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Portable Ireland: Literary and Cultural Itineraries

edited by Samuele Grassi and Fiorenzo Fantaccini

Miscellanea

Voices

Writings

This issue is dedicated
to the loving memory of
Jennifer Johnston (1930-2025)

STUDI IRLANDESI
A JOURNAL OF IRISH STUDIES

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Arianna Antonielli, Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Samuele Grassi

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Arianna Antonielli, Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Samuele Grassi

Portable Ireland

Literary and Cultural Itineraries

edited by
Samuele Grassi and Fiorenzo Fantaccini

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Introduction

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Historically, cultural, religious, and intellectual exchanges have played a defining role in shaping Ireland's connections with other countries across Europe and beyond. From the early circuits of missionary travel and pilgrimage to contemporary patterns of economic migration, the Irish experience of mobility has been central to the nation's evolving identity. Watershed moments – such as the Great Famine in the 1840s, twentieth-century waves of migration to the UK and the United States, and Ireland's more recent positioning within a globalised European economy – have all contributed to collective imaginaries of Irishness, both at home and abroad. These forms of movement have shaped not only demographic landscapes but also affective and cultural ones, transforming how Ireland is seen from elsewhere and how it sees itself.

This special issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* proposes to focus on the "sense" of Irish travel – foregrounding affect, imagination, and embodiment as key analytical lenses. Moving beyond a strictly representational framework, we ask how travel produces and is produced by emotional registers and cultural attachments. What atmospheres accompany Ireland's current engagements with mobility? How do memory, nostalgia, hope, and critique animate the travel narratives and encounters that continue to define Ireland's place in a shifting global order?

The tourist gaze has long played a powerful role in framing Ireland as a site of natural beauty, cultural authenticity, and rural charm. The imagery of rolling green hills, music festivals, and quaint villages remains potent – both cherished by some and questioned by others. Yet in recent years, Ireland has increasingly positioned itself as a site for "sustainable tourism", aiming to balance heritage with ecological awareness. This trend, while promising, opens up difficult questions about who is included in – or excluded from – these visions of Ireland. How, for instance, does sustainable tourism reflect the historical marginalisation of Gaelic-speaking Ireland and with ongoing forms of exclusion based on class, gender, race, and sexuality? What alternative narratives and imaginaries resist or reframe dominant visions of Irishness in circulation today?

We wanted to explore these tensions by considering travel as both a literal and metaphorical practice – entangled with processes of translation, cultural diplomacy, and identity-making. Our call aimed to interrogate how narratives of movement, displacement, and encounter inform historical and contemporary understandings of Irishness. We hoped to gather contributions that address in nuanced and productive ways the politics of representation and consumption, the commodification of culture under neoliberalism, and the affective legacies of colonialism and migration. How do these overlapping contexts reshape the meanings of mobility, home, and belonging? What role can literature, oral history, visual culture, or activism play in imagining more just and inclusive futures of travel?

Finally, the call also encouraged reflection on long-standing routes of exchange – especially between Ireland and Italy, where this journal is based. We invited considerations of historical and contemporary interactions across these national spaces, including through translation, intellectual networks, migration, and cultural activism. These transnational perspectives serve not only to enrich understandings of Ireland, but also to foreground the importance of comparative and dialogical approaches in the study of travel.

The theme of "Portable Ireland" is central to our endeavour, foregrounding how Irish identities, narratives, and aesthetics travel – across borders, genres, and generations – shaping and being shaped by wider global and diasporic contexts. The contributions reflect the complex and shifting terrain of contemporary Ireland, attending to the cultural, social, and political reverberations of mobility, memory, and transformation in both historical and modern frames.

The contributions gathered in this special issue trace the entanglement of Irishness with migration, memory, and cultural reinvention. Matthew Fogarty reimagines Roddy Doyle's *Oh, Play that Thing* through the lens of jazz aesthetics and biofiction, revealing how form and theme subvert traditional emigration narratives and expose persistent racism in Ireland, past and present. Similarly, Martina Zanetti interrogates Irish women's migration – voluntary, forced, or symbolic – probing how home, identity, and belonging are constantly renegotiated in narratives by contemporary women writers. This mobility is not only geographical, but also cognitive and aesthetic. Monica Randaccio's application of frame theory to Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream* unveils the interplay between inherited narratives and the reconfiguration of perception and artistic rivalry, including in translation. Stephanie Rains recovers the cultural hybridity of 1930s pilgrimage cruises, showing how religious journeys doubled as secular pleasures and anticipated the mass tourism that followed – a convergence of faith, modernity, and commodification. Perceptual and affective boundaries are also central to Martina Giannetti's study of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, where language mediates between the real and the mythical, and the liminal becomes a space of encounter with otherness. Giuseppe Pusceddu highlights travel writing as a vital, though overlooked, component of Seán Ó Faoláin's oeuvre, revealing his narrative sophistication and ironic lens on European destinations. The "Miscellanea" section extends these themes of translocation and transformation. Stanley Gontarski revisits Dublin's theatrical radicalism in the 1950s, mapping how the staging of Tennessee Williams and the reception of American modernism shaped Flann O'Brien's creative and critical engagements. Nourhan Ashraf Saleh stages a comparative reading of Irish and Palestinian identities under colonial and postcolonial pressures, showing how fragmentation and hybridity can become forms of resistance and self-reinvention. Arianna Antonielli's essay introduces Debbie Jenkinson's *Midlands* as a quietly subversive graphic narrative, using sequential art to explore loss, memory, and emotional texture beyond heroic tropes. Alberto Mini turns to autofiction, examining how Irish women writers depict and contest patriarchal oppression through literary self-fashioning. Finally, Jeffrey Minicucci's exploration of *The Yellow Briar* uncovers a fascinating feedback loop

between fiction and professional identity, as the novel's mythmaking becomes part of Canadian legal lore. Together, these essays highlight Ireland as a site of continual departure and arrival, of frames disrupted and identities reshaped. Whether through literature, visual narrative, performance, or historical reconstruction, this issue captures a *Portable Ireland* – a mutable, migratory formation whose boundaries are always in motion, even as it remains grounded in the distinctive textures of Irish cultural life.

This special issue is enriched by the writings of three distinctively Irish voices from the contemporary world stage: William Wall's falling in love with a people, a poetry, and a language began in the late 1970s, while he was honeymooning in Rimini, a coastal town in the Centre-East of Emilia Romagna. Dante's account of Paolo and Francesca's doomed love in the *Inferno* served as a point of entry into the articulation of his own growing passion for Italian culture and its many facets. What makes Wall's reflections particularly cogent at this conjuncture is how translation – and the possibility for a text, for words and feelings, to travel and find specific impression or expression in the singular experience of something shared collectively – becomes a way to resist the strangeness of the foreign, which so often feels too distant in time, space, or place. Here as increasingly elsewhere, translation is one of many methods employed by critics and cultural theorists to bridge the gap created by the inescapable fact of life with others on a planet in ruins. This sense of profound anticipation permeates the poems that follow, which take us to Ireland, Europe, the US and Palestine, year 2025. Catherine Ann Cullen's poem "Paper Boats", inspired by the Gaza Freedom Flotilla project and read at a Conference on Palestine in 2018, was conceived as an act of solidarity, hope, and witness since resistance, defiance and freedom are desperately needed in the area, now an apocalyptic landscape of devastation and ruins. Sarah Clancy offers us five poems showing her need of being able to travel to other places and her impulsive response "to the chaotic pace of world events", a world increasingly disconnected from reality, passive in the face of genocide, migration from warzones and insensitive towards the attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Like Cullen, Clancy sends out a message of hope, solidarity, a powerful message that the editors of this issue share and strongly support unconditionally.

Stop genocide!

STUDI IRLANDESI
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A Portrait of Sean O'Faolain as a Travel Writer

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Abstract:

Despite being regarded as one of Ireland's foremost short-story writers, O'Faolain's literary output also encompasses travelogues, although this literary genre is sometimes considered as a minor phase in his writing career. His travel books include *An Irish Journey*, *A Summer in Italy*, *An Autumn in Italy*, and the article "In Search of Sardinia", written for the American magazine *Holiday*. This essay analyses the characteristic traits of his travel writing, namely the constant presence of characters, delineated through the deliberate and sophisticated dialogic form, the setting of the narrated stories, and the personal reflections. His way of narrating and describing the places he visited, between wonder and reality, with disenchantment and irony, makes his travel books a personal form of narrative, thanks to the rich vocabulary due to the artistic maturity, intertextuality, and internationalization of his work.

Keywords: Dialogic Form, Intertextuality, Irish Literature, Sean O'Faolain, Travel Writing

1. Introduction

In the broad and varied literary production of the Irish writer Sean O'Faolain, sometimes written as Seán O'Faoláin (Delaney 2014)[1], baptised John Francis Whelan (the renaming to its Gaelic variant was due to political reasons), it is often assumed that the works attributable to travel writing belong to a minor phase of his career (Doyle 1968). Nevertheless, during a conference commemorating his centenary held at the university in Turin in 2000, where the emphasis was placed on Irishness and internationalism, a significant portion of the two-day discussion revolved around his travels in Italy, "the foreign country he

[1] For the sake of clarity, in this essay we will use the name without the acute accent (the Irish Gaelic diacritic mark also known as *síneadh fada*) on the vowel *a*, as it appears in the titles of his travel books.

loved most and to which he devoted many brilliant pages of travel notes and fiction" (Abbate Badin, *et al.* 2001, 10). Moreover, the emphasis on his travels aligns with the significance of travel writing that has been established in the realm of literary studies, by now considered, according to Tim Youngs, "the most socially important of all literary genres" (2013, 1). It is also helpful to note that "the recent burgeoning of academic interest in travel writing has been accompanied by considerable controversy and debate about the merits and morality of the genre" (Thompson 2011, 7).

2. The Irish Journey

The beginning of travel writing in the life of Sean O'Faolain dates back to 1939, when the Irish author was commissioned to write a travel book about the new Ireland with some illustrations (eight watercolours) by the Belfast-born artist Paul Henry. Rather than starting from Dublin, O'Faolain's journey began in County Kildare, some fifty kilometres from the capital, at Sallins station, where he hired a buggy to Naas, the capital city. Although transport horses were still present, travelling conditions in Ireland had improved over time since young student John Whelan travelled part of the island by train and motorbike some twenty years earlier.

According to Clair Wills, the resulting travel book, titled significantly *An Irish Journey*, "envisaged a new sort of readership, in addition to the English and American tourists targeted in the past: he [O'Faolain] wrote too for the burgeoning Irish middle class" (2007, 295). Furthermore, *An Irish Journey* can also be considered as a "literary initiation into the everyday life of provincial towns in postcolonial Ireland" (Beebe 2018, 19). Therefore, considering all these aspects, from the semiotic perspective of urban space (Barthes 1967) we can interpret each Irish town as a text, or, borrowing a definition from Italo Calvino, as a "combination of many things: memory, desires, signs of a language" (1983, 41).

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, titled "From the Liffey to the Lee", begins in Naas and follows a journey south, touching on Kilkenny, Tipperary, Mallow, and finally Cork. Regarding the town of Naas, O'Faolain notes that there is uncertainty surrounding its gender, stating that certain locations exhibit more "feminine" characteristics than others: "[t]here can be no doubt about the sex and character of Naas; or, for that matter, any part of Kildare. Neddy [i.e., Naas, formerly called Neddy Naas] wears riding-breeches. He speaks in terms of half-dollars and odds" (1940, 4).

The second one, "The South-West", starts in Kinsale, south of Cork, follows the entire south-west coast to go up to Limerick and then to Ennis. In this part of the journey, the writer experiences a return to their ancestral place. He described Cork several times in stories and novels. It is the town of the early part of his life, so he cannot be objective about the town because "[t]here is only one tune for Cork. It is of those towns you love and hate. Some wag that in Cork you do not commit sin; you achieve it. You do not, likewise, enjoy life in Cork; you experience it" (75).

"The West" is the third part of his journey. Athenry, Galway, Connemara, Ballinrobe, Castlebar, Westport all the way to Sligo. And the centre of the West was Galway,

> the most foreign town in Ireland – probably in Great Britain and Ireland: meaning thereby that it is barbarically native. It has no veneer, unless rust is a veneer, or the soot-skin of smoke, or the cake of sea-spray, or the common dirt of old age, stuck into every crevice like the years into an old man's skin. Neither sun, nor paint, nor chromium can alter Galway, or brighten it. Infinite variety cannot stale its custom. Like an old beauty under the enamel, the more she daubs the rouge the more does the antique face impress its power. (171)

The name "The Six Counties", the fourth part of the journey, is not a pleasant one for O'Faolain to hear; indeed, "[i]t falls numerically on the ear, much as if one said, the six-cylinder. Why? Because there is no such place" (235). Here, the former IRA volunteer touches on a sensitive issue whose repercussions are still felt today, as he proposes a novel solution to the problem of partition. The writer recalls the 1935 riots in Belfast, lists the number of Catholics driven from their homes, pointing out that not a single non-Catholic was evicted. He wasn't unaware of the situation. In fact, according to Marie Arndt, O'Faolain "acknowledged the disproportionate political and economic influence of the protestants. He intellectualised the divide as being more based on economic gain than religious concern; those who profit financially from the link with Britain are eager to retain *status quo*" (2001, 96-97).

Apart from the focus on religious, economic, and political affairs, what he finds most exciting is discovering intriguing elements that could serve as a narrative or perhaps a setting for a novel. Indeed, stories waiting to be told can be found; one simply needs to encourage people to share their experiences. For instance, consider the customs station in Lifford. The border ceased to function after six o'clock, and regarding this particular characteristic, one woman shared an intriguing story with him:

> She wanted to bring in some poteen from Donegal to make sloe gin. She bought the poteen (illegality number one), put the jar in the back of the car, and, waiting until after six drove out of Lifford (illegality number two). At the Northern Irish station, to her heart-fluttering dismay, she was held up. But, it was only a clerk who had been detained after hours and who wanted a lift into Strabane.
>
> 'Get in', she gasped, opening the front door.
>
> 'Ah, no!' he said politely, 'I'll get in at the back', and did.
>
> Presently he said:
>
> 'What's in the jar?'
>
> 'Poteen!' said the lady, feeling her number was up, and she may as well make a clean breast of it.
>
> 'Ha! Ha!' said the clerk. 'You will have your little joke!' – and said no more about it. (1940, 243)

This way of proceeding by the Irish writer recalls the well-known words by Walter Benjamin on the figure of the storyteller: "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (2006, 362). That is, in fact, a national characteristic – the essence of storytelling in Irish culture, which is rooted in the tradition of the *seanchaí* (Kiberd 1979; Alexander 1990); after all, "[s]tories of one kind or another have a way of pressing themselves into Irish conversation, both as entertainment and as a form of communication" (Trevor 2001 [1989], ix). And indeed, as O'Faolain wrote after his passage in Derry, "the loveliest of all Northern cities" (1940, 248), spending time in the County Library of Coleraine, he "wanted only to gossip-to pick up, gradually, and casually, some flavour of local life" (254). Sean O'Faolain succeeds in describing events and characters in his travel writing that belong to both real life and the realm of literature, by making in this case frequent use of intertextual quotation. One example is his long-standing friendship with Elisabeth Bowen. Consider the visit, which was first postponed then carried out, to the writer's home in Mallow, near Cork, specifically the famous "Big House" Bowen's Court.

The writer, in the company of Elisabeth Bowen, wanders around the house, talks about things as they arise, and then he goes to the library, picks up "a Spenser" and recites it aloud,

pretending to read the "beautiful stanzas of that unfinished tale of the Titan-Change" (58) under the dim light of a lamp. O'Faolain reports the two Spenserian stanzas in full, inviting the reader to follow his example. Finally, with darkness and silence descending on the fields, the writer and her friend return to the house. From his room, he hears the door close and footsteps crossing the house:

> Far away to the right over the screens, beyond the fox-covert, across the dark bogland, towards Doneraile, he [Spenser] too may well have sat up late and on such a night as this. And at some lines like:
>
> *The day is spent, and cometh drowsie night…*
>
> looked up over the sleeping land of Cork, yawned, stretched his arms, and, as I do now, laid down his pen. (59)

This passage, when read between the lines and considering the insinuating ellipsis at the end of the line from *The Faerie Queene*, can be regarded as a meta-narrative. On the one hand, O'Faolain creates the narrative illusion with the reading of the poet's stanzas, and on the other hand, it makes us think that the protagonists of the poem are none other than the writer himself and his host friend, also considering the comment concerning the previously postponed meeting, in order to "spend a pleasant night in Mallow" (43).

Furthermore, an indiscreet reader would probably have a different perception of the "intimate" friendship between O'Faolain and Elizabeth Bowen. In this respect, we have the testimony of his daughter Julia, who in her memoir devotes an entire chapter to the relationship between the two writers. The daughter also highlights the less than idyllic relations between her father and her mother Eileen, herself a writer:

> All I knew at the time was that there was a bristle of tension in our house, that Eileen was restive and that Seán making trips not just to London but to Cork – and not Cork city either, where his mother lived, but to Bowenscourt. Why, I heard Eileen ask, if he was going, as he claimed, to a house party, had she not be invited too? Airily implausible, he insisted that it was to be a professional gathering which only writers would attend. A likely story! (2013, 44)

At the time of publication, the book could be considered as a "work of literary tourism a guide to an Ireland that could be visited in an armchair" (Wills 2007, 295), but on a closer reading, *An Irish Journey* can instead be understood as a travel narrative. O'Faolain wrote his travel book in the same way he wrote stories and biographies in the 1920s and 1930s. He saw cities and people through the eyes of the narrator. The personal view of places visited, the romantic description of characters, the observations of historical, political, or intellectual figures, every reference to things or people, in short, became for O'Faolain a narrative pretext.

3. The Italian Journeys

The late 1940s saw a turning point in Sean O'Faolain's busy literary career. The encouragement of Graham Greene, who invited him to write a travel book on Italy – "to describe the life-ways and the traditions of one of the most civilised countries in history" (O'Faolain 1993 [1964], 334) – was decisive. He grabbed the lifeline immediately. According to his biographer Maurice Harmon,

> [t]he articles and books he wrote on Italy opened a career for him as an international journalist writing for glossy American magazines that paid well. For the first time he did not have to worry as to

where the next penny would come from. The cosmopolitan European writer replaced the embattled Irish intellectual. […] More than anything else Italy helped him to find a new perspective on human nature. (1994, 165)

The result of the invitation came in the form of the book *A Summer in Italy*, published in 1949. The travel book narrates a journey from Turin to Verona, with stops in Genoa, the Ligurian Riviera, Florence, Siena, Rome, and Venice. The characteristic atmosphere of the stories reflects that of a traveller wandering aimlessly, casually encountering other characters or becoming lost in contemplation before a site of artistic interest. We are faced with the example of writing that reinterprets the journey, that is the interrelation "dalla doppia direzionalità e vettorialità […] del rapporto tra resoconto di viaggio e viaggio fattuale" (Pifferi 2011, 362), where the extra-literary element such as the journey interacts with the literary element of the travel account.

The account of the journey, "a mixture of romance and realism" (Harmon 1994, 165), is constantly interspersed with dialogues, real or fictitious, with people encountered along the way: be they fellow travellers or characters taken from other authors who have visited the same places.

The people encountered and chosen for the story appear to be descriptions of characters invented for a "fictional" work, a task in which Sean O'Faolain, an expert novelist, excels. The same goes for the narrator-protagonist who reveals his personality, through tastes, sensibilities, opinions.

Take for instance the first chapter, titled "Entry". The narrator-protagonist describes the train entering a station. He looks out of the carriage window and sees the blank platform. Through the arcades, outside the station, he glimpses an "equally blank" Piazza Carlo Felice. The narrator tells us even the time: twenty-five minutes to two o'clock in the morning. A warm summer morning in Turin. Without further consideration, the narrative takes an entirely unexpected turn:

> As I climbed down the heat gushed into my face from the platform as if there were red coals beneath it. Suddenly the platform was no longer empty. A small cheering group raced along it immediately they saw Eleonora Spinelli behind me in the doorway. They were four of them, all bareheaded; two women of about forty, a tiny tottering white-haired woman who might have been eighty, and a youth of about twenty; three generations. (1950 [1949], 12)

We are introduced to the character of Eleonora Spinelli, a traveller met on a train and with whom the narrator has engaged in a long conversation. A sudden, mutual, and confidential friendship develops between the two, to the extent that Eleonora invites the narrator to her home for lunch, along with her reunited family members. Once at Eleonora's house, the relationship between the narrator and the characters evolves, a transformation that is reflected in the narrative style:

> 'Stay in Turin. This is *it*. An Italian novel would radiate out from this room, their friends; their ambitions; their lives past and present'. But then I thought: 'It would take a lifetime!' Even as I sat there, alone at the table now; they had already gone from me. They were doing a ballet around the room, squabbling like Furies about something involved in personalities of whom I knew nothing that I was suddenly a complete stranger again. I staggered up to go. They hardly noticed me going, hurling pressing invitations to supper over their shoulders as they fought their private war. (32)

As we can see, personality traits that shape characters play a significant role in the writer's narrative. The role of the character is the stylistic feature that characterises Sean O'Faolain's

stories: his physical description, the way he behaves, interacts, and his standpoint; just as important as his surroundings, the social and cultural context, and historical time. Regarding the figure of the character, in his essay *The Short Story* the writer points out that

> in short story writing there can be no development of character. The most that can be done is to peel off an outer skin or mask, by means of an incident or two, in order to reveal that which is – as each writer sees this 'is'. The character will not change his spots; there is not time; if he seems likely to do so in the future, the story can but glance at the future. (1951, 191)

Of course, in a travel narrative, the central role of characters is diminished because the narrator must also focus on other elements. In fact, the narrator's reliability in observation "can be tested when they deal with geography, flora, fauna, and historical facts" (Adams 1983, 178). Sean O'Faolain solves the problem of credibility through the method of casual exploration. The narrator is not compelled to document his observations or experiences; instead, he recounts what he remembers. In this approach, O'Faolain also distinguishes between two types of travellers:

> The systematic traveller, unlike the casual traveller, has, I believe, more to record than to remember. The casual wanderer stays here, ambles there for each moment's pleasure, and afterwards when people ask him 'What did you do?' he cannot reply. The things that made him happy are too little, too evanescent, too personal to be named. (1950, 26)

The book can be seen as the tale of a casual wanderer; a unique travelogue in which the narrator-traveller serendipitously discovers locations that others, perhaps diligent followers of Aldous Huxley's "Baron Baedecker" (1948), find only after meticulous travel planning.

Due to its historical, literary, and artistic references, *A Summer in Italy* can also be read as a guidebook, albeit in reverse. In fact, one must approach the book with prior knowledge of the events, places, or characters described by O'Faolain. Beyond mere tourist curiosity, the chosen itineraries reflect the author's cultural interests, which often provoke intellectual questions and doubts. This way of looking at the journey highlights the "unimportance" of traditional guidebooks. Indeed, according to the Irish author, "[g]uide-books do us a certain disservice by romancing about the mere paraphernalia of strangeness" (1950, 97). In other words, due to their "non-autobiographical" nature, guidebooks, as Paul Fussell notes, "are not sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction" (1982, 203). Consequently, the result is a plethora of literary citations along with historical and cultural references. For instance, in the case of Florence it is essential to consider the works of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. After all, O'Faolain emphasizes that Browning "is a better guide than any guide-book" (1950, 98).

In terms of cultural history, numerous names come to mind for the writer. However, these figures do not always capture the essence of the Florentine aura: Fra Angelico is set aside due to his "destructive passion"; Botticelli, renowned for his *Nativity*, cannot fit in because he is associated with Savonarola; not to mention Masaccio and Donatello with his iconic *David*. Finally, one morning, a pivotal question arises: what about the most representative figures of Paris, London, or Dublin? The answer is clear: Balzac, Dickens, and Joyce. So, what about Florence? There is only one name that truly stands out:

> Thinking of Joyce, I became excited by the many parallels between the two men; not only for the mere interest of these accidental similarities, but because to think of the story behind the *Vita Nuova* in terms of *A Portrait of the Artist* helps to dispel the cocoon of awe which we have been resolutely spinning about Dante's passionate flesh ever since the doorstep gossips of Ravenna muttered as he went by: 'There goes the man who has been in hell'. (114)

This is the distinctive feature of the book: the element that transforms a travel book into a deeply personal and intimate story. This characteristic is evident not only in O'Faolain's travel writings, but also in those of other authors with similar sensibilities who approach travel writing comparably, such as D.H. Lawrence. With the English writer, evoked several times in his travel books, O'Faolain shares an "absolute necessity to move" (Lawrence 1952 [1921], 7). From O'Faolain's perspective, one aspect of this necessity involves engaging in conversations with people through the Socratic technique of anacrisis, that is, "the provocation of the word by the word" (Bakhtin 1999 [1984], 111); a method frequently employed by the Irish writer to stimulate dialogues that enrich his storytelling. About this method, a few years later, when he returned to Italy to journey south, he wrote: "[i]n my joy and excitement at being on the road again I wanted to talk to my fellow-travellers" (O'Faolain 1953, 11).

The resulting book of this new journey will be titled *South to Sicily* in the English Collins edition; in the United States, it will be called *An Autumn in Italy*, referencing its commercial sequel. In this journey, O'Faolain leaves Rome, travelling to Naples, Paestum, and the islands of Capri and Ischia, before proceeding to Apulia, from Foggia to Otranto, not forgetting the opportunity to visit Padre Pio, the Capuchin friar venerated as a saint of the stigmata in the Catholic Church. Afterward, he returns to Naples and, "after idling happily there for several days" (115), finally boards a train to Messina, with Taormina as his destination, continuing on to Siracusa, Noto, Enna, Agrigento, Palermo, and Marsala.

One of the most intense and exciting parts of the trip is the one dedicated to Naples[2]. While strolling through the bustling streets of Pizzofalcone, O'Faolain reflects on the significance of Neapolitan morality: "[o]ne has to make a special adjustment in Naples. One has to abandon all hierarchical notions of classified or stratified society to enjoy and understand Naples" (23-24). Ultimately, during an evening excursion, the author meets Giancarlo, the "prototype of amoral morality" (Mazzullo 2001, 212):

> Giancarlo accosted me in the course of his work, late one night, quite late, running after me eagerly, trotting beside me as he talked. He wore a mackintosh, no hat, carried an umbrella and the inevitable Neapolitan briefcase. He was dark, small and lively as a rabbit. As he trotted smiling, beside me, he offered me everything that, according to wealth and taste, the heart of man is supposed to desire. A beautiful girl? No? A lovely boy? No? Antiques? No? Cameos, intaglios, coral, jewels? Fake or real as I preferred? No? I persuaded him that I was not rich and did not feel lecherous. At least I needed American cigarettes? I bought a couple of packets. (O'Faolain 1953, 23-24)

In this passage, O'Faolain demonstrates his skill in portraying Giancarlo, the fictional name of the sketch's protagonist, through the frequent use of parataxis. While the writer's ability to evoke dialogue is evident in Naples, the journey to Sicily appears to be quite different. For instance, there are several striking literary references. O'Faolain emphasizes that writers serve as better guides than any guidebook, citing Browning in the context of Florence as an example. One reference pertains to Cardinal John Henry Newman, to whom he had previously dedicated a biographical work. It was in Enna, the Newman's Emmaus according to O'Faolain, "and not, or at least not alone, in the Straits of Bonifacio, that we find the impulse of his one great poem 'The Pillar of Cloud' " (126-127). And again, the reader is invited to read the first lines of the famous hymn.

[2] He returned to Naples in 1956 on behalf of the magazine *Holiday*, and again in 1972 to film the short documentary *There are Too Many Italians in Italy*, part of a programme by RTÉ, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's public radio and television service.

Another reference is to the Italian writer Elio Vittorini, mentioned during the journey between Enna and Agrigento. The reference is to the first-person narrator in Elio Vittorini's novel *Conversation in Sicily*, character who lived as a child in this "vacant landscape": "It is a book which will give the reader ten thousand times more of the smell and feel, the passion and the pain of Sicily than any travel books" (131). Here, the reader is given an account of the passion and pain of Sicily, an example of Vittorini's distinctive writing style. However, the Irish writer overlooks the fundamental meaning of the book's title, which represents a journey conceived as an extended conversation, as it reads in this important passage by the Italian writer: "I was journeying still, and the journey was also a conversation, it was present, past, memory, and fantasy" (Vittorini 2000 [1949], 102). Now, we would have expected a more insightful commentary from a writer such as O'Faolain, who possesses travel experience and appreciates the art of conversation.

The narration is indeed full of the names of different writers. For instance, let us examine the section pertaining to the Palatine Chapel, which is situated within the Norman Palace in Palermo. Here, O'Faolain encounters an old friend who resembles William Morris, a sociable individual he had known during his travels in Northern Italy. The two, beneath the Byzantine mosaics, evoke the works of T.S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, until suddenly the writer bursts out with an exclamation: "Aren't we talking too much? Let us just *look*!" (1953, 144, italics in original). The subsequent passage serves as an ekphrastic, albeit *sui generis*, exercise in which O'Faolain describes the scenes depicted in the mosaics of the Nativity and the Entry into Jerusalem:

> When one looks at Mary putting her hand into the child's bath to see if the water is too hot, or too cold, we look and smile only because we have seen other children's golden bodies swaying in the bath – one's own wife solicitous testing the water. We looked at the Nativity and we laughed. For you never saw such a surprised, gawkish look on anybody's face as there is on Saint Joseph's. And, after all, can any man in the world ever been more astonished by the Virgin Birth? We looked at the Entry into Jerusalem – the entire glittering wall-surface of the chapel is a life story told by a genius – where one boy is seen tearing off his shirt either to throw it under the donkey's hooves or to offer to Christ the tribute of his nakedness, the body bent at right angles, the hands forward to tear off the garment, the head already lost in its folds. How actual that drawing is! (144)

At the end of his Sicilian journey, he realizes that the Mafia has evolved and that Marx's economic theory should be applied to Marsala wine, as it is priced too low at the wine fair. After completing his tour, he returned to Naples and travelled to Calabria. His curiosity about the 1950 land reform law, commonly referred to as the "Sila Law," named after the expansive plateau region in Calabria, compels him to include an appendix in the book dedicated to financing. He then concludes his adventure with a heartfelt wish: "I have always wished that the Italians would make a film of this story: it calls for a script by somebody like Carlo Levi, or Silone, or Vittorini, or John Steinbeck. It is an epic of achievement" (207).

4. The Sardinian Journey

Of all his numerous visits to Italy, only one region remained unexplored by O'Faolain, the most archaic: Sardinia. As his daughter Julia recalled about a letter he wrote to her, these visits to Italy resulted in " 'two chatty books' " (O'Faolain 2001, 24). In contrast, his journey to Sardinia was culturally and socially distinct. The most noticeable differences were in the personalities he encountered. Among the many characters one can encounter along the way, either real or imaginary, one in particular, even for a skilled and experienced writer like Sean O'Faolain, is perhaps impossible to describe: the "vero Sardo", i.e., the real Sardinian.

O'Faolain arrived in Sardinia in 1965 from the United States as a correspondent for the American travel magazine *Holiday*. Following the editorial line, the magazine sent a writer and a photographer to a destination, either near or far, around the world. At that time, the Irish writer was also working as a visiting professor at Boston College. Being writer-in-residence allowed him to continue his travels, especially to Italy, a country he loved. This is how O'Faolain's work for *Holiday* was organized:

> While he worked on new articles to meet deadlines, he revised articles already sent in. He wanted to achieve a realistic sense of place, but *Holiday* also had definite ideas as to what they wanted and frequently asked for revisions. He was philosophical about this and his professionalism steadied him: 'one is asked to do a job competently and the rest is a cheque'. He met deadlines scrupulously, revised when requested, worked hard to make his articles informative, alive and factually accurate. He had the true journalist's capacity to become excited by fresh material. (Harmon 1994, 206)

In his programme of trips to Italy, planned for 1964, the island came after Florence, Val d'Arno, and Turin. Instead, Sean O'Faolain arrived in Sardinia in May the following year. He agreed the costs of his *Holiday* trips with his agent Emelie Jacobson, but for the trip the writer had in mind to Sardinia, the costs were significantly higher than for other Italian or European destinations: "[t]here was a time when I was trying eagerly to charter a motor launch or a yacht to sail around the coast of Sardinia – with a motorcycle lashed to the mast for inland journeys" (1966, 84). Nothing he had in mind came true once he arrived at the island because at the time Sardinia was not "fashionable" enough for this particular type of holiday.

He entitled the article "In Search of Sardinia", as if he had waited for some time before tackling the discovery of the island. However, Sardinia was not a completely unknown land: presumably, his knowledge was based on what he had learned from the novels of Grazia Deledda. In his essay "The State and its Writers", published when he was editor at *The Bell*, O'Faolain pointed out that "the Nobel Prize winner, Grazia Deledda, wrote about the simple life of her Sardinian peasants" (2016 [1943], 256). But the beginning of the article does not refer to the themes and characters depicted by the Sardinian writer, but rather is devoted to D. H. Lawrence's Sardinia trip in 1921, particularly to the excursion in the heart of the island: the village of Sorgono.

Reaching the heart of the island was a long and tiring journey, but a fascinating one for travellers' eager for scenic and archaeological beauty. This is how O'Faolain's Sardinian experience begins:

> I came up here this fine May morning from Cagliari, the capital, in a Fiat 850, at my leisurely ease, on first-class roads. I paused several times, once for about three hours to explore one of the most famous of the 7,000-odd neolithic ruins of ancient Sardinia, the finely preserved village at Barumini. On a straight run I could have done the seventy-eight miles in three and a half hours, though such haste would have been quite stupid, because once you enter the region of Sarcidano, the road starts to wind and climb, and in Barbagia di Belvi [*sic*] the scenery becomes wildly beautiful. (1966, 52)

The first town in central Sardinia where he stays is not in Barbagia (the Romans referred to it as *Barbaria*), but in the sub-region of Mandrolisai, on the border with Barbagia di Belvì. It is called Sorgono, and O'Faolain probably did not choose it by chance. He mentions in his notes the characteristics of the hotel where he is staying, and even here, as we shall see, the choice was not left to chance:

> As for this little hotel in Sorgono, it is modern, state-run, perfectly clean and most agreeably situated, with a wide terrace and flowers, and it even has a little bubbling fountain. I suppose by New York standards it would be considered second class. For central Sardinia it is a godsend, even if there is

no water tonight and the telephone has gone bust. I have no complaint. I am the sole resident. And I have the mountains all to myself. Today travel in Sardinia, with the exception of a few still undeveloped regions, can always be perfectly comfortable, and sometimes (not often) luxurious. (52)

But this is not "one of the luxury regions". The writer's thoughts range from the "silent tumult" of the mountains to the problem of banditry, a scourge that plagued the island in the 1960s. His is a long retrospective of the journey he had just made that afternoon: after leaving Barumini, every eight kilometres he encountered a Carabinieri checkpoint. He also mentally reviews the history and chronicle of banditry, citing names and dates, until he returns to contemplation from his window, to realistic description, averting his eyes from a newspaper reporting a new robbery in the province of Nuoro. But at the end, he makes an unexpected comment: "[t]he same day's Roman newspaper? It simply drips with gore and corruption in high places. I think it fair to conclude that Sardinia is pretty safe and calm" (53).

This time O'Faolain was unable to exploit the dialogical form to enrich his narrative because he met very few literarily interesting and stimulating characters. Those few he met, unlike the Neapolitans, were not particularly talkative enough to engage in dialogue. The day he travelled to Dorgali, on the eastern coast, he met only two people all the way. The first was a shepherd,

whom I asked about *banditi*. He did not expand, but at least he did not laugh. He said philosophically, amiably and without rancor, 'They are just men who don't want to work'. Miles farther on I met an old woman who had walked up to the high-road from one of the villages buried in the valley of the Flumineddu [*sic*]. I gave her a lift to a point near Dorgali. I said, 'What are these lovely pink-white flowers that I see all over the hills?' and showed her one I had picked earlier while pausing for a pipe and a coffee from my flask while contemplating the vast view. I knew what the flowers were, but I wanted to hear what she would say.

She said in Sard, '*Sarbuzzu*'. They are the asphodel of the ancients, who believed that the dead wander through meadows of asphodel in their hopeful search for the waters of Lethe, or oblivion.

After a mile she said, 'They are the tokens of *miseria*, nothing good grows where they grow'. (84)

What remained was the beauty, the silence of the mountain, broken only by the sounds made by the animals. So, on one hill behind him, he hears "the lonely tolling of a cow bell. Far away, the cuckoo faintly flutes his double note. It is otherwise so silent that I can hear a leaf rustling, and a distant stream. Very peaceful. Very beautiful. Very hard" (53).

It is not difficult for a writer to describe emotions where beauty and tranquillity reign, but O'Faolain, in the heart of Sardinia, was also looking for something more for his story:

I have been drawn up to the island's iron center by an old lure, one that has tempted many another traveler before me – the search for that ancient prototype, *il vero Sardo*, your true-born, original Sardinian, almost certain to be an old shepherd or an overworked peasant, utterly conservative in all his ways, resisting the modern world, unspoiled unblended, incorruptible. A symbol, an archetype, a remnant. Almost a myth, an ideal one knows in one's heart will at the best be seen only in glimpses – a man's proud stance, a child's dark brows and blackberry eyes, a mountain woman's nose as magnificent as buttress, a jaw as ponderous as a nuraghe, hints of Carthage and Phoenicia, Africa and Crete, a word, a cool look, a pregnant silence[3]. (53)

[3] In Sean O'Faolain's articles for *Holiday*, one notices the use of American English spelling for some words, such as *center* instead of *centre*, *traveler* instead of *traveller*, or, as we have seen, *rancor* for *rancour* and, as we shall see below, *color* instead of *colour*.

A vain quest. O'Faolain describes the Sardinian character perfectly, as many other travellers and commentators before him, from Cicero to the 19th and early 20th century French and English writers who came to Sardinia, had.

His reflections on his bandits and the "true Sardinian" are the central part of his story, set in a hotel room, with the narrator recalling moments from the journey he has just made:

> I stop my scribbling. It is time to dine. I begin to fear that I will probably never even glimpse *il vero sardo*, least of all among these silent mountains. Hopefully I glance at Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*, open on my bedside table. My eye falls on this comment on the Gennargentu: "How different it is from Etna, that lonely, self-conscious wonder of Sicily! This is much more human and knowable, with a deep breast and massive limbs, a powerful mountain-body. It is like the peasants." In a fury I hurl the book into a corner. What a balderdash! The whole of his damn place is unknowable! (82)

O'Faolain chose Sorgono because in that small, remote village, more than forty years earlier, D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda von Richthofen stayed in an inn that became memorable for its dilapidated condition. After all, as we mentioned above, writers are better guides than any guide-book. Even when the places described are unknowable.

This is how the writer concludes his journey to Sardinia:

> For whatever we take with us from Sardinia – the kindness of its people, its color, its fierceness, its beauty – we must carry also the chastening sense of the immensity of its past. Sardinia is an ark of age, a treasury of time moored in the morning of the Mediterranean. (85)

5. Conclusion

At the end of this portrait, it should be noted that in writing his travel accounts, particularly *An Irish Journey*, *A Summer in Italy*, and *An Autumn in Italy*, O'Faolain has shown a special sense of wonder. This sensitiveness was conveyed through his enthusiastic and joyful way of describing his surroundings, settings, things, and people, which Richard Bonaccorso summed up with the felicitous term "aesthetic gaiety":

> As traveller, O'Faolain partakes in low and high life with equal enthusiasm, and feasts upon the aesthetic impact of landscape, cityscape, individual speech, the dynamics of crowds, historical echoes, architecture, painting, forms, colors, and weather. There is more than descriptive power at work in all this abundance of experience. There is a communication of moments of wonder, when the artist's temperament is excited and his spirit is expanded. In these moments he becomes a model of his major theme, the growth into life of the individual mind and spirit. (1987, 132)

This "aesthetic optimism" adapts the initial spirit of the "Literary Renaissance" that characterised O'Faolain's early writings into a different world view, an extension of Irishness, opening a new chapter in modern Irish literature.

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"You know more than you pretend": Passing, Jazz Inversion, and the Spectre of Reductive Racial Equivalence in Roddy Doyle's *Oh, Play That Thing* (2004)

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Abstract:

This essay explores how Doyle's novel utilises the jazz aesthetic to demythologise some of the most pernicious and persistent misconceptions around historical migration. Adopting a bifocal approach to Irish travel, it looks back to when the novel was published, a period characterised by sustained net in-migration to Ireland, from our current vantage point, which has witnessed the emergence of new far-right political parties in Ireland and a spike in violent anti-migrant criminality. This essay argues that Doyle's reimagining of the Jazz Age allows him to move beyond the constraints imposed by the short story format in which he initially addressed the subject of racism in contemporary Ireland, i.e. the serialised stories published in the Irish multicultural monthly newspaper, *Metro Éireann*.

Keywords: Anti-Jazz Campaign, Biofiction, Migration, New Negro Movement (Harlem Renaissance), Racism

In their recent edited volume exploring the manifold complexities around representations of race, racialisation, and racism in Irish literature and culture, Malcolm Sen and Julie McCormick Weng position Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* (1987) in a longstanding tradition of cultural appropriation, one which can be traced as far back as the problematic comparisons Douglas Hyde drew between the experiences of the colonised Irish and those of enslaved Africans in a 1906 lecture at the University of California (Sen, McCormick Weng 2024, 1). Set amid the gloomy malaise of a recession stricken 1980s Ireland, Doyle's plot revolves around the fortunes, and ultimately the misfortunes, of a Dublin-based soul band assembled by aspiring music mogul, Jimmy Rabbitte. Rather than referring to the original novel in the main body of their introduction, where the language used by Doyle's characters is decidedly more pejorative, Sen and Weng cite the following lines from Alan Parker's film

adaptation of *The Commitments* (1991) to exemplify the text's questionable engagement with African American culture: "Do you not get it lads?" asks Jimmy in response to the band's bemusement at the notion that a band of white musicians from the northside of Dublin might be well placed to cover various soul classics, "[t]he Irish are the blacks of Europe. And Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland. And the Northside Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin. So say it once, say it loud. I'm black and I'm proud" (*ibidem*). In the case of Hyde's 1906 contention that "the Irish were 'not a race of nobodies or of slaves,' a 'people without a past' " (*ibidem*), Sen and Weng identify a re-enforcement of imperialist discourse, albeit in the name of Irish cultural revivalism, whereas, in the case of *The Commitments*, they detect a certain willingness to align the lived experiences of white, working-class Dubliners in the 1980s with those of the African American community (2). It is, therefore, somewhat ironic that the Dublin community where Parker filmed the scenes in and around the Rabbitte family home should find itself at the epicentre of one of Ireland's longest running and most incendiary anti-migrant demonstrations[1].

Like many of the anti-migrant protests that have sprung up around the Irish landscape since 2022, this demonstration coalesced around a disused building that was earmarked to operate as a housing site for those seeking asylum while their applications for international protection were being processed. It is difficult so say when exactly this #CoolockSaysNo protest began. However, a journalist from the national broadcaster, Barry O'Kelly of *RTÉ Investigates*, had been in the locale to film a documentary about these developments for at least four months prior to the key inflection point on 15 July 2024, which culminated in an arson attack on the building and a series of protracted skirmishes between masked "protestors" and the Garda Armed Support Unit[2]. Although this is perhaps the most volatile and extreme example of anti-migrant lawlessness, it is not an anomaly. On 8 February 2024, Deputy Paul Murphy, Teachta Dála (TD) for the Dublin South-West constituency, made the following remarks at the outset of his contribution to Leaders' Questions in Dáil Éireann:

> Yesterday, a house in Leixlip was burned down after false rumours circulated suggesting that it was going to be used for people seeking asylum. Four days ago, the old Crooksling nursing home in Brittas was burned down. On New Year's Eve, the old Shipwright Pub in Ringsend was burned down. It was due to house homeless people. We have seen 26 arson attacks in the past five years against premises rumoured to be used for asylum seekers. The pattern is very clear. A rumour starts, true or false, suggesting a property is going to be used. Far-right activists, people like Philip Dwyer, Gavin Pepper and Fergus Power, are quick to the scene. A few days later it is burned down. We should call what we are seeing what it is. We are witnessing a campaign of far-right terrorism in this State.[3]

Murphy's observations provide two important insights into matters concerning the contemporaneous development of far-right politics in Ireland. First, they foreshadow the ways in which these and other likeminded anti-migrant activists would attempt to establish a political foothold by way of the local Council and European Parliament elections held on 07 June 2024. All three of the individuals named by Murphy stood as candidates in these elections: Dwyer failed to secure a seat in both the South Dublin City Council (Tallaght Central) constituency and the Dublin constituency in the European Parliament elections; Power failed to secure a seat

[1] The scenes in question were filmed in Darndale, a place located less than one kilometre away from the former Crown Paints site where these protests took place.

[2] The documentary, *RTÉ Investigates: Inside the Protests*, aired on 19 September 2024. For further details, cf. O'Kelly 2024.

[3] Cf. Murphy 2024.

in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (Killiney-Shankill) constituency; only Pepper was successful in his bid to be elected Councillor for the Dublin City Council (Ballymun-Finglas) constituency. Kevin Coyle, another anti-migrant activist who played a prominent role in the #CoolockSaysNo protests, narrowly missed out on securing the final seat in the Dublin City Council (Artane-Whitehall) constituency[4]. Secondly, Murphy's observations articulate the integral function that social media performs in both the generation and proliferation of seditious mis- and disinformation, which in turn possesses the potential to make a damaging and lasting impact in the physical world.

This article explores how Doyle's *Oh, Play that Thing* draws on the dynamism of the jazz aesthetic to address some of the more indirect, but no less insidious, rhetoric that plagues these online platforms. Doyle's commitment to challenging the prevalence of reductive racial stereotypes can be traced back to the years immediately preceding the publication of *Oh, Play that Thing*, when he began writing serialised short stories for a monthly newspaper called *Metro Éireann*. Established shortly after the turn of the millennium by Nigerian-born journalists, Chinedu Onyejelem and Abel Ugba, this tabloid newspaper was committed to foregrounding issues affecting Ireland's immigrant population. These serialised short stories were eventually published as *The Deportees and Other Stories* (2007). In a subsequent interview with Maureen Reddy, Doyle would later reflect on the events that inspired him to pen these contributions for *Metro Éireann*: "it struck me as an opportunity […] The word 'problem' was being used about immigrants and I was upset about that. […] I suppose it's my contribution to antiracist work in Ireland" (2005, 382). Indeed, Reddy later acknowledges in this article that Doyle expressed a certain awareness of the fact that "the Irish portion of *Metro Eireann's* audience is likely 'already converted', the stories do not encourage change in that audience but instead offer reinforcement of already-established views" (384). This invites two important questions: who, then, are the unconverted? and how might they be converted? As evidenced in part by Murphy's contribution to the Leaders' Questions in Dáil Éireann, cited above, social media has provided us with countless examples of who these "unconverted" are and how they operate in the two decades that have elapsed since the publication of Doyle's interview. To attain additional evidence of this, one need only type a phrase such as "Irish slaves", for example, into the search function on X (the social media platform formerly known as Twitter). This will undoubtedly drudge up countless memes that exemplify the "Irish Slaves Myth", that is, a fictitious online narrative that contorts the reality and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade with a view to minimising, justifying, or categorically denying the existence of racism in contemporary Ireland. As many scholars have shown, these comparisons conveniently elide important distinctions between chattel slavery and practices such as indented servitude[5]. Rather than focusing on the all-important distinctions that Hyde drew, albeit problematically, between the experiences of the colonised Irish and those of enslaved Africans in his 1906 lecture, these ill-informed reflections opt instead to propose that no such distinctions exist. Taking inspiration from the false equivalence logical fallacy, the following analysis of *Oh, Play That Thing* uses the term "reductive racial equivalence" to describe this revisionist approach to the realities of historical slavery. It further demonstrates how Doyle's reimagining of the Jazz Age in this novel allowed him

[4] For an overview of the far-right's successes and failures in both the local Council and European Parliament elections, cf. O'Keefe 2024. It should also be noted, however, that far-right and anti-migrant candidates failed to secure a single seat in the General Election held on 29 November 2024. For more on this, cf. Gallagher 2024.

[5] Cf., for example, Rodgers 2009 [2007].

to move beyond the "already converted" audience of *Metro Eireann* (cited in Reddy 2005, 384) in a bid to further challenge these all-too familiar myths and the instances of everyday racial prejudice that these myths are contrived to bolster.

1. Rhythmic Syncopation and the Emigration Tale

There is some scholarly debate concerning which criteria should be met in order for a text to warrant the classification of "jazz literature." As Sascha Feinstein explains, some critics insist that the text in question must directly allude to jazz music, or to a jazz musician; whereas others propose that a text need not directly allude to jazz music so long as it is somehow characterised by the rhythms and characteristics associated with the jazz aesthetic (1997, 2). Doyle's novel meets both elements of this criteria. Even though the novel's first chapter presents as an orthodox example of the traditional Irish emigration tale, this mode of narration becomes decidedly more playful and increasingly complex at the outset of the second chapter. Here the advertising slogans that appear on the sandwich boards carried by Henry in his new role as human billboard interpolate the chapter's first-person narration, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

ELECTRIC RAZORS –
BOUGHT
SOLD
AND EXCHANGED
GUARANTEED REPAIRS
ON ALL MAKES

I was an honest toiler, paid to carry the honest claims of small-time commerce through the streets and avenues of lower Manhattan.

STAR OPTICAL CO.
EXPERTS
GOOD RATES
333 PEARL STREET

And I was value for money. Women's eyes went from my eyes and, as they wondered about the rest of the handsome man inside the sandwich, they read the words and were very often sold. (2005 [2004], 9)

At first glance, this structure appears reminiscent of the "Aeolus" episode from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the thematic focus on the offices of the *Freeman's Journal* and *Evening Telegraph* makes its presence felt on a formal level[6]. In this episode, the narrative is interpolated by a series of short, capitalised headings which are designed to replicate the appearance of newspaper headings. As evidenced by the excerpt below, however, these are not entirely separate from the ongoing narrative, as is the case in Doyle's novel, but rather integral parts of the ongoing narrative that are separated only in their appearance:

[6] For more about the relationship between form and content in the "Aeolus" episode, cf. Killeen 2005, 68-77.

IN THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS

Before Nelson's pillar trams slowed, shunted, changed trolley, started for Blackrock, Kingstown and Dalkey, Clonskea, Rathgar and Terenure, Palmerston Park and upper Rathmines, Sandymount Green, Rathmines, Ringsend and Sandymount Tower, Harold's Cross. The hoarse Dublin United Tramway Company's timekeeper bawled them off:

–Rathgar and Terenure!
–Come on, Sandymount Green!

Right and left parallel clanging ringing a double-decker and a singledeck moved from their railheads, swerved to the down line, glided parallel.
–Start, Palmerstown Park!

THE WEARER OF THE CROWN

Under the porch of the general post office shoeblacks called and polished. Parked in North Prince's Street His Majesty's vermillion mailcars, bearing on their sides the royal initials, E. R., received loudly flung sacks of letters, postcards, lettercards, parcels, insured and paid, for local, provincial, British and overseas delivery. (1986, 96)

Where Joyce's integration of newspaper headings into the overarching narrative is designed to immerse the reader in the experience of reading a newspaper, while reading about events that take place in and around newspaper offices, Doyle's manipulation of typography is designed to engineer a syncopated, polyphonic structure that facilitates two distinct yet complementary voices. This is one of the primary hallmarks of the jazz aesthetic, both in relation to music and literature.

For Robert O'Meally, jazz is, in essence, "freedom music, the play of sounds that prizes individual assertion and group coordination, voices soloing and then (at their best) swinging back together, the one-and-many *e pluribus unum* with a laid-back beat" (1998, 117). Indeed, Alyn Shipton has traced this polyphonic component of the jazz aesthetic back to the polyrhythms played at the weekly slave dances that took place at Congo Square in New Orleans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2001, 19)[7]. However, the purposeful manipulation of typography is also a technique that regularly features in jazz poetry. In the context of Irish literature, Michael Longley's "Elegy for Fats Waller" serves as a prime example. It is one of four poems published under the heading of "Words for Jazz Perhaps" in Longley's debut collection, *No Continuing City* (1969). Like the references to Louis Armstrong's life and work that are central to Doyle's novel, this focus on legendary jazz pianist and organist, Fats Waller, clearly meets the requisite thematic standard for Longley's poem to be classified as jazz literature. On a formal level, however, the speaker's depiction of Waller as a larger than life, "Enormous" entity, riding "on a nimble-footed camel" (1969, line 9) exemplifies what Feinstein describes as the jazz poet's propensity toward incorporating "strong visual images in an attempt to appropriate sound" (1997, 5). In fact, Longley would reveal some thirty years later that this imagery was specifically designed "to convey the weightless artistry of this hugely overweight man" (1998, 92). This sense of weightless magnification builds throughout the poems first fourteen lines and culminates in the all-caps fifteenth line that operates as a resounding conclusion: "THE SHOOK, THE SHAKE, THE SHEIKH OF ARABY" (1969, line 15). Coupled with the image of this camel-riding figure, this

[7] For a detailed account of jazz music's evolution from these weekly slave dances, cf. chapter one of Gioia 2021. For a brief overview of Congo Square and its complex position in the pre-history of jazz music, cf. Fogarty 2004, 115-116.

final sentence alludes to Waller's 1938 recording of the jazz standard, "The Sheikh of Araby". Inspired by George Melford's popular silent movie, *The Sheik* (1921), starring Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres, "The Sheik of Araby" was written by Francis Wheeler, Harry B. Smyth, and Ted Snyder in 1921. However, the line that Longley borrows directly from Waller's rendition of the song, "the shook, the shake, the sheikh of Araby", is not an original lyric; it was improvised by Waller during the recording process[8]. Its inclusion in all-caps, therefore, captures the magnitude of Waller's onstage presence, and the transformative energy of jazz improvisation, in a manner that facilitates a mode of polyphonic syncopation. This is the same effect that is engineered by Doyle's studied utilisation of typography in the early chapters of *Oh, Play That Thing*.

In the latter stages of the novel, Doyle eventually makes use of capital letters to incorporate lines from jazz music exactly as Longley does in "Elegy for Fats Waller." However, this represents the culmination of a process that begins with the interpolated advertisements at the outset of the novel and gradually builds through a variety of seemingly random refrains that further underscore the musicality that inheres within the narrative structure. Indeed, these refrains also operate in ways that indicate a certain cognisance of the complex correlations between the protagonist's psychological development and the formative functions performed by the still burgeoning advertisement industry of the early twentieth century. From the moment Henry begins working as a sandwich board carrier, which coincides with his adoption of his new identity, "Henry Smart" it is evident that he sees in this new enterprise some potential for self-advancement and upward mobility: "I killed the day with words of my own", he reveals, "*There's a CAMEL just for you*. I wrote and rewrote, filed slogans for my future use, got ready for the break" (2005, 9, italics in the original). Another key component in the protagonist's character arc arrives in the guise of Fast Olaf, a bootlegger for whom Henry becomes a delivery man on his daily sandwich board rounds, and Fast Olaf's half-sister, a sometime sex worker who operates as something of a love interest for Henry in the first section of the novel. Fast Olaf works for another character who plays a significant role in the trajectory of Henry's development, "Johnny No", who is for all intents and purposes the local street boss charged with overseeing both the bootlegging and sandwich-board businesses. In addition to the italicisation of advertising slogans, as exemplified by Camel cigarette slogan cited above, there are also instances when Henry's acclimatisation to new surroundings makes its presence felt by way of italicised remarks. This is evident, for example, when the first-person mode of narration reveals that "Leon the Cob put a sack on top of the other sacks he was building into a wall at the edge of the path – the *sidewalk*" (18). This process becomes more amplified after Henry steals the sandwich boards to initiate the "break" described above. This is precipitated by Johnny No's refusal to sell to Henry the sandwich boards, prompting the following response: "[t]he answer was easy, now that I was out on the street. I'd rob the boards and lose myself. I'd stay well clear of Johnny No; there were other streets, and lots of them. At the end of business today, there'll be a new me sitting at Hettie's counter. The coming man in advertising, the new man in the new, new thing" (2019, 19). This provides both the earliest and clearest indication that Henry's advertising related entrepreneurialism is intimately entwined with the journey of self-fashioning that will largely define his experience as an Irish immigrant.

This is also true of some of the other external factors that Henry absorbs as his character develops. In fact, the correlations between the power exerted by these external factors and those exerted by the power of advertising are stated explicitly in the case of Fast Olaf's half-sister's utilisation of a process known as "autosuggestion", a psychological technique developed by

[8] Cf. Waller Fats (1938), "The Sheikh of Araby", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YA1MBMxXCU> (05/2025).

Émile Coué at the outset of the twentieth century. In essence, this pseudoscientific mode of self-hypnosis promises individuals the power to guide their own thoughts, feelings, or behaviours through the medium of positive affirmation. This contemporaneous cultural phenomenon is somewhat humorously addressed as Fast Olaf's half-sister attempts to harness the power of autosuggestion to increase her breast size by using the following mantra: "*better and better*, *in ev-ery way*" (2005, 25, italics in the original). These phrases are also italicised, both here and elsewhere in the first section of the novel, because the reader experiences what Henry describes as "the half-sister's chant – *in ev-ery way* – again and again and again" (*ibidem,* italics in the original) from the protagonist's point of view. This journey of self-fashioning is further complicated as Henry draws on remnants from his previous life, as documented in the first novel of Doyle's trilogy, *A Star Called Henry*, as inspiration for his marketing skills:

> I knew what they were doing – *Right Now* – the men who'd come up with the slogans. *Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord*. I knew how to unsettle and soothe with words. I knew how to bully and push. *Shun all policemen and spies!* And inspire, provoke and terrify. I was still only twenty-two, but I'd been inspiring and provoking with words and more than words long before most of the New York ad men knew what they were for. (33, italics in the original)

These reflections overtly juxtapose the advertising slogans conceived by Henry, and others, with Thomas Patrick Ashe's poem, *Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord* and phrases that Henry himself uttered in his previous life as an Irish freedom fighter. Indeed, this is further underscored by the new alias that Henry adopts to evade the attention of Johnny No, which the protagonist formulates by changing "Smart," to "clever," to the Gaelic word for clever, "*glic*," to arrive at the alias "Henry Glick".

As the agency seized by Henry becomes increasingly more amplified in the context of his newfound role as self-employed ad man, the repetition of the phrase "*I* walked" (64) also becomes italicised, as do many of the other repetitious elements that make up Henry's daily routine, such as *Corners, streets. Sharp corners* (67). About halfway through the first of the novel's four sections, many of these italicised phrases, along with other italicised phrases that can be traced to his previous life in *A Star Called Henry*, appear on the page as a kind of jazz poem that signals a shift in the protagonist's mindset:

> in ev-ery way
> let me carry your cross
> I don't see you again
> you hearing that
> so
> now's the time
> the soap of beautiful women
> I am the man who owns
> broadway
> her
> heels
> tapped
> the
> time
> beats
> am I right
> as it sweeps
> for Ireland

as it cleans
for smokers like yourself
am I right
daddio. (79)

This is followed by a similar rhythmic shift that can, at times, be discerned within the structure of Henry's first-person narration. For example:

Men everywhere.
Fuck them.
Waiting. Not hoboes, not lost. There for me.
She was bringing me.
By the hand.
To a door.
Another bare black door.
I could think. I could run. Simple as that. Nothing to it.
Where?
I could think. (81)

This revelation simultaneously captures the psychological toll taken by Henry's life on the run, from both his former Irish comrades and street boss, Johnny No, and illustrates the linguistic patterns that signify Henry's burgeoning new identity. This glimpse into the protagonist's paranoid inner world appears while Fast Olaf's half-sister is leading Henry on something of a mystery tour; as it turns out, she is bringing Henry to meet with a pornographer with the express intention of starring with him in an adult movie. Henry's most recent past exploits do catch up with him at this juncture, when he crosses paths with Johnny No at the pornographer's studio and is held to account for his previous transgressions. Both Henry and Fast Olaf's half-sister narrowly escape, but only after the latter holds Johnny No and his henchmen at bay by way of gunpoint. Consequently, Henry is forced to go on the run again, which ultimately brings him to the heart of Jazz Age Chicago in the second of the novel's four sections. However, the chapter that brings the novel's first section to a conclusion begins with a two-word paragraph: "[w]e ran" (95), which reconfigures the paranoia inducing refrains that re-appear throughout the previous chapters as a series of "calls" to which fleeing is once again Henry's "response". This "call and response" compositional technique can be found in both traditional Irish music and jazz music. A well-known example of this in Irish traditional music is "Rattlin' Bog" which is primarily structured by two musical phrases. In this song, phrase A operates as a call to which phrase B responds. A well-known example of this in jazz music is the Glenn Miller Orchestra's "In the Mood," where phrase A, played by the woodwind section, operates as a call to which phrase B, played by the brass section, responds. In this way, the musicality that inheres in the narrative structure of the novel's first section signals the cultural transition that Henry will embark upon in the latter sections of the novel, where the familiar refrains from the novel's first section are gradually replaced by the jazz refrain that lends the novel its title, "oh, play that thing".

2. Heterotopian Speakeasies and Biofiction as Jazz Inversion

The theme of walking returns, if only in something of a preliminary role, at the outset of the novel's section section. Having started over once again, this time in Chicago, we discover that Henry has "got to know hard work again, [by handling] boxes in one of the packing houses" (129). It is during one of his many nightly walking excursions that Henry first stumbles

upon the prohibition-era speakeasies and the jazz music invariably played there. He describes his first encounter as follows:

> At last. I wasn't Irish any more [*sic*]. The first time I heard it, before I was properly listening, I knew for absolute sure. It took me by the ears and spat on my forehead, baptised me. There was a whole band of men on the bandstand, and a little woman at the piano, all thumping and blowing their lives away. Two horns, a trombone, tuba, banjo, drums, filling the world with their glorious torment. There were two trumpets blowing but the spit on my forehead came from only one man's. I looked at him through the human steam – it was too hot there for sweat – and I knew it.
>
> I was a Yank.
>
> At last. (133-134)

In addition to the ritualistic rebirthing process captured by this passage's allusion to baptism, the two short sentences at the end of this passage recall the jazz poetry structure that materialises near the end of the novel's first section as Henry makes his way to the pornographer's residence. This contrasts with the two short sentences at the beginning of the passage cited above; thus, Henry's cultural transition makes its presence felt here at the level of form and content. It is at this juncture that Doyle introduces the character who, at the very least, operates as Henry's co-protagonist for much of the remainder of the novel. Indeed, as Henry explains, the character responsible for this musical baptism is none other than legendary jazz musician, Louis Armstrong:

> I learnt all his names that night. Dipper. Gate. Gatemouth. Dippermouth. Daddy. Pops. Little Louie. Laughing Louie. Louis Armstrong. The names danced among the crazy lights that jumped from the mirror ball above the dance floor. He was dancing now as he played, as if his legs were tied to the notes that jumped from the bell of his horn. His steps were crazy but he was in control. He was puppet and master, god and disciple, a one-man band in perfect step with the other players surrounding him. His lips were bleeding – I saw drops fall like notes to his patent leather shoes – but he was the happiest man on earth. (134-135)

Once again, the narrative is imbued with a sense of ceremonial otherworldliness, one which draws on both religious discourse and the ritual of blood sacrifice to capture the magnitude of Henry's admiration for both the music and its creator. Indeed, it is soon after that Henry first hears Armstrong utter the words, "oh, play that thing!" (135). Moreover, this idea that Armstrong could simultaneously perform as "puppet and master" and "god and disciple" foreshadows the form that the pair's relationship will ultimately take after Armstrong recruits Henry to play the role of bodyman/manager with a view to navigating the racial prejudices that loom large in the Chicago underworld.

Henry's entry into this underground jazz scene is, somewhat predictably, facilitated by another love interest, an African American called Ethel. As Henry puts it: "[s]he wasn't black. She wasn't white. She was new too, invented seconds before and plonked in front of me. Just for me, the new American" (134). Here Doyle appears to intentionally acknowledge, albeit through the eyes of his conveniently naïve protagonist, that women are being reductively cast to perform as plot devices in a way that evokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writing on the roles that women are all too frequently cast to perform within the context of male homosocial exchange[9]. This knowing sense of naivety is further evident when Henry and Ethel first discuss the subject of racial segregation:

> –You Irish and you tell me you don't know the difference between black and white? You don't know

[9] For more about the prevalence of this symbolic exchange of women in literature and culture, cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993.

> the rules? You people wrote most the goddam rules. What day we meet?
> –Monday, I said.
> –That's right, she said. –Monday. Because I wouldn't be there Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday. And if you say, Why not, I'll tear your balls off and throw them down the street.
> –Because you're coloured, I said. […]
> –That's right, she said. –I'm coloured. No coloured let in that door any other day of the week. Monday our night. Even on State Street. Our Street. […]
> –You could pass for white, I said.
> –You know more than you pretend, she said. –I don't want to pass for white. (140)

Although this allusion to "passing" appears to fall from Henry's lips with a genuine air of organic carelessness, this is a loaded concept within the contemporaneous cultural context. As Laura Ryan points out, this term can be traced to the slavery era, when it was associated with the light-skinned slaves who forged written "passes" in order to escape, and it was a recurring trope in Harlem Renaissance literature, such as James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), and Geroge Schuyler's 1931 novel, *Black No More* (2023, 203-204). As Sinéad Moynihan explains, "to 'pass' is to appear to belong to one or more subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical and/or socio-cultural discourses. To pass as white, if one is 'black,' […] is to challenge assumptions that evidence of one's race […] is always visually available by recourse to a set of physical characteristics considered immutable". In much the same way as the novel subtly acknowledges that Ethel is being used as a reductive plot device, by framing her as a "new American […], invented seconds before and plonked in front of" Henry for convenience, Ethel's insinuation that Henry knows more than he pretends gestures toward Doyle's awareness of the cultural baggage surrounding this idea of "passing" in that specific cultural context (2013, 8).

This initial exchange between Henry and Ethel also points to heterotopian function these underground speakeasies perform within the context of the novel. The concept of heterotopian space was formulated by French philosopher and cultural historian, Michel Foucault, in the 1980s. Foucault describes these spaces as follows:

> There are […], probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (1986, 24)

In *Oh, Play that Thing*, the speakeasy that provides the backdrop for Henry and Ethel's first encounter operates a space in which the unspoken rules of racial prejudice and segregation that govern communications in the everyday world can be stated explicitly in this underground reflection of everyday reality. It is interesting to note Foucault's use of the term "inverted" in this description of heterotopian space. Chordal "inversion" is a technique commonly used in jazz music. It describes the playing of a chord when the root note is located somewhere other than bass; in essence, this involves playing a familiar melody in something of an unfamiliar key. The point is not that all heterotopian spaces, whether they exist in the real world or in the fictitious world of a novel, are inherently related to the jazz aesthetic; but rather that this use of heterotopian space aligns with all the other jazz characteristics that make their presence felt throughout the novel, both formally and thematically.

The decision to include the real-life figure of Louis Armstrong as a co-protagonist draws on the genre of biofiction in a manner that provides another example of Doyle's playful inversion. As

Michael Lackey explains, biofiction differs from traditional biographical writing "because, while authors of traditional biographies seek to represent the life […] of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject's life 'right' and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of the world" (2016, 7). The corrective "vision of the world" that Doyle appears intent on projecting by way of this novel comprises two primary components. The first relates to the early twenty-first century, and indeed the current, propensity towards conflating disparate historical realities, such as chattel slavery and indentured servitude, with a view to minimising the legacy and the realities of racial prejudice. The second relates to the common misconception that all minorities, although in this case Irish and African American individuals, experienced the same measure of ethnic prejudice in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Both of these components come sharply into focus when Armstrong explains to Henry his reasoning for refusing work at the mob-owned Black Canary club: "[s]lavery been gone sixty years, he said. […] They want me to play my cornet there [f]or the rest of my life. […] They want me for my whole entire life. Ain't doing it" (2005, 198). What is at stake here, for Armstrong, harkens back to the critical aspect of ownership that distinguishes chattel slavery from indented servitude. Indeed, this stands in stark contrast to the advertising and packing jobs that the Irish, and more importantly white, Henry has held thus far held in the novel. It is for this reason that Armstrong designs the bodyman/manager role for Henry, which he describes as follows:

> –Man once told me, before I came up from New Orleans. Man called Slipper. He say, When you get up north, Dipper, be sure and get yourself a white man that'll put his hand on your shoulder and say, This is my nigger. And then can't nobody harm ya.
> –And I'm that white man.
> –No Smoked, he said. –That not you. […]
> –Who am I then, Louis?
> –You the white man that puts his hand on that white man's shoulder and say, No man, this is *my* nigger. […]
> –You're my white man, he said.
> –And you're my black man
> –That right, Smoked, he said. –That about the size of it. But not really. Between you me, I'm nobody's black man. That seem fair to you? (212)

This is precisely the "puppet and master" and "god and disciple" role that is foreshadowed when Henry describes the jazz infused, quasi-baptism that occurs upon seeing Armstrong perform for the first time. Indeed, Doyle once again displays a certain knowingness around the complexities of racial dynamics, both in this foreshadowing and in the bodyman/manager role Armstrong describes above, because these descriptions appear to draw on Henry Louis Gates Jr's seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).

3. Reverberations of Ireland's Anti-Jazz Campaign in the South Side of Chicago

It is the scarcity of employment experienced by the co-protagonists before Armstrong devises this role for Henry that drives the plot toward its next key developmental stage. In the process of burglarising a home located in a wealthy Chicago suburb, Henry stumbles upon his partner from the first novel in Doyle's trilogy, Miss O'Shea, and their young daughter, Saoirse. It seems that Miss O'Shea just happens to be working as a maid at the residence in question. At this juncture, it is worth recalling O'Meally's description of jazz music, specifically, that this aesthetic

form "prizes individual assertion and group coordination, voices soloing and then (at their best) swinging back together" (1998, 117). In this section of the novel, the narrative moves without delineation between providing accounts of Armstrong's development as a musical performer and Henry's attempts to rekindle his relationship with Miss O'Shea. Here the mode of narration functions in much the same way as soloing jazz artists might play off each other within these musical arrangements. As is the case with all the other jazz techniques that Doyle has incorporated in previous sections of the novel, this is not merely included for stylistic affect. Indeed, it performs a very specific function insofar as it establishes a vehicle to allow contemporaneous Irish attitudes toward jazz music to be voiced in late-1920s Chicago. This occurs by way of Miss O'Shea's response to Henry playing one of Armstrong's recordings for both her and Saoirse:

> –Nigger jazz.
> I rescued the needle.
> –What?
> –That's what that was, said Miss O'Shea. I've heard it.
> –Did you like it? I asked Saoirse.
> –Yes.
> –That was Louis Armstrong, I told her.
> –The man doing the funny singing?
> –That's right. And he played the trumpet as well.
> –What was he singing about?
> –Nothing really, I said. –He sometimes does that. There aren't real words.
> –It's funny. (2005, 217)

While it may be tempting to dismiss Miss O'Shea's casual racism as a convenient by-product of the influence of early twentieth century American culture, this highly pejorative phraseology was commonly used in contemporaneous Irish society, as evidenced by the local and national newspapers of the day.

In an article titled "Praise of the Foxtrot", published in the *Kerry News* on 16 January 1925, for example, one contributor wrote: "the foxtrot is still what it was when it finally discarded the last vestige of 'nigger' jazz–a gay, intoxicating, magical dance, at once the simplest and most stimulating and appealing dance the world can have seen" (3). Likewise, in a piece titled "The 'Leader,' Referring to Mr. T. O'Donnell's Lecture on the Cost of Government", published in the *Southern Star* on 24 January 1925, another contributor wrote:

> We are surprised that a real nigger jazz band did not supply the music, as was the case with the Dublin Farmers Fancy Dress Ball a few years ago. […] Where are the men and women who, for one reason or another, did their best to revive Irish dancing? They, nor their dances, were not there, but Madam Rock was there–and she is the last word in Anglicisation. In the dancing world, now that we are a Saorstat, Madam Rock is queen; and Cathleen Ni Houlihan has got her walking papers. (2)

In the *Southern Star* on 7 March 1925, an article titled "Treason Bill" made the following observations:

> Many Bishops have protested against inordinate craze for amusement; and the imported dancing as it is danced in the circumstances under which it is danced come in for condemnation. The total of picture house employees, dancing hall employees, publicans and their assistants, and Government servants subtracted from the total working population of this State would tell its own emphatic tale. All night foreign dancing, with drink supplied, is evidently the newest curse of this country. Well the country did not rise to Irish-Ireland; it followed the jazz and the imported movie pictures, and it is to an extent

going to the devil. We did out [*sic*] best against the monkey hugs, or whatever they are called, but our efforts, we admit, were not very effective. A few years ago even the Dublin Farmers Union had a fancy dress ball with a real nigger jazz band. (6)

Indeed, the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland mentioned in this article would subsequently issue a statement on 6 October 1925, which drew the following conclusions:

It is no small commendation of Irish dances that they cannot be danced for long hours. That, however, is not their chief merit, and, while it is no part of our business to condemn any decent dance, Irish dances are not to be put out of the place, that is their due, in any educational establishment under our care. They may not be the fashion in London or Paris. They should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates. We well know how so many of our people have of late been awaiting such a declaration as we now issue. Until otherwise arranged it is to be read at the principal Mass on the first Sunday of each Quarter of the Ecclesiastical Year. The priests will confer with responsible parishioners as regards the means by which it will be fully carried into effect. (2002, 154)

These developments would ultimately lead to the establishment of what was, in effect, a state-sponsored anti-jazz campaign, which would in turn lead to the Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (1880-85) and Juvenile Prostitution, also known as the Carrigan Report (1930-1931), and eventually the enactment of the Public Dance Halls Act (1935)[10].

As these broader cultural developments would suggest, these sentiments were not exclusively particular to the Munster counties in which these articles were published, nor were they necessarily confined to the Irish Free State. In an article titled "More Degrading than Murder", published in the *Belfast Newsletter* on 6 August 1927, one contributor reported on recent developments at Oxford University as follows:

'Nigger music comes from the devil,' said Dr. Farnell, the Rector from Exeter College, when welcoming the members of a summer school for music teachers, which opened at Oxford last night. 'Vulgar music might not be so criminal as murder, but it was far more degrading. Our civilization was threatened by our own inventions, by our dreadful noises, our horrible motor traffic, our Americanisms, and out "jazz" music.' 'Don't take your music from America or from the niggers,' he said, 'take it from God, the source of all good music'. (12)

In the *Irish Independent* on 6 August 1927, the above incident was also reported under the title, "'Jazz' attacked". Here it is reported that Sir Hugh Allen, President of the summer school, "observed that he had always been under the impression that God made the niggers. There was not enough making of music to-day; they lived in an age musical laziness" (8). It is interesting to observe that the same pejorative terms are used even by those who would reject Dr. Farnell's characterisations of jazz music and its creators. However, no attempt at such a counterpoint was made in the *Leinster Leader* on 13 August 1927, where the incident at Oxford University was reported under the heading, "Nigger Music Comes from the Devil". This is by no means an exhaustive list of such reporting from this period in Irish history. It is, rather, a small sample from a selection of newspapers that were published in and around the three-year period in which *Oh, Play That Thing* is based.

[10] For an overview of the Carrigan Report's findings and the subsequent enactment of the Public Dance Halls Act (1935), cf. Smyth 1993.

4. Passing and the Spectre of Reductive Racial Equivalence

The third of the novel's four parts sees Henry return to New York in his relatively new role as bodyman/manager for Armstrong. Upon his return, however, Henry finds himself based exclusively in the predominantly African American neighbourhood of Harlem. At the outset of this section, Henry observes: "Harlem was America; it was new every morning. I liked it there. I loved it" (Doyle 2005, 235). In the series of events that immediately follow, the novel provides something of an inversion of the racial "passing" theme explored in Henry's previous exchange with Ethel, insofar as this section documents Henry's experiences as he grows more and more comfortable embracing cultural codes, such as language and fashion, that are more "African American" than "American" in form. However, this is once again a knowing playfulness on Doyle's part because this process is designed to bring Henry, and by extension the reader, to a crucial realization with respect to racial discrimination. Indeed, to underscore this growing understanding, the passage in which he reaches this epiphany of sorts begins with Henry repeating the description of Harlem that his marginally more naïve self expresses at the outset of this section of the novel:

> Harlem was America; it was new every morning. I liked it there. I loved it. But I had to keep forgetting that I was the white man, strolling with the black man; stopping to talk with other black men, entering the barber shop with the black man, bringing my white man's hair in with me.
>
> –See more temple than I used to see, O'Pops, said Louis. […]
>
> We were sitting side by side.
>
> –Fuck off, Louis. […]
>
> I was tolerated, because I was with the black man. […] He stood back and let me pull open the doors, but it didn't work in reverse. I didn't need Louis beside me to do it; it was just a fucking door. No one was going to step in my way. (251)

In this critical moment of cultural self-awareness, Henry offers a finely distilled and telling image of the disparate stakes at play for him, as a white outsider, while navigating one of the archetypal examples of a male, African American communal space: the barber shop. Moreover, this realisation offers a stark contrast to the unwritten societal conventions that were foregrounded, indeed, spelled out for Henry, during his first experience of Chicago's heterotopian speakeasies.

