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"My grandfathers' double troubles": Joseph O' Neill's *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History*. Biofiction or Autobiofiction?

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Abstract:

In *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History* (2000), Joseph O'Neill, a journalist and barrister of Irish origins living in the Netherlands, (re)constructs the lives of his two grandfathers, the paternal one, Jim O'Neill, an IRA activist from Ireland, and the maternal one, Joseph Dakad, a businessman from Turkey. The two men shared the traumatic experience of being jailed more or less at the same time (1940s) for no clearly apparent political reasons. The grandson's search to dispel "the taut silences" that covered their incarcerations is to be read as a detective story, an example of biofiction, or, rather, a personal investigation attempting to close the gap between the different cultures that contributed to create his identity clarifying in the process the concepts of nationalism and nationhood.

Keywords: biofiction, Irish nationalism, Joseph O'Neill, Levantines, Turkey

Blood-Dark Track: A Family History, by the Irish-born barrister and novelist Joseph O'Neill[1], published in the year 2000, is a double biography of the author's grandfathers, the paternal one, Jim O'Neill, an IRA activist from Cork, and the maternal one, Joseph Dakad, a Catholic Syrian businessman from the city of Mersin in the south of Turkey. The author himself, although born in Ireland, grew up in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Turkey, and several other countries. He attended international schools, Girton College in Cambridge and the Inns of Court in London. The gaze of the narrator, thus, is not purely Irish but rather

[1] Joseph O'Neill, born in Cork in 1964, of an Irish father and a Christian Syrian mother, worked for several years as a barrister before choosing to be a full-time writer. He now lives in New York and has become an American citizen. Apart from the present memoir, he is the author of fiction (*The Dog*, 2014, *Netherland*, 2008, *The Breezes*, 1996, *This Is the Life*, 1991) and a collection of short stories, *Good Trouble* (2018).

post-national, a term O'Neill likes to apply to his own identity (see Reilly 2011). His viewpoint adds a different inflection to the Irish part of the story, questioning his grandfather's bold nationalism but it also casts a shadow on the cosmopolitanism of the Syrian grandfather, to which the author should feel more akin but which he ends up distrusting.

Grandfather, Jim O'Neill[2], was arrested in 1940 when Eamon de Valera's government, fearing that the IRA might compromise Eire's neutrality, rounded up all notorious activists and detained them in an internment camp, the Curragh, in county Kildare[3]. When Joseph O'Neill learnt this, "[n]obody explained precisely why or where, or for how long, and I attributed his incarceration to the circumstances of a bygone Ireland and a bygone IRA" (O'Neill 2000, 1). When he started doing research about his grandfather, he discovered that this episode of Irish history was "a non-subject" (147); there are no records of the IRA internments, no photographs, let alone monuments and most documents have been burned[4].

Meanwhile in Mersin, a small but busy port on the Mediterranean with a substantial cosmopolitan population, the shrewd businessman and hotel keeper, Joseph Dakad[5], a man of the world, was seized by the British at the Palestinian-Syrian border on the train that was bringing him back from Palestine where he had ostensibly been buying lemons. He was detained for over three miserable years in English and French prisons and concentration camps in Palestine, suspected of spying for the Germans and submitted to interrogations, threats and torture. On his return he wrote a memorial for the Turkish authorities and a detailed letter for the British insisting on his innocence and asking for damages.

Joseph O'Neill tries to clarify the circumstances of these two episodes and their significance for himself and his family in a narration moving to and from Ireland to Turkey and back and having, as the author sees it, a three-act structure, "[a]ct 1 being the received stories and silences. Act 2 being my own counter-narrative and Act 3 being the synthesis" (O'Neill 2010).

Although *Blood-Dark Track* cannot be defined as a truly experimental text, it does something new not only through its specific point of view and its double focus, but also through its mixing of genres. Teetering as it does between memoir and fiction, it illustrates an innovative literary trend that has become quite visible in recent years in the English-speaking world, that of biofiction, or fictional life-writing[6]. The growing scepticism about the trustworthiness of history and straightforward biography that emerged from Postmodernism has fostered the rise of a kind of writing that, under the pretext of depicting actual figures anchored in well-defined historical periods, manipulates, indeed, at times "constructs something coherent out of the facts," as O'Neill says in an interview (Payne 2016, 223), to serve an aesthetic, personal or political

[2] Jim O'Neill was born on a farm in Co. Cork and led a life of hardships moving from one small job to another. He fathered seven sons and daughters. Once freed from detention he refused to take part in active political life.

[3] The Curragh internment camp hosted not only Irish citizens who were seen as a threat to Ireland's neutrality (IRA men and pro-Nazi activists) but also Germans and members of the Allied forces who had been caught on Irish territory.

