

THE HOUSE OF FICTION: DERMOT HEALY'S SHORT STORIES

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It's in a neighbour's house fiction begins.
(Healy, *The Bend for Home* 3)

Introduction

Dermot Healy (1947-2014) is often regarded as a “writer’s writer”, and his work is certainly held in high esteem by his peers. Timothy O’Grady, for instance, claims that *A Goat’s Song* (1994) is Ireland’s “most ambitious novel since Beckett’s *Trilogy*” (“Dermot Healy” 26), while Annie Proulx calls it “an exceptional novel, one of those rare books that permanently colour one’s ideational map of place and human behaviour” (112). More generally, Patrick McCabe considers Healy’s fiction to be “truly revolutionary work, and high literary art” (qtd. in O’Grady, “Only myself” 21), while the late Seamus Heaney hailed him as the poetic heir to Patrick Kavanagh: “Kavanagh was the poet of, as he said, ‘the passionate transitory’, bits and pieces of the everyday snatched out of time. He was the poet of praise for those things. It isn’t just nature poetry, it’s gratitude for the whole gift of existence in Healy” (qtd. in *The Writing in the Sky* DVD).

Despite these writerly accolades and comparisons, Healy’s writing was consistently overlooked for the major literary prizes and, partly as a result of this neglect, he has not yet received proper international attention for his varied and ambitious body of work. Outside of Ireland, Healy is probably better known as a novelist, but he was also an accomplished poet, short story writer, playwright, screenwriter, director, actor, and editor (he founded two literary journals, *The Drumlin* and *Force 10*, and taught creative writing for various community groups). Ironically, Healy’s prolific fluency across a range of forms and genres made him difficult to pigeonhole, and so his creative eclecticism has tended to complicate rather than enhance his critical reputation. Moreover, Healy was fascinated by borderlands and liminal states of mind, and he frequently transgressed the conventional boundaries between poetry, drama and fiction, and between fiction and reality. In all of Healy’s work there is a productive tension between the representation of complex lives and events, and the neo-modernist desire to find new ways of expressing the rich subjectivity of these lives (a mode of discourse which we wish to refer to as *counterrealism*).¹ Though usually set in small

1 The concept of counterrealism was first mooted by Richard Kearney in *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (1988), where he uses it to describe an anti-realist mode of writing which explores the “fundamental tensions between imagination and memory, narration and history, self and language.” For Kearney, the Irish authors within this recent counterrealist tradition – epitomized for him by Flann O’Brien, Aidan Higgins, the late Francis Stuart, John Banville and Neil Jordan – “share with Joyce and

provincial towns, Healy's fictional worlds perpetually approach the edge of myth, and his vivid sense of place is rendered with an almost shamanistic intensity. Consequently, these strange landscapes and fractured lives can sometimes appear rather alien to metropolitan critics, which may well account for some of the more tentative and confused responses to his fiction.

Since Healy's untimely death in 2014, however, a series of four books have been published by Dalkey Archive Press which attempt "to address the extraordinary neglect of one of Ireland's most gifted and industrious modern writers" (Murphy and Hopper xiv): *The Collected Short Stories* and an edited reprint of his debut novel, *Fighting with Shadows* appeared in 2015; *The Collected Plays* and a critical volume entitled *Writing the Sky: Observations and Essays on Dermot Healy* came out in 2016. With the publication of these scholarly volumes, the time seems right for a proper critical reassessment of this singular but undervalued writer.

For the purposes of this article, we will examine *The Collected Short Stories*, and (re)consider Healy's achievements within the context of the Irish short story tradition. While Healy's short stories are immensely valuable in their own right, they can also be regarded as formative texts that offer crucial insight into the technically adventurous novels that followed. To this end, we will foreground some of the key formal strategies within the stories, and trace the evolution of Healy's counterrealist style over a forty-year period.² Thematically, we will also touch on a particular thread in this collection, one which centres on the idea of houses and dwelling spaces. On a naturalistic level this motif usually functions as an index of social class and mobility, but it can also act as a self-reflexive metaphor for the act of writing itself. More importantly, this governing motif gradually becomes an existential meditation upon the complex relationship between longing and belonging, or as Flore Coulouma has described it:

Healy expresses his characters' sense of place and longing for home through the recurring opposition between drifters, travellers and immigrants, on the one hand, and the imagery of houses and dwellings rooted in timeless landscapes, on the other. While the uncertain status of the drifter translates in the nostalgic longing for a home real or imagined, Healy also depicts movements in space and time as reflections of the cosmic motion of the universe. His contemplative, wandering subject finds wholeness in nature and transcends his exilic sense of place to reach a universal sense of home. (241)

Beckett the basic modernist project of transforming the traditional narrative of *quest* into a critical narrative of *self-questioning*" (83).