After the conclusion of Doyle's novel, the reader will find a two-page section titled "[t]o the authors of the following books, thank you" (375-376). There are over one hundred books listed here, ranging from autobiographies of Louis Armstrong to cultural histories of both New York and Chicago, and from books written about the New Negro Movement to novels written by some of the most central figures in the Harlem Renaissance. The list, and indeed the novel itself, indicates a learned understanding of the role both jazz music and the Harlem Renaissance played in establishing a space where African Americans might begin to reconcile what W. E. B. Du Bois defined as "double consciousness". Du Bois coined this term in the early twentieth century to describe the sense of psychological duality experienced by African Americans who were simultaneously aware of their own sense of self and of how they were negatively characterised in white American culture: "[o]ne ever feels his two-ness", he writes, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1903, 3). Early-twentieth century Harlem played a pivotal role in fostering a space for new modes of Black aesthetic and cultural practices, which in turn saw the emergence of a hybrid "African American" identity. In addition to the manner in which Henry's barber-shop inspired epiphany exposes the historical realities of racial prejudice that are, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, obfuscated by the spectre of reductive racial equivalence, the trajectory

of Henry's narrative arc in the second of the three novels that comprise in Doyle's *Last Roundup* trilogy further highlights the disparity that defies any false equivocation between the African American and the Irish American identity. What Henry, and by extension the reader, learns by way of his experiences in *Oh, Play that Thing* is that the latter identity is a compound term that amalgamates two national identities, Irish and American; whereas the former is a compound that amalgamates one continent and one country, Africa and American, in a way that speaks to the brutal cultural dislocation initiated by the transatlantic slave trade over hundreds of years. As Kristina Deffenbacher rightly points out, Doyle's *Last Roundup* trilogy "demonstrates how nationalist iconography such as Ireland-as-woman, popular songs such as those made famous by John McCormack, and iconic films such as John Ford's *The Quiet Man* function as medial frameworks of remembering that produce and reinforce the dominant, nationalist narrative of Irish history and identity" (2014, 149). In the case of its second instalment, however, Doyle's widening of the lens around this spectre of reductive racial equivalence is designed to highlight and to counteract the ways in which these dominant nationalist narratives are being co-opted by far-right politicians and anti-migrant activists to minimise, justify, or categorically deny the existence of racism in contemporary Ireland.

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Frames and Framing: Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream* and its Italian Translation

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Abstract:

After a brief introduction to "frame" and "framing" in various disciplines, I will attempt to show that these notions can be applied to the analysis of the play *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) by the Irish playwright Marina Carr. I will analyse the various interrelated frames which compose the macro-construct and cognitive worldview of the play. This play is a contemporary reworking of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* in which I highlight similarities, dissimilarities and references. In moving from one frame to another, in fact, a conceptual activation process is started, and it partly revises the 'acquired knowledge' underlying Carr's play, such as the father-daughter relationship and the reading of *King Lear*. Finally, I will apply frame analysis to the process of translation in the Italian version, highlighting the various translational strategies adopted.

Keywords: "frame" and "framing", Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream*, William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Translation Process, Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

This essay attempts to show how cultural exchange between Ireland and Italy may occur in dramatic narrative, in the light of the concept of "frame" and "framing". In particular, it wants to demonstrate how the notions of frame and framing can be productively used to analyse the play *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) by the Irish playwright Marina Carr and its Italian translation.

Prior to my analysis, and without any pretence of being exhaustive on the topic, I will introduce what frame and framing are and how they have been applied.

As Ernest R. Wendland declares:

> A frame, […] may be defined as a psychological construct that furnishes one with a prevailing point-of-view that manipulates prominence and relevance in order to influence thinking and, if need be,

subsequent judgment as well. It is a cognitive schema involving a set of interrelated signs (in a semiotic sense) that guides a strategy of perception and interpretation which people rely on to understand and respond to the world around them. (2010, 28)

This means that people project their experiences and circumstances in the interpretative frames which allows them to make sense of the reality surrounding them. When some contradiction, incongruity, dissonance or a change in the context of discourse intervenes, then they normally shift frames. I would argue that the broad assumption that frames and framing in general can be identified as a segment of background knowledge that involves a particular aspect of the world, generates expectations and inferences in communication and action, and is associated with particular lexical and grammatical choices in language (Semino, Demjén, Demmen 2018, 227).

Erving Goffman, from a sociological point of view, was among the first to develop and apply a frame theory in the early 1970s. In *Frame Analysis* (1974), Goffman maintains that people interpret what is happening around them through their primary framework. This primary framework is taken for granted by the user. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) examine what they termed conceptual metaphor theory, corresponding to metaphorical framing, which is a type of framing that allows decision-making to be influenced by mapping characteristics of one concept to another. Conceptual metaphor theory has often been used in political rhetoric to influence political decision making. George Lakoff, as Wendland quotes, also adds that frames are cognitive clues that tell everyone how to understand what has happened. They are also a structure of expectation and a body of knowledge that is elicited in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance (2010, 28). Lakoff applies the notion of frame and framing to political discourse to show how it explains some of our fundamental thought processes and deeply felt ideals, which are then evoked and argued in public debate. There are also other dominant framing effects in the terminology of public and private media, for example, in the presentation of events concerning the notion of free election in nations as different as Afghanistan and Zimbabwe, in public relations, in the shift of discourse from taboo or controversial topics to more acceptable ones (i.e., sexual orientation as it affects his/her qualifications for a particular public position, elected office, or civic role) (Wendland 2010, 29). More recently, the notion of framing as a central function of metaphor has been applied to a study of violence-related metaphor for cancer. The two metaphors "ask your chemo nurses or your specialist if you are looking for anything that might be of help in your fight against cancer" and "[t]here are certain points in the cancer journey where the plan has to change" typically suggest different framings of the experience of being ill (Semino, Demjén, Demmen 2018, 625-626). In the first example, cancer is an aggressor, in the second it is a journey to undertake.

To be more specific for our analysis of Marina Carr's play, we should consider how cognitive linguistics and literary critics have made popular the concept of frames and framing as a vital aspect of human perception, reason and communication via various modes and means of communication. There are some sample citations that can clarify this.

Peter Stockwell in *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* maintains that:

contextual *frame* theory was developed in order to understand how readers track reference to characters and events through the process of reading. The basic notion involves the idea of a contextual frame, a mental representation of the circumstances containing the current context. This is built up from the text itself as well as from inferences drawn directly from the text […] A reader must thus keep track of which information applies in any particular context, and this knowledge is arranged in terms of contextual frames. (2002, 155)

These are not simply static pictures of successive moments across the narrative but are a series of ongoing and shifting mental representations of the world of the literary work. As the narrative moves on, different contexts move into the primary focus: "the current frame that is being monitored is said to be primed. Characters, objects and the location of the main context currently being monitored are all bound to that frame and primed too" (156).

A so-called deriving notion that must also be mentioned in relation to frame is the idea of "frames of reference", which "derive" from the conceptual metaphor:

> PERCEPTION IS CONSTRUCTION— i.e., human perception involves (among other things) composing, prioritizing, and interrelating cognitive mini- and macro-structures with respect to distinct aspects of what we experience, think about, and then attempt to communicate to others via verbal and non-verbal signs. (Wendland 2010, 27)

In general cognitivist terms, there are different approaches among those who consider framing as a function of metaphor and those who see metaphor as a result of framing. The former sees how metaphorical patterns play a crucial role both in everyday language and literary discourse. For them, the conventional use of metaphors reflects conceptual connections and the worldview that is likely to be widespread amongst members of the same linguistic and cultural community. On the other hand, the latter makes creative use of metaphors and provides novel perspectives on reality, either through linguistic realisation of conventional metaphor or through entirely novel conceptual mappings (Semino 2002, 108-109; Steen 2002,183-207). It considers framing as a "cognitive model selected, used or discarded in the process of reading a narrative text" (Jahn 1997, 442). The narrative is therefore seen as an arrangement of contextual frames, a series of ongoing and shifting mental representations, in which the focus moves from one frame to another.

I will analyse *The Cordelia Dream* in terms of a series of interrelated macro-constructs and cognitive worldview frames, which include overlapping and shifting mental representations. From these frames, which are rooted in the reader/audience's background knowledge and allow them particular inferences, I move to more specific textual frames. *The Cordelia Dream*, which has been described as a contemporary reworking of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Wilton's Music Hall in 2008, moves from one frame to the other and the conceptual activation process for such frames shows that it involves the situational context of the linguistic communicative event of the verbal text. In fact, these frames activate a process that partly revise, the 'acquired knowledge' underlying Carr's play, as we will see, with regard the father-daughter relationship, the reading of *King Lear* and the concept artistic competition. The analysis of the translation will follow Ernst Wendland's approach (2008, 2010), who is among the few scholars to consider that any translation-related activity can be conceptualized and discussed in terms of frames and framing.

2. Contextual Frames: The Cordelia Dream *and* King Lear

The Cordelia Dream opens with two characters who are not named. They are instead identified as "An Old Man and Woman". The woman rings at his door to visit him, bringing a bottle of wine and some cheese to dine with the elderly man. The Old Man who lives in a bare flat where he cannot see "no tree, no grass, no birds, no sea" (Carr 2009, 243), is sitting at his piano. She starts reproaching him for the too many numerous women he sees, for his disinterest in her and her children and she deprecates his inability to conclude his compositions. In his turn the Old Man accuses her of having disturbed his creative talent, of stealing his "gift" and he declares that her compositions are "mediocre". In a crescendo of recriminations, she puts forth that "you were

destroying all around you" (Carr 2009, 243) and this is the reason why she came to see him, to come to terms with this situation.

In frame 1 these first exchanges are still vague: Woman may be a former lover, the Old Man may have been her maestro; the readers/audience can only infer that there is a strenuous artistic competition between the two. This is a contextual frame which is the mental representation of the circumstances containing the current context. However, contextual frames are not a sequence of successive moments across the narrative, but a series of ongoing and shifting mental representations of the world of the play. As the narrative moves on, different contexts move into primary focus. The first contextual frame does not place focal information in the initial exchanges between the Old Man and Woman but has the effect of establishing an explicit frame of reference for the subsequent exchanges in the play. When Woman eventually reveals the reason why she came, this contextual frame is in primary focus and establishes an explicit frame of reference. The two characters and the location of the main context "are [thus] being monitored and are all bound to this frame and primed" (Stockwell 2002, 155-156).

> Woman. I came here because I had a dream.
> Man. You had a dream, so you came.
> Woman. That's all.
> Man. So what was the dream?
> Woman. About my life and my death. About your life and your death. We are horribly mashed. I dreamt of the four howls in *King Lear*.
> Man. When he carries the dead Cordelia on?
> Woman Yes.
> Man. How is anyone meant to deliver those four howls?
> I've seen *Lear* more times that I can remember. Not one of them, and they were good, but not one of them could deliver those four howls to my satisfaction. It is four howls, isn't it?
> Woman. Yes. Four.
> Man. Not five?
> Woman. There is five nevers. Four howls. Some argue for three, that they've stolen from Hecuba.
> Man. The brazen genius of if it. The four and the five. The proximity. It shouldn't work. It's wizardry. *Lear* is impossible. (Carr 2009, 244)[1]

This citation initiates frame 2, which aligns with the definition given above by the cognitive narratologist Manfred Jahn, according to whom frames "denote the model that is selected and used (and sometimes discarded) in the process of reading a narrative text" (Jahn 1997, 442). These models may be in constant use when we read and engage in new interpretation. The model selected in this case is *King Lear*, the "prior text or pretext" (Wendland 2010, 38). *King Lear* is therefore related to *The Cordelia Dream*, by means of various degrees of similarity (citation, allusion, echo), dissimilarity and intertextuality.

Those who are familiar with Marina Carr's dramaturgy know that there are various "prior text" or "pretext" in her earlier plays. For example, *The Mai* (1995) leads back to Euripides' *Hippolyte*; *Portia Coughlan* (1996) to Sophocles' *Antigone*; *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) to Sophocles' *Medea*. In a recent and informative article that traces the relationship between all Shakespearean plays and Carr's work (Maley, Van der Ziel 2018), there are some general indications that can help to better understand *The Cordelia Dream*. Among the

[1] All quotations from this text are taken from Marina Carr (2009), *The Cordelia Dream*, in Marina Carr, *Plays 2*, London, Faber and Faber, 233-278.

many suggestions, a few are particularly worth mentioning. Carr is indebted to Shakespeare in a way that is never singular or ego-driven, her responses are always nuanced and nimble. Though she claims that Shakespeare is her greatest influence, he is never straightforward, unproblematic; rather, he is at times a baleful presence, an intrusive author to be adapted, confronted or resisted, and not merely admired (179). Carr is also struggling against patriarchal order and tradition and she does that more through artistic engagement than academic expertise. Furthermore, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* have attracted by far the most attention from contemporary female authors and playwrights rewriting Shakespeare, partly because of the centrality in those two very different plays of the father-daughter relationship, which allows criticism of the patriarchal authority as well as colonial heritage. *The Cordelia's Dream* (2008) and *Ariel* (2002) have drawn the most overt dramatic responses from Carr, although her engagement with this popular feminist source material has been more conflicted and ambivalent than that of many contemporaries. In *The Cordelia Dream*, for example, we find "Carr's bleak and oblique approach to *King Lear*, a daughter dreams of independence from a father who will not relinquish authority" (180).

The beginning of this second frame, which works through analogy and contrast, is signalled stylistically by using inversion ("I came here because I had a dream / You had a dream, so you came", Carr 2009, 243) and parallelism ("About my life and my death. About your life and your death", 244) and semantically constitutes the backbone of the play. This frame explicitly makes clear the filial relationship between Woman and Old Man like that between Cordelia and Lear, but Woman's attitude is not Cordelia's. In Act I Scene 1, when Cordelia is asked by Lear "what would you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?", her reply is "nothing, My Lord" (Shakespeare 2022 [1608], 12). This very famous exchange helps to portray her character as the sister unable to speak her own feelings, which will lead to her own ruin. Before this exchange, in fact, in various asides, she says:

> 'What shall Cordelia do?
> Love, and be silent' (10),
>
> 'Then poor Cordelia!
> And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's more richer than my tongue'. (10)

This is reinforced in her second to her second reply to Lear:

> '[…] I cannot heave
> My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
> According to my bond; nor more nor less'. (12)

From a lexical point of view, this difficulty to let her feelings speak is expressed by the association love-silent; love-tongue; my heart-my mouth and underlines how Cordelia can be considered as the woman silenced by the patriarchal order and how Lear interprets her answer as an example of filial ingratitude. Woman instead speaks all her disappointment towards her father and her bitterness: their artistic competition is the trigger which makes their confrontation particularly violent. Unlike Cordelia, Woman speaks and tries to explain why a woman's hatred can never equal that of a man, "it goes inward" (Carr 2009, 246) and concludes that it has never been a good time for women since the Bronze Age until the present day.

The Old Man's attitude instead parallels that of Lear and he is resentful of Woman's filial ingratitude ("I just want to go silent. Leave me the field for a while", *ibidem*). From this moment on, there is another frame of reference composed of interrelating micro-structures which have

the effect of further clarifying the perspective of the reader/audience on the relationship between Woman and Old Man, but also the allusion to *King Lear*. The enmeshed love and artistic competition heighten the violence of the confrontation. Woman is outraged to have lied to her father's colleagues who were sure that Old Man would be proud of Woman success. But now "I stand there and say, we are in competition. I say, the only thing that would make my father happy right now is to be putting flowers on my grave" (247). The Old Man instead angerly admits his jealousy for her daughter: "… and they say your daughter this and your daughter that and I say, yes, yes, it's great…. Pretend I love you… It's not easy to watch your own outstrip you" (249). More calmly, woman regrets that sometimes she might have been more like Regan and Goneril than Cordelia, but, the Old Man's sarcastic comment is: "to go back to your Cordelia dream, when Cordelia dies, Lear dies to… We won't survive each other". She revendicates that she wants them "both to live and flourish" (*ibidem*) and calls for "the blood bond of parent and child". The only answer she obtains from her father is that "you stopped to be my daughter a long time ago" (250).

This frame of reference brings us back to frame 2 of *The Cordelia Dream* and to the model of *King Lear*, where various dissimilarities come to the fore. In *King Lear*, when Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms, the complete citation of the "howl" and "nevers" is as follows:

> Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I'ld use them so?
> That Heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever! (342)
> […]
> My poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no, life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never. (348)

Earlier, when Cordelia and King Lear are made prisoners in the British camp near Dover, King Lear says to Cordelia:

> No, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
> We two alone will sing, like birds i' the cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask for thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
> And pray, and sing […]. (314)

Although both Cordelia and Lear die at the end of *King Lear*, they die in reconciliation and forgiveness, in contrast with frame 2, at the end of Act I, in *The Cordelia Dream*. Even if the use of repetition tones down their confrontation, nonetheless the bleakness of their relationship is explicitly perceived:

> Old Man. Will you come to my funeral?
> Woman. Will you come to mine?
> Old Man. I'll be there.
> Woman. With your speech prepared.
> Old Man. With my speech prepared.
> Woman. So be it. (253)

The frames in the second Act of *The Cordelia Dream* are more difficult to construct as there is sometimes a lack of clarity on the set of interrelated signs which guides the set of perception and clues that the reader/audience relies on to understand and respond to the world of the

narrative. George Lakoff puts it concisely: "[f]rames are […] clues that tell everyone how to understand what has occurred […] a structure of expectation […] a body of knowledge that is evoked in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance" (qtd. in Wendland 2010, 24, 47). It seems to me that here "the structure of expectation" is more deeply related to in Woman and Old Man's exchanges themselves and the reader/audience may struggle more to give a definite meaning to what is happening on stage.

Frame 3, the next frame, in Act II, is a new time frame: five years have elapsed since the last confrontation between Old Man and Woman. Woman goes again to visit him, but he is deranged; he asks her if she is the nurse or the dog-hearted one, the vicious snake-eyed ingrate who lives under the piano. She admits she might indeed be her. In that case, Old Man adds, he must stitch her lips. What's more, he is also trying to fight off his mother who flies around the room on her broomstick and, like all witches, curls up on people's chest with their suffocating snooze. He is apparently scared off by the domineering matriarcal/filial line of his life. Then they talk about his last concerto for piano and string, "The Cordelia Dream", which he defines as "a snatch of something someone threw my way a long time ago" (Carr 2009, 256). Woman says she is very proud to see his concerto advertised but nonetheless she is critical of her father's work as he rarely finishes his compositions. Old Man says he is not left in peace by the dog-hearted, the vicious ingrate and the witch on the broomstick and wants to wear his hat to protect himself from them. He admits that is afraid because women do not understand all a man gets from the moment he is born is rejection. Especially those men "who love music, who dream, who weep, they are lower than women" (262). Then Woman changes discourse and starts talking about the great eightieth birthday party they had for him where he played her and he couldn't be stopped because he "had all by heart" and "knew all her scores" (263). Again, as in frame 2 in Act I, they have a harsh confrontation on music, on who had the gift, who silenced whom, and who was heartless. Woman also asks him why, even if he was left in peace for five years, he did not "flourish" as he said he would, in a sort of ongoing quarrel. Woman says she regrets her cruelty, but he was heartless too and wrong about her, but what she gets in reply is "I am never wrong. That's what living intensely means. To be never wrong" (265). This "eternal battle", as Woman calls it, apparently ends when she tells him that he managed to stop her working, how he succeeded in silencing her, how the magic gradually had gone. His reaction is delight: he has eventually found his daughter's Achilles heel, even if he pretends not to be ecstatic at the news, he can take his hat off and celebrate the event. It is interesting to note that "playing with the hat" is not only a visual dramatic device. Before, when he feels challenged by his mother and his daughter he put his hat on to prodect himself and he takes it off once he feels safe. In *King Lear* there is a reference to a hat:

> This is a good block [– a wooden block carved into a shape of a hat –];
> It were a delicate stratagem, to shoe
> A troop of horse with felt, I'll put 't in proof;
> And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
> Then, kill, kill, kill kill, kill, kill! (276)

If we compare the functions of the two quotes, the ambitious revenge of Lear against his sons-in-law who must be killed, the poor protection from mother and daughter of Old Man is marked by anti-climax, especially if considered with what comes next. Frame 4 in Act II eventually gives the clues to understand what has occurred: there is an awful turn in the structure of expectation and a new set of perception and clues which surprise the reader/audience and guide them to the end of the play. However, frame 3 and 4 are strictly intertwined, and the

full meaning of frame 4 is retrievable not only in the light of some clues of frame 3, but also in the references to "the prior text or pretext", the model of *King Lear*.

When Old Man tells her that magic can come and go but that after all "he is glad she escaped with her life, he is glad she is alive" (272), there is a complete change in perspective in the narrative:

> Woman. Oh, but I'm not alive.
> Old Man. What are you saying?
> Woman. I thought you knew. I'm dead.
> Old Man. What?
> Woman. Didn't the siblings tell you? I imagine you were at my funeral.
> Old Man. I was at a gathering recently. Was that your funeral? (272-273)

While Old Man, more and more forgetful, guesses that she hung herself and she tells him that his youngest child found her body, he says that there is no mention of her death in his diary for the day she committed suicide. His notes for that day are instead his observations about Act III of *King Lear*, "a sublime act", when King Lear says "oh fool, I will go mad, let me not to go mad" (275), and his comments about the four howls and the five nevers in Act V, lines that sometimes possessed him: "howling and nevering for what was, for what had never been and for what has yet to be…" (*ibidem*).

Act III in *King Lear* is one of the most powerful moments of the play. There is a prevailing sense of compassion for Lear's madness: he is in the heath and, as a Gentleman says, he is

> Contending with the fretful elements,
> Bids the wind blows and the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled water 'bove the main,
> That things may change or cease; tears his white hair,
> Which the impetuous blasts […] catch in their fury, and may nothing of;
> Strives in his little world of man out-scorn
> The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
> […] unbonneted he runs,
> And bids what will take all. (Shakespeare 2022, 162)

However, the relevance of the allusion of Act III in this forth frame of *The Cordelia Dream* is found in Lear's complaints for his daughters' ungratefulness:

> No rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.
> I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
> I never give you kingdom, call'd you children,
> You owe no subscription […]
> A poor infirm, weak and despised old man […]
> I am a man
> More sinn'd against than sinning. (168-170)

These complaints culminate in Lear at the height of his madness, who imagines Goneril and Regan on trial before a tribunal made up of Edgar, Gloucester's son disguised as madman-beggar to escape his death sentence decreed by his own father, the Fool, the Earl of Kent, and himself.

These clues refer back to the conversation in frame 3 and explain why Old Man explicitly associates Woman with Goneril and Regan, as he cannot get over his inference of

ungratefulness for a daughter incapable of appreciating her musical gift. From a lexical point of view, in the first part of the conversation Old Man apostrophises Woman with various epithets that were used by Lear for Regan ("struck me with her tongue, / Most serpent like", 146) and by the Earl of Kent for Goneril and Regan ("to his dog-hearted daughters", 250). Although he had already used these apostrophes in Act I, here there is remarkable increase in their use: "[y]ou are not the dog-hearted one are you? (Carr 2009, 255), "[t]he dog-hearted one that lives under the piano" (*ibidem*), "[t]he vicious snake-eyed ingrate?" (*ibidem*), "I like the dog-hearted one that has fouled my life" (256), "[o]h, you mean the dog-hearted one, the vicious ingrate" (257), "[o]h my God. It's you […] the dog-hearted ingrate" (259), "[s]omeone come to save me from this dog-hearted, snake-eyed, vicious ingrate" (*ibidem*), "[t]he dog-hearted that silenced me" (263).

Frame 5 brings the play to a conclusion and shows another shifting representation, allowing a new interpretation for the reader/audience. Woman wants to give Old Man, who is bound to die, a last gift and invites him to sit at the piano and play with her. She tells him that she was the most beautiful thing in his life but admits they will say that the way she lived was unforgivable and they will say the same of him. She concludes: "[t]hey are savage here. The indisputable savagery of the wise and the true" (278). A declaration that our life is not a straight line but is made up of errors, of tours and detours, which recalls the Old Man's words in frame 4: "howling and nevering for what was, for what had never been and for what has yet to be…" (275). Unlike in *King Lear*, there might not be a reconciliation, but father and daughter are for the first and last time together at the piano regardless of what they think of each other and of what can be said about them. In Woman's last words there is a glimpse of similarity between Cordelia and Woman, because, after all, Woman, like Cordelia "never sets out to please through flattery" (Maley, Van der Ziel 2018, 1) and is not afraid of the truth.

3. The Cordelia Dream / Il sogno di Cordelia

The translation of frames is controversial: not many agree on the usefulness of such a methodology. Wendland mentions a few scholars who see instead this practice as fruitful. For example, Maria Tymoczko was in favour of applying frame analysis to the process of translation: "I see attention to cognitive and conceptual metaphors as an important key to the future growth of the field of translation studies" (2010, 139). David Katan is also convinced that

> Frames are a combination of prior knowledge, generalizations and expectations regarding the text. As the text is read so it is checked against expectations and degrees of fit with other similar known or possible texts. As this process unfolds, a meaningful, but still virtual, text begins to unfold in the mind of the translator […]. From the meaningful but wordless text, the translator then sketches a pattern of words in the target language. (2004, 169)

Although many cognitive stylistic analysis has often been applied to literature (Semino, Culpeper 2002), its application to the analysis of the translation of frames are very few (Abed, Ahmed 2024). It must be pointed out, however, that the method of Wendland, who is interested in the exegesis and translation of the Scriptures, lends itself better to show how the idea that a frame approach helps to conceptualise both the process of textual interpretation and translation (2010). In *Il sogno di Cordelia* instead a frame approach is more difficult because the TT (target text) language very often tends to reproduce many of the effects of the ST (source text) language. This is not unusual in translated playtext, especially in contemporary drama. However, it is interesting to analyse how the frame approach helps the process of interpreta-

tion and translation. According to Wendland, all types of translation-related activity can be conceptualized and practiced, in terms of the notion of framing and frame, and he singles out four frame-related categories:

- "re-framing" (to compose a TL – target language – text with careful reference to the semantic and pragmatic sense of the original);
- "de-framing" (render a text in the perspective of the cognitive-emotive frames of the TL language-culture – domestication – or adopt a linguistically unnatural approach so that the audience cannot understand or misunderstand the intended sense of the SL – source language – text – foreignization;
- "hyper-framing" (to enrich or supplement the conceptual framework of the TL readership through various paratextual means, e.g., footnotes, introductions, illustrations, cross-references, glossary entries, etc., to match the cognitive frames of the SL text);
- "co-framing" (to complement the prevalent linguistic (including lexical) and literary uses of frames and framing by means of other socioculturally-oriented applications, such as, for example, the intertextual frame of reference).

I would argue that *Il sogno di Cordelia*, translated by Valentina Repetti for Editoria e Spettacolo (2011) and first presented as a reading at the Festival Trend in Rome in 2015, can be loosely ascribed to the categories of "re-framing" and "de-framing". On the one hand, "re-framing" attempts to render both the semantic and pragmatic sense of the original. On the other hand, "de-framing" renders the text in the perspective of the cognitive emotive frames of the TL culture-language which, in the text in question, very often coincide with the perspective of the original. It must be pointed out that; 1) the frames in the original usually coincide with the frames in translation; and 2) the thematic progression is respected. In comparing *Il sogno di Cordelia* with the original version, I will also highlight and comment some of the translational strategies used in the various exchanges of the five frames[2], which, however, do not change their rendition "in the translation" as "re-framing" and "de-framing". Finally, I will conclude by highlighting some intertextual frames of reference that have an important role in the TL language culture, as very often happens in drama translation (Randaccio 2022).

In the following exchange in frame 1, Old Man reproaches his daughter that she is pleased with middle-class values. In TT there is a linguistic amplification – the use of more linguistic elements - that makes the sentence more fluid: however, the perspective of the ST does not change, and the TT maintains the exact cognitive and emotional impact of the original:

Woman. I have known moments when I'm in love with the earth. Old Man. You in love is one thing. Your soul is another. Your soul to be seduced by all that. It's pathetic. Cars, houses, the rising sun, children romping in the garden come evening. To think it doesn't get better than this. (237)	Donna. Ci sono momenti in cui anch'io sono innamorata della terra. Uomo. Che uno si innamori è un conto, che si innamori l'anima è un altro. La tua anima sedotta da tutto questo. È patetico. Macchine, case, il sole che sorge, i bambini che si scatenano in giardino verso sera. Pensare che non si possa avere di meglio. (80)[3]

[2] The translational strategies used are those classified in Molina and Hurtado Albir 2002, 498-516.

[3] All quotations from this text are taken from Marina Carr (2011), *Il sogno di Cordelia*, in *Teatro I*, trad. it di Valentina Repetti Spoleto, Editoria &Spettacolo, 77-115.

This is true for two other statements that Old man says later on to express his scorn for the conservatism of middle-class couples and their children's education:

Old Man. If I was a woman I'd have a different father for each child. Think of the variety, the expanding gene pool, the colour spectrum, from snow-white to blue-back. Really women are terribly conservative when it comes down to it. (240)	Uomo. Se io fossi una donna avrei un padre diverso per ogni figlio. Pensa che varietà, che espansione genetica, che spettro di colori, dal bianco neve al nero bluastro. È proprio vero che le donne sono fin troppo conservatrici su quest'argomento. (83)

Old Man. No, only passion. Find the child's passion. Feed it. And you will have an extraordinary individual. The rest are dodos […]. (241)	Uomo. No, solo la passione. Scova la passione in un bambino. Nutrila. Diventerà un individuo straordinario. Tutti gli altri sono morti e sepolti […]. (83)

In these two statements, various translational strategies are used: "really woman / è proprio vero che […]" is a transposition and signals a change in the grammatical category; "comes down to it / su questo argomento" is a particularization because a more precise term substitute the pronoun 'it'; "The rest are dodos/Tutti gli altri sono morti e sepolti" is a generalization where instead of the figurative meaning attributed to the extinct bird dodo – "dead as a dodo" – the translator has preferred to use a more common and immediately understandable expression for the reader/audience. In all these cases, the cognitive and emotional import of the TT is the same of the ST, sometimes with some major clarifications for the TT reader/audience.

Old Man. You are wrong, you know. Why do you think I have chained myself to this room, this piano? Why do you think I have chained I've given up kitchens and dining rooms and wine and champagne and cigars? I want the channels clear for the incoming signals. Woman. And are the signals coming? Old Man. They are getting closer. Woman. This will be your great opus? (242)	Uomo. Ti sbagli, lo sai. Perché pensi che mi sia incatenato a questa stanza, a questo pianoforte? Perché pensi abbia rinunciato alle cucine, ai salotti, al vino, allo champagne e ai sigari? Voglio che i canali siano liberi di ricevere tutti i segnali in ingresso. Donna. E arrivano i segnali? Uomo. Si avvicinano sempre più. Donna. Questo sarà il tuo capolavoro? (84)

The exchange above, in which Old Man starts quarrelling with Woman, is a good example of a literal translation. The translation gives back the emotional crescendo of their discussion because it reproduces exactly the words and the repetitions of the original ("You are wrong, you know / Ti sbagli lo sai […] Why do you think […] why do you think […] / Perché pensi […] Perché pensi[…]".

In frame 2, when Woman narrates her dream about Cordelia, the translator adds two notes reporting Shakespeare's words referring to the "howls" and the "nevers". This paratextual mean helps to facilitate the comprehension of the references in Carr's text, which might not be known to the Italian reader/audience. It must also be highlighted that these references are crucial both for *King Lear* and for *The Cordelia Dream* when they resurface in frame 4.

Woman. I dreamt of the four howls in King Lear […] Man. […] It is four howls, isn't it? Woman. Yes. Four. Man. Not five? Woman. There is five nevers. Four howls. (244)	Donna. Ho sognato le quattro urla di Re Lear[4] […] Uomo. […] sono quattro le urla giusto? Donna. Sì. Quattro. Uomo. Non cinque? Donna. I mai[5] sono cinque. Le urla sono quattro.

Soon after this exchange, Woman accuses the Old Man of being unappreciative of her and her work as composer:

You call writing to newspapers leaving me alone? Interviews! Photographs of you! Smiling! Your sordid jealousies spewed over my life, my children, my husband, my home! You call screaming at me in public leaving me alone! Your purple-faced obscenities, your paranoid speeches at my concerts, bullying and shrivelling me to a quaking ghost. You haven't left me alone! I've been hiding! You haven't been able to find me. Given one chance you'll annihilate me again. (245)	Scrivere ai giornali lo chiami lasciarmi in pace? Interviste! Fotografie di te che sorridi! L'invidia sordida che hai vomitato sulla mia vita, sui miei figli, su mio marito, sulla mia casa! Urlarmi dietro in pubblico tu lo chiami lasciarmi in pace? Le oscenità che urlavi con la faccia paonazza, i discorsi paranoici che hai fatto ai miei concerti, maltrattandomi e riducendomi un fantasma tremante. Tu non mi hai lasciata in pace! Sono io che mi sono nascosta! Tu non sei stato in grado di trovarmi! Se ne avessi l'occasione mi annienteresti ancora. (87)

This is one of the fiercest criticisms that Woman addresses to Old Man and the whole passage is highly emphatic. This emphasis, which is the predominant tone of Woman's speech, is rendered in the TT slightly differently through the strategy of compensation, in which a ST stylistic effect is introduced in another place with respect to the TT. In fact, in the ST "you call", "you call" "I've been" are all in thematic position, "lo chiami", "tu lo chiami", "Sono io che […]" have instead been postponed in TT.

After Woman's emphatic speech, there is an exchange between Woman and Old Man in which he is harsh and brutal towards her. In this case, maybe to compensate the previous emphasis, the translator translated the ST literally, except for the use of the term "spiel" – which means "a speech, especially one that is long and spoken quickly and is intended to persuade the person listening about something"[6] which in the TT is given detail not formulated in the ST.

[4] "Urla! Urla! Urla! Urla! Urlate! Oh, uomini di pietra siete!" (Shakespeare 1994, *Re Lear*, *I capolavori*, a cura di Giorgio Melchiori, trad. it. Cesare Vico Lodovici, vol. II, atto V, scena III, 385, N.d.T.).

[5] "Me l'hanno strangolata la mia povera pazzerella! No, no, no, vita! Perché dovrebbe avere vita un cavallo un cane un topo e tu, esanime, spenta? E non tornerai più, mai, mai, mai, mai, mai più" (*ibidem*, 387, N.d.T.).

[6] Cf. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/spiel> (05/2025).

Man. I am an old man who shouldn't have opened the door to you. Woman. Don't give me that helpless old man spiel. You're a vicious piece of work. Man. I don't want you dead. I just want you to go silent. Leave me the field for a while. I don't have much longer. Woman. You want me alive and silent? What is that but a sentimental form of murder? Why not have the courage to nail the lid on? Man. All I know is, for me to flourish you must be quiet. I would give anything for you to be quiet. (246)	Uomo. Io sono un vecchio che non avrebbe dovuto aprirti la porta. Donna. Non cercare di farmi credere che sei un vecchio indifeso. Tu sei un bell'esemplare di malvagità. Uomo. Non ti voglio morta. Voglio solo che scivoli nel silenzio. Lasciami il campo per un po'. Non mi resta molto. Donna. Mi vuoi viva e muta? Non è una forma sentimentale di omicidio? Perché non hai il coraggio di inchiodarmi nella bara? Uomo. Io so solo che per crescere ho bisogno che tu te ne stia zitta. Darei qualsiasi cosa per farti stare zitta. (88)

Strictly connected to the previous exchange there is another salient moment in the play which clarifies the opposite view that Old Man and Woman have of what art should be. Woman's answer to Old Man is at the root of their fierce competition and the TT reproduces the cognitive-emotional perspective of this frame. The TT is literal with the only exception of the use of linguistic amplification – an addition of more linguistic element – in "Plagiarism and cunning disguise / Plagio astuto" which the reader/audience however cannot misunderstand the meaning of the original ST. Old Man thinks that art is a prerogative of the genius, that the artist is genius and reckless, whereas Woman for him is instead only a charlatan who plagiarises from everybody else. This is what she replies to him:

Woman. That's what art is. Plagiarism and cunning disguise, a snapping up of unconsidered trifles. And coursing through it all, good faith, begging from above and underneath the throb of creation, that you are the first to do this, the last to do this, that you will surely die if you don't put something down. Right now! This minute! You think is loose living, bad behaviour and the jottings of your hangover soul. It isn't. Artists are the most disciplined people on the planet. And I hope some day to call me myself one. (251)	Donna. L'arte è questo. Plagio astuto, un furto di inezie sottovalutate. E attraversare tutto questo in volata, in buona fede, implorando di sopra e di sotto il pulsare della creazione, che tu sia il primo a fare questo, che tu sia l'ultimo a fare quest'altro, che morirai sicuramente se non butti giù qualcosa. Adesso! Proprio ora! Tu pensi che basti vivere allo sbando, comportarsi male e lasciare che la tua anima sbronza butti giù degli appunti. Non è così. Gli artisti sono le persone più disciplinate della terra. E spero di potermi definire tale un giorno. (92)

In frame 3 only two translation strategies have been used and most of the TT is a literal translation. This might be due to two reasons: the first is to render the Old Man's deranged state of mind as in the ST; the second is that, although in darker tones, the confrontation between Old Man and Woman seems to be a re-enactment of the previous one in frame 2. All the insults directed at Woman are also translated literally and even if some "quotations" from *King Lear* are not easy to retrieve, nonetheless they retain their function as insults for the TT reader/audience.

Woman. Who is the dog-hearted one? Man. The dog-hearted one that lives under the piano. You're not the vicious ingrate, are you? The vicious snake-eyed ingrate? Woman. I think maybe I am. Man. Then I'll get some twine and stich your lips. I'll crucify your feet with wooden pegs. Oh my mother, my mother. Forgive me, my dear, all the long day I have been fighting off my mother […] She flies around the room with her broomstick, her grey hair spinning. She tries to haul me onto the broomstick and I spatter her to the wall. She's asleep now. Even witches have to sleep. Did you know that? (255)	Donna. Chi è quella col cuore di cane? Uomo. Quella col cuore di cane che vive sotto il pianoforte. Non sei l'ingrata maligna, vero? L'ingrata maligna dagli occhi di serpente? Donna. Mi sa che forse sono io. Uomo. Allora prendo dello spago e ti cucio le labbra. Ti crocifiggo i piedi con dei paletti di legno. Oh madre mia, madre mia. Perdonami cara, è tutto il giorno che combatto con mia madre […] Vola per la stanza sul suo manico di scopa, coi capelli grigi che vorticano. Cerca di trascinarmi sul suo manico di scopa e io la faccio schizzare contro il muro. Adesso dorme. Anche le streghe devono dormire. Lo sapevi? (96)

The two linguistic strategies that have been used are an example of linguistic amplification, in which other linguistic elements than those found in the ST are added, and an example of transposition, where there is a change of grammatical category, specifically a noun that becomes an adverb.

Woman. I just came to see you… I miss you. Man. Miss me. Well, miss me and be gone […]. (259)	Donna. Sono solo venuta a trovarti…mi manchi. Uomo. Ti manco. Beh, allora vorrà dire che ti mancherò, vattene via […]. (99)

Man. Every time I turn on the radio they're playing you. You know why? Woman. Because I'm good? Man. Because you are easy, because you have a facility for jingles I could write in my sleep and often do and toss in the bin first thing in the morning […]. (266)	Uomo. Ogni volta che accendo la radio trasmettono te. Sai perché? Donna. Perché sono brava? Uomo. Perché sei semplice, perché componi senza sforzo motivetti che io potrei scrivere mentre dormo, cosa che spesso faccio, per poi gettarli nel cestino appena mi alzo la mattina […]. (105)

In frame 4, as we have seen, there is a complete change in perspective because Woman is dead. This happens quite unexpectedly both for the ST and TT reader/audience. Central to this frame is the fact that Old Man has not written anything in his diary for the day of Woman's suicide, but instead he only made some comments on Act III and Act V of *King Lear*. The reference to *King Lear* is a variation of the first time that the "four howl" and the "five nevers" were mentioned at the beginning of the play and is easily understandable both for the ST and TT readers/audience. It is also clear that the Old Man has changed his view on Act V, as he first says "[t]he brazen genius of it. The four and the five. The proximity. It shouldn't work. It's wizardry. Lear is impossible" (Carr 2009, 244); while he now claims that "the great four howls at the end of act V or the five nevers […] were written for me" (275). The cognitive emotional impact does not change for the TT reader/audience. However, in the TT the translator anticipates the reference to *King Lear* more explicitly adding a note to Old Man's response just before he reads his diary:

Woman. So do I … And how will you die? Man. I will die bravely, as a bridegroom. (274)	Donna. Anch'io… e tu come morirai? Uomo. Morirò valorosamente come uno sposo.[7]

The strategy of transposition has also been used in Old Man's comments on *King Lear*, where "howling and nevering" function as nouns but are translated with two finite verbs, i.e., "urlavo e recitavo quei mai". This choice implies greater clarity in the TT:

Man. […] What a sublime act, act three is. When I was a boy the master used to stand me on the chair to declaim, yes, declaim *Lear*. […] Or the great four howls at the end of act five or the five nevers. Those lines were written for me. I would howl and never with a passion I could not have possessed but somehow seemed to possess me, howling and nevering for what was, for what had never been and for what has yet to be […]. (275)	Uomo. […] Che atto sublime il terzo atto Quando ero bambino il maestro mi metteva in piedi su una sedia a declamare, sì, a declamare *Re Lear*. […] Oppure quelle quattro urla meravigliose alla fine del quinto atto. Quelle battute erano scritte per me. Urlavo e recitavo quei mai con una passione che non poteva appartenermi, ma che in qualche modo mi possedeva, urlavo e recitavo quei mai per ciò che fu, per ciò che non era mai stato e per ciò che ancora deve essere […]. (113)

Frame 5, more than the other frames, is translated literally. The reason may be that the translation wants to render clear the last shift in the interpretation of the relationship between father and daughter and invite the reader/audience of the TT to have no doubt on how both of them will be judged, that they will not be forgiven for their respective lives. Those around them, who believe themselves wise and true, are in fact real savages.

Man. That is your parting gift? Woman. I was hauled before them, and you know what they told me? That the way I have lived unforgiveable, and I will reckon they will tell you the same. Be afraid, they are savage here. The indisputable savagery of the wise and the true. *She lays her hands on his hands*. This is my gift. Close your eyes and play. This is what eternity sounds like. (278)	Uomo. È questo il tuo dono di addio? Donna. Mi hanno trascinata davanti a loro, e sai cosa mi hanno detto? Che il modo in cui ho vissuto è imperdonabile e penso proprio che a te diranno lo stesso. Abbi paura, sono feroci qui. La ferocia incontestabile dei saggi e dei giusti. (*Poggia le mani su quelle di lui*) Ecco il mio dono. Chiudi gli occhi e suona. È così che suona l'eternità. (115)

The detailed comparison between the ST and the TT for the five frames of *The Cordelia Dream* seem to confirm that the Italian translation has been composed with careful reference to the semantic and pragmatic sense of the original ("re-framing") and that the Italian version renders the cognitive and emotional perspective of the Italian reader/audience in a way that is coincident with that of the original ("de-framing").

It is interesting to note, however, that there are some intertextual frames of reference, some pre-texts that were mentioned when the play was performed in Italy. In the presenta-

[7] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act IV Scene VI: 'I will die bravely as a bridegroom' (111) (N.d.T.).

tion to the reading at Teatro Belli, in the words of Valerio Binasco, director and actor of the reading, the father-daughter relationship, which in Carr's play becomes almost archetypical thanks to the reference to *King Lear*, moves to the background. The two characters, Man and Woman, are portrayed in more realistic terms and recall the characters of Ingmar Bergman's films. Dialogue, in fact, prevails and Man and Woman are presented more as victims than perpetrators. According to Binasco, Carr in this play uses the typical frame of folktales and her protagonist, Woman, resembles a Little Red Riding Hood, who, like many women in Jacques Prévert's poetry, knocks at her father's door waiting to be devoured. Woman is pleading for acceptance and the whole play revolves around the idea of nothingness that condemns both father and daughter. Thus, the intertextual relations to the original dramatic context is marginalised in translation. The new properties attributed to *The Cordelia Dream* in the Italian reading derive instead from other cultural references, creating different intertextual relations (Randaccio 2022, 62).

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to analyse the play *The Cordelia Dream* by the Irish playwright Marina Carr and its Italian translation, according to the notion of "frame" and "framing". After a brief introduction to these notions and how they have been applied from the 1970s onwards, I analysed *The Cordelia Dream* as a series of interrelated macro-constructs and cognitive world-view, including overlapping and shifting mental representations. From these frames I moved to more specific textual frames. It must be recalled that *The Cordelia Dream* is considered as a contemporary reworking of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and, therefore, my analysis, moving from one frame to another, followed the conceptual activation process. These frames, in fact, activate a process that partly revise the 'acquired knowledge' underlying Carr's play, i.e., the father-daughter relationship, the reading of *King Lear* and the concept of artistic competition. To do so, I investigated in detail each frame in relation to the 'prior text or pretext', i.e., *King Lear*, which is linked in various degrees to *The Cordelia Dream*. Though the translation of frames is controversial, I applied frame analysis to the process of translation, and I ascribed the translation to Wendland's categories of "re-framing" and "de-framing". I also highlighted which were the translational strategies used for each frame and commented on them.

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Un viaggio al di là delle parole: l'attraversamento dei confini poetici di Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

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Abstract:

This article explores the way in which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin uses perception and perspective in her poetry to transcend the boundaries that separate reality from the worlds of imagination, folklore and spirituality, with a particular interest in colour and the visual. It will also be argued that language is one of the fundamental tools the poet uses to analyse the otherness and the difference between contrasting dimensions, and that the margin that divides them is a significant space in itself. The texts examined belong to different phases of the author's career in order to emphasise the presence of these nuances of thought throughout her literary production.

Keywords: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Language, Otherness, Perspective, Poetry

1. Introduzione

Nella poesia di Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin possiamo sempre trovare una ferrea volontà di "andare oltre", che si manifesta in molteplici forme, dalla più letterale ricerca di un altrove poetico, al tentativo di riformare certi capisaldi della poesia, della letteratura e della cultura contemporanea – "a determination to rethread the past's strands" (Allen 2007, 22) –, che non concerne mai solo ed esclusivamente la parte mitologica del passato letterario, ma anzi, ha spesso origine da preoccupazioni sociali e politiche (Nordin 2002-2003, 77). Che si tratti comunque del superamento di un limite architettonico o ideale (Johnston 1997, 194), l'atto fondamentale insito in tale operazione è quello dell'attraversamento, del passaggio da un luogo a un altro, siano essi concreti o astratti: "from one realm of experience to another, from the realms of the everyday and the ordinary to the realms of the spirit world and the world of the other" (Nordin 2001, 420).

Esplorando attentamente la produzione di Ní Chuilleanáin ci si può ben rendere conto di quanto questa ricerca sia predominante in molte delle sue opere: ci troviamo di fronte a una poesia che indaga senza posa la transizione tra luoghi opposti, materiali o ideali che siano; una poesia che presta particolare attenzione agli spazi liminali dell'esistenza e ai loro confini e agli effetti che l'attraversamento di queste soglie e il passaggio da un luogo all'altro – o da uno stato dell'essere all'altro – hanno sul soggetto poetico e sulla sua percezione del mondo che lo circonda, in particolare attraverso la disseminazione di dettagli relativi alla luce e ai colori. Per diretta ammissione dell'autrice, gli elementi visivi e sensoriali in genere costituiscono uno strumento atto alla costruzione di un'esperienza che susciti nel lettore delle reazioni immediate: "[w]hen I put something in my poetry in terms of 'I see something', I'm inviting the reader to imagine it. Similarly, if I put in something tactile, I hope the reader will respond to that with some sort of immediate thing" (Nordin 2002-2003, 81); ciò che dà ordine al contenuto poetico è proprio lo sguardo dell'autrice, uno sguardo acuto e attento, attraverso il quale la realtà viene illuminata nei suoi più piccoli dettagli (Sirr 1995, 451). La vista è sicuramente un elemento importantissimo nella poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin. Perciò, lo sguardo come strategia poetica e strumento di indagine non si limita a emergere in componimenti specifici relativi a qualcosa di necessariamente visuale, ma risulta una presenza costante in tutta la produzione dell'autrice, pur non risultando mai superflua o eccessiva. Ní Chuilleanáin stessa, infatti, ha definito la poesia come "a form in which you never have to say more than what you mean" (Villar-Argáiz 2017, 228). E il non detto poetico non rimane in sospeso come qualcosa di criptico e oscuro, ma come evidente prova del limite dell'esperienza e della percezione soggettive, che pure non cessano mai di essere usate come strumento nella ricerca di ciò che va al di là di loro stesse.

2. Oltre la lingua: "Gloss/Clós/Glas"

Senza dubbio, l'atto dello sconfinamento, dell'attraversamento della soglia, del viaggio al di là del limite, è, per sua natura, molteplice, non solo relativamente alla quantità di volte in cui si realizza, ma anche alla qualità della sua forma o tipologia, che può essere interpretata a seconda dello sguardo con cui lo si voglia osservare. Uno dei cardini della poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin risiede nell'annullamento della distanza tra passato e presente e, allo stesso tempo, nella rivendicazione di uno spazio nella Storia, con l'intento di scardinare e demistificare certi assiomi della tradizione poetica e letteraria (Sarbin 1993, 86). Ed è così che, dunque, nella poesia "Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women" (1986), in cui la poetessa rivisita l'XI canto dell'*Odissea*, concentrandosi sul momento in cui Ulisse incontra gli spiriti degli Inferi, tra cui quello della madre, si può assistere a un abbattimento del confine tra mito e storia. Eppure, la stessa retorica può essere declinata diversamente e applicata a situazioni diverse: in "Fireman's Lift" (1994) i mondi che la poetessa attraversa sono quelli del lettore e dell'opera, della realtà e della finzione artistica; sono quelli di passato e presente in "Observations from Galileo" (1989); e, ancora, i domini delle esperienze sensoriali – la vista, l'udito, il tatto – in "The Hill-town" (1989). Ma le soglie presenti nelle poesie di Ní Chuilleanáin non finiscono qui, e i mondi che vengono attraversati – spesso contrapposti e affini allo stesso tempo – sono innumerevoli, e i confini descritti possono essere di qualsivoglia natura: fisici, ideali, sacri, profani, sociali, e via dicendo. A dimostrazione di questa molteplicità formale, prendiamo in esame la poesia che chiude la raccolta pubblicata nel 2001, *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, in cui a incontrarsi e scontrarsi sono i mondi della lingua, ovvero "Gloss/Clós/Glas":

> Look at the scholar, he has still not gone to bed,
> Raking the dictionaries, darting at locked presses,
> Hunting for keys. He stacks the books to his oxter,

Walks across the room as stiff as a shelf.
His nightwork, to make the price of his release:
Two words, as opposite as *his* and *hers*
Which yet must be as close
As the word *clós* to its meaning in a Scots courtyard
Close to the spailpín ships, or as close as the note
On the uilleann pipe to the same note on the fiddle –
As close as the grain in the polished wood, as the finger
Bitten by the string, as the hairs of the bow
Bent by the repeated note –
Two words
Closer to the bone than the words I was so proud of,
Embrace and *strict* to describe the twining of bone and flesh.

The rags of language are streaming like weathervanes,
Like weeds in water they turn with the tide, as he turns
Back and forth the looking-glass pages, the words
Pouring and slippery like the silk thighs of the tomcat
Pouring through the slit in the fence, lightly,
Until he reaches the language that has no word for *his*,
No word for *hers*, and is brought up sudden
Like a boy in a story faced with a small locked door.
Who is that he can hear panting on the other side?
The steam of her breath is turning the locked lock green.
(Ní Chuilleanáin 2001, 46, corsivi nell'originale)

Prima di analizzare in dettaglio la poesia, ricordiamo le parole già citate di Ní Chuilleanáin rispetto al suo modo di scrivere e descrivere: "[w]hen I put something in my poetry in terms of 'I see something', I'm inviting the reader to imagine it" (Nordin 2002-2003, 81). In questo caso, l'invito a immaginare e vedere ciò che viene descritto dalle parole è esplicito e appare immediatamente nell'imperativo che apre il componimento: "Look" (v. 1). Tuttavia, l'espressa richiesta al lettore di guardare, forse, non si limita soltanto alla scena rappresentata, ma può essere estesa al componimento stesso e alla sua struttura formale. Vale dunque la pena fare un passo indietro per osservare la poesia nel suo complesso.

Innanzitutto è necessario sottolineare quanto il titolo, "Gloss/Clós/Glas", sia di per sé significativo: tre parole simili dal punto di vista grafico e formale che si susseguono in una sorta di metamorfosi, non solo tra una lingua e l'altra – l'inglese e l'irlandese, che l'autrice non ha nemmeno bisogno di nominare (Haberstroh 2007, 42) – ma anche tra un concetto e l'altro. Tale viaggio linguistico ha inizio dalla parola inglese "gloss" – letteralmente "glossa" –, che fa riferimento al lavoro svolto dal protagonista del testo, uno studioso alla ricerca di due parole, e termina con quella irlandese "glas", che può essere tradotta sia come "verde" che come "serratura" – un gioco di significati che chiuderà la poesia –, passando attraverso l'altra parola di origine gaelica, "clós", che indica un' "area circoscritta". Sebbene le tre parole scelte per il titolo possano sembrare inizialmente arbitrarie e sconnesse, la poesia riesce a dimostrare verso dopo verso l'inevitabile legame che intercorre tra loro. "Gloss/Clós/Glas" è infatti un testo che, attraverso la messa in atto di una metamorfosi lessicale e semantica, esplora in profondità il processo della traduzione (Collins 2015, 131) e dell'attraversamento delle barriere linguistiche, e che cerca di rivelare la delicatezza e la complessità della relazione fra due parole, luoghi o situazioni tanto diversi – o addirittura opposti – quanto affini gli uni agli altri.

L'enfasi sulla lingua, naturalmente, rimane preminente anche in tutto il testo. Continuando a osservare da lontano, si noterà che la poesia, costituita da venticinque versi, è costruita intorno alle due parole, "Two words" (v. 13), che si trovano al centro esatto del componimento, separate dal resto, parole che messe linguisticamente a nudo di fronte al lettore, spogliate di qualsiasi profondità semantica ulteriore e presentate nella loro essenza letterale, sono il simbolo della giustapposizione e della contrapposizione tra lemmi, significati, lingue e mondi diversi, e fungono da nesso e punto di contatto fra i poli opposti presentati nel testo. Questo magistrale fulcro poetico e metalinguistico dà origine all'asse che sorregge la poesia dall'inizio alla fine, e intorno al quale si costruiscono e si intrecciano le sue similitudini e le sue antitesi fondamentali.

La prima opposizione è forse anche la più evidente. Ní Chuilleanáin vuole far incontrare un personaggio maschile e uno femminile (Haberstroh 2007, 42): il primo, un linguista intento a setacciare i suoi libri alla ricerca delle due fondamentali parole; la seconda, una presenza effimera, volatile, al di là di una porta chiusa. L'incontro materiale tra i due avviene, forse, soltanto agli ultimi due versi – "Who is that he can hear panting on the other side? / The steam of her breath is turning the locked lock green" (vv. 24-25) –, ma lo scontro tra i rispettivi mondi, maschile e femminile, viene segnalato molto prima nella poesia, attraverso la ricerca linguistica, in cui uomo e donna vengono rappresentati da elementi grammaticali: "Two words, as opposite as *his* and *hers*" (v. 6). La soglia che divide le due parole – che non sono ancora quelle cercate dallo studioso – si concretizza alla fine del testo nell'immagine della porta che divide i due personaggi, una barriera tanto sottile quanto significativa dal carattere mistico e rituale. Spesso, infatti, nella poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin troviamo degli elementi di tipo narrativo, impiegati per esplorare le azioni dei personaggi nel loro passato o presente, che finiscono per trasportare inaspettatamente il lettore in mondi altri, che vanno al di là della realtà materiale (Collins 2015, 131). E proprio questo accade in "Gloss/Clós/Glas", che si chiude in un luogo rimosso dalla realtà umana del protagonista – eppure a distanza di una semplice porta –, sigillando così la totale metamorfosi del contesto poetico, insieme a quello formale e semantico.

Nella concezione moderna del passaggio da un luogo all'altro la soglia designa un non-luogo, un concetto astratto che trova la sua realizzazione concreta solo nel punto di incontro tra due ambienti. Tuttavia, il confine così come è concepito nella nostra epoca non ha sempre avuto la stessa forma: anticamente, tra due territori distinti – ossia appartenenti a popoli diversi – esisteva una "zona neutra" dedicata agli scambi commerciali o agli scontri bellici, frequentemente costituita "da un deserto, da una palude e soprattutto da una foresta vergine in cui si può passare e cacciare in piena libertà" (Van Gennep 1981 [1909], 16). Questi luoghi, considerati sacri per la loro natura di spazio "sospeso tra due mondi", hanno rivestito un ruolo estremamente importante nella pratica dei riti di passaggio di molte civiltà, e tuttavia, con il passare del tempo, le loro dimensioni sono andate via via restringendosi, fino a ridursi "solo a una semplice pietra, una trave, una soglia" (16-17). Ciononostante, per quanto possa assottigliarsi dal punto di vista materiale, il margine non perde la propria valenza dal punto di vista ideale.

Ecco che la porta, presentata nella poesia come parte di un ambiente fiabesco – "Like a boy in a story faced with a small locked door" (v. 23) –, che contribuisce a rinforzarne i connotati di oggetto sacro e rituale, carico di una potenza simbolica ormai millenaria, non divide soltanto i poli del maschile e del femminile, ma – in quanto possiede una misura che non ha corrispondenza nel mondo reale – denota anche la distanza, o meglio, la vicinanza tra tutti gli altri oggetti e concetti significativi presenti nella poesia, che sono citati tra il settimo e il quindicesimo verso, in una lunga concatenazione di giustapposizioni.

Ora, avendo sottolineato le caratteristiche della soglia secondo la definizione di Van Gennep e ritornando brevemente alla prima strofa della poesia, è interessante notare la scelta del verbo

"Hunting" (v. 3), che rievoca una delle sacre attività a cui è riservato il margine, dominio di Artemide, dea dalla dubbia origine e dal "duplice aspetto", simbolo dell'alterità e divisa anch'essa tra due mondi: da una parte proprio quello della caccia e della spietata destrezza fisica; dall'altra quello della purezza verginale, votata alla dolcezza della danza e della musica (Vernant 1987 [1985], 19-20). L'essenza di questa divinità risiede proprio nella sua ambivalenza, nel suo essere essa stessa un punto di congiunzione tra luoghi diversi, e può essere scorta anche nelle caratteristiche di alcuni personaggi di Ní Chuilleanáin, come la figlia del macellaio che nella poesia "Street" (1989) ha sporcato di violento e passionale sangue rosso i pantaloni di colore bianco, puro e innocente.

Tali luoghi, come si è visto, possono essere di varia natura – prima fra tutte quella linguistica –, ma nel momento della loro giustapposizione condividono tutti una stessa caratteristica, ovvero la costante convergenza reciproca che tuttavia non può mai risolversi in una vera e propria sovrapposizione, o meglio, equivalenza. Una delle forme che assume questo concetto – che sta al centro degli studi sulla traduzione e da anni ne alimenta la discussione – nella poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin appare particolarmente significativa: "or as close as the note / on the uilleann pipe to the same note on the fiddle" (vv. 9-10). L'immagine musicale, dal sapore vagamente sveviano, evocata da questi versi ed elaborata in quelli immediatamente successivi – "as the finger / Bitten by the string, as the hairs of the bow / Bent by the repeated note" (vv. 11-13) – esprime proprio l'impossibilità di raggiungere una perfetta equivalenza, nonché tutto il duro lavoro che tale processo comporta e che il traduttore è nondimeno disposto a fare. Tanto la vicinanza tra una nota della cornamusa e la stessa nota suonata sul violino[1] quanto la stonatura tra il violino di Zeno Cosini e il pianoforte di Augusta Malfenti – "la stonatura è la via all'unisono" (Svevo 1997 [1923], 731) – sono significative rappresentazioni della ricerca linguistica secondo una delle più conosciute teorie sulla traduzione, ossia quella proposta da Walter Benjamin nel suo celeberrimo saggio "Il compito del traduttore":

> Come i frammenti di un vaso, per lasciarsi riunire e ricomporre, devono susseguirsi nei minimi dettagli, ma non perciò somigliarsi, così, invece di assimilarsi al significato dell'originale, la traduzione deve amorosamente, e fin nei minimi dettagli, ricreare nella propria lingua il suo modo di intendere, per far apparire così entrambe – come i cocci frammenti di uno stesso vaso – frammenti di una lingua più grande. (Benjamin 2014, 49)

Si potrebbe dire che il vaso benjaminiano – "*la pura lingua*", che emerge dall'incontro dei sensi di ogni singola traduzione, "un modo pur sempre provvisorio di fare i conti con l'estraneità" (44-45) – corrisponde, in "Gloss/Clós/Glas", al risultato cui aspira il protagonista del testo: "His nightwork, to make the price of his release: / two words, as opposite as *his* and *hers*" (vv. 5-6). La poesia è, a tutti gli effetti, uno studio sul processo di riunificazione delle lingue, che, nell'ultima strofa, si interseca con la ricerca di un'identità confusa e mutevole, anticipata molti versi prima dalla sovrapposizione dell'uomo con gli strumenti della propria indagine (Collins 2015, 131). La metamorfosi linguistica e formale, tramite la quale lo studioso approda alla lingua irlandese – "the language that has no word for *his*, / No word for *hers*" (vv. 21-22) – raggiunge il suo turbolento apice tra il sedicesimo e il ventesimo verso, in cui si nota quanto i confini tra mondo reale e letterario, umano e naturale siano ormai pressoché indistinguibili:

[1] Parlando dell'impossibilità di raggiungere la perfetta equivalenza tra due concetti o termini, è da notare che la traduzione italiana di "fiddle", "violino", non è tanto accurata quanto la parola originale, la quale indica uno strumento che, per il genere musicale in cui viene utilizzato, si distingue sicuramente dal più classico "violin". Lo stesso si può dire per la "cornamusa", che riduce all'osso l'essenza, ben più marcata e culturalmente specifica, dell' "uillean pipe".

The rags of language are streaming like weathervanes,
Like weeds in water they turn with the tide, as he turns
Back and forth the looking-glass pages, the words
Pouring and slippery like the silk thighs of the tomcat
Pouring through the slit in the fence, lightly
(Ní Chuilleanáin 2001, 46)

Tutti gli elementi descritti si mescolano e si confondono, eppure restituiscono al lettore un'immagine veritiera del mondo, anch'esso confuso e caotico, che si rispecchia nelle pagine dei libri del protagonista, "the looking-glass pages" (v. 18), le quali rappresentano così un passo intermedio, un punto di contatto fra due realtà adiacenti ma distinte. La fessura attraverso cui le parole, "like the silk thighs of the tomcat" (v. 19), possono migrare da una lingua all'altra, e dunque da una realtà all'altra, è ciò che permette al protagonista di trovare finalmente la lingua che lo libererà dalla propria prigionia intellettuale e di mettersi così nuovamente in contatto con il mondo esterno, anche se solo attraverso il senso dell'udito: "Who is that he can hear panting on the other side?" (v. 24). L'apparizione finale del secondo personaggio, una presenza femminile indicata soltanto dall'aggettivo possessivo "her" (v. 25), segnala la fine del viaggio poetico e l'avvenuto attraversamento della soglia, sigillando così il termine del processo di metamorfosi, per il quale l'indagine linguistica, oltre a far combaciare il maschile e il femminile, viene risolta con la trasformazione della parola in un atto silenzioso, nell'esalazione di un respiro (Collins 2015, 132).

Dato che, come si è detto, la ricerca delle parole in un'altra lingua è un atto volto alla ricostituzione di una lingua unica e primordiale, la conclusione della poesia – giocata sul doppio significato della parola irlandese "glas", che, come si è detto, significa sia "verde" che "serratura" – appare come un'ulteriore conferma di quanto si è sostenuto finora. È inoltre estremamente significativo il fatto che né la parola in irlandese né la lingua irlandese stessa siano menzionate nel componimento; l'unica traccia dell'avvenuta metamorfosi linguistica – seguita dall'ulteriore trasformazione, più contenuta ma non per questo meno rilevante, del colore della serratura – è l'accostamento dei due significati della parola in questione, "the locked *lock green*" (v. 25, enfasi mia), che lasciano in sospeso, nel luogo che sta al di là della soglia, la lingua ritrovata.

3. Oltre la prospettiva: "A Journey", "Love"

Il tema dello sconfinamento e dell'attraversamento della soglia, del viaggio al di là, torna anche nella penultima raccolta di Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Mother House* (2019), declinato secondo una serie di motivi che delineano anche le caratteristiche fondamentali della raccolta intera: una collezione di viaggi, cambiamenti di prospettiva, apparizioni oltremondane, ricerche di spazi nuovi e inesplorati. Allo stesso tempo, *The Mother House* è un omaggio alla Storia irlandese e alla storia personale dell'autrice, fatta di suore, conventi, luoghi significativi e personaggi particolari (cf. Mazzullo 2022), che popolano un mondo poetico costruito sulla ricerca di un altrove, di uno spazio liminale. Nonostante ciò, alcuni testi sono ancorati più di altri al mondo reale, e restituiscono al lettore dei paesaggi pieni di luci e ombre, forme e colori. È questo il caso di "A Journey" e "Love". Nella prima di queste due poesie – il cui titolo ne dichiara esplicitamente il tema, benché stavolta il viaggio rimanga entro i confini del mondo umanamente percepibile – la realtà viene descritta attraverso le parole e i nomi stampati sui cartelli, sui manifesti e sui volantini:

I went driving through the countries
Where I could read the names,
The posters outside cinemas,
The leaflets in churches;

The scripts began to slow me down
After the mountain border climb
And beyond the roadblock I could see
Only the shapes: the shed end

And the parked van, and the slow-
Motion shadow of somebody
At the edge of the road. I looked
Again at the deep wound in my arm;

It was all cleaned and covered up,
So as not to frighten the children.
(Ní Chuilleanáin 2019, 14)

La lingua, che nella poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin è spesso il mezzo attraverso il quale l'essere umano indaga se stesso ed esprime la propria appartenenza al mondo (Nordin 2001, 420) – nella poesia "Pygmalion's Image", che apre la raccolta *The Magdalene's Sermon* del 1989, è proprio la finale comparsa della verde foglia del linguaggio che sigilla l'avvenuta metamorfosi di Galatea da statua immobile a creatura vivente –, in "A Journey", viene utilizzata per dare forma alla realtà che scorre sotto l'occhio dell'io poetico. È interessante notare che la lirica, i cui versi non presentano uno schema rimico preciso, ha una forma che ricorda quella del sonetto inglese – ossia tre strofe di quattro versi e un distico finale –, poiché, sebbene il sonetto e la letteratura del periodo elisabettiano costituiscano una parte fondamentale della formazione poetica di Ní Chuilleanáin, ed emergano ormai quasi inconsciamente durante il processo creativo dell'autrice (Villar-Argáiz 2017, 227), questa forma particolare ha una tradizione ben precisa, in cui il paesaggio assume connotati spesso bucolici o addirittura edenici. Tale tradizione è tuttavia legata anche a una sperimentazione al di là dei limiti del genere e dei temi precedentemente considerati canonici, ed è proprio in questa vena che potremmo leggere "A Journey", ossia come lo stravolgimento di un codice prestabilito, a favore di una percezione e di una conseguente rappresentazione della realtà che dipendono dalla corruzione del rapporto tra l'osservatore e lo strumento utilizzato per descrivere ciò che viene osservato, in questo caso, la lingua.

La connessione tra la parola – la parola scritta, nello specifico – e l'individuo, in questo testo, risulta infatti molto enigmatica, in quanto, se nella prima strofa la scrittura segnala la presenza di luoghi conosciuti o riconoscibili – "where I could read the names, / the posters outside cinemas, / the leaflets in churches" (vv. 2-4) –, dalla seconda strofa in poi, una volta oltrepassato il confine, le parole e, di conseguenza, la realtà, diventano sempre più difficili da interpretare: "the scripts began to slow me down / after the mountain border climb / and beyond the roadblock I could see / only the shapes" (vv. 5-8). Ciò che inizialmente poteva sembrare un viaggio libero dalle costrizioni delle mappe e dei confini si trasforma in un'esperienza non del tutto piacevole, quasi inquietante, proprio perché si osserva uno strano mutamento nel rapporto tra la lingua, la realtà, e chi le percepisce entrambe: "the word 'script' functions like a small tear or incision through which the poem's strange mood begins to leak" (Ní Churreáin 2022, 144).

Il cambiamento della prospettiva che avviene al di là del confine, necessario nell'indagine dell'altrove verso cui la poesia tende, riflette anche la materiale difficoltà della comprensione di una lingua straniera in una terra straniera – un richiamo, senza dubbio, a ciò che si è evidenziato nell'analisi di "Gloss/Clós/Glas" –, e si concretizza nello spaesamento dello sguardo: l'occhio, che all'inizio riesce ad individuare degli edifici ben precisi – i cinema, le chiese –, si sofferma, al di là della soglia, su una realtà che non riconosce e per la quale non possiede la lingua adatta: le

persone e le cose sono solo ombre, e vengono percepite fuggevolmente, con la coda dell'occhio, ai margini di luoghi indefiniti: "the shed end / and the parked van, and the slow- / motion shadow of somebody / at the edge of the road" (vv. 8-11). Queste presenze misteriose, che la lingua fa emergere opacamente al limite della coscienza dell'osservatore, evocano un paesaggio infero e spettrale, in cui i personaggi e gli oggetti della vita di tutti i giorni diventano messaggeri ultraterreni e traghettatori di anime (Ní Churreáin 2022, 144).

La rottura dell'equilibrio della delicata relazione tra realtà e parola produce delle conseguenze drammatiche. Negli ultimi quattro versi il lettore viene messo a parte di un dettaglio che improvvisamente cambia il tono dell'intera poesia, ovvero la presenza di una ferita, invisibile sotto una fasciatura, ma non per questo meno sconcertante: "I looked / again at the deep wound in my arm; / it was all cleaned and covered up, / so as not to frighten the children" (vv. 11-14). L'esposizione della ferita, sinonimo di dolore e sofferenza, non solo individuale ma anche universale, è un'esperienza traumatica, che cionondimeno, nel contesto dell'esplorazione dell'oltre poetico, risulta anche rivelatoria. Il lettore capisce, infatti, di non avere alcun controllo sullo svolgimento della narrazione, e assiste a un completo stravolgimento della prospettiva, che, dal punto di vista unico dell'io poetico, attivo e padrone della propria scelta di viaggiare e di interpretare la lingua del mondo, si sposta su quello collettivo, passivo, innocente, ma anche incontrollabile, dei bambini (Ní Churreáin 2022, 145).

Il problema della mescolanza di prospettive diverse compare nuovamente nella poesia "Love", in cui il paesaggio, visto attraverso il vetro del finestrino di un treno, si presenta come un insieme luci, colori, suoni e rumori:

> The view from the train is better than a dream.
> A man is gazing down his lines of beetroot,
> a lone tractor waits at the level crossing,
> one light glowing although it's not quite dark.
> A doll has fallen into the gloom of the hedge,
> her frilly skirt still white. Walls come closer,
> lights on Clara station cast their orange trawl.
> Beyond its margin the engines
> vibrate in the carpark, harmonizing the hum of love.
>
> A newspaper spread on a dashboard
> catches the last light from an office window;
> a parent's overcoated shape is reading,
> waiting for the noisy gang that clings
> by the doors with their luggage while
> the wheels are slowing and finally slide and stand.
> (Nì Chuilleanáin 2019, 16)

Il testo segue uno sguardo che, verso dopo verso, si confonde sempre di più con sguardi estranei, presentando così un paesaggio via via meno naturale e, a tratti, sinistro; finché, inoltre, l'udito non prende il sopravvento sulla vista, rendendo l'esperienza sensoriale e percettiva ancora più ambigua e disorientante. Anche l'incipit di questa poesia, come quello di "A Journey", è fuorviante, e l'illusione di una vista migliore di un sogno – "The view from the train is better than a dream" (v. 1) – viene ben presto dissolta da una realtà immersa nella penombra, illuminata da luci artificiali, fatta di trattori solitari e passaggi a livello chiusi. L'atmosfera viene resa ancora più inquietante dalla descrizione di una bambola, abbandonata nell'oscurità di una siepe, che non riesce del tutto a celare la sua gonna bianca: "A doll has fallen into the gloom of the hedge, / her

frilly skirt still white" (vv. 5-6). Il colore bianco del vestito, insieme alla natura dell'oggetto – un giocattolo –, richiamano alla mente immagini di purezza e innocenza, che contrastano fortemente con la scena descritta; questo è il primo e forse più evidente segnale di ciò che sta avvenendo nella poesia: il progressivo spostamento della prospettiva provoca una distorsione della realtà percepita.

Questo si evince anche dall'uso che Ní Chuilleanáin fa del colore, un elemento che vale sempre la pena prendere in considerazione. I primi tre colori che incontriamo nel testo sono quelli che compongono una tradizionale triade: il rosso, il nero e il bianco. Per quanto costituiscano una solida fonte di rimandi culturali e letterari, questi tre colori vengono presentati al lettore sotto forme corrotte, come nel caso del bianco, che abbiamo già sottolineato, o in maniera velata, come è invece il caso del rosso e del nero, che appaiono infatti indirettamente nel colore delle barbabietole, viste oltretutto attraverso uno sguardo altrui – "A man is gazing down his lines of beetroot" (v. 2) –, e nel colore della notte che ancora deve arrivare – "one light glowing although it's not quite dark" (v. 3). Alla triade viene poi aggiunto un altro colore che spiazza completamente il lettore e conferma un avvenuto passaggio dal mondo naturale a quello artificiale, ossia l'arancione, un colore moderno, abbagliante, che proviene appunto dai lampioni che illuminano la strada – "lights on Clara station cast their orange trawl" (v. 7).

Eppure, al di là della soglia che porta nel mondo dell'oltre – "Beyond its margin" (v. 8) –, se la vista aveva creato un paesaggio inquietante e distorto, l'udito trasforma a sua volta la realtà percepita e restituisce al testo un senso di tranquillità e sicurezza, dato dal motore primario della vita, l'amore: "the engines / vibrate in the carpark, harmonizing the hum of love" (vv. 8-9). Il continuo stravolgimento della prospettiva rende impossibile liberarsi del tutto del disagio ormai percepito nei versi precedenti, ma questi ultimi versi permettono al lettore di fermarsi momentaneamente, come il treno si ferma alla stazione, e connettere il significato del testo al titolo della poesia. L'immagine del genitore che aspetta in macchina l'arrivo della "rumorosa comitiva", composta presumibilmente dai figli e dalle figlie, rende giustizia al senso complessivo di "Love", e riscatta la visione malinconica che si era incontrata in "A Journey", restituendo al viaggio la propria simbologia: una metafora della vita, che ha un inizio e una fine, e che scorre imperterrita, nonostante gli ostacoli e le fermate, lungo un paesaggio fatto di bellezza e inquietudine, amore e nostalgia (cfr. Graham 2022).

4. Oltre la realtà: "The Cat Dinner", "Space"

Quella di Ní Chuilleanáin è, lo abbiamo visto, una poesia piena di bordi e confini, e le loro intersezioni creano le strutture tematiche portanti di molti dei suoi testi (Haberstroh 2007, 84). Ma i punti in cui limiti e confini si toccano non sono gli unici che danno vita a queste poesie, che prendono spesso forma anche quando le barriere tra mondi diversi non si incontrano, nei luoghi dalla prospettiva privilegiata che esistono tra altri luoghi, e che finora abbiamo definito, seguendo l'esempio di Van Gennep, *margini*. In questi spazi dell'oltre, la poesia assume forme indefinite e toni misteriosi, e offre ai lettori un punto di vista – o più d'uno – insolito e intrigante sulla realtà, sfidando la tradizionale nozione di percezione basata sul senso, sullo spazio e sul tempo. Molti testi contenuti in *The Mother House* appartengono a questa categoria, tra cui "The Cat Dinner" e "Space". Iniziamo dalla prima, che evocando l'imperscrutabile figura del gatto, esplora il sottile confine che divide il mondo dei vivi da quello dei morti:

> We knew they were there, their flattened black masks,
> and that when they withdrew into lunar shadow
> there would be no witness, a cobwebby silence.

Lips open but speech fails, round the half-cleared table,
sitting there, but strangers, our fussy notes shuffled,
lying at random. We made the long journey

to deliver the gesture, but who has noticed us?
Like the food left outside for visiting spirits
which is gone the next morning, but did the cats eat it?
(Ní Chuilleanáin 2019, 23)

La poesia inizia con una affermazione dal sapore visionario, oracolare: "We knew they were there" (v. 1). Nonostante il verbo al passato, che corrompe in parte la sua natura profetica, la frase, con una sinuosa allitterazione, rivela delle presenze altrimenti celate alla vista; e tuttavia, nessuno sguardo e nessun orecchio potrà essere testimone della loro apparizione – "there would be no witness" (v. 3). Il silenzio e il segreto sono due elementi ricorrenti nella produzione di Ní Chuilleanáin, e non sono mai casuali o privi di significato (Faragó 2007, 68); infatti, il silenzio che conclude la prima strofa e nel quale svaniscono le presenze misteriose determina, nella seconda strofa, l'impossibilità della lingua di fungere da efficace strumento di comunicazione: "Lips open but speech fails" (v. 4). Non solo, ma anche la scrittura è inutile, ed è ridotta all'immagine di un abbozzato e fallito vaticinio, carte sparpagliate casualmente su un tavolo, anch'esse tanto incapaci di trasmettere il loro messaggio, quanto lo sono i commensali di recepirlo: "round the half-cleared table, / sitting there, but strangers, our fussy notes shuffled, / lying at random" (vv. 4-6). Infine, poiché ogni tentativo di comunicazione è fallito, viene meno anche lo scopo ultimo del viaggio intrapreso dai protagonisti del testo, che rimangono incerti sulla riuscita e sugli effetti della propria impresa: "We made the long journey / to deliver the gesture, but who has noticed us?" (vv. 6-7).

