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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

Definitions

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

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

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

1 As he wrote in his *Memoirs*: "I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer, that it is a form which had been brought in. What I wanted is a new looseness; and in Winesburg I had made my own form" (Anderson 289). Similar claims have been made to argue for the importance of the short story over the novel in Ireland.

2 I have opted for the term short story cycle because it seems to be the term with the greatest currency in contemporary criticism. For a more extensive discussion of theories about the short story cycle, see D'hoker (2013).

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

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

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

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

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

Representative Irish Short Story Cycles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Narrating the Nation: *Antiquities*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 Michael Storey argues that Mulkerns's story condemns the dinner guests (including Denis and Emily) as much for their lack of strong condemnation of the violence as Feardorcha O'Briain (the counsel) for his endorsement of it (157). Conversely, *Antiquities* seems to support Sarah's much stronger stance against the violence in "Torch", even though she pays for it with her own life.

15 In the sixth story, "Torch", Sarah is threatened by an IRA man, but refuses to go into hiding. In "Four Green Fields", the second story but chronologically the last, Emily learns on television of the "death in mysterious circumstances of an Irish student in Paris" (29). The connection with Sarah is not made explicit but strongly hinted at through the dead pigeon Denis found on Sarah's bed earlier in the day.

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

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

Narrating the Community: *A Literary Woman*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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