his application for a weapons permit in the prosperous Monitor building which dominates "an otherwise dilapidated city" (95), he listens to the oral recording of the history of the Monitors which fills the room, while simultaneously perusing the many photographs papering the walls. These photographs, which appear colourful and attractive from afar, transpire to be of victims of the most heinously violent deaths. The juxtaposition of the oral recording which extols the virtues of the contribution made by the Monitors to resolving the conflict, rendered in italics, and the detailed description of the photographs through internal focalisation significantly calls attention to the exponential growth of this so-called apolitical group in relation to the escalation of violent murders. The juxtaposition of the end of one paragraph describing the mutilated body of a woman: "One of the bullets had gouged its way up the length of her left cheek" and the beginning of the next which takes up the oral recording: "*Moreover, the Monitors are a non-interventionist force. Their job is to observe and record*" (103; emphasis in original) is eloquent in its revealing of self-justificatory rhetoric on behalf of those in power and the inadequacy of this as a response to the violent conflict. The recording goes on to explain how civil liberties and foreign intervention have been curtailed all in the name of conflict resolution put in place by the Monitors. It is in this sense that Hagan's novel owes its biggest debt to dystopian narratives in that it reveals what has gone wrong with a utopian ideal to produce such a repressive society: set up to reconcile the warring factions and create a climate of peace, the Monitors actually morph into a powerful force in themselves, to such an extent that they deliberately and violently prevent any conflict resolution and actually stoke the fires of hatred so as to maintain their privileged position in society.

The death of the central character, Kristof Mann, at the end of the novel, just before the signing of the peace deal which propels the city into “its false future” (193) is already present to some degree in his name. The novel abounds with names which have a central or Eastern European sonority, but the significance of Kristof is particularly striking. The allusion to Saint Christopher (Kristof is the Hungarian form of the name which signifies ‘Christ bearer’) is all the more interesting when one considers the flooding of the River Termin which coincides with the end of Kristof’s life and the new peace deal. Inscribed in his very name is the act for which Saint Christopher is best known: that of unwittingly carrying Christ across a dangerous river. Kristof, in a parody of Saint Christopher, by not having the courage to trust anyone with the evidence he possesses of Monitor collusion with the warring factions, helps the city to a new peace deal which will not allow for resolution. In a rather nihilistic rewriting of the biblical intertext, this Christopher is unable to live up to his name and instead becomes a figure who allows himself to be eliminated and in so doing, condemns Man(n) to a future based on lies and falsehood. Similarly, the choice of the name Moloch for the leader of the White faction reveals the grimness of the end of the novel. Moloch in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is one of Satan’s greatest warriors who argues in favour of warfare against God. At the end of *The Auditor*, Moloch Gibbons is one of those involved in the signing of the peace deal, “the choreographed event ousting the birth of Jesus as the day’s good news story” (193). The implication here is clearly that this post-diluvian phase is no new beginning, but rather more of the same, and that, just as in O’Reilly’s story, there is no “good news”. As the voice of an unknown narrator emerges in the epilogue, he muses over the loss of bearings the city has undergone as a result of the flood: land and river have become indistinguishable and the medieval clock tower no longer tells the time. Time and space are suspended, in between violent past and uncertain future.

This suspension of time and space is a common feature of all of these texts. O’Reilly’s two short stories are suspended in a permanent darkness, and both suggest that the diurnal has completely vanished. The circularity of both narratives and the resurrection of Hanley in “The Good News” also reveal a suspension of time and the fact that the characters are doomed to live repetitive, dark, empty lives. Burns, on the other hand, establishes a more complex chronotope in her novel, the narrator stating from the beginning that “[p]eople here have their own version of time and it’s called the Jumbled Time Syndrome and it is contagious and everybody who suffers from Jumbled Time can’t help but suffer from Imprecision and Indiscretion too” (39). The diglossic convergence here of scientific and common discourses creates humour, as does the use of polysyndeton, but this statement also calls attention to what one might call the Jumbled Narrative Time Syndrome which characterises the novel, the various diegetic strands of which are extremely difficult to put into chronological order. Furthermore, this temporal syndrome is directly related to the “Combined Spatial Fragmentation Hallucination Syndrome” (146), from which most of the male characters suffer, thus highlighting the unusual chronotope of this novel, in which both

time and space are constantly shifting, ceaselessly fluctuating, thereby reinforcing the topsy-turvydom of this fictional world.

Lest one should rush to hasty conclusions about these novels and stories as being postmodern reflections on the breakdown of Grand Narratives and “the search for unity (narrative, historical, subjective) [as] constantly frustrated” (Hutcheon 162), which they are to some degree, Hagan offers a note of caution in the final pages of *The Auditor*. The narrator, who we presume is a Monitor, makes the following prediction for the future: “we will soon grow tired of the past and make grand statements about needing to put it behind us in order to move on. Our history will be picked over and rehashed by partisan revisionists until the truth comes to seem laughably gauche. Only then will we have become truly postmodern” (194). This bitter reflection on a discourse of reconciliation which dismisses the past as impossible to make sense of and on the rejection of any monolithic truth is indeed a (somewhat reductive) vision of what may be seen to constitute one tenet of postmodern narrative(s), but it is also undermined by the novel itself which offers an edifying depiction of the dangers of glossing over the past without acknowledging its shortcomings.

The novels and short stories on which I have been focusing are not historical accounts of the Troubles in the North. As fictional narratives, they are not concerned with “the notion of a truth of past experience”, but rather with a “rhetorical performance” (White 147) which aims at exposing a troubled past through different forms and paradigms than those traditionally used by writers of fiction from the North. The fact that there are no strong causal links between past events and the violent present in these narratives does not necessarily mean that these authors are positing violence as inherently senseless, a position which would be in any case extremely problematic if any association with the Troubles is to be established, since it would elide any acknowledgement of material and ideological motivations. What these authors are actually doing is reflecting on the means by which an atmosphere of pervasive violence comes to infiltrate every aspect of life, spilling over from the political sphere to contaminate the domestic sphere. This is why the traditional ordering function of narrative is sidelined in these texts in favour of a more disruptive approach: it is a means of conveying this shift and of emphasising the very real dangers of forgetting why conflicts exist and of mishandling their resolution. The absence of “good news”, not to mention the imposition of “curfews” and the creation of “little constructions” which fence in the self and block out the other do not appear as especially optimistic. They do, however, provide an “audit” of the current status quo that has recently extended south of the border with the publication of Kevin Barry’s *City of Bohane*, another dystopian novel, published in 2011. This migration may well mark the beginning of a new sub-genre in contemporary Irish fiction which expands the contours of the possibilities for narrative depictions of a political and societal violence which in some ways defies representation. Time will tell.

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# **TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH FICTION: SEAMUS DEANE'S *READING IN THE DARK* AND ANNE ENRIGHT'S *THE GATHERING***

Hedwig Schwall (Leuven)

## **Introduction**

“Narrating Ireland” is an interesting concept as it raises two rather fundamental questions. What does it mean to narrate, and how do we define “Ireland”? Let us start with the latter question.

According to Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Ireland makes itself out of metamorphosing attitudes toward “family, religion, and politics, that triple nerve center of so much Irish literature” (133). It is arguable that those three elements are the nerve centre of any culture, but Eóin Flannery specifies: Among the “issues pertaining to the ‘Irish nation’” he names “the ‘Irish family’, Catholic morality, [...] repression of sexuality, the Northern ‘Troubles’, and the disparities and tensions of rural life versus urban living” (6), and he adds “read[ing] Irish fiction since the 1960s” (6) will show lots of “Irish protagonists, who battle daily with the baleful constants of religion, nationalism and the family” (9). Maybe in Ireland the forces of church and state interlock more than elsewhere, or used to, as the 1937 Constitution stipulated, which means that both these forces bore down with even greater oppressive strength on (nuclear) families. Be that as it may, “Irish” is usually connected with a history of catastrophes, with failed revolutions against the coloniser, the Famine, internal conflicts on the pursuit for Home Rule, the War of Independence, the Civil War, the Split with the North, mass emigration, unemployment, state and church abusing citizens. So somehow “Irish” and “trauma” seem to be as chiastically entwined as the institutions of church and state are. And this is not only true for Irish history, but also for contemporary Ireland.

As Carla Power remarks in *Irish Literature since 1990*, “[t]hanks to the boom, Ireland has awoken from its nightmare, and instead of escaping it, the Irish are increasingly willing to explore it” (qtd. in Brewster 25). Indeed there are a great many “Irish trauma novels” since 1990. We could distinguish three groups here. The first and biggest group treats the impact of politics. All of Glenn Patterson’s novels deal with the Troubles, especially *The International* (1999), where, like in Deirdre Madden’s *One By One in the Darkness* (1997), people mourn a murdered friend or father; Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man* (1998) brings “a new rawness” into Troubles fiction (Parker 4), while Robert McLiam Wilson contextualises a severe bombing in *Eureka Street* (1996) in ways which mix realism and humour. Other contemporary novelists deal with political violence in pre-republican Ireland, like Eugene McCabe’s *Death and Nightingales* (1992), Neil Jordan’s *Sunrise With Sea Monster* (1994) and at least

two of Sebastian Barry's novels: *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and *A Long, Long Way* (2005) which focuses on an Irish soldier's experiences of World War I and his bewilderment with the Easter 1916 split. A second group of novels treats sexual abuse, like Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Edna O'Brien's *Down By the River* (1996, inspired by the X case) and Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood* (2006). The latest novel of this kind, Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), seems to introduce a new kind of nuance; inspired by the Fritzl case, it stresses the resilience of a girl who, imprisoned by her kidnapper, survives years of sexual abuse thanks to her friendly communication with her son. The third and biggest group of "trauma novels" focuses on families which are dysfunctional due to incest, drunken fathers (as in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* [1992] and Claire Keegan's novella *Foster* [2010]), mothers who oppress their children with their emotionality (*The Butcher Boy*) or with their severity (William Trevor's *Love and Summer* [2009]). Some novels of this category stress the hardships of family life with alcoholism, but in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and its sequel *Paula Spencer* (2006), it is the protagonist's resilience which is foregrounded, when we see how Paula's narratives (interior monologue but also conversations with her sisters) help her to come to terms with the traumas that have plagued the family over three generations.

Yet since Mary Robinson the concept of "Ireland" and Irishness has opened up considerably, and people like Colum McCann live up to the former president's observation that "Irish communities abroad will show [...] the fascinating diversity of culture and choice which looks back at us" (qtd. in Brewster 32). In his (US National Book Award for Fiction winning) novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) McCann depicts a kind of Bloomsday in New York, a pre-9/11 world in which Irish and Hispanic, black and white, poor and rich figures try to come to terms with trauma. It is a novel which shows a clash of cultures between New Yorkers, while Irish priests and black prostitutes are linked by Catholicism and Islamic poetry. Another "more global" scene is offered in Roddy Doyle's short stories, *The Deportees* (2007), in which "New Boy" stages an African boy who is traumatised by the violence in his home country, but confronted with another type of violence in Irish schools. In these stories, written for the multicultural paper *Metro Eireann*, published by two Nigerian journalists living in Dublin, Doyle illustrates what Anne Fogarty calls "the enduring relevance of the 'national' as a context that can furnish sites of cultural debate between the local and the global" (Flannery 7).

However, what is most important in the context of trauma fiction is that the writer empathises with the conflicts he describes. So William Trevor feels "Irish absolutely to the last vein in my body" in that he wants to write about Ireland as it is "the country you feel strongest about, the country that you actually love" (Core 3). Yet his empathy is only his way to get to the human psyche: "What is important is to take Irish provincialism – which is what I happen to know about because it's what I come from – and to make it universal" (Stout 123).

This metamorphosis of deeply felt Irishness into universal experiences leads us to our second question, that of narrative. Narrative is a skill of conjuring up a world with particulars, like the social and emotional aspects of time and space which constitute the protagonists' perception of their world. This is done with lexical choices, grammatical and suprasyntactic means, with omens and flashbacks, symbols and *mise en abyme*, with degrees of focalisation and with a host of other narrative techniques. Here we will focus on how trauma can be narrated – and can only be narrated, never "stated", as trauma is not a delineated fact. It is merely, at best, a catching up, an assimilation of a past. The best definition of trauma is still the one offered by Cathy Caruth in her seminal work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" ("Trauma" 4-5; original emphasis). So essentially trauma has two main aspects: first, the traumatised subject is in an in-between position, between a first moment when the protagonist could not take in the catastrophe that took place and a second moment which triggers the energies which were stored in the person's unconscious since the overwhelming event. Because trauma breaks out only after it is triggered by a second event it has the character of what Robert Eaglestone calls "afterwardness" (in the title of his plenary lecture for the Fourth International BAAHE Conference at University College Brussels in 2011). Second, the traumatised person is possessed, which means that s/he is entirely passive to its negative energy which is repetitive: the trauma repeats itself at will. Therefore we find master narrators at the opposite end of the spectrum: this is the position of persons who hone their skills to form a world of emotions rather than to be formed by them, and in this sense "narrating trauma" seems a contradiction in terms. Freud too considers trauma and narrative as each other's opposite, as trauma is a matter of compulsive repeating while narrating is a kind of playful, explorative remembering: "'repeating' [is] the pathological re-enactment of a repressed trauma that cannot be remembered and so acknowledged" (qtd. in Alexander 281). In trauma, there is no distance, no consciousness. As Marita Sturken observes,

the traumatic event is not initially remembered or represented but is held at bay by dissociation and reenacted without remembering. It is narrative integration that produces the memory of the traumatic event. It is when they become full-blown narratives that these memories tell stories of blame and guilt. (qtd. in Harte 191)

In other words one could say that the traumatised person only literally re-members, in the body, as the trauma is still like a live wire that sends out charged images which directly affect the members of one's body. Only when the subject can start to word, name, or objectify the emotions can s/he handle them, situate and interiorise them, which leads to figurative remembering.

But narrative does not only allow the traumatised subject to distance himself, to take a stance in relation to the events that affected him, it can also show a way forward by

offering models of empathy. Narrative fiction is a hand outstretched from a human world that is non-threatening: it is a playground on which one can choose to identify, pick up a role, and play, to refuse to do so and just watch, or simply to walk away. Moreover, the fact that good fiction offers simultaneously precision and indirectness corresponds to the needs of the traumatised person. "Philosophical and artistic works are [...] capable of furnishing some extra, because *indirect*, insights into the enigma of horror", Richard Kearney observes; the artist and writer can provide a way to face horrifying things "by virtue of style, genre and language", which is absent in "the all-too-naturalistic stance of most entertainment and mass media" (qtd. in Flannery 202). Imagination is a key factor as it feeds the faculty of empathy, said Ian McEwan in a comment on 9/11, which accounts for "the privileged position of writers as respondents to scenes of immense trauma" (Flannery 204). Yet Flannery adds another asset of fiction: "physical and symbolical assaults" are "moments that required not only explanation but redemption, and literature was a cultural medium through which such redemption could, potentially, be found" (Flannery 201).

The term *redemption* leads us to more moral ground, and here too empathy is an important "tool". In order to try to identify with co-sufferers or even perpetrators, one needs to contextualise and go into particulars, which is exactly what novelists do. "Stories singularize suffering against the anonymity of evil", says Kearney (qtd. in Alexander 280). Many novels describe traumatising events, but others re-enact more specifically the ways in which the protagonist comes to terms with his or her traumas. As we see this form of trauma novel become more popular, we will discuss two of them in this article. In both, the protagonists take recourse to what Suzette Henke calls "scriptotherapy, writing through the traumatic experience which is a therapeutic re-enactment" (qtd. in Harte 190). "Because the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and the constitution of the subject" (Harte 192) we will have to look at the speech patterns, the cultural and family patterns that protagonists pick up, and see how their "scriptotherapy" develops, as they use body and thing language, images and words. Thereby we will give special attention to what Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart call "mental constructs": patterns which are part and parcel of the subject's cultural discourse which turn out to help, support, structure, the welter of emotions that are triggered by a trauma. "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experience, which need to be integrated with *existing mental schemes*, and be transformed into narrative language" (van der Kolk & van der Hart 176, my emphasis).

In this article I want to discuss Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). The fact that both novels were (near-)winners of the Booker Prize indicates that their trauma narratives appealed to a wide and demanding audience. Both deal with a trauma in the family caused by the politics of religion, the first in Northern Ireland, the second in the Republic. Both protagonists realise that some members of their family suffer from an "afterwardness" in a conflict that is transgenerational: Deane's story starts in the 1940s but originates in 1922,

Enright's is set in the Tiger years but it goes back to the 1960s and further to the 1930s. Both protagonists are very aware of the subjectivity of their culture's narratives, and sense how traumas have sedimented into invisibility in the Catholic and Protestant patterns of talk and action; and though both are curious and cautious in their reading of the dark passages of their interlocutors, they fall prey to the dangers of an overzealous empathy. In this sense their own subjectivity perfectly illustrates Soshana Felman's observation that the German word for witness, *Zeuge*, does not only mean "witness" but also "creator", the one who begets something through speech (Felman 24). Both Deane's unnamed protagonist and Enright's Veronica state several times that "the birth of knowledge through the testimonial process" is a performative business (Felman 25). A traumatised person can only be cured if she can start to *play* with versions: if she finds her way back to the "capacity to elide or distort" (Caruth, "Recapturing" 153) she can tell a "slightly different story" to different people and so establish a distance between herself and the trauma. This distortion in trauma narrative is strikingly illustrated in the covers of both novels in their original edition: while Enright's shows a flame-singed family snapshot, Deane's sports a photo of the unnamed protagonist-narrator, marred by the frame's broken glass.

### ***Reading in the Dark: Portrait of the Artist as a Traumatised Man***

We saw that in Ireland church and state are interlocking more than in many other countries, and indeed in Deane's novel Catholic families are oppressed by the Protestant authorities in Derry. In *Reading in the Dark*, Seamus Deane's strongly auto-biographical and sole novel to date, we notice that the author is a Joyce specialist, but it is interesting to see how trauma affects a *Bildungsroman* which focuses solely on the artist's use of language. Like in Joyce's *Portrait*, Deane structures the protagonist's development by inserting symbols with variations (like the moocow who becomes a real dirty cow in Stephen's realist episode, and the cuckoo becomes a hawk when he finds his vocation) only here the symbols of fire, stairs, windows, are never very "realistic" as they always chime in with the flames of hell which haunt the writer's mother. Also Deane's novel focuses more on how language misfires, lies and elides, on darkness rather than on epiphany, and his narrative does not consist of five big chapters but, like the typical trauma narrative, it is split up in small chapters. At the end, Deane's protagonist, like Joyce's Stephen, leaves his mother, but for him this is no liberation: it is his empathy with his mother which made him find out her tragic secret, and this oedipal involvement banishes him from the home. As Deane's "Portrait" is much more tragical than Joyce's, it is no wonder that the conceptual framework of scholasticism with which Stephen wants to invent a new world is replaced by one touching on psychoanalysis. The unnamed child who reads in the dark is confronted with all kinds of authorities who transgress the laws which brings about a chaos that silences whole communities. No wonder then that Joyce's fairy tales about moocows and nicens little boys are replaced with ghost stories here. According to Anne Whitehead, "[t]he ghosts [who] embody or incarnate the traumas of

recent history and represent a form of collective or cultural haunting" are a frequent phenomenon in trauma fiction (7). This haunting atmosphere is present from the opening sentence onward, where the protagonist is electrified by the fact that his mother senses undigested conflict in the air of the family home. However, his keenness to empathise with his mother will lead to an oedipal conflict, as the mother will feel invaded by the narrator's knowledge of her past which will be much more intimate than his father's. This casts the narrator from his home and sends him into survival trauma: it will take Deane years to digest the events and ten to write the novel, thus illustrating how "survival itself [...] can be a crisis" (Caruth, "Trauma" 9).

We will now look at the "scriptotherapy" used by the protagonist, who steers his course between the distorting discourse of his mother and grandfather on the one hand, and the mental schemes offered by his father on the other. Steering his way between the literal re-membering of his mother (whose body language will be symptoms of what she cannot articulate) and the cultural remembering of his father who transfers the horrors of the past into symbols and stories, *Reading in the Dark* is a story of reading different "genres": adventure books, spiritual exercises, classical works, oral (local) history, songs, etc., all of which the protagonist devours, looking for clues to understand the relations into which his parents are locked. In our analysis we will focus on all traumatised characters and the different ways in which they deal with their trauma: first we will look at the narrator's grandfather, then at his mother, next at his father and finally at his own development.

The narrator's grandfather, Mr. Doherty, is a schoolbook example of narcissistic, impulsive behaviour. It is his retaliation for the murder of a friend of his that starts off the whole tragedy. As he revenges himself by killing a policeman without leaving evidence, the police will take it out on the members of his family and on the next generation. Although he is a leader of the local IRA he has no respect for "the Symbolic order", the (Lacanian) set of rules of the local culture and the authorities. Instead, he only goes by his own judgement. This turns out to be disastrous: when the police indirectly conveys the message that it was Eddie Deane<sup>1</sup> who betrayed Doherty's IRA unit, he immediately has Eddie executed. Later, Mr Doherty's daughter, Frances, finds out that the actual informer was Tony McIlhenny, her former lover who jilted her to marry her sister Katie instead, so she betrays him and he flees the country, leaving Katie without any explanation. Around the same time Mr. Doherty allows Frances to marry Frank, Eddie's brother. This marriage seals a link between victims (Frank) and perpetrators (Doherty father and daughter) which the narrator calls "worse than the breaking of the laws of consanguinity in Christian doctrine class" (134). While the narrator finds out about this, he cannot inform his father, as this may break up the family. So all mouths are sealed by an unspeakable set of traumas.

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1 The figures are never given a surname, I only do so to clarify an extremely complicated story that needs condensation here.

In his narrative exploration of this traumatic kernel, the protagonist comes across three different ways to react to the catastrophe, each of which represents a school-book example of the three Lacanian categories of perception. Mr Doherty illustrates the Imaginary one, Frances the Real one, Frank the Symbolic.

Mr Doherty is the one who believes he can control his image of himself. He purports to be a leader of the Catholic group and main fighter of the Protestants, but in reality he is the marionette of their actions. First when he orders Eddie Deane's execution, second when, instead of accepting the offer to be shriven by a Catholic priest on his deathbed, Mr Doherty prefers to pervert the ritual by unburdening his mind of his past directly to his grandson and his daughter, which reinjects all the negative traumatic energy into the future generation. Another detail which highlights Mr Doherty's blindness to his own weaknesses is that it is the Protestant Orange marching music which triggers his fatal confession to his grandson, showing that the so-called Catholic leader is so obsessed with the local Protestant (sub)culture that it dictates him and destroys his own family from within.

Frances Doherty is more stuck in the "Real" perception, which means that she is so traumatised by both her father's and her own crimes (having betrayed Tony, thus leaving her sister without a husband) that she loses the ability to perceive and speak normally; instead, she hallucinates, seeing the flames of hell everywhere, and is reduced to body language. One of her symptoms is that at some stage her personality splits in two different voices, that of the friendly and that of the stern mother, and she develops a form of schizophrenia. The narrator tries to read his mother's body language: as she keeps shifting "the gold ring [...] back and forth on her finger [...] she's switching me on and off" (129). Thus, he illustrates Gabriele Schwab's observation that "Children of a traumatized parental generation [...] become avid readers of silences and memory traces hidden in a face [...] or chronic depression. Like photography, traumatized bodies reveal their own optical unconscious" (Schwab 14).

Frank, the narrator's father, shows how a Symbolic perception is the only way out of trauma. Although he is actually the one who suffered more traumas than anyone else, he is the most reconciliatory figure of all. Not only did he suffer injustice from many people in authority, but all the main rituals of his life (funerals, marriage) were either denied him or perverted. More precisely, Frank suffered three "sets" of traumas. When he was fourteen his parents died suddenly from a fever. This meant that the children were not allowed to wake the parents as the fear of contamination forbade this, but on top of that the family members used the occasion to plunder the house. Next, when Eddie was executed, the truth of the mistake was never revealed, and as a result Frank's siblings were maltreated and never had any future chances in their Catholic community. And thirdly, the Protestant state added insult to injury when the police raided the house of Frank's young family; later, he is denied his full pension when a major illness incapacitates him, only days away from normal retirement. Yet Frank counteracts this abuse with narrative and ritual to ease his children into

their past through “indirect insights into the enigma of horror”, as Kearney put it (qtd. in Flannery 202). So he tells his young sons the legend of the “Field of the Disappeared”, using the popular culture that is available to convey the idea that people who have disappeared physically can still be present in the emotions that play between people. He also devises rituals of reconciliation, like when he takes his sons all the way across the local river to the church of his childhood, a place carefully chosen to confess his deepest shame to them, that his brother was an informer. Thus, Frank tries to actively (re-)construct the Symbolic order, i.e. the link between the individual with the community, in order to fight his family’s traumatic history. Frank is the complete opposite of the narrator’s grandfather in that he does not drink to be able to work better; he obeys the rules of both the Catholic community and the Protestant state; and in contrast with Doherty, who insists on learning Irish only, Frank encourages the children to learn as many languages as possible. Last but not least, Frank is exemplary in dealing with his traumas in that he mentalises,<sup>2</sup> that is, he is aware of the fact that his wife is gravely disturbed by her past, yet he is very careful with his empathy. Unlike his son, the narrator, he senses that Frances badly needs a certain privacy and respects this.

But as the title indicates, *Reading in the Dark* is about the narrator’s gradual learning skills in “reading” traumatised people. This means that, unlike Joyce’s protagonist, Deane’s young artist does not only learn to write better, but he hones the sensitivity which allows him to read the unsaid, as he learns to chart inklings, vibes, atmospheric changes:

My father knowing something about Eddie, not saying it, not talking but sometimes nearly talking, signalling. I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it. (43)

Yet before the protagonist becomes so well-read he starts off being imitative like his grandfather and immersed in body language (i.e. literal remembering) like his mother. This becomes especially clear in the passage where he refers for the first time explicitly to Uncle Eddie. At some point the narrator is set up by his enemies in the local gang as an informer. This of course galls his father especially: “Is it a curse? What have we done to deserve this?” (101) “No, I told him, there’s something amiss with the family. The police were on top of us long before I was born” (103). Thereupon he is hit by his father and sent to bed. However, he will have his revenge by destroying the roses his father always clips whenever Eddie is being mentioned. More specifically, he destroys them by uprooting them and then pouring cement over them. In this action he lets himself unwittingly be dictated by the Protestant soldiers who had raided the house and poured cement over everything. So he repeats his grandfather’s impulse to be dictated by the Protestant authorities (when their marching

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<sup>2</sup> Mentalisation means that one has the imaginative faculty to conceive of possible mental states of someone else, in extreme cases the victim can put himself in the place of the perpetrator. See e.g. Fonagy and Luyten.

music infuriated him to confess his secret that would destroy his own family). But the boy will learn to see the dangers of this naivety, becoming aware of the layeredness of signs and symbols. So the roses develop into a symbol of nationalism, Dark Rosaleen, Yeats's Rose Tree. Like his father, the narrator learns to cope with trauma by distancing himself from the events through the layer of narrative fiction. "Fiction, to perform its necessary function, must have broken its traditional affiliations with history", he writes (Deane, *Celtic Revivals* 93). "It involves, first, a replacement of the political by the aesthetic [...]. The onus of distribution has been altered" (Deane, "Production" 133; original emphasis). This is what happens in *Reading in the Dark*, a beautiful testimony that writing can be therapeutic, and that trauma can even become productive, and sublimated.

### Trauma and Catholic Subtexts in *The Gathering*

The heroine of *The Gathering*, ironically called Veronica, is also a "reader in the dark", though the writing exercise is more prominent in this protagonist's endeavours to come to terms with trauma. Again, family and state structures are interwoven, which generates intergenerational trauma. Here it is not the uncle but the narrator's "twin" brother,<sup>3</sup> who has just committed suicide, who is the scapegoat of society. In his excellent article on this novel Liam Harte stresses the opacity of trauma experiences and observes that "the interconnections between personal and national trauma are central to the moral force and finesse of the novel" (Harte 187), but this "moral finesse" needs to be elaborated. So in this analysis I will focus on how religion can both cause a trauma and help to assimilate it. More specifically, I hope to show how Veronica picks up mental constructs from the Catholic discourse of her community, first using these religious schemes to come to terms with her traumas, then criticising them as she gains distance from Liam and her childhood traumas.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I want to concentrate on how the concepts of original sin, forgiving and redemption work in therapeutic ways in a trauma context.

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3     "Sometimes I think we overlapped in [the womb], he just left early, to wait outside" (11).

4     Like Harte, Carol Dell'Amico focuses on *The Gathering* as "a parable of a nation with the choice either to face or ignore a disturbing past" (73) and "the probing of national identity" (59); she also points out that it is a characteristic of "the testimonial mode" to be "providing a simultaneous assertion and undermining of certainty" (60). While Dell'Amico concentrates on the malpractices in religious institutions, especially the Magdalen Laundries which are clear instances of "Irish cultural misogyny" (67), I want to concentrate here on the "therapeutic" element which the narrative offers the narrator. Sarah Gardam, in contrast, only focuses on the Lacanian structure of Veronica's trauma. Gardam warns the reader not to "dismiss the novel as a mere therapeutic narrative" (99), and stresses the complexity of the entanglements of desire, language and the unconscious, but it is all the more surprising to find how her analysis ends somewhat abruptly in a celebration of motherhood, the love of which seems to "heal" Veronica. It is worth noting that the narrator first becomes aware of that love in church, during the funeral. In my own article, "Relationships with 'the Real' in the Work of Anne Enright", I focus on Enright's feminist agenda more in detail.

The communal problem, according to Veronica and to Enright in her non-fiction book *Making Babies*, is that Irish families suffer from too much oppression by the Catholic Church, and like the Protestant police in the previous story, this authority infiltrates in the family in unseemly ways. “Growing up in Ireland, we didn’t need aliens – we already had a race of higher beings to gaze deep into our eyes and force us to have babies against our will: we called them priests” (5). Indeed Veronica’s mother, Mrs Hegarty, had twelve children and seven miscarriages. In Mrs Hegarty’s days, the 1960s, the church rules came down to: premarital sex is not allowed, sex in marriage is fine as long as it was “functional” (producing Catholic souls), and if you could not cope with the number of children or the husband that was just life, of which suffering was an essential factor. This mentality, uncritically passed on by the mother, infuriates Veronica, who at the beginning of the novel strongly identifies with her angry brother. On the one hand, the narrator sees an almost straight, causal line between the mother’s endless pregnancies which made her fail to protect Liam and Veronica against “evil”, on the other hand Veronica’s scriptotherapy opens with a focus on her own unreliability, her own quality as *Zeuge* – witness but also fabulator:

I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but *I am not sure* if it really did happen. I need to bear *witness to an uncertain event*. I feel it roaring inside me – *this thing that may not have taken place*. *I don’t even know what name* to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away. (1; emphases added)

Later it turns out that “the crime of the flesh” refers to a vague but strong memory of either her brother or she herself having been sexually abused by Lamb Nugent, their grandmother’s landlord. As the narrator was only a child at that time, she did not realise what was going on, but now that she is in her thirties she knows, and actually explains the time lag between knowing and realising in a perfect definition of “afterwardness”:

You know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you [...] (147)

Over the next twenty years [...] I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn’t been listening to the radio, [...] and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people’s homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too. (172-173)

So this novel’s protagonist seems aware of the essences of trauma: it is not a fact but an energy that possesses and repeats itself. Strangely enough, Veronica’s car always drives her to her grandmother’s house. Her anger is not only at her mother, but also pointing at her grandmother Ada: “it was Ada’s fault all along [...] – to bring so much death into the world.” (223) It sounds here as if the whole line of Eve was responsible for engendering human – read corrupted – life. More specifically, Veronica refers to the Catholic concept of original sin which symbolizes an ever-present narcissism which brings evil in the world: “As if the whole world was built on a lie and that lie was very secret and very dirty” (168). Veronica does not refer to only one, but to all three basic elements of Catholic theology: original sin, the blindness inherent to every individual; forgiveness, which lifts the blindness as it connects all

people, even victim and perpetrator; and grace, which is the opposite of trauma in the sense that this positive energy buoys the liberated subjects up in a new impetus of life. A fourth Catholic element is Veronica's repeated reference to the "Noli me tangere" passage in John (20, 1-18), where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus after his resurrection, but is told by him not to touch him, as he has to ascend to his Father. We will now see how these four Catholic concepts form the "mental constructs" which allow Veronica to develop from being an angry young woman to someone who finds a "healthy distance" to those who are dearest to her, both alive and dead.

As the concept of original sin indicates that human imperfection is passed on from one generation to the next, it implies that even children are not innocent. This is pointed out by Veronica when she seems to remember some ambiguity that was involved when her grandmother's landlord abused her nine-year-old brother sexually, in a way we would find shocking: "I could also say that Liam must have wanted him too. Or wanted *something*" (223). Liam is actually almost explicitly represented as an anti-Christ, especially in the inverted "Ecce homo" scene. After Mr Hegarty gets his son back home from custody by the police the young man stands bleeding and accused in the kitchen. Veronica asks has he interfered with a very young girl (repeating the old trauma in inverted form), but he does not answer. Also, instead of loving and forgiving his enemies he hates and blames his friends: "My brother [...] was unkind to every single person who tried to love him; mostly, and [...] still, after a lifetime of spreading the hurt around, he managed to blame me" (168), and instead of focusing on the good in people he tries to find fault – thus actually counteracting people's narcissism:

This was Liam's great talent – exposing the lie. Drink made him vicious, but even sober he could smell what was going on in a room [...]. Liam could be a completely shocking human being, but it was hard to say what exactly he had done to make you feel so off-key. (125)

As Veronica starts off her scriptotherapy strongly identifying with her brother, she is downright angry with her mother. And as Liam was the one who undercut stereotypes, the narrator too does not see their mother in the traditional exemplary way, as a virgin mother like Mary who educates her children for eternity, but rather as a sex machine which produces madness and death: "The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it. I just can't" (7). Yet Veronica's refusal to forgive will mellow as she starts to see that everyone shares in the blind spots that come with humanity (original sin). In her own case, the fault she focuses on is that of "afterwardness", more specifically her own inability to relate to Liam's trauma. This unawareness of what happened makes the narrator feel that she, too, needs to be forgiven for her failure to understand the problems of her brother: "It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too." (173) Yet Veronica is not alone in this condition, it is the whole nation which cannot cope with its own human structures: "This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame" (169).

However, according to Catholic theology, shame can be overcome as contrition offers a way out of narcissism, which can be metamorphosed into grace. This metamorphosis can be helped by confession, and this is a possibility Veronica touches upon. When she is ashamed of her smug, judgmental reaction to Liam in the “Ecce Homo scene” in the kitchen she wants to be absolved of this memory, now that she sees it was a mistake: “If I believed in such a thing as confession I would go there and say that, not only did I laugh at my brother, but I let my brother laugh at himself, all his life.” (167) However, for Veronica forgiving and foregoing is understood more in terms of recognising the Other in the other. She has to let go of Liam, and this loosening of the link turns out to be essentially what Dominic LaCapra calls an exercise of empathetic unsettlement, “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). This is central to the “Ecce homo scene”, which, in Veronica’s writing, means that one has to empathise not with what/who one recognises, but with the Other, the unknown, the scapegoat. Whether that is Christ or a kind of anti-Christ like Liam is not relevant, the basic message is to have respect, i.e. to take distance, to profess “empathetic unsettlement”.

This attitude seems to grow on Veronica especially from the wake onwards. The very idea of this Irish ritual, of course, is a “letting go” of the dead, something which in the Bible was represented as “ascension” – a very “metaphysical” and plastic way of representing the psychological fact that the living cannot keep the dead with them on earth; they “transcend” our understanding of their being. This is what the “*Noli me tangere*” is all about. In this gospel passage, a leading motif throughout the novel, the resurrected Jesus tells Mary Magdalene who is traumatised by his death that she should not cling to him; instead, she is urged to narrate her experiences, so as to come to terms with the human aspect of Jesus that she will never understand, the Other in him.<sup>5</sup>

This is exactly what happens to Veronica, and there are four passages in the novel which refer to elements of the *Noli me tangere* episode of St John. First, at the wake, the narrator suddenly lets go of the fixed idea that her mother is a lump of worry with “holes in her head”, and notices how she positively blesses Veronica’s daughters, who gracefully accept the ritual. Later, she feels a warm touch filling her with positive energy. Yet when she looks behind her there is no one, but she interprets this as being “in touch” with Liam again, only now that she does not cling to him anymore he seems to have turned into a benevolent power. Thirdly, Liam’s funeral yields a kind of resurrection as it turns out he has a son who looks like his dead spit: Rowan. “Everyone wants to touch him” (246) and Veronica says “My skin wants him” (244) but Rowan “shies away”: like in the *Noli me tangere*, the family has to practise “em-

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5 “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers, and tell them that I am now ascending to [...] my God and your God” (*The New English Bible*, John 20, 17; emphasis added).

pathetic unsettlement" and take a healthy distance to the person they lost through traumatic experiences. Fourthly and lastly, Veronica lifts the *Noli me tangere* ban on her husband, which leads to conception. When she realises this later, she finds herself at an airport: "Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. [...] there is such a long way to fall. Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now." (261) Clearly, the ascension is turned into its opposite, but it is a fortunate fall, one which accepts and celebrates life that is passed on generation after generation.