La manifestazione alla luce della luna e la successiva scomparsa nell'ombra di queste creature senza nome – potrebbero essere gatti, come suggerisce il titolo, ma anche spiriti – è un evento che lascia presumere l'esistenza di un'apertura nella barriera che divide due mondi diversi, e la presenza, dunque, di una soglia. La struttura della poesia stessa riflette questa ripartizione spaziale: i due spazi vuoti che separano le tre strofe, di tre versi ciascuna, rappresentano i confini che racchiudono le due realtà vicine, in mezzo alle quali sta lo spazio ulteriore del margine, rappresentato dalla strofa centrale. Ma più di ogni altra cosa, ciò che conferisce alla poesia la sua natura liminale è l'atmosfera enigmatica, costruita attraverso l'incedere di una sintassi zoppicante, l'accumulo progressivo di immagini descritte soltanto a metà, e l'insinuazione finale di un dubbio che non viene mai risolto: "but did the cats eat it?" (v. 9).

La domanda che conclude la poesia e che viene lasciata in sospeso situa "The Cat Dinner" in un altro margine, quello delle creature fantastiche e degli spiriti, che popolano i miti, le leggende, e i racconti del folklore, e alimentano una tradizione piena di superstizioni. Il titolo, come si è detto, evoca il gatto quale animale sfuggevole e misterioso, che caccia e si ciba durante la notte; il gatto, in particolare se di colore nero, è anche un animale che, nella tradizione folkloristica e fiabesca, è usualmente associato alle streghe e a cattivi auspici, ed è il protagonista di numerose pratiche superstiziose. Ma poiché dal testo non possiamo dedurre se siano stati davvero dei gatti a mangiare gli avanzi della cena, rimane aperta la possibilità, suggerita anche nella poesia, che il cibo sia stato consumato dagli spiriti, ai quali è riservata una tradizione superstiziosa molto specifica: "Like the food left outside for visiting spirits / which is gone the next morning" (vv. 8-9). Torna in gioco, dunque, il rituale e il ruolo che esso ricopre, come ha affermato Ní Chuilleanáin stessa, nella qualificazione dello spazio. La cucina e, più precisamente, la tavola sono luoghi dove si celebrano atti religiosi – i pasti – e in cui si riuniscono tanto gli uomini quanto gli spiriti dei defunti e persino le divinità (Deonna, Renard 1994 [1961], 31-35). Nell'antica

Roma, per esempio, gli spiriti degli antenati, che divennero poi i Lari, le divinità domestiche e del focolare, avevano un loro posto d'onore intorno alla mensa e ad essi erano dedicate molte usanze relative al cibo e alle maniere da utilizzare intorno alla tavola: era proibito spegnere la lampada e spazzare il pavimento dopo i pasti, e si doveva lasciare sempre qualcosa sulla tavola, perché gli spiriti potessero nutrirsi (84-87).

Naturalmente, il richiamo alle tradizioni del passato è funzionale, nella poetica di Ní Chuilleanáin, alla costruzione di una tradizione nuova, o, perlomeno, a una riformulazione di quella preesistente, in particolare, come abbiamo visto, per quanto riguarda il ruolo della donna e dei personaggi femminili nella letteratura. Nella ricerca di un posto che appartenga alle donne nella storia letteraria, sia come autrici che come personaggi, la questione dello spazio fisico da loro occupato – sia esso lo spazio dedicato al rito e alla tradizione, o quello in cui si svolgono le azioni della vita di tutti i giorni – assume un'importanza cruciale. Tale rivendicazione è necessaria perché la donna possa far sentire la propria voce in ambienti dove canonicamente non è mai stata presente; tuttavia, ciò comporta la nascita di una nozione secondo cui la donna può raggiungere la libertà d'espressione soltanto dopo "essersi fatta spazio", ossia dopo essersi impadronita di uno spazio ormai vuoto, che non può dunque contribuire, come invece dovrebbe, alla costruzione della sua identità (Collins 2009, 142). È per questo che è interessante vedere come nella poesia "Space", al contrario di quanto ci aspetteremmo, la protagonista sia proprio alla ricerca di uno spazio vuoto:

> She has looked for a space, empty so she can grow,
> and three dimensions seemed enough. The room
> contains her, the white ceramic tiles visible
> beyond the archway, where the low door thrown open
> swings: all is void, and the packed stuff
> menacing her for months in toppling stacks
> is cleared and abandoned
> – just
> then without warning
> down on the river
> the ship that lay moored
> for three whole days, its
> temporary lights,
> empty decks shining,
> begins its journey
> again, silently,
> stiffly almost, down
> to where the river
> spreads wide and smooth
> open to the tides
> and slips off – smaller –
> out on the channel.
> (Ní Chuilleanáin 2019, 48)

L'iniziale sorpresa per l'apparente cambio di rotta sul piano ideologico viene tuttavia vanificata dall'immediata spiegazione sul perché la protagonista abbia fatto questa scelta: "empty so she can grow" (v. 1). Il vuoto, allora, appare necessario per favorire una crescita personale; eppure i versi successivi sembrano ribaltare ancora una volta le nostre aspettative: "three dimensions

seemed enough. The room / contains her" (vv. 2-3). A una prima lettura, le tre dimensioni cui il testo fa riferimento bastano a far sentire il lettore, così come la protagonista, a suo agio; tante sono, d'altronde, le dimensioni che l'essere umano è in grado di concepire. Ciononostante, poiché lo scopo della poesia è proprio quello di andare al di là della realtà percepibile attraverso i cinque sensi, si intuisce un certo senso di instabilità, dato dall'espressione "seemed enough", di cui bisogna notare il verbo al passato – tre dimensioni erano sufficienti precedentemente, ma, forse, ora potrebbero non esserlo più –, e dal verbo "contains", che suggerisce l'esatto contrario di ciò che occorre alla protagonista per crescere. Questa rapida successione di pensieri contrastanti, che riflette in qualche modo il processo creativo, apre le porte all'esplorazione di spazi e concetto che trascendono l'umana comprensione.

Ecco che, infatti, appare il varco che conduce la poetessa, il personaggio e il lettore al di là: "beyond the archway, where the low door thrown open / swings" (vv. 4-5). L'apertura, che si trova alla metà precisa dei primi sette versi – separati dai seguenti da un'interruzione sintattica e grafica –, permette alla poesia di oltrepassare la soglia che divide la realtà dal mondo dell'oltre, in cui tutte le immagini che abbiamo già incontrato vengono amplificate: "empty" (v. 1) si trasforma in "void" (v. 5), "contains" (v. 2) viene intensificato da "packed" (v. 5), e il sentimento positivo del primo verso, ispirato dalla voglia di crescere in uno spazio incontaminato dalla presenza altrui, è sostituito da un minaccioso senso di abbandono: "all is void, and the packed stuff / menacing her for months in toppling stacks / is cleared and abandoned" (vv. 5-7). Finché, alla fine del settimo verso, con un'unica parola separata da tutte le altre e sospesa nella pagina, non si incontra una pausa che stravolge improvvisamente la prospettiva, ponendo il lettore di fronte a una scena completamente diversa: "– just / then without warning / down on the river" (vv. 7-9). Il paesaggio che, al di là della soglia, si apre sotto i nostri occhi – in cui si scorgono le effimere luci di una nave e i suoi ponti scintillanti – trasmette una sensazione di calma e tranquillità, che arresta il precipitoso accumularsi di negatività che si avvertiva nei versi precedenti. L'esplorazione del sé, impossibile, nella prima parte del testo, per la presenza di pareti e mattonelle, pur incentivata dall'apertura del varco, si riflette, in questa seconda parte, nella silenziosa partenza della nave lungo il fiume, verso il suo delta e fino all'immensa distesa del mare, sinonimo di conoscenza e possibilità.

5. Un duetto poetico: "The Informant" e "An Informant"

La nave e il varco quali simboli privilegiati del viaggio e della necessità di esplorare realtà diverse, siano esse lontanissime o immediatamente accessibili, compaiono anche in "An Informant" (sempre appartenente alla raccolta *The Mother House*), che, oltre a riprendere il tema del margine e dell'attraversamento della soglia, condivide alcune caratteristiche – tra cui il titolo, che differisce solo per l'articolo – con un'altra poesia di Ní Chuilleanáin, apparsa molti anni prima in *The Magdalene Sermon*, intitolata "The Informant". Questo testo meno recente, che a una prima lettura risulta alquanto enigmatico, si rivela un'elaborata costruzione sull'elemento chiave della soglia fra mondi diversi, intorno a cui si realizzano inoltre molteplici opposizioni, sociali, temporali, sensoriali:

> Underneath the photograph
> of the old woman at her kitchen table
> with a window beyond (fuchsias, a henhouse, the sea)
> are entered: her name and age, her late husband's occupation
> (a gauger), her birthplace, not here
> but in another parish, near the main road.
> She is sitting with tea at her elbow

and her own fairy cakes, baked that morning
for the young man who listens now to the tape
of her voice changing, telling the story,
and hears himself asking,
Did you ever see it yourself?
Once I saw it.
Can you describe it? But the sound
takes off like a jet engine, the machine
gone haywire, a tearing, an electric
tempest. Then a stitch of silence.
Something has been lost, the voice resumes
quietly now,
The locks
forced upward, a shift of air
pulled over the head. The face bent
and the eyes winced, like craning
to look in the core of a furnace.
The man unraveled
back to a snag, a dark thread.

Then what happened?
The person disappears.
For a time he stays close by and speaks
in a child's voice. He is not seen, and
you must leave food out for him, and be careful
where you throw water after you wash your feet.
And then he is gone?
He is gone after a while.

You find this more strange than the yearly miracle
of the loaf turning into a child?
Well, that's natural, she says,
I often baked the bread for that myself.
(Ní Chuilleanáin 2020, 140-141, italics in original)

I primi tre versi del componimento denotano immediatamente una sorta di straniamento dalla realtà e un capovolgimento della prospettiva, attraverso l'annidarsi di immagini dentro altre immagini, che diventano mano a mano più remote nel tempo e nello spazio. La descrizione inizia con una fotografia – uno dei frequenti riferimenti al mondo moderno che troviamo nelle poesie di Ní Chuilleanáin, – che ritrae una vecchia donna seduta al tavolo della cucina, la cui finestra si affaccia su un aldilà in cui si intravedono fiori, un pollaio, e il mare. La dispersione del contesto poetico, già creata di per sé dalla presenza della fotografia – indicata da Ní Chuilleanáin come "a very inadequate representation of the woman" (Nordin 2002-2003, 81) –, viene ampliata tanto da raggiungere con lo sguardo un'inconcepibile vastità cosmica. Inoltre, la fotografia rappresenta qui la prima occorrenza della simbologia della soglia: il presente della poesia è rimosso dal suo stesso oggetto, che rimane invece nel passato. Tutti i protagonisti che compaiono all'interno del componimento sono contemporaneamente presenti e assenti (Faragó 2009, 302).

La sequenza che determina questa distorsione spazio-temporale, tuttavia, non si esaurisce con questi versi, ma anzi si protrae nei successivi tre attraverso l'introduzione di informazioni salienti che riguardano la donna, fornendo qualche indizio sul contesto che il lettore si trova

ad osservare: "her name and age, her late husband's occupation / (a gauger), her birthplace, not here / but in another parish, near the main road" (vv. 4-6). Tutto ciò che riguarda la donna è connotato dalla lontananza e dall'alterità: "her late husband", "not here", "another", "near"; si tratta quindi di una figura che possiamo osservare, tramite lo sguardo dell'altro personaggio presente sulla scena, solo perifericamente (Faragó 2009, 302). Non può sfuggire, inoltre, un altro importante elemento che segnala la presenza della soglia, ossia il mestiere del marito defunto, "gauger" – un agente del dazio, una sorta di ispettore di dogana.

Nell'ultima parte della prima strofa troviamo finalmente un chiarimento sulla situazione: stiamo osservando un giovane uomo che ascolta una registrazione della voce della donna che abbiamo già incontrato. Spiegandosi, tuttavia, la poesia si complica ancora di più. Infatti, attraverso una piccola spia lessicale, che indica comunemente un oggetto del tutto normale – "*fairy* cakes" (v. 8, enfasi mia) –, il lettore viene introdotto nell'ambito principale della poesia, ovvero quello fiabesco e folklorico. Nei versi successivi, dunque, si sviluppa un alternarsi di domande e risposte relative a eventi sovrannaturali pressoché impossibili da rievocare, gettando dubbi anche sulla natura della donna intervistata, la cui figura può essere interpretata come quella di una moderna strega (Batten 2007, 6).

Lo scambio di informazioni tra i due protagonisti, che ora sappiamo essere una vecchia donna e un giovane uomo, fa sì che si vengano a creare delle forti contrapposizioni e ambiguità di varia natura. In primo luogo, possiamo osservare l'opposizione tra maschile e femminile, dalla quale ha origine il componimento: non è tanto l'evento sovrannaturale in sé a essere rilevante, quanto la relazione tra chi ne possiede la conoscenza – ossia, la donna – e chi vuole appropriarsi di tale conoscenza per ridurla in qualche modo a una forma facilmente gestibile, attraverso strumenti che non sono in grado di contenerla – l'uomo (Haberstroh 1994, 64). In secondo luogo, troviamo la contrapposizione tra vista e udito: la sequenza dei versi a cavallo tra la fine della prima strofa e l'inizio della seconda (vv. 12-16) ne è una magistrale rappresentazione. Il giovane sente la propria voce chiedere alla donna se abbia mai assistito al fenomeno, rappresentato enigmaticamente da un semplice "it" – "*Did you ever see it yourself?*" (v. 12) –, ma nel momento in cui la donna si accinge a descrivere l'apparizione, il registratore si rompe e quella sezione dell'intervista va perduta per sempre: "*Can you describe it?* But the sound / takes off like a jet engine, the machine / gone haywire, a tearing, an electric / tempest" (vv. 13-16). Come abbiamo già visto succedere in altri testi di Ní Chuilleanáin, il suono prende il posto dell'immagine e rovescia violentemente il contesto sensoriale precedentemente introdotto, portando in questo caso all'assoluto silenzio: "Then a stitch of silence" (v. 16). Potremmo quindi aggiungere l'opposizione tra il passato della conversazione registrata e il presente della registrazione ascoltata; tra la naturalezza dell'interazione umana e l'artificialità dello strumento elettromagnetico; tra la vita e la morte – questa era, dopotutto, la vera natura del fenomeno di cui la donna è testimone (Villar-Argáiz 2017, 228) –, tra il sovrannaturale per così dire "naturale" e l'altrove del mondo religioso, che appare nell'ultima strofa dietro all'immagine dello "*yearly miracle / of the loaf turning into a child*" (vv. 31-32).

Vale la pena indugiare anche su un altro elemento che genera un'irrisolvibile ambiguità. Sebbene, secondo quanto afferma Ní Chuilleanáin, si possa supporre che l'informatore a cui si riferisce il titolo della poesia, "The Informant", sia la donna (Haberstroh 1994, 64; Nordin 2002-2003, 81), il modo in cui il componimento è costruito potrebbe suggerire altrimenti. In effetti, l' "informant" – parola già di per sé ambigua – potrebbe rappresentare anche il giovane che raccoglie racconti del folklore, oppure l'uomo del racconto che ha vissuto sulla propria pelle gli effetti dell'apparizione, o addirittura il registratore stesso, che custodirà dentro di sé il segreto senza mai più rivelarlo al mondo esterno (Faragó 2009, 303). Il silenzio del registratore,

che dimostra la qualità ineffabile di certe verità altre e aliene alla nostra esperienza, è un'indicazione di un'altra caratteristica della produzione di Ní Chuilleanáin, ossia l'importanza della segretezza, dell'indicibilità (Holdridge 2007, 115).

Questo elemento è quello che si lega in maggior misura alla dimensione del sacro, della natura e del mito – mondi che forse appartengono ad ambiti distinti ma che rappresentano ciascuno un tipo di altrove, di aldilà rispetto all'umano. La comunicabilità di un'informazione è direttamente connessa alla sua esistenza storica; di conseguenza, laddove è impossibile comunicare – come succede, a dispetto del suo titolo, in "The Informant" – la storia, con tutti i suoi canoni e preconcetti, viene la storia stessa cancellata, il che porta a un avvicinamento a quei mondi altri che la poesia tenta instancabilmente di svelare e alla vera realtà delle cose (119). Stabilito questo, diventa chiaro il motivo per cui la produzione di Ní Chuilleanáin sia piena di varchi, soglie e confini da attraversare, e perché questa poesia in particolare, che affronta il tema dell'alterità su molteplici fronti, prenda la sua specifica forma. Per poter partecipare a ciò che accade nel componimento il lettore deve necessariamente attraversare più soglie di natura diversa: la fotografia, il nastro elettromagnetico, il racconto della donna; tutti questi elementi rappresentano i gradi di mediazione esistenti tra ciò che è accaduto e chi sta leggendo la poesia. La presenza consecutiva di questi spazi liminali fa sì che in "The Informant" venga a crearsi uno spazio ulteriore che esiste tra due confini, in sospeso fra due mondi, e che Arnold Van Gennep ha definito *margine* (1981, 16). Ogni volta che oltrepassiamo una di queste soglie, ci troviamo proprio in un margine, in un altrove rispetto allo spazio che occupavamo precedentemente, e con noi, anche gli stessi personaggi si trovano ad occupare quella serie di spazi liminali che, stratificandosi, costituiscono la struttura portante del componimento.

Ritornando a *The Mother House* e alla poesia "An Informant", vediamo come tematiche simili e affini riaffiorino a distanza di molti anni nell'espressione poetica dell'autrice:

> When I asked her about the fate of the mission ship
> sent away so many years ago
> (and we knew then they'd be lucky to make land)
> I could see she knew. She couldn't stop talking,
> but her words sounded foreign.
> I heard her sigh at last, taking off her gloves,
> then silently picking up one of the lamps,
> and she moved to the front door.
> It was stiff, it hadn't been opened
> since the last visit of the Vicar Forane,
> but we found the key and pulled it wide.
> She laid the lamp down in the doorway
> and looked along the broad walk, to the gate
> that is a roofed arch, with an alcove
> intended for laying down a coffin,
> so the bearers could take a rest. Sighing,
> lifting the lamp, she carried it down there,
> and I understood the words she used,
> and what she wanted, for the action
> to be complete. That we would leave it
> there in the archway until the oil was spent
> and the lamp died of its own accord.

> The flame that had flickered pale in the daylight
> shone steadily in the deep shade of the arch.
> This is the short form, she said, we must
> do this at least. This much we owe their names.
> (Ní Chuilleanáin 2019, 56)

La prima e più evidente similitudine che intercorre tra questo testo e quello analizzato precedentemente è il fatto che entrambi si sviluppano a partire da una conversazione, che nel caso di "The Informant" assume il carattere più formale dell'intervista. Il dettaglio fondamentale e condiviso, indipendentemente dal registro adottato, è la presenza di uno scambio tra due personaggi, durante il quale vengono prima poste delle domande e poi fornite delle risposte; questo tipo di struttura porta in primo piano, in entrambe le poesie, il problema dell'efficacia della comunicazione e dell'intervento del silenzio laddove la comunicazione fallisce. In "The Informant", infatti, abbiamo visto come, nel momento in cui la vecchia donna intervistata dal giovane dovrebbe accingersi a descrivere l'evento sovrannaturale di cui è stata testimone, la parola non sia più uno strumento efficiente e venga immediatamente sostituita dal silenzio: "*Can you describe it?* But the sound / takes off like a jet engine, the machine / gone haywire, a tearing, an electric / tempest. Then a stitch of silence" (Ní Chuilleanáin 2020, 140, vv. 13-16). In "An Informant", possiamo notare una simile successione di eventi: inizialmente, dopo che la domanda è stata posta – "When I asked her about the fate of the mission ship" (v. 1) –, l'interlocutrice risponde, ma le sue parole non bastano a comunicare ciò che sa – "I could see she knew. She couldn't stop talking, / but her words sounded foreign" (vv. 2-3) –, ed è allora che il mezzo di comunicazione tra i due personaggi cambia natura e, dalla lingua parlata, passa prima al segno e poi al silenzio: "I heard her *sigh* at last, taking off her gloves, / then *silently* picking up one of the lamps" (vv. 6-7, enfasi mia).

Nello sviluppo della narrazione, in "An Informant", a questa nuova strategia comunicativa si aggiunge un ulteriore dettaglio, che collega il testo a un altro tema importante, affrontato anche in "The Informant", ovvero quello del rito e della ritualità. Infatti, il testo presente prosegue con un verso che mette in risalto il valore significativo dell'azione e del gesto rituale: "and she moved to the front door" (v. 8). La sequenza successiva, che copre più della seconda metà della prima strofa, descrive una lunga serie di gesti che potremmo identificare come la descrizione dei passaggi di un rituale. Una sequenza simile, benché molto più breve, appare anche in "The Informant", quando la donna descrive cosa accade e come ci si deve comportare nel caso in cui l'evento sovrannaturale abbia luogo: "The person disappears. / For a time he stays close by and speaks / in a child's voice. He is not seen, and / you must leave food out for him, and be careful / where you throw water after you wash your feet" (vv. 25-29). Questo tipo di rituale è legato alle tradizioni folkloristiche, mentre nel testo di "An Informant", il contesto si avvicina di più a quello religioso, che tuttavia non è assente in "The Informant"; ma, indipendentemente dall'origine e dallo scopo del rituale, ciò che risulta fondamentale è la presenza del rituale stesso, qualunque sia la sua forma.

Inoltre, vale la pena notare che, anche nel testo di "The Informant", le norme ritualistiche relative all'interazione con le creature che popolano il mondo dell'oltre sono legate al cibo, come si è visto in "The Cat Dinner", e stabiliscono chiaramente una distinzione tra le due diverse realtà: il cibo deve essere lasciato *fuori*, e si deve prestare attenzione a *dove* si svolgono determinate azioni. Tale delimitazione presuppone quindi l'esistenza di una soglia, cioè la linea che divide il mondo degli esseri umani dal mondo sovrannaturale, e di un margine, ossia dello spazio liminale in cui il sovrannaturale si manifesta. In "An Informant", la presenza di questo margine è segnalata nuovamente dal varco che funge da tramite tra il mondo dei vivi e il mondo dei morti:

"to the gate / that is a roofed arch, with an alcove / intended for laying down a coffin, / so the bearers could take a rest" (vv. 13-16). Come si è sottolineato più volte, questo tipo di limite non è un'entità monodimensionale, una semplice linea, ma occupa uno spazio ben preciso, dunque tridimensionale, che, tuttavia, non sottostà alle stesse regole della realtà; è proprio in questo spazio, in cui anche la luce del giorno sembra svanire del tutto sotto un'ombra più intensa del normale, che il rituale raggiunge il suo culmine: "The flame that had flickered pale in the daylight / shone steadily in the deep shade of the arch" (vv. 23-24). Una volta portata a termine la sequenza dei gesti necessari, la parola torna ad essere uno strumento funzionale alla comunicazione; dopo aver compiuto tutte le azioni di tipo gestuale – "she moved" (v. 8), "She laid" (v. 12), "she carried" (v. 17) –, l'interlocutrice ha finalmente la certezza di essere compresa – "and I understood the words she used" (v. 18) – e, dunque, non solo può utilizzare la lingua, ma può dedicarla ai nomi – le parole fondamentali della comunicazione tra esseri umani – degli altri: "This is the short form, she said, we must / do this at least. This much we owe their names" (vv. 25-26).

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"Or am I seeking home?": Arrivals, Departures, and/or Returns as Identity-Shaping Experiences in Contemporary (Non-)Irish Women's Literature*

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Abstract:

A land historically marked by the sorrows of astonishingly numerous (in-voluntary) "emigrants" and/or "exiles", in recent decades Ireland has also undergone remarkably significant waves of immigration and return migration, which have inevitably questioned the nature of "true Irishness" today. Drawing on fictional and non-fictional narratives of metaphorical and/or literal (e)migration produced by the contemporary generation of (non-)Irish *women* writers, this paper aims to shed light on the personal and national implications related to a woman's "decision"/"necessity" to seek, leave, and/or return to a "new" *home* away from *home*, and therefore to her attempt to "reconcile" with or forge her identity/ies and ambivalent longing and sense of (not) belonging elsewhere or within an ever-changing Ireland.

Keywords: Escape, Otherness, Reconciliation, (Un)Familiarity, Vantage Point

I. Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: a Short History of (E)Migration to/from Ireland

"About 10 million Irish men, women, and children have emigrated from Ireland since 1700": this is how Kevin Kenny, among the most distinguished scholars of the Irish diaspora, begins his recent "Two Diasporic Moments in Irish Emigration History: The Famine Generation and the Contemporary Era" (2019, 43). In order to emphasise the Irish migratory pheno-

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menon's devastating impact and persistent importance since its earliest phases – attested well before the Great Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century –, Kenny further adds as follows:

> Remarkably, this figure is more than twice the population of the Republic of Ireland today (4.8 million), it exceeds the population of the island of Ireland (6.7 million), and it is higher than the population of Ireland at its historical peak (8.5 million) on the eve of the Great Famine in 1845. (*Ibidem*)

Destined predominantly for North America and Great Britain, Irishmen and women left their *home*land in staggeringly high numbers in search of better opportunities elsewhere. Whether should their emigration be considered (voluntary) "opportunity" or (involuntary) "exile", however, it is extremely difficult to claim, today, without easy generalisation about an experience which typically involved/s diverse implications related to each emigrant's gender, age, economic background, destination, etc. Emigrants' (un)willingness to leave – nowadays, as in the past – has indubitably figured among the most debated topics related to the Irish diaspora: a life-, identity-altering experience deeply marked by "the culture of exile" which intesified and spread widely within and outside Ireland's national borders, in particular, throughout the nineteenth century (Miller 1985, 102-130), the migratory phenomenon underwent remarkably significant changes over the three main waves of emigration from twentieth-century Ireland – the 1920s/30s, 1950s, and 1980s – related, in particular, to emigrants' overall "easier", albeit inevitably ambivalent, relationship(s) with *home*, wherever it might be[2].

In his aforementioned article, Kenny further states that:

> The history of Irish emigration consisted of five distinct waves – the eighteenth century, the pre-Famine era, the Famine era, the post-Famine era, and the twentieth century and beyond – that varied considerably in their causes, regional origins, and destinations as well as by class, gender, and religious composition. To collapse these separate phases into a single type is to rob history of its diversity and diminish its protagonists. (2019, 51)

While, nowadays, the extraordinarily high numbers of men and women who left their *home*land's shores over the nineteenth century – in particular, during and in the aftermath of the most catastrophic episode in Ireland's history – continue to be the foremost reference point in the study of the Irish diaspora, the late-nineteenth- and, even more so, twentieth-century waves of emigration doubtlessly acquire paramount importance in the Irish context: "[v]irtually alone among the European emigrants to America", claims Kevin Kenny, "Irish women emigrated in the same numbers as men, even slightly outnumbering them in several of the post-famine decades" (2000, 138) and onwards. Women emigrants' significant numerical preponderance over their male

[2] An emigrant's difficult relationship with *home* following/due to her/his (in-voluntary) "decision"/"necessity" to leave emerges prominently, for instance, in Phyllis Izzard's words collected in Dunne 2021 [2003]. The last of seven surviving children, Izzard left for London at seventeen because her brothers and sisters, emigrated because there were no jobs at *home* (2021, 31), were already there. Despite the displacement which she vividly experienced on the other side of the Irish Sea, Izzard managed to start a "new life" in England, where she also gave birth to two sons aware of their Irish origins, who nonetheless did not ever feel "the need to look for their roots – they were always quite content to be English" (49). Still, her sense of not belonging anywhere emerges distinctively in Izzard's testimony, in particular when asked by Dunne, "[w]here is home for you?" (*ibidem*, italics in original): "I find it a strange phenomenon that when I'm here I talk about going 'home' to Ireland, and when I'm 'at home' in Ireland, I talk about coming back here as 'going home'. I must admit there is a sense for me of not belonging totally in either place. Even though we have made a home here, 'home' is where we were born and where our heart is. Our hearts have never left there. I very often have the feeling of being neither one thing nor the other" (*ibidem*).

counterparts in the astonishing outflow of people from the island most certainly sheds light on the controversies and contradictions of a markedly patriarchal country such as Ireland, historically represented as an idealised woman – often, significantly, as a mother: Mother Ireland –, whose "real" women were nonetheless confined, in Ireland's 1937 Constitution, to a "life within the home"[3] where to perform the idealised roles of wife and mother (Lennon, McAdam, O'Brien 1988, 24), as well as, until remarkably recently, to the role of "the great unknown" of the Irish diaspora, as famously stated by Donald H. Akenson (1993, 157-187). While Hasia R. Diner (1983) – author of the first study entirely dedicated to Irish women's inherent importance in Irish emigration since its most significant phases – highlights the importance *not* to interpret young Irish women's early departures as quest for greater personal "autonomy and independence"(x-iv)[4], over the twentieth century that "necessity" – once related, in particular, to their own and/or their families' economic conditions – was associated increasingly more often with a markedly ideological "decision" irrevocably influenced by Ireland's specific context. "Three generations of daughters left Ireland in the twentieth century", claims Íde B. O'Carroll (2015 [1990], 184). "The reasons given for this self-imposed separation from the home place cannot fall under the simple statement that 'there were no jobs'. Their leaving was much more complex than that" (*ibidem*).

If *e*migration, regardless of its more "optimistic" interpretation, has indubitably continued to be a reality of remarkable importance within contemporary Ireland, in the late twentieth century, in particular, the island concomitantly became a land of *return* migration and *im*migration: attracted by *her* unprecedented prosperity, Irish men and women who had left in the preceding decades as well as "foreigners", literally, from all over the world chose to (re)make Ireland their (adopted) "new *home*". The inward influx of unprecedently high numbers of newcomers, however, inevitably posed questions related to "true Irishness" – questions which, today, are still being asked within an ever-changing Ireland. "There are many ways of being Irish", claims Marie-Claire Logue in her introduction to *Being Irish: 101 Views on Irish Identity Today* (2021, xii). "We can be Irish by birth, Irish by ancestry, Irish by geography, Irish and British, Irish by accident, Northern Irish, Irish by necessity, Irish and European, Irish by association, Irish by culture, Irish and American and Irish by choice" (*ibidem*). As further suggested by Logue, era-defining events with major impact on one's personal and national identity and (not) belonging such as "the 2015 referendum legalising same-sex marriage and the 2018 repeal of the Eighth Amendment" (xi) as well as, on an international level, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (xii) and, not secondarily, the effects of (e)migration to/from Ireland (xi-xii) are often mentioned in discourses about Irish identity within a country with such a significant past as *home*land and present and most probably future as *both home*land and *host*land. While London-based Annie MacManus claims that "[w]hen you are an Irish emigrant, you have the privilege of being selectively Irish […]" (2021, 203)[5], Teresa Buczkowska, Polish by birth and

[3] "The pressures on women to emigrate were further increased by the proposed new Constitution, and by the way women's role was defined in it. […] Article 41 states that 'by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved' " (Lennon, McAdam, O'Brien 1988, 24). "Within the home" (*ibidem*), women were therefore supposed and expected to perform the roles of wife and mother, and consequently support their families as well as, by extension, Ireland – a country which, contradictorily, women had left and would continue to leave in extraordinarily high numbers.

[4] Young Irish women's early "move to America", Diner precisely claims, "did not represent a search for a new identity, nor did it constitute a break with the past" (1983, xiv).

[5] MacManus's contribution, however, significantly ends with her following words: "[i]n our new chosen homes, we are Irish ambassadors whether we like it or not. Maybe it's time to stop being selective about our Irishness and embrace every part. […] Let's tell the world that for all of its trauma and baggage, Ireland is a country moving forwards, and regardless of how far we've travelled, and for how long, we are moving with it" (2021, 205).

Irish by choice, states that, for her, "[h]ome is where our future is, not only where our past was" (2021, 21). Hers, evidently, is in Ireland: "*[c]alling myself Irish*", she significantly adds, "*does not mean the need to renounce my Polish roots. Being a migrant means I am bridging both identities, and I do not have to choose only one*" (*ibidem*, italics in original). Conversely, the Dublin-born, long London-based writer Joseph O'Connor observes that, sometimes, "you almost have to get out of Ireland to be Irish at all, […] that those who stay turn out to be the real exiles, and those who go are the natives" (1993, 18). Inevitably, the diverse issues related to Irishness most certainly involve different implications for Irish sons and daughters born and raised away from their parents' country of birth: being/becoming Irish for the second-generation Irish, indeed, means being able to locate her/his identity/ies somewhere in particular, and therefore provide the word "home" with a meaning which most often differs markedly from the one attributed to it by previous and/or succeeding generations of their diasporic families. Furthermore, the word *home* itself generates personal and (inter)national hurdle to overcome when used by the non-Irish within their *host*land: unfortunately, Ireland is not all magical landscapes and *craic* for "the other". Evidently, the challenges presented by (not) feeling Irish, whether by birth or choice, are currently haunting the contemporary generation of (non-)Irish men and women in ways that vary significantly according to both personal and national expectations. All of them, however, are perfectly aware of the lifelong influence of one's native land on their past, present, and future selves – at *home* and anywhere else.

2. Travelling to, from, and/or back to Ireland as a Woman's Quest for "Somewhere" to Belong

Although the personal and national expectations related to the experience of (in-voluntary) (e)migration have significantly changed in the course of time, one's "decision"/"necessity" to literally and/or metaphorically leave *home*, whether (self-)perceived as "opportunity" or "exile", has historically been a topic of paramount importance in Irish literature. Until remarkably recent times, however, "the story of the Irish woman emigrant […] was underrepresented in both historical accounts and literary representations of emigration", which, not surprisingly, mainly focused on male migratory experiences (McWilliams 2013, 2). It was the second half of the twentieth century which finally witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of women's narratives of emigration from Ireland: from silent, silenced testimonies to three centuries of departures from the island, since then women have become speaking and writing testimonies to their own and/or their predecessors' diasporic existences and experiences (St. Peter 2000, 40-65; McWilliams 2013, 2018; Moynihan 2022). In "Diasporic and Transnational Writing, 1950-Present", Ellen McWilliams particularly highlights the renewed importance provided to the recollection of female Irish migratory experiences: "[u]p until the 1990s", the distinguished scholar claims, "the Irish woman migrant remained what one historian called 'the great unknown' of Irish emigrant history, but since then historians and social scientists have been assiduous in addressing that missing history"[6] (2018, 410).

[6] The last decades of the twentieth century coincide with the publication of two of the most comprehensive studies into women's inherently important role in Ireland's migratory phenomenon: Diner's *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1983) and Lennon, McAdam, and O'Brien's *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* (1988). Since then, remarkably numerous monographs about the innumerable Irish women who (in-voluntarily) started a "new life" in a "new *home*" were published: see, in particular, O'Carroll 2015 [1990]; Walter 2003. Ultimately, see also Dunne's aforementioned *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (2021 [2003]): although not exclusively aimed at recollecting female migratory experiences from Ireland, it doubtlessly sheds light on the main causes and consequences of Irishwomen's "decision"/"necessity" to relocate on the other side of the Irish Sea in astonishing numbers.

Concomitantly, the experiences of female *return* migration and *im*migration increasingly acquired greater importance in Irish literature. While "from the 1950s to the 1990s, we see very few female Returned Yanks in Irish fiction and drama", claims Sinéad Moynihan (2022 [2019], 91), in the final decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first – with few notable exceptions dating back to previous periods[7] – Irish female returnees became almost ubiquitous in narratives of Irish (e)migration, enriching at once a markedly male experience with gender-specific details (McWilliams 2018, 421-423; Moynihan 2022 [2019]). The controversies over gender, moreover, most certainly figure prominently in the literature produced by non-Irish women writers within Ireland's borders: a still largely unexplored topic which indubitably should/needs to be provided with greater attention, non-Irish women face the added burden of being doubly "other" within a land which is still learning to be/act as *host*land.

The women described in contemporary (non-)Irish narratives of female (e)migration from/to Ireland need/want to "escape" the burdens of life when they feel like "visitors" anywhere, and there seems to be nowhere they really belong. These are women who (unsuccessfully) try to leave behind something and/or someone – even, maybe, themselves – they cannot cope with, who struggle to be themselves in the place they have been used to calling *home* for all their lives, the setting of their pervasive otherness. While walking still unexplored streets and/or Ireland's "wildest" areas or inhabiting (un)familiar (real or imagined) houses they would need – but often cannot – call *home*, they attempt to break with the past only to realise it inevitably follows them everywhere. Sometimes, instead, they feel they must/need to look back at past generations of Irish women in order to come to terms with their own past, present, and future, and thenceforth understand where *home* really is, wherever it might be. Only some of them, in the end, manage to provide that word with their own highly personal meaning(s).

In the prologue to her recent *Wild Atlantic Women: Walking Ireland's West Coast*, Gráinne Lyons describes herself as follows: "[a]lthough both of my parents are Irish, I have always prided myself on being a die-hard Londoner – a reaction, to some extent, to having two Irish parents and such an Irish name" (2024 [2023], 2-3). Her name itself has been a "landmark" for her "inherited Irishness" on the other side of the Irish Sea for all her life, while once in Ireland, not surprisingly, it immediately acquires a different meaning: "[a]lmost everyone I meet seems pleased with my parents' decision to give me this name that requires so much explanation in the UK that I use pseudonyms for coffee orders and restaurant bookings" (46), remarks Lyons soon after the beginning of her solo journey along Ireland's western coast. "Here, it helps me fit in, makes me feel like family […]" (*ibidem*).

A highly personal narrative closely concerned with her own quest for clues about her identity as a second-generation Irishwoman who, for half her life, had been used to living exclusively in the urban environment of London – a city which historically provided her parents' and/or previous and succeeding generations of Irish immigrants with better opportunities than *home*, and herself and other second- and third-generation Irish with "a distinct identity" (3) –, Lyons's travelogue recounts her "emotional journey" across time and space, begun "at a crossroads in [her] […] life" (2)[8], aimed at (re)constructing her own past, present, and future through the

[7] See, in particular, Maeve Brennan's *The Visitor*: posthumously published in 2001, it was most probably written in the 1940s (McWilliams 2018, 410), and indubitably figures among the most powerful "parable[s] about the impossibility of return" produced by a Dublin-born woman in America (422).

[8] "I had just turned forty", Lyons further adds while recalling the genesis of her project in 2019, "but was still single and without children, seemingly at odds with the general flow of things around me. […] I felt, in some ways, that I was on a new path – diverging from what I had supposed to be the template of a woman's life. And this all

major achievements, outstanding in their "extra-ordinariness", of previous generations of her family, as well as of well- and lesser-known women of Ireland's ancient and/or more recent past and present. "Rooted in and connected to this landscape" (4), Lyons has therefore chosen eleven women[9], whom she "consider[s] to be outliers or subversives, […] people who confounded, or are still confounding, expectations of what a woman can do" (*ibidem*), as "guiding stars" able to trace a temporal and spatial route which would allow her to understand what it meant for a woman to be Irish yesterday and, consequently, what it means today. Private and public stories which belong to the woman's own as well as to the whole Irish people's personal and national background are therefore juxtaposed by Lyons to the end of giving voice to the voiceless, as well as, not secondarily, of forging her own second-generation Irish identity and sense of belonging to Ireland as *home* away from *home*. Soon after the beginning of her "emotional journey", indeed, the London-born woman of Irish descent questions her real reasons for embarking on such a potentially unsettling, life-altering experience: "[a]m I seeking escape from the expectation of what my own life should or could be? *Or am I seeking home*? I'm unsure" (46, my emphasis).

While walking, metaphorically as well as literally, from Western Ireland's southernmost to its northernmost points (4) in search of "stories that for [her], as a member of the Irish diaspora, were as yet unknown" (3), Lyons almost feels part of the natural landscape which surrounds her, at times unfamiliar for a woman born and raised in the urban environment of London. Simultaneously, she establishes a close emotional and physical connection with the places inhabited by Irish women of her own and Ireland's past and present – among them, first and foremost, Lyons's great-grandmother, whose silenced experiences she instructively uses in order to fill in gaps about the history of her family, and, therefore, about herself. Her journey along Ireland's western seaboard makes it possible for Lyons to assemble the puzzle of her own and the Irish people's past in order to come to terms with her present and imagine a still unknown future while concomitantly raising questions about Irish female identity – remarkably often a limit in the pursuit of a woman's goals[10], today as in the past. Moreover and, perhaps, most importantly, it enables her to forge her second-generation Irish identity:

coincided with a shift in my identity too, as I applied for and was newly bestowed, along with 400,000 other British people, with an Irish passport" (2024, 3).

[9] Part historical and part legendary figures, the Irish women chosen by Lyons are: Ellen Cotter, her great-grandmother; Ellen Hutchins, "Ireland's first and most prolific female botanist" (2024, 21); "pioneering marine biologist" Maude Delap (48), a woman who, in childhood, could not pursue formal education because of her gender (49), whose adult "career might have been seen as unseemly" had she conformed to the role of the Irish wife (59); oral storyteller Peig Sayers, born in the late nineteenth century, whose stories shed light on "how everyday life was lived for [her] generation of women" (81); Country Limerick-born Charlotte Grace O'Brien, who witnessed the horrors initiated by the Great Famine and the consequent departures of innumerable Irish for overseas destinations; Edna O'Brien, "perhaps Ireland's greatest […] writer" (111-112); traditional knitter Úna McDonagh, "born and raised […] on the smallest of the Aran Islands, where she still lives": Inisheer (133); Kate O'Brien, "[o]ne of the most famous Irish female writers of her time", whose "novels – often set in her fictional version of Limerick […] – were once incredibly popular" (159) as well as "banned in newly independent Ireland" (162); "pirate queen" Granuaile (176), "often mentioned in [Lyons's] house as [her] parents tried to help [her] to enjoy, to be proud of a name which in London, with every new school year and new round of pronunciation explanations, was fast becoming tiresome" (*ibidem*); Queen Maeve of Connacht, the woman "whom [Lyons] feel[s] closest" (195) for reasons of geography as well as because passing close to her tomb provides her with "a feeling of being connected, by landscape, to the people of the very ancient past" (196); and, ultimately, Dr. Easkey Britton, "Ireland's most famous big wave surfer" and marine social scientist (207).

[10] "While I feel identity is completely individual", Lyons claims, "I also have to contemplate the fact that life was different, is different, if you are a woman moving through this landscape" (2024, 213).

My mum and dad always called Ireland 'home' when we were growing up, and as a child it annoyed me. After all, Ireland wasn't my home, East London was! After thirty-five years, they finally moved back in 2001 […], and because they are here now, over the past two decades I've spent much more time in Sligo. (108)

Although, in the course of time, her prolonged visits have positively influenced her in the construction of a closer relationship with her parents' *home* and *home*land – which she now likes more than she used to –, Lyons admits missing London and *her* "multicultural life" there when she is on the other side of the Irish Sea. Once in *her home* and *home*land, instead, she misses Ireland (*ibidem*)[11].

Lyons's quest for her second-generation Irishness, uniquely infused with episodes retrieved from her emotional solo journey along Ireland's western coast, differs markedly from the great majority of the writings produced by the increasingly more numerous writers who are finally shedding light on the distinctively diasporic existences of the second generation of Irish men and women, in particular, across the Atlantic Ocean and/or Irish Sea. In their introduction to *I Wouldn't Start From Here: The Second-Generation Irish in Britain* (2019), for instance, French, McCrory, and Mckay focus extensively on the multimodal forms of art employed by the second-generation Irish in Great Britain in order to "capture […] the diverse experience of a group largely rendered invisible" (2019, 1) until remarkably recently, which, significantly, looks back to and draws inspiration from "a shared heritage and past, in a continuously changing present" (*ibidem*). As the three editors particularly remark, the contributors whose testimonies are gathered in their anthology "consider themselves as part of a diaspora" (*ibidem*) whose (in-direct) consequences have impressed incurable wounds on their identity/ies, and, most distinctively, have irreversibly condemned them to experience a perennial "sense of never fully belonging" anywhere (*ibidem*), as well as to the *im*possibility of finding "somewhere" to call *home*[12]. In her comprehensive *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (2013), moreover, Ellen McWilliams particularly focuses on women's quest for their second-generation Irishness as a topic of remarkable importance in contemporary Irish literature, which, according to the distinguished scholar, distinctively "explores the tensions and fractures between generations and the pain of growing up remote from a culture that belongs to the land of the parents"[13] (197).

In Lyons's *Wild Atlantic Women: Walking Ireland's West Coast*, the "sense of never fully belonging" which has marked the experience of being second-generation Irish across the Irish Sea is uniquely replaced by the woman's eventual firm awareness of where *home* is for her as a result of her recent journey across time and space. Although, while wandering around

[11] Although (still) unsure about it, Lyons significantly meditates on the possibility of calling "homesickness" the feeling she experiences while thinking about Ireland once in London (*ibidem*).

[12] For further information about second-generation Irish sons and daughters' perennial quest for *home*, see, in particular, the excerpt from Maude Casey's *Over the Water* (1987) collected in French, McCrory, and Mckay's, which sheds light on three English-born siblings' efforts not to "stand out as aliens in this foreign land. Except, for us, it's not a foreign land. We were born here […]" (2019, 179). "I watch Mammy, preparing to go home", Casey particularly recalls (180). "Here, in her own house, the wild excitement is building to a frenzy. I wonder, for the hundredth time of wondering, why it is that she never thinks of *this* house as being her home. And why she should feel so foreign here, when she's been here for years and Ireland is so near. And I wonder, for the hundredth time of wondering, in which of them is *my* true home, and whether I'll ever find it, one fine day" (*ibidem*, italics in original).

[13] When claiming this, the eminent scholar focuses, in particular, on the writing of Moy McCrory and, more specifically, on her short story entitled "Prize Giving", whose second-generation protagonist "was so English, a foreigner to her parents. To her, Mayo was just a postmark on a card from cousins she did not know very well…" (qtd. in McWilliams 2013, 197-198).

Western Ireland, Lyons insistently questions her unconscious desire to make Ireland her *home*, by the end of her travelogue she apparently acknowledges the purpose of her journey while wondering about one's – and, therefore, her own – "connection with a physical place that is home in a bigger sense, not just the house you were born or grew up in" (2024, 219). Significantly, she ultimately claims as follows: "[p]erhaps I don't need to move anywhere – perhaps, for now anyway, I have it just the way it works? Two places, London and Sligo, both of which can have equal status as home" (*ibidem*). For now, Lyons has managed to forge a "dual identity" located in two equally important places at the same time. Since the last line of her travelogue sees her continuing her walk (227), however, who knows where her Irish "guiding stars" will bring her in the future?[14]

The positively connoted "familiar" feelings associated by Lyons to Ireland as (temporary) *home* differ drastically from the pervasive sense of perennial otherness which is the heartbeat of Arja Kajermo's "Alienation", whose protagonist, a Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman based in Dublin, significantly describes herself, after living for prolonged periods away from her *home*land and choosing Ireland as *host*land, as "a mongrel, a piece of many parts […]" (2020 [2019], 310). Through the recollection of episodes of ordinary life of a non-Irish woman in her unfamiliar adopted *home*, in her ten-page contribution collected in Lucy Caldwell's *Being Various: New Irish Short Stories* (2020) the Finnish cartoonist, grown up in Sweden and herself relocated to Ireland since the 1970s, provides readers with a vivid description of today's Ireland – a country that may attract tourists fascinated by breathtaking landscapes, which nonetheless easily transforms itself into a land of "disenchantment" (306) as soon as someone born outside the national borders, regardless of her/his origins, claims the right to call it *home*. Indeed, "[n]othing works" in Ireland for the non-Irish who (unsuccessfully) attempt to be/become Irish by choice (*ibidem*):

> Go home, you big eejits, if you're so homesick for order and efficiency and good workmanship. You won't find it here because you can't just buy it, it has to be bartered for and you have nothing to barter with. You will never be included in the 'we' that islanders call themselves. (*Ibidem*)

A handwritten accusatory note delivered only to foreigners living in the same neighbourhood as her – apparently blamed for "illeagally" dumping rubbish in an elderly Irish woman's garden (302), but most probably, simply, for choosing Ireland as *host*land – triggers the unnamed Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman's thoughts about the alienating experience of being non-Irish within contemporary multicultural "new Ireland": "[w]e are the *dubhghaill* and the *fionnghall*, the 'dark foreigners' and the 'fair foreigner'. Those words are two of a handful I know in Irish. Most Irish people don't know many more. They grieve the loss of their language, but most of them won't learn to speak it" (304). While there are immigrants who "occupy their space without apologising" (*ibidem*) and feel "at ease" in their adopted land, where "they will happily integrate but not assimilate" (*ibidem*), because they realise their new lives there are better than the ones they would be destined to at *home*, there are others – like the woman herself – who "fear attention in case [their] foreignness attracts hostility" (*ibidem*), as evidently is the case in the Ireland described by Kajermo, a land relatively recently transformed from *home*land for astonishingly numerous Irish emigrants into *host*land for immigrants from all over the world.

[14] Although in the prologue to her travelogue Lyons claims that, in that moment, she is "at the end of a journey" (2024, 1), her final words about where home is for her seem to be permeated by a sense of "temporariness", as if she had not completed her "emotional journey" aimed at (re)constructing her past, present, and future yet: "perhaps, for now anyway, I have it just the way it works?" she actually claims (219).

Nevertheless, the unnamed woman's outsiderness does not only depend on her foreignness, but also on her *im*possibility of conforming to the only roles available to "ideal" Irish women, which she shows to have interiorised and be perfectly aware of. After her Irish husband's sudden decision not to return home after a night out, she no longer could be considered a wife. Once a "*Mother*" (301, italics and capital letter in original), moreover, she had been deprived of that title after her grown-up children's relocation "as far away from Dublin as possible" for university (*ibidem*). In short, she had instantly been transformed into a non-Irish woman within a land which she did/does not belong to, unable to perform Irish women's idealised roles within the familiar environment of a house which she nonetheless manages to call *home*: the "*Family Home*", where she still resides in solitude, is now empty and silent (*ibidem*, italics and capital letters in original). "Without a husband", the non-Irish woman recalls, "I was nothing. I had nothing, no Residence Permit, no work permit, and all the utility bills were in his name" (306). "Without a utility bill in my name", she significantly adds, "I had no identity" (*ibidem*). Still married to a voluntarily disappeared man in a country which, at that time, did not recognise divorce (307), her presence in Ireland was no longer required (*ibidem*). In that moment, therefore, Kajermo's protagonist faced the double hurdle of being (in)visible as a virtually unmarried non-Irish woman within a land unconcerned about foreign women's everyday challenges.

A topic of paramount importance, in particular, since the final decade of the twentieth century, the Irish people's hostility towards the "foreigner" is addressed in close detail by Declan Kiberd in an article originally published in 2001, at the height of the island's most significant wave of *im*migration: "Strangers in Their Own Country: Multiculturalism in Ireland". Although, in Kiberd's own words, "the historical capacity of the Irish to assimilate waves of incomers should never be underestimated" (2005 [2001], 303) as a result of Ireland's history of long-distance *e*migration – which rendered the island "always multicultural, in the sense of eclectic, open, assimilative" (312; also partially qtd. in Villar-Argáiz 2015 [2014], 7) –, the distinguished scholar himself must ultimately admit that "[…] racism of the most ugly kind undeniably exists in Irish society: and the presence of ever-growing numbers of refugees and migrants from overseas has brought it to the surface, making all foreigners (not just people of colour) arguably more vulnerable than once they were" (Kiberd 2005, 307). Furthermore, the Irish people's *in*capacity and/or *un*willingness to welcome foreigners in the most flourishing period in Ireland's recent past is significantly mentioned also by Maureen O'Connor (2006). Focused predominantly on her father's return *home* after fifty years in America, the US-born, Cork-based scholar also addresses the man's *im*possibility of calling "home" the "new Ireland" he found at his *home*coming, "a prosperous country unwelcoming of immigrants, such as he was himself fifty years ago when he arrived in another prosperous, industrial land" (2006, 15).

In her introduction to *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, moreover, Pilar Villar-Argáiz focuses extensively on "[t]he cultural effects" (Villar-Argáiz 2015, 3) of Ireland's recent transformation from *home*land into *host*land: "[i]nward migration", the Spanish scholar claims, "has had inevitable consequences for the literature which has been produced in Ireland from the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period onwards" (2015, 3). Similarly, the Belfast-born woman writer Lucy Caldwell – who, significantly, cannot stop calling her native city "here" (2020, 3) despite her new life in London as a Northern Irish woman married to an Englishman (1) and mother of two "Cockney-born children" (2) – prominently focuses on the nature of "true Irishness" in contemporary Irish literature, and attempts to answer the following question: "*What makes a writer Irish?*" (3, italics in original). In her introduction to the aforementioned collection of short stories by Irish-born as well as non-Irish writers who chose Ireland as adopted *home*, Caldwell further challenges today's Irish identity/ies:

Who is more Irish: a writer born in Ireland who moves and stays away, or a writer born elsewhere who chooses to come – and there's that 'here' again. A writer born in what is technically Ireland, in the 'island of' sense, but who chooses to identify with 'the mainland'? A writer born outside of Ireland to parents who keep it alive through songs, St Patrick's Day and waking up in the wee hours to watch the rugby? A writer born in Ireland to parents from elsewhere, who constantly has to answer the deathly question, 'No, but where are you *really* from?' (*Ibidem*, italics in original)

Evidently, Kajermo's unnamed protagonist does not feel Irish despite her decision to settle in Dublin. In the short story's final scene, the woman cannot even provide a concrete answer when asked what brought her there if not that "grass is greener here" (310). "I love it here, I love Ireland!" she ironically adds (*ibidem*). Although a long time has passed since the Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman's decision to relocate to Ireland, Kajermo's non-Irish protagonist has not forgotten about that "woman of memory" once deprived of her identity/ies by her Irish husband and *host*land. "I am a mongrel, a piece of many parts, my homeland is in my head", she significantly remarks (*ibidem*).

From Indonesia to Australia, then New Zealand and Ireland. And then Peru, Ireland, the Netherlands, and back, again, to Ireland. "Would you travel the world to feel at home in your skin?": this is the question, asked on the back cover of E.M. Reapy's *Skin* (2019), which an Irish woman aged about thirty on the threshold of an indefinite future attempts to answer from remote areas of the world which she makes her temporary *home* in order to silence her ambivalent longing for her real *home* and *home*land. To describe *Skin* – preceded by *Red Dirt* (2016), itself a great success about Irish emigration[15] (O'Hanlon 2019) – as a novel about a young woman who struggles to find her own place in the world when there seems to be nowhere she truly feels at ease with herself and anybody else would most probably be too simplistic. Nevertheless, to say that this young woman has the self-punishing habit of (unsuccessfully) "forgetting" – albeit merely temporarily – about traumatic episodes and memories from her unsatisfactory life through compulsive eating most probably adds particularly important details about Reapy's protagonist's life and, not secondarily, constant necessity to leave *home* for an elsewhere which must be as different as possible from Ireland. To state that the vivid sense of not belonging which triggers her restless move from one side of the world to the other is not generated only in/by her native Ireland, moreover, most certainly acquires major importance in order to acknowledge that, sometimes, the circumstances which lead to one's "(self-)exile" may transcend place, and therefore surface everywhere, anytime (O'Hanlon 2019).

A native of Western Ireland, Natalie Dillon has worked as a teacher in Dublin for six years:

'I thought I was doing the right thing. What I was supposed to do. Got good exam results, went to uni, got qualified, got a job, did the job for six years and then, I dunno, I felt like an alien. Like I was living an out of body experience daily'. (Reapy 2020, 10-11)

Following a good friend's advice, Natalie embarks on a journey which, evidently, is synonymous with "escape": "My old housemate […] said travelling had cleared her head. Made her see life differently. That's what I decided to do. That's why I'm here", she openheartedly tells an Englishwoman who asks her what brought her to Bali (12). "I don't even want to be here. I'm so uncomfortable all the time", Natalie nonetheless adds (*ibidem*). Immediately before, at the woman's question, "What's your home like?" (10), she had answered as follows: "I don't really have a home" (*ibidem*).

[15] In her review of Reapy's *Skin*, Eilis O'Hanlon claims that for both novels "the Irish woman writer, born and grown up in County Mayo", drew inspiration from her "own experience as an emigrant and traveller, at least in part […]" (2019, n.p.).

"But leaving is only conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be", Edna O'Brien would most certainly suggest in this moment (1978 [1976], 87). Under completely different circumstances, the County Clare-born author of international successes voluntarily left her native land at approximately the same age as Reapy's protagonist in search of a "somewhere" which could/would allow her to be who she wanted/needed to be: "[…] I had got away. That was my victory", O'Brien herself significantly remarks in *Mother Ireland* (1976) (*ibidem*). From the "vantage point" of being far enough from Ireland, O'Brien was nonetheless forced to come to terms with her *home*land's indelible marks on her diasporic identity: "The real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon in me then", she herself adds immediately afterwards (*ibidem*). According to Tony Murray, who focuses on O'Brien's unprecedented literary achievement in *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*, the London-based Irish woman writer's aforementioned words from *Mother Ireland* – as well as, more in general, her experience of voluntary departure from the island – suggest that "the migrant is escaping not only his or her home country but also himself or herself" (2014 [2012], 7). Evidently, neither did Natalie Dillon nor Edna O'Brien manage to "leave themselves behind" at *home*[16].

Natalie's pervasive otherness, regardless of where in the world she finds herself, permeates Reapy's *Skin* from its first episodes. From the uneasiness generated by sex tourism in Bali, where "[e]veryone's on the sell" (41) – which, not surprisingly, she temporarily overcomes through disproportionally eating as much as she can, only to wish, immediately afterwards, that she "didn't exist" (45) –, to Darwin, Australia, where she suddenly, unexpectedly feels *home*sick, if just for a remarkably too short time, while "hearing all the familiar accents from home" (63) in the birthday videos for her aunt Dolores, an Irishwoman who has "lived in Australia for over half her life" (50) and, in the course of time, acquired a "wacky Irish-Australian accent" (65). "For a moment", Natalie thinks, "I wish I was home at my parents'. The familiar rooms of where I grew up. But as soon as the longing hits, it vanishes again" (63). Nevertheless, it is in Wellington, Natalie's next temporary *home*, that the young woman truly comes to terms with her sense of not belonging either to her *home*land, Ireland, or her (temporary) *host*lands, drastically exacerbated by her long-established habit and its indelible scars on her body and, not secondarily, soul:

> Fatfuckingbitch, stupidcunt, outofcontrol, uglymonsterfat, nobodylikesyou, beachedwhale, stupidfuck, nobodyfuckinglikesyou, don'tevenlikeyourself.
> 'It's as if I'm not even real. I'm not even here' […].
> […]
> 'I could be anywhere. New Zealand. Home. Nowhere.'[17]
> 'Nowhere's good'.
> 'I think and feel the same way and do the same thing in a different place. I'm the same person in a different place. Same hamster wheel. Rut. Going nowhere'. (99)

Not surprisingly, Natalie's escape has not transformed her into a "new person": she is and feels always the same – everywhere. In this moment, there is no "vantage point" for her.

[16] For wide insight into Edna O'Brien's extraordinary diasporic life and writing, see, in particular, her most autobiographical writings: *Mother Ireland* (1976) and *Country Girl: A Memoir* (2012). See also Murray's aforementioned study – in particular, the section entitled "Escape and its Discontents" (2014, 57-69) –, as well as Donatella Abbate Badin 1997.

[17] Natalie's words brilliantly recall one of Maeve Brennan's most eloquent statements: "no place is home–it is as it should be […]" (qtd. in McWilliams 2014, 98). For detailed information about Brennan's diasporic writing and, not secondarily, life as an Irishwoman in America, see, in particular, Bourke 2004 and McWilliams 2014.

Nevertheless, the time spent away from her native West of Ireland makes it possible for Natalie to see it differently at her *home*coming. Unexpectedly "[g]lad to be back" (107), she seeks and finds (temporary) relief in the healing power of Ireland's natural landscape (108-111), the major attraction for tourists and newcomers – among them, also a friend of hers, a poet in desperate need for inspiration for a new collection, who ultimately claims as follows: "*[t]he unpolluted air has cleared my head. My words have come home*" (128-129, italics in original). While living at her grandmother's, Natalie understands that it is not the place itself which renders it *home*, but the people, and therefore herself. Travelling – imaginatively and/or back in time – enables her to spend more time with, and therefore take care of that beloved woman in her blankest moments of confusion, when she loses memory and concomitantly, revealingly, her way *home* (148-150). While remembering the happiest moments of her youth, instead, her grandmother's "memory [is] crystal clear when she returns to her teens. I sit back in the chair and Gran takes me on one of her trips for the last time" (165).

A brief parenthesis in Dublin anticipates Natalie's next journey, which nonetheless coincides with "the start of something new" (246): the beginning of a more reconciliatory phase of her life. Finally aware of her (self-)destructive habit of "let[ting] [her]self be at the whim of everything and everyone else" (320), Natalie ultimately seems to find her place in the world. Her quest for herself (un)surprisingly finishes in Dublin: finally more at ease with her body and self, the young woman gives fitness lessons for people willing to travel with their minds while physically at *home*. "Where will we be going next week […]?", someone asks her (333). "I draw a breath, smile, and wait for the idea to flash in my mind" (*ibidem*).

While, more than thirty years ago, Dermot Bolger claimed that "[*e*]*xile* and *departure* suggest an out-dated degree of permanency. Irish writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute" (1993, 7, italics in original), Colum McCann concomitantly stated that "*when London is a one-hour flight away from Knock it's hard to say that we've actually emigrated*" (qtd. in *ibidem*, italics in original). More recently, the internationally acclaimed Irish writer has further focused on the "outdated" use of the word "exile" in the specifically Irish context (Cullingford 2014, 84):

> This whole issue of exile has to be redefined for Irish writers. We're not in exile anymore. […] you just commute back and forth. […] But while I'm not in exile, I am displaced. The people I'm writing about are trying to find a way home, looking for a home. The issue of home is enormous. (McCann qtd. in Cullingford 2014, 85)

In the introduction to *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, moreover, Ellen McWilliams similarly focuses in closer detail on the debated correspondence between the concepts and conditions of "emigration" and "exile" in contemporary Irish (women's) literature, and claims as follows:

> 'Exile', which is borne of, but is not synonymous with emigration, […] carries a culturally specific ballast in Irish literature in the imaginative construction of the processes involved in emigration, assimilation and acculturation that take place in the journey from homeland to hostland, and in the making of new kinds of communities, real and imagined. (2013, 3)

While the contemporary generation of Irish emigrants no longer accepts the typically Irish synonymity between "emigration" and "exile", most probably, as a result of emigrants' own more conscious decision-making, "easier" relationship(s) with *home*, and greater openness to the world beyond the Atlantic Ocean and/or Irish Sea, the word "exile" still evokes an imagery closely associated with (self-)imposed, *in*voluntary separation from one's *home* and *home*land, as well as with the pervasive feelings of perennial alienation, displacement, and otherness – everywhere.

The article remarkably entitled "A Writer in Exile – Aimée Walsh on Her Debut Novel", published in 2024 on RTE.ie, contrasts sharply with today's dichotomy between the conditions of "emigration" and "exile", which are distinctively merged by Aimée Walsh in *Exile* (2024). "*Exile*, appropriately, was written while I lived away from my home-city, Belfast", claims the Northern Irish novelist herself (2024b, n.p.). "There was little of this period of time that brought me much joy […]", she further adds. "But I was contented, as my mind was elsewhere […]" (*ibidem*). From the "vantage point" of being elsewhere – in this case, both literally and metaphorically –, Walsh managed to come to terms with her native country as both *home*land and *host*land for her Northern Irish-born protagonist on the threshold of an indefinite future when there seems to be nowhere she really belongs. A narrative which explores in depth the pervasive displacement experienced by an eighteen-year-old girl on both sides of the Irish Sea, Walsh's debut novel vividly suggests that the experience of "exile" does not merely correspond to one's (in-voluntary) "decision"/"necessity" to leave to the end of starting a "new life" away from *home.* Indeed, otherness can be pervasively experienced also – and, perhaps, *most* pervasively – within the safety of one's native place, and consequently lead to "escape". In some cases, moreover, it precisely is their *home*coming which irreversibly marks emigrants' outsiderness – everywhere: "[…] if leaving, or worse, having to leave, can be infinitely painful", suggests Christine St. Peter, "the experience of returning may be no less problematic. Once gone, forever changed, and even a returned emigrant will be an insider/outsider perched uneasily in the place called home" (2000, 43). "LEAVING HOME WAS HARD. RETURNING IS IMPOSSIBLE": there is no need to add more words than those reported on the back cover of Walsh's *Exile* in order to summarise her protagonist's attitude towards *home* (2024, n. p., capital letters in original).

When she receives her final year results, Fiadh Donnelly suddenly realises her life is about to change irreversibly. Three simple consonants – B, C, and D: her results themselves (Walsh 2024a, 41) – condemn her to an uncertain future, on her own and elsewhere; therefore, simply, to "exile". Nevertheless, Fiadh's voluntary decision to leave for Liverpool to pursue education and thus not to accept a second choice which would make it possible for her to stay in her native Belfast with her family and friends since childhood, who "will unfurl into their future selves" at *home* (52), apparently testifies to her openness to the positively connoted possibility of starting a "new life across the water" (49), where she would be able to transform herself instantaneously into a "new" person (*ibidem*).

The young woman's optimistic prospect of beginning a new phase of her life on the other side of the Irish Sea, however, must confront with the challenges she immediately encounters in the urban environment of Liverpool. Unlike in her native Belfast, "a small enough city that everybody knows somebody who knows who you are after" (5), in England nobody seems interested even in exchanging a few words with her. Apart from the two friends she makes in the course of time, the only person with whom Fiadh (involuntarily) spends time in Liverpool – a city of major importance in Ireland's migratory history as "great Atlantic port" (MacRaild 2011, 49), and once known as the "city of plague" as a result of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century (qtd. in MacRaild 2011, 50) – is her landlady, a woman "carrying the weight of the world, or at least that of the Irish diaspora, on her shoulders" (Walsh 2024a, 61). At university, almost all the people she meets do not even understand her very Irish name or accent (68), and neither do they want to know who she is; conversely, they do notice where she is from. One day, while speaking about "trauma, what that means […], what being at home means" (77), Fiadh speaks instead of being silent:

> I'm hearing sounds come out of my mouth. Tumbled together knotting into words I cannot control. I find myself verbally unravelling. I speak of experiences passed down like worn heirlooms: checkpoints in the city centre; armed patrols in the streets; death, hurt, pain, fear. A vivid memory, not my own,

appears to me, and I voice it: a department store in Belfast city centre exploded, people dazed walking the streets, fire-engines dousing the flames of the building. Then my mother, years after these events, fearing for me going to the city centre alone with friends. I was thirteen-years-old at the time. (*Ibidem*)

The girl's words are met with the harsh response from "[a] lad from Milton Keynes [who] tells the room that it wouldn't have happened that way if it weren't for 'the terrorists' " (*ibidem*). Immediately afterwards, Fiadh's silence fills the room – again.

On both sides of the Irish Sea, Fiadh further (unsuccessfully) attempts to "escape"[18] her pervasive otherness through heavy drinking and/or drug consumption, which make it possible for her to distance herself from the ongoing collapse of her "new life" – at *home* and elsewhere, anywhere else. During her visits *home*, she attempts to recreate "the feeling of how it was before [she] left" (106) only to realise she no longer is – and is seen as[19] – the same person as prior to leaving. Evidently, neither are her dear ones able to provide her with the sensations of familiarity and comfort she would desperately need[20]. A night out in Belfast, of which she has no memory at all, impresses physical and emotional wounds on the young girl – wounds that cannot be healed at *home*: "home isn't going to fix this. Home is the problem", she significantly thinks (179). The sexual assault she is victim of – perpetrated by one of her closest friends, one of the few who once made her feel at *home* in Belfast – eventually annihilates all the positive feelings which she had been able to maintain for her native place. Furthermore, her final vengeance, which she partially obtains physically punishing him, triggers her necessity to "escape" again, and therefore irreversibly condemns her to "(self-)exile": "[e]verywhere in this city reminds me of change. A fresh start will do me good, to be unfettered. Freedom", thinks Fiadh on board a flight with unknown destination, at least for readers (248). "I dream that I am home. Over the clouds, I wake up, not sure where that is or what it means yet" (*ibidem*). Impossible to claim if she would ever be able to understand what it means for her, even from the "vantage point" of being elsewhere.

[18] "Escape" from reality is similarly attempted by the protagonist of Rachel Connolly's *Lazy City* (2023): herself a young Northern Irish woman who must come to terms with the "new life" she has not managed to create, on her own, on the other side of the Irish Sea – in this case, in London –, Erin returns *home*, a place she had initially been glad to leave, to erase the pain of loss. Despite her final "reconciliation" with her *home* and *home*land, however, it is evident that, for her, physical escape just provides short-term distraction: her traumas, indeed, follow her everywhere.

[19] "Think you're better than us now?", an acquaintance of hers asks Fiadh (Walsh 2024a, 195).

[20] In particular, her closest friends' reaction to her *home*coming deepens her pervasive otherness: "[f]riendship is like picking up a book, they say, but right now, I cannot speak the language", Fiadh actually thinks (Walsh 2024a, 106). Here used metaphorically, the reference to spoken language conversely acquires major importance in narratives of (e)migration. In Walsh's own novel, for instance, Fiadh's friends address her newly acquired accent just to emphasise her "linguistic otherness": "[t]hey say I'm rolling my *rrrs* now, a guttural rattle to the back of my voice as I pronounce certain words" (188, italics in the original). "Sorry, love. Your accent's fucked", they further add afterwards (203). "Linguistic unfamiliarity" as a return migrant's distinctive feature is extensively explored also by Bernie McGill in "There Is More than One Word" (2022). After numerous years away from *home*, Jaynie experiences bewilderment and displacement at her *home*coming: her native Belfast no longer corresponds to the setting of her memories. While overhearing foreign accents she does not even recognise, she also realises that new words and structures have replaced those which she herself would use in the same context: "Jaynie'd forgotten that people did that here, added linguistic fillers to the end of their sentences. What was that about? A lack of confidence in being believed, even when speaking the truth? For years Jaynie has lived elsewhere, in places where she has had to make herself understood […]" (24). Once at *home*, therefore, she must cope with the otherness arose from her *im*possibility of understanding and being understood: "[h]er own language", the woman acknowledges, "is thirty years out of date, fossilised in the 1980s […]", when she left for elsewhere (*ibidem*).

3. The Role of Ireland as Homeland and/or Hostland in the Process of Personal and National Identity Formation

Ireland as the one and only place where to look for clues about one's past, present, and future and, therefore, about oneself. As unwelcoming *host*land, where otherness and displacement, sometimes, overshadow the island's magical landscape and typical *craic*. As a *home* to leave as soon as possible, and look back to from the "vantage point" of being elsewhere, as far as possible. As a place in memory, which irreversibly changes as much as the ones who leave it behind and those who stay.

In contemporary (non-)Irish women's narrative of (e)migration, Ireland may be all of these – and, perhaps, much more than these – as inevitable result of a woman's (in-voluntary) "decision"/"necessity" to start a "new life" elsewhere.

Remarkably often a life-altering experience with lifelong consequences, one's departure from *home* inevitably involves issues related to one's identity/ies and sense of (not) belonging. In *Leaves* (2007), a play deeply rooted in the specifically Northern Irish context of Belfast, Lucy Caldwell vividly focuses on the indelible impact of one's *home*land on the process of personal and national identity formation, at *home* and elsewhere. " 'We are where we come from?' ", significantly asks one of Caldwell's protagonists (34). As the four (non-)Irish women whose writings are analysed in this article show, all of them definitely may be/are more than that. Caldwell's protagonist herself, however, answers as follows: "[t]hat's not true. That's not true because if that's true there's no hope for any of us" (*ibidem*). "Home is a place in the mind", Maeve Brennan would most certainly add (2019 [2000], 8): it follows you everywhere.

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"Let's Go Cruising": Pilgrimage Cruises from Ireland to the Mediterranean in the 1930s

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Abstract:

This article explores the 1930s phenomenon of Irish pilgrimage cruises which visited a range of religious destinations, but most frequently travelled to Lourdes or Rome. Although these were unquestionably sincere religious undertakings, they were also structured to resemble and eventually intertwine with the commercial cruise industry. The 1930s was the decade when Mediterranean cruises first became a luxury holiday form, combining sea and sun with the distinctly modernist aesthetic of cruise-liners themselves. This article explores the development of pilgrimage cruises, maps their relationship to the commercial cruise industry of the 1930s, and argues that the phenomenon was a forerunner of the package holidays to southern Europe which would later become so popular with Irish tourists.

Keywords: 1930s, Cruise, Package Holiday, Pilgrimage, Tourism

1. Introduction

Travel as part of a pilgrimage – occasionally to Oberammergau or even the Holy Land, but most frequently to Rome and Lourdes – was by far the most likely form of travel to continental Europe for Irish people throughout much of the twentieth century, and it occurred on a notable scale. Groups were often of a few hundred people but sometimes several thousand, and Ben Keatinge has argued it is useful to remember "the important role which religious journeys – pilgrimages – played in the 1930s and beyond in opening up continental Europe for Irish people. Indeed, the two reasons an average Irish person might have had for travel in de Valera's Ireland would have been pilgrimage and emigration" (2017, 139). As this article will discuss, tracking the changing routes taken by Irish pilgrims over time also highlights the changing forms of transport used, as overland travel gave way to sea journeys and then (eventually) air travel. These shifting

modes of travel, as well as the experience they offered pilgrims, then point towards the intersection between pilgrimage and tourism. This article will therefore explore the surprisingly intertwined history of Irish pilgrimage to European religious sites, the development of those pilgrimages into commercial opportunities for Irish travel agencies, and the desirability (especially during the 1930s) of cruise holidays. By mapping out the ways in which large-scale pilgrimage trips from Ireland to continental European destinations developed over several decades, this article will argue that they constituted a form of proto-package holiday which was already well-established for Irish travellers before World War Two, long before the post-war era in which package holidays as they are usually defined became popular. Pilgrimages shared many key characteristics of those later package holidays – a group of people previously unconnected to each other who agreed to travel together to a common destination, all arranged by a professional travel agent in order to benefit from economies of scale in group bookings and therefore minimise their travel costs. As a secondary but not insignificant benefit, the group also shared the social aspects of travel – sharing train carriages, hotels or even entire cruise ships as part of the joint experience of the journey, and becoming a temporary but sometimes quite intensely-bonded social group for its duration.

This intertwining of pilgrimage with tourism was complex, as would have been the motivations and experiences of the travellers themselves. Scholars of both religion and leisure have long recognised and documented the connections between pilgrimage and tourism, and as Raphaël Ingelbien has argued, "mass pilgrimages not infrequently afforded occasions for pilgrims to indulge in more strictly touristic forms of leisure" (2016, 142). This is not to discount genuine religious commitment as a motivation for travel even if the traveller also hopes for more secular enjoyment during the journey. The motivations and experiences of Irish pilgrims to European religious sites discussed in this article would have been widely varied and remain largely unknowable either individually or collectively. Travellers would have included invalids for whom the travel was often a painful and difficult experience born of desperation, as well as those for whom it was a respectable (and even virtuous) way to enjoy a Mediterranean cruise, along with every possible variation and combination of both these motivations. If their motivations and responses are opaque to us, however, what can be traced are the changing routes and destinations of travel, the way those intersected with wholly secular tourism using similar routes and destinations, and the infrastructure which developed to facilitate both forms of Irish travel to continental Europe. It is considerably outside the scope of this article to examine the religious experiences of Irish pilgrims beyond the ways in which their activities intersected with leisure travel. However it is important to note that to focus on this intersection is not to dismiss the sincerity of the religious experiences which existed alongside the pleasures of secular travel.