- 2 *The Collected Short Stories* is structured in three parts: the first section contains all twelve stories from Healy's debut collection, *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories* (1982); the second section contains seven occasional stories, which were published intermittently between 1972 and 2013 (these stand-alone pieces, drawn from a diverse range of sources, are gathered together in this volume for the first time); the final section consists of three appendices, including the original 1973 version of "First Snow of the Year", which differs quite considerably from the extant version published in *Banished Misfortune*.

“New Irish Writing”

In a typically iconoclastic essay entitled “The Hollow and the Bitter and the Mirthless in Irish Writing” (2008), Aidan Higgins bemoaned the moribund state of modern and contemporary Irish writing, while making idiosyncratic allowance for a few more formally adventurous works:

The modernist movement began and ended in Ireland, in full retreat before it had hardly begun, soon sunk out of light, making hardly a ripple. The old lies were merely being perpetuated and no great effort attempted to “make it new.” Some exceptions: *Sailing, Sailing Swiftly* (1933) by Jack B. Yeats; *Murphy* (1938) by Samuel Beckett; *The Ginger Man* (1955) by J.P. Donleavy; *Felo de Se* (1960) (my first story collection); *Night in Tunisia* (1976) by Neil Jordan; *In Night's City* (1982) by Dorothy Nelson; *Banished Misfortune* (1982) by D. Healy. (Higgins 25)

Like many of the experimental Irish writers before him – including Joyce, Beckett, and Higgins – Dermot Healy first announced himself as a writer of intricate and innovative short stories. Although *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories* was first published in 1982, many of the stories in Healy's debut collection had already appeared in a number of newspapers and journals, including, most importantly, the “New Irish Writing” page of the *Irish Press*, edited by the redoubtable David Marcus. Marcus had been appointed literary editor of the *Irish Press* in 1968, and “New Irish Writing” quickly became a cultural institution, publishing new short stories and poems on a weekly basis, and helping to launch the careers of a whole host of contemporary Irish writers including Sebastian Barry, Dermot Bolger, John Boyne, Anne Enright, Hugo Hamilton, Desmond Hogan, Neil Jordan, Deirdre Madden, Patrick McCabe, Colum McCann, Mike McCormack, Eoin McNamee, Mary Morrissy, Philip Ó Ceallaigh, Joseph O'Connor, Lucile Redmond, Ronan Sheehan, and many others (Carty n.p.). The initial impact of “New Irish Writing” was consolidated in 1971 with the creation of the annual Hennessy Literary Awards, and by the subsequent publication of several anthologies of stories edited by David Marcus. Marcus also founded Poolbeg Press in 1976, specialising in new short story collections, and this coincided with the establishment of several other independent publishing houses in Ireland, including Wolfhound Press, the O'Brien Press, and the Irish Writers' Co-operative (of which more later).³ In retrospect, then, the mid-1970s and early 1980s saw something of a renaissance in the venerable but rather fusty tradition of Irish short story writing, and Dermot Healy was undoubtedly one of the key figures at the heart of this dynamic resurgence.

3 The Irish Writers' Co-operative was co-founded in 1975 by Neil Jordan, Desmond Hogan, Ronan Sheehan, Steve MacDonogh, Lucille Redmond, and several other aspiring young writers. Between 1975 and 1981, the Co-op published three collections of short stories, ten novels, and a dozen plays. It also promoted readings of poetry and prose and launched a literary magazine, *The Mongrel Fox* (after a phrase coined by the leader of the Fine Gael opposition, Liam Cosgrave, to describe party dissidents). The Co-op ceased publishing in 1983, but not before it had helped to launch the careers of several major Irish writers including Neil Jordan, Sebastian Barry and Dermot Healy. The Co-op's co-founder and chairperson, Steve MacDonogh, went on to found Brandon Press in 1982 (see MacDonogh).

