

HERE AND THEN, THERE AND NOW: PLACE AND MEMORY IN ÉILÍS NÍ DHUIBHNE'S FICTION

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"Preoccupation with place," writes John Wilson Foster, "is a preoccupation with the past. The past is constantly made contemporary through an obsession with remembered place" (Foster 30).

In Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's fiction preoccupation with place and with the past comes to the fore in the specificity (D'hoker 133) and variety in space and time that characterise her fiction. Geographical settings ranging from Ireland, France, Italy, and Northern European countries to North America, on the one hand, and different time settings on the other, are juxtaposed as the present time of contemporary Ireland interweaves with a distant time, whether it be the future that has become the past in *The Bray House* or the historical past of nineteenth- and twentieth-century events, such as the Great Famine in "Summer Pudding," the Second World War in "Lily Marlene," or the Troubles in the North as a present-absent background in *The Dancers Dancing*. Place and memory intertwine productively in many ways, indicating Ní Dhuibhne's concern with intertextuality and storytelling. The use of Irish folklore in postmodern perspectives, for example in the collection *The Inland Ice*, is conducive to the exploration of "divergences and continuities between tradition and modernity" (Fogarty in *Midwife to the Fairies* xi) so that past and present are simultaneously co-present. In memory the past that is remembered and the present of the act of remembering coexist (Campbell 223), and Ní Dhuibhne's use of place and memory reproduces this effect.

From her early story "Midwife to the Fairies" onwards, this is shown as a *fil rouge* in her fiction. It is Ní Dhuibhne's first experiment in the use of an intertextual technique, where she "counterpoint[s] a modern story with a traditional story" (Moloney 107) replacing the vague location of the legend with precise references to Co. Wicklow. An old legend and its rewriting in a modern context is thus a way of juxtaposing past and present, tradition and modernity, something that is emphasised by the alternate use of the verbal forms of simple present and simple past. This turns out to be a recurring linguistic and strategic choice in Ní Dhuibhne's fiction, so that the deictic notions *here and now/hic et nunc* and *there and then/lille et tunc* often overlap and mingle. The obsessive presence of the past is highlighted by the use of different tenses, a linguistic device that focuses on the problematic relationship between past and present. In a similar way, in Ní Dhuibhne's stories the permanence and continuity of place is a container for time, a reminder of the permanence and continuity of time that can turn into a form of persecution, as place keeps memories alive. Examples of this from Ní Dhuibhne's novels and some of her short stories will be the focus of this paper.

Reviewers of Ní Dhuibhne's fiction have variously pointed out the "indelible impression of each place" (Ferrie), for example in the collection *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, and the obsessive preoccupation with childhood memories (Dunne 175) in her debut collection *Blood and Water*. Places are not nameless entities but recur regularly and sometimes obsessively. "Kingston Ridge," for example, opens with a list of place-names: "We had cousins in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Holyoke, Massachusetts" (*Blood and Water* 43), while in "Fulfilment" place-names are timeless repositories for stories: "Killiney is the Anglicisation of *Cill Iníon Léinín*, the chapel of the daughter of Léinín. Who she was I do not know. Perhaps a saint like Gobnait of Cill Ghobnait. Or a princess like Isolde of Chapelizod. Perhaps she was just the daughter of a butcher" (132). Places and place-names are thus conservative in often mysterious ways, suggesting a continuum of time (Reynolds 9) so that a journey in space is also a journey in time.

This is true of the futuristic framework of the novel *The Bray House*. For the group of archaeologists who venture for the first time to the wasteland Ireland has become after nuclear disaster, Ireland is both a physical and a virtual space, whose landmarks along the coastline exist as names: "Bray Head, the Little Sugarloaf, the Big Sugarloaf, Lugnaquilla, the Three Rock Mountain" (*Bray House* 54). They are "rounded haunches," "pointed breasts," "humps. Lumps. Tumors" (54), scars over a non-existing landscape witnessing a place and a time that are no more. Robin Lagerlof's remark "I had been *there* before" (55, emphasis added) is anticipated by a previous observation "*Now here we were*" (36, emphasis added) when the ship approaches the coast of East Anglia. The references to space and time thus seem to get blurred, overlapping and mingling as mentioned before. "There" appears in the text in its anaphoric use (Fillmore 63), as it refers to the identified destination of the archaeological trip. The use of the past tense also enhances the distance in time besides the distance in space implied in the deictic "there." However, the past tense clashes with the "here and now" in "*Now here we were.*" The distance implicit in the past tense overturns the *ille et tunc* into *hic et nunc*. The time marker "now" thus suggests the quintessential metaphor of the novel as archaeological dig, a "now" that goes deep into the "then" and unearths it in a timeless present. Under the disguise of scientific exploration, geographical location turns into time. In the here and now of the excavation light is shed on the here and then. In excavating the house in Bray, Robin comes face to face with the communal past of Ireland and her own traumatic past. In the overlapping of here and now, place is thus an interface for time and memory.

