REWRITING IRELAND THROUGH FRACTURED MALE SELVES IN THE WORKS OF JAMIE O'NEILL

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Jamie O'Neill's three novels, *Disturbance* (1989), *Kilbrack* (1990), and *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), are unified thematically in their portrayals of tormented relationships between and within male selves, and of the hostile environments that impede their quests for true identities. As a writer, Jamie O'Neill (*1962) is primarily concerned with both introducing a new voice to the Irish discourse on morality and with new ways of representing canonical masculinity. To this purpose, his novels are populated by alternative personalities that make non-canonical, personal, and heroic choices and engage in problematic and fringe ethical behaviour. Consequently, this paper will demonstrate how O'Neill questions the moral absolutes of his culture in order to regain independence from the familiarised eye of mainstream Ireland. This shall be achieved by highlighting that homoeroticism and dissidence latently underpin each of these narratives in ways that ultimately parallel Oscar Wilde's biography and aesthetic. This dynamic will be approached from the perspectives of personality disorders, paternal disturbances, the conflict between real and imaginary worlds, and, finally, the ways in which Oscar Wilde casts his shadow across these aspects of O'Neill's work.

Personality Disorders

Disturbance, O'Neill's short and surprising first published work,[1] concerns young Irish maternal orphan Nilus Moore's struggles with mental and physical breakdown in a house that is both literally and figuratively crumbling around him. His is the hypersensitive mind of a would-be creator, filled with imagination and daydreams, yet his urges to impose and maintain order in this hostile milieu are slowly revealed through a series of obsessions that are repeated daily: the folding of his bedroom sheets, the making and unmaking of a jigsaw puzzle, and the constant ordering of the elements in his bedroom. This visceral need for constantly arranging, dismantling, and rearranging reveals a desire to

1 In a plenary talk at the AEDEI-IX Conference held in Tenerife in April 2010, O'Neill explained that *Kilbrack*, the second novel to be published, was, indeed, his first novel to be written. This would explain the differences in style and content between *Kilbrack* and his two other works, which share many more parallels and similarities.

undo and remake the lack of affection and understanding he suffers in his everyday life:

> In the back of my mind, I knew, I was fiddling with something close to a madness. I had a notion to tamper with the jigsaw. Just, say, a quarter of a quarter of a corner of it. The idea was outrageous. Disrupting all that beautiful symmetry. My fingers were tingling with the mere conception. […]
> I sat on my bed. To engage my errant thoughts I reached under the mattress to check the sheet-folds. They were reasonable enough. A nurse would be satisfied, if a matron perhaps wouldn't. I wiped my glasses. I decided the only thing for it was to venture down to the bathroom, splash cold water on my face. I didn't get to the bathroom, however.
> On my way to the door, inching past the table with the fifty-thousand-piece matt black jigsaw laid out squarely in the middle, my hand dashed out and, before I even knew it, my fingers had tugged on the bottom right-hand corner.
> A tiny segment came away. I worked feverishly. It was a close-run thing, but in the end, after seven anguished minutes, I had the jigsaw completed again. (10)

As this passage demonstrates, this impulse towards order is precisely what provokes Nilus's neurotic fits, resulting from his immersion in the turmoil of disturbances in familial, social, and national spheres.

Some neurotic hints can also be observed in *Kilbrack*, O'Neill's second novel, but these occur at a secondary level, for the sake of the descriptive comic tone of Irish rural life. In this case, the severe amnesia suffered by the male protagonist, O'Leary Montagu, provokes in him a fixation on the rural village of Kilbrack, as it appears in Nancy Valentine's novel *Ill Fares the Land*. After some years, he has the opportunity to travel there and face his obsession.

The potential of such personality disorders for introducing new voices into the Irish discourse is broadened and deepened in O'Neill's third novel *At Swim, Two Boys* through the character of Anthony MacMurrough, who suffers from a benign process of schizophrenia that splits him into four distinct and symbolic personalities. This dissociative identity disorder seems to arise from his need to release his inner guilt and shame, after a lifetime of morally dubious deeds had led to accusations of antisocial activities and, ultimately, incarceration. Indeed, to the strict norms of the time of the novel's setting – directly before and during the 1916 Easter Rising – MacMurrough would have seemed a perverted dandy, with a 'dangerous' attraction to younger boys. To alleviate his remorseful conscience, then, MacMurrough initiates plural dialogues with other *personae* that inhabit his mind: the ghost of his deceased friend Scrotes; an unnamed religious figure, addressed as the Chaplain; an elderly grandmother and consummate matchmaker named Nanny Tremble; and the personification of his virile member, appropriately named Dick. This device successfully

serves as a means of deconstructing the actual identity stereotypes that affect a social reading of Ireland. The four personalities can be read under psychoanalytic parameters, for example, as they embody class, gender, sexual troubles, and other problematic issues connected to the recent history of Ireland.