Of the four Healy stories originally published in the *Irish Press*, two of them – “First Snow of the Year” (1973) and “Banished Misfortune” (1975) – won Hennessy Literary Awards, and would eventually bookend *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories*; the other two – “The Caretaker” (1972) and “This Side of Summer” (1974) – are reprinted in *The Collected Short Stories* (2015) for the first time. It is not entirely clear why the latter two stories were excluded from *Banished Misfortune*; however, in terms of Healy’s rapidly evolving style, he may well have considered them too thematically conventional or formally derivative.

“The Caretaker” – first published in the *Irish Press* (18 November 1972) alongside a poem by one of Healy’s early mentors, Seamus Heaney – is told from the perspective of the elderly caretaker of a decaying Big House, which is now up for auction:

A grey haze had built up on the meadow, and Willie could imagine the visitors and potential buyers hopping on their toes in the rain and the muck when the bidding would start. Men and women of all shades of opinion and dress had been to see him and the house these last six months. They were mostly foreigners or educated people who would be driven to despair at the thought of the work to be done. [...] One Irish couple had stuck in Willie’s mind – they’d arrived complete with shamrocks on St Patrick’s Day. Willie had taken to the young man immediately. He had a good pair of hands on him and an eye for beauty; what’s more, a love for trees – and that was what the house needed. (*Collected Stories* 132-33)

In many ways, “The Caretaker” would not look out of place in a collection by Seán O’Faoláin or Bernard MacLaverty – well-crafted, gently humorous, with a wry anthropological eye on the cultural mores of the time – but it does lack the formal and thematic edginess of Healy’s later work. The “Big House”, of course, is a quite common trope in Anglo-Irish literature, one “infused with the idea of history as a haunting, and with the notion of a continuing past of unease and insecurity, often implying guilt and repression” (R.F. Foster 95). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Big House genre was resurrected by writers such as Aidan Higgins, J.G. Farrell, John Banville, and Jennifer Johnson, and “The Caretaker” can certainly be read in this context. However, as we shall see, houses and homes – both empty and occupied – increasingly become a more personal and dynamic motif in Healy’s work. Indeed, at the end of Healy’s first published story, the literal handing over of keys to the young Irish couple is invoked as an obvious (and somewhat self-reflexive) symbol of cultural continuity and generational change: “It’s all yours now’, Willie said” (*Collected Stories* 137).

If “The Caretaker” bears traces of O’Faoláin, then “This Side of Summer” (first published 27 July 1974) is undoubtedly influenced by the Joyce of *Dubliners* (1914). The story centres on a young unmarried couple, Joe and Kate, who move in together to a new flat in the Dublin suburbs, much to the disapproval of her middle-class friends:

Had she been more at ease she would have been amused at their gravity as they chewed distastefully on the garlic bread she had cooked for Joe till it was nearly black. She would have enjoyed their obvious dislike for Joe and treated their remarks with irony, indifference.

—He had no teeth either, not a tooth in his head when I met him first, Kate was saying.

—That must have been interesting for you, the banker's girlfriend intoned with a mischievous smile. (*Collected Stories* 143)

The influence of *Dubliners* is everywhere apparent, from the free indirect style – where the primary narrator's voice gives way to the individual characters' point of view – to the use of the long em-dash (—) for dialogue instead of quotation marks. At the end of the story, the point of view flickers between Joe's morose self-absorption and Kate's chirpy self-awareness, and their joint epiphany is typically Joycean in its abrupt open-endedness:

Moments were too short. He sat and watched stiff and upright from his chair, the skin drawn tightly across the broken veins in his cheeks. Moments are far too short, he thought, and soon you and I must learn some new industry to bring us again into the world. He laughed a little. She brought in the dark steaming coffee, and never said a word, for it was easy to see that something was troubling him and he was always stubborn when it came to explaining, even frightened. (*Collected Stories* 145-46)

