

## FROM UTOPIA TO HETEROTOPIA: IRISH WRITERS NARRATING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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Ever since its outbreak in July 1936, the Spanish Civil War has generated enormous interest with historians, writers and poets, politicians, and readers alike. Although it has been called “a civil war in a minor power on the periphery of Europe” (Seidman 3), the Spanish conflict encapsulates in a concentrated form all the larger international conflicts of the twentieth century and has been “transformed into an allegory in which the major social and political philosophies of the time were the chief antagonists” (Benson 3-4). This has led to a presentation of the Spanish Civil War along sometimes gross dichotomies, and both sides involved at the time called their fight a holy war or crusade (see Johnston 28; Cunningham, “Preface” 30; Stradling). Irish writers have always been fascinated by the Spanish Civil War, its history, its aftermath, and its international implications. For a country with a civil war of its own and the ensuing partition of Irish society, Irish writers’ own hopes and fears were mapped onto the conflict in Spain. This parallel was close enough to become an extension of Irish people’s quest for liberty and national unity, a fact that led Frank Ryan, leader of the pro-Republican Irish contingent in Spain, to declare: “the Spanish trenches are right here in Ireland” (Sean Cronin 79).

The paper will consider the development of the Irish assessment of this parallel from the 1930s to today. It will start with texts by Irish poets from the 1930s and 1940s that celebrate the fight in Spain as a utopian vision of a future Ireland, but it will also consider Irish poets who depict their political and individual disillusionment with Spain and Ireland. Poetry by Somhairle Macalastair, Ewart Milne, and Charles Donnelly will be included here. An analysis of Neil Jordan’s novel *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (1994) will complement the discussion of the poetry as it is a contemporary assessment of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War which centres on the futility and destructiveness of armed conflict everywhere. The argument is that this development from utopian praise to heterotopian questioning encapsulates the development of Irish identities in Ireland and their larger European context. While most early literary representations of the Spanish Civil War stress essentialist concepts of nation or class and posit an absolute and ideological view of freedom, contemporary Irish literature focuses on the constructed and potentially destructive nature of such notions. Through re-working the Spanish Civil War, Irish writers come to terms with their own difficult history and envision new, potentially hybrid identities.

## Utopia and Heterotopia

Utopia is a name for an ideal community or society and was first used by Thomas More in his book *Of the Best State of a Republic, and of the New Island Utopia*, written in 1516 and based on Plato's *Republic* (Ahlbäck 145). The word comes from the Greek: ού ('not') and τόπος ('place'). The homophone *eutopia*, derived from the Greek εὖ ('good' or 'well') signifies a double meaning: the good place is a non-place. Thus, our concept of utopia retains both meanings and puts the perfect society in an illusory non-place (Castro Varela 114; Sargisson 25). Foucault therefore calls utopias "fundamentally unreal spaces" that at the same time have "a general relation or direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society" (Foucault 24).

European authors have always been fascinated by utopian visions of a perfect society, first in other places, then, when there were no blank spaces left on the map, in other times, shifting to chronotopias (Groeben 177). As a political theory, utopianism was "directed towards the creation of human happiness" which tried to combine the individual with the community and happiness with virtue (Goodwin & Taylor 207). However, after the experiences of the First and the Second World War, of Fascism and Stalinism, utopian visions were increasingly suspected of an ideologically informed totalitarian impetus. Karl Popper interprets utopia as the enemy of open societies, because utopia is not only a vision for a better society but attempts to be a precise blueprint for it. In such a plan there is no room for dissent. Utopias therefore are said to have an inherent tendency towards totalitarianism (Popper 161). Recent research has put this categorical rejection into perspective. As Norbert Groeben points out, only 'archistic' social utopia and its claim to universal validity can be said to be totalitarian and can be called dead (176).<sup>1</sup> What Tom Moylan calls "critical utopia" retains utopian thinking as social dreaming while still expressing "oppositional thought [in an] unveiling [and] debunking of both the genre itself and the historical situation" (10).<sup>2</sup> The often-claimed death of utopia is therefore only the death of one kind of utopia that in the following I would like to call 'traditional' utopia.

