

# *Ireland and Europe: the “European Experience” in Selected Works of Modern Irish Fiction<sup>1</sup>*

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*Abstract: The mobility of people within Europe is reflected in a number of works of modern Irish literary fiction. This article explores how the “European experience” is reflected in a selection of short or long prose fiction by younger Irish authors, mainly born around 1950 or after. After a look at the reasons expressed by the characters for leaving Ireland, their “European experience” is analysed, including the impact that their time in Europe has on how they view their own culture. This is followed by an exploration of intercultural encounters between Irish and Continental characters within Ireland. The article concludes with a brief look at the significance of language and communication within these contexts.*

In 1828, *The Continental Traveller’s Oracle: Maxims for Foreign Locomotion*, by Dr. Abraham Eldon, warned travellers, especially young single women, not to travel to the Continent.

Italy was then a dangerous country ‘infested with robbers of all hues’. Young women travellers should be taught that the Continent is a lion’s den, Frenchmen and Italians little better than two-legged beasts, he said. In fact Eldon is so protective of single women that he believes they should avoid travel, stay at home and read the Bible...<sup>2</sup>

This 170 year old recommendation has rarely been heeded, as we all know, either by women or, in fact, by men. Travel of all kinds and for all purposes has become a normal feature of modern society, with Irish people travelling to the Continent more than ever, and Continentals coming to Ireland in increasing numbers, on short or long-term stays.

This mobility within Europe, like many other developments in modern Ireland, has been reflected in a substantial number of works of literary fiction. But this is only a relatively recent development in Irish literature as Dermot Bolger points out in the Foreword to one of his anthologies *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*: “With a few exceptions ... the experience of that huge section of Irish people who were shipped off abroad, has

played little part in Irish literature.”<sup>3</sup> And Joseph O’Connor states in his introduction to the same work: “Emigration is as Irish as Cathleen Ni Houlihan’s harp, yet it is only since the sixties that Irish writers have written about the subject at first hand.”<sup>4</sup>

This article concentrates on how the European experience is reflected in works of short or long prose fiction written mainly by younger Irish authors, with a few exceptions born around 1950 or after. The authors I refer to include the following: Sara Berkeley, Dermot Bolger, Philip Davison, Emma Donoghue, Hugo Hamilton, Brian Leyden, Deirdre Madden, Gillman Noonan, Niall Quinn, and others.<sup>5</sup> Aidan Higgins, although born well before 1950, deserves to be mentioned in this context. However, because his work is very complex in relation to intercultural issues, and an analysis of this could not possibly fit into the framework of this article, only his use of language will be referred to.

The term “European experience” is used by Dermot Bolger in two anthologies of modern Irish fiction edited by him, and some of the texts in these anthologies deal with, or at least, touch on that experience.<sup>6</sup> In the Foreword to the anthology *Ireland in Exile*, Dermot Bolger says: “Irish writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute ... The experience of Irish life today is as much of London, New York and Paris as it is of Dublin, Derry or Castlebar.”<sup>7</sup> And Joseph O’Connor is quoted in *The Irish Times* in the same year, where he even goes so far as to say: “It sometimes seems to me ... that you almost have to get out of Ireland to be Irish at all....”<sup>8</sup>

Not all European countries or representatives thereof feature equally in these works. Most references were found for Germany and Holland, some for France and other Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries. Very few references were found for any of the Eastern European Countries. There are, of course, numerous references to England. However, the terms “Europe” and the “European experience” usually do not apply to England, partly because of the special relationship between England and Ireland, which has been reflected in many works of Irish fiction. However, England can be seen as a stepping stone, the first stop on the way to Europe or other countries, “a way-side station before the Continent.”<sup>9</sup>

This article looks first at the reasons why the characters decide to leave Ireland to go to the Continent. This is followed by an analysis of the European experience of Irish characters outside of Ireland, and the effects which this has on them.

Cultures can differ in many areas, for example people “obey different moral, religious and social codes of behaviour”<sup>10</sup>. The next section of the article explores some of the intercultural<sup>11</sup> encounters between Irish and Continental characters within Ireland. The article concludes with a brief look at the significance of language and communication within these contexts.

## **Reasons for leaving it all behind**

Why do the mainly young Irish characters in novels and short stories leave Ireland to go to the Continent? For many, the external obvious reasons for leaving have

been economic, i.e. lack of work at home and employment opportunities abroad. This is evident in many of the works of the authors I looked at.

