

Rewriting the “caoineadh”: Dermot Bolger’s *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*

Giovanna Tallone

Abstract: *Dermot Bolger’s play The Lament for Arthur Cleary is an experimental and innovative work focusing on the context of suburban Dublin life and on the character of a migrant worker. In the background of a Dublin that has become a prey of unemployment, poverty and heroin, Bolger reconstructs and rewrites the eighteenth-century Gaelic poem Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire in order to face and discuss issues of contemporary Irish life. However, the use and/or distortion of typical features of a traditional “caoineadh” are at the basis of the play, whose structure and organisation rework motifs and elements to be found in Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire and in the keening tradition at large.*

The purpose of this essay is to analyse Bolger’s The Lament for Arthur Cleary vis-à-vis Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire, identifying images and structural elements that are reworked and rewritten in the structural organisation of the play.

Dermot Bolger’s debut play *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* was among the highlights of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1989, and since then it has attracted praise and attention as “one of the seminal texts of Irish drama over the last few decades” (Jordan xxxi). It is innovative in terms of themes and perspectives, in that it sheds light on the experiences of a migrant worker within a European context. The eponymous Arthur Cleary personifies “an Irishman as an alien in the common European home” (Merriman 170). The focus on the figure of a wanderer gives the opportunity to use the issues of diaspora and displacement in order to draw attention to the “place without history” (O’Toole ix), the dilapidated and violent suburban landscape of a Dublin scarred by unemployment, prejudice, poverty and heroin, the “avoided areas of Irish life” (O’Toole xiii). In its “imaginative use of stage space, of lighting, of props, of masks, of sound effects” (Pelletier 251), Bolger creates a play characterised by fluidity. In fact, in its mixture of expressionistic and surrealist techniques, the play’s episodic structure is based on subsequent scenes quickly dissolving into each other, or overlapping with each other. The first scene, centred on Arthur and his lover, Kathy, flows into the first of

the four frontier scenes, immediately followed by a politician's rhetorical speech on Ireland and Europe, which gives way to a scene outside a disco just before Arthur and Kathy meet. The fluidity in structural organisation has a parallel in the multiplicity of roles each of the actors, except those playing Arthur and Kathy, play almost with no transition. Characters are protean as five actors are cast into twelve different roles, which creates a dark sense of the uncertainty that implicitly characterises contemporary life.

After fifteen years spent as a migrant worker in various European countries, Arthur Cleary comes back to a Dublin he does not recognize. The topography of the place is now alien, speaking of loneliness and exclusion:

It's all smaller, different when you return [...] O'Connell Street – Just like some honky-tonk provincial plaza. Everywhere closed except the burger huts, all the buses gone, everyone milling around drunk taking to the glittering lights like aborigines to whiskey (Bolger, 2000. 21).

The map of “the streets of Dublin tattooed along the veins” (61) is no use. Checking memory against reality, Arthur reproduces his stateless condition at home as well as abroad, he realises that “this is the place but [...] I can't find my own self” (31). “Some days I get lost” (49), his return just means hopelessness and loss. The new Dublin he has come back to is a foreign land, an unknown country dominated by new lords and masters, personified by the money-lender Deignan. An alien in his own city, Arthur is watched with suspicion. Kathy puts into words the new condition Arthur does not seem to be aware of:

They're all watching you and you don't realise it. The pushers, they hate the way you look at them. Even the kids around here, Arthur, they haven't a clue who you are [...] To them you're just an outsider. And now Deignan [...] His kind own this city now, Arthur. He'll want to own you as well (51).

Arthur Cleary's refusal to submit to or compromise with the new *status quo* will result in his violent death, anticipated in the title and in the play's opening scene, a flash forward overture (Grubišić) that makes it clear that the dead will be on stage in revenant drama.

However, the social context of the bleakness of contemporary Dublin life remains in the background, as the catalyst of the play is not so much Arthur's death, but the voice that laments and celebrates his death. In fact, the *files rouges* of exile and return, alienation and exclusion, love and death, past and present, find a coherent and sequential pattern in the structure of the traditional “caoineadh”, or keen in its English form, the lament for the dead, which Bolger uses as a source, as a set of allusions but also as a structuring principle. This means that in many ways, Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* reproduces the formal characteristics of a “caoineadh” beyond its immediate

impact of theme and content, and that the play is a postmodern rewriting not only of the eighteenth-century Gaelic poem that inspired it, but also a rewriting of the behaviour of keening at large.

Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is more or less loosely or freely based on *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the lament composed by Eibhlin Dhubh ní Chonail after her husband's death in Carraig an Ime, Co. Cork, in 1773. The context of its composition is well known. Uí Laoghaire, a captain of the Hungarian Hussars, came back to Ireland after his service on the continent and had to face a country under the Penal Laws. Like his twentieth-century counterpart, Airt Uí Laoghaire does not recognise his own place and becomes an alien at home when antagonism grows with Abraham Morris, the High-Sheriff of the district. Uí Laoghaire's refusal to sell him his famous mare for five pounds is an open challenge to the Penal Laws, which at the time prohibited a Catholic to possess a horse of a greater value than this. In the ambush that followed, Uí Laoghaire was shot at Carraig an Ime (Bromwich 237; Ó Tuama, Kinsella 119). It is said that when his white mare came back with Uí Laoghaire's "heart's blood on her back" (Ó Tuama, Kinsella 203) his young widow mounted her and rode to Carraig an Ime to recite the first part of a powerful and passionate lament over her husband and drink his blood. Eibhlin Dhubh ní Chonail followed the tradition of professional keeners, or "mna chaointe", she might have heard on various occasions (Bromwich 240) and her "caoineadh" is "out of the ordinary" as it developed out of personal grief for the death of a young husband, while "mna chaointe" usually moved from wake to wake and were paid "in whisky or tobacco or with few shillings" (Ó Coileáin 107). *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* is "a favourite nationalist text and a powerful love poem" (Murray 243), it is exemplary of the keen literary genre, it exists in several written versions and translations based on Eibhlin Dhubh ní Chonail's oral performance (O'Brien 56), and "might be the result of other contributors apart from Eibhlin" (Ó Tuama, Kinsella 199). Its thematic and structural features are well-established in the keening tradition – the speaker addresses the dead man directly, often using terms of endearment, describes his physical prowess and the material comfort of the hero's home, reveals premonitory dreams, and curses his enemies (Bromwich 242; Partridge passim). It is generally the lament of a woman for a dead man, in which set images and metaphors are used beyond their narrative and consequential meaning. In telling how she wasted no time to reach her husband's body, Eibhlin Dhubh ní Chonail says:

I gave a leap to the door,
A second to the gate
And a third on your horse
(Ó Tuama & Kinsella 203).

This is not to be interpreted literally but the three leaps are "stylised literary motifs rather than a factual account" (Partridge 33). Likewise, the gesture of drinking the blood of the deceased is a recurring motif in "caoinadh" and in Irish sagas, from Emer's lament for Cú Chulainn to the lament of Deirdre for the sons of Uisneach.

In the play *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* Dermot Bolger exploits the source of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, translating the famous Irish-language poem into modern terms (Kiberd 610). From this point of view, the relationship between *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* and its rewriting as *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*, pretext and aftertext, is in a way of transposition as it “preserves the design of the main story of the protoworld but locates them in a different temporal or spatial setting” (Doležel 206). Bolger’s *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is thus an experimental work transposing an eighth century event and poetic composition to address contemporary Irish life (O’Brien 57).

An intermediate step between pretext and aftertext is Bolger’s own version of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the poem “The Lament for Arthur Cleary” first published in his 1985 collection *Internal Exiles*. Here Bolger provides his own version and adaptation of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* using an explicitly urban or suburban setting, whose elements – or parts of them – were later to be used or developed in the play. *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is thus the result of multiple rewritings tightly interlinked to each other. Parallelisms between pretext and aftertext are fairly obvious in the names of the main characters, closely resembling each other, in their condition of wanderers and returned emigrants and in the unjust death they suffer resisting to figures of authority. In fact, Deignan, the money-lender, and the set of people that now control the city, from drug-dealers to policemen, reproduce the authority and control represented by Morris and the English rule in the context of Airt Uí Laoghaire’s death. Likewise, the horse at the centre of Uí Laoghaire’s death is updated as Arthur’s motorcycle, which emphasises his condition as a wanderer. And in both cases a young woman recites a eulogy for the dead man, so that an act of performance is a catalyst drawing together two texts that are very different in time, setting and genre. If the “caoineadh” is “a central theatre of women’s expression in the Irish language” (Bourke 2002. 1395), its fluid, oral nature “comes to full circle in Bolger’s play, as it reconstructs the traditionally emphasised orality” (Grubišić).