The concept of heterotopia is closely linked to this rethinking of utopia. It is neither the opposite or negation of utopia nor is it dystopia, as this would keep the teleological, unified form of utopia, if only in inverted form. While traditional utopia tries to present an outline, if not a blueprint, even for a better or a perfect world, heterotopia is defined as a representation, contestation, and inversion of the real world that we live in *from the point of view of this real world* (Warning 14). Thus, we can catch a glimpse of another space that is a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the

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1 For another rejection of the death of utopia and its totalitarian impetus, see Goodwin & Taylor 48-57. For contemporary reformulations of utopia as relative and partial and its positive potential, see Bammer and the study by Widmer.

2 For an analysis of utopia as "social dreaming," but also as potential nightmare, see the essays in Moylan & Baccolini, especially Sargent.

space in which we live" (Foucault 24). Foucault therefore calls these spaces "counter-sites" (Foucault 24).

Under six principles that present different forms of heterotopia, Foucault presents many examples of such counter-sites, for example the boarding school or the honeymoon trip, where critical moments of initiation take place in the "nowhere" of another space. Cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, psychiatric clinics, or rest homes are real locations whose positions at the centre or periphery of a city or town tell us something about the imaginary space they occupy for a society (Foucault 24-25). Theatres or cinemas are real places in which a whole succession of different and incompatible images and places can be juxtaposed, leading to a change in our perception of our real spaces and our relation to them. It is this potential for juxtaposition and multiplication that delineates heterotopia from utopia.

The most interesting metaphor that Foucault uses for heterotopia and its relation to utopia is the mirror. A mirror is a metaphor for utopia because the image that you see in it does not exist, but it is also a heterotopia because the mirror is a real object in a real space that shapes the way you relate to your own image. From a real vantage point and with a real object I can catch a glimpse of the world I live in, but in a fictional other space that first represents, then contests, and then (literally) inverts my reality in another space:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (Foucault 24)

Heterotopia is therefore an 'other space' in which I can imagine my real space and my self as probably better, but in any case different, multiple, and open-ended. Thus, heterotopia is a space of "constant re-visioning suggestive of new possibilities and interpretations" (Upstone 15). In contrast to utopia, which tries to design the one perfect place, heterotopia creates a relation to multiple other spaces, which connect my real and imperfect here and now with 'theres' that are other, not perfect spaces encapsulating other, not perfect selves.

### **The Spanish Civil War as a Mirror of the Irish Conflict**

Right from the beginning, the Spanish Civil War prompted an international reaction which often had little to do with the conflict in Spain but more with essentially local issues that international audiences could project onto the conflict (Foster 210). In the case of Ireland, the parallels are indeed striking. Both civil wars were deeply shaped by Catholicism or a rejection of it. Both took place in countries that, until the conflict, had remained at the periphery of Europe. Both countries were seen by England as exotic places full of Catholic zealots and beautiful wild women. The men were depicted as cruel and violent, and the country as a whole as unstable and culturally distant (Alpert 16). These depictions mirror crude prejudices and stereotypes that are

at the heart of the Irish-English conflict and of colonial hierarchies, both of which are based upon the binary opposition of nature and culture, savagery and civilisation (JanMohamed; Cheng 34-38). Both conflicts did not split the countries into two clearly defined opposing sides but into several multiplying factions. What Richardson says about the Spanish Civil War can therefore with equal truth be applied to Ireland: "Both sides in the civil war represented a varied amalgam of mutually incompatible ideologies" (1).

