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# Introduction

Volume 15 of the *ABEI Journal* pays homage to Seamus Heaney, who died on 30 August 2013 at the age of 74. His obituary in *The Independent* described him as “probably the best-known poet in the world”, a well-deserved renown dating back to 1995 when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. With a career extending over twelve main collections of poetry, beginning with the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966, he was also a much-respected academic, a playwright and a translator, producing what many consider to be the definitive translation into modern English of *Beowulf* in 1999. His death deprived the global community of Ireland’s most cherished man of letters.

In “A Tribute to Seamus Heaney,” the distinguished scholar Maurice Harmon, himself a poet, recaptures the beauty of Heaney’s most beloved work. Patricia O’Flaherty, a Brazilian who has lived in Ireland for forty-two years, recalls her unforgettable encounters with the poet. The central importance of Heaney’s 1984 collection *Station Island* is discussed by Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação. The section closes with “St Francis and the Birds”, translated into Portuguese by Brazilian specialists. This poem, so much favoured by Heaney in his readings, is also featured on our cover.

This issue also includes interviews with novelist Hugo Hamilton, at the University of São Paulo, and playwright Owen McCafferty, at Queen’s University Belfast. Liam Harte, a specialist on the Irish in Britain, is present in our regular feature “The Critic and the Author”.

Other essays in this volume discuss: writing by the nineteenth-century nun Margaret Anna Cusack, the “nun of Kenmare”; a film directed by Peter Foott; Seamus Deane’s novel *Reading in the Dark*; Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow*. They are followed by Maurice Harmon’s poem “Camping”. In “Voices from Brazil”, Marcelo Pen Parreira analyses the achievement of Brazil’s most canonical novelist Machado de Assis.

The journal closes with a number of Book Reviews, including, appropriately enough one of Seamus Heaney’s last collection of poetry, *Human Chain*, published three years before his death, and Stephanie Schwerter’s newly published study of Russian influence in the poetry of Heaney and his compatriots Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian.

*The Editors*



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A Tribute to  
Seamus Heaney





# Seamus Heaney, 1939-2013

Maurice Harmon

**Abstract:** *Seamus Heaney explores the historical and cultural origins of his native territory. His poems link to its landscape in loving recreations of activities and customs and in troubled assessment of sectarian divisions. Poetry becomes a means of redressing wrongs, of balancing opposing tensions. The question of the poet's responsibility and of the value of poetry itself becomes central. Ultimately he must be true to himself, have freedom to express himself, and live in the republic of his own conscience.*

**Keywords:** *Seamus Heaney; contemporary Irish poetry; poet's responsibility.*

Seamus Heaney never lost touch with his rural origins. His early poetry, in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), recovers a past animated by the crafts and skills of the farming community. Some poems evoke mystery at the heart of the craftsman's work: within the dark centre of the forge the blacksmith hammers out a fantail of sparks; in the hands of the diviner the forked hazel stick plunges unerringly towards the hidden source; his father's accuracy with a horse-drawn plough is exemplary.

At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round  
And back into the land. His eye  
Narrowed and angled at the ground,  
Mapping the furrow exactly. (*Selected Poems* 8)<sup>1</sup>

Admiring the work of thatchers, turf-cutters, sowers, and harvesters, and remarking their pride in work done well, he reveals what he values. As the thatcher goes about his work, so does the poet.

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades  
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods  
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple

For pinning down his world, handful by handful. (15)

*Death of a Naturalist* concludes with “Personal Helicon”, a poem about the pleasures derived from exploring wells – “I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells/ Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss”; about musical echoes – “Others had echoes, gave back your own call/With a clean new music in it”; and about why he writes – “I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (11). The placing of “Bogland” at the end of *Door into the Dark* not only confirms the imaginative depths of the poet’s chosen world, but in its flowing definitions anticipates the style of poems in the next collection. Contrasting the American imagination, that lifts to the far west, with the Irish imagination, that “concedes to/Encroaching horizon”, “Bogland” accepts the limits within which the Irish artist works. But because the heritage is rich, such constriction is not defeating.

They’ve taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up,  
An astounding crate full of air (22)

The bogs of Ireland, once known as places of danger and decay, preserve and purify.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
...  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,  
  
Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before  
The bog holes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless (22-23)

The confident, fluid grace of this poem intensifies its declaration of faith in Irish sources. W.B. Yeats had memorably declared, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Believing otherwise, Heaney affirms that the Irish psyche hoards experience; the heritage is not inferior; the history is layered. For him, “The wet centre is bottomless”, the imaginative possibilities unlimited: “Our pioneers keep striking inwards and downwards.”

In *Wintering Out* (1972), his third collection, Seamus Heaney’s mimetic ritualising imagination explores the historical and cultural origins of his chosen ground and in the linguistics of its place-names reads evidence of sectarian conflict and colonial dispossession. Many poems are written in Bogland’s spirit of playful confidence. In “Oracle”, the speaker is the nameless one, inhabitant of natural objects, in the hollow trunk of a willow tree, its listening familiar:

small mouth and ear  
in a woody cleft,  
lobe and larynx  
of the mossy places (34)

The poems are chords of attachment to the landscape; the auditory imagination, which he later described as “that feeling for word and syllable reaching down below the ordinary levels of language, uniting the primitive and civilized associations words have acquired”, (*Preoccupations* 81) delights in the music of its saying.

The tawny guttural water  
spells itself: Moyola  
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale  
in the utterance,  
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists  
through vowels and history. (*Selected Poems* 32)

“Fodder”, “Anahorish”, “Toome”, “Broagh” take soundings among the place-names of the locality in which he was raised, and reveal its divided heritage – Catholic and Presbyterian, nationalist and loyalist. Even poems which are not about that division or its violent consequences are coloured by it; the human image is often that of the outcast, of those who suffer or who feel socially excluded. His liberating break-through to such richly varied reading of landscape had been strengthened by his discovery in 1969 of the account by the Danish archaeologist, P.V. Glob in his book, *The Bog People*, of the customs in early Iron Age Northern Europe by which young men were ritually sacrificed to Nerthus, goddess of the earth, to ensure good harvest. He was attracted by the similarities between what happened in Northern Europe and what had begun to happen again in Northern Ireland. The endemic divisions now took more visible shape in bombings, murders, punishments, hunger-strikes, a cycle of killing and counter-killing that would persist and press in upon his work, demanding that he should voice nationalistic grievances and suffering. In “The Tollund Man”, one of several poems about the bog people, he adopts the persona of the pilgrim.

Some day I will go to Aarhus  
To see his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eye-lids,  
His pointed skin cap (39)

The Catholic poet “could risk blasphemy” by imploring this “saint” of the bogs to bring peace to Northern Ireland. Just as Catholic saints are venerated for their triumph over

the dissolution of the flesh, so these bodies have been preserved and made beautiful in Danish bogs. Savagery has been transmuted. Like Christ, another sacrificial victim who rose and was transfigured, they have survived burial and risen in a new light. The poem equates one kind of violence with another, the vegetation ritual of the past with the possibility of renewal in the present. The resemblances are painfully clear.

Out there in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home (40)

Faced in *North* (1975) with the horror of “each neighbourly murder”, Heaney declares “we pine for ceremony/customary rhythms” (66). The poem thereafter provides assuaging images – “temperate footsteps”, “purring family cars”, “sombulant women” tuned to the “muffled drumming” of “ten thousand engines” (66-67). The funeral’s “slow triumph” towards the megalithic tombs of the Boyne links Northern Ireland with that ancient, mythological place. When the mourners return to the North their grief, the poem says, has been eased. As part of that assuagement, Heaney recalls the portrayal of Gunnar’s triumph over death in *Njal’s Saga*. Just as his brothers responded to him, so the people in the poem respond to its images of their people.

imagining those under the hill

disposed like Gunnar  
who lay beautiful  
inside his burial mound,  
though dead by violence

and unavenged.  
Men said he was chanting  
verses about honour  
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:  
which opened then, as he turned  
with a joyful face  
to look at the moon (67-68)

In death, Gunnar has been liberated from vengeance. In art, in the saga and the poem, discord has been transmuted. By transforming death, violence, and grief through the beauty of language, the poet comforts his people and eases their suffering. But he must retain his independence. In “North” the Viking dead instruct him.

‘Lie down  
in the word-hoard, burrow  
the coil and gleam  
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.  
Expect aurora borealis  
in the long foray  
but no cascade of light’. (70)

That advice counters Viking hatred and internecine strife with the mysteries of poetic composition; the associations of hoard, barrow, and lengthy incursion are turned towards aesthetic creation. Other poems in *North* delight in linguistic and imaginative association. “Kinship”, in its fluid quatrains of dissolving line, simile and image, characteristic of many of these poems, is a love poem to what “Bogland” claimed. These richly suggestive poems are acts of empathetic imagining; in one fluid action Heaney imagines and creates, becoming what he describes. The most sensuous poet in English since Keats, at the same time as he writes about public violence, Heaney writes about private peace and the celebrations of belonging. Such deeply imagined poems, which are found at all stages of his career, resist intellectual analysis and retain their mystery. “Sunlight”, the first of two poems in *North* called “Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication”, is like a painting by Vermeer: in its play of light and shade, its sunlit space, its familiar domestic task of making bread.

Now she dusts the board  
with a goose’s wing,  
now sits, broad-lapped,  
with whitened nails

and measling shins:  
here is a space  
again, the scone rising  
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love  
like a tinsmith’s scoop  
sunk past its gleam  
in the meal-bin. (63-64)

In *Field Work* (1979), poems interrogate the poet’s role in the midst of continuing violence. “What will become of us?” “Our island is full of comfortless noises” (109). What is the value of poetry? What is its function? The answer is conveyed more by image and metaphor than by the expression of hope. In “The Toome Road” the poet

meets the armoured convoys of British soldiers; they are on his road. In the elegies for dead friends Heaney looks more directly at sectarian murder, without the mythologizing procedures of *North*. When he describes the assassination of his cousin, in “The Strand at Lough Beg”, he concludes with words of comfort and blessing:

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud (114)

In a similar gesture Virgil wiped Dante’s face at the beginning of the *Purgatorio* and the figure of the Italian poet is present throughout *Station Island* (1984), the next collection, in which there are many encounters with those killed by violence in Northern Ireland.

The troubled voice in *Field Work* is heard more directly in *Station Island*, which begins with poems that question the value of poetry itself. In the title poem, an account of the poet’s pilgrimage to Lough Derg, he is challenged through a series of encounters with figures and incidents from the past. The murdered cousin, for example, accuses Heaney of confusing evasion and artistic tact.

‘The Protestant who shot me through the head  
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you  
who now atone perhaps upon this bed  
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew  
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*  
and saccharined my death with morning dew’. (203)

Another victim vividly relives his assassination and thereby confronts the poet’s “circumspect involvement”. Heaney replies: “Forgive the way I have lived indifferent” (200).

“I hate how quick I was to know my place.  
I hate where I was born, hate everything  
That made me biddable and unforthcoming”. (205)

He wants to atone, to reveal in the poem’s drama how he has been touched by events. But he also wants to assert his rights as a poet. By doing the pilgrimage, he hopes to clear his conscience and earn the right to be free. James Joyce, whom he encounters at the end of the pilgrimage, advises him:



'Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures of your own frequency,  
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea' (212).

and provides the answer the pilgrim-poet seeks.

Poems about Sweeney in the *Sweeney Astray* section of *Selected Poems* illumine the truth of that admonition. Through the figure of this Irish king who fled to the forest and made poetry out of his isolation and separateness, Heaney celebrates poetic freedom. *Sweeney Astray* (1983), a version of the Irish story, *Buile Suibhne*, may be read he has said "as an aspect of the quarrel between the free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation" (viii). Sweeney runs free of the crowd, bound neither by state nor church. He represents Heaney's understanding that poetry should be rare and strange, not dutiful and communal.

I was mired in attachment  
until they began to pronounce me  
a feeder off battlefields

so I mastered new rungs of the air  
to survey out of reach  
their bonfires on hills, their hosting. (216)

A number of poems in *The Haw Lantern* (1987) are analogies and parables for the poet's necessary independence. In "From the Frontier of Conscience", first there is the inspection by the soldiers – "subjugated, yes, and obedient". Then there is the recreation of the experience in poetry and the freedom that brings. "And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed" (236). In the *Haw Lantern* (1987) and *Seeing Things* (1991) Heaney lives even more strongly and securely in the republic of his own conscience. He is not tied to the quotidian. Invisibles shimmer, appear, disappear. The spirit world, in all its meanings and manifestations, is the secret, shifting, luminous, sometimes fearful, apprehended subject. In a poem in "Squarings" the "visible sea" seems empty when scanned, but once you turn your back on it "Was suddenly all eyes like Argus's". And when you looked again it felt

Untrespasted still, and yet somehow vacated

As if a lambent troop that exercised  
On the borders of your vision had withdrawn  
Behind the skyline to manoeuvre and regroup. (*Seeing Things* 107)

The speaker turns his attention to what is there when things are observed in exact, luminous vision. The language deals with reality, but also with absent reality, or a reality that existed in the past, like the chestnut tree that was: “Its heft and hush became a bright nowhere,/A soul ramifying and forever/Silent, beyond silence listened for” (*Selected Poems*, 253). Beyond silence, beyond the visible, but not beyond retrieval and not inferior to what is within the immediate compass of the poet’s senses. The marvellous also lives within the ordinary – in a spinning wheel, in slides, in rides on a swing, in lying on cut logs, in letting go and coming back, as Aeneas did, enriched and strengthened: “whatever is given//Can always be reimagined” (29). This, too, is a pilgrimage “Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves”. Contrasting views of reality are placed side by side within poems, and from one poem to its companion. The balancing and pairing, the steadying equations are a measure of the poet’s own equilibrium. He stands at the still centre where the carpenter’s spirit level comes to a halt, poised between competing attractions: “In apposition with/Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim” (80). In seeing things he may cross from one state of being to another, may see clearly what is there, may also imagine what is not there or what has been there. It is his recreation that is important. The vision of reality that poetry offers should, Heaney declares, be transformative, not just a mirroring of actualities.

That transformative power is present throughout *The Spirit Level* (1996). “A Sofa in the Forties” joyfully recreates a childhood game, when the children knelt on the sofa and imagined they were in a train.

First we shunted, then we whistled, then

Somebody collected the invisible  
For tickets and very gravely punched it  
As carriage after carriage under us

Moved faster, *chooka-chook*, the sofa legs  
Went giddy and the unreachable ones  
Far out on the kitchen floor began to wave. (*The Spirit Level* 7)<sup>2</sup>

In the transformative power of the children’s imaginations what is ordinary and real becomes what is extraordinary and unreal; in the process the imagined seems more real. In tune with this spirit of lift and movement, the poem has a rich freight of sound and rhythm. It credits marvels and makes them creditable. Through the power of the poetic imagination and skill, our spirits, too, are moved and lifted. We participate in the childhood game, happily acknowledging its truth to remembered experience. The child’s invention also transcends shortcomings – “the insufficient toys” (7) – and that, for Heaney, is another of poetry’s values: the redressal of disappointments. Man’s capacity for play that both releases and sustains runs through these poems; so, too, does the sense of poetry’s stabilizing power. In “Keeping Going”, Heaney’s brother performs as

a piper; for sporrán, a whitewash brush, for bagpipe, a kitchen chair upside down on his shoulder. But it is his ability to pretend, to enact, and to revel in so doing that is supreme.

Your pop-eyes and big cheeks nearly bursting  
With laughter, but keeping the drone going on  
Interminably, between catches of breath. (10)

The performance is primary. And it is that capacity that the poem affirms in comparing the early memory of fun and frolic with the contemporary bomb and bullet. The whitewash brush now cleans away the marks of an assassination.

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood  
In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot  
Where his head had been, (11-12)

Finally, Heaney addresses his brother – “you have good stamina./You stay on where it happens.” He keeps up appearances, laughing and waving; it is another, redemptive performance. In the past he was the Pied Piper in the kitchen, but now “you cannot make the dead walk; or right wrong”, (12), but he is able to endure.

Heaney faces the dark, writing specifically and with a more earthy voice about evil and ugliness. The boyhood home had its fear and dread, its brimstone threat. There were few moments when “the soul was let alone” (11). The violence that happened later made real what had been intuited. The reckoning is level-headed and sobering. “Good tidings” amount to no more than this principle:

This principle of bearing, bearing up  
And bearing out, just having to

Balance the intolerable in others  
Against our own, having to abide  
Whatever we settle for and settled into

Against our better judgement. (17)

Finding the right balance, being equal to what happens, is important. When the saint in “St. Kevin and the Blackbird” is kneeling with his arms outstretched and one arm out through the window of his narrow cell, a blackbird nests and lays eggs in his palm. He is moved to pity, “finding himself linked/Into the network of eternal life” (20), he has to hold his hand out until the young are hatched, fledged and flown. Heaney’s interest comes in the questions: What was it like? How did it feel? Is he self-forgetful or in agony all the time? It is another balancing.

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?

Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?  
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,  
"To labour and not to seek reward," he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird

And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. (20-21)

The poems in *The Spirit Level* are rich with Heaney's unmistakable language, truly imagined, vibrant in rhythm, with an exuberant strength and playful delicacy of tone. In "The Swing" there is another metaphor for balance and equation, for letting go and coming back, for seeing "Light over fields and hedges, ... like a nativity/Foreground and background"; the swing itself is "A lure letdown to tempt the soul to rise" (48). His language contains the observed realistic detail and the revealed beauty in the altered perspective, "the bright rim of the extreme" (61).

In the past, Heaney has imagined the poet's freedom through the figure of Suibhne in *Sweeney Astray* and in *Station Island*, flying through the forests of Ireland, unattached to social or political issues. Now, in *The Spirit Level*, he examines the issue of artistic freedom and the responsibilities of the artist in a different mode. Images of flight and self-delight, lyrical rhythms, while not entirely absent, give way to a more weighted style. In addition the structure of "A Sofa in the Forties" for all its light rhythms and of "Keeping Going" is weighted. In the latter, blank verse, rhymeless lines, and shifting tableaux give the poem a different feel from the Sweeney poems. The result in each case is a solid piece of work and a gravity of manner that restrains the singing line. These poems are counter-weights to life's dark realities. A different view of the relationship between the circumstances within which the poet exists and the degree of distancing with which he writes is found in the longer autobiographical poem, "The Flight Path". This is a reflective measuring by the poet, as he bears up in the complex life he has grown into as an international figure flying from one side of the world to another, journeying back and forth from the Republic to Northern Ireland, suffering social and political pressures. The poem's six part structure encompasses this life, sets it out in segments, beginning once again in a childhood game as his father makes a paper boat for him and in the child's breast "A dove rose" in response. Then "Equal and opposite" (22) comes Heaney's lifting response to a jet flying overhead as he stands at the doorway of his cottage in County Wicklow. Section three sketches out his journeying; section four brings him to an encounter with an IRA activist who bluntly demands, "When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/Something for us?" The poet is firmly dismissive: "If I do write something,/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself." (25).

The longest poem in this collection, “Mycenae Lookout”, is more directly focused and serves as another counter-weight to the war in Northern Ireland. Through the figure of Clytemnestra’s Watchman, looking out for the fires that would signal the end of the ten-year Trojan War, Heaney provides a figure for his own witnessing of the twenty-five-year war in Northern Ireland. The Watchman’s empathetic response mimics both the poet’s agonised witnessing and the actuality of violence, vengeance, and suffering. The self-accusing voice of the Watchman, who failed to speak out and thereby who feels he has connived in horror and betrayal, recalls similar moments of self-accusation in Heaney’s poetry and prose. “Mycenae Lookout” offers imaginative parallels for Heaney’s existence, suspended between the needs of his artistic conscience and the needs of his suffering people. Now, during the 1994 cease-fire, he can examine that state of balance in which he stood as the fulcrum, fluid, responsive, sustained in the scales, achieving through the poetry imaginative states of equilibrium and freedom. At the same time, as “The Flight Path” makes clear, the spirit level can represent a point of almost unendurable tension; only the imagination can bring a releasing fluidity. *The Spirit Level* may be read as an *apologia* for Heaney’s maintenance of a balance between artistic integrity and social/political reality.<sup>3</sup>

Heaney’s insistence through the years on the poet’s freedom is in itself indicative of the strain under which he has worked. While he has always emphasised poetry’s unforeseeable, untrammelled spirit, its freedom to be itself, he knows it should also be socially responsible. It must be true to what is negative and at the same time have an affirming force. If individual poems cannot register the complex figuring Heaney describes in his essays, “Mycenae Lookout”, by invoking the destruction of the Trojan War, achieves the magnitude and scale needed to balance against comparable events in Northern Ireland. In the figure of the Watchman Heaney reveals not an indifferent witnessing, but a keenly empathetic participation. Within our individual selves, Heaney says, we can recreate two orders of knowledge, the poetic and the practical; each form of knowledge redresses the other; the frontier between the two may be crossed. In *The Spirit Level* Heaney follows through on ideas which have been developing in the two previous collections, *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*. Although it embodies philosophical and poetic truth, *The Spirit Level* does not lose its self-delighting inventiveness. The aesthetic and the ideological are interfused and balanced. Out of that fusion Heaney’s affirmation of the value of poetry and the role of the poet rises to a confident demonstration of what poetry can do.

Seamus Heaney writes about poetry with persuasive force, in a prose style that is figurative and supple. *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978* (1980) has accounts of his years on the farm and in Belfast. Other essays deal with poets who have influenced him – Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose accentual, consonantal music he once imitated; Patrick Kavanagh, who confirmed the validity of rural life as subject matter; Wordsworth in whom he noted the relationship between “the almost physiological operations of a poet composing and the music of the finished poem”(61). Just as *Preoccupations*

responds to subjects that are found within the early poetry, so *The Government of the Tongue* (1988) takes up issues which have permeated *North*, *Field Work*, and *Station Island*. Here, too, the question of poetry's right to exist concerns him. Does it not betray suffering? Should one write lyric poetry at a time of grief? His considerations of literary figures who have responded to suffering answer these questions: Anton Chekhov's drinking cognac within sounds of the convicts at work represents the poet's right to his gift; Osip Mandelstam's metaphor for *The Divine Comedy* as a vast beehive makes the point that poetry is determined not by ecclesiastical or philosophical ideas, but by the intuitive swarming within the poet's subconscious. In poets who have resisted political repression, Mandelstam, Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, Heaney presents those whose espousal of poetry before politics ratifies what he himself has expressed. Their ideal of plain, anti-lyrical poetry, responsive to reality, using parable to outsmart censorship and oppression comes close to what he does in *Field Work*. He argues for the self-validating singularity of poetry. "Station Island" resembles Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin. Both are rituals of exorcism; both achieve psychic and artistic freedom. Both writers face the horror, show themselves deeply moved, but with equal firmness, unflinchingly show themselves obedient to their consciences as writers. Lyric utterance, in other words, is a form of radical witness. The ungoverned tongue is its freed tongue.

*The Redress of Poetry. Oxford Lectures* (1995) studies a variety of poets, such as W.B. Yeats, Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Bishop, John Clare, Oscar Wilde, Dylan Thomas, and believes that the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it. Heaney has always been attentive to the mystery of creativity, the intimate, hidden processes by which poems rise to the surface of the consciousness, the connection between a given, instinctive language and the language acquired by reading and education, and the actuality of composition in which, he says, a personal force is moved through an aesthetic distance. Its vision of reality should be transformative.

In the last three collections – *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010) – Seamus Heaney's poetry is relaxed, wide-ranging, and often drawn from memory, but not strong as in the previous collections. He returns to the district in which he was born and circles outward to places he has been in his varied life. He revitalises what he has often animated in the past – farm implements, household objects, individuals, family, friends, particular figures and places, such as the Tollund Man and Glandore in County Wicklow. Poems in these late collections resonate with earlier work; the style is flexible, the voice quietly humorous, aware of destruction and menace during the Second World War when they built an aerodrome near his home, the sectarian upheavals in Northern Ireland, and the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. The sledgehammer pulverises what it strikes. He writes once again of the relationship between the living and the dead but finds solace in the natural world. The topics are familiar – farm activities, Anahorish School, the butcher's shop. He writes with his customary ability to find the right illuminating words and to suggest latent threat.



Red beef, white string,  
Brown paper ripped straight off for parcelling  
Along the counter edge. Rib roast and shin  
Plonked down, wrapped up, and bow-tied neat and clean  
But seeping blood. (*District and Circle* 33)

The poet is at ease with his imaginative contexts and excited by the rich possibilities of language put to poetic use. Many autobiographical poems recall events and people within a short radius of his home, in Wicklow or abroad. He writes translations from Latin and Irish, elegies for Philip Larkin, Joseph Brodsky, Ted Hughes, and others. The Tollund Man becomes a spokesperson for the poet, his passion for life, his sensuality.

My heavy head. Bronze-buffed. Ear to the ground.  
My eye at turf level. Its snailskin lid.  
My cushioned cheek and brow. My phantom hand  
And arm and leg and shoulder that felt pillowed  
As fleshily as when the bog pith weighed  
To mould me to itself and it to me  
Between when I was buried and unburied. (56)

He relishes physical presence: “I saw it all/and loved it at the time” (59). The poem runs freely: “My eyes were on stalks” (64). The final poem in this collection, “The Blackbird of Glanmore,” invokes the blessing of the bird, the security and continuity of place and the memory of his little brother who was commemorated in an early poem, when a bird sat on the roof like a bad omen.

On the grass when I arrive,  
Filling the stillness with life,  
But ready to scare off  
At the very first wrong move.  
In the ivy when I leave.

It's you, blackbird, I love (75)

In *Human Chain*, Heaney returns to the congenial twelve-line poem, once again focuses a chosen scene exactly – a woman carrying hot ash to the pit, the smell of cigarette butts in his father's suits, attending a wake, the birth of a grandchild. “I had my existence. I was there./Me in place and the place in me” (43). He writes of the horror and the pity of violent deaths during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

And what in the end was there left to bury  
Of Mr. Lavery, blown up in his own pub  
As he bore the primed device and bears it still

Mid-morning towards the sun-admitting door  
Of Ashley House? Or of Louis O'Neill  
In the wrong place the Wednesday they buried

Thirteen who'd been shot in Derry? Or of bodies  
Unglorified, accounted for and bagged  
Behind the grief cordons: not to be laid

In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot  
Fired over on anniversaries  
By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled (56)

Aware of age and infirmity he still writes short, musical lyrics, personal narratives, nature poems, descriptive poems and elegies. The Heaney persona is engaged, a lively, shrewd and wise observer of the chain of human life, of memories that do not die and can be recreated. He has, as he said recently, been surprised by memory.

As I age and blank on names,  
As my uncertainty on stairs  
Is more and more the lightheadedness

Of a cabin boy's first time on the rigging,  
As the memorable bottoms out  
Into the irretrievable,

It's not that I can't imagine still  
That slight untoward rupture and world-tilt  
As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed (84)

Comparisons between Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats are inevitable, but the two poets are very different in their use of language, choice of subject, and the framing of a persona. From the beginning Heaney created realistic pictures of rural life whereas Yeats turned his Sligo homeland into a romantic otherworld; Heaney portrayed real workers in a recognizable landscape, Yeats created dream figures in a mystical land, Heaney dealt with people and events in a straightforward manner, Yeats turned event and person into symbols and abstractions. Heaney developed an easygoing, adaptable persona, Yeats adopted a magisterial role. In the horrors of the First World War and the violence of the Anglo-Irish War and Civil War Yeats foresaw the destruction of civilization; Heaney drew parallels between savagery in early Iron Age Europe and in the Viking period and the violence done in his own province during the Troubles.

Younger poets in the early years of the Twentieth Century found it hard to emerge from Yeats's shadow. From the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) Heaney has been an importance presence in Irish poetry, but he was greatly influenced by Patrick



Kavanagh, who showed that one could write well about local matters. Heaney's decision to do likewise has been inspirational for poets like Peter Fallon, Thomas McCarthy, and Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin, Michael Longley, the young Paul Muldoon, Paul Durcan, and Dennis O'Driscoll. Heaney used up a whole vocabulary of rural existence that younger poets have been careful to avoid nor can they imitate his appropriation of sacrificial customs from elsewhere. His delight in the natural world has been particularly influential as may be seen in the work of Peter Fallon, Dennis O'Driscoll, Michael Longley, and others. Similarly, his attachment to the work of poets from outside Ireland, from Eastern Europe and America has deepened a tendency already there and is a natural outcome of Ireland's participation in European affairs and world affairs. Ireland has become multicultural. The old isolationist Ireland, together with its restrictive puritanism, has vanished.

Kavanagh's dictum that Gods make their own importance became in Heaney's thinking a belief in the transformative power of poetry, and this idea has permeated the work of other poets such as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paul Muldoon. Future observers may find it strange that his poetry reflected so little of life in southern Ireland at a time when there were significant developments in politics and the Catholic Church, serious corruption in financial institutions, widespread unemployment, massive emigration, and widespread clerical sexual abuse.

While he has been the outstanding poet of his generation, his style, choice of subjects or persona never dominated, and he was not alone. Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague continued to produce work of high quality. In his own time, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, John F. Deane, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paul Durcan, Dennis O'Driscoll, and others developed distinctive voices. Major novelists and dramatists were at work: in the novel William Trevor, John Banville, John McGahern; in drama Brian Friel, Thomas Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness, and Marina Carr. The literary scene had many strong presences in Heaney's time whereas in Yeats's there were only a few other figures, none of whom had his stature. Because of this richness Heaney did not have a dominant influence on younger writers. Rather his unmatched skill, fruitful word hoard, great intelligence, and civilized mind encouraged and stimulated those who came after him. Superb lyricist, Heaney wrote with a natural exuberance and *joie de vivre* that was both attractive and inspirational. He was a humane presence.

## Notes

- 1 Subsequent references are given in the text. In "'We pine for ceremony': Ritual and Reality in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney (1965-1975)", *Studies in Seamus Heaney* (1987: 47-64); rpt. in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1992: 67-86), I have discussed developments in Heaney's work. The first part of this essay has been drawn from my article "Spaten und Wasserwaage: Seamus Heaney's suche nach Herkunft und Gleichgewicht" (1996: 49-67).
- 2 Subsequent references are given in the text. In 1995 Heaney also published Jan Kochanowski's *Laments* (London: Faber & Faber), translated by Seamus Heaney and Stanislaw Baranczak.

- 3 I have discussed the impact of the Troubles in Northern Ireland on Heaney's work in "Seamus Heaney and the Gentle Flame", *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, eds Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), pp.37-53.

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*Seamus Heaney:  
A Tribute by a Brazilian living in Ireland  
for 42 years.*

Patricia O’Flaherty

**Abstract:** *The life and works of our great Poet have been – and will continue to be – documented in journals and theses, books and blogs around the world. What follows is a simple but grateful testimonial of how meeting Seamus Heaney and his poetry helped me begin to understand this magical island and its people.*

**Keywords:** *Seamus Heaney; “Digging”; translation.*

**30 August 2013:** “Seamus Heaney dead RIP.”

Text arrives while on retreat on the mountains of L’Herault, south of France. I’m in shock but can act. Special request for prayers, candles, butter lamps. Action postpones feeling the pain.

At a master-class, Seamus urges us to memorize poems, poems we like, poems that penetrate the heart. His words come back to me:

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.  
(*Doubletake*, from *The Cure at Troy*)

I leave the temple in the direction of the forest. Walk towards the valley.  
Memories crowd in. Back to when I first met him.

**The Seventies**

1971: My first Christmas in Ireland is spent in Derry~Londonderry. I visit St. Columb’s College, where Seamus Heaney boards for six years (1951-1957), having won a scholarship. I’m given a well-thumbed copy of *Death of a Naturalist* by one of the

teachers, a classmate at Oxford. And here begins a long relationship with Seamus' poetry, starting with "Digging", telling us how father and grand-father farmed the land, the sounds, the smells, the feel of the soil, his analogy of their digging out potatoes with a spade and his digging out words with his pen: "Between my finger and my thumb, the squat pen rests, I will dig with it."

I don't fully understand the poems, yet they have a profound impact on me. He ends the book with the words "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing." There is curfew, midnight Mass happens at 9.00 pm. Soldiers in camouflage wait at the door as we leave the church. The city is sad, sombre, starless.

1972: On 2 February I'm one of hundreds who witness the burning down of the British Embassy at Merrion Square, Dublin, three days after Bloody Sunday in Derry.

1975: A very important year for Seamus and his family. He becomes Lecturer in English at Carysfort College of Education and moves to Dublin, leaving Glanmore Cottage, his haven in Co. Wicklow. *North* is published. We are reminded in the *Foreword* of Heaney's "appeal to the ear" ... that the poem is "intended as a song to be heard and enjoyed or, to the 'mind's eye, a picture to be 'seen' and felt."

Sometime in the mid-seventies I meet Seamus and Marie at a large party at Diane Guggenheim Hamilton's home at Percy Place, Dublin. Diane Meek, as she was known then, is patron of the arts, of Irish traditional music, of education. Seamus is here because he is Seamus, the Poet. I'm here because of Diane's interest in my work on Paulo Freire. This is the era of Cuernavaca, Ivan Illich, De-Schooling Society. Someone plays the harpsichord upstairs, Peter Browne has his *uilleann* pipes, an instrument I've just met. Some of us retreat into a small room off the kitchen to discuss Ivan Illich's *To Hell with Good Intentions*. We are inflamed, we want to save the world. The door opens softly, Seamus comes in and gently asks: "Would you mind if I shared with you a few lines I wrote this afternoon?" We are mesmerized by this powerful sudden apparition, this beautiful man, his black mane, his manner. We nod. He starts reciting and we sense urgency in his voice, as if full birth can only take place when the words are heard by others, when the poem is shared. I wish I could quote what he had just created, but this was long ago. I remember his voice, his intonation, the sound of the words. It deeply penetrates my heart, our hearts. So we ask him for more and he recites from *North*:

Compose in darkness  
Expect aurora borealis  
In the long foray  
But no cascade of light.

He leaves the room as softly as he had entered. Revolution postponed, we return to conviviality and to Donal Looney's bazooka. The power of poetry, the spell of the poet.

## The Eighties

In 1981 Seamus resigns from Carysfort College. He has now been discovered by the world, the boy who had grown up in a "three-room traditional thatched farmstead" and "lived a kind of den-life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world", as he would recall 14 years later at the Nobel Prize Ceremony.

### *Crediting Poetry*

I reflect on my own upbringing high up in the mountains of Minas Gerais, Brazil and now living 10,000 kms away. I've been in Ireland for ten years now, married and with a daughter. I want to get into the heart of Ireland. So I let the theatre, music and poetry penetrate my being. Teaching is also a great help: I learn so much from my students. I want to understand Brian Friel's *Translations*:

'We must learn those new names ... We must learn where we live.  
We must learn to make them our own.'

I meet Seamus again, through his involvement with *Translations* and Field Day. Heaney gives Friel great support with the project and becomes a director of Field Day.

I hear the term "fifth province" for the first time. I learn that in Ireland, we have not just the four geographical provinces but a fifth one, a special space which transcends duality and allows for unity through co-creation. It can accommodate green and orange, catholic and protestant, east and west. I realise that the dialogical work of Paulo Freire and the Fifth Province have much in common. I begin to get a sense of unity between my past and present through accessing this special space.

In 1983 Seamus Heaney publishes *An Open Letter* in Field Day pamphlet series, as a response to being included as a "British" poet in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*.

You'll understand I draw the line  
At being robbed of what is mine,  
My *patris*, my deep design  
To be at home  
In my own place and dwell within  
Its proper name –  
(*Ireland's Field Day* 26).

During the Eighties Seamus spends several spring semesters at Harvard (*Stepping Stones* xxx). I visualise him gracing Harvard Yard with his presence. In May 1986 a friend of mine from Cambridge, Mass. days is among the 20,000 Harvard graduates who

listen to Seamus recite “Villanelle for an Anniversary”, celebrating Harvard College’s 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. (*Stepping Stones* xxviii)

In the Summer of 1989 he is elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, an appointment that would continue until 1994.

## **The Nineties**

An unforgettable decade for Seamus and his family. Prizes and publications, awards and ceremonies. These are well-documented in *Stepping Stones*, Dennis O’Driscoll’s Interviews with Seamus Heaney and winner of the Argosy Irish Non-Fiction Book of the Year (2009).

1991: Seamus Heaney and uilleann piper Liam O’Flynn have their first performance of *The Poet and The Piper*, at Cibéal Festival in Kenmare, Co. Kerry. My husband, a Kerryman, is offered two tickets. Everything is possible in The Kingdom of Kerry. Twelve years later (2003) Seamus and Liam were to record an album that grew from this event: *The Poet and The Piper* (audio CD) with instrumental tracks and spoken poetry, a sensitive togetherness of words and music.

1994: Heaney’s work is honoured in the Newsletter *Irish Studies in Brazil*. It has several translations of *The Forge* and *Digging*. “A Challenge for Translators”, it reads. My good friend Munira Mutran sends me a copy and I accept the challenge with my own version of *Digging*. For days I dig in my dreams. I post the Journal to Seamus and include my own translation. He thanks me, sends me a reply: “I see there is a lot of digging in Brazil these days”.

1995: Seamus Heaney is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. His Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1995 is powerful and deeply moving and should be read by students of all ages.

Seamus starts by recounting growing up in rural Co. Derry, “... Ahistorical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern, we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence.” He takes us through Irish history and we emerge with a clearer vision and a deeper understanding of Ireland, of life. On Good Friday, three years later, 10 April 1998, the Peace Agreement is signed.

1998: Dinner at Brazilian Embassy residence in Dublin. We are eight at the dinner table: Ambassador Carlos Bueno and his wife Alice Pittaluga Bueno, Seamus and Marie Heaney and one of his nieces, my husband Bernard and I and our daughter Kathryn. We feel extremely privileged at being invited.

We first talk about Alicinha's beautiful sculpture *Hommage a Matisse* then gracing Merrion Square, Dublin, now at Botanical Gardens in Rio de Janeiro. Soon we move to Stockholm, the lights, the islands, the vibrant atmosphere. Seamus tells us the story of *St. Kevin and the Blackbird*, which he had told the audience in Stockholm. What follows is my own recollection but a full version can be read in *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture*. It is said that once upon a time St. Kevin was kneeling with arms stretched out and a blackbird lands in his hand, and mistaking it for the branch of a tree, nests and lays eggs. Seamus recounts how Kevin never moved for hours and days, because of his love for all creatures great and small until the fledging grew wings and could fly. And then he recites the last verses of the Blackbird poem:

A Prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name  
from The Spirit Level

After dinner, Embaixatriz Alicinha asks me to read my translation of "Digging". I try to escape, but she has a copy from a Poetry Reading I had organized with my students in the Atrium at Trinity College. I try my best and at the end Seamus kindly says that even though he doesn't understand Portuguese, he enjoyed the sound of the words. He recites two more poems. An unforgettable evening.

## **2000 Onwards**

2006: *District and Circle* is published. It is dedicated to Ann Saddlemyer, the original owner of Glanmore Cottage and to whom he also dedicated *Glanmore Sonnets*: For Ann Saddlemyer, Our heartiest welcome. He never forgets his friends.

August 9, 2009: I meet Seamus and Marie at a mutual friend's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, their neighbour in Sandymount. In a brief exchange he surprises me by asking: "So is there still a lot of digging in Brazil?" The poet hasn't forgotten. "The squat pen rests. I will dig with it."

2011: Harvard celebrates its 375th anniversary and Seamus is invited to return and recite "Villanelle for an Anniversary" again. A seal to his long association with Harvard (*Stepping Stones*, xxx).

December 2012: *The Seamus Heaney Professorship in Irish Writing* is announced by Provost Patrick Prendergast: "This is a significant event in writing in Ireland and internationally. Trinity College Dublin is enhancing its extraordinary literary tradition with this new professorship." As I pass the Campanile I see the Provost and



Seamus walking by, his hair totally white, his presence always powerful and gentle. This would be my last sighting of him, our great Poet.

2013: Derry~Londonderry is *City of Culture*.

18 April: I return after 40 years, for a visit of HH Dalai Lama. He crosses the Peace Bridge holding the arm of the Church of Ireland Bishop on one side and the Catholic Assistant Archbishop on the other. A guard of honour of 300 local primary school children cross the bridge singing “Peace is flowing like a River”. The city is bright and shining. We all rejoice in the openness, the spaciousness and I wonder if Seamus is here today.

14 August: Derry~Londonderry, Millenium Forum. Seamus Heaney and Liam O’Flynn give a performance of *The Poet and the Piper*. A friend of mine recounts this magical evening, when the fusion of Seamus’ poetry and Liam’s *uilleann* pipes has the audience spellbound. The Poet back in his own city, a city transformed.