However, far more interesting are a whole range of other more internal reasons for leaving. The most common one is escape. Europe is seen as a window of opportunity, not just in an economic sense. The protagonists flee from what they perceive to be restricting moral and social values, the narrowness and boredom of their lives at home, sometimes their parents or other personal circumstances.

To quote the I-narrator in Deirdre Madden's *Remembering Light and Stone*: "I had so many unhappy experiences in Ireland, that I wanted to put distance between myself and that place."<sup>12</sup>

Ireland is seen as an impossible place to live in Philip Davison's *Twist and Shout*: "For me, living in Ireland was like trying to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth at the same time – it should be possible, but isn't."<sup>13</sup>

The Aachen School of Comparative Literature has, amongst others, developed and defined the theory of "imagology", a theoretical background for looking at images of one's own and the foreign culture (*das Eigene und das Fremde*). Joseph Leersen<sup>14</sup> and Günther Blaicher<sup>15</sup> point out that when investigating national images and stereotypes, what one is interested in is people's perceptions, and it is irrelevant whether these actually match reality or not.

The perception of Ireland as being "dead" is described by John in Sara Berkeley's *The Swimmer in the Deep Blue Dream*<sup>16</sup>. Europe, however, is full of opportunities and adventures, Europe is the "grown-up world", as described in Dermot Bolger's *The Journey Home*.<sup>17</sup> In this book, Shay tries to persuade Hano, the I-narrator, to come to the Continent with him:

I'm sick of it, the job, this town, they're just too small and they are making me too small. Can you imagine it Hano, anonymity, losing yourself in some foreign city where nobody knows who you are and nobody cares? ... Take the risk, just once in your life. 'We are the young Europeans' they keep telling us. Screw them Hano, we'll get out. Just think about it, at half-eleven tonight when the pubs here will be closed and the last bus gone, people will be just going out to drink in Amsterdam, strolling down the Ramblas in Barcelona, gawking up at the whores starting work in the Reeperbahn....<sup>18</sup>

The romantic and idealized image of the Continent held by some characters contrasts with the image of narrow and dead Ireland:

My romantic grand tour: Amsterdam, Provence or the Pyrenees. Paris or Barcelona. Fulfilling that need to get away from home. To escape the parish pump outlook. Leaving the known territory to join that summer migration of young tulip-pickers in Holland, grape-pickers in France, factory workers in Germany, hotel staff in Guernsey.<sup>19</sup>

In Dermot Bolger's earlier book, *Night Shift*, Frankie, one of the main characters, completely idealizes Amsterdam, where he stayed for a short time and to where he wishes to return as soon as possible: "I'm just biding me time in this shithole and then I'm making my escape back to civilisation."<sup>20</sup>

But there are question marks over whether it is possible at all to leave it all behind. In Sara Berkeley's novel *The Swimmer in the Deep Blue Dream*, the narrator says: "I don't know what's right, but however far I've come, it hasn't been far enough."<sup>21</sup> Or Deirdre Madden's I-narrator who is constantly haunted by memories of Ireland and her past.

## The experience in Europe

How do the protagonists get on, once they have made that escape to Europe? Certainly the image of the Continent they had before leaving Ireland does not match the reality of their experience.

To quote from one of Aidan Higgins's stories: "..... the traveller is perpetually in the wrong context".<sup>22</sup> This feeling of being out of context in conjunction with the experience of "otherness", or *Fremderfahrung*<sup>23</sup> prevails. The characters are swamped by the disorienting feelings of strangeness, otherness, non-integration, isolation, homelessness, homesickness, loneliness, and displacement, to mention but a few. For example, Deirdre Madden's novel *Remembering Light and Stone* begins with the sentence: "I don't belong here."<sup>24</sup>

The same applies to Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*<sup>25</sup> whose main character travels to Spain. Her first experiences are of insecurity, strangeness, loneliness. But later she falls in love with the country and a Spanish man. In her degree of involvement and integration she differs somewhat from a number of Irish and English nannies that she meets. Most of them have not integrated into Spanish culture even though some of them have been there for many years. They have no intention of integrating into the foreign culture and reject it, constantly using it as a counter-image to their own culture, of which they have a positive, romantic view. They speak little or no Spanish, complain about the country, its people and its culture. There are also a few examples of this forming of Irish ghettos in other books, such as the foreigners living in Italy not integrating into the local community in *Remembering Light and Stone*.