The complication of the Irish involvement in Spain is that both parties, pro- and anti-Franco, can be called Irish nationalists and that both parties interpreted the struggle in Spain as a reflection of their own righteous struggles. The more numerous party that went to Spain were about 700 men under Eoin O'Duffy, the leader of the so-called "Blueshirts" and former official under Cosgrave's pro-Treaty government. This movement has been interpreted as proto- or semi-fascist, Irish extremist and nationalist as well as idealist (Stradling; Mike Cronin). Frank Ryan's almost 200 volunteers for the communist-organised International Brigade are today more lovingly remembered than O'Duffy's luckless Blueshirts (Sean Cronin). Nevertheless, at the time of the Spanish Civil War, Ireland was dominated by conservative Catholic nationalism "and so the struggle in Spain – interpreted by many as one involving godless communism versus the Faith – was easy enough to read" (English 338), a fact which is illustrated in Jordan's novel. Both parties were in the end frustrated and disappointed by their respective crusades, which not only ended in defeat and an inglorious return home but which also mirrored the non-existent unity and deep factionalism of their movements back home in Ireland.

### **"History is a Cruel Country": 1930s and 1940s Irish Poets on Spain**

Today, the best-known Irish writers who took part in the Spanish Civil War are mostly volunteers for the Spanish Republic who fought against Franco, most of them in the International Brigade. This emphasis is due to a historical bias that can be detected in most studies of the literature of that period (Ford; Benson; Cunningham, "Preface"). The function of poetry in the Spanish Civil War shifts between being party literature (for both parties involved), tendentious and programmatic literature, and highly individual accounts of real experiences, both good and bad (Thomas 17-30). Two poems that openly sympathise with the Republic and that link Ireland's fight to Spain's fight will be discussed first. In these poems freedom is, as Cecil Day-Lewis famously wrote in "The Nabara," "more than a word" (191). The first is Somhairle Macalastair's poem "Ballyseedy Befriends Bajadoz," the second one is Ewart Milne's "Thinking of Artolas." Both poems project traditional utopian perspectives onto an idealised war of heroic sacrifice. Charles Donnelly's critical poem entitled "Poem" will then be discussed, as it also links Spain to Ireland, but presents an entirely different and much more critical perspective on the war that can be called heterotopian.

Somhairle Macalastair was an Irishman who fought in the International Brigade and wrote poetry that is directly addressing Irish matters. The authorship of the ballads attributed to Macalastair has been debated in recent years, but Gustav Klaus suggests that the name “Somhairle Macalastair” was one of many pseudonyms used by Diarmuid Fitzpatrick, who was born in Dublin in 1901 and who became involved in Republican politics in the 1930s (Klaus 107-108). His poetry draws a grim picture of Ireland’s future should fascism and people like Eoin O’Duffy be allowed to rule the country. The title of his poem, “Ballyseedy Befriends Badajoz,” already indicates the direct connection between Ireland and Spain. In the Irish Civil War, Ballyseedy in Kerry was the scene of a massacre of Republicans by Free State soldiers in 1923. In the Spanish Civil War, Badajoz was the scene of a similar massacre in 1936. Macalastair here describes the violence in Ireland and in Spain by turns, thus linking them through proximity and parallel and by directly referring to O’Duffy:

O’Duffy’s dupes are killing as their Fascist masters bid.  
 Gas bombs are falling on the Mothers of Madrid.  
 (The birds at Ballyseedy picked flesh from off the stones  
 And Spanish suns at Badajoz are bleaching baby bones.)  
 (Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 385)

Ireland and Spain are one place in this poem, and the flesh that has been picked in Ballyseedy is missing from the bleaching baby bones in Spain. The future of Spain, embodied by the babies, has been killed by Franco. The future of Ireland, embodied by the dead Republican soldiers, has been killed by the Free State. Macalastair then directly compares the goals of Franco and O’Duffy in Spain with what will happen to Ireland if no one fights for her freedom:

Our lanes are marked with wayside cross to trace their bloody trail,  
 While others lie in quicklime pit in ev’ry Irish gaol.  
 They cant of Salamanca, our Irish Pharisees;  
 ‘Tis the flag of black reaction they flaunt upon the breeze.  
 They hope to lure out Irish youth to learn their murder trade  
 And bring them back to Ireland as a Fascist Shock Brigade.  
 (Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 386)

The Spanish Civil War plays an entirely subordinate role in this poem. What is really addressed and indeed fought out in Spain is an internal Irish conflict between the two parties of the Civil War. Rather than fighting Franco, Macalastair is fighting O’Duffy. The struggle of the anti-Treaty parties in the Irish Civil War is presented as a heroic sacrifice which must be repeated to save Ireland from a dark future that Macalastair describes in the last two stanzas of the poem: “O’Duffy crowned Dictator ‘midst the rolling of the drums / And the fools that listened to him are rotting in the Slums!” (Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 386).

Another Irish poet who wrote during and about the Spanish Civil War is Ewart Milne. He was born in Dublin in 1903 and worked as a teacher, seaman, and journalist. During the Spanish Civil War, he was a voluntary administrator for the Spanish Medical Aid Committee in London (Lovelock). His poem “Thinking of Artolas” is not as openly

referring to the Irish Civil War and its factions as “Ballyseedy Befriends Badajoz.” Yet, through the exemplary figure of Charles Donnelly, an Irish volunteer and poet who died in Spain, and the linking of Donnelly to Wolf Tone the national background is again brought up. The artolas of the title is a Spanish back-to-back seat for two persons on the same horse and is used as a metaphor for the common fight against fascism which unites different nationalities and religions. The two protagonists of the poem are Charles Donnelly, the Irish volunteer, and Izzy Kupchick, the Jewish volunteer:

Two, Gael and Jew side by side in a trench  
 Gripping antique guns to flick at the grasshoppers  
 That zoomed overhead and the moon was rocking.  
 Two who came from prisonment, Gael because of Tone,  
 Jew because of human love, the same for Jew as German –  
 Frail fragments both, chipped off and forgotten readily.

I set them together, Izzy Kupchik and Donnelly;  
 And of that date with death among the junipers  
 I say only, they kept it: and record the exploded  
 Spreadeagled mass when the moon was later  
 Watching the wine that that baked earth was drinking.  
 (Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 178-179)

Here, the linking of Donnelly and Kupchik in the image of the artolas goes even further when both the cause why they went to Spain and their death join them together. The Irishman and the Jew are described as being persecuted because they believe in freedom, a freedom for which they sacrifice their lives. In this context, the martyr who sacrifices his life for the freedom of his mother country refers to a common symbol of Irish nationalism, perhaps most famously embodied in W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (Cullingford 1981, 51-56; Cullingford 1990; Heinz 184-190). In death, Donnelly's and Kupchik's bodies are intermingled, a mixing which mirrors the joining of their minds in their fight for freedom. In this poem the Irish and the Spanish Civil War turn into an allegory of the eternal fight for freedom and humanity, thus taking on a universal meaning.

Charles Donnelly's "Poem" again links events in Ireland with events in Spain, but it does so in a much more critical vein. In this poem

Donnelly recognizes that the public acclaim for deeds of valor will inevitably distort the nature of the deeds. He makes it clear [...] that heroism is very nearly an accident, and that its occurrence is unpredictable; it is not conferred upon a man by his beliefs or by the organizations to which he belongs. (Muste 167)

Donnelly connects this accidental heroism of the volunteer in Spain to the fate of Irish heroes like Parnell and Pearse, whose heroic deeds serve the same purpose that Donnelly's own actions in Spain will probably serve:

Name, subject of all-considered words, praise and blame  
 Irrelevant, the public talk which sounds the same on hollow  
 Tongue as true, you'll be with Parnell and with Pearse.  
 Name alderman will raise a cheer with, teachers make reference

Oblique in class, and boys and woman spin gum of sentiment  
On qualities attributed in error.

(Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 109)

In this complex poem Donnelly makes clear that the fight in Spain is like the fight in Ireland, but not in the sense of being a heroic sacrifice for universal freedom or the necessary fight against fascism. The volunteer is on the same level as Parnell and Pearse, but not in the sense of being a hero or a martyr. They are the same, because all of them will turn into a part of the flexible historical narrative and will become a means for politicians and teachers to stir up sentimentalism and hero worship:

Whatever the issue of your battle is, your memory  
Is public, for them to pull awry with crooked hands,  
Moist eyes. And village reputations will be built on  
Inaccurate accounts of your campaign. You're name for orators,  
Figure stone-struck beneath damp Dublin sky.

(Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 108)

The poem states that war is not heroic and should not be celebrated, and is, as Donnelly formulates, "different from what you'd expected" (Cunningham, *Spanish Civil War Verse* 108). The glorification of the violent Irish struggle is therefore criticised by pointing to the misinterpretation of the Spanish Civil War. The volunteer is not a heroic youth but rather an individual whose deeds are dictated by accident. After being killed by enemy bombs he will be killed a second time by the public orators back home in Dublin who exploit his death just as they exploit the history of Parnell and Pearse: "[Donnelly] saw not just the possibility of sudden death, but the aftermath when ideals are cheaply and callously exploited, when revolutions go wrong" (Ford 124). Donnelly's "Poem" therefore reflects the disillusionment of those who came to Spain and connects it to his disillusionment with the fight for Ireland. Thus, he represents many writers of his generation who wrote about war and violence (Muste 10). In contrast to Milne's eulogy or Macalastair's fear of a fascist Ireland, Charles Donnelly writes about individual experiences that are neither heroic nor a willing sacrifice. Spain thus becomes the mirror of heterotopia in which Donnelly can see Ireland as an 'other place.'

### **"This is no time for heroics": Neil Jordan's *Sunrise with Sea Monster***

This function of Spain mirroring another Ireland is continued and updated by Neil Jordan's novel *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (1994). The novel tells the story of Donal Gore, the first-person narrator of the novel and his experiences in Spain and Ireland. It both narrates the difficult relation between Donal and his father and the love-affair between Donal and his piano teacher Rose, who nearly becomes his stepmother.

Very similar to the structure that Macalastair and Donnelly use in their poetry, the first part of the novel presents what happens in Spain and what happened in Ireland by turns in short, consecutive paragraphs. This narrative pattern connects both strands of the plot into the one attempt of the narrator to come to terms with his complicated

relationship with his father who represents the Irish nation and its recent history. In this sense, *Sunrise with Sea Monster* is a historical novel, a generational novel, a *bildungsroman*, a love story, and a political novel in equal measure (Schwall). Donal is a volunteer in the International Brigade, but his motivations could not be more different from Milne's heroic youths. Asked by a German officer why he volunteered, Donal answers:

I volunteered, I tell him, I took the course of action most likely to wound my father. I became the person he was most likely to fear, despise, to loathe. I wanted to quench forever the last embers of speech between us. I joined the Republican movement he had abandoned, espoused whatever politics would fill him with terror. (Jordan 58-59)

This is a far cry from heroic sacrifice and starry-eyed idealism and very close to Charles Donnelly's depiction of his Spanish experience. Here, politics are not utopian dreams for a perfect world. On the contrary, Donal wants to use the Spanish Civil War as a heterotopian mirror to hold up to his father. By going there, he wants to force the generation of his father to look at an Ireland that is paralysed and partitioned and has remained stuck in a history of seemingly heroic events, first and foremost the War of Independence, in which his father fought himself but which he never talks about. That Donal is not in Spain because he believes in a utopian socialist revolution is made clear by his feelings when the prisoners have to attend Catholic mass. While the other volunteers sneer at the ceremony, Donal feels at home in it. This becomes clear in a recurring conversation with a Welsh communist, who is one of the prisoners:

So what's a Mick doing here? he asks me with monotonous regularity. Passing the time, I tell him. I fancy the heat to disguise the fact that I know he knows I'm not one of them. Something in my face shows it, I suppose, some comfort emanates to me from the altar beyond us on the packing cases, the wine the priest pours from the leather gourd into the cruets and I wonder when he lifts the tiny disc between two thumbs and forefingers will I be able to resist the urge to kneel. My apostasy is almost over. (Jordan 40)

Through this experience, the factionalism of Ireland and Spain is commented upon. Neither the International Brigade nor the Irish Republican movement are one body and one mind, as glorified in Milne's poem about Izzy Kupchik and Charles Donnelly. Even when faced with death the Welshman addresses Donal as "Mick" and the Spanish prisoner only calls Donal "Irlandés" (Jordan 50). Donal in return never uses any first names and for him the other prisoners always remain the two Germans, the Welshman, the Jewish kid from Turin, and the Spaniard. The International Brigade is in reality a conglomerate of national groups that do not mix. This is even a source of hope for them, as Donal explains: "Not being our fight, it could well not be our execution, a thought that plays with a sly unwitting smile behind each face [...]" (Jordan 2). The presentation of both the Spanish and the Irish Civil War as a common fight for universal freedom is here exposed as what Donal later calls "an untruth, or a truth after the fact, a retrospective lie" (Jordan 29).



Donal is finally released from his Spanish prison on the condition that he will help to establish contact between the IRA and the Germans, who are seen as the natural ally against the English enemy. The slogan "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity" is repeatedly quoted in the novel (Jordan 63, 114). A whole series of betrayals, both private and political, lead Donal to the final realisation that "things could have been different" (Jordan 180). Through being a double and triple agent for three different organisations and through his affair with his stepmother he effectively multiplies his selves in many other spaces, again both private and political. What for a traditional utopia is a compulsory telos leading towards perfection and happiness here turns into a heterotopian multiplicity of open spaces, accidents, and multiple selves. When Donal resurrects his dead father in a dream-like vision in the final part of the novel, his father tells him: "We are born out of accident [...] and out of accident we imagine is created the necessary, the indomitable self, which, if we only knew it, could change in a minute with our intervention" (Jordan 180). This is a profoundly heterotopian statement.

### **Conclusion**

The point I wanted to make in this paper was that in Irish writing about the Spanish Civil War from the 1930s to today we can perceive a shift away from authoritarian, ideologically informed traditional utopias towards more individualised, heterogeneous heterotopias. Through re-working the Spanish Civil War, Irish writers like Jordan and Charles Donnelly come to terms with their own difficult history and envision new, potentially hybrid identities. On the other hand, poets like Macalastair and Milne illustrate how writers can become entangled in the ideals and factions of their time, mapping their own background and the conflict in Ireland onto the Spanish Civil War. While Donnelly and Jordan envision heterotopias, Macalastair and Milne imagine traditional utopias, if only by showing how dystopian a fascist Spain or Ireland could look. Here, I want to return briefly to Foucault, who formulates that the ship is the utmost heterotopia: "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (27). This is an apt summary of Neil Jordan's novel. Donal's world is indeed increasingly in danger of becoming a world of espionage and police action. Donal does his best to remain an adventurer and a pirate, that is, an independent and individual human being in his entanglement in state affairs, an attempt which is underlined by the role of boats and ships in the story. If, as Foucault proposes, a society without ships is inherently a repressive one, then Jordan's novel indeed proposes a way out of authoritarianism, sectarianism, and political ideologies. The poems by Irish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and their ambivalent and sometimes partisan responses to the Spanish and the Irish conflict underline this difficulty of retaining independence and agency when faced with ideology, sectarianism, and violence. Blurring the lines of factionalism and

focusing on our individual reception and responsibility is turning utopias into heterotopias, 'other spaces,' where other things and other selves are possible.

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