The Bray House itself opens in the past tense with a specific reference to space and time, the *ille et tunc* of the story: "We embarked at Gothenburg just before dawn on 28 April" (5). With few exceptions, the novel uses primarily the simple past, thus following the traditional pattern of Science Fiction that exploits the use of past tenses to speak about the future, to reach the future of an imaginary world of tomorrow (Weinrich 69).

In a novel which is mainly concerned with the power of narrative and the authority of written texts (Hand 104), the predominance of past tenses is consistent with the concern of the story as story, thus recalling what Harald Weinrich termed "*die erzählte Welt*," the narrated world, the result of fiction, the domain in which time is the depository of merging past and present. Paradoxically, in the report of the excavation of the Bray House, which covers the second part of the novel between Chapters Twelve and Sixteen, the use of the past tense to give background information is followed by the prevalence of present tenses in the actual account of the finds within the house, to be followed again by the past tense in the interpretative analysis. The report is thus an inset text breaking up the story line, but it is also an act of fiction. Its reliability is to be doubted under its disguise of truth. Alternating the use of past tenses, narrative verbs, and present tenses, commenting verbs, to use Weinrich's definition, the interpretation is a mere act of fiction. Objects and documents of the residents of the Bray House provide an input for stories about them. For example, entries in Murphy McHugh's diary about meeting "BOB" are interpreted as pub-going habits with one Brian O'Brien (*Bray House* 160). The use of the past tense in Robin's report thus creates a narrated world which is nothing but the result of her own figments and imagination, an act of storytelling, enhancing the distance of the wasteland of Ireland as fictional space.

The obsessive scars of the past mark Robin in *The Bray House*, Detta in "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams," Polly in "The Moon Shines Clear, the Horseman's Here," and Carmelita in "The Garden of Eden." For all of them, the place of now is the place of then; by returning to familiar and nearly forgotten places, or by venturing into unknown ones, they set out on a journey, an act of obsessive remembering.

Stories with a setting in a historical past make use of the past tense to provide the context of the narrated world. For example, "The Pale Gold of Alaska" sheds light on space and time to introduce the life of the emigrant Sophie, following in her steps to the various places she visits with her husband: "Soon after her eighteenth birthday, Sophie left Donegal and went to America with her sister Sheila" (*Pale Gold* 1). Likewise, in "Summer Pudding" the reference to a specific location provides a context of estrangement for the Irish refugees stranded in Wales "in the last year of the Famine" (Moloney 109): "We camped at Caer Gyby for three days waiting for Father Toban" (*Inland Ice* 44).

However, in the historical past of "Gweedore Girl," set in Derry in the early twentieth century, the simple present is occasionally used in a narration mostly told in the simple past. The story opens with a direct question introduced by a *verbum dicendi*: "Mrs McCallum asked, 'Can you cook?'" (*Inland Ice* 2). Away from home to work as a maid, the protagonist and first-person narrator switches to the present tense when recalling her own family and the place she belongs to, the point of reference of her life: "We own our own farm, ten acres, and we own a boat and a seine net" (4). When describing the time spent at the McCullums', present and past tenses alternate. The

present is used to describe the daily routine of the house chores: "In the morning I get up at six and light the range and bring them tea in bed" (10); the same routine is, however, anticipated a few pages earlier by the use of the past tense: "I had to do everything in the house. Clean everything, scrub everything, cook everything, wash everything and also mind the baby" (6-7). The description of the room she lives in is in the present tense, too: "My bedroom is a room at the back of the kitchen, cosy and warm in winter, at least" (11).