So it looks like both the mental constructs of the scriptotherapy and the rituals of the Catholic system worked, as they allowed Veronica to work through her traumas. But that same system is also criticised and renewed: the ascension has become a fortunate fall into an acceptance of togetherness, and the priesthood is something that is interesting because it is a triple paradox, as we see presently in the way Ernest, Veronica's brother, incarnates his priesthood:

I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family [...] because I can not do it myself, I do not have the arguments for it. (259)

Ernest is simultaneously a priest and no priest, as he does not believe in the institution any more but keeps functioning in it; the physical and metaphysical are at one in him: "My brother has a trained heart; compassion is a muscle for him; he inclines his head when you speak" (195); and he cares while leaving people their freedom: "We were just the right distance apart" (195).

"We were just the right distance apart" – this is what the unnamed protagonist in *Reading in the Dark* missed, as his mother could not cope with his knowing presence. This oedipal situation, where mother and son shared secrets the father could not be let in on, became unbearable for Frances Doherty, so her son left the home to allow her to live the family trauma "without having your eyes on me" (224). The rest of the author's life was one big exercise of survival, through psychoanalytic study, academic writing and creative narration.

In this article I have dealt with a very autobiographical and a totally fictional trauma novel, in which both protagonists use scriptotherapy to find "the right distance" to their past. Both books map the resilience of two writing protagonists who try out different kinds of discourse which may help them to retrace the contexts in which their trauma originated, thus mending the fabric of their life, thanks to literature, to narrative. This seems a great way for people to heal – in Irish families, as in all others.

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## **BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE: NARRATING CHILD ABUSE IN JOYCE, McCABE AND ENRIGHT**

**Anton Kirchhofer (Oldenburg)**

### **Child Abuse and the Loss of Moral Credit**

A wave of disclosures about sexual child abuse in religious and educational institutions has swept western countries in the past two decades. In Ireland, disclosures and allegations led to the establishment of a “Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse in Ireland” which began its work in 1999 and published its report, known as the Ryan Report, ten years later, in 2009 (cf. Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse). Sexual abuse, it turned out, had been practiced for decades in charitable and educational institutions run by the Irish Catholic Church, and it had been tolerated, if not condoned by Church authorities, who had often tended to protect the abusers rather than the victims. Abuse appeared to have been systemic. So did its toleration which aimed at preventing scandal by silencing the victims rather than by punishing the crimes and seeking to prevent them from continuing.

The reversal of this situation was a phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger years. From the early 1990s, Ireland began to turn away from the moral ascendancy of the Roman Catholic Church in many areas of social and sexual morality, including divorce, contraception, and same-sex relationships. During the same period, the media coverage of these topics, and the extensive media presence of voices critical of the previous social dominance of the Catholic Church contributed to rapid revisions in the established patterns of ‘Irishness’ (on these changes see, e.g., Smyth; also O’Toole, “Arrogant”).

Irish fiction, too, participated in these revisions, as it made its contributions to a narrative reassessment of ‘Irish identity’ in the Celtic Tiger years. The scope of this reassessment addressed a wide range of aspects of Irish self-definition. Hugo Hamilton’s *Sad Bastard* (1998), for instance, engages with the reversal of the traditional Irish self-image as an emigrant nation by focusing on the phenomenon of illegal economic immigration to and immigrants in Ireland. As part of this concern, novelists gave new force to a narrative tradition of critical accounts of Irish society and Irish life among whose prominent early twentieth-century representatives were, for example, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* for urban settings, or Brinsley McNamara’s *The Valley of Squinting Windows* for provincial (rural and small town) society. In contrast to those predecessors, novelists now embraced the new publicity given to the themes and practices that had long been taboo, and the new explicitness that had become possible. Patrick McCabe for example, adopted in *The Butcher Boy* (1992) as well as in later novels a narrative language and style whose explicitness celebrated the breach with public decorum. Other novels offered explicit treatments of taboo topics such as

same-sex desire and AIDS – as in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) – or child abuse – as in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007).

Referencing the many narratives told from a child’s point of view in contemporary Irish fiction as well as in the Irish literary tradition, Fintan O’Toole has suggested in an article entitled “Why Irish Writers Don’t Grow out of Adolescence” (2010) that “youth” might be “the comfort zone of Irish fiction”. The novels I have just referred to display a slight, but significant difference in narrative perspective. For one thing, they represent adult characters living in 1990s Ireland who are looking back at the Ireland of their childhood, savouring the contrast or seeking to escape from the suffering which the events and situations of their childhood continued to cause them. In addition, they all describe youth as decidedly a situation of discomfort. This essay will seek to throw some spotlights on the narrative treatment of sexual child abuse in recent Irish fiction by picking two prominent novels which display what might come to be understood as characteristic forms for the representation of child abuse, and above all for the fictional functions which these representations are made to perform. Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992), published at the beginning of the period, is arguably something of an inaugural novel, a narrative pioneering the new and explicit narrative style characteristic for the Celtic Tiger years. Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007) appeared – and achieved high literary fame not least as the winner of the *Man Booker Prize* – towards the end of those years of affluence and social re-imagination. For the sake of contrast and comparison, however, I will begin with a brief analysis of the representation of child abuse – or rather of suggestions of child abuse – in one of the classics in the Irish literary tradition, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914).

### **Suggestions of Child Abuse in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, with a Brief Excursion into the ‘Theory’ of Child Abuse**

“The Sisters” is the opening story of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Its opening paragraph, with its brooding meditation on the word “paralysis”, is generally understood to have programmatic significance for the reading of the work as a whole. As applied to the old priest – whose death is the central event with which the youthful narrator has to deal in his own mind, and in the face of a clearly perceived absence of any moral guidance from his adult environment – paralysis suggests a physical incapacity which stands in a vaguely hinted but never explicitly stated connection with the priest’s potential past failures in his theological role, and possibly even with the effects of past sexual misconduct (cf. Gifford 29). As applied to the entire set of characters of the story, and by extension of the entire collection, paralysis serves as a metaphor for the condition of Joyce’s Dublin and its inhabitants, for the mental limitation and moral vacuity of contemporary Dublin society which Joyce sought to depict.

At the same time, confusion appears as a central thematic element of the story. The narrator, indeed, declares that the old priest “had taught [him] a great deal” (6), but clearly a part of this teaching consists in an initiation into the confusion caused by theo-

logical complexities from which the old priest himself evidently suffered. "Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me", the narrator states, "asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections" (6-7). Father Flynn then enjoys and savours the resulting confusion of the boy: "Often [...] I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice" (7).

A second source of confusion is the resolute refusal on the part of the other adults in the story ever to speak explicitly and directly about any points at issue: "No I wouldn't say he was exactly ..... but there was something queer ..... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion. ..." (3-4), promises Old Cotter, the character who carries the news of the priest's death to the boy's home. Instead of doing so, however, he continues: "I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases. ... But it's hard to say. ..." (4). In the next sentence the narrator goes on to point out that Old Cotter "began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory" (4).

These silences in "The Sisters", signified as much by the lacunae in the characters' discourse as by the typographical means of series of dots of various lengths, are among the famous aspects of the story and have been frequently discussed by critics (e.g. Bremen; Wohlpert; Chadwick). In the present context, the aspect which I wish to highlight is their effect of generating a corresponding confusion in the boy. As he lies in bed the same evening, he records that he "puzzled [his] head to extract meaning from [Old Cotter's] unfinished sentences" (5). Equally confusing to the boy is his own varied emotional response to the priest and his death. The following morning, the boy discovers almost to his surprise, "in [him]self a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death" (6). But as he had tried to go to sleep the night before, puzzling over Old Cotter's unfinished sentences,

[...] I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. [...] It murmured and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly [...] (5)

The currents of anxiety, desire, and perhaps also of transgression and guilt, which are running between the priest and the boy in this dream passage are hard to untangle. The imperfect memory of the dream, to which the narrative returns a little later, adds further elements of exotic and perhaps erotic suggestiveness ("[...] I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I have been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange, in Persia [...]") [7]).

But does any of this indicate the presence of sexual overtones to the relationship between Father Flynn and the boy? As one of the dead priest's sisters points out at the wake with which the story closes, "his life was [...] crossed" (11) in consequence of a pivotal event in the past, involving a broken chalice and an altar boy:

– It was that chalice he broke. ... That was what was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still ..... They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him! (11)

Roundabout descriptions such as these hardly amount to a consistent suggestion of sexual abuse. If anything, the suggestions of the potential sinfulness of the priest's paralysis, his enjoyment of the boy's confusion, and above all the boy's own confused sense of a connection between his "soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region" (5) and "the heavy grey face of the paralytic" (5) which he finds waiting there, might be taken as indirect evidence. Paradoxically, the most clearly suggestive statements might be Old Cotter's declarations that the priest might have been "one of those ... peculiar cases" and the characteristically unformulated "idea" he adds to this: "let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be .... Am I right, Jack?" (4) Arguably, it is this unfinished sentence which provides the clearest, though still unspecified insinuation of a potential of abuse.

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A brief excursion into the 'theory' – and more specifically, the 'epistemology' – of child abuse might help put these findings and these difficulties into context. Ian Hacking has pointed out in "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" (1991) that the term "child abuse" itself has emerged fairly recently and that the notions of what constitutes abuse have shifted considerably over a very short period of time. The term itself attained currency – as well as the status of a formalised medical diagnosis – in the 1960s. Its scope, Hacking points out, shifted from a fairly limited and explicit definition based on physical violence against children, to conceptions that include any conditions which have a tendency to impair a child's development. Sexual abuse was explicitly included in the definition during the 1970s, by which time, as Hacking adds on a highly critical note, medical discourse had taken control of "child abuse", and made sure that all discussion about causes and consequences of child abuse must hence be conducted in medical terms.

We can draw the conclusion from this account that to take early twentieth-century fictions and look for the type of representations of "child abuse" with which we have more recently become familiar would carry a strong risk of being an anachronism. At the same time, we may find corroboration of a point which James R. Kincaid has pursued in several studies of "cultures of child molesting" (*The Erotic Child* [1992] and *Erotic Innocence* [1998]) –, whose historical range spans British and American society from the Victorian age to the present. As Kincaid argues, this culture has produced a paradoxical construction of the child – simultaneously eroticising children and constructing them as "pure" and regarding "an erotic response to children not merely as criminal but as criminally unimaginable" (*Erotic Innocence* 21).

Read against the background of Kincaid's thesis, the various and contradictory features in the narrative representation of the relationship between the priest and the boy, and in the attitudes of their environment may come to be seen as aspects of a paradoxical cultural construction of the pure/erotic child. The choice of a child or

young adolescent as narrator in this context would seem capable of two alternative, even opposite constructions. It could show, on the one hand, the frustration of the child who is inescapably caught up in this paradoxical construction and faced with the fraught attitudes of adults which result from this situation – for Old Cotter's unfinished sentences are just as fraught as the old priest's pointless theological instructions. Both may function as masks to an unformulated “criminal” as well as “criminally unimaginable” desire (*Erotic Innocence* 21). But the child narrator might also have the effect of paradoxically corroborating that very construction, since after all the youthful narrator himself confesses an indistinct and guilty desire which finds expression in his incompletely remembered (or should we read: his partly repressed?) dream.

But across these suggestions, there may very well be a more clear-cut purpose connected to Joyce's decision to build the first story in his collection around this topic. As Ian Hacking has stressed, in spite of all epistemological uncertainty, the issue is capable of the most clear-cut and unequivocal moral construction: “Child abuse, in our current reckoning, is the worst of private evils. We want to put a stop to it. [...] we must protect as many children as we can [...] Anyone who feels differently is already a monster” (Hacking 253). There is, in other words, hardly a more effective means in order to achieve moral discrediting. A person, an institution, a society that would tolerate child abuse, loses all claim to moral credibility.

In this way, the several features which I have evoked in my initial reading of the story – the theme of paralysis, and the incapacity for clear speech and clear moral thinking – unite the adult characters as seen by the youthful narrator of “The Sisters”. Characters as opposed to each other as Father Flynn and Old Cotter add up to form a society incapable of addressing adequately an issue of this magnitude. The suggestion of child abuse functions as a powerful device for destroying the moral credit, or revealing the moral bankruptcy of the society Joyce is describing.

In order to underline this point, it is worth turning briefly to the subsequent story, “An Encounter” before leaving *Dubliners*. Another youthful narrator and his friend set off to the other side of the River Liffey seeking adventure. On a field, they meet with an enigmatic stranger, who sits down with them and begins questioning them and telling them about what he thought boys should be doing with their sweethearts.

After a long while his monologue paused. He stood up slowly, saying that he had to leave us for a minute or so, a few minutes, and, without changing the direction of my gaze, I saw him walking slowly away from us towards the near end of the field. We remained silent when he had gone. After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahoney exclaim:

–I say! Look what he's doing!

As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahoney exclaimed again:

–I say ..... He's a queer old josser!” (19)

Of course we do not know what precisely the “queer old josser” is doing. The narrator-focaliser does not “raise his eyes”. Gifford's *Joyce Annotated* also remains silent on this point. But the fact is that, in repetitive language and a voice of varying expression, “slowly circling round and round in the same orbit” (18), the stranger had been

telling the boys what he thought young boys and their sweethearts should be allowed to do together. When he comes back, he speaks equally obsessively about the necessity of frequent corporal punishment:

He said that if ever he found a boy talking to girls or having a girl for a sweetheart he would whip him and whip him [...]. He said that there was nothing in this world he would like so well as that. He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. (19-20)

The encounter with the stranger resembles the situation we have found in "The Sisters" in several ways. Firstly, there is the boy narrator's confused participation, his sense of being more vulnerable than other, more active and sportive boys. Secondly, the adults' contradictory attitude reoccurs. They eroticise, assert and enforce "purity" and, in addition, eroticise the violence ostensibly intended to enforce "purity". Thirdly, the boys' experience is not contextualised. It has no meaningful unambiguous place in the universe of explicit social meanings of Dublin. Nothing in his experience has prepared the boy of Joyce's second story in *Dubliners* for this encounter with the "queer old josser". But this very fact functions as an effective condemnation of Dublin society. The picture which thus emerges is essentially similar to "The Sisters" where, as I have suggested, an effect of moral condemnation of adult Dublin society was linked to the adults' inability to address the confusions attending the priest's role and the boy's attitude.

In both stories, then, the *Dubliners*' evident inability to offer any adequate cognitive or moral response to the cognitively and morally blurred suggestions of child abuse with which the stories confront their youthful narrator-protagonists, takes on a condemnatory force with respect to Dublin society. The submerged but pervasive existence of these varieties of child abuse, and the patent discursive and practical inability to address the issue in any meaningful manner, serve as indications of a wider social malaise and are strong interpretive cues in Joyce's desperate narrative portrayal of paralysed Dublin and *Dubliners*.

### **Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*: Pronouncing the Open Secret**

Francie Brady, the narrator-protagonist of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, has killed the mother of his former schoolfellow Philip Nugent with a "pig bolt machine" (195). Across the imperfectly defined distance of "twenty or thirty or forty years" (1, 214) spent in a mental hospital, where he was confined after this act, he narrates the long and complex sequence of events which prompted him to commit this action. Waiving for the moment the vast difference in the narrative tone chosen, a number of the experiences Francie reports from the reformatory school to which he is sent as an adolescent delinquent after his first, less serious intrusions on the Nugents' household, sound quite like they might have been taken more or less straight from the Ryan Report, the Report for the Committee for Inquiring into Child Abuse in Ireland which was published in 2009.

The Ryan Report offers a pragmatic solution to the difficulty of defining abuse (pointed out by Ian Hacking) by distinguishing between and defining four types of abuse, "physical, sexual, emotional, neglect" (cf. 7.07, 7.109, 7.146 and 7.213) – which may occur singly or in combination – and by quoting from the statements of witnesses / victims for the purpose of illustration. Chapter 7 of the report presents the "Record of Abuse (Male Witnesses)". For each type of abuse, and for all possible combinations, statistical tables describing the frequency and the categories of perpetrators are offered, and in each case, the types of abuse are subdivided into a range of concrete forms. Sexual abuse, which is defined as: "The use of the child by a person for sexual arousal or sexual gratification of that person or another person" (7.109), is subdivided into its forms and varieties in "Table 23: Forms and Frequency of Sexual Abuse Reported – Male Industrial and Reformatory Schools" (7.117).

As has already been pointed out, in its substance, the experience of sexual abuse which Francie Brady describes in *The Butcher Boy* could be taken straight from that table. There is "inappropriate fondling and contact", "masturbation of abuser", "kissing", and all of this couched in a context of "Grooming and inducements" (7.130). At the same time, there is the presence of the Irish literary tradition. Again, waiving the difference in narrative modes, the preparatory characterisation of Father Sullivan, the abuser, bears a certain similarity to that given of Father Flynn in "The Sisters".

They said [Father Sullivan] wasn't right since he was on the missions. I don't know what happened some Balubas put him in a pot or something and ever since he'd been walking round with a face on him the colour of stirabout never slept a wink romancing round the corridors at night in his soft shoes all you'd see at the window was this yellow face looking out. (78)

Father Sullivan adopts Francie as an altar boy and begins to spend significant amounts of time with him. In contrast to "The Sisters", however, in *The Butcher Boy* it is Francie who is feeding the priest theological yarn he is making up as he goes along. "I told [Father Sullivan] I thought Our Lady was talking to me. I read that in a book about this holy Italian boy. [...] he said I had unlocked something very precious" (78). Out of these stories the incidence of abuse develops, and Francie records it with the detachment of a character whose true pain and suffering lie elsewhere:

[...] if there was one thing Father Sull loved to hear it was my stories of the saints in the low field. [...] I was in the middle of one of these stories when I look up and what's old Sull doing only smoothing my hair back from my eyes and stroking away at my forehead with his pale cold hand. Look at you, he said, my serving boy. Introibo ad altare dei I said I don't know why and the next thing what does Sull do only plant this big slobbery wet kiss right on my lips. Then he said please, tell me the story of St Teresa of the Roses again. [...] sweatbeads as big as berries popped out on his forehead [...] It wasn't until the third or fourth time I told this story about the roses that he began the Tiddly Show. I thought it was a great laugh with all the prizes you could win out of it. Are you all right Francis he'd say. Oh I'm grand Father and dropped my eyelids shyly like Our Lady did. Sit up here he said and slapped his knees. So up I went. What does Tiddly do then only take out his mickey and start rubbing it up and down and jogging me on his knee. Then his whole body vibrates and he bends away over I thought he was going to break off in two halves. I'd be in a right fix if that happened. [...] But it didn't happen like that lucky

enough. Tiddly just crumpled up like a paper bag and lay there hiding his eyes and saying no. I told him not to be worrying his head but he wouldn't come out from behind those hands. Sob sob that was old Sull I mean Tiddly. I read a book while I was waiting for him to come out. [...] I was chortling away [...] when Tiddly says dear God I'm sorry Francis. I said it was all right have you any fags? [...]

You're my best little girl says Tiddly and went away off spluttering at his desk. (78-80)

Francie manages and manipulates Father Sullivan, treating what he calls "the Tiddly Show" as "a great laugh with all the prizes you could win out of it" (89). He clearly appreciates the benefits that come with the "grooming and inducements" which the inadequate priest has to offer. "I was doing alright in that old school for pigs", he records. Nevertheless, he adds, "Tiddly had to go and fucking spoil it didn't he" (89).

Francie's real pain lies elsewhere. While neither Father Sullivan's pitiable sexual practices nor the role play and cross dressing which he expects Francie to do, are explicitly experienced as abuse or as injury by Francie, the priest's insistent questions about Francie's family and home lead to an escalation in which he suffers grievous bodily harm at the hands of the boy. Francie, it turns out, would do anything to repress the memory of the total inadequacy of his parents – the violence and alcoholism of his father, and above all the neglect and abandonment he suffered from his mother in consequence of her frequent and mostly untreated attacks of mental illness and her ultimate suicide:

[Father Sullivan] puts his arms around me you've no idea how much I love you Francis he says in the nights I even dream about you. I want to know everything about you. Ten Rolos, says I. Tell me all about yourself. I told him a heap of lies and true stuff mixed in. (90)

The mixture "of lies and true stuff" gets out of control, however, and Francie soon feels he is betraying his own mother by describing to Father Sullivan the nice and friendly house of the Nugents rather than the poor squalor of his own home. As he imagines hearing the cruel taunts Mrs. Nugent is directing at his mother on account of this wish-fulfilling fantasy, Francie loses control and starts beating Father Sullivan relentlessly until he is restrained by four members of staff. Francie's real pain, as it appears, is the consequence of the violence and neglect which characterise his dysfunctional home, and the sense of guilt and betrayal associated with his unfulfillable wish for a caring and loving home.

The effect of the representation of the 'abuse' of Francie Brady in the reformatory school is to give it the status of an open secret. Francie is not in the least surprised that physical violence and involvement with a sexual pervert are the customary features of the institution to which he is sent. His narrative perspective suggests no sense of any violation of religious or moral norms. If anything, the sexual abuser comes to be seen as a both ridiculous and pitiful person. As the quotations have shown, Francie quickly learns to manage Father Sullivan and draws what profit he can from the situation.

This might be construed into the suggestion that *The Butcher Boy* has a tendency to represent the abuse inflicted in church-run institutions as rather harmless. Such a

conclusion, however, can only be drawn at the cost of ignoring the novel's narrative structure. After all, and unmistakeably so, Francie is an unreliable narrator. In addition to his occasional losses of consciousness and his persistent and frequently attested inability to distinguish between events he imagines or hallucinates, and events that are 'real', Francie has a thoroughly "problematic value scheme", another typical characteristic of unreliable narrators (Rimmon-Kenan 100). To cite only the most prominent instance of this, Francie's moral outlook allows him to describe his 'butchering' of Mrs. Nugent, the mother of his old schoolfellow Philip, as the natural and logical consequence of provocations and slights received from her. If Francie therefore is not capable of assessing adequately the scandalous cruelty and injustice of the conditions in the reformatory institution, this does not detract from the severity of the condemnation conveyed by the text. It does, however, raise the question about the factors which were responsible for giving Francie this moral vision.

Francie is in denial of abuse: all circumstances suggest that, whatever mental illness he may be suffering from, he has been subjected to emotional abuse and neglect, which leads him to develop fantasies about having a caring family and loving mother, for which he punishes himself – and any other persons who may be involved in the fantasy.

Even if he himself does not conceptualise the treatment he receives in this church-run educational institution as abusive, the novel makes it evident that Francie suffers multiple types of abuse, which are moreover contingent upon one another. What emerges above all is a tradition of systemic abuse that has created the enabling conditions not only for the abuse in Francie's reformatory school, but in the first place for the breakdown of Francie's family. Before Francie becomes a direct victim of institutional abuse, he has been its victim *once removed*, as it were. Francie's father whose drinking and violence contributed to the depression which led to his mother's suicide, suffers even as an adult from the treatment he received growing up in a Catholic orphanage in Belfast. This becomes apparent, for example, when Francie's father pays an unwelcome surprise visit to the reformatory school:

Da arrived one day [...]. [...] the sight of the place put the fear of God in him it reminded him of the Belfast school for pigs. [...] His eyes wouldn't settle in his head, they kept darting about. I knew it was the priests looking down at him. They were saying to him: Well, Mr Pig, are *you* back again? [...]

That was [...] why he lowered his eyes and reached in his pocket to get a grip of the whiskey bottle he pulled it out helplessly like a child's rattle. (82-83)

As Francie recognises the symptoms of his father's resurging trauma, the reader comes to recognise the conditions which lead Francie's father to behave abusively in his family ("may the curse of Christ light on you this night you bitch the day I took you out of the hole of that shop in Derry was a bitter one for me" [85], Francie quotes his father addressing his mother at one point, for example). Francie and his family suffered, too, by extension, from the oppressive, small-minded and snobbish atmosphere of small-town Ireland in the 1960s – an atmosphere of immense curiosity but devoid of support for a family and a child obviously unable to cope.

Still it would be premature to conclude that Francie suffers greater and more fundamental abuse and neglect in his family – and by extension in the context of the oppressive atmosphere of his small town – and that the subsequent institutional abuse is little more than an incidental addition. The story of Francie's father points to the opposite conclusion: the pervasiveness of institutional abuse has produced the individuals who, like Francie's father, subsequently act out their traumas and traumatisé their own family and environment. Rather than mitigating the utterly condemnatory view of these church-run institutions, this realisation compounds their moral discredit by disclosing the degree to which abusive social structures are the correlative, if not the product of these Catholic institutions.

The narrative dynamic in *The Butcher Boy* therefore resembles the phenomenon described by Ian Hacking: the shifting reference of the concept of child abuse and the expansion of the forms and conditions included. In terms of the categories used in the Ryan Report, Francie is subjected not only to sexual abuse but also to physical and emotional abuse as well as to abuse through neglect. And while the novel suggests that the incidence of such abuse in the institutions run by the Catholic Church is no more than what is to be expected, it extends the scope to include all other areas and institutions of provincial Irish society with which Francie is confronted.

At the same time, I suggest that there is a reason why the novel has chosen an unreliable narrator instead of one who might spell out explicitly the conclusion which I have suggested. By allowing Francie to narrate the events as they appeared to him, and as he would wish them to appear, and by constructing Francie as an entertaining and at times highly observant narrator-focaliser, the novel uses the medium of narrative in order to valorise the perspective of the individual, flawed and fraught as it may be, in contradistinction also to the authority which, as Hacking has shown, medical discourse has attained over the topic of abused children. The novel is clearly in sympathy not only with its protagonist, but also with attempts to contest the medical monopoly on the subject, and to remove the topic of abused children from the authority of medical discourse. The novel does not turn Francie's story into a case history. If Francie is an abuse victim who is desperately trying to ignore this reality, the novel asserts his right to do so. The fact that the narration in the novel is consistently tied to Francie gives him the opportunity to establish his alternative truth – a truth not contingent on the socio-medical diagnosis of various types of abuse, but on Francie's needs and desires. After all, Francie was committed to psychiatric care after murdering Mrs. Nugent, and whether he spent "twenty or thirty or forty years" there, the time does not seem to have made any difference to his outlook on himself and his past. At the end of his story, on the final pages of the novel, while we see Francie treating the doctor quite like he formerly treated the priests, he seems to find (or to hallucinate) a friend with whom he can continue to live his own version of his identity – one that cannot be translated into the terms of institutions, be they religious, legal or medical. As Francie walks away, with his friend, into an unspecified alternative version of himself, "him with his bony

arse clicking and me with the tears streaming down my face" (215), he even defies the benevolently concerned and comprehending reader to follow him.

### **Gathering the Evidence, Gathering Oneself: Anne Enright's *The Gathering***

Veronica, the narrator-protagonist in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), may be said to set up her own one-person commission to enquire into child abuse. In contrast to the Ryan commission, however, she does not hear any witnesses. In fact, she herself is – most likely – a witness rather than the immediate victim of the abuse. All the evidence she has to review, apart from her own unreliable memory, is "rent books" covering the period from 1937 to 1975 in which her grandmother recorded the payments and correspondence relating to her landlord, Lambert Nugent (217).

At 39, Veronica is deeply disturbed by the situation in her family, both her own new family and her original family. She feels unable to answer to the responsibilities demanded by her husband Tom and her two children. She is troubled by the self-effacing absence of her mother, the idiosyncrasies and lack of communication with her numerous brothers and sisters, the secrets. Above all, she is deeply troubled by the recent suicide – well prepared and planned, as it turns out – of her brother Liam who drowned himself in the sea at Brighton at the age of 40. While Liam spent most of his adult life in England and returned to Dublin only for rare visits, he was her closest ally during their childhood and adolescence.

In spite of this long youthful closeness, however, they never referred to the issue to which Veronica now gives decisive significance as the cause of Liam's suicide and which she seems unable to address directly until well into the second half of the novel. What precisely happened between Liam and a regular family visitor at her grandmother Ada's house where they were staying for a lengthy period when they were aged eight and nine years respectively?

Up to this point in the novel, Veronica has been attending to the practical business of bringing Liam's body home and making arrangements for the funeral and wake – the "gathering" of her large family which is described in chapters 30 and 31. After the wake, as the reader already knows because the narration is not chronological, Veronica is wholly preoccupied with trying to remember, reconstruct or imagine the vital events in the family past, and wholly unable to fulfil either her role as a mother or continue to answer Tom's sexual needs. Instead, she sleeps during the day and stays up at night, drinking, writing, sometimes wandering through the house or driving around the streets.

Veronica goes about her self-set task in a rather roundabout fashion. Her earliest effort in reconstruction is in fact characterised by herself as an elaborate "romantic" fantasy (13). Her goal is to "tell Liam's story" by constructing the relationship between her grandmother Ada Spillane, and Lambert Nugent, who Veronica thinks had been a friend of her grandfather's and had been drawn to her grandmother by a deep and unfulfilled love which continued over decades. It takes Veronica until chapter 22 to realise that romantic reconstruction is not leading anywhere, and to remember, or at

least to write down, the situation she witnessed: "It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine", she declares, and proceeds to narrate as follows:

There was a terrible boredom about the house [...] On this particular day I was variously bored on the stairs, or at the dining-room table, or in the hall, before I got bored again and decided to go into the good room.

What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door. It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man's member, set down mysteriously on the ground in front of him, but a shocked (of course he was shocked, I had opened the door) boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy's bare forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. [...] They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam. (143-144)

Methodically, Veronica goes on to consider what she can gather about the subjectivities of both participants. She does remain highly distrustful of the accuracy of her own memory:

[...] Mr Nugent is leaning back slightly, his hands are set square on either knee. I think it may be a false memory, because there is a terrible tangle of things that I have to fight through to get to it, in my head. And also because it is unbearable. [...]

I don't know why his pleasure should be the most terrible thing in the room for me. [...] It is the struggle on Lamb Nugent's face that is unbearable, between the man who does not approve of this pleasure, and the one who is weak to it. (144)

Liam's subjectivity remains even more inaccessible, although Veronica tries:

There is also the pleasure of the boy to consider. There is also the question of who he hated, or who he loved. [...]

He was terrified.

And before the scene became clear to me, I remember thinking, *So that's what the secret is*. The thing in a man's trousers – this is what it does when he is angry; it grows into the shape of a miserable child. (145-146)

It is only after these musings that Veronica's own presence registers:

I think, often, of Nugent looking at me when he realises I am at the door. The boy's hand (surely it was moving) has stopped, and Nugent, leaning back from his difficult pleasure, takes a moment to notice this. [...]

'Would you ever get out of that,' he says, and when Liam takes his poor hand out of the man's flies I feel that I have spoiled it for all concerned. (146)

With this realisation comes also a reversion to Veronica's own perspective – "I closed the door and ran [...] upstairs" (146) – which is, remarkably, referred and mediated instantly through the perspective of her daughters: "I look at my own children and I think you know everything at eight. But maybe I am wrong. You know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you, sealed up, in a way you have to cut yourself open to find" (147). At first sight then, the representation of sexual abuse in *The Gathering* has a tantalising aspect. The revelation which has been long anticipated and long deferred turns out to be unreliable, and is taken back in all essential aspects almost as soon as it is made.

The experience of child abuse, and the memory of it, are ultimately unavailable. The ‘abuse’ of Liam is never narrated or reflected from Liam’s perspective. The link between Liam’s recent suicide and the childhood incidence of abuse is entirely of the narrator’s construction. No other facts about the frequency or circumstances of this sexual contact become known, no causality or connection is established or suggested.

Instead, what happens is that the clearly stated memories of Veronica are becoming doubtful and partly displaced by others, whose claim to factual accuracy is equally tenuous (cf. Schwall 595-596). “I remembered a picture”, Veronica records ten chapters later:

It is a picture in my head of Ada standing at the door of the good room [...]  
I am eight.

[...] on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand.

But it is a very strange picture. It is made up of the words that say it. I think of the ‘eye’ of his penis, and it is pressing against my own eye. [...]

This comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things, and I can not tell if it is true. Or I can not tell if it is real. (221-222)

Seen purely in terms of writing and rewriting, Veronica is rewriting the abuse scene, this time with herself as the victim and her grandmother as the – none too sympathetic – witness. And a further rewriting shifts the setting from the “good room” of her grandmother’s house to the garage:

Whatever happened to Liam did not take place in Ada’s good room – no matter what picture I have in my head. Nugent would not have been so stupid. The abuse happened in the garage, among the cars and bits of engine that Liam loved. And Nugent was horrible to my brother in ordinary ways, too, out there. (223)

Of course, in the fictional world narrated by Veronica, these scenes are intended to be more than rewritings. They are meant to be accurate representations of scenes, events and actions remembered. But the more Veronica tries to reassure herself by stating what is certain and what is doubtful, the less she is able to hold the two categories apart. This becomes clear when she tries to state “the things that I do, actually know” and finds that certainty gives way to probability: “I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent” (224). It becomes clear, too, when she reviews “the things I don’t know”, which list includes the possibility “that I was touched by Lambert Nugent” and leads to a striking realisation:

In short, I know nothing else about Lambert Nugent; who he was and how Ada met him; what he did, or did not do.

I know he could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still – that we did not need to be damaged by him in order to be damaged. (224)

With this final realisation – “that we did not need to be damaged by him in order to be damaged” – the novel offers a ‘symptomatic’ perspective on child abuse. As in *The Butcher Boy* it is the overall conditions under which these children are growing up,

which are damaging to them. It may not then be possible to reconstruct the detailed facts of the abuse that occurred, or indeed the forms and channels through which traditions of abuse are handed on and continued in families, but the damaging effect of having grown up under such conditions is unmistakeable. This declaration of her ultimate ignorance of matters to whose recovery she had before attributed maximum explanatory power allows Veronica to let go of her self-chosen project of recovering the lost or repressed memory of Liam's sexual abuse. While it still seemed that this information was irrecoverable but all important, she had decided to leave her old life behind, she had flown to Gatwick with the intention of travelling on to Paris or Spain. In the last chapter – whose number, 39, matches her age – she realises that there is nothing to run away from: "I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here", she decides, "I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all" (260).

What are we to make of Veronica's decision to abandon the project which has occupied her for so much of the book, and for so many months, and to return to the life, the husband and the family, which she had declared she could no longer bear?

Perhaps the best way to understand this move is by way of looking at the motives which lead Veronica to undertake her project in the first place. There appears to be a twofold, and not entirely congruent, motivation behind Veronica's intense preoccupation with what happened to Liam. On the one hand, there is her sense of guilt for abandoning her favourite brother. But on the other hand, and equally decisive, there is the public and media attention which the topic of child abuse has received in the 1990s.

[...] the look in Liam's eye was the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what has happened to you, and what you carry round as a result of it. Even your sister – your saviour in a way, the girl who stands in the light of the hall – even she does not hold or remember the thing she saw. Because, by that stage, I think I had forgotten entirely.

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too. (172-173)

In relation to *The Butcher Boy*, *The Gathering* thus corresponds to a later phase of the discursive history of child abuse in Ireland. While McCabe's novel anticipates – one might almost say: inaugurates – the new and open public debate about the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in Catholic institutions, by treating the issue as self-evident, as 'only to be expected', *The Gathering* is set against the background of a pervasive media presence of the topic. This media presence combines with the protagonist's belated sense of guilt for leaving her brother alone with his painful experience. At the same time, however, Veronica's effort to recover the memory of the abuse that happened proves ultimately ineffectual. The protagonist saves herself in the end not by remembering clearly, speaking out loudly and putting things right, but

by leaving the past to itself, entrusting an older brother with the responsibility of relaying the information to the rest of the family, and deciding to get on with her life.

