

# *Artists and Writers: the Shared Art(s) of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary O'Donnell*

Giovanna Tallone

**Abstract:** *An analysis of the work of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary O'Donnell is a way to honour the activities of the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies, as both writers visited Brazil in 2016 and 2019, respectively, and their work has appeared in the ABEI Journal, along with critical essays on their creative production. Born in the same year, Ní Dhuibhne and O'Donnell are two of the most representative female voices in contemporary Irish writing, constantly crossing the borders between different interests, literary genres, and forms of artistic expression. In particular, both are concerned with the awareness of the creative process, so that the conscious literariness of their fiction provides an interesting insight into the issue of writing itself. Throughout their careers, figures of artists, intellectuals, writers, students, teachers and academics constantly recur in their fiction, which displays an increasing concern with the figure of the artist and the writer, creativity and the act of writing. The purpose of this paper is to examine and compare artist figures in the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary O'Donnell and relate them to their narrative strategies, focusing on creativity and on the consciousness of the creative process, disclosing hidden layers of meanings in their literary affinities.*

**Keywords:** *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne; Mary O'Donnell; Fiction; Artist figures; Writing; Creativity.*

**Resumo:** *Analisar a obra de Éilís Ní Dhuibhne e de Mary O'Donnell é uma forma de homenagear as atividades da Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses, pois ambas escritoras visitaram o Brasil em 2016 e 2019, respectivamente, e seus textos foram publicados no ABEI Journal, junto com ensaios críticos sobre sua produção criativa. Nascidas no mesmo ano, Ní Dhuibhne e O'Donnell são duas das vozes femininas mais representativas da literatura irlandesa contemporânea, cruzando constantemente as fronteiras entre diferentes interesses, gêneros literários e formas de expressão artística. Em particular, ambas se preocupam com a conscientização do processo criativo, de modo que a literariedade consciente de sua ficção oferece uma visão sobre a questão da escrita em si. Ao longo de suas carreiras, figuras de artistas, intelectuais, escritores, estudantes, professores e acadêmicos são personagens recorrentes em sua ficção, o que mostra uma preocupação crescente com a figura do artista e do escritor com a criatividade e com o ato de escrever. O objetivo deste artigo é examinar e comparar figuras de artistas na ficção de Éilís Ní Dhuibhne e Mary O'Donnell e relacioná-las com suas estratégias narrativas, enfocando a criatividade e a consciência do processo criativo, revelando camadas ocultas de significados em suas afinidades literárias.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne; Mary O'Donnell; Ficção; Figuras artísticas;*

Both Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary O'Donnell had the opportunity to visit Brazil and come to the University of Sao Paulo in 2016 and 2019 respectively, and their work has appeared in the *ABEI Journal*, along with critical essays on their creative production. A discussion of their work is a way to honour the activity of ABEI and the thirtieth anniversary of the Association, but also to fathom hidden layers of meanings in the specificity of their writing. Not by chance have they crossed the Atlantic heading to Brazil, as this implicitly reveals more than one similarity in their diversity and casts attention on literary affinities in two of the most representative and resonant female voices in contemporary Irish writing.

Interesting parallelisms underlie their writing careers. Born in the same year, both started writing and decided to be writers at an early age. Ní Dhuibhne says: "I . . . started writing short stories in my teens. It was my chosen *métier* when I was about ten" (St. Peter 68), while O'Donnell claims to have made "a fair copy of the stories I wrote as a child" (Fogarty 2018, 156). Both are members of a generation that had their first stories and poems published by David Marcus in the Irish Press, whose "New Irish Writing" page provided a forum for aspiring Irish authors. Both have a European besides an Irish perspective, and have been involved in teaching creative writing. Notably, both contributed to the 2013 volume *Imagination in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning Creative Writing in Ireland* edited by Anne Fogarty, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Eibhear Walshe. Both participated in the collective comic crime novel *Sister Caravaggio*, edited by Peter Cunningham and published in 2014. Both resist classification (Gonzales Arias 252) as they are involved in a variety of interests and in diverse forms of artistic expression, constantly crossing the borders between literary genres, fiction, academic work, literary criticism, drama or poetry. Furthermore, both have a prolific career, they are concerned with the past and the present of Ireland and with issues related to contemporary society at large, being among the authors "deeply concerned with twenty-first century Ireland" (Pierse 9).

In particular, both Ní Dhuibhne and O'Donnell are concerned with the awareness of the creative process, so that the conscious literariness of their fiction provides an interesting insight into the issue of writing itself. Figures of artists, intellectuals, writers, students, teachers, academics constantly recur in their short stories and in their novels, and their metafictional narratives of the new century displays an increasing concern with the figure of the artist, the writer, and with the act of writing.