The frequency with which this linguistic strategy is used is indicative of a stylistic choice that is functional to the narrative and has a multiple effect in terms of the texture of the story. In fact, present and past tenses overlap to provide both distance and proximity, the events of the Gweedore girl's life are both looked at from afar and brought to actuality. And in particular their interlacing sheds light on the story as story, on its metanarrative construction, and the use of first-person narration gives rise to "a mingling of post-modern dissonance with the immediacy of direct address" (Fogarty in *Midwife to the Fairies* xii). In fact, this story, too, turns out to be a story about telling stories. Elliot, the butcher boy who will later deceive her, entertains her by telling stories and in his company she also becomes a story: "My life turned into a big long story that went on and on and I kept finding things in it that I hadn't ever thought about" (*Inland Ice* 14), so much so that she becomes public domain: "They wrote about me in the paper" (28). In a similar way to "The Wife of Bath" from the collection *Eating Women is not Recommended*, in which the fictional self of Alisoun melts in water, she creates a distance between her real and her fictional self, or rather she makes herself a story to come to terms with her own life. In fact, the story closes with the present, as the girl takes control of her own story/life: "His name is Seamus and he is a good boy, kind and funnier than Elliot, and earning much more money. I know I can marry him any time I want to" (28). Like the protagonist of the legend "The Search for the Lost Husband" that underlies the collection *The Inland Ice*, she is "tired of all that fairytale stuff" (262), and the use of the present tense provides reconciliation between past and present selves.

The strategy of alternating past and present tenses is not a peculiarity of "Gweedore Girl," but turns out to be a recurring narrative and linguistic pattern. In fact, it is a fairly constant practice in Ní Dhuibhne's short fiction to find an opening in the present tense to a present or past situation, and alternating stretches of past and present are often graphically indicated by blank spaces.

In "The Flowering," Lennie, a young woman of the 1990s, is determined to "discover her roots" (*Eating Women* 7). The narrative opens and closes in the here and now of contemporary Ireland, something that gives it a circular pattern framing the tale of Sally Rua, Lennie's ancestor, a tale nested within Lennie's untold story. "The Flowering" is a multifaceted story in which different layers intersect. It is a story in which place, represented by a house, is a continuum in time, it is a personal story of madness, but it is also a story which reflects on Ireland's past and on the uses of the past.

However, the present tense that opens the story also introduces the story-within-a-story of Sally Rua: "But look, there she is, hunkered over the black stool in the bottle-green dimness of that cavernous byre ... There she is! Sally Rua. Lennie's great-aunt" (12). In the repetition "there she is," Sally Rua is both here and now in the present image of the mind and there and then in the past, which emphasises the postmodern awareness of it being a story, "a yarn, spun out of thin air" (22). The physical description of the girl is in the present tense too: "People who dislike her ... say she is a snake ... although boys who love her compare her, more conventionally to a swan" (12).

The narrated world, however, soon gains ground through the use of the past tense and the prevalence of spatial elements, "house," "cottage," "church": "She lived in that house in Wavesend ... In the mornings she went to school in the low white cottage beside the church. The rest of the day she was engaged in all the busy activities of the home" (12). The narrative verbs of the past shed light on the postmodern feature of the story as story and on Lennie's awareness of the power of transformation embedded in creativity, which provides a theoretical framework for Sally Rua's story as a successful lace-maker and artist, and her collapse into madness when deprived of "the work she loved" (22).

Memory and invention underlie "The Moon Shines Clear, the Horseman's Here," where the alternating use of past and present tenses marks the obsessive intricacy of things past leaving their mark on the present. After many years of absence, Polly returns to the village of her youth. The place itself makes tragic memories sharper, and the interlacing of past and present tenses has the serpentine effect of endlessly going into and out of the past, just as Polly is endlessly going into and out of the village. The story – or stories – of her past are set alongside the story her old mother tells herself, an old legend the end of which she has forgotten and which strikingly resembles or retells Polly's own story. Place is a catalyst for time, bridging the gap between the here and now of Polly's return with the here and then of the house she used to live in. While the first paragraph is in the present ("The house is a holiday house"), the second paragraph opens a long stretch in the past tense, starting with "Polly lived at home in this valley until she was almost eighteen" (134). The juxtaposition of spatial and temporal referents (home, valley, Polly's age) magnifies the double obsession with space and time that characterises the story. Occasionally, however, a present perfect form is used: "She has read somewhere that in everyone's life are seven devils, and only when you meet them and overcome your fear of them can you find your guardian angel" (140). Not by chance does this verb form appear in a paragraph about telling stories, since in spite of being afraid to talk to her mother, one of her devils, Polly is ready "to regale [her] with the story of her life" (149), so as to regain her own space and reconquer her own time.