30 August: Seamus Heaney dies. The country mourns.

His son Michael tells us: “His last few words in a text message he wrote to my mother minutes before he passed away were in his beloved Latin and they read – “*nolle timere*” (‘don’t be afraid’).” Marie, his life’s companion, for whom he wrote: “Love, you shall perfect for me this child”, for whom he was prepared to “square the circle: four walls and a ring” and father three children: two boys and a girl. REF

1 September: At Croke Park over 80,000 spectators honour Seamus Heaney for three minutes. It is an All-Ireland Gaelic football semi-final match.

President Michael D. Higgins pays tribute: “... we in Ireland will once again get a sense of the depth and range of the contribution of Seamus Heaney to our contemporary world, but what those of us who have had the privilege of his friendship and presence will miss is the extraordinary depth and warmth.”

2 September 2013: Seamus is buried.

They decked his body no less bountifully  
with offerings than those first ones did  
who cast him away when he was a child  
And launched him alone over the waves  
*(Beowulf)*

No, they don’t “launch him alone over the waves”. They bring him home to Bellaghy and bury him at the old graveyard of St Mary’s.

A neighbour visits the cemetery one night, to talk to his father also buried there, and finds a group around Seamus’ grave, reading his poetry. He joins them.



I end my tribute to Seamus Heaney with a paragraph from his Nobel Prize Lecture:

The form of the poem ... is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.

Seamus Heaney, Keeper of the word: RIP

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## Digging

Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

## Cavando

Trans. Patricia O'Flaherty

Entre meu dedo e meu polegar  
A caneta grossa descansa, aconchegada como uma arma

Sob a minha janela, um som claro e raspante  
Quando a pá penetra o terreno pedregoso:  
Meu pai cavando. Olho para baixo

Seu dorso contraído, entre canteiros de flores  
Se abaixa e levanta vinte anos mais tarde  
Curvando-se em ritmo pelos canteiros de batata  
Onde estava cavando

A bota tosca aninhada na lâmina, o cabo  
contra o joelho firme como alavanca  
Ele arrancava altas ramas, enterrava fundo a brilhante lâmina  
Para espalhar novas batatas que apanhávamos  
Adorando sua fria dureza em nossas mãos.

Meu Deus, o velho sabia manejar uma pá.  
Exatamente como seu velho pai.

Meu avô cortava mais turfa num dia  
Que qualquer homem na turfeira do Toner.  
Uma vez levei leite para ele numa garrafa  
Mal arrolhada com papel. Ele se endireitou  
Para bebê-lo, e logo se abaixou  
Cortando e partindo com cuidado jogando torrões  
Sobre os seus ombros, cavando cada vez mais fundo  
Em busca da boa turfa. Cavando.

O cheiro frio da terra do batatal, o esmagar e bater  
De turfa encharcada, os cortes curtos da lâmina  
Raízes vivas acordam na minha mente  
Mas não tenho pá para seguir homens como esses.

Entre meu dedo e meu polegar  
A caneta grossa descansa.  
Cavarei com ela

# *Seamus Heaney's Station Island: The Polyphonic Poetics of Exile*

Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação

**Abstract:** *This article analyzes the poem "Station Island" (Station Island, 1984) by Seamus Heaney as a "polyphonic poetics of exile". Heaney's oeuvre is impregnated with a poetic style that combines the geographical act of frontier crossing to the linguistic work with cultural translation. This technique is most clearly observed in "Station Island" and characterizes his work as a poetic heteroglossia.*

**Keywords:** *Seamus Heaney, Station Island; poetic heteroglossia.*

The *oeuvre* of the Northern Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney (1939 – 2013), is a source of inspiration for poets. The brilliance with which he mastered the craft, combined with the perfect articulation of sounds and concepts, appealed to a universal audience. As a modern Orpheus, the poet enchanted both the world and the "underworld". His use of supernatural images and transcendent perceptions were clear metaphors for very earthly personal identity and history. As someone who crossed literal and imaginary frontiers, migrating from the North to the South of Ireland, and often, to the United Kingdom and the United States, his poetry is impregnated with a "note of exile" ("Fosterage" *Selected* 2001, 89). Not simply as the physical act of leaving his country, but as a real and distressing presence, the theme of exile in Heaney's poetry is easily observed in many poems. However, the clearest example of this frontier crossing is his Dantesque<sup>1</sup> poem "Station Island" (*Station Island*, 1984).

The poem "Station Island" figures as a lyric penitence in which the poet tries to purge his personal guilt over leaving Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles (1972). In order to do that, his subjective voice assumes different personae with whom he establishes a mythic dialogue, each symbolic of his personal anguish: "[t]he main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self" (Heaney qtd. Corcoran 160). To overcome this state, Heaney experiences a three-day pilgrimage in *Lough Derg*, or the Sanctuary of St Patrick, in County Donegal. Through routines of prayers, and outdoor stations one must traverse barefoot, Heaney reenacts the fragmentations and divisions of his own community, whilst he himself recalls scattered

memories of his artistic and biographical past. The poem also holds the promise of an artistic change that will emerge after a transcendental and spiritual forgiveness. In other words, the poem holds a political premise.

The critic Michael Kenneally notes that Heaney, after leaving Northern Ireland, started to imprint a heightened sense of political responsibility onto his poetry. However, Kenneally clarifies that the poet's commitment does not mean a literal address of the situation, but rather an interpretation of it or, to use Heaney's own words, "telling [the] truth but telling it slant" (454). In order to justify his position, Kenneally also quotes a more incisive comment by Heaney: "A poem is a work of art... it is not a work of politics". (Heaney qtd. Kenneally 245). Even believing that political engagement is related to poetic freedom, Heaney recognizes that he is undeniably tormented by guilt.

Due to this problematic relationship between creative exile and political responsibility, the pilgrimage in "Station Island" has artistic and political resonance. While the former is observed in the virtuosic display of rhythms, rimes and metric experiments, the latter is reflected by the phantasmagoric characters he encounters on his way. Nevertheless, both techniques are deeply intertwined and connected hence the verse is also littered with political discourses. Specifically in "Station Island", this double-bind generates a "polyphonic awareness" through the aesthetic representation of transcendent meetings.

I develop the term "polyphonic awareness" based on two complementary ideas: Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and Edward Said's reflections on exile. The Russian formalist argues that texts present a heterogenic combination of discourses, which he calls heteroglossia.<sup>2</sup> However, this plurality of voices is not simply reminiscences of free-floating signifiers without meaning, but a repository of historical and cultural knowledge (Bakhtin 114-5). In my interpretation of the poem, the heteroglossic voices of "Station Island" are poetic traditions and political discourses.

The condition that enables this form of work is the poet's departure from Northern Ireland, or his symbolic exile, which brings us to the work of Edward Said. For Said<sup>3</sup>,

most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal. (148)

After leaving his "home", Seamus Heaney becomes conscious of the existence of contradictory perceptions of the Irish and Northern Irish context. Thus, the already schizophrenic awareness of the situation in Northern Ireland, results in an intricate poetic heteroglossia. The multiplicity of voices he portrays, through real conversations with specters from his memories, is part of an artistic project to reconcile divergent realities. In addition to that, the pilgrimage is a rite of passage to "a poetry of clarity and plain statement, a poetry of window glass rather than of 'stained glass'" (Homem 29). Thus, the poem promotes a change prompted by self and historical knowledge, exile and artistic maturity.

In the present article I will analyze the twelve stations of the poem, explaining how Heaney purges his guilt of leaving Northern Ireland by assuming different personalities – the ghosts he meets on his pilgrimage. Though there is an obvious relationship between Dante Alighieri’s and Heaney’s poetic enterprise, my aim here is not to show how Heaney translates or re-interprets Dante <sup>4</sup>. I am interested in showing how this plurality of voices composes a “polyphonic poetics of exile”, in which a poetic heteroglossia enables the poet to reach a different form of self-understanding and political awareness. The importance of pilgrimage is such that the clarity it engenders is a characteristic which predominates in his poetry until his last collection, *Human Chain* (2010). I have divided this essay in three sections. In the first, I examine the first four poems of the pilgrimage – I, II, III, IV – in which Heaney addresses the personas that have contributed to his artistic constitution. This is the reason why I call it ‘heteroglossia’. In the second, the next five poems are explored – V, VI, VII, VIII, IX – in which the poet expresses of the guilt he feels over distancing himself from Northern Ireland in the middle of a civil war. This means that a sense of guilt takes over the second part of the pilgrimage. And finally, in the third, the last three sections are analyzed – X, XI, XII – as a symbolic wish for artistic liberty and how it can be provided by the critical vision of James Joyce. Ultimately, the whole poem, although very much localized and involved with Irish themes and ideas, represents a universal reflection on the implications of writing poetry in contemporary society, which necessarily involves a fragmentation of the self in different personalities and discourses.

## **1. The Polyphony of Self: Heteroglossia**

The first four poems of “Station Island” represent the outset of the poet’s pilgrimage to Lough Derg. According to the ancient custom, the pilgrim has to go through nine stations of prayers that are performed with the whole body. This means that, in addition to reciting a series of prayers around six beds dedicated to Irish saints, he or she has to walk around those beds and not fall asleep or eat for at least 24 hours on the first day of the retreat. Due to the absence of food and sleep, the beginning of the “Station” appears to be the most demanding. However, in the poem, which is a symbolic re-enactment of the poet’s personal experience during the three days, this is the moment when he encounters the first persons who contributed to his development as a poet. In addition to that, those he meets have also gone through the same pilgrimage. Owing to the fact that the pilgrimage takes place in the North of Ireland, although in Donegal, the main characteristic of this beginning is the recollection of the musicality of the verse, as he argues in “Crediting Poetry”: When I was the eldest child... in rural Co. Derry ... we took in everything that was going on... .. as if we were in a doze of hibernation”. (*Opened Ground: Poems*: 447, 448.). The transformation of the local accent into a literary material is seen in the ambiguity of the first encounter.

Although the ghost is Simon Sweeney, a blacksmith and friend of his parents, his symbolic surname evokes the memory of an Irish folk legend: Buile Shuibhne or King

Sweeney. The sixteenth-century tale had been translated by Heaney under the name Sweeney Astray (1983). The similarity between these two characters is seen in their refusal of the Christian tradition: while Simon Sweeney was “an old Sabbath-breaker” (“Station Island”: 241) King Sweeney was condemned to fly like a madman through Ireland, after throwing a psalter in the river and killing a clergyman. The gift Sweeney receives, though, is the ability to make poignant poetry. With this connection, Heaney is questioning the validity of the ritual. Since everything is so pregnant with sacred meanings, is it worth going through these days of sacrifices for faith and expiation of sins? The poem represents the poet’s uncertainty regarding his own choice of going through the pilgrimage.

The ambiguity of the theme and reluctance in the poet’s faith turns poem I (15 stanzas with five verses each) into a personal and mythical evocation of roots, which also follows the mode of writing in Sweeney Astray. The narrative tone, mixed with short verses of six and seven poetic lines, reproduce the musicality of the Irish tale. In the first three stanzas, the poet sets the scene of the poem: he describes the bell-notes, the silence, and the appearance of Simon Sweeney, who is accused of being a Sabbath Breaker. Nevertheless, Sweeney does not seem intimidated and continues by asserting he was a mystery to the poet as a boy, and describes how his own strangeness fascinated Heaney in the fourth to the tenth stanzas. When the poet reassumes the verse, he is caught up in the processions, despite being advised not to follow them. While confronting the poet’s identity with the Irish ballad tradition, the first station introduces the self-reflexive tone to the whole poem.

Poem II changes the meter completely. Heaney turns to terza rima, the meter used by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*. Adopting a more solemn tone, with iambic pentameters, this poem has twenty two stanzas which follow the discussion with William Carleton, the author of the narrative *Lough Derg Pilgrim* – which describes someone who goes through the pilgrimage. The theme of the conversation is equally disturbing to the placidity of the verse: the poet’s childhood in Northern Ireland. Although being faithful to Dante’s structure, the terza rima is broken in three moments of the poem: in the fourth, seventeenth and twenty second stanzas. These are precisely the moments in which he mentions the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In an indirect way, Heaney hints that classical poetry cannot be fully complete in a place where there is still social turmoil.

The debate between Carleton and the poet involves the cultural elements that inspired Heaney. In the first three tercets, dedicated to the dramatic appearance of Carleton, the poet describes his presence as challenging. Nevertheless, on the fourth stanza, the caesura of the metre explains that this is due to the violence of Ireland in the nineteenth century. When Heaney sees him, he starts going on about the political disputes between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. However, Carleton’s biography indicates his own personal indecision, for he converted to Anglicanism after being raised as a Catholic. When Carleton provokes Heaney, saying that he is defensive, the poet

replies by stating his background kept him somewhat distant from disputes. The poet contradicts himself by simultaneously affirming the naiveté of his youth (marching bands, dances and fair-days) with the underlying menace of constant Orange drums and gunfire.

This is stanza seventeen, the moment when the *terza rima* is broken again and Carleton interrupts his talk. At this point, Heaney seems to be distracted by his own memories of childhood. Carleton claims these memories are “maggot[s] sown in wounds”, and he even goes so far as to state they both are “earthworms of the earth, and all that/ has gone through us is what will be our trace” (247). This grotesque metaphor concludes the section, implying that the act of poetic creation is a filtering of events, perceptions and emotions, be they enjoyable or painful. Moreover, the unification of this section in a Dantesque form supports the idea that aesthetic is very important for the organisation or filtering of this personal experience.

The third section injects a morbid and surrealist tone to the piece, since the prayers at the church remind the poet of a funeral mass of a girl who died prematurely. In order to express the confusion when confronted with death, Heaney uses metaphors of the ocean to describe the church: the wave sustaining the temple’s roof with mussels and cockles adorning the picture. It is clear that mussels and cockles refer to Molly Malone, one of the most famous popular songs of Ireland. In the poem, Heaney symbolically portrays his own vision of Molly Malone, a poor girl who dies while working in the docks of Dublin. For him, the girl’s body signifies something sacred: his discovery of death in his childhood. These nine quartets of the poem express the poet’s enchantment with the child, but it is only on the fourth stanza that he compares himself to her:

pearls condensed from a child invalid’s breath  
into a shimmering ark, my house of gold  
that housed the snowdrop weather of her death  
long ago. (248)

This personal involvement between the poet and girl through the image of the pearl and gold symbolises the precious nature of childhood. But, differently from the girl, the poet is going to become an adult and lose his innocence, as the word *for-age* suggest. The poet’s discovery induces him to a personal involvement with himself, while in the seventh stanza he is requested to walk “round and round” in an empty space. Even with this personal self-devotion, the poet discovers how transitory life is. In the last stanza he treats the carcass and the hairs of his dog, who got lost weeks before, as a synecdoche of this discovery. The section is a transitory piece that connects the poet’s childhood to his early adolescence. Here, Heaney abandons the enchantment with the natural world of his rural Derry and starts to become acquainted with important dilemmas of life.

The fourth section concludes Heaney’s *heteroglossia* of the self with the presence of a priest who is sent away to foreign missions. The twenty tercets – which do not follow *terza rima* – reflect the afflictions of the priest in exile, preaching to native populations. However, at the same time the poem shows how poet and priest are different, Heaney



connects to the missionary in the middle of the poem: “I’m older than you when you went away” (250). They are also similar because the poet abandons his native traditions to pursue his vocation. Due to this fact, the whole poem IV works within a mirroring structure, while the priest’s voice is heard from the sixth to the tenth stanzas, Heaney’s is heard from the tenth to the fourteenth. If the priest talks about how painful reality in the missions is, Heaney goes on about his idealistic life in Ireland. The poet claims his faith gave hope to many people. However, this recollection angers his speaker, who makes him say: “What are you doing here but the same thing? What possessed you” (250). It is interesting to note the double meaning of the word “possession”, since Heaney is literally “possessed” with the presence of literary and ordinary people.

In stanza eighteen the priest has a revelation, which confirms the poet is taking the pilgrimage because he himself wants to take leave of his ordinary life and pursue something new. This is the moment when Heaney discovers he is taking a “last look” and, confirming the priest’s assertion, he follows him. With this section, the poet finally understands the importance of distance for his poetry. But, he needs to take a last look in order to be able to go through with his objective of writing and being truthful to what he believes. His departure, then, is permeated by a heteroglossia of self in which he transmutes and is reflected in the priest.

In general, this first movement of the poem enables the poet to achieve a consciousness that he needs in order to abandon a more naturalistic and family-oriented poetry in order to achieve artistic freedom. However, he is aware that this distance is not blissful, but bears traces of guilt, which are going to be further explored in the continuation of the poem.

## **2 .The Guilt of exile**

The poet’s guilt over leaving his land during the time of the civil war is expressed in poems V, VI, VII, VIII and XIX. While poems V and VI talk about a subjective guilt – as a boy misbehaving in high school and viewing sexual intercourse as shameful –VII, VIII and XIX tackle the civil war in Northern Ireland in a clear way. These two versions of the poet’s self-penitence, personal and collective, are associated with the search for a guilt-free aesthetic. Therefore, after penitence, this new act of writing creates a sense of identity liberated from the fragmented unity of his native homeland.

In poem V, Heaney meets two masters of his secondary school and Patrick Kavanagh. The presence of ordinary persons and the poet indicates that Heaney is haunted both by his old teachers and the poets who influenced his writing. Giving depth to the poem, its formal structure is composed of five stanzas of nineteen, eleven, fifteen, seventeen and two lines, with variable meter. Due to the length of the verse, there is a similarity between lyric poetry and novelistic prose. It also bears resemblance with the epics, whose formulaic tone is abundant in the composition as a whole. However, in section V, the presence of prose serves the function of representing the poet’s first



experimentations with poetry. He transposed the simplicity of the childish jokes and the Latin classes to the musicality of his poetry.

The first master he encounters is called Murphy. After describing his bare foot as a “dried broad bean”, whose sonority takes him back to the botanic classes, the poet shakes hand with the specter. Apropos the comparison between foot and bean, what is relevant is the fact that the teacher is as rooted in this environment as he is in the poet’s personal imagination. The master speaks lightly of the poet saying he is a “good man yourself”. The use of “yourself” is a typical reflexive pronoun used by Irish people. It also has roots in Irish language, in which it is necessary to use the pronoun. His last words before disappearing are part of the naturalistic connection between teacher and land: “and the school garden’s loose black mould is grass” (253). The second master reminds him of the Latin declinations “Mensa, mensa, mensam”. He also reminds the poet that “the great moving power and spring of the verse” (253) is love and that it is always possible to learn something by giving lifts. Both masters are humble figures who teach the poet simple concepts with which he grows. This period represents a sort of “greenhouse” of poetic germination, in which languages mixed together like mulch, fertilizing his later output on poetic craft.

Contrasting with the peaceful atmosphere, the last ghost of the section, Patrick Kavanagh’s, ironizes Heaney’s pilgrimage. It is Patrick Kavanagh who asserts: “Where else would you go? Iceland, maybe? Maybe the Dordogne... In my own day/ the odd one came here on the hunt for women” (253). With this assertion, Heaney turns from the simple guilt of mocking his masters to the complex torment of leaving one’s land and being disturbed by a sinful view of sexual intercourse. This is the reason why in the sixth poem, the poet recollects both his exile and his first sexual encounter. While the former is represented through a verse from Ode 3.21 by Horace the latter is seen through the lens of the second cantica of *Inferno*, in which Dante meets Beatrice, the muse who guides him to paradise. Nevertheless, the experience he recollects is not simply sensual, but self-referential and political. The poem’s symbolic meaning of lovemaking is related to a poetic exploration of Ireland and its landscape. Nonetheless, because the poet is far from his land, he feels as a traitor for representing its troubles and anxieties.

The images Heaney uses to describe the sexual encounter are earthly tactile and based on a knowledge of agriculture. Like a modern John Donne, Heaney experiences Ireland in “the wheatlands of her back... a window facing the deep south of luck... [and] the land of kindness” (254). Nevertheless, there is a sense of guilt because he has left his country. In this sense, the sexual act, instead of uniting the poet and the land, is going to bring memories of violence and death. This is the connection between poem six and seven: if on the one hand the former describes love-making, the latter describes the death of a shopkeeper who was assassinated in his house by mysterious gunmen. The contrast between the two sections can only be understood in the light of a poetical guilt that does not let the poet forget that his poetry is shaped by a history of violent disputes.

This sense of repentance gets more punitive in poem VII, when the reader is presented, once more, with the poetic *terza rima*. The poet’s voice is practically unheard

and what predominates is the narrative by William Strathearn, one of Heaney's colleagues. In twenty eight tercets, Strathearn "speaks of his unmotivated, terrorist murder at the hands of two off-duty Protestant policemen" (Cavanagh 130). This number is relevant for it is the number of the stations of the cross multiplied by two. Thus, the grave tone of the poem is indicative of an emblematic attempt to consecrate an event that was widely discussed and portrayed in media. Nevertheless, such as the people who condemned Jesus Christ, the act of writing about the shopkeeper is not enough for Heaney, for he himself feels that he is partially guilty of his murder. Thus, at the end of the poem, the poet asks for his forgiveness:

Forgive the way I have lived indifferent –  
forgive my timid circumspect involvement

I surprised myself by saying, 'Forgive  
My eye', he said, 'all that's above my head'. (258)

The poet feels he lived a comfortable and indifferent life, while sectarian killings were enacted. In poem eight, Heaney's sense of guilt is multiplied for he meets the archaeologist Tom Delaney and his second cousin, Colum, who was murdered in a road block. The poem oscillates in tone between that of a friendly but serious chat and the accusations of the cousin for not being in Bellaghy when he was buried. With seven long stanzas of more than twelve lines, Heaney begins the poem by describing his last visit to the hospital. He dies prematurely at the age of 32 and his spirit comes back to ask the poet "Oh lucky poet, tell me why/ What seemed deserved and promised passed by?" (260). Heaney, at a loss for words, replies that he does not know, since the "banter" – the joking habit of the Irish – fails him. It seems as if in face of death his gifts do not let him proceed with his creative mode. As soon as the poet acknowledges his powerlessness, the ghost of Colum appears. His first sentence, "Your gift will be a candle in our house" (260), indicates that Heaney's poetry brings comfort, since candles are used for light and prayers. Nevertheless, in the continuation of the poem, the cousin states that even the press showed more sympathy for his death. Heaney replies by saying he regretted being absent and that the poem he wrote to him, "The Stand at Lough Beg", was a symbolic healing of his pain:

'I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg  
and the strand empty at daybreak.  
I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake'.

'You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.  
You confused evasion and artistic tact.  
The protestant who shot me through the head  
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you (261)

The metaphorical guilt of the poet added to the cousin's resentment turn the poem into a debate about the nature of art. At the moment Colum accuses Heaney's poetry of avoiding the truth, the poet displays his personal dilemma of not addressing the Northern Irish situation in a clearer way. Conversely, this sentence subtly points to the criticism his work received throughout his career. Heaney, in "Station Island" recovers the political impetus of his lyric and discusses issues such as commitment and artistic freedom. However, it is clear that until poem IX, he could not reach a liberated form of art.

This dilemma is seen in poem IX, which starts with a reflection about the state of political prisoners in the voice of the hunger striker Francis Hughes. Hughes was a member of the IRA and, due to the death of a British policeman, was sentenced to 83 years in prison. Modulating the attitude of self-pity into self-punishment, the author starts the poem as Hughes. Further on, he tries to get rid of his historical burden, by stating "I hate how quick I was to know my place,/ I hate where I was born, hate everything/ That made me biddable and unforthcoming," (263). Heaney sees himself as a traitor and longs for liberation. At the end, wishing to be part of a tribe who adores the deer, the poet expresses his longing for a liberated form of art, which starts to take shape in the following poems.

### **3. Forgiveness: "Strike your own note"**

In the last part of his poem, Seamus Heaney establishes the formal transformation of his lyric through a religious and symbolic absolution. Poems, X, XI and XII change the rhythm of the composition as a whole because of two peculiarities: 1) they represent the end of the station; 2) they are written from the point of view of the poet – with the exception of the last poem in which James Joyce's presence, like that of a mystic god, gives advice to the poet. This personal perspective alters the critical tone of the previous stations and introduces a sense of renewal in the presence of daylight. The last day is also celebrated with the mass, thus, it also reinforces the view of renewal. Moreover, it is as if the poet is leaving a symbolic hell and entering a creative paradise.

The poet is in the last day of the pilgrimage and the ghosts from the past are practically left behind. However, before his morning confession, in poem X the poet is in the lodge, having his break-*fast* (literally the end of two days of fasting). This is when he has a revelation through the careful observation of a cup. It is as if the cup, unifying references from childhood and the story of *Sweeney Astray*, had the power to transform ordinary objects into literary symbols. In the six stanzas of quatrains, Heaney describes how old objects are seen in new light. While in the first four stanzas the cup is compared to the one which was used as a prop in the play, *The Loving Cup*, in the last two, it is transformed into Ronan's psalter, recovered from the river. This transmutation of the cup from a loving to a cult object is related to James Joyce's technique of epiphany, in which the observation of a thing could bring about the transformation of a life-time. This cup

can also be referred to the moment of transubstantiation in a Catholic mass. This change that the object brings is the absolution he has been seeking to find throughout the poem.

Such is the importance of the cup that its revelation brings a “dazzle of impossibility” (264), or the glimpse of a lyric that would not be tormented by the burden of history. In Heaney’s words, “when I was writing... Station Island I needed something to represent the reality of the ‘magic, enchantment, spell’, something that consumed the ordinary... something signifying possibility, a farther range” (5). This range is given by the next poem, in which the poet, after a religious confession, translates the poem “Cantar Del alma que se huela de conocer a Dios por fe” by John of the Cross. This prayer also echoes *The Divine Comedy*’s structure, since it is written in tercets, but it differs in that because it inserts a chorus at the last verse, “although it is the night” (p. 265). The mystic poem seeks to prove that, even though the world is made of darkness, as the chorus suggest, it is possible to have a mystical connection with God. This is performed through an interior attitude of meditation and devotion.

The twelve stanzas dedicated to the translation of the poem by John of the Cross (it has seventeen totally) empties the senses of all sensation coming to them from the *outside*, and sensitize the body only from the inside. This is reached through the drinking of the “fountain of water” and the parting of the “living bread”. In addition to being clear biblical references to the Samaritan woman at the Well and the Last Supper of Jesus Christ, these elements indicate the poet is finally able to leave the poetry of darkness, as represented by initial poems, and reach enlightenment. Thus, the food or bread of this new lyric is going to be the lightness that stems from forgiveness. However, this is not simply an exterior absolution, but interior, since Heaney will not feel distressed for not writing about civil violence, but reinvigorated to dedicate himself to the possibilities of language and the enchantment that is brought by the small epiphanies of the ordinary life.

The presence of James Joyce in the last poem, in seventeen stanzas of *terza rima*, reinforces the necessity of change. If on the one hand this transformation is the poet’s reconciliation with himself, on the other hand, it is the acceptance of exile and the interchange of cultural values. In his personal search for forgiveness, the poet incorporates a heteroglossia of literary personas to finally, “write/ for the joy of it” (267). The end of the poem represents a paradoxical sacred and profane illumination: while translating John of the Cross, Heaney discovers James Joyce – while writing in the *terza rima* of Dante. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while enchanted by religious life, discovers his real vocation was an autonomous form of art, which would not dwell on nationalism or a constant search for “originality”. Like Joyce, Heaney left Ireland. Most certainly, Heaney’s poetry after *Station Island* will be faithful to the multiplicity of the larger world, in its differences and heterogeneity.

\* \* \*

Through the examination of the poem “Station Island” it is possible to envision a new form of poetry in the writer’s *oeuvre*. In search of an invigorated form of art, Heaney purges his sins in a Catholic pilgrimage that reconciles his childhood, youth and maturity. In this journey, the poet frees himself from the burden of history and becomes free to write about his personal beliefs. The act of writing “Station Island” produces a “polyphonic awareness” in which the poet becomes conscious of his poetic journey. More importantly, it reaffirms the power of poetic discourse. As he states in his “Crediting Poetry”, poetry’s strength lies in the persuasion of “that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it” (467). Thus, it reinforces the Classical view that poetry promotes self and cultural knowledge, while instructing and delighting.

## Notes

- 1 Merriam-Webster (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dantesque>) dictionary offers Dantean, Dantescan and Dantesque as synonyms that refer to the Italian poet Dante Alighieri.
- 2 Even though Mikhail Bakhtin used the term ‘heteroglossia’ to characterize the novelistic genre, “Station Island” bears similarities to the novelistic structure due to the different dialogues it portrays. Also, recent poetic studies have been drawing parallels between Seamus Heaney’s work and the bakhtinian heteroglossia. Some examples are Eugene O’Brien’s *Irelands of the Mind*, and Michael Molino’s “Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality: Seamus Heaney, the ‘English’ Language, and Ulster’s Troubles”. More broadly, Nerys Williams’ book on Modern Poetry, published in 2011 by Oxford University Press, also applies heteroglossia to poetry, along with Helga Geyer-Ryan’s *Heteroglossia in the Poetry of Bertolt Brecht and Tony Harrison*. Other sources are Larifs Pedersen’s article on “The Waste Land” (T. S. Eliot) and David Morris’s on Robert Burns. Based on the new trends of poetic research, it is clear that Bakhtin’s terminology answers many questions raised by modern and contemporary poets.
- 3 The text by Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile”, does not tackle a specific genre, but develops the problematic relationship between artists, intellectuals and their homelands. It is clear that poetry has inspired his theory since, at the end of the article, Said quotes Wallace Stevens: “Exile, in the words of Wallace Stevens is ‘a mind of winter’ in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable” (148, 149)
- 4 For Heaney and Dante see: Fumagalli, Maria Cristina Fumagalli. “Station Island”: Seamus Heaney’s “Divina Commedia.” *Irish University Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1996): 127-142 and Manganiello, Dominic. The Language of Exile: Heaney and Dante. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* , Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring, 2000): 100-113.

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# *Seamus Heaney in Translation*<sup>1</sup>

## **São Francisco e os Pássaros**

**Tradução: Paulo Vizioli**

Quando Francisco predicou amor às aves,  
Elas ouviram, esvoaçaram, farfalharam  
Para o azul como um bando de palavras

Livres dos santos lábios para a diversão.  
Depois de um amplo giro, ao seu redor zoaram,  
Piruetaram sobre os mantos dos irmãos

Chilreantes e travessas, no ar deixando o risco  
De suas danças, como imagens num sendeiro.  
Foi o melhor poema que compôs Francisco,

Verdadeiro o argumento, o tom ligeiro.

## **São Francisco e as Aves**

**Tradução: Benedicto Ferri de Barros**

Quando Francisco pregou amor aos passarinhos  
Eles ouviram, adejaram,  
E como um bando de palavras brincalhonas

Partidas de seus lábios sacros,  
Ergueram-se no azul.  
Voltaram revoando,

Cirandaram chilreando à volta de seu crânio,  
Piruetaram entre os mantos de seus frades,  
Cantaram de alegria e como imagens  
Voltaram para o azul.  
E esse foi o melhor poema de Francisco,

Falando a verdade, iluminado e docemente.

## **São Francisco e os Pássaros**

**Tradução: Darcy França Denófrío**

Quando Francisco pregava amor aos pássaros  
eles ouviam, alvoroçavam, e atropelavam-se  
rumo ao azul, como um bando de palavras

libertas por graça de seus lábios santos:  
então retornavam, rufavam ao redor de sua cabeça  
e piruetavam sobre os capuzes dos irmãos;

com as asas dançavam, de pura alegria brincavam  
e cantavam como se fossem imagens alçando vôo.  
Este foi o melhor poema que Francisco compôs:

seu verdadeiro argumento, seu leve tom.

## **São Francisco e as Aves**

**Tradução: Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira**

Francisco pregava amor para as aves.  
Que, ouvindo, voavam para o azul  
Qual bando de palavras suaves,

Soltas em chiste de seus lábios santos.  
De volta traçavam piruetas  
Junto aos rostos dos frades e seus mantos

Dançavam sobre a asa e, de alegria  
Cantavam, como imagens aladas  
O que foi de Francisco a poesia

Melhor, mais fiel, leve e inspirada.

## **Note**

- 1 The translation of “St. Francis and the Birds” was published by the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies on its *ABEI Newsletter* No. 10, January 1996.





# Interviews





# *Interviewing Hugo Hamilton*

Laura P.Z. Izarra  
Patricia de Aquino Prudente

**Abstract:** *This interview took place at the Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil, on 19th August 2013. Hamilton discussed the relationship between language and identity and reflected upon the art of writing in his novel The Speckled People which is part of the curriculum of the undergraduate course of Linguistic and Literary Studies in English.*

**Keywords:** *Hugo Hamilton; The Speckled People; language; identity; nation.*

On 19 August 2013, Hugo Hamilton spent the afternoon strolling around Ibirapuera Park. Amongst tropical trees, wild flowers, local birds, casual passersby and a beautiful sunset by the lake, Hugo wondered about the art of writing and how it feels like to get under the skin of his characters. After this peaceful moment, he experienced the opposing scenario of the rush-hour traffic of a 12-million-people metropolis in order to get to the University of São Paulo for his interview. At the university, Hugo had some time to enjoy the calm atmosphere of Clube dos Professores, a cozy restaurant in the heart of a preserved area of woods, before meeting the students and general public. There were a hundred and fifty people in the room. Everybody was delighted by his presence, the reading of his work and his interesting reflections on language and identity motivated by the various questions from the audience.<sup>1</sup>

**LI:** I warmly welcome Hugo Hamilton to the University of São Paulo. It is a great honour to have him here tonight and, on behalf of the W.B. Yeats Chair of Irish Studies and of the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies (ABEI), I'd like to thank him for having accepted our invitation to speak about his work with our students, colleagues and readers in general. I'd also like to introduce Patricia de Aquino who is an M.A. student of our Programme of English Language and Literatures. She researches issues of identity in Hugo Hamilton's memoirs. Nearly every year, the Programme receives an Irish writer. This year, *The Speckled People* is included in the syllabus of the course Literature and Difference, which is part of the students' curriculum, and the students will have the opportunity of participating in the interview.

Let me give you a short introduction of Hugo Hamilton and his work. In his memoirs, he writes that he grew up in Dublin speaking Irish or German exclusively at home

while English, the language spoken outside, was forbidden by his nationalist father. Thus, language becomes the center of his work as he has that alienated sense of never really belonging to any of the three languages. Hamilton became a journalist and then a writer. He has published seven novels – four are set in Central Europe: *Surrogate City* (1990), *The Last Shot* (1991), *The Love Test* (1995) and *Disguise* (2008); three in Dublin: *Headbanger* (1996), *Sad Bastard* (1998) and *Hand in the Fire* (2010) – a collection of short stories, *Dublin, Where the Palm Trees Grow* (1996); and two personal memoirs, *The Speckled People* (2003) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006). *The Speckled People* achieved widespread international acclaim and got many prizes, such as the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. The French translation also received a prize, the *Prix Femina Étranger*; the Italian translation won *The Premio Giuseppe Eberto* in 2004.

Hugo, would you like to start by reading some excerpts from *The Speckled People*?

**HH:** Well, thank you all for coming. First of all, thank you, Laura, for inviting me to Brazil and also to Patricia for showing me São Paulo. It's fantastic for me to come to a country which is truly speckled. I should have come here when I was 20. I would have fit in really well. I'm just beginning to realize now by being here for a few days what a truly mixed society can be like. The kind of hang ups that we have in Europe about nationalism and identity are issues I grew up with as a child, particularly in the case of my father who was trying to hold on to culture that was in the process of dying out. So very simply, my story is one about language and identity crisis. My father wanted us to speak the ancient language, which is Irish, which nobody on the street really spoke anymore; my mother spoke German because she came from Germany; and outside on the street there were all these people that spoke a different language (English). So, for me, as I described in my book, going outside the front door was walking into a different country. As children, we had three different countries: two countries inside the house (Irish and German) and another country outside (English). It's quite bewildering. I still haven't quite figured it out. That's what I do as an author. Anyway, I wanted to begin with a passage which describes the street outside...

*Outside our house is a different place.*

*One day my mother let us go down to the shop on our own, but she gave us a piece of rope and told us all to hold on to it so we would not get separated. An old woman stopped and said that was a great way of making sure we didn't get lost. My mother says we're surrounded by old women. Miss Tarleton, Miss Tomlinson, Miss Leonard, Miss Browne, Miss Russell, Miss Hosford, two Miss Ryans, two Miss Doyles, two Miss Lanes, Mrs Robinson, Mrs McSweeney and us in between them all. Some of them are friendly and others hate us. Some of them are Protestant and others are Catholic. The difference is that the Protestant bells make a song and the Catholic bells only make the same gong all the time.*

*You have to be careful where you kick the ball, because if it goes into Miss Tarleton's garden next door you'll never get it back. She told us not to dare put a foot*

*inside her garden. Mrs McSweeney is nice and calls you for a Yorkshire Toffee. The two Miss Lanes across the road have a gardener who wanted to give you back the ball one day but he couldn't. He came to the gate, ready to hand it back, but then one of the Miss Lanes appeared at the window and shook her hand. The gardener stood there not knowing what to do. We begged him please to give it back quickly before she came out, but he couldn't because he was working for Miss Lane, not for us, and she was already at the door saying, 'Give that ball here.' She said she was going to 'confiscate' it. We stood at the railings until Miss Lane said: 'Clear off. Away from the railings. Go on about your business, now.'*

*My mother laughs and says 'confiscate' doesn't mean kill or stab with a knife. It just means taking control of something that belongs to somebody else. One day I confiscated my brother's cars and threw them over the back wall into Miss Leonard's garden, but we got them back. One day, Miss Tarleton declared a football amnesty and we got nine balls back, some of which never even belonged to us in the first place and most of which were confiscated all over again very shortly after that. Miss Tarleton might as well have handed them straight over to the Miss Lanes. My mother wants to know if the Miss Lanes play football in the kitchen at night. And she wants to know what the Miss Lanes have against her, because they just slammed the door in her face.*

*My mother says maybe they still hate Germany, but my father says they hate their own country even more. He says they still think they are living in Britain and they can't bear the sound of children speaking German on the street and, even worse, Irish. My mother says that means we have to be extra-nice to them, so they don't feel left out. You have to try not to throw the rockets up so high because the bang frightens old women and makes them think the Easter Rising is coming back again. You have to make sure the ball doesn't go into their garden. My father says it's your own fault if you lose the ball, because their garden is their country and you can't go in there. He says our country is divided into two parts, north and south, like two gardens. He says six countries in the north have been confiscated and are still controlled by Britain. The difference between one country and another is the song they sing at the end of the night in the cinema and the flag they have on the post office and the stamps you lick. When my father was working in the north of Ireland once, in a town called Coleraine, he refused to stand up in the cinema because they were playing the wrong song. Some people wanted to put him against the wall and shoot him. And then he left his job and came back to his own country where he could speak Irish anytime he liked.*

*So, you have to be careful what country you kick your ball into and what song you stand up for in the cinema. You can't wave the wrong flag or wear the wrong badges, like the red poppies with the red dot in the middle. You have to be careful who to be sad for and not commemorate the people who died on the wrong side (44-46).*

**LI:** I think this excerpt gives us the opportunity to ask many questions. One of our students from the morning class, Gabriel Salomão wonders a lot about the narrator's way of looking things through the eyes of a child. Which are the difficulties you faced

in writing this book from this perspective? Was it easy to do that? Moreover, as this passage also refers to the garden as a country and how it is being divided, Amanda Chaud and Débora Barreto also asked another question about the intersection of spaces: Germany, Ireland and your father's idea of Ireland. We see overlapping descriptions of these places throughout the book. How were these different spaces being configured in the mind of a child?

**HH:** First of all, I will deal with the way that I wrote the memoir. I had always been trying to escape from that whole story of my childhood. As a young adult, I didn't want to know about it. I denied the whole story. I never talked to anybody about it. Even my friends, I didn't tell anyone very much. So, it's only as a writer, in my 40s, that I began to look at that hidden past and what really opened it up for me was the fact that my mother kept diaries. Most of the events in *The Speckled People* are recorded in some ways in her diaries. So, I began to read them. It's almost as if I became a child again. We can ask ourselves that question: when do we actually grow up? Most of us actually remain children all through our lives. But particularly when you're a writer, you hold on to many of the faculties in a child's mind; this ability to see things for the first time. I think that's what happened while writing my memoir. I was seeing the street I lived on for the first time, reliving all those experiences. Everything was parceled off into three countries. I don't know if you have that here so much in Brazil, but in Ireland everybody's garden is fenced off with a little fence and a hedge and that is their country. That's my experience. Every time you kicked the ball, it went to somebody's country and that was it. It got lost. But also, everybody had their own stories and their own histories. My mother had her history of Germany and that was like a country that she talked about. My father talked about the Ireland that he had hoped Ireland would be (Gaelic speaking). It's a fantasy that he had. So, effectively, everybody lived in these different parceled off places.

**PA:** Still on the question of countries and space, I think it's very beautiful the way you construct the image of these gardens and of the separation of Ireland as well. How do you see these two different countries that you might kick your ball into, especially in the case of the two Irelands?