Their complex relationship operates within three different dynamics. Firstly, in the larger confrontation between MacMurrough and the four *personae*, they perform the dichotomous struggle between the *conscious* and the *unconscious*. Secondly, there is a confrontation between the three entirely fictitious and psychological characters and Scrotes, a 'real' character in the novel's universe. Thirdly, there is opposition between each of their individual traits, as one is the only female character (Nanny Tremble), another is a symbolic synecdoche (Dick), the third is a religious figure (the Chaplain), and the last of them a masculine entity (Scrotes). These alter egos depict a social mosaic of the forces that interact in the national panorama, with Nanny Tremble as a representative of the family, Dick as the motor of the sexual impulse, the Chaplain as a symbol of the Catholic religion, and Scrotes as the dissidence, though crushed, of the Irish citizenship. Scrotes happens to be the only one to develop a definite personality, to soothe MacMurrough's remorse and provide him with a certain relief. At the same time, Scrotes becomes MacMurrough's counterpart in a permanent debate between both, in a Jekyll-and-Hyde-esque dialogue in which Scrotes represents the easy-going and rational *ego,* and MacMurrough the violent and rebellious side. The other three position themselves like shadows, tormenting him with lost childhood, animal instinct, and religious repression. Although these voices constitute a constant source of anguish for MacMurrough, a quest for a new and truer identity for Ireland can be glimpsed in their ample and polemic debates. Through the social dialogue undertaken by this plurality, a more concise identification of the Irish issue is proposed, highlighting alternative voices that had been silenced in other literary works and representing a more modern view of the nation, opening up new contexts for reading Ireland beyond the more customarily traditional and conservative ones.

Paternal Disturbances

One of the most interesting sources of disturbance and repression in O'Neill's novels is that of paternal relationships, which are paramount to the formation of the fractured selves of the protagonists. In *Disturbance*, Nilus lives with his alcoholic and broke father while suffering the absence of his deceased mother. The boy grows increasingly isolated from his father as he begins to understand

that he is an unfit example of a masculine prototype. This is obvious, for instance, at the beginning of the novel, when, addressing the issue of nudity among males, Nilus's father chastises him that "there is nothing to be ashamed of" because "men don't need to hide themselves. We've all got the same mechanics. No need for locked doors." As a consequence, "he took to walking around naked upstairs. He stopped locking the door when he took a bath" (1). This natural behaviour contrasts with the feelings of apprehension and decency felt towards the naked body.[2] Nilus, a boy of fourteen, full of doubts about his sexual orientation, uses these words as an alibi to display his voyeurism in front of his father:

> My father then took to leaving the door open. I didn't go upstairs after that, not on Saturday afternoons. When my father started calling for tea to be taken to him in his bath, I decided enough was enough. I brought him his tea, then explained that I was feeling all hot and itchy with the weather, did he mind if I just splashed myself from the basin?
> Not at all, said my father. Carry on.
> I stripped off, splashed some soapy water round my groin, and lathered away, making cooing noises about the lovely cold sensation. My father turned up the volume on the radio. I started towelling myself with the small hand towel, slowly and ever so thoroughly, with my bum stuck almost point-blank in my father's face.
> After five minutes of this, my father said, "I think you're probably dry now."
> And I had no more lectures about nudity. (1-2)

With this little rebellious act Nilus reverses the natural order, pretending to teach his father a lesson: Nilus demonstrates his maleness, but also his sexual awareness and complacency, which are precisely what the father disguises under a veil of authority. He is, then, trying to demonstrate that what he starts to feel as his weakness, that is, his burgeoning sexuality, has nothing to do with his father's perversions (among them, alcohol and women). Thus, a dividing wall is erected between them, as the impossibility of following the paternal ethical model forces Nilus to find alternative routes in order to survive and improve his chaotic situation.