Enright turns her back on the explicitness, which was an innovation in the early 1990s, and returns to Joycean narrative techniques of indirection and suggestion, but she does so in a way that cannot be construed as a 'backlash', a plea for an end to disclosures about past or present sexual abuse. Rather, Enright points to a way out of an unproductive fixation on past abuses that would stand in the way of moving on and leaving the patterns of abuse behind, once one has sought to look at them, and perhaps to communicate them. Veronica's eventual, even belated engagement with the abuse of her brother and her subsequent abandonment of the quest for the truth as fruitless and not for her, thus do not stand in contradiction to each other. The ability to let go and move on is the hard earned prize for the intensive search for the unspoken truths of abuse in the Hegarty family. Or in other words: the value of Veronica's search for truth does not lie in the discovery of the ultimate truth – that turns out to be impossible – but in the acquisition of the ability to move beyond a past occurrence whose unaddressed existence had threatened to destroy her life and her family.

None of the three authors thus presents a simplistic programme for the handling of abuse in society. Neither do any of them propose that society should go on to ignore, or should return to ignoring the existence of abuse and the many forms which it may take. But above all, the texts do not aim to participate directly in a public debate about the existence of abuse in society. Instead, they narratively construct the confused – and potentially abused – child as a central symbolic figure of the contemporary condition of Ireland (and in this respect, they offer extreme realisations of a narrative pattern which leading critics have recently identified as characteristic of Irish fiction and proposed for further exploration [cf. O'Toole, "Why"; and Fogarty]). Finally, in ways that Ian Hacking could be expected to welcome, the three narrative fictions determinedly disregard or contest any medical monopoly on the diagnosis and treatment either of the abusers or their victims. This becomes most palpable, perhaps, at the end of *The Butcher Boy* when Francie simply walks away from the medical institution which has diagnosed and confined him for decades without being able to reach him or offer support. If abuse and the abused children are made to function as symbolic figures, they invariably stand not for a medical condition, but for a social condition, enabling and even inviting a critical reflection on the contemporary social modes of handling the topic of abuse.

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**NARRATING IRELAND ACROSS THE GENRES,  
ON THE STAGE AND IN POETRY**



## PUZZLING NARRATIVE IDENTITIES AND THE ETHICS OF THE LITERARY IMAGINATION IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S 'DUNNE SERIES'

Katharina Rennhak (Wuppertal)

In an interview conducted in 1991 Barry explained that when he returned to Dublin in 1985 after a couple of years abroad, "he felt that 'none of the available identities of Irishness seemed to fit', and so he decided, 'Since I was now to be an Irishman, it seemed I would have to make myself up as I went along'" (Llewellyn-Jones). Obviously, Barry's works build on the widespread postmodernist assumption that national identities are constructed. Like many other contemporary writers he contributes to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century project of "bringing Ireland out of an antiquated nationalism inherited from the Cultural Revival" (Gibbons 104-105) by "using an engagement with Ireland's past to identify resources for reimagining and reinventing a different Ireland of the future" (Kirby, Gibbons, and Cronin 2).<sup>1</sup>

This "Ireland of the future" strives to be more inclusive and more dialogic than earlier dominant versions of Irishness. Emphasising that the construction of 'Irishness' is and always has been contentious, Barry elaborates in an article in *The Guardian*:

It's difficult to say what an Irish person is. That's what we've spent the century since independence doing – looking for shared tradition, then corrupting it, then fighting about the corrupting of it. Dev's idea was that we were all rural, Catholic, poor: he tried to shoehorn a country together, but it was a country of very different people, and if you were Protestant, wealthy or middle class you somehow weren't "Irish", and that's what a good deal of the fighting's been about. (Ferguson)

As this article aims to demonstrate Barry not only opposes traditional notions of what it means to be Irish with a more inclusive concept of Irishness, he also counters Éamon de Valera's ("Dev's") method of constructing Irish identity. Instead of "shoehorn[ing] a country together" he sets out to "make myself up as I go along", as he puts it in the interview quoted above, which can be assumed to mean 'as I go along writing'. In his play *Dallas Sweetman* (2008) the eponymous hero, an Irish servant to Lucius Lysaght, a Catholic English landowner in late sixteenth-century Elizabethan-era Ireland, calls "Ireland, that puzzle which cannot be puzzled out" (58) and points to the endless and open process of narrating and performing inclusive national identities, which is implicitly contrasted to the traditional myths of an exclusively essentialist Irish identity.

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1 On Barry's "attempt at re-imagining ourselves, not as ourselves alone, sinn féin amháin, but ourselves in our plural difference" see Grene, *Politics* 242-243 and 251. Meche uses the term "restaging Ireland" and comments on the "abiding interest in challenging those narratives from which Irishness itself originates" (464). In this article I set out to probe into the mechanisms of *renarrating* Irish identities.

[...] I have seen great goodness on the earth of Ireland, and that is no little thing. I saw Lucius Lysaght, the finest of Catholics, deal in the world with grace. And his daughter Lucinda, peerless Protestant, show her light to the wondering world.

And though I am small, and dark, and of no import, I gauge the width of my own self by these things.

Saying, these matters I saw for myself on the earth, these matters I witnessed, and puzzled for myself.

In Ireland, that puzzle which cannot be puzzled out – and may God commend it. (58)

The term ‘Puzzling Ireland’ in the title of this article refers to the metaphor of Ireland as it is established in Dallas Sweetman’s words. It encapsulates the idea that many different pieces form one coherent image, yet an image that, according to Dallas Sweetman, can never be finalised and is accordingly defined by the perpetual process of its construction. As a consequence, Ireland is puzzling, enigmatic, never fully to be grasped. Dallas Sweetman, however, also holds that, nevertheless, individuals like himself, a low-born Irishman, who deems himself rather insignificant (“small, and dark, and of no import”), more or less actively participate in the process of puzzling. Dallas, who is one of the rather few self-reflexive agents in Barry’s œuvre, reports what he “witnessed” and is certainly confused by what happens to him and his master’s family; but he also “puzzle[s] matters] for himself” or, in my reading of this metaphor, pieces together his own narrative, trying to make sense of his “own self” by understanding it in the context of the lives of others whose stories he integrates into his own. ‘Puzzling Ireland’ then points to the conjunctions of personal, communal and national identity, of individual life-stories as well as of the conjunction of these personal stories with narratives about the course of Irish history. In all those stories different identity categories intersect as they negotiate, for example, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants, between farmers and landlords, between the lower, the middle and the upper classes, between men and women, or between the young and the old.

These conjunctions are central to Sebastian Barry’s narrative of Ireland, in particular, and to the process of performing a narrative identity (in the sense of Ricœur’s post-modernist hermeneutics) by telling a more or less coherent story about oneself and/ as another, in general. Paul Ricœur suggests that “the history of a life [...] is equated [to] the identity of a character” (147) or as Barry has his character put it in his poetic adaptation of Chaucer’s “The Widow of Bath”: “I am the ballad of myself” (*Rhetorical* 23). Philosophers and sociologists working with the concept of narrative identity have emphasised that every individual’s story is always inevitably interrelated with those of others. Hardly any story is dedicated exclusively to a single self, for even autobiographical tales must incorporate the stories of others (see e.g. Ricœur, *Oneself*; Kraus).<sup>2</sup> In addition, stories are inevitably embedded into a certain narrative context and/or communicative situation that is at least partially defined by others, by culturally

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2 Cf. Anna Hanrahan’s contribution to this volume.

and historically specific institutions and contexts, and the success of a life-story is dependent on its favourable reception by others.

The integration of biographies and histories, of the personal and the collective, finds a distinctive form in Sebastian Barry's œuvre. Critics have repeatedly noticed that Barry's work is characterised by two closely related features. Firstly, "the individuals [he fictionalises] are members of his own family" (Roche 147-148). Secondly, Roche states, it "is by now something of a critical truism that Sebastian Barry [...] highlight[s] figures whose lives do not fit into the accepted grand narrative of Irish history [...] because they had in some significant way transgressed the taboos of Catholic Nationalist Ireland and so were consigned to oblivion" (147-148). Another distinctive feature of Barry's work is that he narrates individual members of his marginalised Irish family into the history of the nation by writing across the genres. Barry writes poetry, plays and novels, criss-crossing some genre conventions and adapting others in order to make them fit the requirement of his narrative Irish puzzle.

This article analyses Barry's renegotiation of genre conventions in his 'puzzling œuvre' in order to address afresh the most disturbing – or enormously puzzling – feature of his work: in Barry's fictional Irish cosmos history is more often than not conceptualised as an all-powerful abstract force. History rules the fate of Barry's usually naïve and rather helpless characters who are thus bereft of personal agency and, as it seems to some critics, exonerated of any responsibility for their actions. Especially the central characters of his novels can neither fully understand nor decisively influence the ways of History. Like the eponymous protagonist of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, they are "only the flotsam of its [politics'] minor storms" (224) and "blown off the road of life by history's hungry breezes" (284).

Judging by the international success of Barry's fiction, it seems that large parts of the general readership is appreciative of his attempt to rewrite into the Irish narrative outsiders who are constructed as powerless in the face of politics and history. Scholarly readers, however, tend to find the naivety and helplessness of many of Barry's protagonists morally and politically dubious. Cullingford complains in her analysis of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* that "Eneas is constructed as a victim, not as a political agent" (133).<sup>3</sup> In his article on "The Politics of Pity in Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*", Liam Harte, in a similar vein, criticises what he considers Barry's indulgence "in a kind of rhetorical excess, sentimentalising and sanctifying [the] benighted young men" who fought in World War I in their impotence and innocence

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3 Cullingford's critique of the "schematic political allegory of the plot" (138) which pits a naïve Catholic Royalist victim against a bedevilled IRA gunman in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* cannot be dismissed easily if one singles out this novel for an analysis of its politics. In what follows, it should become clear, however, that the larger picture of Barry's concept of Irish identity turns out ideologically less schematic, if one regards *The Whereabouts* as just one piece, providing the perspective of just one Irish individual, of the much larger literary puzzle that Barry is still in the process of putting together.

(111).<sup>4</sup> My own reflections on Barry's literary universe also take the unease with a fatalistic concept of an all-powerful history as its starting point. Rather than denigrating Barry's fictional cosmos as an example of a "poetics of [...] liberal humanist ideology" (Harte 111), however, I will attempt to frame his literary puzzle as an interesting and potentially beneficial intervention in the contemporary political discourse on (personal and national) identity politics. I am as puzzled as other critics are by Barry's tendency to conceptualise politics and history as invincible. However, the labelling of Barry as a writer who is on a single-minded and personally motivated anti-nationalist mission (see Cullingford) or as a misguided neo-liberal (see Harte) also fail to convince me. While definitions of neo-liberalism undoubtedly are a matter of contention, one of the abiding and defining characteristics of this ideology is, most certainly, the idea of the individual subject as free agent and not as fully determined by historical or social forces. It is thus not applicable to most Barry characters.

Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's concept of the literary imagination, which she establishes as a vital instrument of the ethics that (ideally) distinguish public discourses in democratic societies, I would like to suggest that by renegotiating and breaking with some fundamental genre conventions of the realist novel while still situating his own fiction squarely within this genre tradition, Barry's literary puzzle can be regarded as an aesthetically more radically innovative and politically more differentiated intervention in the cultural discourse of national identity constructions in today's Ireland than has been recognised. According to Nussbaum, the literary imagination counters "the utilitarian rational-choice models that are in use today" and that are based on the four principles of "commensurability, aggregation, maximizing, and exogenous preferences" (14). The literary imagination succeeds in doing so by virtue of

its commitment to the separateness of persons and to the irreducibility of quality to quantity; its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; [and] its commitment to describe the events of life [...] from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives. (32)

Most importantly, in the tradition of "Adam Smith's conception of the judicious spectator" (72), Nussbaum claims that literature functions as a "source of moral guidance" (75) because the reading process forges a readership which learns to balance "sympathetic identification with [...] spectatorial rationality" or "empathetic participation and external assessment" (73). In this context, Nussbaum also distinguishes the political content of a novel that may be dubious or unconvincing from the still potentially positive moral and political effect of the reading experience. My aim in what follows will be to demonstrate how Barry's innovative narrative strategy of puzzling Ireland serves to enact those features identified by Nussbaum as contributing to the ethics of

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4 Constructing some formal and rhetorical analogies and an ideological unity between the earlier Barry texts analysed by Cullingford and the admittedly "less ideologically programmatic" *A Long Long Way* (111), Harte also sees the latter work marred by "a set of rhetorical strategies that, by placing undue emphasis on the cultivation of sympathy, leads to simplifying acts of representational selectivity" (112).

a democratic discourse. I propose, in addition, to interpret Barry's adaptation of certain genre conventions as a means to envisioning a world that is even less indebted to the aesthetics and ideology of the Victorian realist novel and (with it) the neo-liberal tradition than Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* itself is.

### **Individual Stories, Intertwined Plots of Self and Other, and the Ethics of Re-constructing Irish Identity**

A particularly interesting feature of Barry's work is the fact that he writes his characters' stories across different works, often spanning different genres. Quantitatively most impressive to date is the extension of the Dunne family across Barry's poems, plays, and, most extensively, his novels.<sup>5</sup> The eponymous hero of Barry's first major theatrical success, *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), is based on the life of Barry's great-grandfather, Thomas Dunne, Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, a Catholic who cannot rise any higher in the colonial hierarchy and is a fierce admirer of Queen Victoria. Responsible for the death of four people during the Dublin lock-out of 1913 and denounced as a traitor after independence, he ends his days as a deluded, marginalised outcast in a county-home in Wicklow. Of Thomas Dunne's four children, three reappear as the main protagonists respectively of three novels: *Annie Dunne* (2002), *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *On Canaan's Side* (2011). In addition, Barry's aunt Annie figures in a number of poems and her world is at the centre of attention of "Kelsha Yard, 1959", the poem which structurally forms the heart of the collection *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* (1989).<sup>6</sup>

In one of the first analyses of *The Steward of Christendom*, Grene has argued that "It is the otherness of [a Catholic loyalist's] experience written out of history by Catholic nationalist consciousness which [...] Barry's play[] go[es] out to recuperate" (*Politics* 246). After the publication of several additional narratives which focus on other members of the Dunne family, it has become obvious, however, that taken together Barry's texts avoid the rather stark binary opposition of self and other that is still implicit in Barry's play (and, inevitably, in Grene's and Cullingford's analyses thereof). While *The Steward of Christendom* also begins to point to a diversity of interests and identities within Ireland, its main plot pits an eminent individual outsider, Thomas Dunne, against the Catholic nationalist norm. Barry's narrative of Ireland evolves in complexity, however, as each story about yet another member of the family treats

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5 After the publication of Barry's latest novel, *The Temporary Gentleman* (2014), which re-perspectivises the story also told in the play *Our Lady of Sligo* (1997) and forms a trilogy of novels with *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *The Secret Scripture*, the McNultys carry almost equal weight.

6 This article's focus on the Dunne-texts concentrates on Barry's novels, but will also take into consideration some aspects of *The Steward of Christendom* and "Kelsha Yard, 1959".

seriously the fate and psychology of yet another individual,<sup>7</sup> each of whom is marginalised by the dominant national ideology for different reasons. Each successive narrative thus contributes to the puzzle of a group identity of outsiders which is internally differentiated and much more multifaceted than *The Steward of Christendom* or *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* taken alone can possibly suggest. At the same time, Barry's Irishmen and Irishwomen, all of whom are "out of history" (Mahony), can be said to move incrementally closer to the centre of the dominant national narrative from one text to the next.

*The Steward of Christendom* still presents comparatively stark binary oppositions, not just because the play pits a Catholic unionist individual against Catholic nationalist Ireland. Thomas Dunne is, moreover, not just any Catholic loyalist; as the historical Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police he is responsible for the deaths of four people during the 1913 Dublin lock-out. As such he is, clearly, regarded as a (defeated) enemy by most of his contemporaries in post-Independence Ireland. Barry's choice of his own aunt and Thomas's daughter, Annie Dunne, as the main character of his first "Dunne"-novel is almost equally daring.<sup>8</sup> While Annie, unlike her father, is not personally responsible for political violence, she is another Catholic loyalist openly hostile to the de Valera government. Carrying her father's ideology with her into the rural Wicklow of the late 1950s, she complains that "children in school" are told "about those fierce gunmen, Collins and De Valera, those savage killers in their day that thought nothing of murdering each other and far less of killing the likes of my father" (95). She also disparages the Irish language as "that old language of gobdaws and cottagers" (156; see Phillips 238–239).

By setting *Annie Dunne* squarely in Kelshaw and focusing on the daily routine on aunt Sarah's farm, where Annie finds work and a rather precarious kind of home, Barry, indeed, participates in de Valera's narrative of Catholic rural Ireland, which the Taoiseach depicted in his famous radio broadcast on St Patrick's Day 1943, but with more than one decisive difference. *Annie Dunne* neither portrays de Valera's pastoral countryside as one "bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age" (de Valera 748), nor does Barry tell a story in the tradition of Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1937),<sup>9</sup> that focuses on a heroic male figure and his family who struggle to make a living on the hostile Atlantic coast.

7 Cf. Phillips who stresses that "Barry's central characters [are] portrayed [...] as unique individuals with their own flaws but with a very human need for love and affection" (235).

8 About his great-grandfather, Thomas Dunne, Barry stated: "I was in fear of it being discovered that I had such a relative [...]. He was [...] a demon, a dark force, a figure to bring you literary ruin" (*Steward* vii).

9 On de Valera's enthusiastic reception of Flaherty's ethnographic documentary see O'Brien 48–49.

Annie's story is rather set in the rural east, which is less sublime than the Irish West (in the literary imagination, at least), and concentrates on the uneventful and toilsome every-day life of an old spinster. Again, there is a fairly stark contrast between the dominant national narrative and Anne's life-story, between self and other, as Barry sets the elderly aunt, handicapped by a spinal defect and never having attracted a potential husband, in opposition to the post-Independence ideal of "comely maidens" (de Valera 748) and the rural patriarchal family. Barry's Annie, try as she might, is shown to fail to gain her own personal financial and emotional independence in a mid-century Ireland which is built on the same prevailing patriarchal structures that characterised her father's Catholic Royalist world whose protection she has lost (Phillips 240). Indeed, the traditional patriarchal family unit of father, mother and children is nowhere to be found in Annie's neighbourhood; and Annie and Sarah are fiercely envied for having the opportunity to care for their grand-niece and grand-nephew for a couple of weeks during the summer of 1959.

As Grene comments, in "*Annie Dunne* Barry leaves behind the macro-narrative of Irish history, to which the drama of *The Steward* was connected, for the micro-narratives of lives that fall outside the scope of history altogether. [...S]omeone like Annie Dunne was never in public history to be written out" ("Out of History" 170, 177). Moreover, unlike her father, this heroine is not an exceptional, eminent outsider-figure, but rather represents what is depicted in the novel as the larger social group of elderly, lonely women, who desperately struggle for a living in rural Ireland. Indeed, most farms in Barry's Wicklow house old women. Besides Annie and her cousin Sarah, there is another set of cousins living in Feddin farmhouse nearby: Winnie Dunne and "the rook-like shapes of Lizzie and May", her sisters, "wildish women, with their startling hair and rough clothes, the backs of Lizzie's hands torn into scabs and wounds by maybe barbed wire, by God knows what manly labour" (*Annie* 137). While Annie is grateful to Sarah and feels close to Winnie, with whom she proudly shares a respectable past and family history (e.g. 136), she despises the "cottier" Mary Callan, another lonely neighbour, whose family was "nipped and tucked" by a famine in 1872 and who is "said to be one hundred and two years old" (29; also see 73). Thus, on the one hand, Annie is established as an individual "who must bear [her pain] alone, [...] who ha[s] just one life in which to strive for happiness" (Nussbaum 29) and with whom the reader feels sympathy despite her snobbishness. On the other hand, she is one member of an internally differentiated larger group of unmarried Irishwomen who are all left behind in de Valera's rural Ireland and as such has the potential to activate the reader's rational judgement about the construction of national myths.

In *A Long, Long Way* and, especially *At Canaan's Side* Barry's choice of his main protagonists falls once more on characters neglected by the dominant national narrative who, even more obviously than Annie, represent larger groups of Irishmen and -women. Willie is a representative of the Irish soldiers who fought and died on the Western Front as members of the Royal British Army in World War I. As a member of the Irish diaspora in the U.S., Lilly Dunne, the youngest daughter of Thomas Dunne

and the narrator-protagonist of *On Canaan's Side*, represents an even larger group, namely all those Irish-Americans who emigrated from the homeland but still contribute vitally to the ongoing process of defining a (post-)national Irish identity. As Barry's œuvre grows, his outsider characters crowd in on the centre, as it were. In the process, what used to be the centre of the national Irish discourse, the Catholic Irish Republic as defined by Éamon de Valera, becomes increasingly fragile. As more and more Irishmen and -women are shown to have been at odds with the dominant twentieth-century version of Irish national identity, this monolithic Catholic and Republican Irishness, which the array of Barry characters resists and challenges, begins to appear increasingly stereotypical and hence less and less natural.

### Refashioning the National Tale Across the Genres

Quite obviously, Barry's narratives build on the traditional allegory of the family as nation or, vice versa, the nation as family, which has been a distinctive attribute of the Irish national tale ever since Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Barry, however, cleverly refashions the traditional genre by providing a different plot structure for his own extended national tale, one that must be pieced together from various stories that revolve around different individuals. Unlike his nineteenth-century predecessors, he does not write "allegories of love and marriage" (Connolly 88), which in the tradition of Owenson or Edgeworth inevitably construct plots that are driven by a desire for the union of two partners (lovers/nations) who begin their encounters as strangers or even enemies.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Barry takes as a given the basic family unit into which his characters are born – however tenuous this unit may be – and narrows in on the differences within this always already existing family. In other words, Barry's contemporary national tales do not write allegories of love and marriage, but stress the existential isolation of each individual whether within or apart from the family. His narratives reveal that each individual member of the (national) family encounters different hardships that depend on the geographical places into which life blows them and on the historical and social circumstances that shape their experience. If one looks across the full range of his works, Barry can be considered demonstrably to avoid the utilitarian strategies of commensurability and aggregation and practising instead that "deep respect for qualitative difference" which Martha Nussbaum deems characteristic of the literary imagination (45). Nussbaum's *desideratum* that "[p]ain and happiness are shown as things that belong to separate individuals [in the plural], who must bear them alone" (29), may not become obvious if one reads (or sees performed) only one of Barry's works, but grows more and more

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10 Connolly emphasises in her analysis of early nineteenth-century national tales that "[r]arely do these narratives endorse any 'single, self-identical' political future; rather, the 'double reading' that Sommer [in her *Foundational Fictions*] sees as characteristic of allegory serves to hold open the relationship between sexual and national stories" (*Cultural* 89). On Owenson's and Edgeworth's national allegories also see Rennhak 242-294.

powerful with addition of each new literary piece to the puzzle. Despite the diversity and divergence of personalities, careers and experiences, all men and women in the Barry cosmos are ultimately driven by the very same desire to each be recognised as a valid individual within his or her (real and allegorical) family, no single life is regarded as more precious or momentous and no pain more excruciating than that of another.

By focusing on the family into which one is born and which always already exists, Barry deemphasises the most influential literary tradition of the all-powerful romance plot to suggest that there is no escaping from the communal (family and national) past.<sup>11</sup> In order to build a home and a future for the individual outsiders which people Barry's Ireland it is not enough to fall in love with a stranger, already existing relationships have to be renegotiated if/when new ones are formed, conflicts must be resolved and a multitude of stories have to be connected and embedded in the potentially endless process of writing this twenty-first-century national allegory.

After the groundbreaking start of the Dunne series with *The Steward of Christendom*, a *King Lear* adaptation that revolves around a patriarch whose actions in the political and the domestic realm intersect with tragic consequences and that partly draws on and partly refashions the conventions of the Shakespearean and the Aristotelian tragedy, Barry continues to tell the story of the Dunne family in novels. This turn from drama to fiction signifies a quite decisive departure from the extraordinary individual with an overreaching hubris and insatiable desire for a transcendental signified befitting a tragic hero, to the common man who traditionally finds his literary home in the novel. According to Martha Nussbaum "[t]he novel has [...] a greater commitment to the moral relevance of following a life through all of its adventures in all of its concrete context [...]; an especially distinctive feature of the genre [being ...] its interest in the ordinary" (Nussbaum 32). *Annie Dunne* certainly takes this focus on the ordinary to extremes. As one disappointed reviewer scorned, "*Waiting for Godot* has been described as a play in which nothing happens, twice. *Annie Dunne* is a novel in which nothing happens many times" (Sweeney). Instead of constructing an exciting plot which hinges on momentous events, Barry graces the everyday routine on a Wicklow farm with the aesthetic lyricism so typical for his œuvre. Sarah, for example, wins a "delicious victory" when she who "has no knack for the butter" successfully churns the cream.

And this is a great moment, a moment of strange stiffness after long labour, and a releasing moment, and it is how I am sure the butterfly feels when at last it breaks from the discarded caterpillar, drying its wings and easily flying to become that graceful thing. And there is a grace in butter, how can I explain it – it is the colour we all worship, a simple, yellow gold. (125)

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11 I will later argue that some literary strategies employed by Barry also work towards including his audiences and readers into his imagined family by establishing them in the position of the "judicious spectator" as conceptualised by Adam Smith and re-deployed by Martha Nussbaum.

While the twenty short poems assembled under the title “*Kelsha Yard, 1959*”, at the heart of Barry’s poetry collection *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland*, concentrate on individual objects and snap-shot moments typical of life on the farm, the novel, eventless as it may seem, narratively emplots such details by giving them significance as the experiences of Annie (and Sarah), whose identity is constructed by them. To put it with Ricœur: “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told” (147-148).

In a characteristic scene of the novel a stubborn pony turns into a “perilous animal” and fierce enemy that may have “plotted [against Annie] for years, eyeing [her] with those evil eyes” (36), before it bolts and threatens to throw her and her niece and nephew into a ditch. Here, Barry gives an epic dimension to a rather unheroic minor adventure to stress its significance for the narrative of the elderly farmer. In addition, this scene about the trap accident, which ends happily thanks to Billy Kerr’s “epic efforts” (53) in stopping the animal and bringing Annie and the children safely home, also radically adapts one of the conventions of the courtship novel so as to better fit it into Barry’s contemporary national tale that de-emphasises heterosexual love and marriage plots. After all, Billy Kerr, the elderly farmhand of the Dunnes of Feddin, is not the dashing hero who rescues the heroine, first from a carriage accident and later on from spinsterhood. On the contrary, his plans to marry Sarah threaten to expel Annie from her new home.<sup>12</sup>

The second novel in the ‘Dunne series’, *A Long Long Way*, could be said to continue the piecing together of Barry’s allegorical national puzzle by integrating features of *The Steward of Christendom* and *Annie Dunne*. With its protagonist who fights and dies in the Royal British Army during World War I, it returns to the macro-narrative of Irish history and, like *The Steward*, contributes to an ongoing historical controversy.<sup>13</sup> Like *Annie Dunne*, however, it writes this history ‘from below’. Willie’s involvement in the political world differs from his father’s in so far as he is not a high-ranking officer but an ordinary recruit in the service of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. In literary terms, he is the individualised type of an innocent naïf (Mahony) rather than a multifaceted tragic figure. For an analysis of the national allegory as envisioned by Barry, it is as important, however, to notice the similarities in the literary construction of father and son as to comment on their differences. Like his father, who doubts that his son will be able to contribute his share to the Empire because “he would never reach six feet,

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12 While the heroine is convinced that Billy just wants to egotistically better his own social position by a marriage with Sarah, the novel allows Nussbaum’s reader as judicious spectator (see below) to see in this old, impecunious men’s wooing of Sarah yet another legitimate desire to find a home.

13 In *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* Foster speaks of “a policy of intentional amnesia about the extent of Irish commitment to the war effort before 1916” (472; also qtd. in Grene, *Politics* 243). More recently, Keith Jeffrey has contested the ruling “myth of ‘national amnesia’ regarding Ireland’s engagement with the Great War” (256), which he sees as a construction of Irish revisionist historiographers; also see Phillips (241).

the regulation height for a recruit" in the Dublin Metropolitan Police, Willie is driven by the idea to serve. When World War I breaks out he is "proud to [...] be signed up, his height never in question. For if he could not be a policeman, he could be a soldier" (15).

In terms of the construction of narrative space, it is noteworthy that the scope of the realm which the loyal servant Willie must defend has immensely widened from one generation of Dunne men to the next. While his grandfather managed the affairs of Humewood Castle, an old Wicklow estate, and his father's responsibility as head of the Dublin Metropolitan Police was to secure law and order in the Irish capital, Willie and his comrades are called to defend the whole world against evil influences. This, of course, turns out to be an impossible task. The setting of World War I thus, eventually, serves to debunk the ideology of the British monarchy "as the perfecter", and his loyal servants as "steward[s] of Christendom" (*Steward* 16), in particular, and "exposes the cruel myths of heroic warfare and patriotic sacrifice" (Harte 110), in general, as it demonstrates how "all those boys of Europe born in those times, and thereabouts those times, Russian, French, Belgian, Serbian, Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, Italian, Prussian, German, Austrian, Turkish – and Canadian, Australian, American, Zulu, Gurkha, Cossack, and all the rest [...were] flung on the mighty scrap-heap of souls" (*Long Long Way* 4). "[So] many [souls] were expended freely, and as if weightless. For a king, an empire, and a promised country" (290), we read Willie think (or the narrative voice comment?)<sup>14</sup> shortly before his death – in a phrase that features John Redmond's belief that an Irish involvement in the British army would guarantee the implementation of the Home Rule Bill.<sup>15</sup> As Harte shows, Barry uses the setting of World War I to prove his theory of a multifaceted and internally differentiated Irish national identity. Willie "encounters volunteers from many different parts of Ireland who harbour varying degrees of fealty to crown and shamrock" and "give voice to [...] varied ideological positions" (109). They include the Catholic loyalist Willie, the Redmondite nationalist Jesse Kirwan or Captain George Pasley, descendant of landed Wicklow Protestants and probably a "Church of Ireland m[a]n" (51).

With regard to the representation of the Irish soldiers, there are without doubt some passages and tropes – for instance the "associations" of this novel's main protagonist with "a childlike neediness and vulnerability that 'little Willie' exhibits throughout" (Harte 112) – that are open to the charge of sentimentalising the Irish soldiers' pain and suffering (Harte 106).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, a stylistic device that contributes to the senti-

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14 More on Barry's experiments with narrative perspective below.

15 For a concise summary of the historical contexts of *A Long Long Way* see Harte 107–108.

16 Harte bases his criticism of sentimental strategies in *A Long Long Way* on Jefferson's definition of the sentimental. "Jefferson argues that what chiefly distinguishes sentimental works is 'their emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' object. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost inevit-

mentalising effect is the extended lamb /shepherd /wolf metaphor. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that in Barry's Irish narrative of World War I all of "King George's lambs" (54; also see 274) – even the most naïve and innocent ones – are not only being slaughtered and "expended freely" (290), but also in danger of being morally corrupted by a war which dehumanises everyone involved. Within the European slaughter house of the early twentieth century the binary of the lamb-wolf metaphor, Barry's novel emphasises, does not hold (see e.g. 289, 291). This corruption of the innocent soldier is most drastically conveyed when Willie's comrade Pete O'Hara participates in a gang rape that kills a Belgian woman. "Could the soul hold good, could the heart?", Willie (or the narrative voice?) asks himself, in a world where "women like that woman, and old men and their women, and the children of Belgium [were] all swallowed up in the mouth of war. [...] Was there no friendly army left upon the unkind earth?" (169)

It is not always possible to draw a clear line between a simplifying and politically suspect sentimentalism (also criticised by Martha Nussbaum [33]) and the narrative strategies that trigger the kind of sensibility which characterises the judicious spectator as conceptualised by Adam Smith and Martha Nussbaum. The fact that in Barry's national allegory the internal differentiation of the Irish nation is mirrored within the Dunne family contributes appreciably to toning down some of the sentimentalities that *A Long Long Way* may feature, and to complicating the ideological binaries that are constructed elsewhere in the 'Dunne series'. After all, the central conflict in *A Long Long Way* is yet another piece in the Barry puzzle that eschews the conventions of the political allegory as established in Sydney Owenson's national tales and of the historical novel à la Walter Scott. Barry's war novel avoids the melodramatic oppositions between the loyalist and the rebel, the conservative and the progressive, the unionist and the republican, that find resolution at the end of the traditional courtship plot.<sup>17</sup> Instead it focuses on the ideological fissures that run right through the core family of Irish misfits. By pursuing the generational conflict between father and son who both in their individual ways struggle to defend (in the father's case) or find and define (in the son's case) their precarious political and private loyalties, the novel points to the differences within. These intersecting narratives, of a father who admires the British Queen as "the flower and perfecter of Christendom" (*Steward* 250) and of his son who begins to doubt his own loyalty to the British Empire, do not melodramatically pit a likeable protagonist against an abominable or

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ably involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object. And it is a simplification of an overtly moral significance. The simplistic appraisal necessary to sentimentality is also a direct impairment to the moral vision taken of its objects. [...]'" (Harte 112).

17 Phillips also notes that Barry's "novel as a whole [confronts] the simpl[e] binary of the nationalist who refused to fight for the Empire on the one hand and the opponent of nationalism who fought loyally for the Empire on the other. Willie is no nationalist but by the end of the novel he has no loyalty to the Empire or to any cause" (242).

misled antagonist, but rather seek "to purchase the reader's sympathy and pity" (Harte 106) for both characters, to each of whom Barry dedicates a narrative that constructs an individual Irish identity.

The conflict within the Dunne family is accompanied by a refashioning of the dominant Irish master-narrative on the plot level. The Easter Rising, which in the historiography of the Irish Republic has long been regarded as the historical moment in which the nation was born,<sup>18</sup> is of central importance in Barry's *A Long Long Way*. Home on leave, the puzzled protagonist witnesses the Dublin rebellion which renders him an enemy of his own people. This experience significantly contributes to Willie's ambivalence about his involvement in World War I and severely exacerbates the father/son conflict.<sup>19</sup> It is thus the confluence of the Great War and the Rising, together with Willie's inner conflict rooted in his love and friendship for his comrades in the British Army and his father on the one hand and his sympathy and pity for the young Dubliners who give their lives in the fight for Irish independence on the other, which defines the plot of *A Long Long Way*.

However, Barry not only reorganises traditional binaries by contextualising the Easter Rising with the war experience of Irish soldiers fighting in the 16th (Irish) Division; going further, while still assigning due significance to the Easter Rising, he divests the historical event of its momentous, near-mythological importance and centrality by granting it neither the initial, nor the middle, nor the final position in his plotline. In *A Long Long Way* the Easter Rising is neither constructed as origin, as climax nor as final resolution. Willie's experience of the Rising occurs somewhere in the first half of the novel. This insignificant position within the plot structure deemphasises the historical event as such. Instead the novel puts the life of the representative son and soldier squarely in the centre of the narrative attention.

Last but not least, even though Willie and many of the other characters in Barry's puzzle are represented as helpless children, innocent naïfs or powerless, dependent creatures and even though *A Long Long Way* at times verges on sentimentalism, the events demonstrate effectively that their actions do invariably have consequences for the communities to which they belong. Barry does not completely relinquish the idea of human agency, but like other late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century authors (from Virginia Woolf to Samuel Beckett and Salman Rushdie), philosophers and

18 See, e.g., Michael McNally. *Easter Rising 1916: Birth of the Irish Republic*. Oxford: Osprey, 2007.

19 As Phillips summarises, "The novel's particularly Irish dimension is provided by Willie's encounter with the Easter Rising. [...] he meets] a young rebel whose death he witnesses on the streets of Dublin. [...] having witnessed the death of so many of his fellow Irishmen in the war [...] the experience leads him to write a fatal letter to his father in which he says in relation to the execution of the rebels, 'I wish they had not seen fit to shoot them. It doesn't feel right somehow' [139]. [...] His father makes his displeasure clear and Willie meets his death before he receives his father's letter of reconciliation" (243).

political theorists (from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben), he reconceptualises it. The audience/readership, as judicious spectators, of Barry's Irish puzzle are invited to leave behind the idea of the enlightened self-made man firmly associated with the novel and the Robinson Crusoe-figure which single-handedly builds a colonial empire from scratch. Firmly situating himself in the realist tradition, Barry nevertheless experiments with narrative techniques that allow him to construct a new kind of (narrative) subjectivity.

