ABEI Journal

THE BRAZILIAN JOURNAL OF IRISH STUDIES

Number 1

June 1999

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The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies is published once a year, in June. Subscriptions, submitted articles, books for review and editorial correspondence should be sent to the Editors: ABEI (Brazilian Association of Irish Studies), Universidade de São Paulo, FFLCH/DLM, Ave. Luciano Gualberto 403, 05508-900 São Paulo, Brasil.

Submitted articles should normally not exceed 6,000 words and should conform to the method of documentation of the MLA Style Sheet. They should be sent in one hard copy with an abstract at the beginning and biodata at its end and in a floppy disk 3.5" in Word for Windows 6.0, until December of each year.

Art Design: Marcelo Tápia

Front Cover: Maguire at work (photograph by James Concagh)

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1980 the postgraduate programme in Irish Literature at the University of São Paulo has developed many activities. One of them was the publication of the *ABEI Newsletter* which, now in its tenth year, has established itself as an important means of reflecting aspects of Irish Studies from a Latin American perspective. This success has encouraged the editors to take on a still greater challenge – ***ABEI Journal*** – which we hope will be worthy of the continuing support of colleagues in Brazil and abroad in order to guarantee its future consolidation.

Our first volume contains some stimulating points of view and a variety of critical approaches. It opens with James Concagh's article on Brian Maguire's paintings of prisoners in Ireland and his development of the theme of anthropophagy for the XXIV International Bienal of São Paulo through paintings of inmates of Brazilian prisons. Maguire's first concern, as Concagh points out, was to investigate the process of criminality and its causes; since crime usually starts very early in São Paulo, the painter stressed the importance of including children in his final installation, as may be seen in the front cover of this issue.

In "The Critic and the Author," Maureen Murphy "enlarges the inquiry" conducted by Margaret Kelleher in *The Feminization of Famine*, and her article is followed by Dr. Kelleher's reply and comments.

Studies in poetry are enriched by Maurice Harmon's contribution on Paula Meehan's achievement; Rui Carvalho Homem's article dealing with Seamus Heaney in the nineties, which traces continuities from earlier collections and *Seeing Things* (1991); and John P. Kerby's analysis of the poetry of James Simmons, "one of the leading lights of the Northern Irish literary renaissance."

Irish fiction is represented by articles by Rüdiger Imhof, offering a comprehensive critique of Roddy Doyle's plays and novels; José Lanters, with a discussion of Darrell Figgis's *The Return of the Hero* (1923) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) in terms of Bakhtin's theory of satire; by Laura Izarra who analyses Banville's *The Newton Letter* as a metabiographical narrative in which the fictional biographer reconsiders the legitimacy of historical facts; and Munira H. Mutran, placing Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in the context of decadent art at the turn of the century.

Articles on drama include an article by Rosane Beyer on Boucicault's use of the melodramatic tradition, and an analysis by Glória Sydenstricker of the drama produced by G. B. Shaw and Harley Granville-Barker in the 1890s.

Finally, Joseph Ronsley's discussion of Denis Johnston's *In Search of Swift* (1959) reveals the impact of the experience of writing a biography on the playwright himself and upon his work.

We close this issue with reviews by Rüdiger Imhof, Marie Arndt and Werner Huber, News from Brazil, and an invitation to our readers to join us in a fruitful discussion of Irish Studies.

The editors

Greetings from Brazil

Igreja da Glória - Rio de Janeiro

Painting

Brian Maguire and the CASA DA CULTURA PROJECT at Vila Prudente, São Paulo.

James Concagh

I must say I enjoyed the opportunity of having had the chance to work with Brian Maguire. His work reminded me of my teacher Robert Mason when I studied with him in 1979 at Chelsea School of Art. Mason went on to produce his great series of paintings based on the workers that built The Broadgate Complex in the heart of London. I was fortunate enough to witness some of the work in process. Mason spent many hours at night portraying the men at work laying the foundations beneath the earth. These men, for the artist, were very special. They seemed to have a life of their own and his descriptions of the whole project made me realise that Robert was in fact going back to his childhood memories of the factory workers and miners from his home town of Leeds. In much the same way as Mason felt strongly towards the workers that dug deep below the surface, Maguire relates to men locked away in prisons. Although I did not know Brian from my National College of Art and Design days, I would have been aware of his work from the art scene in Dublin. Brian would have just started his work with prisoners when I left Ireland in 1986.

First of all, I was more than honoured to have been chosen by the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland to assist Brian with his research here for the XXIV Bienal International Art Show of São Paulo. I enjoyed meeting the Commissioner Fiach MacConghail on his two visits out here as well as Jenny Haughton whom co-ordinated the whole project from Dublin. I was also very flattered when Munira H. Mutran from the Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses invited me to write an article about the work that Brian developed during his three-month stay here. Looking back now I can see how much went on and how little I know of the complexities that lie behind Brian's work. What threw me most was the Foreword that Thomas MacEvilley writes in the official catalogue for the Bienal. Just when I thought I could get away with a few crisp and clever sentences, MacEvilley draws extensive parallels to Maguire's concepts of art that I would never have guessed in a thousand years. Left somewhat bewildered by the article, I realised that the only way to deal with things was to try to develop some consistent descriptions about what I personally found interesting about the project. This also makes sense when one considers just how many people were involved in the project. I am sure that I wouldn't be wrong if I counted near to one hundred people. So, in order to keep my sanity and try to analyse in some way the artist's work, I have decided to concentrate more on his way of painting rather than the intricate symbolic and social elements that are also important in his work.

In an article by Simon Morely in Art News, edition 196, a great concern is given to the fact that Ireland has very few visual artists and that the run of the mill lies in the hands of a very few. Morely quite rightly sums this up with the exceedingly high level of talents in the field of literature:

> With a combined population-North and South-equalling about half that of London, Ireland can boast a disproportionately large number of 20th Century writers, from Yeats and Joyce to Seamus Heaney. Today the literary scene is as strong as ever but one would have been hard pressed until recently to name an Irish artist of international stature, certainly not based in Ireland.

While many artists are in search of an international sense of what Irish art could be, in a wider sense of the word, Maguire chose to dig deep into his own territory and face the music. For twelve years the artist worked in prisons around the country dedicating him- self to those that had no means of expressing themselves. He also chose to face the problems of a changing society still plagued with moral and political contradictions. In many respects the artist portrays his prisoners as people that were unable to adapt to these new changes. The series of portraits of these prisoners was eventually made into a video based on the rules and regulations laid down by Irish Law in 1958.

Although I only saw these works on slides, I was able to see them on a number of occasions together with Brian. After a while I began to make relationships with the way the artist portrayed some of the prisoners with a different painterly style to that of others. I noticed, for example, that his portrait of Christy was a lot lighter. Brian applied his paint with more refined strokes and was a lot more generous with the open spaces around the figure. With the other prisoners he was a lot more vigorous with the paint. There was hardly any description of space at all on the picture plain. In a sort of naive way I made comparisons between this and the idea of being in a small cell. I imagined that the prison was in fact the pictorial space on the canvas itself. Now the interesting thing about all this was that Christy was one of the few prisoners that claimed he was innocent. He spent nine years proving it and eventually won the case. In order to do this he had to read the law and know it well in order to defend his cause. The other interesting element was that Brian had a collection of portraits of Christy throughout the

process, which were highly interesting from the point of view of contradictory brush-strokes and spatial concepts. From a purely pictorial point of view there is no doubt that there is some psychological element attached to those prisoners that are literally moulded onto the picture plain and those that are not. Although Christy was an exception to the rule I was only able to see this more clearly by looking through Maguire's whole selection of paintings over the last ten years and some of the drastic changes that took place in his work at the Bienal.

The official theme for this year's XXIV International Bienal of São Paulo was chosen by the director, Paulo Herkenhoff, in relation to the question of anthropophagy. Herkenhoff mentions in one of the cities leading newspapers: "...I am more than pleased for having brought these curators and artists for discussions that we proposed. This reflects the amplitude of the Bienal..."

The notion of anthropophagy is strongly related to the idea of cannibalism. Many artists interpreted the theme literally using elements of war and carnage to get the message across while others touched on more everyday forms of Western consumer society devouring their products. Maguire's proposal was interpreted by the critic Celso Fioravente as follows: " National representations have included a segment of countries where one country "fights" with its neighbouring country and everyone loses". Since most of Brian's work deals with prisoners there are obvious traits of the so-called "Troubles" relevant in his work.

Maguire's final proposal, however, was to question the process of criminality and why it happens in the first place. Choosing São Paulo, the artist was interested in not just the Irish process but a much wider notion of injustice. In many respects Maguire was able to touch upon the whole question of how people are, in fact, consumed by social injustice in a far more direct way here in Brazil then, let us say, in Ireland. This does not mean, however, that criminality is not as complex here as it is in other countries but, in a city like São Paulo, there are certain harsh urban realities and codes that perhaps make it easier to differentiate. With only 20% of the population representing middle class standards there is an enormous gap between extreme wealth and poverty.

Since crime usually starts early here, Maguire was very conscious of including children in his final show or installation piece. For two months the artist worked in one of the cities oldest shanty towns, Vila Prudente, depicting more or less forty portraits using charcoal technique. The Irish Commissioner, Fiach MacConghail describes his first visit to the area in the catalogue:

> After my one and only visit to Vila Prudente in São Paulo, a certain melancholy set in. A sense of fatalism that exists amongst the marginalised sector of any society began to disturb me while at the same time offering no understanding of it.

Maguire spent a great deal of his time working in this environment and collecting as much information as he could about the children and their backgrounds. There were a number of problems involved and the language barrier didn't help. Maguire finally visited some of the children's homes and using photographs, projected on to large aluminium panels, included the portraits he had done of the child in his or her environment. The third section of the exhibition concentrates on portraits of prisoners from *Diário Popular* (a more popular newspaper in the city that has a section that announces acts of crime committed by certain citizens) showing photographs of prisoners that had been selected for that day. The large painting entitled "Memorial", based on the 111 prisoners massacred in the Carindiru penitentiary here in the city of São Paulo, completes the exhibition and adds a new scale to the whole space.

In the introduction of the catalogue Thomas McEvilley comments:

> So in a sense the various elements might be viewed as pictures of different stages of life. First the subjects are seen as children, then as convicts whose pictures are in the news, then as corpses after being massacred by the police.

Within the criteria of the Herkenhoff proposal for the Bienal there is no doubt that there is an awful truth to McEvilley's description of Maguire's work. The notion that the poorer classes are much more likely to become the criminals of tomorrow and that the system will consume and annihilate them like a large munching machine is certainly one way of looking at it.

If one, however, reads all the work on this level then the artist has certainly produced an excellent installation piece. What interested me most, though, were the paintings of the prisoners and how Brian painted them here compared with those back home. Maguire had given the figures more space on the canvas both in the Diario Popular compositions and in the large painting *Memorial.*

The most disturbing thing about the prisoners here is that they seem to have been given a place to breathe and reflect. They appear to conjure up this whole psychological question of what is in fact a prisoner after all. The moulding now seems to be the very physical sense of the portraits rather than the environment around. The men are somewhat distorted as though they are struggling with their own physiology. While the portraits of Christy still suggest elements of physical and symbolic repression

around the figure these portraits reveal the struggle from within. The artist is touching on the very essence of human liberty through the act of painting. This is essentially Maguire at his best both as a painter who cares about his techniques and the artist who cares about those who he feels have been hard done by. Oddly enough, it was Yeats himself that drew our attention to the notion of portraiture when he wrote:

If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
*Before the world was made.**

Maguire's tremendous humility before his subject matter and his continuos searching for form upon form allow him to reach tremendous depths in his portraits. His concern for prisoners and the underprivileged are essential and his social consciousness in putting the message across naturally makes him prone to deliver it in some documented format. But the real issue of Maguire's strength comes about when he is face to face with his canvas and paper, usually in a very isolated state. It is here that the artist depends on the minimum of resources and the maximum act of faith.

When I asked Fiach MacConghail over a cup of coffee why he had pushed so hard for Brian to be selected for this year's Bienal he responded, "Because he is a painter". This was more than a straightforward answer and one that was to put into perspective the more essential elements of Maguire's work.

The large painting "*Memorial*" and the "*Portraits of Prisoners from Diario Popular*" are without a doubt the strongest elements in the final exhibition. In many respects Maguire's portraits of prisoners are a lot more about the essence of his own child-like qualities than the children from Centro Cultural. Here Maguire lets loose with the paint and creates his own personal metaphor that is so characteristic of his approach to his painting. The artist is free to deal with the subject...a subject that he knows so well. As I watched Brian working on this series I was astounded at the way he applied the paint and distorted the images to his own advantage. Thomas McEvilley emphasises the importance of Maguire's techniques on a number of occasions: "...The whole metaphor that the painter is spurting his life fluids onto the canvas, which would never be held true of Mondrian but was invited by Pollock".

In much the same way as the artist gave Christy ample space on the canvas Maguire now gives his Diario Popular prisoners the same treatment. The one painting of this series that always comes to mind is the portrait of a prisoner painted on March 18th. Oddly enough the prisoner is not only freed from the mundane reality where Maguire found him, but on the very picture plane where he stares out into this poetic white space over to the right. The contrast of his slightly distorted body...the only thing he owns... in relation to the white non-physical space around creates a contrast that allows the spectator to understand the true level of human dignity at its bear minimum. Maguire no longer needs to protect his prisoners with so much thick lashing paint nor does he have to arm them with symbolic weapons or destructive elements on the picture plain. The Negro prisoner has an air about him that permits him to function as a human being regardless of his destiny. Maguire surrenders to the act of painting and determines his credibility in human nature by the dark tones that make the figure stand out like a rock. "Memorial", by its sheer size deals with similar issues. The prisoners are laid out in their makeshift coffins after having been mercilessly gunned down the night before. Paint runs down the canvas like blood and symbolic forms can be seen along the sides. Maguire, however, leaves an enormous white area in the top centre of the composition. The overall scene is too much to deal with and I sensed that when the artist explained, " I wanted to give the idea that they had somewhere to go after having been slaughtered like sheep...a place in heaven", there were obvious connotations about just how difficult it was to paint. Brian had acquired actual photographs after his first visit here, from the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in order to complete the painting in his studio in Bray.

Apart from the video, slides were also shown to pupils when Brian first came over in February when he gave some lectures and talks at St. Paul's School. As an educational tool the Maguire slide shows were to have a great impact. Practical courses were also set up for the International Baccalaureate Art and Design programme as well as a CAS activity (Creative, Action, Social) for pupils who are now fervently working on one of the Maguire projects along with the Casa da Cultura children in Vila Prudente. Brian also worked in the Art Centre at the School as an artist-in-residence for the first two months of his stay. David Sweetman from the English Department was kind enough to give this interview when Brian returned to the School in September.

DS: Where were you born?

BM: I was born in Bray, County Wicklow, Ireland, and grew up there.

DS: Where were you educated?

BM: In terms of schooling I went to St. Bray's. Following this I went to the National College of Art where I did an Arts Foundation Course. Subsequently, I went to the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1968.
DS: Have you acted as an artist-in-residence in other institutions?

BM: I have acted in this capacity before at St. Paul's, in February/March of this year. I have also lectured abroad at the Universities of Boston and Texas, in the States, and at the University of Helsinki. I have to say though, I've found my time here at St. Paul's amongst the most enjoyable. The children are very receptive and share a rich mix of cultures and interests.

DS: Who is your mentor?

BM: Edward Kienholz. He is an American sculptor who works out of a violent compassion, a rage against injustice. His work is exhibited in France, Italy, Germany, in Europe, but not in England. His work generates its power from its truth-content, its true value. For example, if I were to draw the interior of a *favela* (shanty town) here in Brazil I do not need to change it in my representation, condition it with a personal response. I just need to be truthful. Being true implies a critique. It's not necessary for the artist to be critical; it's necessary for the artist to be true. The truth is critical.

DS: What is art?

BM: Art is doing away with a sense of being alone. In portraiture, for example, which is what I'm doing at the moment, art gives a sense of existence to what is outside oneself, a sense that the other person lived. It is the entrance into a sense of relationship. The picture that is left is the outcome of this process, or performance. Art is best defined as an activity rather than a static object. It also, of course, involves a sense of truth, identifying the truth of what is drawn. In this way, art aspires to the condition of religion. The activity of art is like the activity of prayer-giving back an identity to things, and done in silence.

DS: What makes a good artist?

BM: This is a very subjective question! Empathy with the subject, passion, originality. Not cleverness. Good art is both intellectual and emotional.

DS: What motivates you in your work?

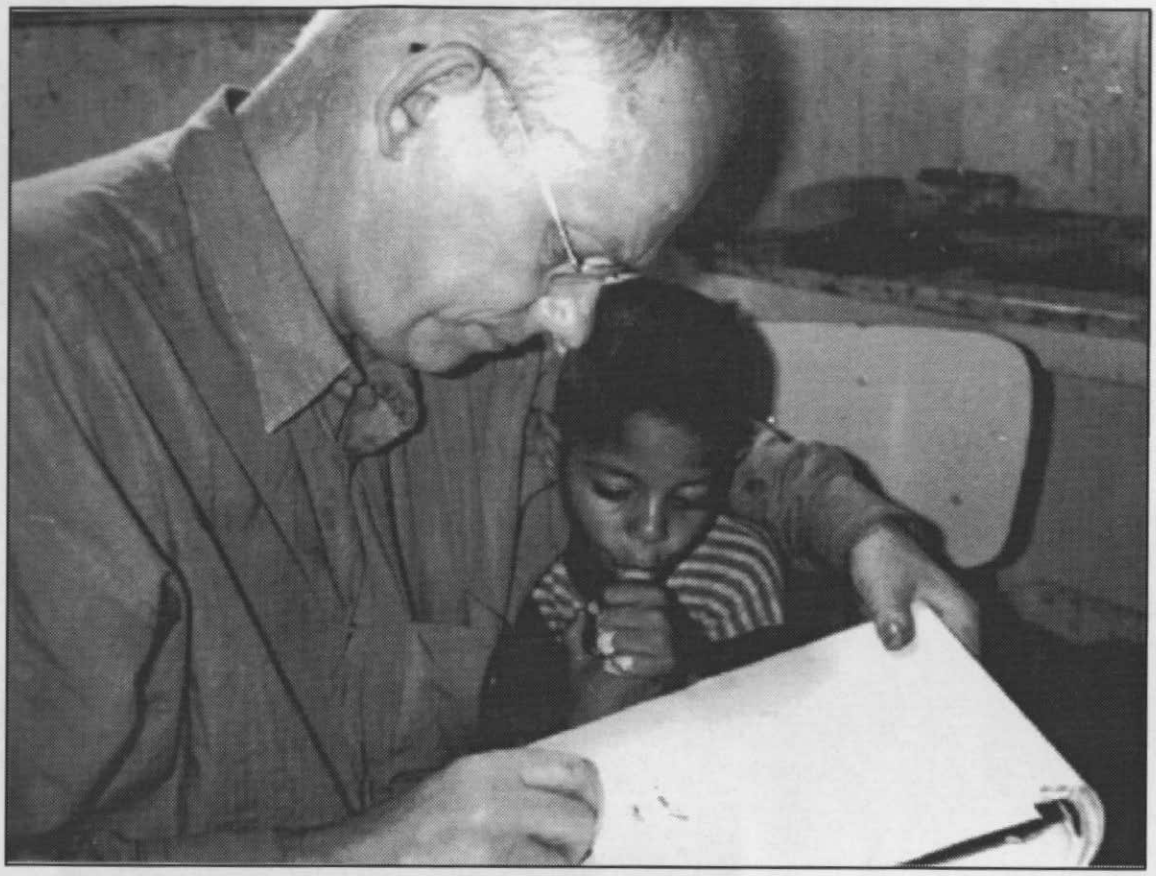
BM: I work in two ways. Firstly, I work out of the spirit of revenge. I worked for twelve years in prisons where I taught the inmates art. I became interested in the nature of society, the way it divides, and creates institutions - a class ridden society. My art became part of a protest for the oppressed. Secondly, I work out of a spirit of love, or innocence. For example, the portraits I'm doing here are of some children. They have an innocence about them. Children are not self-conscious like adults, who are more difficult to draw. The art reflects this innocence because there is no commercial condition in the production of these pictures I'm doing.

Whatever further outcomes might be in store for Mr. Maguire in São Paulo there is no doubt that his work at the Bienal stands out and is recognised by the people of São Paulo for the immense research that went into it. The very fact that Brian came here and spent so much care and attention to every detail of his work clearly shows. Press interviews and general newspaper coverage, as well as television appearances, still continue to appear long after Maguire left. This determines just how important it was for an artist like Maguire to come to Brazil and draw our attention to the social injustices that, one way or another, tend to be swept away under the carpet. Maguire has given back some of the human dignity that is so necessary here for those who struggle every minute of the day to hold on to what they have.

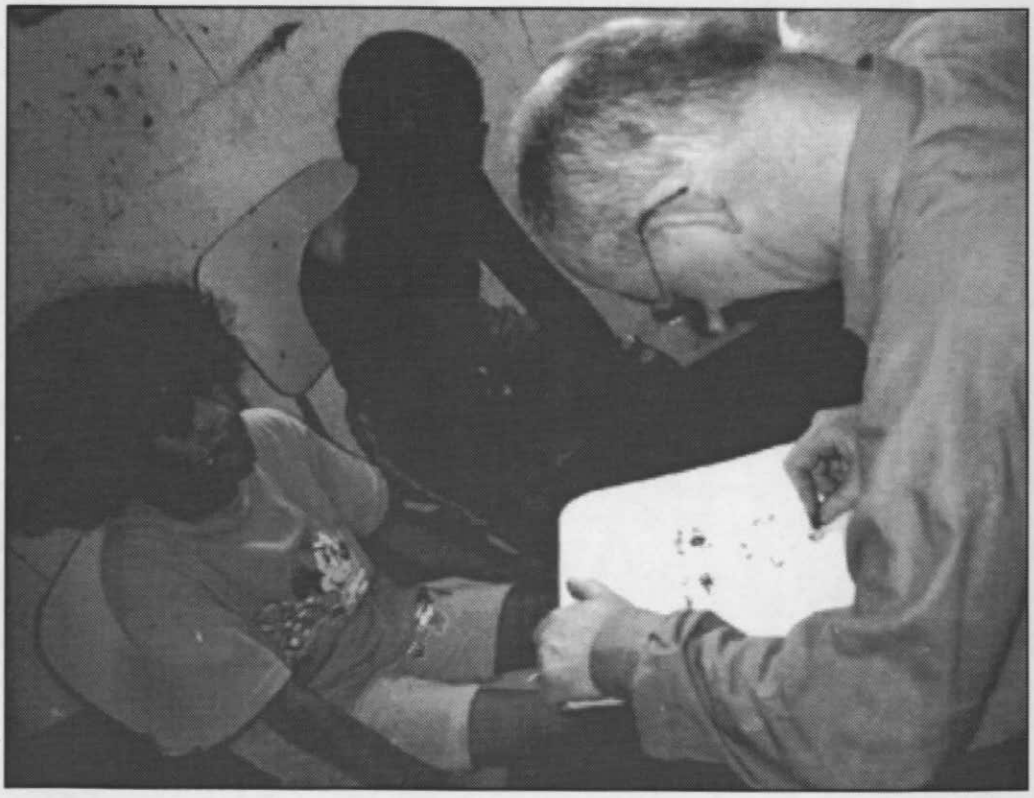
*** This article is dedicated to my mother, Anne.**

A Special thanks to Headmaster Mr. MTM. Casey McCann, for believing in the project, to The Board of Governors and all the teaching staff and pupils, St. Paul's School, and to Mr. Sapsezian and his auxiliary staff.

* W.B.Yeats. "Before the World Was Made" cit. In John Smith. *Arts Betrayed.* London: Herbert Press, 1978. P. 72.



Brian Maguire at Vila Prudente (photographer: James Concagh)



The Critic and the Author

The Feminization of Famine: Enlarging the Inquiry

Maureen Murphy

There is much to praise in Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine. Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (1997). Her book is a bold new analysis of the contemporary evidence about the Irish Great Famine of 1845-9. She has examined the visual and verbal images of famine to discover a pattern of female imagery; she has subjected that pattern to a critical anaylsis, and she has concluded that images of female suffering carry helplessness and hopelessness in their meaning reinforcing the attitude that women are unable to help themselves in such crises.

Kelleher's inter-disciplinary study, a demonstration of the the approach to Irish Studies at Boston College that has proved so effective, considers the contemporary visual images of the Famine in the context of history, literature (particularly William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* [1847] and Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* [1860]) and anthropology and traces Famine themes and images in the work of later Irish writers including Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (1937) and Tim Murphy's play *Famine* (1977). She discovers, for example, that in the twentieth-century representations of the Famine a frequent motif is the death of the female to ensure the survival of the family or the community and that the female figure, the means to express the inexpressible, becomes the metaphor for the sorrowing country.

Finally, and this is perhaps Kelleher's unique contribution to the famine studies that emerged from the observence of the 150th anniversary of the Famine, Kelleher's study is comparative: she tests her theory of the gendered nature of famine representation not only on the images associated with the Irish Famine but also on the images associated with the Bengali Famine of a century later (1943-44). In doing so, Kelleher offers ways to consider how media uses gendered images to create a spectacle of suffering that focuses on the female as victim. Emotional witness to such spectacle establishes the credentials of compassion and commitment. Kelleher mentions President Mary Robinson being moved to tears when she visited Somalia; others of us remember Bobby Kennedy weeping at the malnourished children of Mississippi.

Besides praising this fine book, I would like to suggest further questions and considerations that *The Feminization of Famine* raised for this reader. Central to Kelleher's thesis is the series of Famine illustrations that appeared in *The Illustrated London News*, the world's first illustrated newapaper that began weekly publication in 1842 and is such a valuable source for social historians. In her essay, "The Great Irish Famine 1845-9: Images versus Reality," Margaret Crawford also examines the forty or so illustrations of the Famine published between 1846-1850 mainly views of the south-west. Both Crawford and Kelleher concentrate on the drawings of James Mahoney, a water-colorist from Cork sent by the *The Illustrated London News* in to the field to record the Famine. He contributed a two-part article with twelve illustrations in 1847 called "Sketches in the West of Ireland." It focused on west Cork: Skibbereen and Clonakilty. In 1849-50, there were seven articles with eighteen drawings called "Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the New Poor Law."

Like Kelleher, Crawford is interested in interpreting the drawings to determine the extent to which *The Illustrated London News* provided its readers with an accurate record of conditions in Ireland and like Kelleher, Crawford concludes that the effectiveness of image is related to the political and social content of the subject and that the representation of reality is filtered by the artist. She also observes that literary descriptions are more graphic than the drawings. For example, Crawford notices in "Woman Begging in Clonakilty," an image central to Kelleher's argument, that human suffering is portrayed with anguished facial expression, ragged clothes and limited detail rather than with a clinical representation of the anatomy of starvation.

While I take Kelleher's point that the Mahoney's "Woman Begging in Clonakilty" is an icon of the Famine, some of Mahoney's other images: "Boy and Girl at Cahera," "Searching for Potatoes," and "Ejectment of Irish Tenantry" would support the argument that Famine images are less rather than more gendered. Look at "Boy and Girl at Cahera," the image Crawford identifed as "perhaps the best-known famine illustration." Only their clothes - ragged trousers, tattered skirt - distinguishes their sex. They are both in a field gleaning potatoes. The girl is more actively engaged. Her hand reaches for a small potato to add to those in her apron while the boy hugs his body as he stares at the observer. Behind him is another smaller figure of a woman. The unnamed artist of "Searching for Potatoes" (1849) also switches active and passive gender roles: a woman, identified again by her clothes and long hair, turns the soil with a loy, a boy (her son?) fills a basket with small leavings of potatoes while a male in the background sits with an attitude of despair: head in his hand, eyes downcast.

In the 1848 illustration "Ejectment of Irish Tenantry," the male figure is more active, pleading before the bailiff but he is on his knees making a gesture of supplication that one generally associates with female behavior; however, it is the woman

who is making the more aggressive gesture of grabbing the reins of the bailiff's horse albeit on her knees. Similarly, in two drawings that appeared in *The Illustrated London News* for December 1848, the male figures are passive or absent. In "After the Eviction," the male leans his face on his forearm in a gesture of hopelessness while his wife, with a more placid affect, cradles an infant within the shelter. In "A 'Scalpeen' at Dunmore," a mother and child roof a ruin in the "tumbled" village of Dunmore.

My point here is that the Mahoney images can be interrogated and grouped to make different cases. While taking nothing from Kelleher's argument, I would suggest that *The Illustrated London News* drawings can also make a case for the Famine as an ungendering agent, an episode where gender distinctions were blurred in the interest of the common good: survival. Margaret Mac Curtain argues in "Women, the Vote and Revolution" that gender difference were minimized during the Irish troubles (1916-1923),but they were re-established with the new State when women were relegated to domestic spheres. You could argue a similar scenario for post-Famine Ireland: its marriage patterns designed to accomodate the transfer of land to an single inheriting son and dowered daughter. The image of female as active survivor is not a figure in the post-famine Irish landscape; she is, however, the animating spirit of the plucky emigrant girl.

Kelleher's analysis of Indian famine literature suggests some interesting comparisons and departure points for further scholarship. It would be interesting to know something about the Bengali famine in the contexts of Irish-Indian relations and of Bengali history and politics. Declan Kiberd has discussed Irish and Indian affinities in "Ireland and the End of Empire," an essay in his *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* that describes the links between Irish and Indian nationalist movements in the early twenties. Eamon DeValera's 1920 talk to the Friends of the Freedom of India mentioned British mishandling of famines in Ireland and India. What was the Irish response to the Bengali Famine? What kind of accounts of that Famine appeared in Irish papers? Was there any kind of Irish outreach to the Indian poor?

While Kelleher is right that the Bengali Famine became an argument for Indian independence and that Bengali was the nationalist heartland, the longer range grievance, the one with the most severe consequences for the Indian sub-continent, was Lord George Nathaniel Curzon's 1905 Partition of Bengal into predominantly Hindu West Bengal and predominantly Muslim East Bengal. The partition was rescinded in 1911 partition as an administrative solution had been put in place however temporarily. As well as that, the interim period saw a campaign of terrorism that included assassins who claimed their victims were an offering to Kali.

In the section titled "Famine as Female: the Fate of Kali" Kelleher discusses the figure of the Hindu "black goddess" in the Indian literature of famine. While Kelleher appears to concetrate on Indian famine literature in the context of Hindu mythology, I wonder would Kelleher have something to tell us about the way Muslim writers addressed the Bengali Famine, particularly if they too appropriated mythological sources. Are there differences in the treatment of the Bengali Famine in this much politicized state?

Much of Kelleher's discussion of female images in Bengali literature concerns prostitution and the sale of children. At first glance there would appear to be little to compare with conditions in Ireland during the Great Famine. Kelleher cites the paucity of reference to prostitution in Famine accounts and discusses the rare appearance of an Irish prostitute in Famine literature:the figure of Bridie, a woman who sells herself to get money to feed a pregnant woman, in Gerard Healy's 1945 Famine play *The Black Stranger*. Kelleher is right about the rare mention of prostitution in Famine accounts; however, the work Maria Luddy has done in prostitution, especially her chapter "Prostitution and Rescue Work" in her *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (1995) offers a starting point for further investigation of this subject.

Finally, on the sale of children. Kelleher describes the sale of girls into prostitution in exchange for money and food and the sale of boys and girls in the belief that children would survive in the household of the buyer. Again, there appears to be no comparable Irish tradition at first sight; however, the workhouse numbers indicate that children were left at the workhouse or abandoned outright with the understanding, perhaps, that such abandoned children would become public charges. For example, one-third of the Irish workhouse girls sent to Australia aboard the *Thomas Arbuthnot* which arrived in Sydney in February 1850 were not orphans. Their parents were unable to look after them. The work that Caroline Chishom did with her colonization society that provided loans for passage to try to help immigants, including the Irish servant girls with whom she worked, bring out family members to Australia suggests that at least some Irish "orphans" were reunited with their kin.

Let me finish my comments with a few words about Asenath Nicholson's *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, an account that Kelleher considers in her chapter "The Female Gaze: Nineteenth-Century Women's Famine Narratives." Nicholson is an example of the female who devises strategies for survival, not for herself but for others. Kelleher argues that such women are featured less in famine imagery than women who suffer. In her discussion of Nicholson's account of the Famine, Kelleher admires Nicholson as a witness who was not simply a woman at the keyhole gazing at the spectacle of Famine suffering. She mentions Nicholson's work distributing Famine relief. I'd like to pause at Kelleher's work distribution to suggest the ways that

Nicholson "crossed the threshold" to minister to the Irish poor and why I believe hers is such a model of charity to take from the Irish Famine.

Early on Nicholson determined that she could not save everyone but that she could save some and she dedicated herself to that mission. She ran her own soup kitchen on Cook Street; she went into the homes of her people in the Liberties and made food for them; she crossed the city each morning distributing bread as she walked; she collected and distributed clothing; she prayed with sufferers; she wrote widely to her friends, to the press and to people who could be helpful. In her writing she used various literary genres: parable, biography, satire to make her case for the Irish poor. As Kelleher observes, Nicholson believed the Famine was neither a natural disaster nor a Divine judgement, it was man-made and as such needed basic changes in economics and politics to prevent a repetition of 1845-49. For example, she believed with John Bright in : "Abolition of primogeniture for underived property, registry of property, reduction of the enormous charges for stamps for the sale and purchase of land, security of tenure for the practical laborers of the soil, abolition of the Established Church in Ireland, extension of the sufferage and reinforcement of the representature in the Imperial Parliament" (Nicholson 166).

An aspect of the politicization of Famine philanthropy which is seldom noticed is the moral dilemma that faced the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends about whether or not to accept Famine relief from slave states. (They did and Nicholson approved though she was an ardent abolitionist, the friend of the Tappan brothers who launched the American Anti-Slavery Society from her temperance boarding house in New York.)

Kelleher makes an intersting comparison between Nicholson and her contemporary, the Irish writer Maria Edgeworth, on the subject of "gratuitious" relief. I don't think they were as far apart as Kelleher suggests. Both believed that employment was the only answer. Employment is the *leitmotif* of Nicholson's 1847 account of her first visit to Ireland, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger* which can be read as a Jeremiad in its stern warning of the inevitable disaster brought on by the want of work. She was unimpressed with O'Connell because she believed Ireland need work more than Repeal. By the time Nicholson was working in Erris in the bleak winter of 1847-48, the need had moved beyond employment schemes to direct relief to keep the poor alive.

It is my impression from my own field work in North Longford that while chronically impoverished, they did not suffer to the same extent as the poor of the west. For one thing, as Mary E. Daly has pointed out in *The Famine in Ireland*, resident landlords like the Edgeworths were critical to local relief efforts (Daly 84). Both women were concerned that those receiving aid would be treated with dignity and one can be sure that the barrels of food that arrived from America for Edgeworth and for Nicholson aboard the *Macedonia* were distributed with compassion and tact.

Finally, it would be interesting to see how Kelleher's famine model would work when read in the context of the literature and history of hunger in the Brazilian Northeast. Would we find Kelleher's paradigm with its recurring images of mothers and children's suffering used to "express the inexpressible"?

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The Feminization of Famine by Margaret Kelleher
The Author's Response to Maureen Murphy's Article.

Margaret Kelleher

Introduction

My study, *The Feminization of Famine*, was published in 1997 and thus became part of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Great Irish Famine (1845-1851). As a doctoral student in Boston College, I became interested in the very different images of famine portrayed in Irish texts, ranging from Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond* (published in 1860 and based on Trollope's observations while living in Ireland during the famine period) to Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (first published in 1937 and arguably the most successful Irish famine narrative).

When studying famine literature, one confronts very quickly some of the most basic questions concerning literary representation: is language adequate to the depiction of the horrors of famine; more specifically, is a genre such as the novel suitable to the task; and what strategies of representation are employed by writers to cope with the literary challenges they encounter? What I've called "the feminization of famine" is one of the most significant and obvious patterns of representation in famine texts, i.e. when writers seek to depict the crisis of famine in individual terms, they employ images of women – most frequently, images of the mother and child – to convey the extent of the catastrophe and the challenges posed to human relations. Thus, recurring figures in famine texts – past and present – include the mother unable to feed her child, a child suckling at the breast of the dead mother, a woman unable to bury her child, a mother snatching food from her child or, her heroic opposite, a woman sacrificing all in order to feed her children.

This is not to say that these are the only famine images. Nor should it imply that only women suffered or suffer in famine conditions. But what is clear is that writers, when faced with a crisis such as famine – a crisis in society and a feared crisis in representation – turn more often to female figures, as a means both of portraying social breakdown and of evading the feared breakdown in literary representation. Why this is the case, and what are the effects of these images for a reader's or viewer's understanding of famine, emerged as the central questions to be explored in my work. And my conclusions included the following paradox: images of mothers and their children rank among the most affecting of famine scenes yet can also serve to obscure rather than extend an understanding of why famine has occurred. Scenes such as a mother unable to feed her child spell collapse in the primordial order yet such conventional associations of the female with nature and domesticity run the risk of suggesting that famine is a natural rather than political crisis, one which is inevitable rather than avoidable.

Response

I am most grateful to Maureen Murphy for her detailed and generous comments. She raises many important subjects; I would like to respond in particular to three: the visual imagery of famine, the importance of inter-disciplinary approaches, and the issues inherent to comparative study.

As Murphy highlights in her article, "visual and verbal images of famine" deserve attention. My study concentrates on the written word, examining images of famine in narrative descriptions, ranging from novels and stories to eye-witness accounts and travel writing, with brief references to contemporary visual images of the time. Murphy's fuller commentary on the *Illustrated London News* images, given in this issue, together with the analysis by Margaret Crawford to whom she refers, clearly demonstrates the value of extending scrutiny to visual imagery of famine. In addition, the work of famine historian Peter Gray and art historian Catherine Marshall has restored to attention a much wider range of visual sources; this was also demonstrated in the four-part television documentary on the Great Famine made in 1995 by Irish film-maker Louis Marcus. A number of these images are also available from various web-sites concerned with Irish famine material.

The specific questions raised by a study of famine sources have also more general implications. At the recent ACIS conference in Florida, April 1998, a deepening interest in the visual aspects of Irish culture was evident, one example being the Boston College panel, "Redressing Cathleen", a study of images in art and literature. A number of important publications on Irish art have also recently emerged from Boston College, and the college has paved the way for other academic institutions, in hosting a number of significant exhibitions by Irish artists. The attention paid by the ABEI newsletter to Irish artists is also a pioneering contribution to the study of Irish visual culture, and the importance of the Sao Paulo Bienal exhibition suggests that Brazilian Irish Studies will continue to be an important location for such enquiry.

Other papers presented at the ACIS conference looked at the importance of female representations in other contexts, such as Mary Helen Thuente's work on United Irishman iconography and Perry Curtis's work on "images of Erin" in Irish-American political cartoons. Up to now, the "aisling" figure, "Cathleen Ni Houlihan" and "Mother Ireland" have been the best-known from the Irish tradition; yet much work remains to be done on the origins and use of these figures. There exists a great danger of oversimplifying the genealogy of female representations, of seeing an eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century image as having an uninterrupted or unproblematic link with the Celtic sovereignty goddess, for example, or of translating all female figures into personifications of Ireland. The detailed work of English critic Marina Warner on what she calls the "allegory of the female form" and her careful attention to historical context is an important model for future Irish studies. In a related point, a striking feature of contemporary Irish women's writing is its refusal of the allegorical form: from Eavan Boland's prose work *Object Lessons* to the poetry of Boland, Paula Meehan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, one can trace a marked determination to restore the individual details of women's experience – the complexities and realities which could not "fit" in previous idealisations.

Women's studies, as a discipline, in Ireland and elsewhere, has from the first recognised the importance and benefits of an interdisciplinary approach. In the case of a topic like famine studies, an interdisciplinary approach is almost inevitable. I was fortunate to have available the work of Cormac Ó Gráda, an economic historian who has also published extensively on famine folklore and famine songs. Other models came from my post-graduate studies in North America and, more recently, from the example of close friends who work or have worked for Irish non-governmental associations, in the development field. Their work is a constant reminder that the issues of hunger and injustice which I discuss in relation to the past are still very much with us, and that the close scrutiny of images of disaster, together with a questioning of their political function, is equally urgent in the present. The postscript to the book aims to address, though very briefly, these more contemporary implications in relation to media and journalistic depiction of recent crises and has, I would hope, resonances for various situations, be it famine in Somalia or hunger in the Brazilian North-East.