The Lament for Arthur Cleary is thus an intergeneric and intertextual result, whose fascination is provided by the imaginative use of its sources. The background of the traditional “caoineadh” does not only provide themes and images, but it is also essential to understand the structural organization of the play. Kathy, Arthur’s lover, as a modern “bean chaointe”, dominates the stage and her presence and voice give structure to the play as the play’s organising element (Merriman 170).

The Lament for Arthur Cleary opens with Kathy reciting the first part of her “caoineadh”. The presence of the other characters on stage in the background does not interfere with or change her apartness as a lamenting woman (Bourke, 2000. 76). As she “takes centre stage” (Bolger, 2000 3), her centrality and liminality are emphasised in the peculiar position of ritual separation of lamenting women (Partridge 35). And according to the stage directions, “her voice is echoed by a recording of itself over the music which grows in tempo” (Bolger 2000. 3). This reproduces the voice of the “bean chaointe”, or keening woman, and the chorus of lamentation that grows around her,

showing in embryo the communal nature of the act of keening. By juxtaposing keener and her own recorded voice, Bolger creates the effect of communal grief, at the same time keeping the woman at the centre of the grieving process. From this point of view the other characters, Friend, Porter, and Frontier Guard take part in the mourning. “They advance more, chanting phrases from their sentences which become jumbled into each other” (Bolger 2000. 4), thus resembling the “mumbling”, “sobbing and wailing” (Bourke 2000. 72) which underlie original keens. These are “an oral-formulaic poetic composition” (72) whose “extemporaneous method of composition” (Ó Coileáin 100) develops out of initial mumbling or murmuring allowing the keening woman to gather her thoughts and organise lines and rhythm (101). On the other hand, the merging of voices in a quasi choral lamentation in Bolger’s play is consistent with and emphasises the fluid structure of the lament, which results in the atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty that underlies the play, marked by the unstable relationship between actor and character.

In a process of compression and expansion, Bolger’s poem from *Internal Exiles* is essential for the organisation and development of the play. The first verbal utterance of the play is represented by Kathy’s recitation of the lament, which corresponds to the first and the third stanza of Bolger’s poem reproduced in full:

My lament for you, Arthur Cleary,
As you lay down that crooked back lane
Under the stern wall of a factory
Where moss and crippled flowers cling.

I cupped your face in my palms
To taste life draining from your lips
And you died attempting to smile
As defiant and proud as you had lived (Bolger 2000. 3)

Features of continuity and discontinuity with the tradition of the “caoineadh” interact in the strong metatextual character of the opening, where the direct address to the deceased is mediated by the interaction between the speaker – “my lament” - and the addressee – “for you”. The first line shows a shift of attention from the relationship between speaker and addressee to the relationship between the speaker and the text she is composing. In *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the first line, “Mo ghrá go daingean tu!”, “My steadfast love” (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 200-1] is repeated throughout the poem with slight variations [“Mo chara go daingean tu!”, “My steadfast friend” (200-1); “Mo chara ismo stór tu!”, “My friend and my treasure!” (204-5); “Mo chara is m’uan tu!”, “My friend and my lamb!” (206-7); “Mo chara thu is mo chuid!”, “My friend and my share!”, “Mo ghrá thu is mo chumann!”, “My love and my beloved!” (210-11); “Mo ghrá is mo rún thu!”, “My love and my darling!” (214-15)]. Bolger enhances the theatricality of the text shedding light on the text itself, “My lament for you”, i. e. this is

my keen, and as such certain strategies or techniques are to be expected. Alternatively, the metatextual reference is an allomorph or a form of rewriting of the mumbling or inarticulate and undistinguished sound or cry with which the “mna chaointe” starts the “caoineadh”.

Following the opening, stretches or extracts of Bolger’s poem are occasionally inserted in the play at crucial moments, and if Bolger uses and distorts *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* and the “caoineadh” in general, the use and/or distortion of his own poem provides a basis for the textual organisation of the play.

Literal extracts from the poem alternate with fragments from the poem expanded in the dialogue. For example, the scene at the disco in which Arthur and Kathy first meet has a direct source in the few lines of the poem, stanza 10:

Beyond the cajoling disc jockey
And nervous girls trying to look bored
Away from the slow crucifixions
I had witnessed stranded on that floor
(Bolger 1985. 70)

Likewise, the drug-dealing scene in Act Two is an expanded rewriting of the following stanza of the poem:

And the hand to appear
Dispensing white packages
From a darkened window
As the driver accelerates
(Bolger 1985. 72)

In the play, the scene “is staged in juxtaposition to Kathy’s speaking of her forebodings” (Merriman 169). The overlapping of Kathy’s words and the recording of her own voice is doubled, as her lament overlaps with the rapid exchange between the Frontier Guard and the Friend, pusher and drug-addict, centred around “a bag of white powder” (Bolger 2000. 56). This happens in darkness, a realistic and metaphorical detail also aimed at keeping Kathy’s centrality on stage alive.