[4] While the story of the IRA camp was not told, that of the POW section of the camp inspired *The Brylcreem Boys*, a 1998 film directed by Terence Ryan.

[5] Joseph Dakad (or Dakak, the original form of his surname frequently used by O'Neill in his narration) was born in Iskenderun (formerly Alexandretta) and lived in Mersin. The two ports on the eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey near the Syrian border boasted in the past a multi-ethnic population which at the time the story is set was dwindling and losing its economic and social importance.

[6] The term biofiction was coined in 1990 by Alain Buisine in his trendsetting "Biofictions" published in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*. In the English-speaking world, the foremost expert of this sub-genre is Michael Lackey, the author and/or editor of, among others, *Biographical Fiction: A Reader* (2016) and *The Rise of the American Biographical Novel* (2016). His *Irish Biofiction* is forthcoming.

vision. Ireland has taken a prominent role in the vogue of biofiction with such stellar works as Colm Tòibin's *The Master* (2004), John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1976) or *Shroud* (2002), Anne Enright's *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002) to name just a few[7].

O'Neill's biofictional text reconstructs (or rather constructs) the lives of two men who did not know each other and could not have been more different but who had in common not only a grandson (himself) but also the traumatic experience of being the victims of tense war-times that affected combatant and neutral countries alike and, even more so, of having lived in the aftermath of the dissolution of large empires (the British and the Ottoman). This is the historical background that led to the two men's detentions and which *Blood-Dark Track* analyses in all its implications.

The grandson's attempt to dispel the family's "taut silences" (O' Neill 2000, 11) that enclosed the incarcerations of the two men takes the form of a series of interrogations regarding the past, and of a personal enquiry aimed at closing the gap between the different cultures that contributed to create his own identity. O'Neill's own *Recherche du temps perdu* may not finally reveal much about the true causes of his grandfathers' disgrace, but works as a sort of Bildungsroman in which the autobiographical self's eyes are opened on the true nature of the paradises and heroes of his childhood and of the "cold and profound sea of misconceptions" (262) in which his family's personal narratives were steeped. The insights O'Neill gained into his grandfathers' lives took the form of "a slow idiotic awakening" (2) which led to a similar awakening about himself.

Although carefully documented, the two biographies are finally the fruit of O'Neill's creative imagination, especially in that they regard the actual lives of very minor historical actors immersed in, or rather swept away, by historical events much larger than themselves and that they do not fully comprehend. The grandson-turned-detective's investigation will not deliver any definite truth but lead to a narration of "times and places in which politics might have dramatic and personal consequences, in which people might be impelled to act or acquiesce in the face of evil" (13). Even while raising empathy for the plight of his grandparents and, through the micro-historical dimension, getting a better grasp of the "macro-historical edifices that national narratives offer" (Payne 2016, 223-224), the principal aim of the author is constructing a better rooted and more mindful identity for his own multicultural self. While O'Neill re-imagines the lives of his family at a crucial moment of the twentieth century, his meta-biographical narration frequently foregrounds the soul-searching perplexities and misgivings of its first-person narrator. Thus, the biofiction regarding his two grandfathers becomes a form of autobiofiction.

1. Compositional Strategies

Blood-Dark Track alternates narrative sections regarding the vicissitudes of the two men with macro-historical and sociological ones and, more prominently, sections in which the grandson-sleuth-barrister tries to discover the reasons for the two imprisonments thus becoming the true protagonist of this piece of family-writing. The prominence of the personal inquiry over the grandfathers' stories gives the memoir the dimension of a detective fiction staging a "first person narrator who is trying to think things out" (O'Neill 2010). In an interview with

[7] Michael Lackey in the draft Introduction to his forthcoming *Irish Biofiction,* traces "the origins of biofiction back to the Irish engagement with an appropriation of a newly emerging form of portraiture aesthetic" which begins to be evident, he argues, notably in the works of Moore and Wilde.

Jonathan Lee in the *Paris Review*, O'Neill talks about his preference for the first person which explains away the oddity of using it in a narration concerning two members of his family:

> I just don't think I've cracked the third person. Haven't come close to it. There's a central subjectivity to them – and a first person voice feels to me like the right way to explore a consciousness of that kind. […] The first person is the shortest of shortcuts to an elusive element of the real. (Lee 2014)

Such a choice also tells us that what counts in this story is the consciousness of the narrator thus foregrounding the novelistic structure of *Blood-Dark Track*.