Stories survive just as Polly has survived the death of her boyfriend and her unwanted pregnancy, experiences that have banished her from the life of the valley.

The recollection of a film made in the village is a metaphor for the exclusion from an experience which had involved the whole community: "Everyone had been an extra. Katherine and Siobhan had been schoolgirls in the classroom scenes. All the other people had been villagers, or men drinking ... in the pub ... But Polly had not participated. ... The film had been a disappointing experience, an experience of total exclusion for Polly. No wonder she had forgotten all about it" (141).

The narrated world is cast through the medium of the past perfect this time, a procedure that is functional to the narrative. It is the tense of a very distant past, something forgotten and therefore put behind the past tense of memories, something that also provides a descriptive background. However, not only does the past perfect underlie the distance of time, it also sheds light on the process of "total exclusion" (141) recurring from the past to the present. Thus, the use of the past perfect emphasises both the distance from the here and now of the villagers and the here and then of the recollection. It also sheds light on the world of film as a prototype for the world of fiction, a world magnified by being narrated.

When Polly's mother is engaged in her own narrated world, she tells her story in the past, yet she is introduced in the present tense, since her act of narration is endless and timeless. "That is what she does all day. She tells stories ... There's nothing else, there, just herself, but she is engaged in a long monologue ... not monotonous, but unbroken, fluent as a river" (156-7). Like the fiction of the story her mother is telling, the story of Paddy's death and Polly's pregnancy are told in the past tense. The episodes are made into stories in order to come to terms with place and memory. It is a form of therapy.

"Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams" is also the story of a returned character and of unwanted pregnancy. The story appears in the 2003 collection *Midwife to the Fairies* and in a slightly different version under the title "The Master Key" in Dermot Bolger's *Ladies' Night at Finbar's Hotel*. By calling herself Detta, Bernadette starts a new life in Holland after leaving her child for adoption. Her return to Dublin after twenty-seven years, now as a guest in the same hotel where she worked as a young girl, is at the request of her son, who has managed to trace her back. The story covers the few hours in Dublin before the meeting as well as Detta's youthful years during the summer of her Leaving Cert. The present time of her return is turned into a narrative past, and the past tense also relates the events of the very distant past that led to her pregnancy, which is made more emotionally painful by the significance of the place, Finbar's Hotel. The two different time levels are thus made into a continuum by the use of a common grammatical tense. Interestingly enough, the present tense is used in the very final part of the story, where memory takes over and "later and then become now" (*Midwife to the Fairies* 118). These words mark the sudden shift to the one and a half page that closes the story in the present tense: "Detta holds her baby up. She counts his eyes and his ears and his fingers and his toes. She turns him round and looks at the strip of fair hair on his back. She puts him to

her breast and lets him suck" (118). Chronological time is overturned in the intensity of forgotten feelings and the use of the simple present sheds light on an experience which had long been suppressed. "Twenty-seven years later, but she is getting it again: the happiest moment of human life" (118).

The *bildungsroman* *The Dancers Dancing*, indebted to the early story "Blood and Water," is set in 1972 in the Donegal Gaeltacht where a group of teenage girls attend Irish college. The historical context is fleetingly present with the two Derry girls who share the house with the protagonists. Unlike the story from which it develops, the novel is told in the third person, and, unlike the story, it is told mostly in the present tense. In fact, "Blood and Water" uses the present as a frame to contain the past experiences of adolescence and look at them from the perspective of an adult narrator. The opening of the story, "I have an aunt who is not the full shilling" (*Blood and Water* 109), leaves room for the memory of reiterated experiences recounted in the past, while the present is resumed in the final part of the story: "My aunt is still alive ... I never go to Inishowen now ... My aunt is not altogether well" (120).