**HH:** Ireland is growing up in the last twenty years and one of the best things that Ireland has achieved is to have peace in the North. It is one of the things that dragged Ireland down. It was partly this idea that Ireland was an imaginary space. People believed at some stage that Ireland would be reunited. Protestants in Northern Ireland believed they still belonged to Britain. You can see it from that passage I read. A lot of old women on the street were protestant and they still believed they were in Britain. My father was very proud of having this very noisy catholic, Irish speaking family in the middle of this area in Dublin which often seemed like it still belonged to Britain. Those tensions were magnified in Northern Ireland in Belfast where it became a war. The great thing for Ireland is that we've put an end to that war. We are getting on with a

peace process now which allows us to live together more like speckled or mixed people, accepting each other and being much more tolerant. So, my book actually describes that diversity as well as the insular way of looking at culture, protecting and keeping it pure from other cultures. That's my experience as a child. I suppose that the most graphic illustration comes quite early in the book where the narrator describes going down to the sea with his brother and throwing stones at the waves. Obviously, this is a ludicrous idea, to hold back the waves, like the dog we find who is also barking at the waves. There is obviously a parallel there between what my father is trying to do the impossible, holding back the British culture, and us, alongside the dog, are also doing this strange thing, holding back the waves.

**PA:** It's very interesting that you mention this insular way of thinking. How do you think the geography of the island has influenced the work of artists over time, such as Joyce, and the work of contemporary writers?

**HH:** For us it's an island nation. The sea plays a huge part in all our writing and our culture. We had this rebel song that people sang in the 60s which said "thank God we are surrounded by water." I mean, it describes a very insular way of thinking. The actual fact is that we feel a little bit lost or disconnected in Ireland, and often proud of it. We want to be connected to America. We have always had the feeling, I'm sure it is difficult for Brazilians to grasp, of being a small country which is so self obsessed in a way with staying on this island and being regarded as different. So the sea does play this remarkable role. One of the most famous things Joyce has said was that he wanted to go beyond that shore. He wanted to cross that sea and become part of Europe. And in a way, that's my story as well. In my home as a child, I was living most of the time in fact in a small German town which my mother told me about.

**LI:** Considering the historical violent relations between Britain and Ireland, how much was the construction of your identity, or family identity, influenced by the conflict of having a grandfather aligned with the British Empire and a father being against it?

**HH:** I say this every time I talk about identity and nationalism that these are components of an invented story. It's about the landscape, the kind of buildings we put up, the kind of football we play, how different we are from other people. There is a huge amount of details going to the making up of an identity, but it is essentially a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. And that was in a way the challenge and the kind of predicament that we found ourselves in as children. My father had decided that he was going to tell a particular story about Ireland, how our identity revolved around the reclaiming of the Irish language. Rejecting all other identities, except the German identity, which is a sort of strange conflict of interest. He accepted the German identity into the house, we spoke German, but he rejected completely the British identity. He was trying to tell a story without the people outside on the street, as if he was blanking out or erasing part of the country itself. For example, his own father, my grandfather who was a sailor in



the British Navy. In order to create this new story of Ireland, my father erases his own father. So, there was a big photograph of my grandfather, John Hamilton, as a sailor in the British Navy. He put that away into the wardrobe and hid it there from us. He never told us anything about it, along with his medals from the First World War. It was effectively erasing his own biography, his own past, in order to create this new identity. And yes, the story fails in the end because I was born, I became a writer and I told the expanded story.

**Audience:** I am Sergio Malacrida and a passage that called my attention in your memoir is when you wrote that your father loses the language war. Could you say a little bit more about how people are dealing with the question of language in Ireland nowadays?

**HH:** Well, it has to be explained that the Irish language began to go into decline in the eighteenth century and there was huge impact on it again during the famine years in the 1840s when a lot of people emigrated to America. So, the language was very much decimated. There were various revival movements: the Celtic Revival in the early 1900s and then my father's generation in the 1950s, asserting the newly independent Irish nation. These were attempts to keep the language alive, but the English language had already taken over in Ireland. What has basically happened in Ireland is that we translated ourselves into the English language. Like Joyce, Beckett and many writers after them; we became very eloquent in this new language. It's possible to say that we became more eloquent in this foreign language that we might have been in the Irish language because it gave us an opportunity to hide, to tell, to present ourselves on a world stage. That creates a wonderful challenge particularly for the arts. I think it's one of the great benefits for Ireland. It's one of the lucky stories that the English language, which was initially the language of the oppressor, became the language of rescue. We were saved by the English language. My father would hate to see me saying this. *[laughs]*.

**PA:** Still on this question of language, in another passage your father says that your language is your country. Then, a little bit later, he says that if the world had only one language it would be a place with homeless people. Do you think it would be possible that if people spoke more than one language, instead of being homeless, they could have many homes? Do you think this could be possible?

**HH:** I think so. I think languages, unlike my father's view, are very elastic and are constantly being reshaped. I mean, even if you hear people in Ireland talking the way they do now it sounds a lot more like American sitcoms. We're evolving all the time. I remember my mother often saying that as long as we understood each other that was the most important thing, something which rarely happened in our house. And it wasn't just to do it with language. It was because people didn't want to understand each other. But, yeah, I have a very open view towards language. I love the fact that there are so many different languages. I love speaking German because, suddenly when



I speak German, I am in a different country. In some ways my father was right. Your country is not so much a territory, but an imaginative landscape which has a particular form of memory and a particular way of looking at the world. So when I'm speaking German I'm a different person, when I'm speaking Irish I'm a different person and I'm sure if I learn Portuguese I would smile a lot more and I would be a sunny person. So, language creates an imagination as well. It is an imaginary thing. I don't think it's possible to have just one language in the world. It's good to have so many different ways of thinking and imagining.

**AU:** You said that suddenly you translated yourself into English, right? So you were able to talk about yourself and your story in another language. Was it confusing to deal with the fact that your mother taught you to be silent when in contact with people outside your house and when facing prejudice? It was quite opposite, wasn't it?

**HH:** Well, that's true. First of all, you touched on a very interesting point there. The book is written in English which for me is the forbidden language, but it is also the foreign language, the language of the people on the street. These are the people I want to tell the story to. I want to connect with them. When the book was translated into German and I read from it in German, it seemed more difficult because it took away a protective barrier that I had created by writing in English. Although the events are all true, language creates a kind of protective distance from the events themselves. Otherwise, I think for me, if I had written it in German, I would have been too close to the story. I think that's what a writer does. And you mentioned silence; it was a huge thing in our family. We were a very silent family. Well, if you had met me in my 20s I wouldn't be saying a word. There was a silence cast on the family because of my father's brutality and because of the threat all the time on the outside on the street. We were afraid to speak about ourselves. So, we almost became this kind of hidden people, and that's one of the reasons that I needed to write. My writing provides the same safe place that my mother finds in her diaries, putting in all the kind of things she can't say publicly. Effectively, that's what I am doing as a writer, dealing with that silence.

**PA:** You just mentioned the hidden people, so I'd like to ask something related to that. Your mother's uncle, uncle Gerd, refused to stop speaking with the Jews on the street and because of that your family became like people with no faces. So, how was it like to be German and not to abide by Nazism? And how was it like to be judged and punished by other people who would take you for Nazis, as the boys in the street?

**HH:** I think that was particularly difficult for my mother, particularly. I was called Eichmann. It was hard for my mother, bearing in mind that she came from a family in which her uncle resisted the Nazis, he was the Lord Mayor of this town and refused to carry out the Nazi project, was thrown out of office. He went through the war with no money, an outcast, possibly lucky not to have suffered any worse. It's bizarre and ironic that we were called Nazis in Ireland, a place where the Nazis got to and which

as largely unaffected by the war, having remained neutral. But at that stage the British culture became dominant in Ireland and every child had heard the story of the war from Britain. As children of a German mother, we became aware of history at a very early age. It's what all Germans have gone through, dealing with their past. It has to be said that Germany has done this in a comprehensive and courageous way, something which is ongoing. There was a movement in the sixties when young people began to accuse their parents and ask them all the questions. There is an achievement to be seen in that. Germans have looked into their history and continue to acknowledge the crimes of the past.

**AU:** My name is Lilian Gasparetti Abdoullah and I'd like to know what made you write. You struggled so hard to run away from the story and you decided one day to write a book about it. What made you do that? I'm also interested in knowing how aware you were of the effects of this upbringing before you actually wrote the book.

**HH:** I think I must have become a writer very early because my mother was a good storyteller. Like all children we had nightmares and my mother devised this great technique where she got us up out of bed in the middle of the night when we had bad dreams. I can remember very clearly. She'd give us a crayon or a pencil and we were asked to draw out the nightmare. And once the nightmare was drawn out she'd put it in her diary, so we didn't have to dream about it or be scared anymore. But I think, actually, it was just creating even more nightmares. I tried to escape from that nightmare of my family. I'm not the first writer to say that your family is a nightmare. I tried to escape from it completely. I just grew up like other children. I listened to Bob Dylan, whatever. But it's impossible to escape from your family, no more than you can escape from your own story, or your memory, or your identity. It's almost like cutting off part of your limbs. Because if you cut off your memory, if you deny your own memory, it's a bit like a country trying to deny its past. It's what compelled me to become a writer. I had to find some way of explaining this kind of mystery of my own childhood and there's really no way of explaining anything until you write it down. You don't know really what's there in your story until it's on paper. Then you can look at it and say: oh yeah, that's what actually happened to me! So, it's not as though I knew there were terrible things wrong or hard to talk about. I was very aware as a child of my mother's sadness and her homesickness, but I had no way of explaining it, no way of telling it in a story and nobody to tell it to until I found a way to write it.

**AU:** Hi, I'm Thais Vidal. This book is about your life, but I'd like to know how much of it is fiction. Can you separate imagination from reality? It seems that you play a lot with that. For instance, there is a moment in the book that your mother says her life was a movie. What do you think the role of fiction in your book is?

**HH:** Your question is very interesting. Every memoir writer has to deal with that question. I can point to all those events. You could ask my brothers and sisters and they

will say, yeah, that dog was there barking at the waves, and yes we did get locked in the wardrobe. All these events had occurred, but once you begin to write them, it takes on a significance. And it also becomes a story, a retelling, a kind of imaginary way of retrieving your memory, a kind of fiction, you might even say. Writing it in English produces a kind of dramatization in itself, because all the events happened in German. So, already there is some creative, reimagining process at work. Also, the nature of writing, the nature of storytelling, is that once you begin to tell a story it removes the action from the reality, we experience it through the medium of the story, we feel close to what happened without actually going through it, we can imagine being locked in the wardrobe without actually having to go inside and reenact it for ourselves. Your memory is a dramatization, a special way of retaining the facts, no other person can quite keep the same series of facts. If my brother was to write the story it would be dramatized in his own way. How else can you tell a story? It is always a dramatization. What you remember and what you forget. That's not to say that this is a fictional book, only that your life becomes converted into a story when you begin to tell it to somebody else. Something happens in that process of telling; any event that happened takes on a heightened reality which allows other people listening to the story to believe it. And that's the only way I can describe it. Every now and again, even though I have written the story, I revert to my childhood and become the small boy again, standing at the seafront with these unexplained memories.

**AU:** I am Lance Pettitt. Just to pick on Thais's point. It's not to see fiction as a thing. It is to see fiction as you've indicated Hugo, an enabling feature. So, it enables the person who's writing or telling to express something they couldn't put in words and it becomes so that it allows the person to whom the story is being told to keen into and identify with. I think that's the key thing that fiction shouldn't be seen as a faking thing. Faking is actually part of the enabling feature.

**HH:** That's very interesting. Every now and again, you come across details in a novel that you say the writer couldn't have made that up. That's so true. And you run with it. You want to believe it. You want to believe a novel, the truth that is achieved in storytelling. The difference with the memoir is that sometimes you're told to believe the details. You enter in it in good faith.

**LI:** Would you like to read from your memoirs to show how your style helps to make that up, or better still, to read from your second memoir *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*? By the way, the American publication has another title, *The Harbor Boys*. Why did they change the title?

**HH:** It's a marketing thing!

**PA:** Do you ever think about writing a third book? A sequel? Is there something you haven't written yet?

**HH:** My autobiography gets into all of my books. My next book entitled *Every Single Minute* has very key autobiographical moments in it as well, even though it's pure fiction. Anybody who's read these books will remember or will recognize certain facts, so I won't say any more than that. Well, I'll read just a very short passage, just describing my mother. The best way to describe her is how she made cakes.

*First of all, you have to mix the butter with the sugar. You have to do it hard, my mother says, everything has to be done very gently because you don't want to make an unhappy cake. If you bake in anger it will taste of nothing. You have to treat the ingredients with respect and affection. You lift the mixture and slip the beaten egg inside, the way you would slip a love letter into an envelope, she says and laughs out loud. You fold in the flour with air-kisses and you stir in one direction only, otherwise people will get the taste of doubt. And when you lay the mixture into the baking tin, you place a piece of brown paper all around the edge and another flat piece across the top to create a dome that will keep it from burning. And once the letter is posted and the cake is in the oven, you have to be very quiet and wait. You don't trudge around the house shouting and slamming doors. You don't argue and you don't say a bad word about anyone. You whisper, you nod, you tiptoe around the kitchen. (78)*

**LI:** Another student from the morning class, Thierry Vieira, would like to know what the consequences of using the point of view of a child narrator for language and form are.

**HH:** It took a long time for me to write *The Speckled People*. I like to tell people it took forty years. Actually, in terms of writing and researching it took ten years. I began to write it as an adult looking back and it was almost like I was trying to protect myself from actually entering into the story myself. I was trying to laugh at the way we were and I found that very flawed, as an artist. It was fake, you would say. I was faking it. So eventually, I got this freedom while I was living in Germany and I began to suddenly discover that the only way to write this book was to reenter the mind of this child. It allowed me to do a lot of the things that you cannot do in the voice of an adult. As an adult you tend to analyse; you explain what's happening. What I've done here is to allow things to happen and non-judgmental narrative allows the reader to become the adult, the analyst. The reader does all the explanation, so much so that in parts of the book, and this would be impossible for an adult writer, the narrator misinterprets his parents. The boy repeats things that his mother or father say but he doesn't quite understand why they are saying them. This allowed me as a writer to make deliberate, childish mistakes, doubts, precious moments of misunderstanding. That's something an adult voice cannot easily achieve. The child narrator is exempt from the rules. While the child narrator deliberately reads his parents wrong, it allows the story to be explained much more clearly.

**AU:** [Sergio] – I want to ask you another question. In the memoir, Uncle Ted gave you a book called *Black Like me*. He told you to be on the side of losers. You didn't explore very much the relationship between your uncle and your father, but of course it seems that they don't have the same way of thinking about language or identity. Could you tell us a little bit more about it?

**HH:** They were both very silent people actually. They never talked about West Cork where they came from. It's only after my father died, after I published this book, that I began to talk to uncle Ted and he ended up telling me a little bit about West Cork. Still, there is a very restricted view of the past and I was trying to work this out. There was actually a rivalry of some sort between my father and the Jesuit. I think it's got something to do with my mother, but I still haven't quite figured that out. There's a lot going on in a family that you cannot really access as a child, and you can only guess at later on, but I think my father envied the Jesuit. I think he envied the Jesuit because he could be more silent. My father could never match his brother's silence.

**PA:** You read a passage about your mother and I think one of the very interesting things you do in your memoirs is how you portray the role of women in relation to the war. You show, for example, how your aunt gave shelter to Jewish people, how women suffered from violence, were violated and had this very complicated relationship with the armies on both sides, the Nazis and the Allies. Could you comment on your work on women in both of your memoirs?

**HH:** Well, it's great you ask me that question. I think as a child I became very close to my mother's imagination. She was the one who talked. She was the one who told the stories. My father was a person who made speeches, banged his fist on the table and the clouds started shaking. My mother was the person who opened the world of my imagination, that comes from her storytelling. Her way of thinking has entered into my writing. I'm still imagining through her mind whenever I write, when I collect something, when I observe things. It's not my father that's observing things, he is more idealistic and dogmatic, fighting with the world. It's not my father that notices something because he is staring ahead at the imaginary republic he wishes to create. It's my mother that's discovering the world. So, I would say that it's the feminine side that's doing the storytelling.

**AU:** My name is Isabela Fernandes. Based on your memoir, one of the things that you told you were obliged to do was to have an Irish education with a nationalist orientation. How did that education contribute to your identity?

**HH:** I think it was a real problem, not only for me, but for a lot of Irish people. We grew up with this lingering animosity for Britain. Even though we secretly loved everything that was coming from Britain. Britain gave us John Lennon, it gave us the Rolling Stones? We never quite understood the conflict in Northern Ireland, it was a contradiction in so many ways, completely irrational like most conflicts. But there was an inherited anger that a lot of Irish people felt and we had to work hard to get rid of. I think it was there in my father's anger, something he inherited. I collected things from my mother in her way of thinking, but I also imitated my father a lot. It took me a long time to get rid of that anger. I had to make a conscious decision when I was in my teens and my twenties: I'm not going to be like my father. I felt I had to reject all of the things that he stood for, even the music that he loved. And that is a form of anger in itself, rejecting your

own father, something my father did to his father before me. And it's funny that the same thing happened to a lot of the German people. They hated their parents because they belonged to the Nazi period. I think it's hard to get rid of those inherited ways of thinking, no matter what country you live in. Ireland is only slowly coming out of that now. It's managing to do that without forgetting, I hope.

**LI:** You have been a journalist. How much of the journalist is in your writing and how much of the writer was there in that time as a journalist?

**HH:** Yeah, I had the idea that I would become a journalist and I worked for the newspaper for a while. But a journalist's job is asking questions and I was not very good at asking questions. I was afraid to ask questions because I was probably fearful that would make other people ask me questions back, and I didn't want to tell them anything. So, my type of inquisition, my methods of enquiring are much more personal. I don't think I would have made a good journalist. I found it more interesting to write about those personal, intimate questions rather than public issues.

**AU:** [Sergio] – I'd like to ask about the next generation of the family. How do these issues of identity affect them? Can they deal with it in a better way or they just don't think about it?

**HH:** I think that's fascinating. My brothers and sisters, as I said before, we were a very silent family. We never talked about things and it's only when I began to research the book, when they realized I was writing a book, they all began to talk about it and told me stories. I think we liberated the whole family, not just my brothers and sisters, but also their children. In a lot of ways, we all became liberated by the story because there was something so terribly silent about us. I know that my own children must have thought I was a very weird father. There was something going on in my head that I couldn't talk to them about, something hidden, secretive, and the book explains a lot of that to them. How much of my silence and that strangeness has impacted on them I can't really tell. But it's a very interesting question. You can't choreograph your child's future. You cannot plan what a child is going to remember. I know my parents tried to do that. They tried to kind of create a personality in us; they put us in certain clothes. Your parents can be idealistic, but they can't ever forecast what a child is going to remember ten or twenty years later. So, it would be interesting if one of my children comes back here in twenty years time and tells their story.

**AU:** [Thais] – You said it took you ten years to write *The Speckled People*. Why was that? Are you a perfectionist?

**HH:** Well, yes, I am a perfectionist and I take a long time to write. I mean, I write explosively, I write long passages, but I go back and look at them to see if it's exactly what I wanted to say. So, my writing does take time. But particularly in this case, as I said earlier on, I think you don't know what your story is until you write it. Then, you see



it there, in front of you, look at it and say: “it wasn’t quite like that. There is something else I want to explain.” It is a process of creating it, or recreating exactly what you remember in such a way that it relates to the reader. It’s not just a confession. I think that people often mistake literary memoirs for confession. Confession is something you do with your psychiatrist or your priest. For me, it was much more important to create something; create a story. Part of that was creating the language in which this narrator was going to tell the story. It took a long time to do that. I wish I could write big novels, quick novels, but I just don’t. I have a much more minimalist way of creating my stories, my echoes.

**AU:** [Sergio] – Do you speak Irish sometimes? What’s the language that you use with your family nowadays?

**HH:** I speak English all the time. As a family now we speak to one another in English because everybody is married to people who speak English. So, English has become the operative language. My brother still lives in the house that we grew up and he’s changed very little of it. When my mother was still alive we all spoke German. For a good few years after she died, we went on meeting for coffee or dinner in the house and still spoke German. We still sing a song in German from time to time, on about frogs going into a lake, that my mother used to sing to us as children. But now English has become our language. But you asked me if I still speak Irish? Yes, I do. I have an opportunity every now and again. There is a TV station and a radio station in Ireland which is all conducted in the Irish language. I’m often asked to comment on these stations. So, I love the opportunity of speaking Irish because it connects me to Connemara, to a place where I went as a child. It connects me to a country that seems smaller than Ireland is. It seems like when I speak Irish everybody knows one another. In English, it’s a bigger country. It’s a faster country. The same happens when I speak German. I have a different relationship to the world. My son speaks very good German and occasionally we just slip into German. So, sometimes I don’t even notice anymore.

**LI:** Thank you very much, Hugo, for your kind participation in our Programme of Linguistic and Literary Studies in English and for your elucidating answers about the art of writing. I thank all of you for the interesting questions that have made this event a very special meeting of the students with Hugo Hamilton and of Hugo Hamilton with his Brazilian readers for the first time.

## **Note**

- 1 The transcription of this interview was done by Patricia de Aquino Prudente and attempts to stay true to its oral nature.





# *Interview with Owen McCafferty*

## Scenes from the Big Picture

Fernanda Verçosa

**Abstract:** *The following interview took place at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, in August 2011. Owen McCafferty talks about his work and, in particular, on Scenes from the Big Picture. The technique of writing a play and of constructing scenes and characters is raised together with his views on translation.*

**Keywords:** *Owen McCafferty; Scenes from the Big Picture; writing a play; translation.*

Owen McCafferty (Belfast, 1961) is a Northern Irish playwright who has been compared to the great Irish dramatists John Millington Synge (Dublin, 1871-1909) and Sean O'Casey (Dublin, 1880-1964) for the musicality, quality and eccentricity of his dialogue. McCafferty is seen by critics and producers as the Eugene O'Neil of Belfast, his hometown and setting of his plays, which have been produced in some of the most important theatres in Northern Ireland, The Republic of Ireland, Scotland and England as he is the first truly important Northern Irish playwright to go beyond the clichés of political writing to document the lives of the ordinary men and women of his hometown.

By the time the interview took place, Fernanda Verçosa – whose work now consists of translating and analysing four different plays by Owen McCafferty namely, *The Waiting List* (1994), *Mojo Mickybo* (1997), *Closing Time* (2002) and *Quietly* (2012) – was completing her Masters degree in Translation and her dissertation revolved around the translation and analysis of *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003), one of McCafferty's most accomplished plays.

In the small, blue ceilinged Victorian classroom provided by the Modern Languages Department, Owen felt at ease not only to talk about the play in question, but also to deliberate on his work as a whole and speak a little about his personal life. Noteworthy were also the playwright's views on translation and the task of the translator in relation to his own plays. The resulting interview was so fruitful that the door has since been open for more.

**FV:** Owen, could you start by telling us why you wrote this play?

**Owen McCafferty:** There are things that are practical and there are things that are artistic. In the artistic sense, I wanted to put down as many stories as I could in one go. So I knew that I needed to populate the stage with characters. In a more philosophical sense, what I was attempting to do is related to the idea of maybe describing a reality of the universe. Well, I was working along those lines and if I told a lot of small stories then I would convey a sense of the bigger picture.

**FV:** And what is the big picture?

**OMC:** Well, given the end of the play, it is that our stories are important to us, but in the whole scheme of things we are only specs of dust. This is why, at the end, they all look up at the stars, which is in no way to belittle our own lives with the telling of our own stories. That is just to put them in perspective. It was always going to be set in Belfast as a whole lot of my plays and it was never something that was going to focus solely on the Troubles. What I can see that is important is that there are other aspects of our lives – that the conflict doesn't affect all the aspects of our lives – and that is what I wanted to show as well. Plenty of other things came on that weren't obviously political or sectarian in the same sense that things from here normally can be. In the practical sense, I just wanted to write a big play to see if I could do it.

**FV:** What are the themes and issues presented in the play?

**OMC:** That's a more difficult question because it's difficult to talk about that play in terms of themes. As I was concentrating on individuals and their stories, and on how they intertwined, something emerged out of that. I'll explain to you how I started that off and that might give you a better idea. I knew that I was going to write about a lot of people. I had done that before with other plays, but I had not used a lot of actors. In *Mojo Mickybo*, for example, there were seventeen characters and only two actors, and those characters aren't as developed as the ones in *Scenes from the Big Picture*. So I was writing about Belfast and in order to do that, because I didn't want to be sectarian, I had to make it in some sort of imagined community. If you read the notes in the published version of the play, it says, 'this play is set in an imagined area of Belfast'. So the first thing I thought was that if I wanted to do that I needed some focus of where these people would be or what they would do. So they eat and sleep, therefore there should be a house; they work, so there has to be a working environment, which is the abattoir. There is also recreation, which is the pub, and then there is sustenance, which is the grocery shop where they buy things. So the framework of that play was starting in a very general sense to work itself out. I used those four places and then people could also meet on the street, so there were five really. There were all these places and the general area of the stage. Oh there was a hospital as well because Betty is sick. Now, I just thought of something that answers your question quicker than this. You should concentrate on the idea of a lived day, because in that day everything happens: there's birth, there's death and it follows 24 hours. I always had that in mind.

I'll explain this to you, because it might be of use. I used to write in this old derelict house on the Ormeau Road, not far from here. I knew the accountant who owned the office next door so he used to let me write in this house. It was a big house and I used to write in the front room. There was a man living next door, whom I didn't know, but every day he used to leave the house at the same time. A taxi would call for him and he would get into it say about 11:30/12:00 and he would come back to the house in a taxi around 15:00. You could see that he had been drinking, but he had his groceries with him as well. I was trying to think how I would write a play that is essentially about him but you don't notice that it's about him. So that was one of the things that made me think I should write a bigger play and put him in it. Effectively you follow his day, but, on the way, you see everybody else's day unfold as well and that's the structure of it. In fact, in Germany it's called something else like *A Day in the Life of Frank Coin* because that's what the original title was. Or it could have been *A Life in a Day of Frank Coin* and I decided to change that.

By the by, this has nothing to do with the play or anything, but I went down to work one day and the police had cornered his house. I hadn't seen him for about two or three days and the police had cornered his house because someone had gone and murdered him. This was weird. I think just to rob him. Two young guys were convicted. They tortured him for a while. But that was the sort of thinking behind that. So in a way I wanted to encapsulate as much as I could of what we consider being a sort of modern/urban life day without the politics of it. I consciously stayed away from that. I've done that quite a few times and the main reason I do that is in case these plays are performed here. If you set them in either a nationalist or a loyalist community, that community will automatically think it's about them and the other community will think it's not about them, and I don't want that to happen.

I'm trying to think back now, there's a definite sort of socialism, I would say, running through it. There's the notion of infidelity, that's for sure. There's the idea of the past to do with the Troubles. There's a certain amount of economics in it regarding the running of business. There's disaffected youth. I remember reading an American play called *Street Scene* by Elmer Rice. I remember reading it and thinking that I would like to do that, but in a different way. So that's how that came out.

**FV:** You said that Frank Coin was inspired by that man and that things revolved around him. Is any other character inspired in anyone you know?

**OMC:** No. To write that play, to begin with, was quite technical. Because of the way I was doing it, there always had to be a lot of scenes. So, once I had picked where all the people were, I had to start populating the place. I was dictating, in a sense, how I was going to do it. So, for example, if there was going to be a birth in it, I had to add a family theme. There is a death in it, but it's a strange type of a death and it's related to uncovering one of the disappeared. Somebody lost their virginity on it. So, see, once

you realise you want to put those things in, you have to start thinking that that becomes a character. Or, if it's not going to be a character itself, it's going to have to relate to something. For example, the dead body couldn't obviously be a character so I had to think who was going to be connected to that and how I was going to treat that, which automatically led to that fella's parents. The planning of it is quite complicated, but the writing of it isn't. Actually, once I plan it all out I can write quite quickly. So I think it only took me six weeks to write it, because I had all those things and just had to write a dialogue for them. So there was nothing else real in it. The rest of it was all fiction.

**FV:** Tell me about the language you use in your plays.

**OMC:** Whenever I first started writing, I have become known for a certain thing, but I don't know if that's actually valid or not anymore. Whenever I first started writing plays I was interviewed and I said that what I wanted to do was bring the language spoken in Belfast to the stage. That's a very grandiose thing to say. I don't think that I have done anything anywhere near that. I think what might be slightly different is that, for whatever reason, I seem to be able to tune into the beat of language here. If you tune into that beat of language, it will sound like the way people speak even if you have changed that slightly by making it sound more poetic. It's just heightened in some way, if you know what I mean. That isn't the way people normally speak, it's not actually what people normally speak about even. I think if you follow the beat of something, it feels as if it is. That seems to me to be important to any play, actually. Most plays jar because of the dialogue in them, which is more akin to prose than it is to a speech pattern. In plays, all that people are doing is talk to each other one way or another. It has to sound as if they're talking to each other. You see, I'm not even sure sometimes what heightened means. Look at Belfast language in itself. You can think of Glaswegian or Cockney, or something that can be very inventive, but what I mean is that all languages have that within them. I think I just tapped into that. I don't think I added to it.

**FV:** A stage language. More inferential, perhaps?

**OMC:** It has to be a stage language in that it has to be more concise than we normally speak, and not as repetitive because you are, regardless of what people may think, being manipulative in the words you choose in order to set something else up further down the line. You know, you have to work that out in your head. There's a structure to that. So yeah, for want of a better word, it's dramatic language, not real speech and it shouldn't be real speech. Why would we want that? If you think how plays are performed, the more you write plays, the more you get to know this. And, this is going to sound obvious, but it's not obvious to those who are starting out. It is true that actors have to say the lines, so it has to be written in a certain way that allows them to say them. And it may well be that you're playing to an audience of 400 people and you have to write in such a way that that carries well. That isn't to say that people couldn't sit down on stage and look as if they're having a normal conversation. As practitioners, we're all aware that

it looks as though they're having a normal conversation, but they're not. Maybe that's the skill to it, which is to make the audience think that that's a normal conversation. If it is, I don't know how you acquire it. Maybe it's just something you have? Not in a bad sense, but it is a contrived thing that is obviously planned or calculated instead of spontaneous or natural. And it has to be. I can't imagine otherwise. I think plays would be boring beyond belief if they were just about normal things.

**FV:** How does the performance of this language work somewhere like London?

**OMC:** It seems to be different in different places. In Belfast, you're talking about a specific area of my work, but not all of my plays are like that. If the play is on in Belfast, what it means is that the audience has a short hand into it. Actors, for example, don't need to slow down at the start in order for an audience's ear to pick up what's being said. They get that right from the start. So you can enter at a certain speed. I think that, when performing, an actor needn't be as necessarily conscious about how they say something if the audience's ear is already tuned to it. But if you take a play like that and have it first performed in London, then it's different. I've had about six or seven plays now in London. It takes an audience sometimes ten or fifteen minutes to get into the rhythm of the way something is being said. That isn't just about language though, but about cultural things. I remember that when we first did *Scenes from the Big Picture*, the director Peter Gill got everybody into the theatre just before the first preview. He got all the actors into the theatre and we talked before they went on. He said that he needed to talk to them about the audience. Now, in the first production everything on the stage was blue, everything was painted blue. Some of these things will make sense and some of them won't. Peter Gill was also a writer himself and he said, 'the audience that is coming to see this (it was on at the National Theatre, so you're getting people who are quite well heeled, quite well off), they'll see my name and the first thing they'll think is that I've written the play, not Owen. They will also not believe that it's about Belfast, they will think it's about something else. Then, they'll go into the auditorium and they'll look at the stage and go, "oh no, everything's blue!" Then they'll all sit down and once you start speaking (the actors) they'll think, "oh no, this play really is about Belfast" and the very last thing they'll think is, "oh well, we can't laugh at it then, because it's about the poor."' Consequently, then, you could see how different audiences react differently. When Irish people were in, there was a lot more laughter. Now, the play had the same effect in the long run, I suppose. But there are cultural things there that aren't just about recognising words. I think it's also to do with an expectation about what the play is telling you. When that play went on in America and, as far as I could make out, didn't really do very well (I don't think it did anyway), it was because the gap and distance between Belfast and London isn't that huge, but the one between Belfast and America is bigger. They assumed that what they were going to see was a play about Belfast, what actually means that they were going to see as far as their perceptions about Belfast. So, whenever they didn't get anything sectarian in it, it didn't make any sense to them at all and they just thought it

was loads of meaningless stories and not about very much. Right, so, to answer your question again, I think the further you go away sometimes, the more the audiences start to lose the nuances. And I think that for that to work it has to be robust. But not just robust, it can't be too subtle. It has to tell a story to people about the place they know already. In non-English speaking countries the reaction is different. I sort of argue for this, although it would never happen, that for that play to work in America it should be translated into American English as it is translated into German, for example, because whoever's translating it uses the equivalent to all the little linguistic idiosyncrasies in it so it becomes more recognisable. It was done in Japan as well. There's something about that that's quite strange. I think all that really means is that English isn't a uniform language. We all assume, because we speak English in Ireland, England and America, that things are easily transferable and they don't seem to be. Well, my play isn't anyway and I think that it has to do with it being very recognisably Belfast.

**FV:** You said the first performance was in London; when you wrote the play did you have the venue in mind?

**OMC:** No, only in terms of size. I had already written a play for the National Theatre in London and they got back to me and said that they didn't want to do this at the moment because they had just done a couple of Irish plays that hadn't been so successful and they were going to leave it for a while. But they also asked me if I wanted another commission, that they would commission me to write another play. I had it in my head then that I was going to write a play that they couldn't refuse. I was going to write something that would blow them away. So, the only thing that I thought of was that, because it was at the National Theatre, it would allow me to write something big. Something that you wouldn't necessarily be allowed to do in smaller theatres. I didn't at all think about the audience in that sense. Not for a second. I've never done that. It would have worked to my advantage, I think, but I've never done that. The idea is that if you look at something that's specific and close and you play close attention to it, it should become universal. It should relate to all our psyches. If you just hone in on one, you know...

**FV:** You're talking about making a play universal. What is in this play that you see as universal and what is local?

**OMC:** You see, to be honest, I thought all of it was both. I tried to pack as much as I could into that. That, I considered, had to do with a normal day. The language, I think, makes it specific to here, maybe the conflict does as well, although there's plenty of conflict elsewhere in the world. You see, these things are very, very difficult to talk or argue about, because there's no right or wrong. I don't buy into the idea that we have some form of unique humour. I saw that play in America twice and they didn't find it funny at all.

**FV:** Were the actors from here or were they American?

**OMC:** No, they were American. You see, it would be wrong of me to suggest that what I'm doing is writing about Belfast. I'm a writer from Belfast, but I'm not writing state



of the nation plays. I'm not trying to describe Belfast. I see something through the eyes of someone who comes from Belfast. If that was the case, I would have called that play Belfast, but it isn't. It's invented, it's not full of real characters. Now, the problems, the happiness, the humour and the tragedy of it, I imagine, are universal. Whether this works or not, I don't know. I think I always try to write things that may have a life outside here. I wouldn't want to be that insular, where I write something that would just be understood within these shores. I don't see the point of that at all. I think that's a very negative way to write, actually. So, maybe I don't really describe a Belfast that people know as being factually true. It feels as if it might be, but I don't know. I have difficulty with that, because, as they say, the rhythm of the language is that, but then I've just written a play that hasn't anything to do with that at all. It's an adaptation of a Dostoevsky novel and it's set in rural Edinburgh and is a fictional place in itself. I don't use Belfast language in that one.

**FV:** It's interesting what you said about everything being local and universal at the same time. I read this play when I was already in Belfast for a couple of months and had read and heard about the Troubles. I knew then that you were not writing directly about the Troubles, but about people getting on with their lives after that: their personal stories and how they were dealing with daily matters, etc. But if I had read this play before coming here I would have easily thought that that could happen in São Paulo.

**OMC:** I think that's good. That's a good thing. I don't like plays that are so limited or rigid in the sense that they are only about what they are about. These things are meant to expand, not contract. They are meant to go out. If plays that are from Belfast are just about Belfast all they'll ever do is preach to the audience. What I don't like about here is that Belfast thinks that its problems are unique and, therefore, there are some things that are special about them. But this kind of thing happens everywhere, every minute of every day'. And once you know that, it makes these problems seem nonsense and that's why people don't want to know it. Part of what I want to do is to help in that expansion. That sounds very grandiose and I'm probably just a storyteller. I just don't want to be part of that insular world. It's not that I'm trying to preach to the outside world. It's just that I don't want to be part of that insular world. The way I write and what I write about is slightly different, I suppose. It seems to me that I'm attracted more to people on the periphery of things. So the characters in my plays that are talked about but are not on the stage are usually the bosses and things like that, while the centre of attention are the workers.

**FV:** And life is seen through their point of view...

**OMC:** Yes.

**FV:** There's something very interesting about your plays – you don't punctuate them. I'm curious about that.

**OMC:** Whenever I started that, I was lucky enough, because the second play I'd ever written got published and all my plays got published since then. You see, it's different to type something out yourself and to see it in book form. I was able to look at what was written and realise that there was something wrong with it. Well, there's nothing wrong with it. It's just that I didn't like it. It looked too like a prose. And I thought that because this is dialogue: it's different and it should look different. So I immediately thought that I should take out all the punctuation and capital letters, and use dashes. The dashes would be about beats or about breathing. The dashes work as punctuation. It just needs to look different. You need to look at it and see that this is the dialogue of a play and not a prose. Sometimes they have to do with a change in meaning, which is different. When it's a change in meaning, you have to stick to it. But when it comes to being about pausing, I sort of leave that up to the actors and what they feel they want to do. I don't use any question marks. But, again, that's a purposeful thing in that you want the actor to work out whether that's a question or not. Once they have worked that out for themselves they will never forget that.

**FV:** So you mean to give freedom to the actors...

**OMC:** Yes. I mean, there is a certain amount of work to be done at the start, when you are going through the script. But my experience of it is that it helps actors. They like that. From my point of view, however, I just need it to look different. It couldn't look like prose, because, again, it not only needs to look different, but it needs to be written differently and the same rules don't apply. You don't want to think about full stops, comas, capital letters and anything like that. You would just think about how someone would say something. So the attention is focused on how someone speaks.

**FV:** In what ways is this play typical of your theatre?

**OMC:** The language and the pace of it are very typical. That it's about the normality of people on the periphery and people that aren't in the spotlight, I suppose, is very typical as well. There's a lot of that in it. The small town tragedy of people's lives is something I deal with most of the time. I always think that I'm writing about love in one way or another. There are very few things I would do that wouldn't have any humour in them. I shouldn't say that because probably people don't find them funny. But I think there's humour in them. I try to write about things that are hopefully common to us all instead of specific to people here. Relationships between men and women seem to run through a lot of what I do. Addiction. I'm not really sure of how much of addiction is in *Scenes from the Big Picture*, but there is a bit. A sense of being powerless in relation to your own destiny. I didn't write a play for about a year or more after I wrote that, which isn't like me because I have a job in playwriting and I move from one thing to the next as much as I can. So I normally have something to move on to. I used up a lot of stories writing that play, so, for a while, I didn't find anything to write about 'cause I would think that I had already said all. I didn't realise I was going to do that, actually. It didn't



occur to me when I started it out. It was only after I finished that I thought, ‘oh no, what do I write about now?’

**FV:** You were talking about pace playing an important role in your plays. As a writer, how important to you is pace together with rhythm and musicality?

**OMC:** It’s everything. If a writer doesn’t have a rhythm of his own, in some way, I think the audience becomes bored or doesn’t understand and turns off within seconds. I would say the same thing about prose, to be honest. But, when it comes to dialogue, there has to be a beat to it. There’s a playwright I know that believes that theatre is about ideas. That it’s not about characters or anything else. Even if he were right, which I don’t think he is, he would still need to concern himself with the beat and the musicality of the language that he uses. It’s only after you start dealing with such things that you realise how closely connected they are to music. You need to read the dialogue in a rhythm. Now, that doesn’t mean that you can’t break the rhythm. You can, but the rhythm needs to be the base of it. It has to run right through it. I can’t think, actually, how you can write without rhythm. I have no idea how you can do that. The pace, on the other hand, varies in a play. It can be connected to what’s happening in any given moment; to the dramatic content of something; to the intellectual content of something; to what you are talking about. It can speed you up or slow you down. That’s different from the notion of rhythm – the rhythm of the words. There’s something that drives you on when you are writing a play. You know, everything regarding that task isn’t always about meaning. You can have an overall thought about a meaning within a scene or within a conversation or within a speech. But there are times, when, because of the flow of something, that flow can dictate words. Whenever I’m writing, I’m actually writing physically quite quickly. Those dashes are quite instinctive in that sense. But no, it’s of a vital importance.