If we examine the compositional strategies deployed in the memoir, we notice that alongside the investigative process, a major role is played by the affective dimension. Driven by shock and sympathy for "how forsaken [the grandparents] must have felt" while in prison camps (O'Neill 2000, 11), the author starts his research in a meticulous and loving way, travelling to their places of birth and to where they had lived and worked and been detained, consulting documents, archives and history books and interviewing all the people who had known them and were informed of the facts so much so that the memoir is overwhelmed by details which often seem irrelevant. The process is analogous to collecting valueless keepsakes of a beloved. The barrister-investigator faces "finicky" questions to reach the conclusion that "[w]hat one learns, pretty quickly, is that frequently the truth remains anybody's guess. […] Sometimes, however, something is illumined that is strange and unlooked for that […] twists the case and gives it a new meaning" (13).

2. Biofiction and (Auto)biofiction

Since the purpose of this kind of investigation is not to clear the accused in front of a tribunal but only in the eyes of the investigator, the effect the findings have on the narrator is paramount. What will be illumined is not the truth about his grandfathers' behaviour but rather the sense of his family ties, his sharing of or dissent from the values held by the two families, the ethical and political responsibilities of the individual vis à vis his country, and the evaluation of the author's own life-choices in light of what he has learnt about the past. The lawyer's urge, thus, becomes the grandson's search for new meanings in his family history and in his own nature and beliefs. This is what propels him to investigate but also to create the personalities of the two protagonists, Jim O'Neill and Joseph Dakad, and of their antagonist grandson, the author of the memoir, Joseph O'Neill, who unites the two legacies in his name. This makes *Blood-Dark Track* an example of biofiction rather than of biography or history and, because of the importance he attributes to the personal repercussions of his findings, of autobiofiction.

Constructing the grandparents' personalities is an act of self-fashioning, as well as of finding surrogate forms of excitement and mystery. The more flamboyant and surprising the two characters are, the more the narrator's own expat identity and unadventurous life are put into relief. "I've moved around so much and lived in so many different places," says the author in an interview, "that I don't really belong to a particular place, and so I have little option but to seek out dramatic situations that I might have a chance of understanding" (Lee 2014). Although in the interview he refers to the "dramatic situations" in his most recent novel, *The Dog* (2014), he might as well have in mind his grandparents' "journeys of the body and spirit" that seem "fantastical" in comparison to the unheroic predicament of "many of us, living in the democratic west at the beginning of the new century […] casting our vote twice a decade or losing our temper at the dinner table or shunning the wines and cheeses of France" (O'Neill 2000,

3). Jim O'Neill's and Joseph Dakad's adventures help offset the tameness of his life and milieu, and shape (or at least suggest) a new persona for their grandson. Unlike sixteenth-century gentlemen moulding their selfhood on manuals and literary models (as described by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning),* O'Neill does it by claiming closeness to those two maverick grandfathers. Finally, however, the failings he discovers in them succeed in reassuring him regarding his choices and preferences.

The author, who defines himself as "an establishmentarian and politically sedentary – and politically guilt-ridden person" could not be more distant from the adventurous radicalism and "the values of political resistance" of his Irish family that fascinate him in spite of his fear of extremism and his political correctness (230). On the other hand, his own "bourgeois conception of life as an economic adventure" (*ibidem*) brings him close to his Levantine sources from which he ironically distances himself on recognizing similarities with his own lot. The two characters and their settings act as mirrors (or rather distorting mirrors) of each other, and especially of their grandson. Their doings "set [him] up a glass / Where [he] may see the inmost part of [himself]" (Ham. III. 4.20-21) helping him advance towards self-knowledge.

3. The grandfathers: two different versions of masculinity

Both grandfathers, born respectively into the British and the Ottoman empires, had spent their youth and maturity in young democracies that were trying to come to terms with an imperial heritage and deal with individuals belonging to groups that had formerly played an important role but no longer fitted the new picture.

The IRA, that had contributed to the achievement of an independent republic, was an uncomfortable reality once the Free State had settled in its acceptance of the partition so that the organisation was declared illegal. Jim O' Neill, however, remained attached to the stances of Irish nationalism although it was (at least temporarily) a thing of the past. The glamour of the IRA as impersonated by his grandfather fascinated Joseph O' Neill until he realised that underneath it lay the ugly aspects of sectarianism, hatred and violence.

The Christian Syrians (also called Assyrians), together with the other minority non-Muslim citizens of the country that had played such an important role in the economic and social life of several coastal cities of the empire, were looked askance by Atatürk's Turkey. Several measures to terminate their prominence in the country's economy and inflict financial ruin on them were successfully taken in the 1940s and 1950s. Dakad, as a member of a Christian minority trying to defend their dwindling privileges, had to act slyly and warily to avoid the sectarianism, hatred and violence that characterized the host country and yet, in spite of his prudence, he made a faux pas.