Finally, Maureen Murphy's positive response to the comparative aspect of the volume is most welcome. Comparative studies remain at a very early stage in Irish studies, and are treated with more than a little suspicion in some contexts within Irish academia. Why this is the case is not clear: some of the opposition is based on an often justifiable fear that comparisons will obscure specific historical and cultural differences; but in other cases the hostility seems to run much more deeply, prematurely closing avenues for exploration and adopting a very defensive position towards one's own academic "territory".

I would suggest that Irish studies "at home" has much to learn from its colleagues abroad as to the benefits of comparative studies: my recent visit to Brazil, to universities in São Paulo, João Pessoa, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, certainly convinced me of this. In the case of famine studies, rich potential for comparative work exists between Irish novels and Brazilian writings by Graciliano Ramos, João Cabral de Melo Neto and others. In addition, the future film adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* (screenplay already completed by Roddy Doyle) will provide a very interesting opportunity to analyse Glauber Rocha's theories of the aesthetics of famine in a comparative context. My thanks to the students and staff of USP, UFPB, UFRJ and UFMG who made me aware of these and other potential comparisons.

The 150th commemoration of the Great Irish Famine has now ended at an official level in Ireland, regrettably so since famine mortality continued long after 1847, to 1848, 1849, 1850 and 1851. Yet already much of the silence long surrounding the famine in popular knowledge, historical studies and literary representations, has been broken and a remarkable level of interest, among Irish people of all ages and backgrounds, has been displayed concerning this episode of our past. What consequences, if any, this greater knowledge of the past will have for our engagement with the present, culturally and politically, remains to be seen.

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Poetry

A Note on Paula Meehan

Maurice Harmon

Paula Meehan writes of women's experiences - of love and loss, sexual union, miscarriage, pregnancy, marriage under strain, longing and passion, - without being self-conscious or defensive. Although her poetry often reflects the poverty and deprivation of Dublin's inner city, her response is warm and positive. Her natural exuberance spills into a poetry often characterised by long incantatory lines. That is her the dominant style, the other, more restrained, has shorter lines and stanzas. But the voice is similar in each.

In *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) which incorporates two previous collections, *Return and No Blame* (1984) and *Reading the Sky* (1985), three poems are of particular interest - 'Buying Winkles,' 'The Pattern' and 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks'. In the first of these a child is sent to buy winkles for her mother. It is a magical journey. Although the urban surroundings are bleak, her imagination transforms them: she jumps over the cracks in the pavement, waves to women in doorways, sees the moon as a bonus, the rain as something that makes winkles a wet and glistening blue, pubs as warm places with golden mirrors, and looks forward to the winkle-seller who will show her how to extract a winkle from its shell, the 'sweetest extra winkle/that brought the sea to me.' (17-18) It is light-hearted, playful, exact in its details, creating a vivid picture of the child in a particular place, her zest for life, the mystery and delight in her eye.

'The Pattern' which is also a series of recollected scenes begins with a memory of conflict between daughter and mother - 'the sting of her hand/across my face' - then develops warm portraits of the mother, as she waxes and polishes the floor and the children skate about her, or when she remakes an old dress.

> I wore that dress
> with little grace. To me it spelt poverty,
> the stigma of the second hand. (71)

When she knitted the daughter had to hold the skein. 'One of these days,' she'd say, 'I must teach you to follow a pattern.' The pattern the daughter makes is the poem's piecing together of these changing and contrasting scenes.

'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' sympathises with the fifteen year old girl who gave birth at the grotto. Meehan uses natural imagery as objective correlatives for the agony and tragedy of the event. She assembles images of bleak weather, trees twisting in agony, men hunting down other men, dying lakes, the agony and crucifixion of Christ. In springtime the setting can be lovely, in midsummer there is such a breaking forth of fertility the Virgin herself longs to be incarnate and sexual. Autumn has its pageantry, but in November, the season in which the child-mother died in childbirth, 'there is/no respite from the keening of the wind.' Even the dead in the graveyard implore the sky for judgement. The statue remembers the child coming to the grotto.

> and though she cried out to me in extremis
> I did not move,
> I didn't lift a finger to help her,
> I didn't intercede with heaven,
> nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (44)

Part of the effectiveness of this poem is its use of the language, rhythm and tone of religious supplication, of prayers to the Virgin who now herself implores the sun for pity and forgiveness. The girl's isolation is rendered more pitifully by the failure of the Mother of Perpetual Succour, the one of whom it is claimed that never was it known that anyone who fled to her protection was left unaided.

Returning to the tenement world of Gardiner Street, just north of the Liffey, 'A Child's Map of Dublin' in *Pillow Talk* (1994) counters the destruction and changes that progress has brought with an imaginative repossession of the lost land and the creation of a private world of freedom and love.

The stuffed seagull in the Natural History Museum -'childhood guide/to the freedom and ecstasy of flight' - acts as a springboard to the celebration of personal freedom.

In the updraught
of a sudden love, I walk the northside streets
that whelped me; not a brick remains
of the tenement I reached the age of reason in. Whole
streets are remade, the cranes erect over Eurocrat schemes
down the docks. (14)

That associative leap leads her to recall herself as a child and her fantasies. Written as an address to a lover, it ends with the couple climbing into bed to explore the charts of their bodies, the 'wonders' to be found and with a romantic invitation.

Come, let's play in the backstreets and tidal flats
till we fall off the edge of the known world,
and drown. (15)

'A Child's Map of Dublin', a love poem to a lost place, is a loving, loosely-formed recreation of the past, an introduction of a loved region to a lover, and finally a happy descent into sensuality. The quality of innocent, happy-go-lucky development, a matter of tone, rhythm and association makes the poem attractive.

Meehan's natural rhythm is seen again in 'The Other Woman', a long, chanted line, stanzas built on run-on lines in which the spoken rhythm carries meaning across the line-endings so that what might seem awkward is subsumed in the voice's modulations and rhythms. She wants, she says, in 'The Standing Army' to be a poet who can provide 'chant' and tribal songs' for a people 'weary of metrical talk', and talk in the academies.

In 'Handmaid' the language of religious devotion is used to convey a passionate human relationship. In 'Playing House' the sense of arrival and relief is gently poignant. Many poems deal with the strain and stress of relationships, this is a quiet statement about making a home.

Home, you say, let this be
a home for you. Unpack
your clothes, hang them
beside mine. Put your sharp
knife in my kitchen, your books
in my stacks. Let your face
share my mirrors. Light
fires in my hearth. Your talismans
are welcome. Break bread
with me. Settle. Settle. (p.28)

Running through the poems, as an undercurrent, are the rhythms, the intensity and the directness of prayer, and indeed of the modes of supplication and response, prayer made and prayer responded to. In 'The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me' the mother speaks as a benevolent figure, a trusted, protective presence giving reassurance, bestowing strength and confidence. While some of Meehan's poems express anger at the failure of the Catholic Church, at a deeper level her spirit is open to renewal. The rhythms absorbed in childhood surface as strengthening forces.

Because I am your mother I will protect you
as I promised you in childhood.
You will walk freely on the planet,
my beloved daughter. Fear not
the lightning bolts of a Catholic god, or any other,
for I have paced my body and my soul between you
and all harm. (p.38-39)

There is in Meehan's work a purity of feeling. She is blessed by an instinctive faith in herself, in the powers within her psyche. Her work is permeated by this spiritual energy, in its language and rhythms, in the resonant voice, in the capacity to absorb and transcend life's harshness and to celebrate life's beauty and value.

Meehan is a poet of the streets, particularly of Dubin's inner city and, more recently, of the southern squares. In the background are the tragedies, the cruelties, the deprivations. She walks through the streets, brings back reports of what she has

seen, views of cloud and moon, weather reports, the drowned young man, the battered prostitute, the abandoned girl. Resisting an art that refuses to delineate life's harsh details, she wants to show 'the kinks of my habitual distress,' to test the 'painted doll against the harsh light/I live by, against the brutal merciless sky.'
('Not Your Muse', 24)

She is also a frankly erotic poet. 'Laburnum' exposes the pain in love. It may be laburnum time but the speaker's sense of loss and abandonment fills the poem. In its three line stanzas the poem's simple diction describes the details of the speaker's room, its evidence of dejection, the persona's numbing grief, the determination to face realities. The bleak admonitory address captures the sense of despair as the poem rounds to its conclusion, repeating the descriptive detail of the opening stanza.

> You will live breath
> by breath. The beat of your own heart
> will scourge you. You'll wait
>
> in vain, for he's gone from you.
> And every night is a long
> slide to the dawn you
>
> wake to, terrified in your ordinary room
> on an ordinary morning, say
> mid May, say the time of laburnum. (27)

She is one of the few poets who can release feeling in this direct way - naked, personal, with little artifice. The directness of language, the naturalness of images, reminiscent of folk poetry, avoids sophistication, avoids complexity, gives the impression of being artless.

> Go to your window, look out -
> the moon is safe above the clouds
> growing as our child grows in me
> safely, a secret still.
> I inhabit
> the rain. Lean out. I'll wash
> over your body, cleanse you of burdens
> you've carried too long, rinse you of grief
> and ghosts of old that batter your heart. (30)

On the other hand 'Pillow Talk' carries a warning: she is two women, one protective, the other destructive. The poem has strength of utterance and urgency of tone. It contrasts the imagery of romantic assignation with the imagery of fierce pursuit. As a warrior queen, a mythic huntress, she tears men apart. When her lover is 'panic-stricken', it is because he senses her power. She cannot save him from that 'demon'.

A different complexity is found in 'Not alone the rue in my best garden...' which tells the story of love and loss through its metaphor of tending the garden. The speaker and her husband prepare the soil together. He is a painter who portrays the depths of hell, then overpaints it with a green-eyed young fiddler. But she cannot follow suit. Despite the year-long cultivation, the eventual flowering and the solace it brings, she goes away. She returns to the abandoned husband and the abandoned garden. They grieve over what they have lost. She feels guilty and pleads for forgiveness.

The poem has a strong narrative base, is founded on particulars but escaping the circumstances, rises to artistic play. The imagination enjoys its ability to recreate. Making the garden is not altogether different from making a poem. It reminds us how lyrical Meehan can be and how central to the strength of her work is the presence of an animated persona whose changing perspectives and reactions enliven the lines. Even though this poem has tighter lines, they loop onward, reflecting the forward-looking, varying reactions of the speaker.

> Mornings I walked out after a shower
> had tamped the dust and turned
> the volume up on birdsong,
> on scent, on colour, I counted myself
> the luckiest woman born, to gain such

an inland kingdom, three wild
rushy acres, edged by the Eslin
trickily looping us below the hill,
our bass line to the Shannon
and the fatal rhythm of the Atlantic swell. (p.43)

'Birthday Present' also works through allegory and stays clear of its causes. A child's father comes to claim his child. Because she distrusts his soft hands and their short lifeline, she lies to protect the child. The brevity and incompleteness release the poem. It can gesture towards explanation and experience. It can provide short-hand version of events while keeping its freedom. 'Birthday Present' and the closing poems in Pillow Talk are cryptic and riddling, suggesting more than they declare, hiding feelings, touching on issues but keeping a distance from them. Their slightly mystical nature is in keeping with the religious element in much of Meehan's work.

Born in 1955 in Dublin's inner city she belongs to a new generation of women poets who have a freedom to speak as women that had to be fought for by the genersation ahead of her, including her mentor, Eavan Boland. As yet Meehan's full powers have still to be realised but, as these two collections show, she is a poet of considerable power and promise. Her most recent collection, *Mysteries of the Home* (1996) is a selection from the two previous volumes.

'Unroofed scope'?: Heaney in the Nineties

Rui Carvalho Homem

For the reception of Seamus Heaney's poetry, the 1990s began amidst expectations of change. Many of the poet's more attentive readers made no secret of their belief that some aspects of his writing and of the fashioning of his poetic self which had been prominent throughout the seventies and eighties had by then overstayed their critical welcome. On his part, and in a number of consecutive statements (as in a September 1990 interview), Heaney himself acknowledged a change in his outlook and his poetic ambitions which he characterized as a growing interest in 'the poetry of clarity and plain statement', 'a poetry of window glass' rather than of 'stained glass'. He further stated his belief 'that the pleasures of the language itself and the sportiveness of inventing and just the simplicity of being whatever your volitions and impulses are - that they're enough to be going on with'[1]. On the same occasion, Heaney associated the change in his writing with, on the one hand, 'a slight sense of eeriness and airiness' derived from 'flying on aeroplanes back and forth across the Atlantic'; and, on the other hand, the experience of 'getting a bit older'[2].

In the context of Heaney's carefully designed and self-explained *oeuvre*, such statements about a new mood heralded, in fact, a new book - and were accompanied by the appearance, in several periodicals, of poems whose epistemological, representational and moral universe was to be perceived as different. When *Seeing Things* came out in 1991, the visionary element, which loomed among the implications of the title, was supported by reference in the blurb to the way in which the poet was 'ready to re-imagine experience and "to credit marvels"', and thus to mingle 'the ordinary and the transfigured'. Reviewers would also, understandably, highlight the extent to which *Seeing Things* stood out for its difference, Michael Hofmann calling it 'a departure in style, tone and purpose'[3], Lachlan MacKinnon declaring '*Seeing Things* [to be] a particular pleasure (...) because in it Heaney has learnt not to sound like himself'[4], and Peter Levi's ecstatic appraisal of this new book by his successor as Professor of Poetry at Oxford ending on the statement: 'It is as if our minds had been refurnished'[5].

A note common to many of these statements was relief that Seamus Heaney now seemed to have left behind some of those aspects of his writing which had become Heaneyspeak - whether they were the spade-and-bog, basic rural scope of reference which had been one of Heaney's hallmarks from his poetic début with *Death of a Naturalist*; the Jungian conjurings of earthy and inner darkness inaugurated with *Door into the Dark* and feeding into the mythopoeic treatment of history which culminated in the first part of *North*; or, above all, the long-entertained dilemmas on the poet's artistic and political responsibilities, which had, though in varying forms, extended from the second part of *North* through the poetry of the late seventies and into the eighties, duly supported by elaborate, even if indirect, justification in the volumes of essays. On the poet's conscience pains, Patrick Crotty would declare, in his review of *Seeing Things*:

> Gone is the conflict (...) between poetry's imaginative and civic responsibilities: the underlying engagement with history (...) has now simply been broken off. (...) it is good to see him dispense with the breast-beatings about poetic accountability [6]

And some of the other aspects mentioned above would be the object of one of the most radical characterizations of the change in Heaney's poetics, proposed by John Wilson Foster - in a statement memorable no less for its clear-cut quality than for its discreet but pervasive irony:

> To telegraph the shift: poetry's proper element is no longer seen as earth but as air; poetry is no longer a door into the dark but a door into the light; it must climb to its proper light, no longer descend to its proper dark. (...) The Hughesian raid into darkness, the troubling secrecies underfoot, rich opacities of sound, rootedness: these that brought Heaney his fame are to be subjected to a Copernican revolution, a shift from earth's centrality. [7]

This passage occurs, not in a review, but rather in an essay with the title 'Heaney's Redress'; but its major difference vis-à-vis the statements quoted above is that this one is dated 1990, one year before *Seeing Things* - and, in fact, it locates the 'new' features it describes in Heaney's work of the 1980s, deriving its title from that of Heaney's inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1989. This very fact will support the contention, which will prove central to this essay, that, however appealing it may be, Foster's phrase 'a Copernican revolution', with its implication of a complete break with a previous and incompatible model, actually misrepresents a shift which is gradual, carefully negotiated, and conducive to strategies of writing and representation in no way mutually incompatible with those which they balance rather than simply supersede. (It is only fair to say the phrase in

question does little justice, to begin with, to Foster's perceptive and discriminating essay, alert as it is to subtlety, rather than intent on the clear-cut and the simplistic). It will thus be my purpose to trace some of the ways in which an apparently sudden, 'revolutionary' shift is in fact a long-prepared transition; I will further argue that not only are some of the features of change already discernible in collections previous to *Seeing Things*, but that both this collection and Heaney's most recent, *The Spirit Level* (1996), contain much that bears out a concern with continuities, with affording the reader the comforts of the expected, rather than exclusively producing the shock and the excitement of the new.

The initial stage for developing this argument will have to be, however, the recognition of some of those 'things-to-be-seen' in Heaney's 1991 collection which support the perception of its difference. At their most obvious, they take the form of evanescent moments of illumination, or of the experience of being translated from the dimension of material and objective existence into that of insubstantial being and unlimited space. Perhaps one should, in this respect, take up one of the definitions of its title which the sub-sequence 'Lightenings' proposes at its very end, bringing into play both the homophonous *lightning*, with its implication of the sudden production of light, and the alternative meaning of the release of a burden:

> A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares
> With pure exhilaration before death –
> The good thief in us harking to the promise! [8]

In another poem, a brief ice-skating episode can be represented as involving

> A farewell to surefootedness, a pitch
>
> Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves. ("Squarings, 3.Crossings, xxviii", *ST* 86)

And, in yet another poem, the experience of crossing a serene landscape on a train journey can be described as a switch into another dimension, an altered perception of time being concomitant with that suddenly different awareness of space:

> Air spanned, passage waited, the balance rode,
>
> Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store
> Witnessed itself already taking place
> In a time marked by assent and by hiatus. ('Squarings, 2.Settings, xiv', *ST* 70)

Passages such as these could no doubt be read in the context of what Ken Robinson, in a 1992 article, chose to call 'Putting Words to Wonders' - a study of the transcendent or 'non-relational' moment, characterised by an apparent suspension both of time and of any clear separation of subject and object, which Robinson considers in its philosophical lineage as well as in literary representations especially from the Romantics to the Moderns:

> I am concerned with poets (largely, but not exclusively, Romantic and post-Romantic poets) who share the conviction that spots of time have a peculiar significance. For such poets these paradoxical moments are not simply an escape from but a transcendence of the workaday. They constitute a special form of being (...) or a special form of knowledge which is neither rationalist nor empiricist. [9]

Seamus Heaney is not among the poets considered in Robinson's article, but several poems in *Seeing Things* could have been designed to illustrate his point, in particular the evocation in 'Markings' of teenage football matches played at dusk, sensorial perception soon becoming indistinguishable from mental representations, imaginative impulse, dream images or intimations of a transcendent nature:

> Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
> As the light died and they kept on playing
> Because by then they were playing in their heads
> And the actual kicked ball came to them
> Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
> Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
> Sounded like effort in another world...
> It was quick and constant, a game that never need
> Be played out. Some limit had been passed,
> There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
> In time that was extra, unforeseen and free. ("Markings", *ST* 8)

The limit beyond which an altered, time-abstracted perception takes place is characteristically imprecise, and the notion that one emerges from such moments with the awareness of a spatial, and not just temporal, alterity is also made explicit; in Robinson's words, 'Once we come to ourselves after such moments, we seem to have been elsewhere'[10]. Likewise, the following poem, dealing once more with recollections of football-playing, is pervaded by the indistinction between subject and object peculiar to the 'non-relational moment' - to quote Robinson once more, 'whilst they are happening the subject is not aware of himself as subject or of the object as object'[11]:

> Was it you
> or the ball that kept going
> beyond you, amazingly
> higher and higher
> and ruefully free? ('Three Drawings. 1.The Point", *ST* 10)

And this sudden indistinction will be followed, within the same poetic tripytch of which this was the first poem, by the experience of dissolution in space, again characteristic of the 'non-relational moment'[12] - in this case, through an allusion to an episode in Nordic mythology, as an instance of expansion within a liquid and uncontained environment:

> The hole he smashed in the boat
> opened, the way Thor's head
> opened out there on the sea.
> He felt at one with space,
>
> unroofed and obvious -
> surprised in his empty arms
> like some fabulous high-catcher
> coming down without the ball. ("3.A Haul", *ST* 12)

Something that stands out in Heaney's representations of the experience of release or liberation which may, to some extent, set it apart in the literary lineage of the 'non-relational moment', is the fact that it is so often rooted in ordinary circumstances - Heaney's ability to produce the uncommon out of the common finding indeed its clearest demonstration in *Seeing Things*. That ability, which already points towards my general argument of the basic compatibility of 'old' and 'new' Heaney, finds a particularly emblematic instance in 'The Pitchfork', a poem ostensibly about one of those farm implements which, *par excellence*, stood for the earthy, unidyllical rurality upon which so much of this poet's early popularity was based. But the significance of the pitchfork and the contexts from which it can derive its meaning are broadened and diversified when other objects are juxtaposed with it, from a javelin, ready to be held and thrown by warrior or athlete, to the farm implement's technological antithesis in the form of a space probe. It will be indeed as space probe that the pitchfork will be abstracted from the bounds of finite space and represented on a cosmic journey in which emptiness, light and silence complement one another. The eyesight which gave it this shape is redirected from the thrust and threat which the image of the javelin involved to its benign counterpart on that 'other side' the probe might reach; whether the allusion is to an intergalactic contact or to an intimation of a divine presence is ultimately irrelevant or deliberately undecided:

> an other side
> Where perfection - or nearness to it - is imagined
> Not in the aiming but the opening hand. ("The Pitchfork", *ST* 23)

These are the closing lines of the poem, and it cannot be accidental that the opening lines of the following poem juxtapose an empirical realization of the physics of centrifugal and centripetal forces with the metaphysics of ascribing them to an insubstantial intervention:

> There's a shadow boost, a giddy strange assistance
> That happens when you swing a loaded basket.
> The lightness of the thing seems to diminish
> The actual weight of what's being hoisted in it. ('A Basket of Chestnuts', *ST* 24)

The conflation of the opposite qualities of 'lightness' and 'weight' seems, in fact, to loom large enough in Heaney's creative design at this stage for it to become one of the *leitmotive* of *Seeing Things*, signalling the reformed continuity of such persistent and varied themes of his work as the telluric vs. the celestial, the objects and circumstances characteristic of domestic life, and the transgenerational continuum seen at its clearest in the form of family legacies. The balanced representation of earth

and sky could be found in one of the poems of 'Lightenings', when, looking at the pools of stagnant water in a quarry, which mirrored the starry sky - 'all that cargoed brightness' - against the hardness of that ground, the poet asks:

> could you reconcile
> What was diaphanous there with what was massive? ('Squarings, 1.Lightenings, x', *ST* 64)

With its closing line, the same poem would further associate this opposition with that between the auditory and the visual: 'Shield your eyes, look up and face the music' (*ST* 64) - the colloquialism of the closing words conveying the boldness of deflecting the sight from its previous telluric fixation to the contemplation of space, and the music standing in this case for the visual attraction of the stars (with a possible allusion to the music of the spheres as well).

It is at this point inevitable to remember the overwhelming role played by the auditory in earlier phases of Seamus Heaney's poetry, in that it was both the preferred sense for the poetic subject to know the reality he gave a voice to, and the medium in which many of the rhetorical effects peculiar to Heaney's first volumes - onomathopoeia, alliteration, assonance, the whole range of phonetically based devices - became manifest. Heaney's essays would also insist on the auditory as a decisive poetic factor in poetry's genesis as also in its reception (with reference in particular to Eliot's concept of 'the auditory imagination'[13]) - culminating, in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, in the maxim: 'A sin against the ear is the poetic equivalent of the sin against the Holy Spirit'[14]. But in *Seeing Things* the auditory emphasis is indeed to be refashioned, and the subtlest and at the same time most emblematic sign of that shift and its implications is the 'replacement', in another poem of the sub-sequence 'Lightenings', of Heaney's famous phrase 'the music of what happens'[15], which very clearly established the link between writing and the level of fact and event, by 'the music of the arbitrary', to which Heaney would add, a few lines below, the injunctions: 'Improvise. Make free' ('Lightenings, v', *ST* 59).

The shift to light and vision would converge with the already mentioned theme of the domestic in 'The Skylight', one of the sonnets in 'Glanmore Revisited', a sequence explicitly concerned with the poet's return to the rural retreat which he had celebrated in the original 'Glanmore Sonnets', in *Field Work*. But the dimension of experience and the poetic representation against which this sonnet pits both itself and the new poetic attitude is actually previous to that - it could refer back to a poem like 'Storm on the Island', in *Death of a Naturalist*[16], and its celebration of the domestic as a cosy dark core, closed off from the world, lit only by the *focus* of the hearth; as Heaney now acknowledges (significantly in the past),

> I liked it low and closed,
> Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
> Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
> The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.

The sestet brings with it the change into the light and the open air, and the unequivocal sense of release and of the miraculous, of life renewed:

> But when the slates came off, extravagant
> Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
> For days I felt like an inhabitant
> Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
> Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
> Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.
>
> ("Glanmore Revisited, 7.The Skylight", *ST* 37)

The same willingness to convert from the heaviness of materiality and an attachment to the ground to the 'lightness' of a new look on the ordinary will be represented in 'The Settle Bed'. The title is descriptive of an object which concentrates the themes of the domestic and of the family legacy (it has been inherited by the poet), an object which, at the outset, stands for the weight and the solidity of that which has been made to stand still, defining its space, rooting itself in a definitive manner. But these qualities, which determined so much of Heaney's writing in previous books, are now to be combined with, and partially transcended by, the leap from a perception of the material to the free and delirious working of the imagination, which can take in the image of a shower of beds, as well as produce a *dictum* which cannot be overvalued:

> to conquer that weight,
>
> Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven
> Like some nonsensical vengeance come on the people,

Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is given

Can always be reimagined (*ST* 28-9)

It will not prove difficult to find an occasion to return to this maxim, but for the moment I would like to concentrate on one of the reasons provided by Heaney himself for the prominence of a reconsideration of the home-and-family theme in *Seeing Things*: the poet's awareness of ageing, of a post-paternal moment in which children have left and, most importantly, the previous generation has already died. Heaney has been explicit - notoriously so in a 1995 interview[17] - about the connection between the emotional shock of the death of his parents, and the consequential awareness of being now in the front line of the passing of generations, and a renewed willingness to consider the spiritual dimension, although no longer within the conventional framework of belief provided by the Catholicism of his youth. In *Seeing Things*, the death of the poet's father occupies a pivotal position in the structure of mutual dependence and justification in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are placed[18]. The father is evoked, in fact, both in the rural and domestic environment in which he appeared in previous collections, and in fabulous or mythical/literary contexts - of which an oblique instance is provided by Heaney's version of a passage of the *Aeneid* with which the volume opens, a translation in which the quest for the father is refracted through Aeneas's quest in a place in which the sibyl's voice echoes 'With sayings where clear truths and mysteries / Were inextricably twined' ('The Golden Bough', *ST* 1). The same source will be alluded to in 'Man and Boy', a poem which reenacts the relationship between father and son which Heaney had celebrated in 'Follower' (*DN* 24-5), but now in an imaginary and insubstantial manner, a manner which is also symmetrical to the episode in which Aeneas and Anchises flee from Troy (*Aeneid*, Book II):

I feel his legs and quick heels far away

And strange as my own - when he will piggyback me
At a great height, light-headed and thin-boned (*ST* 15)

Heaney's proneness to represent ghostly counterparts to ordinary objects or circumstances will understandably be manifest also in the most explicit deathbed poem in *Seeing Things*, when the dying father's hand movements are construed as the search for an object emblematic of the Irish rural male - an object which gives the poem its title, 'The Ash Plant', its ghostly presence signalling the father's shift from presence to absence, described as 'go[ing] light with light' (*ST* 19).

Finding the mystical in the quotidian, juxtaposing presence and absence, recognising the self in the broadest possible context of the passing of generations from life into 'light': this is then what a number of poems in *Seeing Things* are about, the poet not hesitating to represent an epiphany as 'a judge who comes (...)/ In a pillar of radiant house-dust' ('Squarings, 4.Squarings, xlv', *ST* 105). This closing line is, in fact, equivalent to answering 'everywhere' when faced with the question asked in another poem: 'Where does spirit live?' ('Squarings, 2.Settings, xxii', *ST* 78). But this is the stage of my argument at which I have to point out that, if these are prominent characteristics in *Seeing Things*, so were they in at least a part of Seamus Heaney's previous book, his 1987 *The Haw Lantern*[19] - in particular in the much-quoted sonnet sequence prompted by the death of the poet's mother. (After all, in *Seeing Things* Heaney dates his ability to acknowledge the marvellous from before he turned fifty -

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
To credit marvels. ("Fosterling", *ST* 50)

- an age he reached in 1989). The very title of the sonnet sequence, 'Clearances', relates to the repeated representation of an absence which is filled in by the poetically fruitful consequence of the mother's presence in the poet's memory and emotional identity. It is true that these poems in *The Haw Lantern* on the death of one parent may seem to contrast with those in *Seeing Things* on the death of the other parent, to the extent that there is in the former a stronger presence of the element of recollection of jointly lived moments. But it does not even take a particularly careful reading to realize that the prospective and visionary representation of the possible forms of an elsewhere, which we have associated with the death of the father, is a fundamental part of the imaginative design of 'Clearances':

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened. ('Clearances, 7', *HL* 31)

This is how the very moment of death is represented, and the impulse to transcendence also finds a confirmation in the imaginary first moment of an afterlife, when the mother meets her closest ancestor in an elsewhere whose sameness with home is countered

only with the pun in the closing line:

> It is Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead,
> Where grandfather is rising from his place
> With spectacles pushed back on a clean bald head
> To welcome a bewildered homing daughter
> Before she even knocks. 'What's this? What's this?'
> And they sit down in the shining room together. ('Clearances, 2', *HL* 26)

As to the aftermath as experienced by the poet, the final sonnet will find a correlative for the mother's death in the felling of a chestnut tree which had once stood by the old family home - a chestnut tree which, as Heaney reveals in *The Government of the Tongue*, he associates with himself, because it was planted in the year of his birth (*GT* 3). The sonnet begins by recreating the image of the empty-fertile place, with two lines whose imaginative importance is indicated by the fact that they are already a self-quotation (of 'Station Island III'[20]) -

> I thought of walking round and round a space
> Utterly empty, utterly a source ('Clearances, 8', *HL* 32)

- and ends with a description of an afterlife, ostensibly the chestnut's,

> Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
> A soul ramifying and forever
> Silent, beyond silence listened for. (*HL* 32)

Who could deny that, four years *avant-la-lettre*, this poet was seeing things?

The advantages of retrospection should, of course, be qualified by a *caveat* against the temptation to construe the development of the poet's work as all design and coherence, denying any role to chance, the fortuitous and the arbitrary. Nonetheless, it has justifiably become a critical truism that Heaney's work has, from a very early stage, repeatedly included the concern with mapping ahead, the ending of each collection usually defining a direction which the following volume will confirm. As I began by pointing out, part of the reception of *Seeing Things* was insistent on the opposite - i.e., on the new and the unforeseeable. And yet some of its most prominent thematic features and modes of representation can be dated back to such relatively early concerns as Heaney's late-1970s explicit refusal of 'any more doors into the dark', longing rather for a 'door into the light'[21] - or even to the alternative posed by 'Hercules and Antaeus', the closing poem of *North* Part I, between the winner, 'sky-born and royal' and the defeated, 'the mould-hugger'[22]. While it is true that in that poem a sympathy for the defeated was the keynote, it could also be an attempt to put a full stop to the involvement with earth and the dark which had found its culminating point in the first part of the book - and provide a link, through Hercules's triumph, with the rationalised, explicitly 'political' confrontation with the matter of the Troubles in *North* Part II. But retrospection does indeed work wonders - see how, from the vantage point of *Seeing Things*, Elmer Andrews has convincingly commented on 'Hercules and Antaeus', making it sound like a poem of the later volume:

> Poetry becomes a kind of lift-off, away from the first kingdom, the holy ground, into the realms of airy vision. (...)
>
> Heaney attempts to free himself from the ground he once treasured. He stresses the need for transfiguration. [23]

Rather less convincingly, Andrews adds that 'Beginning in the imbalance of violence and loss, the typical *Field Work* poem struggles towards imaginative transcendence'[24] - a statement which may leave out all those poems which end on a note of ominousness, repression or atrocity, no less typical of *Field Work* than those which represent release, *potentia* and fruition. But Andrews is surely right as to the presence of the wish, the longing for release from the constraints both of a civic conscience and of modes of writing which threaten to perpetuate themselves. In characteristic Heaneyesque design, that longing had been implied (as Michael Allen pointed out in 1988[25]) in the very last poem in *North*, 'Exposure', with its ultimate sense of the personal and political environment of the poet's writing having made him miss a phenomenon of beauty and the creative opportunity it might have afforded,

> The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
> The comet's pulsing rose. ('Singing School, 6.Exposure', *N* 73)

- a poem whose importance in Heaney's work would be confirmed by being one of the few poems to be quoted in full in his Nobel Lecture.

The volumes following this moment in Heaney's work will, indeed, include some memorable instances of light, brightness

and fruition; however, rather than the celebration of release, what they represent is a protracted reiteration of longing for it, a perpetual deferral of its achievement. The first poem in *Field Work*, 'Oysters', actually enacts the frustration of a moment of sheer pleasure by the irruption of the poet's consciousness of history as violence and abuse - prompting an anger which is self-directed, phrased as a frustrated desire for 'light', and conducive to a hedonistic determination of the creative stance:

> And [I] was angry that my trust could not repose
> In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
> Leaning in from sea. I ate the day
> Deliberately, that its tang
> Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb. (*FW* 11)

But the self-determined art which this closing formula stands for, and the forceful rephrasing of the *carpe diem* motif in the phrase 'I ate the day', will at best find an intermittent continuity throughout a collection which ends with Heaney's version of the 'Ugolino' encounter in Dante's *Inferno*, and its themes of treason, imprisonment, starvation, and horrific retribution.

The dantesque would prove an obvious mode for the continuity of Heaney's concern with poetic and civic responsibilities before violence and suffering, and the poet's resulting penitent stance, notoriously so in the title sequence of *Station Island*. But it also provides some of the references for a poem like 'Sandstone Keepsake', in which the poet half-cherishes, half-resents the independence of his 'free state of image and allusion', and of a harmlessness made obvious when the guards on the watchtowers of an internment camp pay little attention to this evening stroller on a nearby beach, 'a silhouette not worth bothering about,/ (...)/ and not about to set times wrong or right' (*SI* 20). The emotional and ethical complexities experienced here will struggle to be resolved with a Joycean sanction in the twelfth and final station of the penitential sequence, Heaney highlighting Joyce's scepticism as to (in Seamus Deane's words) 'the possibility of maintaining one's integrity as an artist while being involved with a community's enterprise'[26], and also his mistrust of mind-blurring expiations. Heaney's revisions of this poem for the *New Selected Poems* would prove enlightening as to the general direction of his concerns in the latter half of the 1980s, the liberating drive of the injunctions ascribed to the 'Joyce' persona receiving an increased emphasis - as a few examples may show: 'what you must do must be done on your own' becomes 'what you do you must do on your own', reserving the sense of necessity for individual isolation in the act of writing, rather than promoting an understanding of the creative act as itself compulsory; an imperative such as 'get back in harness', which, even if directed strictly at a writerly commitment, could seem to collide with the sense of poetic freedom, is simply eliminated; and the description of the creative consequences of the poet's conscience pains as 'a waste of time', with its purposive implication that time must always be well 'spent', is simply replaced by its description as 'old whinges', a thing of the past and of no account. Heaney thus projects his will for freedom from any bounds extrinsic to a self-determined poetic *praxis* onto the voice of an unquestionable cultural hero of those very areas of criticism and the intelligentsia which would necessarily question the feasibility of such an emancipation. He would later be explicit about his pained awareness of expectations which, though rather vaguely described, could be those resulting from the juxtaposition of a traditional nationalist agenda with a theory-fuelled disbelief in the possibility of language ever allowing for stable and absolute meanings:

> the very vocabulary has become untrustworthy, undermined by our awareness of its collusion with all kinds of secluded ideologies, based (depending upon your suspicion) upon gender or *imperium* or, indeed, subversion; and from this acknowledgement of language's duplicitousness arises a doubt about the very possibility of ever pronouncing the authentic persuasive word. [27]

This 1989 statement came at a time when the search for strategies of writing which would somehow be a compromise between a never unrelinquished sense of civic duty and the poet's growing distrust of the explicit had recently produced the well-known civic allegories in *The Haw Lantern*, rather obviously connected with the attraction for the oblique political writing of (pre-1989) east-European poets celebrated in *The Government of the Tongue*. Heaney's habit of self-justification had already, in one of his 1988 Richard Ellmann lectures published as *The Place of Writing*, given rise to a suggestion of how a politically aware writing could persist in our days:

> these commitments (...) may not so much have disappeared from poetry as refined their means. Instead of tribal celebration we have a lyric irony; instead of earthy certitudes, we have visionary metamorphoses.[28]

This makes clear how civic allegories like 'From the Frontier of Writing', 'From the Republic of Conscience' or 'From the Land of the Unspoken' can antecipate the 'credit' given to 'marvels' in *Seeing Things* - and, as their titles immediately suggest, the link is a metapoetic one. It is true that a poem like 'From the Frontier of Writing' offers the reader of its first stanzas the rather annoying feeling of the *déjà-lu*: there we have again the harassament at the roadblock, its victim resenting it as much as his own passivity before such abuse. But halfway down the poem the evocation of such circumstances is found to serve an ulterior purpose, as an analogy to the poet's approach to writing. And, besides or beyond the moment of intimidation, the experience of

writing offers the gratification, within its demanding borders, of an ever-renewable release: 'And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed' (*HL* 6) - a release which in *The Haw Lantern*, as Terence Brown commented some years ago, often follows instances of scrutiny and judgment[29].

The allegorical rendering of a civic conscience is thus combined with the assumption that lyrical discourse has to comprise perceptions which cannot be reduced to the rational - and this turns such poems into preliminary stages to the intimations of transcendence and the marvellous in *Seeing Things*, a direction characteristically pointed to in the closing line of one of the last poems in *The Haw Lantern*: 'All I believe that happened there was vision' ('The Disappearing Island', *HL* 50). But the way towards the 'new' 1990s liberated mood in Heaney's work can also be read as decisively assisted by the first performances and the publication in 1990 of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney's version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*[30]. As refracted commentary on the Northern-Irish predicament and on his own position in relation to it, Heaney's text foregrounds the allegorical possibilities of the plight of a man stranded on an island by companions who cannot bear his unhealable wound and his ensuing cries of pain, a man who is nonetheless in possession of a much-coveted weapon which makes him the object of a continued enticement and attempted deceit. The option for drama as a means for the representation of the civic and the political is 'naturally' sanctioned by its generic definition as 'one of the most social of all art forms'[31], 'the theatre [being] the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself'[32] - a possibly more adequate form and space for self-dramatizations than the private and subjective framework of the lyric. As Alan Peacock, among others, has convincingly argued, Heaney may have found in a bifurcation of his literary *praxis* a solution to what, within a single generic possibility, threatened to perpetuate itself as conflict:

> Possibly, this successful assumption of a public, dramatic voice (...) has freed Heaney, to an extent, to seek (...) resolutions in the private and familial sphere in his non-dramatic poetry. Certainly the latest volume, *Seeing Things*, is more concerned with personal vision and personal history than with larger political, civic and historical issues. [33]

I will return to the issue of private experience further on - but I would like, for the moment, to pay some attention to the (indeed, mitigated) forms in which 'political, civic and historical issues' can find a place in *Seeing Things*. To begin with, Heaney first employed the phrase *seeing things* in a context which proposed it as the attitude which would supersede a self-concerned brooding, when, in *The Cure at Troy*, the man who had long tended his wound becomes the object of an injunction: 'Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things' (*CT* 74). And indeed *Seeing Things* is not characteristic for wound-licking, although that does not mean the poet will suddenly and radically discard concerns whose socio-historic relevance persists, or ignore the whole course of his ethical and aesthetic *Bildung*, which so continuedly found a consequence in his writing. The difference is that such concerns will now appear in a background of representation or allusion at times recognisable only by all of those on whose complicity a poet who has always invested so strongly in continuities can, after his eighth book of poems, legitimately count.

Thus, when in the opening version from the *Aeneid* Aeneas addresses the Sibyl with the words

> No ordeal, O Priestess,
> That you can imagine would ever surprise me
> For already I have foreseen and foresuffered all ('The Golden Bough' , *ST* 1)

it is inevitable Heaney's readers will get a hint of the self-lacerations in previous volumes. Likewise, when in 'Markings' the poet recollects the making of teenage football teams -

> And then we picked the teams
> And crossed the line our called names drew between us (*ST* 8)

- there is a strong probability we may think of the divisions created by names as they were described in a 1975 poem like 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' (*N* 59). And will it be possible not to recall the difficult balances akin to previously much insisted upon dilemmas when the subject in 'Casting and Gathering' describes himself as kept still by contrary forces?:

> I trust contrariness.
> Years and years go past and I do not move (*ST* 13)

Examples could be legion, and they would include the straightforward account of driving behind a military truck, or the yet disturbed recollection of once having taken part with a friend in a civil rights demonstration followed by police repression and by an awkward escape to the car; as also, in a much more subtle register, and as an instance of an attempted new, more nonchalant self-ironical mood, a poem about climbing the Capitol. Such a *locus*, to the extent that it is the seat of a great power,

produces a temptation by pride which alludes to Christ's temptation on top of the Temple (*Matthew* 4:5-6), somewhat balanced by a consciousness of privilege:

> We climbed the Capitol by moonlight, felt
> The transports of temptation on the heights:
> We were privileged and belated and we knew it.