While many components of Martha Nussbaum's concept of poetic justice can be applied to Barry's work, Nussbaum herself is firmly indebted to the tradition of the novel which features sovereign subjects who have the "ability [...] to choose the shape of [their] life as separate centers of agency" (29) and, thus, she perpetuates the idea of (characters and readers alike as) "social agents responsible for making a world" (31). Barry's Irish puzzle, in contrast, is puzzling because he remains sceptical towards the enlightened and neo-liberal idea of the autonomous and sovereign subject, while at the same time his texts (just like the realist Victorian novels Martha Nussbaum takes as her standard) enlist the reader's sympathy for all those resurrected, marginalised individuals to each of whom he dedicates their very own narrative. With affinities to Lauren Berlant's concept of the subject, for example, Barry's novels compel us to "recast some taxonomies of causality, subjectivity, and life-making embedded in normative notions of agency [...] to counter the moral science of [neoliberal] [...] politics, which links the political administration of life to a melodrama of the care of the monadic self" (99). Like Berlant he invites his readers "to think about agency and personhood not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation of self-fashioning" (99). In Barry's Irish puzzle, the individual may have little power to change the course of history, but it can and invariably does contribute to shaping the life of his community. Characters who are less interested in self-reflexively defining and actively performing their identities are moreover shown to be surprisingly successful at times in positively shaping their personal and group identities.

Taking the next novel of the Dunne series, for example, we learn that Willie's actions made a difference, and that he was more than a slaughtered lamb or a lost soul, and that he persists in the memory of those who knew him. Tadg Bere, "a friend and fellow private in the platoon", comes straight to the Dunes after his return to Ireland and helps Willie's sister Lilly to "underst[and] that Willie had been valued in the army, loved indeed" (34). What is stressed in this scene is the value of ordinary, not very exceptional, let alone heroic deeds of friendship and family love, that can unfold against all the (unsentimental) odds of generational conflicts and adversarial political factions.

'The thing about Willie was,' Tadg Bere was saying, 'it wasn't just you could be depending on him, you knew he was keeping a weather eye out for you, like you might a brother. So I was always thinking that was a sorta [sic] compliment to his family, that they had reared him up in that frame of mind.' (*On Canaan's Side* 35)

This scene, especially if taken out of its context, clearly verges on the sentimental. Again, however, Barry rearranges the conventional genre ingredients of the sentimental tableau. Firstly, the scene is inserted into the novel dedicated to the youngest Dunne daughter, Lilly, and thereby detached from the narrative that revolves around and defines Willie Dunne's Irish identity. It is further distanced by being presented not as a vivid scene but as a distant memory of the narrator-protagonist of *On Canaan's Side*, who is far more interested in introducing Tadg, the love of her life, than Tadg, her dead brother's comrade. Furthermore, while Tadg's visit and his "compliment to [Willie's] family" brings some consolation to father Thomas, it cannot resolve the major breach that occurred between father and son, neither of whom will ever learn that the other had regretted his contribution to their disagreement and had been willing to ask for forgiveness. It thus lacks the most important ingredient of the trite version of the sentimental *tableau vivant*, a happy ending and final resolution for all the characters involved or, at least, for all those still alive. The scene thus foregrounds what the sentimental attempts suppress, namely, that the performance of acts of friendship, love and forgiveness does not (always) lead to easy, clear and fast solutions.

The negotiation of what could be termed Barry's concept of unexceptional 'ordinary agency', which contributes just as much to the individual agent's happiness as to that of his or her community, is also central to *Annie Dunne* and *On Canaan's Side*. *On Canaan's Side* features a particularly ambiguous and unsentimental version of ordinary acts of friendship in the character of an IRA terrorist who, having shot dead Lilly Dunne's fiancé, Tadg Bere, shortly after the couple had begun their new life in the U.S., takes on a new identity and tries to atone for his crime as Lilly's good friend Mr Nolan for the rest of his life. Lilly, anything but a stern and merciless character, is unable to forgive him on learning the full story shortly before their deaths decades later. "You had no right to my friendship all these years. You took away my life when you took him anyhow. I should kill you now. If I had strength in my hands I would do it. [...] 'No', I said, '[...] I curse you'" (243).

In *Annie Dunne* the principle of 'ordinary agency' is discussed on and established via both the plot level and the discourse level. On the plot level of this novel, the embittered protagonist must learn to accept that she is part of a village community that helps and supports even her when it assembles a search party following the disappearance of Annie's little nephew. As Phillips has shown,

The key point is the revelation which comes to Annie immediately after the sight of the search party, "So there is a district. It is myself that has no district, no sense of it, but it is there, despite me" [...]. While [Annie] has felt excluded from a collective and popular memory which has transformed the imagined community of the nation into one which in her view is peopled by gunmen [...], there remains the community of the district, a community she has failed to recognize. (240)

Phillips's analysis, which draws on memory theories, thus comes to the same conclusion as mine, which looks at the identity politics and narrative ethics in Barry's Irish puzzle. "Barry's novels often argue against the inhumanity of too much loyalty to a

political cause, a loyalty which causes suffering" (240). Instead they form a "community [which is] created out of living in a shared space" independent of the agency of a neo-liberal subject.

If the reader empathises with the rather unappealing Annie throughout the book, this is due to the fact that the principle of 'ordinary agency' also shapes the novel on the level of (authorial) narration: *Annie Dunne* is, after all, the most autobiographically informed work of Sebastian Barry to date. It is her own nephew himself who learned to love Annie as a little boy during the summer of 1959, who writes her story, and who gratefully and lovingly integrates her into his Irish puzzle. As befits the concept of unexceptional ordinary agency and the whole drift of Barry's twenty-first-century version of an Irish national tale, the Barry persona on the plot level is a little and anonymous child with an as yet quite undeveloped identity. This autobiographical character's significance for the novel is that he is a recipient of Annie's love and attention rather than an active main protagonist. The readjustment of yet another literary genre – the autobiographical novel – thus contributes to the construction of post-neoliberal personal and group identities in Barry's narrative Irish cosmos.

### Narrative Perspective and the Judicious Reader

A brief concluding look at the experiments with narrative perspective in the novels of the Dunne series will consolidate the idea that Barry creates a narrative aesthetics compatible with the ethics developed in his Irish puzzle. In the process, it will also become clearer how the position of the judicious reader can be said to be initiated by Barry's novels. With regard to the construction of plot, space and characters, Barry mainly uses narrative techniques that allow the reader to become absorbed into the story world and to empathise with the characters. Still, the narrative mediation of this story world is always slightly odd, stimulating questions and encouraging rational reflexions which accompany the reader's emotional involvement in the story world.<sup>20</sup>

While Barry writes historical novels, he does not contribute to the genre of historiographic metafiction that has dominated the postmodern novel (see Hutcheon; Nünning), and is characterised by what Wayne Booth has called "struggle narratives": narratives whose "plot [...] is the plot of the struggle to tell it" (126). Barry's chief interest is in telling the stories of his marginalised family members who never told their stories themselves (like Willie) or who have no great difficulties to articulate what they want to say, if they are constructed as first-person narrators (like Annie and Lilly Dunne). Barry's focus is not on the question of how to represent the past linguistically. Nevertheless, adapting Booth's term of the "struggle narrative", I want to suggest that it is helpful to think of Barry's historical narratives as 'covert struggle stories'. The communicative situation and/or narrative perspective constructed by

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20 Nussbaum stresses "that both empathetic participation and external assessment are crucial" for Adam Smith's concept of the "judicious spectator" (73).

Barry is always somewhat unsettling and, as a consequence, has a subtle but palpable distancing effect, after all. Even though the difficulties of the historiographical voice are not foregrounded, Barry's reader is bound to stumble over the question of how the story of the marginalised can be made audible and/or the question of who would want to hear or read their stories if they were told.

In *A Long Long Way*, passages narrated by a third-person voice which provides value judgments and generalising commentaries typical of an omniscient narrator clash with free indirect discourse (FID), a technique usually found in novels with much less overt narrators. The question of who speaks, thinks and comments is often triggered by FID, which always "enhances the bivocality [...] of the text by bringing into play a plurality of [...] attitudes" (Rimmon-Kenan 113) and becomes even more virulent when the attitudes and voices of an authoritative and assertive narrator and a powerless, naïve and rather quiet character like Willie Dunne are forced together in Barry's fascinating handling of FID. *On Canaan's Side*, which at first sight looks like a rather conventional fictional autobiography, turns out to be a rather paradoxical testimony: the memories of an eighty-nine-year-old narrator-protagonist which the protagonist herself regards as the confessions (to no confessor) for a sin not yet committed (her planned suicide); memories, moreover, which she commits to the written word even though she "hate[s] writing, [...] hate[s] pens and paper and all that fussiness" (9).

*Annie Dunne* belongs to the (until very recently) rare species of a first-person narrative told in the present tense. As such it can be regarded as a particularly radical attempt to reconstitute the lost presence of a forgotten figure. A present-tense first-person narrative constructs an impossible scenario, of course. Nobody tells his or her life to such an extent as Annie does at the same time as they experience it. Even though I do not wholly agree with Grene's analysis and interpretation of the narrative perspective in *Annie Dunne*,<sup>21</sup> his comment certainly points to the fact that readers of the novel cannot but be puzzled: "The inner world of an Annie Dunne is rendered with a rich specificity she could never manage to voice herself. [...] The point of view hovers between the child [i.e. her nephew Sebastian Barry] and the protective old woman, both endowed with the vocabulary of the mature writer" ("Out of History" 175). It is as if in *Annie Dunne* Barry were consciously choosing the other extreme of the metahistoriographical struggle story in order to do full justice to the forgotten Other, while the authorial narrative voice, which – as we cannot fail to notice – must have made this story available, almost vanishes completely.

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21 Grene does not quite acknowledge the radicality of Barry's choice of the present-tense first-person narration, when he compares it to Virginia Woolf's very different kind of an "interiorized mode" (175, 176). Also, there is no need to assume that Annie Dunne would have been unable to think and speak as the text suggests she does. On the contrary, Barry's choice of a first-person narrator serves exactly to suggest just that: that Annie does "manage to voice" the text we read (Grene 175).

### Instead of a Conclusion: Barry's Postnational Irishness

As Barry's treatment of the national family allegory stresses the complexities within the Irish nation and diaspora, his work only implicitly comments on what the Irish have in common. His device of using his own family history as an inspiration simply takes for granted that there are certain centripetal energies that bind the nation together like a family. This is one reason for the fact that his œuvre raises the question of how to define the/a nation once the dominant ideology is being replaced by an inclusive and highly complex new version. Is Barry's work then, ultimately, “‘post-nationalis[t]’, in the sense of nationalism becoming obsolete or losing its popular appeal” (Fitzpatrick 173)? The following passage, which turns the Irish family into just one member of the global family certainly suggests such a conclusion:

‘What is the greatest discovery in our lifetime? [...] In my [Mr Dillinger’s] view, Mrs Bere, it is DNA. [...] The DNA of every modern person goes back to one, or maybe three women in Africa. The good news is, we are all the same family. The bad news is, we are all the same family.’ This was his little joke. ‘The point is, all these wars, all these tems of history, all this hatred of difference, and fear of the other, has been a long, elaborate, useless, heartbreaking nonsense. America is not a melting pot of different races, it is where the great family shows its many faces. The Arab is the Jew, the Englishman is the Irishman, the German is the Frenchman, it is a wonderful catastrophe, no?’ (57-58)

If the Irish can still be differentiated from members of other nations, it is the fact that they all share a specifically Irish history (of which, at times, they seem mere playthings) rather than essential national features. It is the shared experience of certain events (even if from very different perspectives) and the memories thereof which bind Barry's characters together as members of a nation. Their desires – for home, for loyalty, for community and for love – are shown to be universal.

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# NARRATING THE BALLYMUN EXPERIENCE IN DERMOT BOLGER'S *BALLYMUN TRILOGY*

Anna Hanrahan (Wuppertal)

## Introduction: Narrating Ireland in Irish Theatre

Narrative and drama are two categories conventionally separated in literary theories. However, particularly in the Irish case, the distinction between the *mimetic* mode in drama vis-à-vis the *diegetic* mode of prose cannot be sustained. Since the Irish Literary Revival, storytelling has been an integral part of the Irish dramatic repertoire to the extent that "Irish theatre is renowned for its literary character; drama which is verbal rather than physical to the fore" (Wallace & Pílný 43). Rooted in Gaelic oral culture, the Irish stage has seen many storytellers, especially in rural settings. Despite the major changes in Irish culture during the last decades, the importance of narrative in Irish theatre has grown rather than subsided. In plays such as Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) the stories are very personal, tracing the characters' quests to make sense of their experiences and lives in long monological episodes. Since the late 1980s and the 1990s, the monologue has been established as one of the prevalent dramatic devices in works by playwrights like Conor McPherson, Dermot Bolger and Donal O'Kelly. The Celtic Tiger characters are exposed to a rapidly changing society in which traditional values no longer seem valid and identities are inherently unstable. It is in their stories that they attempt to order the confusing and contradictory events with which they are faced; and it is their stories which help them to cope with the difficult task of creating a coherent identity. In this article I am going to analyse how Bolger makes use of narrative elements in the *Ballymun Trilogy* in order to negotiate the emergence of a new type of both individual and local identity. The main focus is on the different ways in which dramatic characters define and express their identity by telling their own stories.

My analysis is strongly influenced by the sociological concept of narrative identity. Narrative identity, as Widdershoven puts it, is "the unity of a person's life, as it is experienced and articulated in the stories that express this experience"<sup>1</sup> (qtd. in Kraus 159, translation A.H.). Identity is understood as a continuous process during which the individual attempts to create coherence and continuity in 'self-narrations' (cf. Kraus 159). This process does not take place in a vacuum; rather, personality is developed as an "object, that is the product of a social process within a certain cultural

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1 "Die Grundüberlegung dieses Konzeptes ist, daß die Prozeßziele der Kohärenz und Kontinuität in der Identitätsbildung mit dem Mittel der Selbst-Narration erreicht werden. Narrative Identität kann verstanden werden als 'die Einheit des Lebens einer Person, so wie sie erfahren und artikuliert wird in den Geschichten, die diese Erfahrung ausdrücken' [Widdershoven 7]" (Kraus 159).

setting; identity is not constituted on the biological level"<sup>2</sup> (Abels 302; translation A.H.). Hence the stories a person tells are always a reflection of their own identity and at the same time mirror the society they live in. Accordingly, the narratives in *The Ballymun Trilogy* are discussed as an expression of the characters' struggles to develop a coherent identity within Irish society. I will focus on selected narrative episodes in all three plays in an attempt to illustrate how both dramatic and narrative form, such as setting, time and style, contribute to negotiating problems of personal and communal identity. In the process I will make use of some of the analytical tools of narratology in order to show how, exactly, narrative strategies and the construction of identity interact within the three plays. The aim is to explore the ways in which the dramatist Dermot Bolger uses narrative strategies to communicate both individual and communal experiences, and identity constructions, and how his trilogy attempts to give to the people of Ballymun the power to narrate themselves.

Ballymun, the site of a once hopeful project intended to solve Dublin's growing housing problem in the 1960s, quickly turned into a synonym for unemployment, poverty, drug abuse and squalor. At the beginning of the 1960s the "demand for affordable rented accommodation far outstripped supply" and many families were forced to live in slum-like conditions, as Somerville-Woodward demonstrates (8). In 1963 a number of the overcrowded tenement buildings in the inner city collapsed, causing several deaths (16). Many of the families living in the tenements either left their houses out of fear or were evacuated as a safety measure by the state. By July of 1963 a total 324 families, amounting to at least 1000 individuals, had been rendered homeless and were placed in temporary accommodation or slept on the street (19). Thus the Ballymun Housing Scheme grew out of a dire need for quick and cheap accommodation to house the most urgent cases and the erection of high-rise buildings was chosen as the panacea to the crisis (Bolger xi-xii). While throughout Europe the "high rise schemes were being abandoned for becoming 'vertical slums', leaving inhabitants socially isolated [...] the Irish government decided that this prefabricated, high-rise scheme represented 'an exciting alternative to the squalor of Dublin's tenements'" (Bolger xi). Due to the urgency to house the families and the government's miscalculation on both the temporal and the financial scale of the scheme, the first tenants moved into the flats in 1966 – before construction had been finished. There were no shopping or health facilities for almost another decade, it would take years until the estate was connected to the public transport network (Somerville-Woodward 139) and the landscaping that was promised to the new tenants was never put into place (118). The new tenants had to struggle with the flawed construction of the buildings, with lifts that were constantly broken, balconies that were flooded, a lack of ventilation and a heating system that they had no control over – i.e. that left them either too cold or too hot (132-133). Additionally, the

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2 "In diesem Zusammenhang muss man sich daran erinnern, dass die Persönlichkeit als Objekt das Produkt eines sozialen Prozesses innerhalb eines kulturellen Rahmens ist; Identität konstituiert sich nicht auf der biologischen Ebene" (Abels 302).

new tenants found themselves isolated from both their former communities and their new neighbours. As Bolger comments, “[p]eople had been taken from close-knit, inner-city communities and dumped in tower blocks. Soon tenants with financial resources were leaving. By 1979, parts of Ballymun were becoming an occasional dumping ground for problem tenants” (xii).

### Narrating the Ballymun Experience

Why won't the voices stop whispering,  
Straining to be heard amid the babbling?  
Lives that were ended and lives that begun,  
The living and the dead of Ballymun.  
(“Ballymun Incantation”; Bolger xix-xx)

The voices of Dublin's notorious Ballymun are quiet; a mere whisper among the loud and more powerful voices of late twentieth-century Ireland. Whispers do not carry far and in the context of Ballymun the desperate attempts of the isolated and stigmatised occupants to make themselves heard were often ignored. The dominant Ballymun-narrative was created by the media which focused on more newsworthy negative stories rather than on positive ones (cf. Somerville-Woodward 182). As a result, the inhabitants of Ballymun were caught between the negative stereotype attributed to them by the media and society on one hand, and the perception of themselves and their own experiences on the other.

Bolger's plays, in particular *From these Green Heights*, seem to retrace the historical research around the towers collected by the Ballymun Regeneration Ltd., a synopsis of which has been published as *Ballymun: a History* by Robert Somerville-Woodward. However, the collection of historical facts is brought to life by showing characters who deal with the daily struggles, as it focuses on the personal side of being faced with difficult living conditions and a growing isolation from society. *From these Green Heights* follows the story of two families who move to the towers in the 1960s. The narrative episodes alternate between different periods of the characters' lives and the distinction between the living and the dead is blurred.

*The Townlands of Brazil* deals with the intertwined themes of single motherhood and emigration. It creates parallels between the lives of two young women, Eileen and Anna, who live in Ballymun during different decades. The two main characters' stories of loss and isolation are complemented by the narratives of other minor characters who, in turn, speak of similar experiences. The third play, *The Consequences of Lightning*, revolves around a group of family and friends. The characters share a past in the towers and are all trying to leave behind the difficulties it entailed, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, single motherhood and violence.

*The Ballymun Trilogy* thus stages hitherto muted or distorted stories and gives a voice to the people of Ballymun: “The *Ballymun Trilogy* was produced in the Axis Arts and Community Resource Centre, a local community initiative that has become the

flagship building of the regeneration project. [...] The plays of the *Ballymun Trilogy* validate the often traumatic struggles of the communities of Ballymun [...]" (Malone & O'Sullivan 235). However, the reclamation of the right to tell one's own story holds more than the validation of experience: The right to speak entails power. Since self-narration, as established earlier, takes place in a social context, Kraus explains that there are various "degrees of freedom" when it comes to recreate and to further develop self-narrations. These

degrees of freedom are not simply given, but have to be fought for. The changes [in self-narrations] are themselves the result of social authority, and if the subjects can assert their self-narrations in spite of this authority, this is the case because they successfully defend their autonomy at least gradually and temporarily, and inscribe it into this potential of [different narrative] forms. (Kraus 182, translation A.H.)<sup>3</sup>

In staging the stories of the Ballymun community, despite the fact that its members' lives often deviate from the national ideal of a proper Irish *vita*, Bolger creates a space where unusual, imperfect self-narrations can be told (and heard). Ultimately, the stories themselves become a weapon against isolation and discrimination, as when the characters raise their voices to narrate their individual fates, they begin to discover that they are not as alone as they thought.

### **Communicating Unheard Experiences**

As with every storytelling, the narrators of self-narrations have to pick and choose the events which they find significant, they have to structure and interpret experiences and bring them together in a coherent story. The way we feel about our experiences is strongly influenced by the stories we encounter in our cultural environment: "Much of our emotional life [...] is bound up with the way we narrate experiences. It would be difficult to imagine someone experiencing guilt, joy, or anxiety without having cognizance of the stories to which these are the responses" (Kerby 214). In addition, self-narrations always take place in a social environment and are founded on social interaction. In the case of *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Bolger shows how the move from a well-known social environment to an unfamiliar space with undefined social ties and yet untold new experiences can affect a character's self-narration and thus the construction of his or her identity.

A brief look at the stage directions of *From these Green Heights* shows that it is in the performance in particular that the narratives unfold their power. First of all, some of the actors are playing multiple roles. Furthermore, the stage is divided into "three interconnecting ramps positioned at slightly different heights to allow the cast to

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3 "Die Freiheitsgrade in der Neugestaltung und Weiterentwicklung von Selbst-Narrationen sind nicht einfach vorhanden, sondern müssen erkämpft werden. Die Veränderungen sind selbst Ergebnis von gesellschaftlicher Macht, und wenn sich Subjekte dagegen anerzählen können, dann weil es ihnen gelingt, ihre Autonomie zumindest graduell und vorübergehend zu verteidigen und einzuschreiben in dieses Formenpotential" (Kraus 182).

*easily move from one to the other*" (Bolger 3). In addition, all actors are present on the stage throughout the play. If they are not involved in the main action, they are sitting on rows of chairs on the right and left of the stage and "almost serve as the play's internal audience, listening to and silently supporting each other's stories with their presence" (3). At first glance, the situation seems like a conventional *play-within-a play*, however, like Samuel Beckett, Bolger explores what Richardson calls "the boundaries of representation" (301). As the characters take turns in telling the story of Ballymun, their individual monologues frame mimetic episodes. As the setting of the play is abstract, it is the narratives that create the *diegesis* (Genette 16), the world of the play. Unlike in epic theatre, which often uses heterodiegetic narrators who are not part of the story world and where the act of narration "interrupts and contrasts the scenic action with the narration" and is used to "disrupt the theatrical communication" (Wehrman 248), Bolger has the characters of the story world tell their own stories to draw the audience into the dramatic world and the memories of the characters. According to Wehrmann such "homodiegetic generative narrators may create a more intense relationship to their audience than heterodiegetic generative narrators" (251). In the case of *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Bolger allows the (diegetic and extradiegetic) audience a glimpse into the characters' private recollections. Their long monological episodes reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings and give an immediate insight into the way they narrate themselves.

As the characters address both the extra- and intradiegetic audience in turn, there are repeated metalepses through which the playwright blurs the lines between the real world and the diegetic "fictional" Ballymun. "In its narratological sense, metalepsis, first identified by Genette, is a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier 190). Especially when the plays are staged in the Axis theatre in Ballymun, this blurring of the real and the fictional intends to transport the real stories of its inhabitants via the characters on stage and the intradiegetic audience provides an example of communal support for its real-life counterpart.

The prologue of the play, the *Ballymun Incantation*, spoken to the audience by 'a Junkie', establishes an immediate connection between the world of the play and the world of the audience. The title 'incantation' implies the almost magical power of narratives on stage, as they are able to evoke the lives that have passed in Ballymun. The incantation serves as a frame to the stories of the other characters. It poeticises the experience of life in Ballymun and integrates the individual stories into enchanting moments of shared experience.

### **Familiar Narratives in *The Ballymun Trilogy***

In all three plays the characters draw on familiar cultural narratives which do not only describe the new experiences they are making but also entail the expectations they bring with them. *From these Green Heights* begins with the characters as new tenants moving into the towers full of hope for a better life. Dessie remembers: "We

were moving up in the world – we were moving skyward” (Bolger 4). To them, the towers are not only a symbol for a new start they are the acme of modernity, in line with the 1960s era of space discovery. Dessie’s narrative seamlessly blends into Christy’s tale that shows the same explorer’s spirit:

... and walked and bloody well walked, miles past the Albert College out into uncharted territory [...]. A few bewildered locals hung about that Sunday, lured from their cottages near Dubber Cross [...]. Bogmen on black bicycles, with flecks of dandruff on their black suits just to add a touch of colour. Gaping at the tower blocks appearing in their fields like they were alien spacecraft adorned with Dublin Corporation signs picked up in some intergalactic sale of work. (5)

The young family draws on the culturally familiar models of the explorer’s tale of the discovery of a new world: it is the story of settlers discovering and claiming new land clothed in the narrative of modernity transforming rural Ireland. Christy’s account also carries the undertone of a sense of superiority which the new tenants feel over the locals, who are described as “Bogmen”, and are presented as being overwhelmed by the fascinating foreignness of the tower’s modernity. Carmel, who is glad to leave behind the dilapidated dangerous tenements, also firmly believes in the promises of a better life, comparing her family’s move to Ballymun to the biblical story of the exodus (in its modern, i.e. American, version):

The Minister for Local Government, Neil Blaney, seemed to me like an overweight Moses with a bogman’s accent, leading my family out there to the Promised Land. [...] The Ballymun flats weren’t finished that Sunday we went out there. They still hadn’t laid out the acres of orchards Blaney promised where children could run at twilight and the playgrounds you normally only saw in films about New York. No shops were built yet or clinics or schools. But all these things were promised and moving to Ballymun seemed almost as classy as moving to America. (6)

Her narrative furthermore reflects the representation of the Ballymun project by the government and through the media of the time. Despite the unfinished state of the towers, she believes in the then dominant narrative in the promise that they are going to be “as classy” as the much admired American archetypes and that they are in fact a “Promised Land”. For Carmel, Ballymun replaces New York as the Canaan of the Irish, as it symbolises Ireland’s glamorous modernity, and she gladly leads her family into what she tells herself will be a better future within Ireland.

In *The Townlands of Brazil* we again encounter cultural narratives that shape the characters’ perception of experience. This time, Bolger contrasts happiness abroad and at home and directly addresses the ever-present Irish theme of emigration. Eileen recounts her mother’s tales of a new dawn in Irish politics:

Mama was eleven on the night the Treaty was signed with England and she danced in her father’s cottage amid the fields in Balcurris [...] That night Mama felt that her turn to emigrate would never come because freedom had arrived. A bonfire blazed and Mama danced like never before, swept up in the arms of young men and old. (115-116)

Through Eileen we encounter the historical narrative of Irish Independence. It juxtaposes (colonial) dependence, resulting in emigration, with national freedom and the

possibility of remaining at home. Emigration, as it is portrayed by Bolger, is a response to a lack of prospects at home. The characters are placing their hope in the seemingly unlimited opportunities abroad. Anna, the Moldovan immigrant in present day Ballymun, remembers the hopes she had for a life in the west and of her uncle sending her off to a better future: “‘You go’, he said. ‘They need workers in Ireland. It’s green with hot geysers. Small blubbery people eat fish-eyes there and dance in the rivers’” (159). Anna’s memories reveal that the idea of a life in the West is almost mythical, not based on any knowledge of reality. “Ireland or Iceland [are] all the one” in symbolising a better, if hazy, future (159). Once more, the act of moving to a new place is retold as an exodus to a “Promised Land”, as Carmel terms it in *From these Green Heights* (6). Similar to the premature optimism of the families relocating from the tenements of the inner-city to the high-rise towers of Ballymun, for the emigrants arriving from Eastern Europe their future lives can only promise an improvement on what they leave behind. Again, as in Carmel’s story, the new Canaan lies in Ireland.

Bolger illustrates how certain types of narratives have a transnational character. The tales of emigration reflect not only how poverty and lack of prospects are not uniquely Irish problems but also that there is a universal wish to improve one’s individual circumstances and a desire to believe that life is in fact getting better not worse. The stories that motivate the characters to leave their homes promise financial gain and a new start away from the social and cultural restrictions at home. Emigration is thus not only interpreted as a move toward a better future, it also signifies liberation from the often restrictive narratives at home that define the social status of the characters. Away from home, the self can be reinvented, constructed anew: “It’s about who I want my children to be. Back here, they’ll always simply be another bunch of Bradys reared in a labourer’s cabin in the townland of Brazil”, Michael states in *The Townlands of Brazil* (126). Emigration for him is not only a chance to avoid the old stories and prescribed life choices that tie him to his class, but also seems to provide a fresh start for his future children, as their story remains unwritten until they begin telling it themselves.

The characters of each play soon find out how different life in Ballymun is from what the prevalent cultural narratives led them to expect. Instead of finding a life in the Promised Land they are faced with drug abuse, single motherhood and unemployment. In the ensuing poverty and isolation they are left speechless and unable to define who they are.

#### **“Certain stories can’t be told”<sup>4</sup>**

In *From these Green Heights* the stories of hopefulness soon take a negative turn. Life in the towers is not as glamorous as the young families had pictured it to be. Within

4 This quotation is taken from the opening scene of *The Consequences of Lightning* (199) and alludes to the mother’s inability to tell her daughter Annie about a miscarriage and about how the ensuing grief led to a one-night stand in which Annie was conceived.

eight months, an old neighbour dies “from a lack of conversation” (14). Deprived of the communal ties they are accustomed to, the new inhabitants of the towers find it difficult to establish new ones, to voice their emotions and worries, and to find somebody who listens to them. Furthermore, the characters are confronted with events for which they know no cultural narrative that could serve as a template to interpret their experiences. The resulting isolation of the characters, as well as the overwhelmingly dismal quality of their Ballymun experience, results in a form of both individual and communal trauma. According to Michael Bamberg, “traumatic experiences are typically viewed as disruptions of continuity and coherence, posing challenges to the formation of a sense of self and (biographic) identity as well as to our sense of agency” (141). Thus the characters do not only feel disappointed by the promises that have brought them to Ballymun, but also lose the sense of control over their own lives.

The destructive force of the inability to interpret and communicate experience can be seen in Sharon, the young drug addict who never fully seems to enter into life. Christy remembers: “She took my hand and walked home to her mother’s flat and I felt … I don’t know … like she was the ghost of my kid sister who’d never properly been born [...]” (74). A little bit further on in the play he states: “Sharon was rarely there and when she was she seemed like a ghost already” (79). Jane recounts:

It scared me how quickly she moved from coming home reeking of cider, to coming home with pockmarked veins, to not coming home at all. It was like she reached the cliff-edge of childhood and saw nothing beyond it but a vast emptiness. Disaffected was the social worker’s term. (69)

Sharon’s world-weariness and her lack of attachment to life leave her constantly on the borderline between life and death and only when she dies, can her ghost finally find peace and move on (85).

Even though Sharon appears in several short dramatic episodes, she does not tell her own story. Bolger thus contrasts the act of narration, which structures experience, with the overwhelming rawness of unfiltered experience. The characters that narrate their memories have gained a certain amount of control over who they are and what has happened to them. Sharon’s inability to make sense of her existence results in drifting through life without ever truly participating in it. She is unable to create coherence and desperately tries to escape her overwhelming, fragmented world.

Sharon’s self-destruction is a symptom of severe depression, a condition from which many of the play’s characters suffer and that both Christy and Carmel term “the high-rise-blues” (32). It is manifested in the hopelessness and isolation the characters feel and the inability to share their emotions with the people surrounding them:

**Carmel** Christy wasn’t the only one who couldn’t say what they felt. The high-rise blues. [...] Maybe it was being so high up … the maze of distant lights … but I felt isolated and tired. After seven years I was tired of waiting for Ballymun to be finished. You saw it in the other mothers too, a different tiredness than our mas had known. (32-33)

The isolation reaches so far that even within the family the members can no longer speak of their pain to each other. In Christy's case, his despair leaves him standing on the balcony on the brink of suicide after his wife has told him she needs a change:

**Carmel** [...] you've been a dead weight around my neck. I drag shopping up those stairs, I drag myself but I don't see why I should have to drag you. [...] Take a good look at the view and if all you're good for is looking, then go back to the porn films or give us all a break and fucking jump. (46)

Carmel in her loneliness and inability to communicate her pain, loses any empathy she might otherwise have felt for her husband. Even though Christy cannot speak of his emotions, Carmel is aware of his troubles. In their unspoken state they seem overwhelming and she has no means to deal with them except by rejection. Secretly observed by his son, Christy is struggling to choose life and he has to make this decision alone:

**Christy** [...] Carmel didn't want me to make this choice for her or Dessie. She wanted me to make it for myself alone, my decision to live or die. I wasn't sure how far I was over the balcony and if I opened my eyes the fright alone might make me fall. So I stepped back with the slowest, most deliberate step I ever made [...]. (47)

Christy's step back into life is not only a step away from suicide. He chooses to move from the state of victimhood to becoming a husband and father once again. He chooses to actively break through the isolation that the towers have imposed on him. By letting all three family members recount this pivotal moment in Christy's life, Bolger demonstrates how the isolation the characters describe is not caused by the singularity of what they endure, but rather by their inability to share it with the people around them. In his monograph *Das erzählte Selbst (The Narrated Self)* Kraus stresses that in the process of developing a concept of our self we are strongly influenced by the assumed evaluation of our person by others (139). As each character struggles with a sense of failure, they are inclined to hide what they conceive as shameful instead of sharing it and discovering that they are in fact not alone in their struggle. However, it is only in retrospective that they can discover the shared aspects of their Ballymun experience.

The narration of the characters can also be understood as an overcoming of trauma. Although Bolger underlines the often traumatic aspects of life in the towers, he shows how deciding to tell your own story is inextricably linked to a sense of empowerment. Making sense of their past and sharing their stories enables the characters to move on and brave the future.

The deficiency and thus the breakdown of cultural narratives cannot only be seen on the local level, where the flawed Promised Land belies the narrative of hope for a better, more modern future, but also on the level of national ideals. Like in many of his other plays, Bolger's characters express disillusionment with the didactic and homogenising idea of Gaelic Irishness. In *From these Green Heights* Carmel reminisces about why she never learnt how to read "Everything was taught through Irish, which I didn't understand, and the real lesson you learnt was never to draw

attention to yourself. That way you'd less chance of being belted." (58) Her memory of mid-twentieth-century Ireland expresses two aspects of traditional Irish culture: The exclusion of people who do not identify with the Gaelic revivalism and the oppression of individualism. The same tendencies can be seen in *The Townlands of Brazil* where Eileen's breach of her society's rules leaves her with two choices: Accept society's punishment and vanish in a Magdalen home or leave the country. In 1960s Ireland, a young girl pregnant out of wedlock is suddenly excluded from her community and forced to choose either imprisonment or exile. In the national narrative there is no room for the story of a "fallen woman". Heather Ingman points out "[t]he sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as anti-Irish or foreign" (qtd. in Ryan 103). According to Ryan, it is the dominant group's fear of what is foreign, and thus the foreigner, as "difference serves as a constant threat to the community's identity" (Ryan 104). As Eileen is now unable to conform to her prescribed destiny of being either married or celibate, she is simply written out of her family's history: "She has [...] joined the Ballymun girls who've disappeared from history [...]. Girls who only exist in whispers about sluts" (112). Bolger uses both the image of a whisper and the over-painted graffiti of the word 'slut' to illustrate the fate of those who have been written out of the national narrative (112). The word 'slut' painted on her parent's house summarises society's judgement and despite her father's attempt to paint out the daub "a white mark [is] left on the tar like a public stain on his soul" (112). With her narrative, Eileen reclaims her right to be part of Irish history and to tell her story, replacing the "whispers about sluts" with her account of ill-fated but true love. Her story, however, is finished by her son Matthew, who reveals that despite Eileen's move into exile in England, there was no escape from both the ostracism and the ensuing poverty of single motherhood. The loss of a husband, of communal support and any other social ties, left her unable to provide for herself and her child. He recounts being taken from her at the age of four by social workers because she was unable to feed him and like the immigrants in Ballymun she was helpless and alone: "she was a foreigner lost in a foreign land" (190).