The purpose of this essay is to examine and compare artist figures in the fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary O'Donnell and relate them to their narrative strategies, focusing on creativity and on the consciousness of the creative process. The essay will be divided into three parts. First, the focus will be on critical work by Ní Dhuibhne and O'Donnell concerning the nature of writing, then examples of writer/artist figures in their fiction will be considered, and the final part will take into account two stories, one for each writer, that have a strong intertextual flavour as they develop from previous writing, pointing out affinities and similarities.

## The Nature of Writing

Artist figures recur in literature in English. In her essay on the figure of the artist in the fiction of Deirdre Madden, Margarita Estévez-Saá points out how “writers have not ceased to reflect on their imaginary alter egos in their works” (49) and artist figures feature in the work of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood (49). The “figure of the fictional artist seems to have been particularly appropriate to comment on the process” of writing “at a metaliterary level” (53), and in their own distinctive ways, Ní Dhuibhne and O’Donnell share a concern with writing, for example in Ní Dhuibhne’s Celtic Tiger novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* of 2007 and in O’Donnell’s 2014 novel on the “Disappeared” in the Northern Ireland Troubles, *Where They Lie*.

2018 was a special year for both of them. In January a Symposium held at UCD celebrated Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. In May, the volume edited by Maria Elena Jaime de Pablos *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer* was published by Peter Lang. Interestingly the volume features a “Preface” by Ní Dhuibhne, who defines Mary O’Donnell a poet “from top to toe” in her “deep concern for truth, care in choosing the most effective word and the keen eye and sensitive ear” (Ní Dhuibhne, “Preface”, vii), a trait certainly shared by Ní Dhuibhne herself. This is revealing of a long-standing friendship and of mutual support and understanding.

In the autumn of 2018 each of them published new volumes, which in a way break new ground in terms of genre. Ní Dhuibhne’s *Twelve Thousand Days. A Memoir of Love and Loss* is a venture in non-fiction writing, a moving journey into emotional memory, recollecting life with her late husband Bo Almquist. The narration is organised in a continuous progress, backwards and forwards in time, alternating episodes in the distant past with events occurring around the time of her husband’s death. *O’Donnell’s Empire* is a collection of short stories often interconnected to one another, in a similar way to Ní Dhuibhne’s 2012 collection *The Shelter of Neighbours*, whose various protagonists are often migrants from story to story.

In 1995 Ní Dhuibhne edited an anthology of poems of the Celtic Revival entitled *Voices on the Wind. Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight*. Her choice of texts by Katherine Tynan, Susan Mitchell, Dora Siegherson Shorter, Ethna Carbery, Eva Gore-Booth, and Nora Hopper Cheeson is preceded by an “Introduction”, contextualizing the role of women poets as “important in energizing the Revival” (Ní Dhuibhne 1995, 9). The fact that the “marginalized gender should have been given, or should have taken, a voice (10) is testified by Ní Dhuibhne’s choice of texts that somehow focus on the figure of the poet. An example is Eva Gore-Booth’s short poem “A Nightmare”, pointing out the occasional frustration of writing:

I wrote eight verses last night  
...  
And every verse - became a hearse  
To carry murdered poetry. (106)

In her “Introduction” Ní Dhuibhne reflects on her own writing, and self-consciously considers: “For me, as a writer rather than as a literary critic or scholar, there were many surprises in my exploration of this period” (13). The surprise for us as readers is to detect in quite an early non-fictional text attention for a theme that will increasingly gain ground in Ní Dhuibhne’s stories and novels, as the self-conscious interest in the creative process gradually becomes an issue in her writing.

O'Donnell turns from writer into critic in a series of writings on Seamus Heaney, Flannery O'Connor, Ingebor Bachman, Michael O'Siadhail, Bridget Flannery. Her academic essays also discuss the *status quo* in Irish writing, for example "Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination to Print, 1980-2008", published in 2009. Here, she presents the difficulties Irish women writers, especially poets, encountered when "trying to publish their work in a male-dominated literary scene" (Palacios 26). She then moves to some of "the major tensions" in Irish writing, taking into account the pioneering work of such poets as Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and publishers like Salmon Press that were particularly instrumental in fostering the work of women.