But this experience of elation promptly leads to invective against a classicizing sort of writing, construed in the image of that American public architecture for which the place in question is the topmost example - an invective which resonates with the poet's possible dissatisfaction with his own bardic and academic institutionalization, directly leading to a wish for a pristine plainness:

> Then something in me moved to prophesy
> Against the beloved stand-offishness of marble
> And all emulation of stone-cut verses.
>
> 'Down with form triumphant, long live,' (said I)
> 'Form mendicant and convalescent. We attend
> The come-back of pure water and the prayer-wheel.'

All this is reduced, however, to its quixotic dimension by a condescending other voice which, frustrating any hierophantic expectations, superimposes on all previous considerations the imperative banality of bodily needs, in a near-Bergsonian deflation of sublime pretensions[34]:

> To which a voice replied, 'Of course we do.
> But the others are in the Forum Café waiting,
> Wondering where we are. What'll you have?' ('Squarings, 4.Squarings, xxxviii', *ST* 98)

This humourous, self-deflationary tone is, in fact, one of the most appealing elements of newness about *Seeing Things*, pervading the different registers and thematic areas of the book. It can therefore be found directed at the poet's self-acknowledged 'Masquerade as a man of property' in one of the 'Glanmore Revisited' sonnets ('5.Lustral Sonnet', *ST* 35) - the purchase of the cottage apparently embarrassing the (in many respects) *soixant-huitard* poet who now finds himself in the shoes of a bourgeois owner. And it also comes to characterise the self-representation of the middle-aged poetic subject as husband and father. The vignettes of young married bliss with children sleeping next door, which had been typical of earlier Heaney, now give place to a mildly humourous analogy with Odysseus and Penelope as ageing couple in a post-paternal moment which better allows for an emotional recollection of the roots of a joint existence ('Glanmore Revisited, 6.Bedside Reading', *ST* 36). And retrospection can also involve reconstruing much earlier moments along the lines of the 'middle aged' perspective, as is the case in 'A Pillowed Head', a poem evocative of the birth of a child who, described as a girl and as not being the first, the usual biographical implication allows us to identify as the third and last of the Heaneys - biography also making us realize that parents described as 'this time' 'clear-headed' and 'self-possessed', because 'older' (*ST* 38), would still be in their early thirties.

Rather than attempting to make each poem true to the emotional framework of any one recollected moment as it was lived, Heaney seems with such strategies to be intent on living up to his own dictum 'that there should be a correspondence between the maturation of a sensibility and its methods of expression at different stages'[35]. This is a passage from one of his Oxford lectures collected as *The Redress of Poetry*, and the final stage of this essay will be partly taken up with the ways in which this volume embodies the poet's preferred self-assessment, and his clues for the development of his poetic work. This may sound like a simplistic understanding of the correlation between criticism and poetry, but one should bear in mind that a characteristic of Heaney's writing, both poetic and critical, from the beginning of his career, has been its 'perfect fit', its remarkable integration - a possible demonstration of Eliot's remark that

> When the critics are themselves poets, it may be suspected that they have formed their critical statements with a view to justifying their poetic practice. [36]

This was immediately noticed about Heaney when his first volume of critical essays, *Preoccupations*, came out in 1980, prompting Edna Longley's remark that 'his criticism is (...) absolutely a poet's criticism, *his* poetry's criticism'[37]. And the 'poet as critic' would himself admit that

> On the whole the poets who appear in my prose (...) are people who are part of my memory. (...) I suppose my criticism is some form of autobiography. [38]

The Redress of Poetry will then no more than confirm what *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue* or *The Place of Writing* had already made obvious - that, in spite or on top of being enlightening studies of Marlowe, Merriman or MacDiarmid, of Clare, Larkin or Yeats, Heaney's essays are fundamental instances of self-reading in which a deliberate guidance of his reader's perspective should not be excluded. In the 'Introduction' to these Oxford lectures the poet is in fact more candid than ever before about the way in which they 'grew out of' the transitions in his poetry between *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things* - although his awareness of this is presented as an *a posteriori* realization.

As Donald Davie noticed in his review of *The Redress of Poetry* - possibly his last review - the aspect of Heaney's writing which is more strongly endorsed by these essays is the 'change (...) in his own poetry', the fact that 'his poems have become, in a word, more transcendental'[39]. In fact, even a cursory reading of *The Redress of Poetry* will not fail to notice the assertion, still in the 'Introduction', that these lectures are determined by their author's 'trust (...) that a reliable critical course could be plotted by following a poetic sixth sense' - a trust which will be made verbal in passages such as the following:

> Just because (...) [this] poetry abounds in actualities, just because it is as full of precise delightful detail as a granary is full of grains, does not mean that it is doomed to pile up and sink down in its own materiality. On the contrary, that which is special and unique about it is its lambency, its skim-factor, its bobbing unencumbered motion.
>
> [The poem's] real subject is the uncanny. The watergaw, the faint rainbow glimmering in chittering light, provides a sort of epiphany, and (...) [the poet] connects the shimmer and weakness and possible revelation in the light behind the drizzle with the indecipherable look he received from his father on his deathbed. But how the poem sounds is probably more important than what it sees. What constitutes the true originality here is the combined sensation of strangeness and at-homeness which the words create. (...) that double sensation of sure-footed homecoming and light-headed expedition which only the highest poetry achieves.
>
> What is at work in this most original and illuminating poetry is the mind's capacity to conceive a new plane of regard for itself, a new scope for its own activity. [40]

This is Seamus Heaney on (respectively) John Clare, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Yeats - but it could easily be a description of aspects of *Seeing Things* identified above: the balancing of the concrete and the ethereal, the leap from sensorial perception to spiritual intimation, with a parent's death as a catalyst of such mixed knowledge, the general yearning for the 'Unroofed scope' of the first poem in the sequence 'Squarings' ('Squarings, 1.Lightenings, i', *ST* 55).

The Nobel Lecture would be the topmost occasion for these emphases to find a worldwide resonance; whilst it is true that it was determined by a much broader purpose of assessment of a whole career, describing it in all its phases in terms which allow his more attentive readers to recognise a long string of quotations or glosses of specific poems, it characterised the present point of arrival (with dual reference to a feeling of elation before the Nobel-awarding ceremony and to the current stage of his poetry) in the following words:

> the platform here feels more like a space station than a stepping stone, so that is why, for once in my life, I am permitting myself the luxury of walking on air.
> I credit poetry for making this space-walk possible. [41]

But it also implicitly defined an inclusive principle for the way in which the celebration of release would relate to the previous emphases in his work, at the end of the poet's account of his moral and aesthetic development:

> Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in despite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous. [42]

The 'as well as' construction in this sentence, together with the attention required by the continuities underlined above, should contribute to qualifying an exclusive insistence on 'change' in accounts of how Heaney's poetry enters the nineties.
This is the point at which the question (finally) arises: to what extent does Heaney's most recent collection, *The Spirit Level*[43], confirm or deny the expectations we have been defining? The very title seems to propose an ironic conflation of the material and the transcendental, since it names a tool associated with manual labour - whilst reminding Heaney's readers of the extent to which his poetry of the nineties places itself at the level of the spirit. A level whose prominence in the volume can be instanced by 'Saint Kevin and the Blackbird', a poem whose underlying legend Heaney gave an account of in his Nobel lecture, precisely as an example of 'the changed orientation' in his work. The saint's decision to stay 'immobile for hours and days and nights and

weeks' so as not to disturb the hatching of a bird's eggs, accidentally laid in his outstretched hand while he was praying, is described as 'true to life if subversive of common sense', a dictum which Heaney declares to try and adopt for his poetry of the nineties[44]. It is not only in this broadly defined dimension of the scarcely believable and the mystical, though, that 'Saint Kevin and the Blackbird' proceeds with the representation of transcendence as we identified it in *Seeing Things*, but also in some very specific processes, such as the rooting of the transcendental in the sensorial and the biological - when the 'warm eggs' and the bird's body in the saint's hand cause him to '[find] himself linked / Into the network of eternal life' - or the dissolution of identity in a 'non-relational moment' construed also as a figment of an unfettered imagination:

> And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
> Imagine being Kevin. Which is he? (*SL* 20)

But, in *The Spirit Level* the moment of transcendence can also occur in poems remote from the mystical register, as is the case with the perception of 'a wind-swept brightness' (*SL* 34) as part of a moment of vision in 'Mycenae Lookout' - a sequence whose orientation is more ostensibly historical, archaeological (and, by implication, political).

In fact, something which stands out in some of the poems in *The Spirit Level* is how the thematic and representational emphases which made out the case for the difference of *Seeing Things* do not necessarily take the foreground when they share the poetic space with those features with a much longer presence in Heaney's writing. Continuity is, indeed, the overall theme of a poem like 'Keeping Going', pervaded by memories of family life and of a shared childhood on the farm, with its chores and appertaining sensations:

> The whitewash brush. An old blanched skirted thing
> On the back of the byre door (...)
> (...)
> Buttermilk and urine,
> The pantry, the housed beasts, the listening bedroom. (*SL* 10-11)

This could be, at a first reading, the universe of *Death of a Naturalist* back again with a vengeance - but also with some obvious differences of perspective: the intervening decades in the poet's cultural and experiential outlook entail a different valuation of what life can be for those who (unlike him) stayed on, enduring not only an (implicitly) monotonous and hard life, but also the explicitly instanced atrocities of the Troubles - 'My dear brother, you have good stamina./ You stay on where it happens.' This is balanced, in a complex manner, with the ability to retrieve from memory some of those happy moments which left particularly strong marks, and re-live them with a sense of wonder, close to an elated pastoral nostalgia, signalled by an interrogative manner:

> all that worked like magic.
> Where had we come from, what was this kingdom
> We knew we'd been restored to? (*SL* 10)

One may, of course, also wonder whether, if one excludes the rhetorical interrogative manner and a totally different prosody, this recollection of whitewashing on the farm is all that remote from the sense of the marvellous in a *Death of a Naturalist* poem like 'Churning Day' (*DN* 9-10). And something similar (even in the use of interrogatives as a mark of the poet's wonder) could perhaps be said of the recollection of a 'journeyman tailor' in the poem 'At Banagher', whose 'touch has the power to turn [clothes] to cloth again' (*SL* 67), when compared to the also special powers of itinerant rural wonder-workers in early Heaney poems, the 'grasp' of 'The Diviner' (*DN* 23) or the 'Midas touch' of a 'Thatcher'[45].

As hinted above, the 'murderous' can share the same poetic space with the 'marvellous', and both 'Keeping Going' and 'Two Lorries' do precisely that, evoking the ordinary and orderly routines of close relatives in their rural quotidian side by side with the extraordinary mayhem of sectarian killings and bombings: whitewashing on the farm, with its imprint of retrospective wonder, vs. the whitewashing of a blood-spattered wall in the centre of town, 'That morning like any other morning' (*SL* 12); the lorry that used to deliver coal to the farm,

> And the last delivery. Oh, Magherafelt!
> Oh, dream of red plush and a city coalman
> As time fastforwards and a different lorry
> Groans into shot, up Broad Street, with a payload
> That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes...
> After what happened, I'd a vision of my mother,

A revenant on the bench where I would meet her
In that cold-floored waiting-room in Magherafelt,
Her shopping bags full up with shovelled ashes. ('Two Lorries', *SL* 13-14)

The quiet account of the killing of unsuspecting victims, the disturbing conflation of the ashes of domestic comfort and the ashes of destruction, even the experience of meeting 'revenants', would not significantly distance these poems either from elegies like 'Casualty' or 'A Postcard from North Antrim' in *Field Work* (19-24), or from the 'dream encounters with familiar ghosts' in the title-sequence of *Station Island* (61-94). As before, the difference is above all rhetorical, the exclamations in the passage above adding themselves this time to the already mentioned interrogative manner: 'which lorry / Was it now?' (*SL* 14).

These are then poems in which the effect of *pathos* increases with the juxtaposition of public atrocity and private memory, in familiar settings. But *The Spirit Level* includes poems which retrieve Heaney's already tried-out strategy of displacing the familiar onto remote places and times - or rather, if one prefers, of allowing the reader to take a clearer look at the familiar by recognising it in the remote. And if, as a strategy for representing familiar atrocity, this goes back past *Seeing Things* to find its antecedents in *The Cure at Troy* as in other translations of the late 1970s and the 1980s, in the civic allegories of *The Haw Lantern*, and ultimately in the mythopoeic design of *North*, the accompanying self-representation of the poetic subject as a site of uncertainty, anguish and ill-defined guilt was supposed to have been overcome with the shift from (in the words of Neoptolemus in *The Cure at Troy*) 'wound-licking' to 'seeing things'. The *persona* in 'His Dawn Vision', the third poem in the sequence 'Mycenae Lookout', describes himself as dominated by the sense of a less-than-adequately-fulfilled duty and of a distance, both physical and moral, from the political rhetoric of those on whose behalf he watches a territory,

Agog, alert again, but far, far less

Focused on victory than I should have been -
Still isolated in my old disdain
Of claques who always needed to be seen

And heard as the true Argives. Mouth athletes,
Quoting the oracle and quoting dates,
Petitioning, accusing, taking votes. (*SL* 33)

And in 'The Watchman's War', which opens the same sequence, the equally isolated sentry is haunted by the inevitability of his position and identity - 'My sentry work was fate, a home to go to', 'I balanced between destiny and dread' - and, above all, overwhelmed by the nightmarish horrors of a war cheered by others:

Some people wept, and not for sorrow - joy
That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy,
But inside me like struck sound in a gong
That killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong
It brought to pass, still augured and endured.
I'd dream of blood in bright webs in a ford,
Of bodies raining down like tattered meat
On top of me asleep - and me the lookout
The queen's command had posted and forgotten,
The blind spot her farsightedness relied on. (*SL* 29)

One would surely, before such a poem, feel tempted to reverse the oracular pronouncement of that reviewer of *Seeing Things* who declared in 1991:

> Gone is the conflict (...) between poetry's imaginative and civic responsibilities: the underlying engagement with history (...) has now simply been broken off. (...) it is good to see him dispense with the breast-beatings about poetic accountability [46]

But shouldn't one also recognise that, to the extent that poems such as these are ascribed to the voice of well-defined *personae*, they partake of a dramatic quality, allowing us to validate the notion of a splitting of purposes and modes of enunciation in Heaney's work, between the lyrical and the dramatic, as had been suggested by the different registers of *The Cure at Troy* and *Seeing Things* at the beginning of the nineties? The affinities between the poems last quoted, which take Homer and Aeschylus for an enabling background of reference, and the authorial design (or the translating strategy) behind *The Cure at Troy* are

obvious - the Classical reference providing a remote analogy through which a suggestion of proximity can be both surprising and effective. In fact - as if to allow us better to recognise the affinities between the postulation of dramatic *personae*, and that other search for 'a cunning middle voice' (*SI* 32) which translation can also become - 'The Watchman's War' was first published in a college journal in the Autumn of 1995[47] together with a translation, in this case not from Latin or Classical Greek, not from the Mediterranean, but rather from an Anglo-Saxon, northern source which had already attracted Heaney on previous occasions: a version of a passage from *Beowulf*, inevitably filled with elated violence and massive slaughter.

Quotation, translation, allusion, glosses of several kinds: the more his own reputation grows and brings him ever closer to the status of a 'classical reference', the more the tendency to refer to others, rooted in his long-manifested concern with exploiting the re-sources of literary memory, seems to come to the fore in Heaney's writing. And this from a poet who has also long been the most visible representative of a tradition characterised for being inherently intertextual - as several prominent critics of Irish literature have insisted[48]: what better model for the understanding of literary production and reception than that which allows for the coexistence of all dualities and contradictions? As Michael Riffaterre puts it,

> intertextuality enables the text to represent, at one and the same time, (...) conventions and departures from it, tradition and novelty, (...) the already said and its negation or transformation.[49]

But something that we suggested above about Heaney's criticism - that it amounted in a fundamental way to a persistent self-reading - can also apply to the relationships his poetry maintains with literary memory. This notion that poetic reference to others may above all be a way of leading us to read him in the work of those others would obviously require a much longer critical argument and a more careful demonstration than the final moments of this paper will allow for - but one single example may at least point in the required direction. I quoted above a few lines from 'The Watchman's War', a poem explicitly placed under the aegis of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, cited in an epigraph. Those lines include the watchman's self-description as 'the lookout / The queen's command had posted and forgotten' - words which a careful reader of Heaney's will remember from a poem in the 'Sweeney Redivivus', third part of *Station Island*, as the opening line of 'In the Beech': 'I was a lookout posted and forgotten' (*SI* 100). Which means that words found in a 1995 Seamus Heaney poem, ascribed to a *persona* with a Classical Greek background, are a self-quotation consisting of words originally put, in a 1984 poem, in the mouth of another *persona* (Sweeney), as part of the consequence for the poetic consciousness of the work of producing, between the early 1970s and the early 1980s, the translation of a medieval, middle-Irish epic which Heaney published in 1983 as *Sweeney Astray*. Internal intertextuality, or self-textuality, can thus be found to be central to the larger intertextual drive of Heaney's poetry, largely as an inescapable consequence of its carefully designed development - a consequence of all the continuities of which this paper may have highlighted only a small part. Eliot, whom Heaney is particularly keen on quoting with reference to the poet's ability to assess and shape his or her work, defined the difference between major and minor poets as depending on

> whether a knowledge of the whole, or at least of a very large part, of a poet's work, makes one enjoy more, because it makes one understand better, any one of his poems. [50]

Well before the 1990s, Seamus Heaney managed to achieve a remarkable unity for his work which rests on the necessity of its internal coherence and of its permanent re-creation, producing in a few decades the conditions - and the authority - which Harold Toliver, in *The Past that Poets Make*, envisaged as feasible at the end of a long poetic career:

> By the time a poet has a lifetime of composing behind him, one of the layers that the past presents him is his own personal accomplishment, which (...) must be broken down into elements and recombined as the imagination now dictates. [51]

And the poet himself has produced a critical description of this process, when, commenting on the work of another Irish poet, he resorted to a biological analogy and spoke of 'the necessity for constant self-digestion as the condition of self-creation' (*PW* 59). On our part, we would end by quoting again from a poem in *Seeing Things*, in order to suggest that for Heaney's poetry, as it reaches its third decade with itself as a fundamental given,

> whatever is given
> Can always be reimagined (*ST* 29)

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2. Wilmer 82. The outlook of the ageing man has been for some years one of Seamus Heaney's favourite self-descriptive features, apparent even before he turned fifty, as attested by Hugo Williams's sardonic citation, in connection with Heaney's appearance at the time he won the Whitbread Award for *The Haw Lantern*, of 'Craig Raine's theory (...) that Irishmen turn into their fathers earlier than we do' (Hugo Williams, 'Freelance', *TLS* (January 29 - February 4, 1988) 110).

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8. Seamus Heaney, 'Squarings, 1.Lightenings, xii', *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991) 66. Hereafter cited as *ST* followed by page numbers.
9. Ken Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders', *Essays in Criticism* XLII:4 (October 1992), (299-319) 299.
10. Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 299.
11. Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 300.
12. See Robinson, 'Putting Words to Wonders' 302-3.
13. 'What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end' (T.S.Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), (London: Faber, 1980) 118-19).
14. Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 24 October 1989* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990) 8; this passage would be excised from the collected Oxford lectures published as *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995). For Heaney's earlier statements on the auditory imagination, see: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980) 81-2, 150; *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988) 148-9 (hereafter cited as *GT*, followed by page numbers); 'Learning from Eliot', *Agenda* 27:1 (Spring 1989), (17-31) 20, 26, 27.
15. Seamus Heaney, 'Song', *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979) 56; hereafter cited as *FW* followed by page numbers. This line became even better known in recent years since Helen Vendler made it the title of her 1988 collection of essays *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P.). The phrase 'the music of what happens' is not, however, originally Heaney's - it comes rather from a Gaelic text which Austin Clarke had already taken up in the last stanza of 'The Hippophagi': 'Could self have learned / In woody, ferny glen to choose / With Fionn the music of what happens' (Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 235).
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17. Interviewed by Maggie Parham at the time he was made 'Companion of Literature' by the Royal Society of Literature - published in Portuguese translation under the title 'Seamus Heaney: Criação e Consciência', *Expresso* (14 de Outubro de 1995) 92-5. In 1991, inter viewed by Blake Morrison, Heaney had declared: 'The most important thing that has happened to me in the last ten years is being at two death beds' (Blake Morrison, 'Seamus Famous: Time to be dazzled', *The Independent on Sunday* (19 May 1991) 26).
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33. Alan Peacock, 'Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer', Andrews (ed.), *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (233-55) 245; see also, for a converging but less developed suggestion, Patrick Crotty, 'Lyric Waters', *The Irish Review* 11 (Winter 1991-92), (114-20) 119.
34. Cf. a passage in Henri Bergson's famous essay on laughter in which it is declared: 'Est comique tout incident qui appelle notre attention sur le physique d'une personne alors que le moral est en cause. (...) Aussi le poète tragique a-t-il soin d'éviter tout ce qui pourrait appeler notre attention sur la matérialité de ses héros. Dès que le souci du corps intervient, une infiltration comique est à craindre. C'est pourquoi les héros de tragédie ne boivent pas, ne mangent pas, ne se chauffent pas.' (Henri Bergson, 'Le Rire', *Oeuvres* (Paris: P.U.F., 1963) 411-12).
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James Simmons: A Poet Like No Other

John P. Kirby

Widely hailed as one of the leading lights of the Northern Irish literary renaissance, Simmons's name is most often linked to the review *The Honest Ulsterman* which, at considerable personal expense, he founded in 1968. The second and no less remarkable venture with which he is credited was the setting up of the Poets' House, an academy to train fledgling bards and creative writing. Initially based in Co. Antrim they have now moved to Co. Donegal in the North West of Ireland.

Now in his mid-sixties, with a sizeable body of work in print, James Simmons is not easily classified. Drawing on sources as diverse as the masters of the poetic art Yeats and Kavanagh, translated work from Gaelic but also the language of the patriotic ballad and even jazz and blues, crossed here and there with the journalistic punchline and the bar-room jibe, James has always addressed ordinary folk. Deliberately seeking out a language close to the idioms and cadences of ordinary speech, he has never conceiled his mistrust of literary elitism. While this is a principle poets have claimed since the heyday of romanticism, one feels that Simmons has been a truer apostle than many. His extraordinary talents as folk singer/guitarist have undoubtedly worked to his advantage here.

Coming from a narrow conventional Presbyterian background, James felt alienated early on in life. As he puts it "the crude puritanical ethos of my local church ... was a cover for simple-minded lust for power and money." In reaction, he has always cultivated a fierce independence of mind. It is hardly surprising that this defiant and outspoken loner has made enemies from time to time. Speaking of the experiences of his wife Janice and himself, he says: "We just hear of their gossip secondhand ... and shrug our shoulders." The basic philosophy may be gleaned from a poem penned sometime in 1973:

Tough reasonableness and lyric grace

Together, in poor man's dialect.
Something that no one taught us to
expect.

A sworn enemy of cant and hypocrisy, he is forever seeking after "Profundity without the po-face." While this formula may have restricted the poet's development incertain areas, it has mostly spawned an art-form which is refreshingly clear-cut in its statements and honest in its sentiments.

Ordinary existence forms the raw material of much of the work. Yet, simple details can sometimes yield results which surprise through their self-mocking ironies. In *Domestic Act* (1985) straightening crumpled shirts becomes a *gentler mystery than cooking*, where the steam iron's:

sharp prow is proud as a gunboat
and it rules the waves now into total
smoothness, warm absolute calm.

In this way, an everyday difficulty is transformed into a metaphor about the conquest of peace.

Elswehere, a bunch of berries in a red jar on the writing table steadioes the poet's nerves since it is "a shrine, a statue, familiar in every detail." A good deal of poet's work is pervaded in one critic's words by a *generous opening out towards life.* A sincere and intuitive feeling of love is present in much of the work. This is often overtly erotic as when he writes in the *Two Libertines:*

Give us a kiss, woman

We have talked long enough
And we have plenty in common
See is it love.

But it can also be of righteous concern for humanity in general such as one sees in about their business on a sunny day, goes on to describe the appalling carnage which results when an IRA bomb explodes in the town centre.

And Christ, little Katherine Aiken is dead

And Mrs McLoughlin is pierced through the head
Meanwhile to Dungiven the killers have gone,
And they're finding it hard to get through on the phone.

The supreme irony lies in the fact that the IRA, having blown up the telephone exchange a few weeksbefore, are unable to phone through a warning for the town to be cleared. Few, if any poets writing during this period managed to capture the horror and tragedy of such incidents.

The poet's most important book to appear in recent years is entitled *Mainstream* (1995). While many of the earlier themes of love, marital problems and loneliness are present, the main image to emerge is of that of an established poet and family man enjoying the leisures of his later years. *Boats in a Tempest* describes being caught in a storm when out yachting in the company of a more enthusiastic friend. The poet who *didn't feel like sailing* is continually thrown off balance as the vessel appears to be going underr:

...Still, a wave runs
by laws, powerful but not surprising.
There was no malice in this grabbing and
Buffeting.

Man is seen to come face to face with the forces of nature, destructive but unfeeling. Although, it has sometimes been suggested that Simmons lacks a stable defining myth, it can be argued that is absolute candour and immediacy with which he confronts the hostile environment relieves him from any such need. Simmons is able to accept the world on its own terms. Despite the dangers inherent in the situation, he can meditate on the violent seascape's tormented beauty, "undistracted by detail, smiling"as he glimpses another boat emerge happily from the same relentless ocean. The ending is a sparse and factual as a newspaper headline:

None of us drowned.

This guarded optimism forms a central and recurrent element in Simmons's message. Though everything turns out all right, the flat understatement invites us to think about a *contrary* outcome. We are forcefully reminded that death is an everpresent part of the human condition, whether by shipwreck or otherwise. One might even extend the comparison to poems like *Claudy* where death and life, the forces of life and annihilation sit in shocking juxtaposition. In short, Simmons is a poet humanity would do well to heed and take seriously.

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Fiction

The Fiction of Rody Doyle

Rüdger Imhof

Roddy Doyle is quite conceivably the most successful contemporary novelist of his generation. Recently Gerry Smyth, in a study on "the New Irish Fiction"[1] that groans under its prodigious weight of colonial and de-colonial theorising, assigned Doyle the central role within the context of the fiction produced in Ireland during the last two decades. "Roddy Doyle", Smyth remarks, is "one of the key modern Irish novelists" (p. 65). Perhaps that is correct. The question, though, is: key to what? "Doyle's work is given a central place here", Smyth suggests as if in answer to our question, "not on grounds of artistic value, commercial success or thematic typicality, although it could be argued that he rates highly on all three of these criteria" (p. 65). One must most energetically beg to differ with respect to the last part of this sentence.

But let us consider some of Smyth's further arguments. Doyle's excellence, we are told, partly resides in matters thematic.

...if there has been one overriding theme in Doyle's work to date it is the exploration of the relations between individuals and the collectives in which they find themselves, especially that collective known as the family. (p. 66)

But has not "the exploration of the relations between individuals and the collectives in which they find themselves" been the overriding theme of the majority of novels since the tradition of narrative prose texts evolved? So what should be so special about Doyle's books?

His representation of life as experienced by the Rabittes [sic], the Clarkes and the Spencers offers a range of perspectives on the ideology of the family as it operates in modern Ireland, and the serious challenges that were offered to that ideology as the 1980s slipped into the 1990s. (p. 66)

If that is true, then Smyth has regrettably failed to add that, judging on the strength(s) - or rather weakness(es) - of the "Barrytown Trilogy", that representation has resulted in pretty small beer. Does Smyth seriously want to make anyone believe that a novel about the introduction of soul music into Irish life has anything noteworthy to say about "the ideology of the family as it operates in modern Ireland"?

As for Doyle's excellence in terms of narrative technique, Smyth notes:

> Since the start of his career, his work has been geared more towards 'showing' than 'telling', letting characters speak for themselves as far as possible. (p. 67)

Smyth goes on to make much of Doyle's reliance - almost exclusive reliance, one feels prompted to add - on the scenic method to the detriment of the summary, or descriptive, method, arguing that as a result of "highly subtle effects through suggestion and narrative restraint" (p. 67), semantic gaps are left in what is told, gaps which the reader is called upon to fill in, so that the "reader must become an active part of the meaning-making process" (p. 67). This is a rum argument. Every literary text worth its salt leaves gaps in what it proffers; this is a constituent characteristic of literary texts, as, in particular, the findings of reception theory have taught us. Without active reader participation, no literary work of art can ever come to life. All art is constituted in, and through, a communicative act between reader/perceiver/listener and text/painting/piece of music. As concerns Doyle's preference for 'showing', or the scenic method, for relying on dialogue instead of description, what Smyth considers a strength of Doyle's art may equally well be singled out as a cardinal shortcoming. There is evidence in Doyle's first four novels, up to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, that the author favoured the scenic method because he could not have been good at description even if someone had held a gun to his head. Which is to say, it is highly dubious whether Doyle elected to write in this manner, even though he had it in him to write in a different style, for purposes of what Russian formalists would have termed 'making it new, or different'. Dialogue-based texts are no novelty, and more is the pity, as the examples of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Henry Green and others show. But Dame Ivy had something profound to communicate through this technique. Doyle, on the other hand, especially in the Barrytown trilogy, may have been aiming at transcending certain stereotypes, but he set up new ones that have greatly appealed to an undiscerning mass readership. This is the reason for Doyle's colossal commercial success: the novels are easy to read, easy to understand and, *pace* Smyth, they do not require sophisticated reader participation.

Doyle himself has remarked in a recent interview that

> inevitably people pick up my novels with all their dialogue and think, 'Oh, thinly disguised plays', which is just ignorance really. They're not aware of the difference in writing a novel and a play, they think that somehow because a novel has a lot of dialogue it's not really a novel.[2]

Well, actually, it is not quite that. Doyle is rather obviously begging the question here by accusing his critics of ignorance instead of making clear what aims he tried to achieve by means of this concentration on dialogue.

*

Doyle was born in 1958 and grew up in the Kilbarrack area of Dublin, the inspiration for his "Barrytown" settings. He was educated at a National School in Raheny, at St. Fintan's Christian Brothers school in Sutton, Co. Dublin, and at UCD before working in Kilbarrack as a teacher from 1979 until 1993. His literary career began in 1987, when he and a friend formed a small press, King Farouk, to publish *The Commitments*, which was later picked up by a London publisher. The novel was turned into a most successful film by director Alan Parker in 1991, with Doyle writing the screenplay. Doyle's second novel, *The Snapper*, was also turned into a film, directed by Stephen Frears, and it also won critical acclaim. The third piece in the "Barrytown Trilogy", The Van, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and also filmed. In 1993, Doyle won the prestigious Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

Doyle has also written plays. His first one, *Brownbread* (which is rhyming slang for 'dead'), was first staged at the SFX Centre, Dublin, in September 1987. In it, three nineteen-year-old Dubliners kidnap an Irish bishop because "there was nothin' on the telly". The play thrives on quick-witted dialogue and coarse humour, as it pokes fun at modern Dublin sensibilities. In 1990 his second play, *War*, was performed at the SFX Centre. The setting is a pub, and the action features a quiz contest. Again the piece offers witty dialogue and outrageous humour, but it is not as convincing as *Brownbread*. His four-part play for television, *Family*, was screened in 1994. It challenged sentimental stereotypes by focusing on the emotional abuse of children by their violent fathers.

The "Barrytown Trilogy" has earned Doyle fulsome praise for his abrasive picture of contemporary Dublin.[3] If that praise is justified one must not forget to point out that in *The Commitments*, this picture is rather a microscopically small one. The novel treats of how the pop group of the title, under the leadership of Jimmy Rabbitte Jr., an ambitious young man, and the tutelage of the trumpet-player Joey 'The Lips' Fagan, who claims to have played with the likes of James Brown, Otis Redding and Sam Cooke, want to bring soul music to Dublin. According to Jimmy Jr., the music of black America is also the music of working-class Dublin. The book has been highly commended for "the candid dialogue and the author's ability to make the music lively even when all the reader has to rely on are the printed lyrics".[4] A friend recommended *The Commitments* to me after the book had been re-issued by Heinemann in 1988, particularly, it turned out, because of his acquaintance with the author. I began reading it, but gave up, I have to admit, halfway through, being firmly convinced that this represented a case of juvenile aberration. (Doyle's own characters would employ a four-letter word here.) The novel, I felt, if *The Commitments* was a novel at all, could not be taken seriously. To my shame, I still see no reason to revise my opinion. A Dublin publisher recently told me of a similar experience. He had bought himself a copy of *The Commitments*, but he had sent it windmilling over his shoulder at somewhere around page twenty. The copy was then picked up by his fifteen-year-old son, who just loved what it offered him.

Like its predecessor consisting mostly of dialogue, *The Snapper* focuses on Jimmy's twenty-year-old sister, Sharon, who, as a result of her having one night in an utterly drunken state engaged in priapic grappling with a married neighbour, is expecting a baby. The Rabbitte family, especially Jimmy Rabbitte Sr., stalwartly stand by Sharon and defend her against any invidious rumour during her pregnancy, as all await the arrival of baby Gina (in Irish slang "the snapper").[5]

In *The Van*, Jimmy Rabbitte Sr. and his friend 'Bimbo', both men having "become redundant" at work (that is: they were fired), decide to invest in a "Chipper van", called "Bimbo's Burger". The time is the summer of 1990, and all of Ireland is fanatical about the Italia '90 World Cup, which the Republic of Ireland team has qualified for. Reasoning that during the event no Irish person will have time to cook dinner, Jimmy and Bimbo expect to make oceans of money when the hungry soccer fans leave the pubs at closing time. But the business turns out a sorry failure. The partners have no business acumen. Further problems arise because Bimbo owns the van and Bimbo's wife wants to control the business. Eventually, a health inspector closes down "Bimbo's Burger", and after a fistfight with Jimmy Sr., on whom he puts the blame for the shutdown, Bimbo drives the van into the Irish Sea. In spite of everything, though, Jimmy Sr. and Bimbo remain the best of friends.

It is certainly true that, in a sense, *The Van* is the most complete work in the "Barrytown Trilogy", and it is also correct to assert that the novel portrays a "darker side of middle-class Dublin [are the Rabbittes really middle-class?] - being on the dole, sorting out family problems, and the struggle to feel needed".[6] The question, however, is whether what Doyle chooses to show can qualify as a serious-minded analysis of contemporary life in Dublin, especially because the social problems engaged with are almost completely drowned by "plenty of laughs"[7] and the tone of the portrayal is too facetious and the picture of Dublin conveyed is rather fatuous. Again Doyle's method relies too heavily on dialogue couched in the idiom of the Dublin working-class and prodigiously peppered with scatological expressions. Quite a few reviewers and critics have raved about what they see as the vitality and freshness of Doyle's style, and they have praised the great variety of socio-economic phenomena highlighted by the author in conjuring up his characters' lives. But most of this is just silly hype. On the strength of the trilogy, it can justifiably be said that the thematic interest of Doyle's oeuvre is quite shallow.

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha signalled a change in approach that has come to full fruition in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*: narrative description began to take up more space and the tone of the books started to become darker and darker. Most notably, the social abuses, defects and miseries he now depicted are incomparably more compelling.

The events in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* are rendered from the perspective of ten-year-old Patrick (Paddy) Clarke, who, together with the members of his family, among them his brother Francis ("Sinbad"), lives in Barrytown. Paddy and his friends like to fool around on building sites, lighting fires and bedaubing walls. They mess about in the barn of a farm and jump into the sea. The older boys take it out on Paddy, and Paddy retaliates by taking it out on Sinbad. At school, Paddy claims that one of the men who signed the Irish Proclamation of Independence, one Thomas J. Clarke, was his grandfather. But Thomas J. Clarke, as the teacher points out, was executed by the British on 3 May 1916. A headline in a newspaper makes Paddy believe that World War III is imminent. So he discusses with his father the question of whether there will also be war in Ireland. In a letter to Santa Claus he asks for a pair of Adidas soccer boots. In short - Paddy reports about his everyday experiences; his two friends, Liam and Aidan, whose mother died prematurely and whose father howls like a dog at nights in the garden from grief; incidents at school; games of cowboys-and-Indians; his enthusiasm for Father Damien, a missionary who devoted his life to the lepers; his love of books; visits to the cinema; the purchase of a car. And now and then Paddy, more in passing as it were, notices that his parents have rows and shout at each other.

A sewerage system is installed and Paddy gambols in the ditches. He and the other boys play soccer matches and watch the final of the European Cup on television; they discuss the matter of what fish fingers are made from, play with a dog and build a wigwam. Paddy is given a bicycle and learns how to ride it. He becomes a member of a soccer team, Barrytown United, and he locks Sinbad in a suitcase. One of his school mates drowns and the whole school attend the funeral. Paddy and his friends watch a butcher doing his work. Finally, Paddy wins a medal in a race.

Yet, despite all the distractions that life has in store for him, Paddy is compelled to realise that things at home are changing for the worse. One morning, he finds the breakfast table in a mess. The dishes from the supper of the night before have not been cleared away. His mother offers the explanation that she did not have the time. But Paddy knows the real reason to have been a row between his parents. The rows become more frequent. Eventually, the father hits the mother. From that point onwards, Paddy tries to stay with his mother as much as possible, so as to prevent his father from maltreating his wife once more. Paddy simply cannot understand his parents' behaviour. "I loved him. He was my da. It didn't make sense. She was my ma."[8] Again and again, the parents have fights and Paddy regards it as his duty to put an end to the fights or to prevent them in the first place. Then one morning, the mother does not get up at all; she stays in bed for two solid days. Paddy does not know whether she is ill or whether her behaviour is the consequence of a violent quarrel. He is utterly confused. In the end, the parents fight incessantly, and Paddy and Sinbad can hear the infuriated voices in their bedroom. He tries to stay awake whole nights, believing that in that way he will be able to forestall the fighting. At school he falls asleep from overtiredness. One night, the father returns home drunk. But the parents of some of his friends likewise have rows, and as a result they move from the area. Paddy senses that his family will be the next to decamp. He thinks of running away, but he stays on, knowing that he is helpless. "Why did people not like each other?" (p. 257), he asks himself. He has a fight with his best friend and after that is ostracised by all the other boys. In the end, the father moves out after another terrible row, and the kids in the street start shouting:

> - Paddy Clarke -
> Paddy Clarke -
> Has no da.
> Ha ha ha! (p. 281)

Doyle shows how ten-year-old Paddy tries to explore the reality of his existence and make himself at home in it with almost febrile curiosity and a carefree thirst for action. Inevitably, he also comes face to face with the dark, seamy sides of life, or rather the kind of life he is forced to lead in the particular social milieu he grows up in, and Paddy reacts to this with helplessness and a sense of pain and loss. The recreation of Paddy's childhood, regarded by some as "superb",[9] gives the impression of being quite random and repetitive. That randomness and repetitiveness might well be in accordance with Paddy's way of gaining experience. After all, it is he himself who is telling the tale. And yet there is also Henry James's view, as expressed in the "Preface" of *The Spoils of Poynton*, according to which life is all inclusion and confusion and art is all discrimination and selection.[10]

As in the "Barrytown Trilogy", especially in The Van, the family is again the focus of attention. If we saw the institution coming under pressure in the preceding novel, in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* we see it cracking and falling apart. Gerry Smyth has argued:

> The dysfunctional family is a symptom of an increasingly disjointed society, for the confusion Paddy feels with the onset of his parents' break-up is anticipated by the confusion already confronting him at the social and cultural levels.[11]

The remark may be to the point. No doubt, the Clarkes are a dysfunctional family; but it remains arguable whether Doyle has succeeded in sufficiently characterising, and giving shape to, that "increasingly disjointed society". Paddy is like most ten-year-olds - confused at the social and cultural levels. Clearly Doyle's attention to the details of a young boy's life is impressive. Without resorting to sentimentality, he re-creates the honest thoughts of Paddy, who may be slightly more sensitive and aware than most children of his age. Doyle also manages to steer clear of spoiling the narrative with "witty adult observations".[12] All this is clearly in favour of the book. Yet, the social and societal factors responsible for the decline of the family unit in the Ireland of the late '60s are allowed to remain too much in the shadow. They are at best implied, but that is rather inadequate for a novel with socio-critical pretensions.