### **Connecting and Embedding Narratives**

Bolger expands the local, individual experience by showing universal aspects of life changing moments. As Paula Murphy points out, "his use of dramatic time is always non-linear [...] Bolger often finds ways of vacillating between past and present in his plays" (183). The effect of these anachronisms is that the events cluster around themes rather than being structured chronologically. The beginning of a new chapter in Dessie, Christy and Carmel's lives, precedes the scene that depicts the fresh start Dessie and his daughter are going to have in a new home upon leaving the towers. Both times there is hope for a better life and just like with the young family moving to the flats, there is also uncertainty:

**Tara** What will our new home be like?

**Dessie** (smiles wryly) Perfect, like my ma used to say. Just wait until it's finished. (10)

The playwright thus creates parallels between past and present events through both the speech of the characters and quasi-mimetic episodes framed by the character's narratives. The newness and incertitude the three family members feel when moving to the towers resonate in the emotions that Dessie and Tara feel when leaving them behind. This clustering of similar scenes from different phases in Dessie's life not only emphasises recurring themes of human existence, it also reveals the power of narrative within the theatre. In her work *Postmodern Theatri(c)ks* Deborah Geis writes:

[...] monologue allows the playwright to dislocate, fragment, and otherwise transform this perpetual present into other temporal modes. The speaker of the monologue has the ability to compress time by narrating a series of events, to suspend time entirely by offering words that do not affect the time elapsed in the play, to move either forward or backward in time (and sometimes to move the ensuing narrative with him or her as well), and to alter time by changing our perception of the rate at which time moves during the monologue itself and/or during the onstage events that follow it. (10-11)

Through monologue Bolger can create an intersection of the "fallen" Irish girl in the 1960s and the Polish single-mother, the lives of the emigrant and the immigrant. In *The Townlands of Brazil* Bolger parallels the lives of the women Eileen, Anna and Monika. One woman lives in Ballymun prior to the towers being built, while the others live there at the time of their demolition. All three women are faced with emigration. In Monika and Anna's case they belong to the people who

follow the work – Irish, Poles, Latvians. Landscapes change, our faces and nationalities change, our clothes, even our jobs. But nothing else changes. We leave home to seek work or sanctuary. And the farther we go, the more home becomes frozen in our minds. (108)

Anna, the Moldovan girl working in Ballymun, narrates the feeling of constant foreignness and exclusion and the struggle to be treated like a human being, not a commodity. She has come to Ireland because "the only way to make this much money in Moldova involves an awful lot of retouching your lipstick and having to brush your teeth afterwards" (158). She knows about the potential dangers of emigration, which often exposes immigrants to different forms of exploitation, because her own cousin Maria has become a victim of human trafficking and she is haunted by the thought of "her [cousin's] eyes staring out if I clicked the right link, another piece of driftwood lost amid the ocean of pornography" (158). Anna's story is one of trying to belong and being accepted. Yet she, like the other immigrants, is stuck with, as Oscar puts it, "a foot in both worlds and his arse in no man's land" (173). By leaving their homes, their life stories are suddenly uprooted. Anna describes her floundering existence: "Sometimes, I feel that a gust of wind will sweep me away with nobody noticing" (169). Furthermore, she is met with the xenophobia of the Irish surrounding her: "Three little girls followed me from the supermarket, jeering, 'Go home, you foreign bitch'. I should be used to abuse, but they're too young to have such hatred. The West was where I thought I'd feel equal" (169). As Kraus explicates: "self-narration is not the story of a single subject. It is not only embedded in social narratives, but also a social construct. By drawing on a language system to convey and

relate events, the individual is involved in a social act. Narrative accounts are embedded in continuous processes of exchange" (180, translation A.H.).<sup>5</sup> In isolation the flow of narrative exchange is disrupted and thus the construction of a stable identity is inhibited: "Self-narration can only be successfully sustained and continued, when it is supported by others who are willing to second its representation of past, present and future" (180; translation A.H.).<sup>6</sup>

The young girls' abuse, just like the word 'slut' on Eileen's house, shows how the dominant cultural narrative that these girls draw on leaves no room for a non-essentialist Irish identity. This leads them to reject the foreignness of the immigrant, inhibiting her from entering into the traditional narratives of Irish identity and tell a story of belonging. As Anna, who is searching to be accepted by the society they represent, is unable to get their approval for the identity she is trying to develop, her integration seems to fail. However, by creating parallels between different characters, Bolger underlines that despite the fact that the characters feel isolated, they are not alone. His way of merging the past and the present emphasises shared aspects within his characters' lives. It is through telling their own stories and listening to the stories of the people around them that the characters can discover what they have in common, emerge from their isolation and begin take an active part in shaping a new community.

### **Renegotiating Life Stories**

As part of the Ballymun regeneration project, the *Ballymun Trilogy* thus intends to show more than just the disintegration of the cultural narratives that fail to help the characters define their identity. As Bolger states himself in the author's note speaking about *The Consequences of Lightning*, "it is about the process of letting the past go, about not diminishing any pain or hurt that has previously occurred but acknowledging it and moving into a different Ballymun, a different Dublin and a different Ireland" (xvi).

Next to its identity forming function, Bolger assigns a cathartic function to the stories the characters tell. Both in *The Townlands of Brazil* and *The Consequences of Lightning* the characters encounter instances of untruthful stories about themselves or their family members. Eileen has to discover that her mother's story about "a boy named Butler" who tried a spell "hoping to spy his future wife" is a lie (123). Accord-

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5 "Die Selbst-Narration ist keine Geschichte eines singulären Subjektes. Sie ist nicht nur eingebettet in soziale Narrationen, sondern darüber hinaus eine soziale Konstruktion. Indem sich das Individuum auf ein Sprachsystem stützt zur Vermittlung und Verbindung von Ereignissen, ist es in einen sozialen Akt involviert. Narrative Darstellungen sind eingebettet in kontinuierliche Austauschprozesse" (Kraus 180).

6 "Selbst-Narration kann nur dann erfolgreich aufrechterhalten und fortgeschrieben werden, wenn die handlungsstützenden Rollenträger bereit sind, die Darstellungen der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft mitzutragen" (Kraus 180).

ing to her mother he ended up seeing "four men holding aloft a black coffin! People found him dead next morning with his hair turned white" (123). Only when Eileen meets Michael the true events are revealed: "Butler was found beaten to death in a field back during the Troubles. [...] By IRA die-hards who heard he was about to cycle into Dublin to join the new Free State police" (129). Suddenly her mother's accounts of the past are exposed as untrue and Eileen starts to doubt. Through this, and the attempt to write Eileen out of her family's history by sending her to a convent and hiding her shame, it becomes obvious that there is a tension between what is told and what is intentionally concealed, distorted or not mentioned at all. The familial story can only remain unquestioned and pure if questionable episodes like the murder of a boy or the pregnancy of an unmarried girl remain untold. (115). The personal life-stories have wider implications, of course: If the rumour of joining 'the other side' in a civil war leads to violence and death, how can one maintain the claim that "freedom ha[s] arrived" with Irish independence (116)? Furthermore, Eileen realises that the ideal of marriage as a sacred space for love, which her parents contrast with the sinful life she is said to be leading, has been eroded by the placing of appearances over substance – while she deeply loves Michael, her parents are trapped in a loveless, hollow relationship (137).

In all three plays the characters have to challenge narratives that were passed on to them in order to shape their lives. As Damien Shortt puts it: "Bolger often explores how traditional nationalist representations of Ireland no longer resonate with most young people. His Ireland is one of suburban streets, unemployment, confusion and a pervading sense of betrayal" (104). In the *Ballymun Trilogy* he sheds light on the hidden aspects of Celtic Tiger prosperity, which often goes hand in hand with the exploitation and isolation of the many immigrants pouring into the "new" Ireland. Starting from this point of disillusionment, Anna has to come to terms with the fact that Ireland is not the hoped for "Promised Land" and Matthew has to discover that his mother's stories of Ireland as a home hold no truth for him, as he is, like her in England, "a foreigner lost in a foreign land" (191). Eileen has to narrate herself against the tale of the "slut, opening [her] legs for the first man" (137) in order to preserve the memory of her love for Michael and to tell her son that his origin lies in a loving relationship.

The narratives of old have become meaningless to Bolger's characters. However, as they relate their individual experiences to each other, they discover that the power of prevailing in a seemingly hostile environment lies in developing new communal ties and in telling new stories. As Marita Ryan puts it:

Bolger's poignant blending of the characters and their situations functions to create a bond and a passage between the self and other, between what is familiar and what is strange, and between the past and the present without ever negating the specificity of each individual's experience. [...] In reconciling ourselves to the other within, therein arises the hope that we can meet the external other in a place of understanding and harmony, not one of assimilation and dominance. (110)

Storytelling has not lost its significance in the Irish theatre but has in fact gained importance. It is the only means the characters have to communicate their experiences and emotions. However, unlike the static and prescriptive stories of nationalist Republican Ireland, the new self-narrations can never be finalised. The characters of a post-national, postmodern Ireland exist and narrate themselves in a continuously changing environment.

In *The Consequences of Lightning* Annie is desperate for her mother to reveal the story of how she came into being: "I want my ma to tell me a story, but I don't know how to ask when I see pain still in her eyes" (200). In her attempt to define her identity Annie is looking to her mother for help as she finds it difficult to "acquire [her] sense of communal historical being and situatedness" (Kerby 218) on her own. As the daughter of a single-mother in a traditionally unforgiving Ireland she is constantly struggling to claim her right of existence by "buil[ding] up a mystery about who [she is]" (277). When her mother reveals that she was the result of a one-night stand, she has to come to terms with the fact that she was just "an accident between strangers" (277). The story of her conception, of her mother in a drunken stupor grieving for a baby she just lost, stands in stark contrast to Annie's hope of being the result of a loving relationship (270-271). "You settled for me, like I was something you'd pick up in a spare parts shop" (272). Her story is shaped by her mother's guilt and lets Annie fear that she was a mistake. "Have I screwed up your life?" (295), she desperately asks her mother, reflecting the prominent discourse of the young single mother who has to sacrifice all her dreams and future prospects in order to take care of an unwanted child. Katie reassures her daughter and reinterprets said narrative: "You're a star. You're so high up that you shine down on all my mistakes, you're the one truly monumental thing I've done in my life. You were an accident but you have been no mistake, because you're the piece of the jigsaw that makes sense of every other bit of my life" (295). Katie clearly defines Annie's life as a gift and thus enables Annie to let go of the past and start anew: "when I finished crying and we walked back here, this new house really felt like home. Like that explosion had blasted the past off my shoulders and we could make a fresh start" (297). Together the two women find a new way of narrating their identity; the love between mother and daughter suffices and replaces the wish to resemble the traditional family of father, mother and child.

Liam Harte claims that Bolger revises 'Irishness' and replaces the homogenising essentialist nationalist view of identity with a "'post-national' or 'trans-national' identity which is defined in terms of multiplicity and diversity" (17). In his view, Bolger opens up the narrow definition of (Irish) identity that is defined by nationality. This is certainly correct, as Bolger attempts to create a theatrical space where new identities can be negotiated and narrated. The idea of the rural, Gaelic, Roman Catholic Ireland is obsolete for most of his characters and the Ireland we find in the *Ballymun Trilogy* is multicultural and diverse. Yet, despite the fact that the static identity categories of cultural nationalism cannot help the characters define who they are anymore, they seem to long for a sense of stability and continuance: The theme of home and be-

longing runs through the three plays. The characters are often desperate to find 'home', a place where they belong. The loss of the roots within the familiarity of home constitutes one of the main struggles in the trilogy. Home is not only a place but represents a shared history, shared values and strong community ties. The confusion of the postmodern individual permeates the life of the characters and in their desperation to give structure to the chaos surrounding them, they have to learn anew how to tell their life story. The process of telling is left unfinished; the characters are shown in fleeting moments of their existence but even death is not final. This home is shown to be created through the telling of, and listening to, self-narrations. Bolger presents characters that have difficulties creating coherence and defining who they are. He stages a world in which the traditional national and cultural narratives are empty shells rather than structures that help to construct a coherent identity and a home. However, the breaking of the old shells, though difficult, can be liberating. Identity construction, as it is found in Bolger's plays, is a process of constant renegotiation. Through their self-narrations, Bolger's characters can structure their experience and overcome traumatic experiences, such as the isolation the tenants of the towers are faced with, the loss of a baby, unemployment or the drug abuse of a relative. Through their stories they can also reach out to each other and establish new community ties. Through their stories they can renegotiate what it means to be Irish, a single mother, an immigrant etc. Through their stories they begin to draft an image of their future selves.

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## IRELAND, LOST BETWEEN COUNTRY AND CITY: EAVAN BOLAND IN THE SUBURB

Christian Huck (Kiel)

### Ireland: “Four Green Fields” and a “Dirty Old Town”?

Ireland – don’t you just love it? Land of green pastures, land of rough coasts, the Cliffs of Moher, the Giant’s Causeway and the Ring of Kerry, but also Dublin’s Half Penny Bridge and Temple Bar, D4 and the Docklands. In the literary imagination, it is the land of Synge’s Aran Islands, land of Yeats’ Coole Park – but also, of course, Joyce’s modernistic Dun Laoghaire, Patrick Kavanagh’s Dublin canals, Roddy Doyle’s working class North Dublin and Ciaran Carson’s postmodern Belfast. The Ireland we encounter in various advertisements and travel brochures, as much as in popular images created in books and films, features a beautiful countryside and lively cities. Until today, academic reflections seem to follow this pattern, as a recent volume of the *Reimagining Ireland*-series underlines when it looks at *Urban and Rural Landscapes in Modern Ireland* (Nordin and Llena).

If we do not think in images, but ask ourselves about the stories we associate with Ireland, the picture becomes somewhat bleaker: the literary landscape from Yeats’ Irish Renaissance plays to Frank McCourt’s autobiographic novels is dominated by suppression and the fighting of oppression on the one hand, and emigration on the other. Both narrative positions – fighting and leaving – share a common relation to questions of national identity. The main reason for leaving Ireland, so the story goes, is the neglect and suppression of the Irish through British colonial power; the Irish, as victims of colonisation, were forced to abandon their home country. Those who stayed in a country that could not become a nation had to become, in the words of Seamus Heaney’s 1975 collection *North, inner émigrés*. Removed from their homeland, physically or at least mentally, the emigrants began imagining a national identity, they began narrating an Ireland of the mind (cf. O’Brien). Topographically, the image of Ireland they created more often than not consisted of “Four Green Fields” and a “Dirty Old Town”, as two popular Irish folk-songs by Tommy Makem and Ewan MacColl have it. While the rural became “the symbol of the loss of culture, traditional values and customs as a result of a long history of colonial domination” (Nordin and Llena, “Introduction” 3), the urban became the symbol of a progressive cosmopolitanism overcoming colonial inhibitions.

However, while the colonial rule and its aftermath are certainly central to the Irish diaspora, I think there are other reasons for failing to feel at home in Ireland; these reasons are, of course, by no means independent from the experience of colonialism, but they reveal an agency on the side of the oppressed that not only effects questions of responsibility, but also opens new possibilities for change. This time it is the

very stories the Irish tell about themselves that make Ireland a place difficult to inhabit; narrating Ireland, narrating a nation that does not exist, can become an act of making the existing Ireland an impossible place to live in. As I want to argue in what follows, ordinary lives can neither be lived within "Four Green Fields" and a "Dirty Old Town", nor within modernistic and postmodern deconstructions and utopias of city and country. Ordinary lives are, in the main, lived in-between the country and the city, the past and the future: they have to be lived here and now, for better or for worse.

### Leaving Ireland, Finding Suburbia

In 1949, Ireland left the Commonwealth and became a fully independent republic. Freedom, however, did not bring prosperity; unemployment loomed large, and widespread emigration was, once again, the consequence. In 1958, a year before de Valera's reign as Taoiseach came to an end, Elizabeth Dwyer and Peter Morrissey decided to look for a better life in Manchester, England. Like most lower class immigrants, the couple found their first home in the rundown inner city of late industrial Manchester, where they became part of a tight-knit emigrant community (Campbell, "Irish" 45). At least, here, they had work. Soon they were able to fulfil some of their aspirations. After ten years of working as assistant librarian and hospital porter respectively, the family, now including two sons, left the crumbling inner-city terraced houses of old and moved into a purpose-built semi-detached house (fig. 1) in a modern estate in the suburb of Salford (Savage 393).



Fig. 1: 384 King's Road, Manchester, home of the Morrisseys © nadzferatu

The younger of the two sons, Steven Patrick Morrissey, was later to be known as the ‘Sage of Salford’ and singer of the influential rock group The Smiths. The rest of the band – Johnny Marr, who wrote the music and played guitar, Mike Joyce on drums and Andy Rourke on bass guitar – shared an Irish ancestry, and the experience of second-generation emigrants became a latent topic in many of the band’s songs (Campbell, “Irish” 44). In a song entitled “Nowhere Fast” the singer deals with the particular experience of life in the suburb.

The suburb, here, becomes a place of utter mundanity, a dystopia of domesticity, of modern “household appliances”. While the parents, who suffered poverty in Ireland, might indeed aspire to such middle-class bliss, for the romantic adolescent with artistic aspirations suburbia is a place of boredom and superficiality that leaves no room for authentic feelings, for “natural emotions” as he repeatedly and intensely sings. The adolescent claims that even the aspirations of his parents are dictated by the ruling classes; the colonial power of the British crown that forced his parents to leave their native home is now colonising their life-world (Habermas 522); what was once a disciplining force that could at least be fought is now controlling people’s desires: “each household appliance / is like a new science in my town”. For an adolescent growing up in the suburb, the “train” on the one hand, and bedroom dreams on the other, represent the only options to escape the suburban suspension between life and death: “I think about life and I think about death / And neither one particularly appeals to me”. The emotional power of the song, it appears, is fuelled by the hatred against middle-class suburbia and drives the 1950s rock and roll style music of the song (Campbell, “Displaced” 94). The art the singer aspires to, it appears, can only exist at the expense of suburbia: the place where people make-do, where people are average, normal, middle-of-the-road, neither chief nor warrior, neither traditional nor cosmopolitan, neither free nor captive. Instead of authenticity (“natural emotion”), the suburb offers a life lived according to other people’s rules. As Erich Fromm once wrote in *The Sane Society*, people “are not themselves [in the suburb]. The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity” (qtd. in Archer 24).

The artists’ hatred of the suburb is, of course, neither a solely Irish nor a particularly new attitude, as the above quote from the Frankfurt School-inspired German social psychologist shows. At least since the 1920s, “[s]uburbia’s detractors began to portray it as a landscape that sapped its residents of their individuality, morality, and agency, and dignity” (Archer 23). In Great Britain, such disdain was famously given form by John Betjeman, who expressed his loathing in various textual and visual vignettes. One of the most famous of these is his 1937 poem about Slough (Betjeman 22-24), a town famous for the Welsh workers who emigrated to the growing industrial town during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Slough, quintupling its population in the first forty years of the twentieth century, became the epitome of a town that was nothing else but a suburb. While the connection to the countryside is severed forever (“there isn’t grass”, l. 3), as Betjeman’s poem claims, urbanity has not been achieved (“the mess they call a town”, l. 9). Instead of having a past to build upon, the town creates

artificial ("synthetic", l. 35) traditions ("bogus-Tudor", l. 30). As a result of industrial production everything now looks, tastes and thinks the same ("Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans, / Tinned minds, tinned breath", l. 7-8). The superficial entertainment of "cars" (l. 29) and "bars" (l. 30) leaves no room for those 'natural emotions' Morrissey and The Smiths were looking for. Every connection to reality seems disrupted, even the singing of birds is mediated ("birdsong from the radio", l. 26). Betjeman, the artist and admirer of landscape and city architecture, saw no right to exist for the neither-here-nor-there Slough: "Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!" (l. 1)

In post-war times, when most of Slough had actually been destroyed by German bombs, Betjeman's sentiment became common currency: "[b]ashing the suburbs became ubiquitous and formulaic" (Archer 23). First and foremost, the superficial and artificial suburb became anathema to any authentic form of art.

### The Un-Irish Irish Suburbs

*The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, edited by the eminent Irish scholar and critic William John McCormack (1999), expresses the Irish attitude to suburbia with some clarity. Life in an Irish suburb, it soon transpires, is as far removed from the 'real' Ireland as life in the international diaspora.

Frank McDonald, a journalist of the *Irish Times*, begins his entry on 'suburbs' with first acknowledging the suburban as the dominant form of life in modern Ireland:

Despite pub talk about 'the rare oul' times', the reality is that Dublin has become a suburban city, with less than one in twelve of its population still left inhabiting its historic core – the oval-shaped area between the two canals. And Dublin, in this context, may be seen as a paradigm for Ireland as a whole, where the suburbs are now strung out along nearly every country road. (549)

It becomes obvious pretty soon, however, what McDonald thinks of life in-between the historic core of the city and the countryside proper: "According to architect Arthur Gibney, Dublin is losing its urban sensibilities as a result of being over-run by 'the inhabitants of its hinterland' [...], with their provincial values. 'After two generations of suburban living, the myth and the memory of city life has nearly disappeared', he complains. Indeed, the city has become a colony, ruled by people who drive in from the suburbs" (549). Once again, Ireland has become the victim of colonialism, more specifically of absenteeism. This time, however, it is not British landlords who neglect their fields because they live in England most of the time, as it was the case throughout the nineteenth century. This time, it is Ireland's very own middle-class that causes the death of Ireland's mythical past – by living in suburbs (cf. Kuchta 30). Not only the city, but the country, too, is damaged this way: "And as the suburbs of Ireland colonize the countryside with reckless abandon, not only is the rural landscape being eroded at an alarming rate, but the cities have become increasingly dead after dark" (McDonald 550).

While putting the blame on Ireland's own middle class, McDonald also emphasises that the lifestyle of the middle class is a foreign invention and consequently alien to the 'real' Ireland: "It could even be argued", McDonald reasons,

that the middle classes have been deserting the city since there was a middle class in Ireland [...]. The drift from the core to the periphery was, of course, encouraged by the 'garden city' ideal [which was seen as an] antidote to the squalor and congestion of inner-city living. It was an ideal adopted with great zeal in Britain and the United States and, inevitably, Ireland's planners followed suit, with enthusiasm. The suburbs they created, starting in Marino [to the north of Dublin] in the 1920s, gave way to bastardized [sic] versions as time went on, to produce the repetitive low-density housing estates which characterized suburban sprawl from the 1960s onwards. (549)

The "purgatorial half-way house" (549) as which McDonald describes the suburb becomes a hybrid mongrel: neither city, nor country, neither past, nor future, neither pastoral, nor intellectual, neither working class nor urbanite, the suburb becomes the sign of homogeneity and superficiality, of a mechanised, capitalist and ultimately alien modernity gone wrong: "tinned meat, tinned minds", as Betjeman has it. While the city is cosmopolitan, and the country Gaelic, the suburb is portrayed as just a bad copy of Little England. The 'real' Ireland, it appears, has to be found elsewhere: the suburb can and should not represent Ireland.

Neither urban nor rural, the suburb, according to such reasoning, has no real history, no authenticity. To quote *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* a last time: "[The suburbs] are also largely featureless, because little or no attempt was ever made to preserve links with the past; indeed, the first casualty of any housing scheme was usually the manor house which stood on the land being developed" (McDonald 549-550). The suburb, apparently, destroys the traditional culture of old and the modern culture of the city at the same time – leaving the country bereft of any kind of national Irish identity.

The suburb, according to these descriptions, has neither meaningful places, just a homogeneous space, nor a meaningful history, just an ever-repeating presence, nor is it home to meaningful individuals, only to boring conformists. The suburb, in terms of anthropologist Marc Augé, is a "non-place". Consequently, it appears, the suburb should not, and indeed *can* not be narrated. For a narrative to work, for a story to be *tellable*, we need events that show "relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness" (Hühn §1), as the *living handbook of narratology* tells us. While urban cosmopolitan mobility provides the basis for Joyce's, O'Casey's and Carson's city stories, the upheavals of a rural, mythical past provides Yeats and Heaney with fitting material. An ongoing present of apparently meaningless space cannot provide such relevant events – or so the story goes. In suburbia, the philosophers of modern life, also known as the Pet Shop Boys, have told us, there is nothing "else to do but hang around, hang around, hang around." (The lyricist of the Pet Shop Boys, Neil Tennant, is also a second-generation Irish emigrant.)

To understand the cultural image of the suburb as being apparently without history, without place and without characters means to understand its repression in narrative representations of Ireland, that is, in films and novels, but also in epic poems and the theatre. Everything that, according to the central theories of narratology, could motivate a narrative, is missing. First of all, the suburb is criticised for its apparent uni-

formity; everything looks the same, and consequently no semantic spatial differences are discernible that could motivate a story (Lotman 535). Secondly, the suburb is criticised for its apparent consistency; everything always remains the same, there is no before and no after, and consequently no chronological differences are discernible that could structure a story (Bachtin 8). Thirdly, the suburban residents are criticised for their apparent standardisation and disconnectedness; as no one is different or individual, no relational figurations evolve that could inspire a story (Propp 21).

The common image of the suburb as “artificial, superficial, monotonous, and dysfunctional” (Archer 25) seems to prevent any further literary consideration of life in the suburb. Modernist and postmodern literature, consequently, has neglected the suburbs almost entirely (Kuchta 10). Ireland, like most countries, understands itself as divided into country and city, to quote the title of Raymond Williams’ famous study of national topography. The country poets write stories of vertical movement, excavating submerged layers of meaning from the past; here, Seamus Heaney digs his way into memory. The city writers write narratives of horizontal movement; here, Leopold Bloom encounters the diversity of the urban dwelling, where different traditions and individuals meet and overlap endlessly. If noticing the suburb at all, the Irish protagonists of modern literature, Yeats and Joyce, showed nothing but an open hostility towards the suburb. Yeats, for example, “castigated [H. G.] Wells’s scientific romances as the ‘opium of the suburbs’”, and Joyce criticised “the ‘crude practicability’ [of Rudyard Kipling] that reminded him of a ‘suburban subaltern’” (Kuchta 10).

While nineteenth century politicians praised the suburbs as the heralds of modern civilisation overcoming unhygienic inner cities and backward countryside living at the same time (Kuchta 5-6), by the twentieth century such domesticising endeavours were increasingly seen as violent acts of colonisation. Colonisation came to be understood as much as an external process suppressing indigenous cultures as an internal process, as a ‘colonization of the life-world,’ as Jürgen Habermas (522) describes it; whereas external colonisation was driven by imperialist nation states, internal colonisation appeared the result of an alien(ating) capitalism. Either way, colonisation, and with it the suburb, was seen as the central opponent to an authentic life. However, in their hatred against nineteenth-century modernity, modern intellectuals, progressives and conservatives alike, began to despise the people that, with no fault of their own, had to live in modern times.

Modernism’s anger at colonial processes was soon to be levelled against the inhabitants of the suburb. According to John Archer, a leading cultural historian of the suburb, Lewis Mumford’s paradigmatic study *The City in History* from the early 1960s

epitomizes this position, condemning suburbanites as leading effectively meaningless lives amidst ‘a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers [...]. (Archer 24)

Modern life, the critics agree, is rubbish; and those who live it do not deserve any close attention. As a consequence, those who are narrating Ireland usually neglect and repress life in the suburb. Those who have to live the modern life leave Ireland – or else, live a life that does not exist on any existing cultural maps. To write about such a uniform, standardised and homogeneous life, it appeared, was against all that Irish literature stood for – and should stand for. To write the suburb appeared as utterly un-Irish.

### An Ode to Suburbia: Eavan Boland

Eavan Boland is probably the first Irish poet, and probably even one of the first poets at all, who dared to ignore the stigma attached to the suburb. In 1975, she published a collection of poems entitled *The War Horse* including an “Ode to Suburbia”. The title of the poem is, contrary to some critics’ belief (e.g. Wenzell 138-141), by no means completely ironic: this is indeed an ode to suburbia, although the praise is still somewhat reserved. While the suburban is still portrayed as a rather “negative location” (Sullivan 340), it nonetheless becomes a central topic of her poetic concerns. The poem begins with reference to familiar complaints. First, the suburb and its inhabitants are described as aesthetically not very pleasing: “the claustrophobia / Of your back garden’s varicose / With shrubs, make an ugly sister / of you suburbia” (*Boland Collection* 44, l. 3-6). In a second step, the “ugly” materiality of the suburb is shown to be devoid of any higher meaning: “No magic here. Yet you encroach until / The shy countryside, fooled / by your plainness falls, then rises / From your bed changed, schooled / Forever by your skill, / Your compromises” (l. 25-30). There are no Cuchulainns here, no rough beasts slouching towards Bethlehem, no Tollund men and no Ulysses: just plain ordinary compromises crafted from life itself. A life, however, that is not as powerless as the (mostly male) critics of suburbanity insinuate (Malcolm 16-19), but skilfully pragmatic.

*The War Horse* closes with a poem on the central figure of this skilful crafting of compromises wrought from contingency: the “Suburban Woman” (Boland, *Collection* 50-52). The poem starts with a familiar sentiment: “Town and country at each other’s throat” (l. 1). While (mostly male) urbanites and traditionalists fight over the right to represent Ireland, the life of ordinary people seems no more than collateral damage, caught in-between: “But they came, armed / with blades and ladders, with slimed / knives, day after day, week by week – [...] Withdrawing / neither side had gained, but there, dying, / caught in cross-fire, her past lay” (l. 7-13). Political concerns, here, are not evaded, but translated to the level of lived experience. Still unsure of her own poetic stance, the speaker tries to wrestle her own daily domestic routines of household, motherhood and partnership from those images that dominate the public discourse and deny this form of life any form of relevance.

Eavan Boland spent most of her childhood away from Ireland in London. She began her career as a poet in the 1960s, after taking Literature at Trinity College in Dublin. Her first poetry collection, although entitled *New Territory* (1967), charts familiar ter-

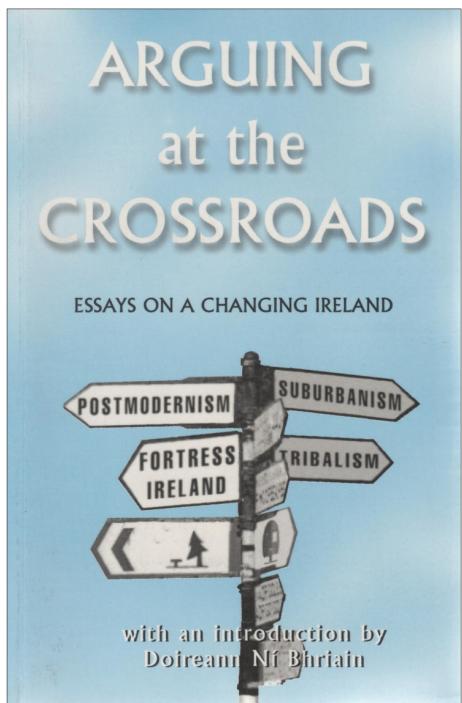


Fig. 2: Cover from *Arguing at the Crossroads*

"Imagining Ireland", which she contributed to a collection entitled *Arguing at the Crossroads* (1997) from the small publishing house New Island Books, Boland reflects upon the impact that moving to a suburb had on her writing. Contrary to the scholarly code of paraphrase, I will quote at length from this essay as I think it captures what is at stake here in exactly the right words:

As a student and a young poet I drank coffee and talked about literature in the centre of the city, inside the shelter of pubs and libraries and college rooms where poetry seemed an unquestioned and honoured undertaking. I had a flat full of books and coffee cups which was hardly a mile away from the canal [...]. I felt part [...] of a literary tradition. I felt the excitement [...] of having the chance to add to it. The word Irish in front of the word poetry or literature felt like an answer now, rather than a question or an enigma. I did not want and I did not seek out any more questions.

But they came anyway. I married in my early twenties. I left the flat I lived in. I packed up my books and went, in the dead of winter, to a suburb only four miles away from the centre but light years away from its concerns. The road was raw and partially unbuilt. The street lamps were not yet connected. No one had the time to sit and drink coffee and talk about poetry or tradition. [...]

That first spring [...] I thought of little else but practicalities. Ovens and telephones became images and emblems of the real world. The house was cold. We had no curtains. [...]

rain and concentrates on questions of Irish identity and how to narrate the nation. Trying to find her place within the literary scene of Dublin, she revisits traditional topics and forms, writing about "Yeats in Civil War" and "The Flight of the Earls". And although she brought new perspectives to these topics, the material seemed never really hers. In the early seventies, Boland got married and moved to Dundrum, once a small town in its own right that had become a southern suburb to the sprawling city of Dublin. Here, Boland became mother to two daughters. It took until 1975 to publish a new collection of poetry, *The War Horse*, from which the "Ode to Suburbia" and the "Suburban Woman" are taken. Here, the rift between Ireland's literary history and Boland's everyday concerns first began to show.

Boland is not only poet, but also a powerful essayist. In an essay entitled

Occasionally I would be aware of the contradictions and poignance of our new home. But in the main I missed the fact that the shops, the increasing traffic, the lights on the hills and we ourselves were not isolated pieces of information. They and we were part of a pattern: one that was being repeated throughout Ireland in those years. Before our eyes, and because of them, a village was turning into a suburb.

Summers came and went and trees began to define the road. Garden walls were put up and soon enough the voices calling over them on long, bright evenings, the bicycle thrown on its side, and the single roller skate, belonged to my children. Somewhat to my surprise, I had done what most human beings have done, I had found a world and I had populated it.

And yet it did not exist on any known map. This place with its cars, its exhaust fumes, its clipped hedges and exuberant children could not be found in any breviary of Irish poetry or any catalogue of Irish history. It was not the place childhood, with its romance and invention, had prepared me for. It was not the place my adolescent years had prepared me to find. It was a downright and actual world. Its emergencies were not national or literary. They did not seem to belong, and they had not been predicted, by that engagement with the word Ireland which had so preoccupied me when I was younger. This place seemed on the one hand, too local, and, on the other, too universal to go with what I had come to think of as a national literature and a national identity.

But in this suburban house, nevertheless, at the foothills of the Dublin mountains, married and with two little daughters, I led a life which would have been recognizable to any woman who had led it and to many others who had not. My days were arrayed with custom and necessity, acts so small their momentousness was visible to no one but myself. Season by season, I separated cotton from wool and the bright digits of gloves from ankle-socks. I drove the car. I collected children from school. In spring, the petals from across the road blew down, strewing the kerbs with the impression of a summer wedding. In February, after a high wind, the village street was littered with slates.

[...] As each morning came around, with its fresh sights and senses, I felt increasingly the distance between my own life, my lived experience, and conventional interpretations both of poetry and the poet's life. It was not exactly or even chiefly that the recurrences of my world – a child's face, the dial of a washing machine – were absent from the tradition, although they were. It was not even so much that I was a woman. It was that, being a woman, I had entered into a life for which poetry has no name. [...]

Only a few miles away [from the city centre] was the almost invisible world that everyone knew of and no one referred to. Of suburbs and housing estates. Of children and women. Of fires lighted for the first winter chill, of food put on the table. No one referred to this. The so-called ordinary world [...] was not even mentioned. [...]

This inconvenient and unglamorous place, where the rain fell coldly on new houses, was not marked on any map I knew, physical, imaginative or literary. It was not that I felt someone, or even myself, should mark it on such a map. It was that its exclusion must call the very act of cartography into question. (Boland, "Imagining" 17-22)

Boland describes how she discovers the world of literature, which had promised safety ("shelter"), community ("part") and closure ("answers"), to be far removed ("light years") from the realities of everyday life ("real world"); indeed, the literary world is found to be encapsulating itself from the normality ("inconvenient and unglamorous") of the "ordinary world". Life in the suburb, on the other hand, was still unprotected against the "downright and actual world": there are "no curtains", for example, to shelter the poet from life outside the window. The suburb appears as completely separated from the

rest of Ireland: physically, as the roads are yet “unbuilt” and the place “not yet connected”, and imaginatively, as it appears on no “maps” that claim to represent “a national literature and a national identity”. The “nation”, which had so occupied the minds of Irish poets, suddenly appears as an irrelevant category. On the one hand, the everyday activities (“acts so small”) of suburban life seem too insignificant and too particular to be of any relevance for the concept of the nation. On the other hand, the recognisability of the “repeated” “pattern[s]” of suburban family life do not stop at national borders: they are identifiable to all “human beings”. Ordinary life in the suburb is, “on the one hand, too local, and, on the other, too universal” to be thought within the parameters of the nation. Instead, patterns of seasonality (“summers”, “spring”, “winter”, “season by season”) and the diurnal (“each morning”), of “food”, clothing and household chores structure life in the suburb. Narrating Ireland is of little concern here.