The transport infrastructures, routes and destinations of international secular travel as it developed during the twentieth century also shaped and changed Irish pilgrimage travel. As train travel gave way to cruise ships and then eventually to air travel, this opened up new routes for pilgrims via different intermediate locations and even to newly-feasible destinations. As will be discussed below, for example, pilgrimages to "the Holy Land", while remaining the longest and most expensive of such trips from Ireland, became feasible by chartering commercial liners to sail directly to North Africa rather than travelling by land across Europe, and it was the commercial popularity of long-distance cruise holidays in the interwar years which made liners available for pilgrimage charter. Similarly, while the shrine at Fatima in Portugal received official Vatican approval for pilgrimages in 1930, the first organised Irish visit there did not occur until 1949, and, although that first journey was by a chartered ship to Lisbon, it was only when air travel became feasible as a form of commercial tourism to the Iberian Peninsula that Irish pilgrimages to Fatima became frequent (*Evening Herald*, 19 May 1949). The business models of the commercial

tourism industry affected pilgrimage travel from Ireland in other ways too. Even an organisation as large and international as the Catholic Church needed professional assistance in organising a pilgrimage across much of Europe for hundreds of people, and commercial travel agencies were often employed to arrange the logistics of travel. The popularity of such ventures even led the Irish Catholic Church to establish its own travel agency, but over time the popularity (and potential profitability) of pilgrimages also encouraged many commercial travel agencies to specialise in organising them. The geography of this form of Irish international travel moved across the sea and rail connections of Europe, with train routes to Lourdes from Dublin via London and Paris, and later sea routes via Bordeaux becoming well-established. Mediterranean Sea routes to Rome via Naples (with "side trips" to Florence or Venice) eventually led to more adventurous sailings to Alexandria via Madeira and Gibraltar as pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem. This expanded the geography of pilgrimage travel from southern France across the Mediterranean and into North Africa in parallel with the geography of luxury tourism, as the 1930s' fashion for cruise holidays was also focused on the Mediterranean, and ships carrying wealthy tourists followed the same routes to the same ports as those carrying Irish pilgrims.

2. National Pilgrimages to Lourdes

The shrine at Lourdes had been a place of unofficial pilgrimage since the Marian visions of Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, and then developed a more official status over the next few decades, aided by both Church approval and developing transport infrastructure. As Ruth Harris documents in her definitive history of Lourdes, "[c]onnected to the outside world by a railway line from 1866, the town grew closer to Bordeaux, and through Bordeaux it became closer to Paris", and Lourdes rapidly developed from an isolated rural town into "a town of hotels, restaurants and railway lines" in the coming years (1999, 175). The first "national pilgrimage" to Lourdes was a French undertaking, organised in 1873 as a direct response to the shattering experience of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and intended to stir national pride via national pilgrimage (255-258). This established a connection between national identity and pilgrimage which would exert a powerful effect on other Catholic countries, including Ireland. While Irish pilgrims undoubtedly visited Lourdes during these earlier decades of the shrine's development as an important European pilgrimage site, it was not until 1913 that the first Irish National Pilgrimage to the town was organised. That it took more than 40 years after the first French venture of its kind is hardly surprising considering the distance, difficulties and costs of travel from Ireland to the south of France in the late-nineteenth century. Even in 1913, one of its key organisers – the Archbishop of Cashel, who would also become a central figure for other Irish pilgrimages in the coming years – frankly described the journey as "affording an opportunity to those of means and leisure, of testifying in a special manner, their love and veneration for the Mother of God" (*Derry People and Donegal News*, 8 February 1913). In order to make the pilgrimage national, it was organised by allocating ticket quotas throughout the diocesan and parish structures of the island of Ireland, and intending pilgrims were required to obtain a signed form from their diocese in order to be added to the list of travellers (*Kerry Evening Star*, 16 December 1912). The actual organisation of travel however required professional expertise, and it was at this point that the religious structures intersected with those of commercial tourism. The Church contracted Thomas Cook (who had had offices in Dublin from 1876) to arrange the train, boat and hotel accommodation, to book pilgrims' tickets and take their payments. The pilgrimage route was overland, sailing initially for Holyhead from Dublin, Rosslare and Belfast, taking the train to Folkestone via London, the ferry to Boulogne, and resuming the train journey

from there through Paris and on to Lourdes. Different groups broke the journey with overnight stays in different cities – some stayed in London for a night, some in Paris, depending on their original starting point, and the train, hotel and meal packages were available in first, second or third class. First-class train and hotel tickets from Dublin were £14 17s, second-class were £11 3s and third-class were £9 12s (*Kilkenny People*, 26 April 1913). Thomas Cook would also organise "side trips" to destinations along the route for pilgrims who wanted them – this concept of "side trips" to pilgrimages would go on to become crucial to the ways that they blurred the divide between religious and leisure travel, and it is therefore significant they were present from the very first large pilgrimage from Ireland. It is also notable that one of the accounts written by a pilgrim who took the route with an overnight stay in London made reference to using that time for "sightseeing" (*Western People*, 27 September 1913). The 1913 National Pilgrimage groups left Ireland on 8 September, which was a day earlier than originally intended because train travel through France had to be rescheduled to accommodate large scale French troop movements, an ominous indication of events to come (*Freeman's Journal*, 24 May 1913). The total group of 3700 pilgrims included a significant number of ordained churchmen and they were led by both the Archbishop of Cashel and Cardinal Logue, but it is nevertheless clear that the great majority were members of the laity who had "means and leisure". That such a large number were willing and able to undertake the expense and rather gruelling travel was an indication that there was considerable enthusiasm for both the spiritual and secular experiences involved.

The 1913 National Pilgrimage was considered a great success by all those involved, with many reports stressing both the powerful religious and patriotic emotions felt by the pilgrims upon arrival in Lourdes, and a more general enjoyment of the entire experience, including the camaraderie among those sharing the journey (*Western People*, 27 September 1913). Wider international and then national events intervened, and the journey could not be repeated during the years of World War One, the War of Independence or the Civil War. The enthusiasm for such enterprises clearly survived that lengthy hiatus however, as in spring 1924 the Second National Pilgrimage to Lourdes was announced in the press. It was in most respects a repeat of the first journey in 1913, being organised by a national committee with diocesan sub-committees which allocated places to parishioners from their ticket quotas. The actual travel arrangements were again managed by Thomas Cook, but there were some significant changes to the transport routes used, and these were notable for the ways that they highlighted the secular possibilities of the pilgrimage for many travellers. Where in 1913 the entire party had travelled by train via London and Paris, the announcement for the 1924 journey emphasised that this time invalids (always an important part of pilgrimages to shrines such as Lourdes) would travel by specially-chartered steamer directly from Dublin to Bordeaux before making the short overland journey to Lourdes itself. By contrast, regular pilgrims would once again take the overland route via London and Boulogne, with second class tickets offering all trains, hotels, meals and tips for £13 11s from Dublin and Belfast, although pilgrims could request an upgrade to first class for their travel in France for 30s each (*Connacht Tribune*, 19 April 1924). While mention was made of the benefits of this new arrangements for the invalids, in that the direct steamer meant they only had to endure one embarkation and disembarkation and would be spared the "coming and going" of other pilgrims, it was also baldly stated that the two routes were also "better for the pilgrims that their journey be not incommoded by the presence of the sick" (*Sligo Champion*, 24 May 1924) a statement which indicated an unembarrassed acknowledgement that non-invalid pilgrims were likely motivated by a range of different ambitions, including the very secular pleasures of international travel and sightseeing (*Sligo Champion*, 24 May 1924). Indeed, as will be outlined below, this change to the organisation of

the Second National Pilgrimage was the first of many indicators over the remaining inter-war years that the journey itself was clearly understood to be an opportunity for enjoyable leisure travel. The 1924 pilgrimage was even larger than its 1913 predecessor had been, with a total of 4000 pilgrims, of whom 800 were invalids and their medical attendants travelling on the direct steamer, the rest being regular pilgrims travelling by train (*Ulster Herald*, 12 July 1924). As in 1913, it is striking that so many pilgrims willing and able to pay more than £13 per person could be found, especially given that many of them probably travelled in couples or family groups. Clearly, they would still have been the persons of "means and leisure" the Archbishop of Cashel had previously described, and it is worth noting that so many of them existed in the earliest years of the Free State when the general economic circumstances in Ireland were poor.

The success of the second National Pilgrimage in 1924 was clearly one of the most significant factors behind the establishment of a professional travel agency by the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI). The CTSI itself had been formed in 1899 and was primarily a publisher of pamphlets and cheap books (Godson 2014, 397-400). In 1928, their printing and bookselling firm was renamed and reorganised under the new name of the Veritas Company, which also established a travel agency of the same name as part of the business. They were to be specialist pilgrimage organisers, and operated their first pilgrimage in October that year when they oversaw 2000 pilgrims visiting Lourdes (*Irish Independent*, 9 October 1928). The smaller party of travellers and the abandonment of a direct chartered steamer for invalids by comparison to the 1924 National Pilgrimage points towards the inexperience of Veritas as travel agents, although it was still a significant undertaking and appears to have been a successful enterprise. The following year Veritas organised a pilgrimage to Rome, which left Ireland on 8 October and returned a fortnight later. This was also an overland journey, which meant that seven of the pilgrimage's fourteen days were spent travelling. Advertisements and announcements of the trip dwelt in some detail on the routes and stopping points between Dublin and Rome, which, given the distance involved, were numerous. They were also without exception popular and fashionable southern European tourism destinations, most of which had no religious significance at all. On their outward journey from Dublin, pilgrims would travel via London, Paris, Aix-les-Bains, and Rapallo over the course of more than four days. They then spent a week in Rome, time which "will be occupied with sight-seeing…and during the five days practically every place of historic interest in the Eternal City will be visited, including, of course, St Peter's, the Vatican Galleries and Library, Sistine Chapel, Raphael's Loggia, Vatican Gardens, Catacombs of S. Callistro, Basilica of St. Sebastiano, and the Arch of Constantine will be visited" (*Irish Independent*, 2 October 1929). Many of these Roman sites were of religious as well as tourist significance, and one day of the trip was "reserved for the audience with the Holy Father", no doubt the high point of the entire expedition for most pilgrims. After that, however, "the special party desiring to visit Venice will leave Rome on Sat., 19th Oct., and join the ordinary party at Milan on the following Tuesday. Lucerne will be reached the same evening at 6.46", after which the entire group retraced their steps home via Paris and London (*Irish Independent*, 2 Oct 1929).

If the Veritas Company's first pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1928 had been relatively simple and small-scale, then their visit to Rome the following year not only displayed a growing confidence as professional travel agents, but also began to develop the template for pilgrimage tours from Ireland over coming years and decades. With a religious shrine or site as the journey's formal destination, its status as a pilgrimage was beyond question – especially if, as was often the case, it was organised by Veritas or accompanied by senior members of the Church – no matter what proportion of the time away from Ireland was spent on travel or sightseeing activities at non-religious locations. This combination of tourist pleasure with religious activity, organised

within the structures and infrastructures of commercial travel but also cloaked by the respectability of Church approval and involvement, then became the pattern for the most common form of travel outside Ireland (excepting emigration) prior to the development of mass market sun holidays decades later. As mentioned above, neither these structures nor the secular pleasures of the journey necessarily undermined a sincere religious commitment or experience for the pilgrims. However, in a mid-twentieth-century Ireland in which displays of a specifically Catholic form of respectability were powerful indicators of middle-class status for individuals and families (a status with very material benefits within communities and professional life), it is likely that being able to experience those secular pleasures while also enjoying the status of a pilgrim would have been particularly appealing (Cronin 2010, 107-129; Delay 2019).

3. Mediterranean Pilgrimage Cruises

Cruise travel as an end and a pleasure in itself – rather than sea travel only as a means of transport to a particular destination – had been available for the very wealthy since before World War One, but on a relatively limited scale and often only for very long journeys such those to the Caribbean during the winter. In August 1928, for example, the Cunard line were advertising a 39-day cruise to the Caribbean in the coming winter (for 90 gns), and even a 6 month "round the world" cruise for £425, both departing from Southampton, as most commercial cruises sold to British or Irish customers would continue to do over the coming decade (*Belfast Newsletter*, 30 August 1928). Mediterranean cruises were already taking place even during the 1920s however, with the *Irish Independent* noting in September 1926 that the Governor-General Tim Healy and his wife, as part of a group which also included James McMahon, the last British Under-Secretary for Ireland prior to Independence, had just departed on a cruise which among other places would visit Lisbon, Algiers, Venice, Corfu and Tangiers (*Irish Independent*, 11 September 1926). These were clearly rarefied holidays for very wealthy travellers, but by the start of the 1930s cruises had become both more numerous and slightly cheaper, and the Mediterranean was becoming a particularly favoured cruise route.

The development of leisure cruising for the (prosperous if not wealthy) middle-classes occurred largely because of external pressures on the shipping industry. Changes to United States immigration rules during the 1920s led to a drastic decline in immigrants from Europe and therefore in the number of trans-Atlantic sailings needed to transport them (Cerchiello, Vera-Rebollo 2019, 155). The impact of the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the deepening economic depression it led to also decreased passenger and cargo traffic across the Atlantic and shipping companies found themselves with underused liners (*ibidem*). By the early 1930s many of these had been redirected to offering cruise holidays to British (and Irish) passengers. In May 1931, the American Express travel agency on Grafton Street in Dublin was advertising "The Modern Holiday – Go Cruising!", promising holidaymakers they could "combine rest and gaiety at moderate cost" (*Irish Independent*, 27 May 1931). And early in 1932, the *Meath Chronicle* firmly stated that "[c]ruising is no longer the prerogative of the rich and leisured classes", noting that in the coming year the White Star Line would be operating "tourist" cruises to Spain, Portugal and Morocco. The article explained that "these 'Tourist' cruises will last for twelve days and the fares are from £12 upwards, thus bringing cruises well within the range of the average person" (*Meath Chronicle*, 23 January 1932). That claim was a very elastic use of the term "average person", but nevertheless it was the case that the cost of cruise holidays had dropped significantly by the early 1930s, and this would have important implications for Irish pilgrimage tourism.

The expanding business of leisure cruises visibly began to intersect with Irish pilgrimages to continental European destinations during 1933 and 1934. This was a significant period for the Catholic Church, 1933-34 having been declared a Holy Year which involved many activities – including pilgrimages – centred on Rome (Bosworth 2010). This was reflected in the pilgrimages organised from Ireland, as their principal destination became Rome instead of Lourdes. The exception to this was the Veritas-organised pilgrimage to Lourdes which departed Dublin in September 1933, a third "national pilgrimage" intended to give thanks for the success of the Eucharistic Congress. That had been hosted in Dublin the previous year, at which more than a million people from Ireland and abroad had congregated in the Phoenix Park, and in a world-first and technological marvel the Pope had broadcast a live radio message from the Vatican (Boyd 2007, 322). In October 1933, however, the first of at least four large-scale Irish pilgrimages to Rome left Dublin to participate in the Holy Year. The shift of destination from Lourdes to Rome was also marked by a significant change in the travel arrangements, as pilgrimage travel and Mediterranean cruises began to overlap. The first "official Irish pilgrimage" from Dublin to Rome (which cost from £19) travelled overland via the usual train routes through London and Paris in its outward journey, but advertised that not only were "extension parties to Venice and Florence" available during the 16-day trip, but also that there would be a "Mediterranean Cruise from Naples (to London) on Way Home" (*Irish Press*, 5 August 1933). In the spring of 1934, this intersection between pilgrimages and cruises became fully-developed. The availability and affordability of cruise ships meant that two large-scale pilgrimages from Dublin chartered cruise ships in March of that year. The Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland (CBSI) chartered the Lancastria (a ship often listed in commercial cruise advertisements during the 1930s) to take 1150 passengers to Rome, and departed from Dublin on 7 March. Although organised by the CBSI, the pilgrimage was also advertised to the general public and among its passengers were Fine Gael leader W.T. Cosgrave, along with his wife and two sons (*Evening Echo*, 24 March 1934). Advertising and reports on this pilgrimage explained that the Lancastria would berth at Civitavecchia (the nearest commercial port to Rome) and there serve as accommodation for the pilgrims during their time in Italy, with trains conveying them in and out of Rome each day. The Lancastria was fitted to offer only first-class accommodation, and the pilgrimage cost between 19-25 gns (*Irish Press*, 15 July 1933).

The Lancastria was gone for 18 days, and returned to Dublin on 24 March 1934. The very next day the Laurentic departed for Rome carrying 700 new pilgrims. This pilgrimage was organised by Hewett's Travel Agency and where the CBSI journey had been timed so that the pilgrims were able to spend St. Patrick's Day in Rome, this second group were there for ceremonies to mark the "Closing of the Holy Door" (part of the Holy Year celebrations) as well as the canonisation of St. John Bosco (*Cork Examiner*, 24 March 1934). As was to be expected, a great many senior churchmen were onboard, including the Archbishop of Tuam. Most pilgrims were lay-people however, and among their number was Nessa Lyne, a journalist who wrote an account of the pilgrimage for the *Irish Press*. She did not name specific passengers, but did note that "unexpected as well as expected friends are aboard. Fellow-students of many years ago, university professors of one's twenties, well-known personalities, clergy-men, journalists, artists, doctors, lawyers, school-mistresses, civil servants, children, mothers, bankers, manufacturers, businessmen and women, officials intermingle" (*Irish Press*, 14 April 1934). This extensive list of middle-class occupations is useful confirmation of what the market was for journeys costing at least £20 per person and lasting up to three weeks. Lyne's account of the journey itself mentions the cold seas of the initial days finally giving way to "Gibraltar and sun, and mule caravans and Spanish folk and British military, and also the friendly hospitality of Irish convents". It was also at Gibraltar that the Laurentic party encountered their secular

Mediterranean cruise equivalents, as the Homeric (a ship from the White Star Line) also docked there and it "unloads more sophisticated passengers, lipstick and all! They are returning home, but not from a pilgrimage. Are they as lighthearted as we […] the peace of God maketh the heart glad" (*ibidem*). This response from Lyne captures both the similarities and differences between pilgrimage cruises and their commercial tourist equivalents. The religious sites and ceremonies experienced by pilgrims were undoubtedly different from those of commercial cruises, yet both were sailing the Mediterranean and enjoying the sunshine and mule trains of Gibraltar. Pilgrimage travel from Ireland continued its adoption of commercial tourism routes and models during the autumn of 1934. Following the Hewett Travel Agency's organisation of a sailing to Rome in March, other commercial agencies had begun to advertise pilgrimage cruises. Universal Travel Bureau in Killarney and Riordan's Travel Agency in Limerick advertised a "pilgrimage by liner" travelling from Dublin to Le Verdon (near Bordeaux) leaving pilgrims only a short train journey to Lourdes. The SS Orduna, run by the Pacific Steam Navigation Company, undertook this pilgrimage as a commercial operation – starting from Liverpool with 400 English pilgrims, sailing to Dublin to collect 410 more, and from there travelling directly to France. This was presented to potential travellers as an important improvement in pilgrimage travel, in contrast to the traditional overland route (*Cork Examiner*, 5 September 1934). It is striking that while in 1924 the second "national pilgrimage" to Lourdes had sent only its invalid pilgrims directly by steamer in order to prevent them "inconveniencing" other pilgrims on the overland route via London and Paris, ten years later it was the overland route itself which was presented as an inconvenience by comparison to the opportunity to travel by liner.

Pilgrimage cruises did not end after the Holy Year of 1934. Indeed, cruise travel to religious destinations (and via entirely secular tourist sites *en route*) for Irish pilgrims became ever more pronounced during the rest of the decade. In 1935 perhaps the most extravagant pilgrimage cruise of all travelled from Dublin to "the Holy Land". Organised by Veritas and departing on the Lancastria on 9 March, the party of just over 400 travellers sailed from Dublin to the Mediterranean, intending to visit seven ports in Greece, Egypt and Palestine. Advance publicity and advertising for the pilgrimage emphasised the avoidance of the "tedious" overland route with its "hawking of luggage", as well as claiming that chartering a cruise-liner would also be considerably cheaper – it was claimed that going overland would have cost almost £80 per person, whereas berths on the Lancastria were expected to cost between £40 and £65, depending on the class of ticket. Furthermore, the *Tipperary Star* commented, "there is no comparison from the health point of view, or for that matter from the point of view of social enjoyment, between travel overland… and travel on a luxury liner like the Lancastria, with no restriction on one's movements, no confinement, with outdoor games and sunshine – three months ahead of the opening of the summer season at home" (22 September 1934). Despite the emphasis upon the price being lower than it would have been overland, this was (inevitably considering the distance travelled) one of the most expensive Irish pilgrimages of the entire decade, so it is not surprising that, aside from senior clergymen, those listed as travelling were members of the professional middle-classes. They included the Secretary of the Catholic Truth Society, the nationalist MP for Fermanagh and Tyrone Cahir Healy, the chairman of the Institute of Civil Engineers (and his wife), the Assistant Harbourmaster of Dublin Port (and his wife), and the Chairman of the Licenced Vinters' Association (and his wife). The married couples travelling would have been paying at least £80 for their berths, and they were away for 25 days – this was therefore a pilgrimage which was demanding of both time and money (*Irish Independent,* 11 March 1935).

The recognition by commercial travel agencies that pilgrimage organisation could be a profitable activity was clearly evident by the middle of the 1930s. As described above, the very earliest

pilgrimages had (for want of many alternatives) been organised by Thomas Cook, and individual agents such as Albert Hewett had also been energetic pilgrimage organisers, but the Church's establishment of the Veritas Company in 1928 had to some extent made them fully Church-organised. The 1934 cruise to Lourdes on the SS Orduna was notable for apparently being an entirely commercially-arranged pilgrimage by a shipping company, and from the mid-1930s they were joined by commercial travel agents who also started to advertise pilgrimage tours. In 1935 for example, both Heffernan's Tourist Agency in Cork and Twohig Travel Agency in Dublin were advertising pilgrimage travel, not as part of large Church-initiated tours but as, in effect, package travel to the pilgrim's chosen destination for which the agency booked travel and accommodation for their party only (*Evening Echo*, 7 January 1935; *Irish Independent*, 16 March 1935). Over time this would become the default model for most pilgrimage travel from Ireland. Few if any large-scale Church-organised pilgrimages occurred after World War Two for example, even if some travel agency packages were able to advertise that their tours were "guided" by individual clergy. With each passing decade after wartime restrictions on travel to continental Europe were lifted, more and more travel agencies based all over Ireland advertised pilgrimage travel packages to a range of destinations. The 1930s saw what would evolve into this business model for commercial pilgrimage packages slowly emerge from the "national pilgrimages" organised by the Church itself, first via the Church's establishment of their own travel agency for such journeys, and then through the entry of wholly commercial travel businesses into arranging pilgrimage travel (*Air & Travel*, July 2020, 32-38).

One of the forms these overlapping business models took during this formative decade of Irish pilgrimage tourism was the curious example of the "all-Catholic cruise", of which there were two during the mid-1930s. The differences between these "all-Catholic cruises" and an actual pilgrimage might not have been entirely clear to many observers (and perhaps some passengers), although they were significant even if small. The most important difference was that unlike a pilgrimage which had a specific religious site as its destination, the all-Catholic cruises (like any other commercial cruise) was a circular voyage with stopping-off points but no specific destination. Where the pilgrimage cruises could present the voyage aboard ship as simply a form of transport to the religious site even when in reality the time spent cruising there and back may well have been a significant attraction to pilgrim tourists, the all-Catholic cruise could freely position the cruise ship experience itself and the glamour of the Mediterranean as its central attractions. The first "all-Catholic cruise" left Dublin on 17 August 1935 and returned after 21 days, during which time it visited Gibraltar, Barcelona, Rapallo, Naples, Rome, Lisbon, Malta, and Vigo (*The Liberator*, 3 November 1934). The cruise cost £24 and took place on the Tuscania, and may well have had a direct business connection to the commercially-organised sea pilgrimage to Lourdes on the same ship which had travelled in March of that year. Advertising for this cruise explained that it was to take place "under the leadership" of four Bishops each representing England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and would have daily masses onboard and a private chapel, while other advance publicity claimed that passengers were promised an audience with the Pope while visiting Rome (*Cork Examiner*, 2 February 1935). In these respects, it did not differ from the arrangements for pilgrimage cruises, but the advertising also stressed that it would offer "all enjoyments of Cruising, Dances, Concerts, Deck Games and Sports, Competitions, Swimming Pool etc" (*The Liberator*, 3 November 1934). Reading between the lines of the pilgrimage cruises leaving Ireland in the mid-1930s – especially because they were often using the commercial cruise ships which were already serving the commercial Mediterranean cruise market – it is clear that many of these activities would also have been part of pilgrimage travel, and that this attraction was in fact something of an open secret for both pilgrims and pilgrimage organisers of the era. Nevertheless, pilgrimage organisers' references to the sociability

of onboard life were carefully subtle by comparison to the "all-Catholic cruise" references to swimming pools and dances. This journey was in its tone and objects little different from the commercial cruises advertised alongside them in Irish newspapers, emphasising Mediterranean sunshine and holiday enjoyment. The key difference was the exclusively Catholic identity of the passengers and the religious services made available to them on-board ship. No commentary on the reasons for such exclusivity appears to have been published, but the clear implication was that the frivolity of a cruise holiday was morally risky in the company of non-Catholics, but acceptable in a Catholic environment. The fact that such holidays were emerging – for those who could afford £24 and three weeks away from home – from the experience of pilgrimage tourism was the most likely reason for such concerns. Irish holidaymakers were becoming increasingly drawn to the specific qualities of a cruise, but were keen to retain a religious identity – and perhaps therefore their respectability – for the journey.

The 1935 "all-Catholic cruise" included 200 passengers from Ireland. Among them was Phyllis Ryan, the pioneering female chemist whose laboratory conducted much of the public analysis in Ireland. Ryan was met at Dublin port on her return from the cruise by Sean T. O'Kelly, then the Minister for Local Government and Public Health, and whom she would marry the following year (*Irish Press*, 6 September 1935). The cruise was clearly judged a commercial success, given that the following year the "second all-Catholic cruise" was advertised. Also sailing on the Tuscania, this group of holidaymakers left Dublin on 14 August 1936, carrying 900 passengers in total, of whom 220 were Irish. Originally planning to visit Spain, Portugal, Madeira, and the Canary Islands, the ship's final route was different, with a representative of the shipping company telling the *Irish Press* afterwards that "the Spanish ports were cut out of the itinerary owing to the troubles in Spain. They called at Lisbon, Madeira and Casablanca" (31 August 1936). The handful of passengers named in the paper upon the ship's return indicate a high proportion of married couples having taken the cruise, some accompanied by their children. Among these were CEO of the Vocational Education Committee who had travelled with his wife and daughter – his occupation underlining the extent to which this kind of holidaymaking was the preserve of the professional middle-classes. Despite this limitation, the evidence of the larger and better-publicised pilgrimages and Catholic cruises which left Ireland for Lourdes, Rome, North Africa, and the Mediterranean in general during the 1930s indicates that there was a sufficient market to support such travel. Those described by the Archbishop of Cashel as early as 1913 as people with "means and leisure" were a small proportion of Irish society but there were enough of them to form the basis of a nascent package travel industry in the decade before World War Two.

4. Mediterranean Leisure Cruises

It is worth noting that throughout this period of ever-increasing pilgrimage cruises from Ireland, the commercial cruise industry continued to grow as well, in many cases on the same ships and travelling almost the same routes as pilgrimage cruises. If the 1933-1934 Holy Year was a particularly busy one for pilgrimage travel, it was also the year in which Irish newspapers began publishing feature articles, travelogues, and fashion columns about cruise holidays, as well as carrying extensive paid advertising for commercial cruises. In 1933 the *Belfast Newsletter* published a hymn to cruises entitled "Ideal Holiday Cruising – Golden Sunshine and Life-Giving Breezes", which described cruise ships as "floating palaces" and included photographs of their on-deck swimming pools (25 January 1933). In April 1934, in advance of that year's summer tourist season, the *Irish Press* published a full-page article headed "Let's Go Cruising" illustrated with a drawing of a fashionable couple looking over the railings of the ship, and surrounded

by cruise advertisements from the White Star, Cunard, and Canadian Pacific shipping lines as well as many Irish travel agencies. The advertisements, which were illustrated with images of liners, palm trees and camels, listed sailings and prices for cruises to the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Balearic Isles, and even one to Soviet Russia to attend the Leningrad Music Festival (*Irish Press*, 14 April 1934). A similar article (still under the headline "Let's Go Cruising") appeared in the *Irish Press* exactly a year later in April 1935, again ringed with advertisements for cruises (*Irish Press* 9 April 1935). In 1933 both the *Sunday Independent* and the *Cork Examiner* published fashion advice for women planning a cruise, the *Examiner* offering the wise advice not to "buy a pair of jazz pyjamas just because your friend has some", while the *Independent* advised that "two or three" evening dresses would be useful if they were a design which would pack without crushing, and further suggested that although "there is a fancy dress ball at least once on every cruise" an impromptu costume rather than a pre-planned one would suffice (*Irish Examiner*, 21 July 1933; *Sunday Independent*, 4 June 1933).

References to evening dresses (let alone having two or three of them) belied the implication in some quarters that cruises were by then widely-affordable for Irish holidaymakers. Both travel articles and several paid advertisements during this period claimed that the less extravagant cruise holidays would cost passengers approximately £1 per day, and were often at pains to point out that this then included all accommodation, meals and onboard entertainments (*Belfast Newsletter*, 25 January 1933). This characterisation of cruises (like pilgrimages) was therefore a foreshadowing of the structures for "all-in" package holidays which would be developed during the 1950s. The *Meath Chronicle* went so far as to claim that the cost of a cruise compared favourably with the full cost of a seaside holiday (23 January 1932, 8). This would obviously have depended upon the seaside holiday in question – these took many forms, and the vast majority of Irish holidaymakers were not spending £1 per day per person. As an example of passengers who were taking cruises, in April 1933 the *Irish Press* briefly noted that Senator James Ryan and his wife Agnes (owners of the Monument Creameries chain of shops) had just departed for a fortnight's cruise during which they would visit Casablanca, Algiers and Barcelona (*Irish Press*, 8 April 1933). Successful business owners and others with similar incomes were the most likely customers for such holidays.

The flurry of articles and advertisements in Irish newspapers about cruises occurring at the exact moment at which so many pilgrimage cruises were also heading through the Mediterranean is notable, however. Praise for the experience of spending time onboard a luxury ship, the benefits of sea and sunshine, the opportunities to visit interesting destinations along the route, and even the advice on clothing to wear on the trip might all have applied to and been appreciated by passengers booking one of the many pilgrimage cruises leaving Ireland during the 1930s. This is not to discount the differences between the two kinds of cruise – the pilgrimage ships offered daily masses, and probably offered a more sober (in every sense) onboard atmosphere than the commercial cruises with their fancy dress, balls, and concerts. Nessa Lyne's article in the *Irish Press* recounting her experience on the pilgrimage to Rome had after all referred to passengers they met on Gibraltar from commercial cruises as being distinguished from pilgrims by their use of lipstick, which is also suggestive of more meaningful differences between the groups. She further recalled having encountered the pilgrimage being referred to by passengers on commercial sailings as a "sad cruise" (14 April 1934). Sentiments among pilgrimage passengers – especially perhaps invalids and their accompanying family – presumably varied considerably, but the mentions of "deck games" onboard ship and side trips to Venice, Turin or Florence depending upon the route belie claims of sadness for many if not all of the pilgrims.

5. Post-War Pilgrimages and Package Holidays

When it was explained of the 1936 "all-Catholic" cruise to the Mediterranean that "the Spanish ports were cut out of the itinerary owing to the troubles in Spain", this was an early indication of the geo-political events which would of course render all holiday travel in Europe impossible by the end of the decade. Both commercial cruises and pilgrimages across the continent continued remarkably close to the outbreak of World War Two, which is perhaps evidence of how unclear the magnitude of events in 1939 actually were for the general population. The Catholic Travel Association (a British organisation which had operated a travel agency in Dublin since 1934 and tended to organise cheaper overland pilgrimages) continued to advertise and operate its pilgrimages to Lourdes and Rome right through the summer of 1939 – at least ten parties travelled to Lourdes between June and August, for example (*Sunday Independent*, 11 June 1939). An overland itinerary to Rome which called at Naples, Florence, Venice and Milan was due to leave on 1 September 1939, and just a few days before that date it was announced that it would "leave according to plan", but that "if…a solution of the present international difficulty is not found until the end of the week, the next departure for Lourdes and Rome will be on September 9" (*Irish Independent*, 30 August 1939). However, perhaps not surprisingly, this was the last discussion of pilgrimages to continental Europe until after the end of the war. The cruise liners which had operated both commercial and pilgrimage cruises were in many instances requisitioned for military use and several were destroyed. As early as 4 September 1939, the Athenia (still in civilian operation and making a trans-Atlantic crossing) was torpedoed and sunk, an event reported in some Irish newspapers with the added detail that "three years ago the liner carried members of the Oblate Fathers' pilgrimage to Lourdes" (*Limerick Leader*, 4 September 1939). The Lancastria, which as a Cunard liner had carried the 1934 Catholic Boy Scouts' organised pilgrimage to Rome and the Veritas pilgrimage to the Holy Land, was sunk during the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940 with an estimated loss of up to 7000 lives.

The post-war tourism industry in Europe would come to be dominated by conventionally-defined "package tours" in search of sunshine and beaches. The transition from pilgrimage to beach holidays as the dominant Irish experience of European travel was slow however. As leisure travel from Ireland to the continent started to become feasible again after the end of the war, it was typically in the form of revived pilgrimage travel. The dominant pre-war destinations of Lourdes and Rome continued to be popular, and pilgrimages to these sites were very swift to adopt air travel – a small party from Ireland flew to Lourdes in September 1946, a date so soon after the end of the war that the town was dominated by recently liberated French prisoners of war visiting the shrine along their way home, to give thanks for their own and their country's survival (*Irish Press*, 24 September 1946). By 1954, as the former military airfield at Tarbes was being developed into a modern commercial airport to serve Lourdes, Aer Lingus was the only airline already running a scheduled service there, and by 1958 "[…] a specific building, the Lourdes terminal, was constructed to expedite passengers through Dublin airport" (Cronin 2011, 49). As well as developing new routes to Lourdes (and Rome) in the post-war era, Irish pilgrims also began to visit new destinations.

Fatima in Portugal had a similar history as a religious shrine to that of Lourdes in that it was associated with a Marian apparition in 1917. The town had been recognised by the Vatican as an official site of pilgrimage since 1930, but does not appear to have attracted organised Irish pilgrims before World War Two. This would change significantly in the post-war years, beginning in May 1949 when a pilgrimage cruise travelled from Dublin to Lisbon carrying 91 passengers. The pilgrims, who paid between £42 and £48 each, used the SS Alca as a floating hotel while in

Portugal, and travelled from it each day to visit the shrine at Fatima. The journey was organised by a commercial travel agency, MacGuill Travel Agency in Dundalk, but was also conducted under the aegis of the Archbishop of Armagh (*Irish Press*, 15 February 1949; *Evening Herald*, 19 May 1949). This first organised pilgrimage was soon superseded however, when in August of 1949 the first pilgrimage by air left Foynes Airport in Co. Limerick carrying 38 passengers to Lisbon, bound eventually for Fatima. The flying boat they travelled in took six hours to complete the journey, and the passengers included several members of the clergy and, among the lay pilgrims, the son of The O'Rahilly, who had died in the GPO during the 1916 Rising, and whose family owned Greenore Port in Co. Louth (*Irish Independent*, 12 August 1949). This journey, which was described as being seen off from Foynes by a large crowd, was a pioneering example of the kind of European travel – for both pilgrimages and secular holidays – which would become the norm over the next decade. The initial pilgrimage to Fatima by sea in May 1949 was in many ways the end of one era of travel, whereas the sea plane's voyage in August was the start of a new one. Sea journeys from Ireland to continental Europe did continue in the post-war years, but the age of cruise travel was rapidly being succeeded by the age of air travel.

The early adoption of air travel by Irish pilgrimage tourists to European destinations was a logical development based principally on the demands of geography – avoiding a long journey across large swathes of western Europe was the reason why Irish pilgrims before World War Two had often chosen to travel by sea and was now the reason why they began travelling by air. If the geography which drove both sea and air travel for Irish pilgrims was the same however, the experience of these two forms of travel was very different. The intertwining of pilgrimage and cruise tourism meant that much of the time away from Ireland was spent on the journey itself – and indeed that was clearly much of the attraction during an era when cruise holidays were very fashionable. If the time spent at Lourdes or Rome was for many a sincerely religious experience, the time spent on board the cruise ship (or at the wide range of secular destinations the ship also called at) was an opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of a secular cruise, and that time might well amount to at least half of the time away from home for many pilgrimages. By contrast, the advent of air travel to pilgrimage destinations dramatically shortened the amount of a pilgrimage spent actually travelling, even in those post-war years when air travel was significantly slower than it would become later on. This reduced travelling time in the post-war era ushered in a new structure of Irish pilgrimage travel, and one which also intertwined pilgrimage with newly developing modes of tourism, just as the cruise pilgrimage had done in the pre-war years. If less time was to be spent travelling, then pilgrims could combine their pilgrimage with another stop at a secular destination somewhere within viable reach of the shrine. One of the earliest manifestations of this new combination of travel plans was a journey by air from Dublin to Lourdes for a pilgrimage visit to the shrine, followed by a relatively short coach journey across the Spanish border to San Sebastian for a holiday. Perhaps surprisingly, Éamon de Valera was something of a pioneer for this form of holiday. In August 1953 it was announced that "Mr. de Valera will be absent on the Continent for the first fortnight in September. He proposes to go to Lourdes, San Sebastian, Lisbon and Fatima. He will be accompanied by Dr. and Mrs. Éamon de Valera and Rev.T.J. O'Doherty, Mrs. Éamon de Valera's brother" (*Irish Independent*, 13 August 1953). By the following year, commercial travel agencies in Ireland were advertising Lourdes and San Sebastian package holidays, such as the Irish and Continental Travel Agency's offer of "Lourdes and San Sebastian – Marian Year Pilgrimage combined with A Spanish Holiday" of 16 days in total for £58-5-8 (*Sunday Independent*, 1 August 1954). In 1958, which was the centenary year for Lourdes and therefore one with large numbers of Irish pilgrims travelling there, a package was advertised offering "Lourdes and Costa Brava by Air", which included one

week in Lourdes and then a second week at Palamós on the Costa Brava. The price was 49½ gns, which the advertisement described as "not a cheap holiday but exceptional value" (*Irish Independent*, 20 February 1958).

As these kind of package pilgrimages grew in number, they multiplied in format and stratified in price, so that well before the end of the 1950s, travellers could find air, sea or coach packages from Ireland to Lourdes, Fatima or Rome, each with different secular tourist destinations built in along the way or as a second destination, and at widely-differing costs. Coach travel – an often-overlooked form of travel which was crucial to the development of post-war package tourism – featured in those package tours which combined pilgrimages with holidays at the lower end of the market, as air travel was extremely expensive. The Catholic Holiday Guild, a British organisation established in 1940 as a Church-approved travel agency describing its mission as being "to promote Catholic friendship through holidays" and whose tours were more analogous to the "all-Catholic cruises" of the pre-war era than to formal pilgrimages, was in 1958 advertising in Irish newspapers their 12-day coach party journeys consisting of three nights in Lourdes, two nights in Paris and six nights in Fuenterrabía, "a typical Spanish seaside resort" for 38 gns, significantly cheaper than the nearly 50 gns for air travel to Lourdes and Costa Brava offered that same year (*Irish Independent*, 4 December 1957). Commenting on the Catholic Holiday Guild's packages that year, the Archbishop of Liverpool struck a slightly combative note when he wrote in the Guild's magazine that "Protestant visitors to Lourdes are sometimes 'mildly shocked' because the pilgrims seem to be all in a holiday mood", before going on to argue that "sadness and sanctity are thought to march together" only because of the Reformation (cited in *Irish Press*, 9 December 1958).

6. Conclusion

Leaving aside critiques of the Reformation, as secular package holidays started to become widespread for Irish tourists from the late 1950s onwards, pilgrimages combined with holidays remained a feature of the market. By 1967, an article in the *Cork Examiner* previewing the year's holiday options focused on the opportunities to combine pilgrimages with beach holidays in southern Europe and noted that "Ireland, in fact, is one of the few countries where this sort of combined trip is keenly sought by such a large proportion of local people". And far from feeling that such choices might undermine the spiritual experience of a pilgrimage, the article asserted that "The real point to the pilgrimage plus holiday trip is that so many people are prepared to give up part of a preciously-sought Continental fortnight to spend their time in devotions when lesser mortals would be seduced by sun and sands" (*Cork Examiner*, 3 April 1967). The market for Irish holidaymakers of "sun and sands" package holidays was still developing in the 1960s, but it is clear that many Irish travellers to continental Europe had long since experienced many of the characteristics of such tourism. Travelling in organised groups brought together under the auspices of commercial travel agencies, using transport and accommodation booked for the entire group in order to benefit from bulk-buying prices, and for a pre-paid "all in" cost per traveller, even the original Irish "national pilgrimage" to Lourdes in 1913 had shared all of these characteristics with the "sun holiday" packages of the 1960s and beyond. As Irish pilgrimages became more frequent and more varied in the decades which followed, their status as proto-package tourism became even clearer. The routes, modes of transport and secular stopping points or side-trips all followed the changing infrastructures and fashions of leisure tourism. This took many forms over time, but the development between the wars of pilgrimage cruises was one of the most explicit ways in which pilgrimages were combined with secular tourism of the period. In 1924, on the

second "national pilgrimage" to Lourdes, when only the invalids were sent directly by steamer from Dublin to Bordeaux, it was made explicitly clear that this was largely to avoid them being an "inconvenience" to other pilgrims on the overland route, and it was clearly that overland route via Paris which was expected to be the more enjoyable form of travel. By the 1930s however, overland travel to Lourdes or Rome was relegated to a rather arduous cost-saving approach, while most of the well-advertised and high-profile pilgrimages chartered cruise ships which not only promised sunshine and "deck games" on the journey but also stopped at such popular tourist destinations as Gibraltar and Malta. The fact that the ships were the very same cruise liners also being used for the very fashionable holiday cruises to the Mediterranean and North Africa which these pilgrimages so strongly resembled only underlined the ways in which they were mimicking the secular industry. After World War Two, when cruise holidays were largely superseded by air travel in European popular tourism, Irish pilgrimages adapted to this new tourism infrastructure as well, and also to the opportunities it offered to combine a pilgrimage destination with the increasingly popular Spanish and Portuguese beach holidays of the post-war decades.

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Miscellanea

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"Well, cut my legs off and call me Shorty"*: Flann O'Brien, the American Mythos and its Argot

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Abstract:

In the conservative Dublin of the 1950s, a tiny Pike Theatre was making a name for itself by staging the controversial American playwright, Tennessee Williams, for Dublin's first International Theatre Festival. Its director, Alan Simpson, was arrested, however, for "presenting for gain an indecent and profane performance". According to *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien*, O'Brien apparently wrote to Williams for advice about resuscitating his own flagging theatrical attempts (McGowan, Sherlock 2021, 155-56). This essay contextualizes the letters to situate O'Brien's grafting an American mythos and its idiom onto "The Auld Sod".

Keywords: Alan Simpson, Dublin Cattle Market, Modernism, Tennessee Williams, The Pike Theatre

He has no personal name at all.
His dadda is in far Amurikey
(O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 1976)

In the conservative if not reactionary Dublin of the 1950s, a tiny, 50-seat Pike Theatre was making an international name for itself by staging Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and offering the first uncensored English-language production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, admittedly in something of a Hibernicized rewrite. But the venture seems to have run aground along the rocky road to Dublin when, even as a subscription theater club, it took on the controversial American playwright, Tennessee Williams. The program read: "Pike Theatre Club [.] Edmund Kelly [,] Georoid O'Lochlainn [,] Alan Simpson [,] Carolyn Swift presents for the Dublin International Theatre

* "The Hateful Eight" (2015) or "H8ful Eight", Quentin Tarantino: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzbBjUuTG-c> (05/2025).

Festival An Tostal [that is, The Gathering] May 12-26, 1957 the English language European Premiere of *The Rose Tattoo* by Tennessee Williams". As Cian o hEigeartaigh writes in a letter to the *Irish Independent*, "[f]or a few years the world was at their feet, but it all came crashing down after a prosecution for obscenity when they staged Tennessee William's *Rose Tattoo* for the Dublin International Theatre Festival in 1957" (O'Toole 2002). This would be Dublin's first International Theatre Festival as the Irish stage was struggling to become a world stage[2]. Simpson was arrested for obscenity, however, after having refused to heed warnings from detectives from An Garda Síochána, who attended performances, to eliminate certain scenes from the play. The charge was, "presenting for gain an indecent and profane performance" (*ibidem*).

How much this initial controversial festival engaged Flann O'Brien is difficult to assess, but one Myles na gCopaleen affirms that "a Saturday never passed when I wasn't in d'Abbey", but, alas, "D'Abbey's gone to hell this ten years" (O'Brien 1999, 356-357). *The Pike Rose Tattoo* incident was unmissable in the press and he seems to have wanted to be part of it. He followed the scuffle in letters to the *Irish Times*, between Seán Ó'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor about recent productions at the Abbey Theatre, and O'Brien, as O'Nolan, waded into the fray under a variety of noms de plume ridiculing both authors. In the summer of 1940, he again weighed in as news of poor attendance at a Gate Theatre production of *The Three Sisters* prompting a string of pseudonymous letters claiming acquaintance with the greats of Scandinavian drama and offering facetious anecdotes about them. According to *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien*, recovered only recently from "an old cupboard upstairs" (McGowan, Sherlock 2021, 155) in the Palace Bar and published in 2021[3], he maintained an active interest in theater and apparently wrote to the controversial American playwright asking for advice about resuscitating his own flagging theatrical attempts (155-156). We do not have O'Brien's solicitation since the letters recovered were responses to him (with one exception), but in his reply, Williams summarizes parts of it, including O'Brien's outline of the impact that contemporary American theater was having on its Irish counterpart, a reference, at least in part to Simpson's staging of *The Rose Tattoo*. We posit that the same or similar might be said for American genre fiction and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the subject of this disquisition. As welcome as the discovery and subsequent publication of *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien* was, however, the joy is tempered by their being offered naked, so to speak, that is, without what some of us believe to be necessary apparatus, as we call it in the business, footnotes and other annotations, even as the "The Contributors" page offers an impressive list of possible annotators, including one "Stan Gortanski", dubbed a "Florida professor", although he may be a fiction since Google offers no confirmation of such a so-called "professor". The attempt here is to mitigate or redress such omission, or at least to contextualize the letters, and so to situate O'Brien's creative and commercial pursuits more thoroughly, particularly his transplanting or grafting an American mythos and idiom onto "The Auld Sod".

O'Brien apparently wrote a series of letters to prominent figures in order to resuscitate something of his "less than successful" theatrical efforts, as he wrote to Williams, or as Myles na gCopaleen has it, "[d]id you ever see my play, hah? (You had to be quick as it happens)" (1999, 395), O'Brien rather Myles here is probably referring to *Faustus Kelly* (1973, 115-198), which had a short run at the Abbey in January 1943. As early as 29 October 1953, having seen *Double Trouble*, he wrote to Stan Laurel after having met him and performed for him some arabesques involving porter and a ball in "the foyer of the Royal Marine Hotel in Dunleary" (1999, 356). As a follow up, O'Brien offered him the lead in his play *Two Policemen*

[2] For a list of the festival's offerings cfr. <https://dublintheatrefestival.ie/about/archive> (05/2025).
[3] Cf. Frank McNally's review of the "Flanndemic" in *The Irish Times*, 9 February 2021.

and a Bicycle. Laurel, and performing partner Oliver Hardy, however, declined the offer (90). In 1960 he engaged Orson Welles in a pub "near the Gaiety Theatre" (125) as Welles writes subsequently "where I began my career" (*ibidem*), at least his debut performance was at The Gate Theatre in 1931[4], their meeting after Welles spoke at the Dublin Theatre Festival of that year. Welles praised Micheál Mac Liammóir, co-founder of The Gate Theatre, for his role in a TV version of *King Lear* (1953), in which he played Poor Tom. Williams, on the other hand, praised Mac Liammóir's earlier major role as Iago (to partner Hilton Edwards' Brabantio) in Welles' abridged and re-arranged *Othello* with its opening of Desdemona's cortege and scenes of the public display of a caged Iago – in a monumental opening of 12 varied and stunning shots (1949-1952). The film was evidently ignored in Welles' praise of the Irish actor since he and Mac Liammóir were at odds for most of their professional work at The Gate Theatre in their various film ventures. *Othello* finally exists in multiple versions, at least two commercially released, the one premiered at Cannes and the other recut for the American market. More to the point, O'Brien evidently felt a connection with Welles' cut-up Shakespeare as he was starring in a mash-up of the Bard's work, *The Chimes of Midnight*, at the Gaiety Theatre when they met. O'Brien apparently took the opportunity of the meeting to propose to Welles "an adaption of *Citizen Kane* in the Irish context" (McGowan, Sherlock 2021, 125-126). Welles was intrigued by such a brash offer, noting that the project "holds my imagination captive this fine evening" (*ibidem*). Kane would become O'Kane, the sled, "rosebud", become a bicycle in O'Brien's adaptation, but no follow-up correspondence has been discovered – at least to date, although *The Lost Theatrical Adaptations of Flann O'Brien* may not be far in the offing if further renovations to the upper level of the Palace Bar are effected. One might hope to find as well not only other bits and pieces of *Slattery's Sago Saga* but drafts and fragments of the play he proposed that Williams write about the founders of the Gate Theatre that he provisionally titled *Love at Harcourt Terrace* or *For the Love of Hilton* or even fragments of the rumored sequel, *At Swim-Three Birds*. Williams declined the offer, but one can only hope that O'Brien took up his own challenge and that effort may be sitting silently among rafters somewhere, its subject of *The Boys* not conducive to the Ireland of the 1950s and 60s when even James Joyce's *Ulysses* was still denied official entry through Irish customs (and so never officially banned), although Archbishop John Charles McQuaid essentially halted the presentation of an adaptation of the novel for the 1958 Dublin Theatre Festival, and his recent published letters, *His Grace is Displeased*, reveal that he worked diligently in 1960 to have the Joseph Strick film adaptation of *Ulysse*s banned in the Republic. Fintan O'Toole recently offered his "personal history" of the era, featuring the issues of Ireland's struggle for modernity. An excerpt appeared in *The Irish Times* on 25 September 2021 describing the Church's effective censorship of the 1958 Dublin Theatre Festival as a story "barely worth an inside paragraph" at the time but one which turned out to be "more consequential" than other more sensational headlines of the day:

> The first story was the cancellation of the Dublin Theatre Festival. The ruler of Catholic Ireland, the Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, had silently indicated his displeasure at the inclusion of an adaptation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and a new play by Sean O'Casey [*The Drums of Father Ned, or a Mickrocosm of Ireland*]. Samuel Beckett [who was prepared to submit his mimes and allow a reading of his radio play, *All that Fall*] had then withdrawn two of his works from the festival.[5]

[4] Cf. "Orson Welles", the TG4's Documentary (17/11/11): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXvHZ-Vm0gEc> (05/2025).

[5] For a fuller version of the account see O'Toole 2021, 10-11.

The adaptation of *Ulysses* had previously cleared the clerical censors, but not the Archbishop, who, also citing *The Rose Tattoo* case of the previous year, refused to offer a votive Mass for the 1958 Festival if these works remained on the program. That refusal resulted in the cancellation of the entire 1958 Festival. O'Casey and Beckett would subsequently prohibit their works' performance in the Irish Republic. The O'Casey issues in 1958 were also reminiscent of Abbey Theatre's reluctance to stage *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926. That year O'Casey would win the Hawthornden Prize, a British literary prize for younger authors, for the play. Presenting the prize, Herbert Asquith described *Juno and the Paycock* as "the most moving and most impressive drama we have seen for ten, it may be twenty, years"[6]. But Irish resistance to O'Casey's dramatic vision continued. Yeats rejected *The Silver Tassie* for the 1928 Abbey Theatre season. And much to O'Casey's astonishment, O'Brien joined the push back, at least through his alter ego "Myles na gCopaleeni", as O'Casey addressed him, noting that the columnist had earlier approached O'Casey "looking for some good words back" (O'Brien 1999, 80), that is, some puffery, a blurb, say – now, in October of 1951, Smiles na gCopaleeni (OK, it's a cheap shot) was:

> condemning from his pulpit on the Cruiskeen Lawn […] a man who dared to produce so 'loathsome and offensive a 'play' that has ever disgraced the Dublin boards. […] O'Casey's *Tassie* […] was 'a straightforward travesty of Catholic ritual' mixed up with 'bunkum and drool'. (*ibidem*)[7]

Frank McGuinness would eventually pick up the Mac Liammóir and *The Boys* thread with *Gates of Gold*, however, which premiered in 2002 at The Gate Theatre, appropriately. Jason Zinoman called it an "enduring love letter of a play" in the *New York Times*, and further notes, "[t]he play explores themes of inheritance, what a dying man leaves behind, and self-invention, while nicely capturing the particular brand of bickering that doubles as an expression of love" (3 March 2009). One reading of *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien*, then, is that O'Brien, at least on this conflicted issue of Irish modernism, seems to have felt left out of local creative scuffles. Outraged, he wrote to the Archbishop in November of 1963, who replied, "regarding the banning of your books […] this is the first time that an author has claimed that he is being discriminated against because not a single piece of his 'work' has been banned" (McGowan, Sherlock 2021, 150). The Archbishop acknowledged that "the censors have been unable to make neither head nor tail of the stuff you have been producing. Frankly, neither have I", calling O'Brien's work, finally, "incomprehensible rubbish that will never be read by anyone" (150-151). Shortly thereafter, O'Brien would seek writing advice from the author of *The Rose Tattoo* (155-156).

Even Samuel Beckett – sensing competition, perhaps, or piqued that O'Brien ignored the daring, uncensored Pike Theatre production of *Waiting for Godot* – distanced himself from O'Brien, as both would from the anxiety of James Joyce's influence. Beckett likewise declined O'Brien's overture, a solicitation to translate his work into Gaelic and to collaborate on "a joint Irish-French research project" (150-151). O'Brien received one of Beckett's curt and cutting replies, ending with "do not write again" (*ibidem*), the letter unpublished, alas, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. And perhaps just as well since the response appears disingenuous if not evasive as Beckett denies having read any O'Brien, or perhaps memory had already begun to fade by 1960 since we know he read

[6] Cf. <https://www.nytimes.com/1926/03/24/archives/sean-ocasey-wins-literature-prize-irish-dramatist-receives-100.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap#> (05/2025).

[7] "Cruiskeen Lawn", *Irish Times*, 3rd October 1951, on a revival of the play on 24th September 1951, noting further: "Like Synge [O'Casey's] stuff is strictly for export. Paud and Paudeen drooling on the stages of the West End, with the 'poetry' slobbering out of their unwashed mouths, will always be a winner. I hope the rest of us know the phony when we see it". Not included in McNally (2015, n.p.).

and delighted in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (McGowan, Sherlock 2021, 125) passing a copy on to Master Joyce. Although that may be mere history, its facticity is confirmed fictively in Joyce's response to one Mr O'Nolan in this case, in March of 1939: "[…] Mr Sheridan [Niall, probably] brought me your novel with inscription. […] I did not have the heart to tell him that I'd already read a copy given to me by Mr Beckett. […] Both your novel and *Murphy* have the true comic (and Dantean) spirit […]" (23). Archbishop John McQuaid goes further, denigrating Joyce in the process, *At Swim-Two-Birds* declared " 'a work of true comic genius' by that renegade heathen […]" (150).

What Joyce fails to acknowledge at this point is the novel's American mythos, central to its "comic genius". Joyce seems to have disengaged from the Dublin cowboys who are "[…] cow-punching down by the river in Ringsend with Shorty Andrews and Slug Willard" (31), the reading of which phrase seems to have put a quick end to the life of American writer Pearl Zane Grey on 23 October 1939, the day he received and began to read a copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. According to his widow, who found him lying (in all senses, perhaps) on the floor of his study with the book open to the phrase above, he died the result of "badly drawn cowboys" (*ibidem*). We have on good authority that carelessly composed words can kill, or at least Myles na gCopaleen has informed us of an essay on Joyce in *The Bell*, which Myles more usually calls *The Ball*, that "[t]hroughout the piece the master's last novel is consistently referred to as 'Finnegan's Wake'. That apostrophe (I happen to know) hastened Mr. Joyce's end" (O'Brien 1999, 239). More likely, however, was that *At Swim-Two-Birds* may have heralded the end of "horse operas", Western genre fiction, to its king, as Zane had written some 80 volumes of "shoot-em-ups" by then. Cowpokes, O'Brien announced, function wherever there were cows to poke or punch, whether that be Ireland or Poland, where the buffalo also roam. Witness, for instance, that Paddy Dignam's funeral cortege in *Ulysses*, that begins in Sandymount in a kind of buckboard, perhaps, and that is interrupted by a cattle drive – a Wednesday ritual through the streets of Dublin, a common occurrence until the demise of the Dublin Cattle Market in 1973. The herd, "a divided drove of branded cattle" as it is called in *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922, 80), driven down the north quays to the docks. They are referred to as "emigrants" by Mr Power since they were bound for English and Scots abattoirs, "[r]oastbeef for old England" (*ibidem*), Bloom muses. Those that remained, these cattle of Helios, or the brown bull of Cooley from the *Táin bó Cuailnge*, perhaps, or those along the Chisholm Trail, where some 1,500-2,500 head of cattle were driven from Fort Worth, Texas, to the rail head in Abilene, Kansas – roughly 520 miles away – on their way to the Chicago slaughterhouses. Those that remained in Dublin would meet their fate on "Thursday, Tomorrow is killing day" where they will be "poleaxed" as Bloom reminds us, remembering his days as sales clerk for the cattle market, "walking around with book and pencil", before he "got the boot for giving lip to a grazier"(80-81)[8]. Drovers or cowpunchers, Fintan O'Toole identifies this Dublin cattle exchange as part of the Irish power elite, "big cattle ranchers" (2022, 10)[9], a follow up to his invocation of the Amurikan idiom in his 1994 exposé, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch: The Politics of Irish Beef*.

But Western genre fiction had moved on to the silver screen, Zane Grey's most famous work, the 1911 novel *Riders of the Purple Sage*, made into a six-reel, silent film in 1925 starring Tom Mix, the pre-eminent Western star of his generation, as a former Texas Ranger in usual

[8] Details at <https://www.joyceproject.com/notes/040037cattlemarket.htm> (05/2025).

[9] According to Declan O'Brien, the numbers in this weekly cattle drive are almost as fantastical as those suggested by that other O'Brien, Flann, suggests: "[…] the South exported around 500,000 cattle annually to Britain, through the 1950s and 1960s. The fat cattle went straight to slaughter in abattoirs in Birkenhead, Liverpool and Manchester. The store cattle were finished by North of England and Midlands' farmers" (<https://www.farminglife.com/country-and-farming/new-book-reveals-the-richheritage-of-dublins-cattle-market-3348767>; 05/2025). And the Dublin livestock Auction is still functioning: <https://m.facebook.com/DublinLovestock/> (05/2025)

pursuit of justice. That is, the American mythos, had gone international by the first decade of the twentieth century, and it is reconstituted, clichés and all, complete with its own operatic absurdities and interchangeable characters who could easily move from one story to another – to wit the Circle N Ranch in Irishtown and Sandymount where some 10,000 steers and 2,000 horses roam, the ranch accessible by Dublin tram, the number 3, to be specific, its Edenic gardens, open on Thursdays and Fridays, even as not much open grazing land was available in Sandymount.

Yet, it's all true, we learn, or are told, especially given the activities of the Dublin Cattle Market that processed some 6,000 head of cattle a week in the middle of the city (O'Brien 2021), and so, like everything else in O'Brien, fiction, even in its fantastical mode, is never far removed from fact, as O'Brien grafts American Western lore on to Dublin's weekly cattle drives, badly or well – that is, whether or not he got the idiom of "United Stations […] down" or not is for others to judge as the interchange among Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan plays out to their internal audience of Casey, Finn and Sweeney. O'Brien's principle mode, like the American western itself, is excess, what in *Ulysses* Joyce calls "Gigantism". To wit, as Shanahan declaims:

> Be damned to the lot of us, I roared, flaying the nags and bashing the buckboard across the prairie, passing out lorries and trams and sending poor so-and-so's on bicycles scuttling down side-lanes with nothing showing but the whites of their eyes. (O'Brien 2008 [2007], 52)

We might carp to suggest that "lorries" and "lanes" are not part of an Amurikan idiom, even as the spirit pertains.

Even as such fictive responses to questions never asked belie veracity, they do suggest a persistent theoretical and critical thread and the facticity of the fictive, as O'Brien's continued interest in the American ethos and mythos, complete with its argot, at least since the writing of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is punctuated *passim*.

> Such recreation would be filtered through other, local psyches as well:
>
> This is a private visitor who says he did not arrive in the townland
> upon a bicycle. He has no personal name at all. His dadda is in far
> Amurikey.
>
> Which of the two Amurikeys? asked MacCruiskeen.
>
> The Unified Stations, said the Sergeant.
>
> Likely he is rich by now if he is in that quarter, said MacCruiskeen.
> because there's dollars there, dollars and bucks and nuggets in the
> ground and any amount of rackets and golf games and musical instruments.
> It is a free country too by all accounts.
>
> Free for all, said the Sergeant. (1976, 270)

And indeed, Amurikey is something of a free for all – in and out of O'Brien. But such a "free for all" of a novel would run afoul of English editors of the day. O'Brien received the news from his literary agent Patience Ross of A.M. Heath and Co. on 11 March 1940. She informed her client that Longmans had declined *The Third Policeman* citing the rejection sent to her: "We realise the Author's ability but think that he should become less fantastic and in this new novel he is more so" (qtd. in Willis 2019). Four other rejections quickly followed, and so

the typescript was relegated to what might be considered O'Brien's unofficial archive, "an old cupboard upstairs in the Palace Bar" (McGowan and Sherlock 2021, 155-56), retrieved only after his death and published in 1967. Its "fantastic" nature would finally receive international popular validation, if briefly but aptly, however, after its flash appearance in the cult TV show of 2006, *Lost*, after which sales surged, particularly in Amurikey, if perhaps for the wrong reasons.

Critic Michael Wood has suggested that "Ireland, unlike England or France, can be itself and easily stand for other places" (2010, 177). *Ulysses*, for example, is a thoroughly European novel, as it is undeniably pervasively Irish. Beckett as well is, that is, can be Irish and easily be from or of other places – or nowhere in particular. I am proposing a similar fluidity for O'Brien who can be substantially if not dominantly Irish, yet also American, speaking to an American mythos and through an American idiom, which is why L.L. Lee could suggest of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, at least, that "this Irish book is also an American book" since "at least the cowboy is a universal symbol by now" (1969, 219). In his "Introduction" to Flann O'Brien's *Stories and Plays*, Claud Cockburn puts it another way:

> It is a tribute to the Irish genius in particular to Irish writers' powers of observation, expression and dramatization that whole tracts of general human experience are acknowledged to be specifically Irish, the Irish having acquired squatters rights to them. It is in this sense that O'Nolan is to be acclaimed as the kind of thing that could only happen in Ireland. (12)

In a moment of cohesion amid the disparate and conflicted characters and raucous story lines of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for instance,

> The travellers would sometimes tire of the drone of one another's voices and join together in the metre of an old-fashion song […] They sang *Home on the Range* and the pick of old cowboy airs, the evergreen favourites of the bunkhouse and the prairie; they joined together with a husky softness in the lilt of come-all-ye's, the ageless minstrelsy of the native-land […]. (O'Brien 1998, 186)

Such cultural fusion, however, is double edged, or, to alter the metaphor, blurs borders and thus distinctions. O'Toole cites Brendan Behan's take on the issue of the "specifically Irish", "Ireland is a lie, a state or place non-existent […]" (2021,17); and he cites a Heinrich Boll story of "a nun finding a dead American Indian in Duke Street in the center of Dublin" (16). For O'Toole the story becomes part of "the fevered images of the Irish as a moribund tribe" (*ibidem*), a follow up to his 1994 *Black Hole, Green Card, The Disappearance of Ireland*, perhaps, or for us, something of the Americanization of Ireland. Alternately, in the unfinished *Slattery's Sago Saga*, a plan is devised to keep the Irish at home and thus to prevent Irish immigrants' colonizing and so further ruining Amurikey, such absorption finally another road to double extinction of native distinctions – much of this is a designated strategy of global corporate modernization that the powers that O'Toole cites, Pan Am, in particular, were promoting. Lee's conclusion further punctuates America's growing global cultural hegemony, witness the outpouring of what were generally called "spaghetti westerns", some 600 of which were produced between 1960 and 1978, all European co-productions shot on location in (mostly) Italy, one of which, the 1966 *Django,* has recently been re-released on Sky. O'Brien lived only a few years into this cowboy craze, but one hopes that he felt some vindication in his double demythologizing, that of his native island and that of the American West – witness the anti-genre films *Midnight Cowboy* (1970), *The Unforgiven* (1993), *The Revenant* (2016), perhaps, and *The Power of the Dog*, the last a winner of the BAFTA "Best Picture" award in 2022, made by a New Zealand cowgirl. On the other hand, iconic character actor Sam Elliott returns us to some good old "identity politics", xenophobia and some misogyny thrown in for good measure – readers may recall Elliott's introducing "The Dude" to us at the

opening of *The Big Lebowski* – Elliott has said of Jane Campion, "[w]hat the f--- does the woman from down there know about the American west?" (Carras 2022). Had he taken the trouble to read *At Swim-two-Birds*, he might have said something of the same about O'Brien. As it turns out, Elliott notwithstanding, Campion won the "Best Director" award for *The Power of the Dog* at the curious 2022 Oscars. Elliott might have said something of the same of another foreigner, Oscar winning director Alejandro G. Iñárritu. Ah, well, Westerns are back in the global market, whoever directs them, wherever they are located and whoever is punching or poking those cows – to all of which O'Brien might also have replied, "Well, cut my legs off and call me Shorty", although we have it on good authority that the Irish version might simply refer to wearing new shoes that are "cutting the feet off me" according to Myles na gCopaleene (O'Brien 1999, 351).[10]

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[10] Listen to the "American idiom" in Louis Armstrong at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhAq9xHbCmA> (05/2025).

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From Dusk to Dawn: The Evolution of Cultural Identity in Edna O'Brien's *The Light of the Evening* and Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*

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Abstract:

This essay traces the evolution of the Irish and Palestinian cultural identities of Dilly in Edna O'Brien's *The Light of the Evening* and Amal in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*. It implements Stuart Hall's Three Conceptions of Identity to uncover the dynamic development of their evolving cultural identities, tracing the three stages of cultural identity evolution. First, the Enlightenment subject outlines the relationship between the protagonists, their homeland. Second, the Sociological subject analyses the protagonists who have been shocked by societal and political changes. Third, the Postmodern subject portrays the fragmentation and hybridity of the protagonists. O'Brien and Abulhawa subvert colonial binaries, generating a radical vision of selfhood that thrives in ambiguity.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Enlightenment Subject, Postmodern Subject, Sociological Subject, Stuart Hall's Three Conceptions of Identity

1. Introduction

The constructs of identity, a fundamental theme in cultural studies, are indispensably connected with the historical, social, and political frameworks in which individuals and communities exist. Literary texts, particularly those rooted in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, depict individuals as fluid and ever-evolving shaped by the confluence of factors. Colonised identities have emerged as a central concept due to the continuous failure of traditional ideas of national and cultural cohesion to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of identities shaped by various intersecting forces, highlighting the inaccuracy of focusing on singular or monolithic forms of identity while overlooking the social, historical, and political conditions. The exclusion of political or

any other cultural force from discussions on cultural identity formation restricts the creation of a more realistic, globalised identity, disregarding the ultimate fact that individuals navigate and negotiate multiple identities as they belong to various categories.

The cultural identity of colonised subjects, by nature, challenges traditional notions of cohesion and highlights the need to address these intersections. Despite the complexity and fluidity of the term, cultural identity is part of an individual's self-definition that subconsciously navigates a cultural subject to be psychologically and socially interconnected to the frame of his/her cultural arena. In other words, the construction of cultural identity is tied to how a culture defines and experiences nationality, political beliefs, culinary practices, traditions, and colonial acts. In this regard, Stuart Hall, a seminal figure in cultural studies, has attempted to challenge the essentialist notion of cultural identity by outlining the chronological evolutionary phases of cultural identity: the Enlightenment subject (pre-colonial phase), the Sociological subject (colonial phase), and the Postmodern subject (postcolonial phase). Accordingly, this article conducts a thematic, comparative analysis of the Enlightenment subject, Sociological subject, and Postmodern subject between Dilly – the protagonist of Edna O'Brien's *The Light of the Evening* – and Amal – the protagonist of Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*.

1.1 Three Conceptions of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity theory aims to scrutinise and navigate the complexities and impacts of culture, history, and power dynamics in the construction cultural identity of a certain nation. For instance, Stuart Hall has developed the cultural identity theory, asserting that identities are not fixed but rather flexible, continuously shaped by social interactions and cultural influences. In *The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual*, Hall confirms that "cultural identity is not fixed, it's always hybrid […] because it comes out of very specific historical formations, out of very specific histories and cultural repertoires of enunciation" (2018, 208). It can be inferred that rigid categories or predetermined essences should not bind identities; instead, identities are constructed by various external factors, leading to a complex and ever-evolving sense of self. In other words, it is suggested that cultural identity is not merely a random assemblage of cultural elements but a positionality: the unique positioning of individuals within the broader socioeconomic, cultural landscape. Hence, cultural identity emerges from the intersection and accumulation of personal experiences, cultural affiliations, and societal structures, reconstructing a provisional yet meaningful sense of self. Hall refers to this loss of a stable "sense of self" as "the dislocation or de-centering of the subject" (597). The traditional notion of identity is, thus, deconstructed by Hall, suggesting a loss of the familiar and disruption of rooted norms; this can occur on both individual and collective levels. Within this anti-essentialist critique, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity undergo a thorough reevaluation, leading Hall to propose alternative theoretical paradigms that attempt to trace and understand the fluid and contingent nature of identity in contemporary society. In *The Question of Cultural Identity*, Hall adds a new dimension that aligns with the postmodern world to trace the construction and transformation of cultural identity, suspecting any fixed or essentialist conception of identity. Hall lists and conceptualises three very different conceptions of identity: those of the (a) Enlightenment subject, (b) Sociological subject, and (c) Postmodern subject (2011, 597).

First, the Enlightenment subject – a stable, coherent, self-centered identity – offers a lens through which to scrutinise pre-colonial, consistent, coherent, and unaltered core identities, which is indispensable for understanding the substantial effects of colonialism and displacement on the evolution of cultural identities. In *National Identity*, Anthony Smith argues that "warfare also acts

as a catalyst for mobilising ethnic sentiments and fostering national consciousness" (1991, 21). In light of this, it can be inferred that colonial acts establish a centralising force within communities, uniting nations under shared experiences of conflict, as warfare has the merits of generating enduring myths and collective memories that become integral to constructing ethnic identities across generations. Building on the Enlightenment subject idea, in his article *Who Needs Identity*, Hall refers to essentialism as built on "trans-historical assumptions", indicating "a stable core of the self" (2012, 3). This perception is built on common qualities – culture – that remain fixed over time. In other words, culture is a set of "shared conceptual maps" where subjects share a common origin and ideals with one group: a nation (18). This perspective underscores that culture transcends mere customs, serving as a foundational framework through which individuals negotiate their identities and affiliations within a national framework. Concurrently, Hall demonstrates that the construction of a self-centered identity is intricately linked to "belonging to distinctive national culture" (274). This implies that cultural identities are shaped and fortified by active participation in and identification with the cultural norms and values emblematic of their nation. Hence, the Enlightenment subject phase in the narratives of Irish and Palestinian women serves as a critical entry point to understanding the ongoing evolution of cultural identities.

Second, as theorised by Hall, the Sociological subject constitutes the second stage in the identity formation of a colonised people; this phase serves as a transitional bridge, bridging the gap between the pure precolonial and fragmented postcolonial identities. From his perspective, the Sociological subject conceptualises identity as being reconstructed through socio-political interactions and colonial contexts, rather than immutable and fixed. In *The Question of Cultural Identity*, Hall explicates that "the subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities" (2011, 276-277). It can be inferred that the coloniser's cultural hegemony establishes a hierarchy that devalues Indigenous identities, creating internalised conflicts with subjects, as they have to navigate pure, native identity and the imposed colonial identity. Reflecting Hall's notion of fragmented identities, it can be deduced that hybrid identity is marked by contradictions and unresolved tensions. In simple terms, the Sociological subject signifies that identity is self-dependent, but rather modified through interaction with significant others. Moreover, Hall confirms that "the identities which composed the social landscapes 'out there', and which ensured our subjective conformity with the objective 'needs' of the culture, are breaking up as a result of structural and institutional change" (277). It can be inferred that the colonial enterprise induced significant changes – the establishment of colonial administrations, the introduction of Western education systems, and the reorganisation of internal entities to serve colonial interests – forced the colonised subjects to conform to new social norms, constructing an unstable identity that is inherently fragmented, composed of historical memories, cultural hybridity, and ongoing struggles for cultural and political autonomy. Hence, this double displacement constitutes a crisis of identity, leading to a state of disorientation.

Third, Hall's conception of the Postmodern subject represents the transition from the sociological phase to the postmodern. Figuratively speaking, the Postmodern subject may be viewed as akin to a post-traumatic reaction to the "trauma" of the colonial era. In response, the Postmodern subject is not simply a non-definite, non-essentialist, unstable construct; it is rather a fragmented, decentered, and performative identity. First, Hall, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, argues that cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture,

and power (Hall 1990, 225). This conceptualisation aligns with the viewpoint that cultural identity is intrinsically fragmented because of the continuous transformation of cultural identity through historical play, implying that the postmodern subject is never a whole or intact but perpetually changing. Colonial domination leads to the disintegration of established cultural frameworks, leaving colonised subjects with fractured identities that struggle with adapting to new power structures and cultural impositions. As a result of the fragmentation of the cultural identity, it transforms into a decentered identity, lacking a central core and relying on external influences. Michel Foucault extends this point further in *Power/Knowledge*. Foucault confirms Hall's conception of the instability of the Postmodern subject by asserting that relations of power are "indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work" (2003, 24). This underscores the key aspect of the Postmodern subject: the notion that explains cultural identity is not fixed but is instead constructed through the circulation of power and so-called truth within cultural discourses.

2. Analysis of Stuart Hall's Three Conceptions of Identity

2.1 Enlightenment Subject

In O'Brien's *The Light of Evening*, the character Dilly – one of the central characters who used to live in the rural Irish countryside and a profoundly emotionally attached mother – presents the Enlightenment subject phase, indicating the pure identity resonating with pure Irish culture, and reflects the unchanging aspects of her cultural identity. For instance, Dilly's life is deeply interwoven with the land and traditional practices, which serves as a demonstration of a stable Irish identity despite influences from postcolonial modernity. In the Enlightenment subject phase, her cultural identity is depicted in her deep connection to her environment and her adherence to rural, traditional practices. For example, Dilly's deep familiarity with her home and farm exemplifies her bond with her rural heritage. This connection is vividly portrayed when "Dilly thumps the armchair cushions in the breakfast room, talks to them, reckons that the swath of soot at the back of the chimney will stop it from catching fire. She knows Con's habits, piling on turf and logs, mad for the big blaze, reckless with firewood like there was no tomorrow" (O'Brien 2006, 17). This narration underscores various elements that resonate with the pure Irish identity: the reflection of domestic knowledge and control, the symbolism of fire and hearth, and the emotional and sensory engagement. First, the narration illustrates Dilly's comprehensive understanding of the household's maintenance, where her awareness of the soot's preventive function against chimney fires and her detailed knowledge of Con's habits demonstrate her control of the domestic sphere. This control showcases Dilly's authority and competence within her home, emphasising the traditional gender roles where women were seen as the keepers of the household. Second, the reference to "fire" and "hearth" is rich with symbolic meaning. The hearth, traditionally the center of the home, symbolises warmth, safety and family unity. Hence, Dilly's attention to the soot preventing a chimney fire illustrates her protective instincts and dedication to family safety, which are integral to her rural identity. Third, Dilly's actions are deeply sensory and emotional. For example, thumping the cushions and considering the impacts of the soot represents the tactile and visual engagements with her environment, further cementing her connection to her rural heritage and underscoring that her identity is constructed through her daily interactions with her environment. On the one

hand, the concept of a pure, unadulterated cultural identity in Hall's three conceptions' initial phase is highlighted by Frantz Fanon's insights in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon discusses the pre-colonial phase of cultural identity as one of purity, untouched by colonial influences, noting that "colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (1963, 210). This perspective reinforces the idea that Dilly's identity, steeped in the unadulterated traditions of the Irish countryside, represents a form of cultural purity that existed before the disruptions of colonialism. On the other hand, Hall explicates – in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* – that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation" (1990, 225). This underscores the dynamic nature of Dilly's cultural identity. Although deeply rooted in a stable past, Dilly's identity has to and will continuously interact with her transforming environment, creating a sense of self that is both enduring and adaptable. This idea is further supported by Edward Said's assertion that "nations themselves are narrations" (1993, xiii). This emphasises the constructed and evolving nature of cultural identity. In this context, Dilly's narrative, shaped by her interactions with her environment, is inspired by Irish national identity. Thus, Dilly's cultural identity is stable and rooted in her intimate connection to her home, land, and family.