Perhaps the most appropriate explication one can offer of Paddy's story is to suggest that Paddy's experience moves from sufficiency to inadequacy. At the start, Paddy is suffused by feelings of possession and belonging. "We owned Barrytown, the whole lot of it. It went on forever." These gradually give way to a sense of displacement and isolation. As Gerry Smyth notes,

> If Barrytown, like Ireland, was a country, then like Ireland in the 1960s it was soon to have the myth of national possession and self-sufficiency shattered. The fields and cows disappear, newer and bigger gangs take over, and Paddy finds himself boycotted by his former friends because of the social stigma attached to the break-up of the family.[13]

Most critics are agreed that *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is Doyle's most convincing novel to date. The narrative is in the form of a heart-rending, a deeply agonising monologue. It is not a soliloquy because Paula Spencer is trying to communicate with someone about her miserable existence. Doyle tries to show, through Paula's words and point of view, the contradictions thrown up by the acts of violence, the guilt, self-hatred and victimisation which she has to suffer in addition to her husband physical assaults.[14]

Paula notes of herself: "I'm a sucker for romance".[15] Her life with Charlo Spencer may have begun as a romance, but it certainly did not end as such. This is what happened to Paula when she first met her future husband:

> I swooned the first time I saw Charlo. I actually did. I didn't faint or fall on the floor but my legs went rubbery on me and I giggled. I suddenly knew that I had lungs because they were empty and collapsing.
> Charlo Spencer. (p. 3)

They danced, and Paula comments: "I put my head on his shoulder. He had me" (p. 4). He was "the King" for her, and that made her someone. "Not a Queen or a Princess, just someone. It was a start. It filled me" (p. 54). But now Charlo is dead. A year after Paula threw him out of the house, he was shot by the Gardi when he tried to make his get-away during an abortive attempt to extort money from a bank manager. Charlo was holding the man's wife hostage in their house. Suddenly he saw Special Branch men closing in on the area and he lost his cool and killed the woman. He ran off to the stolen car and climbed inside. Then he remembered that he was incapable of driving a motor car, never having possessed a car himself or ever had any driving lessons. He was shot while he was trying to get out of the vehicle. Before Paula met him, Charlo had been in prison for robbery. But he was a builder; he had a job. Paula is going over her memories in order to come to terms with her plight.

In her recollection, she tries to convince herself that she had a happy childhood and a loving, caring father, both of which her sister Carmel denies (cf. for instance p. 11). Carmel herself got married when she was seventeen. She would have married anyone just to get out of the house (cf. p. 47). The entire misery probably began as early as Paula's childhood, despite her insisting upon the following:

> Once upon a time my life had been good. My parents had loved me. The house was full of laughter. I'd run to school every morning. (p. 56)

Wishful thinking, more likely than not. For reality would seem to have been quite different. There was, for instance, the fact that where Paula grew up young girls were easily called sluts, whether they liked it or not.

> Where I grew up [...] you were a slut or a tight bitch, one or the other, if you were a girl - and usually before you were thirteen. You didn't have to do anything to be a slut. If you were good-looking; if you grew up fast. If you had a sexy walk; if you had clean hair; if you had dirty hair. [...] Anything could get you called a slut. My father called me a slut the first time I put on mascara. (pp. 45f.)

Paula was a slut before she was a proper teenager, before she knew anything about sex, before she even left primary school. "My father said it, fellas said it, other girls said it, men in vans and lorries said it" (p. 47). The first time she went with a fellow was when she was only eleven. A long string of other fellows followed. Still she insists: "It was great then, that year or two,

from ten to eleven or so. It was all fun" (p. 82). Yet, she is clear-eyed enough to add: "But it got complicated after that, and nasty".

There was also no happy running to school. School was a nightmare. The teachers, if they were not perverts, were either stupid or bored or women, and the only good thing about the women teachers was that they did not mess around with Paula and her fellow-pupils. School made her rough; she was not that way before she started there. "Now I had to act rough and think dirty. I had to fight. I had to be hard" (p. 35). It makes little difference that she adds: "maybe it all happens anyway, when you're growing up, no matter where you are". Most probably things of that nature do not happen "no matter where you are", but most likely they occur in the second lowest class, 1.6, where Paula ended up, eventually "wanking a good-looking thick in the back of the classroom" (p. 41).

A good while later (notably enough there is no mention of her ever having worked), she was swept off her feet by Charlo. Charlo and Paula got engaged not least in order to spite Paula's father, who was against the liaison, hating Charlo and calling him a waster, a criminal. Does one dare add: who would blame him? No matter, Paula contends that after their wedding they were happy, for a while. She could see a smile on Charlo's face that said: I love you and I want to rip your clothes off. "A smile that said We're going to live happily ever after. He believed it. I believed it" (p. 134). Their honeymoon in Courtown was a great success. She can still vividly and lovingly remember details of their mutual experiences in Mrs Doyle's guest-house (cf. p. 154), and plenty of sex, though little tenderness. At one point, she expressly states: "We were very, very happy" (p. 167).

Yet things started to go downhill not long after the honeymoon. And then he started to hit her. She had said that there was a smell on his breath, and "whack" was the answer. She went to a doctor: whack again. He followed her. "There's nothing wrong with you; what's your problem? Whack. And I loved him when he didn't do it; I loved him with all my heart. He was so kind. He just lost his temper, sometimes" (p. 158). In her retelling of her abuse, she always wavers between criticism of her husband and self-accusation, between self-assertion and subjugation. When it happened, she had told him: "- Make your own fuckin' tea" (p. 169). More often than not, she feels that it was all her own fault:

> But sometimes I can't help thinking that I could have avoided it, I could have been cleverer. I could have made that fuckin' tea. [...] it wouldn't have killed me. He'd had his moods before. I'd seen them. I recognised them. I could have seen it coming. Instead, I provoked him. And now, here I am.
> - Make your own fuckin' tea. (p. 169)

She goes even further to note in parenthesis:

> (I keep blaming myself. After all the years and broken bones and teeth and torture I still keep on blaming myself. I can't help it. What if? What if? He wouldn't have hit me if I hadn't...[...] (p. 170)

Charlo kicked Paula up the stairs and he kicked her down the stairs. He burned her, scalded her, threatened her, thumped her, raped her for seventeen years. She became the woman who walked into doors, a euphemism for a battered wife. And all these seventeen years she was craving attention, interest, understanding and compassion. But no one seemed to care. "Ask me ask me ask me", she repeatedly pleads (for instance p. 187). It is a desperate cry for help. "Broken nose, loose teeth, cracked ribs. Ask me" (187). Yet, all that people did - the doctors, the neighbours, even her own mother and father - was ignore her, look through instead of at her:

> I could walk through crowds. I could see all these people but they didn't see me. They could see the hand that held out the money. They could see the hand that held open the door. [...] They could see the mouth that spoke the words. [...] But they couldn't see me. The woman who wasn't there. The woman who had nothing wrong with her. The woman who was fine. The woman who walked into doors. (p. 187)

She goes on to remark:

> My mother looked and saw nothing. My father saw nothing, and he loved what he didn't see. My brothers saw nothing. His mother saw nothing. [...] The woman who kept walking into doors. (p. 187)

But when did it all start? At one point Paula says that Charlo started beating her up after he had lost his job (cf. p. 192). But she then reasons:

> I could rest if I believed that; I could rest. But I keep on thinking and I'll never come to a tidy ending. [...] Why did he do it? No real answers come, no big Aha. (p. 192)

It is all such a frightful mess, such terrible confusion.

> He loved me and he beat me. I loved him and I took it. It's as simple as that, and as stupid and complicated. It's terrible. (p. 192)

Yet, on another occasion she suggests that Charlo hated her for being pregnant, for not being his little Paula any more - "and he drew his fist back and hit me" (p. 163). To escape her misery, she flees into daydreams featuring the likes of Robert Redford or Bruce Willis (p. 58) or imaginary men - a barman, a plumber or an electrician (p. 100): "I ran away in my dreams" (p. 210). Of course, she also withdraws into alcoholism. She started to drink because drink helped; drink calmed her down; drink gave her something to search for and do (cf. p. 212). It was as simple and as complex as that. One of her sons died, "cot death" (p. 84), or so she imagined, once when she was absolutely plastered, and she swore never to drink again. But she could not give up the booze:

> I am an alcoholic. I've never admitted it to anyone. (No one would want to know.) I've never done anything about it; I've never tried to stop. I think I could if I really wanted to, if I was ready. (p. 88)

But she has not been ready yet, not even now after Charlo's death while she is putting her plight into words. The picture she conveys of herself now is this:

> She'll be thirty-nine in two months' time. Give her a mirror, and some make-up and a half-hour, and she'll make herself look thirty. See her when she's getting out of bed and she'll look fifty. She's an office-cleaner; she gets two-fifty an hour. She does houses as well in the mornings. [...] She has four children. She is a widow. She is an alcoholic. She has holes in her heart that never stop killing her. (p. 43)

She is still on the bottle. Sometimes she simply has to get out, cannot stand it any longer - the dirt, the emptiness, the stuffing coming out of the furniture, and nothing in the fridge. "I can't cope. The urge. The bottle. I have to get out" (p. 103). Hers is a terribly miserable existence. At times, she would like to see someone worse off than herself; but she can only get comfort from the telly, the reports from the Third World on the News or pictures from Sarajevo. "[...] but they all seemed to have good warm clothes" (p. 10), she notes. Her own children never had such clothes.

The point about Paula is that in the end, after seventeen years of walking into doors, she is still capable of mustering enough strength to survive: she can still pick herself up.

> I never gave up.
> I'm here.
> I picked myself up. I washed the blood off my face. I put on the kettle. (p. 205)

As one critic has suggested, at the end of the book Paula is half in and half out of the door, an image that represents the threshold between self-control and subjection.[16] She has reclaimed her role as mother and homemaker, even though she may still depend on alcohol to carry on. "I could never get past the door" (p. 209), she writes. But she finally had the will and the power to hit Charlo over the head with a pan and throw him out of the house. "It was a great feeling. I'd done something good" (p. 226). This, significantly, is the last line of her searching account.

Paula's story is of course not structured in the chronological fashion of the present analysis of the battered woman's life. It rather hopscotches about among Paula's recollections and conveys the impression of having been penned in random fashion, just in the way in which her memories assail her. The only conspicuous features that seem to effect a rudimentary sort of compositional patterning are certain recurrent passages which appear to treat of traumatic key experiences. Here are two such passages. The first describes the moment when Paula found herself on the floor after having been hit by Charlo, presumably the first time he did so:

> I knew nothing for a while, where I was, how come I was on the floor. Then I saw Charlo's feet, then his legs making a triangle with the floor. He seemed way up over me. Miles up. I had to bend back to see him. [etc.] (pp. 5 & 175)

The second one concerns the fact that the doctor she went to see, hoping to get help from him and be able to express her devastating grief, did not care in the least:

> The doctor never looked at me. He studied parts of me but he never saw all of me. He never looked at my

> eyes. Drink, he said to himself. I could see his nose moving, taking in the smell, deciding. (pp. 23, 164, 186)

The apparent randomness of the design shows that what Paula has put to paper are memories. She herself states:

> That's the thing about memories. I can't pick and choose them. I can't pretend. [...] I can never settle into a nice memory, lie back and smile. (p. 197)

A little further on, she appropriately notes:

> It's all a mess - there's no order or sequence. I have dates, a beginning and an end, but the years in between won't fall into place. (p. 203)

It is an excellent way of characterising Paula's approach and of supplying a *raison d'être* for the book's structure.

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors is meant to be Paula's work. She has written it, thereby proving that she is capable of exercising control. We find her in a position where she is able to tell her story. That she is responsible for the account becomes apparent through a number of meta-discursive comments. Thus at one point she declares in parenthesis: "(It kills me writing that and reading it - *I could never afford good shoes for my kids.* I don't put all the blame on him either.)" (p. 10). Gerry Smyth sees the effect of introducing the meta-discursive comments as follows:

> I would suggest that Doyle's introduction of the metadiscursive aspects [...] is a way of defamiliarising the narrative, not in order to alienate the reader from Paula's plight, but rather to highlight the issues of authority and responsibility which are the actual themes of the novel. In effect, the text is asking the reader a series of questions. Can language describe violence? How does literature relate to the 'real'? Can a person tell the story of his or her own life? How reliant are notions of identity and character on textual devices? Can a man tell a woman's story? It is indicative of Doyle's skill that when he employs formal defamiliarising techniques [...] the effect is to heighten rather than mitigate the message of the novel.[17]

There are rather a lot of questions here that the meta-discursive statements allegedly ask, and while some of them do make some sense ("How does literature relate to the 'real'?") others are quite silly ("Can a man tell a woman's story?"). Nor do the remarks really defamiliarise the story. They merely throw into relief the fact that Paula is in authority; she is the implied authoress - a woman who has acquired the skill to write impressive passages such as this:

> I walked to the end of the cul-de-sac. There were cars in front of most of the houses. People in; someone was looking - there had to be somebody. Looking at a wet woman in her daughter's jacket. There was a small park at the end of the road and another road at the other end of it, to the left. That must have been where they'd parked their car, Charlo and Richie Massey. I wasn't going to go over there. (Does blood leave a stain on cement?) In front of me, to the right, over a bunch of bluey-green trees, there was a beautiful house, like a castle. A really beautiful thing with two round roofs shaped like cones. And windows in them. A gorgeous-looking place. People lived in that. There was a weather cock on top of the highest roof. It wasn't moving. I don't think I'd ever seen a weather cock before, or noticed one. Arrows pointing four ways. People lived in there, had bedrooms in that roof. The trees in the park were in round groups. They looked old but the place seemed brand new. No cracks in the paths, no dog dirt. I looked over at where I thought Richie Massey had parked the car. I could feel nothing. [etc.] (pp. 145f.)

The meta-discursive statements provide comments on Paula's very own procedure, without aspiring to the status of postmodernist metafictional claptrap. Instead, these comments lead to the cardinal question of what Paula is trying to achieve by committing her experiences to paper. Once again, Paula herself supplies the answer:

> (I'm not. What Carmel says. Rewriting history. I'm doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make it up. [...]) (p. 57)

Her writing constitutes a sense-making process. It is an effort to get at the truth, to come to grips with her own life. Repeatedly, she admonishes herself to adhere to "Facts" (cf. for instance p. 104). Or she notes:

> I'm messing around here. Making things up; a story. I'm beginning to enjoy it. Hair *rips*. Why don't I say He pulled my hair? *Someone is crying. Someone is vomiting.* I cried, I fuckin' well vomited. [...] I don't want to make it up, I don't want to add to it. I don't want to lie. I don't have to; there's no need. I want to tell the

truth. Like it happened. Plain and simple. (pp. 184f.)

Her entire account represents an utterly honest attempt to understand her life, to face the truth and not seek consolation in alcohol. By the same token, she wants to understand why after seventeen years of abuse she still loves Charlo:

> I loved him when I was throwing him out. I loved him when Gerard [the Garda who came to tell her of Charlo's death] rang the bell. I love him now. (p. 24)

Paula may still, as she admits, occasionally need a drink, but the fact that we find her capable of writing her story down and not straying from the facts marks another decisive step in her efforts to become the woman who can walk past the door.

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Embalming Life or Celebrating Action?
A Case Study in the Interrogation of Identities

Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra

Biography is a branch of history whose forms and methods of representing a person's life have changed according to the historical and political contexts of the time. They can be found in the form of diaries or letters, memoirs, memories of living witnesses, official archives - all of them accounts which were sometimes ruined by excessive adulation, prudishness, gentility or prolixity. In the last decades biography, like autobiography, has become a literary form of great importance not only for the academy but also of popular interest. Different postmodern modes deal with the private and public politics of representation introducing intense self-conscious narratives. Thus, the representation of the other (and the self) reveals the problematic relation of the private and the public. History as private experiences brought to public consciousness, counterpoised to private revisions of public experience, also aims to construct a public collective awareness of the past.

There is a common assumption that history is the true account of the past that reaches us through documents, oral reports and writings, what Lemaire (1981) defines as an "archeologized" past, but its source is always a textualized one. History means interpretation. In Adam Schaff's *History and Truth,* E. H. Carr says that the historian should have a voice to be heard carefully by the reader because "history is interpretation". Lucien Febvre adds that in fact, history is a choice, not an arbitrary but a pre-conceived one. According to him, without a pre-conceived theory there is no scientific work. A historian cannot submit to the facts as if they were not constructed and selected by him. Linda Hutcheon (1988:153) says that "history offers facts – interpreted, signifying, discursive, textualized – made from brute events." However, when the historical knowledge is questioned and explored in the realm of the real, she affirms that "literary genres" become *historiographic metafictions.* If historiography is an imaginary reconstruction of the process of critical analysis of the events that survived from the past, then, is the referent of historiography the fact or the event, the text or the experience, the derridean "corpus" or the "life"? Historiographic metafiction does not reproduce events, but directs the reader to facts and to other ways of thinking about events. In the historiographic analysis, the subjective factor lies in the selection of the fact and of the theory that precedes the interpretative process. The choice and the logic chaining of the facts to "explain" the history are controlled by the spirit that selects and gathers the facts.

Biography is a kind of work that is on the borderline between fiction and personal history; both fields deal with human constructs and signified systems. In "Otobiographies", Derrida (1985), when proposing an analysis of the proper name and the signature for biographies of philosophers, questions the *dynamis* of that borderline between the "work" and the "life", the system and the subject of the system. He says that the power of this virtual, even mobile potency of the borderline, *"traverses two "bodies", the corpus and the body."*

John Banville is a contemporary Irish writer who has ventured in the field of historiographic metafiction. He works at the crossroads of Physics, History and Fiction not only to reactivate former incompatible themes - the relation between science and literature, but also to contest the veracity of the historical discourse and bring it closer to fictional discourse. In his tetralogy - *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982) and *Mefisto* (1986) - Banville deconstructs, on the one hand, the illusory antagonism which sees scientific and literary narratives as opposite discursive practices (objective-descriptive versus subjective-poetic respectively); and, on the other hand, the illusory empirical exactitude of historical narratives, mainly biography and autobiography.

Banville's tetralogy is neither a biography nor a fictional rewriting of the scientists' lives in the traditional sense, as it seems to be at first reading. Crossing first the borders of fiction and science, he dissects the processes of the scientists' discoveries in order to understand the mind-set that guided their experiments. He proves that scientific knowledge is a construction of the scientists' mind because they tried to explain in a deductive or inductive way the *apriori* or *a posteriori* theories created in their minds about facts that were perceived sensorially. Exploring the nature of the scientists' creative process Banville can understand his own process of creation in the field of fiction without having to write about artists. According to him, scientific imagination knits "supreme fictions" in the attempt to "save the appearances/ the phenomena" in the old days and to explain the facts with the advent of modern science. The process of "creation" of the scientist resembles the process of imagination of the artist because scientists "do" science in the same way as artists "do" art. So, the nature of both creative processes becomes one: signs and images appear in the mind of the scientist and artist shaping structures of signification that language translates in an orderly and intelligible way within a context that mirrors the original chaos. It is perceived that both fields construct a paradigm of reality; both have the aim of "representing", of controlling nature with the purpose of redefining the knowledge of the world.

Once he crosses the borders of science and fiction, he also trespasses the limits of history and fiction, provoking an unusual double-bound tension in the narrative: the biography is articulated as a self-conscious and reflective fiction that transforms the historical novel into a *metabiofiction,* and the *transparent* "truth" of historical facts into *apparent* reality due to relativity of perception and textuality. Thus I prefer to refer to the tetralogy as a *trans(ap)parent historiographic metabiofiction,* also because there is a strong awareness on the part of the writer that to represent the past in language and in narrative is to construct that past and thus, the links between the personal and the political cannot be separated. If the past is seen from the present there is inevitably a process of erasing, selecting and stressing some events rather than others, when one wants to represent a version of them.

The third book of the tetralogy, *The Newton Letter,* is a satire within three tragedies, as Banville said when he compared it to the Greek form. It is more a novella rather than a novel and it plays the same function of the musical composition mentioned in the subtitle, "An Interlude" – an *"intermezzo"* that is inserted in-between the various parts of a long composition. After having written two extensive novels, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler,* and having the project of a fourth novel in mind, Banville wrote the novella declaring, *"My readers, that small band, deserve a rest."*

I focus my analysis on this precise book because, in my opinion, various modes of historical writing are being articulated: the account of a particular moment in the life of Newton contrasted with the principles of his scientific theory; an autobiography in the form of a personal memoir narrating the biographer's own crisis that echoes Newton's; a letter written to the Muse of History in the form of a confession where an uncertain writer dealing with an uncertain subject concludes that subjectivity is the only reality that could be articulated; and, a personal reflective narrative on the process of writing history and fiction. Thus, in the fictional level, the writer deconstructs the newtonian absolutes (always predictable truths) introducing fictional truths in the pseudo-historical narrative, and, in the metafictional level, it questions the process of writing a biography and a novel.
The narrator, an historian, in order to conclude the biography of Isaac Newton, looks for the causes that provoked the scientist's nervous collapse in the letters he wrote to John Locke (one real and the other Banville's own invention, based on *Ein Brief* by Hugo Von Hofmannsthal - "The Letter of Lord Chandos"). In order to explain the historical fact through the analyses of the documents in hand, the unknown biographer has to cross the borders of reality and he discovers the invalidity of reaching a "historical truth". According to McMinn, the fictive biographer does not believe in the value of interpretation any more, and he re-enacts the history of his book in two simultaneous stories: one is the biographic recreation of Newton's crisis, and the other is his own personal crisis when he moves to the countryside of contemporary Ireland to finish Newton's biography.

The Newton Letter opens in the epistolar form as if it were a confession and it deconstructs all the assumptions that refer to the scientific representation of a mechanistic and predictable world. The aim is to question the void provoked by the fictional truth of the historical and scientific discourses. The anonymous narrator starts the letter revealing his failure to the Muse of History, "Words fail me, Clio", and he affirms, "Shall I say, I've lost my faith in the primacy of text?". The historian is in conflict with himself and with his art of narrating the truths of the past, or more precisely, with the science of "making history", when he discovers the impossibility of deducing the causes of human behavioural phenomena of the past and what is worse, of his own present. Thus, the crisis occurs when he applies the universal law that controls the exterior world to the interior world.

Writing the letter to Clio, the narrator believes he will understand why he has abandoned writing his book. The whole narrative is indeed, an explanatory repetition of the hypothesis raised by the historian on the cause that had provoked Newton's nervous breakdown in the summer of 1693, and why the scientist devoted himself to the interpretative study of the Bible and alchemy, a fact that embarrasses his historians a lot. Perhaps Newton's withdrawal from scientific pursuits was intentional due to his doubts about the truth (or rather fictions?) of his own theories. This interrogation is confirmed more explicitly with the analysis of Newton's second letter to John Locke (the invented one) who had challenged his theory. The scientist appears not to have the same old conviction that the absolutes of space and time and motion, on which he founded his theory of the mechanistic universe in the *Principia*, exist in God. Then, the narrator suffers the same experience of doubt and writes to the Muse of History:

> But Clio, dear Cliona, you have been my teacher and my friend, my inspiration, for too long, I couldn't lie to you. Which doesn't mean I know what the truth is, and how to tell it to you. (p.10)

This quotation is directly related to Banville's belief in the existence of an interaction between the liar and the listener provoked by the shared knowledge that what is being told is a lie. Thus, the lie is sublimated and becomes transformed into a ritual and supreme fiction, a fictional truth. In spite of the fact that the narrator affirms to Clio, "No, I'm not sick. I have not had a breakdown. (...) You'll think me mad", he focuses on the analysis of the two letters, comparing mainly the subscriptions and signatures with "morbid fascination". Therefore, the biographer's approach resembles Derrida's in *The Ear of the Other* where the philosopher develops his theory of *otobiography* when analysing Nietzsche's identity through his signature in his autobiography

Ecco Homo. He says that a text is signed only much later by the other. According to him, as we need to hear and understand in order to produce, "the signature awaits its own form, its own event" to acquire its significance. Thus, it is the reader/listener who will give a meaning to that signature. In the case of Newton's letters, the scientist's signatures become the *morbid* center of the biographer's analysis. In the first letter, the signature is fragmented, "Is. Newton", while in the second one, only the plain surname, "Newton", appears.

According to the narrator, the authentic letter reveals the passionate and irrational Newton accusing Locke of being immoral and "of having tried to embroil him with women". Words and sentences of the letter are "translated" by him when he approaches it as a sympathetic inquirer. So, the reader only hears his voice which is disturbed by the subscription where the famous man appears as a victim of the other: "I am your most humble and unfortunate servant, Is. Newton". This way of signing raises co-implications and meanings for the biographer's cute ear: it could be just an abbreviation of his first name, or an emphasis on the condition of being humble and unfortunate due to Locke's accusations, thus showing Newton's "pain and anguished bafflement", or, it could be also a visual representation of Newton's broken self, of a divided mind between the certainty of the absolutes and the doubt of their origin. The narrator also analyses the scientist from the perspective of an academic historian mentioning the gravity laws and the discoveries in optics that had given Newton fame despite his personal attitude of being "cold, arrogant, lonely." But Banville's reader can also see, throughout the whole narrative, how much the narrator resembles his object of study seeking for a personal reputation and an acclaim for his own work when he refers to the writing of the biography:

> It would be a splendid book, fresh and clean (...) The academies would be stunned, you would be proud of me, and Cambridge would offer me a big job. (p.14).

In an essay on *The Newton Letter* Brian McIlroy (1992) also points out that the narrator accuses Newton of Hobbism, the same monolithic power that he gives to Clio, the muse of history, and the scholar also affirms that he suffers Newton's same entrapment by women when he has sexual relations with one woman while having adulterous desires with another.

The second letter, which is considered the center of the biography and of the scientist's work, is also Banville's center where the centripetal and centrifugal forces keep fiction and history in orbit. In this way he introduces the principles of the gravity laws in the construction of the "novella".

The fictive letter shows Newton's effort to understand and express his inner self. The historian writes again his interpretation of it and transcribes only some passages which are deconstructed in relation to a historical and fictional truth, questioning the meanings generated by the relationship between facts and the language that expresses them. Hofmannsthal's letter, which was Banville's source of inspiration, is a fictional correspondence between Lord Chandos and Francis Bacon in which the former suffers the consequences of his inability to give meaning to reality and reflects upon the inadequacy of language to mediate experience. The narrator reproduces the end of the fictive letter looking for its "true" meaning.

> My dear Doctor, expect no more philosophy from my pen. The language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, but a language none of whose words is known to me; a language in which common place things speak to me; and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge. Then comes that cold, that brave, that almost carven signature: Newton. What did he mean, what was it those commonplace things said to him, what secret did they impart? And so I sat in the shadow of lilacs, nursing an unrequitable love and reading a dead man's testament, trying to understand it. (pp. 60-61)

This passage, reinforcing the inadequacy of language to explain the phenomena, destabilizes both the scientific and the historical truth. If the specificity of the historical narrative is to show the accumulation of relative truths that lead to the absolute truth, the historical will turn into fictional due to the constructed systems of reference and the writer's own evaluative criteria. In his masterpiece, *Principia*, the historical Newton shows the contrast that could exist between the objective importance of a discovery and the subjective meaning given to it by its author. Therefore, as Schaff says in *History and Truth*, the historical facts are manifestations selected among many others due to the relations between cause and effect and to the action in the map of greater totalities. The criteria of choice will give meaning to the fact and it presuposes a system of reference where evaluation and selection take place and endow the historical fact with relativism.

The concept above is developed in the autobiographic level of the narrative where the fictional biographer constantly refers to the historical present and to his own experience every time uncertainty appears when he was interpreting Newton's historical facts. For example, the narrator rented a lodge that was part of a Big House (Fern House), on the roadside near

Dublin, in order to isolate himself to finish writing the biography of Sir Isaac Newton which, after the first weeks, he abandoned as the scientist did with his research in the past. Edward and Charlotte lived in the main house with their niece, Ottilie, and Michael, a child. As he has always been attracted by the "insistent enigma of other people", the narrator made an interpretative reading of those people following the law of reversibility: a typical protestant family in a pastoral context, living in a Big House in decay.

Banville's aim is to manipulate elements that already appeared in his previous novel *Birchwood* - the big house, the assumptions of that age, the name of the family (the Lawlesses)- to prove the vacuum that exists in the scientific theory of prediction. According to Newton's mechanistic conception of the world, time is reversible and the law of reversibility determines the future as it determined the past. Prigogine and Stengers in *Order Out of Chaos*, conclude that Newton makes the synthesis of "being and becoming". The metaphor that represents this theory is the clock, whose major implication is the inference that the world as a machine has a fixed and static form and once it is put in motion, it will continue for ever without the need of a divine intervention. The causal process that permits to relate the phenomena to an organizing principle, determines its future coherence and unity. Common sense is essential in the application of the inductive-deductive reasoning to interpret the facts and unveil the mystery of the commonality, not of the exotic. Since he was a child, the narrator had felt the law of attraction by the Other's enigma:

> I would gaze at that silent house and wonder, in a hunger of curiosity, what lives were lived there. Who stacked that firewood, hung that holly wreath, left those tracks in the hoarfrost on the hill? I can't express the odd aching pleasure of that moment. I knew, of course, that those hidden lives wouldn't be much different from my own. But that was the point. It wasn't the exotic I was after, but the ordinary, that strangest and most elusive of enigmas. (p.19)

However, in his personal history, the "absolute truths" apprehended by common sense will dissipate, and the idea of a predictable nature that is under human control will be checkmated at every destroyed assumption that he had constructed about the family during the first weeks of his stay. Edward is not a *bon vivant*, an opportunist who got married with the daughter of the owner of Fern House, but he is dying of cancer; Charlotte is apparently terribly refined and distant as all high society is, but this is the result of high doses of valium medicated by her doctor; Ottilie is Charlotte's brother's daughter who died with his wife in a car accident, and Michael is a child adopted by the couple which means that he is not their son nor the bastard son of Edward and Ottilie, as he knitted in his imagination.

> I was like an embarrassed anthropologist realizing that what he had for months taken to be the ordinary muddle of tribal life is really an immense intricate ceremony, in which the tiniest gesture is foreordained and vital, in which he is the only part that does not fit. (p.68)

The anonymous historian abandoned his intention of finishing his book because he perceived that in his own personal history the present facts show lying truths. The oxymoron "fictitious truths" used by Riffaterre in *Fictional Truth*, helps to understand the paradox. The narrator questioned himself implicitly about the "true constructions" of the present. If in the process of interpretation they are inferred erroneously, according to the universal law, the abyss between truth and its construction (the "non truth") will be greater when facts from the past are analised. Because of this he abandoned his work leaving it unfinished. The narrator ran away from his exile in the countryside because he could not experience the equilibrium of the natural forces of human beings which should repeat themselves in space *in eternum*. Nevertheless, he realized that in the future he would go back to the same place though this time to question the dilemma of truth in the mechanistic Nature. Banville closes the fictional interlude with an interrogative discourse as a way of affirming and subverting the scientific theory at the same time. The biographer will take up the book and finish it though there will be again the uncertainty of leaving his research and book unfinished. "Shall I awake in a few months, in a few years, broken and deceived, in the midst of new ruins?"

Finally, I would like to refer to the metafictional level of writing a biography as the question of subjectivity in the interpretation of history is constantly present in all the levels.

The narrator received from Cliona a biography of Newton published by another biographer, Popov, to "goad him into publishing". He already knew and criticized Popov's method which reminded him of an embalmer's. His narrative follows the process of embalming life, for example, "Newton was the greatest genius that science has produced." Who could deny it? It does not mean that it is not true; it is a fact. But, another kind of truth was more important for the narrator: he wanted to celebrate action, to reveal its function in the life he is portraying! He admits that he nearly followed the embalming process but was corageous enough to give up on time.

Nevertheless, the fictive historian adopts the method of historical materialism that approaches the object of study as a

monad, in spite of the fact that he believes in history as a "celebration of action". As Walter Benjamin says, to think does not only include the movement of the ideas but also their immobilization. The narrator concentrates his thought in a configuration saturated with tensions, the letters to Locke, which he crystalizes in a monad in order to be able to recover a past that has been silenced and to hear the echo of a voice that has become mute due to the fluctuating political powers of history. Thus, Banville writes his interlude, *The Newton Letter*, to question the "objectivity" of a "historicizing history", which is purely descriptive, in counterposition with the dynamic historicism which, according to Adam Schaff in *History and Truth*, implies to capture nature, society and the human being in motion. Historicism leads to the denial of the absolute principles because the historian has to relate the ideas to the historical conditions. The caricaturesque description of the historian Popov containing some quotations from his own biography of Newton, clearly shows the contrast of the two forms of producing history.

> I met him once, an awful little man with ferret eyes and a greasy suit. Reminded me of an embalmer. Which, come to think of it, is apt. I like his disclaimer: ***Before the phenomenon of Isaac Newton, the historian, like Freud when he came to contemplate Leonardo, can only shake his head and retire with as much good grace as he can muster.*** Then out come the syringe and the formalin. That is what I was doing too, embalming old N.'s big corpse, only I did have the grace to pop off before the deathshead grin was properly fixed (p.29)

The fictional historian rebels against the descriptive function of the facts which reveals stagnation and dissection of the scientist and his work when seen from this perspective. This is due to the absence of a preconceived theory that precedes the historical "doing" which would give it sense, an object, a cause, an aim of writing history. He explains his own theory ironically at the beginning of the novel when he justifies the aim of his book:

> Oh yes, you can see, can't you, the outline of what my book would have been, a celebration of action, of the scientist as hero, a gleeful acceptance of Pandora's fearful disclosures, wishy-washy medievalism kicked out and the age of reason restored. But would you believe that all this, this Popovian Newton-as-the-greatest-scientist-the-world-has-known, now makes me feel slightly sick? Not that I think any of it untrue, in the sense that it is fact. It's just that another kind of truth has come to seem to me more urgent, although, for the mind, it is nothing compared to the lofty verities of science. (pp.29-30)

In the historical narrative, different visions and various discourses, sometimes contradictory, construct relative truths that will be interpreted according to the context. Riffaterre defends that the discourse of truth is external and parallel to the narrative; it is a metalanguage and depends directly on the logic imperatives of assumptions and conclusions. He also affirms that fictional truth belongs to the field of fiction for being a genre, and contrary to what was believed traditionally, it does not depend on verisimilitude. Following this thought, *The Newton Letter* subverts that verisimilitude, or *mimesis* of reality, introducing another fictional truth conceived as a linguistic phenomenon that depends directly on the text.

Such as Newton succeeds in making a synthesis between Kepler's and Galileo's principles and in discovering *a posteriori* the universal law of gravitation, as well as improving the concepts of optics, Banville makes a synthesis between the eighteenth-century and the postmodern thoughts. He deconstructs the knowledge that was guided by fossilized principles rooted in the notion of linearity, and he subverts them in relation to their origin using the same principles of the newtonian synthesis, now applied to the art of writing fiction. Banville plays with the absolute truths of space, time and motion upon which Newton constructed his concept of the universe. The fictional narrative, which develops the question of validity of the description of facts and the objective interpretation of history, subverts the mechanistic vision of the world and deconstructs the idea of Nature as automaton which views phenomena occurring linearly according to a cause-effect determinism. *The Newton Letter* is, therefore, a satire of Positivism that keeps the historians side by side with the scientists as owners of an objetive truth.

Banville reverses the newtonian synthesis which shows an alliance between the rational comprehension of nature and its practical manipulation. To do this, he adopts the scientist's strategies which consist in isolating a specific phenomenon and uses it as a base for all other types of deduction of other groups of phenomena that occur under the same circumstances but in a reversal way. Interrogating the identities presented by the narrator at each different level, the scientific characteristic of the limits of a historical truth are transposed to a fictional space. The embalming of life gives way to the celebration of action at least at a fictional level, but the fictional truth will be also questioned at a metafictional level in the form of a satire which will be understood by those readers with "cute ears", while others will only laugh.

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Bakhtin and Modern Irish Satire

José Lanters

"Carnival," "dialogue" and "heteroglossia" are key terms in Bakhtin's theory of dialogic literature in general and Menippean satire in particular. I will discuss two 20th-century Irish novels in terms of Bakhtin's theory of satire: Darrell Figgis's *The Return of the Hero* (1923) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). O'Brien's novel is far better known than Figgis's; the book is often mentioned in discussions of postmodernism as being an early and therefore noteworthy example of the use of techniques that came to be regarded as staples of postmodernist writing several decades later. While that is a valid approach, it is my intention here to show, in a comparison with *The Return of the Hero*, that *At Swim-Two-Birds* can equally fruitfully be read as a Menippean satire, and that when regarded in those terms the book is neither a particularly early example in 20th-century Ireland, nor an especially unique one.

The purpose of Menippean satire is the testing of ultimate philosophical and ideological positions and truths and the questioning of authority. Among the techniques used to achieve this end are the use of the fantastic and of free invention; the deliberate contemporization of historical figures and heroes of myth; the "making strange" of the familiar by means of unusual contexts and points of view; the incorporation in the text of inserted genres and "found" material; parody; the mixing of multiple styles, registers, voices, types of language and levels of meaning; and the use of abnormal states of mind, eccentric or inappropriate behaviour and the violation of accepted norms. What these characteristics of Menippean satire have in common with each other is their deviation from and distortion of the established norms and values that represent authority (be it in terms of religion, government, social behaviour or language itself); they act as a challenge to all forms of authority, which are by definition dogmatic, absolute and hostile to change.

Both *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* feature heroes borrowed from early medieval Irish literature. Figgis uses the dialogue between Oisín and Saint Patrick as the basis for his own narrative, versions of which are to be found in the *Acallam na Senórach* or Colloquy of the Ancients and the *Duanaire Finn* or Book of the Lays of Finn. Although Flann O'Brien also uses material from the Fenian Cycle, the core of *At Swim-Two-Birds* with regard to borrowed medieval material is *Buile Suibhne* or the Frenzy of Sweeny. The inclusion of characters of myth or ancient literature in a new (con)text with characters whose attitudes are alien to theirs is a technique of Menippean satire: juxtaposing characters from different backgrounds, from past and present, creates a dialogue between different and opposing values and ideologies.

The choice of the core texts used by Figgis and O'Brien deserves further consideration, because both *Duanaire Finn* and *Buile Suibhne* are highly dialogic texts in their own right. The dialogue between Oisín (or, in the *Colloquy*, Oisín and Cailte) and Patrick exists in a number of versions, all of which follow essentially the same pattern: Fionn MacCumhail's son Oisín, after spending several hundred years in the otherworld, returns to the real world where Christianity has meanwhile arrived in the person of St. Patrick. The latter engages Oisín in conversation and asks him about his life with the Fianna; Oisín tells him many different stories. In his turn, Patrick endeavours to convert Oisín to Christianity. This is no easy task, and they have many arguments as to who is more deserving of loyalty: the King of Heaven or the Leader of the Fianna. Myles Dillon points out in *Early Irish Literature* (1948) that

> The temper of the *Acallam* is cheerful, in spite of Cailte's loneliness and decrepitude and his regard for the heroic past. St. Patrick and the kings enjoy his stories, and heaven is promised him for himself and Finn and the other warriors whom he praises. But in the later ballad version both saint and hero become caricatures, and a different sort of humor appears. Here Patrick is a bigoted cleric, pronouncing the doom of hell upon the Fenians, and Cailte or Oisín the defiant pagan (40).

All versions, however, end with the debate unresolved, either intentionally or because the manuscript is incomplete.

Buile Suibhne is also the story of a conflict between a king and a clergyman. Suibhne discovers St. Ronan marking out a church and ringing his bell in the territory over which Suibhne is king; this so enrages him that he rushes out of his house stark naked, grabs the cleric's psalter and tosses it into the lake. Before he can further attack the saint, however, Suibhne is called away to fight in the battle at Magh Rath. Some time later there is another encounter between Ronan and Suibhne: the king is angered when Ronan's psalmist sprinkles holy water upon him, believing that this is done to mock him. He kills the psalmist and pierces the saint's bell with his spear. At this point St. Ronan curses his attacker: Suibhne will be condemned to take to the trees as a bird and roam the length and breadth of Ireland as a madman, to die eventually by a spear-point. Thus it happens, and the rest of the tale is given over to Suibhne's complaints about his plight. Although he eventually repents of his sinful deeds, he still remembers with longing the time "when I deemed more melodious / the yelping of the wolves / than the voice of a cleric within

/ a-baaing and a-bleating" (O'Keeffe 153).