Stanzas 42 and 43 in particular are enlarged in the significant frontier scene, a catalyst in the play, repeated with slight variations four times.

Or halted at a border post
Pulling a compartment window down
To watch the guard’s light
Flicker on the wheels of the train

Clutching a green passport
In a limbo between foreign states

Consumed with nostalgia
For an identity irretrievably lost
(Bolger 1985. 74)

Border crossing is the axis of the play (Merriman 168) working at different levels. The border between countries is also the border between life and death, which is openly revealed in the final frontier scene. In fact, the reference in the poem to “the limbo between two states” has thus a double value, as the two states can be both referred to two countries as well as to the states of life and death. Arthur is thus suspended between two states or conditions. The obsessive reference to and presence of trains and stations highlights his liminal position as well as his state of no belonging. “Where am I now? Which side of the border am I on?” Arthur asks obsessively receiving no reply apart from the awareness that he is never at home (Bolger 2000. 5). “Home” is a key-word in the play, the unattainable object of desire, forever wished for and forever lost. Unable to reach home, Arthur seems to be condemned to stay forever on the border between countries and conditions. The border is nowhere in the same way as the wakehouse evoked on stage is nowhere. Among the sparse props, a box and a barrel recall a coffin accompanied by a sort of funeral procession in the opening scene. Likewise, Arthur himself is in transition on an everlasting border, as he is trapped in the limbo of Kathy’s grief unless he stops haunting her.

The four replicas of the frontier scene are variously compressed, and little by little further and further sentences and phrases become implicit in their suppression. The requirement of his passport is accompanied or anticipated by the use of lights. “A spotlight switches on” in the stage directions which “flickers on the stage” and is used in the dialogue in the meaningless order to “check the wheels” (Bolger 2000. 4). This expands the lines of the poem “the guard’s light / Flicker on the wheels of the train”. This is followed again by the use of lights in the stage directions: “the Porter switches on his torch. He keeps moving the beam up and down the wooden bar in front of which Arthur now stands in semi-darkness with a passport in his hand” (5). The use of light itself focuses on the “semi-darkness” as a *locus* in-between, neither light nor darkness, neither here nor there. This is also part of the theatre of death enacted on the stage, in which the corporeal presence of ghosts reveals the return of the dead. Arthur is revealed he is dead in the final frontier scene, when the Frontier Guard discloses the border as the line between death and life and the play as revenant drama. This is epitomised in Arthur’s conversation with his dead mother:

Arthur – Why am I talking to you, Ma? The dead cannot talk.
Friend – They can son. But only among themselves (32).

The six extracts from Bolger’s poem that appear and sustain the play emphasise the intrinsic theatricality of the “caoineadh” and its tradition as performance (Bourke, 2000 68). In its extemporaneous composition and recitation, the “caoineadh” “is not a literary composition, not merely an oral composition either, but part of a dramatic

performance of which the verbal element is but one factor” (Ó Coileáin 102). Its beginning as mumbling, below the level of verbal articulation, develops into verbal expression accompanied by non-verbal behaviour in the form of body movements such as rocking oneself and clapping of hands (Bourke 74; Ó Coileáin *passim*).

When reading Bolger’s poem, theatre director David Byrne “noticed the dramatic potential of the piece” (Pelletier 250), which is nothing but the intrinsic theatricality of the “caoineadh” as performance. The play *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* rewrites the original theatricality of the “caoineadh” giving new voice to an old form. So the use of the “caoineadh” as performance, the use of the lament as rewritten by Bolger and the use of certain strategies in the structure of the play have their roots in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* and in the tradition of keening itself.

The opening of the play reminds a funeral procession as in the stage direction the actors “file on stage” (Bolger 2000. 3). They are introduced as having “sticks in their hands” which anticipate both death and life. In fact they are immediately seen as instruments of violence as their “sharp banging ... grow(s) in fury”. While the Porter, Friend, and Frontier Guard, speak, “each sentence is accompanied by a sharp thud of a stick” (3). If on one hand this is an obvious gesture of violence and physical abuse which highlights Arthur’s death, on the other hand the sound of the sticks can be read as an allomorph of the clapping of hands that accompanies the ritual of keening, as a sign of life. Life is cry and sound, while death is silence and deafness (Caforio 76) and in the keening tradition the sound of clapping hands corresponds to the hyperactivity of the wake, in that only vitality can keep death at bay, which is inactivity *par excellence* (Caforio 50).

