

## “Who am I? Well, I’m Irish anyway, that’s something.” Iris Murdoch and Ireland

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*Abstract:*

Peter J. Conradi, a lifelong friend and biographer of Iris Murdoch, born in Dublin of Anglo-Irish parents, speaks of her attachment to/ detachment from her country of origin as follows: “Her Irish connection was reflected in a lifetime’s intellectual and emotional engagement [that] – before her illness – transformed her from a romantic Marxist idealist to a hard-line Unionist and defender of the politics of Ian Paisley” (Conradi 2001b). This article is an attempt to investigate possible connections between Murdoch’s social, ethnic, and religious background and her philosophy based on up-rooted and rootedness and self-distancing (terms borrowed from Simone Weil) personified in the characters of her numerous novels. Her only works set in Ireland, namely the short story “Something Special” (1958), and the novels *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Red and the Green* (1965), will be analysed and compared with the novels of another woman-writer from the same background, Jennifer Johnston, the doyen of Irish writers, who has inherited and modified the same tradition in the light of contemporary Irish history.

*Keywords:* 1916 Easter Rising, Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Ireland, Iris Murdoch, Jennifer Johnston

In writing on Iris Murdoch and Ireland I was confronted with a number of crucial questions to which I try to give an answer, since in her works the writer seems to distance herself from her home country.

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Is Iris Murdoch an Irish writer, simply because she was born in Dublin? “Murdoch always claimed she was Irish. But was she mythologizing herself?”

her biographer Peter J. Conradi asks perceptively and explains her complex relationship with the country where she was born in the following terms:

In 1998, [...] Iris Murdoch disconcerted friends by asking, “Who am I?”, a question she herself answered almost at once, “Well I’m Irish anyway, that’s something.” As the mind of the brilliant novelist and philosopher faded, she still clung to a deep sense of identification with Ireland. Her Irish connection was reflected in a lifetime of intellectual and emotional engagement that – before her illness – transformed her from a romantic, Marxist nationalist into a hard line Unionist and defender of the politics of Ian Paisley. Born in Dublin to a father from Belfast, she was always proud of the fact that she carried so many different Irish traditions within her [...]. She set three of her early fictional works in Ireland: the short story *Something Special* (1958) and the novels *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Red and the Green* (1965) [...]. (2001b)

Her sense of Irishness smacked strongly of myth-making – she cherished her distant links with the Anglo-Irish landed gentry, though her immediate family were of far humbler stock. But her identification was due to more than romanticism. I read somewhere that she preferred to be called an “Irish” rather than a “British” novelist, a specification many would consider a trivial detail which is, in itself, characteristically Irish. We recall of the late Seamus Heaney’s *An Open Letter* dated 1983 where he objected to being included in the Penguin anthology of *Contemporary British Verse* with the lines:

Names were not for negotiations.  
Right names were the first foundation  
For telling truth [...]

And concluded:

But British, no, the name’s not right.

But of course Heaney came from the “other tribe” (1985 [1983], 29).

Murdoch’s willingness to mythologize her own origins, and lament a long-lost demesne, marks her out as a kinswoman of Yeats’s. In 1978 Murdoch stated:

My Irishness is Anglo-Irishness in a very strict sense... People sometimes say to me rudely, ‘Oh! You’re not Irish at all!’ But of course I’m Irish. I’m profoundly Irish and I’ve been conscious of this all my life, and in a mode of being Irish which has produced a lot of very distinguished thinkers and writers. (Chevalier 2003, 95)

She was referring to writers such as Swift, Sterne, Sheridan and philosophers such as Berkeley.

Who were the Anglo-Irish in the narrowest sense of the word? Although the definition should in theory refer to all classes of people of British origin