Both grandfathers had to adapt themselves to difficult political and social situations and they did it trying to maintain their dignity: "They lived in extraordinarily hateful and hazardous places and times, in which men with powerful egos were especially exposed", writes O'Neill (O'Neill 2000, 336) tacitly opposing to them the identity of a European Union citizen at a time when a staid European Union meant something. The story of his grandparents brings into relief by contrast the poised personality of the author, fearful of nationalism, and at the same time fascinated by the extremism that goes with it; disdainful of the Levantines, of their opportunism which, for example, made them ignore the massacres of the Armenians or the Kurds, and yet sentimentally close to "these strange French-speaking Turks" (26) of Mersin in whose midst he spent the best summers of his life.

Initially the author is tempted to romanticize the two figures. James O'Neill's obituaries, describing the paternal grandfather as affiliated to the "First Battalion, First Cork Brigade, IRA

and a true Gael" are for the grandson "glamorous texts, call[ing] from a gritty world of hurling and revolution that was thrillingly distant from the bourgeois, entirely agreeable world of the Hague" (7) where he grew up. He imagines his "grandfather's rebel world" (*ibidem*) as it was suggested to him by the illustration on the jacket of one of his mother's books about the IRA. In the style of a boy's comic, the jacket described

> an ambush at dusk on a deserted country road in west Cork, the sky burgundy, the sunken day a low-lying mass of yellow. A convoy of trucks is turning into view, and waiting to jump them are a smart officer in a blue jacket and tie, and two sturdy rifle-toting fellows in rough shirts. (8)

Both the book and Jim O'Neill's world speak "of cold adventurous nights and clean-cut valour" (*ibidem*).

On the Turkish side, when a former accountant of Joseph Dakad's hotel, Salvator Avigdor, told Joseph O'Neill that his grandfather's detention "had something to do with spying for the Germans […] a shiver of an explanation accompanied this information" (1) and confirmed the aura that surrounded Mersin at the start of the war. It was a city "full of intrigue" (55) like Lisbon or Casablanca, said Avigdor, setting the author to fantasize about his maternal grandfather:

> [A] man in a white tuxedo who tries to steer a neutral and profitable course through a sea of vultures, gamblers, desperadoes, lovers and idealists. Humphrey Bogart, as the owner of Rick's Café Américain, had been almost exactly my grandfather's age, and Casablanca was set in December 1941, which was when my grandfather was running the Toros hotel. (56)

This set O'Neill to investigate whether, indeed, his grandfather had entertained a complicity with the Germans who were trying to discover what influence the British might have over the Turkish government and to find out who had (probably unjustly) denounced him.

The mysteries of the two grandfathers' plights were covered by the paternal and maternal families who appeared reticent to discuss them and whose silence was tinged with condemnation: "Jim and Joseph were each in some way in the wrong. *Les absents ont toujours tort*" (12). It was not until the author was thirty "that the curious parallelism in [his] grandfathers' lives struck [him] with any force":

> I was driven to explore it, to fiddle at doors that had remained unopened, perhaps even locked, for so many years and not until then that I began to make out what connected these two men, who never met, and these two captivities – one in the Levant heat, the other in the rainy, sporadically incandescent plains of central Ireland. (2)

It is quite human to try to aggrandize one's forebears, describe them in the rosiest colours and cover up what might throw a shadow on their personality and deeds or make them the victims of adverse circumstances. O'Neill, however, resists the temptation of having a Daniel O'Connell or a Humphrey Bogart character as grandparents. For his forcedly fictional portrayal of the two men, he relies on personal investigations and barrister techniques but also on his feelings and imagination. All of this will eventually yield a much less glamorous picture of the doings of his grandparents who were, anyhow, each in his own way, quite flamboyant characters, fit to be fictionalized. The grandson's piece of family-writing ends up being an act of love (although tinged with misgivings) on behalf of two men he had not really known and is now trying to know, being fascinated with their personalities and adventures but in the end

also critical of their positions. For in the end the memoir finally turns out to be a personal exploration of the author's own expat identity with its shortcomings and merits.

4. The Irish Grandfather

Of the two grandfathers, the one whose personality appears more attractive for his grandson is Jim O'Neill, not the kind of person the respectable barrister nor his businessman father, Kevin (Jim's third oldest son) would have normally approved of. Jim best impersonates the values of rootedness and hot-headedness the narrator does not possess. He is first introduced as a poacher, delving in this minor crime in order to buy communion and confirmation clothes for his children, much like the protagonist of Ken Loach's film *Raining Stones*. Raised during the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War in County Cork, "the centre of fierce resistance to the Anglo-Irish treaty" (O'Neill 2000, 134), Jim witnessed the killing of two of his cousins and much violence all over that led him to join the IRA in his early twenties and throw himself into paramilitary life becoming a competent and respected volunteer. All of his activities as lorry driver, pipefitter, trade-union activist, member of republican clubs and of the Gaelic League, "where you spoke Irish and danced Irish dances" (71), show him as highly politicized. He wanted to participate in armed raids or join the International Brigade in Spain but for different reasons did not, always regretting it. However, because of his reputation and apparently not because anything he did, he was arrested in 1940 as a would-be terrorist, a threat to the country's neutrality.