O'Donnell reflects on the situation of poetry in her 2002-03 essay in *Poetry Ireland Review* significantly entitled "Poetry in Crisis?". Here she maintains that many artists have to cope with the general perception that "written art must be at least entertaining" (51). This public statement is counterbalanced by a more personal note, clearly expressed in a programmatic remark in her introduction to her poetry collection *The Place of Miracles* (2006) where she defines words as "my light burden, my alchemist's bag," (xiii). The "aware(ness) of the creative process" (xiii) is prominent in an interview back in 1990 in which she underlines: "Writing has given me a sense of peace and coherence that nothing else has ever done [...] it's a language in which my way of seeing things is validated" (Wilson and Somerville-Arjat 19).

In a very similar way, in Ní Dhuibhne's short story "Estonia" the main character Emily is a librarian but also a poet, and "the words she wrote at home, late at night", erupt "like volcanic dreams" (Ní Dhuibhne 1997, 187). For the first time, Ní Dhuibhne speaks with a very personal voice about the relationship between a writer and his/her own writing:

Writing is art; writing is work. The artist simply does the work – . . . makes the thing itself . . . The work is its own highest reward (188).

## Writers, Artists and Creativity

Notably, over the years the writing of Ní Dhuibhne and O'Donnell has displayed a growing focus on the awareness of the creative process, so that their fiction is also a forum for discussion about the act of writing, the role of art, and the role of the writer and the artist at large.

The proximity of the publication of Ní Dhuibhne's 2007 novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, and of O'Donnell's 2008 second collection of short stories *Storm over Belfast* sheds light on the explicit concern with writing in the recurring characters of writers, artists and intellectuals, which turns out as *a fil rouge*. If *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* revolves around the world of the Dublin literary intelligentsia and its protagonist is a writer of books for children, in *Storm over Belfast* a writer, a teacher of creative writing, a student and a musician loom largely in the various stories.

Also in Ní Dhuibhne's 2012 collection *The Shelter of Neighbours* writing consciously recurs. In "The man who had no story" Finn O'Keefe is a teacher and writer suffering from a writer's block, in "A literary lunch" Francie Briody is "a writer whom nobody read" (19), already in his fifties, who is refused financial support for the nth time. He returns again in the story's follow-up "City of Literature", published in *Selected Stories* in 2017.

Looking back in retrospection, the issue of writing recurs in different ways in Ní Dhuibhne's fiction also in her early writing, for example in the story "Fulfilment" from *Blood and Water*, published in 1988. In this grim story with comic overtones, an unemployed,

pennyless and unnamed first person narrator comes up with a job as dog killer because Killiney “suffered from unusually severe infestation by the canine species in all its varieties” (135). When arrested and imprisoned, she starts writing her memoir, from which she hopes to gain fame and economic success:

More than one publisher has expressed interest in my project, which has already received considerable publicity in the media. According to some agents, I stand to score a huge success with the book (148).

Ní Dhuibhne will develop the point of such an early work in *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, in which Anna Kelly sees in writing a source of “competitiveness” (Ní Dhuibhne 2007, 38) and in money the measure of success.

The act of writing is obliquely embedded in her first novel, *The Bray House*, published in 1990, as it interlaces the concern with writing and the authority of written texts. A futuristic novel about power with an ecological message, a variation of a science fiction novel, *The Bray House* features a group of Swedish archaeologists led by Robin Lagerlof, travelling to Ireland devastated by nuclear disaster to try and “excavate sites buried under mountains of nuclear ash” (8). Here they intend to rewrite or redraw a new map of the country that is now only a “desolate desert” (85). Carol Morris points out the “conscious literariness” (136) of the novel in the variety of intertextual layers and open references to Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Richardson’s *Pamela*, as well as the Prologue of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. And if the members of the team are readers during the journey, Robin is also a writer keeping the log updated and especially writing the report about the excavation conducted in the house in Bray they discover. Her report is a text-within-a text (Morris 136) that represents the core of the novel, characterised by Robin’s self-consciousness as a writer. She refers to herself as “the writer of this report” (Ní Dhuibhne 1990, 115), the deictic “this” draws attention to “our report” as “our magnum opus” (203), an implicit statement of power and of writing as power.

In Ní Dhuibhne’s second collection of short stories *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991), the story “The Flowering” is a personal statement on creativity and art. Lennie’s ancestor, Sally Rua, was so good at crochet, the flowering of the title, as to surpass her own teacher and be a creative artist. When deprived of her flowering she is doomed to collapse:

She went mad because she could not do the work she loved, because she could not do the flowering. . . . You can love some kind of work so much that you go crazy if you simply cannot manage to do it at all . . . (22).