born and living in Ireland, it is conventionally used to refer to those who lived in Big Houses of the XVIII, XIX and early XX centuries at the centre of large estates. The particular Anglo-Irish class referred to here and of which Murdoch claimed membership, were heirs to the English colonizers of the Elizabethan re-conquest of Ireland dating back to the XVI century, necessarily consolidated by the Jacobean, Cromwellian and Williamite settlements of the XVII and XVIII centuries. After their arrival in Ireland the Anglo-Irish nearly always regarded themselves not as settlers, but as an outpost in a hostile land. Evocative of racial memory is Brendan Behan's curt definition of the Anglo-Irish gentleman: "a Protestant with a horse". Behan not only scorns the "Anglo-Irish Horse-Protestants"; he goes on to maintain that there is, in fact, no such thing as the Anglo-Irish – that the Anglo-Irish concept is a "middle-class myth" (1988 [1958], 15). As a matter of fact both Yeats and Murdoch belonged to the Protestant urban middle-class and shared the same yearning for the aristocratic politeness and stylish ease they hadn't inherited from their families. It comes as no surprise, then, that when the so-called Northern Irish Troubles broke out in 1968, leading, over a period of thirty years, until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, to 3000 deaths, with casualties on both sides, as Conradi briskly reported: "No occasion is recorded on which she allowed that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland had [...] distinct and legitimate grievances" (Conradi 2001b). In a letter of 1945 Murdoch wrote: "There's Ireland, There's England – but I have a fatherland, it would be something like the literature of England perhaps". She described Ireland as an "island of spells, provincial pigsty. 'Little brittle magic nation dim of mind', Joyce, of course" (2015, 43). It is no wonder therefore that, to my knowledge, very few scholars in Ireland would acknowledge Iris Murdoch as an 'Irish' writer. Robert Hogan, for instance, in his *Dictionary of Irish Literature* of 1979 simply excluded her, though in 1975 she had already been included in the American Bucknell UP *Irish Writers Series* (Gerstenberger 1975). In the 1980s and 1990s things changed slightly, probably due to her increasing fame and success. The first critic to break the spell was Norman Jeffares who included her in his *Anglo-Irish Literature* in 1982, but criticized the two novels I'm interested in, as follows:

*The Unicorn* and *The Red and the Green* are set in Ireland, the former a messily melodramatic novel which fails to convey symbolic meaning, but the latter a more serious attempt to grapple with the divided loyalties created by the 1916 Rising. A slackerly written novel, it fails to rise to the potential of its materials. (1982, 248)

Murdoch's novels and philosophical essays were later included in Irish publications such as dictionaries and anthologies. Last but not least her philosophical work is included in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, vol. IV: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Bourke et al., 2002) vis à vis Eva Gore-Booth's theological work.

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Shouldn't a proof of her Irishness lie in the *influence* Irish writers and Irish literary traditions had on her work?

Undoubtedly both Yeats and Joyce loom behind Murdoch's works. Margaret E. Fogarty speaks of an "amalgam of Yeatsian and Joycean motifs" (1987) but she fails to mention and focus on Joyce's mythic method which T.S. Eliot defined in the famous essay on "Ulysses, Order and Myth". Myth is the story known to everybody but "fabled by the daughters of Memory", according to Joyce (1986 [1923], 20). Murdoch's use of classical or local myths, mediaeval or Christian icons to juxtapose to contemporary life, and her tendency to avail of allegory owe something to this mythic method.

Although, she is devoid, perhaps, of the same skill, imagination and poetic drive of her two countrymen, she remains, nonetheless, in their wake, shunning Modernism, however, and thriving within the safe furrow of traditional fiction: "The short story *Something special* recalls Joyce in its detailed, detached naturalism, but its lyrical unexpectedness is pure Murdoch" (Conradi 2001a, 446).

As early as 1975 Donna Gerstenberger, the first critic to tackle the issue of Murdoch's Irishness, wrote: "[...] the real question would seem to be about the writer's own consciousness of national materials and (more or less) conscious attitudes toward them" (1975, 70). The word "conscious" is important here. Umberto Eco provides us with an interesting interpretation of the idea of literary influence. Interviewed about the numerous sources used in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, he affirmed that "Thus I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (2014 [1980], 549). The process of intertextuality is at the root of every work of art, music, and literature. Artists do not live in an egotistical void. Moreover, in his *Lector in Fabula* Umberto Eco (1979) demonstrates that what triggers a story off is not the voice that tells it, but the ear that listens and interprets it: the reader's active role in decoding the text. A cunning use of intertextuality together with the awareness of the idiosyncrasies of her English audience will help us to understand Murdoch's "conscious attitude to Irish materials". We have, in fact, a "conscious", overt use of cliché and stereotypes, like playing a well-known refrain to win over an audience.