The paternal characters of the Dublin boys, Jim Mack and Doyler, of *At Swim, Two Boys* are also relevant, especially Jim Mack's father. Contradictory feel-

2 The influence of religion arises here, as Catholicism considers nudity as something normal only immediately before the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Good and Evil, for having committed the original sin. Thus, covering one's body is a means of avoiding the macula of abomination that all human beings have carried within themselves ever since.

ings are shown towards him; at first, he appears to be a pretentious lower-middle class man with many flaws:

> *There goes Mr Mack, cock of the town. One foot up, the other foot down. The hell of a gent. With a tip of his hat here and a top of the morn there, tip-top, everything's dandy. He'd bare his head to a lamppost.*
> *A Christian customer too. Designate the charity, any bazaar you choose, up sticks the bill in his shop* "One Shilling per Guinea Spent Here Will Aid the Belgian Refugees." "Comforts for the Troops in France." "Presentation Missions up the Limpopo." *Choose me the cause, he's a motto to milk it. See him of a Sunday. Ladies' Mass by the sixpenny-door, stays on for the Stations for his tanner's worth. Oh, on the up, that's Mr Mack, a Christian genteelery grocerly man.* (3)

Later on, Mr. Mack's pretentiousness is shown up as the sign of his fallibility as a human being and, in this way, he becomes a sympathetic character. Doyler's father, who had fought in the Boer War in his youth, shares some of the characteristics of Nilus's father, as he is also a broke alcoholic. The differences between Mr. Mack and Mr. Doyle are striking, but crucial to the plot of the novel is that these old men are to be seen in connection to their sons. Both couples had friendly relationships, both had made contrary decisions regarding their place in society, either assimilating themselves into it or rebelling against it, and both feel the necessity for change in Ireland. Ultimately, however, it will be the younger couple who will fulfil their expectations by performing heroic deeds in the romantic setting of the 1916 Easter Rising and by making love in the symbolic setting of Muglins Rock, after a year of Doyler teaching Jim swimming lessons to reach it. In summary, then, the paternal characters foreshadow the 'disturbances' that split the personality of each of the young protagonists apart, as the pathetic condition they epitomise makes them a point of reference for ascertaining the offspring's reactions afterwards.

The Conflict Between Real and Imaginary Worlds

Despite these thematic similarities, what clearly differentiates *Disturbance* from *At Swim, Two Boys* is the setting. On the one hand, the lugubrious, crumbling paying guesthouse of the former provides an environment adequate for dark humour and melodrama, on the basis of an individual portrait of social injustice. On the other hand, the historical facts concerning the 1916 Easter Rising offer a specific panorama in which the homosexual relationships of the three young men and the urban guerrilla warfare of the Irish dissidents can come together in the form of a neo-romantic epic. At this point, it seems clear that a general characteristic of O'Neill's style is the creation of imaginary worlds that

work as a supra-text to the 'real' settings of the novels. As we have seen, MacMurrough's split self comprises four 'r' elements: reality, romance, religion, and repression. This spectrum offers a clear mosaic of the contemporary social context, with social depression and the church appearing at the core of the fracturing elements in O'Neill's texts. This sense of fractured selves, however, not only shapes the characters, but also the worlds around them. Thereby, the clash between the ideal and the real world also represents an instrument of 'disturbance,' which provokes feelings of mental dislocation and personal rebelliousness in equal parts.

In *Disturbance*, the intertwining of Nilus's psychological reality and that of the crumbling house seems obvious enough. This connection between the objects of the house and his mental instability is clear from the very beginning: "I had known all along that my mother was going to die. The crockery on the dresser in the kitchen had told me" (4). Later on, the jigsaw puzzle also acquires a symbolic meaning, as it comes to jeopardise Nilus's thoughts and, at the same time, it seems to gain life, almost as if it were made from the grey matter of the brain: "After rosary, I went to my bedroom. I stared a long time at the jigsaw. Sometimes it was more grey than black, sometimes it was blacker than midnight. Tonight it was just ordinary" (10). Accordingly, Nilus's tiny room seems to become his own body, alone and safe from the hostile environment that surrounds him, and the house stands for the fatal milieu that is crushing him, whose decadence and crookedness offer a paragon of the moral, social, and religious pressure, represented by the authority figures (father, priest, teacher) that exert an oppressive influence in his formation. This is demonstrated when, after his mother's death,