The sound of sticks recalls one of John Millington Synge’s descriptions of a funeral in *The Aran Islands*, where the mourners beat upon the wood of the coffin with their hands as an essential part of the ritual of keening:

The coffin was still lying in front of the door, with the men and women of the family standing around beating it, and keening over it, in a great crowd of people (Synge 134).

In the stage directions Bolger thus makes reference to an old practice inserting a ritual gesture in the implicit organization of his play.

Notably, this underlies the opening scene, wordless except for the two stanzas of Kathy’s lament and interacts with both her opening monologue and the subsequent scene in Arthur’s flat. The display of sticks raised “in a fan behind (Arthur’s) back” (Bolger 2000. 4) with their related sound is revealed to be nothing but Kathy’s dream, enacted on stage and put into words by the object of the dream, Arthur himself: “A bad dream love, just a bad dream” (4), then reiterated by Kathy: “I’m frightened Arthur. I dreamt it again”. In a way Bolger is here reproducing the frequent reference to premonitory dreams in traditional “caoineadh” as intersigns announcing death

(Caforio 8). In *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, Art's sister mentions a dream of destruction:

A vision in dream
Was vouchsafed me last night
In Cork, a late hour,
In bed by myself:
Our white mansion had fallen,
The Caortha had withered,
Our slim hounds were silent
And no sweet birds,
... (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 215)

Seeing the house demolished in a dream is an obvious premonition of death and destruction, which Bolger reiterates in the final stretch of Kathy's lament at the end of the play. Here Kathy sees "a horse come riderless / Over fields trailing / A bridle smeared with blood" (Bolger 2000. 65), lines quoted verbatim from Bolger's poem (Bolger 1985. 76) which reproduces the return of Airt Uí Laoghaire's white mare in Eibhlin Dubh's lament. Bolger sheds light on the metatextual feature at the opening of his own keen and picks it up again in what in the poem is stanza 72 and the last words that Kathy pronounces in the play:

[...] a woman stood screaming.
As I shuddered awake
I realised her voice was mine (Bolger 2000. 65)

Kathy's reflection on her own voice mixes together the natural shock of the woman with attention to her own voice as a keener, which casts a bridge to the opening words – "My lament for you". The juxtaposition of the monological voice and of the context of dream in a way recalls the trance-like condition of the keening woman (Bourke, 2000 76) that Kathy reproduces in her recitative solo. Likewise, the brief statement of the material comfort Kathy abandons to go and live with Arthur has the quality of dreams in its quick tempo:

I had a room with fresh linen
And parents to watch over me
A brown dog slept at my feet
I left them for Arthur Cleary (Bolger 2000. 34)

In this case, Bolger distorts the usual celebration of the material comfort of the house of the hero to highlight the comfort Kathy leaves in order to share her life with Arthur. The material comfort of Airt Uí Laoghaire's house is thus rewritten from a different angle, and the "caoineadh" is distorted to suit the narrative requirements of the playwright.

The recurring reference to dreams in Kathy's lament is magnified in the structure of the play that has the logic of dreams in its juxtaposition of unrelated sequences (Pelletier 251). This sort of fluidity of scenes is close to the extemporaneous performance of the "caoineadh". As Seán Ó Coileáin remarks, "the stanza, and consequently the poem, is constructed as a series of paratactic phrases" so that "themes can be expanded or contracted, ornamented or laid bare, at will" (Ó Coileáin 102). "The Lament for Arthur Cleary", Bolger's poem, follows a similar paratactic construction in the fast and close development of quick stanzas developing and merging into each other in a continuum stressed by the lack of punctuation.

Bolger follows a similar paratactic construction in the organization of his play, in that the development or merging of scene into scene and of sequence into sequence reproduces the structural scheme of the "caoineadh". Likewise, the repetition of the frontier scene with its dreamlike quality acts as a catalyst to be compared with the reiteration of phrases such as terms of endearment recurring in keens.