The reader quickly notices, for example, the persistence of Irish "types" in Murdoch's novels – lower-class personae characterized by chameleon-like attitudes, while, on the other hand middle-class or Anglo-Irish characters are endowed with a capacity for introspective sensitivity. The 'Irish' character usually belongs to the servant class in the employ of genteel middle-class English society. In some cases the servant class in Murdoch's novels emerge as interesting and complex characters, like Marian in *The Unicorn* (1963), but her lower-class Irish characters are, for the most part, delightful and

deceptively simple. In other words, their Irishness operates as a kind of fictional, narrative shorthand, a way of defining certain expectations. That the idea of Irishness in the English world of Murdoch's novels carries with it a class stigma is reinforced by the long succession of stereotyped Italian servant girls in the novel *The Italian Girl* (1964), who are indiscriminately and oddly called by the commonly used Irish name Maggie. I have the impression that her use of stereotypical characters and iconic social settings is meant to titillate the snobbishness and racial prejudices which she shared in part with her English reading public.

Murdoch does not only use stereotypes but also settings and themes which belong to the Irish literary tradition, namely the Big House and the 1916 Easter Rising. In *The Unicorn*, for instance, faithful descriptions of the landscape of County Clare and the nearby Cliffs of Moher and the Burren with its exotic flora and the centrality of the bog in the novel, while changing the names of Irish topography and obtrusively avoiding naming the country itself and forbidding her publisher Chatto to mention Ireland in the blurb or in any other form of publicity, are an artificial device to capture her reader's complicity. She entangles her reader in a kind of sophisticated puzzle of hinted-at references. Her well-read and cultivated readers have to recreate the atmosphere or the image in their own minds, as in the case of the famous mediaeval tapestry of the Lady and the Unicorn, which she acknowledges in interviews to be the inspiration for the book but is never mentioned. Joyce was a master in this expedient: he never mentions the Greek hero Ulysses except in the title of his novel, the rest is done by his *lector in fabula*.

Moreover in Anglo-Irish literature, as in Irish life, the houses of the Anglo-Irish take on a deeply symbolic value. In *The Unicorn* two Big Houses, the Gaze and The Riders, are set symmetrically and symbolically, on the two edges of the bog, like the two "Eggs" – West and East, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by the Irish-American Francis Scott-Fitzgerald.

There is a discernible difference between the houses of the Anglo-Irish and the small dwellings of the majority of the population. In Murdoch's novel there are no small dwellings, but class divisions are there to establish unbreakable psychological barriers between the two female protagonists – Hannah, the Anglo-Irish lady, and Marian, the naïve commoner.

Throughout Anglo-Irish literature, the vocabulary used in relation to the Anglo-Irish is rich in words such as "pressure", "isolation", "somnolence", "decay", "guilt" and "insecurity". The most emotive of these terms is "burden". The burden of responsibility of a Puritan élite endowed by God's grace reverberates Kipling's "the white man's burden" (Kipling 1899). This recurrent vocabulary and the traditional setting of the Big House Novel served Murdoch's aims in *The Unicorn* very well.

Hannah's ambiguous condition of being privileged and imprisoned in her Big House is at the centre of the novel. This bears witness to Murdoch's

deep knowledge of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. No critic has noticed, to date, that the theme of the lady, segregated and imprisoned by a jealous, violent or sadistic husband had already appeared at the centre of *Castle Rackrent*, the short novel by Maria Edgeworth published in 1800, which is often regarded as the first Big House, and first ever Anglo-Irish novel. It is also widely regarded as the first novel to use the device of a narrator, the servant Thady, a prototype of the 'stage Irishman', who is both unreliable, and a naïf onlooker of, rather than a player in, the actions he chronicles. He resembles Marian in *The Unicorn*. In it the second Lady Rackrent we meet, a British Jew, exposes Thady's xenophobia and narrow-mindedness. It is she who is locked up by her husband, because she is not ready to part with her wealth by giving him her precious gold and diamond cross. In retaliation Sir Kit refuses to observe the norms of kosher and turns the key of the door to her room for good. Like Hannah, she manages to escape from the estate, but only after her husband's death. Another Lady Rackrent, Isobella, is not so fortunate. She does escape, but is gruesomely dragged to death in a carriage accident. Hannah dies in similar circumstances.