**FV:** When you first started writing plays, did you have any background in writing for the stage?

**OMC:** I had written a couple of short stories.

**FV:** Did you already have this conceptual understanding of writing plays back then or did you start understanding it as you gained experience?

**OMC:** When I was in University, I studied philosophy and I wrote a thesis on a duel between two philosophers. So my dissertation was written in dialogue and was based on the notion of how dialogue works. Whenever I was writing the short stories, there were not many of them, but there was quite a bit of dialogue in them. It was, then, my wife who said to me that I should write a play. So I started writing a play. I did talk to a playwright about it. But, I have to say, I didn’t need to talk a lot about it. It’s like one of those strange situations in life when, for whatever reason that you don’t really know, you have the feeling that you know what you are doing. I didn’t, but I had a feeling that I did.

**FV:** So it was very instinctive for you...

**OMC:** When you are confronted with something like that, it either looks as if it is slightly recognisable or completely foreign, in which case you can think that you have no idea of what to do with it. But it didn't look completely foreign to me. So I got into the notion of trying to work out what to do with it. At the start, it's as simple as "he speaks, she speaks" and then somebody else needs to speak and you need to map that out. I think one of the things that I always had was a certain sense of rhythm. Then, what happens along the way is that you just learn through repetition that structure is the most important thing. It's where you hang everything on. You also need to think about what a play is. Even now, I don't go to the theatre a lot, but I read a lot of plays. Whenever I'm writing, I never see a stage or imagine anything on stage. I either see nothing and the language dictates what to do (that's a little bit the way *Mojo Mickybo* was written) or I see something in reality. In *Scenes*, if at the start it opens with a man and a woman in a kitchen talking about cheese, what I actually see is a man and a woman in a real kitchen and maybe that makes it different. Maybe it's linking those images up. It's hard to explain, but it didn't frighten me to do that. It just seemed right and, after a while, it didn't annoy me that people called me a playwright. I did all sorts of jobs and when people said to me that I was such and such it sort of annoyed me. But being called a playwright didn't annoy me, so I thought, 'I can stick at this'. You work out what to do as and when you are doing it. I don't think it's different from working with mathematical equations. You just do it in a different way.

**FV:** How would you brief the translator in dealing with your plays?

**OMC:** I would encourage them to be brave and to interpret it. Not to be rigid. See, I don't see the point in translating something unless you make it recognisable in the place where it's going on. It has to be truly recognisable in the sense that it has to have a feel to it that's connected to the language spoken on stage. So, to be inventive, I think. Not to be frightened, but inventive. I've written versions of plays and, in a way, I think there's a difference between writing versions and translating. You want the writer to recognise it's their work, but, at the same time, they should realise there's something different about it. It has to work that way. I can't see that it shouldn't.

**FV:** When you adapt these plays, do you work based on translations?

**OMC:** I did Ionesco's *Chairs*, so I worked with a commissioned translation. I did *Antigone*, which I worked from an old translation and just read other versions. *Days of Wine and Roses*, well that was a movie so it was a bit different. That was an original play as well, but different. And now I was just working with a translated version of a Dostoevsky novel and I was just given a translation. Someone said that it was the best one and that I should use it. I was told that you want flat translations. But I think the best of the choices would be to know your translator and to be able to work with them so that they know the way you work.

**FV:** So you believe in the collaborative work between playwright and translator...

**OMC:** Yes. I don't see why you wouldn't do that. Maybe you can't take something that exists here and translate it into another language so it can equally exist there. Well, maybe you can, but the best way to do that isn't in isolation. And you want it to work. You just don't want it to be a representation of what happened here, but you want it to exist as it does here. I think translators (in the same way that people do verses) have to make the text their own in some way, don't they? Some people think that you can't do that, but I think you have to. You are not just translating something word by word. I don't see the point in that. You have to try and work out what all the nuances are and see what the equivalent is – if there is an equivalent – or how to make it work – if there isn't an equivalent.

**FV:** Yes, the ideal work of a translator would be to interpret the original and create the new text. So the translator also works as a writer.

**OMC:** Well, but they have to, don't they?

**FV:** They do, indeed. Have you written any translations?

**OMC:** No. I only speak English, which is a dreadful thing. I regret not speaking other languages.

**FV:** We were talking about adaptations and versions of plays. Do you see them as being much different from your work as a writer, since they deal with texts that already exist?

**OMC:** Yes there is a difference. I was just asked to do a verbatim play as well, which is different again. There is a difference that is obvious and quite substantial. You are working from something else. If you are doing your own work you start from nothing.

**FV:** But, do you really?

**OMC:** In the sense that we are talking about, yes. You see, it's easier for me. Say you wanted to write about the Olympics and there's a blank page in front of you. But somebody else has already written about it and you have no thoughts on the topic. If somebody asked me what the difference between those two things is, I would say that the difference is that I have to fill that blank page with my thoughts and structure it in a way that somebody else will read it, while, on this other page, somebody else has already done that. So what you are doing is different. In the first case, I can do whatever I want, and in the second case I can't ignore what I've been given. I don't see the point of doing a version of something you are going to completely change. In this case, just do it yourself. As a writer, I wouldn't want another writer to see the play I worked on and see that it has their title on it but they don't recognise it. You would not have done your job properly. The reason why you picked to do a version of that play to begin with is that you saw something in it that you want the audience to see. Now, the reasons why

you do versions vary. I mean, the reason why I do it is to make plays more immediate. But they still need to have the core of what the original play is talking about, otherwise you might as well do your own thing. It is easier as well. You see, what is very difficult to deal with is the idea of when people speak. If you have four or five people in a scene and someone is talking, you have to make the decision to stop them so somebody else may talk. So the question is, 'how do you do that?' That is quite complex. If you are dealing with that in the second case, the structure of the story might already be there for you and the structure is the most important thing. It's the thing you work at the most. So, if you are dealing with your own original play, you have to work that out and, if you are dealing with somebody else's work, it's already there. Now, there may be variations on how you hang things on that structure, but it's still somebody else who has already done the hard work for you. I don't like to say that it's easier, but I can say that it's different. Well it is easier. It's less taxing so, yes, it's easier. There is also a little bit of risk in adapting regarding the critics as to getting the play wrong. If it's original, it can't be wrong 'cause it's yours. With adaptations, if you are not careful, you might miss the point and if that happens, you get slated.

**FV:** So you say there's no way of not having an adaptation compared to the original?

**OMC:** I don't know how this applies to translation, but, in adaptation, you are never trying to make something better. Well, I'm not. The reason you pick something to adapt is because you thought it was very good to begin with. It's not your job to make it better. It's your job to present it in a different way because you think that may make it more accessible to a new audience or there was something about that story that was written two hundred years ago and has relevance today because of what's happening. But it's never to make it better because that's disastrous. You wouldn't adapt something that is bad anyway. I don't know how that works in translation, because, in translation, you can be asked to translate something that you think is bad.

**FV:** It works very similarly, actually. The translator sees something in the text that he or she thinks is interesting. But, of course, there are translations that are commissioned. So it depends on the situation.

# The Critic and the Author

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'This is a rare book, a real act of discovery that overturns inherited perceptions  
and opens up a rich terrain of Irish experience.'

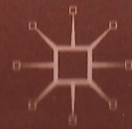
Fintan O'Toole, *Irish Times*



# The Literature of the Irish in Britain

Autobiography and Memoir, 1725–2001

Liam Harte



# *“Oh This Division of Allegiance!” Being Both Irish and British?*

Elizabeth Malcolm

**Abstract:** *This is a critical essay on Liam Harte’s anthology The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001. The historian Elizabeth Malcolm questions the selection of Harte’s “life-stories” and points out the richness of the assembled material.*

**Keywords:** *Liam Harte; the Irish in Britain; autobiography; memoir.*

**Harte, Liam (ed.). *The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 (hbk, ISBN 978-1-403-949875) and 2011 (pbk, ISBN 978-0-230-29636-7).**

The title page of this anthology informs us that it begins in 1725 and ends in 2001, while the table of contents indicates that it contains sixty-three short extracts from the autobiographies and memories of Irish immigrants living in Britain. But, in fact, none of this information is quite true. The book begins before 1725 and ends before 2001; I would suggest that it actually contains sixty-four extracts, not sixty-three; and, while some of the authors are Irish immigrants to Britain, others are not. However, I’m not necessarily criticizing Liam Harte for these inaccuracies; indeed, it seems to me that they reflect the complexity and variety of his collection, and the problem of setting precise parameters to it.

Harte is concerned with “life stories” and, in his introduction, he includes a section on his own and his family’s experience of migration from Ireland to Britain, commencing with a line from the short-story writer Frank O’Connor: “A scholar’s work is as much a self-portrait as a writer’s”. I’d suggest that the book contains sixty-four extracts, because Harte, as well as being its editor, is also a contributor. He acknowledges that compiling the anthology “has never been an entirely intellectual exercise for me” (xxxvi). Harte grew up in east Mayo, “an emigrant nursery for centuries” he tells us, and both his paternal grandfather and his father immigrated to England before him, although both eventually returned to Ireland. Harte is eloquent about the impact of immigration upon his father and how migration stories were a feature of his own childhood.



England etched itself upon his consciousness with the intensity of a newsreel. Life in Ireland afterwards seemed smudged by a penumbra of anticlimax. Even now, my father is seldom more animated than when drawing from his well of migrant memories, the water from which seeped into my own childhood imagination, leaching it with exotic place-names – Mytholmroyd, Skipton, Hebden Bridge – and outlandish tales of hiring fairs and doss-houses (xxxvii).

During the 1990s Harte, while studying at university in England, visited these “exotic” west and north Yorkshire towns. As someone working at a northern English university myself during the 1990s, who also visited such places, I’m sure Harte discovered that their names were the only “exotic” thing about them, but of course we would have seen them through very different eyes from his father, arriving from rural Mayo during the impoverished post-war years, or from his own younger Mayo self. Now based in Manchester, Harte goes on to inform us that since his student days he has become a “serial border-crosser”, his constant comings and goings charted by the ticket stubs he uses as bookmarks (xxxvii-xxxviii). I smiled with recognition on reading this sentence, having the same habit myself and, in fact, marking my place in Harte’s book with a boarding pass from my last flight to Dublin. Such “moments of imaginative connection”, as Harte argues, remind us that we are all part of a “wider narrative of migration” and that our personal stories are often not quite so specific to ourselves as we may like to imagine (xxxviii).

Given that Harte has included in his anthology his family story of Irish migration to Britain and acknowledged the subjective nature of his selection, I feel prompted to follow his example and draw upon my own experience of migration and research on migration in reviewing his book. If his collection “bears vestigial traces of self-portraiture” (p. xxxviii), so probably will this review, for I too am a “serial border-crosser”, having not only migrated from Ireland to Britain once and from Britain to Australia once, but from Australia to Ireland twice – and now being engaged in contemplating a third such upheaval. I’ve spent much of my adult life migrating; while behind me lie four generations of Irish emigrant forebears. However, unlike Harte, I am an historian by profession, not a literary scholar, and this means I come to the topic of migration, and thus to his book, from a rather different perspective.

Before considering what is in this anthology, I’m going to do something that is probably a little unfair, but which most reviewers and critics tend to do, I’m going to complain about what is not in it. Firstly, I must ask: where is the late eighteenth century; in fact, where is the whole eighteenth century? The eighteenth century is represented by just two extracts: both by women, one dating to about 1700 and the other to the early 1740s. On the other hand, there are twenty-five extracts for the nineteenth century and thirty-six for the twentieth. Harte doesn’t explain the scanty coverage of the years 1700-99: could he find no other appropriate materials? That’s hard to credit. Many Irish-born men were prominent in the literature, philosophy and politics of England during the century: familiar names like Swift, Steele, Molesworth, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Berkeley



and Burke immediately come to mind. Perhaps none produced the sort of memoir Harte is interested in. But one I'm sure who did is Richard Lovell Edgeworth, helped by his more famous daughter Maria, both of whom spent long periods living in England. Having recently read Jenny Uglow's book, *The Lunar Men*, I'm very conscious that Edgeworth's contribution to England's Industrial Revolution has been largely overlooked. As regards the nineteenth century, I noted the absence of the memoirs of Lady Morgan and Lady Blessington; and I wondered about the lack of any Fenian memoirs, especially accounts of life in English prisons. There is no O'Donovan Rossa or Michael Davitt or, for that matter, Oscar Wilde. I can only suppose that Harte may have been excluding such well-known figures in favour of lesser-known ones.

In turning to look at the extracts actually in the book, one is immediately struck by their richness and diversity. Many of the authors may be little known, but their writings are frequently colourful and compelling. They refute the judgment, often passed by historians on the Irish in Britain, that this was an impoverished, downtrodden community, racked by poor health and despair; a community partly illiterate and largely inarticulate. There is certainly poverty and prejudice aplenty in this collection, but much more besides, including a great deal of hope and humour.

I want to begin with an overview, before exploring aspects of the book. A substantial majority of the extracts are from memoirs written by male Catholic immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most are written in English by immigrants living in England, and most were published in London. But among the minority of extracts are fourteen by women and eleven by the second generation: that is by the British-born children of Irish immigrants. So not all the contributors are themselves immigrants. Nine authors lived or were born in Scotland and Wales, rather than England, and within England, most authors lived or were born in London and the north, especially Lancashire and Yorkshire. However, there are also a number who were itinerant, including a pickpocket, a beggar, a tramp and several rural labourers. Such people raise the issue of class. About 30 per cent of extracts are written by Protestants, most from middle-class, Anglo-Irish backgrounds. Members of the peerage and landed gentry do not appear in the book, but otherwise the authors represent a wide socio-economic spectrum, ranging from parliamentarians to petty thieves. Although all the extracts appear in the anthology in English, three were originally written in Irish and have been translated. This summary I hope offers a taste of the diversity of the extracts, but there are some persistent themes running through them that lend coherence to the collection and are worth closer investigation.

As an historian with an interest in women's history, I noticed immediately that only fourteen of the extracts are from works written by women – that's less than a quarter of the collection. However, as Harte acknowledges in his introduction, economic and social constraints often made it difficult for women to write, let alone publish, memoirs. Thus the anthology makes "no claim to comprehensiveness" (p. xvii). Despite these limitations, Harte has nevertheless managed to assemble a surprisingly mixed group of women contributors. They include fairly familiar figures, like the writers Laetitia Pilkington, Annie M.P. Smithson and Elizabeth Bowen and the crusading feminist reformer Frances

Power Cobbe. But most are either little known or totally unknown: like Ellen O’Neill, a convicted pickpocket; Maureen Hamish, a domestic servant; Alice Foley, a mill worker; Mauyen Keane, a nurse; and Nesca A. Robb, a teacher with an Oxford doctoral degree. As with the men, most emigrated from Ireland, but three were born in England and so represent the second generation of the Irish in Britain.

Also like the men, only a handful of these women describe events that had happened to them relatively recently. Most are recalling experiences and feelings from the long distant past, sometimes fifty or sixty years before the time of writing. In the case of Elizabeth Bowen, for instance, we have a woman explaining, shortly before her death in 1973 aged seventy-four, how she perceived England when she first arrived in 1906 as a child of seven (pp. 126-9). So, typically, the extracts involve a middle-aged or elderly person trying to remember and reconstruct their youth. Thus, in fundamental ways, the collection is not so much composed of firsthand accounts, as of exercises in memory. And, for this reason, Harte is quite correct in his introduction to caution his readers against treating these extracts as straightforward examples of social history (p. xxvi).

Many certainly yield fascinating insights into the details of past lives, but we must not be misled by the seductive voices we encounter. When Walter Hampson, for instance, tells us his harrowing tales of working illegally as a child chimney sweep for his brutal father during the early 1870s, forced to climb up inside the many tall chimneys of Lancashire big houses and lunatic asylums – burnt, blistered and often nearly suffocated – as moving as his account is, we must bear in mind that we are not in fact listening to the voice of an eight-year-old sweep. Instead, we are hearing that of a professional propagandist and committed socialist, writing sixty years later during the Great Depression of the early 1930s (pp. 107-10). Some of the writers included are clearly very conscious that their accounts are substantially exercises in imagination: efforts to re-connect with a distant and only half-remembered past. Musician Bob Geldof, for instance, describes his youthful 1960s’ self as the “ghost of a boy”. Writing about him is “as if I held hands with someone else, someone who lived a long time ago and had no connection” to the famous man Geldof had become twenty years later (p. 266).

Yet, if some writers feel detached from their past selves, others remain deeply attached to painful past memories. Geldof went to school in Dublin, but a number of the contributors attended English schools. For such children, bullying seems to have been a common experience; and this bullying usually arose out of the fact that they were perceived as Irish and, therefore, not as “us”. Tom Barclay, born in a Leicester slum to Irish parents who had fled the Great Famine of the late 1840s, was “hounded and ill-used by Sassenach kids...battered, threatened, elbowed and pressed back to the door of our kennel” – “kennel”, “pigsty”, “hut” and “crib” are the words Barclay uses as an adult to describe the two small rooms in which his large family was forced to live (75). Multicultural Liverpool, on the other hand, offered some protection to Pat O’Mara, born there in 1904, but a self-proclaimed “Irish slummy”. O’Mara belonged to a gang

and, during his school days, “our gang” was composed not only of the children of Irish Catholic parents, but also of Italian, Spanish, German, Filipino and “gypsy” parents (154-5).

Clearly there was safety in numbers. Such safety, however, was not usually available to Anglo-Irish children, who attended English schools singly and often as boarders. The poet W.B. Yeats describes being abused at his London day school during the late 1870s for being Irish. This led to “many fights”, but because he was “delicate and had no muscles”, he “never, for years, got the better in any one of them” (81). Louis MacNeice was another poet from an Anglo-Irish background sent to school in England; in his case this was as a boarder towards the end of the First World War. Confronted on 12 July by his headmaster, who enquires, “Isn’t it all mumbo-jumbo”, MacNeice agrees – and, influenced by his father, he does genuinely believe that Orange celebrations of the 1690 battle of the Boyne on the Twelfth are nonsense. But, talking later to an Ulster-born teacher, MacNeice says he suddenly felt “guilty and cheap” because he realized that he had “betrayed” his fellow Irish by siding with the English whose approval he craved. “Oh this division of allegiance”, is his adult lament (183).

As must be obvious already, I’m interested in the experiences of children, and this anthology provides a wealth of information on how bullying at school forced many of the young, whether of Irish birth or descent, to prematurely ponder who they were. Some, like the Irish-born but Anglo-Irish MacNeice, seem never to have fully resolved their identity issues, but nor did many of the less privileged second-generation immigrants either. Although he attended a Catholic school in Liverpool, O’Mara says that most of the lay teachers had trained in England and thus lessons reflected pride in empire and a belief that the “British always won wars”. But some Irish priests at the school took a rather different view, especially when it came to religious history. O’Mara says that he emerged from his “English-Irish schooling” with an “intense love for the British Empire and an equally intense hatred for England as opposed to Ireland” – and his views had apparently not changed much by the time he was writing twenty years later (154). Harte characterizes O’Mara’s nationality as hybrid, but one might equally argue that it was schizophrenic.

But at least O’Mara appears to have managed to keep his multiple and conflicting identities in some sort of equilibrium. Others were not so fortunate. Elizabeth Hamilton was born in 1906 into a Protestant military family in Wicklow, but converted to Catholicism in her early twenties while a student in London. She sums up her feelings succinctly when she writes: “to belong to two countries is to belong that much less to each”. In Ireland she feels an “outsider” as a “citizen of Britain”, but in England she is “conscious” and “proud” of her “Irish origins” and feels distanced from the English by their “patronizing tone” towards her (177). Hamilton’s sense of being an outsider in both countries was doubtless partly a function of her Anglo-Irish background, but the Catholic second generation born in England could have a similar experience. John Healy was born in London in 1943 to Irish parents, but from a young age he spent periods of

time living with his grandmother and attending school in Ireland. However, as well as never mastering the Irish language, then a compulsory subject, he finds himself abused by Irish boys as an “English cur”, an “English black and tan swine”, and told to “Go back to England”. Yet in England he is called “Paddy” by English boys mimicking an Irish accent, abused as an “Irish cunt” and, on one occasion, kicked in the “bollocks” (261-2).

Like Pat O’Mara, others seem to have developed ways to rationalize their two identities. Thus we find Joseph Keating, born in 1871 in a south Wales coal-mining village, the son of Irish immigrants, announcing that he “neither would nor could think of any other place on earth as home” but his Welsh birthplace, yet, at the same time, claiming that: “I am Irish in every way...I regard Ireland as my country; and not only mine, but God’s; and its people as a race chosen by the Almighty”. Keating reconciles these apparently conflicting statements by arguing that the “feeling of nationality had nothing to do with the land of birth, but was inherited in the blood”: thus he could be Irish by “blood”, yet still love the land of Wales (87). However, someone born in England would likely have found it much harder to achieve such a compromise.

Some of the immigrants were obviously deeply unhappy and bitter at having to leave Ireland. This seems to have been especially true of those who left during the 1950s. The writer John B. Keane gives readers the precise date of his own departure (6 January 1952) and evokes the “early Christian martyrs” when describing the scenes at Dun Laoghaire harbour and in “steerage” on the boat to Holyhead: “Underneath it all was the heartbreaking, frightful anguish of separation”. The boat sailed at eight o’clock at night and Keane spent much of that day on a pub crawl round Dublin city centre with a friend; indeed, all the young male passengers on the boat are drunk on departure, “not violently so”, according to Keane, “but tragically so” (243). However, Keane’s sad picture of “men and women being torn away from home” is in stark contrast to how Bob Geldof perceived his departure about fifteen years later. He is desperate to be “off” out of Ireland, and “Off meant England”, which had given him his “first sense of real liberty” when he had spent several summers there as a schoolboy working in a Lincolnshire canning factory. So, once he finishes school he is “off” again to England, but this time permanently and clearly without any regrets (267).

In reading and trying to grasp the complexities of the many extracts in this book, I quickly became aware that, as an historian, I had to employ two different chronologies: one is a list of dates when the writings were published and the other a list of dates when the extracts are actually set – and, as mentioned, sometimes these dates could be more than half a century apart. I would commend Harte for carefully providing all the necessary dates. Yet, surprisingly, he does mix these different chronologies in one important respect: he arranges his extracts in an order dictated by the date at which the events described occurred – which is fair enough – but the dates in his title refer to the other chronology, that of publication. This is why I was initially puzzled that a book, which said on its cover that it started in 1725, had as its first extract an account of an incident that occurred in about 1700. I think Harte should have been consistent: having

organised his extracts according to the experiences described, he should have employed the same dating system in his title, which then would have become, 1700-1982.

Harte's short introduction to each extract is informative in contextualizing the life and memoir of the author, while his annotations help in explaining local terms and references. However, based on some of my own interests and research, I registered a few omissions. For instance, in the book's first extract, Mary Davys provides a vivid account of an episode that occurred in an English inn in about 1700, when she and some friends were on route from Dublin via Holyhead probably to York. A local farmer offers one of the serving maids a shilling if she will let him see "the wild *Irish*" since he had never met Irish people before. Davys decides to "humour" him after he enters the room "with Eyes staring" and "half afraid to come near Monsters". She mimics his thick, local accent in her account and, in talking to him, confirms his belief that Irish people are born with tails, informing him that her own tail was cut off when she was a child. The farmer wants to see the mark left by this procedure, but Davys informs "*poor Hodge*", as she calls him, that this would not be "very decent" (2-3). Obviously she is mocking English ignorance and credulity, their "Wonder and Folly" as she calls it, but I think there are further aspects to this story that Harte overlooks.

In his introduction to the extract, he informs us that Davys encounters "an Englishman named Hodge". But "Hodge" is not in fact the farmer's surname; "hodge" is an English colloquial term for a "rustic", someone whom today the Irish might call a "culchie" – the word implies bucolic stupidity. But I also suspect there may be a sexual subtext to Davys' story. Hodge compares the Irish to his cow because he believes that, in addition to tails, they are also born covered with hair. The word "hodge" originally suggested not just dim wittedness, but possibly an unhealthy sexual interest in animals (Partridge 568). One can't be certain, but Davys, by having Hodge compare his cow to the Irish and then request to see her posterior, may be hinting at bestiality among the English – a crime more usually ascribed to the Irish. Yet, "poor Hodge" is actually not as dim and deluded as he sounds. The belief that the Irish mated with animals and thus shared physical characteristics with them is a very old one, widely held since at least the twelfth century, when it was given much credence in Gerald of Wales's very influential account of his visits to Ireland during the 1180s. Gerald, a highly-educated Welsh monk serving King Henry II, spins tales of an Ireland where men are half oxen and oxen half men, where women have sexual intercourse with goats and lions, and where Irish kings mate with horses (Gerald of Wales 73-6, 110). And, indeed, as late as the 1640s, English soldiers fighting in the Irish wars claimed to have seen long tails on Irish corpses (Thomas 42-3). Thus Hodge's fantasies about the "wild" Irish were far from being restricted just to the benighted denizens of early eighteenth-century rural England.

There were a couple of other instances in which I thought Harte could have enriched his extracts with further explanation or annotation. For instance, James Dawson Burn, a self-styled "Beggar Boy", was only about ten, illiterate and penniless, when he fled his life as a rural labourer in Ulster, stowed away on a boat to Scotland and began



a long trek across Britain, in search of his mother and stepfather who were living in Northumberland. Sometimes meeting with kindness from strangers and sometimes with cruelty, in desperation he ends up searching Dumfries for a close friend of his stepfather's, only to be told "that he had left his country by authority!" (28) Harte doesn't gloss this remark, but I take it to be a reference to transportation. The year is 1816 and Burn's stepfather is an Irish ex-soldier, an alcoholic, who works as a pedlar and, at times, a beggar. It is probable that his Dumfries friend came from a similar background. Transportation of convicts to the Australian penal colonies surged towards the end of the Napoleonic wars, which had impeded shipping. At the same time, the post-war depression that swiftly followed the French defeat left many ex-soldiers unemployed and impoverished, forced to survive not only by begging but sometimes also by petty theft (Shaw 92, 99, 147). Young Burn had clearly chosen a particularly bad year in which to seek a better life for himself in Britain.

Another remark that I thought worth annotation occurred in Kevin FitzGerald's satirical account of how he was nearly expelled in 1921 from his English agricultural college for suggesting that students protest against the "appalling" food they were expected to eat by throwing it at the steward responsible for catering. As a result of this proposal, he is hauled up before the principal, a former British army colonel, who begins by saying: "FitzGerald...you are Irish, I think". FitzGerald tells us he "had not yet grasped that this is the typically British beginning to particular forms of insult", that usually continue along the lines of: "You are dirty; dishonest...a Catholic, militant Protestant, [or] red revolutionary". And, indeed, the colonel opts for the latter insult: having ascertained that FitzGerald is Irish, he accuses him of being a "dangerous Bolshevik" (186). As the British were fighting Republicans in Ireland at the time, as well as Bolsheviks in Russia, the colonel obviously regards the wealthy, English-born, nineteen-year-old FitzGerald, who had attended one of England's most "exclusive" Catholic schools, as a serious menace to the peace of the college.

Ordered to appear before the board of governors for further questioning, FitzGerald says that he stood, hands behind his back, "in the attitude of that boy in blue velvet who was being asked when he last saw his father" (187). Harte doesn't explain to us what FitzGerald is referring to here, but I think the remark is revealing. FitzGerald is comparing his plight to that of a boy in a very popular Victorian painting by W.F. Yeames, "And when did you last see your father?" (1878), held in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool. The picture shows parliamentarians interrogating the young son of a leading royalist during the English Civil War. Although FitzGerald, whose book wasn't published until 1986, appears to treat his college "inquisition" in a jocular fashion, nevertheless, his oblique reference to the wars of the 1640s immediately throws a dark shadow over the proceedings. In the first half of 1921 the Irish were fighting the English, just as they had been in the 1640s when many Irish supported the royalist cause. Like the little boy in the painting, FitzGerald has been detained by English authorities, with little hope of escape. In event, however, he isn't expelled from his college because one of the governors, a "stout

lady”, briskly intervenes, chiding her colleagues for making themselves “ridiculous”, and so brings an abrupt end to FitzGerald’s farcical interrogation.

I confess that in highlighting references Harte hasn’t glossed, I’m metaphorically “nit picking” – poor Tom Barclay has to do this literally as a slum child (77) – yet the richness of the materials he has assembled invites the reader, and perhaps especially the historian, to dig deeper for more revelations or, better still, to go in search of the books from which the extracts have been so skilfully chosen. I have copies of some of the books Harte draws upon, but I must admit that a number were unfamiliar to me. The success of any anthology, I believe, must be measured by its capacity to inspire readers to want to read more. On that criterion, this book is clearly an outstanding achievement.

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# *Reply to “‘Oh This Division of Allegiance!’ Being Both Irish and British?”*

Liam Harte

**Abstract:** *The author responds to Elizabeth Malcolm’s critique to the book The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001. Harte reflects upon the process of making an anthology and points out the challenging aspects of his research considering the constitutive complexity of autobiographical works when they are taken as historical sources.*

**Keywords:** *the Irish in Britain; autobiography; memoir.*

The act of putting together any anthology is both daunting and invigorating. It brings with it a host of expectations and limitations and the end products frequently provoke combative responses that sometimes escalate into all-out critical warfare. Irish literary scholars know this only too well. The publication in 1991 of the three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, under the general editorship of Seamus Deane, polarized the world of Irish letters to an unprecedented extent. Feminist critics attacked it for its serious under-representation of female authors, whereas revisionist-minded critics resented its conscription of Northern Irish Protestant writing into an expanded Irish literary canon, which they read as evidence of Deane’s republican irredentism. In the ensuing mêlée, many lost sight of the superb scholarship that underpinned the *Anthology’s* recuperative and reintegrative mission. As debates about the work’s merits and blind spots continued to be rehearsed in various fora, two additional volumes were commissioned, each collectively edited by Ireland’s foremost female scholars and historians. Published in 2002, they were exclusively devoted to Irish women’s writings and traditions and set a new bar for anthological excellence, though this did not prevent some fault-finding reviewers still having their say (see Thompson for a useful overview of the *Anthology’s* reception).

Needless to say, my own anthological gesture is much more modest in scale and ambition than that of Deane and his distinguished co-editors, and yet we do have one central motive in common: the desire to fill a critical vacancy in scholarship. In some ways, the challenges that faced me when I embarked on the research for *The Literature*

*of the Irish in Britain* were starker than those that confronted the Field Day editors, since, as Deane acknowledges in his General Introduction to the first volume of the *Anthology*, they did at least have an existing literary canon to dismantle and rebuild. I, by contrast, encountered blankness when I first cast around for a critical model or bibliographical guide to the literary history of Irish migrants in Britain. Not only was the terrain unmapped, but there appeared to be a settled consensus that the Irish in Britain were not the writing type. It was as if Harry Carney had spoken for all migrants when he muttered, “None of us is goin’ writing books of memories later” in *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), Tom Murphy’s electrifying play about an uprooted Mayo family in 1950s Coventry. This was evidently a view shared by novelist Joseph O’Connor, spokesman for the so-called “Ryanair generation” of Irish writers in 1990s London, whose observation that “At the heart of the Irish emigrant experience there is a caution, a refusal to speak, a fear of the word,” was one of the factors that spurred me to investigate further.

And so my fitful quest for material began, though it was hardly systematic. In my introduction to my book I use the Deanean analogy of reading in the dark to explain the intertwined feelings of excitement and anxiety the search for sources provoked in me, and the lingering worry that I had overlooked an obscure gem. Reading Elizabeth Malcolm’s review of *The Literature of the Irish in Britain* revived such anxieties, especially when I read her criticism of my coverage of the 1700s and her list of eighteenth-century authors whose work is omitted from my book. The primary reason for the non-appearance of writers such as Swift, Steele and Goldsmith is quite simply that they did not produce a non-fiction account of their life’s events in England, though that shouldn’t necessarily surprise us, since the word “autobiography” did not enter the English language until 1797. But even if they had done so, it may not have met one of my key selection criteria, since to be considered for inclusion it was not enough for an Irish man or woman in England, Scotland or Wales, however eminent or esteemed, to have written an autobiographical narrative of whatever length or form. What piqued my interest were those migrants who produced experientially rich autobiographical accounts of what it *felt* like to be an Irish person in Britain in a certain time and place, those who managed to express their individual ipseity through an intimate form of social and personal life writing. Raymond Williams claimed that the most difficult thing to grasp when studying any historical epoch is the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.” It is this “felt sense” that I was continually drawn to as I sifted through the works I read, and I readily concede that this made it more likely from the start that works from the post-1800 period would outnumber those from the 1700s, and so it proved.

As for authors such as Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Lady Morgan and Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, all three made it on to my longlist but, like many of the Fenian memoirists Elizabeth Malcolm mentions (whose work constitutes a subgenre in its own right), their omission from the final list of contents ultimately came down to matters of aesthetic taste and interest and to considerations of compromise and balance. No

anthologist can hope to please all readers on these counts, though it has been gratifying to read the generous assessments of my book by reviewers such as Roy Foster, Fintan O'Toole, Enda Delaney and Mary Kenny, and to hear President Michael D. Higgins single out *The Literature of the Irish in Britain* as an example of how social scientists in particular might “use the narratives that have been given to us by the participants in migration [...] so that we may construct such an ethical version of our Irishness in the present time as is moral and authentic to our people and their lives as lived, suffered, and celebrated.” Like Patrick Crotty, compiler of the mammoth *Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (2010), my editorial selections constitute “an attempt to represent rather than reproduce” the contents of a literary tradition, though I am not convinced that the autobiographical writings of the Irish in Britain amount to a discrete, unified tradition. The more of them I read, the more I realized that what I was dealing with was a series of individual responses to the experience and effects of migration by writers of very varied talents, agendas and *mentalités*, few of whom displayed any awareness of literary lineage or cultural continuity *as migrant writers*.

A host of other gaps and deficiencies also revealed themselves as my research developed, from the relative paucity of works by female and Protestant migrants to the marked disparities in literary quality that the assembled materials laid bare. If I could do little about the former, I could – and did – give space to migrant voices that had long ago been lost in the fogs of history. As a consequence, authors one might reasonably expect to find in the book – Oscar Wilde, say, or Brendan Behan – were in the end edged out by what I considered to be the more beguiling testimonies of obscure figures such as Tom Barclay, Maureen Hamish and William Hammond, about whom nothing is known apart from what they themselves chose to reveal in their self-narratives. Throughout, I had to be mindful of the fact that I was, by definition, dealing with the first-person accounts of an exceptional minority of migrants, those who had the desire, the determination, the resources and the ability to leave a written record of their experiences and impressions. The temptation to use this slender seam of literature as a basis for generalizations about “the Irish migrant experience” had to be resisted as much as possible, therefore, even when the writers themselves claimed to be speaking on behalf of a silent majority.

But perhaps the most challenging aspect of my research was the task of reconciling the tension between my desire to illustrate the multi-layered social realities and changing self-perceptions of Irish migrants in Britain across many generations with the need to acknowledge and respect the inherent limitations of autobiography as a documentary form – limitations that are of course attractions from a literary historian’s perspective. This is a tension that Elizabeth Malcolm is alert to in her assessment of my book, as evidenced by her references to the anthology being composed of “exercises in memory” and “exercises in imagination,” even though many of my subjects issue categorical truth claims in their works. The status of autobiographical works as historical sources has long troubled historians of a certain stripe, since autobiography is a subjective rather than an empirical form in which autobiographical truth and historical fact uneasily

cohabit. Every autobiography, even one that professes unwavering fidelity to the world of biographical reference beyond the text, sustains an intricate interplay of factual and fictive elements. The process of autobiographical recall is endlessly complex and memory's protean qualities make the boundary between recollection and imagination indeterminate and unpoliceable. And yet, as G. Thomas Courser points out in his recent study of the memoir genre, for a piece of life writing to engage us fully, it needs to have some degree of veracity, however compromised by the selectivity and fallibility of memory. The truth of Mary Warnock's observation – "To create a story, both memory and imagination must be deployed, and autobiography is the place where, more than any other, their functions overlap" – is borne out by many of the autobiographers in my book, including W. B. Yeats, who prefaced his *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (1916) with a disclaimer that reminds us of how closely memory and forgetting are intertwined: "I have changed nothing to my knowledge; and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge; for I am writing after many years and have consulted neither friend, not letter, nor old newspaper, and describe what comes oftenest into my memory."

Yeats is an instructive guide to the complex and changing relationship between memory and subjectivity in the migrant imagination, which is, I think, one of the governing themes of my book. Yeats's autobiographical writings not only offer insights into how the process of writing mediates, and thereby alters, remembered experience. They also require the reader to keep time with a double chronology – the reanimated past and the temporal present – since Yeats continually manipulates his past experiences to create a coherent present self, the durability of which is forever in doubt. Yeats is not alone in his shuffling of temporally different layers of experience to forge a "presentable" self, though his self-reflexivity makes him a particularly compelling example. The past inextricably mingles with the present in so many of the works I came across in my research that they collectively call into question the very idea of "ordering" them according to any chronology. Nevertheless, a choice had to be made and Elizabeth Malcolm puts forward a valid case for making a different one. Yet in deciding to order my extracts in the way that I did, I was ever mindful of the tension between my desire for historical anchorage and the need to respect what Walter Benjamin calls "the mysterious work of remembrance – which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been." This dialectic greatly preoccupied me throughout my research and seems to me to be as central to the conversation that takes place between history and autobiography as the interplay of fact and fiction.

That this is not a conversation that can ever be brought to a satisfactory close need not dishearten us. The rewards of reading any collection of autobiographical texts are manifold and include not only the satisfaction that comes from "being allowed *inside* the experience of another person who really lived and who tells about experiences which did in fact occur," as Jill Ker Conway puts it, but also the satisfaction of deepening our understanding of the partial and mediated nature of autobiographers' representation of

their experience. The truth is that every autobiography embodies *a* truth rather than *the* truth. That is perhaps why the genre continues to hold such fascination for so many of us.

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# Biography

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# *Nun of Kenmare Embattled Religious Reformer*

Jerry Nolan

**Abstract:** *The Nun of Kenmare was a widely known controversial Victorian writer and figure in Ireland and America. After her death in 1899, her very existence became a little known fact. Early in the 1960s the Poor Clare nuns in Kenmare, County Kerry in Ireland were amazed to discover her books and papers as belonging to one of their founders about the time when they were marking the centenary of the convent's foundation. Later in the 1960s, a Dublin journalist began reading the Nun's writings. The Poor Clares of Kenmare strove to distance themselves from the Nun of Kenmare when the Dublin journalist published books about her as pioneering feminist. During the 1970s, the Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace in America at last discovered the identity of their true founder, the Nun of Kenmare, a historical fact which surprised and continues to inspire them to lead the way in researching her life and proclaiming her radical views of church reform. Recently Irish historians have been looking into the Nun. Initial approval of "Sister Suffragette" has given way to questioning the Nun's eccentricity as a reformer, the Nun's attitudes towards the hierarchical workings of the Catholic Church, the Nun's excessive hagiographical tendencies, the Nun's emotional entrapment in Victorianism. In response to these questions, here is presented a version of the life and works of the Nun as embattled religious reformer, still relevant to the problems within the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *The Nun of Kenmare; Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace; "Sister Suffragette".*

Here are two very self-revealing quotations from the Nun of Kenmare, written some thirty years apart. The first quotation was penned in the late 1860s when the Nun was about forty years of age:

May we not hope that Ireland will become once more famous for learning and sanctity. The future of our nation is in the hands of the hierarchy. No government dare refuse anything which they may demand perseveringly and unitedly. (*Illustrated History* 9)

The wider cultural context for such a tribute to the powerful and seemingly benevolent authority of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy stemmed from its restoration by

Pope Pius IX in 1850 which had triggered an optimistic programme of Catholic Renewal that included the building of many neo-Gothic churches throughout the land and the widespread spontaneous growth of devotion to Mary Mother of God encouraged by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception solemnly proclaimed by Pius IX in 1854 and by the apparitions at Lourdes in 1858. The Irish Catholic Hierarchy were quick to respond to John Henry Newman's call for a Second Spring by inviting Newman to Dublin, also in 1854, to lecture on the idea of an university as the first step towards the formation of Dublin's Catholic University. No wonder the Nun was moved to believe that the Second Spring in Ireland would be a cultural revival of the "isle of saints and scholars" to be led by the newly reinstated hierarchy.

The second quotation was published by the Nun when she was in her early sixties.

I found that from first to last Rome was a gigantic fraud. She professes to be "holy" par excellence but where is the holiness? The more power she has the more degraded are her subjects, ignorant alike of wisdom, human and Divine. (*Story of My Life* 377)

The shift in the Nun's view of Roman Catholic Church was truly seismic. The Irish context of this shift included the recent fall of her hero Charles Stewart Parnell in which the Irish Hierarchy had played a gloating role. In spite of her mutually complimentary exchanges with Pope Pius XI and Pope Leo XIII, the Nun gradually evolved into a vitriolic critic of the Hierarchy's policies from the 1870s onwards on vexed questions of Irish Land reform, apparitions at Knock, education of poor girls and role of women in public life. Opposition to her work by church authorities in Ireland and America grew so hostile that her already praised contributions were dismissed, later to the point where even her once widely-read books were consigned to oblivion.