Against the background of their own culture the characters experience the foreign culture as strange and, sometimes weird.<sup>26</sup> There are many instances of cultural confrontations, clashes, even nightmare experiences, as for example Shay's experience in *The Journey Home* or in Niall Quinn's story *Voyovic* in which the living quarters of guest workers are described as follows: "Forever and ever that savage, wanton, joyless noise screams out from that doomed, homeless army of European Guestworkers."<sup>27</sup> In the same story, the employees in a French factory are portrayed as extremely negative and xenophobic. It comes to a clash between them and the protagonist *Voyovic*, climaxing in the guest workers being called "scum" and *Voyovic* calling one of his superiors a "Nazi sow"<sup>28</sup>.

If a person has moved and travelled for a number of years, there is evidence of a certain rootlessness:

I was tasting the listlessness, the inadequateness, the homelessness as I had tasted it so often before. In cities and towns in Ireland, Israel, Norway and France I had supped from this cup. And finally, now, the sense of bereavement at losing yet another country, losing another attempt to establish my life.<sup>29</sup>

## Consequences of the stay abroad

Exposure to a foreign culture makes the characters reflect on his/her home culture, and there are frequent comparisons between the home and the foreign culture. As mentioned earlier, against the background of their own culture the characters experience the foreign culture as quite different, often strange. The foreign culture is often seen as a counter-image to the home culture rather than something independent. And the reverse is also true: against the background of the foreign culture the individual develops a new awareness of his/her home culture and how much he/she has been conditioned by it. For example, the I-narrator in *Remembering Light and Stone*, reflects on her stay abroad: "And more than learning anything about Italy, I had found out more about my own country, simply by not being in it."<sup>30</sup>

The criticism of Ireland, which was often the reason for leaving the country, is combined with feelings of loneliness, but also of freedom, of freeing oneself as far as possible from the conditioning and limitations of one's home country, finding one's own identity, and personal growth.

These factors can result in a reluctance or unwillingness to return to Ireland, as expressed in Emma Donoghue's story *Going Back*: "Listen, I felt more of an exile for twenty years in Ireland, than I ever have in the twelve I've been out of it."<sup>31</sup> However, after living in France and Italy for a number of years the I-narrator in *Remembering Light and Stone*, comes to terms with herself and her past and decides to return to Ireland.

Characters who do return to Ireland may feel uneasy about being back or they feel like outsiders, as in Brian Leyden's *Return Ticket*: "I am back, but I still feel like I'm outside all this, standing on the sidelines....."<sup>32</sup>

## Intercultural encounters within Ireland

For the category of intercultural encounters between Irish and Continental characters within Ireland many more references in the literature were found, than for the previously discussed category of the experience outside Ireland.

Since Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, Europe and the European context has been mentioned in many works of Irish fiction. There are numerous examples of references to people working in Europe, the EEC or later the EU, European funds, tourists and foreign industrialists coming to Ireland, Continentals buying Irish businesses, land, farms, holiday homes.

Many foreign characters are stereotyped and often portrayed in a negative way, with marginal characters more stereotyped than central characters. For example, in *The Test*, Chapter 5 of *Finbar's Hotel*, Maureen Connolly sees another guest in the hotel who is actually Irish, but she does not know this:

Suddenly she wondered if she had been wrong to think him insane. It came into her head that he might be something to do with the Dutch rock star who had apparently bought this tumble-down place some time ago. He looked, she thought, a bit like a Dutch rock star himself or at the very least a Dutch rock star's associate. Yes, perhaps she had been mistaken about his lunacy. Rock stars, after all, frequently did appear quite disturbed when one saw photographs of them in the newspapers, their associates even more so; indeed, if it came to it, Dutch people generally looked more than a little unstable, if not downright psychotic, not that she was anyone to talk. He stopped at the room two doors before her own and went in. She realized then that she was relieved to be rid of him.

Alone at last in her bedroom, she felt suddenly quite giddy with anticipation. She found herself thinking dreamily for a moment or two about the strange grinning Dutch rock star, and wondering what he was doing right at that very moment down the corridor. Perhaps he was composing a song. Maybe he would be taking drugs; the combination of Dutchness and musical creativity certainly did not give grounds for optimism...<sup>33</sup>

Characters engage in arguments about the benefits of the EU, intercultural confrontations, feelings and attitudes of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, Europhobia or at least scepticism of a United Europe, as in *The Journey Home* where at the end of the novel Hano has a vision of what Ireland is going to be like in the future when he will be released from prison:

For a while longer the lorries will keep coming, widening the roadways with their tyres, dumping the plastic sacks into the quarry until the holiday homes grow so close that the continentals will object. Our role is to offer tranquillity, not rivers awash with the eyes of dead fish. Some day soon a law in Brussels will silence the convoy, will close down the factory. ...