In *The Red and the Green* (1965) Murdoch uses another popular theme in Irish literature: the co-occurrence of the 1916 Easter Rising with the battles of the First World War in which British and Irish soldiers died wearing the same uniform. Set in the Dublin of her birth, Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green* is an evocative historical novel in which the action takes place during the passionate days leading up to the Easter Rising in 1916. A large cast of characters covers the political spectrum. At the centre of the novel is Millie Kinnaird. Loved by both Barney and Christopher Bellmann, Millie is also idolized by her two nephews, Andrew, Frances Bellmann's eternal fiancé and British soldier on the point of leaving for the Belgian front, and Pat Dumay, the utopic Catholic revolutionary. In a highly comic series of events, on the very eve of the Rising, each of these four men attempts to visit Millie in her boudoir at Rathblane, a short distance from the city. They make their way to her house through the rainy night by means of an assortment of broken bicycles and lame horses. An absurd scene grows ever more farcical as Millie's paramours stumble about in the dark avoiding or bumping into each other. Only the naive and innocent Andrew actually makes it to her bed but his performance leaves her so disappointed that she rushes off the next day to join the rebellion. This darkly comic passage is in sharp contrast with the bloody massacre at the Post Office and proves that Murdoch definitely belongs to the "Irish Comic Tradition", which, according to Vivian Mercier (1962), is an amalgam of macabre, grotesque, satire and parody.

Donna Gerstenberger in her pioneering study of 1975, convincingly plots the almost line by line echoes of Yeats's poem *Easter 1916* in Murdoch's *The Red and the Green* (1975, 77). Yeats's poem is, for Murdoch, what Homer's *Odyssey* is for Joyce, the myth of Western Culture, the story known to every-

body. Once again Murdoch expects her reader to know the poem. The usual stratagem of complicity between author and reader.

Unlike other commentators I feel that *The Red and the Green* is one of Murdoch's most personal and sincere novels, since, as she contemplates an Ireland whose destiny is alternative to that of Britain, she is very much at home, especially as much of the material relates, most presumably, to her own experience underscored by some serious historical research. Murdoch does not refrain from taking a political stance. At one point Barney says "England had destroyed Ireland slowly and casually, without malice, without mercy, practically without thought, like someone who treads upon an insect" (1965, 183).

Murdoch's technique is capable of revealing the innermost thoughts of several of her characters in a way that heightens the irony, both dramatic and tragic, that stems from her characters' faulty assumptions about each other. One is tempted to accuse Murdoch of cheating a little, in that she does not, except for in the final pages, enter the heads of the female characters at all, but prefers to leave them as mysteries for the reader to work out, while she is exposing the men all the time. Her male characters seem to be intimately foppish or immature, while the women appear independent-minded, endowed with sterner inner stuff – or seem, at least, prepared to grapple with the chauvinistic constraints of the era.

In *The Red and the Green* only the three women – Kathleen Dumay, Millicent Kinnaird and Frances Bellman survive.

What I am fascinated by here is the allegorical value Murdoch attributes to each of the three female characters. The novel, set in the weeks before the 1916 Rising, ends with an epilogue dating 1938. This is not irrelevant. This epilogue is a severe critique by Murdoch of the Ireland that emerged after the 1921 Partition, the ensuing Civil War and the new Constitution of Ireland which came into force on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1937, replacing that of the Irish Free State and calling the new state "Éire", or, in the English language, "Ireland". Kathleen – *nomen omen*, an echo of Yeats's play – is the Catholic wife of Frances' uncle Barnie Drumm, the defrocked seminarian, a total failure as a lover, scholar, man of the Church, and as a revolutionary. She remains in Ireland with her ridiculous, estranged husband who dies an unheroic death in 1928. She stands for the new independent Catholic Ireland, poor, shabby and insignificant, deprived of her two utopic sons, Pat killed in 1916 and Cathal in the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923.

Aunt Millicent Drumm, the impoverished Lady Kinnaird by marriage and owner of Rathblane, a run-down Big House, is the 'vamp' of the piece, i.e. she is the 'vampire' that attracts and ridicules the male heroes of the novel. We are tempted to think that Millie is a satirical Murdochian version of Countess Constance Markievicz, an offspring of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, or even of Murdoch's friend Elizabeth Bowen, who until the 1950's, went on pretending to keep the values and rites of her class alive, "besieged" in her ancestral

Bowen's Court, as it fell to pieces. In 1938 Millie is in "a dear little room in Dargle Road. [...] There's a lot of other old crocks in the house and they all call her 'my lady'" (Murdoch 1965, 272) a title that thrills and flatters her.