Irish awareness of the Nun in Ireland began to surface during 1961 when the Superior of the Poor Clare Convent in Kenmare County Kerry, Sister Philomena McCarthy, encouraged by Kerryman Professor Cremin, canon lawyer from Maynooth, decided to mark the centenary of the foundation of the convent by tidying up the convent attic unvisited in living memory. The Poor Clare community discovered many books, papers and memorabilia all closely connected to one of their founding Poor Clare nuns who had travelled from Newry to found the convent in 1861. That forgotten founder was Margaret Anna Cusack, "the Nun of Kenmare."

During the 1960s an Irish journalist on *The Irish Times* and Radio Telefis Eireann Irene French Eagar grew interested in the ways of the Nun. French Eagar read books by M.F. Cusack in Dublin's National Library and a cross section of the Nun's letters and articles published in many newspapers across the world. The first edition of French Eagar's book was entitled *The Nun of Kenmare*. The second revised edition was entitled *Margaret Anna Cusack: One Woman's Campaign for Women's Rights* with the preface by the scholarly Dominican nun, Margaret MacCurtain. In the Preface (vii-xii), MacCurtain discussed the Nun as an unruly, vital and tragic figure who died embittered and solitary

yet still ought to be seen as the most important forerunner of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and the Countess Markievicz for championing the liberation of Irish women, a view taken up by Radharc Productions in 1982 when a documentary was shown on RTE about her entitled *Sister Suffragette*. In 1989 the former Superior of Kenmare, towards the end of her life, published a pamphlet of 86 pages which was written to prove that the views of the Nun of Kenmare were not only very far removed from the real demands of contemporary Women's rights but were the product of a "disturbed mind" lacking in any fidelity to church teaching. While obviously intent on returning the Nun to richly deserved obscurity, McCarthy spread the news that probably the apostate did experience a death-bed conversion mainly as a result of the prayers of the faithful Poor Clare nuns in Kenmare. Perhaps such an approach led MacCurtain to conclude in her brief entry for the Nun in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* that while she remained a controversial figure for eccentricity and wilfulness, "she never abandoned her pursuit of justice for the poor."

In America by the early 1970s the Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace were overjoyed to discover the identity of the person who had actually set up their foundation about ninety years before. This American rediscovery of the Nun climaxed in 1990 when Sister Margaret Rose O'Neill of the Congregation published a graphic account of the founder. O'Neill's book concluded that Mother Clare ought to be remembered, above all else, as the founder of the Sisters of Peace, founded to work out practical solutions to the problems of justice and peace especially for women of all ages in the modern world. O'Neill used a vivid metaphor to explain the poisonous atmosphere which her enemies surrounded the Nun's good works during her lifetime by evoking the legend of the Upas Tree that poisons everything that comes into contact with it (vii). On the final pages, O'Neill directly addressed the source of inspiration beyond the grave with genuine gratitude and affection: "We grieve at your pain while we rejoice at your vision" (203-205).

My own first awareness of the Nun's existence happened during the 1990s with the republication of her book about the history of County Kerry. The book impressed me as a tapestry of the Kingdom, my own native county, combining history, ecclesiology, archaeology, topography, geology, genealogies from the earliest times, plus maps and a selection of extracts from texts over the centuries. My next encounter with the Nun occurred during 1998 with the re-publication of the Nun's first autobiography. In the Introduction Maria Luddy highlighted her interest in the Nun's historical writing which was influenced by renowned Irish scholars such as John O'Donovan, Eugene Curry and Audrey de Vere and grew further from her lively correspondence with the likes of Sir William Wilde and the O'Connell family of Derrynane. While Luddy was full of praise for the Nun's campaigns on behalf of the tenants and labourers on Irish landlord estates, she expressed unease about the Nun's naïveté in church politics with her preference for the role of women as mothers in Christian homes (v-xiv).

Irish historians have expressed views of the Nun in studies of nineteenth-century Irish Catholicism. In Professor Eugene O'Neill's recent study into the Apparition at Knock, County Mayo in the context of a series of local crises involving the Land League,

the Campaign for Home Rule, and the Irish church's uses of the earliest pilgrims to Knock, the Nun may appear only as a minor character but the local coalition of priests and landlords against which she battled are documented in considerable detail. The Nun's relevance in the field of nineteenth-century Irish Studies has been confirmed recently in a long entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, written by the cultural historian Patrick Maume. After his detailed analysis, Maume cautiously concluded: "in her frustrations and partly strategic invalideism, her doubts and polemics, her aspiration as sage and social reformer, Cusack was a Victorian rather than a twentieth-century figure."

Public interest in the Nun has continued to grow apace largely driven by the resourcefulness of her American Congregation (CSJP). Work on their rediscovered founder climaxed in 2006 when Sister Rosalie McQuaide put online an updated long list of the Nun's published writings under the entry of Cusack, M.F. An ongoing CSJP project began in 2005 with the publication of an annual journal in print and online *Studies on the Life & Work of Margaret Anna Cusack* which mainly uses the Nun's own words to piece together for the benefit of both scholars and general readers an increasingly detailed understanding of her place in the history of Church reformers.

Research over the last fifty years has rescued the Nun from the shroud of obscurity wrapped around her by enemies, and has suggested more interesting background on the gaps, digressions, repetitions, self-justifications to be found scattered about especially throughout her hastily over-written autobiographies. Certainly the main thrust of all her campaigning was directed against manifestations of a repressive, obsessive, hypocritical church hierarchy; yet her approval of Leo XIII seems to have remained intact. In the case of her early admiration for Pius IX, she seems to have ignored the implications of his authoritarian Syllabus of Errors issued in 1864. So far the Nun's modern rescue has most benefited her Congregation. Her presence in the Irish imagination has still to progress beyond the flittings of a feminist ghost from the nineteenth century. As my interest in the Nun has been growing, my conviction has been formed that her presence in the Irish imagination ought to be that of a rare spirit battling both for the reform of Hierarchy in the Catholic Church and for genuine understanding and revival of the traditions of prayer to be found in the early Irish Church.

In the following sequence, I divide into seven parts her story as an embattled religious reformer stretching across most of the nineteenth century and now waiting in the wings of the twentieth-first century.

## **1. Reluctant exile from Ireland**

Margaret Anna Cusack was born in 1829 in Coolock village near Dublin, a safe place where members of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry lived apart from the Dublin poor. In her childhood, Margaret Anna's father Samuel who had trained as a doctor at the Apothecaries Hall practised unsuccessfully mainly due to his own poor health in premises on Digges Street, Dublin at the back of the College of Surgeons. Her uncle was

James William Cusack, Samuel's half brother, who had a thriving medical practice at 3 Kildare Street and became a pioneering Professor of Surgery at Trinity College Dublin. James William felt sorry for struggling Samuel and tried to help him out, with a move to Monkstown for a fresh start close to successful members of the family. Samuel's wife Sarah was a fervent Low Church Episcopalian and insisted on bringing up her children in that religious tradition. Meanwhile Margaret Anna largely educated herself by reading very widely, showed musical and linguistic talents and at quite an early age acquired the overwhelming ambition to write. As a rebellious adolescent not close to her mother and brother Samuel, Margaret Anna felt closest to her father as he battled against failure in life. When her mother decided to abandon her failing and ailing husband in 1843 and took her two children off with her to live in Exeter with great aunt Baker and other relatives who were prosperous members of the Plymouth Brethren, Margaret Anna still felt very close to her embattled father.

## **2. Conversion in England**

Margaret Anna was sent to a boarding school, probably Godolphin School in Salisbury where she developed her many talents. She defied convention by travelling alone to Ireland in order to comfort her ailing father whom her mother had rejected. She became engaged to Charlie Holmes, probably a young Devonshire clergyman who much impressed her by his concern for others. A sense of total personal devastation engulfed her when both her father in Wicklow and fiancée in Devon died in quick succession and she resolved to dedicate the rest of her life to battle on behalf of the deprived. Influential local friends introduced the energetic young woman to Edward Pusey, leader of the Anglican wing of the Oxford Movement, who persuaded her to direct her energies by becoming an Anglican novice nun. Very swift disillusionment with inactive Anglican nuns ensued and later Margaret Anna would write a satirical novel *Hornehurst Rectory* (1872) about her negative experiences during this period. She was introduced to Henry Manning (later Cardinal Manning) who persuaded her to join the Catholic Church in whose service she would become a nun who was able to give practical help to the needy poor. Much inspired by Manning's advice and much to the fury of Pusey, first she was received into the Catholic church and confirmed by Cardinal Wiseman in 1858. The Cardinal, a writer himself, challenged her to devote her writing talents in her battle to inspire and support fellow-Catholics in the new age of great opportunity.

## **3. Encouragement in Ireland**

Margaret Anna was introduced to Mother Mary O'Hagan the Superior of the Poor Clare in Newry, Ireland. Mother O'Hagan had been born into a well-to-do Catholic family in Belfast and her brother was Thomas O'Hagan, a very distinguished barrister



who would later be appointed by Prime Minister Gladstone as the First Lord Chancellor of Ireland and the first Lord O'Hagan. After their meeting, Mother O'Hagan invited her new friend to join the convent in Newry to enable her to follow Manning's advice to make a practical difference for the deprived and Wiseman's advice to develop her talents as a Catholic writer. So Margaret Anna was received into the Newry convent in 1859 as Sister Mary Francis Clare. Shortly afterwards an urgent request to Mother O'Hagan came from Father Sullivan, Parish Priest of Kenmare on behalf of Bishop Moriarty of Kerry, to found a convent school for poor girls in Kenmare. Mother Mary set off for Kerry with six sisters including Sister Mary Francis Clare during 1861. Throughout the rest of the 1860s, the Nun concentrated on keeping the promise to Wiseman by writing which she did by researching and writing about Irish history which explored the links between the culture of Celtic Saints and contemporary Ireland. With the permission of the Superior, she set up a form of self-publication within the Kenmare Convent which produced a continuous stream of books and a number of small devotional pamphlets, most of which were reviewed favourably in the *The London Tablet*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Monthly*, *Cork Examiner*, *Irish Canadian*, *The New York Tablet*, *L'Univers* in Paris. The Nun sent letters and articles to many newspapers. Irish emigrants worldwide got to know about her and bought her publications in considerable numbers. Offers from established publishers were gratefully accepted. The Nun of Kenmare was becoming an Irish Catholic household name at home and abroad. Financial profit from the books helped the Poor Clare community in Kenmare to fund the expansion of the education offered to poor local girls to include the skills of lace-making. The Nun's musical abilities as organist and composer of hymns for children were much appreciated by worshippers in the parish church at Kenmare.

By the 1870s the Nun was writing biographies of "heroes" like Daniel O'Connell the Catholic Emancipator, Father Matthew the Temperance Friar, and Pope Pius IX, the Marian Devotee. Already she was beginning to remember her promise to Manning and began to write directly about the social reform necessary for workers in contemporary Ireland. The death of Mother O'Hagan in 1876 inspired a *In Memoriam* tribute. After the loss of her closest friend, the battle on behalf of the neglected increased and turned into campaigning against indifferent landlords after the return of serious famine to Ireland in 1879, and the foundation of the Land League. Lord O'Hagan invited her to write a paper about Ireland's most urgent social problems for the annual Conference of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science to be held in Trinity College. The Nun's campaign against the landlords caused threats to be made to her life. In December 1880, a local march and rally in support of her stand on landlord injustice attracted about some 8000 tenants and farmers, a brass band from Killarney and a gigantic banner with the painted words in large capital *Kenmare resents the insults offered to Sister Mary Clare – Behold her bodyguard*. As a result of a worldwide appeal for Famine Relief by the Nun, contributions began to flow in, many of them addressed to her personally in the Kenmare convent – a total of about £15, 000 was reached.

Her paper for the Trinity College conference in 1881 was read in her discreet absence in the presence of Lord O'Hagan, Lord Chancellor of Ireland. The emphasis in the Nun's paper, widely reported, was on the needs of Irish emigrants set against the background of the appalling statistic that over two and a half million people had left Ireland over the previous twenty-eight years and were now living in dreadful urban ghettos in need of a helping hand from priests who were building great church buildings while remaining largely indifferent to the urgent educational needs of poor young Irish girls at great risk. The Nun's relentless battle against the local Lansdowne landowners began to lose her support from her convent superior, the local parish priest and the bishop of Kerry. Her political tract in 1881 *The Present Case of Ireland Plainly Stated* was such a forthright approval of the Land League policies of Charles Stewart Parnell that the battling Nun, her health now failing like her ailing father, decided to return to the Poor Clare Convent in Newry for a new beginning via Knock, from where there had been local reports of the Blessed Virgin's apparitions which she greatly welcomed. The Nun was accompanied on her retreat north from Kenmare by the few Poor Clare nuns still sympathetic to her plans to reform the Order of Poor Clares. Encouragement of her plans was forthcoming from Archbishop Croke of Cashel.

#### **4. Nun's knock and beyond**

The Nun was welcomed to Knock in the middle of November 1881 by Canon Bourke, parish priest of Claremorris, and Archdeacon Cavanagh, Parish Priest of Knock. Canon Burke, a learned Celtic scholar and historical writer, was already enthusiastic about the Nun's historical publications and Archdeacon Cavanagh was very eager to enlist the services of such a well-known Catholic writer in promotion of Knock as a new site of Catholic pilgrimage to equal if not surpass in popularity the earlier sites of Celtic pilgrimage. The Nun's first public prayers at Knock were to beg for a cure for her rheumatic condition which prevented her from kneeling. The subsequent sudden restoration of her health which meant that she could kneel to pray convinced the Nun that her cure was a special gift from Mary Queen of Heaven. The Nun's cure at Knock was highlighted in the local and the national press. In a strongly worded letter to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, the Nun stated that her cure was not a miracle in need of any approval from the Church authorities but a personal gift bestowed on her by Mary. The Nun concluded that Mary cured her to set up an industrial school for poor girls in Knock and set about raising funds for that project. At first there was strong popular support for the Nun's plans. Meanwhile Archbishop McEvilly of Tuam had worries about the Nun's challenging views of the cures at Knock. In a letter McEvilly ordered her to go to the Newry convent where the bishop of Dromore would clarify her duties as a nun. On her way back to Knock with a document from the bishop of Dromore, the Nun visited the Poor Clare community at Harold's Cross in Dublin, only to discover that the superior there had been forbidden by Archbishop McCabe of Dublin to allow her to stay overnight



in the convent. The Nun, to her consternation, realised that McEvelly's hostility was spreading. She returned to Knock in time for Christmas 1881 where she was forbidden by Archdeacon Cavanagh to receive the sacraments over the Christmas season because the Archbishop had not appointed a priest to be her confessor. The appointment took place after Christmas. Canon Bourke and Archbishop Croke pleaded with McEvelly to support the Nun, and there was much local popular support for the Nun who began to make slow progress with her industrial school project.

In early 1882 against the background of the Phoenix Park murder of British officials and the imprisonment of Parnell, the Archbishop of Dublin issued a pastoral letter forbidding women to take any direct part in politics which was interpreted in the press as a direct attack on the Nun's activities in Kenmare and Knock. When Archbishop McCabe was appointed to be a Cardinal in May 1882, his well-known hostility to the Land League provoked public protest in the streets by those who regarded the Archbishop of Dublin as hand-in-glove with the oblivious landlord class. The Nun obstinately refused to move from Knock, determined to fulfil her promise to the Queen of Heaven to build there a school for poor girls. The hostile yet dithering McEvelly permitted the Nun's project to stumble on when a local coachhouse in poor condition became a temporary convent for the group of Poor Clare nuns and a few idealistic postulants. Among the postulants in the Nun's company at this stage was Margaret Honoria Gaffney, a local national school teacher, who would become her closest friend. Even as the new school buildings were being constructed by local Works, the Nun began drafting a constitution for a new order under the protection of St. Joseph.

Her pamphleteering side continued with the publication of *The Present Cause of Ireland*, yet another attack on the abuses of the landlord system. Now McEvelly pronounced in public that the Nun's presence in Knock was a threat to the church's teaching authority. When the demand by Archdeacon Cavanagh that the Nun appoint him as manager of her school was rejected, the cat-and-mouse battle ended and the Archdeacon, the Archbishop and the local landlords united to indict the Nun of wickedness "unbefitting a nun". Local parishioners were encouraged to harass the nuns in the temporary convent and to disrupt the works on the building site of the industrial school. Under such pressure on all sides, the Nun decided to visit Cardinal Manning in London to discuss the foundation of the new order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. The advice from Manning was that such an order could be first set up quickly in the diocese of Nottingham where the Bishop Edward Bagshawe was ready to be its first patron. Much encouraged by Manning and Bagshawe, the Nun went on to meet Pope Leo XII in Rome to ask papal permission to found the new order, a permission which was granted after their one-to-one meeting in the Vatican in 1883. The audience with the Pope and the foundation of the new order was fully reported in *L'Observatore Romano* and the *London Standard*. The Nun herself wrote a letter to the Times London outlining the educational plans for the new order which was published on the 16 June 1884.

## 5. Nun's new world order and disorder

In 1884 the Nun, with Sister Evangelista, the former Margaret Honoria Gaffney by her side, set off for America to raise funds and set up schools run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace in Irish communities in the New World. Her mission was reported and approved of in the press. Young enthusiastic women were inspired to join the order. In her travels to various cities, the Nun encountered suspicion from the American Catholic Hierarchy who tended to dismiss her views of church authority largely based on reports about the wild nun being circulated by the likes of the Archbishops of Tuam and Dublin across the Atlantic. Her one successful contact in America was with Bishop Wigger of New Jersey who invited her to set up a school at Englewood for the Irish emigrant girls in his diocese. Her greatest opponent was Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York. Corrigan was born in America to Irish parents from County Mayo and trained as a moral theologian in Rome. At the time he was hard at work on the completion for God's glory of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York and so felt much angered by the publication in the New York of a strongly-worded article by the Nun detailing the many social problems being overlooked by the Catholic church in the city. Corrigan's fury was shared by his fellow ecclesiastics who decided that this Nun must be silenced once and for all. Bishop Keane, the rector of the newly opened Catholic University of Washington wrote a devastating rejection in response to a fervent defence of their Superior by the Sisters of St. Joseph already working at Englewood: "I could be no use whatsoever, nor anyone, nor anything, till she is quietly back in her place, her convent in Ireland." As this conflict between Nun and Hierarchy was being reported by the press, the Anglican Bishop of Massachusetts Huntington supported her appeal to Christians of all denominations to set up a mission in New York for poor Irish immigrants. Instant condemnation by Archbishop Corrigan inhibited support for such an adventurous proposal for Church unity in the face of pressing social problems and revealed to the Nun how local government in New York was dominated by Catholics unprepared to challenge the moral directions of their Archbishop.

By Summer 1888, the Nun realised that the preservation and development of the new foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in New Jersey depended on her own total withdrawal: "I hope when Archbishop Corrigan knows I have nothing to do with the sisters, that he will be satisfied and let them do the work of the order in peace." Her friend Sister Evangelista found herself in charge of the order at the age of thirty five. Already the Nun was working on the first volume of her autobiography. In spite of her growing sense of anti-clericalism, the Nun retained her early great enthusiasm for the Second Spring of the Catholic Church in Britain by including two highly significant items at the beginning of the first volume of her autobiography: a long extract from Cardinal Newman's autobiographical book *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and an open letter to Pope Leo XIII which included: "Holy Father, take these good sisters, whom I have so long loved and cherished and trained for this work, to your heart." During her last days in America, the Nun was given very little practical help for her departure by anybody. The only alternative was to seek refuge with cousins and friends back in England. In

1889, the Nun set out on the long sea journey back from the New World to the old world – exhausted, ill, disillusioned, extremely angry.

## **6. Darkness over the nun's soul**

The defeated Nun returned to Devon where she had once been a precocious adolescent. At first she shared a house in Swanage where she was visited by the sisters of her former fiancé Charlie. Requests poured in from newspapers and evangelical groups, aware of her first autobiography, for articles and lectures which would expose further the corruption of the Catholic church. Her fury with Catholic officials and her need for survival money led her to respond to these invitations with chapter and verse. News such as the Irish Hierarchy's role in the fall of Parnell, the retirement from public life of Archbishop Croke, the death of Cardinal Manning increased the Nun's sense of frustrated isolation. The second volume of autobiography *The Story of My Life* appeared in 1891. Spiritual darkness hovered over the soul of the Nun as anger burnt out her strong writing instincts. Inevitably the Nun's detailed criticisms of the abuse of authority and hierarchy within Catholic Church, especially in the case of the Jesuits in another book *The Black Pope* in 1896, became grist to the mills of both fundamentalist enemies of the church and her own enemies within the church who continued to brand her recent writings as evidence of her corruption and absolute proof of her sinfulness and indeed, madness. Priests and nuns began to turn up in Devon in order to bring about the Nun's deathbed repentance which would damage her in world press headlines. During this dreadful period, the Nun's most sympathetic local friend was Rev. J.G. Gregory, an Anglican minister at Christ Church, Leamington Spa who invited her to live with his family at 21, Lansdowne Crescent, Leamington where she availed herself of the health facilities at the Spa. As she edged closer to death, the Nun received a letter of greeting from Sister Evangelista in the New Jersey Convent to which the Nun replied in a note dated 3 January 1899: "My own darling Evangelista, I find it difficult to write now... How I would love to see you and how I long to see you once more... your ever loving Mother, M.F.Cusack." Reports on the Nun's worsening state of health began to appear in *The Leamington Courier*. The Nun died on June 5, 1899 at the age of seventy and was buried in the Anglican section of Leamington Cemetery (v-xiv).

## **7. Nun's afterlife**

What the Nun has published and what others have published about her add up to important testimonials of her important role in religious debate. That her writings have so inspired her Congregation in America to research and action adds substantially to that importance. Doubtless many letters and papers await discovery across the globe.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless enough evidence is now in the public sphere to make a strong case for the

Nun's relevance to controversies currently raging within the Irish Catholic Church. The noteworthy legacy of a battling religious campaigner has occasionally become a belated agency for reform even when that reformer was roundly defeated by contemporaries. Will the Nun of Kenmare turn out to be one of those lives? Stranger things have happened!

## Notes

- 1 A version of this essay was given as a talk to the Irish Literary Society London on 27.10.11
- 2 Recently Sister Catherine Fergusson CSJP published for the first time in her 100-page booklet correspondence between the Nun and her Irish clerical superiors during the multi-faceted crisis at Knock which reveals sequences of mutual recriminations. Fergusson's conclusion is that the Nun was a very gifted woman who had never really embraced the true Catholic faith, a view very different to the one taken by her fellow CSJPs in America. Significantly her view of the Nun of Kenmare is much welcomed in the pamphlet's Foreword by the current parish priest of Knock Msgr. Joseph Quinn. (5)

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# Cinema







# *Irish L'humour Noir: Peter Foott's The Carpenter and His Clumsy Wife*

Matthew Schultz

**Abstract:** *In this essay I read Irish director Peter Foott's short film, The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife (2005), through Oscar Wilde's aesthetic theory, "The Decay of Lying" (1891). I argue that Wilde's critique of Realism as a "complete failure," and as a corollary from this, that Lying "is the proper aim of art," while convincing and useful, stops short of Grotesque Comic theory that combines the real and surreal. In grotesque comedy we encounter exaggerated, nightmarish lies; but beneath the surface there is a certain psychological realism – laughter is a coping mechanism. Foott uses grotesque humour to illicit confused laughter from his audience; he makes the vulgar beautiful and the real surreal. In other words, Foott blurs the boundary between life and art, thus undermining the fundamental ordering structures of society. In this article I focus on the boundary between Art and Nature, and between workspace and domestic-space. The carpenter's wife moves from the domestic-space into the workspace; and the carpenter replaces his natural wife with an artificial recreation.*

**Keywords:** *Peter Foott; Oscar Wilde; grotesque humour.*

In *l'humour noir* we encounter exaggerated, nightmarish lies; but beneath the surface there is a certain psychological realism: laughter as a coping mechanism alerts us to the grim realities that must be made humorous to endure. Exaggerating natural boundaries is the comedic technique of *l'humour noir* that helps the audience cope with absurd reality. In *l'humour noir*, life's vulgarities must be unmasked for the criticism of such vulgarities to be effective: such art treats the grotesque, vulgar, and obscene reality of human existence humorously for two closely related reasons: laughter is a defense against unfulfilled expectations and unavoidable tragedy, and laughter is a means of asserting one's superiority over an absurd situation or character.

In this paper, I propose that contemporary Irish filmmaker Peter Foott employs *l'humour noir* (grotesque humor) to illicit confused laughter from his audience; he makes the vulgar pleasurable and the real surreal. In other words, Foott blurs the boundary between life and art, thus undermining the fundamental ordering structures of society, thereby challenging the authority of all boundaries. I focus particularly on the supposed

divide between Art and Nature, and between workspace and domestic-space. When, for instance, is an artist not an artist? Can a musician ever ‘turn a deaf ear,’ or does that psychological attitude permeate into every sphere of a composer’s life? By this logic we can better understand Foott’s attention to boundary, and his film as an attempt to cope with the absurdity of human predicament, if we view it through the lens of *l’humour noir*. Crossing boundaries is irreverently humorous, especially when the boundary is crossed and the right character ends up in the wrong setting, or the wrong character inhabits the proper setting. This is forcefully illustrated in Foott’s film *The Carpenter and His Clumsy Wife* (2004) when the carpenter’s wife moves from her decidedly gendered domestic-space into his equally gendered workspace; and also when the carpenter replaces his natural wife with an artificial recreation.<sup>1</sup>

To date, critics have been unable to agree upon a definition of *l’humour noir* (also referred to as black humor, dark comedy, gallows humor, Gothic humor, and grotesque comedy); therefore, I will rely on a number of critics to reach a more precise definition. Alan R. Pratt, editor of *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (1993), claims, “Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and tradition, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (xix). Max Schulz goes further to explain why this is the case:

[The Black Humorist] forces us to share with him the painful laughter of examining and analyzing our mutually hidden and camouflaged obsessions. . . . But where satire would perform a lobotomy on these sudden terrors, Black Humor simply records them for future reference, though not without a wink so tight that it brings an empathic tear to both author’s and reader’s eyes. It is more a detached history of the black thoughts of the human mind and the unspoken fears of society than its scourge. (167)

*L’humour noir* literature resists tragedy through laughter: laughter replaces anger, distress, and violent aggression, which are critically unacceptable exhibitions of emotion. Late Victorian society would agree that such emotions would be unacceptable, but it would be equally unacceptable to employ the grotesque as a way to regulate behavior. Thus, *l’humour noir* does not reflect its age, in fact it is in direct opposition to the moral climate of its own time.

J. Jerome Zolten offers an overview of comic theories in his article “Joking in the Face of Tragedy” (1988). Zolten draws upon Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to distinguish between innocent and tendentious jokes; that is jokes that aim only to amuse, and jokes with an agenda beyond amusement. Like most comic theorists, Zolten is interested explicitly in tendentious jokes. He offers three theories in an attempt to understand why we laugh: ambivalence theory, incongruity theory, and disparagement theory. According to Zolten, “ambivalence theorists say that we laugh when we recognize conflicting emotions within ourselves” (305); “incongruity theorists

say we laugh at the improper or inappropriate time” (305). He explains that we might be ambivalent about tragic events because we are ultimately glad that we were not the victims of the tragedy, and “the very act of injecting humor into a tragic situation is incongruous behavior that jars some of us into laughing” (305). Finally, Zolten suggests that disparagement theory, “explains that humor at the expense of self or others is disguised aggression” (305), “according to the ‘disparagement’ theory, joking is a way to create a symbolic hierarchy wherein ‘we’ are always better than ‘they’” (309). Recently, Doug Haynes has argued against the disparagement theory, “while black humor is of course frequently tendentious, its ‘target’ . . . is the nature of social conflict as such, rather than any underprivileged group” (28). After an exploration of what black humor does, and the method by which it succeeds, the question that arises is why turn tragic events into humor? To attempt to answer such a question we must turn, at least briefly, to Freud.

I see *l’humour noir* as an amalgamation of these three theories held together by Freud’s ‘displacement theory,’ which suggests the comic arises when our train of thought is derailed or displaced, thus confusing the psychical process. In effect, black humor subverts pain by confusing the audience – we are ambivalent about the tragedy because it does not directly affect us, we then respond to the tragedy with laughter (an incongruous response) because we see ourselves as superior to the victim. This is only possible if the author decides to present the tragic situation in a humorous way, which confuses our expected response of sympathy. For instance, we do not laugh at tragedy discussed in a sermon because “a clergyman entirely overlooks the comic in the human weaknesses which the writer of comedies can bring to light so effectively” (Freud, *Jokes* 273). Laughter arises from tragedy only because the author has displaced our expected psychical response.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud argues, “the joking activity should not, after all, be described as pointless or aimless, since it has the unmistakable aim of evoking pleasure in its hearers. I doubt if we are in a position to undertake *anything* without having an intention in view” (113). Humor is intended to evoke pleasure, and “the intention of black humorists [is] to transcend the pain and absurdity of reality through works which undermine the seriousness of the subject” (Zolten 310). In light of Zolten’s claim, we should remind ourselves that Freud discusses the repression of pain and absurdity at length in *Totem and Taboo* (1913):

The asocial nature of neuroses has its genetic origin in their most fundamental purpose, which is to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of phantasy. The real world, which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man. (93)

The purpose of the taboo is to escape from reality, to protect the individual from a true understanding of human frailty in a horrific environment. Whereas the taboo

represses, restricts, and protects the individual by *masking* reality, humor uncovers, liberates, and protects by *unmasking* reality. Comedy allows us to approach the taboo without being harmed. Like Zolten suggests, through humor we can observe pain, study it, and experience it, without touching or being touched by it. Laughing at the grotesque allows us to feel superior to the absurd situation by helping us approach it, and ultimately cope with it. And it is not innocent comedy, but *l'humour noir* that allows us to approach the most grotesque situations. Freud insists, "But it is noteworthy that we only find someone's being put in a position of inferiority comic where there is empathy – that is, where someone else is concerned: if we ourselves were in similar straits we should be conscious only of distressing feelings" (Freud, *Jokes* 244). In short, every tragedy is a comedy unless you are the victim.

Often, the source of comic pleasure arises from exaggeration; in addition, according to Freud following Immanuel Kant, "the feeling of the comic arises from the disappointment of an expectation" (270). We might ask: does laughter arise from the disappointment of our expectation to cry? Meaning, when observing tragedy, we expect to experience pity, empathy, or sympathy; but an author might present the tragedy comically, and we cannot help but laugh. This reaction is what Freud refers to as 'broken humor,' the humor that smiles through tears (289). It is precisely this type of humor that has been most prominent in twentieth- and twenty-first century Irish comedy, including Peter Foott's *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife*.

Peter Foott graduated from the Irish National Film School IADT with honors in 2002. His second short film, *Carpenter*, began as Foott's final-year film project in 2002. He had a budget of €5000, and took a further two years to complete it in 2004 (Boylan). Once finished, the fourteen minute long short film was selected to be shown at a number of international film festivals including: Venice, Los Angeles, and Tribeca Film Festivals, and has won nine awards.<sup>2</sup>

Foott produces a Gothic, anti-mimetic, anti-realist argument in *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* via the carpenter's willingness and ability to replace his wife's severed limbs with mechanical reproductions. In an interview with the *Irish Times*, Foott admits, "A lot of stuff I do has to do with Frankenstein." If we couple Foott's admitted interest in the anti-natural, mechanical Frankenstein's monster with Henri Bergson's 1900 anti-natural aesthetic wherein Bergson claims humor is the product of 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living,' then we can conclude that this film is designed to be horrifically hilarious – and it is. In the film, we see Foott execute *l'humour noir* (in particular, the championing of artificiality and exaggeration). He seems to rely on more than just reverse Frankensteinian assemblage, wherein he destroys life by slowly replacing natural limbs with doll parts. The film also draws on W.B. Yeats's "The Dolls," which was published in his 1914 volume, *Responsibilities*. The poem, set in a doll-maker's house, narrates the dolls' horror at the birth of a natural child: "That is an insult to us," one bawls. The child is described as "a noisy and filthy thing" by the 'oldest of all the dolls,' paralleling the Carpenter's disgust of his wife's naturalism in Foott's film. The

doll-maker's wife in Yeats's poem, seemingly possessed by the dolls' screams, murders her child and then consoles her husband (who was awoken by 'the wretch' as it cried out with its final breath) by claiming that it was 'an accident.'

The opening shot of *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* has the audience looking through a camera that mimicks the carpenter's point of view. We hear the carpenter's labored breathing as a woodshop is brought into focus. The carpenter then enters the shot from the left and strikes a pose reminiscent of Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man." As the camera shutters, cheery background music ("The Silver Apples of the Moon") increases in volume, and animated sketching fills in the Da Vinci-esque drawing. At this point the carpenter (Sean Colgan) is established as the main character of the film. Not only is his wife (Nuala Kelly) subordinated in the title, in addition – as we will see throughout – she is subordinated to the carpenter because it is not so much the wife's clumsiness that elicits laughter, but the carpenter's response to her. In the film's opening scene, for instance, the wife enters the workshop to deliver sandwiches. Upon her entry the music and animation stop, and the carpenter maintains his pose, ignoring her presence altogether. The wife tisks, exits the shot, and the music and animation resume.

Following a credit sequence, the narrator (Jim Sheridan) describes the carpenter in a voice-over while the carpenter skillfully and happily manipulates a marionette reproduction of himself. We are told that "he was a very clever carpenter; so clever that he could make almost anything." The carpenter's intelligence and skill as a craftsman will point to Foott's insistence that art is superior to life and nature. To emphasize the point, the narrator describes the carpenter's wife as she is shown on-screen attempting to catch a chicken (which causes her great difficulty), and then peeling potatoes: "She was not at all like the carpenter; she was stupid, and very clumsy." As soon as the word clumsy is delivered, the wife cuts off her index finger. This is a tragic moment because we are reminded of our own frailty: this accident could happen to anyone. What happens next, however, could not. Our first unfulfilled expectation (and thus an ingredient for comedy according to Kant and Freud) is the lack of pain that accompanies the severed finger. The second disappointed expectation is the carpenter's reaction. Whereas most of us would be horrified for the victim and rush to help stop the bleeding, the carpenter reacts without emotion; in fact, there is no bleeding to worry about anyhow. Instead of taking his wife to a hospital, the Carpenter takes the finger from his wife, envisions a mechanical reproduction (with the help of another animated sketch), and crafts for her a wooden replica. As this is happening, we are confronted with another comic gesture: the dog, Henry, steals the severed finger from the carpenter's workbench and feasts on it. Henry's action is taboo because we perceive domesticated pets as being fellow creatures, thus making his eating of the finger at least quasi-cannibalistic. But since the finger was already severed, and the dog steals it when no one is looking, the action is darkly humorous: we laugh uncomfortably. Louis Hasley argues that, "it cannot be too strongly emphasized that nothing is humorous per se, that humor is an attitude, and that a thing is humorous, ridiculous, or laughable only because and when someone considers it so" (113). My argument throughout this essay, however, is that we cannot help but



consider *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* comic because Foott presents the characters and situations with detachment and playfulness. He consistently denies our expectations through displacement, and so we must laugh at our own confusion if nothing else.

“The carpenter set to work making a new finger for his wife;” and when it is finished, and they have strapped it in place, the narrator reports: “It fitted perfectly. In fact, it fitted so well that both the carpenter and his wife agreed it fitted even better than the original finger.” Here, Foott, it seems, takes a page directly out of Oscar Wilde’s playbook. Wilde writes in the opening of “The Decay of Lying,” “the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (1071). The couple’s reaction to the mechanical finger is precisely Wilde’s reaction to all art: the artificial finger is even better than the natural original.

A few weeks after the success of the artificial finger, the carpenter begins working on a birthday present for his wife: “the carpenter wanted to make her something really special.” On her birthday, the wife slaughters a pig and is cleaving it when she slices into the artificial finger. Again, we are confronted with its superiority. Had it been a real finger that she had cut into, she would have needed another replacement. Once she dislodges the cleaver from her wooded finger, the carpenter arrives to give her a birthday present. She begins excitedly unwrapping it, and tells the carpenter, “I think I know what this is.” But as she slides the lid off the box to reveal a pair of wooden, mechanical hands, her expectation is disappointed: “This is not quite what I thought it was.” She picks up one of the hands and pulls on the strings that operate the fingers: very pretty Carpenter; “very life like.” Here, Foott ventures into the complexity of Wilde’s anti-mimetic argument. Though the hands are ‘very life like,’ they are superior to the wife’s natural hands because she cannot do harm to them. Wilde argues, “Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything” (1091). Foott takes this imaginative step in his film with the crafted hands. There was no need for them. The wife hadn’t severed her hands like she had her finger. The artificial hands are purely an example of the carpenter’s imagination refiguring nature’s design. Surely the audience does not suspend disbelief, the film is too absurdly artifice laden, but in order for the audience to accept this critique of realism, Foott employs grotesque humor techniques.

Freud’s discussion of “gallows humor” will be useful to us at this time. He relates a humorous event: “a rogue on his way to execution asked for a scarf for his bare throat so as not to catch cold – an otherwise laudable precaution but one which, in view of what lay in store so shortly for the neck, was remarkably superfluous and unimportant” (285). The situation is similar in *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* in that there is an obvious and horrifying disconnect with reality. Freud continues his explanation of our response to the rogue’s request:

The situation that ought to drive the criminal to despair might rouse intense pity in us; but that pity is inhibited because we understand that he, who is more closely concerned, makes nothing of the situation. As a result of this understanding, the expenditure of the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off. We are, as it were, infected by the rouge's indifference – though we notice that it has cost him a great expenditure of psychical work. (286)

We respond similarly to the carpenter's wife, we are numbed (or as Freud proposes, "infected") by her casual reaction to the mutilations. Initially, the carpenter comes to his wife's rescue and we see him as a sort of comic savior. He then deteriorates into a deranged artist, crafting artificial hands his wife does not need. But she accepts his present, and an eerily upbeat song with apropos lyrics – "Walkin' in the sunshine, sing a little sunshine song. Put a smile upon your face as if there's nothing wrong" – begins playing as the camera pans from the meat cleaver, to the carpenter who winks at his wife, to the wife who puts on a nervous smile as if nothing is wrong, and finally to Henry waiting for the scraps. And though she cries out in pain when the carpenter chops off her hands so that he can install the artificial pair, the narrator reports: "They fitted perfectly. In fact, they fitted so well that both the carpenter and his wife agreed that they fitted even better than her original hands." So the pity that we initially prepared for the wife comes to nothing because we are told that she is better off with the artificial hands. Laughter arises from the disappointment of our expectation to offer sympathy.

In the next scene a fourth character is introduced: the neighbor, Mrs. McCombil. The carpenter's wife and Mrs. McCombil share a pleasant exchange across a fence about trimming hedges, and make a joke about Mr. Ben McCombil's eyebrows being longer than any twig on the bush. Both of them laugh, and the carpenter's wife covers her mouth with the artificial hand. Mrs. McCombil exclaims, "Jesus Christ missus, your hand! What happened!" The carpenter's wife fabricates an accident, "I had a bit of an accident cutting the pig; it's alright though," she says as she places her hand upon her hip as if to show Mrs. McCombil the improvement. "Carpenter made it for me; it fits just like me old hand." Creepy instrumental music plays while the next shot establishes a close up of the hand's movement as proof that it is operational. For a moment, Mrs. McCombil seems to accept the explanation. Then she notices the other hand: "Jesus Christ missus, your other hand!" In a short constructed to echo early *Frankenstein* movies, the carpenter's wife holds out both hands and begins walking towards her neighbor as if to touch her. Mrs. McCombil backs away and the carpenter's wife slouches in defeat. Mrs. McCombil's response to the artificial hands reinforces our initial reaction of horrified pity. But as soon as we are reminded of the situation's grotesqueness the scene is over and the next action Foott presents is purely comic. Terry Heller explains that, "by repeatedly calling upon the reader to shift his interpretation of the incident, to laugh only to weep only to laugh only to weep again, [the author] suspends the reader between the two poles" (201). The narrative's presentation of the wife as stupid and clumsy (an absurdly misogynist positioning – on Foott himself, though not his characters, seems



to be critical of) reminds us that, in the words of Burton Feldman, “it is only playing, one knows that. No one will get hurt. If there seem to be pain or degradation or death on the page, the effect will be made incongruous with the fact, sidetracked into a gag, hammed up, parodied away” (104). This is precisely what occurs when the carpenter’s wife attempts to chop wood in the next scene.