Ten years after their first encounter, Boland revisits the “Suburban Woman” in a poem called “Suburban Woman: A Detail”, from her collection *The Journey and Other Poems* (1986). By now, her poetic voice has become much more assured; to write about suburban domestic life is no longer something she feels ashamed of. She begins with a glimpse of the mundane life on the edges of the city: “The chimneys have been swept. / The gardens have their winter cut. / The shrubs are prinked, the hedges gelded. / The last dark shows up the headlights / of the cars coming down the Dublin mountains. / Our children used to think they were stars” (Boland, *Collection* 111-112, l. 6). The mundane, here, although ordinary and clearly domesticated, is peaceful, serene, good: a place where children can dream. Form and meaning follow a regular, soothing pattern. While this might appear like a middle-class retreat from Ireland’s manifold troubles, it is also the place for a new beginning, for new stories to be told: stories that do not carry the weight to narrate Ireland. The suburb becomes a place where one can begin to experience life beyond the shackles of the traditional Irish imaginary, and where new forms of politics might take their beginnings. When the speaker leaves her house to visit a neighbour, the light of dusk – a recurring moment in Boland’s poetry (Sullivan 339) – makes her loose the safety of tradition, and open for new experiences: “Suddenly I am not certain / of the way I came / or the way I will return, / only that something / which may be nothing / more than darkness has begun / softening the definitions / of my body, leaving / the fears and all the terrors / of the flesh shifting the airs / and forms of the autumn quiet / crying *remember us*” (l. 31-42; emphasis in original).

Where earlier (male) critics condemned the suburb as “bastardized” (McDonald 549), Boland embraces its hybrid quality, coming to understand “the suburb as a hybrid zone well-suited to the complexities of her poetry” (Sullivan 338). The suburb comes to “challenge the intellectually undemanding polarities of city and country (which so readily present themselves)” (Becket 105) and opens the field for more complex relations that offer no static oppositions to rely on. For Boland, the “suburb is altogether more fragile and transitory. To start with, it is composed with lives in a state of process” (*Lessons* 160).

### Life: A Network between Things and Beings

For Boland, the suburb becomes a place to contemplate shifting human relations, relations to one's (changing) body and to other people as much as to the material world. What is crying 'remember us' here, are the small acts of everyday life – too small and too common to find their way into any narration of the nation, but at least as important to those who live their life within the borders of such a political construct. Going beyond – or maybe: before – the official struggles that follow the binary oppositions of colonisers and oppressed, Protestants and Catholics, Republicans and Unionists, modernists and traditionalists, the urban and the pastoral, Boland approaches a language of immanence. Between past and future Boland discovers the present; between mythical images and modernist visions Boland discovers the presence of her body; between the communal 'we' and the individual 'I' she discovers relational networks; between the public and the private, she discovers the domestic.

Boland's first prose collection is called *Object Lessons* (1995). Here, she makes a striking discovery about the tradition of Irish literature she cannot find a place in: "At that point I saw that in Ireland, with its national tradition, its bardic past, the confusion between the political poem and the public poem was a dangerous and inviting motif. It encouraged the subject of the poem to be a representative and the object to be ornamental" (Boland, *Lessons* 178). When Boland is questioning traditional Irish writing and its project of cartography, as argued above, she is questioning the project of narrative representation, a project that is deeply entangled with the concept of the nation-state, where mediated representations and political representation fight for prevalence (Mitchell). Instead, Boland argues for some sort of grassroots politics that begins with the experience of everyday life, an experience that does not stand, symbolically, for some higher meaning, an experience that does not claim to be representative for an 'Irish' experience, but that is offering itself to be shared. Every attempt to include the suburb on the national map, every new act of representation, Boland knows, would only be a new act of repression (Tyler 288-289).

Rather than *representing* life, Boland's art is to take part in life: "I loved the illusion, the conviction, the desire – whatever you want to call it – that the words were agents rather than extensions of reality. That they made my life happen, rather than just recorded it happening" (Boland, *A Journey* 258-259). Both her body and the body of the text regain a material agency that is lost in traditional narrative representations. Similar to Donna Haraway's appropriation of Katie King's theory of the poem, Boland ascribes agency to the body of poetry: "Like King's objects called 'poems', which are sites of literary production where language also is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes" (Haraway 200-201). The female body, instead of being a representative of Mother Éire only, is to be brought out into the open. The language of poetry, instead of providing representations of Mother Éire, is to gain a presence in the life of its corporeal readers.

It would be short-sighted, however, to connect writing about the suburb, about relations and materiality, with femininity only. Urban versus rural (literature) is a binary opposition that does not fold easily onto the distinction between man and woman. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that the binary structure of Irish writing that knows nothing between country and city, past and future, was felt so strongly by a female writer whose experience was not to be thought within such categories. There is, as Boland emphasises, “a powerful tradition [...] of the male poet. Irish poetry was male and bardic in ethos. Historically the woman is the passive object of poetry. We aren’t supposed to write poems, we are supposed to be in them” (qtd. in Battersby 3). While the city and the rural where public spaces inhabited by males, the suburb could be seen as “the domestic sphere writ large” (Sullivan 340). Boland’s writing, consequently, is not a retreat from the public and a re-evaluation of the traditional feminine sphere. Rather, Boland presents domestic concerns, concerns of house and home, as transcending the distinction of public and private. (Seen in this light, the objection against domestication that fuelled anti-colonial (and anti-capitalist) sentiments might be reinterpreted as a fear of domesticising, and ultimately, a fear of feminisation.)

Boland’s final encounter with the “Suburban Woman” in her 2001 collection *Against Love Poetry* adds “Another Detail” to the picture (46-47).

#### **Suburban Woman: Another Detail**

Dusk

    and the neighborhood  
is the color of shadow,  
the color of stone.

Here at my desk I imagine  
wintry air and the smart of peat.

And an uncurtained  
front room where

another woman is living my life.  
Another woman is lifting my child.

Is setting her down.

Is cutting oily rind from a lemon.

Is crushing that smell against the skin of her fingers.

She goes to my door and closes it.

Goes to my window and pulls the curtain slowly.

The kitchen,  
the child she lifts again and holds  
are all mine

    and all the time  
the bitter, citric fragrance stays against her skin.

She stares at the road  
in the featureless November twilight.

(I remember that twilight.)

Stares for a moment at  
the moon which has drained it.

Then pulls the curtains shut.  
And puts herself and my child beyond it.

II

I can see nothing now.  
I write at my desk alone.  
I choose words taken from the earth,  
from the root, from the faraway  
oils and essence of elegy:  
Bitter. And close to the bone.

Life in the suburb, finally, has become a place of sharing experiences. The vision, the smell, the touch of another woman's life in the suburb is so close to the speaker's own experiences that she finds those experiences hard to distinguish. Performatively, as the curtain metaphor suggests, another woman lives her life in "the theatre of ordinary life" (Boland, *A Journey* 212). Despite the recognisable script of the performance, however, the life of the other woman remains her own. When the curtain falls, the union of the speaker and the other woman is disrupted. The feeling of familiarity and closeness turns into recognising an insurmountable difference. The poem neither celebrates a communal union nor individual difference. Instead, it is a practice, a performance, a habitus that these women share: they might live the same life, but each with her own body. Sameness and difference, community and individuality, are no longer oppositions here, but functions of the same act of living. "If art – and indeed poetry –" Boland writes, "was shaped by the interplay between individual and communal, then there was a chance to look into the fire of those contradictions, as if into a moment of origin" (*A Journey* 26). "*Common and proper, genus and individual are only two slopes dropping down from either side of the watershed of whatever [quelconque]*", Giorgio Agamben writes in his book on the *Coming Community* (20; emphasis in original). It is the exemplary life of the 'Suburban Woman' which marks the place where the shared and the un-sharable meet. It is here where an egalitarian politics of difference might begin, and the heroic politics of representation might end.

### Conclusion: "You can't hide in Suburbia"

Neither the city, nor the countryside, but middle-class suburbia is (Western) modernity's most decisive contribution to humanity's way of living. Modernist art, as was shown above, loves to neglect this way of living, and most cultural critics stigmatise it as unauthentic, and consequently un-Irish. It is here, however, in suburbia, where, for better or for worse, modern men and modern women, with money on their hands, but not rich, with friends, but not embedded in a tight-knit community, are born. Without a mythical tradition, neither oppressor nor oppressed, neither coloniser nor colonised, but always oppressor *and* oppressed, coloniser *and* colonised, s/he has to "make do" in her "practice of everyday life" (de Certeau 66). "Suburbia is a physical, social, and cultural fabric (landscape as well as ethnoscapes) that people both employ and pro-

duce as part of their *practices of everyday living*", John Archer (26; emphasis in original) reasons.

Eavan Boland's poems about life in the suburb are neither about the past nor the future, they are about the present. Her poems about life in the suburb are neither about origins nor about destinations, they are about presence. Her poems are anything but transcendental: they are about the immanence of materiality. The details about life in the suburb do not add up to a representative story, they cannot be employed to 'narrate Ireland'. Indeed, the routine work of the suburban woman appears too mundane, too repetitive, too uneventful to be narrated at all. Nonetheless, Boland's close look reveals an endless array of micro-stories hidden behind the grand national narratives: stories of aging, stories of childcare, stories of repairing and mending, stories of routines and rituals, stories of interrupted dialogues and family quarrels. The open form of the poem into which Boland weaves these micro-stories allows the readers to make these stories their own and learn to appreciate the value theses apparently worthless stories have for their own life.

"Young poets are like children", Boland claims of her earlier attempts to engage with 'Irish' poetry: "They assume the dangers to themselves are those their elders identified." The danger "their elders identified" was the loss of a national identity (Boland, *Lessons* x). Both the real emigrants and those who live an apparently alienated life within Ireland appear obsessed with searching for authenticity. National identity seemed to work as a proxy for such desires: the return and re-instalment of the nation promised the possibility of an unalienated life. As long as this was not to be, fictional representations of this nation had to serve this function. The suburb, as we saw above, was seen as an alienating force and therefore to be left out of any representation of Ireland. Once life in the suburb is no longer seen in the light of a lost nation, the claim of alienation can be dropped. The result of Boland's sharable micro-stories is neither the "one, yet many" of the nation state (Brennan 49) nor an autonomous subject. Whereas nation (Bhabha 1) and subject (Taylor 51-52) appear to rely on coherent narratives, Boland offers an understanding of self and other that is episodic at best (Strawson 430), and an open process by nature. Whether such writing is still to be understood as narrative, and whether it is indeed still 'Irish' writing, is subject to debate.

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## **NARRATING IRELAND IN THE NEW MEDIA**



## **CELTIC TIGER IRELAND AND THE POLITICS OF DISGUST: WHITE TRASH IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S PLAY *THE PRIDE OF PARNELL STREET* AND LEONARD ABRAHAMSON'S FILM *ADAM AND PAUL***

**Sarah Heinz (Berlin)**

Social identity lies in difference, and the difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat. (Bourdieu 479)

In his famous 1943 St. Patrick's Day speech – during World War II, six years after the Irish Constitution had been adopted and fifty years after the foundation of the Gaelic League – Éamon de Valera envisioned an ideal Ireland or “the Ireland that we dreamed of” as

a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. (qtd. in Lee 334)

Here, Irishness is constructed as an identity based on the rural nature of the envisioned nation. This nation is created along essentialist categories of religion, gender and family as bodily, genetic facts that can be mapped onto Ireland's geography. Its fields, villages, cosy homesteads and hearths become images of Ireland's 'natural', God-given self. This linking of genetics, folk and landscape can be found in almost all national narratives: “The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression” (Bhabha, *Location* 205). Who ‘we’ are is turned into a natural sight that is “putatively self-evident to the naked eye” (Nishikawa 1725), both in terms of the citizen's body and the nation's geography. National narratives thus invent the nation while simultaneously erasing the signs of their inventedness.

This notion of national communities as genetic or historical facts has been challenged and debated in recent decades. Benedict Anderson has defined nation and nationality as “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” with a very particular, yet “profound emotional legitimacy” (4). For him, nations are imagined communities that need media and narratives to exist and that need constant repetition to go on living in people's minds. In a similar vein, Homi Bhabha states that nations and national identities are the products of narrative and metaphorical processes (“Introduction” 1). A national identity turns into a feeling of ‘nationness’ “as a form of social and textual affiliation” and as “social and literary narratives”. A nation becomes “a narrative strategy” (*Location* 201).

The following analysis of Sebastian Barry's play *The Pride of Parnell Street*, first performed in 2007 at the Tricycle Theatre in London, and of Leonard Abrahamson's film *Adam and Paul*, produced in 2004, will show how the national narrative of Ireland as a bucolic, rural utopia of authentic, native Irishmen and Irishwomen changed in the wake of the Celtic Tiger and its economic success. The play and the film present Ireland's new sense of self as deeply influenced by a globally compatible consumer culture. However, Barry and Abrahamson do not affirm this new narrative of Irishness by celebrating Ireland's new urban way of life with its multiple lifestyle choices. In striking contrast to many films and texts produced around 2000 that presented upbeat stories about handsome young urbanites, they rather question the new nation's self-image by focussing on those who are not able and not allowed to partake in this narrative self-construction. Adam, Paul and Joe are Dubliners, but as junkies and petty criminals whose bodies decay and die they live on the margins of Dublin's and Ireland's new, shiny spaces and find themselves excluded from the new national narrative.

In order to theoretically explain these acts of exclusion I will apply the notion of a politics of disgust that is installed by resorting to ideas of trash, dirt and hygiene.<sup>1</sup> I will then connect this politics of disgust to research on the term 'white trash'. The thesis is that by representing the marginalised lives of people seen as white trash, the play and the film point to the blind spots and potentially dangerous ideological implications of a national narrative that attempts to construct Ireland as a homogeneous nation and culture. This construction is made possible by including those who come up to the new ideal of globally adaptable, successful consumers with multiple lifestyle choices, while it excludes those who are not able to control their lives and bodies due to poverty, illness, addiction and a lack of choices.

This exclusion is justified and naturalised via feelings of disgust. Johann Gottfried Herder sees this as the foundational structure of culture in general: "Everything which is still the *same* as my nature, which can be *assimilated* therein, I envy, strive towards, make my own; *beyond this*, kind nature has armed me with *insensibility, coldness and blindness*; it can even become *contempt* and *disgust*" (qtd. in Welsch 195, emphasis in the original). Wolfgang Welsch calls this "cultural racism" or "the purity precept" (195). Barry's and Abrahamson's narratives uncover the force of such images of outsiders within the national collective: "[...] *those people* encodes the selective, exclusionary strategy of projecting a delimited form of difference [...] that allows a normative center to operate" (Hartigan 3). Although different in content, the new sense of Irishness during the Celtic Tiger therefore shares its basic binary structure and its goal of creating and maintaining boundaries with de Valera's bucolic idyll.

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1 The term 'politics of disgust' was put forward by Ange-Marie Hancock in her study *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004) which deals with ideological justifications for specific welfare policies that restrict the rights of welfare recipients, define their public images and preserve social inequalities.

### Irish Cultural Production during the Celtic Tiger

To contextualise Barry's and Abrahamson's depictions of Dublin and its inhabitants, I will give a short overview of representations of new urban lifestyles during the 1990s and 2000s. Many Irish movies produced around 2000, specifically romantic comedies like *About Adam* (directed by Gerard Stembridge, 2000), *Goldfish Memory* (directed by Elizabeth Gill, 2003), *When Brendan Met Trudy* (directed by Kieron J. Walsh, 2000) or television series like *Bachelor's Walk* (directed by John Carney, Kieran Carney and Tom Hall, 2001-2003, 2006), presented a new and globally adaptable Irishness that was explicitly located in urban surroundings. Cityscape took the place of landscape, and good-looking, cool, hip young people took the place of Valera's comely maidens and the wisdom of serene old age. Such films show a new sense of self and a strong desire for an Irishness that seemed to look to the future instead of the past. This desire to recreate the nation is ironically outlined in Brian O'Byrne's film *The Fifth Province* (1997), a satire on film-making in which aspiring young screenwriter Timmy is told by a 'European expert': "When it comes to the story, I'll tell you what we don't want. We do not want any more stories about ... Irish mothers, priests, sexual repressions and the miseries of the rural life. We want stories that are upbeat, that are urban, that have pace and verve and are going somewhere" (qtd. in McLoone, *Irish Film* 169). The national narrative of Celtic Tiger Ireland wanted to leave behind what was increasingly seen as the miseries of rural life instead of a natural, utopian way of life in the countryside.

The new generation of Irish film-makers and novelists seems to support these problematisations by depicting young people's new ways of dealing with issues of sexuality, contraception, homosexuality or single mothers in urban environments that are open to new identities and self-exploration and that reject older notions of morality, family and the body. The result is a new sense and a new narrative of Irishness as being young, urban, free and optimistic. However, this new narrative has blind spots that will be the focus of the following analyses. While films like *Goldfish Memory* or *About Adam* present a new urban Irishness, they repeat the problematic implications of nationalist images by again basing their self-construction on exclusion and the creation of boundaries. Pat Brereton analyses these common denominators of both images as 'nation branding', i.e. the invention of a group identity which "might be regarded as equally suspect as older more stereotypically Arcadian attributes" (31).

While de Valera's image of Ireland was based on an essentialist, 'natural' connection to the land, the New Ireland in the 1990s and up to the financial crisis constructed its sense of self mainly as partaking in a global consumer culture. What all of this amounts to is the status of (perhaps finally) being 'normal', a status that becomes obvious when realising that the films mentioned above could easily be set in any other European or American city. If the young gay and lesbian couples of *Goldfish Memory* met in Barcelona, Berlin or Vienna, or if the romantic mix-ups of the dating twentysomethings in *About Adam* were set in Paris, London or New York, the main

plot and the audience's expectations would not change: "In the recent bid to divest films of signifiers of tradition and parochialism [...] there has been a move toward an increasingly generic style of filmmaking, which mobilises ahistoric and location-unspecific signifiers of Irishness that are easily exported to the global marketplace" (Ging 185; also see Brereton).

In the following, the paper will analyse the blind spots of this construction of normality in the recent Irish national narrative. Barry's and Abrahamson's protagonists cannot partake in what McLoone calls valorised conspicuous consumption or "hip hedonism" (*Cityscapes* 38), and they are neither handsome nor successful. It is exactly this exclusion of people seen as white trash that makes a new sense of Irishness as young, successful, cool and urban possible. Only by excluding those who question the homogeneity of the new self can the new Irish narrative of liberation and lifestyle choices be established. After centuries of being seen as inferior non-whites that were likened to apes by the English and American mainstream during colonisation and immigration (cf. Curtis; Dyer 52-57; Ignatiev), and after decades of a self-construction as an isolated and rural peasant society, Ireland had re-invented itself as being 'like all the others': a Western consumer society of affluence and liberated sexuality. In the title of his short story collection, William Vorm called this being "Paddy no more". The analysis of narratives that challenge such visions helps to reveal the desired self-images that Ireland had created for itself as constructions because they focus on those who are *not* allowed to take part. In that sense, films like *Adam and Paul* or a play like *The Pride of Parnell Street* are also narratives about the Irish nation; however, they are what Adam Lowenstein calls "confrontational texts" that challenge a nation's self-image instead of stabilising it as "compensational texts" do (8-9).

### **White Trash and the Boundary Work of Disgust**

As outlined above, nations are invented and perpetuated by a systematic essentialisation and naturalisation of belonging. This logic not only needs those who are seen as being part of the national family. It also needs a double movement of exclusion that takes recourse to ideas of purity (and therefore also cleansing) that are implied in a notion of nation as family and genetic fate (see e.g. McClintock 89). Externally, the nation's self has to be set off against other races, systems or ideologies which are turned into that nation's others. Internally, this sense of being a nation has to negate a community's internal heterogeneity by severing the genetic link with minorities within who are marked as outsiders in spite of their location on the inside of the nation. Bhabha calls this "the nation split within itself":

The problem is not simply the 'self-hood' of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference. (*Location* 212)

As studies of taboo and transgression have shown, bodily reactions such as disgust or fear of contamination are among the strongest means to create and maintain such boundaries and notions of difference and to reduce the danger of realising that the nation already is (and always has been) a liminal and therefore hybrid space.

Prohibitions and boundaries which are based on a politics of disgust are so powerful because they, like national narratives of familial linkage and genetic fate, seem to be based on something that is inherent in our genetic make-up. Bodily reactions like disgust seem to naturally support the establishment of boundaries towards people or things seen as unclean or unhealthy. Taboo and disgust are therefore inseparably linked to social order, as Mary Douglas has shown in her analysis of dirt as “matter out of place”: “Douglas argues that objects are not considered dirty in and of themselves, but because of their status or classification in a system of categories” (Horlacher 8). Disgust is specifically tied to the taboo on excretion, a taboo that can be linked to Kristeva’s notion of abjection: “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism” (Kristeva 1). The taboo on dirt and excretion therefore establishes a society by marking off areas that do not belong to the social order or that pose the threat of disorder: “[...] all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points” (Douglas 121). As we will see in the analysis of *Adam and Paul* and *The Pride of Parnell Street*, the fear of behaving like an animal, of being reduced to mere matter and losing the status as a human being is deeply ingrained in the protagonists as well as in our position as the spectators of their behaviour in the theatre or cinema. Taboo, its effects on the human body and its regulation of bodily functions and reactions can thus be regarded as a “symbolic connection between physical purity and social stability” (Gurr 119).

Although interdisciplinary research has repeatedly shown that taboo and disgust are cultural and social constructions and prohibitions which are bound to shifting and historically contingent notions of right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy, pure and impure, the power of disgust cannot be denied and is still at work in today’s societies (Douglas 2; Stallybrass and White). Our bodily reactions towards specific smells, tastes or touch seem to come from our inside instead of being a prescription or construction of a discursive outside.<sup>2</sup> What results from these perceptions of disgust as innate and visceral is the invisibility of the acts of classification, naming and labelling

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2 As Judith Butler has shown, this naturalising power of discourse to make us believe that bodies are a result of innate qualities and that our personalities evolve from the inside to the outside is one of the most powerful instruments in maintaining a social order and its power structure: “[...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25).

connected to taboo and bodily transgression. The analysis of white trash as both a symbolic and a social boundary shows how effective and dangerous the politics of disgust can be because they “make social boundaries seem natural and unremarkable” (Wray 14). The politics of disgust are of a ‘semiotic’ nature (see Culler), and they “are embodied and materialized in our collective practices, our shared activities, and our social institutions” (Wray 14).

The label ‘white trash’ is an example of such boundary work. It is a normative and morally charged name for (mostly) internal others that is connected to dirt, contamination and a threat towards the community’s purity. In the process of symbolic boundaries turning into social ones, such degrading labels create a social system that inscribes hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. onto bodies and minds.<sup>3</sup> In his analysis of white trash discourses in America, Hartigan stresses:

[...] white trash is neither just a name nor a distinct social group. Rather, it is a form of objectification developed by a range of social commentators who tapped the cultural perception of pollution to make their fellow citizens recognize a fearful, debased white threat to domestic order in the United States. (106)

The position of poor whites on the margins of the white mainstream was explained via biological factors like ‘bad blood’, incestuous relations or mental defects. The way that white trash is imagined is more often than not linked to “their threatening difference in bodily and behavioral terms rather than as linked to economics” (Hartigan 40). This move makes a change in economic circumstances or activities against social inequality less pressing. At the same time, it objectifies the social scientist’s or the politician’s view onto urban poverty by focusing on ‘how these people are’ instead of outlining how this image of white trash or the urban poor is created and maintained by multiple boundary work that co-opts class, race, gender and sexuality into mutually reinforcing processes of exclusion, objectification and naturalisation. Hartigan therefore stresses that “we must devise ways to de-essentialize views of the poor as a group apart from society as a whole” (42). His claim is that we can do this “[b]y way of addressing these interpretive stances, and of imagining ways to differently engage audiences – objectifying the relational dynamics of class self-construction instead of producing essentialized portraits of the poor” (Hartigan 42-43). It is exactly this focus on relational dynamics and our sense of self-construction that the play and the film achieve by addressing their audiences’ interpretive stances. In the play and the film, we face up to our disgust and fear and thus are made aware of the relational nature of our processes of self-construction as unmarked and normal. This suggests “ways to think more imaginatively about the fusion of racial and classed forms of inequality, particularly how they are produced and maintained in multiple, visceral, overlapping registers simultaneously” (Hartigan 56).

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3 On the “embarrassed ‘etc.’ at the end of the list [of categories of identity]” and the limits or failure to “encompass a situated subject” and its agency in such lists, see Butler 182.

The following interpretations of *The Pride of Parnell Street* and *Adam and Paul* take up this threat that white trash poses to ‘normal’ society and its self-inventions. The protagonists Adam, Paul and Joe can be characterised as ‘white trash’ whose deviation from Ireland’s national narrative of success, youth and affluence is punished by their exclusion and marginalisation which are justified by a politics of disgust. These acts of abjection, of casting off people who threaten the creation and perpetuation of a homogeneous and homely nation, uncover the hidden fear of people who are foreign yet familiar and who are outsiders within. My interpretation will examine images of dirt and ideals of purity. Here, the analysis will focus on how Adam, Paul and Joe try to resist the politics of disgust and its objectifying gaze at the poor body by reclaiming their subjectivity and humanity. It will also show how the logics of purity have been internalised by the protagonists who desire above all to become ‘clean’.

### Dublin Junk 1: Images of Dirt and Purity in *The Pride of Parnell Street*

As outlined above, the term ‘trash’ is clearly linked to a fear of being polluted by an invisible agent or germ, a fear that justifies and maintains symbolic and social boundaries. The term ‘junkie’ and the connection between trash and junk underline this effect: “The word ‘junkie’ is a derogatory identity category which has long been associated with drug use, particularly heroin injecting. It is a category that encompasses all the clichéd dirtiness, disease, deviancy, crime, dangerousness, laziness, and absence of will that are so commonly associated with injecting drug use” (Malins 159).<sup>4</sup> These associations with the term ‘junkie’ can be mapped onto the patterns of behaviour and physicality that have long been connected with white trash (Hartigan 71). Adam, Paul and Joe fit into both schemata: They have a recognisable physique which is the effect of their addiction, they do not work but live off petty crime, Joe is violent, and all three of the junkie protagonists can be assessed as having failed morally and socially. They are unable to fulfil their roles as fathers, husbands or friends because they fail to be reliable, strong-willed and self-controlled. Their death and decay clearly shows that they cannot even take care of themselves.

The effects of using the junkie as a foil to new notions of Ireland become obvious when looking at Barry’s text. *The Pride of Parnell Street* is a memory play in which Joe, now a junkie dying of AIDS, and Janet, his wife who separated from him after Joe beat her up, talk about their past experiences. They do this in interweaving monologues, and only at the end of the play do they actually see and interact with each other. The play is set in September 1999, a few months before the millennium, and both Joe and Janet reflect on this decisive date that seems to promise a sea change for Ireland’s future that has already started in the 1990s. “I want to see the bleeding

4 It is interesting that in recent years, Irish cinema and literature have appropriated the figure of the junkie and the topic of drug abuse in dramatic as well as comic guises, as examples like John Michael McDonagh’s comedy *The Guard* (2011), Darragh Byrne’s film *Parked* (2010) or Mia Gallagher’s novel *Hellfire* (2006) show.

new millennium that everyone's gassing on about. I want to fucking live" Joe says (Barry 52), and his expectation of a new future for Ireland is corroborated by Janet who says that "it's the new Ireland" which means that there are "[j]obs galore" (55). While Joe still thinks that his oldest son has to go away to England to get a job, Janet tells Joe that his son will help to build "Dublin. The Financial Services Centre. The docklands and all" (58).

However, in spite of his desire to live and to see the new millennium, Joe will not be part of this new national narrative. This failure to belong is embodied in Joe's position on the social margins of Dublin and in his addiction and AIDS infection that clearly show on his skin. At numerous points in the play, Joe describes his body and his addiction with images of dirt, pollution and contagion that activate feelings of disgust. When Janet visits him in the hospital at the end of the play, Joe describes his condition as follows: "And I'm lying there, feeling like shit, like maggots was in me brain, and no doubt, friends, looking like the plague, with rats in me skull and the long dreepy shite coming out me nostrils, a holy show if ever there was one" (56). Here, Joe applies politics of disgust and logics of purity and impurity to himself on several levels. He connects his body with the taboo on excretion and thus turns himself into trash and dirt. Furthermore, he links his body with contagion by saying that he looks like the plague. And finally, even though he is still alive, he presents his body as dead and abject, as infested with maggots and rats, which are both animals generally connected to dead bodies, decay and contagion. Joe even turns himself into a dead animal, taking away both his humanity and his life: "I have more holes in me body than a dead dog that the maggots have been eating" (33).

Such animal metaphors have always been used in order to justify social hierarchies and to perpetuate inequality (cf. Rafter 27; see also Hartigan 79-88). People seen as animalistic white trash and their 'breeding' behaviour are thus presented as endangering the health of society as a whole, a danger that is turned into a biological fact and whose abatement and control becomes a vital imperative. Ideas of cleansing with all their dangerous implications are not far when such dehumanising depictions are presented.

This danger of the politics of disgust becomes evident in the binary opposition of purity and impurity and the idea of cleansing that Joe has internalised. At several points in the play, Joe and Janet refer to Joe's dream of working at the power station in Ringsend. Joe does not want to work there because he needs a steady job but because "he knew the workers there washed the coal off themselves in this river of hot water that came out of the power station, it was after cooling the engines, and they had soap stuck in the walls of the river, and Joe liked all that, he said it was a grand life" (12-13, see also 52, 58). Similarly, Joe talks about "getting yourself cleaned up" when he wants to quit taking drugs (40), and both Joe and Janet refer to going swimming and bathing repeatedly, specifically when they think of happier times and good memories (cf. 12, 41-42, 30, 23). When Joe realises in the final scene that

Janet still loves him, this moment of being redeemed is framed with images of cleansing and regaining purity: "We were swimming then, in the sunshine, it was like we were swimming in the cold water of Dublin Bay, just her and me, when we were young, at the Shelly Banks, and everything washed away" (59). Joe's past and the mistakes he made are washed away, an act of cleansing which makes him regain his humanity. Nevertheless, this redemption reinstates the mutually exclusive opposition of purity and impurity that excluded Joe from the imagined 'we' in the first place and that employs a Manichean hierarchy of whiteness as pure, clean and human vs. blackness as impure, unclean and animalistic (see JanMohamed).

The power of these politics of disgust in defining hierarchical relations and creating stigmatypes also becomes apparent in Joe's corporeality and its presentation in the play. He is described as "*rough enough*" and "*very thin*" (9). His roughness can visibly be mapped onto his skin which has "*tattoos all over*" and is "*blotchy*" (18), both signs of a visible otherness that has literally taken away Joe's normality and health. Later on, Joe talks about people like him as "the shite [...] of Dublin" that the politicians would like to get rid of in order to create a "nice clean fucking perfect Dublin, so clean and so perfect the fucking salmon will climb up the river walls and walk about, happy as Larry" (19). It is exactly this nice and clean Dublin that forms the backdrop of films like *Goldfish Memory* whose aestheticised camera techniques and heavy focus on postproduction create an eternal summer with warm colours. Joe's Dublin obviously does not look like this. When he notices a rash on his arm and develops black bruises, he goes to the hospital. The reaction of the doctor mirrors the audience's intuitive and visceral reaction of disgust and fear of contagion: "So I go to the Accident and Emergency and I swear to Jesus, I see a young coloured doctor – after about two hundred hours, you know – and when he sees me red and black marks, he steps back like I had the fucking plague" (30-31). Due to his illness, which is a consequence of his social position and his past behaviour, Joe's whiteness is literally 'marked' with red and black melanoma. Wray's term of the stigmatype fits with Joe's position as white trash and makes clear that he is not part of the "unnamed, unmarked" and therefore 'normal' part of society (Wray 23, see also Hartigan 114-115). A seemingly natural hierarchy is turned upside down when Joe, the white Irishman, realises that he has become trash while the coloured doctor is a successful young professional.

Here it becomes clear that Irish society has not only changed in terms of economic success but also in terms of its ethnic homogeneity. Janet seems to regret this when she longingly thinks of the days when Ireland was still poor: "In them days was before the Africans came to Parnell Street and it was only ourselves knocking around and drinking in the pubs there" (Barry 11).<sup>5</sup> Joe's and Janet's multiple acts of including themselves in the Irish narrative and community are not successful anymore, even

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5 This change from a seemingly homogeneous to a multicultural society is discussed at several points of the play (see, for example, 14, 25, 34-35).

though Joe constructs his identity along the biologist lines of nationalism repeatedly. Janet stresses, for example, that “[...] he [Joe] could only be happy breathing the air of Dublin, Joe’s blood had Liffey water in it” (49). This logic of belonging via blood is also applied to their first-born: “And the first steps that Billy took was along the Royal Canal, and Joe said he just stepped around all the dog turds like it was in his blood. A real Dubliner, you know?” (30)

The new national narrative of the Celtic Tiger years, however, excludes people like him as it works on the basis of binary oppositions that distinguish between economic losers who are outsiders and winners who are insiders. This exclusive logic ironically reverberates in Janet’s formulation “only ourselves” that is reminiscent of the inclusive nationalist slogan “Sinn Féin” which can be translated as “we ourselves” and has also been formulated as “ourselves alone” (cf. Laffan 20).

The play thus shows that logics of exclusion are not only used by the people who reject Joe as white trash or junkie. Joe himself has internalised notions of purity, skin colour and the hierarchies of race and class connected to it. Consequently, he equally discriminates against the coloured doctor or the African shopkeepers as against himself. Joe even addresses the audience and tells us what to think of him: “All right, you’re looking at me maybe and thinking this fucker’s a dangerous-looking bastard. [...] Maybe you think if you sat up close to me, I’d be smelling, not even washed, you know, or give you some fucking disease, or I’d as soon knife you as look at you [...]. That I’m some bastard like that” (Barry 24). This is an illustration of the effects of the politics of disgust that Joe and the audience intuitively apply in their daily lives. Joe’s smell and his marked skin are interpreted as external signs of an internal degeneration that violate mainstream society’s decorum and that may pollute the individual citizen and the city or nation as a whole. Joe is not merely unwashed or dirty; he becomes trash and junk himself. Consequently, his casting off is naturalised by both our bodily reactions and our fear of the very real threat that an illness like AIDS poses.<sup>6</sup>

Joe reflects on this position at the margins of Irish society:

The fucking inner city they call it, like it was something inside something, something hidden inside, or safe inside, I don’t fucking know. But the place where I come from is all raw in the wind, *outside* with fucking knobs on, nothing fucking inner about it, it’s as out as you can get, like the North Pole. (18)

Joe’s former home has transformed into a space that needs to be cleaned up in order to fit into the ideal of a “nice clean fucking perfect Dublin”, and he has literally turned into an outsider, a dehumanised and unwanted specimen.

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6 In the course of the play, Joe even admits to having used this threat of infection in order to extort money for drugs (34).

### Dublin Junk 2: Images of Dirt and Purity in *Adam and Paul*

Leonard Abrahamson's film *Adam and Paul* opens with a scene that parallels Joe's presentation of Dublin city space as an unhomely outside. In the opening shots of the movie we see close-ups of flowers and grass filmed against the sky and moving in the wind. This calls up the notion of Ireland as a natural landscape and hints at the ideal of an organic way of life that de Valera evokes in his St. Patrick's Day speech. However, Abrahamson's film immediately breaks with these images of Irishness after the opening shots when the camera zooms in onto the protagonists Adam and Paul who have obviously spent the night in the open. Adam lies on an old mattress while Paul lies on the ground. Around them, broken furniture is scattered. This scene is a parody of home which seems to have exploded around the two protagonists (see Monahan 168). As in Joe's feeling of being "raw in the wind", Adam and Paul have no homely space that could protect them. They are vulnerable and literally freezing when Adam has to take off his clothes because his trousers and jacket have been glued to the mattress. Apart from setting the absurd and tragicomic tone of the whole movie, the opening sequence thus externalises the protagonists' positions on the margins of society and the city.<sup>7</sup> Later, when they look out over the city, Adam asks: "Where the fuck are we?" (0:02:57), and neither Adam nor Paul remember how they got to the place where they have just woken up. They are literally misplaced, a misplacement that is an allegory of their position as social misfits. "This opening sequence seems to position the characters outside the city and suggests that the journey back to the city centre will, at the very least, require effort on their part" (Holohan 108). This physical effort of returning to the geographical space of the city is a metaphor for Adam and Paul's attempt at returning to the community and the home they have lost.