Four years between Mountjoy prison and the Curragh would profoundly mark Jim for the rest of his life (as a similar experience marked Joseph Dakad). On his return he would no longer want to be actively involved with the republican army but remained, all the same, "one of the most reliable unofficial men the IRA had in Cork, someone who could be trusted to dump arms, transport people, raise funds and quietly put his experience and contacts at the disposal of the movement" (221). Looking at a photograph of his, the grandson commented: "[M]y grandfather was the very image of the hard, handsome IRA man" (160). His actions, however, were contributing indirectly to the lethal violence that shook Ireland.

As a man without a clear-cut national identity, the author is often swept away by strong vicarious nationalist feelings when he thinks about the flame that burnt in the heart of his family. He remembers, for instance, the profound surge of emotion when as a twenty-one year-old student in a Cambridge University library he had come across the text of the Proclamation of Independence (which he feels compelled to transcribe in full in the novel), or how moved he was by his grandmother's tale of how he, at the age of four, had once broken free of her hand and taken the lead of a parade to celebrate the unveiling of a monument commemorating an IRA ambush. "I cannot fully account for these intense sensations of patriotic exhilaration," he writes, realizing they are rather simplistic but constitute a relief "from the finicky, obstructive, futile, morally muddy world" of his other self and that they make him feel "significant" (150). To the ears of the "post-nationalist" narrator, instead, affected by "a sense of chronic displacement" (Lee 2014), the strong attachment to one's nation exerted a bemused attraction and the names themselves of the places where dark events tied to Irish nationalism took place, often under the eyes of members of his family or, perhaps, through their hands, are modern-day *Dinnseanchas*[8]. Clonakilty, Kilbrittain, Drimoleague, Slobbereen, evoking the events that took

[8] *Dinnseanchas* are short Middle-Irish poems or prose pieces evoking the origins of a place, the traditions attached to it or the memory of events or people associated with it.

place there, "have the lyricism of the unfamiliar" and he continues thinking about them, in spite of their ugliness, "as grey-brown, inward-looking, and vulnerable to flooding by a past that, like the local water table, lies just beneath surface" (O'Neill 2000, 65). What lies just beneath the surface is a nationalist story, which is also the apparently glorious story of his family, both on his grandfather's and his grandmother's side. "My grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather […] was each imprisoned in the cause of Irish freedom" (68).

This was, however, an outsider's view. The author's father, Kevin, instead, who grew up an Irishman and at the age of seventeen did a stint in the IRA with his two brothers, rejected Joe's values and deeds telling his son, "[f]or me, West Cork was about ambushes and murders and the Black and Tans. It was a bloodstained, haunted kind of place – spooky. The roads and fields were dark and isolated. Men were shot and buried there" (64). The author, who was too young when Jim died to remember him, was fascinated, unlike his father, by his grandfather's fame and dare-devil deeds and collected as many stories about him as he could from friends and relatives. Hints of the family's violent past emerge from the apparently most innocent moments of Joseph's fact-finding travels in West Cork with his uncle Brendan. After drinking tea with a cousin on a farm, Joseph is given a "souvenir": a rusted Colt 45 wrapped in a towel. "That's the gun that shot Admiral Somerville" (94), says the uncle laughing. This instigates the author to research the death of that Admiral Somerville[9], a well-respected Anglo-Irish member of the community who was shot in 1936 by an Irish commando, allegedly because he was helping Irish young people to join the English navy. Why was Joseph given the gun? Was Jim O'Neill part of this commando? Joseph has strong suspicions about his grandfather's involvement. For a good part of the novel, the author returns again and again on this event animated by a morbid interest and a sense of horror that his grandfather might have been a murderer until at the end it is revealed that the Admiral was shot by Joseph O'Neill's granduncle, Tadhg, his grandmother's brother. Jim, thus, was not directly responsible of the killing, yet he would certainly have approved his uncle's criminal behaviour. Although from the onset of his writing Joseph O'Neill knew the answer, he prolonged the suspense and the thrill giving proof of his fictionalizing intentions and his desire to create mystery and suspense around a fact with which a biographer would have dealt head on. The suspense adds to the aura that surrounds Jim O'Neill all through the story but also foregrounds Joseph O'Neill's slow awakening to the horrors tied to sectarianism – the main plotline.