In time, some workers will die from contamination, the rest subsist on the dole or merge into the exodus, stand in the foreign production lines where Shay once stood. The paint will peel on the bungalows, the multinationals will buy out the

building societies and foreclose. .... A foreign accent will supervise the bulldozers burying the last of the waste; an Italian expert shaking his head before the television cameras. No more fires will begin accidentally here, no more trees in the wind path will wither up. The last corner of Europe, the green jewel free from the paths of acid rain. A land preserved intact for the community. German tongues clicking in amusement at how it was run in those last years. ....

... Motorists gliding silently through the woodlands, the drone of Dutch and French over the car telephones.

And the chosen million Irish left: red-haired girls in peasant aprons bringing menus to diners in the converted castles, at the one end of the scale; at the other, middle-ranking civil servants who will close their eyes at night, knowing that once we could have stood up as equals, not been bought out like children by the quick lure of grants....<sup>34</sup>

## Language

Finally, a brief look at the significance of language and communication in the context of the European experience.

In many of the texts, the foreign language plays an important role with Irish travellers reporting problems with the languages of their host countries. (Even as a reader, you sometimes cannot get very far in some of the works if you do not know the foreign language. This applies in particular to many of the works of Aidan Higgins. His “macaronic” style, i.e. his mixing of different languages within the text, often within a single sentence, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to follow the meaning of the text without understanding the languages concerned.<sup>35</sup> Some of the other authors also use this style to a lesser extent.<sup>36</sup>)

Some characters can speak only a few key words in the foreign language, such as in German, for example, *Autobahn*, *Gastarbeiter*, *Wurst*, etc. This inhibits their communication with the native people or makes it farcical. In Philip Davison’s *Twist and Shout* two of the main characters, Terry and Avril, live temporarily in Germany:

Neither Avril nor myself can speak much German. We did a lot of pointing. We had trouble with the kilos. Worst of all, however was buying the minced meat. Minced meat is not always on display in German butcher shops. They mince while you wait. It is very hard to mime minced meat...<sup>37</sup>

The main character of Gillman Noonan’s story *Dear Parents, I’m working for the EEC!*, works as a translator in Brussels. He stumbles over the word *Pensionskuhhaltung*, a bureaucratic, technical term which he finds impossible to translate:

Peter closed his eyes, propped his forehead against his hands and tried to keep out the lowing babble. Now two enormous cows in Bavarian dirndls were sitting cross-legged on a bed licking ice-cream, their udders hanging down obscenely. 'Kuh!' said one, 'die Pension ist ganz grosse Klasse, was?' 'Prima,' said the other, reaching for her Kleenex. 'Und gar nicht so teuer, was?' 'Das Essen scheint mir auch wirklich wiederkäuertlich zu sein.' 'Moo, es geht.' They finished their ice-cream and, burping and rumbling, settled back to have it all over again.....<sup>38</sup>

In stories and novels describing intercultural encounters within Ireland, foreign words and phrases also appear. But even more frequent are mentions of foreign accents, which are often a source of mockery. In the following example, an unfortunate Irish male quite obviously had not heard about, or if so, did not pay any heed to Dr. Abraham Eldon's warning of some 170 years ago, cautioning young travellers about contact with Continentals. In Gillman Noonan's story *A Sexual Relationship* an Irish male, Sean Kenny, meets a German female, Helga Liebig. During an unsuccessful sexual encounter, she refers to his private parts as "A klitzekleine Bockwurst"<sup>39</sup>, which would translate into "an incy-wincy little sausage".

After this encounter Kenny has the following dream:

Towards dawn he slipped into a shallow dream in which there were a lot of sausages hiding under rashers from a German Flying Fork. But one of the sausages was his prick and it was having trouble appearing to be as natural as the other sausages all huddled together. Overhead the Flying Fork was escorted by two Messerschmidt nipples. An evil, guttural German voice came over the air. 'Nipple vun to Flying Fork. Enemy Wurstprick sighted. Await instrkshuns to destroy protective rasher.' 'Flying Fork to Nipples vun and two. Go ahead.' The nipples zoomed down and his prick began to scream, 'No, no! I'm a sausage! I tell you, I'm a sausage! A neutral Irish sausage!' To no avail. With a crash the rasher was split apart by bullets. All the sausages wriggled away under other rashers leaving the prick exposed and squirming like a worm. Then it began to distend into a huge tottering erection, while he shouted at it, 'Get down, you bastard! Get down! Do you want to get us all killed?' He awoke, gasping for air, as the glittering prongs were streaking down....<sup>40</sup>

The ultimate intercultural nightmare!