What is interesting about these texts which serve as "inserted genres" or "found material" in the 20th-century satires is that the "originals" themselves also have many of the characteristics of Menippean satire: dialogue as a means of testing philosophical positions, the questioning of authority (the clergy), the use of the fantastic, the meeting of characters from different times or backgrounds, as well as madness and the violation of norms. In other words, the texts which are borrowed and exploited by Figgis and O'Brien as part of the process of subverting authority themselves challenge authority by means of the same methods that are used by their 20th-century counterparts.

Unlike many other "inserted genres" in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the text of *Buile Suibhne* is used by O'Brien almost in its entirety and with only a few hints of a parody of O'Keeffe's 1913 translation; other "found" material in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, both ancient and modern, is much more fragmented and distorted. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* the *story* of Suibhne (or Sweeny) is narrated in its entirety by another borrowed character, Finn Mac Cool; the *character* Sweeny, however, is in addition borrowed by O'Brien's narrator, placed in a new context and made to engage in a dialogue with a variety of other borrowed characters. O'Brien's insertion of a Menippean text within a Menippean text creates the type of serial "Quaker-Oats" or "Chinese Boxes" effect that he was later to use extensively in *The Third Policeman*: in the Menippean dialogue between characters of different backgrounds which challenges dogma O'Brien inserts a character who was originally part of a Menippean dialogue between characters of different backgrounds which challenges dogma. In such a serial universe authoritarian attitudes do not find a firm footing.

The Return of the Hero differs from *At Swim-Two-Birds* in that it borrows from and parodies only one existing medieval tale (albeit that this story exists in a number of sometimes quite different versions). Figgis does not essentially alter the idea and the nature of the confrontation between Oisín and Patrick, for much the same reasons that O'Brien keeps the story of Suibhne largely intact. Generally speaking, Figgis's changes and additions to the found material serve to strengthen the tale's Menippean characteristics, such as the addition of more voices (other bishops besides Patrick to represent different and more extreme religious attitudes), more frequent and more extreme violence and taboo behaviour on the part of Oisín, and a greater emphasis on the impossibility of establishing the conclusive and incontestable truth of any position.

Each of the two satires under discussion, then, creates a series of dialogues: between "old" and "new" characters within a new context and in new combinations who represent different and opposing values and ideologies; but also between the older texts and their modern reworkings. The dialogue between these two separate dialogues creates a paradox characteristic of Menippean satire. On the one hand, the dialogue between characters serves to question and undermine the authority of prevalent ideologies: in *The Return of the Hero*, Oisín's stubborn, uncomprehending and heretical behaviour consistently questions and undermines the authority of the Church. The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* sets out to expose the "despotism" of traditional literary devices which create the illusion of a reality that does not exist. The focus of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is therefore the authority of literature or of the text itself. But while the dialogues on the level of the characters in the satires of Figgis and O'Brien address different types and expressions of authority, what is fundamentally at stake in both satires is the elusive and mysterious nature of truth itself. This is borne out in both cases by the textual dialogue.

The dialogue between texts, and the reference within each satire to the existence of multiple manuscripts, fragments and versions of texts, sabotages the criticism of any particular ideology or authority implicit in the characters' dialogue - since such criticism implies that the critic adheres to a different, but equally inflexible truth - by questioning the authority of the foundation on which all judgments of such issues are based: text, language and meaning itself. The narrative framework of each satire draws attention to the fact that the stories we are reading exist only as (imperfect) texts. At frequent intervals in *The Return of the Hero* we hear St. Patrick reminding his scribe Brogan to write down all Oisín's stories. The narrator of the book makes it clear that we only have access to the characters and the story through Brogan's text. This places a series of narrators between the reader and the "events" recorded in the tale: the narrator of *The Return of the Hero* tells us what Brogan tells us that Oisín said that Finn did. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* the textual maze is more overt and even more complex: the first-person narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* writes a book about an author, Trellis, who creates and borrows characters for a book he is writing; these characters turn against their author and create another author, Orlick, Trellis's son, who writes a book about his father in which he punishes him for being a tyrannical writer.

What is most crucial about the textual layers thus created in these satires is not the number of manuscripts or the complexity of the relationship between them, but above all their incompleteness and obscurity. *The Return of the Hero* relates that towards the end of his inconclusive but increasingly antagonistic argument with Patrick and the bishops, a change takes place in Oisín: he addresses the clerics, but his words are those of a young man, or an old man, or both. The narrator tells us that "It is most unfortunate that at this point the texts vary considerably" and that, moreover, "the value of the texts at this critical moment seem[s] to increase with the degree of their inaccessibility" (201).

The narrator of Figgis's novel reports that there are three extant manuscripts of the tale. The text in the Library at Leipsic is clearly written, well preserved and accessible to all without restriction, but it finishes at a loose end. The text in the British Museum is fuller but is kept locked up in a strong box, and is only shown to those of unimpeachable faith. It is in wretched condition, written in a crabbed hand and difficult to read. It ends with the speech of an old man. The text at Trinity College Dublin is kept in a strong room, underground, and the narrator relates how access was gained to it only after bribing one of the College's most lenient Fellows and drugging the others. The manuscript is falling apart and there is hardly a word in it that is not abbreviated. It gives "what appears to be the speech of a young man" (203). Neither manuscript, however, relates what happened to Oisín after he left St. Patrick.

The narrator of *The Return of the Hero* insists on examining every available scrap of evidence that might throw light on the question of the story's end, since "four rooms at the Royal Irish Academy are piled thick, from floor to floor, with manuscripts dealing only with this point" (213). Two of the rooms full of texts, he claims, are of no help at all: many of the manuscripts contain only rude remarks, obscene jests in difficult Irish or still more obscure Latin; others are filled with perplexing drawings, some of plumed and mysterious presences, others of no kind of presences at all. The narrator tells us that only a few incidents "drop through the finely meshed sieve of criticism, and may therefore with authority be dropped on this page" (214). The first reports that an old man had seen a strange and wonderful being coming down the hill, which led him to the conclusion that the gods were walking abroad and revealing themselves to men. The second recorded incident concerns a young man who told his mother that he had seen a terrible demon stalking down the road, a notion which terrified them both. Reportedly a third man, a Dane, told his wife that he had seen a strange being, either a god or an old sort of Irishman, but that either way it boded ill for the Danish establishments at Cluain Tairbh. One final text closes the series: an old and almost overlooked hagiology which, according to the narrator, contains "the one priceless truth in the century of credulous fables that encumber its pages" (217). It reports that a young herd witnessed a wonderful being leaping across the beach and into the sea; he heard it call out, "Mannanán mac Lir!", and then the being disappeared. A hermit told the young man that he had seen a demon; the herd "asked if this was an omen that he would die by drowning; and the saint told him that he would not die by drowning if he never went near water" (218).

The textual status of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is equally precarious, its manuscripts being similarly inconclusive and full of gaps at crucial points of the story. The first person narrator of the novel, finding the description of the birth of Orlick beyond the powers of his imagination, decides at this point simply "to abandon a passage extending over the length of eleven pages" (144). Elsewhere the same narrator reports: "It happens that a portion of my manuscript containing an account ... of the words that passed between Furriskey and the voice [of his creator] is lost beyond retrieval" (50). This discovery leads to further textual deletions:

> ... I found two things which caused me considerable consternation.
> *The first thing*: An inexplicable chasm in the pagination, four pages of unascertained content being wanting.
> *The second thing*: An unaccountable omission of one of the four improper assaults required by the ramification of the plot or argument....
> ... Without seeking independent advice on the matter, I decided - foolishly perhaps - to delete the entire narrative and present in its place a brief résumé (or summary) of the events which it contained (60).

This decision means that the whole of Trellis's moralistic novel, "the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (215-16), in fact the sole *raison d'être* of all the characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is summarized in just over one page of text. This arbitrary deletion is repeated on a different textual level when Trellis's servant accidentally burns the manuscript of his book, thereby ending the story. *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* each consist of a narrative framework that contains and relies upon incomplete and fragmentary texts. This means that the narrative framework itself cannot be anything but inconclusive.

In the Introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin's theory of communication is summarized as follows:

> On the one hand, a mode of transcription must, in order to do its work of separating out texts, be a more or less fixed system. But these repeatable features, on the other hand, are in the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made; this context can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context....
> Implicit in all this is the notion that all transcription systems - including the speaking voice in a living utterance - are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey (xix-xx).

Both *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* draw attention to the fact that there is no objective truth or meaning: that every perception of meaning is dependent on context and on an act of interpretation on the part of the receiver of the message.

No text has authority: texts are incomplete, unreliable and versions, retellings, parodies and interpretations of other texts without ever touching base in a verifiable truth or reality. The only truth is that there is no such thing as truth; the only authoritative position is that no position has a claim to authority. Needless to say, this also holds true for the position of the narrators of *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

If these satires come to any conclusion it is that anything is possible, that authority is a fiction, since the truth is inaccessible, and that significance is therefore to be found, paradoxically, only in mystery and the absence of meaning. In *The Return of the Hero*, St. Patrick in moments of crisis always vehemently utters one word: "Mudebroth!," which has the effect of immediately silencing even his most heated opponents. Questioned by Oisín as to the meaning of this word, Brogan replies that nobody knows for certain what it means and that it should be remembered that Patrick, being a Gall, speaks imperfect Irish; it might mean "my God's doomsday." Oisín, however, thinks that it is an incantation "and therefore means nothing. It is not possible for an incantation to have any power when it is known what it means. The value of all incantations is in the ignorance of the hearer, and it is because no one knows what it means that Mudebroth is a mighty spell" (62). The value of the word lies in its mystery, and "Truth is itself the greatest mystery of all" (92). A similar view is expressed in *At Swim-Two-Birds* by the Good Fairy: since everything depends for its meaning upon context (including the perception of good and evil, since neither exists in isolation but is defined in terms of its opposite), "Answers do not matter so much as questions.... A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question" (201). The book itself therefore has three alternative endings, and as for the meaning of it all: "It is extremely hard to say.... Nobody knows" (217).

WILDE'S THREAD IN THE FABRIC OF DECADENT ART

Munira H. Mutran

"*Fin de siècle*", murmured Lord Henry. "*Fin du Globe*",
answered his hostess. "*I wish it were* ***fin du globe***",
said Dorian with a sigh. "*Life is a great disappoitment.*" [1]

Irish civilization, wrote James Joyce, is a vast fabric in which "it is useless to look for a thread that may have remained pure and virgin without having undergone the influence of a neighbouring thread".[2] This is also true of literature, and should be remembered whenever one has the temptation of evaluating a literary work from the point of view of originality versus imitation, as in the case of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Since its publication until very recently the novel has been unfairly referred to by some critics as an imitation or borrowing of different sources as Arnold, Poe, Huysmans, Rossetti, Stevenson, Gautier and Pater, leaving, it seems, little left of Wilde himself. (Mario Praz, not only called him "a passive imitator, but placed *Dorian Gray* in the French School "as a curious exotic reflection of it").[3]

Though *Dorian Gray* is a very significant thread in the fabric of European decadent literature, it has no single sources, nor is it a mixture of works of the period. In one level, it interacts with other European threads reflecting the aesthetics of the moment; but it is unique, in a second level, as an original manifestation of the cultural atmosphere of the nineteenth century as it was drawing to a close. Let us then outline, although briefly, some of the important novels of the eighties and nineties in order to enhance similarities and above all, differences, among them.

Walter Pater's *Marius, the Epicurean* (1885) portrays a philosophic journey in "those charmed moments towards the end of the second century". Marius, a deeply religious boy, lives in the country-house where his family has dwelt for generations, and where "the little gods in their altars receive a few violets, a cake dipped in wine, or a morsel of honeycomb". More given to contemplation than to action, as he grows older, an overtension of the soul brings an appetitte for adventure, for new experiences whether physical or spiritual. His journey as a pilgrim towards Rome begins, as he says, in search of perfection. In his conversations and long meditations he yearns to grasp the essence of a whole philosophical tradition, beginning with the theory of pleasure. The movements of his thoughts can be followed in the dialogue with Lucian, in which he asks if there are many ways to true philosophy and if each is different from the other, how to choose? How to know that in the door you have entered truth is?

Marius's journey draws to an end after his visit to his old house, and the tombs of his ancestors, when he is aware that he is the last of a race, that the religion of Numa and the old world belong to a past which cannot be recovered. At this moment of despair he finds solace for the "disease of the spirit", as he calls it, in the contact with the Christians, a small group of people who have a strange, new hope, and for whom the ideas of peace, chastity and cheerfulness are a turning-point in his journey. As a primitive Christian, about to die, he receives the last rites, the oil applied "to all those passage-ways of the senses, through which the world had come and gone for him." [4]

In Pater's novel, the idea of the end of an era and its consequences on religion, culture, philosophy and language establishes a parallel between the crumbling of the British Empire and that of the Romans, when the old and the new values co-exist.

The same sense of vacuity and decline resulted in *À Rebours* (1884), by J.K. Huysmans,[5] with a different view of life, though. Des Esseintes, a neurotic young man, also the last of a race, restless and bored with his corrupt life, full of all sorts of perverse, sensuous pleasure, moves to his country-house. In Fontenay-aux-Roses, isolated from humanity, for whom he feels strong aversion, immersed in silence, surrounded by strange paintings and sacred objects used in a profane way, reading decadent Latin writers, literature of sacrilege and satanism, the objects of his devotion being Baudelaire, Poe and Aurevilly, Des Esseintes goes through an adventure of new, exotic, sensuous, unnatural experiences with colours, shapes, sounds, perfumes, flowers, food and drink. Through imagination he recreates reality artificially. The artifice, as opposed to nature is, for him, the true mark of human genius. His dining-room, for example, is decorated as a cabin in a ship. Staring at mechanical fish, made of precious stones, while they swim in an acquarium, and get entangled in artificial vegetation, he admires the flowers, natural, but which imitate the texture and colour of artificial ones.

In the end, awful nightmares, the use of drugs and very painful physical suffering almost drive him mad; he is forced to go back to Paris, a Roderick Usher well-versed in the writings of Sade.

Marius and Des Esseintes: two journeys, but how different. Pleasure, for Marius, is "fullness of life, and insight – as conducting to that fullness – energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even." [6] In Rome, his

"vacuity of spirit" ends with the idea of Humanism while Des Esseintes' aversion for the human face will be his main torture in Paris.

Other decadent heroes have been anxious to extract pleasure from every moment, as young Count Andrea Sperelli, poet and painter, in D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* (1889) which begins with the death of the year, "l'anno moriva, assai dolcemente", in reference to the end of an affair, but also to the end of a century. Sperelli, the last of a noble Italian intellectual race, received an aesthetic education under the guidance of his father who had a certain byronic inclination for fantastic romanticism. His precept was "Bisogna 'fare' la propria vita, come si fa un'opera d'arte."[7]

Sperelli's aristocratic, refined tastes, and cult of Beauty, build, as he likes to think, the scenery for the comedy of love with the pleasures of the flesh: expensive carpets, valuable pieces of furniture brought from old churches, erotic paintings, splendid roses, objects d'art, create an atmosphere of voluptuousness in which passion is so intense that it becomes one with the idea of death: "Moriremo", Elena Muti whispers many times.

Sperelli, however, seriously hurt in a duel, spends some time recovering in the country. There he meets Maria, a sensitive, loving mother, whose "splendor of the spirit" contrasts sharply with the gallery of sensual women he had known. The paintings in this part of the novel reflect the change in Sperelli (the Madona, Nativity, Anunciation). Despising vice, his conversations with Maria are about the soul, about music, and the beauty of nature, so different from the air of corruption of his house in Trinitá dei Monti. But in autumn Sperelli finds himself in Rome again, only to dive into pleasure more intense than before, dreading to think that life is but a dream.

Valle Inclán's *Sonata de Otoño* (1902) - *Memorias del Marqués de Bradomin (Autumn Sonata - Memories of the Marquis of Bradomin)* goes deeper into the theme of time that destroys every moment, inexorably. It's autumn, Concha is dying; she asks her lover to visit her for the last time: "Mi amor adorado! Estoy muriendo y solo deseo verte", establishes the theme of love and death. In the old palace, Concha and the Marqués de Bradomin, the last of their lineage, re-enact the passionate scenes of years ago. As a married woman, and also his cousin, their sense of guilt had become too strong; they had parted. Was their great sin adultery? Or incest?

While staring at the pallid beauty of his dying lover, her face like that of a Mater Dolorosa, her hands of "eucharistic whiteness", her languid pallid lips that bite his lips, the soul of the Marqués is "drunken with the perfume of a sick rose". Every detail in the palace is invested with symbolic meaning, as the white pigeons and the black bird, the fountain, the labyrinth, the moon, the clock, the roses destroyed by the rain: "Era noche de luna, y en el fondo del laberinto cantaba la fuente como un pájaro escondido."[8]

In a cadenced prose of great beauty, *Sonata de Otoño* is, among the novels briefly discussed, one in which Poe's inspiration is most strongly felt. It would fit in the *Romantic Agony*, by Mario Praz, whose focus is on the erotic sensibility of decadent literature.

Five great novels, five varieties of one literary moment. They share, of course, common traits; the hero, for example: a young, neurotic, aristocratic, refined character who makes art his religion, and goes through self-awareness and self-analysis, torn between the flesh and the spirit in search of pleasure, beauty and truth. The novels show common themes as well: the urgency of time, a sense of cultural saturation, weariness and degeneration in the twilight of an era (here we are reminded of Yeats's essay "Autumn of the Body"). But these common traits, and others, do not take from the novels discussed their deeper level of significance. The theme of specular reflexion, for example, in *Dorian Gray* and in Wilde's prose poem, "The Disciple", is also used by André Gide in *Le Traité de Narcisse* (1891) the same myth under a new form, expression used in a letter by Wilde about *Dorian Gray*. He writes: "the idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth _ an idea that is old in the history of literature, but to which I have given new form."[9]

Rewriting has always been a very important device in literature; but never, I think, has it been used as frequently as in the twentieth century when the *Odissey, Jane Eyre, Hamlet*, the plays of Euripides and Sophocles, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (the list is endless) have become a departure, or frame, for other great works. Wilde's idea of a "new form", is of course in T.S. Eliot's much quoted "Tradition and Individual Talent", or in Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence.*

I hope to have raised a few points about a literary period, the Decadence, which should be seen not as a close-ended phase but as containing anticipatory traits of the modern period. Isobel Murray's suggestion that "perhaps Wilde has more in common with some of the Great Modernists than has been hitherto been allowed"[10] should be taken into consideration in the discussion of *Dorian Gray* and Wilde's critical essays, in which light we see Decadence, as Matei Calinescu does[11], as one of the five faces of modernity.

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Drama

From the Streets of Dublin to the Streets of London, New York, Manchester, Liverpool... Dion Boucicault's Construction of Melodramas.

Rosane Beyer

When investigating the prolific and chameleon playwright Dion Boucicault one is likely to enter a maze but unlike Thesus there is not an Ariadne to help during the journey through it. It is rather difficult to come to terms with such a manifold character. The title of this essay already poses the problem: Boucicault wrote a play like *The Poor of New York* and adapted and renamed it several times to suit the places in which the play toured. *The Poor of New York,* previewed in 1857, had at its origin a French work called *Les pauvres de Paris* and Boucicault adapted it to New York audiences using the financial panic currently hitting the city's banks as a basis for the plot. The play was a huge success and helped Boucicault get rid of his financial problems. However, when he was back in Europe in 1864, after his second bankruptcy, he revived the play, during his tour in Liverpool, as *The poor of Liverpool.* Again a major success as audiences packed the theatre. Boucicault having found his 'pot of gold' took the play from place to place, changing the name as it went. *The Poor of Liverpool* then became *The Poor of Manchester, The Streets of Islington, The Streets of London* and finally, *The Streets of Dublin.*

However, in using the title above there is the intention to imply not only Boucicault's plays but use it as a metaphor for Boucicault's life itself which was being written and rewritten in accordance with what part he wanted or was capable of playing in different moments of his life: meaning the several images of himself that emerged from his plays and in his non-dramatic works.

Therefore, it is necessary to introduce first Boucicault, the dramatist, before entering into the fabrics of his plays as a melodramatic construction. A summary of his life reveals a broad picture of his works with particular emphasis in *The Streets of Dublin.* Its latest performance took place at the Brixton Shaw theatre in December 1995, adapted by Fergus Linehan and directed by Gary Heynes.

From the day of Boucicault's very first play *Napoleon's Old Guard,* produced in 1836 at the Brentford Collegiate School, to the day of his last one *99,* produced posthumously in 1891 at the Standard Theatre, London, 55 years elapsed and the French-Irish Boucicault established his place as a major force in the English-speaking theatre by means of his spectacular, melodramatic plays. In addition, he helped to elevate the stage Irishman from a comic turn to the position of an impertinent, transgressive character – a basis for much of this century's Irish literature. The importance of Boucicault's creation of the Irish character is such that he paved the way in which other authors, O'Casey for instance, would find inspiration to walk on. Meanwhile, suffice it to say that huge claims have been made for Boucicault. Here, for example, is the view of Charles Lamb Keeny, Boucicault's first biographer:

> Boucicault created the Irish drama. With one blow he demolished all the old types and prejudices concerning Irish character, revealing an entirely new development of Irish nature. He knocked the stuffing out of the grotesque image we used to recognize as the Irish peasant, and taught the truth that tenderness, pathos and unconscious heroism were the true sources of Hibernian idiosyncrasy.[1]

The actor, theatre manager and prolific dramatist, Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot, wrote over 150 plays and translated many others from the French.Although his surname shows his French origin, the dramatist, who later changed his name into Dion Boucicault, was Irish. The son of Anne Darley and, allegedly, of her husband[2], Samuel Smith Boursiquot, a wine merchant, he was born on Middle Gardiner Street, North side of Dublin, on December 26, 1820 or December 20, 1822. However, the exact birth date is still a matter of debate[3]. As there was no compulsory registration of births in Ireland until 1864, no birth certificate exists as proof and only circumstancial evidence is available[4].

Boucicault's own life reads like the melodramas he wrote and he himself is something of a stage rogue. During his whole life he helped to forge an image of himself that could never be said to be a straightforward one.As an example we could mention the first book to give an account of Boucicault's life which was written when he was still alive and is entitled ***The Life and Career of Dion Boucicault.*** This volume, nominally by Boucicault's schoolfellow Charles Lamb Kinney, has actually been attributed to Boucicault himself [5]. The book gives a brief account of Boucicault's life from the day he was born until 1890. However, a detailed comparative analysis of the style in *The Life and Career of Dion Boucicault* and that in Boucicault's other non-dramatic works, such as *The Fireside Story of Ireland* for instance, reveals several similarities which would corroborate

Fawkes's affirmation that Boucicault himself was the author of his "first biography"[6].

If Boucicault wrote his "autobiography" disguised as a biography, this is just one example of his tendency to manipulate the truth and to create as many images of himself as possible, positive and flattering ones, specially, to redeem himself from the image presented by some critics who accused him, among other things, of plagiarism.

There was the Boucicault of private life who had several mistresses but came into public life, for at least 15 years, as a devoted husband. There was the politically engaged Boucicault who wrote a letter to Disraeli in 1876 demanding the release of many Irish political prisoners and that rewrote the old Dublin street ballad *The Wearing of the Green* into an anti-English lyric; the song became the unofficial anthem of the Irish freedom movement. Finally there are the actor, dramatist and manager personas. Moreover, the information that can be found about Boucicault's life is contradictory, making it difficult for his biographers to separate truth from fiction, or should we say truth from melodrama. Boucicault was an expert at mixing fact and creative imagination in real life as well as in his documentary dramas.

The contradictory information starts already from the moment he was born. His birth date, just like the identity of his own father, are a matter of controversy; and the controversies include the fact that although he was successful in his career he seemed to spend more than he earned; thus, he went bankrupt three times; his first wife, who belonged to the French nobility, perished in very strange circumstances during a skiing trip they both took to the Alps; the relationship with his second wife, Agnes Robertson, Charles Kean's ward, was tense at the beginning for Kean was against it, and finally, Boucicault eloped to America with her and Kean never forgave him for taking his ward away. Although he introduced Agnes to everyone as his wife and had six children with her, he did not acknowledge having been married to her. When, in 1887, he married the actress Louise Thorndyke during their tour of Australia, Agnes accused him of bigamy and started a divorce process which ended in 1888 when Boucicault then remarried Louise. He also lost his eldest, and favourite child, Dion William, not quite twenty-one, in a train accident near the English town of Huntingdon.

If all his financial and romantic hazards and the loss of his son were not enough to make Boucicault's life a melodrama in itself, the story of his start debut as a dramatist reads like fiction. He started his career as an actor under the stage name of Lee Moreton. His professional debut took place in Gloucestershire in the spring of 1837 when he played the part of *Tressel* in *Richard III*. However, it was because of his *nom de plume* Moreton, that Charles Mathews, joint lessee of Covent Garden with Madame Vestris, agreed to talk to him, mistaking him for the playwright Maddison Morton. Thanks to the mistake, Boucicault, or Lee Moreton, had the chance to write a five-act comedy of modern life as Matthews suggested. Four weeks after their first meeting, Boucicault returned to the Covent Garden theatre and presented Mathews with a five-act comedy entitled *Out of Town*. The play impressed the lessee of Covent garden so much that

> a few days after this, the comedy was called for reading to the actors in the green-room of the theatre. The cast included Farren, Bartley, Anderson, Mathews, Harley, Keeley, Madame Vestris, Mrs. Nisbett, and Mrs Humby. They were all there, stars of the first magnitude: no such group has ever since that time been assembled. The young author, with a trembling accent, proceeded to read his play. His audience, gathered round him, accompanied each act with profusion of applause, to give him courage. At the conclusion, Vestris, who sat beside him, rose, and, taking him in her arms, said: 'we cannot tell what reception your comedy may meet with; but the public cannot alter our opinion that it is a brilliant play, and that you will be numbered amongst the dramatists of the period. You have a future, and we are glad and proud to be interpreters of your first work [7].

The play, renamed *London Assurance*, was first performed at Covent Garden on March 4,1841, and became an enormous success. This was the beginning of a prolific career. Scarcely a year passed between 1838 and 1890 when a Boucicault play was not being performed[8] or a Boucicault innovation was not being made. We can list, for instance, the creation of more and more new sensational scenes in his plays.

Especially when it came to setting, Boucicault had to surpass himself in every new play. Scenery became more and more elaborate as the century proceeded and the effects had to be more and more convincing as the stage moved towards realism. For instance, in Boucicault's *Janet's Pride*, which opened at the Adelphi on August, 11, 1855, Michael Booth reports that 'the entire Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey was reproduced for the last act; this scene was so much praised that Boucicault repeated it at the Westminster in 1863 with *The Trial of Effie Deans* [9]. However, Boucicault outdid himself with the

> most notable stage fire of the century in his *The Poor of New York* (1857), which came to London in 1864 as *The Streets of London*. To destroy vital evidence, the villainous banker fires an apartment building but is foiled by his former clerk, Badger.[in the climax scene] a real fire engine with bells ringing dashed onto the stage[10].

Boucicault was also an innovator in his use of inflammable fabrics to build the scenery of his ever more demanding dramas; he helped initiate the first professional touring companies in Victorian England; he was instrumental in helping to establish the first copyright laws in America and he was an important force in shaping documentary drama, since he was one of the first to write plays based on contemporary issues such as slavery in *The Octoroon*, the American civil War in *Belle Lamar*, the war in India in *Jessie Brown* and the financial panic in *The Poor of New York.*

Forms of drama which have dominated the 20th theatre exist in Boucicault´s melodramas such as chronicles, the movement of dramatic art toward the realistic play, the problem play, and the serio-comic play. If the 'history of any theatrical epoch is therefore the history of its audience's wishes, as interpreted by the playwrights, actors, and managers of the day'[11] then Boucicault´s plays certainly reflect that history for he wrote what the audiences demanded.

For instance, to please the English public Boucicault changed the ending of *The Octoroon*, which opened at the Adelphi on 18 November 1859, because

> the audience simply would not accept that Zoe should die. They identified the character with the actress they loved, and would not allow her to be killed, and the cheers turned to boos as they demonstrated their feelings. Boucicault was puzzled, as well as annoyed, by their attitude.(...)But as far as he was concerned it was not a principle worth fighting for; if the public wanted a happy ending, they would get one[12].

Through the constant effort to recreate reality on stage, Boucicault was paving the way for the acceptance of the realistic stage and when the authors arrived to add psychological realism, the stage and the audience had been partly prepared.

Boucicault as a dramatist exerted firm control over his plays from the creation of characters to the production of the scenery; he also controlled the way he wanted the actors to play the roles he had given them.

Charles Mathews, in a letter to Benjamin Webster, quotes Boucicault's words on the relationship between the dramatist and the actor – "I want no one's opinion but my own as to the consistency of the characters I draw – your business is to utter what I create"[13].

Moreover, Boucicault himself, in a letter to W. Marshall, makes clear his authority over his plays "I shall play in these dramas and they shall be produced under my personal superintendance to which the popularity of my works is greatly ascribed"[14].

Despite the numerous plays Boucicault wrote, he also had a series of non-dramatic works, mainly articles as a contributor to the *North American Review, Era Alamanack*, letters to the newpapers expressing his opinion about the art of acting, actors, the press, critics and so forth. There are inumerable letters in The *London Times* that cover this wide range of topics. Additionally, he wrote a novel with Charles Reade *Foul Play*[15]; another novel named *The Adventures and Works of Hugh Darley*[16] and *A Fireside Story of Ireland*[17], a Victorian style account of Ireland's history that

> pretends to be no more than a brief, perspicuous exhibit of leading events compiled textually from the best authorities, in their own language, compressed to bring this little work within prescribed limits.[18]

Whereas Boucicault's early work conforms to a typical melodramatic pattern, in *The Fireside Story of Ireland* Boucicault's tone is that of despair and political outrage, much as it is in a play like *Arrah-na-Pogue* where unmistakably he adopts a pro-Ireland attitude. The play is based on historical events which took place during the Fenian rebellion in 1798 and, as in *The Colleen Bawn*, where he created the part of Myles for himself to play, he also created for himself the role of Shaun, the post. Together with his Conn in *The Shaughraun* these are the Irish characters that allowed Boucicault to show his best talents by going back to his roots. It also permitted him to construct representations of the Irish as capable of heroic acts, interweaving moments of comedy with scenes showing men interested in helping their fellow countrymen in opposition to the traditional view of the stage Irishman as interested only in drinking and easy talk.

As Andrew Parkin reckons, "Boucicault gave Ireland a theatre in the nineteenth century on which others could draw"[19] and David Krause also agrees that "the Irish drama as we know it today had its origins in Boucicault and it is in his creation of this distinctly Irish yet universal character that Boucicault finally transcends the Victorian world[20]".

Parkin and Krause, among others, highlight Boucicault's particular influence on modern Irish dramatists, such as G. B. Shaw, O. Wilde, J. M. Synge and Sean O'Casey to mention but a few.

Bernard Shaw, for instance, in a letter to the theatre critic R.G. Bright, dated 11 November 1895, suggests, as a

reading list for the former, the works, amongst others, of Moliere, Victor Hugo, Voltaire, Dumas fils, Goethe and Schiller, the Greeks, Congreve, Sheridan and Boucicault[21]. Moreover, Shaw built on Boucicault – "stealing" the trial scene from *Arrah-na-Pogue* lock, stock and barrel for *The Devil's Disciple*.

Oscar Wilde was not only Boucicault's friend, but also borrowed some of Boucicault's wit: the echoes of *London Assurance* or even *A Lover by Proxy* can be heard in the former's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

O'Casey and Synge broached the hinterland of the Hibernian temperament and while Synge looked to remote communities, O´Casey largely dealt with Dublin till his very late works. Both explored the roots of the Stage Irishman and constructed characters far more brutal, self-deluding, complex and viciously absurd than any English playwright could dream of[22].

From the time he started up to the time of his death, Dion Boucicault was caught between the tradition of Victorian melodrama and the first steps into the modern Irish drama which would reach its full glory with the Abbey Theatre. However, it cannot be doubted that the seeds of this modern drama were planted and began to grow with him.

The Poor of New York, which gave origin to so many other plays in different towns in which it toured and which had its most recent version, adapted by Fergus Linehan, shown at the Brixton Shaw Theatre, London on December 18, 1995, can be used to illustrate Boucicault´s creativity in adapting a play to suit the public. He adapts the French plot adroitly, setting the first act during the panic of 1837 and the remaining four acts in 1857, packing the play with references to local social and geographical institutions. The play is an efficient melodrama with its twists and turns in the fate of the hero and heroine. The *coup de grace* occurs in the final lines of the play when the late sea captain's son, Paul, turns to the audience and asks:

> Is this true? Have the sufferings we have depicted in this mimic scene, touched your hearts, and caused a tear of sympathy to fill your eyes? If so extend to us your hands[23].

To which his mother corrects him:

> No, not to us - but when you leave your place, as you return to your homes, should you see some poor creatures, extend your hands to them, and the blessings that will follow you on your way will be the most grateful tribute you can pay to the
> POOR OF NEW YORK [24].

The mother reminds the audience that the only meaningful 'hand' they can render is a helping hand to the people on the streets outside the theater. The characters announce that the audience cannot respond adequately to this melodrama, unless, hopefully, they can extend their charity elsewhere.

It is tempting to celebrate the conclusion to *The Poor of New York* as a radical political statement. Certainly it is worth noting the complexity of Paul's question about what is 'true', in a speech in which he explicitly divorces the sentiment of the audience from the realism of the play. However, the play bases its appeal for social change-help for the poor of New York upon the success of its emotional appeal, and what is true is finally a matter of personal feeling rather than political fact. The last words of the play reclaim the title, *The Poor of New York*, in the ambiguous realm of melodramatic transcendence and place the play within the formal tradition of melodrama.

Boucicault would be - or perhaps is -canonized as the author of some of the best melodramas of the second half of the nineteenth century; but one cannot forget that he acted in his plays regularly. Indeed, beginning with *Jessie Brown; or the Relief of Lucknow*, in which he played the murderous villain Nana Sahib, Boucicault's stage presence figures centrally in the dramas he wrote and produced.

Although Boucicault did not create any role for him or his wife in *The Poor of New York*, Linehan in his 1995 adaptation of it, in an attempt to present it to a late twentieth century audience, has Boucicault and his wife not only to act in the play, but they also become characters in the disguised play Linehan constructs.

Linehan rewrote *The Streets of Dublin* as a play within a play and his adaptation shows Boucicault putting on and then acting in his own play. The inner text follows Boucicault's words *ab initio*, although Linehan supressed two minor characters and changed the destination where Lucy and her mother are sent: from.Dublin to Argentina instead of Rio de Janeiro, in the original version. Apart from that, the inner play follows Boucicault's, even in its final speech, but as a 20th-century adaptation of a spectacular melodrama, Linehan could not revive the scene of the fire with the realism it had at the time of Boucicault. Neither could he provide the elaborate scenery necessary for such a play which is a loss for the audience. However, the play outside the

play is the one that interests us. For here the adaptation uses the information of Boucicault's biographies and takes the poetic liberty of having in the same time and space, Boucicault's wife and two of his mistresses, Lydia Foote and Katherine Rodgers. The playwright is depicted as flamboyant as possible with his cloak-swishing and bombastic volume, and his eagerness to grab the limelight at all time; one could say of him 'all is vanity'.

The reading that Linehan makes of Boucicault and his relationship with Agnes and other actors is well documented in the biographies, letters and articles by and on Boucicault. As a character, he is also found in other contemporary plays. In Richard Nelson's *Two Shakespearean Actors*, he and his wife Agnes are characters who meet the English actor Macready during his tour in New York. The Boucicault presented by Nelson is a flamboyant Irish playwright and impresario who shares the American contempt for the English, depicted by his wife as the man who 'doesn't like English people, but then he's Irish'[25]. Nelson is interested in evaluating the popular theatre against the more classical one comparing Boucicault (a popular actor) in opposition to Macready (a man of artistic principles and integrity but devoid of popularity).

In Stewart Parker's *Heavenly Bodies*, Boucicault is the protagonist of a staged biography of his life. Parker begins the play at the end of the playwright's life: wheelchair-bound, he dies and is sent to limbo. There he meets Johnny Patterson, an Irish clown who was beaten to death by an irate audience after he had pleaded for unity between Green and Orange. Johnny contrives a stay of execution, and in this we see Boucicault's whole life as Johnny announces 'Dionysius Lardner Boucicault, this is yur life'[26]. Parker uses extensively Boucicault's biographies and even quotes whole passages from his letters and his plays and the portrait of Boucicault that arises is that of a man who, in Johnny's words,

> never did anything humbly from the moment your mother relieved herself of you. You stood for all the values that made the Victorian age great - greed, ruthlessness and hypocrisy [27].

Throughout the play Parker is questioning whether Boucicault was really a revolutionary or sentimental and a stage Irishman himself at heart. However, as the story proceeds and the characters that played important parts in Boucicault's life come and go, Parker redeems Boucicault and instead of sending him to limbo he is finally taken to heaven.

Finally, the topic of the Stage Irishman should be mentioned in order to have an overall view of Boucicault´s melodramas. The critic Maurice Bourgeois wrote in 1913 that

> the stage Irishman habitually bears the general name of Pat, Paddy or Teague... he has an unsurpassable gift of Blarney and cadges for tips and free drinks. His hair is of a fiery red: he is rosy-cheeked, massive and whisky-loving. His face is one of simian bestiality with an expression of diabolical archness written all over it [28].

Yet despite his obvious mental and physical deficiencies, the comic Irishman has enjoyed huge international popularity in the guise of various roguish soldiers, sailors and beggars. For instance, it can be found in Shakespeare's temperamental Captain Macmorris in *Henry V*. After this, every farce or low comedy boasted its resident Paddy or Teague until Sheridan, in *The Rivals* (1775), added a new dimension with his portrait of Sir Lucius O'Trigger, a comic character of comparative warmth and dignity:' I was only taking a nap at the Parade-Coffee-House,' he tells a young companion whom he had planned to meet, 'and I chose the window on purpose so that I might not miss you.'

However, the Golden Age of the Stage Irishman came with the Victorian Melodrama. Impudent, devil-may-care oafs wandered through the 19th century scenic effects and the stereotyped version of the Irishman was abundant. It was only when Boucicault showed his Irish characters that the stage Irishman was elevated. His characters have wit and by using it, specially with figures that represent British authority, they contribute to show that the Irish stageman is as intelligent as he is witty. For instance 'What's on your shoulder?' asks a prying magistrate of the Irish smuggler Myles Na Copalleen in *The Colleen Bawn*. 'It's a boulster belongin to my mother's feather bed.' 'Stuffed with whisky?' continues the magistrate. 'How would I know what it was stuffed with,' says Myles.'I'm not an upholsterer'.[29]

Then again in *Arrah-na-Pogue* Boucicault shows the comic Irishman Shaun, the post, beat the English with his wit during the famous trial scene. Shaun is clever and fast in his answer and makes the English look like fools:

> Major: your name?
> Shaun: Is it my name, sir? Ah, You're jokin'! Sure there's his honour beside ye can answer for me, long life to him!
> Major: Will you give the court your name, fellow?
> Shaun: Well, I'm not ashamed of it.
> O'Grady: Come, Shaun, my man.

Shaun: There, didn't I tell ye! He knows me well enough.
Major: Shaun(writing), that's the Irish for John, I suppose.
Shaun: No, sir; John is the English for Shaun.
Major: What is your other name?
Shaun: My mother's name?
Major: Your other name.[30]

The idea of the comic Irishman is even more subverted in *The Shaughraun*. Here the English character represented by Captain Molineux, although ending up marrying one of the two heroines, is ridiculed at the beginning of the play. He cannot pronounce the Irish words and apologises to the Irish girl with whom he is talking: 'Beg pardon; your Irish names are so unpronounceable. You see, I´m an Englishman.' And she answers at once 'I remarked your misfortune. Poor creature, you couldn´t help it'.[31]

But the comic Irishman was more than just a device, he was the very antithesis of Englishness: where John Bull was shown as male, aggressive, commanding, Eire was represented as feminine, weak and irrational. In analysing the use of the Irish characters in Boucicault this difference comes to the foreground and highlights the fact that the Stage Irishman functioned in Boucicault as part of an ideological strategy in some historical moments to show, to the British, that the Irish as a conquered race, docile, foolish, impetuous, dense, childlike, bestial, were not as they supposed incapable of self-rule. The same travesty is done to practically every colonised country in the world.

Boucicault once said that he had written for a monster who forgets. History proved he was wrong. He not only influenced several Irish dramatists but is still remembered as the actor and author of melodramas of the nineteenth century.