5. The Turkish Grandfather

O'Neill's "bourgeois conception of life as an economic adventure" (230) should have made him feel closer to the Levantine cultural roots of which Joseph Dakad was the product and the epitome. And yet between the two grandfathers, the Irish Jim, the protagonist of a possible murder and of many gallant actions, seems to be the one who conjures up the greatest admiration, probably because of his otherness. The representation of Joseph is more critical of the man but inseparable from the tenderness and pathos elicited by old Mersin, his mother's birthplace and the theatre of O'Neill's childhood summers, a town "of verandas, gardens and large stone houses" (22) inhabited by a dwindling community of mixed ethnicity and religion, the Levantines.

[9] De Valera's anti IRA policies (of which Jim O'Neill was to be a victim) were indeed sparked by the assassination of Vice-Admiral Henry Somerville in 1936. He had served in the British Navy and had retired to Cork, where he was recruiting young Irishmen for the British armed services. His shooting marked the revival of terror in the countryside.

The term Levantine initially referred to a nucleus of non-Muslims – Christians and Jews – who had lived in the Ottoman Empire "comfortable in many cultures but perhaps never truly at home in any" (King 2015, 350) and constituting a first model of globalised society. The term, however, has come to sound derogatory[10] (see, for instance, the contempt T. S. Eliot conveys in *The Waste Land* regarding Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant). Joseph Dakad, writes the grandson, "born in the quintessential Levant port of Iskenderun, undoubtedly qualifies as a Levantine in the pejorative sense" (and, he adds, "destructively" so) (181). The same qualifier applies also to many of the other denizens of Mersin mentioned in the story, with their "propensity for intrigue and deception" (*ibidem*).

The "culturally variegated Levant" (198), however, is also a fascinating though pathetic space. One of O'Neill's informers reminisces about "a time when Mersin was a marvel […] a cosmopolis where you'd hear three words of French, four words of Turkish and three words of Arabic" (O'Neill 2000, 54). Those were his grandfather's times when "linguistic expertise [was] highly esteemed" (38). Joseph, himself, spoke seven languages. The Levantines of his grandfather's set felt they were still the real Mersin people, in spite of the fact that the Empire was a thing of the past and the majority of Turks (mostly blow-ins), resented them and were buying them up. They were held together, essentially, by having lived there for many generations and having given "the dusty Turkish port of Mersin" its present importance populating it with "the families of shipping-agents, cotton-traders, commercial landlords, shopkeepers, stallholders, tradesmen, importers, exporters" (40). They were not fully integrated, spoke French or Arabic rather than Turkish (in other parts of the country French and Greek) and considered "les Turques" as specimens of the other (256). A gulf "separated the culturally variegated Levant" from "modern, uniform Turkey" (199). Those people did not know they were a dying generation as they kept looking down on their hosts, the Turks, with a mixture of fear and contempt while clinging to old ways of life and social intercourse – card-games at the club, social visiting, beach parties, intermarriage. It is appropriate, therefore that the chapters describing Joseph Dakad and the mystery of his incarceration should start with his funeral.

Nevertheless, Joseph Dakad, the expression of this dying world, is represented, on the basis of his relatives' recollections, as very much alive. He was chic, with his custom-made silk shirts; a charmer and a womanizer (un *coureur*, as his widow, O'Neill's beloved Mamie – Granny in French – used to boast). Appearance was all-important to him and he enjoyed showing up his pedigree dogs, his horse and his Pontiac, the first American luxury car in town. A photograph of him on his prancing horse gave him "a chivalric air. Le chevalier Dakad: this was what the ensemble was calculated to impress upon the world." The irony, in the eyes of the grandson, was that "to my knowledge there hadn't been a local class of chevaliers to which Joseph might have belonged since Crusader times" (40). The Mersin Levantines were, indeed, a petty bourgeois élite, that thought very highly of itself and Joseph, a well to do and respected member of the Levantine community, impersonated it at its best (or, perhaps, at its worst).