"First Snow of the Year" (first published in the *Irish Press* on 11 August 1973) won a Hennessy Literary Award in 1974, along with stories by Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, John McArdle, and Ronan Sheehan. The award that year was adjudicated by Edna O'Brien and V.S. Pritchett, and in her judge's report O'Brien commended Healy's story for its confident sense of rhythm – "It is told slowly, but has the tension of something about to snap" – while Pritchett found the use of language "very telling in its evocation of winter, rural poverty and passion intensified by loneliness" (Anon., "New Irish Writing Awards" 3). The original 1973 version of the story begins with an elderly postman, Jim Philips, waking up on the first day of his retirement and heading off to the local pub with his young friend Phildy. Beneath the hoary reminiscences and rambling gossip lies a palpable tension, as Phildy is still consumed with bitterness about having lost his girlfriend, Eli-Jane, to his former best friend, Pedey:

The postman realized that nothing could thaw out the hate in the young man's heart – it was the endless struggle and sin of their small society, the civil war between friend and friend, Phildy's mind was being eaten alive by the loss of a woman to another man, he could not explain or forgive, it was part of the weather of life that relaxes and freezes the pain in the soil. (*Collected Stories* 210)

That same day, Pedey – accompanied by the now-pregnant Eli-Jane – is burying his mother in a nearby cemetery, and the narrative fluidly cross-cuts between the chatter in the public house, the solemnity of the funeral, and the inevitable showdown between Phildy and Pedey, who are both tormented by grief and loss. At the end of the story, the old men in the pub glibly debate the merits of different potato dishes, while the younger characters try to negotiate a frightening world of jealousy and desire only partly within their control. As the writer Patrick McCabe remarked:

"First Snow of the Year" [...] possesses not only the same kinetic energy [as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)] but the same seamless blend of trance and the quotidian. It was the world I lived in and one that I recognised – but it hadn't been approached like this before. I mean, I never found much of Borges in

[Patrick] Kavanagh – but this! If he had read it, Francis Stuart would have perked up like a startled hare – pantheistic, unpatronising, the world's stained glass glimmering inside the eye of a dog. (30)

McCabe is undoubtedly thinking here of a provocative essay by Francis Stuart entitled "The Soft Centre of Irish Writing", first published in the *Irish Times* in 1976 and reprinted in 1978 as an introduction to *Paddy No More* – an anthology of contemporary Irish stories featuring work by several writers associated with the Irish Writers' Co-op, including Neil Jordan, Desmond Hogan, Lucile Redmond, and Dermot Healy. For Stuart, the history of the Irish short story is an ongoing struggle for signifying supremacy between "cosy" realists and "subversive" modernists: between conformists who wish "to preserve communal cultural standards and present the national identity," and dissidents who seek "to preserve the true purpose of art as an instrument for the discovery of alternative concepts and new insights" (Stuart 5-6). From this perspective, traditional Irish realism – exemplified for Stuart by "soft-centred fiction like Frank O'Connor's 'Guests of the Nation'" – is more easily consumed and assimilated by the dominant culture, and its conventional poetics enshrine an inherently conservative politics:

This writing – knitting would be a better word – is to the expected pattern or formula [...]. Familiar sayings and attitudes are echoed with a nudge of humorous intent, the curtains are drawn, the fire poked, and a nice little tale with a whimsical slant is about to be told. No passion, no interior obsession, no real or outrageous comedy as in Flann O'Brien, Joyce or Mr Beckett. (Stuart 7-8)

Stuart's polemical critique contains a whole series of binary oppositions, which manifest themselves, primarily, in the different attitudes to place. For realists, "Ireland" is insular and nostalgic – deferring "gracefully to the world they and their readers had inherited"; for modernists, it is expansive and forward-thinking – "widening, instead of narrowing, the thought patterns of our society." Consequently, there is a significant difference in the use of language: the idiom of realism is monological and familiar – "naturalistic, descriptive rather than probing, preoccupied with local colour" – whereas the discourse of counterrealism is dialogical and defamiliarizing: "it causes discomfort rather than cosy reassurance in the reader." For Stuart, this formal estrangement of language has Brechtian implications in the way that it self-consciously explores the gap between conventional representations and lived reality:

National energy, the will, not just to survive but to excel, can only be restored psychically, which is to say within the imagination. In the past societies achieved this through their mythologies or religions. Today, it is [through] the shock of original writing that a community ensures its organic growth. (Stuart 6-9)