Finally Frances is the pragmatic, young Irish Protestant woman, who leaves Dublin for London and an English husband. She represents the Anglo-Irish middle-class, born in Ireland, with divided loyalties. Unlike her father who espouses and kindles the romantic ideals of the Irish fight for independence, dying un-heroically during the Rising, she is soon disappointed by what was to become the Irish Free State and De Valera's Republic, marred by bigotry and pro-German nationalism, and leaves Ireland. In her voluntary English exile, like many others from her social background, she cannot but praise the heroes of 1916, most of whom came from the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia, although they also numbered some "mere Irish" and utopists like the Catholic Pat Dumay she had loved in her Dublin days. Frances's choice stands for the diaspora of some of Ireland's greatest Protestant writers such as Sean O'Casey, Jennifer Johnston and William Trevor. In their works they have all borne witness to the complexities of Irish society, the "muddle" (a favourite word of Murdoch's) of inter-married and fighting tribes.

The fact that only three women survive at the end of the novel, all of them victims of men's wars and feuds, reveals the red thread running through the plot, i.e. that, at the heart of centrality of gender in historical understanding, we find a pervasive use of female figures to defend the essence of Irish identity and the national project, the price being attending to the agenda of living Irish women.

A couple of quotations from the novel may help to corroborate the validity of my argument. On turning down Andrew, Frances says: "being a woman is like being Irish... everyone says you are important and nice, but you take second place all the time" (*ibidem*, 28-29) and when addressing her uncle Barney, whose romantic nationalism she does not share, she asks "and what will Home Rule do for that woman begging in the street?" (101).

The novel anticipates themes that will be at the centre of Irish Literature in the following decades. I'm thinking of the poetry of women writers such as Eavan Boland (namely the poem "Mise Eire"; Boland 1987, 10-11)<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> *Mise Eire*: "I won't go back to it – // My nation displaced Into old dactyls, / Oaths made / By the animal tallows / Of the candle – // Land of the Gulf Stream, / The small farm, / The scalded memory, / The songs / That bandage up the history, / The words / That make a rhythm of the crime // Where time is time past. / A palsy of regrets. / No, I won't go back. / My roots are brutal: // I am the woman – / A sloven's mix / Of silks at the wrists, / A sort of dove-strut / In the precincts of the garrison – // Who practises / The quick frictions, / The rictus of delight / And gets cambric for it, / Rice-coloured silks. // I am the woman / In the gansy-coat / On board the 'Mary Belle', / In the huddling cold, // Holding her half-dead baby to her / As the winds shift / And North over the dirty / Waters of the wharf //



many others. The book is thus a compelling, altogether great and intriguing addition to the canon of Irish literature of the 1960s.

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To what extent have writers of more recent generations been aware of the peculiar use of Irish materials Murdoch made in the mid 1960s? This would help us to include her in the history of contemporary Irish literature. I am convinced that – in the case of writers of the 1970s and 1980s – it was not a conscious influence, but reveals how anticipatory Murdoch’s Irish novels were.

In *The Red and the Green* Murdoch gave voice to the clash between the two nations but in the fundamental last chapter of the novel set in 1938 – centred on the act of transmitting historical facts to the new generations, Frances’ tall son, since “each country tells a selective story creditable to itself” (276) – by echoing Yeats’s “terrible beauty” she ironically criticizes the petty offspring of that “beauty” (Yeats 1950 [1921], 201-205). It may be interesting, however, to quote from a letter from Jennifer Johnston who answered my questions on Murdoch and Bowen thus:

I have never greatly enjoyed reading Iris Murdoch. I never met her, but a great friend of mine, now dead, called Michael Campbell, also a writer, used to see her from time to time. We all had cottages near Oxford. He didn’t like her books much, but liked her. I don’t think that she came very often to Ireland. *I could never put her in the category of Irish writer*: I don’t think that anyone cared very much in Ireland about what her feelings were about this country and her relationship to it. Elizabeth Bowen was a very different kettle of fish. I didn’t know she was a friend of Iris Murdoch’s. I have met her several times in England, She lived close to Ian’s [Johnston’s second husband] uncle Tom in Kent. Her books I do admire, her style is wonderful and she writes with such grace and truth. I always felt that Iris Murdoch struggled not to be Irish and Elizabeth Bowen didn’t give a damn what she was. But this is probably sloppy reading on my part. (Italics mine)

Yet I find echoes of Murdoch’s treatment of Irish history in the works of Jennifer Johnston. Johnston, born in Dublin, to the Irish actor/director Shelah Richards and the playwright Denis Johnston, educated at Trinity College Dublin, in fact, lived in London with her English husband and, after her divorce, returned to live in an elegant country house on the outskirts of Derry with her second husband just on the eve of Bloody Sunday in 1972. She was in her 40s, when she wrote her first novel *The Captains and the Kings*

mingling the immigrant / guttural with the vowels / of homesickness who neither / knows nor cares that // a new language / is a kind of scar / and heals after a while / into a passable irritation / of what went before”.