A far-sighted and forward-thinking businessman, he had turned the family residence into the most sought-after hotel in town, the Toros, to which he kept adding amenities such as central heating or the installation of the first elevator and the first swimming-pool in town. He had a knack for business and became the co-owner of the first cinema in Mersin. It was, in fact, his

[10] Levantines are the non-Muslim inhabitants of the Levant, an area itself of uncertain delimitations corresponding roughly to the Eastern Mediterranean. They were "a nondescript group […] the products of the long period of interaction" between the Ottomans and other religious groups (Christians of various denominations and Jews) (King 2015, 350).

sense of business that led to his downfall but also that put into question his possible involvement in espionage. "Intoxicated" by his business successes, Joseph Dakad had launched into yet a new adventure. Having noticed that, due to an unusual freeze, there had been a dramatic rise in the price of lemons, a chief export commodity of the area, in January 1942, he decided to increase his gains as a citrus merchant by planning a trip to Jerusalem, then under British control, to arrange for a shipment of 200 tons of Palestinian fruit. Having obtained a British visa with much frustration and difficulty, and some bribing, he embarked on the trip. On the train home, however, he was seized by the British at the Palestinian-Syrian border. What followed was, according to the testimonial the grandson found in a storeroom of the hotel, a martyrdom that left him a broken man with a weak heart which, in his wife's opinion, lead to a premature death.

Turkey, a neutral nation that seemed to be leaning toward the Allies, was full of Germans who moved about the country and especially in coastal cities like Mersin where they often stayed at the Toros Hotel. Among the Toros visitors (many of them German) was also the notorious German ambassador, Von Papen (the employer of the most famous of spies, Cicero), who was warmly welcomed and made to feel at home by its owner. Dakad was enough a man-of-the-world to feel he could navigate safely such a stream of events and draw a profit from them, forgetting "the guiding political precept for Mersin Christians [that] *il ne fallait pas se mouiller*, it wouldn't do to get wet" (316).

Although O'Neill could not find evidence of his grandfather's being really involved in spying, he strongly suspected that the latter might have been guilty of some shady actions or imprudent informing, thus partly confirming the conclusions of *The New York Times* reviewer of the memoir that "the fastidious hotelier and import-export dabbler [was] merely a man out of his depth" (Harrison 2002, 16). His grandfather was a fearful man (a *froussard*, as his family used to say) with "a profound aversion to trouble" and aware, like the other members of "a minority with a history of disloyalty" (O'Neill 2000, 311), that survival in the young national state of Turkey demanded at all times to display an impeccable citizenship. He always insisted on his being a Turk, but the belief was not reciprocal as was proven by the events. He probably "failed to appreciate the appearance of [his] actions in the eyes of men who saw the world through nationalist eyes" (333).

These considerations, despite his grandfather's known Germanophilia, convince O'Neill that it was rather Dakad's vanity that led to his downfall. His "central ambition" was to appear as "a gentleman of importance […] connected and knowledgeable […]. He was mesmerized by the idea of himself as a man at the centre of things, a man of accomplishments, a chevalier" (316). This would have made him act imprudently, flaunting his relationships with important foreigners including Germans, boasting about his successes and new ventures and complaining about the obstacles authorities (both local and British) seemed to invent to thwart him. Whether he was betrayed by his British friends from the club or Turkish authorities sold him down the river, he "may easily have been the victim of Byzantine goings on" as the former British consul in Mersin suggested to O'Neill who, fifty years after the events, was interviewing him about the intelligence scene (175).

After meticulously studying historical documents and interviewing some of the people concerned, O'Neill reached the conclusion that Dakad may, indeed, "have been innocent, but innocent of what? It pained me to acknowledge it, but this was a question I would never be able to answer with certainty" (318). Since the detailed account of his investigations did not yield much, O'Neill chose to tell instead the story his grandfather's pilgrimage from jail to jail. Notwithstanding the same detective-like approach the grandson had brought to his two grandfathers' plights, the ascertainment of Jim's responsibility in the murder of Admiral Somer-

ville constitutes a suspenseful story, while in the case of the mystery surrounding his Syrian grandfather's imprisonment, the pathetic narration of his sufferings and especially an extended social analysis of the peculiar Mersin world win out over the opportunity of writing a spy story.

What transpires most forcefully from the Turkish sections of *Blood-Dark Track* is the mixture of nostalgia and sadness with which O'Neill evokes the climate reigning in the old Mersin of his childhood – a spirit close to the *hüzün* Orhan Pamuk has made famous in his memories of Istanbul[11]. Although the portrait of Joseph Dakad is not sympathetic and the Mersin society is represented rather negatively, O'Neill can rightly say, "I felt no hostility towards these lost, disconnected siblings" (181). He claims, indeed, a sense of fraternity, a nearness to this lost world, which even embraces his not quite likable grandfather. His "complexly ambivalent heritage with respect to Turkish history and culture" (Payne 2016, 221) emerges in the conflict between reason and heart - reason opening his eyes on the many shortcomings of the Turkish national state and of its Levantine component, the heart making him evoke this world, and even his reprehensible grandfather, with great tenderness.

6. Conclusion: Nationhood, nationalism and national identity

What prompted the writing of *Blood-Dark Track,* a book which is half way between biography and history, were the historical events that took place in Ireland and Turkey in the first half of the twentieth century and the way they originated the mysteries surrounding the heroes of O'Neill's personal mythology, his grandfathers. Writing the memoir, however, became finally "a way to think about more things than simply my grandfathers" (O'Neill 2010).