In light of this neo-modernist or counterrealist call-to-arms, it is worth noting that the 1973 version of Healy's "First Snow of the Year" is substantially different in style and structure to the final version published in *Banished Misfortune* almost a decade later – so much so, in fact, that both versions are included in *The Collected Short Stories* (3-11; 209-21). Each version has its own intrinsic merits, but for the purposes of illustrating the difference between a more conventional form of O'Faoláin-esque realism

and Healy's emerging counterrealist aesthetic, it is worth comparing the opening lines of both texts. Here is the opening paragraph from the original 1973 version:

It was Jim Philips' first day of retirement. He realized he was no longer a postman when he awoke, and looked at the stained boards that ran the length of his ceiling. Jim spent the entire morning retrieving his habits as a young man, stayed in bed till late and took his ease about the house, looked up the chimney to check for crows, remembering that time of perpetual youth and céilí music before life had propped him up on a bicycle till the end of his days, a messenger in three townlands. But it was a fine thing, he thought, to outlive your job that you could die in a time of your own making. He left his womanless bed with a light heart and laid out his drinking clothes before the fire, that he might be warm this day itself in Grady's. (*Collected Stories* 209)

In contrast, here is the refurbished opening from the revised 1982 version published in *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories*:

For a few bewildering seconds, Jim Philips, on the day of his retirement, queried late morning sounds he had not heard in years. Then his solitary sense of freedom began. He looked with leisure at the low pink boards that ran the length of the ceiling, yellowing at the fireplace, brightening by the window. Light was hammering on the broken shutter. Shadows darted across the mildewed embroidery of dogs and flowers. He cleared his womanless bed with a light heart, glad to have outgrown the ache in his smothered loins, outlived his job that he might die in a time of his own making. He nimbly laid his drinking clothes before last night's fire, coaxed first with paraffin, then whiskey. He hung his postman's uniform in the closet under the stairs. (*Collected Stories* 3)

Although this revamped opening is by no means the most radical change in the body of the text, it does indicate the aesthetic shift towards a more imagistic mode. Realist description and third-person narration now give way to phenomenological observation and impressionistic states of consciousness, mediated through free indirect discourse. Instead of a straightforwardly linear cause-and-effect plot, the new version favours juxtaposition and montage, frequently cross-cutting between multiple and often solipsist points of view, where memories, desires, and contingent sense impressions are continually conflated and confused (as is the case in all of Healy's novels). Throughout the reconfigured text, jaded idioms and flat expository phrases – he “laid out his drinking clothes before the fire, that he might be warm this day itself in Grady's” – are deliberately expunged, replaced by a series of defamiliarizing images which, as one critic observed, “slam the reader awake” (Redmond 6). When Jim ventures out of his lonely bachelor home after the opening paragraph, for instance, “He saw John and Margaret Cawley, the gypsies, stealing through the yellow gorse with rotten turf. Their children moved from clownish tree to clownish tree out of the wind” (*Collected Stories* 3). In this more fragmented and disjointed world, characters appear and disappear, and the gypsies play no further part until the very end, when Pedey and Eli-Jane – now called Owen and Helen – babysit for the Cawleys. Instead of the original, drily ironic ending – where the tipsy postman, in a reversal of the usual retirement ritual, gives away his watch – the new version ends on a more symbolist note of melancholic transcendence (set, significantly, in a gypsy tent rather than a settled dwelling):

They sat in utter silence. When the children woke, she spoke in gypsy talk to reassure them. He filled the stove with timber and turf, snow dripped from the black canvas. He laid his head on her shoulder and they kissed in a direct trusting manner. Soon John Cawley and Margaret Cawley came over the rocks singing dead verse. (*Collected Stories* 11)

“Banished Misfortune”, the fourth and final story first published in the *Irish Press* (5 April 1975), earned Healy a second Hennessy Literary Award in 1976 (the other winners that year were Robin Glendinning, Ray Lynott, Ita Daly, Thomas O’Keefe, and Seán O’Donovan). The 1976 award was judged by Alan Sillitoe and Aidan Higgins, and in his rather cranky judge’s report Higgins complained about “the lack of humour in the stories”, insisting that their plots were too “predictable” and their diction too “dogged.” Higgins reserved his most enthusiastic response for “Banished Misfortune” – “If there is a better account of modern, changing Ireland, I have yet to read it” – and praised it for its “felicity of phrasing, image-making, and magnanimity of view” (qtd. in Anon., “The New Irish Writing Winners” 3).⁴