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4. In Boucicault's grave in the cemetery of Mount Hope his birthday is given on the gravestone as 1822. In: *Prompts* 6(September,1983), p.4.
5Robert Hogan, in his *Dion Boucicault*. New York : Twayne, 1969, p.23, states that, according to Boucicault's third wife Louise Thorndyke, Boucicault himself wrote the book and Richard Fawkes in *Dion Boucicault*, p.259 affirms that the book was "written, in fact, by Boucicault".
6. Richard Fawkes, ibid.
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23. Dion Boucicault, *The poor of New York*, p.45.
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26. Stewart Parker, *Heavenly Bodies*. London : Faber, 1986, p.82.
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At the Threshold of the New Drama with Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker

Gloria Sydenstricker

At the turn-of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, London's theatrical tradition had for decades an intimate connection with musical comedies, opera, operettas, and general types of light performances. Affected romances were also very successful as the public at that time was not used to intellectual drama. So, it was natural that a preference remained still for the sentimental comedies. W.L. Courtney elaborated the ideal recipe for the popular theatre of those days:

...There must be a little psychological analysis, but not too much; a little girding at social conventions, but social conventions must ultimately prevail: there must not be too much logic, but there must be romance and sentiment. [1]

In short, the great majority of the audiences went to the theatre to live emotions and not to think. The theatre was a place of light, sound, magic and mysticism; the melodrama and the spectacular performances were considered the most popular forms of drama. It was not surprising to expect this "visual" public to come to the theatre to see the stars. However, two playwrights who had the courage to withdraw from the conventional and commercial theatre of the time abhorred this practice. So, circumstance brought together George Bernard Shaw and Harley Granville Barker.

It was the year of 1904, and Shaw who was 48 years old, was as yet an un-acted playwright in London. Due to the conditions described above, his plays were regarded as untheatrical and financially unreasonable. Shaw's criticism is self-explanatory:

...There were no murders, no adulteries, no sexual intrigues in them. The heroines were not like heroines: they were like women. Although the rule of the stage was that any speech longer than twenty words was too long, and that politics and religion must never be mentioned and their places taken by romance and fictitious police and divorce cases, my characters had to declaim long speeches on religion and politics in the Shakespearean or "ham" technique.[2]

Shaw met Harley Granville Barker when he was 23 years old. At the time he was looking about for an actor suitable for the part of the poet in Candida at a Stage Society performance. He found his man in the person of Barker whom Shaw described as remarkable, "...His performance of this part - a very difficult one to cast -was, humanly speaking, perfect." [3]

Barker started his acting career at the age of 13 and when he was 18 he was already writing plays. In addition to their individual talents which drew a reciprocal admiration, there were basic affinities between the two artists that drove them closer together. For example, Barker's early plays always focalised the woman question - a theme that was most dear to Shaw. The turn-of-the century was the "Time of the New Woman" and both playwrights wanted more than social and political equality between the sexes. They wanted to stress their interest in woman's achievement, in her human maturity and in the liberation of her natural qualities and powers. They believed that if women had the opportunity to fulfil their total humanity, they would be making way for a new and richer association of the sexes. In fact, Shaw and Barker continued to exalt in their drama the feminine figure, accentuating her courage, intelligence and determination in the various circumstances of life. They shared interests in thematic views and integrated in the ideas and everyday living of their time. Their common concern with the social texture also interested them in the decadent bourgeois society of the end of the century. This led the two playwrights to make a strict enquiry in their plays of the disconnected degrees and forms of human chaos; a seed-bed of fine soil that initiated a social crusade of considerable importance. Shaw and Barker also adhered to socialist ideals in the Fabian Society believing that through art and culture people would be able to improve their living conditions. Thus, the theatre being a generator of social development, was panting for a new era and ready to "remold old forms which no longer expressed the new spirit." [4]

The Stage Society, an organisation that was essentially concerned with the New Drama, was the place where they first met and where Barker became known for his performances of Shakespeare's Richard II and Marlowe's Edward II. By 1904, Barker had produced several plays at the Stage Society and was asked to superintend the production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona. He undertook to do this on condition that John Eugene Vedrenne, the manager of the Court Theatre, would join with him in giving six matinée performances of Candida. The proposal was readily accepted, and out of it grew an alliance between them which had important results. The success of Candida, joined Shaw and Barker in an artistic relationship at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907 . It was not only a remarkable association, but one that was in some ways of a paternal-filial kind which lasted until Barker's second marriage in 1918. At the Court Theatre Barker directed a famous "repertory

season" continuing with Vedrenne as business manager. Barker directed all the plays excepting those of Shaw which the older playwright directed himself but of which Barker was almost invariably one of the cast.

The Stage Society also provided the opportunity for Barker's meeting with Gilbert Murray, a famous scholar who contributed to theatrical literature by translating Greek plays, mainly those of Euripides, which later Barker himself produced. Undoubtedly, Shaw's influence was significant as to the inception of the Barker-Vedrenne season at the Court, mainly due to the production in April 1904 of Candida , but Gilbert Murray's translations of Euripides sprang the beginnings of the scheme. Thus, it was a happy coincidence to have Hippolytus with the Court productions of Two Gentlemen of Verona and Candida which gave the enterprise its practical substance.

The idea of making the Court, that little theatre a headquarter for a new kind of play and a new approach had been in Granville Barker's mind many times. Most symptomatic were his letters to William Archer in which he expressed his anguish as to the future of the theatre in England. Archer was then recognised not only as one of the principal dramatic critics but also as a distinguished man of letters in several literary fields connected with the theatre. The contents of one of Barker's letters to Archer may be considered a historical declaration of a man who truly loved the theatre:

...It seems to me that we may wait a very long time for our National Theatre, and that when it comes we may have no modern National Drama to put in it. We must get vital drama from somewhere, and if we can't create it we must import it first.
I think there is a class of intellectual would-be playgoers who are profoundly bored by the theatre as it is. Matinée productions don't touch these people (who are all workers) and Sunday evening is expensive and incapable of expansion.
Our actors - and worse still our actresses - are becoming demoralised by lack of intellectual work - the continual demand for nothing but smartness and prettiness.
I think the Independent Theatre - the New Century - The Stage Society - have prepared the ground, and the time is ripe for starting a theatre upon these lines, upon a regular - however unpretending - basis.
And above all unless some effective pioneer work is done very soon, some play will be produced with two penn'orth of idea and three penn'orth of technique, will be acclaimed as a masterpiece and all real progress will be set back for another ten or fifteen years.
... - but this idea has been with me very strongly lately. If I am right and the time is ripe and passes unnoticed it will be a thousand pities... [5]

The Barker-Vedrenne management became a reality and went on to become a legend. Shaw was extremely fond of Barker who was responsible for the choosing and casting of all plays, for directing all of them except those by Shaw (who at that time always directed the first production of his plays himself) and for playing in some of them. In the three years during which the venture lasted, Barker played eleven different parts, of which seven were leading parts in Shaw plays: this in a total of thirty-two different productions, some of which were brought back into the repertory three and four times - more particularly the Shaw plays. By May, 1905 one or two of the most successful and most popular plays (almost always Shaw) were brought back for runs of three weeks in the evenings, while the new productions still occupied the matinée slots. The success in achieving an enormous range of plays was indeed remarkable. From Votes for Women, by Elizabeth Robins to Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, from two new comedies by St. John Hankin (The Return of the Prodigal and The Charity that Began at Home) to three translations of Euripides by Gilbert Murray (Hippolytus, Electra and Troades), as well as eleven Shaw plays (six of them for the first time on any stage) and first plays by Galsworthy and Masefield. The importance of the Court Theatre and its influence upon modern drama cannot be underestimated:

As well as giving a sturdy and important voice to the "serious" theatre and placing a new and welcome emphasis on the playwright, Barker's work at the Court introduced the repertory system to ordinary British theatrical life and demonstrated the efficacy and desirability of it, indeed the imperative necessity of it for theatre's survival as a serious art form.... but it is no exaggeration to say that the system on which Britain's two major theatres, the National and the Royal Shakespeare, are now run, is founded wholly on the work that Barker did and the principles he enunciated at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907.[6]

Needless to say, Shaw's plays were the most important dramatic contributions to the Court Theatre. Desmond MacCarthy gives a detailed account of each Shaw play discussing its performance. [7] His commentaries are not only most interesting but are a historical reference as well. He tells that the most striking feature in the Court performance was Granville Barker's acting of the poet, Eugene Marchbanks in Candida on April 26, 1904. He affirms "it's among the best Mr. Shaw has written." Probably, the success of the play was in part due to the fact that it reflected the socialist principles that were so dear to both men. The play suggested that social and moral conventions must be broken up and changed because they do not lead to human happiness. A delicate chord was touched in the heart of the public as the play itself was a tribute to art which is supreme...the artist may crave for love in his weaker moments but he will always be fortified by the ideals that direct his life. No wonder that Barker "succeeded

in playing Eugene Marchbanks where almost every other actor would have failed."[8]

Very curiously, John Bull's Other Island, performed on May 1st, 1905, was equally successful as Candida but for entirely different reasons. According to MacCarthy's account, it did not have any of the qualities of the "well-constructed" play but its success lay mainly in the presentation of character and in the contrast between temperaments achieved in a masterly fashion. Contemporary criticism [9] analysed how the characters were developed in this play by means of a perfectly natural sequence of events; there was no appearance of circumstances being created for the sake of exhibiting them; everything that happened had the air of happening by chance. MacCarthy ends his criticism by analysing Granville Barker's role as Father Keegan who was able to transmit a sense of remote dignity peculiar to the character.

The part of Valentine in You Never Can Tell was played on different occasions by Barker and, according to the same critic, he was able to express well the joy and violence which are part of the character. His performance excelled precisely in the brisk leaps of the heart, which were so characteristic of Shaw's lovers and reflected his general treatment of the theme of love. As to Man and Superman, the critic qualifies this play as a tragi-comic love-chase of a man by a woman and the most brilliant piece of work that Shaw had done. Barker played Jack Tanner which is said to have been one of his best parts as he delighted the public with his explosions of nervous energy and exasperated eloquence. However, the play which is based on Shaw's philosophy of sex does not partake entirely of Barker's view on the subject.

However, not withstanding their differences, they became closer due to the mutual respect and admiration for the artistic talents each one displayed. It was in part due to their intensive theatrical cooperation and stubborn idealism that the poetic and realistic drama had come to stay. As a playwright, Barker's interest was one of intellectual conflict which focalised his characters' emotions. However, he shared with Shaw the same social-political concerns and also condemned pure sentimentality and sexual exploration. As the majority of their plays were indictments against society, they coherently denounced social injustices by expressing them through divergent aesthetical approaches.

Noteworthy is the poetical transcendence which pervades all of Barker's work, in spite of his using an enfolding technique that includes denoting elements of realistic aesthetic similar to Shaw's. Whereas he did not discard social-political themes, he enriched his work with poetic images of great lyrical content. He believed that the theatre needed poets in order to be lasting: "...The theatre, if it is to survive, needs poets. And plays only defy mortality when they deal - as poetry in its essence does - with the things that are immortal." [10] He conceived drama and poetry as being interdependent so drama could only be poetical when it dealt with inner conflicts and emotions. In order to attain this poetical magnitude, Barker used a language that was above rational in its subtle devices: he made use of melody itself, of the rhythm of words, of associations, of suggestions and stimulus to the imagination.

As it may be observed, Barker and Shaw shared similar visualisation of ideas but differed in their aesthetical methods as well as in individual temperaments. Barker was more self-contained in spite of his strong strain of Italian blood. Shaw was quite impressed by Barker's personality:

...He had a wide literary culture and a fastidiously delicate taste in every branch of art. He could write in a difficult and too precious but exquisitely fine style. He was self-willed , restlessly industrious, sober, and quite sane. He had Shakespeare and Dickens at his finger ends. Altogether the most distinguished and incomparably the most cultivated person whom circumstances had driven into the theatre at that time. [11]

On the other hand, Shaw was a man of many contradictions who went through life at once exposing himself and wearing a mask. He was spiritually pure; incapable of a lower action, but delighted at baffling people about his real personality. At bottom he was a moralist – but professing to be amoral, unscrupulous, callous and insensitive. We might apply to him Lady's Britomart's words about her husband Undershaft: "I cannot forgive Andrew for preaching immorality while he practised morality." [12]

Another scholar, Martin Meisel, in Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatrexiii, knowingly affirms that Barker's method of directing and acting were quite independent and different from Shaw who demanded more direct effects and a more extravagant acting than the ones Barker desired. Shaw himself witnessed his friend's performance when he said: "...His taste for low tones which made his productions of Galsworthy plays and of his own exquisite, did not suit mine:..."

Camillo Pellizzi describes Shaw's characteristics as one of the rebellious type:

...He wanted the artist to have a clear, impassive intellect, and to represent human reality with the aim of improving it. For him the true and the only works of art were really Nature and man: the sole aim of every spiritual activity should be the service of Nature and the improvement of man,... He believed, therefore, in the inward virtue of human nature and in the boundless possibilities of reason, which humanity is given to make use of; he believed in progress, in this rationalistic sense, and he saw the

obstacle to progress in the muddles and conventionalism of sentiment in all its forms, including the mystical and religious. For this reason he was a sworn enemy of sentiment and mysticism,...

In some ways, however, Barker was influenced by Shaw: they identified in intellectual quality as we have already commented and also in the use of expanded stage-directions. Barker's remarks are skilful and in tune with the play and include information which cannot be directly conveyed on the stage. They are not polemic as Shaw's are at times, but they are consistent with Barker's belief as a producer that the actors should know in detail the characters they are portraying. No doubt they help the reader feel the warmth, movement and the total emotional and intellectual effect of the performance. Their practice of writing expanded stage directions and the high literary quality of their plays are significantly related to the passing in 1891 of the American Copyright Bill which insured protection to printed works in America and in England.

The affectionate and professional link between Shaw and Barker was no doubt the result of the complementation of their personalities, and therefore reinforced the basis for making the Court experiment go through with flying colours. Barker continued to act in many of Shaw's plays and several critics xiv declared how exceptionally good he was in How He Lied to Her Husband and that in The Doctor's Dilemma he played Dubedat as well as the drawing of the character allowed. In Major Barbara, Barker played Adolphus Cusins, the professor of Greek who fell in love with Barbara and proposed under the impression that she was an ordinary Salvation Army lass. But Candida was the starting point of this remarkable partnership that placed Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker at the threshold of a new era in drama. As already mentioned, many of Shaw's plays followed with Barker as leading actor. Barker with Vedrenne were able to take the Court on a full-blown management and led Shaw to cease writing plays "for anybody who asked him, and to become a playwright in ordinary to the new enterprise." [15]

After Barker's death in 1946, Shaw paid him a tribute in a touching article entitled: Granville Barker: Some Particulars;[16] he comments that Barker worked furiously as he had not only to act, but to produce all plays except Shaw's. He had to find and inspire all the artists whom he drew into the theatre to carry out his ideas. In the end he had to give up acting and devote himself entirely to producing, or, under Shaw's pressure, who admired his plays intensely, to write plays. But the Court was abandoned for larger and more central theatres; in spite of the immense prestige the theatre had to put up the shutters as no theatre in London devoted to excellence could bear the burden of London rents and rates.

This was the reason why Barker struggled to the end of his life for a National Theatre - a dream that would only become true after his death. Nevertheless, the Court paved the way for the art of the theatre at its best. When Barker consulted William Archer about taking the Court Theatre and run there a stock season of the uncommercial drama, he had in mind the oncoming of the National Theatre.

Without doubt the National Theatre will come, but as Ibsen has leavened the whole English theatre during the past fifteen years, so we ought to be getting some more leaven ready for the National Theatre when it comes. [17]

In 1908, Barker accepted an invitation to go to New York to direct a theatrical season sponsored by a group of prominent citizens. He started by presenting Shaw's Androcles and the Lion which was a great success mainly due to the originality of the scenery. There was very good receptivity to productions of other Shaw plays and of several other famous playwrights such as Anatole France, George Meredith , Arthur Schitzler and John Masefield. When he returned to England, Barker was already known as the most important man in the theatrical world. John Gielgud wrote in his mémoires that Barker had been one of his greatest heroes. However, due to the intimate relationship between Shaw and Barker, many critics have placed the latter as a mere Shaw follower.

The artistic work Shaw and Barker produced was remarkable and challenged the highest standards showing the pitch of excellence the new drama could attain. In spite of not having met again since 1918, their mutual sympathy remained unaltered. When Shaw learned about Barker's death he dedicated a vehement tribute to the late friend recalling their service in the theatre's vanguard.

...I hope his widow has come to see that the wild oats he sowed with me have produced a better harvest than she foresaw, and that his original contributions to our dramatic literature are treasures to be preserved, not compromising documents to be destroyed.

Notwithstanding their professional and affectionate partnership and their mutual respectful intellectual cooperation, it is most necessary to emphasise the differences in their respective talents and artistic perception as has been mentioned throughout this paper. Their essential unity remains in the fact that they saw in the drama of ideas a doorway to a new theatrical era, a new way to carry on thought and passion. They struggled to break the chains of the commercial theatre and to build an expressive drama that would reach the public's soul. Shaw and Barker meant to reveal essential truths because they understood that spiritual truths must harmonise with ethical virtues to be able to contribute to effective society. So, the new drama aspired to show guiding principles for the lives of contemporary men. The two playwrights, like Ibsen, Strindberg, Galsworthy and

others, discovered that the scenic art of the realistic theatre may be transformed into a metaphor of modern man's condition. At the threshold of the new drama, their courageous introspection awakened the world to a magnificent new start.

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Denis Johnston's Jonathan Swift *

Joseph Ronsley

I am not a Swift scholar. Not being a Swift scholar, I both enjoyed and was impressed by Denis Johnston's 1959 biographical study *In Search of Swift*.[1] On the other hand, I understand that most of you, being Swift scholars, may just possibly have enjoyed it, but were not impressed by it. I am not entirely convinced the correct attitude here is so obvious, but it would be absurd for me to come to any biographical conclusions of my own, and in any case Swift's biography in itself is not my primary concern. I am more concerned with Johnston, and the reaction by the Swift scholarly establishment to what at least he considered his important contribution to Swift scholarship. This reaction, perhaps along with other disappointments of his life connected with the theatre and broadcasting, has contributed to a certain cynicism and bitterness that prevailed in Johnston's later life, not unlike that which characterized Swift's own old age. This is despite Johnston's very real successes in several fields of endeavour. Johnston, among other things a university teacher, clearly saw his scholarly work to be a compelling combination of original research, disciplined logical conclusions, and brilliant insights, likely to revolutionize the prevailing biographical perspective of Swift. He expected to make a considerable academic stir, and in fact had already eighteen years earlier made a minor one. The earlier one having been quite negative, however, he expected this one to be better received. It was not.

Johnston had reason to be confident in his own abilities. Before embarking on any of his various careers, he had written a dissertation for an advanced law degree at Harvard on the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, and in so doing satisfied his supervisor, who was to become one of the American Supreme Court's most distinguished Chief Justices. As a playwright, he had had mixed receptions, some of his plays being highly controversial, though, disappointingly for Johnston, not so controversial as O'Casey's. He liked being provocative, but however much controversy he stirred, or did not stir, he was considered for a time by many to be the brightest new playwright talent in the Irish theatre. At this point, he left the theatre for a career in broadcasting.

Early in his new career, in March, 1938, Johnston produced what was a pioneering spectacle in broadcasting, a documentary dramatization of the 1688-89 siege of Londonderry, called "Lillibulero." The programme required a year's preparation, including considerable research on an historical period that coincides with Swift's life. Then, only two months later, in June, he produced for radio the first version of his Swift play, entitled "Weep for Polyphemus," which also involved considerable historical research. Johnston's studies for the two projects overlapped, with one possibly generating the other. The Swift research may, in fact, have begun earlier. However that may be, the radio play embodied in inchoate form much of the theory that was to be developed more fully later in *In Search of Swift*.

Johnston's broadcast career, from 1936 to 1947, provided him with more satisfaction, success, and distinction than he was to know before or since. Beginning with BBC radio, he quickly moved to the infant medium of television where he helped to develop basic production techniques and in a sense actually to define the medium. During World War II, he was a BBC war correspondent, in north Africa and continental Europe, introducing several innovations to war reporting, and after the war became the first Programme Director of BBC Television. He also wrote an artful book on his war experiences entitled *Nine Rivers from Jordan*. So, with a strong sense of his own sophistication and worldliness, combined with his intellectual prowess as well as his legal and investigative reporting experience, Johnston's scholarly endeavours over Swift in the mid 1950s must have seemed to him well within his capacities. The subject was a fascinating but relatively easy challenge, and his creative work for the stage and broadcasting would allow him to give his academic production an artistic form that would make it unusually enjoyable reading for the genre.

But the fact is that Johnston had already been disappointed with the academic community's failure to take him seriously on the subject of Swift, and *In Search of Swift* is really a desperate attempt to correct matters. This book was expected to open the eyes of Swift scholars to the important revelations which he had already presented to them in various forms on several occasions over the previous twenty years. His Swift play as transcribed from radio to the stage and called *The Dreaming Dust* was produced at the Gaiety Theatre as early as 1940 by Edwards' and MacLiammoir's Dublin Gate Theatre Company, but was not published until 1954, when it was included in a book entitled *The Golden Cuckoo and Other Plays*. Speaking of *The Dreaming Dust* in the introduction to that book, Johnston anticipates *In Search of Swift*:

> One would imagine that at this distance, it is not a matter of any very great importance to suggest that Swift was a bastard. But unfortunately it involves the statement that a great many books, to which many years of study have been devoted, are at fault in their facts, and that more than one respectable tome has been

written without a proper check of the original documents that it quotes. In the circumstances it is perhaps not so surprising that I have unwittingly got myself into a lot of hot water over Dr. Swift, and am unlikely to get out of it until I have made matters worse, by writing a tome of my own a tome studded with footnotes and terminating with a Bibliography, which, God knows, will make dull reading.

This book was published five years later, though whatever else it is, most would agree it is not "dull reading."

Most would agree, that is, but not all. Frank Kermode, in his review entitled "The Dean Drank Coffee," in *The Spectator* of 6 November 1959, says the book tends to be dull because of too much detail and documentation. It does seem difficult for Johnston to win. In fact, many of the reviewers do credit Johnston's painstaking research and his uncovering of many previously accepted errors. Finally, Kermode says he hopes Johnston "is right, not only because Swift deserved his coffee, but because everything that weakens the myth of his insanity helps his books to a better reading."

It is not my intention to review the reviews. It is sufficient to say that the book was reviewed extensively and with considerable interest, and that the reviews were mixed, with the most serious, and ultimately the most influential, coming down against Johnston, particularly against his evidence for a January date for the death of Jonathan Swift the Elder, a date that would have made it impossible for him to be Swift's father. Other evidence and aspects of Johnston's scholarship are both praised and criticized. Johnston's speculativeness is condemned, often because it conflicts with the reviewer's own speculations. In one or two cases it does seem that the criticism is more abusive than convincing, as in Frank Brady's "Swift: Scholarship and Fancy," in *The Yale Review* . Matthew Hodgart, on the other hand, in "A Question of Paternity" in *The Guardian* of 8 November 1959, has no real objection to Johnston's argument, and says that his "publication of the documents is admirably thorough," but objects to his tone, his apparently "talking crossly to himself rather than addressing the jury with the eloquence of which he is capable."

Defending his endeavours in his introduction to the book, Johnston gives Hodgart the grounds for his criticism:

> . . . for nearly twenty years I have been an unwilling target for a succession of adverse comments on a short paper that I read to the Old Dublin Society in 1941, and that subsequently appeared in the Journal of that body. And as this annoyance is a continuing one, and shows no signs of coming to an end, a man who happens to have been serious in what he said is driven eventually to make matters either worse or better by repeating his point in louder and better documented tones. As a general rule no one will ever come to one's rescue in such matters except oneself.

Looking back at that Old Dublin Society paper, "The Mysterious Origin of Dean Swift," published in the June-August 1941 number of the *Dublin Historical Record*, we find that it itself responds to even earlier disappointment over not being taken seriously when his thesis was artistically expressed in his 1938 radio play. In that paper he explains:

> The theory that I propose to offer as an explanation of the mystery surrounding the life of this perhaps greatest of all Dubliners is one that I embodied in a radio programme some three years ago. Although it was propounded in the most public and universal manner known to science, no attention was paid to it whatsoever, and the whole thing was, presumably, dismissed as an invention of my own for purely dramatic purposes. Nevertheless it was based upon several years of exceedingly interesting research in and around this City of ours, and I am glad to have this opportunity of bringing some of the results of my investigation to the notice of those interested in the mind that conceived *Gulliver* and the *Drapier Letters.*

As I have indicated, this paper had been preceded the previous year by *The Dreaming Dust* , the stage adaptation of his radio play. Between the 1941 paper and the 1959 book, the radio play was adapted for television in 1947 with the new title "Weep for the Cyclops," and *The Golden Cuckoo and Other Plays* was published in 1954, with its introduction and the first publication of *The Dreaming Dust* , as one of the "other plays." In fact, Swift appears to have been approaching an obsession for Johnston, as he explored his biographical theory in one medium after another, the only result being that in one medium he was ignored, in the other reviled. Writing in the 1954 introduction, now an academic himself, he says with barely concealed fury:

> When originally produced on the radio—that is to say by the most universal means known to science, and to the largest audience possible—it produced no critical reactions whatsoever. Nobody takes what they hear on the radio seriously, except News and invasions from Mars. In stage form it evoked very little more response. But then I read a short paper on the subject to the Old Dublin Society, which published it in its journal, at which point the reactions were catastrophic. I had invaded the realm of scholarship, and violent as the reactions of an audience may be to a Point (sic), they are nothing to the reactions of the owners of any literary Tom Tiddler's Ground, towards inter-meddlers from other departments.

So, with what to Johnston were ever more compelling arguments and evidence on the subject repeatedly being rejected, and finally not taken seriously at all, it is not difficult, for all his urbane pretence of modesty and lofty insouciance, to imagine his frustration leading to an almost Swiftian sense of outrage.

Not surprisingly, this outrage becomes increasingly unveiled when not even Johnston's well documented "tome studded with footnotes and terminating with a Bibliography" is received seriously. And nowhere is his outrage vented more clearly than in his review of Volume I of *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age* by Irvin Ehrenpreis, in which review, coming four years after the publication of *In Search of Swift,* he says contemptuously:

> It is not easy to make Swift dull, and while Professor Ehrenpreis comes very close to performing this feat, thanks to some peculiarities in his prose, the substance of his comments on most of the Works that he has dealt with to date are both informative and helpful. This applies particularly to *The Battle of the Books* , which he evidently enjoys. It is when he approaches the biographical snake pit that one wishes he had posted some warning notices before inviting his students to accompany him down the primrose path leading to "Mr. Swift."

The compliment to Professor Ehrenpreis, you will notice, is brief, mild, and sarcastic, sandwiched as it is between caustic criticism, which he elaborates as he focuses on his own area of painstaking research:

> . . .a sound historian might say that the best way to determine whether the residence in Dublin of Sir John Temple, Irish Master of the Rolls, during the closing years of his life, is a fable or not would be to examine the records of King's Inns, of which Sir John was a Bencher, or to make inquiries of the Dublin Corporation. Professor Ehrenpreis prefers to settle the matter by citing Professor Woodbridge of Middletown, Connecticut, who says what he thinks is "likely" on the subject, having been unaware that Sir John's signature appears continuously in the Minutes of the Inns throughout the relevant period. The reason for this preference is sophistical and is not a mere mistake. So also there are valid reasons outside a detached objectivity for Professor Ehrenpreis' views on the coming of the Swift family to Ireland, on the location of Uncle Godwin's residence, on the probable ownership of the house in Hoey's Court in which Swift says that he was born, and most significant of all, on the problem of the date of the death of Jonathan Swift, the elder. He finds evidence on all these points in books that he admires, and it is in line with what he wants to say about Swift. What he omits to mention is that there is source material whichówhether he accepts it or notótends to contradict him on all these points.

Provokingly enough, three years after Johnston's own "important discoveries" had been published in "respectable" academic form, neither his name nor his work is mentioned even in a footnote by Ehrenpreis. No one likes to be treated with the contempt this omission implies. The closest Ehrenpreis comes to recognition that Johnston ever had a word to say about Swift was to declare on the first page of his preface that the first "fable" he was going to "eliminate" was that either Swift or Stella was a bastard. Actually, when it comes to it, he does not really bother to "eliminate the fable;" in fact, he never even mentions it at all. Moreover, it seems there is nothing in Ehrenpreis's biography that makes Johnston's theories unlikely. Quite the contrary! That Swift is not always accurate in his own account of events touching his life is clear. Temple's taking Swift into his family as he does, his distance from his rather dour wife after losing so many children, this combined with his amorous enthusiasms and his vanity in talking about them, Swift's mother's odd behaviour, and Stella's high standing in Temple's family, even, arguably, the extent of Swift's loyalty to Temple, all contribute to Johnston's case, at least circumstantially, and suggest that at least a refutation is called for.

Johnston's theory in regard to Stella had been entertained by others. His Swift argument was more adamantly rejected. But Ehrenpreis says nothing about either of them. Whatever mistakes he may have made, Johnston prides himself on his meticulous documentation. Ehrenpreis, so meticulous and so thorough on other matters, simply makes different assertions on this subject. Right or wrong, then, Johnston's indignant response to Ehrenpreis's "authoritative" work following so close upon his own published treatment of the subject is not surprising. Then, too, more personally, Johnston's mild anti-semitism must have further exacerbated his feelings, especially in the context of his sense of his Anglo-Irish heritage, his consequent strong feeling of kinship with Swift, and his own particular identity with St Patrick's. Certainly, Ehrenpreis's being Jewish was not the main cause of Johnston's annoyance, but it did lend additional pique. His personal territory had been violated by someone who did not belong, and who did not even pay his respects to this rightful member of the clan.

Four years later, in 1967, the Swift Tercentenary Year, and the year of publication for Ehrenpreis's second volume, Johnston, in a contribution to a Swift celebratory pamphlet, again presses his attack against the scholarly establishment, and, by implication, against Ehrenpreis in particular:

> . . . the trouble starts between those who have written their books in the easiest way, by treating everything that they have been told as the truth, and the others [like himself], who believe nothing that they are told until they have been to see what is to be found in the Record Office, or in the basement of the Custom House. Nobody likes to have it shown that he has not checked his facts properly, least of all when it may mean bringing out a revised edition or adding a shameful page of *Errata* . So the books, once published, have to be stood over as a matter of professional integrity, and the sceptical snoopers are either ignored or dismissed as gossips or busy-bodies.

Volume 2 of *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age* surely infuriated Johnston even more than had the first volume. Recognizing the very monumental dimension and overwhelming erudition of the book, he must have been all the more frustrated. There was still no recognition that he existed. But more importantly, it was a matter of the pot calling the kettle black. Many of Ehrenpreis's speculative conclusions are particularly well informed, his insights sound, even brilliant, but when he discusses the reasons for Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley coming to Ireland, for example, he is more speculative than Johnston ever is. Even more striking is Ehrenpreis's account of Tisdall's marriage proposal to Hetty, where he simply announces that "according to Swift only a single obstruction stood in the way of his own offer to marry Mrs Johnson, and that was a determination never to marry at all." Rarely is Ehrenpreis so unquestioning. Without any previous indication of movement toward this decision, and while he certainly questions Swift's statements elsewhere, he simply accepts Swift's word on this subject. Ehrenpreis does, however, give reasons for this "determination" a few pages later: "*To press my own speculations on the episode still further*," he says,

> I may describe Swift's immediate, unthinking response to the news of Tisdall's designs on Hetty as elementary panic. With more pains than most men devote to choosing a spouse, Swift had re-created the domestic pattern which gave him the deepest comfort. As a dependent, compliant confidant, part daughter, part pupil, part mistress, Hetty was a miraculous prize. Every assistance he gave her made her more his own. He could be uniformly benevolent because she must be uniformly docile. It was not conceivable that he should find yet another fatherless young beauty, equipped with intelligence and polite breeding; that he should isolate her too from her family and obligate her to the point where she would indulge his unspoken wishes.

Ehrenpreis's analysis, speculative though it be, may be absolutely correct, but Swift appears here worthy of a character out of MoliËre, or to be the "monster" he is called by one of the women in Johnston's play. Johnston is kinder. Even more astonishing to him than this version of Swift's behaviour, however, was the notion that Stella would be willing to play such a role. Ehrenpreis explains Hetty's opting for spinsterhood and continuing her ambiguous relationship with Swift as resting on the pleasure of continuing Swift's good company and worldly associations, as well as with the general disadvantages of marriage for a woman in the eighteenth century. Whatever personal appeal Tisdall lacked, these explanations seem to me inadequate. Spinsterhood is the least of it, when one considers Hetty's bizarre relationship with Swift. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that Ehrenpreis be right regarding Stella as well as Swift, but his conclusions are again *entirely speculative* . Johnston could not have been pleased to have been attacked and then rejected for his own informed speculativeness, and at the same time to see Ehrenpreis's speculations on the same subject, which Johnston found preposterous, accepted with enthusiasm.

The number of Johnston's writings about Swift is considerable, though there is an inevitable redundancy among them as he repeatedly presses his thesis. These writings were produced over a period of over thirty years, from the radio play in 1938 to a book review in 1970: expository works in the form of lectures, articles, and reviews, and the book; dramatic works for stage, radio, and television.

Clearly, Johnston identified with Swift. At least there are interesting parallels between the scholar and his subject, and it may well be that these apparent likenesses enticed Johnston to his subject in the first place. Both men unquestionably made many enemies, both real and imagined. Moreover, they both took a certain perverse satisfaction in doing so, and were more than normally paranoid and vindictive. Johnston refers to "the Dean's habit [in the *Autobiographical Fragment*] of producing facts in his old age that do not always agree with versions he had already written down." Johnston himself was to do precisely the same thing. He spent his last years revising the diary he had been keeping for over sixty years, often inserting in relevant places long passages which appear to have been written at the times of the events described, but which were in fact inscribed from memory in his old age, with all the hazards to accuracy this method suggests. Johnston comments in regard to Swift's identical procedure in the *Autobiographical Fragment,* which, he says,

> has certain peculiarities that strike the eye at once. First of all, it is written in the third person, as if JS, aware of the fact that future biographers would be interested in his background and early life, was eager to give them what appeared to be some outside party's objective outline of what was to be said on the subject, and to save them from the labour of any independent research, or even of thinking up phraseology of their own. . . . For

what, after all, could be more convenient and authentic than a man's own account of himself always assuming that his intention is to inform us, and not the reverse?

Allegedly, this was Bernard Shaw's method as well as Swift's: leaving to posterity, by means of extensive autobiographical writings, an account of things as he wished them to appear rather than as they were. Johnston, who in his youth sat at Shaw's feet, refers to this policy: "Shaw," he says in his 1954 introduction, "used to object strenuously to any independent investigation of his youth. But as soon as he saw that the enquirer was going ahead with it anyhow, he would immediately bury the writer under a mountain of voluntary information." Johnston, in his own very extensive diary, his own "autobiographical fragment," certainly has "future biographers" in mind as he writes, and wishes to be as accommodating as were Swift and Shaw. In fact, Johnston's assiduous journal-keeping (a journal which he specifically directed in his will to be made freely available to scholars) suggests an imitation of Swift writing his *Journal to Stella* .

"As a man," Johnston says of Swift in his 1941 paper, "a large number of intelligent and sensitive women admired and respected him at all stages of his life, and at least two of them loved him, one of them better than life itself." Johnston, even more than most men, would have liked this statement to apply to himself. A passage in his diary from September 1939 seeks to justify his fascination with his subject. It is simply headed at the top of the page with the word "Polyphemus," a reference to the first version of his Swift play. Under it, we find the following list (the list itself being reminiscent of Swift's own list-making habit):

> Because it is of Dublin.
> Because it is of the great eighteenth century that still lives in odd corners there.
> Because it is of Saint Patrick's, with grand organ music, and a strange epitaph upon the wall.
> Because it has humour and guts and a queer satirical twist.
> Because it [is] about a great man who, in a way, I understand.
> Because it enshrines both the love and the hatred of love that torments me too.
> Because of the two women, both of whom appeal to me.
> Because of the magnificent ready made material.
> Because of the insoluble mystery of it all.
> Because of the Shakespearean proportions of the characters and the superb tragedy of the plot.
> Because it is difficult but worth while.
> Because it lightens my own darkness, for I also have loved two women at the same time, wished them both well and inevitably failed them both.

The impersonal observations are mixed with, and ultimately dominated by very personal ones. It has already been noted that Johnston's investigations in the end exonerate Swift of charges that he behaved so badly in his personal life. Johnston may have wished for a similar kind of sympathetic understanding for his own behaviour.

Clearly, he was anxious to identify with Swift. In an "Oration delivered by Hilton Edwards from a script prepared by Denis Johnston on the tercentenary of Swift's birthday in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin', on 30 November 1967, Johnston imagines Swift speaking out on current issues:

> Can we not hear Swift calling for the creation of a few Communist cellsódummy ones, if you insist, but as formidable in appearance as possible. For why, he would ask, must Ireland be left out of the world-wide distribution of the American tax-payers' money? What have we done that we alone must pay for the equipment of our Army out of our own pockets. It is because we have no Communists. Let us arrange to have some as promptly as possible, even if we have to pay them a small fee to put up a show, before everything has been emptied down the drain of Vietnam, and the last available dollar has been spent on giving tanks and napalm to the Jews and the Pakistanis.

Perhaps the views expressed here in rather heavy-handed satire could be Swift's as well as Johnston's, as Johnston would like to believe. The two men shared, each in his own generation, an intolerance which comprises one of the least attractive features of their characters.

Swift has, of course, been the object of interest and admiration among many of the most important Irish writers of this century. His name has been one to conjure with, as Yeats does so effectively in some of his greatest poems. Joyce's *Ulysses* is punctuated with Swift quotations. And Denis Johnston's own urbane and witty, often patronizing and abusive satire dictates that he was an admirer of Swift's, as were Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. Pride in their Anglo-Irish heritage, of which Swift was a brilliant component, contributed most visibly to Yeats's and Johnston's enthusiasm for him. Both, as well as Lord Longford, wrote plays about him. And, aside from the play specifically about him, Swift's was one of Johnston's dancing

shadows in his first play *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* ó one of the great literary voices in the play, quoted in order to provide satirical comment on contemporary Irish values.

In fact, Johnston claims that it was not academic ambition or scholarly interest, but his problem as a playwright that set him off on his Swift scholarship. While his enthusiasm for Swift was already well in place in the late 1920s when he was writing *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* , Johnston tells us in his 1941 paper that he "first became fascinated by the problem of Swift after seeing Lord Longford's play at the Gate Theatre [in 1933]óa play that brought very vividly before my mind three interesting and vital characters, two women and a man, in a very peculiar and obscure relationship with each other." He goes on to elaborate, as an introduction to his paper:

> What particularly caught my attention after reading several of the published biographies was the fact that the more one read about themóthe deeper one delved in an effort to reconstruct their storyóthe more puzzling became the problem of their collective behaviour. It was no good explaining the matter away by saying that the central character, Swift himself, was a very unusual person and could therefore hardly be expected to act in a normal way, because unfortunately the problem of conduct did not end with Swift. It appeared that not only did the Dean require some explanation, but so also did his two women, his mother, his father, his uncle, his patron, his nurse, and his wife's duenna—in fact everybody in any way closely connected with him, a perfect nest of extraordinary people! Yet few of them gave the impression of being in any way abnormal.

Yeats's Swift play, *The Words upon the Window Pane* , produced in 1934, the year following Longford's, does not clear things up, but instead makes them worse, "drawing Swift," as it does, "as a man haunted by the fear of madness and unwilling to marry on that account. Yet," says Johnston, "there is nothing in Swift's works or correspondence to suggest any fear of insanity, least of all a fear that would prevent his marrying." Yeats, in writing his Swift play, was undoubtedly much more concerned with myth-making than he was with biographical accuracy. But Johnston implies that his own fascination with the subject came to a head when he tried himself to write a play about Swift, and the matter of dramatic realism became a problem. As he says in the 1954 introduction, in his usual condescending tone when speaking of scholars out of English Departments,

> There are a great many books on Swift, and what struck me at an early stage of my research was the fact that, however satisfactory they may be to writers of dissertations in the English Departments, to a man of the Theatre, who had to make sense of the story, they were a total loss. . . .[A] Dramatist . . . is only concerned with personal history, and . . . cannot be expected to write a play without proper motivation of the behaviour that he describes.