In addition, Dilly's Enlightenment subject is manifested through her adherence to and glorification of Irish oral traditions because they serve as conduits for transmitting cultural beliefs and collective memory. As recited by Dilly, "[t]hings learned by heart at school — 'The Harp that once through Tara's hall … Gearoid Og … The fall of the house of Kildare' " (O'Brien 2006, 21). Dilly's references to Irish history and poetry situate her within the continuum of Ireland's oral traditions, as precolonial Ireland has always viewed its oral heritage as the primary tool for preserving historical stories, mythology, and Irish values. By invoking these lines, Dilly asserts her alignment with the history of cultural resilience. Evoking Thomas Moore's poem *The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls* (1875), Dilly's references to "The harp" and "Tara's Hall" symbolises her unnegotiable belief in Ireland's ancient sovereignty, representing the precolonial Irish identity that is intertwined with the glory of the nation. Hence, Dilly's connection to her oral heritage ensures that the rich heritage of Ireland remains alive in the collective consciousness. Oral tradition is not merely a mechanism for storytelling; it has always been a technical strategy for nations to confirm and secure their cultural identity against forces and change and erasure. As noted by Margaret Field and Kona Meza Cuero "traditional stories and other forms of oral tradition may be viewed as interactional strategies through which cultural identity is discursively produced" (2012, 322). This observation depicts oral traditions as active, evolving mechanisms that engage subjects in the co-creation of cultural identity. The "interactional strategies" are dialogic, engaging the interlocutor and the audience in a shared cultural performance in which cultural values and perceptions are craved in the cultural consciousness. For Dilly, Irish oral traditions provide a "discursive framework" through which she articulates her continuously changing world while ensuring communal belonging and pre-colonial ideals. This resonates with Penny Fielding's assertion that "[t]he oral is never simply one thing" and what orality signifies cannot be "understood without considering its uses as an agent in the creation and re-creation of cultural norms and values" (qtd. in Khasawneh 2013, 83). Fielding asserts the multifunctional nature of Irish oral narratives as living traditions that aim at adapting to and facing contemporary needs rather than being static relics of the past. Dilly's engagement with the Irish oral traditions further signifies their ongoing relevance and demonstrates that these narratives function as dynamic mechanisms for preserving identity. By invoking the

Irish heroic epic, Dilly's participation in the active construction of her cultural identity, as her connection to these traditions bridges the past and present, confirms that the Irish precolonial heritage remains alive in the collective consciousness. Aside from being only storytelling tools, oral traditions stand as powerful devices for nations to safeguard, adapt, and ensure, their cultural identity against forces of erasure and change.

Besides the Irish oral heritage, Irish wedding traditions signified Dilly's pre-modern identity, where her sense of self has been rooted in the cultural fabric of Irish traditional gestures and Ireland's rural environment. In Dilly's recollection of her wedding, she recalls, "I knew my mother would be happy, because when the pony and trap had come to fetch me, she blessed herself, shook holy water on me, and hoped it would lead to prosperity" (O'Brien 2006, 114). The reaction of Dilly's mother underscores their premodern attitudes that are interwoven with Catholic rituals and the pastoral simplicity of the Irish heritage. For example, "the pony and trap" that carried her and her mother's sprinkling of "holy water" signal an identity that draws its strength from established structures of faith and family. These traditional gestures are not merely ceremonial; they signify the enduring influence of what Erin Johnston, in *The Enlightened Self: Identity and Aspiration in Two Communities of Practice*, refers to as "aspirational identity", which is, by definition, an idealised vision of who one desires to be, induced by the religious framework (2016, 2). This concept resonates with Dilly's mother's aspirations for Dilly's marriage: prosperity, protection, and purification. Hence, she is projecting an idealised future onto her daughter; this notion aligns with the collective and religious values of Irish Catholicism. Therefore, Dilly's mother participates in the transmission of an aspirational identity – a belief abiding by the traditional path will result in a meaningful life. This conviction – her mother's act – is an unconscious practice that attempts to secure the continuity of conventional heritage, reinforcing a stable, coherent cultural identity. Moreover, Dilly's wedding incorporates various traditional Irish wedding customs. In the wedding, for example, Dilly vividly recalls the tapestry of Irish wedding customs, as she narrates:

> The vows were spoken at a gallop and by the time we filed out, the bell ringer was already at his task, the bells jubilant […] when an altar boy threw a packet of rice over us, my husband and I exchanged our first married kiss in the view of the Liffey water. (O'Brien 2006, 116)

The portrayal of Dilly's wedding underscores Hall's concept of the Enlightenment subject, as her cultural identity – within this moment – is framed as a coherent construct tied to her cultural heritage. The customs of her wedding – such as hurried vows, the jubilant church bells, and the throwing of the rice – situate Dilly's identity in the shared rituals of the Irish rural framework. Dilly, in this context, can be described as "a fully centred", "unified individual", and "very 'individualist" (Hall 2011, 597). On the one hand, Dilly's participation in these customs can further validate Hall's assertion: "[e]nlightenment subject has an inner core, which first emerged as "when the subject was born" (*ibidem*). This can be confirmed under one condition: assuming that Dilly has intentionally and willingly chosen to entail the rural Irish customs in her wedding. On the other hand, the idea of a stable, unified self suggested by Hall may also have its limitations. The very act of following Irish customs may obscure the complexities inherent in individual subjectivity. Simply put, by sticking strikingly or blindingly to traditions or shared practices, one may lose or disregard unique parts of their identity. Although tradition defines Dilly's sense of self, it may mask her inner struggles and differences that make her a unique individual, raising the question of whether Dilly's identity is ultimately hers or is only shaped by societal complications and expectations.

Paralleling Dilly's preservation of the connection to her home and farm, Amal – the narrator and protagonist in *Morning in Jenin* – demonstrates her pre-colonial Palestinian identity with a

focus on her preservation of Oral traditions and practices. For instance, family gatherings and traditional songs are integral elements of the Palestinian cultural heritage. This is echoed in Abulhawa's depiction of Amal and her family, where they immerse themselves in folk ballads to find solace and unity during the tumultuous first intifada and beyond:

> There, Huda and son cloaked themselves in a habit of song at the doorstep of sleep, coaxing the night with melodies to open the doors of pleasant dreams. In the same family room, Osama, Amal – their firstborn – and the twins, Jamil and Jamal, would listen, allowing the lure of Huda's voice to entice them too into slumber. These were the folk ballads of Palestine through which Huda came to lull her entire family to sleep during the years of that first intifada and for a time beyond that (Abulhawa 2010, 197).

Based on this vivid description, it can be inferred that oral Palestinian tradition has the merits of preserving cultural identity, sustaining collective memory, and crafting emotional and cultural sanctuary. First, Abulhawa integrates the motif of songs to underscore the preservation and transmission of Palestinian cultural identity within the family unit. In other words, the act of singing traditional songs at bedtime is depicted as a method of finding solace and maintaining a sense of normalcy amidst chaos. From Hall's lens, the Palestinian identity of Amal and her family is anchored in their cultural heritage, expressed through the oral tradition of folk ballads, where songs serve as cultural anchors to provide the family with a sense of unity and belonging, thereby preserving their pre-colonial Palestinian identity. In this context, Said agrees that the role of culture in resistance – in *Culture and Imperialism* – manifested through cultural practices is mandatory in maintaining identity and resisting colonial narratives (1993, 216). This assertion demonstrates that cultural traditions stand as a method of resisting domination and preserving national identity, maintaining their Palestinian identity against the backdrop of political turmoil and displacement. Adding to Said, Khalidi asserts that these cultural traditions help maintain a sense of continuity and connection to the past, despite the disruptions caused by conflict and displacement (2009, 88). It can be suggested that the transformative power of cultural heritage is capable of reshaping and fortifying communal identity amidst ongoing colonial challenges. Confirming this, David A. McDonald, in *My Voice Is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance*, highlights that nonviolent resistance by Palestinians, rooted in daily life and fueled by resilience and a culture of resistance, has effectively challenged Israeli policies in Palestine where diplomacy and other tactics have often fallen short, so art, especially protest songs, has played a crucial role in mobilizing people against Israeli occupation policies (2013). This confirms Said's and Khalidi's assertions that folk ballads reflect a broader cultural strategy to preserve Palestinian identity against the adversities of displacement. Thus, the oral traditions of Palestine are deeply interwoven with Palestinian identity, as they stand as living narratives that preserve history, convey communal values, and strengthen social cohesion.

In a manner akin to Dilly's appreciation of the dairy as an integral aspect of Irish cultural tradition, Amal views traditional Palestinian food as a vital link to her cultural roots and a source of communal joy and unity. This is evident in Abulhawa's description of the excitement of Amal and her family when sharing makloobeh:

> They shared the makloobeh—a pile of rice made golden in the syrup of lamb, eggplant, and ginger—and passed the cucumber yogurt sauce, the browned pine nuts, and the crisped onions. Amal was happy. The meal was embellished with spurts of laughter from Mama, who found humor somewhere in the hive of her unseen world, while Yousef and Amal conspired purposelessly in risible peace and smiles, placing that time together in a box of good memories (2010, 92).

It can be inferred from this description that Amal views the makloobeh as a cultural anchor. Palestinian food serves as a cultural anchor for Amal and her family, as the meal is not merely sustenance, but a celebration of cultural heritage, embodying the flavors and practices transmitted through generations. For Amal, this familial dining experience symbolises a connection to her pre-colonial identity, where identity is ingrained in the continuous cultural narrative. The shared meal, filled with laughter and conspiratorial peace, underscores familial bonds and situates their Palestinian identity within the context of pre-colonial/regular life. Transitioning to a broader perspective, the importance of food as a cultural anchor and symbol of resilience is further highlighted by the evidence provided by UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri. He notes that after the 7th of October 2023 or El Aqsa Flood, "Israel's attacks against the Palestinian people and attempts to undermine their food sovereignty is not only restricted to Gaza" (2024, 1) . Fakhri explicates, "food sovereignty is a particular articulation of a people's right to self-determination", underscoring that "the power and authority of food sovereignty do not derive from the political form of the State or national authority; it arises from people's long-standing relationship with the land, and their ability to feed their own communities" (2). Fakhri's stance reflects the critical function that food plays in cultural identity and resilience. As Dilly's and Amal's connections to their cultural traditions through food and agricultural practices anchor their identities, the concept of food sovereignty highlights the intrinsic link between cultural heritage, self-determination, and human rights. Theoretically speaking, Roland Barthes, in "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", clarifies that food – as a fundamental cultural feature – is a signifier and marker of pure cultural identity, demonstrating that "food constitutes sets of information" and signifies "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (1961, 27). Food, therefore, operates on multiple levels. On a basic level, it fulfills the biological need for sustenance. On a social level, ancestorial food fosters communal bonding and shared memory; this is evident as the experience of eating makloobeh becomes an occasion for the reinforcement of familial ties, which affirms Amal identity as not only an autonomous individual but also as a participant in a continuous cultural narrative. On a symbolic level, food functions as a repository of cultural knowledge, as each dish reflects accumulated historical practices and meaning; therefore, preparing and serving makloobeh is not merely culinary but mainly a traditional symbol that echoes the rhythms of the precolonial Palestinian life. On a spiritual level, food holds a sacred dimension that is often interconnected with rituals, prayer, and expressions of gratitude to God, as the teachings of their religion view food as a central act of worship. This spiritual ethos roots Amal's Enlightenment subject in a transcendent sense of purpose that roots her identity to her cultural heritage. Hence, food rituals reflect broader social structures and relationships, offering insights into communal values and social norms.

Similar to Dilly's admiration of her Irish heritage and rural environment, Amal's profound attachment to her Palestinian roots is closely tied to her homeland, where the memories of her childhood were created and experienced. This connection is vividly captured in her recollections of the Palestinian geographical landscape, as shown in the description:

> In a distant time, before history marched over the hills and shattered present and future, before wind grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character, before Amal was born, a small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine. (Abulhawa 2010, 11)

Amal's nostalgic memories of pre-colonial Palestine serve as a poignant reflection on the resilience of cultural identity amidst colonial impacts. This idyllic imagery of the past symbolises an unbroken connection to cultural roots, postulating that despite the fragmentation brought

about by colonialism, there remains a strong, enduring sense of identity anchored in the land and its nature. Moreover, the memories of the pre-colonial environment, where the village thrived on figs, olives, signify a pure and untainted identity; therefore, the environment serves as a reservoir of pure identity, preserving cultural essence and continuity amidst historical upheavals. Furthermore, environmental imagery serves as a symbolic reclamation of identity. In other words, this act of recounting the past does not serve to mourn the loss of the land, but also to assert the legitimacy of a cultural identity that refuses to be subsumed by colonial redefinitions. As a result, the natural elements of the land are imbued with cultural significance, as the memorisation of the pre-colonial environment ensures that cultural memory is transmitted through generations, making the land an essential component of Palestinian identity. In *New Approaches to Migration?,* Al-Ali and Koser observe that "the speeches on the landscape are often metaphorical speeches on the national identity, and blossom when the latter seeks to be affirmed" (2012, 79). It can be deduced that Amal's recollections of the pre-colonial Palestinian landscape serve as metaphors for asserting the continuity and survival of the Palestinian national and cultural identity. Doraï also notes that "the images of the past are read again and again and idealised in the light of the difficult circumstances in which many Palestinians currently live. It is primarily produced within families" (2002, 7). This demonstrates the significant function of families as the primary institutions, who – in recounting the past – educate younger generations about their heritage to instill a sense of pride and identity. In essence, Doraï clarifies that "the village is a privileged place of memory for the Palestinians because it represents the very expression of their Arabic Palestinian culture and identity" (6). This underscores the centrality of the village and the land in maintaining and expressing Palestinian identity. The natural environment, therefore, becomes a site of symbolic resistance, where cultural identity is continually reclaimed and reaffirmed.

2.2 Sociological Subject

Following the Enlightenment subject phase, the Sociological phase ensues, during which the rural Dilly must begin to interact with the influences of colonialism. For instance, Dilly's interaction with her contemporary environment during a conversation in a hospital setting, where Dilly is receiving medical care, highlights this clash: "[y]ou're a gas woman, she says, though she cannot understand how a country woman used to hens and chickens and cows and calves could be so pernickety about her diet" (O'Brien 2006, 119). In this context, the cultural clash between Dilly and the hospital staff is demonstrated, as the speaker's incredulity at Dilly's dietary concerns underscores the perception that someone from a rural background, shaped by traditional and agrarian lifestyles, should not be concerned with modern dietary preferences. In essence, the interaction between Dilly (the rural self) and the British environment (the urbanised other) demonstrates that her rural identity is comprehended through a lens shaped by colonial attitudes, which are often viewed as bizarre, barbaric practices. In other words, the aforementioned comment reflects a broader societal influence where the colonial legacies have instilled a sense of urban superiority, sustained by the economic wealth of the coloniser over the Irish rurality, which has been weakened by the coloniser's exploitation of Ireland's resources. However, Dilly's insistence on specific dietary choices represents a subtle form of resistance against these imposed norms, hoping to assert her individuality and the validity of her rural identity in the face of dismissive attitudes forced by colonialism. Thus, Chan and Patten highlight the fundamental fact that "if people get their cultural goods from producers based in other countries, then they risk losing their own culture" (2023, 2). This assertion reinforces that Dilly's situation exemplifies the risk of cultural erosion when local traditions and identities

are overshadowed by external influences. Her dietary preferences symbolise an effort to preserve her cultural identity against the backdrop of colonial imposition. This dynamic of cultural imposition and superiority is further illustrated by Walsh in *The Structure of Neo-Colonialism: The Case of the Irish Republic*, who documents that "the bulk of what little manufacturing industry the colony possessed – based mostly on the processing of agricultural produce – was centered on Dublin, which also acted as the diffusion source of English culture" (1980, 67). In a colonial sense, the centralisation of cultural and economic power in Dublin not only marginalised rural practices but also reinforced colonial dominance over Irish culture. In relation to Dilly's interaction with colonialism, Walsh's clarification justifies why she has been perceived from the colonial lens as irrelevant or quaint compared to urban standards, which mirrors the colonial strategy of dictating cultural values onto Irish society to sideline and diminish rural Irish identities effectively. Adding to Walsh, Animasaun confirms that colonial acts feed "cultural homogenisation", as "[w]estern values and lifestyles are promoted at the expense of local traditions" (2024). Like Dilly's case, the persistence of foreign influence in cultural or medical systems diminishes local traditions and identities, leading to a loss of cultural diversity and undermining the sense of self and collective identity within affected communities, perpetuating a cycle of cultural erosion and dependency on Western ideals. Thus, Dilly's interaction with the English norm – the Sociological phase – uncovers the tensions and the ongoing struggles to preserve cultural identity in an increasingly colonially influenced society.

Through a socio-political lens, Abulhawa thoroughly depicts the harsh encounter between Amal and the settler-colonial dynamics, revealing the disruptive effects of the Israeli occupation on long-standing traditions and practices. The long-standing traditions and practices among Palestinians often clash with settler-colonial patterns, as the struggle to maintain cultural identity is challenged by forces seeking to disrupt and replace these deep-rooted customs. In Abulhawa's narrative, Amal clarifies that she responds to the economic and social pressures by embracing traditional habits and mundane practices, confessing that her "greatest pleasures were moments of normalcy" such as "a pot of stuffed grape leaves" (2010, 132). In this scenario, the interaction between Amal's self-identity (Enlightenment subject) and societal forces (settler-colonial powers) shapes her Sociological subject, which reflects a significant shift in her perception of the ordinary under the impact of the Israeli occupation. Amal's interaction with the Israeli occupation has forced her to reconceptualize the way she engages with routine traditions. Before the Israeli occupation, grape leaves, for example, were merely a routine element of Palestinian cuisine; however, in the aftermath, this culinary item has since come to be seen as a symbolic instrument of soft power wielded to counteract the persistent ethnic erasure perpetrated by Israel. Patrick Wolfe, in "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", postulates that "the native society was able to accommodate – though hardly unscathed – the invaders and the transformative socioeconomic system that they introduced" (2006, 387). This assertion speaks to the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous cultures in the face of colonialism; however, this accommodation is not without profound consequences; it produces a transformed and often wounded cultural and social fabric. In Amal's evolving identity, her Sociological subject – shaped by the oppressive forces of Israel – embodies the tension between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to the realities imposed by the occupiers. In this sense, Amal's experience is a microcosm of the broader native experience, where cultural practices are transformed into acts of resistance and symbols of identity in the face of attempts at erasure. While Wolfe acknowledges the adaptability of native societies under Israeli pressure, he also emphasizes that "the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc) but access to the territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element" (388). This fact-based remark underscores the

fundamental and often overlooked element of settler colonialism: the relentless pursuit of land, which starts with cultural fragmentation and omission and ends with the systematic displacement of Indigenous subjects. Critically, the systematic persecution and atrocities that are practiced by the Israeli occupation against the Indigenous Palestinian settlers uncovers the dual pressures that Amal endures: the need to maintain a sense of normalcy and cultural continuity in a landscape increasingly defined by displacement and dispossession. Through this lens, Amal's story is not just about personal survival but about the ongoing battle to maintain a cultural and territorial identity that is constantly under threat of erasure. Moreover, the pre-colonial privileges in Palestinian communities are severely constrained by settler-colonialism, where the pursuit of livelihood often clashes with systemic barriers that undermine traditional means of economic sustainability.

When examining Amal's social status before El Nakba and her social/economic degradation resulting from Israel's economic blockade after the Nakba, the repercussions become strikingly clear. In 1941, her father, Hassan Abulheja, was acknowledged as "a descendant of the founders of Ein Hod and heir to great stretches of cultivated land, thriving orchards, and five impressive olive groves" (2010, 18) However, following the forced displacement caused by Israeli raids and ethnic cleansing, Amal's self perception was drastically altered, leading her to reflect, "[w]ho was I, *indeed!* A pathetic orphan, stateless and poor, living off charity" (128) The stark contrast between Amal's life before and after the Nakba exemplifies the profound economic and psychological ramifications of settler-colonial practices. Before the Nakba, Amal was deeply connected to her heritage, her family's ownership of significant tracts of fertile land symbolizing not just economic prosperity but also a strong sense of identity and continuity. Her father's legacy as a key figure in the founding of Ein Hod underscored their historical and social standing, embodying wealth, stability, and belonging. In marked contrast to before, after the Nakba, Amal life has been characterised by displacement, statelessness, and severe poverty. Her poverty is not merely economic but profoundly existential. The anguish of being "a pathetic orphan" exposes that her loss of land and community eroded her self-worth, transforming her into a hollowed-out figure and a symbol of marginalised self who is deeply reliant on external support: her sociological subject is in a state of humiliating dependence. It is argued that Amal's inability to comprehend her current state is mediated by the outcomes of systematic forces (settler/colonialism), as the humiliation experienced by Amal is a tool for social erasure. The loss of land and home deprives Amal of her agency, as her identity is no longer self-determined. Amal's sense of humiliation and shock stems from dialectical tension, wherein her shock reflects the clash between her inner self (Enlightenment subject) and the sociological reality of being degraded to a marginal figure. In other words, Amal's humiliation as a sociological subject stems from her inability to resist and defy dominant codes that reduce her to a "pathetic orphan", where her anguish can read as a subconscious rejection of dehumanised labels and a demand to be perceived as more than a victim. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, in "The Palestinian Exile as a Writer", explains that "the psychological toll of this social erasure is a loss […] of inner essence" (1979, 83). Hall and Jabra highlight that systematic oppression externalises trauma, converting the stable identity into a battleground between self-perception (former stable identity) and social imposition (colonialism). In Amal's case, her displacement after the Nakba exemplifies that Israeli dynamics not only destroy physical spaces but also fracture her inner life, severing their connection to history, heritage, and identity. This personal story can be understood within the broader framework of partition and national identity formation. Joe Cleary's statement from *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State* directly articulates Amal's tortured identity by showcasing that the process of national/cultural identity construction – following events like partition or, in Amal's case, the Nakba – requires a "violent and clamorous estrangement" (2001, 57).

The pre-Nakba relationship between Palestinians and their land, culture, and community was deeply intimate, but the forced displacement has resulted in a severe break or "estrangement" between the displaced population and their former life. The formerly intimate connection to their homeland is violently severed, and this estrangement is necessary for the new realities (in this case, the Israeli nation-state and its identity) to be solidified. In Cleary's terms, the "pre-partition intimacy" (*ibidem*) of Palestinians with their land and heritage was profound, making the rupture caused by El Nakba not just a loss of territory but a violent, existential break from their past, resulting in both physical dispossession and psychological estrangement. The displacement not only marginalises Amal but, in parallel to Cleary's observation, drives the construction of new, estranged identities for both the displaced (Palestinians like Amal) and the occupiers. In short, Amal's experience.

2.3. Postmodern Subject

Following Dilly's encounter with modernity as a Sociological subject, her cultural identity is not merely unsettled but fractured into fragments, signaling a profound disruption. Therefore, the disintegration of the traditional fundamentals can be viewed as the beginning of Dilly's transformative identity evolution and its complex reformulation. Her physical relocation from her homeland and her life to modern Western society situates Dilly's cultural identity conflict. Struggling to hold onto her heritage, Dilly encounters the dislocating impacts of a rapidly modernising Western world as the plot progresses. In light of this, Hall postulates that cultural identity is reformulated by any sort of dislocation, as subjects are constantly shattered between their diminishing connection to their homeland and the disorienting pull of modernity. In "Post-Colonial Theory and Modern Irish Culture", James Livesey and Stuart Murray conclude that "given that the colonial moment was, and the imperial moment is, determinative of the cultural and political identities of the twentieth century", proving that "Ireland is doubly hybrid, subject and object of the process" (1997, 461). Livesey and Murray's framework aligns with Hall's conception by situating Irish identity within overlapping power structures and historical processes. The "double hybrid" nature of the Irish identity uncovers – in the modern era – demonstrates the Postmodern subject's complexity, which is known for its multiplicity, contradictions, and enduring effects of postcolonial modernity. In this context, the continuous negotiation between the past and present transformed Dilly's current cultural identity into the postmodern phase. Under the influence of modernity, Dilly's Postmodern subject has surfaced and marked a departure from the idealisation of her rural heritage, uprooting her towards the capitalist aspiration formulated by modernity imperative. This shift, on the one hand, is displayed in her hidden letter, where she wholeheartedly expresses her desire "*to go to America where I can have nice clothes and a better life than I have*", followed by her mother's reaction: [s]he beat me for it" (O'Brien 2006, 28, italics in the original). Dilly's aspiration and journey to America have made her long for material prosperity and a more affluent existence, reflecting the compelling forces of capitalist modernity. On the other hand, the clash between her capitalist, modernist aspirations and her indecisiveness about where she belongs explicates a deeper sense of shattering and fragmentation of her current identity; her dislocation triggered the existential struggle between her roots' ruralisation and modern industrialisation. This conflict is captured through her mother's plea "I'll never forget my mother, Bridget, kneeling down on the dirt road to kiss my feet and saying, 'Do not forget us, Dilly, do not ever forget your people' " (29). Bridget's intense plea underscores the ambivalence central to postcolonial hybridity. Her mother's act – a gesture of reverence – paradoxically situates Dilly not only as a

bearer of cultural memory but also forces her to view her immigration as a potential betrayal. In "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", Homi Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" as a space for "almost the same, but not quite" is portrayed, where identity is in a continuous process of negotiation through unresolved tension (1984, 127). Hence, Dilly's postmodern subject is a site where loyalty and abandonment, memory and reinvention, collide. The contradictions between her Irish upbringing and the capitalist aspirations of America create a fragmented sense of self. This condition mirrors Hall's postmodern subject, where identity is neither stable nor cohesive but continuously reshaped by the forces of displacement and modernity. The cultural pull of modern Western consumerism and individualism clashes with her inherited values of Irish communal life. This tension between the allure of Western prosperity and the loss of cultural roots is central to her identity crisis.

Similar to Dilly's shattered, unstable cultural identity, Amal's fragmented identity in *Mornings in Jenin* reflects the tension between her inherited Palestinian identity and her diasporic experience in America, illustrating her Postmodern subjectivity. At one point, Amal confesses, "[t]he truth is that I wanted to be someone else. And that summer at Myrtle Beach, I was Amy in a bathing suit, lounging on the sand as far away from myself as I had ever been" (Abulhawa 2010, 142). Here, Amal's attempt to reinvent herself as "Amy" signifies a desire to escape the weight of her Palestinian identity, choosing to adopt a carefree American persona. This shift marks a critical detachment from her cultural roots, an effort to reconstruct herself in a new, more comfortable image. In *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland*, Helena Lindholm Schulz offers a comprehensive analysis of the Palestinian diaspora. Schulz emphasises the concept of "creative ambivalence" where "Palestinian identity is not yielded, nor is it simply 'conserved'; it is complemented with new experiences" (2003, 197). It can be inferred that Palestinians in exile maintain their connection to their homeland while simultaneously integrating new experiences and influences from their host societies. The result is a fluid identity that is shaped by both the memory of the homeland and the realities of life in the diaspora. This ambivalence is "creative" because it allows for the formation of new cultural practices, perspectives, and self-understandings, without being confined to a singular, static identity. It is about adaptability and the ability to hold onto multiple, sometimes contradictory, facets of identity at once. Amal's attempt to reinvent herself by adopting an American persona can be seen as an example of this creative ambivalence. Despite her efforts to detach, her Palestinian identity remains intertwined with her new experiences, marking a dual existence.

However, her transformation into Amy is a facade, demonstrating her inability to fully sever ties with her heritage, as the persona she adopts is superficial and fleeting. In contrast to this attempt at self-reinvention, Amal later acknowledges the inescapability of her true identity: "no matter what facade I bought, I forever belonged to that Palestinian nation of the banished to no place, no man, no honor" (Abulhawa 2010, 143). Her acknowledgment reveals the deeper conflict within Amal. While she tries to integrate into American society, her sense of belonging remains tethered to her Palestinian roots, making her feel stateless and alienated. The use of "banished" emphasises her exile not just from a physical homeland but from her true self, reflecting a postmodern fragmentation where she is always "in-between" cultures. In Hall's essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", he argues that cultural identity is not fixed but is constantly reshaped by historical events, societal changes, and diasporic experiences, as Hall asserts:

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (1990, 222)

Amal's adoption of the "Amy" persona mirrors her desperate attempts to produce a new identity, following Hall's view of cultural identity as a continual negotiation. Amal confirms Hall's postulation by asserting her belonging also to the "Palestinian nation of the banished", suggesting a longing for a fixed, true self craved into her heritage – a notion Hall critiques. Thus, her fragmented sense of self embodies the tension between identity as a lived process and the diasporic yearning for an authentic cultural anchor. Hall argues that even her Palestinian identity is not a simple or pre-made label; it is shaped by multiple factors, such as displacement and memories of her homeland. While Amal is trying to reinvent her identity as Amy (changing with her surroundings), she feels like her "real" identity is still Palestinian (fixed and unchangeable). Amal's Postmodern subject can be explained in a simple analogy. For example, assumingly, her identity transformation symbolises a song playlist. Amal's case can be seen as a person who is always adding new songs and removing the old ones based on his/her state of mind (like Amal being Amy). However, this person always reminisces about a favorite section and keeps ruminating, convinced that those songs define him/her (like Amal becoming Amy). This simple analogy explains Hall's assertation that even if the fundamentals of Amal's Enlightenment subject are not set in stone – they keep transforming as she is displaced, but she still believes that they are permanent and unerasable: this is the tension that Amal is drowning in.

In light of this, this tension is further compounded by her confession that she is "*the remains of an unfulfilled legacy, heirs to a kingdom of stolen identities and ragged confusion*" (Abulhawa 2010, 211). These poetic lines mirror Amal's ancient heritage as a broken inheritance; her postmodern subject – fractured and incomplete – yearns for a coherent, whole identity interconnected to her roots; however, colonial history has disrupted that inheritance. Her reference to "stolen identities" symbolises the trajectory of historical ethnic cleansing, explicating that her Enlightenment subject has been violently erased (by settler/colonialism, exile, oppression). Her belief in her authentic self has been completely diminished: a stable identity she can no longer reclaim. Although her identity is explicitly transformed, Hall's notion affirms that her stolen identity is not static; it is constantly reshaped by resistance, memory, and survival. In addition to historical erasure, the chaos and fragmentation Amal endures depict Amal's postmodern subject in its ongoing process of formation. She is neither Palestinian nor American; she embodies a constellation of paradoxes defined by the friction between irreconcilable elements. The "ragged confusion" is not a failure; it is explicit evidence of continuous negotiation of her identity. Hall critiques Amal's clinging to the "myth of wholeness", clarifying that her pain comes from believing that her identity *should* remain complete. Hall's concept of the Postmodern subject affirms that Amal's unstable and fragmented identity is normal for diasporic subjects; it is a production constructed by survival and adaptation. Hence, this explains the tension theorised by Hall: the Postmodern subject is both inherited and invented, painful and powerful. Rashid Khalidi, in *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, explores the complexities of Palestinian identity, agreeing that their identities are constructed by stolen heritage and colonial dispossession. Khalidi argues that the Palestinian experience is marked by statelessness, leading to fragmentation. Khalidi adds that "the lack of a strong state – indeed of any state of their own—has clearly had a great impact on the Palestinian sense of national identity", and this dislocation is exacerbated by external forces such as Israeli and British colonialism" (1991, 20-21). This insight supports Amal's reflection on the "kingdom of stolen identities", underscoring the enduring effects of colonialism and displacement on personal and collective identity. Palestinians, like many in the Arab world, often find themselves navigating "multiple focus of identity" due to the absence of a cohesive nation-state (32). This notion aligns with Amal's internal disorientation, as her personal identity is entangled with larger, unresolved

historical and cultural legacies. Khalidi's work provides a critical framework for understanding Amal's fractured sense of self, rooted in an intergenerational legacy of displacement and loss.

Additionally, Amal's struggle to reconcile these contradictions is tied deeply to her relationship with her mother, as seen when she reflects: "Dalia, Um Yousef, the untiring mother who gave far more than she ever received, was tranquil, quietly toiling well from which I have drawn strength all my life" (Abulhawa 2010, 263). This connection to Dalia grounds Amal's identity in traditional Palestinian values, serving as an anchor amidst her fragmented sense of self. Her mother represents the enduring link to a past Amal cannot entirely reject, signifying cultural resilience despite the dislocation. At the same time, this maternal figure also underscores Amal's distance from that world, as her life in America alienates her from the groundedness Dalia represents. Thus, through the fragmentation of Amal's identity, Abulhawa explores the postmodern tension between place, memory, and the self. This identity is neither fixed nor fully realised, constantly pulled between the past and the present. In this context, Aboubakr's exploration of cultural continuity further clarifies this struggle, as "the memory work, particularly prosthetic, can highlight and safeguard the cultural and family institutions that third-generation or Palestinian diaspora communities have not experienced" (108). For Amal, her connection to her mother, Dalia, exemplifies this. While Amal experiences a distance from her Palestinian roots, her mother's influence acts as an anchor to her fragmented identity, showcasing the resilience of cultural values despite geographical and generational separation.

3. Conclusion

Building on Hall's framework, from the stable Enlightenment subject to the fragmented Postmodern subject, the evolution of cultural identity reflects the complex nature of cultural identity formation. In the Enlightenment subject, Dilly represents a stable, coherent identity rooted in her established connection to her Irish heritage. As her identity is shaped by her deep connection to the rural landscape and cultural customs, Dilly's attachment to the land conveys a time of belonging and certainty, especially with her role as a caregiver that intricately links her to her Irish rural identity. Similarly, Amal's Palestinian cultural identity is deeply rooted in and inseparable from the heritage of pre-Nakba Palestine. As they move to the sociological subject, Dilly and Amal encounter the complexities of postcolonial modernity and settler-colonialism brutality. At this point, the analysis of both characters reveals that their cultural identity is not in the transformative phase but in a state of shock with a paralysed and frozen identity. questioned and destabilized. Likewise, Amal's identity is paralysed by socioeconomic. As she struggles with the values of urban American society, her once-coherent identity deteriorates because of settler colonialism, where her connection to Palestinian cultural practices becomes strained. She experiences an internal conflict as she navigates the pressures of maintaining her heritage and economic and social status amidst the disruptive forces of occupation. In the Postmodern subject, both characters have gradually possessed the symptoms of identity fragmentation. Dilly's sense of self becomes increasingly unstable as she is neither familiar with her traditional roots nor comfortable with the capitalist aspirations of modernity, revealing her struggle with dislocation and ambiguity. For Amal, her identity reflects a profound sense of alienation; her attempts to reconcile her Palestinian heritage with her diasporic experiences in America, unfortunately, failed. This fragmentation underscores their continuous negotiation of identity. Nevertheless, the analysis of the three identity conceptions – the Enlightenment, Sociological, and Postmodern subjects – marks only phases in the ongoing evolution of identity, as the cultural identity evolution does not stop at the postmodern stage. On the contrary, these stages

pave the way for a metamodern analysis of cultural identity, where identity is understood as an open-ended process (neither deeply rooted nor wholistically fragmented). Although uncovering the three conceptions of identity is pivotal, it does not mark the culmination of the evolution of their cultural identities, the Metamodern subject – a phase unmentioned by Hall – represents a crucial step in analysing cultural identity reconstruction in a world that oscillates between modernist idealism and postmodern skepticism.

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Irish Identity and Narrative Form in Contemporary Graphic Novels: The Case of Debbie Jenkinson's *Midlands*

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Abstract

This essay explores the semiotic complexity and cultural significance of Debbie Jenkinson's *Midlands* (2023), situating it within the evolving landscape of Irish graphic storytelling. Through a close analysis of visual grammar and panel structure, the essay examines how *Midlands* addresses themes of grief, belonging, and identity formation in the aftermath of personal and cultural disruption. Drawing on semiotic theory, Irish literary traditions, and the legacy of oral storytelling, the article positions *Midlands* as a quiet but radical contribution to the Irish literary canon – one that reimagines inherited narrative forms through the lens of sequential art. Rather than focusing on mythic or heroic tropes, Jenkinson turns to the textures of everyday life, using visual narrative to explore emotional ambiguity and psychological transition. The essay argues that *Midlands* marks a significant evolution in the expressive potential of Irish graphic literature, both theoretically and formally.

Keywords: Graphic Novel Storytelling, Irish Literature Evolution, Rural Identity in Graphic Novels, Visual-textual Narratives in Ireland

1. Introduction

> It [the graphic novel] is a form that also always refuses a problematic transparency, through an explicit awareness of its own surfaces. (Chute 2006, 767)

The graphic novel has emerged as a medium of growing cultural and academic relevance in the landscape of contemporary narrative forms. Far from the less sophisticated and youth-oriented status long assigned to comic books, the graphic novel combines literary depth with visual artistry to produce a unique and complex mode of storytelling (cf. Baetens, Frey 2015). Rooted in ancient visual storytelling traditions, such as

the Egyptian murals and the medieval tapestries, during the 19th century comics evolved into a recognised narrative medium, driven by illustrated periodicals and satirical prints (Sabin 1996; Groensteen 2007 [1999]). The evolution of modern comics accelerated with the publication of Richard Felton Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* in the late 1890s, which is often cited as the first American comic strip[1]. Like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1911)[2], *The Yellow Kid* contributed to establishing foundational conventions, like panels to organise narrative flow, speech bubbles for dialogue, and dynamic layouts to intensify visual impact. Though often humorous or fantastical in nature, these early strips demonstrated the medium's potential for sequential narrative expression. Throughout the 20th century, serialised comic books, especially those featuring superheroes, dominated the industry but they were largely perceived as juvenile or lowbrow, early examples including *Action Comics* #1 (1938), which introduced Superman, and *Detective Comics* #27 (1939), the debut of Batman, all of which helped establish the superhero genre as a cultural force. Later, Marvel Comics expanded the genre with characters like Spider-Man, Iron Man, and The Fantastic Four in the 1960s, which appealed to younger audiences with action-driven, formulaic plots, and brightly coloured art styles. These works were extremely popular, but they were often dismissed by critics and educators as escapist entertainment lacking literary value. By mid-century, however, several creators began to explore the medium's potential for more "serious" storytelling. The term "graphic novel" gained currency in the late 1970s and early 1980s, notably with Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), which sought to elevate the medium's narrative and artistic ambitions[3]. Eisner himself defined comics as "sequential art", emphasising the formal characteristics that distinguish the medium from static visual art and conventional literature, introducing self-contained stories that addressed mature themes such as loss, faith, and the complexities of urban life (Eisner, 1985; Baetens, Frey 2015).

A key moment in the evolution of the graphic novel as a literary genre is the landmark work, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (serialized from 1980 and published in a single volume in 1991), which recounts the Holocaust through an allegorical use of anthropomorphic characters. Rather than simply legitimising the form, *Maus* marked a critical turning point in how graphic novels were received within literary and academic circles, illustrating their capacity to engage with historical trauma and ethical memory through distinctly visual means. *Maus* exemplifies

[1] *The Yellow Kid* (Mickey Dugan) is a pivotal figure in early American comic strip history, appearing between 1895 and 1898, first in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and later in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Created and illustrated by R.F. Outcault, the character debuted in the comic strip *Hogan's Alley* – one of the earliest Sunday supplement comics featured in American newspapers. Although the visual conventions of sequential cartooning were already present in political and entertainment caricatures, *Hogan's Alley* helped define the comic strip as a popular cultural form. Outcault's innovative use of word balloons in *The Yellow Kid* significantly influenced the standard format of later comic strips and comic books.

[2] *Little Nemo in Slumberland* originally ran in the *New York Herald* from October 15, 1905, to July 23, 1911. When McCay moved to William Randolph Hearst's *New York American*, the strip was rebranded as *In the Land of Wonderful Dreams* and continued publication from September 3, 1911, to July 26, 1914. McCay later returned to the Herald in 1924, reviving *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which ran again from August 3, 1924, until January 9, 1927, when McCay once more rejoined Hearst's press.

[3] Composed of four interconnected stories, the book portrays the lives of impoverished Jewish residents in a New York City tenement, offering a poignant exploration of urban struggle, identity, and disillusionment. Thematically, the stories are united by motifs of alienation, moral ambiguity, ethnic tension, and the fragility of human hope, capturing the raw and complex realities of tenement life with unflinching honesty. Although Eisner did not coin the term "graphic novel", this work is widely credited with bringing the format into broader public awareness and legitimizing it as a serious literary form.

the graphic novel's ability to convey trauma through fragmentation, visual metaphor, and metafictional techniques, aligning with Cathy Caruth's observation that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth 1993, 4-5). Its recursive narrative structure, coupled with metafictional reflection, underscores the graphic novel's potential for literary complexity and critical depth[4]. During the same period, works like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1987) redefined the superhero genre. These texts responded critically to the moral absolutism and ideological simplicity of earlier superhero narratives through introducing psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and sociopolitical critique. In doing so, they also catalysed a broader re-evaluation of canonical characters. For instance, *Wonder Woman*, who was originally conceived by William Moulton Marston as a feminist icon, over the decades had been stripped of much of her radical edge. Her 1980s reinvention by George Pérez reinstated a more complex and mythologically grounded version of the character, aligning with the genre's broader shift toward narrative maturity and ideological self-awareness. Their innovative use of panel arrangements and visual motifs deepened narrative structure and reader engagement. The 21st century has witnessed the continued evolution of the graphic novel into a versatile and critically engaged literary form, capable of addressing a wide range of complex subjects. Works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003) merge personal memory with political critique, offering a postcolonial perspective on the Iranian Revolution. Similarly, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) explores family dynamics, sexuality, and psychological introspection through a layered visual and narrative structure that blurs the boundaries between memoir and literary fiction. In parallel, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017)[5] and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001)[6] exemplify the graphic novel's potential to function as a repository of memory and a vehicle for ethical inquiry, documenting displacement, trauma, and cultural identity with formal inventiveness. Like *Maus*, these works demonstrate how the interplay of image and text can powerfully convey historical and personal trauma. Their use of visual metaphors, fragmented temporality, and recursive storytelling structures positions the graphic novel as a vital medium for representing experiences that resist linear narration, underscoring its critical and affective capacities in contemporary world literature.

The graphic novel is a hybrid form situated at the crossroads of visual art and written language, and it operates through a semiotic system that distributes meaning across multiple channels. Drawing on Umberto Eco's (1975) semiotic theory, which posits that any sign system can function as a language when governed by codes, the graphic novel can be said to integrate images, text, typography, panel structure, and spatial organization into a cohesive expressive form. Each panel functions not only as a container of visual information, but also as a temporal and spatial unit. The size shape, and sequencing affect, narrative rhythm and reader's interpretation. The gutter – the space between panels – invites the reader to perform "closure", a term McCloud uses to describe the cognitive process of inferring meaning between images[7]. Speech balloons and

[4] As Simona Porro puts it, "Maus turned out to be one of the most controversial – and convincing – examples of postmodernist rethinking of historical writing" (2012, 103)

[5] *The Best We Could Do* (2017) is an illustrated memoir by Thi Bui that traces her family's experiences before and during the Vietnam War, their perilous escape from Vietnam during her childhood, and their resettlement in the United States as refugees. The graphic novel was released on March 7, 2017. See Oh 2020; Gusain 2020.

[6] *Palestine* is a non-fiction graphic novel by Joe Sacco, documenting his time spent in the West Bank and Gaza Strip between December 1991 and January 1992. Through his detailed illustrations and reportage, Sacco highlights both the collective history and the personal struggles of the Palestinian people. Cf. also Doughty 1998; Woo 2010, 166-177; Kozol 2011; Gadassik, Henstra 2012, 243-259.

[7] According to Scott McCloud, the gutter engages the reader's active participation in constructing narrative

sound effects contribute tonal and auditory layers, while page composition and panel transitions, from moment-to-moment to scene-to-scene, control pacing and narrative logic. The declarative, exclamatory, thought-based speech balloons act as a metacommunicative layer, guiding tone and emotional inflection. Sound effects (*onomatopoeia*) introduce auditory simulation within the visual plane, blending sensory modalities. Page composition and panel transitions, which can be moment-to-moment, action-to-action, and scene-to-scene, dictate pacing and narrative logic[8]. Even though there is no single consensus on what constitutes a graphic novel, the term generally refers to a book-length work that uses the conventions of comics – panels, speech balloons, narrative captions – to tell a complex, self-contained story. Unlike comic book series, graphic novels typically aspire to thematic and formal coherence and often engage with mature or intellectually challenging content. The emergence of graphic novels as literary artefacts is inseparable from the legitimisation of comics in academic and critical discourse. In their pioneering work, scholars such as Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 1993) and Thierry Groensteen (*The System of Comics*, 1999) provided the analytical tools for understanding the medium's grammar, drawing attention to its unique syntactic and semantic features:

> I'm going to examine cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential "meaning" an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't. […] Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium. Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing. (McCloud 1993, 30)

In this context, graphic novels demand an active, critically engaged reader, capable of navigating the intricate interplay of textual and visual cues. Roland Barthes' (1970) distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" texts is particularly pertinent here. For Barthes, "readerly" texts present meaning in a relatively fixed, consumable form, whereas "writerly" texts invite readers to co-create meaning through an active process of interpretation. Graphic narratives align closely with the latter, given their multimodal structure. The reader is not merely absorbing information but weaving together layered visual and verbal signifiers into a cohesive and often personally inflected narrative experience. Reading a graphic novel is thus inherently a non-linear, recursive act. The simultaneity of text and image encourages the eye to move back and forth across the page, revisiting panels and reinterpreting visual clues considering new information. Recurrent visual motifs, shifts in colour palettes, changes in panel rhythm, and stylistic variations foster thematic cohesion while demanding ongoing readerly inference. In this way, graphic novels cultivate a heightened awareness of form and meaning, making them not only powerful artistic works but also effective pedagogical tools. In her study on the classroom use of Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), Hyunji Kwon (2020) illustrates how graphic narratives can engage students across multiple cognitive dimensions. The image-text interplay encourages students to explore complex topics such as cultural identity, diaspora, and historical trauma through a medium that demands interpretive richness rather than passive consumption. By resisting simplistic decoding and fostering multimodal

continuity. He argues that readers unconsciously bridge these visual gaps by drawing upon prior knowledge and contextual clues, effectively completing the sequence with inferred meaning (1993, 63-68). McCloud demonstrates that this interpretive act applies broadly – whether to playful interactions or more abstract sequences, such as a figure in motion – highlighting the reader's indispensable role in animating static images into coherent narrative flow.

[8] For in-depth analysis of panel structure and page layout, cf. McCloud 1993; Groensteen 2007; Cohn 2013.

literacy, graphic novels offer a dynamic platform for developing critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of lived experience.

One of the most defining features of graphic novels is their versatility. The art style can range from detailed realism to abstract or minimalist approaches, each serving to enhance the mood, setting, and emotional depth of the narrative. While some graphic novels employ vivid colours to evoke specific emotions, others use monochrome to underscore simplicity or dramatic tension: Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (1988-1989) use, for instance, stark black-and-white palettes to heighten their thematic gravity and socio-political resonance. Symbolism is another integral element, with imagery often layered with metaphors that add depth to the narrative beyond the literal text. Dialogue is presented in speech bubbles, allowing characters to express their thoughts and emotions, while narration boxes provide background information or internal monologues. Onomatopoeic sound effects like "BANG!" or "CRASH!" are woven into the artwork to heighten sensory immersion. This interplay of words and visuals allows for an innovative storytelling approach that engages readers on multiple levels. Panel layout and design are crucial for pacing and guiding the reader's journey. Panels may follow traditional grids or adopt dynamic, overlapping designs to influence the mood and rhythm of the story. Full-page illustrations, or splash pages, are often used for dramatic emphasis, while double-page spreads are reserved for expansive or action-packed scenes. The thoughtful layering of text, imagery, and additional elements like maps or documents creates a multidimensional storytelling structure.

The depiction of characters and their emotions is also central to the graphic novel format. Facial expressions, body language, and posture are used to convey subtle emotions and deepen the reader's connection to characters. As Stella Oh observes, "often, language lacks the ability to accurately articulate trauma, and images more affectively convey emotion and color the narrative" (2020, 76). Stylised character designs often reflect personalities and emotional states, adding to the narrative depth without relying solely on text. Themes and tone are enhanced through visual metaphors, atmospheric elements like lighting and shadows, and recurring motifs. Many graphic novels employ a non-linear storytelling, exploring flashbacks, fragmented timelines, and parallel narratives through creative panel arrangements and visual cues. This flexibility allows for layered, thought-provoking narratives that invite reader interpretation. The genre versatility of graphic novels further underscores their creative potential. The combination of visual and textual elements adds emotional depth while making graphic novels accessible to a broad audience, including those who might struggle with traditional prose formats due to language barriers, learning differences, or a preference for visual storytelling. The integration of images can aid comprehension, sustain attention, and provide contextual cues that support meaning-making beyond the written word.

2. The Genealogy of Graphic Novels in Ireland

The development of the graphic novel in Ireland reflects both global trends and distinct national concerns. While Irish comics have historically faced challenges in terms of distribution and cultural legitimacy, recent decades have witnessed a significant flourishing of the form. Early contributions were often overshadowed by British and American imports; however, the emergence of indigenous publishing houses and comic arts festivals, such as the Dublin Comic Arts Festival (DCAF), has enabled Irish creators to carve out a distinctive and vibrant space in the medium. As K.E. Wade (2020) notes, this local production often grapples with questions of identity, memory, and cultural autonomy within a post-colonial context and its formal evo-

lution is underpinned by deeper cultural roots. At the heart of Irish cultural history lies its oral storytelling tradition, where stories were preserved and transmitted by *seanchaithe* (traditional storytellers)[9]. These oral narratives, rich in descriptive imagery and rhythm, created immersive and emotionally resonant experiences for listeners.

Though often classified as a modern literary phenomenon, the Irish graphic narrative draws upon an artistic lineage that extends back centuries. The foundations of sequential art, a defining feature of graphic novels, can be traced to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Ireland, most notably, the *Book of Kells*[10], which takes its name from the location in County Meath, Ireland, where the abbey was founded in the early 9th century by monks from the Abbey of Iona[11]. Now housed in the Library of Trinity College Dublin, and composed of meticulously illustrated texts that exemplify an early fusion of image and word to communicate complex religious and cultural narratives, the *Book of Kells* is considered the masterpiece of medieval Celtic art. Its richly decorated pages of the *Book of Kells*, far from being mere embellishments, functioned as narrative devices, enhancing the spiritual and didactic impact of the texts, much like the multimodal structure of graphic narratives today. Building on this visual-literary lineage, Irish mythology has emerged as a particularly rich narrative reservoir for graphic adaptation, and it has provided a fertile source for graphic adaptation, offering narratives rich in symbolic resonance and visual potential. Among these, *The Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*) stands as one of the most iconic and enduring tales. Traditionally situated in the 1st century during Ireland's pagan heroic age, *The Táin* is the central narrative of the Ulster Cycle, recounting the legendary conflict between Queen Medb of Connacht and the warriors of Ulster, led by the teenage hero Cú Chulainn. The story, sparked by Medb's desire to seize the prized Brown Bull of Cooley to equal her husband Ailill's wealth, embodies the tragic and heroic ideals of warrior culture through Cú Chulainn's supernatural feats and solitary defence of Ulster. Rooted in oral tradition and preserved in three principal written versions (found in manuscripts such as the *Book of Leinster* and *Lebor na hUidre* [*The Book of the Dun Cow*]), *The Táin* is composed in Old Irish, Middle Irish, and Early Modern Irish across different recensions. Rich in poetic language, mythic symbolism, and ritualized combat, the epic offers profound insight into the values of honour, loyalty, and fate in pre-Christian Irish society. Widely regarded as Ireland's national epic, it continues to inspire literary, visual, and performative reinterpretations, demonstrating its lasting influence on Irish cultural identity[12].

[9] The word derives from the Old Irish term *seanchas*, meaning "old lore" or "tradition". *Seanchaithe* held a central role in early Irish society, where knowledge was transmitted primarily through oral means. They were responsible for preserving and recounting myths, legends, family genealogies, epic tales, and collective memory, keeping cultural identity alive through spoken word, often performed rhythmically or accompanied by music. They were not merely entertainers but respected custodians of knowledge, regarded as vital figures within the social and cultural structure of the clans. Their craft was passed down through generations with a strong emphasis on accuracy, and orality itself functioned as a living archive of shared history. For a more comprehensive analysis, cf. Mac Cana 1970; Ó hÓgáin 2006.

[10] Created around the 9th century by Celtic monks, likely on the island of Iona or at Kells in Ireland, the manuscript contains the four Gospels of the New Testament, written in Latin and richly adorned with intricate decoration, interlace patterns, zoomorphic imagery, and Christian iconography. *The Book of Kells* is a masterpiece of insular art, a style that emerged in early medieval Ireland and Britain, blending Christian themes with native artistic traditions. Its ornamental complexity and spiritual symbolism reflect a devotion not only to scripture but also to the visual power of storytelling and sacred expression. Originally intended for liturgical use, the manuscript is now preserved at Trinity College Dublin, where it remains one of Ireland's greatest cultural treasures. For further reading, cf. Henry 1965; Meehan 1994; <https://www.tcd.ie/library/research-collections/book-of-kells.php> (05/2025).

[11] One of the Hebridean islands and home to one of the most important monastic communities in the region.

[12] For further reading, cf. Kinsella 1969; Gantz 1981.

From the 1970s onwards, mainstream comic publishers like the US-based Marvel and DC began referencing Celtic figures, such as Lir, the Dagda, and Nuada of the Silver Hand, into their stories, extending a trend that had already drawn heavily on Norse and Greco-Roman sources. Irish mythological references appeared in *Savage Tales Featuring Conan the Barbarian* (1974), featuring Dagda and Dian Cecht (the god of healing). Although Conan the Barbarian draws more heavily from broader Celtic and fantasy traditions, echoes of Irish mythology, such as the invocation of Crom (based loosely on Cromm Cruach**,** an ancient Irish deity associated with sacrifice), are also present. Following these appearances, individual figures from Irish mythology emerged in Marvel comics. Nuada of the Silver Hand, the first king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, made his debut in *Thor* #300 (1980) as a member of the Council of Godheads. In Irish legend, Nuada is renowned for his magical sword, the *Cliamh Solais* (*Sword of Light*) and his prosthetic silver arm. The Celtic gods were first introduced into Marvel's main continuity (Earth-616) in *The Mighty Thor* #386 (1987). In this issue, Thor pursues a monster through a portal into Avalon, Marvel's version of the Celtic Otherworld. There, he encounters Lir (later spelled *Leir*), originally the god of the sea in Irish and Welsh mythology. However, in the comics, Lir is reimagined as the "Lord of the Lightning" and the "God of the Spear" (both titles loosely connected to Irish mythological traditions). Subsequent issues, such as *The Mighty Thor* #398, expanded the Celtic pantheon further. In these stories, Lir joins forces with fellow Celtic deities, including the Dagda (*Eochaidh Ollathair*, the father of the Irish gods) and Caber (*Cairbre*, the son of Ogma, god of eloquence), to assist the Asgardians against external threats[13]. This reflects the enduring imaginative power of Irish legend, though often filtered through external lenses. Mischaracterisations persist across media, contributing to a long-standing pattern of cultural misrepresentation in popular entertainment.

This tendency towards misrepresentation has deeper historical roots. As Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndalianis (2019) note, the depiction of Irish characters in comics often draws on entrenched stereotypes, inherited from Victorian caricatures portraying the Irish either as primitive and violent or as quaint and childlike. Such conventions, rooted in colonial narratives, have influenced portrayals in superhero comics from Banshee in Marvel's *X-Men* to various adaptations of Irish mythological figures, shaping global perceptions of Irish culture in ways that contemporary Irish creators now actively seek to challenge and revise (231-232). In contrast, the past two decades have seen the rise of independent Irish creators reclaiming these mythological traditions through the evolving medium of comics.

Enabled by digital tools and new distribution platforms, contemporary authors and artists are reworking both major cycles, like *An Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*) and *The Táin,* and lesser-known figures from Irish lore. Irish author illustrator and publisher Colmán Ó Raghallaigh is well known for his pioneering role in developing Irish-language graphic novels. Through visually compelling and linguistically rich adaptations such as *An Sclábhaí* (1999; The Slave), *An Tóraíocht* (2002; *The Hunt for Diarmuid and Gráinne*), *An Táin* (2006), and *Deirdre agus Mic Uisnigh* (2009; *Deirdre and the sons of Uisnech*), Ó Raghallaigh has contributed to revitalise Irish mythology for new generations of readers, while also advancing the use of Irish as a literary and artistic language within the graphic storytelling medium. Ó Raghallaigh has brought Irish mythological cycles to new audiences with strong cultural and linguistic grounding. *An Táin*, with illustrations by Barry Reynolds, presents a visual adaptation of the ancient epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, while Gerry Hunt's *Blood Upon the Rose* (2009), brings to life the events of the 1916 Easter Rising, reframing modern Irish history through sequential art, as noted by Morisson:

[13] Cf. also de Beus 2022; *Irish Myths* 2021, <https://irishmyths.com/2021/04/14/marvel-comics/> (05/2025).

Gerry Hunt and his editors' choices of covers seemingly situate the two novels in a pro-Irish perspective. The subtitle for Blood, The Rebellion that Set Ireland Free, celebrates the 1916 Rising as a foundational moment in Irish history. In fact, historical comic strips, often based on the exemplary stories of great heroes or pivotal moments in national history, have often been vehicles for nationalist propaganda (Louwagie & Weyssow 11; see also Strömberg). Though they dramatise national history, Hunt's volumes nonetheless offer a multi-faceted account of the events. (2015, 115)

Gerry Hunt's *Blood Upon the Rose* adopts a more complex and nuanced perspective, avoiding simplistic heroization, and proving to be a work that resist reductive mythologisation to foreground the political ambiguities and human costs underlying national narratives. Together, these works highlight the medium's potential to preserve cultural memory and to re-imagine it for future generations.

Among the most notable contributions to Irish graphic storytelling are works that stand out for their artistic innovation, narrative depth, and cultural resonance. A key early figure in this space is Jim Fitzpatrick, whose *The Book of Conquest* (1978) appears as a lavishly illustrated volume that serves as a crucial precursor, although it is not a conventional graphic novel. Fitzpatrick continues his exploration in *The Silver Arm* (1981; serialized in the *Sunday Independent*), where he delves into the events surrounding the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, fought between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomóire. The title refers to the silver prosthesis given to Núada Aircetlám to replace the arm he lost during the First Battle of Mag Tuired. The primary source is the Middle Irish text *Cath Maige Tuired* (9th-11th century; *The Battle of Magh Tuireadh*), even if Fitzpatrick's book is by no means a faithful rendition, as he freely alters many details and invents entire episodes, which are not available in any of the traditional sources. The value of Fitzpatrick's graphic novel lies in its intricate knotwork and fantasy-inflected designs, which bring Irish mythology into the comic medium with striking visual flair[14]. This legacy was expanded with Pat Mills' *Sláine*, a fantasy comic series published in 1983 in the British magazine *2000 AD*, which reimagines the mythic hero Cú Chulainn in a world of barbaric grandeur, combining fantasy tropes with hyper-stylised visual dynamism. Sláine reconceives Cú Chulainn through a Conan-style antihero, combining *Lebor Gabála Érenn* or *Leabhar Gabhála na hÉireann* (The Book of the taking of Ireland), with comic-book spectacle. The series follows the barbarian warrior Sláine Mac Roth, a wielder of the axe "Brainbiter", who possesses the magical "warp-spasm", a monstrous battle frenzy drawn from ancient myth. Accompanied by his cunning dwarf companion Ukko, Sláine battles foes such as the Fomorians, sky chariots, and ancient gods, ultimately becoming the first High King of Ireland. The story draws heavily from Irish mythology, especially the Ulster Cycle, blending figures like Danu, Crom Cruach, and the Fomorians with European prehistoric beliefs and some Norse and Babylonian influences. Sláine's world fuses ancient pagan spirituality with speculative fantasy elements, reflecting both historical myth and imaginative reinterpretation. The series continues to this day, featuring various artists and visual styles, and it remains one of the most enduring graphic representations of Irish myth (Mills 2021).

In a markedly different tone, Paddy Brown's webcomic *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* (2008-2015) offers a realistic and historically sensitive retelling of the *Táin*, grounded in psychological

[14] For a broader understanding of Irish comics and their engagement with mythology, cf. *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics* (2019) by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndalianis, which discusses the portrayal of Irish mythology and prehistory in graphic storytelling. Additionally, Jack Fennell's *Rough Beasts: The Monstrous in Irish Fiction, 1800-2000* (2019) offers insights into the depiction of Irish myths in literature and could provide contextual background relevant to Fitzpatrick's work.

nuance and tribal politics, rather than supernatural spectacle. The same myth has also been reinterpreted from a contemporary and humorous angle in M.K. Reed's *About a Bull* (2011-2012), which uses simplified, vibrant visuals and a feminist framing centred on Queen Meabh to make the epic accessible and resonant for diverse audiences. More recent works include Will Sliney's *The Legend of Cú Chulainn* (2013)[15], published by The O'Brien Press, which embraces a heroic-fantasy aesthetic influenced by American comics, and Rob Curley's *The League of Volunteers* (2011-), which blends mythological figures with 20th-century nationalist fiction, casting Fionn mac Cumhaill and Lúgh Lamhfada as part of a superhero team defending mid-century Ireland. One notable outlier is Leann Hamilton's *Finn & Fish* (2010-2014), which stands out as a fresh, comedic adaptation of the Salmon of Knowledge myth drawing from the Fenian Cycle, instead of the more commonly referenced Ulster Cycle or mythological invasions.

In addition to historical and mythological retellings, contemporary Irish comics have become platforms for socially engaged and personal narratives. Artists such as Sarah Bowie[16] and Debbie Jenkinson have brought intimate stories to the forefront of Irish graphic storytelling. Through subtle visual cues and a narrative voice rooted in emotional authenticity, their works connect readers to modern Irish identity, while navigating themes of alienation and belonging. Taken together, these works underscore the unique compatibility between myth and graphic storytelling, and how the latter offers Irish creators a space for both cultural recovery and creative innovation. Freed from the constraints of mass-market publishing, and empowered by digital tools, contemporary Irish graphic narratives are no longer just responding to mythological *clichés*, they are reshaping the myth itself.

3. Midlands

Midlands (2023) is a self-published graphic novel by Irish comic artist, illustrator, and author Debbie Jenkinson. Beyond its narrative, *Midlands* witnesses Ireland's vibrant self-publishing scene. It was first stocked at Little Deer Comics in Stoneybatter, a key hub for Irish independent comics. As Promotions Officer at Illustrators Ireland and co-founder of The Comics Lab, Jenkinson has been instrumental in building platforms for Irish sequential art, helping establish initiatives like Ireland's Graphic Short Prize, in collaboration with *The Irish Times*. Her career is deeply invested in fostering a space for personal, grounded storytelling in the medium of comics. Jenkinson's creative trajectory has always been anchored in the lived experiences of ordinary people. Her debut long-form comic, *Remorse* (2015), depicts the psychological stagnation of a young woman stuck in a call-centre job, capturing the quiet despair and alienation of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Through repetitive visual motifs and a muted colour palette, Jenkinson conveys the protagonist's sense of paralysis and emotional fatigue with subtlety and precision. In *Ghosting* (2020), a romantic mystery set on an Irish bus route, she explores fleeting connections and emotional ambiguity, using fragmented storytelling and

[15] Though it introduces some changes to the original legend, *The Legend of Cú Chulainn* remains a compelling example of myth retold for modern audiences, blending visual spectacle with narrative clarity.

[16] Sarah Bowie is an author and illustrator based in Waterford City, Ireland. Since 2015, she has published three children's books, with a fourth title, *Kevi's In A Mood*. Her short stories and illustrations have also appeared in *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*. She is the co-founder of The Comics Lab, a creative space dedicated to exploring visual storytelling, and helped establish Ireland's first Graphic Short Story Prize in partnership with *The Irish Times*. Her clients include *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *The O'Brien Press*, *Little Island*, *RTÉ Player*, *Irish Design*, and *MS Readathon*.

soft, sketch-like visuals to mirror the transience of modern-day relationships. Jenkinson's style often blends formal experimentation with emotional intimacy, focusing on the inner lives of women in everyday, urban Irish settings. Her sensitivity to body language, silence, and interior monologue marks her contribution as emblematic of a strand in Irish graphic storytelling that prioritises lived experience and social realism over spectacle.

The story narrated in *Midlands* centres on Veronica (Ronnie) Fox, a Dublin pharmacist who relocates to Mullingar, in the Irish Midlands, after her mother's death, and the latter's cryptic parting words addressed to her daughter: "Look for your father, won't you?" (2023, 14), propelling her into a reluctant exploration of family secrets and buried histories. The story soon unfolds into a layered psychological journey of grief, identity, and belonging. Ronnie's life is charged with internal tension, though structured by mundane rhythms, including chatting with customers, helping colleagues, or scrolling through DNA test results. The narrative is balanced between opposite tensions, and it evolves into a subtle accumulation of quiet, observational moments – a cat crossing the road, a garden grotto, the frayed tassel of a car key, the lean of a gate left ajar by time and weather – and the protagonist's attempt to navigate a space geographically close yet emotionally remote, in a setting that does not feel like home. Far from being incidental, these contrasting fragments form the emotional architecture of the narrative. For instance, the soft yellow glow of a bungalow window carries as much narrative weight as any spoken line, signalling comfort, estrangement, or ambivalence depending on context. Jenkinson also weaves naturalistic dialogue with interior reflection, allowing mundane exchanges to resonate with psychological depth. Several dialogues, such as "Never trust a fella with a ponytail!" (15) or "You're no craic" (57) resonate not simply for their colloquial charm, but because they echo the cadences and undercurrents of lived Irish experience.

This attention to tonal nuance and ambient detail situates *Midlands* within a graphic tradition that privileges emotional realism and socio-cultural specificity, aligning more with literary fiction than conventional graphic genres. As Chute suggests, comics operate through "an intricately layered narrative language" (2006, 767), one where verbal and visual cues do not merely coexist but co-produce meaning. In *Midlands*, this is evident in how visual motifs, such as windows, thresholds, and fading photographs, interact with Ronnie's interior monologue, creating a dialogue between text and image that deepens the story's psychological and emotional resonance. What elevates *Midlands* beyond slice-of-life storytelling is its persistent engagement with the theme of inheritance – genetic, emotional, and cultural. As DNA matches and old photos begin to surface, so too does a growing sense of estrangement, from her past, from the version of herself she once believed in, and from the place she now inhabits ("I don't know who I am anymore", 57). Ronnie's journey is not just about locating a biological parent ("So yeah. My father is not my father", Jenkinson 2023, 56), but about reckoning with the implications of being from somewhere, carrying someone else's memory, or absence ("They lied to me my whole life", 56). This sense of dislocation is mirrored by the setting itself. The geographical setting of the Irish Midlands becomes a metaphor for the in-between, a space neither fully home nor entirely alien, which holds estrangement and possibility. *Midlands* is deeply grounded in character, place, and class. The story pays attention to working-class environments, with lovingly rendered details: the textures of shops, signage, tiles, and worn surfaces are rendered with care and specificity, grounding the emotional narrative in a vividly material world. These visual moments are never simply decorative. They offer a tactile, almost cinematic sense of atmosphere. The people in the book, who populate the town of Mullingar, are depicted as strong as the places they inhabit. As observed by Oh, in graphic narratives the archive of memory often unfolds through the mapping of bodies: individual, communal, and

national (2020, 79). This cartographic impulse suggests what Name Duong describes as "transnational sites that symbolize both absence and presence" in the repositories of memory (2016, 66). While geographically distant or historically transformed, these spaces remain emotionally and symbolically alive through personal and collective remembrance. Similarly, in *Midlands*, Jenkinson renders memory as a layered landscape, where places are not fixed backdrops but emotionally charged terrains marked by what has been lost and what continues to endure.

At the level of visual style, *Midlands* reflects both a refinement and a tension in Jenkinson's artistic approach. Known for her expressive pencil work and observational detail, here she embraces a softer, layered aesthetic. Her pencil work, even when mediated by digital tools, retains the autographic quality that Hillary Chute identifies as central to the graphic narrative form, where "the mark of handwriting" itself becomes part of the story's emotional texture (2006, 767). The drawings are lush and textured, at times delicate, evoking an ink-wash feel that adds warmth and emotional depth. At the same time, certain formal choices signal a shift toward a more digitally inflected surface. The lettering feels very digital, and the frames appear slightly stiff in places, perhaps due to the artificial digital overlay used in self-publishing. Some gradients, textures, or panel layouts create a digital façade that makes the scenes feel slightly less "lived in". These elements do not diminish the beauty of the work. On the contrary, they reflect a conscious negotiation between handmade intimacy and contemporary production methods. Slight irregularities, like lettering that occasionally slips outside the panel borders, seem less like oversights and more like expressive choices, revealing an urgency in the storytelling process. This visual looseness resists the polish of commercial comics, allowing emotion and imperfection to surface in ways that feel personal and direct. Jenkinson's command of atmosphere is omnipresent. The colouring, likely done with pencil, provides beautiful tonal moments that enrich the emotional resonance of each scene. These visual decisions align with Jenkinson's thematic focus on the ordinary. As she herself puts it, "The exciting stuff in life is probably only 5 per cent. The rest of the time we're just drinking tea or going about the day"[17]. Indeed, her interest lies in the 95 per cent, which is populated by the small interactions, the quiet gestures, the negative space between one moment and the next. This sensibility permeates *Midlands*, aligning with the Japanese concept of *ma,* namely, negative space as emotional presence[18]. This aesthetic of stillness not only creates visual poetry but also allows space for affect to accumulate. The emphasis on silence, gesture, and atmospheric pauses in *Midlands* resonates with the Japanese aesthetic concept of *ma*, a notion of "negative space" that signifies not emptiness but potential, emotional resonance, and relational energy. By incorporating *ma*, Jenkinson's narrative rhythm privileges what is unsaid or unseen, allowing emotional meaning to arise organically between panels. By inviting the reader to inhabit pauses, glances, or the quietness? between actions, Jenkinson foregrounds emotional presence over narrative momentum. In these silent panels, memory and anticipation often coexist, mirroring the temporal fragmentation of grief, or unresolved longing. Panels linger on moments of silence or pause. The result is a rhythm of reading that mirrors that of Ronnie's emotional life: slow, uncertain, interrupted by memory or unexpected connection. The narrative is also

[17] <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/2024/03/23/comic-artist-debbie-jenkinson-i-like-the-idea-that-youre-looking-over-dublin-and-could-pick-out-anyones-story/> (05/2025).

[18] "In modern interpretations of Japanese art and culture, *ma* refers to the meaningful use of empty space—an intentional gap that holds as much weight as the surrounding elements. Rather than absence, *ma* is perceived as presence: a space charged with potential and awareness. It is not limited to visible voids but includes the sensed intervals between forms or actions. Often described as 'the silence between the notes that makes the music', *ma* embodies the idea that what is not shown can be just as powerful as what is" (Karlgren 1974 [1923]).

marked by its episodic, month-by-month structure, which subtly charts Ronnie's emotional arc, from displacement and denial to confrontation and fragile acceptance. The revelation of her biological origins, when it arrives, is neither cathartic nor shattering; but rather, it simply deepens the complexity of her identity. This turning point unfolds quietly during/in the course of a mundane conversation, precisely in line with the book's refusal of melodrama. There is no dramatic confrontation; instead, the discovery emerges through tone, subtext, and bodily cues. Jenkinson avoids sensationalism, allowing the emotional impact to register in the silences that follow, not the revelation itself. Learning that the man who raised her might not be her father does not bring closure but rather invites introspection. The story's emotional core is captured in the final reflection:

> Wherever you go, they say, there you are, and sooner or later comes a time in all of our lives when we must stop looking back, or forward, or to the horizon, be where we are and love what is. All this to say, apologies to the perfectly fine town of Mullingar, which has been selected randomly as a backdrop for Ronnie's restlessness. (Jenkinson 2023, 87)

This quote encapsulates a key emotional movement within *Midlands*, namely, the struggle between restlessness and acceptance. The narrator's ironic apology to Mullingar, described as a "perfectly fine town" yet chosen as the setting for Ronnie's unease, highlights that the protagonist's dissatisfaction is less about external circumstances than it is about an internal disquiet. The town becomes a symbolic landscape, a random yet inevitable stage for Ronnie's existential tension. This passage reflects the idea that true stasis is not geographical but psychological, in that no matter where one moves, one cannot escape oneself. The impulse to look backward toward memory, forward toward fantasy, or outward toward other possibilities ultimately deflects from the challenge of inhabiting the present. Midlands thus subtly portrays how the self and places become entangled, each mirroring the other's inertia or potential movement. In this sense, Ronnie's restlessness in Mullingar resonates with the Joycean concept of paralysis, a condition where characters feel trapped within the banalities and constraints of their everyday lives. Similarly, in *Midlands*, Mullingar serves not as a site of adventure or change, but as a mirror of internal immobility**,** capturing the dissonance between the desire for escape and the burden of rootedness. Just as Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) are immobilized by the weight of their own histories and the suffocation of their environments, so too does Ronnie's struggle embody a quiet, deeply Irish tension between belonging and dislocation.

Unlike other Irish graphic novels that skilfully pay homage to Celtic mythology as a living tradition or commemorate the more tragic chapters of Irish history, Jenkinson's comics turn their focus to the small triumphs and quiet frustrations of ordinary life. Failed romances, overfed cats, and the inner worlds of office workers recur throughout her stories[19]. As Jenkison herself admits in an interview:

> My interest is in telling stories about ordinary people – the untold stories about unsung heroes. This is about a pharmacist from Dublin who somehow ends up living in a town in the Irish midlands, how she solves the mystery of her family and finds her place in the world. The comic format lends itself so well to these stories, having the power to depict the real moments that constitute our lives.[20]

[19] Works like *Remorse* – a long-form comic about a girl trapped for ten years in a call centre job, or *Ghosting*, another tale of romantic misadventure set in Dublin, illustrate her commitment to portraying the everyday with nuance, wit, and emotional honesty.

[20] Cf. <https://worldillustrationawards.com/projects/debbie-jenkinson-midlands/> (05/2025).

4. Conclusion

Graphic narrative merges the immediacy of visual storytelling with the structural depth of literary fiction. Its evolution from the margins of popular culture to a recognised medium of artistic and intellectual expression reflects what Hillary Chute describes as the genre's unique capacity to convey meaning through the interplay of image and text, allowing for both emotional resonance and narrative complexity:

> Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counter point of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty spaces). (2008, 452)

As she notes, the graphic novel "offers an intricately layered narrative language – the language of comics – that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page" (Chute, DeKoven, 2006,767). Will Eisner further observes how meaning often resides in "what happens between the panels" (1985, 38), as the emotional arc unfolds precisely in those quiet interstices. In this way, Jenkinson's contribution does not break from literary tradition but extends it. Her graphic narrative reflects what Thierry Groensteen terms a *comic arthrology*, that is, the network of "relationships of position, contiguity, and intensity" (2013, 12), where every visual choice contributes to the emotional resonance and narrative rhythm of the work. This intricate visual architecture ultimately serves the broader thematic purpose of capturing the shifting nature of identity and belonging. *Midlands* is concerned with inhabiting the uncertainty inherent in belonging and acknowledging identity as a dynamic and evolving construct. Jenkinson's work reimagines the Irish Midlands not as a passive backdrop, but as an emotionally charged landscape that shapes and mirrors her protagonist's inner journey. The delicate pencil work, balanced use of gesture and negative space, and layered textures invite a contemplative reading experience that foregrounds tone over action[21], while her careful modulation of light and shadow further enhances the emotional landscape of *Midlands*. Soft gradations of grey evoke both physical and psychological spaces of uncertainty, while stark contrasts between light and darkness mirror the protagonist's oscillations between revelation and disorientation, reinforcing the graphic novel's meditative tone. The ability to experience each panel sequentially while simultaneously absorbing the page enables a mode of reading that makes visible the subtle emotional undercurrents of estrangement and loss. Through delicate shading and careful modulation of light and shadow, Jenkinson stains key emotional moments with a quiet, tactile weight. In *Midlands*, tonal shifts (from airy, light-infused spaces to oppressive, shadowed interiors) produce a haptic sense of dislocation and memory, signalling both the aching persistence of the past and the tentative openings toward renewal.

Through a carefully constructed visual grammar of line work, tonal shading, and panel arrangement, *Midlands* similarly builds meaning through the interrelations of its compositional elements. As Jenkinson reflects on her process:

[21] Jenkinson's process reflects this tactile quality: "[c]oloured pencils on paper, scanned, with text and some lines applied digitally afterwards. The pages and cover were compiled in InDesign" (<https://worldillustrationawards.com/projects/debbie-jenkinson-midlands/>, 05/2025). The hand-drawn softness, later subtly integrated with digital tools, reinforces the emotional and aesthetic intimacy of *Midlands*.

My illustrations appear throughout; the book, page design, and writing are by me. The way picture and text work together in the comic format is magic to me, how you can move from drama to quiet moments so seamlessly, the power it offers to trigger empathy in the reader, the way the creator can slow the reader down to observe a gate swinging on its hinges, a cat lying in the sun.[22]

Midlands broadens the scope of Irish literary expression, demonstrating the potential of graphic narrative to articulate lived experience in both intimate and expansive terms. Part of an ecosystem of grassroots support, collaboration, and creative autonomy, *Midlands* is both a personal story and a community achievement. It reflects Jenkinson's deepening artistic voice, and the strength of an alternative comics scene committed to storytelling that values nuance, intimacy, and realism. Ultimately, her work affirms the graphic novel's ability to hold complex, everyday experiences with care and clarity. It invites us to read slowly, to notice the mundane, and to recognize that the most meaningful stories are often the smallest ones:

> For blow-ins and unsung heroes everywhere. (Jenkison 2023, 2)

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Redefining Identity through Emancipation: Exploring Female Self-Representations in Contemporary Irish Autofiction*

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Abstract:

Drawing on transfeminist critique and autofiction theory, this essay explores three autofictional writings by three female Irish authors. Acknowledging the systemic and patriarchal oppression of women, the analysis of the novels *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride (2013), *A Ghost in the Throat* by Doireann Ní Ghríofa (2020) and *Checkout 19* by Claire-Louise Bennett (2021) will focus on how each author deals with individual manifestations of this condition. Furthermore, the different strategies of emancipation and liberation that each writer adopts will be taken into consideration. The main goal of this essay is to demonstrate how the experience of oppression distorts the authors' perception of their identities, leading them to represent themselves as autofictional characters.