The carpenter’s wife is poised with a long-handled axe held in both artificial hands, high above her head. The narrator explains, “although the carpenter’s wife’s hands fitted perfectly, they didn’t make her any less clumsy”: the axe falls, and we hear a slicing sound. The shot cuts to Mrs. McCombil watching from the hedge, then back to the carpenter’s wife holding the bloody axe and smiling as if she had done a fine job chopping wood. There is a faint thud, and as the carpenter’s wife looks down we see she has severed her leg at the hip. She assures Mrs. McCombil that she is okay before falling to the ground.

Another upbeat song, “Love Will Keep us Together,” begins to play in the background as the Carpenter responds to his wife’s accident by crafting her a fully functional wooden leg. Decadent aesthete Charles Baudelaire, claims that, “one of the most distinctive marks of the absolute comic is that it remains unaware of itself” (164). Certainly, the carpenter is not aware that his actions are humorous; he is simply improving upon one of nature’s faults: human frailty. Our laughter comes from the idea of our own superiority over both the carpenter – we would not react in such an absurd manner – and the irrationality of the situation; meaning laughter is a defense against the dystopian universe (Baudelaire, Bergson, Freud). We laugh because the carpenter’s absurd action is really the only logical defense against his wife’s clumsiness. If he took her to receive medical attention, the doctors might reattach her leg. This scenario would allow for her to clumsily cut it off again. The carpenter’s remedy is to replace the fragile, natural leg with a stronger, artificial leg. We were told earlier that “although the carpenter’s wife’s hands fitted perfectly, they didn’t make her any less clumsy;” therefore, we might assume that she would continue to maim herself despite her mechanical improvements.

Our assumption is confirmed following the carpenter’s completion of the artificial leg. While mowing the grass on the slope of a steep hill, the leg detaches. The carpenter’s wife loses her balance and rolls down the hill seemingly uninjured. Once she comes to a rest, however, the mower similarly rolls down the hill after her and chops off her remaining natural leg. Amidst spraying blood and painful screams, the leg flies into the distance with Henry hungrily chasing it down. We laugh at what we perceive to be the sheer improbability of life’s misfortune, all the while knowing these accidents are anything but impossible.

The final scene is set in the carpenter’s workshop. His wife is resting in a chair as he feeds her soup. She is apologetic for her clumsiness, and mentions that she will roast him a joint of meat for all the trouble she’s caused. The narrator assures the audience, “even with all the trouble she caused him, the carpenter really did still love his wife.” Which is why we expect that the carpenter will craft a second artificial leg. We are disappointed. The wife falls asleep as the carpenter begins shaping a stump of wood

that we assume will be the replacement leg. The camera fades out to signal a time lapse, and when the picture returns the wife is waking up from her nap. A fourth lighthearted song, “May I Have the Next Dream With You, Dear?,” is juxtaposed with the horror of what happens next. The carpenter’s wife smiles at the carpenter who is sitting behind his workbench, a burlap sheet covering his latest project. He smiles back at her and lifts the cloth, revealing a wooden head. His wife’s smile slowly fades as the song reports, “close your eyes and put your arms around me, you’d be surprised what love can do.” We are indeed surprised when the carpenter gets up to retrieve a saw from the wall so that he can decapitate his wife and attach the artificial head. We are provided with one last close up of the wife; she is silently shedding a single tear, not at all hysterical as we would expect. The camera returns to the carpenter slowly approaching his wife with the saw as the screen fades out and the credits roll.

According to Freud, humor, albeit dark, springs from mechanical repetition: “A person who has reacted in the same way several times in succession repeats this mode of expression on the next occasion, when it is unsuitable and defeats his own intentions. He neglects to adapt himself to the needs of the situation, by giving way to the automatic action of habit” (75). Thus, the carpenter, who’s original purpose was to provide replacement body parts for those his wife severed, goes too far by replacing body parts that don’t need to be replaced. Ultimately, he kills her so that he can complete her transformation into a marionette. Freud offers a psychological explanation for this type of behavior in *Totem and Taboo* when he suggests that a neurosis like that of the carpenter’s “appears to be so tenderly altruistic, [but] it is merely *compensating* for an underlying contrary attitude of brutal egoism” (91). We are led to believe that the carpenter’s original fear for his wife’s safety and well-being is replaced by a fear that he might become the victim of his wife’s clumsiness. Recall the opening scene of the film, the wife enters the carpenter’s workshop and he immediately stops working until she leaves, perhaps out of fear that her clumsiness would harm him. This would explain why the carpenter goes so far as to kill his wife: he doesn’t see it as destroying her; he sees it as *improving* her. As a marionette, she can no longer cause trouble. She becomes a more perfect marionette than the one that the carpenter fashions at the film’s beginning, because she is the carpenter’s vision of an ideal woman: clever like himself – but only because he will be at the controlling end of her strings.

*L’humour noir* emerges as the organizing theme of this study because it allows for a particular kind of defense against absurdity: laughter helps us stomach the reality that the carpenter aesthetically improves his wife by transforming her into a marionette. The wife’s transformation from natural, living human being into artifice reflects the carpenter’s ideal vision. At no point during the transformation do any of the artificial replacements seem realistic. They are life-like in that they operate, but there is no finishing, and it is through her very incompleteness that the wife approaches the carpenter’s utopian ideal. This happens gradually. At first, when she accidentally cuts off her finger, he is happy enough to remedy the situation by making her a wooden finger as a replacement. Shortly thereafter the carpenter becomes proactive: he makes his wife a pair of hands

as a birthday present, but he must sever her natural hands in order to attach the artificial pair. This assures that any future slip of the cleaver will not damage her at all. But the wife proves clumsier still: she cuts off an entire leg. Happily – whether out of love or desire to craft we aren't sure – the carpenter constructs an artificial leg. But he seems to have made a mistake: he underestimates his wife's clumsiness and doesn't make a pair of legs. The outcome of this oversight is that she rolls down a hill and has her other leg disembodied by a lawnmower. At this point, rather than supply a replacement, the carpenter again gets proactive: he carves an artificial head. It follows that once the wife is decapitated, and the artificial head is in place, she will no longer be stupid or clumsy because a doll cannot think, nor can it act of its own accord. In the end, the ideal situation for the carpenter has been realized: he is no longer married to a stupid woman who could potentially hurt or kill him. Our mood at the end of the film is ambiguous because of the incongruity of the story: it is eerily comic.

So, what is it we laugh at? Seemingly we laugh at the absurdity of the carpenter's birthday gift to his wife: a pair of mechanical hands. We laugh at the fact that this time we are not the victims. Sometimes we might find ourselves laughing at jokes we would rather not laugh at. According to Simon Critchley, "humor can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have" (74); and further, "If humor tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be" (75). This is an interesting perspective to note since *l'humour noir* scholars such as Lisa Colletta maintain that, "the narcissism of humor protects the individual from threat and pain," "it takes on our greatest fears and makes a joke out of powerlessness, loneliness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death, allowing them to be mastered for a moment" (7). As these two views intersect, we are confronted with a paradox: our laugh at once protects and implicates us; our laughter distances us from the absurdity, while simultaneously placing us in its midst. Whatever might come of laughing in the face of tragedy, it at least "open[s] up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced" (Goldstein 10). Though my essay's focus is on aesthetics – mainly mimesis and comic theory – *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* also allows for further investigations into Gothic elements such as human psychology and physiology, feminist readings, and trauma studies.

Mathew Winston declares, "The comedy in black humor helps us overcome our fears" (257). But does it? Do we laugh because we feel superior to the victim, above the absurd situation? Or does it reinforce our fears? Do we laugh because we are afraid that next time the illogical universe will claim us? Or does Gothic, dark humor merely name our fears, taking no action beyond calling attention to our helplessness? Among the various humor critics mentioned in this essay Peter Foott appears to agree with Mel Brooks that, "Humor is just another defense against the universe." At the very least, we might see *l'humour noir* as a useful defense against mimetic art.

## Notes

- 1 Other popular, contemporary Irish films that rely on black comic tropes include: Neil Jordan's *Butcher Boy* (1997) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), Kristen Sheridan's *Disco Pigs* (2001), Martin McDonagh's *Six Shooter* (2005) and *In Bruges* (2008), and Peter Foott's *Just a Little Bit of Love: A Tribute to Des Smyth* (2002).
- 2 Special Mention – Venice Film Festival; Grand Jury Prize – Pescara Short Film Festival, Italy; Best Comedy – LA Short Film Festival; Gold Remi – Worldfest Houston; Runner-Up – Mallorca Film Festival; Special Mention – Cleveland Film Festival; Special Mention (Jury Award) – Night of the Living Short, Kimera, Italy; Special Mention (Audience Award) – Night of the Living Short, Kimera, Italy; FEDIC Plaque – Montecatini Terme Film Festival, Italy; Nominated to the Méliès d'Or for Best European Fantastic Film – Ravenna Nightmare Film Festival (Vico Films).

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# Drama







# *Language Usage and Social Categorisation in Brendan Behan's Play The Quare Fellow*

Patricia A. Lynch

**Abstract:** *The language of Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow (1954), a play set in an Irish prison, is examined stylistically. This is done under the headings of naming, usage of Hiberno-English, of prison jargon, and of Gaelic. These show evidence of categorisation under the conventional class structure of upper, middle, and lower. However, there are more complex divisions present through language. These are: prisoners' pecking-order according to crime, prisoners using more Hiberno-English and also prison jargon than the authority figures, one warder who uses language patterns similar to the prisoners, and the use of Gaelic by two characters, one a warder and the other a prisoner, who along with the warder above, represent the moral core of the play.*

**Keywords:** *Brendan Behan; The Quare Fellow; stylistics; class structure.*

## **Introduction**

More than fifty years after the first production of Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* at the Pike Theatre, Dublin, this article sets out to examine the use of language in the play according to specific categories. The study will follow the principles of stylistics, and the points made will be based on quantifiable evidence, that of frequencies of use of the terms in question. This will be seen to lead to some definite conclusions about the sometimes complex social roles and attitudes of the characters in the play. These conclusions will be interpreted in the light of the whole text.

The play was written by the archetypal Dubliner Behan, from the same background but a generation later than Sean O'Casey. O'Casey took a great deal of trouble to indicate the Irish, and specifically Dublin nature of the speech of his characters, mainly by re-spelling, thus using what Paul Kerswill calls "sociophonetics" (Maci 43). Behan does not do this to the same extent where phonology is concerned, apart from occasional words as in the title of the play: the "quare fellow" is the man due for execution in the prison; the word "quare" is phonologically marked, and the two words together form both Hiberno-English usage and a euphemism from prison jargon. However, he does

use many lexical and syntactical forms of HE. A study of prison jargon is the second category examined here. Of the other forms of language which could be chosen, just one more will be considered here: utterances in Gaelic, usually by the two characters who come from the Kerry Gaeltacht. These three categories are selected as they are related to social classification in the play.

### **Class, categorisation and character**

The play depicts a society of men only. Most of the prisoners are from Dublin, as seen below, and almost certainly of working class origins, to judge by their resentful attitude towards middle-class persons. We do not get to know their names, just “Prisoner A” etc. The juveniles, Young Prisoner 1, “Scholar”, and Young Prisoner 2, “Shaybo”, may seem to be an exception to this, but “Scholar” is almost certainly a nickname, and “Shaybo”, following the Dublin usage of adding –o or –bo to the short form of a name (see below), may be derived from “Shane” or “Seamus”. The character called “Dunlavin” probably has a nickname deriving from his home town in Co. Meath as this is not a common surname. “Neighbour” is a nickname due to his use of that word as a term of address (55). This would suggest that prisoners look for anonymity in the jail by giving and using created names with each other; they may not wish to be easily identified by other ex-prisoners and society in general when they leave the jail. The other possibility is that men in institutional situations, such as the army and boarding schools, prefer names for each other that bond them against outsiders and have meaning only in these closed worlds.

These types of naming, of origin, and of class form contrasts with all of the other characters. Firstly, the warders and officials in the prison usually have specific titles and surnames. This detail shows that they are assured of a place in society, are prepared to be recognised officially, and are not part of the closed group of prisoners. Secondly, their talk about topics such as pay and promotions combined with the previous consideration, means that they can be considered lower middle class. The Governor, some of the principal officers, and “Holy Healey” the Department of Justice visitor, would be more definitely middle-class. In fact, the sub-hierarchy of all of the prison officials, their various ranks, and their jockeying for position, are clearly indicated. As a group they are associated with the bourgeoisie in general, who are seen as part of the whole machinery which oppresses the prisoners: Regan says of the Departmental visitor: “Holy Healey ... ’s a fine bloody imposter, isn’t he? Like an old I.R.A. man with a good agency in the Sweep now. Recommend me to the respectable people!” (99). Regan thus implies that former fighters in the War of Independence have received their reward by being handed sinecures in bourgeois employment. Religion is also associated with the status quo: in Prisoner A’s words: “I never saw religion do anything but back up the screws” (99). Regan however has words of appreciation for their prison chaplains, the Canon and the young clergyman, because they help the condemned men going to their deaths. The fact that the Canon has taken the job because he has done something nefarious, helps

his prison credibility. Nor does Regan blame the hangman: "Himself has no more to do with it than you or I or the people that pay us, and that's every man or woman that pays taxes or votes in elections"(103); in other words, the whole adult population, especially the bourgeoisie, is responsible for capital punishment.

Class resentment appears in the reaction of the prisoners not only to the prison officials but also to Prisoner D, a well-connected man, described in the *Dramatis Personae* as "a middle-aged bourgeois", who has been jailed for embezzlement and who still speaks as a capitalist:

I thought it more discreet to remain in concealment while I smoked but I could not stop down there listening to talk like that, as a ratepayer, I couldn't stand for it, especially those libellous remarks about the judiciary. ... According to that man, there should be no such thing as law and order. We could all be murdered in our beds, the innocent prey of every ruffian that took it into his head to appropriate our goods, our lives even. Property must have security! What do you think society would come to without police and judges and suitable punishments?

Chaos! In my opinion hanging's too good for 'em. ... I shall take it up with the minister when I get out of here. I went to school with his cousin. (93-4).

This leads to a predictable reaction from Prisoner A: "Who the hell does he think he is, a bloody high court judge?"(94). They joke over his boast that his nephew has gone to the prestigious English military academy Sandhurst, likening it to their education in "Parkhurst", an English prison. He is an anomaly, a fact indicated by the innocent comment of young Prisoner C: "A college educated man in here, funny, isn't it?" (95). However, in matters of economics, Prisoner D is ready to fight another prisoner for the condemned man's letters because they can be sold to the newspapers. D: "I'm a businessman." A: "Fair enough. Amn't I a businessman myself? For what's a crook, only a businessman without a shop?"(124). Prisoner D's attempt to converse in Gaelic with Prisoner C fails, because he is using it as a badge of class, boasting that he has taken his gold medal in Irish, but he cannot manage to carry on the conversation when Prisoner C takes his language competence in good faith and speaks to him fluently. Similarly middle-class discourse, in the form of educated speech with literary allusions, is found in the utterances of the sex offender, called by the prisoners "The Other Fellow":

My God! Is this what I've come to, mixing with murderers? ...

I mean, a murderer would be justified in taking his own life, wouldn't he? "We send him forth", says Carlisle, you've heard of Carlisle, haven't you? – "We send him forth, back to the void, back to the darkness, far beyond the stars. Let him go from us." (52).

This reinforces the idea that middle-class prisoners are excluded from the generality and associated with the worst crimes in the prison, thus reversing the social order of society outside the prison.

Not only do the prisoners resent the middle-class, but they also have their own pecking order for themselves. The sex offender, referred to as “The Other Fellow”, is at the bottom of the pile, not just because of his class but because of the nature of the crime. He is referred to as “the dirty man-beast”, and Dunlavin resents the fact that this newcomer has been placed in the cell next to him. He is pleased that the other nearby empty cell is not to house another such offender: “Ah, no, it’s only the murderer, thanks be to God”(42). It is comical that the “Other Fellow” and Prisoner D, conversely, see the other prisoners as socially below them by the nature of their crimes. Prisoner A, on the other hand, has done time not only in Ireland, but also in the English prisons Parkhurst and Dartmoor, and believes that this entitles him to be disrespectful to Warder Regan. However, this plain-speaking warder is a leveller of all pretensions, whether it be of social class, the justice system, or in this case the prison pecking order which gives status to macho-type crimes:

We all know you’re a hard case. ... There’s the national inferiority complex for you. Our own Irish cat-o’-nine tails and the batons of the warders loaded with lead from Carrick mines aren’t good enough for him. He has to go Dartmooring and Parkhursting it. It’s a wonder you didn’t go further while you were at it, to Sing Sing or Devil’s Island (98).

He compares it to “doing the returned Yank in front of these other fellows”(98).

Besides middle-class discourse, class is also closely associated with the degree of usage of Hiberno-English, prison jargon, and Gaelic, as the following sections will show.

Hiberno-English usage in the play

A number of Hiberno-English usages are found in the play. Concentration for the purposes of this paper will focus on the most prominent ones, and will examine their usage by the different characters. Three phonological types of representation will be considered, with seven of vocabulary and seven of grammatical and/or syntactical usage. Their frequencies of occurrence are indicated in Appendix A.

With regard to phonological indications, the word queer is indicated by the re-spelling “quare” (Dolan 211); in this play it is part of the phrase “the quare fellow”, which is a euphemism for the man about to be executed. The pronunciation and re-spelling of my as “me” (Share 182; O’Farrell 11) and the re-spelling of by as “be” (Share 17) are the other two phonological features.

In the area of lexicography, a Gaelic word is used once, outside of the specific utterances in Gaelic by the two characters from the Kerry Gaeltacht. It is “floochoilach” (91); (*flaithiúlach*, meaning generous or extravagant) and spoken by Regan. A hybrid word with a Gaelic suffix, “jackeen” (Ryckeghem *apud* Kallen) meaning in a derogatory way “Dubliner”, is used twice. A word used more often in the play is one which originates from an older form of English (Kallen 19), “mot”, meaning girlfriend. Another word in this drama which has a particular meaning or slant in Ireland is: “bog” (Dolan 32-3), often accompanied by nouns, as in “bogman” and “bog barbarian”; in Dublin it

means the country areas outside of that city, and sometimes the prison of Portlaoise in the Midlands. A very specific Dublin usage is the addition of –o to a name (Hickey 2004); this appears in the name “Shaybo”, as seen above. Another phrase common in Hiberno-English, but particularly associated with Dublin is the plural form of “you” in the word “youse” (Hickey 2002, 173; Dolan 292). There is a reference to Irish beliefs in the phrase “seventh son of a seventh son” (Logan 53), and to the ancient Irish families of physicians in the succeeding phrase “or one of the Lees from Limerick” (*Book of the O’Lees* 10, ii) in Dunlavin’s attempts to flatter Warder Regan, and to distract him from the fact that he is surreptitiously drinking from the bottle of methylated spirits which is being used as a rub for rheumatism.

In grammatical terms, there are quite a number of occurrences of Hiberno-English forms. First of all there is the non-standard use of the definite article (Filppula 68-9; Share 44). It is used most memorably by Neighbour indicating the hardships of life for an alcoholic once outside the prison: “[t]he hard floorboards under you ... the cold and the drink shaking you”, but also by Young Prisoner 1, and in a pietistic way by Warder 2: “I’ll have the sister’s children pray for you”. There is considerable use of unbound reflexives (Filppula 77-8; Odlin 39): “myself” rather than “me” as in the phrase “myself and that man”. In a similar way we find the word “yourself” as in the phrase “Yourself, sir, come on now ...” (77). The word “himself”, usually denoting man in charge, and in this play meaning the hangman, is used seven times. In a play whose characters are all male, the phrase “herself”, meaning wife or woman in charge, is understandably used just once, by Regan in describing the fears of a man going home drunk to his wife: “for fear of what herself will say when they get in the door” (115). “Itself” and “ourselves” are also used.

Some verb forms occur often. The use of a progressive form with certain verbs is used (Jean-Marc Gachelin *apud* Hickey 2002, 183), as in the phrase “He’ll be just fixing up the man” (47). The “after perfect” (Filppula 101), as in the phrase “wasn’t he after leaving the black box” (111) is used often. The “be perfect” (Filppula 117) is used just once, by Dunlavin: “No, but they’re finished hanging up the top row” (55). The “medial object perfect” (Filppula 107), as in “He has him well recommended” (108) is used twice.

A final chosen example is the use of clefting, a form of emphasis common in Hiberno-English speech and achieved through specific syntactical transformations (Filppula 244), as in the phrase: “It’s me she’s waving at” (55) and “A methylated martyr, that’s what I am” (75).

On looking at Appendix A, the frequency of occurrence of these Hiberno-English, or Irish-English, utterances is seen to form distinct patterns in the play. The dialect is used by most of the characters in the play, who are all male and almost all Irish. Most of the prisoners use Hiberno-English. The exceptions are the two middle-class prisoners, D, an embezzler, and the “Other Fellow”, a sex offender; thirdly, the Englishman on remand. Of 151 usages in total, the largest number, thirty-five, or almost a quarter, comes from

the utterances of Dunlavin, an old man who has spent many years of his life in jail. He is followed among the prisoners by Neighbour and Young Prisoner 1 with sixteen each, about one-fifth. All of the prison officials use Hiberno-English, but to a lesser degree than the prisoners. However, the second greatest number can be found in the speech not of a prisoner but of Warder Regan: twenty-one, half-way between the total of the old lags, Dunlavin and Neighbour. The significance of this will be examined below, as it is also true of Regan's usage of prison jargon.

The place of origin of the prisoners and warders does not seem to determine use of the dialect. One prisoner is from the Kerry Gaeltacht. The bulk of the prisoners seem to be from Dublin, where the prison is situated, according to the references they make to the city and its concerns (the Royal Canal, North Crumlin, the North Wall, St James' Street), and by their scorn for country people. Outside Dublin, their knowledge of geography is confined to jokes about Corkmen and Northerners, and the Bog (that is, Portlaoise Prison in the Midlands); they have a clearer idea of the prisons of England. The country areas of Ireland are sometimes associated with the bourgeois, for example, "so as you'd think God was in another department, but not long off the Bog ... " (63); perhaps the warders were often from outside Dublin. The places of origin of the warders and officials are unclear, except for the Irish-speaking one, Crimmin, who is from the same Kerry island as Prisoner C.

The usage is age – related, however, as well as being a marker of class: the largest proportion of the words and phrases are found in the speech of Neighbour and of Dunlavin, old prisoners who have been in prison many times, or "lags" in prison jargon. This is especially marked when Dunlavin is having his rheumatic legs rubbed with methylated spirits by Warder Regan, while he takes the opportunity to swig surreptitiously from the bottle:

Ah, that's massive, sir. 'Tis you that has the healing hand. You must have desperate luck at the horses; I'd only love to be with you copying your docketts. Ah, that's it, sir, well into me I can feel it going.  
... May God reward you, sir, you must be the seventh son of the seventh son or one of the Lees from Limerick on your mother's side maybe. Ah, that's the cure for the cold of the wind and the world's neglectment. (65)

## **Prison jargon**

Many of the terms used by the characters in this play could be termed prison jargon. Those chosen in this article are special language terms used in prison, often euphemistic, and with the highest frequencies of usage in the text. These are: *screw*, *lag*, *flowery dell*, *doing birdlime*, *chokey*, *nick*, and *to top*. Terms not picked are usually self-explanatory and may be used outside prison, for example, *bail*, *remand*, *reprieve*, *landing*. Their distribution by user is indicated in Appendix B.



Firstly, the word “screw”, meaning warder, is used universally; by prisoners and occasionally by the warders themselves. Secondly the term “lag”, or prisoner doing a long term, similarly “laggings”, needs to be considered. These terms are used by the prisoners for the most part; in fact, the new prisoner, the “lifer”, queries the definition (60). Thirdly, there are two rhyming slang usages. The first of these is “flowery dell” for cell. A similar usage is “doing birdlime” for “doing time”. Both of these terms are euphemisms, like others considered above.

The term “chokey”, meaning a punishment cell in solitary confinement, down in the darkness of the prison basement, is harsher than the official term, and presumably arises because such incarceration can lead to suicide. The stage directions call it “punishment cell”, Neighbour calls it “the solitary” and the Chief Officer calls it “the cell under the steps”. The term “chokey” is used almost exclusively by the prisoners. When Warder Donnelly uses the term to the Chief Officer, he is corrected: “Where?” Donnelly then says: “In the punishment cells, sir”; to which the Chief replies: “That’s more like it”. This would suggest that the gap between warders and prisoners includes different language codes. A warder using a term normally employed by prisoners is seen as failing in his duty.

The term “nick” has two usages. Dunlavin and Prisoner A use it to mean “prison”, but Prisoner B uses it to mean “watch out”. “To top” means to execute by killing. It is a term especially applicable in prisons where the original form of the sentence involved beheading. It is used very widely in the play, not surprisingly, as the work centres on a prison hanging.

When it comes to the use of prison jargon, the following conclusions emerge: there are seventy-one examples of the chosen terms. The greatest number of these, twenty, or over a quarter, are used by Prisoner A. This is not surprising as he has done a number of long sentences. Almost as many, sixteen, are used by Dunlavin; he can be described as institutionalised, an alcoholic whose whole endeavour in the play is to secure a place in a half-way house after his next discharge from prison. He is also humorous and full of stories about prison life. Most of the other prisoners make some use of the terms, except for young Prisoner C from Kerry, who is a relatively new arrival and a native speaker of Gaelic, and the middle-class new arrival, Prisoner D. The warders and officials use the terms rarely; Regan employs two of the terms and three others use just one each. The fact that Regan uses both Hiberno-English and prison jargon more than the other prison warders and officials, and almost as frequently as the prisoners, suggests long familiarity with prison life, but more importantly, a degree of empathy with the prisoners. This is in line with his humane attitude to prison life, and his open disagreement with the death penalty, an opinion which he is not afraid to express to his superiors, even if it gets him into trouble. Prisoner A says after getting a rebuke by Regan: “I never seen a screw like that before” to which Prisoner B replies: “Neither did anyone else” (99). Regan will be complained to the Governor by the chief, but probably will not be penalised as he is too useful, being the one called for by the condemned men for their last night, and a sort of mediator with the prisoners if needed.



## Gaelic in the play

The use of Gaelic is confined in this text to three medium to short exchanges, two exclamations, an extract from an official Memorandum, and some lines from a traditional song. Its function is also related to the theme of class, but again it is not the standard social class. The language is not introduced until five pages into Act 2, when Prisoner C, from the Kerry Gaeltacht, surprises the older prisoners with a remark which follows Prisoner B's phrase "God is good": "And has a good mother" (76). After that he uses both Gaelic and English, Gaelic when horrified by the details of the hanging: "To bfoiridh Dia 'rainn" ("May God protect us") (76), and after that only to people who know the language; for example, he exchanges a phrase or two with his old acquaintances in the juvenile section. Similarly, the middle-class prisoner D who boasts that he has taken a gold medal in Irish is discomfited when he cannot understand Prisoner C as the latter proceeds with the conversation in that language (95). The young man has more success with Warder Crimmin (91-2) who comes from the same area, and who visits him surreptitiously to give him news from home. These two men, one a prisoner and one a warder, know each other as they come from a small Gaelic-speaking island off the coast of Kerry. They are also islanded in the prison by sharing the same language and culture which is not known to the other inhabitants within the walls. They are more cut off from the generality of prisoners and warders than the English prisoner on remand, as the Englishman uses the same term "chiner" (78, 104, 122) as the young prisoners from Dublin. When Prisoner C remarks that the condemned man was kind to him when "Jackeens would be making game of [him]", this irritates Dubliner Prisoner A, who replies acidly: "Sure, it's a terrible pity about you and him. Maybe the jackeens should spread out the red carpet for you and every bog barbarian that comes into the place" (97), showing irritation at what he sees as a slur on Dublin prisoners. Prisoner C is an outsider in his view.

In addition, as these two Gaelic speakers are kind and compassionate, they are cut off the more from all except Warder Regan, and with him form another society within a society, that of the genuinely good and clean of heart who put pity before rules and regulations. They are not appreciated by the other prisoners or the warders, but all three are called upon by the condemned man to help him in his last hours: Regan and Crimmin to be the warders on watch with him, and Prisoner C to ease his mental pain by singing the traditional song. Regan sums it up thus to Crimmin:

The quare fellow asked for you especially, Crimmin; he wanted you because you're a young lad, not yet practised in badness. You'll be a consolation to him in the morning when he's surrounded by a crowd of bigger bloody ruffians than himself, if the truth were but told. (101).

It is worth remarking that Behan learned to speak Gaelic from a native speaker while in prison himself, and used it as a medium for his writing. *The Hostage*, for example, was written originally in Gaelic under the title *An Giall*. In spite of his roistering reputation around the world, Éamonn de Buítléir has stated that Behan was unlikely to

be troublesome in pubs when he was in the Gaeltacht or with Irish speakers. This would suggest a significantly respectful attitude towards the language and its users even to the point of straining credibility in this play: Prisoner C is there because of some crime he has committed, after all.

Virtue is not confined to the Gaelic speakers and Regan exclusively in this play, however. When it comes to an evaluation of the compassion of the prison population, the picture can be complex. They may seem at times to be cynical and hardened about the fate of the Quare Fellow. Though they bet on the odds of his reprieve, profit by getting cigarettes for digging his grave, and fight for his last letters which they wish to sell to the newspapers, the horror of the death appals them. They shriek and howl all together as he is led to his death. In addition, they hold to a principle of “honour among thieves” in that they trust one another to contact the mate who will bail the English prisoner out; a prisoner who pretends that Mickser will take the money but not do the request is angrily rebuked by the others. Thus, it is seen to be the common culture of the prison and their status as working class that unites them, rather than nationality. This applies also to their use of language. Though the English prisoner is ridiculed “The voice of the Lord!” when he calls down “I say, I say, down there in the yard” (79), they are ready to facilitate his request because he is one of them; his term “chiner” for friend (104, 122), is also used by Scholara (78).

## **Conclusions**

Having paid attention to different kinds of discourse and jargon in this Behan play, certain conclusions can be reached. Firstly, Hiberno-English and prison jargon are widely used, both by prisoners and most of the officials. Secondly, the type of language used discriminates between various categorisations: prisoners, especially the older ones, use Hiberno-English and prison jargon, which are less used by the prison officials, and disappear from the speech of the most highly placed in the hierarchy of these officials, becoming indistinguishable from general middle-class speech. Thirdly, the educated middle-class speech of two of the prisoners, lacking in both Hiberno-English and prison jargon, alienates them from the general prison population. This and the nature of their crimes make them conversely into the lowest class in the estimation of the prisoners. Fourthly, the English prisoner, though using a different type of cultural expression and accent, shares prison jargon and values with the Irish ones, indicating a bond of solidarity. Finally, the use of Gaelic indicates a sub-group which, though divided by one being a warder and one a prisoner, have a culture as well as a language in common. This culture indicates a moral sense and a compassion superior to that of their companions, whether prisoners or prison officials, apart from Warder Regan. The latter could be described as the hero of the play, or at least the most vocal exponent of basic humanity as Behan sees it.

## Appendix A.

Word	Frequencies of occurrences of Hiberno-English													Tot			
	Dunlavin	Neighbour	PrA	PrB	PrC	PrD	PrE	YP1	YP2	Micks.	PCh	Tit/ StD	Regan		W.1 Donn	W.2 Crimm	Chief Gov.
Quare	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	7	1	2	4	26
me	12	4															19
be	3																3
Gaelic													1				1
jackeen			1	1													2
mot						6	4						1				11
bog etc	1	1	1	1		1							1	1			6
Shaybo						5											5
youse	4	1	2	2	1	1								2			11
7th son	1																1
Lees of L.	1																1
nons.d.ar		3				1								1			5
myself	1	1											1	1			3
yourself	1	1	1		1								3	1	2	1	7
himself													1				1
herself													1				1
itself	1						1										2
ourselves													1				1
progress. Vb	3	1	2										3	1			11
'after' perf	1	2	1	1									1	1	1		7
'be' perf	1																1
m. o. perf				1											1		2
clefting	5	2	4	1	1	1							1	3	3	1	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>151</b>
Dunlavin																	
Neighbour																	
Prisoner A																	
Prisoner B																	
Prisoner C																	
Prisoner D																	
Prisoner E																	
Young Prisoner 1																	(Scholar)
Young Prisoner 2																	(Shaybo)
Mickser																	
Prisoner in 'chokey'																	
Title of play and stage directions																	

Rega:           Warder Regan  
 W.1:           Warder 1 – Donnelly  
 W.2:           Warder 2  
 Crim:           Warder Crimmin  
 Chief:          Chief Warder  
 Gov:           Governor of Prison  
 Hg:             Hangman

## Appendix B

Word	Frequencies of occurrence of prison jargon											Tit/ Std	Regan	W.1 Donn	W.2 Crimm	Chief Gov.	Hg Tot
	Dunlavin	Neighbour	PrA	PrB	PrC	PrD	PrE	YP1	YP2	Micks.	PCh						
screw	6	2	7	5	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	28
lag-gings	1	1	6					1	1	2	1	2	1				12
flow. Dell	2				1								1				4
d. birdlime					1												1
chokey	1				1									1			2
nick	6				1	5											7
top	3	5	1				2										17
<b>Total:</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>71</b>
Dun:	Dunlavin																
Neig:	Neighbour																
PrA:	Prisoner A																
PrB:	Prisoner B																
PrC:	Prisoner C																
PrD:	Prisoner D																
PrE:	Prisoner E																
YP1:	Young Prisoner 1																
YP2:	Young Prisoner 2																
Mick:	Mickser																
PCh:	Prisoner in 'chokey'																
Tit/St:	Title of play and stage directions																
Rega:	Warder Regan																
W.1:	Warder 1 – Donnelly																
W.2:	Warder 2																
Crim:	Warder Crimmin																
Chief:	Chief Warder																
Gov:	Governor of Prison																
Hg:	Hangman																

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# Fiction







# *“Close Enough to One Another and Far Apart as Well”: The Intersection of Literature and History in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark*

Fernando Aparecido Poiana

**Abstract:** *This article analyses the intersection of narrative and history in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark (1996). It uses the Benjaminian notions of memory, narration and experience to investigate how this novel creates a self through a language characterized by the absence of what it refers to. The analysis will eventually demonstrate that the tension between recollection and obliteration makes Literature and History converge as products of a narrative act.*

**Keywords:** *Seamus Deane; Reading in the Dark; literature and history.*

“...I’d switch off the light, get back in bed, and lie there, the book still open, re-imagining all I had read, the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark.” (Deane 20)

## **On autobiography and fiction**

Until quite recently literary theorists and critics would shiver at the mention of autobiographical fiction, in a world that was struggling to cope with the death of the author. Indeed, critics who advocated the literariness of anything autobiographical ran the risk of losing their credibility. “Prior to the mid-1950s autobiography was seen as little more than a special variety of biography and as a kind of stepchild of history and literature” (Olney xiv). Similarly, autobiography would often be an ancillary matter to disciplines like anthropology, sociology, psychology and religion. It was thus a kind of service literature, never being taken “... as a mode of writing with an interest of its own and demanding the sort of philosophical, rhetorical, and linguistic scrutiny that would be given to any other variety of literature” (Olney xiv).

Nevertheless, queries about the frontiers of actuality and verisimilitude have brought discredit to any identification of autobiography with self-written true-to-life

biography. As a consequence, autobiography has gradually come to be regarded as a "... distinct and distinguishable mode of literature with all sorts of complex ties to other, more traditional literary genres and with much to teach theorists concerned with both literary genres and literary history" (Olney xiv). This is so because autobiography employs "... all the devices a novel does: characters and the chronicle of a family, maxims and lyric passages, confessions and narrative" (Fowlie 166). Moreover, if we agree that "... no autobiographer is in possession of the full truth about his past" (Shumaker 36) it becomes evident that narratives about the self are ultimately "... a process of self-alteration [in which living] belongs to the past [whilst writing is in] the present" (Fowlie 165). It is this gap between the tale and the telling that eventually makes room for and justifies the scrutiny of the fictional elements imbricated in autobiographical prose.

The study of autobiographical writing proves particularly relevant in the context of Irish literature and culture. Despite the persistence of life writing in Ireland across four centuries, Liam Harte argues that, if "Irish literature can be said to have a Cinderella genre, then surely it is autobiography" (Harte 1). The analogy is thought-provoking, and addresses the imbalance between the massive amount of criticism on Irish drama, fiction and poetry, on the one hand, and the "remarkably slight, in quantity if not in quality" (Harte 1) criticism on autobiographical writing, on the other. Harte adds that "... this critical neglect seems all the more curious when one considers the preponderance of life writing in contemporary Irish culture" (Harte 1), especially during the brief period of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Hence, the question about how private experience is articulated with social and cultural change remains somehow unanswered. Indeed, the recurrent bursting of dead past events and experiences into the living present fosters the awareness of "... buried, unfinished business yet awaiting definitive settlement [and] fuels the Irish habit of historical thought" (Leerssen 222-223). This bears considerable relevance in a context where the telling of personal stories has progressively traded confessional boxes for the pages of memoirs. In "... such a self-charged context, nation-building can be achieved by the simple expedient of writing one's autobiography: and autobiography in Ireland becomes, in effect, the autobiography of Ireland" (Kiberd 119).

These arguments imply that the indeterminacy of a writer's life is contiguous with the uncertainty of the nation's political future. Moreover, if we are to believe that "... every life is mysterious [to someone else] unless perhaps it is written about [and that] when it is being written about and then possibly read later, it turns into allegory [or some] form of figurative plausibility" (Fowlie 165), arguments such as Kiberd's are hard to refute. Yet if "... much of the past is beyond recall even for the autobiographer ... who must rely chiefly on his unaided memory" (Shumaker 38), and if it is also "... to be expected that autobiographies will contain distortions" (Shumaker 44), then the intimate association between self and nation will not be as easy to establish as Kiberd suggests.

With these considerations in mind, this article seeks to analyse how Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* constitutes a fictional text that purposefully assumes the tropes of autobiography to make "... the events of an individual life ... fully compliant

with the demands of a political narrative” (Patten 68) in which the convergence of narrative and history via linguistic construction forge the narrator’s individual identity and connect him to the past and to the future of the community he belongs to. It also examines how “... the structure of the autobiographical *Bildungsroman* provides the terms in which [Deane’s narrative] finds [its] imaginative expression” (Patten 68) in the aesthetic reconstruction of individual experience. To enquire into the way fiction and experience are interwoven in Deane’s novel this study is based on the Benjaminian notions of memory, narration and experience, and will look into how the narrative self is created through a language predominantly characterized by the absence of what it refers to. Finally, the article analyses how the tension between recollection and obliteration causes Literature and History to converge in the act of story telling in the book. The examination of these aspects might demonstrate whether or not Deane’s novel merely exaggerates “... the tendency of Irish autobiographical fiction ... to refer, through the self, to a national or political metanarrative” (Patten 68)’, and reinforces the traditional “... cultural identification of self and nation” (Patten 68) in contemporary Irish literature.

### **Narrative and History in *Reading in the Dark***

The narrative of *Reading in the Dark* covers a period of twenty-six years, from 1945 until 1971, and it is initially presented from the perspective of a boy growing up in Derry. The narrator/protagonist finds himself immersed in a reality replete with Gothic and heroic stories, legends and folklore, all mingled with stories of family feuds and political assassination. In this context, the boy reveals his fascination for words and for the textual nature of the reality surrounding him. He hears, overhears, repeats and sometimes complements these stories, most of which he can capture only partially. This accentuates the metonymic character of his narrative, so that the landscape often becomes an extension of his feelings: “the town lay entranced by the great sleeping light of the river and the green beyond of the border. It woke now and then, like someone startled and shouting from a dream, in clamour at its abandonment” (Deane 36). In fact, the entire chapter from which this extract is drawn is replete with fragments of apparently disconnected memories. They create a kaleidoscopic scenario of riot and celebration which encapsulates the uneasy atmosphere of the book intensely. At the outset of “Fire, June 1949”, the narrator says that,

It was a city of bonfires. The Protestants had more than we had. They had the twelfth of July, when they celebrated the triumph of Protestant armies at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. ... We had only the fifteenth of August bonfires; it was a church festival but we made it into a political one as well, to answer the fires of the twelfth. But our celebrations were not official, like the Protestant ones. ... Fire was what I loved to hear of and to see. It transformed the grey air and streets, excited and exciting. (Deane 33)

thus stressing the political overtones of the Catholic-Protestant feud while at the same time retaining the narrator's naivety. In addition, passages such as,

We were told never to play in the park at night, for Daddy Watt's ghost haunted it, looking for revenge for the distillery fire that had ruined him. Those who saw him said he was just a black shape that moved like a shadow around the park, but that the shape had a mouth that opened and showed a red fire raging within. . . . Sometimes when passing [the ruins of the distillery], I would hear the terrified squealing of pigs from the slaughterhouse. They sounded so human I imagined they were going to break into words, screaming for mercy. And the noise would echo in the hollow distillery, wailing through the collapsed floors, clinging to the blackened brick inside. I had heard that people ran from their houses as the shooting started and the police cordon tightened. The crowd in the street, at the top of the Bogside, started singing rebel songs, but the police fired over their heads and the crowd scattered. (Deane 35)

reinforce the political overtones of the narrator's account and the predominantly oral aspect of his experiences, constituted largely by the stories he (over)hears and/or is told, often anonymously.