And again this early story anticipates Ní Dhuibhne’s concern with art that is extensively developed in *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, in which Anna wants to write the Irish *Harry Potter*, yet, she has “never considered why she wanted to write a ‘good’ book” (75):

Could creative work be an end in itself, even if the product never reached an audience? She didn’t know (188).

As a conscious rewriting of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* in a Celtic Tiger setting, *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* sheds light on its own self-reflexiveness. The attention to writing is magnified, novelists, poets, publishers, literary agents feature alongside real and imaginary literary icons.

The names of Seamus Heaney, Philip Pullman, Roddy Doyle, “Edna O’Brien, Jennifer Johnston, Clare Boylan, Evelyn Conlon, Deirdre Madden, Anne Enright, Anne Haverty” (15-16) provide a realistic flavour, while J.K. Rowling hovers as an obsessive presence. Books are read, discussed, launched and praised, occasionally also plagiarised, newspaper articles are interspersed in the narrative as inset texts to validate the authenticity of artistic illusion. At the same time, the issue and the process of writing are fathomed alongside competitiveness and financial success. Only at the end of the novel, in an unclear and ambiguous conclusion does Anna Kelly find her own identity as a writer and a new direction in life:

Anna writes, tries to write, writes, tries to write. Lets the words float to the top like spawn on the water, lets the words sit like a hare on the track, lets the words leap like a trout in the lake, lets the words sing like the finches. Lets the words. Lets the words. Lets the words (354).

The poetic musicality of the novel’s conclusion, based on repetition and symmetry, marks Anna’s new balance and the triple repetition of “Lets the words” becomes a magic formula. So in a celebration of the act of writing, in the final paragraph the use of repetitive patterns of speech and of similes highlights writing as a protagonist of the novel.

Likewise, Ní Dhuibhne’s 2012 collection *The Shelter of Neighbours* revolves around writing as a unifying motif. For example, in the opening story “The man who had no story”, Finn O’Keefe, is a teacher and writer who suffers from a writer’s block. When he travels to Kerry to devote his whole summer to writing, everyday distractions interfere with his plan and his writer’s notebook is “full of useless items” (2) he may never be able to use. On the other hand, his reflection on the act of writing is a journey into lost tracks, as “writing is an excuse for not writing something else” (5). In a pattern of Chinese boxes, the story Finn hears on the radio, significantly called “The man who had no story”, recounts Finn’s own story: Finn has no story to tell, no words to write, like the protagonist of the story-within-the-story, unable to entertain his neighbours with a story until he is taken away by the fairies. In an interplay of tradition and modernity, Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes the voice of an old ] to Finn’s abortive attempts as a writer.

In the story “Summer’s Wreath”, published in the 2013 anthology *Town and Country* edited by Kevin Barry, Ní Dhuibhne deliberately plays with the biographical details of a specific moment in Katherine Mansfield’s life to reconstruct the background that led to the composition of her first book *In a German Pension* (1911). This variation in narrative strategy provides the opportunity to deal creatively with Mansfield’s life in order to reflect on writing. Interestingly, when settling down in the Hotel Kreuzer in Bad Wörishofen, according to biographer Claire Tomalin, Mansfield “signed herself in . . . as Käthe Beauchamp-Bowden, *Schriftstellerin* (i.e. woman writer)” (69). Ní Dhuibhne reworks this detail having her protagonist repeat “I’m writing a book”, “I wanted to impress (Floryan) [the Polish intellectual Floryan Sobieniowski], I said I was writing a book” (Ní Dhuibhne 2013, 135, 138). While moving a desk, an objective correlative for the act of writing, Manfield has a miscarriage and in an incursion into magic realism, Kathleen sees her baby eating a book:

in the baby’s little fishy hand was a little . . . book.  
This baby of mine had got hold of my stories. . . . the baby raised my book to his mouth. . . .

He started to eat the book. My stories (153-4)

While Ní Dhuibhne mostly focuses on writers, O'Donnell features a wider variety of artists, including visual artists and musicians, architects and a photographer. Occasionally such figures remain at the periphery of the major preoccupation of the narrative. This happens in her 2014 novel *Where They Lie*, engaged with the tormented past related to “the disappeared” during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The protagonist, Gerda McAllister, is the witness of a crime of the past in which twin brothers Sam and Harry Jebb are kidnapped. but she is also a journalist, a labourer with words. Her ex-lover, Niall, is a poet and a teacher of the Irish language, and her brother Gideon owns a small publishing house. While Gerda is laboriously trying to come to terms with the trauma of her past, Gideon tries to keep an emotional distance, considering his creative work “real stuff”, “books and pamphlets to print and poets to encourage, real stuff” (31), thus finding motivation in life in the written word.