Keywords: Claire-Louise Bennett, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Eimear McBride, Identity Renegotiation, Irish Autofiction

Introduction[1]

Over the last fifty years, the international publishing scene has witnessed the emergence and rise of autofiction, a well-known form of autobiographical writing that blends referential and fictional elements to varying degrees. Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* (1977) is considered the first autofictional novel, and, since its publication, a debate has arisen and still remains unresolved.

* This essay is an adaptation and a translation of the third chapter of the author's MA Thesis: Mini Alberto (2024), *Storia e teoria dell'autofinzione: alcuni casi studio irlandesi*, Firenze, Università degli Studi di Firenze.

[1] This introductory section summarises the main points that the author has addressed in the first two chapters of his MA Thesis.

On the one hand, some scholars argue in favour of a panfictional understanding of this writing, prioritising the fictional aspects over the referential ones (Lejeune 1980, 1986; Robbe-Grillet 1986; Colonna 1989, 2004; Genette 1991; Darrieussecq 1996; Vilain 2005a). On the other hand, others such as Philippe Lejeune – he adopted this position after 1987 –, Arnaud Schmitt and Philippe Forest contend that autofiction can only be read as an autobiography, therefore excluding the fictional elements that characterise it (Lejeune 1990 [1988]; Forest 1999; Schmitt2007). In between these positions, there are those who contemplate the possibility of a mixed reading, where both the referential and the fictional elements of a text can co-inhabit and enrich one another (Doubrovsky 1993, 2003; Laurent 1997; Baudelle 2003; Gasparini 2004, 2008).

The debate has extended beyond the question of "what is autofiction?". It has considered other issues, such as "Is Doubrovsky its father, or does it have more ancient origins?". In this respect, arguing that self-fictionalisation was part of world literature before the 1970s, some scholars have identified noble predecessors to autofiction, such as Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, Marcel Proust's *Réchèrche* and Jorge Luis Borges' self-representations in *El Aleph* (Genette 1991; Colonna 1998; Gasparini 2004; Vilain 2005b). Instead, other academics believe that autofiction is not Doubrosvky's invention. Still, they consider it as the product of the postmodern *Zeitgeist* (Robin 1997): the postmodern "crise des récits" (Lyotard 1979, 7) and a new self of sense – due to the advancements in psychoanalysis – produced a cultural context where pure autobiographical writing has become impossible. Hence, any attempt at autobiography will end up being spoiled by an "I" that cannot give a faithful reconstruction of its own life, therefore resulting in autofiction.

Building on Robin's work, Thimoteus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker and Alison Gibbons have sought to define the new cultural framework that succeeded postmodernism: "Metamodernism" (2017). They argue that, with the transition from one epoch to another, cultural products change too, including autofiction. They indeed claim that metamodern autofiction is different from the postmodern one: while the latter concentrates on the impossibility of faithful self-representation, the former tries to portray reality as it is to recreate the "new depthiness" (Vermeulen 2015) that characterises this new cultural era. Indeed, metamodernism wants to substitute the postmodernist "depthlessness" (Jameson 1991 [1984]) for a new depthiness: "[i]f Jameson's term 'new depthlessness' points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase 'new depthiness' indicates the *performative* reappraisal of these depths" (Vermeulen 2015, italics in original).

Robin's, Vermeulen's, Akker's and Gibbons' theorisations consider another crucial question: "Why write autofiction?". While they answered by identifying the cultural reasons behind autofictional writing, this essay will answer that same question by considering the individual experiences of the chosen authors – Eimear McBride, Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Claire-Louise Bennett – and how they write about it. To carry out the analysis of the texts we will refer to the following definition of autofiction: a type of writing that can neither be interpreted as autobiography nor as fiction and that is particularly suited to represent the traumatic experiences of individuals that belong to oppressed social classes. Furthermore, these experiences make the narrator reconsider their identity and the way they perceive reality by having them undergo a process of identity renegotiation that produces that clash between autobiographical and fictional which characterises autofiction.

The novels that will be analysed – *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*[2] (McBride 2014 [2013]), *A Ghost in the Throat*[3] (Ní Ghríofa 2020a) and *Checkout 19*[4] (Bennett 2022 [2021]) – all fit this definition. Indeed, all three of the protagonists have almost the same life experiences as their authors but each novel has its own way of displaying its fictional elements. Furthermore, the experiences that do coincide between the authors and their autofictional versions are those crucial and traumatic events that make them reconsider their identities. Moreover, said experiences all derive from forms of patriarchal oppression. The corpus was chosen specifically to illustrate how each character finds their own path of liberation from conditions of subordination. This analysis will demonstrate how the characters, through their emancipation, come to realise that their identities have been transformed, consequently undergoing a process of identity renegotiation that culminates in the creation of an autofictional identity.

1. Eimear McBride: A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing

AGIHFT is an anonymous girl's autodiegetic narration which covers her entire lifespan, from when she was a foetus to her suicide. The first sentences of the novel show some of the main points that structure the novel: "[f]or you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day" (*AGIHFT* 3). The "you" refers to the girl's elder brother, with whom she develops a symbiotic relationship. It is he who chooses his sister's name, as his mother tells him: "[y]ou'll give her name" (*ibidem*). Then there is a focus shift: "[b]ounce the bed, I'd say" (*ibidem*). Here the girl's voice appears and she imagines her brother's reaction when his mother told him she was pregnant. The conclusion of the incipit is ambiguous – "[t]hen lay you down. They cut you round" (*ibidem*) – because the girl can either refer to her birth by caesarean delivery, or to her brother's eventual death by brain tumour. The final phrase – "[w]ait and hour and day" (*ibidem*) – is even vaguer, as "wait" has three possible meanings: the pregnancy, the wait before the brother's surgery, or the wait for his awakening from anaesthesia after said surgery (Fischer 2019, 76). The uncertainty is then dissolved in favour of the third hypothesis: "[w]alking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son" (*AGIHFT* 3). The girl's father appears here for the first and only time, as he abandons his family early in the girl's life.

Her brother, her mother and her uncle are three key characters who shape her identity and fate. The symbiotic relationship she develops with her brother is "a kind of incest of the soul" (Sutherland 2014) that, however, does not evolve into sexual behaviour. It "exists above or outside the realm of the physical, and instead manifests in a pre-sexual (and for the foetus Girl, pre-birth) state" (White 2018, 566). The brain surgery he undergoes at the beginning of the novel has serious repercussions on his cognitive skills, rendering him a victim of bullying at school and leading his mother to a nervous breakdown:

> And when you come back that last day there's envelopes. […] It's the start of the end of this life. Well it seems so. Then. Maths F Irish E English E History E Geography E Chemistry Incomplete. Oh love I'm sorry. […] From the Irish Defence Forces. Stamp. We're sorry to inform you height weight IQ

[2] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *AGIHFT*.
[3] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *AGT*
[4] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *C19*.

and eyesight are are but we wish you the very best. You there staring across the table. Weeping mother press her faces into hands. Oh what. Oh what. What will you do? Eighteen years and no exam. You mumbling things like join the navy. (*AGIHFT* 75-76)

The girl always stands by his side and starts defining herself in relation to him. However, she eventually wants to create a distance between herself and her brother to start a path of individual growth. This decision has serious consequences on her psyche:

We were moving off now. From each other. As cannot be. Helped. I didn't help it from that time on. You know. All that. When you said sit with me on the school bus. I said no. That inside world had caught alight and what I wanted. To be left alone. To look at it. To swing the torch into every corner of what he'd we'd done. Know it and wonder what does it mean. I learned to turn it off, the world that was not my own. […] But somehow I've left you behind and you're just looking on. (61)

Going away to college, she creates an even greater distance that will be reconciled when she gets back home because she hears that her brother's tumour has grown back and there is no hope of survival. At this moment, they re-establish their symbiotic relationship to such an extent that, when he eventually dies, there is an evident change in the girl's writing style:

Please don't go no. Not. Go. I. Please don't leave. There's the. Air flying out. Your eyes on me. They. You are.
Silent.
Breath.
Lungs go out. See the world out.
You finish that breath. Song breath.
You are gone out tide. And you close. Drift. Silent eyes. Goodbye.
My. lllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no.
Silent.
He's gone. (188)

The collapse of her brother's body is paralleled by other collapses: the girl's inability to articulate words – "My. lllllllllllllllll. Love" – due to her emotional breakdown and the disintegration of her writing style. She will finally reconcile with him by committing suicide:

Will I say? For you to hear? Alone. My name is. Water. All alone. My name. The plunge is faster. The deeper cold is coming in. What's left? What's left behind? What's it? It is. My name for me. My I.
Turn. Look up. Bubble from my mouth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air famished eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That just was life. And now.

What?

My name is gone. (203)

Letting herself drown in a lake, the girl releases herself from traumas, including her brother's death, but, most importantly, she frees herself from her name – "My name is gone" –, which was the last tie to her brother. By doing so, she goes back to an amniotic stage where she can reconnect with the only person who really mattered to her: "the narrative comes full circle – as she commits suicide, her 'name is gone', and she gives up her living identity to become symbiotically reunited with her brother once again" (White 2018, 567).

While her relationship with her brother is cyclically recomposed through suicide, her relationship with her mother, conditioned by her strong religious beliefs, will never change and can be understood as a "maternal archetype […] of the suffering mother, a self-induced victim, who is also ready to dismantle any attempt of subversion to keep a gendered hierarchy of dominance and submission" (De la Peña 2022, 291). Indeed, the girl's mother is dominated by both her father and the religious beliefs he instilled in her. She is also abandoned by her husband (for an unknown reason). Her traumas and her ideology made her a very rigid, aloof and sometimes violent mother:

> Mammy sorry that I sorry I didn't know. Your hands can't keep her off. […] And hits you on your ear. On your cheek. That hard. Ah Mammy sorry. Sorry. Sorry please, all you say. She have you by the jumper. Slap you harder. Slap and slap and slap. […] Screaming. You imbecile. […] You'll never manage anything. You're a moron. He's right. You're a moron. Hail Mary. How hard can it be? Hail Mary. I've had enough of you. (*AGIHFT* 17)

This is the first episode of violence in the novel. The reason for the beating is that the girl and her brother are unable to recite a "Hail Mary" to their very religious grandfather. This episode marks the girl's first serious trauma. Even when she goes to college, her mother remains an oppressive figure who still wields power over her. Besides physical violence, verbal assault characterises their interactions. For example, when the girl considers returning home from college due to concerns about her brother's health, her mother rants: "[t]elling me what to do you're a fucking slut" (119).

Another traumatic relationship shaping the girl's identity involves sexual abuse by an uncle when she was just thirteen years old. The shame she feels because of the rape leads her to liberalise her body to reclaim control over it. She feels that lust is the only means to demonstrate ownership over her body. In the beginning, she has sex with her schoolmates:

> There is no Jesus here these days just Come all you fucking lads. I'll have you every one any day. Breakfast dinner lunch and tea. […] They'll say my name forever shame but do exactly what I say. I'm a laughing skirt up round my knees and feathery boy rosen cheek between. (72)

Despite feeling a "forever shame" *(ibidem)*, the girl believes that thanks to lust she will be on everyone's lips and that men will do whatever she desires. Sex becomes also a means of defending her brother: "[t]hey'll not say one thing about us you see because after all, what's fair is fair" *(ibidem)*. When she goes to college, her depravity worsens:

> I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead. I met a man who took me for walks. Long ones in the country. I offer up. I offer up in the hedge. I met a man I met with her. She and me and his friend to bars at night and drink champagne and bought me chips at every teatime. I met a man with condoms in his pockets. Don't use them. He loves children in his heart. No. […] I met a man and many more and I didn't know you at all. (96-97)

The anaphoric repetition of "I met a man" conveys the apathy she feels. One day she tries to confront her uncle to vindicate herself, but he doesn't feel any guilt:

> So are you feeling guilty? What? About what? About that time when you fucked me? Yes. About that. I feel guilty and I am. Because I was thirteen? Look you're no baby now. No. So stop with that. You know me. I do. Know you he says. Well. Go on say it while no one's here. Then. Look, do you think he says. You don't think do you that. What? I abused you? That you abused me? […] No. I don't. (106-107)

Right after this dialogue, he tries to have sex with her, but she stands up to him and has him take her home:

> Will you kiss me coming out of my mouth before I know what I've said at all. […] He look down at his hands sitting flat on his knees. He won't do I think. He won't. That's good. What do I want with. Shame. Jesus. Then he does. As he wants to. Now I see. He wants to. Now. […] This is not like. Coming home. I feel that. There. His lips. I'm. It's too. Much. Jesus. Give my eyes back. Let me. See. My. Choke. Stop. Don't stop he says. Stop. No. Stop. I have to make. Myself. Sit back. Jesus he. What. His breath go. Like the clappers. Are we going to do? Go back now I say. […] Go back. Now. Alright. Alright. Start the car now. (107-108)

Though he traumatises her again, he still is an important figure to her. Indeed, when her brother's conditions worsen, it is her uncle who she asks for support. However, he takes advantage of her desperation for sexual purposes:

> I wanted you to come I say. My My My brother. I needed to. I close to cry. […] He pull [Sic] up my skirt. Put his hand between my legs. […] The answer to every single question is Fuck. Stitching up my eyes and sewing up my lips. Will you do that? Say. That. Do that. To me. Yes. Fuck. Yes. Help me. Save me from all this. (131)

Despite being the victim of another abuse, the girl ends up seeing him as a figure of salvation. She also starts seeking sex to cope with her emotions: "I go into the black of trees. […] In this moment in the place like this. I want the. Earth. My legs spread wide. The tremble moment men invade. Boys come in" (168). However, this behaviour turns against her when she meets a group of guys whom she thinks she knows: the attempt to seduce and dominate them is overturned and they rape her. This is one of the last key moments in her life, and it is testified to by a new type of language collapse: some words are written incorrectly to highlight the difficulty of articulating them due to the traumatic experience: "[f]insih in me. Fincsh. Good girl the. End of it" (169). After the death of her brother, she goes back to the lake where she was raped, and she finds a man that abuses her too. Once again, the articulation of the words is made difficult by the traumatic experience: "[d]one fuk me open he dine done on me. […] Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you" (193). Some lines later, the word spelling goes back to normal. However, upper and lower cases start to alternate: "Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR" (194). The only moment when the orthography is respected is when she breathes: "[a]nd I breath" (*ibidem*). In this moment, she thinks of her uncle and, thanking him ironically, identifies him as the cause of her misery: "[t]hanks to your uncle for that like the best fuck I ever had" (*ibidem*).

With regards to the identification between the author and the narrator, there are only a few sources from which to draw a strong parallel between the two. There are some interviews where McBride speaks about her past life. In one of those (Collard 2014), she tells of her brother Donagh, to whom *AGIHFT* is dedicated, who actually died of a brain tumour. The girl's brother and Donagh also share the same nature. Indeed, McBride's brother "was quite an easy-going person, struggled at school" (*ibidem*). In the same interview, McBride also mentions that she was raised in a religious household – just as the narrator was – and that her father died of cancer when she was very young – this would explain the disappearance of the girl's father at the beginning of the novel. Lastly, although the narrator does not give any spatio-temporal information, she makes it quite clear that she lives in the Irish countryside and that she moves to a big city to go to college. Knowing that McBride was actually raised in the countryside and then went to college in London, the description of the city the girl moves to – "[c]ity all that black

in my lungs. In my nose. Like I am smoking am not but still" (*AGIHFT* 83) – corroborates the idea that she went to London too, thus helping us draw this parallel between her and McBride.

2. Doireann Ní Ghríofa: A Ghost in the Throat

While *AGIHFT* concentrates on representing the protagonist's upbringing and (self-) destruction, *AGT* focuses on the relationship between the main character, *Doireann Ní Ghríofa[5], and the poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, author of the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*[6] [Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire], a funeral lament written in the aftermath of her husband's homicide in 1773 (Ó Tuama 1961). It is difficult to identify Ní Chonaill as the writer of the *Caoineadh* because, belonging to a feminine tradition and, therefore, not benefiting from the same prestige as male-tradition texts, it was passed on only orally: "[t]he caoineadh was one of the most popular yet peripheral forms in which women composed. […] Its origins in liminal and extempore female performance rendered the caoineadh subordinate to an established (and decidedly masculine) manuscript culture in the early modern period" (Lawrenson 2023, 33). The medium characterises this kind of composition. It was only in 1892 that Morgan John O'Connell transcribed it and its translation into English by Peadar Ua Laoghair.

Like many before her, Ní Ghríofa wants to translate the *Caoineadh* and in *AGT* she gives this task to a homo- and auto- diegetic narrator with whom she shares the name (*AGT* 28) and many biographical aspects – the number of children they have, where they studied, their writing careers (Birrell 2021). *Ní Ghríofa was first introduced to Ní Chonaill's lament by a teacher when she was still very young – "[w]hen we first met, I was a child, and she [Eibhlín] had been dead for centuries" (*AGT* 10) –, but her initial impression was not very enthusiastic: "[h]er story seems sad, yes, but also a little dull. Schoolwork. Boring. My gaze has already soared away with the crows, while my mind loops back to my most-hated pop-song, 'and you give yourself away … ' " (11). Upon the second encounter with the text, she "falls in love" with the poem – "I develop a schoolgirl crush on this caoineadh, swooning over the tragic romance embedded in its lines" (*ibidem*) – but she does not understand the pain expressed in those words yet – "my childhood understanding of this poem was, well, childish, and my teenage interpretation little more than a swoon" (13)=. As a matter of fact, the adolescent *Ní Ghríofa idealises the text and invents the facts it tells:

> My homework is returned to me with a large red X, and worse, the teacher's scrawl cautions: 'Don't let your imagination run away with you!' I have felt these verses so deeply that I know my answer must be correct […]. In response to the request 'Describe the poet's first encounter with Art Ó Laoghaire,' I had written: 'She jumps on his horse and rides away with him forever,' but on returning, I am baffled to find that the teacher is correct: this image does not exist in the text. […] It may not be real to my teacher, but it is to me. (12)

The third encounter happens much later: she is an adult, married, has children, lives in the city and has already begun her writing career. One day, while driving her car, her eye "tripped over a sign for Kilcrea" (15). After this moment, she starts thinking compulsively about the toponym until she remembers: "*Kilcrea*, *Kilcrea*, the word vexed me for days […] until finally,

[5] To distinguish between the author and the narrator, we will refer to the former as Ní Ghríofa and to the latter as *Ní Ghríofa.

[6] We will use the words "*caoineadh*" "lament" and "keen" when referring to the genre and tradition of this writing; while, to refer to Ní Chonaill's poem, we will call it *Caoineadh*.

I remembered – Yes! – in that old poem from school, wasn't Kilcrea the name of the graveyard where the poet buried her lover?" (*ibidem*, italics in the original). This is why she decides to undertake another reading of the *Caoineadh* that will turn out to be decisive for her life. The emotions she feels are new to her and she grasps new aspects of the text: "I was startled to find Eibhlín Dubh pregnant again with her third child, just as I was. I had never imagined her as a mother in any of my previous readings" (16-17).

*Ní Ghríofa starts feeling such a strong emotional and spiritual symbiosis with Ní Chonaill that "[s]he wanted to know more of Eibhlín Dubh's life, to go beyond the poem and learn of this stranger's girlhood and old age. She wanted to see what became of her children and grandchildren. She wanted to find her burial place and to lay flowers on her grave" (Ní Ghríofa 2020b). She also feels a communion of bodies: she identifies the pregnant body as the element that unites her with the poet. It becomes her medium through which to keep the female tradition alive. However, she soon has to face a harsh reality: Ní Chonaill has almost completely been erased from history. There are just a few documents that certify her existence. She has been overshadowed by the male figures that lived with her – "*Wife of Art O'Leary*. *Aunt of Daniel O'Connell*. How swiftly the academic gaze places her in a masculine shadow" (*AGT* 70) –. The only texts where she is contemplated as an independent human being are *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade* by Morgan J. O'Connell (1977 [1892]) and a correspondence between her brothers Maurice and Daniel. Nevertheless, once she becomes a widow, she disappears:

> Nelly finds herself a widow at the age of fifteen. When she returns to Derrynane, she does not return pregnant.
>
> Here: silence.
>
> How I wish that someone had thought more women's words worthy of a place in that old secretaire. All the diaries and letters and ledgers I imagine in female handwriting, they must have existed once […]. We are left with only the judgment of Mrs O'Connell […] to gauge a sense of the aftermath of Nelly's marriage. (*AGT* 91)

*Ní Ghríofa finds herself unable to put Ní Chonaill's life together using the "tools" of historiography, because she also knows she does not possess them. Hence, she decides to invent her own method[7]:

> I begin with an unscientific mishmash of daydream and fact, concocted while scraping porridge gloop into a bin, gathering schoolbags and coats, badgering children into the car, biting back curses at traffic lights, kissing three boys goodbye, and driving back home again. All the while, I keep one eye on Eibhlín Dubh and one on my daughter in her car seat. (71)

It is a combination "of practical, pain-stalking [sic] research, and deeply felt subjective experience" (Dahlberg 2022, 30). She starts looking for any kind of text to find information about Ní Chonaill: "graveyard inscriptions […], clergy and baptismal records in church ledgers, microfilm, letters, lists of student registrations, depositions, examinations, a transcribed family history written into a Bible" (Corser 2023, 124) and she sets the objective to let the poet's life

[7] This methodology coincides with what is called "creative history" (Corbet, Compton, Pooley 2022), a practice that "preserve[s] silences in history, speak[s] in metaphors, juxtapose[s], hint[s], elaborate[s], or embroider[s] in ways that are particularly valuable when trying to preserve the mysteries" (7).

emerge from the silence she was relegated to by men. *Ní Ghríofa feels that by doing this she can do justice not only to Ní Chonaill but to all the women who were erased from history (Patel 2022). Indeed, she believes that she cannot use the tools of traditional historiography because they were created by the dominant gender to write a narration that systematically excludes female figures.

While alternating parts where *Ní Ghríofa tells her private life with others linked to her research and to Ní Chonaill's existence, the narrator comments on her writing – "[e]ach time I loop back to rewrite these paragraphs, I must watch The Gearagh flooding again. When I type the word 'puppeting', some invisible clock-hand ticks, some secret key twists, and without noticing, I bleed" (*AGT* 196) – and describes her method as such:

> At first, I can't quite see them, these people she knew – they are a sequence of shadows, opaque and distant – but as the weeks pass, the file I build on each name starts to grow. One by one, her people step from gloom to light and walk towards me. They begin to move and to breathe – sometimes flawed and affable, sometimes strange, sometimes violent or irate – […]. They are real and true. […] I compile a long list of facts and quotes, and then, as is my wont, I daydream it to life. (229)

She lets the characters take shape as she collects information. They emerge from the shadows to become people. However, she also acknowledges that:

> Some parts of Eibhlín Dubh's life, I know now, will always remain hidden to me, no matter how closely I look. Instead of resenting the many lacunae where I have not been able to find her, my hand has learned to hover over those gaps in awe. My attempt to know another woman has found its ending not in the satisfaction of neat discovery, but in the persistence of mystery. (280)

*Ní Ghríofa knows that historiography's tools are useless to her goal, but thinking about all the efforts she has made she feels the necessity to write about them: "[i]f I could find a way to communicate all I have learned of her days, maybe others would discover the clues that eluded me, and I might learn more of her from them" (281).

Another means of emancipation is reading. The *Caoineadh* is decisive not only in relation to the novel's motive – the need *Ní Ghríofa feels to know more about Ní Chonaill –, but it carries out a crucial role in the narrator's most traumatic experience: the birth of her fourth child (the first daughter after three sons), who is hospitalised in the NICU for some complications during the gestation: "[m]y baby had not grown in weeks, and both placenta and umbilical cord had failed to such an extent that that she would have been stillborn had she waited any longer" (50). There is a second, and more traumatic, element: *Ní Ghríofa is unable to produce breast milk. This feels like a defeat for her because she has always been proud of producing and donating her breast milk to the Milk Bank in Irvinestown: "*expressed more. squeezed drops on her lips but don't think she swallowed much really. she won't wake. scared now / burped her and tried bottle again. failed. called midwife but no answer / can't stop crying – she's asleep, nappy bone dry – v scared, don't know what to do* […]" (53, italics in the original). She is so disappointed in herself that she enters a spiral of self-blaming that worsens when her daughter is put under intensive care: "I have failed. My baby has been taken from me, hurried away to breathe elsewhere. I lie staring at the wall" (54). Her whole world is crumbling down. The elements on which she based her identity – being a good mother and donating her breast milk – become uncertain and she starts questioning who she really is. In this moment of discouragement, she finds solace in a "tattered copy of the *Caoineadh*" (47) she brings with her while rushing to the hospital. The lament will help her cope with the anxieties that oppress her when she is in "the milking parlour" (58), the room where there are the breast-pumping machines: "[t]here, I pump and

read as I always did at home, and sometimes it feels almost normal" (60). Reading helps her restore her identity and overcome her fears. The importance of Ní Chonaill's text is marked by explicitly saying that she packs it up together with other things when she is dismissed: "[m]y hands shake a little as I clear cupboards of our nappies, babygros, and blankets, the crumpled coffee cups, my photocopy of the Caoineadh […]" (65).

This traumatic experience and its outcome consolidate the relationship between *Ní Ghríofa and Ní Chonaill:

> In the months after my daughter is born the act of reciting the *Caoineadh* comes to feel like time-travel – I am carrying this baby in the same sling and whispering the same verses as I did with her brother. When her sleeping ear rests against my chest, it reverberates with Eibhlín Dubh's words. (68)

She then decides she wants to "donate my days to finding hers" (71). By overcoming her trauma, *Ní Ghríofa sets the goal of her project. She actually does not clarify her objective; she just states that she will nullify herself to let Ní Chonaill speak through her. It is only on the last page of the novel that the narrator confesses her real objective:

> When I get home, I think, maybe I'll try to cheer myself up by opening a new notebook from my stash. This time, I won't let myself begin by writing *Hoover* or *Sheets* or *Mop* or *Pump*. Instead, I'll think of new words, and then I'll follow them. As I turn the bend towards home, I find that I already know the echo with which that first page will begin.
>
> *This is a female text*. (282)

*Ní Ghríofa claims that she will not write poetry to tell this story, but she will pursue a new path that is already clear in her mind: "This is a female text". The last sentence, echoing the beginning of *AGT*, foregrounds the writing of the novel the reader has just finished, thus outlining a cyclical structure.

It is the structure that reveals the autofictionality of the novel: "the author does not mingle reality and fiction in terms of content, but of structure" (Mini 2023, 326). Indeed, Ní Ghríofa builds an almost perfect representation of herself. Her autofictional version seems indiscernible from herself; she gives the reader enough intra and extra-textual information to conclude that they are the same person. Within this information, the most crucial is their poetic careers, which are impossible to distinguish. *Ní Ghríofa writes:

> In those city rooms, I wrote a poem. I wrote another. I wrote a book. If the poems that came to me on those nights might be considered love poems, then they were in love with rain and alpine flowers, with the strange vocabularies of a pregnant body, with clouds and with grandmothers. No poem arrived in praise of the man who slept next to me as I wrote […]. (14)

The "book" she refers to could be *Résheoid* (2011), her poetic debut, whose title means "moonlight" and is paralleled by what *Ní Ghríofa writes in her poems – "the night city's glimmering made stars invisible, but when I woke to feed my first son, and then my second, I could split the curtains and see the moon between the spires. In those city rooms, I wrote a poem […]" *(ibidem)* –, compositions actually written in the moonlight. Furthermore, even the themes touched by Ní Ghríofa in her poems, such as maternity, the relationship with nature and life in the city, echoes through *AGT*. With regards to the extra-textual elements, Ní Ghríofa corroborates the identification by sharing public aspects of her private life that coincide with what *Ní Ghríofa recounts in the novel (Birrell 2021). On these occasions, she also confirms that some of

the episodes told in the novel really happened to her: for example, when *Ní Ghríofa gets used to reading and writing in any kind of situation, like the rooftop of a parking lot, because she cannot work at home with her children (*ibidem)*. A last extra-textual element is the translation of the *Caoineadh*. Both the author and the narrator set themselves to translate the lament but, by positioning her translated version in the peritext, at the end of the novel, the author clarifies that *Ní Ghríofa is an almost perfect representation of herself. Albeit the precision of the correspondences between them, the ending breaks the illusion of pure referentiality by revealing the cyclical structure of *AGT*. It compels the reader to change their attitude towards the text, which "rather than hiding its own structure, prefers to self-evidently exhibit it" (Mini 2023, 327). It creates an interpretative short circuit where the reader must come to terms with two different interpretations: they have to decide whether to understand the novel as referential or to read it as fictional. This oscillation results in an autofictional reading strategy (Gibbons 2022).

3. Claire-Louise Bennett: Checkout-19

This third novel presents an anonymous, autodiegetic narrator whose identity appears closely connected to Bennett. Although there are no direct references to her personal life, there are significant parallels: both come from working-class families – their fathers are plumbers and their mothers work in retail –, both were born in the south-east of England and later emigrated to Ireland. Additionally, both have a brother, though he is only briefly mentioned in the novel (*C19*, 9, 142, 209). However, the text cannot be considered an autobiography. It actually explores the evolution of the narrator's identity through her relationship with books and her education.

Indeed, the central theme of the novel is the role of books in *Bennett's[8] life, and it is introduced early on in the narrative:

> Later on we often had a book with us. Later on. When we were a bit bigger at last though still nowhere near as big as the rest of them we brought over books with us. Oh loads of books. And sat with them there in the grass by the tree. Just one book in fact. Just one, that's right. Lots of books, one at a time. That's it, one at a time. We didn't very much like tons of books did we. No, not really, and neither do we now. We like one book. Yes, we like one book now and we liked one book then. We went to the library for instance and we soon lost the habit didn't we of taking out lots and lots of books. Yes. Yes. Yes we did. (1)

This *in medias res* incipit establishes a rupture between what has happened before, which the narrator considers irrelevant, and what will come next, what *Bennett believes is important: her literary education. Secondly, this incipit showcases a peculiar use of pronouns: the we-pronoun is not used to report a conversation among people, but it refers to a "multiple self, an older and younger narrator in combination" (Corser 2023, 133). This is because "[*] Bennett isn't especially interested in the way her personal story is echoed in other people's. She's interested in getting this particular story right. Her prose is full of little assurances, checks, correctives and adjustments, as though to establish things once and for all" (Wills 2021). The use of question tags and the continuous rephrasing simulate a dialogue between two different versions of *Bennett, where the present one feels the need to rectify what the past one says. This linguistic feature is repeated throughout the whole novel and is the result of the reconstruction of *Bennett's identity after overcoming traumas.

[8] As in *AGT*'s case, we will refer to Bennett's autofictional version as *Bennett.

Literature's relevance is confirmed by a fifty-page-long list she makes of the books she has and has not read yet (*C19*, 74-122):

> Strange to think but when I first wrote the tale I hadn't yet read a single word by Italo Calvino, Jean Rhys, Borges, or Thomas Bernhard, nor Clarice Lispector. I had read *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lolita*, and 'Kubla Khan', and *The Diary of a Young Girl*. […] I had read […] many Imagist poems, one of which had snow in it and a white leopard I think, or, more accurately, it was a leopard that had no outline – maybe it was penned by Ezra Pound, I don't remember. (74)

Blending personal anecdotes with literary references, *Bennett foregrounds how reading is a fundamental aspect of her existence, shaping her sense of self. Books are not simply a form of entertainment; they are integral to her understanding of the world: "[y]ou feel they wouldn't exist without you seeing them. Just as they wouldn't exist without you… And isn't it true the other way around – that the pages you read give you life?" (122). She emphasizes her symbiotic relationship with literature: reading is not passive; rather, it is an active engagement that enlivens both the reader and the book.

Inside this long excursus, there are two other "biographical" digressions. The first one tells of when *Bennett used to work as a cashier in a supermarket while studying for her A-levels. She recalls a peculiar client, called "the Russian", who used to do grocery shopping following a precise routine (75-76). One day his pattern is disrupted: while the narrator was going towards the "checkout 19" – the novel's title is inspired by this episode – the Russian addresses her and hands her a copy of *Beyond Good and Evil* by Friederich Nietzsche. Nonetheless, *Bennett is not surprised by the man's behaviour but by the cover of the book:

> […] on the cover was a painting of a woman with large naked breasts and her hands are resting down, her hands are resting down because she is a sphinx, […] the way her hands rested down like that, exactly like the way my hands rested down on top of the dark brown lid of the till when there was no one there and nothing for me to do […], and I couldn't help but believe that the Russian man must have thought so too. (76-77)

After this, the Russian story stops to reappear two chapters later. The narrative frame is the same but, once again, *Bennett makes some changes. Firstly, she writes in a new style: "[m]any years ago a large Russian man with the longest tendrils […]" (153). Both the syntax and the lexicon resemble the language of fairy tales. Secondly, a new character appears, his wife. When the old man gives *Bennett Nietzsche's book, the narrator has a completely different reaction:

> I am beyond unnerved because it is abhorrently clear that the reason why the Russian man has seen fit to give me this book is because […] a minor yet far-reaching aspect of my disposition wavered in the periodic presence of the Russian man […] the Russian man has seen through my ruffled yet unbroken flesh. Straight into the quickening revolutions of my supremely aberrant imaginings. (162)

She feels violated by the man who, without ever speaking to her except for the strictly necessary, had been able to penetrate her imaginings. The reformulation of the Russian's story is part of *Bennett's identity building. As she rereads some books and grasps new meanings every time, what she writes is subjected to a rewriting process.

The second digression nestled inside the bio-bibliographic list regards the reading of Edward Morgan Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908). She loves the novel so much that she actually goes to Florence to experience what Lucy Honeychurch, Foster's protagonist, has experienced. She especially wants to emulate one scene:

I wanted to flicker through the clandestine arcade onwards to the Arno, to stand above the cool wide river, with my hands, yes, trembling and white over the parapet and to throw something, yes, postcards, yes, just like she [Lucy] had done, and to watch them flutter, wildly, yes, before landing upon and being carried off, away, yes, by the River Arno. That's how I always remembered it, for years and years. (*C19* 106-107)

Almost twenty years from the first reading, she reads it again and she finds out that she misremembered the plot: "[t]he story unfolded much more rapidly than I remembered – and there was a lot more straight-talking than I recalled" (108). She is struck when she discovers that it was not Lucy who threw the postcards in the river but George Emerson, a young man who courts her. Then, questioning why she had come to believe that Lucy was the protagonist of the scene, *Bennett considers that "[p]erhaps there has been operating in me a belief that men do not throw anything into water besides hooks and stones. That the impulse to release a thing into the drift is a female one" (109). This digression perfectly displays how her understanding can be tainted by her imaginings. It is also exemplary of how much the narrator's life is conditioned by reading and of the processes of rereading and rewriting typical of *Bennett's text: the second time she encounters Forster's novel she has to face an older version of herself and come to terms with it. Indeed, the whole bio-bibliographical list exemplifies her awareness that it is necessary to take some steps back in our lives as readers because the relationships we entertain with the books we read are bidirectional: as we interpret them; they can change us too.

*Bennett does not represent herself only as a reader, but also as a writer. She discovered her passion for writing by chance while doodling in the back of her exercise book – "[…] a line again, a smooth line relaxing across the page and the line broke off into words, just a few words, then a few words more, and the words set out a story, as if it had been there all along" (42) – and feels that she has discovered a new means of expression she can use to represent her own reality. However, she hides her talent until her teacher, Mr. Burton, finds out:

He'd looked in the back of my exercise book he said. […] A curious little story, he said, and he asked me if I'd made it up myself and I said yes I had and he asked me if I had any more stories and I said yes I did even though I didn't and what did he say then? 'Can I read them?' 'Would you like me to read them? (50-51)

From this moment on, *Bennett will begin writing one story a week to have it corrected by him.

Notwithstanding the haphazardness of her initiation to writing, she considers it an essential part of her identity. For example, she breaks up with a manipulative boyfriend because, despite liking her for being a writer, he wants her to stop because "[w]riting took me away from him" (139). After the separation, he will tear up a manuscript of hers in revenge. Later, she sets herself to reconstruct the story she had written but her memories are so clouded that she writes four endings and she continuously interrupts the narration to justify herself: "[…] I simply wrote 'long ago' at the beginning of the tale and left it at that because I wasn't really sure myself when exactly or where exactly the story happened" (53-54). From the beginning, the story sounds like a fairy tale: "Tarquin Superbus was a very elegant sort of man who lived in a very elegant European city sometime in a previous century" (53). Tarquin is a very lonely and ambitious man who buys a lot of books to impress his only friend, the "Doctor": "everyone knows if you have a lot of fine books about the place people are likely to automatically infer that you're a serious sort of person […] so he went about procuring an entire library of books" (60). He does not want to read them all, he only wants to appear intelligent. When the Doctor visits him, he starts looking at the books and discovers that all the pages are empty – " 'Tarquin

[…] there isn't a single word on any one of these pages!' " (68) – because he did not acquire a normal library, but the "key to complete and infinite lightness" (73). Here, the reconstruction is interrupted by the bio-bibliographical digression. After fifty pages, *Bennett resumes her narration from where she had left it, adding a crucial detail: "his whole library is filled with blank pages, but for one sentence" (74) that:

> contains everything. […] this one sentence that is everything, is not read – it is seen. It cannot be comprehended through the intellect […]. Importantly, the sentence cannot be shown to anyone else – it is an impossibility. It connects with and emancipates only the person who discovers it. Once connection has occurred, and the awakened state has been achieved, the sentence disappears from the page. It vanishes completely, Tarquin, in an instant, and materialises somewhere else, on another page, another page god knows where inside these thousands of books. (72-3)

Thus, Tarquin begins spasmodically searching for that one sentence. *Bennett would stop the tale at this point, but she is overcome by the power of written words and starts frantically adding new material. Tarquin abandons his mission and is consequently struck by a curse: "Rosalia's soufflé falls flat. The lilies in the alcoves hang their heads, shed their pollen, and wrinkle at the edges […]" (129). So, Tarquin and his cook burn all the books to break this curse. However, from the fire a cloud of darkness arises and evil spreads in the streets. Thus, out of guilt, Tarquin goes out to the balcony and inhales the cloud. Then he vomits that "one sentence" out in the shape of a blob. It seems like the story cannot end: "[b]ut [maiuscolo in originale?] that is not all. Down below in the street, while Tarquin Superbus is sleeping soundly, the disgorged blob of phlegm grows. It grows little limbs and […]" (137). *Bennett stops reconstructing the story when she does not recall anything else, even though she feels there is something more. With Tarquin's story, *Bennett takes to extreme the idea that some books feature sentences that change your life. Tarquin's reading becomes a paradox: he just turns the blank pages looking for that "one sentence".

In *C19*, reading and writing distort the narrator's reality. The aspects of the author's life used to build her character are distorted by *Bennett's literary mind. The continuous reformulations, Tarquin's and the Russian's stories and her relationship with Forster's *A Room with a View* configure an unreliable narrator whose mythomaniac mind is shaped by a series of oppressive traumas. Firstly, her literary education is conditioned by different figures. On the one hand, her mother hides certain books from her because she is too young. As she grows up, she reads those in rebellion towards her mother and the school system: "[…] one summer when we ought to have been reading books from the reading list we laid down upon one of the sun loungers in a halter-neck black bikini with a packet of Dunhill cigarettes and read *A Start in Life* by Alan Sillitoe instead" (9). On the other hand, her education is conditioned by grievous male figures. Indeed, she used to read almost exclusively male authors, albeit not feeling represented by them: "I hardly ever saw so much as a glimpse of myself in any of their books" (171). She will approach female writers later on in her life. However, she will not always be free to independently explore the literary world due to the presence of male friends such as Dale, who "wasn't my boyfriend and never would be but often behaved just as if he was" (117). Moreover, thinking he is more intelligent than her because he is a man, he feels entitled to tell her what to and not to read:

> Women can't withstand poetry, seemed to be Dale's view. Women are beautiful and tender creatures and poetry breaks them, of course it does. Poetry rips right through you, makes shit of you, and a man can be made shit of […]. And what kind of a woman anyway is drawn towards poetry? Only a warped sort of a woman. (118-119)

More importantly, he imposes his poems on her: "Dale didn't […] encourage me to read poetry by those women [Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath], showed me instead his own very neat handwriting and terse yet tender verses" (119).

Dale is also the cause of *Bennett's biggest trauma. Indeed, towards the end of *C19,* she confesses that he rapes her one night when she goes to his house and finds him completely drunk. While they are talking, he starts hitting on her – "Dale said I looked like a beautiful mermaid […]. Then Dale said 'I'm going to come over there woman, […] and I'm going to fuck you'" (181) – and she, speechless at first, rejects him in vain – " 'Oh Dale,' I said, 'not now, not now,' and he said 'Yes now, of course now.' [come sopra] And so that's what happened" (182) –. As a means of self-defence during the rape, *Bennett keeps her eyes wide open:

> I kept my eyes open because if I shut my eyes the outside world would be gone and all I'd have to be aware of then would be my interior and my interior was being invaded in and out in and out and I preferred not to be aware of that as much as possible […]. (182-183)

Once the "torture" is over, *Bennett goes back home but she is unable to process what has happened and convinces herself that nothing bad has occurred: "it's Dale fucking you and you're just so tired, that's all, that's all it is, Dale, poor Dale" (184). A few pages forward she tells of a phone call she has with Dale a year after the rape:

> 'When you came back from Brighton last year I raped you didn't I?' […] 'If you're asking me did you have sex with me when I didn't want you to then yes the answer's yes Dale,' and Dale will curse, Dale will say 'fuck, fuck,' and I'll hear him saying things about how I'd already been treated so abysmally and how angry that had made him and how he couldn't bear it the way I'd been treated so badly by the most disgusting arrogant men and yet it turned out that he was worse, worse than all of them put together, and he'll sound very emotional and I won't feel emotional at all, I'll feel embarrassed, and I'll say 'Perhaps I bring out the worst in men'. (188-189)

Rather than asking for forgiveness, he humiliates her; he makes her believe that she is the cause of her traumas. Dale doubles the wound: first, he rapes her; then, he blames her.

This last episode is fundamental to comprehending *C19*'s autofictional configuration. The narrator displays episodes that contribute to her identity-building as a reader and a writer. However, these experiences affect her understanding. That is what happens, for example, when she misremembers the scene in *A Room with a View*. Furthermore, some of the events she narrates in the novel, such as the rape, are filtered by her self-defence mechanisms. The way she sees and represents reality is influenced by her coping mechanisms. This can be related to the continuous reformulations and the use of question tags: *Bennett is unsure that she remembers what she wants to tell and the clash between her old identity and the new one, marked by the traumas illustrated in the novel, produces such a peculiar writing style. She feels she cannot trust her perception of the world. In conclusion, while attempting to reconstruct her education and identity formation through literature, *Bennett showcases how difficult it is to make a truthful account of one's life after having had to renegotiate one's identity due to oppressive and traumatic experiences.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we conducted an analysis of three novels highlighting the different paths of emancipation from patriarchal forms of oppression each character undergoes, focusing on how such experiences can lead to autofictional writing. With regards to *AGIHFT*, we identified three sources of oppression that produce the girl's identity renegotiation process: the

relationships with her brother, her mother, and her uncle. The first one has almost nothing to do with patriarchy, except for her clear emotional dependence on a male figure. However, her tie with her brother is crucial to understanding the destruction of her identity and her suicide. On the other hand, the relationships with her mother and her uncle do present patriarchal aspects. Her mother, who is a victim of her father's religiousness and misogynistic culture, perpetrates the oppression she suffered on her daughter. The girl's uncle represents the apex of patriarchal oppression: by raping her several times, he contributes to the destruction of her identity. In conclusion, the relationships the girl entertains with these three characters bring her to conceive of self-destruction as her only means of emancipation. Indeed, the dismantling of her identity is paralleled by the destruction of the syntax. Furthermore, since the narration is in the first person, her death renders the whole novel an "unnatural narrative" (Alber 2016), thus provoking a short circuit with the referential elements and configuring an autofictional novel. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the oppression she suffers also affects her writing. Indeed, her wrecked syntax parallels the destruction of the girl's identity.

AGT's case is different for two reasons. Firstly, the identification of *Ní Ghríofa with the author is almost exact. Secondly, the patriarchal oppression does not derive directly from a man, but from the cultural expectations imposed on women. Indeed, her trauma consists in not living up to the expectations set for a mother after her daughter's birth because she could not carry her correctly (the baby was born prematurely) and neither could she produce any breast milk. The disappointment she feels is due to the patriarchal ideology that permeates Western cultures. She starts her emancipation process thanks to the copy of the *Caoineadh* she had brought with her to the hospital. This episode is the turning point of the novel, the moment when the narrator understands her purpose: to do justice to Ní Chonaill and all the women who were erased from history by men, she has to write about her journey searching for Ní Chonaill while translating her lament. Eventually, this will result in the writing of *AGT*, whose cyclical structure clashes with the strong referentiality the novel is characterised by, therefore creating an autofictional narrative.

Lastly, *C19* showcases different forms of patriarchal oppression and of emancipation. *Bennett's traumas are linked to a male figure, Dale, and to an ex-boyfriend. The latter is the one that, on the one hand, praises *Bennett for being a writer, and, on the other, wants her to stop. When she eventually breaks up with him, he will tear up the manuscript of Tarquin's story, which she then tells and reinvents in *C19*. Dale harms her even more because he forbids her to read Plath's and Sexton's poems because she is a woman and he forces her to read his own poems instead. Most importantly, he rapes her and then blames her for what has happened. Dale represents the victim-blaming culture that is typical of patriarchal society: even though women are the offended party, men cannot ever be in the wrong and, therefore, it is women who must be at fault. These experiences, together with her upbringing with an aloof mother who hides books from her, lead her to develop a mythomaniac personality that makes her doubt her mind. This results in specific linguistic features – question tags, continuous reformulations – that help the reader understand that *Bennett is an unreliable narrator and that, no matter how referential the novel can be, *C19* is not an autobiography but an autofiction.

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Fiction as Fact and Legend as History: The Significance of the Irish-Canadian Novel *The Yellow Briar* and Its Author John Mitchell to the History of the Ontario Legal Profession*

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Abstract:

The Irish-Canadian lawyer John Mitchell had an unexpected effect on the history of the Ontario legal profession and vice-versa with his 1933 novel *The Yellow Briar: A Story of the Irish on the Canadian Countryside*. Elements drawn from the profession were incorporated into the novel. The significance of the novel to the profession exemplifies a relationship that may develop between the history of the profession and the persons and works that conserve or promote it. The Yellow Briar, which promoted and influenced the history of the profession, resulted in the profession incorporating Mitchell and his novel within its history as subjects of lawyer lore. Mitchell and his novel were consequently afforded a place in history arguably greater than what they otherwise might have attained.

Keywords: Ontario History, Ontario Lawyers, Ontario Methodism, Osgoode Hall, Toronto Landmarks

1. The Yellow Briar *and its Author*

John Wendell Mitchell (1880-1951), a Canadian lawyer who practiced law in the Province of Ontario, made an interesting contribution to Canadian history, to the history of Irish-Canadian literature, and to the history of the Ontario legal profession with his 1933 novel *The Yellow Briar: A Story of the Irish on the Canadian Countryside* (Slater 1933). With respect to Mitchell's qualifications as a lawyer, members of legal professions outside of Ontario are reminded that the Ontario regulator of barristers assumed full jurisdiction over solicitors in 1857, resulting in all Ontario lawyers being qualified as barristers and

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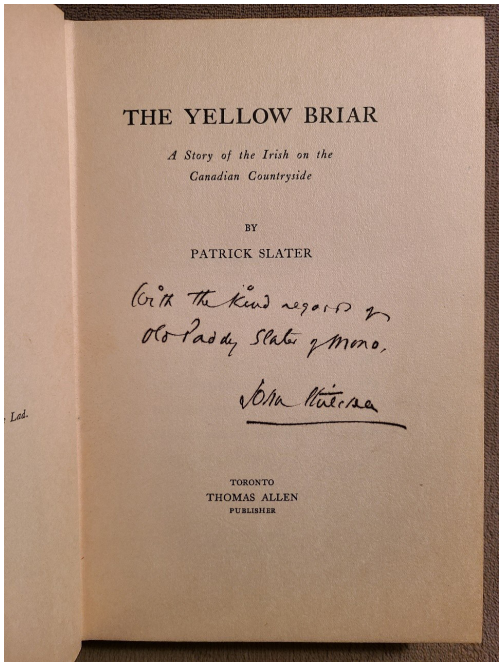
solicitors from that time onward. Although specialists in Canadian and Irish-Canadian literature and literary history have taken an interest in *The Yellow Briar*, it may be fairly argued that the novel and its author remain largely unknown to the majority of the Canadian public. Most importantly, the affinity that the Ontario legal profession has demonstrated for the novel since its inception has resulted in the novel and its author being afforded a place in history arguably greater than what they otherwise might have attained.

With the cooperation of the Toronto publisher Thomas Allen, Mitchell, an Irish-Canadian Methodist, authored *The Yellow Briar* not in his name, but in the name of Patrick "Paddy" Slater, a fictitious Irish-Catholic immigrant in nineteenth-century Ontario whom Mitchell created as the protagonist of the novel. The completed work accordingly was presented to the public as the historical autobiography of Slater documented in manuscript form in 1924 while he was still living and published in book form in 1933 after he had died. Mitchell was known to have autographed copies of the book with his own name including a message to the reader conveying "kind regards" on behalf of the deceased Slater (Figures 1 and 2). The success of the novel did not abate after the public eventually discovered the truth that Slater never existed. As putative author and protagonist, the Slater character became a literary device for affording Mitchell additional storytelling flexibility and creativity when crafting *The Yellow Briar*[1].


THE YELLOW BRIAR

A Story of the Irish on the Canadian Countryside

BY

PATRICK SLATER

With the kind regards of
Old Paddy Slater of Mono,

John Mitchell

TORONTO
THOMAS ALLEN
PUBLISHER

Fig. 1 – First printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* from November 1933 featuring a signed presentation by John Mitchell, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1933) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci

[1] For example, see generally Kenneally 2005.

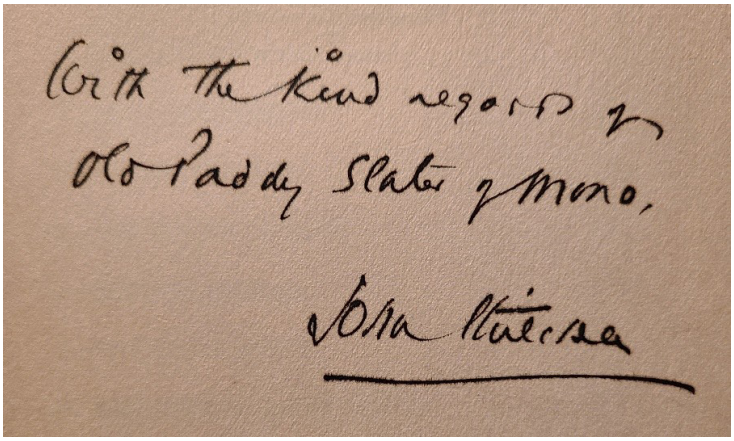


Fig. 2 – Detail of the signed presentation by John Mitchell: "With the kind regards of old Paddy Slater of Mono. John Mitchell" from the first printing of the first edition of The Yellow Briar from November 1933, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1933) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci

A significant aspect of the plot is the interplay between Irish-Catholic Slater and the Irish Methodists in whose midst he finds himself in the rural Ontario town of Mono. Represented in the novel are the political cleavages and the sectarian, cultural and ethnic tensions that existed during the age in which the action of the novel takes place. *The Yellow Briar* encompasses moments of optimism, sentimentality, courage, poignancy, tragedy, bigotry and racism.

Mitchell's protagonist is deeply affected, but not afflicted, by the memories of long ago. Twenty years before the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett published the novel *The Unnamable* (1958 [1953]), it could be argued that his tragicomic mantra "I can't go on, I'll go on" was essentially at the heart of Slater's responses to the sufferings that are described in *The Yellow Briar*. The "patches of crimson" (Slater 1933, 253) revealed in the ruddy autumn foliage of the sugar maple, which Slater equates with the spear wound in the crucified Christ and the associated themes of sacrifice, redemption and renewal, arguably also suggest the traces of the Celtic fire from youth that has continued to kindle within Slater as he has aged[2]. His faith and hope compel him onward as he and his generation lay the foundations for a future replete with opportunities that they have secured at great cost for the next generation, casting away the possibility of an empty future of only embers and ashes. Slater pays tribute to the nineteenth-century nation builders of Canada as he invokes the elegiac words *Ave Atque Vale* (hail and farewell) of the ancient Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus typically reserved for celebrating the passing of heroes or persons of great standing (*ibidem*).

2. The Yellow Briar *and Its Significance to the Ontario Legal Profession*

Mitchell enhanced the content of *The Yellow Briar*; the depth of its characters, and the plausibility of its historical authenticity in various ways including appealing to the history and lore of

[2] Contrast with the fate of the character Krapp in Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* (Beckett 1959).

the Ontario legal profession. His creative decision to make references to the profession ultimately proved to be consequential to the history of the profession. As a lawyer, Mitchell was doubtlessly aware that readers of his novel who were Canadian lawyers would react with great interest to his theme of early Canadian nation building specifically within the context of the nineteenth-century legal and constitutional struggles to construct and shape the Canadian polity. Many of the key nation builders were members of the early Ontario legal profession, some of whom are regarded as historical luminaries of the profession, while others are additionally distinguished as founding fathers of the nation. How many persons nowadays are aware that Canadians owe their system of responsible, parliamentary government and the foundations of Canadian democracy primarily to the herculean exertions of one early nineteenth-century Irish-Canadian lawyer, Robert Baldwin (1804-1858)? The novel touched multiple generations of twentieth-century Ontario lawyers and resonated especially strongly with those whose lives had crossed the end of the nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century. Many Irish-Canadian lawyers who had expressed a particular appreciation for the novel had evidenced a heartfelt sentimentality perhaps typified by characteristics attributed to the Honourable Mr. Justice John Bowlby (1926-1989), a judge of what was then known as the Ontario High Court of Justice who had previously served during his career at the bar as head of the Ontario legal profession from 1980 to 1983: "Bowlby was the sort of Irishman whose eyes filled with tears at the first bar of 'Danny Boy'. He loved a drink, a laugh, and a practical joke. He stood fast by his friends and his colleagues" (Batten 2005, 81).

Of particular importance to the profession is the passage contained in Chapter II "The Tavern Tyrone" that discusses the world-famous, ornate Victorian-era cast iron fence (Figures 3, 4, 5) that surrounds Osgoode Hall, the headquarters of the profession in the province and the location of the appellate courts in Toronto (Figure 6). The fence, manufactured in Toronto using moulds from Glasgow, Scotland and completed in 1868 (Honsberger 2004, 194-195), has been acknowledged as an exceptional Canadian work, having been famously characterized in its "quality of design and craftsmanship" (Arthur 1969, 148) as the equal of the fragment from St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England designed by Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), which surrounds the memorial cairn of the architect and philanthropist John George Howard (1803-1890) in High Park in Toronto (*ibidem*).

Fig. 3 – Outer view of a section of the fence surrounding Osgoode Hall, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 4 – Inner view of a section of the fence surrounding Osgoode Hall, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 5 – Ornate details in the gates of the Osgoode Hall fence, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 6 – Centre block of Osgoode Hall showing the iconic main entrance and the Great Library above it, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

The material in *The Yellow Briar* pertaining to the Osgoode Hall fence invokes the nostalgic, but probably doubtful, legend that the specialized gates incorporated into the design of the fence were created for the purpose of obstructing cows that wandered about the area during the nineteenth century. The gates, which form a kind of zigzag entrance maze, have been variously referred to since their creation as cattle guards, kissing gates, or cow gates (Figures 7, 8, 9, 10). The legend did not originate with Mitchell, but he certainly popularized it, introduced new elements to it, and materially affected how the Ontario legal profession and Torontonians understand the origins of the fence. It can be reasonably argued that the history and mythology of the fence, including the enduring sentimentality that attaches to it, would have been different had Mitchell not published his novel. His account of the fence also influenced the research of early twentieth-century Ontario historians, including, for example, the distinguished, popular historian Edwin C. Guillet (1898-1975), who appeared to have accepted as fact Mitchell's explanation as presented through the character Slater in *The Yellow Briar* of the origin of the design of the gates of the Osgoode Hall fence (Guillet 1934, facing 319). In his recollections of events from 1847, Slater asserts that the cows belonged to John Trueman, who owned the Tyrone, a public house that was located in Toronto on

Queen Street West opposite Osgoode Hall. Trueman and his tavern and inn actually existed[3]. He was one of several Freemasons who convened a meeting at the Tyrone on 27 December 1845 to organize what would become King Solomon's Lodge, No. 22, G.R.C., A.F.A.M., which was formally established in 1847 pursuant to a warrant issued by the Grand Lodge of Ireland (Spry 1868, 7-8). In *The Yellow Briar*, Slater, despite being Catholic and therefore obliged by longstanding papal edict to view Freemasonry as incompatible with Catholicism, declares his approval of the ethics of the Craft. He opines that secular and religious fraternal groups serve a valid function in society and may even be a necessity, while also conceding that such groups historically tended to "keep asunder Canadians who otherwise might more freely break the bread of patriotism at a common board and offer up to a land of freedom the full measure of their united and sincere devotion" (1933, 38). Slater recalls how, as a boy in 1847, he and other children held a mock Freemason's meeting in the Trueman stable after one of them, young Jack Trueman, the son of John Trueman, overheard the first meeting of King Solomon's Lodge at the Tyrone (1933, 39). John Ross Robertson (1841-1918), the writer *par excellence* on Toronto history and a grand master of the Grand Lodge of Canada even provided basic ground floor and upper floor plans of the Tyrone in the second volume of his 1899 tome *The History of Freemasonry in Canada*, which underwent an important reprinting in 1900 (Robertson 1899, 619-624). The Tyrone was ultimately demolished in 1935 (Anonymous 1935). The famous passage in *The Yellow Briar* concerning the Osgoode Hall fence and the Trueman cows is as follows:

> What appealed strongly to my young mind about the Trueman place was a narrow alleyway to the east of the tavern, leading back to a stable in the rear where two cows and pigeons were kept. I liked the job of chivying the cows along Queen Street to a pasture field to the west. One evening the cows got in the way of the carriage of His Lordship, the Chief Justice, and I got a wicked cut from the coachman's whip. All Trueman's cows were breachy by nature; and for years they were headstrong in the notion that a cow-path should be made across the field in front of Osgoode Hall. The heavy and formidable iron fence along Queen Street stands to this day in front of the law courts as a memorial to John Trueman's cows. The law, they say, is tender in its treatment of established customs and ancient ways. For generations, the Bench and Bar of Ontario have continued to sidle and dodge themselves into the precincts of Osgoode Hall through curious stock-yard openings that were specially designed in Europe to keep out Trueman's cows (Slater 1933, 28-29).

The chief justice of Canada West in 1847 was none other than Sir John Beverley Robinson (1791-1863), one of the most eminent personages in the province at that time. He had previously been one of the most prominent members of the province's oligarchy while serving as attorney general and the de facto head of the government in the provincial legislative assembly. Robinson had not yet been knighted in 1847. He was created a Companion of the Order of the Bath in 1850 and First Baronet, of Toronto in 1854. Contrary to the implications of the coachman's harsh response towards Slater in *The Yellow Briar*, it was not in Robinson's character to prompt anyone to intentionally whip a person, whether an adult or a minor, out of the path of his carriage.

[3] For contrasting views of the site in 1847 and 1934, see Guillet 1934, facing 319; 1954, 165.

Fig. 7 – Outer view of one of the gates in the Osgoode Hall fence, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 8 – Inner view of one of the gates in the Osgoode Hall fence, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 9 – Lateral view of one of the gates in the Osgoode Hall fence, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

Fig. 10 – Outer view of one of the gates in the east section of the Osgoode Hall fence, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

It has been argued that a false idea is a real fact[4]. Popular belief in Mitchell's tale that John Trueman's cows were responsible for the origin of the gates in the Osgoode Hall fence created the fact that the public and members of the Ontario legal profession have conserved the tale and propagated it as undisputed history. The modern theory that has been advocated in opposition to Mitchell's account is that the entrance maze gates in the Osgoode Hall fence were Victorian architectural fashion originally designed to facilitate crowd control or riot control to safeguard the courts and the regulator of the legal profession within and had nothing to do with controlling livestock (Honsberger 2004, 31). Acceptance of Mitchell's account nonetheless endures, with some believing it to be true and others conserving it out of sentimentality. In the subtle blending of truth and fiction that *The Yellow Briar* represents, the irony inherent in Mitchell's literary deception is contained within the text: John Trueman is Mitchell's true man amongst fictional characters of the author's invention. Mitchell proffers his real-life man, with a retinue of cows, to promote a fiction told within the pages of Mitchell's world of *The Yellow Briar*. The cow-gate fiction was one of several fictions mixed with elements of fact that the author implemented in his novel in his effort to deceive the public into believing that a work of historical fiction was a work of historical fact. Perhaps if art is truth, might not one of the merits of *The Yellow Briar*, as a work of literary art, be its revelation of truths that are beyond historical facts?[5]

The Law Society of Ontario has been the independent regulator of the legal profession in the province since 17 July 1797. At that time, the province was known as Upper Canada and was one of the British North American provinces, none of which were federated. The Society was then known as the Law Society of Upper Canada. The Society, which was the first statutorily-empowered, self-governing bar in the British Empire (in accordance with the statute *An Act for better regulating the Practice of the Law*, 1797, 37 Geo. III, c. 13, (U.C.) promulgated by the legislature of Upper Canada)[6] held a small exhibition from 2012 to 2017 at Osgoode Hall: *Fact or Fiction: Deciphering the Fence at Osgoode Hall*, where a first printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* was on display, opened to the pages that mention the fence and its cow gates (Figure 11). A descriptive card placed below the book stated "Slater, Patrick. *The Yellow Briar* Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1933". As an appropriate added accent, a small toy of a Holstein cow was humorously placed next to the book. The exhibition showcased descriptive panels, multiple artifacts, including discarded components of the fence, a simplified scale model of the fence, a video, and a section where visitors could post handwritten notes on tags articulating their feelings and impressions with respect to the fence. Referring to *The Yellow Briar*, one of the pertinent questions posed in the Law Society's exhibition was "Did the myth begin with a book?".

The Osgoode Hall fence has survived multiple attempts made by developers, politicians, bureaucrats, and iconoclasts to substantially alter it or remove it. Honsberger (2004) canvassed the history of such attempts up to 2004. The mythology and mystique of the fence, evidently influenced by Mitchell's novel, have been material to efforts to preserve and protect the fence. In 2022, Metrolinx, a Crown agency of the Government of Ontario which manages and in-

[4] The aphorism "a false idea is a real fact" is typically attributed to the French prime minister Edgar Faure (1908-1988) and to the French political theorist Raymond Aron (1905-1983).

[5] The aphorism "art is truth" is typically attributed to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) from Heidegger 1960 [1950].

[6] Members of legal professions outside of Ontario are reminded that the head of the Law Society of Ontario is referred to as the treasurer. The board of directors of the Law Society are known as benchers, who assemble in convocation.

tegrates road and public transport in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, expropriated land at Osgoode Hall for the purpose of constructing public transit infrastructure including a new Osgoode subway station entrance. The project involved removing 11 mature trees from the grounds of Osgoode Hall, with the intention of planting new trees at the conclusion of the construction, and permanently redesigning a part of the fence by temporarily removing it and placing it along new boundaries at the Osgoode Hall site. There was significant concern that the renovated and newly constructed public transit structures would drastically alter and negatively affect the appearance of the grounds surrounding Osgoode Hall. In the case *Law Society of Ontario v. Metrolinx* 2023 ONSC 1169, the Law Society of Ontario unsuccessfully applied to the Ontario Superior Court of Justice for an interlocutory injunction to prevent Metrolinx from continuing with the project pending the resolution of administrative action involving Toronto City Council. The project moved forward.

Fig. 11 – Copy of *The Yellow Briar* on display in the 2012-2017 Law Society of Ontario exhibition at Osgoode Hall *Fact or Fiction: Deciphering the Fence at Osgoode Hall*, image copyright © Law Society of Ontario, used with permission

In another reference to the Ontario legal profession contained in Chapter II of *The Yellow Briar*, Slater speaks of Sir W. Glenholme Falconbridge (1846-1920), who served as the last chief justice of the Court of King's Bench from 1900 until his death (Loudon 1932, 199-200). Slater mentions Falconbridge's notorious interests in fishing and in translating the works of ancient Roman poets, including Catullus (Slater 1933, 29-30). Falconbridge was a member of a family steeped in the law, including in-laws from the greatly respected Moss

family of lawyers and judges. Falconbridge's son, the legal scholar John Delatre Falconbridge (1875-1968), became an innovator of legal education in Ontario and one of the greatest deans of Osgoode Hall Law School.

It could be argued that there are places within the text of *The Yellow Briar* where the face of John Mitchell inadvertently appears from behind the mask of Patrick Slater. This is arguably most evident in passages where aspects of the Ontario legal profession are discussed or where Slater makes references to basic legal concepts or where he shows evidence of classical knowledge, especially an understanding of Latin, the language of specialized legal terminology. It could be argued that the apparent problem is resolved if the reader accepts Slater as an intelligent, observant, thoughtful and literate autodidact whose knowledge derives from experience accumulated over many decades. The voice of Mitchell is most strongly, and possibly even intentionally, heard in the editorial footnotes, where he ostensibly poses as the uncredited editor of the 1924 manuscript of Slater's life, which forms the basis of the published book in 1933. Moreover, the content of the footnotes arguably evidences that it was a lawyer who composed them. Mitchell's use of editorial footnotes in *The Yellow Briar* was an additional means to convince his readers of the authenticity of the work as the autobiography of Slater (Kenneally 2005, 61).

Maintaining tradition historically has been important to the Law Society of Ontario because tradition has been counted as one of the features that define the Ontario bar as a self-governing profession (Wright 1991, 441-443). Although Upper Canada existed from 1791 to 1841, was subsequently redesignated as Canada West of the United Province of Canada from 1841 to 1867, and was renamed the Province of Ontario on 1 July 1867 when the country (Dominion) of Canada was created on that date, the Society continued to respect tradition by steadfastly referring to itself as the Law Society of Upper Canada until the Society amended its name in 2018. The Society's longstanding practice of recording and preserving its traditions has always been a motivating factor in efforts to safeguard the Society's historical treasures, including the famous fence and Osgoode Hall, itself. The Society even opened a small museum to showcase some of its artifacts in May, 1988, but it was eventually discontinued. The museum was said to have been "the first museum in North America dedicated to the history of the legal profession" (Schaeffer 1991, 407). One of the first twentieth-century publications to significantly assemble and prominently discuss the traditions and lore of the Ontario legal profession was a sentimental favourite of the profession *Osgoode Hall: Reminiscences of the Bench and Bar* by James Cleland Hamilton (1836-1907) in 1904. George A. Johnston (1892-1993), chief librarian of the Law Society from 1939 to 1965, authored two early pamphlets in 1947 and 1955 in which he included commentary on Toronto lawyer lore: *The Law Society of Upper Canada* 1797-1947 (1947), and *Osgoode Hall Lore* (1955). Other memorable works on the history of the Ontario legal profession, which have also discussed lawyer lore have been published. Citing the incipient loss of traditional methods of interaction among lawyers, the Honourable Mr. Justice John de Pencier Wright (1940-2020) expressed his concerns in 1991 "[u]nhappily, the mechanisms for the transmission of 'lawyer's lore' seems [sic] to be wasting away" (443).

It could be argued that certain aspects of *The Yellow Briar* constitute expressions of the traditions and lore of the Ontario legal profession and that these aspects, in turn, have accounted for the profession's ongoing interest in conserving the novel and the history of its author. Similarly, for example, the Honourable Mr. Justice William Renwick Riddell (1852-1945), a justice of the Court of Appeal for Ontario from 1925 until his death, was one of the greatest chroniclers of the early history of the Ontario legal profession, having published a significant number of papers and books on the subject. The sheer volume of his scholarly production and the breadth and scope of his research resulted in the profession recognizing him as an impor-

tant part of its history and promoting his own history within the profession. In addition to his scholarly interests, he was known for his eccentricities as a judge (Moore 2014). An editorial footnote contained in *The Yellow Briar* refers to the Riddell Canadian Library, which is a sizeable collection of books stored at Osgoode Hall that were previously owned by Justice Riddell, primarily on subjects falling within the scope of Canadiana (Slater 1933, 71). Because of its location, the collection is mainly known only to Ontario lawyers, judges and legal academics. More particularly, it is typically the case that only those members of the Ontario legal profession who are aware of the history of Justice Riddell know of the existence of the collection (McCormick 1972, 64-67). Attentive readers of *The Yellow Briar* in 1933 consequently could have deduced that it was more likely than not that a lawyer had composed the footnotes, even if they had believed that the novel had been an historical autobiography authored by Slater.

3. The Downfall of John Mitchell in Relation to the History of the Ontario Legal Profession

Toronto was a troubled city when *The Yellow Briar* had been published in 1933. In addition to being mired in the misery of the Great Depression, the city had been traumatized by the Christie Pits Riot, the worst riot in Canadian history, on 16 August 1933. Pro-Nazi hooligans displaying swastikas terrorized a local Jewish baseball team playing in the Christie Pits public park. Italians came to the aid of the Jews, but the antisemites had their own reinforcements. A brawl ensued involving thousands of people and many serious injuries. Fortunately, there were no fatalities[7]. Mitchell endured his own misfortune against the backdrop of such troublous times. Within two years following the publication of *The Yellow Briar*, Mitchell suffered a tragic downfall in relation to the practice of law. Where the novel became especially important to the history of the Ontario legal profession in relation to the Osgoode Hall fence, the case of Mitchell's downfall became infamous in the history of the profession as an urban legend and as a practice management and professional responsibility lesson for generations of lawyers on the importance of properly handling client funds held in trust. Although publication of *The Yellow Briar* did not permanently discontinue following the negative circumstances that overtook its author, the fame that initially had been accorded to the novel receded and it did not attain the status of a ubiquitous classic in Canadian literature. The Ontario legal profession, however, continued to preserve the memory of *The Yellow Briar* and Mitchell. This proved to be crucial to the ongoing survival of the novel and the remembrance of its author.

It could be argued that the Ontario legal profession has historically viewed Mitchell with a mixture of respect and dismay: respect because of his reported intellect, talent, rectitude, and gallantry in the face of adversity. Dismay because every lawyer who has ever heard the story of Mitchell's downfall has almost certainly been dismayed at the lamentable circumstances in which Mitchell placed himself and the ruinous consequences that followed. Mitchell reportedly became burdened by guilt precipitating from an obsessive belief that he had misappropriated client funds and he resolved to publicly accuse himself of financial wrongdoing and turn himself over to police. Mitchell alleged that the amount of money at issue was over $20,000, which was a sizeable quantum in 1935 (Honsberger 1968, 35). The extent to which Mitchell's religious beliefs, morals and values might in any way have contributed to his decision to turn himself over to the authorities and publicly confess his transgressions is beyond the scope of this article, but merits further investigation. It could be argued that Mitchell's use of the pseudonym Patrick

[7] for a complete account of the Christie Pits Riot see Levitt, Shaffir 1987.

Slater may have had the unexpected, ostensible effect of insulating *The Yellow Briar* from the professional misconduct that was associated with the name of John Mitchell. This argument, however, is doubtful. The public had already come to associate Slater with Mitchell and the use of the name Slater did not prevent any of the works that Mitchell subsequently published under that name from failing to attain widespread popularity, longevity or profitability.

The disciplinary decision that the Law Society made with respect to Mitchell's misconduct was virtually inevitable and doubtlessly would be no different if made today. Disbarment, being a revocation of the license to practice law, is an ultimate penalty that the regulator may impose upon a lawyer for professional misconduct and essentially constitutes a dishonourable discharge from the profession. The criminal trial and conviction of John Mitchell by the court and his professional disbarment by the regulator for his mingling of client trust monies with his own funds nonetheless did not culminate in a *damnatio memoriae* against Mitchell. Ontario lawyers, including the regulator, instead of resorting to the overbroad and brutal expedient of purging Mitchell from the collective memory of the profession, denounced Mitchell's professional wrongdoing while, at the same time, sustaining the approval of his record of accomplishments, the most prominent of which was his beloved novel *The Yellow Briar*. The influence of the novel on the history of the Ontario legal profession appeared to have irrevocably bound Mitchell and the profession to each other.

One might wonder if the reported responses of Mitchell's friends, colleagues, creditors, the public and the courts would in any way be different if the identical set of circumstances were to occur today. Although the various published sources appear to have been unanimous in alleging that no one knew Mitchell in a personal or otherwise in-depth manner, it was reported that Ontario lawyers; faculty at Victoria College in the University of Toronto; members of the arts and letters communities; and others who knew Mitchell professionally or reputationally responded by offering him financial and moral assistance. The magistrate who tried him and the prosecutor apparently minimized his crime during the proceedings. Seemingly prefiguring some aspects of the finale of the 1946 American feature film *It's a Wonderful Life* directed by Frank Capra, his creditors reportedly held a party for him after he was released from jail (Honsberger 1968, 35-36). The "comrades-in-arms" psychology of the early twentieth century Ontario legal profession with its quasi-fraternal structure and concomitant reverence for tradition and military service might account for why some expressions of sympathy that had been extended to Mitchell characterized him with words more descriptive of a soldier who had fallen in battle than an accused who had been found guilty of financial wrongdoing (35).

It is arguable that approval from the Methodist community in Toronto may have been implicit in the support that Mitchell received from Victoria College in the University of Toronto. Victoria College was not only his alma mater, it was also the traditionally Methodist college in the University of Toronto. Mitchell's apparent sympathy in favour of Ontario Freemasonry in *The Yellow Briar* potentially raises the peripheral question of whether any Freemasons had expressed reciprocal support for Mitchell during the time of his criminal trial and disbarment. If at least one or more of Mitchell's supporters may have happened to have been members of the Craft, it would be interesting to ascertain whether their support had represented a coordinated Masonic goodwill response to assist Mitchell.

4. The Ontario Legal Profession and Its Accounts of The Yellow Briar

The Ontario legal profession memorably expressed its interest in the history of Mitchell and *The Yellow Briar* in three accounts contained in the vintage *Law Society of Upper Canada Gazette*,

a delightful trade periodical that the Law Society published from 1967 to 1995. Unfortunately, none of the three published accounts in the *Gazette* were supported by any citations of primary or secondary sources. As a trade periodical, the *Gazette* sometimes featured content that was written in the manner of a newspaper or magazine article without citations of source literature.

The first of the *Gazette* accounts "The tragic career of John Mitchell" was originally published in September 1968 by John D. Honsberger (1923-) a Law Society medal recipient and the founder and sole editor of the vintage version of the *Gazette* (1968). Honsberger's account mistakenly stated that *The Yellow Briar* was first published in 1934 (1968, 34). Because the first printing of the novel had been published only two months prior to the end of 1933 with the second printing issued in January 1934, it is possible, on casual inspection, to mistakenly assume that copies of the book from 1934 had been the first ever published (Figure 12). The error may be exacerbated by a lack of awareness of the design features that distinguished the first printing of the novel from subsequent printings. According to Honsberger, Mitchell apparently directed the publisher to produce the novel in large, bold type for the benefit of elderly readers with suboptimal vision (1968, 34-35). But in the first printing of the first edition of the novel and in subsequent printings of the first edition, the font arguably is not especially large or bold, however there is ample spacing between each line of text (Figure 13). Honsberger mentioned that Mitchell practised law in downtown Toronto in the Temple Building, which was a beautiful twelve-storey Romanesque Revival structure, built in 1896 and demolished in 1970 (34). Its address was 62-76 Richmond Street West on the northwest corner of Bay Street and Richmond Street in Toronto's financial district (McKelvey, McKelvey 1984, 116-117). Several impressive Romanesque Revival buildings in Toronto fortunately have been spared demolition over the years and continue to exist. Although Honsberger stated that *The Yellow Briar* is a story of "the early Irish Catholic and Scottish Presbyterian settlers in the beautiful Mono Mills district" (1968, 34) the novel fundamentally concerns Slater's relationship as a young man with an Irish Methodist family in Mono. In support of the argument that *The Yellow Briar* was never relegated to absolute obscurity, Honsberger maintained "[s]ince it was published, *The Yellow Briar* has had a steady sale" (1968, 35). He also noted that "[i]n 1949 it was a selection of The Reprint Society of Canada" (*ibidem*) and that the book was available in a paperback edition at the time of his writing in 1968. He slightly misstated the title of Mitchell's final book *The Settlement of York County* (*ibidem*).