The narrative perspective is substantially altered throughout the novel as the narrator becomes more mature. This is first suggested by the references to months and years in the titles of each of the chapters/episodes that construct the plot. The chapters start in February 1945, and progress almost on a yearly basis until the penultimate one, dated June 1961. What follows then is a ten-year gap between that and the last chapter, dated July 1971. Along with this unequivocal chronological evidence of the narrator's growth, one can also detect traces of greater maturity in his tone. The different portraits of his relationship with his father, in two very distinct moments, "Father, February 1953" and "My Father, June 1961", are good examples of it. The naivety of "now, he said, he wished he could remember if this was the church they came to sometimes on a Sunday on those visits. He looked around as he said so, and so did we, as if some memory would return to us too" (Deane 133) is supplanted by a more detached account of his father's life and personality in:

He went upstairs. He never took a drink in his life. I've reconstructed his vigil behind the door in that noisy room a hundred times since, just as I reconstructed his life out of the remains of the stories about his dead parents, his vanished older brother, his own unknowing and, to me, beloved silence. Oh, father. The man behind the door, the boy weeping in the coal shed, the walk down that dusty road, the ruined rose bed, the confession in the church, his dead, betrayed brother – was that all? In a whole lifetime? How bitterly did he feel or was he saddened into quietness? How much did he know or not know? (Deane 133)

In the ending of the novel (which is not a “conclusion” in the traditional sense of a resolution to the conflicts presented), the narrator, drawn to the window by the sound of hooves (232-33) realizes that “... the present is not a place of hard facts, and as with the past it, too, is a site of potential ghosts and strange disconnected apparitions...” (Hand 248-249). Instead of being a moment of triumph in which both the narrator and the reader would celebrate the former’s discoveries and maturity, the ending reveals that for him “... gaining knowledge only results in driving a wedge between himself and both his parents” (Hand 251).

Even though Deane’s novel incorporates autobiographical tropes – notably the use of memory as its structural principle – it cannot be read as a mere true-to-life book, as the notion of autobiography advanced by Philippe Lejeune implies. For him, autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (Lejeune 11). Despite drawing heavily on individual experiences, there is no denying that the facts and events addressed in *Reading in the Dark* have been subject to intense artistic (re)construction. Indeed, the events narrated are more the result of aesthetic construction than an accurately retrospective account of what was or would have been. The opening lines, for example, set the tone of the fragmented narrative, and anticipate some of the central motifs of the plot: “on the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence” (Deane 5), the latter an allusion to the secrecy and reticence that will permeate the whole story. The narrator proceeds to describe a short staircase, “... fourteen steps in all, covered in lino from which the original pattern had been polished away to the point where it had the look of a faint memory” (Deane 5). Here, the resulting metonymic image interweaves individual and context as it advances the importance of those faint memories: they are at the heart of the episodic events shrouded in mystery that provide coherence to the fragmented plot. As Hand argues, what the narrator has to contend with “... is a constantly encroaching geographic world – real life experienced at street level – with various landmarks dotting the scene, looming large in the imagination, demanding to be negotiated” (Hand 248). Passages such as “it was a fierce winter, that year. The snow covered the air-raid shelters. At night, from the stair window, the field was a white paradise of loneliness” (Deane 9), and “... the water pierced the fire from behind. It expired in a plume of smoke and angry hissings. It was desolate” (Deane 9) lend support to Hand’s arguments. The emotional overtones of these images reverberate throughout the book, accentuating the narrator’s link with his community; at the same time he gradually becomes distant from it: “... my sorrow for myself was overwhelming ... I found myself on my own, and no one would talk to me, and it was in the church, only there, that I could be safe and it was there that I found myself able to talk” (Deane 111).

In addition, *Reading in the Dark* is shot through with elements characteristic of literary genres other than the traditional autobiography and memoir. For Hand, Deane’s novel “... hovers elusively between numerous narrative genres – the ghost

story, detective fiction, the Gothic, and *Bildungsroman* – never finally settling on any single one” (247). Furthermore, both the childlike perspective and tone adopted in the account of the narrator’s formative years lay special emphasis on the mysterious aura this citation of these genres’ conventions eventually creates. “We were haunted!” (Deane 6), says the narrator in the opening episode. “We had a ghost, even in the middle of the afternoon. I heard her moving upstairs. The house was all cobweb tremors. No matter where I walked, it yielded before me and settled behind me” (Deane 6). What seems merely Gothic at first becomes a metaphor for the narrator’s own existential quest for knowledge and identity, and his progressive distancing from his family as he unveils the secrets that underlie their relationship. “My mother was increasingly distant from everyone [and her] anger stayed in her eyes when she was speaking, but when she was silent an empty panic took its place” (Deane 216), he says about the shroud of mystery hanging over his mother’s occasionally stoic figure. He also mentions that she disliked anyone “... standing with her [at the lobby window] to talk, most especially me. There she was with her ghosts. Now the haunting meant something new to me – now I had become the shadow. Everything bore down on her” (Deane 217). This progressively metaphorical language used in Deane’s book caters to a more “... generic subtlety, emotional profundity and authenticating power” (Harte 2) rather than to a mere retrospective account of what would have been his own actual life and/or ideas.

The book also features fantastic elements and motifs. They are incorporated into the plot through the stories the protagonist is told as a child, and that are imbricated in his memories. These are stories such as that of the great exorcism when “... the diocesan exorcist, Father Browne [whose black hair had turned white] in one night fighting the devil” (Deane 162) and that of Brigid, who, after going through several reportedly supernatural experiences while taking care of Francis and Frances, went completely strange in the head and stopped talking. “People used to bless themselves when she appeared and hurry away. ... Until the day she died she never spoke again, would never leave her room, would never have a mirror near her” (Deane 70). Besides, references to folklore as in “people with green eyes were close to the fairies, we were told; they were just there for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away” (Deane 7), and childish meditations on theological matters such as “hell was a deep place. You fell into it, turning over and over in mid-air until the blackness sucked you into a great whirlpool of flames and you disappeared forever” (Deane 7) stress the mystery and suspense in the plot, on the one hand, and the narrator’s struggle to unlock the secrets that haunt his family, on the other. As a result, “... the ghostly presences and haunting within the novel [suggest that] the past is never over and done with, [and also that] it necessarily lingers on to trouble the present” (Hand 250). In actual fact, these stories render his painful reality of betrayal, secrecy and uneasy silence palatable or at least communicable.

This wealth of narrative elements evinces that, despite its apparent genesis in lived experience, *Reading in the Dark* takes on the convention of the novel form rather than that of memoir or traditional autobiography. Hand has a point when he states that “an



integral element of [this book] at the level of meta-narrative is how it traces the struggle towards being a novel” (249). The apparently disconnected episodes are indeed limited and intimate sketches of the young boy’s life, which emerges out of the memories evoked by the telling of “... story upon story” (Deane 9). It is therefore safe to say that Deane’s novel is “... obviously self-consciously concerned with the act of storytelling itself, as it is with reading” (Hand 249), rather than with the self-portrait of its author as a young man alone. Indeed, the constant use of the passive voice (see pp. 150, 184, 225) reinforces the indeterminate origin of the stories that form the basis of the narrator’s memories and of his self too. Therefore, the ambiguities of a narrative whose objects of desire are “... knowledge and knowing [are amplified as the] unnamed narrator searches for the truth at the heart of the secret that troublingly haunts his family” (Hand 247). His family’s history, “... came to [him] in bits, from people who rarely recognised all they had told. Some of the things [he remembers], [he does not] really remember” (Deane 225). In other words, he had just been told about those things, and now he felt as if he remembered them, and wanted to, “... the more because it is so important for others to forget them” (Deane 225).

Despite that, one cannot say that *Reading in the Dark* is completely detached from the world out of which it is written. Actually, as Liam Harte plausibly claims, “there is no singular text of self, no autobiography that does not imbricate other narratives in its own [and that] the complex relationship between language and identity lies at the heart of this discursive problematic” (5). Indeed, it is perhaps best to think of Deane’s book as an a novel that not only constitutes an aesthetic rethinking of individual experiences, of the Irish scene, of the economic, sectarian and cultural oppression of the Derry in the 1940s and 1950s, but also brings into “... sharp, pristine focus concerns with power and authority [that are central to it]” (Hand 248). The narrator categorically states that “... freedom. In this place. Never was, never would be” (Deane 47), and uneasily wonders “[what] was it, anyway? Freedom to do what you should, that was another. Close enough to one another and far apart as well” (Deane 47). This being close yet apart, knowing yet not being quite sure about it, leads to the idea that,

such intimations of fracture and insufficiency can also become sources of creativity; the story of the self is narrated, despite the treacheries of language. ... the vacillating self, poised between definition and dispersal, enunciation and erasure, affirmation and dissolution. Repeatedly, we come upon acts of self-portraiture that show subjects taking a paradoxical delight in doubleness and ambivalence, even as they strive for self-completion, suggesting that the Irish autobiographical self is most itself in the very process of becoming. (Harte 5)

Bearing that in mind, if the “... experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (Benjamin 84), and also if “... among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (Benjamin 84), then one can see the procedures which engender the narrative self in *Reading in the Dark*



from a particularly unique perspective. The nameless narrator/protagonist, woven, as the plot is, from myriad stories other anonymous voices tell him, renders this Benjaminian approach not only possible, but also valid. The narrator not only tells the story, but also listens to it. He gradually finds himself involved in "... a narrative stream [in which the stories he hears or overhears, his own history and History are mingled and remain open to] new proposals and common construction" (Gagnebin 11, *my translation*). This is suggested both in the metaphor engendered in the title of the novel and in the "... communion between life and word" (*ibid.* 10) this insertion implies: what initially appears as individual experience "... is always emerging out of and dispersed back into a collective apprehension" (Campbell and Harbord 12). Consequently, autobiography is not about the self as an isolated entity or project. Instead, it is about "... a self known or embedded within the network of social relations that confer identity and meaning [to it]" (Campbell and Harbord 12). In this sense, the subjective experience is never fixed or programmed; it is "... changed by encounters with the world, with cultural objects and artefacts, and with others" (Campbell and Harbord 12). The facts-of-life talk episode is a good example of such encounters:

[Father Nugent] lit the cigarette with a spill of paper, dropped himself into the armchair opposite me and nodded at me through the blue spiral of smoke. Then he switched on the lamp on the table beside him, even though it was a bright day. I was toasting on the side nearest the fire, so I moved the chair back as unobtrusively as I could by levering my heels gently against the thin carpet. The carpet rucked behind the chair. I was stuck. As he stared into the fire, brooding in a kind-hearted and embarrassed manner before the red coals, I rehearsed the sequence that others had told me to expect. First, the life-is-a-mystery bit. Then, the incarnation – spirit becoming flesh. Reference to Jesus. To His Mother. None to Joseph. Then to Our Own Parents, Adam and Eve. Then to the Fall. Then to our own parents at home. Then to it, the act itself. (Deane 149-150)

The narrative nature of his experiences blurs the distinction between memories and imagination: "I celebrated all the anniversaries ... in my head, year after year, until, to my pleasure and surprise, they began to become confused and muddled, and I wondered at times had I dreamed it all" (Deane 225): as Hand emphatically states, some of the parallel stories in *Reading in the Dark* "... deliberately obscure truth" (250) instead of leading to it. Additionally, the sequence of episodic and fragmented events of the plot "... sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller [in this case, the narrator/protagonist], in order to bring it out of him again" (Benjamin 91-92). The narrator's meditation on his English teacher's account of good writing as being that which just tells the truth alludes to this connection between fiction and experience:

I felt embarrassed because my own essay had been full of long or strange words I had found in the dictionary – 'cerulean', 'azure', 'phantasm' and 'implacable'

– all of them describing skies and seas I had seen only with the Ann of the novel. I'd never thought such stuff was worth writing about. It was ordinary life – no rebellions or love affairs or dangerous flights across the hills at night. And yet I kept remembering that mother and son waiting in the Dutch interior of that essay, with the jug of milk and the butter on the table, while behind and above them were those wispy, shawly figures from the rebellion, sibilant above the great fire and below the aching, high wind. (Deane 21)

The articulation of theory and text reveals that the self in Deane's novel is constituted from a combination of memory and fantasy, from tracks of experience "... frequently evident in his narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it" (Benjamin 92). Jeanne Marie Gagnebin states that the importance of narration for the constitution of the subject – and one could say of the self too – has always been thought to be that of "... recollection, of the redeeming of the past by words which, without that, would fade into silence and obliteration" (Gagnebin 3). She adds that,

If we can then read the stories that humanity tells itself as the stream that constitutes memory, and therefore, its identity, it does not mean that the very narrative movement is not permeated, often surreptitiously, by forgetfulness, which would not be a mere flaw, a "blank" in memory, but also an activity that obliterates, renounces, disentangles, holds the boundlessness of memory against the necessary frontiers of death and inscribes it at the heart of the narrative. (Gagnebin 3)

In other words, memory can "... absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other" (Benjamin 97). Due to that, memory – "... the epic faculty *par excellence*" (*ibidem*) – becomes the means to fictionalize affective, familial, political and historical experiences. As Hand states,

In this novel there is a powerful and significant confluence between art and the act of interpretation, so that the kind of power struggles inherent in all acts of saying and writing are interrogated and deconstructed. What becomes clear is that all acts of writing and saying might be thought of as disguised acts of memoir, as are all acts of reading: innocent detachment is never fully possible. (Hand 251)

Taking this into consideration, it is possible to enquire into the double-bind of this "... retentive yet oblivious word [that] constitutes the subject [and the self through a] language in which the 'things' are there just because they are not there as such, but said in the absence" (Gagnebin 5). This existing dialectic between recollection and obliteration finds its ideal aesthetic expression in the autobiographical *Bildungsroman*,

which "... does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel [despite bestowing the most frangible justification on the order integrating the social process with the development of a person]" (Benjamin 98). The autobiographical *Bildungsroman* operates on the thin line between invention and memory, fiction and reality, literature and history. Due to that, this genre proves particularly relevant in the Irish context. Linden Peach comments that the novel, as a genre, and its features "... appear to lend themselves to the 'in-between' intellectual, cultural and emotional spaces in which writers dealing with subject matter that has been hidden or eschewed altogether find themselves" (3). He adds that contemporary Irish fiction "... has offered new interpretations of Irish history" (Peach 7) and that the contemporary novel "... has given a voice to what was previously unarticulated" (Peach 7). Considering this, one can say that the narrative self in *Reading in the Dark* encapsulates two major questions that permeate Benjaminian philosophy and concern contemporary literature and history: "... what is it to tell a story? What is it to tell history?" (Gagnebin 2). The narrator's story – the main storyteller in the book – , is "... merely one human story among many possible human stories" (Hand 252-253) and, along with Irish history, "... is not fixed, finished or complete; there are always more stories to be told and more stories to be read" (Hand 252-253).

In conclusion, one can join Hand saying that Seamus Deane is capable in *Reading in the Dark* of "... interrogating himself and his own artistic and critical processes, [truly opening up] his version of the modern Irish hero to critique ... in a manner that complicates rather than liberates the individual" (Hand 252). As a result, his novel trades heroic and ideological identification between self and nation for an aesthetic and historical (re)construction of both instances. This reconfiguration of experiences in the in-between of memory and fantasy accentuates their indefinite aspect, causing Literature and History to converge as the result of anonymous narrative acts.

## Note

- 1 Passages such as these offer a good account of this: "That was long before the feud, as my mother called it. The feud. The word had a grandeur about it that I savoured, although it occurred to me that maybe there was more to be told" (Deane 51)

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# Poetry

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# *Camping*

Maurice Harmon

I remember  
Turning to a forest park  
Where the evening sun  
Sends shafts of light between trees

I erect a tent  
Haul out ice-box, lantern, stove  
Settle down  
Listen to wind shooting leaves

I move closer to a stream  
Make fire between stones  
Settle down  
Attend riddling water

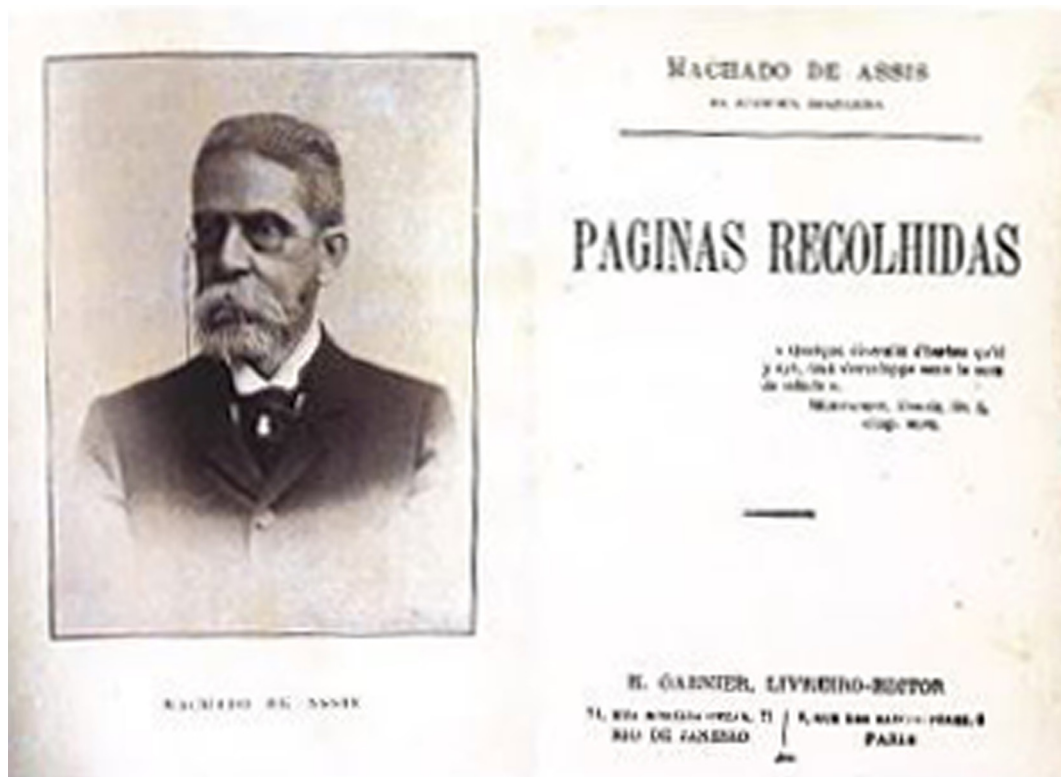
I see that fire  
The sheen of light  
Smoke turns  
I am nowhere to be seen

I sit here  
Remembering  
A bead of ink  
Listening



# Voices from Brazil





Machado de Assis. *Páginas Recolhidas*. Rio de Janeiro; Paris: H. Garnier, 1900. *Brasiliana Itaú*. Uma grande coleção dedicada ao Brasil. Ed. Pedro Corrêa do Lago. São Paulo: Capivara Editora, 2009.

# *Machado de Assis: The Reverse of the Reverse*<sup>1</sup>

Marcelo Pen Parreira

**Abstract:** *Some concepts drawn from critical reviews published by Machado de Assis between 1850 and 1870, such as those of the inventory and mitigated realism, reveal parallels with the artistic platform embraced by the conservative Revue des Deux Mondes. Rather than a panegyric to outdated ideals, however, what seems to be at stake here is Machado's distinctive defence of an alliance between ethics and aesthetics, literature and politics, resulting in a very advanced grasp of the art form in an equivocally enfranchised country.*

**Keywords:** *Machado de Assis, realism, Revue des Deux Mondes, Henry James.*

## I

It is not exactly a novelty. Machado de Assis is the first Brazilian writer to rub shoulders with the great names of world literature, the writer with whom, according to the country's tradition of historical thinking, Brazil became emancipated in literary terms. But, in certain areas, like that of criticism, he took up a position which, at first sight, would never have seemed on the cutting edge. Machado refuted the contamination of the French school of realism, advocated the cause of decorum and purity, and defended outdated procedures, perhaps even that of mere *kitsch*.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, if a careless reader were to glance through the article he wrote in 1878 for *O Cruzeiro* about *O primo Basílio*, by Eça de Queirós, he or she would judge that it was a discourse produced for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, the mouthpiece of the great bourgeoisie and of antirevolutionary ideals.<sup>3</sup> The author begins by recognising the talent of his Portuguese colleague, but laments the fact that he is an “undisguised realist”, a “zealous disciple of the realism propagated by the author of *Assomoir*”. In rejecting “the doctrine, not the talent and much less the man”, he echoes the formula coined by Saint-René Taillandier: “it's not the painter who should be blamed, but the system” – of which variations appear in the *Revue* (Parreira 179).

In truth, even though Machado may not be an example of the critic satirised by Balzac in *Illusions perdues*, since we know that he was sincere in his admiration for the writer (as evidenced in his letter to Henrique Chaves, written in August 1900 after Eça's death), the fact is that he begins his review following the lesson of Lousteau to Lucien:

praising the author or the work and, after demonstrating his impartiality, reproving the “system” to which the books of the new literature belong.

His criticism of the “servile photographic reproduction of the tiniest ignoble things”, of the fact that the disgusting underclass are treated with “minute attention” and the “precision of an inventory”, echoes the *Revue*’s censure of the extreme zeal of the realists in the representation of the complete, detailed and exhaustive portrait of reality – above all when the depiction emphasises the subject’s physicality and roughness, supposedly exaggerated and perverse. Thus, Machado notes that Eça’s realism is based on the “spectacle of physical passions, needs and perversions”. Similarly, Gustave Planche praises Auguste Barbier for having avoided, in his description of the mental asylum of St Mary of Bethlehem in the poem “Bedlam”, the lewd gestures, shouts and burlesque movements, the “endless exaggeration” in short, which would have delighted the “*realist school*” (*op. cit.* 173-4).<sup>4</sup>

We also find in the *Revue* various arguments against the idea of the inventory, repeated twice in Machado’s article, and of the mechanical reproduction, supposedly without mediation, of photography. It is the case of Taillandier himself, who, in 1863, observed that Flaubert’s *Salammbô* would pass as “an official report, a work of statistics”. Some years before, Émile Montégut said that Alexandre Dumas the Younger “possessed an optical instrument and an acoustic instrument which he points at the Parisian world; and he sees, listens and writes. In a word, Dumas is what we describe today as a realist” (*Ibidem* 183-4). There was, at heart, a lack of discrimination, of judicious selection, reminiscent of Machado’s criticism concerning the fidelity of the author who “forgets nothing and hides nothing”. Eça’s concern for accessories, for minute detailing, would be an excessive distraction from what was essential to the plot.

The problem, for the Brazilian, lay in the fact that Eça was an “intense and complete” realist, rather than a “mitigated realist” – which also recalls a certain tendency amongst the *Revue* critics, who, from the 1850s onwards, began to defend the advantages of a kind of fusion between realism and idealism, of an eclectic art, also related to the concept of “pure art” (an expression used twice by Machado, in the article). In fact, returning to the subject a fortnight later, he added that no longer did one seek the “weary portraits of decadent Romanticism”, since there was something “in realism which could be harvested making use of the imagination”. Imagination and creation would be above the mere copying of details, of unrestricted imitation – since art could only benefit if the author decided to *blend* some of the procedures of realism with a technique which went beyond the principles of the new doctrine.

Finally, in quoting the “head of the school”, who had said that “the rough outline is not precise”, recommending that “we turn our eyes to reality, but let us exclude Realism, so that we don’t sacrifice aesthetic truth”, Machado appears to endorse the thesis of Louis de Geoffroy (1851), who, after complaining of the perfect precision, of the grotesque figures and of the art made for everybody of *Un enterrement à Ornans*, by Coubert, concluded that the “truth is not always truthful” (*Ibidem* 166n).

Indeed, Machado's defence of "aesthetic truth" seems to have touched a chord amongst Brazilian advocates of the primacy of form, as we see in the, much later, essay by Afrânio Coutinho, national representative of the American New Criticism. He praises Machado, often using the terms of the author himself, taking for example the idea of "mitigated realism", which does not mean copying reality, but selecting and suggesting imaginatively, transforming it according to internal norms of concision and elegance.

Naturally, Machado's art is realistic. But it is a mitigated realism, verily an impressionist realism. It was not the whole of reality that interested him. He knew how to select that which would help to portray the impression, the sensation, the emotion generated in the spirit by its no presence. [...] His art is more the transfiguration and interpretation of reality rather than that of photographic reproduction. (Coutinho 78-80)

Coutinho goes on to state that Machado's art is classical, insofar as it separates art from morality; in other words, by distinguishing between "aesthetic truth and ethical truth" (in essays like "Ideias sobre o teatro" [Ideas on the theatre]), the writer was defending artistic autonomy. In short it is in the light of this defence of "literary, aesthetic or poetic values" that we should, according to him, understand his judgement of *O primo Basílio* (*op. cit.* 92 and 93).

But is Machado's defence of "pure art" similar to the emphasis of the *Revue* on eclectic art, on good taste, on the half-tone, the *juste-milieu* and the *pièce bien faite* – in short on the aesthetic accommodation of elegant trash, to the reduction of the artistic to the pleasurable and the captivating? (see Hauser 815-33). Although, in this and other articles (like "A nova geração" [The new generation], for example, in which he recalls the expression used by Baudelaire – "*cette grossière éphitète*" – against realism) Machado presents himself as being frankly antirealist, is he subscribing to reactionary idealism, the neoclassicism of dubious taste, and to the futile, easy, agreeable art associated with the Paris of Napoléon III and Haussmann, the artist of destruction? If his work already indicates that this is not the case, it is certain that even his criticism may point in another direction, if we read it carefully. Even so, since he was such an assiduous reader of the magazine, would there not be some trace of it remaining, but in another guise? If so, what guise would this be?

## II

Although the reply is linked to an analysis of what Machado de Assis described in 1873 as the "instinct of nationality", the discussion begins in a certain way with his first article, written fifteen years earlier for *A Marmota*, "O passado, o presente e o futuro da literatura" [The past, present and future of literature]. The all-embracing ambition evident in the title presents the question in an attempt to conjugate literature and politics:



the country had achieved its political emancipation, but what about literature, the other face of civilised society? In other words, was there a literary *fiat* corresponding to the political *fiat*? (Assis 785-9).

For him, Brazilian literature, enslaved to European, above all Portuguese, literature, was not purely national in nature. Although he does not present himself as a tooth-and-nail enemy of material progress, he complains that this “magnificent pretext of speculation” alone is evidence of the harm done by it. Steam power and the telegraph should not only accelerate the process of the exchange of merchandise, but also of *ideas*. Material progress should also be reflected in *artistic* progress.

It was down to the writer to make himself a “social man”, integrated into social movements – in order not be paralysed by the Medusa’s head of foreign inundation (Machado was referring to the large-scale importing of French plays into the Brazilian theatrical circuit, which was acquiring an industrial character).

In “Notícia da atual literatura brasileira: o instinto de nacionalidade” [News of contemporary Brazilian literature: the instinct of nationality], the critic takes up the argument once again, in another key (Assis 801-9). Machado sees works of poetry and fiction, all the literary forms, as an attempt to clothe oneself “in the country’s colours” – in the search for “another independence”, which has neither a 7<sup>th</sup> September nor a River Ipiranga.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, while seeing in this independence “signs of vitality and the future bounty” of Brazilian literature, Machado does not consider the process, fruit of the efforts of many generations, as already concluded.

The reason that many works, possessed of the instinct of nationality, had still not reached literary independence, was due to the fact that (perhaps due to “not having historical conditions and motives”) they revealed nothing more than “a certain local colour”.<sup>6</sup> The error lay in only “recognising the national spirit in works dealing with a local *subject*”. Or, on the contrary, with regard to poetry: “A poet is not national just because he inserts into his verses lots of names of the country’s flowers and birds”. This would only be a “nationality of vocabulary”, lacking “imaginative touches”.

Machado basically means that “local colour” alone is not enough – a criterion maybe, but insufficient on its own.

He wonders whether Shakespeare is any the less English for setting his plays in Denmark, Italy or Egypt. Is there a distinction to be made between the Longfellow of *The Song of Hiawatha* and that of *The Golden Legend*? Would Gonçalves Dias be less Brazilian in non-indianist poetry?

Rather than having a superficial localism, these authors reveal themselves to be *intimately* national, irrespective of the setting or subject. The proof is in the statement of a “notable French critic”, that a certain writer, Masson, has “an interior Scottishness”.

Does it come as a surprise that Machado read this review in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*? It is an essay by the nowadays not-so-celebrated Louis Étienne, which appeared in the July-August 1866 issue of the *Revue*: “*La critique contemporaine en Angleterre: David Masson*”. The extract continues as follows:

However the *Scottishness* of M. Masson (I lend him the term) is not only on the surface. Just as we can be perfect Bretons without always talking about gorse and heather, M. Masson is a good Scot without saying a word about thistles. It is there perhaps subtly, but the Scots do not despise subtlety, an interior *Scottishness*, which, with a turn of Scottish thinking, applies itself to national subjects, but also to human and general subjects. (Étienne 901-26)

This quality that the author identifies as the “Scottish temperament” constitutes something deeply rooted and even hereditary – something, therefore, from which one cannot escape, and which is not in superficial details, but in something far deeper. Once again it appears that we are seeing the rarified dispute inspired by the *Revue* between superficiality and profundity (the realists being superficial in their depiction of the material envelope, while the idealists desire to reach the profundity of the human enigma). Machado, however, once again appears not to follow the script exactly. As he explained earlier, what is under discussion is only an intimate feeling, which “makes a man of his time and country”.

We can understand his point of view better in his observations on Gonçalves Dias. The author of *Os Timbiras* was not entirely Brazilian in the “Sextilhas de Frei Antão”, where not only is the *subject* Lusitanian, but also the (antiquated) *style*. Machado’s emphasis is on something which he judged, in accordance with the ancient image, to reside in the interior – but what is inside would not be the soul as such, but the style. Rather: the soul *is* the style. Or, as he argued in “O ideal do crítico” [The ideal of the critic] (1865), relating it to the soul (of the book): the laws of poetry. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the comparison between literature and politics as something of action (independence), present in “The past, present...”, reappears, almost ten years later, in “O ideal...”, politics in its legislative aspect. The legislator/critic should meditate about works, seeking his “intimate sense”, which unlike hollow phraseology (which only praises or depreciates) and the superficial reading of impressions, would be worthy of “literary science” (Assis 798-801).

When we read the later essay, “O instinto de nacionalidade”, we see Machado arguing that “everything is raw material for poetry, since it contains the *conditions of the beautiful* or the *elements* of which *it is composed*”. Thus, the laws of poetry or the laws of the beautiful, related in “O ideal do crítico” to the soul or spirit of the book, are shown here to be linked to the *compositional elements*. Machado thus seeks to emphasise the importance of form.

But, notwithstanding Coutinho’s reference to the autonomy of the poetic spirit, what calls one’s attention with regard to this aesthetic truth is precisely that the formal elements are fundamentally linked, as we have seen, to the intimate sentiment that makes a writer “a man of his time and of his country”.

To give an example, Machado quotes the speech of old Ogib, when his son is criticised for absencing himself from the other warriors to live alone, in *Os Timbiras*. In the poem, Gonçalves Dias uses the sublime image of the condor, a Romantic topic, to

explain the loftiness of the solitary figure. However, the implied notion of grandiosity – linked in a certain manner to the vast and magnificent Brazilian landscapes, rivers, fields, virgin forest (subject/material) – is only effective when the *expression* is simple, since the “sublime is simple”.<sup>7</sup>

In the same year as Louis Étienne’s essay on David Masson (1866), Machado had already made it clear why, from the artistic point of view (in other words, checking whether “the author met all the requirements of the chosen form”), *O culto ao dever*, by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, was a weak novel. The subject appeared to him to be valid: a young woman sacrifices her personal sentiment of love in the name of the collective interest, of the fatherland, in convincing her fiancé to go to war. However, Machado complains that we do not *perceive* Angelina’s love, while the attitudes of the young Teófilo show him to be a cowardly young man, to say the least. With regard to Angelina’s love, this “only appears in the words of the narrator”, just as the emphasis on duty resides in the “repetition of the word” (Assis 845).

There is something faulty, therefore, from the point of view of the execution, or, to use the author’s terms, of the imagination or creation – the author did not succeed in transfiguring the facts (the mere copy, the simple description of an event resembles the procedure of a “news sheet”) with the “magic wand of art”. On the other hand, in “*Iracema*, by José de Alencar” (another review from 1866), “*one sees* the beauty of movement” in the “scene” in which Iracema tells Martim that she is carrying his child. Compared with a similar scene in *Natchez*, by Chateaubriand, as far as Machado is concerned, Alencar’s is more successful (*Ibidem* 851).

It is worth paying attention to some small suggestions: the beauty of a movement which *one sees* – and which, if the reader sees it, is because the author *shows* it – unlike Macedo’s narrator, who restricts himself to recording the circumstances –, in addition to the idea of the *scene* as the proper time-space for that depiction. What is under discussion, therefore, are elements of composition which would subsequently serve to justify Machado’s appreciation of the character of the servant Juliana, in *O primo Basílio*, whose motivation is strong, unlike that of the heroine Luísa, who lacks any moral accentuation; the latter being, in a word, no more than a “puppet”.

His argument is that, once the affair with Basílio is over, were it not for the episode of Juliana’s theft of the letters, the novel could well have been concluded. Thus, Eça passed from the principal (the action of the characters and their sentiments) to the supplementary, the accidental, the fortuitous (the incident of the letters). Unlike *Othello*, in which, despite the episode of Desdemona’s handkerchief, the drama exists in the characters and in their moral situation (the treachery of Iago, the jealous soul of Othello), the problem that the reader has in front of him is a mere plot detail: “will Luísa get the letters back?” (*Ibidem* 910). The drama is already over. Or never really began.

### III

Allow me to make a quick comparison with another author, contemporary of Machado and an assiduous reader of the *Revue*, and who was also much concerned with the construction of characters: the American Henry James.

While Machado complains of the importance given to supplementary aspects of the plot (the episode of the letters) in *O primo Basilio*, in detriment to the axis involving the drama of the characters, James comments, in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, that the novel originated from the idea of a young woman facing up to her destiny. Like the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, one of his great literary influences, he thinks of his characters as “image *en disponibilité*” (“unattached”). The germ is not (never is), therefore, in the plot, but in this single character, to whom the details of the subject and settings would have to be superadded. James is unable to envision the situation divorced from this support, or in other words, his fable disconnected from its agents. Around them, the appropriate complications, relationships (or the “architecture”, which consists of “what one does with the subject”), are carefully created. In this sense, *The Portrait* is little more than “an organised ado about Isabel Archer” – a commotion which yet, in order to expose the complexity of the character, at times makes use of resources which are not merely technical, but pyrotechnical (“pyrotechnic display”) (James 1070-85). If he makes up the fable or plot around his hero or heroine, in the sense of wondering what he or she would do if this or that happened to them, we must suppose that the existence of elements that are gratuitous or disconnected from the “moral situation” (Machado) of the characters is rare or nonexistent.

Another point of interest is the question of the characters that he describes as *ficelles*. According to the eighth edition of the French Academy Dictionary, one of the definitions of the term, whose original meaning refers to a hemp cord used for tying parcels, corresponds to a trick (like that of an art or trade) or artifice. In the figurative sense, there are expressions like “*tirer les ficelles*”, in other words, to manipulate others without appearing to do so, and “*celui qui tient les ficelles*”, the most important character, who holds the real power.<sup>8</sup> In the story “La Ficelle” (1883), by Maupassant, nobody believes a crafty peasant accused of robbing a wallet when he states that he only took a little cord; for everybody, the “*ficelle*” is a mere pretext used to cover up the “truth”. For James, the trick or skill consists precisely in creating a character in such a way as to make the best use of the principal (like Isabel Archer), developing him or her satisfactorily. Thus, the *ficelle* is less an agent of the subject than of the treatment; not the carriage itself, but the wheels on the carriage, in James’s own metaphor. The example in *The Portrait of a Lady* is that of Miss [Henrietta] Stackpole. If Isabel, “a true agent”, belongs directly to the subject, being an element of the “essence”, Henrietta, as “light ficelle”, is no more than an element of the “form”.

In the preface to *The Ambassadors* James returns the subject with regard to Maria Gostrey, another of his completed *ficelles*. She arises, in the logic of the procedure, in relation to an important aspect, that of the point of view. The question is in the fact that

James intended to make his novel follow “a small compositional law”, that of employing only one centre of conscience to tell the story – in the sense that only the awareness of Strether about all the others, and only his, would serve the author to show it: “I should know them [the other relationships] through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among the most interesting motions”. It would be the use of a single centre that would give the novel “a large unit”, “the grace of intensity” (*Ibidem* 1304-21).

As we know, James attempted to avoid, in his long narratives, “the romantic privilege of the ‘first person’”, since the technique which presupposes the use of his character as “hero and historian” brings with it, for him, “the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation”. But, if we do not have the testimony of the hero, how can the necessary information be provided without recourse to the “seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative”? In short, without simply “telling”, or rather, to “his creator” telling – as occurs in Balzac and, to a certain extent, in several of James’s previous narratives? The technique, he argues in the preface, would run counter to “modern impatience”. In fact, this appears to be precisely the complaint that Machado makes about Macedo – that the character’s love only appears “in the words of the narrator”, by means, in the end, of *telling*.

In order to be able to show Strether’s past, for example, in addition to the conditions which enabled him to take up his ambassador’s position in Europe, and since he could not make use of the theatrical resource of having characters speaking to each other about him (since what is under discussion is his consciousness, the drama of his consciousness which we are following), James ensured that he would have “a confidant or two”. Waymarsh, to a lesser degree, and Maria Gostrey, as an “unmitigated” agent (in Machado’s terms: “intense and complete”), would act as *ficelles*. Miss Gostrey would be, in this sense, “the reader’s friend.... from beginning to end of the book”, helping to give “lucidity”, to offer details about the plot or about the protagonist’s past.

As an element of the “dramatist’s art”, the “ficelle” would be something related to a “scenic consistency”, presented not only in the use of this procedure, but principally in the task of “disguise”. James is obliged to conceal the job of the *ficelle*. Let us recall too how this element of artifice is related to the pyrotechnics of the complications or complexity, of the evolution of the fable of Isabel Archer and, also, if we wish, to the “magic wand of art” mentioned by Machado. We should not forget that the form is a resource of the artifice, which makes the relationship of a character appear to be organic, when in fact it is merely inorganic.

But, then, and this appears to be the heart of the matter, James says that the disguising of the nature of *ficelle* of Maria Gostrey transforms her “**false** connection” into “a **real** one”. The relationship between Maria and Strether, in short, has nothing to do with the *matter* (“the matter of my subject”), but everything to do with the *manner* (“the manner of my presentation of the same”), but he handles her “for fully economic expression’s possible sake” as if she were “important and essential” and, thus, she *becomes* important and essential. In other words, that which belongs to the field of form,



of expression, of procedure, is transformed by his own art into something belonging to the subject, the content, the essence.

What James implies here, and what Machado appears to be implying, in his emphasis on style, is not a move in the direction of mere aestheticism, but the fact that both instances, those of form and content, are, as we have come to recognise, interrelated, to the extent that one cannot be separated from the other, and this is not only an aesthetic truth but also a *measure of aesthetic excellence*. So much so that, the more an author manages to introduce into his work the rules and laws connected to his inner sentiment (and not only to overlay it with the superficial elements of a mere “nationality of vocabulary”), the more he reveals himself to be “a man of his time and of his country”. Only in this way, if he does not completely escape the risk of pyrotechnics and entrapment that wary modern eyes associate with artistic procedure, then at least it seems to be more adequately justified.