“Banished Misfortune” centres around a young Northern Irish family, the McFarlands, who journey from the border county of Fermanagh to the west of Ireland on their summer holidays. The story is set in the mid-1970s, and although the Troubles are only fleetingly alluded to, the brooding force of the conflict thrums away in the background, colouring everyone and everything (in this respect, the story is something of an ur-text for Healy’s 1984 novel, *Fighting with Shadows*). By the time McFarland, a traditional musician, and his wife Judy, a schoolteacher, finally get to Galway with their two children, the more relaxed atmosphere in the South gradually allows their repressed fears and desires to rise to the surface: “they had burrowed down so deep in anxiety that happiness was nearly hysterical” (*Collected Stories* 117). After a night of manic and drunken carousing, the primary mimetic narrative ends with Judy and McFarland cautiously re-pledging themselves to a shared future, in a world where the burden of history, and the ordinary trials of everyday living, can so easily grind people down:

Fear was so addictive, consuming all of a body’s time and she wanted so much to share this vigil with him in Fermanagh but what could you give the young if they were barricaded from the present by our lyrical, stifling past? She said nothing, knowing she shared this empty ecstasy with a thousand others who had let their laziness go on too long.

4 Interestingly, and in sharp contrast to Aidan Higgins’s fulsome praise, Seán O’Faoláin launched a rebarbative attack on Healy’s story in a review in the *Irish Press*: “[‘Banished Misfortune’] is a dubious case. Irish enough in its uncontrolled, undisciplined, auto-suggestive, onrushing, auto-intoxicated, pseudo-romantic, all but disorientated, often disconnected or unconnected logorrhoea. I mistrust it profoundly. It looks like a slab of a novel. It sounds like the Holy Ghost bawling down the blower to the engine room of a ship without a compass – in other words it sounds frightening like fake inspiration. But I am glad it is [included in this anthology]” (6).

"I left home too young, that's what bothers me", he spoke again. "There must be a thousand stories and songs about my own place that I hardly know. But when we return, woman, we'll try." (*Collected Stories* 123-24)

However, unbeknownst to the couple – and, indeed, to some readers (the point is quietly embedded within the imagistic brickwork of the text) – their home in Fermanagh has been burned down that very night, yet another casualty of the Troubles. The reason for the arson attack is left unsaid, although Seán Golden, in a perceptive reading of the story, has speculated that theirs is a "mixed marriage", i.e. the marriage of a Catholic and a Protestant, and so the motive is most likely sectarian (Golden 21). As in "First Snow of the Year", the narrative cross-cuts between multiple viewpoints, but it also flickers backwards and forwards in time and space, and as John Wilson Foster remarked, "The journey through history and geography becomes a form of meditation on Ireland's violent present and broken past" (1093). At the end of the story, the diegetic narrative suddenly shifts back in time to 1910, when the house was first built by McFarland's ancestor, Saul. In the poignant closing lines, we hear of Saul's hopes and dreams for the future, lovingly built into the design of the house:

In a foot of land there's a square mile of learning, Saul had said, and he had learned to build from a sense of duty to the beauty of the hilly Erne. [...] For in April of 1910, Saul had a bad back but nevertheless he had finished building a church in Donegal town and now with Bimbo Flynn the whistler he set about kissing the air and erecting his own house. And it was a house where the best sessions of music would be held [...]. And folks wondered about the ornamented porch that was built out front with the stained-glass windows, and there was talk of a church but when the last stones dried and you could hear the knock-knock of a thrush breaking a snail in his new garden Saul was a proud man. Always before daylight a man thinks of his destiny, as Saul did that last morning talking with the travellers in the half-light of the chestnut hill and he was glad to see that the cream-coloured mare of the gypsies was loath to leave the fine grass now that her time had come. (*Collected Stories* 124-25)