This attempt at reintegration is finally unsuccessful. This is stressed by the emplotment of the narrative: The film's circular movement ends with a shot of Adam and Paul on the same beach on which they woke up at the beginning. The decisive difference is that Adam is dead now and Paul has to face the next day alone. Even the community of the two friends, who are throughout the film collectively addressed as 'Adam and Paul', breaks up at the end.<sup>8</sup> As their friend Matthew's, who is already dead when the plot starts, Adam and Paul's lives go nowhere; they have no future in terms of modernity's focus on linear time as progress and improvement, and they have no place from which to define who they are. Taking up Bhabha's idea of nations and national identities as products of narrative and metaphorical processes, the indi-

7 For an analysis of the influences of Beckett, vaudeville and the physical comedy of Laurel and Hardy see O'Connell 91-93; and Monahan.

8 Intradiegetically, it even remains unclear who is dead and who is alive. Only after the credits have rolled and only if we know the names of the actors, does it become clear that Paul has – as yet – survived. With acquiring the derogatory identity as junkies, the characters have lost their individuality. The viewer encounters Adam and Paul "as one" (O'Connell 96).

vidual self can equally be seen as narratively constructed (see Ricoeur, for an overview see Meuter). But without a place and a past from which they can derive their narrative self-construction, Adam and Paul have no starting point and no origin and therefore only a fragmented personal story without a discernible structure or climax. Even the potentially dramatic moments of finally finding and injecting heroin or waking up next to a dead friend lack any feeling of intensity or goal-directedness. The camera laconically follows Adam and Paul through their day which consists of inconsequential episodes, random meetings and irrelevant dialogue, and then leaves Adam's dead body just as Paul leaves his friend on the next morning.

As a consequence of this seeming lack of narrative control and structure, our connection to the characters is as tenuous and vague as the protagonists' connection to each other, themselves and their past and future. With their "homeplace" (hooks 41) and their individual pasts (symbolised by the loss of their individual names), they have lost a position from which to define who they are instead of being defined by the symbolic and social boundaries around them: "They have no space of refuge from which they can survey these forces [that structure their environment and their lives] and plan a concerted act of resistance or escape" (Holohan 117). If, according to bell hooks, homeplaces are spaces which "act as sources of self-dignity and agency, sites of solidarity in which and from which, resistance can be organized and conceptualized" (qtd. in Holohan 117), then Adam and Paul are in danger of losing their humanity and dignity because with their personal space they have lost their agency. In extension, they have therefore lost both their ability to narrate their own stories and narratively modify the stories that are told about them.

When Adam and Paul move from the beach to the tower blocks of Ballymun and into the inner city, it becomes clear that the city space that they are entering is organised by a grid-like structure of exclusion and surveillance. This structure prescribes where and how Adam and Paul can move, where they can stay and when they have to leave (see Holohan 118). The film visualises this controlling logic of city space by heavily stressing horizontal and vertical lines and by repeatedly placing the two protagonists in front of barred windows, barred or closed doors, high walls, fences or inside concrete corridors. This framing visually underlines the loss of narrative agency because bars, fences, walls and grids control and limit the ways in which Adam and Paul can interact with space as well as the kinds of relationships they can form with their surroundings and their own bodies.

But these limits also work on the level of social interactions which are mainly shaped by the politics of disgust and their naturalisation of boundaries. When Paul is sent into a shop to steal some food he is immediately followed by a shop assistant who asks him what he wants. When Paul stares into the fridge the assistant tells him to "decide fast and fuck off" (0:28). The dirty, sick-looking, badly dressed junkie encroaches on the hygienic and pleasant shopping experience of the consumers who are welcome in this space. The scene opens with an interesting shot that outlines this

boundary between the unwanted and the wanted customers. The camera is positioned on the inside of the shop and we can see Adam and Paul through the shop's sliding glass doors as they stand outside. The viewer takes up the position of the people who are inside and therefore included in this place of consumption, while people like Adam and Paul are not. This exclusion is illustrated by a sign on the door which says "Keep clear" (0:27). This order marginalises the two junkie characters and people like them, for example the homeless man in front of the shop who has already been barred from the premises.

Additionally, the sign follows the logic of cleanliness that becomes even more apparent when Paul enters the shop. After being told to "decide fast and fuck off", Paul aimlessly wanders around the aisles and starts to touch the bread that is on sale. In this scene, both the viewer and the shop assistant are agents of a politics of disgust. Seeing Paul's dirty hands, his scabbed skin, greasy hair and dripping nose, we cringe when he touches the bread, a sentiment that is enforced by the shop assistant's exclamation "Take your fucking hands off the bread, they're filthy" (0:29). Paul is only seen in terms of the dangers of contamination and contagion threatening those customers for whom the bread is on display. He infects the bread which consequently becomes dirt or 'matter out of place'. Because our visceral reaction towards Paul touching the bread is so intuitive it is difficult to question what happens next. Paul is forcibly thrown out of the shop although he protests that he cannot be barred "for feeling bread" (0:29). Carl, the homeless man in front of the shop, uses the commotion to sneak in and steal food. He also picks up the bread that Paul had left on the floor, gives it to Paul and states that it would have been thrown into the bin anyway. Here, Paul is again turned into trash: He is too poor to actually buy the bread, but as the bread is now dirty and infected and therefore trash, Paul can have it. The social boundary that is created by being thrown out of a space of consumption is therefore also a symbolic one. Both Paul and the bread turn into items that have to be abjected to maintain the boundary of health and disease. They are both 'matter out of place' and objects that have to be discarded.

This objectification also becomes clear in a later scene in which animal imagery and the fear of dehumanisation are central. After the incident in the shop, Adam and Paul again roam the streets of Dublin, looking for an opportunity to procure money for a fix. When they pass a small alley Paul stops because he has "the cramps" and needs "to have a shite" (0:38). When Adam tells him to do it "behind something" or to go down the end of the lane, Paul retorts "I'm not having a shite down the lane, I'm not a fucking dog." (0:38) However, his helpless condition and his addiction force him to do exactly that, an act that turns Paul into the dog he did not want to be. Looking for paper to clean himself up, Adam offers an empty crisps bag to Paul who is again appalled by this loss of dignity: "I'm not wiping meself with a tayo bag." (0:38) As in the beginning of the film, the loss of human dignity is connected to a loss of privacy and a lack of a homeplace in which 'dirty' actions like excretion can be kept from the public eye. As Joe in *The Pride of Parnell Street*, Adam and Paul become dirty ob-

jects and animals and can therefore be rejected. This rejection is naturalised and justified by feelings of disgust and fears of contagion.

The unfitness of Adam and Paul even to live through a single day without drugs, without resorting to crime and overstepping boundaries of social decorum and taste enforces our sense that *those people* have lost control, rationality and thus their humanity. They are not like *us*. In the final shot of the film, Adam's dead body is left on the beach and remains the last object for the viewer to see. In the most radical sense, he has turned into trash, a dead corpse that Paul again fails to take care of and whose disposal will be left to the same forces that applied the politics of disgust to Adam while he was still alive.

### **Conclusion: The New Ireland and the Dirty Work of National Narratives**

I proposed that by representing the marginalised lives of people seen as white trash, Barry's play and Abrahamson's film point to the blind spots and potentially dangerous ideological implications of a national narrative that attempts to construct Ireland as a homogeneous, successful and globally compatible nation and culture based on consumption. By focussing on the lives and deaths of outsiders within the national collective, audiences are able to focus on their own evaluations of the junkie protagonists' behaviour, bodies and selves. We therefore face up to the effectiveness of the politics of disgust and their naturalisation of social and symbolic boundaries.

It is striking that those seen as the centre of the New Ireland, the young, successful and sexually liberated professionals of films like *Goldfish Memory* or *About Adam*, are not represented in the play and film. Even in *Adam and Paul*, which is set in the streets and shopping districts of Dublin, the middle-class is conspicuously absent while *The Pride of Parnell Street* completely excludes the middle-class majority from its staged world. Joe and Janet are the only characters on stage, and in their narratives the new mainstream of Irish society does not figure. As a consequence of this narrative strategy, the audience is turned into the representative of the omitted mainstream who evaluates and confronts his or her other in the process of watching the film or the play. In this process, we are confronted with our intuitive habits of evaluation and classification. Since the boundary work of disgust is not only embodied by the fictional characters but also viscerally encoded in our reactions to these characters, Adam, Paul and Joe are shown to not only turn themselves into objects or animals; rather, we are also made aware of the logics of exclusion and objectification applied to people seen as white trash and of our own implications in this system.

Belonging is based on being 'normal', a category that is uncovered as a social construction. In the new national narrative of Celtic Tiger Ireland, this normality is demonstrated to be based on money, success and the ability to consume as well as on physical attributes as youth and attractiveness. The junkie characters are keenly aware of their lack of these attributes, as Joe's plan to get a headstone for his son's bare grave emphasises: "The way normal people would, with money to do it" (Barry

39). If nations are “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” with a very particular, yet “profound emotional legitimacy” (Anderson 4), and if this emotional legitimacy is achieved by “a narrative strategy” (Bhabha, *Location* 201), then *The Pride of Parnell Street* and *Adam and Paul* outline that we always have to question these strategies and their naturalising and universalising effects. Therefore, they are powerful comments on the profound emotional legitimacy of national narratives and their dangerous outcomes.

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## **CРАGGY ISLAND – CRANKY IRELAND? SERIAL VISIONS OF IRISHNESS IN *FATHER TED***

**Rainer Emig (Mainz)**

### **Introduction: An Unlikely Popular Success**

*Father Ted* is a successful sitcom produced by Channel 4 between 1995 and 1998. It was written by Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews and starred Dermot Morgan as Father Ted Crilly, Ardal O'Hanlon as Father Dougal McGuire, Frank Kelly as Father Jack Hackett, and Pauline McLynn as their housekeeper Mrs Doyle. The sitcom won the BAFTA award for Best Comedy in 1995 and 1998. Morgan also won a BAFTA in 1998 for Best Comedy Performance, and McLynn the Top TV Comedy Actress award at the 1996 British Comedy Awards. Although produced by a British TV company, *Father Ted* was popular (though not uncontested) in Ireland too and indeed became a global success, a phenomenon that has left its mark in the proliferation of DVD collections of the three series and Christmas specials of the show, its near-permanent presence on TV networks worldwide, its round-the-clock availability on the internet, and even an annual “TedFest” in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The lifespan of the series was cut short because of the tragic early death of Dermot Morgan from a heart attack. The writers and producers as well as his fellow actors agreed, most likely correctly, that a series that depended so much on its central eponymous character could not be continued with a replacement.

*Father Ted* proved an unexpected success for a sitcom with unpromising premises. What might viewers find funny about a priests' household in a remote corner of rural Ireland? Would the show not cause more offence than mirth, especially in Irish patriots and religious conservatives? BBC One scored a success with *Ballykissangel* (written by Kieran Prendiville), not a sitcom, but a soap opera also featuring a priest in rural Ireland, which ran between 1996 and 2001. But the romantic plot featuring cross-cultural tensions between the English priest and his Irish parishioners as well as an idealised tourist-board location seemed light years away from *Father Ted*'s dark sarcastic humour. The Christmas Special “A Christmassy Ted” (1996) even made fun of the parallels between the two TV shows by placing Father Ted Crilly in the Ballykissangel pub and showing him carry off the scrumptious publican Assumpta (played by Dervla Kirwan), to the great dismay of her regular admirer Father Peter Clifford (played by Stephen Tompkinson).

Yet despite their obvious differences in genre and tone, one could argue that both programmes equally contributed to a postmodern media narrative of Ireland, one that Irish viewers as well as a worldwide following of the shows apparently appreciated as

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1 The TedFest has been going strong since 2004 (see *TedFest*). The “Definitive Collection” on DVD first appeared in 1995 and was reissued in 2007.

versions of Irishness. The present essay wishes to take this popularity seriously and inquire into both the specifics of *Father Ted* and the question in how far the sitcom as a form of narrative may contribute to images of national identity as well as their subversion. It will first explore stereotypes of Ireland and Irishness in the sitcom. Then it will ask questions concerning the status of the sitcom as a specific form of narrative. Following on from this it will ask about the potential structural congruence of stereotypes and sitcom narratives and its ideological consequences. Lastly, and as an outlook, it will make the limitations of current narrative theories with regard to Cultural Theory and Media Studies the theme of its conclusion.

### **Stereotypes of Ireland in *Father Ted***

Literary scholarship is familiar with the “Stage Irishman” as an embodiment of Irish stereotypes. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* describes him as “garrulous, boastful, unreliable, hard-drinking, belligerent (though cowardly) and chronically impetuous” (Welch 534-535). It does not require much historical knowledge or awareness of cultural mechanisms to see in this cliché a distillation of centuries of conflict – between dominant English colonisers for whom the Irish were trouble, though ultimately mostly temporary and ineffectual, never completely to be trusted, yet also a group that one could view condescendingly as impoverished and self-destructive. This heterostereotype also mutated into an autostereotype of many Irish, who were happy (or perhaps just relieved) to view themselves in such a way, especially if the stereotype could be sold, first on stage, later in films and on TV, and for a long time through tourism.

The three priests who are in the focus of *Father Ted* are like a Trinity embodying the whole range of the Stage Irishman’s features divided into three distinct types. Father Jack Hackett is an alcoholic and spends many scenes merely dozing away in the background passive and immobile. But when he awakes, he turns out to be mischievous and fond of swearwords. Father Dougal McGuire, on the other hand, is childlike, naïve, and utterly incompetent when it comes to questions of daily life, and even more so regarding his clerical duties. He is easily led, yet basically good at heart. Father Ted Crilly, on the other hand, comes across as more complex. On the one hand, he is full of thwarted ambitions, a would-be wide boy who has his heart set on glamour and the high life. Yet he is also the one who does all the clerical work on Craggy Island. Moreover, he is the only character in the priests’ house (and perhaps on the whole island) with modern views and a perspective that extends beyond his parish.

Mrs Doyle, the only woman in the house, is also incompetent, moreover old-fashioned, and although she is generally well-intentioned (for example when she provides uncalled-for masses of sandwiches, unwanted pots of tea, and alcoholic drinks for ex-alcoholics), often a threat to herself and others.

Craggy Island thus acts as a fictional and clichéd microcosm of Ireland: it is a fictional island off the west coast of Ireland, thus doubling Ireland’s insularity. The priests’

house functions as conservative kernel even within this fictional condensation of rural and traditional stereotypes, which are at least as old as Synge's famous play *Playboy of the Western World* of 1907, but have in recent years been successfully revived by playwrights such as Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh (see, e.g., Grene 298–311). The island and its parishioners largely stand for a fossilised society in which religion is a mere empty husk, and the priests' household functions as a parody of a stereotyped Irish family – with the woman mindlessly focused on the housework, the *pater familias* drunk, and the two “sons” naïve or forever on the brink of emigrating.

Yet the sitcom's strange set-up and characters can also be regarded as a response to modernisation – rather than a clichéd Ireland frozen in time. The character Father Ted would then be an unlikely specimen of a Celtic Tiger protagonist who dreams of living in the United States and of holidaying in Paris, etc. Modernity indeed invades all the time – in the shape of TV shows, film, migrants, etc. A good example is “All Priests Stars in Their Eyes Lookalike Competition” or several episodes modelled on successful recent films, like *Speed 3* – with Father Dougal on a milk float. This ambivalence between confirmation and disruption of expectations is both a means of providing dramatic material and tension and a structural feature of stereotypes. When regarded through the (contested) kernel-of-truth lens (which assumes that behind every stereotype there lurks some truth), whatever is presented to an observer is then checked for possible conformity to the stereotype.<sup>2</sup> The stereotype is then not the pre-existing supposed truth, but already a dynamic process of desire and search for confirmation.

When narrating stereotypes, no matter whether this is done in jokes or anecdotes, in short stories or novels, in drama, film, or TV sitcoms, stock settings, characters and events are therefore employed as *iconic* markers of clichés, i.e. as signals that attract attention. At the same time, however, these signals also form part of *narratives* that also confirm expectations. They become constituent parts of linear plots with a cause-and-effect logic, which, in our case, lead to “well-known truths about the Irish”, in other words, stereotypes again. Such narratives require a reliable narrative perspective, even when its protagonists are highly unreliable (a narrative perspective that, in the case of a TV sitcom, is provided by cinematic conventions). It is this interaction between exceptional iconic events and characters and familiar reassuring narratives that creates realism, even when this realism is juxtaposed with the exaggerations that are part and parcel of comedy. But in what ways is a sitcom a specific form of narrative?

### The Sitcom as a Specific Form of Narrative

The sitcom is a fixed and usually short TV format (30 minutes for most episodes of *Father Ted*). It features a static setting (in *Father Ted*'s case largely inside the priests'

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2 Many studies of stereotypes find no evidence for the kernel-of-truth theory. This, however, does not mean that it is without influence, as a myth at least (see McGrath et al. 776–779).

house) and an equally static set of protagonists with the occasional added characters. Most importantly, and in contrast to soap operas, sitcoms do not know progress, which means that episodes are usually interchangeable. Each episode consists of a simple structure of exposition, conflict/challenge and resolution (Neale and Krutnik 233). All of this makes the sitcom ideal for stereotyping.

*Father Ted* conforms to this structure. The core protagonists are surrounded by a small number of minor characters who make repeat appearances (usually fellow clerics or inhabitants of Craggy Island). Additional characters are brought in for one episode only and are usually connected with the conflict or challenge that is presented. At the end, the initial status quo of the three priests and their housekeeper in their chaotic yet safe home is restored.

Indeed *Father Ted* even makes fun of this convention at times – by highlighting it. At the start of “Are You Right There, Father Ted?” (Series 3, 1998), we unexpectedly find Father Ted Crilly not on Craggy Island, but in “Castlelawn Parochial House Dublin”, an impressive Victorian townhouse. Classical music plays in the background. A distinguished looking fellow-priest and an officious-looking gentleman have joined him in the well-stocked library, while Father Ted sips a glass of port. Ted’s fellow-priest eagerly takes over two of Ted’s Tuesday masses, because Ted needs rest after an exhausting weekend in Paris. Then another young priest enters, dressed in tennis gear, and they discuss going to the races after lunch – which will consist of pheasant. In short, the sitcom’s usual set-up in a dingy remote location has been turned upside-down. Ted summarises it in the statement “Ah yes, this is what it’s all about. A fine port, beautiful surroundings and intelligent company” (Linehan and Mathews 257). But of course, this cannot be allowed to last. After Ted declares “I’ll be staying here for a good while...as long as I don’t somehow mess it up for myself by doing something stupid!” (257), the officious-looking gentleman turns out to be the church’s auditor and declares ominously “Most of these accounts are in order [...], but I wonder if I could ask Father Crilly a thing or two about some of these things he’s put down under ‘expenses’...” (257). Immediately afterwards we see a miserable looking rain-soaked Father Ted with suitcases in both hands being welcomed back to the Craggy Island priests’ house by an enthusiastic Father Dougal.

In the short prelude to this episode, *Father Ted* not only presents a sitcom episode in shorthand, a kind of play-within-the-play. It also shows the iron rule of sitcoms: there must be no change! This rule will return in the discussion below as a decisive element in the ideologies transported by the sitcom genre.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Neale and Krutnik state that “the reconciliation thus returns the situation to normal” (239). They also emphasise that the family (or its substitutes) form the core structure of sitcoms (239).

### The Reproduction and Subversion of Stereotypes in Sitcom Narratives

Like all forms of comedy, sitcom is a potentially subversive form. As Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal study *Rabelais and His World* proposes, comedy permits (similar to carnival) an at least temporary suspension of order and hierarchies. It thereby exposes power structures and often shows their historical roots and dimensions as well as their frequently arbitrary or outright unjust character (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 10).

An important part of this subversion is provided by the exposure and breaking of taboos. In Bakhtin, these are predominantly moral and sexual ones, and obscenity features largely in his study. Sigmund Freud is one of the theorists who propose a model for understanding the function of taboos, most famously in his monograph *Totem and Taboo* (1913). In *Father Ted*, these are wider-ranging and encompass religious, but also political and racial taboos.

Order and its opposite, chaos, are important elements in comedy, and if one requires a thinker who adds a wider social and political framework to Bakhtin's ideas on subversion, one ought to look at Karl Marx's teleological model of history as a series of class struggles followed by phases of the establishment of class-bound and ultimately power-related norms.<sup>4</sup> As in comedy, in Marx's model the disempowered can empower themselves, usually by breaking with norms or breaking down existing institutions and established authorities.

The taboos that are most obviously at stake in *Father Ted* are Catholicism, conservatism, as well as the related values of a pre-Celtic Tiger vision of Ireland as proposed by politicians like Éamon de Valera, which emphasised moreover rural life and traditional family values. Celibacy, the role and status accorded to priests and lay people, and especially the privileges (and lasting influence) accorded to parish priests have been an issue in Ireland at least since the foundation of the modern Irish Republic in 1949. Of equal importance in the sitcom is the conservatism, supposed or real, of the inhabitants of rural Ireland. In many episodes the islanders on Craggy Island are shown to hold xenophobic, racist, and homophobic views, while at the same time also hypocritically participating in the "blessings" of modern life, which here means especially (and in an ironically self-reflexive twist) television.

Nation and culture are themes that are less obvious in *Father Ted*, but present throughout in the structural setup of the sitcom. Craggy Island as an island off the coast of Ireland is the backwater of a backwater. It becomes more than evident, for example in the episode that starts in the cultured surroundings of Ireland's capital Dublin, that there is no love lost between the nation's centre and its rural margins.

Yet *Father Ted* also contains some of the traditional taboos that Bakhtin elaborated on. Father Jack's very limited vocabulary, for example, centres around the expres-

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4 For an essay that discusses the relation between Marx's and Bakhtin's idea see Young.

sions “feck”, “arse”, and “drink”. While “feck” is not in fact originally the Irish version of the English expletive “fuck”, but has very different linguistic origins, it has in modern English usage become the polite(r) substitute for the English swearword, and one that is associated with Irishness.<sup>5</sup> That “arse” and “drink” should not be part of a Catholic priest’s vocabulary need not be pointed out.

Transgressions in comedy – and thereby also in sitcoms – do not lead to a lasting change. Subversion does not become revolution. In fact, already in Bakhtin’s treatise, the temporary subversion of the carnivalesque ultimately supports, rather than permanently unsettles, the status quo. Comedy is therefore in many ways a conservative genre. Its ending, which is generally happy in dramatic comedy, and often embarrassing in sitcoms, restores normality. In accordance with the genre rules of sitcom mentioned above, sitcom endings must leave room for new episodes that return to and start again at the status quo. Change is therefore not part of a sitcom’s agenda.

### Ideological Consequences

What are the ideological consequences of this double-bind of sitcoms? If the subversion presented in sitcoms is only ever temporary and leads back to the status quo of its starting point, is there any aspect of sitcom that provides more than a thinly disguised celebration of the status quo – and its attendant clichés and stereotypes? A possible escape is pointed out by Roland Barthes in his study of myth. Myth, which can be regarded as a cliché or stereotype turned into a belief system, or in Barthes’ words “a transformation of history into nature” (135-136), also has a powerful stomach and can digest many of its own contradictions. Yet Barthes believes that one can fight myth by exposing its structure. This leads to self-referentiality or self-reflexivity. This means that identifiable forms are exposed while being played out. Elements that normally add up to cliché, harmony, or the status quo are overdetermined (i.e. used in excess) or set against one another (e.g. when iconic markers clash with narrative markers).

A typical scene from *Father Ted*, again from the episode “Are You Right There, Father Ted?”, illustrates this rather abstract idea. It begins with Father Ted observing that the standards of order and cleanliness in the priests’ house have deteriorated so badly that something has to be done (he discovers a vomit-covered Father Jack in the case of the hall clock and observes how Father Dougal tries to write his name in the dust on the living-room table – and fails). It turns out that the housekeeper Mrs Doyle has been unwell ever since she fell off the roof! So Father Ted and Father Dougal embark on some house cleaning, but soon get bored and start fooling around. When Ted dons a lampshade as a hat and does a primitive impersonation of a Chinese person, Dougal

5 *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists as one of its current meanings “slang (orig. and chiefly Irish English). Expressing frustration, regret, or annoyance: ‘damn’, ‘blast’; = fuck int. Cf. fuck v. 4” among its meanings and interestingly references this use also to “1995 G. Linehan & A. Mathews *Good Luck, Father Ted* (television script, penultimate draft) in *Father Ted* (1999) 12/2 Mrs. Doyle: Who’s for tea, then? Jack: Tea! Feck!”

stays unexpectedly earnest. It turns out that at this very moment the newly arrived Yin family are looking through the window. They had planned to introduce themselves to the priests, but are now convinced that these are racists. For the rest of the episode, Father Ted tries to get rid of the reputation of being a racist, which is all the more difficult since the islanders do not consider racism a bad thing and even assume that it is a belief promoted by the Catholic Church. The “Right There” of the episode’s title catches up with Father Ted Crilly with a vengeance.

Subversion is easy to see here: a priests’ household is not supposed to be untidy. A housekeeper is not expected to fall off the roof. A priest, as a figure of authority, ought not to indulge in childish and racist games. There is more subtle subversion still, the type that corresponds to the national and cultural norms that *Father Ted* contains: one would not expect a Chinese family on a remote island off the coast of Ireland.

This is where a further, now self-reflexive subversion enters the episode. It turns out that the usually naïve and unworldly Father Dougal, who cannot even spell his own name, knows that the Yin family have arrived. Moreover he tells Ted that they live in “that old Chinatown area”, a piece of information that Ted greets with incredulity: “There’s a Chinatown on Craggy Island?” The cosmopolitan and worldly-wise Ted is defeated by the backward Dougal, who is not only aware of the goings-on on the island, but also apparently more laid-back about the effects of globalisation that affect even remote Ireland. The sitcom thereby exposes its own roles and clichés (Ted as cosmopolitan, and Dougal as naïve).

The episode continues in this vein, only now the stereotypes entertained by the audience get an airing. When Ted gets bombarded with eggs and abuse for being a racist in the street, he flees into the local tavern, Vaughan’s, every inch a clichéd Irish pub, from which sounds of Irish folk music emerge. This abruptly stops when Ted enters, and we see that the pub is not only filled with Chinese; they also form the folk band. Even the board at the back of the bar sports Chinese characters. Here, the expectations of the viewers (and perhaps also xenophobic and racist fears) are exposed, and their surprise is merely focused through Ted’s.

A further self-referential turn happens when, at the end of the day, Ted and Dougal, who share a bedroom, exchange ideas on how to ameliorate their image. Dougal, speaking, as he himself admits “off the top of my head” (264), proposes an idea that he instantly qualifies as “haven’t thought it through” (264). It turns out to be the plan of a celebration of “all the different cultures of Craggy Island” (264). Even though Dougal ends his proposal with “and then people will think you’re a fantastic man, rather than a big racist” (265), the idea is accepted as brilliant by Ted, a response that scares Dougal so much that he distances himself from it straight away and even insists on sleeping in the spare room. Dougal, the dimwit, knows the concept of a plurality of cultures. He does not use terms such as “people” or “races”, or even “immigrants”. The sitcom *Father Ted* is thus capable of employing, but also playing with and thereby exposing clichés and stereotypes, also of Ireland and Irishness. The ideological func-

tion of this play is at least two-fold, perhaps indeed two-faced: it confirms stereotypes of Ireland and its population, especially in the rural areas, and it presents these stereotypes and clichés as what they are – and thereby opens them up to critique.

A complete summary of the clichés and their subversion in this episode would look as follows:

- clichés of gender (a self-sacrificing female housekeeper versus three grown-up men who are incapable of dealing with household matters)
- racist clichés of “the Chinese”
- positive clichés of the responsible, caring priest
- clichés of rural backwardness and authoritarianism embodied by a farmer who would dearly like to participate in “the old racism” (262), only that his farm “takes up most of the day” (262)
- clichés of xenophobic, racist, and homophobic attitudes among the rural Irish represented by a woman with a shopping bag who rants about foreigners who come “over here, taking our jobs and our women” (262), especially the Greeks, who supposedly “invented gayness” (262)
- clichés of fascism (when a square speck of dirt on the window turns into a Hitler moustache when Ted rants behind it; his gestures also echoing Hitler’s performances)
- subversion of expectations when remote Craggy Island now has a Chinatown
- reversal of roles when the naïve Dougal takes this for granted, while the modern Ted is ignorant
- subversion of the touristy cliché of Irish culture when a pub with live amateur music is taken over by Chinese people – or have they adapted to it?
- reversal of roles when the immigrants turn out to be modern, Western, open-minded and educated, while the locals are dangerously ignorant
- the hints at fascism also refer to the subplot of another priest still harbouring an SS officer, and thus also to Ireland’s historically ambivalent attitude to Nazism

Much more similar to the novel in Bakhtin’s thinking than to dramatic comedy, this specific sitcom is thereby capable of accommodating (also) plural and dissenting voices (as conceptualised in Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination*), not necessarily of the Chinese around whom the episode in question is constructed, but of Irish and non-Irish, of those (Irish or non-Irish alike) who entertain stereotypes of rural Ireland, and those who believe that it, too, participates in processes of globalisation that are largely fuelled by the very medium that broadcasts this very sitcom. When *Father Ted* was first broadcast, these ambivalences did not fail to provoke certain critical reactions. A major debate concerned the question whether *Father Ted* was broadcasting stereotypes of Ireland – or a critique of contemporary Ireland in comedy form. Points of contention were especially the swearing in the show, its depiction of religion, its

representatives and symbols, but also the backwardness of many locals on Craggy Island. A television Internet review page was enthusiastic and wrote: “Surreal, silly and very very funny, *Father Ted* was a sitcom that not so much thumbed its nose at some of Irish cultures most sacred cows, but rather brazenly bludgeoned them to death with a gleefully wielded sledgehammer” (*Television Heaven*). One of the sitcom’s writers, however, reported very different reactions:

The listener was quite serious, and accused us of something along the lines of “anti-Irishness” (!). We used to get that type of criticism occasionally: “The show portrays the Irish in a bad light” etc. We listened to his comments and were quite non-confrontational and polite to him. I think this might have disarmed him a little, as his final comment was: “But, you know, it’s good to see you two doing so well in England.”  
I liked that. Very Irish. (Matthews)

It wasn’t only the television audience and the team behind *Father Ted* that responded to its impact. Even the Catholic Church in Ireland regarded the sitcom at least as a symptom of a new age:

In the 1960s, the conciliar Church was perceived widely as a potential partner in the modernisation of Irish society; when it became clear that this was not to be, the Church began, slowly at first, to lose its impact.

What happened instead in Ireland [...] was a “Vatican II lite”: banal liturgies, the collapse of a tradition in church music and a hollowed out and thoughtless clericalism of the kind viciously – and all too tellingly – satirised by the writers of *Father Ted*. (McCarthy)<sup>6</sup>

Yet no matter which position was taken up by critics, there appeared to be a general agreement that the sitcom represented what was considered to be Irish:

I feel a little strange saying all this, as though I’m transgressing some unwritten national code of honour, because Ted is an Irish cultural institution at this stage, up there with U2 and Roy Keane in a modern-day Holy Trinity. (I know it was funded and first broadcast in the UK, but the actors, writers and sense of humour are Irish.) (McManus)

The last statement also shows how circular the effect of a subversive sitcom can be, when it exposes and undermines stereotypes and clichés of Ireland, yet by its very success with its audience then becomes an icon of Irishness itself. That the producers of *Father Ted* had exactly this in mind can be glimpsed already in the show’s credits that present “Father Ted” in the same style of lettering that is well-known from the *Book of Kells*, an early Medieval gospel produced around 800, whose origin is unclear (it might actually hail from the North of England), yet which has become insolubly associated with Ireland.

### **The Limitations of Current Narrative Theory with Regard to Sitcoms**

The present analysis of *Father Ted* has employed a number of theorems deriving from Cultural and Media Studies. Cultural Studies have many uses for narrative, es-

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6 The term “conciliar Church” refers to the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

pecially in connection with personal or cultural identity. Thus one of the founding fathers of British Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, declares:

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about. If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or narrative of the self about ourselves. ("The Question" 277)

When talking about Ireland, with its particular position vis-à-vis British colonialism, the related positions of Postcolonial Studies concerning narrative might also come into play. Thus Homi Bhabha postulates:

Nations, like narrative, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. This is not to deny the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of nation progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the Volk. (1)

Pinpointed on *Father Ted*, one could summarise and extend their positions into claiming that what narratives of identity (personal, cultural, or national) are concerned with is an impossible unity that, if achieved, would act as a potent symbolic force. Yet exactly the elements that these attempts at achieving symbolic unity rely on (icons, clichés, and stereotypes) ultimately betray it and lead to its failure. Out of this failure, however, emerges the compulsion to narrate. Seemingly consistent – and in the case of sitcoms even circular – narratives function as attempts to heal or cover ruptures and contradictions.

Viewed from the complementary side of the theoretical debate, from narratology that is, the picture looks strikingly similar. Thus, Monika Fludernik, one of Germany's most respected narratologists, claims:

Narrative is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is associated above all with the act of narration and it is to be found wherever someone tells us about something: a newsreader on the radio, a teacher at school, a school friend in the playground, a fellow passenger on a train, a newsagent, one's partner over the evening meal, a television reporter, a newspaper columnist or the narrator in the novel that we enjoy reading before going to bed. (1)

Yet despite Fludernik's encouraging opening remarks, her foundational study suffers from the same shortcomings that most literary works on narratology display. Fludernik's claim for openness is contradicted by the structure of her own book – which is exclusively focused on literary narratives and only includes other media in the selective form of film and computer games (and on exactly 1.5 pages!). Traditional narratology is largely formalist and shows little interest in ideological issues or in media outside the printed text.

The collection of articles *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär* ['Narrative theory across the genres, media and disciplines'] edited by Vera and

Ansgar Nünning in 2002 is one of several publications attempting to broaden narratology into, among others, Media Studies. Yet it also contains only one essay on film – and none on television. Instead, it explores narrative in comics and cyber fiction.

Anglo-Saxon scholarship, in contrast, has embraced Media Studies wholeheartedly, but often steers clear of what it considers the old-fashioned vestiges of Literary Studies, such as narratology, in favour of semiotics and Cultural Studies.<sup>7</sup>

What this demonstrates is that there remains work to be done, both for the Cultural Studies and Media Studies scholar and for the scholar of Literature who desires a broader approach to narrative. The task in question concerns exactly the connection of formal and structural narratological analyses with the questions of Media and Cultural Studies, and in the case of Ireland also those of Postcolonial Studies. Important issues that would then come to the fore, as could be glimpsed from the issues raised by the sitcom *Father Ted*, would be those of representation and articulation: Who or what is represented by whom for whom to what purpose? Does this representation also contain an articulation of differences and contradictions, in short self-reflexive elements?<sup>8</sup> Without bypassing traditional tenets of Literary and Cultural Studies, such as Bakhtin, one would then be able to not only combine Literary and Cultural Studies in a more productive fashion, but also to do justice to modern narratives of Ireland, such as *Father Ted*, even when these are not presented in traditional genres and media.

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7 This is very visible in some classics of TV scholarship, such as John Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987), or David Morley's *Television, Audiences and Cultural Power* (1992). Only recently, the trend has changed, as can be seen in the journal *Critical Studies in Television: An International Journal of Television Studies*. A typical essay from this background is Creeber's "The Joy of Text?"

8 On articulation and representation see Hall ("Interview" 131-150).

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## **SHAMROCKS, STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING**

**Claire Lynch (London)**

### **Introduction**

Throughout this book, the theme of narrating Ireland is taken up in a multitude of ways, ranging across the mainstays of Irish studies such as poetry and drama, through to the more contemporary media formats of film and television. This chapter takes the lead from narratives produced on paper, onstage or onscreen to those we now find online. Within all of these varied narrative forms Ireland is often, not only the source, but also the subject. Indeed, both online and offline acts of narrating Ireland are regularly characterised as expressions of ‘Irish identity’. Rather than necessarily expanding our understanding of Irish literature and culture, the presumed link between the place and the person, might be seen to constrain or limit. National identity is a highly complex psycho-philosophical notion, all too often reduced to the shorthand of symbolic objects; coins and colours, passports and flags. Early-twentieth-century Irish nationalism thrived on this model of differentiation, making strenuous efforts “to distinguish Ireland from Britain through language, literature, drama and other expressive culture” (Brady 28). While these complex modes of expression, in particular literature and drama, form the basis of much Irish Studies research, both material culture and digital ephemera can prove equally revealing. The discussion here will consider these ideas through ‘identity icons’, as they have evolved in online forms and the process which turns symbol to stereotype.