> the days and weeks that followed were an anguish to me. I would return from school and with a ghastly certainty I'd check on the dresser. And true enough the cup was there with its chipped side showing. No matter how many times I might turn it, always if I checked again – morning, evening, evening, morning – driven by a hideous fate, the chip had worked its way to the front. Worse, the phenomenon began to spread to the other cups, then to the saucers. Even the plates suffered, rolling around in their grooves till an inexorable chip was showing. I felt that the world itself was cracking […]. (26)[3]

The main argument of *Kilbrack* resides precisely in the parallel structures between reality and fiction and in the neurotic commingling of the actual and the dreamed visions of the insomniac Montagu and the alcoholic Nurse Mary. The

3 Those moments of reverie are the key to understanding Nilus's mental disturbances, and they are usually connected almost symbiotically with the objects that surround him at home, that is, the real and the imaginary melting in everyday life.

characters in this novel are as mysterious and cryptic as the actual Kilbrack appears to be in the eyes of the diverse narrators. In this sense, the creation of alternative realities and the metafictional recalling of literary texts become a recurrent device in O'Neill's novels. In *At Swim, Two Boys*, the intertext is evident, as the very title (which alludes to Flann O'Brien's famous novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*) indicates that the rewriting of Ireland, both diachronically and ethically, operates as a supra-text in these stories. *At Swim, Two Boys* shares with O'Brien's masterpiece the complexity of multiple voices and perspectives, together with a taste for deconstructing identity stereotypes that affect a social reading of Ireland. This reference is not at all irrelevant, for O'Brien's title mentions a specific place on the river Shannon, full of literary and nationalistic echoes, called "Swim-Two-Birds" (or Snámh-dá-éin).[4] Therefore, both novels use water as the perfect symbol of idealism and daydreaming. On the one hand, water supposes the romantic element *par excellence*: a force of nature to be fought and ultimately tamed; on the other hand, water is conceived as the realm of symbols and disturbances of the mind: a place to create castles in the air.[5]

Sexual Dissidence and Oscar Wilde

Sexual dissidence, represented symbolically through the figure of Oscar Wilde, proves integral to O'Neill's fractured male selves. Its importance is both stylistic – in the use of ironic and subversive humour and in the aristocratic and defiant views of Anthony MacMurrough – as well as political. In this way, O'Neill's dandy purportedly declares himself one of Wilde's co-religionists in a long-lasting moral fight that still affects the image of Ireland.[6] Therefore, sexual defiance and the statement of the sexual condition of the individual become inseparable from the cause of Irish independence and romantic national ideals. Wilde himself, the epitome of the refined Irish dandy, ties together the themes of the novel, and his works recurrently act as intertexts. In the same way that

4 O'Brien also makes use of the Chinese box technique, a mirror image of which can be seen in *Kilbrack*, though at a much more elementary level.

5 Following symbolic interpretations, Cirlot defines water as "a symbol of the collective or of the personal unconscious, or else as an element of mediation and dissolution" (366).

6 Wilde's name also appears as a famous and polemic historical figure: "I was thinking: Parnell and Wilde, the two great scandals of the age: both Irish. It's good to know Ireland can lead the world in something" (*At Swim, Two Boys* 308).

Wilde's life is echoed in those of some of the characters of his own work,[7] MacMurrough is represented as another of Wilde's *alter egos*. Their tragedies are not caused by their desires, but rather by the historical moment in which they happen to be born. Section 61 of the 1861 Irish Offences-Against-the-Law-Act reads: "whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable […] to be kept in penal servitude for life" (qtd. in Ferriter 715).[8] To continue tracing similarities, MacMurrough is an ex-convict, imprisoned for homosexual acts. His imprisonment has affected his social relationships, and he suffers his inner drives and divisions as the result of that traumatic experience. In spite of being physically free, MacMurrough has the feeling that he will be imprisoned by that repression for the rest of his life. His cynical attitude towards the nation can be easily deduced, for instance, in a party organised by MacMurrough's aunt, at which she hopes to find him a bride to silence the rumours about his 'condition.' In a conversation with a former classmate and friend, in which hypocrisy and secrecy prevail, he states:

> "It's quite true. I was guilty as charged."
> Kettle swayed on the soles of his feet. He appeared to waver between outburst and conciliation. An indignant compromise prevailed: "You can't imagine I didn't know? God's sake, man, I took silk years back. I am informed you have since – how to say? –put away the things of a child."
> MacMurrough's eyebrows lifted. "Truth, for instance?"
> "You are telling me that there is a flaw in your character?"
> "I am telling you that I do not think it is a flaw."
> The empty glass went down the table. "There's nothing more to be said." But there was just the tiniest drop at the bottom of the glass. He lifted it, bottomed it, banged it down. "Damn it, MacMurrough, are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?"
> "If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes." (309)

None of these implications would change the political issues of the statement, yet they do specify the connection between nationalism and sexual orientation. If the relation established between sex and revolution is not one of sexual freedom, but rather one between the ideals that sustain that revolution and some form of Puritanism (Hobsbawm *passim*), then the relationship between Jim Mack and Doyler Doyle (and, even more, between the two of them and

7 Inevitably, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comes to mind. The story of the immoral dandy who keeps his image intact while his corrupted self becomes more and more perverted every day proves that the logical structures of reality can be reversed by art.

8 It is important to point out that as recently as 1993 homosexuality was still a crime in Ireland.

MacMurrough), which they relate to the freedom of Ireland, would have been completely unacceptable to mainstream morality of the time. Consequently, the connection between a sexual orientation that is still considered marginal and the struggle for ostensibly normative ideals such as self-determination and patriotism appears especially scandalous (González and Oliva 217).

However, the subtlest of all the parallels between Wilde and MacMurrough concerns their respective incarcerations, as MacMurrough's tone of melancholy and profound sadness finds a correlate in Wilde's writings after he had suffered the solitude of Reading Gaol. MacMurrough is tantalised by this trauma, to the point that he is haunted by it even during sexual intercourse with Doyler:

> He slipped off the boy and collapsed on his back. His head fell on the pillow and, sinking through the down, he heard the pounding of his heart; and every pound was a footstep, as down the iron-railed hall the warder clanged, calling out the numbers of cells and the cell doors slammed as he called them rebounding, and the bawling and banging and hounding steps came closer till his door was resoundly next.
> C.3.4, called the warder.
> Slam. This cannot be. Prison. But it is. (181)[9]

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse the tormented relationships between male selves in the hostile environments that surround their quest for true identities in Jamie O'Neill's fiction. Through metaphors of disturbance and fracture, a clear view of the main problems that affect the life of ordinary citizens in provincial Ireland can be discerned. At the same time, however, O'Neill challenges these mental struggles by offering possible alternatives to the concepts of Irish masculinity. In doing so, he is acting against other canonical and normative readings that are imbued with religious and social rigidity. O'Neill seems to emphasise the generational gap between fathers and sons in order to show the social paralysis of the country, but also to investigate how the impossibility of following the paternal ethical model makes the sons find alibis in order to survive and improve their chaotic situation. Through personal and unorthodox choices they invent unreal worlds that coexist with the tensions of the real ones in order to soothe their anguish. Parallel to this, a revision of the his-

9 It should be kept in mind that it was same-sex intercourse that brought him into prison, so in his mind he associates it with shame and danger. One of MacMurrough's central conflicts is that he does not accept his homosexuality because of the moral education he received, but his rational mind finds absolutely no guilt in it.

tory of Ireland is undertaken, reversing some Manichean codes of conduct and dignifying problematic Irish figures such as Wilde and Parnell. Oscar Wilde, in this sense, stands as a model to follow, that of the aristocrat, gifted with wit and belonging to the 'best,' and his shadow is cast over most of O'Neill's narrative style. Ultimately, O'Neill's works offer the redemption of both the personal and the national traumas of the country by means of love, though a different and subversive kind of love: a love filled with "passionate intensity," as Yeats would put it.[10] Thus, the traditional idea of Ireland as a nation that destroys her offspring can be reinterpreted and rewritten for the sake of stability and modernity but, above all, of ultimate happiness.[11]

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10 This sentence is included in the poem "The Second Coming," which directly mentions the Dublin Rising of 1916.

11 Traditionally, Mother Ireland was depicted by a wide range of symbols; most of them allude to the image of a nurturing female (O'Grady 71). One of the most dystopian, however, is that of a saturnine sow that devours her own children: i.e. "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow," as Stephen Dedalus declares in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (203).

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