## Notes

- 1 This article is based on a paper which was presented at the Annual Conference of IASIL at the Universtiy of Limerick in July 1998.



- 2 Quoted from: A.A. Kelly, *Wandering Women. Two Centuries of Travel out of Ireland*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995, 8.
- 3 Dermot Bolger (ed), *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1993, 8.
- 4 Dermot Bolger (ed), *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1993, 16.
- 5 Apart from these authors, which are quoted in this paper, the following authors are also important in this context: Seamus Dunne, Neil Jordan, Patrick McCabe, Eilis NiDhuibne, Ronit Lentin, Liam Lynch, Michael O'Loughlin, and others.
- 6 1. Dermot Bolger, *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1993, 9.  
2. Dermot Bolger, *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, London: Pan Books, 1993, xxiv.
- 7 Dermot Bolger, *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1993, 7.
- 8 Quoted from: Victoria White, "Home Thoughts from Abroad", in: *The Irish Times*, 18 September 1993, 8.
- 9 Brian Leyden, "Return Ticket", in: *Departures*, Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1992, 92.
- 10 A. Furnham, "Communicating in Foreign Lands: The Cause, Consequences and Cures of Culture Shock", *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, VI/1 (1993), 91-109, 92.
- 11 The term "intercultural" seems to me the most appropriate in this context. "Intercultural Communication" is frequently cited as one of the key research areas for the next century, and I think it is both interesting and useful to apply its concepts to literature.
- 12 Deirdre Madden, *Remembering Light and Stone*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, 37-38.
- 13 Philip Davison, *Twist and Shout*, Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1983, 8.
- 14 Joseph Th. Leersen, *Mere Irish & fíor-ghael*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1986, 1-12.
- 15 Günther Blaicher, *Das Deutschlandbild in der Englischen Literatur*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992.
- 16 Sara Berkeley, *The Swimmer in the Deep Blue Dream*, Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1992, 132.
- 17 Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, 213.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 83-84.
- 19 Brian Leyden, "Return Ticket", in: *Departures*, Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1992, 92.
- 20 Dermot Bolger, *Night Shift* (1985), London: Penguin Books, 1993, 20.
- 21 Sara Berkeley, *The Swimmer in the Deep Blue Dream*, Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1992, 136.
- 22 Aidan Higgins, "Lebensraum", in: *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories*, ed. by Benedict Kiely, London: Penguin Books, 1981, 362.
- 23 This expression originates from Hugo Dyserinck; quoted from: Joseph Th. Leersen, *Mere Irish & fíor-ghael*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1986, 3.
- 24 Deirdre Madden, *Remembering Light and Stone*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, 1.
- 25 Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (1936), London: Virago Press, 1984.  
Although the author is older than most of the other authors mentioned in this article I decided to include her for two reasons. Firstly, one of the novels main themes is the intercultural contact between an Irish woman and Spain. Secondly, Kate O'Brien is from Limerick which was the location of the conference at which the paper, which forms the basis for this article, was read.
- 26 For example in: Hugo Hamilton, "The Compound Assembly of E. Richter", in: *Dublin Where the Palm Trees Grow*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- 27 Niall Quinn, "Voyovic", in: *Voyovic and Other Stories*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980, 8.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 10-11.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- 30 Deirdre Madden, *Remembering Light and Stone*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, 2.
- 31 Emma Donoghue, "Going Back", in: *Ireland in Exile. Irish Writers Abroad*, ed. by Dermot Bolger, Dublin: New Island Books, 1993, 160.

- 32 Brian Leyden, "Return Ticket", in: *Departures*, Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1992, 98.
- 33 Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Finbar's Hotel*, London: Picador, 1997, 161-62.
- 34 Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, 292-93.
- 35 The works I am referring to are:
1. Aidan Higgins, *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966), London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1987.
  2. Aidan Higgins, *Balcony of Europe*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1972.
  3. Aidan Higgins, *Lions of the Grunewald*, London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1993.
- 36 For example Hugo Hamilton and Gillman Noonan.
- 37 Philip Davison, *Twist and Shout*, Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1983, 49-50.
- 38 Gillman Noonan, "Dear Parents, I'm working for the EEC!", in: *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories*, ed. by Benedict Kiely, London: Penguin Books, 1981, 532.
- 39 Gillman Noonan, "A Sexual Relationship", in: *Body and Soul*, ed. by David Marcus, Dublin: Poolbeg press, 1979, 34.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 35.