And in the last introduction Johnston wrote for the play, now specifically for *The Dreaming Dust* , an essay called "Period Piece," he explains:

> A character in a play has to be explained sooner or later to the player who is expected to protray it, and this is no easy task if his or her behaviour bears no resemblance to any known pattern of human conduct, or even to some convention of the stage. Yet here we have a set of characters actually taken from life, the oddness of whose conduct is inescapable, whatever their real motives may have been. . . .While biographers can be intimidated by authorities, playwrights are even more intimidated by the need to make sense that can be explained to a cast.'

In a 3 December 1947 radio broadcast dealing with the three figures, Johnston had maintained that while men tend to believe in, and adore, the sad, devoted and self-effacing, but mythical, Stella, women find her at best unbelievable and at worst boring; they prefer the more real flesh-and-blood Vanessa.

Johnston puts this female cynicism into his play, as the actress playing the double role of Stella and Pride (one of the Seven Deadly Sins) angrily interrupts the action and complains of being given a part that makes no sense. (The play, I should explain, consists of a series of vignettes from Swift's life, linked by commentary among a group of actors who meet in St Patrick's Cathedral after having played in a masque of the Seven Deadly Sins. Each vignette portrays Swift as embodying a different sin, and the actors double in their roles as characters representing the Sins in the linking material and as characters out of Swift's life in the vignettes.) In the vignette just previously presented, Stella has received the letter from Vanessa asking if she is Swift's wife. At this point, breaking out of her role as Stella and returning to the present as an actress playing the Sin of Pride, she says, "I am not Stella in any sense of the word. I'm not even a credible woman. What woman in her senses would behave like this?" To which the modern Dean of St Patrick's, who has been playing Swift before the interruption, replies:

> Dean (*nervously*). Your behaviour is perfectly reasonable. A very wonderful woman.

Pride. Perfectly reasonable!
Dean. It has satisfied generations of biographers.
Pride (*scornfully*). Swift's biographers—not hers. It's [illegible] for his story that she should be content to live her life as his unacknowledged mistress.
Dean. No! As his secret wife.
Pride. That is worse! If I am your wife, why shouldn't I be recognized? Am I something to be ashamed of?

And so on, continuing to express Johnston's difficulty with accepted versions of the story. Pride says, several lines later: "If I am Stella, I must be a real womanónot a wraith invented by some biographer to explain *his* behaviour." No woman, the actress argues, could possibly behave as Swift's male biographers tell us Stella did. As Johnston says, the playwright must be able "to make sense that can be explained to a cast." Johnston, whose own female dramatic characters, he has noted, tend to be "killers," becomes a former-day feminist.

At the insistence of the indignant actress, the scene moves back in time to a private conversation in the garden at Laracor, where Swift discloses to Stella that while she is Sir William Temple's daughter, he is Sir John Temple's son, hence William Temple's half-brother, and Stella's uncle. And when Stella concludes that "it is a sin for [her] to love" him, Swift explains: "More than a sin, Hetty. It is a crime . . . a crime against Church and State. Do you realize what this means in a world that is filled with bitter enemies? Above our heads hangs the unspeakable charge of incest." This revelation settles the matter between Swift and Stella for a time. But what Swift does not then foresee is the complications that arise because of the sexual attractions of Vanessa, and the fact that he is not so different from other men after all.

In the scene where Stella has received Vanessa's letter, Stella reverses her relationship with Swift, becoming the wise tutor, and he rather a confused pupil. Eventually, Stella diffidently asks: "Presto, are you . . . after all . . . are you only . . ." And he breaks in:

> Yes, I'm only a man just like other men! Why not? Time and again I asked myself, what before God, is the impediment? Have I wife of my own, that I must fly from her? Am I to chase after trulls and trollops all my life to keep my thoughts from honest women?

For Ehrenpreis, Swift is not "just like other men." For all his recognition of Swift's human frailties and foibles in other aspects of his life, Ehrenpreis does not allow for them in the Dean when it comes to sex, and maybe he is right. While the information Ehrenpreis provides on their relationship leaves the question quite open in my mind, perhaps nothing physical did occur between Swift and Vanessa. But for Johnston, who approached Swift from the perspective of his own life experience, this does not make sense. Swift had to be as sexually vulnerable as Johnston was himself. The circumstances of Johnston's love life were of course different from Swift's. He did have two wives after all, and hardly the same moral qualms. But, like Swift's, Johnston's love life was complicatedódespite the diary entry quoted earlier, it involved three concurrent women against Swift's measly twoóand caused him to have a guilty conscience, even as he rationalized his behaviour. At least in part of this dramatic outburst by Swift can be heard Johnston's plea for tolerance for himself.

Ehrenpreis's and Johnston's speculations on the subject of Swift's love life are different. Whether or not Johnston's biographical theories are correct, they are not entirely unreasonable. Moreover, they make pretty good drama, being more interesting than theories about Swift's lack of money, the surfeit of fruit, the fear of madness, or simply Swift's own eccentricity. Right or wrong, Johnston enhances Swift's humanity, and he feels a strong sense of kinship with him. In the larger picture, Johnston, like Yeats, took refuge from disappointment by joining company with Swift in projecting his own "savage indignation."

* 'Denis Johnston's Jonathan Swift,' *Reading Swift: Papers from The Third Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Real & Stover-Leidig (München, Germany, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998).

Book Reviews

Robert Tracy *The Unappeasable Host.* Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998. 280 pp.

Robert Tracy's new collection of essays consists mainly of conference papers from the 1980s and early 1990s. Tracy generously acknowledges work by other scholars in the field, including those from non-English speaking countries. He sets out to discuss a largely neglected aspect of Irish literature, namely the identity of Anglo-Irish, "hyphenated," writers as part of a minority under threat, unacceptable as a ruling class both by the English and by the Irish Catholic "unhyphenated" majority. The essays in this volume cover a long period in history - from the end of the eighteenth century to the twentieth century - and deal with writers from Maria Edgeworth to Elizabeth Bowen. The contributions vary in length between eight and nineteen pages; Edgeworth is prominently featured in two articles, while Bowen and Joyce are discussed in three essays; Yeats is the centre of attention in four contributions; the Banim brothers, Roger O´Connor, Sheridan Le Fanu and Synge each mainly feature in one essay.

A critical problem with this book is that the articles were written during an extensive timespan; the earliest piece is from 1962, the most recent contribution dates from 1995. The articles have not been updated and do not include comments on more recent critical work. Insufficient editing of the material for this volume is particularly evident in the essays on Yeats. There is, for example, unnecessary repetition of factual detail. A small, yet irritating, error is that Yeats´s Nobel Prize for literature is dated to 1924, when in fact he was awarded the prize in 1923 (117). But these essays also present more fundamental problems.

The inclusion of a diverse collection of essays, dealing with various aspects of individual writers makes the volume lose sight of the pronounced theme of the book, which Tracy states is to explore the search by Anglo-Irish writers, during the last two centuries, "to discover what role their class was to play" (introd. 8). He also proclaims that the "unappeasable host" in the title refers to the Catholic Irish, by which Tracy confirms his basic assumption that they had no sense of reverence towards their "Anglo-Irish masters," who, in turn, are said to have had an elitist attitude towards the Catholic Irish (introd. 2). This conclusion is a simplification, as there are writers on both sides of the Irish religious/cultural divide who demonstrate diverging attitudes from this generalisation. For example, Louis MacNeice in his poem "Carrickfergus" expresses a deeply felt alienation from the Catholic poor as the isolated son of the local Rector. Sean O´Faolain writes, in his autobiography *Vive Moi!*, about his parents´ allegiance to the British Empire and his own indignation against his fellow-Irish disgracing themselves before the English. Furthermore, if *Waiting for Godot* is yet another example of "literature of interrogation" (introd. 8) it is not, as Tracy suggests in the introduction, only a work which scrutinises the role of Anglo-Irish rule in Ireland, but a play which explores hegemonic power in general, consequently the play alludes not only to Protestant power over the Irish Catholics, but also points to oppression of the whole Irish population by the hegemonic Catholic church in Ireland. So, the relationship between the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic Irish is not as clear-cut as Tracy´s introduction suggests.

The essays, however, no doubt draw on an impressive range of primary sources. Tracy often conveys a picture of Anglo-Irish authors writing out their personal strain, sometimes directly linked to their position as landowners. For example, he succinctly discusses Maria Edgeworth as a rare female Anglo-Irish voice, who, through the narrative of Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*, predicts the fall of the Anglo-Irish through their own neglect. The ambivalence of Yeats as Anglo-Irish and/or Irish is impressively balanced in the article "Long Division in the Long Schoolroom" as a synthesis of poetics and politics in Yeats´s agenda, to bridge the division between the two groups and his own relationship to them.

But Tracy´s analysis of Yeats also presents problems. The poem by Yeats from which Tracy´s book takes its title, is included in the collection *The Wind Among the Reeds*(1899), a collection steeped in archaic romanticism, in the mood of the Gaelic Revival; no poem is strongly political with reference to the Anglo-Irish as Tracy claims. Instead, the poems emphasise the glorification and romanticisation of Gaelic mythology as pure romanticism. Tracy´s view that Yeats considered the Anglo-Irish as nationalist "other" is not convincing. Yeats´s reproach of the "the Irish upper classes" in *Explorations* does not target the Anglo-Irish; Yeats himself remains an Anglo-Irish "other." His scorn against Constance Markievicz practical nationalism, demonstrated in "Easter 1916," is a case in point. The young Constance Yeats had known in Sligo had fallen off the pedestal, where Yeats gladly put women as romantic icons, not least signified by Maude Gonne´s appearance as the Irish nationalist female emblem in Yeats´s play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in 1902.

The essay "Merging into Art: *The Death of Cuchulain* and the death of Yeats" presents the weakest argument in the book. Tracy argues that Yeats had an "eagerness to be a man of [political] action" (120), and in death turn into a "hero" of the same stature as Cuchulain, by merging heroism with poetry in death (135). His argument is loaded with nationalistic emotion and suggests that Yeats wanted to be up on the barricades, when instead his aspiration was for a mythological and idealised heroism. His nationalism was, as Roy Foster repeatedly emphasises based on intellectual and cultural considerations (R. F. Foster *Yeats: A Life*, 1997).

Tracy´s articles on Yeats leave a large potential for elaboration of the aspect of elitist nationalism and his aversion to

the restrictive non-intellectual forces he saw developing in post-independence Ireland. Only marginally does Tracy recognise that Yeats´s aspiration in general and for the Irish Literary Movement in particular, "was not political" but a "poet´s task" to enhance the "glorious past" of a free Ireland in the making (138). This is a very important part of the argument, which unfortunately is lost in Tracy´s discourse. At least two of the essays on Yeats in the present volume could have been merged into one, in order to bring out this tension in Yeats´s writing, instead, we are deprived of a discussion about his trauma between two, if not three, cultures, Anglo-Irish, Irish and English.

Tracy also discusses Joyce as primarily a political animal. Despite detailed references to language in Joyce´s fiction in the article called "Mr Joker and Dr. Hyde," where, of course, Joyce is Mr Joker, Tracy does not bring out the universal Joker in Joyce, instead he becomes a useful tool in Tracy´s own submerged nationalist agenda. For example, Tracy points out, that for Joyce "world revolution was word revolution" (183), but without recognising that these remarks actually confirm Joyce´s prime concern with intellectual and aesthetic values. Joyce mainly cared for his own intellectual freedom, any nationalist pretext was secondary. However, Tracy's essay on *Finnegans Wake* shows that Joyce intellectualises Irish history, connecting it to ancient history, in order to underline the universality of the Irish, as part of that intellectual heritage.

The last three essays in the book deal with Elizabeth Bowen and the Anglo-Irish Big House in her fiction. In the essay "The Burning Roof and Tower" Tracy quotes Sean O´Faolain, feeling like an intruder at Bowen´s big house, Bowen´s Court, to show the alienation of, what Tracy in his introduction calls the "unhyphenated," Irish towards their previous rulers (206). O´Faolain is an unfortunate example for Tracy´s argument as he was an ambiguous person politically: he favoured English and Anglo-Irish cultural sophistication while rejecting the English political colonisation of Ireland. Several stories in his first collection of short stories, *Midsummer Night Madness* (1932), conveys support for Anglo-Irish and English individuals rather than the unsophisticated IRA fighters. There are also examples of Protestant writers who falsify Tracy´s picture of the rulers of the Big House. Hubert Butler has in numerous articles highlighted important Protestant contributions to the general development of Irish society. O´Faolain and Butler exemplify that division between the affluent Irish Protestants and the Catholic Irish is not as clear-cut as Tracy´s essays about Bowen suggest.

There is no concluding discussion in the volume to tie up loose ends presented in the introduction; so, the reader is left asking who exactly is the "unappeasable host" that Tracy set out in the introduction to portray. As the book stands, Tracy is himself the "unappeasable host" of this academic buffet, requiring several sittings in order to be easily digestible.

Marie Arndt

Brian Fallon. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960.* Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998. 313 pp.
Gerry Smyth. *Decolonisation and Criticism.* London: Pluto Press, 1998. 262 pp.

Irish scholars talking about Irish history, politics and literature have very often referred to the Irish situation as unique and therefore have not seen any relevance in comparing Irish and international matters. This has, for example, meant that comparative aspects of Irish literature have been largely neglected by Irish critics and have really only been acknowledged by scholars from other countries, such as Italy, Hungary and Sweden. Declan Kiberd´s monumental book *Inventing Ireland* is the first example where an Irish academic has seriously taken on board foreign ideas as an integral part of a discourse on Irish literature; no matter how successfully that may have been, it is a milestone in Irish scholarship for that reason alone. Furthermore, the period in Irish culture covered by the two books under review here - the 1930s to 1960 - has been largely neglected by critics, Terence Brown´s *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History 1922-1979* being the most prolific exception. The lack of critical contributions regarding this period in general and in particular using theoretical approaches is partially remedied by two new books, by two authors using very different methods to deal with their chosen topic, and as a consequence they reach diverging conclusions in the process. *Decolonisation and Criticism* by Gerry Smyth - one of the younger shooting stars on the academic horizon - and *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*, by the well-respected Irish journalist Brian Fallon. Both books, in different ways, exemplify the process of coming-of-age that has been evident in Irish Studies during recent years. In his previous book, *The Novel and the Nation*, Smyth concerned himself with contemporary Irish fiction. His new book, however, focuses on the 1950s - a much neglected period in Irish history so far - while Fallon´s book includes the period 1930-1960, an era in Irish cultural and intellectual life often compared to the Dark Ages. The two books are essential reading for anybody who wants to widen their perspective of this significant period in recent Irish history and acquaint themselves with two different approaches to Irish cultural life; as the two accounts complement each other it is a fruitful exercise to read them back to back.

In the opening chapters of *Decolonisation and Criticism* Smyth explicates the concept of decolonisation in a general sense upon which he applies it to an Irish context, with particular references to cultural and intellectual life. Smyth´s theoretical framework rests on ideas by prominent postcolonial writers like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Without labouring the purely theoretical elements Smyth´s main argument is that Ireland in the 1950s remained a country resting heavily on old colonialism, that is English values, and neo-colonialism, implemented through, for example, intellectually restrictive government policy. Smyth systematically illustrates his discourse by discussing periodicals at the time, such as, the short-lived magazine mainly written by Peter and Patrick Kavanagh, *Kavanagh´s Weekly*, the policy of universities - bringing to our attention how examination questions in English literature at Trinity College reflects the attitude that Irish literature was still seen as a secondary appendix to the central English literary canon (138, 152-53). Furthermore, Smyth points to examples revealing the deliberate policies by the Irish government to enhance the profile of the Gaelic heritage, by, for instance, establishing the Irish Institute of Advanced Studies under its auspices. Smyth´s overall conclusion is that Ireland was positioned in an intellectual and cultural vacuum for a long time after independence, conditioned by lingering English influences and by attempts to revert Ireland to Gaelic traditions, without any influence from the outside world; Smyth recognises Sean O´Faolain as one of the few persistent voices of defiance against the evident intellectual claustrophobia caused by this situation. Smyth supports the established idea of post-independence Ireland as, to use Patrick Kavanagh´s definition, a parochial country, which thought it had nothing to learn from other countries and whose politicians saw it as their mission to revive and retain uniquely Irish cultural elements in Ireland.

In *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* Brian Fallon puts his proficiency as a journalist into a fluid, partially eye-witness, account of many aspects of Irish cultural activities during his chosen period. Contrary to Smyth, whose method of persuasion is through theoretically based arguments, Fallon very often seeks to persuade the reader by the pure fact that he has witnessed events or situations with his own eyes. Fallon's explicit purpose in this book is to balance the recent revisionist wave of critique of the Irish past, most evidently when rhetorically asking, "How much more intelligent, and more constructive, it is to come to terms creatively with the past than to amputate it like a diseased limb..."(3). Fallon proposes that the high feel-good factor in the Ireland of today has increased the urge by the Irish to damn the past in order to disconnect from it, and to prove themselves as members of a modern society in the eyes of the world. He further argues, that the black picture of Ireland as an intellectually backward bog is an exaggeration; he concludes that Ireland was not really any worse in that respect than other western countries at that time, and that there were more foreign ideas influencing the Irish cultural scene than has generally been acknowledged. He does not denounce completely the existence of restricting forces in Ireland, but claims that they were not as paralysing to Irish cultural life as is most often suggested.

Fallon sets the scene for his discourse by outlining the period immediately preceding the 1930s, with accounts of Yeats, Joyce and that often forgotten, almost mythical figure George Russell, AE, who takes on a most human form in Fallon´s narrative. He further reminds us of artists and musicians long forgotten who contributed to Irish life in earlier decades during the

twentieth century. He excels in his narrative style when describing the now gone literary pubs, reminiscing when they were almost turned into a theatre stage by characters like Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan and legendary newspapermen like R. M. Smyllie, editor of the *Irish Times* in the 1940s and early 1950s. Fallon´s historical awareness peaks when he declares that a predominantly Catholic people expected a country to be governed by Catholic ethical principals; the subtext is, that although it may be difficult to understand for a more secularised Irish people of today, Catholic ethics was a natural part of life to most Irish people of that day.

Fallon declares his rejection of, what he sees as, a steady growth of populism in Ireland throughout the twentieth century. But instead of simply throwing these current ideas out the window he tries to explain what, in his view, brought about this agenda in Ireland, while also recognising similar tendencies in other countries. He traces the appeal of populism to the fact that many politicians and members of the Catholic hierarchy came from non-intellectual farming communities. In the spirit of this approach Fallon balances the view of certain prominent figures who are regularly personified as the vanguard of Irish insularity and Gaelic culture, Daniel Corkery being exemplified as a case in point. More often than not, Fallon stresses, Corkery has been singled out as the foremost representative of reactionaries who promoted most forcefully Gaelic literature and language, at the expense of English, totally disregarding literary merit. Fallon throws a different light on Corkery by pointing to the historical context in which he lived and further reminding the reader that Corkery was one of the first in Ireland who recognised the literary merits of Russian writers, especially Turgenev. However, in all honesty, the fact that Corkery read Russian writers is not solid evidence that Corkery was not a single-minded promoter of all things Gaelic in Ireland, especially when considering that the main attraction of Turgenev for Corkery was his way of portraying Russian "folk" in a realistic way, which he encouraged his *protégé* Sean O´Faolain to emulate in Irish settings. O´Faolain followed his mentor´s advice in the early stage of his career but later rejected it, not to the detriment of his literary output.

Fallon´s indirect attempt to justify events in earlier decades in twentieth-century Ireland is most evident in his statement that the failure to revive the Irish language was the most devastating trauma in post-independence Ireland and that its implications far exceed the negative aspects of Irish censorship, as he is satisfied by the fact that banned books were possible to obtain by those who wanted them and that there was no censorship on ideas. However, the public ostracising of Hubert Butler in 1952, after he had upset the Papal Nuncio after a public talk by making negative comments about certain Catholic priests in Croatia, shows that ideas were indeed under censorship in Ireland at the time. The events involving Butler are not mentioned by Fallon.

The two books *Decolonisation and Criticism* and *An Age of Innocence* demonstrate that two different accounts, one highly academic and the other a pronounced subjective evaluation of similar phenomena and times can reach such diverging yet important conclusions about related issues. Both Smyth and Fallon highlight significant aspects in their respective arguments which must not be discarded in a discussion about this period in Irish cultural history, a period largely left unattended by scholars. A further discussion on this period is important in the current process in Ireland, that of defining the nation and its people as part of Europe. Ireland now eagerly projects itself as a modern society with a dynamic economy, independent of previous colonial masters. But as recently an American was, albeit briefly, the managing director of Telecom Eireann, and Bewley´s Cafe´ in Dublin´s Grafton Street was revamped to accommodate the taste of foreign tourists, one wonders if maybe in Ireland today there are new forms of colonial traumas lurking in the background.

Marie Arndt

***Irische Dramatiker der Gegenwart*, hrsg. von Jochen Achilles und Rüdiger Imhof, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1996, ix + 175 pp., DM 39.80. ***

The student, scholar or critic looking for book-length surveys of contemporary Irish drama is hard put despite the plethora of Irish Lit. Crit. otherwise. The treatment afforded this subject in D.E.S. Maxell's *A Critical History of Irish Drama, 1891-1980* (1984), Michael Etherton's *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* (1989), and Anthony Roches's *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (1994) is less than comprehensive. Since the time the collection under review here was first conceived, Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (1997) has been published constituting a considerable improvement. As regards the German academic scene, one would still have to fall back on Heinz Kosok's *Geschichte der anglo-irischen Literatur* (1990) or the collection of essays entitled *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties* (1996) edited by Eberhard 'Paddy' Bort and celebrating the redoubtable Anglo-Irish Theatre Group at the University of Tübingen now in its 17th year. Full marks therefore, to the editors, Jochen Achilles and Rüdiger Imhof, for providing an over-due introduction to major playwrights on the contemporary scene in Ireland.

From the perspective of *mentalités* the editors define the contemporary scene as beginning in the 1960s, they see it as a distinct break with tradition, a re-orientation, a re-fashioning of the national image, which could be described as the discarding of stereotypical notions about the literature of a predominatly rural society marked by religious conflict, hard drinking, and the melancholy beauty of its landscape. The editors deplore the slowness with which this new image of Ireland was received on the continent of Europe. But, as the examples of John McGahern and Edna O'Brien and the banning of their books would suggest, Irish society in the 1960s and beyond was still very much in the grip of conservative social forces. One wonders how the change would have to be defined that set in in the 1980s and '90s with the internationalization of Irish society as evidenced, for example, by Mary Robinson's Presidency and her definition of Irishness as diasporic and non-territorial.

Be that as it may, here we have a collection of eight articles surveying the work of eight 'major' contemporary playwrights—a few having their beginnings in the 1960s, most of them not fully flourishing until the 1980s. In addition, we find two complementary essays of a more general description on 'Northern' and 'Southern' voices in contemporary Irish theatre.

The authors of the pieces on individual writers apparently had the brief to survey their respective writer's oeuvre according to major themes and forms or related criteria of distinction and subdivision. **Heinz Kosok** writing on Hugh Leonard, the most prolific dramatist in this group, orders Leonard's oeuvre according to forms and functions, he distinguishes between the early adaptations, memory plays, and the typical Leonard play which combines elements of farce, political satire, and the comedy of manners. **Walter T. Rix** takes a largely biographical approach situating the work of John B. Keane in the oral tradition and relating it to the 'submerged population groups' of rural Ireland as the true 'Hidden Ireland'. **Ruth Niel**, handling no easy task in surveying Brian Friel's dramatic output, skilfully manages to isolate the encompassing theme of 'truth vs. illusion' and demonstrates how this is interwoven with such subsidiary themes as 'emigration and exile', 'memory', 'history', and 'language'. Thomas Kilroy's relatively small oeuvre is surveyed by **Rüdiger Imhof**, who stresses the interrelation in Kilroy's work between social criticism, i.e. a response to the problems of modern Ireland, and experimentalism as the search for new dramatic forms. **Jochen Achilles** presents Tom Murphy as the one dramatist who is most vehemently concerned with the questioning of traditional values and structures in Irish society and retraces the psychological mechanisms in Murphy's plays that produce their cathartic effect via the (liberating) return of the repressed (in individual and collective memories). Writing also on J. Graham Reid **Jochen Achilles** names as a major theme the vicious circles of violence in Northern Ireland, he perceives Reid's perspective as gradually shifting towards a smashing of those circles through the cultivation of tolerance and the elimination of racial prejudice. **Elmer Andrews** shows how Stewart Parker puts history to creative use by means of pastiche and collage; again, as elsewhere in the work of contemporary dramatists, the wider social and political implications point to a need to demythologize the past and deconstruct traditional stereotypes. Frank McGuinness is the last in this series, and **Rüdiger Imhof** structures his essay around three major themes and motifs—'bonding', 'the sectarian divide in Ulster', and 'art and the artist'—which he finds recurring in varying constellations.

The two generalizing articles on 'Northern Voices' by **Lynda Henderson** and **William Wylie** and on 'Southern Voices' by **Ger Fitzgibbon** simultaneously go over a lot of ground already covered in the essays on individual writers (i.e. plays by Friel, McGuinness, Murphy, and the theme of history as a nightmare). Henderson and Wylie and, much more so, Fitzgibbon fail to achieve the degrees of succinctness and precision that distinguish the other eight essays on individual writers; their original contributions are limited to the introduction of new names and the discussion of plays like *This Is It* by Andy Tyrie, Sam Duddy, and Michael Hall, *The Hillsborough Script* by Tom Paulin, and *The Saxon Shore* by David Rudkin (in the case of Henderson and Wylie) or summary reports on the work of Sebastian Barry and Billy Roche (Fitzgibbon).

The editors would probably be the first to admit that their selection, their canon, as it were, is open to debate. There are many candidates waiting in the wings who would perhaps have deserved extensive treatment as more strictly 'contemporary' dramatists—the names of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr [and, most recently, Martin McDonagh] being the hottest favourites to get a look in. That is the eternal problem of anthologies. In the present case, however, there is one writer who sticks out like a red cow in a green field: John B. Keane. With all due respect—his is hardly the type of theatre to revolutionize the image and internal structures of Irish society which, as the editors suggest, would distinguish the latest phase in the tradition of Irish drama from earlier ones. Besides, most of Keane's plays date from the 1960s, a fact which clearly relegates him to an earlier generation when compared with the more truly contemporary dramatists discussed here. Walter T. Rix seems to have anticipated such criticisms. His over-assertiveness is telling and makes things even worse. He tries to present Keane as the truly authentic voice of Ireland thereby glossing over the more problematic aspects of his work. Keane, the publican-cum-playwright from Listowel, Co. Kerry, may well have his fingers on Ireland's pulse (34), but all modern Ireland is not a pub, where, in the words of Hugh Leonard's fantasy play *Madigan's Lock* (1958), there is „free stout for life, free stout till God called 'Time' an' gently led them upstairs to His own lounge bar above" (4; as quoted by Kosok). There is simply no denying the 'soap' dimension in Keane, and, despite all euphemistic periphrasis, his plays, especially when put alongside those of the younger generation, appear as unmistakably 'racy and of the soil'. Furthermore, an artist who, in 1995, seriously believes that he is more concerned with „reality as it is rather than life as it is seen" (23) puts himself automatically in a different class from dramatists like Friel, Murphy, Kilroy etc. Against Keane's dictum (in *Self-Portrait*, 1964) that „a man without a country is as confused as a dog without tail" (20) one is tempted to invoke Samuel Beckett's definition of habit as the 'dog returning to his vomit'. It is exactly against this type of mental habit that the recent debate about Irishness as initiated by the Field Day Movement has been directed: the deconstruction of myths and stereotypes about the land.

After all this, it comes as a surprise as well as a kind of consolation and a sign of hope to read that in *This Is It* (1984), a play about the Belfast Loyalist ‚Day of Action', the three co-authors all associated in some way with the Ulster Defence Association intended to „set in motion a community-wide debate on what the people of Ulster want their future to contain, and get away from the obsessions with the past" (147). Here is an astonishing parallel to what had been formulated in a different sectarian corner as Field Day's mission to provide the basis for a „more ecumenical and eirenic approach to the deep and apparently implacable problems which confront the island today" (*Ireland's Field Day* [London: Hutchinson, 1985)], viii).

In short, despite the discrepancies generated by the inclusion of John B. Keane and some looseness in the two survey articles this is a very valuable collection exploring a strangely untilled field.

Werner Huber

* This review was first published in *Anglistik* 9.2 (1998): 165-167.

Jennifer Johnston's Works

Jennifer Johnston's works of fiction have, almost unanimously, met with extraordinary praise and pronounced admiration. *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, if that is anything to go by. *The Old Jest* (1979) won the Whitbread Award for Fiction, and *The Invisible Worm* (1991) was shortlisted for the Sunday Express Book of the Year. The comment on the cover of her latest novel, *Two Moons* (1998), states that Jennifer Johnston "is recognised to be one of Ireland's finest writers" - an appreciation underpinned by numerous articles about her oeuvre. Yet what in the face of all this eulogy may be surprising is that none of the studies written so far has anything to remark on the glaring deficiencies in the novels. Critics may have turned a blind eye to the artistic shortcomings in Johnston out of admiration for her person. Still, it is rather odd that she should seem from their comments to be among the most consummate of stylists and artists. Sean MacMahon, for instance, argues:

> Her technical skill, her handling of dialogue, her tact when writing of youth and age, her detachment and humour, her quality of imagination, and above all her economy [...] all mark her out as a writer who may some day be great.

The tentative note in MacMahon's verdict is due to the fact that it was made early on in Johnston's career. Writing some five years later, Mark Mortimer, with far fewer doubts, asserts:

> Now that she has established herself as a novelist of great and varied gift - admirable in constructing her plots and portraying her characters. Showing, as Minnie says of herself at school, "remarkable genuity in phrase making" [...] she brings to her work many of the qualities that make a novelist's work memorable: precision in handling the army of words implanted in her mind [...]

Similarly, Heinz Kosok finds evidence in her work of a restless search for le mot juste. But there are occasions, too many in fact to justify such praise, where Johnston's mots are anything but justes. Anthony Burgess even had no qualms in evaluating *Shadows on Our Skin* as "unique and perfect art". While he was penning his review, Burgess must, for a moment, have forgotten what perfect art is. After all - *indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*, as Horace so sapiently suggested.

Johnston's works of fiction, to offer a summary critique, are self-deflatingly schematic: just too many of them rely on the same compositional pattern and concentrate on the themes of initiation and the sad plight of, frequently adolescent, would-be writers. Johnston's novels, furthermore, betray deficiencies in narrative style and technique as well as an unsure hand at what may be termed metaphorical enrichment, or metonymy. Lastly, they show the author's propensity for simply overdoing the coincidences in her plots and burdening her narrrative accounts with intolerably melodramatic elements.

There are many ways of indicating the schematic nature of the novels. One would be to ask why if anyone in Johnston's fictional world plays, or listens to, a piece of music, it has, without fail, to be something by Chopin. In *The Captains and the Kings* (1972), Mr Prendergat immeres himself in the playing of Chopin's *Nocturnes* shortly before he dies; Alec's mother, in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974), has a penchant for Chopin, and so has Maeve, in *The Old Jest* (1979); *The Christmas Tree* (1981) yet again carries a reference to the Polish composer, but there, by way of compensation, Beethoven, Brahms, and Liszt get a mention as well. In *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987), the principal character is, as so often in Johnston, an adolescent girl with a propensity for playing the Joanna. She, too, is fond of Chopin; but unlike Mr Prendergast, she is not particularly good at playing his music, having opted for Debussy instead.

Or, one may ask, why so often in her fictional world do raindrops have to "burst" on some character's cheek (e.g. *Shadows & The Old Jest*), or why so frequently her characters have to stare "inimicably" (*Shadows & The Old Jest*). The best way, however, is by pointing to the structural similarity of the books. In most of them, Johnston has favoured two compositional designs: either a combination of diary entries in the first-person and narrative sections in the third-person, or a circular narrative pattern, utilising a framing device.

The first group consists of *The Gates* (1973) and *The Old Jest*, very similar books also in respects other than purely structural. In fact, *The Old Jest* cannot pretend to be much more than a rÇchauffÇ of both thematic matters and structural patterns tried out in the previous fictions, most notably in *The Gates*. An eighteen-year-old girl, Nancy Gulliver, with aspirations to becoming a writer, narrates certain allegedly crucial events which span a couple of days in her life, adopting a third-person point of view. Once again, as in *The Gates*, each narrative section is prefaced with a diary entry. These entries are intended to record "passing thoughts that give impressions of [Nancy]" (p. 6), and their raison d'àtre is simply "that in forty years...[she]

can look back and see what [she] was like when [she] started out" (p. 6), or so Nancy wishes the reader to think. In spite of this explanation, though, it remains teasingly unclear, here as in *The Gates*, what the strategy of combining diary entries with narrative units is meant to convey. For, apart from being from the same pen, the two have little to hold them together thematically. Thus it would have been feasible to have the entries reflect on the narrative parts, or vice versa. Besides, why should someone who believes she has it in her to become a writer and wishes to fictionalise aspects of her own life preface her account with unfictionalised diary entries, or undisguised addresses to the reader concerning her whereabouts, before embarking on her narrative enterprise? In slightly varied form the same problem arises again in Johnston's *The Railway Station Man* (1984), where it is, as in *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*, linked with a shift in narrative point of view, quite a questionable shift, to be precise, as will be argued later.

As for the reliance on a framing device. *The Captains and the Kings* marks the beginning. The novel starts off on the afternoon of 20 September, with Guards Devenney and Conroy on their way to Kill House. After two pages, this unit is left undeveloped and unresolved, and the reader is kept guessing as to what the guards' business may consist in. Only at the very end does the account pick up from there to divulge that the two men are on their way to summon Mr Prendergast to the police barracks. Within this frame, the story is told of what happened between "late May" (p. 8) and 20 September, involving Mr Prendergast and the boy, Diarmid Toolish. Intriguing through a framing device may be, the trouble is that in *The Captains* it fails to have any real thematic consequence; it is just an empty ploy. In her third novel, *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, Johnston once again resorts to a framing device as well as to a circular course of events. Alexander Moore has been sentenced to death and will soon have to face the firing squad for shooting his friend, Jerry Crowe. While he is thus waiting for his execution, he spends his time writing, committed to no cuase and knowing that "for the waiting days [he has] only the past to play about with" (p. 5). His juggling "with a series of possibly inaccurate memories" (p. 5) leads him back to his childhood in Ireland, and proceeding from that period in time, he gradually unfolds the story of his friendship with Jerry. The next novel openly to make use of a narrative frame is *The Christmas Tree*. While it therefore belongs firmly to the group under discussion, the book at the same time shares certain structural characteristics with *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*. The frame is formed by the letter Constance Keating pens to Jacob Weinberg at the outset, urging him to come and see her before she dies, and by Jacob's belated arrival at Constance's house in Ballsbridge near the close. This apart, the story consists of sections told from a first-person viewpoint and recording the events during the last eight days of Constance's life. Intercalated into these are units presenting scenes from a receding past and constituting those "thousand pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" mentioned by Constance herself. This compositional scheme not only recalls the narrative texture of *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*, but is essentially similar to it, the present sections in the first-person corresponding to the diary entries, and the past sections in the third-person to the straight narrative passages in the other two novels. *The Railway Station Man* yet again employs a framing device, and yet again has a circular course of events, while at the same time exploiting the narrative procedure of *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*. It begins with Helen Cuffe, in the first-person, filling the reader in on her past life before she came to live in a cottage in the North West of Ireland, near Sligo. Unlike most of her fellow-protagonists in Johnston's world of fiction, Helen had, until quite recently, no aspirations to become a writer. A painter of sorts, she exchanged brush for pen after a disastrous event in which her son, Jack, and the eponymous railway station man were embroiled. The last section of the book closes the ring-like frame; it belongs to the same level as the opening passage, again presenting Helen directly addressing the reader in the first-person. Within this frame, reminiscent of the procedure in *The Captains* and, especially, in *How Many Miles*, Helen tells the story of her involvement with Roger Hawthorne and of the explosion cryptically mentioned at the start. The references to the explosion at the beginning and the end thus reinforce the circular pattern, as does the device of starting and finishing the account with a single word. At the outset it is the word "isolation", at the close it is the word "running". It seems as if Johnston deliberately chose to begin and end her novel thus in order to further enhance the circular course of events, to indicate (say) that the story moves from the "isolation" which characterised Helen's life before she got to know the titular hero, via a brief period of friendship, even love, happiness, and involvement, to - well, yes, "running". But where to and what from? There's the rub. Apart from the fact that the novel begins and ends with a single word, the idea does not make much sense. Why, one may wonder, did Johnston not select a word for the close that fitted better the otherwise meaningless pattern?

In Johnston's previous books, whenever there was a would-be writer giving a fictional account of her, or his, life, it was done from a third-person viewpoint. That is, at least partly, again the case in *The Railway Station Man*. But whereas previously the perspective remained the same throughout, namely that of the teller, now in the third-person part of the novel the point of view changes between that of Helen und that of Jack, so that taken together the narrative presents three different perspectives: Helen in the first-person, Helen in the third-person, and Jack in the third-person. Thus, as mentioned, the prefatory section has Helen state, for instance: "At this moment, as I write these words [...]". The first and second units of the fictionalised part are seen through Jack's eyes, while the next one shows a change to Helen's. The strategy is later repeated. Why should that be so? Is the change in point of view thematically necessary, or significant? This much is certain: since Helen states of herself that it is she who is writing everything, this means that whenever the reader is asked to assess the incidents through Jack's eyes, Helen assumes cognizance of her son's thoughts. There is nothing odd about the procedure because, after all, the greater part of the novel represents a fictionalised version of recent events in Helen's life featuring Helen the writer taking on the role of

omniscient narrator. The trouble, though, is that *The Railway Station Man* is so centred, for its effect, on Helen (most narrative units are from her point of view), and Jack remains such a marginal figure in the Helen-Roger drama that the change in perspective must appear entirely arbitrary. Why, for instance, if there must be viewpoints other than Helen's is the reader never allowed to enter into Roger's, or Damian's, mind? Why are the events not mirrored through the consciousnesses of all the main characters, in the manner employed by (say) Joseph Conrad in *Nostromo*? The question must remain unanswered. And so must the related one of why Johnston adopted the policy. In fact, the whole strategy becomes nonsensical if one takes the following into account: in her first couple of paragraphs, Helen states: "To be accurate, and it is in the interest of accuracy that I am struggling with these words [...]" (p. 1). How can she be accurate about Jack's thoughts, unless he told her himself, which is wholly unlikely as he was blown to smithereens in the explosion?

In *Fool's Sanctuary*, the narrative present forms a framing device for a recollective account of past events. The frame is quite promising. Miranda, late in life - in fact, she is on her deathbed in "Termon" (an anglicisation of the Irish word for 'sanctuary'), a Big House somewhere in County Cork, a situation comparable to Constance's in *The Christmas Tree* - is playing "[her] play for the last time" in her head, a play focusing on a stormy weekend and involving her father, her brother Andrew, Andrew's British soldier friend, Nanny, her youthful sweetheart Cathal, and members of the IRA. The style of the first pages is almost scintillating and the subject matter seems compelling. But as early as page 7, when Miranda's 'play' commences, it becomes only too apparent that a sour disappointment is afoot. Cathal, son of a Catholic worker at Termon and now a student in Dublin and associated with the fight for freedom, has come from "the real world" to visit Miranda in order "to breath the same unreal air as [she]". Also on a visit is Andrew, a sort of glorified spy for the British Army, whose life in Britain has taught him to despise the Irish and their fight for independence. He is haunted by the 'ghost' of his mother and has never been able to hit it off with his father, Mr Martin, who dreams of repaying his debts to a country exploited by his ancestors: thousands and thousands of acres of derelict land must be given new heart, he believes, through "planting combined with major drainage schemes" (p. 65). Andrew is accompanied by his officer friend Harry Harrington, who complicates things at Termon by falling in love with Miranda, thus becoming a rival to Cathal, who is already hard put to it to stand his ground against attacks from his erstwhile friend Andrew for stepping out of his class. While Harry is making sheep's eyes at Miranda and Andrew is quarrelling with his father and getting drunker and drunker, Cathal comes with the news that the IRA have sent some hitmen down from Dublin to assassinate Andrew and Harry. After some poking around in Mr Martin's antediluvian car, the British "intruders" are packed off to Dublin, and Cathal is later taken away by the IRA men and shot for betraying the cause.