(1972). Her novels are often set in the vanished world of the Protestant Ascendancy, and cling to a largely extinct and deeply unpopular aspect of Irish history. Although larger issues like war, culture clash, the Northern Irish troubles, may not take centre stage, they are always in the background, providing, perhaps, a more realistic picture of the way history intrudes subtly upon most people's lives.

The existence of two voices in the English-language literature produced in Ireland is an established fact. But the difference is not merely a matter of class. These two groups of the Irish population were separated not by wealth and social position, but on the whole, and more significantly, by radically diverging feelings of national allegiance. What happened to the Big House novel after the foundation of the Irish Free State? On the whole we can say that the literary voice of the Anglo-Irish proper becomes faint from the Thirties on. Iris Murdoch's two Irish novels were published just on the eve of the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Easter 1916 and at the onset of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in 1968-69 and anticipated the rebirth in the 1970's and 1980's of the Big House novels set at the time of the 1916 Rising and the First World War. It is against a background of this kind that the new flourishing of contemporary Irish fiction may be viewed. The publication, within two to three years, of Jennifer Johnston's *The Captains and the Kings*, *The Gates* (1973) and *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974), each with a Big House setting and the First World War looming in the background, seen in conjunction with Aidan Higgins's *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966), J.G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970) and John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973), justified talk of a revival of the *genre*. In 1980 John Cronin spoke of a "late blossoming of an amazing kind" (1980, 17-18) the novels just mentioned having been joined in the meantime by Jennifer Johnston's *The Old Jest* (1979) and William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983). And there has also been the welcome reappearance of Molly Keane with *Good Behaviour* (1981) and *Time after Time* (1983) and the reprinting of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1982). It is noteworthy that, with the exception of Higgins and Banville, the Irish novelists who use the Big House setting themselves, come from an Anglo-Irish background.

Does this new Anglo-Irish voice differ from that heard in the XIXth century and in the early decades of the XXth century? Obviously, yes.

In 1975 Brian Donnelly pointed out that in her novels "Miss Johnston was at some pains to weight the scales of relative merit – or fault – equally between the representatives of the two nations" (1975, 138-139). Alexander Moore, the main character in *How Many Miles to Babylon*, has Home Rule sympathies; "a Protestant with a horse" who strikes up a friendship with a stable-boy, who declares himself a Republican towards the end of the novel. They are both enlisted in the English army fighting in Flanders where the officer will be unjustly executed for treason. I think that echoes of Murdoch's Irish novel *The Red and the Green* are to be heard distinctly here.

In 1972, in an article on “The Problems of Being Irish”, Denis Donoghue characterized Irish literature as “a story of fracture: the divergence of one Irishman from another” (292). To my own knowledge, the Troubles in Northern Ireland have re-activated awareness of “the divergence of one Irishman from another” in the South too, and the works of Banville and Higgins are a proof of it. The choice of the Big House as a setting helps to highlight the divergence between the two traditions. Jennifer Johnston, known as ‘the quiet woman of Irish literature’ confesses that The First World War is a “passion” for her, one she initially used as a metaphor:

When I started writing prose, I had it very seriously in my mind that I wanted to write about the Troubles... yet I couldn't face taking them head-on. So I started to write about the First World War... how people try to keep their lives normal, their feet on the ground, even though terrible things are going on. (*The Irish World*, 24 October 2007)

A feeling that reminds us of Frances Bellman's angry cry in *The Red and the Green*: “Why do the men go and fight in that stupid ghastly war? Why don't they all say, no, no, no?” (Murdoch 1965, 105).

Nowadays on the occasion of the centenary of Easter 1916 an endless line of conferences on the event are organized all over the world, but there is a great difference from the 1966 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations held in the Republic guided by Sean Lemass towards modernity, a difference that can be hinted at by juxtaposing the titles of the two documentaries produced and broadcasted by RTE: *Insurrection* of 1916 gives a sense of national revenge on the oppressor, while *Rebellion* of 2016 reduces the event to “Storms in teacups. Who's heard of nineteen sixteen now?” (Murdoch 1965, 276) as Frances' husband says before leaving the house and his wife with the difficult task of telling their son the “true” story.

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