O'Donnell's first novel *The Light-Makers*, first published in 1992 and then reissued in 2017, intertwines difficult relationships with specific focus on visual arts, as the protagonist, Hanna Troy, is a photographer and her husband Sam is an architect. Conscious of her skills and of what she does as a master of artistic expression, Hanna works with the immateriality of light, which in a way is also a form of deception, being based on illusions or lies:

How we distort light! How we pervert our human image by clever camera-work! It is my speciality. I have seen them all – socialites, actors, writers, editors, business people . . . delighted to have me create an image that is not really theirs . . . (28).

Light is magic, and Hanna sees herself as a magician, “supreme alchemist, goddess of positive and negative contours, form(ing) the whole world with my eyes and fingers” (90). Light is a structuring principle in the novel, both Hanna and Sam work creatively with light and Sam “favours glass structures because they let in light” (Shumaker 16) And yet these lightmakers are incapable of shedding light on each other and they “take refuge from sorrow by illuminating the world” (16).

O'Donnell returns to a visual artist in the acclaimed novel *The Elysium Testament* (1999). Nina is an architect specialised in restoring follies and grottoes, a passion that started when first visiting Linderhof Castle in Bavaria as a teenager. The place is literally and not just architecturally “folly”, in which the darkness of Ludwig II's mental illness interlaces with the light of his grotto:

The walls shimmered with reflected light from a shallow pool . . . I left, delighted with this fairytale, crazy about architecture and art without knowing why it excited me (73-4).

Nina is conscious of her professional skill (“my work is highly specialised”, 40), and aware that each of the grottoes she has restored is “work of art” and therefore “irresistible” (61). The Elysian grotto is to be her masterpiece, responding to her need to live with opposites:

To create a grotto . . . means being in love with opposites. . . . With architecture, which signifies order, and with organic forces signifying chaos (75).

The grotto is a validation of opposites and a site for opposites, as it is in the grotto

that Nina's four-year-old child is accidentally killed. As Anne Fogarty suggests, the grotto is a symbolic image for the feminine body (Fogarty 2000, 80), so a womb is also a tomb.

Also O'Donnell's short stories in both her collections *Strong Pagans* (1991) and *Storm over Belfast* (2008) repeatedly revolve around artist figures, thus highlighting her preoccupation with writing and artistic expression per se.

In the early collection *Strong Pagans* artists appear in a diversity of ways. In "Breath of the Living", for example, Elaine, a teacher of German, has a satisfying and fulfilling career also as a singer and musician, looking forward to "the prospect of new gigs with the trio, new music to play and absorb" (4). Music is in the background of the world of rivalry and competition in a context of third level education in the story "Canticles" from the collection *Storm over Belfast*. Anna, a specialist in twelfth-century composition and a famous composer, meets her former tutor who tried to appropriate an ancient manuscript Anna's mother had found, thus creating a barrier instead of intellectual generosity. Interestingly, the story focuses on the figure of the female artist in the present and in the past, acknowledging the existence of female religious figures in the Middle Ages who wrote sacred works (Jaime de Pablos 125).

In "The Inheritance" from *Strong Pagans* the protagonists are artists, Arianna, the first-person narrator, is a painter, her sister Cassandra is a writer, and the mysterious Manfred who lives with them is a sculptor. They have sold their house to *nouveaux riches* who have converted the workrooms for painting and writing into ostentatious purposeless spaces. The choice of names connected to Greek mythology highlights the characters' forms of expression, as in the theatre of Eschilus and Euripides Cassandra is an unheard prophetess, an isolated master of words. Arianna recalls the myth of Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, king of Crete, associated with mazes and labyrinths, and the protagonist's journey throughout her former house turns space into a maze.

The story "Snow" sheds light on the world of the local Irish intelligentsia, focussing on the opening night of the launch of a new magazine of short stories. This interlaces with subtle competition between writers and/or critics, the rivalry of "potential enemies" (71), and the dream of a *magnus opus* (76) that would lift the protagonist, poet and novelist Richard Rowson, out of mediocrity. The games of arts funding and publication are highlighted, as "He had had to set the whole thing up with minimal resources and no funding from the Arse Council as he called it privately" (65). In his official speech Richard gives voice to his awareness of the marginal role of the artist: "it was imperative that they, the artists, band together in the face of a culture which was ready to view them as peripheral" (71). Yet in the strain of the moment Richard perceives himself as an actor playing a role and he follows the script of his official speech, based on stock phrases, "he uttered the *requisite* words, performed the *rites* with an *appropriate* degree of seriousness, tinged perhaps with laconic humour . . . (63, emphasis added).