It appears that some of the content of Honsberger's account was drawn from an obituary article "[a]n Outworn Heart: Author Who Jailed Self In Spite of Crown Dies" which appeared in the Toronto newspaper *The Globe and Mail* in 1951 (List 1951) and from the Patrick Slater Memorial Fund public notice, which was known to have appeared in *The Globe and Mail* in 1952 (Anonymous 1952). Honsberger movingly outlined the circumstances of Mitchell's downfall and quoted the self-incriminating letter that Mitchell wrote to authorities in 1935 (1968, 35-36). Honsberger argued that Mitchell's wrongdoing "was more from his incompetence as a bookkeeper than from any attempt at theft" (1968, 35). He referred to "the maze of contradictions and scanty records" (*ibidem*) and the fact that "only two persons whose claims were small could be found to testify against him" (*ibidem*).

Honsberger discussed the aftermath of Mitchell's death from illness in 1951, including commentary by the literary nationalist and critic William Arthur Deacon (1890-1977) (*ibidem*) and the memorial work that was undertaken by the first head of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Leonard W. Brockington (1888-1966); the editor, literary critic and historian Lorne Pierce (1890-1961), the journalist John Chancellor Boylen (1884-1969), and R. B. Bond, the trustee of the Patrick Slater Memorial Fund. The climax of Honsberger's account was the royal

visit to Canada from 8 October 1951 to 12 November 1951 of the future Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip where the concluding sentence of Mitchell's novel was incorporated into a radio address to the royal couple: "[h]ere's to the worn-out hearts of those who saw a nation built, and to the proud, fun-loving young hearts that have it in their keeping" (Honsberger 1968, 36-37).

The second of the *Gazette* accounts "Letters: The tragic career of John Mitchell" was originally published in December 1968 in the form of a letter to the editor by Arthur Kelly, a reader of the *Gazette*, who apparently had some first-hand knowledge of Mitchell (1968). Kelly offered his opinions on the geographical locations that inspired the action in *The Yellow Briar*. He identified Mono as being located on the head waters of the Humber River in Ontario and opined that the house that Mitchell occupied was not the Yellow Briar farm in the novel, but "was a short distance north and west of the Village of Inglewood, while Yellow Briar [was] understood to have been slightly east of Mono Mills, which is at the junction of No. 9 highway and the Airport Road (the sixth line east of Hurontario Street, in the Township of Caledon)" (42).

The third of the *Gazette* accounts "John Mitchell (Patrick Slater) 1881-1951" was contained in an article "The contribution to Canadian life by members of the Law Society" that appeared in a special, red hardcover stand-alone commemorative edition of the *Gazette* published in December 1972 that presented the history of the Law Society from 1797 to 1972 (Sedgwick 1972). The account, by Joseph Sedgwick (1898-1981), who briefly served as head of the Law Society from 1962 to 1963[8], began with a statement that Mitchell was born in 1881, however there has been some historical confusion concerning the year of Mitchell's birth (1880, 1881 or 1882?) (1972, 98). Such confusion potentially has been further complicated by the additional error of publishers conflating the name of the character Patrick Slater (born in the early 1800s and died on a date in between 1924 and 1933) with the dates of birth and death of John Mitchell. An example is the 2009 edition of *The Yellow Briar* published by Dundurn Press Limited where the problem appears on the page of the book that lists the Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication data.

Sedgwick notably referred to the 1970 MacMillan of Canada edition of The Yellow Briar and its important introductory essay by Dorothy Bishop on the life of Mitchell (Slater 1970 [1933]). There was some minor confusion where Sedgwick suggested that *The Yellow Briar* is "the only book by which [Mitchell] is remembered" while simultaneously appearing to infer that Mitchell had published literally only "one book" (1972, 98). In their respective *Gazette* contributions, Honsberger and Sedgwick ironically both made errors, although very minor, when quoting the final sentence of *The Yellow Briar*: Honsberger and Sedgwick each omitted a hyphen and Sedgwick also omitted a word and two commas. (Honsberger 1968, 37; Sedgwick 1972, 98).

Sedgwick quoted a short excerpt from Mitchell's 1935 letter of confession and commented briefly on Mitchell's crime: "[u]nfortunately, he mixed his client's money with his own; there were no complaints lodged against him, but his conscience troubled him […]" (*ibidem*). Emphasizing the tragedy of Mitchell's impecunious state as a recluse during the years after his downfall, Sedgwick poignantly asserted that Mitchell's total assets at death amounted to exactly $18.75. Sedgwick had apparently seen Mitchell often during the time that Mitchell had practiced law, but he never came to know him personally. Sedgwick was moved to poetry in his personal recollections of Mitchell and *The Yellow Briar*, invoking the spirit of a stanza from the William Wordsworth work *Thoughts Suggested the Day Following, on the Banks of the Nith, Near the Poet's Residence*, which is a component of the work *Memorials of A Tour in Scotland, 1803*.

[8] For a brief summary of the career of Joseph Sedgwick, see Batten 2005, 8-9.

Rather than quoting the actual verses, Sedgwick appeared to have paraphrased them in what appear to be four verses of his own invention. He may have simply erred in his recollection of the verses, of which there are six, and which are quoted as follows:

> Sweet Mercy! to the gates of Heaven
> This minstrel lead, his sins forgiven;
> The rueful conflict, the heart riven
> With vain endeavour,
> And memory of earth's bitter leaven,
> Effaced forever. (Wordsworth 1854, 239)

Sedgwick wrote the following:

> Sweet Saviour, at the gate of Heaven
> This miscreant take, his sin's forgiven;
> And memory of Earth's bitter leaven,
> Effaced for aye. (Sedgwick 1972, 98)

The Law Society subsequently gathered together all three of the *Gazette* accounts pertaining to Mitchell and *The Yellow Briar* and included them in a double-sized September-December 1991 issue of the *Gazette* that commemorated the 25th anniversary of the founding of the periodical (Honsberger 1991 [1968]; Kelly 1991 [1968]; Sedgwick 1991 [1972]). As a testament to the enduring connection between the Ontario legal profession and *The Yellow Briar* and Mitchell, the Law Society has briefly discussed the novel and its author on its website in an online article *Ontario Lawyer-Writers* where the Society asserted "[p]erhaps the most well-known Ontario lawyer/writer was John Wendell Mitchell". It is arguable that the Ontario legal profession can justifiably claim a majority of the responsibility for the remembrance of *The Yellow Briar* and John Mitchell in Canadian history. The profession has done its part to ensure that neither shall be forgotten.

5. Commentary on the First and Subsequent Editions of The Yellow Briar

The first printing of *The Yellow Briar* in 1933 featured a dust jacket with the title and a floral design all in gold colour (Figure 14). The title on the front cover and spine was also in gold (Figure 15). The publisher's use of gold colour in the first printing of the first edition does not appear to be a widely known fact, and copies of the first printing possibly may be rare. Significant amendments were made to the design of the first edition when the publisher issued the second printing in January 1934 and began issuing further printings thereafter. All gold colour was changed to yellow. The top edge of the text block, which had been coloured yellow in the first printing, remained so. An illustrated map was added on the front and back endpapers that depicted an area surrounding Lake Ontario in 1851 (Figure 16). The endpapers were blank in the first printing. Finally, to enhance the deception that the novel and its characters were non-fiction, a nineteenth-century photograph was added on the inside flap of the dust jacket purporting to depict one of the female characters in the novel when she was six years old[9]. The first printing had no such photograph.

The history of John Mitchell has been recounted over the years in introductions contained

[9] For details on the photograph, see Gnarowski 2009, 10, 13.

in republished editions of *The Yellow Briar*. The 1970 MacMillan of Canada edition of the novel included an introduction with an important biographical account of Mitchell by Dorothy Bishop (Slater 1970 [1933]). The Mitchell Church Preservation Community Group issued a 1994 special printing of the MacMillan edition limited to 500 copies commemorating the 126th year and 1994 Heritage Designation Celebration of the Wesleyan Methodist Mitchell Church in the Town of Mono, Ontario (Slater 1994 [1933]). Mitchell's ancestors donated the land on which the church stands. The most readily available edition, published in 2009 by Dundurn Press Limited as a part of their Voyageur Classics series of Canadian literature, contains an introduction by Michael Gnarowski (Slater 2009 [1933]).

Mitchell published five books in total. His first book was *The Kingdom of America, the Canadian Creed* published in 1930. Following *The Yellow Briar* and his legal troubles, he published in 1937 a Patrick Slater book of poetry *The Water Drinker*. In 1938 came another Patrick Slater novel *Robert Harding: A Story of Every Day Life*. At the time of his death in 1951, Mitchell was writing an historical work on early Toronto *The Settlement of York County* (1951). The manuscript was partially rewritten by its editor and published. Because the year of publication was not indicated in the book, various sources have attributed a publication date of either 1950, 1951 or 1952. The manuscript is held in the collections of the University of Toronto Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (1951).

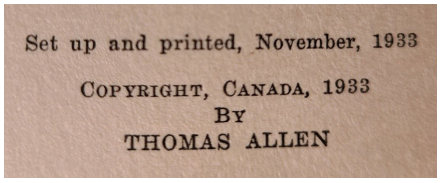
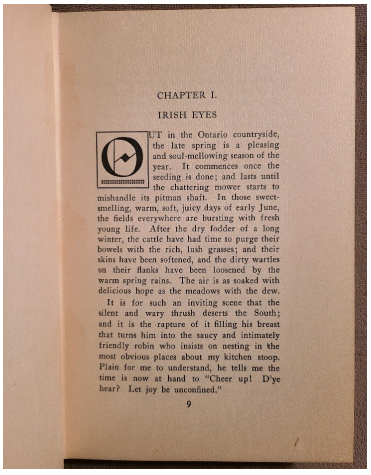


Fig. 12 – Publication date of the first printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* from November 1933, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1933) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci


CHAPTER I.

IRISH EYES

OUT in the Ontario countryside, the late spring is a pleasing and soul-mellowing season of the year. It commences once the seeding is done; and lasts until the chattering mower starts to mishandle its pitman shaft. In those sweet-smelling, warm, soft, juicy days of early June, the fields everywhere are bursting with fresh young life. After the dry fodder of a long winter, the cattle have had time to purge their bowels with the rich, lush grasses; and their skins have been softened, and the dirty wartles on their flanks have been loosened by the warm spring rains. The air is as soaked with delicious hope as the meadows with the dew.

It is for such an inviting scene that the silent and wary thrush deserts the South; and it is the rapture of it filling his breast that turns him into the saucy and intimately friendly robin who insists on nesting in the most obvious places about my kitchen stoop. Plain for me to understand, he tells me the time is now at hand to "Cheer up! D'ye hear? Let joy be unconfined."

9

Fig. 13 – First printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* showing the size of the font and the spacing between the lines of text reportedly for the benefit of elderly readers with suboptimal vision, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci

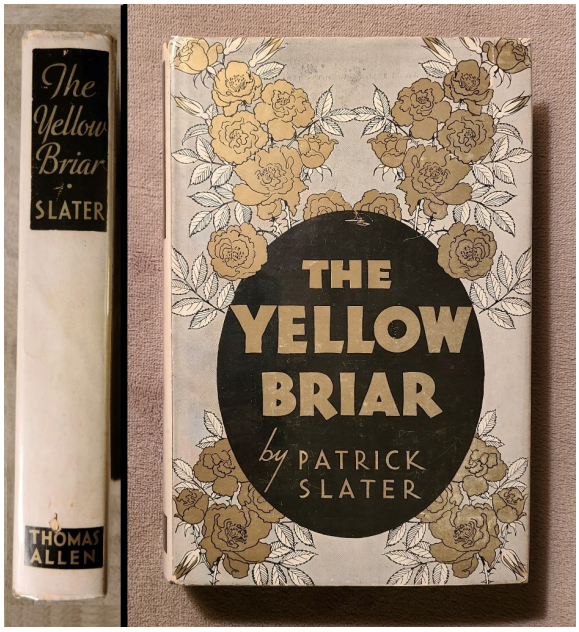


Fig. 14 – First printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* from November 1933 with the gold lettering and gold floral design on the dust jacket, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1933) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci

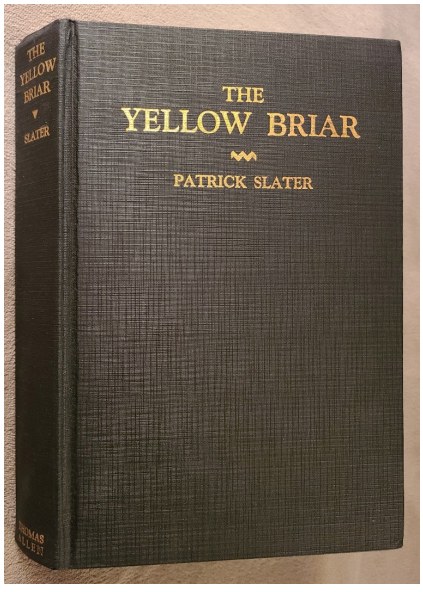


Fig. 15 – First printing of the first edition of *The Yellow Briar* from November 1933 with the gold lettering on the front cover and spine, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1933) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci

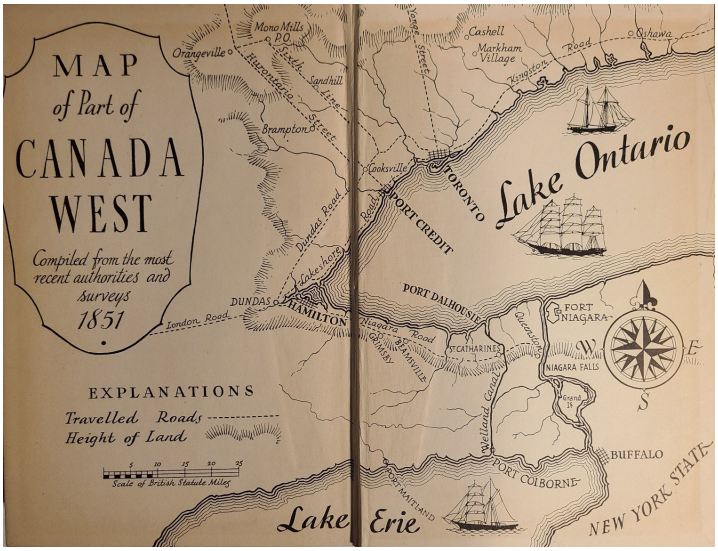


Fig. 16 – Third printing of the first edition of The Yellow Briar from March 1934 with a map of Canada West in 1851 printed on the front and back endpapers, image by Jeffrey M. Minicucci showing material from Slater (1934 [1933]) that was originally copyright © Thomas Allen 1933 but which is now honestly believed to be in the public domain in accordance with applicable law, the book shown is from the private collection of Jeffrey M. Minicucci

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Voices

STUDI IRLANDESI
A JOURNAL OF IRISH STUDIES

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Making It Strange: Learning Italian from Paolo and Francesca

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I fell in love with the Italian language on my honeymoon, a package holiday (Joe Walsh Tours of blessed memory) to Rimini in July 1979. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I fell in love with Italian through the story of Paolo and Francesca as recounted in Canto V of the *Inferno,* which I first heard about at that time, the story of another less fortunate couple – the young Francesca given in marriage to the crippled Prince Malatesta, lord of Rimini, and her lover Paolo, Malatesta's brother. They were caught in the act by Malatesta and slain on the spot. Dante meets them blown on a terrible wind around the second circle and gives Francesca some of the most beautiful poetry in the *Inferno,* in particular about the pain of loving someone and seeing them suffer. "Love", she says, "has conducted us to one death".

It was fortuitous that the *Inferno* was the only book in Italian we could find on our return to Cork – a parallel text, a Temple Classics edition originally published in 1805 by J.M. Dent and translated by Henry Francis Cary, a clergyman who also translated Aristophanes and much else. It was a piece of good fortune because a love for Dante has remained with me ever since and permeated much of my writing in both prose and poetry. I subsequently discovered that Borges had used the same edition which gave me considerable satisfaction.

The style of the translation is very much of its time, a bit awkward by our lights, a bit stilted, but faithful to the original; and in many ways it is useful for learning purposes to have to work with a version that is not in contemporary vernacular. The danger is that an easy fluid translation makes it all seem too natural, not strange enough, not challenging, whereas in fact Dante is not a contemporary in any sense and it takes an enormous effort to inhabit even a fraction of his thought processes, even for someone born into an Irish Catholic background where Hell and its pains were threatened daily. It *should* be strange to read him with today's world at our back.

And this is probably the most fundamental thing about learning a language, that its strangeness casts our own worldview

into a sharper light. Everyone accepts that learning a new language is to enter a new world, even to become a different person in that language. But we also learn about ourselves in the reflections, in the shadows cast by how a different syntax processes our reality, in the actual impossibility of being the same in different words. A new language makes us strange to ourselves in an interesting and productive sense.

Of course, Italian was not my first learned language. Almost all Irish people study Irish from four or five years of age and experts say the acquisition of a third language is easier than a second. The neural pathways exist, though at times they need rerouting, and syntax and vocabulary search each other out. Or so it seems to me. When I came to learn Italian I found myself constantly making links – with Irish grammar, with English vocabulary from Early Modern to the present day and, to a lesser extent, with the Latin I learned at school.

That said, I have learned Italian imperfectly and will probably never fully master what seems to come naturally to Italians, things like the gender of nouns or the various usages of 'ci'. Perhaps this is inevitable or perhaps it's my fault. But one memory sustained me from the very beginning. That first time in Rimini forty-six years ago our entire knowledge of Italian came from a Berlitz phrase book; we were a walking linguistic disaster but the generosity and openness of people like the local bar owner, the man who rented the pedalòs or the stall holders in the market convinced us that Italian was a language that welcomed learners, that pardoned mistakes, that led to human interactions and ultimately that would lead us into a new reality. I suppose we fell in love with Italians first, then with Italian poetry and finally with Italian itself.

Writings

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Paper Boats[1]

I fold my poems into boats
to hazard your shore,
an origami flotilla
bobbing towards the occupation.

Between the white creases
some words are legible:
'resistance' on the sail,
'defiance' on the flag.

And when the gunships
spot the word 'freedom'
rushing the coast,
their shells will rupture my fleet.

The boats will sink and then rise,
or erupt skywards and then fall,
scattering rags of verse
across the water.

But I've folded some so carefully
that their blind sides
might float
past security.

Perhaps one will beach
where children have played
and you will spread it
like a map in your hands

[1] *Paper Boats* was inspired by the Gaza Freedom Flotilla project and written for the Sendiana conference, a celebration of Palestine at Liberty Hall, Dublin in May 2018. It was first published in the *Sendiana solidarity broadsheet* which I edited for the conference to fundraise for Gaza Action Ireland. I'm a member of PalFest Ireland, Irish artists supporting Palestine, and the poem is also about the small acts of solidarity that sometimes feel futile but which, taken together, might bring some sense of hope and witness. The poem will be published in October 2025 in my collection *Storm Damage* (Dedalus Press).

and know that someone
whose rage is not brave
will fold poems into boats
to open on your sands

till on every shore
are hands folding boats
and your waters are white
with fleets of our hopes.

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Five Poems / Cinque Poesie[1]

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Translated into Italian
by Samuele Grassi
and
Fiorenzo Fantaccini

Introduction

Everything I write comes from the perspective of someone located on a small island in the North Atlantic Ocean. For most of my life I have felt the need and had the luxury of being able to travel widely to other places- whether for work, holidays, adventure, volunteering, activism or in recent years to literary events and festivals. This is something vital for me because it helps give oxygen and space to what I might think, feel and write about. Otherwise, I think despite the universality that other Irish writers have managed to wrest from the local and parochial I personally would struggle to create. Even when I write directly and very specifically about Ireland – such as in Cherishing for Beginners the ability to have this perspective at all was informed by the relationships others in other places have to their state and economic systems and the chance I had to engage with them.

Of course, like anyone interested in what is possible with text and language and oration, I do some of this travelling through reading and some of my political awakening was delivered directly by writers who were (are) both literary and political, Eduardo Galeano, James Baldwin, Arundhati Roy and Adrienne Rich for example are people whose work I keep coming back to again and again to help me understand the current context and the possibilities of relating to it through language.

At the moment my writing consists mostly of quick, fractured and impulsive responses to the chaotic pace of world events. Most of these will probably disappear without trace from the social media they've been shared on and from the memories of the people who have heard me read them at public events. To me this doesn't matter the creative impulse I have right now is to capture the moment or to speak in a public way about – or

against something that is happening. When I look at my recent work – by recent I mean the last month or so – what I have written is a "poem" about the way media reports the genocide which is being conducted by the Israeli government in Gaza as if the acts had no author at all- passive voice genocide, another poem in the shape of a question about what forms of resistance Palestinians are permitted in the face of this onslaught, a poem about trans people and the ridiculous campaign against their ability to exist and live in the world and the one included here "We all sing America now".

The other poems I have chosen here, "How to not see", "Anois Teacht an Earraigh", (translation "now comes the spring") and "Hotel Room" are ones that I have committed to actual print publication in various places and in my mind that gives them a fraction more permanence. "How to not see" is an adventure in Europe, a view of the EU and how we have to be able to not see how it acts and what it is based on to believe in its institutions. "Anois Teacht an Earriagh" – borrows (steals) heavily from a well-known poem by Antoine Ó Raifteiri that children learn in school here in the Irish language. It's a poem of hope and going home and lightening days, and for me writing my version gave me a sense of hope and a way to express the huge outpouring of solidarity that is happening here in Ireland for the Palestinian people. "Hotel Room", is a strange and personal poem of the feeling of disembodiment and anonymity that travel can bring and I've included it here because it seemed to me that its meeker, doubt- filled author has something of value to say to the more declarative, and sure of themselves author of the other poems.

"Anois Teacht an Earraigh"

(after Antoine Ó Raifteiri)

Last night in Stoneybatter
I hung a Keffiyeh out for Brigid
and as luck would have it
late that evening she came upon it
and said her words above it
and of what little magic
the world has left in it, I know
Brigid took a handful of the strongest
the most love filled and resilient
and she gathered it and sent it
to those picking through the rubble of their lives
in Khan Younis, in Deir al Balah,
in Rafah, in Jabalia, in Beit Hanoun
and Beit Lahaya, and in Gaza City's
Shuja'iyya where another poet caught it
and in the face of his own death, defied it
and sent the magic skywards
and watched it almost imperceptibly
descend on every living entity and caress
the hearts of those departed
and those who lost them
and I hope against hope
that every person felt it
and they raise their sails
and never settle
until their land is free.

"Anois Teacht an Earraigh"[2]

(al modo di Antoine Ó Raifteiri)

La notte scorsa a Stoneybatter[3]
ho appeso una kefiah per Brigida
e fortuna ha voluto che
tardi quella sera lei l'abbia trovata
e sopra la kefiah abbia pronunciato i suoi incantesimi,
so che di quella piccola magia che il mondo vi ha lasciato
Brigida ha preso una manciata delle più potenti,
la più colma d'amore e resilienza
e l'ha raccolta e inviata
a chi fruga tra le macerie della propria vita
a Khan Younis, Deir al Balah,
Rafah, Jabalia, Beit Hanoun
e Beit Lahaya, e nella Gaza
di Shuja'iyya[4], dove un altro poeta l'ha afferrata
e in faccia alla propria morte, l'ha sfidata
e ha indirizzato al cielo la magia
e l'ha osservata, quasi impercettibile,
scendere su ogni entità vivente e accarezzare
i cuori di chi ci ha lasciato
e di chi ha li ha persi
e spero, contro ogni speranza,
che tutti l'abbiano sentita
e che issino le vele
e non si fermino mai
finché la loro terra non sarà libera. (FF)

"Cherishing for Beginners"

Cherish the meek
cherish the ranchers
cherish the guards
cherish the bankers
cherish the virgins
then ride them and cherish their sisters,
cherish tax exiles and entrepreneurs
cherish the rewards of intergenerational privilege
or if that's too hard for beginners
sure cherish the Rose of Tralee for starters,
cherish the goal and the point and the foul
cherish the priest's dirty sheets
but not the woman who washes them,
don't mention her
or what she might need,
go on though and cherish the IFSC
and its type of laundries —
those ones are fine,

"Amare per principianti"

Amate le persone miti
amate i mandriani
amate i custodi
amate i banchieri
amate le vergini
poi scopatele e amate le loro sorelle,
amate gli evasori fiscali e gli imprenditori
amate i frutti del privilegio tramandato per generazioni
o se per i principianti è troppo faticoso
allora amate la Rosa di Tralee[5] per cominciare,
amate il gol e il punto e il fallo
amate le lenzuola sporche del prete
ma non la donna che le lava,
non parlate di lei
né di ciò che potrebbe servirle
andate avanti lo stesso e amate l'IFSC[6]
e le sue particolari lavanderie —
quelle vanno bene,

they are grand sure.
Cherish Them.
Cherish the men
because they couldn't help it
if the women and girls went and fell pregnant,
cherish the foetus, the heartbeat,
but not the person it's in
then cherish the small graves
in their undisclosed wastelands
cherish the shovels
and boot soles that dug them —
let there be no doubt about it —
Yes We Can!

Cherish the children
if they're from the right class
aren't Travelling people
and are not for god's sake
seeking asylum,
don't forget too that we must
cherish the mute
and cherish the sheepish
but hate those in need,
worship Fr Peter McVerry himself,
go ahead make him an icon
but don't listen to what he's saying
about anything.

Cherish the poor
for how you can use them
to frighten those
who are just one rung above
cherish the people
who learned early and often
what happens to those
with big mouths,
cherish your local TDs,
and the crowd in Listowel
who didn't care that he raped her
sure wasn't he one of their own?
Yea cherish the rapist,
why don't you?

Cherish the golf course
and its sprinklers
sure Irish Water will save us
cherish piece work and internships,
and zero hour contracts
aren't you lucky you have a job at all?
Do you not remember the coffin ships
and are you not grateful?

sono a posto, certo.
Amate tutte queste cose.
Amate gli uomini
perché non potevano farci nulla
se quelle donne e quelle ragazze erano rimaste incinte,
amate il feto, il battito,
ma non chi lo porta dentro
poi amate le piccole tombe
nei terreni abbandonati e senza nome
amate i badili
e le suole degli stivali con cui le hanno scavate —
che non ci sia alcun dubbio —
Noi ce la Faremo!

Amate i bambini
se vengono dalla classe giusta
se non sono Travellers[7]
e se - per amor del cielo -
non chiedono asilo,
non dimenticate neanche che dobbiamo
amare i muti
e amare i timorosi
ma provare odio per coloro che hanno bisogno,
venerate padre Peter McVerry,[8]
avanti, fatene pure un'icona
ma senza ascoltare quello che dice
qualunque cosa sia.

Amate i poveri
perché vi tornano utili
per intimorire chi
sta solo appena un gradino più su
amate le persone
che hanno dovuto imparare presto e
spesso cosa accade
a chi apre troppo la bocca,
amate i vostri deputati[9]
e la folla di Listowel[10]
che se ne fregava che lui l'avesse stuprata
era uno di loro, dopotutto, no?
Eh, sì, amate pure lo stupratore,
perché no?

Amate il campo da golf
e i suoi irrigatori
tanto sarà l'Irish Water[11] a salvarci
amate il lavoro a cottimo e i tirocini non pagati
e i contratti a zero ore
non è comunque una fortuna che tu abbia un lavoro?
Ti sei forse dimenticato delle navi bara che trasportavano i migranti
e non provi della gratitudine?

Yea cherish your own exploitation
cherish the school board,
for our lack of gay teachers,
cherish women's place in the home
then cut their allowances,
sure they don't deserve them
having all of those children
repeat after me — Cherish Privatisation;
and if you don't then you better learn
to cherish the knock on your door
in Jobstown early in the morning.
Consider this a warning.

Cherish Dev and Pearse
and blood sacrifice
but don't mention James Connolly
who said until Ireland's women are free
none of us will be, most of all though
cherish outsourcing and remember
your call is important,
you too will be cherished equally
if you can afford it
as soon as an operator
becomes available
which may well take
another hundred years.

Eh, sì, lo sfruttamento di cui siete vittime
amate il consiglio scolastico
perché ci mancano insegnanti gay,
amate le donne che stanno a casa
poi tagliate loro i sussidi,
di certo non se li meritano
con tutte quelle creature che han messo al mondo
ora ripetete con me – Amate la Privatizzazione;
e se così non fosse allora fate bene a imparare
ad amare il suono di chi bussa alla porta
all'alba di un mattino a Jobstown[12].
Consideratelo un avvertimento.

Amate Dev[13] e Pearse[14]
e il sacrificio di sangue
ma non pronunciate il nome di James Connolly[15]
che disse finché le donne d'Irlanda non saranno libere
non lo saremo neanche noi, ma più di tutto
amate l'esternalizzazione dei servizi e ricordate
che la vostra chiamata è importante,
anche voi sarete amati allo stesso modo
se ve lo potete permettere
non appena un operatore
sarà disponibile
il che potrebbe richiedere
altri cent'anni. (SG)

"Hotel Room"

The four tiny milk cartons
on the tea tray in my latest hotel room
fill me with my favourite type of loneliness,
my old battery radio plays James Taylor
and I can't see the sunset from my window
but I know from the warm glow on the mountains
that it's brilliant and I'm missing it
and that stills my mind and empties it
so I can lie face up on these clean sheets
not waiting for anything.
If a bird flew at my window and stunned itself
I would rescue it so gently,
I'd cup my hands around it so it was safe
and hold it till its frenzied heart slowed,
and when I felt it soften and give way to calmness
I would release it, I would only then free it,
because nothing can fly if it doesn't itself believe in it
and as my small bird flew off
and vanished in the tree line
I would fill up with the lighter breath
of someone who had just that moment

"Camera d'albergo"

I quattro piccoli cartoni del latte
sul vassoio da tè nella mia ultima camera d'albergo
mi riempiono del tipo di solitudine che preferisco,
la vecchia radio a batterie suona James Taylor[16]
e non riesco a vedere il tramonto dalla finestra
ma dal tepore luminoso sui monti so
che è grandioso e io me lo sto perdendo
e ciò placa la mia mente e la rende libera
così posso distendermi supina su queste lenzuola pulite
senza aspettare nulla.
Se un uccello sbattendo contro la mia finestra si stordisse
lo salverei con grande delicatezza,
lo custodirei tre le mie mani per proteggerlo
e lo terrei così finché il suo cuore impazzito non si placa,
e se sentissi che è tranquillo e si è abbandonato alla calma
lo lascerei andare, solo allora lo libererei,
perché niente può volare se non crede di riuscirci
e mentre il mio uccellino vola via
per perdersi tra le fronde degli alberi
mi riempirei del respiro leggero
di chi in quello stesso istante

freed something.
My Counsellor wants me to explain
why I like hotel rooms,
she reminds me of some Newsreader
who doesn't seem to know
that if she didn't show up for work one evening
things would keep on happening —
that everything doesn't always need
to be remarked on.

She says *Tell me how it feels there*
and I laugh, forgetting, that with her
this is the route to more and more questions —
Why? she says *why are you laughing?*
and I say *for me it is self-evident.*
And she says *I don't know*
what you mean there,
And have you noticed
how you've got your arms crossed?
Do you feel defensive?

And I say *I like hotel rooms*
and driving long distances
for me the reasons are self-evident
and she raises one brow at me
in a move that looks practiced
and says *what are you scared of?*
and I think nothing, nothing, nothing
but I wish someone would cup me in their hands
until my heart calmed
until I believed I could do it
and only then release me.

ha liberato qualcosa.
La mia terapeuta vuole che spieghi
perché mi piacciono le camere d'albergo,
mi ricorda una di quelle giornaliste
che sembrano ignorare
che se una sera non si presentassero al lavoro
le cose accadrebbero lo stesso –
che non c'è alcun bisogno
di commentare sempre tutto.

Mi chiede *Dimmi come ci si sente*
e mi viene da ridere, dimentico che, con lei
questo è il modo per farle fare domande su domande –
Perché? mi chiede *perché ridi?*
e io dico *per me è ovvio*
E lei mi dice *non so*
che cosa intendi con ovvio
E comunque ti sei accorta
di aver le braccia incrociate?
Sei sulla difensiva?'

E io le dico che *mi piacciono le camere d'albergo*
e che mi piace guidare a lungo
per me le ragioni sono chiare
e lei mi guarda alzando un sopracciglio
con un gesto che sembra studiato
e mi chiede *di cosa hai paura?*
e io penso di niente, niente, niente
ma vorrei che una persona mi tenesse tra le mani
per farmi placare il cuore
per farmi capire che potrei farcela
e solo allora mi lasciasse andare. (FF)

"How to not see"

For Vicky Donnelly

In Spanish-controlled Cueta I heard
that if you roll yourself up
like an orange and try to dimple your skin
think of pips and segments and citrus
you can get into a fridge truck
then onto a ferry for Europe proper
where you may or may not perish.

In Berlin just off Hannah Arendt Street
curious children made mazes of concrete memorials
and I found myself hoping they'd never get back
to wherever we are, back in Munich
after my tour of Dachau I found
that I'd run out of metaphor and that for a time

"Come non vedere"

Per Vicky Donnelly

A Ceuta[17], sotto controllo spagnolo, ho sentito dire
che se ti raggomitoli su te stesso
come un'arancia e provi a increspare la pelle
pensando a spicchi e semi e agrumi
puoi riuscire a infilarti in un camion frigo
e poi su un traghetto per l'Europa, quella vera,
dove potrai morire o anche no.

A Berlino, accanto alla via intitolata a Hannah Arendt[18]
bambine e bambini creavano labirinti tra le lapidi di cemento
e all'improvviso sperai che non facessero mai ritorno
nel posto da cui noi abbiamo fatto ritorno a Monaco
dopo la visita a Dachau[19] ho scoperto
di essere a corto di metafore e che per una volta

everything was itself, no more or no less
so in order to stop myself from running in terror
from the city's inhabitants I went to the park
where young men surfing the Eisbach
were riding the same wave over and over again
and I stayed there until I remembered
how to not see things.

Yes, I tell you come live in Dublin
where our ministers look at us
in ways that communicate the same contempt
that would see us dismembered with our separate dirty limbs
severed and spewing out of helicopters
if we lived somewhere or somewhen
less visible.

In Ceuta I heard that if you roll yourself up like an orange
and try to dimple your skin, if you really get into it
think of pips and segments and citrus
you can get onto a fridge truck for Europe
where our ministers dream of themselves
mounted on equestrian statues
and where we won't torture you
except when we force you to peel your own skin
and feed on yourself.

tutto era come doveva essere, né più né meno
e così per evitare di fuggire in preda al terrore
dagli abitanti della città andai al parco
dove dei giovani facevano surf sull'Eisbach[20]
cavalcavano sempre la stessa onda
e rimasi lì fin quando non mi tornò in mente
come si fa a non vedere.

Sì, te lo dico: vieni a vivere a Dublino
dove i ministri ci guardano
in modi che ci comunicano lo stesso disprezzo
che ci vorrebbe vedere smembrati con le nostre membra sporche
spezzate e gettate dagli elicotteri
se vivessimo in un altro spazio o in un altro tempo
meno visibile.

A Ceuta ho sentito dire che se ti raggomitoli su te stesso
come un'arancia
e provi a increspare la pelle, se ce la metti proprio tutta
pensando a spicchi e semi e agrumi
puoi riuscire a infilarti in un camion frigo per l'Europa
dove i nostri ministri sognano d'essere
in sella a statue equestri
e dove non ti tortureremo
se non per costringerti a spellarti vivo
e nutrirti della tua stessa carne. (SG)

"We all sing America now"
(after Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes)

I heard America singing the day Lumumba died and it's been background music ever since
the mechanics build drones now and each one intones a petty dirge of power
their Ford faces expressionless no matter what else changes,
the carpenter singing loud as he planes and measures coffins
for the multitudes of Appalachian war- dead sons and daughters,
the mason sings of Mexico and wall building, the longest, best wall you better believe him,
the boatman sings of losing what he thought belonged to him, but what in fact he stole,
the boatman sings the ballad of McDonald's in Guantanamo,
the Latino deckhand hums a tune of torture and how he was the chosen one because
he loved anything to do with water, when he makes landfall, he'll surely be deported
the shoemaker, old now, sings a song of tongues cut in maquiladoras the other side of the border,
of how droves of incarcerated men who can't be allowed laces have ruined the shoe trade
the bare-headed hat maker has PTSD from hearing the panicked desperation
his Afghan fixer sang while hanging one-armed from the airplane
that was getting the hell out of Kabul, since then he hasn't sung at all and won't,
the wood cutter sings the Star-Spangled ballad of Luigi Mangione,
a song of a circular saw, a misplaced arm and a medical debt that can never be paid,
oh opioid ballad of America the wood cutter sings you,
the castrato ploughboy sings morning noon and night of shooting into classrooms and synagogues
because his fifth-grade teacher rebuffed him and nobody listens and now my America,
can't you hear the keening of the MAHA mother with her botox lips
and augmented buttocks as she keeps vigil over the coffin of the children
who were too pure to be vaccinated and who will never know song?
Do you hear those ghost voices? Each one like night expropriating day is stealing
what never belonged to them they're singing hotel-lounge cover versions of an American dream
that was dangled before them but kept beyond reach, they're singing their inability
to forge lives with dignity as minor chord glitches in their free-speech, free market symphony
and even the good people, or those who think themselves so
are singing genocide as the least of two evils, not evil incarnate,
they are singing genocide as the least of two evils, do you hear me?
oh America what have you done, these photos of asphyxiated babies won't ever leave you
and the worst of all people are singing their hymns to techno-futurist eugenics
and lunar escape routes and calling it freedom, oh evolution; survival of the bitterest,
they are making everyone sing America now, oh America! why?
when there are so many other types of music?

"Adesso cantiamo tutti l'America"
(al modo di Walt Whitman e Langston Hughes)

Ho sentito l'America intera cantare il giorno in cui è morto Lumumba[21] e da allora quella è rimasta la musica di sottofondo
adesso i meccanici costruiscono droni e ognuno intona un'insignificante marcia funebre
i loro volti alla Ford[22] sempre inespressivi, a prescindere da ogni cambiamento,
il falegname canta a voce alta mentre prende le misure per costruire le bare
per le moltitudini di figli e figlie degli Appalachi morti in guerra,
il muratore canta il Messico e la costruzione del muro, il muro più lungo, il migliore: faresti meglio a credergli,
il barcaiolo[23] canta la perdita di ciò che pensava fosse suo, ma a dire il vero aveva rubato,
il barcaiolo canta la ballata di McDonald a Guantanamo[24,]
il mozzo, latinoamericano, mormora una melodia di tortura e di come fosse lui il prescelto perché
adorava tutto ciò che aveva a che fare con l'acqua, e quando toccherà terra di sicuro lo deporteranno
il calzolaio, ormai anziano, canta una canzone sul taglio della lingua nelle maquiladoras[25] dall'altra parte del confine,
su come delle orde di carcerati a cui è proibito avere stringhe abbiano rovinato il commercio delle scarpe
il cappellaio calvo, affetto da DPTS[26], dopo aver sentito il terrore disperato
nel canto del suo aiutante afgano appeso per un braccio a un aeroplano
scappando da Kabul, perché da quel momento non ha più cantato e non lo farà,
il taglialegna canta l'inno degli Stati Uniti di Luigi Mangione[27],
una canzone su una sega circolare, un braccio mal posizionato e un debito impossibile da estinguere,
ah, ballata oppioide sull'America, il taglialegna canta le tue note,
il giovane contadino castrato canta mattina giorno e sera le sparatorie nelle scuole e nelle sinagoghe
perché in quinta elementare l'insegnante lo respinse e nessuno lo ascolta e adesso America mia,
senti anche tu i lamenti della mamma sostenitrice del MAHA[28] con le labbra botulinate
e i glutei gonfiati mentre veglia sulla tomba delle figlie e dei figli
troppo puri per essere vaccinati e che non conosceranno più nessuna canzone?
Le senti queste voci di fantasmi? Ognuna di loro, come la notte che si impossessa del giorno, fa razzia
di ciò che non gli è mai appartenuto, canta delle cover da piano bar di quel sogno americano
che gli sventolarono in faccia per poi portarglielo via dove non posson raggiungerlo, firmando la loro incapacità
di creare vite con dignità come fossero errori in un accordo minore della loro sinfonia sulla libertà di parola e sul libero mercato
e anche la brava gente, o quella che pensa di esserlo
canta il genocidio come il minore di due mali, non come il male assoluto,
canta il genocidio come del minore di due mali, mi hai sentito?
ah, America, che cosa hai combinato, queste foto di bambine e bambini asfissiati non ti abbandoneranno mai più
e quel che è peggio è che la gente canta inni all'eugenetica tecno-futurista
e alle rotte di fuga lunare e la chiamano libertà, anzi evoluzione: la sopravvivenza dei più spietati,
adesso stanno facendo cantare a tutti l'America, ah l'America! perché?
quando ci sono così tanti tipi di musica? (SG)

[1] *Translators' note / Nota dei traduttori*: All acts of translations are collaborative acts, involving languages, people, affects. We (FF and SG) want to thank Sarah Clancy for sharing her poetry, Arianna Antonielli and William Wall for their generous input on the Italian translations. / Tutte le traduzioni sono atti collaborativi che coinvolgono lingue, persone e affetti. Vogliamo ringraziare Sarah Clancy per le sue poesie, Arianna Antonielli e William Wall per il loro generoso contributo alla traduzione italiana.

[2] "Now comes the spring / Ora giunge la primavera". È il primo verso della poesia "Cill Aodáin" di Antoine Ó Raifteiri (1779-1835), poeta cieco e musicante, considerato l'ultimo dei bardi erranti. Questa poesia verrà pubblicata da Arlen House nell'antologia *Washing Winsows V – Women Revolutionise Irish Poetry 1975-2025.*

[3] Quartiere di Dublino.

[4] Si tratta di zone e quartieri della città di Gaza.

[5] "The Rose of Tralee" è un concorso di bellezza che si tiene annualmente a Tralee in Co. Kerry. È anche il titolo di una ballata scritta da William Pembroke Mulchinock (1820-1864) dedicata a Mary la sua amata.

[6] Abbreviazione di Irish Financial Service Centre, un grande polo direzionale nel centro di Dublino creato negli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso nei Docklands, un'area dismessa della capitale. Il termine indica anche, più genericamente, i servizi finanziari irlandesi.

[7] Gli zingari d'Irlanda.

[8] Peter Mc Verry (1944-), sacerdote cattolico irlandese, fondatore del Peter McVerry Trust, organizzazione che aiuta i senzatetto.

[9] TD è l'abbreviazione di Teachta Dála, la denominazione ufficiale dei membri della camera bassa (Dáil Éireann) del Parlamento irlandese (Oireachtas). L'espressione significa "deputato del Dáil".

[10] Cittadina in Co. Kerry.

[11] La Società dei Servizi idrici irlandesi.

[12] Sobborgo di Dublino.

[13] Éamon de Valera (1882-1975), politico e patriota, tre volte Primo ministro del paese e Presidente della Repubblica dal 1959 al 1973.

[14] Padraig Henry Pearse (1879-1916), patriota e letterato, fondatore degli Irish Volunteers, che perse la vita durante la Rivolta di Pasqua dell'aprile 1916.

[15] James Connolly (1868-1916) sindacalista e patriota irlandese, giustiziato nel 1916 per aver essere stato uno dei leader della Rivolta di Pasqua.

[16] James Taylor (1948-) cantautore e chitarrista statunitense folk-rock.

[17] Ceuta è una città situata sulla costa mediterranea del Marocco, che però appartiene alla Spagna. Il confine tra Ceuta e il Marocco è recintato e presidiato per evitare l'immigrazione clandestina in Europa.

[18] Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), filosofa, politologa e storica tedesca naturalizzata statunitense. Studiosa del totalitarismo.

[19] A Dachau, in Germania, nel 1933 fu creato da Hitler il primo campo di concentramento nazista.

[20] Fiume artificiale che scorre nel centro di Monaco di Baviera, celebre per la sua Eisbachwelle un'onda stazionaria molto popolare tra i surfisti.

[21] Patrick Lumumba (1925-1961), primo ministro della Repubblica Democratica del Congo nel 1960. Venne giustiziato dai ribelli separatisti del Katanga, probabilmente con la complicità degli Stati Uniti.

[22] La celebre casa automobilistica statunitense.

[23] Il riferimento è a Caronte, il traghettatore dell'Ade.

[24] Guantanamo è una città sulla costa meridionale dell'isola di Cuba, a 20km dalla quale ha sede una base navale statunitense e un centro di detenzione di massima sicurezza.

[25] Le maquiladoras sono stabilimenti produttivi di proprietà straniera presenti in Messico e in America Centrale. Sono strutture che operano in regime di esenzione fiscale e doganale, e sono note per essere centri di duro sfruttamento.

[26] Disturbo Post-Traumatico da Stress.

[27] Luigi Mangione (1998-), è l'uomo accusato di aver ucciso Brian Thompson, CEO di United-Healthcare, la più potente multinazionale sanitaria statunitense.

[28] MAHA "Make America Healthy Again", movimento politico creato da Robert Kennedy Jr., a sostegno di Trump.

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Recensioni / Reviews

Maud Ellmann, Siân White, Vicki Mahaffey (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2021, pp. 504. £180.00. ISBN-13: 978-1474456692.

Irish Modernism has long been a subject of scholarly interest, often centered on canonical figures such as James Joyce and W.B. Yeats. The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism seeks to broaden this focus by exploring the multifaceted nature of Irish Modernism, emphasizing its resistance to various orthodoxies religious, sociopolitical and aesthetic. As the editors' note in their introduction, the volume aims to "reframe and diversify the research" (2) on Irish Modernism, presenting it as a movement characterized by "critical heresies" that challenge established norms. This volume offers an expansive interdisciplinary approach, incorporating contributions from established and emerging scholars, with a particular emphasis on Irish Modernism as an ongoing and evolving discourse rather than a fixed historical moment.

The collection is organized into five thematic sections: "Heresies of Time and Space", "Heresies of Nationalism", "Aesthetic Heresies", "Heresies of Gender and Sexuality", and "Critical Heresies". This structure allows for a comprehensive examination of Irish Modernism from various angles, highlighting its temporal, spatial, and ideological complexities. In "Heresies of Time and Space", Paul Saint-Amour's essay on "Joycean Anachronism" delves into James Joyce's manipulation of temporal structures, illustrating how anachronism serves as a narrative strategy to disrupt linear time and challenge historical narratives. Saint-Amour expertly traces the ways in which Joyce's experiments with time function as a critique of nationalist and imperialist historiographies. Luke Gibbons' contribution, "Temporal Powers: Second Sight, the Future, and Celtic Modernity", examines the concept of second sight in Irish culture, linking it to broader themes of temporality and modernity. Gibbons' work is particularly compelling in its discussion of how Irish folklore intersects with modernist concerns over historical continuity and rupture, suggesting that Irish Modernism operates in a state of perpetual temporal negotiation.

The section on "Heresies of Nationalism" includes Margot Backus's essay, which explores representations of precarious and lost children in Anglophone Irish Modernism, shedding light on themes of identity and national belonging. Backus offers an

incisive reading of texts in which the figure of the lost child operates as an allegory for Irish cultural anxieties about national formation and historical memory. Julieann Veronica Ulin's piece on "Ireland's Philatelic Modernism" offers a unique perspective by analyzing postage stamps as cultural texts that reflect and construct national identity. Ulin's analysis situates philately as a material site where modernist and nationalist narratives converge, demonstrating how small and seemingly mundane objects carry significant ideological weight. The essays in this section effectively challenge monolithic understandings of Irish nationalism, revealing Modernism as a space of ambivalence and contestation rather than outright affirmation or rejection of nationalist ideals.

In "Aesthetic Heresies", Kelly Sullivan discusses the intersection of Irish visual culture and the Arts and Crafts movement, highlighting how Irish artists engaged with and diverged from mainstream aesthetic movements. Sullivan's work convincingly argues that Irish Modernism must be considered beyond the textual, acknowledging the role of visuality and material culture in shaping its development. Catherine Flynn's essay on "Cruiskeen Lawn, Dada and the Blitz" examines the influence of Dadaist aesthetics on Irish literature, particularly in the works of Flann O'Brien. Flynn's essay is particularly illuminating in its exploration of O'Brien's subversive engagement with avant-garde aesthetics, arguing that his playful and irreverent prose reflects an Irish adaptation of European modernist experimentation. The section as a whole complicates the perception of Irish Modernism as predominantly literary, instead of emphasizing its participation in a broader network of transnational aesthetic movements.

The "Heresies of Gender and Sexuality" section features Ed Madden's analysis of the figure of the Irish bachelor, exploring how bachelorhood is portrayed and its implications for understanding masculinity in Irish culture. Madden offers a richly contextualized reading of bachelorhood as both a social construct and a literary trope, revealing how it mediates anxieties about gender, national identity and reproduction. Lauren Rich's essay on the late novels of Molly Keane discusses themes of subversive consumption and the pleasures derived from challenging societal norms. Rich's work is particularly compelling in its examination of how Keane's fiction satirizes and destabilizes traditional gender roles, offering a complex portrait of female agency and resistance within modernist literary forms. This section effectively expands the scope of Irish modernist studies beyond its historically male-dominated canon, foregrounding issues of gender and sexuality as central to the evolution of Irish modernist aesthetics.

Finally, in "Critical Heresies", Seán Kennedy and Joseph Valente's essay on "Degeneration and/as Disability in Beckett's Happy Days" offers a critical examination of how themes of degeneration and disability are interwoven in Samuel Beckett's work, providing insights into his critique of societal and literary conventions. Kennedy and Valente's work aligns Beckett's aesthetics with broader discourses on disability, arguing that his representation of physical and cognitive decline challenges normative conceptions of modernist progress and innovation. The section also includes an essay on censorship and modernist literature, which investigates how Irish writers navigated the repressive legal and cultural mechanisms of twentieth-century Ireland. These contributions illuminate Modernism's fraught relationship with institutional authority, demonstrating how Irish modernists continually redefined their work in response to external constraints.

While the volume is comprehensive in its scope, it could benefit from a more extensive engagement with Irish language-Modernism. The absence of sustained discussion on figures such as Máirtín Ó Cadhain is particularly notable, given his significant contributions to the field. Additionally, while the collection is successful in expanding the scope of Irish Modernism, a more explicit engagement with postcolonial theory would have further deepened its analysis

of modernist nationalism and identity formation. Overall, The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism is a significant contribution to the field, offering fresh perspectives and challenging existing narratives. Its interdisciplinary approach and inclusion of lesser-known works and figures make it a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in Irish literature and modernist studies. This volume not only broadens the critical landscape of Irish modernism but also invites further inquiry into its contested and evolving nature.

Rob Finnigan

David Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modernity. On the Irish Poetry and Modernism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP 2022, pp. 222. Ebook (PDF). £19.99. ISBN: 9781474489829.

"Modernism in Irish poetry […] cannot be understood apart from that history"
(David Lloyd, *Counterpoetics of Modenity*, 2022)

In *Counterpoetics of Modernity: On the Irish Poetry and Modernism* (2022), David Lloyd propone una (ri)lettura della poesia irlandese contemporanea, con particolare riferimento alla produzione modernista e postcoloniale. Riprendendo il concetto di *forced poetics* introdotto nel 2007 da Édouard Glissant, che descrive la tensione tra la necessità di espressione e l'incapacità di realizzarla, Lloyd introduce l'idea secondo cui la poesia modernista in Irlanda non possa essere compresa appieno al di fuori del suo contesto storico. In questa prospettiva, l'autore sottolinea come gli effetti del colonialismo e dell'esperienza "of the violent and disruptive impact of modernization" (1) abbiano imposto condizioni che hanno reso difficile l'espressione poetica autentica nel Paese. Ciò è ulteriormente accentuato dalla mancanza di attenzione da parte della critica nei confronti delle cosiddette *alternative poetries*, ovvero quesi testi poetici che sfidano le convenzioni e le narrazioni dominanti, quali "the divisions between traditionalism and modernism, mainstream and margins, formalism and experiment, that have tended to organize critical approaches to date, usually at the expense of the most vital and innovative work being written in Ireland" (2). Solo di recente, infatti, si è assistito a un più ampio riconoscimento di un corpus poetico "alternativo" caratterizzato da notevoli sperimentazioni formali e linguistiche.

L'obiettivo di Lloyd non è quello di tentare di stabilire "the persistence of a continuous modernist tradition in Irish poetry, to bridge the 'broken line' – in Alex Davis's apt phrase – that leads from the Irish poets of the 1930s who affiliated themselves, if only temporarily, with the radical and iconoclastic energies of European modernism to the contemporary Irish 'neo-avant-garde' (again, in Davis's phrase)" (3), ma piuttosto quello di dare voce all'opera di alcuni poeti irlandesi meno noti con l'intento di considerare le loro produzioni come espressione di una "contropoetica della modernità".

Il volume si articola in due parti intitolate rispettivamente "Specters of Modernity" e "New Things that Have Happened". Insieme, le due sezioni delineano quella che l'autore definisce "counterpoetics of modernity" che attraversa la poesia irlandese, ovvero una modalità poetica che, confrontandosi con le eredità storiche e le condizioni materiali della modernizzazione coloniale, si reinventa per interrogare e contrastare le sue dinamiche oppressive. I due titoli lungo cui si sviluppa la riflessione dell'autore costituiscono una sorta di coppia dialettica che riproduce la tensione costante tra passato e presente.

La prima parte, infatti, pone l'attenzione sugli "spettri" della modernità coloniale che, secondo Lloyd, permea costantemente la poesia irlandese. I quattro capitoli che compongono questa parte (rispettivamente "Overture. The Burden of Discontinuity: Criticism"; "Colonialism, and Anti-Modernism"; "Crossing Over: On James Clarence Mangan's 'Spirits Everywhere' "; "1913-1916-1919: Yeats's Dates"; " 'To Live Surrounded by a White Song', or, The Sublimation of Race in Experiment: On the Margins of Susan Howe"), infatti, propongono l'analisi di alcune delle opere di autori celebri, quali James Clarence Mangan, W.B. Yeats e Susan Howe, mettono in luce come il passato non scompaia mai del tutto, e come questo informi e interroghi le pratiche poetiche contemporanee. In particolare, qui Lloyd esplora i concetti di discontinuità, colonialismo e memoria, costruendo il fondamento dell'idea di "contropoetica della modernità" e proponendo una rilettura delle fratture storiche hanno segnato – e continuano a segnare – la poesia irlandese.

La seconda parte si allontana invece dalla tradizione per esplorare e dare spazio alle nuove forme di poesia contemporanea. Questa, costituita da tre capitoli (ovvero, "New Things That Have Happened: Forms of Irish Poetry"; "Intricate Walking: Scully's *Livelihood*"; "Rome's Wreck: Joyce's Baroque"), pone il focus su poeti contemporanei, quali Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Maurice Scully e Trevor Joyce, il cui lavoro rappresenta una risposta formale alle condizioni materiali e storiche dell'Irlanda del tardo Novecento. A spiccare in questa sezione è l'analisi delle opere di Maurice Scully e Trevor Joyce, poeti che fanno della disarticolazione formale una risposta alla "necessità" culturale – e commerciale – della poesia "ben fatta". Questa parte del volume, infatti, sembra avere lo scopo di dimostrare come le forme poetiche siano non semplicemente mezzi espressivi, ma veri e propri strumenti critici, capaci di interrogare la soggettività, la memoria e il linguaggio in un contesto di continue trasformazioni sociali.

La riflessione di Lloyd si conclude con un capitolo dedicato a *Optic Verve* di Catherine Walsh intitolato "Conduits for the Humane: Walsh's *Optic Verve*". Qui l'opera dell'autrice viene proposta come esempio emblematico di "produzione contropoetica". Lloyd, infatti, si concentra sulle condizioni materiali e psicologiche in cui il testo nasce e si sviluppa, ovvero uno uno spazio domestico disordinato in cui la scrittura, in continuo confronto con la frammentazione del sé, si fa espressione di resistenza.

I nove capitoli, incluse introduzione e conclusione, che compongono il volume di Lloyd non si limitano a tracciare una storia della poesia irlandese, o a offrire semplici letture testuali. Al contrario, Lloyd colloca la poesia in un dialogo costante con il contesto storico-culturale dell'Irlanda postcoloniale, proponendo un paradigma interpretativo in cui la poesia stessa si configura come pratica critica della modernità. Attraverso una riflessione che si snoda tra "passato" e "presente", infatti, Lloyd mira a dimostrare come le *alternative poetries* non costituiscano un elemento marginale, bensì vere e proprie forme di "controrarrazione", di "contropoetica" che pongono il proprio focus su temi fondamentali, quali l'identità, la lingua e la storia.

Alessia Gentile

Edwina Keown, Carol Taaffe (eds), *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Mein-New York-Wien, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. viii+252. £60.00. ISBN: 978-3-0353-0072-7.

Modernism in Ireland, while often dominated in discussions by figures such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, has been shaped by a complex interplay of national and international influences. *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, edited by Edwina Keown and Carol

Taaffe, seeks to expand and complicate traditional narratives by exploring a range of voices, movements and contexts. As the editors' state in their introduction, this volume "examines how Modernism was received and engaged with in Ireland, while also considering how Irish writers contributed to the broader European and Anglo-American modernist movements" (1). This interdisciplinary collection brings together established and emerging scholars to offer fresh perspectives on the emergence, reception, and legacy of Irish Modernism.

The book is divided into four thematic sections: "Origins and Contexts", "Border Crossings: Ireland and Europe", "Catholic Modernism in Ireland", and "Evolving Irish Modernism: Literature, Visual Arts, Architecture". This structure enables a wide-ranging exploration of Irish Modernism, from its early stirrings in the late nineteenth century to its intersections with religion, politics, and the arts.

The first section, "Origins and Contexts", provides historical and theoretical frameworks for understanding Irish Modernism. Jean-Michel Rabaté's opening chapter, "Dublin, 1913: Irish Modernism and International Modernism", deftly situates Irish Modernism within global literary currents, illustrating how Ireland was both a participant in and a site of resistance to modernist experimentation. Jim Shanahan's discussion of Frank Mathew's *The Wood of the Brambles* (1896) is a highlight, as it reassesses Mathew's work as an overlooked precursor to Irish modernist fiction, one that complicates conventional genealogies of the Irish novel.

In the second section, "Border Crossings: Ireland and Europe", the essays consider how Irish writers engaged with European Modernism. Michael McAteer's chapter on Expressionism in the works of W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey and Frank McGuinness traces the influence of German modernist aesthetics on Irish theatre. Karen E. Brown's essay on Thomas MacGreevy explores the interplay between modernist poetry and visual art, particularly the painterly qualities of MacGreevy's verse. This section convincingly demonstrates that Irish Modernism was far from insular; rather, it was shaped by and contributed to broader transnational exchanges.

The third section, "Catholic Modernism in Ireland", examines the intersection of religious thought and literary Modernism. Rhiannon Moss's chapter on Thomas MacGreevy and T.S. Eliot provides a fascinating account of how Catholicism informed their respective modernist aesthetics. Meanwhile, Jennika Baines's discussion of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) reframes Flann O'Brien's work as deeply engaged with Catholic themes, challenging readings that emphasize its irreverence at the expense of its theological concerns. This section offers a fresh lens through which to reconsider the complex relationship between Irish Modernism and religious identity.

The final section, "Evolving Irish Modernism: Literature, Visual Arts, Architecture", brings the discussion into the mid-twentieth century. Róisín Kennedy's exploration of the White Stag Group and its impact on Irish art history is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights the experimentalism of a movement often overlooked in literary studies. Ellen Rowley's chapter on 1950s Irish church architecture illustrates the tensions between modernist design and Catholic conservatism, making a strong case for considering architecture as a crucial but understudied facet of Irish Modernism. Edwina Keown's closing essay on Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love* (1955) situates the novel within mid-century debates on Anglo-Irish modernity, demonstrating how Bowen's late fiction reflects Ireland's evolving cultural landscape.

Despite its many strengths, the collection does have some omissions. While the volume succeeds in expanding the canon of Irish Modernism, its focus remains largely on English-language texts. A more sustained engagement with Irish-language Modernism, particularly the work of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, would have further enriched the discussion. Additionally, while some essays address gender dynamics, a more explicit feminist analysis of Irish Modernism would have been welcome. Nevertheless, *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics* is a vital

contribution to modernist studies. Keown and Taaffe have curated a volume that not only deepens our understanding of Irish Modernism, but also challenges us to rethink its boundaries and influences. Scholars of Irish literature, Modernism, and transnational literary studies will find much to admire in this nuanced and engaging collection.

Rob Finnigan

Rosita Copioli, *William Butler Yeats: Omero in Irlanda,* Milano, Edizioni Ares, 2024, pp. 392. €25.00. ISBN: 978-88-9298-372-4.

Il volume si compone di due parti separate da un gruppo di fotografie di Yeats e della sua famiglia oltre che di alcuni personaggi incontrati da Rosita Copioli nel corso delle sue ricerche. La prima parte, di oltre 150 pagine, più che un saggio critico organizzato secondo criteri scientifici, è la storia di un rapporto personale con la figura e l'opera del poeta, che ne giustifica il titolo: "Viaggio in Yeats"; la seconda parte, della stessa lunghezza della prima, contiene sei saggi, già pubblicati in passato come introduzioni a opere di Yeats o in atti di convegno, in parte ritoccati, riadattati o ampliati.

"I saggi di Yeats", scrive Copioli nelle prime pagine del volume, "sono opere d'arte, non l'opera fredda di un letterato: sono attraversamenti di anima, la ricerca di sé stesso" (14). Non si tratta di una semplice osservazione generale strappata a un contesto in cui potrebbe trovare la sua collocazione naturale, ma di una vera e propria dichiarazione di metodo, o anche – se si considera il suo stile di scrittura – quasi di una dichiarazione di poetica. L'adesione all'opera e alla personalità di Yeats della studiosa infatti è totale, sostenuta da un entusiasmo genuino, che la induce talvolta, sul filo dell'analogia, a costruire come un gioco di scatole cinesi, in cui ciascuna delle scatole, per attenerci alla metafora, offre nuove sorprese, curiosità, riflessioni, spunti critici spesso di grande finezza. Inseguendo gli sconfinati interessi di Yeats, ne fa emergere la personalità complessa e profonda in polemica con quanti nel passato lo avevano bollato come approssimativo e superficiale, un cialtrone di "esoterismi infrequentabili" (63). Avendo avuto accesso alla biblioteca personale di Yeats, Copioli lo scopre, al contrario, lettore assiduo di opere e di autori fra i più vari e complessi, fra gli altri, Vico e Croce, Kant, Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead, Spengler, oltre naturalmente agli amati Platone e Plotino. Di costoro, come per opere note e meno note di Yeats, la studiosa offre puntuali sintesi e valutazioni relative alla forma e alla sostanza.

L'autrice adotta un approccio libero e personale che non segue un metodo sistematico di citazione, commento o valutazione di opere o teorie filosofiche. Le sue riflessioni, spesso ampie e articolate, emergono spontaneamente dal richiamo di un nome, un'idea, un'opera o uno scritto, da esperienze personali, come la visita a un luogo, l'incontro con una persona legata alla figura del poeta, oppure dalla lettura di un'opera o di una citazione che suggerisce ulteriori approfondimenti. Questo processo genera un ricco intreccio di riferimenti: un movimento dinamico e caleidoscopico, paragonabile a una collana di cui si sia spezzato il filo, facendo cadere i grani in un vortice affascinante.

L'effetto sul lettore è suggestivo e quasi ipnotico, sebbene possa talvolta rendere meno immediata la comprensione del rapporto tra la digressione e il contesto iniziale, che Copioli riprende sempre con coerenza, anche se può richiedere al lettore di tornare indietro di qualche pagina per orientarsi meglio. Per quanto riguarda Yeats, l'autrice affronta con grande profondità tutta la sua produzione, spaziando dalle raccolte poetiche ai drammi, dagli scritti sul folklore irlandese all'auto-

biografia, dai racconti fino agli intricati scritti esoterico-filosofici. In ogni caso, riesce a metterne in evidenza qualità e limiti con una chiarezza e un acume critico notevoli. Tuttavia, il ricorso frequente a connessioni con altre opere, interventi critici e ricordi personali, pur offrendo spunti di grande interesse, può talvolta disorientare il lettore, che rischia di perdere il filo principale del discorso.

La seconda parte del volume si distingue per stile e contenuti, risultando particolarmente adatta a lettori con una conoscenza approfondita dell'opera di Yeats. I frequenti e intensi riferimenti alle sue opere, non solo poetiche, e le citazioni da testi filosofici, esoterici o critici, presuppongono una familiarità che potrebbe rendere la lettura più impegnativa per chi non possiede tale background. Inoltre, i saggi presentano una struttura indipendente l'uno dall'altro, senza un evidente filo conduttore, il che si riflette nell'ordine in cui sono proposti. L'ultimo saggio, "William Butler Yeats: John O'Leary, The Young Ireland, Maud Gonne, la nascita dell'Eire", per esempio, avrebbe avuto migliore collocazione all'inizio della sezione; ripercorre, infatti, la storia d'Irlanda, quella dell'Ottocento e della prima metà del Novecento; difatti, essendo Yeats il punto costante di riferimento di Rosita Copioli, si sarebbe colto bene il senso dell'osservazionedi T.S. Eliot, secondo il quale: "fu uno dei pochi la cui storia è la storia del proprio tempo, e che fanno parte della coscienza di un'epoca che, senza di loro, non può essere capita" (316). È un capitolo scritto con estrema lucidità e chiarezza e, proprio per questo e per i temi che tratta, sarebbe stato di grande utilità a quanti di Yeats abbiano una conoscenza parziale e avrebbe facilitato la comprensione degli altri saggi, particolarmente "La magia della soglia" e "La soglia del crepuscolo", ripreso parzialmente in "La rosa dell'ombra".

Yeats vi compare come figura dagli smisurati interessi, lontanissimo dall'immagine del lirico o del visionario fuori controllo che persiste nell'immaginario di molti. Al contrario, Yeats è uomo profondamente inserito nel suo tempo, consapevole della funzione dell'intellettuale nella definizione dei meccanismi che orientano il cambiamento e dei percorsi da proporre per un armonico sviluppo della società.

"Acanti dall'Irlanda", originariamente introduzione a *L'artificio dell'eternità. Saggi sull'arte* (Yeats 2015), è particolarmente interessante per la solida argomentazione sul teatro di Yeats, mai arida e spesso sostenuta da un'intensa adesione ai testi, che coinvolge il lettore nell'emozione della studiosa; l'ultima parte del saggio, piuttosto corposa (più di dieci pagine), ci offre molte delle poesie di Yeats, fra le più complesse, nella traduzione della stessa Copioli. Un'impresa magnifica, una traduzione che non scende a compromessi con l'originale, eppure mai risultato di fredda tecnica quanto piuttosto tentativo di riprodurre la tensione psichica, intellettuale ed emozionale, che Yeats ha profuso in ogni verso, in ogni locuzione e perfino in singole parole; merito certamente di una sensibilità linguistica non comune – Copioli è lei stessa poetessa – che le permette di affermare di non aver mai tradotto "se non per passione" (9). Traduzioni si trovano un po' in tutti i saggi, ma particolarmente in "La magia della soglia" e "La rosa dell'ombra".

"Scrivere autobiografie", originariamente un intervento a un convegno organizzato dal Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio e Letterature Moderne e Comparate dell'Università di Torino, poi confluito negli Atti del Convegno stesso dal titolo *Yeats e l'autobiografismo* a cura di Melita Cataldi (1996), molto più breve e partecipato (la stessa Copioli dichiara la sua vicinanza di poetessa all' "immaginazione simbolica e trasfigurante" (225) di Yeats), è di più agevole e gradevole lettura, particolarmente nella parte finale in cui lo stile si fa più lieve, il tono gentile, quasi affettuoso, poetico.

Il volume accoglie infine una bibliografia essenziale che, oltre alle opere di Yeats, presenta un elenco di studi sullo scrittore e un resoconto delle traduzioni italiane di opere critiche o mitopoietiche o narrative di Yeats con l'avvertenza che tali opere finora non sono state tutte tradotte in italiano. Molte delle opere citate in bibliografia sono ampiamente discusse e valutate soprattutto nel corso della prima parte.

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Giuseppe Serpillo

Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment*, New Haven and London, Yale UP, 2022, pp. 670. $85.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-22272-2.

As various critical responses have so far underlined, Joseph Bristow's monumental volume soon catches the eye as a thorough and comprehensive study of the contextual background, documentary evidence and aftermath of the 1895 notorious court processes – the civil libel suit and the two criminal trials – that catalysed Oscar Wilde's downfall.

Published in 2022 in the Yale Law Library Series in Legal History and Reference, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* carries out a detailed and revealing analysis that devotes special attention to the socio-political backdrop and juridical frame of reference relating to Wilde's "gross indecency" case. In an admirable conjunction of meticulous research and incisiveness, this study succeeds in never losing sight of Wilde's personal ordeal while also throwing light on wider collective dynamics and the multiple forces that were then at work, including political manoeuvres. Drawing on an impressive range of sources, the book shores up the extant critical bibliography through archival material extrapolated from databases, folders and collections hosted by the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library (University of California), the British Library, and The National Archives. These findings, mainly consisting in legal transcripts and newspaper articles that resume the threads of the April/May 1895 courtroom exchanges, do prove instrumental in offering a fuller account of one of the bleakest chapters in the modern history of homosexuality. As a result, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* deservedly takes its place on the podium as a major, authoritative reference source compiled by an eminent Wilde scholar of our time.

Other commendable qualities are to be found in Bristow's lucid style, clarity of thought, consistency, and intellectual honesty, the latter being testified by the author's acknowledgment of a palimpsest of pioneering works that constitute significant departure points for a proper reconstruction of the Crown prosecution. Among these are Charles Carrington's *The Trial of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports* (1906), Christopher Sclater Millard's *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* (1912) along with H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1948, 1973) and *Oscar Wilde* (1962), largely borrowing from Millard's attentive survey. Due credit is also given to Merlin Holland's 2003 seminal contribution – *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* and *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde: The First Uncensored Transcript of The Trial of Oscar Wilde vs. John Douglas (Marquess of Queensberry), 1895* – which has unravelled much uncharted territory:

> In many respects, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* serves as a complement to Merlin Holland's *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (2003). Holland's expert volume reproduces the longhand transcription of the exhaustive shorthand reports that Queensberry commissioned during Wilde's libel case. Yet, unlike the document that Holland has edited, there are no comparable shorthand records of the Crown prosecution. As a consequence, my task has been to reconstruct the full complexity of the proceedings from diverse (often highly detailed) printed sources. Through the critical adaptation of these

materials, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* aims to give a much completer account of the trials than those that exist in the four extant editions. (xix)

As suggested by the passage quoted above (and by the whole "Preface" to the volume), Bristow goes to great lengths to both bring his study into dialogue with a worthy genealogy of hypotexts and keep his own trajectory in sharp focus. Indeed, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* can be shown to take us one stage further by focalizing on an as yet hidden reservoir of printed material connected with Wilde's prosecution, from the pretrial hearing to his conviction. Comments, annotations, synopses, and careful editing help the reader assess reports of lawyers' examinations and cross-examinations which newspaper editors occasionally found themselves attenuating or "purging" of explicit sexual references. Bristow makes the most of an extensive coverage by British dailies and weeklies comprising the radical evening paper *The Star*, the Sunday broadsheet *Reynold's Newspaper*, the venomous *News of the World*, the conservative *St. James's Gazette*, as well as scandal sheets like the *Illustrated Police Budget* and the *Illustrated Police News*, among others.

To avoid any confusion, Bristow also makes sure to map his exegetic terrain by tackling a question that is likely to come to mind:

> Readers may rightly question whether late-nineteenth-century newspapers can reliably provide accurate insights into the astonishing courtroom events that made Wilde's name into such a source of both national and international scandal. Under no circumstances can we view such journalism, regardless of how observational and neutral it often appears, as a transparent account of the truth. Each paper had its political predilections, editorial preferences, and reporting practices. Moreover, journalists sometimes made divergent assumptions about the events that unfolded in the courtroom, especially with respect to Wilde's demeanor and state of mind. In any case, all of the press accounts that have been assembled here involved editors and subeditors abbreviating and condensing shorthand records of the proceedings. […] there is a further noticeable aspect of the abundant reports of the trials. Many of them strove, in the face of considerable pressures to exercise discretion, to reveal the more unmentionable aspects of the homosexual acts that various leading witnesses had described. The comparative openness of the journalism of the time arguably came at a moment before the transition to a more moralistic tone that increasingly dominated the press in the later 1890s. (xxiii-xxiv)

The closing remarks are pivotal here, since they tend to debunk the widely held belief that the 1890s' editorials were necessarily punctuated by circumlocutions or glaring omissions about Wilde's intimacies and sexual life. What is more, the courtroom proceedings themselves seem to have been more direct on these matters than commonly thought, to the point that barristers at the Old Bailey did not refrain from using the word "sodomy", a potentially offensive term capable of shaking hearers out of their complacency.

By exploring these less trodden avenues, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* holds open a discursive space that intriguingly lifts the veil on the debatable grounds of Wilde's "mishandled trials" (xxxii). Bristow corroborates his assumption that Wilde suffered a wrongful treatment and a legal injury by raising the contentious issue of the witness statements' reliability and the coercive moral pressure exerted by the Crown on the vulnerable, uneducated young men appearing in the witness box. Of course, the wheels had been first set in motion by the Marquess of Queensberry's attorney at the time of his client's plea of justification. There is also little doubt that sums of money had been paid to at least some of these boys, i.e. Charles Parker, Alfred Wood, and Edward Shelley. Other flaws in the prosecution process concerned the disparity between the time allowed to cross-examinations and the strictures imposed on the defence's perorations.

On the structural level, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* presents the already mentioned "Preface" (xv-xxxii) and an "Introduction" (1-23) aiming to refresh our memory on various topics and circumstances,

from the eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 to the notion of "gross indecency" at large and its connections with the history of the criminalization of sodomy, from the Radical MP Henry Labouchere's accountability to the sexologist Havelock Ellis's theories and the subcultural queer environment in nineteenth-century London. Here, Bristow begins to reconstruct the path leading to the accusations of "sexual criminality" against Wilde and his falling victim to male sex workers' blackmailing, in a grim foreshadowing of the courtroom events' crucible.

Part I, "Oscar Wilde on Trial: Social Background, Cultural Context, Legal Process" (25-151) covers the broad spectrum of Wilde's career, professional goals, and sexual relationships, with a whole section addressing the author's scandalous affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and, as might be expected, the noxious retaliation stirred up by Bosie's father. Functioning as a precious reminder, these pages endeavour to outline an accurate, unbiased historical framework pertaining to both Wilde's private sphere – his ambitions, marriage, ensuing flirtations and ties with young males – and the public arena, from the demimonde of homosexual prostitution and blackmail to the sensational liaison with Bosie, up until the belligerent Marquess of Queensberry's libel and Wilde's decision to sue the nobleman. Noticeably, among the attempts at redressing the balance is a softening of Bosie's stigmatized traits of narcissism, fickleness, and cupidity:

> It is therefore misleading to attribute to the temperamental Douglas the onus of blame for the events that triggered Wilde's decision to sue the volatile Queensberry for criminal libel. Their union, which endured periods of great devotion followed by ones tarnished with saddening betrayals, was more intricate and textured than it might at first appear. Theirs was a busy, adventurous, and luxurious life marked by a great measure of codependency. Together, Douglas and Wilde made rather poor decisions at the same time as they insisted that they could defy the social customs and punitive laws that sought to discipline their desires. As Nicholas Frankel has observed, the moment has come to even out the historical bias against Bosie. (86-87)

Although one hesitates to unconditionally agree with the statement that "[c]entral to Wilde's fascination with Douglas was the young lord's unquestionable talent as a poet" (86), it is admittedly true that "Wilde himself bears a degree of responsibility for the ways in which this deeply negative view of Douglas developed over the years" (87). Generally speaking, all the substantial portions of Part I going into the technicalities, leading figures, and underhand dealings of the libel trial (*Regina v. John Sholto Douglas*), up to the climactic twist of Wilde's arrest, are cogently articulated as well as aptly itemized.