This standard procedure in the stories is abandoned in *The Dancers Dancing*, in which the use of the present tense provides freshness and immediacy to the young girls' experiences. The novel opens with a reiterated image of watching land from above – "Imagine," "look" – so that visual perception is both here and now and there and then. The referents themselves partake of both the present and the past and survive time. The land is here and now, but it is also there, if seen from a distance, and it is also then: "You see what the early mapmakers imagined" (1). This flight of the imagination is not different from the process of narration; in a way it is a meta-narrative reference, a foray into the past with the immediacy of the present. The invitation to look at the map, to go into it, is an alternative way to enter the text; the map is a text, a story, since "every picture tells a story" (3). The pictorial vision of what is being seen that closes the first chapter is a list of things perceived on the map and seen from a distance; the demonstratively implied distance – "that is the story" (3) – bridges the gap between here and now, there and then. Likewise, the awareness of the story being a story closes Chapter Two: "By now, their future is their past, an open book, a closed chapter" (5). This implicitly draws the attention to the act of narration as a backward look, but also to the choice of using the present tense, Weinrich's "commenting tense," as the prevalent narrative mode of the novel. "An open book, a closed chapter," with the open reference to written words gives rise to expectations concerning the story as text, and thus suggests that the story we enter when entering the map is now over. The time marker "by now" is a prolepsis, casting an eye both at and from the future.

The use of the present tense in the novel can thus be explained as a textual strategy that sheds light on July 1972 as the everlasting present perceived by the four young protagonists during a seminal experience (Warwick) of their lives. This is also consistent with the perception of time in the Gaeltacht: "It is hard for the children to

imagine that there was another life *before this*, before the Gaeltacht ... *The norm is this*: living communally, chanting sentences and songs in class, playing games, dancing every night" (*Dancers* 135, emphasis added). The "now" implicit in "before this" and "the norm is this" make a connection between space and time: the space of the Gaeltacht is the space of "now," "here" is perceived as time now.

Occasional forays into the past provide background information about Orla's family and the girls' friendship. However, in the private and magical space of the burn time is suspended, clock time and chronological time stop. Hidden and feeling protected by the isolation of the place, Orla enjoys playing with the echo, giving vent to the few bad words she knows, and narration in the present tense overlaps with the past: "She tries out all the taboo words she knows ... She does not know very many, as a matter of fact, since *people didn't at that time*. ... Still, there is a surprising store of words in Orla's head that have never before emerged into the light of day, into the sound of light" (201, emphasis added).

The wavering between past and present and the return to the present tense highlight the process of narration, the story being told, as the time marker "at that time" provides the detachment of a story told at a future time. In a way, it is the same detachment with which the opening map unfolds. The here of the burn bridges the gap between now and then, or rather now and then are one. The burn is also the focus of a passage in the past tense that represents a significant experience. Orla's encounter with the burn provides a moment of peace and it is framed in the present and cast into the past tense as if it were a story Orla goes back to every now and then:

After the visit to the burn, Orla is filled with courage ... In the burn, she was a part of whatever whole encompassed the water and the weeds Her heart beat in time with the bubble of the burn down there, her feet gripped the stones ... Orla belonged to the river. She was nothing there, nothing more than a berry dripping to the water or a minnow floating under the surface of a pool. Nothing. And completely herself ... (73)

Only in the final chapter, significantly entitled "Now," does the point of view of the historical present of retrospection – then – shift to the present time – now. Orla writes in the first person now, thus revealing herself as the subjective consciousness of the novel (Traynor 276). In this change of point of view, the distance of time and the continuity of past and present become the focus. If the past tense is used to fill in the ellipses of her life between the summer of 1972 and "now," occasional present continuous forms emphasise the transience of "now," of the fleeting moment. The beach where she is sitting now ("I am sitting on the beach as usual," *Dancers Dancing* 239) is like time a transitory place between what happened and what will happen; the beach is once again the space that contains time, the location for memories, where her summer love for Micheál comes back. Not by chance, therefore, does the novel close on a present perfect form of duration, the tense that bridges the gap between past and present: "Since then I have not seen him" (242). There and then, here and now become one, and look backward and forward simultaneously, thus recalling the

few lines the girls used to sing together when their story was still an open book: "Que sera sera! Whatever will be will be" (4).

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