Intertextuality underlies the story "The Adulteress", in which O'Donnell plays with medieval German texts to provide context and structure to the story. References to writers such as Walter von der Vogelweide or Heinrich von Morungen, and to texts, such as *Carmina Burana*, *Trauenliebe*, *Des Minnesangs Frühling* (151) interlace with direct quotation, as a text in Althochdeutsch is provided and doubled in English translation (151). The protagonist and first-person narrator, a young wife looking for intellectual stimulus, falls in love with the German lecturer, attracted by cultural difference and his artistic outlook (148). The topic of the course in Medieval Studies taught by Reiner is devoted to "die Minne" and "*Deutscher Minnesang*" (149). O'Donnell uses the conventions of "Die Minne" - courtly love, the unreachable lady (usually married), the power of platonic love, the knightly behaviour towards the lady - twisting them to



narrative needs. Reiner is the honourable knight who offers safety to the lady in distress in the form of intellectual encouragement, but it is the married lady, instead, who expresses her love sickness in the language of courtly love: “he tortured me”, “I suffered in his presence” (149). So the protagonist appropriates the conventions of the Minne to speak about herself and her feelings, and in an interesting twist of the courtly tradition it is the woman who takes up the role of the suffering knight.

In the collection *Storm over Belfast*, the story “Aphrodite Pauses, Mid-Life”, features a writer and a teacher of creative writing, Carol, heading to her class of “twelve twenty-year-old Americans who have come to Ireland to write literature” (205) at Trinity. Carol reflects on her physical decline and relates it to the fertility of writing. Though the word “menopause” never appears in the text, its presence is evoked by the paratextual elements in the title, “mid-life”, and especially by the verb “pauses”, emphasised by the stylistic “pause” provided by commas connecting and/or separating each element in the title. The juxtaposition of fertility and writing is evident in the stylistic choice of vocabulary related to conception and birth:

She, being a writer is present to assist in the implantation of literary embryos if not at the actual long-term delivery of fully fledged entities . . . (205, emphasis added)

Writing is juxtaposed to pregnancy, labour and birth, which counteracts the pause – the suspension of life and regeneration – of the context and the title.

## Parallel Stories

This final part will consider two stories of the new century that seem to be speaking to one another and have a common background. O’Donnell’s “Smiling Moon” from *Storm over Belfast* and Ní Dhuibhne’s “Illumination” from *The Shelter of Neighbours* share the context of writers’ retreats, in Australia and the United States respectively, which provides the opportunity to consider the consciousness of the creative process. Besides, both stories focus on the encounter with “the Other”, a Chinese writer in “Smiling Moon” and a mysterious family in “Illumination”. Interestingly, both stories have a double life, having their roots in other texts and other genres and develop from previous work. The stories will be dealt with chronologically,

In 2001 Mary O’Donnell was the winner of the James Joyce Award and obtained a writer’s residency in Australia, where she shared “an ill-equipped apartment with an older Chinese writer whose English was not very good” (Fogarty 2018, 168). The experience was later recollected in the poem “Lantern Light” from the 2006 collection *The Place of Miracles*, out of which the short story “Smiling Moon” developed. In both poem and story cultural differences are reconciled in the experience of contemplating the moon at night – “a Chinese thing” both in the poem (160) and in the story (104). The presence of the moon is a unifying image (Villar-Argáiz, 70), “it shines / into the crevices of Ireland” after having “caressed / The Great Wall’s stones and steps, the alleys of Shanghai” (O’Donnell 2006, 160). It brings together the landscapes and the characters, divided by cultural and linguistic differences. Concern with language and words gradually gains ground in the text. “Our words hesitant” in line 12 anticipate the difficulties in communication between cultures, as the Chinese man and the Irish woman are “stilted with native / cultures” and “clambered and fell over mutual words” (160).