If a series of structural and thematic features are used and/or distorted in the play, it is significant to notice that Bolger enacts also a variation of the motif of drinking blood as a motif of lament in ancient sagas (Partridge passim). In *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* Eibhlin Dubh says:

Your blood streamed from you,
And I didn't stop to clean it
But drank it from my palms (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 205)

Bolger rewrites this motif for a modern audience without losing the passionate grief that characterises the original. Kathy as a modern "bean chainte" rewords and simplifies the motif making it more stylised:

I cupped your face in my palms
To taste life draining from your lips (Bolger 2000. 3).

The reference to blood drinking is not made explicit but it is implicit in the ritual gesture of "tast(ing) life draining from (your) lips". The palms that contain blood in the Gaelic song becomes containers for holding the husband's face in Bolger's rewriting, so that in a game of saying and not saying the parallelism with the 18th-century source is kept alive.

Likewise, as in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, nature dies when the hero dies in mutual synchronicity. In her premonitory dream, Art's sister sees that "our slim hounds were silent / and no sweet birds / when you were found spent" (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 215). The bleakness of the suburban landscape undergoes a similar fate, as the epitome of the industrial Dublin landscape is a prey to further devastation represented by the growth of weeds:

As you lay down that crooked back lane
Under the stern wall of a factory
Where moss and crippled flowers cling
(Bolger 1985. 69; Bolger 2000. 3).

In the shift from Gaelic elegy to modern play natural details such as songless birds are expanded into “moss and crippled flowers”, the liminal state between life and death, which again recalls the choral mourning for the death of the hero. The repeated reference in Bolger’s poem to lanes, laneways, cobbles, factories, streets, yards, car parks, doorways, replaces the landscape inhabited by the hero in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* and provides an imaginative labyrinth where to convey the words of sorrow of Kathy’s lament. The emphasis on these urban details shed light on the inhabited world and expands the few references to places of social life in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, where the “market-house gable” (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 201), “parlours”, “rooms” (201), and “gate” (209) provide a background for the earthly life of Airt Uí Laoghaire.

An allusion to the elegy as a source also recurs in the use of the full name of the protagonist, which regularly recurs in the play both as a vocative and as an object of reference, from the extracts from the lament to the enactment of scenes from the past. Lines like “My lament for you, Arthur Cleary” (3), “Within sight of my father’s home / Is where I first loved Arthur Cleary” (24), “I left them for Arthur Cleary” (34), interact with the repetition of the hero’s full name in dialogue, when he is recognised by people who used to know him in the past, for example in the dole queue scene, or as a form of threatening in the voice of the Frontier Guard and of Deignan:

Arthur – [...] I’d climb down the steps from these flats and people would shout,
‘Arthur Cleary! Arthur Cleary! Come in! Come in!

[...]

Friend – At three in the morning, they’d still be arriving. ‘Is that Arthur Cleary?
Have we found the place?’ (Bolger 2000. 31)

This emphasises the epic dimension (Grubišić) of both source and transposition, creating a tight link between the protagonist and his 18th-century counterpart. In a way this rewrites the tradition of praising the genealogy of the deceased, as in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*:

My friend and my calf!
O Art Ó Laoghaire
Son of Conchúr son of Céadach
son of Laoiseach Ó Laoghaire
... (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 213)

The Lament for Arthur Cleary is a complex play in which the background of contemporary Irish life interacts with reflections on its sources. The 18th-century composition *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* provides a starting point that Dermot Bolger reworks to recreate on stage the act of performance peculiar to the keening tradition. If the play has been seen as a radical transposition (Pelletier 250) of Eibhlin Dhubh ní Chonail's lament, this is in terms of setting and context. As a matter of fact, *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* also reconstructs the structure and textual organization of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* and of "caoineadh" at large. However, while giving prevalence to the woman's voice, Bolger also gives voice to the lamentee (Grubišić), who is aware of his own liminal position. The "caoineadh" is thus brought on stage and the stage space is that of a wakehouse, where traditionally the celebrations for the dead took place. It is a space to let them go, to make the abandonment of life and the journey into Hamlet's "undiscovered country" (Hamlet, III, i) easier. "Let go" is also the final line of the play, with which Arthur decides to stop haunting Kathy's mind and future and to leave the borderline area he has trapped himself in. *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is thus centered on a borderline space, which is consistent with it being in many respects a "frontier play" (Dudley Edwards 148) as it sheds light on Dublin as a "frontier town" (O'Toole ix) in its contemporary complexity. It is a frontier play also because it deals with the borderline between states and conditions, between life and death. And as a rewriting of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is also a frontier with its original Gaelic source (Dudley Edwards 150), whose intrinsic theatricality finds an accomplishment in the verbal and non-verbal patterns that provide and sustain the play's structure.

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