At the core of the book is undoubtedly Part II, "*Regina v. Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor*: A Reconstruction of the Proceedings" (153-400), which systematically digs into the various phases of the three-day pretrial hearing and the subsequent proceedings (6 April-25 May 1895), fruitfully bringing into play the archival treasure that Bristow has been unearthing. While no simple summary or overview would be able to do justice to this multilayered forensic charting, one cannot help underscoring the vivid quality of the narration, which sometimes resembles the scene-shifting sequence in a play script. The interspersed quotations from newspapers further gear our perception towards such a "live streaming" effect, as showcased by the following excerpt:

> Once the court opened its doors at 10.30 a.m., there was a rush to find a seat in a very crowded chamber. The *Echo* calculated that 'there could have been little short of 200 persons who were vainly struggling for admission.' *Reynold's Newspaper* reported that the court 'was so crowded that the ushers had to take chairs in to accommodate the comers.' The journalist also remarked that the court 'was filled with men only,' apart from an unidentified woman 'quietly dressed in black, with close-fitting jacket and small bonnet, slightly relieved with a few violets,' who was 'shown in from the prisoners' entrance, and given a seat immediately behind the prisoners' dock.' Among the crowd was Sir Augustus Harris,

manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, who entered in a fur coat and silk hat. For its part, the *Illustrated Police Budget* took special note of Wilde's entrance: 'About twenty minutes to eleven o'clock the door by which the prisoners enter the Court was opened, and Oscar, hat in hand, and the suede gloves between his fingers, entered the Court. He was conducted by Mr. Bush [the jailer] to the dock at each end of which stood a policeman'. (163)

Needless to say, the effect is graphically intensified by virtue of an array of extracts from the testimony of witnesses and the attorneys' assertions and examinations (with Sir Edward Clarke famously undertaking Wilde's defence, besides Travers Humphreys and Charles Mathews). It is common knowledge that, after more than three hours of deliberation, the jury was to reach a verdict of guilty on all counts except those involving Edward Shelley. As for the judges, Bristow is conscious of how deeply Justice Alfred Wills's harsh attitude has remained engraved in collective memory, and pointedly claims that his lordship's "visible discomfiture […] while presiding over the case made it more than apparent that he harbored deep-seated prejudices against the accused" (305). In this sense, a newspaper's gloss movingly attunes us to the final pronouncement that set the seal on the gruelling trials, in which Wills labelled Wilde's plight as the worst he had ever coped with and passed the severest sentence allowed by the law:

> The *Star* commented on the way in which Justice Wills proceeded to pass sentence: 'Here came another dramatic surprise. The studied fairness of the summing-up had not prepared anybody for the burning, scathing words in which his lordship passed sentence. Seldom have such terms been heard at the Old Bailey, never perhaps addressed to a man of Wilde's antecedents'. (398)

The volume's Part III, "After the Trials" (401-460), closes the circle by dwelling on Wilde's post-trial life, from the disparate responses to his condemnation to the harrowing incarceration periods at Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Reading. Importantly, when getting to grips with the divisive issue of Wilde's merciless banishment, Bristow does not deny *a priori* that there might have been a puppet master behind Her Majesty's legal machinery (to say nothing of the contention that the Crown could have bribed some of the male criminals to testify against the defendant by promising them a pardon):

> Lockwood's headstrong determination to condemn Wilde struck one or two contemporaries as extreme. In 1932, Edward Marjoribanks claimed – without providing any source of authority – that even Carson was startled by Lockwood's tenacity. 'Cannot you let up on the fellow now?' Carson asked Lockwood. 'He has,' Carson added, 'suffered a great deal.' Lockwood's defensive response suggests that there was much more at stake in the Crown prosecution than Wilde's culpable sexual behavior: 'I would,' Lockwood said, 'but we cannot: we dare not: it would at once be said, both in England and abroad, that owing to the names mentioned in Queensberry's letters we were forced to abandon it.' To this day, we do know which 'names' were vulnerable to exposure. Douglas's, Adey's, and (courtesy of Marjoribanks) Lockwood's respective observations are polemical ones that raise the specter of a wholesale government conspiracy. (408)

Part III draws to a close with a section fittingly entitled "Coda: Release", which symbolically projects a ray of light by touching on Wilde's return to life – albeit as an exile and a man reduced to poverty. Travelling between France and Italy, two countries he had been fascinated with since the days of his youth, "Sebastian Melmoth" was to look for another chance in the short span of time left to him, before his passing away on 30 November 1900. Far from making a clean sweep of the hellish prison experience he had gone through, the author developed a sense of civic commitment that led him to write petitions and public letters purporting to bolster an awareness-raising campaign on the inhuman treatment of inmates by the British

penitentiary regime. Furthermore, in parallel with his composition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and in spite of appearing "bleak about his professional career", Wilde "revealed that he was fully engaged with the literary currents of the day" (453).

To be sure, by way of its coda, *Oscar Wilde on Trial* continues to perform the valuable argumentative (and moral) function of rectifying a festering imbalance, in an effort to bring Wilde's all-round human profile markedly to the forefront.

Laura Giovannelli

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Michaela Schrage-Früh (eds), *Well, You Don't Look It! Women Writers in Ireland Reflect on Ageing*, Salmon Poetry, Cliffs of Moher, 2024, pp. 186. €15.00. ISBN: 978-1-915022-60-8.

There is a light touch of disturbing humour in the title of this engaging volume: *Well, You Don't Look It!*. These are the words women who are not that young any more may take as a compliment but also as a statement of their inevitably being "old". This highlights the "double standard" of ageing Susan Sontag identified in 1972 (9), considering how different the process of ageing is for men and women in terms of perception and stereotypes. The Editors emphasize the principle that underlies this issue making reference to Margaret M. Gullette's statement that women are "aged by culture" (2004).

The area of ageing studies has developed considerably from different perspectives in the past decades and in recent years, as a response to an increasingly ageing population worldwide, critical work starting with Kathleen Woodward's *Aging and its Discontents. Freud and other Fictions* (1991), a pioneer of literary gerontology. The field of Irish studies is characterized by the academic work of eminent scholars, such as Heather Ingman, Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill, and Michaela Schrage-Früh, who together with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has edited the present anthology. The volume has thus two outstanding editors. Ní Dhuibhne's resonant and significant voice in contemporary Irish fiction was celebrated by a special issue of the *Irish University Review* last year in recognition of a writing career spanning over nearly five decades. The work of Schrage-Früh is groundbreaking in the area of ageing studies within Irish studies in a variety of publications, for example *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture*, edited together with Cathy McGlynn and Margaret O'Neill, *Ageing Masculinities in Contemporary European and Anglophone Cinema* (2022), and *Ageing Masculinities in Irish Literature and Visual Culture* (2023), both edited with Tony Tracy.

Ní Dhuibhne and Schrage-Frűh have joint forces and effort to realize something different, as, unlike other texts, *Well, You Don't Look It! Women Writers in Ireland Reflect on Ageing* is the product of creativity rather than academic work. It is an anthology of 58 diverse pieces of writing, memoirs, poems, fiction, aiming at giving voice to ageing women and retrieve these voices from marginalization.

The "Introduction" by Michaela Schrage-Früh provides the theoretical framework as well as an account of the research project originating the volume, "Restorying Ageing: Older Women and Life Writing" (2012-2022), funded by the Irish Research Council in partnership with Age & Opportunity (10), the national organization aiming at enabling quality of life while ageing.

Schrage-Früh focuses on the "restorying" process, the pun implying the "restoration" culture somehow imposed on ageing women in order to fit into acceptable social standards, as well as on the storytelling process of exploration of ageing from within (12). The detailed account

of the phases of the project points out the age range of the participants, between 50 and 80, and the creative writing workshop led by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne they took part in (11). The 41 contributors to the anthology are established writers whose work is commissioned or reprinted here, but also women whose first attempts at creative writing took place during the workshop.

Interestingly, there is no particular "chronological, thematic or alphabetical order" (*ibidem*) in which the various pieces are assembled. The editors have chosen to place "the fictional stories at the centre, framed by alternating poems and reflective essays" (*ibidem*). Furthermore, the work of women contributing with more than one item is diluted or interspersed throughout the volume. This strategic organization is consistent with the statement underlying the anthology, "Ageing is a mixed bag" (*ibidem*).

All contributions are quite short, and essays alternate with poems and stories. However, given the high number of texts, it will be virtually impossible to take them all into account in this context, and the necessary selection and exclusion of some of them is not judgemental of relevance, value or significance. The variety of related texts is extensive, each of them giving voice to individual perspectives.

The opening piece by Ann Ingle, "Reflections of an Older Woman", provides an immediate link to the volume's subtitle, *Women Writers in Ireland Reflect on Ageing*. The reflections start with a sharp, brief statement: "I will be 84 in August", which introduces the reader to everyday devices such as a stick, a rollator and earphones, all "part of my ensemble" (13). Health issues related to age are described alongside a required mastectomy, which Ingle calls "another great adventure" (*ibidem*). Being left "cancer free" is also conducive to other forms of freedom, like "wearing earrings that didn't match" (14). This leads to consider the invisibility of elderly women mentioned in Schrage-Frűh's "Introduction", which is also the main concern of Catherine Dunne's piece, appropriately entitled "Invisibility: The New Super Power". She thus puts into words one of the main issues of the anthology, introducing among other things the responsibility and condition of carers within Irish society, wondering "at what age women begin to become invisible" (46). Invisibility is dealt with also in Mary O'Donnell's "The Growing Button", "there are times when I find invisibility a bonus" (20), which interlaces with philosophical issues mentioning Susan Sontag's "Double Standard of Ageing", medical issues, as well as the awareness that "my body is no longer what it was" (*ibidem*). O'Donnell's contribution closes rather polemically on "the ambiguous and weird attitude official Ireland radiates towards the truly vulnerable old" (21).

Fairly obviously, illnesses and ailments are at the centre of most of the essays. Anne Griffin's "Change" sheds light on the change of menopause as well as the onset of coeliac disease later in life, which leads the writer to reflect that "My biggest loss due to illness was my absolute faith in myself" (42).

The impact of the Covid pandemic features in a few essays, as a reminder of a problem that has probably not been explored seriously enough. It is touched briefly in Arja Kajerno's "Recovery Room", in which the 72-year-old protagonist realizes she has undergone major surgery for a mass in her abdomen. The sounds and movements of the oncological ward merge with her feelings, "She thought of the six stages people went through when given bad news. Despair, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance" (72). Her admission to A&E and then immediately to the operating room has not let her any time to elaborate, "All the stages were coming at her like a tsunami" (71). It is while realising her condition that the recent past comes to her mind: "She was seventy-two, called 'vulnerable and elderly' during the pandemic" (*ibidem*). On the other hand, Ailbhe Smyth gives priority to the pandemic in her piece, whose title, "Unseen, Unheard, Untouched. *A View from the Interior*", highlights the experience of isolation and fear that particularly marked the elderly, especially through the absence of touch and of "physical tenderness"

(118). The replacement of real contact with distance meetings can hardly give comfort: "Virtual touch is the ultimate oxymoron, leaving me with an ineffable longing, an ache, a need" (117). Her essay mixes an emotional perspective with statistical data, in particular in relation to the "excess deaths" (118) in nursing and care homes, due to the lack of motivation and stimuli as a consequence of forced isolation. Maria McManus follows these steps not from inside like Smyth but from outside in "What Odds" as a daughter whose mother cannot understand restrictions in usual and everyday actions: "I try to tell her it is not sustainable. That we cannot go in to assist her and do the things that the carers cannot do. Clean. The laundry. Re-stock the fridge and make sure she has food. The pharmacy run. There is no-one to do these things" (172).

Writer and former minister Liz McManus retraces her life's experiences as a student, a mother, a feminist and a politician. In a parallel way, also Ivy Bannister retraces various steps in her life, first at the age of 16, then 36 and 72, this being also the title of her essay, "16, 36, 72". With the passing of time the perspective of age changes and at 72 she wonders "[j]ust how did I get old so fast?" (33). On a similar line, Tricia Cronin writes a "Letter to my 20-year old self ", whose advice follows the steps of her life; notably, half-way through the text she writes "value those who are old" (36) in a sort of reflection on her own ageing.

Advice to a younger self features also in Moyra Donaldson's poem "On Being Asked What Advice I'd Give My Younger Self", whose opening defies all expectations: "Dear younger self – sorry / but I've no advice to offer" (133). The older self is "still muddling through", and the effort is suggested by the irregular pattern of the poem, in which stanzas of different length alternate.

Poetry features conspicuously in the anthology, occasionally writers are present with more than one piece. This is the case of Paula Meehan, for example, whose three poems are here reprinted from previous collections. In the impressive short poem "The Hands" the speaking voice puts away her "young woman's hands" (16) as she has put in a drawer her "young woman's hair", thus accepting ageing and her "old woman's hands". Helena Nolan focuses on the inset of ageing asking "Why are there not one hundred poems about the menopause?" in "One Hundred Poems About The Menopause". The six five-line stanzas and the nearly total absence of punctuation imply the lack of an answer. Bodily features, from "The down-turned mouth, the lips" to "flustered faces", "the knuckles strung / With ropes of shrivelled veins" (23) are accompanied by regular references to poetry, "the mirrored halls of poetry, stanza'd rooms", or "symbols / Metaphor", as a reflection on the ageing body and the need to speak, to put the ageing body into words.

Mary Rafferty presents companion pieces which in a way form a single poem. "What I don't Need" is followed in the subsequent page by "What I Need", in an interplay of texts the writer points out what is superfluous in life, "scarves", "Hand cream / Candles or scented room diffusers" among other things in a long list making the poem (68). The second part – if this is the appropriate expression – is shorter, some lines are just one word, to emphasise what is essential, opening with "Smiles", "Laughter", "Good jokes", "Time". Once again, the limited use of punctuation provides both stream of consciousness and an ethical reflection. The poem is made of a list, closing with "Unfinished business", which leaves the way open to further items in the list of what may be a need in an elderly person's life.

The central section of the volume is made of fiction, with items already published elsewhere which are relevant to the present anthology. A case in point is Evelyn Conlon's "Reasons I Know of What We Are Not Allowed to Speak to Our Grandmother", half-way between a memoir and a short story, disrupting all possible preconceptions about old age and ageing, "Mr. McGrane was particularly interested in how those of us who had grannies living on their own fared on such a busy evening" (75). The grandmother expected to spend a solitary Saturday evening is instead revealed to have fun at the local pub, and she also turns out to be more modern than younger generations as regarding the institution of marriage. The perspective of a young grandchild

having to write a school assignment about the loneliness of elderly people on a Saturday night provides a framework of naivety and spontaneity, with an outward look on the adult world the child in the text is closer to her grandmother than she would ever have expected.

Lia Mills' extract "How long has it been?" is set at a hairdresser's where the visit recalls the past as well as the present of an unpleasant body.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short story "Little Red" from her latest collection of the same title intertwines the isolation of divorce and old age with the use of dating agencies as a possible remedy to invisibility and loneliness. The result is an unexpected visit on a Sunday afternoon from a man who introduces himself as Declan, "Is that Declan the plumber or Declan the electrician or Declan the serial killer?" (102). The reader follows the protagonist's careful steps in trying to cope with the unforeseen as well as with the possible perspectives of her future, aware that she is either doomed to be alone or to run risks to survive.

Old age is an inevitable key stage of life, but this is the first anthology of creative writing on the topic gathering the work of contemporary women writers in Ireland. Dealing provocatively with the invisible, the unspeakable, the untouchable in a society that values youth and beauty, these essays, stories and poems are in a way a celebration of ageing, respectful of its disquieting shades. With insight, humour and a realistic stance Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Michaela Schrage-Frűh lead the readers' steps along the inevitable path of narrative decline, which might be some sort of rebirth.

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Giovanna Tallone

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera (ed.), *Telling Truths: Evelyn Conlon and the Task of Writing*, Peter Lang, Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Mein-New York-Wien, 2023, pp. vii-ix + 202. € 52.95. ISBN: 978-1-180079-481-8.

"Tell the truth, but tell it slant" writes Emily Dickinson, "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind". The poet reflects on how to tell the truth, which should be conveyed slowly and indirectly, approaching it from different angles in order to be grasped. Evelyn Conlon does tell the truth both openly and indirectly, combining realistic outlook, social and political activism and humour to reveal what is hidden.

The volume edited by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera is a long-awaited contribution that fills a gap in the field of Irish critical studies, it pays homage to the resonant voice of a writer who has been working for over four decades and certainly deserves more exhaustive critical attention. It recognizes and celebrates her novels and short stories in individual studies that offer a variety of broad cultural and scientific approaches covering her *oeuvre* as a whole and creating a stimulating ensemble focussing on the complexity of her fiction. The title of the collection of essays underlines Evelyn Conlon's engagement with truth as well as her concern with the "task of writing" and the "endless potentiality of storytelling" (viii), which sheds light on the volume's programmatic stance.

Prefaced by a "Foreword" and an "Introduction", *Telling Truths* is divided into four parts devoted to specific themes, each comprising two or three essays. The compactness and

coherence of the volume is marked by thematic interconnections and critical intersections, which highlight the careful planning and organization on the part of the Editor. The "Coda" provides an interview with the Author held in 2021, which acts as a reflection and a *résumé* of the contents of the volume, and is followed by a detailed bibliography.

In his "Foreword" Michael Cronin points out Conlon's engagement with the unknown and with the "past as a site of possibilities" (vii), as she has retrieved voices and stories that had remained silent or ignored. Making reference to some titles of novels and short story collections, Cronin highlights some of the themes of her fiction, such as justice, discrimination and exclusion, as well as the role of memory. Notably, her formal engagement with different genres, long and short fiction, is revealing of her serious creative perspective in narrative, and making reference to German writer Judith Schlansky Cronin sheds light on the nature of truth telling, thus paving the way to the major concern of the volume.

The Editor's "Introduction" follows this thread in its subtitle, "Nothing but the Truth". After a brief account of Conlon's writing career and publications, Caneda quotes Clair Wills in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* who considers Conlon in connection with "subversive writing" and refers to her as a "radical inheritor of Edna O'Brien" (1). She emphasises Conlon's political consciousness and her awareness of being a writer who is a feminist, capable of disclosing silenced stories with humour (2). With a round-up of significant texts and referring in particular to the novels *Stars in the Daytime* (1989) and *Not the Same Sky* (2013), Caneda observes Conlon's reversal of Joyce's "silence, exile and cunning", in that her voice gives voice to other marginalised and silenced voices. She then introduces the variety of perspectives of the different essays, from feminism to memory and trauma, to narratology or famine studies (3), pointing out the overlaps and cross-talks of the four parts (3), and briefly sums up the volume's contents.

"Writing against the Norm: Representations of Women's Lives" is the title of Part I which comprises three essays that in different ways speak to one another. In " 'Women Behaving Badly' in Evelyn Conlon's Short Fiction", Rebecca Pelan examines Conlon's short stories within the context of the development of feminism in Ireland and the writer's "awareness of the connection between writing and real women's lives" (12), in particular non-conformist women who break the rules (13). Pelan takes into account the changes in Ireland in terms of identity over the past few decades and considers how women's fiction has changed since the 1970s, a transformation of which Evelyn Conlon is a protagonist. Stepping away from traditional female figures that conform to national ideology, in Conlon's predominantly realist mode of writing women challenge "male dominated narratives" (14). In particular Pelan considers Conlon's response to short stories that are part of the canon, "Two Gallants Getting Caught", a rewriting of Joyce's "Two Gallants" from a female perspective in academic surroundings, and "The Last Confession", which recalls Frank O'Connor's "First Confession". If in the former Conlon retrieves women's untold and unwritten stories, in the latter she displays the provocative attitude of a woman breaking the rules to defy the hypocrisy of some members of the Catholic church. Pelan analyses a group of stories, among which "The Park", "My Head is Opening", "Take Scarlet as a Real Colour", "I Deserve a Brandy and Port" to focus on the lives of ordinary women capable of pushing boundaries (28).

Also Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's contribution, "Moving about the Irish Short Story: An Exploration of Evolving Style and Themes in Evelyn Conlon's Fiction", sheds light on the short story form, taking an early and a later story by Conlon as examples, "The Park" and "How Things are with Hanna These Days" respectively in order to analyse thematic and stylistic evolution. Ní Dhuibhne highlights the "political critique and wry and comical voice" (31) that characterise Conlon's fiction, her concern with inequality and injustice and her departure from the general focus on individuals that is typical of short stories. Rather, in "The Park", Conlon deals with

a group, which, according to Ní Dhuibhne, is "rare in the short story" (32). The reaction of a group of activists to the Pope's visit to Ireland is commented upon within the context of the story's inception and choice of tone, thus highlighting Conlon's "departure from the 'national grid' as far as form and theme is concerned" (34). Though different from "The Park" in terms of length (it "is more a novella than a short story", 36), "How Things are with Hanna These Days" focuses again on the individual and on the protagonist's "lonely voice" (37); however, it shares attention to the issue of emigration which marks the subtext of "The Park". While it does not have a political perspective like "The Park", "How Things are with Hanna These Days" has references to racism (40), which is consistent with Conlon's approach to public concerns.

Mobility in terms of transgression, resistance and displacement is at the heart of M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera's essay, "Women's Mobility in Evelyn Conlon's Fiction". In an ideal link to Rebecca Pelan's contribution, also Caneda turns her attention to women who behave badly and who make mobility an act of subversion. Starting from Stephen Greenblatt's dialectic of persistence and change (44), Caneda takes into account the historical and social condition of institutionalised "at-homeness" that characterised women in De Valera's Ireland and its development in narrative across the twentieth century. Movement and mobility are thus considered in the framework of women's reaction to the *status quo* as a *fil rouge* in Conlon's fiction, who "has continued to revise the tensions between traditional values and women's demand for individual freedom" (48). Considering Rose's disruption of rules in *Stars in the Daytime*, Caneda considers the prominence of the theme of travelling in Conlon's later work (50), pointing out how mobility can be both "distressing and liberating" (52). The analysis of "Two Good Times", *Skin of Dreams* (2003), and of the collection *Moving about the Place* (2021) with its emblematic title highlights the "disruptive and constructive aspects of travelling" (53), with a particular attention to the movement of letters, not only in the novel *A Glassful of Letters* (1998), but also in the short stories "Imagine Them", and "Dear You", on Violet Gibson, the woman who attempted on Mussolini's life in 1926. Caneda points out that letters are "containers of buried stories" (57) retrieved from the past, which is a recurring motif in Conlon's fiction.

In Part II, "Writing and Power Relations: The Politics of Language", the issue of language is considered from different perspectives. Seán O'Reilly's essay, "Hurtful Intimacy: Kinds of Knowing in a Pair of Evelyn Conlon's Short Stories", examines Conlon's use of metafictional devices in her short stories "Telling" and "The Reading of It". O'Reilly analyses the setting of both stories in creative writing workshops to consider the politics of language and how the role of point of view disrupts the relationship between writer and reader. O'Reilly's analysis of the stories represents a twist in the critical perception of Conlon's fiction, since by using metafiction she questions "not only the authority of the narrator but the social value of the reader's emotional response" (67).

Marilyn Reizbaum analyses "Two Gallants Getting Caught" *vis-à-vis* Joyce's short story "Two Gallants", pointing out how the story is a "riff" (79) or refrain of Joyce. Exploiting musical metaphors throughout the essay, Reizbaum compares intertextually extracts from the Joycean original and from Conlon's text, commenting textual relationships and palimpsestic layers, especially in the use of puns. The essay is detailed and carefully constructed in its complexity, and intersects linguistic analysis with thematic reflections particularly considering the academic context in which it develops. For example, the theft in "Two Gallants" takes the form of plagiarism (83), and while the story maintains the sexual innuendo (84), the issue of literary authority is also at stake.

Following Reizbaum's essay, Ira Torresi discusses her process of translation into Italian of "Dear You" and "Two Gallants" in her contribution "Translating Evelyn Conlon". An appropriate way to close this section of language, the essay introduces the reader to the challenges

for the translator in her rendering of the original text into Italian. Torresi first describes her first encounter with Conlon, namely with the short story about Violet Gibson "Dear You", claiming that "it is impossible to disentangle objective analysis from subjective experience" (93). She then describes the first obstacle in the translation of the story, that is the title, in which gender is not clear. The characteristics of the Italian language and grammar compared to the "indeterminacy" (95) of "Dear You" require precision in terms of gender, a problem for which she provides several examples, from the formal expression of address (96) to the choice of colloquial expressions (97). Torresi sheds light on the writer's gendered perspective as something the translator is bound to bear in mind, and this adds to the understanding of Conlon's use of language. The second part of the essay is concerned with the translation of "Two Gallants" and the two different perspectives implicit in the texts by Joyce and Conlon respectively (100). Examples of the Italian renditions of the original text gives rise to stimulating reflections. Interestingly, Torresi emphasises the female perspective making reference to the badly-behaved women in Pelan's essay, thus providing a cross-reference within the volume.

History is at the centre of the two essays in Part III, "Writing the Past: History, Memory and Trauma", shedding light on two historical events far from each other in time and space, the journey to Australia of 4,000 Irish girls after the Great Famine and the Monaghan bombing respectively. Margaret Kelleher takes into account *Not the Same Sky* in "Rites of Return: Evelyn Conlon's *Not the Same Sky*", considering the representation of history in the novel alongside the role of memorials. In fact, Conlon's novel intertwines the present of the building of a memorial of the Great Famine with the account of the forced voyage of emigration to Australia of orphan Irish girls sent to the other side of the world to be employed as servants or labourers after surviving the Famine. The novel, and Conlon, cast doubts on what is known and what cannot be known making use of the "particular combination of narrative conventions" (120) defined as historiographic metafiction (118), in which the organisation of data and historical facts are problematized as a form of knowledge (120). The imaginative reconstruction of the girls' forgotten past is for Kelleher a "rite of return", in which Conlon's voice rescues other silenced and ignored voices. Kelleher closes her essay quoting Eavan Boland's famine poem "Quarantine", which aptly concludes her analysis with words Conlon herself might appropriate: "[W]hat they suffered. / How they lived".

The second essay in this section is "*Later On*, Later on, and in Another Country" by Patrick Leech. It follows Kelleher's issue of memorializing considering the collection of writings Conlon was commissioned to write on the Monaghan bombing of 1974, which is by all means a form of memorial. Leech opens his contribution reconstructing the events of May 1974 in Dublin and Monaghan town, when bombs exploded causing a number of victims. His apparently objective and detached tone shifts to a more emotionally charged one when turning to the events that brought to Conlon's involvement in the project of editing a book as a memorial of the events: *Later on: The Monaghan Bombing Memorial Anthology* (2004). Though reluctant at first (130), Conlon, a native of Monaghan, then accepted, spending time listening to the accounts of people who had been present at the time or somehow involved. The essay describes the way in which Conlon worked with local people and refers to Conlon's introduction highlighting the role of "solid sculpture as memorials" and memorials of words – it was "indeed unusual to attempt to have a book play a similar role" (131). The essay highlights the "dialogic and collaborative endeavour" of the book (*ibidem*), whose effort of putting the suffering of the experience into words has a healing power.

The two essays in the final section, Part IV, entitled "Writing and Ethics: Explorations of In/Justice" approach Conlon's fiction from the perspective of social consciousness and justice/injustice. The title of Joseph Bathanti's contribution, "Prisons, Prisoners, the Death Penalty and

Resurrection in *Skin of Dreams* and *A Glassful of Letters*, by Evelyn Conlon" carefully paves the way for his critical intentions. In fact, his analysis of both novels focuses on the sense of justice and injustice that involves law-abiding characters who find themselves at the centre of crucially complex legal situations. Bathanti implicitly evokes the motif of telling truth underlying the volume when he sees the revelation of a "long-buried family secret" (142) at the heart of the novel, whose knowledge shatters the life of Maud, the protagonist. Conlon approaches the truth related to what is generally considered taboo, a "demonized world of pariah" (141). Bathanti then examines the epistolary novel *A Glassful of Letters* which is "in the vein of *Skin of Dreams*" (148), since everyday life and balance are troubled by the intertwining of multiple letters revolving around Portaloise prison. The complexity of the plot and of the letter exchange for Bathanti is a way to "explore escape" (150), which in the end become a form of redemption and/or resurrection (153).

Izabela Curyłło-Klag investigates hauntology in "Ethical Encounters with the Spectral in Evelyn Conlon's Fictions". The critic states that Conlon's novels and stories are full of ghosts, not threatening or malevolent but a source of hope and help. This is highlighted in the provocative opening of her essay, "Ghosts haunt us for a good reason" (155). Following the complex Derridean notion of spectrality, the essay sheds light on various forms of haunting and family secrets in "The Undeathing of Gertrude", "Two Gallants Getting Caught" and *Skin of Dreams*, in which spectres are both "disruptive" and "figures of possibility" (155). In "The Undeathing of Gertrude" the refusal to acknowledge and accept the death of a spouse paves the way for contact and "communion with another world" (156), while the ghost of Joyce haunts "Two Gallants Getting Caught". From this point of view, Curyłło-Klag takes into account both the spectre of a literary predecessor (156) and the figure of the servant girl from *Dubliners* acting as a protection for the protagonist of Conlon's story. In *Skin of Dreams* Maud is haunted by the spectre of the uncle accused and executed of a murder he did not commit (162). This casts a cross-reference to the previous essay from a different perspective.

Telling Truths: Evelyn Conlon and the Task of Writing closes with a "Coda", an interview Paige Reynolds had in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, shortly after the publication of the short story collection *Moving about the Place*. The captivating title, "The Lookout: A Conversation with Evelyn Conlon", emphasises both Conlon's capacity of sharp observation to tell the truth, as well as the rhythm and pace of what is by all means real conversation. It opens with the issue of mobility that characterises the collection in order to focus on issues of Irish identity, as Conlon recounts experiences of being and/or feeling Irish outside Ireland, the contradictions of emigration as experienced in her own family and the experience of emigration as portrayed in *Stars in the Daytime*. The consciousness of the border while growing up is intertwined with the account of how she came to *Later On: The Monaghan Bombing Memorial Anthology*, discussed in Leech's contribution. Here the perspective is from inside, as Conlon recalls moving episodes of people she met while working on the book, the conversations, the need to express repressed feelings, but also the need of privacy in a devastating experience as witnesses or relations to victims. From this the conversation moves to the background of her historical fiction and the awareness that "fiction can tell us (what) history, fact, can't" (176). The detailed account of her visit to the US to gather the information about capital punishment that represents the basis of *Skin of Dreams* closes a full circle with the discussion in the essays. Space is given to her first steps in writing, as she mentions that David Marcus rejected her stories, as well as her development as a feminist and activist. The conversation provides clear insight into her writing technique and her approach to writing and fiction, as she says fiction is "what's happening in the unseen corridors" (176), which reflects her intention of retrieving from silence unspoken stories and unseen paths.

The full bibliography that closes the volume is a precious tool for whoever approaches the work of Evelyn Conlon for the first time and for the scholar interested in having a closer look at the work of an accomplished writer.

The various essays in Caneda's *Telling Truths* are marked by a variety of critical approaches that display the sensitivity and careful critical investigation of the different contributors, who provide an insight into the hues and varieties of Evelyn Conlon's work. The volume is therefore a significant step in the field of studies of Irish women's writing and a welcome contribution that gives voice to a writer capable of giving voice to silent and unheard voices.

Giovanna Tallone

Claire Keegan, *So Late in the Day: Stories of Women and Men*, New York, Grove Press, 2023, pp. 128. $ 20.00. ISBN: 978-0-8021-6085-0.

Already established as an author renowned for her essential prose, rich in detail and tension, Claire Keegan further consolidates her mastery of the short story form with the 2023 collection *So Late in the Day: Stories of Women and Men*. This work exemplifies her ability to condense complex themes into brief narratives, skilfully addressing topics ranging from the imbalances and power dynamics inherent in gender relations to male resentment, societal expectations placed upon women, and the difficulties of communication and conscious introspection. The collection comprises three stories, with the first, which lends its title to the volume, being previously unpublished. The other two, arranged in reverse chronological order, are *The Long and Painful Death*, which had previously appeared in *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and *Antarctica*, which was part of the eponymous collection from 1999.

The title of the collection is programmatic and appears to aim at examining the misunderstandings and emotional conflicts between women and men. However, the perspective adopted throughout the stories is far from neutral or equitable, consistently privileging a female point of view, even when the narrator is male. The reference to the late afternoon, to a time that is almost expired and imbued with a sense of urgency, alludes to the protagonist of the first story – an unremarkable man who reflects on his past choices only when it is already *too late* to alter them. Yet, one might also question whether this is, in fact, a reflection on the state of gender relations in the contemporary world: is it *too late* to create a society free from patriarchal dominance? Or has it become *too late* to begin addressing and correcting the inequalities between women and men? In this regard, the reverse chronological arrangement of the stories could be interpreted not only as a retrospective reflection on the author's stylistic and literary development but also as a commentary on society, which appears to have yet to eradicate the misogyny that continues to corrupt it.

"That was part of the trouble: the fact that she would not listen, and wanted to do a good half of things her own way" (29, italics added). The first story in the collection, *So Late in the Day*, opens with a depiction of Dublin in the height of summer, a scene almost idyllic in its portrayal of freshly cut grass, a clear sky, and a gentle breeze. In stark contrast to this pastoral setting is Cathal, an Irishman confined to an office, staring at the screen of a computer. Keegan's concise prose does not immediately reveal what is amiss, but it begins to offer subtle clues from the outset, starting with Cathal's inadvertent closure of the file he is working on without saving it. The almost clinical repetition of time references draws attention to the temporal emphasis

implied by the title, while simultaneously highlighting a sense of anxiety within the protagonist, for whom the passage of time appears to be a sentence. The reader's first assumption may well be that the man has experienced some form of grief; however, Keegan subverts this expectation, revealing the true nature of Cathal's predicament when, after work, he boards a bus and catches the scent of a pregnant woman. This is the expedient employed by Keegan to introduce the character of Sabine, setting the stage for a flashback that gradually uncovers the gradual and destructive decline of Cathal and Sabine's relationship.

The narrative could be briefly summarised as the story of a man and a woman who meet, decide to marry, but, just before the wedding, the woman makes the sudden and cruel decision to leave her partner. Cathal is left bewildered and disoriented by the abrupt end to their relationship. This, undoubtedly, reflects Cathal's perception of the events, which are characterised throughout by a consistent lack of self-criticism, initiative, and an inability to recognise his own responsibilities. Sabine is introduced as a woman who "seemed at ease in herself but alert to what was around her" (15). However, everything we learn about her is filtered through Cathal's perspective, in which he, perhaps unconsciously, constantly criticises and judges her in ways that show underlying patriarchal assumptions. Two particularly noteworthy issues can be highlighted, on which Cathal seems particularly resentful: money and cooking.

The protagonist exhibits a symptomatic obsession with money, using it as a measure of the love he offers and receives. He complains about her spending more than they can afford, particularly on food, despite his stated appreciation of her cooking. Notably, he never explicitly claims that she asked him for money; instead, it is he who voluntarily offers financial support – though there is little spontaneity in a man who then makes a point of emphasising the six euros spent on cherries. A particularly enlightening episode occurs at the jeweller's, which underscores the awareness of the female character in contrast to the male character's blindness. Cathal almost refuses to pay for the cost of altering the engagement ring, despite, as Sabine points out, having been clearly informed of the additional charge in advance. In retrospect, Cathal appears to feel far more regret for the loss of money than for the loss of Sabine herself. His belief that greater expenditure directly correlates with a bigger expression of love – whether it be the love he gives or the love he expects to receive – betrays a simplistic and outdated perspective on the economic dynamics of relationships. In this view, the man is the provider, and as such, he expects that everything is owed to him in return.

The issue of money emerges even when Sabine, who is unpacking her belongings alone after the move, does not cook, leading them to order takeaway food instead. The prominent focus on the four euros for home delivery further reinforces the stereotypical connection between woman, money, and food in Cathal's mind. While he does not seem particularly bothered by general untidiness, Cathal repeatedly comments on the dirty dishes left by Sabine after cooking, yet he never considers the possibility of washing them himself. Consistently, he expresses satisfaction in not having to wash dishes after ordering food. It is evident that the underlying assumption driving these thoughts is that the woman alone is responsible for cooking and managing food, especially when the man is the one providing the financial support.

The only instance where Cathal exhibits a glimmer of self-reflection manifests when he recalls that it was his mother who consistently prepared meals for the family. In one particular episode, as she approaches the table to eat after serving the others, his brother pulls the chair out from under her, causing her to fall to the floor. The three men of the family – Cathal, his brother, and their father – laugh derisively while the mother silently gathers the broken fragments of her plate. Although Cathal briefly questions who he might have become had his father been a different kind of man, the scene is so deeply unsettling for the reader that this

fleeting moment of hesitation – devoid of any apology or meaningful consequences – fails to elicit even the slightest sense of empathy for a character who has, until this point, given no indication of having critically reflected on gender roles in society. The narrative's exploration of the asymmetry in expectations between women and men in relationships is as evident to the reader as it remains unconscious to Cathal.

In this respect, Cathal embodies a particular archetype of masculinity characterised by an inability to form meaningful social connections, let alone deep emotional bonds. This dynamic is aptly explained by bell hooks in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*: "The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves" (2004, 68). As a result, Cathal develops a profound sense of dissatisfaction and isolation, which becomes obvious whenever he passively observes the way others communicate. First, he notices the Polish cleaner absorbed in sending a message on her phone; later, on the bus, he finds himself seated next to a woman eager for conversation, an interaction that visibly irritates him. And yet, even recognising his own loneliness proves too difficult for him – to the extent that he derives an almost juvenile sense of satisfaction upon realising that he no longer has to concern himself with lifting the toilet seat.

An intriguing aspect to consider is that the author refines the narrative with a series of details that may initially go unnoticed but ultimately underscore Keegan's keen interest in the condition of women in contemporary society. One such detail is the book that the woman on the bus retrieves from her bag, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, a 1996 novel by Roddy Doyle, narrated by a woman who has survived a series of harrowing experiences of domestic violence. Another subtle yet significant reference that Keegan incorporates is the documentary on Lady Diana, which Cathal stumbles upon while aimlessly switching channels. Despite coming across it by chance, he becomes so engrossed that he unconsciously presses the rewind button on the remote control. If this action were to be interpreted as an unintentional expression of regret, it would nonetheless be important to acknowledge the fundamental nature of rewinding: to return to the past is merely to witness the same images once more. Cathal undergoes no transformation, nor does he experience any moment of self-awareness. The life he envisions for Sabine is strikingly reminiscent of that endured by Diana, an almost archetypal figure of a woman constrained by the societal roles imposed upon her, trapped in an affectionless relationship in which her only recognised contribution is that of "getting pregnant and *producing* a son, and then another" (40, italics added).

It is no coincidence that Cathal aspires to a wife who resembles little more than an ornament – someone who agrees with him unreservedly, lacks a distinct personality, and occupies neither physical nor social space. This notion is confirmed at two pivotal moments in the narrative. The first occurs when Cathal's idealised vision of marriage is shattered by the presence of Sabine's boxes, filled with her personal belongings, which he perceives as "too much reality" (31). He does not even attempt to anticipate that cohabitation entails a process of sharing – both in terms of physical space and emotional intimacy – since his own obtuseness renders such an understanding entirely inconceivable to him. Notably absent from his reflections are any references to shared aspirations, values, or desires; even the decision to marry appears fundamentally one-sided, with Sabine merely *persuaded* into agreement. This suggests that she may have harboured doubts – doubts that Cathal never once acknowledges or considers, leaving the reader to infer them from their omission.

The second, and arguably the most crucial moment in the narrative, is Sabine's account of her conversation with Cynthia, which further illuminates Keegan's perspective. Cathal's inability to refute the perception of men as self-indulgent and wishful only of silent, servile

women serves as an overt confirmation of his deeply internalised misogyny. Sabine attempts to confront him with his own failings: like many men, he never thanks women, never considers himself at fault, and is incapable of genuine generosity. Yet, throughout this entire exchange, the only remark that truly registers with Cathal is a linguistic mistake Sabine makes – an error he is quick to point out, seemingly out of petty and childish spite. This reaction is particularly revealing given that, earlier in the narrative, he had expressed irritation at Sabine's linguistic precision and command of language, further illustrating his lack of introspective insight.

Cathal, embedded in a patriarchal system, fails to develop a critical awareness of gender and, consequently, is unable to perceive women as distinct and complex individuals. Instead, he often reduces them to predefined roles, devoid of subjectivity, as evidenced by his portrayal of Sabine, which lacks substance, as though he has never truly engaged with her as a person. He blames her for the end of their relationship, incapable of understanding her perspective. As bell hooks explains, "Since sexist norms have taught us that loving is our task whether in our role as mothers or lovers or friends, if men say they are not loved, then we are at fault; we are to blame" (2004, 21). Similarly, Cathal cannot confront change and retreats into a self-pitying narrative, overwhelmed by his own victimhood, which leads him to hurl derogatory and sexist insults at the woman he was about to marry. These insults reflect male fear of losing social dominance and a deep resentment towards women's autonomy.

Throughout the reading of this story, the aware reader, *alert* to the stereotypical mechanisms influencing gendered perceptions, cannot help but respond in the same manner as Sabine – laughing in a way that is both brazen and revealing. These are the kinds of laughs that arise when something is taken so for granted that it seems absurd that it is not equally obvious to the rest of the world. Rather than an expression of mockery, Sabine's laughter is a bitter acknowledgment of the pervasive misogyny within society and Cathal's passive ineptitude, characterised by an unwillingness to change. The underlying assumption is that extending rights and spaces to others necessitates a readiness to share and recognise their humanity. For Cathal, however, love appears not as a reciprocal exchange but as an obligation or service. Thus, when Sabine presents her perspective, he interprets it as a sign that she has been "falling out of love" (Keegan 2023, 34), confirming his inability to grasp emotional dynamics.

Sabine's decision, which underpins the story but is only explicitly revealed in the final line, marks Cathal's belated awareness. Far from being a simplistic choice, it stands as an assertion of a woman's right to decide for herself, rejecting the conventions that define women's value in relation to men. The unspoken elements within the narrative, likely referring to the oppression of women who are silenced and their perception as autonomous individuals, further contribute to the psychological complexity of the characters. The reader is assigned an active role, tasked with interpreting the situation through the lens of contemporary social processes, ultimately leading to a deconstruction of the myth of traditional masculinity. The same applies to the two stories that follow, the aforementioned *The Long and Painful Death* and *Antarctica*, which, unlike *So Late in the Day*, feature a third-person narrator. The anonymity of this narrator does not depersonalise the character but instead facilitates a closer, more intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist. Although these stories have already been the subject of numerous reviews, they nevertheless deserve brief mention here.

"There, without invitation, the professor sat down in what she considered to be her place and turned the cup upright on its saucer" (75, italics added). The protagonist of the story from *Walk in the Blue Fields* is an Irish writer who arrives on Achill Island to stay in the residence where Heinrich Böll, Nobel laureate for literature in 1972, retreated to write some of his works. The narrative begins with a description of the landscape, gradually introducing the protagonist as she calmly organises the house and prepares for a day that "would be hers" (55). This peaceful

atmosphere, however, is quickly interrupted by the ringing of the phone. A man, who identifies himself as a professor of German literature, claims to be standing right outside and states that he has obtained permission to visit the house. While the most appropriate response in such a situation might range from employing swear words to a firm refusal, the writer negotiates with the man to return at eight in the evening. This unplanned encounter, a metaphor for how men often attempt to interfere with women's desires, disrupts her plans and sets the stage for a conversation in which male egocentrism and the devaluation of the protagonist's talents take centre stage.

In the course of the story, the reader learns that it is the writer's thirty-ninth birthday, prompting her to bake a cake, which she plans to offer to the uninvited guest. She proceeds to purchase the necessary ingredients for the cake and then visits the coast, where she first observes a hen before deciding to take a swim in the ocean. Upon returning home, she prepares dinner and then settles down to read. The choice of reading material is of particular significance, as it is *The Fiancé*, the final short story written by Anton Chekhov. It centres on a woman, on the verge of her marriage, who, in a desperate act, flees prior to the wedding to travel to St. Petersburg and pursue university studies. This dramatic last-minute flight resonates with Sabine's departure from Cathal and evokes in Keegan's protagonist a series of memories focused on her past lovers.

The central point of the narrative revolves around the visit of the elderly academic, rude and his envy poorly concealed, who accepts the cake with evident greed and condescendingly begins to inquire about the woman's artistic endeavours. The professor shows no genuine interest in establishing a meaningful dialogue, and the exchanges that follow are characterised by a lack of mutual engagement or any effort to truly understand the other. Despite the woman's evident discomfort and frustration, the man seems reluctant to leave and he directs a tirade at her, judging her without any grounds, blaming her for her personal choices, her ignorance of Heinrich Böll, and the way she chooses to spend her leisure time, as though he possesses some entitlement over it.

This vehement patriarchal aggression compels the protagonist to reflect on the men she has encountered, all of whom she has left, much like the protagonist in Chekhov's story, before marriage. The German professor's attitude, steeped in a paternalism that undermines the protagonist's autonomy – probably also in matters of relationships – serves as a reflection of the hostility and sense of inadequacy that women often experience within the academic and literary spheres. Indeed, the male interference that conceals a desire to diminish women's autonomy is evident in the tension between the solitude required for writing and the impossibility of achieving it within a world that fails to respect women's spaces. Figuratively, this conflict reflects the systemic challenges women encounter in the artistic realm, where they remain perpetually subordinated to men and are compelled to justify their legitimacy as artists.

It is therefore important that the professor occupies the woman's designated seat: this act of symbolic appropriation asserts both spatial and conceptual supremacy. The seat, far from being a mere physical space, embodies a role – a right to expression and work – historically denied to women by men. As Linda Nochlin argues in *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, for centuries "it was indeed *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, *no matter what* the potency of their so-called talent, or genius" (2021, 80). In light of this, it is highly significant that the protagonist's response to the intellectual violence she faces is a feeling of indignation, which becomes the driving force behind her art and artistic rebellion, sublimating in the literary vengeance of the depiction of her antagonist's slow and painful death.

"Every time the happily married woman went away, she wondered how it would feel to sleep with another man" (Keegan 2023, 89, italics added). *Antarctica*, the eponymous story from Keegan's

debut work, follows a married woman who, seeking an escape from the monotony of marriage and domestic life, decides to embark on an extramarital affair. The protagonist travels to what can be inferred as the English town of Wells, where she first fulfils her duties as a wife and mother by purchasing Christmas gifts for her family. Only once this is accomplished, perhaps alleviating her conscience, does she dress and venture out in search of a lover. A metatextual detail acts as the catalyst for the story: the woman is drawn into a pub, significantly a former prison, by *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* (1974). This song, by the American poet and songwriter Shel Silverstein, intertwines with her own narrative, as it tells the story of a woman in her late thirties, married with children, who realises she will never experience the romantic adventure she once dreamed of in her youth. Lucy Jordan is trapped by the daily obligations of the stereotypically feminine role, which increasingly fuel her frustration and isolation, eventually driving her either to madness or to a form of delusion. Should the latter interpretation be correct, *Antarctica* might be read as a minor hallucinatory nightmare, but it is far more likely that the story reflects a grim reality.

In this pub, the woman is approached by a man wearing a gold chain and a Hawaiian shirt, who strikes up a conversation with her and speaks of his life, self-identifying as "the loneliest man in the world" (92). While this may immediately seem dangerous to an enlightened reader, the solitude of the man might, from the perspective of a woman seeking infidelity, provide a form of comfort or protection. Motivated by her desire for transgression, and perhaps clouded by alcohol, she follows the stranger to his apartment building. While the environment she enters does not initially seem oppressive, its starkness and filth foreshadow something far more sinister. It becomes clear that the man's ability to seduce her appears not so much based on physical attraction but rather on his calculated manipulation and abuse of her insecurities and vulnerabilities. He himself refers to her as "one of these wild, middle-class women" (94), a remark that functions as a mirror, reflecting her internalised roles as wife and mother, but not as a fully realised woman in her own right.

As he himself states, it is undoubtedly the protagonist who attends to the needs of other members of her family, yet no one reciprocates this care for her. Therefore, he lures her by subtly exploiting the cracks that societal stereotypes create: he cooks for her, washes her, combs her hair, and kisses her. The protagonist clearly expresses her desire, which persists in her as a woman despite the oppressive forces and moral judgments she faces; however, this act of rebellion against the gender norms imposed upon her forces her to confront the brutal realities of a world that denies women the right to experience pleasure without consequences. In this context, Keegan may be subtly alluding to the prevailing double standard, where male sexuality – embodied in the man who engages in numerous relationships – is celebrated as a symbol of prestige and virility, while female sexuality is subject to stigmatisation and shame, as it threatens the established social order.

Up until the sexual encounter, there are only vague – and perhaps justifiable – indications that, to some extent, disarm the reader, creating the illusion that all is progressing smoothly. However, the mention of a gun serves to amplify the sense of discomfort and unease, further heightened by a conversation concerning hell. Yet, no one is adequately prepared for what follows: on Sunday, the woman returns to the hotel, but the unknown man seeks her out and drags her back to his home. They engage in intercourse, despite her clear lack of desire – again, a clear reference to the societal expectation that women should prioritise the desires of others. He handcuffs her to the bed, forces her to eat while feeding her, and ultimately makes her drink something that induces sleep. The reader is thus presented with a stark contrast to the earlier notion of care: the forced care, which presages further assaults and violence. When the woman

awakens, naked, in front of an open window, gagged, and incapable of freeing herself, she appears to slowly descend into dissociation, adopting this as a psychological survival mechanism.

As Susan Brownmiller coherently explains in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, "rape became not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear" (1993 [1975], 14). The protagonist, fully conscious of the violence she is almost certain to endure, enters into a psychological state characterised by absolute terror, processing her fate in a complex tension between panic and detachment. As the cold permeates the room – evoking the previously discussed image of a frozen hell – Keegan's minimalist prose intensifies the sense of detachment and surrealism. The open-ended conclusion, devoid of hope, suggests that the woman will inevitably be subjected to both literal and metaphorical submission and silence, having been reduced to the property of the stranger who embodies patriarchal authority in its most cruel manifestation. The author describes, with chilling precision, a man who has not overtly assaulted a woman but has instead lowered her defences and gradually rendered her powerless after gaining her trust. In this almost documentary-like approach, there is no space for the sensationalism of violence, which is only prefigured, but rather a stark portrayal of female sensitivity.

In conclusion, Keegan constructs a narrative triptych that highlights her distinctive expertise in addressing the dynamics of power, control, and dominance in the everyday interactions between women and men, often interjecting thoughts and actions so subtly that they become difficult to recognise. When placed in comparison, the stories illustrate Keegan's remarkable stylistic versatility: while *Antarctica* impresses with its rawness, *So Late in the Day* dissects male resentment with surgical precision, and *The Long and Painful Death* delves into a more corrosive suffering, demonstrating how culture can become a battleground for intellectual dominance. Thus, the collection presents a complex depiction of the female condition and the pervasive dangers of patriarchal society, discussing various forms of gender oppression – psychological, social, intellectual, and ultimately physical – while demonstrating Keegan's extraordinary ability to explore the misogyny that permeates contemporary society.

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Alice Giovanelli

Nicholas Frankel, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, London, Reaktion Books, 2021, pp. 288. £20.00. ISBN: 978-1-178914-414-7.
Nicholas Frankel (ed.), *The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, Cambridge-London, Harvard UP, 2022, pp. 400. £24.95. ISBN: 9780674271821.

Despite being largely neglected or outright dismissed as a scandalous writer for the first half of the twentieth century, Oscar Wilde has enjoyed a revival of interest in our own times, especially as scholars and ordinary readers alike have built on the pioneering work of those

who, from the 1960s onwards and under the impulse provided by Robert Ross and Merlin Holland, managed to wrest Wilde's name from the machinations of powerful social hierarchies. As is natural, life-writing has been at the forefront of this turn in Wildean criticism, as Vyvyan Holland's moving 1954 memoir, Richard Ellman's magisterial 1987 biography, and Neil McKenna's 2005 *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (among others) have positively re-invented Wilde as an intellectual and public persona who was very much in conversation, and at times at odds, with his times. Nicholas Frankel's recent biography of Wilde, aptly titled *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* (2021), continues this important legacy in our own century, insisting precisely on Wilde as an active creator not only of beautifully written texts, but first and foremost of brilliantly and somewhat strategically crafted personae.

Nicholas Frankel's *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* is a nuanced, critical biography that reframes Wilde as both the orchestrator and the performance of his own myth. This study foregrounds Wilde's adept manipulation of his image and underscores how his artistry extended beyond his literary output to his self-construction as a cultural icon. Frankel rightly emphasises Wilde's embodiment of paradox – Irish yet cosmopolitan, socialist yet aristocratic, Christian yet pagan, politically committed to the betterment of society yet propounding a highly wrought aestheticism – and echoes many modern-day critics in his suggestion that the Irish author's provocative blending of art, life, and sexuality prefigured aspects of modern celebrity culture and the "society of the spectacle," as theorised by Guy Debord (10). This paradox was of course part and parcel of his own family, where Irish nationalist sentiments and socialist ambitions seamlessly fed into the high-society circles of his parents, and came to manifest itself more strongly in his studies at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he started signing his poems with a shortened English name – no longer the Irish serials "Oscar F. O'F. Wills Wilde" but simply "Oscar Wilde", as we know him now – while at the same time "purifying" his Irish accent so as to produce a more "standard", and aristocratic English pronunciation. This tendency to conformity is also highlighted by Frankel in Wilde's "Poetry of Englishness", as the title of Chapter Two reads, in that his poems from this early period in his life combined an English national sentiment and a more subversive critique of imperial Britain which is discernible between the lines of such poems as "Ave Imperatrix" (1880). His interest in the visual and performing arts, doubtless prompted by the influence of Walter Pater and John Ruskin (amongst others), veers at this time towards courting the attention of such important actresses as Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry while attempting to produce a public embodiment of the aesthete in his dialogues (and later, repartees) over art with James McNeill Whistler and his appearances with Lillie Langtry. It ought to be noted here that the confrontation with Whistler may now be easily followed in Frankel's annotated selection of critical writings, which, much as the other critical editions of Wilde's writings overseen by Frankel for Harvard University Press, act as useful expansions on this earlier biography, providing readers with a guided access to Wilde's writings while keeping an eye on a more manageable length than *The Complete Works* alongside *The Critical Writings* (2022) under review, present and future scholars will undoubtedly benefit from Frankel's editions of *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray* (2011) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2015) as well as his careful selections of Wilde's prison writings (2018) and short fiction (2020).

Chapter Three of *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* shows how Aestheticism continues to be a useful artistic and public category for Wilde when he embarks on his 1882 lecture tour in the United States. One of those parts of Wilde's life that have been widely discussed in several monographs over the last two decades or so, this American lecture tour is shown by Frankel to be a pivotal act of self-promotion in which the Irish author managed to establish his brand in the face of sometimes outright malicious publicity. It may strike some as slightly strange that Michèle

Mendelssohn's 2018 monograph on this momentous period in Wilde's life is not even referenced in passing, as it stimulated a broader debate around Wilde, Irishness, and race which extended beyond the groves of Academe – a debate which seems all the more important to highlight, it may be argued, in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the "Decolonising the curriculum" mobilisations in most English-speaking countries in the last decade or so. (Mendelssohn's monograph only appears in the "Select Bibliography" at the end of the volume.) Considering how adept Frankel is at making Wilde more "present" to the reader, a feat definitely supported by the numerous photographs and illustrations included in this biography, this omission seems particularly evident to a modern-day scholar of Wilde.

Another aspect which has of necessity been commented and expanded on in the last century or so is of course the issue of Wilde's sexuality. It is evident that Frankel can and does provide a grounded overview of this fundamental aspect of his private and public persona in his subtle navigating between the social obligations expected by Constance in her marriage to Wilde (covered in Chapter Four) and the Irish author's sometimes reckless behaviour in London's queer subcultures (which underpins much of the rest of the volume), and readers will be grateful for Frankel's emphasis on the inherent tensions and ambiguities that Wilde's position created both in himself and in those closest to him. If in other parts of the biography Frankel was quick to notice Wilde's (re-)invention of himself, however, his posing – if we may be forgiven for borrowing this term from the Marquess of Queensberry's notorious note – as a lover of youthful "boys" (aptly and somewhat strategically re-interpreted by Frankel as "young men" in Chapter Eight) seems to come out of this critical inquiry unscathed if not untouched. "Wilde was attracted to young men who were in their late teens," Frankel comments, "or older men such as [Alfred] Douglas and [John] Gray who appeared to be so, and he was not a paedophile" (203). Surely, the somewhat problematic aspect in Wilde's love of younger men lay not so much in how young these "boys" were (even though some of the "rent boys" were in fact *very* young) as in the kind of power dynamics involved in this relationship, which depended on specific class and age differences that are sometimes hard to stomach nowadays.

The oft-cited speech on "the Love that dare not speak its name" that Wilde gave during one of his trials is described by Frankel in these terms: "Appealing to an ancient Platonic idea of love, Wilde here counteracts an older notion of male homosexuality as 'sodomy', grounded in proscribed sex acts, with a powerful new conception of male same-sex love based on personal identity, mind, sensibility and emotion, as well as intellectual and social relationships" (217). While this is indeed what Wilde does, in his speech there is also, an emphasis on the relationship existing "between an elder and a younger man" (217), an aspect which goes unrecorded in Frankel's otherwise subtle account. Although this element still characterises part of today's queer culture, especially when it comes to men attracted to men, this emphasis on age difference and on the intellectual dimension of the relationship is certainly curious for most people invested in LGBTQ+ scholarship and queer theory. That "Wilde's answer constitutes one of the most indelible, impassioned defences of such love in all of history" (215) may be true, but perhaps it may have been useful to draw attention to the sanitisation that Wilde is somewhat shrewdly operating here: from being an erotic (and as such scandalous) act between bodies, love between men is astutely transformed by Wilde into an intellectual exchange of experiences between a younger man full of vitality and an elder, wiser man who thus cultivates the former's mind. Countless critics have of course drawn attention to how Hellenism or "Greek love" became a by-word for what we would now term homosexuality (the early monographs of Stefano Evangelista and Linda Dowling spring to mind, and Frankel does reference Dowling after his comments on this speech), but Richard Kaye (among others) also rightly stressed the

importance of not reproducing the same kind of sanitised rhetoric of queer love at the beginning of our new century (cf. Kaye 2004): although Wilde's speech from the dock of the Old Bailey may have marked "an epochal moment in the history of modern homosexuality" (256), he was at the same time inflecting the category in original, and perhaps not all too impeccable ways, precisely in the same vein as when he was reinventing himself as an English poet or an embodiment of aestheticism.

To emphasise this aspect is of course not to detract any value from the biography; on the contrary, this observation in fact reinforces the driving argument of the volume, namely that Wilde deftly invented and re-invented himself in order to appeal to the audience, performing different parts on the public stage with a view to getting the kind of reputation and praise he longed for. Chapters Five, Six and Seven draw attention to the editorial adjustments and the sometimes astute narrative practices Wilde deployed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his short fiction, and his plays in order to soften the more overt references to "Greek love", thereby showing how one of the clearest continuities in his mature work resides in the conflict between his own artistic (and sometimes political) ambitions and Victorian societal constraints. That classic Wildean rhetorical strategy, paradox, underpins much of his oeuvre, and Frankel invariably provides concise yet enlightening readings of many passages from his works. His biography is thus to be praised for striking the perfect balance between recreating, or *re-inventing*, Wilde for today's readers, while showing how productive an activity close reading can be when we are confronted with such a rich oeuvre as that of the Irish author. Combining well-known episodes in Wilde's life and more curious, less frequently cited anecdotes, the major texts and a number of those that are still marginal in the Wildean canon, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* promises to inform and inspire new generations of readers, critics and thinkers. That Frankel's biography is accompanied by such numerous and generously annotated writings of Wilde, then, is all the more important for those readers who want to get a better sense of the varied, and sometimes positively ambiguous texts the Irish author produced in his short, but ultimately eventful and prolific life. In its combination of early reviews, extracts from essays and dialogues, letters to the press, and epigrams and paradoxes, Frankel's volume *The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* shows how Wilde, far from simply "mimicking" intellectual discourse or aiming to be provocative for provocation's sake, was in fact a serious late-nineteenth-century thinker in his own right who created a philosophy of life combining aestheticism, Decadence, socialism, anarchism, feminism, and neo-Platonism, transforming society in the process.

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Luca Pinelli

Cónal Creedon, *Spaghetti Bowl*, Cork, Irishtown Press, 2024, pp. 168. € 20.00. ISBN: 978-1068732201.

Cónal Creedon's *Spaghetti Bowl* (SB) features a captivating title which, nevertheless, was not Creedon's invention. It has a semantic, economic nature. The World Bank defines the "Spaghetti Bowl Phenomenon"[1] as the confusing and overlapping network of multiple Free Trade Agreements (FTA), which end up complicating trade instead of facilitating it[2]. This term was coined by the Indian economist Jagdish Bhagwati[3] in 1995 when he criticised the FTAs for being counterproductive, complicating global trade rather than promoting openness.

Cónal Creedon's impactful title, through the spaghetti metaphor, compares the nest of converging streets to Devonshire St., where he lives and his family has traded, to a messy, tangled, and lively scenario. And the writer, himself, declares: "[…] and home for me is a spaghetti bowl of streets centring on the one called Devonshire" (3).

Spaghetti Bowl is an anthology of previously published essays (2) mostly commissioned to comment on what was going on during different moments of his story and history, as it happened during the covid pandemic in 2019 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Starting from the very beginning, he delves into the texture of his family's venture into Cork from the "breathtaking beauty" (8) of Beara and Inchigeelah. What strikes most is the author's highly nostalgic dimension when he deals with what was entangled in the Spaghetti Bowl, be it family, relatives, or relations spanning through Cork or the lands of his ancestors. Cónal's uncle Jack, "instilled in [him] the importance of a sense of place and a love of parish" (12).

The "Genius Loci"[4] which indicates the atmosphere, the unique and distinctive character of a place that makes it special and different from others, influencing its perception and the experience of its inhabitants, strongly works through this collection of essays.

From Devonshire Street where kids used to play soccer until one of them was killed, to Rossmuc which ties in as a historic immersion into Patrick Pearse's cottage thanks to the North Mon's trip led by the Christian Brother Hennessy; to Ballybunion[5], his father's summer route as a CIE bus driver, who sometimes took the inner city centre dirty-faced kids (Cónal and his friends) to enjoy a day at the beach. And the litany of sacred places, like beads on a rosary, unravel and dot on Iveleary and Inchigeelah. (Beara, Rossmuc, Ballybunion, The scenic Route Home, and Inchegeelah).

But from "Genius Loci", he plunges into sections that I have regrouped as objects, gods, people, history, sports, culture, and current affairs.

Significant objects like a *pull-along-suitcase* in "Mother of Invention-Mistress of Innovation" to his "Most Expensive Item of Clothing" board on people, important people of his neighbourhood, and school life. The first object stems out of an infinite list of objects he's given away and finally got back when people living in the spaghetti bowl left it, "a catalogue of wonderful artefacts" (46). According to his father, on the 17th June 1973, Ned Ring was the first who attached "a child's roller

[1] <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/spaghetti-bowl-phenomenon> (05/2025).

[2] Quote from <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/spaghetti-bowl-phenomenon> (05/2025).

[3] Jagdish Bhagwati first used the "Spaghetti Bowl" metaphor in a 1995 paper titled "US Trade Policy: The Infatuation with Free Trade Agreements". He used it to criticize the proliferation of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and their potential to create a complex and inefficient web of trade rules.

[4] For a definition and historical meaning of "Genius Loci" see <https://www.unistrapg.it/it/genius-loci> (05/2025).

[5] Ballybunion is a magical seaside town, but it also boasts the first spoken-word radio transmission at the Marconi Station on the 30th March 1919.

skate to the base of [a] suitcase", and also "[attached] an extended *collapsible* handle to the side. He didn't patent it to further the cause of equality". (52). But the object which has constantly yearly reproduced is "a pair of size-10 oxblood Doc Marten shoes" (80) he has bought at McCarthy's every single Christmas. Through the years he's collected "[his] Painting Docs, Hill-Walking Docs, Work Boot Docs, Lounge-Around-the-House Docs, Dancing Docs, Turner's Cross Docs, Going Out Docs, Staying Down Docs and Good Wear Docs for special occasions" (81). What makes it special is meeting his school mate James. "New shoes or old news-it's just the excuse for this annual get-together of two boys who sat in the same classroom […] forty or fifty years ago" (82).

Strangely enough, "The Year Ireland Was Discovered by the Irish" falls into several categories: Stories, History, Genius Loci, Culture, People and strikingly underlines what it means to be Irish and follows the Irish people's reactions when visiting Ireland after the ban of Covid lockdown. Summer 2020 presents a fascinating case study on what it means to be Irish' and tells about Cónal Creedon's and his partner Fiona O'Toole's exploration of the West Coast of Ireland after the Covid-19 pandemic heading to the island of Inishturk to find the roots of her family. Very few people live there, about 70, and she luckily met her cousins keeping to social-distance rules.

The red thread of Covid also runs through "My Dog Dogeen" and the final "And I Am Thinking", where philosophical statements tangle in the love of dogs, which permeated his family for generations. Starting from the epic story of Fionn mac Cumhaill with Bran and Sceólang, he tells and retells his dog-story.

Covid restrictions have marked societal links and, according to Cónal Creedon, "Bubble", "Staycation", "dog-friendly" have characterised the Irish getting into "small, tribal family groups" (53).

"Bubble" was the term used to rearrange this social organisation. And within them, Ireland went mad about dogs. "It was as if channelled our ancient hunter-gatherer instincts" (53). "Staycation" and "dog-friendly" became paramount throughout Covid, but lost their power and meaning once it reduced its fear. But, as he said, his love for dogs was not temporary. He's always had a little mongrel dog throughout his life. So from Jude, backwards to Finbarr, who also had the privilege of being taken to RTE by car, to T-shirt who was excommunicated[6] as his relative Red Mick Riordan for being a Communist, Cónal's dogs have always been popular, epic figures within the spaghetti bowl of Cork. While in "And I'm Thinking" he speculates that an ecological war struck the planet during the covid pandemic. Through self-quarantine, social isolation, and vaccines, the war was finally won, even though dystopian failures hit us.

But the essay I think is most hopeful and successful is "Eurovision the Zeitgeist Barometer", which analyses the political, ideological importance of this festival for Europe. Europe was never united since Julius Caesar's Pax Romana, which lasted 500 years, but after the Second World War we have had the Council of Europe, the EEC, and the EU, which also led to the birth of Eurovision: from Dana, a young Catholic girl from Derry representing the Republic of Ireland in 1970, to the support for Ukraine invaded by the Russians, "Eurovision has been and is the soundtrack of Pax Europa" (132).

I've known Cónal Creedon since he published *Passion Play*, and all his literary work as a novelist, playwright, and film maker has revealed his hometown, as does Joyce's Dublin. Cork and its spaghetti bowl have never ceased to inspire him and us.

Moreover the essay "The Scenic Route" by ascending and descending through steps and under steeples has taken me back to the meandering the writer led me through while tracing

[6] He was "excommunicated" because she barged into St Mary's church 12 o' clock mass "doing helicopter's spins […] in front of the tabernacle" (41).

fundamental stages of *Passion Play*. I still clearly remember me, anticipating his niece Asha, going to see Mrs O'Driscoll and her historical toy shop and Mr Tony Leehan's sweet factory.

I felt mesmerised and again and again felt the legacy of being a blessed guest of Cónal Creedon's spaghetti bowl.

Conci Mazzullo

Síobhra Aiken, *Spiritual Wounds: Trauma, Testimony and the Irish Civil War*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2022, pp. 344. €29.95 HB. ISBN: 9781788551663.

Il volume *Spiritual Wounds: Trauma, Testimony and the Irish Civil War* di Síobhra Aiken, si configura come un'opera di notevole importanza nonché un contributo essenziale per una comprensione più sfaccettata e culturalmente ricca della Guerra Civile Irlandese. L'autrice si propone di sfidare e superare quella che definisce "overemphasis on the reticence surrounding the Irish Civil War [that] has occluded the many voices that broke the silence" (2022, 1) e che, per lungo tempo, ha caratterizzato il dibattito pubblico e la ricerca storica su questo conflitto complesso e doloroso.

L'obiettivo principale del libro è proprio quello di portare alla luce, nel dibattito pubblico, le voci di tutti colori che hanno scelto di non rimanere in silenzio ma di parlare e scrivere, costruendo così un vero "archivio alternativo" di testimonianze di guerra. La genesi di questo studio risiede nella vasta ricerca documentale condotta dall'autrice, iniziata con la compilazione di un elenco di scritti prodotti da veterani della Guerra Civile nei decenni immediatamente successivi alla fine del conflitto. Questo elenco preliminare è cresciuto nel tempo, trasformandosi in un ampio catalogo che include una molteplicità di resoconti e libri. È importante sottolineare che molte di queste opere sono state pubblicate prima dell'istituzione del Bureau of Military History[1], dimostrando così l'esistenza di una produzione significativa al di fuori dei canali ufficiali. Le testimonianze prese in esame da Síobhra Aiken provengono da un campione estremamente variegato e rappresentativo dei partecipanti al conflitto. Vengono considerate le voci di uomini e donne, sia a favore del Trattato Anglo-Irlandese che contrari, ed espresse sia in inglese che in irlandese. Queste narrazioni assumono forme diverse, che si manifestano in generi letterari diversi.

Un elemento centrale del libro è la presentazione di opere che rientrano con difficoltà nella rigida categorizzazione: molte, infatti, sfidano le definizioni convenzionali di genere, presentando

[1] Istituito in Irlanda nel gennaio 1947 da Oscar Traynor, Ministro della Difesa ed ex Capitano dei Volontari Irlandesi, aveva come obiettivo dichiarato "to assemble and co-ordinate material to form the basis for the compilation of the history of the movement for Independence from the formation of the Irish Volunteers on 25 November 1913, to 11 July 1921" (The Military Archives, "Report of the Director, 1957", <https://bmh.militaryarchives.ie/about/guide-to-the-collection/> [05/2025]). La motivazione alla base dell'istituzione del Bureau era dunque quella di dare a coloro che avevano preso parte attiva agli eventi che portarono all'indipendenza irlandese la possibilità di documentare le proprie esperienze. Tra i partecipanti figuravano membri di gruppi come i Volontari Irlandesi e, successivamente, l'Irish Republican Army (Esercito Repubblicano Irlandese), la Cumann na mBan (Lega delle Donne), l'Irish Republican Brotherhood (Fratellanza Repubblicana Irlandese), lo Sinn Féin, l'Irish Citizen Army (Esercito Cittadino Irlandese) ma anche i parenti dei defunti non associati ad alcuna organizzazione. I materiali sono rimasti secretati fino al 2003, quando sono stati resi pubblici. Nei dieci anni successivi alla sua istituzione, il Bureau ha raccolto 1.773 testimonianze per un totale di 35.000 pagine, 334 serie di documenti dell'epoca, 42 fotografie, 12 registrazioni vocali, e una raccolta di ritagli di stampa.

una combinazione di elementi autobiografici e finzionali. Si evidenzia inoltre la difficoltà di dare un nome preciso al genere, notando che tali scritti possono essere considerati o descritti in vari modi:

> The critical neglect of these autobiographically based fictional writings has resulted in a lack of consistent terminology to describe them; they might be considered as autobiographical fiction, semifictional autobiography, autofiction (a 'text that purports to be both fictional and autobiographical'), autobiografiction ('fiction which draws on biography and/or autobiography'), testimonial fiction ('a fictional narrative with a large testimonial component') or *romans à clef* (real-life behind a façade of fiction). (2022, 13)

L'autrice sceglie consapevolmente di non offrire una soluzione definitiva di categorizzazione, concentrando piuttosto l'attenzione su come, indipendentemente dalla loro forma esatta, queste diverse narrazioni possano essere lette e comprese come testimonianza. La testimonianza viene qui intesa in senso ampio: non si limita a essere un semplice resoconto, in qualsiasi forma, di eventi vissuti in prima persona, ma è guidata da una motivazione morale o etica. Chi testimonia è spinto dal desiderio o dalla necessità di esporsi pubblicamente, di contestare un silenzio imposto o autoimposto, o di catalizzare un cambiamento nella percezione o nella comprensione. I veterani della Guerra Civile hanno sfruttato le potenzialità di testimonianza offerte da diversi generi di scrittura: forme autobiografiche come diari, memorie, biografie, ma anche generi fittizi come romanzi, racconti, opere teatrali e poesia. Le storie personali acquisiscono lo status di testimonianza solo nel momento in cui vengono rese pubbliche, presentate a un pubblico. Questo porta l'autrice a esplorare un altro aspetto di vitale importanza per la comprensione di questo 'archivio alternativo': il ruolo attivo e cruciale dei lettori. I lettori hanno acquistato, letto, condiviso e spesso esaminato queste testimonianze e hanno giocato un ruolo fondamentale per il loro riconoscimento pubblico e per la loro circolazione. È attraverso l'interazione tra i testi e i lettori che è nata, si è sviluppata ed è stata sostenuta una vera e propria "contro-memoria" della Guerra Civile. La testimonianza traumatica richiede un destinatario attivo: l'imperativo a raccontare è legato al bisogno di essere ascoltati. Il lettore può diventare un testimone secondario, "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (2022, 237) Questa posizione comporta tuttavia la responsabilità di immergersi nelle storie traumatiche di qualcun altro: attraverso una risposta 'consapevole', il lettore può dare valore pubblico alla testimonianza, contribuendo a trasformare le esperienze represse in un racconto condivisibile. Le opere considerate nel volume dimostrano come la lettura possa offrire uno sguardo sulle esperienze di persone comuni coinvolte nella guerra, ma anche "great solid mass of quiet people who went on living and eating and laughing and sleeping or trying to sleep, during those years" (234) colpita dal conflitto, costruendo un "archivio alternativo" di voci spesso escluse dalla storia ufficiale. Questa "contro-memoria" si è affermata e ha resistito al silenzio ufficiale dello Stato appena costituito e di ampi settori della società irlandese. Per alcuni autori, "writing would stir the sluggish backwaters of [the reader] crowded mind" (64), dimostrando una consapevolezza dell'impatto che il loro racconto poteva avere sul destinatario. Il libro cita esempi concreti di lettori impegnati, come il veterano dell'IRA Mike Quill, per il quale leggere i resoconti degli altri veterani rappresentava un modo per rivivere le proprie esperienze rivoluzionarie passate (236). Questo rivela come la lettura di queste testimonianze non fosse un atto passivo, ma un'esperienza immersiva e spesso personale.

Il libro reintroduce testimonianze ampiamente trascurate di veterani, uomini e donne, sia pro- che anti-trattato, scritte in varie forme, tra cui romanzi e memorie. Una dinamica centrale esplorata è l'uso di narrative fittizie come mezzo per elaborare l'esperienza traumatica della guerra. Il linguaggio delle ferite psicologiche risuona negli scritti di molti veterani alle prese con questa difficile eredità: secondo Desmond Ryan "the deepest wounds of the Civil War were

spiritual wounds" (4), un'affermazione che suggerisce come la narrazione possa servire sia alla "liberazione" personale di chi scrive sia a promuovere la consapevolezza pubblica. Questa idea di testimonianza terapeutica, attraverso la scrittura e la lettura, è un concetto chiave. Molti veterani, come Peadar O'Donnell, Francis Carty, Patrick Mulloy hanno sperimentato diverse forme narrative, spesso misurandosi con le categorizzazioni di genere e mostrando un impulso creativo/generativo derivante dall'esperienza traumatica:

> [They] have written from first-hand experience of the physical and spiritual ordeal through which a riven army and a sundered movement then passed, and few readers of their poignant pages, even if Ireland is to them only a name on a map, can escape the feeling that the deepest wounds of the Civil War were spiritual wounds. (21)

Il volume pone inoltre grande enfasi sulla figura e l'esperienza delle donne nel contesto della Guerra Civile Irlandese e nella sua rappresentazione letteraria, spesso evidenziando come le loro voci siano state storicamente trascurate o relegate al silenzio. Viene riaffermata l'importanza delle testimonianze di donne veterane, pro- e anti-trattato, che hanno rotto il silenzio attraverso varie forme di scrittura, come testi narrativi e romanzi e diari. Il libro esplora come le donne rivoluzionarie, limitate nello scrivere apertamente di sé, abbiano impiegato strategie narrative ibride per esprimere le proprie esperienze, come mostrano le opere di Alice Cashel che rassicura le ragazze sul loro ruolo cruciale per la causa nazionale, o Lily O'Brennan che usa la figura del cane narratore per evidenziare il ruolo delle donne repubblicane nel conflitto. Autrici come Garrett O'Driscoll e Máiréad Ní Ghráda sono analizzate per la loro capacità di intrecciare le esperienze femminili con la lotta nazionale, spesso mettendo in discussione il rapporto problematico tra la causa nazionale e quella delle donne. Il volume esamina anche autrici che hanno raccontato tabù sociali, come la violenza domestica e la depressione post-parto, o la violenza sessuale, tema particolarmente rilevante e doloroso.

Spiritual Wounds: Trauma, Testimony and the Irish Civil War non propone una semplice rilettura della storia, ma un'indagine accurata e umana che confuta l'idea semplicistica di un silenzio post-bellico uniforme e impenetrabile. Attraverso un'ampia raccolta, un'analisi dettagliata e una presentazione di testimonianze di veterane e veterani spesso trascurate dalla storiografia tradizionale, il libro rivela la ricchezza, la diversità e la complessità delle narrazioni che hanno sfidato la reticenza ufficiale. Mettendo in risalto l'ambiguità di genere nelle opere, e soprattutto il ruolo attivo dei lettori nella formazione di una "contro-memoria", il volume offre una prospettiva nuova sulla Guerra Civile Irlandese e sul suo impatto psicologico e sociale. Il suo tratto distintivo è proprio portare alla luce questa moltitudine di voci precedentemente in ombra e dimostrare in modo convincente come la scrittura, in tutte le sue forme, sia stata un mezzo cruciale e potente per elaborare il trauma, rendere testimonianza, e contestare le narrazioni dominanti su un conflitto che ha segnato profondamente l'identità e la memoria dell'Irlanda.

Francesca Salvadori

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Bisi Adigun, Roddy Doyle, *The Playboy of the Western World. A New Version A Critical Edition*, Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 2024, pp. 234. $ 34.95. ISBN: 978-0-81563-8346.

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