Mary O’Donnell considers “Smiling Moon” a very “autobiographical” story (Fogarty

2018, 168) in content and themes, and it replicates the poem in various ways. The first person-narrator is spending some time in Australia at a writers' residence, sharing the house with Wong Tian, whose command of English is extremely limited. He is reading *Soul Mountain*, the novel by the Nobel Prize Gao Xingjian "banned in China" (O'Donnell 2008, 101) and his cultural freedom has a counterpart in Mary's expectations of freedom. She has left home to escape from domestic chores and concentrate on writing, the apartment where she is now staying is equipped with the pervasive presence of "her writer's things", "a new laptop . . . pens, a notebook, several novels" (99) she is reading "three at once" "to absorb three very different styles and plots" (99). In its compactness, the verbless sentence that follows - "Unthinkable at home" - anticipates and contrasts with Mary's reflection on her daily routine, the fragmented "episodic quality of her life at home", a "typical female writer's life" (100). Recollecting the dismissive attitude people around her have towards her work, Mary considers the freedom she has in a different environment - "remote from contemporaries, remote too from... condescension" (100). "Smiling Moon" is thus an open statement on a writer's work, and while resenting Wong Tian's dependence on her practically and emotionally, Mary finds herself involved in a reflection on writing and in a "journey through style" (102). His poor English is a "language barrier" (101), yet, he looks carefully at Mary's latest novel and asks her repeatedly what style is in an endless series of questions: "'What *style* mean?' he presses" (102). For Mary, discussing style with a Chinese man is a nearly epiphanic moment:

When was the last time anybody outside of a writing class bothered to ask anything about 'style' . . . ? Who among her friends - even the writers - mulled over definitions of anything outside of relationships and relating, that complacent monster-word of the West? (101-2)

She has to find the right words, a style, for Wong Tian to understand style, "as appearance, as a way of doing something, a way of writing, a distinctive pattern or description" (102). This shared moment of "style" is reiterated when Mary and Wong Tian go to the beach and watch the moon. As in "Lantern Light", the moon is fragmented, and the lyrical image in the story echoes the poem:

The moon, the lantern which everybody from the north of China to the south of Tasmania can see that very night if they wish, hangs there. It is a smiling moon, and the smile is split into a kaleidoscope of other moons upon the heaving water. (105).

In "Lantern Light" the moon is "the lantern on the ocean" (160), the story's "kaleidoscope of other moons" reproduces the "flung fan of broken light" of the poem. "Smiling Moon" is thus in way a form of rewriting. It is a journey into style.

A writer is at the centre also of Ní Dhuibhne's story "Illumination", where an artists' retreat provides the context to consider or reconsider writing. Interestingly, like O'Donnell's story, "Illumination" has its roots in another text, an article entitled "A gift of time in California" that Ní Dhuibhne published in *The Irish Times* on August 7th 2010, describing her experience at the Djerassi Residence in California for five weeks that summer. Loosely based on personal experience, the story has a remarkable intertextual feature as the first part reproduces the article nearly verbatim. The story starts replicating the opening of the article with slight changes in terms of verbal tenses and vocabulary:

I was spending the summer at an artists' colony in the hills on the west coast of America. The house where I lived was a brown wooden building, sheltered by a grove of pine trees where bobcats have their den. (Ní Dhuibhne 2012, 27).

The change in tense form from present perfect in the article – “I’ve spent part of this summer” (Ní Dhuibhne 2010) - to past continuous is in tune with the vague geographical location: the shift from “an artists’ colony in California” to “an artists’ colony in the hills on the west coast of America” provides a nearly fabulistic setting.

As in “Smiling Moon” the nameless protagonist of “Illumination” shares accommodation with a Chinese artist, “a painter of abstract pictures” (28), and a German musician, characters who remain in the background. She describes her daily and working routine in detail, writing, reading, going for walks in the nearby woods. Her writing career has disappointed her: “my last two books had received terrible reviews, . . . my life as a writer was probably over now” (37). Therefore doubts, hesitancy and questions about writing intensify as the story develops. Already at the beginning, she considers her own writing, both hesitantly and obsessively:

I wrote a novel, doggedly, without hope or despair, trusting that sometime the work would find itself, although my experience told me that with novels this does not always happen. (28)

She hopes the experience at the retreat will give her “Brilliant insights into life and literature. An answer to a question I couldn’t even articulate” (30), “a moment of illumination” giving her “the answer I was seeking, the breakthrough I longed for, and needed” (42). The meeting with a mysterious group of people in an isolated house in the forest seems to provide such moment of illumination. With them, in particular with a musician, Marcus, she formulates her questions looking for “some answer about writing” (43). The story thus discusses the purpose and meaning of writing in the 21st century:

I wondered if it was possible to make new fiction, . . . find a new template, a new mould, and also a new subject, and still create something which was . . . beautiful? (38)

Day by day the illumination eludes her and questions about writing keep obsessing her: “What is it for? Not just to entertain people with stories about other people like themselves. It must have some more profound and important purpose” (43). Like Finn in “The man who had no story” and Anna in *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, ambition and desire for success contrast with the reality of a “breakthrough” that seems far away. Interestingly, the word recurs again at the end of the story as a form of seduction. In fact, the protagonist is invited to stay on in the mysterious house in the forest: “It’s easy to write here” (44) the protagonist is told, “You’ll write well here . . . You’ll make a breakthrough here. Here, you will be enlightened” (44). The use of future tenses in triple repetition is a form of illumination, as she suddenly becomes aware of the temptation of words in people apparently endowed with second sight. The real illumination seeps through in direct address to the reader in which the story acknowledges its own conclusion:

Well.