## Notes

- 1 Translated into English by Peter James Harris
- 2 This article takes up a discussion initiated in my book *Realidade possível: dilemas da ficção em Henry James e Machado de Assis* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2012, principally 161 and 201), but, I would like to think, advances in the sense of attempting to understand the specific nature of Machado’s proposals in a context which involves international ideology and the significance of its acclimatisation on Brazilian soil.
- 3 ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Obra completa* (Vol. 3). Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 903-13. Subsequent references to articles written by Machado are based on this edition. For the conservative stance not only of the *Revue*, but of many of the great European publications, like the *Frankfurter Journal*, see OEHLER, Dolf. *O velho mundo desce aos infernos: auto-análise da modernidade após o trauma de Junho de 1840 em Paris*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999.
- 4 (My italics). This is a reference *avant la lettre* to the school, since the review is from 1837. In this period critics described the new aesthetic directions perceived in Hugo, Lamartine or Balzac, indiscriminately as “materialistic”, “realistic”, or sometimes even as “naturalistic”.
- 5 Translator’s Note: the date and place in 1822 when Dom Pedro I granted Brazil its independence in response to a public petition.
- 6 In “O passado, o presente...” [The past, present...], the characteristic of local colour, seen without the subsequently indicated mediations, seemed to be capable of freeing Brazilian literature from submission to its European counterpart, conferring on it “a purely national character”. (*Ibidem* 785)
- 7 Similarly, he would say some years later (quoting Hugo), in “A nova geração” [The new generation], that, if there is reality according to nature, there is also reality according to art, the two separated by an impassable limit.
- 8 In this way we can trace a parallel between Machado’s puppet and James’s *ficelle*: both are artificially supported by cords and threads. The *ficelles* of James are always secondary characters, so much so that Machado criticises Eça for having converted his principal character into a puppet. Let us also note that Machado was aware of the “dramatic” use of the *ficelles*. In “A chinela turca” [The Turkish slipper], it is in this way that the bachelor Duarte reads the wearisome drama “in seven pictures” by Major Lopo Alves: “What remained were the incidents, the characters, the *ficelles* and even the style of the most finished types of tousled Romanticism”. (ASSIS, op.

cit., Vol. 2, 296). (Fonte: *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*, 8th Edition, The University of Chicago, RTFL Project, 2001. <http://portail.atilf.fr>>; accessed on 16/10/2013.)

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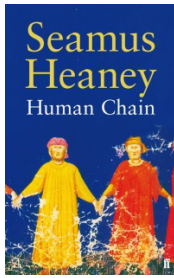
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# Book Reviews







Heaney, Seamus. *Human Chain*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. 89 pp.

The latest collection of poems by Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain*, is predominantly characterized by a craftsman who is honing language. Contrary to the ordinary view that poetry is the art of powerful feelings, the volume shows that a careful linguistic experimentation may capture moments of partial reconciliation between psychological states and historical circumstances. This is possible due to intellectual maturity which stems from a “late style” form of art.

It is important to remember, then, Theodor Adorno’s words characterizing Ludwig van Beethoven’s later work:

Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. (Adorno 564)

This definition could also describe the artistic sensibility shown by Heaney in his last book. Falling back on ethical positions as formal experimentations, Heaney’s poetical choices and tensions are contingent on a physical reality, which constantly reminds the artist of his perishable condition. In *Human Chain*, echoing Adorno’s words, there is a bodily aesthetics that transforms harmony “into the dissonance of its suffering” (*op. cit.*). The poetical subjectivity, in this sense, turns into a creative force, which unites irreconcilable realities in a discourse that questions clichés of identity, national belonging and ethical responsibility.

Throughout twenty nine poems, *Human Chain* represents a poetic revision of a lifetime. Due to the non-judgmental evocation of places and figures of the poet’s childhood, the first five poems of *Human Chain* transform the clichés of the past into something unsettled. The unusual metaphors and the difficult verses force, simultaneously, the poet to reconsider his life and work, and the reader to rethink his or her involvement with the verse. Thus, these poems form a little interlude that presents a contradiction: the vanishing nature of life and the supposedly eternal nature of literature. This revision reaches its highest point with the sixth poem, “Chanson d’Aventure”, in which the poet, in an ambulance on the way to hospital after suffering a stroke, is forced to reflect on death.

The continuation of the bodily aesthetics is seen in poems dedicated to religious and biblical motifs. For instance, the poem “Miracle” transforms one of the cures performed by Jesus Christ into a mythical acknowledgement of the ones who supposedly

carry the crippled to his presence. In the biblical passage (John 5, 1: 16), there is no reference such men, but in Heaney's poem, they "have known him all along/ and carry him in" (17). If on the one hand the poet praises their strength and endurance, on the other hand, he questions their faith and belief in Jesus Christ. This antithesis does not let the poem surrender to an easy interpretation of the gospel, and forces readers to review their own personal opinions, be they Christian or Agnostic. The following poems, "Human Chain" and "The mite box" also question religious and ethical values with the presence of a collective attitude of food sharing and the "widow's mite" tale. The common theme of these poems is the importance given to the body, since the poet's human condition is compelling him to reflect on its fragile state.

In the next poems of the book, there is a symbolical attempt to recapture simple epiphanies of every-day life. Nevertheless, instead of conveying a sense of wholeness and completion, the pieces are consumed by skepticism and doubt. Poems like "The Wood Road" and "Derry Derry Down", which recollect the traumas of the Northern Irish Civil War, are placed side by side with "A Herbal" and "Riverbank Field", which are more lyrical attempts at intertextuality with "Herbier de Bretagne" by Eugène Guillevic and "Aeneid" by Virgil. Due to the paradox created by distressing memories and poetical impulses, the poet implies that poetry is not able to offer a safe haven from the distresses of life. Instead, it brings anguish and questions.

Another revealing characteristic of *Human Chain* is the preference for long poems subdivided into smaller subsections. Similarly to his Dantean "Station Island" (*Station Island*, 1984), this multiple structure allows the poet to exercise artistic freedom to develop concepts and ideas. Similarly, its power stems from the internal conflicts and contradictions they pose. The poem "Wraiths", dedicated to Ciaran Carson, "Sweeney Out-Takes", for Gregory Corkus, "Hermit Songs", for Helen Vendler and "Lick the pencil" play with the double-edged sword nature of art. With images ranging from ghost-like figures, mythical tales, medieval allusions and personal memories, these poems confirm Heaney's awareness of the passage of time. It is as if, due to the multiplicity of the past, a single poem would not be able to capture its complex and varied nature. Furthermore, the poems in homage to family and friends also reflect an emotional attachment to certain memories that still remain in his life.

The last poem of *Human Chain*, "A Kite for Aibhín", dedicated to his granddaughter, concludes the revisionary tone of the volume as a whole. Inasmuch it is a continuation of the poem, "A Kite for Michael and Christopher" – his own sons – the poem seems to be rehearsing an earthly detachment. While in the poem for Michael and Christopher, Heaney urged them to "stand in here in front of [him]/ and take the strain" (231), here the poet cannot hold it any longer:

The longing in the breast and planted feet  
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier  
Until string breaks and – separate, elate –  
The kite takes off, itself alone, windfall (85)

With this enigmatic image of the kite, Seamus Heaney finalizes his last collection. Although the poem ends in an incantatory note, suggesting perhaps a new beginning, the control he had in “A Kite for Michael and Christopher” is not present anymore. Thus, at the same time windfall indicates good fortune, it is also alone, hinting to solitude and mystery. Thus, this ambiguity challenges himself and his previous work, promoting uneasiness with the passage of time

“Late style”, in Heaney’s poetry, is a standpoint that forces poet and reader to reconfigure their own positions in face of life’s eternal questions. It is also a reexamination of the living past. His memory is revisited in the light of a mature subjectivity, whose understanding is not simplistic, but littered with contradictions and paradoxes. Adorno also claimed “late works are catastrophes” (Adorno 567). However, here, the catastrophe for the poet is not the end of his life, but rather, the end of writing itself.

*Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação*

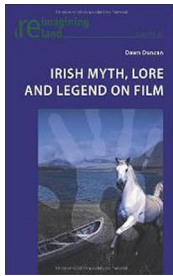
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Duncan, Dawn. *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film. Reimagining Ireland, Vol. 27.* Bern: Peter Lang, 2013. 171 pp.

In *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film*, Dawn Duncan achieved what Yeats has described as bringing “back a little of the old dead beautiful world of romance into this century of great engines and spinning-jennies” (77), while she pinpoints instances of an ancient cultural tradition, whose foundations lie in storytelling, in a set of contemporary Irish films. Her study strikes a new note in the sense that far from focusing on the reductionist and nostalgic view of an idealized Ireland, Duncan shows that there is an ongoing and dynamic interconnectedness between past and present in the form of traditional myths, lores and legends that are revisited and recreated in late twentieth-century Irish cinema. Duncan draws on the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell who, among others, have established the framework of thinking human relationships and personal individuation in a way in which the former’s theory of the “collective unconscious” is reconstructed by the latter in what became known as the “Journey of the Hero” (2). It is also important to underscore that this concept occurs, to her mind, in a postmodern context so that the reimagined journey becomes the backbone to films dealing with images of the Irish whether by Irish or American filmmakers.

Notorious film critics, some of them mentioned by Duncan, such as Martin McLoone, believe these films represent “essentially regressive ideologies... in no way vitiated by the fact that both mobilize aspects of Irish mythological tradition” (120). Nonetheless, this perception is defied by Duncan’s assertion that the purpose of the universal mythical framework has been ignored and the focus has been on the rural versus urban dichotomy. Moreover, the analysis of the films approached in this work challenges what Ruth Barton (1997) terms “Irish heritage cinema” that typically “exoticizes the Celt” and is marked by “[...] a nostalgia for the past, for pastoral innocence; [...] aware of the burden of history, in turn referring to it and denying it” (50). Instead, Duncan indicates how traditional narratives in the shape of myth, lore and legend – that function as the spinal cord of the films – are recreated under different guises and come to the fore in modern-day Irish society.

In the first set of films dealt with in Chapter 2, *Into the West* (1992), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), and *In America* (2002), the children transcend the theme of innocence, which Barton believes is typically attributed to their role, for they, instead, carry the heavy burden of reaching maturity before their time due to the familial and environmental dereliction that surrounds them. The role of the storyteller, the *seanachai* in the Irish tradition, is crucial to these films, for it is through the stories told to the children by the



older folk, the grandfathers in *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *Into the West*, and by the African Mateo in *In America* that the children get emotionally involved with their past and motivated to search for the root of the problem that caused the dismantling of their families in the present. It is also worth mentioning the way in which the hero journey requires their physical displacement. With the exception of *In America*, in which the family move from Ireland to the United States, the children follow the inverse path of the formation novel that expects the protagonist to be dislocated from the country to the city for the maturity-immaturity cycle to be completed. The child-heroes of *Into the West* and *The Secret of Roan Inish* need to go back to the traditional Ireland their ancestors left behind to recuperate what has been lost in terms of their roots and origins, especially in the latter as the children literally rebuild the Irish cottage that had been shattered and have their families move back to the island in order to have the family reunited. Duncan's conclusion is twofold: in the Jungian universal level the heroic journey the children must undergo is a means of achieving individuation and self-responsibility. On the particular level of contemporary Ireland they become the agents that recover their parents and/or grandparents from the paralysing grief of the past opening for them new paths into the present and the future.

Chapter 3 delves around *The Quiet Man* (1955), an emblematic representation of the homecoming Irish immigrant from America and its more recent counterpart *The Matchmaker* (1997), which, according to Duncan, provides the viewer with a commentary on the Ford film as well as on its own historical moment. Duncan acknowledges that traditional lore changes along the generations, since "adaptation [is] part of the process of folklore", and "Folklorists believe that in order to best understand the cultural expression in which they are interested, they must study it in context, considering the setting in which the item is found or used; in which the behaviour is practiced; in which the behaviour is expressed or in which the story is told" (Sims and Stephens 20, *apud* Duncan 46). The behaviour alluded to in both films is, of course, matchmaking, which is culturally marked by temporality, for in the early 1950s it was tied to tradition, family and church approval, whereas in the 1990s it becomes an individual choice. To Duncan both films challenge the societal structures of their time. On the one hand, the figure of Mary Kate in *The Quiet Man* has helped lead the feminist charge as she rejects her husband's mastery; however, her strong character and sexual fulfilment in the 1950s have become status quo in the 1990s. On the other, *The Matchmaker* presents a twofold satiric aspect, for firstly, it performs a critique of American society obsessed with scandal and technology in which intimacy is excluded as a trait of postmodern society; and secondly, the dismantling of a nostalgic Ireland, which turns out to be, in Duncan's words, "only a tourist's game, an image sustained for gain, Ireland being today as much a part of the postmodern world as Boston" (72).

Chapter 4, about ways of serving society and legend of the rebel in *Michael Collins* (1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), traces the way in which two men embodied as the real historical figure of Michael Collins and as the fictional

character Damien O'Donovan became legends and how, despite taking opposite sides of the conflict both shared the same fate in dying for Ireland. Duncan gives a close explanation of chief historical events, such as the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty sides of the Irish Civil War, that are necessary to enable a thorough understanding of both films. She also draws interesting parallels between the past time depicted in both films and the present time of their release, namely the ceasefire that was taking place in Northern Ireland when at the time *Michael Collins* came out, and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* which reflected the frustration of radicalized elements in Northern Ireland to address issues eight years beyond the Good Friday Agreement as well as the widespread of terrorism. Duncan draws on Ken Loach's assumption that *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* is a way for the British to confront their own imperialist history, and that in telling the truth about the past, one can tell the truth about the present (119). By elucidating the difference between concepts of sympathy and empathy, Duncan implies that it is only in understanding Damien and his cause, that we are able to "slip inside the skin of another" (120) in order to understand those vilified as terrorists.

The controversial aspect in the last chapter, which focuses on the journey of the contemporary anti-hero in *Veronica Guerin* (2003) and *In Bruges* (2008), is summed up by Duncan in the words of Sean O'Faolain who "acknowledges that the anti-hero is not a 'neat and tidy' concept" (125). On one hand, I agree that the anti-hero trajectory of *In Bruges* is subverted, for the hit man Ray as well as his partner gain consciousness about their actual roles in taking people's lives. Nonetheless, I believe that the "anti" aspect of his fleeting heroism must not be put aside, although there is a slight hope that Ray might not have been killed and that he and drug dealer Chloe might begin their lives anew. On the other, I feel somewhat uncertain in relation to Duncan's view on the second film, based on the real life trajectory of Veronica Guerin and the herculean task she undertakes to spot the criminals and reveal the Dublin underworld drug scene. The film does, however, convey that Veronica's *naïveté* (that could be taken as carelessness) turns into a powerful self-destructive weapon when combined with her ambition. Veronica is obviously overwhelmed by her sudden celebrity-status, and the scene in which she comments on the bad picture broadcast on the news while she was recovering in hospital after her first assassination attempt clearly demonstrates this point. Yet, at the same time Duncan grapples with the gender complexities that the film has raised, she is critical in relation to her real motivation to pursue such a dangerous investigation while leaving her family aside. Veronica is doubtlessly brave enough to leave the domestic space to which women are normatively confined, whereas if she were a man, the nature of her motivations would hardly have been questioned. I consider her journey as an inner quest that results in her unfortunate death, but which is paradoxically a means for order to be restored in the sense that it became a milestone to Ireland's battle over drugs and that led to the formation of the Criminal Assets Bureau, responsible for inquiring about assets supposedly acquired illegally.

To conclude, in *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film* Dawn Duncan has produced a piece of work that encompasses both the deep research and analysis of a sharp critic as well as the fluidity and clarity of an experienced academic, fundamental to reach both scholarly and popular appeal, or anyone interested in Irish history and cinema. As she states at the outset, while choosing the pronoun “we” to engage and invite the audience to take part in this journey, the reader is left to actively reassess the ways in which each of these at first similarly traditional motifs are present in contemporary cinema under different perspectives and realize how “Time present and time past./ Are both perhaps present in time future./ And time future contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable” (Eliot 1935, 93)

Dawn Duncan is Professor of English and Global Studies at Concordia College-Moorhead, MN, recognized internationally for her literary expertise in Irish Studies and has served on the Executive of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures since 2000.

*Mariana Bolfarine*

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Maley, Willy and Alison O'Malley-Younger (eds.). *Celtic Connections: Irish-Scottish Relations and the Politics of Culture*. Series: Reimagining Ireland, Vol. 38. 237 pp. Bern: Peter Lang, 2013. Pb £ 40.00.

This is a volume that promises much, not least in the back cover blurb, which “offers insights into debates about identity and politics in [...] two neighbour nations, too often overwhelmed by connections with their larger neighbour, England.” Ireland and Scotland share a Celtic history – Scotland is, after all, named after an Irish tribe, the Scoti, that, most scholars agree, settled in the western kingdom of Dalriada, bringing the ancestor of today’s Gaelic across the few miles of sea that separated the territories. But they share, in the north of Ireland at least, a Saxon history too, most obviously from 1609 century when the Scottish King, James VI and I, encouraged the plantation of English and Scottish Protestants in Ulster. And so the book could easily have been retitled *Sassenach Connections*, and several of the contributing authors focus on the long-standing sectarian conflict that lingers in Northern Ireland and which finds its slightly fainter echo in lowland Scotland, particularly in urban areas that have a history of Irish immigration.

There is, then, on the face of it, much to be gained from a perspective that frees Irish and Scottish Studies from the hegemonic preconceptions of Anglocentric “Eng Lit” and considers literary, cultural and political relations between the two nations on their own terms. The shape of the landscape is bound to change when we resituate the point from which we view it. And, reading the essays that make up the volume, change it does – though the implications of that change in perspective are not fully or comprehensively addressed. Instead we get – as is normal in such loosely-themed conference proceedings – a fairly disparate collection of reflections that provoke and stimulate without delivering a coherent programme for reconfiguring Irish and Scottish Studies. There is evidence in the volume, patchy though it may be, that devising such a programme would be a worthwhile endeavour.

The editors provide an energetic introduction, using the catalyst of an Irish-Scottish connection to reanimate the tired critical trope of duality that has understandably permeated much post-Enlightenment Scottish discourse. If Englishness is not to be the “Other” to the Scots, then Irishness might well play that role – and the same goes for the Irish with respect to the Scots. Reconstituting the sense of Self and Other makes the discussion of identity both strange and familiar, and it is worth revisiting James Joyce in the distorting mirror of possible Scottish counterparts, like Hugh MacDiarmid, whose linguistic experimentations and totalising poetic ambitions were influenced by the Irish novelist, and Alasdair Gray, whose monumental novel, *Lanark*, “does for Glasgow what Joyce did for Dublin”.

Several essays in the volume also probe Scottish-Irish dualities and mutual reflections, and their potential for refreshing our perspective on neglected or familiar writers. John Strachan considers the mixed reception in the influential nineteenth-century Edinburgh journals of Charles Robert Maturin's Gothic novels, which pushed the genre's stock suspicion of Catholicism to lurid extremes. How contemporary Tory and Whig opinion-makers in the major cities debated and negotiated the evolving cultural perceptions of Scottish and Irish literature on both sides of the North Channel is an intriguing topic for research; Strachan's paper points in potentially fruitful directions but remains content to focus largely on a positive reappraisal of Maturin's status as a novelist. In comparison, Alison O'Malley Younger chooses to reappraise a much more canonical Gothic text, re-reading *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as a parable of racial degeneration, enacted as "civilised" Dr Jekyll succumbs to his primitive, Celtic "Hyde". Like her co-editor, O'Malley-Younger finds it hard to resist a wince-inducing pun; her likening of Stevenson's descriptions of Jekyll's alter ego to newspaper stereotypes of Neanderthal Irishmen is enjoyably suggestive without being conclusive. But then, *Strange Case* is so stubbornly and artfully open to diverse readings that dualisms like "Saxon-Celt" or "Englishman-Scotsman" can easily be imposed on the evocative hints given in the text.

Other essays in the collection are more concerned with blurring the lines of Scottishness and Irishness in a pan-Celtic melting pot. Willy Maley and Niall Gallacher explore the active interest of three Scottish literary and political figures, John Maclean, Sorley Maclean and Hugh MacDiarmid, in Irish politics in the early twentieth century, and in particular their collective admiration for James Connolly, the Edinburgh-born, Irish republican leader. Connolly is presented as the neglected inspiration for a "Gaelic Socialism" or "Celtic Communism" that draws both upon Lenin's denunciation of colonialism and an idealised vision of the communal society of early Irish and Scottish clans. In a case study of "cultural flows", Masaya Shimokusu explains the attraction felt by Japanese literary translators of the 1920s to the novelists and dramatists of the Irish Literary Revival, among whom a prominent place was given to the Scot, "Fiona Macleod" (William Sharp). An equally pseudonymous Japanese translator, "Mineko Matsemuro" (Hiroko Katayama) translated "Macleod" in the 1920s, and reprinted editions of her work found a new audience in Japan in the 1980s, a readership influenced, Shomokusu argues, by the popular success of the "new age" music of Irish singer Enya, whose work was showcased in the BBC series *The Celts* (1986). On the Sassenach side of the divide, Martyn Colebrook's discussion of the Scottish academic and novelist, Liam McIlvanney's *All the Colours of the Town* explores the mirrored experiences, allegiances and links between Northern Ireland and lowland Scotland, as seen in the genre of political thriller, which is perhaps today's popular counterpart to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic shocker.

Several essays focus less obviously on interconnections between Scotland and Ireland. Deirdre O'Byrne offers a close reading of Hanna Bell's novel, *December Bride*, which is set in a Scots-Irish farming community. A male novelist's exploration of the

relationship of a determined young woman with her traditional, patriarchal community, *December Bride* on the face of it invites comparison with the earlier Scots fiction of Lewis Grassie Gibbon – but connection is not made. And another essay, *Mickey B* by Emily A. Ravenscroft and James Mollison, while dealing with the adaptation and performance of “The Scottish Play” inside a Northern Irish prison, raises general questions about the ways in which performance constructs and constrains gender, class, and religious and political identities – without directly invoking Scotland except as a potentially manageable “Other” to the unruly culture represented by the Irish inmates.

Finally, a brace of essays deals less with literature and more broadly with Irish and Scottish cultural studies. Lauren Clark offers an examination of International Exhibitions in the “Second Cities” of Empire, Glasgow and Dublin, as a means of arguing for the rise of what she calls “Celtic Consumerism.” As with many of the essays in the volume, this raises intriguing questions without wholly nailing the answers. Clark argues that by increasingly offering commodified representations of aspects of the local culture in order to promote local products, International Exhibitions began to offer a form of resistance to the imperial hegemony that at first sight provides a rationale for these kinds of display. The topic is a fascinating one, but the space of a brief essay can hardly allow a nuanced development of the ways in which global and local interactions were enacted by promoters and processed by exhibition visitors. A possible way of understanding these spectacular events was that they offered a narrative whereby visitors could place themselves, not just as “Celtic consumers” but as participants in the immediate and wider imagined imperial community. The concluding essay of the volume, by Stefanie Lehner and Cillian McGrattan, considers the “rebranding” of Irish and Scottish cultures by politicians and political commentators. Lehner and McGrattan cast a sceptical eye on notions of confident modern, liberal, inclusive civic nationalism, as touted variously by Scottish Nationalist politicians, and “post-nationalist” Irish literary critics. In questioning whether nationalism is really a productive lens with which to view the broader issues of class, race and gender, Lehner and McGrattan join sceptical critics like Alex Thomson (2007), and Scott Hames, whose recent anthology, *Unstated* (2012) is an essential litterateur’s sampler of a range of Scottish writers’ views on the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence.

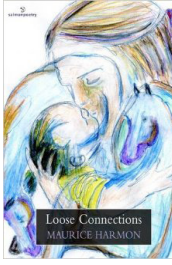
*Celtic Connections* shares its name with a festival of vaguely “Celtic” music, which was established in Glasgow in the depths of January, in part to grasp the marketing opportunity, granted by the convenient date of Burns’ birth, to develop a specialised tourist season in the darkest, wettest and coldest time of the year. The volume is too spiky and awkward to function as a cultural tourist’s confident gloss on Irish-Scottish relations. It is too diverse in theoretical approach, too wayward in content and too partial in the treatment of its subject to function as a proper manifesto for the systematic development of autonomous Irish-Scottish cultural studies. But the contributions are provocative enough to indicate that developing the curricular space to allow such a venture would be well worthwhile.

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**Harmon, Maurice. *Loose Connections*. County Clare, Ireland: Salmon Poetry, 2012. 66 pp. ISBN: 978-1-908836-19-9**

Much of the contemporary debate surrounding literary criticism that regards Poetry turns itself into lyricism and non-lyrical poetry, such as the works by Baltrusch et Lourido (2012); Casas (2011); Gräbner et Wood (2010); Merquior (1999) and Perloff (2009, 1989). Maurice Harmon's latest collection, *Loose Connections*, prove that lyricism is not only still possible, but also, the core of Poetry.

Following his former collections, *The Mischievous Boy and Other Poems* (2008), *The Doll with Two Backs and Other poems* (2004) and *The Last Regatta* (2000), the poet Harmon once again dares exposing the soul in *Loose Connections*, discussing metaphysics and deepening the lyric-I's awareness of the importance of words, and history. In poems such as "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men", and "In a Bookshop", the sounds of those who ground Irish tradition help indicate a sense of Irish identity, as much as the musical lines in poems such as "A Dog's Life", which signal to that other kind of musicality weaved in verses and that form what Ezra Pound has long defined as *melopoea*. The same Irish belonging which identifies Dugort and Howth (in the poems "A Ditch in Dugort" and "Hill of Howth") displays the contemporary cosmopolitanism of which Irishness is made.

It is the same cosmopolitan hue that ranges from a poem ("The Cottage") that quotes Slievemore to others such as "Last Flight to Lanzarote" (where the Nobel prize winner José Saramago kept residence) and "3 Poems from the Galician" that Harmon finds the perfect pace for delving into metaphysics and reflections upon love, desire, life, living together, writing and other themes. His incursions into the Galician atmosphere as both translator and poet had earlier appeared, particularly, in a volume edited by Mary O'Donnell and Manuela Palacios (2010) in which Harmon translated one of the most acclaimed contemporary Galician poets Ana Román. Therefore, the transit amongst other geopolitical spaces and realities grants Harmon the multicultural knowledge to convey the contemporary meaning of Irish belonging/Irishness. This means reflections upon life and the belief in religion and science ("Speed"), which go along poems that reveal the nature of the senses, and the inevitability of passion, such as "Just for Now", "Finding Your Knickers in the Park", "Her New Curate". The evocation of memory, the conventional motive of lyricism, is also present in *Loose Connections*, as in the poem "A Distant Place", showing that the system of genres still accepts literary enunciation nowadays. In short, Harmon's poetry once again proves that the lyric-I's effacement is unnecessary, in times of cosmopolitan subjectification.

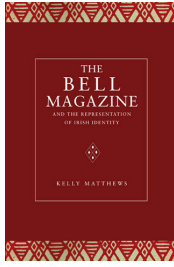
In other words, the subjectification process is still inevitable in poetry and does not give argument to the idea of a non-lyric poetry. José Guilherme Merquior apud Arturo Casas (1972) defines lyricism as that which would “consist of a mimesis of states of mind oriented toward the knowledge of universal human truths, using discursivity that is highly organized or controlled.”

In Harmon’s poems, emotions and feelings matter the most and places interest less than their influence upon people. Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) defines our contemporaneity as hypermodernity, thus, advancing on concepts earlier defined as postmodern. As we go along *Loose Connections*, we easily learn more about hypermodern identities, whose lyrical voices move along poems irrestrictively of places, marking their existences in global life atmospheres. *Loose Connections* is about love and our capacity to reinvent ourselves in a global, hypermodern world, as it teaches us to reconnect to ourselves and to the universe around us, by pointing out to our emotional frontiers: that which is said, and that which is still silenced within ourselves, ready to be said (or, not quite so).

*Gisele Wolkoff*

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**Matthews, Kelly. *The Bell Magazine and the Representation of Irish Identity: Opening Windows*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012.**

In the posthumous 1993 edition of his autobiography *Vive Moi!*, Sean O’Faolain records that “When I began to edit our monthly periodical *The Bell* some Dublin wag said that it was a most distinguished production if for no reason than that it was the only magazine in the world printed on lavatory paper with ink made of soot” (315). Subsequently, over the following two pages he proceeded to reflect in broad terms on his own and Ireland’s relationship with the world while ignoring completely the publication that critics almost unanimously consider the most important of its kind in twentieth-century Ireland. The chapter, only 6 pages long, was by far the shortest in the autobiography and appears to confirm his daughter Julia’s contention that, then in his 80s, the public man had gone private and was no longer “roused” by his time at *The Bell* (318).

This neglect is not, however, exclusive to O’Faolain. In the introduction to Kelly Matthews’s excellent study of *The Bell*, she notes that the magazine has suffered a curious fate in that it is so well known that the perception among critics is that it has, if anything, already been over-analysed, while in reality hers is the first full-length critical study on the magazine yet published (4-5). It is thus a pioneering work and Matthews’s hope that her engagement with *The Bell* “will reinvigorate discussion of the magazine and its impact on Irish society” is a welcome one (5).

So welcome and well-received has the study been that in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* Declan Kiberd, after lamenting O’Faolain’s lack of prominence in recent decades, concludes by recognising that Matthews’s book serves to remind us that O’Faolain was “a postcolonial intellectual par excellence,” while admitting that “Her beautifully written study is a deserved (if only implicit) rebuke to those of us who have excluded O’Faolain from a more central place in accounts of the invention of Ireland” (4).

In part, the central role Kiberd latterly gives to O’Faolain is because of his appreciation of the real influence the Corkman had in bringing about change in society, yet, as Matthews is at pains to show, this was precisely because *The Bell* was a meeting hall for a diversity of protagonists, styles and interests. Kiberd’s interpretation of Matthews’s book understandably centres on the inspiring figure of O’Faolain but much of what is most valuable about the study comes from the author’s ability to go beyond the huge personality of the magazine’s first editor.

More than anything Matthews gives us a nuanced picture of *The Bell*, its initial and evolving values, its conflicts and its eventual demise. She captures most accurately how the magazine served as a debating forum open to everyone where alternative and

competing voices could gain expression. Famously, Vivian Mercier wrote “For Seán O’Faolain is *The Bell*,” a claim that would seem to give succour to those who saw in the editor an overly fussy, even authoritarian figure, yet an interpretation which here finds an immediate riposte in the fact that Mercier’s critique was published in the magazine itself (30). Ultimately, it was, as O’Faolain himself put it, “a highly democratic vessel” (29).

Matthews clarifies in her introduction that she reads *The Bell* as “a collaborative endeavour, the collective work of editors, writers, and readers combined” and this holistic approach is reflected in the close attention to detail which allows her to offer valuable insights that serve to question some of the more commonly held perceptions as to the ideological values which underpin the whole project (3). For example, the documentary approach which marked particularly the early years is shown to be not merely the result of a desire to contest the idealised discourse of the independent state but, to a degree, part of a broader turn to the documentary form in the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, in what is a key touchstone to the study as a whole, Matthews reveals the subtle manner in which the initial emphasis on “representation” evolves into a creative tension with what she calls a focus on “transformation,” before linking this dialogue with the concern to reinterpret or refashion Irish identity away from the constricting mould hegemonic since independence.

In essence, this transformation achieves expression through a plural debate around alternatives of Irishness which complicates the official version of a putatively authentic Gaelic, Catholic people in harmonious rural existence, while simultaneously opening windows on to the world. Matthews, for example, pays attention to how by means of the juxtaposition of articles an attempt was made “to provoke the reader to reflect on the multifariousness of life in contemporary Ireland” (58). A prime illustration of this can be found in the very first issue in which we find an anonymous article “Orphans” competing for protagonism with an autobiographical piece, “The Big House,” by Elizabeth Bowen. The critical sensitivity shown by Matthews in relation to the strategic juxtaposition of articles is also complemented by some very valuable work on the Boston University Gotlieb archive which lends authority to her overall thesis. Through her examination of the correspondence between O’Faolain and the first poetry editor, Frank O’Connor, the author reveals, for example, that the abovementioned “Orphans” contribution was in fact a transcription from the oral history of O’Connor’s mother who had been brought up in a convent orphanage (115).

A further insight from the archive is especially interesting. Interpreting as evidence of an agenda of “transformation” apparent in the magazine’s commitment towards improving or instructing the population on good taste and in relation to the nurturing of emerging writers – notably in the “New Writers,” “Belfry” and “The Country Theatre” features-, Matthews highlights how O’Connor, in his role as poetry editor, exhibited what she considers to be “strongly nationalist views about the purpose of poetry,” while to new writers uncompromisingly insisting upon their depiction of everyday life rather than any “vague romanticism” (48). Given critics’ frequent insistence

that both O’Faolain and *The Bell* were essentially anti-nationalist, Matthews’s reading would initially appear to point to a potential source of disagreement between O’Connor and the main editor. Conflict did indeed arise but for precisely the opposite reason. When in his April 1941 contribution to “The Belfry” O’Connor chose to praise and publish the Welsh poet Cynric Mytton-Davies, O’Faolain took immediate objection. Quoting an undated private letter from the editor to O’Connor accessed in the Gotlieb archive, Matthews reveals O’Faolain’s protest: “I take the strongest objection to printing a non-Irish writer” while herself concluding that the nub of the issue was that O’Connor’s choice “violated *The Bell*’s nationalist intentions” (50). Elsewhere she highlights how O’Faolain’s “Shadow and Substance” editorial criticised de Valera’s “romantic nationalism” while proposing in its stead “a ‘realistic nationalism’ based on the ‘actuality’ of Irish people’s daily lives” (115).

It is on such terms that we can understand the magazine’s project to create a forum for the expression of Irish identity which from the very beginning sought to give all sectors of Irish society a voice. Whether rural or urban, Southern or Northern, rich or poor, Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, *The Bell* offered a potential medium through which a new, plural national idiom could be wrought. Indeed, even the internationalism promoted in O’Faolain’s later years is most effectively invoked with a view to examining what sort of a role the Irish nation should play in the world that was emerging in the wake of World War II. Although often couched in the plainly difficult terms of a contrarian such as O’Faolain, *The Bell*’s intentions are, more than to move away from the nationalist liberation tradition, to promote a re-imagination of the ideas that had led to the imperfect independence of the Free State. Kiberd’s interpretation certainly chimes with this position and in his review he states that “*The Bell*’s call was for a completion, not a liquidation, of the anti-colonial revolution” (3).

Kiberd’s tardy endorsement of O’Faolain and *The Bell* is deserved, as are his well-chosen words of praise for Matthews’s rigorous, stimulating and well-written study. And given that in her conclusion the author chooses to indicate that the most prominent heir to the legacy of *The Bell* was the Field Day project whose broadly postcolonial critical discourse fits in with the work of Kiberd, we can trace an ideological and intellectual map which finds a space for all of these participants. That said, even though Matthews firmly situates her study as postcolonial, her engagement with that intellectual legacy is, one feels, the least convincing part of the study. She is highly original when, for example, introducing into the debate on Irish identity the ideas of the American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, but to do so while failing to address in greater depth the extensive and controversial debate around postcolonial ideas and Ireland is surprising. Certainly, the explicitly postcolonial critiques of the likes of David Lloyd, or more recently Eóin Flannery are highly relevant to a study of this nature. And given the explicit and, one feels, appropriate connection made with Field Day, perhaps a more extensive dialogue with the ideas of Seamus Deane, or indeed the key international figure to consider Ireland in postcolonial terms, Edward Said, would have added to what is, nonetheless, a very solid argument overall.

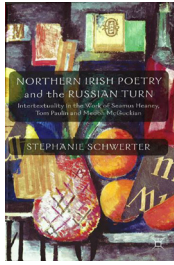
This is, however, a minor quibble. Matthews's book does brilliantly what it sets out to do and it is the standard against which any further studies of this nature will be measured. Blessed also by a very attractive design which tastefully evokes *The Bell* itself, this rewarding, subtle and hugely informative book deserves a broad public, something which one hopes the slightly prohibitive price will not frustrate.

*Alfred Markey*

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**Stephanie Schwerter: *Northern Irish Poetry and the Russian Turn: Intertextuality in the work of Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian* Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, ISBN: 978-1-137-27171-6, ISBN10: 1-137-27171-X, 264 pages**

When the history of Irish poetry in the second half of the twentieth century is being considered, special attention should be paid to the influence of the *troika* formed by Al Alvarez, Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes. Their roles as editor of the Penguin Modern European Poets in Translation series (Alvarez) and as editors of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Weissbort and Hughes) ensured that poets in Ireland, both north and south of the border, cast their imaginative gaze beyond the borders and confines of the island of Ireland, refused the inward musings of the Movement poets and allowed their imaginations to be nurtured by the imaginative heft of Eastern European poetry. Stephanie Schwerter's ground breaking new study is a testament to the influence of these forces on Northern Irish poetry. Her book provides an in depth exploration of the intertextual relationship between the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Medhb McGuckian and a number of Russian poets, notably Boris Pasternak, Anna Ahkmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Schwerter's mastery of the Russian language and literature combined with her familiarity with the cultural contexts and history of both Northern Ireland and Stalinist Russia place her in a unique position, enabling her to explore and offer an understanding of the attraction of Russian poetics for each of the poets she examines in her study.

Schwerter displays her comprehensive knowledge of the topic in her introductory chapter that traces the Russian influence in Irish literature back to the connection between Turgenev and O'Faolain. She provides an overview of the connections between Russian poets and their Irish counterparts, highlighting the connections, for instance, between Sean Dunne and Anna Ahkmatova, before turning her attention to the particular connection between three major Northern Irish poets and the poets whose work provided them with an alternative vision of the *poète engagé*. Schwerter's thesis is that Russian poetry allowed for the articulation of personal feelings and political dissent.

In each chapter Schwerter teases out the historical and literary context, providing the Western reader with a wealth of information necessary to interpret and decode the intertextual links between the Northern poets and their Eastern Block comrades. Schwerter frequently provides her own literal translation of a particular poem and enables the reader to assess the imaginative gap between the original and the Northern Irish adaptation. The section devoted to the links between Chekhov and Heaney is typical of her undertakings. She refers us to Chekhov's hybrid text *The Island Sakhalin* and connects it both to Heaney's poem "Chekhov on Sakhalin" and to his prose work in *The*



*Government of the Tongue*. While other critics have alluded to these connections (notably Shane Alcobia Murphy in his work on Medhb McGuckian) Schwerter's familiarity with the Russian context and her background in translation studies and comparative literature gives the reader hitherto unknown insights, informing us for example of Chekhov's relationship with serfdom, a fact that endows the poem "Chekhov on Sakhalin" with a new and enriched perspective.

Palgrave have done much to underline Schwerter's mastery of the Russian context. Key terms are provided in Russian, both in Cyrillic script and in transcription, before offering a translation. The publishing house has thus embodied the very foreignizing technique (to use Lawrence Venuti's term) that Schwerter refers to in her overview of the modes of translation and adaptation employed by the poets under review. Complete with an extensive bibliography and index, Stephanie Schwerter's study should be acquired by all those who are interested in contemporary Irish poetry. Indeed, as John Goodby suggests in his foreword, Schwerter's comparatist approach is to be commended and opens new vistas for forthcoming studies of Irish literature.

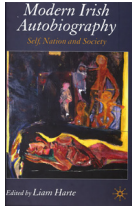
*Cliona Ní Riordáin*

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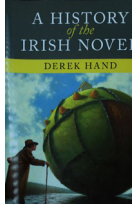
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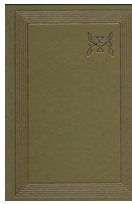
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## Contributors

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**Elizabeth Malcolm** has degrees from universities in Sydney and Dublin and worked at universities in Trondheim, Belfast and Liverpool, before being appointed in 2000 to the first Australian chair of Irish Studies in Melbourne. Her research interests are mainly in the history of gender, migration, medicine and violence in Ireland. Her most recent books include, *The Irish Policeman: a Life, 1822-1922* (Dublin, 2006), and her most recent journal articles are: 'A New Age or Just the Same Old Cycle of Extirpation? Massacre and the 1798 Irish Rebellion', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 15 (2013) and, with Dianne Hall, "'The Rebels Turkish Tyranny': Understanding Sexual Violence in Ireland during the 1640s", *Gender and History*, 22 (2010). With Hall, she is also currently writing a history of gender and violence in Ireland and researching the racialisation of the Irish in Australia.

**Alfred Markey** has taught at the universities of Vigo, A Coruña and León where he has lectured in English language and literature, the latter primarily on postcolonialism and the twentieth century. His research centres on Irish studies in relation to postcolonial theory and in a comparative context, as evident in his PhD dissertation, entitled "From Ireland to Equatorial Guinea: A Comparative Study of Sean O'Faolain and Donato Ndongo." He has published mainly on twentieth century Irish literature with an emphasis on the work of Sean O'Faolain, particularly his role as a public intellectual. His current research focuses on the cultural and political intersections of the Irish and black worlds.

**Jerry Nolan** is an Irish London-based freelance writer who has researched Irish writers such as Thomas Moore, Edward Martyn, Standish James O'Grady, James Cousins,



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<i>Mancha</i>	14 x 24 cm
<i>Formato</i>	21 x 28 cm
<i>Tipologia</i>	Times New Roman 11,5/15
<i>Papel</i>	miolo: off-set 75g/m <sup>2</sup> capa: supremo 250 g/m <sup>2</sup>
<i>Impressão do miolo e acabamento</i>	Gráfica FFLCH
<i>Número de páginas</i>	198
<i>Tiragem</i>	200 exemplares