The link between computer technologies and economic, cultural and social change in Ireland is now well established, from the first advertising campaigns of the Industrial Development Authority, that boasted of an “electronic not an industrial revolution”, through to the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger and beyond. As “the old rural national image” faded, Ireland sought “to represent itself as a thriving, energetic, cosmopolitan place, a vibrant multicultural hub of postindustrial, information age entrepreneurial activity” (Cleary and Connolly 1). The adoption of information technology in domestic as well as institutional settings led to what Gerry Smyth describes as “a revolution in home-computing” in Ireland (124). The uptake of such technology for the purposes of leisure as well as increased productivity was supported by government initiatives and so widely welcomed by the population that “Few countries” could be said to have “embraced the IT-sponsored information revolution with as much alacrity as Ireland” (Smyth 126). Although this enthusiasm might be pragmatically linked to the large IT companies who set up their European bases in Ireland such as Dell™ and Apple™, generalisations detract from the impact on individuals who adopted web technologies as integral to daily life. More than that, attributing Ireland’s embrace of web culture to business or political objectives fails to take account of the ongoing cultural impact which will outlast the most recent recession and the probable with-

drawal of the large corporations that typically accompanies financial crisis. Online technologies alter individuals as well as economies and cultures.

Indeed, this chapter is not about the increased uptake of web technology in Ireland; rather, it is about the narratives formed in response to Irish engagement with online cultures. Technology leaves footprints in languages and societies; this methodology helps us to keep track of where they lead. Web technology, it will be argued, is able to generate both individual and collective narrative forms, since computers are understood here as things that do things “to us”, not just for us (Turkle 26). The chapter considers the presence of stereotypical symbols of Irishness online, why they remain prevalent and what we might learn from them. Since stereotypes grow out of reductive and often harmful characterisations of people, their reproduction online is of considerable interest to those who have noted the “urgent need to theorise online identity” (Boon and Sinclair 99). Technology, now and always, has a socio-cultural as well as a practical function. While web technologies have provided new genres of narrative in the form of blogs, social networks, live feeds and virtual worlds, the core narrative function persists from other written forms. As Kearney argues:

Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is always already an implicit story. (129)

Those who use social networks and other narrative technologies do so with the unspoken understanding that they have a “story” to tell. In the Irish context considered here, pre-existing patterns of explanation, in particular the yoking of the personal to the national are often employed in intriguing ways. The online narratives observed here frequently employ clichéd images of Irishness as well as words in order to produce a narrative “pattern” which links and repeats. In online narratives, as will be shown, stereotypical symbols in the form of harps, shamrocks, leprechauns and the colour green hyperlink images to ideas.

### **Part 1: Narrative Images**

The study of images and their symbolic meaning offers us several insights into the way a static image can convey both an instant instruction (such as a road traffic sign) or a many-layered idea (such as a religious painting). In the computer age, the term ‘icon’ has taken on yet further meaning, linking an onscreen image with a function or programme. The image or ‘icon’ of an envelope, for instance, is widely used to indicate email; the icon draws on its predecessor in correspondence, the letter, while also indicating the name of the new format, *electronic mail*. The icon of the envelope, in other words, stands in for other words. In the early-twenty-first century where web users are more accurately described as web authors, the images produced, edited and shared with known and unknown recipients may be said to take on a similarly communicative function. Unlike email which retains an essentially epistolary form, communication via an image invites, even demands, aesthetic interpretation from the

unseen interlocutor. The combination of images and words to convey a narrative of identity, therefore, requires both linguistic and visual decoding.

Such a combination of language and image is far from the preserve of the computer age. In his postcards of Ireland, capturing the limits of Irish modernity and tradition, John Hinde (1916-1997) emphasised the visual tradition of property and place when narrating Ireland to an international audience. In their hyper-real colours and highly-staged tableaux, the postcards literally sent messages and images of Ireland around the world at a time when the internet was the stuff of science fiction. Now, the sustained impact of these images can be seen in the work of artist Sean Hillen's *Irelantis* project, created between 1994-1997 and described by Claire Connolly as meshing "an eclectic range of current issues (religion, environmentalism, futurology, space travel)" (4). While Hillen's radical montages create something entirely new from Hinde's original postcards, the possibility of viewing both image collections, simultaneously, online, destabilises their relationship. It is equally possible, for example, to view the original images as pared down versions, or fragments, of the *Irelantis* interpretations. Both the original and hybrid formats of these images of Ireland then have different potential meanings when 'read' in isolation or combination.

The postcard, whether in its original or hybrid form, invites the reader to engage with the idea of Ireland, not the place itself. Tourist imagery relies upon symbols and icons to stand in for real people and places; postcards capture the hyper-real, the unblemished shoreline, the flawless hillside. In doing so they stray into the realm of virtual reality, expressing a parallel ideal which belies experience, as Wulff puts it:

Everyone is surely not all that hospitable, and there are also prejudices, criminality and economic problems in Ireland. There are cities with stressful settings, air pollution and not very attractive concrete suburbs. (538)

While postcard images are understood to distort the attractiveness of the holiday location (just as the postcard text invariably distorts the success of the holiday), online images are unfixed and unsettlingly plural. The online galleries of Hinde and Hillen's respective images present the opportunity for limitless further editing and transformation by web users around the world. These, already self-conscious, representations of Ireland may then continue to evolve, contributing further to the visual narrative of Ireland via the stereotypes they both confirm and reject.

Understanding the symbolic as well as any literal meaning of an image is, in the most basic sense, a matter of reading it. In online narrative forms an image may be included to be illustrative, decorative or indeed ironically irrelevant. An online image may have been generated and uploaded by website authors/contributors or linked or copied from another location, necessitating not only the need to interpret the meaning of an image, but where relevant, its provenance. Importantly, for all of the potential for originality provided by photographic and sketching technologies, online images frequently revert to the types of stereotypical images Hillen queried in the 1990s.

## Part 2: Stereotyping

John Hinde's postcards of Ireland, featuring thatched Galway cottages, the round tower at Glendalough or red-headed children leading their turf-laden donkey across the bog, feed off of the stereotypes of Irish hospitality, tradition and rural virtue. Created to be dispersed, the postcards perpetuate the currency of the stereotypical images while at the same time rendering them unreal in their constant repetition. As Pickering explains:

Stereotyping imparts a sense of fixedness to the homogenised images it disseminates. It attempts to establish an attributed characteristic as natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates. (5)

Certainly in these postcard images, poverty and cultural isolation are erased by idealised tradition. The smiling (and very thin) red-headed children, we are led to believe, collect turf with a donkey because they enjoy it, not because they are forced to by necessity, or more probably, by the photographer. By presenting an "attributed characteristic as natural" a stereotype is given the misleading appearance of having been at some point based on truth. A core function of the postcards, for instance, is as a tool of the tourist industry, ensuring the characterisation of Ireland as a welcoming and hospitable location. These sympathetic stereotypes, propounded by the Irish tourist industry, focus on "people, place and pace" (O'Leary and Deegan 213), somewhat implying the relative unfriendliness of other locations. The same ideas form the basis of the interactive website and Twitter stream from "Discover Ireland", from which beautiful images of idyllic locations are sent daily to smart phones around the world, unsurprisingly excluding any unattractive "concrete suburbs" (Wulff 538). The re-use of stereotypical images like these in online formats is important in a basic sense because of the potential to reach a larger and more diverse audience. These same images which were once used as symbolic weapons in regional or historical disputes can even be recast and repurposed in the age of the internet.

The visual stereotyping of the Irish people is, of course, long-established, with the English magazine *Punch* (1841-2002) a renowned proponent (see John Tensile's "Two Forces", available at [www.punch.co.uk](http://www.punch.co.uk), for example). The impact of visual stereotypes can be seen clearly in the way that *Punch* readers learnt to interpret the caricatures so that "Images representing Irishness became tied to physiognomic messages offering character information that became increasingly legible to both artists and their viewers" (Pearl 183). The recurrent personification of Ireland as a simultaneously threatening and ineffectual figure with simian features has been the subject of much critical analysis. Indeed, even in more recent times, the fact that the Irish were "stereotyped as stupid, feckless and idle" (Foster 171) is so well-ingrained in the popular imagination that the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* continues to use the example of "a drunken Irishman" to illustrate the very word "stereotype" and the associated concept of a "stock" racial or ethnic image (McArthur).

Stereotypes emerge from the repetition of derogatory characterisations by one set of people about another in order to gain or maintain primacy. In the nineteenth century, media representations of the work-shy, feckless Irish, just at the point when their hard work was so crucial to Britain's growing infrastructure, reflected the distinction between the economic dominance of British 'captains of industry' and the vital Irish labour that facilitated their success. More to the point, of course, propagating the idea that the Irish were incapable of self-government furthered political justifications for British imperial policy. As Pickering points out, the "Irish were increasingly caricatured as ugly and ape-like, content to live in social squalor and prone to drunkenness and violence" (142). The effectiveness of the stereotype may be noted in the way it was not simply wiped out over time but rather, adapted for re-use under different circumstances such as ethnic jokes. Research into the Irish ethnic joke during the twentieth century, for example, has pointed out that the primary purpose was "to depict the Irish-man as an inept, incapable individual" (Kravitz 278), thereby taking up the same pernicious aims of the visual images and ideas of previous ages depicted in *Punch*.

Alongside the manifestation of fear and hatred which jokes such as these ultimately represent, stands evidence of contested familiarity. As the original source of antagonism fades or socio-economic dynamics shift, stereotypes evolve. The stereotypical idea of the Irish propensity for drunkenness, for instance, has been considerably re-fashioned since the early days of *Punch*. In recent decades, this supposed deficiency of Irish self-governance has merged with the favourable stereotype promoted by the tourist industry of the Irish as hospitable and humorous. When in 2011, images and videos of the US President Barack Obama drinking Guinness were viewed by millions online it became evident that the hyperlink between Irish culture and alcohol was to be seen as admirable not deplorable (RTE). Obama's performance of the stereotype (the drinker) and appropriation of the icon (the pint) linked him to a network of Irish signifiers, particularly pertinent to diasporic audiences. As Murphy explains:

The act of consuming that distinctive national product Guinness is intimately bound up with Irish identity. Further, the role that Guinness and its marketing and advertising producers play in evoking Irishness and in-group membership as a strategy constitutes a complex and commercially potent element of Irish identity worldwide. (51)

As Murphy points out, it is not just the act of liquid consumption that is significant here but also the cultural consumption of marketing and advertising images which Guinness is so famous for, of which the image of Obama may now be considered part.

Whether a stereotype is considered favourable or otherwise is a highly subjective matter. Obama and his advisors were clearly confident that the association with that familiar Irish icon, the pint of Guinness, replete with harp logo, would produce an image suitable for worldwide distribution and positive interpretation. The image and video footage of the US President drinking Guinness was strewn across the web, shared between friends, posted on Irish diaspora blogs, linked to international news

websites, Tweeted and re-Tweeted. The image provides an apt example for the way that “technological embodiments of narrative [...] have forced a re-evaluation of the role of readership in narrative” (Cobley 205). Where readers are also sharers, redistributing images alongside their own evaluations, reading itself becomes a communal act. At its most dangerous, one’s reading is limited by the “technological embodiment”, the meaning pre-digested, the significance pre-explained. Those reading the image of Obama with his pint, for instance, are required to link the symbols: Guinness means Ireland, Ireland means hospitality. Where this has already been glossed by millions of online readers in the form of blogs, comments and tweets, alternative readings are increasingly hard to defend.

As the Obama example demonstrates, the use of images as well as texts to express Irish stereotypes emphasises the reticular structure created by the presence of hypertexts in online narratives. Since hypertexts (understood here as connections with, references to and imitations of, other texts) can be made by producers of online narratives as well as consumers; the chain of links is both perpetual and multi-dimensional. In other words, connections between online narratives are made by the producers who directly insert hyperlinks but also by the consumers who unconsciously browse and think as they read an image online. Obama’s referencing of the pint of Guinness then is a descendent of those who engaged the “harp and the shamrock” to symbolise “Irish nationality for generations” (Orser 83). These ‘icons of Irishness’ are shortcuts to understanding the origin of the object they adorn and are also hyperlinks to the historical and cultural values they reflect. The harp, for example, a proto-multi-media icon, symbol in sound and image, has been utilised “over many centuries” so that each instance “of political, social, and cultural discourse involving the Irish harp built on the previous one” (O’Donnell 255). Printed on flags and stationery, or moulded into souvenirs and statues, simple symbols took on complex meanings. Yet for all of the potential symbolism, overuse of the same symbols inevitably erodes their potency. W.B. Yeats famously teased those nationalist sympathisers drawn to buy “a pepper-pot shaped to suggest a round tower with a wolf-dog at its foot”, noting how many Irish writers preferred “harp and shamrock and green cover” for their books (Yeats 172). The success of these icons, in Yeats’ time as in ours, relates to their potential to act as a metaphor. Like the President’s pint, the harp and the shamrock have ceased to be simply a musical instrument and a small plant and come to ‘mean’ Ireland and Irishness in these highly simplified contexts. This transmission of such a meaning is only possible, of course, if a shared understanding of iconography is in place. These connections continue to be mirrored in online narratives, because, as Castells puts it, “the hypertext is inside us” (202). Links between images and ideas are not solely formed with the click of a mouse but also through learned knowledge and shared experience.

### Part 3: The Shamrock

Yeats' disdain for the shamrock was repeated in 1926 when he rejected it as an "outworn" national symbol in his role as chair of the Coinage Committee (King 144). The poet's repeated denunciation is in itself evidence that the symbol was considered stereotypical by the early-twentieth century. By this point the shamrock had become ubiquitous as a symbol of Irishness and in the process rendered 'inauthentic' through overuse. All the more interesting then that almost a century later the same symbol would have a resurgence of visibility in online formats. Both the supposed 'meaning' of the plant itself and graphic representations of it have an extensive history. References to the wearing of shamrock on St Patrick's Day can be traced back to at least 1681 and the associated legend of St. Patrick explaining the Trinity was first recorded in 1726 (S. J. Connolly 510). Shamrocks were widely used in Volunteer flags and other Irish military insignia during the second half of the eighteenth century and have subsequently been employed in a wide range of logos and advertising, from football clubs and pottery to breakfast cereal and soap. As shorthand for Ireland, the shamrock is frequently used to endorse organisations which transmit concepts of Irishness internationally, notably Aer Lingus, the Irish Development Authority and the Irish Tourist Board. The symbol is equally meaningful in diasporic contexts, marking locations, products and even people in the form of tattoos. As Yeats had noted, the overuse of a symbol simultaneously instils and undermines its meaning. Commercialisation reinforces this, converting the symbol into merchandise:

The North American celebration of St Patrick's Day on or near March 17 has, during recent decades, been marked by an ever-growing accretion of slogans and symbols. In practically any gift shop, posters of rainbows and pots of gold announce the approach of the holiday, as do greeting cards whereon leprechauns declare "Top o' the mornin' to ye", and command, along with the familiar lapel button, "Kiss me I'm Irish." (Quinn 18)

The purchase of these "slogans and symbols" described by Quinn, and with them the associated kudos of 'Irishness' on St Patrick's Day, might well be interpreted as an opportunistic and even erroneous appropriation of national identity. The acts of superficial association Quinn witnesses in gift shops are similarly repeated in the already 'unreal' space of the Internet. Indeed, web users from all over the world brand their online identities with shamrocks, leprechauns and pots of gold all year round, as well as on St Patrick's Day. On homepages, blogs, Twitter feeds and Facebook profiles Yeats' "outworn" symbols are thriving.

Online, both the narrator and narratee are bound by the narrative they co-produce on screen. If the central aim is communication, an understandable temptation exists, to resort to stereotype to share meaning, nevertheless, as with all communication, interpretation is unstable. The shamrock, attributed to St. Patrick's explanation of the trinity is, as a consequence, a reminder of Ireland's Christian heritage, just as its convenient proximity to St Patrick's foot is a reminder of Ireland's rural landscapes.

Equally, the prominent appearance of the shamrock, embroidered in gold on Prince William's collar for his wedding in 2011, invites a reading of Ireland's colonial past and so on. This very same symbol which decorates shops and bars across the world on St Patrick's Day is now re-appropriated in online forms to narrate Ireland in the twenty-first century, cultivated from flag, to advertising hoarding, to smart phone.

A clear example of this organic process can be seen in an Application called "Do You Have the Luck of the Irish?", available via Apple's App Store™. Upon downloading the App users are invited to "Use the amusing calculator below to see how long you'd live if you were born Irish!" Users enter their actual age into an onscreen box, click the "calculate" box and are provided with another in "St Paddy's Years". Perhaps most notable in this evidently meaningless activity is the reliance on the one image, the shamrock, to provide significance and relevance. In cultural-historical terms, shamrock-branded applications like this are all the more significant because their value and meaning is not immediately apparent. The application does not increase the user's productivity or knowledge and can barely be described as entertainment or a game. Nevertheless, it contributes to the narrative of Ireland, not because it is the emergence of something new (an App), but rather, because it depends upon the repetition of the same old icon (the shamrock). Several assumptions are made by the App, not least of all that the user was not actually "born Irish" in the first place. Most significant, however, is the trading on the well-founded assumption that online users will want to seek a connection to Irishness. The App then acts as a reminder of the power of narrative. Those who use this App do so in the knowledge of the wider story and their desire to be a part of it.

It is often assumed that the World Wide Web contains and displays the same information worldwide. In fact, proprietorial tactics by governments and corporate organisations often shape the content made available through a basic web search. A Google™ search conducted in Germany or the US, for instance, on St Patrick's Day 2011 would have presented the web user with the standard primary coloured corporate logo. From the Irish domain of the search engine, Google.ie, however, the water-colour image of four swans would have appeared on screen to assist online adventures (Google; see "Doodles Archive" at <http://www.google.com/doodles>). Web users with some knowledge of Irish mythology would have recognised the swans as the Children of Lir, tragically transformed and banished. Google 'Doodles' like this appear on the banner of the search engine at regular intervals, commemorating national holidays, religious festivals or the lives of historical figures. This image, made available in Ireland in honour of St Patrick's Day, does more than venerate, it invites users to find literal and imagined hypertexts. The image of the swans may lead (in the imagination or through web surfing) to the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin in which they are in statue form, to Lady Gregory's adaptation and numerous other incarnations on stamps, in picture books and on websites. It is clear then that Google adopted a recognisable and widely known image to signify Irishness on St Patrick's Day, but can it be described as a stereotype? One might well argue the contrary

since the meaning and relevance of the image relies on at least a rudimentary knowledge of Irish mythology, literature and culture. Is this why the Doodle was geographically restricted? An odd strategy since, it goes without saying, Irish people do not live only in Ireland, just as people living in Ireland need not be Irish. Equally, nationality or locality are surely no prerequisite for an interest in folklore. A closer look at the image reveals something of a lifeline for the uninitiated reader. In the fuzzy plant life which surrounds the ill-fated swan-children a familiar shape emerges; the tri-partite leaf emblem of the shamrock, hinted at, just enough, to act as a reference point among the green haze. Here, in this two-dimensional image we see the multiple layers of narrative. The story of the children condemned to be swans for 900 years cross-references other tales of wicked stepmothers and shapeshifting which span centuries of mythology across many cultures. At the same time, the image speaks of rural tranquillity without obvious reference to the Celtic origin of the tale or the Christian sub-text associated with it. Rather than offering a wholly obvious icon for St Patrick's Day, the Google Doodle allows for multiple narratives and readings depending on prior knowledge or current curiosity. Indeed, as the Children of Lir so aptly remind us, form can very often disguise content.

#### **Part 4: Social Networking**

Beyond the apparently endless repetition of images and patterns, translated from print to digital, or object to virtual, what does all of this mean? Does the incessant duplication of already well-worn images and patterns of national identity in online formats enhance or simply dilute our understanding of Ireland? Barwell and Bowles take these questions further when they consider the future of cultural nationalism, asking whether we can "continue to distinguish between the global and the universal? And if cultural difference is to be erased, whose cultures precisely will be lost?" (702). Since so many of the technologies which assist us in day-to-day work, communication and entertainment might be considered "universal", maintaining cultural distinctions will surely become increasingly difficult or irrelevant. Technologies, particularly those developed for the internet, are by nature accessible and relevant beyond the limits of one nation. That cultures may be lost as a consequence of an increasingly globalised narrative is a particularly prescient concern in an Irish context due to the linguistic and ideological overlaps suggested by the new contexts and old ideas. Not least of these is the concept of the internet as an 'electronic frontier', apt for colonisation, suggesting interesting points of comparison with Ireland's history of linguistic and cultural precarity in previous centuries.

Within this, social networks may be seen to link the individual and the local, encouraging people to connect across borders and time zones, maintaining contacts that defy geographical limitations. Facebook™, launched in February 2004, is arguably the current world leader of the social networking format, described by its developers as "a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work,

study and live around them" (Facebook). As the archetypal virtual community, Facebook captures the paradox of that term; simultaneously about making connections as well as accessing the world from a position of isolation. As Rheingold describes:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (5)

The "sufficient human feeling" highlighted here is expressed in the human urge to narrate which is so evidently at the core of these sites. In the profile, the status update, and the creation of groups and events the subject contributes to his or her own story as well as to the story of the time and place in which they exist. More recently, as Facebook has adopted the timeline format, users are presented with a chronological narrative of their comments and interactions. As a result, the sense that life is a story to be told is both increased, as one scrolls through photos and conversations, and subverted, as so much that happens in 'real life' is so obviously absent from the screen. Similarly, in the act of online narration people make links with and influence each other. Online reputations are based on the number of 'friends' and 'followers', creating a scenario where individuals can make powerful pronouncements to partially or wholly unknown audiences. When Yeats wonders "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English Shot? / Did words of mine put too great a strain / On that woman's reeling brain?" (Heaney 39), the dangers and fears of writing to an unknown, unseen audience are underlined. Words and images do translate ideas into action but, as Yeats asks, to what cost?

Contemporary researchers are often anxious about the anonymity of online communication, observing that:

An increasing number of people are finding their lives touched by collectivities which have nothing to do with physical proximity. A space has opened up for something like community on computer networks, at a time when so many forms of 'real life' community seem under attack, perhaps even by the same techno-cultural forces that make Internet culture possible. (Wilbur 45)

This paradox, that computers make communities as well as break them, is closely tied up with the idea of propagating national stereotypes. Since virtual communities award power through popularity, both fluent and reckless individuals may be taken as representative by default. The risk of Facebook and other virtual communities seizing control of public opinion is often sensationalised by educators and journalists, but let us push this argument to its logical limit. Just as revelations of adultery or tax-evasion on Twitter have shown it to be possible for an individual's reputation and legacy to be irreparably damaged by comments and opinions stated online, is it not imaginable that the same might be possible on a national scale? While individuals do not simply stand in for nations, those with powerful political and media profiles are often seen to speak for them. Images and ideas have an inherent power certainly, but it is those who narrate and disseminate who wield it.

## Conclusion

Since the content of a Facebook profile is shaped by the in-built questions and categories, expressions of individuality can result in caricature. In addition, despite the illusion of continuous change created by status updates and checking in, these online narratives might as well be etched in stone since “All personal information submitted to Facebook is held by them in perpetuity” (Boon and Sinclair 103). In this way, the narratives we currently produce online are part of a long repeated pattern of technological advancement, both transient and permanent and only partially understood. In 1915, when feature films were in their infancy, Vachel Lindsay wrote to George Brett, editor-in-chief at Macmillan’s claiming that:

[Movies] are as revolutionary in our age as the invention of Hieroglyphics was to the cave-man [...] The Egyptian Tomb-painting was literally nothing but enlarged Hieroglyphics. We now have Hieroglyphics in motion and they can be made as lovely as the Egyptian if we once understand what we are doing. (Marcus 274)

These “Hieroglyphics in motion” which amazed audiences of the early twentieth century are already vividly distinct from the three-dimensional audio-visual extravaganzas now produced for the cinema. In film, as in other narrative forms, change is inevitable; how much further will our current web technology go once we begin to “understand what we are doing”? Certainly, the impact of our current age of narrative transition remains to be seen, but as Burns forewarned in 2007: “A future Taoiseach or president of Ireland” has already left an online trace of his or her adolescence (4).

It may well be that the current manifestations of online narrative come to mark our age only once they become as outmoded as hieroglyphics. What appears clear at present is that narratives which record connections and community and are not so much about *who* but *what* one is. The very notion of social networks applies meaning to the individual only as they fit within a group. Connections, shared friends, family, professional and social groupings all converge to show the individual life as a node within a communal narrative network. As Boon and Sinclair put it: the “success of many groups and applications on Facebook appears to be achieved largely through social pressure and, thus, ‘community’ can seem disturbingly similar to conformism and forced community” (105). While online communities are broadly understood to grow organically, “conformism” may very well be observed through the particular network an individual associates him or herself with as well as the means of self-expression employed. On Facebook and the now defunct MySpace, Irish groups promoting Irish music and local events used the platforms to shape a visual sense of Irish identity through their profiles. In the most crude examples of MySpace accounts, lurid pages dominated by highly stylised and often distorted symbols included neon green shamrocks and, perhaps more unexpectedly, IRA slogans and cartoons of masked gunmen. The powerfully emotive language which accompanied the use of these images unsurprisingly incited fierce conflicts among MySpace users, proving that some issues divide even virtual communities.

On Facebook profiles, national symbols are more typically seen in the form of the colours and emblems of flags. While some users include or overlay flags on their profile pictures, others merge national symbols to visually represent a hybridised identity. During the early decades of the twentieth century, when the concept of independent Irishness was most conspicuously under construction, Anglo-Irish writers were among those who toiled over how centrally to place the dividing hyphen in their identity. As Irish-Americans and other emigrants would similarly discover, the hyphens that stitches together the identities of second and third generation emigrants can “be read as sites for the staging of transgressive subjectivities” (Harte 95). Hybridity is a highly complex issue, requiring the subject to combine multiple and even contradictory, identity markers, making them simultaneously both and neither. As the online icon indicating an Irish-Canadian group on Facebook demonstrates, overlaying a green shamrock on a red maple leaf captures something written language cannot. The creation of icons such as these captures the real value of online efforts to express an individual or group sense of identity. Although they may rely upon over-used, even clichéd imagery such as the shamrock (and indeed the maple leaf) as their source material, once recycled and reformed they begin to narrate a new, hybrid and hyphenated, Irish identity.

With duality and pretence at the very core it is perhaps no surprise that simple images have been recruited to do that which complex words have failed to do. Facebook groups are, in this sense, works of art, or at least works of artifice, yet that is not to say that they are always inventive or free from traditional restrictions. Take for instance the Facebook group called “It’s ‘Cause I’m Irish”. Again, the group relies upon the classic shamrock symbol as its logo linking it to that long tradition evident in the other examples discussed above. Beyond this, the group moves in interesting directions in regard to the question of stereotype. Analysis of the group’s profile demonstrates how the members seek to break down the geographical boundaries of Irishness (by reinforcing an Irish-American identity) but also open up questions of reclaiming negative stereotype such as excessive drinking or a propensity to violence (valorising the “fighting Irish”). Both the appropriation of stereotypes and the reclassification of characteristics are indicative of a change in narrative direction. Expressions of identity are, of course, expressions of difference and stereotypes are no exception. Affiliation to a group may well preclude membership of others. In the Irish context this too frequently permits a politically charged, perhaps even aggressive use of visual imagery to reinforce division. The group “Get the IRA off Facebook”, for instance, uses imagery familiar from the murals and iconography of unionist groups in Northern Ireland. It is significant that the online preservation and dissemination of these identity symbols simultaneously extends the global audience by placing them online while also perpetuating a sense of localised conflict. The union flags and red, white and blue colours are used by the group’s creator to symbolise a national identity manifestly not captured by the green shamrock of the “It’s Cause I’m Irish” group,

hinting once again at the simultaneous significance and arbitrariness of such symbols.

In contrast to such attempts to maintain established imagery, the online environment can also make space for the new, combining symbols which might have once been considered antithetical. The flag marking the banner of the “Gay Ireland” group on Facebook fuses the Irish tricolour with the rainbow of gay pride, challenging, rejecting and appropriating the national symbol. This too has taken on additional symbolic significance in light of Belfast City Council’s policy decision to make St Patrick’s Day “a more neutral celebration”, bypassing the political quagmire of the symbolic green by opting for a multi-coloured shamrock (McDonald n. pag.). The council’s oversight of the dual symbolic meaning of the rainbow colours inadvertently shifted the nature of the celebration “prompting delight from the city’s gay rights campaigners” (McDonald n. pag.). Such an unintended translation of symbolic meaning underlines the flexibility of symbols as well as the potential for stereotypes to be inverted.

Paradoxically, the World Wide Web, a forum which is by definition ‘global’, appears to frequently lead people into ‘local’ frameworks. Users seem inclined to form virtual links with those they actually could or do have real access to, rather than using the full potential of the resource to make contact with those whom they are unlikely or unable to meet. Facebook in particular creates virtual communities of students who may well be using the interface to communicate with others on the same campus or within the same lecture room. As Fintan O’Toole notes, the internet has changed our “perception of space and time” (O’Toole). With sites such as Facebook we are able to constantly monitor people through a News Feed, bringing the 24 hour news age to act upon friendships, changes in ‘relationship status’ can inform us if a couple have parted and conversations can be ‘overheard’ by reading through an exchange of messages posted to the ‘walls’ of fellow community members. Online, even in theoretically anonymous narratives, a group identity is always implied since on a web-page “one’s identity emerges from whom one knows, one’s associations and connections” (Turkle 258). A clear weakness then of virtual communities is in their careless disregard for the real people who produce virtual versions of themselves for the sites. While they facilitate connections and sustain relationships, social networks also permit a conscience-free freedom of speech when the narrator feels uninhibited due to the barrier of the screen which shields them from others. UNICEF Ireland’s “Changing the Future: Experiencing Adolescence in Contemporary Ireland” (2010) captures the impact of this when reporting that 1 in 5 young people in Ireland has experienced cyber bullying. While as the report points out, the majority of bullying reported in schools still takes the “traditional forms” of “words and actions” it is clear that online formats play an increasing role in playground cruelty in Ireland and how young people present themselves to others (UNICEF 19). Virtual communities are by necessity voyeuristic, facilitating a process of mutual observation more often than actual interaction. As Sherry Turkle explains “In the real-time communities of cy-

berspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along" (10).

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Elke D'hoker** is senior lecturer of English Literature at the University of Leuven, where she is also co-director of the Leuven Centre for Irish Studies and of the modern literature research group, MDRN. She has published widely in the field of modern and contemporary British and Irish fiction, with special emphasis on the short story, women's writing and narrative theory. She is the author of a critical study on John Banville (Rodopi, 2004) and has edited or co-edited several essay collections: *Unreliable Narration* (De Gruyter, 2008), *Irish Women Writers* (Lang, 2011), *Mary Lavin* (Irish Academic Press, 2013), and *The Irish Short Story* (Lang, 2015). A new monograph, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* is forthcoming from Palgrave.

**Rainer Emig** is Chair of English Literature and Culture at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. He was educated at Frankfurt am Main, Warwick, and Oxford, and has taught at Cardiff, Regensburg and Hanover. He is especially interested in the link between literature and the media and in Literary, Critical, and Cultural Theory, especially theories of identity, power, gender and sexuality. His publications include the monographs *Modernism in Poetry* (1995), *W.H. Auden* (1999) and *Krieg als Metapher im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (2001) as well as edited collections on *Stereotypes in Contemporary Anglo-German Relations* (2000), *Ulysses* (2004), *Gender ↔ Religion* (with Sabine Demel, 2008), *Hybrid Humour* (with Graeme Dunphy, 2010), *Performing Masculinity* (with Antony Rowland, 2010), *Commodifying (Post-)Colonialism* (with Oliver Lindner, 2010), and *Treasure in Literature and Culture* (2013). He is one of the editors of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*.

**Anna Hanrahan** is a doctoral candidate and research assistant at the University of Wuppertal, where she has taught courses on British Abolitionism, Jane Austen and contemporary Irish drama and film. Her research interests include Celtic Tiger Ireland, constructions and performances of identity in postcolonial and postmodern societies, as well as cultural narratives in different media. Her doctoral thesis will examine the narrative construction of Irish identity in Celtic Tiger plays.

**Sarah Heinz** is currently Visiting Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at Humboldt-University, Berlin. She taught English Literary and Cultural Studies at the Universities of Passau and Mannheim, where she was a Junior Professor from 2008 to 2014. From January to April 2015, she spent three months as a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She received her PhD for a study on postmodern identities in A.S. Byatt's novels, which was published in 2007. In 2014 she finished her postdoctoral degree (Habilitation) on Critical Whiteness Studies and intersectionality in Irish literature and film. Her research interests include postcolonial theory, contemporary Irish, English, and Anglo-

phone literature and film, identity theory, and contemporary drama. She was the principal investigator on three funded projects, and her publications include articles on Irish and British drama, film and the novel, Victorian poetry, contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare, and on teaching English literature in the university classroom.

**Christian Huck** is Professor for English and American Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Kiel, Germany. He has published on popular culture and literature, cultural and media theory, music videos, Irish poetry and nationalism, dime novels, football, film and fashion. His most recent book publications are *Fashioning Society, or, The Mode of Modernity: Observing Fashion in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2010) and *Travelling Goods, Travelling Moods: Varieties of Cultural Appropriation, 1850-1950* (2012).

**Anton Kirchhofer** is Professor of English Literature at the University of Oldenburg and is one of the directors of the research group *Fiction meets Science* funded by the VolkswagenFoundation. His research has focused on literature in its shifting media and discursive contexts from the eighteenth century to the present. Recent publications include the co-authored “Universal Narrativity and the Anxious Scientist of the Contemporary Neuronovel”, forthcoming in *Mosaic*, “The Making of the 1959 Obscene Publications Act” (in Grüttemeier, *Literary Trials*, 2016), and the co-edited volume *Precarious Alliances: Cultures of Participation in Print and Other Media* (2016).

**Claire Lynch** received her doctorate from the University of Oxford, leading to her first book *Irish Autobiography* (Peter Lang, 2009). Now Senior Lecturer at Brunel University London and Secretary of the British Association of Irish Studies she has written several articles on Irish fiction and life writing. Her latest book, *Cyber Ireland: Text, Image, Culture* (Palgrave, 2014), explores, for the first time, the presence and significance of cyberspace in Irish literature, bringing together such varied themes as Celtic mythology in video games, Joycean hypertexts and virtual reality Irish tourism.

**Fiona McCann** is a lecturer at Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille 3 where she teaches courses on Irish and postcolonial literature. She has published articles and book chapters on contemporary South African, Zimbabwean and Irish fiction. Her current research project focuses on gender and violence in twenty-first-century Irish fiction and non-fiction.

**Katharina Rennhak** is Professor of English Literature at the University of Wuppertal, where she is also Director of the Center for Narrative Research. She is especially interested in the interaction of literature and culture around 1800 and around 2000 and in theories of identity, power, and relevance, as well as in the relationship between British and Irish literary cultures and histories. Her publications include a monograph on concepts of language in late twentieth-century historical novels (Fink,

2002), and a monograph on the construction of masculinities in women writers' novels around 1800 that feature male narrator-protagonists (WVT, 2013). She has edited collections on *Revolution und Emanzipation* (with Virginia Richter; Böhlau, 2004) and *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750-2000* (with Sarah S.G. Frantz; Lexington, 2010).

**Hedwig Schwall** is Director of the Leuven Centre for Irish Studies (LCIS) and former president of EFACIS and BAAHE (Belgian Anglicists). She researches and teaches modern and contemporary British and Irish literature as well as Comparative European Literature and Art in an interdisciplinary approach. She has published on Yeats, Joyce and on contemporary Irish literature (fiction, poetry, drama) and is currently involved in an interdisciplinary project about the phenomenon of epiphany in literature and painting. Within EFACIS she has set up the European Network for the Translation of Irish Literatures starting with the Project *Yeats Reborn* (2014-15), in which the 150th anniversary of Yeats's birth is celebrated by translations of his work in more than twenty European languages.

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