Critical Reception

When *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories* first appeared in 1982 – co-published by Allison & Busby (London) and the newly-founded Brandon Press (Co. Kerry) – reviewers were generally impressed by the ambitious scope of this relatively slim volume (only 111 pages in total). The stories are largely set in the borderlands of rural Ireland or in the diasporic communities of 1970s London (five of the twelve stories take place in England). Throughout *Banished Misfortune*, Healy demonstrates a deep sense of empathy towards the marginalized and the dispossessed, and the language is finely attuned to distressed and beleaguered states of mind (a key characteristic of his novels as well). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the early reviewers especially liked the more orthodox stories of Irish small-town life, such as "The Curse" (a Joycean coming-of-age story about a young boy provoked to an act of profanity by an unscrupulous but powerful older man), or "The Tenant" (about an amiable lodger falling foul of his petit-bourgeois landlords) – indeed, the latter story won the 1982 Tom-Gallon Trust Award, which is awarded for stories which are "traditional, rather than experimental, in character" (Anon., "New Irish Writing – Hennessy" n.p.).

However, some critics were less convinced by more obviously experimental and self-reflexive pieces such as “The Island and the Calves”, about a mystical pilgrimage to a holy island – “His house that day took on more and more the appearance of an abandoned novel [...]. For at last he had authenticated the outside world, and each part was now suspended by itself and no longer needed a deity or an interpreter for a tiring audience” (*Collected Stories* 24) – or “Blake’s Column”, about a lonely and disgruntled book reviewer: “on his way home he bewailed writers undone by fawners, who in their need sought religious or spiritual advantage, ravaging the motions of their families, rather than deal with what their uncomplicated senses told them” (*Collected Stories* 48-49). Significantly, a number of reviewers seemed disconcerted by the creamy density of Healy’s prose, while still admiring his sense of ambition. Peter Hazeldine, for instance, in the *PN Review*, thought that some of stories were “over-compressed, the language dense and intractable”, but nonetheless praised Healy for his “willingness to take risks” (87-88). The anonymous critic in the *Kirkus Review* regretted certain “lapses into ineffectual prose-poetry”, but otherwise considered it “a varied, occasionally impressive debut, especially when Healy’s distinct talent for multi-voiced, overlapping drama surfaces” (Anon., Review n.p.). Similarly, Patricia Craig in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggested that “when he writes plainly, Healy can startle us with the vigour and perceptiveness of his observations”, but in general she felt that “intense, wayward and romantic feeling predominates over simple craftsmanship” (642).

In one of the few academic critiques of *Banished Misfortune*, Robert Hogan considered Healy within the historical tradition of Irish short story writing, and compared him to some of his contemporaries from the now-defunct Irish Writers’ Co-op, Desmond Hogan and Neil Jordan, whom he collectively dubbed the “Young Bucks”:

The twelve stories in his collection are of various lengths and two manners. [...] “Re-prieve” [about a woman having an abortion in England] and particularly “The Tenant” are told in a conventional manner; the remainder, which really set the tone for the book, are written with a denser obliquity than that of Hogan or Jordan, and may owe something to writers like [Aidan] Higgins and [Tom] MacIntyre. (201)

In this context, Hogan argued that the attractions of Healy’s free-flowing style “are its freedom, its individuality, and its suggestion of a sensitive, mysterious, and wildly inexplicable persona.” Against that, Hogan cautioned, “the dangers are obvious: certain phrases lose their syntactical anchor so that their position gets puzzling, and their meaning murky; the public presentation of a narrative gets camouflaged, and indeed the narrative becomes less prominent than the narrating” (201-02). To be sure, Healy’s imagistic style and impressionistic techniques can sometimes make for difficult reading, but the process is less “murky” or “camouflaged” than Hogan asserts. In particular, as Healy’s style evolves, he begins to leave more and more room for the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. As Joanne Hayden remarked (in a recent review of *The Collected Short Stories*), “Healy is not always an easy read. Many of the stories reward second and third readings, often drawing on

multiple perspectives, shifting without warning between characters and locations, avoiding neatness and evading overt explanation" (Hayden n.p.). Or as Healy himself noted in an interview (speaking of his final novel, *Long Time, No See*), "I was trying to stay out of it and let the reader take over and run with it. So I would often put the meaning of a passage in, then take it out again" (Healy, "I try to stay out of it" n.p.). In this respect, Healy's oblique but carefully modulated texts need to be considered not just in the classical tradition of Irish short story writing, but in the broader context of experimental modernism (especially Joyce, Faulkner, Kafka and Borges). As Timothy O'Grady has argued:

They are less stories than rendered sensations of consciousness. [...] There is a lack of reference to a set of meanings, and no plot. Nor are there hierarchies. The sound of a bird or rushing water or the sight of the stretched leg of a hare can weigh the same as a kicking in a bank of snow or the wail of human loneliness. The trick to experiencing *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce said, was to read it aloud. I think the trick with these stories is to read them twice. Then you can take them in as breath. (O'Grady, "Only myself" 19-20)

Conclusion

For all of its perceived difficulties, *Banished Misfortune and Other Stories* clearly marked the emergence of a new and exciting voice in contemporary Irish literature. Over the next three decades, Healy produced four novels, a memoir, five collections of poetry, thirteen plays, and numerous essays and reviews. However, with a few notable exceptions, Healy rarely returned to the short story form after 1982. Although these forays into the short form became increasingly sporadic, Healy's later stories build on the themes and tropes of his earlier work, and continue his commitment to formal innovation. "Before the Off" (1999), for instance, is a remarkable piece of writing, a kind of *Under Milk Wood* for race-goers (the story is set in a public house during race day at an unspecified race course in rural Ireland). The structure and rhythms of this hybrid text lie somewhere between a short story and a radio play, with overlapping dialogue, stage directions, and dramatic scene changes woven into the fabric of the free-flowing narrative (at over 8,000 words it is by far the longest piece in *The Collected Short Stories*). Structurally and stylistically, "Before the Off" is strongly reminiscent of Healy's later novels, *Sudden Times* (1999) and *Long Time, No See* (2011), but it also stands out as a substantial work of art in its own right. As the writer Eoin McNamee commented: "The writing is spare, speech-driven. The dialogue an orchestra of the withheld. Such was his ear for the spoken word that he could take it anywhere he wanted, load it with meaning without ever losing the ring of true speech" (13).

Other late works, such as "Along the Lines" (2012), about an actor suffering a nervous breakdown, is a much shorter sketch, but it further attests to Healy's great love of the theatre and to his abiding fascination with fractured states of consciousness: "He stared out at the audience. It was a sad moment in the script, and the distress the audience saw in his face they read as part of the character's inner self as he approached the bad news" (*Collected Stories* 197). And in many ways Healy's final story before his death, "Images" (2013), brings us back full circle to the publication of

“The Caretaker” and “First Snow of the Year” some forty years earlier. In this haunting and evocative piece, a retired college lecturer spends his time taking photographs of abandoned old houses. Again, the central conceit bears witness to Healy’s own ecstatic and existential vision of life and art, and foregrounds his lifelong interest in the problematics of representation:

At one old ruin fresh daffodils were shooting up among the debris in the garden.

Mortality is rife, he said, as he caught an image of the flowers.

After each photograph was taken he’d study the snap, tip his chin off the back of the hand that held the camera and look closely at the place in question.

Maybe, he’d say. Maybe. (*Collected Stories* 200)

As the elderly photographer later remarks (after he fancifully mistakes an old factory for a schoolhouse), “Reality is more complex than the imagination” (*Collected Stories* 205). In this respect, Healy’s epistemological and ontological scepticism places him firmly in the self-questioning, counterrealist tradition of Joyce, Beckett and Aidan Higgins, which may partly explain his rather patchy critical reputation heretofore. As John Paul O’Malley recently argued (in a review of *The Collected Short Stories*):

I suspect the reason why Healy’s work as a short story writer is even less celebrated than, say, his novels, his poetry, or his plays, is because they tend to break the rigid rules of the form itself. In Irish literature, this is a bit like blaspheming on the altar during mass. [...] If these stories haven’t previously found favour with a popular audience, that’s probably because the images contained within all of them are unsettling, violent and troublesome. But maybe that’s the point: Healy doesn’t want to make us feel warm or sentimental. Questioning everything – our past, our identity, our tribal allegiances, our quarrels, and our very existence – isn’t supposed to be easy. But Healy’s magisterial writing makes it a noble quest worth returning to. (22)

The fact that all of these neglected stories are now back in print offers renewed hope that Dermot Healy’s significant but undervalued role in the history of the modern Irish short story may yet be properly recognised.

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