The blurb claims that *Fool's Sanctuary* is about "loyalty and betrayal, and the thin line that divides them". If it is, then the realisation is severely marred, most devastatingly by the reliance on worn-out features of the big-house novel: the ineffective, philanthropic father; the soldier son, who has turned to drink and despises his father's idealism; the stuttering, likeable Englishman who has no clue about Ireland; the no-nonsense Nanny; the overpowering mother, albeit now a 'ghost'; and the Catholic patriot who goes to his death for a grand gesture. There is also the problem that the novella is too much centred on Miranda for the themes of loyalty and betrayal to come into their own. The way that Miranda, imprisoned in the unreality of her fool's sanctuary and stunted in her emotional growth by the hapless immaturity of her consciousness, comes to terms, or rather fails to come to terms, with the disruption of her "Indian summer of illusions" is not worked out properly. In fact at times it is made preposterous. For instance, when Cathal meets Miranda, she suggests, quoting the line from Richard II: "Let's sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings". This is completely out of context. In its overreliance on dialogue the narrative reveals its origin in a stage play, *Indian Summer*, first produced in Belfast in 1983.

The Invisible Worm (1991) yet again employs a framing device, confronting past and present. The novel is about guilt and atonement, about the laying of ghosts from the past. It is the story of thirty-seven-year-old Laura Quinlan and how the invisible worm of memory "doth [her] life destroy", to adopt a line from Blake's "The Sick Rose". Laura is given to standing by the window and seeing scenes from the past in her "X-ray eyes", scenes that reverberate and conjure up other scenes. In them, her father, with whose funeral the account opens, figures prominently. While kneeling in church, Laura reflects: "I can't. I cannot forgive. Forget it, God." What it is that she cannot forgive is left vexingly vague at this stage. Nor is it any clearer why she "will infect this race [with] her hatred". But not to worry, all is revealed in the end.

The past may preoccupy Laura a good deal, but so does the present: for example, in the shape of Dominic O'Hara, a spoiled priest and a teacher of classics who comes to tea when Laura's husband, Maurice, is away and noses about in Laura's gargantuan collection of memorabilia amassed by her forebears. A bloody museum is what Maurice calls it. Dominic is an oaf and an obnoxious inquisitor who elicits the secret from Laura that she is afraid of her late father - at times even feeling his hands around her neck.

Basically, the account is made up of two stories. The narrative present is generated by a series of quite inconsequential events, showing Jennifer Johnston not at her best in trying to get Maurice off the stage in order for Laura to fall in love with Dominic, who has problems of his own: his father is dying and his family want him to stay away. "Barge in. Fight" is what Laura

advises. And that is what he does. There is also much ado about restoring a summerhouse, overgrown with weeds, brambles and dry grass. the summerhouse is the link with the past. Every so often, Laura envisages scenes featuring a woman running. It is herself. Or so it turns out when she divulges to Dominic the reason for her mental preoccupation with temps perdu. Her father raped her when she was still a child, stealing from her the expectation of love, joy and peace. Her mother, when told by Laura afterwards, killed herself in her boat. In the end, having recovered from a nervous breakdown, Laura sets fire to the summerhouse and unburdens her traumatic past to Dominic.

This is ample stuff from which to weave a good narrative. *The Invisible Worm*, though, is an uninspired novel. The main shortcoming is the inexpert way in which the past has been incoporated into the present. Of course, memories sometimes do occur in random fashion; mostly, however, they are generated by optical and audible impressions or through associative thinking. The modernists knew this intimately. Here, memories too frequently happen out of the blue. The affair between the oafish Dominic and guilt-ridden Laura is completely unconvincing, and so is her ambivalent relationship with her husband.

The inevitable framing pattern is also employed in *The Illusionist* (1995). The main character, Stella Macnamara, is once more a writer and the narrative that constitutes the novel is meant to be from her pen. But Stella does not match her Johnstonian fellow-writer-personae in the number of imbecilities she perpetrates, even though she is given to dancing around the house, coughing up lines from songs whether appropriate or not and filling her head with silly words, such as "Tararaboomdeay", in times of crisis, thus, in a way, anticipating Grace in *Two Moons*. The frame-story has Stella's daughter, Robin, visit her mother in Dublin after her father's funeral in London. The father, the eponymous illusionist, was killed by an IRA bomb in his station wagon with a hundred and fifty white doves neatly caged in the back. Mother and daughter are estranged; in fact, Robin seems to hate Stella's guts, particularly because Stella ran away from the illusionist when their marriage was on the rocks. The story accommodated by the frame, which in brief episodes is kept up and elaborated throughout, is the story of that marriage.

Stella met the illusionist on a train. At that time, she was working in the publishing business. The couple married, lived in a dingy flat in London at first, then bought a grand house in Suffolk. She left her job, despite a tempting offer to become a partner in the publishing firm, gave birth to a daughter and lived the life of a housewife. Then, one day, her former boss visited her and presented her with a portable typewriter. For he knew that she had it in her to be a writer. Her first efforts with the machine yield only "QWERTYUIOP", but she made quick progress and before you could say 'Jack Robinson', her first novel was completed. Now, at the age of fifty-eight, Stella has been writing fiction for fifteen years. While she was pottering about the house and getting keyed up for her writing career, the illusionist, Martyn (with a 'y' to the chagrin of Stella's mother), was busy taking his illusionist act to the Continent and all over the place. Stella never knew where he went or what exactly he was up to. For Martyn was an egregiously enigmatic man. He is in fact allowed to be enigmatic to such an extent that he is hardly a real presence in the book. His act is a bit of an enigma, too. Apparently, Martyn on stage has doves all over him and, flapping his arms about, is transformed into an angel that hovers above the darkness of the world. It is all done with mirrors, of course. Eventually, the marital relationship deteriorated because "secrets seemed to be everywhere".

What is somehow disappointing about the novel is that Stella's development, or growth, into a writer, as that of the other would-be writers in Johnston's canon, is not in the least made evident and consequently remains unconvincing. We only have Ms Johnston's word for it. The reader may be somewhat at a loss to say what the illusionist business is all about. But perhaps it is significant that Martyn was an illusionist. For, as one learns at the close of the book, as do Stella and Robin, he successfully created the illusion that he was deeply in love with his wife and his daughter when, in truth, he entertained a fancy woman, his secretary, on whom he sired a second daughter. Which only goes to show that one should not put one's trust in men who keep their pasts a well-guarded secret and perform with birds.

Johnston's reliance, for purposes of structure, on framing devices and circular plot-patterns is thus obsessionally overriding. Even the story-line of Shadows on Our Skin is no exception. For it could be argued that the incidents chart a way from humdrum, stultifying routine via a brief exciting period of time in which Joe Logan, by befriending Kathleen Doherty, is jolted out of the monotony of his existence, back to an even bleaker sort of humdrum, stultifying routine. But enough on that score. There are others that now call for attention, such as the deficiencies in Johnston's narrative style and technique.

In the very first of her published books, Johnston seems to have developed and exploited the narrative method that best suits her talent. It is here, as in most of her other works of fiction, basically a scenic method that depends for its effect on dialogue. The descriptive passages betray an unmistakable heavy-handedness and lack of control. But even the conversational sections rather often have an imbecile ring about them, for example in *Shadows*. While one could excuse some of them, allowing for Joe Logan's age, there is one instance especially which is difficult to accept. Coming back from Grianan, Joe notices his brother, Brendan, "standing by the corner of the garden shop". He hopes Brendan cannot see him; however, in order to make sure, he ducks down his head. Now, this is how the incident is rendered:

> ...perhaps Brendan couldn't see him.
> The ostrich principle.
> 'Hello.'
> He heard Kathleen's voice tentatively speaking.
> 'Hello, Miss...', Brendan hesitated.
> The ostrich never wins. (p. 97)

Ah, well, the ostrich leads a hard life! Or take the manner in which the love affair between Helen and Roger is presented in The Railway Station Man. The affair is of exceptional importance to the novel, for it entails Helen's relinquishing her chosen life of isolation for the love of another human being, of Roger, but with the sad result that, when this love seems in full bloom, Roger becomes the victim of some hare-brained political action and Helen is left to "mourn the needless dead" (p. 186). To begin with, the love affair is pitifully implausible. Why should Helen, a woman in her fifties, become attracted to a man who is not at all physically attractive, unless, of course, he had an intriguing personality? Of that, however, there is next to nothing. In fact, Roger's preoccupation with restoring yet another railway station on a closed-down line unequivocally singles him out as a nutcase. On the first two occasions when they meet, his behaviour towards Helen is rather rude. But the next thing that happens is that they go on a picnic and end up first in his bed, then in hers. A transition from the status quo, as laid down when they first get to know one another, to their mutual infatuation is simply missing.

And what preposterous features, downright imbecilities, this affair contains, implausible as it is! At the end of one evening, before he leaves Helen, Roger feels it incumbent upon himself to tell Helen, entirely out of the blue: "I've had women you know. I'm not..." (p. 121). Well, of course, naturally; after all he is a man well advanced in years, and he was not born a cripple either. Or here is how the first advances in this extraordinary love affair are described:

> He moves his cheek against hers and the sudden scratch of stubble made her heart thud. Oh no God, please God, don't let anything stupid happen. (p. 153)

Of course, something stupid will happen. Yet wait, relish this, just moments later:

> He kissed her. He held her tight with his hands on her back so that she could feel his hardness. The stubble scratched, oh God, she thought again, where are You now? Why didn't You do something before it was too late? (p. 155)

God does not seem to have been much interested. For "ten minutes later" they are "upstairs in his bedroom" (p. 155). Next morning, Helen questions herself about what happened the night before: "Was what happened last night love? Desperation? Alcohol?" (p. 157). She is inclined to say "Yes to all three" (p. 157). Her son, Jack, believes it "is some sort of menopausal madness" (p. 127). Matters become even odder when menopausal madness in a woman of fifty and more is coupled with a kind of outlook appropriate only for a teenager. The morning after they have next had sexual intercourse, Roger urges Helen to stay in bed with him and let "the bloody Aga go out". Helen, however, retorts: "Even for Paul Newman I wouldn't let the Aga go out" (p. 169). And when shortly after Roger asks her to marry him, Helen rejects his proposal, justifying her decision by noting that she would "say the same thing to Paul Newman" (p. 175). Would any woman of Helen's age who claims for herself the sensitivity, creative and intellectual capacity of an artist as well as a writer respond, in earnest, by dragging in Paul Newman?

Since in *The Christmas Tree* she chose to have the story told, for the greater part, by the principal character as well as to include her death, Johnston was of course in need of someone else as the recording authority. It would, at first glance, seem an expert solution to have Bridie take on this role. Thus Bridie notes: "These last few pages are written by me Bridie May, beginning on Christmas Eve 1978. I have made nothing up, nor have I left anything out [...] at least I don't think I have" (p. 158). There is, however, something quite inexpert about this solution. One would expect that there should be discernible a distinct change in narrative voice between Constance's and Bridie's pages. For after all Constance likes to think of herself as a failed writer with three unpublished novels behind her, and Bridie is a girl of all but ebullient linguistic skill. Self-defeatingly, the novel does not contain any such change in tone and style. To have the doctor referred to as "Dr Bill" is about all there is in this respect, and it simply will not do.

The next point of criticism concerns the melodramatic elements and the overdoing of coincidences in plot development. The love affair between Helen and Roger is of course highly melodramatic. All too often these melodramatic elements go hand in hand with vastly implausible coincidences. This rather deplorable state of affairs is noticeable in all of Johnston's novels. In *The Captains*, Mr Prendergast is given to pondering why, in contrast to his brother Alexander, he has never been able to master the piano accompaniment of Goethe's "Der Erlk"nig":

> Wer reitet so spÑt durch Nacht und Wind?
> Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.
> Er hat den Sohn wohl im Arm,
> Er fasst ihn sicher, er hÑlt ihn warm. (p. 111)

It must surely be counted as a pretty preposterous concretisation of the sentiments expressed by these lines, when Mr Prendergast is placed in a situation where, as some sort of father surrogate, he can, or could, hold in his arms and keep warm the

boy who intrudes into his curious privacy. Of the instances of melodrama in *The Gates*, by far the most telling ones can be found in the section describing how Minnie and Ivy try to get the inebriated Major up the stairs into his bed, with the Major in a drunken stupor begging not to let on to his niece, Minnie. The whole passage reads like an involuntary parody of *Tristram Shandy*'s difficulty in getting his father and uncle Toby down the stairs. Yet another example occurs in *The Christmas Tree*, involving Jacob Weinberg's arrival at the side of Constance's death-bed as a result of Constance's letter to him. When she sends it, she is altogether ignorant of his present whereabouts, but she is hopeful that, wherever he may be travelling, the letter will follow him around the world and that he will come to Dublin before her life is ended. And Jacob does come, never mind that he arrives too late - the morning after the night in which she died, on *Christmas Day*, like one of the *Magi*. His arrival represents one turn of the narrative screw too many. Tracing a man whose address is unknown, outside Ireland in under six days, is no mean feat, in fact it is a miracle. The Christmas Tree would have been a better book if Jacob's arrival had been left suspended, so to speak, as a mere thematic potential.

The examples could easily be multiplied, but these will suffice. Attention must now turn to Johnston's misfiring attempts at metonymy, at embellishing her narratives with metaphoric connotations. Again many examples could be cited, but for lack of space one must do. The use of the swan-metaphor, near the end of *How Many Miles to Babylon*? before Jerry is shot by Alex, is certainly rather inexpert and objectionable. Particularly during the Big-House part, the two friends are associated with swans: swans fly above their heads while they are taking a swim; and Jerry, minutes before his death, remarks to Alec:

> 'Remember.'
> 'I can remember nothing.'
> 'The Lake. The swans...'
> 'Only that their wings sound like gun shots.' (p. 140)

Now, before we know what will happen to Jerry, who has just returned to his regiment, Alec observes two swans: "They were flying low, their wings fanning with dignity the air around" (p. 136). While he raises his hand in greeting, the sound of a shot reaches him. "The front bird's neck swung for a moment from left to right and then drooped" (p. 136). One of his soldiers has shot the bird for a lark. But does this incident not foreshadow the fate of Jerry? Yes, yes - but rather too obviously. Even without reading on, one can - by courtesy of this pointing with a bargepole - guess that Jerry will be sentenced to death. Nothing substantial would be missing if those wild swans at Coole were not in the book.

Most puzzling as well as self-defeating about Johnston's novels is surely the fact that in so many of them their author persist in concerning herself with would-be writers, quite a number of whom are adolescents. Minnie, in *The Gates*, is the first of these principal characters. Why, upon returning to Ireland, she should decide to become a writer is a surprise, a mystery even. She claims that a novel is growing in her head (p. 81). But the only explanation for her decision could be that her father had been a writer of sorts himself. He never wrote a novel, though, only "Bolshevik rubbish in the newspapers" (p. 92), as a former friend of his puts it. The next writer-persona is Alec, in *How Many Miles*. Then follow the poetising Joe Logan, in *Shadows*, the novel-writing Nancy, in *The Old Jest*, Constance, in *The Christmas Tree*, Helen Cuffe, in *The Railway Station Man*, and, last in the line, Stella, in *The Illusionist*.

The questions to be answered in connection with this repeated choice of writer-protagonist are these: Do all the characters really represent artists? Are, therefore, Johnston's novels KÅnstlerromane, as some critics think? Are their experiences, artistic as well as initiatory, compelling at all?

As for the mental agonies of adolescent protagonists, did not Aldous Huxley have Mr Scogan, in Crome Yellow, express the view: "Why will you young men continue to write about things that are so extremely uninteresting as the mentality of adolescents and artists"? The same would seem to apply to women writers, this especially so if the mentality portrayed is in no way exceptional, in spite of the author's implicit claim that in *Shadows*, as elsewhere, we are after all concerned with the mentality of a potential poet, or writer.

There is good reason to suppose that Johnston wants the reader to regard Joe Logan's frame of mind as somehow akin to that of Stephen Dedalus, for instance with regard to Joe's preoccupation with the sound and meaning of words. Instances such as these:

> Sugar, gritty crystal in a blue bowl! (p. 18)

> 'Obscure!'
> The word came into his mind and he said it out aloud.
> 'Obscure. Ob...scure...lure...pure...hoor.' He laughed to himself. 'A pure hoor dressed in velour is pretty obscure.' (p. 68)

Hallowed...hallow was a lovely word...Hallowed be Thy...(p. 127)

do of course recall Stephen's musings on "Tower of Ivory", "God" and "Dieu", "suck" and "kiss"; and Joe's deliberations on how he can make words express what he is seeking to express (cf. p. 139) are reminiscent of Stephen's pondering on matters aesthetic and creative. But what a difference there is between the delineation of the two artistic, adolescent consciousnesses! That Joe should be concerned with such issues is quite in order, after all he is endeavouring to write verse. Where Joyce incorporates only one sample of Stephen's poetising, the one about "ardent ways", Johnston offers everal specimens of Joe's poetic efforts, which are presumably meant to chart his artistic progress. Here is one:

> My brother has come home.
> Why?
> That's what I would like to know.
> That's what I ask myself from time to time.
> He has money rattling in his pockets.
> Money that folds in his wallet.
> He says he earned it by working hard.
> Over there he worked.
> Making a packet.
> How?
> My mother says I shouldn't believe everything I'm told.
> Why not? (p. 47)

It may be easier "if you [don't] have to make rhymes" (p. 47), as Joe reasons, but he goes on to ask himself: "[Is] it poetry at all?" Well, the simple answer is: No. It is, among other things, rhythm that matters, as Joe is rightly aware himself, "so that it [doesn't] sound like ordinary sentences" (p. 47). His sentences are pretty ordinary, though. After the trip to Grianan he pens another 'poem', which he recites to Kathleen, once more stressing: "You don't have to rhyme" (p. 85). Indeed not, but the long and the short of it is that Joe's efforts do not add up to much. In fact his forays into poetry bring to mind the wise reflections on poetry of Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge:

> Ah! but verses amount to so little when one begins to write them young. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, and a long life if possible, and then, quite at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings (we have these soon enough); they are experiences...it is the memories themselves that matter. Only when they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguished from ourselves - only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

One does of course not become a writer by merely putting pen to paper while one is waiting for the bullet, like Alex. Nancy's endeavours, in *The Old Jest*, are scarcely less pathetic than Minnie's, in *The Gates*. Constance Keating, in *The Christmas Tree*, may be an exception. In spite of some melodramatic coincidences, the way in which she pieces together the jigsaw puzzle of her life shows a fair amount of novelistic skill. But then, mercifully, she is no longer an adolescent girl, and, equally mercifully, she is well past the stage at which she entertained pretensions to be much of a writer. As early as her sojourn in Italy she told Jacob that, although she left Ireland for London to become a writer, it was hopeless: "I suppose I didn't have anything to say. Not enough talent...perhaps no purpose" (p. 52). The case of Helen, in *The Railway Station Man*, is different. The ado about her art, her sudden burst of creative energy do pose severe problems; and so do her efforts at writing, as witness the examples discussed earlier. Additional problems arise as far as the portrayal of Helen's consciousness is concerned. Here once more, despite her being a woman in her fifties, the theme of initiation looms large. And that is, not least, because her reflections, as offered in what for better or for worse must be termed her interior monologues, are more akin to a teenager than to a woman of Helen's age. Her deliberations on art are of the Simple Simon variety. Her mental reaction to seeing Damian jogging in the raw on the beech: "I hope to God he doesn't catch pneumonia" (p. 105), is quite laughable. Or take her thoughts immediately after she has been informed about her husband's death: "I remember that I hadn't got a handkerchief and wondered would I need one. Uncheckable tears flow in the cinema. Maybe at any moment that might happen" (p. 9). Would anyone at such a moment really be reminded of the tears that flow in the cinema? Or would a woman in her fifties, unless she were dotty, mentally refer to her bicycle, which she has to leave by the side of the road because someone is offering her a lift in his car, in the following manner: "Goodbye, old faithful" (p. 68)? It is in such interior monologue passages, but also how in many cases she makes her characters respond mentally to certain incidents, that Johnston could do with more imaginative resources. The personalities of her would-be writers are frequently at odds with the kind of consciousness they have been equipped with.

The prime instance of this shortcoming is probably to be found in *The Old Jest*. From what is shown there of Nancy's

mental activities, or reactions, one cannot but conclude that hers is a rather retarded consciousness. For would an eighteen-year-old girl really agonise over unrequited love as Nancy does, wishing "the same wish that she had wished for years, that Harry might one day love her" (p. 120)? Would an eighteen-year-old girl, upon hearing that her rival, Maeve, is not present, react thus:

> Fingers crossed tightly in her pocket. Not coming. What bliss! Never coming again. Found beautifully drowned, like Ophelia or the lady who went to call the cattle home across the Sands of Dee. Hair floating, lilies, ever so romantic. What bliss! A beautiful corpse [...] (and so on) (pp. 45f.)

Would an eighteen-year-old girl who is intent upon starting "to become a person" (p. 6), absent-mindedly pick her nose in the presence of a stranger while telling him about her grandfather (p. 52)? Would an eighteen-year-old girl really ask the man she desperately hopes will one day love her whether he has "fucked" (p. 79), and then go on to tell him that she will "have done it by the time [she's] twenty-six"? Oh tempora, o mores! Does an eighteen-year-old girl really talk to her sponge and really say to the cat: "I really want him [i.e. Harry] to love me" (p. 79)? Does an eighteen-year-old girl respond to being told what a good thing it is to be a freedom-fighter by ejaculating: "Tomorrow I'm thinking of starting a life of crime. Maturing crime" (p. 116)? Not very likely, and it is not only Nancy who, for desiring to lose her virginity first ("that's a terrible liability", p. 114) and then join the Republicans (pp. 114f.), needs a "good spanking", as Harry appropriately comments.

And yet, Shari Benstock has approached Johnston's novels as portraits of artists as young men, or women, believing that their subject-matter is fundamentally "the act of writing and the motivation for story-telling". The books, according to Benstock, portray boys, or girls, who, having discovered in them the vocation to become writers, are trying to come to grips with the creative process. Admittedly, if viewed in this light, the weakness and shortcomings discussed here would take on a new significance. They would not so much reflect on the artistic ineptitude of Johnston herself, as on that of her writer-protagonists in the individual books. Thus, for example, the mistake of introducing Christopher Boyle in *How Many Miles*, and the failure to inform the reader about the relationship he had with the Moore family could be laid at Alexander's door. It is a nice thought, but hardly a true one. If one compares these weaknesses and shortcomings and also the tones and styles of the fledgling writers, one will conclude that they are always more or less the same, a fact surprisingly acknowledged by Benstock herself. Does this mean that the juvenile writersin Johnston's world of fiction all share the same artistic difficulties, all grapple with the same creative problems, all adopt the same tone of voice? This would surely be a ridiculous state of affairs. No one would seriously want to submit that every aspiring adolescent would-be writer finds himself, or herself, in a predicament shared by every other adolescent would-be writer. As Benstock goes on to note, these would-be writers all have come to terms with social, parental, familial, and other forces that impinge on their personalities, no matter whether they live in Derry or on some Big-House estate in the Republic. These forces are, furthermore, said to have the same effect on the sensitivity and mentality of the would-be writer. Does this mean that Johnston believes all writers have the same kind of sensitivity and mentality? It is not easy to subscribe to such a disparaging idea. The crux of the whole matter seems to lie elsewhere: in Johnston's inability to differentiate her writer-characters sufficiently. Her novelistic efforts should not bring forth like results.

There is also something quite wrong with Johnston as a literary artist, and this something can aptly be characterised by referring to one of William Golding's statements on the nature of the artist, literary or otherwise. Golding has remarked that the artist, any artist, must remain a moving target. To be precise, he has said of himself: "[...] as for me, I am a moving target". It is true, artists worth the name must remain moving targets. Their artistic conscience must compel them to develop their art. They must keep themselves as well as their readers and critics on their toes by observing the need for innovation, variation, change of technique and subject-matter. They must not let their art grow stale, but keep it alive.

There is a difference, though. That difference is represented by Johnston's latest novel, Two Moons, a book about missed opportunities and relationships jaded because things remained undiscussed that should have been discussed while there was still time to do so, or because of an overriding concern with one's own interests. The narrative thrives on dialogue and interior monologue or free indirect discourse. Whereas on previous occasions, Johnston's deployment of these two techniques, particularly of interior monologue or free indirect style, betrayed an unsure hand, here this has greatly improved, a few lapses notwithstanding.

The novel focuses on the lives lived in a house in Killiney, covering a period of about three weeks. Eighty-year-old Mimi Gibbon all of a sudden receives a messenger from the land of the shadows, someone like the spirit of Hamlet's father, who of course remains unseen by everyone else, even though he occasionally leaves some of his accoutrements lying around the place. The messenger, or angel, has come, one supposes, not least because, as he remarks, Mimi is someone who is able to "see beyond reality" (p. 8). He is one Bonifacio di Longaro, who was born in Borgo Sansepalcro in 1429 and died forty-two years and three months later from a "plague you might call it of misquitoes" (p. 106). Bonifacio fills the old woman with a frehs, quite pleasant and invigorating sense of life. Thus, for example, the pain which she at times feels in various parts of her body disappears in his presence. She enjoys going on walks with him, whereas BB (that is: Before Bonifacio) she spent her days

sitting in her garden or staggering laboriously around on her walking stick. Additionally, he makes her relish the purchase of sinfully expensive Italian suede boots, this being a consequence of the fact that Bonifacio used to be a shoemaker in fifteenth-century Italy.

Most importantly, though, Bonifacio causes Mimi to think about her late husband, Benjamin, "not something she did very often" (p. 31) or used to do BB. Benjamin led a strange life, cooped up within himself and drowning his never-disclosed sorrows and pains in gallons of whiskey. He was like a man "in a locked room banging his body and his spirit against the wall" (p. 59). In the end, he took to silence. The marriage had been reasonably happy for a brief period of time; but after the birth of a daughter it deteriorated quickly. Mimi did not run away from what she experienced as hatred out of consideration for this child. Bonifacio helps Mimi come to terms with the past. "It's so hard to get rid of the past. [...] It's like a web all around me. I keep trying to escape and I can't" (p. 44), she admits. Bonifacio likewise assists Mimi in coming to grips with her misspent life and in arriving at an understanding of her husband. In fact, Bonifacio, first claiming to have been summoned by Benjamin, turns into Benjamin near the ending of the novel, where the husband unbosoms the secret of his life that marred his relationship with his wife. Before he came to know Mimi, Benjamin was passionately in love with another man who suddenly left him after making love to him at the Pine Forest. He kept this hidden from Mimi, fearing that otherwise she would have deserted him. "I was so disgusted with myself. Neither prayer nor drink saved me from that disgust. And I saw [...] how I was destroying your life [...]" (p. 213). After Benjamin's confession, Mimi can say: "[...] you've lifted some burdens from my back" (p. 214).

Mimi's fifty-year-old daughter, Grace, an actress currently playing Gertrude in a production of Hamlet at the Abbey, also lives in the house in Killiney. (Hence the reference to the spirit of Hamlet's father earlier on.) Grace is given to spouting some of Gertrude's lines throughout the book, apparently so as to show the full extent to which she is preoccupied with her work, which indeed is the only plausible reason for having her do so. "[...] I am steeped in omelette" (p. 10), she explains to her daughter, Polly, when Polly is a bit miffed at not being greeted with the expected enthusiasm upon her arrival from London. The 'omelette' is of course meant to be funny, in case you hadn't realised.

The phrase most employed by Grace throughout her adult life as well as in the course of the book whenever someone, especially Mimi or Polly, approaches her for comfort, help or advice is: "Not at this moment" (cf. for instance p. 13). At one point, appropriately, while noticing her mother's sulking face, Grace wonders: "Is this my fault [...] Am I not giving her her fair share of attention? I used to wonder that about Polly too" (p. 20). She presently finds herself in a situation where "[her] inertia or carelessness has caught up with [her]" (p. 130). As Mimi correctly comments, Grace's problem has always been that she puts her work first (cf. p. 149). Thus, when Polly desperately tries to seek succour from her mother after Paul has broken off his engagement to her, Grace is, as mostly, otherwise enganged. Neither Pollly nor Mimi nor any man could ever mean as much to Grace as her work. Her marriage came to an end after fifteen years. There was a divorce and John, her former husband, married again. Polly is now living in the basement of his house in Hampstead, feeling neglected and pushed around.

The title of the novel is a reference, firstly, to the two moons that Grace sees outside her window: "one suspended in the globe of blackness, the other flickering in the sea below" (p. 26), and secondly, it is a reference to her personal approach to life, Grace being suspended "between Gertrude and I [sic]", between her work and her role in a clearly defined social context.

What may somehow stretch one's credulity about the skein involving on Grace is her affair with Polly's lover, who is about thirty years her junior. Paul arrives late one night out of the blue. Polly had told her mother that her new lover would arrive on the next day. Possibly, Polly, like Grace, is so self-centred that she is unable to attend properly to matters concerning other people. The following evening, Grace and Paul go for a swim in the sea and without as much as by your leave he pulls Grace against him and begins to kiss her. Grace's first reaction is to give him a good whack on the ear. But he keeps persevering, pestering her with phone-calls from London and telling her that he does not know what to do. "I am so sorry. My darling Grace" (p. 100). For the most part, she is fully aware that "[this] is all totally absurd" (p. 155) and that she is too old for "this sort of nonsense" (p. 155). But eventually he succeeds in having sex with her at the Pine Forest after the first night of the Hamlet production.

There is a coincidence involved here. Grace's father, Benjamin, made love to his male lover at the Pine Forest. Mimi never went to the Pine Forest with her husband and never lay with him under the trees (cf. p. 233). Grace grants Paul her favours at the very same place before sending him packing for good, saying: "But there is Polly. I love Polly. I couldn't do that to Polly. I couldn't build that wall between us" (p. 225). Has Grace finally overcome her self-centredness? Or is she only trying to have her cake and eat it? It is difficult to tell; and so is it to interpret the significance of the coincidence.

In the end, the strand featuring Mimi is altogether satisfactory and offers some good writing. But the Grace parts of the book fall flat in comparison, mainly one feels because of the love affair, which is implausible simply because next to nothing is provided that could suggest the development of the relationship. So one is landed in a position where one can either take or

leave the entire business. The Polly skein, lastly, is left too underdeveloped to impress.

Of course, one has, in evaluating *Two Moons*, to make allowances for a number of things, for certain supranatural occurrences, for example, things like

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purg'd away.
> (Hamlet, I, v, 10-13.)

One has also to make allowances for other elements that for different reasons beggar one's credulity, such as the love affair or the fact that Grace is given to quoting not only Gertrude's lines, which is quite warrantable in her situation, but also lines from songs at the drop of a hat. If, however, one draws the line at suspending one's disbelief to a degree of that sort, then perhaps there is after all not such a great difference between Two Moons and Johnston's other novels.

Rüdiger Imhof

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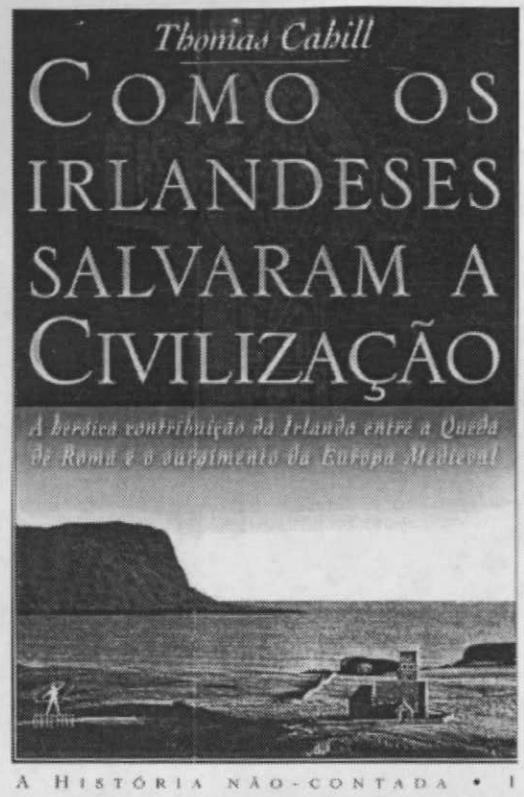
Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Oxford, New York: OUP, 1984, pp. 18-21. There seems to be a mistake in the translation. For the original version reads: "...Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns..." Instead of rendering the first sentence thus: "For it is not the memories themselves that matter", the English version has turned it into a positive statement: "...it is the memories themselves that matter".

News from Brazil

PUBLICATIONS



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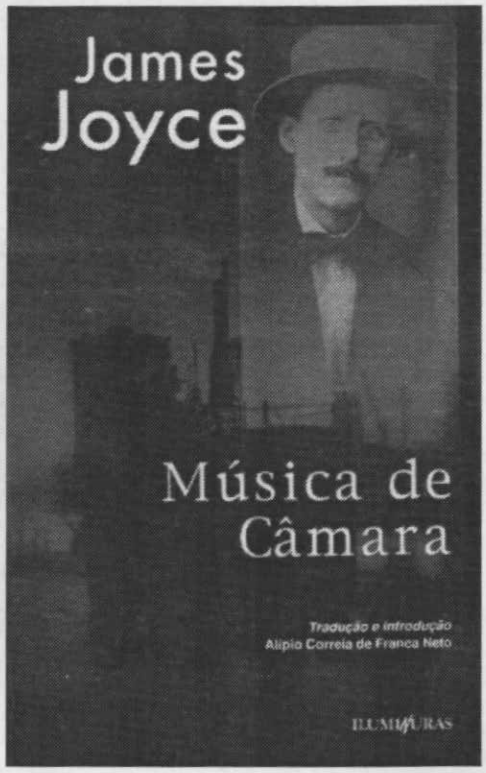

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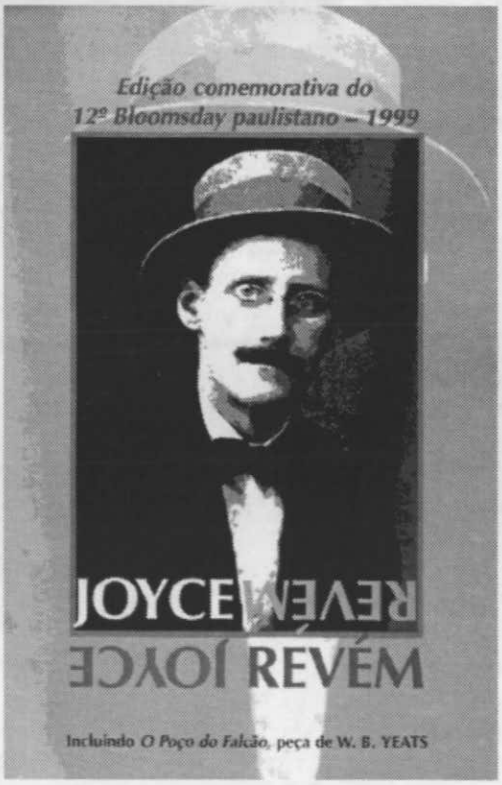


Edited by Marcelo Tápia

Monograph:

Estefânia de Vasconcellos Guimarães. *"Muros que falam: o conflito estampado nas ruas da Irlanda do Norte" (The Talking Walls: The Conflict Depicted on the Streets of Northern Ireland).* Social Communications, Advertising and Propaganda at University of São Paulo, Brazil. Undergraduate final work supervised by Marco Antônio Guerra. 1998.

Muros que falam: o conflito estampado nas ruas da Irlanda do Norte

Estefânia de Vasconcellos Guimarães

"If you are willing to talk about both sides of the murals, I may be able to help you" - said the Northern Irish Liam Gallagher, when I asked him for some information about the troubles and the wall murals of Northern Ireland. His concern about the importance of showing both sides of the conflict (by showing the two sides of the walls) gives us a sense of the importance those walls, as one expression of the conflict, may have for the ones directly or indirectly involved with them.

My interest on Ireland and Northern Ireland started long before that, but it was visiting the island that I took the first step towards what was going to be a long study and my final graduation work theme: *Muros que falam: o conflito estampado nas ruas da Irlanda do Norte (Talking Walls: the Conflict Depicted on the Streets of Northern Ireland).* As a communications student - majoring in advertising and propaganda - the scenario was fascinating. I couldn't help taking pictures of those vivid outdoor ideological expressions of propaganda or wondering about them.

> However, wondering was surely easier than researching, as it became clear when, one year and a half later, I started studying it. Finding material and information about it, here in Brazil, was quite a difficult task. Luckily, I had my pictures, some good History books and access to the Internet. Then, I started studying Irish History, to understand the roots of the Troubles, and went through the world wide web searching for information about the graphic symbols and abbreviations that appeared repeatedly on my pictures of the walls. I found a lot of things on the web, especially about those abbreviations of military groups and Irish (and Irish related) flags and coats of arms. With that material and years of History learned from the books, I could decode most of the messages on the walls.
>
> Still unable to find out some meanings, I tried to be in touch with natives, and that's where the immense support of people like Liam Gallagher and Vincent Morley (an Internet contact) came from.

Having understood what was depicted on the murals, I was ready to search for what was behind them and to find out how those signs were ideologically transformed into propaganda. Therefore, in order to understand how those images built a strong and coherent ideological message, I studied a lot of theory of Propaganda.

But something was bothering me. Most of the studies in Propaganda tend to focus on the ways of manipulation one class exerts over another, specially the forms it might assume in totalitarian and/or fascist governments. They tend to believe this sort of "dangerous propaganda" is more important than the forms of propaganda made by and for the people inside the same group/class, who search for common interests, while they underestimate other realities like the Irish/Ulsterian, where, for

more than 300 years, the idea of an enemy built on religious lines has been kept and fed, making of the religious polarisation a constant in everyone's life. It's a real success in terms of creation and maintenance of an idea.

It seems right to me, thus, to believe in the importance of analysing this kind of propaganda. Maybe it is exactly because of the presence of truth on its foundation that this "propaganda of/for peers" has lingered on for so many years and has had so much power over the people.

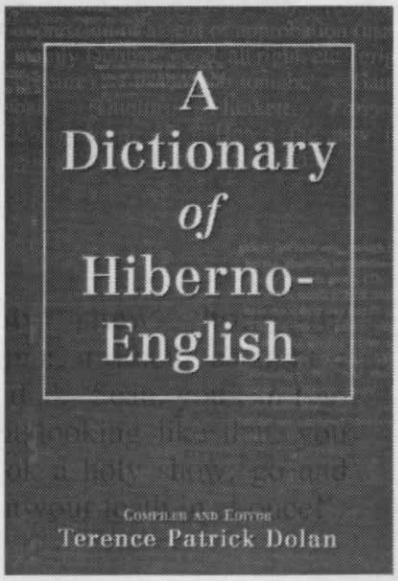
The feeling of belonging, the identity of a group, is built and made stronger in opposition to one enemy, reducing a complex reality to two sides: a good one opposed to a bad one.

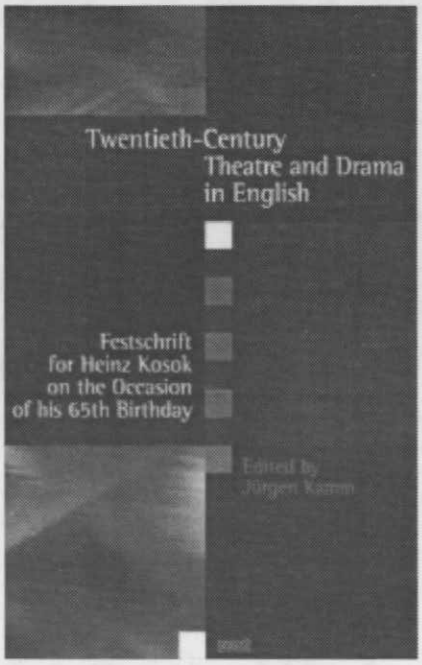
Even though the labels Catholic X Protestants cannot hold all the aspects of the Troubles, they have been, so far, the most common and suitable ways to explain and express the conflict in Northern Ireland. However, canalising the hatred between the two groups, they ended up reducing all their significance and building a religious apartheid.

The wall murals in Northern Ireland are great means of perpetuating this ideological polarisation. The messages they send out revive the history of struggles, losses and victories the years of Troubles have produced, reinforcing the receptor's identification with the group, in opposition to the surrounding threats.

Feeding and being fed by the conflict, that propaganda creates an environment that constantly reminds one of his/her need to fight. Literally written on the walls, those ideological messages just sharpen the differences that created them, in the first place, creating an environment where it isn't possible to forget the conflict or humanize the enemy and, as consequence, to talk about peace.

Books Received





Events

Bloomsday 1999 in Natal, at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, organized by Dr. Francisco Ivan da Silva.

Bloomsday 1999 in São Paulo, at the Finnegan's Pub, organized by Haroldo de Campos, Munira Mutran and Marcelo Tápia.

Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* , a dramatic reading from the Portuguese translation, performed by Bete Coelho, Muriel Matalon and Christine Grainer.

CONTRIBUTORS

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