There is only one ending, as you who read stories know (44).

The protagonist finds herself in the foreign territory familiar in fairytales, where gates open onto unknown tracks in the woods and food appears out of nowhere. In the house in the forest, the lawn has the magic colour of “emerald silk” (32), and the woman of the house with her seductive voice and pleasant manners is half-way between a witch and a fairy, with her strange/yellowish eyes. The magic yet disquieting atmosphere of the house makes it an alternative place for creativity, but also for a potential Faustian pact.

María Elena Jaime de Pablos says that Mary O’Donnell and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne have “acted as magnetic sounding boards for one another when they felt despondent about the Irish literary scene” (1). Certainly, also their writings about writing represent such sounding boards, in the mutual cross-connections of metafictional narratives, in their concern with writer figures and the issue of writing, resonating as a form of discussion on creativity.

## Works Cited

- Estévez-Saá, Margarita. “Deirdre Madden’s Portraits of the Woman Artist in Fiction: Beyond Ireland and the Self.” *Nordic Irish Studies*. 10 (2011): 49-69.
- Fogarty, Anne. “Uncanny Families: Neo-Gothic Motifs and the Theme of Social Change in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction”, *Irish University Review*, Spring/Summer 2000, 59-81.
- . “‘Only on the Edge’: A Conversation with Mary O’Donnell”. María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed., *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 153-72.
- González Arias, Luz Mar. “‘Dealing with Themes as they Arrive’: A Conversation with Mary O’Donnell”. Marisol Morales Ladrón, Juan F. Elices Agudo, eds. *Glocal Ireland. Current Perspectives on Literature and the Visual Arts*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 252-267.
- Jaime de Pablos, María Elena, ed.. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018.
- . “‘Lifting Facades’: Mary O’Donnell Short Story Writing”. María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 99-138.
- Morris, Carol, “The Bray House: an Irish Critical Utopia. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne”, *Études Irlandaises*, 21-1 Printemps 1996, 127-140.
- Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís. *Blood and Water*. Dublin: Attic Press, 1988.
- . *The Bray House*. Dublin: Attic Press, 1990.
- . ed. *Voices on the Wind. Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight*. Dublin: New Island Books, 1995.
- . *The Inland Ice*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1997.
- . “A Gift of ‘Time in California’”. *The Irish Times*, Weekend Review, 7 August 2010, 12.
- . *The Shelter of Neighbours*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2012.
- . “Summer’s Wreath”. Kevin Barry ed., *Town and Country. New Irish Short Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 2013, 133-157.
- . “Preface”. María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, vii-x.
- O’Donnell, Mary. *Strong Pagans*. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1991.
- . *The Light-Makers*. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1992.
- . *The Elysium Testament*. London: Trident Press, 1999.
- . “Poetry in Crisis?” *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 75, Winter 2002/2003, 51-56.
- . *The Place of Miracles*. Dublin: New Island Books, 2006.
- . *Storm over Belfast*. Dublin: New Island Books, 2008.
- . *Where They Lie*. Dublin: New Island Books, 2014.
- Palacios, Manuela. “Straddling Words: Mary O’Donnell’s Cultural Critique”. María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 21-36.
- Pierse, Mary. “Mary O’Donnell and the Vices of Our Time”. María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O’Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*,

- Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 7-20.
- Shumaker, Jeanette. "The Deathly Conformity of Irish Women: Novels by Mary O'Donnell and Susan Knight". *South Carolina Review*, Vol. 45, N. 2, Spring 2013, 16-24.
- St. Peter, Christine. "Negotiating the Boundaries. An interview with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne". *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. Vol. 32, No. 1, Spring 2006: 68-75.
- Tomalin, Claire. *Katherine Mansfield. A Secret Life*. London: Penguin Books, 2012 (1987).
- Wilson, Rebecca E., Gillean Somerville Arjat, *Sleeping with Monsters. Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*. Dublin: Wolfhound, 1990.
- Villar-Argáiz, Pilar. "Gathering 'Word Hoards' into 'Noah's Ark': The Poetry of Mary O'Donnell". María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O'Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 37-79.