The text is principally concerned with nationhood, nationalism and national identity and the ethical questions raised by these concepts. As the book progresses, we may see how the author reverses his initial high esteem for "nationalism's uplifting tenets" (O'Neill 2000, 331) as impersonated by Jim O'Neill and comes to appreciate his own post-nationalism and pluralistic identity.

The book illustrates a would-be competition between grandfathers as to who is going to win his grandson's esteem and love. Obviously, the competition lies in the latter's shifting emotions. In the narration, the Irish grandfather stands a better chance than his Syrian counterpart. Faced with the question of what their nationality was, the elder and the younger Joseph would have been equally at a loss in answering it while Jim O'Neill would have had no doubts. Since one is easily fascinated by one's opposite, Jim with his national faith becomes a foil to a person whose "experience of place is not simply reducible to a notion of nationality based on natality" (Payne 2016, 222). Therefore, Jim enjoys a much more favourable representation.

The litmus test, however, is not only the two men's sense of national identity but also the actions that descend from it. As the Somerville affair is slowly unravelled, the sectarianism of Irish nationalism shows its ugly face and tarnishes the brilliancy of Jim O'Neill's image. Conversely, the absence of a national identity affects negatively the Syrian grandfather's behaviour. In order to be accepted by the Turkish nationalist majority as a real Turk, Joseph Dakad often denies his own identity and cowers in order to be considered a Turk (as in the whole business of his imprisonment) and, together with the rest of the Syrian community, turns a blind eye on crimes such as the massacres of Kurds and Armenians, the fruit of Turkish nationalism which they would not dare criticize, let alone oppose.

[11] In Banu Helvacioglu's definition, Pamuk's *hüzün* is the "melancholic perception of Istanbul's historical and cultural status as a fallen city" (153).

The topic of the massacres, like the story of the assassination of Admiral Somerville, recurs in the memoir taking an increasing importance as the narration goes on. In the end the Turkish events throw light on the Irish ones: "Evidently, just as centuries of hostile interrelationships had done little or nothing to humanize Syrians and Armenians and Turks in each other's eyes, so it was with the Protestants and Catholics of West Cork" (O'Neill 2000, 331). Consequently, both grandfathers appear as victims of nationalism, Jim because nationalism has made him behave in a manner that is in contrast with his generous and loving personality: "[I]ncluded in [his] birthright and estate […] was a tutelary hatred that imprisoned him long before, and long after, the Curragh" (O'Neill 2000, 333). On his side, Joseph is a victim because the nationalism of the majority has obliged him to act hypocritically in order to be accepted. His less than admirable behaviour is caused by the fact that he "relied on unreliable nationalist assurances of [his] equal citizenship" (*ibidem*). The final analysis highlights the similarities as well as the great differences in his grandfathers' lives prompting "[a]n unsettling scenario of shadows," that of Jim, the nationalist, shooting Joseph who, like Somerville (to whom the following words are devoted), "belonged to a rich and profoundly self-sufficient religious minority with a tradition of looking on the national majority as an unfrequentable, undifferentiated and largely negligible mass" (332).

The final soul-searching chapter shows Joseph O'Neill wording a sort of *mea culpa* for not seeing that "nationalism simultaneously nurtured and concealed a capacity in ourselves for a hatred as powerful as that which led to the oblivion of the Armenians" (331). The two heritages merge in this recognition which leads the author to vindicate his post-nationalism as the most viable solution. "We can no longer limit our sense of the world to our country or region or culture," asserts O'Neill (Payne 2016, 222).

Whatever *Blood-Dark Track* may be – history, biofiction, autobiographical writing, a text of political ethics, an act of love or a condemnation – we may go with the author's concluding remarks. It is a warrant granting release:

> I claim the privilege, as a grandson, to dwell on my grandfathers in a way of my choosing. I could think of their lives as tragedies. […]. I could linger on the continuing violence and hatred in Turkey and Ireland, and link my grandfathers' shortcomings to the lethal infirmities in those countries' political cultures. But I would rather release Jim and Joseph from such gloominess (O'Neill 2000, 338)

The release of the grandfathers from a gloomy vision and from the oblivion and condemnation that surrounded the most significant episode of their lives, corresponds with the author's own release from uneasiness regarding his "sense of chronic displacement" (Lee 2014) which in the end appears as the right answer to the evils caused by nationalism and myopic attachment to one land over another. In the end the memoir sounds like a vindication of internationalism and post-nationalism that go hand in hand with love for the two countries of his heart, West Cork and Mersin.

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